

Erotic Mourning and Post-traumatic Sexual Desire

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**Abstract:** In her article, "Erotic Mourning and Post-traumatic Sexual Desire" Gila G. Ashtor investigates the ways Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* 2000 memoir contains an alternative logic of affectivity that locates possibilities for mourning in the ambivalent directionalities of post-traumatic sexual desire. Ashtor links dominant conceptualizations of post-traumatic working-through and regimes of heteronormative sexual reproductivity in order to argue that Eggers's self-exhibitionistic spectacle of failed post-traumatic healing, precisely as a drama of undoing that replaces the cumulative acquisition of psychic cohesion with survival incoherent gestures, produces a version of what this paper will call "radical mourning." To particularize the text's investment in imagining radical mourning, Ashtor's focuses on how, despite Eggers's ambitions to climax himself back into coherent selfhood, sex repeatedly transforms into a theater of suspended intensities and aborted pleasure. Instead of developmental advances toward meaning, Eggers's "aberrant" eroticism that revolves around its own prefigured failure, posits and dismantles the link between sexual redemption and psychic renewal, thereby metamorphosing the ambit of post-traumatic intelligibility into a queer force field of incoherent "liveness" and inchoate healing.

## Gila G. ASHTOR

### **Erotic Mourning and Post-traumatic Sexual Desire**

Ambivalence imperils survival's locomotion. Where the recuperative journey toward post-traumatic survival is literalized by the punctual achievement of narrative intelligibility, structural stasis or affective detours bewilder and derange peregrinations of healing. The well-documented "boom" of memoirs from the 1970s onward testifies to the parallel increase in conceptualizations of post-traumatic stress disorder and an archive of first-person survival narratives. The particular formal investment in linear progress that characterizes a typical first-person account makes the autobiographical register a provoking site for exploring how the teleological pursuit of meaning underwrites a rhetorical agenda of linguistic cohesion, psychic development, and therapeutics that, especially in stories of traumatized subjectivity, frames the reintegration of cohesive selfhood in temporal returns to psychic continuity. Psychiatrist Allan Young's research in linking evolving psychiatric categories with changing ideas of how memory functions and the pioneering work of literary theorist Cathy Caruth and psychoanalyst Dori Laub demonstrating the instrumentality of first-person narration to theories of cure has convened, through "trauma studies" and its appropriation by diverse academic fields, a fertile ground of interdisciplinary discourse and a singular heuristic for probing the interstitial relation between epistemologies of psychic development and genres of self-representation.

Staging and disrupting conventional formulas of normative recovery while hyperbolically dramatizing contiguous spaces of incoherence, Dave Eggers's 2000 memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* contains an alternative logic of affectivity that locates possibilities for mourning in the ambivalent directionalities of post-traumatic sexual desire. Eggers's confessional autobiography chronicles the deaths of his parents within thirty-two days of each other, and the subsequent difficulties and adventures of raising his seven year-old brother Christopher (Toph). Narrated in melodramatic tonalities and self-mocking metafictionality (Smith and Watson, *The Rumples* 5-6) that exploits strategically psychologized symptomatology of victimhood, Eggers's stylistic extravagance foregrounds the text's ambiguous relation to structures of healing and the centrality of ambiguity in trying to heal. In the first account of affective and rhetorical ambivalence, Eggers is preparing to relocate from Chicago to California after having sold the house and buried both parents. Reflecting momentarily on the stockpile of surplus family belongings, Eggers's conflicting compulsions of attachment/detachment animate the stuttering shuttle between restorative anamnesis and purgative release: "I try not to think of the antiques – the mahogany bookshelf, scratches, or the circular end table with nicks in it, the needle-point-covered chair with the cracked leg. I want to save everything and preserve all this but also want it all gone — can't decide what's more romantic, preservation or decay. Wouldn't it be something just to burn it all? Throw it all in the street? I know I offered to keep it, insisted on it, wanted Toph to be able to live among it all, be reminded — Maybe we could store it until we have a real house. Or sell it and start over" (122). Trafficking the transitional threshold between past and future, Eggers's incompatible impulses to "burn it all" and "live among it all" reenact the restless negotiation of post-traumatic "stuckness" (see Berlant). Confronted with trauma's irreparable conversion of the familial sanctum into a wastebasket of memorial detritus, a decaying archive of desire and meaning, Eggers' inability to "decide what's more romantic, preservation or decay" thematizes the paradoxical urge to manage emotional excess by dispensing unwanted, overflowing stuff. Mapped onto economies of waste and renewal, Eggers's desire to splurge, "burn," "throw," and "sell" the sentimental past presumes the curative potency of disposal, as if the ritual dispensation of damaged "antiques" is a fool-proof ticket to futurity. And yet, stalling and stumbling on his way to exchange the "scratches," "nicks," and "cracked leg" for rehabilitative "start[ing] over," Eggers wrestles with the correlative craving for corrosive stasis, an appetite to "be reminded" that seems, at least in this equation of healing with detachment, to jeopardize cure.

Normative structures of post-traumatic healing are predicated upon narrative trajectories of temporal development, curative renewal and technologies of progressive self-legibility. In his work on post-traumatic testimony and "memory theaters," Allen Feldman exposes the "normative and moralizing periodization built into the post-violent depiction of violence" (164). Drawing on Raymond Williams' description of an "archaicized past" that "enforces the linearity of historical time and promotes

history as teleological continuum without ruptures or alterity" (165), Feldman argues that the "medicalized syllogistic structure" (170) of trauma-tropes subsumes complex horrors into linear history. In its processual pilgrimage toward redressive justice, Feldman explores the elision of productive bereavement. Furthermore, as an aesthetic agenda for self-representation, the mandate of anamnesis, catharsis and hope privilege dualistic thinking in which one is either a fragmented victim or reassembled survivor. By retroactively characterizing traumatized incomprehensibility as the temporary, not-yet-healed moment before breakthrough cure, trauma narratives, what Feldman here calls "emplotted" texts, rationalize irrational violence and invalidate the potency of an interrupted present

Throughout Eggers's text, the allure of erotic self-exhaustion functions as a craving for perilous pleasure amidst prevailing post-traumatic chaos. Except for the final erotic experience, which excludes sex altogether, traumatic topographies form the emotional backdrop of sexual encountering. Writing on the nexus of death and sensuality, Georges Bataille localizes eroticism's cataclysmic force in its temporary suspension of discontinuity through momentary fused continuity with another. As love, according to Bataille, is an urge toward death, the individual's latent hunger for disequilibrium is necessarily the temptation of living "on the threshold of dying" (240) and glimpsing the transient pleasure of dissolving separateness. Bataille characterizes erotic conduct, which is "the opposite of normal conduct," as the reckless urge for an irresponsible expenditure of sexual energies. Bataille writes: "Our only real pleasure is to squander our resources to no purpose, just as if a wound were bleeding away inside us; we always want to be sure of the uselessness or the ruinousness of our extravagance" (170). Because the psychic force of extreme pleasure touches the limits of death, erotic spending without restraint proffers possibilities for sovereignty through a dramatic reenactment of self-destruction

Although Eggers's formulaic conception of the "moral good," of "connection + hand-holding," refers specifically to Shalini's need for "connection" through "the pumping of blood," the phrase, "pumping of blood" doubly refers to Shalini's rehabilitation and Eggers' tumescent desire. After all, how different are the vocabularies of eagerness and post-traumatic desperation in their shared hunger to satiate insatiable voids? If, as Eggers reasons, palliative sex restores the futurity Shalini's trauma endangers, it is because her traumatized body cannot access uninterrupted "pumping blood" without his "pumping of blood" to arouse temporalities of purposefulness and fertility. Submitting desperately to this kind of magical thinking, Eggers's sexual desire is also a post-traumatic prayer for redemptive wholeness that, he imagines, is only available in normative rubrics of social reproduction, psychic cohesion and intimate exchange. The affective dispossession of pain, imagined in Freud's model of libidinal de-cathexis, presupposes the paralysis of traumatizing loss. Eggers's imperiled immobility when confronted by familial "antiques" literalizes the anxiety of psychic stasis. Orphaned and trapped on the temporal threshold between past and future, Eggers's hypersexuality fantasizes the curative de-cathexis that he hopes will reactivate the developmental continuum toward healing. Swelling and spilling into new objects of attachment, Eggers' appetite for erotic exchange enacts an urge for activity that is, paradoxically, desire for the stasis he sought to outrun. As Cathy Caruth's analysis suggests, inherent in the compulsion to conquer devastation is the destructive desire to chase what cannot be "caught" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 2-4). Caruth's explanation of "latency" as the paradoxical reenactment of one's not-seeing, opens a way into reading Eggers' sexual desire as the belated attempt to reproduce originary loss. As for Caruth, "trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs" (8), so too in Eggers, sexual exchange emerges as a space of failed re-encounter with the traumatic event. Like replaying memories of disaster in order to assimilate the "unassimilated" event, the episodic malfunction of Eggers' sexual encounters corporealizes circuits of traumatized renewal and collapse.

Having exhausted the exculpatory moral register and alone with Sari, Eggers is only mildly "groping" before he finds himself "thinking of all the things you think about with your eyes closed." This sudden stylistic turn toward rhetorical periphrasis unleashes a diversionary overdrive that eventually confounds affective progress altogether. Like the child's "fort/da" game of calling the trauma forward and pushing it away, Eggers's organs hail emotional objects only to repeat their chronic divestment. Progressing along parallel trajectories, sex toward orgasm and memory toward event, Eggers responds to each bodily advance by withdrawal into the traumatic imagination. The pleasures of "fort," of "feeling and position and rubbing" rapidly convert into the horrors of "da," of "Shalini's eyes closed

and purple," in this way replaying the drama of belatedness, of sexual excitement that repeatedly returns him to ghastly reminiscences. Here, post-traumatic sexual desire literalizes a cycle of clogged affective dispersal. Not only is Eggers's sexual plunge toward totalizing redemption suspended by the traumatized reenactment of a fatal "fort/da," but his attempt to produce psychical intelligibility is likewise aborted. Indeed, although the calculus of seduction initially signaled the dramatic yearning to de-cathect, and therefore heal through intimate "affirmation," the pathogenic language of therapeutics actually frustrates erotic momentum. In what may initially have seemed like normative sex intended to rehabilitate temporalities of coherent selfhood, the "pastoral impulses" (Bersani, *Is the Rectum* 215) and defensive vocabulary of "moral good" actually clot and clutter the way toward erotic malfunction. On a rhetorical level, sexual intensities are directly inhibited by the hyperbolic shame of purposeless sex, but possibly more suggestively, these aborted exchanges foreground the problematic expectation of salubrious de-cathexis, curative breakthrough, productive release. For in his failure to experience curative orgasms, and therefore failure to heal, Eggers brings us closer to understanding that the link between sexual redemption and intelligibility presupposes the mandate, implicit in trauma discourse, that psychic self-cohesion is a rehabilitative necessity. What is more, privileging fantasies of psychic continuity elides the potency of incoherence, ambiguity and affective undoing to produce the conditions of mourning, conditions Elizabeth Hardwick calls the blanks in history that, in the music of their vacuity, unravel possibilities for, and of, unknowing.

In the next post-traumatic landscape of hypersexual desire, Eggers is on a trip home to locate and disperse his parents' cremated remains. Having that day acquired the box with his mother's ashes, Eggers spontaneously decides to pursue Sarah, an estranged friend from high school. Like all previous targets of desire, Sarah and Eggers share the death of their fathers from lung cancer a commonality he repeats to himself as though rhythmically fondling this symbolism for cosmic sanction as foreplay. "She looks like her dead father," he notices as they sit alongside each other on the couch, "and she is smoking like my dead father ... we are opening our mouths on each other ... having lived similar lives" (389). Eggers's morbid soliloquizing continues to the rhythm of their awkward intimate fumbling until the shared trauma that aroused him transforms suddenly into impotent silence.

After a few seconds we are again fiddling our tongues around in each other's mouth, turning our faces left and right. But why that weird look she was giving me? Every time I open my eyes, her eyes are open. It's unsettling. Maybe she's unsettled. She is. I know why. She knows I have my mother's box in the rental car. That's it. She can tell ... We are still moving our mouths over each other's mouths, and her eyes are probably still open — and when I was sitting there, I wished for a minute that I had a picture of my dad ... but instead I just sat there ... She knows, she can tell. She knows that after the bar I went to a pay phone and called the Anatomical Gift Association, and found out where most of the bodies go... We moved to her bed and we fumble, undress — the stairwell was about eighty degrees. Ninety. It was withering, and I had to walk to the seventh floor, where the doctor was, the man I was going to confront about taking my parents... Why was the stairwell so hot? ... I felt faint, and burst open the door, and felt the cool air sing into my lungs ... I am fumbling with something, trying halfheartedly to do something, but feeling so tired, too, my head so heavy — And when I found the doctor's name on the listing ... I was going to confront this man, at least look into his face, have it do something, tell me something — I am falling asleep, so exhausted, so I pull Sarah's back to my front and fall asleep — and then opened the doctor's door (389-92)

Unlike earlier proclamations of sex as the melodramatic splurging of erotic excess, Eggers seduces Sarah with the aloof awkwardness of fugitive desire, of someone whose desired target is always already elsewhere. Even the language of desire, of "fiddling," "turning," and "fumbling" points to tepid bodily intimations that occur as half-gestures, unfinished motions, distracted pleas. Whereas in his earlier encounter with Sari the motion of their interacting bodies provoked nightmares of the risks of pleasurable sex, as symbolized by "broken condoms," here the erotic agenda is secondary to Eggers' explicit pursuit of traumatic reencounter. Transposing the eroticism of "mouths over mouths" into the desire for "a picture of my dad," Eggers' bed transforms into a confessional (or psychoanalytic couch) thereby thematizing the ambiguity of his sexual agenda. Echoing Roland Barthes, for whom the photograph's testimony to "what-has-been" (Barthes, *Camera* 85) authenticates its own impenetrability, Eggers's morbid sex functions strategically here to reinscribe his inextricability from trauma.

What Eggers seems really to desire, then, is not the therapeutic release or psychic repair of sexual combustion, but the repeated extravagant expenditure of self-renewing post-traumatic mess. Converting the excitement of Sarah's disrobing into the funereal unveiling of the "Anatomical Gift Association," Eggers' relation to the body, whether as dust or female flesh, becomes a site of "radical confusion" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 25-6). As the enjambed sentences, absent punctuation, and fluid swapping of referentiality between obtaining "ashes" and "undressing" Sarah reveals, Eggers's desperate attempt to transfer trauma's overflow into another's bodily containers enacts the paradoxical desire to earn emotional wholeness by generating and purging erotic excess. As Gay Hawkins explains, "Waste doesn't just threaten the self in the horror of abjection, it also *constitutes* the self in the habits and embodied practices through which we decide what is connected to us and what isn't" (4). Like the weight of familial "antiques," the palpability of his mother's "ashes" arrests Eggers' urges to dispose or commemorate them, frustrating the attempted procurement of coherent selfhood through the psychic recycling of static death into discharged bodily excess. And yet, as their bodies interact the sexual anticipation dissolves into yet another fixture in the landscape of decay. Like the pastoralizing impulse that earlier precluded sex as purposeless exchange, here Eggers's erotic expenditure fails because it correlates curative release with virile mastery. Indeed, even before Eggers reaches the "Anatomical Gift Association" or the "doctor's door," the scene is cluttered with paranoid claims that Sarah "knows," "she can tell," that, "every time I open my eyes, her eyes are open." Horrified that Sarah intuits his shame of keeping his mother's ashes in the passenger seat, Eggers' tentative touching mimics his stuttering, slow-motion climb up the "stairwell" to locate the trauma. Although Sarah is not immediately worrisome to Eggers, the possibility of her "knowing" the trauma threatens to overwhelm and overtake him. Just as he is doubly humiliated at having ashes instead of parents and at his ineffectual, paralyzed dispersal of them, so too Sarah's "knowing" literalizes his helpless inaccessibility to the event. As Ann Cvetkovich demonstrates, the "representations of trauma as a wound or shock to the self often depict the psyche as a body or material entity that has experienced the violence of penetration" (50). In other words, representational structures of trauma's punctual rupture mimic homophobic fears of feminized weakness, vulnerability and receptivity. Particularly, the binary structure of healing reanimates phallogentric divisions between "active/passive," "masculine/feminine," "fucking/being fucked," surviving/traumatized (60). Doubly failing to conquer incomprehensibility (by penetrating Sarah/"doctor") and surrender to feminized weakness, Eggers' aborted ejaculation marks another version of post-traumatic ambivalence. As the failure to choose between masculine mastery or feminine receptivity, to either *push* past the "doctor's door" or *accept* Sarah's piercing "know[ledge]," Eggers's sterility forecloses his access to intelligibility and healing

Although the framework of Caruthian trauma does not explicitly refer to sexuality, Cvetkovich's reading foregrounds the gendering of survival's normative structure. In its complex entanglement of death and survival, post-traumatic "awakening" poses an especially poignant site of trauma's engendering. Beginning in Freud's case study of sleep patterns, which later became an exemplary instance of traumatic repetition, both Lacan and Caruth explain the "awakening" of the father who sleeps amidst his deceased child's dying only to hear his deceased son's question, "Father, don't you see you see I'm burning?," and awaken, suddenly, into the reality of trauma. In the frontier between life and death, Caruth interprets Lacan's "awakening" as the paradoxical moment of recognizing, in the devastating reencounter with trauma, one's own differentiation into life. To awaken, Caruth explains, "is thus precisely to awaken only to one's repetition of a previous failure to see in time...*Awakening...is itself the site of trauma*, the trauma of the necessity and impossibility of responding to another's death" (100). Both Lacan and Caruth emphasize the ethical responsibility of awakening, explaining that to "awaken is thus to bear the imperative to survive ... the one who must tell *what it means not to see*, which is also what it means to hear the unthinkable words of the dying child" (105).

Although survival is equated with reception, the language of awakening is "sudden," punctual, sublime; awakening suggests a second trauma of being jolted abruptly into life. Structurally mimetic of trauma, survival is shattering. Like the trauma from which it attempts to "awaken," survival is a drama of *overcoming*; the recognition of violent distinction (between one's own life and the other's death), of temporal discontinuity (between past and future), of disavowal (between one's own trauma of life and the other's trauma of death). Although Eggers is surprised the next morning to realize his premature slumber precluded sex, the failure to transact bodies and memories was structurally prefig-



ured by his presumption that the hypersexual penetration of another produces rehabilitative orgasm; or that trauma is at all penetrable through punctual mastery and awakened control. As Cvetkovich shows in her discussion of queer discourses, "butch-femme expands the vocabulary of sexuality, which remains impoverished by presumptions that penetration means only penis in vagina or domination" (52). Instead of grandiosely securing Sarah's submission, instead of forcibly confronting the doctor "about taking my parents and doing things with them," Eggers rattles on into anticlimax, he is "so hot," "so tired, my head so heavy," "falling asleep," "so exhausted." The failure of virility (of penetrating, pushing past, opening, climbing, reaching, getting) therefore dually becomes his incapacity to survive. "Falling asleep" and back into cycles of traumatic repetition, Eggers' serial reproduction of interrupted, soporific sex frustrates the temporal progression toward regenerative futurity. Where "awakening" demands conquering temporal indistinguishability, Eggers's "falling asleep" is the slumber of one whose past and present co-mingle incoherently. It is also the androgyny of one who can neither master nor receive, the ambivalence that locates healing in contemporaneity.

What renders Eggers' failed awakening radical mourning, and not merely an accidental detour en route to normative therapeutics or the fatal repetitions of traumatized stasis, is the transformative ineloquence its failure produces. In her provocative injunction to rewrite queer autobiographies against dominant pathologizing structures, Elspeth Probyn problematizes the tendencies, prevalent in trauma texts, of submitting errant experience to normalizing sequentiality: "I want to place childhood on the surface, to refuse it the anterior status of guarantee. Rather than seeing in childhood a common point of queerness, a garden of Eden from which we all fled or were expelled only to return ever after in nostalgic wonderment and wandering...[we] must proceed by making birth and childhood into a question of 'so-what' or 'whatever'; they must be prised from their position as individualized and precious possessions" (96-97). But what is autobiography's performed search for the traumatized "kernel" other than the frantic recovery of one's "precious possessions"? And what is the working-through of mourning if not the working-toward a reintegration of past and present, self and history into coherent selfhood? Not only is this journey toward survival a priori narrative, grammatically preoccupied with what Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky refers to as "behind," "beneath" and "beyond" - "the topos of depth and hiddenness, typically followed by a drama of exposure" (Sedgwick, *Touching* 8) but the efficacy of autobiographical therapeutics typically depends on the psychic repair exposure enables.

In their discussion of Eggers's autobiography, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson focus on how "Shandyesque" "gimmickry" is deployed to flaunt and "refuse containment by the disciplining power of autobiographical conventions" ("The Rumpled Bed" 8). Especially in climates of "truth-telling" and the memoir boom with its craving for unmediated experience, Smith and Watson explore how Eggers's "miming of memoir" may ultimately be the "one ethical act available to it" (8). In their comparison to performance artist Emin, Smith and Watson suggest that Eggers's ranting, outrageous self-exhibitionism evacuates expectations of meaning by producing, instead, the trivial "material" of everyday experience. However, in the context of post-traumatic narrativization, the representational intensity of hyperbolic self-revelation may less eradicate meaning than explode the boundaries of conventional therapeutic agendas. By inflating the scale of curative release and constructing new economies of melodramatic renewal, Eggers foregrounds how waste, and particularly the meaning/essness its excess produces, can constitute an alternative access to healing. For example, in a scene where he is interviewing to participate in an episode of "The Real World," Eggers derails into a biting metafictional polemic, decrying expectations of autobiography's profluent affective "truth." Like the ever-renewing supply of sexual fluids, traumatic memories are, for Eggers, leftover commodities — disposable knowledge, histories of trivial habits. For implicit in Eggers' insistence that "I don't care," "how could I care?" "everyone knows," is the spectator's plea to hear trauma's eloquent unrepresentability. If Eggers would rather "grant permission" to "give you everything," it is because for him trauma is an opaque horizon of ambiguities where "more is more is more," where linguistic squander generates affective flooding and produces delinquent, trivial inconsequence. Referentially and representationally bankrupt, the "more" he produces, the "more" he perverts possibilities for meaning, the "more" he exposes, the "more" he disrupts temporality, tonality and language (Arac 680) the easier it becomes to shed attachments to truth, continuity, "emplotments" of cure. Eggers's retaliation against victimhood and compassion materializes in a linearity interrupted by fantastic flights, a tragic register corrupted with information about his showers and masturbatory habits (same

passage), and the clotting of sentimentality with outrageous bursts of narcissistic bombast. Pointing overstatement back onto itself, what Eggers is "giving you" when he is "giving you nothing" is a new marketplace of surfaces, irrelevancies, what for Foucault is, "the locus of a dissociated self...a volume in perpetual disintegration" (83).

According to Peter Brooks's work on excess, melodramatic narration, even of ostensibly trivial "errors," is rhetorically invested with the demands of "Promethean sense-making...which man has elaborated to recuperate meanings in the world" (202). In heightened gesticulations and "full expressivity," melodrama pushes past "manners" and "surfaces" in order to reveal life's deeper "moral occult" (4). Exaggerating the cosmic value of social realities, hyperbole is primarily a drama of obfuscation wherein, "Nothing is *understood*, all if *overstated*" (40). This inverse relation between representation and intelligibility posits a paradoxical formula for meaning-making wherein external meaninglessness is exaggerated in order to recover the hidden, meaningful truth that lies "behind." While Eggers's outrageous performance gestures toward this search for "deeper" concealed meaning, his accusation of "giving you things...and it evaporates" rejects the "behind" hyperbole protects. For rather than exaggerating surfaces in order to locate trauma's essential unknowability, or "giving nothing" because truth is hiding, Eggers gives enough of everything to drain melodrama's drama of its sublimity and let linger only affective residue instead. Like his self-renewing organs of desire, Eggers's rhetorical machine of language produces itself outside dualistic spaces of private/public, meaning/triviality, truth/fiction, victim/survivor — because only through "more" noise and "more" mess, through what *fails* to emerge productively into meaning can Eggers disentangle himself from chases of ordinary meaning, un-become himself momentarily

Thematizing this confection of unintelligibility and healing again in a later novel, the narrator of Eggers's *You Shall Know Our Velocity* mourns his dead friend by trotting the globe for the recipients of \$32,000 he is desperate to donate. Returning from Senegal, now approaching the trip's end in Latvia, the narrator confesses to his deceased friend: "Jack I never told you this but for so long I've wanted something like that, I wanted to have some kind of boundary, and this part you will hate but ... I day-dreamed about car crashes. I wanted so many times while driving to flip, to skid and flip and fall from the car ... I wanted limitations, boundaries, to ease the burden, because the agony, Jack ...was in the silence!" (303). The craving for "boundaries" is not restricted to the provenance of mourning. Autobiography too, as a teleology of occults, kernels and origins, delimits affective chaos within the boundaries of hope and futurity. Disrupting this normative model with an experimental recommendation to "suspend origins" so that we may "find words or that words come to us" Probyn exposes the vertiginous possibilities of finding selfhood in spaces of un-becoming and re-becoming (103). Indeed, it is this fall into emptiness, the disorienting submission to irretrievable past and as not-yet-known futures that disrupts memoir's preoccupation with linearity, continuity and origin, entreats memory to wrest stories from diagnosticians and 'hear' them "come to us." To "hear" as to acknowledge the interchangeability of address and addressee; to *receive* one's self aurally. Sedgwick Kosofsky reflects on the rhetorical power of obituaries to "rupture the conventional relations of person and of address" (*Touching, Feeling* 264). This "rupture" that in Sedgwick Kosofsky's example renders cacophonous a material quilt of silenced dead, can become, in post-traumatic autobiography, the survivor's attunement to loss. Rather than conventional narrativization, with its pathogenic insistence on recapturing and redeeming psychic control, attunement to trauma may sound unbearable, the residual "agony ... of silence," an acoustic form of remembering that listens, quiets, receives. For Eggers, collapsed intimacy enables the inhabitation of interrupted ruptures; in the sprawl of affect that failed sex leaves behind and the perpetual reproduction of emotional wreckage, Eggers is given the space to bump into unassimilated pain, fold into it, let it in

As a narrative that tracks its own failed profundity through its narrator's stumbling sexual exchanges, Eggers' autobiography of chronic directional ambivalence insinuates the transformative role of affective ineloquence. In aiming, and failing to attain, the awakened ego autonomy that is normative mourning's reward, Eggers's hypersexual desire stages the inadequacy of melodramatic mastery to arouse healing. Indeed, if sex fails to articulate and confession falls asleep it is because normative parameters of control, progress and awakening obviate the radical potency of psychic disintegration. Writing about Mary Gaitskill's self-interruptive, counter-temporalizing post-traumatic heroines in "Two Girls, Fat and Thin," Lauren Berlant explores the therapeutic possibilities of impersonal affective sim-



plicity: "Justine falls asleep in Dorothy's arms. This is not a lesbian ending, exactly, since exhaustion is not sexuality. On the other hand, this mutual fall into bed is not nothing. It's something else" (99). This "something else" that is "not nothing," that is neither explicitly "violence" nor "release," opens a way into imagining how Eggers's first erotic exchange is also his first recognition of radical mourning. Or, put another way, the exasperation of failed sex for the first time produces Eggers' encounter with himself as the subject of staggering heartbreak.

As a site of hyperbolic extroversion that corporealizes fantasized/disappointed cycles of curative release, Eggers' itinerant body renarrativizes post-traumatic survival as the pulsing desire for involuntary continuity with himself, in the present. What the splurge of physical excess accesses that normative structures of reciprocal interchange cannot is dually the surfacing of traumatic memory and, once surfaced, the acoustic intertwining of trauma with life. In the language of post-traumatic survival, Caruth tells of the father who awakens "not to, but against, the very wishes of consciousness;" awakening here as the climactic (traumatic) shattering that reintegrates selfhood into normative psychic temporalities. The self-shattering of traumatic survival resembles the sexuality that in Leo Bersani's work is "that which is intolerable to the structured self" (Bersani, *The Freudian* 38) the violent defamiliarization of "solipsistic *jouissance*." Resembling the sublime drama of post-traumatic awakening wherein survival inheres the violent distinction, "of not to but against" living and dying, Bersani's version of sex corrodes temporal, relational boundaries, dissolving wholesome selfhood in the "moving between a hyperbolic sense of self and a loss of all consciousness of self" (218). Exiled from what Bersani elsewhere calls the "copulative oval" (Bersani, *Homos* 166) of reciprocal heterosexual completeness, homosexual transactions "break with humanity ... elevate infecundity, waste, and sameness to requirements for the production of pleasure." Unlike heteronormative exchanges that enlist bodies as projectiles of "reproductive futurity" (Edelman), Bersani's shattering sex of sameness swaps procreation for the exhilarating terror of excess

Linking the delirium of Bersani's shattering sex with unintelligibility and survival, Lee Edelman's evocative work on "sinthomosexuality" thematizes the unique role of queerness, and its drive away from reproductive futurism, to unsettle normative relations between being and meaning. In contradistinction to normative temporalities of desire that "always anticipates, in the image of an Imaginary past, a realization of meaning that will suture identity by closing that gap, queerness undoes the identities through which we experience ourselves as subjects" (24). In thus reading queer sexuality against sequential narratives of heteronormative desire, Edelman's conception of the queer death drive as a "mechanistic compulsion whose formal excess supersedes any end toward which it might seem to be aimed" (22), liberates libidinous energy from the demands of meaning-production and foregrounds instead the roaming senselessness of purposeless sex.

Miming the language of heteronormative directionalities, Eggers's erotic appetite qua quest for cathartic self-redemption promises the meaning and cohesion that is normativity's premise. However, what alternatively results in the serial dissolution of sex into moments of awkward fumbling, uncertainty and nonsensical misrecognitions marks instead a queer littering of selfhood that uses the ambivalence detoured desire produces in order to access the sensual nonsense of mourning. Considering the transgressive potential of nonsense from a psychoanalytic perspective, Adam Phillips argues that despite the conventional preoccupation with "endings" and cure, "there is something valuable ... in not being impressively coherent, something about not being wholly plausible, or, in a conventional sense, intelligible" (Phillips 36). Converting sex from an instrument of signification into a weapon for squandering coherence, Eggers' failed sex is therefore also a way of spending trauma that seeks through its promiscuous proliferation of disconnected pleasures, to sustain survival's illegible lilt.

In the text's finale, Eggers is on the beach playing Frisbee with his brother. Less than a year has passed since their hasty post-funeral departure for California. Managing to keep Toph healthy and in school, creating a publishing company with friends, restless for another job and new city, Eggers, absent sex, finally has an erotic exchange:

So today the wind is perfect. There's hardly any at all. This beach, Black Sands, usually has some kind of wind coming from the water, which fucks things up, sending the Frisbee deep into the frigid water, forcing me to wade in my shorts stiff-legged to retrieve it ... but he [Toph] cracks himself up ... Laughing like an idiot — The morphine was taking her under, but her breathing was still strong. It was erratic, but you should have heard the breathing —

when it came, it was strong, forceful, it was a yanking of air ... More and more like snoring, the grinding, the gasping. We stayed up all day and night because we did not know ... The breaths were pulling more and more ... But there was intelligence in that breathing, and passion in that breathing, everything was there, we could take that breathing and hold its hand ... the breaths were quicker and shorter and quicker and shorter and then shallow, shallow and that's when I loved her as much as any other time, when I knew her as I thought I knew her — oh she was out, she was gone ... I draped over her, not knowing when — But she would just breathe, and breathe, suddenly, anxiously, unyielding. (431-32)

In this explosive fusion of life and death, Eggers's arrival at mourning includes his brother playing Frisbee nearby. Futurity engulfs him, whether he gradually reintegrates trauma's interruption or erupts in erotic surrender. Always at the threshold between "preservation and decay" Eggers has not, once and for all, resolved whether or not to dump familial furniture and its indispensable pain. As he reflected at the book's outset, "I know I offered to keep it, insisted on it, wanted Toph to be able to live among it all, be reminded — Maybe we could store it until we have a real house. Or sell it and start over" (122). Indeed, what is post-traumatic wavering if not a wish to return trauma to circuits of exchange, to "keep it," live among it all," "be reminded." In Eggers's experience of mourning, the conflicting fidelities to "store it" or "sell it" are not disambiguated into apocalyptic certainty; rather, ambivalence becomes what it means to survive. For in the pure experience of breathing, the motion to inhale and exhale fragments of life, Eggers, like his mother, like trauma and memory, becomes both the living and the dead. "Breathing" as the rhythmic continuity between life and death, fort and da, control and surrender. Recounting his mother's defiant, "unyielding" breathing, Eggers locates the struggle for life in her stubborn inhalation, the "yanking for air" that devours oxygen, yearns to prolong, procrastinate pending discontinuity. And loving her, "not knowing when," there is a way to imagine that the story actually begins here, a year ago, when "draped over her," he held his breath, waiting. Waiting for a way to start breathing long after she stopped.

As linguistic control disperses into erratic vibrations, trauma is displaced from the narrative register of cognition and into acoustic reverberations. Here, it is breathing — as a beat of inside/outside, living/dying — that instantiates the coexistence of temporalities, that indifferent to fantasies of mastery and submission imagines survival as the encounter of one's psychic continuity in time. This move from the drama of hypersexual anxiety to the memory of stubborn breathing contagiously reproducing the conditions for Eggers's own breathing-along, tells a story of traumatized subjectivity that, rather than working-through the past to the future, emerges through trauma's reworking of the present. Whether disintegrating or restorative, the allure of theorizing melodramatic self-shattering through sudden "awakening" or the jouissance of sex is perhaps an expression of the desire for bearable boundaries to defend against the silence of elliptical, unending unknowing. For this reason, it may be that normative structures for conceptualizing cure are themselves defenses against the incurable life. In fact, it is only by swerving *around* developmental, procreative awakening, failing to recreate cohesive selfhood, and cruising around anamnesis without anchorage at intelligibility, that Eggers attempts to forfeit punctual healing. Although the text is a peregrination toward this eventual and eventual rehabilitative moment, the journey of misrecognitions, excesses and failures produces a post-traumatic healing that limps, pants, staggers. Trafficking the distinction between his own life and an other's death in order to mimic the beat of its temporality rather than insisting on their reconciliation, Eggers surrenders himself *back into* the dream; to the 'Child, don't you hear I'm breathing?' Eggers says yes; yes to a space "beside" (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*) momentary palpitations that fail to evolve past the queer *tempos* of meaningless survival. Toward his autobiography's end, Roland Barthes writes, "the fragment has its ideal: a high condensation, not of thought, or of wisdom, or of truth, but of music: 'development' would be countered by 'tone,' something articulated and sung, a diction: here it is *timbre* which should reign" (94). An attunement to trauma; the staccato of autobiographical undoing. Only where the past and future emerge forth from him is a presentness produced, the ineloquent welcome of erotic mourning.

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