
This Line Connects the Void

Quynh Tran

Abstract

The following piece is the script and a selection of still frames of an experimental 16mm film that considers the space of grief and absence held in the everyday. Filmed in the artist's family apartment on the edge of Parkdale in the city of Toronto, this work follows in the tradition of woman artists depicting interior spaces and domestic life. It explores the poetics of grief and precarity for the family around the time of death and dying regarding the artist's sister. With non-linear storytelling and fragmented images, the work moves between speculative fiction, documentary, and experimental film. Referencing Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* (1982) and Anne Carson's poem "On Walking Backwards" (2015), it considers the space and metaphor of a void and the desire that moves between the dead and the living. This work is funded by the Canada Council of the Arts.

Keywords

grief, family, film

At some point in my pre-teen years, my father painted the walls in the living room and some bedrooms, toothpaste green. He then painted the radiators in these rooms pepto-bismol pink. I don't know why he chose those colours, but I imagine he got the paint for very little. Everyone in the household was upset. We never had many guests but since then, we have had even fewer.



Before she left us, my sister went to Iceland with a friend. She'd been meaning to go for years to walk the open terrain and swim in the hot springs. After she left, we didn't hear from her for a while, but she sent a polaroid home. In it, she's staring at an iceberg from the shore, with her back to us.



In 2019, my sister spent a lot of time in the dark.

She asked my father to board up her bedroom window so she could be in perpetual darkness. He tried to refuse but did what she wanted. She stopped eating and suspended herself in near-constant sleep with drugs. Day after day. It was in this void, which was a kind of shelter, that she went away.



I light incense and lay at her small altar: two apples, two oranges, bananas, and a bottle of water. According to my mother, when you light incense the spirit comes out and eats whatever food you leave. When the incense finishes burning, the meal is over.



My uncle bought my sister a puppy because he read online that having a puppy improves mental and physical health. It was the first time our family had a dog, and my sister was thrilled. She took it everywhere and named it “Marin”, meaning “of the sea”.



In her mother’s womb, my sister was part of an exodus. In the summer of 1989, over a decade after the end of the war, my pregnant mother, father, half-sister, and uncle, like thousands of others, illegally fled Vietnam. Spending days at sea in a crowded boat, they headed to a refugee camp built in the Philippines by the U.N.

After my sister was born, my father had to figure out what to do with the placenta from birth. He couldn't throw it out with the garbage fearing the un-holiness of dogs eating it. So, under moonlight, he found a quiet section of the beach, he dug a hole, and buried the organ.

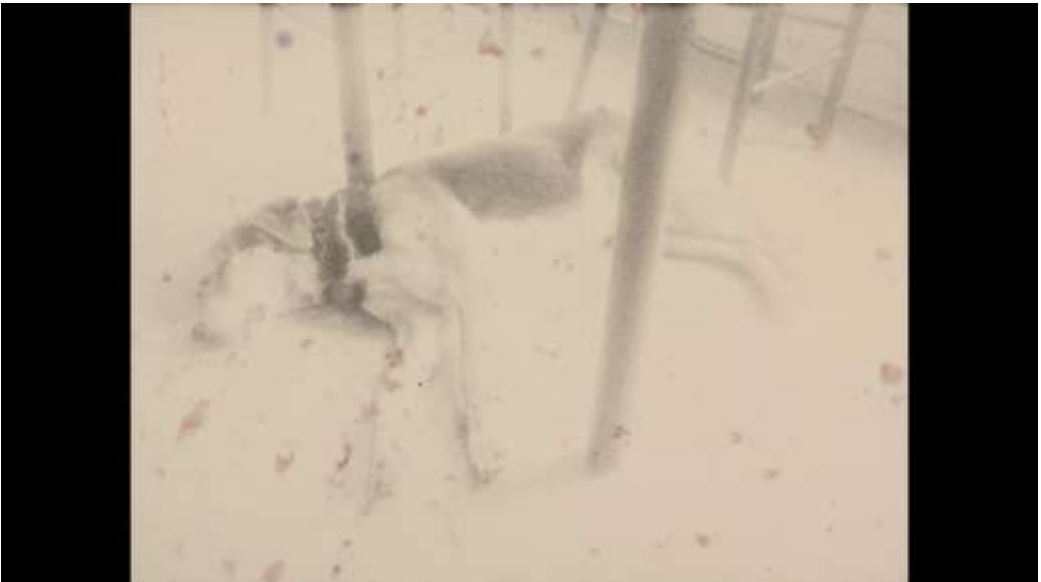


Anne Carson (2015) writes "the dead after all do not walk backwards but they do walk behind us. They have no lungs and can not call out, but they would love for us to turn around" (p. 49).



My mother, following custom, made an altar with a photograph, incense, food, and water. Weeks later, she visited my aunt in Cincinnati and my father took down the home memorial and threw away everything in my sister's room: her bed, linen, books, and clothes. He also throws away 4 paintings she made when she lost her ability to express language, when she lost her words before they reached the cavity of her mouth.

My father leaves behind my sister's porcelain cups with their gold detailing because he doesn't know they are hers.





At three months, a vet recommended my sister get Marin spayed and so she did. I don't know if it was too young, but the puppy suffered cardiac arrest and died right after the surgery. Upon hearing the news, my sister asked my father to go pick up the dead dog and bring it home to our apartment. That night she locked herself in her room and laid with her body. My mother tried to talk her out of it through the door but got no answer. The next morning, she emerged, and gave the dog to my dad to take back to the vet.





References

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Author Biography

Quynh Tran (they/them/she/her) is a queer Southeast Asian cultural programmer and artist working with stills and moving images. Trained in digital video, their art practice uses process-based inquiries, digital/analogue methods, and explores the relationship between people and their environments. They are currently working on an experimental video work funded by the Canada Council of the Arts. When not working around film culture, they can often be found walking their dog, Stella, around the city.