

Sara A. Rich

*Closer to Dust*

CLOSER TO DUST

CLOSER TO DUST. Copyright © 2021 Sara A. Rich. This work carries a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 4.0 International license, which means that you are free to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format, and you may also remix, transform, and build upon the material, as long as you clearly attribute the work to the authors and editors (but not in a way that suggests the authors or punctum books endorses you and your work), you do not use this work for commercial gain in any form whatsoever, and that for any remixing and transformation, you distribute your rebuild under the same license. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

First published in 2021 by tiny collections  
An imprint of punctum books, Earth, Milky Way  
<https://www.punctumbooks.com>

ISBN-13: 978-1-953035-76-9 (print)

ISBN-13: 978-1-953035-77-6 (ePDF)

DOI: 10.53288/0324.1.00

LCCN: 2021942772

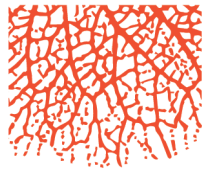
Library of Congress Cataloging Data is available from the Library of Congress

Book design: Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei  
Cover photograph by the author.

  
*spontaneous acts of scholarly combustion*

Sara A. Rich

*Closer to Dust*



tiny collections



## Contents

Author's Preface	7
Ornithology	15
Like a River	17
Inevitability	19
Kamperfoelie	21
Skinny-Dipping (Lithostratigraphy)	23
Ontario	25
Borders	27
Fietstocht	29
Xlendi	31
For Peter Benchley	33
Rats' Nests	35
Tadpoles	37
Sourbrodt	39
The Ruse of the Medusa	43

Homecoming	45
Skinny-Dipping (Red Light)	47
In Absentia	49
Grandmother	51
Land Yacht	53
September	55
Fruiting Bodies	57
Schengen	59
Low	63
Vacant (Archetypes)	65
Referendum	67
Allotment	69
Cunard Line	71
Independence Day	75
Semi-Diurnal	77
Shipments	79
Suddenly	81
Verboden	83
Flatline	85
Cobblestones	87
When You Know You Know	89
Green Silk	91
Lake Park	93
Departure	95
Vacant (Oneiromancy)	97
Sunday	99
Acknowledgments	103

## Author's Preface

No one thinks straight. At least no one remembers straight. But ten years ago, things were different, weren't they?

Roland Barthes once wrote that color in a photograph is like make-up on a corpse. No one is fooled. In anarchic denial of convenient truths, a young international couple meet and marry on a small Mediterranean island. Ten years later, the couple separate in part due to complications with immigration laws. Following this trans-continental rupture, fragmented histories emerge in response to the woman's encounters with a series of color snapshots, souvenirs collected to conjure a shared past (Stewart, 138). There is death here, familiar to the mourner, as the photographs issue their special powers to magically and auspiciously predict the future (Benjamin, 7, 25) and simultaneously to permit the return of the dead (Barthes, 9). Within and beyond the puncta, the woman recognizes pieces of herself as past objects indexed within photographic stills, but paradoxically, she is present, outside in this chaos trying not to fall apart. She knows now that photographs do not create eternity; rather, they embalm time, prolonging its strange and horrifying effects (Bazin, 8). As testaments to time's relentless melt (Sontag, 15), the images and their objects yawn to remind us of the reluctant destiny of all our beloved memories, bodies, and things: that is, to disintegrate.



Memory is the oldest form of fictionality as it assigns meaning to “lowly actions and commonplace objects[, ...] deciphering the signs inscribed in the general aspect of a place, a group, a wall, an article of clothing, a face” (Rancière, 33). The ordinary, the fragmented, the misunderstood, misrepresented, and misremembered all contribute the blurred lines between the logic of facts and the logic of fictions. We know this all too well, as we are in the midst of its consequences—politically, of course, and within this tiny (re)collection of honest traces, untruthful by nature. If “the real must be fictionalized in order to be thought” (Rancière, 34), these fragments examine the extent to which the real must be fictionalized in order to be remembered—because a memory is just a thought, speculated.

Borrowing its title from *The Emigrants* (Sebald, 161), *Closer to Dust* eschews the chronology of occurrence in favor of the chronology of remembrance. This is not to say that there is always a direct correlation between the historical circumstances of the photograph and the memory it has triggered, or shuttered. Often these are separated by entire celestial orbits and vast bodies of water. There is selection at work here too, alongside arbitrariness. Some memories are told; others are not. Those excluded may not have been remembered in time, or no image brought them forth, or because they didn't seem worth telling. In this way, like all collections, this one is haunted by what is cast aside. Nevertheless, it is a séance, a gathering of invitees: inherently biased elegies; the images that conjured them; and the reader-viewer in attendance who considers causality and mereology in ordering these fragments into cohesion.

If truth be told, confessed, as it were, I am the author, the narrator, the photographer, the protagonist, maybe. This is my unlikely family album. Open it like a flower early in mourning.

## References

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Notes on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1982.

Bazin, André. "The Ontology of the Photographic Image." Translated by Hugh Gray. *Film Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1960): 4–9. doi: 10.2307/1210183.

Benjamin, Walter. "A Short History of Photography" (1931). Translated by Stanley Mitchell. *Screen* 31 (1972): 5–26. doi: 10.1093/screen/13.1.5.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1977.

Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984.

Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Translated by Gabriel Rockhill. London: Bloomsbury 2013.

Sebald, W.G. *The Emigrants*. Translated by Michael Hulse. London: Harvill Press, 1996.



*In the subject's desire to experience mortality is issued the simultaneous desire to belie the content of that mortality and hence transcend it: to produce a representation with no referent—each sign as a postcard from the land of the dead, and on the other side, the longing mark that is the proper name.*

—Susan Stewart,  
*On Longing*





For W.F., for the last time.



## Ornithology

There was a robin's nest in the rhododendron next to my balcony. It started with two bright blue eggs, then a third appeared. Two eggs hatched, on your birthday, and out came two tiny pink birdlings. Over the next couple weeks, I watched them grow faint feathers over pink, helpless skin. Their movements and vocalizations, at first indiscernible, began to develop, generously lending to me some semblance of hopeful autonomy. One morning, the nest was empty. No feathered birdlings, no unhatched late egg. Nothing whatsoever beneath the rhododendron to suggest fracas or failed escape.

The previous night, the dogs and I had marveled at the grace of the black snake who glided past us and into the forest.

She giveth, and she taketh away. Nature is a mere cultural construct; she is indifferent.





## Like a River

Wise lady friends have offered river analogies. Be the river: flow around the big rocks (while slowly eroding them and carrying them with you). Know you're safe on the banks (and choose which boats you watch go by and which ones you board). Late last week there was a break in the rain, and I took the dogs to the spot in the Watauga where I like to snorkel. But the water was rushing and dark brown from all the eroded soil runoff, and the big rock in the middle of the river, where I like to sit and think (though not too deeply), was completely inundated. I began to imagine my river writhing with cottonmouths.



## Inevitability

Remember the day I caught the chipmunk, and she bit my hands ferociously and adorably with her tiny buckteeth? You wanted to take a photo to send to your father, but you couldn't find your camera. We searched everywhere but couldn't find it. The next day you called all the places you'd been and described in broken English the Canon EOS with 80mm lens and leather case with neck strap. To no avail.

Two weeks before, we had been hiking near Banner Elk and then drove around the mountains to Nick's Pub for a couple pints. Afterward we walked back to the car, at which point you saw your camera sitting on the sunroof, its strap daintily looped over the luggage rack. It had somehow thwarted gravity and velocity while we raced around curves and elevation changes with great thirst. It seemed like a miracle, a good omen amidst uncertainty, but it was around that time that everything around us started to behave like your speech in my mother tongue—breaking up or just quitting altogether.



## Kamperfoelie

Abandonment was nowhere to be found in the summer honeysuckle air.

What does it mean to not find abandonment? Was it always there, furtively lurking behind some unwilling tree?



## Skinny-Dipping (Lithostratigraphy)

We were on the rocks, the Coralline limestone: Messinian in age, smooth and still hot in touch, hours after sunset. Hours is an amount of time that people can understand, some can even recall. Memories more distant are conjured by science, which has told us that since the Messinian, the water of the Mediterranean has been more saline than other waters. So when we slid like primitive beings into the sea, all the previously unidentified thorn pricks in our skin burned, yet the saltwater was a cooling salve for our shoulders' blistering sunburns. There were so many sensations at once. We swam toward each other, aquatic mammals, through the silent sapphire sea, and threw our bathing suits to the rocks, superfluous. There were so many sensations at once.





## Ontario

What I don't remember is driving back from Toronto. I dropped you off at the Scarborough Station, where the train would take you to Billy Bishop, and then a plane would take you to Montreal, and then another plane would take you back to Zaventem. I know I drove east on the 401. For several hours, I drove along the north shore of Lake Ontario, but I don't remember a thing until the junction of US Interstate 81 and border control inquiring about my stay in Canada and being welcomed back into my country, my traitor country for whom my father fought and from where my husband was banned. Going south, Keema panicked in the back seat. I started crying and worried we'd never see you again. That was the only time I cried that year.

At that same time, my father was in Niagara Falls with symptoms of a stroke. A week later, he would be in a coma. I would go numb.



## Borders

Now is the time for what-if questions, and you are asking them too. What if I'd taken the job in Copenhagen instead of the one in South Carolina? What if I'd been able to negotiate for a spousal hire? What if your green card hadn't taken nearly two years? How much worse might it have been if your skin were darker or your native country called hostile or shithole? What if US immigration laws were not designed to break families apart (despite legislators' incessant touting of "family values")? What if xenophobia were not even a factor in immigration policy? What if you hadn't been treated like a felon once you arrived? What if I hadn't spent the better part of those two years building a wall between myself and you because deep down I knew this was a real possibility? What if self-fulfilling prophecies were relegated to bottom-shelf science fiction? And don't give me that shit about not-meant-to-be.



## Fietstocht

You rode your bicycle 15 miles on Appalachian county roads during a downpour to tell me how much you loved me and that you weren't going back to Belgium, that you really would go to the interview for the job changing sheets at the Mariott. It might have been romantic had you not arrived on my doorstep at 4:38am. You know I love sleep more than anything else. It might have been romantic if you'd had health insurance in this country, but that's not how this country works (does it?), and had you been hit by a car, you'd have bankrupted me. And then you'd be stuck here, both of us and the dogs living under a bridge or making moonshine in the woods.



## Xlendi

Everyone else had stumbled off to bed. It was a black night in August illuminated by the Perseid meteor shower overhead. We watched for falling stars and pointed out constellations: Orion, Canus Major, Cygnus, Cassiopoeia, Ursa Major, and Corona Borealis radiating like a new wedding band. When it was Miles Davis's turn to serenade us, you reached for my waist, and we danced on the rooftop, me clumsy, you intentional. You kissed me for the first time. As documented in my field notes, I woke up the next day with the sudden realization that you were the one I'd marry. In the same place exactly one year later, the Perseids were shooting across the sky, and we wore Corona Borealis on our left hands.





## For Peter Benchley

It was that point toward the end of the three-week Belgian summer when the blow-up swimming pool was nearing its seasonal deflating. We took the extension cord and set up my laptop on the patio table. When the sun went down, we put on our wetsuits and climbed into the pool, warmed by neoprene. I don't remember who pushed play, but we fought all the sea monsters underwater.



## Rats' Nests

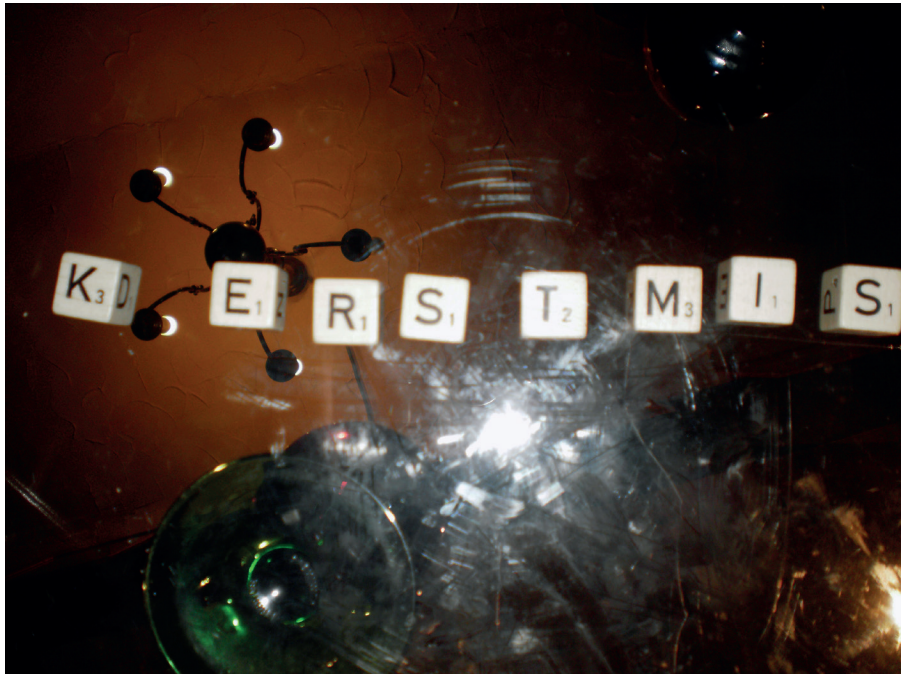
The disentanglement of object attachments has proven futile. A decade of gifting and receiving, and what of the things that we found together, like the Uzbek tapestry in the dumpster, or things that were yours before but that I've acquired unusual taste for, like the little painting your sister brought you from Costa Rica? Surely since I've been tasked with separating these strands of tangled beach hair, I get to decide which locks go where.



## Tadpoles

I requested that you get a job. You got a vasectomy.

Have you ever noticed how divorcing couples with children believe their experience to be fundamentally more devastating than that of a childless couple? As if this rift-ing could not possibly make our lives any more barren than they already are without offspring. Our nonhuman children say that such a degree of narcissistic anthropocentrism is absurd, and we concur.



## Sourbrodt

It was our first Christmas at Moulin de Bayehon in the Ardennes, near the Hautes Fagnes at the German border, when we discovered pizza sandwiches. We had taken public transportation as far as we could to our romantic chalet in the middle of nowhere, and then we hiked the rest of the way through slowly melting snow. We had packed clothes and toiletries for the week, bath towels, magazines, board games, Christmas gifts, and cava for Christmas and New Year's eves. The packs were heavy and the hills steep. The dogs' backpacks, filled with their food and treats, were black with mud by the time we arrived at the chalet. We had assumed there would be a grocery store somewhere in the nearest village, but we were mistaken. So for dinner that night, we ate the plain white rice that someone before us had left in the cupboards.



The following day, we walked to another neighboring village in the hopes of finding a grocer (you always hated that word for its homophonic – and unappetizing – likeness to grosser). We had been walking all day and were probably ten miles out when it started raining. The temperature dropped along with morale as we became soaked and miserable. Correction: I was becoming miserable. You maintained your optimism, as you usually do, which was infuriating. When we finally reached the grocer in the village of Sourbrodt, somehow only two miles from the chalet, we stocked up on wine, cheese, mustard, mixed nuts, chocolate, baguettes, and frozen pizzas. You probably got some sausages. At this point we were ravenous and could talk of nothing other than what we would eat first when back at the chalet. Frozen pizzas were the obvious answer, but you recalled that the oven only had room for one at a time, and this simply would not do. Thus was born the pizza sandwich. It was the most satisfying meal I can remember. We tried it again, back in Leuven or maybe in Southampton, but it just wasn't the same. Some things are only appropriate in their original context, and sometimes I wonder if that weren't the case with us too.





## The Ruse of the Medusa

We were at a performance of a surrealist play by Erik Satie. The play started a few minutes late, and we were restless, like we didn't know how to behave. How many punk concerts, jazz shows, ballets, and operas had we been to by now? Yet we sat there like strangers almost. On the table, there was a sheet of paper and a couple pens so that audience members could play exquisite corpse. I took the pen and paper, and we started listing all the things that had broken or otherwise died in the month since you'd arrived: car battery, new smartphone, bicycle tire, alternator, solar yard lights, wine glass, beer glass, retractable leash, camera, refrigerator, house-plant, light bulb after light bulb, ... It wasn't an exquisite corpse, but it was a list lengthy and seemingly random enough to have passed for a Freudian free association test, or perhaps a Latourian litany. And it was nowhere near complete.



## Homecoming

I'd been in Cyprus for three months working on one shipwreck or another. When I returned, brown and bone-weary, I dragged my dive gear up the street to our house. We always entered through the garage. I opened the garage door, and Sophia was a zeppelin, waddling up in excited turbulence, barely squeezing through a dozen garbage and recycling bags lining the garage. I enthusiastically greeted my pup and simultaneously seethed with disgust at her overfeeding and the gross accumulation of refuse. When I emerged from the garage and into the back yard, there was grass, shorn verdant grass in the place of strangled weeds and brambles. Directly before me, there was a little pond with six or seven goldfish swimming beneath a fountain. On the kitchen table inside, you had left a note: *welkom terug schat—veel genieten van ons paradijs* {welcome home dear—enjoy our paradise}. I could never just stay mad at you.



## Skinny-Dipping (Red Light)

For a year, we shared a fence with the public park, but we only took advantage of this convenience that summer. It was midnight, the first time, and we crept over the fence like ninjas. We waded through a tangle of hedge, and then we were on the gravel path that weaves around the park. Irrationally fearing discovery, we silently sprinted to the second fence surrounding the swimming pool. We scaled it and crept through another layer of hedge before reaching the edge of the pool. We took off our summer clothes and slithered into the warm, shallow water that smelled of chlorine and coconut suntan lotion. Barely breathing, we slowly paddled around the pool, nervously eyeing that single red light at the gable of the poolhouse, terrified that it was a motion sensor and when it detected us would send off a siren, and a sleepy Flemish police officer would emerge from the dark and tell us to go home. This, of course, never happened, but we eventually left the water anyway. I suppose some of the novelty had worn off, like suntan lotion in the water.





## In Absentia

When Sophia died, she was more prepared than I was. It was May, and the tulips and daffodils were blooming on the south coast of England. They encircled the base of an oak tree out front, and when she collapsed into them, she didn't try to stand back up.

A few days later, I was giving a lecture in Brussels, and a few days after that, flying to Galicia for a month of shipwrecks. When I returned, exhausted, you were nearly out of your mind. You could only speak of insects you'd photographed and walks you'd taken. You hadn't had a meaningful conversation with another human being throughout my absence. Immediate, radical change was necessary; instead, we compromised, likely prolonging the inevitable.

One would think that when death is expected, imminent, any day now, that it would be easier for survivors to mourn. But it doesn't seem to make much difference at all.



## Grandmother

Surgeons needed to take my grandmother's leg, and she refused. Like Augustus McCrae in *Lonesome Dove*, she too was well aware of the consequences. By the time I managed to travel from Southampton to London to New York to Kansas City, she would be dead. So I stayed home. During a lucid moment, when she could hear and respond in weak nods but not words, we said our goodbyes to her over the phone. I couldn't complete mine without breaking up: it was something to the effect of we'll see you on the other side, although I'm not entirely sure that I believe that to be true, and she had recently confessed agnosticism to me. Yours was along the lines of see you later, and then you realized that would not be the case and corrected yourself, casually chuckling. I was appalled, and you saw it in my expression. We hung up. The blood clot continued its work, the gangrene spread, lungs failed.



## Land Yacht

We had just hiked a section of the Appalachian Trail, during which we'd brawled most of the miles. By the time we reached the Airstream, I was too tired to fume anymore, and anyway, my resentment was futile as ever. So it seemed appropriate to put on a stream of country classics and teach you the Texas two-step. You resisted, thinking it beneath you, or that this song and dance was relegated to the mythical cowboy. There's nothing mythical about cowboys in my family; my attempt was a gesture toward the ontology of my youth. I was trying to introduce you to the rural America I know and love—trying to remind you of my core being. Understand that this place and I, we are a package deal now. Fall in love with us. You resist, and insist instead upon Jacques Brel.



## September

It might have been my thirtieth birthday. You took off work and had coffee ready when I woke up. Unbeknownst to me, you had also reserved the neighborhood car for the day, which you had already loaded with blankets and picnic gear. The dogs climbed in the back, and you took us to some secret place. We drove past abbeys and farmsteads, past villages whose names I'd never heard of and could barely pronounce. We went around a bend in the road, and then the Medieval castle came into view. Complete with towers, turrets, and surrounded by a moat, I stood enchanted. You spread a blanket on the grass near the water, told me sit down, and I obeyed. From one basket, you conjured an endless array of delicacies: raw oysters, marinated shrimp, stuffed peppers, Greek olives, Camembert, baguette, tapenade, and Spanish cava with two champagne flutes. There were gifts, too, wrapped in shiny paper for me to tear open, but it was the surreptitious orchestration, the premeditation of the event that impressed me most. You'd even brought the sun from behind the clouds, and the songbirds from their nests. You were a sorcerer, I, bewitched.





## Fruiting Bodies

In the fall, we ate for free. The excesses of summer left us penniless at around the same time every year when plants and fungi offer their fruits in exchange for the propagation of their young. Squirrels bury nuts, forgetting a certain percentage, which grow into nut-bearing trees. Angiosperms produce flowers, which, when pollinated, produce apples, pears, and cherries. Mycelia send networks of hyphae above ground, some of which are edible, others of which destroy the hapless and hungry—either way, their spores are spread. We soon learned where to find the best harvests: the long-since expropriated orchard of apple and pear trees by the railroad tracks; the beech, chestnut, and cherry trees in the distant corners of the park; the inky caps, puffballs, chicken-of-the-woods, chantarelles, coral fungi, boletes, field mushrooms, and russulas hiding under pine needles and in plain sight.

One day, shortly after you had arrived, I walked up to the door of my office, and sitting in front of it was a little cup of water and three dandelions, glowing like tiny yellow dwarf stars. First I acknowledged their edibility. Then I considered your kindness, and like a fruiting mycelium, a smile emerged from within.



## Schengen

Every last cent we had saved was spent moving across a body of water the width of the Florida peninsula.

When United Kingdom immigration sent me back at the Belgian border, we rerouted our plans in order to relocate together on the following Saturday. We packed all our belongings into the moving van, squeezed the dogs into the back, and drove to Calais. The dogs' passports and microchips were read and their travel approved. We went on to the border, where the humans' papers were inspected. My passport revealed the previous week's deportation, so I explained that we had initially planned on moving separately—me on the train to start work immediately and you following in the van one month later. This was against UK immigration policy. Now we had arranged affairs so that we were physically crossing the border together, one EU citizen and one non-EU spouse of an EU citizen, in full compliance with policy. The immigration officer objected. From my relatively empowered position as an educated American citizen, I declared, forcefully and between tears of rage, that I knew the immigration laws and my rights to free movement within the EU. Begrudgingly, he took my papers and disappeared. When he returned, I was still sobbing from

rage but also fear, and he stated flatly that I had ninety days to arrange a proper UK visa or I would be deported again. The frail façade of empowerment had crumbled, and that feeling of being subhuman and utterly dependent, like a concubine, would become a familiar one. As you know, such dehumanization is hardly unique along borders; yet even we have felt only its dullest slivers.

You drove the van onto the train car, and we disappeared beneath the English Channel. After re-emerging, for hours, we drove westward along the coast but on the wrong side of the road, to our new home in Weston, which we had not seen prior to signing the lease. Maps failed, and after losing our way and driving in circles, we finally arrived in the dead of night. Even in the December darkness, it was clear that the wooded precinct close to the waterfront as viewed from Google Earth had not done the place justice. We had just signed a two-year lease on a former council housing unit in a seedy, poverty-stricken suburb. And we had no key. You had to return to Belgium the following morning with an empty moving van in order to go back to an empty house and to work at a dead-end job on Monday. We sat in the van, debilitated, deflated, debating. We didn't even have enough money left for a hotel room. You were at your wits' end and ready to turn the van back toward Calais, surrendering again your fight to flight. Giving up has always been easier for you because you have something to return to. Maybe that's why our futures are in different places. Even so, in that moment, a rare one of mutual vulnerability, we desperately needed and found each other.

At last we contacted the landlord, who brought the key, and the van's contents were heaved inside. Although the real-estate agency had applied its art of deception, the unit's interior was more promising than its exterior, and hope hesitantly crept back in. We slept no more than four hours, and then I got into the van next to you and directed you back out to the main road. When you pulled over so that I

could step out and walk back home, my vulnerability was brimming with adoration for you. You were heroic, confident, in control. Mapless, you would find your way back to Folkestone, Calais, Leuven, alone. The dogs waited at the window for weeks after you left, patiently watching the sidewalk for your return. I met you in London, and we walked up to the house together on Christmas Eve. Despite being detained on several occasions, corralled with refugees and immigrants in varying degrees of statelessness, I was never deported.



Funds ran out. Job applications went unacknowledged. There were no more jobs to apply to. The degrees were overqualifying. The lack of teaching experience was underqualifying. The lack of language proficiency was disqualifying. When I finally resorted to requesting social assistance, they directed me to a computer where I would fill in a series of forms to determine my eligibility. I entered my name, marital status, and country of origin. Next I was to select the highest completed level of education. I scrolled down the list: high school, various vo-tech degrees, BA, BFA, BSc, MA, MFA, MSc, and several other kinds of qualifications and diplomas unique to European and Flemish systems. There was no option for PhD. I buckled over the keyboard, defeated, and began to cry in the shame of failure. I resigned myself to performing the role of Dr. Huisvrouw.

Eventually, friends convinced me of the prospect of entrepreneurship. While I braved Flemish bureaucracy to legalize my editing and publishing company, and then pushed to get it off the ground, you took a second job. For well over a year, you spent evenings and weekends painting houses for a slumlord. I tried to make it up to you by bringing you dinner. Sometimes, when work was slow or I was out of words, I helped you paint. You rejoiced in my trivial victories, every time a box of books arrived, a new cover revealed, a launch party advertised. You were steadfast, relentlessly gracious. We persevered.





## Vacant (Archetypes)

Carl Jung wrote that dreams of exploring houses symbolize the search for the self. Our explorations were of the conscious kind, climbing through broken windows and unlocked doors to scavenge bits of detritus of lives not ours. Traipsing through dusty passageways, we were mutualistically energized by heuristic pursuits. The abandoned villa in Gozo, the empty family home in Holsbeek, the scaffolded factory in Brugges, the ruined mill in Damascus, the bombed-out abbey in Netley, the scattered bones of a coyote's dinner, the sheds of a once-rutting buck, the mummified chameleon, the fish skeleton on the shores of Lake Michigan whose vertebrae became my earrings ... we two rejoice in lifeless bodies. Tempted to wonder why, I fear looking too closely may reveal some shared psychological void.



## Referendum

Before I left for work that morning, I checked the news to learn the results of the vote, even though I was rather confident that I already knew the answer. I soon realized, however, that I had been mistaken, and that the majority of British voters had opted to leave the European Union. You were considerably less shocked than I. In the following days, English flags unfurled from the heights of low-income housing units, a neighbor down the street brought out his Nazi flag, and reports of verbal and physical assaults on people of color, women wearing hijabs, and men wearing dastars flooded conversation. You asked a question to the bus driver, and two women seated nearby, noting your thick accent, giggled between themselves that you'd be going back to wherever you came from soon enough. Common decency, or at least its veil, was visibly and audibly evaporating before our eyes and ears. That was when we submitted the immigrant Petition for Alien Relative to the US Department of Homeland Security. That was also when I realized that, despite the polls, a vile real-estate tycoon and reality-TV buffoon would become president of the United States of America. Yet I still refused to move back to Belgium, and I'm not sure you've ever understood, let alone forgiven me, for that. I'm not sure that I understand it myself; perhaps I deceive myself with the notion that a more familiar chaos is more possible to predict, and if it can be predicted, it can be controlled.



## Allotment

When my name came up after five months on the waiting list, I picked up the keys to the Weston Allotments just days before your birthday in May. You had often lamented leaving behind the yard that we had so lovingly landscaped in Leuven, but now we had been granted this comparatively vast plot of land with fruit trees and berry bushes, a little garden shed, and a lot of weeds. On your birthday, I handed you the keys, new master of a new domain, and we promptly got to work. We removed the substantial amount of trash left behind by the previous tenants, cleaned out the spider-infested shack, and planted herbs, vegetables, and flowers. First the slugs ate everything we put in the ground. Then the wind ripped the roof off the shed. When the ground dried enough that the slug population died back, we tried again to plant. We watered and fertilized and mulched, but nothing grew. The roof blew off again. The night before I left you for the US, we lay on our backs on that cursed ground and silently watched the stars, crossing, beyond our reach.



## Cunard Line

One sunny summer Saturday, we took the Red Funnel ferry from Southampton to East Cowes on the Isle of Wight. I had made the trip several times for research, but you had never been, and this was the first time I'd traveled anywhere for pleasure in well over a year. We stood on the top deck and watched the gritty Port of Southampton fade from view. We drifted along Weston Shore past the identical towers of council flats lining the beach. We waved to our own shoddy apartment located directly behind the towers, further obscured by the woodland where people abandon stolen and stripped vehicles, and where I feared I would eventually stumble upon a dumped human body while out for a run. Moments later, we passed the white stone façade of Netley Castle, and then the Victoria Country Park's burned and abandoned Military Hospital. On the opposite bank, the shores were strewn with rotting hulks, obsolete wooden ships abandoned to the sand. These forgotten premodern corpses gave way to the smokestacks of the oil refinery, puffing industrial modernity, fueled by forgotten Paleozoic corpses, into the bright blue summer sky. River Hampton emptied freshwater and millionaires' yachts into the Solent, the strait that



separates the north of the Isle of Wight from the south of Britain and which flows both east and west into the English Channel. The liminal surface of this water was now littered, not with floating plastic debris, but with windsurfers, sailboats, cargo ships pulled by tugboats, research vessels, and coast guard patrols. We ate pasties and drank pints. When we reached the island and disembarked, we wanted nothing more than to reboard the ferry, and just glide back and forth, to and fro between dystopia and utopia, as though we were not immigrants but objectifying tourists arriving from some distant land on the luxurious Queen Elizabeth cruise liner. We would observe for a moment the ways of the natives, and then move on to the next destination. Our departure would be honored with fireworks, champagne, and white linen outfits purchased new for the occasion.





## Independence Day

The mountains brought forth some spark from deep inside me. It took time to recognize it for what it was: liberty. I felt new, having undergone a reverse baptism that shakes off the sweaty confines of predicated reliance and compromise. The process of anti-canonization reversed martyrdom and made a witch from a saint.

At the same time, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, you lived in your childhood home, slept in the bedroom where you'd spent adolescent fantasies, ate at the table where your father set soup with bread and cheese, watched television with English subtitles in the cluttered living room. Does this life make you feel young, like you were, or old, like you're becoming? Before you answer, let it be known that I eat children now to stay this way forever.



## Semi-Diurnal

The wind was always so violent, pushing up from the Gulf Stream. The tides too were restless and relentless, two high, two low, every day. When the perigee moon was full and gravitational pulls between celestial bodies at their peak, the water pushed against shoreline cliffs and walls before receding to its most distant ebb, luring the earthbound into the sand and mud, only to ambush the unsuspecting and drown each wind-breathing apparatus with rebounding waves.

While some taunted the tides to collect periwinkles, we sought bits of maritime derelict and pried broken china, antique medicine bottles, and Medieval pottery from between exposed and vulnerable bivalves.



## Shipments

Before you went back to Belgium, you packed all the items that had been in your apartment into labeled boxes and stacked them in the garage, in the orderly fashion that I had demanded. They were labeled with our names and a reference to what the box contained: dishes, kitchenware, games, clothes, &c. Three weeks later, you decided that you would not be returning to the US after all. Your things, much of which had been shipped in futility from England two years before and had barely been touched in that time, were about to make their second and final transatlantic voyage back to Belgium. Your labels were replaced by numbers that corresponded to an itemized contents list that would be scrutinized by customs yet again. When the pallet was loaded onto the back of the semi-truck, bound for Ravenel, South Carolina, and then the port of Rotterdam and finally Ghent, the sudden downpour conveniently concealed my mourning. My vision was blurring, but the truck was still there when I drove away, diminishing in the rear-view mirror, contracting into a cleaner break. Even so, objects in the mirror are always closer than they appear.





## Suddenly

There is a saying in the military, hurry up and wait. Given the many commonalities between the military and archaeology (fashion, trenches, surveys, targets, recruitment, Phase II interventions, regrettable tattoos, &c.), this has not surprisingly been a frequent mantra of my scholarly aspirations too. Rush to submit written work, funding requests, and job applications while harassing writers of recommendation letters to send them before the deadline, and then wait for months while peer reviewers assess the submission or search committees analyze the worthiness of my candidacy. I hurried, and I waited. My lectureship was offered two weeks before the beginning of the semester, while we were still on the other side of the Atlantic. I hurried: a life-altering decision had to be made immediately. Your petition to the Department of Homeland Security was already being processed, so we concurred that I would take the job, and you would join me, surely by Christmas. We waited: a new executive branch and its associated xenophobia stagnated the winter air and immigration processes alike, so we celebrated the holidays in the Ardennes, like old times. I frequently thought of Hitler's troops marching through those rugged pine forests on their way to capture Paris. It only took two days.



## Verboden

At the point which you were denied a six-month tourist visa to the United States for the second time, we set a date for our wedding. We exchanged vows and rings at the Marriage Registry in Valletta, Malta, and that night, we took the ferry back to Mġarr harbor in Gozo. Our reception was held at an old limestone farmhouse in Rabat, and we were joined by members of your family along with some close friends and colleagues on the island. That day, that night, they were made of the magical stuff that composes fairy tales and their happy-ever-after endings. The following night, we newlyweds took the ferry back to the main island, and you accompanied me to the airport. This time, we exchanged goodbyes, and when we parted ways, we didn't know when we would see each other again.

The third time you returned to the US Embassy in Brussels, your six-month visa was approved. You were at the airport in Chicago three weeks later, where you had a confrontation with an immigration officer and shouted that you didn't want to stay in this fucking country, that you just wanted to be with your wife while she finished her degree. Four months after that, we sat next to each other on a flight to Belgium, where your new wife would immigrate and assimilate and doctorate. That is the only time we ever flew together.



## Flatline

Your interview at the US Embassy in Brussels was scheduled for the same day in January as the start of the semester. I was noticeably distracted throughout the morning classes, and when they were finally over, I scurried to my office and checked emails. There were two that mattered. One was from you, elated, saying that your immigrant visa was approved, and that you were looking for flights. The other was from my colleague in Madrid who wrote that our project's brilliant young Lebanese researcher had just died unexpectedly, and in tragic irony, from a brain aneurysm. There was shock, horror, and devastation at the loss of my friend, competing with overwhelming guilt for my blissless response to your successful interview. The prospect of your entry into my quaint mountain life was no longer deniable, which should have swollen my senses of hope and longing into something objectively present, a color on my cheeks or a brightness in my eyes. Instead, I selfishly dreaded the disruption to the miniscule, quotidian joys that had defined my solitary existence in Appalachia. I feared the loss of the flare I'd found. I had one hour to collect these disparate emotions like bloody shards of glass before teaching my next class. I may or may not have simply handed them the syllabus and walked back out, the winter wind reddening my cheeks and watering my eyes.



## Cobblestones

We rode our bicycles to that spot along the railroad tracks where some company dumped scrap building materials. Inspiration often derived from the refuse we found there. Two abbreviated railroad ties and a couple weather-treated planks became a patio bench. Other boards were fixed together and filled with pinecones and bits of bamboo to become insect hotels. This time, we were after the cobblestones. With our bicycle bags brimming, we could each haul about a dozen at a time back to our house. We must have made ten trips, each more arduous than the last. Stone by stone, we built a retaining wall that kept the compost confined to one corner. We planted nasturtiums, and when they bloomed and draped elegantly over the stone façade, it looked like the wall had been there since the reign of Mary of Burgundy. We felt a sense of permanence grow between and around us as though we were timeless beings, transcending the rubble.





## When You Know You Know

It was January when I returned from Belgium the first time, and I had a three-hour layover in Philadelphia that I used to call friends and family with the news. My grandmother and closest friends didn't need my call; it was merely a confirmation of what they already suspected. My mom responded with, well you two sure aren't wasting any time are you. I quipped, waste not want not. Later that summer, she gave me her ring, and my dad offered his to pass on to you. I asked, in need of confirmation, if they were cursed. My mom shrugged and said, well we got twenty-three pretty good years out of them. I responded, that's plenty. We had them resized in Malta and would use up ten of those years. They were pretty good, too.



## Green Silk

The deal was that if I was awarded the fellowship, we would adopt another puppy. Before we could even settle on her name, I had also purchased a new bicycle for my commute to Tervuren and a completely unnecessary but divine green silk dress. Poverty had been our familiar for so long that when this money was suddenly granted, I made up for lost time, with your express approval. After all, you liked the green silk dress too, and you liked it on me. I wore it to the opening of Mayombe, a collection of African art at the M Museum in honor of fifty years of Congolese independence from Belgium. Of course, I was overdressed, and of course, proud of it. After the opening, we went around the corner to Café Metafoor, where we encountered several friends who had what we might call a head start. We quickly caught up, although I remained diligent about keeping lit cigarettes clear of my green silk dress. We closed the bar and then swervingly headed home on our bicycles through vacant early morning streets. I rode my shiny new Trek straight into the side of a building, fell off and laughed hysterically at the ruined state of my green silk dress. Like a valiant knight, you sat me side-saddle on your bicycle rack and ponied my green-broke steed all the way up the hill back home. Your chivalry was unmatched, my decadence effectively curtailed.



## Lake Park

You didn't know any of these people but mourned with me anyway. We took advantage of the three bottles of wine for ten dollars deal and then settled at a picnic table in the park overlooking Lake Michigan. A friend from my hometown had just killed himself. A few years before, two of my roommates, both of whom he had dated, had taken their own lives using the same means that he had chosen. We entertained the notion that they had called him from the grave, an ill-fated triad of lost lovers. We wondered which of us would die first and decided that you would be the one haunting me.



## Departure

Three days before I was set to leave for a conference in Florida and fieldwork in Cyprus and England, I took you to the airport in Charlotte. You had a one-way ticket to Brussels and a two-month-old US green card. Your panic attacks had subsided upon being ticketed three days previously, and you were sure this was for the best. You would go home, work through the crisis, and come back for Christmas. I held your face in my palms and promised again to love you forever. I drove west, back up to the mountains, and watched the mimosas morph into pines and felt the temperature gradually decrease. Your absence produced not a warm, romantic longing but a cold mourning like death, and I knew with certainty that, after a decade of taunting distance, that was, actually, the last time I would ever see you. I canceled fieldwork that summer and let your haunting commence. Nevertheless, promises will be kept.





## Vacant (Oneiromancy)

My first offer on a house had been made on a home that I'd never seen, but that you had found on the internet and whose potential you had convinced me of. One night, I had a dream that we were arriving at the house for the first time. The dogs ran off to explore the vast yard, exploding with April flowers in bloom. Together, we explored the labyrinthine rooms and hallways, each one promising more than the one before, each pulsing with infectious creative energy. When I entered the living room, there was a homeless man sleeping on the couch. He sat upright and wide-eyed, and I reassured him: go back to sleep, there's plenty of room for everyone. The dream was off in only two ways. In reality, the vagrant was sleeping in the attic, and you would not see our new home.



## Sunday

I read palms these days and listen to songs that remind me of your hands, calloused and smooth; they brushed against my skin once, and I knew I would be your wife, is what I once wrote to you. Here, there, my heart is everywhere I will be – never with you again, is what I wrote for someone else, a long time ago. Maybe in awhile, you will be a someone else, or someone else's. But right now, it's my turn to long for a return. I take my queue from you, always so good at going back. Although I can't stop missing you and maybe don't want to, I won't act upon this desire; the forward momentum is too strong, the perigee tides too high. My ruined house is now occupied.

STILL XVII

*The sun itself is finite, as we know, and its light might some day come to an end, but us? [T]here is mourning and there is death – notice I am not saying memory, innocent memory – only for what regards the sun. Every photograph is of the sun.*

STILL XVIII

*[The photographic essence] knows how to keep silent, an infinitely elliptical discourse, mad with a single desire: to impress time with all times, at all times, and then furtively, in the night, like a thief of fire, archive at the speed of light the speed of light.*

—Jacques Derrida, *Athens Still Remains*





## Acknowledgments

Neither text nor image can sufficiently express my gratitude to Jennie Carlisle, Rani Waugh, Mira Waits, and Heather Waldroup for advising me in life and in writing. Thanks to Jason Kniep for reading thoughtfully as ever, and to Jeremy Killian for his compassionated examination of this backstory, and for not shying away. May the sun continue to keep your spirits glowing and generous, in spite of, or because of, its finitude.











