

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

Habitat, Body, Story:  
Picturing the shifting nature of home  
&  
Decreation: Thorn Collaborative

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## Table of Contents:

### Habitat, Body, Story: Picturing the shifting nature of home

|                 |    |
|-----------------|----|
| Prologue        | 3  |
| Introduction    | 4  |
| Home as Habitat | 7  |
| Home as Body    | 17 |
| Home as Story   | 27 |
| Conclusion      | 35 |

### Decreation: Thorn Collaborative

|                                    |    |
|------------------------------------|----|
| Introduction                       | 37 |
| <i>She and Her ( The Fiction )</i> | 39 |

### Project Descriptions:

|                        |    |
|------------------------|----|
| Gulf Between Words     | 42 |
| Tuning System No.1 & 2 | 48 |
| You Have My Word(s)    | 52 |
| Nympha                 | 56 |
| Postscript             | 58 |
| Bibliography           | 60 |

# Habitat, Body, Story:

## Picturing the shifting nature of home

### Prologue

Upon visiting the Grotto of the Nativity in Bethlehem, Annie Dillard touched a hole, painted with a fourteen-pointed star, in the cobblestone floor of a deep, dingy, poorly decorated cave. The hole marks the spot where Jesus was born. Supposedly, it used to be a stable with a manger, but the landscape has changed over time, now completely covered with monasteries “like barnacles.”<sup>1</sup> Annie’s present day experience of Jesus’s birthplace is an odd collision. The *story* of Jesus in Christian religious texts, the actual *body* and life of Jesus, and the surrounding *habitat* or setting of his birth exist in different time frames. The landscape of the Earth’s surface and the structures we build on it continually recycle. His body is said to have met its end almost 2,000 years ago. His story, infinitely retold and rewritten, endures. She makes this incongruity the home of her work.

## Introduction

At its core, my work grapples with the nature of things as constantly in a state of flux. I focus a study of home in pursuit of the eye of the storm, but the endeavor reveals all but tranquility. In the process, stories, bodies, and ecologies emerge as complex relational structures that shed light on home's complexity, interrelationships, and mutability. The labyrinthine journey of the work teases out synchronicities across narrative, corporeal, and environmental modes of being that articulate our experience of home as a living locus of change.

Inside this endeavor, a concrete definition of home is elusive. It encompasses everything from the domestic house and surrounding landscape, to our relationships with family and friends, to the experience of being inside a body and a mind. Home is our first universe, our own corner of the world, our refuge. It is the central locus around which the rest of life orbits. When home changes, everything else is flung along with it. If we zoom out, it is the sun in our galaxy. If we track its movement, all else follows. Studying home in its multiple forms aids the depiction and examination of the vibrant chaos of life. It leads to a sort of origin, an inner core. From this center point, as it moves and changes, we can glimpse a 360 degree perspective of its efferent ripples, reverberating outward, multiplying and softening in time.

My interest in home focuses on three elucidations—home as habitat, home as body, and home as story. As relationships and interactions within domestic spaces resonate with open-air ecological systems, the inner workings of living bodies, and meandering narratives in the mind, commonalities inspire exchanges. Inside becomes outside. Domestic spaces impersonate landscape. The porous membrane of the house acts like skin. Scenes from the story of the mind are planted and cultivated. Threads from each of these spheres are woven together into the essential fabric of the work, creating hybrid constructs that visualize the changing and complex nature of home. The process compounds time, commemorates decay, and mythologizes memory.

We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection... Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost.

— Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

In this document, brief stories accompany the explication of the three primary modes of the work. These short fictions illustrate the work's concepts in vivid narrative forms, which provide an alternative awareness than that of the work or the discussion of its concepts. Toward the goal of articulating the complex, relational, shifting nature of home in its three interpretations, fiction lends a hand by offering space to wander in and

out of reality and magic. It becomes possible to have things the way we wish they were as well as how they are. And these stories funnel permutations of time and space into linear form. So conglomerate layers and schemes of reality are easier to perceive and map. The stories I write influence, support, and infiltrate the work, sometimes as precursors, sometimes as byproducts. They strengthen the work's connection to both reality and fiction, living in the space between the artist and the work.

## Part 1: HOME AS HABITAT

### *LandHome*

*She named every branch on the way to the top of her favorite climbing tree. From there, she could see the big bell that rang for emergencies or special occasions. She could see the pond and the red dirt damn, the dilapidated bridge that crossed the creek and the path that led up to the well that was always about to run dry. The trails her father carved and maintained through the land re-routed themselves every day. Every time she walked them, she was lead somewhere totally new, but no one else in the family ever seemed to notice. If she climbed high enough in her tree, at the right time of day when the light was golden, she could see the trails draw giant symbols through the woods – a big arch would intersect a straight line just south of the house, then in an instant loop around to cross another straight section going west towards the sun, then zigzag and wind far into the back pasture.*

*She loved her father in a strange way because she could crawl into the painting that he picked out with his mother when he was twelve years old. The scene in the painting looked exactly like the creek that ran through the land they lived on, which made everyone believe that he had dreamed of the land since he was young. It hung above the fireplace that she drew in the evenings, in between the stained glass windows that she never had the patience to draw accurately. While she drew, she wondered if the trail's drawings were big letters that strung together into words and sentences that her father couldn't utter in any other way.*

*The way into the painting was her most precious secret. And one day, she started to store the letters and shapes she saw in the trails inside the painting. Piles of*

them swelled up over the years. When she was in the painting she could arrange the letters and shapes into coherent phrases that her father had spoken to her in his dreams before she was born. They would have conversations this way. It was strange that all she had to do was think something and her father would know it. There was no complicated translation process or time travel to their communication in that direction. But she enjoyed the process of climbing the tree, hiding the letters in the painting and then tackling the word puzzle of putting together her father's thoughts inside his dreams. But sadly, she could never figure out how to bring the conversations back with her when she would crawl out of the painting and back into the living room. Maybe if she had been more vigilant in her attempts she could have found a way, but the piles of letters and shapes in the painting eventually grew out of control and started to block out the light and clog up the creek. Some of the letters floated away before they amassed so much that they damned the creek completely and began to rot and dissolve in the stagnant water. This was of no concern to her in her youth, but the accumulation and decay really started to burden the whole system of things when she got older.

When they put the place up for sale, no one wanted to buy it because the creek had stopped flowing and anyone could see that soon the trees would start to die. She was scared that it was all her fault. He assured her that they would all share the blame equally, since each person had dreamt their own story of the land and none of us could seem to save it, to re-write a better ending. In our last days there, he hung the painting in my climbing tree, from the limb I named Esther, and I dreamt the creek flooded and swallowed it back into itself.

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My work explores **home as habitat** in hopes of illuminating the home's complex, changing, and magical nature. Habitat refers to the network of objects, places, experiences and relationships that constitutes the sense of home. It goes beyond location to encompass the transient, relational, and intangible qualities of a place that has its own time and history. It is the womb that nurtures being.

Home as habitat situates the physical house parallel to larger living systems. Past, present, and future cast the home in different lights. People move homes, architecture degrades, neighborhoods and land develop. With passage of time, rooms shrink, hallways reroute, gardens overgrow and die. Homes have lives that involve birth, death and sometimes regeneration. They foster diverse forms of life, register on multiple time scales, and undergo myriad cultural and psychological forces. Our homes function as environments by enduring change and decay at varying rates and scales – from grocery shopping to divorce. The work tunes into resonances between domestic habitats and natural ones, may they be grander or smaller in scale.

*Baptism* melds the house with a sandy shore or dune. A large angular section of a black shingled roof dissolves into loose black sand. The gradient is concentric, fading from shingles to sand to gallery floor on all sides. The roof is tilted and skewed horizontally and its highest point is 20" from the floor, so it seems to emerge from or sink

into the black sand void. From a distance it appears a dream-like image, a break in the continuity of the floor, a mirage. Up close, the pitch of the incline matches that of the shore when one is emerging from the ocean. The transition into shingles suggests the oneiric possibility of walking out of the ocean, onto the beach, and onto the roof of one's home in one seamless motion.

This gesture correlates the constructed human home with the natural environment, highlighting aesthetic and conceptual resonances between them. Roofing materials are often surfaced with compressed particles, like weather resistant mineral granules, and are installed at a slope to ensure run-off. This relates to the composition and function of a sandy beach. Both are made of particles, facilitate water being where it's supposed to be, and endure weather conditions. Both the roof and the beach mark a boundary between an internal space and an exterior – a roof separates a home's domestic interior from the open sky, and the shore is the threshold between the world underwater and exposed dry land.

Intermingling the two emphasizes the human home's vulnerability. It can withstand rain, wind, or snow, but melding it with the shore suggests a looming tide. The physical house is likely unprepared to handle the ocean's power and persistence, but the image insinuates that it already does. The home endures upheavals of intangible forces

that rival the scale of the ocean's tide. These forces may be mental, emotional, or relational in nature, but their recurrence, severity, and impact parallel the natural world's most powerful forces.

Though these phenomena are alluded to, *Baptism* presents us with a frozen moment, in which the house could be sinking or emerging. The still image stores potential in both directions. Environmental qualities of home, as a structure that endures powerful forces of change, enable both its vulnerability and its creative potential. When the natural world incites decay or destruction, it facilitates a cycle of regeneration. The home is animated by the same cycle. Its destruction enables its creation which both enable its vitality. *Baptism* visualizes home's potential in both directions, toward dissolution and emergence.

In *Dreamdrawn*, a child's dollhouse floods and drains. Water streams into the miniature domestic space from underneath the sink in the kitchen. It crawls across the tile and snakes into the carpet, coating the first floor level. It rises and buoys the tiny furniture inside, which float and dance at the water's whim. The open-facing side of the house is a wall of thin glass, displaying the flooded interior like an aquarium. The type of movement created by the water is dreamlike. Things are gently lifted from their stillness, tilting or flipping to redistribute their weight. They then easily hover and glide, released

from the tether of gravity. As the level breaches the second floor of the dollhouse, the lower level's furnishings are pressed tightly against the ceiling, like the laughing scene from *Mary Poppins*. Then a second tier of furnishings are set free to swim and wander. Light drenches the living space, seeming captured and thickened by the water. Tiny rivers babble down the front stairs and onto the surrounding carpet. As it leaks, the sound of dripping water fills the space. The fabricated wooden house seems to swell. Bits of its blue and white paint crack. It looks ready to burst from the heaviness inside. The water slowly drains, depositing furnishings all around, rearranged and relinquished to gravity. A side table balances upside down on top of a lamp. A footstool dangles from the lip of the bathroom sink, still full of water. Puddles gather and slacken until the water returns and reclaims them. The flood is relentless.

The habitat of childhood is presented in flux, and this is simultaneously a magical and disconcerting image. Its liquidness is imbued with significance as a visualization of the invisible, but the same substance that enables the dream-like gravitational behavior of furniture and the strangeness of liquid light also facilitates material decay and leaves everything strewn about in disaster. Powered by a pump, the flood is incessant and slow, the devastation of the dollhouse unremitting.

If this flood were human scale it could ruin or take lives, but it is miniature – a miniature house overwhelmed by a miniature flood. Its scale makes us feel like giants peering in to a small world. The dynamic removes us from the experience. The viewer witnesses the scene almost god-like, aware of their own adulthood, illuminating the distance between childhood home and present existence.

The dollhouse is a replica of the one my father built for me when I was five years old. Extreme care was taken in its reconstruction, only to be surrendered to a pump-powered deluge. After the initial phase of fabrication, I play the role of the instigator, setting the process in motion and letting go. The result is a cathartic destruction. Time moves slowly, ominous, reminiscent of the unraveling of a household, when it feels like slow motion right before your eyes. You can't do anything to stop it. The process made physical evokes beauty and tragedy, the poetic quality melancholic. As time compounds, the home is envisaged as a tumultuous and magical habitat.

Home's environmental behaviors and resonances evidence its magical nature as a complex network of interdependent forces, qualities, and states. This concept fits into an environmental methodology, as discussed by Jan Van Woert in "Why Is Art Met With Disbelief? Because It's Too Much Like Magic." It is characterized by a perspective attuned to qualities and states, rather than value or status. Environments are composed

of interactions between things, forces, and organisms that are fluid and sympathetic, not quantified or strategic.<sup>2</sup> Essentially, environments are relational. In the same vein, art is historically tied to the “magic of mimesis,” not only in classical notions of observational representation or “taking someone’s likeness,” but in understandings of composition that attempt to explain its mystical magnetism or dissonance. Van Woert emphasizes *rhyme* and *resonance* (between things, worlds, sounds, or colors) as magically mimetic qualities that subvert economic mindsets. So tuning into the idiosyncrasies of environmental relationships around us works like the recognition of rhyme and resonance. Both conjure the “magical” power of art.<sup>3</sup>

The artwork’s goal is to manifest this complex and enchanted nature of home, and one way this materializes is through the use of technology. Technology enables the animation of objects and substances, giving them vitality of their own. These animate forces are situated in relationship to other things, coordinating meaningful contact, interaction, and collaboration. Using electronics disables the work’s self-sufficiency or isolation, requiring it to be plugged into a larger grid. This not only suggests a collective animating spirit or system, but an immanent death when the work is turned off or ceases to function. In *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic & Mysticism in the Age of Information*, Erik Davis explores the presence of myth, magic and mysticism in the age of information, observing

that today we are watching “Boundaries dissolve... between synthetic and organic life, actual and virtual environments.”<sup>4</sup> The dissolution of boundaries and inversion of dualities that technology causes are in themselves, primary objectives of the work. Through the use of technology to manifest environmental interactions, a mystical relationship between the tangible and intangible world unfolds.

The work expresses the enchanted nature of home as habitat by emphasizing its relational qualities and potential for transformation. It is a vibrant living system composed of and affected by a myriad of forces visible and invisible. As the work reflects on the habitat of home though material interactions and time-based scenarios, its rhythms, phases, and behaviors are visualized. By commemorating cycles of birth, death, and regeneration, the decay of home is honored as a sign of its vitality.

My role in these endeavors is that of a cultivator and an instigator. I seek out and facilitate relationships and interactions between materials, substances, and technologies that express home’s transformative potential. As I animate its parts, visualize its intangible forces, instigate its interactions, and cultivate its evolution, my role becomes participatory. By nature I am a part of the habitat, so I relate to it and act upon it fully integrated into its structure. By interacting with my environment and evidencing

relationships between things, spaces, and forces over time, I strive to reveal the dynamism of the habitat of home.

## Part 2: HOME AS BODY

### Hypnogram

*They applied sensors to her entire body – scalp, face, neck, chest, stomach, arms, and legs. Medical tape assisted the routing of all these wires into a bundle that merged with her hair, weighing heavy on her head, then plugging into a motherboard hanging from her neck. Her body's secret melodies were being siphoned through these wires, translated and amplified next door. During the night, they watched her dreams, sucked out of her brain and displayed on a television. During the day, they'd buzz in on a loud speaker and tell her to stay awake. She never fell asleep during the day.*

*As a little boy, he always wanted to sleep in my room. It was like he knew that he needed someone to watch over his rippling and heaving body while his mind journeyed towards forgetting, interrupted 148 times per night. But at the time, I just thought that he could hear the stars better through the ceiling windows in my room, or that he thought the cats could see him better there. I baulked every time because big girls don't sleep with their whiny little brothers, but I always caved. Secretly I wanted the company too and couldn't hear the stars without him there anyway. They only sang to us when we were together.*

*I read a short story while she played piano and we both drank our morning coffee. I braided her green hair and our reflection in the mirror anticipated nothing different in our daily routine. Read and coffee. Walk to school. Share leftovers. Come home. Go to sleep. But my mother and brother sat on our living room floor fussing about the day. "Guys, you aren't really here, just look into the mirror and you'll see that I have nothing planned for you today. This must be a misunderstanding..."*

*The splinters in the rough-hewn log walls woke me up and asked me to stand watch. I thought of Jesus asking his disciples to stay awake in that garden place while he went off to pray, and then laughed at myself for the comparison. I stayed awake for a little while, which of course felt like forever, but soon drifted back towards forgetting. The next night the splinters woke me up again and said the same thing, and this started to happen regularly. They would wake me up at the same time in the early hours of the morning, and he would hum and groan and exhale loudly and grind his teeth. I wondered if the splinters thought his obnoxious sounds were some kind of beautiful music that I'd want to hear. Maybe it was to them. On one of these symphonic occasions, the lamplight flickered on, barely perceptible. It dimmed and brightened recurrently. Then I noticed the cup of water by his bed vibrating to the same rhythm and his blanket and pillow seemed to swell and fall, alive. The heater joined the chorus and I had just figured out that all the objects closest to my resting brother were performing in synchronization with his breath when the rhythm changed. The steady inhale and exhale of everything in the room stopped for twenty something seconds and then was replaced with fitful gasps and panting...*

*They asked her how long she thought she'd been sleeping, which angered her because she was exhausted and was just about to fall asleep when they barged in. It all felt like a sick joke. She ate the food they brought her and tried to read a book, but just ended up staring at the wall and pacing through the hallways. She felt locked up and turned inside out – her body's music playing somewhere her body wasn't, her dreams harvested.*

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Like the first home encases childhood, the **home of the body** functions as the shelter for the tumult of internal life. It houses the immaterial, constructed sense of self, “without it man would be a dispersed being.”<sup>5</sup> It is a travelling shell, the physical boundary of identity as distinct from others (though this is not necessarily true). Our bodies are the homes we can’t trade in for new ones. They develop and deteriorate from conception to death and decay. Growing up is, in itself, a tumultuous and miraculous transformation.

Close monitoring of a body reveals an ensemble of signals, loud and quiet, that indicate its myriad internal processes—processes that affect our daily experience of life. As humans, we are conscious of only a portion of these signals. A multitude of them remain unknown to us, indicating and affecting conditions and activities in our bodies with out our knowledge. My interest the body’s silent symphony, driven by a struggle with asthma and sleep disorder by my family and myself, has fueled the incorporation of a biological awareness into the work. Via data and metaphor, deliberations on breath and sleep recur throughout, signifying a consideration of the body’s affect on daily existence and memory.

*Lullaby [Reconstruction Rescue]* renders the signal of a sleeping body into a domestic scene of home. A walled plywood enclosure sit on the floor against the wall.

Three box fans, three open-ended sections of duct work, a DMX light board, an arduino, and a bucket of water outfit the structure's outer surface, hanging from hooks, resting on ledges or fitted into custom cut outs in the raw ply. The fans switch on and off, ramping up speed and then slowing gradually, again and again. Their humming sound swells and quiets. The water in the bucket siphons in and out through a plastic tube and into the plywood enclosure, giving the bucket its own small tide. The multitude of cords and tubes, powering and connecting this system, loosely drape between connection points, making no attempt to hide their presence. The visible construction methods and exposed technical system give the viewer the impression they are seeing the backside of something, like a stage set.

The sections of duct function like periscopes so when the viewer peers in, they see glimpses of a bedroom inside. A pillow and blanket inflate and collapse with the wind from the fans, seeming to rise and fall like a breathing body. The lamplight dims and brightens slowly, slightly out of sync with bedding's rhythm. A glass of water vibrates anxiously on the nightstand. The objects seem to have a regular rhythm for a short time and then spasm unexpectedly. The enlivened bedroom scene feels staged, and the periscope complicates the viewer's perception of space and scale.

One periscope attached to the side of the box reveals a miniature version of the bedroom – a bed, baby blue walls, and curtained window – but this vignette is animated by water. It floods and drains on a repeating cycle, and as it does so, the bed rises and twirls and the curtains softly undulate. In proportion to the view in the other periscopes, this scene is comparable, but the level of detail perceptible in the decor tells its miniature scale. The flood and drain regularity resembles a slowed cadence of inhalation and exhalation, and over time, the rhythmic quality and swaying bed suggest a strange lullaby.

All the technical clutter on the outside is understood to be manufacturing these synthetic scenes. The rhythm of respiration belongs to my brother; the data gathered in a recent sleep study. His test results were translated and output through an arduino, DMX board, lamp, fans, and motor to imbue the recreated room with his biological information. This gesture animates rhythmic inconsistencies that quietly reveal signs of Apnea. This construction imagines an alternate version of reality where his childhood ailment was made known. It was motivated by the absurd sensation of receiving a retroactive diagnosis. Imperceptible in the past, the symptomatic signal is now amplified to a level that we can see, hear, and feel. Staging this recreation re-inhabits childhood memory with new information, conveying internal signals outside the body that reveal internal

commotion. This casts a new light on how experience is shaped by the body. In contextualizing the biological, the unknown becomes perceptible, increasing awareness of the how the body functions as an ever changing home.

Through material poetry, *Lullaby [Reconstruction Rescue]* uses elemental substances of air and water to signify breath and dreams, and their relationship to the body. As discussed by Bachelard throughout his work, the four elements excite our oneiric imagination, and “materialized images” of these substances express and strengthen one’s knowledge of the self in relationship to the world.<sup>5</sup> Bachelard speaks of air as the element of ascension, freedom. We’ve all dreamt of flying through the air, being weightless, and having a bird’s eye view. Fresh air filled lungs are an iconic image of buoyancy, lightness. The inflation/deflation of the pillow and bed in the first scene conjure the vibrant, life-giving quality of air as it is inhaled as breath. The aerial view of the vibrating cup of water speaks to the invigoration of elevation; its verticality a direct correlation to our desire for an ultimate perspective on the world, because to rise above is to see all.

In the miniature flooding vignette, water acts as a lulling force that gives ungraspable substance to dreams, gesturing transitions from sleeping to waking and commingling beauty and danger. Bachelard said “Water is the transitory element, the

embodiment of flux, compromise, fluidity, pliability, mixing; it demonstrates the endlessly changing substance of our own essential being.”<sup>6</sup> The nature of water enables the flood and drain cycle, and this constant flow resonates with the body’s experience of sleep. It is a liquefactive tide. It comes in waves, and it always leaves residue. The water in the scene is crystal clear, so it captures light like a prism. This buffers the ominousness of the flooded house, situating it in the territory of dreams, where sumptuous beauty has a tinge of danger.

Narcoleptic nosedives from waking into dreaming resemble the sensation of being overcome by water. Sleep dysfunction blurs the leaky boundary between waking and sleeping, though it often goes undiagnosed, obscured by the shadowiness and bewilderment of fatigue. Narcolepsy inhibits one’s awareness of their transitions between waking and sleeping, enabling fluid movement between the two. Only hindsight can reveal the slight incongruities that indicate a dream state, but often these absurdities are deceptively subtle. In a similar way, water allows for the continuation of movement, sight, and sound through space much like the atmosphere we live in, but its unique characteristics alter our experience of gravity and inhibit breathing. The body is allowed to continue, but the experience is distinctly different.

In recent years, my family has discovered our own history of sleep dysfunction, so my focus on Narcolepsy and Apnea specifically has been driven not just by fascination but also by real and intimate journeys undertaken by my closest family and myself. A fascination with elusive or unknown parts of the self has been the result. Though we spend roughly a third of our lives asleep, we are largely unaware of the state of our bodies during sleep and frequently forget our dreams. It's all a blur. In *Decreation*, Anne Carson praises sleep as a glimpse of something incognito. She writes, "What is incognito hides from us because it has something worth hiding, or so we judge."<sup>7</sup> The territory of sleep is seductive and mysterious, always concealing what it just revealed, but it so heavily affects the experience of our bodies that its interrogation is a productive task.

When medical professionals monitor and measure biological data in examination and testing, a strange thing happens. Another being becomes cognizant of the innermost language of a person's body before they do. A patient undergoing a polysomnogram, an overnight test to evaluate sleep disorders, will be plastered with sensors all over the body, which facilitate a constant flow of data about the patient into an adjacent room where a live feed of the patient is also watched on a monitor. These technologies and circumstances combine to create for the patient the bizarre sensation

of being turned inside out. The test seeks to assess even the subtlest nuances of the patient's sleep, discovering the presence of anxieties, hallucinations, nightmares and other abnormal behaviors. Revealing biological information about a character's body inverts internal and external. The inverted structure of *Lullaby [Reconstruction Rescue]* reflects this experience of being turned inside out at the doctor's office. Outward manifestations of internal signals echo the transposal of inside and outside that recurs in the work.

All together, *Lullaby [Reconstruction Rescue]* intimates home as body by utilizing technology and fluid substances to animate biological information and material imagination. The configuration contests *inside* and *outside* by exposing its construction/artifice and hiding its main stage act. Animating biological data, fluid substances, and inanimate objects scrambles notions of what is living and non-living. The domestic displays signs of life that resonate with our own rhythms of rest and respiration.

These meditations on the home of the body resonate with our flesh bound condition. The data and experiences I draw from belong to individuals close to me, but their source is not apparent. To be housed inside a form that pulsates with activities, known and unknown, is a universal state of being. Our corporeal homes are lively,

intricate, and perplexing, and they define our experience. Turning bodies inside out, by imbuing their signals into objects, spaces, and substances, satisfies a desire to reveal our internal worlds.

## Part 3: HOME AS STORY

### *To Mom From Donna*

*She had a crazy childhood after I left. I've always known it would be challenging for her to have me the first four years of her life, then disappear like I did, but now it seems like her memories of me aren't actually of me. She remembered the real me for a good while, but then she started to only remember what she remembered of me those first few times, and now she just remembers her memories of remembering me. It's different. At first when she would think of me, it was practically like we were really together again. She would walk into our bedroom, and it looked almost exactly like it was before I left. The bed was in the corner, pushed up against the wall, the pink elephant bubble lamp hovering overhead. Our toys and Barbies remained strewn all over the floor. The chalkboard easel leaned into the corner with pastel chalk dust filling the rail, and the pass-through closet door still connected our room to mom and dad's. We would still talk and play together and I continued to brush her hair and braid it into pigtails. When she clung to me, I felt her warmth. Then I started to notice that when she visited, she would want to do the exact same things we did together last time, in the same order. We'd play dress-up with mom's clothes, sneaking into her room through the closet. We'd draw pictures, and she'd ask me what to do about Bubba's sadness now that I wasn't there anymore. Sometimes I'd answer differently, but she'd always rest her head in my lap and I'd brush and braid her hair. It didn't really bother me so we just did the same things together, over and over again for a long time. It was hard on her, being the youngest in the family, so I wanted to help however I could, but gradually it seemed like something was different. Even if I didn't ask her one of the questions I always asked,*

*she would respond as if I had. The first few times this happened, I pointed it out to her and we laughed it off. I wondered if she was having trouble hearing, because sometimes she would talk back to me but sometimes she wouldn't react at all. One day when we were dressed up and trying to sneak into mom's room, the closet didn't lead anywhere anymore. It was just a long hallway of clothes with a dead end. What scared me was that it didn't faze her at all. The day I looked in the mirror and saw that all the color had drained out of our reflection was the last day she seemed to actually see me. From then on, she played with me and talked to me, just like she always did, whether I was there or not. All the things in our room that she didn't regularly touch faded until they were completely gone. The walls grew transparent, and the floor seemed to drop out of the house leaving only the narrow pathways she walked in her routine. When I reach out to touch her, there is no warmth. To her, I've become a story she reads to herself, and now in her loneliness she acts out her part and mine.*

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As we weave together our memories, relationships, and emotions over time, we construct **home as a story**. The living narrative deals with where we came from and where we belong, and it exists in the mind. Perception governs this tale; reality is irrelevant. Our stories of home involve a cast characters that populate numerous sets. The scenes are permutations of history and fiction, memories and dreams, past and future, directed by the unreliable narrator of the self.

Our self-understanding is narrative by nature, so posing home as story is a natural step. We live our internal lives at the private address of our minds—thinking, feeling, observing, obsessing, remembering, dreaming—sheltered from the rest of the world. But it is our capacity for narrative thinking that organizes all this stuff in the mind. We can perceive and order our experiences in time, translating them into our life stories, which construct our sense of self.<sup>8</sup> We perform the same process to construct our concept of home, because the two are practically inseparable. Home shapes the self, and the self shapes the home.

In *Family Recreation (working title)*, a cast of characters is center stage and I am an obvious and insistent narrator. The video opens with a moving camera shot from the perspective of a person walking into a home. I quickly begin to speak over the video, and my tone is slightly somber. The narration begins with reflections on the nature of home and family. With a black screen, I describe how we insert our present loved ones into the past and can sense traces of our earliest loved ones in the present. The video resumes, cutting straight into a scene of one female putting make-up on another. I frame everything that follows by declaring...

I dress up these new characters to look like my mother, my brother, and my father, but the most difficult is me.

How do I signify a lost version of myself?

From this point forward, the staged quality of everything is revealed. Costume changes are documented. I openly instruct the characters to perform certain actions. Books are stacked underneath Mom and Dad's chairs at the dinner table to make them taller than the children. The perspective shifts in and out from behind a camera. My narration acknowledges the artifice. As the cast sets the dinner table, I interject into the scene by asking, "*Colleen, can you ask Ben to get waters for the family?*" and she replies, "*Do I say Ben or Matt?*" The actors and their roles are difficult to distinguish. The family dinner scene remains the home base, but the narrator (and daughter) meanders through short stories and reflections on each of the other members of the family. Each character tangent reveals a hint of their personality and relationship to the daughter, noticeably from her perspective. She twists her memories together with bits of imagination, positioning these anecdotes in ambiguous time. She ends each of these chapters with the confession "I don't know what it's like to be a... [brother, father, or mother respectively]," owning her subjectivity and leaving the viewer suspect of her accounts.

The video resolves with the conclusion that recreating family is an absurd task because our perceptions of family are mere constructs, projections of the self. We are incapable of capturing even our closest companions' true identity. With this realization

the characters begin to switch roles, insinuating a continuation where each actor plays each character. This illuminates our condition of isolation; even in family, the individual plays each character, narrating their own version of the story. It also illuminates how the story of home is written. We instinctively compose our individual narratives, and they coexist, collide, and combine with our companions' to weave the collective story of home.

In the processes of creating and viewing the work, reflection on the past and projection into the future become interchangeable. For both the viewer and myself as the artist, looking at home through the lens of fiction heightens our sensitivity to such unconventional behaviors of time. In Mark Currie's book, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time*, he argues that fiction is a place where new perceptions of time are cultivated, rehearsed and articulated.<sup>9</sup> By twisting past, present, fact and fiction into hybrid constructs, my hope is that the work fosters alternative perceptions of time, and subsequently prepares for and contributes to stories of the future.

When we remember an experience or place, the sensation of re-inhabiting and reliving the past resembles the narrated experience of vivid fiction or film. In both of these, we experience time in strange ways by essentially "presentifying" the past.<sup>10</sup> This also happens inside our brains when we relive an experience or re-inhabit a place by

narrating it for ourselves. We reconstitute a version of a version of the original.<sup>11</sup>

Repeatedly narrated by the self, memories become stories, and are re-written each time they are recalled. So the experience of a place in memory mirrors the experience of fiction because largely,

it is.

The work tells a story of home through the fictionalization of memories, characters, and settings over time. The process resembles the unreliable narration of recollection. Incorporating information from my own life causes the work to function like fictionalized autobiography or *autofiction*. The *autofictive* approach involves both reflection and projection, using the past to fashion the future. Strategic efforts to be an unreliable or shape-shifting narrator leave the viewer room to doubt and to imagine multiple potential outcomes. This structure facilitates an unconventional search for self, much like the genre of autofiction provides its narrator. The emphasis is not on what really happened but on the interpretation of experience into a form that bargains accuracy for genuine quintessence.

Sacrificing truthful autobiography for poetic *autofictions* transforms the search for the individual self into the search for collective self. Stories can be personal or public, secret or agreed upon. And the story of home, though full of uniqueness for the

individual, is a communal story. At times the work deals with this by simply removing the characters, presenting settings, objects, and gestures that leave room for the viewer to enter the scene. As they put together the pieces, they become the narrator or character and project their own story upon it.

As I inscribe stories of home into the work, I employ different levels of authorial distance. My life is infused into the work, but my voice only interjects at times, like in *Family Recreation(Working title)*. In sculptural works, my presence is concealed, subliminal. Sculptures involve the same literal process of staging, but a set without the characters invites a different type of viewing. Scenes from the story of the mind are given physicality, plucked from the imagination and planted into the dimension of our bodies. In *Untitled (Sky Floor)*, the viewer looks down at a cloudy blue sky shining through a hole in a linoleum floor, suggesting a house floating through the air. This fairy-tale-like image exists in space, sharing dimensionality with the viewer. In this way, these physical constructions challenge what is inside and outside of our own memory story. They tangibly manifest imagination, and ask the viewer to live inside them, to finish writing the story.

Considering home as story helps us to perceive new poetic realities that articulate its nuances and nature. Reality, memory, and imagination are considered interchangeable, and the work is the process of braiding them together. Revealing my role as the director/narrator speaks to our perception-based realities, experience of recollection, and condition of isolation. Concealing my voice casts the viewer as narrator, highlighting the story's collective nature. Employing fiction enables the work to warp, challenge, and mystify notions of time. In the end, contemplating home as story illuminates the narrated, time-bending, and fictional nature of life in the mind.

## Conclusion

The study of home as habitat, body, and story creates a constellation of reflections on our experience of change. By evidencing relationships between things, spaces, and forces over time, home is envisaged as a dynamic habitat. Turning bodies inside out, by imbuing their signals into objects and scenes, amplifies the internal tumult of home as the body. Constructing and musing home as story demonstrates the fallible and creative narration of the mind.

My role as the artist is that of instigator, cultivator, animator, visualizer, fabricator, character, stagehand, director and narrator. I am integrated into the system. I dissolve and reconstitute throughout the process – evolving, adapting, changing states, switching roles, and forming relationships, wholly immersed.

Consequently the products of this engagement are fluid as well. The work brings imaginary, elusive, and intangible qualities to life, not to be polarized against the real, static, or concrete, but to create potent amalgamations. The artwork animates the inanimate with dreams, bio-signals, and memory. The process of *acting out* rewritten stories casts the mind as imaginative storyteller. Staged scenes meld inside with outside, domestic with natural, home with body with mind. And these scenes function like portals, opening up effortless movement between spheres, across boundaries and time. In this

way, the work visualizes a complex, relational, living system of things that highlights its own richness, variety, and mutability. By picturing the shifting nature of home, I participate in an endeavor that digests and visualizes our continual experience of change into imaginative permutations of reality.

# Decreation: Thorn Collaborative

## Introduction

Thorn is the collaborative consciousness of Colleen Marie and Erin Ethridge. Through an inquiry into the nature of collaboration itself, Thorn questions ideas of shared or composite identity, memory and body. We see these as fluid in nature, and we strive to incarnate that mutability. Toward this goal, we take our own relational dynamic as subject and tool. As friends, roommates, and collaborators, we influence and reflect each other constantly. By examining and at times manipulating our relationship, we hope to explore archetypal duos (sisters, lovers, doppelgangers, etc.), reclaiming and reimagining conventional notions of love.

The term decreation was coined by French philosopher Simone Weil, who described it as “undo[ing] the creature in us.”<sup>12</sup> As a Christian mystic, her ultimate aim was to merge eternally with God. In order to do so, she posited, one must first abolish the self. Weil’s neologism is formed from the prefix “de-“, and *creare*, which, roughly translated from Latin, means “to form from nothing.” Decreation can be defined as “the reversal of the formation of something from nothing” or, “the formation of nothing from something.” The crucial difference between an act of destruction and one of decreation is the notion of nothingness, either as a beginning or end point.

Since the physical laws of the universe tell us that neither matter nor energy can be created or destroyed, decreation implies the impossible. This paradox and impossibility of decreasing ourselves is essential. The process of decreation stretches the senses and imagination toward a point beyond their plausible limit.

Love is a fervent desire to both enter into and take in what is outside of yourself. In doing so, the boundaries of the self become permeable. Our practice negotiates psychological and physical distance and closeness, in pursuit of their limits. Love moves us toward decreation, an infinitely far and unseeable spot beyond the horizon.

## She and Her ( The Fiction )

She wakes first, or I do. That one makes the coffee and warms the couch or the chair. She who sits in the chair is usually me. She that is Her sits on the couch. I sip and read a story about a man dreaming another man into reality. The man sleeps long, as I do, fashioning his dream projection, his son; all the while he is dreamt by another.

*I can't remember my dreams.*

She projects me. She projects me onto Her self. My features conceal Her's, morphing to the terrain of her body, pressing up against her skin. My eyes, stretched and sunken, gaze back at me, like tiny black holes sucking and spewing everything out from one of us into the other. This continues, uninterrupted, back and forth, endless. Inside is outside is inside.

She sits in the chair now. Our sweaters ripen to the exact same shade of green. Our hair grows together into braids that weave into rugs covering the floors completely like thick moss. The door in the wall between our bedrooms is boarded shut, but poorly, such that sound still passes through, and sometimes it is unbearable. This door is one of three doors that act like membranes inside the house. The cat observes all that passes through them. She is the only one who sees the masks, the skins adhered to our faces that cling on and peel off at each threshold. She sees, but Her and I – we can't find the

doors, much less the masks. We do know that somewhere inside and outside of the apartment, there is a chrysalis. It leads us to believe that something will be born from it, metamorphosed. But it is possible that the birth has already happened and that now the creature is transforming backwards into its prior state. Neither of us has actually taken any steps towards ascertaining which is true. It seems like an absurd task, since we wouldn't know the difference anyway.

Over the summer, in a severe landscape, She and Her had a baby. It is a beautiful creature, long-bodied and intuitive. They've been able to continue travelling together as a family and seem very happy. Unfortunately, their bliss is metered by our fear for the baby's life. We've been forced to wonder if the precious thing will be here long because of the strange weather changes lately. Nonetheless, its youth and fragility bring us hope. She and Her continue to tend the child optimistically, naming it everyday. She has her own mother, Her own mother has she, which we only realized when they had the baby. When we talk about our separate mothers, we switch places again but it is unlike the switching that happens all the time. Our mother stories are deeper and more different. Worlds exist between them. The mother-story-switching transports us greater distances, into culturally foreign homes and heart wrenching familial dynamics. On the journey back from these places, I begin to notice the sound of my voice, how loud it can

be, and how alien it feels to us. My jaw aches because hers does, and then my voice is modulated through her body again. The baby reads our stories in its own voice, as it grows up backwards in time, its body fragmented and inside out.

*I dreamt that we were trees that grew berries.*

In my imagination, as we tossed and turned we grew more limbs and berries, intertwining with each other into a thick tangle of branches. Each time we turned back over to face Us, we grew towards Us, like a sudden growth spurt, into our mass of limbs. Our berries were golden and ours were dark blue, but both caught the sunlight coming in the window of our room and glistened translucent. We were completely intertwined. Can a Bristlecone pine grow berries? Gold and blue? If so, maybe that's what Teilhard was talking about when he said, "What is born between [U]s is forever: I know it."

## Gulf Between Words

*"It is not enough to finish your sentences. I want to shape your words with my mouth."*

Gulf Between Words was a ceremonial performance in reaction to the traumatic experience of hitting a deer with our car. Though we witnessed this event side by side, our experiences felt worlds apart. Empathy and trauma fuel the desire to become one, to switch places, to feel and wear the other's suffering.

In order to placate that desire, we feed our words and memories into one another's bodies. We consume and narrate each other's sentiments but are separated by physical distance. Isolation limits intimacy. Communication is fragmented and difficult. The trauma of distance draws a triangle between us and the deer. To witness another's experience, concentrated in a moment of extreme pain, and to be inherently unable to share it, is excruciating.

**November 14, 2015 -- Colleen:**

*I was far too tired to be driving, especially with you asleep in the passenger seat. Before it happened, it was foreshadowed a few times ahead- a sudden spotlight on a black-eyed character, a close call, etc. Recently I confided in you about a recurring fantasy of being hit by a car in front of someone I love. How I would relish the fear and tears, the pity. These would be concentrated nodes of love— from someone I love to me. Of course I also feel pangs of regret during these fantasies, for the selfishness, and guilt because real tragedies have happened to*

*someone I love. That's why you're the only person I ever told until now. You're someone I love. I only saw the first second or so. After the impact I turned to you, to ease your fear after being awoken so violently. I wanted you to know you would be okay. By the time I looked back, the road was clear. No body. I tried to get out of the car but I'd hit you in a way that my door would only open a few inches. You opened your door. Later you told me you were glad the door was stuck, because you didn't want me to see the blood. But after a few minutes I did get out and there was no blood. Only a missing blinker and dents. I was sure by how big the dents were that you were fatally wounded, at the very least. But no body meant your body was somewhere else, perhaps somewhere close and dying, confused as to why. The next day you and I went for a hike behind the school. We saw a group of deer and they stopped and stared at us for a few minutes. I didn't want to romanticize your death, so I tried not to think too much about what it meant. In a book I had been reading that morning the narrator says "Without realizing it, the individual composes his life according to the laws of beauty, even in times of great distress." I still have it with me, the weight of the impact. How heavy your body felt and how incongruous that memory is with its disappearance. The memory too is beginning to disappear.*

#### **November 14, 2015 – Erin:**

*I was sleeping in the passenger seat, but I was right at the edge of sleep, just barely conscious enough to feel guilty for abandoning you on the drive alone. The car jolted, you screamed, and I thought I saw red blood splatter all over the driver's side of the windshield. You yelled to me that we hit a deer, concerned for my harsh ejection out of sleep. In hysterics, you stopped in the middle of the road and I frantically coached you to pull over to the side. My body pounded, so startled, and I spoke in short bursts as I reached for any part of you to grasp onto. I had to be touching you. My loudest thought was that I didn't want you to see all the blood. I didn't want you to see body parts smeared all over your car. I didn't want you to see the dead animal's body. You held your face in your hands, and I hoped you'd stay that way, but you unfurled and tried to open your car door. It*

*had been dented in, so you couldn't get out and I felt slightly grateful. I got out to assess the situation. I walked through the beams of the headlights and around the side of the car. There wasn't blood everywhere and I couldn't find the body. It felt like some kind of hybrid reality and fiction. I must have hallucinated the bloody windshield in my dream state. Afterwards, on the way home and for the next few days, I wished I could switch places with you. I couldn't find any words. My heart broke for the beautiful creature but it ached more deeply for you. You were drowning in guilt and I wanted to take it. I was so happy you agreed to go on a walk the next day. I wanted to be close to the earth, for it to know how we felt, and I thought it would help you. As we were walking we approached several deer and we all just stood there, staring at each other for a long time. It helped me to dream that we were communicating, that they heard me say, "We're so sorry."*

All the windows in the performance space are blacked out except for one. A large, rough-hewn wooden box sits below the window with an aloe plant on top. Two wax masks hang from hooks on either side of the cathedral window. Steam rises from the box, fogging the panes of glass, and bright white light pours into the space. A large projection on the opposite wall of the room shows Colleen sitting in a yellow armchair in an outdoor courtyard. She looks directly into the camera; her gaze penetrates the performance space. Erin stands at the window and writes in the condensation, blinded by the cleansing light. Her words fade quickly.

As we appear and interact in the performance space, Erin is a body, Colleen is a projection. Erin is inside, Colleen is outside. We enact two sets of ritualistic gestures; we

mirror each other without mimicking each other. Written words travel between us on ribbon and string. Voices exchange places through a plastic tube. The presence of these devices in the room and in the projected space attests to our connection. But our mistakes, our faulty communication, our vulnerability make it tenuous.

**December 8, 2015 – Colleen:**

*I couldn't tell when it started. I was isolated. My ability to sense your presence and to communicate with you was mostly incapacitated. I felt like I was under water. My only signal from you was a barely audible voice and a soft tug on the string I held in my hands that was tied to your words. I hadn't read what you'd written prior to the performance. I was being watched but unable to see the audience. The camera was the only eye. It was a compound eye containing all the eyes that may or may not have been in the room with you, and also your eye. I pulled the ribbon of your words from my mouth and showed the camera. Its gaze while I read and recited our private recollections made me feel stiff and uncomfortable. This discomfort, combined with the emotional intensity of the experience the piece revolved around made me cry. I was torn between hiding my tears and allowing them to flow. My binoculars were a boon and my defense—a way of playing pretend, hiding, and deflecting the stare back toward the audience. I searched for your eye within the compound eye but could not find it. It was a one-way mirror. I loved you and knew you were suffering in there, bearing the burden of all the eyes for both of us. Perhaps in that gesture you were able to partially fulfill your desire to protect me from the trauma, to "take the hit" so to speak.*

**December 8, 2015 – Erin:**

*Though I could see your image, I truly felt alone and somewhat incapacitated without you. Everyone could see me except for you, the one my words were for. You pulled them from my heart, around my neck, through my hands and out the*

*doorway, and then read them to me in your own voice. I watched you pull your words from your mouth. You showed them to me, one phrase at a time. I read them aloud. It was strange to narrate your voice; I was exposing you. My pace was faster than you knew, so I paused after each phrase. You couldn't hear me so you didn't know, but everyone else did. I went back to the window and wrote in the condensation. You looked into the camera with your binoculars as if you were watching me and I felt like the window writing was my only private communication with you. I wrote to you about my mother and how she must know what its like to kill something, someone. I moved to the chair and picked up my notebook to read you my version of the story. You hadn't heard it before. At first I spoke a whole sentence into the funnel, but you couldn't hear me. I said less and spoke louder and you still couldn't hear me. I had to yell a couple words at a time for you to hear them. It was uncomfortably loud and slow, and what I had to say seemed so upsetting in that tone. I told you my every thought in the moments after we hit the deer – how I didn't want you to see the blood I hallucinated everywhere and how I anticipated the guilt you'd feel and wanted to take it from you. My voice shook. When you spoke through the tube and into my mouth, it wasn't loud enough for them to hear, so I swallowed your words not wanting them to go to waste. Yet, you were the only one who couldn't see me. I felt both exposed and invisible.*

We are simultaneously in love (love being a violent desire to share one's existence) and in utter isolation. The separation between our bodies is a frustrating hindrance in the context of intimacy. In our living room, in the car, we talk and scheme like frantic alchemists, devising plans, spells and rituals to become one, to empathize in the most vivid way possible. We try to imagine and then manifest a shared vein that will

carry me into you and you into me. But the vein is a metaphor, and metaphors are thoroughly insufficient.

Still, in order to placate this yearning to truly know one another, we attempt to feed our words and memories (which are themselves only stand-ins for our real experience and thus another degree of removal) into one another's bodies and regurgitate them. We do this for the pleasure of the act and to quiet a desperate loneliness. It is unmistakably an act of intercourse.

As in sex, we simultaneously insert our bodies (or thoughts, noises, memories, etc. that originate within our bodies and are therefore extensions of them) into the other and accept the other's body into our own, wearing and expressing one another's byproducts. We perform and trade roles, acting as both penetrator and bearer. Our lives converge, and then begin to move in parallel. It is said that parallel lines will meet at infinity. It is also said that there is no such place. When we search for a point where the lines meet or try to force them toward each other, it becomes clear that the gap itself may be infinite.

# Tuning System No.1 & 2

## **List of props:**

Instrument blank, with tuning pegs

Drill

String

Pins

Measuring tape

Stool

Wire cutters

Washers

Pencil

Mirror

## **Rules:**

Say each measurement out loud.

Note the length and body part on instrument.

When being measured, face the mirror, with back to audience.

Step off stool from the back; step on from the front.

## **Order of actions:**

1. Erin stands on stool
2. Colleen measures her and strings the instrument with her measurement, notes length and body part, and tunes string to any note
3. Switch places (Colleen on stool)
4. Erin measures colleen and strings the instrument with her measurement, notes length and body part
5. She tunes string to match previous note
6. Erin measures a different body part and strings the instrument with colleen's measurement, notes length and body part
7. Tunes to any note

Repeat, alternating roles.

Outwardly, our similarities are clear. We share body type, gender, sex, hair and skin tone, etc. In *Tuning System No. 1*, we embrace these likenesses by systematizing our actions, attempting to bring the subtle but unbreachable differences between us into focus. As a gesture of bodily and psychic convergence, we measure each other's bodies and then translate the measurements as dimensions for the strings of a simple instrument. Each corresponding body measurement is then tuned by ear to the same note (for example, the diameter of Erin's neck is tuned to vibrate at the pitch of Colleen's, the length of Colleen's right arm to the pitch of Erin's). The artifact that is left behind is an instrument that is not meant to be played, but to be tuned. Performing and maintaining the tuning, an attempt at physical and symbolic entanglement, is painstaking. Our bodies, identities, and the strings shift and desynchronize over time.

The system and aesthetic of *Tuning System No. 1* were simple, unadorned. We performed in a clean, white space, our props were utilitarian, and we dressed in all black. In general, the measurements we took were conventional dress-making measurements—waist, hips, inseam, neck, and wrist—all strictly

quantifiable. The instrument itself was a plain pine plank and the strings were strung perfectly parallel to each other.

*Tuning System No. 2* adds aesthetic specificity to the setting and expands the scope of the values measured. The performers wear their own clothing and the props are real objects from our apartment. They begin the performance taking ordinary body measurements like what would be necessary for a garment of clothing, but over time the measurements become increasingly obscure, then abstract.

### **Measurements:**

|                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| Neck                       | Wrist                                      |
| Bust                       | Distance between eyes (between pupils)     |
| Hair length                | Calf                                       |
| Waist                      | Reach (vertical and horizontal)            |
| Finger                     | Ankle                                      |
| Hips                       | Full height                                |
| Inseam                     | Smallness (circumference rolled in a ball) |
| Teeth (width across mouth) | Thigh                                      |
| Shoulders (across chest)   | Breath (distance felt)                     |
| Arm length                 | Whisper (distance heard)                   |
| Ear                        | Embrace (circumference)                    |
| Tongue length              |  |
| Arm (width)                |  |

On the front end, the endeavor is empirical. The system inventories, translates, and catalogs objective quantities into lengths of string. But the tuning process begins to warp the exactitude by stretching the strings, coaxing the different lengths to the same note. The gesture is not analytical but romantic, and ultimately impossible to maintain. The strings continuously fall out of tune, setting the performers in an infinite task. The empiricism decays further as the quantities measured become progressively unquantifiable. The task of being in tune is fundamentally ungraspable.

The instrument itself becomes a geometric plane in which the performer's curvilinear idiosyncrasies are rendered in straight lines. In Tuning System no. 1, the strings were parallel. Parallel lines meet at infinity—an impossible distance. The task of tuning is also infinite, but the body of the instrument in Tuning System No. 2 is redrawn as a curved trapezoid, creating a subtle radial alignment. By warping the plane on which the lines lie, we compress the space between them exponentially, drawing infinity closer.

# You Have My Word(s)

## The Archive

*You Have My Word(s)* is an ongoing book project in which we trade authorship back and forth through alternating pages. The content is a dialogue between us—a conversation, a joint fiction, a shared journal, composed of thoughts, questions, and fantastical propositions about the state of our relationship and being. The project's structure, outlined in the first page, ritualizes the process. We make each physical page and its digital facsimile, then we burn the original and collect the ashes. The book exists as an online archive.

Burning the pages destroys the physical record of our distinct individuality; our two voices collapse into one. In the archive, a short video of the burning of each page documents the act and reveals a glimpse of the world around. As we envision the future of this project, we anticipate these clips will reveal variations in context that indicate our life journeys, separate and together. But the burning gesture itself unites us, and the document becomes a living tether across distance.

Collecting the ashes of the pages emphasizes the significance of the physical remains, elevating their importance to the status of a deceased loved one. But the first page of the book leaves the project open-ended. It states, "If one member dies before the other, the surviving member will perform the following..." Then the rest of the text has been whited-out. The manifesto implies that the ashes are to be used in some kind of final ritual, but the specifics are erased. By treating the remains as precious and insinuating their potential in a future gesture, we regard the symbolic annihilation of our selfhood (in exchange for communion) as death in a cycle of regeneration.

By making a commitment to work on *You Have My Word(s)* until one of us dies, this project idealizes a forever-togetherness. It references the human desire to determine the end of our own stories by taking vows of unconditional love and faithfulness. In a romantic gesture, we look towards the *infinity* where parallel lines converge, but again we are incapable of reaching it. We stand on the beach looking toward the horizon, and though it feels like we can see the end of the Earth, in reality it is only about 3 miles away (at our height, 5'8"). In *You Have My Word(s)*, our mortality is the horizon.

## The Performance [ The FarNear ]

At our exhibition opening we performed a live iteration of this project.

Connected to each other by harnesses and a 25 foot clothesline, we write and

send pages back and forth to each other as we move through the exhibition

space. These pages are made of edible paper and are inscribed with edible ink.

As we communicate we take bites out of the pages, altering the written text and

devouring its record. We revisit the act of consuming each other's sentiments, a

concept we explored in *Gulf Between Words*. It also references Anne Carson's

discussion of the quandary of the self, as articulated by Simone Weil – that

"looking and eating" are two separate operations. Anne writes: "So she creates

in her mind a dream of distance where food can be enjoyed perhaps from across

the room merely by looking at it, where desire need not end in perishing, where

the lover can stay, at the same time, near to and far from the object of her love."

Anne connects Simone's idea to an early memory. She reminisces about how

rich books were as a child, recalling her need to be restrained from the

temptation to eat their pages.<sup>13</sup>

Because reading can be seen as an act of both looking(distance) and

consumption(closeness), the written pages of *You Have My Word(s)* serve as a

physical point where we can be *near to and far from the object of our love*. But reading each other's words is not enough to satiate the desire for intimacy. By consuming the pages as we read them, we physically collapse looking and eating into one operation, attempting to actualize what Simone and Anne dreamt. We are both impossibly far and as close as can be.

As we perform this gesture across our umbilical connection, we leave records throughout the exhibition space. We write the uneaten words left on the pages on the gallery floor in white chalk, and snap chalk line in the place of our the clothesline. This creates a web of words and lines on the floor that visualizes our actual working relationship. It is a process of mapping connections and creating constellations of our shared ideas and identity. The structure of the performance mimics that of the archive. We create and destroy physical pages, leaving a record of their existence that catalogs our interactions over time and space.

## Nympha

*Nympha* pictures a corporeal mergence of two bodies into one. We give the fierce desire to coalesce a decidedly physical presence, through the use of material and body. The primary gesture melds the image of a cast with that of a chrysalis or cocoon. A cast is a casing to protect broken bones so that fractures can fuse together. It is a space for the body to regenerate and heal. But it is also detrimental. Over time, the body inside atrophies due to restricted movement, becoming raw and grotesque. A chrysalis or cocoon is a protective environment where an insect resides during a crucial but vulnerable stage of its metamorphosis, a stage in which it is between bodies.

In *Nympha*, performers use plaster bandaging to invest themselves into a shared cast. They begin by holding hands and ripping lengths of dry bandaging from a large roll, amassing a significant pile. Together they dip the torn sections into a bucket of water and begin to wrap them around their joined hands, binding them. They continue this process, moving up their arms, down their legs, and around their entire bodies, until they are paralyzed.

The performers wrap themselves in a hardening skin representing the desire to grow into one another, to metamorphose into one body. When stretched

across two performers, the plaster bandaging appears delicate like a moth's silk, but as it layers and hardens, its rigidness restricts and distorts their form. As the plaster cures, their protective skin also becomes an impediment. They are interlocked and frozen.

The performance takes place on a patch of stone pavers dotted with moss and grass. The scene could be one of an accident— a broken bone in our backyard, or the birth of a hybrid creature in the pages of a fairy tale. This double entendre indicates our interest in conflating the commonplace and the mythological.

The performers inhabit their cast for the duration of the opening, but for the remainder of the exhibition only the vacated chrysalis is left behind. The body that emerges is undisclosed.

The way in which we hope to mitigate our desire for ultimate intimacy is to fuse two entities into one. But the fusion is always fleeting and incomplete. Even its duration is unknowable and confused. We suspect that it does not last longer than the gestures we perform. Once it has emerged, this new entity is never truly what we hoped; it is not a combination of us, but its own organism.

## Postscript

We started this document with *Gulf Between Words* because it was a pivotal moment in our collaborative work. Performing and reflecting on this performance set us on our current path by clarifying our desire to explore the plurality within our own relational dynamic. In *Tuning System, You Have My Word(s)* and *Nympha* we interpret our relationship in a multitude of ways; the common thread between them is the duality of distance and closeness. Our attempts to overcome the obstacles that these poles present are continually frustrated. They highlight the paradox inherent in relationships. Distance is a wound that can't be healed because closeness is never complete, but intimacy threatens to collapse autonomy. We find pleasure and pain in our separateness and in our union.

## Notes

1. Dillard, *For The Time Being*, 77.
2. Van Woert, “Why is Art Met With Disbelief? Because It’s Too Much Like Magic,” 3.
3. Van Woert, 5.
4. Davis, *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic & Mysticism in the Age of Information*, xvii.
5. Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 7.
6. Leviton, 9.
7. Carson, *Decreation*, 20.
8. Fivush and Haden, *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative Self: Developmental and Cultural Perspectives*, 7.
9. Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time*, 5.
10. Currie, 5.
11. Shields, “Memory,” 34.
12. Carson, 167.
13. Carson, 175.

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