

## SHARING FOOTPRINTS: DWELLING WITH/IN LOSS

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### ABSTRACT:

This essay explores spaces between—between presence and absence, model and canvas, page and thought. Launching from the cliché that love is blind, the piece reads through Jacques Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind* and its inspirations toward the paintings *The Origin of Painting* by Jean-Baptiste Regnault (1786) and *The Invention of the Art of Drawing* by Joseph-Benoit Suvée (1791) to locate spaces in between, spaces of contingency. The essay advocates not rushing through such spaces, but dwelling there—as sites of contemplation. The work engages in conversation with *Lectio Divina* as articulated by Mesner, Bickel, and Walsh (2015) and follows with some of the author's poems to attempt to evoke a sense of loss as being-with in such contemplation.

### BIO:

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When does a relationship end? When does a sense of togetherness or being with move from presence to absence? And what is the condition of being within that state in between? In this essay, I shall explore these questions through a consideration of Jacques Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind*, through the relationships and resonances between these ideas and the practice of reading—specifically the practice of *Lectio Divina*—and I shall also consider the ways in which creative work takes shape in the space of contemplation through a consideration of my own poetry. I find that kind of space between moves into something like a foreground, and it is in this space—the space of contemplation—that generative creative work arises and springs forth.

Indeed, loss is a complex notion. I think about some of the losses I've experienced in my life—my father, grandparents, friends: losses of relationships, losses of places. In all of these cases, something tangible, something in the world, has left, but my experience of it is always within or of myself. Loss involves both an absence of something but also a presence of a kind of aching or pain within myself. What often remains is a self and life changed.

To be sure, sometimes people think of hierarchies of loss. Some losses seem more legitimate or more worthy of a patina of maturity than others—for instance, the loss of a marriage of several decades, or of a beloved grandparent or caregiver, or even something like the loss of a fortune, loss of an opportunity. It seems we make a judgement about the gravity of our loss based upon the significance of the thing that leaves.

Indeed, just as we often think of a hierarchy of loss, we also think of a hierarchy of loves. Consider the popular distinction between love and infatuation. One often thinks of love as the mature affective condition of a properly grownup relationship. Infatuation on the other hand may describe the immature, albeit sometimes burning attachments between the young. As Robert Sternberg (1988) might say, the kind of love that lacks, say, a genuine and deeper understanding of one's other as well as having the anchoring condition of commitment.

I suppose how one defines love depends upon how one thinks about it, how one *looks* at it. I think that an idea really becomes interesting when you apply it to itself: say, for example, when you apply the values of love to love itself. What do we say? *Love is blind*? How true that may be. As I shall discuss, blindness becomes a condition of love itself. Seeing it depends upon not being able to see it; it comes to offer space between somehow.

Do you know the legend of Kora of Sicyon and the history and cultural legacy of her desire? As per Pliny the Elder's account (Brooklyn Museum, 2018, May 16), she was smitten with a Corinthian youth. Knowing that they were destined to be apart, she reached out one longing-filled hand and delicately traced his shadow with charcoal along the wall before her. His shadow self – not quite him, but only what she could see with the sun behind them both – marked the distance between the person of her beloved and what she could see of him. The story of her love tells of both absence and presence, gingerly travelling and filling the space between her beloved and the etching she leaves on the gritty wall before her.

*When does a relationship end? That final fight? Tears streaming down a hot face:  
come back*

*that final leaving at the airport*

*if I hug you so tightly, maybe something of your imprint, your impress, will remain  
with me as the world hurls you far away from me.*

No, the leaving comes much, much before that. One knows the parting will come before it happens. Either one makes up their mind to end the relationship or realizes that the other has done so. It comes while still in the presence of the beloved – one dwells with the loss while still in the presence of the other. This is what Kora did, creating her etching with the other still near her, yet feeling her heart compel her to trace something of his shadow.

And what a long shadow she produced. Her father was Butades, a sculptor. One can't know how he felt for his daughter. We can't know the exact narrative of his motivation, but what we can know is what he is reputed to have done, how he is reputed to have used the skills

of his trade to memorialize the line of his daughter's longing. Perhaps he would have had empathy or some other mixture of feelings as he endeavoured somehow, as it were, to mark her figurative footprint upon the earth, perhaps while it was still warm with the foot that left it, a lingering resonance of life and love for a kind of posterity. He turned the edged line that she had drawn into a textured diorama, bringing forth that thin line of etching into a sculpture hanging up on the wall. This was reputed to be the invention of relief modeling.

This moment has been recorded in paintings including Jean Raoux's *The Origin of Painting*, Jean-Baptiste Regnault's *The Origin of Painting*, Joseph Wright's *The Corinthian Maid*, Joseph-Benoit Suvée's *The Invention of the Art of Drawing*, and Jacopo Benci's *Una Lezione*. Countless viewers have seen this account of love emerging in a moment of blindness, affirming perhaps that love is blind – as also is loss. I would like to consider these notions in conversation with Jacques Derrida's (1993) *Memoirs for the Blind*. This work arises from a 1990 exhibition and catalogue that Derrida curated for the Louvre as the inauguration of its *Parti-pris* series. The first image in his exhibition draws (pun not intended but not denied either) from Regnault's and Suvée's paintings. He considers what it says about "representations" (p. 49) and how it "relates the origin of graphic representation to the absence or invisibility of the model" (p. 49).



Figure 1: Regnault, J-B. (1786). The origin of painting. Wikimedia. Public domain.

I really value the treatment of that moment where she creates the line – not looking at her model, but trying, as it were, to write in a space of loss, a space of without, a space of memory. The moment of inscribing the mark, of creating the work, is imperceptibly bound up with memory. When the artist creates her work, she is not as it were, the model, or the sheet or page or canvas, but somehow imperceptibly between, occupying a rich nonspace. The artist and nonspace merge, and this is the space from which springs forth the act of creation. But it is not simply, mechanically, or crudely coming from her.

Do you remember the movie from the 1980s, *Top Gun*? Of course, it stands as a powerful piece of Reagan era propaganda – a gleaming celebration of militarism. That notwithstanding, there is this great line that I recall from the film. The movie is about the best pilots in the world, all hotshots. Near the beginning, a pilot allows his anxiety to creep in, and he loses his confidence. He loses his connection with the space of his greatest work. Taken by fear, he no longer goes into that space. The pilot turns in his wings and resigns from flight, because he’s “holding on too tight” (Simpson, Bruckheimer, & Scott, 1986). I like that because it says something about the way to consider this nonspace. You don’t get there by holding on too tight! You don’t get there through crudely building its features as tools. You get there contemplatively.

Toward an exploration of this, I consider the title of Derrida’s work. The translators share, “The French title *Memoires d’aveugle* can be read as both ‘memoirs’ and ‘memories’ of the blind” (p. x). How interesting – a blending in consideration of the common heritage of memoir and memory. Memoir is the writing of one’s memories: it draws productively on all the instability and generativity of memory. In the writing of one’s memoirs, memory becomes creative work. This is not memory as bringing forward and capturing some discreet bounded entity, carried forth in perfect integrity. Rather, it is memory and creation as an unfolding. Writing as a righting. But not righting by imposing objectivity, privilege, or power; rather righting as making right through a kind of alignment between one’s self and the stories one tells of oneself. It is not a “right angle” geometrically, in the sense of producing an objective measure, but right angling, perhaps like fishing through a murky past, where the line one drops in becomes infused with the line one produces.

Kora’s inscription in the mark on the wall as she traces the shadow of her love becomes in a sense



Figure 2. Suvée, J-B. (1791). The invention of the art of drawing. Wikimedia. Public domain.

a memoir, an effort to claim something for posterity, and also an inscription of memory. The shadow itself projects an echo of a moment past. It is a mingling of the sun behind the youth and Kora herself, and it shines as a new inscription upon the wall before her. The trace she creates is an act of both memory and writing memoir, a meeting of the light, the figure of the love, and the way in which she sees it herself.

Memory is deeply involved in the process of painting. Memory becomes a condition of drawing, inaugurating a kind of blindness as the source of creativity. When one paints a model, one paints without realizing it from memory. The artist looks upon the figure—looks, looks, looks—tries to understand the figure, perhaps forming an impression in her mind, and then turns away toward the canvas and tries in some sense to reproduce some semblance of the figure, or at least another figure inspired from it. In either case, the figure upon the canvas becomes a trace of both memoir and memory.

What is that space between the model and the canvas? As I attempt to create, I suppose I am tempted to think of it as a space through which I want to travel as quickly as possible. It is a space I want to shrink as much as I can. It comes to be that space of danger through which I can lose the impression I form.

But what if I didn't rush through it? What if that space was something very much worth dwelling within? Lingering within? What if that space was the space of contemplation and the source of creative work? After all, memoir is not the thing itself. After Borges and Baudrillard (1994), the map is not the world. The memoir is not the thing. Nor is it completely not the thing. The memoir weaves imperceptibly with memory; contemplation provides the space of dwelling within, generation, creation.

I find resonances for this idea not only in the visual but in reading text as well. Do you remember *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by Robert M. Pirsig (1975)? I remember one part where he talks about books that he and his son brought with them on their motorcycle trips. He noted that he would read them differently than others might expect. He would read short passages and savor them in contemplation. I like that.

In this spirit, I think that learning to read, learning to read for yourself, becomes a matter of unlearning to read, unlearning how people would have told you to read. When I was a boy, I think I somehow felt that reading was not something that I did but that it was something that was done to me. It felt as though reading, done properly, had to be an imposition. Sure, I read comic books, collections of Charlie Brown strips, and other books like Henry Huggins, Danny Dunn, and the Great Brain series. But reading, real reading, seemed like something other kids did. It seemed to be something I had to force myself to do. Something I had to take, like medicine—unpleasant but apparently good for me. Reading seemed to be something that one had to do with sweat glistening in salty drops upon one's forehead while staring at the page, forcing eyes along one line to the next—getting to the bottom of the page—what did you just read? Who cares. I love the picture that Pirsig paints instead: one of engaging in dreamy, contemplative conversation with the work.

What about the dreamful reading that is not “reading” at all? What of looking up from the page or screen and dreaming away from it? What about entering into a space of contemplation? This is the rich and fertile nonsoil from which springs creative work. But this creative work arises not from a singular, unitary, integrated subject, but perhaps rather through a connection with something flowing beyond or beneath oneself.

I think the way one thinks about reading becomes an extension of how one thinks about the text. If one thinks about the text as inert, fixed, dead, then reading becomes a process (crudely characterized) of scientific examination; meaning-meeting becomes a process of data collection – observation, prediction, control; if it is something dead, then one must unearth it to find what exactly is buried there.

But what if one thought of the text differently. Pliny the Younger, in his letter to Sura (n.d.), is said to be the initiator of a certain characterization of the ghost story – the ghost, the figure that returns to haunt and trouble those remaining and walking upon the earth, to haunt the comfort of their still nights and trouble them with an awareness they might not have recognized (Nellis, 2009). It lets them know that something has happened in the past, and though one may be done with the past, that does not mean it is done with them: the figure of the ghost hauntingly returns to show where the bones are buried. If we think about the text this way it becomes not completely dead, as it were, but both living and dead: one engages it in conversation by attending to the ghosts and spirits that arise in and around it. Reading becomes not drilling down into the reductive features but an encounter and conversation with something living.

Such kinds of reading have a long tradition. *Lectio Divina* is a practice coming from Christian communities often thought of as embodying four phases: read, meditate, pray, contemplate (Catholic Archdiocese of Perth, 2018, May 17). It seems to me that this suggests that reading is not simply boring down upon the page in a way that only sees the page as something to be strip-mined, but rather a launching place for flights of exploration and connection beyond it. Reading becomes not the work of the detective – drilling down to the one solution – but of the artist, opening up toward generative possibilities.

It is in such a spirit that I find the invocation of *Lectio Divina* by Mesner, Bickel, & Walsh (2015) in *Arts-Based and Contemplative Practices in Research and Teaching: Honoring Presence* (Walsh, Bickel, & Leggo, 2015). They take it up as a practice/possibility for offering spaces between pieces to weave the overall collection together and open towards considerations of generative emergence. They take the practice up, not reductively or necessarily aligned with any particular tradition, but rather with a spirit of openness. They employ it as a “contemplative path into reflection on a text” (p. 20). Drawing from Paintner’s *Lectio Divina: The Sacred Heart: Transforming Words and Images into Heart-Centered Prayer* (2011), they mobilize the idea as follows:

Reading 1: *Lectio* (“settling and shimmering”) We invite you to sit with the text in silence and to simply let it sink in.

Reading 2: *Meditatio* (“savoring and stirring”) What word/ phrase or aspect of the image stands out to you? Try to let this word/ phrase or aspect of the image simply emerge organically.

Reading 3: *Oratio* (“slowing and stilling”) What is particularly evocative or resonant to you in this text?

Reading 4: *Contemplatio* (“summoning and serving”) What is a call to action that you hear in this text? (p. 20)

This is a deep, deep reading. This is reading the text but also reading beyond the text. This is reading where, in a sense, one is not looking at the text anymore. One is seeing the text so clearly that you no longer see just it – one is entering into a space of a kind of blindness.

You are also allowing the text to see you. This reading emanates from a certain spirit of *Lectio Divina*, whereby the reader is seen by God. Perhaps in a space of seeing neither solely the text nor completely myself, I can catch sight of what is unseen there. Not only do I catch sight of what sees me, of what I call upon, but also the “unexpected stranger that calls” (Fels, 2015, p. 112) me in turn. I think of this unexpected stranger that calls as the figure of haunting and Haunting Inquiry (Nellis, 2009).

The space where this kind of perception occurs exists between the model and the canvas, between the reader and the text; it emerges from neither one nor the other, but productively develops from both. Indeed, this space maps a movement beyond binarism. Carl Leggo shares his recollected wisdom from his mentor and teacher Ted Aoki: “As a colleague of Aoki’s I know that he was always challenging binary oppositions, always asking questions. Aoki (1993a/2005) promoted the ‘place named and, a place of lived tension between this and that’ ” (Leggo, 2015). Seeing beyond the cruelly reductive, empirical, binaristic relationship between reader and page, model and canvas in a sense of fixedness. I prefer Leggo’s image of a moving sea, the “Caribbean / never still” (p. 143), as a condition of “living poetically” (p. 145). How does one approach such shifting seas of an ever-in-between? What is the condition of doing so? Indeed, Leggo confirms that for him he does so as a way of “remembering” (p. 153). In my own modest way, I draw inspiration from these sentiments as a way of considering my own creative work. And I seek to do so not holding too tightly but holding gently, in a sense becoming in-tune with the way that I too am held – not to be forced or compelled but invited and supported in telling a story, “engaging in a conversation” (p. 154).

So, how do I engage in conversation as a way of imagining a contemplative arts practice? I do so through immediately and imminently commingling between the three terms – contemplative + arts + practice – but not crudely, not quantitatively, as in simply “more of.” I do not imagine the notions as somehow climbing higher and higher, ideas stacking one upon the other, but rather as sliding into each other, mingling together in common space. For me, in this sense, contemplation becomes a bringing together of con (“together with”) and temp (“time”), a coming together in the same time, a mingling of many with the footprints of one.

I would like to share some work here – three poems – that try to explore this. The poems deal with loss. Through the work, I feel and hope to convey a sense of bringing together loss with life, subtraction with generation. That which is lost, removed, displaced, becomes perhaps re-placed: re-placed in the sense of moved to a different location and also replaced in the sense of returned: taking a hand, mingling in mourning, stepping together and sharing a path.

**Griesbach, Edmonton, Alberta, 1941 –**

*It's only by our lack of ghosts we're  
haunted.*

Earle Birney

I guess this land is too valuable  
to just leave  
the way it was since the 1950s –

quiet, faded fields,  
now torn up and in-filled  
with condos and townhouses,

the old roads cut into  
with jet black pavement,  
if not torn up and re-gridded,

a few curious,  
crumbling curbs  
left looking on,

a bluff of woods razed  
down to a stubble  
of shrubs,  
in exposed humility,

a single  
red brick building  
standing  
from the old neighborhood.

Do stories need tellers  
to live, or  
can they breathe on their own  
in the still air,

holding their secrets?

Contrary to popular belief,  
the main occupation  
of ghosts  
is not haunting, conjuring frights,  
but

long

lonely

waiting





Figure 3: Nellis, R. (2011). Danger keep out. Digital photograph.

### Shannon Park, Nova Scotia

today, I shimmy up that pipe and carefully crawl through the window,  
my foot crunching remnants of broken glass long resting on the tile floor inside

I can see children playing, caught in just-hinted shimmers  
of shiny linoleum, smelling of Pine-Sol,

the thud of a baseball hitting the front of the building  
“What the hell are you kids doing!”

the more delicate my steps, the deeper the echoes  
through this decay, like those pots and tables in Pompeii

untouched by human hands  
but changed nonetheless

through the rooms and into the stairwell, piled with 20 years of excrement  
if no sign of birds

I step up the stairs to our old 4th floor apartment

The only locked door in the complex

## Elegy

I had never really thought much about birds  
in the hand or otherwise

she came to us one evening,  
escaped?  
well, she flapped right to us  
and didn't leave...

Are journeys of passing  
- hopefully shared -  
eventually finished alone?

We looked at each other that winter night  
and then to this small bird  
I held in my hand

I suppose a neurologist can pinpoint the exact moment  
but I don't know or need to know that

Maybe it's like falling asleep?

a slow,  
                unfolding

I know she stayed warm in my hand for a long, long time

These three poems are all in their own ways about relationships ending. *And when do they end?* As I suggested at the outset, I believe they end long before the neighbourhood is torn up, the building abandoned, or the bird dies. Similarly, I think that for me creative work begins long before it becomes a writing of memoir. And the space where it really happens, the space where I really connect with both loss and creation, at the membrane of connection, in that in-between, is a space defined not by holding on tight, but by being with, becoming through contemplation: dwelling with/in loss.

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