

Dear Blank Space: A Literacy Narrative

written by Guest Contributor | December 31, 2015



How does a change in vocabulary save your life?

–F. Howe

*The units of sound last only as long as the
breath is able.*

–F. Howe

*A book that is made up of fragments... There is
white space, therefore.*

*Ghosts coming and going, adding and subtracting,
rearranging the air.*

–J. D'Agata

Dear Invisible House

What we are building. A ghost or something to recall the void. When I was a child, I learned that God was a shadow hovering above the waters. Instead, one might say "Sacred" or "Truth" or "Language." Either way we could sense something in the distance, in the fog, and because we are human, we reached out to see if we could touch it.

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Dear Broken Openings

What was unfolding around us. Some writers, for some reason, approach form with a preference for "incoherence" instead of "a distorting order." As if in elucidating the world, they are also compelled to obscure it. Roland Barthes postulates a theory of fragments, of perpetual beginnings and parataxis, and this might be a parenthetical caption for my lifelong work: "To write by fragments: the fragments are then so many stones on the perimeter of a

circle: I spread myself around: my whole little universe in crumbs; at the center, what?"

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Dear Wilderness

Alone in the forest, stranded at sea, wandering in the desert—the kinds of stories that move me are the ones where we continue to find ourselves shrouded in the unknowingness of being. Every day begins and ends like this: the galaxies are ever moving away from you. Inside the planetarium, I leaned into the swathy darkness, and somewhere scientists sensed an unknown, invisible web holding the universe together, to which they gave the name “dark matter” and “dark energy.” Projected on the ceiling, it looks like a vast and intricate skein parachuting our bodies. In my favorite essay by Fanny Howe, she starts, “Bewilderment as a poetics and an ethics,” and from the body of text that follows, a vocabulary emerges like a collection of nodes: *mystery, hidden, unlocatable, complexities, perplexities, errancy, fluidity, spiraling.*

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Dear Void

And what is a constellation anyway, but a shape we temporarily trace in that vast pause, a lyric of geometry we speak into an otherwise dark and uncertain space?

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Dear Rest Note

By which I mean, if it is not yet clear, *form as language*. I mean: The shadowy white of the page. Measures of emptiness, an absence of sounds, as part of the vocabulary. Writers say *form* and *language*, as if they are distinct elements of consideration, but I am interested in tensions of space, pockets of text amidst silent tracts, as a kind of language in itself. It is true that we speak different languages, we learn different native tongues, and sometimes, in an unexpected arrangement of stars and space, we find a discourse for what we could never before say.

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Dear Hiding Place

Sometimes it is a broken narrative, a half-language, that brings us to tears. We have known since we were children how the world is a wounded thing that cannot be said aloud. My story of coming into language: It is strange and exhilarating to come upon something you had not known existed, yet had somehow been inclining toward all your life; My body recognized it immediately, intimately; As if it suddenly had a language for what it knew all along, a form for what it had been collecting in its recesses; innermost mode of navigation, rhythm I could not legitimize on my own, tonal drift I had never thought to speak; When I was twenty and living in a town named Providence, I found myself in an old classroom with two blurry windows, behind the fourth floor library stacks; She had a warm heart, somber body; She called it *lyric essay*;

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Dear Knots and Gaps

Evocative, as if the world were a haunted thing. Instead of linear, a collection of fractured things. Soundings from oceanic depths. What is unsaid holds just as much weight as what is said. "The emptiness surrounding both objects and perceptions as being part of our experience of them."

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Dear Specter of Immigrant History

For we each live within our own language, some more literally than others, and mine is fractured into categories of intimate or functional, hard-pressed or textured, but never something without knots and gaps. If I could take a shadow and sew it to another until it formed a roof above my head. My brother napping on the couch in his winter jacket, I in the next room, murmuring imaginary happenings to myself as the angle of the sun caught the ascending dust. Outside, my father put up wooden beams around our plants, sanding the logs until they made a satisfying sound against the rubber of my shoe.

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Dear Perforations

Growing up, my favorite books were those I read on the cusp of adolescence: *How to Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Mozart Season*, *A Summer to Die*. I sat like a small shell in the overcast corners of the house with stories about characters on the brink of the world's holes. This childhood knowledge of existential emptiness is described by Howe as "the loss of a feeling of enfoldment in the whole cosmos," but I would argue it is this and the opposite at the same time. As a child I knew that loneliness was something I could wrap around me, and that when I felt the world's brokenness, I was also feeling its wholeness. What is longing but my arms pulling at the sky as if it weren't already fog and rain collecting the ground? As an adult, I continue to love coming-of-age novels because the narrator senses something larger than she is able to pinpoint. She knows, in some way, that nothing is simple and above all there is tension: how home and stranger are blurry at the edges, how the world is familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, how it is both solid and slippery—something to hold and something to lose.

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Dear Immigrant/Itinerant/Other

Dear Outsider. Dear Interloper. Dear Exiled. You dampen and blur the skin. *Inside your margin of water, as if to keep warm. Inside a shell, we are all: spilling, dissolved. Inside a blight, blur: all (un)known.*

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Dear Selective Mutism

I have always been shy outside the house, my body tentative and small in a world large and unyielding. Home, above all, is a soft space inside an external space. If it is the noise of the world that renders me silent, and the quietness of home that burgeons my speech, then I will keep the lives I live coalesced between a shaded space. To let me stay half-hidden, half-covered, a whisper that colludes with the dark. Somewhere near the root of my fear, my slowness to voice, is the need for silence as shelter, something to cushion the hard-edged words and acknowledge the gaps. It is only when silence is paralysis, something drowning, that I start to lose myself in an ocean middle with nothing in sight, caught infinitely in the throat. But standing at the shoreline where the ground beneath me disperses to dunes or rocky coast, I can watch the waves tumble toward me, then draw outward, a soothing rhythm of opposing movements. And what is the world but a brief and shaky utterance on the verge of soundless space?

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Dear Anechoic Chamber

Inside the silence: Your heartbeat. Your blood making its way through the body. A ghost is a ghost whether or not you have been waiting to hold its hand. When John Cage wrote 4'33'' he knew that inside the vacuous interval would materialize all our transient noises, unnamed sounds. Silence moors us to the waves inside us and to the air surrounding our bodies. Stitches us into their texture. On the coastal forest where we make a tent in which to sleep ourselves, the night hours grow until they cocoon us. How once your eyes adjust, shapes can be made out swimming in the inky darkness: mountains, trees, seas. How you can detect unevenness in the sky, shadows of varying opacity, movements from darkness to lighter darkness.

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Dear Mother Tongue

This, too: Children of immigrants, like poets, know that language is sometimes a textural thing instead of something linguistic. Lilt of a tone as something woven, like a nest or blanket or boat. They know that language is wind-blown terrain, an entanglement to make one's way through, a process of raveling and unraveling and in that, love. A child in her house moves daily through myriad opacities: intimacies untold, histories unsaid, her loved ones at turns impenetrable, kaleidoscopic, porous. She learns to navigate by way of water mixing into water, a small sound that touches the earth that hinges the sky. Her language of intimacy even in adulthood: Child sounds. Warped and full of holes. So I have something invested in silences. In the roundness held there.

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Dear Absence/Presence

It is no coincidence that Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, daughter of immigrants, spent her life invoking, like prayer, physical representations of silence, where "terms and images of blankness...haunt the terms of signification." In her writing and artwork are blank pages, blacked out pages, empty margins, Korean vowels blurring to white noise and water. Indeed, many kinds of silences bleed into one another: linguistic, oppressive, historic, resistant. What she seeks is the body's experience of it. To turn it into something material. If a person is made in part of silence. If beneath our structures

of articulation, we are awash in shapes, textures, transfigurations. If they are like longings unresolved inside of us. Thus, we are haunted. "Water fills up all the empty places," she writes.

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Dear Ruptures

In the nakedness of summer my grandfather writes to ask me if I feel it when the land on this coast cracks open, readjusts itself. One warm night after I have lost count, there is an earthquake minutes after I have fallen asleep. I waken for a moment to the world shaking and am equally frightened and sleepy. Throughout the rest of the night, my body may or may not have absorbed many small residual tremors. In the morning I hear people moving downstairs, and I try to work up the voice to murmur a response, but I am tired. Half-awake or half-asleep, I mouth the words while trying to project, but the sounds are muffled in my ears. To test that I am really speaking, I try, *Hello, hello*, to no one in particular. Later when I am fully awake, I am not sure if I have spoken or not.

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Dear Open Mouths

The silent ones, the broken ones, the ones who are lost. If there is a peculiar but intuitive relationship between the inarticulable and the sacred, there is also a relationship between the sacred and what is broken. Think: Body. In the Sermon on the Mount of my childhood, it is the meek who inherit the earth. It is the weak who are strong. If I take this logic further: the voiceless who are most articulate.

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Dear Letter to a Distant Person

"The things one says are all unsuccessful attempts to say something else—something that perhaps by its very nature cannot be said. I know that I have struggled all my life to say something that I never shall learn how to say. And it is the same with you. It is so with all who spend their lives in the quest of something elusive, and yet omnipresent, and at once subtle and infinite. One seeks it in music, and the sea, and sunsets; at times I

have seemed very near it in crowds when I have been feeling strongly what they were feeling; one seeks it in love above all. But if one lets oneself imagine one has found it, some cruel irony is sure to come and show one that it is not really found."

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Dear Unsayable

So, an obsession with shadows and ghosts. In theories of metaphor, which is to say language, we are always on the verge of what we know and do not know. According to Ricoeur's "ontology of sacred language," metaphor operates by way of an unnameable meaningful space between two named places: meaning by way of suspension, leap, gap. If we recall the night erasing and outlines of darkness emerging, might we also say *blank space*: "an indirect reference built on the ruins of the direct reference"?

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Dear Archive of Ghosts

You are traces of a mollusk after it has slithered away. You are traffic moving outside my window, softened into a melody I can bear. You are breaking morning and falling evening, when the house is most flooded with shadows and angles. You are inhale, then exhale, my intentions and my failures. You are condensations of the air between us. You are interstices, the heart conditions of an immigrant perpetually arriving and departing, or how we are all itinerants; a map of evaporations. If the world is a thing that cannot be spoken whole, then let me stay a little bit broken, a relief to acknowledge this pile of occluded things.

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Dear Night: Ocean

For we want to be known, but we also want to be alone. A writer investigating Virginia Woolf's sense of sacred unknowability and hiddenness says: "It has something to do with preserving life's mystery; with leaving certain things undescribed, unspecified, and unknown... It depends on an intensified sense of life's preciousness and fragility... We seek out circumstances in which we can feel more acutely the contrast between the outside world and our inner

selves.” The feeling described, to me: Standing at the edge of a chasm and feeling it swell inside you. Inside the cavity, I imagine putting all my immeasurable things: patterns in the air, embroidery of our breaths, atmosphere of my tiny movements when I am alone. We keep them secret inside the body, an expanse we hold in ourselves and yet between us, an ocean in each of us. Another writer says: “Most people are afraid of the dark... the darkness that is the unknown, the unseeable, the obscure. And yet the night in which distinctions and definitions cannot be readily made is the same night in which love is made, in which things merge, change, become enchanted, aroused, impregnated, possessed, released, renewed.”

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Dear Decreation

We were taught that God is a hard slate, like stone, but I found it deafening as water. In 1933 Junichiro Tanizaki wrote in an essay, *In Praise of Shadows*, “I would have the eaves deep and the walls dark, I would push back into the shadows the things that come forward too clearly.” Decades later, having intuited through mathematics what they cannot know, scientists hypothesize what they cannot see: an unknown variable beyond the observable galaxy, a “shadow universe” whose shape we infer indirectly, poring through and in between space like a tenuous, veiny map: undefinable, yet literally keeping it all together. “It is by following the light that we have been led into the dark.”

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Dear Rooms

Woolf wrote how language is not sentences laid out from beginning to end but rather sentences architecting a structure, a building, a house. I say to myself: And a house contains spaces and hollows, and a house circulates, and a house grows brighter and dimmer according to the rhythm of the earth’s relationship to the sun.

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Dear Apertures, Tiny Openings

Or: To let in and keep out light in order to compose our projections of the

world. An elemental tension: We need the sun for lucidity and life, and yet without its nightly disruption, this recurring loss, we would have no rest from a clarity too blinding to endure. "We find beauty...in the pattern of shadows, the light and the darkness, that one thing against another creates," Tanizaki wrote, and in that rubbing, something otherly opens up, an unsettling that becomes its own meaning, mercurial, liminal, impossible to own. It reminds us that what we are after is born of aberration, or what we are after requires us to lose something, or when we are trying to say the world, we are trying to say its holes. In the film when she told him, "There is an ever-growing space between our words, and it is in that space that more and more I exist," I took this to mean that there is a truth in the unoccupied gap, in the distance between a sound and its meaning, between the worldly and extrawordly, where wandering in what is elusive and slippery claims a metaphysical urgency.

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Dear Decreation II

Sometimes it is the ruined structure that I am building—splintered, turmoiled, mystified. To catch the bare bones of it, the slivers of darkness and hunger in between. To remind me that ruin is where we started, and every construction is a false veneer, a red herring. Sometimes, the closest sense of wholeness comes from holding the pieces loosely. Perhaps the failure, and beauty, of language, the world, is this: that meaning is found in its recesses.

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Dear Margins

Why does it move me, the peripheries—the overshadowed, the speechless, the passed-through? When we look from here, everything is slant. Though its spaces are by definition residual and immaterial, it is *residue* that I want to call center; *disembodied* and *irrelevant* that I want to hold dear; *murkiness* and *muteness* that I want to resound. This, too, can have a political stake: a word is a sound to which we give meaning-filled boundaries. If we were to trace a shape around an invisible field of leftover particles and energy, let it be filled with all our ephemeral excesses, grief-stricken, displaced, tongue-tied, full of formidable size and strength, however vague. My truth is this, which the astronomers also knew: The world is blurry around the edges. When I'm looking intently at the page, there is always something in my peripheral vision, some dark shape I cannot shake.

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Dear Longing

A poetics of blank space, then: "The visible world is soon emblematic of the intentions of the invisible." Some days I wake and the fog is already crowding my window, my little green plants, and I know what humans have known since the beginning: we belong and also we do not belong. Somehow we sensed how the fabric surrounding us was not whole but punctured through. Our bodies absorbed a tempo: we search, we suffer, and we search again. In the midst of a buried hour when everything around me is sleeping and straining and I do not know how shallow or deep, my friend H writes to me from the other side of the world: "Prayer cannot exist if there's any certainty that it will be heard." This, I suspect, is at the heart of the contradiction that propels me, though I barely know what it means.

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Dear Series of Intersecting Circles, Moon Cycles

In the end, we recognized something in such a cadence of eclipses and absences, of constant bewildering loss. Instead of oppressive concreteness: a brokenness to teach us longing. Instead, a collection of language shifting and tumbling in the dark: *void, holes, broken, fractured, liminal, limbo, murky, obscured, shadows, night, wilderness, wandering, lost, uncertainty, ambiguity, speculation, hidden, unrepresented, unrepresentable, inarticulable, unknowable, unreachable,*

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Dear []

So I hold you, and I lose you. We are always all a little bit drowning. To investigate the world in the rhythms of a swimmer: to go for deep dives and come up for air; to hold my body half-under.

Notes

Epigraphs: First and second are from "Immanence" and "White Lines" in *The*

Wedding Dress (University of California Press, 2003). The third is from the introduction to Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's excerpt of *Dictée* in *The Next American Essay* (Graywolf Press, 2003).

Dear Broken Openings: Quotations and term "broken openings" are from *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes (Hill & Wang, 1975).

Dear Wilderness: Essay referenced is "Bewilderment" by Fanny Howe.

Dear Knots and Gaps: Quotation at the end is from the essay "Immanence" by Fanny Howe.

Dear Specter of Immigrant History: This body of text is a prose poem from my series *Letters to Mao*, whose addressee ("Dear Mao") I rename here.

Dear Perforations: Quotation by Howe is from "Immanence."

Dear Immigrant/Itinerant/Other: Sentences in italics are adapted from a poem from my series *How to Build an American Home*.

Dear Anechoic Chamber: John Cage wrote about his experience in an anechoic chamber in "An Autobiographical Statement" in the *Southwest Review* (1991).

Dear Absence/Presence: References are made to Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's general body of work and specifically to *Mouth to Mouth* (1975) and *Presence/Absence* (1975). Quotation beginning with "terms and images of blankness" is from *Critiquing Postmodernism in Contemporary Discourses of Race* by Sue J. Kim (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

Dear Letter to a Distant Person: This body of text is from a letter by Bertrand Russell in *Autobiography of Bertrand Russell* (Routledge, 2009).

Dear Unsayable: The quotation "ontology of sacred language" is from "Metaphor and Phenomenology" by S. Theodorou in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. The quotation beginning "an indirect reference..." is from "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling" by Paul Ricoeur in *Critical Inquiry* (Autumn 1978).

Dear Night: Ocean: Reference to "our need to be known with our need to be alone" and the following quotation is from "Virginia Woolf's Idea of Privacy" by Joshua Rothman in *The New Yorker* (July 9, 2014). Closing quotation is from "Woolf's Darkness: Embracing the Inexplicable" by Rebecca Solnit in *The New Yorker* (April 24, 2014).

Dear Decreation: Quotation from Tanizaki is from his essay "In Praise of Shadows" (1933). Other quotations are from a video "The Shadow Universe Revealed" by Dennis Overbye, Jonathan Corum and Jason Drakeford in *The New York Times* (July 15, 2014).

Dear Rooms: This references *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf.

Dear Apertures, Tiny Openings: Quotation by Tanizaki is from "In Praise of Shadows." Film referenced is *Her* by Spike Jonze (2013); language in quotes is

my own interpolation of what is actually said in the film.

Dear Longing: “The visible world...” is from “Immanence” by Fanny Howe. “Prayer cannot exist...” is from a personal letter to me from Henry Leung.

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If writing defies “common sense,” if it seems to go against traditional modes of thought, norms, and histories, the idea of that common sense no longer makes sense, or might make sense if we’re allowed to reinvent ourselves. That’s what I’m looking at with the literacy narrative, the coming-into-language story. I want to hear yours: when you first “clicked” with a language, whatever it is; why you questioned the modes of your Englishes; how you wrote “poetry,” but looked at it again and called it “lyric essay.” I want to see your literacy narrative in its scholarly, creative, and hybrid forms. Send your literacy narratives to Sylvia Chan at sylvia@entropymag.org. Stay tuned for more literacy narratives from [yours truly and others](#).