

UNDISSERTATING¹

CHAPTER ONE: HOLLOW

For Marthe Reed
& The Dusie Kollektiv

From Adra Raine

(April 2019)

“imaging ourselves cut off while deep *in the midst*. [...] There is *no safe distance* [...].”

–Marthe Reed, “‘Somewhere Inbetween’:
Speaking-Through Contiguity,”
*Counter-Desecration: A Glossary for Writing
Within the Anthropocene*

“Love is the interdiction of history.”

–Susan Howe, *The Birth-mark: unsettling the
wilderness in American literary history*

Finishing a PhD is like coming out of a long depression. The world is suddenly full of colors and sensation. I can breathe easier; I feel lighter.

Or maybe it is the coincidence of spring. Everything is blooming.

Or maybe I'm pregnant again. I am easily moved to tears.

I've started taking a new route to pick up my child from school, cutting through the parking lot of a college campus that is always nearly empty of cars. There is a single tree planted in the middle of the otherwise unoccupied concrete ground – young, still growing, alone.

My sadness feels like fear.

August 2018

I met J-- the year he turned forty, the year his dad died, the year they cut down the trees in his neighborhood to clear the ground for a new development.

I turned forty this year, the year J-- died, and as I write this, they are cutting down a tree across the street that was struck by lightning. We've had storms every night this week. H-- was sad, saying he likes our tree-lined street. His sadness reminded me of J--, his lament for the trees and his dad's passing.

Last night, after decades of protest, students finally pulled down Silent Sam. The base of the confederate monument is now empty, as students walk across campus on the first day of classes.

So many things falling, coming down, being torn down, cut down, carried off, gone. The air we breathe.

In *Counter-Desecration's* glossary for writing within the Anthropocene, there is no entry for "suicide."

But if there were, it would fall between "south borderland" and "sus-te-nance."

south borderland: "The border is the acute mirror to our hungers."²

sus-te-nance: "It's growth but it's also a hold."³

In between our hungers and what sustains them is the promise of death: our grasping hands.

When I was busy with deadlines, I said, “I’m under water.” When I passed the defense, I said, “I’ve finally come up for air.”

“Graspability is a self-incriminating thirst utterly native to every hand, an indigenous court from which only the drowned hope to win an acquittal.”⁴

When we were reading the book together, N-- copied the line down on a piece of paper becoming a bookmark. Improvising a lesson plan one day in class, I pulled out the paper, wrote it on the board, and diagrammed its meaning with my students.

I wrote about this line: “The way words can mean more than one thing or evoke multiple images and scenes – by association and sonic resonance – becomes the engine of argument-making, even within sentences themselves.”

Coming together and splitting open. Somewhere in *Spontaneous Particulars*, SH talks about cutting open or coming undone, something that makes me think of J--'s death. I am reminded of the violence of his suicide that I otherwise don't want to think about. He used a pneumatic nail gun to end his life. I don't know where he pointed it. Was it at his head or at his heart? Where on the body did he feel certain life could be ended? Or where could he bring himself to point it?

No time to grieve.

I text H-- to tell him how sad I am. He reminds me it's OK to dwell in the sadness. It hurts, and these cramps hurt too, but the pain is something to hold onto; and being in the present with pain and sadness means being here enough to be with J--, too, to be with the pregnancy that didn't happen, to not miss the chance to be here with them.

“She is a figure as thin as paper.”⁵

A friendship built of words – hundreds of pages of correspondence over fifteen years. Together in our writing we constructed an in-between world that could be shared, to dream in together, a place of permission. Sometimes my letters were photocopies of my journal, about which J-- wrote: “I do understand that you may think me a bit of a voyeur when it comes to reading from you, but I think you like that, having a participant who is an observer. No?”

In “The Master Letters” Emily Dickinson writes to a possibly fictional, possibly real, possibly participant-who-is-an-observer: “nobody else will see me, but you – but that is enough.”

In an early letter from J--, he describes an image of partnership that stayed with me. Reporting on the events of his weekend, he writes, "I returned home to a quiet place that I've known for quite some time, an enveloping dimness that T-- and I have made for each other, where our eyes are the candles that light the space between us only."

I met T-- a couple of times, but know her mostly from J--'s letters. At the memorial, I watched her move warmly about friends and family, knowing her without knowing each other, not knowing how to be there without.

I sat on the edge of a stone wall some distance from the event with my journal, observing the white linen table cloths dance ghostly in the afternoon breeze as a father chased his young child across the green. Images and sounds, absence and quiet. "Words are candles lighting the dark."⁶

Lost, distorted, unaccounted for, erased:
“the heart may be sheltering in some random
mark of communication.”⁷

When the tree was cut down, I collected a handful of small debris – 5-6 solid chips of wood – and carried them back to the house. I had some vague idea about making something with them in collaboration with my child. I left them on the windowsill of the screened-in front porch, behind an armchair. They’re still there, waiting, or just being.

J-- wrote: "When you say 'I don't know,' it brings back funny memories of silence and the things that people expect of one another. There is movement inside, the millions of voices that are never silent but rarely speak to the world outside or make it to the page. What makes it out, i assume, is what you feel most in control of."

"[T]he immediate *feeling* of understanding"⁸ doesn't require knowing anyway.

September 2018

I catch whispers of rumors, but I'm too far removed to know what is happening and I don't want to pry.

It all still feels so tentative, like J-- just decided to try this thing – suicide – and will be back soon to tell me about it. It still feels like the story has different possible endings. And of course, it does, even with him gone, the story is still changing.

I anticipate the way my memories will be rewritten and it frightens me, while at the same time I feel at peace with it. It's always been changing anyway.

I am angry at him. But it's strange to be angry at him when I haven't yet accepted that he is gone.

How to mourn. I feel out at sea. Alone. The memorial might help: a ritual that is social not individual, something that has a form and a community.

sus-te-nance: “We can’t be supported solely by a hollow tree; it bends, then breaks.”⁹

November 2018

Dear J--,

There's a bird outside my office with a special sound to its song. You would know what it is. You had a knowledge I associate with an aristocratic education. You knew the names of birds and trees and flowers, you played the piano, you spoke French.

Does the "presentation of truth severed from Truth"¹⁰ equal a lie?

At your memorial, the subtext of your death manifest itself in many of the speeches as a desire to defend your character.

November 2018

I am sitting outside at the café where I last spoke with J-- on the phone a month before he died. We hadn't talked in a few years but it felt like no time had passed. I remember how good and familiar it felt to hear his voice. Now I'm thinking about all that was unsaid, a great abyss whose darkened landscape I have since been trying to imagine into something knowable.

When he died, I thought about that call, which was supposed to be continued later that week but we played phone tag and then he was gone. I kept thinking if only I had asked the right question, maybe he would have found another way; or at the very least, selfishly, I would have had one last intimacy with him. But now I recognize that there was already a distance between us that no right question would have closed.

I sent our mutual friend with whom I have been mourning an old email from J-- in which he talked of distance between old friends and other senses of loss, to which she responded: "The world was never going to be easier for him."

I've titled the second section of the fourth chapter "Reverence and Revolt: Contradicting Feminism" and the second-to-last "Love Produces Trouble: The Limits of Love and False Narratives."

"At times Howe is critical of those men who have become her kin – the path leading to their encounter an ambiguous one since they speak to her insofar as she is compelled by what they say; but they also refuse to speak to her as their words exclude her as a woman from the conversation. At other times, she is defensive. About Williams' statement about women and poetry, she says: 'I think that he says one thing and means another. A poet is never just a woman or a man.' Pulled in opposite directions. She doesn't cover up the contradictions, doesn't resolve them. They both activate the inquiry and disrupt it. She doesn't conceal or modulate her personal investment. Love produces trouble."

September 2018, *The New Wing of the Labyrinth*¹¹

I am compelled to face these poems that meditate on suicidal depression, lingering on the decisive moment: the event of the present that separates past from future and fuses them. The difference between doing it and not doing it. ER's story is the story of not doing it. J--'s story is not though.

“Violent suicide / is over before you know it’s happening / it’s like a seizure encompassing the moment – / so, somewhere you have to have practiced / the opposite move so when it comes / you can follow through the moment / without succumbing to it, without doing it. Through. / I was so surprised, I froze. I stopped / to watch it so, it didn’t happen, so, I lived. / Observation was my practice so I live.”

But observation was J--'s practice, too. Why doesn't he live? Maybe because he didn't practice "the opposite move," never made an attempt before, and like all things he committed to, once he decided to do it there was no other way to do it but "Through." To go through with it. To go through it. To go.

“He steps off / his shadow easily as // out
of his skin; / the snake leaves what there is
// of the dark beneath him / a waving track,
// a writing, a signature / that signs it all
back.”

The day after I learned about your death, I
laid down in an empty event hall in front of
a glass door leading to a parking lot
surrounded by grass and tall trees; outside
it was a blue sky and white clouds, but the
room was dark. I sobbed and sobbed, and felt
myself sink down into the earth with you,
wanting to join you there, to fit into your
body, in that damp earth your art always
sought, your hands always reached out for,
the desire to sink in, sinking into desire,
finally.

Sitting or standing in the park, surrounded
by trees, sky, earth. What did you think
about? What did you notice? What were you
looking at? Where was your gaze fixed as you
left yourself behind?

I was pregnant. When I learned you were
missing, I knew in my bones somehow that the
baby-to-be would leave me as well. I kept
checking your facebook page for updates. When
I read that you were gone – “passed away” –
the grief immediately seized my body, gasping

for air as the tears gathered up force, as I shook and cried, I held my belly, thinking, “The pregnancy won’t survive this.” Two days later the urine test confirmed – no longer pregnant. They call it a “chemical pregnancy” when it happens that early, wanting to spare ourselves from the harder word, “miscarriage.” But that’s what it was. I was pregnant. My body started its transformation, preparing to protect the growth of a child. And then it stopped.

south borderland: “The borderland is a collision of two ontogenies, though not demarcated. [...] Violence is a fog here. History is effaced by populist amnesia [...].”¹²

It’s a rainy day, gray and wet. The hurricane changed its path. We were all preparing for the worst here, but it didn’t come. It went elsewhere. We should be relieved. But how can we be relieved?

I have deadlines. Lines of death. You aren’t supposed to cross them. It is a strange term. I don’t like it. A deadline is a line of death you aren’t supposed to cross. Once you cross that line, there shouldn’t be any coming back. So if you keep on living, are you living in death?

What do you see when you stare at that dead line? Is it a horizon?

In "Moving to Chicago and Exit from the Bardo," ER observes the visual difference between the view from the third floor and the sixteenth-floor windows of a Chicago apartment building facing the lake. The composition of the world the window frames - the horizon where water meets sky versus the aerial view - his preference for the latter: "And this is how we always fall downwards / to the world. This excess is, of course, the flight I take."

Date: Tuesday, April 13, 2004 3:27 PM

To: Adra Raine

I like it in here on a rainy day, with the steam continually rising to the far right, and my plants bathed in the soft grey. I see the three o'clock, too, and I remember that time as the end of the schoolday- so odd to have it diluted to just an interesting shape on the clock. The form of this day is elusive, the sensations that it brings are disorienting. Since taking apart my studio, I have not felt like the same person. On Sunday, my nephew and I were on a hunt in the woods. He was destroying a rotted tree that stretched far away from us, its termite-pitted innards soft in the p.m.glow. We moved along it's thin tapering trace, until we found a gaggle of smaller decaying stumps. I kicked one over to find a millipede - why does it curl, uncle J--? and the webbing of mildews and tiny spiders was taken for granted. The next log was more difficult to roll over, but it's depression had what seemed to be a grey worm in a pocketed hole at the center, curled up , immobile. Or maybe it's a baby snake. No it's a salamander , see it has little tiny legs - what's a salamander? like a newt, you know a newt from that story I read you a couple months back. You mean like a baby dinosaur, I think it's a baby

dinosuar. It's called a salamander, and it likes the water, see it has gills here like a fish does to breathe in the water. Let's take it to those other guys to see.

And so there was a little terarium made from tupperware, and it really didn't wriggle much , too stunned at this sudden dislodging, this diturbance from the glory days of long sleep. You could smell the trauma of it, up to the not-so-mysterious and inevitable tragedy of tail loss that comes with such events. I couldn't see much in it's eyes, but was conscious for the few hours that we had it near the house of the nature's umbilicus tugging at it and my heart.

All of this runs quite close to how I felt this weekend. Each action and encounter held its meaning relative to the great ripping apart of my studio, and the bungled attempt at my uncle-in-law's material. My actions in life do seem to find amphibian-ness as a funny metaphor - needing more than one elemental state to reach full bloom and survive. I am beginning to understand what the child brings to the life of the adult. But still, it is a trial that I would rather not endure. It is not in the perview of the parent to communicate meaning to the larger world - Oh shit - I've gotta run - hope to get to more of this later.

“Love is the interdiction of history,”
standing in the way of our attempt to record,
recollect, and retell the past; as well as
living in between the words that history
captures. “There is no safe distance” from
which to mourn or make sense of loss. “There
is no safe distance” from which to be here
either.

Notes

¹ *To dissertate* – from *disserĕre* to discuss, treat, examine; *serĕre* to bind, connect, join words, compose. To retrace and rethread the many lines of experience that spun out of five years of research and documentation – that for multiple reasons are not (directly) in the filed dissertation – the project of *undissertating* undoes the binding to loosen and scatter the pages out on the floor – to unjoin and rejoin words – to find others pathways of connection.

² Carmen Gimenez Smith

³ Suzi F. Garcia

⁴ Nathaniel Mackey

⁵ Susan Howe

⁶ Susan Howe

⁷ Susan Howe

⁸ Susan Howe

⁹ Suzi F. Garcia

¹⁰ Susan Howe

¹¹ Ed Roberson

¹² Carmen Gimenez Smith

Undissectating is a process of decomposition and recomposition. This chapbook is printed on drafts of my dissertation, “Resonance Over Resolution: Resisting Definition in Susan Howe, Nathaniel Mackey, and Ed Roberson’s Post-1968 Poetics.”

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