

"THE FRAME OF HER ETERNAL DREAM":
FROM THEL TO DREAMSCAPES OF INFLUENCE

BY

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	v
Introduction	vi
Chapter One: Between Thanatos and Eros in <i>The Book of Thel</i>	1
Chapter Two: Unmetered Memory	28
Chapter Three: Dreamscapes of Influence	41
Part I: Alternate Memory.....	41
Part II: Song in Shell — Woman to Woman	61
Part III: Crossing Colors.....	73
References	84
Vita	87

Abstract

The first portion of this work analyzes how Blake's *The Book of Thel* and Anne Waldman's *Voice's Daughter of a Heart Yet To Be Born* demonstrate the subjection and self-sacrificial position of one permanently confined to a single mode of being. Thanatos, or Freud's death drive, becomes an option for entrapped subjects like Thel, whose enlightenment depends upon a rupture from her original system. Routine and fear over motherhood builds into cataclysmic despair for Thel, despair that eventually makes action possible since these moments offer chances to learn to face her anxiety and obtain the knowledge she craves at the grave plot. Directly confronting horror and subduing it with the poet's voice replaces apprehension or passivity, allowing for levels of authority that may at last free the mind. I identify this kind of dependency on rupture or trauma in my own work as catalyst for the breakdown of identity and subsequent process of reconciliation within private space. Discovery of self-language becomes the affirmative agent, allowing the subject the opportunity to choose a personal mode of being and enable new ontological roles. The final portion turns to my own poetry as I reclaim the domestic as a site of psychological renovation, illustrating how tragedy allows poetic subjects the potential for new possibilities hidden within everyday life.

Introduction

"Thel was pale. If things did not grow and die and change we would be stuck in the frame of her eternal dream." (52)

- Anne Waldman, *Voice's Daughter of a Heart Yet To Be Born*

Too long in paradise, for William Blake, becomes "Ulro," or his version of hell, and thus the very notion of "paradise" is destabilized. The Blakean mythos encapsulates a Romantic vision of utopia that cannot sustain itself and is perpetually haunted by the shadow of a darker alternative (one structured on deterioration, abasement, remorse, and death). The latter, however, ironically redirects toward a haunted-paradisaal vision that transcends, or at least challenges, the first unchanging state of Innocence. This theme interests me because I have noted in my own creative work a trend to disrupt the realities of ordinary, mundane life with cataclysmic events or thoughts — whether based on personal experience or fictionalized narrative. The transformative power of trauma, the moment of reinvention following rupture and the opening of possibility, both embodies Blakean figures and gives voice to the psychological changes I value in my own poetic subjects.

I do not focus in particular on Blake's concept of contrarities, that is, the sudden rupture of Innocence by Experience. My personal emphasis is on the rupture itself and its psychological (or even artistic) aftermath, the moment when life opens itself to other possibilities. Blake's vision of reality depends on this exact kind of shattering and defies

the stagnant perfection other utopian texts might offer. Frederic Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future*, for example, questions "how works that posit the end of history can offer any usable historical impulses, how works which aim to resolve all political differences can continue to be in any sense political, how texts designed to overcome the needs of the body can remain materialistic, and how visions of the 'epoch of rest' (Morris)¹ can energize and compel us to action" (Jameson xiv). Blake's poetics is the exception. His vision of "utopia," if we are to label it as such, *relies* on action and apocalypse. This apocalypse is the amalgamation of history, material bodies, reproduction, and the destruction of linearity that uncovers hidden pathways and potential for subjects entrapped by paradise itself. The "action" that compels these subjects is my emphasis: the Thanatos-driven desire to kill the status quo, to break boundaries in the journey toward self-reinvention.

In the first portion of this work, I examine how the figure Thel in *The Book of Thel* locates and encapsulates a multiplicity of ontological possibilities following lost peace in the Vales of Har. I do not explore questions of utopia on a political scale in reference to Har, but rather the psychological and/or psychoanalytic reasoning behind the actions that drive Thel to reassess her position to herself as woman, creator, and poet. She is motivated by a type of death drive to reassess the systems of being in which she exists, and only through glimpses into a corrupted side of reality can there be a progression to a radically enlightened status dependent on the acceptance of such polarizations.

A critical/creative project grounded primarily in close reading, my main critical methodology in the first portion is psychoanalytical. Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure*

¹ See William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (1890).

Principle (1920) rejects his earlier claim that sexual reproduction is the leading psychological "drive" for man, and introduces a second drive: the death instinct or drive ("Thanatos," in post-Freudian thought) in opposition to "Eros," survival and reproduction. Thanatos, rejecting "reality," seeks palliative oblivion, or the return to a state of nonexistence. The dualistic nature of the claim has since been repudiated but offers literary value if we are to think of Thanatos as a metaphorical figure operating as gateway to other types of being within Blake's poetics. Rather than nonexistence, the state that the death drive aims to achieve becomes the elimination of boundaries and the opening of different modes of being and possibility. These modes do not necessarily involve a complete break from the generative world and relationships, but suggest alternative means of production and sometimes an ironic reconciliation with the Other following trauma.

Chapter One, "Between Eros and Thanatos in *The Book of Thel*," explores the role of Thanatos as the driving factor for Thel, the young virgin dissatisfied by normative roles within her ironic utopian system. I say ironic because the presence of the utopia itself and its oppressive rules coalesce into anguish for Thel, anguish only remedied through the destruction of the self² that has been imprisoned by such rules. Finding her own voice at the grave plot allows Thel to accept limitation and hope at least to achieve an appeasement of self that might eventually allow for (not an acceptance of the

² Let it be noted that my definition of "self" differs throughout this work from that of S. Foster Damon in *his A Blake Dictionary*. Damon defines "Self" or "Selfhood" in Blakean terminology as "the innate selfishness with which we are born; yet is not central Humanity, but is opposed to it. As it develops, it becomes the Spectre and as such is one's Satan" (363). For my purposes, I use the lowercase "self" in the opposite manner, as synonymous with the autonomy, independence, will, sexuality, and spirit an individual possesses and that must be freed in order to thrive.

oppressions she once felt in Har), but a transcendence of or renewed appreciation for Har and its inhabitants. I begin this discussion with an analysis of the conventional Freudian Thanatos vs. Eros and its evolution within Freudian theory, paying particular attention to Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of Life*. After turning from Freud, I situate Blake's oeuvre within another, more contemporary interpretation (2010) of the same concept: Mark Levene's "The Apocalyptic as Contemporary Dialectic: From Thanatos (Violence) to Eros (Transformation)." Although Levene works from the perspective of a cultural activist and environmentalist, his definition of the "Thanatos mode," is helpful for my purposes as well. This mode depicts a population that, anticipating Armageddon, or an "apocalypse of Thanatos," inadvertently destroys itself in an attempt to resist natural circumstances, as opposed to "the apocalypse of Eros" that allows for the path to salvation. I argue that the free-will of those within the Thanatos mode are not necessarily aggressive, however, and that their sovereignty may even ultimately allow for the transformative experience Levene (or Marcuse) calls "Eros." This transformation is from that of the oppressed to the liberated, impossible for subjects who blindly resign themselves to their conditions.

Thel's inner discontent and obsession with mortal finitude inadvertently creates within her a death drive, which, not seeking mortality itself, instead derives from a longing to escape a single, self-sacrificial mode of existence that her sisters have faced through motherhood. The cataclysmic moment on the grave plot is not only the breakdown of Thel's previously static lifestyle, but also the moment of illumination and the opening of personal choice. Blake does not promote a subject who accepts a mysterious apocalypse but rather one who seeks out the mystery and confronts tragedy by

a radical reorganization of selfhood. I seek to challenge interpretations in light of Harold Bloom's reading of Thel as an "unborn soul" or failed feminist symbol, and suggest instead that Thel's language connotes an unusual and powerful anticipatory power that likens her more to Anne Waldman's contemporary vision in *Voice's Daughter of a Heart Yet to Be Born*³ (2016). Whether or not Thel chooses to return as voyeur in the Vales of Har is ambiguous, yet her break from paradise hints toward the possibility of self-reconciliation as redemptive poet. I also hope to illustrate how this appropriation of Freud's Thanatos, in opposition to Brown's renunciation of it as "complete therapeutic pessimism," allows for the celebration of art that is the closest means of not necessarily overcoming tragedy (81) but at least enabling a mature confrontation with it.

One might wonder why I have chosen to work with Freudian terminology rather than employ Blake's own vocabulary in exploring these themes — why Thanatos vs. Eros rather than the ascending levels of Ulro, Generation, Beulah, and Eden? My response is a personal one. Despite Blake's powerful influence on me in 2019, I would be dishonest to suggest that he has been the driving motivation behind my creative work up until this point, or even the inspiration behind the poems shared specifically in this project. In fact, imagining what Blake's synthesis of Innocence and Experience looks like in a reality fraught with horror on the everyday level or in a contemporary landscape is, at times, difficult. My goal as an artist is to keep my writing as "mine" as possible, shaped by my personal muses and bridged by the original paths of my own thought. Concepts of Thanatos and Eros have been inspirations to me longer than I have been intimately

³ Due to the hybrid nature of Waldman's collection, citations for *Voice's Daughter of a Heart Yet to Be Born* include page numbers rather than line numbers throughout this work.

familiar with Blake's lexicon. My study of *Thel* paired with my creative portfolio is, on the surface, an unusual couple. Therefore, the second chapter, "Unmetered Memory," serves as the bridge between Blake's works and my pieces in which I explain my motives for this unusual union, the primary one being my desire to engage with the kind of self-invention I see in *Thel* from a contemporary, realist perspective and also by way of my own inspirations rather than William Blake's.

In this second chapter, I examine the "unhindered moment" from a domestic position and a transformation of mind that does not necessarily depend on fantastical or cosmological reimagining. Waldman chiefly investigates methods of harnessing female control by transcending marginalized positions and gender roles, and I turn instead to familial and domestic spaces as sites of psychological reinvention. In doing so, I locate trauma as the leading potential catalyst for transformation in my work. My fixation is the eruption of everyday life by tragedy rather than a self-willed Thanatos, along with the mental restructuring that occurs following catastrophe. While not necessarily devoted to a direct death drive, the subjects of my poems often must erect new paradigms of being for themselves following the breakdown of their own ordinary systems, whether the systems are those of a daughter, a mother, a lover, or something else equally familiar.

Additionally, these new paradigms of being might be anything from an amplified sense of appreciation for the family following a car accident to a woman's reevaluation of her body after a menstrual cycle. Because trauma is so wildly diverse, I divide the third chapter, "Dreamscapes of Influence" (named for the first poems and also the influence of trauma) into three segments — the first, "Alternate Memory," focused on more personal, autobiographical pieces, the second, "Song in Shell — Woman to Woman," on women,

and the third, "Crossing Colors," on fictional subjects. The principal focus of the first is, of course, the collection "Dreamscapes of Influence," based on my own health concerns. These poems capture the deviation from my familiarity and comfort in my own body following a diagnosis of pre-cancerous colon polyps. Structured around fragments from contemporary poets who address similar themes in their works (Elizabeth Bishop, Rae Armantrout, Jorie Graham, and others), this work nonlinearly follows my experiences watching movies (homage to Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*) after the discovery of the polyps, and moreover how this discovery forces me to reorganize my own method of interpreting illness and my individual role in the world as it transforms from a simple moviegoer to actor. My less personalized poems, although similarly focused on the radical restructuring of self and the experience within and following trauma, expand beyond myself as the poetic subject and imagine the various responses to trauma in women and other fictional poetic subjects.

No one can tell us when trauma might be the stepping-stone to redemption or the road to life-long damage instead. A drive for death may not always result in transformation, nor can trauma promise epiphany when it is as individualized as those who experience it. I believe that both, however, offer the chance or at least *possibility* for rediscovery, even if only through a retreat back to the familiar with an altered perspective. It is the *what-if* that fascinates me, the potentiality of response beyond the traumatic moment of muteness, or Thel regaining her voice after the initial horror subsides. In March 2018, while studying William Blake's *The Book of Thel* and Milton (not discussed in this project), I connected with the kind of paradigm shift I read into figures whose collapsed paradises resulted in absolute transformation. Blake and

Waldman's visions of Thel are outside of time and space; they defy the natural and realistic order of reality in order to parallel the psychoanalytic upheaval of subjects who erupt free of their expected roles. Blake suggests motherhood is the stereotypical route from which Thel must escape, and Waldman specifically positions patriarchal oppression as the expected mode Thel must annihilate. Thel's outer rejection and her flight from the grave plot thus represents, at least for Waldman, an end to patriarchy and the beginning of her own sort of generation. Through my poems, I hope to show how domestic realism and even conventional "female" spaces, in addition to the fantastical, can explore these same hidden potentials in ordinary living areas. In both cases, it is ultimately the break from routine and the destruction of peace that opens the door for the possibility of psychological renovation.

Chapter One: Between Thanatos and Eros in *The Book of The*

Thanatos and Eros

"If we are to die ourselves . . . it is easier to submit to a remorseless law of nature, to the sublime . . . than to chance which might perhaps have been escaped" (39).

- Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

We might always wish to return to the first state of things. Everything is safe at the starting line — all bodies one by one beside each other, no movement, muscles still. In the instant that the gun signals *start*, all must explode, go awry, and your body, composed of trillions of microscopic agents like laborers on the assembly line, begins the fight against all other bodies to the finish. The agents inside of you spark fire to push you there peacefully, to ease you to an ending. And yet they themselves remain fixed in time, undeveloped after centuries' long evolutionary processes within you. They duplicate and repeat. Duplicate and repeat. Endlessly.

Freud imagines that the "germ cell" is unchanging, defiant to evolution. It persists in its task, writing and rewriting your genes, perpetually editing. And still, it is a failed artist because its creations have escaped and lost control over you. The moment you are free from the womb, you are wild. Your cells, desperate to retain you, must adapt their aim, fighting to return you to the "primeval, inorganic state" from which you have come and when you were safest (Iversen 5). The gun fires and the cell's job shifts from one of creation to one of preservation, perpetually battling against external stimuli in an attempt to protect you from a painful, unexpected demise. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud deems the cells of our bodies the "true life instincts" — perfect entities combatting imperfect circumstances. Through constant repetition and reunion with other cells, they

strive for the immortality of their creations (34). Immortality is paradise. But when paradise cannot sustain itself — and it never can — then the germ cells' goal, and by extension our own, becomes less secure.

If we are to follow Freud's thought in this early work, which has been modified, rejected, criticized, expanded upon, narrowed down, and all but practically rewritten since his death — if we are to ignore the common dismissal of the death and life instincts as "mythical beings" and examine them as a kind of oppressed vs. authoritarian relationship within society⁴, then we can conclude that our ultimate aim in life, the life instinct, is the fulfillment of normative, sexual reproduction, and preservation (Brown 78). This is a concept clearly no longer workable in the contemporary world, and yet one we cannot so easily dismiss, given the power of Freud's prose when he expects us to believe that "the aim of all life is death" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 32). Self-preservation, the very essence of the "life instinct," might then be re-understood as the unconscious attempt to lead the body to its own chosen death, to follow its own path, and guard against what lies beyond control.

A considerable difference exists between traumatic experiences in which you are a passive victim and events in which you become an active agent in your own suffering. Freud believed this concept was at least semi-encapsulated by an experiment in which he lived with a young boy who each day reenacted the disappearance of his mother when she left for work. The boy, by throwing a toy out of his sight and shouting "Gone!" replaced his anxiety or sorrow with a game of his own creation (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 9). Ultimately Freud came to the conclusion, ". . . the difference in outcome of

⁴ See Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*.

trauma is the mind's preparation for it" (26). The young boy's reenactment did not foretell a pleasurable outcome, but instead predicted the eventual loss of his mother. His life instincts then did not seem so dedicated to self-preservation at all, but rather to keeping to a path that would conclude with his mastery over the final trauma: his own death. The theoretical leap is clumsily expansive, and yet led to Freud's eventual submission that even the life instincts, our basic protectors, are intricately intertwined with the death drive: "Thus these guardians of life, too, were originally the myrmidons of death" (33). Life instincts become *Eros*. The death drive, committed to disrupting its counterpart's natural harmony by pursuing its independent final destination, becomes *Thanatos*.

If preparation is key to overcoming trauma, then perhaps Mark Levene is on to something when he writes that a visionary like William Blake, who predicts and confronts the "Thanatos apocalypse" within his own mythos, suggests a middle-ground between radical action and passive acceptance during crisis. While Levene works specifically with contemporary war culture and climate change in the Western world, his reworking of Freud's dialectic is intriguing in that it attempts to imagine Thanatos on a more globalized scale than Freud's individualized one, or an expansion of the death drive in a single subject elevated into a catastrophic movement pushing society toward apocalypse.

Those obsessed with apocalypse and devoted to the preservation of society and national security become the very bringers of doomsday themselves in their push for more weapons, more fighting, and more drastic measures. Such people are the embodiments of the death-drive, determined to choose their own fate against the unknown. Better to face their own inspired doom than "the collective, violent death of

millions of unprepared and *unaware* innocent individuals, in the face of the invincible — sometimes invisible forces" (59). Like Freud's Eros, Levene's stands in opposition to these agents of Thanatos:

In the face of this bleak prognosis, is there an alternative version of apocalyptic imagination which might act as an antithetical antidote? The answer may lie, at least in part, in a recovery of the ancient *purposefulness* of the idea of apocalypse — *not* as a prospect simply of obliteration, and with it world-end, but rather as a prophetic warning whose wake-up call to all humanity beckons them to participate in a general act of redeeming planetary reconciliation. It is in this implication of apocalypse as an idea geared towards enabling people — in the face of total wipe-out — to utterly change their lives for the *good* which . . . remains redolent with potentiality . . . I call this updated version of the ancient form, the apocalypse of Eros, to denote life, love and affirmation of the will to live in, and with the natural world. (61)

I have quoted Levene at length because the concept of the "*purposefulness* of the idea of apocalypse" is particularly compelling, ironically, to my definition of Thanatos. Eros, for Levene, is configured as a different kind of world-ender, the overarching prophetic voice whose warning of destruction brings about a newfound appreciation of life and acceptance of its finality. This idea harkens back to Herbert Marcuse's well-known conclusion that Eros, configured as a political entity, must fight for life against a society allocating its materials and time for war efforts and crimes against humanity (*Eros and Civilization*). While I am certain that Levene is building off of Marcuse's

vision of Eros (criticized for the failure to fully incorporate Othered figures such as women) and intends "Eros" to modify "apocalypse" so that we assume the end has been a loving, peaceful one, a second implicit proposal within his words calls to me and suggests that if it is *the apocalypse* (or destruction) *of Eros* that inspires change, then the unspoken postulation must be that it is *the creation of Eros* that *first* blinds us to the reality of global, cataclysmic revolution and convinces us that our paradises are unbreakable. It is not until someone witnesses the disaster, until peace is ruptured, that the warriors of Thanatos rise against their natural circumstances to assume control. I also am not as convinced as Levene that the "Thanatos mode" must be entirely pessimistic and inspire any type of warfare. Imagine instead that the preservation of paradise is not always the end-goal, or even preservation at all.

Imagine instead that the "the apocalypse of Eros," the redeeming instant, is but the introduction of Thanatos to the mind — the raw, awe-inducing moment of fundamental reorganization in which you turn from accepting your fate to deciding to engineer your own. What is Thanatos then but the courage to fight against the confines of an establishment that is finite anyway and to fall in love with the possibilities of life outside those you know? Thanatos *inspires* a reawakened Eros, a transformed appreciation of mortality that need not necessarily depend on aggression.⁵ Hegel was of the first to suggest that death is forever bonded to human individuality and allows man to

⁵ Brown, despite his own pessimism, distinguishes between Freud's death-drive and the aggressive instinct, suggesting that the repressed man all too often turns to violence against the Other and that, "It is one of the sad ironies of contemporary intellectual life that Freud's hypothesis of an innate death instinct, which has been received with horror as the acme of pessimism, actually offers the only way out of the really pessimistic hypothesis of an innate aggressive instinct" (99).

transcend the limitation of one-dimensional functions⁶: "The precious ontological uniqueness which the human individual claims is conferred on him not by possession of an immortal soul but by possession of a mortal body" (Brown 104). In this light, Levene's invocation of William Blake, whose constant intellectual warfare promoted perpetual "preparation for Thanatos," anticipates a battle between Thanatos and Eros that concludes with the "planetary reconciliation" of the two (Levene 78). We must remember that Freud, when first forming the instinct theory, "began by borrowing from the romantic poets" (Brown 79).

Let us then depart from the world of germ cells and apocalypse, and enter instead what we can easily imagine as a Blakean engraving. This Romantic, poetic Eros, adorned in blossoms, crosses the budding meadow, her hands folded over the curve of her belly. She is half-faced, the crescent of her profile turned always as never to reveal the opposing side. Only the asymmetrical beauty of her gaze as her sisters swing in the arms of young men, all embracing on the sunny patch of land — each the ravished or ravisher. There is no time for the Other here, any outsiders. All must grow up and grow new life in the paradise of fertility. Eros overlooks her realm with her single eye, the mother and life-giver of all, devoted to her people and their legacy. And when they all come to sit together, they sit as in a courthouse, the young bare-footed women gathered on one side, the men on the other. A match is made and together the couple roams until a child is born. Rulings preside. Eros' attendants quietly allow the old and feeble to slip through trees branches, unnoticed. And it is not until Eros' sister Thanatos, the interrupter, ambles

⁶ See *Science of Logic*, I, 142.

too near her fields and palaces that Eros must rise up to protect her people or else condemn them to her myopic fury.

This half-faced Thanatos, as warm to the touch as her sister but perhaps less desirable, is always meandering through the outskirts of paradise, always idle to the eyes of those who do not understand her ways. She watches every bending of every grass blade, every mole or vermin that dares to disrupt the solid earth beneath and make its presence known. Now and then a young girl or boy catches sight of Thanatos' dark shape passing and dreams of joining her, of listening to the answers of the secret questions that they have always locked in their own minds, to evade the jurisdiction of the one-eyed tyrant, Eros. "She will lead you to horror," Eros warns her people. "She will lead you to the grave plot." And it is at the grave plot that we find the virgin Thel, who might as well be transformed into Thanatos and returned to the sunny Vales of Har.

It might as well be Thel, whose dissatisfaction in the realm of paradise encourages an epic journey to the underworld — and Thel who at last sees the full face of Eros turned toward her, the fusion of sisters, the explosion of hidden realities unmasked by Thanatos.

The Book of Thel

"The Virgin started from her seat, & with a shriek
Fled back unhinderd till she came into the vales of Har."
- William Blake, *The Book of Thel*

So much relies on the unhindered moment, the instant in which old systems shatter and the subject is liberated. Liberation does not come easily. Liberation is the act of not-living for the moment in order *to* live. Thel's altered perspective at the poem's end has

resulted most overwhelmingly in the consensus that any reconciliation of self following her flight back to the Vales of Har, the paradisaal womb, is thwarted. Worst are readings that label her the ultimate Blakean failure, the woman whose entire journey is analogous to stillborn life. What is Thel's shriek, according to these readers, but the ultimate fulfillment of a fruitless death drive: the refusal to be born at all? The final couplet, noted above, has cultivated countless interpretations, each new one perhaps as slippery as the last.

As quickly as it emerges from the grave plot, Thel's voice disappears again without a trace, somewhere back into her homeland and birthplace, leaving us with virtually no image of her life following the dramatic shriek. Trauma does not necessarily connote paralysis, nor does Blake's language suggest any concrete fate for our heroine. We must then assume that we should not drift too far in any one direction: Thel as pro-feminist or Thel as victim. We are best off instead directing attention to Blake's representation of the emergence of Thanatos within Thel's character, the compulsion toward morbidity that awakens under her oppressed status. And finally, the radical transformation of being this aura of Thanatos inspires — a birth of mind and self that lends to no one particular future.

Anne Waldman's recovery of Thel in *Voice's Daughter of a Heart Yet To Be Born* emerges in particular as one of the most poignant, pro-feminist⁷ portrayals of the poem up to date. The collection's afterward, "Threads," locates the "Hebrew Jewish, or possibly Gnostic, notion of the 'bat kol,'" defined by Waldman as "the daughter of a voice . . . a heavenly voice that proclaims God's judgment" as inspiration (37). More notably is her

⁷ Despite Waldman's offhand mention of a woman who once dismissed her credibility as a poet because said woman was "a feminist" and disagreed with Waldman's positive review of William Carlos Williams (27).

reliance on Antonin Artaud's⁸ delusional belief, recorded in an asylum in France, that he was "Saint Hippolyte, a pure angel sent to replace a fallen one" (109). Thel thus assumes this very role — the feminine, godlike redemption (akin to Levene's "apocalypse of Eros") for a world that we discover in "Book 1: Innocence" is our own fallen one, plagued with men in trenches and children in hospitals (3-6). She, the antithesis of "empire" (3), becomes the angel who eschews the buried child and whose "corporeal death out-of-galaxy adventure" in "Offworld" appropriates her into an amalgamation of voices across mythological, ancient, religious, and contemporary war cultures, including stories of Dido (17) and Martin Luther King Jr. (20). Her shriek is the "Self-repairing" cry (99) of the poet who must learn to rationalize terror through art, the cry of one "radicalized enough to abort herself" (6) and venture to the underworld, subterranean "communities of resistance" (53) in order to seek salvation. For Waldman, Thel is the embodiment of Buddhism, a kind of static consciousness that undergoes "unbornness," "rebirth," and "transmigration" to reach enlightenment (110). This emphasis on Buddhism recalls Brown's rationalization of Freud's "Nirvana-principle," the homeostatic mode of being that is both created and influenced by the death drive (Brown 90-91). Its reunion with the life instinct would result in eternal equilibrium.⁹ With the perpetuation of all these diverse readings, perhaps the only thing we know for certain about Thel's fate is that it is as transmutable, as fluid, and as changeable as the interpretations we attempt to impose on it. Thel's story itself defies ontological singularity.

⁸ See Artaud's "Fragmentations" for the specific work Waldman cites.

⁹ Waldman takes a more optimistic approach than Brown, who claims that the equilibrium of Nirvana-State essentially results in the end of history via cyclical repetition of the past. The result is "unrepressed" time or Hegel's Absolute: timeless time without progress (Brown 93).

To understand the wish for death, we first must address the sorrows that drive one to pursue this harrowing alternative. I think again to a static vision of Eros, not a far cry from Blake's "same dull round."¹⁰ Haunted specifically by the prospect of motherhood, Thel seemingly wastes her existence surrounded by the fecund daughters of Mne. Seraphim as they joyously attend to their flocks. But in this generative paradise, the youngest, ever-dreaming Thel, struggles to find bliss as part of the transient economy of the Vales of Har¹¹ or even her own body. To Northrop Frye, Har is but a fantasy world, an unborn "looking-glass" (*Fearful Symmetry* 233) or utopian ruin — women endlessly reproducing, children growing old and reproducing even more. Waldman is even harsher in her denunciation: "Thel in prison" (4), or later, "Notions of telepathy keep driving Blake's flawed system of innocence. How innocent is that which could be a system of control" (96). Thel is the renegade from this cyclical economy from the start, unsatisfied by the role of motherhood that does not appeal to her and also at the prospect of beauty that never lasts: the pains of childbirth, the bouncing baby, a woman's shape.

She of course is also the virgin daughter of Mne. Seraphim, Mne. being Mnemosyne, mother of the Muses of Memory, and Seraphim the spirits of love and inspiration. These entities coalesce into Thel, making her the paradoxical daughter of

¹⁰ See "There is No Natural Religion" [b. IV].

¹¹ Har makes its first appearance in Blake's abdicated partner piece to *Thel*, *The Book of Tiriel*, as "the father of all mankind" who possesses the "spirit of Christianity." In despair over his ruthless sons' mistakes, he "who was a mountain now lives in a vale, cut off from mankind" (Damon 174). Damon notes that later in Blake's work Har develops into the father of Satan and is reduced to a serpent. Yet Thel's home in *The Book of Thel* is still a place of "primal innocence" (Damon 174). Mary Lynn Johnson puts pressure on the popular assumption that Har represents an early, working version of what would later become Blake's Beulah: "Obviously the unconscious inspiration, sexual fulfillment, and merciful repose from intellectual warfare which are associated with Beulah are all alien to Thel. No contrarities are true for her . . ." (260).

both what Blake loathes (memory) and cherishes (creativity). She is old tradition and creative stimulation, possessing a "deep schism in her own nature" unfamiliar to her sisters (Johnson 261). Blake's illustrations portray her as the only shepherdess neglecting her sheep, voyeur to the dynamic livelihood surrounding her. No young men touch her. Could it be that she is too young, sterile, queer, merely uninterested? No matter the reason, instead of fertility, the wilting, grave-shape of weeds sprouts from her feet, with vines climbing her body and circling her form — encasing her into their own death-womb instead. And yet this signal of death is no cage. A gateway, rather, as it rises green like Thel's dress. An extension of her own body under her control. The blooming flowers, the lovemaking seraphs, the complete *Eros* of the scene opposite to her remains untouchable, completely removed and separate from her body (*Complete Illustrated* 99). *Eros* cannot rouse the heart of one miserable with the status quo. Thanatos, the dying vine around Thel, sprouts green in several places — roadways to new methods of existence growing into being, sinking their roots further into Thel's mind and the poem's motto:

Does the Eagle know what is in the pit?

Or wilt thou go ask the Mole:

Can Wisdom be put in a silver rod?

Or Love in a golden bowl? (i.1-4)

Attributed to Thel and not Blake, the motto¹² positions Thel as the discontented, enquiring poet who cannot thrive in a world in which too many questions remain unanswered. Since Thel has never left the Vales of Har, which, Beulah or not, seems safe and beautiful, her only anxiety stems from an obsession with individuality in a world in

¹² Blake did not always include the motto at the opening of the poem. In other versions it serves as the conclusion.

which everyone operates according to a homogeneous, universal set of rules. For Thel, death renders everything, including the reproduction and selflessness displayed in the other occupants of Har, meaningless because it holds no meaning specific to her. She is uncomfortable compartmentalizing or confining something as grandiose as Wisdom or Love to a single, enclosed object like Har or her own body. Critics have devoted significant attention to the contrasting phallic and feminine imagery of the "rod" and "bowl," and Thel's anxiety over the fact that she herself might be merely a "rod" or "bowl" — an object or vessel meant only for the containment of something else. In addition to her fear of motherhood, the greater meanings of life (Wisdom or Love) exist beyond her; she cannot reach them by remaining merely the bowl or conforming to a life that does not call for the complete utilization of multifaceted skill sets.

I like to think of the motto as the lamentation of Eros, or the sorrow one experiences upon realizing that life and fertility do not necessarily guarantee complete happiness. Thanatos is the frustrated response, the seed planted into Thel's mind, longing for knowledge beyond Har. It is the realization that sincere connection with the Other is impossible under such circumstances, that the Eagle and the Mole share vastly contrasting and potentially irreconcilable experiences. Thanatos for Thel is the self-serving pining for something beyond what has been offered, the desire for her own path. To quote Brown, "It is the search for instinctual satisfaction under conditions of instinctual repression that produces in man the restless quest of the pleasure-principle for a quality of experience denied to it under conditions of repression" (90). Yet, in seeking her own identity, Thel falls victim to her flaw in communication by following others as they attempt to uncover her life's meaning for her. She relies initially only on "second-

hand knowledge" rather than true inspiration, which of course for Blake is tragedy and will surely doom her to failure (Johnson 260). Hilda Hollis notes that the connections between Thel's motto and *Tiriell*, Thel's abandoned partner poem, additionally suggest that Thel's quest (originally Tiriell's) is fated to "fail" from the start:

Tiriell thus wonders whether wisdom can come from a silver scepter and if love can be found in a golden chalice. The gold and the silver symbolize the hypocrisy with which these symbols are overlaid. In particular, the image of the golden bowl is striking since it recalls the Eucharistic cup representing Christ's sacrificial offering. But the golden chalice of a wealthy and selfish church in the face of poverty creates an image of contradiction. While wisdom and love are declared, their opposite is evinced. (88)

Perhaps, however, power *does* exist in acknowledging not only the symbols of wisdom and love, but also the selfishness they conceal. To see only the first would doom Thel to the sacrificial maternal position she fears, and to see only the second would preserve her position as an idle, purposeless, and self-serving maiden. In this case Thel's anxiety in the motto becomes a hopeful suggestion that she, on some level, will develop the capacity to perceive beyond the senses. For it is overreliance on the senses that has made Thel into a voyeur rather than a participant. Together, the rod and the bowl, androgynous, enable a new power: they are the models for "becoming a new person" (Waldman 20).

Simple sightseeing gives way to melancholy, to the belief that all roads lead to the same final path and that everyone is serving his or her essential purpose blissfully except for Thel. The other occupants of Har are "actors" who have memorized their parts,

leaving Thel without room for voice (Waldman 6). Through observation, she has learned that she is expected to conform to a specific role but only understands her position within transient similes. While her sisters lead "round the sunny flocks," Thel is not cognizant of her own desire and only understands her quest as one for "the secret air" (1.1-2). She laments the "fading" lotus of the water and the "fading" children "born to smile and fall" (1.6-7). As the youngest, she is in a "better position" to notice the "gradual fading of her sisters as they grow older" (Bloom 46). Death is the all-consuming aura of Har, the untouchable secret of which Thel becomes hyperaware. Life is brief:

Ah! Thel is like a watry bow. and like a parting cloud.

Like a reflection in a glass. like shadows in the water.

Like dreams of infants. like a smile upon an infants face,

Like the doves voice, like transient day, like music in the air; (1.8-11)

Life is brief and Thel — Thel is nothing. She is *like* everything, but not quite anything herself. All she can be, all that she imagines herself as, is rendered solely through her own mortality. Like all parting clouds or shadows on water, she passes through the senses but possesses no substantial meaning to herself. Her place as she knows it in Har is something that is always in the process of dying one way or another, always unstable. As the power in evincing opposites is teased in the motto, acute mindfulness to death, to beautiful surfaces masking horror, similarly grants Thel a kind of power that no other we see within Har holds. For it is Thel's voice alone that bears the prophesizing gift. Her creation is through language; she will be reborn as artist.

When she moans of the "Watry bow," we anticipate the coming Lilly who will identify herself as "watry seed." The "parting cloud" foretells of course the Cloud's

arrival and the "infants" address the juvenile Worm. This leaves only the "doves voice" likened to music in the air, which, while also temporary, aligns Thel's impending voice from the grave plot as something beautiful, poetic, and transcendent. Her lamentation follows: "Ah! Gentle may I lay me down, and gentle rest my head. /And gentle sleep the sleep of death. And gentle hear the voice / Of him that walketh in the garden in the evening time" (1.12-14). The footsteps in the garden of course allude to *Genesis 3:8* when Adam and Eve, knowing that they have violated God's law, attempt to hide from the punishment of mortality. Hollis notes, "The voice which speaks in the garden is punitive and utters death; Thel desires to be bound by this voice which insists on mortality" (88). To submit to another's death wish or another's language, however, is not the position of the poet. Voice is too sacred, too powerful Thel — she craves vocabulary that makes death intelligible on *her* terms, to emerge from her hiding place as her own mouthpiece rather than accepting the inevitable and unchangeable fate of everything she knows. Thel's fear of dying without having satisfied her own purposes — to a preordained death, no less — waters the burning seed of Thanatos within her.

And if it is Thel's own fear that waters this seed, then it is the Lilly of the valley's meek introduction that germinates it and initiates the process of persuading Thel to accept invitation to the underworld, or "Endworld," as Waldman names it. The Lilly attempts to alleviate Thel's suffering by addressing the likenesses between them. She too is weak and diminutive in size, dwelling in "lowly vales" (1.15-18). Her limitation, as she sees it, is balanced with modesty and selflessness: "Yet I am visited by heaven and he that smiles on all / Walks in the valley" (1.19-20). Each morning the Lilly is reborn by God's voice

urging her to delight in her own humbleness — with the guarantee that when the summer's heat at last melts her, she will find peace in "eternal vales" (1.21-25).

This ever-accepting Lilly, the ultimate symbol of resignation, does not understand why Thel grows frustrated with this attempt at appeasement, Thel who perceives the Lilly as a "little virgin" surrendering her own breath and scent for the innocent lamb, but in herself must be lacking (2.5). Brian Wilkie comments on Thel's inability to distinguish identity from role; she cannot discover a role that is both generous and self-serving, and this is why she neglects her own shepherdess job. For Thel, no identity derives from a role that has zero perceivable use-value for the self: "Thel longs to be of 'use,' that is, to develop her potential life into an actual one and hence come into our world of Generation" (Frye 233). Yet, a generative role by normative, Har standards does not suffice. Creation at the cost of her own body is too frightening. The Lilly's dew, strikingly sexual for the assumed virgin, shall revive the cow and tame the steed, but what of Thel? Thel "is like a faint cloud kindled at the rising sun." She will vanish from her "pearly throne," and, unlike the Lilly, no flower will replace her (2.11-12).

If the Lilly represents the first straying from virginal innocence, then the Cloud (the only explicitly named male in the poem) is symbolic of a complete voyage into the sexual realm. Thel sees herself more in the masculine image of the Cloud than the Lilly because they both fade within time, although he does not complain of his life's brevity. Unlike the lowly Lilly, the Cloud appears before Thel as "golden" and "glittering," magnificent as a god (3.5). He turns Thel's language on her, referring to her as "virgin" as she did with the Lilly when he boasts that she ought not to fear his transience (3.7). He reassures her that he will pass instead "to tenfold life," but of course we know that

promises of what the future *might* store, the fates we do not decide, cannot reconcile the frightening scenarios of losing everything that are equally valid for Thel (3.9-12).

The Cloud describes his communication with dew as one between lovers. He courts the dew and then follows her to her "shining tent" where she, "the weeping virgin," will tremble and kneel before the "risen sun." They will arise "link'd in a golden band," husband and wife, and "walk united, bearing food to all our tender flowers," or children (2.13-16). Of the Cloud, Waldman remarks, "cloud seeing unborn as in being needed to provide for others / cloud familiar to unborn as something vanished / as thought, wasted, cautious survival of holding back" (65). Thel, "unborn" in the sense that she is currently no more than potentiality, is but wasted or misused sexual energy to the Cloud, equated to the celibate nun or monk, but stripped of either's sanctity (Waldman 66). And yet, her very name is the Greek *thel*, "female" or "will" and "wish." Shakespeare's use of "will" in his sonnets of course often denotes sexuality or sexual genitalia, whether male or female, making Thel herself the implicit suggestion that she too possesses a will (sexual and beyond) characteristic to her alone—a kind of will incomparable to the Lilly or the Cloud. She is not resistant to sexuality itself, but to the perceptions of what her sexuality should entail. For Helen P. Bruder, Thel's disavowal of Eros is thus predictable and understandable in a world in which femininity is "fixed by patriarchy into a hard ideology of submissive feminine nurture and deathly female sacrifice" (141). Waldman imagines a very explicit sexual power for Thel that blends binaries and defies concrete gender: "strap on the sex toy / penetrate what you don't know" (18). This pseudo-phallus entails an epistemological penetration rather than a physical one, the plunge of body into unexplored mind, or Thel into Endtime. No children will be born of her, and the kind of

creation she will make is not a generative one. Instantly Thel rejects any earlier notion that the Cloud and she are similar, for she does *not* feed the little birds — she merely listens to their song and leaves them to fend for themselves. Her sexuality is not communal.

The Cloud, ultimate patriarch, strips Thel of meaning, rewriting her into his vision of female value:

The [Cloud] seduces his daughters with mild promises of nourishment and his wives with lyrical promises of love but these soft blessings hold a curse, since the price demanded for patriarchal benediction is a confession of female abjection: the Lilly defines herself through diminutive frailty . . . the Clod, through debased stupidity . . ." (Bruder 141)

Bruder suspects that the Cloud is certain he will find reward ultimately, but Thel apprehends "pointless female masochism" in her own future — nourishing children like the Lilly at the cost of her own body: "The 'secret' of Har's 'grave plot' . . . is that women are valued solely for their utility and the sacrificial doctrine" (Bruder 142). The root of Thel's suffering is then not even motherhood itself, but the realization that, at least in Har, the *only* option for women is motherhood. And being a mother, as Thel sees it, ultimately gives way to the degraded position of the Clod of Clay, breathing life into the infantile Worm.

The Cloud does not understand Thel's misery because feeding the worms — an act of sexual triumph for him — *should* be a great blessing: "Every thing that lives / Lives not alone, nor for itself; fear not . . ." (3.26-27). He summons forth the "helpless worm" before sailing on alongside his own partner (3.30-31). The Worm, helpless,

groveling infant, lies vulnerable on its bed and perhaps is more "like" Thel than any other:

Art thou a Worm? Image of weakness, art thou but a Worm?

I see thee like an infant wrapped in the Lily's leaf;

Ah, weep not, little voice, thou can'st not speak, but thou can'st weep.

Is this a Worm? I see thee lay helpless & naked, weeping,

And none to answer, none to cherish thee with mother's smiles. (4.2-6)

Although Thel does not see herself in the Worm, her own existence is significantly juvenile as well. The worm is "pathetic and helpless" but possesses the "double efficacy of creation and destruction" in its own realm, similar to Thel (Bloom 47). Frye's generally accepted reading posits that Thel herself is metaphor for the undeveloped soul, a refusal to be born: "Thel is an imaginative seed: she could be any for of embryonic life, from a human baby to an artist's inspiration, and her tragedy could be anything from a miscarriage to a lost vision" (233). And the Clod of Clay, degraded mother, is "the red earth of which Adam was formed . . . inviting the virgin Thel to accept incarnation" (Bloom 47). Incarnation of what? Waldman's question (9) arises: "do we live for others or do we live for ourselves?" The Clod of Clay feels she has the answer, repeating the Cloud's sentiment: "we live not for ourselves" (4.10). It is this kind of selflessness and submission to others that allows even she, the meanest and lowliest of things, to believe in God or Christ's love:

But he that loves the lowly, pours his oil upon my head,

And kisses me, and binds his nuptial bands around my breast,

And says: 'Thou mother of my children, I have loved thee

And I have given thee a crown that none can take away.'

But how this is, sweet maid, I know not, and I cannot know;

I ponder, and I cannot ponder; yet I live and love. (5.1-6)

For all her supposed contentment, the Clod confesses to her own "ponder[ing]" as well, a hint of dissatisfaction. Yet she maintains the ability to "live and love" against all odds whereas Thel cannot accept this demeaning future. Thel weeps over the discovery that God would cherish a Worm of all base beings. She admits that she sensed she would lose her place among her "shining lot" after death and that God's love might be lost to her forever. The fear is not new or surprising — religion as the tool to hold us to one path. But this type of cherishing love, equated to that of a bridegroom, feels different (5.6-12). To love all of God's creatures is Thel's duty, and yet to revere the Worm would be surrendering to the kind of sexuality she resists. For Waldman, the worm is "puzzlement," both dependent on the mother and perhaps the most potent masculine energy we encounter in Har, even more so than the Cloud: "it is also serpent and / scorpion, it carries the insulation of sexual prowess, it is the penis / it is arousal, it is also weak of will" (9). The puzzle remains unsolved, concluding again in the question, "do we live for others or do we live for ourselves?"

Having listened to Thel's cries, the Clod of Clay, slave to the Worm, asks that Thel might enter her house, the dead underworld, with the promise that she can return at any time: "tis given thee to enter / And to return: fear nothing, enter with thy virgin feet" (5.16-17). The promise is essential. We cannot help but wonder if Thel would have entered had she not been guaranteed her safe return. To choose without option would be no different than submitting to her preordained and inescapable fate in Har, to wither and

fade as all creatures inevitably do. The tree of Thanatos growing inside Thel at last comes into full bloom upon her acceptance, a call back to the young boy Freud knew and his victorious cry "Gone!" when becoming master of his own fate. Thel might as well shout "Gone!" here too — gone with the Lilly, Cloud, and Worm. Gone with the Vales of Har! Thanatos implores her to seek enlightenment by way of a world in which she has the agency to live (and die) the way she wishes, to write her own prophecy. And who is to say that this type of drive is not heroic when Thel undergoes the hero's *katabasis*¹³ to see the "secrets of the land unknown" for the first time (6.2), receiving no physical reward? She merely is given the opportunity to behold Endtime and to come to terms with mortality at last — to reconcile the image she has of death as all-consuming and inescapable with her newfound ability to choose her own future.

The underworld, as Thel sees it, is all "sorrow" and "tears," laden with the dead draped over couches, devoid of joy (6.1-5). Yet this alternate reality is aligned too with Eros when Blake designates it "the land of clouds" and "dewy" graves. We are reminded at once of the Lilly and the Cloud, the parallel in language forcing us to accept that Thanatos reposes even within the loveliest, liveliest of places, and that this kind of ulterior realm has been "veiled" in the "Vales" of Har long before Thel ever reaches the grave (6.6-7). But when the spectral voice emanates from her designated grave plot, all is lost. At once, instantly, abruptly, Thel flees back to Har. Until now, her driving motivations for action have been introduced, operated, or commanded by others. Only the sound of her own language prompts her to action, moving her heart more significantly

¹³ Ancient Greek *katabasis* occurs when heroic figures undergo a type of descent, typically to the underworld, in search of divine knowledge or to retrieve a lost love – For example, Aeneas journeys to Hades to visit his father, Odysseus to seek the information necessary for his return to Ithaca, and Orpheus to find his lover Eurydice.

than anything else ever has. The ethereal voice, which may very well belong to a future vision of Thel condemned to a fate similar to the Lilly's, bemoans the physical senses' inabilities (6.11) to shut out the burdens of reality: "Why cannot the Ear be closed to its own Destruction?" When she hears the horrific catalogue of all that will be lost, of all the terrors the mind cannot escape, it would appear that Eros has risen as victor and that Thel's seeking of death has ironically redirected her back toward the fate of the Lilly and Clod of Clay. The return to the first state of things has been successfully reenacted. Eve has tasted the fruit and horror is now known. All that must follow is the desperate attempt to win back Eden. We arrive at where we begin, to the couplet with which I started: "The Virgin started from her seat, & with a shriek. / Fled back unhindered till she came into the vales of Har" (6.21-22).

Following Frye's reading, the "seed" of Thel must undergo burial in order to enter the realm of Generation, but upon hearing the tormented cries of the underworld, Thel "escapes back to the unborn world." Her shriek is that "of the disappearing ghost or uprooted mandrake, not the wail with which a baby announces its birth" (233). Bloom supports this reading: while Thel may perhaps accept her burial as a passageway to her own birth, she cannot bear the thought that she still must die and be buried again once her "generative use" is complete (Bloom 48). In this reading, her "shriek" not only seems on the surface to reject Experience, but also *denies* language, suggesting that the words Thel has heard in the underworld cannot suffice, that the dialogues she prizes most exist in the Vales of Har alone.

But how can we cast her aside so easily when Thel *responds* to her own voice at last — the ultimate transition from idle complainer to listener, from rejecter to creator,

from bystander to artist? Her "dead" language is far from clear, telling maybe of a future of eternal virginity, or maybe not. Maybe of the future masochistic existence of the Lilly and Clod of Clay, or maybe not: "Why tender curb upon the youthful burning boy! / Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desires?" (6.19-20). Blake's final illustration for *The Book of Thel* depicts three children riding the phallic serpent either away from the Vales of Har or toward it once again. The colorless children are similar in appearance to the Worm and Clod of Clay in previous illustrations, yet have taken on the forms of new figures (*Complete Illustrated* 105). Hollis observes that the serpent itself might represent Thel's metamorphosis into a bestial Female Will that embodies her refusal to accept an "active role" (90). I believe this kind of Female Will is not entirely bestial, but beautiful. Thel's retreat is when we see her most liberated. The illustration might then instead symbolize Thel's newfound perception of the Lilly, Cloud, and Clod of Clay as they ride the ouroboric, sexual snake, falling victim again and again to the same cycle of self-sacrifice and death. Waldman imagines Thel within a sanitarium, her sisters the suffering inmates, "Reduced to a realm of rest and dementia, regression to a childlike state . . . chasing birds and singing in a great cage" (91). Only Thel walks among the ward freely, searching for them. Whichever scenario Blake had in mind, the young female's ability to control and direct the serpent indicates a shift from the early shepherdess Thel staring inertly onto others to a more dynamic role (*Complete Illustrated* 105). The doubtful Thel seeks out a different life from her sisters, seals her own marriage to Thanatos, and assumes the dominant role to "penetrate" the dreaded "born" realm of physicality, emotion, and passion. Death gives way to life.

Wilkie speaks for the majority of Blakean critics with his claim that Thel is ultimately a failure in her refusal to accept her own destruction: "Defenses of Thel's retreat at the end of the poem, especially if one rejects rarefactions about unborn souls, have generally been unconvincing" (56). However, the poignant word "unhinderd" is worth noting. If we read this word as "unobstructed" or "unrestricted," we are doing the poem an injustice by relating it solely to Thel's physical retreat. What if "unhinderd" modifies more than the flight? What if "unhindered" relates to the liberation of both body and mind? Bloom writes, "The mood of the poem culminates in regret" when Thel "voluntarily denies Experience and returns to a dungeon which will become Blake's Ulro within time" (49). However, Thel *is* altered in that she, unlike her sisters, has seen the grave and cannot return to her former state of Innocence. Memories of what she has beheld will forever replay within her mind, and more importantly, she may even have the opportunity to return to the grave-plot via the Clod of Clay. Deborah McCollister believes that only through hearing "the truth" that exists in her voice alone can Thel undergo the Self-Abnegation¹⁴ to choose fairly between Innocence and Experience:

. . . the attempted seduction of Thel into the cycle of a mortal woman's life fails at last. She will not surrender her haven of virginity in order to live eternally in such a dark world. The sacrifice of her present self for a utilitarian, earthly self would be a mistake . . . Or is her life in the Vales of Har necessarily full of dread? (94)

I agree with McCollister that to cite Har as a "haven" or either option (Innocence vs. Experience, if we choose to think of them this way) as a "mistake" is a bold move. A

¹⁴ Not Blake's Self-Annihilation, which is the necessary obliteration of selfishness in order to reach Fourfold status.

moment of fear does not signify a future of rejection. Can we safely assume that the voice Thel hears is immutable and that any one kind of death (or life, for that matter) is unchangeable? Perhaps the critics who argue that Thel represents the liminal space between Innocence and Experience, fantasy and reality, and stillborn or birth, are on the correct path. And yet to strip Thel of what she *does* accomplish, to write her off as empty space or a failure in favor of more outspoken Blakean female figures like Oothoon denies her of her original purpose — to satisfy her curiosity about death and pursue a realm beyond the overbearing one into which she was born. Although the overwhelmed Thel rejects the lifestyles of those she encounters, she has still delved into the "unknown," beheld the "secret airs," and experienced a new language through her own visionary voice.

The battle between sisters Thanatos and Eros has no definite victor. Were Thel to pursue Thanatos to the end, she very well might embody Bloom's vision of refusing reality, denying herself even possibility in Har. But to remain forever with Eros, the lover of the status quo, results in similar consequences. Each leads to permanency, both bearers of a frozen apocalypse if chased too far. I believe it is Thanatos' *entryway* into the mind that paves the way to the redemptive space beyond dualism (and even dialectic). The journey to the underworld and subsequent breaching moment (not of mere Innocence) but of the old way of being, results in transformation, preventing what otherwise might become eternal damnation. Without Thanatos, Eros dictates forever.

Thanatos is the exposor of secrets, mother to the annihilation of confining structures, and opener of possibilities for new modes of being to arise from the ashes. Thel cannot recover her own sense of self or imagine the highly nuanced multiplicity of

ontological modes (mother, virgin, lover, male, female, alive, dead) until she embarks on the journey that concludes with the corruption of the one into which she was born.

Waldman's "Endtime" envisions the aftermath of the Thanatos-driven rupture — a state of being mediated between war and peace in which no guidelines exist. Endtime is the inhale of breath following the traumatic experience, the caesura before remedial lyric. It is the ghostly voices whose aim is to ". . . reinvent, reinvoke, recover revitalize reoperate recuse recycle redeem redeploy" (Waldman 102). It is the birthplace of poets:

And God's voice which is true human voice listening to itself. Tongue in a kiss. Union in Thanatos which is mind of Endtime. Poetry culture at standstill in its own mire fighting off the middle paths of astute mediocrity. But poets happy in the struggle too! And what will be relative in Endtime . . . Buried in order to live (103).

Norman O. Brown and others dismiss Freud's fixation on dualism, and perhaps even greater, his pessimism. If the roadway to poetry does not necessarily align with any vision of a pleasure-principle (which in itself might become redirected with suffering), then how might art be anything but child's play, the direct denial of reality? Man is a neurotic animal in Freudian theory, a creature constantly struggling to alter his own reality until it conforms to his own unique vision of pleasure, or "instinctual liberation" (Brown 58). For the estranged, the desolate, or those simply unable to function easily behind the bars of their societal prisons, Freud's death drive becomes a means of escaping normative societal roles, and, more significantly, choosing from the wide array of potential lifestyles — even if that choice *is* returning to the first. Self-language is the

answer, poetry the "phenomenon of freedom" that Bachelard¹⁵ champions (xxiii). I agree most with Brown when he claims that "The function of art is to form a subversive group, the opposite of that authoritarian group . . ." (63), and more beautifully articulated, "Art seduces us into the struggle against repression" (64). In this light, Thel's flight becomes less of a retreat and more of an epiphany, the opening of thousands of doors and the reaction of a mind suddenly "unhindered" by the straightjacket of faux-paradise, free at last to a plethora of possibility and potential.

"A dark flower for the Endtime, dear Thel, even with all horrors,
come back and try again" (105)

-Anne Waldman, *Voices of a Heart Yet to Be Born*

¹⁵ In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard posits, "The poetic image is a sudden salience on the surface of the psyche . . ." that exists outside of time and possesses its own unique ontology (xi).

Chapter Two: Unmetered Memory

*something with a melody
to follow the caesura —*

*a rhyme transcending unmetered memory
- "that don't rhyme"¹⁶*

The time comes when we must disown our individual Vales of Har. The footsteps beyond our childhood perimeters give way to the landscape of our own Thanatos-driven ruptures (or even raptures). I chose William Blake as an entryway into my writing not because he has been the dominant creative inspiration behind my work, but rather because the altered female figure of Thel aligns with the vision of transformation I uphold for my own poetic subjects and myself. When writing, I too seek the therapeutic command of finding new paths of being following personal apocalypse.

Thel has demanded, of Waldman, me, and probably countless others, that we concede to the power of self-destruction in order to commence rebirth. It is within this garden of possibility that immeasurable seeds of ironic life-altering Thanatos are planted and sewn into a kind of grave (or birth) plot for all of us — seeds that may sprout at any given time. The fruits of this harvest determine the subject's future. The aftermath is the moment of change, the poem. Thel's influential shriek has reverberated across ages; Waldman's echo of it is cosmic, cataclysmic. The quintessence of Second-wave feminism, Waldman encapsulates the control of the female as oracular, overarching fabric of the universe. Thel's public figure assumes the conventional male domain, reestablishing her as the androgynous redeemer, warrior sent to restore womanhood and

¹⁶ See page 63 of Chapter 3.

transcend it beyond its former confines. While the political undertones of Thel's journey appeal to Waldman and many others, it is Thel's flight back to the *home* that resonates with me most poignantly and invokes a separate vision of feminism — her decision to return to the same place, to her family and roots — and yet with a radically changed mind that allows growth beyond her co-inhabitants and origins even from within it. The spaces we occupy are sacred, and our genders, binaries, realms, and lives are forever intersecting, perpetually blending and crossing in the building of these spaces. Who is to say that one place is intrinsically male or female? My role as poet is neither to elevate woman from the domestic nor to confine her to a position in which man has attempted to imprison her for centuries. I hope instead to illustrate the home as the metaphorical site of psychological reinvention, as the place where ordinary rather than cataclysmic events force us to assume new roles, adapt to trauma, and modify our perceptions. While Waldman blossoms in feminist rule within public, global-scaled issues of patriarchy, war, migrant revolutions, minority activism, and more, I grow into my own private places to seize individual power following personal tragedy.

In Part I, "Alternate Memory," I focus on autobiographical pieces about events that inspired change in my own life, including but not limited to health concerns and my parents' car accident in 2017. I title this section "Alternate Memory" because I hope to showcase the power our minds have in shaping the traumas we have endured and their further effects on our lives. Next, in Part II, "Song in Shell — Woman to Woman," named for the gendered focus of the poems, I expand my focus to women in general and the specific "traumas" of my sex that ultimately allow for the powerful reclaiming of womanhood. In writing this, I do not wish to ignore the political aspect of the influential

female voices that have spoken before me. Nor do I wish to suggest that being a woman is inherently political or confined to the domestic. Rather, through seeking the subtler, psychoanalytic movement from passive to active, I aim to position the domestic, private, familial, or even ordinary space as potential catalyst for reinvention. Finally, in Part III, "Crossing Colors," I use these experiences in the first two sections as models for evaluating diverse human reactions to tragedy through fictionalized narratives, closing with the bestowal of power to the "she."¹⁷ Before turning to my poems in the following chapter, however, I feel compelled to explore the routes, the traumas, and the inspirations that have made these works possible.

My first vivid, unhindered moment returns to me as abruptly as it was born. I was still in elementary school at the time and my parents had recently purchased a new family van, a silver monster with sliding doors that made my classmates envious. My father, without my mother's knowledge, granted me the privilege to ride in the passenger seat for the first time during one of our early morning commutes. As he turned the corner of Downey Street in Radford, Virginia, next to the decaying ballet studio with the pink clay walls that was the dividing line between the university where he worked and my school, white morning light penetrated the glass fractals of the windshield. They splintered into a cathedral of golden arrows inside the car — thousands upon thousands of refulgent lines puncturing the space between us. It must be that adulthood feels eminent when one is in the passenger seat, for in the splintering of the light through glass, I saw childhood broken apart for the first time. Nothing, not even the great pillar of light that one moment

¹⁷ See page 82, "Synesthesia."

ago had seemed an appendage of the sun, is unbreakable. The shape of my father's face, divided by crossbeams of gold, was momentarily unrecognizable. He too, was dividable. My body, our bodies here together in this single space, could not, would not last.

In my own process of (re)self-discovery, I find myself exploring contemporary female writers like Elizabeth Bishop and Anne Carson who seem always to be in the process of self-revision. Bishop experiences the exact out-of-body revelation I recall in my father's van, particularly in poems like "In the Waiting Room" when the terrifying and grotesque photographs of volcanoes, dead men, and deformed babies in an issue of the *National Geographic* force her to reevaluate her own position to herself as an "Elizabeth" and furthermore as a human being (3). Carson's metaphor for this same concept of sudden identity-formation is the solar eclipse, which, by depriving the world of color, throws reality and familiarity into a state of chaos that forces people to assume a new kind of vision for themselves and others. Bishop calls this highly sensitive and fluid type of living "backwards" ("The Man-Moth"). Carson deems it "the sleep side" of life in her essay "Every Exit is an Entrance (A Praise of Sleep)" (23). These women inspire me to reach further and further backward into my own "sleep slide" and extract memories from the past in an attempt to track how these events have shaped my own position to myself, the world as a whole, and my role as an artist.

What I discovered in tracing the routes that have led me to my current path is a particular acuteness to the trauma and its sublime aftermath in my life. Immanuel Kant was of the first (following Longinus and Edmund Burke¹⁸) to clarify between the

¹⁸ See Longinus' *On the Sublime* and Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*.

contemporary definition of beautiful and the sublime, writing in *Critique of Judgment* (1790) that the beautiful "furthered" life, while the sublime produced a "feeling of momentary inhibition of the vital forces followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger" (Iversen1). Poetic figures who find transformation via trauma might further be defined by the Lacanian sense of *jouissance*, the painful, dynamic excess of pleasure that always contains an underlying layer of pain: "Similarly, *jouissance*, in this vein, is related to transgressive violations, the breaching of boundaries and breaking of barriers" (Johnston). Even Waldman pays a brief tribute to trauma — in her case, a hospital stay involving anesthesia and blood transfusions — as the sensations that first evoked her concept of Thel in *Voice's Daughter of a Heart Yet to Be Born* (111). Nevertheless, I do not desire to engage closely with trauma theory¹⁹ and its relationship to art, but wish to speak instead on how the sudden infiltration of disaster into ordinary routine and its aftermath have influenced *my* role as an artist and affected my personal view of the poetic subject.

Although not entirely reliant on disaster or even melancholy, my own transformations, like the unexpected eclipsing of the sun or the abrupt realization of the world's horrors, are often the consequence of personal trauma. Dwelling too long in a peaceful status quo and extended periods of comfort have a way of convincing us that we are indestructible, that we are not rapidly changing with each passing day and that the shelters we take peace in are not worth rebuilding. It is the sudden onslaught of disaster that shifts the spotlight on what matters most, that forces us to fortify our walls and

¹⁹ Numerous theorists beyond Freud debate trauma's role in both literature and visual artwork. Those interested in these theories as they relate to art should consult Jacques Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, and Georges Batailles' *Eroticism*, to name a few.

construct new homes from the leftover pieces, no matter how meager those pieces may be. This process of building, destruction, and rebuilding is, for me, the act of poetry.

Closest to my heart, "Dreamscapes of Influence" is a seven-part piece that I feel most effectively encapsulates the ambience of transformative trauma that I attempt to normalize and ground in realism. In January 2016, a nineteen-year-old college student at Virginia Tech, I regained consciousness on a hospital bed to my doctor's voice telling me that I had what is called an adenomatous colon polyp — that is, not cancerous, but potentially malignant or in the process of becoming so. After months of my mother's pleas, I at last gave in to her request to pursue answers for the symptoms I had been experiencing for the past few years. Confident in a positive diagnosis, I was half-certain that my doctor was joking and that the crystal-clear image of the large ruby-colored object seated directly onto my colon was not real. You either have cancer or you do not have cancer. The liminal space is neither comforting nor terrifying. In some ways, an adenomatous polyp is nothing but stored potential. The possibility of nothing or the prospect of something. And to receive such news is to be thrown immediately into limbo. My doctor burnt out the polyp immediately after discovering it so that it was ash before I ever knew that I had possessed it. Its phantom, the thought that it could return and bring more masses with it at any time, could not be so easily burnt away.

What happened following the procedure was a series of months in which my skin, my insides, my essence, my everything, no longer felt completely *mine*. I realized that something as personal to me as my own body contained thousands upon thousands of secrets that may be forever unknown to me, that have the power to radically reinvent or abolish my health at any time. And yet, this new perspective was not particularly magical

and certainly not outwardly life changing. I continued with my classes and pursued the same dreams I had chased pre-polyps. In fact, the only differences I experienced were internal and unknown to most everyone around me, as if I had secretly repositioned all the furniture inside my house and continued my daily routine despite the necessary accommodations.

And yet these new clandestine pathways around my shifted furniture became increasingly more exciting. With the dust of old places overturned and altered, I unlocked hidden corners and fragments that I had thought lost, in addition to exposing new spaces entirely. My body became suddenly sacred, endowed with unfamiliar energy, fear, and potential. I decided to honor this philosophical upheaval with a collection that merged past and present, while also blending concepts and influential phrases from contemporary poets (Jorie Graham, Rae Armantrout, Seamus Heaney, Robert Hass, and others) with my own thoughts and language. I chose watching movies as the framework to these poems partially as homage to Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, which I was reading at the time, and also because I felt movie watching was an ordinary activity that successfully exemplified the inner change I had undergone after the removal of my colon polyps. When viewing films, transformations are solely psychological. Yet, the impact they can have is permanent.

While the colon polyps altered my self-image and forced me to question the security of my own body's place in the world, the other major trauma I find my poetry drifting back to again and again raised similar questions of my relationship to others. On September 1, 2017, fresh into graduate school, I sat in my apartment waiting for my parents to arrive for their visit to Wake Forest in North Carolina. Anyone who has made

the trip trying to avoid interstates knows that several miles exist between Radford and Winston-Salem in which there is no cell phone signal, so my mind continuously reassured me that my parents were simply crossing that zone when neither of them answered any of my phone calls or texts. My sister suggested first that something might be wrong, but I maintained my belief that nothing could have become of my parents on a route we had made countless times in the summer while moving in. Around four o'clock, my mother finally answered one of my sister's calls to say there had been a wreck in Hillsville, Virginia, not far from Radford, and only recently have the police installed a flashing sign for other unfortunate drivers that might not see oncoming vehicles over the hill. For what must only have been a half of a day in real-time, no one knew whether or not my father had survived — my father who inspired me to be a poet. I felt myself reenter limbo.

The ambulance brought him to the nearest trauma center, which ironically happened to be in the Wake Forest Baptist Hospital, only a few miles from where I was currently living. I spent my time rushing from class to work to visits in the ICU every day as he recovered, and all the while I could feel the person inside my head readjusting furniture yet again, clearing off surfaces for new emotions I had not fully encountered or explored before. Outside the paneled windows that made up those long white hallways, old memories grew upward from the floorboards of my mind. Every little moment spent with my father, reading Housman and Wordsworth, returned to me, and I at last found the language to define the feeling I encountered in the van years earlier. Different kinds of interruptions in our routine expose and sensitize us. We are all more than just the furniture and objects inside our heads. We are the houses themselves, structures in a

constant state of rebuilding with people coming and going. The more time I spent visiting the hospital, the more I realized exactly how many times this feeling had come to me in the past. I saw that not all poems must rely on the excessively traumatic, or even individual suffering, in order to illustrate personal renovation. For this very reason, I include only two poems about the car accident in addition to poems like "Sun to the Blind" (51) to demonstrate how even something as commonplace as the sight of a dead bird can awaken a heightened sense of splendor within the beholder.

In searching for these ordinary moments that propel us to act differently than we normally would, I find myself at times departing further from my own life and into imagining the kinds of effects these slippages might have on more generalized subjects. The most natural choice of focus is women. I stated earlier that I do not believe a woman is fundamentally political, nor that a woman can be confined to a single mode of being. Additionally, I never wish to run the risk of employing gender essentialism in my poetry or suggest that woman is innately one way or another. Ultimately, no one body is fundamentally "female" if we are to depart from restrictive biological understandings of the word. As artists, I hope instead that we might all write from within our own experiences in order to expand established notions of gender. By writing from *my* perspective as a woman and exploring this perception through fictional subjects, I intend to not only investigate individual matters, but also to extend my personal relationship to femininity with others. I have found that my personal vision of womanhood is in itself rich and charged with the sudden breakages of normalcy from day-to-day life. As a result, I am most interested in the constant changes and adaptations of the female body by

menstrual cycles, pregnancies, miscarriages, and so on, although these occurrences are not comprehensive or even defining of what it means to be female.

I feel the most sensitive when navigating trauma in my "women poems" because I do not necessarily desire to linger excessively on misogyny or the negative stereotypes associated with women. These topics are already (and rightfully so) discussed heavily in contemporary poetry and I believe reserved for voices other than mine. In these more feminist-oriented poems, I approach the male relationship to these experiences (with the exception perhaps of "Love" (70) and "Pray You, Love, Remember" (62)) only insofar as to illustrate the sacred connection of woman to her own body or selfhood. I also strive to reclaim the traditional "male" styles of poetry as potential emergent feminist locations. How might these conventional ideas associated with femininity, particularly the changing body, might be used to drive woman to a higher state of power and allow her an intimate connection to herself and nature rather than reduce her *only* to the body? Throughout my own life I have experienced vastly different emotions in regard to my experience as a woman, from disgust and horror to appreciation and awe. I wonder what it means for my fellow sisters to awake wet in their own blood or to lose their children, how physicality similarly alters us epistemologically or philosophically. These are the kinds of questions I hope to raise in poems like "Chickadee" (71), "Pray You, Love, Remember — " (62), and "The Shattering" (64) when I pay homage to *Hamlet's* Ophelia by investigating the private moments in the bedroom and body, or analyze the image of a bird within a magnolia leaf that recalls motherhood.

The disparate reactions to trauma that constitute humanity fascinate me. By focusing so intensely on the trauma in my own life and expanding it to incorporate other

women, I feel that my ultimate goal as an artist is to fine-tune the empathy I feel that we require as both creators and humans. The more that we study how certain events have shaped our own lives (such as my renewed appreciation of the times spent reading poetry with my father in high school following the car accident), we are able to analyze how others might react in the same or different situations as well. I told myself in the days of my father's recovery that all would be all right if he would be all right, and I struggle to imagine the poem that might exist had he not recovered as miraculously as he did. Therefore, my final division of poems abandons my life and the female experience as the sole inspirations, expanding outward to lyrical narratives around fictional subjects who come from different backgrounds with new stories to share. For these kinds of poems, I envision the various types of relationships among people and the dissimilar conflicts that might arise within those relationships.

By inventing a story from an imaginary perspective, I conceptualize what different transformations might look like for diverse people within domestic scenarios and ordinary struggles. For some — trauma does not necessarily guarantee any form of transcendent thought. Crafting a character from scratch is an entirely new way of evaluating trauma as transformative because it allows for situations in which trauma also ultimately *fails* as the catalyst for change. I distinctly recall a seminar once in which, while reading Lore Segal's *Her First American*, the class quickly divided over when to draw the line between trauma in literature as an ironic route to recovery and trauma as unfairly romanticized.²⁰ Although I cannot fairly or accurately represent a culture or

²⁰ In *Her First American*, Segal's Ilka Weisnixx, influenced heavily by Segal herself, navigates her life as a Jewish immigrant in the United States post World War II, falling in love with an African American man and oddly dodging, if not fully effacing, her own

lifestyle completely different from my own, I usually base these kinds of poems on a single moment and mediate on the different types of reactions that these scenarios might evoke. Although I might envision a specific type of character when writing, I generally do not disclose much information on the subject's backstory, relying instead on the interruption from normality and the kind of response it inspires — or, as noted above, the failure to welcome change. In "Third Party" (77), for example, the speaker's connection to the farmhand Ramona remains private and yet the speaker's disdain for Ramona's horse Champion, viewed as the infiltrator of their private relationship, becomes the site of bitterness and ultimately rejection. In "The Old Romance" (73), a young woman's desire to prove her body's power through the domination of her sister's boyfriend ultimately proves nothing more than fantasy.

Although I did not possess the language to name the combined fear and love that struck me in my father's van at the time, I know now that I recall departing, at least marginally, from my old, simplistic self in that moment and embarking onto a new trajectory of multidimensional thought and being that continues growing to this day. This initial step of my journey, I like to think, however, expanded beyond the mere move from childhood to adulthood, becoming rather the transition from singularity to multiplicity that allows for thoughts outside the individual comfort zone. It is not always the poet's duty to decide what constitutes normative versus atypical living, but rather to unpack the ways we as humans respond to situations that disrupt our personal structures and force us to renovate. I therefore find it fitting that this mundane, quiet occurrence in the car should

Jewish culture at times. Ilka's lover Carter Bayoux is inspired by American sociologist Horace R. Cayton Jr., who confirmed when speaking of his affair with Segal in his autobiography *Long Old Road* her habit of evading direct mentions of the Holocaust.

serve as the introduction to my creative processes because these subtle themes embody the kind of understated transformations I champion.

Chapter Three: Dreamscapes of Influence

Part I: Alternate Memory

DREAMSCAPES OF INFLUENCE

I

Elizabeth Bishop, "The Man-Moth"

Today's stomach ache reminds you of a time in high school when you went to the movies with your friends and the film wouldn't start on time, so the theatre workers played the Righteous Brothers for thirty minutes instead. Someone yelled at your friend for talking on her phone and you thought it was funny because there was no movie to interrupt. Only a gray screen and "Unchained Melody" over and over again. Keep waiting, keep waiting — for the movie, for your friends. Later you'd say, "it's okay" when they asked you in the theatre, in the hospital. "I feel good about this." And you *do* feel good about the movie, whatever movie it is. You don't start feeling sick until the voices break and the first scene appears suddenly, violently. It is the same burn you carry in your stomach after they scorch out the masses and tell you we'll have to do this again every two years. "Okay," you say. "I'm okay."

You don't remember the movie, but you remember when the Brothers crooned "I neeeeeed your love" and the notes stretched all the way to the ceiling. You remember how you sat waiting for previews before the sad music could start, but the music came first. What do you do when the music comes first? You let them undress you and touch you so you can shake their hands a few minutes later and pretend they haven't seen any part of your body. So you can look into their gray-screen faces and say "thank you" while they shut off the music and pull the movie in front of your eyes so fast that you don't have time to adjust. You learn to want the song over the movie, the screen over the story,

the lamentation before the onslaught of colors. The waiting over the knowing. They tell you to wear your gown backwards until you forget how to tie it the right way and you can't remember if it is your gown or you that is backward. You sit in the dark theatre with your friends while workers above you scramble to fix the broken celluloid, and you can't help but feel a little sad when they find what's wrong and the music ends.

II

Robert Hass, "Novella"

On the way back from the doctor's office, my mother and I have to pull over and wait for the rain to pass. It is the day before my twentieth birthday and mist rolls onto the window like the fog I remember from my first (and only) drive-in movie. My mother and I order ice cream and watch as white vanilla teardrops run down our hands, rain on the windshield. We have ordered ice cream together for a long time, for almost twenty years. Today our umbrella is broken and everything inside the car is wet. Our faces. Our hair. The drive-in movie wasn't wet, but it was cold like this, like ice cream. My best friend (no longer a friend at all) and I sat on the hood of her car while the movie crackled so far off in the distance that we could hardly see. By the time it was over, my feet had turned blue and were so numb that I couldn't walk. I was scared. Real fear. I imagined hobbling into the hospital with black toes and the doctors saying there was nothing they could do. We'll have to amputate. But my friend laughed and thought I was joking. Even now my feet stay cold all the time, no matter the season or dress. Even now as I sit in the car with my mother. And it *is* funny because my cold feet are all I have left of that moment. Every now and then I remember how I felt sitting on the hood of my friend's car while I pretended to laugh. The two of us were on the upward slope of a hill and the air was

almost white with cold. We never fought. We simply fell into a silence that never ended until the space between us became impossible to fill. I wish I couldn't remember the movie because I don't know how to remember it. And yet still sometimes it comes creeping back into my atmosphere and then gathers into black clouds that rain heavily onto my head until I must pull over and wait for them to pass.

III

Jorie Graham, "Fission" and Anne Carson, "Ode to Sleep"

I was watching a movie when my uncle died. His was the first death in the family I remember, and I think about him today even though I never knew him. Tower bells ringing outside remind me of the movie. It was about Christmas. My sister and I were in our pajamas when our mother told us he was dead. Sick from something. Who knows what. Heart attack. Stroke. When I think of my uncle, I think of the happy farm animals in the movie that granted an ill boy his holiday wish. My uncle becomes the movie and the movie becomes his illness. I think maybe this transmutation of being occurs when the "sleep side" invades your very being. Only a broken mirror world, only something you weren't meant to see awake, can turn a dead man into a movie or a movie into the bells singing across campus. And now somehow Christmas makes me both sad and happy and every movie reminds me of that first one, of when my mother came into the room with a letter in her hand and turned the TV off. The farm animals were in the middle of a song.

I have something to tell you. I have something to tell you.

That I remember this is my own little secret because I know no one knows I remember. Instead we all act as if my uncle was never real, and I always play along. It was so long ago that I now can imagine the scene just the same without me in it. I can see the news of his death creeping through the window into our house while we are asleep. We should have been asleep. We were only awake for the movie. My grandmother's favorite movie. She died in 2005. Emphysema. I remember. I remember the boy's Christmas wish. He wanted to be healthy, and at the end he *was* healthy and could sing like an angel.

IV

Rae Armantrout, "Birth Order" and Walker Percy *The Moviegoer*

The pain in your gut wakes you up again, and for a long time you have to marbleize your bones just so you can move in ten minutes when the alarm goes off. On these mornings, you are thankful you have the top bunk so your roommate doesn't have to watch you hold yourself as still as rigor mortis and wonder what is wrong with you. The day before the procedure, you couldn't stop throwing up and the day after you couldn't stop thinking about it. Books and TV become your way of returning to the old you because you can remember how you used to feel while you're reading and watching them. You think maybe Walker Percy had it wrong when he tried to destroy the everydayness of life because everydayness has not been a part of your every day for a long time. That old feeling of routine feels so abnormal now.

Later you give your presentation on Percy and everyone laughs where you want them to laugh. They clap and your stomach doesn't hurt anymore. Two healthy older women in the class tell you they loved your speech, that they have never heard of *The Moviegoer*

but will read it now. Then the taste of acid returns to your mouth and for a moment you have lost your “this,” have glanced into a theatre you never knew existed and don’t know how to enter. A movie is playing that you have never seen, have never been a part of. In that second, your sentence starts with a different word, a different “this.” You spend the rest of the day erasing and erasing but the mark is always there; the imprint of the theatre on your eyelids remains.

V

Seamus Heaney, “Punishment” and a snippet from T.S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

Not a big audience here. Cold room. Hard chair. In half an hour I’ll lose my concentration. Back will hurt. Wait and see. Two people on the left and one behind. Our mere existences distract me. I always have a hard time leaving my world and entering another. Someone I know once said watching movies is like becoming a snake and shedding your skin to make room for the new one. Lights cut off. Music starts. The bolts in my chair are deafening. Every turn of my legs disturbs the universe. We slump in our seats, each of us struggling not to trouble another. Fifteen minutes in and someone whispers “sorry.” Last apology I hear. Last real voice.

Big scene now. An astonishing, sacrificial move and villain pulls hero to safety. They lie gasping together. Raining. Villain lowers his head and weeps over what he has lost. He dies. Light returns. An awkward moment and we all turn to one another, wide-eyed, guilty, and removed. Not quite ready to admit how much we have enjoyed watching a man die. I see his death still in their eyes. Seamus Heaney calls us “artful voyeurs.”

Movies are a non-soldier's only warzone. Our only way of entering the trenches. Don't feel bad. None of it's real. Outside feels real. When I see no clouds. When I feel my back hurt.

Leaving now. Old skin coming back to me. Everything eventually comes back. Three people walk ahead. Two behind. I feel the "stones of silence" drop from our pockets as we go. A heavy sound follows. Again and again. I pray. Please, nobody say a word.

VI

Anne Carson, *Deceit* and Sappho, "Fragment 31"

When my roommate says we're watching a movie tonight, we watch a movie tonight. Usually comedies with good-looking men. They always sing and dance and they always get the girl. Tonight we watch one about a rich woman who moves to a foreign country after becoming disillusioned with her old life. There she meets him — the handsome man, and they fall in love and the movie ends with singing and dancing. My roommate wants a singing, dancing ending. She worries she'll never fall in love. That movie men will never want her. I know she's wrong, that she will, and that they have. I can't stop thinking about the rich woman who gives up her career for love and a different country. In the dark of our dorm room, her new world makes up only the twelve inches of my roommate's computer screen. I imagine her two houses are really next door to one another, maybe just pixels programmed into green screens. I know the romance is false. I never know about the disillusionment, the sickness that drives them away.

My roommate waits until we are in bed to ask how I am feeling. I have the top bunk and conversations like these work better when we can't see each other. I don't know how to organize my expression when she asks. Last time she cried. The moment still feels more like a movie to me. Right now evening light paints the ceiling in green hues. The woman in the movie lived in a cottage covered in greenery. Green is a sick color. The gravity of the question and the cottage interfere and overwhelm one another — realities come together. For a moment I imagine my roommate and I in a different country, in a room like this one. She is singing and dancing. Maybe crying. The world is the same everywhere. But in this timeline we can meet gazes when she asks how I am feeling. Sappho's poem comes to me. "Greener than grass," I want to say. But if I say that here, in our little room, in *our* country, she will turn in her bed and fall silent. The "possibility of never-having-been-seen" does not make it to the big screen. The ones who stay behind lose their spotlight. They fade into the audience.

She and I are not actors; we have one part to play. I must change mine. Really, don't cry. I feel good. It's one of the best things that ever happened to me.

SEPTEMBER

I could not help but close *King Lear* halfway —
halfway to the moment when Lear might lose himself
and I might lose my father
in an alternate memory of last September
had he not emerged from the busted metal,
breathing.

Goneril, Regan, beasts.

Lear, a beast for misunderstanding . . .

Cordelia, misunderstood,
missing her father.

I stood over the bedroom window ten minutes after I asked if he was okay
and my mother answered, "I don't know."

Nothing will be okay without him, I thought.

And all will be well if he will be well.

Nothing would be okay —

"Nothing," answers Cordelia when asked to defend her love.

Nothing to replace my father,

Nothing to change the facts of the wreck.

Trapped against the window,
my sister, no Goneril, no Regan,
could not breathe.

And when he finally answered the phone,
I thought to myself how precious his voice sounds,
how unlike what I thought I remembered.
Lear emerging from the weeds, dirty,
no longer a king,
but alive still.

My father asked, "What happened?"

I wanted to say,
"Nothing."

PRAYING

Eating a cheeseburger in the hospital at eleven AM is how I spend my Sunday morning.

I sit in a windowed hallway of sunlight
that stretches farther than I can see,
far back to a memory of another time
when I sat in the afternoon radiance with my father
reading poetry.

I miss that light —
how it blazed golden instead of the lonely
white glow of the present.

I miss Housman's "Terence, this is stupid stuff,"
which my father read to me during high school with such passion,
such power.

Somewhere in the trauma ward,
a heart monitor plays in rhythm to the poetry of my past,
to my father's voice.

The cheeseburger tastes like nothing in my mouth.

SUN TO THE BLIND

We are walking back from dinner

when I see the dead bird

something you might pull from the bathtub drain

— smaller than three fingers, his skin darker than oil,

and bent backwards like the paperclips

I mangled as a child.

The tiny twisted throat is the only pink on him,

like a little swell of tongue inside

a black racer snake.

Only this shrunken body has lost all slither.

He bears no feathers and his one eye,

turned to the sun,

has withdrawn inside his head.

I like to think his little locked lid

caught a single light beam

in his brief moment of existence,

that some kind of invisible shine or warmth

drove him from his nest

to die here like this, warm and naked and free.

THE LEASH

Excuse me,

I am not part of your prayer —

but when I saw the old leather leash

empty

in your hand,

I entered an intimate dark space alongside you.

I am here to pick up the cats and dog after vacation,

you here to say goodbye.

I said goodbye here too, years ago,

to the guard dog of my childhood,

the one I rode around the dining table.

And another one before that.

Your wife exits the white room first,

her makeup impeccable, heels sharp.

She stifles a whimper into her palm.

And then you follow with the faded red leash,

the fabric stretched and pulled.

Some fine animal must have strained hard once,

loved harder.

I watch the two of you link hands outside the window.

You leave this place maybe forever,

maybe not.

The shadow of a few minutes ago hangs by your side.

How sad that the sight of that old leash

stirs up in me images of my own great losses,

the nonhuman saviors —

my own personal religion.

AGORAPHOBIA

I am a squatter in my own body,
the North Star fixed in place.
Limb to limb,
points set.

Lately I find my heroes in cesspools.
Multifaceted traders, poly-limbed.
When the hermit crab seeks better proportions,
he aborts himself of shell.
His own shape remains obscure.

The human lifespan drags on —
one set of skin is never enough.

Seashells settle, sand and scum;
new neighbors move in
and I want to give my body away too.

In the morning things will be the same as always
until they aren't.
Your hair will turn gray

and I will brush mine with your pearly comb until you stop calling me
Temple. The house is no longer beautiful.

BIOCENTRISM

Last night I thought that I should buy a telescope.

Without glasses I had never noticed that the half-moon's shaded edge

isn't smooth like sliced butter,

that it's more like one of those broken seashells your fingertips wish

you hadn't picked up.

I should buy a telescope, I thought,

or at least write a poem.

For the first time I felt like a mother,

A mother who has not seen her child until he comes home

changed — her invention rendered unfamiliar, and thus she changes too.

The moon too is predicated on my plasma

if I am a divine architect.

And each word I birth is like spider legs unfurling;

bodies orbit mother.

Star maps evolve with each heart pulse,

a supernova launches

and rock, bird, bumblebee

crawl down my shoulders in moon-jagged trajectories.

Two summer dwellers besieged by fireflies,
back to back, you and I — the shape of beginnings.
Our fingertips wombs.

If we determine life
then I am three quarters everything
and you really are the center of the universe.

THE ARCHITECT

Every day this week I find a ruthless spider on the underside of my sunflower.

She clings to the leaves in a silver-threaded dome of eggs

that seem to multiply hour by hour until I am taking on an army of her DNA.

Her shining shelters hang off leaves like lead raindrops —

new hideouts that she and her descendants take refuge in day after day.

I have saved this particular sunflower too many times already.

First from a groundhog who guzzled it,

second from a torturous heat wave

and now from the spider.

I must defeat the spider.

When a week of rain smothers us at last

I am overwhelmed to find her still living there,

her eight legs still swaddling up her babies, one after the other,

the small gray body grayer now,

swollen with surely the last of her line.

Each time I attack her with the same stick.

How thankful she must be for my poor aim

and her own excellent reflexes.

Today she hunkers down as usual,
preparing for the inevitable hurtle
that will only delay her work.

The daylight's last rays catch her web
and I see golden lines stretched from my sunflower to the front porch,
from my old play set to the dying tree my father planted so long ago —
a glittering, gossamer world of endless highways
and rest stops, of bent dragonfly wings and newborn spiders.

The sunflower is her center,
a blooming golden compass to lead her children home
long after she has borne her last batch.
She braces her long legs onto her final egg sac as the stick comes down.

Old, weary, architect mother —

What am I doing? What am I doing?

Part II: Song in Shell — Woman to Woman

CLEARING HISTORY

Before he published her diary

Otto Frank censored the elements of his daughter's prose deemed too humdrum
for apocalyptic Europe:

her remarks on his scatological humor, condemnation of a friend's invalid husband,
casual interest in the blooming stains on her panties —
all this, effaced to make room for chambers, typhus, mass graves.

A living-dead girl's black eyes rendered in pixels, smoothed into black and white ink
(a flyaway hair edited invisible in color) . . .

I've never withstood her gaze for more than a few moments.

Each time my mind approaches her, petite and pale in her small black dress,
off my thoughts skulk in opposite lines, little shameful things.

Can't look. Can't really ever look.

Chambers, typhus, mass graves.

But this morning, at the cramp by my thigh, I thought of Anne.

I searched her name, saw her for the first time on the phone screen as I opened the dryer,
felt good enough to say hello.

Before we diverged, this one moment we touched together,
before I deleted her from my search engine.

History cleared, option: all time.

*In honor of Ophelia*²¹

PRAY YOU, LOVE, REMEMBER —

Woman. The broken knob on the washing machine, the *wrrr-wrrr-wrrr* when it won't open and the clothes are locked inside, her period coming too early, having a period, her period not coming at all, three missed phone-calls, phone calls giving her anxiety, anxiety giving her anxiety, bad dreams, no dreams at all, cramps, hard to fall asleep, harder to wake up, cramps, bed sheets stained with that damn period blood, the washing machine breaks, she sleeps wet tonight —

or

*the cold, hard smell of funeral, overturned earth, maggots microwave spaghetti
under her shoes, people she never knew loving her suddenly, passionately
his voice saying nothing,
a fine thought to lie between woman's legs*

back to the broken knob, turning it until it works, the comforting *wrr-wrr-wrr*, beautiful bloody bed sheets, dark like a newborn, she sleeps wet tonight.

²¹ Ophelia, *Hamlet*, as she gives out flowers shortly before her death (4.5.176). Further down, Hamlet's response to Ophelia when she says that she thinks "nothing" in response to Hamlet's sexual advances: "That's a fair thought to lie between a maid's legs" (3.2.126).

THAT DON'T RHYME

he told her the night after he dismantled the crib

when he stashed the toys into the closet

and folded the booties

under the nightgown she had worn to the ER

he found her curled like a shrimp next to the baby monitor

that for a month now had recorded only silence

still every night she spoke lullabies to the empty wavelengths

and he wished her song into something classical

something with a melody

to follow the caesura —

a rhyme transcending unmetered memory

THE SHATTERING

Pretty girl looks into herself
and sees the glass crystal,
all violent angles and hard lines.

A little voice whispers
— it whispers every day —
protect the crystal, pretty girl,
always protect your crystal
and polish all those straight-edged corners.

Pretty girl cuts into herself
and heats up the glass crystal with her palm
until it's warm as jelly,
wet as afterbirth.

A thing with tentacles lives inside the crystal.
It climbs through shattered prism after prism,
beast out of hell.

Pretty girl feels those hot suction cups
touch her insides for the first time.
They suck something into her,

out of her.

A little voice dies.

Better than angles,

sweeter than beauty.

ON A DREAM

CVS has run out of lipstick

and I don't know what else to get you for Christmas.

There's a purple and gold one you would have liked —

it's called Raspberry Sundae.

The sign says *good for crying*

and you've been crying a lot lately.

But I missed my chance

and the shelves are empty now.

I am sorry for your tears,

which might have felt more beautiful

had they drizzled in

purple and gold.

TO THE TIGRESS

To my cat, Baby

you are bigger than the world that owns you.

each stripe on you is a stripe

lowering the number on mother Earth.

prideless, but you are proud —

half-blind, nearly voiceless,

you release your war cry.

you spill blood half your age.

i see you in the morning

when the sun whitens the sky,

reflecting the red of your slashed foot.

i wait for you to come limping home.

i wait to see your dark hips roll

toward me again,

slow and powerful.

you would have been a good mother.

UKHTI²²

to my sister in all but blood

may nothing but the sea ever separate us

i used to watch her from across the playground, the way the sun colored her skin amber

she said no so they asked her if she was black and she said no

i used to watch her from across the playground, the way the sun colored her skin amber
and pinned jewels of gold through her hair that shone brighter than a pharaoh's tomb

she taught me to draw Arabic letters in the dust with a stick

she told me your words are different than mine, yours words dance light like wind

mine fall heavy like limestone

yet long after her mother removed her hijab and she stopped sharing her pretty words,

i would find her in the hallways after class with tears in her eyes

eyes as green as a lotus leaf

and she would say

Egypt is dying

i always cry for Egypt

²² Arabic for *sister*.

SYRUP DREAMS

She used to dream about lips on a shadowed thigh,
magnolia leaves on breasts.

She woke each night with burning taste buds;
her chest lingered concave, blood ran for no one
and the memory was all syrup,
melted flower petals.

That empty bedroom was torture —
she would have gone with anybody.

LOVE

When he told her she was a work of art,
he did not mean that she was "a work of art."

What he meant to say was you remind me of a time when I was seven years old and my mother took me to a museum in the city Dad wasn't gone yet and Mom still smiled and all was okay on that day I saw a painting of a mermaid playing on the shore her womans torso on the sand and her amethyst scales underwater as the sun struck her in brilliant golden lines she was more fluid and alive to me than my own body in that moment the painting and my mother and my youth together sculpted within me a collage of splendid color and now you too have evoked my mind's rainbow

He called her a work of art.

She called him a pig —

CHICKADEE

This afternoon I spotted a chickadee within a magnolia leaf,
her small body curved inside the green gondola
— fetus to mother.

I thought how much she resembled a banana's innards
and how delightful it would be to unpeel that waxy thickness
and behold her hidden, singing form.

Then I thought how you will probably say this is phallic,
and so I keep my vision to myself, for other minds,
maybe.

Nothing phallic here,
bird on leaf
song in shell
woman to woman.

Part III: Crossing Colors

THE OLD ROMANCE

Mornings were pleasant torture under her mother's wilted sycamore tree,
watching the dark boy against her sister's moon-colored arms.

From this place, at this angle,
she could peer between the lines of her sister's torn curtain,
divided like the shades of a palanquin,
and catch sinful glimpses of her elegant shape bending,
yielding to him.

He was a jovial type of man;
he called her "sister" in passing — the word was a snakebite in her eardrum.
"Sister" is friendly, familiar. The sycamore was something royal out of old books.
She liked to imagine at times that he spotted her through the window . . .
and once or twice she considered feigning sleep here, nude,
where he might see her.
She would be Artemis then,
and she ravished the idea of setting dogs upon him
or banishing him to the stars.

Had she been a pharaoh, Cleopatra,
something memorable,
she might have bound his wrists together and beaten him to a golden floor.

She could imagine him so well with her heel between his shoulder blades,
if she had been born a different type of woman.

Countries might have disbanded over their union;
she could have pinned him with enough of herself, she thought,
that even great Aries would blush.

But then there was her obedient sister — the soft American face,
a needle stabbed into the pincushion of the present.

It wasn't so much the old-fashioned woman's need to spurn him or hurt her sister,
or what you might have thought.

But rather to see her everlasting footprint on his skin,
to prove her body, too, was timeless.

OLD COUPLE

Three cards left on the dinner table,
someone winning. I see straw in your hair the next evening,
Wildwood Park at twilight, glimpses of mirror water between tree limbs,
my hand reaching. No one removes the straw.

Seven or eight years into it and we're still the same,
your body changing faster than mine,
and then mine changing too. Shapeshifters at the seaside
until we stop growing, the old molds never forgotten.

You, laughing at everything I say.

Me, saying nothing. Laughter continues.

We lie down to the sound of the ocean inside conch shells,
and peace falls like the white dove
we always joked about.

We drift asleep to the sound of each other's breathing,
completely useless to each other
in every way but this.

UFOs

Remember how yellow globes of light once hung above the sea like motionless parasails and we sat on the condo balcony past midnight, wondering what they were while the water frothed white against the sand? Remember how you leaned against the balcony rail and joked that we were looking at UFOs, spaceships packed full of aliens from faraway worlds? I was arrogant then and had no time for UFOs, no room in thought for jokes. Summer was almost over and so was our time together. For days we had wandered side-by-side along the shore as I watched your gaze drift out to sea. Somewhere along the way, we stopped holding hands. You stopped telling jokes.

So when I saw you laughing over UFOs, I got angry. I told you to stop. I told you that the lights were airplanes.

And although we will never return to that balcony together and we will never see those lights again, I remember the look on your face when you saw them — your smile. A smile reserved for a realm beyond our own, at the possibility of life beyond ours. How strange it is to think this moment should divide us.

My anger recedes as small as the sea
the infinitesimal sea,
rising to the expanse of what might just be imaginary
or might just be.

THIRD PARTY

Each morning before the rooster crowed,

Ramona rose to see him.

He was a russet stallion, colored like tribal boots,
a phantom stripe down his snout.

Ramona knew the names of everything.

The pastern and the coronet, the cannon beneath his knee.

I used to eat orange slices in the stable and watch her
scrape green slime from his hooves. Our neighbors called him Champion.

She wasted her life on the great hill beyond our window,
the black shape of her body on his.

When that massive beast went down on Christmas,
Ramona worked for hours on warm hay,
coaxing sugar onto his tongue, wiping snot from his nostrils.

And I stood with my hands tucked away, snow leaking through
the hole in my left mitten.

I wished that the horse would die,
that Ramona would come into bed and stay
at least for the holiday.

I sucked oranges until my tongue was hot, my fingers numb,
while Champion lay heaving,
one misted eye angled toward mine.

HOLDING ON

We had gone out to the lake many times before,
the three of us, late into July evenings
when the sky was sticky and the wind smelled like fireworks.
Richie would sing "On Moonlight Bay" from the tire swing near the shallow end,
turning sticks we broke off birches through iridescent circles in the slime,
his fingers dancing like a diviner's.
Swan-like Lucille glided beneath the surface to the rhythm of his voice,
and Richie was in love with her;
I, in love with everything.

Lucille was the first to leave us when she met a boy twice her age,
ten or fifteen years ago. I never saw her again,
never heard her voice except for that final phone call:
"You have to learn to let things go."
Richie let go the year after, the cause still a mystery to me,
my condolences in the form of a Walmart card to his mother.

And I think now he must have *been* some kind of diviner,
to disappear so suddenly and leave goldfinches on the tire swing in his wake.
Some kind of soothsayer to sing, "*you have stolen her heart,*
Now don't go away" in his breaking voice

on the last hour we spent together, not knowing it was the last.

Divine intervention to —

No —

Not Richie or Lucille or even the ageless revolutions of the swing
turning in the dark. Not any of it producing magic.

But all of it together.

Wind pushing fireflies onto water,

moving the rope we used to pull one another up from the deep end.

The way we fought over whether it was the Big or Little Dipper visible through trees
and imagined the methods of murder our parents would use for breaking curfew.

It was the line of light against Lucille's arm when she dove underwater

or mosquitos making my skin crawl and none of us having the heart to kill them
because here all felt sacred.

All of it together, our three heads disappearing and resurfacing into the lake

disappearing and resurfacing,

until time to go home.

All of it together,

Lucille's out-of-place adult voice telling me to let go,

and both of their memories mingled in the shape of three children on a tire swing,

begging me to hold on tighter.

NIGHT VISION

Alone on a green park bench hidden by trees, you look up at the moon.

You see a face there — a woman's — young — the craters un-crater themselves and become her eyes — dark and deep set in her head as if she has spent the night writing poetry — a weary smile — the white peaks — the dust — every surface collapses into her — her bright cheeks — her lost look when she finds herself alone in the sky — you watch the moon undo itself — an eruption — folded white wings unfold and rise from the fracture — an angel in the sky — she is the universe — swallowing up the stars — consuming space — a reversal of the Big-Bang — this mystical temptress — and you — enraptured — victim beneath her beam —

Up rises a bird from the branches with an un-poetic cry. A vulture.

The vision is lost.

You look up again —

Only the moon, the dusty, dead, fabled

beautiful living moon.

SYNESTHESIA

She wanted him

because his eyes were the color of her childhood bedroom,
and she remembered her mother's paintbrush caressing the walls,
doves on water.

The soft tone to his hair was sweetest in morning lights,
blended into a gentle medley of cloud shades.

"My indigo love," "my pale blue darling," she called him.

She was the one to propose marriage.

It was a Thursday night past ten (the stars struck silver that hour, she thought).

She wanted a private holiday and agreed to exchange vows by the water in autumn.

But when she saw him on the awaited evening,

his gray silhouette tainted the red sky — hues of a bad breakup.

He was massive in her vision, a violent shape.

Blood sun flickered on his body's curves,

erratic, bat wings.

The colors are all wrong, thought she.

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Vita

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