Transparent Sketches: A Field Journal of Silence

Annabel McSpadden
Transparent Sketches: A Field Journal of Silence
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by

Annabel Ashley McSpadden

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Thesis Director, Chelsey Johnson

Examination Chair, Jennifer Putzi

Suzanne Raitt

Daniel Cristol

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DEDICATION

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“I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.”

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*¹
looseness

I got into the silence-self-transcendence game for the humility at the core of both, but it’s dangerous. I forget what I’m searching for and why I started.

Silence and self-transcendence infuriate me. Their literature is too vague, too intentionally. We write mutability into their definitions; we navigate them by permeable boundaries and gerrymander those boundaries to fit academic agendas.

When someone refers to silence, they could mean complete quiet. They could also mean natural soundscapes, white noise machines, sometimes chanting. We observe inner silence and outer, and we toss them into the same definitional bin. The lexicon of transcendence is the same. Self-transcendence means dissolving the barrier between individual and world. By extension, it’s ego death, charity work, and tripping on psilocybin.

In working with such vague concepts, I’ve had to file a mental drawer of manila folders to keep myself straight. I look for direct clues to the relationship between the two: the power of silence in inducing self-transcendent states (STS). How do silent practices encourage us to dwell less on our own selfhood? After all, STS are ways of being in which the individual feels less discrete, more linked. There’s a kinship to be sensed, a community with a greater whole. Humility – that’s what I was searching for.

When I took a course on STS in Fall 2016, day one dropped my shoulders. I had hoped for a route to humble living charted clearly in the syllabus. Instead, I learned immediately that eating shrooms can be considered as transcendent as meditating for an
hour. There’s no metric; you don’t grow three inches wiser after reading Ram Dass. Occasionally I got cynical and dismissed our class as a descent into I-see-your-trip-to-Amsterdam-and-raise-you-my-tab-of-acid-at-a-Sigma-Chi-mixer.

But really I’m just as bad. I quote stats from daytime TV and draw conclusions from glossy meditation apps. The God of Reason throws lightning bolts at my blog entries and I shake my fist because p<.05 is an uninspiring mantra. I guess you need something to come back to if you want reproducibility, headway, and/or self-respect.

All this is to say that when I study and pursue STS, I try to trace each state back to the checkpoint I’ve established: does this condition inspire humility? Inspire transcendence? In some ways, Bring Your Own Definition is a luxury. I can wrangle a trip to the gas station into my spiritual categories. But a wrangled project, even if it feels like questing at the time, is just an exercise in deceit. BYOD makes it easy to obscure what I’m looking for. I can think I’m entering an inspired headspace when really I’m just keyed up on caffeine. It’s been a careful balance, maintaining my own truth in definitional looseness.

awe

In my STS course we studied awe as one of the transcendent states in question. Psychologists generally agree on what awe entails; it comes from experiencing something that challenges the schema into which you categorize the world.¹ This something is often nature, usually panoramic – a sprawling vista, a canyon.² You stand at the foot of El Capitan and feel smaller than you did on the interstate to California. You remember yourself as one of many people on one of many space rocks.³ A few studies trace awe
back to prosociality or selfless altruism. When research participants looked up at a copse of 200-foot-tall eucalyptus trees for one minute, they scored higher on helpfulness measures than participants who spent the same amount of time looking up at a tall building. There’s power in the natural and in its sounds too.

I coined the term Green Silence to describe any practice in which I don’t speak but I’m surrounded by natural sounds: wind in trees, birdsong, flowing streams. Even this specificity glosses over other distinctions to be made, though. What if I don’t speak but I tramp loudly through the forest? I once conducted a silence walk in pathless woods at that burnt-orange junction between fall and winter. The leaves underfoot crunched so deafeningly I couldn’t hear the crickets.

And within this gaping Green Silence category, where does a bicyclist fall? What if I step quietly on a leafless forest floor, say nothing, and listen to birds for an hour, when suddenly a mountain biker barrels through the trees? Has my silence rebranded from Green to some other anthropocentric category? And when does all this specificity ruin my project?

We can link awe to mystical experiences in their common religiosity. Until the 1960s and ‘70s, pointing to mystical experience was a sacred I-know-it-when-I-see-it. Now, though, we have some basic characteristics to work with. For instance, psychologists used to assume a square-rectangle situation between religiosity and the mystical – all mystical experience is religious, not all religious experience is mystical – but now we recognize totally secular or agnostic varieties of mysticism. Apple-orange situation? apple-rectangle?
Religious awe still plays a part in pointing to mystical experience, even though it’s not a criterion anymore. When those participants looked up at the eucalyptuses, they may have ranked on the M Scale, tentatively useful in spotting the mystical.\textsuperscript{6} Besides awe, other rankable elements include positive affect, timelessness or spacelessness, and ineffability. But what units rank ineffability?

People who have mystical experiences often struggle to describe them. We’ve all heard from someone who Just Can’t Explain Their Hike In Scotland. But the pattern accumulates a substantial cargo of anecdotal support. Take Sara Maitland in \textit{Book of Silence}:

\begin{quote}
The self/other...boundary becomes unclear. It is usually the reassertion of the ego that brings this state to an end and with its closure there is an enormous sense of loss, almost a kind of mourning. This is, of course, a central and classic aspect of mystical experience and can be pursued through the writings of that tradition.\textsuperscript{7}
\end{quote}

Jason Blum, a Religious Studies scholar, writes that viewing [ineffability claims] as obscurantist devices functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy.\textsuperscript{8} Maybe ineffability’s link to mysticism is anecdotal so far, but there’s something here and it’s worth finding.

\section*{silence}

On a functional level, we need to set our own boundaries, our definitions for the silences that bring us those states of awareness we pursue. We need to find what conditions keep us from losing our hold on whatever wisdom we try to pull ourselves toward. I interviewed a Benedictine nun at a monastery in Bristow, Virginia. When I asked her how she has defined silence through the decades of her practice, she said:
I believe silence is not something you can make. It’s a stance, an attitude – it’s not always the absence of noise. It’s the condition I need to be aware of God. It’s the condition in which I can listen.9

She told me about riding her bike through her hometown, nestled in the quiet farmland of Northwest Germany, and how as a five-year-old pedaling along in that silence she felt a divine closeness, a presence. If God created all of that, then I’m riding my bike inside of God.

She told me about her work at a Native American reservation in the Southwestern U.S., how she stood on desert cliffs and looked out into the scoop and rise of a canyon. It was awe inspiring, she said. That kind of experience can only come out of silence.

For my final project in my STS class, I took a weeklong vow of silence and conducted nightly sound walks in the woods near my house. I didn’t want to study silence as something you only get if you’re privileged enough to follow your yoga instructor upstate. I wanted to know how to really hear people, how to turn myself down all the way and axe off my ego as much as possible. How to glimpse those spiritual moments of self-transcendence. I wanted to understand the infinite divisions of the sonic world.

In the evenings I brought along a small field recorder and explored the trails around a lake, taking care to keep my steps quiet. It became such a sacred thing, this progression of quiet day into quiet night. I ended up liking the unceremonious nature of my week of silence, not because I drew attention to myself – think note-passing at a college party – but because I could listen to the world and to my friends as well.

The silence I observed amplifies the noises around me and reminds me of everything I miss. By listening, even inadvertently, to the minutiae in my surroundings, I
recognize that I am simply another small particle making vibrations in the world. I am grateful for these chances to turn down my own vibrations and remember all of the ones I casually eclipse.

The brain habituates itself to the signals it receives. If we learn a collection of stimuli as constant or unimportant, we eliminate them from our conscious perception. When was the last time you heard your sock sliding up your foot? I can’t cast a value judgment on my brain’s scrapbooking hobby. It’s an effective evolutionary tool. I can, however, deliberately overturn the pattern and attempt to learn something from this reversal. If I let it, the world reminds me of the percussive magnificence, the rhythmic ecology I populate. More than piano music, I listen to the keys sliding non-tonally against each other on their way down. I hear the hundred padded thuds of their hammers and the creaking of the pianist’s bench.

Walking around during my final project, I felt myself wrapped in a quiet and protective cocoon. I had wondered for so long how to listen, and suddenly I felt like an invisible teacher pulled me along. I could hear the voices of people more clearly, the voices of the breeze, the messages played out in conversations and skittering orange leaves. Everything is so much easier to hear when I do not speak. By hearing this Everything, I realize how trivial my words would have been and how much filler I inject into an already full ecosystem. Emerson reveled in the transcendence he found in undisturbed nature: ...All mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all.\(^{10}\) I have desired this Becoming, to slough off the layers of opaqueness that trap my eyes in and in and in on the self. Since I first read *Nature* as a sixteen-year-
old, I have wanted very badly the transparent eyeball state. That week felt like my closest encounter with it.

I tried to remember my definition and the relationship I pursued so unscientifically: that overlap, however causal, of STS and silent practice. I worried that I’d come across as seeking attention in a roundabout way – that my frantic How are you’s flashed from a small notebook seemed oriented back toward myself. Gregg Blanton, a family therapist, writes, *Silence carries with it the belief that conversation does not always require language. Instead, wordless communication can be a powerful means for accessing the transcendent dimension. A transcendent self…emerges in silence, when the storying-self is quieted.*

What would I have said if I could have spoken, and would it have been worth saying? Usually I’d want to leave a mark on circumstances of finality. Final class discussions, final Friday night jam sessions, all of which occurred during my project. Instead, I found out what happens when I do not leave marks out of obligation. I like the marks other people make, the ones I wouldn’t have seen if I were sharpening my pencil.

After each Final thing, I left quietly – waved at some, hugged some. And then I walked home, and heard early December wind, and saw new winter light.

**stories**

We construct the narrative self from the stories we tell, so that when we refuse to tell stories, we force our existence onto a new plane.* Existence on the silent plane feels characterized by deconstruction. Deconstructing the self into transient notions and
observations, deconstructing the once solid mass of consciousness I walked around within, existing in a mosaic instead of a bottle, seeing through the cracks.

Blanton asks, *Is there a way of knowing that does not require language? If we restrict our knowledge to language, then we might miss out on the wisdom that can be found in silence.*

I used to want to write something seminal and unprecedented on silence, and the more I read the more I realized I am doomed to unoriginality. We’ve mined the quiet since we’ve spoken, and I am one silence practitioner of millions.

But the more searches we canonize, the more sacred we render this earthly place.

Looking back, my STS classmates and I did our best, working from ideas about forgetting ourselves as individuals and perceiving the world outside the lenses of our own experience. Everything after came so easily, and I can’t help but feel a cosmic guidance pulling the project along. I don’t assume my work is supposed to be here in some grand scheme, but I feel too deep a gratitude for it to attribute earthbound muses, much less myself. Just another sound to thank, and to listen for.
At the guesthouse of a small monastery in Bristow, Virginia, two rocking chairs faced a wide lawn. I remember a wind chime with black bells and a wooden clapper. I remember listening to it for hours at a time, seated beside a woman with whom I’d been on one date before we traveled together to a silence retreat.

Two oak trees stood in earshot. I remember thinking about the nature of wind-in-leaves sound, how the larger the tree, the more its rustling wanders into the oceanic. I remember trying to estimate how many oak leaves rustled in tree nearest my rocking chair.

I remember wondering what fragment of an oak leaf I’d have to be to make that nearest tree a representation of all the people in the world. I studied a leaf and tried to find clear demarcations to use as units for people. One person per vein? Per millimeter of vein? There, I thought, I am the junction of the second branching vein with that central line running stem to tip. And then I thought, I shouldn’t choose the easiest identifiable spot for myself – I should have anonymity in this leaf model. So I am a random millimeter somewhere in the middleish of the second branching vein coming off that central line running stem to tip.

I remember wondering if even the green leaves had begun to dry out. I’d traveled to the guesthouse in the middle of October; for Virginia, that’s before peak leaf-turn. That’s one-thirtieth of trees is orange, two yellow, the rest still green. But do the green ones start to dry before they change color, and does the sound of their leaves grow louder as they do?
I had Googled Virginia silence retreats for hours, white gurus pretending the remote farmland on which they spread their mats would not host my death by grain sickle. I decided the only way to protect myself from stabbing or cult induction was to create my own trip. Besides, all the others sounded like they involved too much belly breathing. I drove a few of my friends – Dara, Hannah, Ben – from school to the monastery of the Benedictine Sisters of Virginia at the start of Fall Break. Hannah had agreed to come before we matched on Tinder and each realized the other was queer. I booked the guesthouse myself and talked to the nuns on the phone.

The cabin sat on one hundred and twelve acres along with the main monastery, a small school, a cemetery, forests run through with streams and trails, and a sort of contemplation campus. Hollowed out grain silos served as cells for echoing prayer, stained glass renovated into their plaster. Gold and slate-colored stones wound into a labyrinth next to a Forgiveness Garden and a Garden for Bereaved Parents of Northern Virginia.

Just the intentionality of everything. The selection of monarch-friendly plants, drought-resistant flowerbeds, native-to-Virginia, in-memoriam, deer-repelling flowerbeds. Beehives, compost piles, welcome signs in English, Spanish, and Arabic. Fourteen Stations of the Cross, Jesus in clay, their progression shaded by a cedar forest.

By October 2017 I’d passed my fair share of days in silence, and so I decided on a deeper variety. Deeper? One to push me farther toward whatever state of consciousness. Transcendence, humility. The peace we look for at these sorts of things. I went wordless for three days – no reading, writing, speaking, passing notes, singing, Netflix-watching, nothing. Once I couldn’t meditate because I remembered I hadn’t ordered my mother a
birthday gift, so I powered up my phone and sent her a tapestry via Amazon. I figured this fell under the fifth commandment and thus was appropriate in such a setting.

The prep for our trip chewed at my syntax-addicted pleasure centers, preemptive withdrawal wracking me from the outset. How would I subsist, silence-addled, solitary? My thoughts took to lingering on trees and slants of light, became less linear, less verbal, maybe. Less cogent in the sense that I lost whatever scaffolding of reason holds up notions into supportable things.

When we arrived one of the nuns gave us a tour, directing Ben and Dara to separate rooms and then pointing to a larger one with two beds. The girls will sleep in here, she said, and Hannah and I decidedly didn’t look at one another.

On our first afternoon after we one-two-three-go-ed our silence, I went for a run to explore the grounds, feeling naked with no phone, a single key knotted into my shoelaces. I shot for three miles and measured them with my fatigue. Then I showered and put on soft pants, a soft shirt, my big blue sweater. I brewed a cup of peppermint tea and walked with my shoes in my hands. A long stretch of empty road laddered with tree shadows led me past the Teaching Gardens and chapel and shrine to Saint Benedict, the Columbarium, the Place of Peace. Every day I wondered which part of this was the Place of Peace and wished that it referred to all of the grounds, longing for participation in the named tranquility. I lay in the center of the prayer labyrinth knowing I could disobey it on the way out. But I felt like stepping from the gray stones onto their gold boundaries would be leaving the couch in a sacred The Floor is Lava.
I remember taking very small steps even outside the labyrinth and wondering why. Something about me felt submissive, a fragment. Was this healthy? I let my sweater slip off my shoulders.

I wondered, am I succumbing to whatever chaste mythology comes with an all-woman monastery? Is this a spiritual meekness or an oppressed, societal one? I felt entangled in a prescriptive femininity I didn’t want, masquerading as a humility I very much did want, and I couldn’t separate them enough to flagellate the former. I turned it over in my closed mouth: chaste mythology chaste mythology chaste mythology.

That first night I slept for thirteen hours.

On the second night, other guests moved into our little cabin. There was an elderly nun, her daughter, and another older woman I never saw but heard commenting on Moonstruck through the bedroom door. Hannah and I sat in the kitchen as she waited on acorn squash to bake and I sketched her, running my pencil too frequently over a curl in her hair. The nun’s daughter joined us, asking Hannah what oven temperature she used. Hannah held up her fingers and the woman slid her casserole dish in with ours. Is it hard? she asked, and we nodded, eyes wide. It must be, especially for us women. I cracked up despite myself. I’m still navigating the middle space between relishing that automatic fellowship between women and furthering whatever self-defeating normativity comes out of it. Hannah didn’t laugh, I shouldn’t have laughed. I re-drew her eyelids.

Even company didn’t keep silence at bay. Dara named loneliness as his greatest challenge during our weekend. He expected the tight cabin would protect him from this, but the most we could give one another were pantomimed exchanges and communal dinners around 7:30. One afternoon I walked through the gardens with Dara, unable to
tell him that coral honeysuckle is my favorite flower. He kept pointing to it and I felt impotent.

One night we brought tea to the porch and Ben balanced a flashlight on a deck chair. We performed shadow puppet shows for each other, rehashing various versions of fingery-creature-gets-eaten. Then we lay on our backs and watched the sky, and Dara and I tried with flustered charades to tell the others we’d seen a shooting star.

Ben retreated to his room for hours at a time, emerging eyes unfocused and smile with questions behind it, a Ram Dass meditation guide in his hand. Hannah filled a journal page with tiny identical flowers. When all of our comings and goings intersected on the porch, two sat in the rockers and two on the concrete steps, sparrows flitting in the oaks, the wind chime turning the air blue with its magic resonance.

For meals we sat around a kitchen table under a framed Rumi poem we all kept reading and a calendar with a new Bible verse for each month. Dara drank water – one, two, three, four deafening gulps that we watched without blinking before collapsing on the table. For three days only these moments of shared laughter reminded us of our voices. I sensed something poetic to be explored – something about only laughing together.

Dara foraged for long stretches of his days. Our counter hosted a growing collection of fennel, fava beans, and walnuts, none of which I could identify until he rustled through his bags of them on the way home. On the first day he spread the whole driveway with walnuts and walked the perimeter, toeing them into formation. Ben and I stood by, hoping this took awhile so we could put off meditating again. Then without warning Dara began jumping, knees pulled high, landing flat-footed on the shells. Sound
filled the woods, and his glasses slipped down his nose. He stashed armfuls of nuts under the stair rail, and when they disappeared all three of us kept wondering to where.

I calculated the time I spent rocking next to Hannah on the porch, and it totaled over six hours. I wondered what she journaled about and what she thought of the grounds, whether she enjoyed her book, whether she was glad she came, whether there would be a second date. *I kept leaving situations wondering if I’d spoken,* she said on the drive back to Williamsburg, and Ben and Dara and I agreed. I would come away from a couple hours spent walking beside someone and think, surely I slipped up, surely we talked to one another.

I passed my time wondering about hours and light. When is evening and when is late afternoon, and does Golden Hour overlap both? When is twilight, and when is dusk? I distinguished the kind of dark where you can still see dim leaf detail in the trees. Is there a name for this? After hours of deliberation and a handful of proposals I made then rejected, I proclaimed the end of Golden Hour as the moment the shadow from the middle tree joined the shadow from an oak on the side of the lawn. One day I realized I’d seen the entire progression of day into night, hours I’ve always existed around but never slid into.

Once I pulled myself onto a low branch and felt like an animal hunched there. I hopped down and ran between trees, the grass soft under my feet. The sensation of running barefoot made me feel like a child, and I remembered the same smell of soil and bark accompanying my imaginings, back when imaginings came heavy in the woods. I raced in nonsensical circles and walked through the trailless cedar forest, needles turning light even more gold. I felt a wildness and dedicated my walk to honoring the magic I
would have seen there as a girl. I remembered the jolt of enchantment I felt in spaces that
seemed fairy-laden or spaces with the cinematic potential for the sprint of a disgraced
princess; she glances over her shoulder with an elegant urgency. She needs no one to run
to.

I slipped off my blue loafers and meticulously adjusted them like I’d begun to do
often, making sure they aligned perfectly with one other. This brought me deep and
inexplicably pleasure, and I drew sweeping conclusions about how I should lead a
minimalist lifestyle. I spread my sweater on the ground and lay beneath branches.
Through them, late sun tinged the edges of leaves; this would be well-executed
cinematography. Was this late afternoon? Early evening? I rolled my chin onto my
shoulder and looked at the way light hit a spiderweb stretched between two stems.

Activities like tree climbing became rigid appointments in an imaginary schedule
I revisited throughout the day. After dinner I’m going to sketch that wind chime, I
thought on day one, then found myself re-thinking as the afternoon progressed. Go for a
run, shower, walk the labyrinth, eat, sketch the wind chime. I felt compelled to break
down the ungoverned time stretching before me.

When I could, I pushed myself to longer intervals between my goal-oriented walk
to the shrine, walk to the cemetery, walk to the creek. Distraction from the others helped.
Why was Dara using a serrated knife on asparagus? Is that what you’re supposed to use?
How does he decide how long to cut the ends? He paused and gave me a confused
thumbs-up; I realized I was standing at his shoulder with my brow furrowed.

Ben and I rocked on the porch – him reading, me trying not to watch Hannah do
yoga. By this third morning the temperature had dropped into the fifties. I found a blanket
in the closet and tucked it under my chin, drifting through the house like a specter or the Virgin Mary, swaddling myself in the rocker. Ben piled his blanket on top of mine and snugged it under the arms of my rocking chair. He disappeared into the house and returned with two mugs of chai tea with almond milk, and I kept smiling into the blanket, rubbing my nose on its little silk edge. It was a pleasing red-orange and it smelled like Ben. One hundred leaves rushed the porch.

I grew frustrated at my wordless resolution. On our first night, I couldn’t remember why I’d taken it. Did someone recommend this? I feel like I interviewed someone who recommended this. I made mental lists of all the assignments I could be completing, all the headway I could be making on my grad school applications. If I had let myself produce, produce, consume words like I do naturally, I would have sunk into my regimens and this would have been any other weekend. I would have spent the trip in a straightjacket of text instead of breaking through to whatever I did. Animality?

Day one: Four wild turkeys, squirrels.

Day two: A family of deer seen twice – two families? the same family? four blue jays. Squirrels.

Day three: Three blue jays, do blue jays travel together? a family of deer, squirrels.

On the morning of our departure, no one wanted to be the first to talk. We each thought of ourselves as less competitive than the others and went on like this for an hour and a half, searching for Dara with my car packed and idling, watching him sprint from the woods, his a bag overflowing with walnuts. We stayed quiet, pointing accusingly at one another, daring someone to speak, stubborn all the way up the church steps and face
to face with a ninety-two-year-old prioress who asked us if we enjoyed our stay. Finally I broke, handed over our keys. She told us she had been a nun for seventy-three years. This information and the new sounds of our voices was too much to process, so we thanked her quickly and piled into my Honda.

As I settled back into my life, I joked about the weekend to excuse myself from explaining it to people. After awhile you feel like an animal. One day bunch of deer ran across our yard, and I looked at them like, yeah - same. When the four of us drove into campus and saw students dorm-bound, suitcases rolling behind them, we all experienced an unfamiliar sense of time. As though nothing had passed and we hadn’t spent three days in silence, but at the same time, as though we’d been gone for months. A dreamstate? An era?

In every explanation I gave, I felt a nagging concern that I breached the sanctity of the experience in the ways I spoke of it. I did what I could to break down the hugeness into consumable parts. But this meant breaking it down, and I wasn’t ready for that. My inability to recount the trip probably meant I should have stopped trying. After all, I had learned what it feels like to strip words from existence. I knew there was a productivity in it, but also an accompanying overhaul of what it means to be productive, a recognition of what limits exist to the act of production.
When I lived in Leiden, I attended some yoga classes (most athletic, one suspiciously cultish) at the Universitair Sportscentrum. I was accustomed to the general feel of a U.S. yoga course: drawn out vowels, intricate sports bras, the occasional affiliation with an essential oils pyramid scheme. Dutch yoga classes thoroughly disoriented me. I don’t know whether it was the way the teacher said doenward doeg, the frenzied dashes to enter and leave the studio, or changing clothes in the shade of towering blondes. The Netherlands has the tallest population in the world and so do its locker rooms. Gorgeous limbs flew everywhere — pulled into leggings, arced in ponytail assembly.

On the way to the locker room, I inevitably passed the pole fitness class, across from which a handful of college guys pretended to look at their phones. In this sexually charged corridor, I stumbled on a flyer for Sonic Acts. An edited picture of a face bent surreally across the page. Across it read: The Noise of Being, sonicacts.com. A list of Dutch words or names or places stretched along the bottom. This had to be a grunge music festival or some similarly hardcore thing, but I hoped for a tie to silence, took a picture of the flyer, and searched the website when I got home.

Sonic Acts is a four-day gathering on a new trippy-sounding theme each year. 2017’s Noise of Being festival featured experimental sound performances, back-to-back lectures loosely addressing noise, humanness, etc., and affiliate exhibits spread throughout Amsterdam. I attended as a member of their writing team, with free access to the events and exhibits. I figured I’d kick off my silence work by studying its opposite.
My parents’ neighbor’s cousin, Adrie, opened her painting studio to me during my time writing for Sonic Acts – oh, the profitable vulnerability of being alone and abroad. I took a classic Dutch multi-transport journey there, hauling a reusable grocery bag of clothing on a rainy bike ride to the Leiden train station, on a train from Leiden to Amsterdam Centraal, on a tram from Centraal to outer Amsterdam, and then on a nervous walk as the sky darkened. Adrie ushered me inside to red walls and lamplight, and the smell of salmon.

She and her husband, Bram, would leave for London in the morning. They passed a glass bowl of walnuts between the three of us and told me about ice-skating the canals, back when the winters got cold enough to go. Their daughters were young like me, they said, and also itching to see the world. Your parents must be so worried, they said.

I’d been subsisting on vegan “meatballs” charred in the standard issue exchange student wok, and the salmon almost made my eyes water. dinner, Adrie poured American-style coffee. She and Bram told me they liked it more than the concentrated, espresso-adjacent Dutch brew. I carted my mug around the flat, blissed out, while they gave me a tour.

The painting studio connected to Adrie and Bram’s place through a small door in a narrow entry staircase, but other than that it was a separate apartment altogether. It had a big, open space for painting, a little sitting area, a kitchen, and a bathroom. Adrie’s portraiture covered the walls along with a floor-to-ceiling bookcase stuffed with art theory. Ascending another narrower staircase accessed rooftop room with glass walls wide and long enough to contain a full-sized bed. Adrie had strung twinkle lights on its
walls, and she ducked out the door to switch on more lights looped around the roof railing. We stood over Amsterdam and its million lives, its legacies, its pink-skied suspicion of stars.

Saint Adrie stocked her fridge with gouda, wine, dark chocolate, grapes, and stroopwafels. She and Bram gave me a list of phone numbers, an invitation to their friend’s in-house violin concert, and keys to their bikes, then left in the morning.

Each day I stretched my legs down to Adrie’s bike pedals and got lost in Amsterdam. I frequently confused minor canals with each other, cut people off, and bolted across intersections. Once a man followed me in his car, yelling in Dutch. I relied on my tested strategy of screaming apologies as I continued doing the offending thing. I sweat a lot on my parka.

I eventually wound up at the writers’ meetings, caffeine-fueled sessions that made me feel like we should be in black-and-white and chewing on cigars. The other writers, also in their twenties, each called a different country home. We claimed upcoming festival events to cover then dispersed throughout the city.

I’d arrive late and sweaty to more events, attend talks, and listen to beautifully constructed sounds that filled me up and broke me apart. The weekend had a dramatic stop-and-go to it – I biked desperately and took notes in silent art halls. I jockeyed for exhibits to cover and nodded contemplatively in hushed auditoriums. Each night I eventually found my way back to the studio, checked the door locks six times, and fell asleep in the glass room, enveloped by Amsterdam’s ambient glow. The permeating sacredness overwhelms me only in hindsight.
For one event, the festival organizers bussed a group of us to the small village of Sint Jansklooster, about two hours from Amsterdam. We slogged through below-sea-level mud to an abandoned water tower outfitted with staircases along its inner walls. A pair of sound artists, Signe Lidén and Espen Sommer Eide, had accessorized the 46-meter-high cement room with speakers, unrecognizable instruments, and glass resonators raised so high on extending poles they stood a little crooked. The exhibit, *Vertical Studies: Acoustic shadows and boundary reflections*, drew from earth sounds the pair had recorded.

I stood in hushed reverence with fifty others, and the tower seemed at once grungy and cathedralic. Some people tiptoed up and down the stairs, observing the space’s changing acoustics. Others craned over the railing in scrutiny of the sound equipment, the performers fiddling with switchboards, the distant and suddenly irrelevant pitchers of tea and coffee, the nested paper cups. Many listened motionless, their eyes occasionally flicking to whomever’s phone vibrated.

The sounds Lidén and Eide projected felt like the pulse of the reachable earth. Birdsong filigree played with the upper register while a hollow wind droned underneath. Rumbles blended into one another, and the oceanic masqueraded as the atmospheric. A tenuous buzz suggested an insect or an atom. Some quantum vibration? I felt possessed.

We had all bussed there together, our wide array of accents fighting to be heard across the aisle. Now we stood in a brutalist cavern and let our planet’s music reverberate around us. Vibrations shifted between major and minor keys without warning, pulling us across the emotional spectrum. We were lonely, we rejoiced.
The beauty and cruelty of *Vertical Studies* lay in this juxtaposition of vulnerability and force. We stood, after all, in water’s domain, its legacy present in the stained cement. I felt its resonance, metaphorical and physical, as I listened. Water erodes, erases. Water cascades over human labors and reduces them to shreds of themselves. It topples the sandcastle, it sinks the vessel. Water renders us – and everything we build, mark, love – impermanent.

We heard sounds born and sounds fading into death, and I felt an auditory existentialism. Water reminded me of my transience, my inescapable earthliness. What noises are worth hearing if no noise remains? What noises am I qualified to make when the earth itself echoes around me and then surrenders to a silent force? Water humbled me and I stood dwarfed, awash in constructed yet organic musical ecology. Here, Lidén and Eide seemed to say, listen to the world. If it is fragile, what are you?

Another day, I biked to the Port of Amsterdam to cover an affiliate exhibit called *Spring Bloom*. I sped down highways and over bridges, engulfed in alternating clouds of freshly baked pastry and weed smoke.

Muziekgebouw, a glass-walled concert venue, loomed across a thin metal bridge over the Port of Amsterdam. The flyer for *Spring Bloom* listed the building name with no room or start time. An unmanned front desk displayed vague flyers for the exhibit, and in a far corner, a couple uninterested cameramen tinkered with equipment. Eventually, I saw through the glass to a patio outside. A suspended rectangular scaffold supported eight speakers angled inward.
The artist, Jana Winderen, had compiled her recordings of Arctic sea life. I heard, as I steeled myself against February wind, the symphony of the Barents Sea’s annual planktonic bloom. Feeding humpbacks cut, atonal, through ice formations rumbling against one another, bodies emerging from bubbling water, orcas calling in static staccato. Seals cried and fish released their whisper of eggs.

Shivering and alone, surrounded by shipping boats’ industrial drift, I felt like one of the sea creatures. I lived amidst their arctic night, its inhospitable grayness. I heard their music and bloomed against the cold world.

By placing the speakers at the edge of the port, Winderen connected her piece with the water around me. I wondered what lay beneath this dark surface – what possibility, what mystery. A sense of place and unity overtook me, lost and alone in Amsterdam, dressed unseasonably in a tank top under my parka. I paced beneath the whales and ducked against the wind, letting my jacket slide off my shoulders and feeling so enchanted it almost burned.

Back inside the Muziekgebouw, I sat at a table marked *Spring Bloom* and put on the headphones connected to it. The Arctic greeted me once again. Now, though, a human voice accompanied the sounds. In the midst of fantastical music – life and water, nonhuman voices, fluid motion – I began to understand the piece’s gravity.

Between recordings, Winderen included her interview with scientist Carlos Duarte, who explained that the ocean’s spring bloom occurs at the marginal ice zone, the junction of frozen and unfrozen sea. The bloom creates the largest carbon sink on our planet as algae explode to life in the water column, painting it green, drifting through the
Arctic in a tribute to life amidst barrenness. Diatoms flourish, die, and sink to the bottom of the sea, creating an area super-saturated with carbon.

We can take the vital signs of the Arctic to understand what our ocean has in store and what this means for our precious earth. Duarte called the region the forefront of climate change, explaining that metamorphosis here predicts what will happen in the rest of our planet if we don’t adapt our strategies to the immediacy of death, if we don’t ally with orcas, cod, seals. The Arctic, he said, will inevitably lose all its ice. So will other areas, unless we stop the melt from diffusing to lower latitudes.

Duarte’s voice faded out, and I again found myself awash in ocean music. Now, though, the whale cries cut into me. They resounded in elegy to what had been lost, what will be lost. They begged me to listen and be moved – to be touched by their music and to honor the waters that have touched me.

Is it possible to politicize sound, or is sound inherently nonpolitical? Sound stands alone and moves where it desires, touches us in the places we want to understand, and we manipulate this contact in desperate attempts to unify our own muddled experiences. We want our earth and its music to assure us that all is easily understood, all plainly felt. And yet, though I may spend my life riding sound waves to conclusions I predetermine and desperately pursue, there I stood against the cold harbor. I could not disentangle my tidy resolutions from their sources.

Part of me wished I could walk away from the port and feel only the wonder of ocean sounds, but I couldn’t unfeel the darkness. If Winderen’s sounds weren’t political, still the relationship she established between me and sound was. To enjoy the magic and leave would be to deny the damage I heard within the sound, would ignore the duty I had
to the magic. The music of the spring bloom will die if we do not move ourselves to protect it, and then what will be left to comfort us?

Toward the end of the festival I biked to the Stedelijk Museum of contemporary art to hear music by Supreme Connections. The composers are disciples of the late Maryanne Amacher, who pioneered a new and rumbling style of performance. Amacher called her techniques psychophysiological. In one, she cranked up specific hertz combinations to vibrate the bones of the inner ear causing oto-acoustic emissions, sound coming from inside your head. Supreme Connections followed suit, selecting volumes and frequencies to shake walls, floors, bones. When you listen to them, everything responds. They’d teamed up with Amacher’s old friend Keiko Prince, a visual artist well versed in setting the scene for this sort of ethereality.

As I descended to the resounding lower level of the Stedelijk, I felt music pass through the membranes of my body. The piece began with guttural hums. At random intervals, slamming and screeching noises exploded together; the audience members jumped, then steeled themselves. On the wall, weak light lapped against a luminous disk – I seemed to watch an eclipse from underwater. Keiko’s metallic sheet and overhead projector sat unceremoniously on the floor and threw cosmic patterns, and we all sat, stood, paced around them. The music swelled and receded, but the sound had so possessed me, so deafened me that I couldn’t distinguish volume from vibrations within myself. The music disoriented so thoroughly that it occupied.

We vibrated like fleshy tuning forks, became hosts to sounds projected from deliberately angled speakers. Supreme Connections played bodies and brains like I play
guitar. To them, whatever subliminal response bubbled up in me was expected – notes from their strings they’d heard before. Meanwhile, I sat wide-eyed. I felt an overwhelming love for the crowd of people around me, their eyes closed, their brows furrowed. We all found some meaning in this worth forty-five minutes of our concentration.

For a while, I clung to a delusion that the sound existed as part of my own experience rather than the other way around. Regardless of the direction, I felt a constant awareness of how temporary this ownership was. The music I heard would end, and I would never hear it again.

Mini Sound Series haunted me because it occupied unreachable spaces within me and because I couldn’t control it. Supreme Connections’ work wouldn’t let me add it to a queue or share it with my Facebook friends. To experience a piece, you have to be present in their deliberately selected space and subject to the vibrations induced within your own body. I couldn’t incorporate these songs into my own social brand, my broadcasted consumption and output. I couldn’t shape my self-presentation by publically identifying with Supreme Connections, because the music can’t be shared by anyone who isn’t there. Even trying to film the experience left me with a distorted recording of screeching, high-pitched tones, nearly unrecognizable from what I heard – that cacophonic hypnosis as it unfurled chaoses around and within me.

Perhaps there’s something special about sound we cannot possess, that we can’t send or download or access. I huddled against a shaking wall and felt frustrated at my desire’s irrelevance. In this way, the music ultimately owned me. I couldn’t pin down the
memory, and each note came transient: when it passed, it was gone forever. Even now, I can only string words together and say that I was there, that it meant something.

The thing about sound, about noise, is that it asks something from you. Noise asks us to draw conclusions. It asks to take up space in our psyches. My times at Sint Jansklooster, Port of Amsterdam, and the Stedelijk pulsed with the presence of the divine. But some of the festival events provoked me until I ducked out of the auditorium. People’s research findings and demonstrations and projects-into-spinoff-projects-into-spinoff-spinoff-projects left me with mental tinnitus. At night I sat in Adrie’s studio and jumped at each hundred-year-old wall creak, but at least I had quiet.

The whole thing made me wonder at the sonic realities we construct for ourselves. My classmate in Self-Transcendent States, Tom Kalnas, once said the information with which you surround yourself is the information that defines you. It *wallpapers the inside of your skull*. During Sonic Acts I plastered my mind with really pretentious stuff, and a lot of it. I think the assembled intelligentsia and I were so excited to feed off each other’s creative energy that we lost our awareness of smallness. Of the dwarfing cosmic silence that looms beyond our PowerPoints.

When I remember the whole experience, it comes back in feelings. I marvel at the fatedness of a singular poster by a pole dancing class and a generous painter on vacation. I feel the relentless wonder buffeting me from all sides and the giddiness of gasping for air amidst it all. I feel the suffocation that noise brings, the claustrophobia within idea stacked on idea. I took these sensations with me when I left Amsterdam, and they have
informed my appreciation of Silence. They wallpaper the inside of my skull in dazzling form and intensity.
chapter 4: bean man thinks he’s god

I owe a lot of who I am to reading *Walden* out of context.¹ Henry David Thoreau’s turns of phrase haunted me, cut-and-pasted onto handouts in high school English. A Barnes & Noble Classics edition sat on my shelf for years. I’d underline in rapture for fifteen pages, renounce it, then start over six months later. My multicolored highlights festoon Part I: “Economy,” each year a new ink. Looking back, I see in the annotation rainbow *Walden*’s hold on me and its impenetrability: each color runs out. I couldn’t finish the book.

For years I answered the favorite book question with Walden, *if I ever read it*. Mom gave me a shirt printed with a vintage graphic of the cover, and I moved my rainbow-annotated paperback from dorm to dorm. I enrolled in American Renaissance Literature with a *This Is The Year*, but my professor nixed HDT for extra Hawthorne. I took to the woods, identifying my happy place as the Appalachian Trail with “Economy” quotes turning over in my subconscious.

HDT spiritually seduces us: He can save us from our *nutshell of civility*.² While we *kill time* and *injure eternity*,³ immortal Henry slings an axe in some heavenly cedar grove – he’s macho, he’s an everyman, his honest sweat turns brows to gold. And here, you’re welcome, is his book of answers to the desperate hoards, all of us labor[ing] *under a mistake*.⁴

Conversely, I think *Walden* owes a lot to being read out of context. It’s a cultural phenomenon, ubiquitous in conversations about solitude and quiet. We’ve hyped up HDT’s mountain vacation into a contemplation catchall – I can’t count how many think
pieces I’ve read on silence or nature that namedrop the book in lieu of more relevant citations.

High school English acquainted me with the famous *I went to the woods* passage. In a pond-side cabin of his own construction, HDT pledged to *live deep and suck out all the marrow of life*…*live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life...cut a broad swath and shave close...drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms.*

What once left me drunk with the vitality it promised now reads like a mid-life crisis. If a relative said it to me at Thanksgiving, I’d raise my eyebrows and go for more punch. These days we could have read *Walden* passages in any number of Facebook rants. They’d blend in; stripped of its turns of phrase, HDT’s book of answers becomes the grumpy status update that prompted you to unfollow Uncle Jake.

HDT writes that our innate wisdom is enough: *Do not seek so anxiously to be developed, to subject yourself to many influences to be played on; it is all dissipation.* Humility, humility, humility, he says and rhymes and quotes and insinuates. *Humility like darkness reveals the heavenly lights.* Instead of digging through stacks of old wisdom, be content to model after him: *I did not read books the first summer; I hoed beans.*

And yet HDT waxes Shakespearean. He references the Vedas, epic poems, song lyrics, histories, fables. He lapses into Latin, sometimes including a translation and sometimes not. Does he see himself as a benefactor? For someone who believes innate wisdom is holy and enough, HDT badly wants us to know how informed he is.
Five years after my high school assignment, I Sharpied a line through the title on my *Walden* shirt. I texted a picture to my backpacking group message, the members of which have heard my HDT rants more than once while wandering along the Appalachian Trail. Alone and without cell reception, they tolerate me as I build my case against the American hero.

We all remember the astrophysicist, trail name Astro, we met in Vermont on his weeklong sabbatical. At the top of Glastenbury Mountain, my friends and I spread out our wet socks and rain flies and called over to him. He sat on the shelter steps, tinkering with his camp stove. The group of us debated whether Dylan should have won the Literature Nobel, and Astro helped us start a fire. It came as easily as most wilderness friendships do: inherently transient, identities protected in nickname, we kicked dirt and hummed folk songs.

After the hike our group message lit up: Astro had published his trail musings on the NPR website. He’s a *Walden*-lover, one hiker alerted me Salem Witch-Style. I scanned Astro’s piece and hated agreeing with him. He wrote that in the woods he sometimes stumbled on a *root, a core, an unvoiced song of the world's own presence*. His piece brought me back to pine needle crosshatch, shadows against Vermont sun. I sat again on a shelter ledge, my sock feet happy-sore and dangling. I fished a camp mug from my pack and boiled tea on a mountaintop.

...*That is when you can understand what Henry David Thoreau, one of the first great interpreters of American wilderness, meant when he said, "I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude."*
The thing is, HDT doesn’t transcend in silence: he looks so long in the mirror he dissociates. *I should not talk so much about myself if there were any body else whom I knew as well.* This doesn’t satisfy me, it disheartens. If even this venerated silence writer can’t escape his ego, how can I? I came to *Walden* scavenging for a trail map through my selfhood, deep and dark until it opens to a clearing. Until I, invisible, fade into the universe. Finding hollowness in *Walden* felt like deconstruction, akin to when I leaned against the cold fridge at fifteen and told my mother I didn’t want to go to Bogart Presbyterian anymore.

HDT says he will *walk even with the Builder of the universe,* not wallow with us in our *restless, nervous, bustling, trivial* human epoch. I refuse to believe that attaining wisdom reveals everyone else’s faces to be hideous while yours glows with celestial light. If you pass through us, you should fall in love with us along the way.

Maybe HDT’s trademark misanthropy cleans his conscience when he writes things like *As for Doing-good, that is one of the professions which are full...I have tried it...[and] am satisfied that it does not agree with my constitution.* In the margin, pink ink scrawls *Is Thoreau a jackass?* Two years later, blue ink answers *Yes, I think.*

HDT fancies himself a poor man, cabin-bound on his elective mountain vacation. *None can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what we should call voluntary poverty.* Between his refusal to help the less fortunate and his swearing up and down that we have all the wisdom we need without school or books, HDT understands poverty as a pre-simplified state of being, edging the poor closer to enlightenment, and so they should be grateful. Meanwhile he exists as a white
man in nineteenth century America, with no family dependent on him, no prejudice levied on him.

HDT engages in depersonalization, removing himself from the human world. Edward Pavilč distinguishes this variety of depersonalization from more socially conscious solitudes.\textsuperscript{15} Sabbaticals like HDT’s \textit{can become their own kind of abstraction.} He took to the woods, believing \textit{social interaction as dangerous to the artist/hero}. Pavilč writes, \textit{In the transcendental origins of diasporic modernist culture, Walden Pond has a barbeque pit and a dance floor}. Maybe HDT did what he needed to preserve his heroism or artistry, but in preserving them he left them untested, so worth saving did he consider his valiant and expressive selves.

The same privileges that keep Thoreau from understanding the poverty he puts on and takes off at will give him staying power in our society. Published fifty-one years after the Louisiana Purchase, \textit{Walden} takes root in Westward Expansion and all its affiliate maleness. I can’t help but wonder what station \textit{Walden} would have if a nonwhite and/or nonmale person wrote it. Emily Dickinson wanders our poetic memory in ghostly white, tortured by a crazed spinsterhood we’ve picked apart for two hundred years. In an account of through-hiking the AT as a woman of color, Rahawa Haile writes:

\textit{Outdoor skills were a matter of survival for black people before they became a form of exclusion. Harriet Tubman is rarely celebrated as one of the most important outdoor figures in American history, despite traversing thousands of miles over the same mountains I walked this year.}\textsuperscript{16}
On the trail my friends and I wondered why so many hikers we ran into were white (us included) and why, culturally, Western fascination with nature excursions maintains such a determined whiteness. I stop into REI for a camp stove and push through racks of high-dollar sweat-wicking tops, nylon blend everything, woodsy stickers to plaster on unwoodsy items. The store’s director of public affairs and marketing understands the need to change: *There has been this legacy narrative of the white, performative loner type...The outdoors industry realizes that is changing. It resonates less.*

For a privileged student like me, discomfort carries novelty. Haile writes, *for people of color, the wilderness is everywhere they look. They don’t need mountains.*

In an interview with USA Today, backpacker Jenna Yokoyama spoke to her experience founding the Hikers of Color Facebook page.* The hiking community is not just about the idealized Thoreau [understanding] of what it is to be in the wilderness...For people of color, racism still follows them. Haile writes, Bear paws have harmed fewer black bodies in the wild than human hands.*

Meanwhile HDT brags about his friendships with wasps, thousands of which descended upon his cabin one October. *They never molested me seriously, though they bedded with me.* HDT creates himself into myth – some fantastical forest dweller, a Manic Pixie Wasp Man. A mile and a half from downtown Concord, he writes a book proud that he didn’t walk to the grocery store more often.

But interwoven with his egotism, HDT creates intense beauty. As a silence lover I can’t totally steel myself against the writer who muses, *I desire to speak somewhere*
without bounds; like a man in a waking moment, to men in their waking moments; for I am convinced that I cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of a true expression.  

Words fail.

In the final chapter, “Conclusion,” HDT generates the intense beauties more quickly, allowing them closer to one another without the wide gulfs of misanthropic grumblings. I wanted him to redeem the whole thing, take back his hatred of us and our consumerist groupthink, our existence in bedrooms, god forbid, our wasp-squashing, our store-bought produce. But he writes spiritual prescriptions – so will help you God, and so only.  

How does he know?

This is a self-help book without the help. HDT describes problems in poetry so cutting and eloquent we accept that we have them. Then he’s gone, calling over his shoulder, There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.

In my undressing of his protective mythos, I have found bits I treasure in conflict with myself. Of course I want to suck out all the marrow of life. Of course I tack forest pictures to my wall and let off steam in the campus woods. But even if I can trust my innate wisdom, even if I should follow HDT’s prescription and self-isolate for his holy grail, capital-T-Truth, I also trust and desperately need a diversity of wisdoms spoken across times, cultures, degrees of urbanity. Shouldering my pack in the Blue Ridge isn’t enough.
My research leads me to many new religious contexts, interested, pen and paper in hand, and I feel like an evangelist’s fantasy. A girl from my freshman hall still checks up on me and my depravity. We get coffee once a semester and she sets a holy example through chaste pleasantries and frequent invocations of Jesus. A Raja Yogi I interviewed sent me follow-up emails asking for an in-person talk at his Amsterdam headquarters, said he was sure I could sense the power of his class. A vendor at the Leiden farmer’s market offered to drive me to the beach, where he planned to balance singing bowls on my body. A campus Bible study leader emailed articles on devilish sexual impulses in corrupt women like myself.

After I settled into my life in Leiden, I researched monasteries nearby and planned a visit to Amsterdam’s He Hua Temple, a place of worship for Buddhist monks and laypeople. I stepped off the wind-powered train, and the city swept me up in familiar chaos. Cyclists with food deliveries strapped to their bikes burst through the crowds, pedaling rabidly. Pedestrians stopped in the middle of the walk, a stranger leaning back to take their picture, everyone else ducking under or rushing through. I found my way to Chinatown, and a million lucky cats waved at me through dim sum steam. A curving street revealed the temple, immediately recognizable in its striking pagoda style and bright red shingles.

In the entry room, dozens of tiny red candles flanked Buddha statues. Tables of fresh flowers and fruit alternated with glinting gold ficuses, their leaves spinning languidly. A man invited to make brush strokes on a calligraphy mat, and I liked
watching the water stand out darkly then fade to nothingness. Two other visitors painted squares repeatedly.

A young couple and I took a free tour, following a volunteer through a few temple rooms. He explained Buddhist iconography in the paintings and statues. I understood a little of the origin stories as I was enrolled in a Tibetan Buddhism course at Leiden University, but a lot of my studies didn’t translate. Tibetan Buddhism differs greatly from the Taiwanese Fo Guang Shan organization of the He Hua Temple.

It’s easy to get swept up in the dorm room mandala tapestries and ohm thumb rings I see back home. I’ve realized that my understanding of Buddhism is warped by its profit-driven portrayal and its fashionable appeal to young people like me who want to understand the world but don’t always know the ethical way to do so. The fact that I walked up to the first Buddhist temple Google spit out and felt pretty certain I’d learn about silence there underscores this. I was confronted with my own misconceptions after the tour when a group of nuns let me observe their prayers.

I chose a seat in the back corner of a room with brown vinyl stools arranged in rows. Tasseled lanterns hung from the ceiling and a large statue of the Buddha sat in front of a gold curtain. Candles, white orchids, and dishes of tangerines, kiwis, apples, and bananas stood before him. Smaller statues occupied either side, each surrounded by more fruit and flowers. I opened my journal on my knee and tapped my feet too fast as women filtered in, some in monastic robes, some in street clothes. One nun handed me a book of Chinese prayers with English phonetic spellings beneath the characters.

When it seemed like the something would soon begin, a woman took my arm and led me to a stool in the center of the room. Oh no. Oh no Oh no. It’s okay, I thought, this
will probably be a very contemplative service. Maybe we will meditate, maybe we will pray quietly.

A few nuns sat facing us at a long table between the stools and the Buddha. One of them began to chant from the book, and the rest of the women joined. I searched the page for which syllable I could come in with, my eyes running loose across hollow English. Ten of us stood, chanting quickly in Chinese, mine butchered and probably meaningless. We moved too fast for me to read the brief English summaries at the bottom of each page, so I blinked out a wordless prayer that I agreed with everything. Then I thought about the irrelevance of my agreement, then I lost my place. Standing in the middle of that room and faking a language I definitely don’t know had me hunched over the page, following with my finger. Each time I broke cadence, my eyes uncatching and a little panicked, the same laywoman ducked over and pointed to our place.

One woman kept time for us by rhythmically hitting a wooden block with a stick. We plodded along slow and metered, the tapping sometimes pausing then resuming faster, staccato. Occasionally the women performed a sequence of kneeling, bowing, and standing again, and I stumbled through with my eyes on my neighbor. I looked like I did when my mom took me to Jazzercise.

We passed at least an hour that way, chanting, moving, the wooden beat echoing on the floor tiles. There wasn’t a moment of quiet and I thought sheepishly of my expectation that there would be. What had I conjured – yoga mats and bamboo, a spiritual version of one of those orientalist nightclubs? Tile, a recorded pan flute? I tried to soothe the familiar sting of confronting my subconscious patterns, but I remembered that I formed the patterns by walking them like a cowpath. Then women moved to the
perimeter of the room, still reading from the book. We lapped the stools, passing our spots a few times. I kept getting faked out and starting to take my place again, but the forgiving tide of praying women swept me along. Finally we returned, knelt, and everyone fell silent for a minute. My ears pricked. Then the service ended.

My muscles felt tense and my face hot; I wondered what I had said or prayed or promised. No one had laughed at my chaos, only offered a finger pointed to our place on the page, an exaggerated kneel as I watched, or a nod as I tried to figure out where to walk. One of the nuns invited me to follow them into another room for some celebratory food.

I learned eventually that we had been commemorating the last day of the two-week Chinese New Year celebration. Now temple volunteers filed in, along with a few young people around my age, and some of the women who had prayed with me. A couple people brought out big pots of dumplings from the adjoining kitchen, and we ladled them into paper bowls.

People spoke Dutch and Chinese, welcoming me to the table with them. I sawed the dumplings with the edge of a plastic fork and tried not to eat them as quickly as I wanted to. I hadn’t had any food since breakfast in Leiden, and the sesame paste in the rice dough was warm and sweet. I vaguely remember a woman forking one of her dumplings into my bowl.

I stood to leave and a woman showed me back to the entryway, offering me tangerines from a dish by the door. She gave me a handful of Chinese candies and a business card with their France location listed. I could tell she wanted to engage with me
about Buddhism, have me back, encourage me to explore the substance of the belief system and its other places of worship.

Sometimes I feel like an evangelist’s fantasy, but sometimes things blur. I come into someone else’s space and they trust that an unknowable magnetism brought us together.

After an hour of group meditation, four Quakers shared their paper plates of cheddar cubes and gave me a book of quotes about peace. At a Unitarian Universalist loving-kindness service, an older man said he could tell I’d come back, but he warned me that he wouldn’t remember. Six months after I interviewed a traveling Krishna monk, he called me and told me about his travels in India. His friends had me over for dinner and offered to teach me cruelty-free cooking.

So often I don’t know how to feel.

I took the business card and thanked the woman multiple times for everything. I guess if I had complete confidence that my worldview or cosmos-view or all-creation-view was the correct one, an inquisitive visitor would get my hopes up, too. But I don’t understand how someone can reach that level of confidence, and I often interpret conviction as arrogance. I know others make the same assumption – I’ve seen the trashcans full of Bibles when local churches force them on students. Most people know the trope of the woman with an “Awesome God” ringtone and layered cross necklaces: she’ll invite you to her church every time you see her, she’ll pray for you.

And what of this? In a sense, Church Potluck Lady gives all she has to the searching world. Granted, she doesn’t search so much as broadcast an answer, but I want to be the kind of person who sees beauty in her belief and tacks her John 3:16 greeting
cards to my wall. I’ve tried to find the appropriate line between forgiving the converters and standing up for my own ability to critically think about what’s out there in the galaxies. Who holds them up, who brings us together. I tend toward the side of prolonged listening and low self respect, then come away wishing I had thrown my own ideas into the conversation. Made it a brainstorming session instead of someone’s dogmatic imparting. When I let people pour their fervor over me, I do them a disservice, too. I indicate that that something may come of it for them. The nodding girl doesn’t protest, so I may see her at Bible study on Wednesday.

The prayers and celebration held me in a new silence I would become familiar with during my time in Europe. I spent the day with my observations and hypotheses unspoken. Even chanting constant Chinese to the point of nearly losing my voice, I didn’t understand content or express any felt thing. I communed with the other temple-goers, ate, and listened to words I couldn’t understand, wrapped in a sesame-induced fog, thankful for the million kindnesses these strangers showed me. I sensed a self-transcendence in not gratifying the desires to imprint my identity, thoughts, and general selfhood onto the spaces I occupied. When I existed in an environment full of unfamiliar symbols and rituals, even a different calendar, I appreciated how rich the world stands alone without me and my interpretations.

Holding a business card and listening to a Buddhist evangelize in the Netherlands, I thought about the universality in our desires to understand, to share understandings. I boarded the train to Leiden, my fingernails yellow-orange from tangerine peels, and thanked the God I’ve loosely defined for giving me so much to think about. I prayed something untranslatable – something not spoken, but felt.
chapter 6: oblivions

My college boyfriend held mystery to me, but more than that, he carried a magnetic confidence I felt obligated to indulge. The indulgence masqueraded as politeness, then respect, then devotion. We’d talk about getting married after graduation and I’d think about how a lifetime of not-quite-happiness was better than whatever losing him could feel like.

He thought I was mysterious too, but the mystery we assigned one another took different forms: mine of him cosmic and fated, his of me sultry and to be preserved. I acted on an instinct that whatever he’d guess of me from my silence was more satisfying than whatever he could know of me from my speech.

After our first date, I rushed out of his dorm into lung-tightening air. I said Thank you Thank you Thank you to the constellations overhead, as back then I maintained a dialogue with the stars. We had eaten pita sandwiches on a park bench then gone back to his room to watch Cosmos. He snuggled into me, and we contained so much mystery there, and I thought he felt whatever profound thing I felt when I learned about the solar system.

When I was eighteen I used to put in earbuds and dance wildly on our central campus green, feeling under the sway of night. I could identify Orion, the Pleiades, the Dippers, and Polaris. I spoke to all of them as a group.
After I tore outside and thanked the stars, I walked home on the straight brick path leading from his dorm, across historic campus, and ending at mine. I could stand outside my stairwell and peer through thick magnolias to where he lived.

I ran into him at a Halloween party a couple hours after Cosmos and my breath kept catching. I edged between mesh butterfly wings and unhooked my shirt buttons from fishnet. He pulled me onto a smoky porch and we rushed together through Colonial Williamsburg’s empty backstreets. Our town used to feel like the inside of a snowglobe at night – the way it’s wrapped in twinkle lights year round, the way it empties after eight p.m. The streets glow orange and noiseless, and the occasional hushed group follows a cape-clad woman. She clutches a lantern and whispers ghost stories.

A few minutes after we left the party, the floor caved in. My friends later regaled me with accounts of bottles rolling to the center of the room.

In seventh grade I remember the distinct moment of realization that my jokes would never land. Georgia schools hosted a guys-only style of comedy – it came with a specific cadence and flippant charm, and it hinged on the young comedian’s masculinity. Boys leaned back and shouted asides during Social Studies. They kept up a witty back-and-forth in the halls. I wanted so badly wanted to be a part of it, this unscratchable itch of clowning I couldn’t join.

White Boyhood as an entity carries a revered mythos in the Deep South. No one says Boys Will Be Boys solemnly, they laugh – someone has just beaned his friend with a baseball or set a noncrucial thing on fire. He comes to dinner tousled, and he curses too young. It’s a Sandlot fantasy. It’s Ferris Bueller.
As a young woman, you have a few routes available to you within these limitations. You can ignore the pubescent chaos, jokes and all. You can stand by as a willing audience member/human laugh track. Or you can engage in a limited comedic repertoire. This typically consists of either prompting the boys in a sort of humorous alley-oop, or making yourself a caricature of girlhood – some hyper-femme pre-teen, arming the boys with new material for their routines.

By now I’ve settled into a remaining option, rarely chosen as it requires a general butchy vibe and an aggressive response to comedic neglect. I tend to wedge myself in, riffing as one of the guys. When I’m inevitably glossed over, I force my shoulders back into the huddle and smile in that dogged way so familiar to Southern women. It feels pathetic, the payoff is low, but it’s something.

That my intro to sexism was this laugh gap amuses me still. I’d learn about wages and catcalls, sexual assault, representation. I had plenty of time for the white-hot stuff. But that initial hopelessness, the wanting so badly to get laughs like the boys could, carried a new melancholy.

I see my college relationship as an expression of toxic notions silently ingrained. I see my silence in it as a preemptive measure I took to protect myself against disappointing someone who loved me. I faded into whatever oblivion hollow-hearted girlfriends occupy – gutted, inarticulate. I don’t know the root of all this. He held a tenderness I cared for, and he didn’t rage into my life as some vampiric sexist. Each retelling of those two years leaves me feeling guilty, as though I’ve misrepresented him
to myself and to everyone who’s heard me recount the oppressive nonsense that transpired.

In Georgia I raged against a womanhood I saw as prescriptive. Women chopped vegetables around me while my uncles and male cousins played tackle football outside. We went Black Friday shopping while they visited the shooting range. We traded bridal magazines while they played poker.

Back then I saw myself as some preteen Joan of Arc, shoulders back in a cloud of cigar smoke, bold and boyish and distinct from the baby names discussion playing out indoors. I agonized over that interval when dinner wound down and aunts began gathering dirty plates. Do I take up a sponge or bushwhack my way out of this entrenched binary?

I’d slice pimento olives for devilled eggs then run to the backyard for tackle football. Regardless of which relative was the team captain, he always charted our plays on his stomach and gave me the final triumphant run, however little familiarity I had with how we’d get there. I watched my cousins drive their shoulders into one another as my uncles shouted for passes and sprinted long arcs through the wild onions.

Inside, the women began a jigsaw puzzle. We hulked, grass-stained, past them and struck up Texas Hold’em in the dining room. How was the game? We’d answer over one other, each team staking their honor on the other’s lack of honor. The women shook their heads and teased us. On one’s hip, a baby bounced and slobbered, smiling into his mother’s shoulder.
I’d fan my cards in front of me and play them in turn without raising my eyebrows. In this at least, I didn’t need instruction. Mom visited us and stood behind me, pulled my frizzed and tangling hair into a clean ponytail, told me *You were great out there*.

Now the bitterness fades with the self-importance. I feel the warmth of women making something, sharing the wisdom they’ve pieced together – from other women, from their own concentrated efforts to be good and full of love. Deep South Womanhood still has me slipping through the backdoor, pulling on my jacket and walking in the woods. But I’ll always know my grandmother’s kitchen window as seen from outside: tomatoes peek over the sill, and warm light and muffled laughter reach the driveway.

In college I stopped spending time with the friends I knew independently of him, and soon all of my acquaintances knew him first and me as an extension. He and I attended events together where other women were the convenient, silent-mysterious types as well.

Friday nights we walked to our friend’s house for a jam session. Foam mattress pads thumbtacked to the walls offered makeshift soundproofing, but this can’t have properly absorbed the PBR-fueled folk-punk improv. We all brought cans of vegetables and dumped them in a giant stew pot. Everyone was welcome and encouraged to play – we called it Free Beer Musicians Collective and we named our host’s house The Brewery.
If ever a friend wants to disgrace their conservative uncle, I will provide them with my stories from Free Beer. We read poetry to slackbeat, we lit incense, and we fell asleep on one other.

I never brought my guitar, and I never used any of the junkers leaning in the corner. I’ve played music my whole life, but I froze up at The Brewery. No women played there; we sat against the perimeter, our backs literally to the wall, and listened to our male friends and boyfriends trade instruments in cacophonic hilarity. They encouraged us to play, and everything about Free Beer stayed casual, untrained. But still I talk to other women who agree with my ratio: we left happy half the time and furious the rest.

This juncture still confuses me, because I can’t pinpoint the cause. Women expressed an interest in playing, men encouraged them to play, but the barrier remained insurmountable. I started bringing a sketchbook so no one would invite me to the center of the room. Women popped in and left for less performative parties. Occasionally a stranger showed up, fiddle or banjo in her hand, and ripped masterfully through some fast-paced Appalachian tunes. Those of us against the wall stopped everything to watch her, but these women never stayed long.

Eventually they found black mold in the Brewery’s walls, and my boyfriend and I developed matching coughs. I bought an inhaler and kept going to jams.

In a way, my college boyfriend defaulted to using the tools our society left him. In the same way, I defaulted to the tools left me. Silence is ladylike, appropriate, the least disappointing thing. If a woman doesn’t speak, she doesn’t have to bear the critique of
those who want to dissect her opinions, those who will balk at whatever arrogance they
detect in a woman with things to say.

His dad refused to address me directly, his eyes skipping me around the dinner
table. A year into our relationship, my boyfriend’s parents decided I couldn’t linger in
their house anymore, as I set a poor example for their thirteen-year-old daughter. She
may begin to believe it okay to visit a boy in his home. If I was to drive the hour to visit
my boyfriend, I must stay in the garden shed in his backyard. Ideally I would not pass
through their home to reach the shed.

My boyfriend’s family’s garden shed had no insulation. When our college let out
for winter vacation, I visited him with gloves on. A drum set sprawled across half the
shed, and the other half was a jungle of mic stands, wires, and auxiliary percussion. I’d
clear a space for a stool and he’d explain jazz technique.

We collaborated on a few songs. Once he produced a track I wrote and recorded,
listed it on online as his own, and tacked my name after featuring. He insisted we have a
profit split agreed upon in writing. Have it, I teased, it’s my gift to you. He eventually
agreed on fifty percent. Once at a party of his high school friends, a guy came up to me
and said, I love his track that you sang on.

He couldn’t drive, so on days we weren’t in the shed, I pulled up to his curb and
texted him I’d arrived. He climbed in the front seat, pulled the aux cord from my phone,
and told me where to go.

He said, You know you’re not good at guitar, right? I stopped composing.
When I was in high school, I talked to stars and tromped through briars. Our Georgia house edged up to dense woods run through with a streambed. I’d come home from school, pull on my rainboots, and follow the bed until it opened on a steep clay hillside where young pines grew slant. At the bottom of the hill, a reservoir held hoof prints long after the deer left. I liked to walk long routes through the saplings, their roots marshed with little clay pools. Tadpoles swam over white stones. In the winter, ice wove through the orange ground and snowflakes clung to pine needles. Deer tracks looped, frozen, along the reservoir bottom.

All through the woods, hunters had roped laddered deer stands to tree trunks. I liked that my forests were strung with ready treehouses. I’d reference a wordless prayer that my wonder wouldn’t get me shot and that the red hoodie was talisman enough. Over the stream and up a tree, I could hear symphonies of leaves between infrequent gunshots. I pulled my knees in and let the rungs dig into my back for as long as I could stand it. I plucked thorns from my shins and fished paperbacks out from under my sweatshirt. The breeze came gentle, and the sun that made it through the oaks sent gold between shadow.

I made a rating system for my adventures: the more scratches my legs sustained, the more successful the hike. I crawled through brush and found new streams, staying out until sunset or dinnertime. At night, my front lawn bore witness to crowds of twinkling light – fireflies and the galaxy. I learned to tell a planet from a star, and I kept our conversation regular. The tight feeling of too much magic to hold in my young chest became a near daily sensation.
Other college women helped pull me out of my prescriptive silence, and other women describe it back to me as they’ve experienced it themselves. You find one another in warped sisterhood, and there’s Her, the woman, all women, unified in identical dread you excuse one another from explaining. At parties, she learns your tell and interrupts your conversations, ushering you to some fake urgent thing. She texts you when she gets home.

She tells you stories called *It Wasn’t Rape, But...* 

You are a committee, you revise each other’s definitions for abuse. 

You call her – a man’s following you, she’s not alarmed. You wait together in a convenience store until he pulls out of the parking lot.

You bust into his room and pull her out. You sleep on her floor that night.

She tells you *not him*, you circulate a list of who to avoid. Some will mansplain key signatures and some will drug your beer. It all goes into the same list.

You tell each other about your mothers.

I started fantasizing about leaving him. Even walking out of his room for a moment, my mind flooded with curiosities: what would it feel like, where would I go. I flew elsewhere, grasping at imaginings that used to come regularly. I remembered in abstract a magic life. I met a new friend who laughed at what jokes I had left.

After I broke up with him for the fourth and last time, I stepped out of his dorm and into my car. I didn’t know who would believe me, or believe that this time it’d stick. There was nothing to do but drive home in silence, and then I was breathing, breathing, I breathed so heavily, into a rapid alternation of weeping and laughter.
chapter 7: nada te turbe

Deacon Gert wore a sport coat, a snake earring, fresh slacks, and alligator skin shoes. He looked in his early fifties, and even after three days in his company, I couldn’t get a read on him. At times he seemed like an edgy campus minister, and at times he spoke too overbearing for what you’d expect from one of those. Regardless, he orchestrated a beautiful weekend at Priorij De Essenburgh, a Norbetine monastery in the Dutch village of Hierden. I’d spotted the flyer on an unadorned table at the Leiden University activities fair. A couple weeks later, I packed into a car with a handful of strangers seeking silence.

Our group consisted of three organizers and three students. Gert brought along his agnostic and very anti-Catholicism wife, Corrie. Lucas, a vicar, occasionally led us in prayer throughout the weekend. A young couple – Milos and Nora – had moved from Hungary to the Netherlands so Nora could study midwifery. She spoke frequently of childbirth, and between placental gore and Christ’s blood, the weekend took on an unnerving physicality. I tried to meditate on things other than my vagina.

In Hierden we deposited our bags in clean, bare guesthouse dormitories – desk by the window, hospital-cornered bed, black leather Bible – and met downstairs for Lucas’ carrot soup. Corrie screwed up her face and said the building smelled like nuns. Then the six of us sat in a tight circle and lit tea candles.

That first night, Gert and Lucas led us in Taizé meditations from the French monastic community of the same name. We struck matches for the contents of our
prayers and settled into monastic chants: *Nada te turbe, nada te espante*. Sometimes one of us drifted into harmony and then settled back, switched octaves. We lost ourselves.

I felt grateful for the genderless God of the Taizé prayers: *Bless the Lord, my soul, and bless God’s holy name*. Sometimes I wondered whom the others sang for, or where their hearts retired once the meditation set them at ease. But these wonders passed away, and I felt my mind sink somewhere too blurry for me to understand. Towering altars of gratitude, my only confidence, flanked either side of this unnavigable space.

Looking over my journal entries from the monastery weekend, I try to piece together what I thought about. On one page, there’s a pen-and-ink drawing of our table spread with gathered stones and mismatched candle dishes. On another page, I’ve copied over and over in slow, even cursive, *Bless the Lord, my soul, and bless God’s holy name. Bless the Lord, my soul, Who leads me into life.* Is my soul blessing the Lord or synonymous with It? I still wonder at the comma.

The next morning the six of us met early and walked together to the chapel. This monastery was unusually co-ed: the monks and nuns kept their buildings and their finances separate, but they joined in worship, fellowship, and community service. They were happy with this arrangement as they got to play with the widow monastics’ grandchildren and pray together throughout the day.

We entered a square room outfitted with a cloth-covered altar, a suspended cross, and some chairs stacked with Bibles, hymnals, and liturgies, entirely in Dutch.
One by one the monastics filed in and one took her place at a keyboard. It was still dark, and birds began to chirp in the rainy lawns outside. Between the hymns, prayers, and unison readings that followed, you could hear them singing.

As I couldn’t understand the content of the morning prayer or keep up with the printouts, I thought about the quiet around the voices. A well-meaning nun with pink reading glasses kept holding up her liturgies and pointing to our place from across the room, and Milos, Nora, and I nodded, a little afraid. Milos sang out the Dutch phonetics, faltering, not fooling anyone.

We attended several sessions like these over the course of the weekend, each in Dutch, each conjuring a specifically sacred mood to match the time of day. At dusk, minor chords surrendered us into darkness. Slightly less minor chords introduced the morning. An old monk limped painstakingly into the room for every service, perfectly on time. What do you say amidst such love and mystery?

The monastery weekend took place in an unfamiliar country with rituals I had never practiced in a language I couldn’t speak. I was a Protestant-raised American, fumbling around and conducting some vague project that required frequent journaling. The retreatants granted me immunity when, for instance, I mistook a gesture from the priest as a handshake and firmly grabbed his open palm during Mass. Despite this foreignness obscuring me, five strangers and I talked for days, shared every meal, and played weird churchy games late into the night. This felt like the divine to me.

I scribbled in my notebook like I knew what to remember. But we played a game in which we stepped across masking tape to agree or disagree with fundamental
statements about our motivations and hopes, and I struggled to retrieve them. It’s difficult to pursue spiritual ends through silent means, especially with demons clamoring. I longed for the privilege of clear thought and energized conversations with the Universe. But here was Gert, telling us about God’s purpose for us, and here was Corrie, so disenchanted by her childhood faith that the familiar smell of a guesthouse dormitory affronted her, ransid. She communed with me by swiping through pictures of her art on her phone, our low voices during lessons the only spiritual rebellion for which we had the energy.

Corrie and I shared recognition of what stenciled approaches to God can do to you when you need anything to map out what the world means. To the secular you reek of self-delusion, and to the religious you’re too lazy to shoulder the symbols and duties that yes, may crush you, but will crush you in the name of a Something.

I believe so many things, but people have told me they aren’t enough or they’re in the wrong order. A life in doubt, then in dialogue, has possessed me. I think because my world wanted me to read it that way. Once I made stew for my friend, Miranda, and she ate it at my kitchen table while trying to dismantle my cosmic understanding. I grew agitated listening to what her specific Christ expected of me, so I made the mistake of sharing what my spirit friends whisper in my ears. It hurts to see the hollow eyes of someone to whom your quest means nothing. The unflinching dismissal of every force who loves you. It took me two hours of sweaty nodding to usher her out my door. I cleaned her bowl and read about witchcraft until one-thirty a.m.
Despite all the socializing, we had a lot of time for quiet. The monastery sat on dozens of acres of land run through with trails and, when I walked there, deep green from mist. I kept my steps as noiseless as I could, listening to drops on leaves and watching the eye movements of deer. Nothing stirred but wildlife and water. I wandered a blue chalk prayer labyrinth painted on the driveway.

Once, back home, I conducted a silence walk in the shallows of the James. I’d called the outing *getting lunch with the Universe* – I packed a sandwich and ate facing the water, then wandered ankle-deep to a cove where a stream joined the river. I liked the challenge of keeping ripples quiet.

Gray skies and curious driftwood angles greeted me. I stepped between grasses and clusters of broken shell. Down the beach, a late-thirties woman with a backpack wielded spear-length tools. She walked hunched over, squinting into the river, occasionally forking something with an extendable metal pole or swiping her butterfly net.

*My kids are home for the summer, and they’re driving me crazy,* she said, eyes down, net chasing a rainbow bouncy ball in the silt. *So I come out here and find treasures.* She opened her pack to reveal a folding stool, more extendable tools with varying sharpness, and a gallon bag of bottle caps, seaweed, glass.

We orbited each other quietly until she invited me to study a turtle carcass with her. I followed to a spot on the shore where she stopped, creature at her feet, and explained the art she could make by polishing its shell. I watched while she attempted to
rend the leather legs from the body with pliers, warning me about the cottonmouths that populated the brush along the banks, how they could come after us at any moment.

Before I excused myself, she asked why I was alone on the river and I mentioned my thesis. At the word self-transcendence, she said I should go to a crystal and bone shop nearby.

I dusted off sand and drove barefoot to the shop, my windows open. I wanted the turtle-mutilating absurdity to have a point. But when I studied a handful of tiger’s eye and asked the cashier about silence, she just directed me to a couple flyers from self-proclaimed yogis advertising weekends away in 2005 WordArt. I drove home.

My girlfriend says *Maybe everything is true*, and imaginary altars burn against my ribcage in agreement. They’re piled with tea candles, a stick of blue chalk, turtle legs, Miranda’s dirty bowl.

Loading up the sedan and pulling out of the guesthouse driveway felt unnatural. As though leaving and returning to our former pace was some kind of betrayal. I powered up my phone and texted my family about the trip, checked Facebook, checked my email. Gert switched on the radio, and Milos fell asleep on Nora’s shoulder. Soon we sped down the highway past exit signs and windmills. I remember talking briefly about what we learned and what we’d take back, but the words dropped off and a John Mayer single came on.

Gert pulled up to the church where he’d picked us up a few days before. I dislodged my backpack from the trunk, unlocked my bike, and pedaled home amidst
familiar sounds: car tires, bicycle bells, canal water sloshing against stone walls. My calves burned, and breezes sent goosebumps prickling down my bare arms. Sweater buried in my backpack, I felt the chill of the world moving around me. I smelled spring in the air, and I moved through the world.
chapter 8: appalachian rhythms

On the Appalachian Trail, you and one footstep occupy a tactile interval, and then the next moment starts – a new footstep. The rut you follow runs through with roots, splits around trees, and edges up to undergrowth. Your eyes lock onto it in defense of your ankles or your rashless skin. The directedness of your motion consumes you, and glimpses of canopy feel like breathing itself. Everything else follows a rhythm to be obeyed, settled into.

I walk a week on the Trail each summer and bring a small group of friends. I amuse myself with how inexperienced I began, but I return each August and trace ups and downs in the Appalachian Mountains. Some hikers come with me, some mark my invitation seen and we leave it at that.

I first backpacked the trail three trips ago. I’d just finished my freshman year of college, and I brought similarly virginal hikers. We left one car on a small patch of asphalt off a two-lane road, to be retrieved when we hiked there six days later. I had returned to the Northeast Georgia foothills for some kind of decompressing experience in the woods with my ex-high school boyfriend, his friend, and one of my friends wont to compassionately remind me my sexuality will land me in Hell. The four of us packed into the second car and pulled into the AT visitors’ center in Dahlonega, Georgia. As soon as we stepped out of it, the skies unleashed a downpour to rival all such comedic movie scenes. We dug out our rain gear and let our vertebrae compress under forty pounds of jerky, wool socks, and survival gadgetry.
Where the AT begins in Dahlonega, hikers climb six hundred metal steps anchored into the steep rockface of Amicalola Falls. In a storm, this invites remembered PSAs on lightning safety and prayers one’s mother doesn’t hear about one’s idiocy in tragic secondhand. Our first bear sighting occurred immediately upon leaving the six-hundredth stair: three cubs on the side of the trail, the mother mysteriously absent. That night we stacked our hammocks, four up the same two trees.

Day two of the first year had us wading through ankle-high yellow jacket flight patterns. Their nests pockmarked the trail, identifiable from maniacal shadows convening at the lips – holes scooped from packed dirt and tree roots. Two hikers filled us in: This weekend they helivacked two separate hikers down from here – got swarmed. We stepped, chilled, over decaying wood and other hotspots.

Our yellow jacket march led us to a flat expanse of rock pummeled by Long Creek Falls. A stream from the waterfall basin edged in the clearing. Trees grew sparingly, and boulders rimmed a frothy pool. We took off our packs and shirts, our hipbones crosshatched purple as only new hikers’ can be. The water met us steel-cold, and we wobbled on slick rocks, taking our turns beneath the falls, sharing in some vaguely baptismal symbology and releasing ourselves from the lightning we weren’t struck by, the helicopters we didn’t need to call.

We slept that night right against the stream, strung between trees at the base of the falls. More powerfully than anything on any hike I’ve taken, I remember the deafening exhale of Long Creek Falls, steady, all night. Cool mist dripped down the outside of my tarp, and my headlamp shone on my water-warped journal. We’d strung our bear bag – for us, a hulking trashbag stretched transparent, testing a limb safely away – and filtered
our water sitting on boulders in the stream. The falls rang over my fears, outperforming splitting tree limbs and my suspicions of imminent death.

A young couple were the only others there. They pitched their tent in a little cove downstream and hung their polyester bear bag with military precision. They ate quietly, their camp stove balanced on a flat stone, then retreated into lantern glow on canvas, stream coursing beside them. They emanated a Rumi-like peace, seeming to have \textit{fallen into the place / where everything is music}.\footnote{1}

By year three, my tense march through one million possible fates eased into a trusting blankness. Now I daydream consumer reports about my hiking boots. I question my trail mix variety once I pick out all the dried fruit and am left with a half-gallon bag of cashews. But these mundanities cycle over themselves until familiarity fades them to mental white noise. I feel paradoxically unburdened, there with my life on my back.

I organized trip three with an intention to focus pointedly on nature silence. Four friends and I drove to southern Vermont for a six-day hike in the Green Mountains. My project was coming up on its tenth month, and I felt familiar enough with silence and the AT to keep my palms from sweating on the steering wheel. We completed the South VA-Vermont drive in a single day, with pickup locations in Maryland and downtown Manhattan. One hiker hustled into my car as I idled illegally by a subway stop. He thrust a paper bag of fresh bagels into the front seat and I tore at them as we pulled onto the turnpike.

The AT gently tells you this rhythm is your only option, so you go to sleep at eight because the sun sets, and you walk ten miles because that’s where the next campsite
is. You filter three liters because you need it to carry you to the next stream. You hunch, breathless, in reply to the slope of the earth.

Vermont’s section stood hushed and untamed like all the others, and we loved it for its consistency. We met an older man with a thick Irish brogue, trail name Call Me Daddy, who carried his morning’s bacon grease in a can all day and started his campfires with it at night. In the shelters, thru-hikers told us their stories – what pushed them to drop their settledness for six months and smell like wild animals. We played cards and traded partially cooked rice pudding, quick human breaths before we resubmerged in the woods.

The AT doesn’t promise a noiselessness, but it does keep the manmade at bay. At its start- and endpoints, inscriptions read, *For those who seek fellowship with the wilderness.* In the woods, this fellowship takes on a sociality. You may not speak to the wilderness, but you exchange your momentary life with it.

You’re inherently unproductive on the Trail in the sense that you don’t produce or create – don’t further anything besides your mile count. In any societal understanding of success and what approaches it, your hike is a willful rejection of paths.

In this way, a hiker acknowledges the flimsiness of their aspirations. Those are worth putting on hold, and so is any delusion of control or individuality. The woods remind me each year: in most senses of most things, I am powerless, and I am replaceable.

Once I woke in a wet hammock strung somewhere in the Shenandoah Mountains. My friend stood twenty feet off in a stream, our water filter cradled in his hands. The ceramic had cracked. *Good morning!* he called. That year we boiled our drinking water in
a wide stove pot teetering on a thumb-sized camp stove. It took half an hour to purify each time, and it went down hot and sooty. A hiker named Magic left us a grubby bag of iodine tablets, but we took our chances with drinking ash.

After a hike I feel cocooned in peace, perspective. A preoccupation with every reason I won’t survive has shot through this peace for however many days I’ve gone dark. Despite or because of this, woods linger on me.

I remember exiting the interstate to grab some coffee – one of those trickster exit signs where the café is actually inside a grocery store. Waiting on the barista, I confided, *I just finished a week on the Appalachian Trail.* This was still Georgia, so thumping sweaty and dirt-clad into a Kroger didn’t incite curiosity. Cash registers whirred around us, shopping cart wheels shrieked, a matter-of-fact voice megaphoned pertinent info re: various aisle numbers. I had to tell someone my situation. Speeding to Virginia up I-85 without any closure from the change of scenery swamped me in confused anonymity. Not the humbling anonymity of the trail, but something akin to waking up post-wisdom teeth extraction and immediately talking insurance with the front desk lady. The barista nodded and handed me my cup, and I walked past nested carts to my car. Around me, people deposited full plastic bags into their trunks.

The next day my friend took me to a jazz club in downtown D.C. with hardwood everything. Sound rang from the floors, walls, and tables. We ordered Caesar salads and watched a rotation of performers. My friend salivated over chord structure while images flashed before my head: stacking rocks in a clearing, the movement of a pine bough. Trumpeter joined keyboardist and bassist swapped with drummer in sonic musical chairs. Two bartenders scooped ice into glasses, asked *how are we doing over here?* I thought of
sitting at the top of Tray Mountain, camp mug cupped in my hands – I had stayed that way for an hour, it must have been an hour. The Blue Ridge stood spectrally, turquoise to magenta, in its characteristic haziness, and I had been unable to leave the clearing. We later fit the nozzle of our filter into a thin stream of water someone had routed through a PVC pipe. Three of us took turns pumping, crouched on stones, and there was no one and nothing anywhere else.

A vocalist joined the ensemble, a trombonist left. I fished my journal out of my bag and wrote about the sound of a singular honeybee. From the club we walked to a froyo shop, fluorescents and bright tile, Adele hits. We ate on the street and strolled through Adams Morgan. Slender sweet gum trees accessorized wild urbanity, planted between concrete slabs, growing nonetheless.
chapter 9: dear emily,

Officially this is my first letter to you, but I’ve grown up with you in my head, and I like to think you occasionally hear my thoughts. I realize your genius was of the transpersonal variety that makes everyone feel at home in what you left behind. And of course I sense a kinship with you because anyone with this many NPR feature stories on them has wedged themselves firmly in the American subconscious. But I came of age in your garden, and that seems worth something on some supernatural plane. You taught me to be still and make the world into art, and you kept me company in my reclusive eccentricity. In stumbling on the enchantment you left behind, I have found myself wandering beside footprints.

*Between My Country - and the Others -
There is a Sea -* 1,2

Every day of middle school, I took two forty-five minute bus rides through the University of Georgia Agricultural Department’s infinite crop fields. They stretched gold and misty, and the sprinklers threw up white arches. I drew in the condensation on the window (split latches, persistent whistle of breeze) and queued the *Pride and Prejudice* soundtrack in my ear buds.

The farmers near my house chopped up chicken corpses and fertilized their crops with them. I wouldn’t add this detail, except nature and morbidity are two of your favorite topics. You’ll laugh to know the smell of dead chickens makes me homesick.
I was an anachronistic kid. I read your work and got super into other nineteenth century hermit-femmes like Jo March in *Little Women*. I carted armfuls of paperbacks and notebooks between classes in case I finished reading one or ran out of pages to cover in my musings.

*There is a solitude of space*
*A solitude of sea*
*A solitude of Death, but these*
*Society shall be*
*Compared with that profounder site*
*That polar privacy*
*A soul admitted to itself* - ³

They say you wrote most of your poetry between twelve and four a.m., and I like to think of you in the dark with a candle at your cherry table.⁴ If my lifestyle ever permits, I’ll keep your writing hours. For now I follow pop advice columns and light the same candle every day, typing at a plastic card table, drinking coffee at precisely six p.m.

I love silence with you now, and I have felt what you felt there. I don’t mean to be presumptuous. But don’t you agree that each parcel of air and light brings enchantment in times alone, quiet? Of course you agree. You taught me.

I think we’re linked – not you and I, but all of us. Maybe we feel kinship when our magic aligns with someone else’s.

Maybe you linger, on purpose, in the chill of a handful of clay.

Maybe you lie along a leaf stem.

Maybe you allowed me to happen upon you.

*The words the happy say*
Are paltry melody
But those the silent feel
Are beautiful -

I wouldn’t trade anything for what I have seen and felt in silence, but I will note the witnessing leaves a helplessness behind. How could I possibly communicate movement of branches, slow and mutually eclipsing, like we could measure them as stars with parallax?

Or the little patches of green light thrown from a necklace.

The move-stop-move of people’s eyes when they speak, when they pause.

Oh, when someone pauses it captures me.

We stop in hopes we can think ourselves into righter things to say.

Speech is one symptom of affection
And Silence one -
The perfectest communication
Is heard of none

Sometimes I’m afraid that we all misrepresent you. Do you feel betrayed by “Hope is the thing with feathers” needlepoint? You didn’t publish, and you hid your poems in Margaret’s chest. Do you feel violated with your magic painted across the world like this? I think you’d permit it, wooed by participation in hexing us all toward heightened awareness of, say, violets.

Sometimes I’m afraid my talk of magic reeks of desperation, as though with it I grasp for a new dreaminess to distinguish me from drudge, or maybe mortality. As if I ache in normalcy and so affiliate myself with transcendent ideas – is this all not good enough for me?
You made me a home in your pain. With literacy in the ways I saw magic came addiction to reading it across the world. With the addiction came a crushing withdrawal when I noticed that, for sustained periods, I couldn’t see it anymore. I won’t presume any connection between my shadows and the ones that sometimes overtook you. I just want you to tell me the world will look familiar again, and for longer.

You secreted your epilepsy and light sensitivity away, lying in your room with pounding in your brain. You stopped writing poetry, and you couldn’t look out the window. I want to be there, sitting by your bed, to comfort you but also to solicit lessons: when the magic left how did you grieve? Did you try to convince yourself it would come back?

While I know neither of us are to blame for magic’s departure, sometimes I still punish my eyes for letting the shimmer recede. I imagine my serotonin receptors glowing with light they’ve stolen, looping my brain down long-shadowed spirals.

Is magic a gift, a responsibility, or a delusion? Is it all of them? I reject any suspicions that I blow the enchantment out of proportion, but also I refuse to burden the way I see the world with expectations of consistency.
Silence is all we dread.
There’s Ransom in a Voice -
But Silence is Infinity.
Himself have not a face.10

What kept you company? I feel strongly that something did. Maybe a suspicion of the essence of things, maybe a suspicion it heard you. Maybe your words themselves, or the hope that something outside yourself heard them. I know that one.

To disappear enhances -
The Man that runs away
Is tinctured for an instant
With Immortality11

In high school I scribbled off a litany of hyper-chaste nature poems because I thought that’s what one did. I don’t think you wore white to perpetuate some oppressive virginal mythos. I’m pretty sure that if your white dress alluded to virginity at all, it was in irony. But at sixteen this eluded me, so I wrote verse like oh, you graceful, blue moon jelly / gliding limp in salty tide, / brush again against my ankle / with benign, translucent hide.

I think it’s hilarious that you wore white and darted behind walls when people visited you. That you glided up to Thomas Higginson with two cryptic day lilies after writing faceless letters back and forth for eight years.12 You handed over the flowers and whispered, These are my introduction. What a power move. All I did was ask Hannah to grab a beer.

It haunts me to think of you buried in white clothes and a white casket.13 It’s not alabaster, but they nailed the essence. I like that your sister placed two heliotropes near
your hand for you to take to Judge Lord, another recipient of your cryptic floral messages.

The Fruit perverse to plucking
But leaning to the Sight
With the exstatic limit
Of unobtained Delight 14

I think you taught me iambic, so thanks. Although I spun out of control with it, and when you aren’t good at iambic, it kind of curses your poetry. Thankfully my creative writing professor put a moratorium on my metered verse.

In college I had a brief period of dismissing your work as half-baked singsongs about flowers that didn’t matter.

You would laugh to know how much that hurts to write and remember.

“Nature” is what We know -
But have no Art to say -
So impotent our Wisdom is
To Her Sincerity - 15

I took a semester study on you, and all the students ran into each other at campus events for queer people. I met Hannah in the class, and we still laugh about how you’ve springboarded our Sapphic cliché.

But when a Boy and Barefoot
I more than once at Noon

Have passed I thought a Whip Lash
One student in our class never used gendered pronouns for you, and I think it was because of the way you signed your letters E. Dickinson and referenced your boyhood. I wonder if you’d like this. I’m fairly sure you would on instinct, and then you’d chew on it alone for days, still liking it.

Hannah and I taught one of the classes. We called our lesson “Silence in Emily Dickinson” and we spent a lot of the discussion on “Soft as the Massacre of Suns.” The class ran with it, calling out ideas for why it implies silence so strongly.

Because it’s an unfinished clause? What is the soft thing?

Because of all the s sounds?

Because it describes a silent image?

I fever wrote a paper on you called “Paradox and Control in Emily Dickinson’s Silences.” It took seven hours, and I lost track of time. It was, I think, my only paper on you in which I don’t analyze vaginal imagery. Don’t laugh at me for this – you’re the one with so much erotic flower language.
Since Gift of Thee - 20

I like that you were in love with Sue, and I like that we’ll agonize over the nature of it for hundreds of years. I understand the desperate investigation – I want you as a queer icon as much as the next flannel-wearing liberal arts student. But I respect that our words for connections between people are just as worthy of rebellion as the rhymes you slanted. At a party someone asked Hannah and I if we’re roommates. I said, She’s my –! I’m her –! We’re –! before Hannah rescued me with girlfriend. But even that – I see my friends’ eyes strain as they put on immediate tolerance and try to hear what I’m saying. I have to come out to tell my professor my weekend plans. I drop a word like an anvil and stand back, it’s casual, I’m casual, we’re all casual here.

Love reckons by itself - alone -
“As large as I” - relate the Sun
To One who never felt it blaze -
Itself is all the like it has - 21

In my aforementioned slanderous phase, I called your slant rhymes lazy, but now I understand what they rupture. 22 Now I see the critics calling you an unschooled aspirant. Now your grammar and rhyme read as rebellion. Rebellion against convention maybe, but I think your slanted poetics rebel against the impotence of human language. I think you did what you could to cram magic into a word. Or at least to give magic a voice, however chiseled down.

You lived an Independent Extasy, and that may have been enough on its own, but I’m glad you left a paper trail. If you felt it worth breaching your enchanted silence to tell
what silence may hold, then perhaps I’ll motivate my work with a dream of picking up where you left off. Not as a worthy successor, but as a sort of Ethereality Research Assistant. Or you tell me what to do next. For now I click on my salt lamp and build little altars in an eggshell room. I bookmark the online thesaurus entry for magic because the repetition is ruining my writing. I make midnight pilgrimages to the bridge I’m not supposed to walk by myself, where wind hisses over a moonlit river. I close my eyes and smile at campus lore that now I’ll die alone.

_Incredible the Lodging_  
_But limited the Guest_  

When I saw the new daguerreotype of you I almost cried.

To think I’d only ever seen that one picture of you sitting rigidly, a child. In the new one, you look evenly into all these eyes as, desperate, we look back. Your mouth almost smiles, but nothing else confesses. Your arm disappears behind a woman in black.

What kept you company, as you keep me company? I am content to fade faceless into the thousands who love you, but I think your participation in the world is more nuanced than one-stare-fits-all.

I think the world comes together. Or lets itself be seen that way. I think the world gave me you in confirmation of my fantastical suspicions.

And maybe you orchestrated my suspicions from your station wedged in my psyche. But either way the world let me have you. Me, the undeserving English major self-important enough to characterize her adolescence in some ghostly friendship with Emily Dickinson.
I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you - Nobody - too?
Then there’s a pair of us!
Dont tell! they’d advertise - you know!  

You met me when I needed you, an aspiring writer so jarred by the world that I took to my room and perched by an open window, chicken shit and chicken bodies and sweet pinesap in the air. I often thought that if it was okay for you to live by the window with a pen, it was okay for me, too.

My best Acquaintances are those
With Whom I spoke no Word -
The Stars that stated come to Town
Esteemed Me never rude
Although to their Celestial Call
I failed to make reply -
My constant - reverential Face
Sufficient Courtesy -  

I am not a pearly gates kind of girl, but nevertheless I instinctively picture you looking over a cloudbank from an eighteen-inch writing desk.  

Now you look down at the world instead of out, but you still indulge in your vice for voices,  
listening in on one million English 101 lectures to hear whether they got it right.

Really, when I think about it, you are not lofted and vacant but exist in the fibers of my paper. You walked me to class today, stopping to note the yellow of the leaves.

A Letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend.  

As I wrote this on the floor by the closet, the heater came on and my roommate’s white lace dress began to move continuously beneath the vent.

Annabel
chapter 10: every other fragile thing

I took one of my early instructional flights in an RV4 aircraft compact enough to let the wind toss you where it wills. My dad’s pilot friend, Mike, told me to keep my limbs clear of the rear controls as I cinched myself into a spiderweb of belts behind him.

I’m the first woman in a flying dynasty. Granddad on one side flew B-24s in World War II, granddad on the other flies a four-seater Navion all over creation. Dad was a fighter pilot and now flies private, Uncle flies commercial, brother got his license when he turned sixteen. I used to think I’d have to become more comfortable with my mortality if I ever were to join their ranks, but eventually I loved life too much to let a fear of death cloud my wild living of it. Or maybe I just wanted to be in the sky.

We buzzed down the runway and swept up into Maryland’s golden hour. Hills scooped little farmhouses and tumbled toward the Potomac. The RV4 has an unobscured glass dome for its cockpit, and pilots can see in all directions. Like iMAX, but a thousand feet up. Mike banked dramatically right, our wings sliding on an invisible plane, too ready to follow his whims.

He let go of the stick and I took up my rear controls, banking in crude imitation. Later I’d learn to decrease power in a descent, increase in a turn, push the rudder pedals in a bank, but Mike handled all that for now. We headed toward the river. Ready to barrel roll? he asked.

The glass revealed everything – the world as it circled around us. I felt a kind of giddiness that fills the lungs with helium balloons, and I grinned into the spinning landscape. Golden hour had set the iced Potomac glowing, and long shadows encircled
me. *Oh, the earth*, came a thought unprompted, *oh, the earth, oh, the earth, the earth, the earth.*

We barely leveled out before Mike rolled us the other direction, and everything floated again. I felt of the world and not – a plaything tossed in its atmosphere, deaf to the noises that characterize life on the ground. Rush hour filled the roads below us, but traffic felt like a joke we play on one another. From the air everyone seems in on something funny – we’ll push along in this flatland reality, but we know it turns on a celestial axis, so why lament the long grocery checkout line?

My grandfather hangars his Navion in Franklin County, Georgia, at a rural airport without a control tower. Dad and I visited a couple weeks after my RV4 flight, hoping the skies would clear enough to log some hours.

Franklin County Airport consists of a few hangars and a little office with a green tin roof and a key code everyone knows. A weather-beaten Shell Aviation sign stands beside a fuel tank, and wild onions catch the breezes off the runway. It’s uncontrolled airspace, so when you radio your flight pattern, you don’t speak to anyone in particular. You just announce yourself into the void. We parked the truck randomly on unmarked asphalt, and Dad dialed the number for AWOS, an automated weather update service for pilots. We stood under a gray and unbroken ceiling as a nonhuman voice told us about visibility. The only other sound came from a flag whipping against its aluminum pole. On a nearby hill, a ratty windsock strained against its rigging. We dug our toes at the asphalt and dialed AWOS again, eager for some lasting blue.
We ran a long preflight check on my dad’s Super Cub to kill some time. He showed me how to check its oil and how to snap the nose panel back into place after inspecting the engine. We walked around the body of the plane, cotton stretched tight over a metal frame, thick tires for grass landings. Super Cubs are the mountain bikes of the aviation world, fit to land on varied terrain, perfect for backcountry. We pushed the wing flaps up and down, checking that they moved together. We studied the fastener pins on the ailerons, directional flaps also on the wings. We plucked the cords that pull the elevator flaps on the tail, and Dad taught me how to listen for their familiar bass. I marveled at how much of a plane is simple machine – levers, pulleys, tension and angle manipulated and maintained, as though we fly fishing rods through the air.

*Franklin County traffic – Super Cub 2-8-8-4 Papa departing runway 2-6, stay in the pattern,* Dad said at the top of the strip. No one responded. I sat behind him, our sticks, pedals, brakes, and throttles connected, both sets of controls routed to the same parts of the plane like pedals on a tandem bicycle. Gray clouds still blew above us, but the conditions were flyable, and we were desperate for some time in the air.

Piloting induces a unique detachment. The elevation shrinks me, and the turbulence analogizes me to anything about to be broken. Even the future – the lives I may live out on the ground, everything about me runs out its significance into fragility, links with every other fragile thing. I commune, approach my terminus, my soul loops through states of undoing, redoing, and nothing hurts.

My mind feels the quiet when I’m airborne. To see life play out unannrated below me, to feel myself pass through such states of contentment without remark, leaves
language feeling hollow, earthbound. The prop and engine commingle. Dad slides open the window, and air fills my ears.

I asked Dad to review the controls, popping my consonants in the headset mic to register sound. It had been a bumpy ride, one of those REMEMBER, YOU’RE AT MY MERCY kinds of dialogues with Nature, but my stomach was good to keep going.

Dad ran through the stick and rudder movements, fishtailing the body of the plane, plunging us into a dive, pulling back into a climb, banking right, banking left. The body of the Cub swung back and forth like an ornament on a baby’s mobile.

The wind kept blowing us off course, and I learned to dramatize my aileron adjustments to compensate. On the next day’s flight, clouds came in at a thousand feet. Dad kept reminding me of this: Stay below the clouds. Stay Below The Clouds. He gave me total control over the Cub, tasking me with 360 turns, wide banks, and missions to and from my grandparents’ house. Their pond looked small and still, throwing sun where the clouds broke.

One afternoon Dad loaded my grandpa’s mower into a trailer and carted it to the airport. He’d checked the ground beside the paved runway for holes or other abnormalities, but it seemed fine for a grass strip. Super Cub pilots will do near anything to land in the grass. It’s softer and better for the wheel struts, and it makes them feel Wright-Brotherish. We rattled down Dad’s strip in the Cub, throwing mud on the wings and laughing. Flight, offroading – the world at once contained us and didn’t.
My brother and grandfather were the only others at Franklin County Airport during our two afternoons of training. They wheeled out the Navion and tinkered on it while Dad reviewed parts of the Cub with me. The four of us spoke curtly to one another, intent on tightening the screws of the prop spinner or calculating our fuel rations. My grandpa taught me what a sucker hole is, warning against patches of blue sky that entice you to take off and then close up once you’re through them, hiding your path to land.

We often wouldn’t respond to one another, or would respond by fishing a desired tool out of a duffel, stowing someone’s phone in the car. We had packed turkey and cheese sandwiches and we could stay at the airport for hours, silently maintaining our routes to the sky.

Back at my grandparents’ house, I pulled their pickup into the drive and cranked it into park with a force that made me feel capable, as driving a pickup always does. After the thrill of flight, the house felt cocoonish. A clock sounded beneath popping logs, tins and china percussed as my grandmother fried hamburger meat for chili. I untied my shoes and huddled into the sofa, and Dad showed me airspace maps on his phone.

I like to slip out of the living room and walk my grandparents’ fields. As a kid I’d make holiday pilgrimages to the edge of their land and say hi to the neighbor’s cow. I’d hit the other attractions too: the grave where my cousin’s terrier is buried always gave me a morbidly pleasing spook, and I had a ritual tree root for propping up my jars of fireflies. The burned remains of a cousin’s treehouse fire, the motorcycle shed with rat snakes in it. I’d careen a ramshackle golf cart over my favorite berm to shock my younger cousin, who learned after the first time not to fling himself off in escape. I’d drive wide circles
around the hornets’ nest by the tractor and the well dug into the ground. I’d end my adventures with a ceremonial digging up of wild onions, risking a single nervous lick.

Now I let my remembered self run past me as I walk the fields. She wonders at the honeysuckle, the broken golf tees in the grass. She peels leeches from her feet and looks for snapping turtles. Slow despite its wildness, life here runs in quiet symphony.

Dad finished looking at flight maps and weather predictions, and everyone trickled to bed. Night in rural Georgia feels like a comfortable void. As a kid, I’d snuggle into the void and relish my suspicions of what existed Out There, in the dark. Glistening galaxies and sleeping wild foxes, fish at the bottom of the pond. Now I like to stargaze through lace curtains in the guestroom. No artificial light obscures the constellations.

I fished an extra quilt from the linen closet, wrapped myself tightly in it, and slept within the sky I’d explored. The infinite infused every fiber of everything.

A couple weeks after my Georgia flying lessons, my friend Diana and I travelled to Vegas to celebrate her birthday.

In Vegas, sound jangles from slot machines and pulses in heavy bass. Street performers call from the curb, ice hits the glass. The dregs of a margarita rattle through a straw, dice ricochet, a roulette wheel spins. A Journey cover band strikes up on the corner, a man insistently shouts invites to his affiliate strip club, another man megaphones that I’m hellbound, that Jesus Christ can save me. Betters dispute referees in the sports book, video poker machines sing up and down the chromatic scale, one note for each cent won.
We found our way to the Double Down Saloon, a punk dive bar that made me feel at home in my standard green lipstick and combat boots. The Negative Nancies yelled into a small black room plastered with garage rock paraphernalia. A man said to Diana and me, *I’d say they’re good for a bunch of chicks, but they’re just good.* When he saw the looks on our faces, he treated us to Ass Juice as penance, essentially a ladle of the bar trough and a maraschino cherry. The Nancies screamed against footage of helicopter crashes. I sipped Ass Juice and felt so happy it hurt my bones.

I worried Vegas would exhaust me with its hedonism, but I met scrappy locals and found magic in the matte sunlight of the southwest. I often ruptured the marveling with bouts of intense thinking. About human nature, about goodness and badness. Fake blue skies stretched on the ceilings of clockless casinos. Gambling halls wound labyrinthine, guiding me through beautiful women who just want me to stay, crushed velvet and neon writing about odds in my favor. I watched people press the spin button on penny slot machines, their arms too tired to pull the crank.

And yet, beauty. Layered rock held the city in its protective scoop. I couldn’t see blue in the mountains, but they supported the suspicion of blue. Shadow and ridge, oceanic behind clusters of amber streetlights. Jet contrails lingering for hours, unthreatened in the windless, cloudless desert. Maybe I liked the noise because the earth promised its finitude. Maybe I liked the noise because hope performed it – hope manipulated and hope maintained, humans treating one another to celebration in nighttime both for and against them. Sound came tectonic, pushed up and mountainous around me, and I couldn’t stop dancing.
I often challenge myself to diehard silence lifestyle changes. I should toss my phone and get a burner, delete my Facebook, delete my Spotify. Get a couple CDs and really listen to them, not couch myself in my 1500-song playlist and shuffle through noise I don’t intentionally choose. I should own three shirts and write books in a cabin, pilot a Super Cub in the deserted Alaskan bush. I should meditate for an hour every morning and go on longer silence retreats. What are you, a spiritual wuss? Cut the noise like an ascetic gone tyrannical, plug your ears with the self-important desperation of the disciple you know you should be.

It’s same-song-second-verse of a human urge to reinvent, be better be better be better. I feel myself participate in the beautiful heartbreak of high standards and hopes that we learn more, get closer to some edge. But in Vegas I let loose on a near-empty dance floor. Funk music Sunday night at another dive, Oddfellows. My black dress wet with sweat, I fit salsa step into quarter time and spun under strangers’ arms. This noise was worth hearing.

I love Las Vegas. I am young and so maybe I don’t know what other people know, or maybe I haven’t been burned enough to tap out. In Georgia I seep into the world, walk enchanted, contemplate. My grandmother’s tomato plants evidence the existence of other people, but it’s an abstract existence. I occupy the sky, radioing my runway approach to no one, circling shaky arcs above empty two-lane roads.

At a liquor store off the Strip we bought cheap pinot, two thermoses and a Viva Las Vegas corkscrew. We transferred the wine in the bathroom of a grungy taco joint and walked the streets. A stranger rapped about my coat into a mic, called me Lady in Purple. A man played “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” on steel drums.
As we boarded our flight home from Vegas, the pilot announced that he was slated to fly low over the Grand Canyon, Colorado River, and Monument Valley. The clusters of outer Vegas’ stucco homes quickly gave way to protected land as we flew east, cul-de-sacs bumping up against sudden red slopes. No foothills previewed the mountains there – a sudden limitlessness stretched, cliffs from me to the curve of the earth

I put in my earbuds, faded into otherworldly synths, and watched the ground rise, plummet, layer in shades of red, slide into a thousand rivulets. Sunset turned the air pink and then blue. Dusk-colored mountains spilled across the ground beneath us, studded with clusters of light.
epilogue: air and water

I met Meghan in middle school, before she began studying American Sign Language.¹ Now she’s years deep, and in an interview she tells me that learning ASL taught her to communicate with less: one facial expression can start and end a conversation. She describes a new intimacy, like she can say more with her eyebrows than her words.

In college Meghan completed a placement interview before she registered for ASL classes. The evaluators told her that technically her knowledge matched level four, but they placed her in level three because her facial expressions needed work.

She tells me that when signing for distance, you make an *oooh* shape with your mouth for something close, and you wag your tongue for something far away. You knit your eyebrows together to describe focusing or feeling angry. Meghan learned how to change her face to distinguish between words with the same sign and how to communicate in a language with few synonyms. She says she finds herself making more eye contact now.

Meghan attended college in Rochester, New York because its proximity to the National Technical Institute for the Deaf makes it one of the biggest Deaf communities east of the Mississippi. Her friends typed food orders on their phones and handed them to waiters, popped out their hearing aids to study in noisy coffeehouses, signed across parties to ask for a drink. Meghan’s professors started telling her to keep her hands down during class.
After Rochester Meghan moved to a Georgia town with a much smaller Deaf community. She volunteers at a hospital where, if a Deaf patient comes in, nurses roll an iPad on wheels into the triage and dial up a licensed interpreter. Usually the conversation glitches and lags, so when a Deaf woman listed non-emergent began coughing up blood, Meghan signed to her directly, and seven nurses snuck in to watch. Meghan mainly remembers the woman’s eyes – how afraid they were when she arrived alone, EMTs wheeling trauma cases in around her – and how full of light they became when someone understood.

When one of Meghan’s ASL professors was young, she was beaten with a ruler until she could speak English properly. As doctors began offering cochlear implants, older members of the Deaf community balked. People present the implants as a fix to being Deaf, and Deaf parents with the bruises to remind them what fixing feels like say their children are fine the way they are.

In Meghan’s small Georgia town, the Deaf community really isn’t a community at all. ASL professors at a nearby college can only hang out with work friends. If their kid breaks an arm, they have to find an interpreter. It’s isolating for them, Meghan tells me, and she wishes she could transplant the resources she’s seen in Rochester or even Atlanta: resume workshops, social groups. She tries her best to keep practicing sign language and to help where she can. She wonders, if it’s hard for her to find outlets, what is it like for someone living in silence?

When I thought about silence for a year and a half, paradox rang in my ears. My life felt dictated by a giddy child at a soundboard cranking volume nobs all the way up
then all the way down. I attended Sonic Acts to learn from noise what silence could be, and I slept in monasteries for the same reason.

But it’s not like I scheduled each paradox, showed up notebook in hand. I’m too young and I too often edge up to wanna-be-punk for that kind of restraint. I moshed at Vegas dive bars because I was a little drunk and I wanted to, not because I could extrapolate yin-yang, noise-quiet wisdoms.

The Meridian Coffeehouse doesn’t serve coffee. It’s tucked into an unvisited street between the Baptist Campus Ministry and some sustainability building. On the weekends clusters of students smoke on the front porch while a swinging door sporadically muffles a C-level touring band.

I love the Merid for its people and its grunge: pagan symbols bedeck the walls, a glow-in-the-dark skeleton foot hangs from the ceiling fan. Red twinkle lights, a rotting dancefloor we aren’t supposed to mosh on anymore. My sound engineer friends, Ben C. and Ben F., monitor my levels when I perform there, putting up with my old school guitar, fitting me with an instrument mic and kicking amp cables out of the way.

Last fall we started gathering at the Merid for Thursday Noise Nights. Four of us showed each week, plucked the pocket lint from our earplugs and wired up homemade soundboards velcroed onto scrap wood. We turned off the lights and projected movies on the wall, muted and sped up into mutilated cuts of racing mouths, unnatural gaits. I’d hunch in the corner of the couch and write shit poetry in my journal while the three others amplified siren noise, sliding pitch dials up and scooping down, and ran their screams
through a loop pedal, scoring the abstracted film. We tried it: sealed inside with the front
door closed, you couldn’t hear an amplified keyboard hammered at full volume.

I wrote by the light of blinking dials and Johnny Depp darting children through
the Chocolate Factory. Noise collectively swelled and sickened.

A couple times I forgot my earplugs, and Ben F. loaned me his noise-cancelling
headphones. But even with those on, I felt sound wedging itself into every fold of my
brain and body. Once I made an empty promise to bring pots and pans and bang them
into a mic, but I showed up with just my journal and a pen like the two times before.

Every Thursday I took a twenty-minute break on the porch swing, watching for
police lights now that the new campus chief was cracking down on the 11pm noise
ordinance. I toed moldering slats and listened to the chains whine over rumbles from
inside. Even on the stoop the sound shook my body. I turned off my phone and watched
the moon, nodded at cops idling across the street before they left to take another lap.

Shortly after one of these nights, Ben C. ran into me on campus and handed me a
printed article on hearing loss, his eyes wide. He’d just ordered new earplugs, he said,
and in the page’s upper corner he’d written Show Annabel for thesis. Since, I’ve never
seen him without his carabineer key ring, silver earplug capsule swinging safely from his
hip.

When I thought about silence for a year and a half, I thought about minimalism
and intentionality and muting my ego. I deleted my Facebook and gave away a lot of my
clothes, and I still have too many clothes but more than anything I feel supra-conscious.
One afternoon I read on the couch for four hours while the light blued through the
window, and I remembered watching time stream through the air in sunrays at the
monastery in Bristow.

I deleted Snapchat and Tumblr and even Linkedin just to be thorough, freedom
from each successive social media buzzing me with those dopamine highs they say
Millenials get from a notification. I selected pages of my thesis at a time and wiped them
with a single electric tap.

Meghan put me in touch with her friend Oliver, the president of a Deaf student
group at her alma mater.² He agreed to an interview, and we traded a Word document
back and forth: I typed questions, he filled the spaces between them.

Oliver was born during a snowstorm, with or without hearing loss. He still doesn’t
know – the hospital audiologist couldn’t navigate the roads. Oliver’s parents noticed
warning signs when he was three. He didn’t respond to his name, and his what’s
punctuated otherwise indecipherable speech.

During recess Oliver stayed in for speech therapy. He cites ten years off the
playground as the source of his introversion, or maybe his difficulty following
conversations, or the headache his hearing aid gives him when he cranks it all the way up.
Without the aid he hears nonverbal voices humming to one another. He appreciates a
good conversation, he writes, more than he would if they were easy to come by.

Regardless of his solitude’s motivation, Oliver prefers it to company. He doesn’t
realize he’s been alone until people tell him they haven’t seen him in a few days. In the
interims he loses himself, hiking alone in upstate New York, reflecting and reforming and
doing all those things that come to him so easily in quiet space. On Sundays he meditates for an hour at his local Quaker meeting.

_Silence isn’t a lack of anything – it just is a different place_, Oliver writes between my bullet points, _like how air is the contrast to water_. At school he can spot new American Sign Language students because he sees them whispering while they sign, trying to fill the silence with sound. _They view it as a gap or a void in space. I much prefer to think of it as a setting in itself._

People tell me I should book a sensory deprivation tank at a spa for my research. I tell them I’ve been claustrophobic ever since I cinched a bug net around my hammock and couldn’t get out. The nearest sensory deprivation tank costs $130 per hour – I tell my mother and she says I’m exempt because I was _quiet already at that monastery_.

Ben C. and Ben F. invited me to sing with their band at a Fleetwood Mac cover night. The Merid crowd transplanted to an off-campus basement so we could drink away from school property. I make the same joke every basement cover night, collecting a pool for what time the walls will start dripping.

I scrolled through pictures of Stevie Nicks, drew on thick black eyeliner circles and laced up my combat boots. I tried to wash my earplugs before the show, but the rubber wouldn’t dry and so I went without them, feeling edgier than I am in a thrifted black dress with wooden buttons all the way down the center and ropey lace across the chest.
We packed into the dark room, exposed pipes and unfinished floors, tangling wires the only division between band and audience, and hammered out “The Chain,” “Edge of Seventeen,” and “Dreams.” I stomped so much I almost unplugged Ben F.’s effects pedal three times. I had run through the songs on repeat in my car, adding my own riffs, making Stevie’s vocal range work. I had Sharpied the lyrics up my forearms. But in the soaking basement I couldn’t hear myself – I screamed over the drummer, snare ricocheting with nowhere to go, dancing with my arms in the air so I could read them. Moshing students screamed back, the front row a foot away, all of us buzzed and deafened.

The noise stopped having layers. Instead of vocals over keys, bass and guitar over drums, all of it pressed into me. I felt my mind’s eye blinded, couldn’t slide into falsetto, couldn’t set up Ben F.’s harmonies. Instead I yelled out of my chest, giddy, unhearing.

The rest of the night I listened to a high whine, steady in my ears until morning. I said sheepish prayers I hadn’t done lasting damage, then watched shaky phone videos of our set on repeat. I laughed at the breaks in my voice, rewinded, watched them again.

My academic advisor, Dan, is a professor of Ornithology. He has trouble settling into nature silence because he can’t keep from identifying birdcalls. Even the white noise recordings of forest sounds I crank up in my earbuds when the neighbors argue keep Dan tuning in, naming varieties of sparrows. He used to teach a hard of hearing student who had increasing difficulty listening to the birds, so he tucked cardboard flaps into her ballcap. I asked him about this and he didn’t remember which time it was. He’s tucked a
lot of cardboard over his career, and he told me there’s usually something in people’s trunk they can use to funnel in the sound like an elephant’s ears.

Ben C. and I drove from south Vermont where we were hiking on the Appalachian Trail to Johnson City, Tennessee. It was the summer of the 2017 solar eclipse, and we wanted to crash at a friend’s near the line of totality. Cars moved under five miles per hour down the interstate as millions of people slogged across the U.S. in celestial pilgrimage.

I will never forget the disparate cheers of travelers spread down the hillside. We had pulled taut a white sheet at the highest point in a random municipal park. Cars spilled onto the grass, filled the shoulders of the roads. The air darkened, birds split down the middle of the sky and took to the treelines, little electric C’s hovered across our sheet before light clasped a dark moon and false sunset fell across the soccer fields.

Life surrendered to thick, curious silence. The air wasn’t what it should be, the time wasn’t what it should be, crickets sang in mid-afternoon. Then the celebration, the clapping and unselfconscious shouts of people breaking through time. Squinting through rainbow-scaled eclipse glasses, faceless behind craigslisted welding masks – what pulled us here?

I liked the unity of the eclipse more than the sun’s disappearance. I didn’t even mind the traffic – windows down in Ben’s orange Hundai, we took turns DJing in three-hour shifts. I came away with tinnitus in my ears and gold crescents behind my eyelids, sound and light remembered, paper glasses tacked to my bulletin board.
There are quiets I will never comprehend – faiths and hushed reverences, lived experiences, hand movements, mutednesses and oppressions, isolations, contentments. Trying to name silence is like trying to hear a flower bloom, but still I have felt an unfolding. When I thought about silence for a year and a half, I encountered infinite symphonies of life and meaning, praises to sing until I lose my voice worshiping something I can’t put down.
Notes

epigraph

1. Emerson 12

chapter 1

1. Shiota et al., “The nature of awe” 945
2. Shiota et al. 950
3. Shiota et al. 946
4. Piff et al. 895
5. Hood 29
6. See Hood for an explanation of the M Scale.
7. Maitland 72
8. Blum 202
9. Westkamp, personal interview
10. Emerson 12
11. Blanton 217
12. Blanton
13. Blanton 216

chapter 3

1. Eide & Lidén, *Vertical Studies*
2. I adopted some descriptions of *Vertical Studies* from my Sonic Acts coverage.
   
   See McSpadden, “*Vertical Studies.*”
3. Winderen, *Spring Bloom*

5. Supreme Connections, *Mini Sound Series*


   See McSpadden, “Power and Ownership.”

chapter 4

1. Thoreau, *Walden*

2. Thoreau 13

3. p. 15

4. p. 11

5. p. 143

6. pp. 506-7

7. p. 507

8. p. 175


10. Thoreau 18

11. p. 508

12. p. 508

13. p. 116

14. p. 25

15. Pavilé 122-3

16. Haile, “Going it Alone”

17. Spillman, “Hikers of Color”

19. Thoreau 372-3

20. p. 500

21. p. 509

22. p. 514

chapter 8

1. Rumi, “Where Everything is Music,” p. 34

chapter 9

1. For the Dickinson excerpts, I cite each poem with “Fr” followed by its number in the Franklin edition.

2. Fr829

3. Fr1696

4. Gordon 124

5. Fr1767

6. Fr1694

7. Gordon, Lives

8. Fr824

9. Gordon, Lives

10. Fr1300

11. Fr1239

12. Wineapple 86

13. “Emily Dickinson and Death”

14. Fr1239
15. Fr721
16. Fr1096
17. Gordon 148
18. Fr1146
19. Fr1548
20. Fr1195
21. Fr812
22. Gordon 251
23. Fr1452
24. “A New Daguerreotype”
25. Fr260
26. Fr1060
27. Figure captioned “A replica of the poet’s writing table,” Gordon, *Lives*, unmarked page.
28. Scheurer 28
29. “Emily Dickinson’s Letters”

chapter 11

1. Hovell, Personal interview
2. Stabbe, Personal interview
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“Emily Dickinson’s Letters.” *Emily Dickinson Museum*,

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