HELEN OR MY HUNGER

by

GALE MARIE THOMPSON

(Under the Direction of Ed Pavlic)

ABSTRACT

*Helen or My Hunger* is a poetic sequence that began in conversation with H.D.’s *Helen in Egypt*. It explores the relationship between memory, writing, and power, charting such concerns as iconicity, trauma, the body, and systemic violence. The poems think through a feminine mythmaking and storytelling (how and who we remember), weaving in and examining the speaker’s own “mythology.” It is motivated by some foundational questions: How is writing an act of memory? How do we construct our identities around the preservation or construction of memory? How is memory placed/displaced in the materiality of the body and its functions? How can power be drawn by resisting a single form, by allowing the work to find its own form, or formlessness?

“Reading *Ekstasis*: Tracking Contradictions, Sustaining Incongruences” re-examines the classical concept of *Ekstasis* as a means of opening up the self to public, social reality, as opposed to shutting it off. Primarily discussing the works of H.D. and Adrienne Rich, this introduction asks how a poet can “break through the abstract” using a patriarchal language that serves to divide and isolate.

INDEX WORDS: Poetry, Essay, Feminism, Desire, Hunger, Helen of Troy, Adrienne Rich, H.D., Anne Carson, Maggie Nelson, Poetic Form, Ekstasis, Hybridity, Subjectivity, Body, Memory
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DEDICATION

To Caroline Cabrera and Anne Cecelia Holmes—

my comrades, mis medias naranjas.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Caroline Cabrera and Anne Cecelia Holmes, for being my constant go-tos in all matters Helen-related. They read these poems as embryos, and remained (/remain) my main sources of critique, dialogue, and support throughout the process. Thank you to my committee members—Ed Pavlic, Magdalena Zurawski, and Andrew Zawacki—for their patience, rigor and friendship. In Athens, thank you to Amy Bonnaffons, Lindsay Tigue, and Gabes Hovendon, for their companionship and brilliance. Thank you to Alex Edwards, ballet partner extraordinaire, whose encouragement and wisdom over the last five years has given me a confidence and conviction I never knew I had. Thank you to my family, who has the faith to abundantly love and support someone whose livelihood they don’t understand. Finally—Helen or My Hunger began the month my grandmother died. She was nicknamed “Scrip” as a child because she helped to distribute the scrip at the coal mining company where her father worked, and the name stuck. Her Farness is more Near.

Poems from this manuscript have appeared in the following publications: Gulf Coast, The Volta (They Will Sew the Blue Sail), Bennington Review, TYPO, NightBlock, elsewhere, MiPOesias, jubilat, Ghost Proposal, bone bouquet, Powder Keg, B O D Y, Smoking Glue Gun, interruption, Dusie, and TIMBER.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................................. v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION: READING <em>EKSTASIS</em>: TRACKING INCONSISTENCIES, SUSTAINING INCONGRUENCES ..................... 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 HELEN OR MY HUNGER ................................................................ 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED ........................................................................ 103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Reading Ekstasis: Tracking Contradictions, Sustaining Incongruences

Preface

_Helen or my Hunger_ came in fits and starts. I just accidentally typed _fists and starts_, and I don’t think that’s all that untrue. The main reason I don’t know how to talk about _Helen_ is because I still don’t quite know where to place it. The primary “form” of this book is its shapeshifting. The pieces reach in toward one another, and yet they also reach out and away from the group. It is not a “long poem,” but I can’t see the pieces as belonging to any other name. It is not an “epic poem,” does not truly push forward via narrative, but uses Helen and the idea of an epic narrative to self-generate. I had been calling it a “serial poem,” a “poem sequence,” which was about as close as I could get to it, but even that didn’t seem to cover it. The filename for the manuscript has always been “AREYOUHELEN.docx.” To get myself started writing the prose-ier pieces I would call them “Helen loops”—restarts, broken pieces of something that can’t finish, can’t complete.

_Helen_ is at once a repeatable experiment—trying to write the same poem over and over—and its opposite—a trying to get out of the experiment. I began writing it in Spring of 2014, as part of my creative project for Ed Pavlic’s course on Adrienne Rich. It began as one poem. For over two years I would write a poem, title it something else, and then later realize that—of course—I was writing a _Helen_ poem all along. The result, as you will see, is a range of form, genre, voice, and intimacy, all written inside an array of frustrations. The core of the book contains, and at the same time rejects—tries to distract itself away from—the substance,
the material, of the writer’s life, the writer’s body, when even disorders, illnesses, uglinesses, are marked by privilege. The question that bubbles up in this manuscript, and continues to bubble even afterward, is—what are we (or the speaker) gaining by calling out to Helen in this way? What is being extended here because we are addressing myth? What is being displaced? We have a speaker soothed by privacy and anonymity, so much so that it is often private even to her; and yet there are moments that concede to particularities, to breakdowns of the abstract. That question remains, and I want it to remain—that’s the work going on in the book.

In the end, there might not be much here, formally, that might relate to Helen in Egypt, except for a few overall hints. Much in the same way that Helen in Egypt is both myth and an exploration of self(-myth) for H.D., this is what Helen or my Hunger has come to be for me. H.D.’s Helen searches for her own I; I am searching for the you.

The following introductory essay explores this search for the you—(through the I)—by rethinking the classical concept/experience of ekstasis. This is the beginning of a thought—not the culmination of one. I could have written about the “long poem,” in all its iterations and questions. I could talk about gender in the long poem, a lovely narrative we all already know and easily swallow at this point, of women taking over a male-dominated form, of finally invigorating the form with a specifically “female” voice, of writing to realize a totalizing desire. At the moment, I have never been less interested in that. I want to see what comes from this “form,” what its possibilities are; I want to use this space to mark out the unknown. It’s something I always tell my students: it is so much better to be specific about what you don’t know than vague and general about what you do know.

A second disclaimer: What I am venturing toward in this essay may not necessarily be Helen or My Hunger, but rather something I hope to move toward, something that waits for me.
I’d hate for Helen to be measured up against this yardstick I’m describing when I already know that it fails to do so.

Disclaimer three: Marking out the unknown may not come to fruition or argument. This introduction, then, is, I suppose, communication. Apologia. A handshake.
“Holding the tools in my mouth I struggle uphill, my body so perfectly suspended by my father’s push and gravity’s pull that no progress is made.”

—Rosmarie Waldrop, Reluctant Gravities

“I remember a little book of The Lives of the Saints that was given to me about age five. In this book the various flowers composing the crowns of the martyrs were so lusciously rendered in words and paint that I had to be restrained from eating the pages. But maybe the impulse to eat pages isn’t about taste. Maybe it’s about being placed at the crossing-point of a contradiction ...”


When I say ek-stasis, ekstasy, ecstasy: I don’t mean pleasure, bliss, passion, a blind union with an otherworldly entity wherein I learn some Truth. I don’t mean a total engrossment with an object, or that I am beside myself, enraptured, mesmerized until I can’t speak. I don’t mean Saint Teresa; I don’t want her deep, white folds. But I am reckoning and re-reckoning with what I don’t know, with what I can’t know. I am attempting alchemy, transference, to sublimate beyond a border of self—to be here and there at the same time. In a sense, that is otherworldly.

Ecstasy comes from the Greek word ἔκστασις, ekstasis, formed of the prefix ek (outside or beyond) and stasis (“standing,” “position,” sometimes “static”). ἔκστασις (ekstasis) is the stem of the word ἔκστασιν, which means “to put out of place” (“Ecstasy”).
Most of what is said about ekstasis regards the subject’s consciousness, the Self. The general philosophical term ecstasy is used to mean that consciousness is “outside-itself.” For example: most of the time, our consciousness is not self-enclosed, can be fully conscious of another person outside of the self. In fact, what our consciousness decides to think about is often not itself (as opposed to enstasis, standing-within-oneself, generally meaning inner contemplation) (Moores 15). Classical concepts of ekstasis were along the lines of “madness” or “bewilderment.” In late Greek the definition of “withdrawal of the soul from the body, mystic or prophetic trance” was added on (“Ecstasy”). The original lyric poems of Ancient Greece historically involved ecstasy; the poems were accompanied by music, and performed by a poet whose voice comes partly from himself, partly from a “muse” outside of himself (Moores 44). Much has been written on the ancient Dionysian ecstasy rituals, most relevant to us here because of H.D.’s lifelong fascination with occult practices and Hellenic mythology. Yet even at the heart of this ritual is an encounter with otherness that displaces the self so that it occupies two spaces, simultaneously. As Anne Carson explains in an interview with the Paris Review:

One thing I do understand about the Greeks is that they, too, understood otherness and valued it. That is what the god Dionysus is as a principle—the principle of being up against something so other that it bounces you out of yourself to a place where, nonetheless, you are still in yourself; there’s a connection to yourself as another (italics mine). It’s what they call ecstasy. (“The Art of Poetry no. 88”)

Ekstasis is not antistasis, the opposite position. Ekstasis is not even on the spectrum of position. It is outside position. It is the process of being abstracted, channeled out. A stand-off.
A radical discontinuity. Standing outside of the body, looking back from a vantage point exterior to it. Folk tales tell of bodies staying put while the rest go on a journey of ekstasis give us a sense of something akin to: Astral Projection? Bilocation? Antoscopic hallucination?

One foot in the door, one foot out.

*  

**Dislocated Subjectivity**

I want for distraction, always.

My mother’s blood is coal mining blood. The domain of my father’s HR work is the factory: first, capacitor manufacturing, and then the strange, dismal world of truck manufacturing in rural Appalachia. The only video recording we have of my childhood was taken using a camera that my father had borrowed from work, and it was recorded over security footage of the plant operating at night. The transition between footage is abrupt, and I remember each time waiting in terror as my sister’s nine-year-old face with oversized glasses shattered into the loud, gold stamping of machinery. I used to sit and watch this unchanging efficiency for as long as I could. I wanted to be the kind of person who could watch until the tape finished.

I cannot sit still. I do countless things in order to not find myself sitting still: working innumerable, often mindless, paid and unpaid jobs; I “stick things out” far past when I should, use the doggedness, the difficulty, to make up for failures—to avoid risk, liability, accountability. When traveling with friends, I have to be reminded to do things like drink water, go to the bathroom, sit down to rest, eat lunch. I often have to ask those close to me what my preferences are. Knowing what I want is impossible.
To long for a subject is a lack; it must be desire, but a retreat further into the cage\(^1\). I am a thinker in dialogue; I still find it hard to write to a paper that can’t answer back, ask me questions, make myself think harder, push farther, \textit{to say the thing}. If I am alone, it is all too easy to ignore what I think before it’s even thought. To detach into silence. When I was in college a professor criticized students’ (over)use of the \textit{I} in our poems, thought it excessive, something to grow out of. I understood it as a direct assessment of how self-involved, how self-interested I was. The last thing I wanted was for my poems to be a litany of whines. I had grown up believing that the last thing I should be caught doing is thinking my experiences or ideas warranted “telling” about them. Every \textit{I} written beyond this point has been pushing against, or conceding to, this moment.\(^2\) What happens when a poet forces away an action, when there is self-consciousness without the self-consciousness? Every poem loses, every poem a stutter.

* 

There is a consequential and valuable difference between the \textit{I} of the poem and the \textit{I} of a real person behind it, the real person with the real body who is either writing or reading the poem. There is more to it than just saying the empty words \textit{I} or \textit{body}. I want those two \textit{Is} together, and I want them to rescue each other. I also want to mind that “No ‘we’ should be taken for granted when it comes to other people’s pain” (Sontag 7); I want to mind that “we” is not the plural of “I.”\(^3\) At the same time, the dialectics of \textit{inside} and \textit{outside} in our language

\(^1\) “The intensity of our need to be understood distorted our positions, backed us further into the cage” (Nelson 82).

\(^2\) Case in point: I want to delete this section because it uses \textit{I} too many times.

\(^3\) (“Did anyone ever know who we were / if we means more than a handful?”)(Rich
have everything to do with hierarchical, hegemonic meaning-making—identification depends on it; alienation depends on it. We have self and other, subject and object, interior and exterior, conscious and unconscious. Gaston Bachelard illustrates this as the “dialectic of division,” through which language has developed its own open and closed dialectics (211). Difference and power has been enlaced in our language, serving to isolate us all and silence the marginalized.

This is an essay, then, about the gesture of ekstasis as a vital touching. This is an essay about the transformation inherent in the touching, its potentiality. This is an essay of ekstasis as an opening up to the world, as opposed to shutting it off. I don’t want to be interested so much in an “ecstatic subject,” although what I have to say is about the subject. My aim isn’t necessarily a call—for an ecstatic form, or an ecstatic subject; rather, I want to read the experience of ekstasis as an experience of potential, as an experiment. Perhaps, then, the form of Helen or My Hunger might find itself coming clearer. I want to work towards a form that can be transformative, that is, to transmute the form in its untransformability.

This is an essay of tracking self and other, of sustaining, holding on to what we track without being tempted to define or consume: how can a poet bridge the reality of the self with social, public reality, when the tracking itself is a violence, is codified in violence? How do you articulate pain and experience, when language’s very existence depends on the structures of power, where that language serves to isolate and divide us—where “I cannot touch you and this is the oppressor’s language” (Rich “The Burning” 366)? How can you bridge public and private pain when bodily experience, pained experience, not only resists language but refuses to be named?

“Contradictions” 25.1-2).
Further, I want to ask: how can we make visible the silences? (and/or absences, since “silence can be a plan / rigorously executed [...] has a history a form,” and we should “not confuse it / with any kind of absence” (Rich “Cartographies” 31-37))? How does a poet mark and articulate differences, yes, but also: how do we make visible the samenesses? How do we communicate so that one line doesn’t hide another line, one memory or death or absence or experience doesn’t hide another? How can a poet “break through this film of the abstract/without wounding myself or you” (41-42)?

*  

A series of insatiable vectors. Insatiable, meaning: a gaping hole.

Each piece arrives and arrives and arrives.

*  

I am struggling to write this. So far this is climbing a hill, shirtless, hands tied. In prose it is all subject position. It is enlaced into the very language, syntax, of prose. It encircles the writer. I pull myself by the collar to find my way back. In order to know my body, my subjecthood, I have to clip against its edges. How can I be someone who depends on my own experience for knowledge when I give my own so little worth. What is it to depend on memory, but give one’s own memory so little value. Where does that put you. To codify but delete the code. It is not a new cry, it is a very old cry (Woolf 129).

*
Before Helen was Helen, I called it *Ex-stasis of Galaxies*, after Adrienne Rich’s “Hubble Photographs: After Sappho”:

It should be the most desired sight of all
the person with whom you hope to live and die
walking into a room, turning to look at you, sight for sight
Should be yet I say there is something

more desirable: the *ex-stasis of galaxies*

*so out from us there’s no vocabulary*

but mathematics and optics
equations letting sight pierce through time (1-8)

For Rich, moments of *ekstasis* are celestial, out-of-time. She yokes together what is intimately up close with what is infinitely far away—the cosmic and the infinitesimal. The positionality of desire is juxtaposed with this sustained communication between the universal and self. Neither party is violated in this encounter; neither party is really subject nor object. The “impersonae” do not look back, and the “we” can either “look at them or don’t” (17-22).

Gaston Bachelard describes “Intimate Immensity” as how the imagining, remembering consciousness intimately, and internally, comprehends a “world that bears the mark of infinity” (183). The image being described (galaxies) has nothing to do with physical description or geographical information—in fact, they are described as being “so out from us” that it cannot be described (“Hubble Photographs” 6). “In other words,” as Bachelard states, “since immense is not an object, a phenomenology of immense would refer us directly to our imagining consciousness. In analyzing images of immensity, we should realize within ourselves
the pure being of pure imagination” (184). Even before we can imagine something empirically, our imagination comprehends immensity, which therefore must come from within. The image “accumulates its infinity within its own boundaries” (186). Interestingly, it seems that Bachelard describes all daydreaming as an *ekstasis*: “[daydreaming] always starts the same way, that is, it flees the object nearby and right away it is far off, elsewhere in the space of elsewhere” (183-184). “When this elsewhere is in natural surroundings, that is, when it is not lodged in the houses of the past, it is immense” (184). In other words, in order to be thrown out of oneself, one must be thrown *in* oneself.

* 

Only in the reality of writing can we permit such intensities of contradiction to exist: being here *and* there at once, allowing a subject or object to be intimately near, yet at the same time far away. This is what a metaphor is—it holds a contradiction in its hands, perpetually implying both distance and proximity: Anne Carson describes it as “a shift of distance from far to near [...] [the reader] sees their incongruence, then sees also a new congruence, meanwhile continuing to recognize the previous incongruence through the new congruence” (*Eros* 73). This sustained difference is what we know of the “Image” as well—or at least its definition re: Imagism: (“an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time [...] sense of freedom from time limits and space limits;”) (“A Few Don’ts”). A poem can be an event in itself that links between self and Other.

*Ekstasis* can offer this sustained difference. In “Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete, and Simone Weil Tell God,” Anne Carson describes how, rather than a blind trance, the writings of three female mystics—the poet Sappho, Marguerite Porete,
a medieval Christian mystic, and 20th century French mystic Simone Weil—present the process of ekstasis as more of a self-unfolding, or a self-exposure to the world. Weil calls this experience of crossing the boundaries of the self—of moving the Self aside in order to let God in—“decreation,” or “to undo the creature in us” (194).

All three women describe this experience of the self moving beyond its container—the boundary which separates the self from the rest of the world, and makes the very “self” itself—as a love triangle of jealousy and desire. Sappho’s ecstatic experience in Fragment 31 (“He seems to be equal to gods that man”) occurs during a moment of jealous desire for a woman (the “you”) speaking with an anonymous man. During this moment, Sappho’s physical senses break down (“in eyes no sight and drumming/fills ears” (qtd. in 189), yet she is still able to observe herself from the outside, her Being (according to Carson) “on a brightly lit stage” (190). “[G]reener than grass/I am and dead—or almost/I seem to me,” Sappho writes (qtd. in 189). In this event, Sappho has not left the world, does not clear this stage—instead, we see her standing outside her own body, recognizing herself as what is represented there—“I seem to me,” she says. Sappho the subject, Sappho the object. As Carson notes, she “leaves it unclear [...] just how many people she imagines herself to be” (“Sappho Shock” 228).

The focus on jealousy in these experiences of ecstasy, for Carson, emphasizes the splitting of the Self in order to expose the Self to its own scrutiny; it allows a forceful, transformational dialectics of ‘here’ and ‘not-here’. “It is a dance with a dialectical nature,” she says:

For the jealous lover must balance two contradictory realities within her heart: on the one hand, that of herself at the centre of her universe and in command of her own will, offering love to her beloved; on the other, that of herself off the center of
the universe and in despite of her own will, watching her beloved love someone else. Naked collision of these two realities brings the lover to a sort of breakdown— as we saw in Sappho’s poem—whose effect is to expose her very Being to its own scrutiny and to dislodge it from the center of itself. (“Decreation” 193)

For Weil, for example, this triangle included herself, God, and all of creation, in which she was a third wheel (which explains Weil’s wishes to disappear: “If only I knew how to disappear there would be a perfect union of love between God and the earth I tread, the sea I hear” (qtd. in 195)). Marguerite Porete’s “erotic triangle consist[s] of God, Marguerite, and Marguerite” (192) in which ecstasy is an “annihilation” of the soul, leaving an “aperture” to be filled with God (191).

As opposed to what we might imagine of a more ‘negative,’ interior, or ‘blind’ traditional mysticism, in all three experiences of mystical ecstasy, the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of the self collapse—can be both at once—so that the “decreated” subject is all exteriority and can participate most immediately with the world and with God: “higher no one can go, deeper no one can go, more naked no human can be,” Porete muses (qtd. in 194). The exposure allows the Self to observe itself outside of normal realms of subjectivity, to see itself as Other. Yet, interestingly enough, the real struggle comes when our mystics want to “tell,” or write about this experience. When the soul is displaced and leaves the Self—according to the mystics—it is transmuted, and has no contact with language. “In other words,” Carson explains, “such a soul passes beyond the place where she can tell what she knows. To tell is a function of self” (197).
The underlying question in Carson’s exploration, then, becomes what it means to be a writer who wishes to decenter or displace herself from her work, and yet who is also (and necessarily) a Self. Because, “to be a writer,” she says,

is to construct a big, loud, shiny center of self from which the writing is given voice and any claim to be intent on annihilating this self while still continuing to write and give voice to writing must involve the writer in some important acts of subterfuge or contradiction. (196)

The three mystics approach this contradiction, Carson states, by constructing “a kind of dream of distance in which the self is displaced from the center of the work and the teller disappears into the telling (italics mine)” (198). This kind of paradox, a quick wrinkle of disbelief, is allowed in writing—“A writer may tell what is near and far at once” (200). Porete’s ecstasy, for example, eliminates any concept of distance between Self and Other, Self and God: “His Farness is the more Near,” Porete imagines, this contradiction of location leading her to her own epithet for God: le Loingprès (in the Old French), or, “the FarNear” (qtd. in Carson 200).

Carson concludes her essay by reading a prayer by Sappho invoking God to arrive; Carson describes how the distance alluded in this kind of invocation is “decreated” as opposed to destroyed. Sappho “will have to invoke a God who arrives bringing her own absence with her—a God whose Farness is the more Near. It is an impossible motion possible only in writing” (198). There is no journey here—the boundaries are undone, and desire is eternally poised. The most moving explanation of this sustained contradiction of desire is Weil’s explanation that “Man’s great affliction [...] is that looking and eating are two different operations. Eternal beatitude is a state where to look is to eat” (199). Weil creates an imaginary
dream of distance where the desire for consumption and the consumption can exist at the same time—where its Farness is more Near. Ever-present, ever-fulfilling potential.

In order to “tell God,” the writer must open herself to the telling, let its gravel scrape her. As Carson puts it:

Decreation is an undoing of the creature in us—that creature enclosed in self and defined by self. But to undo self one must move through self, to the very inside of its definition. We have nowhere else to start. This is the the parchment on which God writes his lessons, as Marguerite Porete says. (201)

*Ekstasis*: to be pummeled, abstracted by the unknown. To come back from ekstasis is to be unable to speak about it: “So out from us there’s no vocabulary” (“Hubble” 6). The relations are quick and radical. The translation fails immediately. Head hanging, mouth framed tight around the tongue; realizing that you have dissociated means at once that you back in the world.

But the Self becomes patterned by the world. In leaving itself, the Self becomes scratched, marked, incised. Grooved. Looking back at itself in scrutiny. But in order to do so, it must understand the surface edges of the self.

That patterning is then transformed into an instrument of telling.

The pattern(ing) is the instrument.

Carson’s argument is, of course, more often applied to meditations on translation, when the writer is literally trying to ‘displace’ the self, so that the “teller disappears into the telling” (198). Yet I also see reflections of this love/desire triangle constructed in Adrienne Rich’s discussion of the relation of the I in her poems. For Rich, the I is in dialogue both with the self and the you, placing the self in continuity with the real world. In “Blood, Bread, and

15
Poetry” she describes the process as “a kind of action, probing, burning, stripping, placing itself in dialogue with others out beyond the individual self” (181). I can’t help but imagine this as an ekstasis of practical poetics. Perhaps, then, we can have a Self is in the continual process of becoming.

“The Courage of the Tenuous”

How are Helen in Egypt
and Helen on the ramparts,
together yet separate? (H.D. Helen 63).

Although not the work of a mystical “decreation,” the character of Helen in H.D.’s Helen in Egypt is also the product of a plurality of “selves”—the splitting, or “translation” of the ‘real’ Helen and her representation(s). Moreover, the work of Helen of Egypt itself—through its alternation of form, voice, and genre—is in a similar process of self-dialogue, allowing for a sustained, externalized self-scrutiny. With each new vision comes change⁴, and must come contradiction, difference. Helen in Egypt places these incongruences next to and against each other, evading closure of any kind; it is a construct ever-aware of its role as construct.

⁴ “what we see, we see / and seeing is changing” (Rich)
Helen or My Hunger began as one poem, came from one poem in Helen in Egypt—

Eidolon, Book III: 4:

Did her eyes slant in the old way?
was she Greek or Egyptian?
had some Phoenician sailor wrought her?

was she oak-wood or cedar?
had she been cut from an awkward block
of ship-wood at the ship-builders,

and afterwards riveted there,
or had the prow itself been shaped
to her mermaid body,

curved to her mermaid hair?
was there a dash of paint
in the beginning, in the garment-fold,

did the blue afterwards wear away?
did they re-touch her arms, her shoulders?
did anyone touch her ever?

Had she other zealot and lover,
or did he alone worship her?
did she wear a girdle of sea-weed
or a painted crown? how often
did her high breasts meet the spray,
how often dive down? (245-246)

From the beginning, I knew I wasn’t after Helen of Troy. That what we had here was

a lost loss. There is so little here of what is known, even as a description of a representation
of Helen, that there shouldn’t even be a poem. The questions litanied in this poem retreat backwards, negate any sort of expressed truth, yet at the same time build a distinctly subjective, negative precision. The character of Helen is so well-known, yet so abstracted, that it is reasonable to say that no one had ever touched “her” — that, as Anne Carson finally concludes in *Autobiography of Red*: “there is no Helen” (149). Any “real” Helen, rather than be exonerated or vindicated, gets swallowed up by her own icon-self. She is simply the echo of an echo. An echo of a form. In Greek she is called *Eidolon*, a representation of the form of an object; a phantom or look-alike of the human form.

*Helen in Egypt* is, for all intents and purposes, an attempt to resee and revise the myth of Helen of Troy—“Helena, Helen hated,” as H.D. calls her (2). The myth is famous: Helen, the wife of King Menelaus, was considered the most beautiful woman in the world; Paris, the Prince of Troy, abducts (and/or seduces) her and takes her back with him. This abduction brings about the Trojan War. Beauty and violence, twinned.⁵ *Helen in Egypt* is based on an alternative version of the myth, derived from texts of Euripides and Stesichorus of Sicily, which claim that Helen never was in Troy. “According to the *Pallinodes,*” H.D. writes in the introductory prose caption, she was “transposed or translated” from Greece into Egypt”—“The Greeks and the Trojans alike fought for an illusion” (1).

Within the poem’s lines I watched the violence of representation—a life, battered and cancelled into an icon. The process of a gendered poetic object (female), being encountered

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⁵ W.B. Yeats’s “No Second Troy” in 1919: Helen’s beauty is “like a tightened bow”: “Why, what could she have done, being what she is? / Was there another Troy for her to burn?”

⁶ Earliest usage of the word *translate* often involves bodies “removed” from one place to another, or even “to carry or convey to heaven without death” or “the death of the righteous” (“Translate”). This is a *removal from*, a transmutation more than a journey. A vector.
by a gendered poetic subject (male). The same polarized definition of being and otherness that is historically patriarchal, imperial: what Roland Barthes designates “Classic Humanism,” which “most often results in a contestatory relation between beings, where ontological reality is accorded to the perceiver alone” (Alfrey 10). That perceiver, historically, in the lyric voice, the privileged point of view, includes a lone male speaker, the feminized object the ideal.

I wanted to write to that phantom of Helen, even as I wanted to hold on to the fact that when we look for “beauty” in a work of art, we are still deeply folded into the ideal of “beauty” in the “work” of the Female figure. “The iconicity of the text (the lyric icon on the page),” Rachel Blau du Plessis remarks in “Otherhow,” “seems deeply related to the beauty, inviolability, self-containment and iconicity of the Female Figure as object which the text dominates” (142). In other words, as my students recently wryly questioned: “Why don’t we call a sunset handsome?”

I wanted to write to that phantom, even as I wanted to hold on to the fact of rethinking the relation between the poet-speaker-subject and the icon-object-receiver. Who am I writing to, if I want to communicate to something uncontained, spectral, whose edges blurred? What do I touch, if Helen is untouched? Who am I writing to, how do I communicate, when to name her is violence? Who am I, the writer, and how do I do the least amount of violence? I wanted to name, to articulate, to hold the thing, the loss. When even the loss is absent, what do I hold? (What warm stone do I hold now?)

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_Helen in Egypt_ faces these concerns head-on; it is a book of shifts, working to undermine narrative control and representative power at every instance (particularly the
identities defined for Helen by a male-dominated culture). The feeling overall can be disorienting—the book is comprised of self-reflexive dialogues of form and genre. The voice shifts, includes other voices or consciousnesses, gets caught in loops, cycles—asks the same questions repeatedly. Folds back in on itself. Is grounded on groundlessness. Singular lyric poems alternate with prose captions throughout. These poem/prose segments are then yoked together into even further divisions: three sections, entitled Pallinode, Leuké, and Eidolon, consisting of seven, seven and six books, respectively. The captions and lyrics often ask the same or similar questions. Susan Barbour comments that this pattern “can seem troubling and disruptive,” that the prose interludes imply illumination, yet fail at doing so: “Stylistically, they seem to interrupt the flow of the verse; and on a functional level, they seem to obviate the narrative progression in the lyric that follows” (467). Instead of being a strict revision of Helen’s story and identity, Helen in Egypt is instead a struggle for identity, “more concerned with questioning than affirming,” revising its own content as it moves forward, evading any sort of closure (O’Brien Hokanson 331). Alternative stories are put into dialogue as Helen tries to find her bearings and establish “what she can and cannot know” (Twitchell-Waas 485).

A book of hindrances.

In order to do the work to “touch” or gesture toward whoever Helen is, we can see how H.D. begins to allow for the exploration of contradictions, inconsistencies, for continually defining the relations. For example, the self-reflexive, searching voice in “Eidolon, Book III: 4” is an illustration of what Diane di Prima coins “the courage of the tenuous”—H.D.’s

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7 In fact, it is almost quite literally a dialogue—a letter to Norman Holmes Pearson reveals that she chose to include prose segments “after she had visited a nearby recording studio where she had made the spontaneous decision to give brief introductions to the poems. The prose, therefore, is a phonotext conceived in oral consciousness” (Barbour 466).
predilection for including a fragment, of memory, vision, or a combination of the two, and not being afraid to come back to the same fragment, change it, or see it in a different light throughout the book. These fragments accumulate, and the sustained liminality helps explore “what can’t be pinned down” with precision, so she can stay with what she has seen, “neither to forget, or to reduce the seen (the scene) to any of its commonplaces,” di Prima states (13).

A book of questions: sustained fluctuation of position, form, genre, narrative, and of voice. To more fully understand how this book of indeterminacies works to resist the very language and narrative it constructs, it is helpful to see Helen in Egypt in context with Ezra Pound’s Cantos. Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas argues that Helen in Egypt, in response to the Cantos, “situates itself with respect to Pound’s poem as the latter’s textual unconscious, insisting on an exploring those spaces of the personal and psychological which tend to be repressed in the Cantos” (466). Specifically, what is repressed is the maternal (for Achilles, this is represented by the sea):

This is a self-perpetuating ethos: the repression which makes possible the warrior manifests itself in violence and war, which in turn motivate the need for the warrior. What is left out is the ‘feminine,’ not just simply all those designated ‘women,’ […] but the whole sphere of the personal, of those human relations requiring a degree of surrender of the ego and the possibility of the transformation and interpretation of selves. (466-467)

Helen in Egypt argues for a “surrender of an ethos of control and power,” for vulnerability, a submission to memory, uncertainty, and expansiveness—what are considered specifically “feminine” traits in Helen in Egypt as described above (470). These traits would allow one to,
H.D. writes, “plunge beneath the surface, / without fear of the treacherous deep / or a monstrous octopus” (*Helen* 93).

Yet, herein lies the challenge: in order to critique the stubborn, patriarchal ego of the *Cantos*, “to accept the uncertainty that [Pound’s] poem proposes but which he is constantly at odds with and attempts to man-handle,” H.D.’s poem must *enact* what it proposes (Twitchell-Waas 473). Thus, rather than offer a direct rebuttal or refutation to the “original” myth, *Helen in Egypt* gathers the uncertainties, remaining ever-self-aware of the “versions” of Helen as well as its role as narrative construct. As Robert O’Brien Hokanson states, the self-consciousness of form and construct illustrate how *Helen in Egypt* “investigates the dilemmas of imposing form on experience and demonstrates the elusiveness of the ‘true’ story” (331). Twitchell-Waas similarly remarks that “*Helen in Egypt* does not so much reject the Homeric narrative for a preferable alternative as it sets the two in dialogue and so complicates both” (466). H.D. is fully engaged in the epic tradition, to be sure: Helen is on a quest—albeit one “without *telos*, an epic of negative capability” (474). In its alternating, reflexive form, the book charts the difficulties, and ultimate possible futility, in attempting to impose form on experience. “Is it all a story?” H.D.’s Helen asks (*Helen* 88).

This fluctuation is also reflected in the spiral form of two of H.D.’s beloved and often-used images: the “intricate spiral of the tower-stairs” in *Helen in Egypt* (143), as well as that of the shell in *Trilogy* (*The Walls Do Not Fall*):

> There is a spell, for instance,  
> in every sea-shell:  
> continuous, the sea thrust  
> is powerless against coral,

[...]
yet the flabby, amorphous hermit
within, like the planet

senses the finite,
it limits its orbit

of being, its house,
temple, fane, shrine:

it unlocks the portals
at stated intervals:

prompted by hunger,
it opens to the tide-flow (I.4.1-20)

These images may tempt us to call up the word “hermetic” in the pejorative sense, with boundaries of the shell as a form of “husk,” or protection from the outside world. Yet, this is liberation: As Twitchell-Waas points out, the “centrifugal-centripetal manner” of the shell (and staircase) instead “alternately opens itself up to and closes out the sea tide” (474). The synchronous, opposing movements make this a mode of transformation, of changing and shedding, and it is this movement that allows for both entrance and closure—almost like a Mobius strip—which, together with the prose sections juxtaposed, acts as a sort of ‘non-argument argument’ against Pound’s very clear, patriarchal view in the *Cantos*.

The two opposing forces undermining the argument of a patriarchal ego remind us once again of Porete’s “FarNear,” and its contradiction of ever-present desire, ever-fulfilling

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8 “You died in Troy on the stairs, / one does not die here; / you slipped from a husk / or a web, like a butterfly” (141).
potential. Meaning is in the continual process of becoming. Desire can exist in this perpetual becoming, and not in the subject’s consumption of object. In the preface to his *Splay Anthem*, Nathaniel Mackey muses on the serial form of his collection, calling up the image of H.D.’s geese in *Trilogy* (“who still (they say) hover / over the lost island, Atlantis / seeking what we once knew”) (III.3.21-23) as an illustration of its sustained liminal force:

> Provisional, ongoing, the serial poem moves forward and backward both, repeatedly “back/at/some beginning,” repeatedly circling or cycling back, doing so with such adamance as to call forward and back into question and suggest an eccentric step to the side—as though, driven to distraction by shortcircuiting options, it can only be itself beside itself. [...] H.D.’s crazed geese, circling above the spot that was once Atlantis or the Hesperides or the Islands of the blest, come to mind, as do John Coltrane’s wheeling, spiraling runs as if around or in pursuit of some lost or last note, lost or last amenity: a tangential, verging movement out (outlantish). (xi-xii)

We may think of dancers, moving in and out of synchronicity—pleasure arrives as they careen out, arriving again as they wind back toward the center, and then again as they fall back out. The searched-for note is both “lost” and “last,” and so the gestures are in pursuit but display a “dream of distance,” and therefore a persistent defining and redefining.
H.D.’s lifelong engagement with the ancient, occult practices of Hermeticism and alchemy (part of what Elizabeth Anderson calls her religious “syncretism”) emphasizes how the boundaries between the material and divine world are in constant, “centrifugal-centripetal” flux as well, allowing for regenerative transformation. Hermeticism’s main tenet is the understanding of our world as a living revelation of the divine world; specifically, for H.D., both “are seen to be as mutual unfolding and dynamic rather than static: ‘even the divine image is not complete’” (77). Alchemy in particular is a process based on the assumption that all matter is living and in “dynamic relation” (77). Matter is combined, distilled, and transformed in a crucible, with multiple layers of meaning inherent in the practice. Portals close, then unlock to the tide. The craft of poetry, for H.D., enacts a ritual of creation which necessarily involves the current, physical universe:

We must not step right over into the transcendental, we must
crouch near the grass and near to the earth that made us. (*The Gift* 50)

Sustained dynamism and movement between writer and reader, sacred world and material world, can be traced through her overall work, particularly her later, longer poems. A reaching out—one foot in, one foot out. An address. Mysterious, cosmic, yet intimate (*immense*).

This is the age of the new dimension,
dare, seek, seek further, dare more,

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9 Overall, as Anderson describes, rather than support a single authority, H.D.’s use of occult images and concepts insists on their contingent relation to the material and individual; her practices are “resistant to deterministic, fated revelations; instead they are precarious, open and conditional” (32). Writing for her is a spiritual practice built upon the ground of the world, and the mystery is where language, the material world (and therefore contingent and historical), and the “sacred” intertwine (1).
here is the alchemist’s key,
it unlocks secret doors (I.30.7-10).

H.D. begins *The Walls Do Not Fall* by placing the reader both in-time and out-of-time, in-poem and out-of-poem. Under her dedication to Bryher, H.D. writes, “for Karnak 1923 / from London 1942” (509). The doubling continues:

An incident here and there,
and rails gone (for guns)
from your (and my) old town square:

[...]  

there, as here, ruin opens  
the tomb, the temple; enter,
there as here, there are no doors:

the shrine lies open to the sky,
the rain falls here, there
sand drifts; eternity endures:

ruin everywhere (I.1.1-16)

Destruction occurs in two places, two times: The first, Karnak in Egypt 1923; the second, London during the Blitz. Boundaries are permeable: movement is not occurring *between* poem-present and poem-past, from writer to “real” reader; rather, they are both occurring simultaneously. Parentheses further suggest the markings of inside/outside; the rails are gone, but it is explained immediately, on the other side, that they are “for guns” (2). The markings of boundary in the parentheses also work to bridge outer with self experience: “from your (and my) old town square” (3). These discrete, dispersed experiences—sustained
incongruences—occur at once. The frames of the shrine, doors, roofs, still exist—there are markings, notations of boundaries—this finitude is important—but “there are no doors”(12), and “the shrine lies open”(10). It is through the “ruin everywhere” that eternity endures, through this openness and freedom that meaning can be constructed: “the fallen roof / leaves the sealed room / open to air” (16-18). Yet, if we did not have the finitude of the rooms, the door frames, it would be like the “slow flow of terrible lava”(33), that comes out of Pompeii, which “has nothing to teach us”(31), finds us slipping into abstraction, or “oneness lost, madness”(43). Similar to the spiral shell, unlocking its portals with its “centrifugal-centripetal” movement, the framework of the ruined houses allows for (alchemical?) transformation.

Robert Duncan’s *The H.D. Book* also meditates on the possibility of poem as (Hermetic) ritual and the necessity of ritual in the material world. “The fabric of history, of memory, then,” he writes, “must be continually woven in order to exist because it is not the fabric of the past but the fabric of the present that we weave” (451). The work of ritual is what turns the interior exterior—and therefore, poems are works of creation:

> It is Poetry, a Making. It is also the *opus alchymicum* of Hermetic and Rosicrucian alchemy. The rhymes of this poetry are correspondences, workings of figures and patterns of figures in which we apprehend the whole we do not see. The path that poetry creates between reality and the soul is the path of a conversion. (79)

Poetry is a creation which is regeneration, which is transmutation. Duncan quotes H.D.: “Dream is the reaching out feelers like a snail’s horns. Reality is the shell or the thing of crystal boxes. We must have the two together” (397). He understood poetry as revealing that which is seen, through lines of images recalling one another through association, “toward the
structure of the whole”—but also that what is seen is informed by a charge of hiddenness—and must highlight the hiddenness: “The impulse of dream or poem is to provide a ground for some form beyond what we know, for feeling ‘greater than Reality’” (99). As Boughn and Coleman remark in the introduction to The H.D. Book, “that is, after all, the poet’s craft—to bring what is hidden while honoring its hiddenness” (7).

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Heartbeat of the Pulsar

Adrienne Rich’s “Planetarium” (1971) envisions another “ex-stasis” of galaxies which allows the speaker moments of deep connection with the lived experiences of others, corresponding with a recognition and material embodiment of the self’s own subjectivity. The poem is dedicated to Caroline Herschel (1750-1848), “astronomer, sister of William (William Herschel, discoverer of Uranus); and others,” and begins with a woman, assumed to be Herschel, observing and measuring the cosmos. The woman then moves from her position by way of these instruments, “levitating into the night sky / riding the polished lenses” (11-12) up to “Galaxies of women, there / doing penance for impetuousness” (13-14). Herschel’s vision enacts an encounter with the galaxies:

An eye,
‘virile, precise and absolutely certain’
from the mad webs of Uranusborg
encountering the NOVA
every impulse of light exploding
from the core
as life flies out of us (17-23)

As the eye confronts the “NOVA,” the entity erupts with light, sending it out in all directions, while simultaneously “life flies out of” the “us” (20-23). The self leaves the confines of the body as a collective of “us” (at this point transcending Herschel, the galaxies, and the speaker). The seeing and the collapse of individuality occur simultaneously, giving way to transformation:

What we see, we see
and seeing is changing

the light that shrivels a mountain
and leaves a man alive

Heartbeat of the pulsar
heart sweating through my body

The radio impulse
pouring in from Taurus

I am bombarded yet I stand
I have been standing all my life in the
direct path of a battery of signals
the most accurately transmitted most
untranslatable language in the universe
I am a galactic cloud so deep so invo-
luted that a light wave could take 15
years to travel through me And has
taken I am an instrument in the shape
of a woman trying to translate pulsations
into images for the relief of the body
and the reconstruction of the mind. (26-45)

The speaker’s relationship to the language of the self changes after this moment of ekstasis. The ecstatic movement isn’t simply communing with a divine spirit—the speaker here is crossing historical thresholds, spatial, temporal thresholds—and by doing so, becomes fully integrated with her “I” by the end of the poem: “I am bombarded yet I stand,” she declares (34). The final stanza exudes urgency; the longer lines remain closer together, still avoiding punctuation. The form becomes the telling: the speaker becomes the instrument of seeing/changing herself, to be the instrument to experience the lives of others, to shape and be shaped by the signals coming at her (what I have previously called “patterning,” for lack of a better word). The regular intervals of a pulsar in outer space become her heartbeat (dare we call this the “FarNear”?). The self undergoes “a battery of signals” from the universe—marked by the outside, but not extinguished (36). The “translation” from the pulsations won’t ever be “perfect”—they are “untranslatable” by nature. It is enough just to be the instrument. She is no longer “a woman in the shape of a monster / a monster in the shape of a woman” (1-2); she is “an instrument in the shape / of a woman” (42-43). The power from the nova is the same as inside of the “us,” and the “I,” and the “I” then becomes a transmitter of this power. What it comes down to is this: ekstasis is a profound touching.

Not a shying away from the self, but allowing the self to become patterned by others.

Where the Farness is the more Near.

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Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* (2015) is primarily concerned with trying to articulate and “track” that which refuses to be named. At its center is the story of Nelson’s relationship with gender-fluid artist Harry Dodge and the complexities of their foray into queer family-making. Nelson explores the restrictive ways we have approached experiences of desire, motherhood, partnership, and family, and how we can allow for broader definitions, make space for fluctuation and fluidity. At the same time, the transformation of something fluid and alive into something abstracted is dangerous. At one point, Nelson discusses the kind of “sloppy praise” that might come from getting “too juiced up about a concept like plurality or multiplicity and start complimenting everything as such” (62). This sloppiness is a kind of silence—the other side of silence—of abstraction, allowing similar experiences to eclipse the other. To combat this tendency, Nelson explains to the reader that Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick wrote and thought a lot about that which is more than one, and more than two, but less than infinity. That finitude is important. It makes possible the great mantra, the great invitation, of Sedgwick’s work, which is to “pluralize and specify.” (Barthes: “One must pluralize, refine, continuously.”) This is an activity that demands an attentiveness—a relentlessness, even—whose very rigor tips it into ardor. (62)

The goal of H.D.’s “courage of the tenuous” was a similar one: da Prima describes this action as being “precise but not definite,” and “neither to forget, or to reduce [...] to any of its commonplaces” (13). These are relentless, liminal gestures of displacement (and desire) as well;
we must make the gestures outward from us, but the moment that we begin to abstract, make a
definition, the moment we grasp for redemptive closure, we’ve stepped far, far away from it. Perpetual accumulating and sieving give us the same “sustained incongruence,” or “dream of distance” Carson’s mystics were able to construct in order to indicate the “FarNear”ness of God. “A writer may tell what is near and far at once,” Carson says (200). But, as Nelson writes, “that finitude is important” (62); our goal is to be “precise but not definite” (di Prima 13). In other words, we can write, as Rich explains her ‘split’ pronoun use, “not as an opportunity for literary voyeurism but as a drama we ourselves are engaged in” (181).

Adrienne Rich’s serial poems often take on this kind of drama as a way to “pluralize and specify,” articulating a network of relations to the experiences of others. The form tends to permit a kind of ekstasis by focusing on the boundaries, limits, and margins of each link in the sequence as the speaker moves from subjective experience out to the cosmos, then to another body—from inner, private pain out to a more general public pain. Allowing the poem’s self (and form) to split from its very plane in this particular way works to pluralize and specify, to call attention to the limits of our experience, which serve to strengthen our connections.

If the function of our meaning-making relies on this patriarchal, hegemonic structure of inside/outside, then what this form attempts to do is not necessarily cross boundaries, but “decreate” them—allow the self to be “both near and far at once” (200). For Rich, who shows this awareness best in her series “Contradiction: Tracking Poems” (from Your Native Land, Your Life, 1986), we live “in a world, in which pain is meant to be gagged / uncured un-grieved over” (18.3-4) and the question becomes how “to connect, without hysteria, the pain / of any one’s body with the pain of the bodys world” (18.5-6). How can we be an instrument within these gestures? How can we track those specifics of the world outside ourselves “without
hysteria,” yet still communicate difference and conflict, across boundaries, between bodies (18.5)?

remember: the body’s pain and the pain on the streets
are not the same but you can learn
from the edges that blur O you who love clear edges
more than anything watch the edges that blur (29.9-12)

Remember: “that finitude is important” (Nelson 62).

In “Contradiction: Tracking Poems,” the speaker addresses herself in order to share her experience of pain, paying close attention to the limitations of the body, the limitations of communication:

Dear Adrienne,
I feel signified by pain
from my breastbone through my left shoulder down
through my elbow into my wrist is a thread of pain
I am typing this instead of writing by hand
because my wrist on the right side
blooms and rushes with pain (7.1-7)

Rich details the significations with precision, and by doing so bangs together both the I of the poem as well as that of the writer: “I am typing this instead of writing by hand”(7.5). I am in material pain, she says, and therefore my writing, my communication with you, comes to you this way. Because writing is a physical labor involving real, material instruments which must be handled by a real, material body.

Much of Rich’s writing, including “Notes Toward a Politics of Location” (1984) and Of Woman Born (1976), is devoted to resisting the silence of abstraction and committing to an
embodied experience. In “Notes Toward a Politics of Location” she calls for women to resist theoretical abstraction (perhaps she would call it sloppy?) and urges her readers to locate themselves more in the materiality of their lives and their subject position. Grounding politics in the material can bring us back to more personal accountability and and responsibility. Similarly, in Of Woman Born, Rich calls for women to reinvigorate language with the physicalities of writing, with the materials, in order to experience (and continue to redefine) their relations to others. In a much later essay, she writes: “Poetic imagination or intuition is never merely unto itself, free-floating, or self-enclosed. It’s radical, meaning root-tangled in the grit of human arrangements and relationships: How we are with each other” (“Permeable Membrane” 99). In this way, as we continue to “pluralize and specify” our relationship(s) in the world, we create a “network of intersecting identities ‘experienced simultaneously’”—a field of potentiality when we “watch the edges that blur” (“Contradictions” 29.12).

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I want to imagine a series of vectors, each vector resisting its own archival, pointing towards its own unarchivability; I want to imagine a series where each section acts out its own ekstasis on the page, each transposed to a distinctly different plane. Fragments, not of a bigger whole, but of themselves, with no outer or inner limits; they don’t accumulate, they don’t add. They are One and one and one and one. Here I am reminded of Bhanu Kapil’s ruminations of hybridity in Ban en Banlieue: “One thing next to another doesn’t mean they touch,” she writes (13). And later:

An organism that shares a membrane with other organisms is a false indicator of hybrid forms,” I wrote afterwards,
laboriously, so as not to forget, in the lobby, waiting for my
ride. You can be a hybrid and not share a body with anything
else. Thus, the different parts of “Ban” do not touch. They
never touch at all. (100)

This is the toothache at the heart of the narrative. What happens when a number cannot hold what
loss it represents? Consider this moment in Claudia Rankine’s *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*:

It is difficult to separate [Giuliani] out from the extremes
connected to the city over the years of his mayorship. Still, a
day after the attack on the World Trade Center a reporter asked
him to estimate the number of dead. His reply—More than we
can bear—caused me to turn and look at him as if for the first
time. It is true that we carry the idea of us along with us. And
then there are three thousand of us dead and it is
incomprehensible and ungraspable. Physically and emotionally
we cannot bear it, should in fact never have this capacity. So
when the number is released it is a sieve that cannot hold the
loss of us, the loss Giuliani recognized and answered for. (81)

To express it in language reduces its reality. No matter what the reality ends up being, the
number (word) is unmade by its reality. If the language we use is unmade, unraveled, before
we even begin, it is understandable to be tempted by silence (or its corollary, “sloppy”
plurality). So we must work to name it; we must push toward language, even as it evades us.
Because language will signify, no matter what. We must be “precise but not definite” (di Prima
13).
There is no poem if there is no one to read it—if nothing echoes back. A poem is a vector, a calling out, “is not about; it is out of and to” (“Permeable Membrane” 97). Paul Celan said that poems were handshakes, a ritual of offering, asserting presence. The gesture, charged with the intensity of: I am right here. Are you right there? Adrienne Rich included lines from H.D.’s Trilogy (The Flowering of the Rod) as the epigraph for The Dream of a Common Language:

I go where I love and where I am loved,
into the snow;
I go to the things I love
with no thought of duty or pity (III.2.1-4)

The lines of a poem are the lines in the snow our footsteps make as we walk toward the things we love. What is written, drawn, made present, patterned, is constructed from our moving toward. Ekstasis is an incessant calibration, a dance of becoming and becoming and becoming.

One thing is for certain, and it is that the act of ekstasis is one that reaches toward a highest vulnerability. It is an act of exposing oneself to its own scrutiny, an act of self-making as well as self-othering—“more naked no human can be,” Marguerite Porete has told us (qtd. in 194). Ekstasis leads not simply to the crossing of the boundaries between self and other, but to the undoing of those boundaries; the question of ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ no longer exists. These Selves have been annibilated, pummeled, bombarded, probed, stripped, and that is their instrument. Ekstasis can be a practice of creating a space where we can be most fully in our selves in order to move through that definition, to touch something profound in someone else.
Ekstasis is also an act of displacement and desire, an act that dances away from any attempts at closure. To encounter otherness in this way is to be unable to “tell” the experience through any sort of language. Our poets recognize this “untranslatability,” of the information received, but share the intensity, that “dream of distance”—they know we can only gesture toward this revelation. It is “to bring what is hidden while honoring its hiddenness” (7); this dream of distance is an experience of sustained potential, a continued encounter that continues to encounter. This dream of distance is, of course, only a dream—a wrinkle of disbelief writers are able to keep folded for just a little while. But if we were to grasp for redemptive closure it would be stepping further away from the truth, from touching something profound. Ekstasis, anything but nothing, is nothing but gesture.

But being-with is touching, touching is seeing, and seeing is changing. Perhaps ekstasis isn’t losing your self, but rather the release of your self’s power to define you. Identity is a field, a grid—fluid and circumstantial, and we must define and redefine (pluralize and specify, continuously) as a practice—of ardor, of devotion.
“Helen—Helen—Helen—
there was always another and another and another”
—H.D., Helen in Egypt

“The suck of symbol, rather, she quotes. Or an inflection of
the voice? Let the song go on.”
—Rosmarie Waldrop, Reluctant Gravities
I wait to come to good. I wait carved
from the same war, draped by the mechanism
between myself and fabric pleasure,
how pressed, how shut. The icon I remember
is ragged and full of brown cardinals.
It sees me, parallel shoulders and not.
The young thing in a frame.
A slow press of film I wait for to ripen.

I am asking this of you. To see things out of order.
My body’s floor bright and fixed with you,
clay mask powder in the tub and sink.
The finest way to avoid is through the body,
getting out so quickly it doesn’t deserve
the name of leaving. I reveal the ship’s bone
like a stammer, magnet a napkin of sage
to the fridge, fruit fly blood on my fingers.
We can’t go back to empty forms.
With lemon voices they called you *bated Helen*. They called you *Eidolon, Eikon*.
In the cooked tin sheet I can see her face, yours, eyes scoped out and over.
Sands shift, pull down into a strip. You are no one’s mother.

I have placed all of this in you, Helen. I am scratching it out, groove-voiced.
This is not an embrace but a crimp, a coil. I breathe out, talk to you, am immediately not my own.

If I am a creature with a sense of time—of *passage, lapse, rupture or ekstasis*—I can be said to remember. I foam trees at the mouth and approach story.
I wake to the quiet points of my instrument.
A weighty topography to posture.
Mewling myth of sandals, full-stepped
into sand, the silver gelatin
of growing-up. A posture, and yet elsewhere
footage of the reenactment,
elsewhere my pierce, bone alarmingly definite.

The poem disappears, Helen. The poem says nothing
unless it comes back answered.

Like a myth, it bleeds at the edges.
Where to stop and start is a postcard
hung by a pin.
Mermaid, myth, bloom of breast and carpenter—always, Helen, you drown, lose your shiny peel of memory, mark frame and frame by incision. You fast before men who will have you in this house, men peering over their glasses of beautiful, beautiful. You drown. I am cut on slabs of wax. Looking out at the empty spaces in the heap.

I write for the belly of the I, the breaking of the fan. I read and need it to fold me. The only name for this is *palimpsest*, to go over the tangle again and again.

In dreams I carry women on my back.
—Helen must remember other loves, small things—
I’m thinking of nonsense now, Helen: June a gash of poplar, and the silver light on my chest at four in the morning. Rereading a big astronomy book on the counter at the hotel restaurant where I work. *Married with Children* on the television above the bar.

I eat two mini croissants and a pistachio muffin, and vomit sugar in the bathroom stall. I eat pineapple and keep it down.

Perhaps I should like to have more than one body, this one too dismantled. Too carnivorous. Mistaking morning for salvage.
I knew the first of my own appetite. That to apprehend meant to look down. In the peel of the sequence I wait to hear the word *ravine*, and only then put it into signs that recognize me, mark me. I don’t eat at any table most of the time. I cut my mouth on a heart-spoon.

This is not an argument, but the violence of beacon. A shell, a staircase, other spirals, are husks, but also a mode of changing and shedding, allowing for both entrance and closure. And out of that shame, I am pulled into print.

The past is self-scarring. I skin and skim myself, my last folds, my scold.
Are you here or not-here
little film, icon
How still you are becoming
Wreaths strung of glance
upon glance, copied
onto a bright garden floor
The form has an oily slip
a folding-over place,
the sharp thread of disorder
Bodies as mine flinched,
becoming large in shadow
A girl inside the picture is settling,
Her hair covers up the pier-glass
She is touching the body of a leaf
A signal, like when we ask
the I in each other
The brain shores images like a hum, a churn. All I know to do is shore and accumulate, step into these long fossils like a skirt, to move from margin to margin. I am at a loss for faces, and look around for something not so sleek, not so un-grooved. Graphite lozenges between days of unbeing. Perhaps there is a different kind of container.

I can’t listen to the body anymore, store more of its spill. I nuzzle myself into that spiral form, a hard, gold scrubbing of an image. After two hours I look up from my book to find my arm clenched and rigid at my side.

You look out from the fabric of your painting, and I / into your exhausted shell.
Now I am expected to sing
how am I to feign singing
This story is Greek
I should be bouncing my voice
I should be between
two or three rooms, my oaken oars
half-filled with sand
I should be stiffening
with a terrible closeness
What I remember in place of
The unpictureable
I lean in to it
What is occluded here
I know grinds its lens,
holds tools in his mouth
in yet another way
to ring out this icon logic
eidolon, a hinge
crease in the hips
Yet another way to howl
in a gold shawl
To copy myself
a copy, blanketed
and justified
to pick up the telephone
with a stellar female anger,

who I am against you

against me
I don’t know what I’m supposed to dial into

The nation, museum

the institution

I stick the moon onto my bedroom wall

and look at photographs

to convince my brain of faces,

of page marks

And the woman there is heavy-collared

and plain in her sewing

her pier-glass

thighs plodding in half sleep

She looks up from the cover of the book

She asks me for another container

but I’m thinking of nonsense now

The old forgetting and underfeeding

Some weakless encounter

with the constant present

Knowing what I know now

I could be better

I could be a Shaker

and create things with my own gender
Mistaking wandering
for upwards

Rehearsing in advance
this disappearance
Touch in me a stammer, Helen
Let me press you into wax, find you
again and again

I need to account for what patterns I find,
to expose my daughter animal
and her movements, the coming squalor

I need to bring you in,
to speak to you to bring you in

but something before me
has stained the floorboards

bodies desert-made, skin bubbling
around earlier words

What I want is a disruptive,
distorted flower, unquotable
a heated talisman to hold

In using the world, we alter the world
Don’t you agree

I swallow here to swallow there
This line will change
Quiet now on the citadel
I erase my sandal steps
the final step of burial threading
of stone slaughter
I have loved you like a mother would
Drawn only what I have learned
A bitter pillowcase feel in the mouth
A fully green leaf shaped like an antler
I cross my arms as evidence
and lean into the very first poem,
move from pearl to shell burst to gash of chorus
I don’t want to live in any coming after
Any story you get now will be refusal
Every word *tastes of its context*. A stem, inflamed, ragged. The part I remember. The part I don’t remember. When I sit in a public space my legs take up less room than his. Someone draws my blood and I blink back the gray.

He plumbs old friends. He says, *Who doesn’t love to be an instrument?* My mouth now on the book, on the symbol. An ancestral swallow. I watch a cooking show and let my face wander back toward the blood.

I believe very strongly in permanence. I keep pulling at the stretch mark on my side. The tea olive is golden-lined, and follows me to my new house. The men are different now but also the same, covered in crumbs, draping.
We double up to hunt. We can learn to love in private, widening and Greek.

I write this breach for you, Helen. The system I’ve already followed before I can say “I follow.” And it is unremarkable. Instead of knowing, this body names. This body takes and takes its mark; the forgotten version is crystal under its thumbs.

This poem equals the length of fission; for example: I AM IN PAIN and not just YET I AM WRITING / but I AM IN PAIN AND THEREFORE / MY WRITING IS THIS WAY. I master open my own vessel, test out the touch. Cut my hair to pull the bloody text out from under me.

Helen, the swell in me feels the double, desires it across from me and yet it is not me. Nightly now I expose the under pattern I have woven, use pieces to make a passage. I forget what has been constructed in other people’s words, keep lists to sustain anger. No decision my own but always against a mother, father. I fall asleep and find myself round with narrative.

I am certain this museum can be summoned better by hand.
I have nothing to give and it tastes sour
Like how the history of me flowers in on the object
but more remote. Helen, you are right to worry,
I want to say. Sometimes in this story
I cannot read the traces, or half-turn my head
but for some dim mirror
I dress in the dark and no one knows
“Pleasure,” on the page
“in sounding like a woman”:

I give it up, am desert-made
no outline, no ambulance

The oils in my hair
radiate a dirty myth
I drink clay to heave it
onto the floor again

What else but a receding
your symbol of pleading
into the ceiling,
him pushing up against

Helen, I see myself
edging bright to you

I need your lineage
Who am I to be solid by
in the ravine between ancestors
I fumble toward my coal-mining family
ask myself what mediates a distance
what does it mean when a word
is left rammed and humming,
separated from its future
Each line comes achingly intact
Like a brittle fig I see you
Between the orphaned haze
of my grandmother when I saw her
sideways and alive, in a thin picture
and later, opened-mouthed, crystalline
Standing with other women I remember the tribe. A glass museum of bobbing last names. I read for the silver rub of my brain about hunger and the factory. A woman wears a green shawl and calls herself *meshugganah* into the feather mattress, with words like *ravenously* and *starved*.

Once I met my sister in a room and fought to be the first body to pass through. She told me *this is now your weight. This is now your fight*. Now I watch the documents collect in me, newly-swallowed moss forming a belly. A lineage in brassy spills.

In front of a mirror I measure myself in several forms, none of them manageable, none held back. Imagine a string holding you up, I hear. You have two parts to your ribs, keep them buttoned together. Here is a song in another language; I'll ask you to hold it still.
An actress friend of mine posted a picture of herself as Helen today. She has leaf eyes stab eyes, she is facing sideways. She is clean, her blood root frozen. Little threat, little body of a leaf.

If the form of the body is the icon I reject it. I drink this oil and I reject it. See how I hold it in, the excess/ex-stasis, this bruise on my arm.
Helen, I spoke to you when I wrote a trick about termites

I spoke to you when I wrote “the glass bends with the fecundity of mother termites” / I spoke to the window / with my own body’s naked mirror in it / I spoke lit with sweat

This part the meat of me / the only meat of myself / the simplicity / the purge the open net / how irreducible it felt to burst hard to destruct / to build the body then destroy it / to wake up dreading the suspension / I once knew in my throat and again / bright red to face my body and deflate

The form is instruction is no soft space / is where I bleed above my space / I face my own carving and chain it to the floor

When is a throat not like a cave

now the orange tabby outside

she wants to eat from my hand

(good women / virus / etc.)
How do I see it / how do I know to see / the object of a body
and how do I read / such a disappearance?
Inscription is an act of both remembering and forgetting.

Every read of this poem a healthy overturning, some sense of cycle.

The center of the Milky Way as seen from the earth.
I can hold my form, a pulled, leadened fear

not form but trunk, Helen

pained and not too separate from stellar nurseries,

from negative space/avoidant/postured/planetary/polite

too grateful to split

Open your mouth, Helen,

here is a greater

weight

it doesn’t settle

it arrives

and

arrives
I don’t know what refrain of near-disaster
to be committed to. Which leg of mine bears all the weight.
In the morning, tornado sirens break
in between each dream of tornado already inside,
ararching, wandering. I cleave and reason on,
ask, *What is making peace*
if it doesn’t benefit me? I feel nothing
but that we work out our ancient movements,
crawl into a silent good, our young faces
draped over glasses of water.
Each crease of pregnancy another rotation.
I will put my hands here, mind just un-centered.
Everything I carve in myself is in order to forget.
Inside my voice, a violet room zooms out
into something more vicious.
June. Three rings of dried pineapple and a third coffee. I write “WHAT IS THE
THING?” and the thing is always more instruction. More notes, a preparation. If
we are both still alone in the gesture then there is no word one. Each ending a gap,
a window.

What we know about Helen is her sex, her little form. A body of nouns.
Irrepressible. We know that she is unraveled to be yellow-haired; the machine of
Helen always was. What we know about the machine of Helen is being cited and
cited and what kind of warm stone do I hold now.
Waking too late, I feel out of symbol. I braid into others’ layers. My hands fill others’ pockets. Tell me what deserves intimacy, Helen. A poem is a catch-all, carries hesitation inside of it. The public orange of writing, too much, much too much. How do I decipher my own name in its largeness.

I know I have ancestral people; the fossil record implies trial and error. I am in a café where the glass frame of painting reflects my writing body: heavy with arms, hunting violets until barbed. Scratching into the screen I get no correspondence, only echoes.

We forget words, but hold each gap by the throat.

Here I am slipping on the same page. Even my handwriting changes when trying to get to you.
The given of Helen is aperture. Whatever form is
is not here. Hair parted down the middle: this is how
the frame works.
Slash and cut. I am speaking of and for
nobody now. Nothing changes; boundaries flanked
in me still cast as boundaries, lines of devotion
to exclude the function.
I want to drop my stones to the ground,
see the grafted disorder of Helen
for what it is: fragrant and good.
Instead I build and build consequences, secretly
become too tired to be valuable
Again I wake a humming body
after dreaming of marlins
the mess of their spears
against my thigh, ocean a nagging oil
pulsing underneath

I attempt to be breathable
watch butter melt in the pan

I remember sitting in the bathtub once
seeing a child-roll and thinking
sex, and also how fat

You are not benign, I said, not a benign thing
What makes up our bodies
vs. what is being emitted

and how do we know when to draw those lines
Driving to one place to swallow it down,
then driving to the next
to vomit it out

Who or that which generates
or begets, a vessel in which steam is generated

instead I attempt a stand-off, thighs
half-buried in sand

Becoming so undisciplined

that I can touch

and touch and all but know it
In this small tent men pound
on my portico, hold ground bees
to death in their fists. I hear their drills
slice walls, skin against nail against
pure bone frame of pointed organ and venom.
Against the soft holes of my body
organs press and rupture, press and rupture.
My little husk. Nothing holds upright.
I make mythical these small walls, hold a spoon
inside my mouth until the skin breaks,
here as in there. We disagree with ourselves
and choke on the institution. I run and am stunned
at how my body has created an emergency in me.
No choice now but to go on toughening
the memory, its piece of flesh.
Are we part of some heavier pattern yet?
When will men stop wasting all this energy
on transcendence? I want to write a poem where
the I is the one always rescuing the other I,
but am told over and over again that you can’t just
*unconsciously collaborate*. That it’s just not possible.
But I didn’t write this poem for you.
I do not write this poem.
*Being itinerant is easy,* he says, the poet says, filmed blazing and reaching across a couch. He stands for hours by brackish water, shouting the lyrical and the present, sounding out his own brassy lines. An old mechanism to ask *how fuckable am I, how very sweetly fuckable.*

There is nothing in this recording any more, save devoted rage. Say that someone lived here, spoke here once, left this house inside-out, mastered, worked-over, and I would believe you.

What I mean to say is, any sound is a sound against silence.
Am I a load-bearing performance / a larger and lighter watchword

Am I what whistling allegory you sang / that I sang
I do remember language, Helen. I can’t change it.

Memory is the name of this next life
and the next. There is no peace in the icon.
When I try to focus on its rosewater, its blood,
I am altogether soaked in it. I feel hunger
like a dark streak, a trick, a key word
for something left outside the room.
I dream new limps. I come to my own gender
like an epithet. Somewhere else
I remember my thigh as the ocean,
as a green shawl. One thick line on my shoulder,
blond body hair on olive skin: spills I have
never refused. I want to call our version of things
timeless, but you tell me this is something
longer, and thick with cycles.
Can I mouth this myth again and again? Will it make me unsexed, undergrown? Is there ever a bird less beautiful than man? *Stop tucking in your tailbone*, he says.

I resist his pity, well-oiled, my voyeurs a side wish. His pity. He tells me to land softer; I land a plunge, away. Off-stage, I pull in.
MIDDLING

: Burrowing how you name me. Pregnant, meaning \textit{walled-in}. You said the skies were changeable. I felt it in the next room.

: Because Berryman said, “all has pointed to HERE.” Because the baby eggplant outside already has a worm that bore its way through. Because I don’t ever feel safe.

: What are your feelings toward boxes?

: My lungs are metallic when I wake, this blanket a cape full of my ashes. The skyline is a dirty haze, meals in the early hours.
It hadn’t occurred to me that I am *adamant*, that I am *vicious*. That if you aren’t dead-on I’ll make you dead-on. Every meal is a disappointment, this habit to swallow lost.

: How long have you been trying to lose weight?

: I’m not looking at this leaf unless you’re watching me look at this leaf. What to diffuse, to implode (this obligation). Do I know you in this language or do I *know you*?

: Situated, not located. Think of: deep pockets, muffled, some straining star. The ocean, scale-filled and buckling.
: Did you fast before coming here?

: An animal scrapes against the metal roof and the cat goes mad.

: The tea olive outside has a hidden smell, and no flowers to spot or rub up against. A family of owls and the train speak up at the same time.

: So what if I taste blood in my lungs in the cold. Over a thousand years ago, a group of monks saw fire coming from the moon and it was a meteor all along.
What to calibrate now, am I conflicted, this backhanded pain in my chest, someone’s dark belief of a body. I mean to speak of primacy, to mark by incision but am at a loss, a flag shaking toward the cold and the good. Riots end and don’t end. Any loss knows this: though small against it the winds still come. The speaking subject is continual disappointment. I’ve defined it. This museum his artifice, war thrashing at its lens. All I wanted was to make contact, to be of an accepting body, and still I tell only stories of an echo. Is it better to have misgivings than to imagine a woman without face or hands, or is this even a new cry
There are 85 different kinds of pain, my physical therapist and I discuss, after he gives me two broken pieces of dark Venezuelan chocolate. The kind of pain, he says, that makes you withdraw, only applies to a quarter of the 85. The rest we were born for.

Don’t mind this language, its shriek, a fuming, less limited self. I fold my hands. I read *Middlemarch*. Ants fall from the ceiling and onto my bedsheets. When I roll them in my fingers they smell like dark metal. This is a symptom.
In this wreckage I am a wild service. A chapter within a chapter. I speak of hair of leaving, messy only when I repeat myself. Precede my own repetition.

You let me burrow into those readymade cuts, let the care carry over me. In this speaking I can take and take my mark, but still I fall in among animal hair and semolina.

When I scrub this old skin it just gets older, a yellow, papered fruit in my hands. What I read breaks in me like a gash of atoms, the cigarette burn on my hand a perfect round window.

I want to know how to make a book of resisting, want to make a list of foods that stayed down when I do what I do / and I write and waste / how very loud I waste how loud I waste / am meat to myself too, an ornament of doors opening and shutting, too am punctured, too heaving against walls collecting fruit flies until I wipe them away.

Don’t give me a subject / This memory is ruin / is ruin

The subject of this memory / is ruin /
I have had years of cleanliness, have carved
a candle out of starving

Now I want any warm thing
First we have the sea
attuned to some stable thing,
clouds blowing over a bolstered buzz
a flowering supply of beasts here, our island
The metal springs outside say to cut this film
of the authentically beautiful
of the event horizon of beautiful
To shut down our watching
this pinprick of atoms, always in motion
in bodies, entryways
What is the future of this island
Our knocked hip our word one
Doubly dark now in the marginalia
my singing, probing

An attempt to mouth some winter
a wish to run over baby snakes
to step into what little signal there is left
and make rooms of equal size

We are permanently hard to say
a waking wall, a body wall
to stand braided over the stairs
and drop a wreath over our primed island

But what to guarantee
What symptoms are we to each other
women as fingers born forward
A hunger blister unlearned

What wide wire markings on the canopy
No loving sounds we are now
Now fastened
to the chilled galaxy
Helen you are often overhead
when I imagine war.
The practice is always the same,
part ancient guessing, part real knowledge,
who may collapse on a chair
in this all-male house. Snow heaps
onto the book cover as a way out,
double-edged and settled on tree branches.
My chorus embraces a gorgeous room.
I draw it out, this hum, slow ideogram
of recall, where into my elsewhere knot
I mouth *Out, my comrades, out.*
What I am trying to tell you
you know already—I'm olive, I'm far
orange, I am alternate shining scars
and tethers of body fat. It took me a year
to admit it, and in stillness I remember
my thicket. Helen, touch the doorknob,
the house is falling. I think I should go under.
The way the body curls
I want to follow it, these politics,

heart-bodied and soldiered
until a violent outburst occurs

like calving glaciers
I know that it isn’t my job

to keep this concavity
from brimming,

that there are enough
documents in this list

to keep the continually occluded
occluded, continually

No adult tells me how
to get back to it, where we put it,

why we call this spindle
of wanted white loss story

To own
is not an archive

How do I carry this fullness
when what burns is its absence
I was once beautiful in my flexibility:
the door opened, the door opened
My flatness more luminous against other
jutting skins: against hardness
I could sit and carve

A woman wears lines of a poem
in the way we find striations in our teeth
and fingernails,
bulbs of muscle tissue

Older now I address myself
by more parts to grip, how I exceed
the long bridge between
two broken pieces of poems
Standing with other women I wake up apart
from them, copy their length of hunger,
pleasing, expertise

_Am I and what is a woman,_ and if I keep
repeating this question, sharing
this same body won’t seem so distant

I look over and arrange and arrange and arrange

How can a body make so many mistakes
When is a throat not like a cave? My question is about being stalled, about intimacy. I am learning what it means to swallow this gold thread, to let the scatter keep itself in me, scatter over me for years.

You offer a blankness, Helen, and I am learning how to speak to you. How very loud I carve into the old voices. When I yawn, my littered body opens out like a cup for you. The form has an oily slip, a folding over place, the sharp thread of disorder.

I am surprised at how long it took for me to be angry. Or to know I have always been angry. To outline this anger into the form into the pier-glass.
We find rupture in those first sentences
Glaciers, a thawing space of power and hard fabric
Don’t tell me about the wreck of forgetting
I refuse to answer the question as asked,
stagger out to punch an ode into the cosmos
An unending child, waiting to be shook open
I the day cracks I am that child
My comrades and I, we continue
our bloody mary lunches in the Rainier fog,
make peace with a toxic sex, a real
hanging fear
that we are never safe
That pulling my tights up is a sign. That leaning over to pull up my tights is a sign. That the man over there is stopping and touching himself and that is my fault and my tights’ fault. That I will never know what my body is doing and I will hear always someone tell me to put it away, to discipline it, a body, another body, my body.

Under hold of this threat: little girl waiting to be shook open / around a nice man who will inevitably do bad things. That everywhere she goes, there will be a nice man who will do bad things.
I write to convince my comrades that our bodies (always abstract, always slipping from under us) are strong, heavy thrones, much stronger than they are weak. Shark skin and velcro, running thighs/glass bodice. How difficult it is to actually keep it up. Before I was born I had a name but no gender. I was confused with a water parasite. When I was born the doctor told my mother she's too pretty to be anything but a girl. This is no new alarm. Lock. Lock again. Unlock/lock to confirm.

The very nature of memory is violent. Barthes writes of the punctum, the puncture; in his mourning diary he is constantly lacerated by surprise presences/absences. But only violent enough to engrave, not to alter time itself—that is trauma’s domain. I know that when a man went to prison I was six years old, not entirely unaware. I cried and was afraid the ballerina platypus toy he gave me had cameras in its plush. In the bathtub my hand would brush against my own body and I would feel immediately sick. Woolf: I could not pass it / dumb horror.

I look out from a body ravenous for sea water.
I say I'm working on a poem thinking about.

I say this is a poem vector. This is a vector towards.

I say I'm working on a female serial poem. Towards anger, towards trauma.

I say I have nothing to give and it tastes sour.

I say I wake with a mouth full of chicory, of woodworm.

I say there are no other words for what I mean by body.

I say I'd recommend not reading it at all, but it's what I've been marinating on if I'm not writing Helen poems and then this just sort of came out.

I say And one part is something I've been meaning to say, that it just sort of came to me a few weeks ago, and I say it's not a poem, but maybe after doing this I can figure out what else to write about, it's been bothering me in these kinds of poems.

I say This is not a poem.

I say Whatever, it's Easter, the day of being renewed, right?
This is not a poem. A poem figures things out via language. I have no language. Every word becomes a covering up of something I haven't done. Each ending a calling out, a final, watery note to be repeated without resolution. Then the fade-out.

When I was born I was born good.
“Did they re-touch her arms, her shoulders?
did anyone touch her ever?”

– Helen in Egypt, H.D.
How did she hold a nectarine? Who stood, kissing her belly like the ship’s bow? What did she see in silk stockings, in the breasted light of the grey pier-glass?
Were her eyes screened and away? Was her dress blue-dashed and signal-heavy? Did her hard, oaken scars show through? Did she at all find me here, painted with the telephone of her? Was she more afraid of fog or a field, living room or bank? How did she move through this caroled multiverse? Had she seen a glacier, filled with rivets and the bodies of mermaids?
What glowing berries did she hold in her lap, waiting for the snow to start? Was she always told when to be full, when not to be? Did she write the fecundity of mother termites when she wanted to write eating disorder?
Was she glad to have me in her future? Did she hear the daughter upstairs watching National Velvet?
How often did she speak of willing bodies to be good?
Did she alone have a throbbing lightness, a courage in defining some quick green beginning? How, then, did she recover the hyacinth body, my body, like her body?
From here the swell of growing female, allure
of being infected, it moves in and on
I feel the inertia weight, someone else’s insatiability,
someone else’s hunger for the sake of hunger
Yesterday you would be shrunken
and un-believed, and now your concavity
a state of matter become machine

The marble does me in again, Helen
such heavy disregard of hair of discharge
To follow is to take in a liquid

It is a beautiful corpse
Outside I am full
Helen, this is for you and it is unremarkable. Some part of a solar eclipse ends before it begins. I used to think that I could only know my memory through what came out of me. The base of my throat, an object: bulb and water.

We try to make memories pieces of flesh, threads of leather we grab and mouth.

I’ve forgotten most of this already, even though I just typed it out.

This, and this.
No one is here to see me pick up this leaf,
swaying in the dirt of my own female
knowing well the rearranging
and how we neglect the vault
Nature continues to be a hidden talk,
slipping at its labels
and all I remember is the maddening host
we continue to allow in our evening body,
rearranging ice to swaddle the nodes
Calibrations in my throat
to not freeze out

You can heat my body, Helen
but it will only make the virus grow faster
From here a skein, a solution:
harbinger of an opening

A little note from beyond, ie.,
the lost “family joke,” the long bridge
between moments of being
and their reverb

Should I not be supremely content
that a fire is built instead of made,
made instead of male

That in the pockets of this overcoat
I am female, a form of being bold but not bold

red in eyelet, repeating I am 27, I am 27
to doctors and the tea olive’s hidden smell

a sense of stalemate overhead

an obligation to make angles and lose
this animal body
to sing about and value preparedness
like something we weave and erect a fort under

To deserve this realm of history
in no language
Never mind the shriek on the radio:

A hemorrhage subsiding
a long file of rain
Dear Helen, our dead
names are on your tongue
my space in this seat
of language, patient as the teardrop
shape of a hand
as it dances through the other hand
I can't change that: I wait until
the hunger returns,
ever small this loss of canopy
That it is difficult to settle
this hollow, that I bleed above
my lip and don't mind
the mechanism: that I deserve
this riddled hunger
WORKS CITED


