

Care Packages: Examining the Importance of Care in Three Parts
An Exhibition of Installation and Sculpture

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

This thesis illuminates the importance of care between individuals and within society. The exhibition, entitled *Care Packages*, uses installation and sculpture to encourage collective care and support. Through monumental forms of sculpture, I expose the intense stress paid caregivers are subjected to and point to the labour needed to help people during vulnerable transition. Domestic and cultural signifiers embedded in the materials, combined with poetry of inclusion, define and suffuse the space, further augmenting my message.

Acknowledgements

I live on a portion of Treaty 3 Territory, Between the Lake Purchase, now called Guelph. It is the ancestral and traditional homelands of the Anishinaabeg Peoples, specifically the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Hodinöhsö:ni' Peoples. While working at the University of Waterloo, I have been learning on the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishinaabeg and Hodinöhsö:ni' peoples. The University of Waterloo campus is situated on the Haldimand Tract, the land granted to the Six Nations that includes six miles on each side of the Grand River. These territories continue to be homes to many First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples.

I acknowledge my privilege as a person of settler and immigrant descent who has been free to use and benefit from these spaces that have been taken from the original peoples, who have been subjugated to cultural genocide, attempted erasure, and colonial rule. I continue to search for ways to reconcile the cognitive dissonance of my privilege with the continued subjugation of the original peoples of Turtle Island. I look for ways to support and promote the calls to action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to Care Givers, both paid and unpaid, both recognized and overlooked. The work you do is what holds society together.

Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family: Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one.

Jane Howard, author

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Introduction

What does it mean to care for others? What does it mean to put another's needs ahead of our own, if even for a brief time? Offering comfort, performing acts of kindness, providing a meal, or listening to another's worries and fears is a complex act. It is also profoundly gendered. Despite being 2023, it is still women¹ who are expected to provide most of the care and nurturance, regardless of their abilities or inclinations, while boys/men continue to be discouraged from acquiring the skills needed to care for others. Meanwhile transgendered and non-binary people are regularly denied any place at all.² Such conformity sets the stage for who is supposed to perform what labour; it also shapes the stories we are told about fulfilment in life and connection with others.

My thesis work, an exhibition of experimental installation, focuses on the elements of caregiving needed for a resilient and healthy society: caring for the sick and elderly; caring for those growing into new identities or life situations; and caring for each other in times of distress or loneliness. The works in the exhibition contain second-hand, found textiles that have their own histories and cultural signifiers, and, since the act of caregiving is traditionally of the female sphere, they are embedded with the Feminine. Using local thrift stores as a primary source, I have purchased uniforms worn by caregivers (e.g., scrubs), domestic adornments such as tablecloths and lace decorations, bedsheets, and pillowcases, all of which symbolize our universal need for care, safety, and intimacy. Through my artwork, I celebrate the caregivers of the past and present, inviting all – regardless of gender – to embrace these labours to support each other, for the future.

¹ Within the body of this work, I will use the words woman, women and girls to refer to female-identifying persons, and man, men and boys to refer to male-identifying persons.

² This work focuses on the societal forces that want to divide people into a gender binary, which attempts to push transgendered, non-binary, gender fluid and two spirited people into one of the two categories, thus refusing to acknowledge other ways of being.

Scrubs

Over the past seven months, I have been collecting, cutting, and resewing second-hand uniforms used by nurses, personal support workers, cleaners, and cooks, and assembling them into a monumental collage that fills the back wall of the gallery. Scrubs are a ubiquitous garment worn by caregivers; they are stain-resistant, durable, functional, and frequently adorned with cheerful colours and cute patterns to ease patients and encourage approachability. They become stand-ins for the women who, like the sculpture, are stretched taut, reaching their collective breaking point despite their best intentions. Society has struggled to uncouple the assumption that caregivers will always be there, like a never-ending resource, oblivious to the real and imminent threat of losing many of the workers that make up the backbone of our healthcare system.³

My textile collage is not solid, nor is it refined. It has purposeful holes and gaps built into the fabric. It is stretched and nailed into place, with protrusions pushing further, stretching it from behind. As a monument, it is meant to overwhelm the viewers' vision with tension and chaos and be unavoidable. As such, it also serves as an homage to both the people that wore these scrubs and the work that they did throughout the pandemic. As a former nurse, I keenly follow the stories of my previous colleagues who have worked throughout COVID-19 and are now facing the crisis of staff shortages and burnout. I remember getting ready for a shift, going through the process of selecting my scrubs with consideration of the people I would be interacting with, especially when I worked with children. I see from the multitudes of uniforms donated to charity shops that the intention is still there amongst caring staff but is subsumed and buried by the stress of being chronically understaffed. *Scrubs* is presented in solidarity with the caregivers of whom society demands so much yet does little to support.

Care acts, relegated to one sphere of the gender binary, have had a long and entrenched

³ As an example, the CBC reported on the rise of complaints (this year there were over 3,000) to the Ontario patient ombudsman, reported March 7, 2023. "The report cites a 43 per cent increase in the number of patients and caregivers who reported that they were treated with a lack of "sensitivity, caring, courtesy or respect" at hospitals. That increase signals that the strain faced by patients and health-care providers is affecting interactions at a personal level, said patient ombudsman Craig Thompson in an interview."

history. In her book, *Caliban and the Witch*, Silvia Federici outlines how through history via codes of conduct laid out by the church and state, (97, 115) women have found themselves forced to perform the acts of caregiver, nurturer, and submitter to men. This historical journey stemmed from a paradigm shift from land-based labour transfer to urban labour (97). The opportunity to dominate women and their labour was a latent incentive for male workers to leave the land. This in turn established a social contract where labour deemed feminine (i.e., performed by women) was not valued as work. Capitalism, Federici further explains, through support from the church and state, further transformed this social contract whereby:

a new sexual division of labor, or, better, a new “sexual contract” ... was forged, defining women in terms of mothers, wives, daughters and widows – that hid their status as workers, while giving men free access to women’s bodies, their labor and the bodies and labor of their children. [...In] the new organization of work *every woman (other than those privatized by bourgeois men) became a communal good*, for once women’s activities were defined as non-work, women’s labor began to appear as a natural resource, available to all, no less than the air we breathe or the water we drink.(97)

In this way, *Scrubs* highlights the intense pressures put on female caregivers through Western ideologies (both historical and today) that serve and enforce a gendered binary of skills acquisition.



(Figure 1: *Scrubs*, Christine De Vuono, 2023)

This assumption, that women's labour is natural and free, is in direct conflict with the fight of female-dominated professions for fair wages and work-life balance. Concerning nursing, it is worrisome that the uniforms I find are in remarkably good condition, and that there are so many to choose from which to use. When I trained to be a nurse, I obtained a university degree instead of a college diploma because it gave me the skills to critically reflect and act on the complexity of factors that would affect the people for whom I cared. I wanted to work with a holistic understanding of what constituted good care, understanding how personal history, poverty, diet, social interconnectedness, and privilege affected health outcomes. That was twenty years ago, and today I read stories from burnt out nurses who are so busy triaging patients and filling gaps, that there is no time for this next level of care work (Ontario Nurses Association (ONA), 2022).

The need for caregivers is higher than ever, yet the capitalist paradigm continues to exploit

and undervalue this essential work. In *Care Under Capitalism: The Crisis of “Women’s Work”*, Helen Hester argued – two years before the pandemic – that although the need for care workers is predicted to increase, “Looking at the US government’s projections for job growth to 2024, one journalist noted that ‘nine out of the 12 fastest-growing fields are different ways of saying ‘nurse’” (346), the ways we remunerate or retain these caregivers was not going to change in a capitalist society: “Care under capitalism will remain under-recognised, undervalued, and underpaid.

Crucially, a care economy is not necessarily an economy that cares.” (347)

A long history exists of using textiles within contemporary art to accentuate the relationship between gender – particularly feminine – and capitalism. Although the intent and overall experience differs from my installation, Allyson Mitchell’s *Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata in Late Capitalism*, a multi-room internal space made of charity shop blankets, rugs, curtains, and pillows, is a maximalist’s approach with maximum impact. The work is a materially rich and layered commentary about female labour, overconsumption, and discarded objects saturated with personal histories and “crafty” work. Curator Sarah Quinton describes the experience of *Hungry Purse*:

From floor to ceiling, folds of large pink pillows, soft drapes and carpeting comfort and cocoon. [Mitchell’s] installation creates feelings of unease as the participants confront their fears of claustrophobia, genitalia, mortality and appetites. *Hungry Purse* refers to 21st-century addictions to consumption that result in credit card debt, over-shopping, and the lines of credit that swallow people up and overtax nature. Mitchell’s commitment to reworking found textiles and handicrafts is a comment upon the excessive availability of second-hand goods that are loaded with emotion and sentimentality, to erect an ‘other’ space from which the vagina dentata can be considered, accepted, and literally moved through. (<https://allysonmitchell.com/project.html?project=hungry-purse>)



(Figure 2: Allyson Mitchell. *Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata of Late Capitalism*. 2004)

Mitchell's installation draws from items that have enough sentimental value to not be thrown out, but not enough to keep. The overwhelming presence of the female, through handmade labour, sculptural references to genitalia, and item choices, solidifies the *Hungry Purse* as representing the complex experiences of women in a consumerist world. I see a connection of commentary regarding female experience in a capitalist system between Mitchell's work and my own, although we are each focusing on distinct aspects of the experience. Where we both have a love of second-hand materials and the symbolism they hold, Mitchell utilises the symbolism to speak of sexuality and the lived experience of the female body, where I am using materials that illicit a more clinical

relationship to the health care system. I manipulate my fabrics to point to its failure to prioritize workers, which runs counter to the fact that those who feel supported are much more apt to support those in their care.

In terms of caregiving, the social control through the centuries which Federici describes not only physically curtailed women's movements and actions, but also instilled a narrative that women are only fulfilled by their service to others, and it is their natural role to be caregivers to all. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sarah Ahmed delves into the various ways society shapes our assumptions about what a happy life looks like and how to achieve it. In terms of gender conforming pursuits, there is a long history of convincing both men and women that, "any deviation from gender roles defined in terms of women being trained to make men happy is a deviation from the happiness of all." (55) Roles of social reproduction are trained into children through education both in the home and in society in general. Ahmed argues that the role of education attempts to shape the outcome of children's destinies: "What happens to the child will shape what the child can become... Education becomes about directing such potentiality; about steering the child in the right direction" and "a good education should contribute significantly to personal and collective happiness." (56) But this education does not offer the same imperatives for all children. Girl children are taught that their happiness is contingent on the happiness of others. Ahmed defines these lessons: "We can think of gendered scripts as "happiness scripts" providing a set of instructions for what women and men must do to be happy, whereby happiness is what follows being natural or good. Going along with happiness scripts is how we get along: to get along is to be willing and able to express happiness in proximity to the right things." (59) To get along, women must reproduce social behaviour for others – men, children, ageing parents, etc. and if their charges are happy, so too shall be the woman. While creating *Scrubs* and pulling taut the fabric, I envisioned the nurses stretched to their limits trying to care for their patients as well as their families.

So, what are the costs of this so-called happiness? According to Sarah Jaffe, capitalism needs women to care for others out of love and a sense of duty to keep that labour cheap or free.

(26) If one can also throw happiness into the mix, all the better. But this flavour of happiness is one that is contingent on another's happiness, and if that other person is not happy, then you are not happy. Ahmed defines this as conditional happiness which "involves a relationship of care and reciprocity; as if to say, I will not have a share in a happiness that cannot be shared. And yet, the terms of conditionality are unequal. If certain people come first – we might say those who are already in place (such as parents, hosts, or citizens) – then their happiness comes first. For those who are positioned as coming after, *happiness means following somebody else's goods.*" (56) By pushing this belief, those whose careers are focused on caring for others are made to feel selfish or uncaring if they want to prioritise care of themselves. The bright colours and cheerful patterns of *Scrubs* reflect this conflict of wanting to provide a positive persona yet being unable to follow through, due to overwhelming demands on the caregivers' mental health and physical bodies.

In *Work Won't Love You Back*, Sarah Jaffe highlights the use of these societal lessons as ways to keep women caring for others in the workforce because they are told this is what will make them happy. Women know they are being exploited and overworked, undervalued, and underpaid, yet they are fighting both the assumption that social reproduction is free and their happiness scripts directing them to make sure that the people that surround them are happy and cared for. In this COVID world, we see this play out as people elevate and praise overburdened (predominantly female) healthcare workers as heroes, yet various healthcare governance bodies refuse to pay them better or support them with better working conditions and work/life balances (xiv). In writing this paper, I have deliberately included commentary from three countries: the United Kingdom (Hester), Canada (ONA) and the United States (Jaffe). Although each country has very different governance structures of their health care systems, they all are pointing to growing crises in nursing care in each country. *Scrubs* is a commentary on this internationally untenable condition.

Grandma's Tattoos

If you are *of a certain age* (i.e., over 50), the grandmas that had tattoos while you were a child were considered women who had lived less conventional lives and had the marks to prove it. Although and perhaps because my grandmothers did not have any tattoos (that I knew of), as a kid, tattoos on older women were an awe-inspiring thing to see. In naming my sculpture *Grandma's Tattoos*, I envision all the nurturance of a grandmother infused with the empathy and fire that a non-conformist life holds. This person wears what she wants, says what she thinks, and provides a safe haven for the outcast and misunderstood. The other reading of the word "tattoo" also connects with this project: a tattoo is a bugle song to call soldiers back to the barracks, and the idea that a grandma would call out for her soldiers to return to her feels poetic. These 'soldiers' are the community and family members and friends who care for the vulnerable, the transitioning, and the growing people of their communities.



(Figure 3: side, outside image of *Grandma's Tattoos*, Christine De Vuono, 2023)

People are often surprised when I tell them that you do not know what an inflatable will look like until you have sewn up all the seams and filled it with air, especially when the materials used are a mixture of reclaimed fabrics. My assembly began with the floor, a 72- inch vinyl tablecloth. Like quilt construction, I added pieces, some as more floor and then sides. I also sewed two vinyl windows for lightness and transparency so that those on the outside can see inside and vice versa. To some fabrics I applied insulation foam and spray paint to make them more colourful and highly textured; others I sealed with acrylic medium to stop the air from escaping. Although I was building the sculpture intuitively, I knew the general feel of what I was going for, and trusted in the serendipitous process.

Before the work was fully sewn, I had a lapful of fabrics threatening to slide to the floor, pulling away from the sewing machine's needle. Feeding what felt like mountains of fabric through a sewing machine and then a serger to finish the outside seams gave me an appreciation for the skills needed to sew clothing, tents, and even sails. Once the seams were sewn and the fan installed, the sculpture grew so much bigger than I had expected, and I was ecstatic – it looked like a hot-air balloon growing and growing until the top of it was my height and other objects in the room had to be moved away from its expanding form. After all that sewing while trying to predict what the curves of seams or cuts of fabric would look like, seeing the realised sculpture shifted how to approach a project like this, where I need to be open to multiple alterations, responding to each change until it was how I wanted. The process of refining the shape, adorning the shell, and hand-crocheting the two fuzzy rugs inside was all done in consideration of the overall shape as it evolved through these alterations. I had initially envisioned that viewers could only imagine what it was like inside via the vinyl windows, but after going into the space myself, I realised how different the experience was to physically be inside versus outside. As a result, I installed a 48" zipper to allow people to enter. This then prompted me to add the rugs to soften and personalise the floor. The softness and the size encourage people to stretch out and enjoy the tactility, and that, along with the diffused lighting and the gentle breeze of the inline fan, work to shut out the world that can

be so overwhelming.



(Figure 4: *Grandma's Tattoos* inside detail)

The sculpture's exterior is marked by various signs of domestic labour and signifiers from my heritage from both my Scottish Protestant and Italian Catholic immigrant grandmothers – doilies, wallpaper patterns, fabrics from a handmade dress, a tablecloth and a caregiver's uniform. These indicators remind me of the support I felt from my grandmothers, as both had these patterns in their homes. The surface has layers of mark-making in vibrant colours, emphasising the need for alternations, and maintenance to sustain a safe space. On the inside, the colours are also vibrant, intensified by the gallery's directional lighting, the walls blue, orange, purple, yellow, and pink with soft, hand-woven rugs. The interior reflects the qualities of a safe space – intimate, made with care, and with soft cushion-like surfaces – whereas the outside acknowledges and celebrates the labour that went into creating it. If everyone who needed to transform had a metaphorical

cocoon provided by their family and community responding to needs as they arise, this would be a hallmark of a caring and healthy society.

Grandma's Tattoos is also informed from my experiences as a mother. My own children and their friends are diverse, specifically in terms of their gender identity. I hear the ease with which my kids use gender-affirming language and discuss the dramas that inhabit their teenage years where gender-diverse experiences are seen as normal parts of those narratives. I compared this holistic respect with the anti-LGBTQ2+ laws and vitriol in politics proliferating in the media while I worked to make this piece. This was amplified because I began the construction in Michigan, where polarising American politics were so close, and many of the people I worked alongside were gender-diverse and had to deal directly with anti-queer sentiment. While my initial inspiration was thinking about what small kids need in their lives, such as nurturance, love, non-judgmental understanding and safety, as I worked and considered this piece, I shed the preconceptions of who would need a safe space and now think of it as applying to any who need sanctuary.

Safe havens would not be necessary if we did not live in an unequal world filled with homophobic and transphobic vitriol. Understanding that gender roles are prescriptive and have created much suffering for so many people, I look to thinkers that are actively turning away from the gender binary and the forces that profit from it. For example, Audre Lorde – Black, lesbian, feminist, activist, poet, mother, outsider, and “warrior” academic – was a leading figure in the political and social movements from the 1960s until her death in 1992.(12) Thoughtful and nuanced, Lorde called out the sexism and homophobia in the civil rights movement, and the racism, classism, and homophobia in the women’s movement, advocating for the inclusion of diverse voices and lived experiences. She wrote about the strengths that come from rejecting the mindset of patriarchy that limits care and pits people against each other. When speaking at “The Personal and the Political Panel” Second Sex Conference in New York (1979), she highlighted the stark lack of inclusion within the speakers and the research presented, which ignored the lived

experiences of poor women, women of colour, as well as non-heterosexual and non-academic insights. From her research and own lived experiences, Lorde spoke of the dangers of individualism that kept feminists from benefiting from the diversity of experiences that would create a non-patriarchal community. Although she was specifically speaking of racial inequities within feminist academic circles, this sentiment can be expanded to include everyone's diversity:

Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. Difference must be not merely tolerated but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity of interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters. (111)

Lorde points to the strengths that lie in the diversity of outlook, lived experience, and history, and that we can only achieve wholeness if we confront that which causes us pain and embrace all aspects of ourselves honestly. (146) The strengths she speaks of cannot flourish in the boxes of conformity made by others. *Grandma's Tattoos* aims to honour the richness of diverse experiences, a subtle resistance against the laws and politics of those who want to curtail the kind of wholeness for which Lorde so eloquently advocated.

The potential of inflatable sculptures to be both functional and political is seen in artist Michael Rakowitz's *ParaSITE* (1998 - ongoing), an inflatable designed to provide unhoused people with temporary shelter as it attaches to the heating and air conditioning (HVAC) vents of buildings in cities such as New York, Boston, and Chicago. It is his response to the ongoing crisis of house insecurity and the dangers of weather exposure. The tents are warm and can have doors for added privacy. Rakowitz has posted the "how-to-build" pdf on his website with clear instructions – using twenty garbage bags, a roll of duct tape, a plastic tarp, thin electrical wire and scissors – and the decades long project is a reminder that the housing crisis is still a chronic problem. This inflatable

is not the (literally) warm and fuzzy of *Grandma's Tattoos* – it is an artistic yet practical response to the real and present dangers experienced by many people living unhoused in urban settings. Rakowitz's sculpture *cum* tent addresses the immediate need for harm reduction, whereas the whimsical details of *Grandma's Tattoos* is a metaphorical stand-in for the care and support vulnerable community members need from those who can provide that care.



(Figure 5: Micheal Rakowitz, *ParaSITE*, 1997- ongoing)

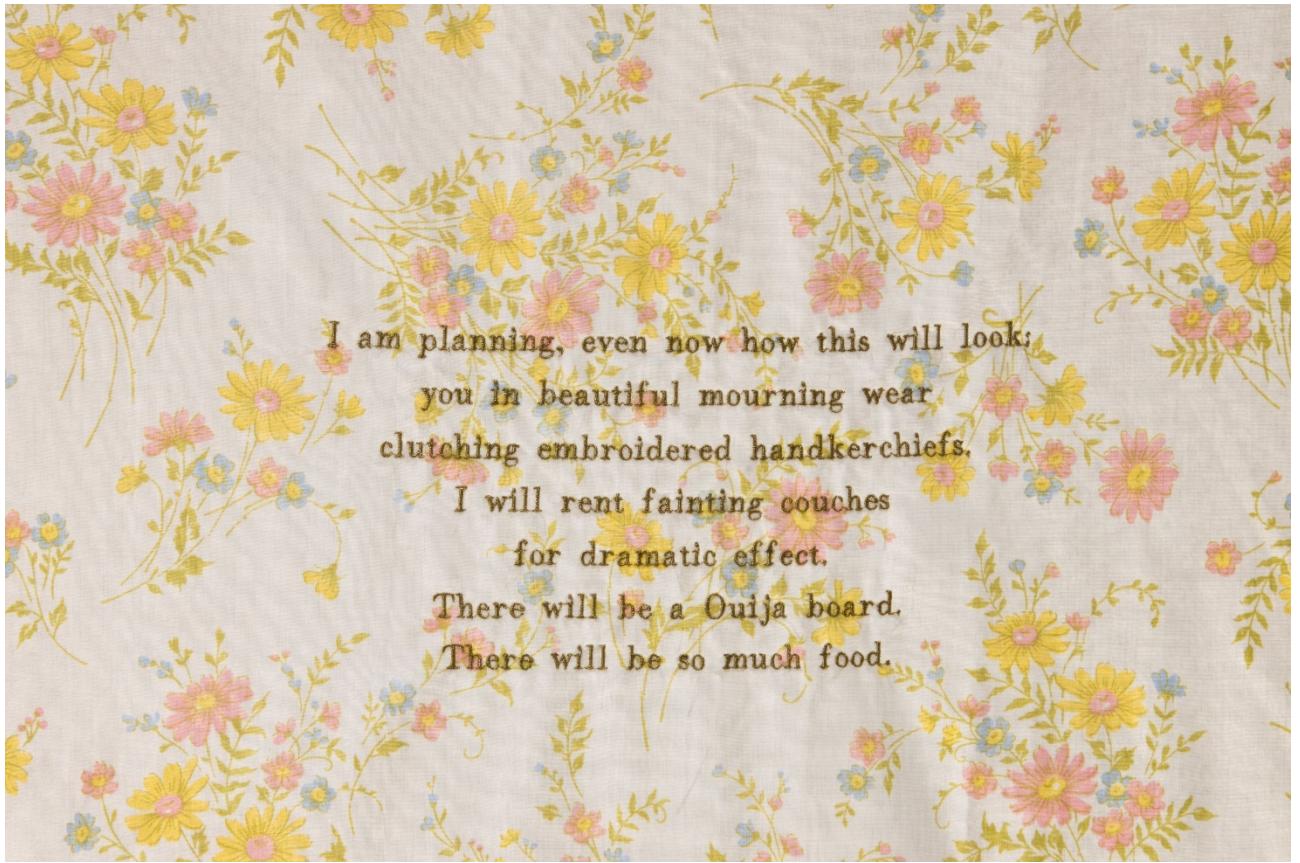
Rakowitz's tents are a functional, modular artistic response to a social problem, whereas Tracey Emin's tent, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995*, explores the personal experience of being intimate, whether in a state of sleep or through sexual relation. As with *Grandma's Tattoos* and *ParaSITE*, Emin's tent "functions as a private sphere, a place of refuge, a bedroom, and a temporary dwelling. At the same time, the tent represents a place exposed to danger – as an ephemeral architectural structure it is less protective than solid walls." (Crasemann) Within Emin's tent, viewers can read the names of everyone that shared a sleeping space with her – an intimate act in an equally intimate setting, one which the viewer is invited to inhabit. In her article, "Tracey

Emin's Tent," Lenna Crasemann explains that Emin further accentuates the intimacy through the handsewn letters and feminine handicraft, adding adornment to highlight women's skills both in the context of what constitutes art and playing on cultural assumptions of accessibility to women's bodies. Here, Emin subverts the masculinity associated with gallery environments by bringing in craft, personal experience, and gendered expectations that affect her body and experience in the world. Whereas *Grandma's Tattoos* is an enclosed space that provides safety, one that is constructed to metaphorically keep danger out, Emin's tent accentuates and exposes the possible dangers and insecurities that come with being vulnerably intimate with various people. Women are still considered accessible, both emotionally and sexually, to others, but society also does not want to hear about the fallouts. Where Emin used feminine crafts as a signifier of labour, paying attention to the lived reality of women, the handicraft of *Grandma's Tattoos* is of projected care for individuals who need a safe space that has signifiers of love, labour, and attention to care.



(Figure 6: Tracey Emin, Everyone I have Ever Slept With, 1963-1995, 1995)

You're Invited



(Figure 7: *You're Invited*, 2022, detail, Christine De Vuono)

You're Invited is an installation of bedsheets hung from clotheslines in a maze-like pattern. Poetry, placed in scattered stanzas and embroidered on sheets throughout, reflects my thoughts on longing, vulnerability, and intimate connection. The first time I hung this installation, *Scrubs* hung opposite, and the two pieces were in conversation. Whereas *Scrubs* is chaotic without a cohesive pattern, *You're Invited* is calm and orderly with a contemplative air. Together, these pieces spoke of caregivers on the one side trying to hold themselves upright, with the vulnerability of patients convalescing on the other side. The cheek by jowl placement represents the close proximity in which these stories play out.

The second-hand sheets, along with the poetry, speak to mortality and the need for more

than physical care – the emotional labour that makes people feel seen and nurtured.⁴ I chose second-hand sheets as a ubiquitous item that is a source of comfort, solace, and warmth: an object present during birth, death, and sex, that I then elevated into an art installation.



(Figure 8: *You're Invited*, 2023. Installation)

In *You're Invited*, I have pulled the private space into the public, making a maze that envelops the participant into an environment reminiscent of home. To be surrounded by bedsheets, hung on clotheslines with pegs, references newly washed laundry and the domestic labour that goes into this act. Yet it also refers to the absent bodies who slept between them. Second-hand, the linens come from the homes of strangers, prompting questions about what dreams, inner thoughts, and mental struggles these strangers may have had. The intimate nature of the sheets and their purposeful tethering, along with the poetry's content, speaks to the

⁴ Emotional labour is defined as anticipating another's emotional needs and attempting to meet them. Some examples of this are remembering and making someone's favourite meal, keeping other people's schedules in mind when planning events, consoling someone in distress, or asking after a person's sick family member. (de la Cretas).

connection between people, the healing of pain and loneliness through words of common struggle.

It requires the participants' time to both meander the maze and read the embroidered poetry.



(Figure 9: Eric-Paul Reige, *a home for Her*, 2022)

Diné artist Eric-Paul Reige's installation, *a home for Her* is a blueprint of his childhood home made of hung tapestries that took the place of walls. The work profoundly resonates the power of the domestic and the female labour that goes into making a home. Made of tapestries woven by Reige and the women of his family, *a home for Her* invited participants to walk through a space as a translation of the emotional labour and familial knowledge that sheltered and nurtured him throughout childhood. Reige speaks of the importance of the process:

Our stories and our craft and our teachings and our gifts as Indigenous peoples are woven into our bodies. We have survived and will continue to survive. The makeup of my family and my ancestors permeate from my fingertips into my work. This project allows me to hold hands with my sisters and my mother through a large collaborative weaving piece. Born from a history of fiber artists, textiles connect our history to Diné cosmologies and these stories and beliefs are directly woven in the threads of our family.

Reige's installation celebrates and honours the lineage of labour that has sustained his culture historically, as well as the intimate family support that raised him personally. This homage to the

intertwined circles of intimate relations and community support within a shared culture reflects the care acts that create resilience in communities. This resilience is echoed in bell hooks's writing on the importance of community in her book *all about love*, "Communities sustain life – not nuclear families, or the "couple" and certainly not the rugged individualist. There is no better place to learn the art of loving than in community." (129)

The purpose of *You're Invited* is to see each other as sources of strength and support, vulnerability becoming commonplace and accepted. The sheets are stand-ins for the multitudes of people within our community, complex in their insights and sorrows. To find strength in each other, to relinquish a bit of individualism for community would be an act of resistance to both capitalism and patriarchy. bell hooks elaborates on this possibility:

Much of the talk about "family values" in our society highlights the nuclear family, one that is made up of mother, father, and preferably only one or two children. In the United States this unit is presented as the primary and preferable organization for the parenting of children, one that will ensure everyone's optimal well-being. Of course, this is a fantasy image of family. Hardly anyone in our society lives in an environment like this. Even individuals who are raised in nuclear families usually experience it as merely a small unit within a larger unit of extended kin. Capitalism and patriarchy together, as structures of domination, have worked overtime to undermine and destroy this larger unit of extended kin. Replacing the family community with a more privatized small autocratic unit helped increase alienation and made abuses of power more possible. (130)

Interconnectedness as a hallmark of a resilient community can be found in every culture, through every lifestyle. Within each community a poet is attempting to make sense of it all. Poetry has a unique space within writing and art together. As Maria Popova, Bulgarian born author, essayist, and poet now living in New York, says of poetry: "Poetry interrupts the momentum of story, unweaves the narrative thread with which we cocoon our inner worlds. A single poetic image can lift us from the plane of our storied worldview toward the gasp of a whole new vista, where in the

spacious silence of the unimagined we imagine ourselves afresh."(Bass) In this installation, I aim to not only disrupt the environment of the viewer by placing them in a space of wandering domestic signifiers, but also offer words of compassion, interconnectedness, and shared vulnerability.

As I came to write my own poetry for "*You're Invited*", it was important that the poems addressed the reader directly. In *Returned* (2023), I wanted to welcome the reader as a beloved, returned from their wanderings back home, yet also emphasise the impact of their return on others:

Returned

I watch as heads turn,
sunflower sure to the door you enter.

There is nothing on first blush that is
extraordinary about you –
no loud clothes or diamond rings.

You blend with those who gather
as birds, similar soft
colours and crinkled eyes.

I watch them come to you,
pulled by a warmth that radiates
like a languid sun in the sky
but felt in the bones.

Other conversations dropped
like candy wrappers
for scents of fresh bread.

They listen deeply to your voice,
drinking in your words like nourishment.

I watch and you catch me watching
and smile with easy knowing.
We clasp our hands
in the custom of our kin.
You kiss my cheek and
even though you were the one
who walked for miles in ruined boots,
I am the one who is returned to
the warm, breezy safety of home.

The second poem I wrote for *You're Invited* is the installation's namesake. I began thinking of this poem after attending the funeral of a dear friend who died at 92 years old. The room was packed with hundreds of people, from a myriad of connections. I knew almost none of them and would always ask, "how did you know her?" The stories I heard inspired this poem where a life well lived is in context with the people that life touches.

You're Invited

I never wanted a big wedding, but
I am planning on a big funeral.
I am expecting you there,
to mingle with every other person dear to me.
To ask them, "How did you know her?"
To tell our stories, to cry.
Yes! I want tears to flow from every eye.
I will invite the Wailing Women,

they know how to have a good funeral.

I am planning, even now how this will look:

you in beautiful mourning wear
clutching embroidered handkerchiefs.

I will rent fainting couches
for dramatic effect.

There will be a Ouija board.

There will be so much food.

But I get ahead of myself.

There will only be a big funeral

if we begin planning now.

We must get together frequently,
even if we don't speak of my funeral per se.

This is a slow burning match,
one that can do its work in the background.

While we over-plan birthday parties.

While we're drawn to drinks on the porch.

While we celebrate new lives and old traditions.

While we battle off-spring and borrow sugar.

While we sob over sudden heartbreak.

While we share drama from work.

While we tag-team childcare.

While we commiserate over bona fide fuck-ups.

While we honestly appraise a new haircut.

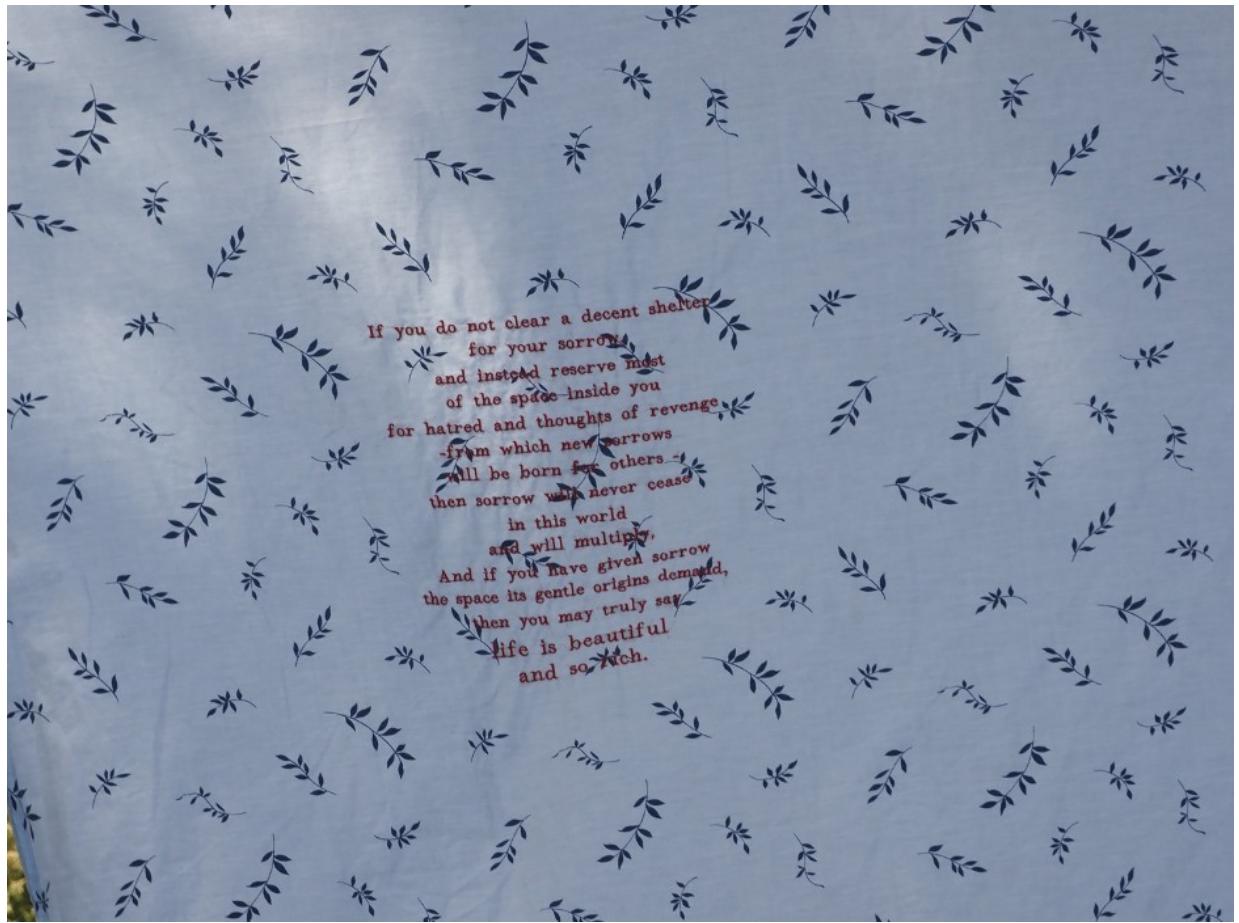
While we send each other memes of cats.

After all of this preparation,
when the invitation comes,
everything will finally be ready.

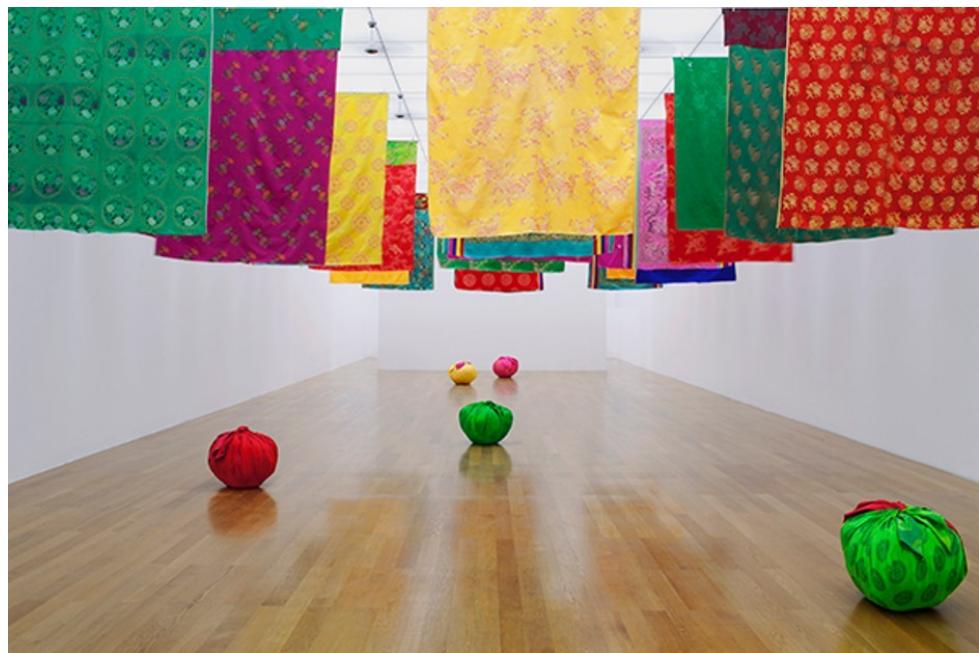
And you will say,
“Of course I’ll be there.
I never miss a good funeral.
And this one promises to be *epic*. ”

The two poems were written to elevate connection and the importance of friendships, but also encouraging intimacy within relationships. Coming to poetry through the research for this thesis, I have read extensively from eloquent poets such as Naomi Shihab Nye, Mary Oliver, Etty Hillesum, and Juan Felix Herrera. The poetry I learned from focuses on shared vulnerability, mutual connection, and empathy. I cannot choose a favourite as they each speak to nuances of the human condition in poignant and unique ways. Instead, I have provided a selection of the most moving poems in Appendix A.

To embroider the poems, I hired an exceptional embroiderer, Debbie O’Brien, whose professionalism, and skill gave me beautifully crafted text, perfectly positioned on the bedsheets. It was important to me that the embroidery in this piece was done with care. Unlike *Scrubs*, which was collaged with a purposeful roughness, or *Grandma’s Tattoos* which emphasised the multiple layers of labour involved through the surged seams and layers of spray paint and fabrics, *You’re Invited* required care and precision. Having worked with an embroidery machine before, I understood this is a skill that takes years to perfect, along with very expensive equipment. I am thrilled to have met Debbie as this project would not have come together nearly as beautifully without her.



(Figure 10: *For A Moment, precursor of You're Invited*, detail of poem by Etty Hillesum)



(Figure 11: Kimsooja, *A Laundry Woman*, 2000)

With *You're Invited*, I am creating an environment of quiet contemplation, peace, and reflection, and the nature of bedsheets helps to invoke this emotional state. Other artists such as Kimsooja also utilise bedsheets to illicit feelings of home, which is especially evident in their installations of suspended bedsheets in both *Kimsooja, A Laundry Woman* (2000) and *A Laundry Field* (2020). *Kimsooja, A Laundry Woman*, was a site-specific installation of twenty-seven vibrantly coloured and patterned traditional Korean bed covers that hung from the ceiling of the gallery space of Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, with five equally colourful bottaris – “a bundle wrapped with Korean traditional bedcovers for carrying household belongings” (Hyunsun, 2000) – and six ceiling fans. This installation spoke to the immigrant experience, displacement, and adaptation to a foreign country – holding the intimate knowledge and lived experience of a home country personally close, yet publicly and geographically out of reach. *A Laundry Field* was one hundred white embroidered Swedish bedsheets hung in a woodland near Malmö in 2020 during the first wave of the pandemic when the world was becoming familiar with lockdowns and social isolation. Of these white sheets swaying in the green, natural space of the forest, Mark Rappolt wrote:

They give an idea of stains removed, fresh starts, new beginnings, extreme hygiene and slates wiped clean. And, with their embroidered trims (an example of local craftspersonship), of old traditions of manufacture and housework, which to a lot of us might seem anachronistic in a world of urbanised living, rapid manufacture, household convenience and washing machines. White: the mark of mourning, purity and rebirth. Or perhaps all this is to overthink what is simply evidence of an easily comprehensible, quotidian routine.



(Figure 12: Kimsooja, *A Laundry Field*, 2020)

Both installations call upon culturally influenced notions of domestic labour, home, and interconnectedness, yet the feel of each is unique and diametrically opposed. In *Kimsooja, A Laundry Woman* – Korean signifiers in form, colours and usage in a German museum – have the bedcovers in a gallery setting with white walls, above viewers’ heads, out of reach, richly saturated in colours that are mirrored in the bottari on the floor, yet *A Laundry Field* uses Swedish traditional bedsheet designs that hang throughout a Swedish forest. Kimsooja intermixes the mundane with global diversity to inform her work, having commonplace intermingle with diversity of culture as she experiences it through her life and practice. “I saw art in life and life as art. I couldn’t separate one from another. So my gaze to the world and my questions were always related to life itself” (Kimsooja, quoted by Rappolt).

We are steeped in the everyday – some items offer touchstones for memory, traditions, and

a sense of home. *You're Invited* is meant as a welcoming to a comfortable, unpretentious gathering, to come as you are. With breezy bed sheets, cleaned and hung, holding words of compassion, it is my hope that those who wander through can feel a sense of belonging with others both present and absent.

The phrase, “The future is female” is not insisting that women will take over the world, rather it acknowledges that the labour within the female sphere – social reproduction, emotional labour, cooperation, and community building – are the skills needed for a healthy future, and they cannot only be performed by half the population. The projects I have been working on encourage community involvement, human connection, and empathy for those who are overburdened with the labour of caring for others. The evidence that patriarchal capitalism is failing society and the environment is becoming more evident to more people, yet there needs to be something to take its place, which has been with us all along albeit devalued and ignored. My practice is based on looking at these talents and skills of community building and being comfortable with each other’s needs and vulnerabilities, offering them as an alternative for people to grow into, and for communities to thrive.

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Appendix A

These are the poems that have spoken to me. There is no shortage of incredible poetry focused on human connection and tenderness.

[Let Us Gather in a Flourishing Way]

By Juan Felipe Herrera

Let us gather in a flourishing way
with sunluz grains abriendo los cantos
que cargamos cada día
en el young pasto nuestro cuerpo
para regalar y dar feliz perlas pearls
of corn flowing árboles de vida en las cuatro esquinas
let us gather in a flourishing way
contentos llenos de fuerza to vida
giving nacimientos to fragrant ríos
dulces frescos verdes turquoise strong
carne de nuestros hijos rainbows
let us gather in a flourishing way
en la luz y en la carne of our heart to toil
tranquilos in fields of blossoms
juntos to stretch los brazos
tranquilos with the rain en la mañana
temprana estrella on our forehead
cielo de calor and wisdom to meet us
where we toil siempre

in the garden of our struggle and joy
let us offer our hearts a saludar our águila rising
freedom
a celebrar woven brazos branches ramas
piedras nopalos plumas piercing bursting
figs and aguacates
ripe mariposa fields and mares claros
of our face
to breathe todos en el camino blessing
seeds to give to grow maiztlán
en las manos de nuestro amor

Red Brocade

By Naomi Shihab Nye

The Arabs used to say,
When a stranger appears at your door,
feed him for three days
before asking who he is,
where he's come from,
where he's headed.
That way, he'll have strength
enough to answer.
Or, by then you'll be
such good friends
you don't care.

Let's go back to that.
Rice? Pine nuts?
Here, take the red brocade pillow.
My child will serve water
to your horse.

No, I was not busy when you came!
I was not preparing to be busy.
That's the armor everyone put on
to pretend they had a
purpose in the world.

I refuse to be claimed.

Your plate is waiting.

We will snip fresh mint

into your tea.

Shoulders

By Naomi Shihab Nye

A man crosses the street in rain, stepping gently,
looking two times north and south,
because his son is asleep on his shoulder.

No car must splash him.

No car drive too near to his shadow.

This man carries the world's most
sensitive cargo
but he's not marked.

Nowhere does his jacket say FRAGILE,
HANDLE WITH CARE.

His ear fills up with breathing.

He hears the hum of a boy's dream
deep inside him.

We're not going to be able
to live in this world
if we're not willing to do what he's doing
with one another.

The road will only be wide.

The rain will never stop falling.

Wild Geese

By Mary Oliver

You don't have to be good.

You don't have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Etty Hillesum

If you do not clear a decent shelter for your sorrow,
And instead reserve most of the space inside you
For hatred and thoughts of revenge
from which new sorrows will be born for others –
Then sorrow will never cease in this world and multiply.
And if you have given sorrow the space
its gentle origins demand, then you may truly say
Life is beautiful, and so rich.

These Poems

June Jordan

These poems

they are things that I do

in the dark

reaching for you

whoever you are

and

are you ready?

These words

they are stones in the water

running away

These skeletal lines

they are desperate arms

for my longing and love.

I am a stranger

learning to worship the strangers

around me

whoever you are

whoever I may become.

Appendix B

This appendix holds the poems I wrote for *You're Invited. For Nicola* has not been embroidered for this rendition but is earmarked for future installations.

Returned

I watch as heads turn,
sunflower sure to the door you enter.

There is nothing on first blush that is
extraordinary about you –

no loud clothes or diamond rings.

You blend with those who gather
as birds, similar soft
colours and crinkled eyes.

I watch them come to you,
pulled by a warmth that radiates
like a languid sun in the sky
but felt in the bones.

Other conversations dropped
like candy wrappers
for scents of fresh bread.

They listen deeply to your voice,
drinking in your words like nourishment.

I watch and you catch me watching
and smile with easy knowing.

We clasp our hands
in the custom of our kin.

You kiss my cheek and
even though you were the one
who walked for miles in ruined boots,
I am the one who is returned to
the warm, breezy safety of home.

You're Invited

I never wanted a big wedding, but
I am planning on a big funeral.
I am expecting you there,
to mingle with every other person dear to me.
To ask them, "How did you know her?"
To tell our stories, to cry.
Yes! I want tears to flow from every eye.
I will invite the Wailing Women,
they know how to have a good funeral.

I am planning, even now how this will look:
you in beautiful mourning wear
clutching embroidered handkerchiefs.
I will rent fainting couches
for dramatic effect.
There will be a Ouija board.
There will be so much food.

But I get ahead of myself.
There will only be a big funeral
if we begin planning now.
We must get together frequently,
even if we don't speak of my funeral per se.
This is a slow burning match,
one that can do its work in the background.

While we over-plan birthday parties.

While we're drawn to drinks on the porch.

While we celebrate new lives and old traditions.

While we battle off-spring and borrow sugar.

While we sob over sudden heartbreak.

While we share drama from work.

While we tag-team childcare.

While we commiserate over bona fide fuck-ups.

While we honestly appraise a new haircut.

While we send each other memes of cats.

After all of this preparation,

when the invitation comes,

everything will finally be ready.

And you will say,

“Of course I’ll be there.

I never miss a good funeral.

And this one promises to be *epic*. ”

For Nicola

I see you as you were on that last day –
Or was it sometime before that? I'm not sure.
We were in the yarn shop on the High Street.
Or was it the sandwich shop?
I can't remember where it was.
But I remember the joke – not the actual joke –
I remember the punchline made us laugh so hard
strangers started laughing too.

Do you remember that time
at the school (dance class? karate?)
waiting outside for the kids
with all the other grown ups
when I told you why my lip quivered
and you inched over and rubbed your
raincoat shoulder against mine?

Do you remember when you had that fight
with your husband (or was it your mother?)
And we went for coffee, just the two of us to
that place with the collection of teapots?
We had to order second coffees we didn't want,
just to stay longer to talk.

I remember these things, vaguely.

The spectres emerge

feelings mostly –

of our time together.

How you caught with

feather-light hands the volley

from that day that threatened

to overwhelm me.

Or that time when you slipped

and the possibility

to fall forever was real,

but I caught you

(I still can't believe it).

I remember these things as I summon your spirit –

but seances don't work on the living.

This is what happens when we wander,

which is more my fault than yours.

Of course, I will send you an email,

but first, right now,

I send my longing for your presence

into the ether with only my mind

and I hope to sense you.

I am better when I think of you here.