

Cups (Sufficiency Enigma, 1999)

Craig Gingrich-Philbrook

I. Overture

Even as a boy, I wanted more.

More than my bicycle and the pleasure of riding down hill.

More than the blue dog running along beside me.

More than the road's curves and their feel, banking in my body as I coasted around them, standing up on the pedals.

More than the hill itself and the valley, the shadow, the meadow it framed.

More than the long grasses that grew there, where my dog lay quietly in the crook of my arm or busied himself in the ground, trying to unearth something, trying to dig deeper.

I wanted more than the place apart from home and the sad stories there.

More than the sad story of the dead brother, ever present, like dust: invisible until the light was right and then revealed everywhere, disintegrated, slowly settling, gathering on everything until someone tried to sweep him away, only to stir him into clouds again.

More than the sad story of the estranged father, soon completely estranged in death, with whom, in the stories, though not in my

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experience, I did not “get along”; who I would bring coffee to, in the morning, while he stood at the mirror shaving; who would reach backward to me, finding me in the reflection, from the reverse world where he looked tired and lost.

I wanted something like a companion, like my friend Andy who sometimes came with me, wrestling, raising himself breathless, pushing himself above me and staring—still—then suddenly growling and rolling me over onto him, his eyes wide, taking it, all of it, my own face, and Blue's barking beside us, and the sky above us, taking all of it, all of it, in.

But I think I wanted most to just *be there*. To find myself sufficient, “enough,” something other than the empty vessel I felt myself to be; wanted to be content, steadfast, simple—like the rocks, trees, grasses, the shallow rooted everything resisting, everything resisting falling, everything resisting falling further down hill.

What I wanted, what I wanted on that hill, and find myself wanting still, is a new language; a language that embraces the strength of attraction and desire but doesn't reduce life to that.

A language to describe the delicacy, the simplicity of erotic possibility between men—erotic in that sense of presence, and connection, and pleasure.

I turned to autobiographical performance as a way to track down, to construct this language; to glimpse it in the evidence of experience, hovering everywhere when the light is right; to string stories together with the words and phrases of this language, using them like pieces of broken vessels worked together into a mosaic, mobile, or wind chime; into a totem; into a monument—no unity in the pattern of the shards, only unity in the sound they made encountering one another in the breeze as overheard, as interpreted in the heart of passersby.

But it's not always easy. Sometimes the language and I seem like fellow prisoners, kept on opposite sides of a wall, scanning our senses for signs of one another: the touch of a message tapped out against the cold stone; the glimpse of one another in our shaving mirrors held out in our hands through the bars; the smell of old clothing, solitary cum, and the bleach the guards use to blot it all out; the overheard grain of one another's voice: breathing, weeping at midnight, singing at dawn, praying, though we each sit, lonely,

isolated, trying to collect ourselves, to compose ourselves, drinking coffee from our battered cups.

I want to talk to you about these cups: about fullness and emptiness; about the cold of the cupboard and the warmth of use; about the handle, and the hollow, and the lip; about the stone and bone, milled and wheeled a world away; about the sudden accident and thud in the heart that leaves everything changed, in pieces at one's feet.

About being a performer who is also broken in this way.

About this performance; which is also broken, and will not conceal the conditions, the apparatus, of its own breakage.

II. Enough

I'm a performer who has grown tired of performing, but is scheduled to perform anyway—tired of talking about performance as if it exists outside of our use for it. As if it were autonomous, separate from everyday life. It started two years ago, before I moved back to Carbondale, but after I knew I had an interview. I was a few weeks from a date at Dixon Place, a performance art space in Manhattan, so had to work anyway. I had to make the show anyway.

See, I have grown tired of making all the little connections that audiences respond to in my work. I have become self-conscious about them, worried about what they obscure, worried about what difference and chaos they blot out. I mean, I love a returning theme as much as the next person—they kill me. I hear the words repeating or feel the pattern recurring and feel like I'm floating in a boat that's picking up momentum, just out of sight, but not out of earshot, of the falls. And I love to go over.

But this love covers over the fear of all the randomness. It's cold comfort, because the fear is my theme—what keeps me coming back, and so it strikes me as counterproductive that I should only paper it over again with pretty pictures arranged in a pretty pattern.

I wonder, does a word like “counterproductive” have a place in a performance, in something that wants to be aesthetic?

Jonny, my partner, my companion on the hillside that has become my life, diagnosed it this way. He said that piece I was

working on, called *Grooms to the Flames*, was about death—about having had *enough* death in my life—like one ever gets to say that, but it's true. He said to make more connections, and think about death. Think about death more. Contemplate our finitude.

So I did. I took a day to go into New York and think about how everyone comes and goes so quickly here on this little ball of dirt we call home, this little ball of dirt making its trip, lickety split around the fire ball, around the fireball at the center, at the center of nothing at all.

By afternoon I had bought too many books and too many art supplies to glue down and paint over the scraps of paper I saved for the postcard collages I send out into the mail like so many seeds to the four winds, but I had thought precious little about death. So I went to one of my favorite cafés to pull out my notebook and do my work.

I'd sat there for a while trying to put things into words when my waiter left and a new one took over. He came on through an archway between sections of the cafe, a metal security door rolled up above, in front of it, as if we had something to fear from the barflies in their black turtlenecks and designer glasses. It was drawn up like a curtain, drawing attention to this arch's material correspondence with a theatrical proscenium.

The waiter had slight bed hair, like he'd woken up late and had run to work. In his forties, he seemed to hover here between jobs or lifetimes. His jeans were worn, and he wore them low—an old flannel shirt hanging over them, open on an ancient t-shirt that must have been holy to him. It looked thin and familiar, with all of the fight and most of the color washed out of it, leaving behind a muddy robin's egg blue relic that would be just the kind of thing I'd save in that other dimension where I love and will survive him. That other dimension presses close to this one, to this one where we're strangers but I recognize his slight resemblance, with his beard and moustache, to what the late pornstar Al Parker would have looked like if he'd survived the AIDS crisis.

This new waiter goes over to the coffee station and, surveying the café crowd, taking stock of what he's up against, rolls up his sleeves to get ready for his shift.

And then he's off. He's into it. He lifts the pots and starts his tour of the tables. We part for him as he completes the blocking he's marked out between the narrow tables—so characteristic of New York—that force us unwanted into conversations we learned a long time ago to ignore or cannibalize for films, novels, performance art pieces, or the life-story we present to shrinks—whatever we're working on at the time. He's gonna give us that coffee, damn it, whether we want it or not, and we, compliantly, make way for him. We part like prairie grasses in homage to our bottomless cup, the self-filling abyss this handsome stranger oversees like a disfigured minor god, exiled here, suspended between the transformations wrought upon him by the major players of the vengeful mythologies we all grew up on.

There's something about the potency of this waiter—the way he fills the cups, fills them like they belong to him, fills us up like we belong to him. I've seen this kind of behavior before.

On the Discovery Channel.

Among the zebra.

The way the narrator explained it, when a new dominant male zebra takes over the herd and drives the previous dominant male away, he goes around checking all the females, goes around to find all the female zebras to tell which are pregnant. The Discovery Channel, that wholesome purveyor of nature porn, went on at great length about this, about the length and functional design of the zebra's penis. How he inserts it and causes a spontaneous abortion of all the other zebra's potential offspring and, later, reinseminates the “empty” zebras with himself. He wants to keep them full, wants to keep them full of himself. And I know this is an unpleasant image. And so is this guy who keeps coming around to fill his cups.

And I know you may be thinking I shouldn't complain. At least he's refilling them, right? I mean, this is New York. This never happens. But it's the way (it's always the way, isn't it?), it's the way he's filling them. It has nothing, and yet everything, to do with “me.”

As a performer, I'm interested in this feeling his performance gives me. I'm asking myself, who is this “me” who allegedly disappears under his mistreatment? His self-indulgence in fulfilling his waiter role? I mean, does he steal me from myself when he

confronts me with his difference? Does he rob me of my memories of trauma or delight, of the feel of my grandfather's dying weight in my arms or the little deaths of the leaves in such romantic, overwhelming abundance along the avenue of sycamores by my undergraduate college, all those leaves broad and yellow, swirling, manic, in a storm around me as I rode my bicycle home, standing upright on the pedals in the last verifiable moment of my vanishing youth?

In the at least momentary insistence upon his heterosexuality, does he erase my own queerness—that touchstone our era has taught us to use to make sense of everything from life partners to toothpaste?

I don't think so. I think I remain, even as I resist. It's the only way to explain the complex emotional cocktail of outrage, boredom, and desire I consume as his spectator. I think, for example, in the sports-oriented language of skill he might identify with that he'd probably throw a good one, so long as I didn't want his attention, really, really didn't want his attention and wasn't just saying that to myself to bear the numb absence of soul in his gestures as he closed his eyes and relived, what exactly, what, the triumphs of his own youth?

I wonder if he thinks of it—school—the way I do sometimes: the scattered comrades, the afternoons in an open car. The excruciating moments of learning one's place in the social order, when, say, he and his football buddies would've harassed my friends and me, the debate and drama proto-queers. Who can say how all of that really was—they wanting to beat us up because they presumed we wanted to fuck them or us wanting to fuck them because we presumed they wanted to beat us up? All of it, all of it creating an absurd, interdependent, intermittently decodable vicious circle that could only lead to glimpses of drunken compromise at senior parties or in certain public parks I heard of, we've all heard of, and have or have not gone to, for richer or for poorer, for better or worse, as long as we all shall live.

So. How do you like my little experiment? I'm testing this theory about sexuality being constitutive, playing a role in everything. I'm

trying to find the language required to transcribe this role, even in something mundane like one man filling the cup of another.

And I'm making assumptions. I'm forgetting things. So watch me. I'm dangerous. I'm making assumptions and you know what assuming does—it makes us very vulnerable. I'm assuming that this coffee thing is about me even though I know it's not about me, not a personal me, but a me after all of the personal stuff is suspended though it cannot be suspended, a me after it's all boiled away even though it will not boil away, a me after all the me is gone and I am just "one." Just "one." One who has a cup. One who's sitting in this man's station, this man's section, this man's theatre. And this coffee thing, this coffee thing he's prepared for me, well, this is just his performance today. He's working on it. It's a work; it's a work in progress.

And me. I'm supposed to be working on my journal, even as I anticipate him coming around again with those damn pots; I'm supposed to be thinking about death. I'm writing something about it—who knows what—who remembers their life so exactly? Who remembers their deaths so exactly?

Perhaps I was writing the story of how I knew I'd changed forever the first time I stepped over a body on the street and didn't look back—assuming it was a drunk until a few blocks later when the sensation of lifting my leg to go across him finally registered and I realized he might have been dead; or maybe I was writing about that day at Shakespeare & Co., a bookstore on the Upper West Side—it's not there anymore, pushed under by a mega Barnes & Noble that opened across the street, that became dominant in that territory, that took over the readers.

I was down on my knees in the poetry section, reading the titles of the W authors, when I heard a noise [*demonstrate*]; a man had come up to me. I saw his shoes and looked up. He had his arms open, he had his arms wide open, and bandages wound around his head, and a fresh scar—pink and muddy robin's egg blue from a trache-tube; it was as if he had wandered out of intensive care into the poetry section, and with his arms open like that, I knew, I just knew what he wanted.

I had been prepared for this moment many times, by a dream of my father. It started just after he died when I was twelve. And I had that dream over and over again, for twenty some-odd years.

In the dream, there's a knock at the door [*Knock on stage/rise*]. I go to it. A man's at the door in a suit with a clipboard. He says, "Hello Craig, My name is NGGGGGGG, and I work for the hospital. Apparently your father has decided to come back from the dead." He steps aside, revealing my father standing sheepish and ashamed behind him.

Dad's wearing bandages on his head—an allusion to the brain hemorrhage, I guess, and the unsuccessful surgery to try to save him that followed. He looks a bit like Lazarus in the paintings: startled, grateful, uncertain how to process his recent taste of death, how to hold it in his mind alongside what he thought he knew of life. How to square it.

He reaches out to me, and I go to him, obviously delighted to see him, startled myself, and hold him. And then it becomes a nightmare because, in my enthusiasm, I pop the stitches in his brain open again and he dies again. We sink to the ground. He dies again. Right there. Right there on the WELCOME mat.

And so here's this man, with his bandages and his fatherly body, with his salt and pepper hair, with his arms open. Now, I don't think it's my dad, right? You get that? It's not so much the body that I recognize as the structure; it's the structure I recognize, the structure of a damaged man with the taste of death in his mouth wanting an embrace. So I rise. And hold him. Without questioning it. In a city of strangers. I try to be gentle; I smell him—the soap and bleach they use to blot it all out. We are dancing, all but dancing, as he rocks me back and forth, comforting *me*: "ohhhhh, ohhhhhh." The store is suddenly quiet, except for his small noises of comforting through his small noises of discomfort with his risen body. With how to square the taste of death alongside this brush with life.

And then. Then there's another labored breathing, almost a choking, added to his. It's coming from around the poetry shelf, and for a moment I think, "Oh my god, there's an army of them, an army of half dead men struggling over the event horizon, backing each other up, like shark's teeth, waiting for their chance to rip back into

the present.” I open my eyes and see a dog struggle around the corner, pulling, choking itself against a leash, pulling a woman who appears to be some kind of nurse or rehab therapist, and she says:

“Hi there. Is he bothering you? I'm sorry. He won't hurt you. He's recovering from brain surgery. He has a little brain damage. They love everybody when they have the brain damage. They love everybody at this stage.”

I can't speak. So I nod my shaky version of “I understand,” and hold on to him a little tighter. This embrace—mmmm—it tells its own kind of story; it's not just like a business hug, you know? It has moments, intensities, remissions. Transformations. He holds me tighter, too. The therapist puts her hand on his shoulder: “Are you finished, Honey? Is that enough now?”

With a kind of obedient regret, he loosens his hold on me, holds me by the shoulders, at arm's length. He cocks his head slowly, like it hurts a little. Looks at me like he's sorry. Like he knows we'll never see each other again. Bites his lip like something out of a corny movie, except he seems to mean it. And nods. The therapist takes him by the hand and leads him slowly around the tables of books to the door. As the distance between us grows, other customers look back and forth between us, as if to try to figure it out, but only briefly, only briefly. It might never have happened. Except that he turned around once to wave. And then was gone.

I don't remember if I bought any poetry that day.

I do remember having a cup of coffee from a newsstand and standing on the corner drinking it, shaking until I could speak enough to call my friend Lisa and tell her what happened.

I do remember that I never had the dream of my father again.

But I suppose the fact that I have included it in this performance suggests that I miss it.

So it's this encounter that I'm rereading and rewriting, or something like it; when I rise from my notebook like Lazarus to face the strange world of the cafe again, wondering what to do about this waiter coming towards me again, with the pots again, when I have had enough death and enough coffee and so I put my hand out over my cup in the universal gesture of “NO MORE. NO MORE. No more. Please. You're going to burn me if you don't pay attention.”

And, entirely without shame, entirely embodied, he looks at me and shrugs, lifting the pots above his head to make it past me. As he raises his arms, he pulls that worn t-shirt up out of his jeans, up like a curtain. An inch or so of his white boxers shows too, marking all the stages of dress and undress in a small territory—his bare skin, his underclothes, his shirt and jeans. He's somewhat tan, and though this structure of revelation would be enough to momentarily catch my eye, until civility and recognition led me to turn away, I glimpsed his small yin and yang tattoo, rising like a moon above the edge of those boxers. And, in the final moment of this transformation, the thin trail of hair leading from his navel into his pants caught along the length of my forearm, tripping the hair along the edge of it like so many hundred alarms.

And he smiles down at me. And I still have the goose flesh, and the wondering what it was, and the wondering how to square it, and the wondering how to leave it at the level of the mystery that all performance leaves, as an encounter with the unforeseen, as I pack up my things to go, and cast down a tip on the table, wondering if I've left him, wondering if I've left him *enough*.

III. Kill

Did you like that?

Did you like that story?

I wonder what to make of it sometimes. It doesn't end very clearly. Perhaps it would have been better if it had ended with me knocking the cup of coffee over and off the table as I left, then I could pick up one of the pieces as a souvenir and hold it out to you now and say *this is my last story, this is the last broken piece on my string*, and you'd know it was over.

But it's not always that neat. Jonny was right about the death part, I think. He's very good about helping me find the language.

In a few months, though, he and I were living apart, he still in New York and me in Carbondale again, back where I'd gone to graduate school. Plan was to try to get him here somehow, given that this was the sort of place we wanted to be.

When I took the job here, some of my New York friends thought I was crazy. Never mind the loss of bookstores and performance, they warned, you won't be safe there. Well, I'd tell them about the good stuff I'd seen or heard about in the Kleinau and the Doug and the lab theatre and remind them of all the shit we'd seen at Dixon place and PS122. And I'd say I felt safe here—reminding them of the puddle of blood I'd stepped in during the Pride Parade in Manhattan. Nothing like that had ever happened to me in Carbondale. Perhaps because there is no Pride Parade in Carbondale

But I'd always flash on a certain inscription in the marble wall of the stall in the men's room on the second floor of the Communications building and wonder if it was still there.

When I got here, sure enough, there it was. Untouched. I try to ignore it, most days, but I know it's there. It's an everyday thing, you know, always there, this inscription in marble, this inscription in stone like around the top of a library or courthouse; this ethic of destruction handed down like a sentence, like a version of justice.

I try not to take it seriously, you know? It or some version of it is carved in walls all around this great nation, this land of the free. Which includes free speech, I guess, which includes that great form of popular expression known as graffiti, right? Even when it's done with a knife.

And, hey, it's just an opinion, and you know what those are like, right, and everybody's got one.

So, no pun intended, but I try to work up my best belief that shit just happens and I don't have to take some wall carving seriously. I try to just go in there and wash out my coffee cups—one with the Van Gogh irises, one with Homer's boys running hand in hand playing crack the whip, you know, a little beauty, a little solidarity, a little joy—and just be on my compensatory way, you know? Making up for it.

I don't have to think about it, just like I don't have to call the phone numbers written there to arrange for some "real good head," and I don't have to indulge in the racist and misogynist sentiments written there, and I don't have to feel sorry for all the people who write that there they sat all broken hearted

And if I gotta sit there, If I gotta sit there because, how shall we say this, because nature calls, well then I just sit there with that language.

It's not like there's a spotlight on it.

I could turn away. I could turn the other cheek.

But one day, soon after I get to Carbondale, it's the day after a candle light vigil for Matthew Shepard, and the phrase "Kill Fags," carved into the stone stall wall, has an aching particularity. I'd stood out in the cold with a bunch of others mourning this boy who'd been tied to a fence and murdered, left to die there so someone could find him in the morning and say, "At first, at first I thought his broken body was a scarecrow you know, an exaggerated figure, a straw man constructed to frighten away the birds, to keep them from gathering, to keep them from going about their business in the natural world."

Everything is a warning.

Everything threatens, everything we take for granted.

All the talk at the vigil reminded me of the calls I got as the co-chair of the gay and lesbian student group in college; the spitting voices threatening to come over and kill me, and how, in the hours getting back to sleep before the next day's exams or whatever, the headlights on the road outside seemed brighter, heavier, racing my heart until they passed.

I thought about Wayne, the other co-chair, being chased through the night by a bunch of guys in a pickup truck, following him up over lawns, through the rose bushes, swinging baseball bats in the back, in the bed, in the bed in the back, and shouting about what they'd do to him when they caught him, until finally, he lost them.

And about the boy we called Daredevil, telling me one night about running for his life through his hometown, people breaking up into teams to find him, and finding a car with some of the girls from school parked on a corner, and how they wouldn't let him into the car and how they sat on the other side of the locked door, laughing at him on the other side of the window. Because, because good cheerleaders, good cheerleaders know they shouldn't interfere with the game, you see.

At the vigil, one of the speakers made an allusion to this, how the violence happens in our own *front* yards. He asked if anyone

remembered Michael Miley, a young Southern Illinois man killed and beheaded and burned in his car about ten years ago. Some of us shouted “yes,” remembering how the car had been found near a “popular” cruising spot, a park restroom, similar to another where, four years later, one of the janitors who worked in the Comm building would also be killed, shot to death in the middle of the night, “looking for it.” He might have buffed the inscription in that restroom: KILL FAGS. He might have been one of the ones leaving messages about where to meet and what to show that grace these walls and pose something like an alternative language to the language of killing.

What’s remarkable about Matthew Shepard is not that someone wanted to kill him. What’s remarkable is that they caught him. What’s remarkable is that he didn’t get away. Sometimes you don’t get away.

Everyday.

Every day.

Every day, like a cliché: Don’t count your chickens. KILL FAGS. Follow your dreams. KILL FAGS. Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me. KILL FAGS, KILL FAGS.

Wash your cups as fast as you can and just get out of there.

It doesn’t have a spotlight on it.

Because it doesn’t have to have a spotlight.

It doesn’t have to have a spotlight to serve.

It doesn’t have to have a spotlight to serve as a warning for something hungry and alive.

IV. Empty

(a. The Train Station)

The year apart from Jonny was very hard. It was hard to talk to him about the everyday work of performance, or things that happened in cafés. Sometimes, sitting in my empty house, I’d remember saying goodbye to him at the train station in St. Louis. He’d just helped me move to Carbondale, and was going back to our place on Long Island. I hate goodbyes; who doesn’t? There’s a little taste of death in every single one of them.

And so I tormented myself by trying to disassociate from the moment using the Heideggerian lever of authenticity; of course I had known this moment would come when I took the job. We had negotiated this moment, decided we were old hands at long distance. It was all worked out, and while the grief rising in my blood like a faint might be understandable, there was no use feeling it. It wouldn't diminish the sorrow of parting, and it wouldn't diminish the fact that it was coming at our own hands.

I kept trying to celebrate the fact that we had made this moment together, acting as a couple; however dubious an achievement it was ours—the work of months of conversation—on walks through parks, in bed on Sunday Mornings, facing each other in the bath, and countless other situations—some simple, some at the point of extremity, and some, perhaps more than we would have liked but less than the number required to be ashamed of ourselves, unspoken.

“No,” I kept saying to myself, “this isn't the time to weep like a schoolboy separated from a crush by a parent's changed job and a U-haul. You've done this together. Couples make complicated decisions. This is what it is about. If there's risk here, it is as mundane as it is breathless, breathtaking.”

We said goodbye by the car, away from the station, more for privacy, I hope, than shame or fear but let's be real, there was some of all of it. Standing out in the parking lot in the shadow of a great arching overpass that begins Highway 70's long reach across the Mississippi river into Illinois. Holding each other, we kissed and rocked a moment. He smelled of soap and sun and salt, and that memory haunts my senses with residues of the moment, right down to the green of his back pack and the sound it made settling into place, and the way his body had to stiffen under the weight of it and felt changed when I held him again before we walked to the door where my friend Mari waited discretely, waved with me as Jonny went inside, and walked back to the car with me, doing the unique work of friendship, comforting me across our own history of parting and return.

(b. “Empty”)

I don't remember where I first heard that the relationships men had with each other were “empty.”

Might have been my mother's pastor;

Might have been on a sitcom;

Might have been Dr. David Reuben's book;

Might have been something Jesse Helms said;

Might have been something on a bathroom wall;

Might have been a letter to the editor in the *DE*¹;

Might have been from one of those self-aggrandizing power fags at the bar justifying his own legitimate preference for the ephemeral by demonizing its straw opposition in commitment;

Might have been something you said or did before the show;

Might have been one of those Gay Agenda type films or a sign some asshole brandished at a funeral:

Maybe it was in the gynonormative undertones of emotional imperialism that haunt the tyrannical binarism advanced by folks like Julia Wood that women are the ones who really bond with talk and connection whereas men prefer implicitly silent rounds of shared activity, a second wave line of crap that fails to explain, why more men don't get off on the bonding power of synchronized swimming or kicklines.

For Chrissake—maybe we shoulda satisfied all of their language better. To hell with finding our own. Maybe we had it all wrong talking each other through it. Maybe we should have fucked goodbye on the hood of the car or passed some kid back and forth to each other between the columns of the overpass, or sucked each other off in the Amtrak john. Woulda been more in keeping with the expectations, yes? Talk about your empty. Talk about your shared activities, talk about your flavor of soap and salt and sun.

¹ (Ed.) The *Daily Egyptian* is the campus newspaper at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

(c. The Maple Tree)

In the front yard of my Grandmother's old house stands a maple tree; only it doesn't stand so much as arch—it swings to one side like the handle of an auger. The last time I visited Chico, I had a friend drive me there, and when she saw the tree she asked what it was doing with that bend in it, with that curve that looked almost like a piece had been taken out of it.

And I said, “that bend is a testimony to the emptiness beside it. There used to be an almond tree there. My great grandpa got the maple seedling at some ecology fair, and planted it so close to the almond tree that it had to twist its way out of the older tree's shadow. When it finally outgrew the almond tree, it righted itself again, growing back over. It's just that the Almond tree died, and isn't there anymore, but it is there, in a way, in that testimony, in that bend. And what looks like a fault in the tree is really just a record of what it did to survive. That bent out place, that looks like emptiness, that looks like something missing, that's the scar of how it learned to make do when the almond tree wouldn't, or couldn't, share the light.”

(d. The Cup/Falling Zen)

The house in Carbondale seems empty, the most, in the mornings. That's when I miss Jonny the most; Morning would come and I'd go down and start coffee, give the cat a treat, do some dishes, make some biscuits or fruit smoothies or something and take them and two cups of coffee upstairs, waking Jonny up or finding him already stirring a bit. And every morning he thanked me. And we had some time. Just some time together, before going in to the storm of it all.

Now, a thousand miles apart, the morning seems empty, evacuated of meaning; except for this partial charm, this making do: Before I left New York, I packed a cup that he favored, and left one that I favored, so that we could, in a way, still have breakfast together. I hope that's not too corny for you. It seemed like a good example of a cherishing behavior, and it worked, too. I took a Kelly Green (Forest Green?) cup.

When Jonny came to visit me for his Fall break, I was making breakfast one morning. I had to move something in the sink, which moved something else, which moved something else, which moved the dish drainer, which shook the cup loose from the hook around the side, and, well, this is what's left of it [*display the broken cup, just a handle*].

I had disturbed the universe just enough to make it fall. And you know how moments like that are. Slow-motion-moments? The cup rolled down through the air, its handle revolving, teasing my frozen body and quickened mind with the possibility that I might snatch out and catch it, hook it with my finger, or disregard the handle altogether and just dive for it like a friend tipping backward over her child, shy behind her, suddenly imperiled by the proximity of love.

Anyway, you see before you that I did not succeed in saving it. Perhaps I should have held the suspense and only revealed it to you now, but it is already corny enough, potentially, and too precious to me to turn into a suspense object, finally.

I just stood there. Finally calling out to Jonny, who swept it up for me, who went out in advance of my paralysis, and made me a clean place, while I did my dissociative work. Or maybe it's just reflective. You be the Judge. You will anyway, whether or not I invite you to, yes?

I kept telling myself, surely we all know cups may break. And it was a precious cup. Yes. But I kept telling myself that zen story. Once upon a time there was a warrior riding through the woods. He came upon a monk, breaking the most beautiful pottery the warrior had ever seen. For a long time he waited and watched, trying to make sense of it. But as the monk raised the last of these pots over his head, to let it fall, the Warrior rushed forward and asked him to wait, to spare it, to explain this madness, this act of violence against such beauty. "Yes, thank you," the monk said, "the pots are beautiful. But I am most interested in the beauty that remains after the pots have been broken."

And so I hold onto this piece of broken cup, this handle I couldn't hold on to when it fell beyond my reach. I keep it in a Jar on my windowsill, where it rubs up against other shards of other broken stories, contributing to a criss-cross architecture of unequal and

ununifiable sources. With the rest of them, it catches the sun in the morning, the handle, and the hollow, and the lip of it, warming and cooling with the course of the day.

And though it can no longer hold water to the standards of the material world, it has never, since he picked it up and put it back in my hands, been the slightest, been the slightest bit, been the slightest bit empty.