

POINT OF ORIGIN

First published in *Gulf Coast*, issue 36.1 Winter/Spring 2024

This is a story about my love for grids, but first I need to tell you about my godfather, a longtime resident of Paris, who every summer since I can remember would take me on long, meandering walks through his city, a city arranged as defiantly un-gridlike as possible, with its twisting boulevards and snail shell spiral of arrondissements. Before we set off from his apartment in the 18th, he would pull a pocket guide from the desk drawer in his luminous, book-lined living room and, rubbing a hand over his head that's been bald since he was twenty, propose an itinerary: *Ça te dit, chéri?*

Très bien, I would reply, regardless of whether I knew the route or not.

Sometimes we would take the metro to the Left Bank and slowly wend our way north, my godfather leading me through the narrow, labyrinthine streets and pausing to point out which architect had designed that building, the story of this sculpture, who wrote what book while living in that house. Our conversations followed the paths our feet traced, wandering through our lives. The loops widened as I grew older to include the books we'd read, the films or exhibits seen, his lovers, my lovers, the intricate familial net in which we're both enmeshed. He's my mother's youngest brother. The two of them had been close. It didn't dredge up the debris of grief to talk about her—he often brought her up unprompted.

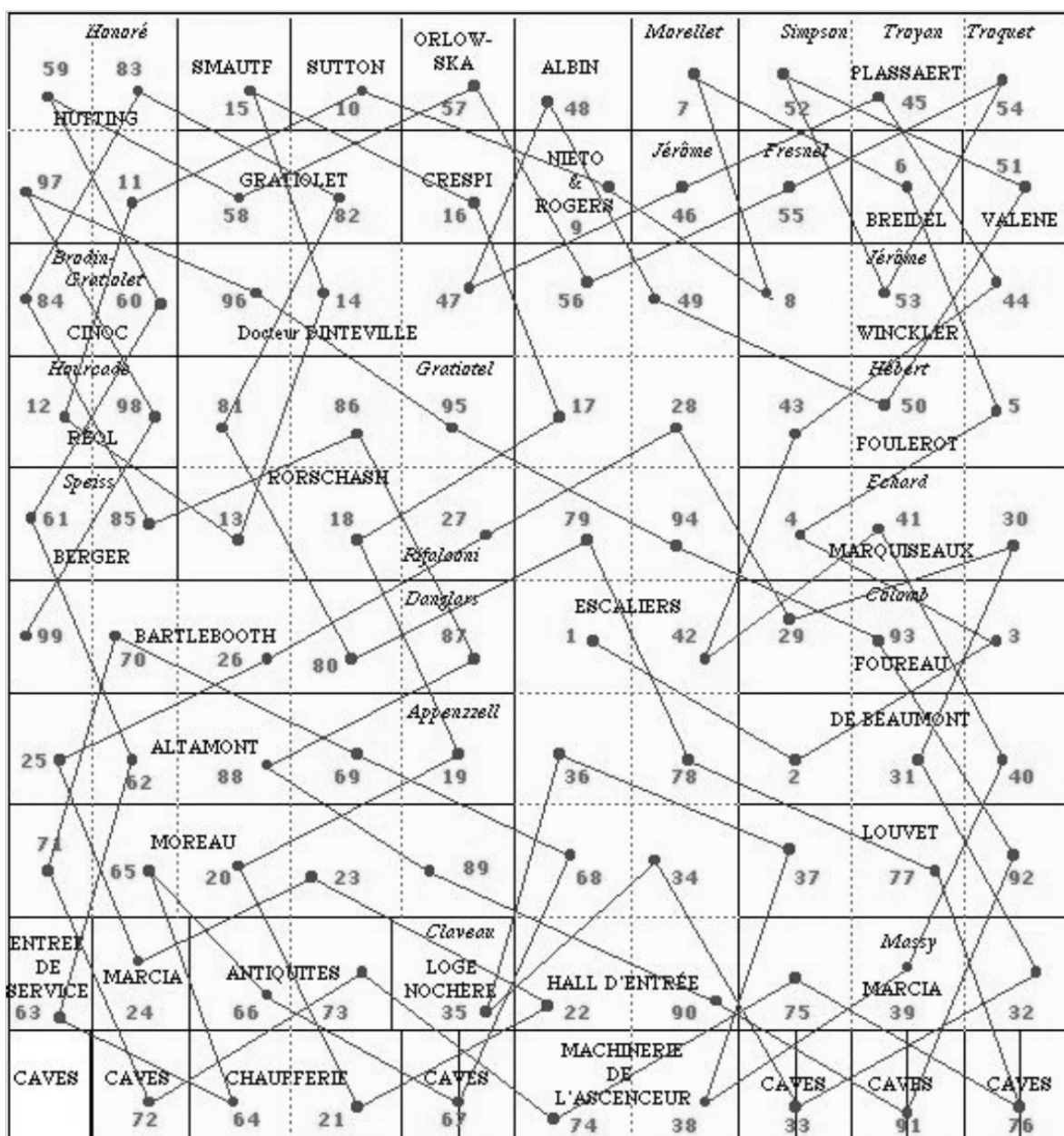
I appreciated the anecdotes my godfather told me for their scope. Not all entirely flattery, his stories lended volume to the contours I got from others. They gave human dimension to an infuriatingly flat saintliness.

“Oiseau de malheur,” he once said of her, which translates literally to *bird of misfortune*; her mind often fluttered to the worst possible scenario. And yet, my mother’s close friend—the witness to her wedding—offered a portrait of her as zen. Are these descriptions incompatible? Apart from sifting through her possessions, I’ve learned about my mother through the images refracted from those who knew her: more often portraits of the person speaking than of her. No perception without point of view. A line from Vilém Flusser springs to mind, “a text has as many meanings as it has readers.” I underline it here once again, drawing in the margins an emphatic if not particularly revelatory *yes!*

But my enthusiasm has gotten me ahead of myself; I brought up these long walking tours to drop us in the Place Saint-Sulpice where, moments before we dipped into the cathedral to see Delacroix’s *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, my godfather pointed to a café across the street and described a certain project Georges Perec had executed there. Well before I saw a picture of the writer—his small grin poking out from a coiled beard, the wild, triangular hat of his hair—I held an image of him leaning back in a rattan bistro chair, his pen scratching the page to catch every mundane detail of the Latin Quarter’s square.

I like to think the association this walk drew between my godfather and Perec primed me to love the writer’s chef d’œuvre, *Life A User’s Manual*, but nostalgia might be fogging the lens of hindsight. The truth is, it was when I saw Perec’s blueprint for the novel that my reader-writer pleasure neurons started firing.

He’d imagined a building constructed on a 10 x 10 grid with its facade removed and used a chess move, the Knight’s Tour, to determine the chapters’ movement from room to room.



The path of Perec's five-hundred-page tome can thus be followed in a matter of minutes. Try it. Take a pen or your finger to the building plan and, beginning at square one, follow the line of his steps, moving like a knight across a chessboard—down one, two to the right; up one, two to the right; two to the left, up one, etc.—until you hit square 99.

Bravo! You've now read the book, in a sense.

The title page describes the book as novels, plural; *Life* has a primary plot, but each chapter pauses in the dwellings of one of the buildings' numerous inhabitants. Though Perec leaps through the centuries to tell, say, the wild tale of a certain painting, the novel—the novels—take place in a frozen present, moments after the central character's death.

His unique handling of time comes from the book's construction of space: the tension between the slowness of description and the swiftness of the *récit* is born of its very structure. Onto the 10 x 10 grid that dictates the book's unwinding, he imposed forty-two lists (e.g., position / activity / small furniture / fabrics) of ten permutations each, distributed in every chapter according to a grid-based puzzle, the Graeco-Latin bi-square. Perhaps he suffered from puzzle-mania. Or perhaps it is the neat lines of grids that invite a layering of structures. The two are not mutually exclusive.

Perec was an early member of the Oulipo, a group of writers and mathematicians dedicated to seeking new patterns and structures so as to “force the system [of language] out of its routine functioning, thereby compelling it to reveal its hidden resources.” Technically, he's still an Oulipian; once inducted, not even dying liberates you. (In current minutes of the monthly meetings, the living members excuse his absence “for the reason of death.”)

Founder Raymond Queneau famously called them “rats who construct the labyrinth from which they propose to escape.” The idea is that any literary creation, every linguistic act, is inherently constrained, and the imposition of an arbitrary system of restrictions is a sort of liberation; otherwise put, constraint-based writing “freely furnishes its own code.”

The name stands for *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentiel*. I bristle when it's translated (as it's often translated) to Workshop for Potential Literature. In “workshop,” I hear the whirring

of power tools slicing through wood. I feel the heat of metallurgical activities. I see Quonset huts lined along the Iowa River.

Ouvroir, on the other hand, means sewing circle.

There's a certain tactility, a textile aspect to it. Marcel Bénabou reminds me that "one must first admit that language may be treated as an object in itself, considered in its materiality, and thus freed from its subservience to its signification obligation."

Oulipian constraints, I've found, force you if not to divorce, then to gently unwind words from their meanings, and consider instead the sounds and shapes of language, the relationship of parts to the whole: letters to words, words to sentences, syntax as a system to arrange these various threads. (Poetry, too, does this: rhyme schemes braid lines together; a guttural skips across a stanza, moving over and under a fricative; an idea dives under another and resurfaces; images interlace.)

Though many may think of the analogy between weaving and writing in strictly metaphorical terms, still I insist: there's a material connection, too. "The prototype for the straight, ruled lines of the manuscript," Tim Ingold explains, "lay in the warp strings stretched taut on the loom." These lengthwise lines scoring the space between letters, once faintly visible on the page, disappeared once Gutenberg invented his printed type. "From that point on, the text was no longer woven but assembled, pieced together from discrete graphic elements." At that moment, the textile grid vanished from the written word.

I'm thinking again of Vilém Flusser: "a text is unfinished." It's the reader who supplies not only the meaning, but also, I'll add, the text's missing warp. When the work is constraint-based, this completion takes the form of solving a puzzle. But any encounter with any text is

inevitably warped by the receiver's way of thinking—as you come, reader, with your own kit of associations.

An interlacing, then—reader and writer together. *The eye follows the paths that have been laid down for it in the work.* That's Paul Klee. Look at his line's grammatical subterfuge: agency evaded with the passive construction of paths. And that definite article: "the eye" could belong to either receiver or maker. So who—or what—is in control?

Back to Paris. Another walking companion of mine was a woman who married into my mother's sprawling family. When I moved to the city after my bachelor's degree, she and my godfather (both over fifty) were among my dearest friends. A buoyant presence, with a deep appreciation for the handmade—developing black-and-white photographs in her bathtub, covering the tables on her patio with spiraling mosaics—Mimi offered the kind of wisdom I needed: things get easier, it takes time, the intensity of feeling in your twenties will settle as you grow into yourself. *Patience, ma petite.* In her youth, she once told me, she carried around Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein because she saw in Stein's eyes an image of her own.

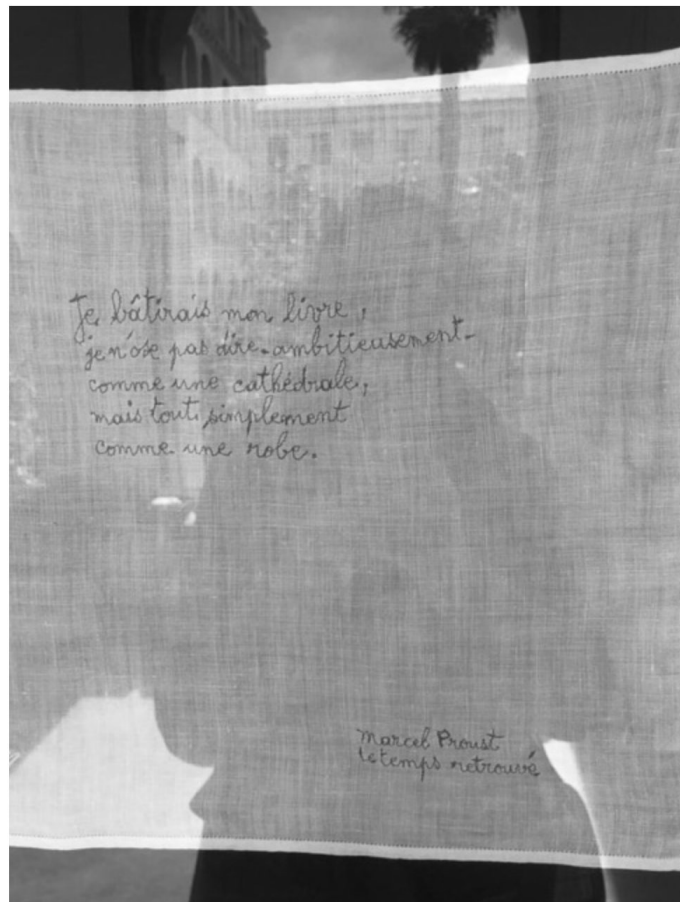
Mimi is the closest to a mother I have—though also a friend.

You can see her figure reflected in a glass pane of a photograph she sent me after I'd left the city. On the other side of the window hangs a translucent, tabby weave linen, onto which someone had embroidered in red thread a line from Proust's narrator: "I should construct my book, I dare not say ambitiously like a cathedral, but quite simply like a dress."

So the writer sews the book, and the reader tries it on. This idea of wearing a book delights me—a text as something you slip into, which in turn becomes a part of its reader-wearer as she makes her way through the world.

Appropriate, this portability, this motion: neuroscientists have described the act of reading as “a felt motionless movement through space.”

Proust’s rejection of monumental architecture in favor of humble textiles doesn’t, in my mind, stand in opposition to Perec’s gridded building. When Mimi sent me this picture, I was reminded of standing in the tailor shop in Cameroon (which, inexplicably, doubled as a photocopying center) as my sewing teacher spread a large sheet of butcher paper on the table, quickly sketched a grid, and began drafting a pattern. In awe, I watched a body emerge under Master Ela’s sure, swift hands—a body visible as a flat surface, constructed on a grid.



The tailor shop—that room’s alive in my mind. All I have to do is think of it, and the air around me shifts. There’s the stack of uncut fabrics facing Master Ela’s bench. A rickety

ladder leading to an alcove with a ceiling so low that even I, just short of five foot four inches, had to stoop. The row of treadle-operated cast iron Singers with which the tailor's wife taught another apprentice and me how to sew — straight seam, then pleats, then double welt pockets — the pedaling motion accompanying me as I fell asleep. I felt this when I began weaving, too. It's like spending the day at sea and, from the stillness of land, sensing the boat's rocking carried in the body as it slips into dreams.

The body remembers, too, paths habitually followed. Trails followed by one's feet retraced in neural pathways. In Bandjoun, I lived on not the crown but the brow of a pine-covered hill, and many mornings I'd go running on the valley's capillary trails. I'm sure, if I were to go back, I'd be able to wind my way back to the place that so marked me: the crest of a hill with its ochre-red soil, steep descent to a river with water-dark stones, a line of eucalyptus trees, each trunk carved with the figure of a woman — an angel?

How many times did I pass, in wonder, until I met the mark-maker? A man with a boy's face whittling trunk after trunk into his mother's likeness. The trees gave a thick gum to the man's knife. I can hear it now, as if I am there: the river murmurs as he works, and the man whistles back to the river. His song is tuneless. It is sweet. Sometimes, he carves his mother wings.

I am not a reliable witness. I have conjured too often this man and his trees and the striking iterations of his carved elegy. Memory, like grief, is a laceration of the self: impressions ripped from their contexts. Over time, these scraps are reassembled to seem whole: we associate this-or-that, weave it into the memory.

I am sure of the river, I am sure of the wings, but the song... did I invent his whistling?

Music and weaving: wildly different arts, but you'd think they were sisters looking at their notational systems. When I first tried to decipher a weaving plan, it felt like attempting to solve a crossword puzzle in an invisible language. I was supposed to be able to *read* this arrangement of black and white boxes?

I came to the floor loom equal parts enticed and intimidated; it seemed to me a terribly complicated machine. (I recently learned that in ancient Chinese, the character 机 (ji) meant: 1) a loom and 2) a matter of wit and intelligence.)

Feeling neither witty nor intelligent, baffled by not only the loom itself, but also the graphical representations which weavers employ to show structural elements, I squinted at the screen as my weaving teacher projected a lecture on draft notation.

Defined by the act of interlacing, weaving is a crossing of two systems of threads, warp and weft, at right angles. It's as basic as that, though the loom's mechanics allow the threads to intersect in an infinite number of ways. "An algorithmic rising or sinking," my weaving teacher called it. "Threads are lifted, or they are not." Straightforward, and yet within that simplicity, inexhaustible possibilities. (*A logic of alteration that, much like language, we think through.*)

"We read draft notation from the point of origin, which is the weaver's position at the loom," the teacher said, alternately defining the weaving plan as *a map with which to operate the loom* and *a record of its movements*. If this is a map, I thought, I'm missing the legend.

"Draft notation isn't an image of the cloth," the teacher continued. "It shows what's invisible, how the machinery works to lift or lower certain threads."

The constraints of *Life A User's Manual* are not only invisible to the reader but, according to Perec, they became irrelevant after he finished writing the book. Once he had resolved the complexity of his puzzle, “cela n’a plus d’importance” (it was no longer important). His key ambition was “to exhaust not the whole world[...] but a constituted fragment of the world,” and his system of constraints was the path to this fragment, a path that dissolved once completed.

The grid—a scaffolding, a recurring structure for Perec’s literary experiments—is most evident in his work designing crossword puzzles, an activity he didn’t consider as separate from his writing. His approach to crosswords can be read as a kind of poetics. The work, he writes, involves two distinct and opposing operations: the construction of the grid, followed by the elaboration of the definitions. The first is “a tedious, careful, obsessive task; a sort of letter-based arithmetic.” A constraint composed of letters without language. Writing the definitions is an associative process: “a fluid work, impalpable, a stroll through the world of words.” What’s often called inspiration (though I prefer his term, *a briik illumination*) belongs to the second, which cannot occur without the steadfast, trial-and-error procedure of the first.

Perec expressed regret in publishing the scaffolding of *Life*: people might interpret it only through its constraints. Maybe I’m doing him wrong (I’m certainly doing him wrong) with my singular focus on structure, as if his prose were cold, clammy, without a heartbeat. I despise the idea of formal innovation and emotion as mutually incompatible. I’m thinking of Calvino’s phrase, “algebra and fire.” I’ve neglected Perec’s own biography, pockmarked by tragedy. Son of Polish-Jewish immigrants, both killed in World War II, he once confessed, “I have no childhood memories.” Too simple to say that constraints filled his existential void.

Perec was a storyteller. The grid gave form to his fire. A map with which to stroll through the world of words, and the heart at the center.

Life revolves around incompleteness. Its primary plot describes the fifty-year quest of Bartlebooth, an eccentric millionaire, in which he “starts from nothing, passes through precise operations[...] and ends up with nothing.” It’s a plan with no purpose but its own execution. Faced with the “inextricable incoherence” of existence, Bartlebooth learns to paint watercolors for the first ten years and travels to ports for the next two decades to paint five hundred seascapes, which another character, Winckler, transforms into jigsaw puzzles. In the final phase, Bartlebooth completes the puzzles and then sends them back to the ports, where they are to be reconverted into blank paper. Thus, no trace would remain of his sole activity for a half century, an operation which ultimately fails. *Life* begins when its protagonist dies, clutching the final piece of the four hundred and thirty-ninth jigsaw puzzle, the space left unfilled, the form of an X; the piece in his hands, shaped like a W. It is the puzzle-maker Winckler’s revenge.

Though its pages hold a dazzling breadth of human experience, *Life* always returns to the unfinished. There’s the painter, Valène, whose death cuts short an attempt to create an elaborate painting of the building’s residents and its major and minor events; “Perec’s conduit,” Valène was painting the book the author writes.

But Perec finished the book, you might say. Look again. There’s only ninety-nine, not a hundred, chapters. Perec skips the bottom left room in the building. The culprit comes from the book itself: a girl holding a shortbread biscuit with its corner nibbled off.

Incompletion: a word that tugs at my most vulnerable core, the little self I try to obscure. But she is there, she is always there, she is me, coming into consciousness with the void that swallows all our plans. There I go again, using language to cast a veil over what it is I'm saying. My first memory takes place right after my mother's unexpected death. This fragment drifts up from an inner storehouse and grips my entire being: the soft plush of carpet beneath my feet. A rocking chair, and in it, my father weeping.

Among the things her abrupt passing left unfinished: raising her three children. As an adult I inhabited the same city as she once did, even lived in the same apartment. Briefly attended the same school, not far from Place Sainte-Sulpice, where Perec noted the passing buses and fluctuations in the weather. Certain streets are charged with associations. But these spaces we shared offer no map, no procedure for me to know what she had experienced in them. What ephemera caught her eye. How walking shaped her thinking.

This is the image I will never grasp in its entirety: a woman who died nearly three decades ago. Perec, again: *An incomplection pointing to the unsayable, that desperate object of writing's desire.*

Impossible to speak of the grid without conjuring what escapes it.

Another walk with my godfather. We're on an indirect route to the Louvre, talking about my father. The way I've been writing about the loss of my mother is hurting him; he doesn't remember his silence as I do. What I sensed, from an early age, was a pain point welling in him whenever I asked about my mother, and so, gradually, I stopped asking. When I explained this, my father exploded—he just wanted to avoid turning her into a saint, as certain family members did after his own father's passing. We have the same hot

temperament. His childhood also marred by the sudden death of a parent. When he lost his wife with three children under five in tow, he thought he was doing right by letting us live our lives, without some sanctified lost mother hovering above us. Where is the user's manual for a widower?

"But still, he never—he so rarely talked about her," I say to my godfather. We round the corner to the Fontaine des Innocents, its carved nymphs watching over the wet steps and a toddler babbling to a pigeon.

I tell my godfather about my surprise that my father remembered the clothes in which my mother was buried. His answer—a forest-green-and-brown skirt and blouse—unravels with a shake of my godfather's head. He remembers something else: a dark gray suit. Wool. But he's not sure, he can't be sure.

What to do with this kaleidoscope assembly of contradictions? Richard Powers:
Memory is always an ongoing collaboration.

The next day, I ask my aunt and my grandmother. My aunt is certain: it was a black-and-white silk blouse printed with small collies.

"Like the dog?" I ask. My aunt nods.

"I chose that shirt because I knew she liked it."

I look to Grand-mère. She shrugs. My aunt is certain.

So my mother was buried, again and again, for each of them clothed differently. I've given up trying to find one answer. Multiple interlacing realities, multiple truths that can't be plotted together but exist, somehow, on the same plane.

If I had any memories of her, would I trust them?

An ordinary day at the weaving studio. After I'd set up the warp threads—"dressing" the loom, as they say: *a tedious, careful, obsessive task* if there ever were one—it was there, sitting on the weaving bench, that the lecture on draft notation crept back into my mind. A phrase rhythmically repeated with each passing of the weft. *Point of origin. Point of origin. The weaver's presence in the grid.*

In conversation with my weaving teacher, I was determined to get to the bottom of it, to put my finger on why that phrase had taken up residence in my head.

"If the point of origin indicates our orientation in the channels between different parts of a draft," I said, "it's a space that doesn't actually exist."

"Well, none of it *actually* exists," the teacher said.

It's true, of course: all of draft notation, every grid, is an unreal site of repetition. A place for patterning to occur, once material intervenes.

Still, I felt a sucker-punch to the gut. How little it takes, a phrase not meant to mean anything more than how to read a textile logic, for me to come shuddering back to myself—this relentless and impossible hunt for my own point of origin—motherless in the world, adrift.

In Bandjoun, a man with a boy's face carves his lost mother's image again and again, until he runs out of trees. It's how the iterative suggests infinity. I wonder if, with each portrait, there comes a swelling or a shrinking of his grief. Nothing he makes was ever intended for me, for my viewing. He works with bark and knife; I work with word and thread. But there is more similarity than difference—both acts involve *working with material (listening to it) to mediate the ineffable.*

The elegy goes: expression of lament, then praise of the dead. Portraiture in absentia — a task made more difficult by the fact I never knew my mother. But not impossible, no.

Interrogate your tea spoons, Perec says. Here is the method: I will gather all of the ordinary objects she left behind. I will write around what remains. One last grid springs to mind: this one with a curve and its asymptote. From the Greek *asumptōtos*, “not falling together.”

Consider the description the curve, inching ever nearer what it aims to describe. Toward but never reaching. Strange comfort in that incompleteness, that nearly.