Meaning and Its Opposites

Jenn Boxer McNeal

I'm often asked, "Who invented asemic writing?" That's like asking who invented food, sleep, language, laughter. All of us have always been happy authors of non-sense. Just look at the marks a child places on the page before they learn to write—their joyful imitations of adult lettering that are always better than the so-called "real thing." Our love of the meaningless starts as early as our capacity to love anything at all.

—Ember Wilson

Meaning? Who needs it?!

—Sigmund Castor Mime
(attributed)

Preface

I am grateful to the editors of the *Proceedings of the Society for Graphic Poets* for the opportunity to publish this version of the paper I gave at our annual convention in Orlando. My primary goal at that meeting was twofold. First, I wanted to offer a few thoughts about the nature of meaninglessness and the role it plays in our lives. Second, I wanted to set the record straight about a range of issues related to Aseminal Affairs (AA), the company that Alectrona House and I founded in 1999. AA became the sudden focus of public attention after our name began to surface on Facebook, Substack, TikTok, and various other disinformation mills a while back. We have been called everything from

a "nonsense factory" to a cult. In the wake of Alectrona's untimely death, it seemed particularly important to offer an accurate account of our history and work. I felt that the members of the Society for Graphic Poets would be most likely to appreciate the somewhat esoteric mission of AA. It seemed like a natural place to begin the hard slog of restoring our reputation.

During the Q&A session that followed my talk in Orlando, a member of the audience near the back of the room stood up and asked—with no discernible compunction—if Alectrona House and I were lovers. I rolled my eyes and moved on, but I have not been able to shake the sense that the question contained some kind of accusation. Was the imputation that there was something inappropriate about a romance between Alectrona and me? That, at this late date, I was still ashamed of being gay? That my ideas couldn't be trusted if my business partner was also my romantic partner? That as Alectrona's lover (should that fact be established), I was somehow complicit in her death?

My sense is that within the larger community of scholars, poets, designers, and artists who knew Alectrona, there is some vague, lingering cloud of scandal. So I've added this preface to my original remarks in order to address the gossipier issues right from the start. Friends and coworkers with whom I have shared drafts of this paper have advised against including this personal information, claiming, variously, that it's irrelevant, inappropriate, and indecorous. But I am determined to clear the air once and for all. If you're one of the readers who isn't enticed by the scent of scandal, I invite you to skip ahead to the next section.

Let's deal with the issue straightaway: At the time of her death in 2023, I had known Alectrona House for nearly three decades. Were we lovers? We were more than friends.

I met Alectrona as an undergrad in 1990. I had enrolled in a special program at the University of Michigan that offered an interdisciplinary arts curriculum housed in one of the old dorms. The idea was to place classrooms, studios, and faculty offices in the same building where we lived in hopes of nurturing a kind of artist colony for college kids. We had a gallery, a library, and a small theater. We made pottery, wrote poems, staged plays. The program, let's be honest, attracted weirdos and misfits. I fit right in. I'd come from a rough high school at the edge of Detroit's urban sprawl. The late eighties were still very homophobic, and I didn't come out until my sophomore year of college. That curious program in Ann Arbor was possibly the best place on

earth for someone like me to announce that I like girls. My friends were more than supportive. Indeed, at times it felt like they were insistent.

Alectrona was two years behind me. We met in a theater class that I was forced to take because I needed to satisfy a particular requirement for graduation. The class incorporated a lot of improv. As a devout introvert with a surfeit of social anxiety, I hated it. I skipped class regularly and often refused to join activities on stage.

Alectrona was only a first-year, but she became a kind of coach and mentor. She had a shaved head and stood barely five feet off the ground, but I thought of her as a kind of bodyguard. Her delicate, exposed ears contained multiple piercings, with a striking silver bar struck through the cartilage of her top left one—an "industrial." I wanted to kiss her the first time I saw her.

One day, as we left the theater, I blurted out something like, "I [expletive] hate this class." She laughed, but listened with genuine compassion while I cataloged the various ways I found the whole enterprise torturous. After that, when we were asked to perform together on stage, she came to my rescue. I would freeze up, and she would offer a lifeline, feeding me prompts that were absurd but also generative: "I bet that reminds you of the time when your pet frog died." Everyone would laugh, including me. She helped me invent characters that would turn my nervousness into a character trait. It wasn't me stuttering, it was my persona. It wasn't me staring blankly, unable to respond, it was the role I was playing—the role of a lost, frightened, bewildered girl.

I learned that Alectrona approached life in general like an improv comedy performance. She was always adopting personas, roles, parts. She was always embracing very specific, obscure passions, obsessions, pursuits. For a long time, she had a poster of punk-rocker Richard Hell—looking stoned in his tank top—taped to her dorm-room wall. If you asked her about it, she would unleash a torrent about the mistreatment Hell had received at the hands of his Television bandmates. Later, she claimed that her favorite genre of music was "accordion competition." Virtuosic performances of "Flight of the Bumblebee" or "Beer Barrel Polka" were constantly flowing from her stereo, calling up images of carnival rides spinning out of control.

Alectrona shaved her head shortly before I met her. I always thought she was emulating badass Sigourney Weaver in *Alien 3*, but Alectrona claimed she was doing it precisely for no reason at all. She claimed that she was "in love" with human acts of randomness. She wrote poetry, but only unrhymed sesti-

nas. (Me: "Isn't rhyme part of what makes them sestinas?" Her: "Not when I do it.")

I remained in Ann Arbor for over a year after graduation, working in a small printshop that specialized in letterpressed cards and invitations. Alectrona and I hung out almost constantly but then had a falling out the summer after her junior year. I entered an MFA program in graphic design at the Center for Creative Studies in Detroit. Alectrona completed her degree and then moved in with an aunt in Seattle. She began coursework in women's studies at the University of Washington, but spent most of her time in poetry workshops that she had somehow finagled her way into. She never completed her degree. Alectrona and I were in touch intermittently. It's natural for college friendships to fade after graduation.

But several years later, we discovered that we were both living in Lansing, Michigan. I received a postcard that had been forwarded from my old Detroit address. It turned out that Alectrona was living only five minutes down the road. I confess that this news was thrilling, but also mildly unsettling. I didn't have words for it then, but I think I was worried that Alectrona would once again become my mentor and bodyguard, and I wasn't sure if that was healthy.

I was working at a community arts center where I was paid a subsistence-level wage for helping school children learn basic printmaking skills. Alectrona had accepted a position at Michigan State University where she joined an army of Visiting Assistant Professors (VAPs)—a label that was a euphemism for faculty who lacked the job security of tenure. Both of us were poor and in need of cheap digs; we moved into an apartment above an Irish bar on Lansing's Washington Square, a brick street lined with shops, restaurants, and galleries. I began calling her Alec, which she claimed to love. (Until then, friends often referred to her as Tron, like the movie, but that always felt gimmicky to me.) When I asked if the gender misalignment bothered her, she gave me a bewildered look. "Because 'Alec' is traditionally a boy's name," I explained. She merely shrugged.

We cobbled together a life. People Alec knew were always experimenting with hippie-style entrepreneurial endeavors: food co-ops, vegan food trucks, coffee shops that doubled as art galleries. We moved in and out of these endeavors—working a booth at the farmer's market one day, staffing a gallery the next. I took on as much freelance graphic design work as I could find,

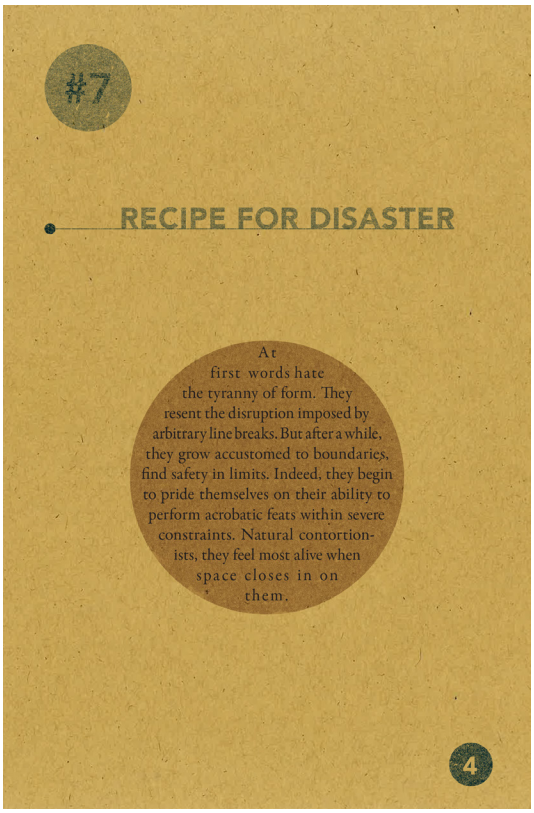

Figure 1
Alectrona House (b. 1969)
"#7 Recipe for Disaster"
From 50 Circular Recipes, 1997

Chapbook design and printing
Jenn Boxer McNeal

applying my skills to catalogs, political posters, glossy brochures for dental implants, and the like.

Alec published poetry in small literary journals. She was invited to read one of her poems on NPR. Although she had no formal training in art, she had a cartoon published in *The New Yorker*. But she was restless and poor, and she began to resent the piles of freshman essays that she was asked to grade as a VAP.

Alec's poetry grew increasingly experimental. Together we started W$^{\text{SQUARE}}$ Press, devoted to publishing limited-edition books by poets and artists within our ragtag coterie. At one point, we published a letterpressed chapbook of her poems, all of which were formatted into the shape of a circle (Figure 1). It was time-consuming to set the type, even by letterpress standards, and I worked very hard to format each piece with Euclidean perfection.

To this day, it's the project of which I am most proud. Since Alec's death, I find myself leafing through its pages on a regular basis.

At one point during this period, Alec took a day trip to the Art Institute of Chicago, and when she returned, she was in a kind of manic state. She had stumbled on a work called *Infinit-y*—a postcard created by Zooma Gutiérrez (Figure 2).* She saw the postcard mounted on the museum-white wall of the AIC and immediately thought, *This is the height of absurdity. Modern art has dissolved into the trivial. And I have dissolved with it.* She had periodically struggled with depression, and at that moment, thinking that her life had been pointless, she could feel the energy drain out of her.

But it just so happened that a young boy of about five or six was also looking at Gutiérrez's postcard. He started to chant, "Why? Why? Why? Why?" Upon hearing this, Alectrona understood the postcard in a completely new way. She felt lightheaded, as if she might faint. In subsequent weeks, she be-

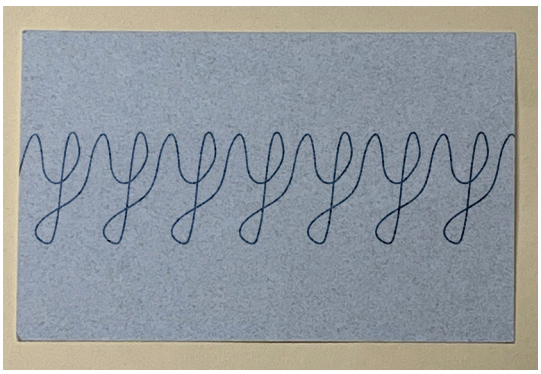

Figure 2
Zooma Gutiérrez (b. 1941)
***Infinit-y*, 1970**

4 in. x 6 in.
Xerox photocopy on cardstock

Reprinted with permission of the artist.

* Gutiérrez had crossed paths with Luis Camnitzer et al. in the 60s. Calling themselves the New York Graphic Workshop, this group was devoted to an ethic of FANDSO—free assemblable nonfunctional disposable serial object. Postcards were a favorite medium. Alectrona claimed that there were several "translations" that occurred when she heard the chanting of the young boy at the Art Institute of Chicago. Y became Why?, which in turn became the question that young children foist upon adults. And then the repetition became the ultimate futility of ever answering the question with any degree of sufficient depth of satisfaction. That a child immediately "got" this work was stunning to Alectrona. It convinced her that something complex could be rendered very simply.

came obsessed with a particular niche of avant-garde art and poetry that embraced a radically minimalist approach. She constantly sought out edge cases. What could you get out of a single word? What could you get out of a single letter? She spent numerous hours at MSU's library, sleuthing out obscure experiments in the visual presentation of texts. She was particularly infatuated with a specimen that she found in MSU's Special Collections—a black 3x5 card from which a short text had been die cut (Figure 3). When I asked her why the simple piece captured her attention, she said something about the way it "shimmered" between presence and absence. Finally, she stumbled across the work of Sigmund Castor Mime, famous for prints that featured invented writing systems.

Happily, this led to a renewed interest in me. She would grill me for hours about typography, the history of printmaking, principles of design. She became obsessed with the ampersand and began collecting vintage letterpress forms of that character. She even started to design ampersands of her own (Figure 4).

One day Alec received a letter in the mail that contained a single 4x6 snapshot. The photo shows a young woman whose right hand was raised as if to block the camera lens. The faded colors of the print are consistent with pocket cameras popular in the 1970s. The hand is over-exposed, indicating the use of a flash. The woman's eyes are visible and emotionally charged. With anger? Surprise? Amusement? On the back of the photo was a message rendered in neat, hand-printed letters: *Thought you'd appreciate this*. The message was unsigned, and the envelope contained no return address, and the mostly obscured woman was unrecognizable.

The photo began to haunt Alec. She felt like she was failing some kind of test. She tacked the snapshot to the fridge with a magnet and would stare at it periodically. She took it to the library and made photocopies, which she sent to the last three people who had lived in our apartment: *I'll send you the original if you think this photo was intended for you*. No one responded.

One day, while drinking her morning coffee at the kitchen table, she recorded her consternation in the steno pad she used as a journal. Soon her handwriting degraded into a kind of unreadable script—the raw marks that emerge when exasperation pushes the writer beyond letters, beyond language. Alectrona ripped the page out of her notebook and placed it on the fridge next to the photo (Figure 5). The oppressive need to obsess about the photo lifted.

Figure 3
David M. Sheridan (b. 1969)
"a poem was here"

3 in. X 5 in.
Die-cut black cardstock

Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 4
Design for an invitation
Alectrona House and
Jenn Boxer McNeal, 1997

This invitation designed by McNeal incorporates House's concept for an ampersand based on overlapping circles.

Shortly thereafter, I walked into the kitchen to refill my own coffee mug, and I noticed the torn page from Alectrona's journal. I stood in front of it, moving my lips silently, as if I were reading it to myself. Then I tapped it with one finger and said, "I think that's your best poem." I winked at her, chuckling at my own joke.

"Oh my God," Alec said, "that's brilliant."

"Pardon?"

"You're absolutely right. That's my best poem. And I feel better. I can finally forget about that damn photo."†

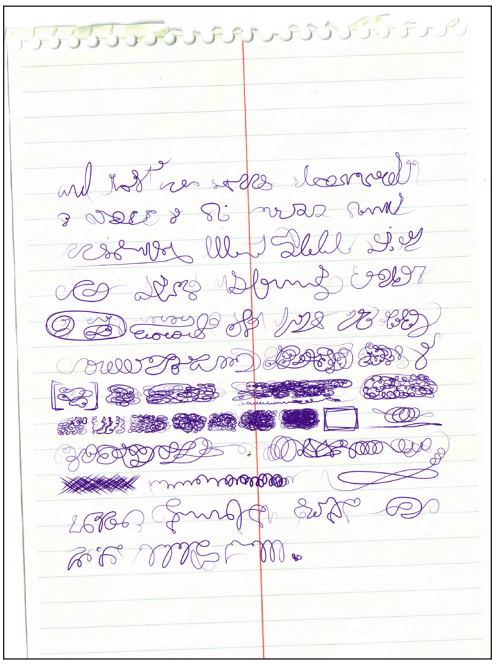

Figure 5
Alectrona House
Page from steno pad, 1998

† Alectrona's exploration of avant-garde poetry had led her to the work of Tim Gaze and Jim Leftwich. Although the word *asemic* had been in use for a long time, and the idea of unreadable poetry had been around for thousands of years (see the experiments of the Chinese calligrapher Huaisu, a.k.a., the "drunk monk"), Gaze and Leftwich (I'm told those names are real, and not *noms de plume*) are credited as the first to apply *asemic* to poetry. When I referred to Alec's scribbling as a poem, her brain had been primed to understand that there was a deeper, more literal truth to my observation. She had no problem thinking of her scribbling as a poem, and eventually published it in an obscure literary journal called *Knotte Poetry*.

I told her that I was happy she had found peace and went back to the living room with my refreshed coffee. A moment later, she rushed into the room, wearing a familiar eyes-wide expression I had come to understand as a kind of fit—an acute sense of euphoria that comes from finding oneself in the grip of a transformational idea. Whatever she was about to say, I knew it would shape our lives for weeks to come.

"This should be our business," she said.

"Our business? Like, what we care about?"

"No, like an organization. That we start. To make money doing good things."

She laid out her idea for a company devoted to replicating the experience she had just had with her scribble poem. Humans, she said, are continually suffering experiences from which meaning cannot be extracted—like getting a random photo in the mail. But she had found relief by "transmediating" the meaninglessness into a text. She had "cleansed" the meaningless from her body, had transferred it into the "container" of the scribble poem, which was a "hard object"—something that could be stuck on the refrigerator. Surely there was a market for this kind of service.

So there you have it: the story of Alec and Jenn and how we stumbled on the idea of an organization devoted to meaninglessness. What was the precise nature of my relationship with Alectrona House? At times we were friends, roommates, business partners, co-mentors, each other's muse…. But Alec would say that such labels are meaningless. What matters is the lived experience in all its complexity, vibrancy, and undeniability.

Prospectus: The Business of Meaninglessness

The name *Aseminal* is derived from the word *asemic*, which consists of the prefix *a-* meaning *not* (as in ***a****typical*), the root *sem*, meaning *meaning* (as in ***sem****antic*), and the suffix *-ic*, meaning *after the fashion of* (as in *artist****ic***). Aseminal Affairs,‡ as our website explains, is a company "specializing in occasions when the absence of meaning is imposed or desired."

‡ Periodically one of us suggests changing the name of the company to Dystextia, but they are typically argued down on the grounds that it is a poor marketing strategy and also unethical to pun on a disability. One person suggested Abyssmal Affairs. They were subsequently let go, though not necessarily for making that suggestion.

Here are a few characteristics of our asemic compositions—which we call *cyphers* or, less commonly, *decompositions*.[§]

(1) Cyphers are related but not equivalent to the unsayable, the unknowable, the illogical, the irrational, the unreal.[¶]

(2) Cyphers are cathartic. Cyphers allow our clients to *purge* themselves of a meaningless experience by *externalizing* it.

(3) Cyphers create a "threshold experience" for the viewer. In the presence of a cypher, it feels as if you are perpetually on the verge of being able to read the text. The best cyphers have an entrancing quality. It's hard to look away. Your brain is continually tricked into thinking that, with enough patience, you can crack the code. The technical name for this feeling is *longing*.

(4) Cyphers are specific. As Tolstoy said, each meaningless experience is meaningless in its own way. It is the job of the designer to capture each absence of meaning in its particulars.[**]

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§ I was initially against using the term *cypher* to describe what we do because it commonly refers to a code that can be cracked—which is contrary to the nature of asemic compositions. However, skimming through the *OED*'s entry for *cypher*, I am heartened to learn that the word can also mean "zero" or "nonentity." Even better, cypher can refer to a situation when an organ plays a sustained note due to a mechanical malfunction. What could be more meaningless than an organ blaring a random noise apart from all human intention?

¶ I will add here that I occasionally I hear someone equate *meaningless* with *ambiguous*. I really don't understand how such a conflation can be made. Something is ambiguous if one can attach multiple meanings to it. How can something be meaningless if one can attach meanings to it? That just doesn't make any sense.

** The artists who create our cyphers/decompositions are called *designers*. I don't want to make a big deal out of it here, but I can tell you that all of us at AA hear a hyphen in that word *de-signer*. In English, of course, the prefix *de-* signifies reversal. If something is mysterious, *demystifying* it will make it clear, understandable. If a sign is something that conveys meaning, our job is to create the reversal of that: to create an entity that conveys no meaning.

(5) In cyphers, the lack of meaning is experienced as either a failure or a refusal. This is one way that cyphers are different from a blank page. A blank page is about potential, possibility. It's a beginning. An asemic text is a completed text, a whole text.

(6) A well-made cypher is a vessel that sails at the intersection of two roiling seas. On one side is the sense of the meaningless that corresponds to pointlessness, futility, boredom. Think Sisyphus and his rock. On the other side is meaninglessness as a zone free from limits, from the burden of signification, from the confines of language and tradition—a space in which "everything is permitted." Think the color and chaos of Carnival.

I'll also say a bit about what our cyphers are not. They are not incoherent. In fact, their purpose is to lend coherence to the meaningless. They are not confusing. They bring lucidity: when our clients look at one of our cyphers, they think, "Yes. Exactly." Cyphers are not absences, negations, or vacui. Rather, they are assertions of the presence of the absence of meaning.

The natural thing to do here, of course, would be to show you several cyphers that we've produced for clients over the years. Unfortunately, for legal reasons (our clients own the copyright to their compositions) and company policy (which guarantees confidentiality—no one wants the meaninglessness of their lives to be exposed to the public), I can't simply reproduce examples here. Moreover, as I will explain shortly, releasing cyphers into the world can have unexpected consequences. I will, however, share our business card, which includes a very simple asemic text designed by Alectrona herself (Figure 6).

Let's say that a child's goldfish dies. It's the child's first experience of death. We would begin with a series of gentle questions. What did the fish mean to you? How do you feel about the fact that it is gone? Based on what we learn, our designers construct a customized representation of meaninglessness. In this case, maybe just a 5x7 card. In presenting this card to the child, you explain, "Often, when we lose someone we love, it doesn't make sense." Then you show the child the neatly framed and matted cypher. "See this? It doesn't make sense, right? It's just like what you're feeling right now." Hung on the

Figure 6
Aseminal Affairs business card (c. 2007)
Design by Alectrona House

child's bedroom wall, the cypher *contains* the meaningless experience, which otherwise feels overwhelming, infinite, unrestricted, all-consuming.

Cyphers are like those moments in comic books when a character encounters something ridiculous and is given a speech bubble that encloses "!@%$"—if we interpret this literally, rather than as a stand-in for an unprintable word or phrase. Alectrona herself often told the story of Abbot Paul, the monk who wandered into the Porphyrian desert and lived on dates. Every day he busied himself weaving baskets from palm leaves. When his cave had filled up with his work, he burned everything and started over. "We're the fire," Alectrona liked to say.††

Over the years, Aseminal Affairs has helped clients deal with myriad flavors of meaninglessness. One woman saw a double rainbow on her way to work only to discover that she had been fired, the personal belongings from her cubicle already packed in a cardboard box. A young botanist specializing in phytoremediation returned to his Honda Civic on the curb in Downtown

†† There is some controversy over whether Abbot Paul weaved baskets. John Cassian says that Paul simply collected the leaves. It is possible Paul was merely filling his cave. This is not the place to give a full account of early monastic demonology, but it is worth mentioning that Cassian sees the story of Paul and his cave as an example of the struggle with Acedia, the demon of boredom (aka the "noonday demon"). This is the demon in charge of meaninglessness; his powers include torpor, listlessness, and lethargy.

Lansing to discover that his windshield had been smashed with a sledgehammer. A college student walking home from a Psych 101 lecture on a warm April morning was accosted by another student who, in what seemed like a fit of rage, snarled, "Merry Christmas to you too!" and then ran away.

When I think about our work, my mind always circles back to one client who made contact with us during our first year of operation. I'm going to tell her story here, because I can think of no better way to convey the essence of what we do. I will, of course, change all of the details to protect her anonymity.

Through Crack: The Risks of Wild Clay

In pottery, vessels will occasionally crack so severely that the opening extends fully from the inside of the piece to the exterior. Such cracks are called "through cracks" or "full-thickness cracks" and can result from the particularities of the vessel's shape, the clay itself (moisture level and chemical makeup), and the firing conditions (kiln type, oxygen level, etc.).

Michigan is known for its glacial clay, particularly the rich deposits along the eastern coastline of the Lower Peninsula. Brick and tile have been made from such clays since the nineteenth century. (Ask any brick collector about the "Daniel brick" from Detroit.)

Kelly, a potter in Mid-Michigan, got an Airbnb in Grindstone City. Why did she make this trip? What did it mean to her? Was she going through a breakup? Had she been diagnosed with a serious illness? You know I can't answer those questions for you. But I can tell you that she was dealing with life, and this trip to Grindstone City (obviously not her real destination, but it's what I've selected to serve as a close correlative to where she actually went) was supposed to help her sort things out.

At this time in her life, pottery was virtually the one routine activity Kelly could count on to provide a respite. Most evenings, after the workday was over (she was a district supervisor for a chain of convenience stores), she looked forward to her time in a local studio. This work appealed to her because it resulted in products that were both beautiful and functional. She loved knowing that friends and family were sipping coffee each morning from mugs she had given them.

One day during her lunch break, she found herself looking at the state of Michigan on Google maps—the familiar hand of the lower peninsula. She

found herself zooming in on the Thumb. While she couldn't remember traveling much in that region, she suddenly wondered what was at the very tip of that peninsula. When she zoomed in on the map, the words Grindstone City appeared—a small town on the shore of Lake Huron. Further searching revealed that the name of the town reflects the fact that, in an earlier era, high quality grindstones, scythestones, and honestones were manufactured from the special rock quarried there. She flipped through photographs that showed mysterious piles of these discarded industrial grinding disks along the beach, like dinner plates left behind by an ancient race of giants. They seemed to occupy a space between nature and technology—they were made of heavy rock, yet their circularity testified to human intention.

Kelly was smitten. She wanted to stand on an ancient grindstone, at the tip of The Thumb, and look out across the Lake. So she found a cheap Airbnb—a single room in a house on Quarry Dr. Within an hour of her arrival, she was climbing on the grindstones on the shore of Lake Huron, just like the people she had seen in online images. It was satisfying in the way she had imagined—the sense of being on the tip of a peninsula, the massive stone wheels that connected her with heavy industry in an earlier age. But then it was 2:00 in the afternoon. What should she do with the rest of her stay? She could feel the malaise creeping in on her from all sides.

She bought a pepperoni pizza from a local shop and brought it back to her Airbnb. There, she found the homeowner in the backyard, digging a hole for a decorative pond. ("Frogs and turtles will move in.") Kelly noticed that the dirt was mostly clay—likely part of the glacial clay deposits that were common on that side of the state. A little Googling revealed that Grindstone was located on the Marshall Formation, which comes near the surface in Huron County. The owner was happy to give Kelly the pile she had dug up. Kelly purchased a box of fifty-five-gallon contractor bags at the local hardware store and harvested nearly one hundred pounds of the reddish clay. (None of this, of course, is what really happened to "Kelly," but I'm doing my best to capture the feel of things.)

With this new development, Kelly began to feel a certain energy return. Her evenings in the studio took on a deeper sense of purpose. Kelly had never worked with "wild" clay before but consulted several colleagues whose expertise she trusted. Combining their advice with YouTube video tutorials, she purified and dried the clay. Glacial clay of this kind should be "tempered" with

sand or grog to resist over-shrinking during the firing process. For symbolic reasons, Kelly decided to use Michigan beach sand, which she collected herself during yet another trip to Lake Huron. Her research indicated that sand should be ground to make the granules sharper, which in turn meant that they would more readily bond with the clay. Surprisingly, sand can be ground in a regular kitchen blender.

Kelly made a sugar bowl and creamer set for her friend Louise, a cocktail shaker vase for herself, and four teacups for her mother, who was obsessed with herbal teas. Kelly considered the teacups some of her best work—delicate shapes that echoed the asymmetrical flowers of calla lilies. For the first time, she experimented with a double-coiled handle, a standard S-shaped handle in which a top coil spins out into a bottom coil running in the reverse direction. She started with a Hopewell Gray glaze on the interior and the top third of the exterior. Then she brushed on a band of Deepwell Cerulean #314, modified with a cone 5 recipe that balances alumina, wollastonite, and feldspar to make a slightly "runny" glaze which would drip in the kiln.‡‡ The bottom half of the cups featured the raw glacial clay, which retained the texture of the ground beach sand, documenting this cup's link to Michigan's eastern coast. She began to entertain thoughts of devoting herself exclusively to working with Michigan clay. Perhaps there was a market for pottery made from locally sourced materials. She imagined opening her own shop. The future began to hold a bit more spark.

One of the teacups, however, developed a through crack in the bottom, likely the result of a slightly faulty sand-clay ratio. The cup looked intact but was not suitable for liquids. In the end, Kelly gave the complete set of four cups to her mother, with strict instructions to use the cracked cup as a planter or candy bowl. Strangely enough, the cracked cup quickly became her mother's favorite of the set. She used it to hold a tea candle. The slight asymmetrical shape of the cup created interesting patterns of light and shadow, and sometimes before going to bed, her mother would shut off the electric lights and sit alone at the kitchen table, watching the candlelight play around the room.

Months later, Kelly's mother was performing this ritual on a Friday night at the end of a busy week. It just so happened that the tea candle burned out

‡‡ In ceramics, the temperature of the kiln is monitored through the use of pyrometric cones—pyramid shaped pieces of precisely mixed clay that bend when a desired temperature is reached. Cone 5 is used for temperatures of ~1070°C.

just about the time she was going to head upstairs to bed. She stuck her fingers into the teacup and fished out the tiny metal cylinder that had contained the candle. She dropped the cylinder in the trash, making a mental note to place a new candle in the cup the next day.

Kelly's father (actually her stepfather) habitually got up before her mother. The next morning, he rose at 5:30 as usual, went downstairs, made coffee, and placed a few dirty dishes into the dishwasher—including the empty teacup that sat on the table. (Normally, the presence of the candle would have alerted him that this was the cup with the crack.) Once in the dishwasher, of course, the cup entered into regular circulation. It found its way into the cupboard, joining the other glasses and mugs.

Kelly paid a visit to her parents soon after that. Her mother made tea, as usual, and invited Kelly to rifle through the extensive teas and tisanes to select something that suited her mood. Kelly examined various concoctions involving ginger, turmeric, plum, rose, lavender. There were sachets of ground schisandra berries and tins of loose juniper needles. She selected a metal cannister that contained a mixture of sumac and elderberry. Unscrewing the cannister revealed a collection of silk pouches that each harbored a cache of red-brown dust. She placed one of these into her teacup.

Her fingers wrapped satisfyingly around the vessel she had made. She noted the feel of the line where the smooth glaze met the rough glacial clay. Holding the teacup in both hands, like a baby bird, she extended it to her mother to receive the hot water, who poured it from a blue-and-white teapot. The water went right through the crack in the bottom of the cup, scalding both of Kelly's hands just below their respective pinky fingers. Kelly dropped the mug onto the tile kitchen floor, where it shattered. The puddle of steaming water released a pleasant earthy-fruity fragrance that seemed to mock Kelly's discomfort and shock.

Kelly knew that the pain she felt and the burns the hot water left—twin rose-colored clouds—were meaningless. No one had intended them. They were not the result of spite or sadism. In any event, the burns were not serious: only a small amount of water had managed to trickle through the crack in the bottom of the cup. After rubbing on a little castor oil provided by her mother, the pain soon subsided.

And yet in the ensuing weeks, Kelly found that a nebulous plume of blame was continually emanating from somewhere deep inside her consciousness.

She found herself perseverating over the petty crimes her parents had committed over the years—the times when they had said unkind things, had known, as her parents, precisely how to wound her. And, of course, there was a surfeit of self-blame as well. After all, she was responsible for the crack in the mug and for the decision to gift the mug despite that flaw. Interacting with her parents after that incident, she had to cover up a bitter feeling, and keeping up this pretense drained her.

The ability to understand something as meaningless is an important coping mechanism. Without that tool, it is easy to embrace unhealthy interpretations of events. We think we are being punished; the universe is trying to tell us something; we are reaping the consequences of poor decisions; and so on. Kelly began to question whether her parents really were as loving and supportive as she'd come to think. Perhaps she'd willfully overlooked a darker side to her relationship with them. Instead of simply dismissing the through-crack burn as meaningless, she was spiraling into a vortex of doubt and suspicion.

When she wandered into Aseminal Affairs, we interviewed her at length about her experience, taking note of the wild clay and the pile of grindstones, the frogs and the turtles, the sumac and the elderberries. We wrote down on our respective yellow legal pads repeated words—*haphazard, texture, grind*. There seemed to be an unusual focus on geology: stone, sand, water, clay.

The cypher we fashioned in response to all of this data took the visual form of a modern poem—a narrow column of text surrounded by ample white space. This is a typical case in all important respects. Someone's life has been infected by meaninglessness. We insert a catheter and bleed it out. We seal it off in an airtight container, like the ashes of a loved one stored in a beautifully sculpted urn displayed on the mantle above the fireplace.

The Broder Case: Why Proximity to Meaninglessness Is Always Dangerous

At this point, I hope that I have adequately summarized the concept of meaninglessness and the work of Aseminal Affairs. Now I shall move on to the troubles that eventually befell us. There is a good chance that if you have heard of Aseminal Affairs, it's because of the eruptions on social media that

resulted from the Broder case. I feel duty-bound to provide an accurate account of this chapter in our history—to set the record straight.

In August 2022, AA was contacted by a woman who was confronting the effects of a recent tragedy. Obviously, I can't divulge the specifics, but if you imagine the unexpected death of a loved one or waking up one day to find that your whole family is homeless and facing complete financial ruin, you'll have some idea of the scale. By that point, AA had grown into an organization of around fifty employees. We'd outgrown our original digs (a small suite in a coworking space) and moved into class A office space Downtown. I was in charge of design, but we also had departments for marketing and communications, R&D, and production. We had a whole department for in-take—a group of ethnographers who met with clients to perform a formal study of their encounter with the meaningless. We were a well-oiled machine.

Given the seriousness of this new project, Alectrona and I decided to oversee it ourselves. Following a process that had become standard for us, Alectrona made pencil sketches of concepts for the cypher. We selected the most appropriate one, and I massaged it into its final, polished form using the Adobe Creative Suite.

Most of the work we do is 8x10, 11x17, or (occasionally) 24x36. Frankly, most people prefer to contain their lack of meaning in an 8x10 frame. But given the intensity of the tragedy in this case, we needed something larger to accommodate the profound senselessness. We even visited the client's home to explore specific locations for display. In the end, we designed a four-foot silk banner that contained "letters" eighteen inches high. This decomposition was slated to be hung on the wall above a library table in the client's living room.

When the banner came back from the printers, our intern rolled it up, placed it in a mailer tube, and took it to the post office. But instead of being delivered to our client, the tube found its way to one Landon Broder. We were never able to determine if the error came from our end or the USPS's. Broder's name was similar to our client's, and he lived on the same street. Our intern swears he included an itemized receipt with the banner. I have my doubts. In any case, Broder opened the cannister and examined the contents. We don't have the precise details of what happened next, but from the social media explosion that followed, we know that this massive cypher infected Broder's life. At first, he took it out periodically and stared at it. But eventually he hung it up on the soffits above his kitchen cabinets. Suddenly, the cypher we had

designed to accommodate a tragedy was continually shouting itself at Broder as he took his morning coffee, as he ate his microwaved dinners. It wished him a loud, senseless farewell when he left for work in the morning and blasted him each evening with an aseminal greeting. When he got up in the middle of the night to fetch a drink of water, the banner was there, broadcasting its anti-significance in a stage whisper.

In short, the banner took over Broder's life. Up until that point, his routines had seemed purposeful. Then, suddenly, a riotous beacon of meaninglessness hung over his existence, bellowing relentlessly and gratuitously, night and day. Since the banner had nothing to externalize, the process went the other way. Instead of containing meaninglessness, it distributed it—injected it into Broder's daily experience. Broder began to question everything. He would help himself to a bowl of ice cream, then look at the banner. "Meaningless!" it shouted. I think I'll go for a hike today: "Meaningless!" Perhaps I should read a book: "Meaningless!" Everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind. As far as we can tell, Broder's son visited at some later date and connected Broder's malaise with the banner, which he ultimately brought back to us, having found our return address label on the mailing tube.

Broder recovered, but only after a lengthy period of anger, during which he launched a series of scathing posts on social media. His TikTok video is particularly notable. It's likely that you, or someone you know, has seen it. Broder offers a five-minute rant in which he references a company called Aseminal Affairs that is "devoted to pumping meaninglessness into the world." He sounds like someone suffering from a mental illness—someone paranoid, delusional, semi-coherent. "They targeted me with an orgiastic growl of gibberish," he says at one point. He describes our decomposition as a "diabolic code" designed to "subvert the foundation of human existence." He repeats the phrase "soul sick" multiple times. Parasitic language dominates his rant—AA is "draining," "sucking," "sponging"—calling up a leech affixed to its host. "Their sole purpose is to siphon off everything in your life that feels important." His anger takes on a delirious quality; his eyes widen frequently, as if he is perpetually rediscovering how magically awful we are. As with most viral videos, when you're watching this without the backstory or context, it takes on a mysterious and fascinating quality. If you don't know anything about Aseminal Affairs, the whole thing is mesmerizing. An "orgiastic growl of gibberish"? What is this person even talking about?

Like previous viral videos featuring cats or rainbows, this one spawned a kind of cottage industry of parodies, tributes, and sympathy cards. A late-night talk show host incorporated references to Broder in his opening monologue, imitating Broder's wide-eyed pronouncements. "I tried to brush my teeth, only to find that my toothpaste was a writhing goo of nonsense." A Jesus-looking man strummed an acoustic guitar, singing "Why bother to get dressed / when everything is meaningless." An undergraduate at Yale established a GoFundMe campaign to raise money for a nonprofit devoted to combating the creeping sense of meaninglessness in our lives. Meanwhile, the phones at Aseminal Affairs lit up with complaints of the "How dare you!?" variety, punctuated by the occasional "I'll have what he's having!" plea.

Meaning's Failure and the Weaponization of Aseminality

Just as the Broder case was heating up, AA experienced an internal crisis that eventually boiled over into the public as well. Sometime near the end of 2023, AA department heads entered the conference room for our weekly meeting with Alectrona to discover an instance of vandalism. One of Alectrona's most treasured works of art—a limited-edition print by the asemic poet Sig (Sigmund Castor Mime, Figure 7)— had been defaced. Someone had stenciled, in bright red spray-paint, what appeared to be a new asemic text over the top of Sig's original (Figure 8).

Alectrona was late to the meeting, as usual, and the five or six of us in the room sat murmuring expressions of confusion and fear as we waited for her. The room quieted when Alectrona entered, and we watched to see how she would react. A signed, limited-edition print by Sig is worth several thousand dollars. More importantly, we assumed that the work had deep personal value for Alectrona quite apart from its market price.

To our surprise, when she saw the defaced work, Alectrona began to laugh. She erupted into a full-body giggle even before she took her place at the head of our walnut conference table. It disconcerted me, and I remember wondering if Alectrona was having a bit of a breakdown. "Brilliant," she proclaimed. The meeting proceeded according to the agenda without further comment.

In talking with Alectrona later, I learned that her response had been intellectually substantive. She thought someone had extended the asemic work of Sig's poem through a subsequent act of "(dese)cr(e)ation." In offering his

Figure 7
Sig (Sigmund Castor Mime) (b. 1955)
***Presto!* 2019**

12 in. X 19 in.
Risograph print on brown paper bag

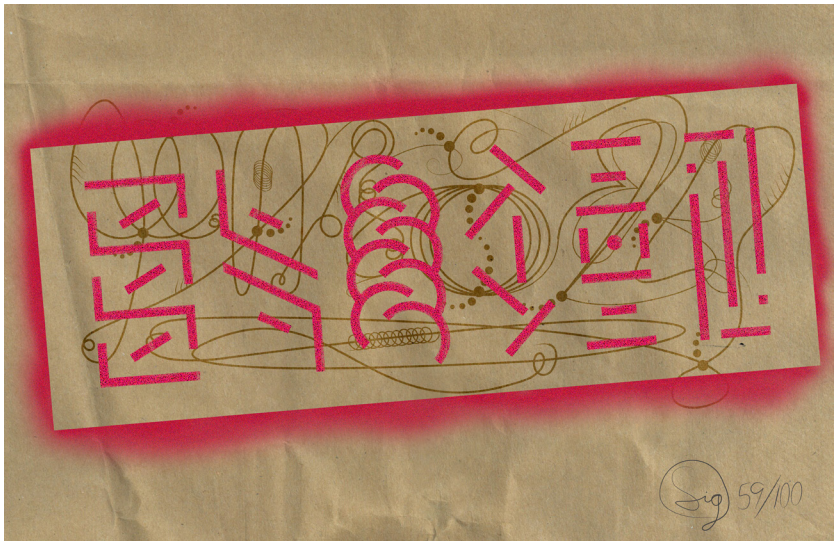


Figure 8
Defaced version of *Presto!* 2022

poem, Sig was saying, "This meaninglessness." The vandal was responding, "No! *This* meaninglessness." In Alectrona's view, this was perfectly in keeping with the spirit of asemic poetry. A refusal of meaning had itself been refused.

Shortly thereafter, we started to get clues that this might be a coordinated effort—the work of some collective. They clearly had an inside connection, since no public record of our clients existed. Several of us suspected that Broder was involved somehow.

Soon the reports started filtering in from clients: they would return from a day at work or a family vacation to find that someone had broken into their house to vandalize their cypher. It was always the same. Someone had used scarlet spray paint to stencil a new cypher on top of the old one—always at a slightly oblique angle, the way you might use a rubber stamp to mark CANCELED on an obsolete contract, license, or certificate. Alectrona remained unbothered, insisting that it was "all part of the game."

Some clients reported they experienced a kind of closure that had heretofore eluded them, as if our cypher had helped them manage their encounter with the meaningless, but only in the layering of the red stencil did they finally achieve true peace.

Parade as a Contested Space for the Meaningless

Not long after this, we began a project designed to introduce to the world the full power of the meaningless. What strategy did we have in mind for this purpose? A float for Detroit's Thanksgiving Day parade. Writing it here seems a bit ridiculous, but at the time it made perfect sense.

It was no secret that Alectrona loved parades—spectacles of absurdity that draw thousands of onlookers, featuring giant balloons fashioned in the shape of fantastical creatures (frogs, bugs, personified suns), as well as dancers, clowns, sequined girls twirling batons. Untold millions of dollars are invested in "floats"—the word itself calling up magical vehicles that drift through space like dandelion seeds—boasting color explosions, fairy scenes, unsettlingly gigantic expressions of joy. An eclectic group of artisans (illustrators, sculptors, welders, carpenters, papier-mâchérs) is recruited to produce dreamscapes seen no more than once a year.

When Alectrona first began making references to AA sponsoring a float in Detroit's Thanksgiving Day parade, we thought she was kidding. We started

to take her more seriously when her references included alarmingly specific details about cost, designs, and protocol. "Floats are made in a former atomic bomb facility on Detroit's East Side," she would say. "An entry-level float costs a mere $75,000." After a couple weeks of this kind of thing, I paid a visit to Jess, our marcomms director. I confided that Alectrona's obsession with the parade worried me.

"I think she's serious," I said. "And this is a huge mistake. This is going to backfire in so many ways. Putting us out there with giant inflatables like Elmo and the Ninja Turtles or what-have-you…. It's embarrassing. Our current clients will want to hide their cyphers. Prospective clients won't take us seriously. Not to mention that Thanksgiving is a celebration of settler-colonial violence. We're going to be canceled."

Jess agreed with me, and the next day we approached Alectrona as a united front. Alectrona listened carefully and then stared out her window for an awkwardly long period of time at the Capital Bank Tower—Lansing's one true skyscraper. I remember seeing a flock of pigeons performing a series of aerobatic moves in front of the clock on the tower's face.

Finally, Alectrona's gaze returned—if not to us, at least to the proximity of the room. "This is perfect," she muttered.

"Pardon?" I said.

"I'm sorry?" Jess said.

"Don't you see? We have a chance to subvert the cultural authority of the parade, to reveal the fundamental meaninglessness of celebrating oppression. We are uniquely positioned for this work. This is our moment."

I don't mind telling you that Alectrona's quiet excitement proved infectious. From her expression, I could see that her brain was assembling a vision for this grand gesture, how we would slip a gargantuan nonsense bomb into the parade—10,000 pounds of cyphericality that would undo centuries of Western violence. We were like Luke firing his proton torpedoes into the exhaust port of the Death Star—a single act of rebellion that would cause the entire infrastructure to explode.

So we hatched a plan. Alectrona herself designed the cypher, drawing inspirations from the markings of butterflies and moths (Figures 9 & 10). Most modern parade floats are constructed of some combination of carved prop-foam and wire-frame papier-mâché, often with an outercoat of shiny polymer to achieve that hyper-real sheen. To contrast with these norms, Alectrona cre-

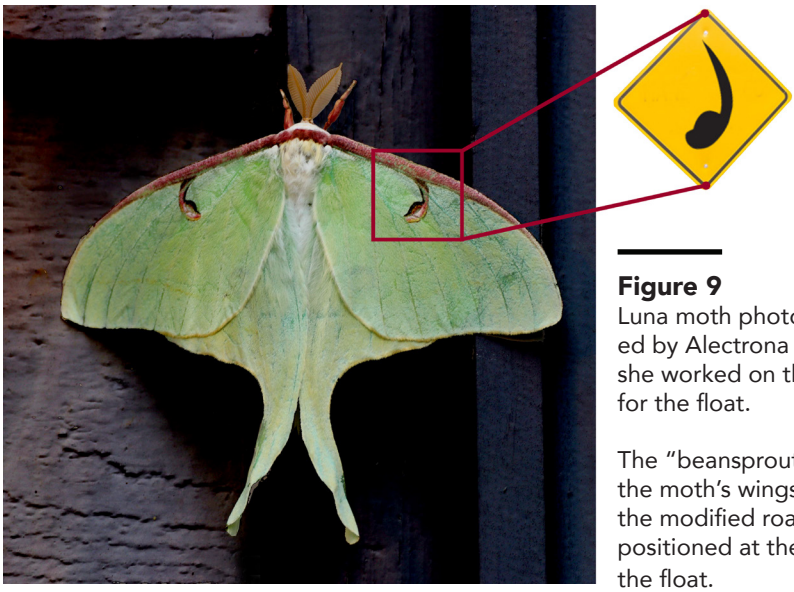


Figure 9
Luna moth photo consulted by Alectrona House as she worked on the designs for the float.

The "beansprouts" on the moth's wings inspired the modified road sign positioned at the front of the float.

Figure 10
Alectrona House

Cypher for Detroit's Thanksgiving Day Parade float

Figure 11
Photoshop mock-up of Aseminal Affair's float for Detroit's Thanksgiving Day Parade

ated a design that made use of heavy, rigid materials (Figure 11). We worked with the artisans at the parade studio to design a float constructed of wood and metal. From a local salvage supply, we secured sheets of corrugated aluminum, discarded road signs, rusty metal poles, textured steel flooring repurposed from ramps in auto factories. A platform was fashioned out of boards harvested from discarded forklift pallets. We contracted with a local metal fabricating firm to have Alectrona's design plasma cut.

To create the illusion that floats are, indeed, floating, tires are typically hidden from view. We went the opposite way: using giant exposed tractor tires with knobby treads. In the parade itself, the whole thing was pulled by a wrecker. "I want it to look like someone is paying to have their junk hauled away," Alectrona said. Obviously, all of this raised eyebrows at the parade studio. But, through carefully evasive language, Alectrona led everyone to believe that our cypher communicated a message of peace in an obscure language "not unlike Esperanto."

I don't think anyone was truly surprised by what happened next, even if we were collectively deflated. Sleeper Towing Service arrived at 6:00 a.m. on Thanksgiving Day as requested. They connected to the float using their standard hook-and-chain getup (rather than through a simple hitch) to underscore the sense of transporting salvage. We had worked with the welders to include metal connection loops for this express purpose.

Alectrona had a friend with a fourth-floor apartment in the David Broderick Tower, positioned on Woodward Avenue, just south of Grand Circus Park—and therefore a perfect position to watch the parade. A small number of us gathered there, sipping weak mimosas and watching the parade pass in front of us. Through the southwest-facing windows of the apartment, floats were only visible when they appeared directly below us. We could not see upstream.

Detroiters know that the People Mover's serpentine path slithers over Woodward at precisely this point, which made for a curious experience of the parade. The bigger floats and balloons had to undergo strange permutations to fit under the crossing. Some floats placed taller structures on hinges and had elaborate hydraulic systems for lowering them. We had designed our float to provide the requisite 18" clearance. As it happened, we were positioned directly behind the Kermit the Frog inflatable. Kermit had to be lowered on his back and partially deflated to slide under the People Mover tracks. Ac-

complishing this took several minutes, during which time our float remained out of view.

Finally, Kermit limboed under the bridge and our Sleeper Towing Service truck entered the frame of our fourth-floor window. Just as our float passed under the People Mover, what looked like a giant canvass tarp unfurled from the concrete overpass; our float charged into it like a bull pursuing the red cape of a matador. The tarp caught on the yellow road sign positioned at the front, and then perfectly blanketed Alectrona's butterfly cypher, snuffing out our carefully prepared nonsense bomb with the ease of someone pinching out a tea candle. The whole thing looked like a well-rehearsed maneuver, like a dexterous magician covering an elephant before making it disappear. What was stenciled on the tarp, with two-story élan? The very same decomposition that had been stenciled on *Presto!* several months prior.

"No!" I said.

Alec began to giggle—a king of maniacal purr, like an evil cat amplified through Metallica's concert amps—an act even more unsettling than the defamation of our float. I could feel the anger rise, anger at the nameless person behind the tarp, anger at Alectrona for laughing, anger at our willingness to invest so much time, money, and energy into this farcical project. Explode the settler colonial infrastructure? Ha! The joke was on us. But this feeling passed over me relatively quickly while I watched Alec's laughing seizure. Ultimately, I just rolled my eyes and groaned. I called Sleeper Towing and asked them to radio the driver to remove the tarp. Too late. The float reached the end of the route with the tarp intact.

We never figured out who was responsible for the tarp or the acts of vandalism that preceded it. We chose not to involve the authorities, as none of our clients felt that there was anything to be gained by exposing their private battle with life's emptiness to local police. And Aseminal Affairs didn't want an extended investigation that might perpetuate negative news and social media coverage. What we do know is that, after the parade incident, the vandalism suddenly stopped. It was as if the grand public gesture of ruining our float on TV had finally purged the saboteur of their grievance with us—or, as Alectrona would say, their love affair with us.

Conclusion: The Conspicuous Absence of Meaninglessness

Alectrona died suddenly about six months after the parade. She was only fifty-one. She and I lived apart at that point, but we had breakfast plans, and I let myself into her apartment, as usual, with the key that she had given me. She was sitting on the couch in front of the TV, tuned to The Weather Channel. When she ignored my greeting, I quickly suspected that something was wrong. The subsequent autopsy proved inconclusive. Cause of death indeterminable. It was as if Alectrona planned the whole thing—a parting gift of performance art aimed at frustrating all attempts to derive meaning.

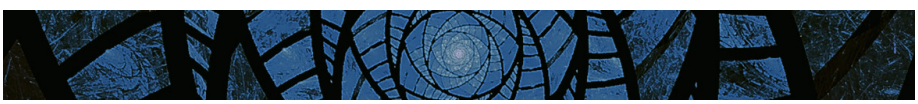
Careful readers will have discerned a flaw in the preceding account. Perhaps you spotted it in Alectrona's careful selection of grave materials (wood, steel) for the float. She did it to signify the float's intended meaning as a dissenting note in a parade full of plastic—industrial ballast aimed at counteracting the buoyancy of helium-filled balloons. The characters of the cypher were lifted from the elegant wings of butterflies, and even if you don't know that little fact, at some level their adorable curves convey meaning to you. The mere reference to butterflies evokes whole systems of meaning, from entomological facts to Hallmark greeting cards and their obligatory rainbows. Perhaps you saw it in the ritual burnings of Abbot Paul in the desert. There can be no doubt that meaning saturated those rituals. Can you imagine how free Paul must have felt, how refreshed, by the blank slate left over after the inferno had completed its work? Because, the truth of the matter is, humans are not capable of experiencing pure meaninglessness. Everything is meaningful—flowers, clouds, ice cream, rainbows, through-cracks, and death. Death is always full of meaning.

Meaninglessness is like antimatter. Eruptions of antimatter continually vibrate into existence, but are instantly annihilated when they come into contact with matter. (Truthfully, I have always loved that physics has been forced to use such a theatrical word as *annihilation*.) Anti-stuff is always absorbed by stuff. Absence is no match for presence. The same thing is true of meaninglessness. We see flickers of it, but ultimately it is always assimilated into the larger stories we tell ourselves about our lives. I don't know whether to feel sorry for

Alectrona, because her life's dream of relieving herself and others of the heavy weight of significance remained unrealized, or to take solace in thinking that her work was always secretly demonstrating the stubborn meaningfulness of existence through our own valiant but failed attempts to create something perfectly meaningless. Rest in peace, Alec. You mean the world to me.

Acknowledgments

In writing this article, I consulted a number of helpful sources, including *Wikipedia*—especially the entries for *asemic writing* and *acedia*. Michigan State University's *Geography of Michigan* website provided useful information related to Grindstone City. John Cassian writes about Abbot Paul in *Institutes*. Alan Palmer's "Acedia: Its History and Development" provided additional details regarding Abbot Paul and acedia.



David M. Sheridan (he/him) teaches writing and design in the Residential College in the Arts and Humanities at Michigan State University. He holds an MFA (fiction) from Western Michigan University and a PhD (English) from Michigan State University. His work has appeared in *Story*, *The Missouri Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, and other places. He is working on a collection of poetry entitled *52 Missing Poems*, in which every poem is cut out of a black 3X5 card.