theories and methodologies

A Manual Approach to Mourning

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM

I'M WRITING THIS ESSAY ON A GREEN HERMES 3000 MANUAL TYPEWRITER FROM THE 1950s. A PAINTING STUDENT GAVE IT TO ME; HE found it on the street.

I imagine telling Eve about this typewriter. She would have understood how a material instrument—ink-flecked platen, jade-pale space bar—can change syntax: to looms and to Victorian textures her sentences responded, and I recognize, in her prose's rhythms, the period-specific thrill of stretched syntax, and the renunciatory satisfaction of curtailing a clause before it can exercise its right to conclude.

Although, in a self-deprecatory moment, she claimed to disregard music, I often fantasized about inviting her to my apartment for an evening musicale. On my Steinway M piano, I'd play a harmonically indecisive piece from Proust's era—a Fauré impromptu. She'd forgive my technical deficiencies; she'd comment on the performance's abreactive ambition (she taught me the word *abreactive*), my attempt to neutralize shame by exulting in it, my finger labor a haptic game affiliated with her favored arts—masturbating, interpreting, containing, hugging, sitting, retreating.

Shyness, a personality trait she often asserted, justified her opulent refusal of banalities. I was less shy, and therefore more banal. Much of what I said to Eve—during a friendship, including intermittencies, spanning twenty-two years—sounded wrong: too effusive, poetic, dumb, pop, dualistic, predictable.

I'm ashamed to remember how infrequently we spoke directly about her illness. (She seemed to forgive my squeamishness, or to regard it as a species of shyness.) Instead, I'd complain about a minor ailment of my own, as if to displace emergency from her body to mine, and to suggest that we shared a pain-stricken continuum.

Conversing with Eve, I'd blurt out embarrassing declarations. At our first dinner date, I confessed that I had a soft spot for evangelists, and that when a Moonie once buttonholed me in Golden Gate Park, I'd mistaken his god-dazed eye contact for cruising. Why brag about flawed gaydar? I wanted to persuade Eve that I was bruised.

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At the MLA's 1989 convention, I heard Eve give the electrifying talk "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay," later published in *Tendencies*. I'll never forget the moment when she described the "effeminate boy" as "the haunting abject of gay thought itself" (157): as if in *Last Year at Marienbad*'s many-mirrored hall, I hallucinated serried ranks of junior nellies, awaiting description and embrace. Munificently, Eve transformed sissy shame from unfortunate idiosyncrasy into golden exemplarity—to be retrieved, annotated, politicized, and enshrined in art. Don't efface your abjection, she suggested; don't bury it under an avalanche of femme-annihilating intellectual styles. At Eve's flute-voiced instigation, I pledged never to disguise sissy subjectivity, never to shirk its inebriate, swishy atmosphere. And therefore both of our bodies, whose erotic inclinations I dare you to summarize, were together wrapped in a complex scene of mutual recognition. (Forgive imprecision; around mutuality, a tense topic, I can only falter.) When she ended the talk by calling for a "strong, explicit, *erotically invested* affirmation of some people's felt desire or need that there be gay people in the immediate world" (164), she redeemed and crystallized my eroticism at the same moment that she announced her own. Thus, whenever confronted by Eve's auratic charm, I grew physically self-conscious. (Suddenly, we've wandered into *The Awkward Age*.) To say it plainly: in Eve's presence, I felt stoned on the cannabis of her smartness.

In mourning, it's difficult to be organized, or to avoid the slipshod; I can't begin, now, to honor the depth, edge, wit, melancholy, sumptuousness, and formal variety of Eve's works. Above all, her writing gave license—liberty to think, in detail, about embarrassments; permission to laminate, self-consciously. In her essay "Queer and Now," in *Tendencies*, she applauds the "flamboyance with which some critical writers—I'm one of them—like to laminate our most ambitious work." She continues: "Many people doing all kinds of work are able to take pleasure in aspects of their work; but something different happens when the pleasure is not only taken but openly displayed. I like to make that different thing happen" (19). Her works consciously create the playground wherein others may invent and disport, unencumbered by precedent. Like Roland Barthes, Eve advocated taking many-fibered pleasure in the quagmire of "what is," and in her accounting, the "what is"—the here?—looked irrevocably queer. And therefore any queer-affirmative project, or any writing endeavor buoyed by excess, was vulnerable to being considered *risible*, one of my favorite Eve words: "The most self-evident things, as always, are taken—as if unanswerably—to be the shaming risibility of any form of oblique or obscure expression; and the flat inadmissibility of openly queer articulation" (18). Be complicated, she invites us; be obscure, oblique. Be odd. Especially if you can't help it. Like Henry James, be flush with innuendo, your clauses dependent, dilated, filthy, yet discreet.

Curmudgeons sometimes praised Eve's ideas but criticized her prose's roundaboutness. The treasures of her brocaded prime were the epochal *Epistemology of the Closet* and the unfinished narrative poem "The Warm Decembers," which appeared in *Fat Art, Thin Art* and which she embedded in "A Poem Is Being Written," an essay that links spanking and enjambment, and that forever enlarged my estimate of the rear end's profound formalism. She never feared embracing the difficult and the undraped: "Clearly for Austin, taxonomic work with particular sentences is not a rigid, Searlean reification of performativity, but rather the filthy workshop of its creation, criss-crossed with skid marks" (*Touching Feeling* 17). Even in Eve's gnarliest sentence, a reader could find a blessed phrase—"skid marks"—on which to relax, as if in the lap of an orrisroot-scented Buddha.

Although unusual diction and accumulating syntax always enriched Eve's writing,

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in later experiments she broke through to an interrupted tempo. In *A Dialogue on Love*, by combining prose, haiku, and her psychotherapist's notes (rendered in block capitals, like James Merrill's Ouija board transcriptions), she found a new, serenely irregular prosody. Eve's jousts with her poetic vocation (would she have called the face-offs intractably Kleinian?) were not, as she once told me, a happy story, and yet she remained, at heart, a poet, which means that she tasted words one by one and struggled to array them in shapes commensurate with their fitful emergence:

> I knocked my funnybone somehow against a doorjamb—and
>
> then I was waking
> on the floor, where at first it
> seemed quite natural
>
> that people would be
> saying, and with tenderness,
> "Eve," and me with my
>
> headful of azure—
> *then* disorientation—
> then the whole rupture
>
> of consciousness kind
> of reconstructing itself—
> backward. By magic. (90)

Enjambment—reaching toward the brim, and then exceeding it—came naturally to Eve: she liked containers, and she knew how to tease their limits.

"In every language the loveliest question / is, You can say that?" So she wrote in a poem in *Fat Art, Thin Art* (39). Eve always made me feel that new possibilities for speech and embodiment were around the corner: the solution was to walk steadily and patiently until I reached the block's end and could glimpse its astonishing verso. Once when I told her that perhaps my classroom manner was slapdash, she kindly said, "At least you're giving them a sense of the *thrilling life*." Her day-to-day pedagogy, en passant, showered us all with a stopless cascade of thrill—open-ended horizon, prairie-wide, unparochial.

I became "me" after reading *Between Men* and then more "me" after reading *Epistemology of the Closet*. And it continued, this tidal process of becoming "me," every time I read or encountered Eve. In no one else's eyes have I ever felt so recognized. And by "I," we mean the unfortunate mess as well as the pleased riotousness. Her written words ("For readers fond of the male body, the year 1891 makes an epoch" [*Epistemology* 131]) and her greetings in the congenial space between our adjacent offices at school ("I like the colors you're wearing today") lifted me from my private sump, its idiocies and fixities.

I'd say she was a Buddha if that statement would convince you how fractal and nimble-mooded and void-attuned it felt to exist in her vicinity. From Eve in person (not merely on the page), I learned how one might hazard a life where as frequently as possible, without harming others, you acted in accord with your desires—if you could figure them out. Or maybe, following Eve's tutelage, you could throw away the compass and the chart. You could use your hands instead, and trust your fingers to discover where the action is.

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