was talking about Italy, and about COVID. But it's worth asking the same question of the United States—not about COVID per se, but about the racial injustice and violence we have lived with and suffered from, for who knows how long. There are many depressing answers to this question, especially when it comes to interracial relationships. Marcopoulos's photos from the past six years tell a different story. They depict moving scenes of intergenerational and interracial love and support, including between parents and children, employees and customers, the living and the dead, artists, neighbors, friends, and lovers, including Marcopoulos and Walker themselves. They conjure a world in which Black sociality and culture feel primary, while wagering that others are welcome to contribute, witness, and play. If one answer to "what becomes of human relationships" during this deeply painful, deeply disruptive time can be found in this patient, democratized, often joyous record—well, that's the best news I've heard in some time.

(2023)

AND WITH TREES

Conversation with Eileen Myles

MAGGIE NELSON: I was so happy to see the article in the *New York Times* the other day.

EILEEN MYLES: Oh, yeah.

MN: What did you think?

EM: I mean I'm so sick of the public account of who I am. It's not like I think I'm a household name, but those same details have been trotted out so many times—it's like sitting through a boring introduction of yourself at a reading.

MN: Did you want it to be more about the issue at hand? Because I felt mixed, like, I see that they're running the same career narrative of you that they've run before, but now they're running it through the question of why Eileen cares so much about the trees. I liked reading it, but I get why it might have seemed boring to you.

This conversation with poet, novelist, and art journalist Eileen Myles was conducted over Zoom, then transcribed and edited for publication in an issue of *Women's Studies* devoted to Myles's work. The "caring about the trees" referenced here has to do with the activist campaign in which Myles has been involved to save Manhattan's East River Park—along with its 991 trees—from demolition.

EM: Instead of Why Eileen cares about the trees why doesn't the *New York Times* care about the trees? I mean *in New York*. Because you waited a fucking year for most of the trees to be cut down before you covered this.

MN: Did they approach you about the piece?

EM: Alex, the writer, started showing up at our events and he was nice and immediately was very excited about profiling me *through* this. I felt a little embarrassed is all, because *this*, the fact of the city's total demolition of our green space, is the thing that's really important.

MN: Well, I get all that, I can see all that. Then, of course, as your friend, I was just like, Yay, what a beautiful picture of Eileen hugging a tree for us to immediately put on our refrigerator.

EM: Oh, sweet. I like being on your refrigerator.

MN: To talk to you today, I reread *For Now*, which I really love. And it was interesting because you told me that for this conversation you wanted to talk about time—and then in the *New York Times* piece you talk about how one needs time if one's going to get arrested, time to waste. And in *For Now* you say that you don't consider literature a moral project, save in its capacity to waste time. I love that.

EM: Yeah.

MN: But also, I would just say that, again, while I understand the badness of the *New York Times* approach to the trees, since I've known you for a long time, it was interesting to me to hear this new, updated recitation of your life—like, when I met you, you were like, "I've lived in this neighborhood for twenty years." And now you're like, "I've lived in this neighborhood for forty-four years." It gives me this feeling of tumbling through time with you, and getting to see you tumble through time.

EM: Right, right.

MN: Writing about time through time. And I thought, wow, what an honor for me to have heard you thinking about time for the past thirty years. You know what I'm saying.

EM: Yeah. A thing that's weird about time is there's this inclination to be making a judgment about it, like is it a good thing? Whether it's living in a space for twenty years, then forty years, then fifty years. Is that good or is that bad? How do you feel about it? How do you feel about me? How do *you* feel about time? The thing that's so great is it doesn't matter what we think or say, it's just constant movement. I think probably the thing that was so disturbing about what happened in the park was the trees are that too. They're this incredibly beautiful collective austere rendition of time that we live among and around. And a park is one of the many studios of the writer. For me that's always been one of the puzzles about what we are and what we do, Where is that place? It does and it doesn't exist, because it's language, but it camps out in the world in all these various places, and there are some places that are more conducive to that camping out than others. In some parts of your life, it's a bar, in some parts of your life, it's a lover's apartment, and in some parts of your life, it's a mountain, a beach, a park. But all these places, they're holy, because that's what held you while you did some part of the work.

MN: In *For Now*, at the very start, you talk about the way you've amassed various philosophies, but the point is to be here in the present. And then you talk about writing as a technology for that. And I wonder . . . like, I believe in that, philosophically . . .

EM: Uh-huh. [*laughs*] I'm very excited by this hesitance.

MN: I guess in my lived experience of writing, writing has become much weirder, maybe less "present," over time. When I was younger, it felt like I was really inhabiting the present by scribing—scribing felt like a way of being there, being here, more thoroughly. I don't feel so sure about that anymore. I think a lot of us begin writing as a way of getting privacy, and feeling free, and feeling alone. And then, the more books you write, the

more intense the struggle becomes to play dumb that you're not writing this for public consumption in the future. There's something about that playing dumb process that takes me out of time, because there's always this other time, the postpublication time, the other-people's-eyes-on-it time, that you're spending energy keeping at bay in order to be present with the writing in the now. This could just be a parable for the difficulty of being in the present in general. But I find it all deepening in challenge and complexity as I go along.

EM: Yeah, I feel like success is like a shitty edifice. It really becomes such a place that's so antithetical. I love what you were saying about playing dumb, you kind of have to do that. Like here, in the situation I'm in, which is a residency, where a number of people applied to work with me and be mentored by me. I hate that language, because I feel like I came from such a kind of a casual place where, you know, you and I are friends. We came from friendship. I would never say, Oh Maggie, I mentored Maggie. You know, it's like, no. But, nonetheless, here in this residency we do this collective writing, which is my favorite thing. We occupy these spaces here and we agree on silence. I think you went to the Radar retreat. Did you do that?

MN: Yes, that was the best part, the silent hours of writing in the morning.

EM: That's where I got the idea. I was like, oh, we don't need to be apart, we need to be in agreement. And that agreement is so sweet. For me, its roots have to do with being in church, and then, later in life, in Buddhist meditation, where something makes us sit together silently, and to get to a place where writing does that is such a gift. But, nonetheless, they are all making new work. I realize that continually what *I'm* doing is rewriting something. Something that didn't go here and should go there is getting tweaked, or oh, I have to look at that again. A novel that I wrote in the '90s (that I didn't publish) is hopefully being installed into a larger novel structure that I'm working on now, so that I'm having to look at my back-pages. I probably haven't reread it enough so I haven't crossed over into understanding it *is* my writing. It feels other. I just want to run and

screech into the present and future dark and write something new. I do do that once in a while, but it feels perfunctory because the larger structures are shaking and calling to me. Even the larger structure of time—meaning that I keep wanting to be vague about my age now. Not because I'm shy about being seventy-two, but I just would rather be saying something like, "well I've been here for a while." Like a stray dog that came into the shelter. Well we think it's about six but we don't know. I like that because the specific fact of time means that I probably only get to work on so much, and so I feel quietly crushed by some of those structures.

MN: And do you feel like the rewriting, instead of the writing off into the new, is it because it feels like there are agitating problems that are asking you to figure them out, that have to do with larger structures?

EM: I think there's probably midpoints in making books, right? Where you feel like there's a part where you're just writing. Definitely, a couple of years ago, I was writing a lot. And, here and there, I'm writing. In fact, I was writing something this week that's part of it. I guess with working with earlier material that I'm fitting into something larger for a long while I might be working with a bad idea. That's very uncomfortable. Sometimes it's not even writing. It's waiting. So it's not that I don't like editing, I think I'm just super aware of the pleasure that these guys [at the residency] are having, of not knowing where this is going but doing it. Writing over time does become more conceptual. You're in the distance. I think that part of the struggle when you have a career is that that is the open space you're trying to find, on some level.

MN: I feel like the small amounts of writing that I've done in the past several months, I can only do them by opening the file and then saving it and shutting it and never looking at it again. It's like I'm taking private turds and then burying them, and I actually feel phobic about ever looking at the pile. I used to get really excited, when I was younger, to write at night and behold all I'd written the next morning. But at the moment, it's like I need to keep it so dumb that it's actually literally dumb, it's not speaking, it's entombed or something. Maybe this is just a normal feeling you get

after the public exposure of a book—you're tired of dealing with what the world, from intimate to not intimate people, have to say, you're struggling to recreate this private space, even if you know it's kind of a ruse.

EM: Well, it's interesting because you think about those writers who used to seem inexplicable, like J. D. Salinger. Maybe he stopped writing, but he definitely stopped being J. D. Salinger. There's a way in which that's appealing. I definitely think that, because I'm trying to write something big now, which I feel like only strikes fear in the hearts of editors and agents.

MN: Whatever it is it's going to be huge—

EM: —and problematic, and too expensive. And what if it sucks? There's so many questions about it, and yet for some reason that's what I've decided to do with this moment in time.

MN: That sounds great.

EM: It is when I'm deep in the pleasure of being lost in it. But, actually, the most fun part lately was being with these younger writers, I managed to create feigned dumbness. There was a book I was kind of obsessed with that I read a year ago, a nonfiction book that I wanted to use for this book. I underlined like crazy, and all year it was propped out waiting to be done, I was going to have to type up those underlines and see what this all added up to. Normally if I'm writing a piece that would be my process. So, though it is my book, it's the same deal. So, I finally got around to that but I was doing it around these other writers. And I was transcribing by hand, so I was sitting there with legal pads, writing in a scrivener-like way. Again very excited about wasting time. I just was trying to drag it out and make it as bodily as possible, that was the only way. I was pretending to write to be with them. Kinda. But the thing that started to happen was that I started to go off in journalistic, diaristic ways about what was going on in the room and out the window and in my head and in my other reading. And I thought oh my god, I think it's becoming a

piece. That was not the plan at all, but something started to happen. I feel like the present sort of stole me in a way. And that was exciting. I finished typing it last night, and of course I go in and out of thinking this sucks, this is not anything but no it is something. Because the real wants you, in some way. And what's funny is that the real has come to mean the real fact of actually nakedly writing.

MN: This is a different subject, but I've been thinking a lot during the pandemic about the everyday and magic. I was rereading Joseph Cornell's diaries, and he would go out around New York hunting for what he called the "spark." The spark was in a poster of a starlet or something he saw in the garbage or whatever. When I came to New York, your poetry and your teachings all seemed to be about how to go out hunting for the spark. This sounds clichéd, but after the everydayness of being mostly in the house for eighteen months of pandemic time, the spark became pretty hard to find. To find magic, do you need to go outside? Was it in other people? Was it in contingency? Thoreau said it's not what you look at, it's whether you see. If I looked long enough at a piece of bamboo in my backyard, would magic come back? Maybe what I'm describing is just depression, I don't know. But I started to think maybe I just wasn't playing dumb enough with my life. Maybe I need to play even dumber.

EM: It totally makes sense. It's like the pandemic created a problematic new studio for all of us.

MN: Right.

EM: I mean Thoreau would have gotten out a tape measure and measured the house.

MN: Totally.

EM: And even today's work—today, we're going to go on a field trip to, among other things, the bar that Aileen Wuornos was arrested in. It's called the Last Resort.

MN: Oh my god.

EM: [*laughs*] Apparently it's a real scene. It's like the West End Bar, people hang out there all day long. So we're going to go there and write, which is really funny.

MN: That is definitely not any field trip that I could have had in mind, but it's so good.

EM: And there is some great tree. This was not my initiatory desire, but there are some great old trees in Florida that are really beautiful. So we went to one last week and we're going to go to another one today. So, with the tree and Aileen . . . but I'm also going to be looking at this Thoreau piece—I had this topsy-turvy publishing experience writing it. In the nineties, I read Thoreau's *Cape Cod* and I loved the book and thought I'll write a similar piece. So I asked everybody on the planet if I could write about [*Cape Cod*] basically redoing Thoreau's walk and nobody wanted it. So I did the walk, I didn't write the piece, but I wrote a handful of poems. And recently I thought I'll write it now. I started pitching it around and this one editor said he wouldn't commission it, but "if you do it, I'll look at it." Then when the park started heating up, I was pouncing on everybody, saying let me write about it. And just like *Cape Cod*, nobody would let me write about the park. Finally *Artforum* did. But in the midst of that, this same journal goes we'd like that *Cape Cod* piece now. It was sort of weird, it wasn't the right time, and I'd hurt my ankle, so we put it off until this spring. I went down there in April, and I did the Thoreau walk and it was amazing. It was many things, including that I still had an injured ankle, so my foot was part of the story. Thoreau had never been to Cape Cod when he began, whereas I have many friends there. Instead of the Wellfleet Oysterman, I'm going to talk to Larry Collins and Michael Carroll and Helen Wilson. I wrote the piece, and because he did the walk several times with different surges, so he didn't end it all at once, I quasi-ended it and then I got back to New York, and that's when I got arrested with the trees. And that was the end of the piece. And I gave it to this magazine, and they killed it.

MN: [*gasps*] They did?

EM: I should read you the [rejection]. I'll read it to you, it's so amazing. It was really one of those rejections where it's a beautiful description of what you do, and they were like, but we don't do that. You got us very close to the experience of doing the walk in a poetic way. And we like an arc and freestanding narrative pieces. We don't know how to edit this. And they killed the piece.

MN: Well now you have the piece, I guess.

EM: It's like now I have this time frozen and this kind of voyage. And of course it'll go into a book. And yeah somebody else is going to publish it. And they are great. What's amazing about this whole saga is that the original journal's kill fee is better than most other places' fees.

MN: I was going to ask. Great, that's fantastic.

EM: It's probably going to turn into its own little book. I'm going to keep doing the walk. I wrote too much. I wrote fifty pages. So, I'll take it to one hundred. But I learned so much, I think this is what triggered me—I learned so much about Thoreau on the way. He's queer, he's absolutely queer, and I suspect that was part of what they didn't like me talking about. Not because they are homophobic. But because it's not a fact. It's speculative. It *feels* right. And that's what it feels like to be in a queer world. It's its own place. And so many of the men who have done that kind of work, so many of them are gay. Alexander von Humboldt, he's the guy that first discovered plate tectonics and the relationship between heat and climate change and trees. Stuff we know today, but he was the first guy to say it. He was totally gay, you know, it's just funny. But that otherness is a research tool. If you're all buttoned up about sexuality can you really think about climate.

MN: Yeah.

EM: I learned that Thoreau was a surveyor, I didn't know that. He actually made his money surveying farms. The new biography of him is actually pretty great. But he was just out there with his measuring tape. That's who he was, and that's what he did. And his joke about himself was I've traveled a great deal, in Concord.

MN: Right.

EM: Back to the pandemic and staying still, he kind of did. He went out at night, listened to the birds. It's a conceptual thought.

MN: When I took classes with Annie Dillard, who, before you, was the only person I had ever taken a writing class with, that was her whole thing, you go out, and it doesn't matter if you're looking at trash and beer cans, just stick around for a while and just keep writing about what you see in front of you, you just keep doing it, you keep scribing. And then I met you and it was a similar ethos, but you took us to Times Square. But I also have this part of me that works with a lot of abstract ideas. There's a scriber in me, and then there's this other part of me that feels ideas as concrete things that I'm moving around in my head, but it's very internal labor and doesn't really involve that kind of journalistic or even poetic attention. It involves a different part of my brain.

EM: Which part? I think I almost understand, you mean write about things or the abstract?

MN: I just feel like with all writing the easiest way to make it better is to make it more specific. But you have this funny line in *For Now*, when you say something like, "I'm really abstract." [*laughs*] And I feel like there's a part of me, the "really abstract" part, and it reads a lot of philosophy and stuff, then starts imagining these blocks of ideas, like things that I start moving around as furniture. And then I'm arranging ideas, the same way you might be looking at an assemblage of shit in the gutter, but they're all in my head, pulled from my reading. I'm doing this other kind of organization, to which there's not a "well, just say it how you saw it" kind of an answer.

EM: Right, right.

MN: I have to invent a scaffolding—it's just it's a different process, and it has different solutions for how to make it feel alive, I guess.

EM: I just think we're so different in that way, because I feel you are so much more comfortable with those abstract ideas than I am. So I also think that when you come back to the real, you get so much bang for your buck.

MN: [*laughs*] Yeah, right.

EM: You're very comfortable in that place, but you still have that poet's need to get the fuck out of there too.

MN: For sure. I feel like each book I write is a kind of refuge from whatever mental space the last one had me in, like I can't stand that space anymore and now I want to fly away and do something very different. But it's hard because I know, as a reader and as a teacher, how much purchase the "real" has. So, when people might say, "oh, why doesn't Maggie get back to talking about her body, that felt so much more real?," I get very bristly, because I feel like I get that, I know that, maybe I've even given that advice to someone else. But while I know I could write an essay on my toes this morning, and it would have a lot of purchase in some way, that's not the only thing in me at all.

EM: Yeah. Though I think the interesting way you subverted that in *On Freedom* is how you got to the planet as your body.

MN: Right.

EM: I mean you use your son—I don't mean you *use* him—but there *he* was. And then there *it* was. And then it just kept becoming a bigger and bigger disaster film.

MN: [*laughing*] Yeah.

EM: It was very scandalous and prescient in the way that it just kept getting worse.

MN: You mean writing about climate change?

EM: Yeah, I mean some of the stuff you had there was the most scary stuff I've heard anywhere. The guy who said we have thirty years.

MN: Guy McPherson.

EM: I've been using that, that was one of my constant takeaways from your book. It's a very loaded nugget.

MN: I think I kind of move off him and that attitude in the chapter. Maybe the link to what we've been talking about, about attentiveness, is that I think some people have the idea that the moment "now" is to take that attentiveness and turn it into a kind of death doula practice. You know, attentiveness to the earth dying. I don't know that we know what we're doing as much as that. I think for some people that orients them toward a feeling of possibility and purpose. It doesn't do that for me. So, I can't make that turn at present.

EM: Yeah. Though I like dying a little.

MN: I can get into it if it's a kind of Buddhist thing where attending to living is attending to dying, attending to dying is attending to living, but I don't like thinking of it as a kind of switch from one to the other because life is bigger than that, I think.

EM: For me, the urgency of that thought, that we could be that close to the edge, ultimately just flips me back into the present, because I just have nowhere to go.

MN: I know, right, where is there to go?

EM: Though any knowledge I have about the larger crisis is in relationship to the specific little plot of fifty-seven acres [of East River Park] that I've been so obsessed with for a few years. To understand this park's relationship to this larger struggle became really, really interesting to me. You know, this is not just my problem.

MN: I was going to ask you how it felt. Was there any conflict, or did it feel like it was the right thing to narrow down on this fifty-seven acres as where you could make your mark or make your stand?

EM: It was so literal. It was like being a Palestinian. Like, oh my god, the settlers seem to think that my house is their house. I just think it was that close. But again, it did throw me onto all these things, including how much I realize that trees have been in my work since—

MN: I've noticed that too! I was just thinking about that. Obviously way before *Sorry, Tree*, but I was thinking about so many encounters, specifically where you're talking to trees.

EM: Right!

MN: Or even saying, "Can I come out to a tree?" A lot of companionship.

EM: I mean they are so interesting; they're sculptural, they're vertical. When you're the last man standing, you're not, because there's a tree. It's sort of like they're always this echo. Because we are. Somebody lately—I don't know the science—said we're actually 50 percent tree. I don't know what that even means, but it seems right. There's that wonderful book by that Irishwoman about speaking to trees [Diana Beresford-Kroeger's *To Speak for the Trees*], and she's way steeped in Celtic lore and is a scientist as well. She is so good at explaining how trees just absolutely created the condition for us to live. There actually could be no oxygen. The planet was dominated by plant things before there were ever human things, and it's like they adjusted the atmosphere to an extent that we could become. So, it's so literal what their destruction means, just how insane that is.

MN: Do you feel like loneliness is assuaged by trees, or do you feel like it's not that kind of enmeshment?

EM: No, I think that's completely, literally, and absolutely true. There's no words besides yes because I feel like they've just been such a presence. What's better generally means trees. And it's always anecdotal too; when I was a kid, there was a chestnut tree out my window of my house. We just had a shitty backyard, a little gravel backyard between two family houses, but there was this tree, and it was the conversation, the syntax, the seasons, the everything of my growing up, watching the tree change. My mother loved plants and growing things, and she was particularly aware of the tree and we had so many rituals involved with the tree. When she remarried, my stepfather came in and cut down the tree.

MN: Oh god. Did he not know the cliché that he was living, of cutting down all that was prior to him coming into your family?

EM: I mean I think that was a piece of who he was. He was probably cutting down both of their families. He was really a nice guy, a great guy in many ways. We didn't really get along. [*laughs*] But I think that was part of his mission, perhaps. To end things.

MN: You were saying that reading the *New York Times* piece was like sitting through a boring introduction of you. And you write in *For Now*, "I'm sick of my history." Then you have a bunch of stuff in there that I really love and really relate to, when you're railing against this proprietary, self-important concept we have of "MY WRITING," you know, the big deal *it* of it. You talk about how we get bored and want things to change and we're tired of the same old thing, but we're also having these thoughts while tying our running shoes against this same old tree, and we can only tell it's a new thought because it's happening against the old tree. Have you thought about how those things move together? The boredom and the restlessness, alongside that which stays or bears witness?

EM: I was just getting really lost at what you were saying in the beginning because it's so absolutely beautiful that you go through all these phases of your life in discontent with it and fixation with it and discarding it, and there just keeps being this rhythm of this other thing—that is not other, that is really such a part of us. I do feel it's part of what we began talking about in the beginning, this kind of playing dumb and all that has to do with wanting some parts of the particularity of whatever our journey is to be gone. To make space. My therapist is always talking about sanding off the details and getting past the particular and getting into the larger principle because that's what's driving me and that's what's happening, and how do we affect that. Before we talked, all I could think of was time because I just wanted to get big as hell, and as far away as I can from the particular horizon of tiny details that I've been identified with as a writer, or I have been used to being comfortable with. To get beyond that. Of course, the scary thing is: What is beyond that? I don't know, I don't know. And yet I can't help feeling like it's this backdrop, not just for me but for everybody, something about how and where we live, and how we live with it, and coexistence in some way. We don't know where the world is going. Whether that means something that happens in my writing or something that happens in my life is something that I know I care about. Much more than I care about the particular pieces—the thing about being a lesbian or no, I'm trans now. Or life in this place, not that. That's only interesting as it becomes vaguer and vaguer to me. I think with life, what happens isn't that it becomes vaguer, but it does become more general, because it starts to be about movement itself, and how am I in sync with that or not. And how I find ways to hold it. Because that's the only difference between me and death.

And a tree is always there. A tree is always there, you know.

MN: When you say what is beyond that, you mean what's beyond the shedding of signifying details that have clustered around a life, rendered it legible?

EM: Yeah, and make it feel so known that you're sick of working there. Because I am, I know I am. And sometimes just by stating that, I start to come up in a different relationship to it all. But it's true, I just find myself longing for something beyond. I've had passions and interests that have cropped up in my life that feel like they're beyond, and I love standing there and finding people to stand there with, to stand there with other people. But I can't help but keep continuing to say "and with trees."

MN: Yeah, and with trees. I gave my students this semester your essay on flossing [from *The Importance of Being Iceland*]. And I was thinking about it when I was reading *For Now,* in which you talk about your, or someone's, *Selected Poems* as being like a good full scan of the corpse. And then you're talking about an ex and what she thinks about being in your papers in the archive and you say she was already imagining her future in the crypt. In the flossing piece, there's a lot about the skull, about death in life, which has always been in your work. But I guess what's interesting to me is that most people, even if they're as young as John Keats, when they start writing, they immediately sense that something about writing is about death, or at least about death in life. I remember reading Cynthia Carr's book on Wojnarowicz and she was saying—and I'm paraphrasing here, and maybe I've projected this read into the book—that Wojnarowicz's early writing had always been about death in life, in a kind of romantic way, and then when HIV came along, it gave this prior impulse its content. Anyway I was just thinking about the way that all writing has that good full scan of the corpse aspect, and how, if you get to keep living, your writing records changes in the scan, because you're in a different relationship to mortality at different moments in your life. I wonder how you feel now when you look back at earlier writing of yours that may have felt at the time like it's writing from the future crypt—like, do you look back and go, "oh, I didn't know anything then," or do you feel like, "oh, I was feeling the same continuum of death and life that I feel now"?

EM: I think when I began I thought that was subject matter. I just thought that you went to the heaviest, deepest, darkest stuff. Trauma was the territory. And I thought my relationship to that was what I had that was interesting.

MN: Did you do that consciously? Would you have said that then?

EM: I said it in my poems for sure. And then really got educated away from that by my particular avant-garde writing school, until I gained permission by proving that I was any good, to then figure out how to bring it back in. Of course, it returns always. It's interesting, there's so much trauma bashing right now as well as trauma promoting. Because I think we're in a multitude of global states of panic. But, of course, trauma is always with us, which is death and dreams, and what your particular relation is to that—where you sat when you first discovered that, and where you're sitting now, and then mapping that for the rest of your writing life. I think that part of what I'm struggling with and what I feel like we've been talking about in this conversation is what I don't want death to be is a pile of little tchotchke things about me. I don't want that in the room. And I'm trying to figure out what the room is without that sitting here, while really being attendant to the wily magical place that death always holds.

MN: A few years ago I asked some students in a questionnaire what they would most like to take a future class on, and over half said "trauma studies." I was like, "What do you think we just read together?" [*laughs*] It seems to me it's not so much that the literature differs—so much literature always circulates around trauma—but rather the psychologized or medicalized ways we talk about life, which change era by era. The *literary* question, it seems to me, is How do we make our writing address things in such a way that it moves beyond, or will last beyond, the diagnostics of any given moment.

EM: Right. Because it seems crucial that you do make your own map. Beyond is a rendering.

MN: Yeah. And the literary seems like a place where you have to allow the narrative to surprise you—it can't just reinforce a predetermined map.

EM: In part because I think there are other people, and they're all talking stories, you know. All I have to do is visit somebody that I haven't seen for a long time who I've had a past relationship from this place, and they're someplace so different now, and you wind up either talking them off the cliff, or seeing that their extreme experience is like an amazing demonstration that something else is possible. I feel like other lives totally knock me out of orbit. I feel like there always are all these planets that are affecting my orbit, and I don't know what or where they are until I find them.

MN: You've said you're interested in the question of how something becomes a book. Can we talk about that a little? What do you think a book is? It strikes me now that I was probably very influenced, early on, by your sense of what a book is. The book as container. It's become difficult for me to write something that's not book length, besides individual poems, or art catalog essays. My mental holder is always "this will be a book." I never think, "this will be an essay." I'm trying to change that a little, because I get moored up in books for years, and end up saying no to everything else in the meantime because I'm like, the book, the book, the book. I can't do anything else but the book.

EM: That's great, and I envy that. At this point in time I feel like I'm trying to conceptualize a book that will be a cabinet that will hold all these other parts. Because it's the book, and it's not the book. And it's like, what would these speedy little boats do if they come into the book, you know. What would the book become. I like these problems, otherwise I'm bored by the book when I'm writing it. Plus I enjoy being outside it, writing other things.

MN: The thing is, being in a book is really great and also really boring. And here we are, back to the pandemic studio—you have to keep hunting for the spark. I think a lot about how writing is just like life in general. You complain endlessly about "oh, this is dragging me off the main thing," and it's like, no, all of it is the main thing. You never really know what's the main thing and what's a digression. We just have the pretend idea that the real work is somewhere, and it never is. There's no *there* there.

EM: Yeah, the great mistake is thinking, "oh, I wish that would stop so I could stay here" when that was the thing that was making here.

MN: But is that part of the game? Do we have to keep thinking, "oh I wish that would stop" to somehow manage our being, or is that way of thinking just unnecessary suffering?

EM: I don't know. I think my burden of time is that I always want things to be over, and then something distracts me and then I'm in it.

MN: Often when I've agreed to take on a writing assignment, I resent that I've taken the job, and when I finish it I think, "god, that was such a distraction." But (a) from what? and (b) before I started it, I probably felt like everything else in my life was a distraction keeping me from the assignment. When I see this pattern from afar, I just think, wow, this is all a really elaborate mind game about where value is, where things are happening. You know, I'm hot, better turn up the AC, I'm cold, better turn on the heat. So you're spending a lot of time just jiggering the thermostat.

EM: Right, and almost like anything else you can do with your body brings you back to it in this completely other way.

MN: I think about it a lot as a parent. I think parents are really annoying to kids because they always want their kid to be doing something other than what they're doing. When you go up to your kid and you're like, "oh, are you hungry?" and they're like, "no, I'm fuckin' reading a comic book, I don't want to think about 'am I hungry?'" But you're always trying to service them, and be like, "are you cold? do you need a sweatshirt?" And they're like, can you just get away from me. You're trying to care for them, but you're also making a bid for connection, but you fail a lot because you don't know how to do it. And in part you don't know how to do it because you're this adult and it's no longer natural to you to connect by just sitting down on a beanbag. Often I'm like, I'm fifty, I don't want to sit down on a beanbag in the middle of my day, that's not where I'm at. But I do want to connect, you know?

EM: Just the fact of that must make you think all the time that you need to do something about that, and you don't.

MN: You're right, I don't. But also, sometimes I will sit down and just try to be there, and my son will be like, "why are you just sitting there?!" and I'm like, "oh, I'm just trying to be." Sometimes nothing feels right, including not trying! It's hard, to let nothing be quite right.

EM: Uh-huh, and there's always an unhappy little author in the house.

MN: Exactly! Is it him or is it me?

EM: That is the question. Alright, I love you, I have to go to Aileen's.

(2023)