

**Творче письмо: автобіографічні експерименти**  
**Creative Writing: Autobiographical Experiments**  
**(Autofiction, Autotheory, Creative Non-Fiction)**



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**The In-Between**

The space heater plugged into the wall behind S's bookshelf melts the socket. I try to yank it out, but the plastic has gone to putty around the prongs. It isn't until later as I lie in bed that I let the scenario play out in my head: maybe a single spark, a single spark landing on the spine of the 1953 paperback reprint of Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*—a book I'll never read, a book that sits closest to the outlet, that's flanked on either side by other books I'll never read—a single spark and within seconds: the whole library up in flames. Lying there, I let myself wonder if I'd like it to burn.

My office is filled with books that don't belong to me. In fact, I have to move my own books to make space for S's. I unpack hers, then relocate my own library to the archival boxes Kate has given me for transport. I shove them to the back of my closet as if I am the one who has died. As if I am the one with things that someone else can't bear to get rid of.

My office is located at the same university where S was a graduate student a quarter century ago. This is where we've collided: a coastal town with the institution built into the side of a hill over a big blue view of the Pacific.

I take S's books as a favor to Kathy, a relative stranger. I call her a "stranger" because there's not a better word for what she is to me; what do you name the sister of the ghost who haunts you? A sister? I say it is a "favor" because while it is me who asks Kathy if I can borrow the books, she is the one who insists that I keep them. In the parking lot of a suburb in the Central Valley, we stand beneath the shaded awning of a drive-through Starbucks. She says *these books have been taking up space in my garage for over 25 years*. I say, *I look forward to using them for my research*. I use the word "research" because it holds the cheerful fantasy that a close or rigorous investigation will lead to a new set of facts or even a conclusion. Though I don't know what the word "conclusion" means.

Nor do I comprehend the term "beginning." My attempts so far to straighten this story—to locate one or the other end of it, to lay it out, to say *it starts here*—have been futile. Perhaps I lack the dexterity, or perhaps I'm simply too invested in the tangle: the ways S's narrative crisscrosses and loops around itself, the little segments of story that come loose and snag on everything around them.

On Zoom, a professor leans close to the camera and says, *but why?* He says the question that I still have not answered, the one that all my readers are going to ask is *Why S? Why do we care about S?*

In the only video footage I have of S, she's wearing large plastic sunglasses and a headscarf. She's sitting by a window, daylight streaming past her and silhouetting her against the pane. It's October 1995. S looks like she's wearing a disguise, like she's a thief in an old Noir, attempting to be discreet. From her chair, she's interviewing a performer dressed up as a dead version of Marilyn Monroe. The performer's first name is Paul. Paul is wearing a white halter dress, like the famous one that Marilyn wore when she stood on the subway grate at Lexington and 52nd Street, right as an uptown train streaked across the tracks below her. But Paul's dress is dirty, as if it has just been unearthed. As if it has risen from the grave.

Twenty-six years after the interview was filmed, I speak to Paul on the phone. I can't quite read his voice. (He wasn't expecting my call—no one is ever expecting my call). Yes, he says after a moment, he remembers that day. He thinks he remembers S. Yes... if he really thinks about it, he can conjure her up in his mind. In fact, the more he thinks about it, the better she resolves. Oh, that's right. Now he definitely remembers. No, he didn't realize that she had died. I offer to send him the footage of the interview. He says *sure*, he'd like to see it. I spend the afternoon transferring the VHS tapes to digital files and uploading them to a Google Drive. I copy the link. I press send. And then, I wait.

Years ago, I was running late to meet Zay for lunch. They texted, “no rush, I love to wait.” I steal that phrase all the time. *I love to wait*. I don’t know if it’s true, but I know that saying it always makes me smile, always makes me feel a little more patient, as if time were not in fact something needing to be chased, something slipping away, something for grabbing onto.

Paul is one of dozens of people I have reached out to in pursuit of this “research.” My inquiry has led to hours of conversations with people who knew S. It has led to a feeling of getting closer and a feeling of moving further away. In other words, it has led everywhere and nowhere. On the twelfth page of the third chapter of the second draft of S’s unpublished book, she writes: “Research wants to appear to be coherent but it is arbitrary.” She is writing about the life of a woman who is absent from history. She describes the woman first as a gap, and then as a wound. She describes herself as a suture. She asks the page, “what might *she* say?” She plays with various responses, imagining them through the mouth of her subject. And then, with the swift cut of a sentence, she admits to herself—or perhaps to me—“I don’t know.”

(Dear S, was it ever about what we could know? Wasn’t it always about what we couldn’t?)

When I read S, I feel as if I am coming to understand the way she would think. She loved language. She loved to stretch it into shapes it could barely contort to. S wrote with words of double meanings, so that each line of text contained a trap door to somewhere better. She believed in somewhere better! She spent a lifetime trying to fit herself into academia, but she was more like a magician, or a poet, the sort of genius you don’t go to school to master. “If there is one thing I’ve learned so far in the academy,” S wrote, after over a decade ensconced in it, “it’s that life is elsewhere.”

In July 1997, S received a rejection letter from the University of California Press—the same publisher that, two years prior, had released her first book. It’s a scathing rejection. In the first paragraph of the letter, the editor declares that the book, however inventive, is condemned by its “debilitating traits.” These traits include (but are not limited to) “inadequate scholarship, poor writing, and incomplete thinking.” In fact, the editor admits she is “rather shocked” that the manuscript was sent for review in its present condition.

When I reach out to the editor, I receive an out-of-office reply. I love to wait. A day later, I find a note in my inbox. The editor states matter-of-factly that, “it was very tragic that S died by suicide.” The editor is the first to insinuate that S’s death was not an accident. I stare at the email, but I can’t bring myself to reply to it. Now, it has been over two years since it appeared in my inbox, and though it is starred and sorted into a folder named “to do,” I still have not responded. I love to wait.

The day I drive to collect S's library from Kate, the highway is almost entirely engulfed in smoke. A wildfire in a different state has blown across the valley and settled onto the road. I drive very slowly, because time is not something to chase. I think about the question posed by my professor. *Why S? Why do we care about S?* At home, I open my computer and Google "why do we care about things?" The internet asks me if the question I am trying to ask is "why 'should' we care about things?" It suggests three articles:

A piece in *The Guardian* titled "Why should I care?" is answered with a sentence that reads, "it is mentally impossible for a person not to care about something." The second result is a piece from *Time Magazine* written in 2022, titled "It's Harder Than Ever to Care About Anything." The third result is an article in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. It introduces a set of social science-based strategies for communication tactics that make more people care. The final principle is *narrative*: "Storytelling is the best tool we have for helping people care."

On her own mission to write individuals into history, S wrote in a 1996 grant proposal that, "by textually exhuming their forms I hope to shed some light on the flaws of the foundation itself." She knew that beneath every flawed foundation, there was always more dirt. She imagined that her writing was a shovel, that it could dig beneath the soil; that little by little, it could move the earth.

(Dear S, Rita says the proper answer to *Why do we care about you?* is: *Why do we care about anyone?*)

LuLing thinks that S is stuck somewhere between Earth and elsewhere. She thinks it's possible that something's keeping her wedged in this in-between space, something unsolved or unfinished. She thinks I've been tapped to help set her free. Sometimes I think I'm just keeping S around longer—that it's me who's stuck—that I'm the one flailing around in a vain attempt to hold her in place. As if she is something to chase. As if she is slipping away.

In March, I sit on the floor of S's best friend's house. Lindsay is in her sixties now. She lives alone. She has a well-behaved cat. She offers me tea or wine. I take the wine. She says, *good*. We're listening to a cassette tape of S's and Lindsay's band circa 1985. They called themselves 4-FUN. Lindsay is on the bass, and S is singing that old song *I Think We're Alone Now*. From the way she is singing, you can tell that she is smiling.

*Running just as fast as we can  
Holding on to one another's hand  
Trying to get away into the night  
And then you put your arms around me  
As we tumble to the ground and then you say—*

Lindsay tells me that the recording was made in a basement, and that right after they finished taping the song, the drummer's beer tipped over onto the amp. I ask her how on earth she remembers that. She says she has no idea. I write this down in my notebook: both the story, and the uncertainty of its recounting. We finish our wine.

(When I first encountered you, I imagined you were a gap or a wound. That I, too, could be a suture. Ha! But, oh, S, we only pretend to be obsessed with closure.)

When I get home, I set the notebook onto the shelf in my office, the one that's filled with books from S's library. The shelf is piling up with other things, too: a box of S's plastic jewelry from Lindsay, a stack of her trinkets from Pam. On the phone with another of S's friends, Richard, he asks if I have a sense of a timeline for this research. I say *I'm not sure it has a conclusion*. He agrees, *no, it could go on and on*. He says I'll have to decide when it's over.

I let myself imagine a fire that engulfs my office. Everything goes up in smoke. Within minutes, the whole archive is ash. S dislodges from the in-between. She turns to smoke. She swirls, and then she dissipates.

The other day, Yasmine says, *I love archives*; she says, *I love to dream of archives burning*. We laugh and laugh. I call an electrician to check on the outlet. He can't figure out what has caused it to melt. He installs a replacement. I ask him if it's OK to use my space heater now. He says he thinks so. He says I should try it, then check on it every few hours to make sure it's not overheating. I joke that I want him to promise me that it will never catch fire, that nothing bad will ever happen. He chuckles. He says I'll just have to wait and see. I say *I love to wait*.<sup>4</sup>

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### **Everything Remains Still**

I

“What are you doing tomorrow?” B asks while packing her stuff.

“I don't know... Why?”

She looks at me, confused.

“It's Thanksgiving!”

“Oh, yeah, right... nothing... just staying at home... do some work.”

An awkward silence and then a smile (I recognize the smile: it pops up on *their* faces every time they see the opportunity to solve something.

“Well...”

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<sup>4</sup> NOTE: certain names have been changed to respect privacy.