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**Sister, Mother, Lover: Erotics of absence
and the physical language of “Yours Now”**

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DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

**Sestra, matka, milenka: Erotika nepřítomnosti
a fyzický jazyk "Yours Now"**

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Declaration

I declare that I have prepared my Bachelor's Thesis/Master's Thesis, Dissertation independently on the following topic:

Sister, Mother, Lover: Erotics of absence and the physical language of "Yours Now"

under the expert guidance of my thesis advisor and with the use of the cited literature and sources.

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Abstract

Through reflecting on and contextualizing the process of creating “Yours Now”, my final work on MA DOT, this thesis decodes the physical language of the performance and expands on its literary and aesthetic references. By conducting a close reading of the two versions of the solo performance, the thesis considers how the eroticism of grief is comparable to how desire works in a staged encounter and how this dynamic is expressed through the choreography of the piece as well as its relationship to the audience. Looking at strategies of artifice and remove, as well as methods of narrative fragmentation and nonlinear temporality, I develop a movement language that translates between text, speech and the body through an engagement with the absent and invisible. Doubt, unease and distrust are identified as generative states for a consideration of more general questions concerning theatrical time, queer time, visibility and truth, and the position of a performer on stage.

Abstrakt

Prostřednictvím reflexe a kontextualizace procesu tvorby "Yours Now", mé závěrečné práce na MA DOT, tato práce dekóduje fyzický jazyk představení a rozšiřuje jeho literární a estetické odkazy. Na základě podrobného čtení dvou verzí sólového představení se práce zamýšlí nad tím, jak je erotika truchlení srovnatelná s tím, jak funguje touha v inscenovaném setkání, a jak je tato dynamika vyjádřena choreografií díla i jeho vztahem k publiku. Při pohledu na strategie umělosti a odstranění, stejně jako na metody narativní fragmentace a nelineární časovosti, rozvíjím pohybový jazyk, který je překladem mezi textem, řečí a tělem prostřednictvím zapojení nepřítomného a neviditelného. Pochybnosti, znepokojení a nedůvěra jsou identifikovány jako generativní stavy pro úvahy o obecnějších otázkách týkajících se divadelního času, queer času, viditelnosti a pravdy a postavení performerera na jevišti.

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Introduction

*Like in your head? Our father pleads.
No, she mouths. Like I'm speaking
to you now.*

Darius Atefat-Peckham: *to touch a ghost*

Yours Now is my final work on the MA Directing of Devised and Object Theatre at DAMU, Prague. It is a solo performance for an audience of up to 12 people. Through a movement score and a script that mesh personal memories with fragments of novels and poems, the performer tells a story of grieving someone's death while simultaneously imagining diverging alternative pasts for that person.

Imagine a child who has woken up in what feels like the middle of the night (although it's probably only 9 pm). She climbs out of bed and starts cautiously creeping down the dark staircase toward the kitchen, where the lights are on, taking one step at a time (her legs are short). Her parents are awake and in quiet conversation; there is the beeping sound of a microwave. The child doesn't want to be caught up past her bedtime, but she also wants to be acknowledged by her parents, who at night seem to have a whole other life without her. Conflicted, the child stands just shy of the door to the kitchen, hovering on the border between shadow and light, and waits to be noticed. When her mother ultimately sends her back upstairs with the directive to 'think of something happy', she'll feel both embarrassed and pleased.

I started working on *Yours Now* in October 2021, about a year after my paternal grandmother had passed away in October 2020. She died in Baltimore in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, which meant that I couldn't travel to see her. The experience

of grief at a distance, in more ways than one, lent itself to considerations of time, impossibility, and ownership over personal narrative. Thinking about my grandmother as a female figure in my family also made me decide to focus the work on difficult relationships between women, both in a familial and romantic/sexual context. As someone who has always looked to poetry for companionship first, and who processes feelings through the body, I built a devising process that revolved around assembling a script and developing a movement language, defining the relationship between text and the body. Throughout different showings of work-in-progress and in the final performances, I was also presented with questions about navigating a relationship to the audience that seemed characterized by refusal and broken promises.

This thesis aims to detail and contextualize the driving forces and guiding principles behind the process of creating *Yours Now*, the questions I had and the strategies I employed to answer them. The objective is to analyze how the performance was made and what informed it on literary, performative and aesthetic levels. How did I take on multiple storylines and make them converge in one body? *Yours Now* is a result of thinking through making performance from memory and/or how remembrance plays into performance; thinking about how we perform, seen in parallel with how we remember (or forget). To that end, it traces themes of authenticity, temporality (repetition and return), absence, theatricality and antitheatricality.

The performance exists in two versions: The first version was performed in May 2022 and the second version was performed in December 2022. In the May version, the framework of the performance is reduced to one performer, one empty apartment, a hidden speaker, a set of costumes, and a nail file hidden between floorboards. The main elements are text, movement, costume, and space. In the December version, the

main elements are text and movement. The score is based around a table and a chair, and the objects used are a water glass, a container of fake pearls, pink slippers, a red pantsuit, and a black and white photograph in A3 format. On a formal level, the key differences between the two versions lie in the format and the script. The May version was created specifically for an empty apartment in Prague 10, while the December version was performed at DAMU and uses an unspecified table and a chair as its main setting. The movement score of the May version makes the performer travel across the rooms of the apartment; the December choreography was reduced mainly to the hands and the face, extending to other parts of the body in some moments. While the text of the May version focused on parallel narratives of grandmother/lover, the script for the December version was shortened and rearranged into a fragmented story of sister/ mother/lover. The rehearsal period leading up to May dealt more explicitly with authenticity, with the question of performing in general, and on a narrative level with family history and appropriation. For the second version in December, I revisited the material in the weeks before the MA DOT Showcase. I was tasked both with adapting the performance to a new space and considering how to re-perform it on a more conceptual level. For this version, I dealt more in-depth with the physical layer of the performance, concretizing and crystallizing my approach to moving.

The language of the performance centers on the mouth (speaking) and the hands (touching); my proposal is that, in this piece, the mouth is *also* touching and the hands are *also* speaking. I chose to focus on language and the voice in addition to movement because much of the performance is made through literature and speaking words that aren't 'mine'. It's also about language moving through the body: through hollows and empty spaces, with the help of phantoms and forgetting. What I want to discover about authenticity and absences has something to do with the phenomena of performance

or theater itself: thinking about repetition and return, invocations of absent things and people. However, my thought process is not focused on the death drive so much as on the subversion of dominant modes of temporality, which performance as a medium is intimately suited to do because it works with time; we organize and structure time in the making of a performance and in the moment of performing. In thinking about authenticity and doubling, I'm thinking about narratives stolen or appropriated from other femmes in my lineage – who I learned femininity from or am supposed to model femininity for, and I'm thinking about the betrayal of these bonds. I think these relationships between women* are fitting as subject matter for a discussion of re-enactments and failing to repeat - since as Rebecca Schneider describes in *Performing Remains*, theatricality, the 'fake' and unoriginal are modes associated with femininity (and the never-natural status of homosexual desire in the 20th century, as described by Neil Bartlett in *Forgery*).

The thesis aims to consider different possibilities of relating to an audience and the ambiguous space between acting and performing, especially in the context of object theater which decenters emotionality and tropes of dramatic theater like grief and loss. The classic elements of a theatrical performance - text, time, body, and space - are considered in ways that point to the instability or unreliability of these elements and how the doubt I experienced working within and outside of these paradigms contributed to the shape of the performance. Overall, it is an exploration of what the act of retelling requires, and what can emerge in the attempt - traveling across the emotional landscape of the piece, including anger, insolence, sadness, irony, contempt, and wanting. In the following chapters, these themes are exemplified through a critical look at the stage situation (the audience and the setting), the vocabulary of actions (gestures and movements), aesthetic references and motifs in

the script as well as objects used, and finally, the theoretical underpinnings of the piece. The first two chapters focus primarily on the May version of the performance, the third and fourth chapter on the December version. Chapters 2-4 describe a movement from time to gesture to language as the main lenses through which to view the material of the performance. The role of the audience is primarily discussed in Chapters 1 and 4. The parts of the text that are colored gray are descriptions of the performance (Chapters 1-3) and excerpts from the script of the performance (Chapter 4), which should be read in conversation with the thoughts I develop around them. Finally, a last note on the logic of this thesis. I am analyzing the performance through a very close reading of the material. This mirrors how I worked on the performance itself: I approach big themes like death, heartbreak and sexuality through very small details and gestures. This approach extended to contextual works of performance, literature and film, but for the sake of the length and scope of the thesis, I only touch upon these briefly. The methodology of working through text makes sense for a performance that is made through intertextual authorship itself. Close reading and obsessing over details work for me as a dramaturgical approaches because I am curious about the subtle workings of the body and playing on the boundary of what is and isn't visible or verifiable as material.

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Chapter 1: Authenticity and Femininity

(*Yours Now, May*)

You enter a two-room apartment in Prague 10 that has been emptied of most of its furniture. You file into the apartment, try to get oriented, and ultimately find your place among other audience members at the kitchen counters. There is a woman in a white t-shirt and black jeans lying under the table with her back to you, seemingly sleeping. She's resting on top of a lavender colored leather jacket. You wait.

Slowly, the performer's feet start scratching at the legs of the table with small movements. It seems she's waking up.

When I started working on the performance, it was by putting myself in the situation of performing. I wanted to think about it from the simplest premise – what do I do, alone up here, when I don't know what to do? I was thinking about 'truthfulness' on stage and about what it takes to 'believe' a performer. Where does the performing self start to diverge from my self? What is interesting about being on that boundary?

The performer sits up and starts tracing underneath the surface of the table with her head, like an animal or a child. She peeks over the edge of the table, then retreats again. Then she emerges to sit on a chair, suddenly upright, and turns her gaze to the other chairs, empty. You hear a recording from behind a closed door: *I wrote it all down and now I don't like what I've written. This is my voice, but these are not my words. My mother leaks, and I catch it.* She establishes eye contact with the audience and smiles.

The performer crawls out from under the table and motions for the audience to follow into the living room, where she moves cushions and assigns seats while pulling pieces of costume out of the sofa. She changes into red pants and a red blazer. Once

everyone is seated, she surveys the group. Then, with a sudden movement, she slides under the sofa to retrieve a pair of fluffy pink slippers. Emerges again, rolls over onto her back, and says, *So, my grandmother was a liar.*

Thinking about make-believe, I started to think about my grandmother, a storyteller whose narratives I was very familiar with and yet had learned to mistrust - both as a natural result of becoming a more critical adult and as a conscious way of creating some distance from a persona that had dominated my childhood. She was someone who I wanted to shape myself after, whose affection and good grace I longed for - also because she represented a world, over there, that I was no longer a part of since my family had moved from the U.S. to Germany. It meant that I had to work to stay a part of her stories. When she passed, I could only think about how much of what I had built my longing around may not have been what I thought it was - I was angry at her while I grieved her loss, and it was complicated by the fact that I wasn't physically there to process the grief with the rest of my family. At this remove, I felt like all I had was fiction; but that this fiction was bound to be untrustworthy.

Possession

Steal big sister's presents.
Swallow pieces,
ride her bike, ride it far
into the grove.

Show her you've discovered
all her holy spots

and watch her try to find another,
deeper forest. Everything she's kept from you
is yours now: these frilly private things,
this tiny book of screams.

Steal your sister's bike
And ride it deep into the grove.
Tell her you found out about
all of her holy spots
And watch her try and find another,
deeper forest.
Everything she kept from you
Is yours now.

Martha Rhodes (1995)

after Martha Rhodes: *Possession* (1995)

I took the title of the performance - *Yours Now* - from the last line of this poem by Martha Rhodes, titled *Possession*. When I first started working with it, I would speak the poem as I remembered it, which was always slightly off. For the script, I changed its wording to my version. I kept thinking, this isn't mine. But it's mine now.

This is what I did throughout composing the piece: I took anecdotes from my grandmother's life and reinterpreted them into something else, an imagined rather than a real life. I took objects that were hers together with what could have been hers and presented them on the same plane of inquiry. Through these appropriations, I started to question what it meant to have or not have ownership and authorship of personal material, and to willfully re-interpret a real dynamic into an art object. I was looking at these few objects and memories from the skewed perspective of someone who is at home in them, my personality tied up with what they mean, and yet an outsider to a lot of it; either because events took place before my time, or because I was intentionally told a different version of them. These fragments of story and their reinterpretations were things that I took on almost like a child that is unaware of the consequences of listening in on someone else's conversation. Misbehaving, wearing a dead person's clothes, mocking, lying, sleeping under the table, possessiveness, wanting, withholding, the self-indulgence of listening to the same words over and over - there was a childish joy in make-believe, saying something and pretending it's true.

And there is one lie she told that, for some reason, annoys me more than any other. And it's this story she tells about how the best day of her life was on a picnic in seventh grade. It was a sunny summer day, her whole class went, and they had to cross the train tracks to get to the field - and she says that was the best day of her life. And I just don't think that's true.

One of my starting points was in researching mourning performances: As Guy Cools describes in his book *Performing Mourning: Laments in Contemporary Art*, traditional laments use a “codified, socially understood language”¹ to transform the state of grief “from a static to a fluid one”² and allow the individual mourner to re-enter society. Mourning means to make grief public, witnessed – it is like agreeing to undergo a transformation, to adjust to a new world in which the person has died. Following this logic, I wanted to try and say things out loud to liquefy them, to move my state from static to unstuck. Instead, I discovered that it was not that easy: Rather than any kind of straightforward relief, I found a lot of anger, entrapment, and distrust – both in myself and in those watching me. From the beginning, audiences would question me on this issue –I didn’t seem to trust the space, the stage, what I was saying, or them as witnesses. There was a pervasive doubt I experienced while performing, not sure why I was even on stage. And there was vulnerability in that doubt and anger that I was interested in exploring at the same time as I was terrified of it; I did think it had implications for the dynamics of the stage beyond just my personal grieving process. It made me think about what I may have internalized about truthfulness and the expectations towards a performer. Working in the context of relational aesthetics and postdramatic theater, where theatrical tropes of ‘character’ and script-based repeatability are less interesting than the potential ‘blurring of art and life’ in performers that are ‘being themselves’ on stage - what could be interesting about refusing to be trustworthy as a performer? And how might the audience’s expectation of authenticity and the rejection of theatricality relate to the fact that *Yours Now* is a performance about women and by a woman?

¹ Guy Cools, *Performing Mourning: Laments in Contemporary Art*, Amsterdam, Valiz, 2021, p. 17.

² G. Cools, *Performing Mourning*, p. 10.

Trust Issues

Theatricality, in performance practice after the 60s, is commonly associated with deception and artificiality. As scholars like Rebecca Schneider and Jane Blocker have pointed out, this ties back to an anxiety around mimesis that is even older than that, reaching back to Plato's time. Imitation seems to threaten the integrity of the original – just like a forgery threatens the value of the original work until it is exposed as a fake.³ Performance art emerged in the West in the late 1960s as a way to disrupt more institutionalized and commodified practices of gallery art, like painting and sculpture. The 'ephemeral' nature of performance seemed to resist commodification and "[offer] a value outside the market".⁴ As Jane Blocker explores in *What the Body Cost*, there was a longing for the body - understood as separate from the mind in the Cartesian sense - as a means to counter masculinist purity and patriarchal traditions in the art world. The body was considered disruptive because of its supposed unknowability, which made it a source of authenticity. This is in line with the Western fantasy of leaving nature and body behind, transcending them with cultural production; and then equally, the tradition of returning with longing and hope in search of some kind of 'reality' a priori. While the body as the site of pain and physical function was understood as outside of signification, artists like Vito Acconci would assert that the work was not concerned with their individual, personal bodies, but with the 'body in general'. This attempted abstraction produced an ideal body that could never fully be accessed, only hoped for - a patriarchal fantasy. What Blocker discovers is that underpinning performance art of the time was an understanding of the body that at once invited its associations with the feminine - liquid, uncontrollable, and emotional – and tried to

³ Neil Bartlett, 'Forgery', *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: a Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto, Edinburgh University Press, 1999, p. 183.

⁴ Jane Blocker, *What the Body Cost: Desire, History, and Performance*, University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p. 14.

renounce them – as secondary, imitative, and theatrical.⁵ The ‘literal’ body - the one that is unknowable, an object of nature - is presumed to be feminine, and that is the one we are asked to abstract from or transcend in order to apprehend the ‘body in general’.⁶

Blocker further points out the strategic distinction between works that are ‘universal’ and those that are ‘personal’, resulting in a tendency to think of femme performance practice as therapeutic, confessional, or diaristic, while masc performance art supposedly has the ability to “transcen[d] the narcissism of personal reflection”.⁷ Novelist Vanessa Veselka, for example, has pointed out how audiences frequently refuse to see her stories as fictional, especially if they are written from the perspective of a mother or wife. Finding out that it was fiction, they feel betrayed and “subjugated”;⁸ it becomes dangerous to an established power dynamic in which primarily masc artists are granted the power to manipulate emotions. So there is a bias towards femme artists’ work as diaristic, and a deep discomfort when they’re not ‘honest’ about the emotionality they supposedly have special access to. Then there is also a discomfort with theatricality and the fantastical because it is femme and we want masculine purity and truth. Seeking the elusive body and doubting it at the same time.

The performer puts on slippers, and starts walking the periphery of the room, speaking to the audience like an actress or a standup comedian. *A famous drag queen was once asked in an interview whether she had ever had a life-changing picnic. And this drag queen, by the name of RuPaul, knew immediately what the interviewer was*

⁵ J. Blocker, *What the Body Cost*, p. 14.

⁶ J. Blocker, *What the Body Cost*, p. 15.

⁷ J. Blocker, *What the Body Cost*, p. 32.

⁸ Elle Nash, “Writer Vanessa Veselka on realizing you can’t quit – The Creative Independent”, *The Creative Independent*, 29 September 2020, <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/writer-vanessa-veselka-on-realizing-you-cant-quit/>, (accessed 10 August 2023).

talking about and said, Yes. When I was a little kid, my sister, one day, took me out into the garden. And she had a blanket, and we had cookies. And so she sat me down on the grass and said, RuPaul. This is a picnic. And RuPaul says that was the day that he understood magic. That was it - he understood magic.

As Rebecca Schneider writes in *Performing Remains*, mimesis is seen as degrading to some imagined prior 'actual', and thus connected with loss: "The first time was true. The second time is false [...] or infelicitous. The second time, the third time, the nth times are *not actual*. Thus: the second time is lesser."⁹ It presents a threat to masculinist modernism and its attachment to the idea of original genius and verifiable authorship.¹⁰ So while performance art of the 60s was looking for immediacy, for the reality of the present moment, re-enactments bring with them "the threat of the imposter status of the copy, the double, the mimetic, the second, the surrogate, the feminine, or the queer".¹¹

Re-enactment is key to queer performance practice that understands theatricality as a critical mode - for example, in drag. In the 20th century, as Foucault has argued, sexuality became a marker of identity, an expression of an immutable truth about a person. Deviance from the sexual norm, in turn, was also constructed as identity-defining – "a pathology of being, rather than a kind of behavior in principle open to all".¹² As secondary to both 'nature' and 'reality', queer sexuality is understood as unnatural, forged, and performative while cisgendered heterosexuality is seen as

⁹ Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, New York, NY, Routledge, 2011, p. 180.

¹⁰ R. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 15.

¹¹ R. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 30.

¹² Jonathan Dollimore, 'Post/Modern: On the Gay Sensibility, or the Pervert's Revenge on Authenticity', *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: a Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto, Edinburgh University Press, 1999, pp. 221-236, p. 222.

(biologically) authentic. Through the lens of heteronormativity, queer sexuality can only imitate and badly copy; it has no innate relationship to 'truth'. Jonathan Dollimore writes in *Post/Modern: On the Gay Sensibility, or the Pervert's Revenge on Authenticity*:

[C]amp comes to life around that recognition; it is situated at the point of emergence of the artificial from the real, culture from nature [...]. Camp knows and takes pleasure in the fact that desire is culturally relative, and never more so than when, in cathecting contemporary style, it mistakes itself, and the style, for the natural.¹³

Camp sensibility with its embrace of artifice and exaggeration plays on an awareness of the distinction between "instinctive and theatrical behavior".¹⁴ As Sontag writes in *Notes on Camp*: "Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a 'lamp'; not a woman, but a 'woman'. To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role."¹⁵ Drag performance exaggerates the codes of normative femininity and masculinity through such tools as the pose and the mannerism; both by identifying with frivolity and "failed seriousness" and by retaining a certain distance from and disharmony with its source material.¹⁶

In theater, the issue of imitation is at first glance less complicated because it is understood that there is no original to begin with - as Schechner elaborated, the work of drama necessarily takes place in repetition and difference.¹⁷ But in a context that is used to viewing performance outside of the theater in a tradition following performance art of the 60s, 'acting' confuses the paradigm. Another example Schneider cites of an antitheatrical attitude is the approach of using untrained actors or amateur performers under the assumption that their performance will reveal something 'more real' than

¹³ J. Dollimore, *Post/Modern*, p. 225.

¹⁴ J. Dollimore, *Post/Modern*, p. 225.

¹⁵ Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp', *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: a Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto, Edinburgh University Press, 1999, pp. 53-65, p. 56.

¹⁶ S. Sontag, *Notes on Camp*, p. 62.

¹⁷ Richard Schechner, 'Theater Criticism', *The Tulane Drama Review* 9:3, 1965, pp. 13-24 as cited in R. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 131.

actors who 'mask' their true feelings. Acting is understood as passive in the sense that it "corrupts" authentic expression - it does not originate in the sense of the myth of male genius authorship: "Acting apparently does not instantiate the pure act, the "singular spectacle" of liveness."¹⁸ This is because acting brings an awareness of repeatability, is never only live and of the moment but always in reference to a prior source or event.

Yours Now uses a non-theatrical setting, a domestic setting. The audience members have to find a place in the apartment, arrange themselves in a space that doesn't seem to account for their presence – there is no seating set up or a space marked separate from the stage. We're in close quarters. Reduced to 10-15 people in a small space, only few people actually see *Yours Now* at any one time. I think this makes the 'posed' nature of it more uncomfortable or unsettling - because the way I perform at times seems more suited to addressing a large crowd of strangers than a small group of people around a kitchen table. The scale of projection is off.

The performer under the table isn't immediately obvious; it took some people a few moments to notice that I was under there, unmoving. I have my back turned to them, which is protective for me, but also a risk – I don't know who is behind me, what I will find when I turn around. Once I emerge from under the table, I acknowledge the presence of the audience and establish eye contact – there is no fourth wall. I'm addressing them directly when I say: "My grandmother was a liar." Through direct eye contact with the audience, I am also establishing a meta layer through which I can comment on the situation we're in together. But throughout the course of the performance, a wall does go up between me and them at times. Especially preceding

¹⁸ R. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 132.

sequences where I bring my hands to my head and face, it seems like I have retreated somewhere inside of myself, am speaking to myself. Those are the moments where the tension between 'authenticity' and 'artifice' or stagedness become apparent or most pressing, it seems. Because the transition is entirely internal – I am the one making it, according to a logic that is not made transparent. If the gesture doesn't follow from something relational, it must have been predetermined.

Some sections of the performance were clearly set and structured, others I kept on more unsure footing, improvised. There was a volatile element to the performance – “anything could happen” – which some people instinctively responded to with a distancing mechanism – “it felt like a film.” Some audience members responded to the confrontation in close proximity by letting their feelings show on their face, and laughing; others unconsciously hid behind their hands, or avoided eye contact, looking dazed.

What am I asking the audience to witness - to empathize with - and what to watch - stay at a remove from? How does their position shift from one to the other in the course of the performance? *Yours Now* works less with imitation and more with appropriation of gestures and behaviors. The performer destabilizes the separation between audience and stage, seemingly offering an authentic conversation, only to switch back into a distanced mode of storytelling. The confessional mode and emotionality that may be expected of a female performer are cut through with opacity or fragmentation of narrative, switching perspectives and embodiments in quick succession. The project deals with ambivalence and power and a kind of violence in the direct eye contact and the way you have to listen to the performer without reprieve. The theatricality and disingenuity with which I speak to the audience, telling them openly that they will be lied to, is uncomfortable when the expectation is sincerity. It may be interesting to think

about vulnerability here, too - whether my feeling of vulnerability in the beginning of the process lessened with time, and whether it would have been relevant to preserve it as part of the performance material, in the service of 'authenticity' and 'the real'. Why would it be important to trust me as a performer? What does that exactly entail? What does this trust enable, and what does it smooth over?

For a lie to work, it has to be inserted at a specific point in the narrative. It needs to have a relationship to the truth; you need to know what you're not saying. If a magic trick isn't done perfectly, the magic simply doesn't show up. In a similar way, we expect fiction to be controlled for us. For someone to draw the line between what's real and what isn't real; between what's true and what isn't true. She keeps speaking, walking along the audience and touching individual people gently with her slippers, until she reaches the corner of the room by the window. So imagine this. Imagine only sleeping with women for years. You haven't seen a dick in years, just hasn't been near you. And then one day, you wake up, and you're convinced that you're pregnant. And so you feel stupid, but you go and you buy a pregnancy test. And it's like, how is this possible, immaculate conception or something, except it's not immaculate at all, it's actually dirty as hell, you feel dirty as hell taking this test. And then the test is negative. Because of course it is.

Queer Failures

The approach to appropriating and repeating gestures in *Yours Now* is childlike in its curiosity, but also holds the darker intention of making them inappropriate or reinterpreting them to serve my narrative. A cigarette becomes two fingers in a c*nt becomes a gun. There is a lot of death and loss in the moment that *Yours Now* lands us in – it's a dark spot. Only glimmers of longing, of sex - but sex, too, is tied to death

and loss. Babies are born but under unhappy or twisted or violent circumstances, and there is jealousy somehow towards the living and breathing of these children. They can never be born from the other woman. There is a want for closeness with sister, mother, lover, but too much anger or darkness to achieve it. This is someone who feels clearly separate, like an outsider looking in. But there are also moments of lighter feelings - when I smile or make things seem ironic or look at the audience and acknowledge a provocation - or seem to be saying, isn't it funny that you're here, wanting something, and I'm also here, wanting something? Who's going to get it?

One of the productive failures of *Yours Now*, I think, lies in the refusal of the intimacy that the piece seems to offer – the degrees of separation I placed between myself and the audience by making it a staged encounter, by acting, make the piece a 'failure' to connect.

As alluded to above, there is a tradition that ties queerness explicitly to failure – both from the dominant narrative and from the sides of queer thinkers like Lee Edelman and Heather Love.¹⁹ Jack Halberstam further links this to capitalist logic with its emphasis on production and reproduction, in which queer bodies fail to make “the appropriate connections between sociality, relationality, family, sex, desire, and consumption” while heterosexuality follows “a logic of achievement, fulfillment, and success(ion)”.²⁰ Themes of mastery, repeatability, and the unreliable nature of memory were central to the drama of making *Yours Now* - in trying to 'get a story right', I was wrestling with the stakes of re-telling something I may not remember well. This extended to mastery over my body - whether or not I would be able to re-perform something exactly as I had done before. I did not attempt to convincingly impersonate or embody my

¹⁹ See, for example, Edelman's *No Future* (2004) and Love's *Feeling Backward* (2007).

²⁰ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2011, pp. 94-95.

grandmother - even as I subtly switched between perspectives and characters; these shifts happen on the level of text more than on the level of physicality. But what is revealed when things are actually misremembered, wrong, inadequate? What is the value in not being faithful to the original? In the words of Tavia Nyong'o: "What does it mean to mistake a memory, to remember by mistake, or even to remember a mistake?"²¹ The mistakes made in the attempt to imitate or repeat may actually show both me and the audience where the faultlines of the narrative are.

What about a more deliberate forgetting? In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam explores an alternative archive, a queer canon in which failure functions as a break with normativity; and where darkness - or opacity - is disruptive in a positive sense to the pervasive (capitalist, modernist) idea of progress and to the relentless pursuit of happiness, clarity or visibility. Failure is a mode of not fulfilling expectations, while opacity is a mode being unreadable, of not giving what you're expected to give. Failure and illegibility can be ways to retain autonomy, to resist Foucaultian disciplinarity. Forgetting, or the failure to memorialize, resists inscription into an archive or tradition and with that the "tendency to tidy up disorderly histories".²²

In the case of my own work I am wondering specifically about the potential in the meeting point of femininity and refusal. Halberstam addresses this, for example, in their discussion of Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, in which the artist let audience members cut and take away pieces of her clothing; and *Promise Piece*, in which she handed out shards of a broken vase. Crucially, the pieces of clothing and the pieces of vase will never be reunited – as Halberstam says, it is a "commitment to the fragment over any

²¹ Tavia Nyong'o, *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory*, University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p. 136, as quoted in R. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 17.

²² J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 15.

fantasy of future wholeness” and a refusal to “remake, rebuild or reproduce”.²³ These are examples of masochist performances by a female artist in which she performs passivity and an implicit unraveling of self. Ono is saying, I won’t make this whole again, it will not be sublimated into wholeness. This refusal of wholeness and coherence is the most potent aspect for me in relation to *Yours Now*, which insists on fragmentation on the level of narrative and performativity. I am thinking also of this part of the script, which I adapted from Ai’s poem *Nothing But Color*: “I didn’t write, I cut her open. She was carmine red inside, no viscera, nothing but color.” First of all, the reference to cutting something - and then the fact that what was found inside was not organ, flesh, demystification and the fact of death but further opacity - the blood doesn’t even flow.

In Martha Rhodes’ poem above, *Possession*, the sister is someone the speaker is jealous of and steals from. The speaker stakes a claim on her bike (a means of autonomy), on her “holy spots” (which may be hiding spots in the forest, or even worse, private places on her body), on her presents (attention she receives from others) and lastly, her “book of screams” (a record of pain). For me, this scenario is juicy as a betrayal of the supposed close bond, the blood ties between sisters. It undermines the expectation of solidarity between femmes; in the popular imagination, violence between women is largely inconceivable because we think that women are only harmed by men. Halberstam posits this breaking of essential bonds, like between sisters or between mother and daughter, as an interruption to the “generational modes of transmission that ensure the continuity of ideas, family lines, and normativity itself”²⁴ – by refusing the mother’s or sister’s legacy and her role in the patriarchal system of power. The refusal of the relationships that ensure continuity of power within patriarchy

²³ J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, pp.138-139.

²⁴ J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 123.

is a taboo – Halberstam calls it a “shadow feminism” that is characterized by radical passivity and even masochism, as in the works mentioned above.²⁵ In Halberstam’s words, these anti-social feminist works offer a way of “unbecoming” woman if how ‘woman’ is understood within patriarchy “prop[s] up the dominance of man within a gender binary”.²⁶

I find reflected here some sense of the anger I felt in performing *Yours Now*, especially in early versions and especially, although not entirely consciously, towards cis het men in the audience. Some told me they felt an aggression, an accusation even, that was much sharper than towards the women present. I think this was part of working through a power dynamic between the audience and myself in which I was using (self-)control to project domination. Some audience members were curious about bringing a heterosexual dynamic back into the performance: “How would the performance change if the audience was only men?” I didn’t follow this line of thought because I didn’t think the narrative or material was lacking without the inclusion of straight men. Crucially, the performance presents a fantasy of family and intimacy that exists independently of heterosexual reproduction. At the same time, the provocation in *Yours Now* is the breaking of bonds that would keep me safe socially - between mother and daughter, between sisters, between femme lovers.

Strategies of Separation

Wstyd (‘Shame’) directed by Gosia Wdowik depicts one family’s mother-daughter relationships across three generations. As this performance is a reinterpretation specifically from the perspective of a daughter, I want to briefly consider its strategies of artifice and point to parallels in *Yours Now*. *Wstyd* weaves together scenes on a

²⁵ J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 124.

²⁶ J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 144.

rehearsal stage, in which actors Ewa Dałkowska and Jaśmina Polak play the daughters and mothers, with film footage of the real mothers and daughters taken in the director's childhood home. The director is present on the side of the stage, seated at a desk with her back to the audience. Additionally, the performance is narrated by actor Magdalena Cielecka. The performance directly addresses the problem the director-daughter encounters: "She's trying to stage-direct here and there, because the mother isn't ashamed enough. After all, she had read *Eribon*, and she knows what sort of story to tell." The projected story of class embarrassment is not the material she is getting from her mother; this places the daughter in a sticky spot where she has to decide whether her envisioned, but 'untrue', narrative or depicting 'reality' is more important to her.

I found *Wstyd* to be an interesting reference for how femininity can become fraught in mother-daughter relationships. Especially in the scenes that explicitly deal with costume or clothing, I saw some parallels to *Yours Now*. In the stage layer of *Wstyd*, the actors assume their roles by putting on clothes, with a moment of confusion about which costumes are intended for whom. In the video layer, there is a scene in which the mother is trying to give the daughter clothes that she presumably once wore herself, dressing her like a doll. It made me think about fabric as a material that is coded feminine, and about clothing as a way to signal belonging - or the opposite.

I saw her ashes the other day. Through Skype. And they are kept in what looks like a vase, a big vase? And it's all pretty and pink and floral. And it just sits there behind a glass door in the living room. There hasn't been a memorial yet, so. The performer pulls off and drops the purple jacket demonstratively. Looks back at the audience, I feel like I have to do that again. Because I don't know if you guys fully understand how

heavy this thing is. She drops the jacket again and again, with more emphasis. Compares it with the red suit jacket, throwing it on the floor. *This one's real, this one's fake. That you see, right?*

My grandmother was a seamstress, a maker of doll's clothes. In the May version of *Yours Now*, I talk about memories of textures and textiles and remember what it felt like to be close to a woman in my lineage. It also made me think of daughters as prized possessions that mothers will sometimes fashion to resemble them. The costumes of *Yours Now* move between signifiers of 'authenticity' and 'theatricality', from jeans and a white t-shirt to a red pantsuit and purple leather jacket. It is supposed to show a shift from 'normal attire' to clearly 'costume'. In *Wstyd*, the red color of the narrator's dress is a marker of artificiality, of show-woman-ship, a connotation which applies here, too. The costume intends to bring the fabrication of the situation to consciousness. Especially in the purple leather jacket, I am trying to instill some doubt about the origin of the object and my trustworthiness as a narrator – the implication is that the jacket would have been my grandmother's, but you can't be sure if it's a keepsake or a prop. The suit and pink slippers I wear present a contrast: The performer is prepared for a performance, but is found sleeping at the beginning of it, which is somewhat clownish and sets up everything to follow as a kind of farce. Putting on slippers to begin a performance is like the opposite of putting on heels or dance shoes to perform. The slippers also seem to suggest a familiar space, as if I am at home here; but as an 'actor', I haunt the space with the suggestion of the double, the not-actual. I am therefore also unbelonging to this space, critically a stranger. To me, this is a comment on the fact that every performance is a stranger or visitor in the space that it inhabits temporarily.

Why would someone look at their family and want to add layers of distortion instead of clarity? This step of defamiliarization and of staging is interesting to me and at the core of the motivation for *Yours Now*. I'm fascinated by how even the attempt can be revealing, and simply painfully awkward – embarrassing in what it says about the child's desire to turn around the power dynamic of who gets to interpret a situation. Watching *Wstyd*, what became visible to me through all these dramaturgical tools was mainly the daughter's shame. Showing the stickiness of family dynamics in the theater and making it into a staged situation – both the lack of control and attempt at control are inherently embarrassing for the director, who shows up here as an author even as she tries to disappear. While I wear red in *Yours Now* like the narrator of *Wstyd*, crucially there is no narrator to perform objectivity for me. I am the narrator, unreliable and hypervisible in my desire to reshape the story. There is no third party to verify what I am saying, no documentary material. I am not evading this by turning my back for the entirety of the performance, but rather face the audience and present no other perspective but my own. So the approach is quite different: Externalization in *Wstyd* (through actors, narrator, and stage as symbolic realm) versus further interiority in *Yours Now* (gestures directed at myself, subjective logic of sequencing).

Yours Now is a performance about queer sexuality. It is performed by a woman and uses camp and drag as a reference for playing with artifice and exaggeration. As such, it is subject to expectations of both femininity and queerness as paradoxically more literal and more performative at the same time. The dominant attitude towards theatricality in performance is that it is threatening to an experience of reality that is immediate and original, free from associations with the past or reference to character. I want to assert that imitation and theatricality are actually part of a critical approach to normative reality and undermine our experience of it in productive ways by failing to

align with what is considered 'believable'. For *Yours Now*, this is most salient in the refusal of inherited values around femininity, and through the depiction of fraught relationships between mothers, sisters and daughters. One of the central tensions of the performance lies in the attempt to get something right versus adding layers of distortion, especially as it is tied to family and femme embodiments brought to the stage.

Chapter 2: Queer Temporality

(*Yours Now*, May)

The performer shoves all costume pieces under the sofa and then re-emerges from underneath. *When I grieve, my mind becomes like a public domain for words, rhymes, phrases, bits of song. And they patter and intone – they patter and intone - until I arrange them for my own ends.* She taps on her cheeks, throat, pulls from the mouth, pulls her face to the side, patters fingers on the forehead and behind ears. Then she mimes vomiting into her hand, pushes into her chest, nose, mouth. She starts scratching her fingernails across the floor, her body staying close to the ground. Throws herself on her back and reverses, drawing big circles, forcefully pushing up her pelvis. *Now, this is not my grandmother, but it could be: When my desire grows dull, I sharpen my nails.* She continues moving in circles while repeating the same sentence. Finally, she rolls up quickly to stand. *She would say: Everyone remember to breathe while Grandmom catches her breath.* Speaking to the audience: *Actually, I have no memory of how she excused herself. But I feel like I'd feel better if I did know. But as it is, I have no idea. Nothing.* She attempts a frustrated noise, then pauses. *Wait, let me try that again.*

The two key problems I will be considering in this chapter: Firstly, repetition as it challenges the present moment and how this is a characteristic of theater more generally. And secondly, returning and repeating as a mode of queer temporality and the specific reasons for this approach. What does the fragmentary, confusing and repetitive structure of *Yours Now* reveal about how we understand time dominantly, and why might the discomfort that arises in perceiving it differently be generative?

When my desire grows dull, I sharpen my nails. While I am repetitively scratching my nails across the floor, I am actually not sharpening, but dulling them down and breaking them. I say this one sentence - taken from the poem *Eternally Turquoise* by Rachel Rabbit White - over and over, again both sharpening it and dulling it down. As a structuring device, repetition follows a very simple principle: Seeing the same gesture twice or more makes it appear as a pattern, and a pattern suggests meaning. However, repetition can also break down the integrity of meaning, making a gesture or utterance become strange to itself. If it can return the same, was it ever true in the first place?

Other aspects of temporality in this performance are possibly less easy to grasp. I am thinking about moments that are very small or residual, an unease that seeps into the atmosphere while we're primarily paying attention to something else. Here, I encountered another, more fundamental question about repeatability and mastery over time: Sometimes I repeated the score of the performance and had a strange sense that it was not happening in the present at all, but somehow it already happened in the past and the present moment was an insincere repetition. Not only is the performance structured through repetitions, but it is a repetition itself. As we will see, a theatrical performance always involves a latent return, at the same time as it makes obvious the impossibility to come back exactly as it was.

In *Performing Remains*, Rebecca Schneider writes about re-enactments, specifically Civil War reenactments in the U.S., as attempts at literally touching the past through embodiment. She considers the possibility of temporal recurrence, and how the failures and inaccuracies of re-enactments produce "temporal leaks" in which the present seems to belong no longer only to itself.²⁷ In this line of thought, she questions

²⁷ R. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 10.

a logic of liveness in which performance is bound to conditions of disappearance - and instead posits that time has a 'stickiness' to it and that the body is not antithetical to the archive in its ability to remember and remain. I think that remaining as a method is interesting: Paying attention to what sticks in, to, and around in time and on the body - pointing to past and future as part of the fabric of a present moment and thereby defying the supposed singularity of a performance event. This is a key question Schneider's work offers: Whether theater and performance are ever really live, taking place only in the present, or if there aren't always multiple times at play.

That is, if liveness must imply an immediacy or a "real time" devoid of other times, as many might have it, then the delay, lag, doubling, duration, return [...] could suggest that theatre can never be "live." Or, never *only* live.²⁸

In the same vein, Alice Rayner asks in *Ghosts: Death's Double and the Phenomena of Theatre*: "Can there be a present that does not also hold the memories and anticipations and therefore the disjunctions of the perception of time, past, present, and future?"²⁹

To unpack these two quotes for a moment: The categories of past, present, or future are not true of time per se but rather constitute conceptualizations of how we perceive change and duration. As we remember the past or anticipate the future, we make them part of our present; thus, the experience of the present is more disjointed and less straightforward than we have conceptualized it, which also means that it is a moment that continually evades us. But not only is it deferred or never arrived at, in the negative sense - it also has the potential to be composed of multiple times, all simultaneously available to experience. Both Schneider and Rayner are interested in the fact that in

²⁸ R. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 92.

²⁹ Alice Rayner, *Ghosts: Death's Double And The Phenomena Of Theatre*, University of Minnesota Press, 2006, p. 6.

performance, whatever we are watching unfold is not happening for the first time. Especially in dramatic theater, what we see live has possibly never happened 'for the first time', as there is no 'original' in that sense - every theatrical performance happens through interpretation of a text that precedes it.³⁰ Further, since performance is composed of performative acts, it is always already reiterative as the result of learned, embodied behaviors. Beyond just performance, any ritualized context reiterates a precedent and makes something occur for the first time - creating the meaning of repetition as "again for the first time".³¹

As already discussed in chapter one, the mode of theatricality as imitation challenges the value of the 'original'. In a similar way, repetition challenges the notion of the present moment as a "real time devoid of other times". It displaces an act or image by placing it 'again', thereby making the present no longer singular but enmeshed with things that came before and have the potential to return again. Repetition can bring the past back on the performer's body and point to a future return in that same moment. This underlying sense of return is a characteristic of theatrical time. It is what Schneider calls "the fold: the double, the second, the clone, the uncanny, the *againness* of (re)enactment".³² In *Ghosts*, Rayner equally asserts that this 'againness', and the doubt that it instills in a viewer, is central to theater as a medium. The doubt that arises about whether something is happening for the first time or the nth time: Rayner describes this haunted feeling as the presence of 'ghosts'. Theater, in this understanding, is a medium that works on the boundary of life and death, brings this ambiguous space to the forefront - through characters, objects, and scenes that do not

³⁰ "In the dramatic theatre, the live is a troubling trace of a precedent text and so (herein lies the double trouble) comes afterward, even arguably remains afterward, as a *record* of the text *set in play*." R. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 90.

³¹ R. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 90.

³² R. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 6.

exist outside of the actors' animation of them, and yet must have existed before the present moment, since we are aware that this moment is not happening for the first time. The thing is manifest in the present and yet seems to be coming from the past. Rayner defines theater as a mode of consciousness that is aware of this inherent contradiction, of its being and not-being at the same time, and makes this awareness material in space.³³

This is not my grandmother, but it could be. “No matter that lines are learned or gestures repeated: the actor is ghosted by an absent text that has already produced the phantom of character.”³⁴ The terminology of ‘ghosts’ resonates with me for *Yours Now* because I felt ‘ghostly’ as a performer: I felt like I was haunting the space with a repetition of the past and by ‘being and not-being’ at the same time. For me, this thought was incredibly present in the moment of performing. It animated my own doubt and it may have contributed to the distrust of the audience. As viewers of the performance, you are watching these two things at the same time: What I am and am not, what you see and what you don’t see at the same time. It requires a “theatrical way of seeing double” which “recognizes both the animate aspects of the inanimate objects and the death implicit in the living being”.³⁵

Wait, let me try that again. The performer screams at the top of her lungs, then looks to the audience for confirmation and nods in approval. She wanders into the kitchen and sits on top of the counter. She returns to a distanced storytelling mode. *Imagine you’re sleeping with her again after years. And there are stretch marks on her waist and stomach.* The performer leans over and spits into the kitchen sink. Slides off the

³³ A. Rayner, *Ghosts*, p. xviii.

³⁴ A. Rayner, *Ghosts*, p. xx.

³⁵ A. Rayner, *Ghosts*, p. xx.

counter, lands on all fours, then leans her head back against the cupboards. *I didn't write, I sliced her open.* She reverses her position so that her feet are on the counter and she is lying on her stomach on the kitchen floor, head in the direction of the audience. *Is this a memory that's with me, always? No. It's one that gets lost for long periods of time until it gets pushed to the surface by some other memory.*

Another effect of theatrical time is a kind of recognition that Rayner calls a "remembering that is contingent on forgetting".³⁶ It is the paradoxical sensation of recognizing something that one is seeing for the first time - that moment of seeing the world in a new and strange light that the experience of an artwork can produce. What comes into awareness is that this new world must have preceded its perception, yet one is only seeing it now - "giving one the sense of both remembering and creating in the same moment".³⁷ Rayner calls this sensation "unforgetting". In *Yours Now*, this idea of unforgetting becomes visible, for example, in the principle of reversal. With my feet on the kitchen counter, I upend a habitual way of using that space. The reversal also happens in the allusion to substances coming out of my body that are supposed to stay inside or move the other direction - like spit and vomit.

Wait, let me try that again. "Wait" - a pause, an interruption to the steady onward flow of time. "Let me" - asking for permission, presupposes a relationship. "Try that again" - the obsessive return to a prior event with the intent of reshaping it.

³⁶ A. Rayner, *Ghosts*, p. xvi.

³⁷ A. Rayner, *Ghosts*, p. xix.

Acts of Revision

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival.³⁸

In reference to this quote by Adrienne Rich, Schneider points out that while Rich was thinking about text, the same mode of revisiting and rewriting could apply to performance - through “re-gesture, re-affect, re-sensation”.³⁹ In the following, I will consider queer acts of re-vision as subversive to a linear progression of time and archival logic, aligning with the core imperative *to remain*, through difference.



Fig. 1. Scanned photograph of my grandmother on her wedding day.

This is not my grandmother, but it could be. The above photo was placed on the wall behind me in the December version of *Yours Now*. It is behind me for the duration of the performance and I only refer to it at the end - as if I just remembered it, or as if I

³⁸ Adrienne Rich, ‘When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision’, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, W. Norton, 1979, pp. 33–49, as quoted in R. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 6.

³⁹ R. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 6.

was drawn to it as the origin point of the performance. It is supposed to haunt the space with a suggestion; it's an image that isn't explained, it's unclear who these people are. The photograph is an instance of a story I have reinterpreted. It's slightly unsettling to me how entirely I can divorce this image from its origin and project a story onto it: A story of two brides instead of two sisters. I wonder if this is because I can see my own face so clearly in my grandmother's. In this photo, she is the woman standing in the front. It's even beyond physical similarity of nose and eyes – she looks small in this image, I can imagine her being my height even though I know she was taller. She looks like a teenager, and she is – it is 1965, she's 19. There's something naïve or wide-eyed, romantic about her here, and I recognize that in myself. I think about how immediately this image became fantasy to me, how it became a story. I imagined finding this in an archive of queer history. But factually, she is marrying a man, and the other woman is her sister, Kay. There's something taboo about that, too, imagining her marrying her sister. Her sister is fixing the veil on her head. She already has a ring on her finger (although that's her right hand, not her left). She's taking care of her like a child and my Grandmom's dependence on, closeness to and intimacy with her seems to emanate from this photo, almost like a smell or sensation.

As Elizabeth Freeman writes in *Time Binds*, the notion of private and public time as separate spheres was created with the aid of technology such as home photography.⁴⁰ Especially for the continuity of middle-class family memory, photography played an important role. In family photographs taken on holidays or on special occasions, middle-class aspirations were illustrated by the proper poses, settings and props. The wedding photograph is an example of the organization of time, through ritual, into a life legible to the state; in this case, marriage as a ritual of reproduction and of labor

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2010, p. 22.

organization. It represents the imagined trajectory of the family. If we make the distinction between ‘natural’ time and mechanized, labor time, there emerges an understanding of queer sexuality as ‘out of time’ insofar as it is unproductive to the state.⁴¹ Reinterpreting this photo and the ritual depicted, imagining it differently by giving it a queer narrative, is an instance of “undermining the logic of sequence”.⁴² The gesture that Kay is caught in - fixing the veil - is also symbolic for the continuation of bonds between women in the family, as mentioned in Chapter One, as a perpetuation of patriarchal power. The gesture expresses care, but also complicity.

In her book, Freeman analyzes queer works that engage with issues of naturalized domestic time, displaced industrial labor and legacy. Failures to abide by the “chrononormative timings of bodies” are addressed here specifically through the mother-daughter relationship, which “becomes a problem [...] of intimacy and inheritance, troped as rhythm and sequence: will the lesbian daughters repeat their mothers’ gestures ad infinitum, disappearing into the vortex of maternalized timelessness?”⁴³ The queer lens on these relationships presents a rupture to the smooth machinery of the home and a refusal to disappear into linear progression. Freeman characterizes this mode as “arrhythmic” in its shifting between past and present, between stillness of photography and the motion of performance.⁴⁴

Everyone remember to breathe while Grandmom catches her breath. An involuntary, instinctive interval in the flow of time, urging everyone else to keep going as usual, not stop with her and endanger themselves, because stopping time is dangerous to life as we know it.

⁴¹ E. Freeman, *Time Binds*, p. xv.

⁴² E. Freeman, *Time Binds*, p. 22.

⁴³ E. Freeman, *Time Binds*, p. 44.

⁴⁴ E. Freeman, *Time Binds*, p. 44.

My mother leaks, and I catch it. An instance of temporal leak - there is an excess beyond the stringency of time, the disciplinarity of bodies, and across time and across death, I catch it. As it's in my hands now, it acquires a new meaning.

Following Freeman, queer performance often has historiographic tendencies, meaning it is concerned with re-interpretations or escape-artist-like maneuvers out of dominant history. Queer performance presents acts of re-vision, for example, through fragmentation and being out of sync. One way of being out of sync is to insist on remaining in the past, or re-encountering the past: “compulsive returns, movements backwards”.⁴⁵ Re-encountering or insisting on repetition and return is both Freudian and queer. As Heather Love explores in *Feeling Backwards*, attaching to melancholia and shame can be a way to resist progress and productive temporality, the chronobiopolitics that are useful to the organization of lives to a productive end for the capitalist state; this harks back to what Halberstam explores in *Queer Art of Failure*, where resistance to coherence presents a way of remaining unknowable.

The dramaturgy of *Yours Now* is built from fragments of movement and text that are associative, making only a loose storyline. The piece, generally, is structured through recurring images, and it makes meaning mostly through patterns that emerge in repetition (although there are only few). As stated in the previous chapter, the dramaturgy follows a logic that is internal, not declared. It's supposed to mirror the non-sequential and non-narrative nature of memory and also reveal how we string things together that may have no relation to one another. Misremembering, fragmentation, and improper recall became a methodology through which I could insist

⁴⁵ E. Freeman, *Time Binds*, p. 23.

on the untrustworthy double and multiple nature of time. These oblique strategies and the de-constructing of bodies and subjects in the breaking apart of linear narrative can create a sense of belonging across the separation of time; following Freeman, “bodies, de-composed by the workings of experimental film and literature, meet one another by chance, forging—in the sense of both making and counterfeiting—history differently”.⁴⁶

There is a persistent sense of impossibility at the core of these historiographic attempts, and yet artists hold onto “the odd detail, the unintelligible or resistant moment”⁴⁷ that is found in the past. How might the affective gestures of ‘holding on’ to something, grasping a detail, refusing to let go, be a way of apprehending history and making it new? The movements I use to touch someone or something through time on my own body create physical sensations and emotional responses that might be able to break open the homogeneity of time as dominant history presents it and make the present a moment of intersubjective meeting points.⁴⁸ I find this concept interesting for my work because while the text of the performance mainly uses the past tense and I am recounting anecdotes from the past, I didn’t feel that I was reaching back in time and bringing something back as much as I was making events part of the present - placing and displacing them, again. This felt doubtful, and unsteady, never ‘full’ - as in fully embodied or entirely present. Not just on a technical level did the past feel inaccessible - it was also unreachable, in a way, because every feeling I had felt ‘impossible’. Freeman finds a way to describe it thus: “a pseudo-encounter that isn’t worried about the ‘pseudo’” and has a fundamental “disbelief in the referential object”.⁴⁹ The object I am referring back to is not construed as truth, as the original; my bringing it back is not a valid attempt to re-enact in the historical sense - it is more

⁴⁶ E. Freeman, *Time Binds*, p. xi.

⁴⁷ E. Freeman, *Time Binds*, p. 16.

⁴⁸ Compare E. Freeman, *Time Binds*, p. xx.

⁴⁹ E. Freeman, *Time Binds*, p. 14.

concerned with fantasy and fiction, doesn't take the lost object as more truthful than what I am inventing right now.

The aspect of repetition and return was even more relevant on the other level, in which the performance was always already a repetition of itself. In returning to the movements of the performance, touching the past while simultaneously creating a text for the future, it felt like I was coming back to myself as a ghost presence. Former versions of the performance were somehow both present and impossible to access. There was an anxiety about being unable to repeat something. Conversely, I was often not precious about saving material, letting a lot of rehearsal and material go 'undocumented'. I don't have mastery over my body in the sense that I can repeat exactly what I did before; strictly speaking, it is not possible, and ultimately, it wasn't my main concern. And yet I was aware that the gesture, if repeated, does bring the past performance back with a difference. This is the critical gesture - to repeat something with a difference, and recognize both the similarity and the discrepancy at the same time. What I was committed to was returning through the body, but in ways that remain ungraspable to the archive in the traditional sense. Not letting go, and not sublimating into wholeness, on the level of time. This process was bound to be unruly and fragmented.

[Mimesis] itself has two elements - copying, which depends on the visual apprehension of sameness, and contagious magic, which is more like infiltration and depends on contact.⁵⁰

An aspect of 'sister' is the potential of doubling. For the posters representing the performance to the public, I chose to use childhood photos not of myself but of female relatives who look similar – my sister and my cousin [Appendix II].

⁵⁰ E. Freeman, *Time Binds*, p. 126.

For the May poster, I chose a photograph I have of my cousin Jenna. She is sitting topless at a table with colorful, birthday-themed paper plates in front of her. We cropped the photo for the poster so as to show only part of her face, the corner of a smile. She stays somewhat unknowable in this way, even as the photograph seems so intimate. There is an eerie quality to this image, resting in the shadows on the wall and the hand of the anonymous adult behind her on the back of the chair. It's easy to make a creepy, disturbing narrative out of it. The combination of naked body and dangly earrings is so young girl, small child. I wonder if I could evoke that as an adult, or if it would make me uncomfortable to be so infantilized. Looking at this photo, I remember being adored like a princess throughout my childhood and at some point becoming uncomfortable with that role and its expectations.

For the December poster, I chose a picture of my sister Elisabeth taken in our family home when she was around the same age, probably five or six. She is in a pink dress and holding out her arms to the camera to show the fake tattoos stamped across both of them. We also cropped this image to show her mouth but not her eyes. You see a part of my sister's arm, and she still has that same arm, but her body also became entirely another one. Do I wish I still had the body of a small girl, adorned with earrings and naked from the waist up?

As Freeman writes in *Time Binds*, from the late 19th century onwards the popular genre of children's photos solidified the idea of succession, indicating as a document not just the past but also a projected future for this child. How does using the childhood photos for a public-facing poster fit into that? It establishes a logic that links a childhood photo to the existence of me today - a success of reproduction and a proof of linear

time as it is established in familial generational logic. Use of these pictures is also nostalgic, pointing to the trope of a loss of innocence with the loss of childhood. The words *Yours Now* in combination with these photos also mark a new ownership of the narrative. There is also something there that plays on a fantasy of belonging or submission - the little girl belongs to you now. Yet it is deceptive in its doubling, because it is not me in the photographs - not the same person that you see on stage.

The shadows in these images immediately evoke home photography by digital cameras in the 2000s. Looking at these photos, and considering these unintentional dark spaces around the girls, what I think about are the corners and secret hiding spots we retreat to as children (or at least I did). I know that as a child, in these secret hiding spots, I was in some strange way already daydreaming about the fissures and hidden corners, hidden pains but also delights of adulthood. What will I become? Who or what will protect me? From what, I'm not even sure? In *Yours Now*, the spaces underneath – for example, table and sofa – evoke these hidden corners or secret spaces, giving a sense that something more is always waiting to be revealed underneath everyday appearances.

Latent Returns

The performer stands up from the floor and walks to the doorway of the living room. *So there is... conception from eating a mango.* What follows is a forceful miming of imaginary ways to get pregnant while addressing the audience, laughing sometimes at the impact or sound of an action. Swallowing, vomit, penetration, ingesting, shooting through, including: *Conception through spit.* She opens the zipper on her trousers and spits into her hand, *I will be right back.* The performer steps into the bathroom and lets water run into the sink. Then she returns to the living room in silence and retrieves a

nail file from between the floorboards. She settles in the far corner of the room and files her nails for a long moment before memories emerge, which she lists almost to herself. The list ends on: *I remember leaving notes / around the house of her first wife.* There follows a repetition of some movements from earlier, but much gentler: Tracing the face, touching her neck with the full hand, a motion like removing spiderwebs from the face.

“If future and past events exist, I want to know where they are.”⁵¹ Much of the spoken text of the performance uses the past tense. Is it a performance only concerned with the past? Who am I in this moment now, then, and why am I here? Where have I come from and where will I go?

As Rayner mentions in *Ghosts*, the art of memorization came to be associated with placement of material in space through the classical concept of the memory palace.⁵² This logic of attaching certain material, pieces of text to certain locations did not occur to me to use in the performance, but it was suggested to me by mentors. I did use this method in the apartment in May - for example, I connected ‘pregnancy’ to the bathroom and running water, and again to the sink and spit - but in my mind, the links of text to place were actually quite weak. I have always considered the text of the performance - both the text in the sense of words and the text in the sense of physical vocabulary - to be separate from the space it is located in, strangely suspended, hovering - not quite touching. This separation is also created through a stark confrontation with the artifice of the stage(d) space, a feeling I did not want to override but maintain. I always imagined that the text of the performance was located in my body; that if I was not

⁵¹ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 230 as quoted in A. Rayner, *Ghosts*, p. 5.

⁵² A. Rayner, *Ghosts*, p. 15.

there, the performance was not there. In the apartment, this was not entirely true, because the setting played on all of these lingering associations and meanings of a domestic space. At DAMU in December, in the second version using a standard issue table and chair, it was closer to what I had imagined; more precisely originating from me and with only minimal relationship to the space around me. I was questioned from the beginning of the devising process on my relationship to the space, as I didn't seem to authentically inhabit it, which undermined the audience's trust. I think ultimately I figured out a way to retain this alienated feeling from the space, the not-quite-touching, while also not creating confusion.

A memory that is lost until it gets pushed back to the surface from underneath. The performer taps the ground, points to that space below the surface, a gesture that is haunting in its repetitiveness. *You're not 18 anymore* - pushing that knowledge below the surface in denial of the passage of time. The performer takes a nail file out from between the floorboards - again, something concealed, and in this case, sharp, coming from a space underneath our feet. She turns on the water in the bathroom, then steps outside again as it runs, doubling her presence in that way - one visible, one hidden where the water continues to run. As she touches her face, she seems to be touching invisible matter in front of her; the gestures return as reminiscent of movements the audience has seen before.

The uncanny is defined as the latent potential of something sinister to return, something secret to come to light. The location of the thing that is waiting to return is often described as buried or concealed 'underneath' - such as in this excerpt of a play by Ferdinand Gutzkow, quoted by Anthony Vidler in *The Architectural Uncanny*: "Well... they are like a buried spring or a dried-up pond. One cannot walk over it without

always having the feeling that the water might come up there again.”⁵³ This is how, in Rayner’s work, the uncanny relates to the idea of theatrical ghosting:

Ghosts hover where secrets are held in time: the secrets of what has been unspoken, unacknowledged; the secrets of the past, the secrets of the dead. Ghosts wait for the secrets to be released into time.⁵⁴

“Holding” something in memory in order for future and past to both happen in the same body in the present - this makes time also into a spatial problem. One might argue that all problems in performance are ultimately spatial problems, as they must appear in the composition of the spaces, or no space, in between objects, bodies and acts. The locating of the uncanny as a force that is both belonging to the past and yet to come in the spaces ‘underneath’ the comfortable and familiar makes it both a temporal phenomenon and a spatial problem. This is most apparent in the archetypal setting of the house, which is connected to both time and space as a site of memory. As Vidler describes in *The Architectural Uncanny*, the haunted house is a favored trope of the 19th century uncanny in Romanticism.⁵⁵ It is characterized by the normality of the setting and the absence of overt terror, so for example in *The Fall of the House of Usher* by Edgar Allen Poe: “how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up”.⁵⁶ Another example is the grandmother’s house in *Wstyd*, where things are left to mold and the mold comes to represent shame. Escaping the house is seen as synonymous with moving on from your childhood, which in the story of the piece requires a renegotiation of one’s relationship to memory, memorizing, and being remembered. There is also the refusal of the grandmother to look into a mirror, and how she keeps walking into furniture, over and over, because she forgets that it has

⁵³ Anthony Vidler, ‘Unhomely houses’, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1992, p. 25.

⁵⁴ A. Rayner, *Ghosts*, p. x.

⁵⁵ A. Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, p. 17.

⁵⁶ A. Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, p. 18.

been moved. This image shows up in Freud's description of the uncanny as characterized by 'involuntary repetition' - for example, in "the experience of being lost in 'a dark, strange room,' 'looking for the door or the electric switch', colliding time after time with the same piece of furniture".⁵⁷



Fig. 2. Still from: David Lynch, *Mulholland Drive*, 2001.

The image in the beginning of *Yours Now*, in which the performer is lying asleep under the table, finds a parallel in a scene in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, where 'Rita' (Lauren Harring), who is disoriented and amnesiac after a car accident, creeps into an empty apartment and goes to sleep under a table. When the other main protagonist, Betty (Naomi Watts), enters the apartment, there are a few moments where we think she's going to find 'Rita' under the table and scream; but we are spared the jump scare and instead, she enters as 'Rita' is taking a shower in the bathroom, and she discovers her there, in a more quiet (and sensual) manner. A consistent theme in *Mulholland Drive* is the uncertainty around whether 'Rita' is imaginary or real – both actresses play double roles in the movie, and as is typical of Lynch's work, are constantly situated in liminal spaces that oscillate between dream and reality.

⁵⁷ A. Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, p. 18.

The setting of *Yours Now* evokes a transient space – the apartment may have been only recently emptied to make space for prospective new inhabitants; as a performer, I inhabit domestic spaces (the kitchen counter, the dinner table, the living room couch) that have been hollowed out, emptied of people. The audience is asked, after the first part, to follow the performer from the dark kitchen into the lighter, more open living room. By offering the sofa and cushions on the floor, I am asking them to interact with the space in a familiar way, to ‘feel right at home’. The dark kitchen, lit only by the countertop lights, is still visible from the living room, and they can look into it through the door frame from where they are seated. There are two doors near the entrance that remain closed for the duration of the performance. There are cupboards that are taped shut, and some that have been emptied. The performer is on view for most of the performance but disappears into the bathroom at one point to turn on the water tap. There isn’t a backstage to retreat to, but simultaneously the sense that as an audience member, you’re not given agency in your access to the space. In the end, the performer exits the apartment through the front door, leaving the audience behind.

Freud situated the uncanny firmly in the domestic sphere by focusing his analysis on the German word “un/heimlich” (un/homely).⁵⁸ In its current use, “heimlich” can mean both “cozy” and “secret”. In the second sense, it refers to that act of concealment – in a bourgeois sense, maybe, specifically from strangers who shouldn’t be privy to intimate familial knowledge. The uncanny is also referred to as a feeling of claustrophobia.⁵⁹ I called the performance a “Kammerspiel” to refer to this sense of confinement and loneliness in a “Kammer”, a small space in the home. As suggested by some audiences, the entrapment felt in this space may not have been an empowering message about femininity and domesticity - it doesn’t offer a way out of

⁵⁸ A. Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, p. 23.

⁵⁹ A. Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, p. 39.

the confines of the home. I think, however, that the intimate, small setting is required for this sense of the uncanny. The physical proximity is a confrontation, and it feels like familiarity and unfamiliarity at the same time. It ties in with the frameworks of comfort we build in the bourgeois/nuclear family and how susceptible they are to becoming strange and threatened or threatening. I think it is scarier to be close to a performer than when they are further away from you - considering boundaries around touch, the polite distance we usually keep from each other in public spaces, and being able or unable to protect yourself from a certain energy or intention. I enjoy the violence in the proximity, the direct eye contact and I enjoy haunting a space in this way. I don't think the piece belongs on a bigger stage, not in this version. Twilight, shadows, empty homes... it is absolutely supposed to be scary specifically as a femme person in that space. The fear is intimate.

Another meaning of "unheimlich" is not being 'at home' in an experience. Here, Vidler refers to the essay *The psychology of the uncanny* (1906) by Ernst Jentsch when he says it is "a fundamental insecurity brought about by a "lack of orientation", a sense of something new, foreign, and hostile invading an old, familiar, customary world".⁶⁰ In the May version of the performance in particular, the feeling I projected was not being at home any longer where I once was at home - in the stories of my family, as a prized possession, as something to be proud of. My sense is that, in the framework of this performance, I'm a stranger entering the space and that I'm not at home where I'm performing. The idea of betrayal finds another possible origin here and relates back to issues the audience had with trusting my position in the space. In his analysis of Herman Melville's short story "I and My Chimney" (1856), Vidler writes the following:

⁶⁰ Ernst Jentsch, 'Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen', *Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift* 22, 1906, p. 195, as cited in A. Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, p. 23.

This need to veil the source of dependency was mirrored in the narrator's resistance to deciphering or interpreting this hermetic chimney. [...] By this means, a kind of tacit treaty was reached between the subversive and comforting powers of the house, allowing it, during the life of its owner at least, to remain a home.⁶¹

The necessity of keeping something sealed reminds me of the vital balance between restraint and excess in mourning performances, as described by Guy Cools in *Performing Mourning*. When the performer exits the apartment, she closes the door behind her - preventing the ghosts from being released into time. The idea that sealing something off is required so that the place can stay a home; the "resistance to deciphering" so that whatever it is can stay concealed, at least while I'm still here; an agreement between the subversive and the comforting powers of the house; this all seems apt to describe the dynamics of the uncanny as they appear in *Yours Now*.

Fractured Time

Yours Now is about queer domesticity - as both a utopia and a dark space, as "a problem of intimacy and inheritance" expressed through "rhythm and sequence".⁶² A key reference for me was the memoir *In the Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado, which features a haunted house at its center. Moving through 146 chapters organized into parts I - V, the memoir tells a story of domestic abuse in a queer relationship in a nonlinear and fragmented way. Each chapter of the book takes on a different genre: *Dream House as Folktale Taxonomy*, *Dream House as American Gothic*... the narrator both hides and reveals herself and the facts of the case through these genres. It was an interesting reference for me because it is a book written from memory, but unusual for a memoir in the way it addresses the unreliability (actual and presumed) of the narrator from a few different standpoints, including political and legal. Maybe 'fragmented' isn't the right word for its structure – the puzzle pieces have been

⁶¹ A. Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, pp. 43-44.

⁶² E. Freeman, *Time Binds*, p. 44.

arranged meticulously, each labeled and attached to a key concept. It's very intentional. It's just that it is not a chronological, subjective account, and doesn't aim for either seamlessness or cohesion. This connects back to the refusal of wholeness that I already mentioned in connection to masochist performances by female artists such as Yoko Ono. Machado addresses this herself, in the chapter *Exercise in Style* (135), writing that the narrative structure is a mirror of how the situation is breaking her down - it is like saying, with Ono, that it will not be sublimated into wholeness.

There is something tricky in here, too, about the seductiveness of fragmentation, the dark addiction and voyeuristic pleasure that I get from reading the memoir. It is not *because* she is queer that the narrator is unreliable. The safe, monumental, invisible time of the domestic sphere becomes fractured, piecemeal and dangerous not through the queerness of its inhabitants, but because of the violence they enact. Machado addresses a similar issue, in *Dream House as Queer Villainy* (48-49), when she talks about characters in popular culture (Disney, Hollywood, and beyond) that are coded queer with their campy behaviors, extravagant fashion, or general outsider status. She says how she both loves and hates them: They are made into "metaphors for wickedness and depravity" but are also often the most colorful and powerful characters on screen. Ultimately, 'queer' is morally neither good nor bad, it is just one way of being, and so the characters - just like real people - should not need to be depicted as more depraved or more upstanding than their straight counterparts to find a place in the story. At the same time, it is clear that Machado uses strategies of storytelling that are subversive to heteronormative time and space. Truthfully, the genres of horror, suspense, and the uncanny, as narratives that play on the boundary of dream and reality, seem painfully apt to talk about something that many people don't think is real in the first place.

A tension between reality and haunting also plays out in the central setting of the Dream House. The house is symbolic of a dream of domestic bliss, the making of another life outside of the dominant narrative. At the same time, it is a place of entrapment for Machado as the victim of abuse. The house is haunted in a way that has all of the characteristics of the uncanny: “It’s a bizarre mix of money and trash: like the belongings of a fallen aristocratic family” (just like Poe’s House of Usher) and: “There is something desperate about the house; like a ghost is trying to make itself known but can’t.” (71) Finally, in *Dream House as Haunted Mansion* (116), Machado realizes that she herself is the house’s ghost: “you are the one wandering from room to room with no purpose, gaping at the moving boxes that are never unpacked, never certain what you’re supposed to do.” I find this moment very powerful as a realization of how the unstable position of a ghost, between material and invisible, between present and past, between fact and fiction makes it difficult to know how to behave, how to speak and relate to the space that you’re in.

For the making of *Yours Now*, the most important chapter of *In the Dream House* was *Dream House as Mystical Pregnancy*, in part III (145). Machado starts experiencing pregnancy symptoms in the Dream House but rationally knows she can’t be pregnant since she hasn’t had sex with anyone who could impregnate her. The sentence “You cannot be pregnant, you cannot be pregnant, you literally absolutely could not be pregnant under any circumstances” leads to footnote number 39:

Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, Types T511.1.3, Conception from eating mango; T511.1.5, Conception from eating lemon; T511.2.1, Conception from eating mandrake; T511.2.2, conception from eating watercress; T511.3.1, Conception from eating peppercorn; T511.3.2, Conception from eating spinach; T511.4.1, Conception from eating rose; T511.5.2, Conception from swallowing worm (in drink of water); ...

This list is both a neutral index and a fantastical poem. It is immediately funny because it is absurdly long (presenting 40 different motifs in total). For *Yours Now*, I took this list of possible ways to get pregnant in folk tales and paired it with a movement score. The list of possibilities is naïve, both more innocent and more sinister than conception through sex. There is the pain of that impossibility, too – the fact that you can't get pregnant from a pearl or a mango or from fucking another cis woman. The arbitrariness of impregnation in these ways is unsettling: People who can become pregnant spend a considerable amount of energy on attempts to prevent it or control the circumstances, and then it comes at you from everywhere anyway - from the sky, from the earth, from the food, from a wound - possibly not even as fact, but as projections onto a femme body. This list is another instance of the tension, in *Yours Now*, between trying to protect myself from something, versus letting it happen, submitting to it. It is also a moment of humor because I spontaneously try to mime what this might look like – eating a mango, eating a woman's heart, conception from moonlight, and so on. It is almost like presenting an index (like a *Motif-Index*), a moment of explanation. It creates legibility. Most importantly, though, this sequence is not just about violence coming from all sides and being helpless to it. There is also a taste of possibility in the delicious eroticism of fruit, rain, dragon hearts and honey. I think this is why Machado loves queer horror and sci-fi narratives and possession stories so much, too – the body realities they describe are beyond normative scopes in a terrifying way, but also full of possibility.

Repetition and theatrical time challenge the purity and singularity of the present moment, as well as the successive logic of heteronormativity. Through queer acts of revision and the re-encounter of the performance with itself, *Yours Now* deals with the (im)possibilities of bringing multiple times into the present moment. The performance

is structured through compulsive returns and doubling, and makes time a spatial problem through evoking the forces of the uncanny underneath the comfort of a domestic setting. This happens in the movement, text, and spatial layers of the performance. Considering queer temporality as a methodology and contextualizing my work within a tradition of unreliable narrators and pseudo-encounters shows me both the pain and the possibilities of being 'out of sync' with dominant time.

Chapter 3: Phantom Touch

(*Yours Now*, December)

You enter a room in the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague on an overcast morning in early December. Opposite the door is a window, and below it are three sofas arranged in a half circle. Positioned within this half circle, there are a table and a chair, and a woman is lying under the table, seemingly asleep. She's wearing a bright red pantsuit. Next to the table, there is a pair of pink slippers. On the table sit an empty water glass and a pink plastic container. You squeeze to fit on the couches among your fellow audience members. The light in the room is sparse, casting everything in gloomy twilight, contrasting with the bright red suit of the woman under the table. It's silent for a moment. Then, the woman under the table stirs and seems to wake up. With a sudden movement, she unfurls and lifts her head to look out from under the table and directly into your eyes. Then she crawls out from under the table and steps into the slippers. Sits down heavily on the chair, places her hands on the table, and faces the audience.

After its premiere in May 2022, *Yours Now* was shown for a second time at the MA DOT Showcase in December 2022. For this version, I reorganized the performance to be more focused on choreography, and reduced the score to movements primarily on my hands, head and face. This was by necessity, as I had to adapt the piece to a new space that I would not be rehearsing in; however, it also allowed me to focus on what interested me most, which was the vocabulary that was stored in my body. I liked the idea that I would be entering an unfamiliar space and making the performance appear and disappear through my body. I worked on bringing the sense of the uncanny with me instead of locating it in the conditions of the setting. The script was also changed:

It became a story of mother/sister/lover, and anecdotes from my grandmother's life were almost entirely cut. I believe I edited it in this way because I wanted to bring the performance material into a different kind of immediacy - closer to myself, less composed of recollections. There was a contradiction I was still trying to resolve between proximity and distance - somehow, I needed the material to become closer to the present even as I still spoke about death. This near removal of the figure of my grandmother actually seemed to take away many of the problems I had with imitation or mimesis: Somehow it allowed me to uncouple the material from the pressure of theatricality, which had burdened me even as I found its contradictions exciting. The performance still took place in a small space, now with the audience stationary on the couches in front of me. In the following, I will detail how the choreography of the performance was shaped. How did touch become a language?

Physicality through Grammar

Seated at the table, the performer establishes eye contact with the audience. Tips her head slightly, raises her eyebrows with a smile. She changes the angle of her head to look at someone else. Then lifts a finger, takes it to her mouth as if thinking. Her movements seem to start as one thing and then turn into another; are suggestive or provocative and then offhand, meaning nothing in particular. She is tracing the face as if trying to understand its shape, meeting it with her hands. There is a moment of miming pulling something down the throat and into the stomach; bodily noises: sucking, suckling.

If *Yours Now* was an attempt to make performance from memory and ask how remembrance plays into performance, its contradictions mainly play out through the body. Seo-Young Chu's concept of postmemory has offered me a framework to make

the potential multiplicity of the present moment, as explored in the previous chapter, palpable through the body.

“Han” is a word used to describe a grief or melancholy that is specific to Korean culture and remembrance. It is characterized as a latent, repressed emotion of anger and sadness in a people that has a long history of oppression by and forced dependency on larger nations (Russia, China, Japan, or the U.S.A.) and today is marked by the traumatic separation of North and South. “Postmemory” is a term that Chu borrows from Marianne Hirsch; it describes the phenomenon of re-experiencing something that someone else experienced first-hand. In this way postmemory is different from traumatic flashback, which is the re-experience of something you experienced first-hand. Postmemory is like a transference of memory between the minds and bodies of different generations. People experiencing postmemory are often in exile, removed both in time and space from the locale of the original event. The central question Chu asks is: “How is it possible to grieve for something that one never knew firsthand?”⁶³ She seeks to answer it by describing how works of sci-fi literature make postmemory available to representation by literalizing some of its aspects as extra-natural. Her focus lies on the works of Korean-American writers and artists: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s experimental autobiography *Dictee* (1982), Jane Jeong Trenka’s adoption memoir *The Language of Blood* (2003), Nora Okja Keller’s novel *Comfort Woman* (1997) and Suji Kwock Kim’s poetry collection *Notes from the Divided Country* (2003). Each of these artists experience han at a remove - distanced in time by being second generation immigrants and distanced in space by not living in Korea - and yet as immediately as if they had struggled through war and oppression themselves. Postmemory han is a specific form of postmemory because han itself is hard to define,

⁶³ Seo-Young Chu, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep? A Science-Fictional Theory of Representation*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2010, p. 188.

and yet physically manifests in the bodies of Koreans, even as a recognized medical condition. In each of these works, Chu finds science-fictional ‘figures of speech’ that make the mechanisms of postmemory han appear through characters, devices and scenes. The figures of speech that Chu uncovers in the science-fictional grammar of postmemory han are metonymy (the mental association between two things that are closely related), the lyrical use of the simple present tense, invocation of the muse and apostrophe (addressing a person or object that is absent). I will focus here on metonymy and simple present tense as inspirations for *Yours Now*, and define where my approach differs from postmemory han especially in its use of apostrophe.

The first example, metonymy, illustrates the haunting and uninvited force of postmemory han as “[defying] the unwillingness of those involved to participate in the remembering”.⁶⁴ Neither the descendents nor the forebears explicitly want to experience postmemory han, yet it is not a force they can negotiate with. In a similar way, metonymy works by conflating two things with each other that are closely related yet not the same thing (for example, a house and its inhabitants). Chu gives an example from Trenka’s *The Language of Blood* where an adopted child longs for the landscape of Korea despite never having been there. In the narrative, it is suggested that the child can experience han because it was transferred to her through the blood of her biological mother. The child doesn’t even have a word for it and doesn’t understand where her longing and melancholy are coming from - “but nevertheless it climbed up from the other side of the earth, through the bottoms of her feet, and was crystallized in sadness at an impasse in the throat [...]”.⁶⁵ In the same way that metonymy works by mental association of two things that are close together and yet

⁶⁴ S.-Y. Chu, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?*, p. 194.

⁶⁵ Jane Jeong Trenka, *The Language of Blood*, Graywolf Press, 2005, pp. 237-238, as quoted in S.-Y. Chu, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?*, p. 195.

cannot be directly compared, postmemory can not be directly compared to memory; the child never knew the world that was lost, “the body that starved was not hers”.⁶⁶ The memory belongs to the parent, and postmemory to the child, and they are closely related yet not the same insofar as the child and parent are related yet not the same. The experience of postmemory han collapses that distance, and in this sci-fi narrative, this is literalized in the transference of han through blood.

The second aspect of science-fictional grammar, the simple present, introduces a mode of temporality in which the categories of past, present and future become multidirectional. The simple present is the tense most characteristic of poetry, although it is rarely used in spoken English to refer to actions taking place in the present (the present progressive is more generally used in these cases). Where poets use the simple present without specifying the time of an action, it makes it seem like it is taking place in an eternal present outside of habitual time; unchanging, un-passing no matter how often it is read. The action is “neither single nor repeated”⁶⁷ (which, as discussed in previous chapters, is also true of theatrical time). Chu uses the simple present as an example of how grammar in poems about postmemory han can make its subjects exist in many directions of time at once.⁶⁸ The Korean-American telepath in Suji Kwock Kim’s poems “experiences the present as the future of a long ago past—a past as immediate to her as it would be if happening now”.⁶⁹ This reminds me of the mechanisms of erotohistoriography, which, following Freeman, “does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid”.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ S.-Y. Chu, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?*, p. 196.

⁶⁷ S.-Y. Chu, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?*, p. 202.

⁶⁸ S.-Y. Chu, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?*, p. 202.

⁶⁹ S.-Y. Chu, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?*, p. 203.

⁷⁰ E. Freeman, *Time Binds*, p. 95.

Finally, the last figure of speech that is literalized through science-fiction is an atypical use of apostrophe. An apostrophe is a rhetorical device through which the speaker addresses “an absent person, inanimate object, or abstraction as though it were present, animate, and concrete”.⁷¹ This dynamic is central to works that deal with the particular grief of han - the absent people and places, for example across the DMZ, can be addressed only *as if* they were present. The mechanisms of postmemory, however, make the absent people and places immediate - it is thus “defined as much by presence and life as by absence and death”.⁷² When the subject invokes what is absent, it is not *as though*, but literally - subverting the logic of apostrophe and becoming dialogic in nature. This telepathic conversation can make other forms of intersubjectivity appear, so, for example, in the chapter structure of *Comfort Woman* by Nora Okja Keller, which alternates between daughter as narrator and mother as narrator. A reader remembers both viewpoints in the spaces between the chapters, thinks of each narrator simultaneously as an “I” and a “you”, which creates “the ghostly yet palpable effect of intersubjective consciousness”.⁷³ In poems by Suji Kwock Kim, Chu identifies three concrete forms in which this particular telepathy can be expressed through grammar. These three forms are second person narration, secondary first person, and what Chu calls “reflexive secondary first person”. In a case of second person narration, the speaker addresses the absent person at the same time as the experiences of that person are present and knowable to her. In the case of secondary first person, the speaker uses first person to talk about another person’s experience - the object of the apostrophe becomes the speaker themselves. Lastly, through “reflexive secondary first person” the ancestor speaks to the descendent by using the

⁷¹ S.-Y. Chu, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?*, p. 205.

⁷² S.-Y. Chu, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?*, p. 206.

⁷³ S.-Y. Chu, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?*, p. 207.

descendents own voice.⁷⁴ In each of these grammatical forms, a reader starts to wonder who is speaking, and who is being addressed. There is the text as it is, and then there is a sense of a “reverse-text” that we perceive “shimmering behind”⁷⁵ - it becomes a kind of composite text in these multiple directions of speaking, the two and more times in which we are placed when we read or hear the text.

Tomorrow my sister will leave. I'm already scared of her leaving. I'll find myself alone with my mother who has gotten into the habit of grabbing my face and kissing it with such intensity that I have to turn away. The performer is sitting upright at the table but there are small twitches in the face, gestures that seem almost involuntary. Imagine you're sleeping with her again after years and there are stretch marks on her waist and stomach. And then you put into words what you already know, because it's an irrevocable and powerful fact, and it's that she has had a child. Presumably, without you. She reaches over and extracts a pearl from the pink container, then drops it into the water glass. She stares into the glass for a while, the audience follows her gaze. Steal your sister's bike / And ride it deep into the grove. She sits up forcefully, transitioning into a series of movements that are like a readjustment of machinery or ribbons; retching and blowing away, extracting. Clicking the tongue, sighing. Hiding the face, fingers in her mouth.

Reading Seo-Young Chu's work on postmemory han in science fiction, I was struck by the connection between language and body, the possibility of physical sensation through grammar. I felt that both how the artists and writers use fiction to represent the phenomenon and how it can become apprehensible through the text itself, for example in the perception of a “reverse-text” underneath what is on the page, was relevant for

⁷⁴ S.-Y. Chu, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?*, p. 211.

⁷⁵ S.-Y. Chu, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?*, p. 211.

the performance I wanted to make. The performativity of *Yours Now* is built primarily around negotiating between the text and the body; the physicality of the piece focuses on the head, the neck and the face as primary locations of language and the mind. Especially the images of postmemory han as creating an “impasse in the throat” and “climbing up through the feet” (in Trenka’s *The Language of Blood*) stayed with me. Further, the guttural, visceral nature of postmemory han was inspiring for how I use self-touch to insist on discomfort both for myself and the audience. In putting my hands on myself, I am pointing simultaneously to the fact that there is no one else to touch - the ancestors are absent, I don’t have access to the memory - and yet somehow, through how touch makes things material, they are not, and I do.

The very inaccessibility of other times to touch guarantees a binding that cannot be reduced to the literal, the physical—yet cannot be thought otherwise than with the erotic at the center.⁷⁶

Freeman’s concept of erotohistoriography as a mode of rewriting events is less a mode of recalling and referring back to the past than it is an understanding of the present as already unstable, comprised of multiple possible times. Crucially, erotohistoriography performs the encounter with other times through a body that imitates - unstable, slippery, erotic. Schneider’s work in *Performing Remains*, Chu’s on *Postmemory han*, Freeman’s in *Time Binds* and to a certain degree Rayner’s in *Ghosts* all connect in this moment of ‘confusion between you and me’. This was one of the main things I wanted to evoke and work with: a confusion around who was speaking and who was being addressed. The confusion between ‘you’ and ‘I’ shows up on the narrative level, but also in how I subtly change subject position as I speak; becoming each other, taking something into my body that didn’t want to be there, identification to the point of overlap, becoming more than one. Specifically for *Yours Now*, it also addresses how

⁷⁶ E. Freeman, *Time Binds*, p. 127.

the performance encounters itself through repetitions: 'You' and 'I' are possible ways of addressing myself at different times, which is a strategy that Machado uses *In The Dream House* and Keller in *Comfort Woman*. Postmemory has presents the possibility of dissolution of a bounded self, and in *Yours Now*, I respond to the threat of that with violence or rejection (basically, not wanting to become my mother). These aspects of postmemory can connect to temporal leaks in (re-)embodiments, or the act of reaching through time and across bodies in erotohistoriography. This shifting reality is also connected to the idea of "reverse-texts" underneath - or makes it possible to think of them, to perceive them.

Possibly the most important quotations for *Yours Now* are found in this passage from Cha's *Dictee*, in which the protagonist addresses her ancestors thus: "Tell me the story / Of all these things."⁷⁷ But instead of telling her the story, the forebears take over her organs of speech and speak literally through her:

She allows others. In place of her. Admits others to make full. Make swarm. [...] Inside her. Now. This very moment. Now. She takes rapidly the air, in gulfs, in preparation for the distances to come. [...] Now the weight begins from the uppermost back of her head, pressing downward. It stretches evenly, the entire skull expanding tightly all sides toward the front of her head. [...] The delivery. She takes it. Slow. The invoking. All the time now. All the time there is. Always. And all times. The pause. Uttering. Hers now. Hers bare. The utter.⁷⁸

"She allows others. In place of her." This is how the absent person would take over the body of the performer: By her allowing entry, permitting someone else to step into her place. I thought about this often, being swarmed from the inside. There is a sense of being haunted by something, the uncontrollable nature of it; an improbable proximity, blood memory. The two actions or images that may come closest to materializing this

⁷⁷ Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee*, University of California Press, 1982, p. 11, as quoted in S.-Y. Chu, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?*, p. 205.

⁷⁸ T. H. K. Cha, *Dictee*, pp. 3-5, as quoted in S.-Y. Chu, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?*, p. 205.

genetic and blood connection are: In version one of *Yours Now*, the nails, which store DNA, as they are broken or filed down to ash; and in version two, the action of spitting onto the pearl to insinuate conception. The repetition of “now” - returning over and over again to the immediacy and impossibility of the present. The past is exerting pressure on her in order to become the present. Most notably, it is exerting pressure on her head, and the text tracks where the weight presses. This image is what some of the movements of my hands on my head derive from. The imagery used to describe postmemory has also been a core reference for the idea of ‘excavating’ something from inside the body – although the word may be imprecise for *Yours Now*, as I am less methodically processing and much more intuitively rupturing in my gestures. However, there is a strong aspect of turning inside out – things that come from inside of my body and will be carried to the outside in a reversal of containment. This tension between internal and external reality is crucial to what the choreography communicates, and opens up the question of who is being addressed - whether that is the audience, the performer herself, or people who are not present. The energy that is stored in that one word, “now”, is like a command that I respond to while I am performing. “Yours now.” Now. There is no other possible time to do this in, yet I don’t seem to fully exist in this one either; repeating gestures I have performed before, projecting myself into a future to continue living. “Preparing for distances to come.” Even while those absent are entering the narrator’s body, she conceptualizes them as distances, not quite reachable, which contradicts the supposed lucidity of “now”. The utterances change ownership towards the end of the passage: “Hers now. Hers bare.” This, of course, is a connection to *Yours Now*, which presents the idea of a child taking over the narrative of a previous generation that had been exerting pressure on her mind and language.

Finally, there are some crucial aspects in which my approach to movement diverges from the logic of postmemory. “As [...] many Korean American artists show in their work—postmemory han is no abstraction.”⁷⁹ No abstraction - meaning it shows up literally, on the body. The literal body versus the metaphorical body: In these sci-fi narratives, the telepathic powers are not a metaphor but, as part of that fictional world, actually happening. Postmemory han is an interesting reference for creating choreography because it is all about literalizing on a physical level, which performance does. However, while science fiction makes the literal dissolution of ‘you’ into ‘me’ possible, I’m not in science fiction. What I had to do was translate where I couldn’t literalize. It almost felt like the solitude and impossibility of dialogue are more central to *Yours Now* than a moment of literal invocation. The distance that is violently challenged in the experience of postmemory han is still very much present in *Yours Now*. The impossibility to become one and the same, to collapse the distance, to tell the story right, to remember correctly - I think that is at the core of it.

Ghosts on the Body

Carrying mother on my back
Just for a joke.
Three steps: then weeping –
She’s so light.

Ishikawa Takuboku⁸⁰

A joke becoming heavy, a mother becoming light. An interrupted movement – first I think the speaker of the poem might fall from the weight, realize they can’t carry their mother – but it’s that they *can* carry her, too easily, that makes them stop in their tracks. It feels like she is there one moment, on their back – then suddenly, gone. And they

⁷⁹ S.-Y. Chu, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?*, p. 204.

⁸⁰ Matthew Ogle, ‘Pome | Carrying mother on my back’ [email newsletter], 26 March 2023 (accessed 16 August 2023).

may not even know where to – because she was on their back, out of sight. They may not have seen the exact moment she disappeared, may have missed her departure. It's by sensation that we lose her, not by sight. "She's so light" seems to mean "she's not there" – or, "she's ill". A weight lifted and its absence becoming heavy is the paradox here.

Distanced in time and place from the loss of my grandmother, the grieving process was deferred or inhibited. This process was bound up in the making of *Yours Now*. I was alone, and only able to touch what was absent on my body. This extended to thinking of my body as a transient presence, an unreal experience. I thought about what it may mean to think of performing as an act of reaching into the unknown, being stationed at the edge of what is visible and material. "Phantom Touch" is an established medical term that describes the continued experience of sensations in parts of the body that have been amputated or surgically removed. I apply my own reading of this deeply human, mind-body problem by developing an approach to movement that works through touching what is not visible.

Phantom Touch, as a movement language, is about ghosts on the body. The places they might find to inhabit. I think repeatedly about that hollow, valley, crest on top of the cheekbone and between bone and eye. A place to sink into. Places on the body that make it possible to slip into, take over, fill up. Places that seem like an invitation to fit your hands to them: Hollows / entrances / spaces between fingers, hands, mouth and head / where the breath can exit / controlling how it exits / the mouth and the navel / a theme of *almost*. The sensuality of self-touch is crucial to the dynamic. It's liquid, that desire to touch what isn't there; it's warm like affection and cold like want – cool like revenge, actually. Fingertips, the whole hand, sneaking through an arm bent at the

elbow. Places to fit yourself into on a body that is no longer there, or to imagine on my own body where someone absent might be hiding. Hiding places: The dark matter of the body and the vast inner sphere and mud that I can't visualize while I work. The tension between trying to make the outside expression precise and calculated while the insides are working away, red, warm, wet and uncontrollable.

In engaging with what is absent and implied over what is apparent and concrete, the choreography of the piece seeks to question the dominance of the visual and the equating of visibility with truth. It follows the idea of going via negativa to arrive at a physical expression. This is one way to engage with theater as an art of appearances: As theater refuses to accept a dichotomy between visible and invisible, the imaginary and the real and requires a simultaneous apprehension of what is and is not there, as elaborated by Rayner in *Ghosts*. Considering everything I have looked at so far - the problem of authenticity as it relates to bringing back something that was done before, the force of the uncanny that resides just outside of view, and the presence of other bodies on the body of the performer through postmemory - I can say that I don't think the idea of 'making visible' is important to *Yours Now*. In this piece, my body works through and catalogs touch that is past, missing or imagined, in many cases only alluded to (like an impossible pregnancy, unacknowledged inheritances, or a blood child that will never materialize).

Devising the choreography was a negotiation between what is written down and what occurs in response to my own touch, between structure and improvisation. Repeating the text with each performance, I am not improvising - I am repeating the words in the exact shape and rhythm in which I put them down. The script provides a tight dramaturgy which is my basis for being able to open up for movement in between - air,

sounds, gestures. This is what I conceptualize as 'writing' both with words and hands – the movements of my hands remind me of punctuating, of threading a sentence together, keeping a storyline taut. In a similar way to a vocabulary of words, the movements are like a set of symbols, an ad hoc system of connecting signs.

The notion that all bodily practice is, like language itself, always already composed in repetition and repetition is, paradoxically, both the vehicle for sameness and the vehicle for difference or change.⁸¹

The repertoire, following Diana Taylor, is a non-archival, embodied system of transfer - a way to remember through the body ("a corporeal mnemonic").⁸² As Schneider points out in *Performing Remains*, performance became married to death and disappearance in the 80s and 90s through the work of Phelan and Schechner - almost as if it were preferable that something disappear entirely rather than be restaged or re-enacted as lesser. Schneider argues against the live as disappearing, and the dichotomy between the body as faulty and forgetting versus the archival document as remembering and preserving. She situates the act of recording in the body through the idea that repeated gestures remain as embodied knowledge. She suggests that the imprints of codified behavior make it possible for a performer to step not only forward but also backward in time when imitating a gesture.⁸³

Performing *Yours Now*, I am reaching into a depository of actions that I've stored through repetition. The performance uses a repertoire of gestures that I can't trace back entirely to where they come from – they are both encoded and not, repeatable and not. What differentiates a movement from a gesture is that a gesture is in reference to something outside of itself, addressed to someone or something, while movement can be without reference, even unconscious. Decoding the positions and orientations

⁸¹ R. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 10.

⁸² E. Freeman, *Time Binds*, p. 71.

⁸³ R. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 10.

of the head and hands is both intuitive and highly cultural, shaped through representations in art and media. This also allows me to start a gesture in a recognizable way - for example, by resting my chin in my hands or licking a finger - and then turning it into something stranger, less readable.

[W]hat is the time of a live act when a live act is reiterative? To what degree is a live act *then* as well as *now*? Might a live act even “document” a precedent live act, rendering it, in some way, ongoing, even preserved?⁸⁴

Most of my rehearsal process was not documented, but rather I shaped the movements through repetitions. All the gestures that I inevitably forgot - where did they go? Following Schneider, the mistakes made in trying to get something ‘right’ expose something vital about the act itself. Building physical memory through a repertoire and its necessarily changing nature is a way of learning. In Schneider’s words, this is how performance holds “the resilience of the seemingly forgotten (that nevertheless recurs); the domain of error and unreliability known as flesh memory in the embodied repertoires of live art practices”.⁸⁵ Not sealing events and actions into the archive, but staying ‘unreliable’ instead, is an act of resistance in line with the works of queer artists that Halberstam champions in *The Queer Art of Failure*.

In my rehearsal notes, a word that kept coming up was “sticky”. Schneider, via Sara Ahmed, also writes about stickiness to think about emotional resonance across time:

A viscosity that does not sediment in a body as singular nor exist as completely contained, stickiness is a leaky, even fleshy descriptor suggestive of touch (and being “touched” or “moved” become monikers of affect that signify a between bodiness [...] of emotion that can jump, or travel, in time as well as space).⁸⁶

⁸⁴ R. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 37.

⁸⁵ R. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 6.

⁸⁶ R. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 36.

Touch and time make stickiness. The word describes the 'between' state that you land in looking for a liquefaction of feeling over getting trapped in static or physical fact. The text of the performance uses images of water, sand, breath, fog, red as blood, repetition - and yet on the textual as well as the physical level, I am getting stuck in a lie, or stuck haunting a liminal space. The performance feels "sticky" to me on multiple levels: Sticky in the awkwardness and doubt, sticky in the repetition of things that I didn't have full control over, sticky in the evocation of mother and grandmother, how their habits stick to me, the sticking of my own gestures to my performing self and vice versa, the stickiness of shame. Stickiness as related to memory as metonymy ("my mother leaks and I catch it"). What I didn't consider in my engagement with the body as site of recording is that the gestures, like retching or pushing and pulling on my head, would have a physical effect on me beyond the immediate moment. They rippled through me even after and made me tired and disoriented – especially because the audience was so close to me and because I didn't stage the work on a classical stage, a space markedly separate from life. Even though the container of the performance was construed as separate, neither the performer nor the audience can keep the spaces of 'life' and 'performance' wholly distinct. My body didn't make that distinction on a more somatic level - on a level that works both faster and slower than the thinking mind. This seems obvious but was a blind spot for me. It seems obvious, at least, once you start thinking in a feminist way about bodies and materiality and even time – that no one space is distinct from the other, that entanglement is the condition of living things.

I will now look at specific parts of the body (as well as objects) to see how the principles of Phantom Touch were expressed.

The mouth

Language is simultaneously abstract as conceptualization and physical because it is made by the mouth and the tongue. The mouth touches, but doesn't, because it speaks, which is abstract. The mouth is a place of entry into or exit from the body; as Blocker writes, its "meanings may be arranged on a spectrum whose limits are contained by the civilized (the spoken word, the breath-borne soul) and the barbarous (spit, vomit, biting, sucking, eating, kissing, screaming)".⁸⁷ Putting things in your mouth is an act of transgression and regression, even, to an infant or toddler stage of development. There is something naïve about it in that way. There are some reversals happening when I gag or spit - things that were supposed to move in another direction or stay contained move past the border. Within its vocabulary, I would argue that *Yours Now* places vomit and spit on the same plane of meaning as literal words. The meanings of spit in particular: It can be connected to disgust, disrespect or disbelief, the throwing out of something, as well as lubrication, kissing or contagion. When I spit onto the pearl in the water glass, it is a focused action in a series of movements that are less readable or scattered. It joins the pearl in becoming something strangely crystallized, compact and non-bodily perfect; while the transparency of glass stands in contrast to the mystery of pregnancy.

The head

With some of these gestures I seem to be touching invisible threads or substances around my head and face. I hold it between my fingers, the audience follows it with their eyes, then I drop that imaginary substance again. What do we interpret these

⁸⁷ J. Blocker, *What the Body Cost*, p. 20.

substances as? Often, the origin point of my movement is the mouth, which seems to point back to bodily fluids like spit. The gestures remind of veiling, assembling, sewing, stringing (along); I think it plays on a tension between hiding and revealing, but also has connections to composing something - for example, in writing. The focus on the head, as mentioned before, further reflects the preoccupation with mind and memory as a contained space, mostly a game of language. The sense organs are places to soothe or invade (eyes, lips, ears, nose). Touching the head in the ways I do brings out child-like feelings – echoes of having my head held, the stroking of hair, someone wiping food off my face, kisses to the cheek. Being gentle on the jaw, one of the body's strongest muscles, also brings out a kind of surrender.

The hands

The hands and the fingers hold, grab, grasp, point, reach, speak. They call in, hide the face, slap the face, pull. I suck on my fingers, I mime smoking and stroking, I make them into the shape of a gun. As discussed above, the hands, together with the face, is where I can play most directly on codification and move between legible and illegible gestures. The hands both process and send out information, are points of connection to the outside world. Elizabeth Freeman, in *Time Binds*, introduces the concept of “the lesbian hand intervening in history” by pointing to the emphasis on hands in *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf; in this work about gender-bending and time-travel, the protagonist's hands “invoke the pleasures of both reading and writing history”.⁸⁸ The erotic connection of hands to both reading and writing are present in *Yours Now* through the choreography and the engagement with fiction in the text. It also reminds of the holes in history, the gaps in the archive that Machado talks about in *In the Dream House*.

⁸⁸ E. Freeman, *Time Binds*, p. 123.

Sticking a lesbian finger into these holes in history could be a way of penetrating the silence and reorganizing what is and isn't considered touchable / tangible. Further, the direct pressure that an index finger (and other fingers too) can apply - insert a finger, push a button, effect an action. And also conversely - stopping something with a finger (breaking the flow of water or wind, interrupting a sentence).

The last physical component I want to consider are the **fingernails**. On a surface level, I use the nails in their connection to learned behavior and as signifiers of sexuality - in reference to the popular assumption that long nails mean you have sex with men and short nails mean that you have sex with women. I also use the nails to evoke dead skin cells, DNA, and ashes. Throughout the performance, I am in a kind of conversation with myself as I bring my hands to my face; this makes breaking my nails on the floor an even harsher gesture. It is an aggression directed towards the part of my body that I use to communicate or reach out to others with. The hands and nails can be gentle, but in this action they twist and become dangerous until they become useless. When I file them down, in the first version of the performance, it is also a kind of reparative or re-normalizing gesture after the nails have been split and became jagged on the ground. Nails can scratch in both harmful or pleasurable ways. Filing them is like a return to normal behavior but it's a threatening gesture at the same time because I'm sharpening them. In the nails, I see most directly an aspect of the physicality of *Yours Now* that is present throughout: Violence paired with gentleness, the thin line between the two at times. It makes me think back to masochism as unbecoming and untethering from patriarchal reality, via Halberstam:

She refuses to cohere, refuses to fortify herself against the knowledge of death and dying, and seeks instead to be out of time altogether, a body suspended in time, space, and desire.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 144.

People who have recently lost someone have this look on their face, recognizable only if you've seen it on your own. It's vulnerable, open, lost, as if they've stepped into bright sunlight from a dark room. They look naked like this because they think themselves invisible. She touches her face as if afraid to make contact, then covers her mouth quickly. Sighs, makes sure her head is intact. Pushes invisible things out, moves her hand in front of her face as if to test that she can see it. I remember leaving notes. Around the house of her first wife. These notes I made in breath, not writing. Her hands trace the surface of the table until they disappear again off the edge. Her eyes are closed. There are small shakes, sighs, the tensing and releasing of small muscles on her face. Then she slowly turns her head back to the wall, fixing her gaze on a black and white photograph of a woman fixing a veil on another woman's head. The performer gets up and walks to the wall, then curls up with her back to the audience again, head resting on the slippers.

No, now - Darius Atefat-Peckham: *to touch a ghost*

Through a closer look at the images and dynamics at play in this poem⁹⁰ I want to illustrate the workings of Phantom Touch and how it can be expressed in language and grammar. This allows me to bring some threads from previous chapters together: ghosts, doubles, time and touch.

The first sound was the quieting
of my fingers brushing
the first, brief shocks of hair
from your head. Still. There
when our father said
we had five seconds to cry
before he'd get angry
or cry himself.

⁹⁰ Darius Atefat-Peckham, "to touch a ghost", Chicago, IL, *Poetry Foundation*, 2023, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/159434/to-touch-a-ghost> (accessed 16 August 2023).

The first problem the poem introduces is between time and touch: “First”, “brief”, and “still” as opposed to “quieting” and “brushing.” The short, fleeting moments in time are juxtaposed with a quality of touch that is ongoing: quieting and brushing are active processes, as indicated by the present progressive tense. The speaker of the poem starts with themselves, with the perception of their own body - “my fingers.” The parts of the body that feature here are the hands and the head. The senses are hearing (“sound”, “quieting”) and touch (“fingers brushing”). The central contradiction of this part of the poem is between what remains and what is aborted: “Still. There” and “five seconds to cry”. The father interrupts the slow pace of the first few lines by giving an ending point, but in the reality of the poem, this ending point remains forever in the future. Every time I read it, there will be another five seconds. There is a sense of staying suspended in those five seconds. There is a parallel in the text of the performance, quoted from Chantal Akerman’s *My Mother Laughs*: “She speaks with such an overt sentimentality that me and my sister have to stop her. We stop her just in time.” For the comparison with Phantom Touch, the problem of time is crucial, as is the reference to the senses, and the contradiction between what remains and what is aborted.

Am I
both or neither of us
now? My fingers through your hair
aren't so much fingers
anymore. My touch not so much
touch. Only breeze, your dark hair
like mine, this absence
you'll hear now and for the rest of
our lives.

“Am I both or neither of us now?” This is the central question that Chu asks about postmemory and that concerns Schneider in *Performing Remains*: When ancestors take over the organs of the children to speak to them from the past, or when a gesture is repeated to touch time in at least two directions. The choice here is,

interestingly, between being “both” or “neither”: Either I am both of us, or I am not at all. This is reinforced by the words “Your dark hair like mine” – an instance of confusing one for the other, being a mirror image, which is again an aspect of postmemory and also comes up in *Time Binds*. There takes place, now, a negation: “My fingers/ [...] aren’t so much fingers /anymore. My touch not so much / touch.” This disappearing and becoming less in touch seems like an expression of Phantom Touch. “touch. Only breeze” mirrors the line in the script of *Yours Now* towards the end: “When I breathe onto her face, it’s only a breeze.” The touch is not visible, but it is felt, but still doubtful, not quite concrete enough. The next interplay of senses is between vision and sound: “this absence/ you’ll hear”. The confusion between the senses is striking because it makes the experience seem everywhere at once, even though it is an absence. “You will hear now” announces something that is yet to happen but already predicted to last for an entire life. It belongs to the past but also, through you, to the future, as long as you still have one. There is something anticipatory about the poem even as it speaks about something that is lost or still lingering: The past is liable to return. And crucially, the experience of this “now” that exists as the multiplicity of time is both individual and shared, both interior and external: *you* will hear the absence for the rest of *our* lives.

Half-drowned
tree in the lake shrouded
in mist. Listening, beyond
the doorway of that haunted
shore where you wake
from every dream, our mother saying,
I speak with the dead. If I can

This part of the poem adds dreamlike, ghostly images, takes us out of the immediacy and familiarity of touch and into environment, setting. It paints the picture of an in-between space from which one might reach out into the unknown, like in performance. Much of this poem talks about sound in lieu of vision - apprehending through the ears instead of confirming through sight, a more subtle route of perception and possibly one

more useful for tracking ghosts. How it undermines the connection of visibility to truth, and the need of immediacy for relationship, is another way in which the poem illustrates Phantom Touch. Here is also another parallel to the script of *Yours Now*: The haunted shore: “if I get this story right, I’ll make a shoreline in the driveway” and the mist: “I’ll see the fog of the living”. Both lines are quoted from the poem *Fiction*, by Keith Leonard. “Mist” or “Fog” are used here to assert that something exists, even though we usually think of fog as obscuring. The haunted shore of this poem both obscures what you are looking for and presents a doorway. Lastly, “where you wake /from every dream” seems to mark a return to reality. What woke you from the dream? Is that my mother speaking? Oh, no, that is my voice. I missed her again.

If I can
reach and hold across this always,
these galaxies, your forehead
like a steaming cup
to my lips. If I can mouth my silent swan-
song into you, know this without
my saying it: Brother,
lend your ear. There are many
different ways to sing yourself
to sleep.

At first glance the use of “if” presents a hypothesis rather than a concrete reality. However, it’s not if I *could*, it is if I *can*. It is less the yearning for something impossible and more like saying, “If this possibility is already established, then there are many different ways to sing yourself to sleep. That’s what I deduce from that, and you know it’s true.” In Phantom Touch, the logic is similar: If for the duration of the performance I believe that I can touch your absence on my own body, then this is what follows from that. Lips and steam, lips and smoke - the speaker is touching disappearance with the mouth. ‘Mouthing’ is silent but the words are still spoken. The image of ‘mouthing’ in the poem is crucial to the understanding of Phantom Touch: Forming the words with

my mouth is like touching something, making something appear, and yet sometimes I wonder if it needs to be heard, become apparent in that way. Even while I was saying things out loud, sometimes I thought they should merely be mouthed. “sing yourself / to sleep” suggests the absence of a parent who would sing you to sleep, which reminds me of how much of what I am doing by touching my face is replacing someone else’s touch.

*Like in your head? Our father pleads.
No, she mouths. Like I’m speaking
to you now.*

Beyond the father’s attempt to re-establish the line between reality and imagination, the last part of the poem also involves a very concrete problem with time: She says, “like now”. Imagine it *like* I am speaking to you now. Except: she is mouthing it, not speaking. Another version of that line could be: *As if* I was speaking to you now. This is where the aforementioned difference between Postmemory han and Phantom Touch is illustrated: I can not literalize, only translate. “Like” points to a closeness through comparison, but likeness is not the same. Further, there is a contradiction in the last two lines that both negates something and makes it appear: No – now.

I took from Chu’s concept of postmemory han the idea that memory expresses itself physically in the body, and examples of how this can be described in language; the confusion between you and I; the idea of reverse-texts that are implicit in the changes of perspective; and the image of being swarmed on the inside by someone else’s story. Phantom Touch is the name I gave to my approach to choreographing *Yours Now*, which centers on the hands, the head and the mouth and works to define a relationship to what is absent and unseen. The choreography focuses on these parts of the body as the loci of language, allowing me to work with a system of both codified and illegible gestures. It addresses the tensions between internal and external reality, between the

collapsing of distance between different generations versus the resistance to this dissolution of the self.

Chapter 4: Erotics of Absence

(*Yours Now, December*)

Tomorrow my sister will leave. I'm already scared of her leaving. I'll find myself alone with my mother who has gotten into the habit of grabbing my face and kissing it with such intensity that I have to turn away. She speaks with such an overt sentimentality that me and my sister have to stop her. We stop her just in time.

What I'm trying to decipher in this chapter is why I decided to make a piece that brings together mourning and sex; what is erotic about loss, and why I am expressing that through performance as a medium that deals with absences. How might the eroticism of grief be comparable to how desire works in (this) performance, both on the performer and the audience? I will look to answer these questions mainly by considering the use of language in *Yours Now*, moving between text, speech and gesture.

Double Vision

In *Eros the Bittersweet*, her treatise on eros as a phenomenon in Ancient Greek poetry, Anne Carson describes the experience of the erotic as a triangulation: Desire moves between the lover, the beloved, and the distance between them. The Ancient poets understood eros as a force from without, an assault on their individual selves;⁹¹ as a breach of the boundaries of the body that made it possible to perceive the edges of it, producing the pain of separateness. While the poet reaches out toward the object of their affection, it is understood that they can never arrive: "Space must be maintained or desire ends."⁹²

⁹¹ Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay*, Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 12.

⁹² A. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 28.

Carson demonstrates the dynamic of triangulation through an analysis of Sappho's *Fragment 31*, in which the poet watches from afar as the object of her affection speaks to a man: "He seems to me equal to gods that man / who opposite you / sits and listens close / to your sweet speaking." The poet looks at the man, who is looking at the girl. The girl looks back at the man and not at the poet. As the poet simultaneously imagines themselves in the position of the man and makes sure to stay at a remove, it is this third component, the distance, that plays a crucial but paradoxical role in the geometrical figure:

[I]t both connects and separates, marking that two are not one, irradiating the absence whose presence is demanded by eros. [...] And something becomes visible, on the triangular path where volts are moving, that would not be visible without the three-part structure. The difference between what is and what could be is visible.⁹³

Following Carson, the absence of something makes desire 'visible' or possible as a force. And as a person who desires, it is crucial to maintain that distance - "the difference between what is and what could be" - otherwise desire ends. Either it no longer pulls on you, or you are destroyed by contact with the thing that you want. The dynamic of eros complicates ideas around presence and absence through the empty space it both necessitates and produces. In the triangulation of desire, the locus of what we want is unreachable. But does unreachable mean the same thing as absent? Distance is between me and something I want – it exists, I can perceive it. Absence is something not being there at all – or being somewhere, but not here. Distance describes the relationship between two entities, absence describes the state of one. Distant doesn't mean unreachable, but absent is unreachable. Distance and proximity are dynamic, absence is absolute. Distance places the object in the same space of experience or perception (like seeing something in the distance). Absence removes it.

⁹³ A. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 21.

On a material level, *Yours Now* engages with absence and lack through emptiness in the setting: A stark reduction of objects, empty chairs, an empty room, bare walls. On the level of movement, absence is expressed in moments of near-touch, in hands ghosting over the face, and the solitariness of the performer on stage. There are attempts at making herself absent: Hiding under a table, disappearing under a couch, beginning and ending with the back to the audience. The piece creates a lack by referring back to the past and to people who have been lost (reaching back in time, but not arriving); and on another level, it creates a distance between elements of the performance in the present, in the moment of performing. These are some of the gaps created within the performance, as uncovered in the previous chapters: In Chapter one, the distance or difference that is present in theatricality as mimesis, the distance felt from the 'original' or 'true', and following from that, the distance that opens up in refusal and a failure to connect; in Chapter two, the force of something that is liable to return in time, concealed and yet present; and in Chapter three, the methodology of touching what is absent and undermining the link of visibility to truth. On the level of narrative, *Yours Now* deals with absent people and the idea of the absent original in imitation. It deals with death as an absence that is final, seemingly non-negotiable. Grief is an experience of the erotic because it is about loss; there is something erotic about the dynamic between what is there and what is no longer accessible. Eros, just like grief, makes a person experience the boundaries of their self. Reaching to touch what is beyond our limits (presuming that I, while alive, cannot reach into death) teaches us about what we lack; makes us notice that hole in the self. Lack is an identity-constituting element of our lives; grief means that something or someone we used to define ourselves in relationship to is no longer here. Were we other than we are, we might be able to reach across that distance; as it is, we cannot.

The empty spaces of the performance were produced through the experience of loss, through my grandmother's literal absence. And they were supposed to draw the focus to what we cannot see and yet feel. They were also produced by my curiosity about that theatrical movement "from nothing to something". A state of nothingness is assumed to lie beneath acting: When you stop acting, the character disappears. Since it is mere infelicitous imitation, there is nothing behind it. Only in the accident on stage does 'the real' emerge. It's not true that there is 'nothing' before the performer enters or starts to speak. Other genres of performance work by calling attention to what is already ongoing - in the setting, in the surroundings, or between people, or between objects. But in the case of *Yours Now*, the content of the performance rests almost entirely inside the body of the performer. This is further amplified by the estrangement of the performer from her setting. If I don't make it appear, it does not appear. This vertigo in the possibility of nothing - it's very alluring, a bit addictive.

On a more metaphysical level, absence is crucial to theater as a medium. In *Ghosts*, Rayner writes about theater as an art of appearances that has a complex relationship with visibility. On stage, we are dealing with materialized objects, situations and characters that are simultaneously there and not there; an audience is asked to suspend disbelief about what they are seeing in front of them. The paradox is that these apparitions are material but require a certain mode of attention to be recognized: "a certain line of sight that can perceive the mysterious thing that is distinct from, yet embodied by, the theatrical object".⁹⁴ Rayner also calls it "a kind of stereoptic double vision".⁹⁵ How might this certain mode of attention – being able to see both what is and

⁹⁴ A. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 21.

⁹⁵ A. Rayner, *Ghosts*, p. xxiv.

what isn't at the same time – be comparable to how desire works in Carson's analysis of Eros?

[A]n edge between two images that cannot merge in a single focus because they do not derive from the same level of reality—one is actual, one is possible. To know both, keeping the difference visible, is the subterfuge called eros.⁹⁶

In a staged situation, there is a distance between at least two things that do not derive from the same level of reality - one is actual, one is possible. Possible in the sense that it is potential, but not material. The performer is and simultaneously isn't what they are performing. Perceiving both of these images at the same time while witnessing a performance is to be in this space of erotic charge. Carson calls it a subterfuge: "a trick or a dishonest way of getting what you want". This also points to the act of constructing the triangle: Desire doesn't just happen, you have to fabricate the situation in a certain way so that the actual and the possible are both visible and can be moved in between "without losing sight of the difference".⁹⁷ Rayner further uses the phrase "sideways glance"⁹⁸ to describe the perspective required. This makes me think of looking at history from a different angle like queer artists who work erotohistoriographically; yet, these works seem to collapse the distance in their encounter through the body, experiencing something vicariously, creating "a pseudo-encounter not worried about 'pseudo'" while theater and the dynamic of eros as described by Carson actually emphasize the aspect of 'pseudo', the fabrication of it all; comparable to what Sontag says about Camp as a mode of "seeing everything in quotation marks". Postmemory has also collapsed the distance, violently; but in *Yours Now*, while the piece is inspired by these approaches that posit an actual touch across time, I feel like the separation between what is actual and what is possible was more central to what the piece communicated. I think this is how the piece is theatrical: in its insistence on the

⁹⁶ A. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 50.

⁹⁷ A. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 107.

⁹⁸ A. Rayner, *Ghosts*, p. xxii.

discrepancy. A crucial point for me is this idea of “marking that two are not one” - the fact that desire reaches across a space but stops short of taking hold.

So imagine this. Imagine only sleeping with women for years. You haven't seen a dick in years, just hasn't been near you. And then one day, you wake up, and you're convinced that you're pregnant. That's just what it is, you're pregnant, that's just what it is. How is this possible, immaculate conception? Except it's not immaculate at all, it's actually dirty as hell, you feel dirty as hell taking this test. And then the test is negative. Because of course it is.

Imagine you're sleeping with her again after years and there are stretch marks on her waist and stomach. And her belly button is turned out a bit, different from how you remembered it. And her nipples are larger too, different from how you remember them. And then you put into words what you already know, because it's an irrevocable and powerful fact, and it's that she has had a child. Presumably, without you.

Sappho in her fragment 31 superimposes one level of desire upon another, floats the actual upon the possible, in such a way that our perception jumps from one to the other without losing sight of the difference between them.⁹⁹

How does the audience make this difference a possibility? Would the presence of the audience be able to fill the empty space between the actual and the possible, or not? Might the audience itself be a blank space for the performer - a space of projection and possibility?

Sappho's *Fragment 31* is a poem concerned with placement and displacement. The “man who listens closely” is necessary to the poet's experience of the girl's beauty - were she in his place, looking directly at her, she'd be destroyed. He functions like a

⁹⁹ A. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 107.

mediating presence, or a safe-guard, or a witness in place of the poet. The presence of the audience to a performance produces a displacement of the performer's attention: By being a third space, the audience produces the dynamic of stagedness, and this opens up the necessary distance between what the performer is and what they want, between who they present as and who they are. A performer on stage 'floats the possible upon the actual' (in reverse to what Sappho does above) while remaining conscious that "two cannot become one" – the performer cannot become what they say they are, as collapsing the difference between these two (or more) possibilities would eradicate the impossibility, the walk on the wire that the audience came to watch. Thrillingly, it's both in concrete reality (I move, in action) and takes place in the imagination. The perception of an audience jumps between these two levels of reality. This is the double vision required by the stage, and the doubt that, following Rayner, has to be kept active, that has to be kept in circulation. If the performance works deliberately with artificiality and theatricality, and is not interested in tricking the audience that something is happening 'in real life', then that distance somehow has to be maintained. If you're interested in keeping the space of the performance and the space of 'life' distinct.

"[T]he boundary of flesh and self between you and me. And it is only, suddenly, at the moment when I would dissolve that boundary, I realize I never can."¹⁰⁰ As a performer, I work to maintain this space in-between: in-between emptiness and fulfillment, at the same time as I seem to be at pains to overcome it. If the stagedness of the encounter between stage space and/or performer and audience is a layer of fictionalization, and this is required for theatrical doubt, I can't collapse that distance and become known, because my desire to be known would immediately disappear. This also applies to the

¹⁰⁰ A. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 30.

distance between myself and what I am performing as. I will not dissolve that boundary; I realize I never can. It is an issue both of 'finding the edge' of myself and never wanting to reach the edge of 'me', not wanting ever to dissolve because this would destroy my longing. This tension needs to be upheld in order to express my desire to you. If you were not here, I would not be at such a distance from myself (my mind not split in two), but I also would have no demands (no want).

I think the audience is not just mediator, conduit, witness but shows up with their own desire to be in that in-between space of knowing yet reaching beyond knowing. The audience, too, is rehearsing behavior that has been done before. They, too, might be repeating gestures of being witness to something, forming part of the ritual that is made from past script and yet happening "again for the first time". Not only the performer experiences and creates the gap/ the hole/the distance, but also the audience watching the performer's actions, the non-reality that the performer is conjuring/positing. You want what you are seeing to be true, simultaneously you don't, because then you can't long for it. The performer displaces something - maybe the locus of 'truth', maybe one time into another - but the dynamic of desire and unfulfillment comes in with the audience. The triangulation of desire, as elaborated by Carson, throws us back on ourselves, and we can see ourselves looking. This estrangement may be comparable to the moment of "unforgetting" - recognizing something that one is seeing for the first time.

If you were to die, if you had died, or if you'd been hit by a car and lay dying, would I have gotten on a plane? Would I have flown eight-thousand-plus kilometers? And if I had taken that flight, what would I have done when I got there, other than cry? [...] I would have donated a lung to you, a kidney, my liver too, of course I would have.

Would have removed my pancreas without local anesthetic and let you lay your head gently on my lap. I would have given it to you, I'd give it right now, and maybe that would be a good way to apologize, ask for forgiveness, an unquestionably concrete way. I'm sorry, here, have a kidney.

If we follow the trajectory of eros we consistently find it tracing out this same route: it moves out from the lover toward the beloved, then ricochets back to the lover himself and the hole in him, unnoticed before. Who is the real subject of most love poems? Not the beloved. It is that hole.¹⁰¹

Between text and speech

Language, as a technology of naming and describing, is inherently a distancing tool. Turning something into a code or metaphor gives us the “pleasure in mastery over objects of the world”;¹⁰² it bridges the gap, the edge of things where we can't fully grasp them, and makes them into something that can be used and rearranged. The distances and gaps created in the process make language a medium very suited to making a sense of longing play out. In *Eros the Bittersweet*, Carson details how learning to read and write requires a containment of self in order to channel one's energy into text. By closing off the senses to the outside environment, resisting dissolution into their surroundings, a reader or writer becomes aware of their interior world as separable from the exterior world. As elaborated in *Phantom Touch*, the choreography of *Yours Now* with its focus on the hands and the head as tools points to that contained space of mind and memory that is required for an engagement with the written word. This requires a lot of self-control; as a consequence, extreme stimulus from the outside is perceived as an attack on their individual integrity.¹⁰³ The Ancient poets that Carson

¹⁰¹ A. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 30.

¹⁰² A. Rayner, *Ghosts*, p. 16.

¹⁰³ Compare A. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 37.

analyzes were writing from this newly found sense of physical vulnerability which arrived with the advancement of the Greek alphabet:

The poets represent eros as an invasion, an illness, an insanity, a wild animal, a natural disaster. His action is to melt, break down, bite into, burn, devour, wear away, whirl around, sting, pierce, wound, poison, suffocate, drag off or grind the lover to a powder.¹⁰⁴

Because I say leaking is another word for saturation. Our mother leaks and I catch it. Any border is merely a boundary, an offer of more space to transgress. Any boundary is merely a margin, a place of leaping, of silt. I receive with a wide mouth, stomach pebbles on an ocean floor. My mother leaks and I catch it. She says I am not in pain.

When do we start thinking of ourselves as dead? A few days before she passed, she was writing a note to herself. But she wrote it in very faint pencil. Barely making a mark.

In a live performance, we usually think of the spoken word as disappearing with the passage of time. In pronouncing words, we move one syllable at a time. This makes speaking a temporal process.¹⁰⁵ Writing, however, fixes an object in time. Reading, then, is equally “an experience of temporal arrest and manipulation”.¹⁰⁶ A reader steps out of the flow of time in reality to focus on words which will remain as they were put down, and can be returned to in this way. “A piece of ice melts forever there.”¹⁰⁷ This links back to Chu’s analysis of the simple present tense in poetry: how without specification of location and duration, the reality of the poem seems suspended outside of our own. In postmemory han, this tool creates the possibility for a

¹⁰⁴ A. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 97.

¹⁰⁵ A. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 81.

¹⁰⁶ A. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 81.

¹⁰⁷ A. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 81.

multidirectional experience of time. The lesbian hand of *Orlando* intervenes in time and rearranges it through writing and reading. The text of *Yours Now* plays with this idea of control over time in the way that it is composed of fragments that could be rearranged - the text doesn't tell a linear story, so the meaning wouldn't change if they were in a different order. Yet: The text is spoken in the same way each time. Remembering the text of the performance is one aspect through which it is controlled. It requires the discipline of memorization. For me, this was vital to keeping the internal logic of the dramaturgy throughout the performance. It reminds me of how Rayner states that theater is made through "the force of remembrance"¹⁰⁸ - how repetition and memorization are deeply embedded in each other as ways of knowing that constitute the practice.

Fragmenting the narrative and making it possible to rearrange it and produce the same result is not just the refusal of wholeness that I saw, for example, in Ono's *Promise Piece*. It also denies the linear progression of time to say that time, under my control, does not pass in a linear way, which would lead to someone's death, which I refuse. No - now.

If a magic trick isn't done perfectly, the magic simply doesn't show up. And for a lie to work, it has to be inserted at a specific point in the narrative. And you need to have a relationship to the truth; you need to know what you're not saying.

I want to return to this dynamic found in the last few lines of Atefat-Peckham's *to touch a ghost*: The tension between the words 'no' and 'now'. The absence created by

¹⁰⁸ A. Rayner, *Ghosts*, p. xvi.

withholding some crucial information is also exemplified in the chapter *Traumhaus as Lipogram of In The Dream House*:

It's hard, saying a story without a critical part. Thinking you can say what you want as you want to, but with a singular constraint.[...] A woman hid my *thing* and I can't find it again.¹⁰⁹

The second chapter of Rayner's *Ghosts*, "Tonight at 8:00: The Missed Encounter" talks about how performance, by creating an artificial moment of 'now', creates an awareness of "the impossibility of ever really being in time for the beginning".¹¹⁰ It points to the gap between perception and consciousness that forms part of the theatrical experience. Rayner posits that through the double perception of reality and representation on stage, performance rehearses a missed encounter with the present that we are continuously trying to "awaken to". This idea of disrupted time / gap in perception also shows up in the very first part of the script of *Yours Now*: "She speaks with such an overt sentimentality that we have to stop her. We stop her just in time." We stop her - *in time*. This interruption creates a suspension in the flow of time, much like the father's interruption of the children's crying in *to touch a ghost*. The instance of "There/ when" presents a rupture to the processual time of "quieting" and "brushing". I also see a missed encounter with the event of disappearance in Takuboku's *carrying mother on my back*: one moment the speaker is carrying her on his back, the next she already seems too light.

As Rayner tells us, both Freud and Lacan in their concern with the discrepancies between reality and dream use the same example of a father waking to his son burning in the next room. Both retell the dream without saying who dreamed it - maybe because it doesn't seem relevant, or the origin point simply got lost. She describes it as "[a]

¹⁰⁹ Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House*, London, Serpent's Tail, 2019, p. 136.

¹¹⁰ A. Rayner, *Ghosts*, p. xxxi.

series of displacements from the missing dreamer”, in which each displacement “repeats the missing encounter in the act of telling the story of the missing encounter”.¹¹¹ It reminds me of the simultaneous absence and presence of the figure of the grandmother in *Wstyd*, an ungraspable origin point for the relationships that follow. This is what it feels like to speak the script of the performance: There is a missing origin point in each of the pieces of text, as it is either invented or taken into my life from someone else’s. The person who dreamed all of this is missing - at the same time, it is me, as the performer of the piece. And it makes me think of that fear of the void - of simply snapping out of it one moment, and realizing you’re in a completely fictional situation, and if you don’t keep bringing the past into the present - performing - then the performance ceases to exist. I enjoy this continuous displacement in the piece. There is a repeated motion towards something, only to turn away from it.

The blind point of Eros is a paradox in time as well as in space. A desire to bring the absent into presence, or to collapse far and near, is also a desire to foreclose then upon now. [...] Meanwhile you are aware that as soon as ‘then’ supervenes upon ‘now,’ the bittersweet moment, which is your desire, will be gone. You cannot want that, and yet you do.¹¹²

Eros is a paradox in time that mirrors some of the dynamics I have spoken about before. For Carson, the moment of desire emphasizes the impossibility to collapse ‘then’ and ‘now’ - it is a want for an immediacy that I cannot support, “a crisis of contact”.¹¹³ Carson describes how this moment that we reach into and never arrive at, where we want to see our own reasoning, is paradoxical and produces a blind point.¹¹⁴ What fascinates me is how the triangular shape of eros is not static, but it moves – it creates a point of instability and contradictions in the moment of desire as it is felt in

¹¹¹ A. Rayner, *Ghosts*, p.13.

¹¹² A. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 75.

¹¹³ A. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 36.

¹¹⁴ A. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 54.

the difference between what is and what could be. No difference: no movement. “There is no stillness at that point.”¹¹⁵ This is what it feels like, also, to want to make something appear - to reach beyond yourself - move outside of stillness. In my case, to start speaking.

Carson, somewhat in contrast to the idea of control in language, presents the shift from literal to metaphorical meaning as a moment of vertigo in which two images are brought together but can't overlap, keep shifting out of focus. In *Yours Now*, an instance of a metaphor that produces this kind of effect is this line: “There will be fog until there's no other place to look at but each other.” Paradoxically, as the fog becomes more dense, the image seems to sharpen. It makes me think of a riddle that can't be solved to satisfaction: How sister, mother, lover all converge in my one body and stay shifting in and out of focus. Is it me who is speaking, or is it my sister, or is it my mother, or my mother's mother? It also makes me wonder whether there is a chance that, even as I keep adding more layers of distortion and opacity, the mutual recognition between the audience and me becomes sharper - creating a moment of vertigo in which there is no other place to look at but each other; no other thing to understand clearly except that we are both somehow here and looking at each other.

Carson's “crisis of contact” seems to contradict what Schneider proposes in *Performing Remains*, and Chu in *Postmemory Han*. Schneider and Chu assert that it is not a paradox but actually a possibility, that ‘now’ is a fraught moment that consists of more than one time, through the sticky nature of the citational gesture or the telepathic force of postmemory han. Is it important to never arrive? Or rather to sit with the discomfort of being in many places at once? Modes of queer temporality subvert

¹¹⁵ A. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 53.

the linear logic of fulfillment or consummation that is so dominant in the dynamic of eros as Carson paints it. I wonder if there aren't more possibilities beyond the one-directional focus of collapsing distance. We cannot touch, which is painful, but we also might be touching at all times...just in ways that slip through the cracks of the dominant narrative? The present as a moment that continually evades us - this is an absence or gap that the performance plays with while I'm simultaneously learning how performance might actually be a mode of multiple possible temporalities. Would it be possible to shift the focus away from that one thing I can't grasp? And instead consider what is becoming present through my physicality, through what my body has stored and equally, what it has forgotten? Through what I can make appear by conceptualizing it as absent: the space between my fingers and my mouth is a gap and yet I am making it appear, making it perceptible.

"Again, now" is an imperative inherent to eros because, as Carson details, there is a necessity to negate change, to arrest the object of desire in its current state and in its current position. In this way, the lover wants to experience the beginning - the first assault on their senses - "again, now". In grief, you have not yet accepted that you will keep running forever since the object of your desire does not exist - so you make it return. You see what is missing inside of you, for an instant, and reach for that knowledge, that moment of 'now'. I want to return to an assumption I made in the dynamic of eros and grief: "Reaching to touch what is beyond our limits (presuming that I, while alive, cannot reach into death)." As I previously discussed in connection to Rayner's concept of ghosts in performance, there is an understanding of theater as playing on that boundary of life and death - the performers on stage, and the images they conjure, being animated and breathing and yet through this awareness of their not-being, that consciousness of theater, also not part of the same reality as the (living,

breathing) audience. Considering this, I may actually, as a performer, be able to reach into death while I am alive. Further, the illusion of control over time that Carson discovers in writing may actually not be an illusion in performance, since the gesture does come back, again and again. This is the problem of repetition that Schneider, Rayner and Freeman contend with: It can't come back, and yet it does - "again for the first time." This is one of the moves at the core of *Yours Now*: Asserting that something should return that was placed firmly in the past; asserting that someone should come back who maybe doesn't want to come back, and doesn't consent to being reanimated or remembered through the flesh; through sexuality. How does this aspect of 'again' interact with the dynamic of desire specifically as it relates to the situation of the stage?

I am thinking about the seductiveness of repeating things over and over, the indulgence and excess that can come with that; and also about the survival tactic of repeating things but differently, or of repeating things so they become embodied knowledge, or of repeating things to keep them 'unforgotten'. Performance both enables this dynamic and undermines it: The framing, the staging of the event points out the slippage in behavior and makes an audience recognize 'againness', recognize that it's not a singular event. It is an event that will disappear in time, but it is also repeated already. As such, we are, in a performance that is staged in this way, aware that we are never stationed at the beginning - at the original act. 'This has been done before' ('this is not a new story') is an interesting notion in the context of mourning and of making things appear through speech. Knowing this hasn't happened for the first or last time - as death is what defines life - but there is a novelty to it, again and again. The desire to repeat something, the pull towards repetition and reenactment - for example in *Wstyd*, at the moment where the mother says to her daughter: "Tell me again, why are you telling me this again?" Somehow this is where grief becomes erotic:

In the experience of immediacy that is simultaneously tied to repetition. The vertigo of repeating and knowing it's not the same, of seeing both what is familiar and what is novel for the first time. It is like being positioned on a spiral staircase that leads in two directions endlessly ... make it stop, do it again. I perceive my mind in this moment of tearing, of seeing two possibilities at the same time and being arrested in the experience of neither. If you ever truly touch, you'll disappear. The erotics of grief is being in that experience of wanting something you can't have, and the insolence of asking for it anyway, of bringing it back and subverting linear time.

One starting point for this project, as mentioned before, was in researching laments and mourning performances. In *Performing Mourning*, Guy Cools describes his experiences working within the tradition of *moirologhia*, an ancient Greek mourning ritual performed primarily by women. The most relevant part for my process was his description of how laments are constructed by walking a line between expression and control: "Highly codified" in singing and speaking and then interrupted by intakes of breath or sobs, non-language.¹¹⁶ Switching between these two states, switching rhythms and dynamics to make the music or voice break apart are "techniques of discontinuity"¹¹⁷ that allow the lament to remain unpredictable and thus emotionally impactful. Formalized language and repetition can be used to capture and preserve; these same tools can also be used to find 'the edge of breath': Through stops and starts, pauses and breaths, the release of breath, holding breath, these structures play on the edges of body and thought as well as on the boundary of individual to community.

¹¹⁶ G. Cools. *Performing Mourning*, p. 41.

¹¹⁷ G. Cools. *Performing Mourning*, p. 43.

Words stay on the page. Speech enters the flow of time. In *Yours Now*, language seems to both fill a void and create a gap or distance. There is a contradiction there that I think the performance plays with. The body 'writes' and documents through movement as much as it speaks and disappears through words. Going from written text to spoken text is an instance of moving between the two poles: of control / isolation and moving on breath / shared. There is also an auto-eroticism in turning something written into something recited / oral. In this performance, what is the relationship of the written word to the spoken word to the shapes of the hands?

"A piece of ice melts forever there"

"again, now"

If this is how written text functions

then this is how moving text works.

Written text produces a suspended moment in time where things can recur and recur as they are frozen in language. Performing text through the voice brings something back to make it part of the fabric of the present in a way that is less controlled, and more prone to leaks and mistakes in repetition. Using a repertoire of gestures that are brought back both systematically and intuitively creates a choreography that writes itself in real time. The approach of 'writing with the hands' is made by the connection of hands and the head to writing and reading, but similarly to speaking, it cannot freeze something in time; it can only recur with a difference. Both static and moving, fixed and improvised, remove and immediacy are part of the vocabulary of the piece. I kept the two modes of speaking and moving largely separate; for most of the performance, I was alternating between them. In this way, the performance both makes the distinction between text and movement, between control and fluidity obvious, and at the same time, through giving both the same weight, it undermines that distinction or hierarchy.

Keeping the distance

The protagonist of *Drive My Car*, directed by Ryusuke Hamaguchi, is a theater actor and director, Yūsuke (Hidetoshi Nishijima), whose wife, Oto (Reika Kirishima), has recently died. Before her death, she used to record the scripts he was working on, leaving silences for him to fill in with his lines. At the time of Oto's death, Yūsuke was rehearsing *Uncle Vanya* by Chekhov; now, three years later, he is invited to stage the play again. He listens to the recordings on his commute to work, immersed in the same lines over and over. The way that quoted text and dialogue weave in and out of each other is a big part of the film. Yūsuke needs to remember his lines to fill the blanks, which makes this recording not merely a thing of the past but a thing of the present. If he stops filling the blanks, the recording will only be a document, and Oto will be dead. He keeps her alive through continuously filling the blanks, which is to say by remembering his lines; he is floating the possible upon the actual. In this way, the protagonist of *Drive My Car* also has something in common with the memoirist of *In the Dream House*: Faced with repetition and haunting, both utilize language to gain control over time.

Yours Now also uses a recording in the May version of the piece: At the beginning and the end of the performance, we hear it coming from speakers hidden in the bathroom and hallway cupboards: "This is my voice, but these are not my words. My mother leaks, and I catch it." A few aspects of speech in performance come through here: Firstly, that you can speak words in your own voice that do not belong to you; a condition actors work with when they are dealing with a script and that I use to destabilize the idea of a confessional performance. The recorded voice heard as part of a live performance makes different temporalities meet, heightens the discrepancy between what the performer spoke and what is recorded; but it also means that other

parts of the text could be recorded; and as we know that the performer is repeating words she has said before, isn't she also a recording in that sense? The second sentence of the recording - "my mother leaks, and I catch it" - points to memory as slippery, the voice of someone as unreliable and the recording as one way to "catch" and preserve but also own someone else's voice. The placement of the same text at both ends of the contained timeframe of the piece is supposed to evoke the potential for repetition - the fact that this performance could start over again, be played back like a recording.

Eros requires lack and the dynamic is a triangulation; both eros and theater require a double vision; one can see its triangular shape expressed in the discrepancy between what the performer is and is not, and the audience that makes this distance palpable and also possible. The erotic lack of the stage situation is the layer of fiction in performance: a distance that the performer works to maintain, as it constitutes a basic element of the dynamics of a stage performance. Without this layer of fiction, desire ends and both the double vision and doubt required for a staged situation collapse. *Yours Now* negotiates this tension through alternating between the illusion of control in written language and the fluidity of spoken words and improvised movement.

Conclusion: The betrayal of fiction

If I get this story right, then I can make my mother's grief melt back into sand. Enough sand to make a shoreline in the driveway. And we can take off our shoes and we can hold them in our hands and we can walk across the shoreline. And when I hold a compact mirror under her nose, I'll see the fog of the living. And there will be fog. There will be fog until there's no other place to look at but each other.

The tagline or subtitle of *Yours Now* is "the magic of grief and the betrayal of fiction". As I understand it, the magic of grief is an example of queer temporality, creating in remembrance an impossible encounter across time. The anger and affect that drive the reinterpretation of a relationship after someone's death are also magical in their transformative power. In mourning as I experienced it, there is an untethering from reality and the stepping out of the timeline of the public clock and into the temporality of body and interiority. The betrayal of fiction, as I define it, is a kind of reversal of this same principle – there is a re-encounter through story that is material, but not; I have a response to the words on a physical level that isn't material, and the words I am speaking aren't true in a material sense.

If I get this story right, I can make something appear. In the excerpt above, the speaker can make it disappear at the same time as it appears. The mother's grief disappears, the shoreline emerges, and then the fog materializes as a sign of life at the same time as it hides things from view. "There will be no other place to look at but each other." This is what the speaker wants, but what the mother might actually say is: "Go back to bed and think of something happy."

“Eros is always a story in which lover, beloved and the difference between them interact. The interaction is a fiction arranged by the mind of the lover.”¹¹⁸ Speaking things into existence requires an act of imagination at each point of the triangle. As Cools argues, the creation of personas and fictional characters means dealing with people who will always be absent, making literature and performance inherently elegiac. *Yours Now* gives shape to absences through the medium of language, through words, and not just by writing to define the absence, but also by trying to bring it into physical space, to perform it. It creates a relationship between the material and the non-material, and points out how the body and language are not separate. The hands speak in a codified system of gestures and approaches to touching myself, to framing my body and manipulating it through violence or softness directed at myself in lieu of situations and people that are not material, that are either fictional or no longer there. Saying something untrue and watching belief and doubt shift in a viewer is an expression of desire. This desire becomes apparent in speaking about it, giving it a shape, and a reinterpretation; and the narrative of the performer is undermined by what opens up in the failure to embody or the refusal to connect. It is a kind of betrayal I experience in living through an imaginary character and having to return to my own life; I think the particular nature of theater as an art of doubtful appearances fits into this, and the idea that if truth is what ‘appears’ as visible, then invisibility and refusal, not-giving can have a generative force.

Deep doubt and its extremity in the confrontation with nothing that is something, with the unintelligible mystery of death, is more than a conceptual position for theatre. The artfulness of theatre needs to raise the hackles of doubt and produce the pleasurable pain of tension between what is and what is not comprehensible, what is and is not living.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ A. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 110.

¹¹⁹ A. Rayner, *Ghosts*, p. xxvi.

Yours Now: I kept thinking, this isn't mine. But it's mine now. It's also yours now. The title goes two ways, concerns both the audience and myself. There is a promise in it that stays unfulfilled through the distances that the performance upholds. As a lament, the performance is unsuccessful on a personal level because it didn't (and doesn't) allow me to integrate the loss – it stays with it, suspends it, repeats it, doesn't enable re-entry into 'linear' time. On the level of performance it intends to show this exact moment and stage of struggle, the impossibility. I thought it was interesting to discover through watching *Wstyd*, too: that the uneasy feeling that you're left with when shame is not resolved, or there isn't a moment of catharsis, is difficult but powerful.

The pleasurable pain of doubt: The doubt that I experience on stage is the doubt I share with the audience. It lies in the distance / gaps between what I am and what I can't be at the same time as I am. It is produced by my potential non-being in fiction. Why was it important to me to preserve this doubt? It is an expression of a bruised kind of desire: The impossibility of getting a story right in order to either mend or forge a connection with mother, sister, and lover is the moment that the performance attempts to show. I am thinking back to what I said in the beginning of this text, to the origin point of my work on the performance: "I felt like all I had was fiction; but that this fiction was bound to be untrustworthy." The image of a child hovering on the border between darkness and light, waiting to be noticed, reflects the exploration in this performance of spaces on the boundary, examining the reality of my own body and mind in closeness to or at a distance from sister, mother, lover. The life of adults that I am sneaking my way into: As a piece about inheritance and family, it reflects the doubt that pervades both continuing or breaking with learned behaviors. Trying to reconcile a desire that I feel guilty and ashamed of with still loving and mimicking the behaviors of mother and grandmother. It is about trying to imagine something different

while simultaneously not betraying someone's memory. Trying to imagine something different and wondering whether my version of reality is always going to be less real, less believable than what I was taught. There may be, underneath the negotiation between being and not-being on stage, a real reckoning with the fear that I am not at all. It's an exploration of where I experience myself as tangible, and where I don't. Where I can touch, and what I can't touch. "Deferred, defied, obstructed, hungry, organized around a radiant absence - to represent eros as lack."¹²⁰

Chu's work on postmemory has presents the possibility of the dissolution of self - Carson asserts in her analysis of eros that the boundary must remain. *Yours Now* ultimately also insists that the boundary must remain, even as other possibilities slip into the performance, especially through movement. I find doubt as a state in which to watch performance generative and exciting for all the faultlines and destabilization it produces in a viewer. I think it's true that it can block empathy; but these qualities of anger and refusal are related to what the performance talks about on a thematic level, which is why they needed to be there. Misremembering, fragmentation and improper recall here are methods to produce a rupture and start speaking; to tell the story of a daughter emancipating herself from mother and grandmother and the shared identity with her sister or lover. At the same time, the movement layer hints at the possibility that I may not have full control over my body within the family; that these other women do pull on me even as I try to assert that I am not them.

So, doubt, distances and failures are crucial to what the performance was trying to do. They emerged through a confrontation or conflict with some of the core problems of theater, like questions of authenticity and visibility, as well as with ideas of what a

¹²⁰ A. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 23.

performer should do, what a performance should provide. In that sense, the queer failures of the performance were interesting starting points to consider the mechanisms of the stage more generally and think about how I was perceived as a performer and why. Ultimately, *Yours Now* claims the eroticism of that difficulty as a motivation to perform; the right to opacity against the demand to provide for an audience; a queer perspective in order to stay outside of linear timeline and archival logic; emotionality and an unreliable, sticky, uncomfortably human perspective against the dominance of objects; and the ghostly and hard to grasp over the primacy of the visual. Through the performance, I confront my body as a repository of memory and material beyond my control and lean into the strange beauty of text over either explanation or silence.

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Appendices

Appendix I

Description of *Yours Now*, May version

Premiere 24.05.22, 15:00, Oblouková 16, 101 00 Praha 10-Vršovice.

The performance is a solo work for an audience of up to 12 people. The framework is reduced to one performer, one empty apartment, a hidden speaker, a set of costumes, a nail file hidden between floorboards. The main elements are text, movement, costume, and space.

You enter an apartment in Prague 10-Vršovice that has been emptied of most of its furniture. What remains is a large table in the kitchen, and a sofa in the living room. The kitchen is lit by under-cabinet strips of light (warm yellow), daylight is coming into the living room through a big window on the far side of the room. It's between 15:00 – 18:00 on an overcast day in late May; the daylight seems faint and somehow far away. You're with a group of about 8-10 other people, and you are let into the apartment by a young woman (who tries to become an invisible part of the crowd as soon as she's completed her task). You file into the apartment, try to get oriented, and ultimately find your place among others standing along the kitchen counters. There is a woman in a white t-shirt and black jeans lying under the table, seemingly sleeping, with her back to you. She's lying on top of a lavender colored leather jacket. There are red leather shorts draped over the back of one chair. You wait. It's quiet, save the occasional shuffling from your fellow audience members, but you can see her breathing. The kitchen is dark, the table is dark, through a doorway you see an empty living room with a wooden floor. Slowly, the performer's feet start scratching at the legs of the table

with small movements, which then extend to the legs of the chair. It seems she's waking up.

The performer traces underneath the surface of the table with her head, like an animal or a child. She looks up as if trying to see through the surface of the table, to see what's going on up top. She peeks over the edge of the table, pulling herself up to look over the edge, then retreats again. Then she emerges from under the table to sit at a chair, suddenly upright, and turns her gaze to the other chairs, empty. She dives under the table again and emerges to sit upright on another chair. She establishes eye contact with the audience and smiles, acknowledges being watched, then dips her head all the way back to look at the audience member behind her. She starts scratching her fingers on the table, laying out her arms elongated, and tapping gently. Moves her head to the side slowly with both hands, gestures towards the audience like *come here*, presses her fingers against her mouth with a smacking noise, and lies down on her own arms.

She flicks something out of her mouth. Presses, pulls, pushes on invisible matter, away and towards her face. A sound recording starts from behind the closed bathroom door: *My mother leaks, and I catch it.* When the sound recording ends, the performer speaks. *Is this a memory that's with me, always? No.*

Then she crawls under the table, emerges on the other side, and gathers up the jacket. She motions for the audience to follow into the living room, where she moves cushions and assigns seats while pulling out pieces of costume from the sofa. She changes from the jeans into red pants and a red blazer. Once she is dressed and everyone is seated, she surveys the group. Then she slides under the sofa to retrieve a pair of pink slippers. *So, my grandmother was a liar.*

She puts on slippers, and starts walking the periphery of the room, speaking to the audience like an actress or a standup comedian. *A famous drag queen was once asked in an interview whether she had ever had a life-changing picnic.* She puts on the lilac jacket over the pantsuit and keeps talking. *For a lie to work, it has to be inserted at a specific point in the narrative. We expect fiction to be controlled for us.* She keeps speaking, walking along the audience and touching individual people gently with her feet in slippers, until she reaches the corner of the room by the window. She peeks out of the window, making people in the audience look out of the window as well. Then she bursts out of the corner, speaking in a tone that sounds less casual and more like anger. *So imagine this. Imagine only sleeping with women for years. And then one day, you wake up, and you're convinced that you're pregnant.*

There hasn't been a memorial yet, so. She pulls off and drops the purple jacket demonstratively, like mocking a symbolic gesture. Looks back at the audience, *I feel like I have to do that again. Because I don't know if you guys fully understand how heavy this thing is.* She drops the jacket again and again, with more emphasis, and closer to the audience. Compares it with the red suit jacket, throwing it on the floor. Then goes to grab the red shorts from the kitchen and throws them on the ground together with the jacket in quick succession. *This one's real, this one's fake. That you see, right?*

She takes off the slippers, gathers the individual pieces of costume, and shoves them all under the sofa. The performer lies under the sofa for a moment with only her legs sticking out comically. Then she emerges again, sitting on her heels. *When I grieve, my mind becomes like a public domain for words, rhymes, phrases, bits of song.*

The performer taps on her cheeks, throat, pulls from the mouth, pulls face to the side with a palm to the nose, patters fingers on the forehead and behind ears, makes a movement like pulling invisible string around her head and across the face on a

horizontal plane. Then she mimes vomiting into her hand, pushes into her chest, there is an explosion from the chest, nose, mouth, kissing fingers, *come here*, tongue. She starts scratching her fingernails across the floor, her body staying close to the floor. Throws herself on her back and reverses, drawing big circles, tapping with one finger. She twists and turns on the floor, forcefully pushing up her pelvis.

Now this is not my grandmother, but it could be. When my desire grows dull, I sharpen my nails. She continues moving in circles, tracing harsh spirals on the ground around her body while repeating the same sentence about desire. Finally, she rolls up quickly to stand and draws her nails up from the floor to scratch on her stomach. *She would say, everyone remember to breathe while Grandmom catches her breath.* Pressing hand to chest, to sternum and stomach. Speaking to the audience now, back in a casual mode – *Actually, I have no memory of how she excused herself.* She attempts a frustrated noise, then pauses.

Wait, let me try that again. The performer screams at the top of her lungs, then looks to the audience for confirmation and nods in approval, like *that's better.* Smiling and laughing, she takes a moment to gather herself and then wanders into the kitchen and sits herself on top of the counter, next to the sink. She leans forward as if tired or recovering, then looks up and is back to a distanced storytelling mode. *Imagine you're sleeping with her again after years.* The performer leans over and spits into the sink. Slides off the counter, lands on all fours, looks briefly into the oven to her left, then takes her head back to lean against the counter. *I didn't write, I sliced her open.* She reverses her position so that her feet are on the counter and she is lying on her stomach on the kitchen floor, head in the direction of the audience.

Is this a memory that's with me, always? No. She scratches and taps the ground softly while speaking, then takes down her feet to curl up on the floor, as if sleeping. After a moment, she gets up again slowly and walks to the doorway of the living room, where

she leans her body casually against the frame. *And she would say: If I was younger I'd go to all the Broadway shows.* Kisses her fingers, come here, like pulling string through the mouth, a bit like making music with her fingers. Motions for a kiss on the cheek or the nose. Taps against underside of the chin. Makes small noises, humming and chuckling. *So there is... conception from eating a mango.* What follows is a forceful miming of different imaginary ways to get pregnant while walking across the room and addressing the audience, laughing sometimes at the impact or sound of an action. Retrieving, swallowing, vomit, penetration, ingesting, refusing, shooting through. She opens the zipper on her trousers and spits into her hand, *I will be right back.* The performer steps into the bathroom and lets water run into the sink. She steps out of the bathroom and stands in the doorway while the water is running, then goes back in, turns it off, closes the door. She returns to the living room in silence and retrieves a nail file from between the floorboards near the sofa. She settles in the far corner of the room, near the window and files her nails for a long moment before memories emerge, which she lists almost to herself. The list ends on: *I remember leaving notes / around the house of her first wife,* which she addresses again to the audience. There follows a repetition of some movements from earlier, like kissing the fingers and the hands moving the head to the back, but much gentler. Tracing the face, touching her neck with the full hand, a motion like removing spiderwebs from the face. Then she snaps out of it, gets up and pulls blue jeans out of the other corner of the room by the window, stepping around the audience to do so. Pulls off red pants and pulls on jeans. Gathers herself, stands with her back leaning on the empty wall across from the audience. *If I get this story right, then my mother's grief will melt back into sand.* Once she finished speaking, she gathers all costume pieces up from under the sofa and piles them into her arms; pulling pink underwear with a Powerpuff girl on it out of the sofa cushions. Then she walks towards the kitchen and into the hallway, where she pauses in the

doorway and starts an audio recording inside the cupboard. *This is my voice, but these are not my words. My mother leaks, and I catch it.* She stands and listens to the audio with the costume pieces held in her arms, then exits through the front door. The audience is left behind in the apartment and eventually led outside by the same woman that let them in.

Description of *Yours Now*, December version

Premiere 03.12.22, 11:00, DAMU Prague.

The performance is a solo work for an audience of up to 12 people. The main elements are text and movement. It is based around a table and a chair, and the objects used are a water glass, a container of fake pearls, pink slippers, a red pantsuit, and a black and white photograph in A3 format. It is a devised work using a script assembled from fragments of novels and poems.

You enter a room on the first floor of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague at 11:00 in the morning. Opposite to the door is a window, and below it are three scraggly sofas arranged in a half circle. Positioned within this half circle, there are a table and a chair, and a woman is lying under the table, seemingly asleep. She's wearing a bright red pantsuit and has her head propped up on her arms, face buried. Next to the table, there is a pair of slippers made from a pink, fake fluff material. On one corner of the table sits an empty water glass. On the other corner of the table, a flat, round plastic container in a bright pink color. The chair has a transparent seat and back. You walk around the table and sit down on the couches among your fellow audience members, squeezing to fit. It's an overcast morning in early December, and the light in the room

is sparse, casting everything in gloomy twilight. The bright red suit of the woman under the table stands out in contrast against this twilight.

It's silent for a moment as you wait to see what will happen. Then, the woman under the table stirs and seems to wake up. With a sudden movement, she unfurls and lifts her head to look out from under the table and directly into your eyes. She holds eye contact like a child, delighted with the intensity of the stare. Smiles. Then she crawls out from under the table, straightens up, smooths down her suit over her chest and walks over to step into the slippers at the side of the table. She then sits down heavily on the chair, places her hands on the table, and faces the audience.

Seated at the table, the performer establishes eye contact with the audience. Tips her head slightly, raises her eyebrows with a smile. She changes the angle of her head, then looks at someone else. She lifts a finger, then takes it to her mouth as if thinking. Pulls in her fingers like a *come here* gesture. The gestures oscillate between casual and forceful, shooting through, private gestures and expressive ones. The movements seem to start as one thing and then turn into another; are suggestive or provocative and then private, meaning nothing in particular. There are movements of pulling something invisible into the face, or rejecting it. She is tracing the face as if trying to understand its shape, meeting it face with her hands. There are fingers in the mouth. Small imaginary objects pass in and out. There is a moment of miming pulling something down the throat and into the stomach; bodily noises: sucking, suckling. Then, looking at one audience member, she starts speaking to them directly: *Tomorrow my sister will leave. A lie needs to have a relationship to the truth. And then one day, you wake up, and you're convinced that you're pregnant.* She is sitting upright at the table almost like someone presenting a business proposal but there are small things that make it seem off - twitches in the face, small gestures that seem almost

involuntary. *And then you put into words what you already know, because it's an irrevocable and powerful fact, and it's that she has had a child. Presumably, without you.* She reaches over and extracts a pearl from the pink container, then drops it into the water glass. It drops into glass with a sound, bounces. The performer sets her chin on her hands to stare at the glass for a while, the audience follows her gaze.

She shifts her eyes to look up after some time and speaks to the audience in front of her, without moving her head. *Steal your sister's bike / And ride it deep into the grove.*

Then she sits up forcefully, transitioning into a series of movements that are like a readjustment of machinery or ribbons; retching and blowing away, extracting. Clicking the tongue, sighing. Hiding the face, fingers in her mouth.

She shifts to sit sideways on the chair and speak to someone directly. *If you were to die, if you had died, or if you'd been hit by a car and lay dying, would I have gotten on a plane?* The performer climbs on the table and continues speaking while sitting on the table, holding on to her foot in the slipper with one hand and the table with the other. She then moves to sit on the edge, with her hands on her knees, looking up to the ceiling. *I still just want to be the prodigal daughter.* She extends her pinkie finger to point at someone in the audience. *You eat when I eat.* Jumping off the table, she moves into miming a variety of imaginary ways to get pregnant: *So there is... conception from eating a mango, conception from eating a lemon, conception from eating watercress.* This sequence repeats some of the gestures that she started the performance with and ends with her leaning on the edge of the table, breathing heavily; then leaning over to spit into the glass with the pearl inside. When she begins to speak again, she moves as if trying to catch something in her fist, in her hand, or in her pelvis. *Our mother leaks and I catch it.* She holds her hands out in front of her, which are shaking. The performer walks over, closer to the audience, and squats on the ground to ask, *When do we start thinking of ourselves as dead?* Crawling under the table and

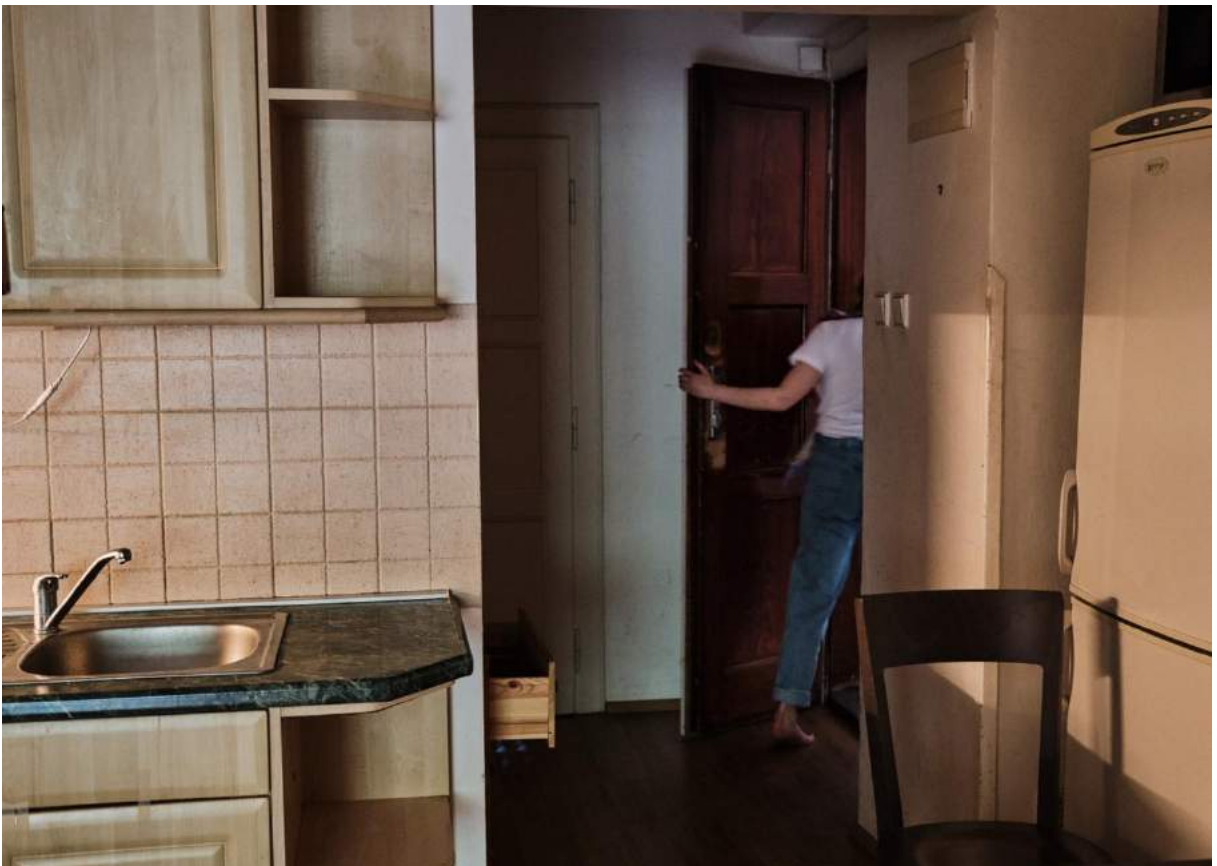
back onto the chair, she breathes out and settles again. Places her hands flat on the table. *If I get this story right, then I can make my mother's grief melt back into sand.* She shifts her hands on the table as if tracing, as if to suggest tiny steps, walking, then she snaps her fingers. *And when I hold a compact mirror under her nose, I'll see the fog of the living.* One palm of her hands is open, on the other hand her fingers seem to be frozen in the moment of snapping, but her pointer finger and thumb are subtly shifting, like testing texture or density. She takes these testing fingers around and towards her face, then returns her hands to the table: *People who have recently lost someone have this look on their face, recognizable only if you've seen it on your own.* Her hands move under the table and onto her thighs. She touches the face as if discovering it or afraid to touch, then covers her mouth quickly. Sighs, makes sure her head is intact. Pushing invisible things out, moves her hand in front of her face as if to test that she can see them. There are involuntary whimpers and sighs. Shifts to look in one direction, resting one hand on the opposite side of the table. Keeps shifting thumb and hand while she speaks, *I remember leaving notes. Around the house of her first wife.* Her hands trace the surface of the table until they disappear again off the edge closest to her body. Her eyes are closed. There are small shakes, sighs, the tensing and releasing of small muscles. Then she slowly turns her head back and to the wall, fixing her gaze on the black and white photograph. In the photograph, we see a woman fixing another woman's veil on her head. The performer gets up from the chair and walks to the wall, takes the slippers off and places them below the photograph. Then she curls up against the wall with her back to the audience again, head resting on the slippers. After a moment, a volunteer goes to open the doors, signaling to the audience that the performance is over.

Appendix II

Photos of *Yours Now*. 28.05.22. Image credit: Michael Lozano



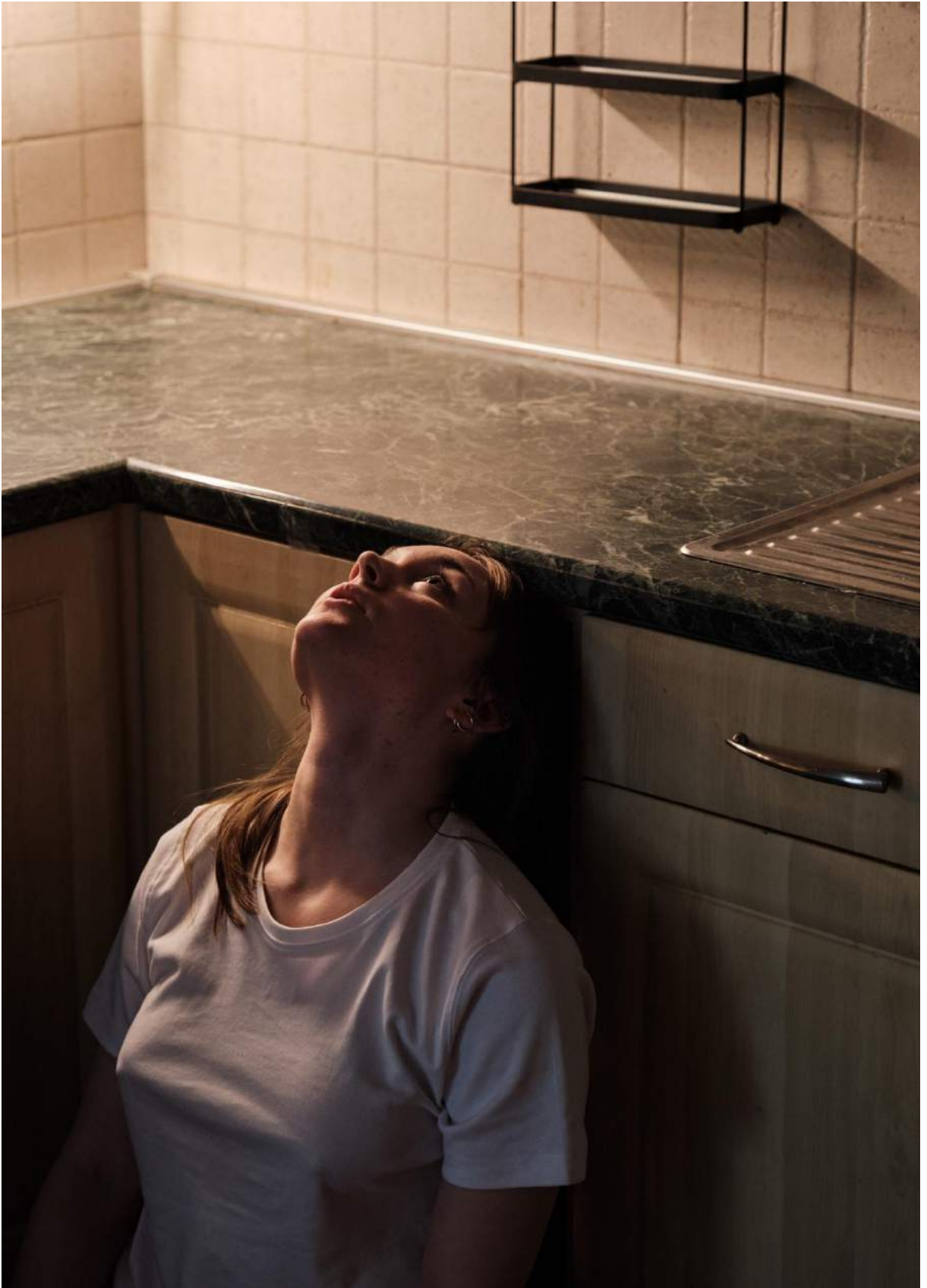




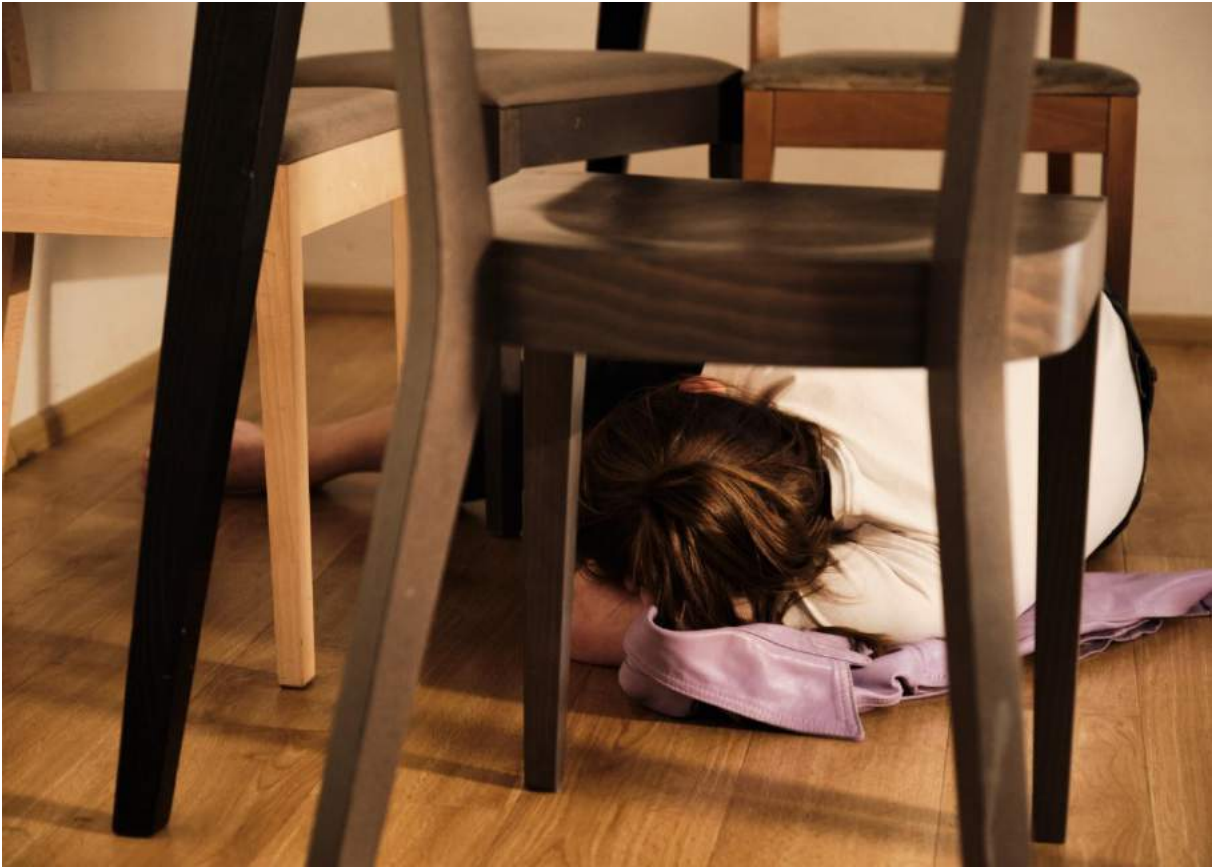




















Screenshots of *Yours Now*, filmed 03.12.22. Image credit: Katharina Joy Book













Photographs used for promotional material



May version: Scanned photograph of my cousin Jenna.



December version: Scanned photograph of my sister Elisabeth.

Appendix III

Script: *Yours Now* – May version

[Recording: I wrote it all down and now I don't like what I've written.¹²¹ This is my voice, but these are not my words. My mother leaks, and I catch it. My mother leaks, and I ca-. My mother leaks, and I catch it.]¹²²

Is this a memory that's with me, always? No. It's one that gets lost for long periods of time until it gets pushed to the surface by some other memory. Flowery beds of ease laid over cursed grounds and unquiet graves.¹²³

So, my grandmother was a liar.

And there is one lie she told that, for some reason, annoys me more than any other. And it's this story she tells about how the best day of her life was on a picnic in seventh grade.

It was a sunny summer day, her whole class went, and they had to cross the train tracks to get to the field - and she says that was the best day of her life. And I just don't think that's true.

A famous drag queen was once asked in an interview whether she had ever had a life-changing picnic. And this drag queen, by the name of RuPaul, knew immediately what the interviewer was talking about and said, Yes. When I was a little kid, my sister, one

¹²¹ Chantal Akerman, *My Mother Laughs*, trans. Daniella Shreir, London, Silver Press, 2019, p. 1.

¹²² Hannah Rubin, 'I say leaking is another word for saturation', *51st Issue - Berkeley Poetry Review*, University of California, Berkeley, 2021, <https://www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~bpr/past-issues/51st-issue/> (accessed 16 August 2023).

¹²³ Margo Jefferson, *Constructing a Nervous System: A Memoir*, New York, NY, Knopf Doubleday, 2022, p. 43 / p. 97.

day, took me out into the garden. And she had a blanket, and we had cookies. And so she sat me down on the grass and said, RuPaul. This is a picnic.

And RuPaul says that was the day that he understood magic. That was it, he understood magic.¹²⁴

My grandmother and RuPaul are a similar age, they're both in their 70s. And I've noticed something that they both do, which is that they will interrupt themselves in the middle of telling a story and go, And now this is a true story. And now this is a true story. And now this is a true story. In that tone of voice? And I just haven't heard anyone my age say that.

For a lie to work, it has to be inserted at a specific point in the narrative. It needs to have a relationship to the truth; you need to know what you're not saying.¹²⁵

If a magic trick isn't done perfectly, the magic simply doesn't show up. In a similar way, we expect fiction to be controlled for us. For someone to draw the line between what's real and what isn't real; between what's true and what isn't true. Because if it looks too close to reality, it's unconvincing as fiction. And so it seems that we agree to being lied to in exchange for the promise that the lie will be convincing.

So imagine this. Imagine only sleeping with women for years. You haven't seen a dick in years, just hasn't been near you. And then one day, you wake up, and you're convinced that you're pregnant. That's just what it is, you're pregnant, that's just what it is. And so you feel stupid, but you go and you buy a pregnancy test. And it's like,

¹²⁴ *RuPaul Answers Increasingly Personal Questions | Slow Zoom | Vanity Fair* [online video], 2019, <https://youtu.be/72AAICa1Nko>, (accessed 27 July 2023).

¹²⁵ Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, Princeton University Press, 2005, p.16.

how is this possible, immaculate conception or something, except it's not immaculate at all, it's actually dirty as hell, you feel dirty as hell taking this test.

And then the test is negative. Because of course it is.¹²⁶

She also said that it was such a shame that none of her grandchildren inherited her red hair. And I'm in the back seat like, I did? I did, right? Grandmom, it was me?

I saw her ashes the other day. Through Skype. And they are kept in what looks like a vase, a big vase? And it's all pretty and pink and floral. And it just sits there behind a glass door in the living room. There hasn't been a memorial yet, so.

When I grieve, my mind becomes like a public domain for words, rhymes, phrases, bits of song. And they patter and intone until I arrange them for my own ends.¹²⁷

Now, this is not my grandmother, but it could be: When my desire grows dull, I sharpen my nails. When my desire grows dull, I sharpen my nails. When my desire...¹²⁸

And she would say, "Everyone remember to breathe while Grandmom catches her breath." And then she'd go outside and light a cigarette. She'd say, I'll be right back, and go outside and light a cigarette. Actually. Actually, I have no memory of how she excused herself – whether it was, I'll be right back, or Just a minute, or See ya, kid. But I feel like I'd feel better if I did know. Cause it's the small things that matter, you know. But as it is, I have no idea. Nothing.

¹²⁶ C. M. Machado, *In the Dream House*, p. 145.

¹²⁷ M. Jefferson, *Constructing a Nervous System*, p. 78.

¹²⁸ Rachel Rabbit White, 'Eternally Turquoise', *Porn Carnival: Paradise Edition*, New York, NY, Wonder, 2019.

Imagine you're sleeping with her again after years and there are stretch marks on her back and waist. And her belly button is turned out a bit, different from how you remembered it. And her nipples are larger than what you remember, and you do think you would remember. And then you put into mental words what you already know, because it's an irrevocable and powerful fact, and it's that she has had a child. Presumably, without you.¹²⁹

I didn't write, I sliced her open. She was carmine [red] inside, no viscera, nothing but color. Each time, I cut you a little and when you leave, I take the piece. You laugh, holding me belly-down with your body. So much hurting to get to this moment, when I'm beneath you. I meant to do it.¹³⁰

Is this a memory that's with me, always? No. It's one that gets lost for long periods of time until it gets pushed to the surface by some other memory.¹³¹

And she would say: If I was younger I'd go to all the Broadway shows. If I was doing better, I'd go to New York and I'd go to all the Broadway shows. And my aunt would say, stop talking out of your ass. You're not 18 anymore.

And now here's a true story: You're not 18 anymore.

So there is... Conception from eating mango, conception from eating lemon, conception from eating watercress, conception from eating peppercorn, conception from eating spinach, conception from eating rose, conception from swallowing worm, conception from eating louse, conception from eating woman's heart, conception from

¹²⁹ Alejandro Zambra, *Chilean Poet: A Novel*, trans. Megan McDowell, New York, NY, Penguin Random House, 2022, p. 32.

¹³⁰ Ai, 'Nothing But Color', New York, NY, *The Paris Review*, no. 74, 1978.

¹³¹ M. Jefferson, *Constructing a Nervous System*, p. 97.

eating finger-bones, conception after eating honey given by lover, conception from swallowing a pearl, conception from drinking saint's tears, conception from drinking dew, conception through dream, conception from sunlight, conception from moonlight, conception from rainbow, conception from falling rain, conception from bathing, conception from wind, conception from falling star, impregnation by a comet, impregnation by thunder (lightning), conception from stepping on an animal, conception from fruit thrown against breast, conception from spittle, conception from blood, conception from fire, conception by a cry. And then there's conception by... that might be it, actually.¹³²

I remember ice cream in bed. I remember shopping for fabric. I remember big sunglasses. I remember pink, I remember yellow. I remember gold jewelry that faded to silver with age. I remember brown leather handbags. I remember dolls, so many dolls. I remember no dogs. I remember the knife collection next to the bed. I don't remember which flavor ice cream. I remember big brown eyes behind the big sunglasses. I remember laughing a lot. But I don't remember exactly what your laughter sounded like. I remember - diet coke?

I remember leaving notes. Around the house of her first wife. These notes I made in breath, not writing. I breathed onto her mirrors and I breathed into her bread.

Her first wife is a vision. She doesn't exist. Her house is down the road from ours, closer to the stream. They had a baby and nobody knew where it came from. This confused me for years.

¹³² C. M. Machado, *In the Dream House*, p. 230.

I walked up to my first wife one day and down came an outpouring, straight from the heavens back into my navel. I zoomed in on her face. This wife was a quick one. She was stealthy. So I took it upon myself to straighten her hair, lace her toes, administer poison and sit her out in the sun. I sat that woman out. Bread is in the oven. Her first wife sits beside me, counting peas. And as I breathe onto her face, it's only a breeze. It's only a breeze on the tip of her nose.

If I get this story right. If I get this story right, then my mother's grief will melt back into sand. Enough sand to make a shoreline in the driveway. And we can take off our shoes and we can hold them in our hands and we can walk across the shoreline. And when I hold a compact mirror under her nose, I'll see the fog of the living. And there will be fog. There will be fog until there's no other place to look at but each other.¹³³

I would love to have a picnic by the ocean.

Recording: I wrote it all down and now I don't like what I've written.¹³⁴ This is my voice, but these are not my words. My mother leaks, and I catch it. My mother leaks, and I ca-. My mother leaks, and I catch it.¹³⁵

¹³³ Keith R. Leonard, 'Fiction', *Ramshackle Ode*, Boston, MA, Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

¹³⁴ C. Akerman, *My Mother Laughs*, p. 1.

¹³⁵ H. Rubin, 'I say leaking is another word for saturation', 2021.

Script: *Yours Now* – December version

Tomorrow my sister will leave. I'm already scared of her leaving. I'll find myself alone with my mother who has gotten into the habit of grabbing my face and kissing it with such intensity that I have to turn away. She speaks with such an overt sentimentality that me and my sister have to stop her. We stop her just in time.¹³⁶

If a magic trick isn't done perfectly, the magic simply doesn't show up. And for a lie to work, it has to be inserted at a specific point in the narrative. And you need to have a relationship to the truth; you need to know what you're not saying.¹³⁷

So imagine this. Imagine only sleeping with women for years. You haven't seen a dick in years, just hasn't been near you. And then one day, you wake up, and you're convinced that you're pregnant. That's just what it is, you're pregnant, that's just what it is. How is this possible, immaculate conception? Except it's not immaculate at all, it's actually dirty as hell, you feel dirty as hell taking this test.

And then the test is negative. Because of course it is.¹³⁸

Imagine you're sleeping with her again after years and there are stretch marks on her waist and stomach. And her belly button is turned out a bit, different from how you remembered it. And her nipples are larger too, different from how you remember them. And then you put into words what you already know, because it's an irrevocable and powerful fact, and it's that she has had a child. Presumably, without you.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ C. Akerman, *My Mother Laughs*, p. 29.

¹³⁷ H. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, p. 16.

¹³⁸ C. M. Machado, *In the Dream House*, p. 145.

¹³⁹ A. Zambra, *Chilean Poet*, p. 32.

Steal your sister's bike

And ride it deep into the grove.

Tell her you found out about all of her holy spots

And watch her try and find another, deeper forest.

Everything she kept from you

Is yours now.¹⁴⁰

If you were to die, if you had died, or if you'd been hit by a car and lay dying, would I have gotten on a plane? Would I have flown eight-thousand-plus kilometers? And if I had taken that flight, what would I have done when I got there, other than cry? And what would my crying have sounded like? A prudent, embarrassed sobbing, the cry of a secondary character? Or a wrenching and honest cry, the decibels of which would compete with the wails of your mother? I would have donated a lung to you, a kidney, my liver too, of course I would have.¹⁴¹

Would have removed my pancreas without local anesthetic and let you lay your head gently on my lap.¹⁴² I would have given it to you, I'd give it right now, and maybe that would be a good way to apologize, ask for forgiveness, an unquestionably concrete way. I'm sorry, here, have a kidney.¹⁴³

I still just want to be the prodigal daughter. The daughter that calls from the airport – Mommy, I'm at arrivals, come pick me up. Who leaves the bed unmade, who watches

¹⁴⁰ Martha Rhodes, M., 'Possession', *Ploughshares*, Boston, MA, Emerson College, Winter 1992-1993.

¹⁴¹ A. Zambra, *Chilean Poet*, p. 247.

¹⁴² Cavin, Gonzalez, 'If Action is Required', *I Could Be Your Neighbor, Isn't That Horrifying?*, Back Patio Press, 2020.

¹⁴³ A. Zambra, *Chilean Poet*, p. 247.

from the veranda while my siblings wash the fatted calf's blood out of the wood. Only raising a pinky to drink sweet tea. Dinner at the table I call head, you eat when I eat.¹⁴⁴

So there is... Conception from eating a mango, conception from eating lemon, conception from eating watercress, conception from eating a rose, conception from swallowing a worm, conception from eating woman's heart, conception from eating finger-bones, conception after eating honey given by lover, conception from swallowing a pearl, conception from drinking saint's tears, conception from sunlight, conception from moonlight, conception from rain falling on woman, conception from feathers falling on woman, conception from wind, impregnation by thunder (lightning), conception from stepping on an animal, conception from fruit thrown against breast, conception from spit, conception from blood, conception from fire, conception by a cry.¹⁴⁵

Conception from sweetness and smoke. Conception from a brownie sundae. Conception from corn syrup. Impregnation by chlorine in the pool. Birthing on hot sidewalks, jewelry sticking to the skin.

Conception from air, breath, exhaustion (car fumes). Steal your sister's bike.

Because I say leaking is another word for saturation. Our mother leaks and I catch it. Our mother leaks and I catch it. Any border is merely a boundary, an offer of more space to transgress. Any boundary is merely a margin, a place of leaping, of silt. I receive with a wide mouth, stomach pebbles on an ocean floor. My mother leaks and I catch it. My mother leaks and I catch it. She says I am not in pain.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Kandace Siobhan Walker, 'Cowboy', *bath magg*, no. 5, 2020.

¹⁴⁵ C. M. Machado, *In the Dream House*, p. 230.

¹⁴⁶ H. Rubin, 'I say leaking is another word for saturation', 2021.

When do we start thinking of ourselves as dead? A few days before she passed, she was writing a note to herself. But she wrote it in very faint pencil. Barely making a mark.¹⁴⁷

The last time I saw her, she said that she would pencil my girlfriend's name into the family bible.

If I get this story right, then I can make my mother's grief melt back into sand. Enough sand to make a shoreline in the driveway. And we can take off our shoes and we can hold them in our hands and we can walk across the shoreline. And when I hold a compact mirror under her nose, I'll see the fog of the living. And there will be fog. There will be fog until there's no other place to look at but each other.¹⁴⁸

Tomorrow my sister will leave. I'm already scared of her leaving. I'll find myself alone with my mother who has got into the habit of grabbing my face and kissing it with such intensity that I have to turn away. She speaks with such an overt sentimentality that me and my sister have to stop her. We stop her just in time.¹⁴⁹

People who have recently lost someone have this look on their face, recognizable only if you've seen it on your own. It's vulnerable, open, lost, as if they've stepped into bright sunlight from a dark room. They look naked like this because they think themselves invisible.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, New York, NY, HarperCollins, 2021, pp. 148-150.

¹⁴⁸ K. R. Leonard, 'Fiction', 2016.

¹⁴⁹ C. Akerman, *My Mother Laughs*, p. 29.

¹⁵⁰ J. Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, pp. 74-75.

I remember leaving notes. Around the house of her first wife. These notes I made in breath, not writing. I breathed onto her mirrors and I breathed into her bread.

Her first wife is a vision. She doesn't exist. Her house is down the road from ours, closer to the stream. They had a baby and nobody knew where it came from. This confused me for years.

I walked up to my first wife one day and down came an outpouring, straight from the heavens back into my navel. I zoomed in on her face. This wife was a quick one. She was stealthy. So I took it upon myself to straighten her hair, lace her toes, administer poison and sit her out in the sun. I sat that woman out. Bread is in the oven. Her first wife sits beside me, counting peas. And as I breathe onto her face, it's only a breeze. It's only a breeze on the tip of her nose.