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Stopped Before Beauty: Meditations on the Closed Door

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Stopped before Beauty: Meditations on the Closed Door

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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“Noah says this is
an error of depressives, identifying
with a tree, whereas the happy heart
wanders the garden like a falling leaf, a figure for
the part, not the whole.”

Louise Gluck, *Matins I*

Introduction

Eventually, our eyes tire from looking, either at ourselves, or at the world. This will lead us toward an empty page. So, we begin with an image:

At 15, I stood on stage in white lace panties. The play was *Noises Off*, a British farce about an acting troupe performing a flop called *Nothing On*. I played Brooke Ashton, a failing actress, who played Vicki, a tax collector. While the others talked, she stared at her fingernails. The audience loved her, and roared with laughter as she moved.

In the final act of the play, the chaos of the actors' various personal dramas has overrun the production. The comedy becomes entirely physical. The actors tumble down stairs, over railings, feebly improvising their lines in an attempt to recover from each misstep. Meanwhile, Brooke as Vicki carries on, not missing a single line. She follows the invisible thread, one line to the next. And I follow her, both wearing my own nakedness and performing it, even as the audience looks through me at Brooke as Vicki wearing her almost nothing in *Nothing On*. It's as if the audience, laughing in delight at the unswerving Brooke, can't see me, hidden as I am in my near nakedness in Brooke in Vicki.

I am nearly naked. I am hiding in plain sight.

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In his chapter *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, Immanuel Kant establishes *taste*, or the capacity for judging the beautiful as “disinterested and *free* delight” (Kant 210). This disinterestedness implies one does not desire the beautiful object, nor do they expect any satisfaction from it. We are free to simply observe it. Various scholars have contested this notion of the beautiful. Contemporary aesthetic scholar Alexander Nehamas views the experience of beauty as inextricably linked to the “pleasure of anticipation” (Nehamas *Beauty and Judgment*).

This pleasure is wrapped up in a tantalizing, mysterious form of the beautiful. We want to continue looking, to approach and perceive more from the prospect of beauty. Therefore, the individual has a clear *interest* in pursuing the beautiful, particularly the inkling that they may eventually find reason to know and come to love its beauty.

Then we have Simone Weil, whose series of aphorisms and essays establish a religious metaphysics that are consistently reaching for crisp and complex new formulations with which to express the paradoxes of beauty. It is possible to get lost in Simone Weil's beauty, as her paradoxes pose beauty as "a sphinx, an enigma, a mystery" (WFG 104). One definition is that "beauty" is "a fruit we look at without trying to seize it" (G&G 150). Therefore, we must not approach it. However, this detached mode of perception is not disinterested, but rather "it incites desire" while it "makes one feel clearly that there is nothing in it to be desired" (Veto 95).¹ Weil admits that this renunciation is not inherent in the beautiful itself, but rather must be cultivated. Often, we stand before the fruit of beauty, desiring to take a single *bite*. Sometimes, one takes the bite.

The bite into beauty opens up a second tier to our capacity for and interest in *desiring* the beautiful. This posits a corresponding *shame*, affliction—as well as the potential for the creation and the development of style out of that shame, that affliction.

In the Western canon, this first shame begins with the Fall. In Genesis, man and woman were forbidden from eating from the tree of knowledge. It would kill them—that is, they would become mortal and die. The woman saw that the fruit from the tree was "good for food and pleasing to the eye" (Genesis 3:4), that is, beautiful, and so she took a bite from the fruit. But the fruit did not kill Adam and Eve; rather, it opened their eyes. Therefore, in biblical terms, to *eat*

¹ Veto quotes Weil from Selected Essays, 29.

initiated a new form of looking. Adam and Eve now perceived not only the beauty of the garden, but looked *down* at the naked curves of their bodies. They realized they were naked and hid themselves.

In Weil's theory, there is nothing wrong with hiding oneself. In fact, Weil asserts that the *I* is hidden for us, "it is on the side of God, it is in God, it is God" (Gravity and Grace 38). Weil constructs a spatial relationship between the *I* and God, only to merge the dimensions by directly equating the *I* with God. Therefore, God too, remains hidden for us. All we can see of God is what is expressed in the beauty and order of the world. The image of God can be gleaned in the piece of fruit dangling from the tree of knowledge. Once it is bitten into, we become caught in the knowledge of our bodies, and again we must hide ourselves.

In Hiding from Humanity, Martha Nussbaum defines primitive shame as an early awareness of "finitude, partiality" (Nussbaum 173). This is betrayed by the very forms of our bodies, with "pointy jutting limbs" and "oddly naked front parts," revealing our particular lines and ridges that will not fit into the whole of the world (158). In tracing the lineage of such shame, Nussbaum recounts a scene from Plato's *Symposium* which builds on the principles of the Golden Age, where we were once "whole and round," and lived in "blissful totality" (155-156). We were the shape of the world, and therefore the world was not closed to us.

Fearing the power afforded by our wholeness, Zeus cut us into shapes, setting an "unbridgeable gulf between us and the gods" (158). When we come to and discover the reality of our bodies, we are ashamed to look "at the cut parts of ourselves" (158). So, one began looking "always for his other half" (Plato 15). This pursuit of the whole is known as *love*, specifically *eros*. The *whole* is hidden for us in the body of an *other*. But we cannot reach this merely through

looking, instead, we must find a way to embrace. In Genesis, after the fall there is the embrace: “the man knew his wife Eve,” and she bore a child (Gen:4).

In Simone Weil’s religious metaphysics, humans are no longer “round and whole,” but rather resemble the pointy, jutting figures of Nussbaum’s modern understanding. For Weil, even if we hunger for our *other half*, once we embrace them, we will not be made whole. However, Weil suggests the possibility that we could return to this golden age of being. It is a matter of religion, and in *Love of Religious Practices*, Weil calls for it to be “publicly and officially recognized” that religion is “nothing else but a looking” (Waiting for God 130). The direction of this look matters. Weil advises a renunciation of our self-directed gaze, in order to return us to “our humanity” prior to the fall into self-consciousness and shame. We must empty ourselves of the *I*.

Therefore, she instructs we lift our tilted gaze, and take in the shapes of the world around us. This will return us to the beauty of the world.

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You could say that the essayist who writes about herself risks a certain form of nakedness. In Hiding in Plain Sight, Wendy Lesser draws a correlation between the autobiographer and the critic in terms of the extent to which they reveal themselves in their respective forms. This might appear puzzling, as the role of the critic is often thought in terms of his process of *seeing* the object, and not as a mode of self-exposure. However, Lesser proposes that the work of both the autobiographer and the critic share the delicate borderline between exposure and evasion. The critic looks down at the page, examines her *own* response to the work and then steps aside so we can see “the thing itself” (Lesser X). The autobiographer looks down

at himself, tracing the impressions of his internal world, and then he steps aside, or *rises above* his own reality.

In his seminal text the Function of Criticism at the Present Time, Matthew Arnold establishes the role of criticism as a way to “see the object as in itself it really is” (Arnold 27). Criticism is then defined as a mode of seeing. Therefore, Arnold defines criticism as a mode of seeing clearly and objectively, whose *purpose* is to advance “the best that is known and thought.” In accordance with this further definition, for the object—in Arnold’s case, a work of literature—to be seen as “it really is,” it must be situated within a critical context. Arnold later defines “the grand work of literary genius” as “synthesis and exposition, not analysis and discovery,” the latter of which is attributed to the critical faculty (11). Therefore, “its gift lies” in “being happily inspired” by a context of ideas, in which criticism’s job shifts from *seeing* the object after its creation to *inspiring* the creation of the object (11-12).

This order of perception is reflected in the contemplation of the beautiful, where we attempt to really and clearly *see* the object. Oscar Wilde countered this assertion in his characteristic ornery way, that the aim of the critic was in fact “to see the object as it really is not” (The Critic as Artist). Aesthetic critics continue to trace the lines between these two modes of perception. For Wilde’s critic “the work of art” is somehow personal, becoming the basis, or suggestion for “a new work of his own” (Wilde). The beauty one perceives in a work of art leads them to their own creation.

This work is in the venue of Walter Pater’s proposal for aesthetic criticism: “to know one’s impression as it really is” (Pater 5). Adam and Eve *knew* they were naked, and *felt* the eyes of God on their bodies. In the first moments of their shame, Adam and Eve “sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves” (Gen 3:12). Thus, their first creation is to gather

the surrounding materials and clothe their bodies. Hiding, then, becomes a form of creation.

Adam recites the first line of his autobiography: “I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself” (Gen 3:10). Before he blames Eve or explains the Fall, he sees himself *through* his sense of shame and fear. In an attempt to burrow into the “fertile terrain” between autobiographer and critic, this project will integrate nonfiction vignettes within a critical study of three personal writers’ entryways into the beauty and meaning of the world (Lesser X). It will examine the work of art as a response to our tendency to see the object as it really *feels*.

* * *

Before the creation of the work of art, and before the image of the self, something else occurs. In Genesis, this is the Fall: tumbling from the beauty of paradise and into the domain of self-seeing. In *Forms of the Implicit Love of God*, Weil outlines the process of returning to the world of form:

“We reconstruct for ourselves the order of the world in an image, starting from limited, countable, and strictly defined data. We work out a system for ourselves, establishing connections and conceiving of relationships between terms that are abstract... Thus in an image, an image of which the very existence hangs upon an act of our attention, we can contemplate the very necessity which is the substance of the universe but which as such, only manifests itself to us by the blows it deals” (WFG 108)

Weil’s model for the contemplation of the beauty of the world begins on the level of the “image,” and finishes in the moment of “the blows” dealt by the world. This first note of reconstruction suggests that something has happened, some event, or explosion that disassembled the order of the world, and from which we are attempting to recover. The event remains abstract, and perhaps even in our shock we cannot perceive where it begins. All we have

is “limited, countable” data with which to reassemble the parts of the experience. This is the origin of both autobiography and criticism: it begins with a blow. We are given a *blow*, and somehow we are to construct an image out of it.

This project opens with the youthful violent *blows* dealt by the world, addressed by Virginia Woolf in a *Sketch of the Past* as the foundation of her writing project. Therefore, Woolf’s moments of being will be complemented by a series of nonfiction vignettes in the manner of violent shocks. In these modes, Virginia Woolf acts as a critic, attempting to empty herself from the experience in order to clearly perceive meaning of the blows of the world. This process most closely resembles Weil’s systematic contemplation of the beautiful, and with it unfolds the “certain love” that accompanies such contemplation (WFG 108).

I will move beyond Woolf’s immediate experiences of violent shocks into other foundational experiences and images of her early life. These are not identified by Woolf as violent shocks, but they represent some element of the world that penetrates Woolf, and reveals a corresponding emotional reality such as the shame of self-looking, the ecstasy of reading, and finally, a linguistic encounter with the beauty of the world. She recalls stumbling upon beauty, outlining the scenes and impressions which startle, puzzle and provoke her. These moments of self-observation and reading will be amplified by the perspective of Etty Hillesum, a devout diarist chronicling her daily life in the German-occupied Netherlands. Further, I will incorporate my own foundational experiences with beauty, perception, and the suggestion of love through early reading experiences. Each of these threads represent creative relationships with a form of beauty; however, we do not yet have the critical context to *see* the object beyond their feelings for it.

Then, I will reintroduce Etty Hilleusm's narrative, as she was uprooted from her home and detained in the Westerbork concentration camp. Alongside Hillesum, I will bring in the perspective of the contemporary, secular novelist and short story writer, Mary Gaitskill, who faced her own form of affliction. In their efforts to love and write in spite of their affliction, they treat the processes as an embodied gesture in the likes of Plato's eros. Therefore, their modes of processing affliction embrace the potential for meaning within, and alongside these sites of affliction. These modes blend autobiography and criticism, where they attempt to both *see* the object and *feel* their impression of it.

According to Nehamas, the self we construct is a result of, and in response to, "the works we admire and criticize" (Nehamas). Further, the projects we embark on respond to, and engage with works of beauty in literary contexts, felt experiences, and violent encounters with the world. The nonfiction throughout the project will serve as an alternative form of looking at such events. It does not presume to see the object as it *really* is. But, I will attempt to see and know the *blow*, to sense the impression, and reach towards the affliction.

Finally, in the Idea of Courage, Louise Gluck draws a correlation between the artist and the naked dancer. She calls it the "performance of nakedness," where they become clothed, even protected by their chosen medium (Gluck 9). The writer who writes about herself must take a single bite from the beauty of the world, revealing her own nakedness, and pausing before it. The fruit remains in his hand. She opens her eyes.

Chapter 1

Contemplation as Relation: Violent Moments of Loving in Virginia Woolf's Sketch of the Past

I open my eyes. There is a soft tickle of feathers. On the pillow rests a large beaded object that had fallen into the crease of my neck. I know it is from Dad, and I know it in a sense at once mystical and physical, as if he had placed it in my hand and then tiptoed to the door and simply floated away. I can see him in my room wearing brown work boots, a white t-shirt with a small hole below the neck, and jeans spackled with white plaster. Also black hair, broad shoulders. His t-shirt displays a firm round stomach.

It was the largest dreamcatcher I'd ever seen. Occasionally, I'll see key chain dreamcatchers, which appear as miniature imitations of that night. They look too small and manufactured to catch a single dream.

I could not have known it was from Dad and yet I did. I could not have known because that would've meant knowing he had left, and that the dreamcatcher was there to explain something. When I show her the token, Mom pulls me on her lap, and does what the dreamcatcher meant to: she explains that Dad went to a hotel for a while, needing some rest and that hopefully he'll be back soon. He had been gone two days, and I hadn't noticed.

Staying in hotels is one of my favorite things, and so I understood why Dad would go to one to rest. Then I get a brilliant idea. I exclaim: "We should visit him, to see the room!"

"No sweetheart, I think he needs to be alone this time." I recognize the tiredness in her voice, and I wonder if she wishes she could stay in her own hotel room, though I know she would bring me with her.

He couldn't have known but I was already overwhelmed by dreaming; when Mom tucked me in she would bend over and whisper *no dreams*. It was not the nightmares that terrified me, as

much as the sweet dreams. I wanted a catch-all dreamcatcher that would absorb both forms of feeling into its soft net. In the morning, I would jolt awake, unprepared for the disappointment.

For many years, my father was at the casino most nights. Casinos are where you can go, after dark, without your family. They help you when you are poor, and soothe you when you are alone. And yet, that night, he was within my room, offering an explanation. The explanation was only a surface, a nighttime cure-all that promised to absorb the dark matter of the dreams. But perhaps, on the level of the memory, the gesture worked. When I labor to imagine the dreamcatcher, my father is present, and although his hands are empty, he is offering something.

When I open my eyes, he is gone.

* * *

French Philosopher, mystic, and keeper of notebooks, Simone Weil opens the chapter “Metaxu” with: “the world is a closed door. It is a barrier. At the same time, it is the way through” (Weil 145). Weil’s description of world as barrier constructs an image of “a closed door,” a physical boundary. When she shifts to its other dimension, world as entrance, the details are abstracted: “the way through” (145). The barrier remains intact, in order to form the paradox: the door does not open, but a way through is found. How is the way through found? Or perhaps I should ask this another way. What might the way through lead to? In Weil, the way through leads to the sight of, and therefore understanding of, the *beauty* and order of the world.

The beauty of the world resides behind the closed door.

The door will not open, but if we concentrate our attention on the surface, we may begin to notice the smooth lines of the frame, the glint of the silvery knob. The attitude demonstrated by the beautiful is that of “watching and waiting.” Weil calls it “a fruit one looks upon without eating it, also a misfortune one looks upon without drawing back”—or even a door one looks

upon without entering. The door is an obstacle, preventing me from completing my projects, and seeing into the workings of the world. Entry into the beauty of the world therefore requires a shift in perception. I do *not* want to open the door, but rather I want it to remain exactly as it is, and from my seat, I will observe it. That is the way through.

But what if this doesn't work? What if we need the door to open; and we need to know what is beneath the surface? Peter Winch summarizes Weil's perspective as our essential living "project" which forms "the straight line, connecting the agent to where he wants to go" (Winch 165). In this movement along this path, we may be faced with *an obstacle*, which we perceive as something that may be circumvented, or a constraint, which represents the overwhelming force of the world: "I do not see it as anything. I am simply overcome by it" (Winch 66). Weil locates the potential for human progress, and "progress in understanding ourselves," in the potential for "changing constraints into obstacles" (66). Once we can perceive the contours of the obstacle, we might begin constructing a *bridge*, or *metaxu*, between the place where we are and that which we are travelling towards. Gustave Thibon characterizes Weil's aphorisms "as pieces of advice to travelers," detailing the modes and methods of locating the way-through to God. These travelers can learn the detachment offered from the contemplation of beauty of the world (Winch 123). This form of detachment initiates and mimics the love of God, serving as a "foundation course for decreation" (Veto 108).

Virginia Woolf's *Sketch of the Past* posits a personal, secular experience of Simone Weil's contemplation of the beautiful, while exposing the limitations of its secular frame. I will focus Woolf's methods of integrating her *personal* vocabulary and private experiences into a form of love for the realities of the world. In Virginia Woolf's personal writing philosophy, she vouches for another form of "watching and waiting," not in an effort to move through the world,

but rather to look within her experiences and find the particular *reality*. In her autobiographical writing and works of fiction, Woolf uses various terms for this sought after *reality*: meaning, the thing itself, being—and her methods for accessing such a state: shock-receiving, explanation, writing. This reality “fixes and makes permanent” all it touches, creating a foundation “in which I can continue to exist” (*A Writer’s Life*, AROOO). Woolf’s interest in the ordering of reality represents a secular effort to uncover a *way through* toward a lasting contact with the passing beauty of the world.

In a *Sketch of the Past*, Woolf deems her practice “life-writing,” a form of integrating her lived experiences into a scene, a chapter, which eventually reveals the life of Adeline Virginia Stephen, or “Virginia herself” (MB, 65). Employing Simone Weil’s concepts of the contemplation of the “beauty and order of the world” and the uses of *Metaxu*, we can see the potential of self-examination and personal writing to transform *constraints* to entry—the closed door, or sudden violent shock—into obstacles which one may perceive clearly and find a way *through*. Virginia Woolf turned constraints into obstacles and obstacles into bridges towards the beauty of the world. But we will also examine instances where Woolf becomes caught in obstacles, and how such tendencies are reflected in the form of her memoir. Lastly, we’ll incorporate critical response to Woolf’s project of transcendence, and see how the text unfolds her own ambivalence towards her authorial identity and the dimensions of self-understanding. In echoing that process of writing-through, I step onto the entryways provided by Woolf and Weil, where a sketch of the past and an aphorism for future wanderers might share a sliver of the *real*.

I. From the Real: Early Encounters with the Beauty of the World

In *Sketch of the Past*, Woolf proposes that a “nondescript cotton wool” embeds much of the experience of daily life. This cotton wool preserves a sense of domestic mystery; it is at once

a gentle cushioning, and a muffling of vision. Further, it suggests that the “non-being” of daily life forms a substance that both protects and obstructs us from feeling and remembering their contents. On the level of the cotton wool, there lies a justification for why the material of daily life cannot form the substance of life-writing. Woolf looks to three instances of her childhood, where “a sudden violent shock” punctured the cotton wool, violently halted her and revealed to her the “great delight” of explanation. The process resonates with one of the pillars of Weil’s writing on the *metaxu*, where “every separation is a link” (G&G 145)². After the initial shock, Woolf links the violent moments to her writing project, constructing the basis for the impacts of daily life *as* the material for memoir writing.

One such violent shock appears when Woolf sees a flower at Saint Ives and discovers “that is the whole,” meaning “part earth; part flower” (71). Woolf comes to understand that the whole is not complete in itself, but is a link between the individual properties and the associated network of meaning. The flower is both partly linked to, and an essential element “of the earth” (71). This strikes Woolf as “a thought I put away as being likely to be very useful” (71). It is not a shock on the level of feeling, but rather represents a shift in her perception of the world.

In addition to the encounter with the flower, the other two moments consist of painful encounters with the natural and physical world. While play-fighting with her brother Thoby, she suddenly “felt: why hurt another person.” This feeling translates into Woolf’s instant decision not-to-hurt, which causes her to stand still and “let [Thoby] beat me” (71). This discovery “that people hurt each other,” and physical resistance of such a fact, leads her to discover her own

² Weil borrows the term *Metaxu* from Plato’s symposium, which the Priestess Diotima uses to describe the character of *eros*. In Weil’s metaphysics, the *metaxu* are the “relative and mixed good things” which form the link between us and God. The translations of the greek *μεταξύ* vary between *metaxy* and *metaxu*: middle, mediator, in between (G&G 145).

“powerlessness.” The second revelation is therefore a feeling of “hopeless sadness” that consumes Woolf, and envelops the original discovery.

In yet another shock, she comes upon an apple tree that she feels is indelibly connected to Mr. Valpy’s suicide, and finds “I could not pass it” (71). As an element of the earth, the apple tree holds the feeling of suicide, and Woolf finds herself halted by this internal violence attached to the surface of the world. Therefore, to apprehend it as whole would require Woolf to *pass* this sensation of the world’s pain, and allow such a possibility of reality to touch her. As Woolf traces the discovery, she reads the scene as a barrier to enter into a sensation she cannot bear, an aspect of the whole that she does not yet seek entry into.

* * *

Dad picks me up from school, in his long, low gold 1990 Chevy Impala he’d bought for 200 dollars from a guy from the casino. The Chevy’s brakes had nearly worn out and so he would meticulously slow down before red lights. On hills the car would inch forward, and I would hold the side of the car and count inside my head. Driving that Impala was a game to him, and though part of me trusted his skill and agility, I knew he couldn’t master failing brakes.

He used the Impala as a truck; the back seat filled with metal tools and planks of wood. I notice its resemblance to the “pimp cars,” which the older boys at the high school drive. It’s loud and imposing, and parents seem afraid of it.

We’d never been in an accident, but the few times we’d come close, his private rage would give way to a gentleness, which he let out instinctively. *Sorry about that*, he’d say with a small, quick laugh and look over at me, checking in. When we would reach the top of Maryland Ave, I jumped out of the car.

I once saw three boys, in an identical car. Two of the boys sat on the edge of the windows, and fanned out stacks of money. They whistle at our group as we walk home from school. *Isn't that your Dad's car?* Jolene asks. I want to hit her, and it surprises me. I've never wanted something like that before. But Jolene is very tall, and has curved muscles in her legs. So I look towards the pavement, and shrug.

* * *

Since she cannot pass through the sensation, Woolf turns her focus to how the sensation might pass through her. In their temporal occurrence, these “violent moments of being” are *isolated* instances of pain. They are also *strong*, revealing to Woolf the delicacy of her body, and leading her to “a physical collapse” (72). However, they are not complete until they are made “real by putting it into words;” that is, by putting it into words “I make it whole” (72). Woolf then performs the inverse of the world’s work on her, translating the sensation of powerlessness into this “wholeness” which relieves her of the shock: “it has lost its power to hurt me” (72).

In employing the phrase *violent shock*, she unites the sensations of physical powerlessness at the hands of Thoby, *apparent* paralysis at the sight of the tree, and the shock of discovering the properties of the flower. Thus, Woolf attempts to render the impact of each sensation within a network of similar sensations. In placing the moment of discovery between the other two experiences, she does not distinguish between the quality of each shock. Only after explaining the shocks, Woolf “realise(s) something that I have never realised before,” that two of the instances ended in “despair,” while the third, observing the flower, ended “in a state of satisfaction.” This process of stringing the shocks together leads Woolf to place them within a scene, and understand the trajectory of each experience both as individual sensations and stages within a broader framework of feeling.

* * *

Linda, Dad's new girlfriend, loves to tell the story of their meeting, and I loved to ask for it: Thursday night in the Turning Stone Casino with a few of her girlfriends. *Ay Linda, what kinda man you gon find here?* Linda pointed at a balding man with traces of black hair, a black turtleneck: *that guy, a real Tony Soprano.* Which is where the story ends.

She sits at the computer, stroking her bottom lip, meticulously clicking through the screen. Linda is a cleaning lady, and cleans my friend Jolene's house. At Dad's house, she sweeps under the bed, does not let food sit out after dinner. She teaches me to fold things properly: only one crease, nearly flat.

I love Linda—not deeply, but steadily through those years. I love watching her. She inhaled slowly while she worked on a painting of puffs of blue and white sky. The paint was thick and rippled. She let me make my own painting, and my sky looked like hers, but it felt like mine.

She tells my father's family that he is listening in on their conversations, that he's placed tape recorders beneath their bathroom sinks. Dad's sister will believe her. Then Linda will move away. Mom explains that she started seeing things differently. Dad says nothing. She sends me pale pink Hallmark cards on Easter. They're signed: *Love, love, love, Linda.*

* * *

Later in Sketch of the Past, Woolf recalls another moment of being which reemphasizes the problem of what is real and what is not:

There was the moment of the puddle in the path, when for no reason I could discover, everything suddenly became unreal; I was suspended; I could not step across the puddle; I tried to touch something... the whole world became unreal.

This is the first moment where “the whole world” has *lost* its reality for Woolf.

In her earlier moments, non-being coats the surface of Woolf’s days, and the moments of *being* reveal the perceptible *reality* beneath the cotton wool surface. This scene of *unreality* represents Woolf’s first violent shock, which is not attached to any preceding stimuli, but rather for “no reason [she] could discover” penetrates her. In Woolf’s description, the ellipses express the absence of language with which she might describe the particular sensations forming this unreality. Following her attempt “to touch something,” the ellipses lead into “the whole world bec[oming] unreal,” where her difficulty in describing the sensation mimics the challenge of trying “to touch something” and “step” out of the unreality of the whole world. This moment of being is the clearest disruption to Woolf’s project to pass through the barrier and understand *reality*, which in a diary entry from 1928, she identifies as “the most necessary thing to me: that which I seek” (A Writer’s Diary 130). She also identifies this experience as what makes her exceptional, something that is particular to her. Woolf’s physical experience within the scene echoes Woolf’s encounter with the apple tree, where she stood paralyzed with non-feeling. This resemblance suggests the suicide of Mr. Valpy expresses a feeling attached to reality, which overwhelms her physical faculties, thwarting her from passing through the barrier with the intimation of paralysis.

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At our weekly sleepover, Madison Ebeling and I decided to order a *Movie on Demand*. Usually, we just watched our favorite trailers again and again. But Dad said we could pay the \$3.99 just this once, while him and Linda spend the night away. So we order *Sex and the Teenage Mind*. A girl stands a towel wrapped around her waist, her breasts exposed. The towel seems effortlessly held up by the shape of her hips.

Madison talks all throughout the movie. Probably because she hasn't a boyfriend yet, and doesn't know what she could be learning. The two best girl friends in the movie start shouting at each other over some boy, and Madison pauses the film. Suddenly, she speaks slowly. She moves to the black recliner across the room.

She says my Dad once accidentally called her at 4 a.m. He was screaming at some woman. *Get the fuck outta my car.* She had never heard anything like it. But, sometimes Madison makes things up. I assure her it must've been a misunderstanding, maybe even a robbery.

She walks over to my side of the room. *It was not,* and it was the scariest thing she's ever heard. I accept this, and switch back on the movie. I tell her to *try* to watch the movie, and I'll make us popcorn with real butter.

Two days later, Dad and Linda sit me down to have a very serious talk. They say movies of that sort are completely inappropriate, false representations of the world. Dad appears suddenly stern. Then he walks out of the room. So Linda did the talking. I cannot look at either of them for days. Even as I avoid looking, I see Dad in the front seat of the black pick up (the impala's replacement). The car is parked in an empty lot. His phone is in the crevice of the passenger seat. He is trying to close the door. But someone is keeping it open.

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Woolf returns to her efforts to make whole when she describes the sensations of the writing process, the "rapture" in making a scene come right, or after the explosion of the violent shock, "to put the severed parts together" (72). This process acts as an inversion of the discovery of the flowerbed, where the apparent divisions *expressed* the texture of the whole; in this latter action Woolf fits the severed parts together to seal the divisions and allow what was once jagged to form an even whole. Echoing Woolf, Winch summarizes Weil's perspective on our essential

living “project” which forms “the straight line, connecting the agent to where he wants to go” (Winch 165). This process in effect is also one of Woolf’s projects: to reach beyond the contours of the experience and sketch the underlying shadows, lines, and shapes. On the material plane, the despair-inducing violent shocks prevent Woolf from completing her straight line of motion. On the spiritual plane, they initiate the motion between her embodied experience and the moment of reflection when she reimagines the shape of her line.

In the early pages of *Sketch of the Past*, Woolf invokes her present tendency to “add to feelings much that makes them more complex; and therefore less strong; or if not less strong, less isolated, less complete” (67). The content of this “much” is left open, whether it is a manner of thought, a product of time, or some combination of the proceeding elements: the stain of daily life. In her revision of the definition of strength in order to encompass isolation/completion, Woolf constructs a framework for feeling that hinges on the intensity of its immediate occurrence.

Further, such feelings are expressed as individual agents, and *we*, as their vessels, gradually move away from them. In Woolf’s effort to explain this translation of the matter of sensation into the network of thoughts, she suggests that something is *lost* in the process—these sensations are examined, prodded and stirred up by the discerning mind, until they are worn out, and come undone. In her essay *Love’s Knowledge*, Martha Nussbaum deals with this very transition, from the raw material of “impressions of suffering” into the material of our projects: “we *think* what we had merely felt before” (272). Woolf takes this process a step further, in proposing that the writing process itself expresses a form of *love*, allowing her to *make whole* the isolated sensory experiences. This love is demonstrated in Woolf’s conversion of the two *despair*-invoking shocks into the feeling of “rapture” when she performs the work of explaining

the sensation and brings a scene together. This process demonstrates the unreliability of the *felt* experiences of the world, as the sense of rapture exists within the same temporal framework as the despair it extinguished. However, both the sense of despair and the feeling of rapture serve a valuable function in *revealing* to Woolf the contours of the relationship between her internal landscape and impressions of the outside world.

This relationship between the world and its corresponding perceptions resonates with Weil's version of the beautiful as a "relation of the world to our sensibility" (*Waiting for God* 110). In the *Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, the French religious philosopher, Miklos Veto, stresses Weil's concept of beauty as "not an objective or ontological category," but rather the "sensible experience of the order of the world" (Veto 93). Woolf's concept of the "real" exists within the same *relation* as the beautiful, while the *unreal* appears to sever all ties between the senses and the world. Therefore, each of Woolf's discoveries mark her encounter with a particular element of the world's necessity, and converts the world's passivity into an active appreciation of what is "given to us in this way" (*Waiting for God*). In her final moments of examining the cotton-wool process, Woolf proposes "that the whole world is a work of art, that we are parts of that work of art" (72). Therefore, instead of forming a relationship between herself and the "thing itself," Woolf claims "we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself."

On one level, using Weil's methodology, this statement would prove a dangerous identification with the world's beauty, since Woolf draws the unification between her language and entry into a unity with the world's community. However, on another level, it aligns with Weil's own connection between "love of the order of the world," and "love of our neighbor," both of which imitate the divine love which created "us and all our fellows" and the "order of the

universe of which we are a part” (Waiting for God). In locating the whole of humanity within the material of artwork, Woolf employs a spiritual model of *loving* the order of the world (the words, the music) and by metonymic association, loving her neighbor (“all human beings”) (72).

II. Toward the Real: Writing the Illusion

When he left that first time, for a week, he snuck back into the house one night and left the dreamcatcher on my pillow. It was a fight about his driving: *Just not so aggressively when your daughter is in the car*. And he replied by saying nothing. Looking away from her, containing it. He walked out, slammed the door.

When he left, he hadn’t gone to a hotel. Mom didn’t know where he stayed and she never found out. It was this fact that disturbed me: he left and returned without any explanation. I was thirteen when this second conversation happened, in the heights of preadolescent certainty, and I knew very well intimacy meant *knowing everything about someone*. I had had a boyfriend for 1.5 months. He told me everything there was to know. She had been married 11 years, how could she *not know*?

And his driving was scary. He drove like the road was composed of creepy old men, and he was sent to banish them. And yet he would taunt and mutter to himself, becoming another man of the road. I remember being afraid, not of my father, but of the parts of it: his voice, my mother’s expression, the abrupt jerks of our bodies. When he left the dreamcatcher, my father’s anger was already strange to me. I imagined it as a private, solid mass within him. It slowed him down, and weighed on our conversations, but he never turned and showed it to me, and so it remained impersonal, a surface.

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For Woolf, this process of loving also expressed in terms of the relationship between the surface of living and the qualities of its underside: “behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern,” the pattern signifying “some real thing behind appearances” (72). The contours of this process are expressed in one of Weil’s metaphors for decreation: “appearance clings to being,” and the sensation of “pain alone can tear them from each other” (39). In Weil’s terms, Woolf’s cotton-wool *clings to* the substance of daily life, and the violently felt experiences physically tear them from each other. While Woolf’s philosophy appears to align itself with this process, the shocks do not expose some invisible reality beneath appearances, rather a perceptible world of order appears behind the muffled cotton wool. After the division of appearance and being, Woolf finds some new order of appearance, which is whole, a work of art—and therefore, perceived as a form of Weil’s *beauty* of the world. To return to the temporal structure of feelings, this suggests the potential to move out of a feeling, and perceive the network from which it sprung, and with which it remains connected. In Woolf’s own words, this is not expressed as a quality of feeling, but rather a shift in perception: “I see this when I have a shock.” Therefore, Woolf’s experience of *feeling* the shock opens her eyes to perceive another form of reality, the world as “work of art.” The real world is equated with the world of perception, and the suffering of the violent moments reveal the contours of its beauty.

And yet, if the world is a work of art, is there some artist figure behind the door, placing the finishing touches on it? Woolf does not think so. She vouches for the purity of the text that Hamlet represents *the truth* of the world; we do not need to look to “Shakespeare,” and we “certainly and emphatically” do not need to seek out God (72). This correlation between the author and figure of God is essential to Woolf’s self-conception. In perceiving this new order of the world, she looks towards the text, where she finds an effortless link between her and “all

humans.” Therefore, Woolf is not the author of the work, inasmuch as she is a merely a participant. In Woolf’s explanation of the process she demonstrates Weil’s theory of “language [as] a bridge crossing over the moments of time” (Winch 51). As she closes the description, the process of *putting it into words* constructs a metaxic bridge surmounting the individual impressions. In her final description, Woolf identifies herself with the language (“we are the words”), locating her sense of community *with* the world along the linguistic bridge that led her to her present location. She will follow this bridge to its end. Woolf does not enact the final step of Weil’s contemplation to “read God behind order,” and so her philosophy remains at the whims of the world (G&G 136).

In a late entry from Woolf’s diary, she reexamines her project towards reality, wondering if “perhaps this is my gift: this perhaps is what distinguishes me from other people” (Writer’s Diary 130). In Woolf’s acknowledgment of her own distinct project, she clarifies her authorial intention towards reality, sketching it as particularly *hers*, distinguishing her from the other-people who compose the world as “work of art.” Woolf notes this in her private diary, where unlike her memoirs, she does not exactly sketch out the foundation of her past, but outlines the tendencies of the present. The work of her movements towards reality are addressed in a parenthetical in Martha Nussbaum’s *The Window*, where Nussbaum notes the “hubristically ambitious” work of the authorial voice, whose “detachment from ordinary activity” could be attained “perhaps, only by a god” (The Window 735).

This is counterintuitive to Woolf’s project, which appears to detach itself from ordinary activity in order “to give up being the center of the world,” and unite itself with the world as a world of art (WFG 100, Winch 136). Therefore, Woolf’s writing process treads the fine line between the process of decreation, a mode of self-effacement and the risk of clinging to the

“false divinity with which we were born” (G&G 75). In her diary, Woolf describes her annual August visits spent at Monk’s House where she “entered into a sanctuary; a nunnery; had a religious retreat.” Woolf moves towards her destination; not behind the curtain, but towards this real place “residing in the downs or the sky; beside which nothing matters; in which I shall rest and continue to exist” (WD 130). The possibility of this *real* thing, which leads Woolf towards her pen, and towards which her pen glides—somehow eludes the precision of her descriptions and the shape of her scenes. Thus is the crux of her gift. In her youth at St. Ives, she encountered the first real shock of the violent moments of being, and in her diary twenty years later, she labored to redefine this reality without sketching out a scene, or more generally, to anticipate the future incarnations of such reality. Therefore, reality becomes “something abstract,” which Woolf insists forms *one thing*, and yet can be found “in the downs” or up in “the sky,” and “in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now a daffodil in the sun.”_These various senses merge the forms of beauty embedded in the shocks of living, with another form of reality expressed in the subtle visual phenomena impressing themselves on Woolf’s days.

By contrast, Simone Weil renounces her want, along with the *I*, in the effort towards her destination, which is behind the curtain where God resides. And yet one of Weil’s lasting paradoxes grapples with the presence behind the veil:

A case of contradictions, both of them true. There is a God. There is no God. Where is the problem? I am quite sure there is a God in that I am sure my love is no illusion. I am quite sure there is no God, in the sense that I am sure there is nothing which resembles what I can conceive when I say that word.

Here, Weil approaches a closed door, running up against her medium of expression. In an inversion of Woolf’s philosophy on the values of language in exposing the reality of one’s felt

experiences, Weil speaks to the sanctity of her internal landscape. She claims “my love is no illusion,” while attending to the limitations of its form of reaching towards and entering God. Resembling Weil’s conception of God, Woolf’s efforts to describe her project towards “that which I seek” labors to form some *precise* term for the sparkling, various reality. Like Weil, Woolf knows her *love* for the beauty and order of the world *is* real, even if she is without the terms to fix and *make permanent* the moments of being within it.

The question of *where to* and that of *how to* become inextricably linked in the pages of Virginia Woolf’s *Sketch of the Past*. Woolf does not know exactly what resides behind the closed door, only that it is what she *seeks*. For Weil, her medium of rendering God is *not* the form through which her love is expressed. Language is not the means by which the literal, actual God is elicited; that process only occurs through the love directed towards him. One method by which the love of God is accessed is through the renunciation implied in the contemplation of the beauty. Therefore, “love is a direction,” which through our process of renunciation, directs itself towards the absent God.

* * *

He began gambling when she was pregnant with me. I learned this from reading my mother’s baby journal. They were low on money. Mom was working at a New Age bookstore in Santa Fe, and Dad worked construction jobs.

When I began my Mother’s baby journal: she continually referred to the gambling as *filling something*. The gambling poured into some part of him, the place that music once filled. *Write a fucking song, Dan, be brave*. Therefore, what I regarded in him, as solid, an invasion, she regarded as empty, a longing, which she could not find the substance to help him fill. All I could glimpse beneath my Father’s silence was the pure solidity of rage, and I responded with my own

In Simone Weil's notebooks, she instructs, "it is very dangerous to love God as a gambler loves his game." Love of the game is antithetical to Weil's conception of love of God, which requires we pull away, giving God only "the strict minimum in us" (G&G 54). The gambler loves his game as though his game feeds him, and therefore, he has passed through the realm of order and entered into the domain of the imaginary. Weil admires the gambler's endurance for "watching and fasting almost like a saint." Even as he plays his hand in the quest of gold, he risks losing it. Similarly, in the act of decreation, we must renounce the *I*, divest ourselves of "a personality," in order to pass from our created perspective into the domain of the uncreated. Inside my limited self I occupy the "perspective of creation" that God loves and would love to see. However, I've become a constraint, a closed door, preventing God from peering around the edges: "I act as a screen. I must withdraw so that he may see it." The gambler clings to the *absence* of money, as if it might be the presence of the Good. That is, the gambler fixes his concentration on the door, and with a steady grip on his hand, he closes his eyes, and watches it open. The conditions of reality are dictated by the "false divinity" of the Gambler (G&G 34).

In Weil's world, the gambler may win his game, but the way through has been lost.

* * *

As established with Woolf, the writer also risks holding onto this false image of divinity. When I embarked on this project, I stumbled upon a moment that I could not pass. So, as I had in the past—I thought I might write my way through. If I could write it, then I could *really*, fully feel it. I had nine months to work on the project. I had time to find the feeling.

In the early 1970s, Dad, Don, Jeff, and the other Dan stumbled upon a clearing in the Pochuck Mountain. The clearing was small, barely wide enough to fit four boys, their packs and dusty sleeping bags. Another passerby might have overlooked it, not seeing it as a clearing, but

rather a continuation of the dense forest. However, the boys called it a clearing, and *their* clearing, which they would then borrow every summer for the next thirty years for a day and a night.

Two summers ago, Don Lorvig, one of the original four boys, gave Dad his credit card so he could to fill up the truck for the long drive home. When Don called him two days later, Dad shrugged his small, sly smile and said: “I wouldn’t give a gambler my credit card any day of the week. Even on Pochuck day.”

Dad took a large sum of money from Don. They stopped talking. Then Dad got a call from the other Lorvig brother: Don had died.

An anonymous 911 call was the harbinger of Don’s death. The doctors explained that Don’s heart gave out on the second floor of a Best Western. He had been clean for months, so his family decided to forego the autopsy to check for heroin in his blood.

* * *

“Here.”

I look out the window, but the street remains quiet, with a thick film of dark orange afternoon light coating the rural homes. Finally, the rusty red pick-up labors down Montgomery St. The engine whines, and then stops. Dad steps out of the truck. It’s the summer after Don’s death, and his daughter arranges to spread his ashes over Pochuck Lake. In honor of Don, his by now middle-aged male friends opened up the 43rd Pochuck day to the daughters. Aunt Sasha decided to join Don's daughter and me, for the memorial, which coincided with my birthday.

The night before the trip, we spend the night at our grandparents' stone cottage nestled at the base of the mountains—Adam and Eve. Dad’s anger reemerges, but it's different this time. It

won't stop. Nothing he says makes sense, and yet everything does. He tells us he could and might kill someone—and it appears that he has.

I don't believe he would literally kill someone. I don't think his mind works like that. In her baby journal, my Mother wrote "Dan and I have been fighting about gambling. He accuses me of being American and literal in my attitude toward it." Dad's love was often enacted in symbols. When my mother and I would come home from trips with Mom's boyfriend, Dad would have mowed our small lawn, and the screens would be replaced with storm windows.

My father's suggestion that he killed his friend is not a *violent shock* of the immediate order, nor is it a tragedy, but it is a small opening. For the first time, I see the corroded interior. I try to contain, and remember each word from the fight he had with his sister, Sasha. Awful as it was to overhear, I have the sense that it will one day be useful, and that, like Woolf, I'll find the appropriate scene in which to place it.

A week later, on a train to meet a boy, I begin to write the scene. I am suddenly confident. I will simply describe the literal progression, and out of that I will see my father—building my own metaxu between his shouted line *I don't have to take care of anyone ever* through to the symbolic line of his care. I know it is there.

The train jostles my computer, and the scene comes out in a stiff, clunky sentence. It is the first line I write for my project, my first attempt to make something tangible, to unveil the traces of rage and shame in the fine pointed edges of *Times* font. I describe the dining room table: dark wood, a bottle of raspberry seltzer, two ears of corn. I lose the line of thought, and shut my computer. I look outside at the long even lines of the passing lumber yards. A bulldozer drops a few dozen planks of wood. I want to feel the wood in my hands. I know it would feel good, but I don't know what I would make with it.

* * *

For my birthday, Dad had brought a batch of Green Chile enchiladas. *A taste of New Mexico*, he said as we drove to the grandparents. *You can share them if you want.*

Later, Sasha whispered (while he sat across the room, looking down at his phone) that he must've lost a lot of money gambling. It would explain the explosion, and the fact that he hadn't given me a real gift. But I had thought that the enchilada was real. It tasted real, equal parts tangy and spicy, slowly warming. After dinner, although full and waiting for dessert—we each took a piece. After the fight, Zoe and I silently put the dishes away. There's one piece of enchilada left in the Tupperware. There's no room for it in the fridge. I check the compost, and find it empty save for the morning's coffee grinds. But I want to throw it out, in the trash can that is reserved only for non-recyclable waste. I walk to the trash can, and standing over it—I take a bite.

Chapter 2

Before the Beautiful: Turning Away from the Surface

We are under the impression that the beautiful object is behind the closed door. If the world is a “closed door,” then the body that navigates the world approaches the door in search of an opening (Weil 145). In the previous chapter, I examined Woolf’s discovery of the properties of language and explanation as a form of metaxu opening up violent “constraints” to the world into entryways and an understanding of the *beauty* and *reality* of the world. Now we can reevaluate the closed door, where we begin to perceive it as a reflection of ourselves and the properties of our world.

In this chapter, I will examine a second tier of Simone Weil’s theory on the contemplation of the beautiful, the sense that “we want to get behind beauty but it is only a surface” (Waiting for God 105). In the memoirs of Virginia Woolf and diaries of Etty Hillesum, beauty is treated as an *obstacle* to truth and meaning. There are two tiers to this problem, first the desire to reach inside and extract meaning *within* or *behind* the beautiful surface, and second, the desire to ingest the world’s beauty, in order to merge oneself with the *whole* of the external world. Both efforts express the desire to tug open the closed door by force.

In *Only a Promise of Happiness*, Alexander Nehamas speaks of beauty in terms of our *attraction* to the beautiful sight. He emphasizes our desire to continue interacting with the beautiful, and therefore to discover what our lives might look like were we to invite this beautiful presence to stand beside us. For Nehamas, this impulse does not lead us to a form of knowledge beyond, or beneath the beautiful surface, but rather functions as a *continuation* of our pursuit of beauty. We have the sense that other experiences—safety, love, understanding—will be

exemplified by the person we find beautiful, and find the *promise* of such to be a latent quality of the beautiful.

He offers a scene to illustrate the experience. You are at a party, keeping your eyes level as you move around the crowd, surveying the faces for a new or familiar sight. Suddenly, you stop. A “shock of delight” ripples through you. Nehamas insists this reaction is warranted because for a moment “you are looking at beauty” (53). After this universal moment of shock in which we move from the second person address of *you*, (in which the reader is invited to experience the beautiful) to the use of *I*, Nehamas tells us how his moment of shock gives way to a moment of stasis: “the desire to keep looking.” Finally, the look gives way to a step forward, where he might approach the sight, and “get to know you better from up close” (53). In this shift, the reader *becomes* the beautiful sight, as Nehamas expands on “my judgment that *you* are beautiful” (my emphasis) (55). He begins to approach us, inviting us into his life, and contemplating our merit, and then he stops. He will see whether the beautiful can deliver what it has promised.

Nehamas offers a secular, and inherently *personal* alternative to the contemplation of beautiful. Simone Weil’s theory of beauty poses an inversion, where the contemplation of beauty and order of the world instructs a course of detachment from the material world. We are to understand the beautiful in terms of the beauty of God. This relation to the world’s beauty initiates our love of God, as “we unite ourselves to God this way, we do not approach him” (149). We may desire to approach him, but we must “fasten ourselves” to such a desire and remain at our distance (G&G 23).

Are we to be found beautiful? The other level to Nehamas' method is the delicate risk that the beautiful "glance" does not extend into a beautiful exchange. If we avert the eyes of Nehamas, and enter into the body of the beautiful, we can locate a concurrent experience of the beautiful person being evaluated. In the domain of romantic love, Weil's mode of contemplating the beautiful appears no longer sufficient. Instead, we must approach the beautiful, and search out a face that reciprocates the gaze of our love. This mode of perceiving the beautiful gives way to a need to *touch* and engage with the sight, and moves in the direction of sensual love.

The experience of beauty is an *invitation*, beckoning you to find the opening. But what creates shame in us? When the promise of beauty fades, and the watcher turns away from the sight. It's as if the beautiful object is no longer concealed—once it comes out of hiding, it might remain beautiful, but it no longer attracts the watcher. Nussbaum attributes such experience to the "sense we ought to be whole" paired with knowledge "we are not" (Nussbaum 183). These perceptions create a sense of shame as they cannot reconcile the lines of the beautiful with the whole of the individual. When our attraction to the sight (and its possibilities) fades, what remains of beauty is a *mere* expression of the surface.

The contemplation of one's own face, or the face of a friend, lover, or stranger represents a personal dimension to the contemplation of the beautiful. What are the implications of revealing such shame in the public form of the memoir, or for Etty Hillesum, the private form of her diary? Beyond this paradigm, I will examine Hillesum's and Woolf's attempts to find entryways through beauty, particularly in attempts to read into and through the beautiful surfaces and step into the realm of the depths, where the reality of the world resides. Finally, in the course of Virginia Woolf's and Etty Hillesum's pathways onto the plane of the beautiful, they discover a method of *stopping* before the beautiful, and renouncing further entry into it. After all, Weil

insists “distance is the soul of the beautiful” (G&G 149). I will examine three forms of the intersection between beauty and shame, each of which begins with an invitation: first, to contemplate one's face in the looking glass; second, to search out in those features cultural ideals of a beautiful face; and lastly, to witness the reflection of one's face in the gaze of an *other*. These forms of beauty are rooted in momentary experiences of the beautiful, and can be examined as youthful beginnings with beauty—even when they are located in their adult incarnations, and continue beyond the first few knocks on the door of beauty.

I. The Screen of Divinity.

In the back row of the corner movie theater in Carousel Mall, Jordan Hines was my first boyfriend. We were not alone, but surrounded by an army of thirteen-year-olds spread throughout the back row, guarding each other. We were watching a rom-com. All the boys were long, lanky limbed kids who slid past the ticket-collectors, sprinting down the aisles and crash-landing into their seats. They are on the brink of adolescent rebellion, which will consume them in their high school years. The girls were the girls, quiet, serious, entangled in each other's lives.

I liked the movies, I didn't have to think of things to say. And that day, Jordan liked me. As we sat there, I felt something framing my face. Without turning my head, I glanced over at him. He was looking over at me. For a moment, I felt what he was seeing: my face in the low light, my quiet framed by the rom-com banter. I looked back at the screen, where so-and-so was crying, walking through the city alone, as the soundtrack led her on. But Jordan kept looking, lifting himself out of the fifteen minutes of despair between the first false-happiness and the happy-enough ending. I felt him pulling me too, but kept my eyes fastened to the screen.

I followed the woman on the screen, but I could still feel the warm pulse of his eyes. When I returned home, I put on the mixed-tape I'd made him, and things quieted down. In the

glint of the computer screen, I caught sight of my face. Around me, there were poems written in sharpie permanently marking the walls, a thick red comforter, and clothes heaped in the corner.

The form of beauty represented by the image of the face can often be gleaned from the chiseled look of a movie star, whose desirability in contemporary culture is associated with the commercialization and commodification of the world's beauty. In Speaking of Beauty, Denis Donoghue traces the evolution of this relationship in comparing historical cinematic representations of the female face. Through comparing the “absolute difference” of Greta Garbo's screen-time to the modern movie star, such as Julia Roberts, who appears “existential, contingent, coming and going,” Donahue traces the loss of the onscreen divinity to a place of a bourgeois visibility (Donahue 106). Therefore, we are no longer attracted to what we *cannot* see in the star's face. We can see nearly everything, and on the visual level, we can emulate the movie star's way of being in the world. In the movie theater with Jordan I watched Jennifer Garner's face lit up by the screen-light, a modern incarnation of beauty, where “no secret is concealed in her eyes” (106). Jordan was pissed he sprung 10 bucks on the movie, and I agreed. This knowledge did not stop me from loving Jennifer Garner, who I was certain was more intelligent, and intriguing than her character in the film. There was a reason she'd chosen to be seen through this movie, we simply could not see it.

Years later, after a drawn out break-up, I browse the aisles of the Charlotte Airport's *Charlotte's Gotta Lot*. I stop before the shining covers of Travel Reads:

Jennifer Garner on the Rebound!

Her smile is wide, her hair is blown back and the cover promises to reveal *all* in this EXCLUSIVE look into her life: “kids, men, and Ben” (Vanity Fair March 2016). She looks at

me with such unassuming warmth that I have to buy her. I have to see what's beneath this first image: a series of other images, a story, and I have to know how the story ends.

I do not know what this story will give me, but I am certain that I want it. I want to open up the magazine, and see what else the face might show me. I know it will feel something like her close up in the final scene of the movie, where we placed ourselves inside of her. It will be a series of jaunts across the screen. I have a real book beside me. I do not want to be seen with my eyes plastered to the magazine.

* * *

After school, ten of us sat on the pavement of our elementary school playground. The pavement had been freshly painted with a map of the United States. The paint was made to look like chalk, a gradient of pastels spread across the nation. New York State, where we lived, was a soft tangerine color. Graffiti decorated the perimeter of the map. The *L* from *LAMA's Bloods* touched the edge of Florida. We're all talking, deliberating whether we want to go back to Brueggers Bagels or up to the park for a game of rugby. On every half-day we play rugby, we chase and tackle each other. We're young enough for the girls and the boys to play together, but old enough to feel each other touching.

Jolene and I stay back with Alex. He tells us he can get us on the back of a motorcycle. As we walk up the steep side of my hill, we feel taller, only stopping to catch a few breaths of air from our incessant giggling. We love him so much, and we lean into each other—still giggling, so we don't have to think about which of us he loves back.

When we reach the top of Maryland Avenue, my house is empty. Jolene eats goldfish

from the carton, and we put on a movie. I take out a notebook half-filled with my Mother's poems, and begin to write: "*Dear Diary*. He is *really* beautiful. I don't know how to describe it. I just have this sense that he knows me."

Alex Zink was beautiful. He was of Filipino descent, and had dark almond shaped eyes, and sculpted arm muscles. We had each been in love with him, softly, and momentarily. He was filled with stories of a violent past, and we listened, unconcerned. Except for the kid whose eyes he gouged out. That one we listened to, but still—guys like Zink live for their stories.

* * *

Jordan wasn't exactly pretty. He had nice hair, and sometimes he wore fitted jeans, which we called his *hot pants* and suspected that he never washed. He loved Jolene and me equally and interchangeably. One day, Jolene wore light blue striped shorts. We both noticed the shape of her thighs, and how her blue veins matched the tint of her shorts. Some kid on the playground said, *I guess you like Jolene today*.

Somehow, in his own way, Jordan won us over. First, me. Then, Jolene. When they first kissed, she described their mouths as *well-fitted*. When we first kissed, his nose grazed my cheek. But Jordan and I talked well, every day after school for hours, and so he decided we should be together.

II. The Shameful Surface

In her early years, the fabric of Virginia Woolf's world was penetrated violently by three shocks from the outside world. Through such shocks, she discovered the potential to peer out of them, and contemplate the beauty of language. Prior to introducing the shocks, she explains another "exceptional" encounter, which carries with it "a long ribbon of scenes, of emotions" (Woolf 67). Following her examination of the structure of feelings, Woolf interrupts her analysis

to offer a scene of feeling she experienced as she stood before the looking-glass in the hall at Talland House:

“By standing on tiptoe I could see my face in the glass. When I was six or seven perhaps, I got into the habit of looking at my face in the glass. But I only did this if I was sure that I was alone. I was ashamed of it. A strong feeling of guilt seemed naturally attached to it. But why was this so?” (68).

Woolf’s relationship to the glass begins with a discovery, becomes a habit, and finally is revealed as a private experience. The impulse that drew her to the glass is not revealed, only the underlying shame produced by the experience. Woolf suggests that the sense might emerge from her tomboy image, where glass-looking went “against our tomboy code,” but decides “my feeling of shame went a great deal deeper.” This sense of depth suggests shame originates beneath the level of the image, and that the feeling exceeds a discrepancy in appearances. After further musing, Woolf finds more compelling possibilities when thinking about her family’s narrative: “my natural love of beauty was checked by some ancestral dread.” Finally, she wonders, “I must have been ashamed or afraid of my own body.” This final possibility extracts her shame from the looking-glass experience, the social and historical dimensions surrounding it, and hones in on the sight of her own body. This last option links the relationship between the image in the looking-glass and the reality of her body, suggesting that the act of *seeing* her body helps her realize her shame in living within it. Woolf was “ashamed of it,” “it” referring either to her role in the experience or to her own body. She says that a feeling of guilt “naturally attached to it,” that is, to the structure of the glass itself. The first instance of *it* thus attaches the shame to Woolf’s embodied experience. The second instance attaches the guilt to the mirror itself, suggesting that the guilt of self-looking is derived from the physical reality of the mirror. As she

traces the origin of the shame “in being caught in the glass,” Woolf initially does not reveal a scene of ever being caught in this looking, and the shame resides only in the anticipation of the onlooker.

Then this act of self-examination poses a barrier. Woolf claims, “I do not suppose I have got at the truth.” More precisely, she has not accessed the reality behind the sensation. This is problematic for Woolf. The looking-glass feeling is in fact devoid of anything violent or *shocking*. In each of the violent shocks, Woolf finds herself penetrated by some intense, inexplicable sensation. The shame Woolf discovered during the looking-glass scene functions within a different model of perception than the violent shocks; and yet both experiences represent the *exceptional* moments that penetrate the foundation of Woolf’s early life.

Each of the violent shocks prompts Woolf’s entry into the *pattern* behind the cotton-wool. In recalling the scene, Woolf attempts to travel beneath the shame and get at *the truth* of it, the pattern behind it, and the reality behind appearances. After her examination Woolf admits: “I do not suppose that I have got at the truth” of *why* she was ashamed (69). This ordering is reversed in the looking-glass scene, where Woolf’s “natural love for beauty,” is checked by her underlying ancestral puritan dread, shame/guilt around self-observation, and fear around the reality of her body. Each of these potential reasons attempts to reach the past reality; however, none of Woolf’s reasons trace the shame to the actual experience of *looking* in the mirror. A possible rereading of the mirror-scene is that although Woolf *feels* the shame “went a great deal deeper” than the realm of images, since the reality of the occurrence is demonstrated by the images of the scene itself. Woolf’s natural love for beauty is complicated by her presiding interest in accessing the real and produces a sense of shame at the discrepancy. Whatever pleasure she derives from the observation of her face is only shameful to the extent that it

represents an experience incongruous with her project towards the order and beauty of the world. Therefore, her self-reflective motions are stymied in their pursuit of a *real* reason for her shame.

Peter Winch connects Weil's contemplation of beauty with the ideal of an "undistorted reading," requiring we "not read what we fear or desire," but attempt to access what "another person, differently situated...is able to read" (Winch 176; Weil, Notebooks 38). This requires the disinterested perception of the object of beauty, something which is complicated in the perception of one's own face. In Woolf's moment before the mirror, her sense of *shame* anticipates the reading of the onlooker. Therefore, the reality of the experience can be observed in this hypothetical reader who catches Woolf and reads *into* her character as she eyes herself before the glass. In recounting the possible historical and situational reasons for the shame, Woolf attempts to give meaning and depth to her impulses toward the surface, and therefore *show* her readers what they could not glean from her face in the glass. She gives her reader the material through which to enter the experience and share in her pursuit to locate an entry-point into the overwhelming surface of the looking-glass.

This process is shameful insofar as it mistakes the image in the glass with "Virginia, herself," where such a conflation of image and identity blurs the necessary line between the domain of "one's body" and the underlying conceptions. In "Decreation," Weil's conception of glass-looking, a woman "adorning herself" in the glass does not feel the "shame of reducing the self, that infinite being who surveys all things" to a *small space*. Weil's woman is performing two acts: observing herself, while adorning her form—presumably with clothing, or make-up. It is an act of vanity. It is also an act of "reducing the self" into the sight visible in the mirror. In terms of Weil's conception of mirror-shame, Woolf's shame suggests that she has a preemptive sense of her own abasement before the image. For Weil this sense of abasement is justified, as it

reveals the disconnect between the self-image and the beauty of God, hidden behind the looking-glass screen. Observing her face in the mirror, Woolf finds her beauty distilled into its *isolated* and complete form. Weil warns of the danger that a beautiful woman “can very well believe she is that” reflection, and therefore confines herself “to being no more than that” (33).

Virginia Woolf’s violent “Moments of Being” are developed out of her encounters with the world of nature and violence, whereas she constructs the shame in relation to herself, and the world’s perception of her. She has added to the complexity of the experience, but the historical depth does not initiate her entry into the pattern behind the sensation. And so she lets the shame remain on its surface level: unexplained (72). Because the shame is connected with the *appearance* of her body, she cannot look beneath the image. The violent shocks and the need to write through them proves that “one’s life is not confined to one’s body and what one says and does,” but rather functions in “relation to certain background rods or conceptions” (73). The first statement equates functions of the body—its feelings, desires, impulses—with the saying and doing of daily life. Behind the passivity of her body is an under-world, composed of visual “background rods,” that can be strung together into a pattern. The background rods of the mirror are attached to the visual plane, which reflect back to Woolf the contours of her face, the potential of an onlooker, and finally, the threat of an underlying face.

Woolf recalls a single dream image that may refer to the looking-glass sensation. She remembers seeing in the looking-glass “a horrible face—the face of an animal—suddenly showed over my shoulder” (69). This hideous sight introduces the first sense of the world-as-perilous, the image of which reflects something back to Woolf that cannot be seen in daylight. Although she has “always remembered the other face in the glass,” she cannot decipher whether “it was a dream or a fact.” Because she cannot decipher the reality of its occurrence, the occasion

In conjunction with these “vanities and fantasies,” a few months later Hillesum recounts a dream about her therapist Spier. Early in their relationship, Spier’s psychoanalysis, palm-reading and spiritual education form the groundwork for Etty’s own spiritual process. A form of her attachment is realized in a dream, where she recalls “a lot of people round a table with [her therapist] S at the head of it” (61). When S suggests Etty should visit with the others, Etty hesitates, deciding she would rather focus on eating her meal. Spier responds with “that famous look of his” (61). Instead of describing the look, which would take “a whole lifetime” to elicit, Hillesum relays what she *reads* within the look: “So that’s what you’re really like, eating is all that matters to you.” In this manifestation of being seen into, Hillesum finds herself caught within S’s gaze, which expresses “exactly how materialistic I am” (62). While Spier’s face eludes description, Hillesum finds her own impulses flatly described by Spier’s gaze. He has seen through Etty and, in the underside of her person, found only a surface revealing the “ordinary” character of a woman who indulges in the food spread before her.

Although the beautiful object is “merely something to look at,” Weil ascribes the weight of our experience before the beautiful to a desire “to feed upon it” (WFG 105). In The Just Balance, Winch highlights the inconsistency of the pursuit to *consume* the beautiful in terms of its relationship to “universal beauty” (Winch 170). Winch proposes that our relation to beauty must be understood in terms of “its relation to the order of the universe.” Metonymically speaking, Winch proposes that it’s grammatically unsound to “manipulate” or “consume” the universe. And yet, there remains a hunger to taste the spread before the watcher, and ingest the various flavors that inhere in the surfaces of the world. Weil ascribes this to the possibility that “vices, depravity, and crime” represent attempts to “eat beauty, to eat what we should only look at” (WFG 105). In Gravity and Grace, Weil notes “Beauty: a fruit which we look at without

trying to seize it.” The fragment expresses Weil’s *ideal* reading of the beautiful, where the watcher has contained the desire to approach and *seize* the experience. Hillesum’s dream places the mirror-shame within a scene, organizing the principles of her desires into various visual categories: a large table, S’s gaze, and the general sense of “other people” (61). Her private fantasy of being lavished in, and thereby consuming the gaze of the onlookers across the table, is literalized in the scene of consuming the meal.

Even so, Spier does not catch Etty in the physical act of eating, but merely finds her in her desire to eat. Immediately, Hillesum rejects her own description of the dream, claiming “it cannot be done” (AIL 61). She continues to describe the realization that “now he has seen through me, knows what I really am like.” In being caught in her mode of consumption, Etty finds herself consumed by S’s gaze, where the sense of being *seen through* realizes the degradation of Weil’s mirror-shame: “being no more than that” (G&G 33). In an entry from some days prior, Hillesum recalls Spier’s critiques of certain analysts for their “lack of real love, their materialism” (AIL 59). Hillesum has already introduced Spier’s personal definition of materialism as the *absence* of real love. Therefore, Hillesum’s desire to love and clearly perceive the world becomes caught in the image of herself, preventing her from peering past the spread of food, and visiting with the “other people” (61). The table filled with food has become a marker of the material world, and the site, which intended to bring together the company to share the meal, exposed the divisions between the material plane and the relationships among it. Although Hillesum already theoretically renounces these values, the dream initiates a space where Hillesum’s attachment to beauty is expressed as void of “real love,” enacted in the expression of her spiritual teacher and romantic partner. Therefore, the renunciation of the desire to seize and taste the fruit allows the beauty of the world to appear before Hillesum.

At the same time, the literal occurrence of Weil's metaphor exposes the limitations of manifesting such an ideal reading in the *real* world. Although Winch proposes we must understand beauty in terms of its relation to the universal, Weil's understanding asks us to consider it in terms of the *edible* world. Although Hillesum's dream demonstrates the shame in the pleasure garnered from a meal, her surrounding entries are testaments to the potential of sensuality to be an expression real love. In a later entry she claims, she exclaims "I sipped (Spier's) breath out of the beaker of his mouth," which feels to Hillesum like "the first time I have really kissed a man (112). Therefore, Hillesum's sense of ingesting Spier's breath becomes the expression of a *real* kiss, and momentary entryway into a real expression of the physicality of their love. This is an entryway into the terrain of erotic love, which surpasses the surface of beauty, and opens up the aspect of the soul "that looks in this world to be satisfied" (Veto 95).

What happens when we look into the mirror? The texture of our bodies appears on the surface of the looking-glass. We desire to appear beautiful in order to unite ourselves with this potential whole. This is the trick of the looking-glass; for a moment, we can glean the image of completion. We have mistaken the shimmer of the looking-glass for the door into the beauty of the world. Are we to turn away from the glass, and return the gaze to the world? We peer into the glint of the door knob, and recognize ourselves. The woman who peers into the looking-glass finds herself paralyzed before it. On the conceptual level, neither Woolf nor Hillesum are convinced they are the woman in the glass. Yet they keep peering within it. She cannot peer long enough to perceive the way through, for as she continues to look, her face will continue to sheepishly return the gaze. She has become caught in something unreal, some emblem of the presiding *I*.

Look away from the glass, Weil would ask of you. Then, you will see it.

III. Page as Entryway, Literary Encounters with the Beautiful.

As demonstrated by Woolf's efforts, there are two realities the mirror will not show us. It will not show us *why* we are in the pursuit of a way through, nor will it provide a reason for the shame embedded in the experience. They are imperfect surfaces for garnering a sense of understanding. Dreams can assist in the matter.

Years after the mirror incident, Woolf provides an alternative experience of *reading into* when she happens upon a love letter from her sister Stella's fiancé, Jack. In it Jack muses "there is nothing sweeter in the whole world than our love" (Woolf 105). When she reads the letter from Jack, she immediately puts the page down, "not so much guiltily," but in "a quiver of ecstasy at the revelation" (105). Woolf suggests that her discovery of their romance initiated this *quiver of ecstasy*, surpassing any sense of guilt around prying; the bodily quiver implies she has discovered the sensation of "love between man and woman" (105). On another level, Woolf suggests that the act of peering into others' things was tacitly approved of in their household, because of "the lack of privacy in which we lived." This hyperbolic expression of Jack's love for Stella becomes the threshold through which Woolf measures this form of romantic love.

According to Nehamas' theory of beauty, Woolf has experienced the "shock of delight" inherent in an encounter with the beautiful. Unlike Nehamas, Woolf does not approach the sight. After recounting the sensation, Woolf reveals that she keeps such a sensory discovery within her immediate experience: "still I cannot read words that give me that quiver twice over" (105). Woolf's restraint mirrors the paralysis experienced before the violent shock, interpreted initially as a "blow from an enemy," but in this case the "enemy," or risk of the reading, would constitute a weakening, or shift in the sensory experience. In order for the words to retain such ecstasy, Woolf "never read it again," possibly for fear that a second reading would reveal another layer to

the text, or diminish the intensity of the revelation. This sense extends into her daily life: “if I get a letter that pleases me, I never read it again.” Woolf’s reading pattern places the origin of the sensation within the scene of reading, and therefore the sensation is not embedded in the *meaning* of the text itself but connected to the particular moment of discovery. Therefore, when the world violently shocks Woolf, she retreats, allowing the sensation to rest and her mind to return; in contemplation she revisits the experience. Alternately, when she finds herself before the mirror, she continues to look into the glass, and beyond the physical examination she attempts a conceptual study of the contours of the experience. However, in the rare moments of “bodiless” joy, she does not risk rereading the signs, or finding the *meaning* of the words beneath the sensation they provide. Therefore, a small crux of Weil’s definition of the beautiful is nestled in Woolf’s discovery of love-feeling. Through reading into the surface, Woolf has stumbled upon a sensation that she desires to hold onto and not extract the meaning, or potential explanation behind it. Woolf catches herself in the moment of reading, momentarily wrapping herself in the “bodiless” ecstasy of the engagement, where there lies *nothing sweeter than our love*.

In her examination of looking-glass shame, Woolf notices her ability to feel “ecstasies” as long as they are “disconnected with my own body” (68). This form of love is disconnected with any mode of being seen, perceived or touched. Rather, Woolf finds an entryway into the beauty of this linguistic, bodiless expression of love. Therefore, Woolf’s desire not to look *beneath* the text represents an encounter with the beauty of the world that *stops* Woolf, in awe and regard for the passing quality of the sensation.

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In the Barnes & Noble on Erie Boulevard, we decided we'd each buy a copy of *Twilight*, just to see what it was all about. None of us had boyfriends yet. We knew it was trashy, but if we read it together it was harmless. It kept us quiet as we sat beside the purple flames of the electric fireplace of Barnes & Noble. Back at home, I continued. It poured rain outside, and I lay on my side on our red couch, slowly navigating the curves of the plot.

I turned the page, Edward grasped Bella and I learned abruptly that I was in love with Jordan Hines. I know this now because I noted it in the only diary I remembered to keep. In it, I admitted I couldn't love Jordan the way I loved the vampire in *Twilight*, but while it was a different, less potent substance, it was love and for the time being it would suffice.

We began tentatively dating a month later. We travelled the streets in a pack, stopping by my living room to refuel on Goldfish and raspberries. One afternoon, I walked in on Jordan in my room. He was curled up next to my stuffed llama, turning the page of my silvery spiraled notebook. He shrugged, and said "It's funny, you know, we have so many of the same feelings."

He looked up at me, gangly, posed with my hand on my hip. And I looked right back at him, how calm he looked, with his grubby hair and slight, guilty grin.

* * *

Thus far, we have two forms of attempting to transcend the surface of beauty, first to locate a reason for shame, and second, to understand the reality of beauty. Then, we have a moment of turning away, in attempt to contain the *quiver* of a beautiful discovery. Later in *Sketch of the Past*, Woolf recalls another moment of reading, where she opens the English songbook the *Golden Treasury*, and begins to read aloud to Vanessa. As she reads, she suddenly senses she "understood" the poem, although "which it was I forgot." She recalls:

It was as if it became altogether intelligible; I had a feeling of transparency in words when they cease to be words and become so intensified that one seems to experience them; to foretell them as if they developed what one is already feeling. I was so astonished that I tried to explain the feeling. “One seems to understand what it’s about,” I said awkwardly (SOTP 93).

Woolf relays a second sudden revelation through the reading process. In contrast to the shock of ecstasy in reading Stella’s diary, which Woolf is *stopped* before, here, she extends the moment into an attempt to classify and explain the sense of discovery. In her use of the passive voice, Woolf universalizes the experience, employing the general *one* to describe her particular sensory experience. The boundary between the words and their representative meaning dissolves, as Woolf locates the motions of her feelings in the language itself. When she attempts to render the intensity of the connection, the very faculty that she has encountered (the beauty of language) begins to falter, as she tentatively guesses at how to communicate the sensibility. Weil would call this clumsy gesture evidence of a direct encounter with the beautiful. In the example of a beautiful poem, Weil insists “the word is there because it is suitable that it should be” (WFG 113). This reveals the poem is “beautiful, that is to say the reader does not wish it other than it is” (113). Further diverging from the love-sense embedded in her sister’s diary, this reading experience does not introduce to Woolf a sensation *outside* of the reading experience. Instead, Woolf finds her emotional landscape unfolding throughout the reading experience, beckoning in Woolf the sense that “poetry was coming true” (93). This final reading experience represents another encounter with the beauty of the world, leaving her inarticulate before it. Woolf is unable to develop her own correlating explanation for the emotional explanation unfolded by the text.

This moment initiates her creative faculty—but Woolf does not yet have the critical landscape, nor vocabulary through which to explain the poem, nor construct her “philosophy of mine.”

* * *

In Biology class, Jordan passed me a thick wad of paper. The letter was eight pages long, with various entry points. He recalled there was a moment during that shitty movie where he looked at me and felt *fully content*. For the first time in our note-passing, I was suspicious of this revelation. I knew the exact moment, and I could even sense the feeling. But I did not know why he was telling me, it was nothing I had given him. I did not know what it meant. The handwriting of the letter was his usual slanted scrawl; thick black ink bled through each page.

Two weeks later, I ended things with Jordan. We remained close friends. The break-up was not directly related to the letter, but it was connected. We were only thirteen and so I believe it meant I like you, *that was a cool night*. But I interpreted it as an equation of the face with the underlying emotional experience. Wasn't *I* beneath the face? There was a note of expectation alongside the surface of the face. It was as though he looked at me, looking for something beautiful, and when finding it, he felt steadied, and kept safe. I kept the image, and tucked it away with the letter. The feeling was fleeting, a false promise.

Jolene and him started things up, and when they went to the movies, they went alone—just the two of them. They smoked together after school, and snuck into each other's houses late at night. When I talked about other guys, Jolene shrugged. She said it never got boring. You always think it might, and then you notice something new.

* * *

Pages ago, I misspoke. I cannot remember who was in the movie. I thought it was Jennifer Garner, but now I'm not so sure—the dates don't align. If I had chosen the movie, she

would have been the star. I loved her, and I did not care if the love was false, or surface; because it was a simple, private form of love.

I let go of the image of Jordan and me. I let go of Jordan altogether, until I first read Simone Weil. It was in American Literature course at Bard College, and it read, “we want to get behind beauty, but it is only a surface.” I thought, Jordan. I saw us both in the crowd of thirteen-year-olds, our faces lit and mouths’ slightly ajar.

Weil wrote “Beauty always promises, but it never gives anything.” It promises us a glimpse of what is behind the door. In his lecture *A Promise of Happiness*, Nehamas establishes the cause of beauty to *fade* when it “can promise nothing it has not given already” (Nehamas 205). In Nehamas's formulation, the promise of beauty and the fact of what it has given become caught in the past tense, and any motion to continue toward the receding beauty is stopped. The promise of beauty has worn out, revealing the familiar lines of a closed door.

Inside the magazine, Jennifer is spread throughout four pages of images, and two pages of text. I read the article all the way until the final black star signifying the end. I don’t remember a word of it. I suspected that would be the case—but I had to reach the end.

A few months ago, I found it, caught in the crevice between the bedframe and the wall. It was covered in a thin layer of dust. I flipped through it. Jennifer noted she was not in fact on the rebound. She had not been touched in months.

I tossed it our recycling. The bin was full, spilling over. So I stepped into my roommate’s slippers, and carried it out into the wet dawn. The air is light, full of a familiar scent. Back inside, I gather three books—Woolf, Hillesum and Weil, and prepare for the day.

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I remember sitting in the movie theater, and waiting for the lights to dim, and the final movie-goer to shut the door. Each time, I thought I could predict the moment and sense the precise *thing* before the lights dimmed. There would be some shift in the stale air of the room and then we would feel it. The movies would teach us something: how to sit (not quite touching) and to love the one on the screen. That's how I thought it would be, waiting for him to touch me. When the lights dimmed, he would touch me. I looked around, with shy, squinting eyes for an image to crystallize the shift. But suddenly, it was all dark.

Interlude

In Advanced Freshman English, Mr. Jones required eight minutes of silence at the beginning of each class. In those eight minutes, the class would transcribe three new vocabulary words off the board: Astute, Benevolent, Cantankerous.

One class, he interrupted the 8 minutes of silence for one minute of wisdom. His wisdom was plentiful and various: corporeal punishment can be useful on occasion, wait two years into marriage to give birth, college is absolutely not for everyone. If we ever meet Jennifer Aniston (another modern beauty), we must send her over to him. This particular piece of wisdom was a statement: *One* of you will die violently and suddenly before graduating high school.

It was the only time Mr. Jones' invoked the singular: the exceptional one. We had all read Harry Potter, or at least seen the first three movies. We had watched American Idol, America's Next Top Model, and Survivor. Life was about being moving forward, or being sent home. We understood what it meant to be chosen, and what it meant to be voted—or killed—off.

* * *

After high school, Jordan stayed in Syracuse where his business dealing pot was thriving. Jolene and Jordan had broken up two months ago. He is less handsome than ever. He still reads every night, but when he smokes, he no longer feels high. My first night back from college, we walk along the path of our elementary school.

As we walk, two other people neared. One shouted:

“Ayy, where's the party?”

Jordan glanced at me, and grinned:

“I've got it right here.” He sprinted across the street, dangling the eighth of weed. I watch the vague motions between them. They lean into each other, close, but not quite close enough to

kiss. And the one in black, his hand leaves his pocket, and slides something toward Jordan. He steps closer, and breathes in Jordan's face.

“Does it gotta be this way man?”

Jordan drops all he's got in the boy's hand. He repeats the phrase to me when he makes it back across street. He stands proud as he recalls it, as though the statement is entirely his. It is as though before the rage, even before the trembling, he needs to feel listened to. Running back towards me, I noticed how pale and boyish he looked. The arch of the street lamp lights the whole of his face—almost handsome again, his grin still intact.

* * *

When I first meet Tina, I stand naked, on a podium. She paints me. After class, she pulled me aside and whispered, *your face is so familiar*. Then, she offered me a week's worth of work for her Portraiture in Clay workshop.

I spend the summer of 2015 on Cape Cod, interning at a nonprofit writing workshop center. All summer, I worked on a poem about daydreams—but it wasn't going anywhere. I write each morning, and am surrounded by writers doing the same. It was the summer Ben Affleck cheated on Jennifer Garner. Some nights, I read about the scandal. All the interns modelled for local artists on the side. In Jim Peters' class we slip on the bodies of the intimate—all his portraits were set in the bedroom. We remain completely still, and my feet go numb against my partner.

I could go home, and directly to the hospital. But instead, I stay and walk into Tina's classroom. It's a group of retirees, already slapping at their clay mounds. Tina places a skull replica on a cylindrical container of pretzels. They are impatient with demonstrations, ready to touch their hands to the clay. They look at me, and sigh. And I look at the skull, how delicately

everyone handles it, slowly they lift it from its stand, cradling it—looking for the face inside all that matter.

I have two jobs: stillness and obedience. But I can do nothing to help the artists. I can only sit, the promise of their making process. My senior year of High School, I had taken a drawing course. They were always portraits, gestural imitations of a photograph—and I would spend the whole of the semester on one face. They were very direct imitations. After class one spring, Jordan looked over at my drawing, and said *Janis*. I was so surprised—I didn't think he could see.

During my break, she directs their attention back to the skull, where she traces the geometry of the lines. She shows them how to gently slap the clay in an effort to tease out the shape of the jawline. Then she lifts the skull and opens up the pretzels for us to share.

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I remember the first fight we all watched. In fifth grade Tremel Raymie got beat by that other kid whose name I've forgotten. The other kid laughed in Tremel's face. Tremel kept shaking his head, and then began shoving the other kid. I remember how natural it looked—from laughing to beating, and how even in its speed, I knew exactly when the fight would begin. Afterward, the desk lay sideways.

After the fight, we all sat around comparing notes. It didn't feel malicious, or gossipy—we simply wanted to remember the facts.

But then I remember another fight. It was the first fight I saw between two women, and it was in Mr. Jones' classroom. Deja was yelling at Martina as usual, but suddenly there was a crack in her voice. The front of row of empty chairs all fell together in a line.

I jumped out of my seat and stood behind my desk. Mr. Jones ran to the center of the room, and pulled them apart. He kept shouting *not in my classroom*. It all happened in succession, and by the time security arrived, I was back in my seat. Mr. Jones had a small gash above his eye, and the red in his cheeks made him look young. I felt the heat in mine. I can still see myself standing outside of the fight, tall, paralyzed.

* * *

The last time I had seen him was around the time he was almost stabbed. I was in Syracuse for the week, staying alone at my house at the top of Maryland Ave. I walked into my room after a party, to find one of our yearly bats spinning around the terrain. I shrieked and ran. When he got there, the bat was hiding. We fell asleep on top of the red comforter. Though we both heard soft fluttering, we lay very still, and kept quiet. He relayed a recent dream that Jolene had killed him—she put her hand directly through his chest, and he shattered into slices that coated her carpet.

I didn't tell him that once Jolene had kissed me, drunk at a party. It was like she was kissing traces of him on me, or extracting them from me. We stumbled out of the bathroom together, tiptoeing our way back into the darkness of the dancefloor.

* * *

None of the girls were there—not Jolene, not me. It was the usual crew, the kids who stayed around 'Cuse for trade school, or picking up odd jobs and bumming around Westcott Street. Then there were a few stragglers who were home for the summer.

One of the boys from my street (the clean, false heart-throbs) noticed Jordan stumble out of his house. His shoulders were soaked in blood. He was coherent, telling everyone how to proceed.

Westcott attacker gets 9 years for brutal stabbing he was too high to remember

(Syracuse.com).

Jordan would live. Alex Zink had wrapped his hands around a girl's neck, and Jordan had told him to leave. Then blackness. Jordan's crew—Mike, D, and Rich locked Alex Zink and his knife in Jordan's room. Beautiful Alex wiped his hands on the walls—D called it drawing, Mike said he was writing his name. 9 stab wounds to the face, neck and head. One year for each wound.

Chapter 3

The Lines of the Tragic: Forms of Affliction and Beauty in *The Lost Cat* and *An Interrupted Life*

We have been confronted with the temptations to approach, enter or consume the truly beautiful. But, we have been told to keep our distance. As established in the previous chapter, Weil urges the art of renunciation, to remain in sight of the “fruit which we look at without trying to seize it” (Gravity and Grace 150). The experience of the beautiful is mirrored in another form of patient contemplation: “an affliction which we contemplate without drawing back” (150). In this way, beauty and affliction must be attended through an identical navigation of detachment and attention. They are alike, primarily in “the attitudes they make us adopt towards the real” (Veto 101). Affliction is an imperfection description. There is no exact translation of the French *malheur* into an English phrase, but Weil renders it as a delicate mixture of “physical pain, distress of soul, and social degradation” (81).

In *Decreation*, Weil poses “how could I ever think of an affliction too great?” I want to pose a similar question about the smallest affliction. According to Weil, the “wound of an affliction” tears the surface, forming an opening to the knowledge of “human misery” (G&G 35). This very knowledge of our condition is the “door of all wisdom” (35). Therefore, the penetrating wound of an affliction represents an opening into a form of knowledge, leading us to stand before another door. Like the door towards beauty, the door of all wisdom remains closed, even when in our affliction we approach it. In this chapter, I want to consider affliction not in terms of the scale or depth of the wound, but rather the breadth of the *openings* it affords, and the potential *beauty* and *reality* gleaned from forced, sudden encounters with the affliction of the world.

In Holland in March of 1941, Etty Hillesum began a diary at the suggestion of her psychoanalyst in order to organize some of the jolting sensations of her daily life. She kept it at her small desk, covered with “pinecones, vases of flowers, and books” (viii). Etty Hillesum’s diary entries span the course of her days, her fluctuations of temperament and conflicting attachments to the material world. After a year of devout diary-keeping, Hillesum was detained in the Westerbork Transit Camp. Her diaries become both a representation of the most intimate revelations of her private life and a public document, providing us with her particular reading of the events of the Holocaust. The world closed the door, and Etty Hillesum, along with her immediate and national community were locked inside the Westerbork transit camp as they waited to be shipped off to extermination camps throughout German-occupied Poland. Deprived of immediate agency and material goods, Hillesum reached for her internal resources, establishing the authority of her internal world, and the *beauty* within the haunting landscape of Westerbork.

Before addressing Hillesum’s concept of beauty, we might consider the relationship between Hillesum’s spirituality and Simone Weil’s own form of mysticism. In *Concerning the Our Father*, Simone Weil addresses the epithet of Matthew 6:12, “And forgive us our debts as we have also forgiven our debtors,” where she equates the forgiveness of debts with “spiritual poverty, spiritual nakedness, death” (WFG 149). In her equation of nakedness with poverty and death, Weil emphasizes a form of nudity disconnected from the frame of the body. Throughout her metaphysics, Weil is consumed with the task to “see things in their naked reality,” which can be achieved only by cultivating the “perfect detachment” (G&G 52). In an early entry, Hillesum warns against tendencies towards a “vague sort of mysticism,” for things must be “stripped down to their naked reality” (143). In contrast with Weil’s interest in “naked spirituality,” Hillesum’s

naked *reality* retains the contours of a physical form. This naked reality can be accessed by “crystal clear honesty,” where the honesty forms a transparent surface through which the *reality* can be gleaned. Hillesum segues into a discussion of prose-style, where she admits to longing to compose “immediate aphorisms,” rather than the “plain and clumsy” dialect of a diarist (143). Where Weil seeks such reality through the process of renunciation, a “nakedness of spirit,” Hillesum refers to a literal image of *stripping*, undoing, and exposing the nakedness of things. This process requires Hillesum to exert effort to make things naked, as they are not inherently naked, but must be stripped and revealed to her. Hillesum’s process requires something to be removed from the surface, whereas Weil’s process requires only a shift in perception. Both Hillesum and Weil’s writing are efforts at expressing their love for God. The texture of Weil’s aphorisms resist employing the analogies and metaphors of the physical world, as she attempts to empty the linguistic form of any traces of the jagged lines of the body. Hillesum’s writing, however, might attempt to transcend embodiment, but ultimately relates to God within the terms of the physical and sensual world—particularly through the mode of touch, and gestures.

* * *

In the fall of 2007, on the outskirts of Bard College, contemporary American novelist Mary Gaitskill lost her cat Gattino. Eight years later, on the third floor of Bard’s Olin Hall I was assigned her essay, "The Lost Cat." This is mere coincidence. If I were to give meaning to this, I would risk entering the terrain of illusions.

Similarly, in "The Lost Cat," when Mary Gaitskill briefly references the philosophy of Simone Weil, she reformulates Weil’s writing on *Illusions* for its contemporary incarnation: “magical thinking,” the risk of mistaking one’s dreams and deceptions for the world of reality. In the essay, she recounts the loss of her cat, highlighting her own tendency towards the comforts of

magical or illusory thinking, in seeking the guidance of psychics, omens, and signs leading her towards her cherished lost Gattino. This form of mysticism remains clothed in the “trite and stupid” symbols of contemporary material culture. However, Gaitskill’s resolute pursuit of the real within the coded symbols, metaphors and personal conversations she has establishes Gaitskill’s personal form of perceiving the *naked reality* of things. Employing Gaitskill’s own terminology, this naked reality is expressed through the loss of her cat, which Gaitskill proposes “tears” something open within her and exposes the reality around her.

On the same floor of Olin, in the corner room—filled with windows, I found the diaries of Ety Hillesum. Through a lecture series known as *The Courage to Be*, I enrolled in a course called Heroism and Hubris, where we spent the semester conceiving of, tracing, and reimagining the lines between the courageous and the cowardly. On the first day of class, Hillesum’s entries were judged by the class to be more hubristic than courageous in their pursuits towards the *real*. According to the views of many of the students, Hillesum’s entries shied away from reality as they attempted to transcend the immense suffering endured in the internment camps of the Holocaust.

I followed the lines of their logic, but I disagreed. The texture of Hillesum’s writing and personal form of courage remained with me through the course. I will try to offer a justification for Hillesum’s form of courage and her attempts to reinvigorate her relationship to reality within the barriers of the Westerbork camp. Hillesum’s efforts to achieve this form of spiritual awareness retains certain similarities to Virginia Woolf’s nonfiction pursuits, as Woolf writes towards a unification with the *thing itself* located beneath the trappings and sensations attached to the surface of daily life. However, where Virginia Woolf focused on the moments of internal

violence, Hillesum's spiritual awareness is mediated through the macrocosm of a violent landscape located in history.

In comparison to the magnitude of what Hillesum suffered in the concentration camp, it may seem odd for me to try to trace parallels between Gaitskill's and Hillesum's experience. But while the loss of Gaitskill's cat is a relatively small event, her loss also ripped through the fabric of her internal world. Much like Hillesum, throughout her essay Gaitskill unpacks the linguistic and social dimensions of her emotional experience. As she retraces familiar pathways, Gaitskill attempts to locate two things: first, her small, one-eyed kitten, and then, the *real* reason why something so minute and ordinary could express itself as a personal tragedy. Gaitskill's chosen mode of explicating that reason is in the form of a memoir that intimately examines the pathways and various motivations of her experience.

Similarly, Etty Hillesum's collected diaries, *An Interrupted Life*, attempts to render the nuanced realities of personal and communal tragedy. On the level of surfaces, both Gaitskill and Hillesum are representing two vastly different forms of tragedy; however both authors critically engage the presumed dimensions of the tragic represented by their personal narratives. Within these justifications, both Hillesum and Gaitskill chronicle the discomfort around a) finding beauty and meaning within tragic occurrences, b) using symbols to extract beauty and meaning from smaller, more ordinary losses, and moments of affliction.

Using Weil's work on Affliction and Illusions, I will examine Hillesum and Gaitskill's efforts towards *the real*, as they explore the affliction of the world and the potential beauty and order residing beneath, within, and often, alongside the experience. In the previous chapter, I alluded to the potential work of eros in scenes which extend beyond contemplation into the terrain of the sensual and the bodily. In Plato's symposium, the priestess Diotima defines Eros as

a form of metaxy (or metaxu) in its function as an “intermediate between the divine and the mortal” (Plato 22). Further, this metaxy forms the “mean between ignorance and knowledge” (22). Resembling Woolf’s metaxic bridge between the violent blows and her subsequent writing process, Hillesum and Gaitskill form metaxic *gestures* between the isolating horror of affliction and its corresponding beauty. Therefore, their work appears to extend beyond the detached contemplation of the beautiful, and into the intimate gestures of Eros. And yet this process does not discount Weil’s contemplation, but rather forms its own metaxu between Weil’s style of spiritual contemplation and the potentials of *sensory* entryways through affliction.

On this last note, Hillesum’s pursuit of beauty and meaning within Westerbork does not *turn away* from the reality of the suffering, but rather exposes another form of reality alongside the physical sufferings of the camp. Gaitskill’s pursuit of illusory, or sentimental means of relating to her immediate world of human and feline relationships, expresses its own limited form of love for and understanding of the order and beauty of her immediate world. They tread the intersection between wisdom and ignorance, and as “lovers of wisdom” they approach the beauty of the closed door. Although we cannot enter the door of wisdom, we may run our fingers against the ridges of the surface.

I. The Chronicles of Affliction

On April 29th 1942, the Germans ordered the Dutch Jews to wear a yellow Star of David on their clothing (National Holocaust Centre). This was the day that Etty Hillesum lost her anonymity as a Jewish woman. In her 8 p.m. diary entry on that day she imagines the recent past when “politics did not touch me” (Hillesum 126). Now, the political landscape had intercepted her immediate world, branding her with her religious identity in an intended “badge of shame” (Star of David). She briefly mentions the ordinance when noting the “touch of nervousness” in

S's voice when he telephones her to see "Well, are you coming over here with your yellow badge?" However, the entry goes on to reflect on the reception of the news in terms of its bearing on her feelings towards S. As the entry progresses, she switches to second person, announcing directly to S, "I am coming over," with her new "pink wool blouse," freshly washed in her "lilac soap" (127). These declarations renounce the object of shame as Etty focuses her gaze on the various colors and scents which she'll drape herself in before entering S's home. She continues to reference objects, relishing the remaining tokens of comfort, as she prepares for S with a renewed sense of their intimacy.

The only break in Etty Hillesum's diary occurs between July 29th and September 5th 1942. During the month-long hiatus, Hillesum voluntarily accompanied the first group of Jews sent to Westerbork transit camp (Interrupted Life 197). On leave from Westerbork, she received the startling news of the sudden death of her therapist and lover, Julius Spier. Spier's death (from natural causes) coincided with the Gestapo's arrival to deport him to Westerbork, where he and Etty had planned to spend their time together. On the day of his death, Hillesum returned to her diary. In her first entry in the aftermath of Spier's death she calls "oh God," relaying the recent events which act as reminders that "a human being has a body, too" (197). In the latter stages of her entries, Hillesum's writing takes on a spiritual gravitas, as she shifts her gaze towards God, whom she intimately and extensively addresses. Following Spier's death, she writes to God of her "growing need to speak to You alone" (198). This shift demonstrates Hillesum's presiding desire to reach *love itself*, the reality of which lies beyond the domain of material objects.

With the passing of Spier and her reentry into the Westerbork Camp, Hillesum is immediately stripped of material and sensual comforts. However, this process only affirms Hillesum's belief in the beauty and meaning of the fraught times.

Two days after Spier's death, she meditates on the memory of the Westerbork barracks, which appeared to her as "the bare palisades of life. Life's innermost framework, stripped of all outer trappings" (207). In her description, Hillesum attempts to expose the "innermost framework" of the Westerbork barrack as a potential metaphor for the structure of life (207). Hillesum's double-edged metaphor merges the material scarcity of the camp with the expansive open space of her desired transcendent plane. The naked palisades lining the camp reveal the transcendent space, which has been stripped of external concerns. However, on another level the palisades form an enclosure, keeping Hillesum within its walls. Hillesum does not push against the barrier, but rather turns inward and seeking out the internal freedoms within the enclosed space.

Exactly a week following Spier's death, Hillesum writes one of her seminal entries describing the intricacies of the shift between the concerns of her private life and her brief time in Westerbork. As a diary writer tracing the mind at work, Hillesum broadens her gaze and attempts to reconcile the conflicting properties of her writing and embodied life. This marks a shift in the spiritual interests of her prose, as her entries become increasingly concerned with transcending the form of her body, and becoming one of the *lilies of the field* surrounding the transit camp:

Someone who managed to read this age correctly would surely have learned just this: to be like a lily of the field... I was sitting at my desk and had no idea what to make of life...And then I was suddenly flung into one of many flashpoints of human suffering. And there, in the faces of people...I was suddenly able to read our age—and much more than our age alone. It suddenly happened: I was able to feel the contours of these times with my fingertips...There was simply one great, meaningful whole (209).

In Hillesum's moment of discovery she bridges two qualities of her desired mode of reading: to enter the natural world, like a "lily of the field," and to physically inhabit the age, and touch the times with her fingertips. This second mode of reading accesses meaning through the sensual perceptions, as Hillesum feels her sense of touch sharpen in her fingertips, and their potential to decipher "like hieroglyphs," the "faces," "thousand gestures" and "life stories" of the inmates. This reading experience converts the scale of this "flashpoint" of human suffering into terms which one of the smallest points of her body—the tips of her fingers—can *feel*, and in feeling, translate the dimensions onto the page. However, this sensation does not guarantee explanation, for after laboring through description, Etty wonders "Will I be able to describe all that one day?" This experience suggests that in Hillesum's entry into "the life within myself," she remains plagued by her desire to sit at the desk, and put down the "living letters" of the camp. This experience allows Etty to *touch* what she considers to be the "naked reality" of the world stripped of its outer trappings, affirming the role of the body within her spiritual practice. At once, it does not initiate a movement *within* the times to access "the few simple words I need" (209). Within her experience of the scale of "the age," Hillesum need only touch the times in order to read them as meaningful. This reveals an alternative mode of reading, in contrast to Woolf's moments of *particular* violent shocks which reveals to her the larger pattern behind her particular moments of suffering.

On the occasions where the "sad circumstances" touch Etty, she advises herself and her reader to "clear a decent shelter for your sorrow." This process is not a matter of *stripping*, as occurs in her perception of objects, but of "giving your sorrow the space that its gentle origin demands" (97). For Hillesum this is not a matter of transforming the sorrow into an object of beauty, but rather *bearing* one's sorrow and in the process, allowing the beauty of the world to

appear. After you have endured such sensation, then you will be able to say “life is beautiful and so rich. So beautiful and so rich that it makes you want to believe in God.” Woolf performs a similar act in response to her violent shocks, however she works with the sense that *she* is making it whole. Even though she is the clear agent in repairing the body, articulating the sense and marking the text, in Woolf’s experience, the *I* is lost in the writing process. For Hillesum, this motion of clearing space within herself allows her to touch the beauty of *life*, enacting her belief in a creator. Life becomes so beautiful that it causes her to see herself as fitting within the whole of humanity. The sorrow of the world does not force her towards a creator, but rather gives her the *space* to want to believe. Further, Hillesum’s evolving personal definition of the contours of love is reinvigorated throughout her experience in Westerbork. As her time in Westerbork progresses, Hillesum wonders how: “heathland surrounded by barbed wire, through which so much human suffering has flooded, nevertheless remains inscribed in my memory as something almost lovely?” (209). The flood of suffering flows through the barbed wire, and is released onto the world, while Etty finds her memory inscribed by the sensation of its *almost* loveliness. In the use of the term “inscribed,” Hillesum finds the heathland physically etched into her memory. The form of the heathland reflects Hillesum’s internal relationship to suffering, where she allows moments of agony to “pass through me.” Thus, Etty finds her own internal processes mapped onto the structure of the environment she is imprisoned by.

There are of course risks associated with this reappraisal of the contours of emotional experience. The sense of puzzled wonder Hillesum directed towards her experience *within* the camp is reflected in the sense of shame she feels towards her private life. In an early entry Hillesum laments, “with all the suffering there is, you begin to feel ashamed of taking yourself and your moods so seriously” (41). Again, she attempts to reconcile the scale of the world’s

suffering with the reality of her internal landscape. However, this earlier attempt to quantify the experience remains on the personal level, as Etty addresses her own particular internal states, instead of a more representative emotional experience. This process contrasts with a false mode of seriousness that “floats above reality and later seems unnatural and overdone” (40). The preceding form of seriousness forms a filmy surface that prevents one from perceiving the real. Hillesum’s own mode of seriousness requires you “remain your own witness...never shutting your eyes to reality” (41). As she explains her ambitions to become “the chronicler” of the present world, she inserts a parenthetical description of the scene occurring around her:

(downstairs they are screaming blue murder, with Father yelling, “Go, then!” and slamming the door; that, too, must be absorbed, and now I am suddenly crying since I am not all that objective really...all right, make the best of it then); oh yes, a chronicler. I notice that, over and above all my subjective suffering, I have an irrepressible objective curiosity, a passionate interest in everything that touches this world...I have stopped crying (41).

Here, Hillesum’s tracks the motions of her project of chronicling, where the traces of the external stimuli penetrate her writing process. The world enters into her writing in the form of an *aside*, implying it does not precisely fit into her chronicling pursuit. Hillesum’s absorption of the experience begins on the physical level, as she finds herself “suddenly crying” at the sounds of violent disorder in her home. Following the parentheses, Hillesum collects herself, lifting herself “over and above” her subjective suffering, and continuing on her chronicling pursuit. The experience appears to be divided into the parenthetical “subjective suffering” and then the return to an “objective curiosity” towards “this world and its people” (41). However, Hillesum interprets the *suffering* as emerging from the “misery outside,” whereas the objective curiosity

towards the world represents “the way back to myself” (41). The rhythm of her processing, dividing, and tracing the experience, represents a return to *herself*, where she might regain a broader view of the markers of reality.

The broadening scope of her gaze is catalyzed by the rapid increase in anti-Jewish measures imposed by the German occupation. In the following entry from April 30th 1942, Hillesum recounts a sudden epiphany at the reception of the news that the Star of David would become a forced part of her uniform:

Yesterday I suddenly thought: there will always be suffering, and whether one suffers from this or from that really doesn't make much difference. It is the same with love. One should be less and less concerned with the love object and more and more with love itself, if it is to be real love. People may grieve more for a cat that has been run over than for the countless victims of a city that has been bombed out of existence. It is not the object but the suffering, the love, the emotions, and the quality of the emotions that count (129).

Hillesum proposes that the reality of the emotional experience takes priority over the object of the emotion. She vouches for “real love” residing beyond the objects of desire. This process justifies the convergence of the loss of a “cat” with the scale of suffering represented in the bombing of a city, or more specifically the internment of Jewish prisoners throughout World War II. In the above paragraph, Hillesum alternates between guidance towards her general audience: “one should be less concerned,” and observations on the natural occurrences of one’s emotional processes, “people may” grieve for, or experience a minute loss with greater intensity than a massive tragedy. When things are stripped to their naked reality, Hillesum suggests they no longer take on the form of an object, but must be located within the abstract substance of a

feeling. How can we concern ourselves with this “real love,” with what vocabulary can we express it, if we cannot fall back on the terms of our objects?

And yet, there remains one material object that Etty Hillesum will not let go of. Even in Hillesum’s time in Westerbork, certain material objects retain the holding space of love, where “some material token” continues to act as a conduit for Hillesum’s memory of Spier (217). Throughout her days in Westerbork, Hillesum holds onto a “grubby little pink comb” that Spier left her. Although she discards any photographs of Spier, the man “whose name I have almost forgotten,” she laments “how wild with grief” she would become should she lose that small pink comb. This small object with which “she has seen him comb his thin hair” becomes the remaining physical marker of Spier’s embodied life. The object itself appears to hold the repetitive motion of Spier’s daily ritual, whereas photographs of Spier, and even the sound of his name become representations of the “dead matter” of his absence (202). The comb then becomes an intermediary between Spier’s physical absence and the remaining traces of meaning clinging to the object. “I carry on what is immortal in you,” Hillesum maintains, while she also carries the last small token of his days. In two months, she will no longer be able hold onto the latter object, as she will have passed from her embodied form back into the “broad, eternal stream” of life.³

II. The Affliction of Chronicling: A Study in Scale

The problem of *real love* and the patterns and objects of its expression is an essential inquiry in Mary Gaitskill’s essay The Lost Cat. Hillesum’s interests in the expressions of love are echoed throughout Gaitskill’s essay, as she attempts to parse through the startling immensity of her grief towards, and eventual obsession over, the loss of young Gattino. This experience

³ On the question of her coming death, Hillesum waivers between a calm readiness and moments of sudden dread. In an entry from late September, she has learned “to read life in one long stretch.” The following evening, she finds her sense of the present suddenly *unfinished*, “a book, and what a book, in which I have got stuck halfway. I would like so much to read on” (221) Hillesum comes up against barrier to her expansive view of things. She would like to read on.

coincides with various other scenes of loss, such as the experience of caring for her foster children, Caesar and Natalia. On a car-ride driving Caesar back into the city, Peter, Mary's husband, and Mary wander into an abstract discussion about human love. As they trace its cruelties and perversions, Gaitskill admits:

Flippantly, I said 'Maybe it doesn't even exist.' Right after I said that, a stuffed animal bounced off my head and into my lap; it was a smiling little cow that Caesar had won for me at the county fair the previous day. 'What do you call that?' he asked... Love as a cheap stuffed toy bounced off your head – it's a brilliant metaphor and a true one. But the metaphor for love that I feel more deeply is a lost, hungry little animal dying as it tries to find its way back home in the cold. It isn't truer. But I feel it more (Lost Cat 58).

Here, Gaitskill recounts her own experience of measuring the muddled realities of love. She does not attribute the metaphorical motions of love to the experience of *losing* her cat, but rather finds the nuances of human love in the cat's own experience of gradually and blindly navigating the world. In these motions, Gaitskill identifies love within her imagined sense of Gattino's internal world while lost, meandering, and searching for a way back *into* the world. In Gaitskill's personal vocabulary, there is no *love itself* but rather love *as* a "lost, hungry" cat who attempts to find its way through, and finds itself becoming weaker, and smaller in the process.

In identifying her sense of love with the feeble motions of the lost cat, Gaitskill finds her personal terms of love within the vocabulary of a cat that has lost its way. Etty Hillesum's argument for the erratic expressions of grief and mourning work to justify the intensity of Gaitskill's felt experience at the loss of young Gattino. Throughout her essay, Gaitskill questions the reality of her own emotional experience. Early in the essay, she recounts a dinner conversation with "an intellectual writer" whom her and her husband greatly admired. When

discussing her new home in the Hudson Valley, Gaitskill reveals the moving experience had been “spoiled for me by the loss of our cat” (Lost Cat 17). The writer scoffs at the story and asks, “Oh, that was your trauma was it?” Gaitskill attempts to discern the relationship between trauma and tragedy, recalling her own skepticism towards her sister’s use of the term “tragedy” to describe a family falling out over the question of euthanizing her own cat. Gaitskill corrects her sister, pointing out that tragedy belonged in the realm of “thousands of people dying slowly of war” (18). After the conversation, she looks into the definition of tragedy, finding the second definition— “extremely mournful, melancholy or pathetic”—to align with her sister’s meaning. Gaitskill emails an apology to her sister stating that she was wrong “at least technically” (18). However, she maintains her belief that her sister “was being hysterical,” in equating the strain of her relationships with a potential tragedy (18). With this small admission of guilt, her sister never responds to the email. Gaitskill strings the two scenes alongside each other, employing the esteemed position of the “admired” writer and Gaitskill’s own linguistic prowess in their attempts to define the terms of tragedy, trauma and the dimensions of grief within each category.

Critics of Etty Hillesum approach an inversion of this problem of scale when examining her singular emotional and spiritual response to the events of the Holocaust. *In Facing the Extreme*, French literary theorist and historian Tzvetan Todorov dedicated a chapter to “Nonviolence and Resignation,” where he examines Etty Hillesum’s puzzling method of “accepting the world” at the precise moment when the “world was falling apart around her” (Todorov 198). While Todorov commends Hillesum for “extraordinary” character, he remains skeptical of the “passivity and fatalism” of her radical *acceptance* of the world’s evils. Further, he criticizes the incongruity of her emotional experience within the extent of her tragedy, stating “as readers we find ourselves wishing that Hillesum, too, could *suffer* from this suffering instead

of constantly transmuting it into beauty” (Facing Evil, 208). Todorov interprets Hillesum’s reading of the Westerbork Barracks as a translation of suffering into the matter of the beautiful, presupposing that the two experiences compose different substances, and that Hillesum avoids the *actual* sensation and instead focuses on the potential of beauty of her surroundings. Although on one level Todorov may be correct, his reading of Hillesum flattens the rich texture of her description, demanding a clean, even alignment between her emotional reality and the corresponding cultural and social truth. The complexity of Hillesum’s experience is reflected in the texture of Westerbork’s landscape, where the bountiful “heathland” is inscribed by “barbed wire,” constructing both a site of terror, and a marker of loveliness. Further, the *almost* proceeding the lovely, qualifies Hillesum’s efforts to describe the sensation (209). As she continues to describe the scene, Etty provides a potential reason for this shift: “it is because I read the signs of the times, and they did not seem meaningless to me” (209).

In “To Desire Without an Object,” Weil instructs us to “draw aside the veil of unreality” in order to perceive that the “suffering, emptiness” associated with our desires, are in fact “given to us in this way” (G&G 23). Under Todorov’s reading of Hillesum’s suffering, he suggests that her discernment of meaning within the times allows her to transcend the grips of suffering, and therefore perceive the world through a hazy lens of illusions. Weil continues, “when we see that, we still suffer, but we are happy” (23). For Weil, the motion of *drawing aside* the veil of expectations and illusions will not uncover a happiness beneath the suffering, but rather opens up the space where *happiness* can be felt in spite of our suffering.

So to be a chronicler and a witness does not dislodge the realities of our suffering. At points in the Lost Cat, Gaitskill tugs at this formulation, hoping to unveil a happiness *beneath* the suffering. After establishing the *lost cat* metaphor for love, Gaitskill also begins parsing through

her own more muted, layered exchanges of human love. She offers an experience with her father as a convergence of the value of the *given* and the potential entry into the *real*. When visiting her childhood home, Gaitskill is met with a representative scene of her family structure, with her father tirelessly yelling at her mother, as the family quietly waits for him to wear himself out. In this particular visit Gaitskill joins her father in his shouting spree, attempting to “break the pattern” of her Father’s emotional expressions (Lost Cat 49). By the end of the scene, Gaitskill stands at her father’s doorway screaming “I’m [yelling] because I want to have a real relationship with you. Do you want a real relationship with me?” To this question, Gaitskill recounts her Father “said ‘No,’ and shut his bedroom door in my face” (50). In contemplating his response, Gaitskill repeats the conversation to an older male friend, who is also a father, and agrees he would have responded similarly. She is left with the impression he found the phrase “real relationship” a particularly “corny or therapeutic” colloquialism (50). Reflecting on her earlier conversation on the subject of *trauma*, this effort to orient her experience with a second, more removed listener, offers Gaitskill an alternate intellectual interpretation of her impulsive means of describing her emotional experience.

Within this reading, Gaitskill’s question asked her father to consider another form of relating to each other. When Gaitskill shouted at her father, matching his anger, she channeled his form of communication. However, she used his means to pursue her own form of meaning in their relationship, a manner of relating which *feels* real, opening clear channels of communication between them. Given the response of Gaitskill’s friend, the available vocabulary Gaitskill offers her own father is read as an insufficient expression of her love, a feeble attempt to relate to her father. As she continues to process the event, Gaitskill’s mother relays her father’s perspective on their falling out, “Mary and I have a real relationship” (50). After hearing

her father's perspective, she revises her original request for a *real* relationship to a misguided desire for some *ideal* familial relationship. This connects Gaitskill's pursuit of reality to a way *out* of the harsh, even distant real, and into an ideal (even beautiful) manner of relating. Gaitskill then tries on her father's form of reality, and allows her own pursuit to drift away into the terrain of "dreams and self-deceits." Although, Gaitskill counters her original reading of the scenario, she chronicles the full process, offering the reader to try on the various entryways into a "real relationship."

Although she concedes that her stilted, corny phrasing was an element of her father's response, more specifically, she attributes her father's sharp *no* and motion to shut the door, to the "sudden nakedness" in his daughter's voice. Contrasting Hillesum's early chronicling attempts, Gaitskill does not merely observe her "moods," but rather steps *into* the scene in an attempt to directly address the chaos at work. Gaitskill's own form of approaching the *naked reality* immediately fails, both on a conceptual and emotional level. However, Gaitskill proposes that beneath the initial layer of clichéd language, her father sensed something "heartfelt and naked," which formed "a kind of violence" touching "him forcefully" in a place that was securely guarded within him (50). Therefore, although the question may have sought some ideal manner of relating, the quality of Gaitskill's voice expressed a form of *naked* love. However, the mode of expression remained clothed in the "corny" demands of Gaitskill's language.

Towards the end of The Lost Cat, Gaitskill reflects on the work of the essay thus far, attempting to reach a verdict on the value of her efforts to engage the loss of Gattino with the memories of her father. Gaitskill wonders if it was "wrong" to chase her father, demanding a "real relationship," or put the metaphor of love into something as small as a kitten. Finally, she wonders about the potential harm in "analyzing and questioning" the experiences "in public, no

less.” This final question unites Gaitskill’s physical pursuit of meaning in her relationship with her father to her linguistic attempt to qualify, and clearly express her father’s own sense of meaning within their relationship. Gaitskill’s shift to the moral dimensions of her analyses reintroduces the effects of her work on the *actual* world. She recalls:

I once read a Chekhov story which described a minor character as ‘trying to snatch from life more than it can give’⁴; maybe I have turned into such a person, unable to accept what is given, always trying to tear things up in order to find what is ‘real’, even when I don’t know what ‘real’ is, unable to maintain the respect, the dignity of not asking too much or even looking too closely at the workings of the heart, which, no matter how you look, can never be fully seen or understood. (59)

Here, Gaitskill momentarily extracts her gaze from the particulars of her experience and focuses on the broader purposes of her work. Gaitskill begins with a quote from the Chekhov story, locating her own quest for the real within the flawed minor character in the text. Gaitskill draws a correlation between what is “given” and what is potentially “real,” and examines her own tendency to peer within the *given* in order to extract the “real.” In identifying herself with the minor character’s actions, she imagines herself embodying and becoming “such a person.” In a *Sketch of the Past*, after explicating her own tendency to perceive the real within her violent shocks, Woolf finds her cotton wool philosophy to *prove* that by spending each morning at her writing desk, “I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else” (SOTP 73). Here, Gaitskill pulls back her perspective and examines her particular work of reaching reality; however, she is left in uncertainty about the value of her work toward the real. In Gaitskill’s attempts to peer inside the heart, she perceives some boundary, or blockage, that prevents her

⁴ Gaitskill is referencing the Lady with the Dog, which describes not a minor *individual*, but rather “the few beautiful cold women, into whose eyes there would flash suddenly a fierce expression, a stubborn desire to take, to snatch from life more than it can give” (Lady with the Dog).

from processing the “workings of the heart” as the visible functions of an emotional system. In this sense, the *real* has become obstructed, preventing her from peering inside the vessel, and locating the entryway into the real network of emotional experience. The form of the text reflects this skepticism, as Gaitskill places quotation mark around the ‘real,’ creating physical markings that reflect the loss of status the term holds in Gaitskill’s own vocabulary. She acknowledges the limitations of such efforts, and the potential that the act of peering inside severs the experience, tearing up and redefining the event that it attempts to clearly perceive. Gaitskill’s vocabulary of *tearing* further contrasts with Woolf’s work to put “the severed parts together,” and finally make *whole* the scattered jolts of the violent shocks (SOTP 72). While both writers are performing similar acts of interpretation to realign the workings of the heart with the motions of the world, Gaitskill comes up against a barrier to her project that she cannot locate a way through.

As Gaitskill’s search for Gattino continues, she seeks the guidance of various psychics to piece together the various potential sightings and “connective symbols” into a “cobbled reality” within which Gaitskill might perceive “something real, something bigger than what I could readily see” (Lost Cat 45). Reflecting on her examination of her father’s consistent faithfulness to the “guarded place” within him, Gaitskill lucidly observes the “needs of her disordered mind,” which had become blocked against the “known, visible order of things” (45). In this process, Gaitskill establishes a justification for the reality of her Father’s “guarded place,” in terms of her own *disordered* form of establishing order and meaning. In contrast with Hillesum’s method of stripping, Gaitskill’s mode of accessing reality disassembles and reformulates the given symbols, creating an opening through which her *torn up* internal landscape can readily perceive the real.

After questioning the value of her feelings, Gaitskill pauses—acknowledging that the process makes her “look down in self-reproach” (59). However, after the moment of self-

reproach, Gaitskill reexamines herself, posing “if you are only given one look, shouldn’t you look as fully as you can.” The concept of *looking* arches across her internal and external processes, expressing both her peering “inside the heart,” and her literal pursuit of Gattino, through her initial physical search (flyers, emails) and eventual metaphysical gestures to realign the mysteries of the world and retrieve Gattino from its grips (59). This attempt to *find* Gattino is an attempt to locate and contain this lost form of love. Or maybe I should rephrase this: Gaitskill’s process to *find* Gattino expresses its own form of love *as* both a “looking down in self-reproach,” and a meandering gaze searching for a lost pet, a beautiful symbol, a real relationship (59). Gaitskill is divided on the merit of this process of *looking* within, concerned that it *tears up* the reality of things, while she remains convinced of the potential to restore order to the world. This division exposes the very processes of Gaitskill’s life, uniting her faltering moments of *tearing* with her father’s own personal violence.

Gaitskill ends the essay on this note, re-enlivening the mixture of hope and skepticism. She recounts a scene from a time when she begins to lose hope of every finding Gattino. Peering out of the window of a hotel room, Gaitskill notices a family walking their dog, and recalls:

The dog got excited, and his owner let him off his chain. He went running and made a wild leap into the water, his legs splayed ecstatically wide. I smiled and thought ‘Gattino’; for once the thought was comforting, not sad. I thought, even if he is dead, he’s still here in that splayed, ecstatic leap.

This idea was no doubt an illusion, a self-deception. But that dog was not. That dog was real. And so was Gattino. (59)

Here, Gaitskill organizes her experience into “the idea” and the two animals. Initially, the

idea is comforting, locating the missing object in the “splayed, ecstatic leap” of the dog. However, after recounting the sensation, she admits the sense of comfort and the familiar thought *Gattino* was illusory, deceiving Gaitskill into a false terrain of comfort. In the final line of the story, Gaitskill transitions from her own potential illusions back to the domain of scene at hand: “that dog was not,” meaning *not* an illusion, and therefore, “that dog was real.” Finally, if the dog was real, then by association of their animal forms “so was Gattino.” This final line of the narrative expresses a past tense reality, acknowledging that Gattino *was* real. Despite being lost, Gaitskill retains the belief that Gattino not only represented something real, but was an innate physical expression of the *real*.

In the end, the many efforts of Gaitskill’s search do not lead her to Gattino. She did not find Gattino, but she did find what was *real* and represented by Gattino. Gaitskill performs an inversion of Weil’s work to strip the world, where instead of stripping the emotion from the object, she locates the passing reality of the lost object. By placing Gattino’s identity in the past tense, Gaitskill allows her presiding love for Gattino to be directed towards his *past* reality. If we read this passing reality as an acknowledgment of Gattino as permanently lost, even potentially *dead*, Gaitskill’s love for Gattino has taken on a new dimension. This suggests that in these final acknowledgments of the lost cat, Gaitskill renounces her possession of Gattino, finding a means of letting the cat be lost, and letting herself *lose* Gattino.

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My path was linear enough. I followed Brooke to her final bow. In college (most days) I finished the reading for class. I followed along until I was told to stop. Then I stopped.

When I read the Lost Cat, I took it as a gift. I read the scene between Gaitskill and her father—the Real Relationship, and I paused. Immediately, the stilted vocabulary of my own

And so, he roamed the country. He met my mother this way. Her hair reached her waist, and she loved him and looked at him. In her journal she wrote, *I looked at his arm this morning. How can I love an arm so much?* He wrote a song describing the way they shared a peach. *She cleans it from my cheek.*

He found a casino up by Albuquerque, where he could spend a few nights a month. Often, he lost. He stopped playing music, and slowly stopped looking. Still, Dad discussed music with a patient, slow intelligence. When he introduced a new album to me, he would present it with a single story about the artist. It was often a story about a great friendship between musicians, or a strange, tragic loss.

I remember watching Drew, one of Aunt Sasha's *real characters* who she brought home for a real dinner with everyone. He strummed whining country ballads on her back porch. The family gathered around the spread of food, shouting over the song. I noticed Dad looking at Drew, half smiling and humming his tune.

He stayed very still, kindly nodding to the bad music. I know it is difficult being a father. And he is my father.

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When Dad came to pick me up for the 43rd Pochuck weekend at my apartment in Tivoli, he was two hours late. He thought he had brought me a hand-drawn map of the Pochuck terrain. He unpacked the car, and then began chucking the camping gear on the ground. He had left the map at home.

Inside, he fixed our ceiling fan, which he pointed out had been spinning all summer in the wrong direction. On the drive to the camping site he began to describe the map—but could not. We swerve onto the shoulder of the road. He steadies, and recounts one of the adventures along

the path of the map. He follows the path by foot. I rest my feet on the cushion of junk food wrappers and tools.

A muted green sign welcomes us to *The Garden State*, and we realize we have driven thirty minutes past the exit for his parent's home. I ask him for new music, but he cannot think of any. I am aware that he is in pain.

Earlier that day, I got lost in the woods surrounding Bard College. I was not roaming. I followed the path from my home to the small building where I worked, compiling press links for the Bard website. I was lost in my own woods, half a mile or so from own backyard, and another half mile from the library. I sense the familiar dips in the forest, and hear the distant blare of NY 9G. They are the same woods which lost Gattino. This is a simple coincidence, a trite symbol of loss and distance. I do not think of Gaitskill, or Gattino. I rest on the smooth surface of a rock. Then I trace my steps backwards.

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After Jordan's stabbing, I finished up the week of modeling, and immediately began a poetry workshop on revision at the Fine Arts Work Center. I wrote a new poem, and titled it *Jordan Hines*. I wrote it in a single sitting, in the fluorescent computer room. I knew it would begin with the scene in the movie theater. In fact, I had already notes on the scene. I had written the scene two years prior—when Simone Weil had first entered into my education. It began with Simone Weil. It began with beauty.

When I stood on stage at the Work Center, I began reading. I got to *Dear Jordan*, and I looked up at the audience. It was nothing like the theater, but a brightly lit room with rows of folding chairs. I scanned the crowd of faces. I did not expect to see him, but for a moment, I looked. Everyone's eyes were open, and they were looking right at me. I kept reading as I looked

at them. And in my face, I felt they were looking for Jordan, rooting for him to make it in the end.

And he made it in the end. The shape of my love, the final letter of response and regard for being seen, and seeing—was recited, prepared for a crowd on a stage. Someone hugged me after, and whispered *he would be proud*. I wasn't so sure. All the interns folded and stacked the lines of chairs. I switch off the mic, and glance at my phone charging by the sound booth. Molly texted: *he is home, laughing already*.

A year later, I sat in the backseat of D's bright blue chevy. Jordan slipped in beside me, and gasped *get outta town sister*. I had surprised him. It was too dark to see the scars, and too dark to see my face. We hugged quickly as the car lurched forward, and my chin bumped against his chest. At the party, we ended up on opposite sides of the room. Then we stood around each other, shy again. Slowly we became ourselves, but something was different. He had a line through the center of his face. He looked taller, sturdier, more himself—and no longer mine.

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Dad did not want Sasha to come on his trip to Pochuck. It was evident when she suggested it. And it became crystal clear when she asked *what time we should leave* in the morning and Dad said, *leave whenever you fucking want*. Then, when she accused Don of sneaking into her tent thirty years ago, when she was only 13, Dad said *you're not that hot*.

Immediately after, I tried to write it. Then, I tried something else. Lying on the couch with Eli, the boy I'd traveled by train to see, our conversation unraveled to the relative miseries of being either a man or a woman. If given a choice, Eli would prefer to be a man. He says there's a lot to being a woman that he simply wouldn't want. Particularly, he points to the experience of walking into a room and being instantly looked over and evaluated. I am surprised.

We are from different economic classes, and he plans to enter law school after his undergraduate degree. I know he would rather not have this conversation, but we have it. I vouch for being a woman—but I cannot recall the line of argument. I argue my point, clearly enough. And he argues his with grace. In the end, we shrug and laugh. I walk him to the door, and we wrap our arms around each other. Through the window, I look out at him. For a moment, he stands at the edge of the driveway. Then he disappears.

I remember to turn off every light in the house. I glance at myself in the mirror. My hair is matted, and there are dark blue circles under my eyes. I look older somehow, and very tired.

My mother once said, *I think your Dad would've rather been a woman*. She suspected he wanted the softness it would afford—the private, whispered conversations. Also, the beauty. There's a depth to womanhood that he was, had always been, cut off from. At the height of the screaming, Dad glanced over at me—and then down, at his fists, which he seemed to learn were clenched. After, my cousin Zoe, Grandma and I all surround Sasha on the Grandparents' bed. Downstairs on the soft pink armchair, Dad is left alone.

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When Dad began threatening Aunt Sasha, my cousin Zoe pulled me aside. She said *let's go upstairs*. But I wanted to stay in the room. I needed to be there, as a witness, and a daughter. And when it was all over, I needed to leave.

We continue in our way. I will not ask for a real relationship, and he will not slam the door. I will spend months not writing about the non-tragedy. It will have intercepted my project—I'll begin a sentence, and watch the thread dissipate.

In the months following the argument my father and aunt stop speaking completely. But I have one line to follow: I am writing a project. I look at the page. I concentrate on the shape of

the markings. The words are leading me somewhere. I can make out outline of an image. It is the image of a door, or is it only a mirror? Either way, I look closely, but there is no way through.

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In Weil's metaphysics "the love we devote to the dead," when we have released any sense of authority over them, or secret hope of their return, becomes an "entirely pure" form of love (G&G 66). The deceased "can no longer give anything new," and therefore we can only desire "that the dead man has existed" (66). This process recalls Weil's language for the beautiful, requiring that one simply acknowledge *that it should be* (WFG 113). Therefore, the love one expresses toward the dead becomes representative of an encounter with the beauty of the world. However, Gaitskill only managed to reach such a measure of detached contemplation through her tireless searching, piecing together, and even *tearing apart* the clouded images, "trite" symbols and representative scenes leading her towards Gattino.

In distinguishing between the physical reality of dog and the deceiving connections of her searching mind, Gaitskill makes a final effort to divide the reality of her experience from her crippling affliction in the wake of Gattino's disappearance. Beyond identifying it as a sign that Gattino is *still here*, Gaitskill does not offer any further commentary on the real dog's "wild leap" into the lake. By interpreting the dog as real, then the "splayed, ecstatic leap" became the physical expression of such reality in terms Gaitskill could readily perceive. The real Gattino has become lost, and Gaitskill can only locate the image of reality in the vitality of the stranger's animal. On the material level, the vision was an illusion, but on another plane, the experience represented something real, a joyful risk, and leap *into* the world.

Similarly, even in Hillesum's disavowal of the material world, she holds onto the one "grubby pink comb" which held the gestures of Spier's everyday life. Both motions represent

some lasting expression of their lost object of affection. In the texture of Hillesum's entries, her personal and spiritual work thrives in the motions of her mind at work, as she labors to sketch and reimagine the relationship between her internal landscape and the palisades of Westerbork. She allows her pen to move towards the *affliction* afforded by the Holocaust, and the *beauty* embedded in the experience, creating the textured passages of a life we might follow along until its sudden final break.

On the affliction of life, Weil finds it "hideous, as life in its nakedness always is, like an amputated stump... life without form" (G&G 28). The stump has been severed, divorced from the rhythms of the natural world. Here, Hillesum might approach the stump, trace the outline of its emptied limbs, and wrap her arms around the thick air marking their absence. In the final line of her diaries she advised, "we should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds" (AIL 231). I would only add emphasis, *all* wounds even if they appear as pale scratches on the surface, the residual hairs of a lost cat, or small deceptions of a *real* relationship. Even if our balm is only a form of looking, from a distance, in the direction of our love.

Conclusion

A year ago, I decided I was writing a project on shame. I began at the ending, after the fall but before the image. I kept my eyes closed. I did not know I needed beauty to reach shame.

In Plato's symposium, Diotima opens up the possibility that "love, Socrates, is not, as you imagine, the love of the beautiful only" (24). It is also the love "of generation and of birth in beauty" (24). In the sensual world, this might take the form of embrace. We need knowledge of our nakedness in order to embrace. We need to feel the blow of having a body.

So we begin with a blow. We feel it, and observe the feeling. We contemplate it. And with time, we assemble something new. We make an image from it. We make a series of images, a map, or a bridge—with the intent that someone might follow them.

When business is good, my Dad creates structures: floors, decks, shelves. But mainly, he mends structures that have worn down, or caved in. He has worked in construction for 25 years. Weil has great admiration for the physical laborer, and their "specific contact with the beauty of the world" (WFG 108). She writes of the laborer, who after a day's work is "aching in every limb" (108). After the day's exertion, his challenge is "to look and to love" (108). It was not my father's style to unravel as he did that evening last summer, to show himself so brazenly. But he had had a very long day.

On the closing night of Noises Off, the stage manager joked that I was *just like my character*. It was a small blow, and I was ashamed of the image. I was ashamed of being perceived as foolish, girly, young. I was much more serious than that. So I put away the image, and followed a serious line. As at the age of fourteen Weil herself sought:

After months of inward darkness, I suddenly had the everlasting conviction that a human being, even though practically devoid of natural faculties, can penetrate to the kingdom

of truth reserved for genius, if only he longs for truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention upon its attainment” (WFG 23).

Like the contemplation of the beauty of world and the wisdom of affliction, we finally place ourselves before a frame we can peer into. We must *desire* truth. We must study, and surround ourselves with beautiful work. That is one way through.

Although Weil’s “kingdom of truth” is an exclusive terrain, this quest for entry must be distinguished from the love of power, or luxury. These are not qualities of the beautiful, but rather “incomplete, unconscious” quests for beauty (112). In our quest to *establish* order in the world, we begin to draw a circle. This circle is not real beauty. Instead, it resembles “the scenery in a theater” (WFG 107). It mimics the world, clothing it in a layer of cottonwool. But what might be hidden in the scenery in the theater?

When a play is enacted on a stage-set, the world may still intervene.

Before I ever stepped onto the stage, I sat in the audience and watched another high school production—Stage Door—another play within a play about a boarding house and failing actresses. Zoe Meighan was the lead. She wore a velvet dress fitted to her petite frame, and her dark curls framed her face. Each night Zoe Meighan’s shoe got caught on the step leading to the *stage door*. On the Sunday matinee after the last fumble, she exclaimed: “oh my, these shoes are giving me a bother.”

I remember nothing of the play except that moment of grace. *That* was the beauty of the world—the subtle improvisation—reworking the shape of her line.

Each night, she stumbled before the Stage Door. Then, she lifted her gaze from the wooden floor and looked over her shoulder at the darkened room. We laughed along. I knew.

We followed her, until she reached the door, and vanished.

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