

Can distance make us closer?

Honors 320

Margaret came to our family delicate and lifeless. The heartbreak of April 2000 is hazy to me now. Even as a six year old, though, I remember struggling to crystalize the reality of her. I distinctly recall the discomfort of that unclarity.

As I have grown up, Margaret has entered and left my consciousness a number of times. I have come to function under the assumption that she is a real person, and her spiritual existence was not invalidated by her still arrival to this planet. However, I often forget her when we have lessons on “eternal families” in church, or even when I am numbering off my siblings to new acquaintances. When I realize this tendency, I understand I still have trouble articulating the nature of my relationship with her. The resulting ambiguity has been uncomfortable for some time now, as I have realized there is an irreconcilable distance between us. I am here, and she is someplace else. How do I make this reality acceptable to me?

When I say distance, I am thinking of all of the aspects that remove me from experiencing what Margaret is. There is physical distance, as I am not at near to Arlington, Virginia, where I last encountered her. As far as I know, I am physically removed from the location that she might be experiencing in the after world. There is also distance in time between the last interaction I had with her, and any future interaction I could have. There is also somewhat of a cognitive distance in how I am perceiving her versus what she actually might end up being like when I meet her.¹ There is distance, or room for uncertainty that that reunion is actually guaranteed.

So how does the distance I experience with her condition our relationship? Perhaps there is no relationship at all. I don't know anything about her personality traits, interests and strengths. It's possible that we don't have anything in common, that the mere fact of our shared parents has no bearing on the proximity of our souls. If a relationship between Margaret and me does exist, though, can it be strengthened? If so, what advantages does this separation offer? *Can distance make us closer?* In my heart of hearts, my relationship with my deceased sister is the specific context that I am searching for a personal answer to this question. However, if I am truly operating under the assumption that Margaret is a real person, then the conclusions that I arrive at throughout my pathway to discovery will be relevant to any human relationships. *Can distance make any of us closer?*

¹ *If I ever meet her.

My first impulse in triangulating these answers is to work within the environments that I am regularly immersed in. Art has always been a major part of my life, and it has recently occurred to me that many of my aesthetic choices have begun to reflect a philosophical gravitation towards removal. I have adopted the medium of transparent, veil-like canvases that I can choose to put images behind or in front of. (see figure 1)



Figure 1²



Figure 2³

Different levels of proximity to the veil-surface result in varying levels of abstraction and lost information. I have been told that the denial of this information is sometimes frustrating for viewers. To be honest, it's not very natural to me, either. When making art, my reflex is always to insert myself into it. I have a tendency to “overwork” pieces, often going one mark too far, only to fix it with more marks. It seems that I feel like I need to continually assert my connection with the piece in order for it to feel authentic. It is hard to let a painting go when my instinct is to pull it close, or in other words, assert my presence in the work through an abundance of complicated mark-making and layering of materials.⁴ Analogous to a personal relationship, I often feel like it is hard for me to believe in the presence or depth of a bond between me and another person if I cannot see the impact I am making on them. Does this type of “closeness” add value to an art piece, though? Furthermore, is complete transparency of the influence which individuals I have on one another necessary for the relationship to be valid? Or

² Figure 1: “Echo!”, 2017

³ Figure 2: “Window Negotiations”, 2016

⁴ While producing this work, I had been vigorously working on the left panel for a critique. Probably not apparent right now, but there are actually layers and layers of marks, with materials ranging from astroturf to wood glue and ceiling spackle. I originally planned to do the same to the other panel, but ran out of time, and presented it as shown here to my class. To my surprise, during the critique everyone agreed that the untouched panel was essential to the piece, and begged me to leave it as is.

is this clarity and metaphorical proximity merely my own preferred platform for communication? This is yet to be determined.

This exercise in rescinding our own presence in the object of our engagement is present in other art forms, as well. In “The Necessity of Theater” author Paul Woodruff analyzes the importance of roles of both audience and actors in the theater setting. While there is no personal interfacing between the participants on the stage and those seated watching them, both experiences are interdependent in a very intimate way. Both grow through the shared, but separate performance. What I found particularly interesting was the articulation of “the Art of Watching.”⁵ Investment in watching an on-stage performance, (and I would add, when viewing any work of art), requires the deliberate emotional involvement in the storyline and characters as they develop before you. Empathy towards Hamlet or even Claudius is an active choice, and the emotions can be very real. However, as the author points out, the theater is not the setting for these feelings of sympathy to be acted upon. “As a watcher, you feel that you would break a spell if you engaged in what you were watching, and in most cases, you are right.”⁶ In the realm of theater and art, a removal of direct interaction is essential to the impact that the creative work can accomplish for all participants.

In visual art, this distancing is manifest not only in the philosophies that have emerged in various eras of art history, but also in the very mechanics of our visual language. A lesson that all artists learn early on is that the physical blurring of our vision is a part of our reality. Among the most important tools that representational artists have to articulate their chosen scene is the suggestion of “atmospheric perspective.” While we might not always notice it, our eyes are constantly registering the interaction of the particles of the air, and how they layer to contribute to our sense of space. Obviously this is more noticeable on a foggy or polluted day, when mountains or buildings disappear into a veil of unclarity at a faster rate than we are used to. However, this is actually happening all around us all of the time, and is an important indicator of spatial relationships. This method of depicting distance was discovered (or perhaps rediscovered) during the Renaissance. Take, for example, the iconic fresco by Piero Perugino located in the Sistine Chapel, “Christ giving the keys of the kingdom to Saint Peter.” (see Figure 3) This work

⁵ Woodruff, Paul. *The necessity of theater: the art of watching and being watched*. New York: Oxford U Press, 2010. Print.

⁶ *The Necessity of Theater*: page 163

of art is notable to many art historians due to the obvious application of innovative technical discoveries at the time.



Figure 3

The piece is a textbook example of single-point mathematical perspective, in which the composition serves to highlight Jesus Christ as the center of important action occurring. This is facilitated by receding lines in the surrounding architecture, and figures that shrink with distance. Beyond the town square where this scene is occurring, though even more distance is implied by far off mountains. The mountains fade in color, indicating layers of atmosphere that are separating the viewer from them. Although, objectively speaking, these mountains are just a few swatches of blue and lighter blue, they push the depicted space into reality. If everything existed with the same degree of optical brilliance and clarity, then this wouldn't register as a location grounded in reality. To some degree, the visual abstraction caused by distance, which could be termed also as a removal from detail, is necessary for technical accuracy in art. It is this visual ambiguity that expands the viewer's ability to conceptualize and digest the scene in front of them. Especially during the renaissance, tricks that improved the accuracy of visual rendering were important to transport the viewer into a relatable instant. Jesus conferring authority to the apostle Peter is one thing to read on paper but another thing to see at human scale with a complete constructed atmosphere and architecture. The details make this story relatable, but it is only within the context of visual cues such as atmospheric perspective that viewers can truly accept the gravity and immediacy of this event. Without the implied distance, it is very possible that this story could continue to remain purely allegorical. The acknowledgement of space and the obscurity that distance brings is a necessary condition to accepting our immediate reality, and extracting meaning from it. Comparable to a relationship, the confines of physical distance, time or other factors of removal cannot be ignored. In order for the scene of this relationship to be authentic, the distance needs to be acknowledged. Only then can it be grounded in reality and

provide a foundation for learning and growth from the metaphorical fresco created by both individuals. It is clear to me that the distance between Margaret and me is literal and cannot be pretended away. While this is important for me to understand and allow to sharpen the meaning I extract from the relationship, it still leaves me with the question: *What is lost in the distance?* As in Pergugino's fresco, I am left with the reality of hazy blue swatches- implied mountain ranges that I cannot access the details to. How do I reconcile the inaccessibility of certain pieces of information when it comes to people?

When I first read the term, "Distance decay," I knew exactly what it implied. Distance decay is a term used in urban geography to describe the decline in availability of services as one moves away from an urban center. It's a pretty intuitive concept. Roads in the center of a city are repaired with more urgency than the skirting suburban or agricultural belt. On heat maps, there is a clustering of light and energy at the centers of cities, which dissipates in every direction of the center. At the same time, "higher-end" services and products are more accessible in the center of the urban environment such as luxury goods, the headquarters for a major law firm, and government buildings are usually located in Central Business District of a city. On the other hand, businesses such as pawn shops, same-day loan franchises, and thrift stores are typically positioned farther away from the center of high-rent action. Distance decay not only refers to the maintenance of infrastructure, but also the corresponding markets that respond to this decay.

College students such as myself are well-aware of the hierarchy in housing prices and their relationship to the proximity of campus. The higher demand locations at the center of our universe (campus) are usually more expensive than something a mile down the road. I, for one, am paying \$100 more every month than I did last year to be a half mile closer to school and the services it provides. At the same time, campus and its surrounding market of quality housing and services doesn't expand into a vacuum. Markets of different qualities emerge to fill in the gaps. In my own college town of Provo, the further south and west you go of campus, the more plasma donation centers and pawn shops begin to emerge. When one market dissipates, in this scenario, highly valued housing options, other, corresponding services appear to fill-in the gaps. Similar to the layers of particle-level atmosphere that arrive to inhabit and obscure the scene in a way that ties the picture to reality. In the urban landscape, neighborhood features do not disappear into a vacuum. As these elements of the physical landscape become less prevalent, they are replaced by other features to take their place, and shape the overall character of a geographic space.

What is filling in my gap with Margaret, then? I have collected almost 17 years of experiences without her. I have acquired innumerable possessions, made hundreds of friends, and eaten thousands of meals without her there. Are these things filling the distance? Is that filling serving to connect or further separate me from her? If compared to a hypothetical city, with me as the center of one market, and she as another, this distance could be assumed to be filled with pieces of both her and me. The character geographic landscape would be the result of both of our combined infrastructures. It would look like the combination of both of our unshared experiences.

My sister, Becca was born about a year after Margaret's death. She was born the day after September 11th, 2001, in a Jordanian hospital that refused to print her birth certificate in English. I wanted her to be named Lily, after some character in the book I was reading. My mom named her after Rebecca, her own sister who had been an important comfort to her during her trial of losing Margaret.⁷ I've heard my mom tell people that they chose to have Becca because she felt like we had made room for another person in our family. I hope Margaret doesn't think that we were trying to replace her, though.

The existence of a physical substance that connects us and separates us is a popular motif in science fiction, from “philotes” in the Ender’s Game series, to “dust” in The Golden Compass series. It is also a recurring phenomenon in our physical universe. At the subatomic level, any discussion of physical matter is purely hypothetical. Atoms and anything smaller are unobservable. But even in the complete absence of this visual, leading scientists cannot reconcile themselves to any other conclusion other than the existence of particles that build up into larger ones to formulate the foundations of everything we see and interact with. Some of these particles are hypothesized to be completely massless, such as photons (which facilitate light) and gravitons (which condition gravity). Even in the unseen world, the prominent theory among theoretical physicists that in the realm of our existence, there is virtually no “vacuum.” Any

⁷ Margaret herself was named after our elderly neighbor in Cleveland, Ohio. She is probably passed now, but I remember she was stern with me when I picked her flowers. She would call me over when she saw a rabbit in her yard, or if she had remembered to stock up on Sunny D. One time, she let me come over to see how her sprinklers were making a rainbow with the help of the summer sun.

distance is actually filled with innumerable particles. One of the subatomic particles of interest among scientists today is the “quark.” Quarks belong to a class of subatomic particles called “hadrons,” which combine with each other to form protons. Between quarks themselves, there exists corresponding networks of even smaller particles called “gluons.” According to leading theories, when these quarks accumulate distance between each other, the string of gluons multiplies to fill the gaps. It is fascinating to me that the ever-presence of physical matter is seen both at the scale of cities, as well as in particles that we will never be able to observe with the naked eye. The substance both separates and connects different particles and entities of varying scales together. In the metaphorical painting of the resulting relationships between these pieces of infrastructure and matter, the seen and unseen objects in the frame serve to separate these things from their full observable detail, and also to provide a visual pathway in which the objects and characters within the scene relate to one another and condition the believability of the picture. Perhaps the matter that has accumulated between Margaret and me is a potential pathway to retracing my way back to her. The very substance of our unshared experiences could be considered analogous to the relationship that exists between us.

There are certain niches in the contemporary art world that focus on a similar discussion of the materiality of distance. Two artists who significantly contextualize the work I produce are Do ho Suh and Rachel Whiteread. Both of these artists employ the visual languages of architecture, with similarly removed tastes, but with entirely different purposes. Do ho Suh is an artist who analyzes his own disconnect towards his upbringing in South Korea. His ethereal silk constructions of former spaces that he used to inhabit. His iconic piece from 1999, “Seoul Home, New York Home,” (figure 4) originated from a longing to retrace his steps back to “the last time he had a good night’s rest.” Each of his artistic endeavors requires a pilgrimage to the site of reference. In an interview, Do ho Suh stated that this process is about immersing himself in the longing for a place.⁸ In essence, his art is about embracing and encapsulating the immediacy of the emotions that are heightened when we miss something that we are removed from. Likewise, longing is something that fills the space between individuals, and potentially drives them to rediscover each other.

⁸ “I don’t really get homesick, but I’ve noticed that I have this longing for this particular space, and I want to recreate that space or bring that space wherever I go. ...I didn’t want to sit down and cry for home. I wanted to more actively deal with these issues of longing.” - Do Ho Suh



Figures 4⁹



Figure 5¹⁰

Rachel Whiteread is famous for her direct approach to the inquiry as to what fills the empty space between walls themselves. Her massive installations are actually concrete molds of interiors significant to her. These monuments are heavy to look at. To me, they embody the sheer “weight” of the experiences that are conditioned by the environment provided by the encasing of four walls. In a very straightforward way, Whiteread’s pieces also acknowledge that there is substance that fills the apparent vacuum caused by distance between walls and their inhabiting objects and persons. What this representation could be lacking, however, is the depiction of the living and evolving dynamism that occurs within these spaces. The compartmentalized experiences had within the seclusion of an architectural structure are not simply weighty, but a constantly shifting, molten weight.

The construction of spaces, as a practice, it is intricately interwoven with psychology. Domestic spaces are strategically organized to imply either unity or peaceful seclusion. The materials used in home building symbolize our willingness to be influenced by our surroundings. More windows? What kind of insulation is used? In office settings, are workers separated by cubicles? The placement of certain individuals of rank is often strategic to facilitate differing degrees of accessibility and respect. In the book, “The Poetics of Space,” by Gaston Chelard, the author argues that the articulation of space provides a physical framework by which inhabiting individuals can imbue more meaning in. The definition of space, which is to say, the separation of one space from another provides a site in which an individual, even when he or she is

⁹ Figure 4: Rachel Whiteread, “House”, 1993

¹⁰ Figure 5: Do ho suh, “Seoul Home, LA Home.”, 1999

removed from this space can actively interact with. “The house, like fire and water, will permit me... to recall flashes of daydream.” He goes on to explain that these daydreams, or memories are active and continuously developing: “[in these spaces] memory and imagination remain associated, each one working for their mutual deepening.”¹¹ Similarly, in the realm of theater and art, there are opportunities for continual development of meaning both in the art-making process as well as the art viewing process. In a 1991 talk given by the primary writer of the “Monty Python” movie series, John Cleese outlines the necessity of a defined space and time for creativity.¹² He refers to this as a “Space-Time Oasis.” The delegation of a creative space, and its separation is a pattern seen with many artists. I myself have greatly benefitted from having a studio to produce work. In “The Necessity of Theater,” Woodruff refers to the stage as a “sacred space.”¹³ He compares it the biblical “Holy of Holies” within Solomon’s Temple. It is a space uninterrupted by outsiders. The “sacred space” of the theater produces its most valuable experience for both the actors and audience when this separation is kept intact. Perhaps this is comparable to the distance within relationships. I can imagine Margaret and I in our own respective architectural structures, gaining meaning from each other despite and perhaps because of this separation. The distance of observation, lending itself to the continuous intertwining of our shared and unshared memories and experiences, coupled with whatever projections our imaginations color these as.

The appropriate physical distancing of individuals and families within a community has long been scrutinized by social psychologists and urban planners alike. Especially in United States, the perception of personal property and space pushes us away from each other. While we need the amenities such as schools, grocery stores and doctors that exist in physical conglomerations of city centers, having a mini kingdom has become a symbol of status and wealth. Many people choose to compartmentalize work from home, and even look forward to commute time to transition between characters that they adopt in order to fulfil the obligations of each environment. On average, Americans prefer a commute time of around 20-30 minutes each day. This is definitely understandable. It is not a selfish to want space to decompress and function

¹¹ *The Poetics of Space*, page 5

¹² Popova, Maria. "John Cleese on the Five Factors to Make Your Life More Creative." *Brain Pickings*. N.p., 27 Oct. 2016. Web. 19 Apr. 2017.

¹³ *The Necessity of Theater*, page 109

to our full potential in a specific setting.¹⁴ Sometimes it is more effective to have space to sort through personal matters.¹⁵ When it comes to Margaret and me, there is a particular abundance of “personal space.”

Many early American urban planning schemes were the result of religious motivations. Shaker and some Methodist sects arranged themselves in utopia-modeled physical orientations to stimulate a sense of unity and community. Joseph Smith and Brigham Young have both posthumously been awarded their development of the Plat of Zion. This city plan functioned on a grid, and kept residential housing at the center of the planned landscape, radiating from the centrally placed temples and public buildings. The plan was similar in its motivations to draw from scripture and prepare for the second coming of Jesus Christ. A unique feature of this plan in particular, though was that it was built with the intent to facilitate Zion-like interactions between neighbors. A key feature of the plat¹⁶ that sets it apart from other grid-like patterns is alternating block directions.¹⁷ This was to ensure privacy among neighbors. To me, it is relatable to other mechanisms of self-selected separation as discussed in art production and architectural compartmentalization techniques.

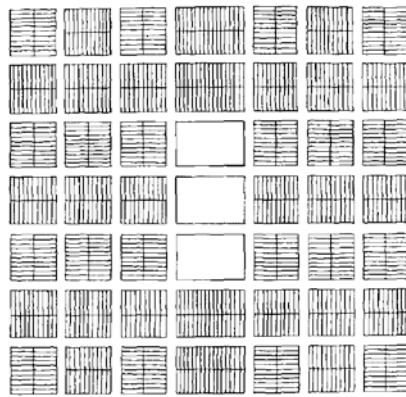


Figure 6¹⁹ 18

¹⁴ Shoup, Donald. *The High Cost of Free Parking*. N.p.: Natl Book Network, 2011. Print.

¹⁵ I guess that’s just my personal opinion.

¹⁶ A “plat” is a plot of land. Not used in regular speech today, but among urban planners, it is most often used as a verb. “Platting” is the same as to plan and survey the land use for a particular portion of land.

¹⁷ Reys, John William. *Cities of the American West: A History of Frontier Urban Planning*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979. Print.

¹⁸ In this figure, the rectangular strips within each grid block represent a lot that would be inhabited by an individual family. The orientation of these houses alternate from running East to West, and North to South throughout the plat.

¹⁹ Example of the Plat of Zion’s blocks of alternating orientation.

“Good fences make good neighbors.” is a line that becomes somewhat of a banal platitude when shrugging off irreconcilable differences between individuals, even when the reality of their correspondence is immediate. “The Mending Wall” is a poem by Robert Frost in which the narrator scrutinizes his neighbor’s insistence of a wall between their two properties. They meet regularly to patch it up, and the author is skeptical about the need for a wall when there is no livestock that need containing, insinuating that perhaps his neighbor is hyper sensitive to the need for separation. However, the narrator fails to acknowledge the hypocrisy in his own statement. Even within his own paradigm, there are needs for walls to contain and separate certain elements from each other. Perhaps we need separation to be able to function authentically. Some degree of distance is necessary in order to fully appreciate and coexist. While we want to love our neighbor, there is still a need of room for error and personal growth in the process of achieving that. After all, it is the narrator himself that voluntarily returns to rebuild the wall that he is supposedly so against. While urban planners mourn the tendency towards seclusion, it is evidently natural preference among individuals within a community.

*“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
 “...The gaps I mean,
 No one has seen them made or heard them made,
 But at spring mending-time we find them there.
 I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
 And on a day we meet to walk the line
 And set the wall between us once again.
 We keep the wall between us as we go.
 To each the boulders that have fallen to each.””*

....

*“There where it is we do not need the wall:
 He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
 My apple trees will never get across
 And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
 He only says, “**Good fences make good neighbors.**”
 Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
 If I could put a notion in his head:
 “Why do they make good neighbors? Isn’t it
 Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
 Before I built a wall I’d ask to know
 What I was walling in or walling out,
 And to whom I was like to give offense.
 Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
 That wants it down.” I could say “Elves” to him,
 But it’s not elves exactly, and I’d rather
 He said it for himself. I see him there,
 Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
 In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
 He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
 Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
 He will not go behind his father’s saying,*

*And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."*

But when does this become excessive? Many urban theorists would argue that the worth of our preference towards territorial separation is manifest in its fruits. Planners blame the trend towards suburbanization for the pigeonholing of gender roles, increased child dependency and lack of community involvement.²⁰ Isolation can lead to depression and also lack of investment in others, which in turn leads to a decline in empathy. Many Urban planners mourn the loss of traditional, walkable neighborhoods which are replaced with private, gated developments which are "placeless."²¹ They say that these developments replace history with a generic stucco vacuum, devoid of connection or relevance to the landscape and an intended long-term future.

"Community is not something you have, like pizza. Nor is it something you can buy. It's a living organism based on a web of interdependencies- which is to say, a local economy. It expresses itself physically as connectedness, as buildings actively relating to each other, and to whatever public space exists, be it the street, or the courthouse or the village green." -James Howard Kunstler

Returning to one of my recurring questions: "What fills the distance?" Many proponents of "new urbanist" philosophy blame the advent of the automobile, in conjunction with the ending of WWII and veteran loans for America's inorganic hyper-separation of peoples.²² What filled this separation was an intense network of roads. The interstate highway system is the largest piece of infrastructure that mankind has ever built. There are over 40,000 miles of interstate highways alone in the United States. And roads aren't cheap, either. To build, or resurface a stretch of highway costs around one million dollars per lane per mile on the interstate, making it the largest scale, most expensive public works project in human history. The distance between individuals is filled with something actually quite substantial. Something that has the potential to facilitate both further separation, as well as connectivity. What if the substance that has gathered between Margaret and me is the kind that would push us further apart instead of link us together? I have no way of knowing what Margaret is contributing to this bridge, and so all I have to analyze is my own behavior for the last 17 years.

²⁰ Duany, Andres, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck. *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*. New York, NY: North Point, 2010. Print.

²¹ Placelessness means that a piece of infrastructure is disconnected from its location.

²² New urbanism is the theory that proposes increased walkability to facilitate community unity and make better use of land available.

I remember one time in church, an elderly lady told me that Margaret's spirit was in Becca. Becca was Margaret. That shocked and disturbed me. She clearly thought that that information would comfort me. I believed it for a minute, though, and felt genuinely disappointed. It was like I had lost something magical and mysterious that had come into bloom with Margaret's distance. At the same time, In the moment that Becca was Margaret, I was struck with several sudden realizations. I was overcome with with the fear that I had mistreated Becca, (who was actually Margaret) and I was not actually the kind of sister I had fantasized about being if I ever earned the chance to see Margaret again. I remembered all of the times I pinched Becca without anyone knowing, or I hadn't shared my toys with her. I was devastated. Perhaps there is some truth to what my primary teacher told me, then. Becca does represent my relationship that I might have had with Margaret had she survived. For better or for worse.

While the thought of my activities creating a force that would repulse Margaret further away from me is terrifying, I still have complete control over my own actions. I have the power to change myself and my contributions to the web of content that exists between us. There will always exist a degree of uncertainty in the relationship, though, as I have no idea what her activities are doing to this network. Everything between us will always be abstracted. Perhaps the utilization of an obscuring genre of communication and thought could provide a method of expression and access to these inarticulable details.

Poetry is something new for me. I started exploring it as a kind of verbal doodle in certain classes in order to stay awake. I began with a fascination with the friction that is caused by the metaphorical distance between two words, and how that is an energy source that enlivens a sentence. Meaning is birthed in the effective use of a juxtaposition in phrases. It is the distance between two words which causes a chemical reaction of sorts. Readers are touched when unexpected connections are made between words that reach beyond their original set of associations. As I have explored the philosophy behind poetry, I have found that more and more I want to know when words are too close, when they are too far, and when this distance is just right. When is the disconnect preferred in language? And what makes it beautiful to us? What I have learned has driven me to experiment with the application of these principles in a direct way. I think it is worthwhile to include one of these experiments.

*I've been retracing the web of my false starts
and trying to re-excavate the constellations that I once saw in it*

*an exercise in fluency.
do you remember how to play cat's cradle?
I could only do one trick
but I can still feel it written in my fingers*

*that may be beside the point.
though, it makes me wonder if my dogwood angel has access to these things
recently
the composition of her sacred silence has felt so liquid
assuming the form of every passing heartbreak
and still sometimes I think she makes a game of holding me at arm's length
which is infuriating
in response
I have decided to give my eyes permission to match the defocusing of the distance
coaxing my heart into making beauty of the resulting haze
hoping that the ambiguity will envelop and soften my edges.
I assume she is soft too?*

please make me soft.

*I carry her like a newborn in my veil
but I am the one being lifted
my delicate sister: abide, please.*

I have already seen how the manipulation of metaphorical distance between words has allowed me to express things about my sister that feel more accurate than straightforward speech. Charles Olson described this disconnect between words that results in a richer meaning as a “high energy construct.”²³ An ideal poem is one that skillfully crafts juxtapositions and re-contextualizations to expand the meaning of both parts. The opening of TS Eliot’s “The Wasteland” is a heart-wrenching example of this.

*“April²⁴ is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, ...”*

April, traditionally associated with holidays celebrating new life is villainized. The season is re-cast as cruel. Flowers and death are juxtaposed against one another, and an implied disconnect of similar magnitude is imposed on the word pair, “memory and desire.” There is, however, refuge in winter. In the opening of this iconic poem, Eliot sets a precedent for the

²³ Olson, Charles. "Projective Verse." *University of Pennsylvania Press*. N.p., n.d. Web.

²⁴ April is the month that Margaret died.

shattering of assumptions. This keeps the reader alert and mentally present for the constant readjustment of paradigms. To me, attention transferred from the poet to his audience captures what Olsen meant by “high energy.”

A discussion of energy is inseparable from its connections to theoretical chemistry and physics. The last chemistry class I took was in the 10th grade, and it has been somewhat of an academic pilgrimage to re-excavate the extremely limited knowledge I already had about energy levels and the interaction of orbitals within and amongst certain molecules. From what I understand so far, there are circumstances in which atoms and molecules are attracted at certain distances, and then are repulsed at others. This is based on their composition and specific qualities. Sometimes when they are put under the right conditions, they create something different entirely. The potential parallels in relationships fascinate me. There are certainly discoveries to be had in defining the similarities that could be extrapolated from comparing emotional distance and the various reaction speeds and intensities of physical distance which occur at the molecular level. The Van der Waal attraction between two atoms occurs at a specific distance so as to not repel atoms apart from one another. If the atoms get too close, then the force between the two positive nuclei will become repulsive. On the other end of the spectrum, though, if the two atoms get too far apart, then they won't be attracted to each other at all. So yes, distance is an element in the relationship between these two entities that allows them to connect, but there is a limit to an effective distance. This effective distance changes according to whatever pair of atoms are being analyzed. Analogous to human connections, perhaps there is an optimal level of involvement, or metaphorical proximity that allows for the benefits of separation and autonomy, as well as the connectedness that is more readily measured and observed.

The Van Der Waal attraction is a principle that is manifested in the discipline of urban planning. When zoning for the most effective use of space, there are certain professions and land uses that need to be closer to the center of the city (the CBD) to be profitable. As mentioned before, there is an element of distance decay with the price people are willing to pay for a plot of land. Special services such as retail are more profitable where they are most accessible to pedestrians. This relationship changes with the type of land use, though. Agriculture has a very low priority for a CBD location. As shown in the graph below, there is an intersection of the rent people are willing to pay for the land use, and its continued profitability as it distances from the center. In this case, the assumption is that all land uses would prefer to be located closer to the

center, but this just looks at the economic side of its dilemma. It makes the point that competing industries need different levels of proximity to the CBD with varying levels of intensity.

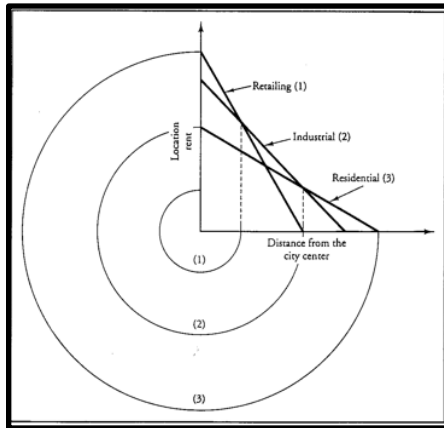


Figure 7²⁵

A unique perspective that this has given me is that these economic relationships are conditioned by the participating parts. I think some comparisons can be made to the participating agents in social relationships of various qualities. The conclusions to be drawn about the optimal distance for optimal closeness is contingent on the character of the specific individuals involved.

Recently, I felt compelled to produce a painting about my sister, Amelia. She is the closest to me in age, and much of our friendship is based on common experience, taste, and even our physical similarities (sharing clothes.) We attend different schools and have pursued different opportunities in life that have separated us for around 5 years. Of anyone I can think of on the earth, she is my closest friend. The painting that I produced was intended to be a diptych representing her and me, but by the time I had included all of the layers of information that I wanted, they looked virtually identical. The painting that came from this project was unlike anything I had ever produced before. It was much more detailed and representational. I think this illustrates the relativity of the Van Der Waal attraction. My optimal closeness with Amelia, or at least the distance that we are used to communicating love and affection for one another is very different than that which I could ever have with Margaret. However, while the literal distance between Margaret and me is undeniable, I don't think that it should be insinuated that this makes our relationship less valuable. It's just different. The optimal distance between pairs of individuals is contingent upon the actors within each specific scenario. While some distances are

²⁵ Figure 7 is a graph illustrating the hypothetical perfectly central city and the interaction that different industries have with this morphology.

imposed, ultimately it is what the characters acting within the scene choose to make of this circumstance that dictates the depth and course of the relationship.



Figure 826

I remember looking at her in the mortuary. A tiny white dress. She might have had a little head band. We were led into a small, softly lit room where she was lain on a tiny padded counter which raised her body right to my eye level. It must have been some kind of structured time to pay our respects face to face. What did we do? I hope we said a prayer or hugged or something. I wouldn't blame my parents for not knowing how to act, either. I just remember looking and not taking it in. Maybe the moment was rushed for all of us. I couldn't really believe what I was seeing. I guess I still can't believe that I looked directly at her. I can barely picture her face. How had I been so calm? Writing this down, I now realize that this must have been shortly before her cremation.

My mom took a few pictures of Margaret on that padded counter-top, but they never turned out. Something happened with developing the film, or maybe the lens cap was on and they came out completely black. My mom wasn't upset, though. She said that she knew that she shouldn't have taken them because we had been in a sacred space. Now none of us remember Margaret's face, though. Is this lapse more respectful to her? Somehow it feels appropriate.

The very principle of Van Der Waal attraction is limited in the type of particles it pertains to. I already mentioned quarks above, but they are a notable exception to this theory. Quarks are

26 Figure 8: "Several Attempts at making our places the same", 2017

high-energy subatomic particles that we have never actually seen before.²⁷ They are the tiny building blocks of the building blocks of atoms. What we understand about them is that their energy comes from existing in a pair, which compounds itself with distance. The force between two particles is strengthened with distance as the two particles gain energy. This energy is correlated to the participating particles degree of “asymptotic freedom,” or in other words, the distance between them. I like the use of the word, “freedom,” here. A quote that I recently happened upon by Maria Rilke states that “We need, in love, to practice only this: letting each other go. For holding on comes easily; we do not need to learn it.”²⁸ This echos the trite old saying: “If you love something, set it free.” I always thought of this in a literal way. The image of a child setting a captive pet bird into the wild comes to mind. Maybe the cliched version of Rilke’s quote isn’t that far off, though. When we truly love something or someone we undergo a process of rescinding the need to project onto them. We decide to let them be who they are, and let them come back to us. So then, am I willing to let her go? Am I willing to distance myself from drawing conclusions on her character? Perhaps, when used correctly, distance provides an opportunity to love unconditionally. It maybe even makes it easier.

Can distance in communities provide us with more opportunities to develop love, then? How far can we be from each other while still remaining a connected community entity? What policies and regulations are in tact currently to apply these findings in neighborhoods today. I have learned that there are various models for articulating the inter-connectedness of cities among each other, such as Chrystaller’s central place theory.²⁹ This places the relationships of varying sizes of towns in a hierarchical web of relevance and usefulness. Each place in the network is dependent on the other to survive, though. How aware of our thin ties are we? How aware of our need for each other are we? Can two people facilitate growth in each other from a distance of time and space?

So far in my analysis of physical interactions of molecules, I have mainly focussed on pairic reactions. Which are reactions that occur between two molecules in isolation. But in reality this is a fictitious assumption. The interaction of two molecules are constantly being affected by the background noise of interactions surrounding and contextualizing them. Perhaps my

²⁷ M.S. El Naschie. "On Quarks Confinement and Asymptotic Freedom." *Chaos, Solitons & Fractals* 37.5 (2008): n. pag. ELSEVIER. Web.

²⁸ Libretexts. "Van Der Waals Forces." *Chemistry LibreTexts*. Libretexts, 21 July 2016. Web. 01 Mar. 2017.

²⁹ Marshall, Alex. *How cities work: suburbs, sprawl, and the roads not taken*. Austin: U of Texas Press, 2000. Print.

relationship with my sister is similarly conditioned by my interactions that I have on an everyday basis, with Becca, or Amelia for example. Every interaction that I have with someone else, or by myself even is setting me up to learn and evolve as a person. I know from my end of the relationship, what I am learning on this side of the veil is influencing my innate ability to love and care for another person. Maybe these abilities can function independently of distance.

We planted a dogwood tree in memory of Margaret at a park in DC that has Potomac in the title. I went back and saw it a couple of years ago with my sister, Millie. It was really cold, and there weren't any leaves. It hadn't gotten very big in all of that time, and it still had a little protective fence around it. But the bronze plaque in front of it gleamed as brightly as the matching one that we always kept in our kitchen growing up.

Non-representational art is often accused of being “unclear” or inaccessible to those without a background in the field. I have had my own art reduced to the umbrella term of “abstract art.” However, I think “abstract” is an unfair arbitration. Sometimes viewers are too quick to assume that the simplicity of is hiding something from them. They are blind to the possibility that this mechanism for presentation within a piece might actually be a more clear depiction of things as they really are. Sol Lewitt, a legendary conceptual artist and critic of the 1960s responded to criticism of a reduced aesthetic in his influential essay “On Conceptual Art” with the following statement: “Most ideas that are successful are ludicrously simple. Successful ideas generally have the appearance of simplicity because they seem inevitable.”³⁰ In my case, if I am interested in stimulating a conversation about veils and barriers, would it not be more effective to remove extraneous elements that might create layers of a complicated narrative that would ultimately limit the work’s ability to breach barriers and connect with different people? Why not just place a veil in the gallery and be content with that. In this case, the distancing from detail provides an opportunity to simplify and refine our sense of what is really important to us. Is this comparable to relationships? Perhaps the limitations on my capacity for complexity within my relationship with Margaret can serve as a refining process. Maybe it can streamline the sifting process of extraneous details that can take months or years of dating and friendship and cut to the real investigation: Do I love my sister?

³⁰ Sol Lewitt. "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art." *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*. N.p., n.d. Web. 01 Mar. 2017.

I was offended when my best friend Nancy's mom came over to retrieve a small lacy dress their family had gifted at a baby shower. But also understood that there wasn't really anything else to say or do. I hadn't known that they had brought Margaret a gift until they took it away. In fact, I remember very little about my mother's pregnancy apart from the eventual heartbreak. Maybe I wouldn't have known what was special about Margaret if she hadn't been taken away.

Good art, in my opinion, requires something of viewers. It leads to more questions, rather than merely presenting a didactic narrative. A seemingly simple piece, say a modernist cube, requires a viewer to invest time in understanding its significance. The artist spends energy on the conceptualization and production of the piece, and the viewer, in turn, meets the piece with the intent of learning and shedding paradigms. Both sides rescind control. I see how this investment of energy is paralleled in the process of nuclear fusion. With an immense input of energy, the repulsion that occurs when atoms are too close with one another can be overcome, causing two positively charged nucleuses to bond and form a strong nuclear force, the fission of which releases energy equatable to an atomic bomb. With the input of energy from both sides, a new level of reconciliation, which is more binding than any other force that we know of is unlocked. This gives me further hope that through my own actions and input of energy, perhaps the forces that separate me from my Sister can be broken. Perhaps, through immense effort, a certain threshold is crossed that binds us with our own atomic "strong force."

A few years ago, I was about to leave home for a service opportunity. I was distraught over how unprepared I felt, and my father offered to pray for me. I have always regarded the blessings that he left me with as inspired. I have thought about his words to me that night nearly every day for more than four years. “You will receive help beyond the veil. Margaret will be with you in this.” Then, and still now, I have been perplexed, even tormented over how to make this closeness a reality.

From what I have discovered, distance is not filled with emptiness. What fills the gap in time and physical proximity to me and my sister is something that I often contemplate. I hope that my activities and experiences that I have accumulated in her absence can provide pathways that lead me back to her. There are many methods of analyzing the conditions that distance can impose on a relationship. When it comes to Margaret, perhaps there are some shreds of common experience between us that can create a network to extrapolate connections from someday. I really can't make any conclusions as to what these connections will eventually all look like. The distance between us has the potential to be utilized as a refining force for both of us though, of that I am sure. Perhaps the energy put into this process will make the relationship more meaningful to both of us. I hope so, at least. Ultimately, I believe, the functionality of distance in any relationship comes down to the the actors in each scenario. Perhaps there is an optimal distance at which any particular relationship functions. Perhaps we are meant to extract meaning from whatever proximity we are placed at to another human. Perhaps any distance which is as irreconcilable as that which exists between my sister and me can be turned irrelevant through unconditional love. The space between individuals has the immense potential to add depth to

relationships, but this is contingent on the willingness of participants to rescind their need for a clear image. It requires us to become comfortable, even to thrive in ambiguity.

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