

HOW DO YOU TELL A SHATTERED STORY?
THE INTIMATE DISASTER IN 21ST CENTURY MEMOIR AND FICTION

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Abstract

This dissertation considers the ways in which writers write about disaster in 21st century memoir and fiction. It positions narrative as an intermediary in the confrontation of loss, dread, and upheaval, and proposes the concept of the “intimate disaster” as a vital connective tool. This research interrogates the intersection of the colossal disaster (tsunamis, earthquakes, geopolitical warfare) and the individual disaster (heartbreak, illness, loss) as a crucial point of transformative witnessing and creative mediation. By examining the ways in which the big and the small communicate, this dissertation explores the concept of “the intimate” as a point of access between the ordinary and the extraordinary, and between the individual and the collective. I argue that intimate disasters undo the world like the big, spectacular disasters, and the colossal, in turn, is made known through the intimate.

Through an interdisciplinary lens that combines literary analysis, narrative theory, and the tenets of disaster and emergency management, this dissertation analyzes contemporary works of memoir and fiction that confront disaster. Chapter One, “The Opening,” examines key temporal phases of disaster onset through the opening pages of Sonali Deraniyagala’s memoir of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, *Wave*, and Joan Didion’s memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Chapter Two, “The Meeting of Dread,” explores anticipatory disaster through the concept of the “dread space” in Julia Phillips’ novel *Disappearing Earth* and Andrea Gunraj’s novel *The Lost Sister*; texts that narrativize the familial and communal wreckage caused by abduction and disappearance. Chapter Three, “How Do You Tell a Shattered Story?” confronts the atrocity of the Cambodian genocide through the exploration of the child witness in Loung Ung’s memoir, *At First They Killed My Father* and Madeleine Thien’s novel, *Dogs at the Perimeter*.

By theorizing the intimate disaster, this research contributes to contemporary scholarship on disaster writing by showing how writers confront—or meet—disaster through a liminal, fragmented, intermediary space grounded by objects of intimacy. It emphasizes the role of the intimate in making vast, incomprehensible upheavals points of vital witnessing where both the individual and the collective work in contentious symbiosis to mediate disaster.

Dedication

my Creator, to whom I return, again and again.

*Lulu Bilkis Banu and Shahidul Islam Khan
for the gift of your love
and for your enduring support of my dreams.*

*and for all of us
who cup our wounds close,
and contemplate.*

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Introduction

what if a much of a which of a wind

gives truth to the summer's lie;

bloodies with dizzying leaves the sun

and yanks immortal stars awry?

e.e. cummings

In my memory, the photograph materialized before me, a gauzy black dress blown out and backlit by stark white light. I emerge from thick, wet heat, the air drizzling with mists of rain that stick my shirt to my back in welts, my skin fizzing. I remember the humidity churning the air; it felt like breathing butter, every breath stifled by the weight, my chest heavy, something bodily skirting the edge of panic. And then—I step into a light filled space. The air lifts. The soft earth shifts to light wood. And there, a gauzy black dress, its collar torn, its sleeves crumpled and strewn, like something windblown, but shocked. This image—a dress once owned by someone who perished in the atomic bombings of Japan, appears in photographer Ishiuchi Miyako's "Hiroshima" series, and it captures, through Ishiuchi's arrangement and styling, a moment of impact. Expansive and haunting, the image catches me, catches my breath, and draws me inward. I'm in a gallery space now, surrounded by photographs of objects—clothing and shoes and dolls—and something wrenches inside me; I want to both retreat into myself and revolt outward against the thing I now witness. I also want to embrace the thing I see, unravel silk threads with my fingertips, the dress a tangible, slippery thing, and descend into the image to get as close as I can to this incomprehensible thing, this wretched moment, this disassembling of everything known. But all these objects left behind—a polka dotted shirt, a school uniform, a young boy's kimono—by people violently absconded by an atomic blast, situates me into a specific moment,

then into a specific life, then into the incomprehensibility of something so profoundly vast in its destruction, it is too much to hold at once. I circle the exhibit, the lightness of the air-conditioned space disassembling my heat-locked brain, but I cannot stay. I feel an urgency creep up inside me, and then it's pounding, and I need to leave. I slip back outside, the humidity of a Portland forest re-embracing me, but this time there is a lookout, and I stand at its edge, the forest sweeping out and out, into cityscape, and then up into the point of a mountain—Mt. Hood, known as Portland's Mt. Fuji—and I stand and look at it, my breath ebbing back into my body.

Mapping the Architecture of Dread and Disaster

In January 2020, just weeks prior to the worldwide closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, I visited Ishiuchi Miyako's photography exhibit "Spirits Rising: ひろしま / hirosshima" in the Portland Japanese Garden. The exhibition featured photographs by Ishiuchi encountering clothing and objects left behind by victims of the Hiroshima bombings. Donated by family members to the Peace Centre in Hiroshima, Ishiuchi explains to documentary filmmaker Linda Hoaglund, that family members don't wish to let these objects go: "They want to keep them close because they embody the person who died. But they feel a responsibility to ensure that no one has to endure what their loved ones went through. They donate them to the museum so the objects can tell their stories" (qtd. in Hoaglund 89). Though each of these items carry the story of an individual, of the spiraling intensity of the sudden loss, and the profound grief of the family left behind, Ishiuchi insists that her photographs depict a specific encounter with the objects—her encounter—rather than a mediation of the past to the present. She explains, "I can't photograph the past. I can only photograph what happens in the moment I encounter this particular object, my most personal reactions, what I feel and see" (qtd. in Hoaglund 89). Her interactions with the objects, the subsequent exhibits around the world, and the capture of this process in a documentary film, form a chain of witnessing where the

specificity and vastness of an individual's inner world meets the disaster, and the disaster, in turn, echoes out through time, across borders, and erupts again and again.

The 2020 “Spirits Rising: ひろしま / hiroshima” exhibit at the Portland Japanese Garden Pavilion Gallery sits at the centre of a series of interlinked gardens. This semi-open gallery and exhibition space guides visitors down the languid, circuitous pathways of the botanical gardens, where we pause mid-stroll amidst a lush and meticulous gardenscape. Circular, cyclical strolling paths curve around several gardens, one leading into the next. In total, these paths move through eight interconnected gardens, each designed to showcase “unique aspects of Japanese garden history and design” (“Garden Spaces”). The Historic Gardens surrounding the gallery space include the Strolling Pond Garden, the Flat Garden, and the Tea Garden where intentional Japanese design threads the natural geographic features of the Pacific Northwest into a meditative experience; visitors stroll, rest under pavilions, and breathe in misty mountain air. Along one of these strolling paths, a squat stone lantern with three legs known as a *yukimi doro* sits in the cascading shade of surrounding trees; it's a “Peace Lantern,” gifted to the city of Portland in 1954 from the city of Yokohama and its Mayor, Ryōzō Hiranuma, symbolizing “the first step in a new relationship between Yokohama and Portland where “For the first time since the war, many Portlanders started to become reenergized about the idea of once again having a relationship with Japan, both culturally and from a business standpoint” (“A Symbol of Everlasting Peace and Friendship”) linking the garden inexorably to a collective traumatic history. By design and with intention, these curated garden paths intertwine history with individual introspective meandering, and with present-day cultural exploration and investigation. The landscape and architecture of the Portland Japanese Garden functions as a narrative space where designers and organizers serve a collective vision, carefully and artfully curating a specific story of hope, reconciliation, and witnessing. This curation supports the natural flow and eruption of traumatic

memory and emotion, the gardens cultivating a space of openness through intimacy where the individual physically walks a meditative path that guides recollection, gestures toward mending, and offers active mediation of intrinsic feeling.

The “Spirits Rising: ひろしま / hiroshima” exhibit stood in the Pavilion Gallery, which lies at the base of the Flat Garden. In the tradition of the other Historic Gardens, the Flat Garden functions as an enclosed space, and does not feature gift shops, ticketing booths, cafes, or any other commercial gathering points. The Portland Japanese Garden’s website likens the Flat Garden to a landscape painting, instructing visitors to view it from one, singular position as opposed to a dynamic viewpoint where the viewing experience of the garden shifts and accommodates depending upon where someone stands:

The Flat Garden is meant to be seen from a single viewpoint, framed by the sliding shoji doors if viewed from inside the Pavilion or by the veranda itself if viewed from outside. This enclosed view can be appreciated in much the same way we would appreciate a landscape painting—perhaps a view of a shoreline across the water of the raked gravel plane. (“Portland Japanese Garden - Garden Spaces”)

From this fixed viewpoint, the observer stands, takes the view in, and participates in a meticulously constructed perspective designed by a curatorial eye; the curator presents the garden as a *still* perspective, immovable and static, the visitor cast into the role of an observer who may consider the view, assess it, and perhaps move on from it: here is the picture—look at it like this. Contextualized this way, the garden as “landscape painting” functions as a focal point rather than a point of mediation. In this contractual viewing, the observer is both integral—who has the garden been built for, after all?—and inconsequential—the curatorial vision remains intact through multiple viewings, through an abundance of visitors, through the absence of the observing eye. If we cast the garden observer into

the role of witness, the observer functions as a vessel through which the vision of the landscape travels, their whole being—their place in the world, their fears, their values, the intimacy of their emotional landscape—transmutes the focal point into an act of mediation where the individual is not only a viewer, but a *someone*, and the view itself feeds something innate in the witness. In this contract to view a garden, the placement of “Spirits Rising: ひろしま / hiroshima,” an exhibit of personal encounters with objects of disaster, at the end of the carefully curated experience of the Flat Garden, creates an accidental experience of witnessing tethered between the tension of passive observation and intimate interaction. Here, the designing eye requires the observer to transform into an individual witness who experiences an internal eruption of intrinsic dread.

The physical context of the gallery is important. As a structure, the Pavilion Gallery blurs the line between landscape and architecture, between the observer and the observed. The floors, made of soft stripes of light wood, and the walls, made of traditional *shoji*—translucent paper panelled doors—allow diluted light to stream into the space. Looking at photos of the gallery years later, the space breathes with light; it mediates the flow of light, shifting energy from one end of the room and out the other. A verandah wraps around the gallery and bridges the outside to the inside. The gallery itself functions as a transitory, in-between space between the encounter with the exhibition—a visitor enters the gallery, moves through bends of light, and exits out the other side—and the sparse, open courtyard that looks out across a wet forest landscape to the mountains beyond at the “Mt. Hood Lookout.” My personal encounter with Ishiuchi’s photographs in the Pavilion Gallery maps the pathway of an accidental encounter with dread. I did not intentionally seek out the exhibit; I happened upon it while on a writing trip with a group of friends. The trail leading to the gardens moved in hilly pathways through a great swathe of forest, and deep in the gardens, I separated from my group, walked slowly up the length of a verandah, and yearned for respite from the thick humidity of the day. I wanted some

relief, wanted the heat to lift from my body, and for something cool to slip between my sweater and the stickiness of my back. The transition into the gallery space nudged my psyche from the green shade of forest and garden into a blurry transitional space where the exhibit functioned as a punctuated stop. I experienced a jarred awakening into a witnessing space. We meandered through several gardens before reaching this one; we wandered through the quiet flatness of the gardens surrounding the gallery, experiencing their stillness and stoic demand for placid observance rather than dynamic participation, and entered an exhibit in an unexpected encounter with the construction and deconstruction of disaster. Upon entry, gallery signage indicated that the exhibit was "...documenting cherished items and clothing left behind by victims of the atomic bomb detonated in Hiroshima at the close of WWII that are now housed at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum." ("Gallery signage" *Spirits Rising*: ひろしま / *hiroshima*). Information provided on the Portland Japanese Garden website contextualizes the exhibit as an intentional appeal for peace: "The subjects are captured in her [Ishiuchi's] unique, moving style that resurrects and gives voice to those who suffered and died on that fateful day, bringing to life a renewed appeal for humanity and global peace ("Spirits Rising"). This narrative of global unity and peace, created with thoughtful, good intention by the Portland Japanese Garden, perpetuates a belief about the power of art to "appeal for humanity and global peace." The exhibit, presented within the context of "commemorating 2020 as the Year of Peace in recognition of the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II" ("Spirits Rising"), functions as an active symbolic remembrance of a collective traumatic experience and an urgent wish for the experience to, in some way, compel a fierce dedication to peace. By design, we are here to observe, to take in, to bear witness, and in doing so, collectively illuminate pathways to global peace. But in confronting the disaster through the witnessing of personal objects that emerge from the ruin of the disaster itself, the individual encounters the disaster through closeness, the intimacy plunging the witness into a psychic

space of familiar and personal grief, the memory of vacuous loss and the imagining of its potential arrival carving our meandering pathway through the gardens, and through life, the approach of disaster a familiar, terrifying object of unknowability and limitless dread.

The Intimate Disaster

This dissertation explores the intimate disaster and the intimacy of disaster as correlative concepts in constant energetic exchange. As a powerful and integral lens to understand disaster, intimacy magnifies and instigates engagement with an innate part of our being—the part of us that simultaneously anticipates, dreads, and interrogates the devastation of our mortality. At our centers, we stave off death, avoid it, committing consciously and subconsciously to survival. We are against decay, against deterioration, against self-destruction, but the spectacle of disaster also enthralls us with its ability to unravel us. While we abhor it, we innately advance toward it and in the cultural production of art that occurs following disaster, memoirs and fiction about disaster play a crucial role in the cultivation of intimacy between the text, its writer, and the reader. These forms offer a field for mediating the numbing, seemingly irresolvable feelings individuals as both reader and witness experience towards events of intense rupture and mass destruction. How does this mediation occur between the survivor, the event, and the witness, and how do works of memoir and fiction use intimacy as a tool of both representation and knowing?

Intimacy, as a fraught interrogative force, demands both tenderness and confrontation. When the colossal disaster upends and destroys life on a breathtaking scale, the realm of the intimate opens in us the primordial instinct of watchful wonder and dread. The large-scale, sudden onset ecological disasters (earthquakes, cyclones, tsunamis, etc.) are the “spectacular” disasters that impress themselves with great force on the imagination. They also move as metaphorical beasts, tracing the pathway that all sudden disasters take when they strike our lives.

There is a connection between the big and the small: the “intimate disasters”—the romantic heartbreak, the loss of a loved one, a terminal diagnosis—share the moment of “onset” of large-scale disasters where within minutes, the known world is unmade and a person must tread fallen, unknown, treacherous territory. This connection is important: intimate disasters undo our private worlds like big, spectacular disasters undo massive systems of collective existence; in parallel lines of profound impact, the colossal, in turn, is made known through the intimate.

I’ve termed the intimate disaster as the disaster that is at first, intensely private and individual. It is not a singular event that affects vast expanses of people and places in one fell, cinematic swoop. It is the private event, the quiet loss experienced at the individual level. Though the individual experiences the colossal disaster through a singular lens, its massive impact cultivates a collective experience and forms aspects of our collective consciousness. Conversely, the intimate disaster, though relatable to others who survive the same or similar event in their own lives, forms an intensely individual and isolating experience of loss. The intimate disaster can have the same ruinous effect—an irreversible change—but it is not a mass collective experience pinpointed in history. It is a close, intimate, and quiet ruin.

The intersection between large-scale disasters and the intimate, individual disaster is an important one. Revelatory overlaps exist between the individual, private experience of an intimate disaster and the collective experience of a large-scale disaster that provide insights into the human experience of loss and dread. But the intimate is not only characterized by the idea of “the big” and “the small.” The intimate is the very close, the small, the minute, the flesh and the bone. It’s the crumbs on a countertop, the sweat-rumpled bed sheets, the page of a book folded over. The intimate is the privacy of closeness and the privilege of proximity that allows entry and absorption of the tangible remnants of the private life that are left behind. Sometimes the

intimate is too close—the loving familiarity of the roundness of a lover’s toes is at once warm, loving, and enclosed in the realm of the private. I am this close to your toes because I have gained closeness to you. But if the toes are not your lover’s, or your child’s, or your own, if the toes belong to someone else and there you are touching them, observing them, noticing the rough edges of the heel, or the softness of the skin, the intimacy is too much. The closeness is rejected or reviled—by both the observer and the observed. Even further, the removal of the intimate object from the intimacy of emotional closeness and familiarity, cultivates an experience of revulsion and quiet horror. Picture the blankness of a foot among wreckage—this is the intimate object removed from the privacy of its environment. It is not only an object out of place, but also an interjection, a pause—*this does not belong here*. Then, an intrusion—*I do not belong here*. Both the observer and the object observed intersect at the pivotal point where the abject horror of disaster displaces familiarity and recognition—*I know what this is; it's a foot*—and transfigures it into a violation. Intimacy forms an avenue of knowing; it opens in us an old wound, something deep, known, and frightening, where we recognize our vulnerability amidst the vividness of destruction. That foot in the wreckage should not be.

This dissertation examines interactions between intimacy and disaster in works of 21st century memoir and fiction. I consider memoirs written by individuals with first-hand experience of surviving a disaster, and fiction that narrativizes specific disaster events. These texts explore and interrogate disasters that fall across the spectrum of what we know to be disaster: disasters of natural origin like earthquakes and tsunamis, man-made conflict in the form of land wars and genocide, and the individual disaster of personal loss. Specifically, my chosen texts confront disasters both intimate and colossal: memoirs that oscillate between the incomprehensible hugeness of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the isolating grief of the sudden wrenching loss

of a beloved husband; novels that navigate the cataclysmic rupture of domestic households wrecked by the disappearance of young girls Kamchatka, Russia and a teenager in the community of Rexdale in Toronto, while interrogating the institutional complicity in domestic rupture and disappearance; a memoir alongside a novel that both place the child-as-survivor and witness amidst the extreme apocalyptic impact of the Cambodian genocide. The works in this study demonstrate the constant correlation between the intimate and the colossal where the writing and reading of disaster hinges on confrontations between the self and the collective.

My exploration of how writers write about disaster through the lens of intimacy focuses on major movements that interact in texts across the spectrum of disaster writing in memoir and fiction. I argue that in the writing of disasters in memoir and fiction, these movements—*the opening, the meeting of dread, and the shattering*—comprise a structural and thematic framework for the storytelling of disaster. Within each of these movements, there exist distinct temporal moments—*pre-onset, onset, unfolding, upheaval, and loss*—that work as points of introspective and reflective inquiry. Together, these movements and moments comprise a disaster writing framework that creates multiple spaces of contention, communion, and compulsion toward dread throughout a disaster text. The unifying element of intimacy in this vast spectrum of disasters that differ in scale and type informs the trajectory of this dissertation. I propose that the connectivity between disasters, colossal and intimate, requires a narrative approach where intimacy functions as a tool of knowing. The process of narrativizing disasters is a negotiation between the intimate and the “uncanny” colossal that creates, confronts, and navigates the feeling of melancholic dread that arises in the act of second-hand witnessing of a disaster. In any disaster text, the reader moves through “rooms” of disaster experience that construct disaster not as a point of arrival (Siskind), but rather a space structured specifically to open psychic wounds

of fear and dread that demand confrontation.

Intimacy in Research

The role of intimacy in the “labour of research” differs from the study *of* intimacy, but forms fascinating and provoking pathways for understanding how intimate relationships between researchers and the process of their research can “inform the making of knowledge, shape power relations and enable or constrain the practical negotiation of ethical problems” (Fraser and Puwar 1). I am interested in this strange grey-space between my role as researcher and my role as witness when interrogating works about intimacy and the disaster. Intimacy shapes my approach to these texts, while also providing a lens through which I analyze the relationships between the writer, their process, and the reader’s interaction with the text. In the Introduction of a special issue of *History of the Human Sciences* entitled “Intimacy in Research,” Mariam Fraser and Nirmal Puwar emphasize how though often omitted from “methods and methodology,” intimacy forms important connective bonds between the researcher, their research, and the broader audience that they serve. They write, “The rhythm, smell, sense, tension and pleasure that go into producing what will become research and data remain largely outside of such discussions, even though these are the very ways in which we carry research into the library, the studio and the lecture hall (Fraser and Puwar 2). The intimacies of the research process are particularly relevant to the study of the intimacies of disaster because of how the process often mirrors the representation of disasters in the arts. The “flesh, fabric, glamour, sounds, grease and grit of the everyday nature of research, often polices communication of how the research was undertaken.” The level of detail used to depict the context of a historical event, for example, to better understand specific actions by individuals, is seen as a “level of detail ...arguably more acceptable in a novel” rather than in objective research. The “thick descriptions of texture could

be considered to be rather dramatic and unnecessarily fleshed out” (Fraser and Puwar 5) in an academic inquiry whereas in a novel they have the effect of creating a realistic, sensory experience that serves the purpose of a narrative meant to vividly depict the landscapes, feelings, textures, and tones of the story being told. The intimacy expected in narrative prose is questioned as potentially voyeuristic and sensational in research. In my analysis of the texts in this dissertation, I consider how the detailed closeness of intimate description serves as a contextual and connective aspect of experiencing a text, alongside the idea of intimate detail as a transgressive and voyeuristic lens. Both construct the reading and writing of disaster as a self-interrogative force.

In “Intimacy in research: accounting for it” Carolyn Steedman explores 18th century account books as historical sources. She shows how historians often serve as the unintended readers of their primary sources, whereas researchers who encounter novels, government reports, or other documents form the intended audience of the work. This positioning of historian as unintended reader means that the historian “reads something that was never meant for his or her eyes” and participates in an “intimate invasion of purposes and circumstances, unlikely to be uncovered” (17-18). This “intimate invasion” of “pieces of paper and parchment” that form “traces of the Everything that made up a past reality, that is no more” (18) directly correlates to how the reader of memoir and fiction about disaster assumes the dual position of reader as intended witness and reader as intimate invader. The intimate details that serve as sources of fascination because of the intense, tactile, and raw physical experience they provide, also contribute to the tension of questioning the production of meaning when engaging with intimate details that do not afford a researcher observational distance, while also carrying the stigma of voyeuristic sensationalism. Artifacts of disaster—tangible objects left behind—construct the

realm of the intimate disaster where the ordinary overlaps with the extraordinary (the intimate with the colossal), and a relationship of intimacy transpires between the reader as witness and the crisis being witnessed. The archival document makes up a reality that no longer exists just as artifacts left behind in a disaster setting—a shoe, a foot, a note, a child’s toy—form objects that crystallize a moment in time. They locate the exactness of loss, a point of irreversible change. Intimacy invokes witnessing, and in doing so, it cultivates a space of contentious internal reflection about our inability to contend with the deep knowledge that we are almost always “unknowingly imperiled by catastrophe” (Hoaglund 95).

Defining Disaster

In this dissertation, I use the term “disaster” to describe the particularity of a massive combusive force, beyond immediate control, that causes a sudden, incomprehensible rupture in our individual and collective lives. Almost every discussion of disaster begins with the Latin root of the word, *astrum*, which points to the skies, the *disaster* originating from the *stars*. The root of the disaster branches downward from the skies, its route pre-destined, its impact an object of fate, the *why* beheld as a plaintive cry, its question unanswerable, any answer hidden behind the veil of an unseen world. In the field of Disaster and Emergency Management, the term “disaster” contains finite parameters. The idea of control, or our sheer lack of it, in the face of massive “natural” disasters, such as the shift of tectonic plates grinding into a cataclysmic earthquake and echoing out into tsunamis, brushes up against “man-made” disasters of war, ecological demise, or nuclear disasters. Additionally, the term “complex humanitarian disaster” refers to man-made disasters where geopolitical conflict results in mass displacements of people, and the resulting complications extend into chronic events such as famine, disease, and further conflict (Zibulewsky 144). In the context of disaster and emergency management, the disaster forms an

atlas of interconnected ruptures that spill one into the other, rippling out into endless gridlines of internal and external upheavals:

Disasters do more than cause unexpected deaths, injuries, and illnesses. Among their effects are the destruction of local health infrastructures—hospitals, doctor’s offices, clinics, dialysis centers, pharmacies, and the like; the environmental impact, such as increased risk of communicable diseases, premature death, and decreased quality of life; psychological effects, including anxiety, neuroses, and depression; food shortages and nutritional consequences; and, in some places, large population movements. (Zibulewsky 144).

In this way, the term “disaster” can apply to a vast network of events, its defining factor that it affects populations on a collective scale, the impact widespread. The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction defines disaster as “A serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic and environmental losses and impacts” (“Disaster” UNDRR). The disaster as massive disruption gestures to a focus on function, and perhaps, an eventual return to a pre-disaster state of “normal.” The interpretation of disaster through a historic and literary lens considers the mass event as not only an interpretive tool, but as a method of understanding how we respond to ideas of disaster. In *Inventing Disaster* (2019), historian Cynthia Kierner approaches disaster as a “culture of calamity” (210) and considers our shifting responses to disaster over the course of three centuries, the disaster revealing the human relationship to tragedy. In Jonathan Boulter’s recent book, *Blanchot, Ecology and Contemporary Fiction: The Thought of the Disaster*, Boulter understands disaster as “extreme experiences of shock and disruption” (1) that relate to the idea

of extinction (3). He contends with Maurice Blanchot's characterization of the disaster as a diaphanous form that resists definition. My interest lies in the interactions between these overlapping understandings of disaster and the various "synonymizing" (3) terms that we as a culture use to describe the disaster. What do they tell us about how we transmute disaster as a method of knowing? In this dissertation, I use descriptors of disaster—catastrophe, upheaval, calamity, atrocity—in synonymous ways but also use them to articulate the reverberating impact of the disaster itself. I use "the disaster" as the most comprehensive term to describe events of sudden rupture and ultimately consider the sites of overlap between disaster as a defined term and disaster as a conception of understanding.

The Writing of Disasters in Prose

Historical Background

Historical precedent for the writing of disaster is vast in its scope and fascinating in its almost universal obsession with disaster as a force of undoing. The writer's preoccupation with disaster—its characteristics, its manifestations, its ruinous, irredeemable impact—is traceable through all genres, but writers of prose explore the intimate relationship between the disaster and the individual in ways that make specific demands upon the reader as a participant. Long-form narratives offer an opportunity to understand a process of mediation between survivors and their experience of disaster, and between survivors and the second-hand witness to the disaster in a way that other forms of cultural production do not negotiate. In one of the earliest examples of the fictionalization of a disaster, Daniel Defoe uses archival documents—bills of mortality and testimony found in his uncle's journal—to fictionalize the Great Plague of 1665 that swept through London and killed an estimated 100,000 people in less than two years. *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) stands apart from other narratives of the disaster written contemporaneously,

most notably, Samuel Pepys' journal, which contained a first-person perspective of the plague (as well as the Great Fire of London) and provided a first-hand account of the disaster as it happened rather than a retrospective reflection of the event after it had passed. Defoe's work fixates on "Bills of Mortality" which were weekly reports listing causes of death. The bills, posted in public spaces, showed a growing number of deaths due to the plague. In addition, Defoe's narrator "interviews" various firsthand witnesses—nurses, watchmen, pub owners, and maids—who describe in graphic detail the undoing of life caused by the disease. Defoe fictionalizes a historical event by mimicking the accumulation of "evidence" that serves as testimony of a disastrous event that occurred when he was two years old. Defoe cannot claim a full and vivid experience of the disaster himself but relies on the stitching together of archival material through an imagined narrator to help navigate the representation and understanding of a disaster that he just scarcely experienced. The text places importance on the first-hand experience as a method of effective capture. In doing so, Defoe moulds the experience of the disaster into a malleable and approachable form that provides potential readers with an intact experience of disaster that is, strangely and alarmingly, digestible. It is within this "digestible" form that the reader's encounter with the disaster of plague—in so many ways revolting, incomprehensible, and indigestible—proves both approachable and confronting. Another text written about the Great Plague from this period is a "found" or "discovered" text, *Due preparation for the plague, as well for soul as body*, originally published in 1722 but happened upon by editor John Scott sometime in the 1820s and attributed to Defoe. Scott recounts in his re-published 1832 edition, *Narrative of Two Families Exposed to the Great Plague in London, A.D. 1665*, how he came upon a "small duodecimo volume" in a "book-stall in London" (Scott iii) and was struck by its contents: it contained the experiences of two families who lived through the 1655 plague in London. Noting

the original 1722 publication date, Scott writes,

This was a time when the plague, which had commenced in Marseilles in 1720, was still raging in France, and was making such progress towards our own shores as induced the government of that day to adopt measures similar to those which are now employed to prevent, by the blessing of God upon them, the introduction or diffusion of another fatal disease amongst us, which is calculated to have carried off, in various parts of the world, as many as fifty millions of our fellow creatures within the last fourteen years! (Scott iii-iv).

Scott's re-published text includes a subtitle: *with Conversations and Religious Preparation for Pestilence*. This title, along with Scott's introductory notes on the publication, contextualize the writings as distinct cultural productions of disaster that function as instruction and mediation of current and future disasters. Like Defoe's work, *Narrative of Two Families* is purportedly written and published years after the initial experience of disaster. Its function, in Scott's view, is one of ideal mediation of those disasters that strike, bewilder, and horrify, through palatable descriptions devoid of the "minute and revolting descriptions, which sometimes make us turn away from such narratives with horror." The text is still "interesting and affecting" but achieves this through means that divert from the sensational and shocking and instead supply spiritual context and guidance to help prepare the reader for similar, future afflictions. Scott praises the text as one of gratification and interest enjoyed by anyone he has introduced to it, and comments that now, with his family, "it has been so much a favourite among them, that I found I could seldom afford a greater treat to my children, than by allowing them the use of 'The Plague Book' (v). This "plague book" and its reception by Scott and his circle signifies the heart of disaster writing as a genre that plays with the tension between entertainment, interest, and function. While other texts

in this period provide first-hand accounts of the Great Plague, the interplay between these aspects in Defoe's archival writing process and in Scott's editing process provide an opportunity to better understand how disaster writing as a genre began to develop into a form with specific elements of design. The form is defined by both experimentation and focussed intent, where the authors work towards specific goals of representation and function. Defoe aims to represent the Great Plague through the voices of those who were present during its infliction, providing an immersive first-person experience of events patched together via the testimony of others. Scott's text aims to provide a form of spiritual guidance where the works "forcibly...press upon the conscience the necessity of living prepared for death and eternity" (v-vi). In modern disaster management terms, this text may be considered a rudimentary foray into risk perception and coping: the plague of 1665 provided a case-study of the spread of disease that could and did happen again in the decades that followed. As an example of disaster writing, Defoe and Scott's texts demonstrate the multiple facets of approaching the writing of disaster. In this case, disaster writing becomes an object of projection where the question of how to understand and prepare for the unthinkable is made somehow manageable, navigable, and alluring. These texts provide a training ground of sorts—*look, these are the horrors of the plague, and they could very well happen to you*. And should it happen to you, the texts provide guidance in the form of spiritual instruction to help you understand how and why such horrors can come to visit, and how best to absorb their impacts. Other texts, such as Samuel Pepys' diaries, which offer his experience of both The Great Plague and The Great Fire of London, are not cultural productions with an aesthetic intention to mediate the occurrence of disaster. They include occurrences of disaster, and I consider them as relevant and helpful inclusions in the understanding of disaster writing as a whole and in tracing a trajectory of disaster writing as a developing genre. The Romantic era is

one of avid exploration of the blurred lines of mortality where the act of survival is a space of mediation. Writers like Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley dwell in this tenuous space in their works, and offer both meditative and urgent depictions of disasters, their onset, and their aftermath. In her book, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), Wollstonecraft looks upon a “wild coast” as she sails along it and meditates on the forward movement of time where “these bleak shores” (let. xi) would no longer be able to hold the weight of humanity. She writes, “Imagination went still farther, and pictured the state of man when the earth could no longer support him. Where was he to fly to from universal famine? Do not smile: I really became distressed for these fellow creatures, yet unborn. The images fastened on me, and the world appeared a vast prison (let. xi). Considered a travel memoir, Wollstonecraft’s letters contain the kind of fatalistic imagining of a dismal, disastrous future that offers insight into the ways in which the philosophizing of the inevitable—the knowledge that as we move forward in time, the end, in its various mutations, will come—is a method of preparation, control, and willful exposure to the unthinkable. Her letters demonstrate that the unthinkable is very much imaginable (she had just witnessed the French Revolution) and that the horrors we think cannot be do descend upon us and when they do, we navigate them, in terror and in grief, and still, we go on.

Shelley’s apocalyptic science fiction novel, *The Last Man* (1826), was not received with warmth in its time. Its exploration of a world decimated by plague does not quite follow in the footsteps of Defoe and Scott as exercises in fictionalized memoir or creative non-fiction, (though it also uses the premise of “found” papers as a point to propel the narrative); Instead, Shelley’s construction of a ravenous plague is adamantly a work of fiction—it’s a futuring of disaster that takes place in the 21st century and falls into the writerly fascination and creative compulsion

produced by disease. Like Defoe and Scott, the plague provided Shelley with the opportunity to imagine and construct a disaster that moves quickly, quietly, and indiscriminately across boundaries of vulnerability. It is close enough in history to be believable—familiar and intimate—and therefore, horrifying. Reviewers pulsed with indignation at the subject matter. *The Monthly Review* called it “The offspring of a diseased imagination, and of a most polluted taste” (qtd. in Paley 3) while *The Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, &c*; described it as “A sickening repetition of horrors” (qtd. in Paley 3). At the time, it fit within a much reviled and dismissed genre of “The Last Man” writing where the idea of anything being “last” was contradicted by the existence of a reader who remained present. In “Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*: Apocalypse Without Millenium” Morton D. Paley attributes the rejection of “last” writing to a resistance in the imagination. He writes of the reviewers: “Behind the ridicule, however, there is a suggestion that the imagination resists the idea of Lastness, an idea that presupposes a recipient or reader whose very existence negates the Lastness of the narrating subject.” Paley continues by attributing the scorn of reviewers to an existential anxiety. He writes, “We can see that in the year that Mary Shelley’s novel was published, its very subject seemed to invite derision, although behind that derision one senses a certain eschatological anxiety that may account for the virulence of some of the reviews” (3). This “eschatological anxiety” is an adamant, fear driven resistance to the graphic, vibrantly imagined death of humanity—the destined arrival and transformative sweep of disaster. The reaction to Shelley’s work points to revulsion and dread as pre-cursors to the encounter to disaster in Romantic era prose. The idea that death and disaster is not a subject for exploration in the novel is an argument that has more to do with taste than with subject matter. Disaster—plague, the end of humankind—is acceptable if represented through a specific aesthetic form. As a subject it

requires solemn practicality, unattached from bodily horrors. The form of the novel de-contains disaster, allows an unfolding that is not synthesized by aesthetic constraints. The novel, at this stage, and in Shelley's hands, is a deliberately exploratory and changing form that creates pathways where the vagrancies of Shelley's imagination and her fascination with an imagined future that is deplete rather than thriving—borne very much from the historical context within which she wrote—can bloom through the writing of a disaster.

Disaster in 20th Century Prose

One of the most pivotal works of disaster writing in the 20th century captures through vivid testimonial and reportage, the experience and aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing in 1945. The publisher's note in the 2012 edition of John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (1946) details how emerging news about the destruction of the bomb in Japan proved unreliable and spotty because so little was known about the on-the-ground experience of the bomb. What *was* known was that it had caused indescribable devastation. Many reports detailed the mechanics of the bomb, philosophizing on its use and what it could mean for the future (Hersey "Publisher's Note" v)—“But of the feelings and reactions of the people of Hiroshima to the bomb, nothing, or at least nothing that was not pure imagination, could be written; for nothing was known” (“Publisher's Note” vi). Originally published as the sole editorial content in the August 31, 1946 edition of *The New Yorker*, Hersey's 30,000-word narrative contained the experiences of six people who survived the bombing. Like Scott's assessment of his found plague narratives, which he deemed interesting and affecting, but not sensational, the Publisher's Note remarks that Hersey's account is “vivid yet matter-of-fact” and “tells what the bomb did to each of these six people” and is “written soberly, with no attempt whatever to ‘pile on the agony.’” The narrative is so matter-of-fact that “the presentation at times is almost cold in its economy of words,” (Hersey “Publisher's

Note” vii) the spare, stripped back style necessary to depict as close to the lived experience as possible, the impact and aftermath of a bomb so irredeemably destructive it seems unimaginable. In this view, emotive language in the domain of the extreme, functions as unnecessary excess.

How closely a writer represents the “agony” of a disaster through their treatment of graphic detail is fraught with concern because the line between representation and sensationalism is a blurred one. The introductory material of both Scott and Hersey’s work expresses a preference for a sparse writing style when documenting the experience of a disaster. This is a preference for restraint—why “pile on the agony” when the agony stands for itself? But it also serves as an expression of discomfort against a feigned closeness achieved through an excess of description. The reader as witness cannot experience a meaningful encounter with disaster through an assault of contrived feeling via graphic detail; the extreme of the disaster experience not only defies the need for words, it exists in a realm beyond words. This also gestures to a fine line of discomfort with closeness, expressed through a presumed preference of a style that rejects a “piling on of agony.” This style repudiates the language of excess as indulgent authorial energy that aims to overwhelm and shock, but it also reveals a palpable discomfort with the intimate.

And this—the limits of imagination and language in depicting the disaster’s complete undoing of our world, and the lived horror that it produces—is the signifying point that all works of disaster writing must consider. In many examples of disaster writing, the object of most value is the lived testimony. Defoe and Scott recreate and reproduce it, Shelley imagines it, and Hersey reports it. The presumed effect of—*here, in the words of the people who survived it, is how the disaster happened*—is that the reader will experience, as closely as is possible through the written word, *the real true thing* and that the reader will encounter what seems untouchable.

Intimacy and Representations of the Holocaust

Intimacy in studies of disaster roots itself in the vast and varied representation of the Holocaust. As a genre, Holocaust literature established the model for why the intimate matters in disaster. In the chapters that follow, I return again and again to Danilo Kiš's demand for literature to concretize the abstraction of history, for the impenetrable mass to find a pathway to witness through the specificity of an individual: "What is the meaning of 'six million dead' (!) if you don't see an individual face or body—if you don't hear an individual story?" (Kiš 206). As a teenager, my quiet, enclosed, and scintillating experience reading Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* carved an intimate pathway towards the atrocity. Amidst the fury of my middle school years, I spent hours scanning shelves at the public library, engrossed in the stories of precocious, often overlooked, but undeniably sparkling, gifted girls. The girls were storytellers—L.M. Montgomery's Anne Shirley of *Anne of Green Gables*, Sara Stanley from *The Story Girl*, Emily Byrd Starr of *Emily of New Moon* or Louisa May Alcott's Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. When I discovered the published diaries of L.M. Montgomery, I traced my way into what felt like a secret world of intimacies; I could enter the private world of a beloved writer and emulate the minutiae of her life, engage in the privacy of her thoughts and reside there with her. I selected Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* because it promised a secret like this, but it existed in a world of terror I did not yet understand, could not comprehend, but that felt palpable, the fear and dread as close as skin. I only knew that here existed another girl who told stories, whose voice skipped off the page in energetic, humorous, acerbic intensity, and, who like me, wrote to imagined friends and hoped for her work to one day be published. The close heat of the secret annex, where Frank stayed hidden with her family for two years, the constant threat of something *out there* rupturing their enclave of enforced safety in a cultivated domestic sphere, stitched the

massive incomprehensibility of “six million dead (!)” into the private sphere of a teenage girl fighting with her mother, crushing on her neighbour, and imagining a life beyond this dread, this unrelenting uncertainty.

When a few years later I encountered visual documents testifying to the events of the Holocaust, I felt the visceral pull of something intrinsic and terrifying. Let loose in the stacks of my high school library for an English or History assignment, I viewed the images as an act of removed, belated witnessing and flipped through pages in a state of mesmerized horror, my gut twisting; the images on slick pages depicted torture, human experiment, and mass obliteration of life. Photographs of mountainous piles of shoes, glasses, and personal belongings seared my memory, and I found myself returning to the library again and again to fixate on spectacles—fine, wire frames accumulated in an endless pile, the particularity of each frame igniting in my mind an individual, a specific face, the bridge of a single nose. I felt tied to the idea that all these things belonged to *a* someone, the collective penetrated by the individual, the incomprehensibility made finite by a pair of glasses I could imagine holding in my hand. I felt a distinct tension between the minute specificity of an individual amidst the massive anonymity of the colossal. This kind of witnessing, at once private, introspective, and intimate, intersects with the ways in which the cultural production of Holocaust representations, particularly in film, brought the enormity of the extreme into theatres, and then into the living rooms of the general public, invoking an act of public-private witnessing rooted in intimate bonds. In the confines of my childhood living room, my father gathered our family together to watch the film *Schindler's List* (1993). His desire for us to bear witness to a collective wound, to understand a profound cultural and historical rupture, signified something about how the knowability of the atrocity relied upon private decisions of intentional witness, upon an individual to bring the atrocity—its

shock, its extremes, its astonishing images of life flayed from flesh—home, where through the medium of a DVD or VHS played on a TV screen in the living room of one family, the atrocity enfolds itself into a private consciousness.

Intimacy's pathway to the atrocity maps its way through a vast tradition of witness literature representing first-hand experiences of the Holocaust. Imre Kertész's *Fatelessness* (1975; 1992; 2004), the 2002 winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, continued in the tradition of significant works by survivor-witnesses that came before it—Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1956), Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz (If This Is a Man)* (1947), Viktor E. Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), Gerda Weissmann Klein's *All But My Life* (1957; 1995)—but centers a child-witness who articulates the extreme conditions of Auschwitz and Buchenwald through a narrative voice characterized by nonchalance, the eeriness of the extreme against the placidity of an ordinary, seemingly unaffected observational eye creating a disruptive, disconcerting experience of individual witnessing. Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1986 and 1991) forms the experience of a second-hand witness of the atrocity, where Spiegelman transcribes his father Vladek's story, including his survival of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. Spiegelman, as artist, interlocuter, and son, mediates the raucous, fragmentation of generational memory, navigating a space where, as Marianne Hirsch describes in "Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory" his "own life [is] dominated by memories that are not his own" (12) and is an experience of "post-memory" where he "does not literally remember the concentration camp" (Hirsch 18) but mediates his father's memories by navigating his individual relationship to his father, the loss of his mother to suicide, and the loss and destruction of his mother's voice, the diaries she kept of her time imprisoned in Auschwitz destroyed by Spiegelman's father after her death. Spiegelman continues this trajectory

of accessing the atrocity as a second-hand witness through the intimacies of personal conversation in his latest work, a collaboration with artist Joe Sacco called “Never Again and Again: A Graphic Conversation” where the artists “have drawn themselves into the Gaza strip” (Spiegelman and Sacco) rendering their witness of atrocities in Palestine in a three-page-comic published in *The New York Review* in February 2025. The comic, an illustrated conversation between the two artists, places the decimation of Palestinians within the historical context of the Holocaust, referencing Spiegelman’s own representations in *Maus*, and mediating the complexities of witness through a collaborative comic “jam” (Simpson et al.) where the two artists contend with the events through personal introspection and conversation.

Disaster and the Arts

Disaster narratives produced during and in the aftermath of disaster—journalistic reports, personal narratives, oral histories, diaries, compilations of witness testimony—form the primary focus of researchers who seek to understand how the process of writing, articulating, and creating representations of disaster demonstrate “meaning and meaning construction during crisis” (Sellnow and Seeger 165). In “Disaster Narrative Emergent/cies: Performing Loss, Identity and Resistance” Phyllis Scott Carlin and Linda M. Park-Fuller establish disaster narratives as a form of cultural performance where an individual aims to “make sense of the traumatic event, to understand who they are in a time of great loss and to regain control of their lives.” The study characterizes the performance of disaster as a meaning-making activity where “reflective witnessing accomplishes a speech act that forges emergent identities, ethical stances, and social commentaries.” In this way, the telling of the disaster story forges a pathway through the disaster by cultivating from it a sense of meaning: “The first way to make meaning of the lost, the indescribable, the unbearable, then, is to describe it, to bear it as a witness, and then in

turn, to witness the tale” (Carlin and Park-Fuller 25). The telling of the personal disaster story transforms from an individual experience to a social act where “tellers recognize they are part of something profound and seem to feel responsible to their role in that sudden twist of history.” The survivor performs the story to audiences they perceive as “multiple and layered” (22) the narrativization of the disaster coagulating the public with the private, the collective with the individual. In *Natural Disasters and Victorian Empire: Famines, Fevers, and the Literary Cultures of South Asia*, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee argues that the construction of the disaster experience through narrative informs socially and politically complex relationships between populations affected by disasters and the policies that govern them. These narrativizations can inform “acts of governance and policy” during recovery periods as demonstrated through media constructions in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans (Mukherjee 5).

The emergence of studies of cultural production in disaster contexts provides fertile ground for much needed investigation. In the chapter “The Popular Culture of Disaster: Exploring a New Dimension of Disaster Research” that appears in the *Handbook of Disaster Research*, disaster researcher Gary R. Webb argues that popular culture forms an “important, but to some extent ignored, cultural strain of disaster research” where television programs, films, novels, comic books, etc. serve as sources of valuable information about how people respond to disasters through mass culture, and what those responses reveal about our beliefs related to disaster (432). In the aftermath of disaster, survivors engage in acts of cultural production that form a storied documentation of the event: “Following catastrophic events, survivors and responders also engage in a wide range of cultural production. They tell jokes and share stories about the events. Buildings are spray-painted with graffiti to convey messages of hope, humour, or frustration (430). Graffiti as cultural production in the aftermath of disaster works as an

“emergent, spontaneous, ephemeral, and publicly displayed” expression of social thought where survivors “express grievances about the official response” by government agencies (435). This cultural production is meant to do something—protest, process, grieve, uplift—in the communities in which it appears. In *disaster porn!*, an analysis of the spectacular, apocalyptic visual imagery captured, created, and used to represent disaster in mass media, sociologist Timothy Recuber traces the rise of the term “disaster porn” and demonstrates how the intention to ignite public response to human suffering contributes to “compassion fatigue” that deadens public reaction instead (32). His analysis of popular films, including the blockbuster *2012*, offers a study of ways in which fictional representations of disaster on screen make ethical spectatorship an impossibility while also challenging the comfort of “ironic detachment” from such imagery (Recuber 33). The inundation of extreme disaster-related imagery does not always have its intended effect—instead of compelling people to feel, these cultural productions shock people into numbness that protects both the individual and collective from traumatic feeling.

But this response to disaster imagery also urges the question: What is the intended effect of extreme disaster imagery? Does intense imagery create emotional connection and investment in a story that the viewer feels distanced from? Does it create awe through entertainment, the spectacular, otherworldly images immersing our senses in the overwhelm of a witnessing experience? Does the repeated exposure to a frightening event through a contained form that at least structurally promises an end to the trauma help the viewer attain a feeling of mastery over the shock and surprise of the event itself? In “‘Katrina That Bitch!’ Hegemonic Representations of Women’s Sexuality on Hurricane Katrina Souvenir T-Shirts,” researchers considered the cultural production of Hurricane Katrina souvenir t-shirts and the representations of women’s sexuality through aggressive and humorous slogans as an indicator of how humour functions as a

method of control over the uncontrollable. The study demonstrated how reactions to disasters were expressed through “collective processes of displaying solidarity symbols” (Macomber et al. 538) like national flags, and that souvenir t-shirts demonstrate a gendered, sexualized method of creating solidarity in the aftermath of disaster. In the case of graffiti and souvenir t-shirts, the cultural production is quickly rendered, the “products” meant to provide almost immediate outlet and impact. The “ephemeral” nature of these elements is a contrast to the “preplanned, carefully produced, and strategically distributed” (Webb 435) production of disaster movies meant to use spectacle to shock viewers into a connective response.

In “101 Years of Mine Disasters 101 Years of Song: Truth or Myth in Nova Scotia Mining Songs?,” a combined study between the Emergency Communications Research Unit at Carleton University and the Department of Ethnomusicology at Cape Breton University, researchers analyze Nova Scotia mining songs to demonstrate how folk songs created after several mining disasters provide accurate renderings of the events of the disaster, cover rescue efforts, and memorialize the dead and the trapped. As cultural productions, the songs offer a way of understanding human responses to disaster. Previous studies on folk songs about mining disasters show how “composer, performer, and audience jointly express their feelings of sorrow, shock, and possibly hope” (Scanlon et al. 38). Anna Veprinska’s book, *Empathy in Contemporary Poetry after Crisis* (2020) examines representations of empathy in poetry written after three major world crises—the Holocaust, 9/11, and Hurricane Katrina—and establishes the dissonant nature of empathy, its power and its violence, as well as its “benefits and dangers” (184). This disaster continues in the direction of studies like these by focusing on the representation of disasters in memoir and fiction, aiming to fill a gap in current studies that seek to understand the connection between disaster and the arts, but that do not adequately consider the role that long-

form narratives play in the creative processing of disaster by individuals and communities who have lived experience of the disaster as well as those who arrive to the disaster as removed witnesses. How do memoir and fiction address the desire to turn away from death? This dissertation explores how the tangibility and temporal longevity of the reading and writing process creates a communicative experience between the writer, the reader, and the disaster, that in turn cultivates negotiation with the discomfort and dread-filled relationship between humans and uncertainty.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided examples of immediate and real-time cultural productions in response to a world-wide, collective disaster. At the start of the pandemic, the production of songs, raps, collaborative sing-a-longs, skits, and “quarantine diaries” featuring social media stories, posts, and photographs emerged as a collective and living archive and a method of immediate coping. The immediacy of real-time narrativizing of a worldwide disaster provided a rare opportunity to collect and assess examples of disaster storytelling as the disaster unfolded. What role does the production of art play in the emotional and managerial processing of disasters? The online video-poem “The Great Realisation” by British poet Tomos Robertson “Probably Tomfoolery” provides an example of narrativizing the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of retrospective moralism. The video uses the familiar archetype of the bedtime story where a child asks his father for the story “about the virus” before going to bed. The tale, read from a gilded book, embeds the virus story into the intimate, everyday routine of a family, and establishes it as existing lore, a collective memory of a widespread disaster we look back at from a post-COVID-19 world. The world left behind is one of “waste and wonder, of poverty and plenty,” (Probably Tomfoolery 00:00:26) where “the meaning must have melted and the work-life balance broke” (00:01:01). The poem depicts a pre-pandemic world already contaminated by

complex disaster—ecological ruin, ruptured families, ever-growing capitalist greed—and when the virus arrives, entire populations relegated to the privacy and enclosure of home, the world enters a period of deep learning, gratitude, and renewal where “the people dusted off their instinct...[and] remembered how to smile” (00:02:14) and where the “earth began to breathe/the beaches bore new wildlife that scuttled off into the seas” (00:02:31). In this story, the virus arrives as a great trial that forces humans to leave behind a deeply damaging way of life to discover a new life that brings nourishment and connection; the poem, its immense online popularity, and its subsequent adaptation into a picture book, reflects the desire of the creator and the consumer to not only make sense of worldwide upheaval, but to draw purpose from pain. These means of cultural production connect the colossal all-encompassing nature of disaster with the experience of the individual (Recuber 33) and in doing so, insist on wresting an understanding of meaning from catastrophe, impose form on the heedlessness of chaos, and engage in a complex moral argument that arises from the desire to contain amoral forces. Art, music, graffiti, popular films, folktales, memes, and other cultural products like t-shirts, commercials on television and on social media feeds, bumper stickers and more, use satire, caricature, wit, and comedy as emotional and social responses to disasters, and contribute to how we process and understand disaster. These creative productions help us understand emotional responses to disaster events and in turn, those responses tell us about the mitigation of disaster, ethical spectatorship, compassion fatigue and social engagement, and how specific creative forms shape our interactions with disaster. They show us how suffering happens as well as how moral engagement with the suffering of others can lead to some forms—however conflicted—of social understanding (33).

Historical and sociological context play an essential role in understanding the

development of the disaster narrative in modern literature. To guide my approach to disaster through the lens of intimacy, I consider the ways in which disaster writing, particularly disaster fiction, projects deep existential and xenophobic fears onto an imagined landscape of colossal world destruction. In many ways, traditional “disaster writing” and representations of disaster in popular culture correlate with plot-driven, commercial, genre writing that renders disaster as a large-scale, ecological or catastrophic event. In Mike Davis’s *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*, Davis identifies nine major story types of Los Angeles disaster fiction, a city that exists at the epicenter of the disaster genre with its unique geographical position. Located on ecological fault lines that echo a historical precedent of disasters (floods, droughts, earthquakes) combined with sociological and political tensions (extreme income disparity, “illegal aliens,” racial friction) Los Angeles serves as a prime landscape for the onset of a spectrum of disasters. In this context, the disaster, always awe-inspiring and all-encompassing, serves as a reflection of deeply entrenched psychic fears of the other (281). Davis’s story types trace disaster trends in fiction from 1900 to the 1990s, with each type embedded and reflective of the political and sociological climate of the day. The story types include hordes, romantic disasters, cult-catastrophes, the bomb, ecocatastrophes, cinematic disasters, Armageddon, alien invasions, and magical dystopias, while the method of destruction spans over 23 different modes that include nuclear weapons, earthquakes, invasions, monsters, pollution, gangs and terrorists, floods, plagues, comets and tsunamis, cults, volcanoes, firestorms, blizzards, and more (280-281).

The destruction of Los Angeles through disaster fiction offers an understanding of how we often view disaster: when we think of disaster, we think of the bigness of it, of a world torn asunder, of uncontrollable, perhaps inexplicable forces of nature that come down upon us

mortals, us recipients of fate. Davis writes, "...the abiding hysteria of Los Angeles disaster fiction, and perhaps of all disaster fiction—the urge to strike out and destroy, to wipe out an entire city and untold thousands of its inhabitants—is rooted in racial anxiety." For Davis, the "literary destruction of London and New York...[and] the latest survivalist fantasies about Los Angeles" exhibit "white fear of the dark races" (281) rather than any anxiety about earthquakes, nuclear weapons, floods, or hurricanes (282). This interpretation of disaster fiction as an existential trope shows how the representation of colossal disasters functions as a "constellation of fears" (282) where the disaster novel becomes a tool of understanding deep cultural biases and embedded violence. Reading disaster texts within the context of Davis's analysis of story types in Los Angeles disaster fiction provides a framework for understanding what underlying social fears and conflicts intersect when "futuring" the disaster in fiction.

The Disaster, Recognition, and Dread

The study of disaster narratives is the study of the "unbridgeable rupture between the ordinary and the extraordinary" (Rothberg 4). I consider how works of memoir and fiction about disasters act as forms of aesthetic mediation (Siskind) when they contend with the "end of the world"—or, the end of *a* world. Though disaster writing often correlates with writing that addresses large-scale, ecological, and apocalyptic events, the term disaster, as Maurice Blanchot describes in his text *The Writing of the Disaster*, indicates a disorientation of the absolute (4) where a force "ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact" (1), where we experience "irreversible loss," and where we cross a threshold of "no return" (Schuster 167). Disaster, as a term, must encompass the intimacy of personal loss and trauma that occurs at the local, personal level in order to fully represent, comprehend, and mediate the complexity of responses that occur during and in the aftermath of a disaster.

In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), Amitav Ghosh investigates the role of fiction in combatting climate change. He reflects on his personal and familial history tracing back to a day in the mid 1850s when a river suddenly changed its course and drowned his family village. Ghosh writes of how this story, told to him as a child journeying down the very river that uprooted his ancestors, incites a moment of exchange that occurs between him and the river, between him and this story. It's a moment of *recognition*. He writes:

Recognition is famously a passage from ignorance to knowledge. To recognize, then, is not the same as an initial introduction. Nor does recognition require an exchange of words: more often than not we recognize mutely. And to recognize is by no means to understand that which meets the eye; comprehension need play no part in a moment of recognition. (4)

The moment of recognition is an exchange between the viewer, the viewed, the witness, and the witnessed. When Ghosh looks at or thinks of this river, something in him awakens. He experiences an intrinsic unveiling where his inner world responds to a collective memory as a form of witness. That this recognition happens “mutely” and that there is no “understanding” or “comprehension” reflects what happens as the reader approaches the disaster text, and stands as witness to the disaster unfolding in the pages of a memoir or novel, then recognizes in it an intrinsic pull towards knowing the unknowable thing. Ghosh writes that

a moment of recognition occurs when a prior awareness flashes before us, effecting an instant change in our understanding of that which is beheld. Yet this flash cannot appear spontaneously; it cannot disclose itself except in the presence of its lost other. The knowledge that results from recognition, then, is not of the same kind as the discovery of something new: it arises rather from a renewed reckoning with a potentiality that lies

within oneself. (5)

In reading disaster narratives, readers knowingly enter a space of reckoning; the “prior awareness flashes before us” as a primordial instinct to turn away from the thing that destroys, recognition mirroring our internal resistance to the inevitability of loss. Further in his analysis, Ghosh outlines narrative techniques at play in the realist novel that contends with the overwhelm of disaster. These techniques—*improbability, concealment, and fillers*—construct the disaster as an active, living thing characterized by complex interactions of hope, anxiety, and dread. At the beginning of the folk-epic *The Miracles of Bon Bibi*, a tiger locks eyes with its prey, a boy named Dukhey: “‘How long has it been since human flesh came my way? / Now bliss awaits me in the shape of this boy Dukhey.’” On the far mudbank Dukhey caught sight of the beast: “‘that tiger is the demon and I’m to be his feast’” (qtd. in Ghosh 29). Ghosh references this moment as one of mutual recognition. He writes, “to look into the tiger’s eyes is to recognize a presence of which you are already aware; and in that moment of contact you realize that this presence possesses a similar awareness of you, even though it is not human” (29). This moment of recognition between the tangibility of human flesh and the unknowability of something terrifyingly sublime encapsulates the encounter between the reader and the disaster text. Monstrous, chilling, and reflexively revealing, the disaster acts as a living being that desires to usurp you but also reveal something in you.

The Intimate Object: Documenting Intimacy

I return now to my encounter with Ishiuchi Miyako’s “Spirits Rising: ひろしま / hiroshima” exhibit to situate what I call the *intimate object* as a transformative point of mediation in the works I discuss in this dissertation. The process of documenting these objects forms a network of witnessing that illuminates my reading of disaster as an act of intimate knowing. The photographs in

the 2020 exhibit I visited in Portland were originally taken by Ishiuchi in 2011, and shown in exhibition at the UBC Art Gallery in Vancouver from October 2011 to February 2012 (Hoaglund 85). Linda Hoaglund's documentary *Things Left Behind* (2012) captures the process of creating the UBC exhibit and provides a multi-layered film experience that navigates and interacts with tangible objects of disaster. Hoaglund began filming "a scant ten days after the great earthquake rocked northern Japan and a millennial tsunami reduced many of its cities to rubble reminiscent of the aftermath of World War II" (89). Hoaglund's filming process begins in the cyclic dread of the always-arriving disaster, the rupture physical and existential, the act of witnessing a never-ending, spiralled pathway of constant upheaval.

Things Left Behind demonstrates an ongoing interaction between the latecomer witness and the disaster mediated through visual observation of intimate objects. There are multiple lenses at play, each representing a unique relationship between viewer and disaster. Through their interactions with objects of intimacy, the "viewer" in each of these layers of interaction serve as latecomer witnesses to disasters. At the centre of this witnessing is Ishiuchi, interacting, staging, and photographing intimate objects. Hoaglund's documentation of communication between the photographer and the object comprises a second layer of witnessing. The visitor in the exhibit who interacts with Ishiuchi's photographs, their internal world ignited by what they see, form a third layer of witnessing, and the encounters captured by Hoaglund, then viewed by someone at home, continues the act of witnessing as an outward moving echo. This outermost circle of witnesses interacts with the disaster event through a series of overlapping lenses that amplify and refract the experience of disaster into a multitude of individual moments of intimate engagement.

The objects observed represent intimacy as an assembled image viewed through the gaze of the photographer. Ishiuchi Miyako's contentious relationship with her mother impacts her

photographic gaze. After her mother's death, Ishiuchi constructed the exhibit "Mother" where she photographed her mother's lingerie as a form of communion with a woman she felt she had only begun to know. By communing with her mother's lingerie—the most private items that lay closest to her skin—an intimate performance experience unfolds. These moments of engagement ignite a confrontation between mother, now absent, and daughter, her ever-gazing eye fixed on the wounds of a lost relationship. The object of intimacy as a primary artifact of disaster and as a point of interaction between the victim and a latecomer witness forms a pivotal aspect of reading the disaster text. The intimate object becomes an avenue through which the latecomer witness observes the disaster, connects with the victim, and interacts with their own complex feelings of grief, forgetting, apprehension, and dread. These layered and complex interactions show the importance of intimacy in discourse about disaster, its representation, and its relevance in the everyday interactions of people who witness and absorb it.

The artifacts in this exhibit—fancy dresses worn secretly under wartime garb, a ceremonial kimono especially made for a teenager, a girl's high school uniform, her name and school badge still stitched to the front, a wooden doll still wrapped in its original protective papers, leather boots worn by a boy lit up and completely burned by the impact of the bomb—arrive as donations from surviving family members who characterize the items as objects of witness for future generations. For the original exhibition in Vancouver, curators removed the personal artifacts from protective archival storage where Ishiuchi shifts the objects from the softness of shadow to arrangements in clear, bright, natural light. Each arrangement of a dress, a doll, or a shoe creates a personal encounter between photographer and object, where Ishiuchi imagines the process as a spiritual release for the departed individual. As visitors meander the exhibition, Hoaglund conducts interviews and captures conflicted, cathartic, and meditative encounters with the objects, these intrinsic responses forming introspective

spaces of confrontation with collective memories of disaster through individual experience. In

“Behind Things Left Behind,” Hoaglund describes this semi-curated act of witnessing. She writes,

the textless photographs invited viewers to imagine a narrative, unlocking a wealth of secrets and memories from those who encountered them: Japanese Canadians recalling the misery and humiliation of their parents’ wartime relocation; young Spaniards evoking the enduring impact of their Civil War; a young Korean who addressed the tragedy of the Japanese occupation of his own country. (95)

For these visitors, the photographs act as mediums that recall individual memories of collective trauma. The objects belong to a specific historical event and they belong to specific people. They possess both individual and collective histories. This existing narrative, one of individual and collective trauma that proves both incomprehensively vast and minutely intimate, commands the deep and immediate presence of visitors where they access personal and historical memory through the artistic representation of a specific, inanimate object.

Hoaglund’s film, *Things Left Behind*, captures multiple layers of witnessing and mediates encounters with intimacy. Hoaglund considers these moments of witnessing as points of ignition; visitors arrive as survivors of traumatic disasters themselves, or as firsthand witnesses, or as vessels of inherited generational knowledge experienced as deep grief or sinking bewilderment. From this place of bodily remembrance, visitors “imagine a narrative” that forms a connective bond with the witnessed image. They share stories of large-scale disaster events, of warfare, of occupation, the memories, both inherited and experienced, saturating into vivid remembrance as they negotiate an individual and intimate encounter with an individual and intimate object of disaster. Hoaglund states that the intent of her film “is to reimagine our collective perception of Hiroshima, too long a prisoner of terrifying archival footage and black-and-white photographs. Through the film, Ishiuchi’s images

transport Hiroshima into the present, so we can imagine ourselves in their fashionable clothes, shoes and watches, while unknowingly imperiled by catastrophe” (95). There is an insistence here that Hiroshima exists as a static concept; the colossal, “terrifying” devastation is now a “prisoner” of archival representation. The objects of intimacy, the “fashionable clothes, shoes and watches” emerge from their archival prisons into a series of intense, intimate encounters of witnessing. Cast into rushes of new light and life, the disaster as an intimate encounter forms new pathways of imagining. Ishiuchi explains that “...the image of Hiroshima has been trapped in time. It was such an enormous event for humanity, that we’re not supposed to have an intimate reaction to it. We can only relate to it as a symbol, especially for us in Japan. But I only photograph my most personal reactions, the way I feel and see. I want to liberate Hiroshima from its history” (*Things Left Behind*; 00:14:44). Here, the sheer enormity of the colossal event of Hiroshima entraps it in time, memory, and history. The enormity of the event and its colossal collective impact create a barrier between the individual and the disaster, where the disaster subsumes the individual, the “intimate reaction” prevented, even destroyed. In pulling the objects from the archive, unwrapping them, and photographing them in natural light, something personal, something like yearning, emerges.

In inspecting her photograph of the focal image for the exhibit—the gauzy black dress that stole my breath—Ishiuchi reflects: “This dress is made of georgette crepe, a sheer, refined silk. The fabric is transparent and it feels like you can trace the other side, along with the person wearing it” (*Things Left Behind*; 00:24:21). The tangibility of the object itself is fragile; its representation through the photographic lens mediates an intimate interaction where the witness observes the physicality of the object, feels the fabric imagined between fingertips, specifies its composition, and then—traces the illusion of a body that belongs to the garment. This reaching alchemizes into earnest yearning for the closeness of something, someone, beyond reach. The encounter encloses the witness

into a room of individual grief and imagined connection. Here, individual interactions with personal objects liberate the colossal disaster from its own archetype; the intimate pulls the disaster from the sky into the hands of the individual who contends with the disaster through an experience of public-private introspection.

The exhibit, the accompanying documentary, and the viewing of that documentary by an unknown witness, creates a chain of individual and collective witnessing. In curating experiences of intimacy with objects of disaster, these interconnected acts of witnessing echo out in repetitive encounters with intimacy, memory, dread, and disaster. In “Inventing Iris: negotiating the unexpected spatialities of intimacy,” Bronwyn Parry describes her encounter with the brain of Booker prize-winning writer Iris Murdoch “in a rather undignified plastic bucket.” Murdoch, who died of Alzheimer’s disease in 1999, donated her brain to medical science. Observing the brain in a bucket, Parry “...felt, in that moment, a sentiment that was both extraordinarily intimate and uncanny at the same time” (39). This reaction, Parry surmises, is a combination of a “prurient public gaze” (38) where the privacy, tenderness, and intimacy of connecting to an individual through the “things” they leave behind meets the intrinsic feeling of unsettled displacement. *Should this be here? Should I be here? Am I allowed?* Parry writes, “Although highly artefactualized, curators generally view these parts as acutely intimate remnants of an individual that it would be entirely improper, if not even in some individual’s conceptions sacrilegious, to place on open view to a voyeuristic public” (38). These “material objects” form social and spatial relations with the witness-as-mediator, the “distributed spaces of intimacy” where objects “create essential points of interface between individuals and communities” (Parry 34) negotiate the relationship between the witness, the victim, the survivor, and the self. The witnessing gaze views the object across expanses of space and time and despite the voyeuristic gaze—or perhaps because of it—ignites a primal reaction of horror, revulsion, and

curiosity, while tracing the deckled edges of grief.

The public viewing of “objects left behind” plays with a peculiar tension—between the public and the private, between vulnerability and protection, and between the self and the collective. Parry describes a frantic tension as she looks at the brain: “you register immediately and strongly that this is something you weren’t supposed to see, and certainly something about which you mustn’t speak to others...” (40). And though this feeling of intense privacy and sacred silence amplifies and intensifies when viewing objects left behind after disaster, the witness also forms a connective pathway toward the very thing that hurts them, and that they fear. Ishiuchi’s exhibition invites the visitor to embrace the intimacy of a moment and allow an intrinsic unearthing to take hold. Viewing two pieces of tattered clothing, a visitor to the exhibit remarks, “I can almost feel the impact of the moment of the bomb. The actual moment that it hit, the clothes the people were wearing. The burns and the holes and how things were torn. It’s a very close-up experience that I got” (*Things Left Behind*, 00:42:52). The objects pinpoint a specific moment—the moment of the onset of the disaster. The onset fascinates us and draws us in; this is when the disaster irreversibly changes our lives, the trajectory forever shifted. The witness accesses the overwhelm of the disaster, its particular wound, through “the burns and the holes and how things were torn.” The tangible fragments of material transform the big into the small—so small, we can touch it, fingertips skimming the edge of an atomic blast. We touch the complete obliteration of life; we encounter it through the tangibility and closeness of an intimate object. The transgression of viewing personal objects of loss, opens in us a volatile discomfort with the idea of ending, and the inevitability of an end. The material objects mediate connection across physical space and time, where individuals and communities connect through imagined and remembered historical narratives of collective loss and trauma. This connective force is important, and perhaps apparent, but it’s the individual encounter with recognition and dread that

compels my research of intimacy and disaster. Viewing a rumpled, polka-dot shirt, yellowed from age—or from the detritus of impact—a visitor to the exhibit reflects on objects as survivors: “We never see these kinds of fragile survivors of the bomb. We see stone walls that are ruined. We see the iron framework of the Hiroshima dome. But to see such fragile survivors, it reminds me of the intimate trauma that immediately impacted one person’s body [she puts her hands together]” (*Things Left Behind*, 00:45:00). In this circumstance, Ishiuchi realizes her vision “to liberate Hiroshima from its history” (*Things Left Behind*; 14:44). For this visitor, the haunting skeletal framework of the Hiroshima dome—the only surviving building after the drop of the first atomic bomb—dominates the collective visual narrative of devastation and survival in Hiroshima. While the dome speaks the language of a haunted stoicism, the photographs of personal belongings—these tattered shirts and dresses, these unraveling shoes—speak a tender language of breathless loss. These “fragile survivors” appear in the form of textiles, fabrics, and material objects that were present in life—brushed against skin, dampened with sweat, creased and rumpled at elbows and knees, and lifted in the wind. In these photographs, Ishiuchi’s tender arrangement of garments into windblown, back-lit, movements, signifies a moment of impact, of no return. The photographs burn with energetic life, the body removed, but the object in place. Burnt-edged holes, torn edges, the absence of a sleeve, or a giant gap at the waist—these mark the intimate trauma, the immediate impact on “one person’s body” of a colossal, human-driven disaster. The big and the anonymous is made small and individual. As participants pass through the exhibit, they encounter the object as witnesses who imagine, who delve, and who engage with their own feelings of dread, loss, and grief. Hoaglund’s documentation of Ishiuchi’s process is particularly illuminating because it depicts the construction of a multi-layered experience of witnessing where the objects left behind, the artifacts of disaster, articulate the event of disaster as a continuous force that arrives, and arrives again.

My accidental encounter with the exhibit invoked feelings of driven curiosity paired with the panic of dread. The focal image—that gauzy black dress blistered with light, lay strewn as if in mid-explosion, mid-breath. When I looked at it, I immediately sensed something like kinship; I know this dress, or something like it. I want to draw close, to trace my finger over the gossamer folds. I succumbed to a compulsion; I had to sink into this inexplicable moment of knowability and awe, even as I recoiled with dread. Some unknowable thing stirred in me a deep disturbance, the distress compelling me through the exhibit, and then tyrannizing me into a state of retreat; I sought relief outside the gallery; I looked at a forest-shrouded cityscape framing a far-away mountain and fixed my gaze on it. I witnessed the disaster, and in doing so, I plunged into a roiling internal world lit by the terror of knowing, and of uncertainty.

I provide this experience of an accidental encounter with dread to clarify how the relationship between intimacy, dread, and disaster constantly correlates. Entering this exhibit was an unexpected way of encountering disaster that highlighted the correlation between physical structure and context, the function of intimate objects (and therefore, intimacy), and the curation of a disaster experience meant to invoke feelings of immediate, intense presence. This triangulation replicates in the way writers of memoir and fiction write about disasters and utilize intimacy as a tool for knowing.

The Chapters

This dissertation considers the ways in which writers write about disaster in 21st century memoir and fiction. It positions narrative as an intermediary in the confrontation of loss, dread, and upheaval, and proposes the concept of the “intimate disaster” as a vital connective tool. Through an interdisciplinary lens that combines literary analysis, narrative theory, and the tenets of disaster and emergency management, this dissertation confronts the intersection of the colossal disaster (tsunamis, earthquakes, geopolitical warfare) and the individual disaster

(heartbreak, illness, loss) as a crucial point of transformative witnessing and creative mediation. I consider “the intimate” as a vital point of access between the ordinary and the extraordinary, and between the individual and the collective. Here, the overwhelm of the colossal disaster overlaps with the quiet solitude of the private upheaval, and renders a new space of witnessing accessed through tangible, tactile, and visceral intimacy. I argue that intimate disasters undo the world like the big, spectacular disasters and the colossal, in turn, is made known through the intimate.

The chapters of this project organize around three major points of disaster mediation: “The Opening,” “The Meeting of Dread,” and “The Shattered Story.” I trace the movement of disaster through temporal moments that interrogate the disaster as a space of undoing exploring “pre-onset,” “onset,” “unfolding,” “upheaval,” and “loss” as key points in the construction and deconstruction of disaster. In pre-onset, the world is not yet altered, but the narrative moves with a double-consciousness, where in narrative time, the disastrous event has not yet struck—but we know it will. The pre-disaster narration creates a space of contention; nothing has happened, the world is intact, but something *will* happen, our intact world *will* fall apart. The moment of onset is when the disaster strikes—the wave overwhelms, the earthquake erupts, and the disaster irrevocably alters our lives. In the space of unfolding and upheaval, we enter a state of prolonged ruin that leads to a complete and irrevocable loss. The world as it was once known has been dismantled and the narrative reflects a state of confusion, an embedding into breathless shock. Loss forms a version of reconciliation, where we return to ourselves in a state of mutual dread and hope.

In Chapter One, “The Opening,” I examine key temporal phases of disaster onset through the opening pages of Sonali Deraniyagala’s memoir of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, *Wave*, and Joan Didion’s memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking*, which takes place after

the sudden death of her husband. The chapter traces the narrative construction of the moment before catastrophe strikes and the rupture of a sustained, enclosed pre-disaster reality protected by the domestic realm. I trace the temporal moments of “pre-onset” (before the disaster strikes), “onset” (the moment the disaster “hits” undoing the shared pre-onset reality), and “unfolding” (the immediate rush of reverberating events that echo out into a quickly changing state of reality). I consider the ways in which an anticipatory narrative structure that hinges on the moment of onset creates a schism of “before” and “after” that defines our understanding of disaster and ourselves. The chapter delves into the interactions between the ordinary and the extraordinary to articulate the disruptive, yet connective tension between the disaster as an unknowable force and the intimate as a distinct tool of knowing.

In Chapter Two, “The Meeting of Dread,” I explore anticipatory disaster through the concept of the “dread space” in Julia Phillips’ novel *Disappearing Earth* and Andrea Gunraj’s novel *The Lost Sister*; texts that narrativize the familial and communal wreckage caused by abduction and disappearance. I conceptualize the “dread-space” as a volatile territory of mediation where uncertainty ruptures the domestic space and establishes the “threshold” as a transitory space between states of knowing and unknowing. By placing two novels that fictionalize the disappearance of young girls side by side, I confront the disaster as an oblitative force that ruptures the private realm, and dismantles the physical body as a site of ruin.

Chapter Three, “How Do You Tell a Shattered Story?” confronts the mass disaster of geopolitical violence—the disaster of atrocity—through a reading of Loung Ung’s memoir, *At First They Killed My Father* and Madeline Thien’s novel, *Dogs at the Perimeter*, which both confront the atrocity of the Cambodian genocide. The chapter shows how the atrocity decimates

the intimate through a usurpation of the domestic space, and how from this fragmented realm, the child narrator accesses points of extreme trauma via the construction of a “phantom witness” who, through intimate renderings, bears witness to profound experiences of extreme loss. The chapter also interrogates the desire for atrocity texts to complicate blame, historicize upheaval, and contextualize atrocity as a method of representation. I argue that the child-witness accesses a binary of good/evil that serves as a tool of agency and revival in environments of the extreme.

My concluding chapter will illuminate how this project conceptualizes the intimate disaster as a way of holding the overwhelming incomprehensibility of disaster close, and by examining the disaster through intimate encounters with objects left behind. I will show how the intimate disaster provides a pathway towards the knowability of the extreme and aim to articulate the interconnected experience of witnessing between the writer as survivor and witness and the reader as latecomer witness in representations of disaster. This final chapter will also offer insight into the challenges I faced in navigating the intent of the project, offering reflection on the relevance of studying traumatic wounds as a way of exploring our intrinsic sense of un/belonging. I will also provide a projection of future projects connected to the intimate disaster, offering insight into “the futuring” of disaster through an interdisciplinary lens. The dissertation concludes with a reflection on the complexities of individual and collective interactions with disaster, and hope for a continued path towards knowing the unknowable, where intimacy can shape the way we move through the uncertainty of our worlds.

Chapter One: The Opening

*I entered this world not wanting
to come. I'll leave it not
wanting to go. All this while,
when it seemed there were two doors,
there was only one—this
passing through.*

Tess Gallagher's "Opening" from *Is, Is Not*

The first sentence in Maurice Blanchot's formative text *The Writing of the Disaster* proclaims that "the disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact" (Blanchot 1). This movement between the ruin and what remains intact gestures to the heart of disaster studies across disciplines. As discussed in the Introduction, the disaster is a spectrum, not a "point of arrival" (Siskind). No matter where we write from—literary studies, disaster and emergency management, or creative writing—when we write, we are drawn to the thing that "ruins everything" (Blanchot 1). Our questions probe at the disaster itself, but quickly unfurl into existential gesticulations: *What is it? What does it do? How did it begin? Where does it go? Can we stop it? What happens when it strikes? What happens after that? Why does it happen at all?* The breathlessness of this inquisition is fixated on the loss of the "everything"—this is the known landscape, where everything once was, but is no longer. This fixation necessitates a contemplation of the remains, of what has been left "intact." The lost landscape is where the writer's curiosity of loss and pain coincide; this is where the disaster speaks.

When I consider the "lost landscape" I am thinking of how the writing of disaster is a

conjuring of the seeming impossibility of the task. If the disaster is the thing that decimates, if it “involves irreversible loss, a radical non repetition, an event in which a nongenerative point of no return has been crossed” (Schuster 167), how does a writer encapsulate this boundless event within the constructs of a narrative? If we think about the writing of disaster as merely an effort to represent an event that exceeds human comprehension, then we miss the essential thing that happens when engaging in the act of writing it—that is, that works that contend with the “end of the world”—are forms of aesthetic mediation (Siskind) that tell us something about the nature of disaster, about what has been lost, but in doing so, contend with what remains. The end of the world—a world—is about the transition from a known landscape into an unknown one where something else is being communicated. In this chapter, I want to understand the “something else” within the context of what I call the “intimate disaster” as expressed through the opening pages of a text.

In this dissertation, I propose that the “intimate disaster” is the disaster understood through the close and the familiar. In representations of the collective and individual disaster, the big and the small overlap, interweave, echo, and communicate. Through this constant communicative process, the writing of the disaster as an impenetrable event that resists or defies representation is more deeply understood as a process of simultaneous undoing and re-making of worlds. The intimate disaster creates a place of resistant witnessing through narrative constructions that compel the reader, as a latecomer witness, to confront their dread while re-configuring and re-navigating ideas of melancholic belief surrounding loss and disaster. I discuss the “latecomer” later in this chapter as an aspect of Michael Rothberg’s constellated terminology to describe Holocaust representation. I use the term “latecomer witness” interchangeably with the “second-hand witness” to discuss the reader’s arrival as an observer and participant in the

mediation of traumatic representation; this witness did not survive the disaster, nor did they directly witness it as a bystander. Instead, the latecomer and second-hand witness encounter the disaster after-the-fact and, in the context of the texts I discuss in this dissertation, communicate with the disaster through its narrative representation. This chapter centers on the beginnings of disaster texts, in particular, the opening chapters of memoirs that articulate deep loss. The openings of these texts provide an avenue for investigating the ways in which representations of the colossal and the personal disaster speak to each other and create a common language of grief. In their personal memoirs, Sonali Deraniyagala (*Wave*, 2013) and Joan Didion (*The Year of Magical Thinking*, 2005) map the trajectory of the disasters that met their lives. The opening sections narrativize the onset of the disaster, the first critical moments after the arrival of an irreversible event that sets both their lives asunder. In *Wave*, the disaster strikes as a collective and colossal event; the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami swept away nearly 230,000 lives and remains one of the deadliest disasters in modern history. In *Magical Thinking*, the disaster slips into a living room in New York; Didion's husband, John Gregory Dunne, slumps over at the dinner table and dies of a heart attack (Severo). I argue that the opening chapters of *Wave* and *A Year of Magical Thinking* enter the realm of disaster through (1) an anticipatory narrative structure fixated on the moment of onset, (2) that their "future-focused" anticipatory structure relies on contextual details that oscillate between the "big" and the "small" where the contrast between the ordinary and the extraordinary mimics an existential relationship to the unknown and the uncontrollable, and that (3) a fixation on tangible documents and objects creates a focal point of navigation that forms an entryway to the realm of survival after loss. This opening structure triggers a "vortex"—a space of split-consciousness and resistant witnessing by the reader as a latecomer witness. This space is an invitation to the split self—the self that

experiences the “now” in the writer’s narrative, the self that projects itself into the future in anticipation of the unknown that is to come, and the self that exists in the past where experiences of previous upheaval project ghosts of traumatic injury forward. Ultimately, the opening provides a version of control over the uncontrollable that creates pathways to imagining future possibilities of disaster and that negotiate the inevitability of disaster. The reading of the disaster text as a narrative with a distinct and concise opening structure characterized by a conflation of knowing and not-knowing provides an opportunity to understand disaster writing as a distinctive genre. As a genre, the literary disaster text participates in creating multiple strands of possibility that simultaneously contend with the representation of the *impossible*. This relationship of narrative tension in the reading and writing of the disaster creates a contentious realm of both possibility and dread.

The Opening is the Entryway

The opening sections of literary disaster texts serve as an entryway into the archive of survival. They represent the descension of disaster as a contemplation on the ways in which survival happens as an undoing, then a re-making of worlds. The work of survival unfolds in the opening pages; writers create structures that act as revelatory containers for the boundlessness of disaster, interrogating the forces that make disaster possible. The openings, in representations of both the massive, all-encompassing grand-scale disaster and the isolating, shadowed quiet of the personal disaster fixate on the moment of onset as a propelling force that marks the point between two worlds—the before and the after.

The opening pages of the writing of any disaster provide a blueprint for the creative rendering of disasters as an intensely intimate storytelling experience where the intimate and the colossal must constantly correlate, ultimately demonstrating that disaster is a spectrum and never

a “point of arrival” (Siskind). This intersection and coexistence between the ordinary and the extraordinary provides a lens to understand the extreme, a representation that Michael Rothberg terms “traumatic realism.” In the writing of disaster, the extreme of the tsunamic wave, the colossal earthquake, the sudden, violent death of a loved one—is brought into intense focus by the presence of the ordinary. The ordinary is often found in objects. The intersection of the extreme with the everyday, the ordinary, *the intimate*, is the space of confrontation and introspection that the writing of disaster provides.

In this chapter, I place *Wave* and *Magical Thinking* side by side as memoirs that speak to the volatile spiral of grief that follows sudden loss. This choice does not indicate however, that these disasters are comparable; *Wave* documents the colossal, collective experience of a tsunami that, along with almost 230,000 other lives, swept away the lives of both Deraniyagala’s parents, her husband, her two sons, her best friend, and her best friend’s mother (Monahan). In *Wave*, Deraniyagala revisits the tragedy more than ten years after the event, reconstructing the experience from the moment of onset. *A Year of Magical Thinking* documents a year of fractious bewilderment where Didion contends with the sudden death of her husband while tending to her critically ill daughter who lies in hospital in a coma. Written a mere year after her husband’s death, Didion’s memoir time-warps through memory to make sense of the singular moment where irreversible loss changes the trajectory of her life. Though both authors contend with deep and abiding loss, they take separate paths in grief, and do not occupy this chapter as a pair characterized by likeness. Rather, it is their place on opposite ends of a disaster spectrum—one collective and colossal, one individual and personal—and the ways in which each echo across the chasm and overlap in a space of intimacy that brings them together. The tsunami in *Wave* is a collective traumatic memory, but it is understood through Deraniyagala’s individual experience.

In the same vein, the death of Didion's husband is the death of one man, one husband, one father, but the experience of this kind of personal loss echoes as a collective understanding—we share what it might be like, or indeed, have experienced what it is to suddenly lose the one we love. The singularity of Deraniyagala's experience—to lose one's entire family in the aftermath of one spectacular, crashing wave—incites the shock and awe of the colossal disaster. This kind of extreme loss happens in circumstances of the extreme and through the singular perspective of Deraniyagala's point of view, expressed through a chronological recollection of her grief, we traverse unknown waters. The quiet, spent loneliness of Didion's loss echoes through a fragmentary narrative sustained by a defined chronological structure. In both cases, the opening pages spiral out from a fixed point—the moment of onset.

In reading the opening pages of these texts, I look at the storytelling of the disaster as a method of intimate confrontation through the role of the reader as a latecomer witness. The witness is an important figure in studies of representations of extreme, often unspeakable violence. Michael Rothberg identifies three “emblematic figures [arising from] an era of extreme violence” that work together in all Holocaust representations (13). These figures—the survivor, the bystander, and the latecomer—function as a “constellation” of lenses that offer a more “concrete and complex” (13) account of the extremities that constitute trauma, and “the writing of the disaster” (Blanchot). In these opening pages, the writing of the disaster happens in the juxtaposition of the intimate, familiar details of everyday life alongside the representation of the uncanny colossal.

The tsunami in *Wave* struck the coast of Sri Lanka and wiped out Deraniyagala, her family, and hundreds of thousands of others; Deraniyagala narrates this colossal disaster through the singular, intimate experience of one family, her family. The big is explored through the small.

Like the microhistory, which originally worked to recover the lost histories of underrepresented classes through oral testimony that more closely represented the individual voice (as opposed to the macrohistories represented in legal and historical records) (Peabody 5), the focus on the split subject and the detail of the ordinary prioritizes the active construction of a complex subject tied to a witnessing reader. The experience is collective, but the narrative uses the intimacy of Deraniyagala's own intensely personal and individual experience to understand the unthinkable—an earthquake and tsunami so big that it is remembered as “one of the deadliest disasters in modern history” (World Vision International). How do you understand something so unthinkably large except through a finite experience of that event? The big must be made small to be felt, absorbed, comprehended. As Danilo Kiš states in *Homo Poeticus*: “What is the meaning of ‘six million dead’(!) if you don’t see an individual face or body—if you don’t hear an individual story?” Kiš considers literature as a corrective force where “Literature corrects the indifference of historical data by replacing History’s lack of specificity with a specific individual” (206). In this line of thinking, history exists in the realm of the collective where “History is manifold, literature individual” (206). In historical record, Deraniyagala’s experience exists as a collective event—the “2004 Indian Ocean Earthquake and Tsunami” (World Vision International)—but the “finite experience” of Deraniyagala and her family yields the kind of specificity that incites an active form of witnessing where the reader enters a state of “empathetic dissonance” (Veprinska 3). In *Empathy in Contemporary Poetry after Crisis*, Anna Veprinska describes “poetic empathy” as a multidimensional process where “poems variously enact, invite, refuse, evoke, deploy, condemn, show interest in, and/or ambivalence toward empathy” (3). In similar ways, when confronted with the uncanny colossal through the experience of the individual and the finite, a state of intense discord opens in the reader an avenue for both

understanding and confrontation of inner, subdued fears. The lens of intimacy affords a kind of understanding, a place where interaction with the unspeakable is made possible. In *The Year of Magical Thinking* the disaster is small; it happens at first, to one individual, one family; it is individual and isolated. A tsunami and a heart attack are two very different things; they are incomparable events and to set them alongside one another may seem disingenuous, forced, and artificial—the forming of a comparative fallacy. Yet, when considering each narrative through the lens of disaster writing, each works alongside the other to show the interrelated nature of the disaster—the space of the intimate. In both texts, the tangible object, or “authentic documents, letters, and objects bearing the traces of real beings” act as portals to a “vortex” of split-consciousness where time slips and the “concretization of abstract History” (Kiš 206) takes place. The split-consciousness exists in the experience of the writer as herself, the narrator, the narrated I, and the reader as tentative witness. Concretization and abstraction, like the intimate and the colossal, work as a combined force in the writing of disaster where, in constant correlation, they create an oppositional, tension-wrought duality that invites—or compels—the confrontation of dread that sits subdued and quieted within us.

The disaster—both colossal and intimate—is an analytical point of impact. The overlap of the colossal with the intimate is where we can interrogate the social movement of the text. The text is a form that functions as a cohesive force; the anonymity of 230,000 lives becomes individual, close, and very real through the narration of the individual experience. The intense specificity of individual experience in the personal loss is a force that moves wave by wave through every household via a narrative framework that demonstrates the reverberations of the small; the small is made big. The understanding of the disaster through the intimate is an interrogative tool for understanding how texts negotiate the events that “undo” us. It is not

always a cohesive force. It is also a witness that challenges the ways in which we understand disaster as a uniting force. Disaster destroys and renews. But it also simply destroys.

The opening is the entryway, but it is also the blueprint; it is where the world building begins. In the context of disaster texts, it's where something unique to disaster writing occurs. In the opening pages of disaster texts we are not in a place of world building, but rather, undoing. It is in that space of undoing that we recognize a primordial wound, an inherent state of dread. The opening pages take us through a mental rehearsal of what is to come. They function as a practice in mastery over the uncontrollable and situate us in a space where we willingly confront fears of calamity. In *Relational Integrative Psychotherapy: Engaging Process and Theory in Practice* (2015), psychotherapist Linda Finlay describes a therapeutic context where the "container" is part of a process of literal and metaphorical "holding," "containing," and "boundarying," and where the therapist creates and holds a space that provides emotional care and protection. This therapeutic space is meant to hold the client and contain "emergent emotions and dynamics" (59-60). In essence, the "container" is a holding space for the volatility of feelings: "The aim is to allow a client to express and explore feelings that may feel too shameful or painful to be shared with others; through this process the client learns to cope with those damaging, overwhelming, or potentially explosive emotions" (Finlay 59-60). This therapist-client process is necessarily collaborative where through a "collaborative, witnessing, *dialogical* process" (60) the holding, containing, and boundarying happens and is mutually constructed. The therapeutic relationship between the therapist and client is not the nature of the reader-writer relationship. The opening pages of disaster texts are a container, but not a therapeutic one. As with many texts that dwell in the realm of loss and trauma, there may be a temptation to characterize the relationship between

the reader and writer as dialogical, where we process the mutual exchange and identification with feelings of grief through the reading and writing of a text. Often, this temptation comes from a desire to make literary works “useful” to our own healing. The desire for writing to have “real world impact”—particularly the desire for the writing of trauma, violence, and loss to *do* therapeutic work—can deaden the movement of a work, confining it within the bounds of healing. Theorizing reading and writing as a therapeutic process can be useful, but it can ultimately limit the ways in which a text can be understood, not as a balm or a medium for processing individual feelings, but as a disrupter and an intentional deregulator of a state of unknowing that makes day-to-day human function possible.

The opening pages of disaster texts are a container for the willful confrontation of deep human fears. Jung’s ideas of the therapy process as “an alchemical container in which the ‘chemicals’ are the thoughts and feelings of both patient and analyst which have to be held safely” (Finlay 64) is useful in understanding the relationship between reader and writer as a process of alchemy based on expression through structural choices made by the writer, and the actions of entry, witnessing, and identification processed by the reader. The structure of the disaster text may be read as a container where the confines of a physical book and the narrative structure “hold” the reader, but the sense of “safety” provided is not one of comfort and validation, but a mimicry of control that allows for a “rehearsal” of deep fears. The opening pages of *Wave* and *Magical Thinking* demonstrate how the storytelling of a disaster is a negotiation between the intimate and the “uncanny” colossal. This negotiation creates, confronts, and navigates the feeling of melancholic dread that arises in the act of second-hand witnessing of the disaster, a term I use to describe when a reader, who did not experience the disaster themselves,

encounters the disaster as an outsider. It is helpful to look at the opening pages of these texts as a blueprint of how the representation of a disaster in prose works.

The opening pages of *Wave* and *Magical Thinking* feature a distinct anticipatory narrative structure fixated on the moment of onset. As writers of “survival memoirs,” both Didion and Deraniyagala create narratives in their opening chapters that compulsively orbit the moment of onset. In “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through” Sigmund Freud connects the repetition of repressed memories or actions as a compulsive act “...where the patient does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but *acts* it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it” (150). In this light, the onset in the disaster memoir—the moment of shock—becomes a repressed non-memory that the writer, as narrator, reflexively returns to, again and again, in an effort to master the moment that, when it occurred, created a split in the conscious understanding of their lives. The construction of a narrative about past traumatic events follows the established pattern in traditional psychotherapy where though “the patient experiences it [trauma] as something real and contemporary [actual], we have to do our therapeutic work on it, which consists in a large measure in tracing it back to the past” (Freud 152). This repetition occurs within an atmosphere of resistance where the narrator “repeats instead of remembering, and repeats under the conditions of resistance” (151)—felt keenly by the reader as the distinct feeling of their own avoidance and dread. As Bessel van der Kolk writes in *The Body Keeps the Score*, “Telling the story is important; without stories, memory becomes frozen; and without memory you cannot imagine how things can be different. But...telling a story about the event does not guarantee that the traumatic memories will be laid to rest” (221). Trauma narratives—and by extension disaster narratives—circumambulate the traumatic incident, spiralling in and out of the

moment of initial trauma in a reflexive telling where the narrative revisits the trauma as if gazing at an undying wound. Sometimes a repeated glance backward, but more often a fixed and intent focus on the inexplicable thing, the narrative represents constant movement rather than stasis. Though compulsive, even obsessive, and repetitive, the spiraled narrative cycles the moment of trauma, but never from the same observing position. As Jane Alison writes in her study of contemporary narrative structures *Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative*, the “meandering” narrative “begins at one point and moves toward a final one, but with digressive loops” (117). These “digressive loops” point to a digressive narrative that, though moving towards a fixed point somewhere in the future, the narrative loiters and wanders along the way, as if avoiding the inevitable outcome. In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Italo Calvino writes that “The digression is a strategy for putting off the ending, a multiplying of time within the work, a perpetual evasion or flight. Flight from what? From death, of course” (46). In contrast, the spiralling narrative “begins at a point and moves onward, not extravagant or lackadaisical like a meander, but smooth and steady, spinning around and around that central point or a single axis” (Alison 143). Here time splits and a “spiralling narrative could be a helix winding downward—into a character’s soul, or deep into the past—or it might wind upward, around and around to a future. Near repetitions, but moving onward” (143-144). The disaster narrative combines the forward thrust of the meandering narrative, multiplying time (while perplexed by its simultaneous bendability, speed, and stasis) while evading death (literal death, but also the “death”—the end—of the narrative itself, for what happens in the afterworld of disaster? What is there but blankness and an emptied narrative space, now that all has been told?) with the dizzying spiraling narrative that delves into a vortex of past, present, and future, with no definitive sense of an ending as “spirals could go on forever” (144). This retrospective, “future-

focused” narrative structure, expressed through a temporal framework where the reader moves through distinct phases or “rooms” of disaster, demonstrates how, again, the disaster is not a point of arrival (Siskind), but rather a space structured specifically to open psychic wounds of fear and dread that demand confrontation. This opening structure places the reader in the role of an absent late-comer witness who, through complex relational awareness, must contend with competing feelings of empathic connection and horror of an unknown, but dreaded future. This structure functions as an anticipating force where the writer, as a documenter and navigator of grief, and the reader as a late-comer witness, commune in a holding space—the boundaries of the opening chapters of the memoir—where the work of undoing, re-making, and prospecting real and storied worlds haunted by disaster takes place. The opening is the entryway to the wound of survival. A series of key temporal moments that, in the opening pages, the narrative moves through room by room, constructs a framework for containing the split world of “before” and “after” disaster. Characterized by a “bifurcated subject” where the “narrating I” and the “narrated I” constantly interact and collide (Liveley12). The movement through these rooms of disaster experience create a split consciousness where the reader contends with a narrative tension that compels the imagining of an uncertain future. The temporal moments consist of three distinct moments: pre-onset, onset, and unfolding.

In the prior landscape (pre-onset) the world is not yet altered, but the narrative moves with a double-consciousness where in narrative time, the disastrous event has not yet struck, but the witnessing of the event has already begun—the reader is aware, or at the very least on alert, that the disaster will strike. The pre-disaster narration is a space of contention; nothing has happened, the world is intact, but something *will* happen and this world we have only briefly entered, *will* fall apart. The moment of onset is when the disaster strikes – the wave overwhelms,

the earthquake erupts, life is irrevocably altered. In the space of unfolding, we have entered a state of ruin that leads to a complete and irrevocable loss. The world as it was once known has been dismantled and the narrative reflects a state of confusion, an embedding into breathless shock.

The Prior Landscape: Pre-onset

The storytelling experience begins with worldbuilding that is defined by a retrospective perspective through a combination of backshadowing and prolepsis where the disaster has come and gone, and we—the narrator and the reader—inhabit a post-disaster present. In this place, a split narrator actively constructs, destructs, and re-constructs the world that was lost while casting a projection of the possibility of a future world that does not yet exist. The pre-onset world represents the narrative present of writing, remembering, and constructing the world that was lost by fixating on “ordinary” moments and objects against the backdrop of the expected “extraordinary” onslaught of disaster. The representation of the big against the small is the space of the intimate disaster. This world is preparatory; in the context of the narrative, the disaster simultaneously has come and will come—we hold our breaths for the moment of onset.

Amitav Ghosh, assessing the rise of the realist novel in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, brings to focus the movement of storytelling that “delighted in the unheard-of and the unlikely” (16) where “narrative proceeds by linking together moments and scenes that are in some way distinctive or different...nothing other than instances of exception” (17). The novel functions however on “the concealment of those exceptional moments that serve as the motor of the narrative” (17). The concealment is achieved by the inclusion of “fillers”—these are the everyday details, the items of intimacy such as breakfast rituals, the buttons on a piece of clothing, the rhythm of a morning with its hot tea and other minutiae. In this way, the

everyday becomes the main event, while the exceptional is shifted to the background. This “banishing of the improbable and the insertion of the everyday” (16) provided a “regularity” and “calm passion” to the narrative world inside the novel. In the disaster text, this “calm passion” is more accurately and tellingly felt as foreboding anticipation.

The opening of Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* consists of the first two chapters of the text that encompass the pre-onset, onset, and unfolding as narrative spaces, or rooms of disaster, while the remainder of the narrative occupies a space of overlapping, repetitious series of rooms that evolve eventually into *reunification*, a room briefly discussed at the end of Chapter Two. The first chapter consists of a pre-onset reality that inhabits a post-disaster narrative timeframe. These opening pages function as a transcript of Didion’s effort and intention for her work: to recall and reconstruct the disaster through writing and in doing so, attain a sense of understanding of what happened the night her husband died, her life shifting into a phase of tumultuous grief. Her search for “what happened” reflects the consciousness of the reader who also seeks to understand how “life changes in the instant” (Didion 3). How does it change? What is that change? What does it mean for the change to have happened? How could it have happened? The opening chapter echoes the movement of the rest of the narrative, a tapestry of split-subject recollection and analyses where Didion as the archivist, the historian, the writer, and the grieving storyteller wrenches her readers from the passive position of witnessing to the active roles of editors and curators of her grief.

Didion opens *The Year of Magical Thinking* with a script from her past self. Set apart from the text like an epigraph or poem, it reads (emphasis in original):

Life changes fast.

Life changes in the instant.

You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.

The question of self-pity. (3)

Didion tries to situate the narrative time and explains: “Those were the first words I wrote after it happened” (3). At first, this seems like a definitive anchor in time, a way of gripping a tangible moment in a territory of murky memory. However, time slips and Didion acknowledges that the document titled “Notes on change.doc” (3) was saved in May 2004, four months after the death of her husband. For a moment, the reader grasps for an anchor in time. Is Didion commenting on her own confusion? Is she revealing an error in memory, demonstrating a lapse in her recollection of time amidst grief? When are we in the narrative? Didion continues, clarifying that this date “would have been a case of my opening the file and reflexively pressing save when I closed it” (3) and that she “had made no changes to the file in May” (3). Again, time slips—when were these words written? Is Didion correct in her initial statement? In the next line, Didion definitively asserts that she “wrote the words, in January 2004, a day or two or three after the fact” (3) and again the declarative precision of her assertion slips into uncertainty. These first few lines open the chapter into a fragmented timeline where both Didion and the reader chart unsteady, changeable waters. This is the post-disaster period where the “present”—the space from which the writer writes ruptures into something fragile and untenable. In her investigation of the relationship between the concept of anticipation and narratology, Genevieve Lively addresses the “presentism” typically found in memoir where “first-person (autodiegetic) narrative modes...seek to remember and reconstruct the past from the perspective of the present” (12). Lively calls this narrative position a “quasi-schizophrenic split between the ‘narrating I’ and the ‘narrated I’” where the reader must merge the conflicting perspectives in order to “process a simultaneous (dis)continuity between the now of the experiencing and the narrating subject, and

between the simultaneous past/present/future space-time (or chronotope) occupied by this split subject” (12). This “quasi-schizophrenic split” echoes over and over again throughout the memoir but is particularly relevant in the opening pages of both disaster texts discussed in this chapter as it creates the structure for what Didion calls “the vortex effect” where a physical trigger for a particular memory spirals you into a constellation of memories—one memory leads to another and another and another—until you find yourself surprised to inhabit the physicality of your present self in present time. Didion welcomes the vortex effect but also fears the way it surfaces in her life unexpectedly. One moment she is staring at the “rose-patterned wallpaper border” (107) at Beth Israel North where in the weeks after her husband’s death, she sits at her daughter Quintana’s bedside waiting for her to wake from a coma, and in the next moment she is swept into a series of memories that offer a temporary forgetting: “I had avoided thinking for at least two minutes about why I was at Beth Israel North” (110). In emerging from the vortex, Didion writes, “See where that particular vortex sucked me. From the Dorothy Draper wallpaper border at Beth Israel North to Quintana at three and I should have listened to John. *I tell you that I shall not live two days*, Gawain said. The way you got sideswiped was by going back” (112). For Didion, the vortex functions as both a desperate escape and a destabilizing force. The vortex effect gets her “sideswiped” from the present into a collision of memory and future projection that mimics the ways in which the reader must navigate the disaster in the opening pages. The “quasi-schizophrenic split” centres on present time where “[r]emembered events from the past are selected for their significance in the light of the present” (Liveley 12). Didion’s tapestry of memory serves the construction of her narrative present; her opening lines reconstruct the past to actively contextualize, create, and establish the time-scape in which she has already survived the disaster. This places the reader in a space of future-focused projection. The unsteady “present” of

Didion's "narrating I" projects a future that does not yet exist for her "narrated I" and creates a relationship with the reader where they are called to move beyond witnessing to actively construct the narrative as Didion writes it. *The Year of Magical Thinking* begins in retrospect and in a created "present." Didion writes,

In outline. It is now, as I begin to write this, the afternoon of October 4, 2004. Nine months and five days ago, at approximately nine o'clock on the evening of December 30, 2003, my husband, John Gregory Dunne, appeared to (or did) experience, at the table where he and I had just sat down to dinner in the living room of our apartment in New York, a sudden massive coronary event that caused his death. (6-7)

Though Didion outlines the moment of disaster (indeed, she is *in* outline) this is not the moment of onset. Here, Didion lays out the circumstances that bring her "here," that is, in the present narrative, the "now" in the act of writing what we are now reading. This "now" already exists in the past (we read a completed text; we hold the book that Didion is only beginning to write in narrative time complete in our hands) but is experienced in split-narrative time as both "now" and "then." Didion provides a representation of the moment her husband died through a re-imagined documentation of the event. Her "outline" of events reads like an obituary, the solidity and tangibility of the document—even if it is only the idea of the document mimicked through language and form—create the grounds for entering the realm of survival and meaning-making after loss. This pre-onset moment in the narrative does not rise from a place of yearning or desire for meaning; rather, this moment "in outline" represents the construction of tentative scaffolding upon which Didion, in real and narrative time, remakes her life. In *Memory, History, Forgetting* Paul Ricoeur characterizes primary memory as an act of retention, and secondary memory, the act of reproduction. He writes,

Reproduction assumes that the primary memory of a temporal object such as melody has ‘disappeared’ and that it comes back. Retention still hangs onto the perception of the moment. Secondary memory is no longer presentation at all; it is re-presentation. It is the same melody but heard ‘as it were’. The melody heard earlier ‘in person’ is now remembered, re-presented.” (35)

As Didion sits down to write, her recollection of events falls in the hazy territory between primary memory and secondary memory. She does not yet know what she’s retained of the traumatic event—her memory lies in fragmentation. The act—the labour—of writing what she remembers, what she thinks she knows, and what she’s trying to say, forms a tertiary space between retention and reproduction (re-presentation) where the opening pages serve as a space of documentation, not of the event itself, but of Didion’s *attempt* as writer and survivor wayfinding through memory to reconstruct the descent of the disaster. The opening pages reflect writing not only as a way of finding meaning, impressing order, or making sense of things, but as a representation of the labour of confrontation.

Time, place, and memory collapse in the opening pages where the active labour of confrontation takes place. In “A Dialectic of the Deictic” Julia Creet describes the blurring of first-person experiences and third-person narrative—free indirect discourse—as a technique that creates “a communal narrative.” She writes, “In the first-, second-, or third-person plural, free indirect discourse does not distinguish between narrator and narratee, the person inside the text to whom the story is narrated. Thus, the narrating consciousness of this voice is both absent and present, and represents multiple points of view in the form of a communal narrative” (209). Didion’s narrative voice fragments as she simultaneously addresses an external reader and an externalized self while channeling the disembodied, ghostly absence/presence of another self—

the self still in-process—that grasps through the writing of this narrative for an understanding of what has happened, what it means, and what lies ahead. This fragmented narrative voice creates a continual split-consciousness where Didion “make[s] present an absent thing that happened previously” (Ricoeur 229) through a narrative voice that dictates and records her *trying* to write. The opening, where we expect to meet the onset of the disaster serves as a workspace for the beginning of a process of living, the labour of remembering, recording, and writing. That is, the pre-onset phase of writing the disaster scaffolds the way in and structures the most immediate space of confrontation; the reader interacts with a text in motion and recognizes this as the writer’s room. Lit up by brief flashes of recognition by the witnessing reader, Didion’s “mak[ing] present” of the disaster transpires in this space through the establishment of a “communal narrative” (Creet 209) where Didion’s direct address of the reader through the use of “you” is simultaneously a shared and individual experience: “...I could touch a key and collapse the sequence of time, show you simultaneously all the frames of memory that come to me now, let you pick the takes...” (8). Directed at the reader, the “you” performs as a plural, general “you” aimed at the reading public, while also invoking the individual reader as the “you” directly involved and invited into the process of re-constructing the disaster. In her discussion of the deictic address of “you,” Creet describes “you” as shared “...between the experience of the narrator and the narratee, often the same figure at different points in experiential time, a kind of self-address on which we, as readers, eavesdrop, positioned somewhat voyeuristically” (218). At once, Didion draws the reader in while resigning herself to the solitary task of confronting her personal loss. The task of looking back upon the year that has passed since her husband’s death belongs to Didion and she takes it up; she writes what will later become this book. She wishes for an almost passive role, an offering up where, as the memories surface in her, the reader can

“pick the takes” (8). But at the end of this first short chapter, she turns inward: “This is a case in which I need whatever it is I think or believe to be penetrable, if only for myself” (8). The writing of the disaster becomes a triangulated effort, a communal narrative, where the writer, the reader as witness and participant, and the narrated I exert a combined effort to make the narrative do its work. The voyeurism of the reader, where we “eavesdrop” on Didion’s private navigations through grief serves an essential function where the reader’s own relationship with disaster—their desire to meet dread through the page as a method of mastery (a kind of compulsion to repeat before the event has happened or a vicarious repetition of one’s own past disasters) coincides with the writer’s own uncertain, dread-filled approach to the disaster as a force to be understood, processed, and perhaps overcome.

The dissolving of the deictic—identifiers of time and place—in the opening pages happens through Didion’s shifting narrative address. In narrative time, Didion addresses both herself and her reader, trying to situate both herself and the event that brings her to the page in a specific time. She grasps for specificity in time and ties it down through the recreation of documentation. As Ricoeur writes, “Here and now, in truth, constitute absolute places and dates. But how long can we maintain this bracketing of objectified time and space? Can I avoid relating my here to the there delimited by the body of the other without having recourse to a system of neutral places?” (43). Didion does not avoid relating her “here” to the “there” of an externalized reader and witness. These opening pages provide the neutral space where Didion establishes a congruous relationship with her reader. In plain, direct language, Didion tries again to anchor the narrative in time. *This* is the date it happened, *this* is thing that happened, and *this* is why we are all here. The directness of the language wavers into uncertainty, a fragility edging the narration. The dates conflate—Didion sits down to write *this* text on October 4th while contemplating the

circumstances of a document that contains her opening lines, written days after her husband died, but opened and saved an innumerable number of times between the time it was written and the time it was last saved—May 2004. But now, we exist months later, in October 2004, when Didion sits down to write the book we now hold in our hands. The opening is a time vortex made up of multiple strands of narrative time; this is a tenuous, slippery space where the attempt to grasp onto the disaster as a definitive thing fixed in time falters and fails, the language hesitant, yet yearning to impose a sense of exactness and finality on the event. Didion places herself as an outside observer, the tone detached, almost sardonic. When Gregory Dunne sat at the dinner table, he “appeared to (or did)” experience a heart attack. The language is non-committal while it pushes for exactitude. The dates scatter through the opening requiring constant doubling back, counting, and re-counting; the overlapping erratic map of dates corral the event into a reflexive timeline meant to impose order. But the disaster confuses order; instead, the narrative demonstrates a constant grasping for firm ground, for a precise moment to situate, stabilize, observe, and understand. What does the writer, the survivor, confront? The very thing that set the narrator, the narrated I, and the witnessing reader off course to begin with—the dreaded disaster, the unwished-for thing, the incomprehensible dismantlement of the habitual comfort of the everyday, the disruption of the regularity of living. Didion considers the turmoil, the trauma, the loss. In doing so, she confronts the marrow of it all—what do we believe about life? What did we *think* we knew? And how was it all wrong? Reflecting on her role as a writer in these opening pages, Didion expresses the impossibility of the work that lies ahead. She writes of the “impenetrable polish” of writing as an act of withholding the depth and clarity of her thoughts and beliefs where meaning is “resident in the rhythms of words and sentences and paragraphs” (7). This relationship with writing, the act of careful, meticulous, and intentional construction

defines Didion. She offers readers an argument where the writing of this book is an attempt to make sense of the period that followed, weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory, about grief, about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself (7).

As a thesis, this declaration cuts into the opening narrative with clarity, directness, commitment, and a definitive blueprint for what the reader can expect to meet. This declaration reads as a promise for readers who select this book from a shelf with both intrigue and trepidation; if I am to read about loss and grief, what can I expect to be served? What will I consume? In this tightly wrought, compact proposal, Didion promises an implosion of previously held beliefs on almost every topic that defines our understanding of what it means to be human. Here, her clarity of thought leads to a promised decimation of the very things that have previously held her—and us—together.

But how will this happen? Didion suggests, that until this point, the way she writes—the writing that artfully conceals meaning through an “impenetrable polish” (7), the writing that wayfinds to meaning, the writing that materializes meaning through process—defines her: “the way I write is who I am, or have become...” (7). But, immediately after setting forth a concise argument for her memoir, Didion suggests that this is a case where the “words and their rhythms” cannot do their job. Instead, she compels the reader to emerge from the seeming passivity of witnessing to a role that inhabits active construction of a projected future reality—a point at which Didion (and by proxy, us) can come to an understanding of the disaster. She writes,

...this is a case in which I wish I had instead of words and their rhythms a cutting room, equipped with an Avid, a digital editing system on which I could touch a key and collapse the sequence of time, show you simultaneously all the frames of memory that come to me now, let you pick the takes, the marginally different expressions, the variant readings of the same lines. This is a case in which I need more than words to find meaning. This is a case in which I need whatever it is I think or believe to be penetrable, if only for myself.

(7-8)

The process of writing the disaster requires for Didion, a narrative structure that defies chronological restraints and instead functions from a collapsed timeline where everything—every image, memory, and feeling—arrives all at once into the consciousness of the reader who takes on the role of witness, editor, and curator of the disaster. In this role, the reader navigates the disaster from a tenuous space of split consciousness; they actively participate in the rendering of a future they have not yet encountered.

This split consciousness characterizes the opening pages of Deraniyagala's memoir, *Wave*. The storytelling experience of *Wave* begins before readers ever interact with the words. Deraniyagala's memoir was published in 2013 to great acclaim. The reviews, like clockwork, almost always begin with the weight of an unspeakable loss: Deraniyagala is a survivor of the 2004 tsunami "that took an estimated 230,000 lives across a dozen countries" and on the morning that this tsunami engulfed the coastlines of Sri Lanka, it took the lives of Deraniyagala's husband, her two sons, and both her parents in a catastrophic sweep of engulfing waves. This prior knowledge contextualizes the memoir, prepares the reader, but also creates a narrative tension where the reader is in immediate communion with a kind of melancholic knowledge where, as Freud says in *Mourning and Melancholia*, "he knows *whom* he has lost, but not *what*

has been lost in him” (Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia” 245). This moment of mirrored reflection where the reader recognizes loss as an aspect of themselves but cannot identify where the loss roots itself in them, or what the loss has stolen from them signifies an integral unresolved form of recognition that arises in the reader when they approach and engage with a disaster text. Before the first lines of the book have been read, there is a *recognition*—and I suggest, a puncturing of a veneer of necessary forgetting. Here is a woman who has lost her world; what does this loss awaken in me?

In some versions of *Wave*, the cover of the book features the first several sentences of the text:

I thought nothing of it at first. The ocean looked a little closer to our hotel than usual. That was all. A white foamy wave had climbed all the way up to the rim of sand where the beach fell abruptly down to the sea. You never saw water on that stretch of sand. It was our friend Orlantha who alerted me. A short while before, she’d knocked on our door to ask if we were ready to leave. We almost were. (4)

With these first few lines of the text, the disaster has already begun. We are in a “pre-onset” phase—the thing has not *yet* happened, but we are not in a state of naïve, unencumbered peace. Deraniyagala uses a retrospective narrative voice that looks back on the event whilst still moving through narrative time as if the events are presently unfolding. Like Didion, there is a split-subject where the “I” that exists in Sri Lanka looks out at the foaming waves of the ocean while chatting with her friend exists alongside the “I” who exists post-disaster having already survived. When Deraniyagala thinks “nothing of it at first,” the *it* is already known. The reader is already witness to this disembodied thing that will devour the life we have only briefly entered. The reader opening the page is the latecomer witness—they have arrived after the fact, and through

this positioning can access traumatic memory, and recognize the “potentiality of its presence” (Rothberg 13) in themselves.

Narrative dissonance characterizes this pre-onset phase. Something is amiss; the “ocean looked a little closer” to the hotel, the familiarity of the geography – “that rim of sand where the beach fell abruptly down to the sea”—is disrupted by the unusual presence of water. Right from the start, subtle indicators expressed through a removed, restrained, and eerily calm narrative voice interrupt the norm of placidity. In Deraniyagala’s memoir, the opening pages are a tapestry of the everyday woven alongside the improbable. This tension-wrought correlation creates a narrative dissonance where the volatile energy of the unlikely is embedded within the comforting normality of the everyday. Directly following the opening paragraph, in the pre-onset phase of writing the disaster, Deraniyagala’s narration shifts into the quiet history of her family, delving into their normal: her husband is in the shower, the boys are “buzzing around their Christmas presents” (3). We learn about their chosen vacation spot—Yala National Park in Sri Lanka where there are “white-bellied sea eagles” for her eight-year-old bird-loving son Vikram to admire. We learn that the family is set to return to London in a few days having just recently viewed their younger son Malli’s violin concert. This is the everyday—the calm passion of vacations, birdwatching, the comfort of returning home.

But this calm passion edges against the knowledge that something will disrupt the ordinariness of everyday peace. The reader anticipates the onslaught of the disaster, knows that as the “narrated I” stands in the doorway of her hotel room talking to a friend, the tsunami rolls onto the shore in foaming waves. The “narrating I” knows this; it constructs a narrative that places the ordinary on the forefront. The narration oscillates back and forth between glimpses of the extraordinary and the anchoring images of the ordinary. This triple-consciousness—the

narrated I, the narrating I, and the witnessing reader—constantly communicate in a constellation of frenetic energy. The first paragraph signals the uncanny eeriness of the pre-onset stage of disaster that exists moments before a distinct shift catapults the narrative into the realm of onset—when the disaster strikes. But before this can happen the narration establishes the ordinary as an undeniable, fixed truth. The ordinary exists in details that communicate its regularity and reliability. Deraniyagala writes, “Vikram knew heaps about birds. A pair of sea eagles nested near the lagoon that edged this hotel in Yala, and he’d sit on a rock on the lagoon’s shore and wait hours, hungry for a glimpse of them. They always turned up, as reliable as the tooth fairy” (3). Deraniyagala’s narrator simultaneously recalls and builds memory. The post-disaster “I” remembers Vikram perched on a rock by the edge of a lagoon; this image is already a memory. But the pre-disaster, pre-onset “I” exists in a realm where Vikram is still alive. The arrival of the birds is “as reliable as the tooth fairy” for the mother who exists in a time before the tsunami. The post-disaster mother knows that nothing is reliable, that nothing is guaranteed. That the birds nesting by the lagoon will be lost, and that this image of her son is a projection from her future self onto the storytelling past.

For Didion, the recollection of any disaster requires that the ordinary and the extraordinary constantly correlate. Didion reflects on the opening words of her memoir and suggests an edit:

Life changes in the instant.

The ordinary instant. (3)

The ordinariness of the instant her life changed—preparing dinner, chatting with her husband, sitting down together for a meal after an exhausting day—feels “striking” (4) against the sudden impossibility of her husband’s death and she considers adding the line. She decides however, that

“there would be no need to add the word ‘ordinary,’ because there would be no forgetting it: the word never left my mind. It was in fact the ordinary nature of everything preceding the event that prevented me from truly believing it had happened, absorbing it, incorporating it, getting past it” (4). The focus on the ordinary, for Didion, becomes an obstacle to processing the traumatic event as something real. The unlikeliness of her husband slumping over the kitchen table amidst the ordinariness of their evening—a ritual they have re-enacted innumerable times—seems unlikely, unexpected, and shocking because against the backdrop of the humdrum everyday, it is. In *Matter and Memory*, Henri Bergson describes two types of memory—one creates “memory-images” that in concise detail record the events of our daily lives linking “each fact, each gesture” to a place and date (92). This kind of memory acts as a space of habitual familiarity where “we take refuge every time that, in the search for a particular image, we remount the slope of our past” (92). The memory-image of the everyday habituates actions and builds a cavern of familiarity to which we return every day in expectation of a repetition of the past; this mirage-like canvas of perception propels forward through our bodily action—we perform the habitual actions of the day before, and the day before that, and on and on and build layers of habit upon this memory-image. For Bergson, these actions “modify the organism, and create in the body new dispositions towards action” that form an experience that “accumulates within the body, a series of mechanisms wound up and ready, with reaction to external stimuli ever more numerous and more varied, and answers ready prepared to an ever-growing number of possible solicitations” (92). This future-focused, action-ready version of memory represents the embodiment of dread. Being present in the habitual actions of the everyday—setting the table, stirring a pot of soup, laying down a spoon—creates pent up expressions of action that edge toward an open door to the unknown. It is as if by living through habit, we also prepare for the

interruption of that habitual existence. Habit and memory provide comfort but the ordinary set alongside the extraordinary creates a space of narrative distress; an oscillating narrative in which the ordinary and the familiar seduces you into a place of enclosed safety. Didion reiterates that “confronted with sudden disaster we all focus on how unremarkable the circumstances were in which the unthinkable occurred” (4). The ordinary soothes the anticipatory instinct to find the thing that is awry—to search with anxious precision for the sign that something bad is afoot and to prepare for it. The retrospective gleaning of the events leading up to the disaster yields a narrative littered with the ordinary. The ordinary details – “the clear blue sky from which the plane fell, the routine errand that ended on the shoulder with the car in flames...” (Didion) insinuate that no preparation will suffice in the face of disaster.

Didion attempts to understand her own fixation on the ordinary details—“a faded terrycloth XL robe bought in the 1970s at Richard Carrol in Beverly Hills” (5)—through a journalistic briefing of a litany of disasters—the highway death of a psychiatric nurse’s husband, the ““ordinary Sunday morning”” when bombs hit Pearl Harbour, or the cloudless sky on the morning of September 11th (4-5). She lists these disasters—colossal alongside personal—to contextualize the grey-misted days following her husband’s death. Didion struggles to recall how and when she relayed the details of what happened to the friends and relatives who gathered in her home, the people who “brought food and made drinks and laid out plates on the dining room table ...all those who picked up plates and froze the leftovers and ran the dishwasher...” (5). She lists the minutiae of these ordinary activities that kept her household running and states that she “has no memory of telling anyone the details, but I must have done so, because everyone seemed to know them” (5). The split subject constructs a tapestry of details; the “narrated I” moves fog-like through the first days of grief, while the “narrating I” remembers and constructs. Like *Wave*,

the pre-onset room of disaster works as a space characterized by a collision of the ordinary against the extraordinary. The reader steps into the space and actively constructs, along with Didion, a future space defined by uncertainty. In this way the “bifurcated subject (the narrating I and the narrated I) have important implications for modelling future scenario involving the self” where “the split subject plays a significant function in shaping the dynamics of anticipation in accounts not only of ‘my’ personal future but in ‘our’ collective social future(s)” (Liveley 13).

The Onset of the Disaster

The onset is the moment the disaster descends. In popular culture and in “disaster writing” it is the spectacle, the thing that explodes in terrifyingly sublime imagery before our eyes and in our minds. When these apocalyptic disasters strike, they signify the end of a world. The onset is the moment it happens—it’s big and all-encompassing; it takes our breath away. We are enraptured by this singular moment; *this* is when it all changed. Disaster writing and representations of disaster are obsessed with this moment: *What happened? This* is what happened, this is the moment disaster struck—this is the thin line between the world we know and the world that comes after. The representation of the personal disaster, the quiet, individual loss that is not immediately felt as a collective experience, resounds with the same terrifying explosion—a colossal interference that divides a life into “before” and “after.” The personal disaster implodes the trajectory of a life, where what was once known, expected, hoped for, and imagined transitions abruptly into a state of perpetual unknowing. In literary representations of both circumstances, there is an urgency to meet that moment of irreversible change, to trace its approach, and then to face it, to know it. But it is the movement from ruin to what remains intact where the study of disaster releases itself from shell-shocked inquisitions and dread-based curiosity into a new, more terrifying landscape of survival. In *onset*, the anticipatory narrative

structure shifts more firmly into a psychological space characterized by a dual state of knowing and not knowing where the ordinary and extraordinary enmesh to create a vortex of complete immersion into the disaster. The triangulation of the reader, the writer, and the narrated I collapses into an immersive narrative voice that moves in “real time” through the disaster with simultaneous clarity and disbelief. This “vortex” netherworld brings the reader most directly and distinctly into the space of disaster, the thin membrane between reader-witness and writer-survivor momentarily broken.

In *Wave*, the narrative moves to the onset of the disaster in the paragraph immediately following the establishment of a precarious “prior life.” The “filler” material is now more closely interspersed with the unusual and the two become enmeshed: “It was then she saw the wave. ‘Oh my God, the sea’s coming in.’ That’s what she said. I looked behind me. It didn’t seem that remarkable. Or alarming. It was only the white curl of a big wave” (3). This retrospective narrative voice is apprehensive, but almost taunting. The naivete of Deraniyagala transforms into resigned horror. The reader as witness and the narrator share an acute awareness of what is to come. This wave *is* remarkable. It *is* alarming. When the wave scales the slope of the beach and reaches the conifers, Deraniyagala comments that “this was peculiar.” The “filler” of the everyday shifts into the realm of the uncanny where the familiar unsettles instead of comforts. Deraniyagala calls for her husband to come out of the washroom so that she could show him “something odd” and her husband mutters that he would be out “‘in a minute’ ...with no intention of rushing out” (5). While embedded in the domestic regularities of the everyday, the image of the extraordinary—the increasing speed and approach of frothing white waves against the image of a young boy reading the first page of his book—creates an experience of the uncanny which “is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us,

once very familiar” (Freud, “The Uncanny” 2). The narrator’s observation of the increasing froth of the ocean does not stand alone as an all-encompassing visual image: “Then there was more white froth. And more. Vic was sitting by the back door reading the first page of *The Hobbit*. I told him to shut that door. It was a glass door with four panels, and he closed each one, then came across the room and stood by me. He didn’t say anything, he didn’t ask me what was going on” (5). The extraordinary advances and embedded inside it, the ordinary resides. Deraniyagala’s son sits reading by the door—*The Hobbit*, the classic tale of leaving the comfort and familiarity of home (a warm hobbit hole) to embark on one last adventure—invokes warmth, coziness, and familiarity. But the slight, almost imperceptible difference in behaviour—her son comes when called, obeys her directions, does not ask what the matter is—disrupts the familiarity and creates tension. Vik’s silent compliance works as the final signal that something uncanny—terrifying, otherworldly, and treacherous—advances with increasing speed upon both the narrator and us, the reader. This tension-wrought narrative space evokes internal echoes in the reader. Though the reader has (most likely) never experienced a tsunami, the narrative space of the extraordinary hinged to the ordinary evokes a sense of familiar dread. If not meeting a tsunami, the reader meets their own fear of loss of control, their fear of complete destruction by the colossal, their fear of decimation, of death. Within *onset* inhabits the realm of *unfolding*. In the next paragraph, the disaster unfolds, advancing on the narrated I and on the reader. As external voyeurs, we know the moment is upon us—as does the narrator, a conflation of Deraniyagala as writer, narrator, and narrated I. This builds and continues an anticipatory narrative where we hold a collective breath awaiting the arrival of the thing that we know will arrive. How the disaster arrives, its enmeshment with the ordinary, the sudden explosion of the uncanny-extraordinary reveals itself through the immediacy of Deraniyagala’s narration. She writes:

The foam turned into waves. Waves leaping over the ridge where the beach ended. This was not normal. The sea never came this far in. Waves not receding or dissolving. Closer now. Brown and grey. Brown or grey. Waves rushing past the conifers and coming closer to our room. All these waves now, charging, churning. Suddenly furious. Suddenly menacing. (6)

Here, a switch occurs. The “unheard of” rushes to the foreground and everything familiar, all the ‘calm passion’ drops away. The declarative statement—“this is not normal”—signals awareness: this is it; this is the disaster. Everything from this moment forward marks a progression of loss, but the narrated I does not yet possess this knowledge, though the narrator does. This tension between the known and unknown drives the narrative forward. A present narrative voice that signals imminent action ensures that no concealment of the colossal, improbable disaster occurs. The disaster is here. The reader, breathless alongside the narration, arrives as a latecomer witness absorbing the events long after they have happened, while experiencing recognition marked by the grief of something yet unknown.

The onset phase features the room of *unfolding* where a revolving door spins in and out of the room of *loss*. The immediate action characteristic of this space features a narrative voice that hinges on physical movement and reflects heightened urgency; the narrator situates herself in a dual position of immediate, real-time presence, and retrospective knowing. The narrative voice maintains the intensity of its presence but evokes a stirring split-consciousness as this inescapable and unknown disaster unfolds. The actions taken in the moments immediately following the onset of the disaster are narrated with a quick, repetitive cadence that amplifies the dual consciousness of knowing and not knowing. Deraniyagala knows the choices she made in those pivotal moments after the onset of the tsunami; she knows the instinctual impulse she

followed to run and not look back. In writing these moments, she also knows the repercussions of that choice. She writes,

I didn't stop for my parents. I didn't stop to knock on the door of my parents' room, which was next to ours, on the right as we ran out. I didn't shout to warn them. I didn't bang on their door and call them out. As I ran past, for a splintered second, I wondered if I should. But I couldn't stop. It will stall us. We must keep running. I held the boys tight by their hands. We have to get out. (6)

The distinct shift from the retrospective past tense to immediate present/future tense marks an active “stepping in” to a space of agency and power. Where the quick, rhythmic cadence of the repeated refrain of “I didn't” drips with the forlorn anguish of a present-day narrative voice that offers up an explanation to herself, and to the reader, for the impossible choices made in the split seconds following the onset of the tsunami, affirmative, action-driven, and willful energy characterize the lines that follow. In the “splintered second” where Deraniyagala contends with the memory of an impossible choice, the tense shifts. The memory dissolves and the language of survival, immediate and present, shifts into place. The shift signals agency in the face of an insurmountable force: “We had no time. We had to be fast. I knew that. But I didn't know what I was fleeing from” (6).

As readers who arrive as latecomer witnesses to the text, we know—but only in part—what Deraniyagala and her family seemingly escape in those first few seconds of realization. The receding ocean and its subsequent violent approach arrive as a direct threat and Deraniyagala's narrator expresses this awareness. Simultaneously, Deraniyagala's ‘narrated I’ faces the unknown—the ocean threatens, but the immensity of this threat, the reality that the colossal force of a tsunami approaches with ghastly speed—that this force *is* a tsunami and that they will not all

escape it—remains unknown to the ‘narrated I’ yet known to the narrator, and partially known to the reader. As readers we may arrive at this text with knowledge of the mechanics of what has and what will happen in the text, but we do not possess bodily knowledge of the experience. The narrative split mimics the anxious anticipation of the dreaded unknown force or event that will upend and destroy life as we know it.

The disaster unfolds in a rapid succession of unstoppable events that leads directly into a state of sudden, chaotic loss. In *unfolding* the narrative moves quickly, but it also moves in slow-motion, slowed by the intense level of photographic detail that unfolds like a mechanism of reflexive traumatic memory. The loss is spun through a cycle of fear and active imagining that pauses the freight-train speed of the narrative movement. This happens in a cycle of panic and repeated reclaiming of agency through vivid imagining. Having grabbed her children by their arms, Deraniyagala and her husband run barefoot through the hotel and into a jeep that jolts through quickly rising water. When she yells to her husband, Steve, that they’ve left her parents behind, her husband responds by comforting their child: “‘Aachchi and Seeya will be okay, they will come later, they will come,’” (8). Deraniyagala enters a space of vivid imagining where in this reality, her parents have survived. She writes, “Steve is right. There are no waves now. Ma and Da, they will walk out of their room. We will get out of here first, and they’ll join us. I had an image of my father walking out of the hotel, there were puddles everywhere, and he had his trousers rolled up. I’ll ring Ma on her mobile as soon as I get to a phone, I thought” (8). Deraniyagala’s ‘narrated I’ exists in the disaster as it unfolds, as it rages on. This brief pause, this imagining, slows narrative time and provides a space for reclaiming control through the visualisation of a wished-for outcome. The specific visual imagery—calm waters, an intact hotel, puddles, rolled up trousers—focus on the minute, the individual pieces that we can wrestle and

turn in our minds. This handling of the details, the small things that make up the everyday like ringing up Ma on her mobile, enforce a feigned normalcy on the spectacle of disaster and work to contain the colossal within parameters that prove familiar and expected. This moment of pause, this imagining, yields a breath before the immensity of the disaster dismantles the precarious structure of narrative consciousness that Derniyagala sustains throughout the opening pages—up until a crucial point of collapse.

In the passages that follow the brief “reprieve” of imagined normalcy, the narrative builds in intensity shifting back and forth from past simple tense into the immediacy of past continuous tense, and at its most urgent moment, into simple present tense:

Steve stared at the road ahead of us. He kept banging his heel on the floor of the jeep.

Hurry up, get a move on. The jeep was in water then. Suddenly, all this water inside the jeep. Water sloshing over our knees. Where did this water come from? I didn’t see those waves get to us. This water must have burst out from beneath the ground. What *is* happening? (8-9).

This sentence-by-sentence shift in tense creates a jangled consciousness that mimics the distressed dismantlement of the self in the context of disaster. The mixed tense creates the sense of everything happening all at once, a mind-meld where, as Deraniyagala looks back she revisits her memory of events, but simultaneously re-enacts them through a narrative structure that immerses and disrupts the immediate action. In fiction, the use of simple present tense signifies intense urgency and immediacy, a technique used to immerse the reader into the action. Here, though Deraniyagala uses simple present tense (“Suddenly, all this water inside the jeep.”), she shifts into past continuous tense (“Water sloshing over our knees.”) because in re-constructing these moments, Deraniyagala must step inside the memory to re-live it, while stepping outside

the memory to look back upon it. This structural effect replicates the movement of traumatic memory, where the process of the memoirist rather than the experience of the reader takes precedence. The intensity of these final moments, the bewilderment, the catapulting fear, the focus on minute changes as they happen replicate not only the intensity of the events, they depict the time-bending process of piecing these events together. Again, the focus remains on the minute—Steve’s shoes, water sloshing over knees, the floor of the jeep—against the impossibility of the effort of coming to terms with the colossal impact of the disaster, which approaches with alarming intensity. These passages lead up to the pivotal moment of onset—the point of no return.

The pivotal stage of the onset of the disaster features a moment in the opening pages when the split consciousness of the narrator, the narrated I, and the reader collapse into a unified state of knowing where the loss encountered proves irreversible. This moment marks a point where the consciousness of the narrator and the narrated I unify and experience abject horror. As water rises in the jeep and reaches their chests, Deraniyagala paints an image of tension-wrought stillness that edges towards the abject:

Steve and I lifted the boys as high as we could. Steve held Vik, I had Mal. Their faces above the water, the tops of their heads pressing against the jeep’s canvas hood, our hands tight under their armpits. The jeep rocked. It was floating, the wheels no longer gripping the ground. We kept steadying ourselves on the seats. No one spoke. No one uttered a sound. (9)

Like cinematic images of quicksand consuming people whole, the image of rising water, heads pressed against the rooftop of the jeep, hands gripped under the armpits of children too small to stay above water, and an eerie, breathless silence create an uncanny stillness where Deraniyagala,

her husband Steve, and their two children, Vik and Mal, await whatever comes next. This “limbo” marks the full extent of human effort; no one can do anything further to alter the path of this disaster—they can only wait. Written in simple past tense, the narrator creates distance—this happened in the past—and situates the reader in her current state of mind where she looks back upon the last moment before everything changes, before the moment of unfathomable loss descends. The narrator and the reader unite; we both know that something treacherous awaits, but Deraniyagala as narrator knows what the reader does not—that the moment that follows will mark the moment where the disaster irreversibly upends and destroys life as she knows it. Immediately following the passage above, this moment of disaster arrives in an image reflecting abject horror: “Then I saw Steve’s face. I’d never seen him like that before. A sudden look of terror, eyes wide open, mouth agape. He saw something behind me that I couldn’t see. I didn’t have time to turn around and look. Because it turned over. The Jeep turned over. On my side” (9). This moment marks the last time that Deraniyagala sees her husband and children. In narrative time, Deraniyagala’s ‘narrated I’ and her readers, however, do not possess this knowledge. Instead, the narrative creates a mirrored effect where the readers witness Deraniyagala’s witnessing of her husband’s encounter with something sublime—the vast all-encompassing enormity of a tsunamic wave just before it engulfs their jeep. Steve’s “sudden look of terror, eyes wide open, mouth agape” mirrors back to us the realization of our deepest fears of complete and utter loss of control, utter powerlessness, and meeting face-to-face the thing that will destroy you. In this moment, the minute and the colossal collide as the ordinary dissolves, disintegrates, and implodes through the sheer force of the extraordinary. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva describes the abject as the thing that “draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (3). This moment in onset signifies the collapse of perspective; the narrator knows too

much, the ‘narrated I’ experiences an instance of recognition—she’d “never seen him like that before”—and thus, the “terror, eyes wide open, mouth agape” tell her that she faces something new, something inexplicable. Through the narrator’s eyes, the reader experiences the effect of the uncanny where we recognize, through the disturbing image of reflected horror, the feeling of the end of things, the knowledge that it happens like this, that it happens now. The collapse of meaning occurs hand in hand with the loss. This critical narrative point during the onset of the disaster engages with the abject as a force that navigates dread and explicates the undoing of a world. Kristeva characterizes the abject as a force that separates the self from the death and decay that the self will inevitably meet. She writes that the abject moves as

[a] massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A “something” that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. (2)

Steve’s expression of complete terror, the narrator’s witnessing of that terror, and the reader’s witnessing of the narrator and the narrated I’s experience of that terror establish a moment of collapse where at once, and together, the reader, the writer, the narrator, and the ‘narrated I’ coalesce and unite in the acknowledgement of a reality that threatens to annihilate the self—the moment of collapse, of loss, of decimation that cannot exist in the same sphere as meaning. As the horror washes over Steve, it washes over Deraniyagala, and it washes over us; in this space, meaninglessness overcomes the self because here is the wave, here are the lives the wave takes, here is the death. All at once, here we are together standing in witness to the thing that unwinds

us from ourselves, the knowledge that death comes and it takes, often in horrifying ways, and that all that we hold close—the ordinary, the everyday, the intimate—belongs to this terrifying world of the unseen that eludes understanding. For, what kind of meaning lies in a wave that crushes your husband, your two small boys, your mother, your father, and hundreds of thousands of others? This unified state of knowing (of horrified awe, of terror, of truth, of the colossal world of the unseen) lasts for only a moment—it cannot withstand much longer because if fully embraced, it threatens to annihilate.

The abject surfaces more gently for Didion, where the pivotal moment of onset—the moment where disaster irreversibly alters her life—occurs in a moment of abject revulsion immersed deep in the intimate cavern of domestic ritual. Here, the ordinary and the extraordinary correlate and interact as a method of knowing—not understanding—a sudden and intimate loss. Didion traces her loss with fragile uncertainty; moving along the edge of the abject, Didion’s opening pages feature a careful layering of the “big” against the “small” to trace, navigate, and determine the moment of loss. As in Deraniyagala’s text, the opening pages serve as a transcription of the effort of *trying* to remember, of the act of tracing and retracing fragments of memory and documents to reach something “penetrable” (Didion 8). The loss of one man upends one world—and the worlds intimately tied to his life—the experience close, almost singular. But this kind of loss—the sudden loss of a beloved husband and father through illness—echoes and reverberates in a multitude of households: never the same experience but experienced by many. The mass collective trauma of a tsunami or other natural disaster is at once shared by others who survive the same disaster, but the experience also proves incredibly singular. In our circles, who has survived a tsunami, but lost their entire family? By contrast, who has lost a loved one to illness or accident or suicide? To understand the impact of the colossal, we enter the quiet

domestic space of Deraniyagala and her family. We picture *The Hobbit*, the ordinary ease of an early morning, the minute details of a shoe stamping the floor of a jeep, the hands clutched under the armpits of two small children—the intimate, the close, the familiar—the things we know help us penetrate the unknown. The intimacy of the personal loss, though felt by many, remains individual and the intimate becomes known through the colossal. Didion constructs her narrative through a willful connection with the “big,” in particular, war and worldwide conflict—the collective traumas and disasters contextualize the intimate moments, providing a large scope of perspective for what lies close and familiar. In the same way that we meet the quiet, familial tableau of a family on a morning during their vacation in *Wave*, we enter the space of onset in *Magical Thinking* through the warmth, safety, and familiar coziness of a fireside dinner between Didion and her husband in the second chapter of Didion’s memoir.

While the first chapter prepares the reader for the onset, Didion actively traces and re-enacts the hours leading up to and following the death of her husband in the second chapter. She returns to the scene with an explicit and exact date—“December 30, 2003, a Tuesday”—in contrast to the mapping of multiple dates at the beginning of the text. In this chapter, Didion’s prose reads like a bulleted list tracing habituated memory. The sentences follow the subject-verb-object structure of the simple sentence and read as clear, precise, and direct. However, in past perfect tense, the sentences slow down. Instead of encapsulating urgent, intense energy, they translate Didion’s methodical, yet hesitant navigation through memory. The prose mimics Didion’s search for something particular—we don’t yet know what; she does not yet know what—but in doing so the prose moves slowly, each thought comprising a single line as “in the search for a particular image, we remount the slope of our past” (Bergson 92). These opening lines mimic body memory: “We had come home. We had discussed whether to go out for dinner

or eat in. I said I would build a fire, we could eat in. I built the fire, I started dinner, I asked John if he wanted a drink” (9). After visiting their daughter, Quintana, who lays in a coma at Beth Israel North Hospital, Didion and her husband return home. As retrospective narrator, Didion reiterates her daily routine. Methodical and meticulous in her remembering, she relays this information to a newly arrived observer—the reader. This careful rendering from movement-to-movement traces for Didion a pathway through her bodily memory. By-retracing her habitual actions, re-living the ritual of her everyday, Didion hopes to understand the nature of her loss, a seemingly irresolvable event. How could life change in such an “ordinary instant” (Didion 3)? In this memory-walk towards the moment of “no return” Didion focusses on objects that emphasize the ordinariness and ritual of the evening. The ordinary and the extraordinary constantly correlate throughout the phase of onset, both before and after the pivotal moment where the abject emerges from/interrupts Didion’s domestic realm. The next three paragraphs create a scene of domestic comfort and regularity marked subtly by the presence of the colossal, collective disaster of war. Didion writes,

I got him a Scotch and gave it to him in the living room, where he was reading in the chair by the fire where he habitually sat.

The book he was reading was by David Fromkin, a bound galley of *Europe’s Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?*

I finished getting dinner, I set the table in the living room where, when we were home alone, we could eat within sight of the fire. (9)

Didion’s focus on particular objects—a Scotch, a bound galley, the fire—creates an uneasy tableau of domestic comfort: habitual regularity, warmth, rest. The bound galley, a book not yet published but ready for review, marks a point of liminality, of residing in the in-between. In its

unfinished state, the book echoes the ongoing state of upheaval that Didion and her husband face each day. The habitual state described by Didion (hospital visit, Scotch, reading, dinner by the fire) emerged as a new normal when their daughter collapsed and sunk into a coma. For weeks, they've functioned in this liminal, in-between state where they travel to the hospital each day and come home weary with heavy news, their previous state of "normal" upended, now in the past. The book's title echoes the loss of a pre-war era—a seemingly golden time before the onslaught of war and subsequent decades of upheaval. The book belongs in this fireside setting (this is, after all, the household of two writers); its presence does not disrupt the domestic scene as much as it bends the light to contextualize it, altering the borders of the safe enclave of home to include the unease, restlessness, and apprehension of the "big picture," the larger threat of the unknown and the uncontrollable.

This unease layers into the narrative through Didion's retrospective emphasis on fire. She writes, "I find myself stressing the fire because fires were important to us. I grew up in California, John and I lived there together for twenty-four years, in California we heated our houses by building fires. We built fires even on summer evenings, because the fog came in. Fires said we were home, we had drawn the circle, we were safe through the night" (9-10). Didion draws a metaphorical barrier around her domestic space, the fire serving as protector of her private domain. The act of building the fire functions as a protective deed that wards off outside forces (the fog, the danger, the night), a supplicatory tending of the hearth and a message to the "out there" and the unseen that "we were home, we had drawn the circle" and that this space, the space of the intimate, the close, the ordinary, and the dear were protected and "were safe through the night." The night, shrouded in the shadow of the unknown brings with it the world of the sublime, the awe-inspiring, and the colossal. When Didion "draw[s] the circle" she

sets the action of the individual against the onslaught of the colossal. In this narrative moment, in the meandering backward into memory and reflection, Didion again draws the circle around her hearth, this “vortex” of memory offering a momentary pause, a temporary barrier, before the pivotal moment of onset, before the unknown and the uncontrollable infiltrate the privacy and intimacy of her household and of this narrative.

In the next few lines, the sentences return to past, simple tense. The direct subject-verb-object structure isolates each action, every sentence its own meditative moment: “I lit the candles. John asked for a second drink before sitting down. I gave it to him. We sat down. My attention was on mixing the salad” (10). Each sentence shifts the narrative, and by extension, the narrator, the narrated I, and the reader, towards the moment of shock. The simple structure slows the pace and fragments the flow, each movement a staggered breath. The next line pulls the narrative into the moment: “John was talking, then he wasn’t” (10). Didion, as narrator, does not linger here. Instead, she meanders. As Jane Alison explains in *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, “a meander begins at one point and moves toward a final one, but with digressive loops” (117) where “digression is a strategy for putting off the ending, a multiplying of time within the work, a perpetual evasion or flight. Flight from what? From death of course” (Calvino 46). Didion meanders into a digressive spiral where she fixates on the “seconds or minute before he stopped talking” (10) to trace her husband’s last actions and words:

At one point in the seconds or minute before he stopped talking he had asked me if I had used single-malt Scotch for his second drink. I had said no, I used the same Scotch I had used for his first drink. “Good,” he had said. “I don’t know why but I don’t think you should mix them.” At another point in those seconds or that minute he had been talking about why World War One was the critical event from which the entire rest of the

twentieth century flowed.

I have no idea which subject we were on, the Scotch or World War One, at the instant he stopped talking. (10)

We move from a series of sentences that move like half-staccato beats to “swirling recollections” (Alison 146) fixated on two focal points: the Scotch and the topic of World War One. As Alison writes, “a spiraling narrative could be a helix winding downward—into a character’s soul, or deep into the past—or it might wind upward, around and around to a future” (144). For Didion, the narrative moves both downwards towards the singular moment of change and upwards towards the unknown. She staves off death (his death, the death of the life she once lived), but also meticulously re-visits and re-considers every minute action, every word exchanged in “those seconds or that minute” (10) as if re-tracing, studying, and re-living those final moments will yield something that she will “believe to be penetrable” (8), something to excavate and examine with surgical precision. She pauses before the fall as if to say, “Can I dwell here? Can I turn these objects—this glass of Scotch, this galley about World War One—around and around in my hands and consider them?” In doing so, Didion sets the ordinary alongside the extraordinary, the intimate against the colossal, and offers them up not as objects that provide a pathway to understanding but as a realm for knowing. The writing of the disaster does not provide clarity, nor purpose, but instead produces a method to look closely at loss, to bring the impenetrable unknowing force of disaster and its “bigness” close, and then closer, to grasp it and hold it under an unrelenting gaze.

Didion arrives at the pivotal moment of onset in the next paragraph. The moment of horror reveals itself in stages, instead of one fell swoop. Here, still deeply habituated in domestic ritual, Didion looks up:

I have no idea which subject we were on, the Scotch or World War One, at the instant he stopped talking.

I only remember looking up. His left hand was raised and he was slumped motionless. At first I thought he was making a failed joke, an attempt to make the difficulty of the day seem manageable.

I remember saying *Don't do that.* (10)

In narrative time, Didion does not yet realize that her husband has died. She moves through un-habituated action that feels automatic: she performs the Heimlich. She feels his weight as he falls forward against the table. He falls to the floor. She calls the paramedics. The abject, unlike the sudden violence of a tsunamic wave, arrives in Didion's home in disguise. When she looks up and sees her husband's left hand raised and his body slumped and motionless, she computes the posture as a joke rather than an intrusion. She maintains the safety of her domestic realm by incorporating her husband's odd posture and sudden silence into the safety of her sphere, the action something she could expect from her husband, an expression of exaggerated exhaustion, an effort to manage the overwhelming emotions of a difficult day. In retrospect, the narrator knows this moment is irresolvable; she will not see her husband alive again. Didion writes, "I remember saying *Don't do that.*" Didion's 'narrated I' revolts against the posture, the aberration from regularity, from habit, from norm. Something within Didion as the 'narrated I' repels the image and knows it as an intrusion. Didion as retrospective narrator looks back and identifies the visceral reaction to something abject. Kristeva describes the abject as visceral bodily violence that draws us towards the thing that disintegrates life, but also triggers an instinct in us to separate from it. In a section titled "The Improper/Unclean" in *The Powers of Horror*, Kristeva writes: "Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that

protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck. The shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery. The fascinated start that leads me toward and separates me from them” (2). When Didion identifies her husband’s physical position as an aberration, her first reaction pushes the image away—“*Don’t do that*”—and she then immediately attends to him, drawn not by fascination, but by the urge to alter the image, to put it right. Didion’s intrinsic utterance, her “*Don’t do that*” functions as a bodily response to the stimuli of the abject. Like “spasms and vomiting” her words reject the image, the signal that the disaster unfolds before her and will envelop and take the life that she inhabits. The abject, in this instance, works subtly, and more insidiously, as an outside force that transgresses the boundaries of home. But, unlike the bodily reaction to “the improper/unclean” Didion’s rejection does not separate her from the disaster. Instead, it creates a momentary barrier from the knowledge that is to come.

Didion, as retrospective narrator, identifies that in narrative time, the knowledge of her husband’s loss arrives not at this moment when she witnesses the abject, but later when she arrives in a separate ambulance at the hospital and a social worker greets her. The gurney carrying her husband disappears into the hospital and a man in civilian clothing approaches the driver of the ambulance, turns to Didion, and introduces himself as her social worker. “Present day” Didion emerges with slightly muddled clarity: “...and I guess that is when I must have known” (13). This “knowing” remains hazy and unfocussed. For in that moment, what does her ‘narrated I’ know? She knows, in a way, that her husband has died. And she begins to know that the path leading forward into her future moves into a hazy landscape, a place yet unknown. Didion constructs this knowing through the embedding of the colossal alongside the space of intimate loss. Immediately following her arrival at the hospital and her reception by a social

worker, she begins a new section of the chapter with an outside voice—that of a mother whose son is killed by a bomb in Kirkuk, Iraq. Didion writes,

“I opened the door and I seen the man in the dress greens and I knew. I immediately knew.” This was what the mother of a nineteen-year-old killed by a bomb in Kirkuk said on an HBO documentary quoted by Bob Herbert in *The New York Times* on the morning of November 12, 2004. “But I thought that if, as long as I didn’t let him in, he couldn’t tell me. And then it—none of that would’ve happened. So he kept saying, ‘Ma’am, I need to come in.’ And I kept telling him, ‘I’m sorry, but you can’t come in.’

When I read this at breakfast almost eleven months after the night with the ambulance and the social worker I recognized the thinking as my own. (14)

The uneasy haze when Didion steps out of an ambulance to meet a social worker, shifts into grounded awareness. Didion invites us to enter this knowing space, to participate in the recognition that a war waged in Iraq, a colossal, systemic disaster resulting in mass collective trauma and loss can be understood through witnessing the intimacy of the exchange between a soldier and a mother receiving news she does not want. The mother bars the soldier from entering her domestic space, and attempts, like Didion, to draw a circle of safety around her home. Though the mother *knows* the news that awaits, she creates a parallel reality where she can continue to exert authority over her domestic realm. Like Didion, and like this mother, the reader stands in this psychological space of knowing and not-knowing and recognizes the expression of human futility against and amidst the force of disaster.

Unfolding

The opening pages end in a realm of unfolding, a space of unresolved turmoil where the narrative enters a time-warped landscape of survival. Here, the psychological space of the

known-unknown shifts more firmly and exclusively into the unknown. Through *pre-onset* and *onset*, the narrative moves deliberately towards a known point in the “future” marked by the moment of onset. In *unfolding*, the narrative shifts into the grey space of the unknown, the turbulent imagery, hazy structure, and ghost-like movements in time emphasizing the unknowability of the disaster and setting the trajectory for the rest of the text. As a whole, the opening pages serve as a microcosm of the disaster text where the interplay between a future-focused split narrative voice, the ordinary and the extraordinary, and the fixation on tangible documents echo throughout the rest of the text, the narrative shifting from phase to phase in cyclical repetition.

In the passages that immediately follow the moment of onset, we move into a grey space of volatility and complete loss of control. In this space of unfolding, the narrative positions the narrator in a state of passivity where the force and all-consuming nature of the disaster diminishes or completely blots out individual agency. In *Wave*, the grey space engulfs Deraniyagala, her body flung by the immense force of a tsunamic wave. Key aspects of Deraniyagala’s narration shift in and out of passive tense, her autonomy compromised and at the mercy of something she cannot name. She writes, “Am I underwater? It didn’t feel like water, but it has to be, I thought. I was being dragged along, and my body was whipping backwards and forwards. I couldn’t stop myself. When at times my eyes opened, I couldn’t see water. Smoky and grey. That was all I could make out. And my chest. It hurt like it was being pummelled by a great stone” (10). The murky waters of the unknown transport Deraniyagala from her previous life into an undetermined, now treacherous future. She feels the violence of the change—its physicality strikes with such force, the pain explosive, but its source remains unknown. This characterizes a new space that dominates the rest of the narrative, moving—being moved—

limbless through the water represents the catapulting of the body into an unmasked future where dread splits open and unleashes unending loss. This marks the space of survival, the place where your body whips “backwards and forwards” through time and memory towards a place you don’t know.

The aftermath in *The Year of Magical Thinking* moves similarly, where Didion walks hazily through a grey space, the hours and days that follow her husband’s death punctuated by automatic actions, her thoughts and movements listed, as if memorized. Where the disaster engulfs Deraniyagala’s agency, her physical and metaphorical space “smoky and grey,” devoid of clarity, her vision obscured, Didion’s aftermath responds to the smoky, grey haze of shock and trauma through a fixation on the tangible, the controllable, the narrow spaces within which she can exert even imagined control through cyclical rumination on specific details and tangible documents. Didion outlines a series of logistical actions—waiting in line, readying insurance cards for an unfamiliar hospital, the feasibility of a hospital transfer—as a method of tethering herself to the hope that the unknown produces. As retrospective narrator, Didion surmises that before she ever stepped foot inside the hospital, she already possessed the knowledge that her husband had died. But, her anxious focus on the minute makes it possible for her to believe that something else could be true—if she could arrange this one thing (or another thing, or another) and make herself useful (“...but I could make this unfamiliar hospital work, I could be useful, I could arrange the transfer to Columbia-Presbyterian once he was stabilized”) (Didion 14) she could, like the woman holding off the soldier at her front door, keep the aftermath at bay. Didion writes, “I had entered at the moment it happened a kind of shock in which the only thought I allowed myself was that there must be certain things I needed to do” (28). Didion’s fixation on the minute as a method of staying tethered and in control extends later to the tangible object—the

physical objects left behind after disaster. In the haze of her first night alone in their New York apartment, Didion lists her husband's personal effects:

In the plastic bag I had been given at the hospital there were a pair of corduroy pants, a wool shirt, a belt, and I think nothing else. The legs of the corduroy pants had been slit open, I supposed by the paramedics. There was blood on the shirt. The belt was braided. I remember putting his cell phone in the charger on his desk. I remember putting his silver clip in the box in the bedroom in which we kept passports and birth certificates and proof of jury service. I look now at the clip and see that these were the cards he was carrying: a New York State driver's license, due for renewal on May 25, 2004; a Chase ATM card; an American Express card; a Wells Fargo MasterCard; a Metropolitan Museum card; a Writers Guild of America West card...a Medicare card; a Metro card; and a card issued by Medtronic with the legend "I have a Kappa 900 SR pacemaker implanted," the serial number of the device, a number to call for the doctor who implanted it, and the notation 'Implant Date: 03 Jun 2003.' (6-7)

Didion's methodical listing of, as Kis notes, "authentic documents, letters, and objects bearing the traces of real beings" (206) solidifies the abstract. When she arrives home that first night she recalls "What I remember about the apartment the night I came home alone is the silence" (Didion 17). The list serves as a method of filling the space left behind—here, let the objects fill this page; they bear witness to the absence, the loss, and testify that this space once belonged to someone alive and loved, that the solidity of a human body once filled this absence. They testify that something happened—the slit in corduroy pants exposed an injured body and now that body no longer lives, no longer takes space in this physical realm. The blood on the shirt documents the trauma and viscerally reminds the viewer that yes, this happened, this flesh broke, this person

bled, what flowed inside, spilled out. The litany of cards mark the movement of a person through the world in which they live; they indicate belonging, status, and existence through monetary transactions, museum visits, and club memberships. They document the presence and absence of life; they bear what remains of the life that once lived. These “personal effects” serve as points of access to the immensity of loss that Didion faces; they concretize the very thing that she—and we—try to escape.

Both *Wave* and *The Year of Magical Thinking* close their opening chapters with imagined futures that emerge from the existential tension between the known and the unknown after the descent of disaster. Didion ends her opening section through a narrative movement backwards in memory through a split-narrative consciousness. In a retrospective narrative voice that resounds clear and definitive, Didion contends that though she knew that her husband had died and that her domestic sphere had been irrevocably altered, some part of her believed “that what had happened remained reversible” (32). She navigates a narrative space that defies the confines of time and creates an entryway into the realm of survival after loss where “magical thinking” signifies a redefined relationship with the unknown and the uncontrollable. Didion writes, “I needed to be alone so that he could come back. This was the beginning of my year of magical thinking” (33). In this way, the disaster text becomes a method for negotiating the future not as a landscape of survival, but as a potential realm where the thing that destroys you never happens at all. This in-between state resists relenting to the colossal as an impenetrable force and instead, redefines the ways in which the disaster can be understood and borne.

The opening chapter of *Wave* ends in bleak rationalization. Through narrative that shifts between two imagined futures—one where her family survives and one where they don’t—Deraniyagala navigates the volatile connection between the known and the unknown, the space

of survival firmly planted in the in-between. With cutting, sharp clarity that rings acrid, bitter, and true, Deraniyagala narrates the survivor state of mind: desperate, angry, devoid of hope, yet desperate for it. Taken to safety inside the ticket office at the entrance of the national park, Deraniyagala observes other survivors trickle into the office, some of them children. She considers the supernatural force of what she has just experienced: “Was it real, what just happened, that water? My crumpled mind couldn’t tell. And I wanted to stay in the unreal, in the not knowing. So I didn’t speak to anyone, ask them anything” (17). In the space of not knowing, the terrific force of colossal tsunamic waves cannot exist and cannot come fully to life. And if this is the case, then the tender realm of the intimate remains protected. In her next breath, Deraniyagala veers toward hope: “But what if they survived, I couldn’t help thinking. Steve might come here with the boys. Maybe someone found all of them, just as they found me” (17). The end of the chapter arrives with caustic conclusions where Deraniyagala, watching a plump young boy wander around the museum sobbing, concludes that her children could not possibly have survived. The last lines of the opening chapter read:

The boy kept walking back and forth and crying. I wanted him to stop. Someone brought a large towel and wrapped it around his shoulders. Still the boy sobbed. But I didn’t speak to him. I didn’t try to comfort him. Stop blubbing, I thought, shut up. You only survived because you are fat. That’s why you didn’t die. You stayed alive in that water because you are so fucking fat. Vik and Malli didn’t have a chance. Just shut up. (19)

Here, Deraniyagala transitions from willful habitation in the state of not knowing to entering a state of visceral, spontaneous, and self-imposed ‘knowing.’ What brings with it deeper treachery? The hope that emerges from not knowing, or the reality of meeting what you dread?

The structure of the opening pages—pre-onset, onset, and unfolding—replicate

themselves over and over again in the rest of the text, thus acting as blueprints for the text as a whole. As readers who arrive as latecomer witnesses, the opening pages draw us inward into the text and into ourselves. We immerse in the narrative's psychological dualities. We confront our own dread and doubt through a split narrative consciousness that imagines a future beyond what we know.

Chapter Two: The Meeting of Dread

If each day falls inside each night,

There exists a well

where clarity

is imprisoned.

We need to sit on the rim

of the well of darkness

and fish for fallen light,

with patience.

— Pablo Neruda

“Sccada día cae/If each day falls”

The Sea and The Bells: El mar y las campanas.

The intimate disaster exists in the realm of the close and familiar where the personal, private, and individual overlaps with the collective, public, and the institutional to create chasms of un/knowning. These chasms represent spaces of perpetual knowing and unknowing where the reader, as latecomer witness, arrives as an informed, invested, yet voyeuristic entity engaged in play with the concept of dread. The disaster texts explored in this chapter, both works of fiction, contend with personal disasters—the insidiousness of abduction—that strike at the centre of the private realm and perforate the intense intimacy of the family circle. The disasters reverberate outward from the private realm, echo through communities, and implicate institutional bodies as active participants in the dismantling of the protected private realm. From this dismantled

domestic ground the “spatiotemporal” (Tally Jr 10) realm opens and dread, as an unbodied, undefined, often subconscious force of angst, anxiety, apprehension, and anguish disrupts the self-imposed vigilance exercised against the unknown. I return to the opening words of Maurice Blanchot’s *The Writing of the Disaster* to understand the moments following the onset of the disaster; this is the distinct moment where there is no turning back, where, “The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact” (1). Here, the disaster unfolds into a newly generated space of ruin where dread forms the vision of an anticipated, but feared future characterized by profound loss. This dread-space of unrest works simultaneously as a disruptor and a generator of a new, dark, present-future life. The disaster in fiction functions as a container for the management of dread. Dread, as an intentional deregulator of the reader as resistant but intentional witness, functions as a method of purposeful knowing of the unknown, and navigator of the terrifying chasmic space of the threshold. In the previous chapter, we explored the concept of openings as an entryway into the rooms of disaster. These rooms house the temporal moments of “pre-onset” and “onset” where the disaster dismantles a shared pre-disaster reality and opens the way into a new landscape characterized by ruin. In this chapter, we delve into this ruin and enter two new temporal phases—“unfolding” and “loss”—where the initial impact of disaster reverberates in a state of reality that edges against the constant interplay between hope and dread. In this space, dread functions as a social tool for survival where the excavation of the self as a site of melancholic anxiety fixated on death, edges towards an unachievable state of perpetual contentment.

Both published pre-pandemic in 2019, the novels *The Lost Sister*, by Toronto-based writer Andrea Gunraj, and *Disappearing Earth* by New York-based writer Julia Phillips, contend with the disappearance of young girls. Both writers spent time writing and developing their novels at

the Banff Writing Studio in 2015, where along with a collection of other writers immersed in various projects, they worked with mentors to develop their work. As a fellow participant in the 2015 Banff Writing Studio, collective writing goals fueled my interest in Gunraj and Phillips' work. As a collective of writers spending "studio time" in the mountains of Banff, our hours spent in isolation, writing, drafting, and developing our individual works intercepted with communal time spent during meals, hiking, and sharing in conversation in workshop settings. The writer's life—both individual and communal—contributed to the development of two unintentionally thematically linked works in a setting where the writer's privacy and isolation connects (and clashes) with collegial interaction. The writing process as both an individual and communal experience illuminates the structural components of the novel that link the individual with the collective. As most writers do, Gunraj and Phillips moved through various structural possibilities, both working to incorporate essential immersive research that formed the major thematic relationships in their novels. For Gunraj, a Toronto-based essayist and novelist, the writing of *The Lost Sister* explored the contentious relationships between two sets of sisters: Diana and Alisha, the daughters of immigrants growing up in the 1990s in the neighbourhood of Jane and Finch "where they have pressure on them to perform in a particular way—be the star in the family—and be the reason why their parents immigrated" (Gunraj "The Relationship Between Sisters") and Paula and Ave, two sisters impacted by the trauma of forced removal from their homes and eventual institutionalization in the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children. The novel centers on the abduction and murder of Diana and its catastrophic impact on her tight-knit family, but the intimacies of this profound loss link inextricably to the institutional abduction of Paula and Ave, who generations earlier, faced a fragmenting assault on their family unit. Gunraj's personal friendship with former resident of the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children, Garnet

Smith, who shared the intimacies of his experience with Gunraj and provided “his patient blessing” (Gunraj "Acknowledgements" 306) for her to write the book, inform this connection between personal and institutional disaster, and emphasize the function of the disaster novel as a contentious, but connective force. Similarly, Julia Phillips’ novel began as a collection of linked short stories, but in the years of revision that followed, the novel’s setting in Kamchatka, Russia, informed by Phillips’ year as a Fulbright scholar conducting research in the Kamchatka Peninsula in Eastern Russia, compelled a throughline that united the disparate stories of several families. In both novels, the private disaster links inextricably to the collective and the institutional. My curiosity and interest in placing the novels side by side in this dissertation remain rooted in their visceral treatment of the “same” disaster—the abduction of young girls—and the fixation on this act as a narrative force. The intimacy of the violence, its intense, irreversible impact on the family unit, and the repercussions of the act on the wider community as expressed through structural choices in the drafting of the stories into novel-form, provided precise insight into the thing I am most interested in: how do we connect the private, suffocating isolation and intimacy of our personal disasters to the grand sweep and colossal movements of the world around us? And when the world thrums on and on, disaster after disaster, how do we collectively understand the impact of that colossal destruction? The terrifying, de-stabilizing violence that erupts the smallest unit of community—the family—creates explosive ramifications in our collective existence. The focus of this destructive violence on the girl, on the body of the girl, and on girlhood, reveals the root of disaster as the undoing of the protective realm of the feminine. The destruction and renewal of this protected and protective realm *is* the center of the intimate disaster; it is where the disaster destroys, and where the dread-space—the transitory realm that forms the heart of this chapter—takes root.

From this initial loss, the structure of both novels forms a narrative arc that features multiple intersecting storylines that propel the movement of the main narrative forward. In *The Lost Sister*, chapters alternate between the main plot—a Guyanese-Canadian teenager goes missing from the Jane and Finch neighbourhood of Toronto—and a correlating storyline of Paula, a school volunteer who once resided in the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children with her sister, Ave. In *Disappearing Earth*, the novel begins in Kamchatka, Russia, where sisters Alyona and Sophia go missing. The novel cycles outward into the community where chapter by chapter, the narrative arcs through the homes of different residents, the overarching impact of the abduction unravelling their private worlds. The undoing and remaking of worlds in these texts emerges as a contentious, ever-evolving oscillation between public and private realms. These realms, represented throughout the disaster narrative as locales of dread, incubate a liminal space of internal vacancy where the disaster both destroys and remakes the self. These dread-dwelling spaces, wound tight with anxiety, trepidation, and latent alarm exist in three distinct, but overlapping categories: the dismantling of the private realm, the institutionalization of the domestic realm, and the body as a site of collective dread.

This Awful Place: Dread and the Disaster

In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot, in urgent, fragmentary, often breathless reflection, explores what it means to “to abide in disaster’s infinite threat” (“The Writing of the Disaster - Nebraska Press”). For Blanchot, the disaster both eradicates and depersonalizes the “I” where the intense influx of disaster in our lives, generation after generation, one horror after another, “does not touch anyone in particular,” and instead, the “I” is “not threatened by it [the disaster], but spared, left aside” (Blanchot 1). The ambivalent, depersonalized disaster does not arrive as much as it always exists, and as it casts aside the individual, it “threatens in me that

which is exterior to me—an other than I who passively becomes other” (1). This passive retreat from the self into an other forms a fragmentary, discordant self that exists vicariously through visions of future disaster and anticipated loss. This is what I have termed the “dread-space” and in it, the self abandons self to master the inexplicable. I have created the term “dread-space” to describe a transitional and transitory psychic space of competing and conflicting feelings related directly to the imagination of the disaster. The dread-space emerges before, during, and after the onset of a disaster as a mechanism of protection and as an active interaction with perceived and real threats. In the dread-space, driven by curiosity, anticipation, fear, and hope, we viscerally embody and vividly envision past and future loss.¹ The dread-space facilitates access to the colossal, the infinite, and the uncontrollable even as it acts as a simulated form of protection *from* the disaster. The dread-space contains the immense psychic pressure of perceived control and allows the freedom of witnessing, of play, and of experimentation with the deadening horror *and* the insatiable thrill of complete destruction and ruin. The dread-space acts as an avenue—a fractious, de-stabilizing, immobilizing transitional pathway—that moves towards a kind of freedom, a temporary relief. We never completely abandon the dread-space; it will collapse when the tangible evidence of the most-feared outcome erupts into our lives and penetrates our consciousness, but it echoes on and on in an endless cycle of fear and catharsis that follows the disaster as it comes.

¹ In *Disaster and Emergency Management*, my conception of the “dread-space” translates to an acute sense of risk-perception. How likely is it that an earthquake will strike my city? How do I know how much risk I’m in? Governments and communities prepare for the possibility of disaster through an assessment of risk and subsequent “vulnerability reduction” to reduce that risk and the potential impact of the disaster. How ready is my city for the impact of an earthquake? What vulnerabilities put me and my community at increased risk? These preparatory interactions play an interesting role in my understanding of dread as an active space of introspective confrontation because of the ways the internal and external form tensions in risk management. In “Perception of Risk” Nirupama Agrawal describes how the “‘locus of control’...classifies people according to the extent that they believe hazardous events are dependent on fate (external control) or within their own responsibility (internal control)” (195). Uncertainty, the recognition of risk as a specific, tangible element, and the conflicted relationship with control all comprise the palpability of the dread-space.

But, even as the dread-space reaches for the disaster, as Blachot writes, “There is no reaching the disaster. Out of reach is he whom it threatens, whether from afar or close up, it is impossible to say: the infiniteness of the threat has in some way broken every limit” (1). In the dread-space, fear and revulsion interlink with curiosity and anxiety to create active visions and future projections of loss. Here, we recognize our vulnerability to the infinite, all-encompassing disaster, but we try again and again to “reach” it, to grasp it, to confine it. But disaster dismantles time and space, where “We are on the edge of disaster without being able to situate it in the future: it is rather always already past, and yet we are on the edge or under the threat, all formulations which would imply the future—that which is yet to come—if the disaster were not that which does not come, that which has put a stop to every arrival” (1). The dread-space encompasses this collapse in time where the disaster greets us from some future realm, while already having moved through us, the wreckage felt in our bodies, and anchored in our subconscious. In the dread-space, it is *threat* and *knowing* that propels the visioning of loss; we create ruminative visual fantasies of what is yet to come, or what has already passed. Moving through the dread-space becomes a method of coping with the intangible wreckage of threat, the ever-descending spiral of loss. In the space of unfolding—the vast stretch of time that extends after the precise moment of disaster’s onset—the dread-space yields retrospective ruminative questioning as we dismantle the thing that has happened to understand how it has happened, how it could possibly be, while simultaneously holding off what could yet dismantle us, what awaits us further down the path that disaster carves into our futures. The path that moves forward through the dread-space constructs itself from the shadow and bone of the past, but in the darkness, shafts of light cut through, and here, the potential of new growth, and thus, new pain appears.

Revulsion and curiosity co-exist in the dread-space. For a time, whether in fiction or memoir, the reader, the writer, and the subject of disaster cannot acknowledge the light; the dread-space demands a constant state of vigilance against the dark, from within the dark. The “silver lining” glimmering through the darkness appears as a false construction (and it may well be false when imposed), and for the subject, a complete impossibility. When immersed in the wreckage of a new world characterized by loss, the light, for a time, may not exist at all. The desire for light, for a divine reason to make sense of the dark horror that we face, disintegrates in the dread-space. When writers act as architects as they narrativize the disaster, the longing for light emerges in the narrative structures imposed on the disaster, even as the disaster defies all structure. And even as the longing for light seeps into the disaster narrative—in the form of closed, refined endings, for example—in the dread-space we inhabit a darkness that evades all light; the unspeakable disaster decimates our humanity and thus, obliterates the yearning for something beyond the ruin. At the same time, the human impulse for survival trains us to look for the way out, the way beyond the darkness; this awful place, this fractious plane of time, sits us on the “rim of the well of darkness” where we may eventually “fish for fallen light” (Neruda) but for a time, we exist between worlds—the world that once was, the world that will be, and the world we now reside in—our vision set on the darkness, our beings bound to a world now lost.

Though I consider dread as *the awful place*, this chapter explores the dread-space as a site of play driven by morbid curiosity, fear, and anxiety. As an innately human experience, dread opens a pathway to understanding how the human psyche functions amid disaster. When faced with intense precariousness, the feeling of dread can dictate the internal compass to such an extent, that the world we move through shifts into a landscape made only of the perpetual potential for turmoil. In considering the ways that writers represent disaster in fiction, dread

appears as a distinct and otherworldly energy that creates narrative spaces of great closeness and intensity between the reader, writer, and focal characters.

Often interpreted as anxiety, Søren Kierkegaard's concept of dread, or *angst*, describes a distinctly human experience where the concept of constraint threatens a blissful state of oblivion maintained by an external framework of control working unconsciously as part of the human spirit. Though often used interchangeably with fear, Kierkegaard differentiates anxiety/dread from fear. Where fear arises as a response to a known threat—the feeling that arises if faced with a rabid animal, or the feeling that churns when faced with an unpleasant task that may go wrong—dread/anxiety arises when faced with the unknown. Choice, the possibility that other ways of being exist *and* that these ways can be chosen by the tantalizing and frightening force of free will creates a new sensation. For Kierkegaard, when Adam awakens to a prohibition—you shall *not* eat fruit from the forbidden tree—the idea of possibility births a new feeling, one of both apprehension and thrill. In the most essential terms, Kierkegaard views dread as a spiritual experience that occurs when we face the possibility of our own freedom. The feeling of dread roots itself in the concept of original sin where Adam, newly invigorated with knowledge of a prohibition—he cannot consume fruit from the Tree of Knowledge—feels the rush of *dread*:

The prohibition alarms Adam [induces a state of dread] because the prohibition awakens in him the possibility of freedom. That which passed innocence by as the nothing of dread has now entered into him, and here again it is a nothing, the alarming possibility of *being able*. What it is he is able to do, of that he has no conception; to suppose that he had some conception is to presuppose, as commonly is done, what came later, the distinction between good and evil. There is only the possibility of being able, as a higher form of ignorance, as a heightened expression of dread, because this in a more profound

sense is and is not, because in a more profound sense he loves it and flees from it

(Kierkegaard "Dread and Freedom"; addendums in original translation).

In the dread-space, the thrill of freedom transmutes into vigilance against vulnerability. The “freedom” of original sin—the “being able” that we both love and flee from—indicates a split reality where constraint and free will collude. In the process of fictionalizing the disaster, the writer and reader both arrive as latecomer witnesses to the disaster and engage in an interplay between these two states: the suffocation and safety of narrative constraint. Here, the bounds of the narrative enclose the disaster within the confines of technique that replicate the movement and enormity of disaster and yet, also collapse under its immense vastness, its undying weight. In the writing of the disaster, the “possibility of *being able*” forces the reader and the writer to confront the ways in which narrative offers a conditional reprieve from the terrifying boundlessness of disaster. The dread-space functions as a site of experimentation where the reader, writer, and the subject confront the illusion that the things we do as individuals have impact on the ultimate, all-encompassing outcome that we inevitably meet. The dread-space guides us into the space of knowing where we understand that no matter what, the disaster, ever-present and always approaching, will break our hearts, undo our worlds, and bring to us an end.

In *Dread: Facing Futureless Futures*, David Theo Goldberg interrogates dread as a pervasive state that grows and shifts in response to movements in the social landscape. For Goldberg, dread serves as an indicator of the constantly changing social environment that we experience as a collective community. He argues that dread “is driven now by the socially specific interaction of currently impactful conditions. As the expressive manifestation of complex social fields, then, dread is a general index of contemporary specificities” (ix).

Goldberg begins his preface with a retrospective look at the perpetual affront of a disaster-ridden

year. He lists the a litany of global disasters, mostly politically charged that take place over the course of 2015-2016: in 2016, the election of Donald Trump to President of the United States both stunned and alarmed, the Brexit referendum followed and the endless civil war in Syria and the massive outflowing of refugees into Lebanon and Europe continued. We witnessed the Pulse nightclub massacre that targeted the gay community, the Paris attacks, the unsettling of Afghanistan and Iraq, the open proliferation of sexual violence and racist attacks, the melting of ice caps, and the impact of increasingly destructive storm systems (Goldberg vii) that decimate entire communities. All this combined into an endless series of politically mired disasters. This endlessness, Goldberg writes, placed people on a perpetual edge, bracing themselves for what may—and will—come next:

By early 2017, many were waking each morning to wonder what disaster faced them, what sinister arrangements, what enclosures and exclusions, would be enacted by authoritarian leaders worldwide with smiling approval from their thrilled supporters. I couldn't quite put my finger on the uncanny upset pouring from most everyone with whom I interacted, in person and virtually. That summer, the sensibility manifested more clearly for me. Dread had gripped life. (vii)

We recognize this onslaught of disaster as a cyclical phenomenon of existence. Though the disaster's impact feels unique and "unprecedented" when we stand in its midst, the disaster exists as an ever-present state of being where the doing and undoing that disaster brings upon us throughout history, and on and on into the future, characterizes the nature of human existence. The events Goldberg lists in his preface, will, less than ten years later replicate themselves in new ways: in 2025, Donald Trump once again rose to power as President of the United States, the Russian war on Ukraine entered its third year, the decimation of life continued in Palestine,

Syria buckled under “humanitarian stress” (Human Rights Watch) after the forced deportation of refugees back to Syria from Turkey and Lebanon, and an earthquake hit and de-stabilized an already precarious situation. The humanitarian crisis in Sudan escalates by the day, the civil war resulting in the “world’s biggest displacement crisis, largest child displacement crisis, and worst hunger crisis” (“Sudan Humanitarian Crisis”). “Natural” disasters continue in newly escalated forms, yielding some of the worst seasons for wildfires and flooding. Wildfires in North America and Brazil, flooding in West and Central Africa, South Asia (Bangladesh, Nepal, and India), Europe, and beyond, haunt our consciousness as the capacity of our Earth to contain the exertion of human existence reaches—no, exceeds—its limit. In “The dread of dread” Goldberg writes how this constant influx of calamity creates an atmosphere where “Anxiety seems globally inescapable, a function of both space-time compression and the incontainability of causes and effects” (423). Here, the world conflates itself into one universal experience of anxiety even as we remain isolated from one another’s individual experiences of upheaval, and disconnected from the extreme experiences of those who live and die in war zones and environments of complete instability. The “incontainability of causes and effects” indicates how what happens here, under the auspices of our governments, directly causes upheaval in societies that are not our own. The collective impact of human consumption sends ripples worldwide, global temperatures rising, icecaps melting, polar bears drowning. The “space-time compression” reflects the ways in which “faraway” no longer feels that faraway, with global conflicts appearing in an unending scroll on personal devices that hook the addictive centers of our brains. This compression of time and space where a disaster on the other side of the world appears in seconds on a screen we hold in our hand—no intermediary or news conglomerate needed to access or distribute the images—creates a collective consciousness in real-time where we

experience, or more accurately, bear witness to the same event at the same time.

The central focus of this chapter, two works of fiction with personal disasters at their center, represent the dread-space as a transitory, connective pathway between the private, familial loss of a single family and the private struggles of individuals in households that make up a larger community. The impact of a single event, by its nature, reverberates outward and infiltrates the primal instinct in each of us to protect ourselves from the unseen dangers that threaten the steady onward beat of our lives. In “The dread of dread” Goldberg explains how dread functions as a shared space. He writes, “Like environmental and pandemic conditions, dread does not halt at national borders. Its emanation in one place prompts the proliferation of related anxieties in others” (425). The individual *is* the collective and the collective informs the individual. Sara Ahmed explores the idea of emotion as a shared state in “Affective Economies” where

emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments. Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective (119).

Ahmed goes on to discuss the function of emotions as a form of adherence where they “stick[...] figures together” to create “the very effect of a collective (coherence)” (119). In this chapter, I argue that the fictional representations of the individual disaster transform the private disaster into a collective experience through the social alchemy of the dread-space; this is the amorphous, unsteady, precarious psychic space of vigilance and terror that at once, indicates the social deficiencies that permit these disasters to upend our lives and reveals the bewildering illusion of

control we cling to but can never truly hold over our futures and our fates. As this chapter will show, the dread-space feels illusionary, slipping from the exactness of definitive terms, encompassing constantly shifting tensions between vigilance, tolerance, and acceptance of what is to come. Goldberg connects this murky state to the instability of the social fabric that constructs every part of our lives. In “The dread of dread” he writes, “Dread’s indecipherability is a function of its amorphousness. It is more like rickety scaffolding—a perilous patchworking platform helping to identify the crumbling state of the social but bending under its own weight...” (423). The importance of recognizing the dread-space then, arises in its function as an indicator of our psycho-social states and as a method of naming and knowing—*here* is the thing that threatens me and my world, *this* is the thing that will undo me if it arrives.

Goldberg’s assessment of dread as a response to social upheaval points to dread as an interpretative tool and an effect. He writes, “Dread consequently resonates more pressingly as the state of psychic response to the otherwise unnameable instabilities and intrusions of our shifting times” (423). The dread-space provides agency; as an interpretive tool it indicates how the social environment moves through us and how we can read and understand the upheaval that arises from this shifting social landscape. It allows us an avenue through the indescribable impact of disaster by allowing for specific points of interpretation.

I argue that these points of interpretation materialize in specific ways in *The Lost Sister* and in *Disappearing Earth*. This chapter considers the ways in which the fictional representation of disaster contends with dread as an energetic force that disrupts, destroys, and rebuilds. As realist representations of disastrous events, both texts exist at a point between dystopia and utopia; at this point in the spectrum—between complete destruction and complete perfection—dread functions as a mediator, disruptor, and a resting place where the idea of possibility

awakens. In *The Fiction of Dread: Dystopia, Monstrosity, and Apocalypse*, Robert Tally Jr draws a distinction between the fictional representations of dystopia and utopia, where in dystopian narratives dread functions as “the foundational emotion” (3): “...dread seems to be the inversion of hope, the animating spirit of the utopian impulse. Whereas utopian narratives may invoke hope, dystopian ones evoke dread. Yet dread turns out to be a form of hope, a dialectical instance of the unity of opposites, perhaps, in empowering the imagination and positing of alternative futures” (3). I consider this direct correlation between dread and hope and how it functions as a method of resistant optimism. “The unity of opposites” creates a point of expansion that energizes imagination to create a future that does not yet exist but could. I also consider how in fictional representations, dread functions as an aspect of disaster that links the individual to the collective by mirroring the fears of the reader and writer through fictional motifs and structural constraints. Though neither *The Lost Sister* nor *Disappearing Earth* fall into dystopian genres, their representations of the intimate disaster as an aspect of the collective consciousness echo, in deliberate and revealing ways, the ways that dread functions as a signal for social unrest. The dystopian narrative responds to the “accumulation of dreadful things” (Tally Jr. 3) that move constantly toward us at great speed, but also reflect a present reality. In explaining the role of the dystopian narrative, Tally Jr. writes, “It sometimes feels that the present is fundamentally dystopian, beset on all sides with monstrous forebodings and terrors, amounting to a veritable teratocene or “age of monsters” in which various predictions of the end of the world, of some sort of apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic condition, becomes almost utopian in their own right” (3). The dread represented in *The Lost Sister* and *Disappearing Earth* reflects a present psychological state of stasis where we, upon recognizing the disaster as it happens to others, hold a hand up against the replication of this disaster in our own lives. In addition, dread in these texts reflect the

unending state of vigilance against the constant approach of a multitude of disasters that threaten to swarm our lives. The dread-space functions individually and collectively through three distinct aspects of both novels: (i) through the disruption and dismantling of the private, domestic sphere, (ii) through the institutionalization of the domestic realm and (iii) through the physical body as a collective site of cathartic dread.

Dread and the Dismantled Domestic

In the previous chapter, I consider Didion's use of fire as a protective talisman against the infiltration of the unknown, the fire in the hearth the signifier of an enclosed, private space of physical and spiritual protection. The hearth cultivates the fire that provides lifegiving heat and sustenance; as the protective and sustaining central point in the home, it bars outside elements and keeps them at bay, beyond the threshold of the home. Didion's husband slumps over at the table as he and Didion sit down to eat dinner, the disaster opening like a sinkhole inside their home, the boundary between the terror of the outside and the ensconced quietude of the inside irrevocably breached. Of course, in these opening pages of Didion's memoir, the disaster already exists—Didion and her husband return to the safe enclave of home after visiting their daughter, Quintana, in hospital. Quintana, in a coma in the ICU of Beth Israel Medical Center, exists in the dread-space of Didion's psyche. They visit her each day, her medical condition a mystery, the vast and sickening unknown pricking like a quiet threat at the edges of this new state of normal – a seriously sick child, daily visits to the hospital, a return home each evening to assemble dinner and talk to one another as they always did, forming the new routine. The dread-space quickly becomes a space of regularity and the return home from the hospital each night, a return to some sense of normality, privacy, and safety; worry, unease, and the unknown exist in flashes and pinpricks in this new normal, ever-present, but familiar. Yet, the return home leaves the disaster,

at least partially, at the door: Quintana lies in an institutionalized space, the ICU, outside of the private realm.

The death of Didion's husband at the dinner table breaches the last sacred barrier between the private and public, between the known and the unknown. The perceived separation between the outside and the inside, between the public and the private collapses in the realm of disaster, and in the fictionalization of the disaster, this unsettling, blurred space of the in-between defines the domestic space. This quiet, intimate disaster swallows the murmurs of regular, daily conversation, quells the intimate rhythms of a household. The disaster transgresses the sacredness of the private space, the separation between the outside and the inside now compromised, the threshold violated. The disaster collapses the private and the domestic, the distinction between the public and private blurred. This dismantled domestic space transforms into the dread-space and it is here in the space of frozen unrest, that the vacant space of unknowing opens.

The translator's remarks in Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* provide an inter-textual analysis of what the "writing of the disaster" means. Yes, it refers to the "process whereby something called the disaster is written—communicated, attested to, or prophesied" (Smock ix). However, Smock emphasises the disaster as an active force that generates the writing of something from ruin where "It means the writing done by the disaster—by the disaster that ruins books and wrecks language" (Smock, ix). Further, she locates a point of simultaneous vacancy/being where "'The writing of the disaster' means the writing of the disaster—which liquidates writing—is, just as 'knowledge of the disaster' means knowledge *as* disaster, and 'the flight of thought' the loss of thought, which thinking is" (Smock ix). The writing done by the disaster erupts from a place of nothing—the site of decimation and destruction left by the

disaster—and yet the site of the disaster is not nothing, its vacancy, the absence of the life and existence that once was, emerges as the grounds for a regeneration. Here, in the minutes, hours, days, years after the disaster unfolds, whether experienced or witnessed, the dread-space breathes to life.

In both *The Lost Sister* and *Disappearing Earth*, the private realm appears already compromised, the novels presenting domestic spaces as vulnerable, easily transgressed by the horrors of a public existence and the power of destructive institutions. From the start, we arrive in domestic spaces where the boundary between the private and public appears non-existent or completely dismantled. In this vacancy and ruin, dread forms as a palpable and ever-present energy that makes possible the witnessing of the disaster through the creation of an intermediary space. Here, through the vehicle of the domestic space, the experience of loss (and the envisioning of that loss) emerges as a point of union. It is here that the intimate disaster functions as a connective force that replicates through households, mirrored by the narrative structure of both texts. Through the reading of the domestic space as a signifier of dread, the reader, as the second-hand witness to the disaster, unites the individual with the collective, the intense privacy of the intimate disaster metamorphosing into a collective experience of dread-envisioned loss. The narrative structure of both novels connects the individual, private disaster to the collective experience. Through shifting perspectives and timelines that work alongside parallel storylines, both narrative structures evoke movement—movement from one household to another, one point in time to another, from one internal family system to another, one community to another—and fade in and out of the central story and characters. In this way, the narrative constructs the experience of the collective, and illuminates the shadows within a private domestic world upended by a disaster that strikes one family. The impact of this singular disaster reverberates

across the boundaries of other households, the narrative distance wide and vast, then close and intimate, cohering the big to the small. In Gunraj's *The Lost Sister*, the title seemingly indicates the central loss: the narrator, twelve-year-old Alisha, blames herself for the disappearance of her sister, Diana, who at fifteen, pushes in secretive and surreptitious ways to break free from the close-knit, tightly wound, protective love and control of her Guyanese-Canadian parents. The first chapter unfolds in first-person perspective and follows Alisha on the night that Diana goes missing. We begin outdoors in a designated public space—the public library—and follow Alisha as she makes her way home late into the evening having purposefully evaded her sister. She hides in the library instead of meeting Diana and walking home together as their parents had repeatedly and sternly instructed that morning. Paragraph by paragraph, we move through city streets in Rexdale, passing cars, townhouses, and loitering teenagers. Arriving at her apartment building, we move through the lobby, up the elevator, down the hall, and in through the door of the family apartment. Alisha batters her way through the door and into the arms of her mother who weeps in relief. But then, the doorway remains empty. Diana does not appear. The apartment holds her mother, her father, her aunt, but no Diana. Where is her sister? This is the moment the disaster descends, when dread unfolds in a thick fog, engulfing every breath.

In Chapter Two of the novel, we begin again. The chapter opens in Nova Scotia in 1938. The perspective, now third person, sets a spotlight on Paula and her sister, Ave. An ominous figure appears in their doorway, an icy wind blasting through their home. In an instant, the figure scoops up the two small children and carries them out into a car. Their mother watches from the doorway, then shuts the door tight, the disaster—her children confiscated—shut out of her vision, the upending of her life swallowing her whole. The rest of the novel follows this alternating pattern, the central story focussing on the immediate tragedy of Diana, a Toronto teen

inexplicably gone missing, a Rexdale family imploding in their apartment, waiting for news, for a sign, for answers, for something. The parallel story of Paula and Ave involves an institutional abduction, two Black children taken from their home by the government and placed in the Nova Scotia Home for Coloured Children. They grow up as orphans in the system, yearning for a mother, a home, a place of domestic regularity and safety—essentials that may never come. Both stories enter the intimate sphere of the domestic while struggling against institutional entitlement, power, and the racial inequities of Canadian public services. Placed alongside each other, the stories speak to one another through the network of the collective.

Similarly, in *Disappearing Earth*, the narrative structure places the disaster of a singular family in correlation with the quiet eruptions dismantling the lives of individuals across an entire community in Kamchatka, Russia. Beginning in August, the narrative moves month by month for a year through the lives of 10 different families, tracing the vibrations of the inciting incident—the disappearance of the two sisters, Alyona and Sophia—like a seismograph. The news of the missing sisters hums into these strangers' lives and uncovers the dread-space, the shadowy realm hooked on the terrors of possibility. Chapter by chapter, we meet the death of two beloved husbands, the loss of a friendship, a life-threatening illness, the vacuous suppression of and threat to sexual identity, the slow death of a romantic relationship, and the miniscule implosions and unravellings of domestic life that methodically dismantle worlds while building new ones. Threaded through these domestic spaces, the case of another missing child from a year before, an Indigenous teen from Kamchatka deemed a runaway and a “whore” (Phillips 163), hardly searched for and never found, reveals underlying inequities and collective biases against the Indigenous populations in Kamchatka. The cyclic narrative structure, beginning in August and ending the following year in July, begins and ends with Alyona and Sophia, their abduction the

central throughline that brings all the disparate stories in the novel together, unearthing the multitude of miniature movements that accumulate and erupt, the disaster centering itself in the private spaces from which it emerges.

How does the experience of a missing teenager in Toronto connect to the massive institutional crime of mismanaged, racist social services? How does the brutalization and murder of a teenager in Toronto connect with the trauma of familial separation, abandonment, and institutional neglect of two young girls living more than half a century ago in Nova Scotia? The parallel stories that make up the narrative structure of *The Lost Sister* compel comparative observation and witnessing; it highlights the networked structure of the disaster, how the abduction and the unknowing that infiltrates Alisha's home echoes the vast loss and mass systemic separation between children and their families in Paula and Ave's life. Paula's entrance in Alisha's life 60 years after Paula and Ave's removal from their mother's home not only links their tragedies across time, it connects Alisha's story to a vast network of loss defined by the "missing" and the unknown. The hyperlinked narrative structure of *Disappearing Earth* further emphasizes this network of collective experience and witnessing of missing girls and women. Multiple storylines connect, overlap, and produce a collective and connective narrative map of dread and disaster. The dread-space—a place of waiting, observing, and coping—forms a connective force between these seemingly disparate stories where the reader-as-witness assumes the role of an interpretive intermediary. These disasters function as separate stories, each with their own social and institutional complexities, each functioning within their own disaster-orbits. The narrative structure of both novels—an alternation from one story to the next and back again, and the movement through multiple linked stories—contains the constellated, combustive, inconceivable disaster into a connective force that unites the individual with the collective.

The disaster constantly compromises the private realm, the threshold between the threat of the outside and the enclosed safety of the inside crossed, the domestic space untethered and a new space—the dread-space, where no distinct realm of safety exists—defining the domestic unit. The domestic spaces in both texts signify a disturbance, with the dread-space by the end of both novels producing an altered state—a poisoned domestic realm that perpetuates a state of stasis. However, the decimation and ruin of disaster eventually produces rebirth, and the imagined futures that arise from the domestic dread-space produce an alternate existence interlocked with the collective. The poisoned domestic realm dies under the pressure of the collective and then, an imagined future takes hold. Both *The Lost Sister* and *Disappearing Earth* begin in public spaces, the disasters that strike the lives of the sisters already afoot at the start of each narrative. Gunraj and Phillips place their focal characters outside the home, removed from domestic control, privacy, and safety, and inhabiting the terrifying and thrilling openness of public freedom. The texts open with a yearning for agency, an already dismantled domestic realm further stressed by the conflicted desires of the girls to at once inhabit their individual freedom while ultimately returning home to the regularity and routine of their lives. At the start of the central narratives of both novels—the stories of Alisha and her sister Diana, and that of Alyona and Sophia—the tension between public and private settings produces a “third space” that simulates the safety of the domestic but reveals the absence of the private sphere and the birth of the dread-space.

In *The Lost Sister*, the tension between public and private intensifies from the moment we meet twelve-year-old Alisha. Ensnared in the stacks of the public library, we learn that Alisha evades her older sister Diana by purposefully “wandering through the public library stacks and small streets and parks” of her Rexdale neighbourhood for hours. Her desire to get her older

sister “in trouble” (Gunraj, *The Lost Sister* 1) stems from her intense desire to exert control over her small sphere of agency—her sister Diana shifts further and further out of the family circle, her interest in jobs, boys, and life edging her beyond the threshold of their small family apartment. Diana, eager to attend a job fair at the local mall, reluctantly agrees to let Alisha accompany her—a condition set down by their parents to ensure their safety and to ensure that Diana remains tethered to their family unit. This contextual information, however, appears later in the novel, revealed through Alisha’s narration of events as she tries to retrace the moments that lead to her sister’s disappearance. At the start, the close-third person perspective follows Alisha as night descends and she makes her way back home, fear stitching its way up her body as her vision of a reprimanded Diana, admonished by their parents for losing sight of Alisha, transforms into a deeper fear: “I could never be sure my parents would choose me over her” (Gunraj, *The Lost Sister* 1). This internal vacancy, an insecurity fueled by sibling rivalry and the constant shifting emotional landscape of her family, propels Alisha through the streets, the urgency to get home suddenly amplified. She moves through a public sphere characterized by absence, domestic signifiers vacant, spaces of public congregation emptied:

My chest was tight; my heartbeat ricocheted to my throat. The sidewalks were emptied of bikes and strollers and pattering children, and even the few passing cars seemed quieter than usual. It was just me and my wheezing breath, my stinging legs, hurrying past buildings and townhouses that were dark rectangles, past bushes and trees that were billows of black. (Gunraj, *The Lost Sister* 2)

This hollowed-out urban landscape cultivates the dread-space; it rises up and encompasses Alisha, and as she speeds through the streets, her energies fixated on reaching home—a return to regularity, familiarity, and the known—the dark and the shadow of the unknown surround her.

Alisha's urgency pulsates, the dread expressed physically—tight chest, ricocheting heartbeat—her internal turmoil set against the vacancy of the city streets she moves through, now devoid of human energy, the movement of society removed. Even potential domestic abodes, where the heat of human interaction should exist—in buildings and townhouses—exist as voids, as “dark rectangles” vacated of human life. The inside and the outside morph into a shadowed existence characterized by vacancy. The dread that pulses in her body—the wheezing breath and the stinging legs—responds to the stimulus of a dismantled domestic state: Alisha grieves her place in her family, resents and rebels against its hierarchy, then panics when she envisions a reality where her actions disrupt and cause turmoil, but reinforce the existing domestic hierarchy where she, as she states in the opening line of the novel is “the cowardly sister...” Alisha yearns to shock her family system in her “first real attempt at defiance” (Gunraj, *The Lost Sister* 1) but the thought that her defiance will further entrench her in the existing family dynamic propels her into a state of panic.

Though Alisha does not yet know it, the disaster—the abduction and disappearance of her sister—has already taken place. The spatial construction of this scene, of Alisha's retreat from the anonymity of the public sphere to the enclosed safety of her home, reflects the transitory space she now inhabits—the space between the known and the unknown. As Alisha races home, the narrative moves through several “threshold spaces,” the transitory spaces that function as public-private spaces, or “third spaces” of congregation where the public and the private co-exist and the boundary between the two states blurs. Alisha moves into a complete state of transition where the physical space that surrounds her reflects the dread-space that opens inside her—and a few blocks away, inside her family home. The domestic dwellings, the buildings and townhouses she passes, exist as voids—“dark rectangles”—along her path, and the “Stoplights and orange-

yellow street lamps and empty backlit bus shelters glowed” (Gunraj, *The Lost Sister* 2). The dread space emerges from this domestic void, the public space encroaching inward. The “bus shelter,” a public space that creates a separation between the outside and the inside, offers a space of transitional privacy. Its glass-windowed walls a “material threshold” (Winton 43) that indicates the creation of an enclosure that straddles the line between public and private in similar ways that a car or glass-walled office do. Material thresholds—the ways in which the built environment and the materials used in their construction tell us about our social and psychological relationships within domestic interiors can also tell us the ways in which the public and private overlap and initiate new spaces, new relationships, and new imagined futures. In her chapter on domestic interiors, “Inhabited Space: Critical Theories and the Domestic Interior,” which appears in the *Handbook of Interior Architecture and Design*, Alexa Griffith Winton traces a shift in domestic structures through the newly available building materials in the early twentieth century. She writes,

New building materials and construction methods began to transform not only interiors but also the way they were inhabited, beginning with the extensive use of concrete and glass by the early twentieth century. Increasing use of large expanses of glass in domestic architecture blurred the conventional distinctions between inside and outside, potentially exposing much of what had been private life to the outside world at large. (43)

Glass used in domestic interiors blurs the boundary between inside and outside, “exposing” the private life to the outside world, however in this instance, streetlamps stream light into the “empty backlit bus shelter” and the warm glow of a protective fire that we expect from the inner hearth of a home appears inverted, now aglow in this public shelter. The “bus shelter” combines a vehicle of public movement—the bus—with refuge—the shelter—a separation and

demarcation from the movement of traffic creating a public protective lodging. In Alisha's movement towards home, this inversion emphasizes a transitional phase where the dread that now pulses through her body extinguishes the traditional marker of safety, privacy, and protection—the domestic realm—and lights up a new transitory space where the unknown ignites. This transitional phase continues as Alisha reaches the steps of her apartment.

As I turned onto my street and approached my apartment building, I passed some teenage boys. They were crouched at the curb, passing a smouldering blunt between them, their ball cap visors pulled low. The smells of spicy food that always wafted out of the apartment windows at dinnertime had already blown away from the block: the curry and jerk and cardamom and masala. (Gunraj, *The Lost Sister 2*)

The steps act as another material threshold between the insular domestic realm that lies within her family's apartment and the dangers of the outside world. But here, the steps mark a transitory space that lies in the in-between. The teenage boys gathered on the steps share a blunt, their caps pulled low over their heads, forming a third space for congregation. They populate a threshold, a transitional space that marks the point between the inside and outside. As Alisha moves up the steps, the warmth of the hearth—the smells of cooking from innumerable kitchens inside the building that would normally waft outside—have already dissipated. Here, as she moves up the steps, the light also dissipates—though the congregation of teenage boys serve as a form of community, they also signal the terrifying transition from boyhood to adulthood where a new unknown energy emerges; their faces remain anonymous, the glowing ember at the end of a blunt the only source of light, their presence not overtly ominous, but edging along the curve of a terrifying unknown. The warmth of dinner-time congregation now removed, the turbulence of male energy—outside energy—marks a new threshold for Alisha, who, though fixated on

returning home, returns to a home now wrecked by dread. Alisha's first act of defiance unveils a simmering energy *in her* that yearns to burst out of the confines of an existing familial dynamic, while at once terrified at the possibility of change.

As Alisha rushes inside her apartment building, she passes through a series of threshold spaces that reveal the terror of the liminal, transitional space. In Mary Douglas's foundational work on the significance of pollution and taboo across cultures, *Purity and Danger*, she characterizes the transitional space as dangerous. Referring to Arnold van Gennep's work on the role of rites of passage in maintaining social stability, she writes,

He saw society as a house with rooms and corridors in which passage from one to another is dangerous. Danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others. The danger is controlled by ritual which precisely separates him from his old status, segregates him for a time and then publicly declares his entry to his new status. (Douglas 2)

Alisha moves through "rooms and corridors" crossing one threshold after another—first the steps leading up to the building, then the lobby, the elevator, the hallway, and finally through the doorway to her apartment—each space a liminal threshold that signifies the dismantling of a protected domestic space. We follow Alisha as she moves further and further inward: "I jogged over the patch of grass and up the front steps of my building. I shoved through the broken outer door, jammed my key into the inner door, and dashed into the lobby to stab at the chipped elevator button. All I could picture was my mother and her queenly gesticulations. *Off with her head!*" (Gunraj, *The Lost Sister* 2). The spatial construction of Alisha's movement into the apartment building indicates incongruency and brokenness, every vehicle of access to a new

space, every room or corridor, a threshold that appears “broken,” “jammed,” or “chipped.”

Alisha’s movements increase in urgency, her energy direct, forthright, and insistent. The thresholds appear in succession, and Alisha, fueled by direct, forthright, insistent, and combustive energy, battles through them—shoving, dashing, bounding, and finally upon reaching her apartment, “battering the door like I was the leader of a police raid” (2). Her urgency, rooted in a deep-seated desire to simply return home, the impact of her first act of defiance unknown and therefore feared, the return home signifying a return to what once was, as if through the act of return, Alisha can undo what she does not know may come.

Alisha emerges into an apartment corridor that reveals a blurred public-private threshold where light, spilling out of her apartment door reveals the transgression of a final boundary between the outside world and the protective interior of the private home:

I reached the twenty-third floor and bounded down the brown-carpeted hallway. Light leaked out of the slit between our apartment door and its frame. My mother never left it cracked open like that and would get upset when me and my sister forgot to close the door ourselves. *You want these people to stroll in here?* She would say, flicking a hand to implicate the whole neighbourhood, as if everyone wanted to step on our parquet floors and admire our furniture and our squat television set. (2)

The dread-space—the liminal space of fear, guardedness, and expectation of incoming danger—already exists in Alisha’s domestic unit. Fear of the unspeakable, unthinkable, and the unknown governs the way Alisha and Diana’s parents navigate the caretaking of their daughters. Their condition for Diana to attend the job fair required Diana to take along Alisha, for their domestic unit to remain intact as the girls ventured unattended outside the safety of their family home. The light that emanates from inside their home—the light, we can imagine, that glows symbolically

from the hearth of the home—“leaked out of the slit between our apartment door and its frame,” the threshold the point of transition, the “dangerous” territory where Alisha must pass from one state—that of girlhood and innocence—to another—that of young womanhood and knowing—and through which her family will also enter a new, state where the life they knew, the intact family unit, safe and enclosed, will implode, their roles collapsed, their home an incubator for grief and loss, the dread amplified, intensified, and infectious. The matriarch of the household normally ensures the domestic realm remains protected; their mother “never left it [the door] cracked open like that.” The daughters serve as the avenue through which the door constantly opens and closes, and ultimately remains open, the threshold crossed again and again, their mother “upset when ...[Alisha and her] sister forgot to close the door.” The absence of the women of the household—a missing daughter, a grief-stricken mother, and a guilt-ridden daughter—creates a dismantled domestic state where dread disrupts and deadens vitality and life and creates a new environment characterized by repetitive, cyclical patterns of coping.

Alisha’s entrance into the family home—“battering the door like I was the leader of a police raid” (2)—brings with it the volatility of the public sphere; Alisha batters through the final threshold and brings with her the brief relief of familiarity and return, but also further ignites the vast, all-encompassing weight of the unknown. When Alisha enters, the private, enclosed safety of her domestic world undoes itself, the entrance of an institutional entity—“the leader of a police raid” to “right” the upended world of the domestic now necessary; his two daughters uncharacteristically late, her father has called the police, has driven up and down the streets searching while her mother waits at home for their return. The outside world pours into the protected realm: “The stove’s blue digits read 10:23 P.M. and the night beyond the living room window was lit up by the high-rises and the headlights and the street lamps that stretched into the

distance” (Gunraj, *The Lost Sister* 3). Through the play of light in the spatial construction of Alisha’s world, the division between the private and the public blurs, the outside world pouring in. In this dismantled domestic space, dread ignites and flourishes. Embraced by her parents and pulled into her mother’s arms, Alisha’s world rights itself, her fragmented domestic unit realigned, her parents’ questions about Diana dissolving in this temporary sphere of comfort where the old world remains intact. At this pivotal moment between the known and the unknown, dread emerges:

Where’s your sister?

I was so astonished by my parents’ reactions, so pleased at their concern for me, that I hardly heard their question.

My father stepped back to look out of the apartment doorway. “Why isn’t she with you?”

“Where did Diana go?” my mother asked, gripping me at my shoulders. Relief had hardly had the opportunity to set in before dread was already mounting, threatening to crash over them again. (3)

Alisha’s arrival provides temporary relief that morphs into dread; Diana does not arrive home along with Alisha. Diana—where she is, who she’s with, and if she’s safe—remains unknown. That Alisha’s father checks the doorway, stepping into the threshold to look for Diana, marks the threshold as the place of danger—this is where her absence re-ignites his alarm and where dread enters again.

The household objects in a domestic space provide the material with which we can track the development of the dread-space. In “Inhabited Space: Critical Theories and the Domestic Interior” Winton considers how the study of objects in domestic spaces is “a means of

apprehending value systems and modes of living” (45) and an “essential tool in decoding wider social and cultural practices” (45). She places significance on the everyday domestic object as an interpretive tool where, as Daniel Roche says in *The History of Everyday Things* “furniture reveals to us a state of society through its significance, giving material form to needs and referring to the silent language of symbols” (174). The objects in Alisha’s home at the precise moment she crosses the threshold and enters her domestic space provide a “material form” that expresses the “silent language” of dread. The threshold between the outside and inside now crossed, Alisha enters a liminal space of vulnerable volatility. In a pre-disaster memory, Alisha reflects on her mother’s vigilance against outsiders crossing the threshold of their home. Her mother never leaves the door “cracked open” and guards against these outsiders from transgressing into their home: “*You want these people to stroll in here?*” Alisha dismisses her mother’s concern: “as if everyone wanted to step on our parquet floors and admire our furniture and our squat television set” (Gunraj, *The Lost Sister* 2). Here, in the protected privacy of home, the household items remain connected to their owners as belongings over which the family hold ownership; the items themselves connect to the idea of what makes a home. Those parquet floors, that television set, that couch—these items, selected and procured by the family, create physical spaces of gathering. The living room and the kitchen function as the hearth of the home, and regardless of whether these items hold monetary value, they form an inner sanctum that requires protection from outside forces—Alisha’s mother guards the threshold as Didion does: “Fires said we were home, we had drawn the circle, we were safe through the night” (Didion 10). The ordinariness of the items paired with their mother’s heightened vigilance inspires an amused dismissal from Alisha, however, once infiltrated, this protected living space transforms to a dread-space. Characterized by an intense mix of vigilance, fear, and hope, the parquet floors,

furniture, and squat television set transform from static household items to a “portal” through which the family fixates their future projections: is Diana okay? What if she’s hurt? What if she’s lost? She’ll come through that door. Please, let her come through that door. This collision of fear and longing defines the dread-space; this is where fearful uncertainty and desperate hope interlock and spin into an endless cycle of distress. Once Alisha and her parents realize that Diana’s whereabouts remain unknown—she has not returned to the safety of home—home becomes a place permeated by uncertainty and defined by dread. The short-lived relief of Alisha’s return collapses and the dread-space re-opens swallowing the private living space whole. From this space, Alisha observes the guarding of the threshold and the permutation of her family home into the dread-space: “We stayed up all night in the living room in front of a black television screen, staring at the half-open apartment door and studying its locks and chains and dents. We prayed to it, hating and loving it. Hating because it was closed when we longed for it to open with her arrival; loving it because it was the only portal through which that arrival could come” (Gunraj, *The Lost Sister* 5). With the threshold’s protective barrier compromised, the apartment door transforms into a portal through which the family directly confronts the unknown. Through it, they imagine an outcome they hope for and will embrace—Diana returning home. They wait in the living room, now a place of suspended existence, fixated on the image of Diana returned, safe, intact, and whole; but the blank wall of dread provides a canvas upon which futured images now play. The domestic space exists in stasis, in waiting, and in fervent imaginings of what may or may not come. The disaster—their daughter did not come home—attaches itself to a litany of unknown and unsaid outcomes that fight for space—some rationalizations, some horrific: their daughter delayed, their daughter hurt, their daughter raped, their daughter dead. The half-open apartment door, the unlocked locks, the chains unlatched, all

signify a perpetual state of transition, the demarcation between the outside and the inside now indistinct, the family's psychic space drowned by the limitless possibilities of the unknown. The definitive impact of this disaster (Diana's eventual murder) remain unrealized and unknown at this point in narrative time; the dread-space exists within a time warp where the onset of the disaster hits the centre of the home, and slowly settles, unwinds. The dread-space, the place where we lie in wait for the next thing that will undo us, occurs after the onset of the disaster, the point at which things have irrevocably changed. The markers of the onset of disaster—that there is no turning back, that the world that once was, has disappeared—exist for the reader as witness, but not *yet* for Alisha's parents, who exist in a state of dread that incubates the hope that there can and will be a return to what once was. They sit in expectation of the worst but hope fervently for a return to their state of normal, their daughters within the protective realm of the home, the outside world held at bay. Alisha, however, holds information that she does not reveal to her parents and reveals only partially to the reader: "*Why did I talk to that man at the mall? Why did I lead him to Diana?*" (Gunraj, *The Lost Sister* 4). This narrative split places her as an intermediary between the reader and the disaster, seemingly between the disaster and her sister, and between the disaster and her parents. Alisha manipulates the narrative—the narrative of events that she relays to her parents as well as the narrative that the reader arrives at as a second-hand witness—to retain the safety of the domestic world she wants to inhabit, and thus, tries to create. Before the family settles in front of the half-open apartment door, their television screen black, their eyes fixated on the entryway through which they hope Diana will appear, Alisha's mother urges Alisha to tell them everything that had happened, each detail a morsel, a clue, to tracing how this transgression—a daughter lost—could happen.

My mother nodded and nodded at me like a dipping bird toy, encouraging me to recall every detail.

Before long, my truths had been determined and replicated and we were all choking on them. I was a good girl obeying Mommy and Daddy. I had stood waiting and watching in the mall parking lot for my big sister's return, dutifully searching for her when she didn't come back out. Finally I had had no choice but to find my own way home in the dark without her. (Gunraj, *The Lost Sister* 5)

Alisha's story, fragmented, and earnest, trips out of her mouth in a succession of lies that create a fragile mirage of the domestic world that she not only wants to keep intact, but a world that doesn't exist in the first place. Alisha "obeying Mommy and Daddy" and making her way "home in the dark without her [Diana]" creates a series of made-up events where Alisha protects the hearth, stays within the protected domestic realm, and never crosses the threshold. In this altered version of events, Alisha never strays, never defies, never rebels. She confronts the dread-space with an alternate reality that temporarily holds her world intact; she did not stray, so she will be safe. However, Alisha conceals the truth of her involvement in her sister's disappearance from her parents while covertly lifting the curtain with slivers of admission that allow for a more intimate level of witnessing by the reader. As their fragile domestic unit collapses under the weight of dread, Alisha turns inward providing clear-cut admissions that center her role in upending the domestic unity that previously defined her family: loving, protective parents, dutiful, ambitious daughters:

I sipped water from my glass and realized that the lump in my throat had sprouted burrs. I knew my parents weren't the ones to blame. It was me. I had willed Diana away, because she was too talented and ambitious about everything, school and

sports and speeches. She didn't need me for anything and I was jealous and angry at her for it. Now that I had made her disappear, I ached for her.

I hope she dies, I had said to myself the last time I saw her. (Gunraj, *The Lost Sister* 23)

This self-blame, a moment of clarity and self-reproach, reveals an essential function of the dread-space—a place of phantom control where ownership over the disaster awards us with a sense of control over the uncontrollable. Here, Alisha, struggles with her place in the family and connects her jealousy and defiance to the outcome of the disaster—"I had made her disappear." This lends a sense of false ownership and control over a realm where Alisha exerts no control. This exercise in control both soothes and disrupts: if our actions can lead to disaster, then they can also prevent the disaster. But the dread-space approaches a pained existential question—does the disaster come no matter what we do? Does our action/inaction reach far up into the existential plane to disrupt the onslaught of an unnameable force?

Collective or individual, we cannot stop the tsunami—no human effort will stop the shift of tectonic plates deep in the ocean. We cannot stop the wreckage of a heart attack; the damage that renders the muscle tissue dead cannot be reversed. We cannot undo centuries of patriarchal and misogynist psychological disruption that enables a man to rape and murder a woman. No great act on our part will repel the disaster—like so many films since the turn of the millennium depict, nothing we do will stop the comet/planet/asteroid from hurtling through space and striking our planet and existence into smithereens. This absolution from control can burn into a catatonic melancholia² where we oscillate between deadened acceptance of the impending end

² As in Lars von Trier's 2011 film *Melancholia* where two sisters face the imminent destruction of the planet in two different ways: one sister, Claire, burns with the intense anxiety of hope that the planet will miss Earth by a few critical degrees, while the other sister, Justine, succumbs to an existing depression that deepens after she ends her marriage. Justine accepts and welcomes the ultimate end, while Claire circles it in fear, then sheer panic. These two

and a desire for the end to arrive because without agency and control, where does meaning or purpose exist? However, in the field of disaster management, the “natural disaster”³ remains a contested term; though we cannot stop the tsunami, our responsibility and control lies in tsunami preparedness and mitigation of the disaster before it arrives and once it does crash onto our shores.⁴ In the face of colossal disaster, our realm of control seems limited, but the management of disasters, and indeed, sometimes the prevention of disasters from occurring in the first place, lies within the realm of collective control. Further, the impact of individual control remains limited, but not non-existent: the heart attack may come, but we can slow its progress; the man intent on hurting a woman may do so, but revoking his power will impede his path. This tension between control and submission characterizes the dreadfulness of the dread-space: the illusion of control taunts, while igniting hope—I can stop this from ever happening again.

The dread-space, constructed in the dismantled domestic, cultivates a tension between the intense desire to hold tight to the previously intact world and the creeping horror of facing a new, unwieldy world filled with cataclysmic unknowns. Alisha’s admission to herself and to the reader highlights the transitional point between these two worlds; she struggles with her role as an individual within a collective unit that morphs as others in this unit change and grow. Her last moments with Diana occur late in the evening in the mall parking lot, her rage at her sister’s

opposing reactions to imminent disaster create an excellent model of the dread-space, which consists of a taut relationship between control and surrender.

³ The term natural disaster can absolve humans from action with the false belief that the colossal disaster lies beyond our control, when human action/inaction—knowingly establishing buildings and communities in environmentally fragile areas, failing to establish proper evacuation routes or conduct proper disaster planning, and ultimately, ignoring the negative effects of human action that impact the environment—directly cause and lead to long-term natural disasters. The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) details how “human action such as deforestation, urbanization and inadequate infrastructure worsen the impacts of events like floods, earthquakes and storms” (“5 Reasons Why Disasters Are Not Natural”) and critically consider human action as central to the impact and outcome of disasters.

⁴ The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) recommends “improving evacuation routes, building tsunami evacuation structures, limiting new development in tsunami hazard zones, designing, siting, and building structures to minimize tsunami damage” as important interventions to mitigate the impact of tsunamis. (*Tsunami Preparedness and Mitigation: Communities*).

emergence into womanhood—a secret diary, a possible secret boyfriend, a desire to leave the tight circle of family—felt by Alisha as a betrayal. How dare her sister disrupt the delicate balance of their family? How dare she introduce a world of unknowns—secrets, boys, a life beyond this one, beyond what they know? In these final moments with her sister, Alisha threatens to upend the mirage of their domestic unity and reveal Diana’s secrets to their parents, thereby dismantling the family unit as they know it—doting parents and dutiful daughters now set against a world of unknown. In this way, Alisha inhabits the dread-space—simultaneously mourning the disruption of her known world, while following the impulse to directly upend it. As Alisha retreats, she witnesses a man approach Diana:

I slowed, stopped, and turned around. My sister was in the same spot, her eyes cast to her shoes. The basketball game beside her was flashing and screeching again. She didn’t notice the person walking toward her from the other direction, the man with the sunburned nose who I had met at the mall, the loose front of his T-shirt undulating like a flag...

A vacuum opened in my brain and an idea swelled in. *Who cares about that guy?* I thought. *I never want to see my sister again. I hope she dies.*

I always tried to make my parents happy, always tried to impress my sister and make her care for me. What if I gave up and walked away? (Gunraj, *The Lost Sister* 126).

Here, Diana apprehends the upending of her carefully preserved emergence from a protected life; Alisha threatens to shatter the mirage under which they both function—dutiful, obedient daughters, one a future doctor, the other a future lawyer—and collapse the fragile vision that keeps their family intact. Diana fears this revelation because it puts her agency and her “I” under direct threat. Diana needs her secret ambitions to remain secrets so she can preserve, protect, and

give them life. Her individuation from the family functions as a means for her survival. Alisha's threat translates into an undoing; for Diana, the disaster has already arrived. She does not chase after Alisha; she stays behind, her world already undone. Alisha, who yearns for her sister to stop her, to stop the undoing, to bring her back into the fold of what they already know, recognizes that the loss has already occurred. She rushes towards it—gives up the old world she so desperately clings to—and walks towards a threshold that leads to a blurred vision, to a future she does not yet know.

Later, at the police station, now under institutional authority, Alisha flounders in the dread-space, holding tight to a vision of her family life that she can never return to again. As the disaster continues to unfold, Diana's disappearance still a mystery, the tangibility of the loss still undefined—no sure sequence of events, no body, no death, no closure—Alisha inhabits the dread-space and steps into the role of protector of the private realm; she bars the intrusion of the institution, her desire to keep her old world intact interlocks with the desire to break through into a new world. When the police officer questions Alisha in private, he prods at the illusion of familial unity. He asks Alisha if she has ever lied to her parents. Alisha responds from a blurred, transitional space and offers an answer that reflects a sense of insecure ambiguity: “I don't know” (Gunraj, *The Lost Sister* 44). The officer continues, pulling apart the threads of their family structure, the closed, private realm of their familial interactions pried apart with assumptions and interrogative inquiry. He says,

“And your sister? Did she [lie]? Not because she's bad. Maybe she wanted that summer job and they weren't happy. They're not permissive, right? It's part of your culture for girls to do what they're told.”

“No.” This man and the other police officers didn't know my sister or my family.

That was why I had hidden Diana's diary before the police clomped into our apartment to look through her bedroom and canvas the building and neighbourhood" (44).

Alisha draws a curtain between the sacred private realm—a space she continues to try to preserve and protect even as it crumbles beneath her feet—and the public realm of authority rooted in the institution. As Alisha inhabits the dread-space, her focus remains on guarding the threshold from the intrusion of the institution, which, if permitted to intrude, threatens to shatter the illusion of Alisha's private world. The institution "clomped into our apartment" crossing the threshold of the home. It infiltrates the bedroom, the most private, safe, and sacred space in the home, to find signs of discontent that may direct officials to Diana's whereabouts. In the dread-space, Alisha fears the undoing of the world she knows, and her efforts fixate on protection and preservation rather than confrontation of the dangerous unknown.

Dread and the Institutionalized Domestic

In the realm of disaster, the intersection of the domestic and the institutional points to a connection between the individual and the collective; the institution—government agencies, hospitals, police, media representatives—when integrated effectively into communities, create a symbiotic relationship of protection, preservation, disaster response, and communal care. However, in the context of the intimate disaster, the dismantled domestic space yields a more conflicted relationship with the institution. In *The Lost Sister* and *Disappearing Earth*, the institution disrupts the (already dismantled) private domestic realm, while at once uniting individuals into a collective experience of dread. In addition, the dread-space reveals the stark contrast of institutional response to missing persons in racialized versus white communities and the ways in which an institution eradicates and replaces the dismantled domestic realm to produce a new space where the "I" of the individual erodes and exists only in a state of perpetual

transition.

In *The Lost Sister*, chapters alternate between Alisha and the story of Paula and Ave, two sisters removed from their home in 1938, and placed in the Nova Scotia School for Coloured children under a governmental directive. Through this alternating narrative structure, two seemingly disconnected stories of familial disaster unite across time and vastly different sociological conditions. In both cases, the “tsunami”—a missing daughter and two sisters removed from their home by government officials—crashes into the cocooned safety of the family home. Alisha observes the upending of her family’s peace, her father desperate and restless to put everything aright “could no longer stand waiting for the police to come. He left the apartment with his car keys in his hand to search the streets again” (Gunraj, *The Lost Sister* 6). While her father escapes the disrupted safety of the domestic space, Alisha’s mother remains at home, guarding the remains of her family—her daughter Alisha: “My mother sat against a cushion and brushed her clammy hand over my hair as I lay my head on her lap. I battled sleep and the sickening shame of what I had done” (6). In the final section of the chapter, the narrative time shifts to a time gone by: “Six years back, on Christmas Day of 1992, I was seven years old” (8). The shift in narrative time signifies a movement from a transgressed domestic realm—the threshold to the private realm now permeable—into memories of familial unity, of a domestic realm intact. With Alisha’s domestic realm upended by the onset of a disaster she does not yet fully comprehend, the narrative structure works as a method of preservation of what once was, while the private realm sinks into a shadowed, transitional space.

From this place of retrospective preservation, we enter Chapter Two and the narrative shifts into the dismantled domestic sphere of Paula and Ave. This point of transition intersects two worlds separated by time, but united through the collective experience of a distinct loss—

sudden separation from a sister that causes the implosion of the private sphere and the disappearance of the home as a domestic space of familiarity, safety, and the known. For Paula and Ave, the intrusion of the institution into the private realm eradicates the dismantled domestic realm and creates an institutionalized “domestic” space—a “poorhouse” and later, The Nova Scotia Home for Coloured Children. The dread-space surfaces at this intersection of the domestic and the institution where the sacred private realm morphs into a falsified domestic environment that produces a state of perpetual waiting, an existence in a permanent transitional realm that ultimately destroys the individual.

In the dismantled domestic space, domestic imagery depicts the disaster’s transgression of the intimate, private realm. This imagery—nightgowns, lights, and doorways—generates the institutionalized domestic, a transitional realm defined by the integration of public and private worlds; this conflated, transitory realm cultivates a fixed state of dread. In this way, the dread-space—a threshold space—creates a collective experience of loss (in this case, poor, orphaned, and stolen children separated from their families) while isolating the individual child in a state of simultaneous fear and hope—she hopes to be reunited with her parent, but fears that she will be left abandoned—that engulfs familiarity with the horror of new thresholds. In particular, the nightgown (this intimate piece of clothing worn during our most vulnerable state—asleep at night) and the use of household light signifies the permeable threshold of the dismantled domestic. When we meet Paula and Ave (aged seven and two), they form their own alternate domestic duo, already absent of their mother. In these opening lines of their story, Paula stands alone in the doorway of her home, the house darkened, her mother and sister still seemingly asleep:

When she was seven Paula heard noise and thought her mother was making them. She

got out of bed and felt about in the dark. She reached the front door of the house and opened it. The looming shape of a man in a long black coat stood in front of her. A car rumbled out on the road behind him—a hunk of black metal with headlights that looked like a pair of unblinking eyes. The air was icy. She shivered as the wind shot under her collar and down her nightgown. (Gunraj, *The Lost Sister* 13)

From the start, Paula inhabits a permeable and unprotected domestic space vulnerable to the outside world. She rises in the night as protector of the home, her mother absent. Paula opens the front door—the barrier between the private world and the unknown, feared world of the outside—her instinct to investigate driving her to stand at the threshold of the unknown life that awaits her. The reader follows Paula’s gaze, which, fixated on the objects that pose threats to the quiet of her private, indoor world, fill the narrative space with signifiers of danger and threat: public, institutional power. These objects do not belong—the looming man in a long black coat, a car with headlights like unblinking eyes—situate themselves as observers of Paula and Ave’s domestic life, their presence an institutional interrogation into the interior dynamics of their home. Their presence crosses Paula’s personal threshold, and she shifts from an observational stance, to one of protective fear. The nightgown, the last protective barrier between Paula and the outside world, signals the domestic space as sacred and safe. The arrival of the looming man in a long black coat alerts Paula to the arrival of the unwanted thing—the upending of her domestic world. When the “wind shot under her collar and down her nightgown” the public sphere trespassed into the intimate space of the private sphere; the outside crashes inside, the institution commits a bodily transgression, and the dread-space blooms. Paula experiences an institutional abduction, the narrative perspective emphasising domestic imagery and placing the reader as a second-hand witness to the disaster. As Paula stands in her doorway looking out, she stands at a

threshold, a transitional realm where she exists in a split between two worlds: the known and the unknown. On one side of the threshold lies the world with which she's familiar—the domestic space where she mothers her younger sister, her mother present, but functioning like an apparition. On the other side of the threshold stands the intrusive “white man” and his world of unknown terror: “Paula feared the man. White people never came by for good reasons. She felt tugs at the hem of her nightgown. Ave stood next to her in cloth diaper and bare chest. She had wobbled out of the bedroom behind Paula. She was two years old and following her big sister as she always did” (Gunraj, *The Lost Sister* 13). Ave, bare-chested and only in a diaper, clings to Paula's nightgown. The nightgown tethers the two sisters together in an alternate domestic world where Paula serves as protector and guide. In the passage that follows, Paula's mother emerges from the darkened depths of the home, dressed in her nightgown, but powerless against the intrusion of an institutional power that takes her children from her home:

Paula heard steps and turned to see her mother coming toward her in her nightdress. Her brow was knitted in shadow as there were no lights, nothing beyond a leaking moon.

Paula didn't know why her mother had stopped a few paces behind her and Ave, why she wasn't crouching down to pull them in with her slender, sturdy arms.

“No,” her mother said with a cracked voice, “please.”

“I have to,” the man answered.

Foop. Paula's bare feet left the floor as the man picked her and Ave up, one in each arm. He turned and carried them toward the car with its smoking tailpipe. (14)

Here, the mother, dressed in her nightgown, descends into shadow and confusion; moonlight from the vast outside world leaks into the quiet shadow of their home, no light source glowing from inside. A man stands in their doorway with the authority and intention to remove the

children from their home. Her daughters stand at the threshold, their gaze upon her, their yearning pinned to their knowledge of their mother as their home. Their mother protests these outside powers, but her voice remains powerless, and she remains frozen. She does not enclose Paula and Ave into her arms; already, she exists as a separate entity, no longer united with her daughters as a domestic unit. While Ave tugs at Paula's nightgown, her sense of safety attached to the garment and to her sister, Paula's gaze searches for belonging in her mother. At this integral moment, dread awakens and Paula and Ave experience a complete loss of independence and agency: the public official scoops Paula and Ave up and carries them over the threshold of their home into the public realm.

Paula and Ave enter the transitional realm of the dread-space; torn from every aspect of their private, domestic world, they must navigate the institutional space as their new domestic realm. All signifiers of the safety of a private world—the intimacy and familiarity of their own clothes, the safety of a home closed to the furor of the public world, the life-giving warmth and light of a fire lit in a hearth—transform into symbols of a falsified domestic world where Paula must exist in a perpetual state of not-knowing. As the disaster unearths them from their home, Paula looks back in desperate yearning; her home and her life exist already in the past, irretrievable and beyond reach. She witnesses the terror of the threshold as it claims her mother—"Her mother skidded forward to clutch at the doorframe, as if the wind might tear through and blow her away. Paula tried to make out her mother's face, the most beautiful in the world, with her chestnut skin and pepper-black eyes. But her features were a blur" (Gunraj, *The Lost Sister* 14). Here, the doorway separates the old world from the new, divides Paula and Ave from their mother, and demarcates the public from the private. The next time Paula looks up, "she felt too far from solid ground in the man's grip, too small and weak," and now in the

custody of two men who joke that their “‘Mama should’ve kept her legs together’” Paula “turned to look for her mother’s reaction to their laughter. The door of the house was closed” (14). Their old world blurs from view and their domestic realm, the sanctity of private life, shuts them out. Removed from their home, the girls find themselves in a transitional institution, a “poorhouse” that will house them until they are taken to “‘...where they take other negro children’” (18). The public and private collide in this “large brick house” (15) that mimics the domestic atmosphere of the private home. This intrusion of the institution into the culture of domesticity creates arresting, assaulting chaos where markers of a private, individual life quickly erode. The first act of erosion occurs moments after Paula and Ave enter the house and “A white woman in a white dress took them inside and drew musty cotton shifts that were too big over their heads” (15). These “musty cotton shifts” replicate and replace the personal nightgown and transform it into a uniform that identifies them as temporary tenants of the institution. Here “strange people paced the room and hallway, cursing each other up and down, scuffing and scratching at the walls” (16). The walls do not serve as protective barriers and instead facilitate the horror of the threat to permeate and make itself known. In this communal space, light emanates as a threatening force where “each lamp glowed a violent yellow” (17) and the shifts in light and shadow project a greyed-out in-between world devoid of a central, protective hearth. Paula observes how the “light changed in the window and crossed the room, going from sharp to hazy and then slinking away entirely...[p]ockets of shadows emerged as the night crept in” (16). In this in-between world of shadow and light, Paula yearns for a safe haven, an escape from the cavernous vulnerability of not knowing what is to come, yet still holding tight to the life that once was. Paula still hopes for her mother to retrieve her and Ave, but in this transitional space of public-private tumult, she creates a new domestic state in her mind; first, she fixates on a spider, “black

and immobile as a pebble, suspended on a web” (16–17), its stillness a form of steadiness and stability. She imagines an alternate domestic haven where “By morning, she hoped she and Ave would wake to find themselves under a dome of webbing, strung thick as a basket and stiff as straw” (17). Paula’s vision of a protective web, solid, thick, non-diaphanous, forms a protective mental image that stills the raucous movement of her life as the disaster continues to unfold.

Each of these domestic images—nightgowns, lights, and doorways—interconnect with the concept of the threshold as a terrifying space of transition that encapsulates the experience of dread. As the disaster upends Paula and Ave’s life these domestic objects signify the transition from the protected, private realm of the domestic to the falsified domestic created by institutional powers. These points of transition echo key moments in the main narrative where Alisha moves through the dread-space. The mirrored structure of the narrative creates a collective experience of dread that situates the disaster as a destructive, generative, and connective force.

Collective Dread, Domesticity, and the Body as Catharsis

This collective experience of dread works similarly in Julia Phillips’ novel *Disappearing Earth*, where the narrative structure threads the abduction of two sisters, Alyona and Sophia, aged 11 and 8, through ten chapters of hyperlinked stories that represent the intimate lives of families living in the Kamchatka Peninsula in Russia. Chapter by chapter, by entering the intimate domestic lives of individual families, the narrative reveals the story of a missing Indigenous girl, Lilia, from the Even community in Eso. While the thrust of the main narrative traces the development of Alyona and Sophia’s case, the story of Lilia moves like an undercurrent, emerging in discordant pieces interspersed with the most intimate, stark details of people’s private lives. In the same way that Alisha and Diana’s story intersperses with that of Paula and Ave, the hyperlinked structure of *Disappearing Earth* morphs the isolated, individual

disaster of one family and connects it to the institutional injustice and loss experienced by another family, also missing a daughter, but separated by culture, social inequity, and lack of communal concern. The hyperlinked structure creates the experience of collective dread; at the start of every chapter, it places the reader in the dismantled domestic setting of a new character, building an interconnected web of collective instability.

The isolated and individual disaster that collapses the life of one family reverberates through an entire community. In the opening chapter, “August,” the horror unfolds second by second, in close third-person perspective, following the two sisters as they are lured, trapped, and then abducted. The perspective stays with Alyona as she watches over her younger sister Sophia: the abductor lures the girls into his car with the promise of a ride home, redirects the vehicle towards a different location, and then the girls disappear. At the close of the first chapter, the narrative places the girls in a narrative ether where the reader does not reconnect with them until we reach the final chapter of the novel. The narrative form reflects the loss; Alyona’s perspective disappears, and we plunge into the private lives of a network of families in Kamchatka. The girls, now peripheral figures in the plotlines of other lives, instigate a collective experience of dread. Now, the isolated disaster of one family echoes in the form of dread-spaces blooming in the private, domestic spaces of other lives: every family moves through an amplified instability, as if holding their breaths for the next thing to come. How could this happen? Who would take these girls? Who left them alone, without care? How could something this terrible happen to *our* girls, in *our* community? What terrible darkness exists amongst us? Girls stolen—just like that? Impossible. But it happened to them. If something terrible like this could happen to them, something terrible could happen to us.

The cultivation of the dread-space in *Disappearing Earth* begins with the consideration

of the novel through a paratextual lens. The “reading instructions” that surround the actual text of the novel itself require that we consider the novel as an object of mediation that invites the reader as a second-hand witness to the disaster. Considering the book as an object of consumption where there is an “interplay between reading and handling” (Price qtd. in Perloff-Giles) engages the reader in a personal relationship with the text. The cover of the first edition of the novel compels the reader to enter the dread-space before ever interacting with the narrative itself. With multiple versions of the cover, each iteration serves as mediating force that guides the reader into a realm of expectation, curiosity, wariness, and eventually, dread. In the first edition cover, we enter the landscape of the uncanny—the cover design intimates that something dangerous, something beyond the human realm sits squarely in our hands. It communicates that something terrible is afoot.

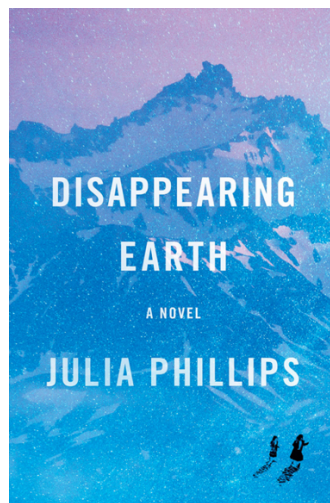


Figure 1. Hardcover art for *Disappearing Earth*, Knopf 2019.

The original, hardcover edition released by Knopf in 2019 (Figure 1) features a watercolour wash of an icy, mountainous landscape that scrapes across the cover, overwhelming the entirety of the page. The silhouettes of two tiny figures move across the icy landscape, sharp cuts of ink smear into fingerprints and tiptoe along the bottom right corner of the cover: they urge us to enter

the narrative, the larger figure pointing ahead, leaning forward, leading the way. This quiet urging into an unsettled space feels tender, diminutive, and intimate: *it's this way—come with us*. And yet, the mountain overwhelms the two figures, bears down on them, the landscape beneath their feet ever-growing and endless. This complete overwhelm butts up against the physicality of the reader's action—our hand holding the book. Hefty and substantial, the book appears like a block of ice in the reader's hand; the dichotomy between the colossal and the minute pricks at the internal compulsion to at once, hold off *and* succumb to the overwhelm. Through this physical interaction with the book, the dark and intimate space of the subconscious opens itself to an anticipatory dread where, by entering the narrative, the reader confronts their desire to face the unthinkable, the uncontrollable, and the (almost) unimaginable while staying within a realm of safety. As an object, the book works as a physical play on the relationship of the human to the disaster. What is the effect of holding the book in your hand? It places the threshold in the hand of the reader, the dread-space opened and closed at will.

Prior to reaching the third title card which marks official entry into the narrative, a list of “Principal Characters” grouped under family names appears at the start of the book: The Golosovsky Family; The Solodikov Family; the Adukanov Family; The Ryakhovsky family; and a list of peripheral characters. The inclusion of a list of “Principal Characters” gestures at the structural components required in a play where actors fill roles, their actions scripted, their ends pre-destined. The list has a functional role of providing clarity—the reader can (and will) return again and again to the beginning to pinpoint a character, their family, their role in the community, and their connection to the missing sisters. The list functions as a unifying key to a map of lives spread across the province of Kamchatka and visited chapter by chapter throughout the novel. After the initial chapter, each subsequent chapter delves into the life of another character; the list

becomes a reflexive, yet obsessive tool that provides basic identifying aspects of a character but also creates an unrestful reading experience. Every new name is an interruption—who is this? What do I need to know about them? How does Oksana “a researcher at the volcanological institute” (“Principal Characters”) play a role? Of what significance is Lada, “a receptionist at a city hotel”? Their lives are separated by chapters but interconnected in ways that the forward movement of the narrative reveals throughout the course of the novel. The constant revisitation of the list at the beginning of the text to situate the character in the narrative, positions the reader outside the text, while demanding a constant entry and exit from the narrative. The reader takes on the role of a detective and a latecomer witness, tracing the route of the disaster through the text and drawing connections from a place of seeming objectivity and distance. The formal inclusion of a list of “Principal Characters” speaks to the complex, interconnected relationship between the individual, their community, the personal disaster, and the collective experience tied to the experience of the individual disaster. One disaster in one family replicates and reveals the creeping dread of a multitude of disasters that lie in wait in every home, every family. Like the formal elements of a tragic play, the list gestures to a fixed ending, where predestination marks the outcome of specific lives. If then, the tension between knowing and unknowing characterizes the dread-space, the presence of a list of principal characters replicates a kind of threshold that the reader returns to again and again. Here are the people you will encounter, these are their roles, and remember, they all have predetermined ends. The form that encases the narrative demonstrates a structure that urges contemplation on the relationship between how disaster unfolds, who it effects, who arrives to witness and understand it, and what is required of them to engage with the material of the disaster.

This tension between human control and fate, the architecture of the dread-space, carries

forward onto the next page which features a map of Kamchatka with the city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky starred. The city where the sisters go missing and where their mother continues to work and search for them marks “ground zero” of the disaster. The inclusion of the map functions as a practical tool: Where is Kamchatka? The primary audience for this book is North American and at the time the novel was acquired for publication, the interest in “anything Russian” in the New York based publishing industry had peaked (Phillips, personal communication). Russia remained a mysterious, cold, mountainous force of unknowability and a book about Russia targeting a largely Western audience required basic geographical material to both educate and engage the reader. The map portrays the place where the story takes place—it makes sense to include this as a necessary element to enrich the reading of the text. However, the map as a tool of engagement invites the reader to interact with the material of the text in a way that demonstrates the tension between human navigation, control, and the unknowable forces of nature. It lures the readers comfortably into the dread-space. The map features a zoom-out of the Kamchatka region in contrast with its positioning in the Pacific Ocean. It juts out like a spare limb from the giant land mass of Russia, the region surrounded almost completely by water. Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky sits at the very edge of the coast jutting against the waters, precisely the point—feet in water—where we meet Alyona and Sophia at the beginning of Chapter One. The title page adjacent to the map reads “*Disappearing Earth*” in italicized block letters, appearing like floating letters in the sea of nothingness of a blank page. From the start, the landscape of the narrative entangles itself with the actions of the reader, a late-comer witness, whose entry into the narrative marks the crossing of a threshold where the terrain erupts as tenuous, cryptic, and unsteady. At the same time, the closed structure of a book holds the narrative—and the reader—like a container, the alarming horror of the disaster literally contained

between covers, inside pages. The structural elements of the book as an object invite the reader as an observer and a participant whose interactions with the text reveal the collective confrontation of dread.

In *The Lost Sister*, the disaster implodes into seemingly whole domestic spaces, its arrival revealing these private spaces as dismantled domestic units at the threshold of great, irreversible change. Similarly, in *Disappearing Earth*, the narrative enters dismantled domestic spaces again and again, the missing sisters driving into the heart of homes across the Kamchatka community like the edge of a serrated knife, the insular and closed private realms torn with apprehension, with dread. In “September,” Olya, a young girl with an absent father and a mother away at work, struggles with the tension between belonging and freedom, her domestic situation observed as threatening and dangerous by her friend Diana’s mother who views the absence of Olya’s parents as the root cause of how any young girl could go missing; After all, Alyona and Sophia also moved through life without their father, their mother also away at work, while the girls spent long summer days alone and outside the house, unsupervised, and free. In “November,” we meet Diana’s mother, Valentina Nikolaevna, “an office administrator for a city elementary school” (Phillips “Principal Characters”) whose own domestic realm remains her center of meticulous control alongside her public role in the school office. When she notices a persistent blister on her chest that plunges her into dread and uncertainty, she fixates on exerting control over the public, institutional realms that investigate the missing girls. As the state of her health increases in urgency, the blister ominous, dangerous, and requiring immediate surgery and removal, Valentina’s tight realm of control unravels and she faces the thing she fears most—complete loss of control—in the form of immediate and sudden surgery. In this way, the narrative drives through a full year of dismantled domestic realms where characters dwell in the uncertainty of

their own personal dread-spaces while at once, the blank dread of two girls gone missing echoes through the quiet of their lives. It isn't until much later in the novel that the reader encounters a depiction of Alyona and Sophia's domestic life, through the eyes of their mother, Marina. In the chapter, "June"—ten months after the disappearance of Alyona and Sophia—we meet their mother Marina, a journalist, who reflects on the pivotal moments that, retrospectively, she believes could have changed the outcome of her daughters' lives.

Her ex was a comfort to speak to because they could share the blame: she should have never left them alone that day; he should have never left them in Kamchatka to begin with; she should have taught their daughters to stay away from dangerous men; he should have shown them what a trustworthy one looks like. He was the only person, besides the girls' kidnapper, who might deserve more guilt than Marina. (Phillips, *Disappearing Earth* 216)

She fixes the blame on their fractured domestic unit; it places the girls outside the private realm and into the public sphere, where they must spend their summer days entertaining themselves while their mother works to provide for them, and their father, absent and far away, cannot protect them. Marina's loss empties her life. She exists in a perpetual dread-space where she oscillates between tentative, fearful acceptance that her daughters must have drowned, while facing the relentless abundance of possibilities—they could be alive, they could be dead and the vast space between these two points unearths an unending surge of both horror and hope.

The opening chapter, "August," centers on the pivotal action of the entire novel—the abduction of the Golosovsky sisters, Alyona and Sophia. The girls, alone for the summer, and devoid of an intact, private domestic realm, create an alternate domestic world interlocked with one another and linked to the wild vastness of the nature they witness. Here, the physical body

serves as a connective force, bodily flesh and blood a portal through which the realm of dread operates. In the opening image, they stand at the seaside, their bodies at the threshold of the colossal and rugged landscape of the Kamchatka region. Alyona observes her younger sister: “Sophia, sandals off, was standing at the water’s edge. The bay snuck up to swallow her toes. Gray salt water over bright skin. ‘Don’t go out any farther,’ Alyona said” (3). Already, Alyona senses a greater, impassable threshold she feels they should not cross. The bay moves surreptitiously, sinking feet beneath water, the enormity of the landscape crashing up against their bodies, revealing the tension of earth against flesh. As Sophia crouches next to the water, Alyona watches “the pebbles breaking the curves of Sophia’s arches, the sweep of grit left by little waves” (3). The imagery punctuates the hunger and aggression of the ocean, the delicate arches of a child’s foot dismantled by the sweep of ocean remains. Defiant, Sophia ignores her sister and rolls up her pant legs preparing to venture further into the water. Alyona, her reluctant guardian and protector, observes that “her calves showed flaking streaks of blood from scratched mosquito bites...” (3), the intimacy of the observation bringing the reader uncomfortably close, the vulnerability of the sisters—and by extension, the reader—palpable and alive. Through these fleshy, intimate details, the reader accesses the grand sweep of the ocean landscape, its enormity punctuated by prickled, bloody skin, by feet crushed against stones.

At this threshold between the flesh of the body and the enormity of the physical landscape—at the point of tension between the uncontrollable force of fate and the constant human exertion of control—Alyona and Sophia create an alternate domestic realm that exists in interdependence between them. Alyona relates the regularity of their summertime days where “they had spent their summer vacation alone with each other” (4). This small world of the sisters, this summertime bubble of sea-stretched sun, crashes up against the grand ocean landscape of

Russia where the big reins in the world of the small. Standing by the ocean's edge and looking out, they observe the water: "It was calm, barely touched by ripples that made the bay look like a sheet of hammered tin. The current got stronger as it pulled into the Pacific, leaving Russia behind for open ocean, but here it was domesticated. It belonged to them" (3). Their gaze domesticates the wide, grand sweep of open ocean, the waves re-visioned into the rippled tin of human industry, a point where nature meets confinement. They feel the urgent swell of ownership over the uncontrollable, a packing away of immense power and profound awe into containers of familiarity—tin-roofed homes, a town, a place of human inhabitation. This yearning for control reveals, perhaps, a quieter desire to exist in symbiotic balance with powers very much beyond human control. At the threshold, they pull the vast wildness of their landscape into a space of familiarity, ownership, and safety. At this vital meeting between the vulnerable intimacy of human life and the colossal wilderness, the unstoppable force of nature—and by extension, fate—transmutes into the tangibility of the domestic.

At this significant threshold, a lone male figure in the distance intercepts Alyona's vision. A double consciousness interrupts the idyllic normalcy of their routine and the sanctity of their newly domesticated environment; who is this unknown man who enters their realm? The reader's instinct also intercepts: something is going to happen. Is this when it happens? Like Alyona, we recognize the intrusion as something unknown and therefore unwanted.

Most days, though, they hung around the city, watching rain clouds gather and the sunlight stretch out. Their faces tanned gradually. They took walks, or rode bikes, or came here.

While Sophia balanced, Alyona looked along the shore. A man was picking his way over the rocks. 'Someone's coming,' Alyona said. Her sister splashed one leg down

and lifted the other. Sophia might not care who saw her act like an idiot, but Alyona, her forced companion, did. ‘Stop,’ Alyona said. More loudly. Heating up in her mouth—

‘*STOP.*’ (Phillips, *Disappearing Earth* 5)

The “STOP” functions as both a narrative stop for the reader, and as an active effort by Alyona to stop her sister from stepping into the waves and thus, crossing the barrier of safety into the unknown. Alyona recognizes the threshold, the point at which they no longer hold control. This double consciousness forms a liminal space of anticipatory dread where the reader already knows the fate of the girls, but the unknown—when the abduction will occur, how it will happen, and by whom—form narrative secrets that place the reader alongside Alyona and Sophia. Like the visitors to an exhibit of left-behind objects who can imagine themselves in the “fashionable clothes, shoes and watches [of the victims], while unknowingly imperiled by catastrophe” (Hoaglund 95), we dwell in this split place of knowing and not-knowing where the disaster proves inevitable and we expect its imminent arrival, but we also stand at the edge of the ocean, unaware.

The framework of temporal moments is not one built on chronology, but rather one built within the architecture of a house with several rooms. In the moment that Alyona orders her sister to stop, the dominant narrative also stops, standing on the threshold of the unknown, when the disaster will descend and the narrative will splay open to a moment of complete knowing between the survivor (Alyona and Sophia) and the latecomer witness (the reader); something bad is happening, it’s happening now, and there is no going back. In this moment of transition, the narrative stops and we enter a liminal space—the dread-space—and at this point, Alyona introduces a new, alternative narrative where she exerts control over the uncontrollable. Having noted that “[d]own the line of the water, the man was gone” (Phillips, *Disappearing Earth* 5), Alyona attempts to placate her sister who, bored and restless, hungers for activity. Alyona offers

her sister a story.

The novel begins and ends with Alyona telling the story of “the town that washed away,” (5) where a tsunami wipes out a city but leaves them encased in perpetuity. The story functions as a framing device and also reveals an exertion of control over the uncontrollable gesturing to questions of why and how we construct and tell stories of disaster, and how we mediate and mitigate the feeling of dread. Alyona offers the story as placation and occupation, but also as a method of control. She can’t stand the concerted, defiant energy of her sister, the imposed responsibility of having to care for her, and the constant embattlement with her sister’s willful desire for independence. In the story, the supremacy of nature subsumes the built human environment, but more than that, it reveals how to bring someone to the realm of dread, that place where they stand “blank with fear” (7). Through the telling of the story, Alyona contains and controls terror of the threshold and the horror of the dread-space. She creates a world in miniature, detailing structures and objects of the everyday. Step by step, she builds a world, only to demolish it. Through an act of imaginative construction, Alyona controls the crossing of the threshold, guides the movement into the unknown, and creates and cultivates the realm of dread. When her sister asks whether the town that the story is about has a school, Alyona responds: “‘Yes. A market, a pharmacy. Everything. A post office.’ Alyona pictured it: stacked logs, carved window frames, doors painted turquoise. ‘It looked like a fairy tale. And there was a flagpole in the middle of town, and a square where people parked their old-fashioned cars’” (Phillips, *Disappearing Earth* 6). Alyona builds up the town with details of the everyday and the familiar. The routine of the everyday punctuates her narrative; she establishes the known world, furnishing it with signs of domestic stability explaining that “‘It was like a settlement. Like a village. Just fifty wooden houses, filled with soldiers, wives, and babies. This was years ago.

After the Great Patriotic War” (6). From the warmth of familiarity, Alyona shifts quickly across the threshold. She says:

“Okay. So one morning, the townspeople are making their breakfasts, feeding their cats, getting dressed for work, and the cliff starts to shake. It’s an earthquake. They’ve never felt such a strong one before. Walls are swaying, cups are smashing, furniture is—”

Here Alyona looked to the gravel beside her but there was no washed-up branch for her to snap—

“Furniture is breaking. The babies are crying in their cribs and their mothers can’t reach them. They can’t even stand up. It’s the biggest earthquake the peninsula has ever had.” (6)

Swiftly and succinctly, in simple declarative sentences that evoke both nonchalance and immediacy, Alyona describes the arrival of an earthquake. Like the desired “washed-up branch for her to snap” to produce a desired effect, the objects Alonya lists—cups and cats and furniture—all serve as domestic props. Household items placed alongside “the biggest earthquake the peninsula has ever had” juxtaposes the big against the small and creates an uncanny effect where the ordinary must surrender to the extraordinary and the tangible, palpable, and meticulous world Alyona creates—the world of the “fairytale,” a cozy township, filled with “soldiers, wives, and babies” meets its fate. When Alonya relates the arrival of the tsunami in the story and Sophia asks “what happened to them?” Alonya describes a blank landscape:

“No people, no buildings, no traffic lights, no roads. No trees. No grass. It looked like the moon.”

“Where’d they go?”

“Washed away. The wave picked them up right where they lay, like this.” She propped herself on one elbow and gripped Sophia’s shoulder, its bones shifting under her palm.

“That’s how tight the water was around their bodies. It locked them up inside their houses. It lifted the whole town and took it out to the Pacific. No one ever saw a sign of them again.” (7)

Alyona’s telling of the story exerts control not only over her sister, but over the forces that remain beyond her ability to control. In a few short moments, the lone man in the distance will lure Alyona and Sophia into his car and they will disappear. Alyona’s final image of the town and its people places life at a stand-still, locked inside their homes, suspended in time forever. It mirrors the final image the reader receives of Alyona and Sophia, locked unwillingly inside a stranger’s car, and swept away. In the dread-space, time stands still; we stand on the threshold of what we know and what remains unknown, our faces blank with horror. Alyona relishes her exertion of control over the story and over her sister, her ability to bring her sister right to the edge of horror electrifying: “In the shadow of the hill, Sophia’s face was dark. Her lips were parted to show the ridged bottoms of her front teeth. Alyona liked, every so often, to bring her sister to a place where she looked blank with fear” (7). Alyona’s storytelling helps her regain control and exert power where she has none: she is forced to care for her sister through the summer and forced to live without the domestic stability of a present father. Here, the story functions as an experiment with control. It also functions as a framework for understanding the human relationship to disaster as a constantly shifting push and pull between individual human free will and the overwhelming uncontrollability and immense destructive power of nature and the inescapable powers of fate. This double framework of storytelling functions as an active demand for interaction with the psychic wounds of fear and dread.

The storytelling of this embedded, fictional disaster functions as a narrative device that generates a relationship between the main “players” involved in the text: the sisters who go missing (purported survivors), the one left behind who experiences the loss resulting from the trauma (their mother), the other characters whose stories are told chapter by chapter through the rest of the novel (bystander witnesses), and the reader of the text as a whole (we arrive as latecomer witnesses who seek to engage with the trauma from a position of invested distance). These categories of witness work as an interconnected system of representation that demonstrate the cultural interactions between representations of disasters and those who witness it. This system is not reliant on strictly realist or anti-realist representations of trauma (Rothberg 3-4) to tell a complex story of loss but rather exists in a transitory space that demonstrates the reality and necessity of individual engagement and response to disaster. This framework presents a unified approach to writing and representing the unthinkable that responds to a “demand for reflection on the formal limits of representation” (Rothberg 7). The text exists between the reader as latecomer witness, the narrative as the bystander witness, and the survivors of the disaster. Here the “survivors” are an abstraction represented by the abduction of young girls from the Kamchatka community in Russia. As the effects of the crime ripple out into the homes and inner worlds of community members, their lives serve also as “survivor” lives absorbing the impact of the disaster.

At pivotal moments in both texts, the body/absence of body serves as the final point of cathartic release in the confrontation of dread. If dread treads the liminal in-between, the body, as a tangible entity and the primary site of the sudden, traumatic disaster serves as the final locale of dread. In the final chapter of *Disappearing Earth*, “July,” a year after the girls first go missing, the narrative circles back to a disembodied voice belonging to Alyona. Written in the de-

stabilizing, and intimate second-person perspective and addressing Sophia, Alyona's voice emerges from the darkness. Intimate and exceedingly close, her voice remains as the only narrative guide. Devoid of any setting—the expansive endlessness of the rugged, physical landscape shrinks to the space of a single room, the voice almost disembodied, life constrained, almost removed. And yet, in this close, emptied space, Alyona retells Sophia the story of the town that washed away, this time riding through the expanse of dread into a soft landing where the unknown is made known. She says,

The wave scooped everyone up from the ground. It carried them, their house, their cars, over the cliff. If the villagers hadn't been shut in on all sides by water, they would've been hurt, but they were, so they weren't. They were just locked in place like bubbles in ice. They were in the center of the wave holding their breath. Their eyes were open, and their arms and legs stuck out by their sides. (253)

Here, Alyona enters the dread-space in full force, the town frozen in time and suspended at the moment the disaster strikes. At the start of the novel, moments before Alyona and Sophia stop to help the man who eventually abducts them, the story ends at this moment of suspension—the town swept away by great waves, no one ever seen again. The story stops here and Alyona, Sophia, and we, as readers, stand outside the disaster, watching it from the threshold, immobile in the dread-space. In the final chapter, the presence of their bodies removed from the visual atmosphere of the narrative, Alyona continues past the threshold, through the horror, and out the other side. She says,

The people were frozen, but now they're free...They're swimming and coughing and pushing their hair back. All the heavy things that washed out with them—their homes, the sidewalks, whole trees—sink away. Everything that was light, though, is floating.

Groceries. Toys. Remote controls. What else? Pillows, blankets, and books. The people can't believe it. There are even cribs floating with babies inside. (254)

Alyona's revisionist story occupies the dread-space through a fantastical, desperately hopeful image of survival, where most of the known world falls away, but the items that matter—simple, domestic items like pillows, blankets, and books—survive. In the utter depth of the disaster, in the terrifying chasm of dread, Alyona plays with narrative to help her sister engage with a sense of safety and strength while she uses it to express her deeply held wishes. In this way, the dread-space cultivates the birth of something new, something alternative to the frozen terror they lay suspended in for so long. The reader sits in the chasm of dread with the sisters, Alyona's guiding voice forming the pathway to possibility. And though the narrative ends with a rumble of noise that promises freedom, and reveals in the previous chapter that rescuers grow ever closer to finding the girls, it closes with the intense dread of unknowing—the girls not knowing who will open the door, not knowing why Lilia slams on the walls and screams in the next room, not knowing if they will ever be safe. And the reader, through Alyona's disembodied voice, witnesses the unsaid horror of what the girls have experienced. In her retelling of the tale, Alyona creates a utopia of togetherness blunted by the blankness of intimate violence: "Everyone is kind to each other. Nobody gets hurt. No. Sophia, not that. Because that can't happen there. They're taking care of each other" (254). The violation remains unsaid, but the reader stands as witness to the thing that can't be uttered, its horrors beyond the realm of words. In the end, Alyona's disembodied voice reaches for companionship through the dark and promises a collective unity through the terror of the unknown: "We have each other. No matter who opens the door. Remember that Mama's out there. She still loves us. After they go away, we can knock to Lilia, she'll knock back. She's just on the other side of the wall. Yes. I'm here. I promise. We'll stay

together. We have each other. We are not alone” (256). At one level, the reader knows that rescuers will soon save the girls, but so much remains unknown. We connect the dots with contextual knowledge—the girls were kidnapped, imprisoned, and most likely victims of sexual violence. The narrative reveals the horrors of their containment through the absence of definitive details—the blank horror achieved through wordlessness. The ending provides the reader with an answer to our yearning. Yes, the girls will be found. Yes, they’ll go home to their mothers. But at once, we push away all that we don’t know and all that remains unsaid, the dread of embodying the fullness of the horror too often too much to witness. Alyona’s voice rings earnest, hopeful, but also terrified—*she* does not yet know what lies beyond the door. She expects the horrors of the last year to continue—maybe it’s the man, maybe it’s one of his friends. Her insistence that “we are not alone” signals the need for collective connection to live in communion with dread.

In contrast to this ambiguity, in *The Lost Sister*, the absence/presence of the body works as a direct confrontation of the unknown, where the body serves as a site for the cathartic release of dread. Alisha moves deliberately towards the threshold, eager to break through the barrier that keeps her in the space of the known. When officials call to inform the family that a body, identified to be Diana’s, lies waiting under a sheet at the morgue, Alisha insists on accompanying her father and her aunt to confirm or deny the findings. Her father moves with “sheer belligerence” (Gunraj, *The Lost Sister* 154) rooted in denial and doubt. Unable to accept such finality, Alisha’s father hungers to stay in the liminal world of the threshold where the possibility that Diana could still be alive can continue to exist. Unwilling, he must step beyond the threshold and allow the dread to disintegrate into knowing: “But now, affronted by a foreign object under a cloth, he couldn’t stay aloof. Someone had folded the plane of our existence in half and he and whatever was under the cloth were suddenly face to face. One would have to prevail over the

other” (155). Alongside her father, Alisha stands at the threshold, ready for the “foreign object” to be revealed. When the woman at the morgue lifts the sheet, she reveals “hard things, rusted and blackened things...laid on the table. At the foot of the table was a clear plastic bag with soiled, shredded pieces of black and white fabric and a single grimy shoe” (155). These barely-there, mutilated objects form a tangible connection to the pivotal moment of complete undoing. The remains—bits of bone, scraps of clothing, a shoe—show the physical devastation exerted upon the body. What could result in such a violent and vacuous absence of the body itself? When Alisha looks up at her father, she witnesses the eruption of dread in his eyes where “confusion exploded into horror in the black of his pupils” (155). For Alisha, the liminal space of dread solidifies through bone, her interaction with the body a compulsion to know: “I couldn’t look away from my sister’s bones. I traced the long arm and leg bones with my eyes, thinking of Diana as she stretched in front of the television and ran relays on the track” (155). The object—her sister’s bones—forms the final connection to this terrible thing: her abduction, her rape, her murder, her body left behind. Diana’s remains form the tangible document of her final pained moments of life, a record that it really happened, a solidified transition where the dread burns into the terrifying new reality of grief. As Alisha succumbs to the disintegration of her previous life, her consciousness separates from her body and she screams:

I heard a raspy cat-mewl. *Who’s making that sound*, I wondered, *that ridiculous screech?*

I realized that I was the one screaming like a wounded animal.

Diana? Dirty bones on a table?

The sound of a horn pierced my ears and white dots sprayed across my vision like fireworks. They kept bursting until my knees buckled like two spilling pans of water.

(156)

Disembodied—unaware, at first, that the scream that shatters through the room erupts from *her* body—Alisha crosses the threshold into the realm of loss, where sensory extremes form the body of grief. The solidity of bones on a table delivers Alisha from the uncertainty of the unknown, from the anticipatory anxiety of the dread-space, into the certainty of the known. This new space brings the full-bodied grief of a dreaded outcome now realized. However, this shattered space of disaster, the disembodied center of ruin, does not fulfill the intense existential desire for freedom from bindings of empathic connection and the overwhelming, self-shattering intensity of those feelings. As Blanchot explains, “The disaster—experience none can undergo—obliterates (while leaving perfectly intact) our relation to the world as presence or as absence; it does not thereby free us, however, from this obsession with which it burdens us: others” (120). This moment of confrontation triangulates the reader, the writer, and the characters within the narrative as interdependent witnesses of an integral point in the disaster: the collapse of the dread-space. Here, the endlessness of the dread-space, the perpetual dwelling in fearful imaginings, the holding off of the long-dreaded, most feared outcome crystallizes to a stand-still and shatters upon contact with the tangible remains of the disaster—bones on a table—the realm of loss igniting utter detachment from the body. In this transitory state of realization, consciousness unhinges from the solidity of the body and the body collapses into fragmentation. Alisha’s knees buckling like “two spilling pans of water” forms a visual abstraction that wrenches the reader into a new transitory space now defined by loss, the visceral undulations of trauma soon to transform into the viscous shadow of grief. Alisha witnesses her father’s fragmentation seconds before she experiences her own: “Out of the corner of my eye, my father’s blurry shape shrank to the ground and coolness washed the side of my body where he had been standing. My aunt crouched over him and I heard a peculiar sound, an undulating bass.

Is that how my father sounds when he cries?" (Gunraj 156). In this mirrored perspective, Alisha witnesses her father's disembodiment—his disappearance from her side a sudden bodily absence, his cries alien vibrations that bewilder Alisha. In the next breath, Alisha hears pained cries but does not recognize them as her own. The reader witnesses Alisha's fracturing, then her moment of recognition—this is *her* voice, *her* world crumbling. The disembodiment at this precise moment of confrontation, the tangible evidence that the disaster *did* occur, that it has happened, and that it is inescapable "obliterates (while leaving perfectly intact) our relation to the world as presence or as absence" (Blanchot 120). The dread-space, a realm inhabited through simultaneous detachment and hyper-vigilance epitomizes Blanchot's state of presence-absence. The witnessing of the complete obliteration of this state situates the reader as an empathic, yet voyeuristic witness engaged in the concept of "sympathetic imagination" (Vickroy 2). Attributed to Geoffrey Hartman, sympathetic imagination explores the relationship between words and trauma. In "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies" Hartman references an act of witnessing and processing when we "'read the wound' with the aid of literature." I consider the reading of the "wound" as a triangulated action where the reader bears witness to the trauma represented in the text, and in the act of witnessing, gains access to their own inner psyche. Hartman argues that the experience of trauma itself "is composed of two contradictory elements. One is the traumatic event, registered rather than experienced. It seems to have bypassed perception and consciousness, and falls directly into the psyche. The other is a kind of memory of the event, in the form of a perpetual troping of it by the bypassed or severely split (dissociated) psyche" (537). When Alisha bears witness to her sister's bones, she accesses the tangibility of the trauma exerted on her sister's body and the traumatic event drops into and splits her psyche. Discordant visual imagery represents this dissociated state and in reading,

visualizing, and making sense of the words on the page, the traumatic event impresses itself on the psyche of the reader. This “traumatic knowledge” repeats itself, “troping” its way between the reader, writer, and the subjects of the literary text where it “calls upon an original inner catastrophe whereby/in which an experience that is not experienced (and so, apparently, not “real”) has an exceptional presence—is inscribed with a force proportional to the mediations punctured or evaded (537). This “original inner catastrophe” exists in the reader who also occupies the dread-space, anticipates the threat, fears the ruin, and through interacting with the text, experiences the disaster second-hand. Though the disaster does not exist for the reader, it “has an exceptional presence” that provides bodily and psychic practice of the disaster, recognition of the perpetuity of the dread-space, and the thrilling horror of its collapse.

Imagination—visualization, rumination, contemplation—in the act of reading functions as a vehicle for accessing traumatic knowledge and rooting it in the physical body. This form of witnessing connects the reader to the unknown experience of disaster where the fragmentation, disintegration, and ultimate destruction of the body and its consciousness in disaster reverberates through sensory experience and recognition. Hartman writes:

Imagination pursues a body—the body and atmosphere of fact. It tries to make us believe the unbelievable; it demands the acknowledgement of being real, not only imagined. The means for doing so include somatic feelings. We are drawn into a species of belief by the recovery of certain visceral sensations: extremes of heat, cold and thirst, glare of color, horror of the void, loss of speech. Perhaps the only way to overcome a traumatic severance of body and mind is to come back to mind through the body. We recall how voice dries up, and chokes its way out again. (543)

In the act of reading, the imagination ignites this visceral sensory experience and transforms the

sheer spectacle and unbelievability of the disaster into an embodied somatic practice of seeking both thrill and deliverance from the unknown. The imagination in interaction with the fictive dread-space provides an avenue for the reader to move through the dread-space as an act of play, where the “original inner catastrophe”—the sheer terror and exhilarating freedom of “being able”—collides with deep, anxious frustration when the colossal “bigness” of disaster obstructs the freedom of certainty and knowing. We enter the fictive dread-space as an experiment with our own limitations in the realm of the unknown. Our inner catastrophe recognizes the fictive dread-space as an experimental environment: here, we can observe the moment the disaster, the traumatic event, splits the psyche of a character and dismantles their being. We sympathize, we even empathize, yes, but we also seek to live through the thrill, the danger, the horror, the complete fragmentation of our being by the disaster within the confines of a book we can close. We want to experience utter lack of control within the controlled environment of the fictive text. As in horror films, where the exploration of fear opens avenues of self-analysis that require exerting oneself in the extremes of human emotion, the dread-space in disaster fiction invites the reader to dwell in a particular kind of fear. However, in “Gangs and guilt: Towards a new theory of horror film” TS Kord proposes that horror films, understood as a genre that aims to evoke the feeling of fear, more accurately provide a psycho-social ruminative dwelling in the feeling of guilt (69). Kord argues that the fear-theory of horror proves dissatisfying because horror films inadvertently show that *we* are the source of most of our own fears. He writes, “we are the ones creating the potential for nuclear disaster, World War III or other forms of Armageddon. So long as our thinking about horror remains on the level of effect, the fear-theory will serve just fine. Digging for causes, however, quickly raises the suspicion that perhaps the horror film is seeking something else as well” (70). Similarly, the dread-space in disaster fiction seeks to create a

microcosm of human frailty where we exercise the limits of our sympathetic imaginations. In doing so, we confront our own deaths; the characters, their traumatic knowledge, and the representation of psychic violence function as proxies for our own terrifying ends. We pre-mourn the death of our physical beings, but ultimately, we sense the volatility and unreliability of human control and make (violent) way for the death of one world while preparing, *mostly* unwillingly, for the painful rebirth of another.

I began this chapter with the supposition that the dread-space functions as a place of play where the reader engages voyeuristically with disaster. On the surface, the voyeuristic impulse can veer on the edge of exploitative thrill-seeking, a primal hunger for the extreme driving our curiosity to witness the destructive impact of disaster. Think, for example, of the automatic impulse to take in the scene of a vehicular accident on the highway. Sure, we slow down for safe passage, but we also slow down because we must. Our bodies seek the awe-struck stupor of witnessing destruction, a car crushed, metal mangled, humans unnervingly absent, their bodies removed from impossible articulations of metal and concrete. We turn towards the ruin while at once wishing vehemently to remove ourselves from its threat. The voyeuristic impulse serves as an entryway rather than an end destination. It compels us into a primal state of acute awareness, our senses awakened and alert, the physical rush of thrill interlocked with the deadening thud of dread.

In Susan Sontag's "The Imagination of Disaster" the adaptation of the science fiction novel into film provides a sensate experience of the disaster where the viewer interacts through "images and sounds, not words" to access the primal function of the disaster in art. Sontag writes that the strength of the science fiction film "is the immediate representation of the extraordinary: physical deformity and mutation, missile and rocket combat, toppling skyscrapers." She argues

that film provides the sensory experience that words cannot, a “sensuous elaboration” where “one can participate in the fantasy of living through one’s own death and more, the death of cities, the destruction of humanity itself” (189). Though Sontag’s argument fixates on the visual experience of the science fiction film, the dread-space in fiction creates this intense sensory experience through the violation of intimacy—we enter private spaces, we witness the destruction of those spaces, we recognize the frenetic energy of the transitional realm and the suffocating desolation of the dread-space in our own bodies. We willingly and compulsively participate in the death of our own worlds through the sensory experience of the dread-space cultivated through intimacy, and culminating in the intimate disaster.

As we step quietly through the ash of our old worlds, the narrative force pulls us forward into a world made new. Phillips’ final lines edge along a combustive, explosive rupture, where we hold a collective breath, awaiting a discovery of the sisters that does not appear on the page. And yet, the suffocating edge of dread feels very much like the heart-stopping thrill of hope. What lies beyond the rupture? What can we imagine outside the poisoned domestic realm? We stop mid-breath, and we *wait* for whatever will come. In the cycle of disaster, we move toward a room where reunification can burst through the closed door and deliver us into a newly discovered realm of something else, some hoped for beginning.

Chapter Three: How Do You Tell a Shattered Story?

Pale skies draw us inward
 to the place of no speaking, no words—
 to stillness where we wait
 in the threshold between worlds.
 Here there is the deep sea of ourselves,
 the strange fish of our dreams.

“Solstice”

Laura Weaver

The shattered story⁵ is a story narrative cannot sustain. So extreme in its violence, so deep in its erasure of human life, it can only be witnessed—and rarely completely understood—through the fragmentation of a shattered lens that bridges the foggy territory between fiction and non-fiction. The disaster text that forms the heart of this chapter, Loung Ung’s memoir *First They Killed My Father*, narrativizes the atrocity of the Cambodian genocide from the perspective of a child witness. The supplementary text I reference in this chapter, Madelein Thien’s novel *Dogs at the Perimeter*, features poly-vocal narrations transmuted through the perspective of an adult narrator who unearths her experience of the genocide she survived as a child. Both texts encapsulate the mass, collective impact of the institutional violence enacted by Pol Pot’s Khmer

⁵ I first encountered the phrasing of “how to tell a shattered story?” (436) in Arundhati Roy’s novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, a fractured, chaotic, abundant work described as “An astonishing, intimate epic” (Daily Telegraph) where the overwhelm of a politically fractured India and a seemingly endless array of characters speaking from the illuminated fringes of society occupies the murky space between fiction and non-fiction. The phrase appears within a poem in the final chapter of the novel where two lovers congregate before parting, one headed for his death in Kashmir, the other awaiting news of this inevitable end. The poet asks the question that lies at the center of every conflict, every atrocity, and it forms the central thrust of this chapter.

Rouge government against Cambodian citizens through narrative structures that resist the strictures of a traditional narrative form while closely adhering to a structure that bridges the known and the unknown. Their “in-between” story forms straddle fiction and non-fiction as narrative necessity.

In the shattered story, the disaster narrative reaches for the furthest edges of the extreme. Here, the geo-political conflict is the disaster defined as “disagreements and clashes that arise between nations or groups of nations...[and] involves power struggles over land, resources, influence, or strategic positioning on the global stage” (“Geopolitical Conflict”). The geopolitical conflict, as an atrocity, obliterates the moral and physical limits of human violence to enact calculated and deliberate schemes of killing that aid in a multi-pronged supremacy of ideals and assumed justice. The geopolitical disaster renders catastrophic atrocities where warfare and genocide exert brutal and extreme violence against the human psyche, body, and spirit, in service of a vision of collective and institutionalized supremacy and control. At its core, disaster in this politicized and institutionalized form seeks to completely eradicate the individual through decimation of the intimate. The intimate, defined in Chapter One of this dissertation as “the close and the familiar”—objects of personal significance, familial bonds and blood ties, the ligaments, the muscles, the blood and the bone of our physical bodies, even the secrecy of personal thought—dissolves and putrefies under the impact of the geopolitical disaster. Narrativizing this disaster forms the shattered story where the writer offers a witnessed re-telling of abject horror, of individual and collective loss, and recovery of the self through access to the intimate. When a geo-political institution strategizes disaster, it eradicates the intimate, and in doing so, eliminates human bonds of empathy and connection; it creates a vacuous system where the self disappears, and the primary desire to survive takes complete precedence. The geo-political disaster functions

through a complicated network of competing political ideals that purposefully cast the disastrous event, whether war, terrorism, genocide or any other mass-scale violent event, under a veil of purposeful misconception that obstructs any simple act of witnessing. The intimate, destroyed, forms the only point of access to the disaster for the survivor-as-witness, and the viewer/reader as second-hand witness. The shattered story takes form through connection to intimacy even as the atrocity, layer by layer, eradicates the intimate. Thus, direct and fragmented witnessing hinged on the intimate, forms the telling of the shattered story.

My interest in the child as witness to the disaster as well as the events of the Cambodian genocide as a uniquely child-focused campaign of repressive erasure, drives my choice to focus on Loung Ung's memoir *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* (2000). Featuring her child-self as witness to the disaster, Ung's first-hand experience of the genocide drives the forward movement of the narrative, while the figure of the present-day adult, haunted by the trauma of surviving a genocide, creates a looping, fragmented narrative marked by crucial moments of unknowing. Supplementary to this text, Madeleine Thien's novel *Dogs at the Perimeter* (2011) features a poly-vocal narrative where fragmented, often dis-embodied voices circulate the wound of the genocide, the child narrator emerging at distinct moments of displacement. Both texts cover the same vital points of "plot" in the progression of this disaster: from evacuation from Phnom Penh, to forced labour in work camps, the excruciations of famine and torture, to escape to Vietnam, the eventual smuggling to a refugee camp, and the beginning of a new life in Canada and the United States.

In this final chapter, I focus primarily on Ung's memoir but place it alongside Thien's novel to draw parallels between two works of prose that contend with the same disastrous event, both using elements of the non-fiction novel to narrate the atrocities of genocide. In doing so,

both texts dwell in the in-between to answer the question at the heart of this dissertation—how do you tell the shattered story of disaster? What does that telling do? The geopolitical disaster and its multitude of devastations focuses on the intimate; in the ruin of mass, collective, human-orchestrated, long-term devastation, intimacy becomes our only point of personal access to the disaster and positions the detached reader as a latecomer-witness upon which the writer exerts specific demands.

First They Killed My Father follows the eye-witness account of Loung Ung, who, at the age of five, witnesses the takeover of Cambodia's capital city, Phnom Penh, by the Khmer Rouge. Written from her perspective as a five-year-old, the account follows the journey of her family—her parents and six siblings—as they travel, mostly on foot, out of the city center deep into the Cambodian countryside. Forced to live and work in labour camps in service of the Angkar—"the organization"—they struggle each day to protect themselves from the watchful brutality of their captors, and to survive the utter scarcity of food and sustenance. Through the deaths of her older sister, her father, her mother, and her youngest sister, the narrative follows Ung as she absorbs the impact of these losses, while facing separation, recruitment into a training camp for child soldiers, and the frenetic uncertainty and hidden threats of refugee camps. Published in the year 2000, blurbs for the book praised the impact of the child narrator, lauding the "child's indomitable spirit" (qtd. in Ung) and in awe of "this scrappy kid [who] struggles for life and beats the odds," (qtd. in Ung). In a *New York Times* review of both Ung's memoir and Chanrithy Him's *When Broken Glass Floats* (also a memoir about the Cambodian genocide featuring a child as witness), Richard Bernstein praises the directness of testimonial witness where the authors tell their stories "straightforwardly, vividly, and without any strenuous effort to explicate their importance, allowing the stories themselves to create their own impact" (E1).

These blurbs and reviews, excerpted as promotional praise for the book, focus on the impact of the narrative on the potential reader where the child as direct witness tells an unimpeded story of triumph over mass loss. The promotion focusses on the potential of emotional movement in the reader, the book and its child witness positioned as an intermediary between a story of genocide and a reader who desires to access the disaster as a secondhand witness.

Atrocity texts that feature a child narrator such as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis: The Story of A Childhood*, which follows Marji's coming-of-age during the downfall of the Shah and the Islamic Revolution in the 1980s, or Imre Kertész's Nobel Prize winning novel *Fatelessness*, which narrativizes the experiences of 14-year-old György Köves, a Hungarian Jew who comes of age in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, positions the child as an "autobiographical protagonist" (Gilmore 157). As direct and indirect witnesses to an atrocity that they survive, the child-narrator inhabits the projections of a removed, adult witness who "frames" the text with a politicized empathic appeal intended for the reader. In "Witnessing *Persepolis*: Comics, Trauma, and Childhood Testimony" Leigh Gilmore contends that *Persepolis* moves beyond "a global, neoliberal agenda of asking readers simply to identify with distant individuals" and instead suggests that "the critical adult perspective of the text's framer is ultimately the position of politicized witnesses her readers should strive to inhabit" (157). In this view, child witnesses in these atrocity texts don't simply fulfill the archetype of the naïve or precocious child observer, where their perspective signals an inviolable state of innocence set in contrast to the atrocity and obstructed by its evil. Instead, their gaze transmutes the positioning of the adult survivor who frames the text as a witnessing lens for the reader who must access the atrocity through the violated figure of the child.

In 2017, director Angelina Jolie adapted Ung's memoir into a feature-length film; it

screened at the Toronto International Film Festival and was later released on Netflix. The makers of the film—co-written with Ung, co-produced with Cambodian documentary filmmaker Rithy Panh, and executive produced with Jolie’s Cambodian son, Maddox Jolie-Pitt—reflected a collective narrative effort to represent the fragmented experience of the genocide while rooted in Cambodian authorship. As a collaboration between the survivor as witness and the outsider as secondhand witness,⁶ the creative process for the film works as a unified unit of representation. This bond between the survivor-witness-writer and the secondhand-witness-observer communicates the geopolitical disaster—the Cambodian genocide—as a shattered story assembled through a multiplicity of perspectives but told most impactfully and compellingly to the second-hand witness through the solitary perspective of the child-witness. The film, shaped through collaborative testimony in the form of multiple avenues of creative input, stays embedded in the child’s perspective, Jolie filtering every scene through the eyes of the young protagonist, the audience’s access to the disaster tethered to the child-witness. Co-written by Jolie and Ung, and based on Ung’s memoir, the film posits a relationship with disaster that embraces the shattered story with its multiple conflicting moral collisions as necessary representations of stories too extreme and too horrifying to endure, or to tell. And yet, the film modifies central moments of traumatic impact from the memoir to express a broader representation of the genocide, the trauma untied from the individual experience to depict a representative experience based on key moments of testimony. Internationally lauded, and still

⁶ Mentioned in my Introduction and in Chapter One, I use the term “second-hand witnessing” as a distinct form of witnessing that describes the position of a reader encountering the disaster text as an outsider who did not experience the disaster themselves. In this chapter, the writer-as-survivor provides direct and indirect witnessing of the atrocity, and the reader arrives as a second-hand witness who observes both the survivor and the atrocity through the narrator’s first-hand account of events. In “The Second-Hand Story: Origins, Meaning, and Use” Luigi Pinton describes a similar framing through the term “the second-hand story,” but describes a narrator who “listens to and reports other people’s stories” (274) and can stand as a kind of witness. In the context of the atrocity narrative, the writers serve as direct witnesses and the reader forms the second-hand witness.

one of the best-known memoirs about the Cambodian genocide, Ung's book also received scathing criticism that questioned the veracity of her memory as a child witness. The direct, unbridled voice of its child narrator seared readers' minds with its unobstructed witnessing of events, but in "The Cambodian Tragedy: It's Writers and Representations" Sody Lay, executive director of the Khmer Institute, and perhaps Ung's most insistent critic, characterizes Ung's memoir as having "received the most publicity, despite being (or perhaps because it is) a sensationalization and over-dramatization of the Killing Fields experience" (173). Lay, a legal analyst and lecturer on the Cambodian-American experience, writes from the perspective of a second-hand witness. A teenager living outside of Cambodia when the Khmer Rouge took power, the loss of his "aunts, uncles, and cousins who did not survive the earthly hell" (172) ignited his desire to learn about the genocide. He writes, "Survivor's guilt has led me to learn all I can about my people and the tragedy that befell them" (181). Lay expresses concern about how "younger people, including many Cambodian American youth, have very little knowledge about why and how the Khmer Rouge came to power and why and how they destroyed Cambodia" (172). The publication of multiple accounts of the Cambodian genocide at the start of the millennium re-integrated Cambodia into our collective consciousness while also creating a reliance on these survivor memoirs to accurately teach the general public about the Cambodian genocide through a contextualized, balanced representation of events. In Lay's view, Ung's memoir contains cultural inaccuracies, fails to divulge class-rooted complexities, and skews the memories of her five-year-old self to improperly narrativize her experience. These lapses in narrative, Lay argues, fail to accurately represent the Cambodian experience, where economic injustices directly and indirectly caused by class elites (like Ung's family) and government officials (like Ung's father) fueled the political unrest and furor at the root of the genocide—something that Ung does not

directly address in the memoir. Lay contends that “Although the Khmer Rouge regime was evil and destructive, not all Khmer Rouge cadre were simply sadistic monsters bent on destroying the country and fellow Cambodians” (178).

These criticisms illuminate what I term “the shattered story,” a geo-political event at the centre of the human extremes of violence; the narrativizing and witnessing of that event through an individual lens intersects at misaligned crosspoints with the collective experience. The individual experience resonates as representative of the collective experience, while the collective experience resists representation in a singular form. The shattered story requires testimony, and the individual narrative, as expressed through Ung’s memoir, provides a testimony that overlaps, aligns, and in some ways overshadows the many ways in which other individuals in the collective understand and make sense of the intense trauma of genocide. The individual narrative, especially through the eyes of a child-witness, forms an essential avenue for the outsider witness—the reader as second-hand witness—to access and form an intentional relationship with the disaster as a form of shattered consciousness, where the self splits in order to encompass the extreme and integrate it into a form of self-knowledge. The memoir, as a form, requires this split-self where the older and younger self constantly correlate and interact to form a representative whole. Criticisms of Ung’s memoir, and of testimonial literature, demand a purity of representation, a cohesive picture of a whole. Testimonial narratives form an integral part of subsequent tribunals and trials where, as essential sources of evidence, they play a role in bringing perpetrators to justice. Lay’s scathing indictment of Ung’s narrative as “some kind of literary Frankenstein” (Lay 182) reveals a furious, heartfelt, but also misdirected fear that any creative license in a testimonial narrative risks the believability of the experience of genocide, and thus, risks the wellbeing of the collective. Although Lay’s critique provides perspective on

the nuanced impact of a bestselling atrocity memoir on the fractured collective it represents, this perspective fails to fully account for the multi-pronged purpose of the memoir, and for the nature of memoir as a form of art. This chapter explores the telling of the shattered story as an exertion of ownership over immense, irreparable loss sustained by the individual survivor and so often harboured internally and in solitary grief. The shattered narrative defies any limitation on structure, the realm of loss so extreme, so limitless in its capacity for destruction, that the individual must stand for itself, *before* and *as* it stands for the collective. Criticisms of Ung's memoir focus on the gaps in memory she fills with imagined recollection of the deaths of each of her family members, with Lay accusing Ung of basing her narrative "more on imagination than any kind of real memory" (Lay 173). Objections to her narrativization reflect a resistance to the testimonial narrative as an artistic and personal process with deeply felt ethical implications. However, I want to understand the shattered story as a complex process of witnessing where the writer represents their grief using narrative tools, through mixing genres, and where fictive imaginings of deeply traumatic events unearth the truth of *an* experience rather than a misrepresentation of the *whole* of an experience. The shattered story resists the demand for a purity of representation, or a cohesive picture representative of the whole; instead, it resonates through the fragmentation of its representation, its incongruency, its insistence to exist as a non-cohesive text. I chose to use *At First They Killed My Father* as a central text in this chapter so that I could interrogate the multifaceted relationship between the witness on standby—the audience, who, curious about a geopolitical disaster and navigating feelings of ethical responsibility, pick up the text—and the witness who survived the disaster, and engages in the process of both testimony and healing through the narrativizing of that disaster.

The tensions between testimony and representation form the shattered story, where the

narrative structure succumbs to competing demands of representation. Though this chapter does not focus heavily on the narrative strategy used in works of fiction, I consider how the writer integrates the demand for testimonial accuracy of a complex and horrific conflict with the desire to create a cohesive, impactful narrative when articulating atrocity through a fictive lens. It's useful to consider how Madeleine Thien's novel, *Dogs at the Perimeter*, embraces this multiplicity of demands, incorporating overlapping, sometimes discordant perspectives, ambiguous documents, and a narrative that leaps back and forth in time. *Dogs* begins with Janie, a Cambodian woman who survived the genocide as a child and now lives in Montreal. The novel traces a series of vanishings; we follow Janie as she retraces the steps of her mentor, Hiroji, whose apartment lies empty and abandoned. The last image of Hiroji appears on a security camera where he exits his place of work, coatless, carrying nothing, and disappears in search of his brother James. Years prior, in Cambodia, James disappears amidst the tumult of the Khmer Rouge takeover, his small world of domestic intimacy imploded. Janie's narrative circles these vanishings and traces her own disappearance—a forced withdrawal from herself—her survival and witness of the genocide as a child surfacing in the fragmentation of her present-day life. Through these vanishings that sink one into the other, the novel depicts the experience of the genocide as one of fragmented dislocation of the self, where the writer as interpreter and witness, and the reader as interlocuter and second-hand witness, unearth the story of deep, violent, and profound loss experienced in a climate of political terror and strife. Remnants of Janie's identity surface in the space of the in-between, tucked in the overlap of one story upon another.

In considering the ways that representative tensions and the networks of narrative relationships negotiated by *First They Killed My Father* form a version of fragmented storytelling that challenges the overlap between the collective and the individual, it is helpful to

consider Thien's intentions to represent a genocide outside her direct cultural or lived experience through the narrative pathways offered by fiction. Published in Canada in 2011, and later released in the United States in 2017, Thien describes her second novel as a method of understanding the seemingly inexplicable. I've described the disaster as so massive in its descent and so immense in its impact, that it resists containment in narrative form, the structure collapsing under the strain of representation, the shattered story inexplicable, incongruent, too complex. In an interview with *The Tyee's* Fiona Tinwei Lam in 2011, Thien insists that "one of the most dismissive things we can say is that the genocide was madness and cannot be understood; this response negates all of the history, Cambodia's and our own, that led up to 1975" (Thien, qtd. in Lam). In a special report of York University's *Canadian Writers in Person* series of public readings, Thien acknowledges that "no book or language could encompass the genocide, it's simply impossible" (Thien, qtd. in Cornish). However, the spaciousness and agency afforded in fiction to "find that exit" for her characters, escape routes that may not exist in the reality of genocide, offers a representation of the "splintered interior" of her main character, a survivor and witness to the "madness" of disaster. Though Thien is not Cambodian and acknowledges the complexity of writing and representing a history that is not her own, she approaches the writing of the novel as a responsibility, recognizing, at the time, a lack of fictional representations of the Cambodian genocide. Explaining her choice to write about the genocide in fiction, Thien says,

In the end, I felt there was something about this fragmentation of the self—these histories that somehow stayed separate from one another but were intertwined in the minds and memories of individuals—that fiction could speak to. I hoped that *Dogs at the Perimeter* would be able to stand behind the historical and witnessing books, to say that

all of us have a stake in understanding what happened there, that we are all connected to it. (Thien "Making Fragments Whole")

Thien's fictional rendering of the Cambodian genocide represents the "fragmentation of the self" by channeling a multiplicity of perspectives and experiences through a central narrative voice, Janie's perspective, where a network of seemingly disparate characters, also impacted by the genocide, collapse into Janie's interior world. Thien places her novel—or hopes to—alongside "historical and witnessing books," as another essential act of witnessing, understanding, and processing, fiction offering an alternate, connective form of communication between survivors, witnesses, and second-hand witnesses who encounter the genocide from the periphery, but experience it in some form, from within.

In a similar way, Ung expresses her intentions for *First They Killed My Father* in her Author's Note at the beginning of the text. She writes,

From 1975 to 1979—through execution, starvation, disease, and forced labor—the Khmer Rouge systematically killed an estimated two million Cambodians, almost a fourth of the country's population. This is a story of survival: my own and my family's. Though these events constitute my experience, my story mirrors that of millions of Cambodians. If you had been living in Cambodia during this period, this would be your story too. (Ung, "Author's Note" xi)

Ung's introductory note shifts from a third-person, detached witnessing that describes the collective impact of the Khmer Rouge on Cambodia as a whole, the "two million Cambodians" a collective unit of suffering, to a first-person declaration of her family's experience, a testimonial of their survival ("my own and my family's,") to a second-person direct address of the reader implicating the outsider witness as an invested participant and calling upon their empathic

responsibility (“this would be your story too”). Ung’s note drapes a connective web over the individual and the collective, a thread drawn between the intimacy of the individual experience and the massive resonance and impact of genocide on the collective. In both texts, the disastrous impact of concerted human-to-human violence eradicates the intimate, the individual story replicated but also lost and diluted among millions. As we encountered in Chapter One, in an environment of massive loss, the intimate, the personal, the particularities of the individual experience of loss, provide the most vital route of access to the disaster. Again and again, the profound importance of the individual amidst the vastness of the disaster surfaces, a reflexive return to the minute, echoing Danilo Kiš’s call for the tangibility of human experience amidst the colossal overwhelm of numbers too vast to comprehend. I return to Kiš’s call for literature as the concretizing matter of atrocity throughout history. He writes in *Homo Poeticus*, “I believe that literature must correct History: History is general, literature concrete; History is manifold, literature individual. History shows no concern for passion, crime, or numbers. What is the meaning of ‘six million dead’ (!) if you don’t see an individual face or body—if you don’t hear an individual story?” (206). When the disaster eradicates the intimate, the intimate forms the essential pathway toward the wound, and it is here that agency within the atrocity emerges. In this chapter, I argue that Ung constructs this movement through disaster and navigates the disaster space of *unfolding* and *loss* through (1) a centering of the child as witness, victim, and mediator whose split narrative voice mirrors the reader’s act of intentional witnessing to access the central wound of the atrocity and (2) the narrativization of what I term “phantom witnessing” when the child-narrator meets the limits of their knowing and a “phantom witness” appears at the juncture between the known and unknown to create a pathway of agency through the extremes of the atrocity. Throughout, the body serves as access to a corporeal “intimate” that emerges

through the complete collapse of the domestic realm and the atrocity's shattering of the self. Together, both texts inhabit a newly constructed space where the narrative must exist in a realm between fiction and nonfiction to encapsulate the shattered story—the geopolitical disaster, the atrocity—a story that resists the act of telling, the extremes of human-to-human violence treading the absolute limits of comprehension. Ultimately, this signals the nature of disaster as an ever-increasing loss that constantly transmutes the disaster as something ever-changing, an unfixed and unfixable entity that cannot be rooted through narrative, through words, or even the moveability of thought. In the shattered story, the dread space extends on and on, until it settles into a dispirited normal, a detachment from human feeling where we rest in embittered, justified dejection: nothing stops the disaster—it keeps arriving.

The Expectations of Representation

The extremes of the atrocity narrative represent a conflation of the ordinary and the extraordinary where our current reality, as Seymour Krim writes, “has become so extravagant in its contradictions, absurdities, violence, speed of change, science-fictional technology, weirdness and constant unfamiliarity” (qtd. in Zavarzadeh 70) that the traditional framework of the fictive novel can no longer sustain the weight of such a fractured, fantastical reality. The atrocity narrative cultivates a pathway through the extreme and yet, the unnavigable reality of our everyday, “normal” existence, the unending approach of disaster after disaster, the circuitous, cyclical onslaught of historical strife cannot be stopped or contained, nor can we navigate it. And so, what does the writer do?

In his book *The Mythopoeic Reality: The Postwar American Nonfiction Novel*, Mas'ud Zavarzadeh proposes that a new landscape of “narrative energy” (“Preface”) emerged after the extreme nature of World War II cultivated new realities. These new realities required a new

literary form that resisted the response of the “mono-narrative” which, based on traditional values to make order out of chaos is insufficient in a world where the chaos is too chaotic, too horrific, too expansive, to be brought into any sense of meaningful order. Meaning itself is no longer an end goal; it is inconsequential. Zavarzadeh posits that the traditional novel no longer serves the needs of our new realities and that the emergence of the nonfiction novel which “replaces ‘interpretation’ with a ‘transcription’ of naked facts” (224) is the most ideal form of response to the extreme. Extreme situations like Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Dresden, or My Lai demand more than the search for “anthropomorphic meaning” (94) where the writer and her drive for purpose is placed alongside the reader and her desire for meaning as the central thrust of a narrative. Instead, it is the nonfiction novel and the way that it “acknowledges the discontinuity of facts,” (94) and resists the writer’s urge to make order from chaos that is a truer account of the extreme.

I hesitate to place Ung’s *First They Killed My Father* in this unconscious middle-space between fiction and non-fiction. Ung’s narrative strategies highlight her simultaneous role as survivor, witness, record-keeper, and writer, and the contentious nature of the atrocity as a force that defies *knowing*. Ung’s narrative approach—mixed perspectives, creative expositions to fill in memory “blanks,” and the perspective of her child-self as first-hand witness—create a record of Ung’s processing of the extreme as a volatile, changeable experience that resists the comprehensive whole. Ung does not write from a place of detached observation; rather, her text channels and records the process of her *trying* to navigate the shattered story of her childhood experiences under the Khmer Rouge. Her attempt to narrativize the extremes of her experience to fit within the confines of a cohesive narrative structure creates a disjointed whole where narrative gaps, mismatched perspectives, and blurred contextual information form a truer representation of

the shattered story. Ung's narrative process tries to meet the desire for a narrative whole but instead resists it because the processing of her experience cannot function within a rote structure. In addition, her position as an individual of Chinese-Khmer descent raised among the "urban-elite" (Tuon 109) conflicts with the need for any collective representation to address the complexities of positionality, which Ung does not directly do.

In her Author's Note at the beginning of the text, Ung characterizes her narrative as a dual-function representation that though embedded in her individual experience, could reflect the experience of a multitude of other Cambodians. She writes, "Though these events constitute my experience, my story mirrors that of millions of Cambodians. If you had been living in Cambodia during this period, this would be your story too" (Ung, "Author's Note" xi). Though Ung attempts to unite her individual experience with the experience of "millions of Cambodians," rather than an indication of her desire to be a representative voice, her Author's Note serves as a method of connecting the individual with the collective, and directly confronts the reader to act as an active witness and participant rather than simply an observer or worse, a passive consumer of her story. Ung's choice to narrate her experience through the perspective of her child self is deliberate.

By considering Ung's memoir a misrepresentation that "ignore[s] reality in preference for telling a more easily digestible story" (Lay 179), Lay dismisses Ung's visceral processing and articulation of the atrocity's impact on the five-year-old child's body, psyche, and spirit, and discards her narrativization of the extreme as a desire to shock and titillate the general readership and gain commercial success and advantage. I agree that when a single text takes precedence in the public consciousness, especially when that text seeks to represent an underrepresented culture and its wounds, it can inadvertently silence lesser-known voices that also form essential

aspects of the fragmented whole. Lay's understanding of Ung's narrative as a "some kind of literary Frankenstein" where she "unearthed, butchered, and put back together" (Lay 182) the Cambodian tragedy for her own benefit strikes at a difficult place of contention. In "Inaccuracy and Testimonial Literature: The Case of Loung Ung's *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers*" Bunkong Tuon contends that Ung's narrative cannot balance "her psychological need for healing with the political duty to speak on behalf of the Cambodian people." Tuon writes, "Ung's need to work through the traumas originating in the Cambodian genocide, what I call her *emotional truth*, often overshadows her responsibility to represent accurately what happened under the Khmer Rouge regime, that is, *factual truth*" (108). The demand for legalistic, factual "truths" imposes a legally focused lens on the form of the memoir where the melding of emotional and factual truths creates a narrative that sits in the uncomfortable space of the in-between. From here, Ung writes first for the individual—herself—and then for the collective—the reader as witness. In this greyed-out space of the in-between, Ung channels the perspective of her child-self and stitches a "story of survival" (Ung, "Author's Note" xi) where the child narrator functions as the record-keeper and the channeler of the things that happened as they happened. This perspective functions viscerally; Ung's narration processes as it records, the text representing the atrocity as the force that shatters the child and splits comprehensibility into a thing we can only absorb in pieces. This "literary Frankenstein" of mixed perspectives, melding of emotional and factual truths, and fill-in-the-blank imaginings forms a representation of the shattered story that centers the experience of the individual as a form of truth telling; if we understand the child in the atrocity, then we understand what the atrocity does.

Witnessing Atrocity: Survivor Representations, Witness Interpretations

In the winter of 2016, I visited Cambodia for a brief, four-day exploration of Siem Reap, a city in the northwestern part of the country and the site of the Siem Reap Killing Fields. Here I encountered the Cambodian War Museum. I entered the museum space with vague, mirage-like knowledge of the country's brutal history, just as a naïve reader might pick up a novel or memoir about Cambodia while browsing bookstore shelves. Our collective cultural consciousness marked the genocide as a significant point in Cambodian history, the vastness of extreme violence and the testimony of visual images—piles of bones and bodies—transmitted across borders via television screens, triggering our collective memory of mass human extermination. It compelled witnessing at an international scale. The sheer magnitude and depth of the disaster itself transmuted the boundary between borders and between the individual and the collective. The individual, eating dinner on a weekday night in front of the television, or picking up a newspaper from the doorstep, encountered massive human devastation in much the same way as news of a tsunami, earthquake, hurricane, or other disaster appears as front-page news and disrupts the equilibrium of our consciousness. Always, there exists a cognizance of the ever-arriving disaster, an expectation of it even as we dread it. Someplace, somewhere in the world, something happens and we know it, though we resist the knowing. For a time, resistance helps uphold a protective barrier around our consciousness, the sanctity of our individual sense of safety and peace prioritized against an almost constant influx of disaster-related news. The atrocities that ravaged Cambodia from 1975 to 1979 extended onward from a civil war that began in 1967. The massive loss of human life and the complicity of international powers echoed the visual imagery of other world events: in the last several decades, how many ditches had we seen filled with bodies? How many open-mouthed skulls? How much desecration of flesh and bone? How much had we already witnessed and what more was to come?

My entry into this space marked a passive witnessing of an act of massive violence. I walked the pathway of an outdoor exhibit of leftover weaponry from the war—tanks, guns, and landmines set in a grove of trees—navigating a strange in-between space where I tentatively took on the role of an uncertain witness. What was I looking at? What was I meant to understand? I stood before a tank and stared at it. Flecked with bullet holes, it functioned as a transitional object meant to take me from here to someplace else, a place of metal against flesh, of war, of death, of pain, of terror. A museum guide led us through the trees into a shelter that held a display of guns set in a circle in the center of the room. Placards with photographs of landmine victims lined the walls and I slowly moved through the room scanning the text. The guide allowed us to hold a gun, and I disliked the feeling of it; was I playacting? For what undefined purpose did I need to feel the weight of a gun in my hands, its muzzle against my shoulder? The artifact of *place* transmitted something visceral but fragmentary through me; the land itself yielded something desolate and I felt discomfited, as if I sought to understand something from a place of distant and detached safety. I flew across oceans to land in a country not my own and laid my hand against the soft and dusty earth, reverberations of something desolate and anguished vibrating at a steady rhythm beneath my palm. The museum guide explained things—the war, the landmines, the anguish of combat—my memory dissipates. But at the end of his presentation, the guide lifts a pant leg and reveals the metal of an artificial leg. Lost to a landmine, the absent leg, its metal replacement, and the look of amused knowing on the guide's face revealed a quiet and purposeful orchestration of a narrative link where the human body as artifact urges the latecomer witness to emerge from a state of passivity to one of active witnessing: out there, the metal artifacts of disaster lay silent in a flush of grass under the gentle shade of gnarled trees. And here, this is the body before me, the survivor, the human against the impact, the bigness of the disaster

suddenly minute, viscerally intimate, present, and alive.

Later, we pass by a bookshop and browse the shelves; this is where I encounter *First They Killed My Father*; the paperback edition compact, the pages so thin the text appears slightly blurred. I wonder if these copies arrived as bootlegged versions of the original and I wonder what it means to access representations of your own history through black market book routes because the original lies too far out of reach. I'm reminded of the black-market book stalls in Dhaka, Bangladesh, a country that emerged from famine, cyclone, flooding, and a brutal civil war in 1971, where bootlegged copies of every classic cram the shelves of shops, some copies better than others, the prints almost indistinguishable from the original. Other copies feature misaligned text, blurred print lines, and shoddy binding, the point being, that you can read it if you try, and at the end of the day, the words still appear on the page, the stories still survive. Prior to our visit to the war museum, our driver, upon request, takes us to the Genocide Museum in Siem Reap, one of the sites of the killing fields, where the Khmer Rouge killed, buried, or left to decay massive numbers of Cambodians during the Pol Pot regime. I step out of the tuk-tuk into an outdoor courtyard and my eyes land on a display of skulls in a box shielded with glass. I later learn that these glassed-in bones form memorial stupas that hold the exhumed remains of Cambodian lives taken during Pol Pot's regime. Every year, during rainfalls, the earth yields fragments of bone and scraps of clothing from bodies yet undiscovered, and museum workers collect and archive the ever-onward influx of remains. These sites, visited by tourists from around the world, function as sites of testimony, where the tourist enters as an observer, then negotiates a position of witnessing. I relate my experience of travel in Cambodia and my encounter with my copy of *First They Killed My Father* as a method of inquiry into the wayfinding to and through the geopolitical disaster by the latecomer and second-hand witness. In

attempting to encounter, let alone understand, the disaster as an atrocity—the mass killing, the genocide—the path of the witness moves circuitous through territories of death and survival. The moral positioning of the witness as an outsider requesting access to the collective wound determines how one “makes sense” of the extremes of human cruelty. The tourist as witness works in similar ways as the reader as witness, where we question the function of the site as we would the function of the literary text. We might make the intention to visit a site of historical significance, but once inside, once we walk the pathways between tanks, guns, and fragments of bone, we might question our presence, our utility as individuals up against the edge of a profound collective wound. Before attempting to understand, or “make sense,” we pick up the book to gain entry to a site of collective trauma that may not be our own. We close the book, we leave the site, and the psychosomatic experience of holding what we witness forms an internal *upheaval*, where we enter the cavernous space of empathic loss. In considering the narrative, we may also consider what it might mean, and what it might tell us about ourselves, about one another, about the relentless, churning nature of the disaster as a connective force that compels witnessing. The narrativizing of the geopolitical disaster, and particularly, the atrocity, invites the witnessing of the outsider; it works as a call to purposeful internal upheaval where the individual moves with intention *toward* the disaster instead of existing in the paralytic state of dread against it. In a state of massive atrocity and loss, the individual dissipates in an unending sea of victims—between 1.5 and 3 million people died during the Cambodian genocide—the intimate, the individual, eradicated. *First They Killed My Father* narrativizes this collective loss and in doing so, transforms the intimate into an essential tool for connectivity. The individual, through intimacy as a connective force, dispels the massive, impenetrable, and often incomprehensible weight of large-scale, geopolitical disaster. When the intimate is eradicated in disaster, it also

becomes essential.

In *Atrocity: A Literary History*, Bruce Robbins traces the history of the literary representation of atrocity, a term he uses to describe acts of mass violence perpetrated by humans against other humans, focusing particularly on “representations of atrocity that have been committed by one’s own people” (xiii). Though Robbins’ definition of atrocity includes “large-scale killing of defenseless civilians and prisoners of war” (14), his study fixates on the question of morality and the moral indignation we feel when we witness the atrocity from afar, whether geographically or through time, and especially the “national self-indictments” (xiii) when the perpetrators of the atrocity turn out to be our own people. This fixation on the question of morality gestures to how the moral indignation of a witness provides a “clean” pathway through the wound. When the extremes of violence overwhelm, we cling to absolutes of “good” and “evil” to provide clear-cut visions of where we can stand as witness. The absolutes provide shelter as we walk, sometimes literally, through the remains of massive violence, the profoundness, the sublime nature of such immense, but specific cruelty shocking us to such a degree, we reach for the clarity of the binary—right, wrong, justified, unjustified—to keep us fixed in a position of surface control. Moral positioning becomes a tool of navigation through the extreme, but also a shield against the drive inward to a place of inner un/knowning. This inner space, like the space of dread, yields the terror of the in-between, where we desire to make sense of the disaster, but cannot. Instead, we meet the limits of human understanding; we do not know our own nature, our own capabilities, our own capacity to willfully enact the extreme. And if we do, or if we begin to, we descend into a kind of ambivalence where the horrors of human-orchestrated violence play out as norms in the progress of human history.

Robbins discusses the “resistance to the historicizing of atrocity” as a spectrum between

two ways of thinking of and representing atrocity. He writes,

On the one hand, the unspeakable awfulness of massacres puts them in or near the category of the sublime, as if challenging and even incapacitating the categories on which we ordinarily rely to make such sense of life as we can. They defy comprehensibility itself...On the other hand, there is the idea, rearticulated at the highest period of imperialism by its most fervent champions, that the struggle to conquer or be conquered is eternal, and in modern times only the scale has changed...(19)

This spectrum places geopolitical disasters, or atrocity, as either an extraordinary event that defies comprehension, or as a terrible, but ordinary progression of human expansion and survival. At one end, the individual stands at the edge of the collective wound, their foundation dismantled, the “categories” of comprehension insufficient, even destroyed. At the other end, the endless onslaught of violent massacre in the name of conquest functions as a collective continuum where the individual matters only as part of the collective; the individual acts as perpetrator, victim, or bystander witness within a larger campaign of un/justified conquest. The disaster narrative, and by extension, the atrocity narrative, emerges between these two states, but as an active force of narrativization, Robbins contends that “good atrocity writing” (20) includes explanation: “while letting the chaos in, it doesn’t keep explanation out” (20). This explanation of the atrocity, according to Robbins, must contextualize the event and balance moral indignation by providing historical explanation. Otherwise, when moral indignation takes center stage, context and explanation absent, sentimentality abounds and obscures something deeper that atrocity can tell us. Robbin writes that the “discourses of human rights humanitarianism sometimes seem intent on displaying a sensitivity to suffering that is so relentlessly expansive that it escalates itself out of existence” (22) seemingly suggesting that in focusing on the

suffering without a narrative hand guiding the reader to a *point*, the sensitivity does not do its intended job, which is, to communicate *something*. What is that something? For Robbins, the atrocity story ignites in the witness, a transition from one state of being to another: “For better or worse...that is the point about atrocity stories. They are events which, rightly or wrongly, make for real-life (and real *life*) transitions...” (25). In addition, Robbins suggests that moral indignation requires tempering, not erasure: “Assuming that there is no account of atrocity without some account of blame for it, we can also assume that good writing about atrocity will do just that—will complicate blame, taking it beyond the simple binary of evil perpetrator and innocent victim, without doing away with blame altogether” (24). Without this complication, moral indignation creates an atmosphere of indulgence where “liberal sentimentality is held to be merely a form of self-pleasuring, when the indignant witness to atrocity is held to be guilty of *enjoying* that atrocity” (22). The question of the survivor or the witness “profiting” from the disaster poses an intriguing question about the function of the atrocity narrative. Does the survivor benefit from the public telling of their experience? Undoubtedly, yes. A survivor’s telling through both formal and informal means invokes an experience of immediate witnessing, which transmutes an isolated experience of individual suffering into one of communal reception. The telling of a traumatic experience through the structural supports of narrative positions the survivor’s experience as both a powerful act of expressive testimony, as well as the active processing of a wound that though experienced as an individual, may also “belong” to the public, especially in instances of mass atrocity. As a survivor contends with their individual wound in a public forum, they place it in the hands of a witnessing public that may scrutinize it as much as they may identify with it, or *because* they identify with it. Certainly, the publication of Ung’s *First They Killed My Father* brought with it international fame, acclaim, and domination of

collective cultural space that holds knowledge about Cambodia. The adaptation of Ung's narrative into a feature-length film directed by international star, Angelina Jolie, further pushed Ung's work into the collective consciousness. This kind of "benefit" positions Ung, in the eyes of some critics, as the recipient of undeserved fame and attention because the narrative itself lacks or seemingly misrepresents the cultural and historical context necessary to understand the original intentions of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and therefore, prevents a full understanding of the impact of the genocide. Ung, through the lens of her child-self, narrates events in a stream of consciousness that very acutely places blame on the perpetrators of the violence she and her family face, while eliminating the kind of cultural context that, according to Ung's critics and Robbins, creates a "good" atrocity narrative. Structurally, Ung's narrative moves in strict chronological order, relating events from April 1975, when the initial takeover of Phnom Penh by the Khmer Rouge took place, to February 1980, when Ung travels to Lam Sing Refugee camp in Thailand. This chronological, step-by-step progressive narrative structure provides a scaffold for the development of the text, the paratextual information that appears before the written narrative itself—the table of contents, Ung's author's note, a diagram of her family tree, a topographic map of Cambodia and surrounding countries—offer ways for the reader to orient themselves amidst the sheer overwhelm of information to come. Though these signposts have an historicizing effect and may promise, in the words of one reviewer, "...a straightforward, unblinking account" (qtd. in Ung) the nature of the atrocity that Ung endures overwhelms the structural design and her choice to narrate from a deeply embedded child perspective and voice creates a misalignment between the critic's desire for a historicized, contextual rendering and the survivor's commitment to a visceral process of re-telling. Repeated forced and unexpected movement from one location to the next, prolonged, agonizing journeys

on foot over unknown expanses of land, arduous labour and extreme starvation, death by starvation, labour, or execution, intense psychological and physical abuse of young siblings, invading forces that both threaten and liberate—all this bears an unsustainable weight on the intended chronological structure and results in 27 chapters that stagger forward through time at uneven intervals, the rise and fall of action stretched out into a continuum of prolonged, intensely detailed narration characterized by a split narrative consciousness.

Similarly, reviewers have both praised and critiqued the fragmented structure of Thien's novel, where the narration does not dwell or expand upon historical context in any significant way, and instead, constructs the narrative through fragmentations and “blanks” that form a representation of the shattered consciousness of a witness to genocide. In contrast to Ung's narrative, Thien approaches the shattered story through a non-chronological narrative progression that moves back and forth in time. Thien's narrator, Janie, accesses the genocide—an event she lived through as a child—through inserted “fragments” that act as historical documents representing the fragmented reality of her present-day life. Slips in memory pull the narrative voice back in time, melding past and present voices in a foggy, boundaryless movement that embeds into her child-self and then releases back into her adult perspective. The novel begins with a disappearance and appears through the articulation of a precise date followed by a descriptor—“fragment”—followed again by another date:

Saturday, February 18

[fragment]

On November 29, 2005, my friend Dr. Hiroji Matsui walked out of Montreal's Brain Research Centre at 7:29 in the evening. On the security video, his expression gives nothing away. For a brief moment, the camera captures him in passing...He exits through

a side door, down a flight of metal steps. And then Hiroji walked into the city and disappeared into air. (Thien, *Dogs* 1)

We move with uncertain stops and starts, unsure of where we stand in narrative time. The first official “chapter” of the novel begins in the section that follows, entitled “Janie.” Here, we begin again, embedded within a consciousness we do not yet know (who wrote the fragment we first encountered?) observing someone we do not yet see: “They sleep early and rise in the dark. It is winter now” (5). We begin with an indirect use of the pronoun “They”—we do not know who “they” are and enter the narrative disconnected from the previous fragment—who is the speaker of “my friend”? In the next few lines, the speaker visualizes her seven-year old son, observing his movements through visions in her memory as she sits in her car outside their home—her home—the fragmentation of her domestic sphere, a concept I explore in detail in Chapter Two, forming the midpoint of her story, and the starting point for the reader. Later, as Janie hunkers down in the abandoned apartment of her friend Hiroji, she slips into memory: “I remember floating, a child on the sea, alone in the Gulf of Thailand. My brother is gone, but I am looking up at the white sky and I believe, somehow, that I can call him back” (5). This marks the entry-point, via a fragmentary memory, into a disaster that forms the narrator’s past. It’s a clue; the reader walks on unsteady ground aware that this slip back in time signifies a traumatic loss, that our narrator’s separation from her son somehow links to her separation at sea from her brother, and that her presence in the empty apartment of a man gone missing tells us something about the absence of something integral in her.

The desire expressed by critics for a more fulsome representation of the atrocity, reflects a desire for narrative to act as a guiding force through the extreme, or for it to lay out, with no question or confusion, the brutality of the acts so that they *can* be witnessed. Thien’s fragmentary

approach demands a complicated form of witnessing where the reader does not readily absorb a fully contextualized, historicized representation, but must participate in a “resolving” of the narrated self through fragmented representation. And so, how does Thien, as writer, and second-hand witness, “benefit” from this kind of fragmentary representation? And, is it “indulgent” for us as readers to interact with these texts through a moralistic lens? Do we take part in a form of indulgent, moralistic self-righteousness in reading the atrocity narrative and expressing condemnation?

The vehement criticism Ung faced for her reliance on childhood memory to depict her experience reveals less an issue with the accuracy of representation and more a tension-wrought expectation of what we believe the atrocity memoir, and more specifically, the testimonial narrative, *should* do. Lay condemns Ung’s memoir as sensational and overdramatized because Ung’s young age at the time of the takeover of Phnom Penh—just five—proves her “‘memory’ is suspect, and her book seems to be based more on imagination than any kind of real memory” (173). Lay’s review assesses two other narratives⁷ about the Cambodian genocide, both published in the year 2000, the same year as *First They Killed My Father*. All three texts relate the events of the genocide, but according to Lay, do a more accurate job of representation. Lay writes, “Thankfully, the stories narrated by Him and Kravanh seem to be more clearly based on true recollection, and memory gaps, if any, are at least filled with culturally and historically accurate facts. The stories of these latter two narrators contain subtleties that characterize real life experiences and give color to the darkness of the Killing Fields” (173). Lay’s desire for the atrocity narrative to seep “color” into the “darkness of the Killing Fields” aligns with Robbins’s characterization of the “good” atrocity narrative that provides thoughtful reflection of root

⁷ *Music Through the Dark: A Tale of Survival in Cambodia* by Bree Lafreniere, as told by Daran Kravanh; *When Broken Glass Floats* by Chanrithy Him.

causes, cultural and historical context, and nuanced interrogations into the complex drive behind acts of mass, human orchestrated violence. Lay's dissatisfaction with Ung's narrative stems from an abhorrence to a narrative voice that prioritizes the unilateral perspective of her child-self, a perspective dependent on her specific domestic atmosphere, where her family's relative state of wealth and status did not reflect the state of constant threat, strife, and upheaval that most of the Cambodian population, and particularly, the Khmer people faced. The racial privilege of Ung's Chinese mother, and her father's role as a high-ranking government official, obscures Ung's child-gaze from the narrative complexity and comprehensiveness of a more conflicted socio-cultural-political position. When Ung does step into a pseudo-omniscient narrative gaze, it stays steeped in the sphere of her child and family experience. Her third-person narrative perspective, an opportunity perhaps, in Robbins's and Lay's vision of the atrocity narrative, to provide historically accurate context, provides instead, a singular, individual experience. Rather than a multi-faceted perspective that provides collective representation of a whole, Ung amplifies the intensity of the individual experience and in moments of profound trauma, depends upon the binary of good/evil to tether the self to a survivable reality.

Lay's critique calls for a comprehensive narrative that functions as a representative whole; his fixation on the need for historical and factual accuracy combined with objective characterizations rather than representations of recollections rooted in an individual emotional experience, points to an important consideration when assessing atrocity narratives that function as testimony in the public sphere. He writes, "My indignation against misrepresentations of the Khmer Rouge period is therefore both personal and professional. A story based on fabrications lacks pedagogical value and reflects a lack of personal moral value. It demeans the experiences of survivors and offends the memory of lost loved ones" (181). Lay's characterization of Ung's

factual missteps—Ung recalls a family trip to Angkor Wat having occurred during a year where the site lay steeped in conflict and therefore, a trip during this time would be impossible; she miscalculates the Angkorian period in Cambodia and characterizes the temples of Angkor Wat as monuments of “self-glorification” by Khmer Kings rather than as essential components of Khmer heritage (Tuon 107)—signals his understanding of Ung’s memoir as an egregious act of misconduct in the realm of testimonial literature. Ung’s distancing of herself from Khmer culture, her filtering of cultural monuments through a lens of cultural bias or personal interpretation, in conjunction with inaccuracies in historical detail transforms into a form of representative threat for Lay, where the text is now “A story based on fabrications” and “lacks pedagogical value” and further, “reflects a lack of personal moral value” (Lay 181). As a Cambodian living outside of Cambodia, Lay understands Ung’s text as a personal affront and as an act of negligence against the Cambodian community. However, Ung writes as a Cambodian-American and a former refugee, having escaped Cambodia during the genocide, finding refuge in the United States, and writing her memoir from the position of a direct witness who leaves her country to survive.

The testimonial narrative is a contentious and fragile form because of its very real impact on the legal proceedings that hold perpetrators responsible for orchestrating and carrying out atrocities. The testimonial narrative, if carefully documented and “absolutely accurate” form critical evidence against those responsible. In “Inaccuracy and Testimonial Literature: The Case of Loung Ung’s *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers*,” Bunkong Tuon explains the link between testimonial literature, the representation of victims, and the political effort to bring perpetrators to justice. He writes,

These writers are survivors of the Cambodian genocide, writing to an international

audience, bearing witness to the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge regime, and presenting their work as evidence against those responsible for the genocide... In order for writing by survivors of the Cambodian genocide to be effective as evidence against the Khmer Rouge leaders, it must be absolutely accurate in its portrayal of life under the regime. As legal documents, they derive their power from their adherence to truth. (Tuon 110)

Memoir as testimonial literature carries the profound burden as well as the opportunity to act as evidence in the public space of the war tribunal. The factual inaccuracy in one text, no matter how small, affects how the public perceives other testimonials, their trustworthiness cast under a shadow of doubt when one text fails to meet specific standards required for testimonial witnessing. Though these standards vary, legal and judicial expectations for consistency and accuracy often fail to capture the nuance of processing through art forms. In addition, the anxiety surrounding the accurate representation of Khmer culture and its complexities roots itself in a landscape of knowledge scarcity. Lay writes, “The Cambodian tragedy remains something of a mystery for many people and for them these books may represent the totality of their knowledge. Promoting misinformation is therefore dangerous as well as insulting to the experience of millions of Cambodians who toiled in misery and perished in the Killing Fields” (182). At the time of the publication of these texts, Lay perceives Cambodia and its tragedy as an outlier, unknown in the general collective consciousness. When a scarcity of representation of a people, their culture, and the tragedy they suffered exists, *any* representation carries significant weight and almost automatically influences general perceptions. The collective cannot benefit from a multiplicity of narratives that provide a diversity of experience and perspective simply because only a limited number of these narratives exist. Therefore, any representation that exists should, in this view, perform a service to the collective. This means that any narrative about the

Cambodian genocide carries with it the responsibility of objective representation rather than subjective service. Ung's text, immersed in a subjective perspective that drifts in and out of a constructed omniscient perspective as a method of wayfinding rather than a comprehensive representation, serves her as an individual processing her trauma, and in doing so, Lay believes, harms the collective. Lay contends that Ung benefits from her narrative through her commercial success, her memoir the most publicized and well-known of the three, and therefore the most integrated into our collective consciousness. Lay goes so far as to characterize Ung as "an entrepreneur willing to sacrifice honestly[sic] and integrity to sell tragedy" (Lay 181). Lay's critique hinges on Ung harbouring a personal and moral deficiency that compels her to prioritize celebrity through sensationalization. Lay's contention, however, roots itself in conflating Ung's historical/contextual blurriness with outright falsehood, where he understands her depiction of severely traumatic events as an attempt at shocking an audience to garner attention instead of a representation of what it might feel like for a child to absorb the extremes of atrocity. Lay's vehement rejection of Ung's narrative choices, of melding factual and emotional truths (Tuon 108), originates in a fervent desire for the public to bear witness to a whole and complete version of events that comprehensively represents the Cambodian genocide experience. The individual, in this version of testimonial literature, expresses their experience, but tempers it, contextualizes it, provides retrospective reflection that shows that "good and evil is not black and white, just as in reality it is not" (Lay 179). Lay's re-framing of Ung's narrative as a desire for commercial success and advantage sidesteps the complexity of how representation can work in literature about atrocity. In "Cultural Memory: A European Perspective" Vita Fortunati and Elena Lamberti expand on the idea of "contested memory" first introduced in their study of traumatic memories in World War I and World War II. In this initial study, they set out to "question the

very act of bearing witness by combining macro and micro history, as well as the forms and times of testimony (134). They suggest that memory functions as a force of fluidity rather than as a static determination. They write about the idea of a “non-monolithic memory...a more fluid memory” where “The process of memory and recollection is always the result of an interaction which, at times, is marked by strife juxtaposing the individual and the group” (129). The collective might benefit from a richly contextualized narrative that serves the intrinsic need for wholeness in the face of the unthinkable, where the atrocity narrative cuts a pathway through the shattered story to form an understanding of the *how* and the *why* of the absolute extremes of human-orchestrated violence. When encountering the unthinkability of the shattered story, its fragmented incomprehensibility drives a need for the reader as witness and the bystander witness to form a fragmented whole through an analytical scope; we want to use the atrocity narrative as a clarifying tool that will unearth sense from the senseless. We want literature to do the important work of filtration; let us bear witness *and* help us understand how this happened. The incomprehensible must be comprehended.

Robbins acknowledges that no account of atrocity can exist without the presence of blame. However, he contends that a good atrocity narrative will not sink into moral indignation, but will, rather, as previously quoted, “complicate blame, taking it beyond the simple binary of evil perpetrator and innocent victim, without doing away with blame altogether” (24). Both Ung and Thien write from a place of singular focus—the “self” as the primary battleground of genocide. Their narratives emanate from the representation of a shattered self. Here, in the state of vacuous loss, the individual stands at the center of the conflict, and the mind, the body, and consciousness itself serve as the grounds upon which the atrocity carves its map of devastation. From this individualized place, the narrativization of the atrocity in both texts forms an image of

the whole. The reader witnesses the disaster in sync with the narrator's consciousness; we sit so close that we inhabit the narrator's consciousness, but we also inhabit the unique position of a distant witness, as if looking down from a plane at a grid of twinkling city lights, the fragmentation forming a whole. The objective of both texts does not reside in a desire to form a singular representative narrativization of the experience of genocide in Cambodia. Through the figure of the individual as survivor, both texts aim to represent the impact of the genocide as a force that shatters the self. They understand the genocide from singular perspectives, but these perspectives form parts of an expansive whole comprised of a multitude of narratives, testimonies, and representations. As unique and individual works, they inform the whole, communicate with it, and challenge the desire for the atrocity narrative, and by extension, the disaster narrative, to act as a comprehensive whole. Robbins's criteria for "a good atrocity narrative" signifies a desire for wholeness, where moral indignation in the form of black and white thinking, of evil vs good, oversimplifies the atrocity and dismisses the nuance, depth, and comprehensiveness of human-driven disaster. Robbins asserts that the capability to commit atrocity is *not* unique to an individual, to a people, to a dynasty. Rather, that the capability exists in every context, and in every people, and is inherent to the human drive to conquer or retaliate. The context, Robbins argues, proves essential to understanding how the atrocity unfolds, why it happens, and what it tells us about being human. In this way, the "good atrocity narrative" provides a "truer" account of atrocity, comprehensive and whole, whereas the singular account that hinges on moral indignation only scratches the surface.

I certainly agree. The balance of visceral experience with a retrospective narrative voice tempers the extremes of feeling using historical background and contextual complexities to provide a comprehensive representation; this kind of representation tempers any surface level

conclusion of atrocity as simply “evil” and helps us delve deeper into the source of conflict, external and internal, advancing us beyond the “indulgent” and instinctual response to human-driven extremes of violence to a more profound and even helpful understanding of extreme events that, though atrocious and even inconceivable, are not singular, nor unique in human history. However, I propose that though a comprehensive representation of atrocity provides a contextualized whole that serves an important and essential role in our understanding of the function of disaster narratives in literature, our tendency to temper our own discomfort of the extreme by relying on historical context as a reminder of the long history of the extremes of human violence can also omit the importance of the immediate and the visceral. Representations that rely less on historical and cultural context and function primarily as experiential narratives meant to mimic the shocking impact of the vast atrocity of genocide on the individual provide an essential function in our understanding of the extreme. To understand the wholeness of the extreme, we must understand its function both against and within the individual. Though the representation of extreme violence and trauma in both narratives can trigger a binary response where the reader channels moral indignation—*what, other than evil, could exert such horror?*—and seemingly simplify the atrocity into a binary of good versus evil, the narrative approaches of both texts serve a deeper, more important purpose.

Both narratives use the point of view of the child as witness, and employ “blanks” and fragmentations as essential aspects of storytelling, to represent the immediate, visceral, and violent dismemberment of the self at the point of impact between the disaster and the individual. In the atrocity narrative, this moment is not singular, it repeats again and again, and extends beyond any point of limitation, reaching such an extreme that it produces a purity of intense feeling—that of anguish. Anguish is a place of suffering and turmoil so deep, it breaks every

internal and external boundary that holds the world we know together; what we thought we could endure, we have, and then we meet horror anew, to a greater degree, and it hits like this, again and then again, unending. Anguish is the feared destination of dread. In the moment of horror, context and historical information serve nothing of value to the individual. We recognize this feeling in ourselves, the point when the hurt splits us in two and we cannot hold together; our reality, the world as we know it, splits and we cannot grasp what will keep us intact. The moment of anguish requires the binary as a force of clarity and as a method of survival. In the midst of atrocity, the binary, the ability to categorize, clarify, and set in order the thing that destroys us, our world as we know it, and our very sense of being, grounds the individual back into a realm of spiritual control. How do I explain the thing that renders my body uninhabitable? How do I understand the thing that infiltrates every sand speck of my being and then obliterates what I am, who I think I am, the *I* and the *am*, my very being fragmented beyond recognition? I do not know myself, I do not recognize myself, there is no *my*, there is no *self*? I arc my arms around the language that explains horror: This thing that hurts me is *evil*: this is the taxonomy of survival. It simultaneously limits and makes possible our understanding of the extreme, and in the most essential way, it provides an escape from the shattered self into the solidity of language. The representation that Ung and Thien provide reflects this essential and defining aspect of the atrocity—that it completely destroys, that it obliterates, and that the space of anguish where the horror exists, unending, requires the kind of representation that allows the reader as witness to recognize this moment as the absolute extreme of the human capacity to absorb harm.

The Child-As-Witness: Domestic Rupture and the Split Narrative Voice

Both Ung and Thien's texts approach narrative structure and perspective as an avenue of investigation into the individual's visceral experience of the extreme. The perspective of the

child-as-survivor and as witness positions the extreme against the most vulnerable. Here, the wide-eyed, observational shock of the child's gaze meets the purposeful witnessing gaze of the reader. This meeting point between the child and the reader creates a schism in our comprehension of disaster: why must the child be *here*? If the close, the minute, and the personal comprises the world of the intimate, then the child, as the issue of the deepest intimate act, and as a most vulnerable being, embodies the intimate. The child belongs in the protective boundary of the domestic realm, sheltered and shielded, enclosed in the arms of the family unit. But in these texts, as in the texts discussed previously in this dissertation, the atrocity dismembers the domestic, fractures the family unit, ruptures the child's world, and positions the child as both victim and witness to the disaster. The child's gaze channels the reader's witnessing, fusing the survivor to the witness; it is through the child, that the reader accesses the disaster. In this state, the reader embodies a dual psychic state where they experience the atrocity through the eyes of the child witness and in doing so push up against the limits of their own psychic comprehension: Again, why must the child be here? How can the child withstand such extremes of horror? In this impossible rupture, what happens to the child's small body, their elastic mind? How can this be? *The child should not be here.* In *First They Killed My Father* the perspective of the child-as-witness, in conjunction with narrative "blanks" or absences at key moments of extreme trauma articulate the shattered story as one where the atrocity shatters the child, and in doing so, eradicates the intimate, the very matter of life. The narrativization of the shattered story questions the very thing—the intimate—that adheres the individual to a sense of their own existence.

In *First They Killed My Father*, Ung's mixed narrative perspective, a combination of a third-person omniscient perspective and a first-person narration from the perspective of her

child-self, creates a split narrative experience. She relies on the intangibility of her childhood memories to chronologically and viscerally relate her individual experience of the events that, over the course of four short years, violently took the lives of 1.5 to 3 million Cambodians. The narrative voice shifts back and forth between the “all-knowing” perspective of an invested observer, to the close, visceral perspective of the child-witness, common in memoirs featuring a child narrator.⁸ The embedded perspective of the child-self compels intimacy between the reader and the narrator as child-witness, but when confronted with “blanks” in memory, the contextual and historical information that Ung’s child-self could not know, as well as the “unknowns”—the not-knowing-never-knowing inherent to genocide—Ung “fills in the blanks” with a more informed third-person narrative voice that acts as an omniscient “filler.” Ung constantly negotiates the relationship between the child as witness, the reader as witness, and her own position as a survivor experiencing retrospective witnessing. Through this entanglement of narrative perspectives, Ung channels a vital expression of volatile anguish essential to understanding the function of the atrocity as an agitator and usurper of our sense of self and our place in the world. Through the individuated perspective of her child-self, she shows how you cannot tell the story of the atrocity by bypassing the purity of the darkness it produces. The resistance to a “binary” of right/wrong and good/evil, and its characterization as an “easily digestible” atrocity story signals a desire of the collective for the shattered story to serve as an intellectual pursuit of understanding rather than a visceral process of confronting our own darkness. Ung’s fragmented narrative voice, split perspectives, and the “filling in” of the unknown cultivates an active and engaged relationship *with* the atrocity at the primal level of

⁸ I previously mentioned narratives of atrocity that feature child narrators who speak from a split-consciousness—the graphic novel, *Persepolis* and the semi-autobiographical novel *Fatelessness*. The child narrator in Alison Bechdel’s graphic-memoir, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, also narrates from a split consciousness, contending with intimate familial relationships, sexual identity, and coming-of-age.

anguish.

First They Killed My Father opening lines settle the reader into the city of Phnom Penh, beginning, as I've established in Chapter One, as many disaster texts do, with vivid depictions of a pre-onset state of normalcy. Through a third-person omniscient point of view that guides the reader into the text from a position of distant witnessing, Ung describes a pre-invasion Phnom Penh where the "city wakes early to take advantage of the cool morning breeze before the sun breaks through the haze and invades the country with sweltering heat" (Ung 1). Paratextual information—an "author's note," a "family chart 1975," and a map of the region under conflict showing Cambodia's borders with Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam act as contextual preparation for readers, outfitting us with tools to encounter the onset of the disaster. As discussed in Chapter Two, this paratextual information works in contention with descriptions of pre-onset settings to create an atmosphere of dread. In the atrocity text, the reader does not simply enter a pre-disaster reality of pristine normalcy; they enter a state of sustained dread that intensifies into anguish as the disaster—the dreaded thing—approaches and then comes into fruition. The opening pages move paragraph by paragraph from an omniscient perspective that provides a sweeping view of the city and its bustling life of normalcy to details that bring the city vibrantly into focus: "food carts piled with steamed dumplings, smoked beef and teriyaki sticks...Children in colorful T-shirts and shorts kick soccer balls on sidewalks with their bare feet...the wide boulevards sing with the buzz of motorcycle engines, squeaky bicycles, and, for those wealthy enough to afford them, small cars" (1). Ung builds this vibrant, colourful world in the opening paragraph and constructs a "pre-disaster" world that she meticulously dismembers through purposeful shifts in perspective that increase the intimacy between the reader and the text, while also disrupting the narrative flow. The lens zooms closer as we move from the cacophony of the public streets to the

intimate routines of Ung's family life. In the movement from the first paragraph to the second, Ung shifts from the omniscient gaze, a perspective tethered to the collective, to the first-person gaze of a child fixated on the minutiae of everyday life. The perspective shift guides the reader into a semi-private realm:

My family lives on a third-floor apartment in the middle of Phnom Penh, so I am used to the traffic and the noise. We don't have traffic lights on our streets; instead, policemen stand on raised metal boxes, in the middle of intersections directing traffic. Yet the city always seems to be one big traffic jam. My favorite way to get around with Ma is the cyclo because the driver can maneuver it in the heaviest traffic. A cyclo resembles a big wheelchair attached to the front of a bicycle. You just take a seat and pay the driver to wheel you around wherever you want to go. Even though we own two cars and a truck, when Ma takes me to the market we often go in a cyclo because we get to our destination faster. Sitting on her lap I bounce and laugh as the driver pedals through the congested city streets. (1)

The narrative voice combines the perspective of Ung as a child with the descriptions of an explanatory observer intended to service the reader, a foreign witness. Ung inhabits a child's voice but melds it with a retrospective narrative voice that stands outside the child witness as an observer and as a record keeper who transmits information to an outside viewer. Though Ung writes from the perspective of her child-self, these initial paragraphs form a transitory period where the separation between Ung's past and her present remains distinct, the child still at armslength, the reader observing Ung observing herself. This jostling between the point of view of the child witness, and the contextual narrative voice of an omniscient narrator creates a disruption in the narrative flow—a schism that reflects Ung's own processing of past traumatic

events as well as the reader's uncertain approach to the atrocity as a fragmented realm of disaster that resists any cohesive understanding. Ung builds a "pre-disaster" world by following the gaze of her child-self through the streets of Phnom Penh, providing a cultural crash course in food, transport, her family's financial status, and the interpersonal dynamics within her family. The narrative gaze rests on objects that the child-self would notice—the policeman on the box, the swerving of the cyclo, the thrill of bouncing against her mother's lap—but it also provides contextual information about her family's financial status—"even though we own two cars and a truck"—gained in retrospect and intended to signify their position in the societal hierarchy of Cambodia. As the narrative lens zooms closer, we enter an increasingly intimate space where we learn how Ung's parents met and married: "Pa is dark-skinned and was very poor, Ma's parents refused to let them marry. But they were in love and determined, so they ran away and eloped" (5); we experience cultural expectations and values through Ung's interactions with women who praise her mother's "perfectly arched eyebrows; almond-shaped eyes; tall, straight Western nose; and oval face" (3), and we learn about Ung's personality as a rambunctious five-year-old: "Ma says I stomp around like a cow dying of thirst" (3). Ung creates a tapestry of her child-self that the impending atrocity will, chapter by chapter, disassemble and seek to destroy. Further, Ung's direct address of the reader as both audience and participant—"You just take a seat and pay the driver to wheel *you* around wherever *you* want to go" (1; emphasis added)—exemplifies the contractual relationship between the reader as consumer and the writer as labouring wayfinder, where the writer must cut pathways through the chaos to serve the reader's desire to reach a very particular destination. Ung simultaneously serves and subverts this expectation, her fragmented narrative exposition an active processing of her traumatic experience as well as a translation of that experience for the benefit of a collective audience who arrives as witness.

In Chapter Two, “The Ung Family, April 1975,” we enter the domestic realm of the Ung family, Ung constructing a rich family portrait describing each of her six siblings, their “middle-class” (7) home, and the slow shift in daily domestic routines as the political situation in Cambodia intensifies. As the narrative sinks deeper into the intimate space of the domestic realm, the child’s point of view inhabits a split consciousness to deliver key contextual information for the benefit of the reader-witness. Murmurs of the impending atrocity vibrate into the home: “Lately, Ma has stopped taking me to the market with her” (9)—but the narrative establishes how the disaster exists at all times, stitched into the everyday, always approaching, always present. Ung relates,

Ma says I ask too many questions. When I ask what Pa does at work, she tells me he is a military policeman. He has four stripes on his uniform, which means he makes good money. Ma then said that someone once tried to kill him by putting a bomb in our trashcan when I was one or two years old. I have no memory of this and ask, “Why would someone want to kill him?” (11)

Establishing her child self as a precocious observer who asks “too many” questions, Ung creates a mirror for the reader: her child self asks the same questions that the general reader will have as they access, through her memoir, an unfamiliar geopolitical disaster. A bomb in the trashcan of a high-ranking government official invites questions about the Ung family’s positionality in a conflict driven by class differences and discontent. Already, the geopolitical disaster conflicts with the concept of the disaster as an irrefutable, indiscriminate force that we cannot evade. Instead, the progress of the geopolitical conflict into the disastrous extremes of atrocity involve human-driven, human-controlled actions that evolve into full-blown catastrophic consequences.⁹

⁹ The Pressure and Release Model (PAR) in Disaster and Emergency Management coincides with the idea of disaster as a social force that interacts with human action. It considers the intersection between vulnerability and

In much the same way that Disaster and Emergency Management scholars contest the term “natural disaster” as a misrepresentation of the direct role that human choice plays in the level of risk and the severity of impact of an environmental hazard on human populations, the child, as observer and narrator of a geopolitical atrocity fulfills the role of the disrupter who complicates any binary understanding of the conflict through her questioning. When Ung’s mother responds to her question, she provides a simplified answer that forms a clear line of reasoning for an intended act of extreme violence. She says,

“When the planes started dropping bombs in the countryside, many people moved to Phnom Penh. Once here, they could not find work and they blamed the government.

These people didn’t know Pa, but they thought all officers were corrupt and bad. So they targeted all the high-ranking officers.”

“What are bombs? Who’s dropping them?”

“You’ll have to ask Pa that,” she replied. (11)

This clarifying explanation truncates decades of complex political history and condenses the layered, often conflicting renderings of political strife in Cambodia into a simple cause and effect series of events. The child cannot make sense of why a person would plant a bomb in the trash to kill her father; this mirrors the reader’s own desire for clarity. Why is Ung’s father a target? What does it mean to be a high-ranking officer in the military police? What role does Ung’s father play

hazards as an essential aspect of managing risk. Its relevance here, however, lies in the way that vulnerability and hazards constantly interact and influence one another, characterizing disaster as the outcome of long-term social, political, and institutional forces rather than solely uncontrollable natural hazards that happen *to* us. The PAR model contends that “a disaster is the intersection of two opposing forces: those processes generating vulnerability on one side, and the natural hazard event (or sometimes a slowly unfolding natural process) on the other” (Wisner et al. 50). It shows how you cannot detach the disaster from social systems that increase vulnerability, and therefore, increase risk. Similarly, Forensic Investigations of Disaster (FORIN) understands disaster as a historical process where “all disaster risk is socially constructed” and aims to understand “underlying, root causes and dynamic processes” that construct disaster. By linking causes and effects, FORIN aims to better manage the way risk is constructed (Oliver-Smith et al. 5-6).

in the impending conflict? The child narrator's questions seek clear-cut lines of responsibility; the pantomime of questioning articulates a call-and-response where fragments create a semblance of a whole. When Ung asks "What are bombs? Who's dropping them?" she asks questions central to the construction of atrocity: What is this? Who is doing it? Why is it happening? Her mother's response—"You'll have to ask Pa that"—redirects Ung to another source. Her redirection mimics the work of making sense of the atrocity story, a task characterized by fragmentation, incessant questioning, dead-ends, and the multiplicity of perspective. The story never fully unifies, the information remains scattered. Her redirection also reveals a trail of expectation: a high-ranking government official must answer for his government's actions. For Ung, her mother and father act as sources of grounding clarity; for the reader, the child narrator acts as precocious interrogator, record keeper, and transmitter of information. The position of the child witness is not an interpretive one; here, Ung asks what the reader wants to know and provides answers that the reader must consider. On one hand, like Ung, the reader desires and benefits from the simplified narrative that a parent provides—clarity, ease, the fractious map of discontent clearly labelled.

The narration continues with Ung's child narrator questioning her father about the bombs in the countryside. Ung's father explains the state of civil war in which Cambodia exists:

Later that evening, out on the balcony, I asked Pa about the bombs dropping in the countryside. He told me that Cambodia is fighting a civil war, and that most Cambodians do not live in cities but in rural villages, farming their small plot of land. And bombs are metal balls dropped from airplanes. When they explode, the bombs make craters in the earth the size of small ponds. The bombs kill farming families, destroy their land, and drive them out of their homes. Now homeless and hungry, these people come to the city

seeking shelter and help. Finding neither, they are angry and take it out on all officers in the government. His words made my head spin and my heart beat rapidly.

“Why are they dropping the bombs?” I asked him.

“Cambodia is fighting a war that I do not understand and that is enough of your questions,” he said and became quiet. (11)

Again, the narrative perspective shifts from the child-as-witness to a paternal voice of omniscient translation. Ung’s narrative inhabits this in-between voice and tells the tale of the Cambodian civil war as if moving page by page through a child’s picture book. The narration of events moves in a swift forward progression, each event directly impacting the next, the plot building in action and reaching a climax that delivers no resolution. The “story,” the civil war in miniature, renders an image of a quiet agricultural existence violently interrupted by bombs falling from airplanes in the sky, followed by terrified retreat into a city of ruin that brings no relief. The story explodes in dissolution and violent retribution against officers of the government—men like Ung’s father—but ends with an unanswered question: Ung asks, “Why are they dropping the bombs?” Ung’s question prods at the heart of the conflict, any conflict: what is this for? Her question highlights the ever-cyclical call-and-response of bombs for land, for power, for supremacy, for life. Her father’s response—“Cambodia is fighting a war that I do not understand”—points to a critical narrative gap, a contextual blank that remains unfilled as the memoir progresses. Here, the limits of the child’s point of view collide with the limits of the narrative itself: it cannot account for the roots of the civil war, nor provide contextual understanding into what compels the extreme response of genocide in the years that follow. Ung’s rendering of conversations with her mother and father creates a piecemeal process reflective not only of a child’s processing of an atrocity as it happens, but of the process the

reader willfully engages in when choosing to confront atrocity through the realm of memoir. In Robbins's view, this narrative gap may create a fault in the foundation of Ung's memoir as a "good" atrocity narrative. At this point, contextual information provided by a retrospective narrator who, having looked back at her life, having reflected, processed, and understood her traumatic experience, could provide an intentional service to the reader and to the collective through an analysis that seeks to answer the question Ung's father could not. Instead, the narrative stays embedded in this in-between state where the child narrator acts as witness, record keeper, and intermediary.

In the following chapter, the Khmer Rouge enter the city of Phnom Penh, and the Ung family, like most other families living in the city, pack up their belongings in rushed panic. Ordered to evacuate the city by the Khmer Rouge, the family joins a mass exodus of Cambodians from Phnom Penh into the countryside. At this critical point, Ung's child-narrator collides with the first direct impact of the disaster—her traumatic removal from home. The narrative voice, embedded in her perspective, shifts into a state of detached witnessing where the reader sees what she sees, and feels the impact as sheer shock. In the previous two chapters, Ung establishes a world intact, moving from the wide lens focus on the heat and hubbub of an actively inhabited Phnom Penh, to the intimate dynamics within her family home. However much sustained by an undercurrent of dread, the domestic space formed the architecture of a pre-genocide reality for Ung's middle-class family. At the beginning of the third chapter, "Takeover April 17, 1975," the unsettled tension of the impending disaster breaks, the dread now amplified into an active state of fear and anguish. The approach of Khmer Rouge tanks upends the normalcy of Ung's life, marking the beginning of the atrocity she would endure for the next four years: "Usually on a Thursday I would be in school, but for some reason Pa has kept us all home

today. I stop playing when I hear the thunder of engines in the distance. Everyone suddenly stops what they are doing to watch the trucks roar into our city. Minutes later, the mud-covered old trucks heave and bounce as they pass slowly in front of our house” (Ung 17). Here, Ung’s child self stands as witness to the moment of impact, transmitting the images to her reader as they would appear on a TV screen, the entry of the Khmer Rouge on mud-covered old trucks as foreign and unknown to her, as they would be to a viewer at home. The narration incorporates “blanks” in knowledge: Ung does not know why her father has kept her home from school. It is “for some reason” and Ung as retrospective writer, certainly understands that the entry of the Khmer Rouge into the city marked the end of the civil war. She knows that the Khmer Rouge’s successful resistance against “metal balls dropped from airplanes” (11) placed her father under scrutiny as an officer in the government’s military force—a representative of those airplanes in the sky. The Khmer Rouge would now target him, his family, and others like him. Ung’s child-self does not know this. To fill this “blank,” Ung creates another narrative pantomime where the exchange of information between father and daughter serves to represent her confusion but also provide the reader with threads of information to stitch into a cohesive whole. The blank of “for some reason” functions as a narrative device that forces the reader to witness the bewilderment of this upheaval as a child would, as Ung did, the fragmented narrative negotiating a feeling of overwhelm and insight between the reader, the text, and the child as narrator. In the paragraphs that follow, the narrative voice quickly enters an in-between state where Ung’s retrospective voice emerges while still maintaining a child’s point of view. Re-entering the now changed domestic space, Ung writes:

I run up to my apartment to find Pa sitting on our balcony observing the excitement below. Climbing onto his lap I ask him, “Pa, who are those men and why is

everybody cheering them?”

“They are soldiers and people are cheering because the war is over,” he replies quietly.

“What do they want?”

“They want us,” Pa says.

“For what?”

“They’re not nice people. Look at their shoes—they wear sandals made from car tires.” At five, I am oblivious to the events of war, yet I know Pa to be brilliant, and therefore he must be right. That he can tell what these soldiers are like merely by looking at their shoes tells me even more about his all-powerful knowledge.

“Pa, why the shoes? Why are they bad?”

“It shows that these people are destroyers of things.”

I do not quite understand what Pa means. I only hope that someday I can be half as smart as he is. (18)

Ung’s exchange with her father signals the limitations of her singular perspective, while transmitting her father’s perspective not as an all-knowing truth, but as a signal to the reader of the absence of essential context that would illuminate the complexities of why the Khmer Rouge wear sandals made of tires, or why they look the way they do. Ung’s voice as writer and retrospective witness enters the narrative and differentiates her position from that of her five-year-old self: “At five, I am oblivious to the events of the war, yet I know Pa to be brilliant, and therefore he must be right.” Ung cradles the child’s voice with the voice of her present, knowing self and embeds a “blank”—“I am oblivious to the events of the war”—that alerts the reader to missing information. Ung melds the narrative voice to inhabit this in-between space but directs

the focus to the experience of the child as an individual. To the child, her father serves as a hero-figure, his perspective sacrosanct, his knowledge an armour against the calamitous impact of the outside world. Ung as writer and retrospective observer, articulates how her child-self adopts this view in blind adoration of her father and “his all-powerful knowledge.” While Ung signals an awareness of the missing context, this exchange functions as a representation of the visceral experience of the child rather than a representation that would reflect a nuanced and tempered analysis of the Khmer Rouge.

In his critique of Ung’s work, Lay expresses a preference for texts about the Cambodian genocide to show “a sense of rationale behind the Khmer Rouge’s action” where the text can provide “color and complexity to the Khmer Rouge ordeal rather than simplifying it to a black-and-white, good-versus-evil picture that distorts reality” (178). As a result, Ung faced vehement criticism for the blurriness of her historical and contextual references, and accusations of creatively rendering memories of political conversations that may be impossible for a five-year-old to retain. However, Lay’s desire for a contextualized and complex rendering of the events signals a desire for the text to serve a larger collective understanding of the conflict, rather than the text representing a process of witnessing by one individual, one victim. In her response to the criticism she received from Lay and his colleagues, Ung explains her choice to inhabit the voice of her five-year-old self. She writes:

Writing my book from a child’s point of view was the most powerful way for me to tell my story. A child’s point of view means that at times the story is shallow, misleading, overly dramatic, and larger than life, as all children tend to be. . . . For me to correct, fix, add research, historical references, and other adult knowledge to the misinformation in my book meant that I had to step out of the child’s shoes to do so. I didn’t want to do

that. As a child, I was neither smart, clear-sighted, nor did I have the intelligence to reason or question my surroundings. . . . I wrote about my childhood that was filled with all the wrongs, rights, racism, ageism, hate, etc. (qtd. in Tuon, "Response" 114)

Ung's loyalty to the child narrator provides an integral service to the representation of the atrocity: the expression of primal responses to extreme trauma. The contextualized narrative where "research, historical references, and other adult knowledge" corrects "misinformation" primarily serves the reader who represents the collective need for the "whole" story to inhabit a position of informed objectivity. We want to navigate the atrocity through a lens of complex and contextualized understanding so that we can access intense feelings from a position of detached control. When we view mass violence through screens as our primary medium, our position as detached witnesses informs our expectation of the atrocity narrative to serve as a navigating force of nuanced clarity. When we pick up the atrocity narrative and knowingly enter a psychic space of extreme violence, trauma, and mass devastation, we willingly engage with the terror of embodying feelings of dread and anguish; we want the narrative to hold us through this anguish, to contain it so it does not overtake us. We want the narrative to act as a container for the thing we cannot control—the absolute inevitability of death, and the absolute willingness of humans to exert horror so shocking it shatters our connection with our primal instinct to survive. We fear it and we dread it because it eradicates our very sense of being.

But Ung's narrative revels in subjectivity. The "shallow, misleading, overly dramatic, and larger than life" nature of the child narrator channels the untempered, unimpeded, and visceral point of contact between the child and the atrocity. In witnessing the horror, the child channels the purity of anguish instead of tempering it with retrospective analysis. In this way, the child narrator provides access to our own existential rage against suffering, against human brutality,

against the disaster itself. Where the tempered narrative provides contextual validity and retrospective narrative space that aids in the processing of the traumatic event from a distance, the child narrator provides direct access to the horror. To the child who suffers, in the moment that she suffers, none of the desired context matters. What does context, history, and the collective mean to the hungry child? What does it mean to the terrorized child? What does it mean in the moment of separation, your father escorted to his death, your sister faded into death in starvation, your mother and baby sister executed? Ung takes us into the downward spiral of anguished rage where the *only* thing that makes sense at this moment of impact is the binary we resist: that those who commit acts of atrocity can only be evil, for what kind of context could explain—or justify—this kind of devastation? The child narrator allows access to our primal response to extreme violence; here, rage blooms. The purity of that vitriolic, anguished rage cultivates the only force of resistance accessible to the child amidst the atrocity; through her rage, the child cultivates her agency and cuts a pathway through the overwhelm of the extreme.

The Phantom Witness and the Desecration of the Intimate

Ung expresses this agency through narrative blanks. These blanks occur when the child narrator reaches the limits of her knowledge and experience, often at the most integral moments of loss. Genocide, as an act of massive, obliterating violence, eliminates “knowing,” the fate of family members arrested, missing, or killed left unknown. The “phantom witness” appears at the juncture between the known and unknown. When Ung’s child-self meets the limits of her knowledge—she does not witness the moment of death for each of her family members and cannot provide a first-hand account—Ung creates an omniscient, all-seeing witness who “fills in” the details of these final moments. The narrative shifts from the embedded perspective of her child-self to a phantom witness who inhabits the child’s consciousness to viscerally experience

the “blank” induced by the atrocity. The phantom witness fills in details the child-self cannot yet access. It incorporates fragments of retrospective information and forms a representative depiction of the atrocity while also individuating the mass loss and transforming it from a collective experience to one of individual impact.

The chapter “The Walls Crumble” begins in November 1978 in a child labour camp where Ung, separated from her mother, father, and her siblings, labours alongside other children. At the camp, a training facility for child soldiers, Ung spends her days training “with the few sickles, hoes, knives, stakes, and guns that are available in the camp.” The camp enforces strict adherence to a daily schedule of field work before it shifts into a full-time training facility where Ung and the other children train with tools to attack invading Vietnamese forces, combatting “the evil of the Youns” (158). With her family ties severed, Ung’s tether to her intimate bonds remains rooted in her body where her inner-most realm, her subconscious, anchors her to a visceral connection to her mother and youngest sister, Geak. After repetitive days of combat training, Ung wakes up one morning with an altered feeling. Her body tells her something is wrong: “Early one morning, I wake up with dread and panic. My stomach knots and I am drenched with sweat” (158). She moves through her daily tasks trying to convince herself that the knotted dread in her stomach and her body’s exhalations of sweat do not carry deeper meaning. She adheres to her duties to the collective: “With a six-inch knife in my hand, I stand at attention in front of the line. Panting like an animal, with my legs shaking and my hand gripping the knife, I attack at Met Bong’s cue, charging at my dummy, I yell, “Die! Die!” Though I focus on its head, I am only tall enough to thrust my knife into its stomach” (159). While Ung stands “at attention in front of the line” in compliance with the demands of the collective, her body propels her into instinctive action. She tries to focus on the head of the dummy, the symbolic center of logic,

compliance, and collective devotion, but she thrusts her knife into the stomach—the gut—the symbolic center of instinct and intuition. Her primal instinct, her intimate core, overrides the pull of the collective and through this impact, she reconnects with her “self” as a separate, individuated spiritual and physical entity. The body holds knowledge that Ung must confront and use. Through this physical-existential tether, Ung feels compelled to break free from strictures of the camp, her bodily instinct a defiant rebellion against the usurping power of the atrocity. She relates,

The next morning, I wake up in great agony. My head throbs, my stomach hurts, and my chest constricts as if someone is sitting on it. I wrap my arms around my stomach, wanting to scream to the world. Something hurts inside me. Rage erupts in my body, making me jump and run out of the hut. I don’t understand the electricity in my body, this panic, this sadness, hatred, emotions that manifest into physical pains.

I have to see Ma. It is dangerous to travel without permissions, but I do not care. I have to go to her. (159)

Ung’s body holds intrinsic knowledge; the atrocity—the unnamed thing she rages against—moves through her in a sensory ambush. Every bodily instinct compels her to return to her mother in Ro Leap, the explosion of rage a powerful torrent of primal instinct that activates her defiance against the collective; in this moment, the bond of the intimate—the physicality of her bodily knowledge guides her back to her domestic unit, back to her mother—supersedes the insistence of the collective for compliance, for eradication of the intimate instinct. When “rage erupts,” Ung’s child-self jumps and runs “out of the hut.” The “electricity” of “this panic, this sadness, hatred” forms a sense of knowing. She *knows* she must see her mother but does not know why. She only knows she must. In the hours that follow, Ung’s child-self follows this

undeniable sense of knowing, moving towards the object of her mother, not knowing what lies ahead. Like dread, the atrocity operates in a constant and consistent in-between state. Within this territory between knowing and unknowing, the intimate functions as a definitive guiding force pulling Ung toward her most-feared thing, towards an undeniable knowing that will shatter her already disassembled sense of reality; the intimate roots as the atrocity shatters.

The atrocity of genocide produces a culture of subversive lying as a technique for survival. If you are the target, you hide who you are, you create a story that reinvents your identity, and you use what you know to navigate the treacherous pathways that lead every moment to punishment, torture, and death. The circulation of whispers, rumours, and mis/heard information feed an ecosystem made up of fragmented truths. In this constant state of re-designed identity and un/knowing, the intimate forms a rooted point of access. This in-between narrative space represents the conflicted territory that Ung, as survivor, witness, and writer/testifier occupies, and mimics the fragmented experience of the reader who arrives as a belated witness. As Ung's child self secretly moves through the jungle towards Ro Leap, her intrinsic sense of bodily knowing guides her to the center of the wound. Upon arrival to the village, she collides with the blankness of unknowing—a state where she meets the limits of her intrinsic knowledge. Ung's child-self enters the village and approaches her mother's hut, the state-assigned dwelling that, after their evacuation from their home in Phnom Penh, served as the center of her family's private, domestic life. Piece by piece, the atrocity dismantles their temporary domestic unit, their final private enclave. First, to protect her elder brother Khouy from conscription, and a young woman, Laine, from assault by soldiers, Khouy and Laine marry and must depart to a different labour camp. Authorities determine that Meng, at 18, and the eldest brother in the Ung family, is old enough to leave home and serve with his brother and Laine at a

separate labour camp. A few months later, Khmer Rouge authorities announce that “the Angkar needs every teenage male and female to leave tomorrow for Kong Cha Lat, a teen work camp” (73). For the benefit of the Angkar, “The Organization,” Ung’s oldest sister, Keav, 16, departs to the camp and later dies of starvation; Khmer Rouge soldiers arrive to escort Ung’s father to his execution, his demise known and understood, though never explicitly confirmed by those who take him, the family left in a perpetual cloud of terror and uncertainty; in a desperate effort to increase the chances of survival for her remaining children, Ung’s mother orders Ung, her sister Chou, and her brother Kim to leave home and present themselves as orphans at separate labour camps. Huddled in their camp hut, and whispering so no one can overhear, she explains her decision to her three young children:

“If we stay together, we will die together,” she says quietly, “but if they cannot find us, they cannot kill us.” Her voice shakes when she speaks. “You three have to leave and go far away. Geak is four and too young to go. She will stay with me.” Her words stab my heart like a thousand daggers. “You three will each go in different directions. Kim, you go to the south; Chou will head to the north; and Loung to the east. Walk until you come to a work camp. Tell them you are orphans and they will take you in. Change your name; don’t even tell each other your new names. Don’t let people know who you are.” (121-122)

This moment marks the extreme fragmentation of the family unit, the children dispersed, the remaining two members of the family, Ma and Geak, staying behind. The atrocity shatters the domestic unit, scatters the family from its unifying bond, and strips any connection to individual or familial identity to ensure survival from the atrocity itself. When Ung approaches the hut, compelled by intrinsic bodily knowledge, she approaches the final site of domestic union, the

final dwelling of intimacy and belonging. She finds remnants of domestic life, but the hut sits empty of life: “When I enter the village, I run to Ma’s hut. ‘Ma,’ I call out frantically. ‘Ma! Geak!’ No one replies. ‘Ma!’ I run as fast as I can into the garden. Ma and Geak are not there. Tears blur my vision as I run back to her hut. Everything is still there. Their wood rice bowls and spoons. The small pile of clothes. ‘Ma!’ I scream, my voice hoarse” (160). Ung’s child self enters a space of domestic remains. The hut functions as the final point of intimate connection; this is where her family last existed as something unified and whole. The domestic objects—the bowls, the spoons, the small pile of clothes—signal an evacuation, an emptying out of human life under the wearying dredges of an atrocity that feels never-ending. As the only connective bonds to her mother and sister, these objects signal the ravaging toll of the atrocity; the bowl and the spoon, though objects that feed, signify the lack of sustenance, the years-long starvation cultivated by the geopolitical disaster and resulting in the slow starvation of mother and child. The clothing—state sanctioned tunics and black pyjama pants—mark the atrocity’s stripping of individual identity, the domestic dwelling hollowed out and echoing a blankness that Ung must now confront.

As tears blur Ung’s vision, and she encounters her mother’s disappearance, she stands at the cross-section of the known and unknown, the center of the wound. The witness, another villager, provides Ung with her testimony. This fragment of information only makes sense within the context of Ung’s own witnessing of the atrocity as it unfolded over the previous two years:

“They are not here,” a voice answers. A young woman stands in the doorway of the next hut. She is new; I do not recognize her. “They left yesterday. My baby is sick so I did not go to work. I saw them leave.”

“Where did they go?”

“I don’t know. They went with soldiers,” the woman says quietly and looks away.

She stares into the distance, refusing to look back at me.

We both know what it means when the soldiers come to the village and take someone with them. (160)

With this witness account, Ung knows that soldiers escorted her mother and youngest sister out of the hut and to their deaths. Ung and the witness share collective knowledge; when soldiers come to the village and take people away—as they did with her father—they execute them. Ung’s child self struggles against this known, unknowable thing: her mother and sister are gone but she did not directly witness their moments of death. She struggles in the in-between and roots herself in her intrinsic knowing: “Part of me cannot believe what the woman says, but the other knows it is true. Yesterday I could not explain the mental anxiety and physical pains I woke up with. Now I know it was Ma and Geak telling me about the soldiers” (160). As she struggles in the un/knownable liminal space, the intimate roots her to a reality she trusts because it aligns with her visceral experience, the torment felt a day ago in her head, her stomach, and her chest—a bodily experience that forms a moment of recognition. The information the woman in the village reveals mirrors Ung’s own witnessing of death in the ruinous path of the atrocity. When Ung reaches this point of overlap between the known and the unknown, the inexplicable anguish that wracked her spirit and her body finds itself absolved at the site of the atrocity; the soldiers have taken her mother and sister. The woman saw it happen. Everyone knows what this means. Further, the dismantled domestic sphere, in this case, the hut assigned to Ung and her family when they arrive at the labour camp, forms the site of the core wound. When she confronts this wound, no longer in a prolonged state of pursuit, but now standing within it, facing it, Ung reaches a limit to her knowing. She *knows*, and she doesn’t know. Ung links the physical

manifestations of anguish to an “extrasensory perception” her father once told her she possessed (159) and when she meets the limits of her knowledge and must confront the blankness of unknowing, she succumbs to the liminal. A flash of memory from her pre-disaster reality ignites a state of split consciousness where she experiences a rupture between her physical and mental worlds, her body leading her out of the wound towards something else, someplace else.

A memory of Ma singing me to sleep in Phnom Penh flashes before me. I cannot be strong anymore. My wall crumbles and collapses on top of me. Tears run uncontrollably down my face. My chest compresses, my insides gnaw at me, eating away at my sanity. I have to run away, I have to leave. Somehow my legs take over and carry me away from the village. “Ma! Geak!” I whisper to them. Their faces flood my consciousness. My mind races, remembering the time I stole rice from the container, out of their mouths. She never knew how it felt not to be hungry. (160)

When her “wall crumbles and collapses” her mind and body unite in a cataclysmic rupture that pushes her to meet the blankness of the unknown. Beat by beat, the body relents under the unyielding compulsion of her mind to *remember* what has happened, and to *imagine* what she does not know, and has not witnessed: *Beat*, her chest compresses; *beat*, her insides gnaw; *beat*, the bodily knowing eats away at her sanity; the knowing in her body compels her (“Somehow my legs take over”) again, to depart from the collective, (“carry me away from the village”) and submit to her consciousness (“Their faces flood my consciousness”). *Beat*, her legs run and carry her out of the village and in doing so, her mind floods with a memory of intense hunger, her theft of rice a tether to guilt, and a connective bond to her sister, who existed in a state of starvation. The realm of the visceral shifts into the realm of the mind, and the mind’s perceptions pull the body into a state of submission: “My mind will not leave me alone. My body goes weak when I

wonder which one the soldiers killed first. My mind projects pictures of the two of them together” (160). When faced with the unknown, the blankness of not witnessing, of not knowing the final moments that her mother and sister faced, Ung’s psyche relents to the liminal.

In the next paragraph, the font shifts into italics, a stylistic choice Ung utilizes to encounter the violent loss of family members whose demise she does not directly witness but she viscerally needs to access; the first instance of this “break” occurs in the chapter entitled “Keav” where Ung imagines the final hours of her sister Keav’s death from dysentery; the second instance of this break from witnessed narration occurs in the chapter “Pa” where Ung’s child-self confronts the reality that her father has been killed. In all these cases, the narrative remains embedded in Ung’s child-perspective but articulates a vision through the lens of a “phantom witness” borne from Ung’s ruptured mind. Where Ung’s conscious awareness ends, the phantom witness begins. It walks in Ung’s shoes and unites her body with the collective consciousness. What does Ung’s body know? What does her child-self already know? What has she already witnessed? For three years, she observes the atrocity’s desecration of human life, its indiscriminate unravelling of intimate bonds and its mutilation of bodies. Ung does not witness the deaths of her mother, her sisters, or her father, but she does bear witness to countless other deaths and the burying of corpses in the village. In the chapter, “New Year’s – 1976,” Ung narrates the descent of the village into a fetid state of starvation: “Many of the villagers are getting sicker and sicker from disease and starvation...Concave faces have the appearance of what they will look like once the flesh rots away” (84). She witnesses the decay of corpses, her sensory system at first shocked, then lulled into a numbing sense of void. She relates,

Under the summer sun, the stench of death is so strong in the village, I cover my nose and mouth with my hands and breathe only the air that filters through my fingers. There are

so many dead people here. The neighbors are too weak to bury all the corpses. Often the bodies are left in the hot sun, until the smell permeates the surrounding air, causing everyone passing by to pinch their noses. The flies come buzzing around the corpses and lay millions of eggs on the bodies. When the bodies are finally buried, they are nothing more than large nests of maggots. (85)

The witnessing of death, constant, slow, and in great numbers, cultivates a repository of sensorial information encoded into Ung's body-memory. The bodies, "left in the hot sun" deteriorate into the air, their stench "permeating the surrounding air" and breathed in by passersby, who pinch their noses, and move on, too tired, too numb, too defeated. The extraordinariness of such slow, intended violence, of unstopped mass human death transforms into an uncanny ordinary existence, where Ung's child-self faces the extreme of bodies mutilated into nests of maggots, and observes the communal burials of rotting bodies, the corporeal feeding the atrocity: a geopolitical ecosystem of the extreme fed by the mass execution of human life, and feasted on by corruptions of idealism and power. The stench of death permeates not only her body, but also her psyche; she witnesses the burials: "...I often watch the villagers dispose of the corpses. I see them dig a hole underneath the hut of the dead family and cringe as they push the bodies into the hole. The dead families are buried together in one grave. There were times when such scenes terrified me, but I have seen the ritual performed so many times that I now feel nothing" (85). The atrocity corrupts the cycle of life and death, the ritual of burial, the natural ebb and flow of human life; it converts the extremes of disaster into a never-ending cycle of normalcy that transmutes into the ritualized ordinary. In this space, the visceral instinct to recoil from horror, to resist the thing that destroys you, numbs into resigned submission and detached witnessing. Ung's child-self witnesses the burial of the family unit, the "death" of the "safe" enclosure of the

domestic sphere where “underneath the hut...The dead families are buried together in one grave.” When Ung confronts the death of her own family unit, the bodies do not appear. She does not stand in numb witness to their burial beneath her family hut. Instead, she faces what I call a “phantom witnessing” where the anguish of not knowing compels the psyche to channel anguish through a phantom witness who can “fill in” the blank with an extrasensory, visceral, firsthand account of the death of her mother and sister. At the critical juncture of the known/unknown, a phantom witness emerges from Ung’s own mind to *fill in the blank*:

I see them marched slowly in a long line of twenty people collected from other villages in the province. A group of five or six Khmer Rouge soldiers walk on either side of the villagers. The soldiers’ rifles point at the prisoners. The rain three days before has left the field wet and slippery with mud, making it difficult for the villagers to keep their balance.

(160-161)

The phantom witness projects an image siphoned from collective memory; this narrative voice combines the knowledge Ung possesses as a retrospective writer with the witnessing knowledge of her child-self who collects information in fragments, remembering “stories...of how the Khmer Rouge kill their victims” (162). The phantom witness functions similarly to the split consciousness of the memoir’s narrative voice, its witnessing eye a refracting lens of the individual and the collective, the visceral and the cerebral, the intimate and the communal. The opening lines of the phantom witness reflect a collective movement, no individual singled out, the “*twenty people collected from other villages*” moving in a line through the muddy fields, the suffering a lonely, anguished, but shared experience. From this wide-lens view of the collective, the phantom witness moves closer, the details more intimate, observing “*mud stains on their bottoms and knees...The men walk[ing] with their fingers locked behind their head.*” The lens

zooms closer to witness how the “*Sweat drips from their forehead and stings their eyes.*” In this space of tension-wrought intimacy, we observe Ung’s mother, and sister, Geak: “*Trailing along at the end of the line, Ma carries Geak on her back. Ma cries softly, her body tense with fear and her hands holding on to Geak. She feels Geak bounce slightly on her back as she catches her balance and prevents herself from a fall in the mud*” (161). The phantom witness, through the gaze of Ung’s child-eye, fixates on the intimate bond, the physicality of the body as it tenses, as it holds onto the child, as a small body collides against the firmness of her mother’s back. Through the phantom witness, Ung inhabits the body and psyche of her mother and sister, uniting with them through a corporeal bond. The mother and child serve not only as representative of the millions of mothers and children marched to their deaths, but as method of individuation of the masses, of two figures among millions with individual emotions, heartaches, and bonds of intimacy. The “projected images” continue, with the phantom witness guiding Ung’s vision to a point of overlap between the collective and the individual through envisioning the final critical moments before their execution:

The soldiers lead them past the rice paddies, past the swaying palm trees, to a field at the edge of the village. There, away from all eyes, they make Ma kneel with the other villagers. Sinking in the cool mud, Ma and Geak cling to each other. She hugs Geak tight to her chest, as if trying to push her baby back into her belly to spare her from the pain. She slides one hand up the back of Geak’s head to make sure her face is turned away from the massacre about to happen. (161)

The testimony of the phantom witness interweaves the collective with the individual, the fixation on the moments of intense, anguished intimacy between Ung’s mother and sister working as a projection of Ung’s own processing of trauma as a victim, a witness, and as a writer who uses

narrativization as a tool for metabolizing the extreme trauma she experienced as a child. In doing so, Ung complicates the genre of testimonial literature as not simply a representative tool where the needs of the collective subsume her individual experience to serve as factual evidence of the atrocities committed (Tuon 112), but as a method of active processing and witnessing of the ways in which the atrocity decimates the whole of a society by untethering the individual from her connection with the intimate—her body, her familial bonds, her instinct:

Her heart palpitates with fear. The soldier reaches down and grabs Geak's shoulders. The two of them scream a loud shrill scream that echoes through the air. But the soldiers do not stop and pull Geak out of her grasp as they cling to one another, yelling to each other not to let go. The soldier tears them apart until only the tips of their fingers hold them together, then that chain too is broken. All the villagers cry and beg and start to get up off their knees. Suddenly the rattling sounds of the rifles go off and bullets pierce through their bodies, silencing their screams. (Ung 162)

The phantom witness observes the death of Ung's mother and sister through the lens of Ung's vital, searching eye. Ung as writer and witness accesses the atrocity through the wound of her child-self, her mind engaged in details of the intimate—of breath, of blood, of physical connection, of final familial bonds physically severed through the unstoppable decimation of human-to-human violence that flows as the lifeblood of the atrocity borne through the geopolitical disaster. In these final moments, the figure of the soldier looms as the unrelenting, vicious force of the atrocity, pulling the child from the mother's grasp, and silencing the rising of the collective as they "get up off their knees." As Ung's child-self emerges from this psychic rendering of her mother and sister's death, she dwells in a fragmented state where the scattered information she knows through rumours and whispered warnings collides with what she

imagines might have happened to her mother and sister:

All the stories I have heard of how the Khmer Rouge kill their victims come back to me. Tales of them tying their victims in potato sacks and throwing them in the river and stories of their torture chambers frequently circulate among the villagers. It is said the soldiers often kill children in front of their parents to elicit confessions and names of traitors...Ma's face appears before me. I choke as I think of the pain she feels as she watches the soldiers hurt Geak. My mind obsesses over the pictures my mind makes up of their deaths, which refuse to let go of me. (162-163)

The “blank” Ung collides with again and again—when her father dies, when her sister Keav dies, and now, when her mother and sister Geak disappear—forms the core of the shattered story; the atrocity creates deep unknowns that the child-as-witness threads together by accessing collective memory and by engaging with the intimate through a corporeal-psychic connection. Her domestic enclave now completely decimated, her family unit shattered, direct connection with her family severed, Ung's child-self exists only as part of the larger collective. The atrocity hijacks her labour as part of an enforced communal effort for political ideals that do not exist in Ung's child-consciousness. The atrocity embeds her into a collective network and employs her as a tactical tool, the individual almost non-existent. Layer by layer, the atrocity eradicates the intimate; it erodes the domestic unit and familial bond, absorbs the individual into the collective, and transforms the intimate—your family, your identity, the individual elements that make you who you are—into objects of political force for causes beyond your understanding and outside your circle of relevance.

Interestingly, in *Dogs at the Perimeter*, Thien makes the intentional choice to embrace a “blank” or wordlessness, as a narrative tool to signify the extreme violence of the atrocity against

the body and psyche of the child-witness. Here, the phantom witness stands silent, accompanying the child through the rupture and encapsulating it with spacious, wordless, witnessing. As the narrative slips back into Janie's memories of escape from Cambodia with her brother Sopham, it illustrates the dread-space, discussed in Chapter Three, as an entryway into the disaster's rupture. Thien depicts a scene of a boat adrift for days at sea, reality and fantasy morphing into an altered state of lucid dread:

On the sea, we moved through a turbulent world, forever adrift. Three or four nights passed, but each day, no land appeared on the horizon. On and on we went until the night when the men came. The collision hit like an explosion. Once, these men had been fishermen, but now they were something else, some instinct that has no pity, no name. They robbed us, and then they forced the girls up out of the cargo hold. I remember the sound of crying, a noise like a serrated edge. Minutes passed, hours... Time stopped. I have no words for what was done. (137)

In this case, the child narrator bears direct witness to the rupture: "when the men came." The surfacing of this memory in Janie's adult consciousness places the child at the center of the rupture where the child-self bears witness but also endures. In this wordless place, intimacy transforms into a tool of violent subjugation, and the phantom witness stands outside the rupture as a container for the death of something sacred, rather than a lens through which to gaze closely at the wound. The adult narrator, as a phantom witness to her own memory and to her own life, encounters her child-self and stands still. She has "no words for what was done" and the reader must stand witness to the wordlessness even if she yearns to stand closer, to collect the intimate details of the atrocity's evisceration of the child's center, the hunger *to know* satiated only through the enormity of blank space, of everything that could have happened, might have

happened, likely did happen, the terror alive in phantom articulations in our mind.

In *First They Killed My Father*, the phantom witness carves a pathway through the anonymity of colossal disaster to the visceral intimacy of individual agency. As Ung's child-self emerges from the intimate experience of phantom witnessing, she inhabits the corporeal and accesses a primal human instinct for retribution. The "good" atrocity narrative might temper the depiction of vitriolic hatred with measured reflection, providing an understanding of complex geopolitical contexts that directly contribute to acts of genocide so as not to simplify a preventable act as an unutterable "evil" that withstands understanding. Here, the phantom witness engages the child witness with the vivid documentation of loss, establishes a visceral connection that reignites intimacy, and channels rage, anger, hurt, and imagined retributive violence as an agentic release. The phantom witness enables a visceral encounter between the writer as victim and witness, and the reader as intentional witness:

My skin vibrates with hate and rage. I hate the gods for hurting me. I hate Pol Pot for murdering Pa, Ma, Keav, and Geak. I stab my wooden stake high into the dummy's chest, feeling it puncture the body and hit the tree. Hard and fast, I stab it, each time envisioning not the body of a Youn but that of Pol Pot. Now it is all real. Now I no longer have to pretend to be an orphan. (164)

Ung's distress, her anguished attack against a force she cannot reach nor contain, certainly signals a final stripping of power, the loss too great, too cataclysmic, too deep to sustain. Yet, it also signifies the metabolic power of hatred as a form of resistance and as an instrument of release from the atrocity. When atrocity subsumes the child, when it eradicates the child's intimate bonds, strips her sense of safety, and ultimately violates her connection to her sense of self, it eradicates intimacy as a form of knowing and being in the world. When Ung's "skin

vibrates with hate and rage” she exerts the feeling and directs it to a point of focus: “I hate the gods for hurting me. I hate Pol Pot for murdering Pa, Ma, Keav, and Geak” and then converts the feeling to action. She stabs the dummy’s chest and inverts its intended use and meaning; meant as a representative of invading Vietnamese soldiers who pose a threat to the Angkar, and also used to train her as a child soldier in service of the Angkar, Ung’s child-self inverts the target so that the thing that eradicates her, is now eradicated *by* her.

Conclusion

what if a dawn of a doom of a dream
 bites this universe in two,
 peels forever out of his grave
 and sprinkles nowhere with me and you?
 e.e. cummings

Conceptualizing the Disaster

In the early stages of conceptualizing this dissertation, I presented an overview of my research interests at a World Literature roundtable featuring four other graduate students also enrolled in the program. Intended to showcase the beginning stages of our thinking to faculty and students in the English and Humanities departments, and to receive collegial feedback, the event felt informal, intimate, and convivial. Still, presenting your research, no matter how informal, to an assembly of peers and professors felt like a test of our value as researchers, where very easily we could conflate our individual worth with the reception of our ideas. We gathered in a meeting room in the English department where organizers pushed tables together for panelists to sit facing an arrangement of office chairs and couches. Attendees crowded together, knees brushing knees, coffee cups on tables, the energy expectant and ruminative. One by one, we presented our ideas and I posed my central question, which now forms in new ways, a portion of the final chapter in this dissertation: “How do you tell a shattered story and what does a shattered story do?” At this early stage, the idea of the “shattered story” translated to stories of “the extreme.” Why does the writer try again and again to respond to, articulate, and convey the extreme? I wondered. At its root, I wanted to know what to do and how to be when the worst thing happened—how would I contend with the deepest forms of upheaval? What could we all do?

I recall this roundtable now because it marked the first of many times I would need to consider the relevance of my research. Once I presented my research overview—at the time a preliminary proposal in three strands: the writer’s approach to the extreme, the metaphor as method in conceptualizing World Literature and the extreme, and the use of archival ephemera as tangible access points to the extreme—an audience member expressed frustration at my choice to pursue research in an area that seemed rife with explorations of societal upheaval, decade after decade producing wars, disasters, complete ruptures of the world as we knew it. Writers throughout history have always interrogated the extreme; this was not a new phenomenon. Postmodernists in particular, she argued, confronted the extreme in fascinating and genre-bending ways; my curiosity about form and the writer’s approach to the extreme formed an exploration of a pre-navigated, already discovered destination. Why was I thinking about “how to tell the shattered story” when we already knew how? When there already existed an abundance of interrogative creative work and scholarship?

I remember offering a response that did not feel like enough; I startled at the vehemence behind the question. The comment revealed a perplexity with the “trend” to fixate on the destructive impact of mass calamity, to ruminate on trauma, to circle the wound as if it were something revelatory. The draw to the extreme, the excitement of its violence, the awe-struck wonder it compelled, pointed in many ways to a superficial enthrallment. In the years that followed, I returned again and again to this moment, often in bewilderment. I wanted to write about the extreme, about disaster writing as a form, precisely *because* of its unrelenting, repetitive presence in our lives. I did not hope to discover an explosive new narrative approach to the extreme (though this is a possible avenue of continued research); I only knew that in the constant supply of disasters and extreme world events, that writers would continue to write, and

readers would continue to seek some navigable path through their own disasters via these creative works.

I did not wish to approach my research with the belief that we existed in an “unprecedented” moment in time where the current extremes of mass violence, rendered via “natural” disasters or via the endless capacity of humans to enact violence on one another, exceeded in number or in intensity from disasters in the past. I believed it *felt* this way, but the relevance of my research stayed rooted in the understanding that collective and individual disasters continuously punctuate our progression through time. I resisted the argument that the perpetual existence of disaster events meant the perpetuation of an attitude of unaffected ambivalence, the idea that “this is nothing new” and so there is nothing to be said or done. I recognized the uniqueness of our accelerated rate of access to information and visual matter, which enabled a more immediate act of witnessing. This increased exposure, this immediacy, and this willful witnessing of disaster events contributed to a cultivated sense of closeness, this constant and consistent tension between the hugeness of a disaster event and the intimacy of the individual experience.

Developing pathways towards the extreme

I approached the extreme with a wide lens, conceptualizing in precise terms the concept of “the disaster” as a connective experience that bridges the big and the small. I returned to Maurice Blanchot’s fragmented, cyclical rumination on the language of the disaster and recognized in it the upset of contending with the thing we fear. He writes, “There is in death, it would seem, something stronger than death: it is dying itself—the intensity of dying, the push of the impossible, the pressure of the undesirable even in the most desired” (47). I began my research with the intention to pursue what felt “stronger than death”—the disaster: the knowing

of it, the tentative, tempestuous obsession with controlling it, the dread of it, the submission to it, our intense fear of our own destruction because of it, and the upheaval it pours into our outstretched arms.

The “intimate disaster” developed as a concept through an interdisciplinary lens. I stood at an intersection where the pathways of narrative theory, creative writing, world literature, and disaster and emergency management converged and pointed towards a connective understanding of the representation of disaster in contemporary prose. As I continued to publish my work as a writer in fiction and creative nonfiction, I wanted to understand, very earnestly, what the writer could do in a world characterized by the extreme. Through the writing of fiction about the 1971 Independence of Bangladesh, a war that my parents and extended family lived through, I accessed disaster as a latecomer witness, as someone who wanted to understand the wound of an atrocity that decimated so many lives. As a writer, I could only do so through a fictive space that ruminated on tangible objects, or artifacts of disaster, as points of access. This approach in my own creative work informed my reading of texts that explored moments of catastrophic upheaval. I recognized a pattern where tangible objects transmute the incomprehensible and I wanted to investigate this with vigour. In my creative work, both fiction and non-fiction, archival ephemera—photographs, letters, diary entries, newspaper articles, maps, police reports, dictionary pages etc.—formed integral points of ruminative access. What would happen, I wondered, if I approached tangible objects in disaster texts, not as artifacts of historical truths, but as objects that offered interrogative space for the exploration of traumatic wounds?

The tenets of disaster and emergency management provided a comprehensive, regimented, and clarifying “on the ground” structural approach to disaster that overlapped in curious ways with the narrativity of disaster in prose. Structural and policy-driven approaches to

conceptualizing disaster illuminated the ways in which I considered how hazards, risk perception, and vulnerability coincided in practical, but also poetic ways, with narrative approaches to disaster. Exploring how DEM researchers consider vulnerability and risk as social constructions, helped me articulate the ways in which complex disasters do not simply *happen*, but instead, exist as active, constantly evolving energies influenced and often controlled by institutional choices. Similarly, my work conceptualizing approaches to World Literature informed my interest in the liminal space as a territory of narrative investigation. Pascale Casanova's approach to criticism as an internal and external method that works within a "mediating space [that] exists between literature and the world" (72) helped me consider literature "*as a world*" where "an ordered set of motifs ... can only be understood in relation to each other, and which only become visible when perceived in their totality, in their reciprocal dependence and mutual interaction" (73). Casanova's approach to literature places at its centre a "mediating space" that is murky and intangible:

[It is] a parallel territory, relatively autonomous from the political domain, and dedicated as a result to questions, debates, inventions of a specifically literary nature. Here, struggles of all sorts—political, social, national, gender, ethnic—come to be refracted, diluted, deformed or transformed according to a literary logic, and in literary forms. (72)

This "refracted, diluted, deformed or transformed" space formed a liminal domain where I could trace the movement of the extreme. In this cloudy, mist-laden realm, I found the concept of "the clerk," which illuminated alternate ways of understanding the role of the witness, an integral figure in the representation of the extreme. Canadian poet and novelist, Dionne Brand, published her companion texts, the novel *Theory* (2018) and the prose-poem collection, *The Blue Clerk*

(2018), where I first encountered the figure of “the clerk” who acts as a living archive gathering and keeping record of the left-behind thoughts of the writer, the “Author.” The Author, as the architect of representation, discards “the worry and the damp thoughts and the arid thoughts” (6) that cloud the process of creation and instead chooses “the presentable things, the beautiful things” to create a sense of order, direction, and meaning in their work. Here, the author’s choice to write “the presentable things, the beautiful things” indicates an authorial drive towards a purpose: the representation must say something. In representing the extreme—the terror and ugliness of it—the author’s choices reveal a concerted intention to provide a specific vision to the reader. To do this, the author leaves behind the detritus of process and includes only what serves the vision; the author leaves behind what she does not want to fully acknowledge or what she does not want the reader to see. The “clerk” takes up the role of the record keeper and the documentarian, collecting pages from the murk of the in between, taking up what the Author leaves behind, withholds, or destroys. From this liminal, shadow-space of the in-between, I recognized the role of the witness-as-reader coinciding with the role of the clerk. I questioned how writers, when writing about the *worst thing that could ever happen*, negotiated the liminal space between experiencing, witnessing, and representation. I considered the disaster text as a work that occupied this space of the in-between.

The Intimate Disaster

This dissertation culminates in three pivotal stages that conceptualize the writing and witnessing of disaster in contemporary memoir and fiction: the onset of the disaster, the meeting of dread, and the telling of the shattered story. The concept of “the intimate” makes familiar the incomprehensibility of the disaster as a decimating force that upends the knowability of our lives and of ourselves. As an interpretive tool, it compels intense closeness to the catastrophic through

the tangibility of “archival” left-behind objects, through the transgression of the threshold space, and through the visceral embodiment of the liminal realm between the individual and the colossal that ultimately necessitates the presence of a new kind of witnessing I’ve termed the “phantom witness.” The temporal scaffolding that marks the cyclical movement of the disaster—*pre-onset, onset, unfolding, upheaval, and loss*—extends across this conceptual foundation and forms an essential framework for the interrogation of the disaster text as a diagram of witnessing between the reader as a latecomer witness and the writer as survivor and witness.

In Chapter One, “The Opening,” the pivotal temporal moments of *pre-onset* and *onset* mark the violent transition from the shared, known reality of the everyday—the intact realm of domestic familiarity—to the shock of a sudden, intense, world-shattering upheaval. Deraniyagala’s *Wave* and Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* overlap and echo into a dual space of knowing and unknowing—*unfolding*—where the negotiation with disaster as an unstoppable force occurs through the fixation on the minute, the intimate. The confrontation of the unknown shifts into the caustic space of dread in Chapter Two, “The Meeting of Dread,” where Phillips’ *Disappearing Earth* and Gunraj’s *The Lost Sister* contextualize the *upheaval* through the “dread-space,” a tension-wrought space of ruminative transition from the known to the unknown, a “threshold-space” of liminal contention between the enclosed privacy of our domestic lives and the scrutiny of public unrest. This state of unbearable unknowing reaches a fever-pitch in Chapter Three, “How to Tell a Shattered Story,” where the geopolitical disaster, the atrocity, completely decimates the intimate in service of a collective power. In the realm of the shattered narrative however, the intimate forms the only method of accessing *loss*—the wound of the atrocity—and from this fractured state of the unknown, the “phantom witness” emerges as a figure that orchestrates an alternate, unattainable knowing emerging from the dark, fractious

center of the atrocity.

The intimate disaster is a way of knowing. How do we comprehend the incomprehensible? How does the writer enter the impossible rupture as survivor, as witness? How does the reader stand as witness to the cataclysmic influx of apocalyptic disasters that do not end? The intimate disaster is the disaster held close, the upheaval wrenched from the unknown into the palm of our hands where we inspect it and begin to know it, confront it, and interrogate it. We do this from the center of the rupture, our realities now liminal, fractured, and unknown, or we do it standing outside the rupture, in horror, in anticipation, and in dread. Intimacy provides a palpable pathway into the disaster, but it also requires a confrontation of the thing we fear most; it holds us in the realm between knowing and unknowing where we yearn for certainty, but retreat into the cursed refuge of uncertainty, resting under its shield, holding off the inevitability of the newly emerged known. The intimate disaster spirals inward, then outward, around and around, the writing and reading of it a mirrored, centrifugal act of witnessing. In our shared reality of constant and overwhelming dread and disaster, the intimacy of disaster and the disaster as intimate forms for us a realm of mediated contention as readers, writers, and witnesses.

The Future of the Intimate Disaster: An Interdisciplinary Lens

The potential of future research in the realm of intimacy and disaster holds exciting thresholds. While I explore the “onset” of the disaster in Chapter One, “The Opening,” the potential of further research on the declination of the disaster as it moves from complete rupture into the emergence of a newly formed reality remains yet unexplored. How does the disaster “close” and how do writers approach the “endings” of their disasters in the closing of their texts? Each of the texts explored in this dissertation follow a self-reflexive pattern where the

speaker/narrator travels back to the site of the disaster to bring it, or the narrative, to a “close.” In the explored memoirs, the act of writing the disaster, of processing it through the narrativization of it, the writer enacts their own story’s ending and stands as witness to the movement of the disaster into a new realm. The disaster, associated so closely with apocalyptic endings, offers insight into the realm of new beginnings, the etymological root of the word “apocalypse” originating in Koine Greek, meaning “to uncover or reveal” (Scranton). The disaster’s end, and the end the disaster brings forth, articulates a revelation of something transgressive and transformative. Continued research on the narrativization of disaster would benefit richly from investigations into the author’s articulation of endings, or the enclosing of a disaster into a narrative end.

My conceptualization of the “tangible object” as an artifact of disaster and a tool of intimate interrogation provides an avenue for continued research in disaster studies and the domestic realm. These objects, left behind or found in the aftermath of disaster, offer a focal point for analysis, particularly in understanding the significance of the domestic object in recovery and repair after disaster. Recent studies on “post-disaster homemaking” explore the role of re-assembling a sense of “home” after disaster through the re-integration of domestic objects lost during the 2011 Brisbane floods (Harel). This research intersects with my work in creative non-fiction, where in a forthcoming collection of personal essays that parallel my current research, I consider the ways that domestic objects function as artifacts of disaster in intimate spaces, making and unmaking the home as a place of intrinsic un/belonging. The intimate disaster as a conceptual framework provides a lens through which creative writers can consider the tangible object as a method of connective wayfinding when writing about periods of upheaval.

In early drafts of this dissertation, I envisioned a comprehensive work that would approach disaster texts through a wide scope, offering a panoramic analysis of disaster memoirs, fiction, graphic novels, and children's literature to create a foundational framework for understanding the writing of disaster. This level of comprehensive analysis requires further research and would allow for the extended analysis of texts I could not include in this dissertation. In particular, key texts such as Dany Laferrière's *The World is Moving Around Me: A Memoir of the Haiti Earthquake* and Richard Lloyd Parry's *Ghosts of the Tsunami: Death and Life in Japan's Disaster Zone* provide journalistic insight into the colossal disaster from the perspective of an outsider witness. Laferrière, a Haitian, visited Haiti for a literary festival when the 2010 earthquake hit (Laferrière), and Parry, a reporter for *The Times* (London) lived in Tokyo with his wife and unborn child when the 2011 earthquake and resulting tsunami crashed upon Japan's shores (R. L. Parry). Both writers survived the intense disasters and did not lose immediate family, but stood as outsider witnesses to the extreme horror and monumental loss of life. The inclusion of these texts in a future analysis would broaden my conceptualization of witnessing to include the perspectives of invested, "embedded" witnesses who stand at once outside and inside the tragedies they write about.

In addition, an extended study would also include texts that could broaden and complicate my assessment of the geopolitical disaster. I consider Arundhati Roy's novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, a liminal work that oscillates between fiction and non-fiction; its messy, splintered, multi-layered narrative structure is a necessary strategy to represent the miasmic, tension-fraught landscape of a politically raucous India. As a political thinker, writer, and activist, Roy embeds herself within fractious political conflicts, voicing acerbic criticism against government subjugation of movements that threaten their dominant power. Her

experience proves visceral; she witnesses conflicts firsthand through immersion. She embeds herself in the jungle with the Naxalites, Indian Maoists who form a far-left insurgency against the Indian government; she campaigns against the US war in Afghanistan; she protests India's nuclear arms program; she advocates for Kashmiri independence (Aitkenhead), and writes from a place of urgency, her work in non-fiction serving as a vehicle for her advocacy. In the final pages of *Utmost*—her first novel after a 20-year hiatus from fiction—she articulates the fractured, multi-vocal, dizzying effort of narrativizing conflict that arises from a state of perpetual rupture: Lovers Musa and Tilo briefly reunite at a graveyard inn. They stay at Janaat Guest House, where for three days, they live in imperfect, but seemingly idealized harmony. Here, amongst a community of Hijras, a lonely imam, a mortuary worker, an orphaned and abandoned child, and two lovers reunited—the novel's central question appears: “how do you tell a shattered story?” (Roy 436). Presented in the form of a poem, the question positions the novel as a response to a current reality that is extreme and inexplicable in ways that seem unsolvable, and if not impossible, then insistently resistant to interpretation. I formed the final chapter of this dissertation around this central question, but within the context of the geopolitical conflict at its extreme—the atrocity. Continued research on the role of the writer as both witness and activist amidst the complexity of the geopolitical disaster would open up avenues for the exploration of the non-fiction novel as a narrative response to disaster.

When I conceptualized this research, I was asked the ever-essential question of *why? Why do this? Why explore this? Why disaster? Why the extreme? Why now?* At the time, I felt haunted by the echo of irrelevancy, but in the years since, I've felt the clarifying incisiveness of the inquiry. It's served as a directive force, where at every stage of this process, I interrogated my intentions, my hopes, and my vision. I'm thankful to the questioner and grateful for the perpetual

haunting; it helped me shape the important ways that intimacy moves us toward and through disaster, how it cultivates a terrifying force of intrinsic self-knowing, and how it constructs a complex form of hope. Since I began research for this dissertation, we have, as a collective, stood witness to a constant influx of colossal disasters, both ecological and geopolitical. These disasters—the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic; worsening wildfires in Australia, South America, Canada, Russia, the United States, and more; the South Asia floods; the Indonesian tsunamis; the Turkey-Syria earthquake; long-running wars in Syria, Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, and most recently Iran—continually flood our consciousness, the tentacles of disaster far-reaching, the world at once big and infinitesimally small. We feel the acrid touch of death and disaster through our own intimate connections: friends, family, neighbours, colleagues—all of us pressed to our phones, thumbs flicking on endless scrolls for information, for *updates*, for the latest slip of hope signaling survival after onslaught, movement after decimation, a breath amidst the decay. Private terrors splice the soft enclosure of our private lives—we fear sickness and death, we witness it as we dread it, we tread the thick waters of deep loss, and in increments, we inch into each day, our internal systems frenetic, our psyches perpetually subsumed by the demands of grief. The pulse of disaster thrums on and on, our internal states hinged to spiraling vibrations of uncertainty, the downward curve towards the unwanted thing—the unmistakable shock of the shift, the upheaval, the upturned life no longer known—curves again to a new, knowable thing, a gentle arc onward, on and on again. My hope remains that the work of this dissertation provides a pathway, however dimly lit, through the thick forest of our fear and grief, that the disaster as an indecipherable, incomprehensible force, is made knowable, the catastrophic alighting in our minds as something palpable, something we hold so close, that it resides as an ever-expanding world in the palm of our hands.

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