
Senior Projects Spring 2021

Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

Spring 2021

It Could Have Been Anyone

Mariel Ruth Cupp
Bard College

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Recommended Citation

Cupp, Mariel Ruth, "It Could Have Been Anyone" (2021). *Senior Projects Spring 2021*. 119.
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It Could Have Been Anyone

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

by
Mariel Ruth Cupp

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2021

To Lake Norman and all those who left.

And in memory of Chris. We miss you every moment.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my family for your unrelenting humor and unconditional support, and for allowing me to be here in the first place.

My roommates, Mia and Deirdre (and Sarah on occasion), for three years of boundless love in our little dollhouse. Thank you for hearing the stories a thousand times before they met the page.

My advisor Susan Fox Rogers, whose optimism and encouragement convinced me to loosen my imagination.

My brilliant friends. Through every night and every novelty, you never let me be lonely.

Sempre Skylar, for always giving me the first peek. Thank you for the lessons on slowing down and saying what you mean.

Manny, for being an attentive reader and attentive friend. Thank you for staving off my worries.

Isaiah, for the room to myself.

My Wednesday group, for letting me lie and keeping me sane.

And thank you to the Gaskins team, for feeding me, supporting me, and letting me dance.

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Hugh [Water]

Hugh had hung up his work belt. Wrenches, pry bars, tins of oil and jerry cans of gasoline accumulated dust, hot and untouched in his shop, which was the only garage in St. Thomas, Nevada. It was a small town, dry and orange and wide, where Hugh was born and had stayed until eventually reaching middle-age. For some time, before the unfolding, he would visit the retired tools and ensure that none of them had spontaneously shifted during his moments away. During those days he cared to dust things off then put them carefully back in their place. He even occasionally took some things home for safekeeping. Other times he tidied nothing and simply sat, listless on the concrete slab of the shop's entrance where he remembered the sound of cars, the reek of grease and oil.

His days of waiting arrived towards the end of 1935 and bled into the years thereafter. From that year onwards, his months seeped into one another and were distorted by the sort of meandering and nonlinear daydreams conjured in the minds of the lonely, muddying the space between reality and myth.

When Hugh finally locked the doors to the garage, nearly a year had gone by since he serviced a vehicle. Automobiles, had there been any around then, could no longer drive through the town. The roads had become dangerously slick as dirt became mud and nobody remained to witness this slickness. Nobody besides Hugh. He alone watched the morphing closely. This was how he spent nearly three years of his life.

Hugh did not spend much of his time during the lonely years longing for the period that had preceded them, though it did run through his thoughts on occasion. Things had not been normal - that is, as they were for the first forty years of his life - since around 1920, when he was often elbow deep in an engine and half invested in some unimaginary task and he had nothing of importance to watch.

It was 1920 when the well dressed gentlemen with dark ties and tall campaign hats meandered into St. Thomas. They claimed to be “from The Federal Bureau of Reclamation.” Hugh greeted them warmly with handshakes and nods - he was always polite, more childlike than refined - wondering whether he had read the word *reclamation* once before in a book but never heard it uttered out loud. This is a fairly new branch of Bureaucracy, they excused themselves, and he nodded kindly at the considerate number of syllables. At that time he welcomed their visit to a town as negligible as his, even put their beer on his tab at the bar and patiently answered their questions about the assets of the people who lived there. How much might it cost to buy land around here? Strange of them all to move, Hugh thought then. They must be seeking a business

venture. Perhaps an economic boom is on the horizon. They were gone by nightfall, and Hugh thought nothing of them for the year that rolled out routinely in their wake.

Then 1921, those same gentlemen came back in larger numbers. This new mass of men took lodging on the property of the Chadburn family's farm. Angels of Sodom in Lot's home. No matter the context of retrospect, all who attended would remember it as a joyous occasion, with the Chadburn's ten children running around the cohort of neighbors, Hugh among them, all invited to the dinner. Ms. Chadburn served the meal on long, clothed tables with various mismatched chairs spotting the forested yard. The house was tall for St. Thomas, two stories of sturdy wood and brick foundation being climbed, on all sides, by roses. Any person filling a seat could look into the stretch beyond the lawn and see orange landscape, sparse brush, and imagine it going on forever. Land so careless it was unburdened by the sharp misshapen mountains of the horizon.

Hugh recalled seedlings of dread having grown in him that evening, when he had politely tried not to gape at their nonchalance. A part of him was silently appalled at the ease with which these men, "agents" he now knew to call them, made themselves a burden upon one family and their neighbors alike. The Chadburn's youngest daughter Verna was hardly a year old at the time, and toddled on her mother's hip as the woman frenzied to entertain and impress. Surely Hugh understood that the ease of her hospitality was lubricated by the matter of money, for the men not only represented the government, they represented as well the promise of government funds which sat heavy in their pockets. This compensation the men were eager to wave in the faces of

St. Thomas as an owner taunts their dog with the scraps from their dinner plate. The Chadburns would later joke that they might have been less eager to feed the agents had they known the eventual sum offered to each landowner in town - a meager 40 dollars an acre. But without this knowledge they drank and rejoiced, heralding in a vague promise of change.

Nearly a decade passed without stir, then came the dawn of the unfolding. It started as a rumor, spread as quickly as flames licking the dry brush that freckled St. Thomas, from one mouth then out of another until the gossip overtook the very air. President Hoover was making a dam, which would open to make a lake, and St. Thomas stood in the way of where the waters would be.

In the months following the government Angels' visit to town, conversations began shifting. Words did not land in their previously predictable routines of weather, drought, the recently widowed, or whose business might go under. Neighbors were suddenly curious about their future in a manner they had not had reason to be for years. They had ample questions, but hardly any doubt. It was undeniable that St. Thomas' was facing change. They all were. They couldn't possibly stay and live beneath the lake. They had paranoias, certainly. Fears abounded. But beneath these worries hummed the brimming of possibility. To leave meant to go somewhere, and somewhere can be an infinite place during the slim slow moments before plans are truly made. Something was bound to give soon. But those few years were spent waiting for instructions of Exodus, when the people of St. Thomas would be free to walk through the desert for years and land in a place called Anywhere.

It was not the case that life in St. Thomas was idyllic. It was hardly the hope of building a Utopia which kept people there. Instead, it was the Muddy River and the Virgin River, which converged and encouraged crop growth, and this opportunity for farming was the anchor keeping life in the lower Moapa Valley since the settlers who paused there in the 17th century. Before Hugh's St. Thomas, which at its largest was home to nearly 2,000 residents, Mormons had rested their things and built homes, farms, families, in what they thought was Utah. When the state of Nevada demanded they pay back taxes for the time they had been living there, the families stormed off the land rather than pay for a life they thought was free. Instead of forfeiting money to the government, the Mormons abandoned their roads and brief plots of land and left a blueprint of St. Thomas behind. They then took the extra measure of building a fire which would consume the brush, in hopes that the place could not carry on without them.

St. Thomas lived on anyway, and decades later when new people wandered into the area they were met with the remnants of roads and fields suggesting a home, a suggestion which the new wanderers took kindly to. The town grew again. This was the version of St. Thomas where Hugh had built and lived a life, the version that harbored a church and an ice cream parlor but no doctor, a schoolhouse with nearly 50 students, thick brush brimming with grasshoppers and crickets that filled the air with buzzes and creaks.

Some people carried rage around with them. They had scarce food and scarcer money; slow lives in St. Thomas. Still they harbored the deep seething spite which arises in those who are deemed inconsequential, a pushing back by those pushed out in the name of electricity provided by the

lake to the larger cities of the region. It came as no surprise but was hurtful all the same: no one seemed to care what came of them, them who were easily set to be replaced by a massive sum of water.

The children were not deaf to the town's stirrings and talks of water. Verna Chadburn, too, no longer a baby on her mother's hip, could eavesdrop on muffled conversations about reclamation and flood. As some children are when faced with upheaval, she was plagued by nightmares that replaced the vague spaces of adult explanations, nightmares about a biblical wave rising up and sweeping everyone away and leaving no remnant of the town behind. Would the waters come quickly? Would she be big enough, by then, to outrun them?

Had God set aside St. Thomas, as he did to Noah's Earth in Genesis, to be wiped clean of sin, of animals, of life? She was one of many whose daily thoughts were occupied with the fright of God-fearing people.

But Hugh remembered his thoughts in those days did not turn to fears or fleeing or to the great thirsty possibility of Anywhere. He did not dream feverishly about the people Noah left behind. Hugh's mind turned to Moses: standing in the midst of a gorgeous sea, watching the two tall towers of water bright and luminescent on either side of him.

One memory Hugh did find himself resting on often, like a pivotal verse one revisits from their favorite book of Moses: the sight of Verna Chadburn at Church, just barely grown into a girl, the

merry frills of her dress contrasting the dark expression she wore. Her red cheeks tear-stained and her face contorted into a practiced look of worry and dread. When the Reverend spoke of watery chaos or world's end, Hugh would glance down the pew and into the child's eyes, which became scrunched up and too old looking, and he would stave off the images that he knew Verna had seen in her restless sleep. Hugh feared that even too long a glance might mean catching the nightmares, so heavy they weighed on her they must have been contagious. And there were a few nights when the prophecy was fulfilled, when that dark expression crept onto his own face during his sleeping hours.

He privately considered himself and the child to be one and the same, two preoccupied souls taunted by the impending lake. Were she older, Hugh might have pulled Verna aside as a confidant and together they would have divulged their secret fears and safe guarded one another's worries. But given societal protocols of privacy and maturity, children are not often confided in or assigned the role of guard, so the two had to face these worries alone. Still, Hugh would give her his church glances, his grey, wrinkled eyes attempting to fish a familiar thought or some surviving detail of a dream out from her glimmering blue ones, and this he thought to be connection enough.

Many daybreaks Hugh tried to forget. Dim grey mornings when he woke with a lingering chill then quickly shook off the apparitions that had hung over his head in the night: his mother's gravestone becoming eroded and her name illegible under miles of lake, water lapping hungrily at his chin until it poured into his mouth. Visions of clear cold water coursing over the Muddy

River, the Virgin River, the ponds in the neighbors' yards, of bodies being dragged along the lake's bottom, gravel and glass leaving little cuts all over their skin.

What he was unable to shake off were the dreams that were not nightmares, but meditations that had wandered from the realm of his thoughts as he lay still at night into the defenceless world of the sleeping: thoughts of himself building an ark, gathering animals, and watching God's gorgeous waters from the highest plane. These woke him in mornings that felt less dim and more blue, and he rose from them with marvelous, awestruck wonder. Visions of windswept tides in green tinted water, the lake composing its gentle music against the barrier where the water met the shore.

These dreams might have been one, likely among many, of the seeds which grew into anchors and tied around Hugh's ankles. The seeds that convinced him to stay.

No one was without fear. This is only our nature. Fear becomes a leak, false memories seeping into the fabric of our lives. Every worry that is imagined is pantomimed with the same vividness as a memory being recalled, until there arrives a new reality in the mind of the beholder. As interwoven and indecipherable as childhood. It is a daily chore we all must make, differentiating and discerning which realities have come to fruition, and which were only fears that taunted us and did not step into the realm of the living, despite how it tried to weave itself into what we know. This is how people grow delusional. Or lose inhibitions. They grow tired of distinguishing, lean into the mouth of monsters, unsure if they're invented.

The monster they called the Hoover Dam began to grow in 1931. They needed infinite hands (as some work only hands can do). Nearly every man of every age in St. Thomas was put to work creating it. Laboring from far off the ground, squinting to see home in the distance, just beside Anywhere. Despite how little they'd be compensated for their homes, and the frugality of those numbers were a disconcerting smog hanging before their faces, the dam was good work. It paid well and made them feel strong, like men who were needed to tie up the loose ends of their lives thus far.

Hugh would have loved to be face to face with it, the concrete monster which would one day open unto him. He deemed the young men who enlisted in the project to be clever for keeping their enemy close. But with so many neighbors turned work commuters, he was needed in town - those were the blissful months when Hugh's hands were full, always on his back under the bellies of the automobiles who suddenly required routine maintenance and minor fixes to carry their owners towards the Colorado River. He would not be that busy again until the cars were preparing to drive away and never return, but that was not for some years. While The Hoover was rising not far from him, Hugh was a half-heartedly working man who mused on a horizonless future, the one he crafted and visited between tire rotations and oil changes. Tucked beneath cars, his mind kicked its feet and tread in place, almost envying the men who would be able to take responsibility for the water, claiming that their work allowed it to pool and tense and eventually bleed out.

By the next year there was a suggestion of a dam where there once was only barren land, and the government owned every bit of St. Thomas. The residents were tenants in their own homes, awaiting the right moment to go. But that moment seemed to be dragging its feet. This made them reckless, even childlike, knowing their homes were owned by an entity with every intention of destruction. They must have grown sloppy and flighty like birds building nests in abandoned barns, storing debris in their corners and packing valuables into hidden nests. New habits of wildness descending on them, the people who sat in their own mutating realities.

Then they did fly from their borrowed nests, gradually. Hugh watched this without comment or urgency himself, nothing packed or taken apart. His life stayed intact and around him the procession developed like the set of a play being lovingly and quietly dismantled with respect for the next act: trees were reduced to stumps lest they catch boats from their bottoms. Homes taken apart one board at a time and the debris carried off so as to not be left floating. All of this work required great imagination. *Pretend we're underwater. What would cause problems?* And his neighbors were dismantling, too. Reduced to fifteen students, the school closed. This was the time for catching trains and saying goodbyes, and they migrated in V shapes towards every direction. Only Hugh was left in his home, disinterested in departure. Surely not all birds are nomadic. Some must stay behind, independent and patient with a plan for the coming season.

Though stagnant, Hugh was not totally separate from them. Even his neighbors did wonder about his fate, no one questioned outright, and Hugh continued to relish in the pretense of a shared imagination. A common hallucination from which he alone was not sobering up. *It's all going*

underwater. They knew now that it would not be a wave or a flood. More of a pour, like something had spilled all over the ground and no one could scoop it back up. Something like a river. The residents, nagged by their curiosity, promised to come back and see the town wet and misshapen.

The Dam opened in 1936 and it was not sluggish. St. Thomas sat in its place, everything either anchored or reduced to heaps, and waited with patient eagerness to become wet. It all seemed friendlier, all touched by water. Some people, like Hugh, had imagined this friendliness already. It was one of their realities - the ones they'd been careful not to sew too closely to the truth, but with luck it stepped into their real lives. As promised, people came back upon the town to see it reborn. Weeks passed with a steady income of water, and the visitors played in the shallows like children splashing in puddles. More weeks and they came by boat, casting fishing line into the low depths with hopes of catching something living, or something hidden.

This was where Hugh calcified in the memories of his neighbors. The ones who came back were struck by him, reliably perched on the top step of his tall stairwell, his house an unmoving backdrop of white. They passed along the image to the others who had scattered, describing him in detail. His face entirely relaxed, his wrinkles (mostly crows feet from years of thoughtful squinting), suddenly sunken deeper into his skin, which glowed an almost bronze tone after days berated by the sun. Some wondered if he had died and miraculously stayed upright, but others claimed to have ventured close enough to see his chest rise and fall. He was taking the breaths of a person infatuated and unable to look away. It was as if staring into the waters had turned him to

stone: for in every moment that the water level rose, he seemed to be logging the very centimeter by which it grew closer to him. St. Thomas had never had a statue before. No idol at whose feet people could leave offerings. But in those first months of slow filling, people who waded near or boated by often left gifts, baked goods, bibles, on the stairs where Hugh always sat. He was their beacon, not commissioned, not assigned, but clearly legitimate in position: he had assigned himself the role of witness.

Hugh's yard was the first thing he lost. Namely, his flowers. At some point, in the normal days, he had planted tulips to bloom in March and allium bulbs that sprang up in the summer months, and the colors once stood proudly across the sides of the stairwell that led to his front door.

Come April of 1937, the growing water had overindulged the plants, and Hugh's tulips began to brown and bow their heads while the soil continued its metamorphosis from warm ground to the cold floor of a lake. They must have drooped until eventually they were caught by the pooling liquid at their stems where they floated horizontally, their roots still deep in the ground, bobbing against one another and pretending they were boats at a dock. This was at the base of the stairs, the white painted wood at the top of which Hugh sat, seeing the ebb and flow of water gushing in, then slowing, slow tides making wrinkles and creases on the surface which caught the day's light and threw it playfully back at him.

The visitors meant that he did not live in isolation, but they all had respect for his solitude. It was busy work, watching, but Hugh was not unfriendly. The rumors of his stillness were mostly imaginary and hyperbolic. When people called for him he waved. Some even brought their boats

up to his stoop, sat and chatted for a while about how life was unfolding in Anywhere. He was never rude, simply preoccupied, watching the water come nearer with every moment. It was so full now that it sometimes looked still, but he knew better than to believe that the filling had finished.

The following year, he invited it in.

He had considered the invitation for some time, and with each imagining it became more vivid, the picture of embracing the water, letting her near. They had only touched a few times, very briefly: an occasional temperature-probing finger, or a foot dropped off the stoop too low. But it was something he had tried to avoid. His imagination was his ruler and the lake his subject of fixation, and relentlessly he imagined it, inside of him it had been swelling: it gathered first near the throat and rose until it swirled behind his eyes and to the top of his head, swirled with the confidence of something brand new and ruleless, the confidence of youth that has never even wondered if there might be guidelines in place. Emerged boundless and possibly pouring over. It swirled in him so ruthlessly he wondered if it might escape the realm of thoughts and pour out of his ears and down his sides, dampening his torso with a chill, like beads of sweat rolling down a ribcage from armpits during the slickness of summer. It did begin, ahead of his realization, to spill, to slowly leak from each side of his head. He thought he was feeling it gather at his feet. The bottoms of his pants became damp.

It was morning, in June, and the bottoms of his pants became damp. Hugh, leaning against his cool porcelain sink, would look down to see this was true. It could still well be a runoff of his obsession - he wondered if his preoccupations might have developed their own boundless grandeur and became too confined in the space of his mind. But it was undeniable that here in his kitchen, where the morning light stuck to each appliance, there were two inches of water separating the air from the cold tile of the ground.

Hugh couldn't take his eyes off of it. For months he had watched the water take greedy ownership of everything. He had grown familiar with its confidence, how it claimed every inch. But it looked like a stranger inside his walls, and it made his home a stranger too. He was a being on a new planet, eager to see every fixture and surface of space overtaken with new character, transmuted by the color and texture and drownedness that the lake had dragged inside. Hugh took each step carefully, as one he might privately document, the uncoverings of his secret world. Slowly, the dark soggy hem of his sleep trousers pooling and billowing around his ankles, he walked from the counter to the stove. He took his matches off their shelf and lit the burner, the small head of the match lighting with a crack, then dropped the still-lit piece of wood into the wandering mass below him. Even sounds moved with a new careful intention in the presence of his new guest. The match was extinguished in a hush which sounded to Hugh like a swallow landing in the river's shallow edges. Something being lulled, so Hugh allowed it to lull him. He pocketed the matchbook.

Early sunlight was pushed off by the water at his feet and turned every item into a warped mirror of itself. The light would not be still. It flickered and gleamed, unevenly dancing with its new legs against the flat of every surface. Once the perculator was brimming with coffee, it released thin clouds into the bright air, and the steam settled eventually into the young mass of liquid sloshing against the walls.

The lake loosened already-worn down bits of wallpaper, flakes of paint, accumulated dust, until the microscopic evidence of Hugh's life became a film over the water. Hugh carried his mug and feet to the bathroom. He combed his hair and looked into the eyes of an important man, a man wide awake and curious to the wonders of the world, and the man looked back at him: dampened and alone in a drowning home, and the men smiled at one another, sipped their coffee, and gathered their comb, pomade, and razor into a bag.

The wetted portion of Hugh's pants was spreading as his own strides formed a gentle tide in the new unfixed floor of his house. The eddies followed him out of the bathroom, down the narrow hallway whose walls were peeling their beige-floral print, then into a small bedroom with only one window through which light struck down onto water, shining right back into his eyes. The light outsmarted his vision, and everything appeared as if it were doused in white. He noted this as one of the transmutations of the new planet.

It was through this bleached haze that Hugh, slowly and calmly, opened the drawers to his dresser and pulled out his clothes - not all of them - only the neatly folded favorites which he

knew brought him comfort to wear. He ignored the slow coldness of his ankles, how his leg hair became plastered to his calves. It regulated the temperature of his whole body, which was soothingly awakened as though he had stepped into the shallow tip of the ocean. Hugh's clothes went into the bag atop the razor, and were followed by the short stack of bibles - those which had been gifted by the visitors on boats - on his night stand, as well as his reading glasses, and a photograph of him beside his mother, both of them young and smiling ear to ear in front of his newly purchased garage. He looked at the photograph for a moment longer, not noticing that his face had begun to spread into that same smile, then carefully laid it down on his bed, which he neatly made, even fluffing the pillows so that they looked unused and welcoming.

Hugh looked down every once in a while, careful that his legs were not bothered by the small accumulations floating past him: a milk cap, a torn page corner from a weathered book, now only a page number '47,' empty envelopes with which he had once meant to send out mail. He wished he had written to those neighbors who did not return to play, those who went far. It wasn't so bad, he wanted to write. It wasn't so scary. And it wasn't - it was kind. He noted that, as he wiggled his toes: that the water was not so cold the longer it sat around him. If anything, Hugh and the lake were becoming acquainted.

Having gathered his things, which hung from one shoulder, Hugh made his last lap. He began in the kitchen, where he reached into the cabinet below the sink and pulled out the last remnant rescued from the garage: a plastic red jerry can which held 20 litres of gasoline. His arm strained from the weight of the vessel, causing him to walk with a slight leftward tilt, and it was like this

that he slowly poured out small splashes of the fluid with each step. First he was shy, fearful of an uneven distribution and careful not to splash his own legs, but as the fumes began filling the air and the weight in his hand gradually lightened, he became unbothered, was instead captivated by the dance between gasoline and water, the technicolor shine as the two mingled and swirled and greeted one another, their fingers intertwining like two young lovers then parting again as his legs forced a current down the hall.

He splashed the gas onto the walls, onto his tidily made bed, his greying quilt, his bathroom cabinets, his pantry doors. Tossing the can, coating his past, began to feel strangely familiar, as if it was a ceremony he'd executed before. This was the new planet's religion; honorably dousing every inch of his home with the container. In the foyer, another bible. Hugh paused his sloshing, squirreled the book into his bag. John promised his people, I will baptize you with water. Hugh poured more, trudged through the waves. But the messiah, John warned, will use fire. Back in the kitchen, Hugh gathered an orange from the counter, then took slow steps towards the front door.

The stairs were submerged, with only the top two still visible through a greenish cast over their once white wood. Few paint flecks floated above them, and he stared at these bright bits of detritus for a moment, wondering how they knew to float before returning his attention to the boat. Twenty or so weeks ago he had bought the small red canoe from the man at the post office and brought it home where he tied it to one of the beams in the stairwell's bannister. The small seat was slightly rusted, and there was a pile of dry clay where he was to place his feet. Hugh had

half a mind to scorn himself for not sweeping the boat when he had dry land to do it on, but that half of his mind was placated for the moment. That half could not conjure scorn, nor regret, nor hardly even such a glistening thing as nostalgia, for since the moment he felt the water greet him, Hugh had been coated in a hopefulness brought upon only by the kind of possibility held in expansive, glimmering bodies of water.

He stepped into the narrow canoe, nestling the unimposing bag of belongings between his knees then sat like that for a while, unaware of the charred scratchy feeling under his legs nor the chilling breeze that touched the tips of his ears. Then something like a snake, a small sliver of liquid that did not blend easily with the rest snuck out of his house in tendrils towards the boat. He untied the canoe and drifted a careful distance away before, a crack, he lit the match, and a sigh, dropped it onto the gasoline. It was not the shallow sound of landing; nor was it a singular sound when it went out. It was relief from the mouths of many, all the animals aboard Noah's ark thanking God in their humble language, and their breath spread across every yellowed part of water right through Hugh's door. He had no idea it could be so quiet. So gentle. But the flames were horribly polite, warming his face where the breeze tried to cool him. They climbed every inch easily and peeled his wallpaper down, rose up his shower curtain, melted his windows. The house protested occasionally: a crack of glass, snapping of wood. Hugh had never seen such a confident shade of orange. It was even more greedy than the water, he thought, as he breathlessly watched the shape of his house become a shadow held by the fire. It looked like a matchstick, entirely spent, crooked and charred. He watched until he could conjure the choice, at some point, to move his arms and boat away.



That was June 11th, 1938. The day that Hugh Lord became the last man to leave St. Thomas, Nevada.

I have told Hugh's story too many times. I over eagerly invite him to any conversation. "He *stayed*," I urge my - often unwilling - listener to consider. "He knew the lake would take everything and he *had* to stay anyway."

Hugh is often overshadowed. This is why I am relegated to the role of passing him on. In records and fanfare he is usurped by St. Thomas itself, which is mildly sensationalized among the variety of people who are enthralled by the sorts of things like ghost towns and historical ironies.

Particularly it is famed for its stubbornness, for being a place that was erased by man only to come back breathing at nature's hand. Lake Mead - the largest manmade lake in America - was struck with drought not even a decade after its birth, and has continued to shrink. Since the year 2002, the lake has receded enough that St. Thomas is entirely dry, and a person standing in the ruins can not even see water in the distance.

The first instance of the water level lowering was in 1945, two years before Hugh's death. This detail matters: it means he could have boated back any number of times after that final June to leave greetings just like the others had. He had even more warranted visitation rights, since what

sort of nostalgia arose for those others, looking at a place that the lake had reconstructed? Hugh would have recognized it that way, better than the rest of them. I imagine him confessing: *I recognize every drop.*

The fascinations of St. Thomas seldom mention the town's final straggler, its ultimate witness. I suppose few people could, with a quick glance, understand him. Getting to know him did take me a while. When I recite the simple facts of his story, Hugh is able to engage someone for a short period of time - though I sometimes take a wrong turn somewhere and complicate the facts, which are this: his town was bought out, he stayed, he had to leave, then the town came back. Where I must get lost along the way is in the details which he told me, in the fearful moments that I worried over him, solidifying into fact. He is no longer what I found on a page. He became someone who saw a life laid out before him and decided to pay it the utmost attention and wonder.

First, Hugh Lord was a name on a Nevada government website. In regards to St. Thomas they gave Hugh a sentence and the gift of a story: *[he] paddled away from his home when the waters lapped at his front door in 1938.* So maybe the flooded hallways were only something I wanted for him, or something he pleaded with me to tell. Though I could swear I read it somewhere, the water gently tapping against his bed. This might have been one of those tricks that imagination plays on memories, intertwining the intimacy which I'd handed Hugh with the reality of his evidence.

Then there was the article, built around an interview. An unintuitively built website with garish fonts which demanded that I make an account to receive reading privileges, thus subscribing me to the Las Vegas Review. The interview was from 2010, eight years after the final gulp of drought that lifted St. Thomas back to permanence. The reporter spoke with a 91 year old Verna Chadburn, whose family left St. Thomas when she was 13. Verna recalled the agents, the brief sadness, the suddenness of leaving. She mentioned Hugh with a humorous tone, if one slightly touched by awe, and I recall wondering if she remembered what he looked like. If she did, she was too greedy to say. The article only granted him an Exodus: *Lord waited until the water was high enough for him to step out his front door into his boat. Then he set fire to his house and watched it burn.* If Verna had not misremembered this fact, confusing Hugh for the original Mormons, if the government website had known about the fire, they too were overcome by greed and kept the information to themselves.

When I have finished reciting the confused details of Hugh, listeners often land on the first easy question. “Where did he go?” Just like that, rendering me an empty-handed storyteller, unable to provide a simple conclusion. Often I protest, try to convince us that it doesn’t matter in the slightest. After the waiting then the fire then the flee, a postpartum bleakness must have followed. Aside from this he’s told me nothing. “What about all those years he spent with the lake?” I refute my victim. “What about what was burnt?” One particularly curious listener, a professor with whom I’d been editing, insisted that I try asking Hugh. “Go to sleep wondering,” he suggested, “then wake up and tell me where Hugh went.”

The issue was, I had hardly any interest in where he'd gone.

He could not have followed his neighbors, with whom he'd been too stubborn to flock.

Nor could he have gone to an old lover - had he even had one, he would have been a stranger to them now. Nevermind the new wrinkles sewn in during his thinking, or the hair that had accumulated on his cheeks with new speckles of sneaky grey - Hugh had found a new romance in the lake.

The worst part to imagine was not the logistics of Hugh's Anywhere. No matter where it was, I couldn't stand to imagine him landing on shore. I am certain that it hurt Hugh, returning to dry land. He had lived a long life in the dry bleak orange of Nevada, a foreigner to green and a stranger to waves until his lake arrived and he learned to watch colors change, light move differently. During the nine years between his departure and death, I like to imagine some extended dreamlike floating. One where he did not really have to leave the water.

When I found Hugh's headstone, I began to cry.

It was never a real stone before me, of course. I haven't travelled much to begin with - I've been to America's West Coast only once, when I was too young to notice that places differ from one another, let alone commit to memory any characteristics particular to that side of the country - and travel was not an option in the time that I found Hugh. A pandemic made sure that there could be no new people, nor places. Old ones, on the other hand, legends, did not carry germs. Hugh could hypothetically hold my hand.

So we met on a screen, the most permissible way that people meet in the germ-filled days, on a website called findagrave.com. It was the closest I got to him, nearly face to face, if he'd had a face, but instead it was an image of a stone. It was impossible to be positive but the evidence amounted enough to assume: I'd found *my* Hugh. The small rocks read HUGH L. LORD, and the accompanying text online notated that he was buried in Saint Thomas Cemetery located in Overton, Nevada. The stone is slanted and short, and I enhanced, widened, and sank into the only two images that capture it. It struck me as too small. Cheap, too, appearing almost foraged, a slab of gravelly cement with a plaque of text affixed to it. Both photos were uploaded by users with memberships on the website - one with the screenname *Nevada Bob* and the other named *Lora*. Being a member, I deduced, means becoming a citizen archivist, capturing evidence of strangers on the off chance that someone has been, or one day will be, looking for them.

In a different cemetery but the same county, Verna Chadburn's grave. A large smooth stone, carved and adorned with space saved for a husband. 1919-2014. Unlike for Hugh, the site has a photo of her: round face spread into a small-toothed grin, squinting eyes behind thin wire glasses. Paragraphs of history and genealogy. *She is one of the last known people to have lived in the little town lost to the waters of Lake Mead.* Survivors include an endless recitation of family.

Hugh seemed to be survived by no one, and he had not left behind ample evidence for a memorial page.

The stone tells me that Hugh lived from 1880-1947, meaning he died at the age of 66 or 67 - unclear, since days and months are excluded from the stone. (Greedy.) He was nearly 60 when he finally left St. Thomas. I had always pictured him younger than that, or it would be better to say I pictured him without any age. Maybe it hadn't occurred to me that he'd ever died, and I'd hoped we might cross paths, as I was sure we had before. I'd seen him fishing, or swimming, or sitting on his porch, men of his kind, awestruck witnesses. Some part of me assumed he was the man from the small white house in Cornelius, North Carolina who the Charlotte Observer named "The Waving Man" for his habit of perching reliably on his porch, day after day, beckoning his arm to drivers and pedestrians with a wide welcoming grin. The Waving Man has been old my whole life, and I don't imagine him ever dying. Beside his porch, under the shade of bowing sunflowers parks a blue truck with Alaska plates. It appears to have never moved. Hugh could have rowed all the way up to Alaska, I thought, the two might have met there. They might have waved to one another across the shoreline, The Man from his truck and Hugh from inside his canoe. I'm sure that if I were to visit the steps of The Waving Man, he would remove his gaze from the passing roads when he recognized Hugh's name.

In the photographs, the sun is out. Hugh's gravestone is surrounded by faded clay and driveway gravel, with one plastic rose resting at the base. A green synthetic stick pokes out where the rose's stem should be, and behind the too-bright red of the flower's too-large petals, Hugh's name looks small. Just behind the grave there is a pile of smooth rocks, softened as if they used to rest under a stream of water. They seem to be hiding, or to have just slid off the top. At the other angle they appear to have been placed there strategically, perhaps in order to prop the main

stone up straight. I wondered if they were offered by Jewish relatives, just as my family leaves rocks at the graves of our predecessors. The idea is that rocks last longer than flowers. I suppose we hadn't accounted for plastic.

On the website where Hugh rests, beside the empty page that says *memorial*, there is another button, offering *flowers*. An alternative for the overly-invested archivist, or the stray descendant that cannot visit - leave flowers on this page in lieu of placing them on the grave. An option that might be more immortal than plastic or mineral. Flowers which will not be killed by drought or overnourished by flood. Flowers that will not die since they have not lived, but are even less likely to be seen. Flowers that are relatively private. Alone on this page, a pixelated image of a pink bouquet. In September of 2011, someone offered digital flowers for Hugh. *Left by Anonymous*. Threatened by this stranger who had already honored him, I created an account, then agonized over which ones he might like. I settled on forget-me-nots, and left them floating for him there.

Kathleen [Fire]

According to Mark, Kathleen C. Mandeville is an Episcopal Reverend. Just beside ours, Mark lives in the house with the bright chartreuse door and vines crawling up the sides. Ours are two of many on the long street of a sparse village in Hudson Valley, New York. “A fucking incredible, insane woman,” he continues, rattling out more admirable descriptors - none of which do anything to specify what exactly it is that Kathleen *does*. It could be dance, or missionary work, or performance art, or any number of elusive careers.

Only one thing keeps coming up in the vague details of her legacy: she set things on fire. A lot. “Just an insane, amazing woman. Look her up, here’s her website.” He hands me his phone, the screen pulled up to show an outdated LinkedIn account. I go home and find her on my own.

When we moved into the unit where my two housemates and I currently live, there was endless wreckage in our yard. Forgotten memorabilia from shifting tenants and debris from years of minor repairs and renovations littered the yard: the cap to a truck bed with “Your Path to a Healthy Environment” sprawled across the sides in a soft green typeface leans against our red shed, alongside tires with weeds growing out of the middle. An old toilet was leaning against the

siding beneath my bedroom window for three months last fall, and a mostly broken wooden table still proudly stands on two legs. The largest and most mysterious of the artifacts is a cauldron; a large and rusted pot propped up on a metal frame that's hoisted by wheels, still adorned with a small welded plate that reads "1-PYRO." I was to find out, after thirteen months of living here, that the cauldron was Kathleen's.

These details are precious and personal, but they're not mine. This is something I remind myself often. I'm not the first nor the last to treasure this yard and its litterings. I'm not the first nor the last to lay a claim on Montgomery Street, posting up on my porch like some overseer of greetings who is destined to be disappointed when a passerby fails to wave back at me. This is the nature of my staying here. I settle into a spot and grow vines for some months of the year, and when the season turns I carry on while the chartreuse door to my left opens and closes, day after day.

The first evidence I find of Kathleen online is a poem titled "A Candle for Karma." It was published in Chronogram magazine in 2010, and begins:

"I do all the things one does
when backed into the corner
of change or die."

I wonder what sort of things I do when I'm backed into the corner, considering I'm not dead yet and not near it either. I wonder how this house is my corner, how it has forced me to morph.

Have others felt that too? Is this place where we pause a grounds for changing, or else?

Though we renewed our lease for another year, the other half of our duplex recently moved out, leaving us with new faces on the other side of our walls - and this is not a time when new faces are a thing to be taken for granted. Trying to scrounge up some use of the backyard, they emptied the cauldron of the bug breeding water and reddened mud at the bottom, and in it our new neighbors began to build fires. Propped up between two ends of a pole - which was merely a shower rod split in two by the force of a blow torch - they balanced griddles for cooking, and grates to hold cast iron pans.

Early evening in the closing hours of August, it is barely dark enough outside for the orange licks peeking above the rim of the pot to create any source of light. This is when Mark saunters into our yard, wearing the signature alpaca printed sweater that it seems he always has on. He is not a tall man and not a young one either, but the shaggy way he wears his shoulder-length greying hair and the bouncing purpose in his walk both beg to differ. He's just climbed out of the small pickup he drives, the one which wears a sticker proudly gloating "This Car Climbed Mount Washington!" and the car is old and modest enough to make this claim impressive. Mark is pleased that the cauldron is being used and explains to us that he is looking after it for his friend, that amazing figure Kathleen. It was moved to our side of the property line accidentally years ago and he never bothered to gather it. "Well, I just wanted you to know the history. This thing's got a big fucking history."

We meet our neighbors frequently and introduce ourselves often. Their response is patient but halfhearted, and almost always prefaced or punctuated by a disclaimer that students come and go. With weak smiles they let me down easy, offering “I probably won’t remember that name.” I grant them that it is three syllables, no small task of a mouthful. Sometimes they even practice pronouncing it back to me, nevermind that they have no obligation for greetings. It is through their practiced patience that I understand longtime residents of any area as, compared to me and the fleeting nature of my life here, immovable. They not only hold the many tiny histories, they create them.

The next thing I find out about Kathleen is directly from her actual website, which explains her role as a spiritual officiant. A “Mistress of Fire,” for many forms of rituals and ceremonies, from weddings to funerals. Most commonly, her spiritual practice revolves around the conducting of Sacred Fire Ceremonies. After much reading I still have difficulty grasping the full origin and nature of these ceremonies, though I understand them as a manner of innovating an otherwise traditional sacrament, creating experiences that are unique and binding. The explanations on her website complicate our neighbor’s descriptions: “she lit everything on fire.”

The interaction with Mark is not unusual, but his eagerness holds some novelty. Much like the truthful stories that are the foundation for fairytales and fables, learning the history that lurks in our borrowed home always feels like something more than a gift; it feels like a truth at the core

of something that is otherwise always moving just out of reach. The knowledge we've been granted is more permanent than the brevity of our living here.

Kathleen's poem continues:

“Some of us
make fires,
make a mess,
make word and image
to make it through”

I've sewn together skeins of linen to make ribbon, written letters on them, hung them over creeks and across clotheslines. This practice began after the sudden passing of a friend, halfway through my time at college. He had lived one floor up and five doors to the left from mine, and I recorded all the things I'd say to him if I were given the chance, then strung these words on the face of our building, from his window to mine. Since that first one, the letters have turned hopeful. I write to those who still walk by my side as opposed to those who have become a part of my history and once I am finished with their installation, I bring the letters home and hang them from branch to branch and let the rain and snow weather them. Adding my own littering to this yard. We've spray painted sheets on the clothesline, poured paint on tarps, shuffled out feet through the snow to leave messages behind us. I've sat with friends in the outdoor shade and we've drawn pictures on the daunting leaves of the Catalpa tree behind the house, watched them float off in autumn, then seen them decay under frost. These are the words and images that persist. That get us through.

But beyond the mess and word and image, Kathleen's instructions leave me grappling with the matter of making the fire. An endeavor which feels hopeless in this cauldron, knowing it won't be as raging as Kathleen's. I have watched things shift and groan under the weight of change, but I have seldom watched them quickly burn. I'm left grappling with what to do with the mess that the ashes have made at the bottom of the pot that is not ours. I'm left grappling with whether or not to leave my words up for the next person who is backed into the corner of this property.

The more I learn about Rev. Kathleen Mandeville, the closer she seems. I am convinced that many of the adults in my life knew her at some point, too. She was the former chaplain of the college where I will soon be graduating, and her company IgniVox Productions - which is justified on its website as "a music production company/congregation dedicated to excellence in performance and transformation through music" - began in this town. I wonder if I've ever heard music she was involved in wafting down the street and through my window.

Such as my first correspondence with the neighbor across the corner from us, with the lovely garden and a bright blue door. When the sign of frost arrives each year, he trims the marvelous bulbs and buds from his lush trees and gathers them in a bucket. Perched on a stool in the yard, it reads "take one." I often do, but I prefer to keep count of who else reaches a hesitant hand into the mess, where they take it from there. It was only recently that I was reading on my porch and I heard a strikingly beautiful song, a sort of slow and wandering melody being finger-picked on an electric guitar. I walked to the sidewalk on his side of the street to confirm that his windows, barely opened, were the source of the sound. I left him a note:

“Dear neighbor,

I live on the side unit of 32 Montgomery, and around 1:30pm today I heard the most beautiful song I’ve heard in a long time. It might have been an entire album, or a long track. Can you tell me what song that was?”

I signed off with my name and phone number. The next morning I got a text - his name is Bill. He found my note amongst the flowers when he woke. I suppose it had drifted off of the doorframe where it was stuck. “I was working on one of my original pieces, hence the length of the track. Your note brightened up my morning.” It took 13 months, but now we wave to each other. I like to believe I’ve become slightly more permanent in his eyes, even though I’ll be on my way soon enough. I like to believe I made it into one of Bill’s tiny histories, even if only for the length of a morning.

Kathleen continues, scorching the ground beneath her:

“I pray for the karma
between you and I
to be burnt up,
transmuted into kitten fur ash,
floating motes to the stars.

I see a zipper unzipping,
time to take off the coat,
familiar with the stains of every battle,
pocked with tear marks.”

What fire does is take the excess, then makes it into something bright. What anger does is steal a portion of truth from each sentence so that we can never say in entirety what we need to say.

What loneliness does is poison honesty and cause us to tear each other, irreparably, to shreds. It backs us into the corner and forces us to change, or else. According to Mark, Kathleen brought our large and creaking pot all around the country to burn things in it, creating brightness which gives way to mess at the bottom of a pot that we are borrowing.

A Candle for Karma continues, a few stanzas later:

“I say thank you for letting me wear it,
I don’t need it any longer.
I say I have to go now
and turn on my way.”

Long after nightfall on that August night, the fire which drew Mark into our yard had gone out.

“I just wanted you to know the history.”

I survey the ashes. I thank Kathleen for letting me wear it.



Something I have since discovered on the matter of tiny histories, as must be the case with all historical fact, is that they are subject to change. We are capable of stepping backwards into them.

But I have also discovered, of myself, that it is often not enough to simply wave to these fixtures from the street. It is not even satisfactory enough to thank them. I suppose I have a need to dig my heels in.

Such has been the months since I first read *A Candle For Karma* and became preoccupied with Kathleen's fire.

It is morning, around 8, and I'm confined to the burden of my blankets listening to the drone of the alarm clock radio. The men ramble through the wavelength from Woodstock, NY in unpracticed, un-radio voices and are occasionally joined by the sound of relentless phone alarms, set as a supplemental call to action when meaningless chatter isn't enough noise to rouse me. I continuously snooze the phone's buzzes. They are interrupting this riveting conversation about where to get the best sandwich in the Hudson Valley. If I became a supporter of WDST 100.1, I might get a coupon to this alleged best lunch spot. By the third ring I've snoozed, I check the rest of the notifications that managed to accumulate through the night, through power flickering in and out and WiFi shutting down entirely from high winds. Is March air always this fast? At seven this morning, my astrology app had sent me a notification, a bold banner that sat just beneath the screen's display of the date. "Welcome to the beginning of everything," it warned.

When Kathleen and I first spoke on the phone, she asked me my Zodiac sign. (She's a Leo - a fire sign - no surprise.) It was probably the second thing she said to me, besides the words we exchanged via email.

I suppose we were introduced following the backyard visit with Mark. That is, she was introduced to me. I knew Kathleen the moment Mark spoke of her. I sent her an email on September 5th, half a year ago, with the subject line “A relic of yours.” I told her that I had found myself an accidental keeper of her cauldron, and that I wanted to know what it was about, what she was about. I asked if we could meet. Her response was a banner on my screen beneath the same date, 9 hours later. It was all lowercase and indented strangely, as if in verse.

“thank you so much for reaching out.
 I would be most happy to speak to you.
 and hear more about what you are doing with your project
 and reflect on fire, poetry, all of it.
 I am a bard alum, also worked at chaplain there in the 90’s.
 say hello to susan fox rogers for me.
 I suggest we have a phone call
 to see how to connect further.
 I live in rosendale currently (across the river)
 I have some time to talk monday afternoon or tues am...
 or?”

Her full name address of my academic advisor - whose name she slightly misspelled - was enough evidence that my suspicions were on track: Kathleen and I existed in the same universe. We had encountered similar stories, heard the same voices before. This could be my proof of her existence if a poem would not suffice. We spoke on the phone two days later, labor day. I had a night shift but she rang in the afternoon. She wanted us to speak face to face, reassured me that she didn’t have the plague. A new face, a gift. I imagined it sharp and youthful. Maybe she

would have a streak in the face-framing piece of her hair like Susan Sontag, or a pointed nose that turns relentlessly skyward. Her house is secluded in Rosendale, she told me, across the bridge. This is where I'd be joining her - Kathleen doesn't drive. She gave me the type of visual instructions useful for those of us too confident in our instincts to rely entirely on GPS: cross this river, that bridge, then that bridge - but don't go under that bridge. That means you've gone too far. It's the yellow house.

Four mornings after that, the sun came out, and I was on her porch. There was hardly hesitation or awkwardness in our greeting - beyond the fear that this palpable excitement between us exceeded an appropriate level, but even this was forgivable. There is anticipation inherent in meeting someone who you have previously only known digitally, facelessly.

Kathleen was shorter than I imagined, and her face was not sharp at all, but defined and etched with the many expressions she'd worn in life, so that in an instant glance it was possible to imagine her smile, her scowl, her wide-mouthed yell. And her nose was not pointing skywards. It stared squarely at me, sitting firmly on her face above her easy to smile mouth, which was slightly parted in thoughtful ease, ready to speak but pausing for the correct sentence to present itself. She wore patchy, layered clothing which I'm sure incorporated denim, a vest, a flat billed cap. She had her gray hair - still nearly blonde at the roots - pulled back in a low ponytail and she called me by my full name.

“Okay, Mariel Cupp. Here we are.”

Her voice was steady and narrativizing, her real time recitations promising that we were in the same moment, aware of where and who the other is, nevermind the fact that we didn't have an idea. She nodded her head very seriously, very often, murmuring litters of "hmmm," "yeah," "wow." These kept up throughout our conversation: short sharp phrases in which she seemed to take a moment, right there in the middle, to rack her brain for how she felt before turning outwards again and resituating us.

"All right, we're on the porch. You drink your coffee black. Okay."

We talked for three hours, two of which were before the audience of my cell's microphone.

It began slowly.

"So the thing in my yard. I've been calling it a cauldron. Would you call it that?"

"Sure. What I called it was a rolling fire pit, since that's what I used it for. However, here's what it is: they're used for scalding the hair off of a pig, for a pig roast. An old practice would be, after you've slaughtered it - not that I've done this - you put the pig in the cauldron of boiling water and it takes the bristle off."

I took note of her never having slaughtered a pig, then took notice of the ease with which she shared. She spoke quickly, excitedly. It was not unlike the voice I read in her poem, which poured out of the page as playful, thoughtful, wanting. Playful, greedy.

From there the conversation veered. I hear this veering take place on the tape, the two hours of chatter I recorded between Kathleen and I. It winds between whispers and shouts and is threaded with breeze and bugs and bird wings, all moving between us as we leap out of our seats and into the yard, into the air, chasing one another's words.

It was this tape that became my ultimate proof of her, and the ultimate challenge to bring justice to. I put off the task of listening to this conversation for months. I put off the task of transcription for even longer, and with good reason. The process of documentation was meticulous, and I was driven mad over the particulars of her voice, her tone, her ticks. I bemoaned this work to other friends who deal in transcriptions, particularly Anthropologists, who were all gleefully prepared to recommend me one transcription service over the other. It eases the work, they told me, and I could not believe in those moments how different our work must be. As if an algorithmic microphone could tell me when Kathleen has begun to dance around the porch, when she has reached a frantic scream, or a terrible whisper.

There was the initial thrill of finding her, then making contact, then making plans. I told my neighbors and friends and parents, "I've found Kathleen. I'm *meeting* her." This was, of course, not without its fears. How horrible it would be if we met the voice of every poem we loved, every song we sang along to. I can only imagine what a disappointment my favorite painting might be if it could talk to me. But for Kathleen, I chose the risk of finding out.

Then there was the thrill of following through, and the satisfaction of an actualized, thorough conversation. But after all of these came the question of what to do with her. I set this question on my bedside table, unanswered, for 24 weeks.

The first time I told a member of my school's faculty that I was seeking Kathleen, they warned me: "if you track her down, she'll track you down back."

I accepted that risk. After the laborious work of transcription, I reread the many pages repeatedly to try to map our conversation, to make sense of it, but the swings are uncanny and fast. From laws of Kashrut to Dutchess County real estate, then a myriad of shenanigans Kathleen pulled during her time at Bard, then her time in Tivoli. "I was wild. I did a lot of wild things back then. I could tell you all about that." This was a repetitive promise in our conversations, what she could tell me all about. Perhaps she meant it as a threat. It felt as though, rereading it, she must have told me about everything there was to tell, and still I knew there was more. There was never enough.

Our discussion became a delineation of the many homes and endeavors we've known in this area. We discussed the town where I work. Kathleen shared she "has a history there." I told her about what they've done to the new laundromat, and how the deli has changed hands, riding the thrill of possessing knowledge that could fill in missing histories otherwise known by this veteran of the area.

She said of this town, “It’s had its own morphology.” She placed this phrase as a preface before many of her sentences on the topic, like a mantra urging us to remember how badly things want to morph, how they bend out of shape and remain, magically, recognizable to us. She told me about the chain smoking Italian butcher, Esther, who originally ran and maybe owned the deli. She told me about doing a pop-up wedding in that same deli.

“You did? A wedding? Was there fire involved?” She laughed at my enthusiasm.

“You’re cute. No, my two friends who lived in Germantown asked me to officiate them and they wanted to do it in a very pop-up sort of way, and they loved that place so we did it there. Then we did a procession down to the river and had another ritual down there.”

Then there came the shifts in the tape. I heard a moment, one of many, when I left the role of cartographer and came to her, instead, as insistently theoretical, curious. Prying. A potential student of fire.

“Okay, I had another question I wanted to ask you.”

This one veer must have been the first step in our staircase which led Kathleen and me to move upwards together, seemingly both always seeking the next door to open things. I remember being nervous to ask. I suppose I feared sounding pretentious, or that she would come to see my intentions clearly as impure, academic, over-poetic and probing and imposing. I transcribe my question honestly nonetheless.

“I guess this question is...a metaphysical one. About the burning. This might be a little....tell me if I’m projecting some depth onto this. But when you are burning things and you think beyond the physical: what do you think you’re burning?”

I imagined she would laugh at me. I also imagined she might have embraced me, thanked me, for knowing the question that brought about an honest answer. She would tell me that she burns the Karma between you and I, that she burns the memories which make sleeping more difficult, she burns grief; otherwise known as the histories we leave out of our books, she would say I burn everything, I give you permission to burn it all. I give you permission to stay here, so long as you burn it all.

I was transcribing in a windy, dark room with unreliable power. Receding into memory [which was slower than my keystrokes, which are dutifully trying to keep up with her cackling], trying to conjure her out of this recording’s flat nasally version of some woman who might be Kathleen Mandeville. This interview, according to the wind outside that played alongside it, happened in a snowy season, not possibly early September. The ground was covered in layers of ice, stacked delicate and fragile and sharp the way a river freezes, in sheets; it happened in the dead of night, 3 or 4 in the morning, no one knew I was in Rosendale, New York and perhaps I died there after and no one would have been able to track me without passing the wrong bridge. Or it didn’t happen in Rosendale New York, but in Antarctica or some other remote hypothetical version of a place, a barren one where I have never been and only projected to, where there was only us two;

it was bright out in a dull and loudly silent way as it is before daybreak; it was August and we were sweating so badly that I felt naked and vulnerable close to her; we were instant friends; we were mother and daughter; I was in her congregation, see, I met her at church; Kathleen was in my bedroom, she was sitting at my desk; she was asking me for water and ducking under the broken lamp in my kitchen; it was pouring rain; I couldn't see her face, only the tip of her cigarette.

Like this it weaved and repeatedly escaped me. I was transcribing in a room and in the months that had passed Kathleen had gone from history, to mythology, to real and then myth again, and the ashes of each transmutation settled into the cracks of everything. But my memory conjures the truth of all our transmutations. We were on her porch. It was morning, in Rosendale, New York. It was September of a terrible year. Then we went everywhere in every kind of way until I finally gave in and heard us, the real us, speaking again. I let her in on my secrets. The keystrokes were loyal to record even those, which come from a thin warped voice that I suppose could have been me, talking to Kathleen C. Mandeville.

“What do you think you're burning?”

There is silence on the tape. I can't remember how she looked at me during this silence or if she just looked at her cigarette and wondered who I was, how I got to her house. She must have looked furious. Or full of wonder and awe. We were sisters, we knew about fire. She wanted me off of her porch. I think we fell in love.

“Are you trying to burn anger? Or is it more generative than it is destructive?”

Kathleen's voice reemerged on the tape as low and decisive “Well,” an opening that demanded pause, like I had just set something precious in front of her. Or something horribly frustrating.

My voice apologizes for the weighty, maybe pretentious question.

She continued, still in that low pitched voice. This was the slowest and clearest she spoke since I had arrived. I could hear on the tape that we are listening to each other with something unspeakable at stake. We are officially invested in one another.

“Well. Well, well, well, well: that’s fire. Fire is both. It is generative and destructive. That...that’s one of its true alchemical functions, if you will. So...that’s a great question. I’ve done a lot of fire ceremonies. We could talk about fire endlessly but let me just give you a little bit of a down-low about it or I can try to answer your question specifically...The thing about fire is that it’s transmutative. That is to say, it changes the form of what it is that you’re burning.”

“I know about this,” I want to tell the tape. “You do it too,” I can’t tell the tape.

She did not hate me for asking. Well, well, well. Fire is both. Why was I so afraid to ask, to remember asking? I cannot avoid the pestering guilt and confusion that surrounds my avoidance

of this recording. The chore of listening can't have been the largest factor in my avoidance. Not the dutiful transcription, pausing and unpausing to catch every mumble or grunt from my subject. I was mostly obstructed by my own voice, which elicited a consistent cringe each time that nasally flattened sound of myself came from the speaker, prying into Kathleen or overexplaining. Stepping too much into the conversation. Why did I talk at all? Why didn't I just let her go on? But then, it was what she elicited. Kathleen had a way of staring. She might only have been processing, but her eyes demanded more. She forced the interview out of its confines and into the wideness of conversation until it was as though we were reminiscing together on memories that were entirely hers, that she allowed me to hold in my hands.

It could be that I spoke so readily due to the awe I had for her, before her, for the mystery surrounding her, the one I had laid down at her feet when I first read that poem. I thought about Kathleen, wrote towards Kathleen, I spoke about her and spread her name, before ever meeting her. I thought about her during a lonely year. One without touch or strangers, a year with too many poems and no one to read them for. She'd elicited my secrets before she was even real.

Kathleen's theories about fire went further, indoctrinating me as someone who burns:

“Think of the reasons why anything happens around a fire. You'll find that when people are around a fire, to a certain extent they're more relaxed. There's a way in which the fire holds the center of the engagement. If you're around a fire you can talk or not. If you're sitting in a room with a group of people everybody has the need to fill that social space, but the egoless

performer of the fire holds that. We're sort of free to... I've done some writing on all this, I'd love to share it with you."

The Egoless Performer would be the name of the book she wants to write, if she ever does write it. I pray that she does. I mourn the words not recorded if she chooses to keep them private.

"I'd love to read it."

So the work of listening became a task of unraveling memories: hers and my own as they became confused. Similar to two necklaces bunched in a fist, clinging to each for dear life, our chains snarled and our locket hit against one another. Holding someone else's thoughts inside that heart pendant with its hinges. I sift through the sentences in my fist and cannot find any words that are mine.

I remember a time I was recalling a story to my roommate from our first year living together. She didn't recall and laughed at the reminder. "You have a good memory," she told me, then suggested it's why I write. Which might mean that writing is only stealing or replaying what other people can't. Or telling stories that other people won't. Holding on to their thoughts tighter than they do. Kathleen has started to send me poems, the unpublished ones, to pick my brain about. She has not asked to pick my brain about the way her eyes pry, or how far her laugh carries so as to let everyone in town in on our jokes. If she ever does ask, I'll certainly have insights.

“For me, my language is quite esoteric and sometimes obtuse but that’s my own issue I work on.” Her tone when we discuss writing is almost meek, apologizing. Despite an obvious wisdom, Kathleen alludes to herself as someone devoid of authority in regards to language. I try to mitigate this shyness.

“No, I understand. I find it hard to not be overly formal or analytical when I’m writing. I’ve challenged myself to write something funny but it’s simply impossible. There’s nothing funny about trying to get to the root of something.”

At this, the recording plays back Kathleen’s laugh, abrupt and erupting, as if my inability to joke has been the inevitable punchline at the end of this long set-up.

“Well it can be! I mean, humor is definitely a piece of it and people do it. But I don’t know.” Again, excusing herself of command.

“I guess I think of myself as witty in conversation.”

“That’s clear.”

“But paper is different. There’s no wit. It’s a singular activity, there’s no one to bounce off of. So I’m very serious on a page.”

“It’s a singular activity...” She repeats my words to herself, again as if I have stepped politely out of her earshot to allow her to deliberate, conjure, alone. “Nobody to bounce off of. Yes.”

“Which I think is why you have to read to write. To have something to bounce off of. To talk and connect with.”

It did not occur to me until I had filled countless pages on the matter of Kathleen that it was her bouncing off of every word. Not as an audience but a touchstone, a friend. A vessel. I write a sentence and she laughs. I pause the tape, rewind, and listen to the laugh again.

“But don’t you consider your audience, when you’re writing something?”

Someone to write to, or for. We’ve got to give our thoughts and memories and lies to other people, and hold theirs in return. Otherwise we are liable to lose them elsewhere, for good. Something lost with a friend is far safer, after all, than something lost in a pool, in a place, down a sewer. Instead we allow others to draw thoughts out of us then we hand them off, where instead of breaking or dissolving they get twisted together: they become connected by their similarity, their desire to get twisted and to touch. Like people need. Their need to know too much, like people need.

“Oh, I don’t consider my audience enough.” I admit.

And she of course accompanies me in the land of self-doubt:

“I mean this is my challenge in writing too. Coming into truth about my own voice and trusting it, as it were, you know? “

“Well you have to believe that someone will read it and know what you’re saying. Beyond knowing - you have to believe someone wants to hear what you’re saying as well.”

“If you think about who you’re writing it to, for me that helps. Because it becomes less of a singular activity, although I don’t always see to that part.”

Then another truth, one she pulled out of me carefully [effortlessly]:

“I’ve had difficulty knowing when to stay out of a story, and knowing when it’s too empty without me.” Especially a story, I don’t say, or a person, that consumes and scorches my every thought.

“But it’s helpful to force yourself to just think of the form as a physical thing.”

Once I brought us to the topic of form, another step in our staircase appeared.

“Yes! That’s Right! Mastery is form is…”

Kathleen's hands can be heard clapping on the tape, more hollow than the clap was before my eyes, as the idea takes its shape. “Form is everything. If you can’t master that, that’s part of how you come to terms with the limitations of what your art form is, right?”

“Absolutely.”

“I mean you have to confront that.”

“And it feels horrible to confront,” I assure her, “like being constrained. But once you learn the constraints you are able to bend them. It’s like any tradition. You have to understand convention in order to break it.”

“That's the thing. This comes back to the cauldron, and fire, and alchemy and generation and destruction as well: here’s one of the central theological functions and images in the Episcopal church and Roman church as well, the idea that you have trans-substantiation - whatever the fuck you think about that, we don’t literalize it. But, if I have wine in a chalice, I

need to have a container for that wine, and then the spirit, in whatever way you understand that, comes in and mediates an ontological shift, right? And then we take that into our bodies. So, if you don't have that chalice, you can't have the alchemy, you have to have a form in which to hold the mediating function of the spirit so there's a transmutation. A transformation, whatever way you want to think about it."

"A vessel," I offer. A relic, I think.

"A vessel, right? And so that is part of the function of form."

"So you can't write without a vessel. You have to put it in something."

"Yes. This happens in religion too, or any spiritual practice. But it shouldn't distract, either. As a Native teacher that I know very well says, you end up eating the menu rather than the meal. Because the convention becomes more of a focus than the actual essence of what the menu - the form - is to create. So it's a dialectic."

It was always just a cauldron. Bring your own fire.

"It's a fixation."

"Yes, it can be." Kathleen reassures me, "form can become a fixation, right? It can."

"Then you're seeing everything through that."

We sat in each other's silence for a moment. I imagine while listening back on these silences that in the quiet moments, we are locking eyes. I can't remember what color hers are. I want to say gray. I want to say my interest in her is too elusive, or too obvious, to place on the menu. It could be both. Destructive and generative. But the fact of it is, I was fixated on her and I saw

everything as flammable. If I hadn't left the tape stagnant for those months then I might have burnt her.

I listen to Kathleen and I hum something, play with words, reincarnate them - unlike with lost facts or hard memories, we can rejoice in the sounds of our thoughts being knotted and friendly, intertwined, bouncing. A friend once told me that him and I have rewarding conversation because we both have a constant narration happening in our heads. We're dying for someone to play commentator, interviewer, host. We play along with ourselves with each other, pull out some narrative to the otherwise nonsensical nature of interest.

Then there is a spark captured in the audio, a harsh end to silence, and I hear myself rudely bring us back into a moment of reality. Back to the root of fixation: A Candle for Karma.

“I just want to know what led you to write it.”

This moment felt blasphemous now that the poem had a face. A face I was prying at for more. She told me it is the only poem she's ever published.

“That's really funny that you found it,” but she didn't sound amused. She put an emphasis on funny, F-unny, lingering on the F, low-voiced. She almost sounded like I'd thwarted her.

“And I wrote it, like, I don't know 10, 12 years ago. It was about a completion. That was probably obvious. Nothing like tortured love to create inspiration.”

“And to hinder it, if it’s all you think about. Like the way of form.”

She took fondly to this idea, encouraging me to get to the point of my prying. I remember looking at her before asking my question, my mind elsewhere, imagining the first night I had used the cauldron. Along with her eyes I stared into the ashes from that night, when I had wondered where they’d go. The same night I’d wondered online about who this woman was, what she did, where I could find her.

“I guess it left me with a question. What do you do with the ashes?”

Followed by another loud Kathleen pause, which might have been an honest reflection that I misread as a demand for explanation.

“Because the fire is so much more rewarding than the mess.”

“More rewarding than the mess? Is that what you said?”

Yes, that’s what I said. She took fondly to this as well. This is how we began discussing her profession. Her art form is events, she told me.

“But events are ephemeral. There’s always a kind of postpartum thing after you’ve done something big. That’s sort of the narrative arc of fire. There’s a completion cycle. And so, what you do with the ash.... and what to do with the ash? Well.”

“I guess you write a poem about it.”

She declares that “what you do with the ashes” will be the title of her poem of the day, the ones she’s been writing every day for nearly a year - since the very beginning of quarantine.

But she did not necessarily answer me. Perhaps she trusts me to answer it myself. The entire tape took me two weeks to get down on paper. As if a computer knew what to do with the ashes.

So I reread the poem. I realized that the first time I wrote about her I had run out of words. I no longer felt capable of conjuring more from this vessel, this stranger. In the penultimate stanza, Kathleen wrote:

“This time I don’t look back to see
the storm starting in your face.
I know the sound of thunder in your throat.
And lightening quick
with a crack and a boom and a bang,
I could become salt
Again.”

But I had chosen to look back. As did she.

It must have been two months after we first met that Kathleen texted me out of the blue. It was 11 in the morning, a Saturday. I was still in bed when her name appeared on my screen as a text: “Hello there, Mariel. I happen to be in your backyard...are you home?”

If you track her down, she’ll track you back.

I was instantly - though not efficiently - clothed and joining her in the frosty grass outside, where she was peering curiously into her cauldron. The other half of my duplex had recently moved it

to the middle of the yard, where it was a focal point during presentations for the philosophy department. This news delighted her. Her voice from the tape echoed in my mind, *I did all kinds of things with that cauldron*. Us too, I told the voice. I had, since our first meeting, shared with Kathleen what I wrote about A Candle for Karma. It was met with pure delight, which she expressed via email, this time from a personal address as opposed to the one I had found from her website to initially contact her. It was written, as is Kathleen's style, in verse.

“hey mariel-

well this piece you wrote...

(aside from you ‘mining’ my legacy

so it is a bit hard to be too objective:)

is pretty fucking amazing...

the detail, the narrative arc, the personalities evoked by word & gesture, using the poem as structure

you clearly command your own ‘voice.’”

Mining her legacy. I felt as though I'd been caught in the midst of a crime, but her awe mitigated these nerves. She reiterated her pleasure then, during her surprise arrival in my backyard. “I know I'm biased. But you've got a fan in me, Mariel Cupp.” And you in me, I might have said, or I might have burned every page right there in front of us.

Most recently, she came to my porch. This meeting was more premeditated than the last, and I joined her happily with coffee in hand. Black, she recalled. Black, I confirmed, though these days I had taken to cream and sugar. Periodically, a neighbor or roommate or friend of mine would pass out of their door and down the street. It is on those slow mornings that a home feels

permanent, when nearly every face is a familiar one. To those who stopped, I introduced her. “This is my friend Kathleen.” To which they would reply “Kathleen *Mandeville*. I’ve heard so much!” or “Kathleen...*The Kathleen?*” Some simply answered “I know,” before having the pleasure of introducing themselves. To these acknowledgements she gave one of those howling laughs and shot me a playfully scornful look, clearly delighted. “You’ve certainly spread word of me, Mariel Cupp.” And of course she spoke easily and excitedly with all of them while I rang my hands and I hoped that in her voice they would understand my rambling.

We discussed her work - she had sent me a folder of poems just nights before - and her prospects of doing a writer’s retreat. She asked me for insight about voice. I regurgitated the advice peers and professors had kindly handed me in past months and she nodded along intently, as if I might be saying something horribly important. This meeting was even more littered with silence than our first, a most urgent and awe-struck silence between our gazes. Only this time I can confirm, during the stillness, her eyes did not once leave my face.

“It’s getting late.
Without a coat,
I step lively along
inhaling the fresh moment.”

This is how she finishes *A Candle for Karma*. We sip our coffees and inhale and continue sharing advice, fears, theories, and stepping up into something.

Burt [Air]

It must have been March, late at night, the first time I heard their voice. An elusive and peculiar pitch, accented with the curvature of a New York dialect, brought me to pause between static. The station was 104.1, and the show was composed of callers, all granted thirty seconds or so to profess some truth, a free-for-all of complaints and anecdotes. One was an oral surgeon, frustrated that New York State didn't deem her fit to administer vaccines. *But you'd let me stick a needle in your mouth?* Another was a response to a recent shooting. The man calling in was all echoes, surrounded by the rumbling of an 18-wheeler's cabin. *I had a buddy tell me about how things are down in Atlanta.* A nervous chuckle, or maybe it was a grunt. Voice after voice, a quick thank you from the host, no we really need to go on to the next caller, this one's worried about insurance, they want you to admit you're a smoker for vaccine eligibility, but it'll only increase your premium, it's insidious, I don't trust it, my daughter said the opposite, a new topic, please go on, thank you but that's all our time for tonight. I had never heard the air used this way: for a communal shitstorm.

Then the show ended, and after a crackling moment of voicelessness, the slow Northern drawl emerged again. Despite the four years I have spent in the Northeast, I am never less charmed by the bending way people speak here. In Southern airwaves, the ones I grew up on, this voice would be more drawn together, the radio speakers sewing their words one right into the next then flipping up at the ends of sentences, the same overfamiliarity which allows strangers to assign one another pet-names. But this voice was all periods and pauses, no indulging fondness to it.

In a deep tone that was clearer than all of the people from the telephones, they greeted me from Woodstock 104, WIOF-LP, licensed to Birds of a Father Media. It was now two o'clock in the morning, on the dot, they continued, and the station would be ending its broadcast. Which they promptly did not do. Instead, at a painstakingly slow pace the voice recited the schedule of the coming week. Then there was the matter of sharing the station's Post Office address, and to whom tax-deductible donations should be made payable, and slots available for advertisement, and the state as well as charity funds that support the station. They explained the radius that the low power FM waves reached, every town which could be feasibly tuned in, and those which could not, due to the rivers and mountains stubbornly placed to block their signal. Each new matter on the docket came through the weary voice, exhausted by itself. It was as though the voice wanted badly to sleep, to finally shut down the waves, but was haunted by relentless agenda items that floated at random to their attention.

Then, the schedule for the morning, which slowed the voice further. *At 7:50 and thirty seconds in the morning, the voice of the founder of this station, and the love of my life, the late Randi Steele, will be heard reading the name of the station as well as the introduction for Democracy Now.*

I was consumed by pity, which was then crawled over by shame. I had misjudged this person as unprofessional, exhausted, lacking passion. But the passion had belonged to Randi, their life partner. A short search said she died in September of last year. This person was simply looking after the station now. The task must be exhausting.

After that first night of pity, the voice earned an allotted time slot in my nightly ritual. There were a number of evenings where I came to bed too late, and the air was already consumed by the low growl of an empty studio. But on the nights the voice joined me, it demanded empathetic attention, and I turned up the volume. It became clear that the nervousness with which the host spoke was coincidental, as nearly every night it carried out the dutiful announcement in the same order, with only brief conversational tangents. The schedule again, then the long case for why to donate. Woodstock 104 is set up as a 501c3, hence the status as an LPFM. The FCC grants this Low Power license to nonprofits with a limited broadcast radius. The voice ritualistically mispronounced the Federal Communications Commission as *The Feder-all Communi-case-ee-on Commish-ee-on*. Then, how the week will look, and lastly, a reminder of what's missing, the love of their life, the soulmate.

Randi passed away during that first month of Autumn, punctuating a long summer - an awful time to lose the backbone of the station. I think of how she left a widow to stumble awkwardly through the particulars, night after night.

Recently the voice got lost in the details of their own full hands. Rambling on in some low tone, they began, *I am always very busy*. My roommate had fallen asleep in my bed that night. Despite my having told her about this voice nearly every morning, her unexpected company brought about a twinge of guilt: usually the voice and I were alone together, along with all the hypothetical listeners in the towns that the mountains did not block. I shook her body curled next to mine and received a chuckle of recognition as confirmation that we both heard the rant. The voice continued, a sleepy monotone, *there is a lot that happens behind the scenes, and I am, really, always in the station*. Another chuckle, or maybe it was a snore. *You might not even hear everything that I do*.

The voice closed off the same, *This is WIOF-LP, Woodstock 104, Woodstock New York, at 104.1 on your FM tuner, and Birds of a Feather. Saying good night, and we are out*.

In my state of enamorment, I told another friend about the radio station. In these private gossips, I tend to disparage my beloved host. "What I adore is that the speaker is so bad at being on the radio," I told the friend, then instantly regretted my harshness. He asked if I've gone down the radio-outer-space rabbit hole. A cruel question, since he must have known that his asking was nothing short of a shove plunging me into research. I called him a day later.

"Did you know the word radio is from the latin *radius*? Spoke of a wheel. Or a beam, like light."

Did you know radio waves move closer to the speed of light than the speed of sound?

Did you know the music we've broadcasted through radio waves has travelled through space and it floats there light years away? Do you know about the hypothetical life out there with their hypothetical transmitters, maybe listening to our songs from 1908?

I don't often listen to the radio when I drive. It's too difficult, on long stretches, to find a worthwhile station that stays in range. The last time I made the flat drive home from New York to North Carolina, I arrived at dusk. In the living room, my legs still weightless from twelve hours of lingering over the pedals, I sat across from my mother. She was eager to entertain me. Over beers she presented a website, dense with text, chronicling the history of an AM station from Roanoke, Virginia - her hometown. WROV history follows the longtime owners, Burt and Muriel Levine, and the many jockeys that gave the station its character. It's a highly organized page, with chronologically ordered chapters that detail happenings from 1946 (The Beginning) to 2004 (The Epilogue) and the many years in between. Then there's the Engineering page, information about the building, blueprints, musiccards, commercials, jingles, testaments from listeners, interviews, memories - seemingly endless information. Someone, or likely multiple someones, clearly labored over it.

WROV was dialed on 1240 AM - *Oh Lordy, 1240!* was the popular slogan - and its character began to take shape as an influential force of the Roanoke Valley in 1953. The website called these "The Burt Levine Years," this being when the Levine couple bought the station. Burt's wife

Muriel was the daughter of a broadcasting executive. With the help of her family, and his knowledge of the accounts after having worked ad-copy for the station, they moved headquarters and began hiring a cast of lively disc jockeys who would define the sound of Roanoke for decades.

Throughout my visit home, we landed repeatedly on the endless content of wrovhistory.com for our entertainment. One morning over a puzzle and coffee, my mother was narrating the site to me. She eventually reached the year 1983 and extended the phone, asking that I carry on aloud. This was the point in the archive when Burt's wife suffered a ruptured cerebral aneurysm, and my mother was too overcome by tears to continue reading. This due to the fact that Burt and Muriel Levine were, among other things, my mother's parents. Muriel's aneurysm, which occurred when my mother was a sophomore in high school, resulted in a coma that lasted eleven years before culminating in her death in October of 1994. Six months later, Burt passed away as well. His death was surely a result of medical complication, as he was seventy when he passed. But the matter of months always struck me as necessarily correlating. As a child, I came to the conclusion that he had been killed by grief.

Did you know that *noise* is another name for any unwanted interference with a radio signal? Much like a friend once explained to me an Anthropological idea: that *dirt* is only matter that we deem out of place. They demonstrated this by shaking my hand, then asking me to put my palm out. Into this palm they clipped their fingernails. The same nails I had just embraced while attached to their person. "It's not dirty. It's out of place." Did you know that when I turn to

Woodstock 104 at night I try to remain as still as possible, fearful that the sounds of my turning will become disturbances?

After more time spent with the WROV website - a laborious place to rest the eyes, all bright blue background and yellow text, tens of thousands of words and hundreds of images - there emerged a parent website. This I found accidentally. On the home page, the url was no longer wrovhistory.com - instead, it was patrickwgarret.com/wrov. A minor change, but one that suddenly attached a name to this beast of information. For curiosity's sake I erased the /wrov, hoping to investigate Patrick himself. The url worked - and there lived an autobiography. It was formatted similarly to the blue page I knew, only this one was red and entirely about Pat Garrett. It was organized the same as the historical site as well, cut into segments chronologically with bonus archival material. His writing, though lengthy, was by no means dry. Nearly every sentence was layered with humor. From the very beginning: "I was born six weeks premature. There were two reasons for this: I didn't want to miss out on a Christmas, and I didn't want to deny my parents a 1957 tax writeoff." Pat writes about being bullied in middle school, getting a radio job in high school, tangents about what the FCC and corporate FM stations have done to radio, sonnets for the days when stations were places for connection.

Did you know radio waves can be the length of an arm or longer than our planet? Did you know that in Carl Sagan's book *Contact*, he supposes that the first Earth broadcast to reach alien life would be Hitler's voice at the Nuremberg rallies? Do you think this is cause for abandoning the romantic hope that terrestrial life has the technology to eavesdrop?

On the WROV site, there is a column for *Memories*, where old listeners and friends submit testimonies about the AM station's legacy. One of them my mother left in 2004, thanking Pat for his sleuthing and careful compilations. I tried to send an email to the address soliciting testimonies, but received a message back that the account was now defunct. This was months after my visit home. I called my mother, hoping she had a phone number for me.

"You need to call Gary," my mother instructed. Her brother-in-law, my uncle Gary is the closest thing to a family - and Roanoke - historian that I have. He was the high school sweetheart of an older Levine daughter, and before his many years delivering for the Roanoke post office, Gary was employed at the station. According to the autobiography, Patrick was also with WROV - from 1980 until 1982. Gary knew the name, but they never worked together. "He's a little unusual, but a real nice guy," my uncle offered.

Once I had plunged him into the depths of his radio memories, Gary's texts kept crawling in. "I worked there a few years, but Pat and I didn't overlap, so I know folks that know him, and I think he was one of the organizers of the reunion parties they used to have. You went to one when you were young." So I likely met Pat when faces were plentiful and fleeting, in the young years before meeting people meant anything to memory. From the rest of Pat's *Career* page, it appears that he moved to North Carolina in 1983, a few years before my mother made the same move. Though Gary offered plenty of contacts that might help, he didn't have a phone number for the archiver.

“I’m on a wild goose chase for this guy Pat,” I told my boss. “But he doesn’t seem to have Facebook, or email, or a phone.”

“Uh oh,” she mumbled. “...Dead goose?”

But there are too many geese. There was an entire day spent pouring over music cards, the ones Burt had lettered and printed with his knack for design in the garage of my mother’s childhood home. I uploaded the tracks chronologically into playlists, then sent them around to family and friends. “Wanna listen to WROV’s songs from October 18th 1965?” Then that night, the radio. My Woodstock voice went on another tangent, this time about “vax-fanatics.” *If you want to get it, fine. If you don’t, that’s also fine. Why should we always question authority, unless that authority is the people who gave us opioids?* The next morning, the rant still on my mind, I went goose hunting for the voice and finally found a name: Felicia. Each time I turned on Woodstock 104, I mistook her gender. Certainly I was projecting, a lifelong curiosity about Burt shrouding my connotations of radio. Did my grandfather wander on this way? I wondered the first time I heard her. No, he worked behind the scenes, never with a chance to ramble. Then the news that she was a woman. Couldn’t have been Muriel - she worked from home. In finding Felicia I also found her legal troubles, which have persisted for nearly half a decade - a battle with the other Woodstock station, 100.1 WDST, which is not an LP but a highly profitable business. They trademarked “Radio Woodstock” and “Woodstock Radio” years ago and have been grilling Randi’s station for even mentioning the town name. Nevermind that the LP station plays the town board recordings and the weather and the local news and hardly makes a dollar off of it.

The injustice of these legal worries I had to abandon. At the very least, I pick my battles better than my geese.

My mother called to ask why I'm looking for Pat. My justification: the introduction page of his autobiography, which he began in 2006 and "continuously put on the back burner because of the higher priority of finishing the other website I develop, The WROV History Site." Two years of work at WROV, one among dozens of stations Pat was part of - yet it was prioritized over his own life story. What was so urgent about Burt and Muriel's legacy that it ranked above cataloguing his own?

Did you know I was born in 1999? That I never met either of my grandparents? Did you know their voices are nowhere in the archives?

"The 1980's brought a stream of bad luck to WROV," Pat, or someone, says on the blue page. This was the decade that began with Muriel falling ill and ended with Burt selling the station. ("Though Muriel never regained consciousness, Burt continued to consider her a part of the business, and signed her name to the company's holiday gifts to employees.") One of the jockey's had a dog that was found dead - poisoned. Rumors flew about animal abuse. Burt organized a cash giveaway that rivals called a scam, and when the winners came to claim their cash WROV couldn't find the money to fork over. Then in 1985, a flood.

Did you know flood is an old English word with German and Dutch origin, meaning *to flow*? Did you know that in the 20th century, floods were the largest natural culprit of lives lost and property torn in the United States? Did you know the AM station was in a valley, at the bottom of a hill, 100 yards from the river?

Gary began working at WROV a year before the flood. These were the final five of The Burt Levine years. When the water came, he was at the station with his infant son, my older cousin. “There was a paint factory across the street from the station, and I remember looking out the window and seeing their cars sinking into the water. I said, ‘we need to leave.’” They went to the top of the hill and watched as one, then two feet of water spilled into the building, drenching the transmitters and carpets and wrecking the vinyls.

I had heard of a season when it rained for days. I once tried to write about it, the great 1916 flood of western North Carolina which many credit as a catalyst for the state’s largest man-made lake - the body of water on which I grew up. After the trauma of a river bulging and escaping out of place, people were more eager to allow an energy company to gather it. *It rained incessantly and it rained unkindly, and it rained for days*, I remember summarizing. Then, the WROV website: “it started raining and didn’t stop for five days.” Besides these words which Pat and I somehow share, I don’t remember much of my research. Only that people were swept up: deposited onto trees and rooftops. On the phone, Gary: “a lot of people had to be rescued off roofs of buildings. People were riding around town in boats. It was all pretty traumatic.” He then mentioned his father-in-law, who he called Grandpa Burt. “His wife was sick and had been for a couple years,

and I think he was starting to feel like God was testing him. But he was a positive guy. He was proud of how many people pitched in, not even on the clock.” All of them unpaid and covered in mud, the river which had wandered out of its designated place coating their rubber boots.

Did you know that in Hebrew school they asked us to imagine God and I always pictured the sun? Did you know it is difficult to pray to the sky without being blinded? Did you know that in those days I imagined Muriel, peering through her large glasses, smiling down at me?

“Did you ever get in contact with Pat?” Gary asked. Since the answer was no, he offered some more memories. He said Pat had been a nerdy kid who came down to the station at age thirteen asking to volunteer. There were plenty of kids like this, Gary said, ones who wanted to work in radio. It made them local celebrities - within a limited radius, but celebrities nonetheless. Kids who were picked on or avoiding home. “They used to say on the air, ‘Jeff Dickerson is in someone’s way right now.’ He had a tough home life, so he was always there, and one of the jockeys took him in like a son.” As for Pat, he’d wandered into WROV as someone rejected by his peers and obsessed with radio. His digital autobiography reflects that this hasn’t changed much.

I came back to WROV on my own, seeking evidence of my family. Not rejected or obsessed, it was not for a love of transmitters and a vengeance against the FCC that I became loyal to stations like the Woodstock nonprofit. It was through a culmination of things, like dirt or noise or flood, wandering out of place, that the geese gathered. The voice of my night could have been anyone.

In the people we find, we fill in gaps regarding those still lost. An absent person, like Burt, cannot be conjured from the clues of other people. But this does not stop us from trying. Us being the people I assume to be everyone, Us who wonder too fondly about others. We rest in the solace of strangers, who often do not return our gazes. Pat cared for my family without knowing they were mine. Felicia, who puts me to sleep, is not my mother. She cuts out the sound along with the noise and puts static back in its place.

WROV fought to avoid static at all costs. The station had always committed to being on air 24 hours a day, but the night of the flood they had to sign off. They remained silent for a week. Pat talked to Jeff Dickerson, the one always displaced and in the way, to recall the night they went quiet. There was one man left, the last person to leave the station before they killed the power. Into the mic, towards any stranger in listening radius who might still be there amidst the chaos, he bid his farewell. "Thanks for stopping by."