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GRIEF NARRATOLOGY IN THE DIGITAL AGE: WRITING THE SELF IN  
ACADEMIC SPACES

BY

SARAH WEDDLE SOUTH

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Date: 4/7/2023

GRIEF NARRATOLOGY IN THE DIGITAL AGE: WRITING THE SELF IN  
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BY

SARAH WEDDLE SOUTH

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
Eastern Kentucky University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

2023

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## DEDICATION

For my three amigos, Jack, Jeb, and Beau.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the care and attention of my committee in the process of completing this document. I am also grateful for the opportunity to learn and work at the University as a graduate consultant with the Noel Studio. I am especially thankful for the experiences shared with my colleagues, Lauren Blair, Josiah Coleman, and Tara Pulaski, and the Studio directors, Dr. Clint Stivers and Trenia Napier. while working at the Noel Studio. In addition, thank you to my committee chair, Dr. Gerald Nachtwey, for his mentoring and insight throughout this process, and Dr. Dominic Ashby for challenging my more traditional thinking. Finally, this endeavor has been possible only due to the unquestioning support of my mother, Zona, my sons, their father, and our extended family.

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the prescriptive writing practices associated with both grief narratives and academic writing and how those constraints work to constrain and contain stories and writing genres that run counter to dominant, heteronormative paradigms. This process of exclusion and transgression is interpreted through the critical lens of Foucault's heterotopias. The advent of digital spaces has led to a proliferation of modes for the delivery of content, which has precipitated a questioning of traditional academic writing. Self-writing genres, such as memoirs or autobiographies, which are not historically associated with academic discourse, are transgressing discourse boundaries through hybridized forms, most notably, the autocritography or autoethnography. Self-writing provides voices and narratives that have been relegated to heterotopian spaces with a mechanism for subverting traditional discourse practices and spaces. This paper alternates between the use of formal academic prose and informal, reflective personal grief narrative to demonstrate one means for how these dominant discourse practices can be challenged in academic spaces. The role of the personal grief narrative as a mechanism for disrupting traditional discourse forms has further implications for stories of groups that have been historically marginalized such members of the LGBTQ+ community, women, and minorities.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	Introduction .....	1
	Preface .....	1
II.	Background .....	3
	Grief Narratology and Life-Writing in the Modern Era.....	7
III.	Foucauldian Heterotopias.....	13
	Academic Writing Boundaries .....	16
	Experimenting with Life-Writing.....	18
	Digital Spaces and Self-Writing.....	21
	Creative Writing Project: Seed Draft .....	25
IV:	Conclusion.....	29
	References .....	34
	Appendix A: Creative Writing Manuscript Final Draft .....	38

## I. Introduction

### *Preface*

Before moving into the body of this thesis, I think it is necessary to provide a brief explanation for some of the style and content choices made for this work. My decision to move away from the formal, traditional academic voice is conscious and deliberate. While I explore several issues regarding contemporary writing practices, I believe that central to my research is a somewhat paradoxical concern for members of the academic community—especially those who work in the humanities—that of “face”. Be it the fictionalized personal narrative, memoir, or autobiography, texts that attempt to present the personal position of the academic ironically convey little academic capital. In the publish-or-perish world that is academia, the individual *I* is suppressed and denied. My hope with this thesis is to question the underlying linguistic paradigms that contribute to the ongoing, systemic constraints in professional, academic writing. To accomplish this goal, throughout this thesis, I make frequent use of the first-person pronoun, rather than the generally accepted third, whenever possible. I need only point to the movement in pedagogical practices to embrace more openly various non-standard Englishes such as African American Vernacular (AAV) or Appalachian English (AE) as evidence for an expanding understanding of the forms and rules for academic writing. Recognizing both the fluidity and multiplicity of the English language allows for greater diversity and representation in academic discourse. Those who object to this shift from traditional academic writing practices and subjects seem to provide proof of Foucault’s claim that, “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault, 1978: 95-96). Academic writing in the modern era is a site of resistance and struggle.

This resistance to the proliferation of new modes and mediums in contemporary discourse is often compounded by an aversion to expanding the category of what constitutes appropriate academic messages. My thesis is geared not only at questioning how we write in academic spaces, but also what we write about. Although a great deal of canonical literature takes as its subject matter what might be construed as emotionally difficult material, the process of analysis (be it Reader Response Theory,

Structuralism, or Post-Structuralism, to name a few) often provide scholars with a barrier to emotional damage. Material that could elicit a dangerous emotional response is safely contained by processes that effectively eliminate the very human element that made their creation possible. For those narratives that seem to transcend these paradigmatic constraints, emotional duress is either completely avoided or tempered by an accompanying content or trigger warning that allows readers the opportunity to “opt out.” Yet, there still exists a tacit expectation that high-stake projects, such as this thesis, should not deal with emotionally charged material. Consequently, I provide this preface as an extended content warning for my readers. The impetus for this project was my son’s death. While I do not explicitly detail the events of his illness or death, my research and writing are the effect of that cause. Although writing about loss or the death of a loved one figures frequently in both fictional works and so-called life-writing texts, outside the life sciences (sociology, psychology, or ethnology, for example) scholars do not typically delve into such deeply personal experiences. For that reason, my decision to craft an academic narrative founded on personal loss places me in something of a liminal space.

Not long after my son died, someone attempted to give me a copy of Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking*. While my memory of the time is hazy, I must have had some inkling as to the contents and initially refused the offer, most likely tersely. Possibly kindly. In the past, such acts of refusal, characteristic to me, have functioned not as a means for communicating negation, but, rather, as signifiers of independent thought and ability. The simple utterance, “No, thank you,” allows for the polite creation of distance and a separation of self from the surrounding world. It is not often regarded as anti-social to say, “No, thank you. I already have plans.” Or “No, thank you. I don’t like that brand of drink.” The prescribed norms of human behavior allow for such expressions based on preference. The death of my oldest son, Jack, in 2019, not only left me grieving but also brought about a crisis of identity for me. At the time, I thought that turning to the works of others who had written about similar experiences would help me to somehow work through my own loss. While reading Plutarch, Shakespeare, and Joan Didion might have been successful as distractions, none of the models employed by these writers (or the countless others I poured through)

seemed to completely mirror my own loss. Grief is wholly personal; consequently, the stories through which grief is shared should be reflective of the individual. This thesis is my attempt to arrive at a form of narrativization that merges both my scholarly pursuits and my personal grief process.

## II. Background

Grief narratology developed as a mechanism for producing societally sanctioned signs of mourning. Regardless of the mode or medium, the system of signs allotted to mourners has historically functioned as a means for ensuring the relegation of the grieving to the peripheral physical and psychological spaces of most cultures. Grief discourse is subject to the conditions of the dominant discourse structures. The area allotted for grieving, be it discursive or spatial, runs separate and counter to the normative operations of society. As a result of this discursive distancing, those who grieve frequently find themselves relegated to a liminal space where the traditional conventions and linguistic markers of narrativization may be rendered void or meaningless. Already cut off from the dead, mourners are further traumatized through the disruption of discourse relations with and distancing themselves from those members of the community who wish to avoid acknowledging the inevitability of death. This second separation, from the living, pushes mourners to the periphery of society. Through these combined traumas, which limit their communicative autonomy with both living and dead, mourners come to constitute what is effectively a marginalized group. Consequently, those who grieve may experience a crisis of identity caused by the death of a loved one and the disruption of community ties.

In the Western tradition, some of the earliest examples of grief narratology can be located in the *consolatio*. In a discussion on the nature of honor, Aristotle identifies memorial praxis as a key feature of the virtue: “The components of honor are sacrifices, memorials in verse and prose, privileges, grants of land, front seats, public burial, State maintenance, and among the barbarians, prostration and giving place, and all gifts which are highly prized in each country” (Aristot. Rh. 1.5.9). For Aristotle, acts of remembrance, “in verse and prose,” are indivisible with one’s public self and the preservation of social codes. Honor is a correlative of those characteristics that

comprise what the philosopher refers to as the noble. The noble, according to Aristotle, “is that which, being desirable in itself, is at the same time worthy of praise, or which, being good, is pleasant because it is good. If this is the noble, then virtue must of necessity be noble, for, being good, it is worthy of praise” (Aristot. Rh. 1.9.3). In the early Greek memorial tradition, such praise was generally reserved for “[t]he funeral speech [that] developed out of the formal laudation or commemoration of those who had fallen in battle for their country” (McGuire, 1953, viii) (cf. Ziolkowski, 1981) (cf. Kent, 1991). One of the most notable examples of ancient memorial rhetoric is “Pericles’ Funeral Oration,” which appears in Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. Thucydides’ *History* not only includes the text of Pericles’ eulogy, but also provides a detailed account of many procedures related to memorializing the fallen soldiers and the events preceding the funeral speech. After the bodies of the fallen have been laid to rest in a public space, Thucydides’ notes that,

a man chosen by the state, of approved wisdom and eminent reputation, pronounces over them an appropriate panegyric; after which all retire. Such is the manner of the burying; and throughout the whole of the war, whenever the occasion arose, the established custom was observed. Meanwhile these were the first that had fallen, and Pericles, son of Xanthippus, was chosen to pronounce their eulogium. When the proper time arrived, he advanced from the sepulchre to an elevated platform in order to be heard by as many of the crowd as possible... (Thuc. 2.34)

The “established custom” for mourning, as demonstrated through the above anecdotes, is one that requires the heroic, male dead to be remembered through verse in public. The hero’s death and ensuing memorial is less a remembrance of the individual, and more a celebration and solidifying of the civic values that his death affirms.

Plutarch’s consolation to his wife on the death of his young daughter illustrates how a more personal loss would be recorded. Around the year 100 AD, Plutarch wrote the *Consolatio ad Uxorem* to his wife upon learning of the death of their young daughter. By the time the news had reached him, Plutarch knew he had most certainly missed the funeral rites for the child. In his letter, while Plutarch advises his wife not to allow memories of their child to cause her pain,

I fail to see any reason why, when this and similar behaviour pleased us during her life, it should upset and trouble us when we recall it now. I worry about the

alternative, however — that we might consign the memory of her to oblivion along with our distress. (par. 7)

While the subject for his *Consolatio* might at first seem atypical, especially when compared to the heroic memorials described by Aristotle and Thucydides, and possibly even unworthy of memorial verse, Plutarch nonetheless observes the forms and features associated with the genre. As Jo-Marie Claassen contends, in his *consolatio*, Plutarch: “employs many of the usual features and topics of a formal *consolatio*... the essay is 58% conventional, 22% relates to praise of the mother, and only 20% of its text is devoted to the baby herself, and that in mere allusion to the deceased” (3). However, Plutarch’s work is not the first example of the *consolatio* being employed to memorialize the death of a child. Crantor, Pliny, and Servius Sulpicius all offered verses occasioned by the death of a child (Claassen 6). However, unlike the *consolatio*, composed as monuments to the memory of dead heroes, this latter type of verse appears to be written with the express purpose of curtailing grief. At a time with high infant and early childhood mortality rates, many families would have been familiar with the experiences associated with child death. In these instances, the overarching purpose of the *consolatio* seems to have been to advise the living to avoid protracted displays of grief.

Plutarch appears to be attempting to guide his wife away from excessive mourning when he warns her of the dangers surrounding so-called “foolish women”: “But that which is most to be dreaded in this case does not at all affrighten me, to wit, the visits of foolish women, and their accompanying you in your tears and lamentations; by which they sharpen your grief, not suffering it either of itself or by to help of others to fade and vanish away” (Plu. 7). He then proceeds to provide a rhetorical strategy, an *exemplum*, to illustrate the potential dangers inherent in associating with those who appear to derive a sort of satisfaction in communal grief:

For I am not ignorant how great a combat you lately entered, when you assisted the sister of Theon, and opposed the women who came running in with horrid cries and lamentations, bringing fuel as it were to her passion. Assuredly, when men see their neighbor’s house on fire, every one contributes his utmost to quench it; but when they see the mind inflamed with furious passion, they bring fuel to nourish and increase the flame. (7)

Plutarch's admonishments to his wife present something of a paradox. Readers are left with the impression that personal loss is best dealt with in private. Yet, Plutarch would have composed this missive with a greater audience than his wife in mind. The *Consolatio ad Uxorem* is also more than a stoic treatise on the ubiquity of death. Plutarch the grieving father uses the talents and abilities of Plutarch the writer and philosopher to craft a grief narrative as a means for working through his personal loss. Throughout the *Consolatio*, Plutarch employs common rhetorical strategies to construct an argument on mourning. As both Claassen and Baltussen detail, the structure of the letter adheres to standard rhetorical practices. The letter begins with: "... an *exordium* stating the circumstances under which the bereaved father is writing, followed by nine different sections, each consisting of a traditional consolatory *topos* and its application to the Plutarch family" (Classen 40). While The *Consolatio* provides evidence of Plutarch's rhetorical skills, it also demonstrates how, in the face of a personal grief story, the prevailing norms and strictures governing epistolary grief writing could be manipulated—if not subverted. Throughout the letter, Plutarch incorporates distinctly intimate details about his wife, their daughter, and their marital and parental relationships. As Baltussen contends, "Strong indications that Plutarch's prime objective is to practice a form of *psychagogia*, occur at moments in his advisory exhortations and betray a preference for rational argument intended to control emotions" (82). Plutarch's letter can thus be seen as an illustration for what, in the early twentieth century, Freud would term the "work of mourning" in his treatise, *Mourning and Melancholia*. The work of mourning involves a process whereby at first:

the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged. Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercathected... It is remarkable that this painful unpleasure is taken as a matter of course by us. The fact is, however that when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again. (245)

Consequently, I argue that in Plutarch's *Consolatio*, we are presented with an early example for what I am attempting to accomplish in this document. Plutarch employed standard rhetorical strategies and elements to construct a grief story reflective of his

unique relationships and experiences. Through the process of writing the letter, he also demonstrates that the purpose of such narrativizing in the past was not dissimilar from grief narratives composed in the modern era: writing to work through loss. Loss as the impetus to narrative construction is a common component of a collection of genres loosely grouped under the category of life-writing. Additionally, Plutarch uses forms and tropes that would have been deemed socially acceptable discourse; however, through the incorporation of *exempla* about a young child, Plutarch's *Consolatio ad Uxorem* attempts to transgress and, to some extent, subvert the paradigmatic constraints of ancient grief narratology.

### *Grief Narratology and Life-Writing in the Modern Era*

In the modern era, the advent of digital technologies, accompanied by an evolution in the modes and mediums for communication, has precipitated a reimagining of writing in general as well as the life-writing genre. Be it blog or vlog, Instagram story or Facebook post, YouTube channel, Tumblr, even the business-oriented LinkedIn—a myriad of mechanisms have arisen as a means for the delivery of content. However, grief narratology, arguably the most individual of all storytelling formats, still resides on the periphery of the digital sphere. Although grief-centered communities can be found on various social media platforms, their existence remains marginalized. Additionally, while the analysis of loss-centered texts constitutes a great deal of academic endeavor, the employment of a first-person persona and personally informed prose runs counter to long-held principles of academic writing. As the synthesis of traditional scholarly writing and personal expression, various forms of life-writing, such as autocritography, can allow for the advancement of subject-informed writing in academic spaces.

To understand the role of life-writing in contemporary academic spaces, it is necessary to first identify the features of a genre with which it maintains a close, if not direct, relationship: narratology. The field of narrative studies greatly expanded over the course of the twentieth century. With origins in varied disciplines (including linguistics, anthropology, philology, and even folklore) arriving at a succinct definition for what comprises a narrative or narrative theory has been and continues to be problematic. Tzvetan Todorov is credited with introducing the term *narratologie* in his *Grammaire*



*du Decameron*. Although Todorov appears to focus his efforts in *Decameron* on identifying a grammar of narration (like Noam Chomsky's attempts to identify a universal grammar in linguistics), he does provide a useful working definition for narration:

Todorov's restriction of his object of investigation to narration, which he characterizes as that aspect of discourse susceptible of evoking a universe of representations. As so defined, narration is a phenomenon that is not restricted to verbal discourse, but occurs also in films, dreams, etc. Thus, although dealing with discourse, Todorov's concern is with the universe evoked by this discourse, not with it as a linguistic entity. That is, he abstracts from the linguistic nature of narrative units by not taking account of whether a given unit is represented by a single proposition or by several paragraphs. (Hendricks 264)

Todorov's universe of representations allows for an expanded understanding of narratives. Although it might seem simplistic, with Todorov's concept of narration, we are provided the foundations for exploring narrative discourse through an ever-evolving universe of modes and mediums, to include digital ecologies. Understanding the universality of narrative discourse depends on first recognizing, as David Lodge contends, that, "*Narratology and Narrative Grammar* [are] the effort to discover the *langue* of narrative, the underlying system of rules and possibilities of which any narrative *parole* (text) is the realisation" (25). However, one must also recognize that *la langue* is never fixed and almost entirely dependent on a given cultural signification. The role of society in determining the meaning of a given rule or linguistic sign was initially detailed by Saussure, who found that: "The arbitrary nature of the sign explains in turn why the social fact alone can create a linguistic system. The community is necessary if values that owe their existence solely to usage and general acceptance are to be set up; by himself the individual is incapable of fixing a single value" (10). Barthes goes a step further when he pronounced, "Man does not exist prior to language, either as a species or as an individual ... it is language which teaches the definition of man, not the reverse" (42). While this train of thought would eventually lead Barthes to declare the death of the author, and contend that, "Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" ("The Death of the Author" 147). While Foucault argued that shifting from a veneration of the

individual author allowed for a greater understanding of the underlying discourse system. For Foucault, what he labels the author-function,

is not formed spontaneously through the simple attribution of a discourse to an individual. It results from a complex operation whose purpose is to construct the rational entity we call an author ... these aspects of an individual, which we designate as an author (or which comprise an individual as an author), are projections, in terms always more or less psychological, of our way of handling texts: in the comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent, the continuities we assign, or the exclusions we practice. In addition, all these operations vary according to the period and the form of discourse concerned. A 'philosopher' and a 'poet' are not constructed in the same manner; and the author of an eighteenth-century novel was formed differently from the modern novelist. ("What is an Author" 9)

I must acknowledge that introducing these concepts, and in particular, Foucault's articulation of the author-function, could appear counterproductive to the goals I have set forth for this thesis. As mentioned in my Preface, I am working to uncover how stories of the individual subject might be recognized, integrated, and in some manner, legitimized into and by academic spaces. The key to recognizing the relationship between these seemingly disparate theories and goals may be found in the very act of writing as discussed by Barthes in "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?" in which he muses,

It would be interesting to know at what point the verb *to write* began to be used in an apparently intransitive manner, the writer being no longer one who writes *something*, but who writes absolutely... This passage from the verb *to write*, transitive, to the verb *to write*, apparently intransitive, is certainly the sign of an important change in mentality... No writer, whatever age he belongs to, can fail to realise that he always writes *something*: one might even say that it was paradoxically at the moment when the verb *to write* appeared to become intransitive that its object, the book or the text, took on a particular importance. (15-16)

To paraphrase Descartes, I write therefore I am. If, as Kristeva contends, "that all identities are unstable; the identity of linguistic signs, the identity of meaning, and, as a result, the identity of the speaker" (132), then only when the entity that occupies the author-function position engages in the act or process (to use Kristeva's term) of *writing* do they acquire any semblance of stable representation. Kristeva's theories of linguistic acquisition have origins in the works of both Freud and Jaques Lacan. In "The Mirror

Stage as Formative of the Function of the *I* as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” Lacan set forth his theory for the development of identity, which he proposes begins with a fundamental misconception during a period of development he terms the mirror phase. At approximately eighteen months, according to Lacan’s theory, an infant’s first awareness of self is a distortion, a fiction or misrecognition that leaves an impression of an inherent lack. The infant:

can nevertheless already recognize as such his own image in a mirror... This act ... once the image has been mastered and found empty, immediately rebounds in the case of the child in a series of gestures in which he experiences in play the relation between the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it reduplicates – the child’s own body, and the persons and things around him. (1)

The child, and later the adult, pursues a seemingly endless series of identities in an attempt to create a whole self. For the writer, nowhere is this cycle of adopting and then discarding identities more apparent than in those works that fall into the category referred to in this thesis as life-writing. In the twenty-first century, we find our identities and images subject to a seemingly continuous process of creation, revision, or reconstitution—all enacted through an omnipresent gaze. Social media, one arm of our digital world, functions as a virtual panopticon—one that works constantly to regulate behaviors of users thereby ensuring conformity. Perhaps that is why, as James Olney contends,

so many contemporary authors offer themselves as obvious choices [as subjects of study] is part of the point: that an agonized search for self, through the mutually reflexive acts of memory and narrative, accompanied by the haunting fear that it is impossible from the beginning but also impossible to give over, is the very emblem of our time. (xiv-xv)

In his text, *Memory & Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing*, Olney examines the works of St. Augustine, Rousseau, and Beckett to understand the relationship between memory and narrative construction creating a similar strand in these seemingly disparate products. Olney’s position or theory of life-writing is predicated on recognizing Augustine’s *Confessions* as the first iteration of the genre. Olney makes the claim that, “The entire justification, validation, necessity, and indeed exemplary instance of writing one’s life, of finding the words that signify the self and its history, are offered to us for the first time (according to my narrative) in the *Confessions*” (2). Thus, it is only logical for Olney that he uses Augustine as the underpinning for his argument on the place of memory in narrative writing. Indeed, memory, according to Olney (and Augustine

through Olney) is the key to any form of narrative that takes as its subject the self. As Olney claims, “Memory, if it is truly memory according to Augustinian understanding, should be the guarantor of identity and continuity being across time, the only liaison—but an unbroken and fully capable liaison all the same—between past experience and present consciousness” (5-6). Yet, memory is fallible, or, to borrow the term employed by Olney, it is composed of experiences that cannot always be verifiable. However, this concern over veracity can be overcome—for both Augustine and the modern writer—through structure. According to Olney, with Augustine there is no lack of correspondence between form and function. Such is not the case for writers in the modern era. As Olney contends, quoting Beckett, “the task of the contemporary artist is ‘to find a form that accommodates the mess;’” and that:

for a writer in the modern world there could be no security in the set of narrative conventions that Augustine partly accepted from previous life-narrators but mostly established for future ones. To seek a form that accommodates the mess will mean obeying in the strictest way the modernist injunction to “make it new” , refusing not only any traditional narrative conventions that may exist but also any momentary formal successes the individual writer may have enjoyed in previous attempts. (12)

In his study of the ways in which writers have worked to craft a form that will “accommodate” the mess that is the personal narrative, Olney has produced a text that is almost exclusively devoted to relating the masculine, heteronormative experience. While he does mention the names of some female “modernist writers” (Gertrude Stein, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Virginia Woolf, for example), they are not the focal point of his work. Although I do not wish to detract from the validity or depth of Olney’s scholarship, twenty-first century researchers would be more than remiss to categorize the absence of a feminine (let alone, queer) perspective on narrative theory as an oversight. Indeed, Olney’s *Memory & Narrative* was first published in 1999—thirteen years after Susan Lanser professed her “desire to explore the compatibility of feminism and narratology” (342). With his focus on male-authored narratives, it could be argued that Olney does for life-writing what Harold Bloom did for poetry. When, in *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom asked, “How do men become poets?” (25), he participated in the reinforcement of the prevailing heteronormative discourse regarding the production of poetry. As Gilbert and Gubar rather succinctly state the case, “Western literary history is overwhelmingly male—or, more accurately, patriarchal” (47). While the work of critics such as Gilbert and Gubar did much to further the advancement of

feminist-informed literary criticism and theory, Lanser noted that such had not been the case regarding narratology. Writing in “Toward a Feminist Narratology,” Lanser noted:

Yet in the sometimes sharp debates both within feminist criticism ... and between feminism and other critical modes, structuralist-formalist methods have been virtually untouched. In consequence, narratology has had little impact on feminist scholarship, and feminist insights about narrative have been similarly overlooked by narratology... Although feminism and narratology cannot really be said to have a history, there have been few gestures of synthesis. (341)

In Lanser’s musings and call for a feminist-informed *theory* of narrative studies, it is possible to discern the echoes of Virginia Wolfe, Simone de Beauvoir, and Helene Cixous, who, when arguing for a feminist-informed *form* of writing, saw that:

I maintain unequivocally that there is such a thing as *marked* writing; that, until now, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that’s frightening since it’s often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction; that this locus has grossly exaggerated all the signs of sexual opposition ... where woman has never *her* turn to speak—this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures. (879)

This struggle to identify both a form of writing and narrative criticism that not only acknowledges but also incorporates the feminine perspective takes place in the spatial dimensions of the text. For Cixous, and others such as Michel Foucault, the text becomes a space for the production of knowledge, and through that knowledge, ultimately, a place for the manifestation, interaction, and subversion of systems of power.

### III. Foucauldian Heterotopias

Much of the critical framework for my research on grief narratology is underpinned by an understanding of the mechanisms by which mourners are marginalized to heterotopian spaces, as defined by Michel Foucault. Through the Foucauldian heterotopia, the potentially subversive potential of grief narratology and its associated discourses becomes clear. By expanding beyond its historical heterotopian boundaries, as defined by Foucault, through the means of digital media in the modern era, the process of grieving can be brought to the foreground of culture. An ensuing shift in the discourse on and societal perceptions about death, grief, and mourning could result in a transformation of the very semantic codes by which mourners craft new understandings of their own identities. Foucault outlined his theory on space and its historical significance in a lecture entitled, “Des Espaces Autres” (Of Other Spaces), presented in March 1967. The work would not be published until after Foucault’s death in 1984 and was done so without being reviewed by the author. Consequently, “Of Other Spaces” must be read as an incomplete expression of Foucault’s theory of space and discourse.

A great deal of the research conducted for this thesis is directly related to understanding the degree of impact of systemic constraints on space and its inhabitants and the ramifications for individual subjectivity as explored by Foucault in *The Order of Discourse*, in which he postulated, “... that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ... gain mastery over its chance events” (*The Order of Discourse* 239). Mastery of discourse allows those in control to work through the mechanisms and institutions of a given society to continue their domination of the systems of power. The sustainment of a given culture depends on the principle of exclusion predicated on speech acts, which are deemed acceptable or aberrant. Systems of containment developed in response to those individuals who enacted prohibited behaviors—sexual, linguistic, political—or, as a means for coaxing societally-sanctioned behaviors.

Because a great deal of this thesis is grounded in Foucault's spatial analytics, I believe it is necessary to provide a detailed description of this unique discourse theory. In "*The Order of Things*," Foucault argues that post-Enlightenment thought moved beyond a temporal to spatial signification. For Foucault, our contemporary understanding of space does not arise from a vacuum:

space itself has a history in Western experience and it is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time with space... in the Middle Ages there was a hierarchic ensemble of places: sacred places and profane places; protected places and open, exposed places ... In cosmological theory, there were the supercelestial places, as opposed to the celestial, and the celestial place was in its turn opposed to the terrestrial place. There were places where things had been put because they had been violently displaced, and then on the contrary places where things found their natural ground and stability. It was this complete hierarchy, this opposition, this intersection of places that could very roughly be called the medieval space: the space of emplacement. (22)

Foucault went on to argue that spaces can be predicated on a fictive semblance, "So that in this hinge between two things a resemblance appears. A resemblance that becomes double ... a resemblance of the place" (20). Such seemingly perfect doubling should result in an ideal replication of a given space—a utopia. But utopias do not occupy any real space; they are fictive constructs not unlike the individual *imago*. The world through which a subject passes while seeking to piece together an identity is itself a reflection of something else: "... we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another" (Foucault, "Spaces" par. 9). Foucault also references a certain quality of *irreducibility* that exists with the mirroring of the individual images and the juxtaposition of spaces. The manner in which a society contends with the schism between juxtaposed spaces leads to the creation of what Foucault termed heterotopias. A heterotopia does not mirror the utopia; it is the simulation of a distortion that arises from a need to maintain that distortion. According to Foucault, heterotopias are: "... a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" ("Spaces," par. 12). Foucauldian heterotopias are very real spaces that arise to meet the changing demands of a given society. The heterotopian spaces of a culture can shift, be redefined, or even

discarded as values and mores evolve or change. This process of discarding spatial identities (for a given space can be seen not only to confer an identity on its members, but also as embracing a signification in and of itself) appears to mimic a similar procedure that takes place in the development of the human psyche, Lacan's mirror phase. As previously discussed in this thesis, during this period of development, a child's initial identification is a misrecognition. Consequently, the adult works to craft a whole identity out of this fractured understanding of self. This process of identity adoption and discarding occurs in the heterotopian space. While the specific identity needs vary according to the needs of the individual and correspond to a variance in types of heterotopian structures that evolve, what does not change is the underlying cause for the existence of such a construct. A heterotopia permits members of all other groups to maintain both physical and psychic order. Of pronounced usefulness in effecting this preferred societal structure is the emanation of deviant heterotopias. Heterotopias of deviation act as spaces of containment for those whose actions are deemed aberrant by the greater society such as criminals or madmen. How a society contends with the schism between juxtaposed spaces leads to the creation of Foucauldian heterotopias. Once more: a heterotopia does not mirror the Utopia; it is the simulation of a distortion that arises from a need to maintain that distortion. A heterotopia permits members of all other groups to maintain both physical and psychic order. The emergence of deviant heterotopias is necessary for effecting this preferred societal structure. Heterotopias of deviation act as spaces of containment for those whose actions are deemed aberrant by the greater society such as criminals or madmen. While Foucault identified several such sites, it is his description of the cemetery as a crisis heterotopia (a liminal heterotopia) that is especially salient. As the cemetery came to act as a heterotopian space of containment for death, so too has the grief narrative functioned to contain and constrain discursive space. The area allotted for grieving, be it discursive or spatial, runs separately from the normative operations of society. However, Foucault's definition of these sites that run counter to the normative, non-aberrant actions of society was articulated long before the advancement of digital media and the consequences those technological advances would have on the way we read, think, and write. While the impact of digital modes of communication on personal or



business-related forms of communication has been addressed (in Carr's *The Shallows*, for example) the ramification for academic writing is perhaps not yet fully understood. *Academic Writing Boundaries*

As mentioned in the Preface, my decision to write from the first-person perspective is a deliberate, if unnatural and somewhat unprofessional choice. I have generally viewed academic writing as something emanating from a disembodied, soulless voice. Even when the writer is considered an expert in his or her field, inserting that pronoun *I* has always seemed somehow taboo. And, yet the work must still be imbued with or seen as a reflection of the writer's own personality and views. The seemingly paradoxical nature of academic writing has been taken up by several scholars (*Personal Effects: The Social Character of Scholarly Writing*, eds. Deborah H. Holdstein and David Bleich, for example) who contend that the formal nature of the academic voice is, ultimately, incompatible with the nature of humanist studies. In the introduction to their collection of essays, editors Deborah H. Holdstein and David Bleich contend that:

The study of language and literature without reference to its roles in scholars' lives and communities has been the most common academic practice; such study is also academic in the pejorative sense of its being "not practical" or moot or removed from real life. The adjective "academic" has meant, among other things, that scholarly writing about language and literature assumes that the subjectivity and social memberships of scholars are not factors in their humanistic knowledge in the same sense as physical scientists assume that their subjectivities are not factors in their knowledge of science. Because humanists have used the scientific sense of objectivity to conceptualize their own work, and because humanistic scholarship does not have as great an economic and physical consequence as science, humanities have come to seem less important as subject matters than science, law or business. (1)

Possibly the strongest argument against the inclusion of a personally informed perspective in the humanities is that such analyses somehow detract from the overall authenticity of academic scholarship. Additionally, as Bleich contends, the lack of a system for measuring the subjective response is seen as a legitimate concern for those who argue against the self-referential position in scholarly writing. This perceived lack of a measurement for these subjective texts has led the institutions and organizations that house the various disciplines that fall under the humanities umbrella to create

classroom environments deemed prescriptivist, at best, and potentially traumatic, at worst. As Bleich and Holdstein contend,

In secondary and postsecondary writing pedagogy, authorial detachment is part of the curriculum; self-inclusion, particularly the use of the “I,” is strongly discouraged. Students are not taught that sometimes the first person is effective, or that one’s own experience may well matter in one’s way of announcing knowledge, but that it is actually not acceptable to use the I or to fold in personal experience in substantive ways in academic writing. In this way, matters of writing pedagogy are closely related to matters of writing conventions in the humanities. Humanists are often unconscious to a great extent of just how coercive these conventions are. (2)

For many academics, the distinct division between personal and professional selves allows for the erection of both figurative and literal barriers. The governing rule of academic discourse ensures that only those capable of demonstrating fluency are allowed admission to the Ivy Leagues, hallowed halls, or Burkean parlors of the humanities. This closely protected insularity within the humanities has, in turn, resulted in the isolation of the individual academic. While such seclusion would seem conducive to introspection (and it might very well be so), it does not necessarily translate into an outpouring of self-writing. Or, if the individual does take up pen to write the occasional memoir, such efforts are often seen as avocational rather than vocational and very rarely do the two intersect: the Harold Blooms of higher education, those who are at liberty to publish what are essentially vanity pieces, are few and far between. Most academics are guided by the publish or perish aphorism in order to maintain their institutional standing or relevance. This long-held professional measurement is key to understanding the origins of academic writers and their products. However, while the need to publish is ultimately driven by what might be for most less-than-altruistic motives (tenure, grants, lectureship), the individual writer must feel some degree of control or choice for the process to go on. As Willard-Traub contends,

Those of us whose experiences inside the institution readily challenge the usefulness of unqualified autonomy as an ideal, simultaneously recognize its appeal ... This ideal of autonomy endures perhaps because the vision of relative (if not absolute) autonomy provides academics with what Richard E. Miller would call a “felt sense of distinction” (26); perhaps it endures as well because it comprises, at least for some, part of a legacy and a link to a common, professional past. In any case, at the very least such an ideal operates within the institution like other “subterranean text(s)” (e.g., the text which Linda Brodkey

argues leads composition to “abet middle-class illusions of meritocracy” [234]) that “insinuate rather than argue (their) claims” (215). That such an ideal figures strongly in others’ and our own perceptions of the profession is evidenced, for example, by the frequency with which “autonomy” is cited by tenured faculty members as one reason for high satisfaction in their jobs (Schneider par. 8). (27)

Thus, that figure of the autonomous, solitary scholar is predicated on the need to preserve an element of separateness. It is ironic that the “felt sense of distinction” is most frequently effected through writing practices that work to erase any traces of the individual. As I have already mentioned, the privileging of the objective academic voice over the subjective voice has promoted pedagogical writing practices that have historically disenfranchised and *othered* the perspectives of minorities and women.

### *Experimenting with Life-Writing*

In the early 2000s, Nancy K. Miller examined the causes and features of an exploding trend in academic writing frequently referred to as “‘the new belletrism’ – a mode of writing keyed to a ‘reconfiguration of audience and audience expectation’” (421). Both Miller and Isabel Duran contend that the origins for this explosion of so-called private writings can be traced to the expansion of feminist literary criticism (Duran, 204; Miller, 422). Miller argues that life writing relies on the act of reading and the relationship between writer, reader, and text. Her essay unfolds as an example of this process of identification—her own identification with a series of autobiographical texts. While Miller asserts the connectivity between a writer and her audience(s), Duran details how self-writing, and autocritography in particular, can be used to foreground the voices and experiences of the marginalized, “It is, in other words, an account of the individual, social, and institutional conditions that help to produce a writer or scholar and, hence, his/her professional concerns” (205). Autocritography, Duran goes on to argue, is especially appealing to female scholars who desire a “departure from ‘normalcy’” yet still need the sanctity afforded through scholarly distant writing (208). Miller identifies a common strand in the texts she explores, as she explains,

the author, typically a writer who has entered middle age, revisits the experience of losing a parent, often through a long illness and a prolonged period of caretaking. In these narratives of loss, there are always quite distinctly at least two subjects: the writing child and the dying parent. It became clear to me after being immersed for several years in the world of memorialization that this

relational model of binding self to other historically has shaped the narrative of most autobiographical experience .... (422)

Thus, the construction of a remembered self is frequently dependent on a loss. Miller focuses primarily on the memoir, which she believes fosters the advancement of a relationship between writer and reader that, to some degree, mimics or possibly mirrors the relational binding between the writer and their lost loved one. Miller muses:

Now what if this relational mode that I kept finding wherever I looked within autobiographical texts was also the model of relation that organized the experience of *reading* autobiography itself? I want to consider the kinds of bonds and desires that connect readers to the contemporary memoir ... In other words, what seems to be going on between memoir writers and their readers is a relational act that creates identifications (which include disidentifications and cross-identifications), conscious or unconscious, across a broad spectrum of so-called personal experience. (423)

During the research process for this project, I have considered how to take on the autobiographical component. From the earliest stages, it was almost a given that this thesis would contain details of my lived experiences and not simply textual analysis. However, I was always cognizant of the need for a governing set of guidelines or rules. One relatively systematic approach to scholarly writing that incorporates the individual experience is autocritography. In “Writing through Grief: Using Autoethnography to Help Process Grief after the Death of a Loved One,” Angela Matthews relates the process of balancing academic writing with grief narrativizing. When I first found Matthews’ article, I was not yet ready to approach the material, nor did I understand how it might be used to inform my own research and writing processes. Matthews’ experience with the death of her son, Taylor, was the impetus for her exploration of autoethnography. For someone whose professional existence was closely intertwined with research and writing, an autoethnographically-based approach afforded Matthews with a mechanism that allowed for discovering how, “... weaving personal experiences with academic research can reveal understanding of complex, painful issues, such as death, grief, and traumatic loss” (Abstract). Matthews addresses a concern regarding autoethnography that I have worried about as well, namely, that such writing is frequently dismissed by critics who denounce it as mere wallowing with no legitimate academic value. She asserts that the value lies in the very relating of such deeply

personal experiences. Matthews' methodology is particularly enlightening for me. Her decision to turn personal journals into field notes (making her the sole human subject) provided a potential method for detailing my own grief, and how to derive material that would typically be derived from human subjects. Special concerns arise when those subjects are contending with their own traumatic experiences. As Matthews states, "Use of personal introspection instead of observations and interviews allowed me to avoid infringing on the grief of others," (6). As a narrative practice, autoethnography affords those who have experienced loss or trauma, such as Matthews or me, with a means for exploring and writing through our grief. Before delving too far into this form of life-writing, I should attempt to elaborate on the differences between autoethnography and autocritography. Adams, Ellis, and Holman Jones define autoethnography as,

a research method that uses personal experience ("auto") to describe and interpret ("graphy") cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices ("ethno"). Autoethnographers believe that personal experience is infused with political/cultural norms and expectations, and they engage in rigorous self-reflection—typically referred to as "reflexivity" – in order to identify and interrogate the intersections between the self and social life. (1)

Thus, autoethnography exists almost as an extension of practices employed by ethnographers who expend a great deal of energy in the process of collecting and analyzing field data and then turning that data into notes. It is less easy to define autocritography. Perhaps, one means of discerning how these genres are paradoxically intertwined and yet intrinsically different is in recognizing that, "ethnographies are of interest as an object of enquiry in themselves, as literary works (Alsop 117). Beginning with that recognition, the autocritographer can then work to understand, explore, play with, and engage in:

evaluating the extent and the ways in which literary works draw on the ethnography in the construction of narrative. While the discussion ... has focused on the literary analysis of texts explicitly presented as ethnographies, here the attention is moved to uncovering and exploring the possible basis of other forms of literature not customarily defined as ethnographic, but where the narrative draws on ethnographically produced material. (Alsop 118)

Matthews' career as a scholar and researcher, in part, guided her to choose autoethnography as the form for her grief narrative construction. Explaining her process, Matthews acknowledged that,

The researcher is already a part of the world she is studying, so observations are internal. Field notes require autoethnographers to recall memories of pivotal experiences in their lives and as many details about those experiences as possible, so rather than gathering field notes by observing others, autoethnographers gather data by looking inward at past experiences. As we write about our experiences, we reflect on them and their meaning because writing is a method of inquiry, discovery, and analysis. (Method)

Following the death of her son, Matthews had recorded her thoughts and reactions in a grief journal, which she was then able to use as a primary source document for more detailed field notes. She then used the field notes to create vignettes, which she would finally use as the source for her vignette analysis/reflections. This process not only allowed for a recursive examination of her personal grief, but abrogated the risk associated with other human subjects. As Matthews notes, "Use of personal introspection instead of observations and interviews allowed me to avoid infringing on the grief of others. In this way, I avoided many ethical issues involved in gathering data from grieving participants" (Data collection). Matthews' process provided me with several possibilities for my research. Originally, I considered surveying members of different grief groups through their various social media platforms. And, while the questions might have been very general (Do you keep a journal? Do you have a blog or vlog presence for sharing your grief journey?) I still felt uncomfortable not only soliciting grieving parents like me, but also exposing my own experiences to others. With these concerns effectively ruling out a truly autoethnographic approach, I turned my focus to other possibilities.

#### *Digital Spaces and Self-Writing*

While writing this thesis, I found myself continuously struggling with overcoming those coercive conventions discussed in the preceding sections. Even though my intentions to break away from standard writing conventions associated with the humanities have been clearly announced, I fall back on those very conventions almost reflexively. There is a seemingly imperceptible voice in my head that has

conditioned me to interpret references to myself or the actual insertion of my person into scholarly discourse as something not simply wrong, but almost subversive.

Although the scholarly voice was borrowed from other subject areas as a method for crafting the image of the humanities as a serious branch of knowledge, the result has been somewhat antithetical to the nature of academic humanism. As a result, the further humanistic scholarship moves from its origins, the less respect the field is accorded. Counteracting such consequences can only occur by reinserting the human element to the humanities. Humanistic scholarship, rather than asking scholars to deny the existence of self, must expand to allow one's own personal experiences to operate openly, which would work to advance the field. Such a re-imagining of traditional scholarly discourse is not easy. As both a student and teacher, the message has been clearly communicated to me: remove all instances of the first or second person. Additionally, as an aspiring academic professional, writing in a manner that could be construed as subversive is not a matter to be taken lightly. However, as the modes of production evolve to meet twenty-first century digital expectations, so too should the content. The project that formed the basis for this thesis was multimodal. The style of writing employed in the essay component differed from a blog posted on the accompanying web site in both tone and scope. It is naive to ignore the influence of one form of discourse on the other.

Over the course of my two years of graduate studies at Eastern Kentucky University, I have used various classroom assignments as a means for crafting my personal narrative of loss. Obviously, this thesis is itself the culmination of those explorations. For a class taken in the Spring of 2021, one of my instructors assigned students with the task of developing a digital presence. This assignment was also my first interaction with multimodality. I chose to create a blog, which I named [My Hiraeth Journey](#). I used my first post to introduce myself, and the second to define the term *hiraeth*. As I detail in the post, the word has several connotations, but the general implied sense is summed up as:

[Hiraeth](#) is a Welsh word that is somewhat difficult to describe in English, for the reason that there is no single English word that expresses all that it does. Some words often used to try to explain it are homesickness, yearning, and longing. (South, *My Hiraeth Journey*)

Initially, I considered the possibility of using my website and blog entries as quasi field notes. I envisioned mimicking the process employed by Matthews to create a digital grief journal. That journal would, in turn, become a source for reflective field notes. All these materials could then be used as artifacts for this thesis. However, I have, admittedly, never been a consistent diarist. I am, to be blunt, a lazy writer. I have come to recognize that structure and routine are prerequisites for any writing endeavor I undertake to be successful. I am not able to perform without a looming deadline. With these personal insights, I decided to push myself and enrolled in a creative writing class.

As a result of that experience, I decided to include (in its entirety) the manuscript that evolved from the different assignments for my creative writing class in Appendix A. I have also included an excerpt of my manuscript and an accompanying reflection in the body of this thesis. I first became aware of the usefulness of this form of introspection in self-writing texts while employed as a graduate consultant with the Noel Studio for Academic Creativity at Eastern Kentucky University. Undergraduates enrolled in the University's English 102—Research, Writing, and Rhetoric had been assigned to compile a portfolio of the texts produced over the duration of the course. The portfolio would include various iterations of different writing assignments—from brainstorm draft to peer review, to final draft. In addition to this collection of work, students were asked to reflect on the different assignments, and to then write on what they learned about themselves through the writing processes. This practice is not dissimilar to the end-of-course reflective essay assigned by my Creative Writing instructor. I came to believe that form might allow me to explore, expand, and develop upon my personal narrative and to create a sort of hybridization of the various life-writing genres I have been exploring. Admittedly, this is something of a creative punt. As I near the culmination of this academic project, I am still not entirely certain how to define or even understand which texts might fall under the category of life-writing. Some scholars seem to have very rigid expectations, while others (like me) allow greater latitude. Olney, in his *Memory & Narrative*, states, “I call the kind of writing I am looking at by various names—confessions, autobiography, memoirs, periautography



... autography ... and—the most frequently employed term—life-writing” (xv). On occasion, I have employed a perspective like that of Chief Justice Potter Stewart who, in his opinion on pornography, is infamously credited with stating, “I know it when I see it” (*Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 1964). I believe that the form a self-writing text takes must be unique to the individual. My position on that this type of writing is not easily quantifiable and requires something inherently personally defined is possibly best expressed by a writer with whom I have only very recently become familiar. Annie Ernaux, who was awarded the 2022 Nobel Prize for Literature, refers to herself as “an ethnologist of myself,” and states, “I don’t try to define myself in terms of a genre. For me, the most important thing is to find the form of the writing that fits with what I’m writing. So, to me, the right term is writer” (*PBS NewsHour*, 12.09.22). Therefore, what follows is an exploration of form that best fits me. In addition to providing a type of structure that seems to work for my concept of life-writing, I believe that this narrative-reflection format is also well suited for digital platforms. As I have indicated, one of my goals in this project has been to consider how grief narratology has changed as digital ecologies evolved (and continue to evolve). Not only has the advent of the World Wide Web affected the ways we read and write, it has altered the very way we receive and think about information. As Nicholas Carr asserts in *The Shallows* (sounding somewhat reminiscent of Marshall McLuhan):

When it comes to the quality of our thoughts and judgments, the amount of information a communication medium supplies is less important than the way the medium presents the information and the way, in turn, our minds take it in ... When the brain is overloaded by stimuli ... when we’re peering into a network-connected computer screen, attention splinters, thinking becomes superficial, and memory suffers. We become less reflective and more impulsive. (ix)

Carr’s observations may seem obvious to anyone who has seen the development of digital technologies from its origins with Tim Berners-Lee’s web server in 1989. As I compose this document, I have four devices in front of me: a desktop computer, a laptop, an iPad, and an iPhone. These devices are an integral part not only of my scholarship but have become woven into the very fabric of my daily life. Like many digital citizens, sharing some of the most personal moments of my life has become commonplace, as well. From vacation pictures on Instagram to Facebook status updates

on my son's college admission, I have provided friends, family, and acquaintances from around the world with instantaneous access to events and thoughts that at any other time in history would have remained private or reserved for a diary, journal, or letter. Facebook was how I shared with the world the time of my son's death. His obituary was (and still is) posted on the funeral service provider's website. Was the content or shape of his obituary different from the print versions? There is no way for me to know because there was no print version. Much like the landline, or housephone, print editions of almost every discourse form appear to be making their way to obsolescence. There will be both a print and digital version of this document—in its entirety—for official channels. But, I know that my website audience (aside from close family) will have little to no interest in reading the entire text. There is a new *anxiety of influence* that exerts its impact on digital content creators: how to deliver content in a format and scale that will be easily disseminated across different platforms, channels, and devices while ensuring engagement. While I, too, am aware of this influence, I am as yet unsure as to the myriad ways in which it will guide the creative process.

### *Creative Writing Project: Seed Draft*

For the first assignment in the advanced creative writing class, our instructor tasked students with drafting a seed that we would work with over the course of the semester. The requirements were relatively simple: 500 words maximum, first person, and about an event that happened. The following is my seed draft, in its entirety. The scene is a fictionalized account of a real exchange between myself and my mother. At the time I wrote this draft, I had been living with her for over two years, and we had just passed the third anniversary of my son's death. I have always been interested in my maternal grandmother, who died when I was seven. She was a woman who had experienced a great deal of loss in life: her husband, a brother in a tragic sawmill accident, and her own son. Underlying my questions to my mother is a desire to understand how my grandmother survived those deaths. If I could find some connection or insight, perhaps I, too, could live through my child's death. What follows below is the first seed draft with its accompanying reflection. The material is also shared on my website in this same form.

## *Reflections*

When I started this creative writing assignment, I had no idea how to proceed. I have never aspired to be a fiction writer, and even attempting to write creative nonfiction seemed a daunting task. So, I think that this assignment, which had to be based on a real event, was a good way for me to ease into the process. Even with some relative degree of comfort, I was still uncertain with what to write. I wanted to explore the impact of my son's death, but doing a deep dive into that event was just too much for me, and also seemed, in some way, exploitative. I needed a way to write around his death and my grief. The answer to what to write (and perhaps the answer to how to contend with my grief) might be found in my family history. After the death of my own child, I thought knowing more about how these women survived traumatic loss might help me. So, I started going through my grandmother's belongings. I have often thought about how frequently all we are left with as clues to a person's identity are the objects they leave behind. This might be another reason that I have become similarly obsessed with stories like the dreamer's in *Pearl*.

\*\*\*\*\*

A carton of Camel cigarettes (missing three packs), two shriveled chestnuts, four spent pistol shells, one pair of lady's black leather gloves, one pair of lady's tan leather gloves. These are some of the items contained in my grandmother's purse. My mother sits on the couch taking each artifact out carefully and setting it beside her. I am perched on my knees before her.

"Do you know what this is?" she asks while holding up a piece of wood about an inch in length. Dust emanates from the frayed top as she brushes back and forth.

"A match?" I mean, that would make sense considering the Camels.

"It's a snuff brush. They used it to get the snuff out of the can" Mother points to the tin of tobacco she has just pulled from the bag.

Although still pungent, the snuff fails to elicit any core memories of my grandmother. We sat a few steps away from the kitchen. There lie the origins for my mythos of Mama Lela. In the past, I have brought out the infamous possum incident whenever it was necessary to demonstrate my authentic hillbilly-ness, or to provide evidence of my family's stalwart quirkiness to outsiders. I am uncertain what insiders recall, though.

"Mom, do you remember when Mama Lela fed me the possum?"

While she does, the exact circumstances are unclear for my mother, "Where would we have been?" She means everyone else -- her, my father, my four siblings. This feast could only have taken place when I was left in my grandmother's care.

"I don't know where you were. I had to have been maybe four or five -- we hadn't been in this house for too long. Everything was new and clean. I do remember that. Why do you think she did that to me?"

While the story has always been presented as humorous, I have started to question why a woman would serve a roast possum as chicken to her youngest grandchild.

*"I'm sure she thought it was funny. You ate it all up. She thought that was hilarious. I don't know any of these people," she mutters while leafing through the address book pulled from that cavernous bag.*

*"Prepare for what?" My attention turns from Mother's ruminations to the TV screen. Sorting through the Google search engine that is my brain, I recognize an actress who began her career in soap operas. She plays the mother in the made-for-television drama. She tells the young boy in the hospital bed, "Ryan, you have AIDS."*

"Why are you watching this? Why are you watching this now?" I ask.

"It's just on. We can turn it off. Do you want to look through any of this?" Gesturing to the address book.

No. I don't want to look through any of this now.

The cigarette carton goes in first. It is the largest item. I carry the purse back upstairs, back to the storage room, and place it in the steamer trunk.

*End Reflection*

The italicized text in this excerpt is notable for two reasons. First, there is a slight shift in perspective. The mother's point of view is still limited, but her gaze has been drawn to the television and a scene that is familiar to her (and the daughter) not only because of the actors, but also because of their own intimate experiences with hospitals and a dying child. Second, I think the ubiquitousness of media, in this instance a tv drama, for almost every life event, has become nearly commonplace.

.....

#### IV: Conclusion

To employ my local vernacular, I have struggled mightily with this conclusion. To conclude something connotes, to me, a summing up. However, as there is much that I have been unable to address in this thesis, I would prefer to mention, briefly, what has been set aside and what a future in grief writing might look like for me.

My original intent with this project had been to include an examination of some Anglo Saxon and Medieval texts to ascertain how the Foucauldian theory of heterotopias could be used to further our understanding of the episteme in which the texts were composed. Foucault shared his theory on space in March 1967; however, the work would not be published until after his death in 1984. Consequently, “Of Other Spaces” must be read as an incomplete expression of Foucault’s theory of space and discourse. Foucault also left the fourth volume of his *History of Sexuality* unfinished. In the draft version of *Volume IV: Confessions of the Self*, Foucault proposed to explore the concept of pleasure in both pre-Christian and early Christian societies. While his death prevented a thorough examination of sexuality in the medieval era, traces of what might have been developed in the fourth installment of *The History of Sexuality* are available. As Anne Clark Bartlett contends, through texts such as, “What is an Author,” “The Battle for Chastity,” and “A Preface to Transgression,” it is possible to identify what Bartlett terms Foucault’s Medievalism. Although Bartlett’s essay might be considered dated (published in 1994), her overall argument about the viability of a Foucauldian-informed reading of medieval texts is still relevant. Bartlett states,

My position, though, is that – thoughtfully incorporated – current critical theory can (and perhaps even must) represent a valuable component of our medievalisms. Newer theoretical approaches can offer provocative perspectives on such vexing issues as the social functions of literacy, the exercise of power through bodily disciplines and miraculous behaviors, and the political significance of divine revelation. Critically engaged medieval scholarship also provides a useful bridge for communication with colleagues in other specialties ... who may share our interests in issues of ... literacy, gender, and the body as social text. Our participation in discussion of such shared concerns can remedy the progressive marginalization or disappearance of medieval studies in college curricula. (11)

Like Bartlett, I argue that such “newer theoretical approaches” as Foucault’s are necessary for the revitalization of medieval studies along with other increasingly

marginalized, historically so-called canonical eras or genres (Anglo-Saxon texts, for example). Furthermore, I concur with Bartlett who points out that,

theories such as Foucault's view the world as a setting for the operation of cultural codes that precede the self and bring it into being... members of social groups ... inhabit specific and overlapping oral and written systems of organization. These in turn allow the production of variable shifting identities, roles, and positions of authority" (13).

A Foucauldian-driven analysis of medieval texts would allow contemporary scholars to unravel the cultural signs and rules that guided identity construction for the medieval self. Although the scope of this thesis precludes an analysis of medieval texts, I have explored these concepts in another paper, "Non-Normative Grieving: Reclaiming Marginalized Female voices in Anglo-Saxon Elegies," which is scheduled to be presented at the Kentucky Philological Association's 2023 conference. My argument for that paper is that within the constraints of the Anglo-Saxon elegy lies a transgressive, heterotopian dimension where a fluidity of gender identity exists that allows for non-normative forms of grieving to be expressed. The poems "Wulf and Eadwacer" and "The Wife's Lament" stand alone for their representation of female grief in the corpus of Anglo-Saxon poetry. While the elegies are not the only instances of female voices found in A-S texts ("Judith," for example) or even of female grief (the Geatish woman at the end of *Beowulf*), these poems are unique for being narrated by women. As is the case with most of the corpus Anglo-Saxon literature, the author of the poems is anonymous. Located within *The Exeter Book of Old English Poetry*, the poems have traditionally been attributed to a male scribe. While a great deal of scholarship has been devoted to assigning authorship of many pieces found in the Exeter Book to Cynewulf, no conclusive evidence supporting him as author for the unsigned works exists (Butler, "The Cynewulf Question Revived"). The absence of a known author requires that readers construct an authorial identity through a close reading of narrative clues. In the case of W&E and Wife, where those traces of identity are provided by female narrators, we are tasked with considering the way a masculine author is constructed through feminine voices. Such an undertaking falls within the parameters of historical sensibility, as articulated by Tinkler and Jackson; in particular, the exploration of gender construction in Anglo-Saxon literature, "... prompts us to

question novelty claims, in other words, claims that a contemporary practice or discourse is a recent phenomenon with no historical precedent or parallels” (74). Additionally, employing the work of contemporary gender theorists such as Judith Butler as a lens for understanding Anglo-Saxon literature takes up a second feature of historical sensibility for it, “... encourages us to embrace our feminist intellectual heritage” (Tinkler and Jackson 74). Furthermore, it is my position that the recognition and recovery of Anglo Saxon feminine-informed texts through the employment of novel analytical practices, such as the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software application used in my research, allows contemporary scholars to reimagine the position of so-called canonical works whose pedagogical and social merits have become increasingly questionable.

As I mentioned briefly, I believe that the future for narratology, gender studies, and more traditional forms of literary scholarship could be advanced in unique ways through a broadened application of language analysis programs such as LIWC. I am providing some of the data derived from using LIWC as part of my research on “Wulf and Eadwacer” and “The Wife’s Lament.” Dr. James W. Pennebaker pioneered the use of language analysis software to further the study of the underlying mechanisms entailed in human communication acts. In *The Secret Life of Pronouns*, Pennebaker, a trained social psychologist, explains the impetus that led to the development of LIWC. As Pennebaker recalls,

By way of background, my early career dealt with health, emotions, and the nature of traumatic experiences. In the early 1980s, I stumbled on a finding that fascinated me. People who reported having a terrible traumatic experience *and* who kept the experience a secret had far more health problems than people who openly talked about their traumas. Why would keeping a secret be so toxic? More importantly, if you asked people to disclose emotionally powerful secrets would their health improve? (4)

Pennebaker’s research brought him to the conclusion that writing about traumatic experiences frequently does result in increased well-being. While such a finding might appear rather obvious or even simplistic, and not necessarily novel, Pennebaker identified a gap that previous understandings of trauma and writing had left unexplored. The new approach that Pennebaker envisioned was brought about by advances in digital



technologies taking place in the early 1990s. Together with software programmer Martha E. Francis, Pennebaker was able to create a software program that connects word choice to psychological states. At the heart of LIWC are a set of word dictionaries. Each dictionary is composed of words (along with associated word stems) related to a specific emotion. As explained by Pennebaker,

For example, we built an anger dictionary ... that comprised numerous words related to anger, such as *hate, rage, kill, slash, revenge*, etc. We also included word stems such as *kill* so that any word that starts with the letters K-I-L-L, such as *killer, killing, kills*, and *killed*, would be counted as well. We then went on to build dictionaries for sadness, anxiety, positive emotions, and other mood states. (6)

When a given section of text is submitted for analysis, the program begins with a simple word count. LIWC then searches throughout its built-in dictionaries to determine if any of the words can be located. In addition to the emotion dictionaries, the creators of LIWC built dictionaries for function words, which includes words such as pronouns, articles, and cause-effect words (Pennebaker 6). In “Did Shakespeare Write *Double Falsehood*? Identifying Individuals by Creating Psychological Signatures With Text Analysis,” Pennebaker and co-author Ryan L. Boyd used LIWC to identify linguistic so-called tells. Pennebaker and Boyd argue that “words can ... be classified along hundreds of psychological dimensions ... [and] that function words reveal much about psychological processes, including emotional state, cognitive complexity, and sociability” (571). LIWC allows for a data-driven analysis of the psychological processes underpinning a text. As the authors contend, “By considering multiple psychological dimensions of a person’s language simultaneously, it is possible to create a psychological signature of that person” (571). This study is of particular interest to me because it involves texts that are both non-contemporary and (possibly) of canonical authorship. The study detailed in this article would be useful as a model for a future analysis of Anglo-Saxon and medieval texts.

Finally, had I world enough and time, I would like to devote more research to the forms used by female writers in the modern era. I have alluded to the work of Annie Ernaux briefly. Ernaux is interesting because she writes with an awareness of the power/knowledge dynamic articulated by Foucault as well as the question of

subjectivity and authorship as put forth by Barthes—which then unfolds through the lens of gender. For Ernaux, the awareness that “All the images will disappear” (Preface)—the need to find a means for recording the past, her past—is compounded by the lack of a form. The answer for Ernaux appears to be in locating the self through shared cultural markers. Written in what Ernaux labels “an unremitting continuous tense” she declares, “This will not be a work of remembrance in the usual sense, aimed at putting a life into a story, creating an explanation of self. She will go within herself only to retrieve the world” (*The Years*). Like Ernaux, I am still working to identify a form that will somehow provide a satisfactory “explanation of self.” The traditional academic text, such as this thesis, is a textual space that is, typically, not conducive to writing often deemed experimental in nature. As technologies, modes, and mediums of communication evolve, it is not unimaginable that the forms and narratives shared through academic platforms undergo a congruous shift.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Creative Writing Manuscript Final Draft

## Appendix A: Creative Writing Manuscript Final Draft

### *A Thing There Was That Mattered*

*Lucy*

“Shh, shh. Please, baby. Please, hush. I just need a minute. Please be quiet for just a minute so I can think.” The tiny bundle in her arms seemed to recognize the desperation in Lucy’s pleas. Her hoarse wails diminished to intermittent heaves and whimpering. Continuing her aimless pace around the narrow confines of the room, Lucy moved from dresser, bed, fireplace, window, again, and again, and back. Soon, the repetitive movement combined with a slight jostling lulled the infant to a restless sleep. Absentmindedly, yet instinctively, Lucy placed her child in the cocoon of the tick blanket on the bed.

“One dollar and fifty-seven cents. One dollar and fifty-seven cents.” As if repeating the amount would cause some sort of alchemic multiplication to occur. “Oh, God. What am I going to do?” Raising a shaking hand to cover her eyes, Lucy began to feel the anxiety that always seemed to hover below the surface of her skin. The bile rose in her throat. Racing to the window, she threw up the sash. March had come in like a lion. The cold wind raced into the room, whipping the lace panels around Lucy like a shroud attempting to embrace her in its grasp. She gulped deep breaths in until the panic began to subside.

“Mama?”

Lucy’s attention was ripped away from the open window back to the confines of the bedroom where three pairs of eyes were trained on her. She hadn’t forgotten them, but for a fraction of time, Lucy had set aside the existence of her three other children. She looked at them now where they sat, huddled together beside a fireplace that put out little in the way of warmth. The two girls, seven and five, the boy, three, and the baby – was she four months yet? No, the 24th was still a few weeks away. But, she was certain this youngest child would share the same blue eyes as her brother and sisters. Their father’s eyes. Lucy’s glance began to drift toward the dresser, and a picture of a young man. “No.” But, it didn’t matter whether or not she looked at the sepia-toned image. She knew his face better than her own.



“Not now. I can’t do this now.” Steeling herself against the pain, Lucy opened her eyes.

Aunt Dolly had once cautioned Lucy about the man in the picture, “You best watch out. Any man with bedroom eyes like that can’t be trusted. I guarantee you he’s got Gypsy blood somewhere in his past. He won’t ever stay in one place.”

In the end, Aunt Dolly was right, she supposed. And, oh, how the women in her family loved being right. He was gone. Good and buried, as the saying goes. But, he’s left me with these Gypsy-children. “And, one dollar and fifty-seven cents.”

“Mama, we’re hungry,” the oldest girl, always the responsible one, spoke up.

“Yes, I know you are. Take your sister and brother downstairs and see if your grandmother has fixed anything for supper. I’ll be down with the baby soon.”

Lucy watched the children descend the twisting walnut staircase. Hand-in-hand they went, with bodies so slight, so ephemeral, their treads were scarcely perceptible. They had learned to be ghost children over the last year. Silent observers of the adult business of dying.

Lucy closed the bedroom door, and barely resisted the temptation to turn the key in the lock. Whether that impulse was born of the need to keep the world at bay, or to imprison herself made no material difference.

Her attention returned to the infant on the bed. Rebecca. Named after Lucy’s own grandmother, a woman about whom she’d heard more than enough tall tales and legends. Rebecca Crockett had kept the farm going when all her *boys* had gone off to die in what would forever be remembered as the Great War of Northern Aggression. Like Lucy, she had buried a husband, and sons. She would have known how to survive. The thought didn’t console Lucy at all. “What am I going to do?” Lucy’s mind raced. Four children, no husband, no money, no skills. Looking at the picture, a tortured whisper escaped, “Damn you to hell and beyond for leaving me like this.”

And, briefly, she knew that if she could have joined him in the grave, she would.

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*Eliza*

She never set out to abandon her children. If anyone had been observing, (in order to make a case study, perhaps), nothing in her upbringing would have indicated that she would one day be the type of woman who could walk out on her own offspring. At the age of five, she'd fed and changed the Baby Alive that had been gifted to her for Christmas. At six, she played Mommy while her cousin, Samantha, was Daddy to a brood of stuffed animals. Motherhood had never *not* been in the cards. And, then, one day she was thirty with a living, breathing, shitting infant of her own making. For almost twenty years, she was a *very good* mother. She performed all the motherly duties. Playgroups and preschool. Oshkosh B'gosh overalls and little league. *Goodnight Moon* and Disney World. She made it all happen. Until she couldn't do the one thing, the most important thing, a mother is supposed to do.

*I am an unnatural mother.* She'd read that phrase once in a story or article. The writer had left her daughter with an ex-husband and stepmother—a woman far more motherly than the writer, or so it seemed. There were other examples she could recall—but all were from books or movies. *Anna Karenina*, the mom in *Kramer v. Kramer*, *Sophie's Choice*. “What emotional well did Meryl Streep tap into to play those roles?” she had sometimes wondered.

That first year she went back to work after her eleven-year excursion into stay-at-home mothering, she'd met real, honest-to-goodness abandoned children. They were so matter of fact about being left behind. The class had been in the middle of reading *Walk Two Moons* — before the climax, before the falling action, before the emptiness of its conclusion — and during a pause, Essence piped up, “That's how my mom left me. She put me to bed. Kissed me good night. And walked out of the room. She was gone when I woke up.”

One story opened the floodgates of abandonment. And, from behind the safety of her podium, she listened. She tried to suppress the sanctimonious judgment — “What kind of woman would do that? I would never leave my children. ”

But, she did. Not for another man, or a career, or from being lost to addiction. But, because of death. It was impossible to explain not only to other people, but herself. *I would have died if I'd stayed.* The thought often flits across her mind. Perhaps

not a literal death, although the temptation had seemed, at times, to offer the only release from a lifetime of pain. The one job a mother has – to keep her child alive – Eliza had failed. What right did she have to mother the children who remained?

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*Rebecca*

*Ochre.* That was the color she had intended for the walls. They were meant to be a warm yellow that would draw out the warm reds of the brick fireplace and the mahogany paneled walls. It was close. No one other than her would probably notice a slight leaning toward buttermilk. Her eyes continued to circumnavigate the narrow room. It wasn't really much of a family room, although that's what it had been. She tried to remember a time when all five of her children had been able to sit there together. A portrait of the four girls and one boy sat on the mantle above the fireplace. The youngest was what? Five? Six, maybe in the picture. A grown woman with children of her own. At that thought, her gut lurched, and her gaze was drawn to another picture. This one of a young boy, slight, blonde hair, his laughing face turned up toward the sun. His eyes were closed, but she knew their color the same as she knew her own. Blue. Enough of that, she thought. Then, looking back at the bag in her lap, Rebecca pulled out another artifact from the recesses of her own mother's life. Holding up the treasure, she showed her youngest daughter, Eliza.

"A match? I mean, I guess that would make sense considering the Camels."

Of course, she wouldn't know what it was, Rebecca thought. "It's a snuff brush. They used it to get the snuff out of the can" "pointing to the tin of tobacco she had just pulled from the bag. Although still pungent, the snuff fails to elicit any core memories of its former owner.

A carton of Camel cigarettes (missing three packs), two shriveled chestnuts, four spent pistol shells, one pair of lady's black leather gloves. These are some of the items contained in Lucy's purse. Or, Mama Lucy as Rebecca's children had called their grandmother. Each artifact is carefully extracted, then placed beside her. She is as deliberate as any archaeologist in her movements.

“Mom, do you remember when Mama Lucy fed me the possum?” Lucy looks at the woman perched on her knees before me. Who is this person, she finds herself asking once again.

Although she does recall the story, the exact circumstances are unclear, “Where would we have been? Your father? Me? The others?”

Eliza is somewhat exasperated, “I don’t know where you were. I had to have been maybe four or five—we hadn’t been in this house for too long. Everything was new and clean. I do remember that. Why do you think she did that to me?”

“I’m sure she thought it was funny. You ate it all up. She thought that was hilarious. I don’t know any of these people,” Rebecca mutters while leafing through the address book pulled from that cavernous bag. *Why is she always asking these questions?*

“Prepare for what?” Rebecca’s attention turns briefly from the task at hand to the TV screen. An actress who began her career in soap operas in the 70s appears. She plays the mother in the made-for-television drama. She tells the young boy in the hospital bed, “Ryan, you have AIDS.” Another child dying. Another quick dart of eyes to the boy in the portrait.

A diversion is required. “Eliza, do you know what this is?” she asks while holding up a piece of wood about an inch in length. Dust emanates from the frayed top as my fingers brush back and forth.

It’s too late. “Why are you watching this? Why are you watching this now?” Eliza pleads. Too close to home. Too raw. Too soon. Always too soon.

“It’s just on. We can turn it off. Do you want to look through any of this?” Rebecca gestures to the address book.

“No. I don’t want to look through any of this now. I have to get out of here.”

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*Lucy*

She would lie there for just a little while. It was early when she headed out. She never looked at the clock, but moonshine had lit the path from the screened-in porch to the garden. The shape of that full moon was still visible through the mist from where

she was now. And she was tired. A weak “ha” escaped from her lined lips. She could no longer recall a time when she wasn’t tired or worn down. Her arms still shook from the confrontation.

“Oh, god,” she thought, “Why did I do that?” An old habit, the impulse to clamp a hand over her eyes and shut out the world, rose up, but was immediately shuttered by the tremors that reverberated throughout her body. Clenching her eyes closed didn’t prevent the scene from replaying in her mind.

“God damnit. God damnit. God damnit.” A useless litany escaped in a hoarse whisper. Why she maintained that whisper was a mystery. No one was there to hear her. She could scream for help or sing all the verses to Yankee Doodle Dandy. It would make no difference. She was alone with no company but her memories and the possum lying dead beside her. As her eyes fluttered open, and her vision righted itself, she slowly turned her head. Just a few feet away from her lay the corpse of her former foe. Between them, the instrument of death. She had never meant to kill the animal. Its death was the mistake of a moment, or the result of her own impatience. She had known it was the Louisville Slugger in her hand and not Aunt Dolly’s walnut cane when she left the house. But, once she was set on a path, she did not stray.

The creature was about the size of a healthy infant. And, she thought without irony, almost as attractive as some infants. Of course, she never was the motherly type. Even when her own offspring were small, she couldn’t recall finding them particularly engaging. If she were completely honest (and shouldn’t she be now?), handing them off to Aunt Dolly or her own mother was always a relief. They all had been better off without her as a mother, anyway.

“A cat would make a better mother than you.” Her mother’s words came back across the decades. How unfair to cats, she thought.

“Yes, mama, I’m sure they would.” She had never uttered those words. But they lived with her. “And you, as well.” Another phrase that never crossed her lips. No, no one spoke back to the Grand Dame. They just left.

Best not to pick at that wound right now.

Mothers. Her eyes darted to the possum again. A male. At least she didn’t have to bear that responsibility. Relief coursed through her but was quickly followed by

another fear. Do possums mate for life, she wondered? Has he left behind a Mrs. Possum and a passel of little possums?

She turned her head away from the carcass and closed her eyes again. From the nearby woods came the call of a mourning dove. Its” coo OOO ooo” sent out to bring his mate home. The other sounds were lost to her as she listened for the bird’s song to repeat.

“Please, please, please. Come back to me” she begged.

Oh, how she longed to see him again! The strength of that desire shocked even her. For over half a century, thoughts of the man with snow-white hair -- hair the same shade as her youngest child—had been firmly tucked away. She ached to trace the curve of his spine with her index finger. Not for carnal knowledge, but simply to affirm he had once existed.

Once more, my now bewildered Dove

Bestirs her puzzled wings

Once more her mistress, on the deep

Her troubled question flings—

“Why did you do that to me? Why did you leave?” A low moan, a soft sigh. She returns to her rapidly failing body. The dew has begun to seep through the worn cotton of her house dress. Time to move on before she catches a chill.

“Riddled with cancer but killed by a cold. Wouldn’t that be funny,” she thought, laconically. She pauses for a moment and cautiously extends her body. Arms, legs, vertebrae, neck. If only she were barefoot. But, her toes can still wiggle in the two-sizes too big rubber work boots. Her fingers dig into the soil, still rich and fertile.

“This is the last time I will be here. The garden will end with me.”

But, before she finally died, she had one task left. Struggling to her knees, she began to make her way back to the house.

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*Rebecca*

“I don’t know any of these people,” the words spilled out of her mouth before the thought had fully formed. Well, no. That’s not exactly right. Her sisters’ names are

there. The crossed-out entries detail decades of movement from Germany to Biloxi, to Selma. Wherever the military or work took them. They had multiple entries. Then, there were the addresses for her brother's wives. All three of them. She often wondered how many more wives he might have had if he'd lived beyond 24. She herself had only one entry. But all the rest ... while some of the names seemed familiar, could she really claim to know them?

She sits in her chair in the garage—a space that one of her daughters archly refers to as The Veranda. She comes here to smoke and think. What was it her daughter asked?

*“Why do you think she did that to me?”*

But, she knows this is not the question her youngest really wants to ask. Taking a long draw of the cigarette, her eye travels around the garage surveying the detritus.

“Mom? Are you out here?”

“Over here. Careful, I spilled coffee on that bottom step.”

Following the direction of her voice, Rebecca watches as Eliza crosses the threshold of the garage. A quick glance to where her mother sits in a dilapidated Adirondack chair—no longer considered adequate for the screen porch or backyard, but still useful. A slight haze of smoke floats above my head; Rebecca has been out here longer than she realized.

“It's getting cold out here,” Eliza shivers slightly while settling down on the concrete step.

“It is. Last night's rain brought the temperature down.” Rebecca takes another long drag of her cigarette. Not Camels.

Eliza looks down at her polished toenails, “Mom, I'm sorry to bring up Mama Lucy. I know you don't like to talk about her.”

“I just don't remember her. I don't know what to say.”

“I know. But, it's just that I was so young when she died. I don't feel as though I really know anything about her.”

A second passes, maybe two, or more. Her daughter in bare feet, and her eighty-two-year-old self wearing a thin gown, with a housecoat held together by a safety pin.

Rebecca has always been frugal. She learned that early in life as a child of the Depression, the War, and abandonment.

“I remember one time she came back home, ” She begins, carefully. “She must have been working in Lexington, maybe Tennessee. I don’t know. But, she was taking me and your Uncle Clayton somewhere on a bus. I might have been five or six. I put my feet up on the seat in front of us. My shoes had holes in the soles. Oh, she was so embarrassed by that. ‘Why are you walking around with holes in your shoes?’ ‘I remember that. She had to buy me shoes then. And then she left again. “Rebecca pauses for a moment and thinks about the woman who left her with little more than a bag and the framed photo of a man with ash-blond hair.

“I don’t know why she fed you that possum. She probably had a little nip of whiskey. She liked her whiskey.” Maybe that would suffice.

“What? She drank? I don’t even care about the possum. I just want to know ... “

“She was never there. How can I tell you anything about her when she was never there? How can I tell you anything about her? I didn’t know her.”

We are silent for ten seconds, twenty, a lifetime. The old dog who has silently slept at her feet stretches, gets up, and slowly lays back down.

“I just ... I just feel like if I knew more about her... If I could understand her better... Somehow, maybe, if I knew how she lived through it, how she went on... then, maybe I could too.”

“Oh, how I wish,” escapes me in a defeated whisper, “I could help. I don’t know how she did it, and I don’t know how you will either. If the living could ask the dead how to go on, what would they tell us?”

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*Lucy*

There was no recipe. There never had been, nor would one ever be found. This was something that had been passed from generation to generation. The women simply knew from sight, or smell, taste, or touch what was necessary and right. She looked down at the carcass in the cast iron pot. She had killed the animal with her own hands,



which was the only requisite element. It had nearly done her in though. She was old and weakening more every day as the cancer ravaged her body. She would not be alive to share the secret with the child.

With a sigh she returned to her task. Closing her eyes, she tried to recall her mother, then her grandmother. She needed to see each woman standing before this same pot. Her hand began to move at the moment her eyes opened. Gone was the enamel stove on which she had placed the pot. The distinct smell of burning peat reached her before the heat of the fire. And, extending from a chain above the fire, hung the pot. As the report of gunfire reached her ears, she slowly became aware of the screams of men. *Culloden*. Not here, then. Further back. She closed her eyes again and tried to think of the other women, some who had names, most who did not.

Her eyes snapped open. Gone was the crofter's hut and the dying Scotsmen. She was now in a small clearing surrounded by evergreen trees that reached to pierce the sky far above. Before her, the pot rested upon the ashes of a small fire, which did little to ward off the damp chill of the forest. Again, the screams of men came from nearby. But, this time, the screams were intermingled with those of women and children, all crying – *harjis* – *Varus*. And, someone chanting over all the screams *meina teile*. Teutoburg. Not here either.

She closed her eyes once more. A camp beside a mountain covered in snow. And, again. This time, Steppe lands. At each point, she heard the words: crone, witch, Danu, Vølve. All the names for all the mothers. Her mothers. Only their secret would save the child when her time of loss came.

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*Eliza*

Two years seemed to be her limit. Granted, she'd only lasted four months in Palm Beach, but chalk that up to nasty South Florida heat and humidity. Now, when that feeling came over her – that her skin was too tight, or that there was a current running between her skin and her blood vessels – it was time to go. She had been able to push it down for a while. Sometimes, just planning the escape helped. So, she submerged herself with work or by searching for the right hotel or flight. Anything to keep the thoughts from intruding.

“7A. 7A. Four, five, ... six.” There it is. A window seat. She had treated herself this time. A window seat in Business Class. “Two checked bags included in the fare,” she mutters to the powers-that-be.

Eliza quickly hoists the olive-green Osprey backpack into the overhead compartment. She hates to cause a bother to those behind her. Luckily, no one is seated next to her – yet. Fingers crossed, she thinks. Small talk has never been her skill. Most people would be surprised to learn that about her. She once overheard colleagues talking about her, “Yeah, Eliza has her shit together.” She’d chuckled about that. A real laugh. “I just put on a good show,” she whispers.

Settling into the seat that will be her home for the next nine hours, Eliza begins to remove items from her purse (crossbody Coach, not easy for those European thieves to pickpocket – she’s done her homework). Excedrin migraine, ear pods, a pack of Dentyne– all are temporarily placed in the stowaway net of the seatback in front of her. Eliza digs into the side compartment and fishes out a tiny plastic object. She keeps it encased in her fist; unable to look at it. She knows what it is. A totem. A symbol. A relic of all that she once had, and who she has lost. All that significance tied to a tiny Lego figurine. But, it goes with her everywhere.

“Og 7B - Det skal være mig.”

Her companion for the red-eye flight is another woman, old enough to be Eliza’s own mother. Out of the corner of her eye, Eliza noted the Burberry scarf, a gold key bracelet that could only be from Tiffany’s, and the Louis Vuitton bag gently slid underneath the seat. *The real deal*, Eliza knew automatically. She glanced down at her own very utilitarian outfit: underneath the fleece joggers, a pair of fleece-lined leggings, and the faux-fur lined Sorrels that had already been kicked off to the side. Denmark would be cold this time of year; Eliza was dressed for comfort. Yet, she still felt a sense of dissatisfaction with herself. She often talked a good game “down with capitalism,” but truly ridding herself of those old habits was still a struggle at times.

With a sigh, Eliza turned her attention to the view outside the window. Luggage was still being loaded into the plane’s cavity while a steady rain continued to fall. In the past, she would have been terrified to fly in the rain, but that fear had disappeared when

she had learned there are worse things to fear than death. She gripped the Lego figure tightly in her hand, repeating over and over to herself, *I take you with me wherever I go.*

“You are American?”

Eliza turns her head to her seatmate, “Yes, I am. And you are ... Dutch?”

“Ja, yes. I am returning to Copenhagen. I have been visiting my son here in New York for the holidays. Is that a Lego?”

Eliza pauses briefly. This woman was more observant than she’d realized. “Yes, yet it is. It was my son’s.”

“Ah, you have a son too?”

Another pause, then Eliza begins the story that is always the hardest to tell, “Yes, I once had three sons.”