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Writing against Memory and Forgetting

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Writing against Memory and Forgetting

Gabriele Schwab (bio)

Holes and gaps are so central in narrative fiction because the materials the text provides for the reconstruction of a world (or a story) are insufficient for saturation.

Stories are told to register a truth that cannot be found in the simple telling of facts.

Sue Grand, *The Reproduction of Evil*

For to end yet again skull alone in the dark the void no neck no face just the box last place of all in the dark the void.

Samuel Beckett, *For to End Yet Again*

We tell or write stories in order to defer death. In his story "The End," Samuel Beckett approximates the end from the distant memory of a possible life story: "The memory came faint and cold of the story I might have told, a story in the likeness of my life, I mean without the courage to end or the strength to go on."¹ Stories in "the likeness of . . . life" reside in a transitional space between memory and forgetting. They arise from faint memories, memories not to be trusted. Life writings often emerge from a traumatic core, occupying a space between two parallel universes: daily life and trauma. In real life, it is dangerous for these universes to touch. In writing, they must converge. Otherwise, stories remain cut off, their words stranded in the silence they try to cover, orbiting trauma like satellites. Writing from within the core of trauma is a constant struggle between the colonizing power of words and the revolt of what is being rejected, silenced. Trauma kills the pulsing of desire, the embodied self. Trauma attacks and sometimes kills language. In order for trauma to heal, body and self must be reborn and words must be disentangled from the dead **[End Page 95]** bodies they are trying to hide. In *A Child is Being Killed: On Primary Narcissism and the Death Drive*, Serge Leclair writes, "The subject is born and reborn solely from the constant disentanglement of body and words, from a perpetually repeatable crossing of the grid of signifiers, from the ghostly, hallucinated reunion with the lost but immediately present object, right there, so very close to us."²

There is no life without trauma. There is no history without trauma. Some lives will forever be overshadowed by violent histories, including colonial invasions, slavery, totalitarianism, dictatorships, wars, and genocide. Some murders, including soul murders, are committed by people using sanctioned disciplinary regimes that enforce subjugation and oppression. These may include kidnapping, lynching, torture, mutilation, captivity, disappearances, police brutality, and rape. Collective trauma is passed down to individuals in multifarious and refracted ways. Some lives are hit with catastrophic trauma over and over again; then trauma, with its concomitant strategies of survival, becomes a chronic condition. Defenses and denial become second nature. Traumatic repetition becomes second nature. Trauma as a mode of being violently halts the flow of time, fractures the self, and punctures memory and language. And then there are those afflicted by what Freud calls *Schicksalsneurose*, that is, a "fate neurosis," who seem to be living under a bad spell, haunted by a curse that often preceded their lives, an ancestral curse perhaps, hidden and intangible, relegated to secrecy and silence.³

When I was a child I loved to talk to old people. I sought them out because I felt an insatiable curiosity about their life stories. Looking back, I realize that old people often tell stories about trauma. Yet, in these stories, trauma is often curiously contained. Words and images seal over violent ruptures and wounds. Voice has settled in quiet detachment. Occasionally, a few tears emerge, like traces leading away from an old wound. Mostly, however, the stories have grown over the wound like a second skin.

Perhaps my sense of life narratives is colored by my growing up with war stories told night after night by adults around the dinner table. These stories were not addressed to me, not meant for me. They were stories told in my presence as if I was not there, stories that left me stranded in a muted space outside.

I remember the traumatic...

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Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*

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