“WHAT REMAINS REMAIN REMAINS”:
SCRAPBOOKING GRIEF IN THE MEMOIRS OF ALISON BECHDEL,
ANNE CARSON, AND KAREN GREEN

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores multimodal, scrapbook-style responses to loss in three autobiographical works: Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home, Anne Carson’s Nox, and Karen Green’s Bough Down. With particular consideration to their use of the deceased’s documents, scraps, and detritus in articulating their grief, I argue that these authors manipulate their archives and reassemble their contents to generate new past, present, and future conditions for their relationships both to the dead and to themselves. From the wreckage of artifacts – paper scraps, paste, and ink – counter-histories emerge framed by desire and affection: works that present fragmented histories as changed by the material engagements of those left behind.

By virtue of these books’ experimental, collage-style forms, and their often-intertextual meditations on loss, this project necessitates diverse theoretical engagement. It draws on scholarship primarily from the fields of media studies, cultural studies, queer and feminist critical theory in accounting for Bechdel, Carson, and Green’s formulations of grief, memory, and time. As becomes apparent over each case study, all of these works ultimately resist their authors’ closure and resolve in suspended irresolution. This project considers how these authors’ formal experimentation stresses the impossibility of their catharsis; the gap between body and shadow, past and present, dead and living refuses reconciliation.
Lay Summary

When kin die, they abandon the living to more than their grief. This thesis examines three autobiographical works that contend with what remains unburied after the body recedes: Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, Anne Carson’s *Nox*, and Karen Green’s *Bough Down*. These books make use of their deceased’s documents, scraps, and detritus in multimedia, scrapbook-style meditations on grief and loss. This thesis aims to show how these experimental writing styles contribute to one common theme: that the gap between past and present, dead and living cannot be overcome.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Lian Furlong. It was completed under the supervision of Dr. Kevin McNeilly.
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This thesis entered my life in ways I never anticipated, when in the first year – like Bechdel, Carson, and Green – I found myself sorting through the immense scraps and remains of someone I love. Nana, I wish you enjoyed a leaner life, but thank you for leaving so many things to think about.
Chapter One: Introduction

When kin die, they abandon the living to more than their grief. Mourners contend with a new absence or loss – of life, of self, of futurity – but they also respond to what remains unburied after the body recedes. The life’s material shadow – its scraps, archives, and detritus – is of central concern to the works studied here, in which artists reveal themselves to be haunted by what the dead leave behind, as their photographs, letters, and refuse persist as indices to a life expired. The books under analysis in this study – Anne Carson’s Nox, Karen Green’s Bough Down, and Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home – make documentary remnants of the dead hyperpresent and continually seen on the page as co-authors in narratives of loss.

Through their integration of material artifacts, these books fashion what I regard as a “scrapbook poetics”; they are multimodal in their demands on visual, textual, and material literacies, and autographic in their asserted primacy of the particular, the personal, and the irreproducible. Bechdel, Carson, and Green’s respective collages of juxtaposed paper scraps, drawings, and original text foreground their visual elements – and by extension, their artifacts – as inherently dynamic and mutable. Each of their pages should be understood as what Johanna Drucker and Jerome McGann call a “system”: “a relational, dynamic, dialectically potential ‘espace’ constitutive of . . . the graphical presentation of a text” (Drucker, “Graphical Readings” 270-271). By bringing familial archives, personal reflections, haunted refuse, and their cultural influences into seen and layered proximity, Bechdel, Carson, and Green lay bare what Drucker in Graphesis regards as the histories and texture underlying books themselves:

[W]e think we know what a book is – a finite, bounded, set of sequenced pages, defined by its form as an object. We think it is a thing that we hold in our hands, finished and complete, a series of organized openings with recognizable and
familiar physical and graphic features. But in fact, a book is a momentary slice 
through a complex stream of many networked conversations, versions, and fields 
of debate and reference across a wide variety of times and places. A book is a 
temporary intervention in a living field of language, images and ideas. (174-175) 
The “living field” Drucker describes here is what Roland Barthes also defines as the “Text” 
exceeding a book’s bounds. In contrast to an author’s discrete, published “work,” the Text 
refuses closure and its “metaphor . . . is that of the network” (Image Music Text 161): “that space 
where no language has a hold over any other, where languages circulate” (164). Bechdel, Carson, 
and Green produce art that is conscious of this networked interplay between artist, work, 
audience, and world. Indeed, as will become apparent over the course of this study, none of these 
women – for either their books or for their grieving – believe there can be closure. 

Few genres of book so reliably expose their influences, their thingness, and their 
relationship to “a living field of language, images and ideas” as the scrapbook does (Graphesis 
175). As Ellen Gruber Garvey asserts in her study on nineteenth-century scrapbooking, the 
scrapbook’s materials bear markings from the subject that arranges them. She contends that for 
their makers, “the scrapbook record of their reading [is] a part of them, a second self” (Garvey 
251), because through their creative practice, “compilers [save] the mediated experience: the 
memory and evidence of where and in what form they have read an item” (28). Through their 
shredding, snipping, redrawing and gluing of what their dead left behind, Bechdel, Carson, and 
Green exert agency over their pasts and see them in new ways. They grieve with the inventive 
drive that de Certeau sees as central to everyday life and its demands of bricolage: “the act of 
reusing and recombining heterogeneous materials” (49). And as Sophie Tamas observes, the 
scrapbook’s form is especially conducive to articulating trauma and grief – experiences that
often resist resolution. Within trauma scrapbooks, “collage . . . juxtapose[s a] celebration of the beauty of the mundane with the esthetic vocabulary of suffering and loss, allowing them to coexist without pressing toward coherence and closure” (Tamas 91). Just as Drucker suggests that a book is a complex system that disguises itself as finite, these authors’ scrapbook poetics expose the ever-open networks of memory, desire, and affection running underneath a life.

By virtue of the ways that scrapbooks and collages colour their materials with their artist’s subjectivity, their styles facilitate complex and creative articulations of mourning and of loss. Like Barthes’s belief that his mother’s photograph was “enough . . . to apprehend the suchness of her being,” the authors I investigate here demonstrate the social import of what their loved ones left behind (Mourning Diary 237). Photography, letters, notes and other possessions appear indexical of the departed; they are exemplary, as Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey describe, of how in “material forms and spatial enclosures from which ‘the figure has escaped’ we find traces, measurements and models of the body and its plight” (85). From their shared interest in kin who hid their internal lives stubbornly from view, Fun Home, Nox, and Bough Down exhume scraps of the perished to seek not only the men that they lost, but also the men they never fully knew. Through their archival interventions, these authors may knit together the implicit tragedy of both their practices and their product: that to remember, to grieve, and to document are to participate always in the obliteration of origins. But I contend that none of these books – concerned with breaching interpersonal barriers and making legible particular pasts – should be regarded as funerary or destructive; their objectives are not to retrieve any lost, virginal past through the document, unaltered by time and interpretation. In Junk, Gillian Whiteley suggests that such truths cannot be found: “the narrative of the souvenir is not related to the object, but to the possessor . . . [;] the subject rather than the object provides the narrative”
(Whiteley 36). Bechdel, Carson, and Green manipulate their archives and reassemble their contents to generate such narratives: to articulate new past, present, and future conditions for their relationships both to those they have lost and to themselves. From the wreckage of artifacts – paper scraps, paste, and ink – counter-histories emerge framed by desire and affection: works that present fragmented histories as changed by the material engagements of people left behind.

This study examines interventions within personal and familial histories in three case studies. Chapter Two concerns Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir *Fun Home*, and understands its author’s search for “the truth” of her father via his paper trail to be self-reflexive. Old letters, diary entries, and photographs wherein “the evidence [of her father’s homosexuality] is simultaneously hidden and revealed” filter through Bechdel’s subjectivity and present position of self-knowledge (*Fun Home* 101). In mimicking her father’s handwriting with her own pen, in redrawing his photographs, and in staging her panels by personally modelling each subject, Bechdel mines the life buried in her father’s closet. And while Bechdel’s efforts to know her father’s desires, motivations, or past arrive at unanswerable questions, she nonetheless unearths histories through her photographic and epistolary engagements: that of her own development as a queer and artistic subject.

In Chapter Three, I turn to Anne Carson’s sprawling, accordion-folded work, *Nox*, and argue that Carson’s archival search for her deceased and estranged brother emphasizes that the elegy – and by extension, grief – places as its subject what is present rather than what is absent: the mourner rather than the dead. Through acts of scrapbooking, Carson articulates and claims the story – not that of the brother who kept living, developing beyond estrangement, but that of a woman who prowls his documented shadow, and mourns their bond as paper-thin as what he left
behind. *Nox* cannot elegize Michael, but it memorializes Carson’s attempts, the holes in her documents, and her continual residence in a state of affectionate farewells.

Chapter Four looks at Karen Green’s *Bough Down*: a mourning diary on the loss of her husband, David Foster Wallace, which contains collages of found-objects from their home. The book’s visuals represent her reactions to the suicide of her husband, David Foster Wallace, as both intensely personal and potentially universal; her work becomes metonymic for the specific horror shared by widows collectively – the feeling of having one’s self erased by the death of another. Like Green’s 2009 piece, “The Forgiveness Machine,” which encouraged audiences to feed their written misdeeds into a shredder to be forgiven, *Bough Down* never allows Green’s despair to remain hermetic. In writing herself over every trace of Wallace left behind, Green makes seen the interminable suffering catalyzed by her husband, and crucially, she also builds his forgiveness machine.
Chapter Two: “my father’s end was my beginning”: Framing a Queer Genealogy in Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home

In Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir, Fun Home, sifting through her father’s archive with the aim of exhuming his uncensored self becomes an ultimately recursive task, where her documentary engagements prove more illuminating in accounting for her development as a queer and artistic subject. Bechdel’s speculative account of her father’s closeted homosexuality and probable suicide demands what she calls “a tricky reverse narration [of] entwined stories,” in which she recasts the past of her father Bruce, her own childhood, and their interrelations as impelled by their fugitive queerness (Fun Home 232). Understanding the father – his rage, his policing influence, his desires – becomes, for Bechdel, an anterior introspection. Alison¹ coheres as subject through the assembly and (re-)reading of her life’s intertexts: family letters, diary entries, photo-albums, and furniture.

The reflexivity of archival labour reveals about Alison what Judith Butler in Giving an Account of Oneself identifies as the “constitutive incommensurability” troubling claims to self-knowledge (Giving 39):

. . . my story arrives belatedly, missing some of the constitutive beginnings and the preconditions of the life it seeks to narrate. This means that my narrative begins in medias res, when many things have already taken place to make me and my story possible in language. I am always recuperating, reconstructing, and I am left to fictionalize and fabulate origins I cannot know. (39)

¹ I employ the conventional practice in Fun Home’s criticism of using “Bechdel” to refer to the text’s author and “Alison” to refer to her in-text avatar.
Bechdel acknowledges her “preconditions” in *Fun Home*’s opening pages, where she draws a young Alison balanced on her father’s feet during their “Icarian games,” and likens Bruce Bechdel to “Daedalus—that skillful artificer, that mad scientist who built the wings for his son and designed the famous labyrinth” (*Fun* 3, 7). Bruce and Alison’s positions within their mythic relationship shift increasingly, as Bechdel notes “it was . . . [her] father who was to plummet from the sky” and later questions “which of [them] was the father,” but Bruce’s art is still one of constructing walls – around himself, Alison, and homosexual desire (4, 221). In *Fun Home*, Bruce defines Alison’s “constitutive beginning” or lost origin, and in his creations – the family’s restored Victorian home and its interior decor – Bechdel sees a labyrinth that hemmed her within (*Giving* 39). Alison may be at times the minotaur, lost in a “maze of passages and rooms [from which] escape was impossible,” but Bruce, looming silhouetted over her on page 12 – “a half-bull, half-man monster” – is the twin shadow she either follows or leads: inverted images of the other (*Fun* 12).

Bechdel’s depictions of her early childhood anchor this sense of entrapment or pre-determined experience to the family house and its objects, which permeate *Fun Home*’s panels as symbols of her father’s artifice. Several pages visualize the ornate home’s maintenance; on page 16, which pictures Alison dusting crystal pendants and polishing antique wood, Bechdel concludes that Bruce’s Victorian decorations “obscured function” and were “embellishments in the worst sense. They were lies” (16). Before she identifies as queer, Alison positions herself against her father’s scenic manipulations, his décor, and by extension, his closet. Given an abusive father with whom interactions were “missing . . . a margin for error,” Alison comes to regard Bruce’s objects as extensions of his being (18). She reads his “meticulous, period interiors [as] designed to conceal” his “fully developed self-loathing” (18), and she rejects them in
developing a “preference for the unadorned and purely functional” (14). But, like the “permanent linoleum scar” from Bruce’s hurled plate in Fun Home (21) – which is pictured again six years later in Are You My Mother? – Alison cannot evade her father’s material haunting (263). The things around her become increasingly – and symbolically – threatening at age ten, when she obsessively hallucinates an “invisible substance that [hangs] in doorways and . . . between all solid objects” which must be “dispersed constantly . . . to avoid in particular inhaling or swallowing it” (Fun 136). Her tremendous anxiety of being invaded by things extends Bill Brown’s reading of “being possessed by possessions”: a state where the “loss of things spells not a physical but an existential crisis” (5, 65). Alison’s situation poses a slightly different problem: what does it mean to be possessed by another’s possessions, and who emerges once they loosen their grip?

For the adolescent Alison, being tangled within Bruce’s worlds and work – his Victorian house and funeral home – constitutes a greater violation than one of taste and comfort; his antique restoration and embalming also coaches Alison to conceal uncomfortable truths rather than air them. Bruce Bechdel’s home and cadaver prep-table constitute the kind of physical geographies Michael P. Brown considers unaccounted for in theoretical readings of the “closet” metaphor. But while Michael P. Brown figures the physical closet – “a series of ‘real’ spaces [queer people have] encountered thorough their life course” – as a dominant actant that “shapes [queer] (in)actions,” Bruce’s closets present a crucial extension to this reading that structures his

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2 I reference 2012’s Are You My Mother? in acknowledging its status as a companion-text to Fun Home. While Fun Home focuses on Alison’s relationship to her father, Are You My Mother? considers her relationship to her mother as it evolves from Alison’s adolescence to the writing of Fun Home itself. With its overlapping subjects and time periods, this second memoir by Bechdel offers valuable context for reading Fun Home, while also demonstrating the impressive, internally-consistent detail Bechdel uses in drawing her past.
daughter’s sexual narrative (Closet Space 44-45). Bruce does not build a hetero-performance around his environment, but rather, builds his environment – his physical closet – around his fictive sexuality via performative space acts.³

Bechdel recognizes Bruce’s closet-building first in his aforementioned decorative arts which “ma[de] things appear to be what they were not,” but his proclivity for deceptive space-making becomes increasingly insidious and symbolic in the family funeral home (Fun 16). As a mortician, Bruce governs his public work by inscribing “life” onto the faces and bodies of the dead, and – as in his private life – transforming the socially repellant into something palatable. Bruce’s letter to Alison regarding Fay Murray’s death intimates his shame’s contaminating effect on his physical surroundings:

Some highlights of my work her yellow lace bikini rose-embroidered panties. Her died red hair after three months of hospitalization. Her hairdresser and her hairpieces. Her bitter green velvet jumpsuit with gold sequined trim and plunging neckline. Well I did my best with red lips, green eyeshadow, lots of rouge and eyebrow pencil and low and behold there lay Fay. She had lovely flawlessly smoothskin [sic]. Everyone was pleased and you would never have guessed she was seventy. (49)

For Bruce, a successful mortuary job does not end at embalmment or makeup application, but instead in a baffling diversion from any disagreeable reality, such that the bereaved register to him as “pleased” and a cadaver’s value is reducible to its sex appeal. Death, decay, and the

³ I use this term – performative space acts – as an inflection of Michael P. Brown’s contention that closeted life persists through “performative speech acts”: the negotiation of speech and silences that encode a presumed straight identity (Closet Space 42).
unadorned home garner the same brand of resistance from Bruce as his homosexuality: obsessive, yet conspicuous, disguise.

It is unsurprising, then, that when Bruce invites Alison into his spatial closet, she is already fluent in its rules. When he calls an adolescent Alison into the embalming room for the first time (its door notably marked “PRIVATE”), Bechdel notes that being presented with a naked, split cadaver “felt like a test” in which she “studiously betrayed no emotion” (44). Here, Alison becomes subject to this closet’s transfigurative properties; for her to admit the horror lying in plain sight would “betray” – or breach the fourth wall of – her father’s fugitive world. Her unflinching reactions are necessary to maintain the closet’s conspiracy: what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identifies as “a silence . . . that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it” (Epistemology 3). And although Bechdel passes this test, she admits that she never leaves that mortuary room: she notes that when sterilely recounting her father’s suicide as an adult, “the emotion I had suppressed for the gaping cadaver seemed to stay suppressed . . . even when it was dad himself on the prep table” (Fun 45). In recounting this trauma, Bechdel acknowledges that the ambient shame, silence, and suppression particular to Bruce’s physical closets – the Bechdel and “fun” homes – bled beyond their borders. Indeed, as evidenced by Alison’s journal archive, this encounter with her father’s mortuary was no brief performance, but rather, a moment of transference; in sharing his silence, Alison accepts the blueprints for a closet of her own.

Bechdel subtly charts this growing adolescent shame in both Fun Home and Are You My Mother? by visually reproducing past diary entries which – like made-up cadavers and gilded foyers – augment their world through ornamentation. The ritualistic markings and omissions in Alison’s daily report of events make visible her marked progression from self-doubt to self-
denial as she evolves into a self-reflecting subject. One of *Fun Home*’s panels illustrates how her ongoing interest in accurate record-keeping instigated a crisis of faith in her own testimony and felt experiences at age 10. That panel, on page 169, draws attention to several minute scrawls of “I think” squished between plain recollections like, “We watched the Brady Bunch.” Alison’s visual codes for uncertainty (later replaced by the shorthand “^”) suggest adolescent cynicism in their interrogations of “truth,” but they also denote a felt powerlessness over and dispossession of the self.

This self is made suspect for Bechdel by its porosity: its malleability against the influence of others, or, as Butler states, the certainty that “[self-]narrative will be disoriented by what is not mine, or not mine alone” (*Giving* 37). Referencing (and re-drawing) the same habit in *Are You My Mother*, she depicts an August diary page covered in circumflexes that obscure all proper names and written pronouns. The captions – “these [markings] were an attempt to ward off evil from the people I was writing about” and “the most heavily obliterated word is ‘I’” – encapsulate the quiet terror Bruce imbues in Alison (*Are You 49*). “Dad” – Alison’s partial origin – and “I” are both figured here as twin participants in their shared threat and propensity for “evil.” Bruce coaches Alison to conceal and fear her desires in a diner when she is as young as four, when Alison sees “truck-driving bulldyke” (*Fun* 119) and “recognize[s] her with a surge of joy” (118). In response to Bruce asking, “Is **that** what you want to look like?” (118), Alison declines: “what else could I say?” (119). Their bond forged in practiced silence evokes a problem Butler identifies in developing personal ethical accountability: that another’s “trans[mission of] certain messages to us . . . produc[es] an indistinguishability between the other and [the self]” (*Giving* 75). Thus, when Bruce’s criminal trial threatens to out him three years later, only for his desires to remain hidden when “the real accusation dared not speak its name” (175), Alison
echoes with her own omissions, as her “earnest daily entries [give] way to the implicit lie of the blank page” (*Fun* 186).

This dense, symbiotic silence will not only expire but be radically redressed by Bechdel in the multimodal narrations of *Fun Home*; just as Alison’s blank pages project the exterior of Bruce’s closed closet door, Bechdel’s hundreds of filled pages turn the structure inside-out. Her publication functions as a response to the question preceding her father’s funeral scene: “Who embalms the undertaker when he dies?” (51). Who will protect Bruce’s fictions, and who will maintain his disguise? *Fun Home* transports readers to the other end of a road as depicted on page 52, where two panels bisect Alison’s head and torso: the left containing her and the deceased Bruce’s face, and the right, his suited lower half. *Fun Home* necessarily exhumes the leftmost Alison – the child drawn within her father’s closet and queer denial – to affirm the out, lived history that exceeds her origins. But this affirmation of the right-most Alison is only a distinction from her *lived memories* of her father. In mining Bruce’s archived secrets – what is concealed, or below the belt – Bechdel envisions her father’s counter-history wherein their parent-child roles invert. If she embalms the undertaker, she is the one to split him open, and if she forms his closet, she is his open door.

Bechdel’s task to take account of her father’s fictions is an investigative process whose methodology retraces her own formation as a queer subject. Though her memoirs depict her transfixion with men’s extreme exposure (the cadaver’s “chest, split open to a dark red cave” (*Fun* 44) and the “vivid glimpse of [her] father’s shame . . . [when she] saw him naked”), Bechdel’s search for Bruce necessarily considers his surround: the artifacts and memories that produce him and by extension, impact her (*Are You* 195). Throughout her writings, Bechdel understands homosexuality as an innate physical drive and intellectual mode of being, but she
also envisions gay lives as comprising a great, networked community archive in which she and her father reside. *Fun Home* frequently treats Bruce’s scraps with the same obsessive detail and visual attention that it gives Alison’s journals, drawings, and books; his world – like hers – belongs to a collective struggle for (and against) queer visibility. Bechdel, when speaking of her body of work, has considered her comics as mobilizing a politics of sight in ways that directly respond to her father’s cloaked sexuality. In *Fun Home*’s 2006 press release, she addresses that social consciousness in reference to her comic strip, *Dykes to Watch Out For*:

I look back now at the genesis of *Dykes*, and I see it very much as a reaction to what happened with my father. I felt that to a certain extent he killed himself because he couldn't come out, so I was determined to be utterly and completely out in my own life. I know I had the luxury of doing that because of the progress made by earlier generations of gay men and lesbians. And I've always been acutely conscious of that queer genealogy, because for me it's also a literal genealogy. (“Press Release”)

By reproducing or filtering Bruce’s library, photographs, body, and letters through her pen, Bechdel acknowledges his rightful position within the prior gay generations that made her life possible. She restores his voice to its abandoned chorus and his touch to the other home he denied.

*Fun Home* renders the tether between gay lineage and a physical, community archive most explicitly in Alison’s coming-out story, where nearly every panel furnishes her sexual awakening with the spines and redrawn pages of LGBTQ literature. She refers to this moment of recognition as “a revelation not of the flesh, but of the mind” in a scene that displays two pages of *Word is Out*, published interview transcriptions of gay men and women from the documentary
of the same name (*Fun Home* 74). The interior of that book – along with the spines of *The Well of Loneliness, Delta of Venus, The Gay Report, Homosexualities, Out of the Closets & Into the Streets* – repeat from their earlier presence in Bechdel’s 1993 autobiographical comic, “Coming Out Story.” In that story, Bechdel positions both herself and her reader as participants in the rite of passage that is “out” queer story-sharing; she ends the comic with a depiction of her grown self in an open door, announcing her “humble contribution to that epic tale of collective self-revelation” and inviting readers to “come out again” (“Coming Out” 6). In these overlapping accounts of Alison’s lesbian awakening, one theme is evident: gay liberation demands opened doors, undone secrets, and the repeated sharing of queer archives. For Bechdel, the gay individual never leaves their closet for an empty home, but rather, their forebears await them in a vibrant space already furnished for their arrival. In that appeal to the collective, Bechdel echoes core criticisms of the very closet metaphor she invokes, particularly Diana Fuss’ claim that “to be out is really to be in–inside the realm of the visible, the speakable, [and] the culturally intelligible” (4). In life, Bruce may have led Alison into his labyrinthine closet – his “maze of passages and rooms opening endlessly into one another” – but in death, Alison provides the Ariadne’s thread to lead him out, into another home altogether (*Fun Home* 12).

Just as Alison’s journey out of the closet is enabled by the gay histories that precede her, *Fun Home*’s project of locating her father’s secret life reflects her felt responsibility to break the closet’s silence for those still cloaked within. Her extensive exposure to LGBTQ literature catalyzes a significant psychological departure from Bruce’s fixation with “mak[ing] things appear to be what they were not” (16). After coming out to her parents, Alison’s diary on page 78 no longer bears the visual scars or strikeouts of internalized hate, but instead, her thoughts and emotions frantically stretch across her notebook in a stream-of-consciousness style. Alison also
extends this new, transparent approach to self-writing by smearing her blood to the left of her handwriting: an act that at once communicates ownership over her language and pages, the externalization of something locked within, and a call to recognize queer bodies and knowledge. As happens often in *Fun Home*’s circular treatment of time, the diary panel on page 78 foreshadows or inflects Bechdel’s later representations of her past. Chapter 3’s final panel depicts Bruce reading through a window – displaying his “preference of a fiction to reality” – and Alison appears in the window opposite his (85). In this panel referring to literature as their “last, tenuous bond,” Alison is represented hunched, pen poised above a desk: the writer to her father’s reader, and the recorder of a life long obscured (86).

This transition wherein Bechdel, the out artist, leaves Bruce’s closet only to lead him forth into her world is a shift that reaffirms itself in Chapter 4’s opening page. Above the title, “In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower,” is a coordinating image: a redrawn polaroid depicting an assumed young woman in a bathing suit and cap. Only at the chapter’s end does Bechdel reveal that in fact this “young girl” is a photograph of her father. The juxtaposition of the chapter header and narrative descriptions presents a possible undressing of Bruce, and suggests in one sense that this is further evidence of his lifelong compulsion toward artifice. But rather than reading her father’s drag as akin to the ornaments that “were lies” in their family home, Bechdel sees in this polaroid a rare glimpse of his sincerity (16). In this unveiling panel, Bechdel transposes the viewer’s perspective into her own; Alison’s thumb holds the polaroid aloft, and her caption fixates on the stunning lack of irony in Bruce’s drag pose, noting that “he’s lissome, elegant” (120). In contrast to the “glowering, malevolent presence” that describes Bruce in Bechdel’s earliest memories, he appears relaxed, and even gentle in feminine dress (197).
Alison’s thumb, her father’s fragility, and the reader’s appropriating gaze interact here in a moment of startling intimacy within a book that is so often about the walls built as a byproduct of love. Through its inclusion in her gay memoir, this panel files this facet of Bruce within a shared, queer repository of experience and also memorializes Alison’s recognition of that very facet. She repurposes his ephemera for a queer archive – what Amy L. Stone and Jaime Cantrell define as a “place of recovery, a recuperative project of moving from silence to productive, transformative discourse” (3). Bechdel also maps herself and her desire to reach that “real” and lost Bruce onto the document itself, so although she recovers, she does so to transform. Via Bechdel’s interventions, the polaroid is both semantically and materially altered, as evident in one crucial distinction found in the photograph’s drawing on page 87’s chapter heading. Here, the film’s creased edges – evidence of extensive and repeated handling – demonstrate the emotional imperative underlying Fun Home’s project. For Alison Bechdel to write, to draw, and to retroactively know her “true” father are ultimately dogged – and failing – attempts to touch him.

When Alison sifts through Bruce’s relics on the pages of Fun Home, she continually confronts the impossibility of their closure – the circumstantial conditions barring his past from reconciling with her present. But, while incomplete, his photographs and handwriting enable other modes of contact. A crucial exchange occurs in a double-spread Bechdel describes as “the core of the book [and] the centerfold”: a redrawn 1969 photograph taken by Bruce of the family babysitter (Roy) which is held aloft by Alison’s left hand (“An Interview” 1006). In one sense, this photo of an undressed, teenaged boy and its year “carefully blotted out . . . with a blue magic marker” offers further evidence of a fundamental distinction between Bruce and his adult daughter: that where he lived compelled to obscure truths, she felt empowered to reveal them
(Fun 101). However, beyond the image’s literal content and censored date which Bechdel considers exemplary of her father’s sexual secrecy, the photograph gestures more to generational relation than divergence. In questioning why she considers Roy’s image beautiful before morally repugnant, she cites identifying with her “father’s illicit awe,” and notes that “[a] trace of this [awe] seems caught in the photo, just as a trace of Roy has been caught on the light-sensitive paper” (101). Bechdel’s consideration of the photograph as trace echoes theoretical characterizations of the medium as an indexical touch, such as W. J. T. Mitchell’s likening photography to “lipstick traces on your collar” (Mitchell 24), or Rosalind Krauss’ description of rayographs as “footprints in the sand” (Krauss 203). Bechdel’s use of “trace” also critically exceeds this understanding; the photograph bears Roy’s physical imprint, but it also harbours this “awe” or emotional residue from behind the lens. Bechdel reminds readers that what a photograph captures is not simply a scene but also a gaze. In sharing Bruce’s sight, Alison in the centrefold opens another space for their connection and models an alternate mode of knowing her father, as looking out with Bruce becomes another way of looking in.

*Fun Home*’s centerfold and the voyeuristic awe Alison and Bruce share offers one of the memoir’s nearest examples of father-daughter touch, but that intimacy is both enabled and limited by its reliance on mediation. Bruce’s sentiment behind the camera requires Roy’s photograph for its transmission, as well as a knowing audience to receive and share in his awe. Beyond the strictly tactile, Bechdel’s double-spread also positions her reader as yet another screen, one that both joins and divorces parent and child. Because of the scene’s limited visual scope – a hand holding a photograph alongside several floating captions – the centerfold makes particular demand of its readers as narrative collaborators. They must perform significant acts of what Scott McCloud terms “closure,” wherein comics readers bridge the gap of pictorial and
textual representation to “find meaning or resonance in even the most jarring of combinations” (73). The more Bechdel relegates details to beyond the frame, the more agency she gives readers in interpretation. In this centerfold, can the hand be definitively read as Alison’s hand? Can Bechdel’s captions resolve into any obvious order? Does this depict a single moment in time, or do Bechdel’s present-tense reactions to Roy’s photograph suggest her repeated, or even continual assessment? Any resulting closure can approximate but never replicate Alison’s documentary encounter. The reader’s insufficient closure in *Fun Home*’s centerfold echoes, then, the limits of Alison’s own reading: we behold a trace of Alison capturing Bruce’s trace.

*Fun Home*’s centerfold – like the drawn photo-paper and documents that permeate the memoir – serves as a particularly rich reinforcement of the work’s underlying crisis: the dead cannot grasp back. To depict a hand thumbing over a photograph is to capture that limit – that of prodding the static, the flat, and the suspended as if they can be moved. Held against *Fun Home*’s past-tense narratives, the book’s present-tense work with Bruce’s scraps adds an intriguing dimension to what Hillary Chute understands in non-fictional drawing as desire:

> Activating the past on the page, comics materializes the physically absent. It inscribes and concretizes, through the embodied labor of drawing, “the spatial charge of a presence,” the tactile presence of line, the body of the medium. The desire is to make the absent appear. (*Disaster Drawn* 27)

If Alison’s retold memories reflect a desire to make the physically absent past appear, her redrawn documents (photographs, letters, book pages) instead portray a need to make her father’s residual absence apparent. These moments in *Fun Home* concretize the perpetual “almost” enforced by Bruce’s death. In redrawing memories, probing documents, and positing
alternate timelines, Bechdel must always confront the solitude of her reach, and of always being close, “[b]ut not close enough” (*Fun* 225).

Even as Bechdel memorializes the lived distance between Bruce and herself in *Fun Home*, her project – both in process and product – blurs them together in ways that figure her queer life and artistry as enabled by and in dialogue with his trace. At times, the text positions their doubled relationship as one of phoenix-like succession, as in Chapter 4’s statement that “my father’s end was my beginning” (117). However, just as she modifies this suggestion in the same panel – “the end of his lie coincided with the beginning of my truth” (117, my emphasis) – Bechdel’s work invests in not only their resemblance but also their difference. In the panel closing Chapter 4, Bechdel juxtaposes two photographs of herself and Bruce in their early twenties, asking whether “the boy who took [Bruce’s picture was] his lover” just as “the girl who took this polaroid of me on a fire escape on my twenty-first birthday was mine” (120). The panel at first glance might offer an instance of father-daughter contact exceeding temporal and spatial limitations – a post-mortem touch – but their shared experience is also fractured by the very metaphor of translation poised to pull them together. Just preceding Bechdel’s caption in the panel that deems the twin polaroids “as close as a translation can get,” she ruminates on the inherent semantic gaps produced by translation: as in the English Proust title, *In Search of Lost Time*, “what’s lost in translation is the complexity of loss itself” (120). Considering this attention to the incommensurability of an original and its translation, this metaphor frames Bechdel’s relationship to Bruce in multiple manifestations. She is less Bruce’s “translation” in the sense of conversion as she is one in terms of movement from one life to another; she is the urban, out, working artist and he is – as Alison fantasizes screaming – the “manic-depressive, closeted fag [who] couldn’t face living in [his] small-minded small town” (125). Translation operates in even
more ways, however, in *Fun Home*’s production. In assembling a book on Bruce and their relationship, Bechdel slips from being Bruce’s living translation to his life’s translator, and as she does so, their respective roles radically shift to position Alison as the authority: the parent to her father.

In this curious reversal of father-daughter roles, though, Bechdel’s authority avoids being “patriarchal,” with the word’s connotations of control over a family and its history: the kind of control demonstrated by Bruce’s “artifice [used] not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not” (16). Instead, Bechdel – as parent, translator, and family historian – represents her family’s experiences by placing herself in their narrative center. Her memoir then underscores the transfer of a family’s narrative power to its younger generations, and in several moments, Bechdel infers that her and Bruce’s inversion began before his death, in the aftermath of her coming out. She maps this shift with precision when depicting their drive to the theater on pages 220 and 221, a conversation that is uncharacteristically protracted in its telling across 24 panels. The scene moves from Alison asking Bruce why he gave her Collette’s homoerotic *Earthly Paradise*, to Bruce’s partial admission of his own sexuality, to shared silence; in turn, they move from a father reading his daughter, to her reading him in return. This interaction corresponds to Butler’s definition of “the interlocutory scene”: a moment where “one is asked what one has done . . . and for what reason” (*Giving* 13-14). For Butler, the speaker’s self coheres in the inherent surrender of their dialogue; in narrating themselves, they confront “the prospect that the story might be given back in a new form,” and thus in that transference, they “lose whatever narrative authority [they] might otherwise enjoy” (80, 82). When Bruce tells Alison of his “first experience” here, he surrenders mastery over his narrative, but that submission and transferred authority is also – in the interlocutory scene – a kind of backwards
birth: another version of Bruce coheres and can only cohere through Alison’s perception (*Fun Home* 220).

Bruce surrenders his narrative authority in this car ride in a way that inverts he and Alison’s familial roles and even enables the *Fun Home* project. Bechdel questions here “which of [them] was the father,” and notes that she “had felt distinctly parental listening to his shamefaced recitation” (221). Across the scene’s 24 panels, Bechdel underscores this reversal by mapping it across their faces. In nearly every panel prior to her question of “which . . . was the father” on page 221, Alison’s eyes are drawn in wide-eyed shock against her father’s half-lidded, neutral expression (even in semi-alarmed drawings of Bruce, Alison’s apparent unease eclipses his own). But in page 221’s bottom-left panel, they exchange expressions in tandem with and in support of Bechdel’s question; Alison’s eyelids become half-closed and downcast as Bruce’s eyes widen and his mouth disappears into a barely discernible speck. While moving from Bruce’s explained identification of Alison’s queerness to her identification of his own, they mimic one another’s appearance in concert with appropriating the other’s social role. In Bruce’s sexual disclosure in the interlocutory scene, Alison assumes authority to newly recognize her father, write her father, and position him in her own art and world-making. When the greater arc of their outing concludes with an illustration of Alison now behind the wheel, far more than their vehicle is given to her control.

To then seek her father, write her father, and work to know her father, Bechdel necessarily labours within a paradox: Bruce’s full story is only intelligible with Alison as its origin. From appropriating Bruce’s gaze in *Fun Home*’s centerfold, to interpreting her own photograph as translation on page 120, or to redrawing his documents and their shared memories, Bechdel theorizes the past as a space whose meanings accumulate in its aftermath and its
witnesses. She tightly demonstrates this narrative transfer again in Chapter 5’s header, “The Canary-Colored Caravan of Death,” and its pairing with a Polaroid of the sunset (121). In this chapter’s opening, the “Caravan of Death” conjures associations with the fatal Sunbeam truck, sunsets emerge in Bechdel’s “premonitory dream” of Bruce arriving late to view the sunset, and together, these elements coalesce into a tangled narrative pun: a man’s own light extinguished by a Sunbeam (124). But as revealed later in the chapter, these daisy-chain associations with Bruce importantly root themselves in Alison’s own artistic archive: her sunset photograph taken at age 13 (129) and the “canary-colored caravan” in her colouring book (130). Bechdel’s use of her own archive in these paired allusions to Bruce’s death – the setting sun and the Sunbeam truck – encapsulates the core inversion in Fun Home’s project. Although in childhood, she makes art only for Bruce to alter and overwrite it, Bruce’s death repositions Bechdel as the creative authority behind Fun Home. Bechdel’s memories, body, and subjectivity, akin to Bruce’s “shame [that] inhabited [their] house . . . pervasively and invisibly,” stain Fun Home’s every page. Again in Chapter 5, Bechdel narrates a memory of her father “fixing” the “canary-colored caravan” she fills with her “favorite colour, midnight blue,” since he explains that “[her] blue side will be in shadow” (130-131). The scene is a victory for Bruce rendered dramatically hollow in the context of Bechdel’s memoir; he, his daughter, and every “yellow” truck around them appear washed in shades of blue.

At every printed moment, Fun Home stresses Bechdel’s often defiant, ascendant role in her father’s narration as she performs the roles of his historian, archivist, photographer, and reporter. But behind the pages, Bechdel’s artistic method further inscribes fascinations with generational distance and narrative succession into her book. Before being placed within a book-body, Bechdel’s work first passes through her own in several manifestations. She is – as she calls
herself in *Fun Home*’s press release – a “method cartoonist”: each panel in her memoir was drawn from “thousands of new reference photos of [Bechdel] posing as virtually all of the characters in the book” (“Press Release”). From one perspective, these self-orchestrated re-enactments echo the narrative’s crisis of interrupted contact; just as *Fun Home* charts the limits of the archive as a surrogate human or historical presence, its readers can only receive Bechdel’s memories through their mediated performance. However, coupled with this attention to the archive as a “gap,” *Fun Home*’s assembly presents other models for intimacy between the lived past and its transmission. In her analysis of *Fun Home* as a text of “embodiment,” Chute suggests that Bechdel’s redrawn documents and scenic posing animate her archive, since “the archival is by definition in *Fun Home* refracted though Bechdel’s experience and her body” (“Animating an Archive” 186). While there then remains for readers – as for Alison – a dissociation between Bruce’s archive and his experiences, Bechdel also disturbs any assumed dichotomy between that same archive and her own lived reality; a redrawn letter bears traces of Bechdel’s body even as it records another’s handwriting and words.

With its emergence from Bechdel’s “shadow archive,” *Fun Home*’s conscious artifice builds a complicated proximity between father and daughter, past and present, object and world (Chute “Animating” 200). While Bruce’s private and public talents as an “alchemist of appearance, a savant of surface, [and] a Daedalus of decor” repeatedly alienate him from Alison, Bechdel exploits her own “inherited . . . inventive bent” in another sort of restoration project (*Fun* 6, 231). Her book, in many ways, is a magnum opus whose aims are inverse to her father’s own Victorian mansion, the ornate appliques of which conceal its wartime decay – a place transfigured by his ability to “spin garbage . . . into gold” (6). Underneath the jacket of the first edition hardcover, *Fun Home* also presents itself as a house. Its cover repeats a panel on page
134, wherein the Bechdel mansion’s exterior exposes its contained family through isolated transparent apertures. If Bruce’s version of the Bechdel house is one designed to mask the past and obscure imperfection, it seems Bechdel rebuilds that same home – with its now-porous exterior, exposed documents, and visible child abuse – to demolish her father’s façade, or to recover the garbage spun into gold. Even the book’s endpapers reinforce this distinction in their reproduction of the home’s wallpaper, which readers necessarily peel back to enter Bechdel’s world. Like in colouring her memoir blue, Bechdel’s work to peer beneath her father’s impressive veneer has a palpable sense of defiance, although it is still one challenged by her labour’s written and structural affection; indeed, to look within is an act very different from turning away.

Bechdel closes *Fun Home* with documents and imagery that confirm her personal and creative desire to reach toward her father, rather than push against him. The book’s final scene returns to the photograph in the same chapter’s heading: an image of the child Alison suspended mid-leap between a diving board and Bruce’s outstretched hands. Bechdel redraws the action preceding that scene – Bruce carrying Alison about the pool on his shoulders – in her concluding panels, and she pairs them with the suggestion that in her father, “spiritual [and] consubstantial paternity . . . coincide” (231). This “spiritual” lineage gestures toward their homosexuality, but more so, it references their “inventive bent”: their shared artistry and, with *Fun Home*, their twin commitments to building a house and home for each other (231). The book’s final page, a vertical diptych juxtaposing the Sunbeam truck with Alison’s leap from the diving board,

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4 In interview with Hillary Chute, Bechdel identifies that wallpaper as William Morris’s “Chrysanthemums.” Illustrating the obsessive detail with which Bechdel reproduces documents, poses, and historical objects, she recalls having painstakingly traced this wallpaper “[f]or an entire weekend” (“An Interview” 1008).
suggests a cause-and-effect relationship between the two events that evades linear time. Julia Watson reads this page as the “conjunction of a moment of violent finality with one of creative birth . . . [linked by] a narrow gutter that is both gap and suture” (51). The memoir’s final moments, then, return us to its origins since in Bechdel’s words, “my father’s end was my beginning” (Fun 117), or, echoing Butler, “I am formed in ways that precede and enable my self-forming” (Giving 82).

*Fun Home*’s final panel evokes Alison’s “creative birth” in the structural relationship to its photographic referent on page 187. While Bechdel’s archive captures Alison’s leap from a position behind Bruce, the perspective reverses at the book’s conclusion: the instant before the Sunbeam truck’s impact. With Bruce’s death, their shared archive and their narrative shift, from a history that looks out from Bruce toward Alison, to one that looks out from Alison toward Bruce. Like the stubborn near-touch of pawing photographs, retracing letters, and posing as the dead, both the photograph and drawn reversal of Alison’s leap hold her in perpetual suspension, with their arms outstretched in the space between father and daughter. Bechdel closes her memoir in partial resolution, but the stubborn gap between herself and Bruce becomes something less than tragic; she draws them, eternally, to the brink of reconciliation.
Chapter Three: “all is lost, yet still there”: Grieving Beyond Time in Anne

Carson’s *Nox*

Anne Carson’s experimental poetic project *Nox* – like *Fun Home* – dwells on and within personal and literary archives in response to familial loss. While for Bechdel, photographs, letters, and literature form rich sites for renegotiating her relationship to her deceased father, Carson’s documentary engagements only amplify the felt distance between herself and her dead brother. At once scrapbook, diary, and translator’s workbook, *Nox*’s meditation on the life and death of her estranged brother, Michael Carson, positions archives as spaces that obscure the past even as they attempt to be its echo. For Carson, to labour with the postcards, photographs, and telephone transcriptions left in her brother’s wake is a task that can only widen the gap between them; it is to grow acquainted with a shadow, and be barred from its source. As she grieves the irreparable rift between them, her parallel struggle to translate Catullus’ elegy “101” extends *Nox*’s crisis of “unknowing” far beyond her family’s borders. Out of its fractured, piecemeal assembly from scissors, staples, and scanner-beams, *Nox* exposes Carson’s grief as the felt inability to resolve certain borders: those between finger and fingerprint, word and meaning, life and death, self and kin. In searching for personal answers within the tangible and the documented – what is there – Carson is haunted and stalked by what is missing. Indeed, by speaking through her archive, Carson draws us always to its limits – not only the things it cannot say, but that which it cannot even begin to address.

On the back of the large, grey box containing the 25-metre accordion-folded sheet comprising *Nox*, Carson writes, “[w]hen my brother died I made an epitaph for him in the form of a book” and she describes the box’s contents as “a replica.” Just as Carson proves unable to know the man Michael became, or just as she struggles to produce a satisfying translation of
“101,” her statement on the back of Nox signals the impossible task of categorizing this project within a discrete genre or literary form. Nox – in Carson’s words – is an epitaph, a hand-made book, and a commercially-made replica, but in addition to these descriptors, it is also a scrapbook, a translation, and an elegy. It is only from this polymorphous, unmasterable form that Nox can fully articulate what Joan Fleming considers a core theme underlying Carson’s continual mourning: “[t]here is no definitive cure for grief, only better questions” (67).

As a dense, multimodal memorial, Nox consciously converses with another of Carson’s epitaphs: one for her mother, Margaret Carson, in the 2000 writing collection Men in the Off Hours. Carson introduces this epitaph in the collection’s final piece, “Appendix to Ordinary Time,” and states that it was “found on p. 19 of the Fitzwilliam Manuscript of Virginia Woolf’s Women and Fiction” (Men 166):

\[
\text{such} \quad \text{abandon} \quad \text{ment} \quad \text{such} \quad \text{rapture}
\]

Obviously it is impossible, I thought, looking into those foaming waters, to compare the living with the dead; make any comparison.

Carson’s layered, experimental epitaph for her mother presents an aesthetic origin for Nox, but it also crucially offers a basis for Nox’s semantic and affective significations; her radical style in “Appendix” coincides with and emerges from a profound shift in her perceptions of language,

5 Nox’s unusual form also poses a challenge for navigational references. In this study, I follow Liedeke Plate’s citation style. Plate explains, “Because the pages of Nox are not numbered while its paragraphs are, I use these numbers for referencing . . . [A]nother way of navigating the text is through Catullus’ poem 101 [and] I have therefore added Catullus’ words as references” (Plate 98). Here, I refer to passages in Nox first by paragraph number, if applicable, and secondly by the lexical entry that precedes it.
death, and mourning. Carson prefaces her mother’s epitaph by articulating how “the crossed-out line fills [her] with a sudden understanding,” in that it is “like death: . . . all is lost, yet still there” (166). In “Appendix to Ordinary Time,” Carson theorizes death in her writing as inextricable from language and the writing process itself. She suggests that seeing a cross-out evokes the same haunted quality of living in the wake of loss – a state when “death lines every moment of ordinary time” just as it “hides right inside every shining sentence we grasped and had no grasp of” (166). Curiously, it seems that Margaret’s death therefore precipitates other kinds of ends for Anne Carson – the dissolution of boundaries between not only the living and dead, but also between what is written, unwritten, and overwritten. In confronting a life suffused with her mother’s spectral absence, Carson irrevocably recognizes a present absence structuring the language and objects we leave behind.

In concluding “Appendix to Ordinary Time,” Carson’s perception of life, language, and things as haunted by their histories renders her losses partial, but her grieving irresolvable. Similar to the comfort Carson seeks in “old photographs of [her] mother in happier times,” she writes, “[c]rossouts sustain me now” (166). But in her jumbled mother’s epitaph, and her suggestion that she may “never again think of sentences unshadowed,” Carson ultimately suggests that photographs and cross-outs – or traces of absence – challenge survivors more than they comfort them (166). In her analysis of Carson’s “Appendix,” Priscilla Uppal interprets the epitaph’s non-linear layout and cross-outs as presenting a hopeful model of recovery. For Uppal, the epitaph’s structural resistance to linear reading models mirrors the uncertain “directional movement of the dead” and thereby intimates that “[the dead] can be retrieved by a number of different routes” (Uppal 99). However, by offering countless possibilities to comprehend and articulate her loss, Carson also implies that any attempts to do so must be incomplete and
insufficient. That expressed impossibility recurs on the final page of “Appendix” and *Men in the Off Hours*, where she captions a photograph of her and her mother, “*Eclipsis est pro dolore*” (167). Just as Margaret’s photograph and cross-outs preserve malleable versions of the past in an “Appendix to Ordinary Time,” Carson’s epitaph, mourning, and book reach similarly unsettled conclusions. Sophie Mayer translates the Latin to read, “It (she) is crossed out in the face of / because of / from / on behalf of sorrow / pain” (113). In the Latin’s unmasterable interpretation, and its suggestion that Margaret (or Anne) may be “crossed out” – made a present absence – in sorrow, the only consistent implication in Carson’s concluding caption seems, fittingly, to be a paradox: an end can ever end.

As a purported “epitaph” engaged with mourning kin, and one told through discarded writing, photographs, and Latin translations, *Nox* extends the thematic and stylistic concerns in Carson’s “Appendix.” In *Nox*’s structural commonalities with “Appendix,” Carson intimates that mourning Michael extends her enduring grief for Margaret, and that connection between her losses becomes especially apparent in her use of photographs. Two folds past *Nox*’s paragraph 2.1., Carson displays a photograph strikingly similar to the image concluding “Appendix to Ordinary Time”; while “Appendix” depicts Margaret with the infant Anne and *Nox*’s image shows Margaret with Michael, both documents picture Carson’s mother in the same strapless swimsuit and swimcap, posed with her child on a lake dock lined with dense woods. When placed together, these photographs they look similar enough to have been captured on the same day, or at the very least, filed together in a family album, and that likeness forges particular associations between the *Nox* project and Carson’s articulated grief for Margaret. In Carson’s emotional world, where the dead linger in the things they leave behind, Michael and Margaret
Carson exist bound together by their pieces. If Margaret’s death draws Carson into thoughts of “eclipsis” – eclipse – Michael’s death returns her to that unmappable night: “nox.”

From Nox’s opening folds to its final panels, Carson characterizes Michael’s death and his life’s material remainders as an obfuscating darkness, resistant to both her comprehension and articulation. In paragraph 1.0., she emphasizes that this impenetrability renders her project paradoxically impossible from the outset; she writes that while she “wanted to fill [her] elegy with light of all kinds . . . he’s dead,” and “[l]ove cannot alter it [and w]ords cannot add to it.” In other words, writing Michael cannot reanimate his life or their relationship, just as a crossed-out phrase cannot assimilate with the sentence it shadows, and just as a still image cannot return to the world it represents. Carson’s persistent attention in “Appendix” and later in Nox, to such unsettling communions between the decipherable and indecipherable, or between what is present and what is unfathomably lost, recalls Julia Kristeva’s formulation of the abject. In particular, Carson’s cross-outs, scraps, and photographs of and from her dead brother relate to Kristeva’s reading of the corpse as an abject sight, since they are “that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything . . . [and] is death infecting life” (Powers of Horror 4). But despite invoking the unspeakable throughout Nox, Carson’s treatment of abjection in art differs markedly in effect from Kristeva’s theorization. In Powers of Horror, Kristeva frames the ritual purge of abjection through art and religious rites as a confrontation through mimesis, where “[t]he abject, mimed through sound and meaning, is repeated” in a way that “arranges, defers, differentiates, and organizes, harmonizes pathos, bile, warmth, and enthusiasm” (28). However, even as Carson “arranges” Michael’s scraps, reproduces her documents, and meditates on historical articulations of loss in Nox, she suggests that any attempts to repeat and arrange an
abject site necessarily fail, instead reconstituting the abject’s horror in other, inconsolable forms. Where Kristeva might read catharsis, Carson sees more crises.

In emphasizing her inability to utter the abject in a way that spurs catharsis – what Kristeva terms the abject’s “purification” – Carson spells a kinship between her project and that of historians. Carson opens Nox with statements that Michael Carson’s life “remains a plain, odd history” that impels her “to think about history,” and in the following pages, she frames her resistant attempts to speak the unspeakable as part of the past’s disassembly through historicization (1.0; “multas”). Through a reading of Herodotos, she illustrates how history dislocates the living from abject pasts. Herodotos tells that the Skythians – in his request for “the size of the Skythian population” – directed him to a bowl “made of the melted down arrowheads required of each Skythian by their king Ariantes on pain of death” (1.3; “multa”). Carson sees this artifact as an example of how “History can be at once concrete and indecipherable” (1.3; “per”). That unintelligible record – the Skythian bowl – is but a “‘monument’ . . . of the [population] number” rather than a number itself, and even more confounding, the bowl responds only to the inverse of Herodotos’s question: not how many are present, but how many are lost (1.3; “per”). It seems that, like Carson in her self-reflexive epitaph, the Skythians articulated their present in the husks of a measureless and mute past, and for both mourning parties, the price of that articulation extends beyond what Kristeva sees as the terror of “confront[ing death’s] otherness, . . . [the] deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate” (Powers 6). The countless sharp and threatening Skythian arrowheads melt down into a round, single object of aesthetic and domestic utility, and Anne Carson’s scrapbook disseminates across an audience as a curiously-smooth screen of its original elegy. The abject is neither confronted or mimed in these cases but is instead given new permutations – new means to confound. Creating
*Nox*, then, is akin to fashioning a single bowl from thousands of arrows. Carson’s efforts risk more than speaking the unspeakable; rather, she risks redrawing the abject’s borders altogether.

*Nox*’s recurring references to ancient historiography, and its appeals to classical writing, echo the impossibilities of writing what is dead and past. Alongside her written and visual responses to Michael’s passing, Carson attempts translating Gaius Valerius Catullus’ “101” – an elegy that also addresses a brother’s unanswerable “mute ashes.” In its grief that resolves in muteness, Catullus’ “101” – like the Skythian bowl – further mystifies the past it mourns. Carson also admits that any translation she writes of “101” can never approximate the original Latin: “*nothing in English can capture the passionate, slow surface of a Roman elegy*” and “[n]o one (even in Latin) can approximate Catullan diction” (*Nox* 7.1; “indigne”). Yet even in elegizing a brother that “remains a plain, odd history” (1.0; “multas”), or translating a poem that “[n]othing in English can capture,” Carson still persists (7.1; “indigne”). In her twin efforts to translate untranslateables (Catullus’ elegy and Michael’s life), Carson locates her pain within a human narrative that long precedes her.

In her painstaking, failing translation efforts, Carson intimates that her difficulty elegizing Michael lies less in selecting the words to evoke his life than in her reliance on language for the task. On nearly every verso leaf in *Nox*, Carson pastes pages from a Latin-English translation dictionary in an order corresponding with the words of “101”, as if performing a literalist translation of Catullus’ poem in word-by-word sequence. The first dictionary page given exposes the limitations of her translation project as a whole. For the word, “*multas*,” Carson’s lexicon lists English translations including “numerous,” “many,” “late,” and “too much” as but a few of its sister terms. This sense of multiplicity, of abundance, of even a burdensome excess, describes the barriers inherent to Carson’s translation. With similar, lengthy
dictionary pages attributed to each word in “101,” Kiene Brillenburg Wurth suggests that through this piecemeal approach to translation, “Carson probes the plurality of meanings of every single word of “101” so as to show that a final result cannot be had” (30). Instead of comfortable answers, the semantic possibilities of the poem bloom with each new dictionary page, multiplying in all directions until the act of reading “101” resembles the task of mapping a black hole. In *Nox*, “101” foregrounds Carson’s profound skepticism of anyone’s ability to know or write another’s life; Catullus offers yet another loss, and another record, that eludes Carson’s utterance.

Carson’s incapacity to translate “101” exposes inadequacies in language that unsettle its ontological foundations and in turn, threaten or undermine her elegiac project. In her focus on language’s ambiguity, Carson aligns her anxieties around language with another manifestation of the abject in Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*. In Kristeva’s understanding, just as the word cannot comfortably limit itself to a single or primary signification, neither can that word truly attach itself to any signification at all; for Kristeva, sign and signifier, word and meaning are brought perilously together as “a language of want . . . the want that positions sign, subject, and object” (38). By describing the structural lacuna between sign and signifier as a space of “want” or “desire,” Kristeva also implies that language organizes itself around an unconquerable absence: a “void,” the unnameable, the abject (37). Carson reveals that the epistemological gaps haunting our collective historical records and personal archives are deeply intertwined with this lack at language’s centre, as she thinks through contradictions of memory, memorial, and translation in *Nox*.

In paragraph 3.3., Carson illustrates that the same “desire” to contain the abject – desire that Kristeva sees motivating speech – is also the impetus for recording our pasts. Her readings
of Herodotos suggest that the historical project began and continues through the “want [for] other people to have a centre, a history, an account that makes sense . . . [to form] a lock against oblivion” (Nox 3.3; “frater”). But as she indicates in this opening sentence of Herodotos’s Histories, such a lock breaks in the moment of its inception:

Of Herotodus of Halikarnassos’ history this [is] the showing forth, so that deeds done by men not go extinct nor great astonishing works produced by Greeks and barbarians vanish, and in particular on account of what cause they went to war with one another. (qtd. in Nox 3.3; “frater”).

In reference to this above quotation, Carson notes that even as Herodotos introduces his project of averting the past’s extinction, pieces of that past already dissipate in his language; she writes, “[is] at the start is added by me, the first sentence of history has no main verb” (3.3; “frater”). Carson’s meditations on Herodotos contribute to the unshakeable fatalism haunting Nox’s project, in that they reveal Herodotos to be not only the Father of History, but also an exemplar of History’s failings. As Carson turns to elegizing Michael, she knows through Catullus and Herodotos that she cannot dam his flow into oblivion, and more, that her words can only participate in his life and her mourning’s relentless dissolution.

If Carson is so conscious of what she calls death’s “[o]vertakelessness” through art or historicizing, why does Nox nonetheless exist as a published epitaph, complete with an attempted translation of “101” (1.3; “per)? Early in her project, Carson suggests that elegizing Michael is less a choice than a condition of her living and of her humanity. In writing of “history,” she distills the word to its etymological origin, the “Greek verb ἵστωρειν meaning ‘to ask,’” and states that “[o]ne who asks about things . . . is a historian” (1.1; “per”). This shift from words like “elegy” and “history” – nouns with a sense of finality – to the verb or process “to ask”
encapsulates how Carson comprehends the past and its dead as ceaselessly dynamic to those that remain. And for Carson, any individual’s attempt to recognize or know the past is also a means of asserting their very existence, as she ruminates that “[i]t is when you are asking about something that you realize you yourself have survived it” (1.1; “per”). To illustrate that idea, Carson turns again to Ancient Greece, where Hekataios describes a phoenix flying from Arabia to Egypt to bury its father. In presenting this myth, she envisions the phoenix suddenly struck by “the immense fragility of its own flying – composed as it is of these ceaselessly passing shadows carried backward by the very motion that devours them, his motion, his asking” (1.1; “gentes”). Carson’s pasts – her deceased mother, brother, and their lives both together and apart – are, like the shadows falling behind the Arabian phoenix, produced and re-produced by her continual asking, searching, and striving; they persist as meaningful by the virtue of her surviving grief, though these are meanings held in perpetual flux.

As Carson elegizes Michael in spite of knowing that work’s limitations, *Nox* – in its multimodality and physical form – offers a self-referential expression of grief that reflects the tremendous uncertainties shadowing her loss. In its scrapbook-like bricolage of memories, mementoes, and often-partial reflections, *Nox* resumes an interest in grief’s disordering quality that Jahan Ramazani finds characteristic of modern elegies. In part, Ramazani reads such an artistic commitment to representing grief’s maddening, private world as a social responsibility, where modern “elegists have constructed their discourse against many other cultural forms [like obituaries] that quietly simplify, rationalize, or occlude the intimate experience of death and mourning” (225). Carson certainly exposes her melancholy for public gaze, but her attitude on publishing *Nox* seems curiously cool. The brief, clinical author’s statement on *Nox*’s back box cover – “When my brother died I made an epitaph for him in the form of a book. This is a replica
of it, as close as we could get” – bears commonalities with Herodotos’s detached statements on
the impetus for and value of his Histories. Carson highlights two such asides by Herodotos in
Nox’s paragraph 10.1.: “I have to say what is said” and “let anyone who finds such things
credible make use of them” (Nox; “atque”; “fletu”). For Carson, her historicist urge to report her
grief for Michael – like Herodotos – as an end in itself, regardless of its empirical truth-value,
demands a complex formal interplay of remediated images, texts, and documents;6 to “say what
is said” in her memory and grief, Carson necessarily reports in forms that exceed written
language, linear narrative, and the neatly-bound book (10.1; “atque”).

As plain as Nox’s back cover may be, its final sentence – “This is a replica of it, as close
as we could get” – also encapsulates the profound union of meaning and methodology in
Carson’s project. The phrase “as close as we could get” might refer to the publisher’s replicated
epitaph, or alternately, that vague “we” may also hint of “Ann and Michael” as a unit, this latter
usage indicating Nox’s preoccupation with the emotional and material limits of their closeness.
Whether Nox’s reader receives the work as a collaged meditation on a sibling’s loss, or an
alienating semblance of that original notebook in its published context, Nox leads us to consider
how material archives engender, organize, and obstruct human intimacy. Alongside its Latin
dictionary pages and Carson’s numbered commentary, Nox is filled with such an archive – the
limited letters, scraps, and photographs shared between Michael and his estranged family. Plate
reads Carson’s obsessive attention to these documents, like Michael’s “one letter, to [his]
mother, that winter the girl died” (2.2.) as an indication that Carson sees archives as “indices of
lived experience and of the real bodies that produced them . . . their perspectives, feelings,

6 I employ the concept of “remediation” here as it is defined by Jay David Bolter and Richard
Grusin: “the representation of one medium in another” (45).
emotions, beliefs, and desires” (Plate 99). Indeed, Carson admits about Michael, “I prowl him,” and in doing so, she combs through every crinkled phrase in his blue-penned letter (7.1; “indigne”). It reappears, torn scrap by scrap, throughout Nox’s concertina folds with the same attention she pays to her translation of “101.” In a task grimly reminiscent of her word-by-word Latin translations, Carson juxtaposes small pieces of Michael’s handwriting with her typed transcriptions of that same letter. But just as Carson states she “never arrived at the translation [she] would have liked to do of poem 101” (7.1; “indigne”), she recognizes a similar, oppressive opacity in her brother’s archive, where in “prowling the meanings of a word, [or] prowling the history of a person, [there is] no use expecting a flood of light” (7.1; “frater”).

Rather than the “light of all kinds” – an intimate kin-knowledge – that Carson longs to bring into Michael’s epitaph, she instead comes to associate their relationship, visually and verbally, with light’s negation: “nox,” darkness, shadow, night (1.0; “multas”). The motif pervades Nox’s photographs and collages, but this connection is particularly pronounced on the second leaf of paragraph 7.1., where a lexical entry for frater, “see above,” appears below a snipped photograph of a head’s shadow. The trace’s exact origin – like the other photographed shadows in Nox – is indefinite, but here, Carson draws an unmistakeable verbal-visual equation between this image and a “brother” itself: the shadow’s spatial position above “frater” marks it as a de facto definition. Given this “definition,” Carson insinuates that many of the other bodies Nox displays in shadow also belong to Michael: in particular, those photographed on pages following the lexical entries “inferias,” “mortis,” “more,” and “multum.” Elsewhere she suggests that these images – cut to omit their original subject and retain the photographer’s shadow – were in fact taken from Michael’s diaries, which Carson describes as “filled with photographs that he developed himself … of [his lover], the girl who died” (3.2; “has”). The photographic record of
Michael’s adulthood cannot then transgress time and space for Carson as it might for Barthes, for whom “the photograph of the missing being . . . will touch me like the delayed rays of a star” (Camera Lucida 80-81). If anything, such traces only thicken Michael’s associations with muteness, shadow, and night – as another photographed shadow does on the page facing paragraph 1.2. The page’s reverse side reveals a pencil-traced reflection of the image’s silhouette – presumably done by Carson herself. To behold this engagement, remediated once more through Nox, is to sense the “overtakelessness” by which Carson will later define her brother (1.3). Michael appears here – as he does to our poet – in densest night: a print of a drawing of a photograph of a shadow of a man.

Although most of Carson’s interventions into her family’s archive – excising photographic subjects, tracing their shadows, and tearing letters – underscore, rather than redress, the “muteness of [her] brother,” her work in Nox complicates the narrative history of Michael’s otherwise-silent scraps (1.3; “per”). Like the Skythian bowl that aims to quantify a lost population but instead tells more about its makers, Nox functions less as an epitaph to Carson’s brother than as a monument to her very grieving. And while that grieving as expressed throughout Nox is so often bordered by dead-ends, starless nights, and lightless rooms, Carson locates creative possibilities in “taking over” the “overtakeless” and in memorializing a life lacking memory. The shadows haunting Michael’s scraps may be black holes in the archival record, but they also enable imaginative worlds; they are places in Nox of both nothing and everything. Nearly a decade prior to Nox’s publication, Carson identified this paradoxical nature of archival gaps in the introduction to If Not, Winter, her translation of Sappho’s fragments. In writing of instances where there exist recorded citations of Sappho with no source text, Carson states that “these stories carry their own kind of thrill – at the inside edge where [Sappho’s]
words go missing, [there lies] a sort of antipoem that condenses everything you ever wanted her to write” (Sappho xiii). Later, with Nox, Carson points her scissors at a family archive of letters and photographs, and multiplies the gaps in a life already riddled with holes. At the outset, her methodology seems antithetical to a project lamenting the distance and silence between siblings, but for Carson, the scrapbook memorial enacts a *reparative* violence. Regarding photographs in an interview on Nox, she explains that “[t]he more you cut, the more story they gather” (Carson and Currie). As with Carson’s readings of Sappho, the edges of Michael’s archive border everything she would want him to say.

Hence, Carson’s work dismantling Michael’s scraps may be as affectionate toward her brother and generative of his memory as it appears destructive. One such space illustrative of Nox’s creative violence exists where Michael’s letter is torn to isolate the word “and” below paragraph 4.3. In one regard, this scrap again foregrounds loss and absence; readers are drawn to the vacant spaces at its seams and to the clauses it once joined that exist elsewhere, now orphaned. But the page’s facing dictionary entry for the Latin “et” at the same time reminds its reader that “and” is at its core an invitation blooming with possibility rather than a point of closure. In this second lexical entry for “et” in Nox, Carson includes distinctly strange usage samples that are evocative of the ways she mourns and remembers the dead. One of them—fittingly—speaks of night:

(introducing a strongly contrasted thought) and in spite of this, and possibly but still; *et dubitas quin sensus in nocte nullus sit?* And do you still doubt that consciousness vanishes at night? (4.3; “et”)

Just as she associates Margaret Carson with the present-yet-absent cross-out in “Appendix to Ordinary Time,” or finds herself “letting the sheets of [her parents’] memory blow on the line” in
Copenhagen, Carson refuses to characterize the dead as vanished or their worlds concluded (5.5; “abstulit”). They drift back as little scraps of “and” infringing upon the living: a demi-consciousness lingering long after their light expires.

Carson’s decisions to snip and multiply Michael’s scraps, to include a translation log of “101” in her elegy, and to package Nox as one continuous sheet underscore her representations of memory, mourning, and love as ceaseless acts that evade ordinary time. Even in her unresolved translation – what she describes as “a room [she] can never leave” – Carson suggests that Catullus’ elegy, over two thousand years prior, was haunted by the same irresolute conclusions on the death of his kin (7.1; “nunc”). She translates the final two lines of “101” to read, “soaked with tears of a brother / and into forever, brother, farewell and farewell” (7.2; “prisco”). While an immediate interpretation of these lines may read Catullus as bidding goodbye as his brother passes into death’s “forever,” they also indicate that Catullus will forever repeat these farewells, much like Carson, thousands of years later in Nox, will state alongside this very translation, “[a] brother never ends” (7.1; “indigne”). Nox as elegy – and the many elegies nested within its folds – possess qualities Ramazani ascribes to elegies written in the post-1945 period; they are “poems less of solace than of melancholia, less of resolution than protracted strife” (226). Nonetheless, Carson’s translation of “101” and her ruminations on Michael present these themes as enduring among grieving poets, from the classical to the contemporary. If her translation of “101” is indeed as insufficient as she bemoans in paragraph 7.1, perhaps Nox itself is a worthier response to Catullus’ work: another reverberating farewell to a brother’s wordless ashes.

In coupling her scrapbooked elegy with another elegy’s translation log, Carson imagines grief as both continual and inconsolable, but more, she also intimates that these qualities grant mourning a transformative force – the means for a life to evolve beyond its dying breath. For
Carson, translation is transformation, and in Nox, her work on Catullus’ “101” is but one translation situated within another: her attempt to write her brother’s totality from the scarce scraps of the brother she had. Below another photograph of Michael in shadow, Carson alludes to this communion between her elegiac project and that of “101,” stating, “Because our conversations were few (he phoned me maybe 5 times in 22 years) I study his sentences the ones I remember as if I’d been asked to translate them” (Nox 8.1; “more”). In translating Michael’s conversations – “Don’t go back to the farm . . . Put the past away you have to” – Carson distills his words one page later into a cryptic kernel: a charcoal rubbing reading “I HAD TO” (8.1; “parentum”). Whether this “I” refers to Carson’s urge to revisit her parents’ farm and graves, or Michael’s impulse to abandon his family and past is touchingly ambiguous – Carson exhumes a language that brings them improbably together.

The charcoal rubbing of “I HAD TO” exemplifies how Carson’s translations – between languages and between people – cherish flux and intimacy amongst a source, its translation, and the body writing between them. The scrapbooking and visuality throughout Nox’s translations speak to Carson’s insistence that the translator is never an invisible hand in transmitting their work. Rather, in the foreword to her translation of Electra, she suggests that the translator’s subjectivity makes a profound impression upon their product:

A translator is someone trying to get in between a body and its shadow.

Translating is a task of imitation that faces in two directions at once, for it must line up with the solid body of the original text and at the same time with the shadow of that text where it falls across another language. Shadows fall and move.

(Sophocles 41)
Carson’s ideas extend those espoused by Benjamin in “The Task of the Translator,” who praises Rudolph Pannwitz’s statement that “the basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state into which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue” (Illuminations 81). In her translation career, Carson resumes this sentiment that to translate is to fundamentally transform, but her praxis regards the translator’s subjectivity and their embodied labour as especially instrumental in this equation. In her charcoal rubbing, we see not only her words, but the directional motions of her hand, the plastic shards used to form the letters on the fold prior, and the charcoal shadows of lexicons, photographs, and paper scraps that hemorrhage across Nox’s every fold. Nox’s readers receive both “101” and Michael in shadows repeatedly broken and refracted by Anne Carson’s body; she begins her scrapbooked elegy feeling alien to her subjects, but in Nox’s sprawling accordion, she, Michael, and Catullus share a single skin.

Translation – like recorded history – challenges Carson for its inability to recreate the past or the original artwork. However, those very limitations are also what impel her to grieve beyond and in spite of her brother’s muteness. While referencing both her translations of “101” and of her brother, Carson asks “[w]hat if you made a collection of lexical entries, as someone who is asked to come up with a number for the population of the Skythians might point to the bowl at Exampaios” (Nox 7.1; “mihi”). Carson admits here that she memorializes Michael with the sort of creative abstraction she finds so opaque and “indecipherable” in Herodotos’ account of the bowl (1.3; “per”). But while earlier, she regards the Skythian bowl as exemplary of how the “Historian … collect[s] bits of muteness like burrs in its hide,” when Carson writes reflexively in 7.1 on Nox’s composition, she intimates that to dissect Michael’s scraps and “101” is her only recourse against their muteness (1.3; “per”). Responding to her own question on the
following fold, she writes, “a place composed entirely of entries / Is it not astonishing, entry” (7.1; “nunc”). Indeed, in the near-endless significations for each word in her “101” lexicon, or the manifold ways she may cut, paste, and rearrange her family archive, Carson finds entry – new ways of seeing – into subjects otherwise locked in the past. Of course, for Carson, this constructive deconstruction is imperative for writing an elegy or a translation; she has to tear an opening to let herself inside.

Yet despite Carson’s efforts to forge new sites of contact between herself, “101,” and her brother’s scant remainders, Nox finds no space for her grief’s resolution, nor can it truly redress Michael’s enduring muteness throughout her life. Carson’s reflections on the “likeness between [her] brother and Lazarus” in Nox’s concluding folds make that futility especially clear (8.3; “munere”): “You can think of Lazarus an example of a resurrection or as a person who had to die twice” (8.4; “ad”). While that statement suggests that either interpretation is possible, she also intimates that the outcome remains static:

I don’t know how Lazarus saw it.7 He is mute at the famous supper where Mary Magdelene spills spikenard on Christ’s feet (John 12). Mute in the “parable of the rich man and Lazarus” (Luke 16) where, sitting in paradise, he hears a rich man lost in the flames of hell calling out / to him for a drop of water. Mute also throughout his resurrection. Even in the painting of it by Giotto, notice the person

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with raised hands and no mouth (perhaps his sister) placed behind Lazarus to load his space with muteness. (8.4; “ad”)

When Carson pens this association between Michael Carson and Lazarus, she writes of a brother in a broken miracle. His scraps are dissected, translated, and repeated in Nox in ways that reanimate his presence across Carson’s folded paper, but his resurrection is still illusory – bound within Carson’s book-body and her manipulations of the archive. Michael’s and Lazarus’s muteness even throughout their seeming revival relate back to translations, and what Paul de Man sees as their phantasmal nature, since “the process of translation … is one of change and of motion that has the appearance of life, but of life as an afterlife, because translation also reveals the death of the original” (85). In essence, Carson’s translations and scrapbooked elegy may appear to usher Michael and “101” forward in time, but an afterlife is something very different from a new life altogether. Even if Carson can for moments fill Michael’s muteness, he himself is dead, and what is dead cannot speak.

It is entirely fitting, then, that the voices dominating Nox’s conclusion should belong to a chorus of bereaved, rather than the dead they mourn. Nox leaves many of its parting words to Michael’s widow, whose funeral elegy regards her past with the linear logic Carson otherwise resists. After the widow’s speech, which states, “Yesterday you cannot change. / Today you might alter. / Tomorrow does not give any promise,” Nox ceases its visual and written motifs of revival and possibility (10.2; “ave”). Dissected photographs of staircases – and their associations with liminality, and connection – cease to appear, and are replaced by a visual and verbal endpoint: a brick wall reading “ave,” latin during “sepulchral moments” for “now it is night” (10.2; “ave”). On the book’s penultimate page, Michael – in all his forms – slips into nothingness; indeed, in Nox’s words, “he disappears.” But what, or who remains at this precipice, is the
work’s historian, its translator, its poet, its griever: Anne Carson. *Nox*’s final image captures its surviving artist in every one of these roles; it shows a torn copy of her “101” translation, with its words illegibly sodden in a visual performance of its closing lines, “soaked with tears of a brother / and into forever, brother, farewell and farewell” (7.2; “prisco”). In Catullus’ poetry, and in Carson’s own writing two millennia later, it seems that the living invariably speak to the departed through tears and unrelenting farewells. The dead, as recognized by Michael’s widow, may belong to a yesterday we “cannot change,” but in her scrapbooked epitaph, Carson reveals that death’s aftershocks, mourning and grief, are acts that transcend ordinary time, in a space that is not quite yesterday, nor today, nor tomorrow (10.2; “ave”). It is a space where the words are never enough; it is a time where farewells are never the last; it is where a life’s remainder is not all that remains. That time, that space, is *Nox*. 
Chapter Four: “his ear whorls in every shell”: Confronting the Body’s Afterlife in Karen Green’s *Bough Down*

In spite of their differences in form, tone, and (ir)resolution, Bechdel’s *Fun Home* and Carson’s *Nox* tell a shared story. That story is of a woman sifting through private scraps and public archives in her search for one man, and yet two people: the man citizen to her memory, and the fugitive who hid from sight. In each of these autobiographical works, the mourning author ascends as the story’s core subject, as her memories, questions, and fears become more known to her audience than her father, or brother, is known to her. But my third case study presents something of a different story. Although we once more read a grieving woman confronted with her loved one’s scraps, that mourned man is not a mystery, but instead a writer of great renown. In turn, his widow responds to an unusual challenge: to elucidate her *particular* grief for a man mourned by thousands.

Karen Green’s *Bough Down* is that response: a book of poetry and collages reflecting on the loss of her husband, David Foster Wallace. In it, Green wrestles with her felt status as “the woman behind the man” – in terms of both her public recognition and her own self-conception. She does this in a diary-like format that logs, month by month, the two years after Wallace’s death, and her struggle to feel, to think, and to survive as an individual again after losing her “other half.” Green confronts that identity crisis playing across both personal and public spheres, much like D.T. Max stated she feared doing when her husband was still alive: “Green warned [Wallace] that if he killed himself she’d be ‘the Yoko Ono of the literary world’” (421). After Wallace did end his life on September 12, 2008, her speculation proved prophetic; in a 2011 interview with *The Guardian*, Green spoke of her treatment by *The New York Times*, and their resolve, despite her requests, to write details of Wallace’s suicide in a piece on her 2010 art
show, *Sure is Quiet*: “I know journalism is journalism and maybe people want to read that I discovered the body over and over again, but that doesn’t define David or his work . . . It has defined me too, and I’m really struggling with that” (Green, “Celebrity Writer Dude”). In *Bough Down*, Green acknowledges this struggle – of being known principally as the witness to a tragedy – but her collaged meditations on widowhood also challenge thoughts that her story or circumstance is exceptional; she concedes in interview with Max Benavidez, “My shuddering is every woman’s shuddering; it’s a collective shuddering” (Green, “A Conversation”). As she pores over the hairs, scraps, and stains left in her husband’s wake, and moves through every feeling but that of forgetting, Green elucidates that a widow’s story is one tortured by the threat of her own erasure. From its prose, which loops continuously back to the dead, to its visual expressions of a world beyond recognition, *Bough Down* traces that “collective shuddering”: the widow’s interminable walk from the graveside, back to herself.

*Bough Down* opens with a question – “Does it begin like this?” – about a portended terminus: evidence of her husband’s suicide plans (*Bough Down* 8). Max describes the event “like this” in Wallace’s biography, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*: “in the summer [before Wallace’s death,] a yard hose went missing and Green found it in the trunk of their car. He had planned to tie it to the exhaust pipe using his bandana” (423-424). But the “it” in Green’s opening question is not so easily defined; it may refer to widowhood, solitude, mourning, trauma, her book, a new life, a death, or it may refer to all these things at once. Ambiguities, like those presented by this “it,” pervade Green’s memoir. In accounting for her earliest years of widowhood, *Bough Down* sees a world stripped of any certainty, be that of identity, home, belief, or even sensation. Green concludes her account of that summer in an acknowledgement that her known life and psyche lay on the precipice of profound collapse: “(But) here my prayers are
called prayers and are answered. Here I still see in color” (9). The summer of 2008 was a nightmarish world for Green, but the fall would bring something unimaginable.

Green marks her passage between these inhabited worlds – summer to fall, wife to widow – with a structural shift. Two blank pages on 13 and 14 visually mark this transition between her pre- and post-mortem narratives, and the miniature collages that follow on pages 15 and 16 make this turn especially plain. The remainder of Bough Down is filled with such collages: small, densely-layered panels that mix ephemera like handwriting scraps, poetry fragments, stamp manuals, drawings, and prescription labels. Bough Down contains no paratextual clues like a gallery label for viewing these pieces; the pieces seem designed, above all, to be inscrutable. The pieces on pages 15 and 16 submerge readers in the colourless, answerless world that Green warns of in the book’s opening paragraphs. Throughout Bough Down, Green insinuates that grief is as visually affecting for her as it is emotional, and she confirms this in an interview with Max Benavidez:

Death is very black and white: After [Wallace] died I felt like I couldn’t see anymore, I couldn’t find beauty, I couldn’t see in color. It’s the transitional, universal language of grief from a visual person’s perspective, but at the time I was no longer a “visual person.” I lost the innate ability (a crow’s, a magpie’s) to find the sparkly thing in the garbage pile and it panicked me. Whatever it was that soothed no longer soothed, probably akin to losing one’s religion, losing faith. (Green, “A Conversation”)

In turn, the only colour present in these first two collages – a torn red “ENCE” on page 16 – is bleached out by a ricepaper wash that clouds everything beneath it. These motifs of colourlessness resume in collages on pages 21 and 24, with the former crowded with colour-names written in mismatched crayons, and in the latter, similar strips of colour-words, alongside
a fingerprint, are all inked in black. As a self-described “visual person,” for Green to express a world without colour is to foremost spell a crisis of self: her world is not expressible or legible in the ways it once was.

In addition to visualizing Green’s epistemic crises, *Bough Down*’s early collages multiply their vacuums of meaning through audience engagement. On pages 15 and 16, Green’s strips of typed writing end prematurely – “September, and so it,” “Why did [h]e,” and “How do I stop” – as if her grief constrains her capacity to follow any thought to its end, or as if part of her, like her husband’s life, was cut short (*Bough Down* 15-16). But Green’s verbal omissions and their surrounding layers of washed-out handwriting further evoke themes of fractured and irresolvable meaning through a participatory relationship with their audience. Collages in *Bough Down*, as they repel understanding, function like a reversal of the “interface” as theorized by Johanna Drucker. In *Graphesis*, Drucker suggests that “[i]nstead of a boundary, or ‘between’ space, an interface becomes a codependent in-betweenness in which speaker and spoken are created” (151). As one peers fruitlessly into the translucent handwriting on pages 15 and 16 of *Bough Down*, guesses at the words excised from Green’s verse, and fails to find any answers among the scraps, the reader paradoxically completes Green’s transmission of the incomplete; artist, art, and audience coalesce in their failure to speak the unspoken.

Other design-elements – like the collages’ miniature size – compel the book’s intimate examination in ways that shift Green’s described struggle to “see anymore” from a private trial to a communal one (Green, “A Conversation”). Typically comprising 3 square inches (of a 7.5" x 5.5" page), the collages force readers to lean closer, even with nose to page, to evaluate words or images concealed in the lower layers. In their movements, *Bough Down*’s reader becomes something of a performer; they reanimate Green’s described struggle to make sense of her life.
and her world in the wake of loss. By spurring such face-time with its pages, *Bough Down* furthers its resemblance to an interface, specifically in exhibiting what Drucker describes as a “constructivist process of codependence” (*Graphesis* 158). In this interactive space, engaging speaker and subject to produce the spoken, the collages’ “graphic features . . . constrain and order the possibilities of meaning producing conditions, but do not produce any effect automatically” (158). Through design elements that invite intimacy and lure its audience into an abyss of meaning, *Bough Down* disseminates its author’s embodied crises of knowing among other hosts. While *Bough Down* is deeply introspective and fixated on felt abandonment, Green’s art is far from egocentric. Rather, she commits to forging connections between her widowed self and the world that remains.

In a memoir filled with dissociative thoughts – whose speaker reifies her family as “heads . . . on diminishing torsos” – why might Green invite such intimacy between her readers and her own grief (*Bough 35*)? Despite its verbal and visual preoccupations with Green’s solitude, *Bough Down* resists romanticizing self-exile in the wake of loss. Green in truth does more than contest such an impulse; in *Bough Down*, she doubts that alienating herself in widowhood is even possible – that to “feel deleted” by a partner’s death betrays an emotional and existential reliance on others (32). In her post-traumatic stress and depression, Green frequently shifts her focus toward others, such as fellow psychiatric patients, her dogs, support workers, or often, Wallace. During a walk on which Green ruminates, “I have forgotten my ways,” nearly every living or inert thing she sees triggers thoughts of her late husband (27):

> A crow in the sycamore opens his beak like big black garden shears and says, Ha.

> The mockingbirds say *plummetplummetplummet*. 
I have few desires and fewer aims. I dream of standing on the shore and not seeing
his ear whorls in every shell. (27)

The mockingbirds’ song tortures Green with thoughts of hanging, a crow’s beak conjures
memories of cutting Wallace down, and all the natural world appears saturated in her husband’s
likeness. Green’s loss arrests her within a world that saps her of self-direction. To have the
direction, “desires” or “aims” that Green reportedly lacks requires faith in a future, or even a
present, in which “I” still exist, and her fantasy of “not seeing [Wallace’s] ear whorls in every
shell” puts that faith into definite doubt (27). Her shoreline dream is bordered by an unnerving
question: who am “I” when bereft of those who produce me?

Sandra Gilbert, also writing from widowhood, elaborates on these anxieties in her semi-
autobiographical study of modern grieving, Death’s Door. In the chapter “Widow,” Gilbert
challenges her earlier thoughts of her mother’s cry – “I’m a widow” – as “a narcissistic self-
dramatization” at her husband’s deathbed (Gilbert 24). Instead, Gilbert theorizes that to be
widowed is to be irrevocably fractured in and by death, or as observed in an aptly disjointed
collage by Green, “It’s not LIKEbreaking up. / It’s actually breaking” (Bough 42). Gilbert
explains the scope of her and her mother’s losses:

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “widow” comes from the
Indo-European *widhwe*, meaning “to be empty, to be separated,” to be “divided,”
“destitute,” or “lacking.” Death has entered the widow, this etymology implies,
and she has entered death, for she is filled with vacancy and has dissolved into a
void, a state of lack or non-being that is akin to, if not part of, the state into which
the dead person has journeyed, fallen, or been drawn. (Gilbert 24-25)
Green shares in these feelings of dividedness and of partial non-being throughout *Bough Down*, and in a passage on crisis workers, the resemblance of her images to Gilbert’s are uncanny.

When a counselor asks that Green “[t]ry to feel [her] feet on the floor,” she only feels uprooted from the scene: “Can I feel the floor here, when there is a body out there . . . a body who was my body to like and look at, at a time like this, a time of no time. Wherever it is he wants to wrench me from is where I am” (*Bough* 31). Here, Green recognizes her liminal position in death’s doorway; her practiced self – tethered to the dead – passes into that void of non-being, or the “time of no time,” and although her body remains on the other side of that door – among the living – she identifies as somewhere else (31).

The facing artwork on this page also echoes Green’s felt division between the realms of dead and living, past and present. A muddled triptych consisting of an overdrawn stamp, a blended panel of red and black, and an obscured scrap of Wallace’s handwriting, splits neatly in half with an X at its center.8 At first glance, the triptych’s fissure evokes a violent break or separation in a book where there are many – a lost marital union, a fractured self. But that X’s central placement in Green’s collage – when viewed either horizontally or vertically – also resembles the lemniscate.9 In this light, Green’s collage on page 30 is as suggestive of connection as it is of separation; its interconnected halves sit poised in infinite contact. Just as Green feels elsewhere when among the living, or as the dead restlessly haunt her world, or even as this collage projects both union and dissolution, *Bough Down* finds few reliable boundaries between the life that is and the life that was. They are, as Gilbert suggests, intrinsic parts of one

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8 I consulted samples of Wallace’s handwriting available through the University of Texas at Austin’s Harry Ransom Center in identifying his writing in this collage.
9 The mathematical symbol associated with infinity: \( \infty \).
another, since “if those who have died are still part of us even while they are part of death, then death is part of us too” (Gilbert 16).

Although Green portrays herself as halfway erased by Wallace’s death, *Bough Down* recognizes that the very mechanisms by which Green loses herself can also recuperate a self; the path from her lost connection is not one of independence, but of *interdependence*. Green shows evident concern for her own incompleteness, as she fills her book with images of lone women split into halves, such as the torn woman’s face on page 73, another shredded in strips on 62, and a proliferation of cameos in her collage-work.¹⁰ These feelings of self-loss are a permutation of what Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou perceive as “dispossession.” In their dialogic text *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*, Athanasiou claims that “a broken interpersonal bond might deprive us of our sense of ontological viability and durability,” or that in losing someone, “[we] recognize [our]sel[ves] in a state of not being [our]selves, of being dispossessed of [our]selves” (118). But while Wallace’s death instigates Green’s fears of her own erasure, Butler and Athanasiou also contend that dispossession catalyzes our self-formation, as it draws “the limits of self-sufficiency” and foregrounds our existence as “relational and interdependent beings” (*Dispossession* 3). In this sense, Green’s identity crisis does not signal a self irrecoverably broken by loss, because that self was always protean – molded in the bonds she held, would lose, and form again. Butler elaborates that dispossession is continuous: “we are moved by various forces that precede and exceed our deliberate and bounded selfhood,” and thus, “we cannot understand ourselves without giving up on the notion that the self is the ground and cause of its own experience” (4). Then while it is true that Wallace’s death opens a void

¹⁰ Cameos may be found on the following pages of *Bough Down*: 73, 96, 105, 109, 143, and 161 of this text.
within Green, that loss also maps her route to renewal; if connections with others have the capacity to unmake a person, they hold the potential to mend one too.

*Bough Down* is closest to being hopeful when it attends to these moments of dispossession: times when Green is moved from herself through contact with others. These encounters can feel like a retreat to the womb, such as in her account of “[t]he beautiful dentist cradling her] in her Bazooka pink polo top,” while outside, the “parking lot smell[ed] like . . . mother’s milk” (*Bough* 153). At other moments, Green’s connections with others read like a relived adolescence; in one scene echoing her earlier statement, “I have forgotten my ways” (27), Green reports to later “remember [her] ways” when “[s]omeone smart knocks at [her] door and [her] brain catches fire” (163). Elsewhere, such as in her recurring meditations on “the jazz lady” – an implied resident of the psychiatric hospital in which both Green and Wallace were patients – other people model future selves. Green juxtaposes her account of being stood up by the man who makes her “remember [her] ways” with a depiction of the jazz lady’s resilience on the page following (163). She describes the jazz lady as a domestic abuse survivor whose abuser “tethered her to claim ownership but also to prove . . . that she was alive and belonged somewhere” (165). Snared in an arrangement that limits her to “the dogdreams of freedom,” the jazz lady shares how to nurture one’s self even within bonds made to constrain it:

To escape the proof she said, There are other things to do besides being man’s best friend. One can sit around and compose, for example. The more he said he understood the more unknown she became. Eventually, to be undestroyable became her life’s work; it didn’t happen overnight. (165)

For the jazz lady, composing music and creating art are what make her “undestroyable” – able to survive and flourish as subject both in and outside a marital life. In *Bough Down’s* early pages,
Green introduces the “jazz lady” as someone she has absorbed within herself: “I don’t know if the jazz lady is in first or third person” (19). Even at the end of Green’s book, that debate remains unsettled, but it is also rendered irrelevant. We now read and examine an instrument of Green’s survival of a loss that threatened to undo her; *Bough Down* is her account of becoming “undestroyable,” from a voice inflected by those of countless jazz ladies and widows who share her path.

Earlier, I asked why Green organizes such intimacy between her audience and her grief in *Bough Down*. Why – in expressing memories of her post-grief alienation – might Green use such small, layered graphics and cryptic language that necessitate our close scrutiny? If Green’s continued survival and resulting art are produced through interpersonal contact, then *Bough Down*’s format becomes a means of affirming an open border between her self and the world beyond her grief. In her book’s multimodal structure resembling Drucker’s interface, Green builds a relation between content, speaker, and audience that recalls Butler’s formulations of self-making – that “the self . . . [is] dependent on environments and others who sustain and even motivate [its] life” (*Dispossession* 4). Likewise, in Drucker’s theorization of the interface, “[a]n interface is a space in which a subject, not a user, is invoked” (*Graphesis* 177); it is a system that continually redefines speakers and texts by their “circumstances of use, ritual, exchange, and communities of practice . . . [and both] they/we are produced by it” (177). Through this process, *Bough Down*, Karen Green, and their audience are indelibly affected by contact with the other. Or – to follow motifs appearing in nearly all of the book’s collages – the speaker, the spoken, and the audience bear each other’s stamps, each other’s fingerprints. Green and her art can touch and be touched by the world long after she has laid down her pen, her scissors, or her paint, so
although *Bough Down* may evoke Green’s feelings of isolation, it maintains that she is never fully alone.

While *Bough Down* depicts Green’s healing and artistry as rooted in her exposure to the living world, it also acknowledges that the widow grieves in two temporal dimensions; being intractably haunted by the dead threatens her continued survival among the living. As in the other works in this study, by Bechdel and Carson, Green’s relationship to the dead seems as affected by her immaterial memories as it is by material scraps. Wallace’s physical traces suffuse *Bough Down*’s prose and collage work, pose as sites of torment, and confound its author’s conception of both herself and the person she lost.

In the book’s early pages, Green traces the boundary between the past and present, dead and living, along property lines, as the house she shared with Wallace – filled with the refuse of a loved and expired life – becomes more representative of a morgue than it is of a home. This boundary is evident early in her account of Wallace’s wake: an event where “[t]he rooms unfurnish themselves, . . . everyone drives off, [and] what remains remain remains” (*Bough* 35). While ambiguously-worded, Green’s phrase suggests that she is part of these “remains,” especially since elsewhere in the text, she repeatedly figures death as a contaminating presence, one that threatens to consume her. She discovers this infection at night, as she notes that her brown dog “refus[es] to sleep with [her] because of some smell [she’s] contracted,” and as Green continues confronting what Wallace left behind, his material traces envelop her like the pathogens of a common disease (26). In describing how she “find[s his] crumpled corsage . . . [and] a letter recommending calcium supplements,” Green again likens her husband’s haunting to an illness: “[t]he laws of contagion affirm that once two objects have been in contact they continue to tease each other even after the contact is severed” (98). As with Gilbert’s account of
her own widowhood as having a “strangely muffled sense of wrongness . . . as though I incarnated something people would indeed like to isolate,” Green insinuates that being touched by death taints her as something “other” in the realm of the living (Gilbert xx).

These anxieties of being marked or infested also enter Green’s collages in an effect that references her drive when moving from Claremont to Petaluma, when the “consistency and hue of the sky” appear as a “bloom of contaminates . . . a red tide” (Bough 115). Red blooms recur in Bough Down’s collages and stain them with their associations of blood and death, such as on page 62 where the colour floods over the morbid words “red tape,” or on page 128 where red bleeds over Wallace’s handwriting, used bandage, and prescription receipts. Above all, red filters through Bough Down as the colour of catastrophe. As Green hurtles down the freeway away from Claremont – her infection’s ground zero – the blood-red sky underscores the “landscape’s lack of promise,” and worse, it seems to spell the collapse of her former self and her known world (175); in that murky red sky above burning acres, Green sees “the eye shadow palette of the apocalypse” (114).

In accordance with dispossession, wherein we are moved by another toward a new subject-position, Green’s crises – instigated by Wallace’s scraps – are not wholly self-destructive. Rather, when Green feels leveled by Wallace’s material haunting, it reads less like a totalizing catastrophe and more like the promise of a chapter’s end, a small apocalypse that impels her renewal. Beside a panel of weaved handwriting, Green observes that “[s]entences have been highlighted just to demolish [her] when [she] find[s] them” in an address to Wallace: “I know what they say, what they are trying to prove. . . . No need to reiterate and reiterate” (171). Despite Green’s feeling that she “live[s] in the past,” Wallace’s traces “reiterate” that this is not the case (124). Instead, she occupies a transitory space between two temporalities and two
selves – past and present, wife and widow. If Green sees “the apocalypse” lining the California sky, perhaps it is nearest to the Yeatsian apocalypse Frank Kermode characterizes as “a time of transition, the last moment before a new annunciation . . . [where] out of a desolate reality [comes] renewal” (Kermode 98-99). Indeed, though Green feels undone by the dead’s scraps, there is a clear disjunction between that sentiment and the book it occupies. Wallace’s scraps now claim little mastery over Green, because they surface shredded, overdrawn, and repurposed across Bough Down’s pages; far from demolishing Green, they in fact seem demolished by her.

Bough Down’s interventions into what Wallace leaves behind indicate that Green transcends crisis by dismantling or abandoning its physical evidence. Her motions to tear and reappropriate those traces might seem violent and even resentful, like the anger that underlies her comment on inheriting their home: “Like it was an act of generosity, what you left” (Bough 141). But despite the pain that riddles these scraps, Bough Down frames Green’s shredding and collage-work as practiced love and forgiveness, directed toward both Wallace and her evolving self. Green seems deeply reluctant to discard the leftover pieces of her marital life; even her statement she “want[s] to buy the first sand-colored place . . . where [she] cannot hear [their] conversations” rings hollow, since it succeeds her cognitive-behavioural reminder, “I am not supposed to say should, I am supposed to say want” (75). Though she “tr[ies] not to count animals, losses, remaining tablets, [and] scenery changes” (76), Wallace’s remainders tug at her as evidence of both her intense hurt and her enduring affection. Her Claremont home is a painful memorial to partnership, with its “His and Hers sinks” (89), her “tiny portion of the memory foam,” and “[h]is pillow[:] a sweat-stained map of an escape plot, [and] also a map of love’s dear abandon” (122). Like her descriptor for Wallace on Bough Down’s second page –
“agathokakological”\(^\text{11}\) – Green’s vestiges of her husband, and by extension their sacrifice, are defined by contradiction (9). As such, Green comments that “[f]orgiveness may mean retroactively abandoning the pillow and abandoning the photograph of someone with curious eyes, kissing [her] toes, poolside” (125); forfeiting such mementoes recognizes their affective power rather than dismissing it.

In her creative disruptions of Wallace’s ephemera, Green develops communal responses to grief and forgiveness that emerged in her prior artwork. One of \textit{Bough Down}’s chief visual motifs is the shredded document, like those seen on the book’s cover, or in the handwritten notes woven together on page 170. The latter’s page placement in \textit{Bough Down} – beside descriptions of Wallace’s writing scraps that continue to “fall off the shelves, [and] flutter down from who knows where” – implies that some of those papers may appear in this collage (171). Through Green’s labour that shreds them beyond recognition and reassembles them in multi-directional strips, these documents take on new meanings. The scraps become legible as one image that Green directs to us, rather than as the many writings Wallace directed to Green. Shredding performs similar labour – transforming private torment into public art – in Green’s 2009 kinetic sculpture, \textit{Forgiveness Machine}. The machine was a seven-foot long device mechanized by a vacuum tube and paper shredder, and the exhibit invited visitors to write down what they wished to be forgiven for or to forgive; after placing their message in the machine, it emerged shredded on the other side, forgiven. In a 2011 interview with Tim Adams, Green frames \textit{Forgiveness Machine} as a site of shared catharsis. She notes that “[f]orgiving is never as easy as we would like” and that upon using the machine – which quickly broke from the volume of requests – “quite a lot of people cried” (Green, “Celebrity Writer Dude”).

\(^{11}\) The O.E.D. defines “agathokakological” as “Composed of both good and evil.”
Like *Bough Down*’s collages, which redefine the significance of their materials, Green’s *Forgiveness Machine* is a transformative object: it converts private strife into communal action and seemingly-insurmountable traumas into piles of illegible scraps. And like *Forgiveness Machine*, Green’s work in *Bough Down* doesn’t necessarily “cure” her from heartache or pacify her existing anger toward Wallace. Instead, *Bough Down* is Green’s own “forgiveness machine”: it opens her to the world her grief once kept at bay. Bringing Hegel, Arendt, Derrida, and Kristeva into conversation, Kelly Oliver contends that “[t]o be human is to forgive . . . [and that] the absence of forgiveness undermines humanity, subjectivity, and agency” (280). In *Bough Down*’s collage-work and written accounts abandoning Wallace’s remainders, Green models such a forgiveness during a period of feeling both “decomposed” and “fl[own] apart” (*Bough* 153). Oliver writes that forgiveness produces the human and “makes it possible to transcend alienation, if always only temporarily,” because by enacting forgiveness, “[w]e translate our own individuality/particularity, our finitude and limitation, into the universal, into language, and thereby unite being and meaning; we become beings who mean” (286). Like the users of her *Forgiveness Machine*, Green’s production of *Bough Down* translates what is private into what is public, and what is unutterable into what is spoken; through the book, she returns from being apart from the world to being one of its parts.

By her book’s end, Green demonstrates that she returns to Wallace too. *Bough Down*’s final collage mixes handwriting, Green’s fingerprint, and dictionary cuttings with words and phrases that gesture to the eternal, such as “infinite,” “enduring,” “closed loop,” and “[h]aving no end in space” (*Bough* 186). Much like *Fun Home*’s conclusion that suspends father and daughter at the precipice of contact, or *Nox*’s depictions of mourning as ceaseless, *Bough Down*’s final collage alludes to a love and affection that endure beyond the body’s final breath, that persist
beyond time’s boundaries, and that circulate continually in the scraps we leave behind. In Green’s repurposing of Wallace’s writing and remainders, her art ends their story by returning to its beginning in an act that forms – as her final collage indicates – a “closed loop” (186). That beginning was in 2002, when in a series of illustrations, “Green had reimagined [Wallace’s] story, [“The Depressed Person,”] so that in the last panel of her painting she is cured” (Max 380). While Green does not envision such a cure for either herself or Wallace in her reconfigurations of their archive, she does challenge the idea that their love and relationship could ever reach a true terminus, even if “unremembering” Wallace might spare her pain. For Green, to resume her love is an act that escapes her control: “I can’t help but root for all this perishable animal behaviour” (Bough 184). Her following closing sentence describes all three of this study’s scrapbooked responses to loss, love, and the physical pieces that death and memory leave behind. Green’s book, like Bechdel and Carson’s works, concludes inconclusively, and resolves in irresolution. In contending with the unknown in death, in the kin that produced us, and in our very selves, there is really no conclusion to be found. Green, like Bechdel and Carson, finds only one certainty: “I can’t wrap this up” (184).
Works Cited


---. Interview with Tim Adams. “Karen Green: ‘David Foster Wallace's suicide turned him into a “celebrity writer dude”, which would have made him wince’.” The Guardian, 10 Apr.


