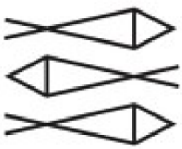
THE UNWRITTEN BOOK

AN INVESTIGATION

SAMANTHA HUNT



for

Diane, Amy, Charley

Lizzie, Katy, Andy

There was a man dwelt by a churchyard.

Well, no, okay, it wasn't always a man, in this particular case it was a woman dwelt by a churchyard. Though, to be honest, nobody really uses that word nowadays. Everybody says cemetery. And nobody says dwelt anymore. In other words:

There was once a woman who lived by a cemetery.

Every morning when she woke up she looked out her back window and saw—

Actually, no. There was once a woman who lived by—no, in—a secondhand bookshop.

—ALI SMITH, **"The Universal Story"**

Circulation Desk

The sun will set soon. Birds come to the feeder. Each bird is magnificent. Each bird is weird. How did the birds get so weird? A bright red head, spiky tufts, yellow eyes, pink feet, hidden fluorescence, the ability to fly. How did the word "weird" get so weird? And my hands, they are also weird. I'm watching the weird world, the weird birds when a thought arrives from nowhere. What if I've been dead for a long time? What if I've been dead my whole life?

If I am dead, the strangeness of existence is momentarily comprehensible. I catch a glimpse or scent of our dispersed worlds, this place without border, boundary, pain, or punctuation. This place where we are all intimately mixed up with one another. My branch, your book. His leg, her light. All the elements my body and your body have known: a mountain boulder, sediment in the sea, an underground pebble, sand. Everything is ancient, small, and eternal. More birds arrive. More birds leave. My children are playing in the yard. They jump, shriek, and pretend to be something other than their current forms. I hear them speak and, as if waking, my specifics come to collect my body back into being a mother, sister, daughter, wife, friend, a woman who is alive, reading a book outside before dusk. In the yard, I shake off enough deadness to go make dinner. My arms feel stronger with the memory of the rocks that make me.

But we have been dead a long time. "Of bodies chang'd to various forms, I sing." Our repurposed parts, like Frankenstein's creature, are calcium, potassium, phosphorus, sodium, magnesium remixed into bodies. Everything is forever. No one's going anywhere. Toni Morrison writes, "It's hard to make yourself die forever." Thich Nhat Hanh says, "I have been a cloud, a river and the air." Cristina Rivera Garza tells us, "I know you from when you were a tree. From those times."

Being a human is extraordinary. Being a tree or chickadee or pile of ash is also, no doubt, extraordinary. I just don't often remember having been those things. Though I studied geology, the long view of existence—our lives as minerals—is not the story I most often focus on. Rather, I look for and love the drama in the small details particular to one person, the crooked tooth, the bitten nails, the hidden suffering. We mourn the loss of one extraordinary human life: a grandmother, a cousin, a father, a friend. There is exquisite beauty and storytelling in the smallness. Reading life and death like a book. Start here. Finish here. These things that end (humans, winters, childhoods, love affairs, books) have sharp edges, painful as desire and packed with grief. Their hurt is precious and rich with meaning. It speaks to the work our bodies are really made for: feeling.

How do you feel? I feel like a teenage girl. By that I mean I experience torrential emotions, trying to stay as awake to feeling as a teenage girl might be. In her poem "Some Girls," Alison Luterman writes, "I have learned that some girls are boys; some are birds / some are oases ringed with stalking lions." Girls are brave in the ways they feel things. I want to have their courage, to be someone who feels always. I want our world to be led by people who feel things deeply. Then, some days, I am wrecked by feeling. Grief and desperation, anger and anxiety tear a hole in my being. Other days, I feel nothing. Those are the worst days.

My grandma Norma Stallings Nolan Santangelo had an accreted name that marks waves of twentieth-century immigration in New York. She lived to be 101. She loved Jesus. Her condo was filled with sexy pictures of him: damp eyes, bare chest, cuts in his body like small vulvas. His flesh broken and open to the world. My grandmother loved people. When I introduced her to the man who became my husband, she flirted with him, danced with him. I teased her. "Nan, that's my boyfriend." And she said, "I know, honey. He's so cute." She had little of material value, but maintained a deep generosity. She was money poor but she'd wink and say, "I have a rich father," a statement I didn't understand as a girl. She and her sisters created their own language. "Buz," "Zan," "snicky," "Nomy," "jubby." My grandma played with words, discarding definitions she didn't care for. It made her powerful. She was a pool shark, and a great one because no one ever believed this small woman could beat them at billiards until she did. She told me, "If you have a problem with the word 'god,' replace it with the word 'love.'" The cosmos she described is flexible, kind, and commodious. Now God often looks like her, a tiny feather of a woman dressed in bright colors and costume jewelry, a god who knows the names of small flowers and birds even if she created the words herself, a god who is insecure not from lack of loving but because she is full of mistakes, broken and open to all. She is without protection, feeling everything, fear, sorrow, and love. My God.

After the word "god" became the word "love," rocks became books, and books rocks. It makes sense to me. The longer I live with books and words, the more I enjoy their erosion. I break them open. I make beaches. And, as my grandma did, I reinterpret meanings. The older I get, the solid rock books of my youth make room for a literature that's more like the trees, so much greenery and decomposition. I confuse which book is which and what chapters belong where. Books composed in the hope of also one day being decomposed. Life and death in the library of trees. Death as a library. Library as a forest.

My friend Annie sent me a quote from Matisse. "Do I believe in God? Yes, when I work." I keep this card on my wall beside a photo of Mr. Morgan's bloodred library in New York City, beside a photo of the long-gone geodesic dome built on the edge of the woods in Vermont where I spent my twenties with an exceptionally open family who allowed me to live in the forest with them, who took me in as one of their own when I was eighteen. These three photos on my wall: art, library, forest. Lately, my library does look more like a forest. Some

books grow in memory or importance, some decay. Books, like trees, live longer than people. I make them into my natural history. Books as birds, rocks, trees, bees, moss. I read and write stories that have already been written, of how the dead are ever returning to us, how the dead never left.

In *Swimming to America* Patricia Spears Jones writes about a dream of Borges. "He built a library near a fjord." Then: "When they search for the library, they find mist." Where are those misty volumes?

Many people are dying these days. I've lost four friends in the time I've written this essay. One of them died only yesterday. And revising now, a different time, another friend has died. It doesn't feel like a tremendous leap to connect death, the library, and the forest. They are bounded spaces without a boundary, full of dust and ghosts. Dust that never leaves us. Not creepy or stagnant, but dust, Ms. Jones's mist, and ghosts who are golden with possibility, fermentation, and growth. "Growth" is another word I like to smash open.

Growth surrounds itself with flattering companions like evolution and progress but it can quickly turn to something worse. People get stuck on the accumulation of wealth, piling up hills of money and ownership. Once our basic needs are met, the idea of more is a growth that can be cancerous, murderous. Growth imagines its opposite is decay. As if to grow is to stay alive, and other delusions taught by capitalism. In reality, most of our lives are spent shrinking, eroding into bits and decaying. What if we celebrated that decay and championed the infinitesimal? I look for the bright colors and beauty of rot. Etymologically, there's decadence in decay. Non-etymologically too. Like a gorgeous mushroom, I hope to become brilliantly colored as I age, golden, pink, green, and blue.

When I was a girl I was given a set of tiny green lemonade glasses for my dollhouse. My attraction to these miniatures was so strong, their perfection so overwhelming, that I swallowed a handful of the glasses. Tiny is powerful.

The miniature is having a large moment. A virus has mobilized (and immobilized) our planet with unimaginable swiftness, changing our behaviors of consumption, climate care, equity, access, and ideas of societal control. If I were writing a story (I am always writing a story whether I like it or not) I'd say this virus is a tiny intelligent god, a miniature, complicated hero going into battle against an even more complicated and conflicted species: humans. Maybe the narrative Covid-19 tells itself is one of heroism, David and Goliath, a microscopically small virus trying to fight and sometimes kill the only species that actively, wantonly tries to destroy planet Earth—us.

The New York Public Library perches on Bryant Park. Blood flowed there in the Draft Riots. The park is also a potter's field of bodies. The library was built on the site of the Croton Aqueduct, an edifice whose fifty-foot-tall walls once held the city's water supply. Standing in the library foyer, I remember the water. I swim. I feel fluid in this library. I feel fluid in all libraries because I know how words change. I am devoted to the paper archive because paper is not permanent. It will decay. It will flow. The papyrus Sappho wrote her poems on has crumbled. The

brackets below are the translator Anne Carson's way to mark what's missing from Sappho, the holes in the page.

Go [
so we may see [
]
lady

of gold arms [
]
]
doom
]

Time and decay give Sappho's words meanings she might never have imagined, a real fermentation. A real growth.

Loving libraries, tabernacles of impermanence, is like deliriously trying to preserve the most delicate and ephemeral things: the dead katydid on my windowsill, or people, or snowflake crystals, or love.

When I was very young I had a dream about a small door. Crouching through the door, I passed into a series of scarlet, velvety rooms, small getting smaller, a birth canal in reverse. I know a number of people who have had a similar dream. It gave me terrific comfort. I knew the tunnel contained mystery. In the dream, I never pressed through the tunnel all the way, but rather sat in the small passage, content in the unknowing, hidden. The first time I saw Mr. Morgan's red library I was reminded of the dream tunnel and thought, This must be the place where that tunnel led. The Morgan, or a golden bookstore, some uncanny, cranny-filled athenaeum. I am a very slow reader, so a vision of death as a place where I'll finally get some reading done is heaven indeed. In death, might we have access to the infinite stacks of books we never got around to in life, books written by insects, trees, bacteria, and rocks? In death, might we have access to the books that never had a chance to get written? Those books stored in a place whose system of classification escapes recognizable logic, much like the system in the narrow frame of my own body where *Les Fleurs du mal* rubs up against *Flowers in the Attic* rubs up against my undergraduate geology textbook, Willard Bascom's *Waves and Beaches.* Bascom made me realize that our very human attempts to make language, to label waves in the sea, matter little to said waves. Language making is fascinating but also absurd since classification is fleeting. Bascom wrote that in a storm "concepts of wave period and length tend to lose their meaning." Where I live, storms approach out of the mountains and across a wide river. I see them coming from a long way off. The terror they bring is a welcome feeling for me, the possibility of stopping, of newness and chaos, though climate change complicates my love of storms by adding fear and regret. Georges Perec writes that Rabbi Simeon finds seventy different meanings for *Bereshit*, in the beginning, the first

word of the Torah. Loss of meaning is only a loss if you have only one narrow meaning.

In this afterlife library we'll dissolve back into the many, the microscopic. I'll browse. I'll read. I'll lose concepts of period and length. I'll lose bits of myself in books, in soil. Alphabet as molecule. Page as ecosystem. Here's the Natural Science section. Here's Poetry. Here's the Universe. Skin cells will become dust; flesh, food; bone to stone. Along with every book we never had the chance to read in life we might find the ghost books too, texts that were never written or never finished, phantom books with invisible and unverifiable Dewey Decimal numbers.

W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* is a book that *does* exist and I have read it a few times. It concerns a long walk through a region of Great Britain riddled with buried archeological treasures, an excursion over the lives underground, as all our excursions are. The walk happens in August, "when the dog days were drawing to an end," dog days because they unfold under Sirius, the Dog Star. *The Rings of Saturn* seems to be a book about everything because it maps thought and memory. It moves the way a mind moves, fluently from part to part, node to node. It allows multiple moments in history to rest on top of one another, procreating, generating, electrifying. It allows for large gaps so that a reader might travel independently. Sebald draws our attention to a tremendous number of histories and small stories. While there is a finality to knowledge, there is an infinity to what we don't know. He references so many books, people, and histories I've never heard of before that the question of what is fiction or nonfiction, though always present, becomes in some way unimportant, or falls into the realm of the fussy. In a 1997 interview with James Wood, Sebald says he is trying "to precisely point up that sense of uncertainty between fact and fiction, because I do think that we largely delude ourselves with the knowledge that we think we possess, that we make it up as we go along, that we make it fit our desires and anxieties and that we invent a straight line of a trail in order to calm ourselves down." *The Rings of Saturn* is a microcosm of an entire library, or an entire brain. I begin to wonder, Do I really want to read all the books? Maybe a better life would be spent rereading the handful of books—different for each reader—that reveal the universe's patterns, eternal, ever-shifting, and wise?

Sebald's book begins with two epigraphs. I've repurposed one.

> The rings of Saturn consist of ice crystals and probably meteorite particles describing circular orbits around the planet's equator. In all likelihood these are fragments of a former moon that was too close to the planet and was destroyed by its tidal effect (—> Roche limit).
>
> —*BROCKHAUS ENZYKLOPÄDIE*

You've already encountered one epigraph in this book that has barely even begun, yet here is a second one. In *After the Quake*, Haruki Murakami creates a character who loves salmon skin so much, she dreams of a salmon made up of only skin. Maybe right now you are imagining an entire book made up only of

epigraphs. *Bereshit.* This is not that book. Maybe you are writing that book. If so, I look forward to reading it. I love the potential of beginnings. How many books I have started—reading them, writing them, never finishing. I enjoy the idea of having no end even while I'm arrogant enough to imagine a day when someone might read these words and be extra haunted because at the time of their reading, I'll be dead. This is not a book of epigraphs, or epitaphs, but it is a book of books. *See* The Forest: A Bibliography.

Poems and stories that try to contain the many are my favorite sort of books. Multiple narrators, impossible texts that might have no end, no author, or feel like a house of mirrors: *The Thousand and One Nights*, Ryunosuke Akutagawa's "In a Grove," Ali Smith's "The Universal Story," Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, Farid ud-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*. The last, a twelfth-century Persian poem, tells how the birds of the world set out to find their leader. Many birds offer excuses. The hawk can't leave the royal king he serves. The heron cannot go either, as her misery keeps her staring out to sea. "My love is for the ocean, but since I—a bird—must be excluded from the deep, I haunt the solitary shore and weep." Only thirty birds make the journey to find the benevolent, female, mythic Simorgh, a name that means "thirty birds" in Persian. A name that also sounds like someone saying "see more" in English, on a perfect day for bananafish. On their journey the ragtag bunch of birds passes through seven valleys. Each valley has its own story. The poem's title comes from the Quran. "O people! We have been taught the language of birds, and on us have been bestowed all things. This is indeed, grace." I am trying to learn the language of the birds. I'm looking for that grace.

Kites were simultaneously, independently invented in Korea and Guatemala. When Chaucer wrote *A Parliament of Fowls*, he did not know of Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*. Then Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and *The Conference of the Birds* share moments of eerie harmony. Like Attar's thirty birds, Chaucer's thirty-one pilgrims are on a journey, traveling to the shrine of Thomas à Becket while engaged in a storytelling contest. Much of *The Canterbury Tales*'s magic is in those parts that remain unwritten. Chaucer died before his pilgrims finished telling their stories, or at least before they finished telling their stories in a language the living can read.

The rings of Saturn are far away, 1.2 billion kilometers at their closest. Still, their structure—tiny individual crystals held loosely together in a circular orbit—feels deeply familiar and intimate. Dots and leaps, holes and collisions, bleeding, mingling, messy birth, bumbling, multiverse, stumbling. The rings of Saturn are like the scattered, dusty house I live in, my body. They feel true to the way I've shelved Carl Sagan's *Cosmos* between my other grandma, Marcella's, diary of 1983, "Oct 20 Permanent wave—2:30," and a copy of *Reader's Digest* that features a disaster narrative my dad edited, "Adrift in the South Pacific."

Once I wrote a love letter to an artist who builds tremendous spheres. In the letter, I told him everything I thought about Saturn's rings, how distance between our particles of dust and ice might not signify alienation but rather a kinder plan

that allows space for current and mystery to exist between points, between people, between ideas. The nature of longing and tolerance. He never wrote back. I suppose there's a certain mystery to that, and a perfect model for unrequited desire, but afterward, when considering his chilly attitude toward our sixth planet, it was easy not to be in love with him anymore. The desire for bodies is rooted in our mortality. The desire for books shares a similar fevered passion with our decomposition. We will never be able to read all the books or love all the bodies. We feel the comfort of our smallness, our minerals, our parts.

As with the dust of Saturn's rings, our eyeballs also reside in orbits. Rods and cones perceive partial information. Our brains concoct the rest to create vision. Sight contains so much imagination, one wonders if the view of a mountain is fiction or nonfiction.

Thoughts take leaps. Chemistry to minerals to vitamins to living to dying to reading to paper to trees to nature, biology to chemistry. Or, maybe less logical. Maybe chemistry leads to thoughts of nail polish, yeasted breads, high school, or quilts. Either way, collected ideas bounce off one another like some percussive instrument and the sound of one thought striking another thought is a beautiful sound.

All this to ask, where should I begin when writing a book about birds, words, books, death, hormones, collections, desire, letters, booze, family, birds? A circle starts where? Or more to the point, a circle ends where?

Sebald's ring of ice crystals collects the Western canon, those books Sebald ingested in his life and the people he met. *The Rings of Saturn*'s first chapter starts with a photo and a description of a hospital window "which for some strange reason has been draped with black netting." The narrator's view is sliced into a grid. A reader sees the sky through this grid, the eternal past the *x* and *y* axes of an institution, past the Cartesian plane into the realm of imaginary numbers. Farewell to Melvil Dewey's narrow classifications. Imagine the library shaken like a snow globe, discrete ideas fall gently on a reader within a contained space. Sebald's first chapter moves through Flaubert's walks; the deaths of two colleagues and scholars; the Swiss author Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz; Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson*; Descartes's anatomy experiments; the diamond-like quincunx patterns of starfish, crystals, vertebrae, silkworms, water ferns, and horsetail; Borges's (paradise *is* a library) *Book of Imaginary Beings*; and Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial*, his 1658 discourse on fifty Bronze Age sepulchral urns unearthed in Norfolk, near the small locality where Sebald lived. "Browne scrutinizes that which escaped annihilation for any sign of the mysterious capacity for transmigration he has so often observed in caterpillars and moths." The chapter ends wondering what meaning we find in objects left behind by the dead. *Musaeum Clausum* (the hidden library), Browne's posthumously published tract, also considers the books and objects that were *not* left behind by the dead, a catalog of the disappeared and nonexistent. Sebald looks for patterns and leaves enough space between parts that patterns indeed emerge. Orders, ghosts, and mysteries peek though these blanks.

We understand Descartes's grid even as we leave the mappable world behind for one that permits silence, mystery, memory, the dead. Because where we're going, you know, we don't need *des cartes.*

I have lost my mind to books. That is also true. I sometimes study a book to the point of obsession. I paw at it until I've worn through the very fabric of sanity. Sometimes it's fun, like being addicted to crosswords. The universe is filled with clues. Even if it's not. Sebald and my dad died the same year, 2001. A good year for death around these parts. Sebald and my dad mingle into one story. What I mean is, there's an owl outside my house at 3:00 a.m. talking to another owl. I imagine the nature of their conversation. I bet I'm wrong. I haven't yet learned the language of the birds. That's okay. Delusion can be close to revelation. Birding delights me. Believing delights me. It's a game. It's artifice. It's art. Barry Holstun Lopez writes of the great blue heron, "If you will not speak I will have to consider making you up."

Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, published in the 1990s, are set in Los Angeles, 2024–2032. The city suffers under climate change and drought. Its gated communities are rife with guns and fear. Slavery is common; women are silenced; white violence rages. Police and education have been privatized. News is delivered in "bullets." The government does not believe in science. There's even a presidential candidate running on the slogan "Make America Great Again." Citizens cope by ingesting "smart drugs" (which we should, in pursuit of honesty, now call our phones) or pills that turn arson's destruction into an erotic sensation. Burn it all down. Or, people cope by wearing "dream masks" that plunge a person into virtual, simpler times. A deadened world tries to feel again though acts of annihilation or nostalgia. Butler's work is so prescient, I experience it as divination, observation of the highest order. Her science fiction reads to me as realism. Thirty years ago, Butler read patterns and made deductions as to where we were heading. Her fifteen-year-old narrator, Lauren, "suffers" from a condition known as hyperempathy. Lauren feels the emotions of other people. Lauren feels a lot. In the world of the *Parables*, feeling and empathy are dangerous. Lauren is often crippled by the pain she experiences. In a talk called "'Devil Girl from Mars': Why I Write Science Fiction," delivered at MIT in 1998, Butler said of the *Parables*, "This was a cautionary tale, although people have told me it was prophecy. All I have to say to that is: I certainly hope not." At the age of fifty-eight, Butler fell, hit her head, and died suddenly. She was young, with so many books still unwritten. The story I make around Butler's premature death is one of limits, one that links her to Lauren and the dangers of feeling, a seer who saw too much, felt too deeply, was changed by the seeing and transformed into an entity I am not yet able to understand, though that doesn't stop me from trying.

In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk writes, "Imagination is critical to recovery."

There's a *re* in the word "read," suggesting that an obsessive return, rereading, or repeating cycle is built into the word. The same book read at the age of

eighteen, twenty-seven, fifty-three, ninety-one is a different body of water. "Read," from *rædon*, is etymologically related to the words "riddle," "discuss," "to make out." Which is the first time I've thought about making out as a way of reading or process of unpacking meaning, a wet, sloppy kiss between author and reader. We let words come inside our bodies. Reading is deeply intimate, generative procreation. There's breath in that inspiration. I read Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* for a college course on contemporary literature. Twenty-five years later I cracked it open again to teach a class on Blueness and was alarmed to re-find things inside that book I thought were my own guts. I had devoured Morrison's book and made it into me. Morrison's cells had divided and multiplied in my body. And not just Morrison's, but every book I've loved. Every book she loved.

Like wine, the notes get complicated and delicious. In Morrison, I taste hints of Faulkner. In Faulkner, I taste the King James. In the King James, the fabulist works of Aesop, a storyteller who dissolved into a fiction. One version of Aesop's history says he was a slave who told stories to win his freedom. Who was Aesop's mother? What stories did she tell him? In each book we discover flavors we don't recognize, bits from books so hidden and lost to us, they are now soil. In reading, I taste the dirt.

In the early 1980s my family lost our collective mind over Kit Williams's *Masquerade*, a gloriously illustrated picture book my father brought home from work one day. Williams hid a riddle inside its pages. Solve the riddle and you might find the golden, jewel-encrusted hare Williams had smithed and buried somewhere in England.

One *Masquerade* buff, Ron Fletcher, became so wrapped up in the treasure hunt that seemingly unconnected events, objects, and phenomena—a whiskey bottle label, a blue ribbon pinned to a tree, a found love letter, his own last name—were read as signals and secret messages there to help Fletcher solve Williams's riddle. Some people might consider what happened to Fletcher to be mental illness. Some people are narrow-minded. Jess Zimmerman writes beautifully about Fletcher in her essay "'This Goes All the Way to the Queen': The Puzzle Book That Drove England to Madness."

> In 1958, German neurologist Klaus Conrad coined the term *Apophänie* to describe schizophrenic patients' tendency to imbue random events with personal meaning. An apophany has the form factor of an epiphany—the sense of breakthrough, of events finally coming together and making sense—but without any relationship to real explanations. But though Conrad focused on instances of apophany occurring with psychosis, the phenomenon he described applies to the ill and the well alike. Now called "apophenia," the instinct to pick out patterns from meaningless information is essentially universal.

How might we use this universal tendency to notice patterns, and see our connectedness, rather than finding divisions and paranoia? Apophenia as conjunction. Hold two unrelated objects in your hands. An apple and a tornado. A baby chick and your fearful uncle. Wild rice and snow. You and the stranger approaching you on the street. To make these leaps, to pull together the seemingly unconnected—words across the blank spaces that hold them—is how we read. It is to make peace, to make out, to make abnormal meaningfulness.

My family spent years puzzling over the *Masquerade* treasure's whereabouts. We were disappointed when the jewel was finally found. Not that we thought we would find it. We didn't even live on the same continent as the prize, but we were disappointed because it meant the game was over. We would have preferred for the hare to remain lost. Having treasure is less fun than wanting treasure, searching for treasure in misty fjords.

On the topic of our wanting, the classics scholar and poet Anne Carson asks us to consider the word "eros" as "deferred, defied, obstructed, hungry, organized around a radiant absence—to represent eros as lack." Desire as lack, rather than love, a hole unfilled. "Eros is an issue of boundaries ... Who is the real subject of most love poems? Not the beloved. It is that hole."

Ross Gay, in an essay titled after a line from Zadie Smith, "'Joy Is Such a Human Madness,'" writes:

> Here's the ridiculous part. Is it possible that people come to us—I do not here aspire exactly to a metaphysical argument, and certainly not one about fate or god, but rather just a simple, spiritual question—and then go away from us—
>
> I don't even want to write it.
>
> Rather this: And what comes through the hole?

Gay asks, do people come and go from our lives so that we might begin to understand what the hole contains? Holes in our bodies, in the earth, in our understanding? What better site of desire than the hole left by the dead? What better way to know ourselves than to look into that place, to dig into the place where the dead went? Yes. Where is that place again?

My mom lost her wedding ring. She does that regularly, as her house is complicated by an abundance of stuff. She is an artist. Some people might use an ugly word to describe my mother's home, but it's a bad word. She hates the word and I won't use it here. Imagine instead the hole that swallowed that word. My mom says, "I know I shouldn't be so attached to objects." Then, "Can you look in your house? Maybe I left my ring at your house." I have my own problematic attachment to objects, especially books. She asks my dad to help her find the ring also. He's been dead for decades. But, after she asks him, she finds the ring in a coin purse under a bag of hangers in her hall. "I have no idea how it got there," she says.

Nick Cave, the artist, created his first Soundsuit in 1992 after Rodney King was beaten by members of the Los Angeles Police Department. Cave's suits are assemblages of twigs, toys, sweaters, buttons, beads, pot holders, globes, stuffed animals, afghans, cookie tins, ceramic birds, sock monkeys, baskets. Cave's carefull constructions translate these objects into something more meaning-full than their original purpose. More meaning-full because the bits that make up his Soundsuits are now in relation with other objects. These objects are now family, stuck together whether they like it or not. I read the objects and the space between his objects. Cave calls his suits "alternative relics that contain or hold a spirit." Wearing a Soundsuit shields or dissolves identity so that one can exist without so much classification. What happens once we have loosened identity? In an interview with Diana Sette, Cave asks, "How do you step into the unknown?"

Nick Cave, the singer, a different Nick Cave (if we believe in the boundaries between bodies), in reference to the death of his child, writes:

> I feel the presence of my son, all around, but he may not be there. I hear him talk to me, parent me, guide me, though he may not be there ... Dread grief trails bright phantoms in its wake. These spirits are ideas, essentially. They are our stunned imaginations reawakening after the calamity.

One daughter asks me, "Where is your dad?"

"He is a cardinal now." A story my siblings and I came up with after he died, something to make death bearable and visible.

"Like a bird?"

"Yes." And then sometimes we have four or five cardinals in our yard at the same time. It's not a magical deduction. It's not supernatural. It's reading.

A magazine asks me, "What does your writing space look like? What objects, photographs, texts or talismans do you keep there?" Dori's rocking chair, Peter's futon, Uncle Zeke's dollhouse, Nanny's bookcase, Matthew's photos, Patchen's photos, Grandpa Nolan's painting, Grandpa Hunt's tissue box, Grandma Hunt's diaries, my father's manuscripts, typewriter, pencil nubs, and the dirty socks I found in his suitcase after he died. I am surrounded by dead people's things.

I inherited my neighbor's end table when she died. I put it in my studio. I found a disposable camera in one of its drawers. I had no way of knowing how long the camera had sat in that drawer. It looked old, eighties design. I sent the camera out for processing, hoping to find my neighbor or some other deep past in the film. Gillian Welch sings about dreaming a highway back to people and times that are lost. She describes the roads we sometimes walk back to the dead. Time had really turned up the violet, blue, and green in my neighbor's film. Every image was of my neighbor's peach tree laden with ripe fruit, saturated by unreal colors. Talk about a dream mask.

Maybe I shouldn't be so attached to objects either. But everyone keeps dying, leaving stuff behind, objects I can't usually get rid of. And I enjoy the company of the dead. They are so quiet. They know things I don't know. The dead leave clues, and life is a puzzle of trying to read and understand these mysterious hints before the game is over. Even if these clues are not coming from the dead. Even if I'm making the whole thing up.

My mom's house resembles a Nick Cave Soundsuit, Tyree Guyton's *The Heidelberg Project*, the pink installations of Portia Munson, Nelson Molina's Trash Museum, or the Song Dong piece *Waste Not*, which makes order from his mother's collections. So many of the artists and curators I admire are those who know how to re-present the things humans have owned. My mom has a drawerful of nail polishes beside a toy turtle beside a pink pillow beside an expired jar of my dad's cancer drugs beside a golden statuette of the Virgin. I make it make sense. I plot these points and create a chalk line around the ghost, all that's missing. What do I mean by "ghost"? A dead person, certainly. But is a bruise a ghost? Is the bruise your boyfriend gave you a ghost? In what ways is a postcard a ghost? How much dust is made by the dead? Is haunting the same thing as memory? Does reading make you more haunted by more ghosts? Are books dead? Are books ghosts? How many holes?

I work at Pratt Institute, a complex and glorious school. It is not without its skeletons. It dates back to 1887. Students create breathtakingly new work here, despite or even because of the skeletons. There's ivy and hidden places. There are actual secret tunnels underneath a number of the buildings. Alone in a gallery or a quiet classroom, time travel feels possible and likely. The library has books of maps as large as the desks they rest on, charting the streets of New York City from years long lost. The floors in the book stacks are made out of glass squares crafted by Tiffany in 1888. They show a bit of wear and scuffing. If someone is browsing over one's head on the floor above, their footsteps are hazy and ghostlike shadows

through the glass. Pratt's power plant is a glittering Victorian jewel box. There's a clowder of semi-feral cats fed and sheltered by faculty, staff, and students.

Like most academic institutions, we are often organizing conferences to bring visiting scholars and thinkers to campus. One day I have a thought to organize a conference for ghosts, but really, ghosts are very hard to organize. Plus, the dead never really speak to me. I organize an Old Lady reading series instead with Rachel Levitsky. We don't formally call it "The Old Lady Reading Series." A handful of people warn us this term is offensive, though when I say "Old Lady," I mean wisest person.

Our first season we invite Paula Fox and Judy Grahn. During Grahn's visit I feel greedy. A small sip of this woman creates only more thirst. An hour-long talk is severely insufficient to move through Grahn's same-sex elopement in 1958; her dishonorable discharge from the military; cat scratch fever and coma and waking up to poetry; eating disorders; women's mythology; the Gay Women's Liberation group; the Women's Press collective; *Metaformia*, a journal about menstruation; Metaformic Theory, Grahn's tracing of culture to early menstrual rituals; books and books of poetry and essays. It might take an hour to simply read Grahn's epic nine-part work, *A Woman Is Talking to Death*. It might take an hour to discuss these two lines:

a woman who talks to death
is a dirty traitor

A dirty traitor, or someone who trades in dirt. Yes, I think. Yes, that might be me.

Paula Fox had been lost from the public eye multiple times in her life. Her parents left her at a foundling hospital in 1923 and her novels, some of the twentieth century's finest, were mostly lost until a copy of *Desperate Characters* was plucked off a dusty shelf at a writers' colony by the novelist Jonathan Franzen, who then helped bring her work back into the light. I found the real person Paula Fox living in Brooklyn on an ordinary street.

After a morning class, I made my way over to the auditorium where I'd introduce Fox. She'd warned us that reading might be a challenge. She said she would bring her magnifying glass. I checked my voice mails. Fox's husband had left a message saying there was no way Fox could do the reading. He asked, did I realize she was ninety-one years old? I entered the auditorium. Would she be there?

Paula Fox wore a chic brown pantsuit. She took to the stage with her magnifying glass. She brought down the house. She spent the next hour running up and down the auditorium stairs, greeting students and answering questions. She was courageous, triumphant, and gracious. Fox died at ninety-three, on March 1, 2017.

We hoped to next bring Paule Marshall to campus. Her brilliant book *Brown Girl, Brownstones* considers the body of a girl against the architecture of a

neighborhood. The book begins, "In the somnolent July afternoon the unbroken line of brown stone houses down the long Brooklyn street resembled an army massed at attention." Then teenager Selina comes strolling through the park, the very opposite of these armies. Her free movements poke holes in fearful ideas of safety, property, and capitalism. The book is set in Pratt's neighborhood. To walk these streets, having read Marshall's book, invites understanding, embodiment. Having taught her book for over a decade, I could not wait for Marshall to visit.

In the summer of 2019, Levitsky texted me from another time zone. "So sad to read that Paule Marshall has passed. Love from the cathedral in Reims. Here's a fallen and magnificent Eve with serpent." Levitsky attached an image of an alert Eve carved in marble, holding a snarling creature in her hands. I read Marshall's obituary in *The New York Times*. It was late at night. My thinking was misty. A small part of me hoped, schemed, wondered: Would Marshall still be able to come to Pratt to visit us?

In this room where I'm working right now, an ant collects the bodies of her departed brethren, creatures I squished earlier, accidently I try to tell myself, though I know better. What will she do with the bodies of her dead? The ant is a hard worker. Me too, I tell the ant. A dirty traitor knows dirt well. Ants have undertakers, those members of the community charged with collecting the dead into middens to keep disease away from the colony; also, because ants use chemical pheromones to communicate, a dead and decomposing ant might release chemical pheromones without sentient intention. Imagine the confusion. Imagine what mixed message a decaying, dead ant might broadcast, or, for that matter, a dead aunt.

In this room where I am working now (a different now, a different room from the previous paragraph) my family is sheltering in place to stop the spread of a virus. Our new intimacy with death does not feel calm and wise. It is often marked with fear. Last week a woman in a parking lot could not stop screaming at me. She was so stressed out. People were hoarding groceries. People were fearful. She was trying to care for an elderly mother in a wheelchair. I tried to help but could not find a way past her stress. We were too close. Our hearts beat too fast, a tempo of panic. One friend lost her father and mother to the virus within a few days of each other. Death often does not behave the way I want it to. A woman in my town, mother to three, ended her life this week. And death, sometimes, takes children. Death leaves the living raw and ruined. I grabbed at the empty air for weeks and even months after my father died, trying to catch a trace of him in the skein of my fingers. Nothing there. Mary Oliver writes that she thinks our world is "the prettiest world—so long as you don't mind / a little dying." But we do mind. It hurts. James Baldwin writes that white Americans do not believe in death. He writes, "Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order

might somehow have escaped violence and fear, as if in being little it might hide from what is huge and horrible; a story I created.

Our outhouse is a double-seater. When I consider the number of people who may have lived in this house before me, I multiply the number by two, like the toilet seats. I have no idea how many people this house and land have held. A lot. Our narrow dining room and all the Decembers that have happened inside it are like glass slides held up to the light, singularly or layered. The others who sat here before me, warm from wine. What part of this dust is theirs?

The house has beams cut from American chestnut, a species that, more or less, no longer exists. These beams tempt me to think of the house as a living tree. Before furnaces, families hung blankets from the beams in winter to close off rooms and trap the fireplace's heat in a smaller space. The family would gather in these blanket rooms.

The historical society wants to include my parents' house in their registers but my mom likes her freedom. She says they can have it when she moves out. I don't think she's ever going to move out of that house.

My mother is a beauty, a serious practical joker, an opera fan, a painter, a lover of literature, flowers, carnivals, dessert, travel, children, and people. She is kind, funny, and intelligent. She is a sharp dresser. When I plug a description of her house into the National Study Group on Chronic Organization's Clutter Scale, it ranks between a Level III and a Level IV. There are five levels. The blindness of categories is a tool to flatten the story.

Olympia Dukakis delivers the best line in Norman Jewison's 1987 film *Moonstruck*. To her cheating husband she says, "Cosmo, I just want you to know, no matter what you do, you're going to die, like everybody else."

If my mom keeps all her stuff, maybe she'll keep on living? Seems worth a shot. She doesn't buy new things. The stuff in her house is old. A copy of *Treasure Island* inscribed to my father—*To Walter Jr. from Dewell and Phelps Christmas 1940*, my mother's well-played-with Ziegfeld Girls paper dolls from 1941—Patricia Dane, Louise LaPlanche, Anya Taranda, and even the inventor Hedy Lamarr, their undergarments printed with stars that seem distant, as if we are seeing their light across the universe and they've already burnt out. I find a xylophone made to look like a green caterpillar; a miniature stuffed pink hot-air balloon whose basket hides a music box; an empty tin of lotus tea, a souvenir from my wedding; a tin of pickup sticks; and a cookie box printed to resemble needlepoint—"Saturday's child is full of grace"—stuffed with crayons. I was born on a Saturday. There's beauty in her house and lots to look at. Thrift store clothes and art books. There's little of financial value but much that's rich in color and meaning. If I started reading the books in my parents' house right now, I'd die still reading.

In between my visits some things disappear, others emerge. I suspect things in the house are reproducing. The child of a Dutch windmill salt shaker and the old brown velvet couch might be the elegant secretary with an angled tabletop that one day appeared in the kitchen. My mom doesn't buy things, but things I've never seen before, sometimes, suddenly appear.

I tell her, "You can't hold on to every beautiful thing." But watching her sort through a pile of old magazines is like watching an Arctic hunter carving up a seal. There's no part of the beast without a purpose; nothing goes to waste under my mother's attentions. She finds value in things others might discard. An article about South American frescoes that was written in 1992 holds just as much value to her today as it did when first published—perhaps even more now that a periodical from 1992 might be hard to find. I admire her thriftiness, even if I sometimes worry that what she's done is built herself a very colorful tomb.

Every now and then, important things do get lost in the ramble of her home. We had my dad cremated. My mom put his ashes in an old cookie tin, then she put the tin into his well-loved briefcase. Then she put the whole thing under the bed they had shared for thirty-odd years.

After some time, my mom started to date other people. Maybe it became strange to have the ashes of her dead husband underneath her bed when she had a boyfriend. She moved my dad into another room.

A few years later one of my daughters asked, "Where's your dad?"

"He smoked cigarettes so he died."

"But what happened to his body?"

"We burned him."

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