Katina L. Rogers

# The Presence of Absence

## Meditations on the Unsayable in Writing

# THE PRESENCE OF ABSENCE

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*Fig. 1.* Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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Katina L. Rogers

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INTRODUCTION

# Writing the Unspeakable

Grief and loss submerge us in feeling, simultaneously demanding and resisting articulation. As I write these words, the COVID pandemic continues to ebb and flow, with each new wave bringing fear and uncertainty and loss as well as mundane challenges, then receding into something like hope or relief. It is hard to grieve when the loss never quite stops; hard to assess emotion when the trauma is both collective and relentless. Since late 2019, individuals and communities have tried to find ways to process our changed and changing realities, commemorate the dead, honor those who are on the front lines, and advocate for change. And yet, we can never quite get outside of the loss itself. The world hasn't quite stabilized into a recognizable shape.

It is perhaps this uncertainty, set against the backdrop of these waves of shared and solitary grief, that has drawn me back into the work of literature and mourning, and the effort to communicate the unspeakable. In particular, I find myself turning to the work of Anne Carson, Jacques Roubaud, Saidiya Hartman, and Edmond Jabès as they engage with questions of loss and absence.[1] In the midst of the prolonged grief and trauma

1 Anne Carson, *Nox* (New York: New Directions, 2010); Jacques Roubaud, *Quelque chose noir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986); Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New

of the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with societal and political upheaval, their ways of making space for the unspeakable have resonated. How can we write that which is unfinished, that which resists language?

Though my primary research has shifted from literary studies toward a more structural focus on critical university studies, something keeps drawing me back to this work, parts of which I began more than a decade ago. These meditations around silence, invisibility, and expression have taken root in my thinking. I had no real intention of returning to these ideas, and yet they continued to pulse in my mind, helping me to understand truths — about loss but also about knowledge, beauty, even higher education — that are difficult to articulate. Each time I circle back to these concepts I find them newly resonant with ways that the world around me functions, from the prolonged grief of COVID to the difficulties of navigating tacit knowledge in the academy.

## Silence as Structure

I have long thought about silence — or, more precisely, the limits of language — as a structuring mechanism in fiction. As a graduate student in comparative literature, studying words and language day after day, I was taken in by what the words didn't say, what they couldn't say. I was drawn to the ways that writers found to make space for things that went beyond language — sometimes through white space on the page, sometimes through conspicuous absences or arbitrary constraints.[2] Such constraints may at times feel mechanical or forced but

York: W.W. Norton, 2019); and Edmond Jabès, *Le livre des questions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963).

2 See for instance many of the works created as part of OuLiPo (L'ouvroir de littérature potentielle), such as George Perec's *La disparition* (Paris: Éditions Denoël, 1964), in which the letter *e* is not used (published in English as *The Void* [London: The Harvill Press, 1994]). See also Walter F. Motte, ed., *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2014).

they suggest something essential — the limits of language, and the ways that language is always trying to approach that which cannot be said. Constraints and unspeakability can push textual work to its edges, until it verges on other media — the visual arts, maybe, or something ephemeral and temporal, like dance. There are moments when language seems to approximate something else, something ineffable.

Sometimes structural modes of silence or absence gesture toward the unspeakability of loss or trauma. When experience resists articulation, writers may turn to structural interruptions to hold space for what cannot be said. And indeed, those interruptions are key — not only when writing about loss, but in all communication. In this way, the silence and invisibility in literature about loss helps us to understand something fundamental about the ways we live and relate to one another. "Quand deux hommes parlent ensemble, ils ne parlent pas ensemble, mais tour à tour."[3] This sentence in Maurice Blanchot's "L'Interruption: Comme sur une surface de Riemann"[4] has rattled around in my brain for nearly twenty years. Blanchot writes of the need for breaks between letters and words for legibility's sake, and also between dialogue partners in the give-and-take of conversation. He calls it "la respiration du discours."[5] Repeatedly in "L'Interruption," Blanchot emphasizes the necessity of rupture, of pause, of turn-taking in dialogue so that communication may occur. Words can be understood by the spaces between them, thoughts by the gap between their end and the response of the interlocutor. Phrased another way, "l'interruption permet l'échange. S'interrompre pour s'entendre,

3 Maurice Blanchot, *L'entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977): 106. "When two people speak together, they speak not together, but each in turn": Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation,* trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 75.

4 "Interruption: As on a Riemann Surface" in the English edition, 75–79.

5 Blanchot, *L'entretien infini,* 108. "the respiration of discourse" (Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation,* 76).

s'entendre pour parler."[6] It is clear that for Blanchot, interruption is not only an inevitable part of communication, but indeed that which permits communication to occur.

Though this idea of turn-taking is completely common sense on its surface, it changes the way I understand the people, relationships, and structures around me. The moments I may think of as emblematic of togetherness or connection always depend on a silence between the words, a distance between individuals. Without distance between individuals, without silence between words, connection is impossible. Silence is necessary to speech. Alterity is necessary to connection. Writing that deals with grief or trauma magnifies this: there is an absence or loss or impossibility that sits right at the core of the work, propelling it forward while also rendering it impossible. Simply writing *about* the unspeakable seems to diminish its power, just as a spoken word interrupts a silence. How, then, to make space for the unspeakable without diminishing its power?

These limitations, this unspeakability, can be explored through metaphor and paratextual elements, including the use of visual metaphors, the intersections of text and image within a printed book, and the use of auditory and spatial metaphors. In what follows, join me in walking through the silences of several texts that I deeply love: *Nox* by Anne Carson; *Quelque chose noir* (*Some Thing Black*) by Jacques Roubaud; *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* by Saidiya Hartman; and *Le livre des questions* (*The Book of Questions*) by Edmond Jabès. Each probes the edges of unspeakability using not only language, but also visual and auditory metaphors for expression and absence.

## Photographs and Their Absence

Photography is one key element in how Carson, Roubaud, and Hartman explore ideas of language and loss. Each writer does so

6 Blanchot, *L'entretien infini,* 107. "interruption permits the exchange. Interrupting for the sake of understanding, understanding in order to speak" (Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation,* 76).

in a different way, either intentionally incorporating or omitting the photographs themselves, thereby using them to broaden or constrain meaning. Their writing falls into different genres: Carson's *Nox* and Roubaud's *Quelque chose noir* are book-length elegiac poems in which photographs play a key role, while Hartman's *Wayward Lives* is a sociocultural and historical study that probes gaps in the official archives. Why might writers turn to these visual metaphors? What are the relationships between the limitations and impossibilities of language and the suggestive but inarticulate play of light and darkness on paper? In other words, why photographs?

Though their styles and techniques differ greatly, both Carson and Roubaud look to photographs as key elements of the mourning process, not as memorials in themselves, but as passageways to understanding and expressing ineffable qualities of relationships, identity, and grief. Yet their approaches lead in very different directions. In *Nox,* an elegy to Carson's late brother, images and scraps and fragments lend meaning where words fall short. Carson includes family photographs among myriad other original and borrowed scraps, creating a complex physical memorial that she decodes through the lens of translation: she studies her brother fragment by fragment, trying to reach something whole.

Conversely, in *Quelque chose noir,* a haunting elegy by Jacques Roubaud for his late wife, Alix Cléo Roubaud, photographs are notable for their conspicuous absence. The author excludes any reproductions of his wife's photographs, and yet the text is profoundly marked by them, even haunted by the dual gaze they imply. With this double absence — both through death and omission — visual referents take on heightened power, and the merest suggestion of photographs holds space for the unspeakable. Where Carson's text is additive, weaving complex layers together in excess and abundance, Roubaud's is reductive, stripping away all but the suggestion of his referents. Despite the differing approaches, in each text photographs serve to underscore the inadequacy of language in the face of loss, to reflect simultaneously on the gaze of the loved one and oneself, and to

meditate on darkness — both physical and metaphorical — and its relationship to love and death.

Hartman's *Wayward Lives* does something different. In this text, Hartman includes archival photographs not to examine what they depict, but to urge the reader to imagine what is just beyond the frame, what is not seen in the official record. *Wayward Lives* is not a book of mourning, but of celebration and exuberance. And yet, that exuberance too is unspeakable — because it centers people who were marginalized because of their race, gender, and sexuality. It calls attention to the legacies of enslavement, to inequity and silencing, to the bias that permeates the historical record. The stories Hartman tells fall outside the dominant historical narrative. They disturb the accepted history, the ways of identifying and delineating and categorizing people into their social cadres. And so, while Hartman includes numerous photographs from her archival research, she emphasizes that those photos *do not tell* the story she wishes to tell. Instead, the stories she tells would be illustrated by "pictures anticipated, but not yet located."[7] As readers, we have images available to us — but not the ones we need. Hartman builds what she calls "intimate histories" of the lives we don't quite see in the photographs, the stories that resist being pinned down in the surveillant gaze of the camera. The layers of unspeakability multiply, as Hartman urges readers to consider what is *not* visible in photographs in order to probe untold stories.

Shifting from photography to broader nonverbal metaphors, I will also bring these three works into conversation with the uncategorizable *Le livre des questions* by Edmond Jabès. Titled *The Book of Questions* in its English translation, the seven-book series draws on both visual and auditory metaphors to make space for the unspeakable and massive trauma of the Shoah. Where grief is probed through visual means in Carson and Roubaud, for Jabès, the unspeakable takes shape primarily through the formulation of unanswered questions. Here, the unspeakable can mean erasure, impossibility, and unanswerable ques-

7 Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 30.

tions. Jabès makes space for the unspeakable through repeated references to the tensions between silence and sound, and a marked or unmarked surface (desert sand, a blank page). But it is the auditory metaphors that are most urgent and powerful, intertwining silence and expression, including vocal but nonverbal sound. The voice of one of the main characters, Sarah, is primarily conveyed not through language but through a scream, a visceral figuration of the unsayable. Sarah's scream is evidence of a nonlinguistic but insistent emotion of the traumatic experience of the Holocaust. It represents an immediate physical and emotional response that is not bound up in language. Rosmarie Waldrop describes *Le livre des questions* as "A book about the word. Between scream and silence. The word through which we become human. Other. The word which is our mirror and our wound."[8] This, to me, is the key tension: this distance between scream and silence, at once impossible to bridge and impossible to separate.

**Showing My Work**

A distance of years stands between many of the pages that follow and my revisiting them by way of this introduction. I have tried to fit this project into so many other spaces, but it craved its own home. These texts engage with the breaking point of language, the point at which words fail. A point that many of us are grappling with in this period of both acute and prolonged grief and uncertainty. And so I circle back, again and again, thinking about the nonlinear nature of loss and mourning and the ways in which our brains move fluidly through past, present, and future. Perhaps this is part of what makes words on a page feel limiting; the sequential, linear nature of the letters marching across the page, the difficulty of evoking that swirl and slide of thought and emotion. Roubaud and Carson both play with this sense of sequence and linearity in the ways their words are

8 Rosmarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence: Recalling and Rereading Edmond Jabès* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 2.

printed on the page: Roubaud's with ample white space and non-standard typesetting, and Carson's with collage and handwriting and image, leading the eye all over the page rather than letting it settle word by word. In very different ways, Hartman and Jabès invite the reader on journeys of possibility. With Hartman, we imagine a different past, present, and future in which play and deviance and marginality are all worth attending to with care and curiosity. Jabès brings readers into a dreamlike state, with language and imagery leading everywhere and nowhere. Taken together, these texts make any linear progression of time seem like an anomaly, with a dreamlike state of wandering much more realistic and applicable for the ways we live and think now.

Much of my writing and professional work has moved away from literary analysis, and yet these foundational questions of loss, alterity, silence, and structure are always in my mind. I feel compelled to share this work, if for no other reason than as a kind of extended citation, a way to show how I came to think in the particular manner that I do. I am reminded of Katherine McKittrick's thoughts on citations: "I was finding it difficult to track, within the context of a public talk, how I know what I know, where I know from, who I know from, and what I cannot possibly know."[9] These words gesture toward the importance and impossibility of tracing our thoughts' antecedents. But our thoughts are constantly shifting, returning on themselves, cropping up in unexpected moments. How do we properly acknowledge and make space for the intermediate thoughts, the ones that lead to something new but do not make it onto the page themselves? "Perhaps the function of communication, referencing, citation, is not to master knowing and centralize our knowingness, but to share *how we know*."[10] I want to go back and show my work, and also create footholds that I can return to in future thinking.

---

9 Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 14.

10 Ibid., 17.

1

# Constructing Memorials, Translating Loss: Photographs and Fragments in Anne Carson's *Nox*

One way to read Anne Carson's *Nox* is as an extended meditation on the impossibility of fully knowing or understanding another person, including (or perhaps especially) in grief. The back cover of *Nox* suggests loss as well as distance: "When my brother died, I made an epitaph for him in the form of a book. This is a replica of it, *as close as we could get.*"[1] This first sense of disconnect is repeated throughout the book, folded back on itself much like the accordion-fold pages. Outside of the book, we learn that it took two weeks for Carson to learn of the death of her older brother, who was living in Copenhagen after having fled Canada many years prior to avoid being sent to prison for selling drugs.[2] The loss is protracted — the relationship between them had shattered long before her brother's death. At

1 Anne Carson, *Nox* (New York: New Directions, 2010), back cover. Emphasis mine.

2 Meghan O'Rourke, "The Unfolding," *The New Yorker,* July 5, 2010, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/07/12/the-unfolding.

the same time, the gap in time is emblematic of a gap in knowledge: if something irrevocable has happened but one does not yet know, the consequences of that loss are deferred. The fact of loss is mediated by time and distance, experienced secondhand, parsed slowly over time. *Nox* is a physical and literary reflection of this mediation and nonlinear process. The book layers text and image, stitching them together in such a way that not only the text but also the physical object are studies in excess. It is as though Carson, as she works to uncover and understand her brother, builds up a physical and emotional monument through the assembled scraps. The action of bringing together all of the items that bear a trace of him may in part be a way of solidifying the nature of the loss.

### Physicality and Excess

It is impossible to encounter *Nox* without an acute awareness of its unique and highly constructed form. The book is very much a physical object; its outer box is large, and its thick, unbound, accordion-folded pages are unwieldy. Unfolded, it extends to a length of nearly 1,000 inches, or more than eighty-three feet. Its drab grey bulk is not unlike a headstone. In her review, Parul Sehgal described it as "a book in a box, as self-enclosed as grief; a book so bulky it cannot be carried but must be visited."[3] The notion of visitation is apt, not only in the sense that one might visit the memorial of a lost loved one, but also physically; the book requires the reader to adopt an unfamiliar reading posture, one that demands attention. On opening the pages, the predominant structure is that of collage. Carson has ensured that the pages retain the appearance of texture, so that the reminder of human contact on the pages is ever-present. Handwriting, hand-drawn pictures and doodles, paper torn by hand, and photographs taken with the press of a finger on the shutter,

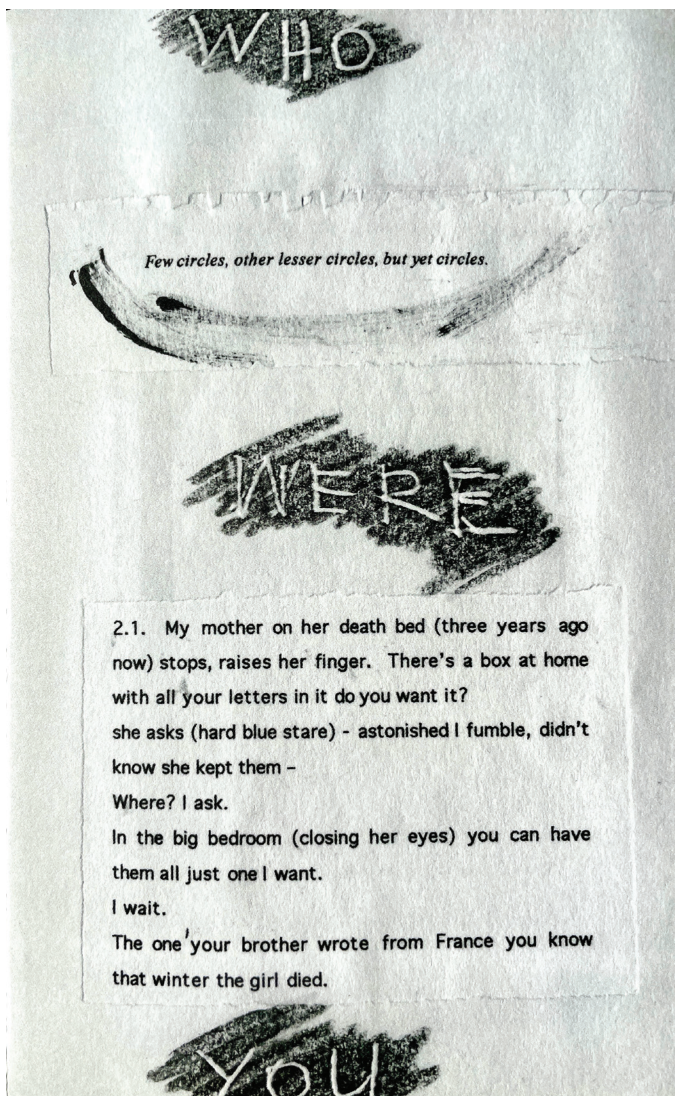
3 Parul Sehgal, "Anne Carson: Evoking the Starry Lad," *The Irish Times,* March 19, 2011, repr. *Parul Sehgal,* March 20, 2011, http://parulsehgal.com/2011/03/20/anne-carson-evoking-the-starry-lad/.

all appear pasted — by hand — onto the pages. We can see the pressure of a pen on paper, the ink of an ad bleeding through from the unused side of the page (see fig. 1). *Nox* is — or rather, it *seems* — deeply tactile. For the reader, the impression of human presence is fabricated; we see only a facsimile reproduced on a flat, even surface. We encounter an illusion of human touch, an impression of presence and physicality. This illusion coaxes us to look closer, to bend our heads over the book, to wonder about what we see and what we don't see. Moreover, the back of the unfolded book is blank, suggesting a continued openness, a possibility for further unfolding.[4] So begins the reader's encounter with this unconventional elegy.

The layering begins with language on top of language and bits of paper on paper, but expands across many other kinds of media and expression. Within the boxed book, the evidence of tangible objects gives a sense of embodiment and presence. Handwriting shows much more than type. Traces of glue, smudges, and torn edges are all signs of someone having touched the same object that we now touch. The plurality and intimacy of these visual registers allow fluidity of interpretation while also being additive, not reductive, as though she cannot strip anything away from what she knows of her brother. Still, even after the assembly of all these layers, she is confronted by silence rather than understanding. "In cigarette-smoke-soaked Copenhagen, under a wide thin sorrowful sky, as swans drift down the water, I am looking a long time into the muteness of my brother. It resists me. He refused to be 'cooked' (a modern historian might say) in my transactional order."[5] Still, she probes the edges of possibility, discerning as much as she can about the

4 This blankness also invites continued expression. Sehgal writes that Carson "is keen to see [*Nox*] used and appropriated and personalised. 'Because the backs of the pages are blank, you can make your own book there. We did this with a class of eight-year-olds. They loved it'" (Sehgal, "Anne Carson").

5 Carson, *Nox*, sec. 1.3. The book is not paginated, so I will refer to the sections of text according to the numbering system Carson uses within the book.



WHO

*Few circles, other lesser circles, but yet circles.*

WERE

2.1. My mother on her death bed (three years ago now) stops, raises her finger. There's a box at home with all your letters in it do you want it?
she asks (hard blue stare) - astonished I fumble, didn't know she kept them –
Where? I ask.
In the big bedroom (closing her eyes) you can have them all just one I want.
I wait.
The one your brother wrote from France you know that winter the girl died.

YOU

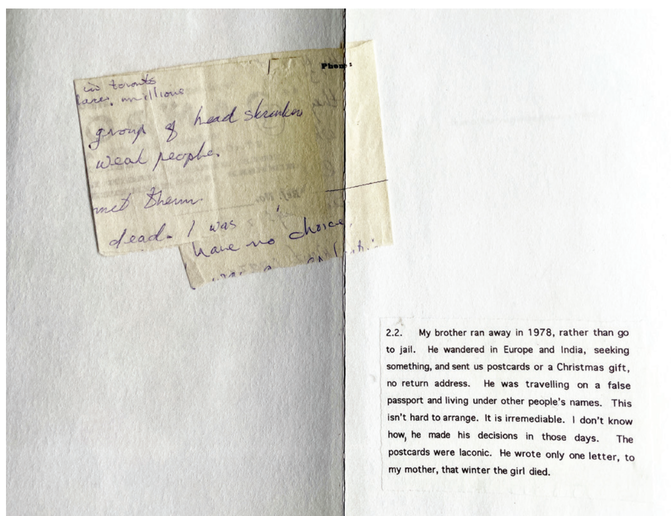
*Fig. 1.* An example of the tactile nature of *Nox,* giving the impression of pasted-on layers and heavy writing pressure. Carson, *Nox*, sec. 2.1.

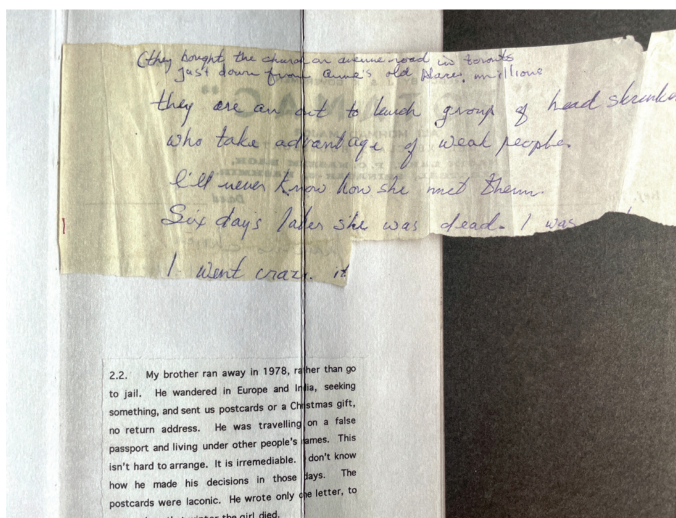
tone of the muteness, the shape of it, translating it from meaninglessness and unfamiliarity to understanding and connection.

Carson uses repetition sparingly, and so the repeated moments are noteworthy. In section 2.2 in particular, Carson recounts the moment of her brother's flight: "My brother ran away in 1978 rather than go to jail. He wandered Europe and India, seeking something, and sent us postcards or a Christmas gift, no return address. He was travelling on a false passport and using other people's names. This isn't hard to arrange. It is irremediable."[6] Alongside her own typeset words, she includes a scrap of a handwritten note (see figs. 2a & 2b). As in other fragments, we see the trace of her brother's presence through the marks he made on a page, but in this case, Carson presents the shred in an unusual way: first a portion of the fragment that shows only pieces of what her brother intended to say; then a fuller, unfolded note that gives complete sentences, though not the full letter; then mere fragments again, including the apparatus of the letter (such as letterhead and postmark). The full sequence occupies eight pages. She does something similar with another key note, one that reads "Love you. Love you. —Michael" in her brother's handwriting.[7] Unlike most other included items, here Carson presents not only the scrap alone, but also scraps of the scraps. Perhaps by doing so she encourages the reader to take part in the process of inquiry, as we strain to read and discern the meaning in the fragments, dwelling on them longer than we might if they were presented whole.

One thing she cannot include among the visual fragments is her brother's audible voice. She reflects on his voice in section 5.2: "His voice was like his voice with something else crusted on it, black, dense—it lighted up for a moment when he said 'pinhead' (**So pinhead d'you attain wisdom yet?**) then went dark again. All the years and time that had passed over him came

6 Ibid., sec. 2.2.
7 Ibid., sec. 10.1.




*Figs. 2a & 2b.* Two parts of the scraps of writing that Carson presents in a sequence of repetition and alteration. Carson, *Nox,* sec. 2.2.

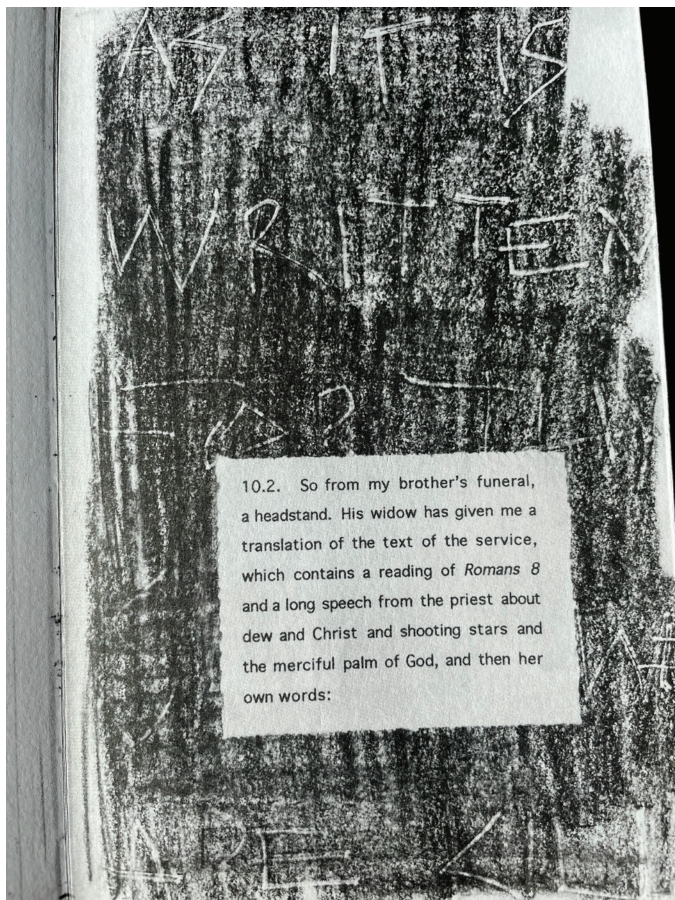
streaming into me, all that history. What is a voice?"[8] Later, she considers the resemblance between her brother and Lazarus, underlining his muteness:

> He is mute at the famous supper where Mary Magdalene spills spikenard on Christ's feet (John 12). Mute in the 'parable of the rich man and Lazarus' (Luke 16) where, sitting in paradise, he hears a rich man lost in the flames of hell calling out to him for a drop of water. Mute also throughout his resurrection. Even in the painting of it by Giotto, notice the person with raised hands and no mouth (perhaps his sister) placed behind Lazarus to load this space with muteness.[9]

Later, scribbled over in black and covering up an illegible scrap, "There is no possibility I can think my way into his muteness."[10]

Among the scraps, Carson includes several rubbings: black scribbles revealing words in the negative spaces. The first, "WHO WERE YOU,"[11] could be read as an illustration of the indirectness of Carson's inquiry into her brother. She can no longer speak to him directly, and there is no way for her to find out more about him in a direct manner. Rather, as she gathers up the fragments and labors at her translation, she may learn about him through the things that can no longer be said. She must discern what was a part of him by blacking it out, and she likewise creates a sense of meaning on the page through an inverse process, a negative rubbing rather than direct writing. Further, the pressure made by the rubbing and the relief seems to show through on the following page (though of course it is only a facsimile). Because of the way the letters are formed, seen in this way, the word that appears looks like the word "NOX." Later, "I HAD TO" appears the same way, just after Carson recollects that she remembers her brother uttering, "Put the past away you have to."[12] It fills the page and seems to be a justification, perhaps of abandon-

8 Emphasis in original.
9 Carson, *Nox*, sec. 8.4.
10 Ibid., sec. 8.5.
11 Ibid., sec. 2.1; also shown in Fig. 1.
12 Ibid., sec. 8.1.




10.2. So from my brother's funeral, a headstand. His widow has given me a translation of the text of the service, which contains a reading of *Romans 8* and a long speech from the priest about dew and Christ and shooting stars and the merciful palm of God, and then her own words:

*Fig. 3.* The background of the page reveals words through a negative rubbing, reading "AS IT IS WRITTEN [...]." A dictionary entry for *frater,* or "brother," appears on the opposite page, with traces of the ink or crayon having discolored that page as well. Carson, *Nox,* sec. 10.2.

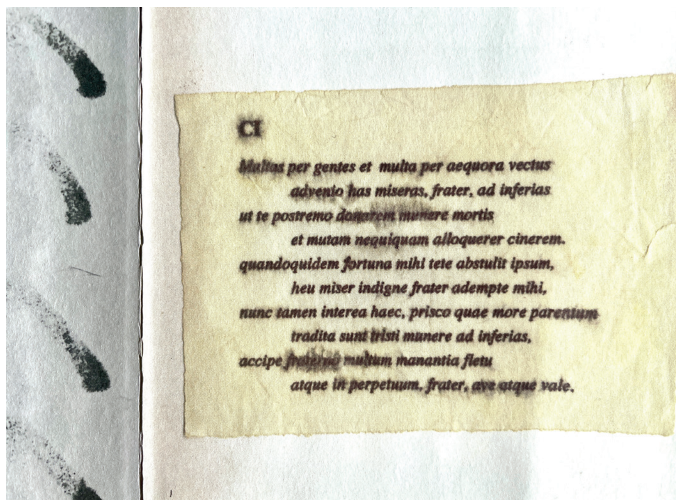
ment or turning aside. Another rubbing, in sec. 10.2, seems to be the beginning of Romans 8:36: "As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter."[13] Only the first ten words are visible, leading the reader to seek out the reference outside the boundaries of the book (see fig. 3). The rubbings evoke a photographic negative with its reversal of white and dark space, or perhaps an echo of the way one might capture the etchings of a headstone.

And yet, even with the layers upon layers of modes of expression, Carson's text reads in a quiet, minimalist way as well. For all the elements the text-as-object shows the reader, there's relatively little text-as-text. The book does not take long to read, though it reads best with ample time for observation and quietude. Fragments are the key: There are so many modes because none is complete on its own, each tells something slightly different, and there simply is no coherent whole to be distilled into black ink on a white page. A linear narrative would perhaps feel too defined as a representation for so many layers of difficult emotions. Presenting a fragmented assemblage instead suggests complexity of emotion and the ways that pain and confusion resist the effort to pin them down in language.

## Translation

If the makeup of the physical book feels excessive, a literal piling-up of memories, the structure of the narrative is more elusive and subtle. On one level, the narrative is composed of these layers of memories and images. But there is more. In addition to the personal artifacts and composed text, Carson — herself a translator — includes the act of translation as a central theme as well as mode of writing. Perhaps this is a way of juxtaposing her own life and way of thinking with that of her brother, or perhaps it is a way to encourage the reader to read at a slant, not only for what is present, but for what is not, for what may be lost in

13 Bible, King James Version.



CI

*Multas per gentes et multa per aequora vectus*
*advenio has miseras, frater, ad inferias*
*ut te postremo donarem munere mortis*
*et mutam nequiquam alloquerer cinerem.*
*quandoquidem fortuna mihi tete abstulit ipsum,*
*heu miser indigne frater adempte mihi,*
*nunc tamen interea haec, prisco quae more parentum*
*tradita sunt tristi munere ad inferias,*
*accipe fraterno multum manantia fletu*
*atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale.*

*Fig. 4.* A smudged reproduction of Catullus CI in the original Latin appearing at the book's outset.

the telling. Perhaps it is a way to suggest the darkness of loss, of incomprehension, of the infinite distance between beings.

Carson uses Catullus's Poem 101 as the primary artifact of the book, and its smudgy, untranslated words are the first thing the reader encounters (see fig. 4). Like *Nox* itself, the Catullus poem is an elegy to a brother who has died, and its words and sentiments reverberate throughout Carson's work.[14] The poem is translated bit by bit as *Nox* progresses, one word at a time. Unless the reader knows Latin, the book thus starts in a figurative darkness, and Carson hints that the act of translating is central without stating it explicitly.

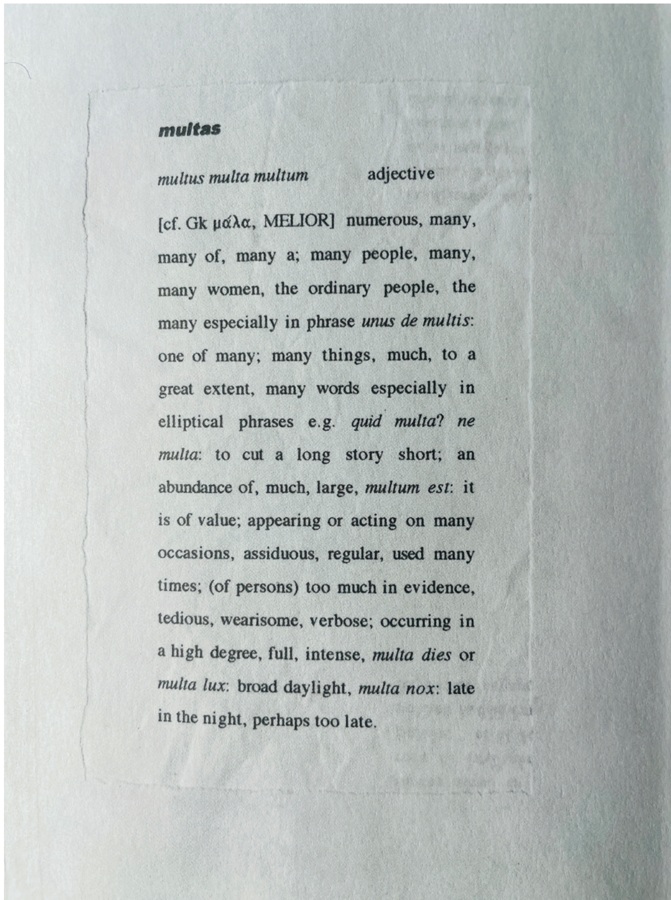
---

14 Carson's own translation of the elegy is available in J. Kates, "Catullus by Night: Anne Carson's Nox," *Harvard Review Online,* July 23, 2011, https://www.harvardreview.org/content/catullus-by-night-anne-carsons-nox/. For an alternative translation, see C. Valerius Catullus, "Carmina, Poem 101," in *The Carmina of Gaius Valerius Catullus,* trans. Leonard C. Smithers (London, 1894), https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0006%3Apoem%3D101.

The fragments are bound to one another by the act of translating: on the left-hand side of each accordion-folded page, a creatively modified Latin-English lexical entry for a single word of the poem appears, providing the tools to translate the poem one word at a time. Or perhaps again, merely the *illusion* of tools. As these entries begin, they barely help; it is impossible, for instance, for a reader like me who doesn't know Latin to glean any richer meaning of the poem from the first entry, an entire page on the word *multas* (see fig. 5). The entry is both too much information and too little — an entire page of possibilities for one word, and yet the lexicon cannot convey the context of the words around *multas,* nor does it reveal how the syntax ought to fit together. The poem can't bear a translation from one word — *multas* — to "numerous, many, many of, many a; many people, many, many women, the ordinary people, the many especially in phrase *unus de multis:* one of many […]."[15] The paradox of excess and insufficiency suggest the impossible task of memorializing a lost loved one.

And yet, at the end of that same entry, Carson reminds the reader that her hand is guiding the complex process of translation, as she subtly and beautifully underscores the darkness in the otherwise routine lexical entry: "*multa dies* or *multa lux*: broad daylight, *multa nox:* late in the night, perhaps too late." Carson frequently shadows the ends of the entries with darkness. In another instance, the innocuous "*per*" ends with "*haud per ambages portendere:* by no means implying a riddle, enigma or dark fact." *Gentes* ends with "*noctis gentes:* nightpeople." *Et* includes the example "(*et nocte*) (you know it was night)." In an especially beautiful entry for *aequora,* Carson includes "*inmensumne noctis aequor confecimus?* Have we made it across the vast plain of night?" Nearly all of the lexical entries conclude on an imagery of darkness, night, or mourning. Further, the lexical entries are fallible. In at least one case, relative to the definition

15 This and all subsequent translation entries are from Carson, *Nox*. The translation snippets fall outside the numbered sections of text; I do not want to impose a numbering system on them here.



**multas**

*multus multa multum* adjective

[cf. Gk μάλα, MELIOR] numerous, many, many of, many a; many people, many, many women, the ordinary people, the many especially in phrase *unus de multis*: one of many; many things, much, to a great extent, many words especially in elliptical phrases e.g. *quid multa*? *ne multa*: to cut a long story short; an abundance of, much, large, *multum est*: it is of value; appearing or acting on many occasions, assiduous, regular, used many times; (of persons) too much in evidence, tedious, wearisome, verbose; occurring in a high degree, full, intense, *multa dies* or *multa lux*: broad daylight, *multa nox*: late in the night, perhaps too late.

*Fig. 5.* A constructed dictionary entry translating the word *multas*. Carson, *Nox*, sec. 1.0.

of "miseras," Carson includes misspellings ("adjecctive"; "speical"). Given Carson's professional identity as a poet and a translator, our reading must assume that these supposed errors have been introduced with a purpose, perhaps to draw the reader's attention to the constructed nature of the definitions, the impossibility of the task of translation, or simply the effects of grief. Far from the supposed neutrality of a dictionary definition, we are reading Carson's words as she finds an expression of elegy for her brother after she has lost him a second time — first to estrangement and distance, and then to death. The constructed definitions emphasize the searching, inquiring mode that Carson employs — a mode of historical inquiry applied to her own emotions and familial relationships.

From this first gesture at translation, the reader knows at least two things: that she is being kept in the dark intentionally, darkness being central to the text, and that something about translation must be pivotal to the way Carson will spin her work. Darkness and incomprehension are kinds of disorientation, and there are other ways in which the reader is disoriented as well. The book has no page numbers, for one thing; instead, clusters of folded "pages" are grouped into numbered sections. While some photographs are clear, others are dim or abstract, and many are mere light and shadow. In some cases, such as in section 10.1, fragments of photographs are stapled together. Indeed, most of what the reader sees see are scraps — parts of sentences, torn bits of letters and envelopes, bits of drawings. The abundance of these fragments of relationship and loss is overwhelming, like the size and scale of the book itself, verging on being too much, too literal. The focus on translation, though, adds nuance and subtlety to how the scraps are read. Like the dictionary entries, each bit of memory that Carson sets on the page is perhaps not significant on its own, but must be subjected to the translator's hand in order to shape a newly meaningful object. In this case, Carson is translating the fragments of her memory of her brother into an elegy for her brother — and the process is not a straightforward one.

By directing the reader's attention to the process of translation, Carson invites us to consider the ways in which *Nox* includes both a linguistic translation (of the Catullus elegy) and a figurative translation (of her brother). This relationship returns us to questions of representation, whether through reflection, photograph, or translation. In "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin suggests that the primary task "consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original."[16] Unlike a reflection, an echo does not perfectly reproduce an image of the original (albeit, with reflection, that image is flipped and flattened). Its character is somewhat different from the original voice, yet intrinsically bound to it. An echo is looser, softer, but includes all the sounds and tones of the voice. *Nox* can be thought of as an echo as well: the sights and sounds and scraps of her brother are authentically him, and yet the outlines are fuzzy and incomplete.

Benjamin also notes that "no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original."[17] Likewise, Carson is not attempting to create a replica of her brother, but to reflect upon him and her relationship to him. A translation is not at all a mechanical rendering of one language into another, but a creative process dependent on intangible attributes of the work that are nevertheless somehow embedded in, or attached, to language. Carson's work seeks out a similar light and transparency, functioning as an uncovering of individuals and relationships rather than a covering over of them, even as she creates a monument that appears heavy and dense. Benjamin also argues that the relationship between meaning and form changes with the translation. In the case of *Nox,* the elements of translation are largely visual rather than verbal. A photographer, like a translator, observes and interprets an origi-

16 Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections,* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 76.

17 Ibid., 73.

nal, judging not just the technical method required to reproduce the visual scene, but how best to represent the significance of that scene.

Carson's translation is part of her additive act, a layer added to the scraps and memories and photographs. Because her brother had been absent for such a long time, and with such sporadic communication, his death is a permanent loss superimposed on an indeterminate one. She mourns him, and she tries to understand him, circling around his words and images as she draws meaning from scraps — a childhood photograph, an enigmatic postcard, a bit of a note. Each of the items that she adds is incomplete on its own, and the only complete item is the Catullus poem that opens the work. Even her translation of Catullus is deciphered in fragments, through the piecemeal understanding that the lexical entries provide. The full translation is shared, smudged to the point of illegibility, on the book's final page (see fig. 6). Through the assembled fragments and the work of the translator, the elegy must become something other than the sum of its parts — much as the translation must be more than a collection of dictionary entries.

**Space, Movement, and Temporality**

Even beyond the covers of the book, Carson continues to add to the work, further increasing the layers of understanding and interpretation — and translation. In 2010, Carson collaborated with Robert Currie (her husband and frequent collaborator; he also worked with her on the design of the book) and dancers Rashaun Mitchell and Silas Riener on the creation and production of a dance adaptation of *Nox*.[18] Beyond the languages, photographs, handwriting, drawings, and remembered words of the book, Carson steeps the elegy in additional forms of expression, adding light and embodied movement and sound

18 Alastair Macaulay, "Translating Poetry to the Stage, With or Without Words," *The New York Times,* July 21, 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/22/arts/dance/22mitchell.html.

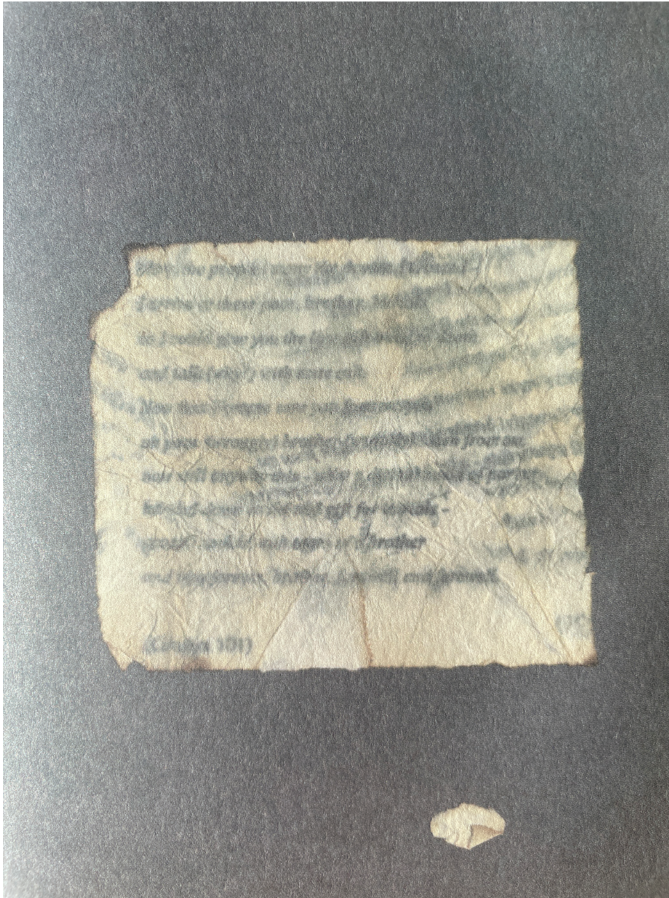


*Fig. 6.* A smudged reproduction of Catullus CI, translated into English but illegible, appearing at the book's conclusion. *Nox,* final page.

through dance. While the jumble of fragments and abundance of dictionary definitions might seem ill suited to a performative piece, the dance adds richness to the reading. For instance, the performance features Carson's recorded voice reading sections of the book, including multiple lexical entries. By hearing them aloud, the audience becomes aware of repetition and patterns that might be easy to glance over in reading. The act of reading aloud also emphasizes the overabundance of the definitions, and the work takes on a temporal element, with the reader and audience no longer controlling the pace of the encounter. The dance production is a new translation, giving embodied movement to the words and fragments on the page. The interpretation suggests a certain limitlessness to the ways the work might unfold. If a dance adaptation is possible, perhaps subsequent interpretations into additional media types would further deepen the reader's encounter with the work. The dance adaptation suggests that Carson pushes *Nox* to keep trying to express the same thing in new and different ways, pushing at the edges of what it means to be mourning.

One compelling aspect of the performance is the use of light, shadow, and space. Figurative darkness is an ever-present motif in *Nox,* from the title to the definitions to the photographs, and in the performance, Carson uses light and darkness to portray a disconnect between desire and expression. The first words of her original text (following the Catullus poem and first dictionary entry) are:

> I wanted to fill my elegy with light of all kinds. But death makes us stingy. There is nothing more to be expended on that, we think, he's dead. Love cannot alter it. Words cannot add to it. No matter how I try to evoke the starry lad he was, it remains a plain, odd history. So I began to think about history.

The tension between the desire for light and the reality of darkness colors the opening of the dance version of *Nox* as per-

formed at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery in New York City, which begins in a darkened sanctuary. In an interview, Mitchell emphasized the importance of creating an atmosphere of darkness, even (or especially) for daytime.[19] Yet, even in the dark, the sanctuary shows the promise of "light of all kinds" — stained glass windows, spotlights, and overhead projectors, each extinguished but harboring the potential to fill the space with warm and cool light. In contrast, the performance in Boston is in a venue encased in glass, and begins flooded with light. In this case, the tension between darkness and light is more figurative — the dark content contrasting with the bright surroundings — and while beautiful, it is perhaps less evocative than the close darkness of the sanctuary.

The interior of the performance space at St. Mark's is spacious and open, with clean lines and bright white walls, which set off a series of large stained-glass windows on the ground and balcony levels. The different kinds of light echo the fragments of different kinds of materials in the book. In particular, Carson's unusual incorporation of overhead projectors disorients the audience, creating unexpected lines and a sense of strangeness as they spotlight the dancers and cast enormous shadows on opposite walls. All of the elements of light are punctuated and heightened by long moments of darkness. The production is jarring in many ways, retaining the highly constructed and fragmented feel of the book. Sounds are tumultuous, noisy, and dissonant in the first scene, then retreat into total silence for several long minutes in the next. It also features Carson's voice as she reads — sometimes recorded, sometimes live. Visually, too, the performance is often discordant rather than smooth. The first scene features the dancer Silas Riener flailing, almost seizing, giving the impression of someone shipwrecked and broken. Later scenes depict repeated gestures of falling, juxtaposed with moments of careful, silent movements. The final moments, in

19 "Rashaun Mitchell," *Time Out New York,* April 30, 2012, https://www.timeout.com/newyork/dance/rashaun-mitchell-2.

which Carson reads live rather than on a recording, shows the dancers off to one side, collapsed and heaving.

The interpretation adds compelling depth to the work. For instance, while Carson's voice reads a section recounting the movement of a phoenix toward the light, the dancer also moves toward a single light source, projecting his shadow onto the opposite wall of the sanctuary, much larger than light. The phoenix "comes to see the immensity of the mechanism in which he is caught, the immense fragility of his own flying," and is undone by it.[20] The phoenix represents not her brother, but the role of the historian — in other words, the role of Carson as she seeks to know and understand her brother and her relationship to him.[21] She notes that "history and elegy are akin."[22] Her elegy, then, in which she inquires into the life of the brother whom she knew so little, can be thought of as a history. History is vital and difficult, and remains a burden that one must carry: "It is when you are asking about something that you realize you yourself have survived it, and so you must carry it, or fashion it into a thing that carries itself."[23] The visual representation of the phoenix's movement in the dance performance calls attention to this work and personifies it, making it larger than life.

The historian is linked to inquiry, but also to muteness. "History can be at once concrete and indecipherable. Historian can be a storydog that roams around Asia Minor collecting bits of muteness like burrs in its hide," Carson writes.[24] The muteness is not about quietude, but about the impossibility of complete understanding, and the glancing ways in which we come to knowledge. "Note that the word 'mute' […] is regarded by linguists as an onomatopoeic formation referring not to silence but to a certain fundamental opacity of human being, which likes to

20 Carson, *Nox,* sec. 1.1.
21 I am influenced here by Carson's own words in her interview with Parul Sehgal, in which she emphasizes that the work is less about mourning than about understanding the history of others.
22 Carson, *Nox,* sec. 1.1.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., sec. 1.3.

show the truth by allowing it to be seen hiding."[25] While Carson reads this passage, the dancer (Mitchell) moves slowly on the stage, while Currie directs the light from an overhead projector towards him, but never quite illuminating him. This continues for some time in silence — no voice, no music — with the light briefly catching his movements, then drifting away again. Even when Mitchell is illuminated by the projector's light, it's not quite focused on his body, but on the ground near his feet — leaving him mainly in shadow — and we hear only his feet sweeping against the floor. The scene and the words underline the same point: we cannot fully understand the actions of others. Looking at them directly does not ease understanding, and yet looking just to the side of them, or at the fragments of them, may yield some meaning.

This fundamental impossibility of full understanding is at the heart of inquiry, and therefore of elegy and history. The process of inquiring, looking, and collecting will never cease, because a full understanding is never possible. Carson remarks that she never translated the Catullus poem in a satisfactory way, and so must continually sound out its meaning and express it in new ways: "I never arrived at the translation I would have liked to do of poem 101. But over the years of working at it, I came to think of translating as a room, not exactly an unknown room, where one gropes for the light switch. I guess it never ends. A brother never ends. I prowl him. He does not end."[26] This remarkable passage suggests that, like the unattainable translation, she will never reach the ends of understanding her brother; instead, she must continue to inquire, to seek meaning in fragments, and to translate them into language, visual work, and dance.

* * *

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., sec. 7.1.

"I wanted to fill my elegy with light of all kinds."[27] I return to this line, this first line, depending on how you read the text, as a way to conclude. Light and darkness, photographs and text, memory and uncertainty — the text is filled with these tensions, these complexities that require translation and interpretation. The play of darkness and light are what makes photography possible. Darkness is associated with loss, and yet, the loss is what prompts Carson's reflections on her brother, whom she associates with light. (Indeed, the "*miseras*" definition includes the telling phrase, "made sadder by the brother's night than by the brother himself.") Carson refers to him as a "starry lad," and the women he had loved called him "light of my life."[28] Similarly, her excavation of his memory is aligned with light:

> Prowling the meanings of a word, prowling the history of a person, no use expecting a flood of light. Human words have no main switch. But all those little kidnaps in the dark. And then the luminous, big, shivering, discandied, unrepentant, barking web of them that hangs in your mind when you turn back to the page you were trying to translate.[29]

In the book, these words occupy a page of their own, opposite a repeated dictionary entry for *frater*. In the dance production, Carson uses these pivotal words as a powerful conclusion. Unlike most of the spoken text in the production, which is recorded, Carson reads these words live from a fully illuminated stage, with little movement from the other performers. As she reads the translation, one dancer slowly moves into a contorted backbend; the other wraps himself around the knees of the first as the stage goes dark, leaving the audience to dwell on Carson's haunting words that underscore the beautiful impossibility of ever fully understanding the people closest to us.

27 Ibid., sec. 1.0.
28 Ibid., secs. 1.0 and 4.1.
29 Ibid., sec. 7.1.

2

# Ever-Absent Photographs: Jacques Roubaud's *Quelque chose noir*

In contrast to the layers of texture and sensory elements in Anne Carson's *Nox*, Jacques Roubaud's *Quelque chose noir* (*Some Thing Black*) is characterized by spare simplicity.[1] The extended poem is an elegy to his wife, Alix Cléo Roubaud, who died at age 31 of a pulmonary embolism.[2] And yet, while this loss is the fulcrum around which *Quelque chose noir* turns, readers won't learn it in the text, but rather by reading the cover copy that Jacques Roubaud wrote to accompany the publication of Alix Cléo Roubaud's journal.[3] This missing fact — a lost loss — haunts the text and sets the stage for other hauntings, traces, and echoes

1 See Jacques Roubaud, *Quelque chose noir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), and Jacques Roubaud, *Some Thing Black,* trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 1994).

2 For clarity, in sections where I discuss work by both Jacques Roubaud and Alix Cléo Roubaud, I will refer to each by their full name. While this is a bit cumbersome, I dislike the more commonly used (but patriarchal) method of referring to Jacques Roubaud by last name only, and Alix Cléo Roubaud by first name only. In sections that only reference Jacques Roubaud's work, I will use last name only.

3 See Alix Cléo Roubaud, *Journal* (*1979–1983*) (Paris: Seuil, 1984). Her story haunts me, too: I experienced a pulmonary embolism at age 24, not long before reading both *Quelque chose noir* and *Journal*.

of a lost beloved, of a call that will never hear a response, and of unseen photographs. Photographs are a key conceptual and structural framework for the text, as the central photographic reference is a series of self-portraits by Alix Cléo Roubaud, titled "Si quelque chose noir,"[4] to which the title of Jacques Roubaud's work is a clear reference. All other references are oblique, and the images are not reprinted in the original version of the text.

The photographs feature multiple exposures, a nearly empty room, and a predominant sense of darkness. The ghostly images of Alix Cléo Roubaud observing her own body, often nude and in a room devoid of ornamentation, suggest a meditation on death — a reading which Jacques Roubaud explores in his work. The importance of the images suggests that they figure importantly into Jacques Roubaud's mourning process — and yet, by excluding them, he withholds an interpretive aid from the reader, suggesting in turn that loss cannot be glossed by images any easier than it can be articulated in language.

## Visual Hauntings

Traces of black and white photography appear throughout Jacques Roubaud's work — not as images, but as text. The frequent references to images in *Quelque chose noir* create a sense of engagement and allow Roubaud to explore silence and loss through rich visual metaphor:

> Laisserait voir: les blancs entre les morceaux.
>
> Se tairait le plus possible, manquant de consistance, grisaille.
>
> Se taire par la photo: aphorismes […]
>
> Mémoire infiniment tortu euse[5]<br>
> r

4 "If Some Thing Black."

5 Roubaud, *Quelque chose noir,* 70. "Would let show: white space between the pieces. // Would be silent as much as she could, lacking solidity, gri-

In addition to their reference to white space, these lines suggest that visual elements allow for silence in multiple ways: first, they occupy a defined space, which allows for the empty spaces between them to figure into the discussion. Second, they create the possibility of silence because of their ability to convey meaning both with and without the use of language. This passage is emblematic of the interplay between the visual and the auditory throughout *Quelque chose noir* through the use of both form (such as the dropped letter "r" hanging below the rest of the word, leaving a blank space that changes the meaning of the sentence) and content.

At times Jacques Roubaud contemplates the photos as an entrance to his memory of his wife, reflecting on them as indications of her relationship with the world. His text is in conversation not only with the series of photographs, but also with a book written by Alix Cléo Roubaud, titled simply *Journal (1979–1983)*.[6] Indeed, the above passage closely echoes her own reflections: "Que vas-tu faire de moi,ma grisaille,mon manque de consistance,mon désire de me taire le plus possible,par la photo par exemple.Ou pourquoi la photo?parce qu'elle est fragmentée et que,comme dans les aphorismes,la fragmentation laisse voir les blancs entre les morceaux;"[7] "les ruses de la mémoire,l'infiniment tortueuse."[8] Still, while photographic imagery can serve as a connection to Alix Cléo Roubaud's life, it

saille. // To be silent in photos: aphorisms. […] // Memory infinitely tortu$_{r}$ous" (Roubaud, *Some Thing Black,* 68).

6 Roubaud, *Journal*. The English translation is titled *Alix's Journal* and includes an introduction by Jacques Roubaud, as well as photographs from the *Si quelque chose noir* series. See Alix Cléo Roubaud, *Alix's Journal,* trans. Jan Steyn (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2010).

7 Roubaud, *Journal,* 67, punctuation as in original, here and throughout. "What are you going to make of me,of my dullness,my lack of consistency,my desire to keep quiet as much as possible,through photography for example.Or why photography?because it is fragmented and because,like in aphorisms,fragmentation makes visible the white spaces between the fragments" (Roubaud, *Alix's Journal,* 83).

8 Ibid., 87. "the tricks of memory,infinitely tortuous" (Roubaud, *Alix's Journal,* 103).

also functions as a mechanism for remembering her death. Even beyond actual photographs, visual memories and impressions haunt Jacques Roubaud, particularly as he recalls the image of Alix's hand after her death, frozen in time. The visual nature of this memory calls to mind the precision and permanence of a photograph, rather than the fluidity of a memory of a particular moment.

Jacques Roubaud immerses himself in silence, allowing the text to slowly emerge from the absence of words that filled thirty months of silent mourning. Whereas Carson's mode of historical inquiry and translation suggested that she was working to create an image of her brother and understand it all at once, Jacques Roubaud's elegy is like half of a dialogue, compact and quiet and allusive, leaving space and silence for a response that never comes. He eventually finds that language allows him to protect the memory of his wife even after the loss of her body: "En te nommant je voudrais te donner une stabilité hors de toute atteinte."[9] He also hints at the permanence of language, even if it does not have the tangible weightiness of reality: "Ton nom est trace irréductible. Il n'y a pas de négation possible de ton nom."[10] Still, the possibility of immortalizing her memory in language was not immediate. Jacques Roubaud notes that for a long time, he suffered an incapacity to speak or write: "Impossible d'écrire, marié(e) à une morte"[11] — a phrase that echoes Alix Cléo Roubaud's earlier sentiment indicating that she felt an "impossibilité d'écrire,mariée à un poète."[12] Roubaud repeats this impossibility later on as well:

9 Roubaud, *Quelque chose noir,* 87. "Saying your name I would give you an unassailable stability" (Roubaud, *Some Thing Black,* 84).

10 Ibid., 88. "Your name's an irreducible trace. There is no possible negation of your name" (Roubaud, *Some Thing Black,* 85).

11 Ibid., 63. "How can I write, married to a dead (wo)man" (Roubaud, *Some Thing Black,* 61).

12 Roubaud, *Journal,* 126. "impossibility of writing,married to a poet" (Roubaud, *Alix's Journal,* 143).

> Devant ta mort je suis resté entièrement silencieux.
>
> Je n'ai pas pu parler pendant presque trente mois.
>
> Je ne pouvais plus parler selon ma manière de dire qui est la poésie.[13]

Poetry, then, is Jacques Roubaud's means of overcoming silence, even though his poetry incorporates that silence into itself through its tone and its use of white space. Alix Cléo Roubaud also refers to her own means of expression as silent elements: "Photography is indeed a form of silence.But still a diary can show its silences,as an incomplete image its incompleteness."[14] Paradoxically, it was another traumatic event, unnamed in the text but presumably referring to his brother's suicide, that sparked Roubaud's ability to speak through poetry in the first place, making death a catalyst both for speech and for silence.[15] Silence is a slippery character in what the reader can know of Jacques Roubaud's emotional and authorial processes: it both comforts and antagonizes; it is overcome by death and takes its grip via death; it is the antithesis of writing and is present simultaneously within writing.

### Writing Silence

Even when Jacques Roubaud does not focus on silence or the impossibility of expression, his language has a deeply quiet, minimalistic feel, as though the words are just barely able to disturb the sea of silence that surrounds him. Part of the quiet feel is achieved through the abundant use of white space, both surrounding the poetry and internal to each poem. The breaks within the lines create a sense of hesitancy, as though the words

13 Ibid., 131. "Faced with your death I remained stone silent. // I could not speak for nearly thirty months. // I could no longer speak in my way of speaking, I mean poetry" (Roubaud, *Some Thing Black,* 128).

14 Roubaud, *Journal,* 104.

15 See Roubaud, *Quelque chose noir,* 131–32.

were difficult to find and even more difficult to pronounce. Roubaud's choices of language and syntax also contribute to the quiet feel of the book. By describing dark, silent mornings where he arranges everything in advance so as to make as little noise as possible, by focusing on colorless scenes, by the lack of conversation or any sense of interpersonal contact, Roubaud conveys the impression of the silence that engulfs his life at this point. Similarly, Jean-Jacques Poucel writes about Roubaud's avoidance of elegiac language: "the spare language of *Quelque chose noir* presents a work of grieving that resolutely resists conventional elegiac rhetoric and casts memorialization in a minimized and exacting poetic discourse."[16] Roubaud's mourning process is idiosyncratic and quiet. There is no sense of words overflowing in an abundance of emotion, but rather a restraint that withholds all but the bare minimum of expression. *Quelque chose noir* feels reticent even in its expression, partly due to Roubaud's use of minimalistic and understated language in a work of intense emotion. For instance, he describes her loss not as something sudden and jarring, but as a quiet diminution to nothingness: "Disparaissant, tu n'as pas été mise ailleurs, tu t'es diluée dans ce minime espace, tu t'es enfouie dans ce minime espace, il t'a absorbée."[17] This loss — as expressed through Roubaud's language — is so quiet, so profound.

This quietness extends to structure and format as well as language. Roubaud comments on the poetic form and the white space it includes, recognizing that it suggests a readerly expectation of dialogue:

> Même dans la page : la réponse supposée par la ligne,
> les déplacements, les formats

16 Jean-Jacques F. Poucel, *Jacques Roubaud and the Invention of Memory,* illus. edn. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 174.

17 Roubaud, *Quelque chose noir,* 37. "When you disappeared, you were not put away, you dissolved into this minimal space, burrowed into this minimal space, it has absorbed you" (Roubaud, *Some Thing Black,* 34).

> Quelque chose va sortir du silence, de la ponctuation,
> du blanc remonter jusqu'à moi[18]

Here the silence appears as a backdrop against which a dialogic response will (or at least could) emerge. The idea of dialogue is subtly reinforced by stylistic elements that Jacques Roubaud borrows from Alix Cléo Roubaud's journals, indicating a call-and-response between the two works. As Véronique Montémont notes in her rigorous analysis, *Jacques Roubaud: L'Amour du nombre,*[19] the influence of Alix Cléo Roubaud's journals on Jacques Roubaud's writing is particularly noticeable in the punctuation: "En outre, Roubaud calque la ponctuation d'Alix, qui utilise nombre de points à l'intérieur de la phrase. La transposition de cette habitude dans les poèmes à la fois déconcerte l'œil et marque le texte du sceau de l'épouse défunte."[20] The use of nonstandard punctuation, similar to that of Alix's, fragments the text while also linking it to the emotional source of his writing, and the white spaces also allow a quiet that awaits a reply from the beloved. Sadly, though, the silence remains only that — "Ce poème t'est adressé et ne rencontrera rien."[21] Jacques Roubaud's writing responds to that of Alix Cléo Roubaud, but she cannot continue the movement of the conversation.

In crafting this one-sided conversation, Jacques Roubaud draws attention to insurmountable separation in the form of

18 Ibid., 124. "Even on the page: answer implicit in line, spacing, format // Something is going to arise out of the silence, the / punctuation, the blank space going to surface for me" (Roubaud, *Some Thing Black,* 122).

19 This title could be translated as *The Love of the Name* or *The Love of the Number.*

20 Véronique Montémont, *Jacques Roubaud:L'amour du nombre* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires Septentrion, 2004), 59. "Furthermore, Roubaud traces Alix's punctuation, which uses numerous periods within sentences. Transposing this habit into poems simultaneously troubles the eye and marks the text with the seal of the spouse who has died" (my translation).

21 Roubaud, *Quelque chose noir,* 125. "This poem is addressed to you and will encounter nothing" (Roubaud, *Some Thing Black,* 122).

silence. He doesn't reconstruct Alix Cléo Roubaud, either for himself or for the reader; rather, he creates distance between himself and his late wife, focusing on his role in the process of mourning. Unlike Carson, who adds endless layers of fragments in an effort to build an understanding of a person and an evolving relationship, Jacques Roubaud strips away these layers: stripping color out of his writing (black and white are nearly the only colors referenced), removing all but the oblique reference to her photos, removing her half of the conversation in the form of her diary and focusing instead on emptiness. The way that Roubaud simultaneously incorporates and excludes elements like photography and journal entries serves both to distance himself from the signs of loss and to establish a sense of permanence of the loss.

While the content of the photographs always suggested mortality, they are meditations done by Alix Cléo Roubaud herself, and therefore are also a sign of life, recalling the moment of their creation. As Roland Barthes notes in *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie,* photographs provide an immediacy and an authenticity that written text cannot match, while also suggesting a simultaneity of past and future that always bears the mark of death because of its ability to unite an image as moment, memory, and future object. Because each photograph has the potential to outlive its subject, the paper image always has the potential of being looked at long after the subject has died. Barthes describes looking at the photograph of someone condemned to die, and notes that both the statements "he is dead" and "he is going to die" are equally true. "*Il va mourir.* Je lis en même temps: *cela sera et cela a été;* j'observe avec horreur un futur antérieur dont la mort est l'enjeu. […] Que le sujet en soit déjà mort ou non, toute photographie est cette catastrophe."[22] The moment shown in a photograph has happened already, and

22 Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1980), 150. "*He is going to die.* I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been;* I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. [. . .] Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe" (Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflec-*

though it evokes an emotion in perpetuity, the photograph is evidence that the moment has already passed.

**Showing Loss**

Photographs are mentioned from the first page of *Quelque chose noir* — mentioned, but never shown. The first instance seems not to refer to Alix Cléo Roubaud's series of photographs, but to mental images as he remembers her, or perhaps medical imaging related to her illness:

> Cette image se présente pour la millième fois    à neuf    avec la même violence    elle ne peut pas ne pas se répéter indéfiniment    une nouvelle generation de mes cellules    si temps il y a    trouvera cette duplication onéreuse    ces tirages photographiques internes    je n'ai pas le choix    maintenant.[23]

When he writes of "l'image de ta mort," when he writes "la mort même même, identique à elle même même," is he referring to his wife as he sees her, or the ghostly, double-exposed self-portraits she has taken of herself?[24] It is impossible to know from the oblique language, addressed to his beloved in the second person, but missing any clear referents. Elsewhere, he refers to her photographs more directly; multiple sections are even titled "Cette photographie, ta dernière."[25] And yet he does not tell us what he sees in the photograph, with one exception: her

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*tions on Photography,* trans. Richard Howard [New York: Hill & Wang, 1980], 96).

23 Roubaud, *Quelque chose noir,* 11. "This image again    for the thousandth time    with the / same violence    can't help replaying forever    my next / generation of cells    if there's time    will find this / duplication tiresome    these inner photo prints    I have / no choice    now." (Roubaud, *Some Thing Black,* 9).

24 Ibid., 15. "This image of your death"; "death itself-self. identical with itself-self" (Roubaud, *Some Thing Black,* 13).

25 Ibid., 91; 103. "This Photograph, Your Last" (Roubaud, *Some Thing Black,* 89; 101).

gaze, her eyes. He writes: "mais surtout il y a, ce qui maintenant manque // Toi."[26] The capitalized "toi," set off with a period, feels like a downbeat, an exhale, a cry. She is missing.

Roubaud does occasionally describe the content of Alix Cléo's photographs. In these instances, he compares what he sees in them to the unbearable moment he keeps reliving — the moment of finding her body, no longer alive: "Ta jambe droite s'était relevée. et écartée un peu. comme dans ta photographie titrée *la dernière chambre.* // Mais ton ventre cette fois n'était pas dans l'ombre. point vivant au plus noir. pas un mannequin. mais une morte."[27] It is horrible, reading and rereading this intimate moment of loss. It is drained of color. It is indeed something black. But it is like a wisp of smoke, an errant ink-scratch on the page, a call with no response. She is gone, the photographs are gone, and this quiet poem is what remains.

By removing all but the traces of the photographs, Jacques Roubaud also strips away the signs of life that they incorporate. At the same time, though, Jacques Roubaud also casts Alix Cléo Roubaud as though she were a photograph: black and white, two-dimensional. For example, "Sous la lampe, entourée de noir, je te dispose : // En deux dimensions // […] Image sans épaisseur     voix sans épaisseur."[28] In doing so, it is not so much her that he preserves, but rather his pain, which repeats indefinitely and relentlessly: "Cette image se présente pour la millième fois. avec la même insistence. elle ne peut pas ne pas se répéter indéfiniment."[29] Faced with the impossibility of undiminished emotion, Jacques Roubaud leans on the photographic image as a

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26 Ibid., 92. "but above all there is what's missing now, // You." (Roubaud, *Some Thing Black,* 90).

27 Ibid., 21. "Your right leg had come up. and spread a little. as in your photo titled *the last room.* // But this time your belly was not in the shadow. not a live point in the darkest black. not a mannequin. a dead woman." (Roubaud, *Some Thing Black,* 19).

28 Ibid., 19. "Under the lamp, surrounded by darkness, I spread you out: // In two dimensions // […] Image without substance     voice without body" (Roubaud, *Some Thing Black,* 17).

29 Ibid., 21. "This image again for the thousandth time. with the same insistence. can't help replaying forever" (Roubaud, *Some Thing Black,* 19).

way of maintaining silence. Jacques Roubaud achieves distance, space, and silence by alluding to — but excluding — the things that bear the strongest mark of Alix Cléo Roubaud: her photographs and journal entries.

By excluding the photographic images, perhaps Jacques Roubaud is also preserving the particularity of the moment that the image captures. The decision to exclude such key images recalls Roland Barthes's decision, despite his inclusion of many photographs in *La chambre claire,* to exclude the one most important to him: a photograph of his mother as a child, which he calls the "Winter Garden Photograph." As he explains in a parenthetical remark, "je ne puis montrer la Photo du Jardin d'Hiver. Elle n'existe que pour moi. Pour vous, elle ne serait rien d'autre qu'une photo indifférente, l'une des mille manifestations du 'quelconque'; […] tout au plus intéresserait-elle votre studium: époque, vêtements, photogénie; mais en elle, pour vous, aucune blessure."[30] Barthes refers to the wound provoked by a photograph as the *punctum:* a detail that arrests the eye, punctuating but also pricking the gaze. Unlike the *studium*, or general interest in the scene depicted in a photograph, the *punctum* is highly individualized. Barthes excludes the photograph that means the most to him because it would not create the same sharp sensation for an anonymous viewer, and to have a potentially uncaring gaze examining the photograph strikes Barthes as problematic. Similarly, Roubaud's elegy excludes the precise photographic elements that wound him in his mourning. His method of coming back from the aphasia of mourning is to circumscribe the abyss of loss with language. He cannot reveal her to the reader, or even reveal what she has seen through the camera's lens; rather, he reveals his interaction with her loss, what he sees when he looks at what she has seen, what he sees when he reads what she has written.

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30 Barthes, *La chambre claire,* 115. "I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the 'ordinary'; […] at most it would interest your *studium:* period, clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound" (Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 73).

In discussing his decision not to include the "Winter Garden Photograph," Barthes also notes that the work of mourning is incapable of erasing pain: "On dit que le deuil, par son travail progressif, efface lentement la douleur; je ne pouvais, je ne puis le croire; car, pour moi, le Temps élimine l'émotion de la perte (je ne pleure pas), c'est tout. Pour le reste, tout est resté immobile."[31] Roubaud's first lines exude a similar feeling of stagnation in mourning: "certains en de semblables moments ont pensé déchiffrer l'esprit dans quelque rémanence cela fut pour eux une consolation ou du redoublement de l'horreur pas moi."[32] Though Roubaud's text clearly engages in the work of mourning, he is hesitant to see in it anything more than the mundane and painful daily actions that it consists of. Barthes finds that in this banality lies the true horror of death: "Comme si l'horreur de la Mort n'était pas précisément sa platitude! L'horreur, c'est ceci: rien à dire de la mort de qui j'aime le plus, rien à dire de sa photo, que je contemple sans jamais pouvoir l'approfondir, la transformer."[33]

We are left, then, with the silence of one-sided conversation and the white space of an absent photograph — an absence that is central, not peripheral. Oddly, in publishing an English translation, Dalkey Archive Press chose to include Alix Cléo Roubaud's images as an appendix to the work. This decision undeniably alters the way that readers encounter the work. Much ambiguity is lost, since the "*quelque chose*" of the title is

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31 Ibid., 118. "It is said that mourning, by its gradual labor, slowly erases pain; I could not, I cannot believe this; because for me, Time eliminates the emotion of loss (I do not weep), that is all. For the rest, everything has remained motionless" (Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 75).

32 Roubaud, *Quelque chose noir,* 11. "some in moments like this thought they could decipher some residue of spirit it was a consolation for them or a double horror not for me. (Roubaud, *Some Thing Black,* 9).

33 Barthes, *La chambre claire,* 145. "As if the horror of Death were not precisely its platitude! The horror is this: nothing to say about the death of one whom I love most, nothing to say about her photograph, which I contemplate without ever being able to get to the heart of it, to transform it" (Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 92–93).

no longer indefinite, but rather is a clear reference to the series. At the same time, a layer of complexity is added, as readers can readily contemplate the work that is so clearly present in the text. In one sense, by excluding the photographs, Jacques Roubaud is limiting the reader's perspective while also broadening interpretive possibilities. The reader sees the photographs only through the filter of Roubaud's language. The inclusion of the images changes this balance.

The complexity surrounding absence and presence, or darkness and light, is emblematic of the underlying issue at the heart of both *Quelque chose noir* and *Nox:* the impossible but necessary effort to distill loss into some form of expression. Both Roubaud and Carson use visual metaphors associated with photography as a way of weaving the unsayable into a textual medium, and while their techniques differ, the haunting result in each case is a nuanced exploration of the experience and articulation of loss. Both writers create a powerful emotional charge, drawing readers into extended meditations on the nature not only of loss, but also relationship and identity. Through their different approaches, we come to see that the emotional valence is not bound up in any one particular mode of expression; rather, the powerful sense of connection seems to stem in part from their willingness to explore the contours of absence itself, through form as well as content. How deeply this silence resounds with the reader — our own losses reverberating in quiet communion.

3

# Gaps in the Archive: Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*

If photographs and their absence signal loss for Roubaud, they serve as slivers of possibility and speculation for Saidiya Hartman.[1] In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments,* Hartman includes photos from her archival research as a backdrop against which her narrative histories unfurl. It is a book for imagined pasts and hoped-for futures: "The album assembled here is an archive of the exorbitant, a dream book for existing otherwise."[2] In it, Hartman sets the stage as though for a play, providing readers with settings (parts of Philadelphia, Harlem, "Jim Crow car on the Atlantic Coast Line Railway," and "theaters, movie houses, dance halls, casinos, lodges, black-and-tan dives, buffet flats, and chop-suey joints"), as well as a cast of characters including W.E.B. DuBois, Ida B. Wells, Mabel Hampton ("Cho-

1 My thinking in this chapter has been shaped by Ashley Cheyemi McNeil and the collaborative work we have done together. Our work, while not published, is emblematic of the deepest and most generative modes of scholarly discourse, and I am grateful for what I have learned in the process.

2 Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019), xv.

rine, lesbian, working-class intellectual, and aspiring concert singer"), and The Chorus ("All the unnamed young women of the city trying to find a way to live and in search of beauty").[3]

While these images are not indicative of loss or mourning in the way we find in the texts by Carson and Roubaud, nevertheless there is a profound absence that they convey. In this case, Hartman asks us to consider, what is *not* captured in the photograph, whose lives are *not* shown? Whose pain do we see, and whose joy? The matter of narrative impossibility and the ethical dilemma of how to address archival silence is something Hartman dubs "critical fabulation" in her brief but breathtaking 2008 essay, "Venus in Two Acts," and then engages as method in *Wayward Lives.*[4] Starting from photographs and other archival materials from her research on early 20th-century Black life as documented in numerous libraries and archives, Hartman weaves an imaginative composite history of the figures whose lives were visible within them. This visibility is fraught because the white, male perspective tended to dominate the determination of historical significance, such that the moments of Black life that are found in formal archives tend to be moments of interaction with the world as structured by that white, male perspective. Telling a more meaningful story means combining research with fiction, with critical fabulation, to imagine the fuller possibilities that surround a moment of, say, legal infraction. Hartman describes this method as a kind of improvisation within constraint: "Each space had its own script and set of requirements, dictated the terms of possibility, decided the arrangement and comportment of the figure. The challenge was to improvise within the space of constraint, bending and breaking the rules without breaking the form."[5] This could as easily describe how the historical and imagined subjects of *Wayward Lives* move through the world, or Hartman's own writing. For the subjects of *Wayward Lives* — Black women, many of them queer, whose stories we

3 Ibid., xvii–xxi.

4 Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.

5 Hartman, *Wayward Lives,* 303

glimpse in refracted imaginings from materials deemed historically significant — life was circumscribed by Jim Crow laws, overt and tacit bias, poverty, and risk. Within that constraint, Hartman shows us surprise, joy, delight, possibility. Hartman's writing similarly dances within the rules that circumscribe it. In a space of scholarly discourse, archival research, and all that entails in terms of methodological rigor and scrutiny, Hartman finds space for poetry.

The key absence in this text is embodied by gaps in the archive. While Hartman is careful to ensure the accuracy of her research, she also spells out the problem with relying on the historical record that grounds her work: "All of the characters and events found in this book are real; none are invented. What I know about the lives of these young women has been culled from the journals of rent collectors; surveys and monographs of sociologists; trial transcripts; slum photographs […], all of which represent them as a problem."[6] What the archives can't reveal are the moments between these documented instants. These gaps are what interest Hartman — but how to create something that isn't there? In "Venus in Two Acts," Hartman considers the passing mention of an unnamed Black girl who was abducted and did not survive the middle passage. In returning to this girl's story, Hartman takes a bold and essential step: she offers the girl a name (Venus). In *Wayward Lives,* though many of the figures are in fact named in the historical materials, Hartman uses absence and fragments to build a rich exploration of, as one version of the subtitle describes it, "Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval." This is a powerful combination — unseen or unrecorded moments revealing both the day-to-day lives of marginalized and often criminalized Black people, and the context of those lives in the broader historical moment of the early 20th century in the United States. Hartman teases out these absences to craft a meaningful and evocative understanding that relies on things unsaid. Photographs are included throughout *Wayward Lives,* and Hartman attends to them closely.

6 Ibid., xiv.

However, the historical narrative she pieces together is not the story *told by* the photographs; rather, it is that which is resisted in the photographs, that which is moving away or slightly out of view. Instead, the image that Hartman creates is one imagined, one that fits in between the visible and surveilled spaces of record. "In pictures anticipated, but not yet located, we are able to glimpse the terrible beauty of wayward lives. [...] It is this picture I have tried to hold onto."[7] Here, the absent pictures are possible but not available. Lack of record does not mean lack of existence.

A question I grapple with: What violence is present in the archival photographs that Hartman both describes and includes in her book — and what violence do I commit if I choose to reproduce them here? I don't like it; I'm a bit afraid of it. As a white woman, I feel particularly unsure of my footing. Quoting text feels comfortable, but reproducing an image feels almost aggressive in this context. What is my role relative to Hartman, relative to the archival subjects she studies, relative to the reader of my own words? I approach Hartman as a reader, just as I approached Carson as a reader — but whereas Carson made the conscientious decision to publish each image in *Nox,* the subjects of the photographs in *Wayward Lives* are at many more degrees of remove. And yet, the analysis is no less important for that. With that preamble and hesitation, I dive in.

How to analyze what isn't there? An archival gap may mean a lack of photographs, or it may mean an active resistance seen within the photographs that are available. Hartman describes going through the archives and never finding what she sought:

> It was not the kind of image I was looking for when I set out to tell the story of the social revolution and transformation of intimate life that unfolded in the black city-within-the-city [...]. I browsed thousands of photographs taken by social reformers and charity organizations, hoping to find them, but they failed to appear. They averted their gaze or they

7 Ibid., 30.

> rushed past the photographer; they clustered at the edge of the photos, they looked out of windows, peered out of doorways, and turned their back to the camera. They refused the terms of visibility imposed on them.[8]

The photograph these words refer to is included twice within the book — first as a full two-page spread, printed behind the text, and also as a smaller inset. One image cannot be avoided but also cannot be seen clearly; the reprise makes sure you didn't miss it. I won't include it here; this picture of a nude Black child is not for me to share. How could anyone take this photograph, print it, index it? As a mother, as someone who was once a child, it breaks my heart. And yet. Hartman's words seek to tell a different story than this and other photographs. Her words challenge the dominance of the official record, probe the edges of what the lens sees. Her words — generative, hopeful, joyous — and the unbearable photographs work at a slant. It is an account of resistance, an act of powerful refusal from the margins.

**Racism and the Written Record**

Given that written records are deeply entwined with the history of enslavement and institutional racism in the United States, it is perhaps not surprising that the records found in formal spaces like photographic and textual archives would not provide a complete and vibrant view of Black people, women, and people on the edges of society. Records serve to document ownership, or engagement with the state through birth, death, or marriage. They can serve a disciplinary purpose: police records, identity cards, transcripts, and so on. It follows that many of the archival photos that Hartman references serve an agenda — one that portrays the Black subjects and their environs in a negative light, often focusing on poverty, violence, unruliness, supposed deviance, or the seemingly benevolent intervention of white people. Many are anonymous, the subjects' names not considered rel-

8 Ibid., 17–18.

evant to the dominant story. Some are more baldly exploitative, such as the excruciating photo that Hartman considers at length of a very young girl made to pose nude for the camera.

The collected photos do not capture the fullness of life. As Hartman says of the young girl's photo, "It was not the kind of picture that the girl would have wanted. It didn't even look nothing like her. They eyes are flat and withholding; hard like the eyes of the girls working Middle Alley. They are *eyes in advance of time and experience.* To keep the photographer from coming any closer, she tried to make mean stay away from me eyes, I dare you eyes, eyes of flint, not whore eyes that solicited — *Hey Mister* — and refused — *I don't do that* — in the same glance."[9] Her stony gaze is an act of fierce resistance despite the heartrending and haunting vulnerability of her stature as a child. But what *might* this child have wanted her photograph to reflect? That is where Hartman invites our imagination. Not to dwell merely in the images that we have, those that pin down and surveil and judge and exploit, but to also dwell in the ones not taken — the moments of joy and fullness and pleasure and delight.

The distance between the documented record and the deep, joyous, complex subjectivity that Hartman imagines is great. *Wayward Lives* is a way to bridge that distance, to uplift subjective possibilities that are denied space in the materials that present themselves as objective. The book works at the intersection of history and fiction. Hartman writes that she "pressed at the limits of the case file and the document, speculated about what might have been, imagined the things whispered in dark bedrooms, and amplified moments of withholding, escape and possibility, moments when the vision and dreams of the wayward seemed possible."[10] Hartman takes an absence and uses it as a space not of negation, but of potential.

9 Ibid., 35.
10 Ibid., xv.

**Beauty, Movement, Abundance**

The seemingly static nature of archival photographs and other records may not easily lend itself to an exploration of desire, of movement-toward. And yet, it is precisely this movement where Hartman focuses her energy. In a chapter focused on Esther Brown, introduced in the cast of characters as "Chippie and Rebel, who insists on being treated the same as the white girls,"[11] Hartman writes of this desire as hunger and longing: "Esther Brown longed for another world. She was hungry for more, for otherwise, for better. She was hungry for beauty. In her case, the aesthetic wasn't a realm separate and distinct from the daily challenges of survival; rather, the aim was to make an art of subsistence."[12] Within this movement is also *beauty*—an emphasis on beauty not as an adornment or a luxury, but as a need as deeply felt as physical hunger.

This dynamism ultimately becomes a key focal point as Hartman moves from individual lives to the image of a collective: the chorus. Hartman gives the final word in *Wayward Lives* to this anonymous collective made of whirling individuals in a closing chapter titled "The Chorus Opens the Way." This chapter returns to ideas of anonymity that are raised by the form of the book and the method of archival research before it is combined with critical fabulation; questions arise of whose names and whose lives are worth remembering. A single member of a chorus is indistinguishable from others, by design: their role as members of a collective supersedes individual identity while playing that role. And yet, the dynamism and motion and beauty and hunger are at times more visible and immediate within that collective than by following a single individual. "Muses, drudges, washerwomen, whores, house workers, factory girls, waitresses, and aspiring but never-to-be stars make up this company, gather in the circle and fall into the line where all particularity and dis-

11 Ibid., xxi.
12 Ibid., 235.

tinction fade away."[13] Here in the chorus, namelessness is not indicative of shame or violence or a lack of care. Instead, anonymity is freedom and belonging, a sense of participation in the collective. "If you listen closely, you can hear the whole world in a bent note, a throwaway lyric, a singular thread of the collective utterance."[14] In this case the collective is a space of abundance, of potential. More than that: it is a space that changes you when you encounter it. "Now it is impossible to turn your back, to carry on like the world is the same."[15] The world is not the same once you know the stories. But, as Hartman explores powerfully in "Venus in Two Acts," there is also tremendous risk in telling these stories: "How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know? How does one listen for the groans and cries, the undecipherable songs, the crackle of fire in the cane fields, the laments for the dead, and the shouts of victory, and then assign words to all of it?"[16] Words are all we have, and words are radically insufficient.

As the book concludes, Hartman calls our eyes one more time to the margins: "The bodies are in motion. The gestures disclose what is at stake — the matter of life returns as an open question. The collective movement points toward what awaits us, what has yet to come into view, what they anticipate — the time and place better than here; a glimpse of the earth not owned by anyone. So everything depends on them and not the hero occupying center stage, preening and sovereign."[17] When images and historical artifacts don't show us this motion, this possibility, Hartman shows us a way to find it in the spaces between.

## What Else Is Missing?

Hartman's close, affectionate, powerful consideration of the voices and lives that are hard to see in the archive helps open

13 Ibid., 345.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 346.
16 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 3.
17 Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 349.

the reader's eye to other potential spaces of absence. In a world awash in data and information, these absences are particularly salient. Collecting data could not be easier in our historical moment, a century after the era that Hartman evokes in *Wayward Lives*. Now, maintaining anonymity requires an active choice, an opting out, a technical savvy that declines to be quantified. And even still, absences persist, and these absences once again tell us what is important, and to whom.

In a project called "Missing Datasets," contemporary Nigerian-American artist Mimi Ọnụọha trains her vision on the blank spaces nestled within an otherwise oversaturation of data. Her multimedia artwork, which uses digitally collected data and a GitHub repository in conjunction with tangible objects like filing cabinets and file folders, "questions and exposes the contradictory logics of technological progress."[18] Photographs of the art installations show folders with labels like "English language rules internalized by native speakers," "Publicly available gun trace data," and "White children adopted by POC." In her description of "Missing Datasets," Ọnụọha says,

> "Missing data sets" are the blank spots that exist in spaces that are otherwise data-saturated. Wherever large amounts of data are collected, there are often empty spaces where no data live. The word "missing" is inherently normative. It implies both a lack and an ought: something does not exist, but it should. That which should be somewhere is not in its expected place; an established system is disrupted by distinct absence. That which we ignore reveals more than what we give our attention to. It's in these things that we find cultural and colloquial hints of what is deemed important. Spots that we've left blank reveal our hidden social biases and indifferences.[19]

18 "About — MIMI ỌNỤỌHA," *Mimi Ọnụọha,* https://mimionuoha.com/about.

19 Mimi Ọnụọha, *The Library of Missing Datasets,* 2016, mixed media, https://mimionuoha.com/the-library-of-missing-datasets.

Ọnụọha has undertaken three iterations of this project to date, with the second (which she refers to as v.2.0) focusing specifically on data related to Blackness. The first iteration, by contrast, was broader in its scope. As rationale for this narrowing of focus, she notes that "Black folks are both over-collected and under-represented in American datasets, featuring strongly as objects of collection but rarely as subjects with agency over collection, ownership, and power."[20] This closely echoes Hartman's project, taking an angle of data and visual art where Hartman uses history and narrative. Both consider the meaning of the absences.

In the GitHub repository associated with the project, Ọnụọha offers a clear explanation for why certain data is nowhere to be found. She notes, "The word 'missing' is inherently normative. It implies both a lack and an ought: something does not exist, but it should. That which should be somewhere is not in its expected place; an established system is disrupted by distinct absence."[21] The data might be missing because of matters of incentives, or power, or fear. Data might be missing because it's hard to collect or quantify. "Things like emotions are hard to quantify (at this time, at least). Institutional racism is subtle and deniable; it reveals itself more in effects than acts. Not all things are easily quantifiable, and at times the very desire to render the world more abstract, trackable, and machine-readable is an idea that itself deserves questioning."[22] Ọnụọha articulates an idea at the heart of *Wayward Lives:* the supposed neutrality and objectivity of data collection is in fact a highly subjective process riddled with individual and systemic bias. Each decision point — what is worth collecting, what matters, how is it indexed — can potentially reinforce structural inequities and erase the lived experiences of those who may not fit a particular norm or category. We tend to study the data that is *present,* but both Hartman and

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20 Mimi Ọnụọha, *The Library of Missing Datasets,* Ver. 2.0, 2018, mixed media, https://mimionuoha.com/the-library-of-missing-datasets-v-20.

21 Mimi Ọnụọha, "On Missing Data Sets," *GitHub,* May 27, 2021, https://github.com/MimiOnuoha/missing-datasets.

22 Ibid.

Ọnụọha ask us to consider what is *missing*. By first noticing these absences, then interrogating them, the underlying value structures they uphold can more readily come into focus.

Bringing both Hartman and Ọnụọha's work back into conversation with the use of photography and mourning in Carson's and Roubaud's work, we begin to see the prismatic valences of silence and absence. Carson excavates her loss, piecing together every scrap of possibility in an effort to make sense of it. Roubaud holds loss and absence at arm's length, letting them form the structure of his text and influence its language and format, but never looking at them straight on. Hartman and Ọnụọha ask us to look differently at the things we can't see, the data that isn't there, and interrogate those absences while also imagining what might perhaps be missing. Each of these modes of addressing absence through the imperfect and insufficient medium of language offers poignant insight into the timbres of silence.

4

# Between Scream and Silence: Meaning and Blankness in *Le livre des questions* by Edmond Jabès

Amplifying the metaphors of photography and absence as ways of writing silence and the unspeakable, we come to the enigmatic work of Edmond Jabès. His seven-volume work, *Le livre des questions,*[1] addresses the traumas of exile and the Holocaust through a series of questions and answers interwoven with fictional rabbinical commentary. The book unfolds in a constellation of aphorisms, questions, commentary, and the faintest wisps of a storyline. We meet two characters, Sarah and Yukel; they seem to be Holocaust survivors, and they seem to be in love with each other. Piecing together their stories, we get a sense that they are both struggling to process the trauma of the concentration camps. Sarah's scream — a scream of madness and grief at the incomprehensible horror of the Holocaust — recurs frequently in the book. Yukel eventually commits suicide, unable to come to terms with either the horrors of the Holo-

1 Edmond Jabès, *Le livre des questions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), and Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions: Yaël, Elya, Aely,* trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1983). *Le livre des questions* is the title of the first volume as well as the series as a whole.

caust or with Sarah's continued pain. Meanwhile, images of the desert and imprisonment suggest Jabès's own life in Egypt and his eventual exile as well as the ancient Jewish story of enslavement and wandering in the desert, while the fictional rabbinical commentary gestures to the deep tradition of written critique, analysis, and questioning in Jewish cultural and spiritual history. But summarizing it this way feels far too tidy. The experience of reading the book feels like trying to remember a dream, the images escaping just outside the edge of conscious thought. Who is speaking? Where are they? What has happened? All of these details are fuzzy.

Born in Cairo in 1912, Jabès lived in Egypt until his family left for Paris, as exiles, in 1957.[2] Culturally French, Jewish by religion, and with Italian citizenship, the experience of being an outsider figures prominently in Jabès's writing. In *Le livre des questions,* Jabès presents trauma and exile as some of the most basic elements of Judaism and Jewish heritage, from the rite of bris to the forty years of wandering the desert that followed the Jews' escape from enslavement in Egypt. That desert wandering — in Egypt, Jabès's childhood homeland — is an image that appears frequently in *Le livre des questions,* drawing a connection between trauma and the written word — another foundational element of Judaism, for instance in the rich written commentary of the Talmud. Jabès creates haunting connections among elements that seem unrelated or contradictory, never flattening their difference, but rather suggesting unlikely affinities that open into rich new meaning.

A foundational tension in the book is that between silence and *le cri,* the scream or the cry. While they seem to be opposite extremes, both are inarticulate and instinctive responses to trauma, making them more similar than not. And yet, they are mutually exclusive: a victim cannot engage in both simultaneously. By putting a false opposition such as this at the heart of his work, Jabès suggests the importance of examining and

2 See Didier Cahen, "Questionner le livre (Edmond Jabès)," in *À livre ouvert* (Paris: Hermann, 2013), 103–38.

undoing other instances of apparent contradiction that conceal deeper truths. For instance, Jabès writes: "Yukel, parle-nous du silence qui est le terme et le commencement, étant l'âme des mots."[3] The idea of silence as the beginning and the end echoes biblical descriptors for God, as does the invocation of words (or, the Word), suggesting a holiness and mystery surrounding language and silence. But it is also bound up in contradiction: silence as the soul of words. The paradoxes fold in on themselves, leaving the reader with a sense of swirling evocativeness but without a solid place to stand.

It is difficult to separate the book's various concepts cleanly, as their edges bleed together and make it nearly impossible to refer to one element without recourse to the others. Loss and mourning in particular enter Jabès's work on a number of levels: at the basic level of the letter or the word, where he explores affinities between words like *l'amour* (love) and *la mort* (death); at the level of the story of love and pain that seems to unfold between Sarah and Yukel; and at a conceptual level, where trauma is understood as being intrinsically linked to writing and to heritage. The book opens with one line each from Yukel's and Sarah's journals, with no introduction about who these figures are or what the context is, but clearly showing a relationship between them. "Je t'ai donné mon nom, Sarah, et c'est une voie sans issue" (Yukel). "Je crie. Je crie, Yukel. Nous sommes l'innocence du cri" (Sarah).[4] These lines open the book with naming, with impossibility, with relationship, and with a scream, images that return throughout the volume. But not yet. Once the reader turns the page, the text changes completely, and we find a sequence of brief, one-line questions and enigmatic replies:

—Que se passe-t-il derrière cette porte?
—Un livre et en train d'être effeuillé.

3 Jabès, *Le livre des questions,* 74. "Yukel, tell us of silence which is the end and the beginning, being the soul of words" (Jabès, *Book of Questions,* 66).

4 Ibid., 17. "I gave you my name, Sarah. And it's a deadend road" (Yukel). "I scream. I scream, Yukel. We are the innocence of the scream" (Sarah) (Jabès, *Book of Questions,* 15).

—Quelle est l'histoire de ce livre?
—La prise de conscience d'un cri.[5]

What are we to make of these questions? Jabès doesn't give the reader many clues. *Le livre des questions* is highly suggestive in its style, its context, and its means of opening possibilities without overdetermining them. Nothing is pinpointed in a definitive way. Connections are made and erased, everything is a question that raises new questions, and the infinite and nothingness blend together in a space of possibility and limitation — an openness that both invites and paralyzes, like the inhospitable freedom of the desert after slavery for the Jewish people during the time of Moses. Clusters of words and ideas become important not so much because of a linear argument, but because of their tendency to recur in various guises. The book and the word themselves are part of the fundamental questioning, and related to them are notions of the infinite, in that interpretation and questioning can continue perpetually, resulting in an unending text. The infinite is in turn suggested in a variety of ways: as the desert, the blank page, God, and death. Underlying all these elements is an undercurrent of the unspeakable — that which is beyond language or impossible to express in language.

## Ink on a Blank White Page

Within this loose and blurry framework, Jabès considers the written word and the page it alters alongside other marks on blank spaces, such as footprints on an expanse of desert sand. The mark requires the surrounding blankness in order to be legible, and yet destroys the blankness by its presence. Jabès extends this visual metaphor into an auditory one, considering the paradox of sound and silence: "La parole divine est tue aus-

5 Ibid., 18.
— What is going on behind this door?
— A book is shedding its leaves.
— What is the story of the book?
— Becoming aware of a scream. (Jabès, *The Book of Questions,* 16)

sitôt prononcé. C'est à ses anneaux sonores, qui sont nos paroles inspirées, que nous nous accrochons. L'absence d'une parole divine la crée. Au commencement de la parole, il y a l'emphase."[6] Speech and silence: for Jabès, they cannot be separated. Jabès urges us through this writing to consider the tensions and paradoxes themselves — not only in what they might represent, but in the mere fact of their being, and in the incompleteness of communication and comprehension that they suggest. Jabès's work uses an interrogative and often self-contradictory approach that simultaneously elicits and resists interpretation. One way the unspeakable takes shape is in the formulation of unanswered questions. Where responses would be inadequate or impossible, Jabès provides none, focusing instead on the enigmatic importance of the question. For instance, consider these lines: "Si la mer n'avait pas de sel ni d'écume, elle serait la mer grise de la mort au milieu du soleil coupé de ses racines […]. Mais les fruits. Que deviendraient les fruits? Mais les hommes. Que deviendraient les hommes?"[7] Or, these words, spoken by a character named Tima who appears only in these lines, and with no other context: "Le silence est dans la pierre. Nos douleurs se pétrifieront losque nos gestes n'auront plus de sens. Mais nos larmes, mes frères, qui les assumera?"[8] Similarly, oblique and allusive connections ("Signes et rides sont questions et réponsees d'une même encre"[9]) or seemingly contradictory statements ("'Tu', c'est quelquefois 'Je'. Je dis 'Je' et je ne suis

6 Ibid., 97. "The divine utterance is silenced as soon as it is pronounced. But we cling to its resonant rings, our inspired words. Eloquence is created by the absence of a divine word. It is at the beginning of speech" (Jabès, *Book of Questions,* 85).

7 Ibid., 35. "If the sea had neither salt nor foam, it would be a grey sea of death in the sun cut off from its roots […]. But the fruit. What would become of the fruit? But man. What would become of man?" (Jabès, *The Book of Questions,* 30).

8 Ibid., 102. "Silence lives in the stone. Our pains will petrify when our gestures no longer make sense. But our tears, brother, who will take them on himself?" (Jabès, *Book of Questions,* 91).

9 Ibid., 34. "Signs and wrinkles are questions and answers of the same ink" (Jabès, *Book of Questions,* 91).

pas 'Je'. 'Je' c'est toi et tu vas mourir. Tu es vidé"[10]) also serve to open spaces for that which is not said. These stylistic elements are set within a large amount of white space on the page as well, which slows the pace of reading and creates a sense of silence among the printed words, much like in Roubaud.

These elements also help flesh out the idea of significant absence, meaningful silence. One complex set of contradictory ideas that Jabès coaxes into harmonious relationship centers on the idea of blankness, both literal and figurative, and its possibilities of imprisonment and liberation. Blankness takes on a variety of forms in Jabès's work. As a writer, the most daunting blankness may be that of a blank page threatening failure; as a Jew, it may be the barrenness of the desert and the lingering fear of wandering and exile. Both appear prominently in the book not only as menaces, but also as unlikely prisons. Pure blankness can be more confining than a brick-and-mortar prison, as it undermines the human need for limits and boundaries; when none exist, limitless possibility can have a paralyzing effect. As Jabès asks, how can a person conquer the nothingness of the desert? There is nothing to destroy: "vivre c'est affirmer ses limites […]. Que peut-on contre un mur sinon l'abattre? Que peut-on contre les barreaux sinon les scier? Mais contre un mur qui est le sable? Mais contre des barreaux qui sont notre ombre sur le sable?"[11] Furthermore, the desert's vastness makes any progress irrelevant, as none is visibly apparent. Freedom, instead, is to be found in the confines of the familiar, as "nous ne sommes vraiment libres qu'entre nos quatre murs."[12] To combat the captivity of open space, Jabès suggests that humanity seeks

10 Ibid., 38. "'You' means, sometimes, 'I'. I say 'I', and I am not 'I'. 'I' means you and you are going to die. You are drained" (Jabès, *The Book of Questions,* 32).

11 Ibid., 61. "living means acknowledging one's limits […]. What can you do against a wall? You tear it down. What can you do against bars? You file them. But a wall of sand? Bars which are our shadows on sand?" (Jabès, *Book of Questions,* 56).

12 Ibid., 83. "for only within our four walls are we really free" (Jabès, *Book of Questions,* 74).

refuge in creating borders, to the point that establishing limits becomes synonymous with life: "Élever des murs, n'est-ce pas vivre?"[13] The human desire to establish a defined space of home and comfort is strong, and Jabès recognizes the legitimacy of the quest to ease the anxiety of too few limits. "Nos poitrines sont nos geôles, écrivait Reb Veda. Nos côtes sont les barreaux qui nous empêchent d'étouffer. Et tu vivras dans ta geôle, mon frère, pour ton salut; car l'élu est le prisonnier de la parole transmise de Dieu."[14] The open desert is too vast; we need some kind of structure to experience real freedom, whether the four walls of a home, the protection of a ribcage, or the structure of a religious creed.

Still, despite their paradoxical potential for creating a sense of confinement through their very openness, the infinite possibilities of the blank page and of the uncharted desert can in many ways be emancipatory, allowing the writer and the wanderer to choose their own paths. The blankness is simultaneously freeing and confining. Jabès places great value on the process of searching that such an environment enables. Faced with a blank page, the writer must ask, "Où est le chemin? Le chemin est toujours à trouver. Une feuille blanche est remplie de chemins."[15] The paths are all the infinite possibilities a writer might choose as they search for just the right way to tell their story. The desert forces similar searching, even to a greater degree, for one's path is always at risk of erasure, as happens to this unnamed writer (possibly but not definitively Yukel): "Il s'était retrouvé, à midi, face à l'infini, à la page blanche. Toute trace de pas, la piste avaient disparu. Ensevelies."[16] With all of one's footsteps

13 Ibid., 108. "To build walls, is that not living?" (Jabès, *Book of Questions,* 96).

14 Ibid., 95. "'Our breast is a jail,' wrote Reb Veda. 'Our ribs are the bars that keep us from suffocating. You will live in your jail, brother, for your salvation. The elect is a prisoner of the transmitted word of God'" (Jabès, *Book of Questions,* 84).

15 Ibid., 59. "Where is the path? It must each time be discovered anew. A blank sheet is full of paths" (Jabès, *Book of Questions,* 54).

16 Ibid., 60. "At noon, he found himself facing the infinite, the blank page. All tracks, footprints, paths were gone. Buried" (Jabès, *Book of Questions,* 55).

washed away in the heat of the noon sun, the risk inherent in this particular blankness is immediate and physical. Still, Jabès does not suggest a more prudent path. As Jabès may never write a definitive answer to any of the questions he poses — about the nature of silence and the scream, about the connection between identity and trauma, about the reason for unspeakable horror such as the Holocaust — still the gesture of circling around those questions and ideas is one of meaning and value. But by moving toward blankness and infinite potential, Jabès creates a space of questioning, which he prioritizes over knowledge.

The blankness matters, but so too does the mark that disrupts it. Marks on blank space — say, footsteps on desert sand, or ripples in a still pool — echo writing and echo wounds. They create identity and make meaning possible. As translator and theorist Rosemarie Waldrop describes it, this book is first and foremost, "a book about the word. Between scream and silence. The word through which we become human. Other. The word which is our mirror and our wound."[17] What we see, what marks us, what makes us who we are. Unspeakable, and yet impossible to avoid or ignore. This visceral figuration of the wound and the unsayable is rendered most concretely through the scream that the character Sarah utters. This scream is a depiction of a nonlinguistic but insistent and intimate emotional response to trauma that is not bound up in verbal language. By allowing space for that which cannot be defined by words, Jabès creates room for indeterminacy that retains meaningfulness, while not eliminating the fundamental uncertainty at the root of his project. Throughout *Le livre des questions*, there is a tension between silence and expression. Not any kind of expression, but a scream. The question that Jabès probes is, what exists in the space between these two poles? Or are they, in fact, even in opposition with each other? Perhaps they are rather so closely associated as to be inseparable. Jabès does not flee from paradox; on the contrary, he elevates it to a position of prominence

17 Rosmarie Waldrop, *Lavish Absence: Recalling and Rereading Edmond Jabès* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 2.

with unnerving frequency. By focusing his attention on questioning, paradox, and ambiguity, Jabès creates an environment that nurtures uncertainty and allows for pain as an integral part of life.

## Meaningful Contradiction

One of the salient traits of *Le livre des questions* is the manner in which Jabès brings together seemingly contradictory images in order to encourage the reader to reconsider expectations. The movement is not unlike that of metaphor, but the fashion in which Jabès carries it out leaves far more room for ambiguity and shifting references than is typically found in metaphor. Waldrop refers to this as "the *gesture* of analogy rather than one specific analogy."[18] By juxtaposing opposing ideas in ways that reduce their antagonism, Jabès creates an opening for the reader to recognize the complementary workings of forces that ordinarily seem antithetical. He gives a sense of inevitability of the existence of opposing elements, and thereby encourages the reader to accept the unsettling possibility of allowing both to exist without having to decide between them. Jabès explicitly notes the contradictions that are common in the book. He remarks that he does not deliberately contradict himself, but rather finds it natural to do so, partly because of the contradictions present in the words of God according to Jewish tradition. Indeed, the contradictory nature of Jabès's writing becomes a main thread, which he recognizes: "Vous me prêtez une intention: celle d'être contradictoire. Je ne suis pas volontairement contradictoire, je le suis naturellement. […] S'il y a une cohérence dans mes livres elle n'est due qu'à la continuité de mes contradictions."[19]

18 Ibid., 86.

19 Edmond Jabès, *Du désert au livre* (Pessac: Opales, 2003), 152. "You are crediting me with intention: the intention of being contradictory. I am not voluntarily contradictory, but naturally so. All in all, I accept my contradictions, otherwise my books would seem to me to partake of the lie, the artificial. If there is a coherence in my books, it is due only to the continuity of my contradictions" (Edmond Jabès, *From the Desert to the*

One such contradiction is within the life cycle. Jabès makes it clear that there is simply no way of getting around the fact that life includes death. By connecting the life cycle to the circular path of the hands of a clock, he even undoes the primacy of one over the other, with each instead constantly moving toward the other's reign. He paints it almost as a love relationship: "J'ai besoin de toi, comme la vie a besoin de la mort pour renaître, et la mort, de la vie pour mourir."[20] By creating a paradigm in which contrary ideas are complementary facets of like, rather than opposing, forces, Jabès destabilizes the reader's assumptions and creates an opening for a variety of such tensions to coexist. By rooting this paradigm in the wound, he asserts that trauma must never be far from the reader's mind. Even before the very first volume fully begins ("Au seuil du livre," or "at the threshold of the book," as Jabès puts it), the notion of a fundamental wound is introduced: "Marque d'un signet rouge la première page du livre," says the fictional rabbi Reb Alcé, "car la blessure est invisible à son commencement."[21] Trauma is thus immediately linked to storytelling, invisibly present from the beginning of the process — even a force that contributes to its creation. Indeed, the narrator later envisions the wound as a sort of well, providing inspiration for the story.[22] Trauma is also present throughout the entirety of the work, as narrative is described as having the power to give voice to pain and to increase awareness of trauma; the story is described as "la prise de conscience d'un cri."[23] The narrative is not about events or characters, but rather about becoming aware of the scream underlying the events. On another level, writing itself is also

*Book: Dialogues with Marcel Cohen,* trans. Pierre Joris [Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1990], 110).

20 Jabès, *Le livre des questions,* 152. "I need you as life needs death in order to be reborn, and as death needs life in order to die" (Jabès, *Book of Questions,* 134).

21 Ibid., 15. "Mark the first page of the book with a red marker. For, in the beginning, the wound is invisible" (Jabès, *Book of Questions,* 13).

22 Ibid., 65.

23 Ibid., 18. "Becoming aware of the scream" (Jabès, *Book of Questions,* 16).

deeply linked with trauma — so much so that they seem at times to be interchangeable, as if they were two sides of one coin: "Et c'est moi qui pense, qui parle pour toi, qui cherche et qui cadence; / car je suis écriture / et toi blessure."[24] If writing is the means used to become aware of trauma, to process it for oneself and to bring it to light for others, to be its spokesperson after having been inspired by it to tell its story, then writing will constantly be both a way of processing pain and a renewal of the experience of that pain.

Bringing together opposing ideas or images is a delicate balancing act, according to Jabès. For this reason, he writes of the desire to "rétablir, à chaque épreuve, l'équilibre originel entre la vie et la mort."[25] One difficulty in maintaining this equilibrium, though, is that the distinctions between life and death are not always as clear as one might expect. Writing is partly at fault for the blurring of lines: Jabès speaks of using writing to soften the edges between normally distinct elements. He writes, "J'ai aboli, dans mes livres, les frontières de la vie et de la mort."[26] Perhaps writing achieves this feat by blurring the boundaries between past and present, or between reality and imagination. At many points in Jabès's writing it is difficult for the reader to be certain about who the narrator is (the perspective often seems to be that of Jabès himself, and even Yukel's narrative voice shifts between Yukel as character and Yukel as writer). Determining the dividing line between fact and fiction, therefore, is not easy, nor is it easy to be sure about the chronology of events or whether such events even occur. An example of this is Yukel's implied suicide. We read of it only in sidelong glints, uncertain whisperings that leave us wondering: "([…] 'Je', c'est toi. Tu vas mourir et je serai seul.) Tu marches vers la mort qui t'a épargné jusqu'ici afin que

24 Ibid., 38. "And I think, I speak for you. I choose and cadence. / For I am writing / and you are the wound" (Jabès, *Book of Questions,* 33).

25 Ibid., 62. "to recover, after each blow, the original balance of life and death" (Jabès, *Book of Questions,* 56).

26 Ibid., 65. "I have erased, in my books, the borderline of life and death" (Jabès, *Book of Questions,* 58).

tu ailles, de ton plein gré, vers elle."[27] Elements of a text such as narrative voice and plot are frequently some of the clearest to decipher, so by making them murkier in *Le livre des questions,* Jabès suggests that even the most fundamental components must be called into question.

## The Space of the Book

While all the contradictions that Jabès presents may seem impossible to circumscribe in any kind of overarching theory, he suggests that there is one place that can contain them all: the book. Jabès depicts the book as being all-encompassing, containing the infinite within itself, much like Stéphane Mallarmé's or Jorge Luis Borges's concepts of the total Book. Mallarmé endeavored to create a book that would encompass all books, a total and totalizing artwork. He worked on this project for decades, but it wasn't published until after his death.[28] Where Mallarmé's idea of the Book is one of totality and closure, however, Jabès's is open and unending. In *Questioning Edmond Jabès,* Warren Motte notes: "[Jabès] suggests that Mallarmé's Book was necessarily closed, in that it synthesized all books, all readings, into one, allowing neither prolongation nor interpretation."[29] Instead of this closed version of the complete Book, Jabès focuses on a Book that continually opens to greater and greater degrees, encouraging unending interpretation, much like the Talmud. And although Jabès explicitly distanced himself from the apparent similarities with Borges's writing,[30] the similarities nonetheless strike me as significant. While Jabès may be resistant to the possibility of a physically infinite book, as Borges depicts in "The Library of Babel," the idea of a figuratively infinite book that

27 Ibid., 38. "([…] 'I' means you. You are going to die. And I will be alone.) You are walking toward death. It has spared you till now, so that you should go towards it of your own accord" (Jabès, *Book of Questions,* 33).

28 Jacques Scherer, *Le livre de Mallarmé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957).

29 Warren F. Motte, *Questioning Edmond Jabès* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 101.

30 See Waldrop, *Lavish Absence,* 133.

expands through interpretation is present in other Borges stories as well, such as "The Garden of Forking Paths" and "Death and the Compass."[31] Moreover, the surface of the infinite book in "The Library of Babel" is similar to the infinite notepad or Riemann surface that Maurice Blanchot uses to illustrate his essay on Jabès's work, "Interruptions."[32] Blanchot describes a Riemann surface as a kind of idealized, infinite space in which language can occur concurrently and in an unlimited way, never using up the pages of the notepad. He uses this image of the infinite to describe not only language, but the pause between speakers in a dialogue — the silence as well as the utterance, as is so important throughout *Le livre des questions.*

Motte also notes Blanchot's influence on Jabès in the idea of the Book as always in the process of becoming or always to come, as in Blanchot's title *Le Livre à venir,* which also appears in Jabès's Yaël, the fourth volume of *Le livre des questions.*[33] The Book for Jabès thus incorporates a Messianic quality of expectation for what has not yet arrived — a sense of possibility and uncertainty, like the blank page where the writer must search for the right path.

The infinite nature of the Book allows it to become the site of all the contradictions that Jabès explores. The book itself can be understood as a microcosm of the relationship between the tension of the blank page and that of the wound or mark. The silence before speech, and the blank page before the writer begins to work, is the canvas for the vocable (as Jabès so often refers to the word) that has not yet come into existence. Each book contains all of its own potential, even from before it is written, creating a paradox of origins. "— Où se situe

31 Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings,* eds. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1962).

32 Maurice Blanchot, "L'Interruption (comme sur une surface de Reimann)," in *L'entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 106–12, and Maurice Blanchot, "Interruption as on a Reimann Surface," in *The Infinite Conversation,* trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 75–79.

33 Motte, *Questioning Edmond Jabès,* 102. See Blanchot, *L'entretien infini.*

le livre? — Dans le livre."[34] No other response is possible. Even God's existence is understood as being contained by the book: "Si Dieu est, c'est parce qu'Il est dans le livre."[35] Jabès frequently references Moses's encounter with God as evidence of the primacy of the word in Jewish theology. While Moses was able to have a direct encounter with God, no other being has done the same. The result of the conversation was the presentation of the Ten Commandments, subsequently broken, indicating not only that God must be approached through the word, but that that word consists of fragments. As Jacques Derrida interprets, "La rupture des Tables dit d'abord la rupture en Dieu comme origine de l'histoire."[36] The book and written words are also likened to the totality of Jewish existence, both individually and collectively: "Ainsi le pays des Juifs est à la taille de leur univers, car il est un livre. Chaque Juif habite dans un mot personnalisé qui lui permet d'entrer dans tous les mots écrits."[37] The emphasis on the textual study of the Jewish holy texts and the mystery promised by the word in the tradition of Kabbalah: each of these emphasizes the importance of the text as a site of meaning originating with God's communication to his people through the tablets. Still, even words can evince absence, Jabès suggests. "Toutes les lettres forment l'absence," he asserts, again throwing off the reader's equilibrium by a counterintuitive association.[38] While such a statement seems contradictory, perhaps one way of understanding it is through writing's destructive potential.

34 Jabès, *Le livre des questions,* 19. "Where is the book set? In the book" (Jabès, *Book of Questions,* 16–17).

35 Ibid., 36. "If God is, it is because He is in the book" (Jabès, *Book of Questions,* 31).

36 Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la difference* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 103. "The rupture of the Tables articulates, first of all, a rupture within God as the origin of history" (Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference,* trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978], 67).

37 Jabès, *Le livre des questions,* 113. "So the country of the Jews is on the scale of their world, because it is a book. Every Jew lives within a personified word which allows him to enter into all written words" (Jabès, *Book of Questions,* 100).

38 Ibid., 51. "All letters give form to absence" (Jabès, *Book of Questions,* 47).

When Yukel sees antisemitic slurs written on the walls, everything else disappears for him — even though the words may be unnoticeable to other passersby.

Considering that Jabès's project for the book is so vast and enigmatic, with the seven volumes released over a course of a decade and each unfurling more questions and ambiguities, it is fitting that the volumes of *Le livre des questions* are not marked with any indication of genre. In *Du désert au livre,* Jabès speaks of his impatience with the novel as a genre (and, more specifically, with the novelist): "Ce qui me gêne, c'est sa prétention à faire de l'espace du livre *l'espace* de l'histoire qu'il conte; du sujet de son roman le sujet du livre. / J'ai l'impression qu'il y a là comme un assassinat."[39] The book, then, may tell a story, but it is not limited to the story it tells; it may contain characters, but the characters do not define it. The book is something altogether different from the novel, but Jabès does not say exactly what it is. Instead, the lack of definition is the essential component to understanding the genre of his work.

* * *

Jabès's book is ultimately a site of deep paradoxes, the most provocative of which may be that of silence and the scream. The space of expression seems to be situated between these opposed, yet similarly non-linguistic, reactions. The scream of Sarah functions as one unstoppable response to the horror of the Holocaust, while silence functions as an equally powerful force. Writing incorporates elements of both — the expression and the silence, the ink marks as well as the blank page — while not fully being either, which would seem to indicate that it occupies a space between the two of them. Jabès incorporates both silence and scream in a way that suggests that they do not oppose each

39 Jabès, *Du désert au livre,* 141. "What makes me uneasy is his pretense of making the space of the book *the space* of the story he tells — making the subject of his novel the subject of the book. / To me this feels like a sort of assassination" (Jabès, *From the Desert to the Book,* 101).

other as merely different volume levels at opposite ends of the auditory spectrum. Rather, they share a profound similarity due to the tendency of people to resort to one or the other in situations of extreme duress. Since both silence and the scream are nonlinguistic, writing cannot fully encompass either one. And yet, by creating a space in which both scream and silence can be understood, it becomes something of a point of intersection between them. Such a point may be both infinite and infinitesimal.

CONCLUSION

# Listening to the Silences

*We must listen to the silences, that which is not written.*

— Clelia O. Rodríguez[1]

Writers are constantly exploring the limits of what language can do. Strong emotion resists language: shock leaves us "speechless," wonder renders us "dumbstruck." Working with language as a medium, then, writers bend that medium, push its limits, test its boundaries, finding the ways they can use language to articulate something impossible — silence. The most effective writers can draw attention to this tension between language and the ineffable obliquely, embodying silence in a character, in a structure, in the use of images to say what words cannot. When this happens, a rupture in the ordinary mode of language jars the reader into a space of recognition, into not only noticing that such silence exists but also directly experiencing its effects. As readers, we see the limits of language, what it cannot do, at the same time that we see it do something we may never have expected.

Each of the writers in this book engages in this interplay. Yet after engaging with their work — through the pages above,

1 Clelia O. Rodríguez, *Decolonizing Academia: Poverty, Oppression and Pain* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2018), 33.

through the years that precede this book's emergence — I end my meditation with more questions than answers. I am filled with curiosity about silence, absence, things left unsaid. I continue to wonder about the plurality of these silences: something unspoken because it is unknown, or because it is too traumatic to face, or because it is taken as a given. Absent, impossible, or omnipresent. The unspoken may be unspeakable, impossible to articulate — whether because of complexity, trauma, or uncertainty. The writers of each of the works I have explored in the preceding pages use language and also its absence or interruption to explore the contours of loss, mourning, and trauma. And yet it is not only the matter of the writer, the person expressing the unsayable, that is in play. The questions of silence, of invisibility, are subjective and require an interlocutor. What is invisible depends on who is looking, how they are seeing. A sound can be heard only by someone within a given range or making use of a particular technology, and even then, not always. There is a question of perspective implicit in the matter of silence or invisibility. Who am I to say that something is invisible? It may be invisible *to me,* silent *to me,* but perfectly plain to others. This tension is especially present in Roubaud's work, where the photographs to which he refers are not presented to the reader in the original publication. To me, to the reader, the photographs are missing. To Roubaud, they are a clear and obvious referent. This sparks the question: Who determines what is missing? Missing for whom, and in what context?

Each of these works calls the reader to pay attention — not only to what is there, but also to what is missing, and to the structure that contains both. It is not only the text or the content that matters. Any silence or absence is inextricably linked to that structure as well, because without it, the content would have no meaning. The omission of images of Black joy in the early 20th-century photographs that Hartman investigates upholds a structure of white supremacy. The excluded photographs by Alix Cléo Roubaud in *Quelque chose noir* make the allusive, oblique, evocative writing more poignant. The silent spaces in conversation create the possibility of communication

and meaning. In each of these instances, the thing that is not said makes the surrounding structures possible.

Silence is one form of interruption. Language itself can be another. My epigraph above is from Clelia O. Rodríguez's book *Decolonizing Academia,* the cover of which features a broken pencil. The pencil is sharpened, ready to write, and yet the brokenness is what is immediately noticeable. It is a fitting image. Within the pages of the book, Rodríguez breaks the expected structure of the scholarly monograph and reveals how deeply oppressive such structures can be. By interrupting the expected reading process, Rodríguez calls us to read differently — to notice not only what is on the page, but also the unspoken expectations that we as readers may have had when encountering that page. Rodríguez plays with genre and form. The book includes fictitious letters, contracts, poetry, bibliography, definitions, translations, phonetic transcriptions, visual play with words. Photographs, censored text. Modes that resist description.

What happens when we put this interruption at the center? Suddenly, we focus on the pause between words, the air we breathe, the thing we no longer notice. The thrumming rhythm that determines how we move through a world. The ways we try to shape ourselves around that silent thing. The fact that this unspoken thing forces some to contort themselves, erase themselves, disguise themselves in order to fit.

Silence can be peaceful; it can also be violent. It is inaudible, unspeakable, invisible. It can aid in understanding or block it. But so often, we barely register its presence. The first task is to notice it.

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