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## CALAMITIES

I began the day with a group of characters, who were sometimes people in the world with real names and jobs that let them out for the summer; some of these characters wrote books in which the world was never mentioned, the world where one took a bus or walked through snow to buy eggs; it seemed better that the reader not know the details. I read in a book about a girl holding a stack of paper over a body of water; I read a book where a flood comes and covers a town, and though everything is wet all the people are dry; I read many books about people sitting in rooms, and these were all by writers I knew. I wanted them to come over, but they lived everywhere, in too many places. I wanted coffee when I had given it up; I wanted gluten all the time. At some point I began working on the beginning and end of something at once. I hadn't had my bases covered in a long time. I was reading a line in a book, then reading a line in another book, and performing small acts in between: I sat at intervals on the toilet, I slept sporadically, I ate kale and "fish food," and called myself "Renee" for a time. Nobody knew who I was at the grocery store, but going there was my big event. I knew the books of these people; I knew these

people and I didn't change their names, but when they appeared in my books it wasn't really their stories I was telling, so they didn't need my protection and I could go "Danielle, Danielle" all day. I could say, "Danielle," and not disturb the Danielle who was sitting next to me, reading *Animal Architects*; because I could be saying "Danielle had had a certain body" or "Danielle was swishing across the floor," and the Danielle sitting next to me would go on reading her book. I could say "Lisa," who had written a book I loved, but also mean "Barbara," who *too* had written a book I loved, but say "Lisa" because of a sound I wanted to make, or simply to be anachronistic. I went on to fill my days with as many writers as I could find and sometimes would try to say their names or the names of their books or just the names of the cities they were in or just the name of a color or object I associated with them, though it wasn't their story I was telling. Because it wasn't their story, sometimes I just paused in my thinking and let them pass through me, and wouldn't resume until they were gone, or would resume when a trace of them was still there.

I began the day giving a lecture to a group of university students. I said, "—" and made a certain gesture with my hand. They asked, "How do you know," with some small showing of contempt. Well, I was trying to say, "It's okay to think," but maybe what they heard was "You don't think" or "You are not thinking." I made the "Let's start again" gesture with my eyebrows, and calm was restored. I started over from the top, "In any case, one can see the city—" I was interrupted before I could replace the errant word. These were conservative students. "I *mean*, the sentence!" I yelled over their clamor. And as they grew quiet, one of them muttered, "You don't think," but he hadn't planned on being heard. He said, "I think you don't think?" by way of correction. We were trying to get to the heart of the matter. I said, from the head of the class, "This is really good," and smiled grandly, with so much love falling from my cheeks I worried that Alex Peters, sitting in the front row, might explode with grief. Everyone else grew sad, too. But, we were approaching something that was perhaps new for all of us. Someone raised her hand. I don't remember who. She

said, "We might not like your questions," but said it while smiling with her arm still up. I had to go on with my lecture: "When you turn in your mind, you reach somewhere, open something, make some gesture." I paused. My notes had quotes around them. I was almost done.

I began the day having given myself the task of compiling a list. I wanted to see whether I could trace all the problems—large and small—I had taken on in my somewhat long career as a writer. But I didn't mean those asinine problems of writer's block or other equally frustrating problems of self-worth (feeling too much or not enough). Rather, I wanted to document the questions that *led* to writing, writing such as I was doing then. I had to put my pen down. Suddenly, I was flooded with sensations of a sexual nature. I didn't know from where they'd come. As I just said, my mind was, in that moment, fixed on academic matters—what it meant to write and what I in fact had written—and usually I approached such topics with discipline: I was a serious writer; there was nothing inherently sensual in the act of writing (hands tapping at keys). So when out of nowhere I felt her pressing against my back I had to put my pen down. "What are you doing?" I asked an empty, flaming room.

I began the day thinking that in order to write a talk on “The Ongoing Story” I would need to incorporate it into these essays I’d been writing about my life. I began, “I began the day staring into the face of the question of narrative—was anybody still interested in it, and, if so, why?” It was a simple question to ask but had taken me eight days to write—you’d think it impossible to construct a sentence two words at a time, writing two words then taking the rest of the day off then on the next day writing two more words, maintaining the thread the whole time, until finally, on the eighth day, you had it, the sentence, but this sometimes happened when you were writing about narrative inside of narrative. Recently, I had found that to talk about something that was in essence everything was too exhausting, and that the only way around it was to talk about the question of the thing rather than the thing itself, since in the end, it would become both. “Narrative—” I went on with my talk, “Was anybody still interested? I didn’t want to open my eyes to it. I hadn’t wanted to think about narrative at the same time that I was conscious of my body lying in the object world. It was a problem of space similar to what Martha and I

were discussing yesterday: Was it possible to say that something was gathering outside of a thing with the intention of meeting something else when this something else was the larger space in which that first thing existed? Could I talk about narrative as I was operating within it? I closed the quotes enclosing the text for my talk and took a train to New York. I wanted to surround myself with other people who were thinking about narrative and asking themselves whether they were for or against it. Someone was having an event that evening, and it seemed appropriate to the essay that I narrate the events of the event before they actually happened. But not for the essay inside which I was writing the panel talk, rather the outer essay in which I felt isolated and needed to travel three point five hours to be among people. When I opened the quotes again for the talk I was thinking, It wasn’t just narrative we were talking about but narrative in relation to poetic time, which was not the time of the object world in which I was lying but *was* the time of the essay toward which I was attempting to *draw* the object world. Once the object world arrived I hadn’t figured out what I would do in it (though you see the complication I was unearthing since I was already in it, the object world). This returned me to a conversation I was having elsewhere. I’d been arguing that the problem of poetic time was a component of

fiction but now I saw: fiction could not concern itself with problems of time. If there was a problem inside a fiction—a problem of any nature other than what's happening inside the plot—then the whole thing would swell and small holes would form across the surface and the swellings would become as large as mountains while the holes would fill with water and become river valleys and soon we would be so far from the surface of the water that we'd recognize the picture of the mountains and valleys as part of a geological map and recognize ourselves standing in an object world much larger than the object world in which we'd been lying when we began this essay. I closed the quotes when I bottomed out. I would have to open my eyes if I wished to understand fully where I was and whom I was with, if anybody. The figures forming in the light directed toward my closed lids (by the sun or the lamp I'd failed to turn off before falling asleep the previous night or by the panel talk that I was living rather than writing) would not grow in definition so long as I carried on not-seeing in this way, I thought as I closed the quote on *this* narrative. I didn't want, in the middle of the whole thing, to become *anti-narrative*. After the event in New York, which was formulated around the celebration of the appearance of a long-awaited thing, I was disappointed to find people more anti-narrative than narrative.

Someone took my number instead of giving me hers—this was anti-narrative. We spent hours at a restaurant called the Half King and were given the wrong check, which, when corrected, turned out cheaper than the right check. This was anti-narrative. Those of us standing around the table, hoping there would be enough money to cover the bill, were thinking anti-narratively about the people who had evaded this torture by departing early, their contribution left behind. When we found there was enough money, even extra, we thought anti-narratively about our previous anti-narrative attack on those others. I wanted to turn our living toward narrative so suggested we all take the subway home. This was not agreed on, but we did all walk off together. Somehow it was only the black people who'd been in attendance that remained in our group. We walked along 23rd Street and I called a person and counted off the number of black people with me. I counted seven, narratively. This was astounding, but I didn't tell the other black people what I was thinking, only that person. This was anti-narrative. But clearly I was happy, as this configuration of blackness did not occur for me in the lonely little white city that I'd fled, thus was narrative. But within that, an anti-narrative moment, when I had to remind myself that it wasn't the little city that was white but rather the neighborhood in which I'd

chosen to live. Imagine my surprise when I found it was possible to be both narrative and anti-narrative at the same time, which was like being a little overwhelmed in a large crowd. I was again pointed to a problem of time, or rather, space in time (it was hard to figure). How would I escape this crowd, but just to get outside it? Would it be possible to leave my name with someone? I closed the inner essay to look at the outer. I wanted to find a word or sentence that would prove there was an even larger essay that was further outside of this one. I closed the quotes of lying in the bed with my eyes closed, and opened my eyes, looking literally into the face of the question of narrative, which was the emptiness of my apartment and the long stretch of day that lay ahead.

I began the day having just uttered the words, "I am not looning up on claw," and feeling angry as a result of my disposition. It was as if I knew indisputably that I would never loon up "on claw" or any other substance that would threaten whatever in that dream was the opposite of *looning up*—I knew this, but it seemed I had to make my stance clear anyway. I was angry and thought I should go strictly decaf that morning, which had to be retrieved from the depths of the cabinet. It had been a week of procuring beans from all the continents, minus that very small one. It wasn't long before I realized I'd somehow looned up on decaf, though decaf was designed expressly to avoid such a thing. How confusing to have found yourself shaking as you brought a large mug of decaf to your lips. How ridiculous.

I began the day in a faculty meeting—though I was late in coming, having just walked into the room. I didn't know how I had gotten there. The doors were closed—that's how I knew I was late—and, much worse, locked when quietly I tried to open them. However, upon knocking, I heard the director say my name, and I thought at least I had been expected. A senior member opened the door and thought it would be a good time to play a joke on me, saying you can't come in here, though I'd just heard my name. I didn't think it was funny, since often I can't attend meetings, since being junior often meant I couldn't. But everyone laughed and welcomed me seniorly. Faculty meetings are strange; there is always someone there whose rank you don't understand, someone who had seemed just a visiting lecturer or scholar now sitting with his back very straight and holding a clipboard. Yes, in fact, it did seem that certain people in the room had been in a meeting before this one, a pre-meeting meeting as it were, and this newly important person had been among those in attendance. Some people were eating coffee cake. Some people were deaf and couldn't wait to leave the room, to return to the vibrations of their mu-

sic. Some people were in town just for the day, eager to get on the next plane. Some people weren't there and soon became the topic of conversation. Some people were saying they were always there though this was clearly untrue to everyone in the room except those people. We didn't say anything, I think, because of the coffee cake, and suddenly the weather had grown beautiful, and we all felt it. But the agenda kept us sitting there and soon the sun was forgotten. We were talking about the thing that made me disagree with the majority of the room and this kept the clock ticking and got everyone full. You couldn't storm the halls in that manner, someone was saying, but you also couldn't forgive the infraction. I nestled into the corner. And the clipboard rang with paper. It was clear that some of us would go on wreaking havoc behind the scenes, and the director would write the memo. The meeting was over. We agreed that agreeing meant we could leave the room, so we agreed, and in some column this was important.



I began the day on an Amtrak train that was backing up. New England had flooded (once again) and become impassable: it had us pulling in then backing up then pulling forward then stopping and repeating these motions until, finally, we'd achieved the right alignment and passengers could disembark the train. This dusky place was New Haven and the platform was full of Connecticut commuters hurrying home in a light rain, in this month of May, which everyone expected to be hot in this part of the country, where what you had instead was a wet, perpetually cold feeling in the air. A voice came on. Apparently, the tracks had flooded. We needed to remain here. No, we needed to detrain and wait for buses in the station. No, the station was too crowded we should remain on the train. No, half in the station, half on the train. No, finally, it was decided: all on the train. My fellow passengers had grown tired and all tried to get into the café car at once. The voice came on again to say that the café car was closed. We were in a predicament. I hadn't moved. I hadn't become thirsty. There was some math to figure out: New England was becoming the Pacific Northwest. To be more specific, the Atlantic Northeast was becom-

ing the Pacific Northwest, and quickly. First, I had to figure out what would happen to the Pacific Northwest once we had become it. It couldn't be that both northern ends of the opposite coasts would have twin weather systems. There was no place in logic for that. So if we were to become the Pacific Northwest, then the Pacific Northwest would have to undergo its own transformation. Obviously, the Pacific Northwest would not become the former Atlantic Northeast, because we could have just stayed what we were, if that were possible. No, it would be something more along the lines of declension, something being less than it was before, which was why I was doing math and not paying much attention to the conductor's voice, which was, if anything, loud and New England in nature. You had to understand the enormity of the problem. It would not be simply that the former Atlantic Northeast was now the Pacific Northwest, but that the environment—the people, how they called themselves, the structures they built—would have to change as well. You couldn't be the new Pacific Northwest and behave as if you were the former Atlantic Northeast, which technically you still were in terms of geography (though, soon, your new climate would make your landscape unrecognizable). So, what would happen to the New England personality? That was what I was trying to figure. It was not so good right now. It was tight,

shut in, like winter but all year round. So, I was trying to understand what happened to a bad personality when the conditions in which it lived became worse, and couldn't help wondering why the former Atlantic Northeast wasn't always the new Pacific Northwest with the way people behaved. I mean, they really did already act as if all there was was rain.

I began the day asking the individuals of this group of my ex-lovers to map a problem of space, but not the problem that involved the anxiety of whether they could or could not draw, nor the one that asked how it was even possible to translate "problems" into lines, rather, I meant real problems, where you had to think about where you were in a defined space and what your purpose was for being there. We got thrown off course. One of our party was insisting that the "point" should be our vehicle of expression ("not the line") since it was the point that was the base of all communication. While I felt compelled to agree with her—the point certainly did take up less space than the line and seemed to be the originary gesture of all movement—I did have to counter that though the point may be the base of all communication, it could not function as the base, because most people did not begin looking at points until they became lines. We were having a picnic in the park, perched on a small hill, our bodies arranged on an old pink sheet from the 70s, decorated with a bloodred stripe. This was a time of the summer where Brooklyn had become a regular destination for me, and I was turning forty. I was turning forty so I felt that my ideas were very potent. Every time I found myself leaving

an era at the same time that I was entering a new one, which was not always how it happened, sometimes something big ended and absolutely nothing followed it for a long, long time, except maybe you got fat or your sweet dog died, but on the occasion of going from thirty-nine to forty—well, it was one of those things where everyone filled in your sentences for you. You'd say something like, "I'm turning forty on Monday," and people, regardless of the degree of intimacy between you, began to tell you a story about themselves or a stranger or about *you* yourself—and yes, their stories did approximate some of what you'd been thinking over the past weeks, but why wouldn't they let you tell it? Impossible when it was a small picnic and you were among your dearest and one of them was nowhere near forty and one was quite generously past forty and the last was just kind of dragging some years behind you, and every time you wanted to say something serious about these eras you were exiting and entering you kept getting interrupted by the name Chana Morgenstern, because no one there knew whether she was a real person or a code name used by someone who was not in attendance and didn't like you anymore. So you let everybody else tell you about turning forty as the sauvignon blanc did its thing in the cooler bag and tasted amazingly of grapefruit. You would never be forty again, somebody had just brilliantly told you.

I began the day considering the possibility that the person I am before I set my eyes upon the page I'm about to read—in this case, page 79 of Herta Müller's *The Appointment*—is entirely different from the person I am once I commence reading. I know this because I am not Eastern European in my real life, at least I can't get anyone to think of me this way. I can't get anyone to understand how black people are another kind of Eastern European, especially not the Eastern Europeans. I can't get black people to want to be anything other than black people, which, as a black person, is incredibly inspiring, but on the other hand delays the thinking that black people are like Eastern Europeans, which could be of use when observing the state of things inside a book. But being "like," I realized as I somehow went on reading Müller, following her description of her narrator's most recent summons from a suspicious government official, is not the same as being "another kind of." How eventful it would be for the Eastern Europeans to begin calling themselves black, or even black Asian. How undermining of all that is the case were I to proclaim in my bios, "Renee Gladman is an Eastern-European African American."

I began the day trying to imagine a suitable place for an academic to attend a vacation; it had been a long time since I was a domestic tourist, and because it was only a long weekend over which I would travel, my destination needed to be in close proximity to where I lived. It turned out that I was already planning to be away, so I just did what I was planning to do, which was travel to Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, with my family, and by this I did not mean my husband and children, but rather my mother and two sisters. It was our first family trip in twenty-one years—it had taken that long for them to recover from the last time they vacationed with me. The scene, those twenty-one years ago, had not been pretty. It was an unfortunate period in my life where I seemed to have time only for Ayn Rand, a condition that left me sitting in the blazing sun for hours reading *The Fountainhead*, oblivious to all other forms of engagement. It wasn't just decided that we'd do this thing; we had to assess it as a family. After crunching the numbers—the years that had passed since that trip, the number of mood swings I'd had per day, now versus then, etc.—we determined that not only had I become far more companionable

as a full-fledged woman-loving adult (V. thought my then-solemnity had had something to do with repressed sexuality), but also we discovered that somehow we'd all gotten old. So, we went and were all fat, or if not fat before we arrived, definitely fat upon our departure. Gwen, who'd been thirteen at the time of that long-ago trip, had now become everybody's captain. We did what she said do and only a short while after she said do it. I found that I liked to be bossed around in resort conditions: you can be sunning on the beach, drifting in and out of sleep, and at any moment the tall robust captain might stand over you and command you to do something. It was exhilarating to be told it was time to dress for lunch or that I needed to put away the Snickers. You might see how she was a government worker. However, the Snickers seemed to want to spend all their time with me. This was surprising, as we hadn't been close for years. But I ate them only when I was in the vicinity of the captain. She supplied the Snickers, and then at random times of the day tried to retrieve them from me. It was easy to eat so many Snickers that you put yourself to sleep as you stared out at the ocean from the oceanfront balcony. It was easy to fool yourself into believing you were eating Snickers when in fact you were eating rib eye and mashed potatoes. Soon I began to eat only these items and everything slowed—

my speaking voice, my bowels. It became a problem. No one could understand me. It was more than that my mouth was full. It was that I was no longer digesting my food. I couldn't get enough oxygen to form words. This was okay, in the end, because all I really wanted to say was, "How can Snickers be this good?" It was hot on the island.

I began the day reading the third section of Eileen Myles' *Inferno*. I was in "Heaven," and had been awake only a short time, still in bed, lying on my side. I hadn't yet had coffee, so after a line or so of the book my eyes would close. I'd be sleeping, except also reading. The book would go on in my mind as I slept (how much time passes in this state?), until suddenly I'd be awake and would find the book fallen to the floor (it wasn't a high bed) or sitting at an impossible angle in my hand. I'd right the book and try to find my place. The lines I'd been reading would not be there. Where had I gotten them? They continued the story perfectly, but not, it turned out, in the direction Eileen had wanted it to go. But, why? My additions were not terrible, and they seemed bodily connected to her text, and what's further, they stayed with me as I went on reading, mingling with the lines that actually were there. I woke up again. I was thinking this and not reading the page I was reading and I didn't quite know what I was thinking though it made sense with what had been on my mind before I'd fallen asleep. I'd been reflecting on how your mind writes what you read and lays it out only one or two steps ahead of you, so that there's always a risk of taking a step that isn't yet there.

I began the day in an audience lifting my feet from the floor one at a time, in recognition of something. I lifted the left foot. I lifted the right. I stared at him, the person onstage, whose actions were a kind of choreography: he used his arms and spoke loudly; he swung his arms. I stared at my feet and lifted them separately, now the right then the left, but brought them down softly. I was practicing, waiting, on my own backstage. There were patterns on the underside, debris from the previous night, but this wouldn't get in the way. Suddenly, the time had come. I raised both feet from the floor then brought them down hard, several times; then raised the one and the other in succession, slamming them to the ground, lifting, slamming. The speaker had finished, and we were doing all we could to make noise. You didn't want to use your hands; he'd taken care of that. I lifted my feet. They were dirty and tired, but no one seemed to care. It was an environment of relaxed standards: the main thing was to get the stomping of your feet to resound in your ears. It was also a place where when one person left the stage another quickly replaced him. It wasn't like church; you weren't in a fit. You did your work, then you were done, but

you were a part of a string. It was hot outside, but inside we didn't fan ourselves; we weren't dressed in white. People were performing in a file. You banged your feet and someone took your picture.

I began the day looking at nothing move slowly in and out of focus on a movie screen. I stared at the expanse of it: I thought it was the night, I thought I saw telephone wires in the night, I thought I saw the bottom corner of the night curl up like a page. The screen becoming a kind of absolute for ten silent minutes, until the darkest part of the night became the top of a hill that took up the entire width of the lower part of the screen and the lighter part of what had been nothing suddenly filled with explosive shocks of light then it all went black again. Clearly, this new black was the nothing that I had mistaken the earlier black for. A person got up and went to the bathroom. I was writing in near complete darkness about this nothing when suddenly everything was repaired. There was an image of the sea. Though this surprised me, it seemed integral to this very slow-moving film. The sea moves but not in the direction of most things. I felt sure that most things moved from left to right or in the reverse. But the sea has an entirely other relationship to space; it seems to move backward, pushing at the end of it. The sea wanted to reach the end of space then to rush back here,

then to push out, then to return again. It had been a long time of watching figures move across the screen on some type of boardwalk, moving in two streams in opposing directions; the light of their commute dull, and pink, and very dark.

I began the day in an embrace. Somebody was saying something; a car was crossing the earth on a highway. There was nothing but green fields, in a kind of architecture. The earth seemed proud of itself, which was part of the conversation I was having with the driver. She wanted to know if this was the letter or the essay I was writing, having promised her both. But the driver couldn't look at the passenger. And the passenger couldn't look at her lap for long (in her lap, she was writing). But she *could* look at the driver. The driver had to keep her eye on the road. It took a long time to fill up the page. I'd had to see that there was a small patch of yellow growing in a field as we drove along. And I was sucking on ginger and needed to swallow. You had a feeling that when you were turned away she had her eyes on you and wasn't driving properly. And wasn't driving. But neither were you pulled over. Would looking at her mouth bring on speech? Would it say what you wanted it to say as the car neared the hangar structure? Someone flung a door open in Denver, Colorado. "Someone jumped on my skin," I was writing when the question of the earth was raised—was it happy? She didn't think so.

I began the day in a fog that cleared before I'd gotten the chance to write about it. I was in one neighborhood, moving toward another, thinking, "This fog . . .," but slowly such that it took me a while to realize I wanted to say more than *this fog* about it. I wanted to document it, talk about the glare it produced and what it did to my perception of the buildings of the city I was visiting. Eventually I thought, "This is an essay," then looked up to take it all in. I was surprised to see that the sky had cleared. It was a stunning blue and I had lost my memory entirely. That is not exactly true, as I remembered in vivid detail that I had just made a decision to look at the world (i.e., sky) in such a way as to produce an essay, but looking out at the world I couldn't figure out what was so special to say right then. It was a beautiful day in this place. I entered a density of streets that formed a plain, or maybe had a plain underneath. People were dressed oddly—high-waist pants, glasses with excessively large and hexagonal lenses, blouses and button-down shirts adorned in glitter and checks, patterned stockings with rips in them. Mostly, it was that everyone's hair was overgrown



and flat or huge and beckoning. People looked frizzy, yet seemed to feel delectable. In any case, there was a feeling of elevation, like we were all riding glass-encased rising falling structures.

I began the day standing at a threshold of time—the beginning of something, the end of something. I had a method for standing that was called art, then writing. The way I stood allowed me to see how things could begin and end this way—simultaneously. It was hard to follow these opposing tendencies, especially when you were writing and couldn't see anyway, see anything other than these words appearing on the laptop screen. You were writing about something you weren't looking at. There had been a break. I was saying this on paper. I am not ready for school. I was typing this. Almost a summer had elapsed. I was looking at committee meetings ahead of me and *Friday Night Lights* behind. I was looking at the desires of my students. I was picturing January. I was picturing September 7. Aja seemed to be saying I wasn't feeding her. I was typing this. It was still summer. In a moment, Angela Rawlings declared her love for Iceland. I could see her threshold between her feet. Rachel Levitsky had a threshold. Martha had just crossed hers. Stacy kept changing her name. We were all trying to end something and were finding something new in the process, though what we found didn't seem to belong to us exclusively. Aja flew

to the East Coast to go swimming, but there was a hurricane. Rather than fly back she sat solidly in the wind. I didn't hear from her for hours. I made cups of coffee. The day was tremendous. I wanted to name all the people who had threshold between their legs, and began to compile a list, which quickly became a volume, and was at volume 14 when it overflowed the walls of that writing.

I began the day waiting with my houseguest for a hurricane to ravage a city to the southwest, a city that was like the capital of the United States but wasn't. It was a situation of making coffee and watching the interactive map change depending on how intensely anxious we felt about the coming storm. I said "we" though I actually didn't know how to worry about weather. Many times I said, "We are frightened and obsessed about what's coming," but really I meant Aja was obsessed and frightened. Aja was headed to the coast and was hoping not to meet the hurricane, who had a girl's name. You couldn't understand all the calculations involved. It wasn't just that she would be on the coast but also that she would be at its tip, and didn't want to get blown out to sea, which does happen. Yet, she had flown all this way and there were many bottles of white wine that needed drinking. She wanted to run along the beach. The hurricane blew the famed city about then moved northward. Aja fled to the coast. I stayed here and wondered if I'd procured enough supplies. People kept running in and out of their homes with bags. I'd done this only once with only one bag. Aja was gone. The storm came. It was not wet as much as it was windy. I did not go outside that day. I ate my emergency supplies and stayed up late.

I began the day looking up at the whiteboard, wondering how I would do the thing I needed to do. My students were waiting. Robert Frost was their contemporary picture of poetry. I didn't think this would help them with Ed Roberson. I was going to try to draw a grid of light, as if one were looking down upon it, a grid that extended across an opaque surface, then draw, a good distance below that, a container, inside which were symbols. From the lower container, I wanted to draw lines that reached the opaque surface then became the actual lines of the grid. I would call those lines emanations. Without being essentialist, or perhaps being only momentarily so, I wanted to say, Often when reading poetry, it's the grid you're experiencing, and the grid is not the same thing as that subterranean container, where some meaning might lie, the actual story of the poem, rather it's the shape of the emanations refracted through language and feeling (though many contemporary poems have no feeling) that you're reading. I didn't know how to draw the effect of looking down on something, so I asked for a volunteer. Someone tall offered, and as I was looking up at his attempt to look down, I realized that there was a flaw to my thinking. The

place from which the emanations arose was not intact, it was not a container wherein lay meaning. It was a grid itself but of what I could not explain within the allotted time. I had to let the class go: it was 3:51, one minute into their "free" time. I couldn't find my words; they remained sitting there. How could I send them off to read Roberson's book without having explained poetry to them. "There is a grid above and a grid below," I said slowly, trying not to uplift my voice into a question. Perhaps to read poetry was to read through a sieve. I wanted to incorporate the idea of a matrix. "Poetry comes out of nothing," I said, opening something I would never be able to close. 3:52. "Read the nothing," I shouted after them as they walked out the door.

I began the day looking into the infinity of the revision of my novel in progress. In fact, I had just exclaimed, "I'm afraid I'll have to start over," into a pre-dawn morning, when space expanded and I found myself in this infinitude. The novel, it was a wreck. I would have to begin again. I said this and looked at the screen for affirmation. "I have written sixty pages," I said, exasperated. "Houses of Ravicka, are you there?" It was hard to call the book out in this way, as it wasn't too long ago that I'd called the name of another book—asked it to step out of its hiding place, its refusal place, and come to me—and not only did that book never appear but I'd already written another book about its not appearing. I couldn't even call for *Houses* without it feeling like a rerun, and it was this—not being able to call its name but still looking at it, waiting for it—that gave shape to the infinitude, which was ultimately something beyond shape, which couldn't possibly have a shape and also be infinite. And yet, I clearly sat in a vastness (arguably a kind of shape), my pages blowing about, but never blowing about so much that I lost sight of them (they seemed to go no farther than the horizon: another shape). For months I ran after them,

but pages floating so far away just begin to look like sky (infinity). "It's snowing over there, in infinity," I began to tell myself, and let that take the place of the novel for a long time. I was getting caught up in how a shape (my flailing novel) could be inside something infinite (not flailing), which would seem unable to contain anything (doesn't one need a body to hold?), but, perhaps in the summers, building pages all the same. I had sixty pages and a few ideas I wanted to share with the world, like geoscography, a science we all needed. But my novel was stuck in infinity, this snow system (sky), and was nearly untraceable (it wasn't clear how you could arrive there), and was itself looking for a shelf, some corner in which to grow old; although it was hard to find shelves and corners in absolute space, where geoscography made no difference (infinity being houseless). There wasn't a single house, a street, and nothing was needed other than the words *infinity* and *nowhere*. It made you tired to look into something without edges and empty of all the things it was full of. Eventually, I might encounter *Houses of Ravicka*, the revision, but could find many other millions of things as well, things other people were looking for, such as their own imponderable revisions or their own houses or songs. Could it be that every ten years you simply started something that couldn't be finished, that was impossible to

finish because the person you needed to be to write the book never settled into form, or the form came and went while you were off teaching or buying furniture in a little city that stayed little the whole time you were there? I needed to say something about suspense, both in my novel and in my life, but in the novel you felt suspense yet had to plan it too, really removing any possibility for suspense when every second you were plotting it: why couldn't I discover it as the reader would and why, because I was writing this mystery novel, which had a real mystery—where was house no. 96, and was house no. 32, which wasn't there appropriately, actually not there in error?—why couldn't I experience the mystery firsthand? I didn't know where they were, either, why did I have to act as though I did?

I began the day recalling my bath of the previous night, which was scalding hot as usual and reaching the point where soon I would have to get out, or faint as I sweated through another page of Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*. It was often when I was in the bathtub that my most cogent ideas struck me; yesterday was no different. When I reached the point where to read another sentence would probably have resulted in cardiac arrest, I laid the book down, and leaned back—this was the last phase of the nightly bath—and as I was doing this, there came an exciting new thought: if I was no longer going to write, as I had begun to worry that I wouldn't, then I should at least write about not-writing. And was so struck by the idea that I rose from the tub, dripping, to jot it down, which I was now doing. I was writing down the idea "I no longer wish to write" by writing down that I was writing it down. I wanted a threshold to open that also would be like a question, something that asked me about my living in such a way that I could finally understand it. I couldn't understand why my days unfolded the way they did and why they took me away from writing. I was writing, "I no longer wish to write," repeatedly, and in making this

gesture uncovered distant, repeating scribbling from my childhood: "I will not tell a lie," "I will not leave the top off the peanut butter," "I will never raise my voice." Each declaration filling tens of pages, and this was a kind of writing, similar to what I believed I'd been doing for some time—a writing so as not to write, so to find the limit (that last line) beyond which the body is free to roam outside once more.

I began the day thinking that writing was becoming a thing of the past as my fondness for Rollerblading now was, though in my time of writing and my time of Rollerblading—and these did sometimes overlap—I was far better at the former than the latter. I was far better at writing than I was at Rollerblading, and for the most part considered them vastly different. However, when they departed my life, they did so identically, robbing me of the ability—in retrospect—of remembering separately when I wrote and when I Rollerbladed. You were going to say that writing was for birds flying when suddenly a feeling came over you. Someone beautiful was talking about your sentences. It felt like rain. Things were starting to line up: history was speaking, which hardly ever happened to me. It was saying I had arrived at a moment where I could put writing down and walk away from it. I remembered the ache in my mouth when I ran into the back of that pickup truck. I was alone in a parking lot and had already given up too much—too much to brake, too much to swerve. I gave up most in my mouth, where a tooth chipped and I bit through my lip. I gave up most in going to the

hospital. The language I had accumulated confused me, and slamming into the truck had cut my knees. I didn't know how to explain myself to the medic, but soon I began writing poems. In the ensuing years, the poems became prose, and I had written my last of it. Finally, I was done.

I began the day transcribing several of Gail Scott's sentences onto the wall of my living room. For months I had been trying to say something about them, which when I went to say it became layered, thus impossible as an utterance. I had already argued somewhere that one could not express many different things at the same time in the English sentence, and so was not terribly surprised by my failure. I'd learned that to think in this language you had to be patient: you had to say one part, like drawing one side of a cube, then say the next part, like drawing another side, and keep on saying and drawing until eventually you'd made a complex observation and a picture-feeling. You had to be okay that it took you twenty minutes to make this multilevel statement and accept that you hadn't actually scraped the surface yet of what you were really trying *to see* in this language. But when you were alone, when no one was there to listen to you unfold some puzzle in your mind, you coveted that ability to think in paragraphs with a single sentence, an ability you may never have had but that your instinct said belonged to you. I was saying "you," because I wanted to type this essay and draw on my walls in the same instant of 9:15 that

Sunday morning. In the center of the mural was the sentence: "Each time I start, it's as if the memory of the past (the noun, the sentence's beginning) wipes out the present (verb)." I wrote, "The woman sits still." "The woman sips her wine." I wrote, "In fact, this whole story might be more appropriate on a train." I wrote, "It's true, also, that in waiting, the space of melancholy can open up too much." I'd memorized these sentences years ago. I wrote, "Walking across this hotel terrace in the heat is like being in a postcard." I wrote, "Thinking that the problem with feeling better (calmer) is, it opens space for the inner anguish under." I wrote, "the inner anguish under" again, because it had reminded me of something. The mural was expanding and had now reached my dining area. As long as there were other rooms it seemed okay to rewrite those words until I understood what was particular about them. I wrote them as if they were a geometry instead of a verbal consequence. I saw that "the inner anguish under" was trying to tell me something about all the sentences I had just written, really reaching back to that first one. "Each time I start..." about progress through the sentence being wiped out by its own beginning, what the noun said. Suddenly, it became impossible for there to be verbs, or rather, it happened that the verb was in such a fragile state there could be nothing else around it.

There could be no duration. The "sentence" had to be divided infinitesimally. There was an "inner anguish" underneath. I resumed writing. I wrote, "Looking out window. Pale blue sky beyond anarchy of chimney pots." I lifted my wrist from the wall and rotated it to release the tension, then I wrote, "Below on sidewalk the pale man. Living in basement." I wrote, "Walking back down. Suddenly feeling happy. When old woman in thick black-and-white sweater. Asking help." I stopped. I breathed. I wrote, "For pushing heavy door open. No sooner falling over threshold with effort thereof." My heart hurt, I pulled my arm back, laid it across my chest. A few moments passed. I resumed, "When butch bouncer slamming it closed behind. Waving us down worn plush stairs. Entering red-and-white crescent-shaped room. Several lesbians dancing." My breath had grown jagged, and I couldn't repair it. These were the shortest sentences I'd ever seen; yet they were not the kind of sentences that allowed you to rest when you reached the end of them. They pointed always to the one up ahead. I was looking at the changing shape of the mural; what I'd thought was the effect of a strong sun in the middle room of my house was actually another kind of "inner anguish" in the language. You couldn't write these short sentences now without making paragraphs. Were you building the present?



The shadows said so. There were sentences that I didn't know by heart that were written in a notebook in the bedroom. I was worried about entering another reality, which would happen as soon as I left the drawing space. But the mural would not be complete without them, and would never be complete, but would be drastically incomplete without them. If I left the room now, the room with these paragraphs, I didn't know what I would find when I returned. Paragraphs had too much momentum to remain themselves. And really didn't hold content very well. But the walls were holding the paragraphs, and this looked likely to persist for at least the few moments I needed to run out of the room. I went and retrieved the last sentences. There was something dangerous about them. They pushed you off a balcony; they caused fissures in your reading mind. I wrote, "And day's final filtered trace abruptly snuffed by street lights. So railway-flat Room, indelible in middle, emitting air of stagnant or impregnable, into night beyond casement." I wrote, "The skinny deemed-dead-or-disappeared agoraphobe in window opposite." Then, "Old boats of once-amazing fries." I wrote, "That uncontrollable contingency, once more streaking past keyhole." Then wrote, "Whorling swarms + electrons." I wrote, "Acuiting." I wrote, "I/R surely kneeling on floor + placing fingers about your ivory throat." I wrote,

"Grandpa, in number of dreams lately." For a while, I hadn't actually been writing but doing a transcription that fell in the deep space between drawing and landscaping. I shaped, "As two clouds, in spreading, emitting low pink ray projecting full charge of light on Settler-Nun limestone or brick, an effect of cut-into-ribbons," and dropped the granite pencils to the floor. These were many of her sentences. I wanted to say more.