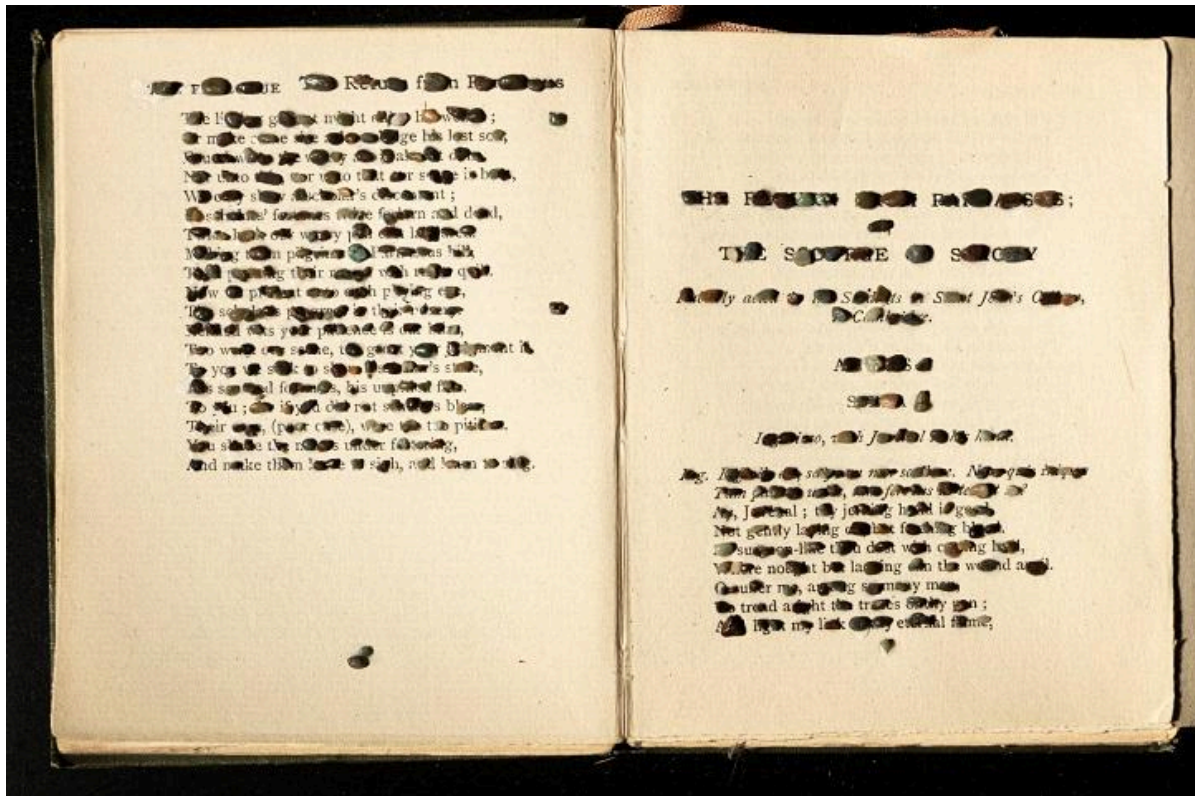


From Blank to Blank: How and Why to Use Blackout Poetry and Erasure

Matt Donovan & Jenny George



—Anne Hamilton, detail from *Untitled*, a book modified with pebbles

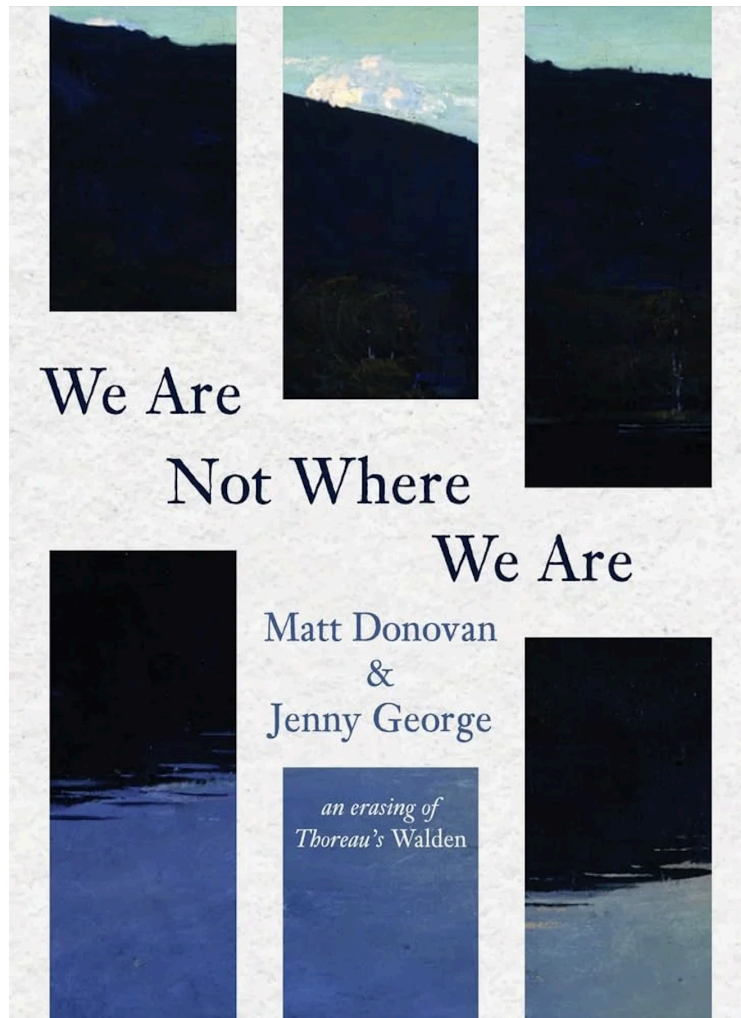
The Text We'll Be Erasing Together

—Thomas Wentworth Higginson, co-editor of Emily Dickinson's poems, describes his first meeting with Emily Dickinson following their eight-year correspondence

On August 16, 1870, I found myself face to face with my hitherto unseen correspondent. It was at her father's house, one of those large, square, brick mansions so familiar in our older New England towns, surrounded by trees and blossoming shrubs without, and within exquisitely neat, cool, spacious, and fragrant with flowers. After a little delay, I heard an extremely faint and pattering footstep like that of a child, in the hall, and in glided, almost noiselessly, a plain, shy little person, the face without a single good feature, but with eyes, as she herself said, "like the sherry the guest leaves in the glass," and with smooth bands of reddish chestnut hair. She had a quaint and nun-like look, as if she might be a German canoness of some religious order, whose prescribed garb was white pique, with a blue net worsted shawl. She came toward me with two day-lilies, which she put in a childlike way into my hand, saying softly, under her breath, "These are my introduction," and adding, also, under her breath, in childlike fashion, "Forgive me if I am frightened; I never see strangers, and hardly know what I say."

But soon she began to talk, and thenceforward continued almost constantly; pausing sometimes to beg that I would talk instead, but readily recommencing when I evaded. There was not a trace of affectation in all this; she seemed to speak absolutely for her own relief, and wholly without watching its effect on her hearer. Led on by me, she told much about her early life, in which her father was always the chief figure, — evidently a man of the old type, la vieille roche of Puritanism...He did not wish his children, when little, to read anything but the Bible; and when, one day, her brother brought her home Longfellow's 'Kavanagh' he put it secretly under the pianoforte cover, made signs to her, and they both afterwards read it...After the first book she thought in ecstasy, "This, then, is a book, and there are more of them." But she did not find so many as she expected, for she afterwards said to me, "When I lost the use of my eyes, it was a comfort to think that there were so few real books that I could easily find one to read me all of them." Afterwards, when she regained her eyes, she read Shakespeare, and thought to herself, "Why is any other book needed?" The impression she undoubtedly made on me was that of an excess of tension, and of an abnormal life. Perhaps in time I could have got beyond that somewhat overstrained relation which not my will, but her needs, had forced upon us. Certainly I should have been most glad to bring it down to the level of simple truth and every-day comradeship; but it was not altogether easy. She was much too enigmatical a being for me to solve in an hour's interview, and an instinct told me that the slightest attempt at direct cross-examination would make her withdraw into her shell; I could only sit still and watch, as one does in the woods...

Two Sample Poems from *We Are Not Where We Are: An Erasing of Thoreau's Walden*



**It is, after all, always the first person
that is speaking**

I set out one afternoon a poet
when I found myself suddenly
uninhabited:—
 a Field
a Field!
before some fresh impulse
had altered it

It is true, I never assisted the sun materially
in his rising

But I often did better

I sat and grew

ticking forward the passing day

A man without end

setting the grass

making the pines and hickories

pushing up through the embankment

pushing out from dry sticks

which had seemed to be dead

stirring the glassy surface of the pond

my out-of-the-way I am

unfolding amid the mountains

the I am blowing through

woods without stopping

whirled along like leaves run wild

Now more alone than ever

my I am cock-crowing

to fill the pauses

clear and shrill for miles

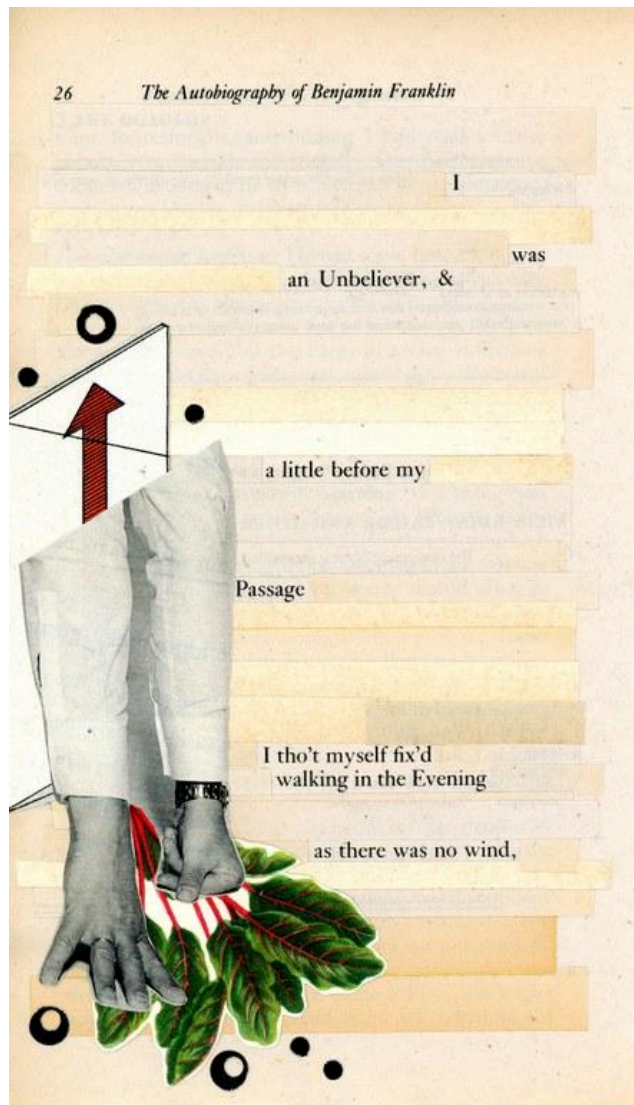
reaching up to your sills

under your windows breaking through

into your cellar rubbing

against the shingles for want of room

Some Additional Models & Strategies & Approaches to Erasure & Blackout Poetry



–Sarah Sloat, from her blackout collage of *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*

Poem In Which Words Have Been Left Out

—*The "Miranda Rights," established 1966*

You have the right to remain
anything you can and will be.

An attorney you cannot afford
will be provided to you.

You have silent will.
You can be against law.
You cannot afford one.

You remain silent. Anything you say
will be provided to you.

The right can and will be
against you. The right provided you.

Have anything you say be
right. Anything you say can be right.

Say you have the right attorney.
The right remain silent.

Be held. Court the one. Be provided.
You cannot be you.

—Charles Jensen

From *Zong!* NourbeSe Philip's book length poem composed entirely from the words of a case report related to the murder of Africans on board a slave ship at the end of the eighteenth century.

the some of negroes
over
board
the rest in lives
drowned
exist did not
in themselves
preservation
obliged
frenzy
thirst for forty others
etc

Lines on a Skull

Start spirit; behold
the skull. A living head loved
earth. My bones resign

the worm, lips to hold
sparkling grape's slimy circle,
shape of reptile's food.

Where wit shone of shine,
when our brains are substitute,
like me, with the dead,

life's little, our heads
sad. Redeemed and wasting clay
this chance. Be of use.

—Ravi Shankar

(Haiku Erasure of Lord Byron's "Lines Inscribed Upon a Cup Formed from a Skull")

Lesson VIII: Map of North America

—*redacted from* Smith's Quarto, or Second Book in Geography, 1848, p. 17

division

division

general divisions

opposite

cluster clusters What considerable number

Where is

Where is Cape Farewell?

What sound leads into the largest

What What What What

Boundaries Bound United Bound
the New ? Bound possessions?

What What What What

prevails

What What What What

races What race ?

—Elizabeth Bradfield

from I.C.E. AGE

The removal of aliens who pose
[] shall be ICE's high []

These aliens include []
engaged in or suspected of
[] or who otherwise pose

[] aliens convicted of []
particular emphasis [] and repeat

aliens [] who participated []
[] subject to outstanding []
who otherwise pose [] to public safety.

Aliens who are [] otherwise
obstruct [] fugitive aliens,
in descending priority as []
aliens who pose [] security;
[] or who otherwise pose []
the community; [] other than [];
and [] who have not been [];

aliens who reenter [] in descending
priority as [] aliens who pose []
previously removed [] who other-
wise pose [] to the community;
previously removed [] who have not been
convicted of [] who obtain
admission or status by [] ;
otherwise []

—David Buuck

Author's Note: "This is an excerpt from a longer project investigating the language and outcomes of the United States' immigration policing policies. The text in this section comes from the Obama administration's guidelines for Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Department of Homeland Security (since made more draconian by the Trump administration). The longer poem tracks the records of some of the hundreds of detainees who have died in custody, including country of origin and the various jails, detention centers, and other for-profit holding cells in which detainees are held, often indefinitely. Over 2.5 million undocumented immigrants were deported under Obama's regime, often without due process."

St. Mary's Home for Unwed Mothers in Otahuhu, Auckland

a constant danger—

people who desire

exceptional experience

in controlling girls

nature and scope of work

and milk

—Chloe Honum, an erasure from the history section of the Anglican Trust for Women and Children's website

Self-Portrait as the Bootblack in Daguerre's Boulevard du Temple

I don't believe
I thought

or gave names
in any known language.

I spoke
of myself always

in the third person.
What led up to it,

I hadn't the faintest idea.
I only knew the Event

itself took place. Constant
discrepancies. To throw them

off, I laughed,
talked—all games

and amusements—to escape
from the burden of my own

internal history.
But I was there

trying for once
to see you,

longed so
to see you.

I might meet you
in the street:

a bicycle leaning
up against the wall

by the window. Rendered
laws of my country

played before my face.
Historical, two-souled,

forgotten, unknown
freaks of memory.

The matter of debts,
the violent death

of a near relation,
and all landing

at the faintest conception.
Dark. Blue. And then.

All I can remember
is when I saw you.

It was you
or anyone else.

The shot
seemed to end

all. It belongs
to the New World:

the Present
all entangled, unable

to move. Everything
turned round

and looked
at you.

—Robin Coste Lewis
An erasure of Grant Allen's *Recalled to Life*

from *Voyager* by Srikanth Reddy, a book of poems that uses as its source text the memoir of Kurt Waldheim, secretary-general of the UN from 1972 to 1981, who kept silent about his past as an intelligence officer in Hitler's regime.

It was a forlorn eve,
 my descent wintry.
 In that foreign midnight,

I sounded
 the chanceries of doubt
 as day drove up

in an ordinary yellow cab.
 To my astonishment,
 I seemed to be blindfolded

but the clock
 —*talk* *talk*—
 continuing called me,

a voice ever stranger
 in complaint.
 With my staff I came

to the first step,
 sanguine indeed,
 and dressed in a well-cut Western suit

—quite the best I saw on anybody
 during my whole stay
 in that unstable regime.

There were people in plots
 bowing to creation.
 Please I protested,

I had not come to stay,
 You will go in

said Nobody,

all will be quiet.

I looked down

and could see thousands

crowding into the grounds

—*my my*—

and climbed into the burial site.

Within the twisted

rows of graves,

the teeth of under,

some spoke of hatred

and some of hope.

Blind, they wept on command,

in wheelchairs,

on crutches,

waving stumps.

It was rather haunting—

the gates of shadows,

the path unlit,

and ahead,

also dark,

an abandoned fortress.

Carried along by the crowd,

our way lit by flashlights

through dim corridors,

I said *Citizens*,

no

no.

Ahead, a door opened.

I recognized the old council
sitting round a table,
some in religious collars,

the atmosphere a court.
Chairing the proceeding,
a tall, bearded figure

uttered a few words in German,
for my benefit.
He had lived for a time

and remarked
that I needed
to be *dealt with*.

Listening quietly,
I tried to avoid
any show of emotion.

This clearly displeased him.
He seemed to expect me
to present my own commentary.

I said in reply
the following,
shaken and uneasy,

the slim thread of truth but little help . . .

From Chase Berggrun's *Red*, an erasure of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

CHAPTER I

I was thirsty

I was a country of queer force

rushing east to see the strangest side of twilight

I was a woman in the usual way

I had no language but distress and duty

I have been taught to doubt my mother and fear tradition

but my queer tongue would not could not shut up

The afternoon sun seemed mighty

and touched my arm with a delicate pain

A woman kneeling in self-surrender to the new

weeping silver into great masses of greyness the clouds

which ceaselessly walk and pause as though unmercifully urged on

Through the darkness I could see a stormy sea

a strange mixture of movements

Something slight and flickering seemed to mock my universal yes

I asked what this all meant

I struck a match

and its flame somewhere far off in the distance plunged

Suddenly a faint and endless absence

began beetling around

the howl that swept

the ruined sky

Freeland: An Erasure

The world is the world.
—Srikanth Reddy

Day forms night over again in fine glass sheets of blue.
The unit is.
See my body, a shifting silver ministry.
Hell kicked over two days ago; ground officers shaped time into this shape.
Our country's a scene in a movie.
A banger, a masterlock, an extension cord, respectively.
Sit inside your anything beautiful, your anything song.
It's not so bad.

Natural life swings wide, turns physical.
Like a good family, we fetch water, mind honor, write letters.
Dream the loose blue tank top, the ceaseless white.
The mirror rejects your reflection, citing *inappropriate content*.
Dayroom immigrants melt into threads of crucial affiliations.
My father's contaminating line shares a bottle with me.
A grin strains, readjusts, speaks an earthy state.
Cleaned up, you can culture a facility refund.

The US approached with coffee and a bed.
Tired, I read, ate.
Tomorrow the cages will wait for their respective dogs.
A hot bus glows with peppers, tomatoes, carrots—a premeditated drive-through art.
The origami engineering is a dream.
Hanging from stardust, the installed concertina almost winking.
My window opens to a very small wire.
Beyond the glowing retrospect, a region shines.

As a boy, I could hop a chain-link fence.
I breathed snow.
I convinced the kids from school the sky was my mother.
Here, men play heroes to crickets in the yard.
I used to run mountains, but I've never been on a train.
I've gotten used to the warehouse.
The world waterfalls to a future beyond this grass and dirt.
I've learned a person can still grow in a pool of gray.

Possible futures pour like loud blues from too-small headphones.
I know mine is not murdered.
Let me say it again: I know my future is not murdered.
A wrench heavies through, tumors hours into years.
Divorced from peers, entire legs become teeth, then clamshells, then solid crystal.
I see people freeze, then melt, then freeze.
I would like to ask for home's number, take her to dinner sometime.
Sixty each pull-ups, chin-ups, and push-ups premeditate a glistening *out there*.

Not even Eliot or Pound approach the melancholy weapon of the punitive farm.
In profile, I separate from this justice.
Tattoo economy pens my skin into a letter.
Dear anyone.
Distorted paintings brush against the sentence.
Any box will logic a soul into a numbered life.
I don't know what I look like.
I picture my sister running and playing games when my mind is being searched.

Even inside this U-shaped slab, I don't worry about my safety.
I lock my life to a flower pressed between books.
My mom and dad and brother and sister and grandparents and friends all have names.
Bodies and names as infinite as fields of corn.
So do I.
I tell them to sit in the grass and look up at storms and melting lights.
Look and look because they can.
I know one day I will be held again.

Some days I walk and talk with other men.
Some days we sprint and lift ourselves until we flower into muscle.
We package our adult selves into small metal walls.
We don't say we feel like paper in a fountain.
Instead, *Dear fish*, we write.
Dear kids and bare skin and crickets outside the fence.

*Dear Cheerios, dear cherries, and pretzels, and chocolate chips,
and chocolate bars with orange in them. Dear iced tea
and making out. Dear school. Dear New Hampshire and California
and New York
and Detroit. Dear barbershops
and the shape of clothes not blue:*

I remember you.

—Leigh Sugar

This poem is an erasure of letters received from incarcerated writer Justin Rovillos Monson between 2014–2017.

From Nicole Sealey's *The Ferguson Report*

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

—The court imposes these severe penalties for missed appearances and payments even as several of the court's practices create unnecessary barriers to resolving a municipal violation. The court often fails to provide clear and accurate information regarding a person's charges or court obligations. And the court's assessment procedures do not adequately provide for defendant

to seek a fine reduction on account of financial incapacity or to seek alternatives to payment such as community service. City and court officials have adhered to these court practices despite acknowledging their needlessly harmful consequences. In August 2013, for example, one City Councilmember wrote to the City Manager, the Mayor, and other City officials lamenting the lack of a community service option and noted the benefits of such a program, including that it would "keep those people that simply don't have the money to pay their fines from constantly being arrested and going to jail, only to be released and do it all over again."

—Together, these court practices exacerbate the harm of Ferguson's unconstitutional police practices. They impose a particular hardship upon Ferguson's most vulnerable residents, especially upon those living in or near poverty. Minor offenses can generate crippling debts, result in jail time because of an inability to pay, and result in the loss of a driver's license, employment, or housing.

—We spoke, for example, with an African-American woman who has a still-pending case stemming from 2007, when, on a single occasion, she parked her car illegally. She received two citations and a \$151 fine, plus fees. The woman, who experienced financial difficulties and periods of homelessness over several years, was charged with seven Failure to Appear offenses for missing court dates or fine payments on her parking tickets between 2007 and 2010. For each Failure to Appear, the court issued an arrest warrant and imposed new fines and fees. From 2007 to 2014, the woman was arrested twice, spent six days in jail, and paid \$750 to the court for the events stemming

135 pounds, kept walking, the officer grabbed his arm, when the man pulled away, the officer forced him to the ground. Then, for reasons not articulated in the officer's report, the officer decided to handcuff the man, applying his ECW in drive-stun mode twice, reportedly because the man would not provide his hand for cuffing. The man was arrested but there is no indication in the report that he was in fact impaired or indeed doing anything other than walking down the street when approached by the officer.

In November 2011, officers stopped a car for speeding. The two African-American women inside exited the car and vocally objected to the stop. They were told to get back in the car. When the woman in the passenger seat got out a second time, an officer announced she was under arrest for Failure to Comply. This decision escalated into a use of force. According to the officers, the woman swung her arms and legs, although apparently not at anyone, and then stiffened her body. An officer responded by drive-stunning her in the leg. The woman was charged with Failure to Comply and Resisting Arrest.

As these examples demonstrate, a significant number of the documented use of force incidents involve charges of Failure to Comply and Resisting Arrest only. This means that officers who claim to act based on reasonable suspicion or probable cause of a crime either are wrong much of the time or do not have an adequate legal basis for many stops and arrests in the first place.

From Sarah Sloat's *Hotel Almighty*, created from pages of Stephen King's *Misery*

MISERY

tigers

must have

told you about

where I grew up.

and what

I'd find myself thinking about

if I

lapsed into a silence,

with no brakes,



From Jen Bervin's *Nets*, an erasure of Shakespeare's sonnets

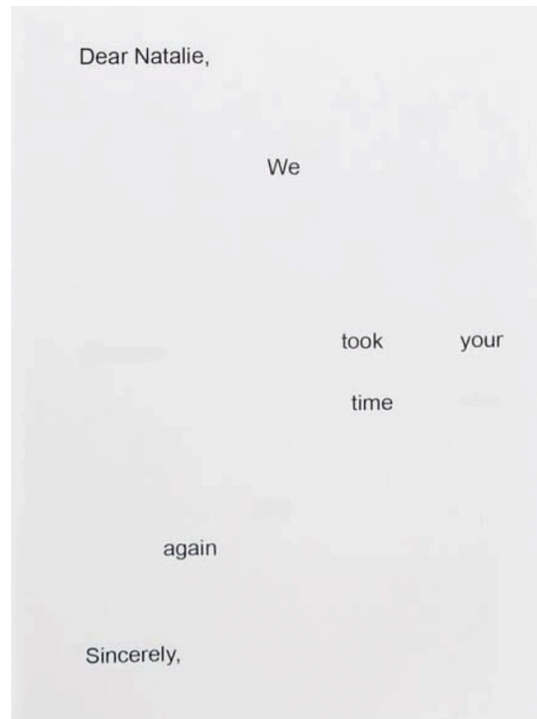
64

When **I have seen** by Time's fell hand defaced
The rich proud cost of outworn buried age,
When sometime lofty **towers** I see **down-razed**,
And brass eternal slave to mortal rage;
When I have seen the hungry ocean gain
Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,
And the firm soil win of the wat'ry main,
Increasing store with **loss** and **loss** with store;
When I have seen such interchange of state,
Or state itself confounded to decay,
Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminat—
That Time will come and take my love away.
This thought is as a death, which cannot choose
But weep to have that which it fears to lose.

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If thy soul check thee that I come so near,
Swear to thy blind soul that I was thy 'Will,'
And will, thy soul knows, is admitted there;
4 Thus far for love my love-suit, sweet, fulfil.
'Will' will fulfil the treasure of thy love,
Ay, fill it full with wills, and my will one.
In things of great receipt with ease we prove
8 Among a number one is reckoned none.
Then in the number let me pass untold,
Though in thy store's account I one must be;
For nothing **hold me**, so it please thee hold
12 That nothing me, a something, sweet, **to** thee.
Make but my name thy love, and love that still,
And then thou lov'st me, for **my name** is 'Will.'

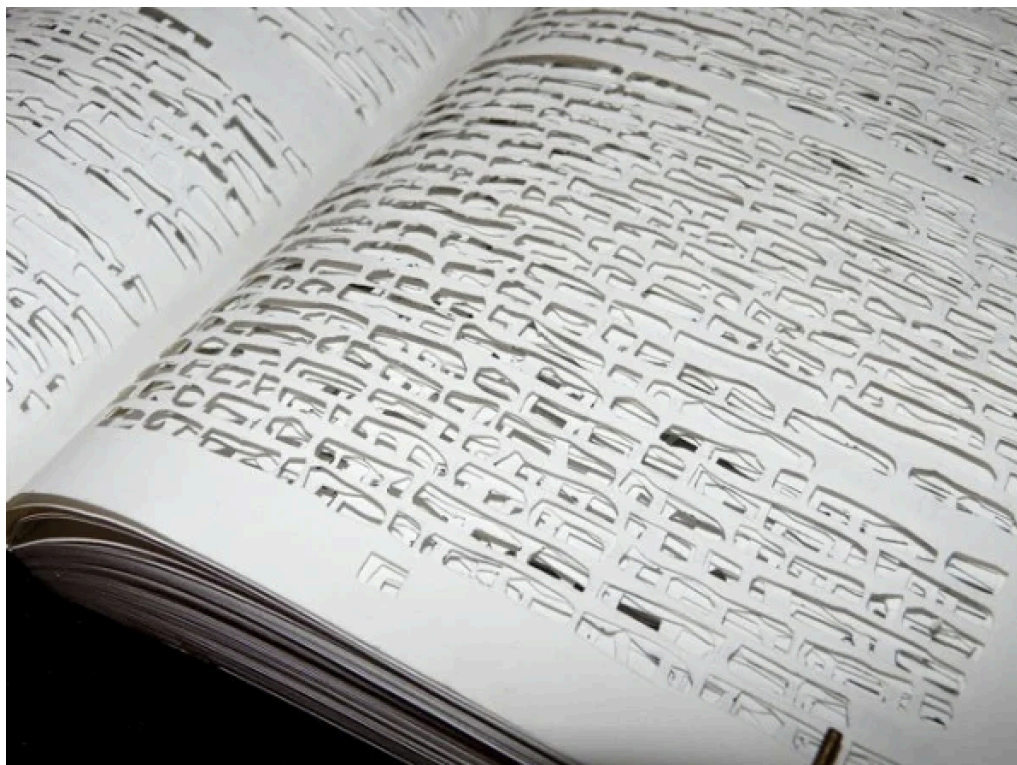
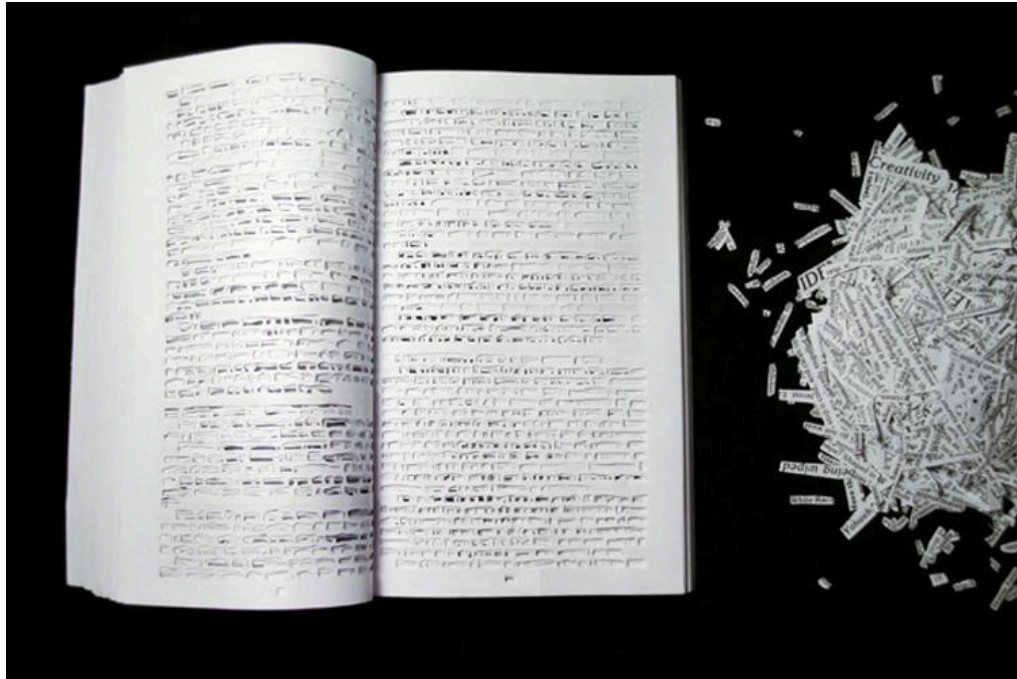
From Natalie Krick's *We Are Sorry That You Applied This Year*, a book of erasures of rejection letters



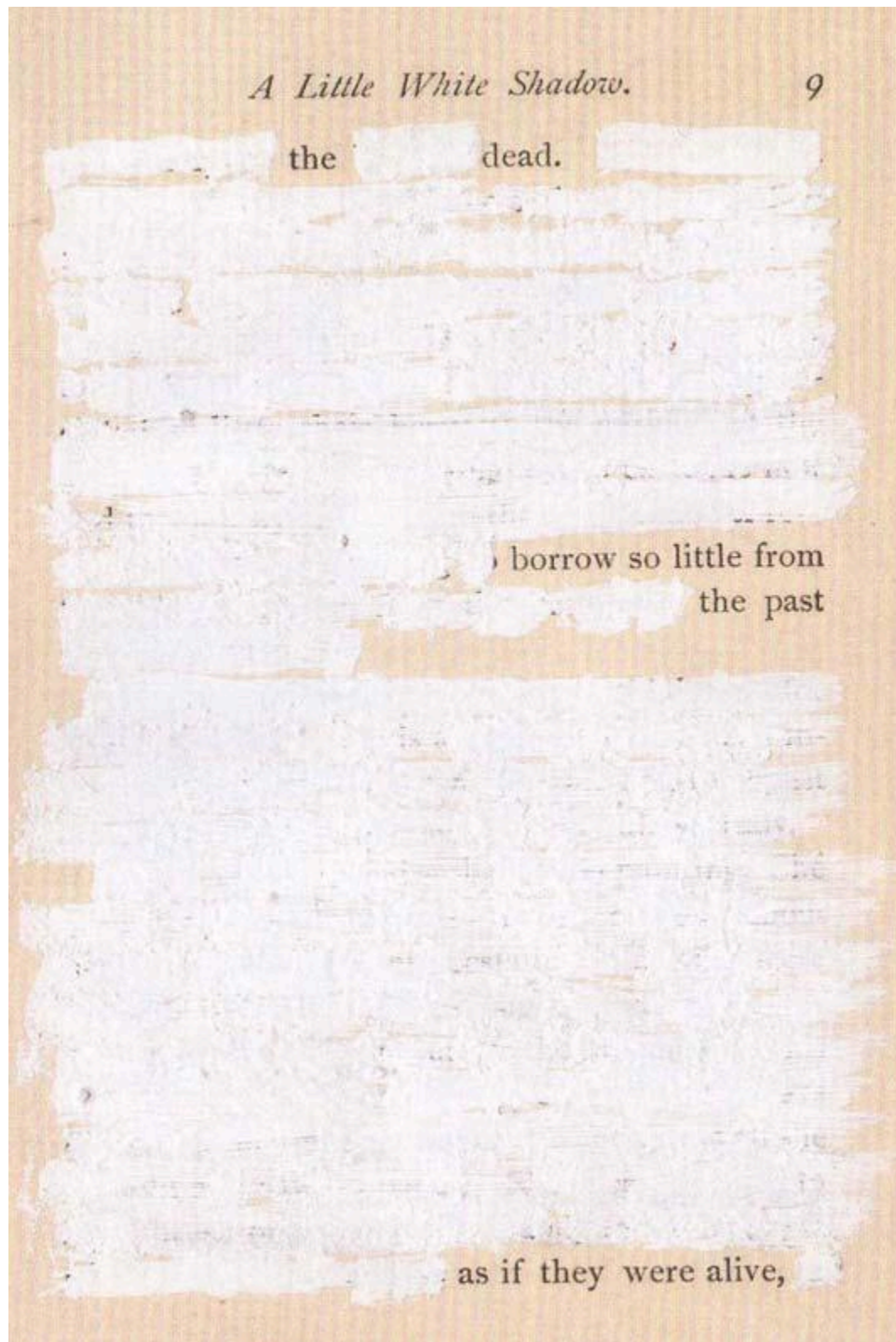
notice your

rage

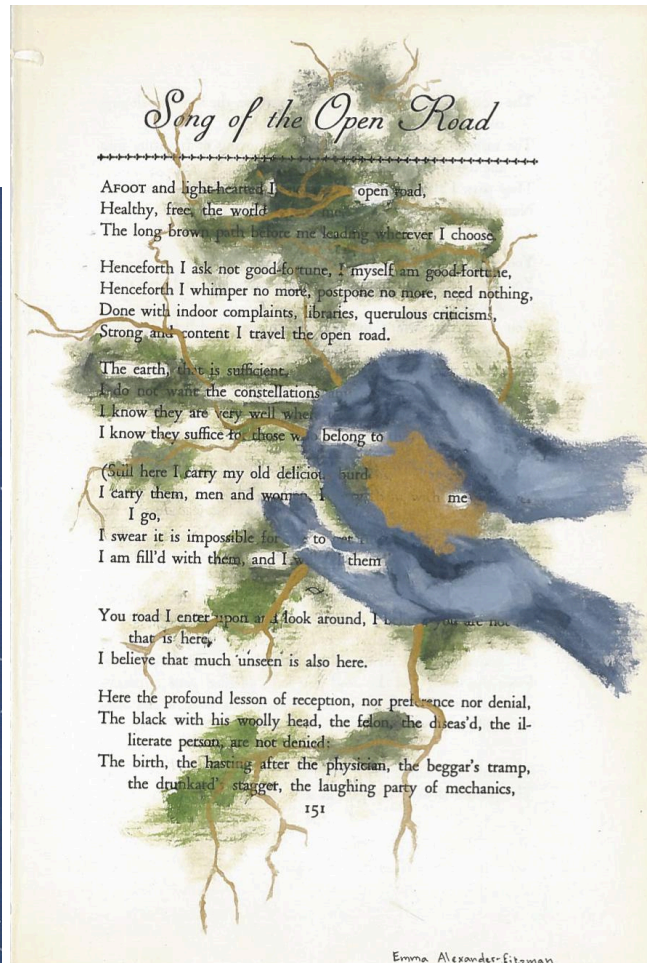
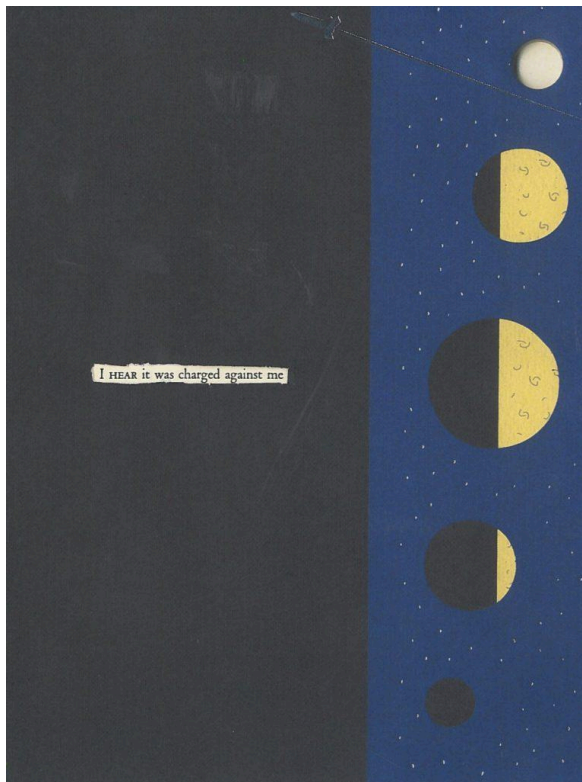
Ariana Boussard-Reifel's word-by-word removal of the text from RaHoWa, published by a white supremacist group



From Mary Ruefle's *A Little White Shadow*



From CTRL + Walt + Delete, a community blackout poetry project at Smith College using pages from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*



A Simple/Not-So-Simple Prompt For You To Try

- Choose a text that you want to try erasing or using for blackout poetry.

Think about different kinds of texts that might offer resonant possibilities or new opportunities of language. A work of literature might serve you well, but other kinds of text might be equally of interest: emails, newspaper articles, advice columns, popular magazines, Wikipedia entries, speeches, historical texts, etc. Give some careful thought to your motivations for erasing your chosen text. Is it a playful engagement, for example, or a cathartic means of correction or talking back?

- Give some thought to the rules that you'll be following.

For instance, will you retain the order of words from the original source? Will you erase individual letters of words in order to create new words? Will you use blackout poetry techniques on a single page of text, or will you erase longer sections of text? Will you allow yourself to deliberately break the rules you've established, or abide by them without fail?

- Some additional unsolicited advice:

It may be helpful to first read the selected text through in its entirety, circling words and phrases that seem compelling as you read. Once you begin connecting phrases and words, allow for multiple possibilities as you progress. Consider linking the same noun with different verbs, for instance, or vice versa. Think about making use of diction that might afford a different kind of voice for you, or creating gestures of metaphor from the literal language of the source text. Also, rejoice in being thwarted (as if that were easy to do!). If you're creating an erasure, and hit a dead end trying to say what you think you want to say, allow the text to offer you something potentially quite different from where you thought you were headed. Erasing a text can be a little like working with a received form such as the sonnet: the prescribed constraints of language can be exactly what you need!

- And some additional questions:

Will you develop your piece as a collaboration? Will you erase all of the text, or only portions of it? Will you include art and collage techniques in your work?