

# Acts of Love: Autotheorizing Queer Relating - Memoir

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## Abstract

My PhD thesis consists of an autotheoretical memoir about being neurodivergent, non-binary and in the closet in Greek society, as well as a critical reflection section in which I analyse my research questions, literature, methodology, creative process, and conclusions.

I use a combination of creative and theoretical methodologies to process my own experiences in a self-reflexive and analytical manner. I achieve that through a dialogue with scholars, writers and artists who inspired my research and personal journey. I analyse my personal experiences, feelings, bodily sensations, interpersonal interaction and community participation through a self-reflexive lens. I use entries in personal diaries, photographs, and logs of conversations, to process my feelings and actions, and shed light on different elements of Greek millennial, non-binary, and neurodivergent life.

The memoir explores the coming-of-age of a non-binary person who suffers from OCD, within an upper-middle class Greek family, the process of hiding their gender identity in hostile social environments and strategically performing different identities in varying contexts.

The thesis of my research is that the choice to come out as a queer person does not happen in a vacuum, as it is affected and shaped by the individual's cultural background, and choosing not to come out does not make someone less 'queer' or 'radical'. In certain cultural settings, queer people have to make concessions and compromises in order to survive and make their lives livable, realizing that what Lauren Berlant calls 'the good life' cannot be achieved. I show that coming out is not a linear process, and might be met with reactions that exist beyond the binary of either acceptance or rejection, with which queer people might have to come to terms and make their peace. Sometimes, the choice to stay in the closet might even be characterized as an act of love towards loved ones with limited understanding of the modern concepts of gender and sexuality, and may be grounded on the need to preserve the peace within the family. This knowledge is essential if we want to accurately represent the lives and choices of queer people in non-Western, non-White-centric narratives.

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*Disclaimer: This is a work of Creative Nonfiction. The events described are portrayed based on the author's memory, feelings, and conclusions, and they only claim to show their side of the story.*

*While the events in this memoir are true, some names and identifying details have been altered and fictionalized to protect the privacy of the people involved.*

## **Family**

The day was gentle and expectant. It was one of those days with God rays bathing the white and turquoise kitchen, making dust swirl languidly in ways that spelled out afternoon siesta, but not quite yet, let's just linger for a little while, awake. The air smelled citrusy and was warm on the skin. We were doing the dishes, bumping our butts against each other every now and then. I would come up behind you, ironically over-performing my deviant gender identity, and pretend to hump you. At that point I felt like an eternal boy riding his bicycle in short pants, even though I always cherished a floral dress and red lipstick. As non-binary as they come, or a boi in drag, one could say. You felt euphoric, feminine, me coming behind you like that while you did chores. We had accepted that our gender consciousness had been systematically chiselled by a society that urged us to succumb unwittingly to pre-existing moulds. Thus, the least we could grant ourselves was not policing what made us feel warm and fuzzy inside, when we had struggled so much to internalize that feeling warm and fuzzy was a radical form of resistance.

On days like this I would worship your body, play with it. I would bite your ear and pinch your love handles while you pretended to be annoyed. Eventually you would turn around and grab me by the waist, inevitably stronger than me, the clouds of your name turned into a jaunty kind of micro-thunder. You smelled earthy, of wheat and yesterday's sweat. 'Who's laughing now?' you would chuckle, tickling me and threatening to eat my nose, before ceasing to let me catch my breath, and asking me: 'Do you think your mother will like me or will she hate my new sandals and my stupid toes?'

I stared gravely at you. ‘She won't let you step on her impeccably mown lawn with those goblin toes.’

I giggled while you simultaneously complained and fed the cats. It was teatime for them. The bedroom, smelling faintly of ammonia and lavender from the litter boxes, was filled with their infantile voices protesting starvation. The beige and peach tones of my surroundings had turned into lavish platinum from the sun that was pooling on the tiles, making my eyelids heavy

I lay down and my limbs melted inside the swamp of bedding. The cats, their hunger now satisfied, found their respective places: Kate, your beloved chaotic black boy snuggled up on my feet, and Gatis, the grey beast that stole my heart six years ago, nested on the crook of my neck. An antisocial feline with a babyish meow and a clingy disposition towards me, always saturating my loneliness with kinship, softness, boundaries, and conversation.

It was nap time, and I loved the intimacy of the habit: drifting with family.

\*

Mum brought us mushroom pasta à la crème, crackers with cheese, the fluffy lemon pie you had brought, and filtered coffee with ice. Seeing you for the first time, assessing and approving you, she looked like a little girl, graceful and timid yet playful, dressed in purple and orange, tired and refined, small lines framing her olive-green eyes as she laughed genuinely at our jokes. You had both been feeling nervous about the meeting, but soon the tension was diffused, and we leaned into the familiarity of the setting sun, the pleasant breeze, the trim lawn, and Lucy, the cherished family beagle.

My dad, fat, thinning hair, charming and eternally boyish, took up space telling us stories from his army years. You engaged politely even though the thought of mandatory army service had been a cause of great suffering and anxiety during the previous winter, when you had to present psychiatric evidence to be exempted. My brother was getting ready for his army service and was quite pumped

up about it. It was a thorn prickling against our family ribcage, his refusal to attend university and his admiration for all things military, conservative, and reactionary. The family mantra at the time was ‘the army will either do him good, force him to mature, or it will be detrimental and lead us to lose him completely.’

The fact that he was joining us at the table, ostensibly carefree but looking a bit lost, had been a cause for surprise, as well as concern for both of us. The house we were visiting, the home I had grown up in, was haunted with memories of violence, of children fighting viciously, of stationery and toys being thrown around with the intention to hurt, of breath-stopping word-punches in the stomach. His reputation had reached your mother who, creased with concern, had advised you to text her should anything go wrong.

We had been together for almost a year, and our parents were either relieved and elated at the prospects of a heteronormative relationship or just genuinely liked us for each other (why not both?). The fact that we appeared like a genderbent version of our trans selves was not doing their fantasy any harm either. In their mind, I had finally settled for a smart, nice boy. How wrong they were! But still, it was a milestone of approval we were after, so that our historically turbulent lives could finally enjoy some peace, assisted by their emotional and practical support. The closet was the price we had to pay for the privilege of parental presence.

In *The Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick writes: ‘the fact that silence is rendered as pointed and performative as speech, in relations around the closet, depends on and highlights more broadly the fact that ignorance is as potent and as multiple a thing there as is knowledge’ (Sedgwick 4). She describes the very state of ‘closetedness’ as ‘a performance initiated as such by the speech act of silence [...]’ (Sedgwick 3). Our silence had never been hollow, an absence of words: instead, it was theatrical, conciliatory, convincing in what it disguised, affirming of people’s assumptions, loud and provocative, a word play. Our existence was subtextual, we found shelter in the crevices of interpretation, we blossomed in the fields of others’ guesswork.



My brother was measuring you up, and you were conscious of all the silent negotiation at work. You played your part successfully, humouring him and doing your best to ignore his try-hard racist comments. I could see the adoration glimmer in my parents' eyes as it grew — you were even making an effort with their son! This was going well.

The concept of being well held described by paedopsychiatrist Donald Winnicott (Winnicott, Nelson) became a buzz-phrase in — or maybe the conceptual framework of — my inner dialogue after I read *The Argonauts*. When, on a later day my therapist asked me when was the last time I felt safe, I slid back into my childhood, at a time when we were still living in our first apartment with the bougainvillea entrance by the park where book fairs used to be held in the summer. I told you that up until my brother's birth, for which I had been very excited, before our relationship went to pieces and had then to be stitched back together, I had really felt well held.

That was what I desperately craved on that evening, for our small family, for little us to be accepted, nurtured, toddlers. I wanted to curl up between my parents in their bed and have them name me 'good' in a way they refused to do six years ago. I wanted to let go, be honest, be transparent, and be loved not despite, but because of it all.

My love for my parents can take over me like a tornado, crush me, lift me up, throw me around. I hope someday I can find a way to openly be myself, without feeling derelict in the potentiality of their disappointment, of the grief for that long-lost miracle kid that was once deemed to be deserving of a good holding.

I suggested looking at baby photos to complete this much sought-after Hallmark moment. I brought the Snow White, Winnie the Pooh, and Goofy photo albums from upstairs. They were laced with marginalia in childish handwriting, an early effort to take control of my life's archivization. You laughed at the funny faces and poses of the gremlin in the photos, at my two front teeth and my pigtails in a photo where I am barely taller than my mother's knee, standing next to her in front of an almond tree in full bloom. My parents' narrating stories from my childhood, all this tender

attention on me, felt reparative, intoxicating. They told you about the time I had lifted my dress all the way over my face to hide my embarrassment after my mum's colleague had addressed me at her job, and about the way I used to ask questions and including the answers, like 'Dad, why do we wear a coat so that we don't get cold?' They then proceeded to reminiscing about my brother's childhood, a gesture of pure tenderness, unconditional like saying 'nothing you ever do will unmake you our child, a profoundly venerated creation, a bird in flight,' which made me wonder whether they would still love me if they knew about my gender identity.

I took out my phone and digitized some photos. I then led you upstairs, to my childhood bedroom, to show you my hardback and paperback treasures: my illustrated Jules Verne editions, Enid Blyton's Saint Clare's series, and the pop-up book with Donald Duck about Ancient Egypt. The house I grew up in was a strange kind of dollhouse, structured yet minimalist, modern yet immaculate, like the cover of a glossy interior design magazine, or an exhibition at a design museum. I had always worked diligently to turn my room into a maximalist woodland utopia, with posters on the ceiling when I was a kid, and fairy lights, garlands, and impressionist prints as a teenager. Apart from my books, there were no remnants that revealed I had once been the owner of the room. I was okay with that. My parents were paying my bills, catering to my need to live alone from an early age, to get away from my brother and their own conservative beliefs. They deserved a utility room, and I was okay with my mother using my childhood bedroom as another redecorating project to satisfy her unparalleled passion for interior design. A passion which I seemed to have inherited, only mine focused on the more colourful, cottagecore, chocolate-box end of the spectrum, which would never fail to give her a killer headache.

Kitsch has always been my mother's nemesis, filling her nightmares with polychromy and mayhem. She would watch videos of minimalist villas on TV during family gatherings, eagerly inviting my grandmother and aunts into her Bauhaus realm. I was glad to see her get so pumped up about something, although I had always dreamed of growing up in the Burrow instead, with all the scruffy Weasley boots lined up at the entrance, a place bustling with life, a place filled with people and

things, a family music box made for containing. Her almost masculine love for functionality and symmetry made me feel hollow, and I often, almost rigidly, expected her to change. Why don't you braid your words with flowers, mum? Why do you show your love by cooking for me, why don't you tell me you love me so much it's making your head swell, why don't you become a poet in my own love language? Why did you weep when you first read my poetry?

'Stereotypically 'women's tastes' still stand outside the 'true' canon of aesthetic values of the dominant culture ... characterized as they so often are by gilt and glitter, soft pastel colours, rich textures, 'frilly' decorative effects, and a general sense of cosiness' (Sparke in Holliday & Potts 109).

If masculinity is considered to be unmarked, natural, and the artificial that beautifies (my pink hair), considered to be kitsch, decadent, feminine (Holliday & Potts 133), so much so that it made you not talk to me for two months (maybe there is such a thing as too feminine, as so feminine that it becomes deviant, perverse, genderfluid), then how did I, out of the two of us, end up being the not-woman, mom?

It's queer, isn't it?

That day at my parents', while going through my things, I showed you one of my favourite books from my childhood, Blue Balliett's *Chasing Vermeer*, filled with scribbles and worn with use. The book is about the world of two mixed-race wallflowers, a girl who longs to become a famous writer and a boy that prefers games of pentominoes, patterns and solving puzzles to using words. They end up discovering a conspiracy, unravelling mysteries that adults failed to solve, making lists, noticing synchronicities, and communicating with visions while wearing pearl earrings. The art is contained in engraved wooden boxes and curious books, in chapters that unfold, laced with Vermeer's aesthetics: the maps, the letters, the antiques, the oriental rugs and the sun peeking through windows, satin and fairy-like, in people's private moments. A miniature trinket world created for miniature readers who love to write and ask philosophical questions about language,

communication, aesthetics, who ‘breathed patterns the way other people breathed air’ (Balliett 9), who long to sneak into dusty, labyrinthine bookshops, cryptic backrooms in art museums, and historic buildings inhabited by gargoyles. Petra and Calder peep into the cryptic chambers of art history, seeking to restore justice for those who sleep in them.

‘You need to read this book,’ I told you as we sat on the bed, heat osmosing between our touching knees, and opened the book on a random page.

It was early December, and patches of ice alternated with drifts of brown leaves. Petra scuffed along, thinking about Charles Fort. He wouldn’t be feeling discouraged. He’d have his eyes wide open. With that in mind, she picked up a scrap of paper off the ground and read, corn oil butter  
tea bags  
onions  
green grapes  
bacon

She popped it into her pocket. Was there poetry here, in these accidental combinations of words? Would Fort have seen an interesting pattern or a secret of the universe in grocery lists?

Hey- this might be something they could get into with Ms. Hussey one day: accidental combinations of sounds and ideas. Why did some words seem more elegant, more graceful than others? Why were some words peanut butter and jelly sounds, and others caviar? What made the words ‘onion’ or ‘tea bag’ so plain? Why did a word like ‘ice’ or ‘exquisite’ sound so lacy? (Balliett 167-168).

Here we were again, always, enthralled by words. After numerous discussions about speech, ineffability, grief and communication, a passage had once again found us and made us grin. A gourmand dictionary of terms and connotations, rich in flavour or plain as white bread. Words were

the foundation of our relationship, the core of our wooing, of our play, like a child spellbound by the solving of a strange puzzle, bringing together our pieces, our constellations, and making them dance. Or, in the words of Ms. Hussey, Calder and Petra's teacher:

'It all depends on what we get interested in — or what gets interested in us.' (Balliett 6).

Leaving my childhood home that day I took a couple of books with me, as well as an old, orange, hard-cover notebook with sunflowers on the front, which used to be a scrapbook made to include a conversation with my friends. I was always trying to put everything into words, convinced I should take everyone else with me. These books were a tradition during my school years, and I remember us exchanging dozens of those and filling them in, using nicknames. My nickname at eight was Monica Bellucci — wanting to be her or wanting to do her? — and that night we ended up watching the Asterix movie with Bellucci as Cleopatra. I always had a thing for voluptuous, maternal amazons, and the scene which is supposed to be funny, with Cleopatra and Caesar making out fervently at Caesar's new palace with Ti Amo playing in the background, had definitely been some sort of sexual awakening during my childhood.

Every room of the house had witnessed the shattering and scattering of toys, gifted by my parents, my aunts, my grandparents, my godmother, and Santa Claus. My brother and I used to fight all the time because of my reluctance to let him anywhere near Snow White's cottage or the Playmobil town house, and my parents would urge me to include him. I initially wanted to, but eventually a series of offenses to my property became traumatic. Both sets eventually ended up with their pieces scattered everywhere.

In his 1853 essay 'The Philosophy of Toys' ('Morale du Joujou'), Baudelaire writes: 'The toy is the child's earliest initiation into art... and when maturity intervenes, the most rarefied example will not satisfy his mind with the same enthusiasm...'. The essay also touches upon the notion of the 'souvenir' — both the memory as a faculty or an individual impression, and as an object that aids to impress that memory on someone's mind (Rosenthal 132). In 'Morale du Joujou,' the souvenir is a toy that Madame Panckoucke gives a little boy that is visiting her with his mother, so that he can

remember her. The souvenir here is both material and immaterial. It is the toy that renders the moment — and Madame Panckoucke — notable, and the detailed, psychic memory of that day, impressed in the boy's mind. In the words of Adam Rosenthal: 'In a sense, 'Morale' interrogates the relation between a presentation and its inscription in memory — an inscription, moreover, that would not foreclose, but rather open the event of something like poetry' (132). Thus, one way to interpret 'Morale du Joujou' can focus on the gift and the act of giving as central in the essay (Bergers in Rosenthal 136). It is through these toy-souvenirs 'that the child's aesthetic faculties become stimulated,' it is through 'the gift of memory' that play becomes art (136).

My toys were important to me. They embodied the kingdoms I travelled through as a child, particularly those which managed to safely contain — boxes full of small marbles, Cluedo, a magician's set in a case, dollhouses. I embraced clichés with fervour: the image of the tin toy box discovered and delivered by Amélie to its 50-year-old owner introduced me, a child who hasn't yet had the opportunity to feel nostalgia, to its saturnine magnificence. Always with a flair for the dramatic, when my dad became concerned with the extent of my Harry Potter addiction, I told him that, were they to limit my consumption of the series, I would die and get buried in the Philosopher's Stone VHS box. I sought to be enclosed, enveloped, in tents made of sheets and chairs, in nests made of fairy tales and the enchanted universes they contained, and later in reading nooks, secret, claustrophobic, loaded with baubles and souvenirs, inviting my world to unfold, unscrutinized, in all its vastness.

Being a child at play, undisturbed, has an incredible air of androgyny about it. A vast universe with endless opportunities for imitation unfolds. The child can embody Elsa, an astronaut, a mother, a pirate, Mike Wazowski, Peter Pan. Despite his typically masculine connotations (Peter Pan syndrome traditionally refers to the condition of boys who never can, or want to, become men, which at the same time has a queer element about it) he used to be enacted by women in its first theatrical productions, as Carol Mavor writes in her jewel of a book *Reading Boyishly: Roland Barthes, J.M. Barrie, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Marcel Proust, and D.W. Winnicott*, which is 'a labor of love for four boyish men and one boy' (Mavor 24). She goes on to describe those stage

portrayals of Peter Pan as often androgynous, feminine, fairyish, and even maternal, (175) given that the eternal boy always longs to return to the mother, to have a queer love affair with and embody her, and come to terms with the fact that he can never become. The quest to return to the mother, that boyish travail (meaning both travel and labour) takes the form of nostalgia. She refers to Barthes' discourse on nostalgia, on his 'focus on 'certain old and lovely things, whose signified is abstract, out of date'', and sets out reparatively, as per Sedgwick's term (125), to demonstrate the usefulness of such a nostalgic approach of the past. (33) Mavor writes:

As a graduate student, I was initially drawn to Barthes (not only because he was then in fashion) but also because of his writerly emphasis on desire and pleasure. More recently I have become more literate in the nuances of his queer sensibility. And even more recently, I owned up to the fact that what drew me to Barthes and continues to draw me is not only his tender and beautiful writing, his hedonism, his brevity, his strangeness, coupled with my own nostalgia for 'the good old days' of graduate school and critical theory and tiny houses and too much coffee and generous teachers and startlingly smart fellow graduate students, but the fact that Barthes himself is nostalgic. Barthes is claimed by what Susan Stewart refers to as 'the social disease of nostalgia'. (33)

I am lucky enough to still remain in those 'good old days' of being a graduate student who consumes too much coffee and reads Barthes doe-eyed, mesmerized, feeling as if I have just discovered the wheel — a really old wheel that has been there for several decades but still makes the reader feel unique, chosen, in Barthes' hedonistic, melancholic process of wooing, unrequited. A wheel, or rather a hoop and stick for a Victorian boy to roll down the pavement, or the wheels of a bicycle I learned to ride in the ripe old age of nineteen, relearning to scrape my knees, relearning to ask for mum, to show her no hands, to ask for her concern like I beg for the attention of a lover.

In the age of #aesthetic, consider me afflicted. I practically live in the #lightacademia side of Tumblr, I revel in the pleasure I derive from my Pinterest moodboards, I thrive the most in performing, making a scene, in a black turtleneck and a tweed mini-skirt, sipping a glass of rosé, in

a dimly lit bookshop café near our home, where I am writing these lines. I somehow even embrace pretentiousness, trying to convince myself that it is of the good kind.

Returning to boys and fairies who fly, my toy world was my Neverland, a shot in time, a miniature utopia with a materiality that ensured permanence, a plastic Elysium safe from decay and death.

My parents used to buy me a weekly magazine about Victorian dollhouses. Every issue came with a piece of furniture, tiles, curtains, windows, or parts of the roof. I never managed to collect all the pieces necessary to build the house, and I would carry that sense of incompleteness with me for years to come. I tried to satisfy my hunger for a minuscule roof that would protect my furniture dreams from rain with makeshift cardboard houses that would end up in the trash during my sweeping adolescence.

A month ago I stumbled upon the same miniature furnishings on Facebook Marketplace and ended up purchasing them. I had found a vintage tartan suitcase in the trash while moving into my first rented apartment. I had given you this suitcase when you were in the process of moving into a bigger place whose emptiness you longed to exorcize. We later came to live together under your roof, and the suitcase returned, curiously, to me, to hold my first good- enough dollhouse. During those days I also ordered a DIY miniature kit from Ebay, and spent my afternoons listening to you recounting your day at uni, engrossed in my Lilliputian woodwork. Not for one moment did I pretend that it did not look like the house of our dreams; wood, rusty brown faux-leather, mint walls and kitchen appliances, a tiny nursery to cradle a hope of our queer selves being reborn, as well as our heteronormative facade.

Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space* (1957) has captured more aptly than anyone the magic of the miniature, and described so eloquently the way I experience the world, and the way I write it:

Also one must love space to describe it as minutely as though there were world molecules, to enclose an entire spectacle in a molecule of drawing. In this feat there is an important dialectics of the intuition — which always sees big — and work, which is hostile



to flights of fancy. Intuitionists, in fact, take in everything at one glance, while details reveal themselves and patiently take their places, one after the other, with the discursive impishness of the clever miniaturist (159).

and

The man with the magnifying glass — quite simply — bars the every-day world. He is a fresh eye before a new object. The botanist's magnifying glass is youth recaptured. It gives him back the enlarging gaze of a child. With this glass in his hand, he returns to the garden

*où les enfants regardent grand* (P. de Boissy, *Main première*, p. 21) (155).

The erotics of the miniature is a science I yearn to study as I am using my tweezers to put the one-inch polka dot baby overalls on the tiny hanger and place them in the closet of the miniature nursery. I wish to delve into the discipline of fitting in, being contained, cradled, beheld, so I crawl onto your lap every morning, sticky and swollen with sleep, and I nuzzle your neck, I ask you to kiss my hands and my feet, and in my turn, I bring you pots of gardenias, and sometimes we call each other mother.

[REDACTED]

## Freeze

My mother was planning her trip to Naxos. Her interior design project during those days was the renovation of a house she had inherited from her father, next to that of her sister's where we used to spend our summer vacation every year since I was four months old. 'We finally need a place of our own for the summer,' she would reason before letting her tenant, a physiotherapist, go. 'We've spent thirty years as guests, in a house full of people. We will have our privacy, you will have a beige room with linen and lace, the way you like it.'

The beige was the bribe for me to like the modern, minimalist light switches. My biggest contradiction as a sworn maximalist was my obsession with beige — a colour used in novels to describe unimaginative people, boring suits and mother-in-law dresses. I protested this prejudiced view of sand, of dulce de leche, of creased tan satin. The whole earthy palette of beige and brown always invited me in its textures, liquid or grainy, translucent or opaque. I would lay on the earth and drink in a world of caramel. I would draw fingerprints, spirals and concentric knots carved on skins of different tones. I would wear clothes that made me look nude, aiming to tease while modestly covering. I felt alluring in earthy tones. I dyed my hair auburn and I became a deer.

The day in our apartment began with us, two cats, a dog, and a fish.

They brought Lucy over for us to dog sit while my mother would be at the island, my brother in the army, and my father working at the hospital. On her blue leash and orange saddle, she jumped out of the car and started frantically sniffing the streets, getting acquainted with new pee and new neighbours. We took her upstairs and my father stayed for tea. She was ecstatically taking in all the scents of that new place, our living room. The cats were safely contained in the other half of the house — kitchen, bedroom, and my tiny sunlit study — still, she smelt and sought them.

The lady upstairs had just brought us her son's goldfish to look after while they were on vacation. You placed the bowl on your desk and we watched different objects reflecting and shapeshifting through the water — an ashtray, a miniature desk, the carved squirrel pen that my grandma had

brought for me back when she used to travel with the church.

After my dad left, Lucy huffed, whined at the door for a while, ran up and down the house, looked for him everywhere. We made a mental note to say goodbye to my dad on the street the next time, and to quickly distract her with a walk so that she wouldn't notice when he would leave, instead of letting her watch his car disappear. Lucy eventually jumped on the sofa, made several turns around herself, and finally settled to rest. We took photos of her to send to my parents, always double checking that no cigarettes appeared in the frame. The fish floated slowly around the ball, wide-eyed and babbling on mute. The rhythmical sound of Lucy's snoring accompanied our day. I would stretch my bare legs on the couch, stroke her soft fur with my feet, and every now and then lean in to kiss her damp nose, inhale her hot scent, and gently play with her long, veiny ears. She would grunt and stretch her legs, and we would simply watch her, the creature that had first introduced me to a whole new capacity to love.

I remember reading in *The Argonauts* about A.L. Steiner's 2012 installation 'Puppies and Babies', in which the titular subjects appear in photographs alongside their caretakers, redefining what familial bonds can look like and what is considered to be art worth displaying. Nelson writes that the installation '[...] places interspecies love firmly on par with human-human love' (Nelson 2015, p. 89). 'Some of the subjects of Puppies and Babies may not identify as queer, but it doesn't matter. The installation queers them. By which I mean to say that it partakes in a long history of queers constructing their own families' (p. 90).

In the past, I often wondered about what it really means to be part of a family in which relations of love and care depend on putting someone or something else's well-being before your own. I mean it not in the sense of women and queer people taking up all the emotional and physical labour that goes unrecognized to care for others, totally sacrificing oneself. I mean it, rather, in ways that humble you by making you remember you are just a part of nature, and part of nurturing the earth includes nurturing its creatures. This is, in my opinion, a way to love the self: not giving it away, but becoming immersed in the often unsteady rhythm of birth, health, sickness, death, and living

through those things together, supporting each other. Trying to locate examples to prove the possibility of my soul being lifted through taking care of a living creature, I always end up returning to Lucy. After all, was she not the one to nurture me when I needed it the most? What is our bond made of, how does it feel so natural?

In his book *Jerry*, an ode to his dog, Greek author Auguste Corteau writes:

We are all monuments: of love, trauma, luck, pain, temporariness. And as monuments we reproduce, with our children and our books, with our parents who birth us and are birthed by us, with the animals that help humanize us.

I am writing this book because there is no other way, because your very existence, Jerrikins, shines within me like a supernova, and it spreads, from the soul out to the hands and the fingers (Κορτώ, p. 73).

In his essay *Love in the Anthropocene*, Preciado writes about his dog:

Philomene and I are children of the Anthropocene. Our relationship is marked by ties of domination: legally, I have the right to subject her, lock her up, make her reproduce, do what I like with her puppies, abandon her, sell her. But we love each other. For, as Donna Haraway tells us, *Canis Lupus* and *Homo Sapiens* have mutually constructed each other, throughout the past nine thousand years, as ‘companion species’ (Preciado, p. 85).

Diving into the works of my favourite authors and scholars helped me immensely to better understand why my sentiments about my pets are so complex. Society introduces one’s first pet as our ‘new best friend’, but is that all there is? Why do I feel like I am taking care of my child every time I police what goes in and out of my cat’s mouth in the way Nelson polices her toddler’s mouth activity in the *Argonauts*? Had I not felt the weight of the world back then, had it not felt as if this precious creature with its soft falling breaths and endearing little noises is my child? Or have I not felt those bursts of infatuation which made my love for my animal companions almost erotic? Do I not have a crush on those stunning paws stretched out in the sun, their sleek fur, their loud snore and steady heartbeat aligned with mine when we sleep together? I am almost too scared to write about that, because the categories of love, eros and kinship are so fixed and static in our society, and the

ways they are experienced are dictated in extremely rigid and deterministic terms. Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick writes in her *Dialogue on Love*:

Oh, right, I keep forgetting, for lots and lots of people in the world, the notion of ‘falling in love’ has (of all things) sexual connotations. No, that’s not what I think is happening. For me, what falling in love means is different. It’s a matter of suddenly, globally, ‘knowing’ that another person represents your only access to some vitally

transmissible truth

or radiantly heightened

mode of perception,

and that if you lose the thread of this intimacy, both your soul and your whole world might subsist forever in some desert-like state of ontological impoverishment (168).

Are words good enough? (Nelson). With Lucy, I find my words failing me, because I experience this relationship largely in emotional, spiritual, and corporeal terms. I do not mean I want to have sex with my dog. I mean that we are ‘Significantly other to each other, in specific difference, we signify in the flesh a nasty developmental called love. This love is an historical aberration and a naturalcultural legacy’ (Haraway, p. 3).

Haraway goes beyond binaries such as those of nature-culture, organic-technological, human-animal, and expands the way we categorize different species. She believes that all creatures are not fixed, but are in a constant process of becoming together in relations that have become intrinsic to their natures not because they were born that way, but because they constantly interconnect and reconnect with each other. Haraway speaks to my experience when she writes ‘As a little girl, I loved to inhabit miniature worlds brimming with even more tiny real and imagined entities. I loved the play of scales in time and space that children’s toys and stories made patent for me. I did not know then that this love prepared me for meeting my companion species, who are my

maker.’ (Haraway, p. 4).

In his book *Feline Philosophy: Cats and the Meaning of Life*, John Gray writes about the ways in which cats can teach us to live a better life, as well as about the complicated but chosen and respectful relationships we form with them. At some point, he refers to John Laurence’s incredible relationship with a cat called Mue which he formed in Vietnam during the war. He quotes:

I think we have come to respect each other’s skills as survivors. There was no doubt that his limited number of lives allotted had been used up long ago, so that every new day he lived was a bonus. Also, he seemed wise. He knew. We had become friends. Our long, angry, loving relationship had come to symbolise in some way the bond between our two countries, drenched in each other’s blood, locked in an unbreakable embrace of life, suffering and death. (Laurence in Gray, p. 19).

Preciado writes that feminism is not a humanism but an animalism, because it ‘[...] reveals the colonial, patriarchal roots of those universal principles of European humanism’ (Preciado, p. 100). The relationships many people form with their pets are much queerer than they are heteronormative. Cats and humans cross borders to be with each other. Cats teach us boundaries and we learn to adapt and live together peacefully despite our differences, a great paradigm of respect and acceptance in the pursuit of a life of companionship. Gray writes:

‘If they do not enjoy our company, they leave. If they stay, it is because they want to be with us. This too is a reason why many of us cherish them’ (Gray, p. 25).

I am made me because, through, and together with Lucy, Gatis, and Kaitoulis. They have survived so far with my help, eating expensive prescription diets, having fingers stuck in their mouths, training me better than I have managed to train them, snuggling up for warmth by my side.

\*

Your grandma had already been dying for a long time. Alzheimer's had left her body derelict, her mind annihilated. Confined in a bed, non-verbal, just 'laughing' (muscle memory?) when you tickled her. You helped your mother in the full-time labour of caring for her, you baby-talked, introduced me as your partner. I told her she looked beautiful and kind, and she laughed hollowly.

The following day we walked Lucy to a traditional shop where she used to take you that sold coffee, nuts, and sweets. 'My granny,' you said longingly, nibbling on the caramel candy that brought her back. 'And all the ways in which she uttered words... Sweetie instead of sweaty. Sillyppers instead of slippers.' Her rural dialect warmed our hearts as we started infusing our everyday talk with her words. She used to be all that, you said, yet now she was diminished to this lifeless thing.

Your grandma was the type of person who would give you whatever you wanted to eat during fasting, and then would mutter guiltily to herself. She had spent her life moping stairs to raise her family. While cooking, she would place the herbs in the food wrapped in a small tulle bag, because she knew you didn't like to eat the tiny green pieces. She had raised you in paradise in the centre of Athens, on her jungle-like veranda on Syngrou street, and infused in you her love of plants. She had even planted an apricot tree in a pot, and felt devastated when she had to move and leave it behind because it was too huge to carry without spending a fortune. When you lived there you had your own mortar and pestle, and you used to mix together leaves and flowers to make magical potions.

You had mourned her already so many times that you had no tears left. The doctor had been telling you to expect her death every day since last December, yet she endured. The standing theory is that she never learnt to give up, or rather, to let go. This time, however, things looked grim. While I was planning my trip to Naxos for the following week, you were planning to wait for her. I bought a black dress for the funeral, and you tended to your plants. Lucy brought some joy to you and your



exhausted mother. With the dog, she seemed to soften. She invited us to the terrace for drinks and even allowed Lucy to pee there. 'That's why we have a hose.'

My mother, my aunt, and my grandmother were expecting me in Naxos the following week, and I needed vacation more than ever. The heat, the stuffy air of the city, and the post-covid burnout were taking the best of me. I couldn't help but dream of our first summer together, but your family was grieving.

On that day, forest fires engulfed Evoia, and were soon sweeping the country. The air was yellow and thick, and it had the scent of death. We shut our windows and stayed inside, unwilling to partake as spectators in the environmental disaster, denial seeping through our bodies like a cold, thick liquid. The government boasted that no lives were lost, yet photos of fossilized woodland animals, dogs and cats took over social media. I spent the day wanting to vomit. My parents' house was five minutes away from the nearest flames. It took a lot of convincing for my dad to leave the house and agree to spend the night at my grandma's. 'That house is very hot,' he complained. He never liked to leave the comfort of his home. The only thing I could focus on was how Lucy was safe and with us.

It would take decades for the land to be revived, provided that it wouldn't be turned into a cement cemetery of nature first.

My brother came home on the second day, on leave from the army. They returned to the house that seemed to be safe for the time being and took in my parents' best friends, an open-minded Orthodox priest and his wife, who had evacuated and spent the night in their car with their three wolfhounds. The dogs were upset and kept sniffing Lucy's scent around the house, the people were sleepless. They had been told by neighbours that the fire had licked their windows, and then stopped there. Religiously explained, a miracle. In scientific epistemologies, a coincidence. To me it felt more like the experimental development of some surrealist narrative where cohesion doesn't really matter, or rather, it feels intangible.

It was the second time in a year, next to a snowstorm, that the leading party was selling its own kind of helplessness, blaming the Armageddon on the heatwave, ignoring the absence of infrastructure, and the avoidability of such extensive spreading of the fire had more firefighters been hired, more equipment invested in, instead of the constant enforcement of the police the government had obsessively been prioritizing during the past year. People stayed behind and fought flames to save their property with the help of firefighters, while the leaders of the country patted themselves on the back because they had taken the bare minimum of measures: establishing an emergency number that texted citizens to evacuate. That ensured that no (human) life was lost, a definite improvement from the catastrophic outcomes of the 2018 fires at Mati that cost the lives of over a hundred people who were trapped at the beach as the flames approached. The fires at Mati were the second deadliest of the 21st century in the world, and the deadliest in the history of the modern Greek state. The problematic handling of the fires that led to the loss of so many human lives was what gave the then governing left-wing party, SYRIZA, the final blow. The current right-wing government of Nea Dimokratia that had previously based its opposition rhetoric largely on the disastrous dealing of SYRIZA, had managed to mitigate the political cost of lives lost. They had failed, unfortunately, to execute a more effective firefighting plan for the conservation of the ecosystem and people's properties and jobs.

What mattered was that one government after another kept failing their people, sentencing them to a life of precarity by leaving them naked in the face of this rapidly expanding kind of climate injustice. Those who lost their homes, shops, animals and crops after waiting for hours for state assistance would be granted an official apology by the prime minister — the first in a series of what was about to become a habit — as well as the promise of immediate financial reparations. Justice was buried in Pompeii. For years, people in Greece remained fighting in the arena of survival as the political games went on in the Colosseum.

I wondered whether the beautiful beach, surrounded by lush greenery, where I had gone camping a couple of years ago, had been touched by the fire, and I realized how stupid and small my experiences of the place could be compared to those who lived around there, whose lives were

interwoven with the earth and its beings. I felt powerless, paralysed. Pessimism was spreading like poison in my body. I felt ashamed of myself, grateful to those who were still fighting. People were volunteering, helping the firemen, bringing supplies to the affected, rescuing animals. I just sat there for hours, doom scrolling, terrified. A piece from your favourite poet, the 'heroic pessimist' Argyris Chionis, kept coming up on my screen.

There will come a day when the trees will hate the ungratefulness of humans and will stop producing shade, rustle and oxygen. They will take their roots and go. Big holes will remain on the ground where the trees used to be. When people realize what they've lost, they will go and cry bitterly over these holes. Many of them will fall inside. Soil will cover them. Nobody will sprout.

In her memoir *Aftershocks*, Nadia Owusu brilliantly describes a similar feeling of helplessness and privilege, in the face of a war which she experienced from the protective bubble created by her family and class, as well as of various earthquakes she survived. In her narrative, she braids those events with major personal moments in her life, and shows what it is like to live in instances of disaster from the somewhat privileged — but conscious — viewpoint of those who are not directly affected by it, those who live to tell the story of others.

I have lived in disaster and disaster has lived in me. My share of natural disaster was minor, my share of war abstracted. I felt numb during the terror in Manhattan, but my legs carried me. Almost always, I have found a hand to hold (Owusu, p. 227).

I didn't just have hands to hold. My family had private insurance for our home, and an extra layer of protection against the fires because they lived in a high-end neighbourhood that was bound to be protected more diligently. I thought of all the people who lost everything, the work of a lifetime, their animals, their homes.

In the evening, my brother texted me. Being back for just a few days, he wanted to spend some time with the dog. It was a feeling I could relate to and respect. The possibility of having him over,

especially with you feeling overwhelmed with your grandmother, was unthinkable. I suggested we take Lucy to some cafe with a patio and spend time there. It took a lot of convincing for you not to worry about me. I assured you that if he even flinched the wrong way, I would immediately call you.

He had recently learned how to drive. He parked on our street and shrugged off the whole cafe thing. 'Let's just walk her instead'. I asked him whether he wanted some apple cider, he said he was okay. Still, I went upstairs and brought some juice for us and water for Lucy. Making an effort, which had been a rare occurrence in our relationship. We walked across the park. It was dimly lit and the heat had softened. I remember stepping over some water pooling on the cobblestone, reflecting the orange hue of the few streetlights. I told him about your grandmother and he listened quietly. He held on tightly to Lucy's leash as I lit up the grass with my phone, making sure she wouldn't eat anything dangerous. I stole glances at my brother: his buzzcut, his broad shoulders. He looked nothing like the baby with the blond curls and the dimples I had cradled, his eyes huge, his smile toothless and mischievous. It had taken a lot of courage to come to terms with that fact throughout the years. I had grieved the potential of that relationship many times, over a laptop broken during a fit of rage, in tears. When he was born it felt like he was a part of me, like a limb had split in two and lent its flesh to another being. He didn't feel like a part of me anymore, yet every day we looked more and more alike. Our reactions to trauma were similar, our jokes had the same flavour. Despite my refusal to face it, we were tragically mirroring each other.

I had always wanted a sibling fiercely. I wanted to be able to share my games, to have a baby to nurture, a comrade to ally with. The roles had always been a bit blurry, given that my parents treated me as an equal, discussed everything in front of me, included me even when I should not have been included. I didn't feel like an adult, but I did feel prematurely maternal. It was all very strange for a seven-year-old, and yet it seemed very normal to me. I watched my mum grow round and big. I remember her in lavender PJs, looking royal, untouchable, like a naiad. I remember her hugging one knee and pushing all the weight of her belly forward to sit up on the bed. I had found that maneuvering of her body hilarious. My parents used to buy a magazine for new parents that

came with all these VHS tapes about pregnancy, childbirth, bathing a newborn, teaching it to swim. These became my obsession, along with the book with all the organs in it. I was quite clinical, now that I think about it — I was curious about the body's workings, its whims and bursts of creativity. I remember being in the car with my dad and grandma. We were driving to the hospital to see Mum. I was boasting to them about my burping skills, all the dolls I had raised all on my own, giving them terrible made-up names and telling everyone around me a story about how my husband had left me with seven babies (a believable story was deemed necessary for internal coherence's sake, since there was no husband around).

I already loved our baby and I would raise the hell out of it.

'Look at his orange-sized head' my mother had told me when we moved him into our old apartment. There wasn't enough space so we initially put the crib in the living room. I don't remember much else, aside maybe from bathing him, his plump little body, his plastic bathtub with the big bear sponge, the infinite water I had seen on the educational videos.

I don't know where we went wrong after that — we. I have always been seen as complicit and held accountable for his upbringing, despite my being just eight when he came. I had claimed that role and my parents went along with it. I would teach him to count and read, buy him Playmobil, introduce him to Harry Potter and make him the brightest, most talented little boy in the world.

The debate over where they went wrong is, to this day, inconclusive. Yet all that matters when I write about hurt is my version of it. My parents were people: with their own traumas and triggers, with their brilliant moments and their horrible ones. They had the noblest interests at heart but the contrast was unbearable for a child: On the one side, a democratic upbringing where no parental order was followed unless it was explained and led to mutual consensus. It was almost anarchic, lacking boundaries. I never saw it as a problem as I thrived in it. I grew up confident, immersed in constant dialogue, my opinion always asked for. On the other hand, many liberties that we took were fiercely criticized: they often disapproved of the way we dressed or the music we listened to. My obsession with Harry Potter was deemed unhealthy. His obsession with rock music would lead

him to drugs, his obsession with kick boxing was violent and unrefined, his obsession with the church was just over the top. When, in a big fuck you moment he'd decide to become a right-wing football hooligan at 16, my father would regret being so persistently negative about the long hair my brother had sported during his rock and roll phase. 'We always rejected you when you were just being kids', he'd said mournfully. 'That was our mistake'. There was always space to study more than we already did. Our accomplishments were never enough. The word potential became dreaded — a synonym for great expectations, and they fell heavier on him than they did on me. All my mother's dreams of having given birth to renowned scientists, all the comparisons with me, the brilliant older sister, all the pressure to play with maths cards I would buy him with my allowance when all he wanted to play with were keys and sticks. I had grown up without experiencing many stereotypes thrust upon my gender. Suddenly here he was, hitting his sister with a toy sword while my grandpa asserted that it's normal for boys to play with weapons.

He displayed violent tendencies from a very young age and, predictably, I was his favourite target. My parents didn't know how to handle the situation. Throughout his childhood and adolescence they remained submerged in helplessness. I was a ten-year-old who was exposed to physical violence in her own home for the first time — and yes, I experienced it as violence even though it came from a three-year-old (they should really consider making those toy swords a bit lighter). We both somehow felt rejected by each other. I was hurt and too young to process it, so I became violent in return. I still retained the physical strength to actually hurt him more than he hurt my shins and feelings. I could pull him around by the hair and make him scream. My parents would yell at me in horror because I was older, I could seriously harm him if I wasn't able to control my strength. I should be the mature one, reason with him, turn the other cheek to the baby, but the baby was really bruising my arms and throwing objects in my face, making my lips bleed profusely into my hands. I was ten, I was getting beaten up, and I felt that no one cared to do anything about it. We never managed to have a relationship that didn't entail extreme violence, harsh words and crushed hopes. Our good days could be counted on the fingers of my two hands. A museum outing, some gifts, some early peekaboos, that one fireplace photo of a funny bald

baby with a bowtie and an impeccably dressed little nerd. I felt inconsolable, angry, lonely, betrayed by my parents, exposed to harm during a textbook case of adolescence-from-hell. When I was thirteen I would scratch my mother's hands when we argued, vicious in my desperation. They would blame his violence on my teenage swearing — I had been expected to be a model adolescent after all, the linear evolution of the child prodigy they believed I was. In his turn, he was an extremely energetic and incredibly clever child, pushed to fit into the mould I'd unwittingly left behind. We despised each other and broke my parents' hearts.

When the dog got tired, we sat on a bench. Funnily enough we ended up agreeing on one thing, politically: that the current government sucked. The key was that we were looking at it from opposite ends of a spectrum. For me it was 'capitalist interests', for him it was 'illegal immigrants'. Unlike the other times, he didn't call me names, but tried to convince me of his stance. 'There's no point in it, you know that,' I asserted. 'You won't change my mind and I won't change yours. I know that you hate me for it but you need to accept it.'

He scoffed. 'You're such a drama queen. I don't hate you.'

My parents had disclosed that, every time I went abroad, he would nonchalantly ask how I was doing. It was another thing to hear him utter these words to my face. I knew he cared about me, in the same way that I cared about him and disliked him at the same time. This strangled utterance was an assertion: he wanted me to know he didn't hate me. A typical man of few words, he would never become vulnerable enough to utter them unless he intended them to be listened to.

'You are so preoccupied with demeaning your sister and making fun of her that one would think you're obsessed with her.'

Silence fell heavy in the playroom of my childhood home. My cousins focused intently on their screens, refusing to acknowledge what had just taken place. I could see a vein throbbing threateningly on my brother's forehead as he had been (finally) rendered speechless by the audacity of Stefanos, my partner back then. It was my birthday. My mother was throwing me a party with

the family at my childhood home. She had matched the tulips in the vase with the tulips on the napkins, and when she saw my new, bubblegum pink hair, she turned her face away. She refused to look at me even while I blew out the candles, then wept to everyone willing to listen to her drama: I was at my lowest point, she said. In the face of such ridiculousness and pain I could only wonder: didn't she see that I was finally happy? Didn't she care? The pink pixie cut was described as my lowest, an insult to her aesthetics so great that it became a moral failing. I listened on as my mother spoke with such pain and shame that it could make one think I had a terminal disease, or had taken heroin in front of her.

We didn't speak for a month. I never got over that, and neither did she. I went to my old therapist and asked her to help me come to terms with the possibility of a life without my mother. She pursed her lips together. I insisted, then called Mum on Mother's Day.

My parents would never forgive my ex for offending their son in his own home. That instance of disrespect at the party confirmed their negative opinion of him — they could sense that something was off about him: his baby face, the distance he kept from his mother, his appearance on TV when he spoke at the parliament about legal gender recognition. They couldn't put their finger on his deviance, so they looked for reasons, and he amply provided them.

When he openly took my side against my brother I felt, for the first time, supported, well-held, I felt that I mattered. The love I had for him back then was epitomized in that scene.



\*

I returned home with Lucy and sat on the couch by the honey-warm lamp in your study. The air conditioning was blasting cold air in full force. I felt tired. I wrapped my legs into a fleece blanket and pulled my long hair into a bun, leaning into the comfort of returning home to you. At that moment, I considered a haircut, dyeing it chestnut, inhaling those thousands of ways to love back into me, slipping back into the womb, going unnoticed.

## Falter

Your mother kept a small, lush patch of green in the backyard. It was a secret garden of sorts, an oasis we could see from the window, fading into a trapeze of concrete. It had a small gate with a padlock and it was colourful, fragrant, its vegetation anarchic and diverse, from wild weeds to dainty purple flowers that encircled the place where your son rested. You had lost your cat about a year ago, a creature with whom you had a rare soul connection, and the grief was just starting to turn into balm instead of a sentence. He lay beneath the circle of rocks that signalled his presence. Tall wild daisies bloomed around him, and the cats of the neighbourhood often came to keep him company, mate, sleep, and stretch their legs near him.

Ever since I moved in with you we had not visited the garden. That day, you asked your mother for the key. You felt ready. We took Lucy with us and peered into that intimate Eden. We could hear the humming of birds. The grass that was growing uncontrollably tickled our bare ankles. The cats, lulled by the song of cicadas and the afternoon heat, hardly flinched at first, but then the dog took notice of them and started growling, so they jumped up and disappeared over the fence. Lucy traced their scents, sniffing around frantically.

In the middle of the garden stood a short but proud lemon tree that I was very fond of, heavy with fruit, yet it was the pomegranate tree that reigned, its branches reaching up to the windows of my study, its red blossoms filling the view in the spring and summer. The sun burnt on our skin, but before retiring at the chaises under the parasol on the cement patch, we stood close to the centre of the garden. I felt you sigh by my side, and you reached for my hand. I felt all the weight that fell on your shoulders, the ghost of your alive grandmother hanging in the building, the memory of his silky fur beneath your fingertips.

‘Hello baby,’ you muttered. Lucy stopped and lifted her head, looking at you, as if in reverence, then tilted her face to the side, and stretched her hanging ears to catch the vibration of the string that tied your heart to the earth.

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You lost him during the first covid lockdown, on Easter Saturday. We were just good friends back then, and I was spending the quarantine at my parents' house, grieving my breakup with Stefanos.

Your cat was only three years old. On my birthday that year, all my friends surprised me with a Zoom call. We blew out the candles with my parents in the room, sang folk Greek love songs and laughed together. At some point, we heard him wail, as if in pain. He had been vomiting for a couple of days and we all told you it was probably an irritable tummy. The following day you took your mother's credit card and took him to the vet. I was adamant about him having just a stomach upset, but the vet seemed concerned. You called me and I listened to his cries, terrified from inside his carrier.

You left him at the clinic for some tests overnight, I couldn't stop calling you to ask for news. The next morning they called you and told you that he was gone. Just like that. A brain tumour.

The news about his loss shook the ground beneath my feet. I clung tightly to my grey companion who looked exactly like yours, minus the fact that yours had huge, owl-like eyes. Terrified and heartbroken for you, I called Stefanos in a moment of desperation, only to be reminded once again by the reserved, distant sound of his voice, that he wasn't my person to go to for comfort anymore. That phone call was the last time I told him I loved him, and he said he loved me too. I was left alone with my thoughts about mortality and about the different things 'I love you' can mean. I cried myself to sleep that night, while my parents watched Easter mass on TV. You disappeared for almost three months. You just assured us you would be safe, and then became unreachable to all your friends.

I later learned you hadn't exactly been that safe, and I will forever resent myself for becoming so terrified of your grief that I so easily let you keep your distance. You said it was better that way. I would later come to understand that, being around people who are afraid of your grief when it is all

you have does the opposite of helping. People who have had their souls severed by the disarming certainty of loss: only those can understand, and I hadn't gone through such loss yet.

You had made a playlist for your cat that included Greek songs about mourning and hymns of Good Friday. Ah, my precious springtime! Ah, my Son beloved, now where is gone Your beauty? you listened to the angelic voice of Flery Dandonaki, nursing a bottle of whiskey, and in those moments you were unreachable and looked, but weren't incredibly alone. You had hundreds of pictures in your phone, with him staring back at you with those huge, inquiring eyes. On Mother's Day I brought you a pot of gardenias, and your eyes welled up with tears.

I remember you telling me 'If anything's evidence of God's existence, for me that's Ori.'

John Gray writes about Mary Gaitskill's memoir called *Lost Cat* which explores her relationship with Gattino, her beloved cat that was lost when he was very young and never was found:

Whether Gattino was still present in the world does not matter much. It is the fact that Gattino existed and what he did that are important. Mary's attachment to the cat was unlike any she had with human beings. The intertwined emotions of vanity and cruelty, remorse and regret that are at work in love between humans were absent. Her memories of Gattino changed her feelings towards her father, the children she hosted and the Iraqi medical student who had been shot. A love from beyond the human world untangled the love she had known with humans. [...] Gattino lived and died by chance, but he was not a loser. In his short, fearless, un-tragic life, he gave her something no human had been able to give her. For a while she was no longer ruled by laws of pleasure and pain. She no longer hated the people she loved — or herself for loving them. A tiny, one-eyed, seemingly inconsequential creature broke and remade her world. Perhaps Gattino was, after all, a magical animal. (Gray, p. 44-45).

In one of the photos Ori is an adorable kitten, curled up like a croissant on baby blue sheets. I thought of Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*:

‘When we define the Photograph as a motionless image, this does not mean only that the figures it represents do not move; it means that they do not emerge, do not leave: they are anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies’ (Barthes 1980, p. 57).

Years later, on the day after my grandmother’s funeral, a monarch butterfly got in through the window and nested underneath my desk, refusing to leave. I joined our reunion, and took dozens of photos.

Auguste Corteau writes in *Jerry*:

Every love has its predecessor: we adore our parents instinctively because, at some point, they were also adored instinctively.

And death, the loss of someone who carried inside a piece of our soul — it doesn’t only defeat love, but it renders crucial the need of its rebirth. The heart always has so much surplus, isn’t it a shame to let it go unspent? (Κορτώ, p. 22).

You felt ready to slowly start letting people — and animals — in again in the early summer of 2020. I realized how blocked my feelings had been, how much I had missed you when I saw you watching us from your balcony as our friend parked outside your house. You were wearing a wrap on your head and had that sassy mock-impatient smirk on. It was the moment when, after years of friendship, it suddenly occurred to me that I had always been attracted to you, and that could possibly mean something.

You had been my rock all these years, my best friend, my soulmate. I loved you immensely and was elated to see you and interact with you again. But hoping that our other friend would leave so that I could do you dirty on your couch, that was a new thing. We inevitably third-wheeled her, as you willingly jumped into the banter, and it was only a matter of time before I would end up exploring your body on your bed and then watch the egg yolk remnants of the sunset fade into blue together at your balcony.

It was a perfect arrangement that maintained that form for almost a year. We fucked and enjoyed each other's company. We called our relationship queerplatonic, and it was all very convenient, you being aromantic and asexual, enjoying that specific sex but having no ability to develop romantic feelings for me, and I, religiously hung up on Stefanos. We even spent a big part of quarantining together that year discussing whether he still wanted me and gossiping about his new girlfriend. You gave me tarot readings and even admitted to 'shipping' us, which means you wanted us to be together the way fans of a book or TV series feel about their favourite character couple.

Soon, however, you started noticing and pointing out red flags about the relationship I was mourning. At the same time, I started feeling exhausted by all the tears and high hopes. I grew depressed and my obsessive-compulsive symptoms flared up. Stefanos would keep his distance, or worse, throw me crumbs and raise my hopes. What took a long time to become evident was that what he felt or didn't feel about his new girlfriend or about me didn't matter. What mattered was the choice he diligently and consciously made every day: not to be with me, and that this finally started to mean that I didn't want him in my narrative either. Even though I didn't admit to it back then, we had both grown apart, we had grown different but not together. We were moving in parallel directions, and today I thank him for leaving me, for giving me the gift of you.

*List of things I mourn: dancing with Stefanos wasted at a queer party, having cheese pie at 6am with my friends, watching the stars from a terrace at Patisia, not smoking, being in love and fucking in a friend's bathroom at the party, touching the sky, sleeping with light filtered through shuttered windows at friend's house with mosaic floor sticking with beer, muttering at night with dreams on my bedside, summer, confession tripping up breath fairy lights on the constellation map without any knowledge of astronomy just fairy lights phone breath i have been meaning to tell you for a long time ever since at friend's house with summer, light filtered through shutters, beer stains, sanitary confession, tripping up*

*breath*

*phone*

*i love you echoes i heard breath half-swallowed warm like honeydew kept safely as if you're taking  
it out and then back in warming it up sheltering it in a cocoon of warmth self-born personal that  
means i understood I took my time*

*tick tock*

*voice of a baby that broke the vase*

*mybabymybabymybaby*

*the conclusions of all paths inside me*

*are tracing the outline of your skin mentally*

*the short hair with colors of the rainbow in the morning*

*droplets*

*adolescent*

*groggy*

*one by one*

*and the queue at the airport moves as slowly*

*as we allow it to.*

I do not grieve the fact that Stefanos and I are not together — we have nothing in common anymore, and after seeing what love can really look like I do not miss what we had. What I sometimes feel melancholy over is that a version of me once loved a version of him, and back then, we'd made a beautiful thing together. Isn't it a pity? To lose a version of a person you felt so much

for, to lose the optimism of the person you were back then, the feeling of being young and holding the world in the palm of your hand, to lose so much love which you never actually lose, you just learn to direct elsewhere, but imagine all that love, imagine the massacre.

It's not a pity. It's just life.

Whenever I found myself drifting in those murky waters, I remembered the following passage from Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, which I deeply felt when I first read it:

There used to be a white streetcar that ran between Bayonne and Biarritz; in the summer, an open car was attached to it: the caboose. Everyone wanted to ride in that car: through a rather empty countryside, one enjoyed the view, the movement, the fresh air, all at the same time. Today neither the streetcar nor the caboose exists, and the trip from Biarritz is anything but a pleasure. This is not to apply a mythic embellishment to the past, or to express regrets for a lost youth by pretending to regret a streetcar. This is to say that the art of living has no history: it does not evolve: the pleasure which vanishes, vanishes for good, there is no substitute for it. Other pleasures come, which replace nothing. No progress in pleasures, nothing but mutations (Roland Barthes 1975, p:49-50).

Nowadays, I don't feel like there are no new pleasures, but I do deal with the loss of something that will never come back. I don't know if you ever stop being sad over things that left you traumatized, especially while you sleep. What I do know and can easily say is that, living with you during the year of the quarantine, the fires, the fucking and the reading, against all odds and despite everyone's better judgement, I fell for you and you fell for me. You showed me that love takes work, and we decided to keep healing together.

We had already faced collective loss, that of Zackie as well as the simultaneous loss of democracy in a country that never stopped burning its children alive. In forest fires and femicides, in train crashes and police shootings, in more ways than one if one's a woman, working class, queer, black



or brown, youth in Greece were losing jobs, dignity, and often their very lives. At the same time, we were facing our personal Pompeiis. We both entered this relationship as two beings learning how to grieve, how to let go and lose oneself, how to be engulfed, scattered, and yet how to walk towards a future that hopefully holds new things, how to rebuild within the folds of collective reality, an intimate public against the socially dictated cruel optimism (Berlant).

We were tired of feeling let down by the expectations and the blame society thrust upon us, so we decided to make our own little democracy. We shut ourselves inside our bubble of safety, within the four walls of our bright and spacious home, we petted our cats and left home only to walk the dog, we self-medicated with pot while I avoided the news like the plague, and you immersed yourself in them. I felt I had lost all control but you were still pessimistically optimistic. Knowing every single update and cross-checking your sources gave you the feeling of control, and back then I believe you did, with your articles and translations, with your comments and your posts, make the world a little bit better. Meanwhile, I scrapbooked, made dollhouses and shopped to numb the pain. I was privileged enough, financially, socially, racially, to avoid what I couldn't handle. We often argued when I couldn't stand listening to your informative endeavours about the state of the world.

I recognize this privilege and try to tame the guilt brought by my political hibernation. Today, I have made peace with the fact that I needed that period of grief and resignation to gather up the courage and energy to write about our lives, to contribute to change in the best way I can.

I still hold anger in me for having to grow up, to 'mature' like a fruit, to feel ripe to the point of rotting. I hold anger in me for the fact that you had to lose your animal child so early, for your grandmother's dementia that still makes her wither little by little every day, for covid, and for the fact that my grandmother who hardly ever left the house got it a couple of years later, and had a stroke because of it, which left her helpless, small, with tubes coming out of her nose. I resent the fact that I don't feel as hopeful as I used to, I resent feeling so drained and exhausted from the tossing around of life, I resent the reflection of my mortality in my childhood photographs, in the one where I sleep angelically on my mother's lap and our yellow clothes match, without a single

care in my head, just learning how to be held. I even resent the benign mass on my dog's leg for giving us a scare. I cannot pretend that I have it figured out, or that I'm sure I know how to make it in the world. Nowadays, I'm constantly faced with my mortality, I'm growing old without being able to halt the process, and that's terrifying.

Queer people cannot leave things to chance. Life is set with obstacles at every step, and it can often feel like you're walking on eggshells. Only with you could I let down my guard and be myself, without being conscious of the logistics of it, without hiding any part of me.

*List of things I love: singing songs of the resistance with you in Greek at the top of our lungs with all windows wide open, dollhouses, shelter, the cat that loves me and the cat that loves you and how they sometimes get along, listening to the theme of The Leftovers with you, growing with you, watching everything on TV with you, learning to dance in our living room, books, your belly, our collective smell of heavy sweat, exhaustion and cohabitation, our Polaroids, our aesthetics, your baby photos next to mine, the pin on the google maps of our dream house in Ireland but we'll have to go to Iceland instead because of the third world war, how you always*

*everyday*

*tell me the news*

*so that i don't have to read it*

*tell me to not look at your computer screen while you browse through news about the*

*war how you care*

*about the news*

*how accepting you are towards my denial*

*how you carve*

*how you mend*

*how with you i don't usually have many words*

*i have actions*

*and mud and rocks to build with*

*and always pomegranates.*

\*

I developed a habit of turning to my favourite prose for comfort, and sharing bits with you. We would remain silent for a while, and then discuss how the passage related to our own lives. Theory became a way for me to feel in communion with the world. It reminded me that my experience was not my own to carry; it was a tile in a mosaic of what it means to be human. People had felt the need to write about it, which meant that it mattered. I spent that summer sending you passages from my favourite texts, an invitation to communion, come meet my family.

I will never be able to fathom the extent of my privilege, to have a family, that is, to have been written about. White, middle-class, European, living in my own country. I have been written about for centuries. Of course, what I once experienced as my womanness, my eventual transness, the feeling of losing my mind as I came to terms with my OCD, my being queer in Greece, had only recently started appearing in text. But still, at times, when I read passages with big words and cited them to back my argument, when my parents passed me their credit cards to pay for my tuition fees, whenever I go to a therapy session or go shopping to feel better; at those times my privilege becomes tangible. Every day, hopefully, a compass.

One of my favourite books I used to feel held by was Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* and I had taken to ecstatically sharing paragraphs with you. I first stumbled upon it in 2016, in the historic London bookshop 'Gay's the Word'. I hadn't heard of the book before. All I knew was that there was finally, in my radar, a piece of literature about trans issues that also happened to have a positive review by Emma Watson on the cover. Mainstream? was my first thought.

Stefanos was at the time planning to have top surgery, and I had been obsessed with having kids since I myself was a kid. The book dealt with themes that mattered to me, but the way I could stretch the events described in it to match those in my life wasn't what really intrigued me. There was more that I could relate with than the life events themselves: a form of internal monologue, how it feels to be devoted, deviant, dense in our corporeality, afloat.

Words change depending on who speaks them; there is no cure. The answer isn't just to introduce new words (boi, cisgendered, andro-fag) and then set out to reify their meanings (though obviously there is power and pragmatism here). One must also become alert to the multitude of possible uses, possible contexts, the wings with which each word can fly. Like when you whisper You're just a hole, letting me fill you up. Like when I say husband (Nelson 2015, 9).

Greek belongs to the Indo-European group of languages. According to Angeliki Alvanoudi, it is a highly inflecting one 'in which several grammatical categories are marked morphologically, e.g. nouns inflect for gender, number and case'. Greek is also a heavily gendered language, as all adjectives, nouns, articles, and passive participles are 'inflected for gender'. The two binary grammatical genders (masculine and feminine) are the ones used to refer to people, whereas the neuter is used for inanimate objects and animals.

As Alvanoudi points out, trans/non-binary people in Greece have resorted to modifying or expanding language to deal with this problem. We often avoid denoting gender when referring to human referents, we informally use '@' as a gender-neutral suffix in online spaces, and we expand the use of the neuter grammatical gender to refer to people (both to ourselves and to others). That includes the use of neologisms that result from the addition of the neutral suffix to previously binary words.

Although I completely understand and respect people for whom the use of the neuter grammatical gender works, I never felt like it suited me. Maybe it's my fault that I still associate it with inanimate objects or animals, but that is also the violence of language as a world-building tool. Maybe it's my fault, for not fully accepting that I am, indeed, an animal. Yet still, I prefer to use the two binary grammatical genders when I speak about myself.

When I first came out as non-binary, I did what many Greek-speaking non-binary people had done before me: I kept my given, feminine name, and adopted a name that sounded masculine enough for

me. I went by both, and asked people to use any or both, to rotate, to remind me that I contain multitudes.

People, however, rarely ever rotate. Although they would use my more masculine yet still gender-neutral chosen name, they often opted for feminine pronouns and suffixes, making me feel unseen. Soon, the feminine side of Greek grammar became oppressive for me. It's the most obvious and legible kind of dysphoria I have felt, and I still feel it today. I started cringing every time anyone referred to me in the feminine grammatical gender and, even though I have rarely felt a man, I preferred the balance offered to me by being referred to in the masculine by those who were in on the truth: people who did not know about my true gender identity, that is, almost everyone, referred to me in the feminine. If the people I was out to could refer to me solely in the masculine, then I could live both lives, as well as one in between. You more or less did the same. It more or less worked.

But what about Greek speaking non-binary people who do not feel comfortable with either binary grammatical gender, and do not feel satisfied by the use of the neuter? I cannot even imagine what these people go through every day to make sense of their existence while refusing to be silent.

When speaking Greek, non-binary gender identities remain largely ineffable. I have always felt that, for something to exist, it has to be put into words. I don't believe that anymore. In the Greek language, and in many other languages shaped upon — and shaping the — gender binary, non-binary genders or the absence of a gender are often forced into a heavily binarist paradigm from which they cannot escape.

‘Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.’ (Wittgenstein)

Non-binary people definitely exist, and we will not stay silent, even if the language that can contain us is very limited — and often seen as marginal. The efforts to expand the already rich, but at the same time inadequate universe of the Greek language so that it can render non-binary gender expressible, are productive and necessary, but still, they do not completely solve the problem. Many

people whose gender lies outside the male-female binary, like us, are confined within the suffocating limits of inexpressibility, and are therefore rendered non-existent.

‘Perhaps what is inexpressible (what I find mysterious and am not able to express) is the background against which whatever I could express has its meaning.’ (Wittgenstein)

That’s the gist of it. There are things that lie beyond language. That does not mean they do not exist.

We have to learn to lead ineffable existences, which often feel incompatible with survival.

Inexpressibility means a lack of recognition, of rights, of respect. We have to fight constantly to be seen, to be believed, for our existence to prove its reality and materiality, to be acknowledged.

Living between words is exhausting, but sometimes it is also liberating. After all, language is alive, and we can keep on modifying it and expanding it in creative ways so that it includes us. It also means that we often speak in code with those closest to us, that we move in many little parallel universes using the art of disguise, that we can decide to come out fully, or partially, or to stay in, to thrive in the privacy of silence that is often claustrophobic, but in its denial of a normative, universal truth, it can also become abundant, a sphere of awareness and resistance.

Most of the time, you and I are compelled to manipulate this world so that it can contain us, while also making sure we remain relatively safe inside it, while going to work, dealing with trauma, and paying rent. I still like to think that there is power in that, in writing your own narrative, in finding ways to live outside pre-constructed moulds, in starting afresh even when constricted. I sometimes like the fact that we do not fit on their lips, that they cannot call us, they cannot find us, they can never hold us in the palm of their hand and imprison us on their terms. In a binary world, we choose to make our own rules. We remain elusive.

As redundant and hopelessly cliché as it sounds, I sometimes feel like you are the only person in this world who understands me, like my world is you. It also probably sounds co-dependent, and unhealthy, and sad, but isn’t sharing one’s tiny, secret universe with another person also the

climax of intimacy?

I like my world being so full of you. I like the fact that my story is being written in our language.



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Back to *The Argonauts*: Nelson has created a patchwork of emotional mentors, the 'many-gendered-mothers-of-her-heart', a term borrowed by from Dana Ward's poem 'A Kentucky of Mothers' (Ward 2014) and referring to intellectual and artistic figures such as Barthes, Sedgwick, Winnicott, Eileen Myles, who shaped the development of her identity and the ways in which she experienced the world, as well as to real life maternal figures, like college professors and her own mother. I decided Nelson would become my own intellectual matriarch — not that I ever asked for her permission. I was enraptured.

That evening would stay in my memory as enrapturing, but this time it was not about Nelson. In that special string of coincidences — or fateful intertextual encounters — where one text leads you to another, I somehow ended up googling my favourite passage from the 1945 autofictional novel *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* written by the Canadian author Elizabeth Smart. My research brought to my attention Emily St. John Mandel's article that explained the aesthetic and literary function of the quoted Song of Songs in the context of the novel and gave some more information about the uniquely mystical, luminous, erotic scroll of the Tanakh. It is a text that has been interpreted in religious terms by many Jewish scholars, but also simply as a collection of songs about two lovers and their harmonious relationship.

Elizabeth Smart, an educated woman in her twenties from a well-off family, fell passionately in love with poet George Barker through reading his poetry, decided she would marry him, sought him out, developed a one-sided relationship with him, and bore him four children. In *By Grand Central Station* she tells the story of her infatuation, her meeting with Barker and their affair, in a language that ebbs and flows gracefully, lyrically, mystically, deliriously, a language that many have deemed as so flowery it becomes kitsch, a language that rivets me. The passage where the Song of Songs is quoted (in parentheses) is the following, which refers to her and Barker being stopped and questioned by police for breaking immorality laws.

But at the Arizona border they stopped us and said Turn Back, and I sat in a little

room with barred windows while they typed.

What relation is this man to you? (My beloved is mine and I am his: he feedeth among the lilies.)

How long have you known him? (I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine: he feedeth among the lilies.)

Did you sleep in the same room? (Behold thou art fair, my love, behold thou art fair: thou hast dove's eyes.)

In the same bed? (Behold thou art fair, my beloved, yea pleasant, also our bed is green.)

Did intercourse take place? (I sat down under his shadow with great delight and his fruit was sweet to my taste.)

When did intercourse first take place? (The king hath brought me to the banqueting house and his banner over me was love.) (Smart 1945 (1982 ed.), p. 81).

That same evening, I decided to start reading Susan Sontag. I was negatively predisposed towards her. Stefanos's girlfriend who still made me feel petty resentment, nowadays mostly out of habit, loved Sontag, so she had to be pretentious, didn't she?

I felt awestruck as I read *Against Interpretation* in which she defends art that prioritizes form and the aesthetic pleasure it provides against its critical interpretation, the often tyrannical quest for meaning, and the elitist way in which critics judged 'high' and 'low' art forms.

I joked to you about ending up admiring Sontag's work — before we fell in love and became monogamous you had graciously spent hours humouring me while I counted all the ways in which my ex's girlfriend should be cancelled, and Sontag was one of them. And then, my eyes

fell on the following passage:

Interpretation is a radical strategy for conserving an old text, which is thought too precious to repudiate, by revamping it. The interpreter, without actually erasing or rewriting the text, is altering it. But he can't admit to doing this. He claims to be only making it intelligible, by disclosing its true meaning. However far the interpreters alter the text (another notorious example is the Rabbinic and Christian 'spiritual' interpretations of the clearly erotic Song of Songs), they must claim to be reading off a sense that is already there (Sontag 1966).

I was spellbound. I'd never heard of the Song of Songs prior to reading the article on Smart that day (as it later turned out I had, but it was in Greek and my mind hadn't made the connection yet), and here it was again. It had found me without my seeking it.

Smart, a love addict like my recent self, and Sontag, a sworn aesthete and another love addict, live and write in communication, float among the discourse. This is something, of course, that we all partake to — willingly or unwillingly — as everything we do in culture is done as part of a global, historical dialogue. But to embrace the palimpsestic so consciously and to actively seek out contact, to perceive oneself as a tile in the mosaic of humanness, to embody atemporal and atotopical utopias of communion, to 'relate to' and to 'refer to', as an active means of connecting and (dis)identifying, strikes me as a beautiful thing.

*Come meet my family.*

Virginia Woolf writes, in her autobiographical *A Sketch of the Past*:

It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the stronger pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what;

making a scene come right; making a character come together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we — I mean all human beings — are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock. (Woolf 1939, p. 72).

That intricate, unexpected piece of embroidery made of threads connected to one another in ways that made me believe in the supernatural, shook me to my core. It was instances like that one that constituted the vibe of what I came to call ‘the rapture weeks’ before I read Woolf’s *A Sketch of the Past* and found that she used that word to refer to a similar ritual of participation and a feeling of connectedness. Two weeks in August during which we consumed everything, hungry for kinship, hungry to share snapshots of our childhoods, of all the specific books, moments, scents, words, flavors, that had made us who we were. We invited each other in, we felt big, Whitmanian, one with the universe. We would manically search for songs that had once been our jams, shared stories about our grandmas and our favourite Playmobil sets.

*Come see me, come taste my movie*

*watching Lucy sleep, inhaling her strong canine scent, reminiscing of her puppy years, her puffy little face, inquiring brown eyes, ears longer than the rest of her body, filling my very core with a joy and tenderness that had been unimaginable before I held her in my arms for the first time, before I first heard her try to bark, ears flailing around her face as she shook with puppy fervour*

*my little corner in your study, you on your desk, me on the sofa, so that the three of us could spend the day together, smoking, watching movies, reading and benefiting from the air-conditioning. I brought my favourite lamp that gives off a warm light that looks like honey, and put the big book with Cavafy’s complete poetry given to me by my dad on the coffee table.*



I have a dream of people falling in love with you through my language, the you within me, the way I fell in love with George Barker through Elizabeth Smart's metaphors (despite a later interview of their son and even the plot of her own book revealing he was kind of a jerk).

I cannot claim to portray you accurately, I am not to do justice to you when I'm partial (I cannot convey the whole, the inexpressible, one would have to meet you to be taken with). Only my feelings are my own, even the heart in which they reside is claimed by you, a beagle, and two cats.

Pondering on writing about her partner, Harry Dodge, but situating him in her story, Nelson shares a concern:

‘The inexpressible may be contained (inexpressibly!) in the expressed, but the older I get, the more fearful I become of this nothingness, this waxing lyrical about those I love the most (Cordelia).’ (Nelson 2015, 57).

I'm not there yet. I embrace the cliché elements of my nature — an upbringing of Hallmark-ness is how we relate. The nothingness of waxing poetic about you envelops me, as you tend to say, like a warm blanket.

For the first time in years, a raw, consuming happiness was making its way into the narrative. I felt like I had found my way. We had reached a quiet break of peace together, and we yearned to explore. Me, our multitudes, and you.

In the article (2020) that preceded his book, Kevin Brazil, author of *Whatever Happened to Queer Happiness* (2022) locates happiness in those moments of belonging, between bodies pulsating with desire, at a queer club. When I first read that, I felt a paradox arising in writing autobiographically while not fully recognizing my story as ‘mine’. My history is a collective history. Contrary to those who deem happiness as elusive or ineffable, such as de Montherlandt as quoted in Brazil’s article (‘Happiness writes in white ink on a white page’), I write my happiness, and I challenge my reader to read it till the end. I don’t believe a happy story has to be a sappy or boring one, or that it can

ever be devoid of suffering. Neither do I believe that suffering leads in a linear way to a path of growth and living the good life. But, like Brazil, I believe that my happiness is a vase glued together by pieces of others in me, pieces that broke, pieces that (were) mended. It is a vessel that can contain flowers, a one-room student apartment with a view of the Parthenon that held all those parties, all those breakfasts at the terrace, all my friends, you on my bed, our first exploratory caresses. When I write my story, 'what makes [me] feel like the self [I have] made has been worth it is that it is a self among others' (Brazil on the American trans activist and author Lou Sullivan).

Brazil writes in reference to Sullivan's diaries: 'it was a happiness I never knew could exist, because it is a happiness none of us can ever know alone'.

I, too, have found happiness at the queer club, shoved against a smoky corner pulsating with shades of alcoholic blue, in those seconds when I foresaw his lips approaching, watching him in disbelief as he came on to me with that inebriated bad boy look that would make me horny for years to come. Happiness lurked in murky alleys that smelt of piss, a homeless man sleeping close by as he lifted me up against the window of the closed toy shop, tasting each other as if we'd been starving for years, I feel for you, well I'm still hung up on my ex, we fucked anyway, an amethyst dawn broke as we kissed on our way to his place, then fighting with belts and zippers, show me how to touch you, not yet, his cat slept in my pile of clothes, I was Icarus and I would soon be extinguished, how can I ever look at you at a meeting again, now that I know your sex face? The aesthetics of the days were puffy eyes and romanticization, confetti daggers starting the bloodbath at the queer party, all the butterflies electrocuted by the disco ball at my feet, the tall boy with his face painted as a skeleton grinding against me, whispering it's your call, I don't really care, the metronome monotonously following Not in Love by Crystal Castles, never wanting to be naked again, just to stand in the heart of the city unmoving with arms spread wide open like the statue of Christ the Redeemer, the queen of the alley with a heart made of sandpaper, sipping milk from his lips, fingers laced up in a chain, tying nooses around our necks.

I think that being queer goes against the binaries of happiness and suffering. I have found both in

the same places, because it is those places where relating really happens. Sitting by my grandmother on her bed and listening to her stories, on her bedside at the hospital, by her coffin, kissing her temple. Sleeping on my mother's lap, and then sleeping in my bed, dreaming of her using the correct name and pronouns for me, only to wake up and realise this will never really happen. On the dancefloor, derelict, with a sprained ankle, with some random girl's hand up my shirt. In your study, crying and nursing a bottle of wine on another day when cops beating people up in squares was all over the news. In your study, one cat on the bookcase and one by the window, lo-fi music playing on the computer, as we study in the opaque light of a cloudy winter afternoon. Getting high to get by, and getting high before taking a walk in technicolour, laughing with jokes only we could understand. For me, happiness was something I was born into, something I lost, sought, found, lost again, mourned, and finally, having experienced pain, learnt to accept it when it returned, this time, without letting fear take over me.

My whole life, being queer has felt like the main road to happiness, and it has largely been so, although it has also been the source of many tears. I used to think that happiness is irrevocably tied to the end goal of being accepted, recognised, and granted rights by generous cishets. Happiness meant being desired and admired by everyone.

I've come to recognise happiness as relating vulnerably, resiliently. I don't just mean being resilient in the sense of developing coping mechanisms that work, or becoming used to enduring hardship. I mean being resilient in relationships — standing your ground and placing boundaries, while at the same time not giving up easily on people. I don't mean pestering reluctant unrequited crushes, or staying in toxic and abusive relationships while trying to make it work. I think that there is something profoundly queer about those boomer heteronormative memes with the photo of an older couple and a saying along the lines of 'In my day when something broke we fixed it.' I can read in it something that goes beyond a perpetuation of harmful dynamics that most often end up imprisoning women and femininities. It is, in my view, a choice of persistence, the abolition of a cis/heteronormative quest for mass acceptance, of the perfectionism of normality, of meeting others' expectations as a condition for recognition. It means to love unconditionally, with honesty



and boundaries, or else to not love at all.

In her paper 'Happiness and Queer Politics' (2009), Sara Ahmed writes:

Queer politics might radicalize freedom as the freedom to be unhappy. The freedom to be unhappy would be the freedom to live a life that deviates from the paths of happiness, wherever that deviation takes us. It would mean the freedom to cause unhappiness by acts of deviation. Queer enjoyment can thus be expressed as an embodiment of the freedom to be unhappy (Ahmed 15).

Being happily queer means, for me, staying queer, grieving those things that 'you miss out on' as a result, and then making space for the construction of a world based on new, personal and collective standards, a world in which failure is welcome, communication necessary, a world that makes it possible to rebuild those relationships with parents, sisters, brothers, neighbours, that went through misrecognition, disrespect, and chaos, only for overwhelming care to eventually prevail over difference. That happens, imperfectly, when all parties of a relationship decide that it is worth fighting for and end up doing the work, transforming themselves through and for the other, learning to accept that we need to shift if we want to keep each other afloat. Happiness cannot possibly take the form of a promise, not ever, especially not when one lives in the margins. Rather, its hue is that of hope, of possibility, not just of recognition but of alternative forms of relating, of merging into each other while maintaining some boundaries for the self.

This is why I write about my mother and about our cats, this is why I write about you.

I look back at those summer days tenderly, like the days of my childhood at the house with the bougainvillea entrance. They seem so long gone that the pain can feel insufferable at times, so when the grief eventually turns into nostalgia, I allow myself to indulge, lean into it.

Nostalgia is grief with bougainvilleas.

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When I dream of home, I often dream of the one-room apartment at Vyronas where I stayed before moving in with you. The apartment had certainly witnessed many of my transformations, its tiny bathroom sink stained with hair dye, a vessel for hair I cut myself with nail scissors. A friend had sat on that sofa while amateurishly engraving the nape of my neck with my first tattoo — the phases of the moon, after Stefanos broke up with me. The walls had overheard me recite many poems about shovels, purple armpit fuzz, and my mum. The makeshift breakfast-on-bed table embellished with stickers that read ‘The faggots are coming for you’ had shielded Stefanos’s chest from my cat the night after his surgery, as he tried to catch some sleep in his Captain America onesie. The mouldy wooden floor had held me as I fell on my knees, bawling my eyes out, begging him not to break up with me after a horrible fight that was neither our first nor our last. The tiny window over the piano that allowed me a portion of starry blackness every night had been my consolation when I was left alone, masturbating to the thought of him coming back. Then the kitchen sink had bathed the top half of my body when the black kitten arrived to ease my despair, and I had to keep him in the bathroom which was essentially a hole with a shower head on the pink wall, to protect him from the dangerous movements of my older cat. That apartment had offered shelter to many young queerlings, the terrace had hosted the best parties with trashy Greek pop music and the best views of the fireworks on New Year’s Eve. It also held the memory of a birthday party that had led to yet another rejection by Stefanos at the entrance when I asked him back, which had left me devastated and incapable of eating or getting out of bed for days. That apartment, with its pastel walls that always carried fairy lights, photos of deer, artworks by queer artists, and the first Pride placards I’d made (one with a beard made of flowers and one with a stiletto-heeled hairy leg kicking the patriarchy), truly contained me. I stored my ideas in its cupboards, I puked my emotions on the walls. I painted them every other year and redecorated every inch every other month. I bought a smart TV to watch *Friends* and *Sex Education*. The TV was nailed to the wall lopsidedly, I used to joke, like my gender.

And then you came along: you, sleeping over the night before Stefanos’s surgery because I needed a

friend to help with my anxiety, you, kneeling together with my other friends by the sofa and wiping away my tears after the rejection of the man I loved, you, playing prank calls from the '90s on your phone to cheer me up, you, ending up half naked, your body plastered against mine, as we lay together in the dark after a Halloween party, satisfying my hunger for human touch, quietly allowing me to explore the new yet familiar terrain of skin, your hills and your valleys. And then there was the first weekend we spent together as a trial couple, watching Mr Bean, applying face masks in a space that felt too claustrophobic for two people, two cats, and a new relationship which I wasn't yet entirely ready for, lying down on a rug on the terrace, holding each other and listening to music, staring at the city that unfolded below our feet at night, in its dimly lit, busy, buzzing glory. It was in my apartment when I did your make-up in shades of rose and pomegranates, you tried on my dusty pink skirt, I wrapped a scarf around your torso and took photos of you that you then sent to your other friends, giddy with gender euphoria.

I thought I would miss that apartment when you first asked me to move in with you. I would miss the tiny bachelor pad with the mosaic floors and the windows that served me the city morning, offered me the sky, its sluggish indigos and brilliant azures, all its watercolour sunsets, the gray fleece blanket of a cloudy noon, the honeydew warmth of the golden hour landing liquid on beige building façades, and the nebulous fuzziness around the Acropolis hill about which I couldn't stop rambling when we first got high together.

The truth was that all the love and all the hurt had come full circle. It was time for me to move on. I packed parts of me like the first Starbucks cup I ever got with my chosen name written on it in cardboard boxes, I photographed the terrazzo tiles, and took a taxi for our new home, in which your study and my study with the new view of sky and the pomegranate tree that reached my window were linked through the corridor and oversaw each other, and we would often turn around and cheerily wave at each other during our honeymoon period from across the corridor. I showed you romance, you showed me integrity. We explored grief together, but we also explored love. The harvest from the lemon tree in your garden seasoned our food. Our cats, sprawled over the desk as the sun peered in through the large windows, meowed for attention. For the first time in my life, I

felt truly safe.

## Friend

Who we are, the multiplicities of us, is always determined by the relationships we form with those who surround us. Even at those moments when we are alone, we exist in relation to the silence with which we are forced to converse.

I have often wondered who I really am, and the frictions and silences of the covid-19 pandemic of 2020 helped me discover that I do not consist of one solid self. I float on different planes of existence, I perform different identities, I wear various clothes and paint my face with different tints, either clashing or harmonious, depending on the humans or other animals I coexist with at each given moment.

I spent the first lockdown at my parents' house with a cat and a dog, mourning my breakup with Stefanos. My family knew I was going through heartbreak and they were very understanding. My mum would make me food when I felt too depressed and my dad would talk with me about my feelings and watch movies together. Yet still, while living at their place, I had to pretend I was cisgender and fine with being called by my given name. Those first months when the virus spread were full of fear and uncertainty, which made us care for each other with excess, fight with each other even more — my brother refused to respect safety measures and I blamed him for not caring for my middle-aged parents' health — and wonder what to do with all the time suddenly left in our hands. My not-so-tech-savvy mother used to have nightmares about teaching online. My father was an essential worker, an oncologist working at the hospital, facing the new threat every day. Amidst all that, I could not see my friends, I could not see Stefanos with whom I was trying to be just-friends, I socialised through Zoom and, most of all, felt terribly lonely. I was trapped with a fearful, heartbroken self, yet a self nonetheless, and I tried to silence the screaming voices in my head about my past relationship and my uncertainty about the future, with Netflix and online courses on literature. I met with my friend in person only once, on my birthday. She drove to my parents' place and brought me homemade cupcakes and scraps for my journal, performing the, at the time, illegal act of getting out of the house without what the government considered 'a serious excuse'. It had

felt exhilarating, to break the law to do something so beautiful as to meet a friend. The pandemic intensified how I felt about my friends. We were unable to see each other, yet it was their existence that kept me going.

Among other experimental measures that ended up achieving more policing and less protection, people in Greece were required to text the government every time they had to leave the house to walk the dog or go grocery shopping. There was a specific code for ‘Physical Exercise’ during which socializing was prohibited. The rest of the world still is not fully aware of the extent of the strict — and often nonsensical — government measures which led to fines and even beatings by the police.

The second lockdown found us together. I had come to stay at your place and even brought the cats, for a week that would eventually stretch into years of cohabitation. That quarantine was different in many ways. We were more scared of the cops doing rounds in our neighbourhood than of the actual virus that was killing people. People were dying and we were forced to hide in your house. Our relationship was young, our wounds (mine from the breakup, yours from the loss of your cat) were still fresh, living together was a form of self-care for both of us. We created vices of self-medication, spent so many nights awake, talking for hours, blasting music really loudly and singing to the top of our lungs, or nursing a bottle of wine and crying together. Deep inside, I was no less myself with my parents than I was with you, but with you, I didn’t have to hide anything. I could exist loudly, all of me. One evening after the fateful day when the police beat a man with a metal club, claiming that he was violating the measures for the pandemic, hell broke loose: in the neighbourhood of Nea Smyrni, which was quite close to our neighbourhood, Kallithea, civilians clashed violently with the police in protest. A policeman was lightly injured and suddenly his life was all that mattered, while hundreds were dying every day in understaffed and underequipped hospitals, while people were arrested for participating in protests and beaten up in their own homes. Another policeman was seen raising a gun. The city was burning and I was glad about it. At the same time, though, I felt helpless and terrified. Watching the walls of my city tumbling down, I

burst into tears and nursed a bottle of wine alone, watching videos from the mayhem in our kitchen. You did not find me like that until later. I was crying uncontrollably and posting drunk stories on Instagram. You held me and asked me why I had not immediately come to you. 'We are together now,' you said. I realised once again that you were there for me. I did not have to be alone anymore. We had each other and that way we survived.

Summer had now arrived and, even though the virus was still killing hundreds every day, the heaviest measures were lifted for Greece to welcome tourists.

Even though you were a great friend to everyone who was lucky enough to have you in their lives, you were also a total hermit, and preferred to have friends over at home when you had to socialise instead of going out. We did not really mind the excuse of staying at home together. We were lucky in our arrangement. Staying within the safety of our little nest during the covid-19 years offered you peace, pleasure, even. As much as I loved cocooning, I could never stay inside for too long and the quarantine had brought me to my wits' end. It was the second summer since the beginning of the pandemic when measures were loosening to welcome tourists into the country, as if we weren't mourning thousands of victims, as if we did not have to text the government when we wanted to walk the dog a couple of months ago.

So I decided to go out and meet a friend.

Friendship, for me, is mainly about feelings and effort: the feeling of safety when you know that someone has really chosen — and proven it, time and again — to have your back, but also to let you know when you disappoint them. We choose our friends, unlike our biological family, which we inherit, and with them we experience giddiness, connection, anger, grief. We fall in love with our friends, in a way. We relate to each other even when we are completely different, we have fun together, we play and we fight, and we always choose to become better for them. The knowledge that we can opt out at any time is what makes this choice so majestic. For those who really matter, we choose to follow difficult paths, and we always persevere.

Marilyn Friedman (1989) had already located voluntariness as a defining aspect of friendship and she had pointed out the possibilities for subversion it offers to queer people and politics:

Friendship is more likely than many other close personal relationships to provide social support for people who are idiosyncratic, whose unconventional values and deviant life-styles make them victims of intolerance from family members and others who are unwillingly related to them. In this regard, friendship has socially disruptive possibilities, for out of the unconventional living which it helps to sustain there often arise influential forces for social change (Friedman 286-287).

Roseneil suggests the de-centralization of the heteronormative model and the family and the centralization of friendship in its place, acknowledging its critical role in queer communities and ethnic minorities, even when their narratives have redefined, radicalised and subverted the notion of family (334) using terms such as Kath Weston's 'families of choice' (1991) (335).

In Greece, the notion of family has been ingrained in nationalistic and heteronormative narratives about what is considered healthy, normal, and useful to the nationalist, capitalist model. Being overridden by those narratives about family in Greece, as well as by the fixation of our society with romantic love, we tend to prioritise family and ignore the power of friendship to subvert dominant structures. Greek mothers often say 'no friend will love you like your mother'. I reached a point of asking myself: why does everything have to revolve around biological family, or (mainly heterosexual) romantic relationships? Why shouldn't the notion of friendship hold just as much emotional and constitutive power?

I have a friend with an unparalleled talent for making tangible what it feels like to be a woman, a queer or otherwise marginalized person who lives in Greece. They sign their poetry as  $\mu\kappa\chi$  and recently published their first collection. In one poem, they compare their friends to different kinds of insects (butterflies, cicadas, cockroaches etc.) based on characteristics such as their resilience, their beauty, or their trauma. The verses which I find the most striking remind me of the subversive



potential of friendship that so many feminist and queer scholars have demonstrated, of the importance of self-identification, of moving away from the often violent, normative gaze of traditional dominant narratives:

we all like  
to dip  
our feelers  
in the damp soil  
and we fear  
big animals  
especially humans  
especially when they  
agree with the taxonomies  
and the roles  
without understanding  
that effortlessly  
we change form  
and none of us is lost  
during winters  
and you  
Aesop, you wanker  
you forgot to say  
that the cicada  
used to sing  
about the nights  
she spent  
with the ant  
together

hidden

almost seventeen years

from your gaze

(μκχ)

Friendships were crucial when it came to my self-discovery and self-identification. As Aristotle, and Nancy Miller, referring to him, write, a friend is someone who often mirrors you, and through that mirror I could dare to see myself as I wanted — masculine at times, androgynous always, like someone in drag when I wore my feminine dresses and put on makeup. Most importantly, they all saw me as Sam. With the support of my friends I found the words to describe myself, I grew into them, I received the support to stand my ground and believe in what I felt was true. We helped each other grow from caterpillars into butterflies with a distinct beauty of their own. We accepted each other's cockroach selves, the ones that, like in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, repelled and alienated our families. We were feminists and queers, small crawlies who struggled to survive, unwelcome in most households, chased and beaten with a flyswatter, yet we persisted, we took each other into our hands and eased them in the air, out the window, when we needed it the most. With my friends, we crawl, we fly, we dig our shelter underground, and together we play, we sing, and we laugh at society's gaze, which thinks it can contain us.

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In Platonic philosophy, Platonic love refers to an intense, deep bond based on a mutual appreciation and pursuit of truth, beauty, and goodness. However, Platonic relationships also did have a sexual element in Ancient Greece. Are we misusing the term when we refer to friendships as platonic? I remain confused about the boundaries between romance and friendship, and about how they have evolved through the ages. I believe that our relationship started off as Platonic, in the most accurate meaning of the word, and gradually it became everything.

I need to tell you this, my love, even though we are currently not in the same room: ever since I met you, you have always been, first and foremost, my best friend. There is power beyond words in the trust, the honesty, the resilience, the familiarity, and the pleasure the title connotes. I cannot help feeling in awe when I think about the foundation of our queerplatonic relationship which we tried, failed — and sometimes succeeded — to explain to all those who asked. Queerplatonic is a term coined by the aromantic/asexual Dreamwidth user Meloukhia in 2010 to refer to 'a deep (almost symbiotic in some ways) emotional connection that transcends what I think of as friendship' (Meloukhia). For us, queerplatonic was an in-between state — like most things in our lives. It meant a connection that was more than a friendship — even if that friendship included sexual benefits — which, gladly, in our case it did — but without the being-swept-away element. For a good year into our relationship we weren't in love in the traditional sense. Unlike many queerplatonic relationships between asexual or aromantic people which remain that way, that changed for us. I fell gloriously in love with you one morning on a balcony over crepes and strawberries, your eyes glimmering as you smiled for the camera on my phone, and on that day at the beach where, again, I captured the moment on the camera when we dipped our toes in the water. Such photos crystallized the moments when our play turned into dreams to become enmeshed with each other, when the food that we ate and the homemade martinis that we drank turned into butterflies in our stomachs. We became ourselves as the other person bore witness to our transformation, we were rendered real through the recognition of our peers. Where our parents had often, unwittingly, crashed us, we rebuilt our nests

and we

weaved our webs anew.

Every time I let go and fall back into your arms, I feel, at last, like I am flying. Every day when you call me by my real name, I choose you as a friend more than anything else, and that is the deepest romance I've experienced.

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That day, you offered to stay with Lucy and the cats while I went out to meet with my best friend, George, who picked me up in his car from the train station by the mall, a meeting spot that had remained unchanged in the last ten years. It was here where me and the hot, quiet senior-year-student who I was convinced looked like the dark-haired Edward Cullen of my teenage dreams, went on our first dates in high school. I had stalked him in school corridors and courted him by slipping anonymous love notes under his desk, religiously following the words of the great Young Adult fiction classics I used to consume with great ardour. George has always been one of the most important people in my life. He was my first romantic relationship and I thought we would eventually get married. It lasted for six years, during which we discovered the world together. Every year we saved up to go to Paris, we shared our books and read each other's writing, we made each other advent calendars on Christmas, we wrote poems and funny jingles, invented our own language and printed a dictionary for it. We grew together and grew apart after I went through the existential crisis of my queer awakening and fell in love with Stefanos. George had been extremely supportive of me coming out as bisexual. His heart was big enough to let me stay in it even after I broke it – and our relationship was important enough for the both of us, even without its romantic and sexual elements. We split up and proceeded to upgrade our relationship to one of the deepest and most rewarding friendships I could have wished for.

‘Let's go to Pefki,’ I blurted out first thing when I got into his car.

‘Sure thing,’ he laughed and turned on the ignition. His home was only minutes away from the house where my family lived since my parents' marriage and until my brother's birth. For years, George had been quite obliging during my compulsive bouts of nostalgia, when I visited him and asked him to walk around the neighbourhood together, stalk the building, and play with the swings at the playground where I used to go with my grandfather.

I hadn't been to the neighbourhood in ages — the last time had to be long before the pandemic —

yet everything looked and felt the same. Same quiet cobblestone road, lathered in warm streetlight, a calming and familiar view I used to enjoy as a child, lulled by its uneven texture on the backseat of my dad's car while he drove us home after an evening at the cinema. Same one-story 80s homes, with their slightly worn-out yards, their garden gnomes and faded plastic kid houses. The grove our balcony used to overlook seemed unchanged as well, with its bent, swaying pine trees that offered their shade to morning dog-walkers and housed the lamp-lit kiosks of the annual book fair under their breezy roof on the most memorable summer evenings of my childhood.

That is part of what home looked in my head back then: a balcony that's facing a grove where fairy-like feasts take place on moonlit nights, where children prance around mountains of books; it is the place where I used to return to after visiting the fair, still able to hear the song of the cicadas as I put on my pyjamas and curled up on the couch to slowly sink into Greek children's writer Evgenios Trivizas' enchanting wordplay universes.

The imposing, vibrant bougainvillea was still there, arched around the entrance of our old building. Every time we went to the house with George, I would sneak into the parking lot and look through the glass on the front door, always comforted to see that the same black marble, nebulous with liquid white tinges, still covered the floor and stairs. George, always a bit more law-abiding than I was, would look around himself awkwardly during those stalkerish moments of nostalgia hunt. We then looked up at the balcony on the second floor made of a white, sturdy wall that separated my mother's lush jungle from the rest of the world. I would picture the inside of the house that grew too small for us after my brother was born, but always appeared big enough in my knee-height point of view memories. The living room with the pink sofa, the sage armchairs and the glass table, with the huge mirrors I would pose in front of, with my mum's out-of-tune antique piano I would practice unmusical tunes on, and with the black marble floor, my barefoot pitter-patter on which my dad loved to mock adoringly. The small white-and-yellow kitchen, the only room of which no photos exist today, had always appeared to me so bright and cosy that its memory has now been completely fictionalized into a blinding, universal glow. My parents' room, muted burgundy and

dusty pink, the big bed I used to jump on, singing ‘Amado Mio’ in imaginary English, with my dad always saying that it was his mother’s favourite song while he was shaving and trying to get me ready for kindergarten. My bedroom, with the crib I kept until I was six, the pale yellow teddy bear wallpaper and curtains, filled with toys from ceiling to floor: dolls, board games, books, and my first dollhouse furniture: a miniature bedroom my parents had brought me from a trip to Paris. I remember the baby Mickey Mouse train, a Little People house, the kiddie desk with the whiteboard cover and, last but not least, Billie, the huge cuddly bear, my very first gift from Santa Claus. My childhood room was a paradise of privilege, and I was lucky to have been brought up surrounded by such abundance. That experience made me attached to material objects, to the point where, during a germaphobic phase when I was six, I would wipe my books and toys clean with alcohol after every use, to prevent decay. Objects always gave me a feeling of permanence which, I realized, would not be granted to me through other attachments.

I have often asked myself, why do I identify with Barthes so much? What is it in this white male aesthete that makes me return to him, finding him in my pantheon of women and non-binary mothers, alongside Victor Hugo, Marcel Proust, and Leonard Cohen? What is it about that specific territory of canon that makes me feel echoed? Is it that half of them are queer? The rest surely is not. Is it that I relate to them? Is it something of the stars that we have in common, or is it simply my heritage, my class privilege, my upbringing? Is it, in the words of Mireille Ribière when she writes about the house of Barthes’s paternal grandparents, that I lived in a house where I took from my mother my ‘[...] first music lessons on the piano’ and where I ‘[...] witnessed at first hand the social rituals of provincial bourgeois [or rather Greek middle class] life’?

At this point, I’ll allow myself to write about stars, be it good or bad writing. The stars I want to write about are the ones on the ceiling of my first bedroom, coming out of a white plastic Playskool projector, along with pink sheep and light blue elephants. The stars were pale yellow and chunky, with rounded angles so that they couldn’t hurt me. They were soft and pastel and they danced upon my first sky, while Brahms’s lullaby was playing from the projector. Mum and Dad would wind it from the back and then give it to me to hold until I fell asleep. I recall one of them standing on the

doorway of the room and smiling at the pastel multitudes, with bright yellow light coming from behind them, from the corridor where we used to store the ironing board. I don't know if that scene ever actually existed, or if it is significantly more fictional than the others. I asked my mum but she couldn't remember it. I am probably expecting too much of her. She couldn't be further away from being a romanticizer. Perhaps I expect the people around me to show me their love in my love language: words. That is unfair to them, for the people who cook, for the people who offer to clean your kitchen drawers.

'You always diminish my love for you', Stefanos had told me. 'I'm tired of having to prove it to you verbally all the time. You keep demanding my words, but you forget that not all of us are poets.'

I have some memories, like those of Barthes's, saturated with privileges that make the world seem magical to children's eyes, but in reality is just another way to perpetuate inequality.

The worldly, the domestic, the wild: is this not the very tripartition of social desire?

It is anything but surprising that I turn from this Bayonnaise garden to the fictive,

Utopian spaces of Jules Verne and Fourier?

(The house is gone now, swept away by the housing projects of Bayonne)

(Barthes, in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*).

I have some memories. Reconstructed or refabricated, some projected, some glowing.



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George had always been so insightful and tacitly wise, a force of empathy and forgiveness in my life, the epitome of a person who loves unconditionally, who gives second chances even when he shouldn't.

After meeting Stefanos, I broke George's heart, slowly, surely, tragically. I could see nothing past my new infatuation, and it was a fact that ours had been, in nature, an adolescent relationship. We lacked the necessary training to get past this. It was true that George and I had started to move in different directions long ago: he, well into his twenties, worrying about his future and preparing to start a more grounded life as a graduate student alongside a person who had vowed for six years that they would stay with him forever. I, having just started university, living with my grandma, for the first time close to the bustling city centre, dealing with a newly discovered, insatiable bisexual desire, faced for the first time with the terrifying axiom that used to infuriate me: that most first relationships don't last forever. I had new leftist friends and my favourite past-time and way of releasing sexual tension had become fighting with my new, hardcore Marxist buddy at uni; retro Communism vs. a faltering, third-ish wave of feminism.

George was satisfied with his life; I wanted more. There were periods of not speaking with my mum after my coming out, which had triggered my first, terrifying panic attacks. George was now discovering the mind-blowing abundance of books that existed in the world, and wanted to stay at home, play video games, study everything that interested him, and look forward to our moving abroad, our much anticipated going 'where culture is'. I, on the other hand, was vicariously living through the lives of fanfiction characters, Les Mis uni modern AU, was revolting against my family by giving myself highlights the colours of the bisexual flag, and all I could think about was going out at parties and kissing girls. I was out, proud, and already traumatized. I wanted to travel the world with a backpack, to drink this liquid life, to get away from my grandmother's subtextual curfew and live with a chosen family, have a queer community, a queer bestie, a queer mentor, and,

as I started to realize with dread about the future of my relationship, a queer partner. Someone who could understand what I was going through, what that awakening felt like: life-changing, world-discovering, utterly inebriating.

Another thing that was true was the drive and conviction both of us had when it came to salvaging the relationship. We truly believed that resorting to immature attempts at polyamory would just make our problems disappear. He was my favourite person in the world. I was deeply in love with him until the end, and that love turned friendly, never disappeared, but our incompatibilities were becoming more serious than my need to 'experiment' with girls and get it out of my system. We had both grown trapped into a relationship that had accidentally stopped working by the time I met Elena at uni, who smelled of weed ('like burnt flowers', I had told her), asked me to taste her breasts at a secret sleepover with my parents out of town, during which we exchanged a mouthful of Nutella while wearing nothing but oversized tees in the kitchen. Then, Stefanos came along, and I had been ready for a long time to be swept off my feet; I had been dreaming for ages, craving to have my wings burnt by getting too close to the sun.

Things ended explosively, traumatizingly — both with Elena and with George, eventually with Stefanos as well. Hollywood and Disney movies, as well as my Orthodox Greek family, had taught me how to immerse myself into a relationship, but never how to end it when it stopped working. Instead, I started fucking Stefanos and, when he told me he didn't want anything more serious, I fell into a self-destructive, depressive rut. Inevitably, it was George, my all time biggest confidante, who had to support me through my zombie period, while witnessing his relationship of 6 years falling apart, unable to do anything about it. For six months, until I got properly together with Stefanos, I simply dragged George down my very own special pit of hell. None of us knew how to leave and, to this day, I have no idea how we survived that period and managed to remain friends — family. Our bond was too strong.

There are some people who come into your life to make it one, to hold you and teach you, to call

you in and out, to love you, and love you well. I will be forever grateful for you, for George, for all my friends. I will always get high on seeing you thrive.

When I returned home, I found you in the middle of a call with your best friend, Lee. I was the first one to meet Lee. Back then, he was a shy queerling, with his hair dyed in the colours of the rainbow. Today he is a grown man, living in Glasgow with his two partners, thriving at being an adult, at making choices, at caring for himself and for others.

He had come to a meeting of our queer organization about six years ago. It was an open meeting with the purpose of bringing together young queer people to socialize. He must have been eighteen at the time, and I immediately felt protective of him. This feels ridiculous now, after Lee has offered me his protection, wisdom, and support in all those ways, whenever I hit rock bottom.

After a quiet adolescence, I had just started to party a bit more wildly, much to the dismay of my family. Now here was Lee, younger than me, telling me that he had plans to go to a queer party after the meeting. For some reason, the first thing I thought to ask him was whether he had eaten anything to stomach the alcohol, and when he replied negatively, I offered to take him home and make him some pasta.

It was like that, back then. I was living alone for the first time — or, rather, with Stefanos — and I was open to everything. My apartment would welcome every queer person I had just met and trusted, as a way to give back to the community that had invited me in and was holding me so well. On Christmas, I would make cupcakes for ‘the kids’ (my queer friends, and proteges who had nowhere to go for the holidays). I listened to people’s problems and, ever so naively, tried to fix them. I felt alive, until my flame burnt out.

But back when I met Lee, I still had things to give.

He immediately had my attention. He was highly intelligent, an extremely talented artist, witty, and funny. He met my Irish friend Karla who was staying with me in Athens, and they immediately got

along with each other. I made Lee some pasta and gave it to him in a Tupperware as he shared his story with us. He had been traumatized by British academia and had returned to Greece to start over. I saw kindness in him, and he soon proved my initial assumption. We got to witness each other raw, to take care of each other during breakdowns, to understand what it was like to be non-cis and neurodivergent in Greece. After years of shared crafting and hair dyeing sessions, after years of laughing, trying to change the world, watching *Steven Universe* and supporting each other, Lee made it: he left the country. We are both planning to follow his example.

You met him when you first came to the group. One day, we all met at the house of Stefanos's best friend and did face masks. You were my new friend and I invited you along. We all took photos with slices of cucumbers covering our eyes and posted them on Facebook.

You and Lee formed your own profound bond. When I first met you, you were more sociable than you are today. You weren't burnt out in the same way that I was, but you were fighting your own battles. In the midst of it all, you saw something in each other, and immediately started hanging out. When I was with you two I felt at home. The atmosphere was always one of kindness and understanding, of working towards making it, of figuring out ways to survive.

Unlike us, Lee was out about his identity. He was also autistic. Among us he found his people, but in Greece he faced incredible violence everywhere he turned. Violence is deeply ingrained in the culture, in the system, it permeates society, it drives the authorities, it defines the climate we live in. Lee announced to you that he would move to Glasgow at a park on a small hill with a view of the city. The sound of cars from the busy road below you muddled the silence that followed your shock. For some reason, you had misunderstood and thought he was leaving immediately. It took you some time to calm down after you realized you still had some time together.

After Lee left, you came even closer to his mother, Christina. Stefanos and I had been introduced to Christina both as Lee's mom, and as an activist within queer spaces. She participated in the first group for parents of queer children. Those parents changed our futures. They drove us home from

gender reconstruction surgeries and advocated for us at the Parliament for the Legal Gender Recognition Act. Christina, individually, changed our lives. She invited us to her colourful home, full of art and cats, she cooked vegan dishes for us, dyed her hair blue with us, and she walked by our side at Pride.

For almost a year, you filled Christina's empty nest, visiting her after your classes and sleeping over. You used to sleep on Lee's bed, smelling his pillow, in the brightly coloured room with the posters of The Beatles, the stuffed owls, and the pink Christmas tree sitting in the corner year-round.

Christina never uttered the word 'mother' to you, but she honoured it with her every action. Today we are neighbours and we often eat together with her elderly mother. Lee's 90-year-old grandmother adores him, and has welcomed us into her life with our real names and pronouns, no questions asked. One day, maybe, all of us will be living in a house in Ireland, making a new togetherness out of friendship.

In *Trans Care* (2020), Hil Malatino writes about the care webs formed between trans people, when they are tied to one another in a pursuit of mutual care 'in the aftermath of [the] refusals' of the institutions which are forced upon us (Malatino 2-3). Malatino theorizes the importance of aftercare, a form of care that comes after the abuse and neglect inflicted upon us by dominant structures, in order to help us heal 'in the wake of massive upheaval and transformation'. We need aftercare '[...] when our lives fall in the gaps between institutions and conventional familial structures. Those gaps are worlds, and those worlds don't function without care work'. Between the folds of trauma and not-belonging, trans care is 'what facilitates and supports emergence into a radically recalibrated experience of both bodymind and the world it encounters' (Malatino 3).

With our friends, Lee and Christina, his biological mother yet also a person who chose every day to accept us for who we were, we weaved webs of mutual care and understanding, we diligently patched up the wounds we had suffered in the hands of others, and every day we keep proving that

people, despite their flaws and failings, are more than able to hold each other well.

I was exhausted by all the socializing of the day but that never prevented me from feeling joy whenever I saw Lee's face on your screen. I jumped in front of the camera and he greeted me with his smile of unadulterated bliss. I sighed, sharing the warm feeling that was spreading inside my chest. I imagined holding his hand with the beautifully painted nails and looking into his eyes, puffy from sleep, at their pastel house in Glasgow. My friend. Our friends.

You lit a joint and I took a seat next to you. 'Lee, I've got to show you the new miniatures I've made!' I shouted, looking for trinkets around the room, eager to share my toys with him. His smile never failed to reach his eyes. His hair was, this time, a brilliant turquoise, long and curly, framing his burly, pixelized figure.

Even during your most solitary days, you have a secret stash of energy for Lee. You play Don't Starve Together and Stardew Valley online, and you sigh with relief after unloading your burdens and dreaming together of our futures in a collective somewhere in the Irish countryside.

Lee brought his own miniatures to the camera. He was designing props for an art course. He held a tiny pencil and pillow between his deft fingers that could turn the earth and its various tints into magic — music made from clay, coffee stains, paint. He showed us different textures that he'd painted — bricks, cracked soil, wood, and floral tapestries. I wanted to touch it all. 'We should make a doll house together one day,' he said.

I smile as I am writing this. I text my friend Karla, who is currently living her best life among musicians and other contemporary bohemians in County Mayo, Ireland. She sends me a video of herself dancing with older people at some event. My digitally maintained friendships help me stay afloat and dream on. The pixels that look like my friends, blurry and loud, with a background of my utopias of abroad, remind me that I, too, belong in the wide, messy world.

Friendships between women, and people socialized as women surely is an issue that is not being

talked about enough. Being born and raised in a patriarchal society, I had to work extremely hard to overcome the misogyny I had internalized. As a young girl, my hatred and jealousy were targeted mostly at classmates who were more popular or had bigger breasts than me — Alas, validation and admiration from men have been intrinsic to my sense of value from a very young age, as a result of intense bullying from boys during my wallflower years. I had to fight hard against the secret name-calling and antagonism, so that I could create meaningful bonds that weren't tainted by competitiveness, jealousy, and selfishness. Every day my friends teach me more about care, empathy, humility, healthy boundaries, and rewarding relationships. These are the people I've chosen and continue to choose, the people who have called me out and in, forcing me to face my mistakes, the people who were there for me when I withered, nourishing my roots with their compassion.

In her 2019 memoir *My Brilliant Friends*, Nancy K. Miller presents her views on friendship through the analysis of her connections with other feminist scholars. Tracing the history of philosophical theories about friendship, she begins with Aristotle's views of a friend as a mirror of oneself, continues with Montaigne's views on the ineffability of feelings caused by intense bonds and, concluding with Nehamas, she asks: where is the place of female friendship in philosophical discourse?

Miller finds answers in the wisdom of her friends, Carolyn Heilbrun, Naomi Schor, and Diane Middlebrook, as well as in other woman philosophers such as Simone de Beauvoir. At some point, referring to Naomi Schor, Miller writes 'Were we like each other because we were women or already friends, or because we were fucked up?' I relate to that a lot, even though I do not see myself as a woman. Most of my friends are what the dominant part of society would consider fucked up, in several ways. Crazy, sick, fat, neurodivergent, non-Christian, leftist angry femmes, and enbies with a tendency to confuse people with our appearance.

Feminist scholars such as Sasha Roseneil (2006) have pointed out that

Friendship offers feminism a focus on the agentic, non-institutional, emotional, and pleasurable aspects of social life. [...] While friendship is never outside the relations of power which shape the social world, neither is it ever fundamentally contained or defined by the core social institutions of family, work, and nation. [...] friendship is characteristically and distinctively interstitial, unregulated, voluntary, chosen, and driven by emotion and the pursuit of pleasure (Roseneil 325).

Friendship is laced with relations of inequality, like class, gender, and race differences. What defines friendship for me is the work invested in acknowledging, addressing, and bridging those differences, and an ability to shut up and listen to the other person, to be willing to learn. It is often about putting the needs of others before our own, but also about always listening to ourselves, since friendship is a choice, we can opt out of if our needs are not met.

I met Karla online when I was 15 after we had both commented on each other's Harry Potter fanfiction. She encouraged me generously to keep writing even though, to this day, I cringe at the realization that she had read what I wrote back then. We soon started sending videos to each other, talking about how Malala Yousafzai being shot was the only reason we didn't drop out of school. I learnt to play Under Pressure on the piano for her birthday, and she would sing Beatles songs for me in her angelic voice. The transcripts of our earliest conversations, each message being a 500-word essay are a study in self-radicalizing. I recall reading her email where she talked about feminism as I was getting on the school bus. She had told me that she'd spent the night camping outside the parliament, advocating for abortion rights. 'I guess feminism is good,' I had replied to her, mesmerized by her persistence and dynamism. 'Just not the hairy kind'.

Karla was the one who'd inspire me to become an activist and a raging feminist with remarkably hairy armpits and a healthy amount of class consciousness. She was different from everyone I had met in my secluded upper-middle-class Greek upbringing. I idolized her, even fancied her a bit, but eventually something stronger than romance would take hold: friendship.



Karla got into uni one year before I did. She began studying archaeology, which would soon bring her to Greece on a student exchange programme. Both her parents and mine were scared of the other kid being a grown-up predator, so we showed them the videos. Dad bought her flowers, and came with my brother and me to receive her at the airport. It was her, and the video of us screaming and hugging still haunts our old Facebook accounts.

To this day, Karla keeps inflicting some of her wisdom on me, keeps changing me, always towards a better direction. Over the years she met all my romantic partners, her family always welcoming us in their warm and dreamy cottage. I couldn't be happier that she has now come to call you her friend.

Of course, we keep discussing how Harry Potter was a determining force in our friendship, and we often discuss J.K. Rowling's transphobia. We are two adults who grew up being entirely obsessed with Harry Potter, a series that seemed to be, during my childhood, all about equality, diversity, and non-discrimination. It was a time of teenage idealism, and I used to cling to every form of resistant representation I could get. I had written fanfiction that queered up the characters and felt as if Rowling had allowed that. We felt overwhelmed with Rowling's betrayal of trans people.

My journey through coming to terms with my non-binary identity had largely been shaped by the opportunities offered by Harry Potter's enchanted universe, by a world whose members fought for the inclusion of the Other, a world of ostracized werewolves who transformed at full moon and woke up with their bodies full of scars, written, as Rowling herself had stated, as a metaphor for people living with AIDS, of people judged based on the 'purity' of their blood, of 'freaks' and 'abominations', to use the words of Sirius Black's mother's portrait, with pink hair, shapeshifting abilities, and a punk attitude. Harry Potter had been a paradise of escapism and belonging during my childhood, and had evolved into a universe where I could finally be myself and be recognized and embraced by the matronly Molly Weasleys of my heart. Where the grown-ups of my family had failed to love me the way I wanted, where my grandmother had unknowingly hurt me with her homophobia, and my parents withheld their approval I sought the unconditional care of Ron

Weasley's mother, of a professor, of Harry Potter's godfather. I spent the year of my coming out writing fanfiction about trans Remus Lupin (scars, shapeshifting, stigma, too obvious and simplistic, though it felt fitting and revealing during my early twenties), embracing his pansexual identity through transitioning from his school sweetheart Sirius Black to his new relationship with genderfluid Nymphadora Tonks, who hated her birth name and could change her appearance at will. My writing mirrored my reality of being non-binary and in love with a trans man and then a trans fem in a society that saw us as freaks. Through my writing I advocated for our right to live, to love and to be loved, to be included and valued, for our rights to be recognized, for our voices to be amplified. It finally made sense why I had always been obsessed with Tonks, and why it was so liberating to imagine a character who could instantly grow colourful tattoos and a beard, widen their shoulders, become pregnant, and tend to a lover's transformation wounds. To this day, I have a photo on my Instagram, snapped by Stefanos, of me dressed as Tonks for some queer Halloween party, posing in front of the teal wall of the one-room apartment on top of Athens. I was wearing a maroon cloak sent to me by Karla, a studded tank top and combat boots, and I was proudly showing off the shock of pink hair that drove my mother to ignore my presence at my own birthday party.

Eventually, I decided I would let Rowling's characters nurture me whenever I needed it. Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author* would soon become the retro manifesto of my liberation. *L'auteur est morte, vive l'auteur!* Yet the author is very much not dead here. Instead, she is haunting the text.

Rowling's rejection, her hate for trans people, made me feel inconsolable, like my mother's rejection when faced with my pink pixie cut. How do I learn to keep the good (memories, actions, intentions, gifts) without being crushed under the debilitating weight of rejection, of broken relationships, of phobia?

I eventually fell out of love with Harry Potter, but I got to keep Karla, who is one of the best things that ever happened to me.

*Letter to Karla:*

Sometimes I call life a forest, myopically deprived of the whole, busy being in constant panic about the tree, the splinter. On other days I try to draw straight lines on the ribbon of time, or along the frontiers on the map, I try to convince myself that I have never rested in this country of shame. We might see life as evolution, always losing hair that builds up and clogs the drain, old stars, nail clippings, cocoons. And then (you always used to joke about my fanfiction sentences starting with 'and then'), we tiptoe around the circular tattoos of history, the patterns on our skin, we defy the determinism of the body.

Karla, you taught me that life is a herbarium, All its dead beauty reverberates through the pages when the flowers are neatly — or even hastily — pressed and dried, when photos of your dad are shared on Facebook, when songs are written about him, when you remind me that time you had met my grandma and, not knowing how to communicate with you, she had simply held your hand. You watched me as I transformed by your side. Our shared constellations are made of love and all the failures I cannot digest. I took many showers, you broke the law too many times. You are a waterfall I can admire, you are my poet, my heroine, a flaneuse in times of terror. Activism and body hair, taking pride in the problematic flesh of each of us, indivisible pieces of me, unwrapped, peeled, reclaimed by you. You nursed my faltering expression, the kindling before my tongue started to burn. My dreams and I are never alone, our plans, our faith and care for the shuddering blossoms of each other.

Thank you,

Your friend.

[REDACTED]

## Flight

The ferry was approaching the port and that moment came with the usual deafening noises of the machines in the garage, screeching, beeping and thudding. All passengers about to disembark at Naxos waited there in front of the vehicles with their luggage, their crying babies and barking dogs. The cats wailed and bumped around inside their carriers. Their weight was breaking my back, and their distress after having endured a five-hour trip was breaking my heart. It was a deeply uncomfortable moment, yet it was also a great one. I knew this moment well enough. The slow turning of the ferry, the glimpses of sky and sea I could steal as the lowered gate slowly revealed the beloved island, the view of the great ancient door, the Portara, dominating on the hill rising on our left.

Entering the port meant entering the island of childhood dreams and carelessness, this place of familial wholeness that welcomed me warmly every summer since I was four months old. It was that feeling of returning, when nothing mattered and everything was beautiful. I would forget all about the arguments, the pressure, the adolescence, and care only for the sound of the gate being lowered and slowly revealing to me a beloved figure standing in the distance: my dad, my uncle, or my mum, one of them or all together, waiting for me. The anticipation of the long, heavy chain that separated us being removed and allow us passage on the ramp, the steady step, carrying the bags and rolling my trolley-case behind me, the first drop of salted water on my lips, the smiles, the waving, and eventually, the hug. The receiving of me.

Whoever it was, the uncle with his racist views, or the homophobic mother, at that moment I felt helpless with my love for them. These people had cared for me primordially, before the world (my world) even began, before I knew them. Despite all our differences, which, unfortunately, they travelled together with us from Athens, here I always somehow feel better held than in the city.

The main questions that troubled me were: Why am I not getting all the things I was promised?

Why are there hollows with their shape in my chest that hurt when I breathe? How can I live my life

while carrying my trauma, without constantly feeling like I have to fight, freeze, fawn, or flee?

While trying to theorize based on my experiences with my family, I found some of the explanations I was seeking in Lauren Berlant.

In their book *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Lauren Berlant explores how precarious and marginalized people manage to live in conditions of crisis. They introduce the term 'good life' to describe the model of living promoted by neoliberalism that can never be attained. This is why the optimism of trying to live the 'good life' is described as cruel, as the fantasies invested in it become an obstacle to the subject's flourishing (Berlant 1). Cruel optimism 'names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility' (24). Our process of seeking the 'good life' is filled with crises. This creates the situation of a 'crisis ordinariness' in which we live in our societies (10), and only by understanding that can we seek to create alternative modes of living that promote our flourishing.

The 'good life' I was promised in my upbringing was one of love, recognition and acceptance. I thought it was all unconditional — I was wrong. The love was, and would forever be, unconditional. The recognition and the acceptance, without the shame and guilt under the weight of which I can forever sink, not so much.

My own experience of cruel optimism has always looked like fleeing to Naxos. It smells of dewy figs and a lullaby of jasmines. It is about always expecting to find something there (a childhood, a bicycle, a complete version of acceptance, Grandpa, Grandma, the small grocery store where they sent me to get aubergines and let me buy bubblegum with the spare change), yet always being met with the lack of that something, a reminder that it has long ceased to exist.

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Dad smelled clean, reassuringly, of cologne. In his car we joked and caught up excitedly. He told me all about Lucy adjusting to my grandparents' house where we would be spending our vacation, and about my brother's most recent shenanigans. I couldn't stop talking to him about you. We shared our news hungrily, as if we didn't talk on the phone every day, as if we had been living in different countries during the couple of days they had been on the island without me. That was true, in a sense. The island was an a different timeline — we went about things more slowly, we slept more, we stayed out late, eating waffles by the sea, and after everyone had gone to bed, I would always write until the first sunrays would enter through the shutters in 'the room of the dead', as I used to call it during my teenage years, because it was full of portraits and old framed photos of dead family members. We drove past low white buildings and those the colour of the sand, allowing space for the vast bright sky that made breathing an easier task.

I have always been aware of my idealization of the island. The villages where my grandparents grew up, the Chora — the urban centre of the island where my mother and her siblings spent their childhood, without pretence or ornamentation, I simply call these places home.

We arrived at the house with the small garden full of fruit and flowers. In the past there were vines with grapes climbing up and tangling around the railings of our balcony. Around Christmas, the neighbour sends us pictures of the poinsettia tree every year, blossoming red. In the middle of the now unkempt garden, stood the fountain my grandfather had filled. There is a sepia photograph with three small children playing and laughing inside it. Their parents are standing inside as well, smiling.

Outside the fence of the garden patch, stood a tiny church of Saint Kyriaki — my mother's side of the family had always been devoutly Orthodox for as far as known generations go. When we order takeaway at Naxos, where most buildings do not have street numbers, we use the blue dome with the white cross as a landmark. Even though small churches on driveways dedicated to someone who

died there are present everywhere in Greece, the sight of a church within a home is much less common. In small things such as those, one can easily see the class element, but also the importance of religion in Greek families because often, even with few resources, devout Christians would make their own wooden altars and hang the holy icons along with their wedding wreaths above their beds.

Dad unloaded the car. I ran upstairs, inhaling the jasmine bush that twirled around the small iron door which was painted blue. I released the cats into their room whose closed door kept them safe from the dog. I then fell into my grandmother's plump, soft hug, with a happy shriek. She smelled of clean sweat and cooking — there was always pasta with minced beef on the day someone would arrive. 'Dear dollie,' she cheerfully started reciting the little kid's poem she always used to greet me with, 'tell me please, how have you been, alone, all this time in your box?'

As I was growing and my grandmother was aging, I had taken to a little game with her, picking up the poem from where she left it off. 'Were you crying, little dollie, sealed in your box, like a kiddie cries, asking for her mummy?'

For grandma, I was her 'sweet doll'. She would call me playful nicknames from the past, from various places of Greece, like 'kokkona' and 'sourtouko', words whose meanings I never bothered to learn. I lovingly called her 'little girl' or 'my little shit', which she always found hilarious. Years later, the first time I would see her after her stroke, that would be the only phrase which she seemed to understand, and it would grant me a precious smile to the memory of which I still often return.

With my grandmother, we had spent a life of holding hands, of sleeping on her bed after storytime, of buying books and reading them together. I would ask her to stroke my arm and she would ask me to unclasp her bra and wipe the sweat off her back with a towel after church, because she had stopped being able to reach that spot. These were our little rituals — as well as her always trying to feed me. We used to go to church together when I was little. I remember the scent of incense and sweat mixed with hairspray, all the old ladies who wanted to pinch my cheek ('My, how you've grown, may you be safe from the evil eye!' They'd say to me, as my grandma and grandpa would



boast about my achievements. ‘Tell theia Koula what you want to be when you grow up! Show theia Popi the poem about the chickens you wrote the other day!’

In 2024, two years after my grandmother’s passing, I returned to the keepsakes I had found in her closet: a bottle of the L’Oreal Elneette hairspray she always used to wear, a Playmobil figure she kept that had once belonged to me, and a small bottle of perfume I had never seen her wearing: Anais Anais by Cacharel.

I rediscovered my grandmother only when I finally found Anais Anais. Not that I had ever smelt it on her (Mum thinks it must have been a gift she kept without using, the bottle was almost full). It just managed very well to capture her essence. (Whoever bought that gift must have been either very insightful and familiar with my grandmother’s psyche, or merely very lucky in blind-buying a perfume that was en vogue in the late 70s).

Before spritzing Anais Anais on my wrist, I half-expected it to smell like roses. My brain was probably paying tribute to the memory of my grandmother cutting pink roses from her balcony and placing them in glasses full of water, on my desk while I was studying for uni. I do not recall the scent of those roses.

Instead, Anais Anais smelled old. Not in a bad way. Just stuck in time. Like someone who had died but whom I craved to meet, peering through dusty chests full of dresses and hand-knitted jumpers wrapped in a cloud of naphthalene. I eagerly greeted my grandmother’s elegance in the room, her poise, the sternness of her mothering, the grace with which she smiled. I heard the voice in which she called me ‘sweet doll’, the voice in which she admitted, a week before her second stroke, that although I made her proud, she still grieved over the disappointment of my atheism. ‘You have strayed from God’s path. That is my only woe’.

It was the incense, combined with the elegance and doe-eyed romance of the iris and hyacinth, that brought me back to the cruel optimism of the moment. My grandmother wasn’t just a devout Christian — she was a fanatical one. Jesus Christ was the love to which she gave herself most

freely, the shelter she sought when earthly affairs became unbearable. Based on my own spiritual experiences, I can only compare it to literary ecstasy, to the orgasmic feeling that comes when someone does something human-like and I relate to them, to the grappling with the all-crushing fist of falling in love.

In Orthodox Greece, before Holy Friday when the burial of Christ takes place, a wooden structure upon which His body is laid, Επιτάφιος, is decorated with spring flowers and sprinkled with rose water. During the litany, four men carry the fragrant coffin on their shoulders and lead a procession to the streets. In Anais Anais I smell the church on the day of the Επιτάφιος. I'm still seven years old, sitting next to grandma who's whispering — reading out of a pocket Bible synopsis she's holding in her wrinkled hands. I suddenly see my grandmother younger, wearing pearls and clean lilac cashmere, sitting in a wallpapered living room, crafting Easter decorations with the kids as my grandpa reads his newspaper. Like the one she worshiped, my grandma is resurrected, if I'm allowed the blasphemy.

These days, I spray Anais Anais on my chest, and spend the evening sitting next to you, watching the Leftovers on the computer, with my jumper (Dad's jumper, actually) stretched over my nose. I inhale deeply. I remember the monarch butterfly that once made its way into the one-room apartment of my mid-twenties. I remember the shame, the guilt, the dew, the devotion. Smelling a perfume that my grandma rarely wore, I become her image, I breathe in her sighs, I choke on her laughter, on the cruelty of my optimism. I reconstruct her.

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My grandfather, a distant parent yet always tender, and softer when I met him, always brought me chocolate bars from the supermarket. He used to tell me 'Oh, how I wish I had a yiayia as good as yours!' He died when I was fifteen. Sadly, I don't remember much about him, and this lack still haunts my dreams at night. On the day of his death, I had been praying so hard. I slowly stopped going to church after that. God hadn't listened.

My mother and her sister were to be greeted after my grandmother and stood there smiling, waiting patiently for their turn. My aunt had practically raised me while my parents worked evenings (my dad used to have appointments with patients and my mother used to tutor high school students in maths). They would drop me off at my grandparents' every afternoon and pick me up at night. My aunt didn't marry and she lived with them with a break of the six years of a failed relationship, when she had moved in with her abusive partner. When I was a toddler, I used to call her 'mum'. She had lost part of her hearing during infancy. She and her family suffered gravely in the small, ableist societies of Naxos and Syros where they lived during the children's school years. She was bullied at school and excluded from activities such as ballet shows, because she was considered incapable of following the other students. My grandparents fought hard, with limited resources, to help her speak, read, and eventually study art at university, although they failed to put in the same effort when it came to her socializing and independence.

My grandmother's faith that bordered on fanaticism wasn't very helpful in those aspects. My mother and her siblings grew up in a loving yet strictly supervised environment with many limitations. My mother still regrets missing out on many opportunities in her youth. Their travels during vacation were either for pilgrimage to the Virgin of Tinos, or for treatments for my aunt's chronic autoimmune stomach illness. Their clubbing was meeting at respectable coffee shops at the port. There was a curfew, and occasionally even a younger brother sent by his dad to supervise the girls. They weren't allowed to attend school dances and they didn't wear pants. They put on their Sunday best at church, and stared at boys in secret. My aunt learnt to feel shame for her hearing aid

and cover it with her hair. To this day, she flirts with the idea but has not yet allowed herself to get a more revealing haircut.

For a long time, I resented my grandparents for restricting their children so much, for not respecting their boundaries and desires, for the intergenerational trauma, for the guilt and shame I carry about my sexuality, my gender, and other vices. But it would be an injustice both to my grandparents and to their children to not take a moment to revisit the memories they treasured: my grandma, young, beautiful and vibrant, sitting by the fire, writing Christmas cards for friends and family, or decorating the tree by the window. Three children pulling harmless pranks on the neighbours. Two sisters helping each other grow into their own person. A woman who gave everything in life away for the happiness and wellbeing of her family, someone who mothered several children and their children, someone who kept our bellies full, someone who nourished. And then there was the clean winter light entering through the window shutters and falling on my baby uncle's crib while all five of them slept in the same room for warmth.

I wish I could have been there, to see my grandparents vibrant and energetic, my mother carefree, full of dreams, to watch her play and grow.

I inherited these memories from my aunt, a remarkable storyteller. She has always had the magical ability to see good in every word and action. She has learnt to feel compassion for other people's motives, and gratitude for everyone who held her, even when she sometimes wishes her opportunities hadn't been so limited. My aunt is the kindest person I know. She has always been my friend, my comrade at play, my confidante. Never having married, she cared for her parents until their final years. When I was a child, I was delighted by her (real or apparent) singleness: I wanted her all for my own. When she got a job I cried and tried to change her mind so that she would stay at home and spend more time with me. She would buy me the Martine book series and read me to bed as I looked at the whimsical, happy drawings of Marcel Marlier. I soon learned the books by heart and would correct her when she would change a word to make it more understandable for a four year-old. 'No, Maria! She doesn't ask how much it is, she asks how much it *costs*!'

My aunt has always been a powerful source of light in my life. After my mother's rejection of my identity, I came out to Maria, and she immediately accepted me as if her conservative upbringing and eventual mindset had never existed. Soon after, her best friend also came out to her as gay, and she was able to see him for who he really was.

All this time, Lucy had been jumping around and barking. I kneeled and hugged her, murmuring sweet nothings in her huge ears. Her earthy scent filled my soul, and I buried my face in her fur.

I hugged my mother last. Hugging her, all these years, has often felt like hugging an iceberg, but also sometimes like hugging the burning core of the earth. The most turbulent relationship I have had, the love of my life.

I inhaled her delicate scent and stroked her soft arm. 'Hello, my doll,' she said smiling, and suddenly I saw flamingoes in the sea and hot air balloons in the sky. 'Hi, mummy,' I muttered, and we went inside.

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[REDACTED]

Why put so much weight on my mother's views? Why am I so desperate for her complete recognition and approval? I do not think there is any parent out there who completely, a hundred percent approves of everything their child does, or is.

In *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (2018), Jacqueline Rose writes: 'motherhood is, in Western discourse, the place in our culture where we lodge, or rather bury, the reality of our conflicts, of what it means to be fully human' (8). Taking that into consideration, it makes complete sense that the stakes are very high for mothers, that they always end up taking a disproportionate part of the blame. It only follows that '[f]ailed mothers are everywhere — overinvested, neglectful, dead' (87).

And yet, in my relationship with my mother, we both seemed to expect too much of each other. I wasn't allowed to be bi or trans, and my mother wasn't allowed to have feelings about my identities. It sounds slightly unequal, since I can't choose to be anything other than who I am, but hear me out — we are the perfect paradigm of what Rose describes:

Expecting mothers to be perfect is, of course, not unrelated to the drive to perfection of the so-called 'overinvested' or 'narcissistic' mother, who sees the whole world — a world that must be flawless — in her baby. Or to put it another way, if you are asking mothers to be perfect, why wouldn't they pass that impossible demand on to their child? Any mother who obeys this diktat could therefore be said to be perversely fulfilling the requirements of her role. Perfection breeds perfection, lives frozen at the core, compulsively fawning over themselves (89)

My mother always wanted to see us conquer the world with our wits, work for NASA, become famous, achieve everything. This intense pressure on my brother and me drove us to insanity. But

today I understand her limitations, where she came from, the inscription of her dreams on us. I understand that, although I acknowledge it is not my burden to carry (still struggling with it). Rose explains that

each birth arrives with a history not of its own choosing. And since, to risk a cliché, there must surely be dark as well as lightness ahead, a mother who yearns most powerfully for her child to embody the free, the new, the best — as mothers mostly cannot help but do — is in danger of inscribing her denial of history, her own flight from suffering, across the body and mind of her child (Rose 202)

I think of the pressure imposed on her by my grandmother — the religious guilt, the compulsion to be proper, silent, shameful. And I remember the shame of my grandmother's mother, who became pregnant outside of marriage and worked herself rotten in the fields, hoping to miscarry. She then lost her only son to a Nazi bullet, and decided that God was punishing her for her past misdeeds. My grandmother was only eight years old when she saw her father carry the lifeless body of her brother from Chora to the village to bury him. I always felt a profound connection to my great uncle, the storyteller, the artist, the resistance fighter, the boy who was different, and who stood by his values until his last moment. My family rarely spoke about him, and they all eventually voted right-wing. 'Silly boy,' my grandmother would only say, ever so rarely, 'he went and got himself killed, destroying a family.' This was her trauma, and before it I always remained silent, but my imagination would run wild, make up stories about him riding his bicycle from village to village, delivering secret messages, writing revolutionary poetry, meeting up with a secret lover, hoping that at least some of the vivid images of him I got in my head had been true, hoping the connection I felt with this man I'd never met was really there, a tangible thing, a handshake across history.

But to return to my mother: 'Whether in sexual passion, giving birth or being a mother, joy is fleeting, as they say, not so much because it doesn't last, as because you can only experience it by letting go of something else?' (Rose 221)

So, why won't my mother let go of the notion that she can control who I am? And why do we cling so much to assumptions and expectations that are bound to hurt us? It is inescapable. We must not bring shame upon the family, we must not give neighbours things to talk about, even if that means scattering ourselves in the process.

I read Sophie Lewis' *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (2022) later, while trying to make sense of our problematic coexistence, overflowing with love and toxicity. Lewis proposes that we abolish the family. In her terms, loving the people in one's family, 'is not at odds with a commitment to family abolition. Quite the reverse' (12). In her definition of love, Lewis asserts that one must behave in a way that respects the autonomy of their loved ones.

Perhaps the answer lies in this. Loving each other more than we love the family as a sacred entity. You remind me of that when you explain why you do not speak to your father. Family is what we make, not what happens to us.

Having had a 'hard childhood', Lewis says, encapsulates the need for family abolition. One can love and care for a family member, whilst also acknowledging that they are not good for them.

'Frankly, loving one's family can be a problem for *anyone*.' (13)

Chronic, unsolvable, existentially debilitating. I take my problem, and run with it.

As Greek novelist and scholar Angela Dimitrakaki (2009) writes in *Inside a girl like you*:

'The author is dead but I desire my mother'.



\*

After I unpacked, Dad and I left for the supermarket. Shopping had always been a strong love language in our family, and a favourite pastime for both him and me. Today, the prices at the supermarket scare the hell out of me, but back then I did not have such worries. With Dad, there had always been that feeling of abundance, even before he started making money as an established oncologist, back when he was a young doctor with nothing but debts. Going to the supermarket on a school evening, just the two of us, was always a field trip. I remember the security I felt among the full shelves, the fun I had while filling the trolley with French children's magazines from the press kiosk, with chocolate bars and a new toothbrush or some nice-smelling shampoo. I remember the chilly, brightly lit corridors with the fridges, the smells from the fish alley, or that of freshly-cut pineapple on ice.

Nowadays, my privileged upbringing has been proven to be an obstacle to my adjustment to adulthood. This transition has been bumpy, to say the least, but I still long for these moments with Dad, and decide to enjoy them, now more prudently than in the past. I felt safe for a while, as if I could forget my adult problems for a while, and become the child that climbed on the rear of the trolley again and laugh as I was being pushed along the cereal aisle.

With Dad, communication has always been easy. We shared the same silly sense of humour that caused my mother to roll her eyes. Up until I grew old enough for our discussions to turn political, I used to idolize my father. He was my God, a healer, a kind person who loved helping other people, someone I could talk to without any fear of judgment. He was 'the good parent', a comrade in mischief, someone who would often take our side in family arguments. Sometimes, he would even encourage us to make fun of Mum's strictness and prudishness. He never punished us — in reality, there rarely were any repercussions for our actions at all. He was a mentor, a guide, and a friend, something he took pride in and which, retrospectively, often became harmful to his parenting.

Things changed as I started developing a political consciousness. I suddenly began to realize that he

did not care as much as I did about issues such as teenage trans suicide. ‘There are bigger problems in the world. What about the Turks?’ He blamed marijuana for the direst social problems, while I started noticing the misogyny and homophobia that threatened my existence in society. He never managed to understand why we still needed feminism, ‘women are equal to men in all aspects today’, and like most baby boomers, he was sceptical about the MeToo movement — ‘people your age have demonized flirting’.

Realizing that I disagreed with my father on issues I considered fundamental completely crushed me. It made me feel unbeheld. Our arguments never failed to reduce me to tears. I held him to such high standards that I became increasingly alienated with every wrong word he uttered. It took me a long time to see him as a human being in the sixth decade of his life, with faults and biases of his own, and I still sometimes internalize the differences in our opinions as betrayal.

At the cookie shelf, my dad pulled me into a bear hug, squeezing my head against his shoulder. I felt the soft thud of his heartbeat and smelled his expensive cologne. ‘Take the peanut butter ones, aren’t those the ones you like, bud?’ That’s how he’s called me all my life. Like the bud of a flower, waiting to see me blossom.

Between the cheeses and the yoghurt, I thought then of how I longed for this dyad of ours, for the security he made me feel as a child, when it was just us, and nothing else between us but awe and adoration.

At the queue for the cash register, he remembered you. ‘Shouldn’t we buy something sweet for your boyfriend?’ he asked. I felt the tenderness in his voice, but my insides churned. How I hated this cruel game of hiding we had to play sometimes, how I hated to pay witness to the mispronunciation of you.

\*

I loved walking around Naxos alone, among the bright pink bougainvilleas, on the narrow cobblestone streets. I would go to the far side of the port and watch the orange sunset melting into the sea or climb the hill with the great ancient door and sit among the rosemary and lavender, smell the salty air and write. I only saw the island every summer, and there were both locals and tourists much more dedicated to its life than I was, yet at moments I would feel that the island was mine and mine alone. Through the years, I would sit on the rocks, where the waves crashed, avoid people my family knew like the plague ('People talk'), and speak on the phone with my different lovers: George, Stefanos, and now you.

'How's it going over there?' I asked you.

You sighed over the phone. 'Same old. Gran is dying. I miss you. And how are things over there?' Melancholy flooded over me. I did not know how to answer that question. I was elated to be on the island, but I was missing you too, and interacting with my family nowadays tended to fill me with gender dysphoria.

'You know how it is. Gran is fretting over my thinness. Mum wants to teach me how to do my hair properly. At least this year it isn't pink, so we're good.'

You stifled a laugh. 'Hang in there, babe. Next year I will be there with you.'

'Remember last year, when I was here and you were there again?'

'How could I forget?'

The previous summer, our relationship was still fresh and I was still getting over Stefanos. I had spent it lying in bed in 'the room of the dead' with you on the phone. You would read me the tarot and we would share our music interests. When it came to Greek music, we realized we both loved two singers we had both grown up with: Flery Dadonaki, who used to sing Manos Hadjidakis'

music with her crystalline voice and was celebrated globally, and Arleta, a singer with a tranquil angelic voice that belonged to the Greek New Wave movement of the '60s and '70s. She had also worked with Hadjidakis, and was chased by the junta of '67. Both personalities fascinated us, and their songs taught us how to feel from a very young age. You were the first person my age I met who loved them both. I became awestruck with this revelation. Maybe that is when the seeds of my romantic feelings for you were first planted. As an archivist of our love, I have reserved a soft spot in my memories for those days when I would sing Cohen's 'Suzanne' along with Dadonaki in the bathroom with the flamingo on the tiles that my grandfather had built. You were my Suzanne, earthy yet somehow otherworldly, showing me how to pay attention to small things both inside me and outside of me, how to discover new depths in my feelings. I would listen to Arleta's 'You'll come again,' being reminded of Stefanos, but at the same time, new horizons of tenderness and care were opening up to me as our friendship developed into something more.

You had been respectful of my longing for Stefanos while it lasted, secure in yourself, supporting me through the tears of several drunken nights, humouring me when I wanted to analyse every bit of our breakup. You never expected me to be anyone else than who I truly was. Yours is the queerest kind of love I have ever experienced. Soon, I was falling for you and you for me — the most unexpected ending, or beginning, of it all.

My entire family had now met you and adored you. My aunt Maria had immediately felt a kinship with you, she saw in you someone she could talk to and be heard. My grandmother could not stop asking about you and your grandmother. She felt true empathy for your family, herself fearing the loss of her mental capacities as she grew older. She approved of you. This was very important to me, even though I knew she saw us as something different than who we were, even though she did not even know your real name. Your existence made my grandmother happy, and that added to my own happiness. She had seen something in you, your endless kindness, the vastness of your generosity, she could sense I was finally safe.

Night found us sitting on the balcony, enjoying the slight warm breeze that twirled and filled the air

with the scent of jasmines. My grandmother had washed and peeled peaches. She loved to give me slices of her fruit, and then to come behind me and wipe her hands, wet with the sweet juice, on my neck and back. That way she would relieve me from the summer heat, ‘some dew for you, my love’. I can still feel her hands on my skin, the wrinkles of the fat fingertips caressing me like those of a mother. ‘My child’s child is twice my child,’ Greek grandparents love to say. I would lean into the words, savour them as a mantra, engraving them permanently in my memory.

We spent hours like this, sitting together, my aunt Maria on her phone, me watching Netflix on my laptop, and my grandmother doing her crossword puzzles in the flickering lamp light. ‘Who are they? Where are they going?’ my grandmother would ask every time we saw tourists walking on the street below our house. She yearned to see someone she recognized, and I could see her disappointment when we answered ‘they’re strangers from the Airbnb across the street, grandma.’

My grandmother got up sometime after midnight. ‘Heading to bed,’ she said, where she would continue working on her crossword puzzle. ‘Goodnight, perdikes,’ calling us partridges, another playful nickname she used for us.

[REDACTED]

What do we dream of? Living in a remote village with a lake, surrounded by cows and horses. Being surrounded by people like us, by a community where no one cares about our past, and will accept us for things other than our gender and sexuality, but also in spite of them. We dream of a village to which we will *want* to entrust the rearing of our children (as per the common saying). What is the care we dream of giving and receiving, through unlearning and relearning how to hold and to be held? Where is the happiness we seek?

Reading Sophie Lewis taught me that ‘like all utopias, too that world already nestles latently in the present. It has its wispy sprouts in nooks and crannies wherever people, against all odds, are seeking to devise liberatory and queer — which is to say, anti-property — models of care’ (37).

I think of the atrocities committed in the name of the family: middle-aged family men in Lesbos shouting profanities at pregnant refugee women while refusing to let them set foot on the island. ‘We don’t give a fuck. Who told you to come here? You shouldn’t get fucked like a bitch, so you wouldn’t get pregnant. Fucking bunnies. Go to hell. Were we the ones who fucked you?’ they spit and slur, as bystanders laugh and applaud.

I think of what family means to me, of what love means to me. Inevitably, I return, full circle, to Lewis:

We need concepts with more bite, concepts like ‘comradeliness’ or ‘accomplice’. Or, if we want something intermediary, we could also consider resurrecting the defunct first half of the still-familiar Old English phrase ‘kith and kin’. The concept of ‘kith’ denotes a form of dynamic relation between beings, a bond similar to ‘kin’, but one whose ground is knowledge, practice, and place, rather than race, descent, and identity. (137)

If we ever find our place in the world, I will let you know. Not all of you. Just those who are looking for a village to rear their children and keep their animals, with a kind of love that is not possessive, far away from the men of Lesbos.

**Free**

*In these dark rooms where I live out*

*empty days, I circle back and forth*

*trying to find the windows.*

*It will be a great relief when a window opens.*

*But the windows are not there to be found—*

*or at least I cannot find them. And perhaps*

*it is better that I don'*

*t find them.*

*Perhaps the light will prove another tyranny.*

*Who knows what new things it will expose?*

*The Windows – C. P. Cavafy*

*transl. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, ed. George Savidis*

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