PART II

SEDGWICK’S UNCOLLECTED POEMS
Someday We’ll Look Back with Pleasure Even on This: Sedgwick’s Uncollected Poems

On the Eve of the Past, or A Queer Young Woman is Being Remembered

In one of the final lyrics Sedgwick published in her lifetime, she offered a translation and recontextualisation of Virgil’s phrase: “Forsan et haec olim meminisse juvabit”: “Someday we’ll look back with pleasure even on this”. The poem documented how, even though “Things with us are actually very bad” at the time of writing, Sedgwick had a reparative sense of the future, masochistic pleasure she would experience recalling the sore scene; in a similar way to which, in the earlier ‘A scar, just a scar’, she knew that “someday soon” she would “feel more nostalgia” for the painful hospital experience she was immersed in “than for any school” she had fantasied about.¹

As we learn from across Sedgwick’s oeuvre, she suffered from depression, and her childhood, adolescence and early adulthood were often acutely painful. For example, ‘Not’ describes the youthful Eve Kosofsky’s “wish not to be” and “not to

reproduce”. In the summer of 1967, however, Sedgwick began her studies at Cornell University, where, amongst other courses, she took a year-long poetry writing class with A.R. Ammons, whose work she admired, and which generated a number of poems collected here. It was also at Cornell where Sedgwick first met, and later married, her husband, Hal, aged 19, in the summer of 1969. Three poems in *Fat Art, Thin Art* return us to this moment of Sedgwick’s life. ‘Nicht Mehr Leben’ (To No Longer Live) recalls the way her “old life abandoned her” at eighteen in favor of a “new life”, where there was “abundance” and “always the kindest eyes / for her”. “It seems that there are two kinds of marriage’, returns us, a year later, to the

coed on her honeymoon
preregistered for ‘George Eliot and Flaubert’,
reading *Daniel Deronda* in the frail airplane;
learning to be pleased and to please,
the silent corridors of marital exemption.

‘One of us falls asleep on the other’s shoulder’ again recalls Sedgwick as a “girl of nineteen”, who otherwise “doesn’t bear thinking about”, but whose early marital experience with her patient young husband, provided an “inexhaustible […] motive” in the poem, and clearly inspired a number of poems in this collection. Those poems fill out our understanding of Sedgwick’s early life and poetic development and focus further our picture of the “performativity of the long unconventional marriage” Sedgwick began whilst still an undergraduate and that lasted throughout her life.

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2 Sedgwick, *Fat Art, Thin Art*, 36.
4 Sedgwick, *Fat Art, Thin Art*, 37.
5 Sedgwick, *Fat Art, Thin Art*, 34.
6 Sedgwick, *Fat Art, Thin Art*, 35.
7 The quotation is drawn from the inside cover blurb of *Fat Art, Thin Art*. 
With her own adolescence in mind perhaps, *Tendencies* opens with haunting statistics documenting how queer teenagers were “two to three times likelier to attempt suicide, and to accomplish it, than others”; that “up to 30 percent of teen suicides” were “likely to be gay or lesbian”; that a “third of lesbian and gay teenagers say they have attempted suicide”; and that “minority queer adolescents” were “at even more risk” from the “despoiling” energies of a homophobic mainstream culture including numerous parents who would rather “their children were dead as gay”.

Sedgwick’s major manifesto on the queerness of (her own) poetry, ‘A Poem is Being Written’, was composed with just such painful personal and political contexts in mind and represents a sustained “claim for respectful attention to the intellectual and artistic life of a nine-year-old child, Eve Kosofsky”. The poems I collect here represent a claim for respectful attention to the intellectual and artistic life of that same young poet in her mid-teens and early undergraduate and graduate days, at Cornell and Yale; as well as of that same poet, in the late stages of her life.

In choosing to bring together and to bring out Sedgwick’s uncollected poems, and especially the ones that preceded and were not included in *Fat Art, Thin Art*, loyally ascetic, rather than greedy, readers might feel anxious about issues of consent and the cost to Sedgwick’s reputation. But ‘A Poem is Being Written’ helps us think about what’s at stake in what Sedgwick calls, there, the “fearful (self-fearful) and projective squeamishness that for successful adults churns around the seeing displayed of children in their ambition and thought and grievance, in their bodies, in their art”.

And Sedgwick’s Cavafy essay reveals a writer who was interested in the “youthfully melodramatic tone” of some of Cavafy’s early verse that “made it ripe for later repudiation”, differentiating such repressed poems from other, “very early”

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9 Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 177.
10 Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 177.
texts that Cavafy “allowed to remain in his canon” and that, she inferred, “had some kind of foundational importance for him”, but not being interested in excluding those repudiated poems from either her essay or her artworks.\textsuperscript{11}

Indeed, in the same essay, Sedgwick emphasized that she was not remotely averse to poems exemplifying the “shame of being small”, even if such verse risked a “Disney cartoon” aesthetics of “funniness” or “cuteness”.\textsuperscript{12} Rather, she remained excited, as she had been across her career, by the idea of cross-generational self-relations in poets as they existed as a “person at different ages”, and it would be a mistake to underestimate the “erotic warmth” of her, as much as Cavafy’s, investment in such adult relations to a “younger self”; “an erotic ritual” in both of the poets’ work, “seemingly […] attached to masturbation” and “central to the creation” of both of their poetry.\textsuperscript{13}

In addition, in ‘A Poem is Being Written’, Sedgwick had earlier come out in favor of the “visibly chastised”, which she described as her “favourite style”, and as a person aesthetically and relationally concerned with apparently “spoiled” children, spoiled in the sense of food having gone off, having been left too long, rather than in the sense of having been given too much.\textsuperscript{14} Indeed, in that essay, Sedgwick fretted that her own “sulky problem child” of a poem, ‘The Warm Decembers’, at that point “going on nine” destined never to be finished, would not “grow any more”. Whilst not wanting to either “deform or abandon” Sedgwick’s reputation, by a gauche editorial move, or by the inclusion of what she herself described as “juvenilia” and the “queasier”, “charged-up work of a twenty-four year-old-graduate student”, examples of whose work she was happy to skip or only

\textsuperscript{12} Sedgwick, \textit{The Weather in Proust}, 44.
\textsuperscript{14} Sedgwick, \textit{Tendencies}, 177–178.
partly cite; ‘A Poem is Being Written’ encouraged my desire for the shelf of available writings by, and about, Sedgwick, to just keep on getting fatter.\textsuperscript{15}

In thinking about the fantasy book of Sedgwick’s uncollected poems, and particularly her juvenilia, a book of poems that might, in readers’ minds like Sedgwick’s idea of reading Melanie Klein, “have a presence or exert a pressure” that “may have much or little to do” with the actual form or contents of those poems,\textsuperscript{16} questions of the urbane and provincial, and of paranoid and reparative reading, are also crucial, since the paranoid fear is that Sedgwick’s earlier writing might risk making her look less than cosmopolitan. However, as Sedgwick reminds us, in Epistemology of the Closet, “knowledge of the world” and ideas of the “worldly” or “urbane”, whilst appearing to be “flatly descriptive” attributions “attached to one person”, actually describe or create a “chain of perceptual angels”, marking the “cognitive privilege” of a speaker “who through that attestation” to being cosmopolitan “lays claim in turn to an even more inclusive angle of cognitive distancing and privilege over both the ‘urbane’ character and the ‘world’”.\textsuperscript{17}

But, even with that warning against cultural one-upmanship in mind, if there is still a risk of making Sedgwick seem potentially provincial by reprinting some of these poems, poems chock full of emphatically acquired knowledge, we can be again reassured that Sedgwick herself was in favor, as we learn in the ‘Preface’ to the second edition of Between Men, to coming out as manifestly and “irrepressibly provincial” as a “young[er] author”, full of “passionate, queer, and fairly uncanny identification[s]”, as she journeyed from her “provincial origins” and the “isolation” of her “queer childhood” to her, later, “metropolitan

\textsuperscript{15} Sedgwick, Tendencies, 178, 187, 191. In finding that my own introductory essay had gotten so large, I took comfort from the fact that the first ‘proper’ chapter of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), appears after 90 pages of ‘introductory’ material.

\textsuperscript{16} Sedgwick, The Weather in Proust, 123.

\textsuperscript{17} Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, 97.
destiny”. And, as in many of her essays, Sedgwick herself provided the tools for readers to better understand the early poems that accompanied her on this journey.

Thus, in her famous ‘Paranoid Reading’ essay, Sedgwick suggested that her readers might want to consider more reparative forms of literary engagement, in which they would recognize, for queer authors, the fact that the “culture surrounding” them was “inadequate or inimical” to their nurture and survival and that queer authors might, as a result, tend towards “additive and accretive” aesthetics, involving “startling, juicy displays of excess erudition”, “passionate, often hilarious antiquarianism, the prodigal production of alternative historiographies; the ‘over’-attachment to fragmentary, waste, or leftover products”; a “rich, highly interruptive affective variety”; an “irrepressible fascination with ventriloquistic experimentation”; a “disorienting juxtaposition of present with past, and popular with high culture”. All of those descriptions resonate with Sedgwick’s uncollected poems.

For example, those poems includes a number of examples that reveal, in Sedgwick’s phrase from ‘A Poem is Being Written’, earlier and further examples of her youthful “exhibitionism” and “blissful new vocational pride”, as a person just beginning to come out, to themselves and others, as that most potentially shameful of identities: a poet. We find evidences of overt self-reference in ‘Cain’, whose mother is, of course, another Eve. ‘Lawrence Reads La Morte D’Arthur in the Desert’ alludes to the “Eternal spirochete of Eve” and a “fleshy Arab / as guilty as Eve”. And the speaker of ‘Epilogue: Teachers and Lovers’ describes “my slight friend the snake”, again suggesting the person speaking might be an Eve.

Evidence of vocational and educational pride, meanwhile, of “excess erudition”, “ventriloquistic experimentation”, “pas-
sionate [...] antiquarianism”, and the “prodigal production of alternative historiographies”, occurs in the queerly-detailed, precocious Jewish-girl, Old-Testament theology that underpins both ‘Cain’ and ‘Saul at Jeshimon’, with its long epigraph from 1 Samuel 26 and in the repeated poems in which Sedgwick comes out, frankly, as a “vain virgin / Who has read the Aeneid” and the stories of Abelard and Heloise, as well as Richard Lovelace and Romeo and Juliet, with enough recentness and enthusiasm to want to write poems about them, to want to try out Middle- and early-Modern English, and to begin a poem with a direct quote from Shakespeare: “Thou Know’st the mask of night is on my face” (‘Calling Overseas’); as well as to complete a famously unfinished poem by Shelley.\(^{21}\)

Indeed, the uncollected poems rarely leave us in any doubt, as Sedgwick puts it in ‘Epilogue: Teachers and Lovers’, that we are reading “a poem after all”. That is because, as we have just seen, and like Cavafy, she often employed literary quotations in her verse that became the “kernel of the poem”. This meta- or para-literary-critical practice involved anything but “throwaway erudition”. Instead, Sedgwick, like Cavafy, repeatedly set such, to her, novel, hard-won quotations “like gemstones, in a more or less elaborated periperformative surround”; a version of “over-learning whose taste is quite other than servility or abjection”.\(^{22}\)

This is true to such an extent that, rather than daring to look or talk down to the youthful Eve Kosofsky, I frequently found myself embarrassed at my own lack of urbanity, as I tried to wrap my mind around Sedgwick’s earlier work. There is, after all, learning coming out the wazoo in these poems that require a reader who is fluent in a millennium of English poetry, a reading knowledge of French, German and Latin poetry, as well an ability to recognize, and, if not, to internet search, unattributed quotations in those languages, with even the internet failing me

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\(^{21}\) The tacit quotation is from Romeo and Juliet, 2.2:85. Compare Sedgwick’s account of herself in similar terms, as a “vain virgin” whose passion is all With Lawrence in Arabia in ‘Epilogue: Teachers and Lovers’.

when it came to the German quotations, about which I had to seek the advice of a professor of German!

For example, if the affair de Monsieur O, as well as Sedgwick’s discussion of Ronald Reagan’s monolingual inability to address his French counterpart has understandably emphasized the “importance of French” to her poetic idiom, her uncollected poems also stress the importance of German literary and cultural history to her corpus. This is apparent in the case of ‘Siegfried Rex von Munthe, Soldier and Poet, Killed December, 1939, on the German Battleship Graf Spee’ and in ‘Die Sommernacht hat mir’s angetan’, with its tacit allusion to Joseph Victor von Scheffel’s poem of the same name; a tendency that Sedgwick continued in ‘The Warm Decembers’, where Beatrix is haunted by various “short and violent bits of language” she learned from her father “for his plagiarisms”. Passing through her mind on her midnight flit, for instance, is Andreas Gryphius’ seventeenth-century grave inscription for his niece Marianne, “Geboren in der Fluct”, “Des Vaters höchste / Furcht die an das Light gedrungen”. The memory is apt: Beatrix is seeking to be re-“born in flight”, and to escape her “Father’s worst fear[s]”, whilst Gryphius’ poem itself—often associated, during Sedgwick’s youth, with the flight of German children from Europe during World War II—must have been a key bid for cosmopolitanism in the case of a poet who described herself as a “secular Jew”, who grew up in the immediate post-holocaust, Cold War era where identifications with German culture must have been especially fraught.

In gathering together Sedgwick’s collected poems, I thus hoped to do justice to a youthful Sedgwick who had, as a kid, committed to memory “one patch of dirt” in her “elementary school yard”, having “stood staring at [it] and intensely willing” herself that “yes, this, I will remember, this I will project forward

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23 Sedgwick, Tendencies, 23, 183.
24 Sedgwick, Tendencies, 206. Andreas Gryphius, ‘Grabinshrift Marianae Gryphiae seines Bruders Pauli Töchterlein’. I am grateful to Stuart Taberner for helping me with these details.
into the future so that it’s there as much as it is here, just this, not because it’s exceptional but because it’s ordinary, it’s nothing, it’s dirt; I will remember it”. I do not think, for a second, that the poems collected here are dirt, ordinary, or nothing. In fact I think they’re really something exceptional and extraordinary, since they contain a fossil of the crucial “inner space” of the youthful, would-be-poet, Eve Kosofsky.

As such, and especially if they remained uncollected, Sedgwick’s poems risked representing something like, if not quite abandoned queer children, then otherwise neglected, queer adolescents and young women, whose inclusion here stands, in many ways, for Sedgwick’s miraculous queer survival. And, in including them here, I look back at the teenage Eve Kosofsky and say, as Sedgwick would later say, in 1993, to a generation of queer teenagers and young adults, including myself: “farther along, the road widens and the air brightens”, and I refuse the “profligate way this culture has of denying and despoiling queer energies and lives”.

In addition, like Van Wey at the end of A Dialogue on Love, I want to gather up, “with a low, graceful dip”, the “clumps of” poetic “pine mulch” Sedgwick displaced from her canon, and to pat them “back into place”, my hands smoothing them “in with the other [poetic] mulch”. And this seems particularly crucial, in terms of reparative aesthetics, because, rather than avoiding displays of excess erudition that might be potentially embarrassing, or genres that other poets and critics might find sentimental, morbid, cheesy or icky; insincere, manipulative, or

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vicarious; knowing, arch, or kitschy, Sedgwick seems, from the start of her writing life, to have repeatedly zoomed in on such “squeam-inducing” texts, which, in part, explains her passion for country songs and attraction to mournful aesthetics, as we shall now see.\textsuperscript{29}

**Walking Music for Your Feet, or Sedgwick’s Country Songs**

Sedgwick’s corpus abounds, as we have seen, with allusions to the lyrics of standards and pop and country songs, and a number of her uncollected poems more than flirt with such genres. In addition to a ‘Lullaby’ that commences with lyrics from the Coventry Carol, and, specifically, the flight of the innocents from Herod; readers can find Sedgwick playfully exploring versions of the kind of shit-kicker country tunes that appear in part 4 of ‘Trace at 46’. There, the respectable, contemporary, avant-garde composer Cissy overhears, playing on the radio of two dreamily absorbed young men in a pick-up truck, fragments of songs including “I go for baby eyes, I go for hair that’s soft and curled”, and “I could wear my heart / to rags, making you your pretty treats, giving / you (unintelligible) walking music for your feet”.\textsuperscript{30} In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick also came out in favour of a related song, the homoerotic/romantic country classic ‘In The Garden’, by Willie Nelson, and documented the certainly related scene of herself weeping “in Ithaca in the mid-seventies”, where she, disingenuously, “happened to tune into a country music station in the middle of the song”.\textsuperscript{31}

The three related poems in this volume are clearly lyrics of this kind. ‘Hank Williams and a Cat’ comes not only with a chorus, but references to country singers Loretta Lynn and Conway Twitty, and specifically to the lonesome whippoorwill of Williams’ ‘I’m So Lonesome I Could Die’ and Lynn’s ‘Pill’, her ode to the liberation provided by female contraception. The poem also

\textsuperscript{29} Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 148.
\textsuperscript{30} Sedgwick, *Fat Art, Thin Art*, 60.
\textsuperscript{31} Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 141–150.
tells, in the first person, the tale of an abandoned woman left with nothing for comfort but cold chicken, country music, and a feline pet, who, like the cat in Sedgwick’s later ‘Pedagogies of Buddhism’ essay, has “brung” her a mouse.\(^{32}\)

A prison lament, like Oscar Wilde’s *Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1897), also discussed by Sedgwick in *Epistemology*,\(^ {33}\) ‘Jimmy Lane’ draws on the idiom of the blues—“I was blue as hell”—and evokes a queer homosocial triangle ‘straight’ out of *Between Men*. In the poem, the male speaker’s friend, the eponymous Jimmy Lane, has taken seriously the speaker’s wish that he “watch over” his female beloved whilst he is in the clink “wearing chains”, with the result that his girlfriend seems to have abandoned him for Lane. The speaker, however, seems as excited by, as jealous of, the idea of Lane with his girlfriend as he is of his girlfriend with Lane, to the extent that he’s wet “dreaming ‘bout” Lane, because he knows that Lane’s “got a tongue, sweet as honey dew”.

The final poem in this trio, ‘Jukebox’, tells the equally lone-some tale of a previously hurt speaker, of an undetermined gender, who has failed to show up and meet a girl in a bar the night before, because the speaker “wasn’t man enough to talk to her”. Pondering the girl, the previous night, “sat an hour”, watching the disks “go round and round in this old Wurlitzer”, the speaker wishes and hopes his/her would-be girlfriend would return, and works hard at being brave and trusting again. Whilst Sedgwick leaves the grammatical gender of the speaker of the poem strategically unclear, if I had to express a preference, my own “skinny dime” would be on the speaker being a bar-room butch lesbian, *à la* k.d. lang, waiting on her femme. I make this claim because of the way in which the speaker keeps repeatedly “press[ing] the worn-down button” on, wait for it, her juke-box, as s/he waits,


a masturbatory Gertrude-Steinian discourse of tender buttons that Sedgwick was far from averse to, as we have seen.\textsuperscript{34}

Readers hearing the title of Sedgwick’s ‘Ring of Fire’, meanwhile, should almost certainly have in their heads the Johnny Cash hit, co-penned by wife June Carter Cash, and, whilst the poem is not best placed in this ‘country songs’ section, since it in fact concerns an astronaut, as we have seen, the context of Sedgwick’s broader anal poetics certainly encourages her readers to imagine the queer erotic possibilities of the man-in-black’s hit where, lovers “bound by wild[e] desire” not only go “down, down, down”, to where “the taste of love is sweet”, but end up with a “fiery ring” and a “ring of fire”.

\textbf{Between Men, and Between Women: (More) Homosocial Desire in Sedgwick’s ‘Juvenilia’}

The writing and publication of \textit{Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire} in 1985 seemingly spelt the end of ‘The Warm Decembers’, which, Sedgwick documented, reached its final, incomplete state “between 1984 and 1986”, and whose plot, especially around Chinese White, Humby, and Beatrix Prothoe, came into crisis as Sedgwick realized quite how much might be at stake, for the poem’s contemporary queer readers, in the context of an AIDS crisis centrally scapegoating the figure of the “shadowy bisexual”.\textsuperscript{35} As a result of this over-determined plot crisis and the broader AIDS pandemic, Sedgwick’s balance tipped, for about a decade after 1985, towards the literary critical, rather than the poetic.


But triangular homosocial relations between men, and women’s centrality to them, represented in many ways the origin of her poetic identity, as she revealed in ‘A Poem is Being Written’. This is a claim confirmed by a specific sub-set of her uncollected poems that focus on three queer topics: Monsieur O; stories from the Old Testament; and related desert poems centering, mostly, on T.E. Lawrence.

In *Tendencies*, Sedgwick revealed much about the eleven-to-twelve-year-old Eve Kosofsky’s French teacher, the “gorgeous” and “delectable Monsieur O”, who got in “hot water”, when he was entrapped in the “men’s room of a down-town Y”, and who was, Sedgwick thought, just “too pretty” in an affirmative sense. Sedgwick also described her mortification at not having been able to see what was right under her *petite nez*—Monsieur O’s queerness—and she emphasized how quickly and deeply she was motivated to regain her “urbane” with research beginning with what could only be described as “wild’ guesses” that, as she “got more experienced, turned out to be almost always right”, when it came to, for example, the appropriately named Oscar Wilde.36

Sedgwick’s homophonic juxtaposition, here, of her “wild” guesses with Wilde’s surname provides a definite hint that, whatever else is going on in the difficult poem, ‘Die Sommernacht hat mir’s angetan’, something queer certainly is, given the repetition of Keats’ “wild surmise” in the first two stanzas of the poem, from ‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer’ (1816), with its account of “some watcher of the skies / when a new planet”, the suggestively named Uranus, “swims into his ken” and, given Sedgwick’s own account in the poem, of how the summer night “came over” her.

But “wry, handsome”, “pederast” Monsieur O, appears more explicitly “six years” on from Sedgwick’s immediate pre-teens,

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in the delicious ‘Epilogue: Teachers and Lovers’ from c. 1967–1968, hanging, this time, for a newly filthy, fist-y Sedgwick, “bottom-upward like a sloth”, from where he “takes with gravity the tendered limb”. Having “eluded” a tearfully-frustrated Sedgwick at twelve, now that she “wish[es] desirously to be [a] bride”, she can speak of Monsieur O more learnedly, as well as tacitly and emotionally, in the repeated, romantic ejaculation “O” commencing no fewer than four lines. In addition to its use of a Shakespearian “womanish” that brings to mind the homoerotic and androgynous poetics of sonnet 20, and inclusion of a Shakespeare-like figure who “goes down from Belmont into Venice”, the poem incorporates an unattributed quotation from Baudelaire’s ‘Au Lecteur’ (1857), “O mon semblable”, and encouragement to let our “ears flap wide”. Baudelaire’s poem had earlier chided its readers that if the “drab canvas” they “accept[ed] as life” contained no “rape, or arson, or the knife”, it was because they were “not bold enough”. Sedgwick’s similar poem “about poetry” encourages its readers into a “turbulent speculation / with the stroke of eyes” and into “inappropriate” and “curious questions”. Sedgwick identifies herself, meanwhile, as she does in more than one poem, as a “vain virgin”,37 as we have seen, an acknowledgement both of her youthful, provincial, virginal lack of sexual experience and her increased masturbatory pleasure: the vanity referring both her misplaced adolescent self-regard and to a now highly sexual body that delights, vainly, in itself, just as the later ‘When in Minute Script’ describes a speaker turning to themselves “like a hermaphrodite”.

But, the still-frustrated poem anticipates nothing so much, perhaps, as Between Men in its recognition that “Men are for men, and poems / For poetry” and that whilst the snake / Monsieur O / a later tutor might brush from her cheek a “puzzled tear”, he does not love the female poet as he does the “Silken hair of a grave and pickle-faced freshman”, even if she would be

37 For example, in ‘Calling Overseas’, Sedgwick describes herself as singing “with the sluttishness of a vain virgin / Who has read the Aeneid".
Socrates’ Athens or God’s Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{38} The poem ends with the speaker expressing her desire to “make you read” further, and admits a second, homoerotic youthful passion, this time \textit{With Lawrence in Arabia}, the title of Lowell Thomas’ 1924 biography of T.E. Lawrence, the subject of no fewer than three uncollected poems.\textsuperscript{39}

\textbf{With Lawrence in Arabia: Poems from the Sotadic Zone}

In ‘A Poem is Being Written’, Sedgwick had included parts of the opening of ‘Lawrence Reads \textit{La Morte D’Arthur} in the Desert’ as an example of the way in which, for her teenaged self, “narrative poetry” was “coextensive with, was the same as, one or another plot of male homosexual revelation”, in a list also including David and Jonathan, \textit{The Man from U.N.C.L.E.}, Roger Casement, the Round Table, and an “avant-Girardian reading of \textit{Jules et Jim}”.\textsuperscript{40} In the same year in which she started work on the essay, 1985, Lawrence was also popping in in \textit{Between Men}, which was preoccupied with the scene of his rape in \textit{The Seven Pillars of Wisdom} (1926).\textsuperscript{41} But the queer juxtaposition of Law-

\textsuperscript{38} This “pickle-faced Estupinan” returns in ‘The City and The Man’, haunting the “warmest dreams” Sedgwick has, always capturing and consigning her to the “asylum or prison”, and in which she tacitly follows Richard Lovelace’s ‘To Althea, From Prison’ (1642), in declaring that “Stone walls do not a prison make”.

\textsuperscript{39} For more, see Lowell Thomas, \textit{With Lawrence in Arabia} (London: Hutchinson, 1924).

\textsuperscript{40} Sedgwick, \textit{Tendencies}, 208.

\textsuperscript{41} For more, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, \textit{Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 106, 173, 193–196, 198; Lawrence carried Mallory’s text with him, in the desert. According to Angus Calder, however, “we now know that the most dramatic single episode” in Lawrence’s \textit{Seven Pillars of Wisdom} (1926) — “our hero’s flogging and sodomisation in Deraa — simply cannot have happened” since “the dates given do not square with Lawrence’s known movements” and the “Turkish governor who allegedly desired him was in real life, it seems, a notorious womanizer”. For more on Mallory, the rape, other highly queer moments, and "gay talk about the war", see, T.E. Lawrence, \textit{The Seven Pillars of Wisdom} (1926; Ware: Wordsworth, 1987), x, xvi, xix, 1, 82, 96, 150, 228, 316, 380, 384, 398, 402, 423, 428–429, 432–438, 476, and 545.
rence and the Round Table had occurred earlier in ‘Lawrence Reads’, which informs its readers that

It was not Honour
That made Launcelot
Love Guinevere,

nor mottoes, nor morals, but, the poem suggests, his triangulated love for Arthur, a figure that Lawrence explicitly identifies himself with, leaving a scene of battle, “frank as Arthur”. Towards the end of the poem, Lawrence’s rape and Sedgwick’s own complicity in imagining it so frequently may also figure in the admission that

I have a body,
And the fleshy Arab
Is guilty as Eve
And twice as shoddy.

It’s good to know
I couldn’t help it.

‘Falling in Love over The Seven Pillars’, meanwhile, begins with an extract from ‘To S.A.’, the poem Lawrence wrote to an Arab boy that Sedgwick also cites in Between Men, where she suggests that the young man provided the “motive of [Lawrence’s] entire commitment to the fate of the Arabs as a race”: “I loved you, so I drew these tides of men into my hands / and wrote my will across the sky in stars”, although the Between Men version enjambs the sentence differently and breaks the line after “my”.42

In the poem, Sedgwick acknowledged that, when she was fourteen, she was engaged in a self-set, post-Monsieur-O homework, in which she was “partly seduced” by the “queer soldier”, gazing often at “all [the] portraits and photographs” in With Lawrence in Arabia. The poem stages the scene of Sedgwick

42 Lawrence, Seven Pillars, 1; Sedgwick, Between Men, 193.
reopening the volume, years later, “its binding falling off”, and seeing, for the first time, the “fliespecks pressed obediently / Like flowers, but in passive files”; the equally passive book lying “open”. Again, the rape seems quietly figured in Sedgwick’s account of Lawrence’s “backward grimaces” and “muffled iambics”, an early account of the s/m dynamics of meter that anticipated ’A Poem is Being Written’ by decades, as well as her description of the book’s anal appearance as “brown and profound, with a little gilt”. The poem ends with a prayer to God to grant her poetry “greater love and equal chastity”, but since she had earlier described, with relish, Lawrence’s “perversions” that prayer is a pretty queer one.

Sedgwick’s Old Testament poems are equally preoccupied with the homoerotism of the Biblical desert. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick would subsequently write about the story of Esther, particularly as mediated by Jean Racine and Marcel Proust, as a “model for certain simplified but highly potent imaginings of coming out and its transformative potential”. She would also offer up a snapshot of herself, in this context, aged about five, probably taken by her father, “barefoot in the pretty ‘Queen Esther’ dress” her grandmother made for her, “making a careful eyes-down toe-pointed curtsy”. But this later braid of herself, Jewishness, and queerness was already present in her juvenilia.

There, in the two versions of ‘Saul at Jeshimon’, we encounter David and Jonathan. They are seen from the triangulated perspective of Jonathan’s father, Saul, “through shadows” and “over the seductive sand”. Jonathan “dreams sweetly of his friend”, the “loose and muscled” David, who “comes with such grace”; whilst the speaker, who “know[s] them better than sleep” and who has “listened, as well, wakeful”, also documents how two dreamy, “lovestruck” men “lie with an ancient tome beneath their hands”, a deeply “desired” book, whilst he “smooths the distended skin” of a water bottle. Sedgwick’s Cain and Abel, meanwhile, in ‘Cain’, represent another peculiarly homoerotic,

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Old Testament couple, with the Cain-identified poet admiring Abel’s “golden head” and remembering him “winding with deliberation / through his indifferent fingers / my sleeky hair”.44 In spite of its cross-gender pairing, and probable location in American cattle country, given the presence of the “cowgirl”, we might also locate ‘The Prince of Love in the Desert Night’ in this company, if only by virtue of its title and eroticized sandy locale.

As Sedgwick acknowledged in ‘A Poem is Being Written’ and as Kent’s essay in this volume explores, Sedgwick survived the “depression” of her teens through “passionate and loving relationships” with women, although she remained baffled, “during that time” and after, as to why she failed “to make the obvious swerve that would have connected [her] homosexual desire and identification with [her] need and love, as a woman, of women”.45 As a result, Sedgwick has been better known for her explorations of male than female homoeroticism. But the uncollected poems, especially in the form of Sedgwick’s third great narrative poem and queer bedtime story, ‘Pandas in Trees’, written by the adult female poet for a girl, challenges that trend with its sustained exploration of the triumph of the finally sublime, cosmopolitan, and passionately panda-loving female friendship of Carrie and Louise, in spite of their culture’s cold-war homo-

44 If we can read Sedgwick’s Cavafy essay as a guide to some of the themes of her earlier poems, the loving attention paid by the crop farmer Cain to his brother-lover’s “artichoke heart”-like head, in Sedgwick’s ‘Cain,’ and the vegetables that, “lately / named”, grew about him — “cabbage”, “lettuce”, and “green grape” — in turn, perhaps, explains why Sedgwick was drawn, in the Cavafy essay, to the first-century CE poem by Philippus of Thessalonica she cited from the Greek Anthology, with its similarly homoerotic description of “A yellow-coated pomegranate, figs like lizards’ necks, / A handful of half-rosy part-ripe grapes, / A quince all delicate-downed and fragrant-fleeled, / A walnut winking out from its green shell, / A cucumber with the bloom on it pouting from its half leaf-bed, / And a ripe gold-coated olive” all “dedicated to Priapus” by “Lamon the gardener” (The Weather in Proust, 64).

45 Sedgwick, Tendencies, 209.
phobia and xenophobia. The poem is surely meant as a rich lesbian resource in the project of how to bring up your kids gay.46

Equally Explicit

In ‘A Poem is Being Written’, Sedgwick encouraged her readers to differentiate between the absorption and theatricality of masturbatory fantasy, as it appeared in her poetry, and the “visibly rendered plural possibilities of sadism, voyeurism, horror, Schadenfreude, disgust or even compassion” in the pornographic verse she included in the essay.47 In the second part of Fat Art, Thin Art, she collected together four poems from the mid-1970s — ‘An Essay on the Picture Plane’, ‘Everything Always Distractions’, ‘Sexual Hum’, and ‘Sestina Lente’ — that resonated in that sadomasochistic context. Three previously uncollected poems further round out our picture of Sedgwick’s s/m poetry: ‘When in Minute Script’, ‘Explicit’, and ‘Lost Letter’. ‘When in Minute Script’, which appears here in two variants, tells of a man waking up to find himself castrated “with even the fever of torture not to be regained”, but within the narrative frame of a warm, childlike, masturbatory fantasy that is pleasurable enough to make the pillow blush and that recalls, again, Lawrence’s rape “in the lethal desert”, who awoke similarly from an unmanning “liquefying sleep” “in terror” to “find it done”.

The similarly dream-like ‘Explicit’ imagines the scene of a “dark downtown office building” where the narrator is “half-fainting [...] with pain and humiliation”, before waking up,

46 For more, see Tendencies, 134–166. The queer eroticism of ‘Pandas in Trees’ also benefits from knowing something about the “PANDA RITUALS” Sedgwick and her husband Hal had, which, “AMONG OTHER THINGS”, “ALLOWED HER TO FEEL MAGNETIC, RARE”, “happier”, and “VALUED EVEN WHILE GAUCHE AND UNSEXUAL” (A Dialogue on Love, 215–216).

47 For Sedgwick’s relation to Michael Fried’s account of these two terms, see Tendencies, 182–183. Fried’s Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) is also relevant to ‘An Essay on the Picture Plane’. For more on the way in which lyric poems “thrust [...] up out of the picture plane”, see Tendencies, 185.
coming out from the warm, dark, dream, like emerging from a cinema or Plato’s cave, into the “light and innocence” of a nearby “parking lot’. ‘Lost Letter’ returns to the dark erotic goings on in that downtown office building, this time in the context of a relationship between a tenure-track writing teacher and her former mentor, within the James Merillian frame of a novel-within-the-poem. As such, the poems are kissing cousins, who beat off, in some curious ways, to the “hidden treasure” of the scene that ends A Dialogue on Love, where, in a similar “parking lot”, Van Wey, as we have seen, “gather[s] up from the pavement the clumps of pine mulch” she “kicked down” as she was “teetering on the brink”, before patting it “back into place”; a “condensation of sweetness”; an “enigmatic pebble” of meaning to be “secretly finger[ed]” that might “in the past” have made Sedgwick “fall in love”.48

Other poems also resonate in this masturbatory register. ‘Another Poem from the Creaking Bed’ is already alive to eroticism of language — “we desire certain words” — and to the feelings of shame and embarrassment that preoccupied Sedgwick in the mid-to-late 1990s. The poem also suggests the already close relationship, for the youthful Sedgwick, of poetry, sadomasochism, and anality. Written from a “Creaking bed”, the poem is focused on the erotic possibilities of “five hot fingers” upon the “bottom” amongst other areas, whilst the young lovers’ hearts are “creaking in mysterious leather straps”. We also find this anal eroticism in the “stunning hamstrings” and “backside round as apples” in ‘Movie Party’, whilst urinary aesthetics are present in ‘Once There was a Way to Get Back Homeward’ with its account of how “He knew she was there because she / peed on trees”. ‘Ribs of Steel’, finally, begins with an account of how “The skin is discrete, / red and hot” and “stretches to / your remotest tender, elastic parts // spreading listless fever”, whilst lovers are compared to “white whales heaving in play” and “red lobsters boil[ing] in passion”.

Someday We’ll Look Back with Pleasure Even on This

Sedgwick’s later poetic preoccupation with the symptoms of both cancer and HIV–AIDS, meanwhile, are prefigured in the references, in ‘Lawrence Reads La Morte d’Arthur’, to what “Cancers the hale / Tanned body” and “spirochete[s]” — the bacteria that cause syphilis.\(^49\) Sedgwick’s later meditation, in ‘Mobility, speech, sight’, on the comparative losses of a bowel, genital, hand to grasp, and breast, is anticipated by ‘Phantom Limb’s earlier reflection on the different losses of our “senses”, “reason”, “love”, and “limbs”\(^50\). ‘What the Poet Thought’ considers the Proustian scene of overhearing the “knock, / Knock of exhausted asthma” from a thin bed\(^51\) and begins in the epistolary vein Sedgwick would explore again in ‘Lost Letter’, Chapter 7 of ‘The Warm Decembers’, and in her 1998–2003 Mamm column.\(^52\) And, finally, and this list might have been considerable longer, what Sedgwick would call the absorbing, “force-field creating power” of reading, in Touching Feeling, resonates with the “extreme quietness” of ‘Lawrence Reads La Morte d’Arthur’\(^53\), a poem whose focus on military victories being “Neither vital nor / Particularly sullying” suggests Sedgwick’s early interest in “the middle ranges of agency”.\(^54\)

\(^{49}\) For more, see Fat Art, Thin Art, 9–18, 28–30.

\(^{50}\) Sedgwick, Fat Art, Thin Art, 28.

\(^{51}\) For more on Sedgwick’s relation to Proust, see Epistemology of the Closet, 213–252; The Weather in Proust, 1–69, 144–165.

\(^{52}\) Sedgwick, Fat Art, Thin Art, 139–146. For examples of Sedgwick’s self-penned and replied-to agony aunt letters in Mamm, see February–March, April–May, and August–September 1998; April, June, and October–November 1999; January, April, June, and September 2000; May and June, 2001; November 2002; and January 2003. Compare specifically the June–July 1998 column, ‘A Scar is Just a Scar: Approaching the First Mastectomy Tryst’, and the earlier poem ‘A Scar is Just a Scar’, both employing the same pun on Freud’s supposed, but apocryphal remark: “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar” (Fat Art, Thin Art, 29).

\(^{53}\) For more, see Touching Feeling, 114–115.

\(^{54}\) Sedgwick, The Weather in Proust, 48.
Ars Longa, Vita Brevis, or Last Poems

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick had encouraged her readers to think again, in more positive terms, about the overlapping characteristics of the sentimental and the morbid, drawing particular attention to the “uncanny shifting first person after death”\(^{55}\). In *Touching Feeling*, she later encouraged her readers to think about the Buddhist idea of ‘the bardo’, the space between life and death, or between lives.\(^{56}\) But death, and the various adjacent positions readers might find themselves in relation to it, as well as what Sedgwick would describe as Cavafy’s “writing about and ‘around’ epitaphs”,\(^{57}\) had evidently been a subject long close to Sedgwick’s heart, as a number of her uncollected poems reveal.

‘A Death by Water’ focuses on the effects on the speaker of a “real death on a real summer night”. ‘Two P.O.W. Suicides’ admits to taking “from the dead what I get”, and struggles “to keep in charity” with the “happy endings” of other war stories than the poem’s own, even with the returning “men with no legs” who still owe the poet “a friend”. ‘Ring of Fire’ deals, as we have seen, with the death of one of the three astronauts in the Apollo I fire of January, 1967, as its subtitle makes clear; whilst ‘Siegfried Rex von Munthe’ addresses the death of a fictional World War II soldier-poet from the perspective of his child; and ‘Yellow Toes’ seems to imagine the last moments of a mariner drowning in freezing water, a subject Sedgwick was fond of, as she acknowledged in the case of Cowper’s ‘The Castaway’ (1799)\(^{58}\) and Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1610–1611).\(^{59}\)

In 2006, Sedgwick published her final three lyrics: ‘Death’, ‘Forsan et haec olim meminisse juvabit’, and ‘Bathroom Song’. We have already had cause to talk about her late take on Virgil, and all that remains for this final, melancholy section is to intro-

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\(^{56}\) Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 177.
duce further the remaining two poems. ‘Death’ follows Audre Lorde in encouraging survivors of breast cancer to not “grab that prosthesis”, and readers to embrace “what’s you” rather than “what becomes you”, whilst ‘Bathroom Song’ represents, as we have seen, Sedgwick’s last great urinary/anal poem. In this, she compares her future death to the scene of her toilet training, a parallel that suggests, as she put it in a still unpublished essay, ‘Come As You Are’, that toilet training, like the task of dying, is about “learning, forcibly, to change the process of one’s person into a residual product — into something that instead exemplifies the impersonal in its lumpishly ultimate and taboo form”.

Sedgwick may be “gone, gone, forever gone”, as ‘Bathroom Song’ suggests, a fate she bravely and passionately embraced with all the curiosity and relish the poem can muster, but for some of us left behind in “the ravening flush” of fate, who have not achieved “enlightenment”, coming to terms with the fact that Sedgwick has “utterly gone” remains a tall order. For that reason, her uncollected poems, across the following pages, begin with her ‘Death’ and return her to poetic life, being arranged in reverse chronological order.

The poems are drawn from five main periods of Sedgwick’s life. The first two periods occur in the decade after the publication of Fat Art, Thin Art and focus on the time around 2006, when she published her three last poems, and the period between 1988–1997, when she had finished the abandoned ‘The Warm Decembers’, was working on A Dialogue on Love, and when she was simultaneously at work upon ‘Pandas in Trees’, some untitled Panda poems after Blake, and a number of other lyrics, including a ‘Valentine’ to Van Wey.

The third key period of Sedgwick’s production is the early to mid-1970s, when she was a graduate student at Yale and working towards what she hoped would be her first collection of

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61 Sedgwick, ‘Come as You Are’, manuscript, 21. I am grateful to Hal A. Sedgwick for making this script available to me.


Seven poems date from the year before, 1967–1968, the year in which Sedgwick was at Cornell’s Telluride House. These are ‘T.E. Lawrence and the Old Man’, ‘Movie Party, Telluride House, Ithaca, New York’, ‘Falling in Love over The Seven Pillars’, ‘Calling Overseas’, ‘What the Poet Thought’, ‘Epilogue: Teachers and Lovers’, and ‘The Last Poem of Yv*r W*nt*r*s’. Finally, there are three poems that date from the mid-1960s, when Sedgwick was at High School in Bethesda, Maryland, on the outskirts of Washington, DC. These are ‘Siegfried Rex von Munthe’, ‘Saul at Jeshimon’ (1965–1967), and the earliest poem in the collection, dated by Sedgwick herself to 1964, ‘Lawrence Reads La Morte D’Arthur in the Desert’. Sedgwick certainly wrote poetry earlier than that, which may yet emerge, but it is likely that she herself destroyed most of it, consigning it to a category beyond her canonical juvenilia.\footnote{I am grateful to Hal A. Sedgwick for helping me to date the poems.} But much more remained to be seen, known,
and enjoyed of Sedgwick’s “winged and beaked” “Greater Aesthetic”.