

# MESSY ARCHIVIST

I.

On the subways, my work commute is straightforward. If I get on the platform at the right spot on the L, I can step off the platform and walk right up a staircase that goes to the downtown N, Q, and R train lines, and take the first local train to Prince Street. On a good morning, this is fairly speedy—meaning there’s not much time to bring the book I brought along. On a bad morning, there’s not even enough space on the subway to hold a book in front of my nose.

Racing to get out the door, I was searching for *Play as It Lays* on the color-coded bookshelf. This is an embarrassment for most ex-librarians, but there’s nothing wrong with arranging space to suit aesthetics. That being said, if I haven’t seen a book in a while, it’s usually because I’ve forgotten what color the spine is. Staring at the part of the shelf where I’d seen Joan Didion before, I noticed *The Year of Magical Thinking*.

“How’s this one?” I ask Conley.

“It’s good, but it’s about death. It’s really

depressing. Let me keep looking..." he says, browsing the upper reaches of the shelf.

It's already late—I've spent too long getting dressed. I grab *The Year of Magical Thinking* and tuck it into my bag. I like Didion's writing because the things she does in life seem to be fun to her. Pleasurable. She will describe having a drink and not losing her mind about it, for instance. Or going out to a nice dinner multiple times a week because she likes the routine.

By the time I reach Prince Street—no delays, to my chagrin—I'm over thirty pages in. The book is about the death of Didion's husband, while her daughter undergoes serious and recurring medical crises. The book follows Didion's search for information at the hospitals—a contextualizing comfort that is powerless in the face of pure and unadulterated grief.

As I walk the subway platform to the exit stairs, I think about the stack of books I'll be cataloging today. They belonged to Anselm Hollo, a poet born in Finland who lived in Colorado for many years, whose death has been described to me as the perfect death by his widow, Jane Hollo, an artist with a beautiful sunny Southern accent.

Though it's not always there, the implication is that the paper or digital body exists to survive the fleshly one. This is because of our collective cultural insistence on preservation in the face of death.

I read and walk. Didion recalls the impossibility of getting rid of her husband's shoes. Just in case he came back. I remember

my sense of bewilderment at finding dirty hats in someone's archive, which was recently cleared out of their house by friends. *Are hats literary?* I thought, reconsidering e. e. cummings' array in the Berg Collection. I remember a story about curators wanting one of Charles Olson's shirts, to show how tall he was. As usual I was asking the wrong question. The hats make sense.

We no longer have to pretend that archives are "neutral," that the documents speak for themselves and are preserved uniformly. This conversation is a relief, because I'm not neutral either. I am full of compassion for poets and artists and their archives, and I want their collections to be as gorgeous and accessible as the night sky. There is such tenderness in the logistics of this work. The advice slipped out in the final moments before the last box goes down the stairs, as I push my hair away from my forehead.

There is also the contact high of grief, of carrying memory on. The idea of keeping these things not for the dead to return and use, but for rituals to become research. A bit like donating organs or a body to science—allowing the remains to be harvested.

As I stop reading and prepare to catalog, I wonder about the sheepishness of productivity in the face of it all.

I finish my coffee, close the book, and pull a stack of Hollo's books off the shelf.



Baristas absorb the equivalent caffeine of seven cups of coffee for every eight hour shift, just through their hands. Working in archives, you get stories about people in reading rooms eating tiny fragments of manuscripts or book bindings that crumble off from works they've handled—just to ingest the spirit of the book. It's all about communion. I wonder how much book dust I've snorted, or inadvertently eaten off my own hands when I'm too hungry to wash them, on a twelve-hour site visit. It's full-contact work: I've broken out into rashes, cheeks bright pink from mildew.

What I'm not willing to do  
is play it, pretend:  
staying for the gravity of eras  
someone else made topiaries  
instead of wild flowers in the field.

But some days  
we bring things into being.  
Other days, whether we mean to,  
we stamp them out,  
throwing powder off scattered wings.

Spacetime is not our own, a massive  
whirling arc in the star-bed.  
Still, sledges of land  
stretch out beneath us  
taking on the shape  
of Saturnal rings  
and we can't help but notice  
the way it all slides  
like little wheels or marbles  
beneath our bare feet

What I'm not going to do  
is reach for the bells—  
the song is clarion, ancient.

"You've got to listen, then let it rest."  
"You've got to let yourself  
ring like a hollow metal bowl."

A moment of observation  
before improvisation.

It comes to me in flashes  
the poems, the books

It comes to me in green  
electric relief  
like dropping back into the sea.

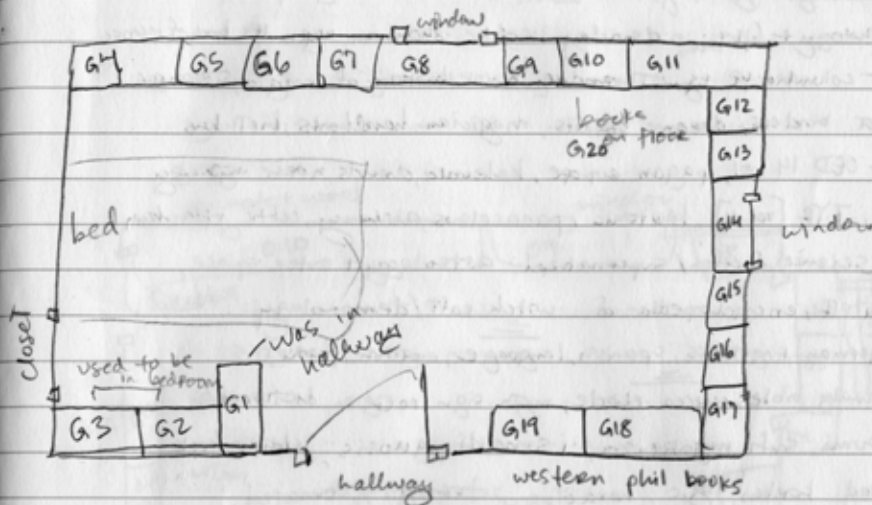
highly eclectic shelves, fun for  
guests

- G1 - 1 thing, The visitor's guide to 1 thing, wanderers of  
The natural mind, oracles + demons of Tibet, book of the dead
- G2 - self help [these are no accidents], alphabetic labyrinth, shaw,  
swankon, godfrey higgins' apocalypse, Resula, bilwax litten, Talismans
- G3 - nag hammarci, ben johnson, hip, lovecraft paperback, brone's  
works (3 vol) The decline + fall of roman empire (3 vol) Blake, blackwood
- G4 - radical sex, john des passos, 9 vol darkbody sheelack, ram dine,  
blom, eco, anais nin [lower level right next to bed]
- G5 - des passos, guy darcenport, cults, cult reptree, The omnibus of  
crime, robert anton wilson, litceogz bio + commentary
- G6 - henry matthews, jack kerouac, S.P. elledge, jonathan  
strong, raymond greenaw, french language poetry, lovecraft, cabell  
paperbacks
- G7 - heron robin, henry miller, iain sinclair, gay lit + detective  
anthologies, faultline, toomer, paris review
- G8 - poems for the millennium anthology, waltz, Thornton wilder,  
gassing, beattigan, mina boy, african american lit, except <sup>pois</sup>
- G9 - kenny george, marx + german, ideology, social thought + economic  
revolution, cult of information, kapital, lewin anthology, mein kampf
- G10 - neil gaiman, pulp contemporary barnes n noble stuff,  
torman capote, rudy rucker, philip k dick, A. mead, Pushdie
- G11 - lord dunsany, The illuminator, oscar wilde, J.G. ballard,  
The Inklings, robert anton wilson, aldous huxley, ghost stories, <sup>again</sup> sand
- G12 - mil gaiman, Coelho, Tvegenov, bram stoker, dan brown,  
sci-fi paperbacks, Edward lea, The mind map book
- G13 - [FROM BEDROOM] houghton mifflin 1911 complete works of emerson,  
houghton mifflin riverside press 1892 complete Thoreau, more emerson essays  
of michael lud of montaigne 1893 david witt, edinburgh (3 vol), limited eds.  
club "north's plutarch", upanishads, vedic experience, more Thoreau/Jon,  
michael deighton, george chapman, eubelais, J.H. mees, The revolution  
in the wilderness, plato's lives (10 vol, pliny's natural history (6 vol)

69 + 494 +  
1296 + 140

(23 x 3) + (26 x 19) +  
(16 x 81) + (35 x 4) + 20 [est  
for floor]

GUEST ROOM - 19 bookcases, 113 shelves + floor  
stacks  
168 Ft



- G14 - jewish fantasy + The occult, guy debord, future science, anarchists in  
russian sov, machiavelli, kropotkin's revolutionary pamphlets, godwin, max steiner
- G15 - kenneth burke, samuel butler, gadwin, anthony powell, alien  
encounters, what is marriage for?, nonsense desire, huxley, poetic meter + form
- G16 - charles dickens, J.K. Rowling, woolf, hardy, mary web, a e kosman  
fred madox foed, donna tartt, huxley, david foster wallace, angela carter
- G17 - dickens, dawn powell, george macdonald, katharine mansfield,  
jane austen, gadwin, neal stephenson, Evelyn waugh, <sup>[another infinite chest]</sup> Compton-briett
- G18 - Jina barnes, chris showwood, john crewley, cervantes, dan delillo,  
Tennessee williams, compe powys, bilwax litten novel, paul auster
- G19 - henry fielding, math + universe, bronte, Thackeray, lawrance, ~~the~~  
George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, angela carter, samuel beckett
- G20 - books on floor, for easier access to sellers, mostly  
mass-market pulps of contemporary or classic fiction, anthologies,  
pulp paperbacks.



When on research trips, few principles serve as well as these: be grateful for the access you have to things, marijuana-themed gifts are the best thank-yous and souvenirs, and find the local co-op to buy the good coffee for the motel pot.

I remember sitting in the room, eating buckwheat and cranberry crackers dipped in peanut butter, writing in my underwear until I had arranged to arrive and catalog books in Diane di Prima's garage. The first morning in the motel, a woman sounds like she's dying next door, hacking lungs and rasping breath. I vaguely remember she was in town for cancer treatments. I could have made this up.

The occasion for the motel? I'm finishing my PhD in two months. I'm claiming to write on poets' libraries, that is, the books that poets assemble and call their libraries, for various reasons, but it doesn't feel so cut and dry. It's soft and wet, cardboard in the street, a persistent cry, "what is saved is material, the material is political."

Back in the city, I meet with a literary agent and archives broker, who cut a million plus dollar deal with the NYPL. He wants to read my dissertation--I think it's so he can figure out how to sell poets' libraries, which currently have almost zero market value unless they're rare items.



He asks what I've been reading lately. It's Amiri Baraka's *Blues People*. I pretend I'm not reading anything, *wow, I'm not so sure, really in the thick of it with revising...*In the years ahead, will I remember what I was reading, stolen in chunks of commute on the subway, between Broadway Lafayette and 42nd Street, Bryant Park, when I'm left with a moment of New York "solitude"? The only moments of time when I'm beholden only to my attention span, and what captures it. What I can train it on.

Leaving for my advisor's house at 11am on Sunday, piled in scarf and a fleece jacket purchased because it was large enough to stick my chihuahua inside, I step out and grab babka and coffee at Whole Foods, feeling like a chump for not having a decent local spot on the way. By the time I reach the platform the G, a train has just left, and I walk to sit on a bench. The coffee is just below perfect drinking temperature, cooling quickly in November weather. I pull open a copy of the *New Yorker*, which only makes the Whole Foods thing feel worse, and by the time I encounter the word "democracy," about ten seconds later, I feel so tired that the magazine nearly folds itself in my hand.

I devote my stare to the train tracks, the rim of the coffee cup, the utter exhaustion of this headlong run into a celebration whose rites I will have no idea what they mean.

Honesty pulls the fabric of your life in strange directions, to cover the parts of you that sadness, confusion, experience, or just your damn self would expose. Tugging honesty by omission as a dress to fit.

# IV.

Processing an archive means taking out every folder in a box that an author has put together (or not), describing what's inside it, and putting it back in place. Most author archives are longer than a semi tractor trailer these days. It is important historical work.

Sometimes, it is like being possessed by spirits. Sometimes, it's like eavesdropping on the most fascinating conversation at the coolest party you never got invited to. And sometimes, because we are talking about the papers of people here, it is so boring that it will reduce you to tears. I want to qualify this, but I can't. It's just the truth.

What I want to do is put the lids on all of these boxes, stack them up, and walk out into the last sliver of winter daylight. The boxes are full of papers, collected off the floor of a poet's house in upstate New York. Now that large libraries and historical societies collect archives, or groups of mostly paper documents that reflect the life or work of their organizer, most people have awareness of the "burning building question" with a public-facing twist—what do you save when you have a choice? And what do you save for others to go through, if you think you've done something worth sharing? But while similar in sentiment, archives tend to have less of the burning building type of urgency—things accumulate as time passes, and scope

increases. It is hard to organize your life. Most people try to avoid it.

That's where I come in. I'm the person who shows up to an author's or artist's house with overalls, ready to carry between twenty and sixty bankers boxes (for most archives) and put them in a truck. I show up high on coffee and submissive to the process, pursue a regular routine of push-ups and squats so I can enjoy lifing all that cardboard, and savor reading the books by the people I work with.

Once I have access to a good table for a few days straight, I take out the contents of every single box and write down what it is. Then, I organize that information in a document to make sense to the librarians that will one day receive it. If it makes sense to the librarians, it can justify the price. Which the creator deserves, and often needs.

Poets are organizers of knowledge, but they don't do it in the way one might expect. I marvel at the mystifying and bespoke ways that some materials get stashed. Sometimes, it makes me wonder how something could get so crumpled and squished, yet still be offered as sacred part of a collection. Dried snot, locks of hair, cat hair, a tin of dead bees, a handgun—archival boxes contain multitudes. In tough moments, they contain traces of the panic that accompanies cleaning out a closet—quickly shove random things into a box, label it "assorted," and hope for the best.

But keeping things is not enough if you actually want to find anything in an archive. To know

what's there, someone has to have laid eyes on it, described it, and made a note of where it is. Otherwise, in the oceans of paperwork already out there, it might as well not exist. To make it exist, I have to describe it as closely as possible. I've been sitting at this table for hours, attempting to make sense of a one-foot pile of papers that have been shuffled as though someone planned to play Black Jack with pages of five different manuscripts. It's difficult to learn how to catalogue well—a sea of acronyms like TLS, ALS, APC, or variations on hifalutin turns of phrase like “very fine” and “though uncalled for.”

But once I learned how to catalog and process archives: first, the Eden-like satisfaction of naming. Or driving a car with a powerful engine. Power, precision. Then, second: I thought, I will be shuffling and describing endless paperwork in perpetuity. The fast-car feeling vanished. These things are gifts. These things are hard work. These things unlock histories yet to be known. People get tired. People are messy, and frankly, organizing doesn't always make sense.

People deserve to be messy, I remind myself. None of this is under any obligation to make sense to anyone else.

I put the lid on the last box and walk out into the twilight. A mess is not what we think.

A mess,  
amass:  
send, let go  
then put or place.

Political, spiritual: we eat the same  
dish together as communion.

Know the history: post-1800,  
the nurture of cooked and baked  
becomes disorder and dirt

but at its core,  
it is the nourishment we share  
at the same table.

Mess of experience, mess of papers,  
mess of what sustains.

**THIS IS A DIGITAL COPY  
OF MESSY ARCHIVIST**

THERE WAS ALSO AN EDITION OF 33 COPIES  
PLUS 3 ARTISTS' PROOFS

PRINTED IN WRAPPERS  
28 COPIES HANDBOUND IN ORANGE LINEN THREAD  
5 COPIES IN PURPLE LINEN THREAD

9 COPIES INCLUDE LIMITED POSTCARD FROM ROOM 26  
DISCRETE NOTIONS EXHIBITION SERIES 15 #5A, "GERRIT'S  
LIBRARY (MAGIC ROOM)"

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