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Apprentice to the Work of Thinking: Essays on Violence, Fear, Freedom, Hope

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Apprentice to the Work of Thinking:
Essays on Violence, Fear, Freedom, Hope

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Prelude: To Touch One Another

When I was a child, my sister and I weren't allowed to touch each other. My mother made this rule for us early on, and it was one we usually followed with little trouble. I can remember telling someone once that nobody had ever intentionally hit me before, which is something I have believed for most of my life. It was only recently, when violence became something I had an immediate and urgent desire to understand, that I realized that this story was untrue.

The morning after finding out that my college boyfriend had cheated on me, I sat in the office of a beloved professor weeping.

"It just feels like," I kept repeating over and over, unable to finish the sentence.

"Like someone punched you in the face," my professor said, with the kind of sincere assuredness that made me feel like she wasn't falling back on a platitude. After the daze of confusion and shock that I had been in the night before, when I had received news of the betrayal in my dark dorm room via social media, the bright light of the office and the reality of my professor's concerned gaze was the first moment that the weight of the situation truly struck me. The confusion I felt in that moment was something I had only experienced once or twice before in my life. It was the same kind of confusion that I have come to associate with acts of physical violence.

I realized later how I knew this. I was maybe thirteen years old, standing in the bedroom that my sister and I shared. My sister's mouth hung open and her eyes were stunned, then transfixed on me. We had been arguing over who the actual owner of a certain tube of lipgloss was. Completely sure that it belonged to me, I threatened to divulge a secret my sister had been keeping from my parents if she didn't relinquish the gloss to me immediately. Convinced that the gloss was rightfully hers, and that she would not be forced to bend to blackmail, my sister abandoned reason, reached out with both her hands, and pushed me hard enough that I stumbled backward. In the seconds following, we were both motionless. I stared back at my sister in similar slack-jawed silence, unable to compute what might happen next. The act was incomprehensible. It defied the private rules we had been living within the bounds of for our entire sisterhood; not just my mother's rule that told us not to touch each other without permission, but our rules of how we waged war on one another.

My sister had stepped across an invisible boundary and I didn't know how to respond. I knew she would be in trouble for hitting me, but in that moment I wasn't thinking about tattling on her. I never even told my mother about it. I realized in that moment that the use of physical violence was a possible line to cross—one that *had* been crossed—and that realization was enough to make me never want to think about the incident again. For the next eight years, I essentially buried this memory.

In college, when I made the discovery that a person I loved and trusted had betrayed me, I had the same feeling of raw shock I had felt when my sister pushed me. It was the feeling of being suddenly pulled outside of a code I had believed was unwavering. My understanding of what was true and possible shifted; my genuine predisposition to trust people began to come

unglued. I began to question whether my boyfriend's betrayal was my own fault for not having known any better.

It is the boundary between blind trust in moral codes and the ease with which we cross into disregard for them that makes violence such a confusing territory. I don't walk through my day-to-day life expecting to get punched in the face, literally or metaphorically; if I did, it would call both my personal security and health into question. It would be a deep cause for concern.

Abuse is never okay. Violence is never the answer. (We have heard all of the sayings.)

But what happens when we call violence and abuse by other names? Names like duty, sacrifice, and honor? Violence wounds us in one way when we are not expecting it. It wounds us in entirely different ways when we know what is coming, but wait for it to come anyway. This has been something I have struggled to understand, and simultaneously have been victim to. I struggle to find words to talk about the kinds of violence that permeate the world I live in. I live in a world that accepts violence. Until recently, I never attempted to understand what this meant. I never asked myself what the differences between protection and violence are. Lately, I have been trying to understand where these terms intersect. What happens when two things so opposed—*to harm* and *to protect*—are fused together? This contrast, this clash, this incongruity has become, in recent years, a source of great moral turmoil in my life.

I have attempted at various points to unpack and repack this moral problem around the intersection of harm and protection. It is something I am still trying to understand. Much of this thinking took place as I tried to reconcile my pacifist upbringing with my boyfriend's military career (which is the primary subject of the third part of this essay). The more time I have spent thinking about the military, the more I have uncovered ways in which the structure of that system

frames our understanding of what constitutes an ethical action. The unwritten laws of patriotism, central myths of the U.S. military, tell us that loyalty to our country, and loyalty to the cause of freedom for our fellow citizens is—fundamentally—an act of protection. This loyalty is an act of care, or heroism; of upstanding moral character. Care, heroism, uprightness: these are values we stand behind as we send our soldiers into battle. But *battle* is not an alternate moral universe. *Battle* happens in the same universe where I live, the one where I have been taught to understand that killing is wrong, that violence against a fellow human being is extremely difficult to justify by circumstance. And soldiers are citizens, like I am.

What I have begun to uncover and reckon with in my own life is that the military is just one system that frames how we understand what violence can mean. There are other systems constantly at play in my life, like my gender identity, race, and class, that dictate how violence touches me, and in what ways I access it. How can I understand violence if I am unable to see the factors at play in my life which are acting on me?

For a very long time, I never questioned whether it was right or wrong for a soldier to kill another person, because I did not think this was something I was allowed to question. But even more than that, I sensed that even if I might have liked to ask such a question, nothing was *forcing* me to understand. I was safe inside my subject position. But I sensed that maybe my subject position did not protect me in every regard. After all, my sister had pushed me; she broke the rule against touching in our house. My question, then, became about understanding the power structures behind individual acts of violence. What has transformed the way I experience and understand violence? What factors are acting on people in other subject positions which I have not been able to understand? *How do we touch one another?*

I. Two Considerations of Fear

When I was in middle school I suffered from severe anxiety. For a period of time when I was in seventh grade I was bullied by a boy I had known for several years, with whom I shared only one class. I did not have much contact with him during the day, but when I did see him I was usually alone.

In the hallway on my way to the bathroom, I turn a corner and his face is close to mine, his taunting voice in my ear, where are you going, Annie? In art class, I am at the sink mixing paper mache paste and I hear snickering. I redden, not turning my head to look because I know he is behind me. What's in that bucket Annie? Did you puke? I am standing at my locker, and I see him coming towards me staring but he says nothing. He passes. Fuck you Annie, under his breath.

In elementary school, I had gotten this boy in trouble for throwing a basketball in girls' faces to scare them. When I spoke up about it, I trusted that my teacher would stop his behavior from harming anyone in the future. I didn't understand the nature of harm then. I viewed it innocently. I trusted that there was a system in place that would protect me. Telling my teacher would ensure the basketball would be removed from the classroom, and the boy would no longer be able to cause me or other girls harm.

Over the next several years, we were in different classrooms and had little contact. But he never forgot how easy it had been for me to speak up against him, and as he got older, he found ways of harming me that I could not speak about. After his private verbal abuse got particularly bad, I remember confiding in my sister. I was in the shower one evening, thinking about an

incident at school that day, and suddenly I felt as if I would be sick. I got out of the shower, wrapped my towel around me and sat on the bathroom floor crying. My sister heard me and burst in to see what was going on. When I told her about what had happened at school that day, and that it had been happening for some time, she shrugged and told me that boys sometimes make fun of girls they like. Standing in the shower, reflecting on his words was panic-inducing, but as soon as my sister left, my wet, shaking body on the floor of the bathroom began to feel melodramatic, maybe even shameful.

I didn't speak about it to anyone else for a long time. I had friends at school who cared for me and they didn't know. I did well in school. I didn't even see this boy every day. I convinced myself I was okay. On the way to school in the morning I would curl up into a ball in my seat alone on the school bus pretending to listen to music on my iPod, but what I was really listening to were recordings I had made of myself saying things like *you're safe at school, everything is fine, he doesn't matter, they are just words, they are just words, they are just words*. It was not enough to think these things; I had to actually *hear* myself saying them. Eventually, the boy moved away. But here again my understanding of the pervasiveness of harm was wrong. I had thought distance would bring safety, but the boy's words still found me in private Facebook messages. *Hey bitch, did you think I was gone? I will find you. I have a gun and I will find you wherever you go.*

There can be a disconnect between a *sense* for right and wrong and one's *actions*. When I have tried to understand this in the past, I have been asking myself the wrong question. My question used to be, *is violence rational?* After a certain point, the question became less about

trying to understand what constitutes a violation of our moral code, and more a question of how I rationalize a breach in this code. Is there really any gray area when it comes to acts of violence?

How does a person get to a place in which the confiscation of a basketball is proportionate to a threat of death? Something about how this boy was socialized taught him to believe that, or made that belief pass in his own narrative. It wasn't until years after he threw the basketball in my face that I even questioned what was actually happening. For many years, I just tried to forget what had happened. It was my brain's way of trying, not just to survive, but to live. But now I ask myself: what was happening in his mind? In mine? In the minds of those who narrate and decode for children the systems of protection that are in place for them?

Years after the situation had been resolved, I was home from college on Thanksgiving break and I went upstairs to look for my passport in the file cabinet my parents keep in their bedroom. Inside this cabinet is my father's record of everything. Folder after folder was labeled in his neat dark pencil script with all the things I expected to see: *Annie's taxes, Cindy's benefits information, UMF tuition payment plan, family history notes from Mam, Car payments*. And then there was one I didn't expect: *Annie's court case*. There was something unsettling about seeing a record of an event that had slipped through the crevasses of my life. *Of course* my father had kept a record of it. He had kept copies of the protection order, notes from the police, information from the court, and screenshots of the social media messages before they were removed from my inbox, before the boy's account was somehow erased from my reach for my own protection. The records were a reminder that this moment in my life which I had wiped from my memory still existed as a collection of material artifacts with its own narrative.

When this boy threw a basketball in my face, it was with a lack of regard for or knowledge of my situation as a girl who was socialized to expect harm. A girl who, through this experience and others would develop an understanding of her vulnerability to men. The initial act of throwing the basketball in my face was an act committed on the basis that it could be committed. Even if the boys had been unable to articulate why they held the power in this situation, even if they could not name gender as the leading factor, they could sense my position of subordination to them. They sensed that throwing a basketball in my face was an act that they could commit against me based on their position of dominance.

A group of boys blocking a door that a girl is trying to walk through—a group of boys among whom one throws an object in that girl's face—articulate a power structure. On one side of the threshold is a single girl trying to exit the room, and on the other are three boys with a basketball trying to enter. Because she is alone, and because she has nothing to throw back, the three boys can easily scare her into submission and out of their direct path.

In this narrative, confiscation of basketball could be proportionate to threat of death, because this particular boy did not understand the threat he, a boy, posed to me, a girl, and because of that he also did not understand why what he did had frightened me enough to tell our teacher. He did not have to imagine why I would be frightened. He did not have to understand this because he exists inside of a structure of gender domination that gives him power over me as a girl. Little boys tell each other that they “run like a girl”, they make fun of expressions of emotion by telling each other not to “cry like a girl”. From the beginning of this boy's life, he has been given to understand that girls are inferior to him in some way, even when admitting this belief outright is impossible. This structure *allows* boys to be ignorant of girls' experience. It is

in such spaces of what my teacher calls “imaginative lack” that violence among sane people occurs.

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt writes about this kind of gap in a person’s capacity to understand and empathize. In her descriptions of Eichmann’s trial and her own exploration into his career as a Nazi, she emphasizes how puzzling Eichmann’s sanity proved to be for the court. Arendt asks us to consider her titular proposition: “the banality of evil.” That is, she asks that we consider the quality that makes evil a possibility for *anyone* under the right set of circumstances. Arendt writes of the circumstances in Eichmann’s life that led him to the courtroom in Jerusalem with so little regard for the acts he had committed. She writes:

What Eichmann failed to tell the presiding judge in cross-examination was that he had been an ambitious young man who was fed up with his job as traveling salesman even before the Vacuum Oil Company was fed up with him. From a humdrum life without significance and consequence the wind had blown him into History, as he understood it, namely, into a Movement that always kept moving and in which somebody like him already a failure in the eyes of his social class, of his family, and hence in his own eyes as well could start from scratch and still make a career. And if he did not always like what he had to do (for example, dispatching people to their death by the trainload instead of forcing them to emigrate), if he guessed, rather early, that the whole business would come to a bad end, with Germany losing the war, if all his most cherished plans came to nothing (the evacuation of European Jewry to Madagascar, the establishment of a Jewish territory in the Nisko region of Poland, the experiment with carefully built

defense installations around his Berlin office to repel Russian tanks), and if, to his greatest “grief and sorrow,” he never advanced beyond the grade of S.S.

Obersturmbannführer (a rank equivalent to lieutenant colonel) in short, if, with the exception of the year in Vienna, his life was beset with frustrations, he never forgot what the alternative would have been. Not only in Argentina, leading the unhappy existence of a refugee, but also in the courtroom in Jerusalem, with his life as good as forfeited, he might still have preferred if anybody had asked him, to be hanged as Obersturmbannführer a.D. (in retirement) rather than living out his life quietly and normally as a traveling salesman for the Vacuum Oil Company (33-34).

These were the facts of Eichmann’s life. This was the structure which allowed him, at the end of his life, to go to his death unable to show remorse for his actions. That kind of remorse would have to be constituted by a kind of imaginative capacity that Eichmann’s situation in life never required him to develop.

In Eichmann’s case, it was not insanity which led him to make the choices he made, but rather his belief in and adherence to systems (German, middle-class, early-20th-century masculinity; Naziism) that allowed for his violent acts to exist within the bounds of his conscience. His ability to adhere to his position within the Nazi regime came from a lack of imagining, or will to imagine, the situation of Jewish people. If Eichmann questioned that what he was doing was wrong, he was undoubtedly able to convince himself otherwise; at the least, as Arendt suggests, he was able to convince himself that “the alternative” was worse than “what he

had to do”. It is this state—not of disconnecting, but of never having had to be connected—that allows for the most horrific violence to occur.

Our complex understanding of right and wrong is created by the systems we exist inside. More directly, it is created by what we have ourselves experienced. From within our own individual socialized experiences, there is often nothing that *requires* us to understand someone else’s experience of oppression. It is, in fact, easier not to understand. Sometimes—as was the case with Eichmann—being unable to imagine or understand is caused by being within a system that requires or hinges upon this imaginative lack.

During Eichmann’s trial, Arendt witnesses the judges grappling to understand this complexity:

Their case rested on the assumption that the defendant, like all “normal persons,” must have been aware of the nature of his criminal acts, and Eichmann was indeed normal insofar as he was “no exception within the Nazi regime.” However, under the conditions of the Third Reich only “exceptions” could be expected to act “normally.” This simple truth of the matter created a dilemma for the judges which they could neither resolve nor escape. (27)

From where Eichman stood, the expectation was for him *not* to be able to sympathize with the people he was helping to murder. (To have sympathized with them would have made them *people* and to see them as *people* would have required some recognition of Eichmann’s own relation to them.) The expectation of the Nazi regime was that its members would recognize themselves as a dominant force powerful enough to completely overshadow the personhood of the Jewish people. Eichmann’s own position allowed him to reduce the lives of millions of

Jewish people into objects for his disposal. He lived in a time and place that normalized such things. And for Eichmann, this context is essentially what makes evil possible, by making it ordinary or even by making it a duty, especially when duty is something to obey without question.

Eichmann excused himself by resorting to notions of normality and duty. Acting out his duty was essentially all he knew. But taking care to see what one does not *have* to see is also a duty. Such seeing, however, is chosen work, and all too often it is work left undone.

*

Denying relation, denying culpability, the inability to see fault: these give way to the normalization not just of violent acts, but of whole ideologies that are rooted in violence. James Baldwin writes:

One can be, indeed one must strive to become, tough and philosophical concerning destruction and death, for this is what most of mankind has been best at since we have heard of man. (But remember: most of mankind is not all of mankind.) But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime (5).

Being inside a system that affords one the ability to commit violent acts without thinking about them does not excuse those acts' occurrence, nor should it detract from the ethical problem at hand. But I do not have to look far to see that this is not the case. Often, permission to act includes permission not to look at the harm one's actions have caused. When Baldwin says, "It is

the innocence which constitutes the crime”, he is telling me that being ignorant of evil does not excuse evil. It is always adjacent to me. Hannah Arendt offers a different perspective on a similar idea:

The attitude of the German people toward their own past, which all experts on the German question had puzzled over for fifteen years, could hardly have been more clearly demonstrated: they themselves did not much care one way or the other, and did not particularly mind the presence of murderers at large in the country because none of them were likely to commit murder of their own free will...(16).

In post-war Germany, the presence of former Nazis in the German people’s daily lives was not a salient issue because it held little bearing on those daily lives. For these people, knowing that the murders occurred under a certain set of circumstances was enough to remove any concern about the violent nature of any one individual. This disposition puts a degree of separation between the actual moral implications of the acts and how they are perceived.

Systems that allow violent acts to occur among sane people confuse and unhinge the ability of victims to grasp what is ethically “correct.” Baldwin writes to his nephew:

The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe, what white people say about you. Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear (8).

Structural racism, anti-semitism, and sexism are systems that require objectification. It is objectification or othering by a dominant subject of a subordinate one that perpetuates the ability of the system to exist. The ability of the dominant party to exact control over the “other” is fed in

two ways. First, by reducing the other to the status of an object, the dominant party is in effect enhancing their own status as a subject. Refusing to see the other as equal to themselves, they lose the ability to view the situation as a conflict between two equal parties, further reducing the other. Second, by stripping the other of the freedom that the dominant subject possesses—by threat or by social constraint—the oppressed “other” is forced to conform to their position as an object.

*

I was so confused by what happened to me as a child that I went nearly a decade unable to speak about it. For a very long time, I didn't even understand what was confusing me. I identified my situation as a common narrative of bullying in a public school system. It was the kind of situation I had heard about in guidance classes, on the news, from parents and teachers. *I was the victim of bullying and it wasn't my fault. I had done the right thing by reporting it. It was terrible, it shouldn't have happened, but it was taken care of now and I would be okay.* Roll credits.

In the context of the narrative I was being told by my parents and teachers—the narrative I was participating in telling—of “bullying”, the story was over. But over time, my inability to stop thinking about what had happened made me realize that perhaps my narrative had been insufficient.

As I got older, it became easier for me to see how “bullying” serves as a blanket term to describe all kinds of violence. As a seventh grader, I could not understand the ways in which I

had been conditioned to expect intimidation and violence from a boy. I could not recognize that my being a girl made me an easy target for this boy's abuse. I could not see that the ways my teacher and parents responded to the incident were informed by my gender. I could not see that I existed inside a system that safeguarded my welfare as a *girl*. The artifacts from the court case that I found in my father's file cabinet tell a gendered story. They tell the story of being a female inside a structure where fathers are supposed to protect their daughters. If this kind of protection means something completely different today than it did one hundred years ago, something less linked to property and more closely linked to love, I cannot overlook the fact that I exist inside a structure where fathers have to protect the safety and wellbeing of their daughters because men have been socialized in a way that allows them to inflict harm on women. One thing I have come to see is that my narrative is deeply informed by my being a girl.

And what?

And what?

And *then* what?

My narrative is deeply informed by my being a *white* girl. The one key factor in my story that I had convinced myself was irrelevant is perhaps the most relevant piece in understanding what was happening. *He is black; I am white*. The artifacts in my father's file cabinet tell a story informed by gender *and* race. It took me until my senior year of college to be able to verbalize the importance of this key fact. Nobody brought race into the conversation at the time the incident occurred, although it remained a factor. Not my white parents, not my white teachers or

the white administrators of my school. Nobody wanted to go near it, and so we pretended it wasn't a factor at all, much the same way I had pretended that my gender wasn't a factor. The story became a story of an incident of bullying between two children, something that could have happened to anyone. *These acts could have been committed by anyone.* This is true, but it doesn't tell the full story. Because when I come right down to it, the facts of what happened tell a specific story. Or they tell multiple stories at the same time. By ignoring these facts, I was denying myself the ability to see and understand what the complexity of the narrative was.

In fourth grade, when this boy realized that I was going to tell our teacher that he had thrown a basketball in my face, he felt threatened by *me*. As much as I would like to believe—have in the past believed—that this was not the case, the facts of what happened *are* linked to the history of white femininity in this country, and the reaction of my teachers and parents to what happened to me were informed by structural racism. They were informed by a structure in which my subject position held power over his. He felt threatened by me in a completely different way than I felt threatened by what he had done. We were both afraid, and each of us unable to see where the other person's fear came from. As fourth-graders, the structures that we existed inside which caused me to fear him as a boy, caused the white teachers at my school to fear the problematic behavior of him as a black boy, and for him to fear me as a white girl were unrecognizable to me, and yet they existed. These structures deeply informed our individual reactions. My inability to understand this plagued me for years.

When I was unable to see how my story was so deeply tied to a narrative of structural racism, I was inadvertently participating in the perpetuation of that structure. My consternation

and fear over thinking about my story in this context came from a place of not being able to face what this story might be saying. James Baldwin says to his nephew, “We cannot be free until they are free”. The trauma of what happened to me followed me for so long because of my ignorance as a white person and inability to understand all sides of what happened. As long as I ignored what was happening, I could not come to terms with my own complicity and I could not learn to imagine what this other person might have felt or experienced. Ignorance is comfortable.

What stopped me from realizing my effect on my classmate? What stopped me from understanding his fear? What allowed me to believe that I was the sole victim? How else might I understand how we cause harm to each other?

II: Interlude: A Letter to my Teachers

“I will do this phenomenon ill, but that will do me good—
if only because it will make me feel my incapacity to say it,
just as it will make me take note of my own powerlessness to
make it. I will therefore say I at my own risk and peril.
But, dear reader, know this: I will say I in your name.”

—Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*

At the beginning of this one of you asked me, “What do you already know about fear?”
As it turned out the answer to this question was *a lot less than I know now*. The conversations
that the three of us have had over the past year have taught me a lot about my relationship to
context. I think about context almost obsessively. I don’t want to begin without it. I can’t say *this*
without first knowing enough about *that*. This is the kind of learner I have always been. I am
cautious. I am afraid. I am afraid to begin. I am afraid to speak. I am afraid to speak wrongly.
My first attempt at not-beginning was by not putting myself inside of the work. The writing was
going to be an observation. A consideration from the outside. I laughed when one of you gave
me a sticky note with the pronoun “I” circled in dark ink. I laughed, but I brought it home and
hung it on my bedroom wall—right next to the sticky note where I have written: “That is not
what I meant at all; / That is not it, at all.”—and I considered it for the entire semester. “I” brings

responsibility. Responsibility, I thought, would demand context. If this is going to be my voice, my *word*, will I ever have enough context to begin? The answer, I think, is no.

As my teachers, you have given me so many places to begin. For the first semester of my final year at college, when this project was just beginning, I slogged into the Creative Writing House every Friday morning, with a backpack full of your books, and the three of us crowded around the little desk in the second floor office.

“I’ve just sent something downstairs to the copier for you,” one of you would say, probably smiling impishly. At first, I thought I might never finish this work, because by the time I finished your suggested reading alone, it would be time for graduation. What I realize now is that you understood my fear of this project being impossible and wanted to assure me of all the ways it was, in fact, completely possible. Not just one way, one approach, one definite path to knowing. Instead, many. In giving me Arendt, Woolf, Foucault, Baldwin, Hegel and all the rest, you were giving me permission to start anywhere, in any way I could. I began to learn that context can only take a person so far.

The gathering of context does not end when I begin. Writing is part of the process of developing a thought. To write and record where I am right now in my understanding of the world, of fear, of violence, is just to record one particular truthful moment.

Another important professor said to me once, “my entire pedagogy is based on making a fool of myself in public.” I know that to some degree, my life as a writer has to embrace a similar idea. The desire for context comes from a deep place of not wanting to get it wrong. What if I am misguided? What if my words fall short of their intended meaning? What if I have been irresponsible and insulting? I wasted a lot of time—precious and irreplaceable hours of my

waning undergraduate education—afraid to begin. I began to realize that my need for context, despite having come from a conscious and responsible place, had turned insidious. From talking to the two of you (and reading your work), from the long days spent gathered around the table with our cups of tea and our writing, I have learned how to hold not-knowing, and how to converse with not-knowing, and how to prevent not-knowing from turning into *never* knowing. Now I endeavor to be the kind of writer who does not write as a result of *having* thought, but instead writes and thinks simultaneously, who thinks *by* writing.

*

I must also consider my position.

It occurs to me that, when considering what I already know about fear, I do not have very far to look. Already inside this project I have undertaken, this project of research, of contemplation, of attempts, I have uncovered something about fear. From the very beginning, what I wanted to know was *why*. Why do we commit violent acts? Of all the possible ways for humans to behave, why *this* way? But now even more than *why*, my question is *how*. Undertaking this research has brought me closer to an answer, but in a different manner than I had expected.

I wanted to know how we let soldiers kill people. I wanted to know who I was talking about when I said—when I say—“we”. I began researching what I thought might get me closer to an answer. I read books, visited museums, timidly talked to people about my ideas. One person asked me if I was going to interview soldiers and talk to them about their experiences.

The idea of doing this nearly turned me off the project completely. It seemed like a fair question. Wouldn't this project, so concerned with the military and its moral ramifications, be utterly incomplete without this kind of research? But the thought of sitting down with someone, trying to understand their story made me shrink back. I feared that my position as a young middle class female college student trying to push a pacifist agenda with little life experience or philosophy to back it up would immediately put people, especially people involved in military life, on the offensive. I am timid. I didn't want my project to insult anyone. I don't like insulting people. But still my questions waited for me. Why? How? In my mind these felt like questions worth asking. Fair to ask, even. Still, every time I tried to voice them out loud to someone, I became unsure. I am still unsure.

Figuring out how to approach this project, in many ways, has given me a way to understand what I set out to find. There are ways in which my position makes me feel as if I do not have authority to speak on this topic. As if I cannot speak *to* it. In reality, though, my privilege puts me in a place where I *can* do this work. I can express these opinions with minor consequence. I am learning that there are contributing factors to everything, even this.

I have a lot of memories of being a child and sitting alone at my dining room table with paper and paints in front of me while my dad watched TV in the next room. The will to create something was there in me, even then. I would dip my brush in the paint and start to make shapes on the page with no real plan for where it was going. Most of the time I would get frustrated by my inability to choose an object to paint, my inability to commit to painting something that might not be good. So I just made markings that weren't intentionally abstract. I couldn't even commit to the project of making something abstract because every mark was obviously imbued

with the restraint of wanting it to be something else—something that it was not, or could not be. Many times, from deep inside the making of this project, I have felt that same kind of restraint.

*

In the fall, we went to Harvard to do research. *Just come with us, and see what you find.* How do you look for something when you don't know what you are looking for? How do you know what will be useful? I was disappointed to learn that in order to do archival research, you have to have a plan. I generally like to have a plan, but in my mind I already had one: Do not implicate yourself. Do not try to say something you don't know how to say. It was months into my project; a draft already existed, and still the thought of finding an angle, a specific path through factual research, felt too daunting.

I used the search tool on the Harvard Library website, randomly typing in terms that I thought might get me closer to something useful. *Violence, war, military, gender.* One of you suggested talking to one of the librarians about my project when I arrived, but this, too, felt impossible. How could I explain to a real person what I was doing, what I was looking for? I finally settled on requesting two boxes, at two different libraries, to be looked at over the course of two days.

We were going to meet in Cambridge for the weekend. The two of you had your own work to do. We had been supporting each other in our individual projects, and if the research trip wasn't something I would have indulged in alone, I was willing to go there in the spirit of our

shared investment in each other's work. Our plan was I would spend the first day on my own, and we would meet up later in the evening, then return to the archive the following day together.

Driving down from Maine the evening before, trying to beat a blizzard that had been forecast, I wondered whether this whole thing was maybe just a waste of time. Of course the idea was exciting. Saying *I'm going to Harvard to do research* gives the illusion that you know what you're doing. But as I drove down I-295 in the dark, I couldn't help but feel like the entire weekend was a massive extravagance. Didn't I have *real* work to be doing back in the fluorescent library in Farmington—the library full of students in L.L. Bean boots and sweatpants? Shouldn't I be doing my work inside the shabby but safe confines of a place where I knew at least some kind of real work was possible? I should be spending these hours writing my term paper for Critical Theory, or catching up on one of the readings for Victorian Lit. What business did I have wasting an entire weekend doing fruitless, silly research in libraries with soft light and marble floors, among men in sports coats with briefcases, women with pearl necklaces looking through stacks and stacks of Important Documents, writing notes in brown leather notebooks? I felt like a fraud.

The entire time I was in the reading room, I felt like an imposter. I felt as though at any moment someone was going to figure out that I had no idea what I was doing and the shame I privately felt would suddenly become public. I worried that one of the severe archivists would happen to ask me, as they brought out the materials I had requested in cardboard file boxes, what *exactly* I was researching. *Why* did I need to look through 12 boxes of autographed photos of military leaders? Was there some photo in particular I wanted to see? Which box did I want to look at first? *Why? Why? Why are you here?*

I didn't realize until I reflected on the experience with the two of you later that my reason for feeling these things was getting toward exactly what I had been wanting to think about all along. *What do I know about fear?* How information is disseminated, how the academic world is set up, how the systems of higher education have been developed, these things were all pressing on me as I sat in the library staring at my empty notebook page. I felt that this place was not for me. I felt that my *project* was not for me—not for my voice—and I was shrinking beneath that feeling.

So, then, what? There are always things pressing against us. From the very first moment I sat down in a creative writing class—no: from the very first time I put a pencil to a notebook and wrote something—there were expectations of what I should say. They were not just pressing down on me from the outside, not just the oppressive weight of history acting on me, but they were coming from within me too. *I* had expectations of what I should say.

We learn what is expected of us by watching the world, and if we watch with even remote attentiveness, we'll find plenty of rules to follow and plenty of reasons why the rules shouldn't be broken. Listening to the rules is something I have been good at. I have never been the type of writer or artist—or even human being—who feels a need to break them. At one time in my life, this was something I was proud of. Lately, it makes me feel like a coward.

What is pressing against *me*? *Me specifically*. You have both been asking me to think about where I am writing from. You have been asking me to think about my education; what it is and is not, what it has and has not been, what it should not be and what it could be, what I want it to be. Who is the dangerous work for? The daring work? Not much about where I come from, about what I have learned, has told me that this work is for *me*. Nobody has ever explicitly told

me that I cannot do this kind of work—the kind of work that would take me to Harvard to do research that might go nowhere—but I find I am always running up against the expectation of *normalcy*, of *rule-following*, of *good enough*, of *good enough for most of us*.

I wonder what I am talking about when I say “this kind of work”. What work do I desire to do? I cannot name it. I cannot see beyond what I know, I can only sense it. Even from within my education as an artist, I am taught that it is okay to conform. I am reading writers who have conformed deeply to the traditions of classic literature, thinkers who exist inside something which I fear cannot be dismantled and from which I cannot escape. The English language, the very element of my craft—the language I have built my life in devotion to—is itself an oppressive form.

I have been taught that if I want to break the rules, I have to break them in the correct way: there have already been rule-breakers, and now rule-breaking itself is a tradition. I cannot point to one specific part of my education that has caused me to develop such an attachment to the rules. I think it comes back to my need for context. When I ask for context, in a way I am responding to a deep need to understand *how things are done*. I want to know how things are done so I can know what to do and how to avoid transgression. I do believe that it is difficult to know what is possible for me to do without seeing what others have done, but I see the ways in which my education has facilitated the limiting quality that context has over my work. Perhaps the context I have been looking for has been all wrong. Maybe it is not context I am afraid of, but *tradition*.

*

I live in a place that does not make clear to me what our responsibility is to one another when it comes to living as artists and writers—when it comes to living a creative life. Within our university in rural Maine, I am a part of a small community of artists, but it becomes unclear how to sustain that community when I leave this place (where my creative work at least has some currency). How will I carry on after that is gone, after *I* am gone? What will my relationship to my work be when I no longer have a designated space in which this type of thought is at home?

Outside of the university—even from within it—I get the sense that making a space for your creative work can be a long and lonely road to walk. I have felt a lack of community in my creative life. It feels to me that imagination is a possibility for everyone, not just those who call themselves artists. But for young people in Maine, committing yourself to a creative life feels like a leap of faith. When I told people I was going to study creative writing in college, most were skeptical of my ability to make a return on that investment. When life has always been about struggling to make ends meet for nearly everyone around you, the project of making money, of finding a career, of not wasting your time feels like the only possible way to walk through the world.

Recently, I wonder what danger there might be in this split I perceive between creativity and practicality. I fear that what is really happening when I treat creative life as frivolous and risky is that I create a dichotomy between *creativity* and *life*. It is from deep within that distinction that I have felt the most powerless in my work. Where does this need to be practical come from? The word literally means “relating to practice or action, as opposed to speculation or theory” (OED).

Considering that word gets me very close to what I have been thinking about from the beginning. In fact, it all seems to be right there inside that word. Action without theory. Action almost without *thought*. Is that what we are committing to when we condemn imagination as frivolous? Imagination is an impulse through which we learn to think and through which we learn to feel. It is a possibility in any life. What I felt pressing against me when I undertook this project was the space inside a large cavern already mapped for me, into which I am not required to say anything, and into which I can walk in invisible subsistence for the rest of my life. The cavern of practicality, of not allowing myself to feel what is difficult to feel.

As I write, I become more and more anxious over what the expense of this kind of creative fear might be. In my fear, I have essentially been denying myself the ability to think critically about something that I need to understand. What happens when I halt this kind of creative process? What am I not considering because I am afraid and because I feel bound to what I already know? Sometimes I am afraid to admit that I think something until I know that someone else thinks it too. But what happens when there is nobody to do the thinking for me? If I am too afraid to ask the questions that I need to find answers to, who will ask them? And will I feel satisfied with the answers? I worry that through my fear and shame, I am losing my ability to think, not just with authenticity, but with responsibility and awareness for how I comport myself in this world that is so public and so shared.

In the archive at Harvard I was afraid, but I was not powerless. I did my research. I didn't stop writing, because I knew that despite my fear there were two people sitting across the table who would hold with me every moment of not-knowing. It is because of this, because of the way that you, my teachers and companions in bewilderment, have shown me on a rather molecular

level what it means to be responsible for one another creatively and ethically that I have begun to feel like there is a possibility for seeing past the fear I feel in speaking. No time to waste, actually, in getting to the work of expression.

III. Thinking Towards Freedom

First, I thought two things at the same time. *Soldiers are good. War is bad.* The military had always been there. A fact. One that I had, perhaps, the capability to accept or oppose. People say that we are free to act how we choose. We are free to speak, think, feel, love. *We live in a free country.* I am capable of accepting the military. I am capable of opposing it. I am capable of never addressing the fact that I have a choice, never choosing, never choosing a side. I am beginning to think that that capability and freedom are not synonymous.

I didn't think much about violence in high school, although I thought I was thinking a lot about it. I cared about the world and I cared vaguely about "social justice". I wanted the world to be a more peaceful place. But I didn't understand then that to care about something in earnest requires action. At the time, and for a long time since, I viewed the world as something impossible for me to change.

I didn't think much about the military in high school either, at least not until I had to. At the end of high school, my then-boyfriend joined the Army and I was overwhelmed by the need to decide my own ethical position regarding war. I had been taught to "respect the troops". I had also been taught that war was bad, that violence was bad. War was something I felt a vague sense of ambivalence toward. Reflecting on this now, my formative education in both ethics and patriotism feels bereft of meaning. I am opposed to war, but I was raised by my family and the community I live in to support the military. It is still a deeply personal question for me. I will

admit, I am afraid to reveal that I have hesitations about the military. To say anything other than that I have “the utmost respect for the military” feels blasphemous. I have observed in my everyday life that people often preface their opinions about the military this way. *I have the utmost respect for the military, but I don't condone killing civilians. I have the utmost respect for the military, but I don't think the government should be spending so much money on military and weapons technology.* To me, using this preface feels like something that grows from fear. I have to say *this* before I can exercise my right to say *that* or....

Or what?

Or what?

Or *what*?

Lately I have been asking questions that, for a long time, I didn't think there were answers to. I used to ignore these questions. Perhaps I don't have a way to solve any of the moral or ethical problems I have with the military, but I realize now that I can begin to understand how we have gotten to this point, how these are the ethics we have agreed on in this country where I am a citizen. I am trying harder to think in this way, to be able to look closely enough at one thing that I can ask what else it might mean.

There is no way for me to understand my hesitations around violence and the ways in which I am complicit in violence unless I can teach myself to find answers in things that do not look like they will provide answers. In his essay “Technologies of the Self,” Michel Foucault identifies a link between sexuality and secrecy. My question right now is not about sexuality, but

I think it *is* about secrecy. Foucault explains his “study of the link between the obligation to tell the truth and the prohibitions weighing on sexuality” (2000, 224). Social prohibitions weigh on me when I try to think about the military. When I think about the military, I feel prohibited from expressing my opinion; speaking. I feel this because I know that people around me consider the military an untouchable subject, and that their reverence might make me seem ignorant for questioning it. The prohibitions I feel pull me between two different loyalties: to the community from whom I learned that the military deserves my utmost respect, and to my inner sense that war is morally wrong. When I feel as though I am prohibited from speaking my opinions, I begin to keep my feelings a secret, not just from the people around me, but also from myself.

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I want to understand who is complicit in each act of violence, and in order to do that I have to think about how these acts are differentiated from one another. We have different words for acts of violence that take place within the military. Sometimes we call them acts of courage, or heroism. Closer to home, I was taught to recognize from a young age that certain acts of violence—and I am thinking of violence as one party intentionally damaging another party through emotional force, speech, physical assault, or death—are permissible under certain circumstances. At times I have wondered whether it is ridiculous to think that every act of violence is wrong, no matter the intention. I always assume there is more to any situation than I can understand, so I hesitate to develop lasting judgements of things. Putting this into words feels wrong to me, though, because I was *also* taught that violence is wrong. This suggests to me

that my definition of what constitutes violence has been too narrow; it cannot be sustained in this tension I feel between violence as something that is sometimes permitted and violence as something that is never permitted.

In “Technologies of the Self”, Foucault goes on to ask how “the subject [had] been compelled to decipher himself in regard to what was forbidden” (2000, 224). From where I am now, the conclusion that I draw when I think back to my high school self is that in order to think what I thought, I had to have not been thinking very deeply about anything that I believed in. This is probably true, but Foucault tells me that it might not be as simple as that. “How have certain kinds of interdictions required the price of certain kinds of knowledge about oneself?” he asks. “What must one know about oneself in order to be willing to renounce anything?” (2000, 224). My high school self may not have been thinking about her ethical position on the military, but I think the reason for that goes beyond the fact that nothing was forcing me to think about it at the time. I did not even learn how difficult it would be to question a structure like the military until I was faced with the need to do so. I did not try to question it because I was afraid. What if my relationship to knowledge had not been defined by fear so early on? Would I have been able to begin thinking about and questioning the military if I did not have such a profound fear of being misinterpreted?

How had I, as Foucault might ask, been compelled to decipher myself in regard to what was forbidden to me—namely this kind of inquiry? The more I think about it, the more I realize that my fear has not been of misinterpretation, but of disloyalty. When the question of my feelings toward violence in the military became a personal one, I felt a profound sense of self-consciousness in trying to name it. It was loyalty—to my boyfriend, to my family, to my

community, to my upbringing, to my country—that told me not to question what happens when soldiers go to war. *Soldiers are sacrificing their lives so we, the American people, can be free*, people say to me, but I find I do not yet understand what any of those words—sacrifice, life, American, people, freed—mean in this context.

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At the time that my boyfriend joined the Army I thought my biggest question was figuring out how I felt. What troubled me so much about him joining was not that he was going to go kill people, but that I thought he was going to die. I could only see myself in my question. My immediate reaction was that *I did not want him to die*. This was the first emotional response I had. I did not think of it as a question of ethics. I was only thinking about his life, not any other life claimed or saved by war. As time went on I began to realize that perhaps what was so disturbing to me about war was not that the person I loved was at risk of death, but that he could elect to be in that position, that the government would hire someone to fill the role of being both killer and killable. I was faced with a need to find my moral stance on war itself, not just come to terms with the prospect of someone close to me being in danger.

Through the months when my relationship disintegrated, my questions about violence remained. All the way up until the moment of writing this, I have wondered whether a world without a military is even possible. According to the CIA, there are 36 countries that do not have standing militaries, the majority of which are small island nations. That is just shy of 20% of the world's countries. It is possible for a country to exist in this way. That America defines itself by

its strong military and militaristic foreign policy does not convince me of the *need* to define ourselves this way. It does not convince me of the necessity of disregarding my ethical questions in favor of being a patriot.

I have found that the perception of criticism of the military as constituting an egregious lapse in one's values complicates the difference between the military as an institution, and the individuals that make up its parts. Patriotic rhetoric forefronts the personal. The military as a perceived good is defined by *individual* sacrifice, by *personal* acts of heroism on the part of *fellow Americans*. In this way, it becomes difficult to look at the structure as a whole without first seeing the individuals involved. It is for this reason that I have been afraid to ask questions about violence as they pertain to that structure and to the individuals within it. I have been afraid even to use the word 'violence' to describe certain actions when I am speaking to others. But when privately and secretly considering who has the right to kill and who can be killed, I am much less afraid to identify what I believe to be morally correct.

In his book *What Have We Done*, journalist David Wood explains the way in which the moral codes we live by in our normal lives change during times of war. He writes that

[...] war is an alternate moral universe where many of the rules and values we grew up with are revoked. Do unto others, suspended. An alien world in which complex moral puzzles, like confronting a child combatant, demand instant decisions by those who are least fit to make them, for reasons of incomplete neurological development and life experience (11).

What Wood captures in this passage is the complete ethical confusion a soldier is faced with when in battle. It is a confusion I will only ever be peripherally acquainted with, but even the

distress I feel in my position so far outside of the military has been enough to drive me in undertaking this inquiry. Wood's words help me understand how much heavier this weight—which I am struggling to carry in these pages—is for the people who experience battle.

However, I find that I disagree with Wood when he says that war is “an alternate moral universe”. I understand the idea that circumstance changes what an action means, but I tend to think of this as more of a problem than a reason or justification. I feel compelled to echo a statement I made at the beginning of this work: war is not an alternate moral universe. War happens in the same universe where I live, the one where I have been taught to understand that killing is wrong, that violence against a fellow human being is extremely difficult to justify by circumstance.

That rules change in battle—that what constitutes a good moral life seems largely to depend on the laws that permit or forbid certain actions—causes me to question the power I give these laws to provide me with a correct way to be a moral individual. For some people, the fact that these moral “rules” change in battle adjusts the circumstances such that the acts of violence being carried out really do transform into something acceptable. I have to wonder though if the fact that these acts have the ability to be transformed in such a way in our minds can make them all the more threatening. I wonder whether this collective moral relativizing is what allowed me, at one point in my life, to wholeheartedly deny *any other possibility* for how a country, a populace, a government, a community, a *person* could be.

And what if this *is* the case? I often feel overwhelmed by my inability to see what forces are acting on a situation and what structures have formed it. And speaking is another question than seeing. Even if I truly believe that killing is always wrong, that war is never the right

solution to resolving conflict, that we should not trust solely in laws to teach us what is right and what is wrong, how can I *speak* about this? What can I trust to teach me? How can I know for *sure*?

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I recently moved into an apartment after having lived in dorm buildings for three years. Sitting at my dining room table one night, a friend asked me to think about why I liked living in that space more than I liked living in the dorm.

“Because I can arrange everything the way I want now,” I answered. “I have more space to move things around.” We had been talking about conversation in writing, about being aware of the limits of our own voices.

“Right,” my friend said, “and I don’t think that is completely ingermane to your writing. Sometimes we need to make our space bigger.”

When I first started thinking seriously about violence, it was in direct response to my need to figure out where I stood on a question that felt very close to home. My boyfriend might die. He might kill other people. What do I know is right? What will I believe? What will I accept? I still think these are important questions, but I wonder more about my need to ask them. My consideration of violence has been rooted in what I have personally experienced, because this is how I have been taught to understand the world. It is natural that our experiences teach us things, but I think it’s possible that I have been trying too hard to find answers to my questions based on my experiences alone.

What I know now—more than anything—is how much I don't know. My need to keep bringing that phrase back tells me something about the way we deal with knowledge and with education in this world. It strikes me that the more I learn, the more I feel the weight of what I don't know pressing down on me. It feels to me that once you pass a certain point in your education, everything you don't know becomes more important than what you do know. But Foucault tells me that we “find it difficult to base rigorous morality and austere principles on the precept that we should give more care to ourselves than to anything else in the world”. He reasons that we “are more inclined to see taking care of ourselves as an immorality, as a means of escape from all possible rules” (2000, 228). The idea that secrecy, a characteristic of fear, guides my inability to understand myself (and thus the world around me) tells me that the ability to think freely without the limitation of fear is essential to being able to decode systems of power. Foucault writes that, “in theoretical philosophy from Descartes to Husserl, knowledge of the self (the thinking subject) takes on an ever-increasing importance as the first step in the theory of knowledge” (2000, 228). Foucault explains that to care for the “self” is different than caring for the body. He says the “self is not clothing, tools, or possessions; it is to be found in the principle that uses these tools, a principle not of the body but of the soul. You have to worry about your soul—that is the principal activity of caring for yourself” (2000, 230). Through caring for our souls we become better able to decipher what we believe. Through my own secrecy regarding my feelings of unease toward the military, I have denied myself the ability to form truthful knowledge about it, and other things, without giving in to the complication of fear.

When I began this project, I thought that I only had my own experiences to guide me. What I already knew about violence, about fear, about shame—and what I wanted to know: all of

these things formed the basis of my desire and my need to do this work. My fear in speaking has been deeply formed by the limitations of my own experience and the lack of freedom I feel in using my experience as a basis for knowledge. It is impractical to assume that my experiences alone are enough ground for answers. To learn to think about things in a way I would otherwise not have done—to imagine something different to my own experience—offers a different, complementary kind of knowledge. I can put these imaginative instances to work as a basis for further thought—and for further *life*.

My experience helps me understand one part of a story that can extend outward to infinity in every direction. But I have also learned that in order to understand just my own experiences of violence, my own experiences of fear, the small parts of my life that have touched the military, I need to make my space bigger.

When I moved into my apartment this year, I suddenly had a very large space to fill, and I took great pleasure in trying to fill it. Among all of the books, posters, tea cups, records, and plants is the story of my understanding of myself and what it means for me to occupy a space. What I fill that space with helps me tell that story. When I wanted to tell the story of how I was hurt as child, I needed Hannah Arendt to help me understand how people thoughtlessly hurt each other. I needed James Baldwin to help me understand that I was not the only person who had been hurt, and why this was something I could not see. This is my story, but I cannot tell it alone.

Foucault explains Plutarch's belief that "we must learn to listen to *logos* throughout our adult life" (236). *Logos* is an Ancient Greek word with many meanings, including 'reason,' 'word,' 'proportion,' 'principle,' 'order,' or 'logic.' Foucault says that the "art of listening is crucial so that you can tell what is true and what is dissimulation, what is rhetorical truth and

what is falsehood in the discourse of the rhetoricians” (2000, 236). The rhetoric we subscribe to (or that surrounds us) tells us certain stories about our world, about who we are and about what we should think and feel. Rhetoric gives *logos* a place. The rhetoric we use creates our ability to reflect on a situation and see it for what it is, not for the story we are being told about it. All my life I have listened to people in America talk about freedom. Lately I have begun to wonder what meaning that word has in a patriotic context, and also in a personal one. I have been accepting patriotic rhetoric my entire life without allowing myself to question what is ‘rhetorical truth’.

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What am I free to do? It depends on how we define the word freedom. I don’t know whether that is something I can do alone. The last two lines of the U.S. Military Soldier’s Creed read, “I am a guardian of freedom and the American way of life./I am an American Soldier.” The “American way of life” is something that, since the establishment of this country, has looked very different for everyone. This country is not free for everyone; it never has been. In the context of racial violence, of gender inequality, of economic injustice, the “American way of life” seems a rather brittle cause to stake one’s life upon. So why are so many of us willing to accept this rhetoric? How are we willing to accept freedom as central to our national identity when it so clearly is not available to everyone? Before the Army became an immediate part of my life, I did not have to question how I felt about it, so I didn’t. At eighteen I did not consider deeply the notion of freedom that is characteristic of American patriotic rhetoric. It also didn’t

move me emotionally like it moved some of my peers. I do not understand the definition of freedom in America. I do not even understand the definition of freedom in my own life.

I have a profound sense of the freedom I have experienced in my life as a white middle class cisgender female, but I have come to realize that the value of this freedom exists only in a structure designed to oppress people. But what if I am to think of freedom differently? James Baldwin tells me:

[White people] are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men. Many of them, indeed, know better, but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know (8-9).

I have found it difficult to act on what *I* know. That difficulty is at its core a part of a deep feeling that I am not free to act in a certain way. What tells me that this is true? It is the very system which affords me power that prevents me from being able to see the ways that I should be questioning it. It *is* difficult to act on what I know, because I must first learn to see that I know it, and accept that I know it. I must accept what it means.

I am still trying to understand what freedom means. I sense that it has many meanings of which I am yet unaware. To touch one another, to harm one another: we do not always understand that we are committing violent acts. We do not always understand these acts as wrong. I still do not know the answers to my questions about why we harm each other, but what I have begun to understand is how we do. The difficulty that Baldwin writes about is the difficulty of not understanding your place inside a system of power. Being unable to recognize

occupying a place of power robs us of our ability to dismantle our position and the structure that upholds it. Baldwin tells me that it is an attachment to my power or my safety that makes it difficult for me to reflect on and understand my position. I have always wanted to be able to voice my opinion about the military. I have always wanted to feel safe in opposing it. It has been my choice, even when I didn't think of it this way, not to act on those desires. In Baldwin's words, to "act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger" (9).

Coda

“But I must admit that I have had to follow
the motifs, at least, of my first attempts, as far as the
topical heart of the matter is concerned”
-*On Touching*—Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Derrida

I would ask, at the end of this writing, for the reader to refrain from understanding the above work in the context of a search for a narrative conclusion. What I have written, read, researched, learned, and accomplished over the course of one calendar year marks only an opening. I have been able to write only from what I know and from what I have come across in my research. The writers I have thought with in these pages have formed the basis of my understanding of how to verbalize and give names to acts of violence. There are surely many other ways in which I could open for myself this space of knowing. I think of the above text, more than anything, as an ongoing experiment in learning to think.

As I continue with my writing and thinking about violence (whether that be through revision and expansion of this work or through new projects) I hope to strengthen my philosophical and critical background in the concepts introduced here. My project began with questions. It began with the need to find answers for issues weighing on my personal conscience. I have not been able to find answers in the way that I thought I would; I find instead that I have

new questions that are stronger, more vivid, and more precise than the ones I began with. More than that, I have directions to point myself in, and companions to help me navigate.

I have written here about being consumed by a need for context. I find as I consider how I might move forward from this writing that the context I have developed for myself through this project is a sufficient basis for where I am going. I have James Baldwin to help me think now, and I have Hannah Arendt; I have Virginia Woolf, Michel Foucault, Eula Biss, Jane Gallop, G.W.F. Hegel; I have my companions in bewilderment, my teachers, and their bright and critical writing and thinking about the world. I also have my own curiosity, and a newfound empowerment in following it. I have grown less concerned with trying to find answers and more concerned with asking questions, with making *attempts* at answering them. This is one way I am taking up Baldwin's call for us to *act*. The act of trying to understand and to question has opened itself up in my ability to ask more freely and with diminished fear. I am not free of fear, but I understand more than I did at the beginning what an impact fear can have on what I know about myself and about the world. In seeing this fear, in facing it, I have given myself the opportunity to think with complexity and to value that practice, even with no promise of conclusion in sight.

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