

Divorce is the sign of knowledge in our time, divorce! divorce! (William Carlos Williams)

EVERYTHING WAS SO RANDOM

I'm in the Broad, outside the Kurasama show, waiting for a friend when I hear a woman flipping through the show's catalog whisper to her boyfriend, *Did you know that she has hallucinations?* He raises an eyebrow. *She does. Visions. She lives in an asylum.* I look to the man, nonplussed; in my notebook, this imperative: essay on *the consumption and production of art's relationship to mental illness*.

My first night on the 17th floor, my apartment of two rooms looking out to Lake Michigan, north not south, so the light not what it might be but the view all I saw that day in August before we went to Saugatuck for The Best (Last) Vacation Ever, as we three called it and so I said yes and decided yes yes I'll move here, for nine months, you said but live with me in the small condominium you'd bought quickly and I said No, I knew that would not do; I knew we weren't there (yet) if that's where we were going which you (we) knew we weren't you weren't I was or wasn't who knows anything now--but (you would tell me later)-- this choice of mine, this deferral had *consequences*. That word in your mouth so serious; still: I could not see the seventeenth floor where I'd hear the howl of the wind against glass, November through March, into April, truly, and I did not know how unsettled I'd feel by that howl, by the height, by the weak construction of the aging skyscraper, from which I could see my grandmother's once apartment, once the Edgewater Beach Hotel, or the pink building, as we called it. One day on that seventeenth floor, the window washers appeared like spiders on the glass window, just like that, hanging by a rope, Goober and I gaping or gawking in awe or admiration, and little Goo, once Magoo, now seven, the age of reason, or so the Catholics say, little wise Goober asks what I won't, "But what if the rope breaks, Mama?"

We were all reading Ferrante back then still I didn't expect this particular wound of recognition, found in *The Days of Abandonment*, that stunner, Olga reflecting upon her own shattered marriage: her loss, the surreality of the end of a Love once contained, codified, marked by the state:

Everything was so random. As a girl, I had fallen in love with Mario, but I could have fallen in love with anyone: a body to which we end up attributing who knows what meanings. A long passage of life together, and you think he's the only man you can be happy with, you credit him with countless critical virtues, and instead he's just a reed that emits sounds of falsehood, you don't know who he really is, he doesn't know himself. We are occasions.

We are occasions. When I was seven, I read *Where Do I Come From?* and when I was nine my mom (where I came from) got very very sick and died. I can't stop telling you this story, even after you've gone, even before you arrive. I remember our wedding, you gave a toast, you toasted her, my long gone mother, and you said, "I miss her. Though I never knew her, I feel as if I did." I watched my sister, who also never knew my mother but *felt as if she did*, wipe away her tears.

We are occasions. So I read about the psychoanalysis of Louise Bourgeois, a letter she wrote but never sent to her father: *Mon cher Papa, In the 20th century the best work has been produced by those people whose exclusive concern was themselves.* Bourgeois' father was a tyrannical philanderer who had a 10-year affair with their live-in English governess; this was *the central trauma* to which Bourgeois *endlessly returned*.

The endless return. I'm still here, still in Los Angeles, still waiting outside the Broad, just after the conference you and I would attend together but not really together, we had our own people and, much as I tried, your people never became my people, not really-- last night I listened to two of neither of our people, a couple S & B perform with a baby strapped to B's chest, and I knew, listening to them, I knew what I would do: I would write you or us back to life, if only to find my through; I saw the baby; I knew this would be a project of radical vulnerability; I would write myself into the next life.

We consummate life and lose it because in some long-ago time someone, in the desire to unload his cock inside us, was nice, chose us among women. We take for some sort of kindness addressed to us alone the banal desire for sex. We love his desire to fuck, we are so dazzled by it we think it's the desire to fuck only us, us alone. Oh yes, he who is so special and who has recognized us as special. We give it a name, that desire of the cock, we personalize it, we call it my love.

Did I know I would *endlessly return*? After all, the ones I've loved most have always been *of the dying-clairvoyant kind*. But I've said that already. Bourgeois was an "enthusiastic" list-maker. In one list she wrote at 47 years old, she catalogued her failures:

"I have failed as a wife / as a woman / as a mother / as a hostess / as an artist"

A year earlier, at this same conference in a different city, a friend walks into a room and sees you, standing with a woman she assumes is me (but is not me). This friend went to you and the woman and the woman turned and my friend saw: it was not me; this was someone else; this was your new woman, with longer hair; your latest occasion, a new Poetess; and she (my friend) said Oh. She turned, she said, away, and later told me and then I knew what everyone knew: you had a new Poetess, a new Occasion; she would call you My Love; she is, you later told me (bragging or confessing or apologizing), "more sane than either of us."

Once he fucked me, now he fucks someone else, what claim do I have? Time passes, one goes, another arrives.

But who ever said we wanted to be sane? Was there ever a link between sanity and artistry? And weren't you the one who said (wrote):

To be alive is a spiritual mission in which you must get from birth to death without killing yourself.

In another list, Bourgeois considered "*seven easy ways to end it all*". Elsewhere, a list of her fears: "*I am afraid of silence / I am afraid of the dark / I am afraid to fall down/ I am afraid of insomnia / I am afraid of emptiness*"

Sometimes, from the 17th floor, it seemed the howling of the wind would cause the glass to fall--this was, after all, a 56 floor condominium, built in 1971, the year I was born-- I visited once, I noted the doorman, antidote to you; plus the rooms, which came with furniture. I didn't want my furniture, our furniture, in another space, a new space; and I didn't want the former space. I couldn't make a decision; know what I wanted, but I knew what I didn't want: our furniture, your condominium. Your

ambivalence. For a time, I took comfort in this generic furniture, the liminal *room of my own* if only for 9 months, within a skyscraper above the harbor of a Great Lake.

Bourgeois is often quoted as stating: *To be an artist, you need to exist in a world of silence.*

There is, after all, a link between our fear and our fantasy. We might need the very emptiness we fear most. And so, the occasion was mine now. *My great good luck*, I thought more than once: to be here, to have this solitude, again.

A friend who understood before I did, sent a poem by Derek Walcott:

*The time will come
when, with elation,
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your mirror,
and each will smile at the other's welcome,
and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you
all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,
the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.*

The truth is--that first night on the 17th floor, I felt free--as if I were a child again. I'd lost you, I'd lost my mother, and it was (I knew already) the same loss; the *endless return*; but in this moment I was free, which is how it was with her, too. Exhilarating, as it's always been, as I move myself there without fail: circling-- only this time I don't --only now I don't want --a husband, a marriage-- any of it-- and after all those years of *wanting*, all that for so long I was meant *to want*, and for some time, I *did want*, and often, you *didn't want*, though we loved each other we did not *want* in the ways two

people in love (or the ones *more sane than either of us*) might align this wanting. So, now, that first morning, that first month, that first year without you: all that space of *wanting* opened up, and it felt like freedom, or more--I could occupy the emptiness through the loss of you which was the loss of me, too. Endlessly returning, no longer this particular occasion.

Despite her stated fear of emptiness, Bourgeois is most famous for saying, again and again:

Art is a guarantee of sanity.

TAMMY WYNETTE

If you were still my confidante, I would tell you that the first man I slept with after you left or I left had a bedroom with photos on the wall, a cluster a collage a series of photos, his heroes. I knew many of the heroes --bell hooks, James Baldwin, Angela Davis-- but one hero, recently deceased, I knew or have known *in the biblical sense*. I don't want to go out with a guy who has a picture of this quotidian hero over his bed. Especially or maybe painfully when it is also true that he (my rebound) hasn't read the hero's books. I can not come while lying back looking up into the eyes of the image of a person I once, long ago, loved. It's weird, my girlfriend says, and I agree, but it's something else, too.

Last night I tried to explain things, not to you, we have reached the point of no return, there is nothing to say that would suffice, it is as if we are back but now, the hate affair, the kindred inverse of Larkin's space:

At this unique distance from isolation / It becomes still more difficult to find / Words at once true and kind, / Or not untrue and not unkind

and I notice lately all the ways I try to explain, and the words! how flawed yet with some truths: So I point to Boston, to the snow, to the explosion, to the Polyamorous Poets and I say: *That was the beginning of the end of my marriage.*

Or I point to the day your polyamorous lover sent me texts quoting Elena Ferrante:

We are occasions.

Did you know that Algren, when he was the polyamorous lover to Simone, the contingent lover as Sartre preferred to name this-- did you know that he (Algren) found DeBeauvoir's devotion to Sartre to be slavish? Did you know that he called Simone his "crazy frog" but not long after it was over he stated unequivocally that

anyone who had “contingent lovers” was crazy or not really in love? That the idea of contingent lovers was insane? He was voice of reason. He was more sane than either of us.

There were two singers I remember as soundtrack to my early life. My mom’s most favorite album was by a singer named Tammy Wynette, and I used to listen to the song without thinking about it without knowing that the song my mom most loved was later described as a *cri de coeur*, a rejection of all that second wave feminism championed. Stand By Your Man vs. A Woman Needs a Man Like a Fish Needs a Bicycle. I don’t know if my mom was a feminist or not, my guess is that she was not, but I would rather not know. There are benefits to having a dead mom. In this memory, a year or two before she died, I am coming into consciousness, I am 7 or 8, just as I see Goober now, coming to understand more than he can understand, and my mom’s two favorite songs: YOU LIGHT UP MY LIFE by Debby Boone and STAND BY YOUR MAN by Tammy Wynette. She would play the Tammy Wynette album and she would sing along. I would sing along.

My mom, I realize now, was married for about the amount of time that you and I were together. That is no time at all and all the time; as Claudia Rankine wrote:

It occurs to me that 40 could be half my life or all my life.

And so it was for my mother. All my life. “You were not a Good Wife” you told me one day, your final (retrospective) accusation. Maybe you were right. Maybe you were not a Good Husband. I don’t know. But I do know that I didn’t mind the accusation entirely; as one friend asked later, when I quoted you, trying to recognize you:

“Did you say, ‘Thanks for the compliment?’”

But what if my life was as my mother’s had been? What if 41 or 42 had been the end of my life?

I read the list of songs and there was one song that my mom never played but the title intrigued me and I asked her about it but she wouldn't explain, the title D - I - V - O - R - C - E a song about a woman with a 4 year old son, and they spell the word so he doesn't know what they are talking about.

It was, I realize now, my introduction to the word if not the thing itself--we did not know anyone in Aurora in the seventies who lived this reality--and so the thing itself, in that song, in that title, linked (as it remains) with Death itself, with the Ultimate Female Horror.

It is worth asking: if my mom had lived, would I be here now? Would I stand by you?

I walked right into my mother's greatest fear. And all because I could.

These are questions - more than *a reasonable person should ask* - but she is gone and these awful ballads play on through the haze of nostalgia.

Not for you, but for her. Not for her, but for you.

As I write, I find Tammy Wynette on You Tube; I listen to D - I - V - O - R - C - E and *Stand by your Man* and *I Don't Wanna Play House*; she epitomized a Southern femininity, a resistance to the feminists of the 70s, breaking down ideas of heteronormativity, there she was, abject and symbolic in her loss and longing and failure. What a prison; did my mother really not recognize it for what it was? Did she only like her voice, the rhythms, the beauty? Or did she believe it, too? Was Wynette playing at abjection? Did she see the power in it? Did she take pleasure in it?

Or, should I ask (Jocasta begs, Do Not Inquire Further) is there any difference between our fear and our desire, our pleasure and our pain? Did she wonder about the end of her story with the same fervor she'd hoped for its beginning?

Later a student comes to see me; we sit for hours, talk about her mom. I encourage her, gently, towards what she wants: to move out of her mom's house, prison that it is. Later, thinking of the student, the conversation, I say to a friend, "Sometimes I think the only thing worse than not having a mom is having one."

By our 10th anniversary, it is all over, and I have to teach. I teach C.D. Wright and, later, check into a hotel by myself; I go to a spa where a woman scrubs my skin with little rocks, till black dust falls off; I get room service. I stay in bed all day. *I am not lonely*, I say to myself, but only once.

I lie in bed thinking about my mother--about how she played that song, STAND BY YOUR MAN, and how it would be if she'd lived and I'd learned that--that I should Stand By Someone.

There was a time that all of these questions about my mom seemed like things to answered, but now I know the questions are who I am.

CD Wright:

. . . An atmosphere of depression will arouse artists' attention over an atmosphere of prosperity nearly every time. Also true, ruins are beautiful to us; blues make us feel good; it is through the wound that we perceive the body alive alive-o.

. . . I have never thought it hyperbole to say coming to poetry is a near-death experience. I myself arrived here after a succession of losses.

DIVORCE SONG

2002: Division Street, U.S.A. Where we walk down and up the Champs d'Elysee of Wicker Park (you call it), back and forth, from my place over the Alliance Bakery to yours on Wolcott, that old two-bedroom with a toilet on a pedestal, a futon on the floor, a cat named Desdemona.

La Mosca Tsé-Tsé (foreshadowing): or the first Spanish you taught me, an Argentinian song: *Je rompel tus photos, tu camera je rompere tus photos, je camere tus ...vente ma!* Also: Istanbul. Cappadocia. Santiago. Magoo. Tomboy. Ciya. Lexapro. *Arbitrary Tales*. Tofu and Green Bean stirfry. *A vegetarian who doesn't eat vegetables*. Silver Lake. *For Suzy*, you wrote. Venice. *The Ecstasy of Capitulation*. Binging on *Six Feet Under*. Walking along the Bosphorous. (*Was that me, Suzy?*) Simit. Clotted Creme, Honey, Jam. *Little Miss Sunshine*. Monsterface. Seeley. Belle Plaine. Winona. (*Has Andersonville, USA been the site of trauma for anyone, ever?*) *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Ornette Coleman. A spot on his baby heart. Meconium. *Do you want to see the placenta?* What the NICU doctor said: "Shoot first, ask questions later." Brittney with the PhD. *The Ethical Slut*. Club Quarters. Connecticut. Pittsburgh. Falling Water. Park Place. Grace. *I thought we were flying / we were falling we were falling*. Grace. Grace. Grace.

Or Sharon Olds: *I thought / wherever we were, we were in lasting / love-- / even in our separateness and / loneliness, in love--even the / iceberg just outside the mouth, its / pallid, tilting, jade-white / was love's, as we were. We had said so.*

But the smell of you like shampoo and sweat and soap and oil and (worse) the stickiness of you I feel it again next to you in the theater where we'll spend the next ten years or more, our seats too close for our bodies which need distance and you fall asleep there in the theater where, nodding off, your snoring brings me back to your mother or father or sister declaring or deciding or considering (a sport) who is happy and who isn't happy telling me to smile and my students arguing the idea from the

mural's title: STOP TELLING WOMEN TO SMILE-- and your father that
December a decade ago in Venice our newborn niece, we visit yet you are there not
wanting me not wanting me enough or wanting me but clearly confused also wanting
another life which later you would try to find and the way your simple, declarative,
disastrous

I'm not happy

fell like an icicle from a skyscraper, the buildings I walk away from in the winter, those
Caution Falling Ice signs, and I never know where to go when I read those signs,
which way, towards or away, *who knows how ice falls?* A warning without precision is
prophecy. But you, us, all of that: what a cage!

Or what the great writer said to me, when it was all over (is it ever all over?): *Can't you
be philosophical about break-ups?*

Or Plath: *Go out and do something. It isn't your room that's a prison. It's yourself.*

(Can't you Suzy?)

Hair long and thick and black now ever so slightly peppered by gray which only
renders you more distinguished and you called it a Jewfro you grew it and then cut it
sometimes in the summer you cut it all off and you looked years younger, my little
brother, it wasn't meant to work I needed someone else too but that didn't mean I
didn't need you *it was myself I didn't want to lose* and you too but we could only find that
self or selves through others. I'm not mad at you (only sometimes). I won't talk about
your hair. Or your movie star smile, mine funny, but it is in our son: his beauty your
smile and there I am, too, magic (reproduction) this merging of two people who now
undo what is alive and present in the one each loves more than the moon.

Simulacrum: like the thing but not the thing.

Or what you said: “You are too much.”

Was it all to turn our lives into a text? You wrote later; you were reading *I Love Dick*.

Oppenheimer: *We’ve always known that what we call mental illness can be a condition of deficit or excess, often both at the same time. We’ve known that what we admire most about ourselves, and our species, can cause disturbances when there’s too much of it.*

Sometimes I want to hurt you (excess) or touch you (deficit) but most of the time-- today, for example-- I want only to imagine a future wherein I wish you love and goodness.

Chile, December, 2009, our baby is 2 and I am pregnant, again, and I sink my heavy body into the corner of a red leather sofa in the living room of A’s flat in Providencia, downtown Santiago de Chile, on my computer I write to a friend back home, describing the apartment where we’ll spend the holiday: on the wall, a poster of Antonioni's *Blow-Up*; next is Bergman's *Persona*. On the bookshelves: Leon Tolstoi's *Que es el Arte?*, Sontag's *Contra la interpretacion*, Neruda's *Odas elementales*, Joyce, Nabokov, Woolf, the Restored Edition of Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*. The poster from A’s own film set in Santiago, as presented in the Greek International Film Festival, down the hall, near the bedroom.

Or were you the Too Much? Wasn’t *The Ethical Slut* too much? Those late night walks? The way you begged me to *promise not to leave* you if you went one more time to

her dude ranch in Laramie? Or the way you reminded me, an accusation: “You want to be alone.” And what of it. Or: “You don’t need anyone.” What did I say? I said *I will always prefer the bohemians, the freaks, the intellectuals, the brooding artists*. After all, I’d married you.

Discussing Jonathan Caouette’s TARNATION, a film tracing his own mother’s life, her lifelong struggles with mental illness (an illness created, or at least exacerbated, by excessive psychiatric treatment); a student notes how the film upends our divisions between the public and the private. In the film, Caouette makes the private space public, that intimacy--what we wish not to see--he offers it up. *This is my life*.

Of the film, another student (more sane than either of us) writes, “*That was too much. I am happy this is nothing like anything I’ve ever known in my entire life.*”

In Santiago, we visit Pablo Neruda’s La Chascona, built to resemble a ship, one of his three homes, which he built for his secret lover, Matilde Urrutia: the guide, a student, tells us about Neruda - notes that he was not a brooding artist type; that instead he was great fun, he loved life, he loved women (women equal commodity here). Later, we sit in the backyard of Great Poet’s home in Santiago. His wife is a novelist, but she doesn’t speak English and I don’t speak Spanish. He has been married many times. Later still, I tell you that, in some ways, I’m a brooding artist type--but in other ways I want to be inside of life. A constant struggle. I try to explain this to you. But by this moment--our baby was two, I was pregnant again-- you didn’t want to know. You were done knowing.

Matilde wrote one book, titled *My Life With Pablo Neruda*.

Elizabeth Hardwick wrote *Sleepless Nights*, without ever mentioning poet Robert Lowell, who left her for Lady Caroline Blackwood.

W.H. Auden, to Joseph Brodsky, re: Robert Lowell: "I don't like men who leave behind a smoking trail of weeping women."

A structural deficit in the marriage of freaks, or the coparenting of freaks. One freak needs to let the other fly. Or alternately fly. Or not hold too tight, as the Buddhists taught. For a long time I thought it was my problem and then I read everything I could read and before long I learned that in fact I am human. Still it became something to understand, to see the others, to figure out how they did it or didn't do it.

Or what Anne Carson wrote: *Who has ever loved what is not lost. No one. The Greeks knew this.*

When I told my Analyst that I loved (you) more when it was over, she said "That is something important to know about yourself." Which means that I don't miss *you*. I miss. I love. I long for.

Maybe the structure itself is the Deficit. The thing contains its own failure.

That first Spring: meeting our families, saying I Love You or Baby and the way you took care of me, after the violence of Division Street, which marked our early romance: I can still hear the background music to our incipient love and I laugh--of course! I think, it was there from the start (the end contained within the beginning): you played *Para No Vente Mas* over and over, we sang badly and together, you corrected my accent, I couldn't be your student, that made you angry, the elegance of

your accent, your sexy bilingual tongue, *What could be better?* I whispered to a friend, who concurred, *He's hot.*

Because I've always been this way. Yes I longed for the dead. Yes I love what is lost. A fatal flaw. It was written on my tongue in the first decade of my life, what I thought was fate, or what I would believe was fate as Jung said, until *I made the unconscious conscious*: how I would love the dead, the beauty, mystification of it all. The distance, too.

Because the dead stay dead. Because the truth (I've sometimes thought) is that the Real Thing, Life Itself is too close, too real and there is so much in that space.

If it were possible to say anything: I want to make something vulnerable, radical, something which might imagine a future. We are not the first to create enmity.

Or a line in a play I saw the other night: I CONFESS I HAVE LOST WHAT I THOUGHT IMPOSSIBLE TO LOSE

That first night I looked to the great lake and heard the small howl of the cold wind which never ceased, not at all, that entire year, as if marking our disintegration, as if

the very construction of the building would collapse. It was built in that shabby seventies way, and the furniture wasn't mine. This is how I wanted it. I wanted the liminal space, I sought it out, the rooms dreary and thrilling in their anonymity. That first morning I woke and felt as if I were a child again, or 23 again, only without the fear, without the wish to have my problems solved (without the belief they might be possible to solve; rather, I woke with the desire to live my problem.) Yes, I knew that first morning, creating my syllabus, that I would live my problem, no longer our problem, there on the 17th floor, with my books and my shoes and my Montaigne.