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A Series of Series

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## Abstract

### A Series of Series

By Julie Levine

Writers and artists like Andy Warhol and Susan Sontag have suggested that repetition leads to desensitization, that if one witnesses the same images and ideas over and over, they are subject to losing their novelty. Although I agree there is validity to this claim, is there also something more mystical to the idea of repetition? This collection explores the question at hand, creating a narrative out of a series of pairs, each of which touches upon repeated images, ideas, words and phrases that are manifested in the life of the speaker, art, myth, and a more fantasy-based, metaphorical world. Over the course of the collection, I have delved into concepts such as death, destruction, love, fears, impulses, desires and creation, since these demonstrate those repetitive facets of human existence that are universal and therefore some of the most present. Through a seamless interplay of repetition between these pairs, the poems serve to blur the lines that exist between art, dream and reality. In turn, they suggest that the omnipresent nature of repetition across time and space has the power to render a feeling of entrapment, and therefore, to a certain degree, a heightened sensitivity rather than a desensitization. Thus, as a whole, the collection aims to ask a more overarching question: in the quest to free oneself from the repetitive patterns of existence, where might a person find solace?

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## Warhol's *Green Car Crash* Sells for a Record \$71.7 Mil at Christie's Auction

"Isn't life just a series of images that change as they repeat themselves?" – Andy Warhol

Perhaps fate led the photographer there: he watched from a distance, capturing the moment, the capsized car, the rising, impenetrable smoke cloud, capturing the catapulted driver, the climbing spike of a utility pole capturing

him like a tack on a bulletin board, penetrating his spine like an electric shock, jolting him in and out of consciousness, his hands dangling, the shell shock weakening him, his head despairingly drooping sideways, as if in shock

the impact had not yet killed him, as if hoping the wreckage fire might run through him, might blacken him into the charcoal ink that would run in *Newsweek*, issuing his photograph among strangers, that Warhol would run

over his overexposed image during a factory late night, probably high on amphetamine, quickly laying out seven replicas to dry, high on the American dream, the speed of machine production, high

on fame. Perhaps the photographer missed the ambulance, did not see his deposition, the blood dribbling down his back, the paralysis, did not see his mother's face buried in her hands, never expecting she would live to see

her son die. In this private home, his life is a series of seven images repeating, a testament to consistency: the moment heartbeat stopped repeating.

## A Series of Series



## Caving, Budapest

You knew the trek underground would be difficult at times,  
but the caves you walked through, or scrambled through, rather,  
were a mystery you and he had not yet discovered.  
Three hours seemed like a year, the beam of light  
mounted on your hard hat  
not bright enough to reveal  
the glisten of stalactite water droppings  
along the limestone. It was  
inevitable you both would stumble: there were slippery  
rock piles that shoes could not grip, as if they preferred  
climbing backwards, feet jammed between  
unseen crevices, sharp edges, mud that seeped  
into open fissures on scraped hands,  
and bodies that had to birth themselves  
through narrow passages  
just to move a few feet forward.

You wondered why you had gone down there in the first place.  
Had you expected to find crystals? Ancient masterpieces  
painted on cave walls? After being stuck  
in the darkness, you managed to find your way out  
into sunlight. Now came the real discovery:  
dried mud. It was everywhere,  
on your shoes, hands, face, tangled in your hair, history's  
fallen rubble crumpled between your breasts. Would you ever  
be clean again? You tried to wash it off  
as best you could, soaping your body  
until it felt pristine, scrubbing your shoes  
like pumice to dead skin, but it was no use. A part of you  
would always feel eroded.

## Baggage

I come to before a log cabin, alone,  
the middle of the woods, bare feet  
dampened from dew, no  
recollection of a prior journey.

I unzip my black nylon suitcase  
beside a glowing fireplace,  
no clothes, just  
stacked cleaning supplies:  
windex, crystal blue 409,  
liquid detergent,  
bleach, disinfectant.

With a croak in my throat,  
I think of what  
I could have left behind.

Floral dress? String bikini?  
Black pumps? Hot pink lipstick?

“You were on drugs,” my father says  
faintly from outside, the image of him  
translucent through a black screen door.  
“It seems like you’re okay now.”

I try to answer, but he’s  
gone as quickly as he came  
and I feel worse, less comforted,

realizing I lost my head to someone,  
something, on the way to this point.  
But everyone thinks I’m fine.

## The Persistence of Memory, Salvador Dalí

I think I was dead before I was alive.  
 In my parents' bedroom, I find myself  
 convulsing at my brother's photograph. I wriggle

like maggots painted on my canvases, layered on my decaying body,  
 as if to say he is real and I live in shadows.  
 Nine months before I was born, he died,

his name the only hand-me-down, left behind  
 to reflect a tradition of Spanish culture I am tied to.  
 Salvador: my double, my forerunner, my mirror image.

\*\*\*

Salvador: my double, my forerunner, my mirror image  
 to reflect. A tradition of Spanish culture, I am tied to  
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 In my parents' bedroom, I find myself:  
 I think I was dead before I was alive.

## Hospital Recovery, Frida Kahlo

I am plaster cast in this bed.  
Attached to the negative impression of myself.  
I am achromatic.  
A black and white photograph.  
A still life with rotting fruit.  
Pottery cracked beneath the mold.  
I am the refraction of the ray of light and growth.  
I am blank canvas space.  
Waiting for liquidity of motion.  
For my limbs to sway like brush strokes.  
For you to fill me in.  
To bring me flushes of ripe colors.  
To be in my photograph.  
But it has already been taken:  
I am only a copy of the original me.

## Distance

The measurable space between two objects or points.

The square root of  $x^2 - x^1$  squared, the hypotenuse between right angles.

The actual condition or fact of being far apart in space, a span beyond outstretched arms and ocean depths, beyond swinging branch to branch.

The metaphysical space between an individual. As in, thoughts of a foreign country, the language of which he cannot speak.

To walk along a cramped street with headphones, music blasting. To see but not hear pedestrian chatter. To be alone with thought, separated from others.

A remote point in time. A moderately far away memory of a past or future hope.

Those seemingly familiar hands, that same lavender and amber scent on a neck.

To be in disagreement or dispute with another. To be in emotional discord. To change into different colors but fall from the same autumn tree.

To go great lengths, not in the sense of measuring tape.

To be willing.

To be selfless.

To act in lieu of thought.

To be sitting right next to someone, to love him, but to not know him at all.

## At Sea

Being here means being paradoxically  
pinned to the expansive, to boundlessness,  
where the eye cannot distinguish  
between sky and ocean, horizon line  
naturally fading to distant gray haze.

How difficult it is to be objective  
when nothing is clear!

And no one could possibly stop swooning  
here, this rocking inescapable.

And even after docking it still takes time  
to regain a feeling of solid ground.

## Vagabond

I am walking down a sidewalk, trying to find  
the secret storybook tree house, the one tucked  
between palm trees along a nearby shore.

I am walking because I have insisted  
to my brother and father that, at six years of age,  
I am old enough to live by myself.

They have provided me with tootsie rolls, water,  
and a few dollars to get me started,

and as they drive away, waving goodbye  
for the last time, I begin dreaming  
of sand angels and bright bonfires,  
crackling embers and ocean waves my lullabies.

It takes five minutes for me to accept I am lost,  
and I begin to cry, hoping someone might rescue me.

Of course they come back for me in the end,  
and even through the glass of car windows,  
I still can hear the muffled sounds of their laughter.

I guess this is what happens to the baby  
of the family—you know, the youngest child  
who is always young, always the most naïve one,  
no matter how many years go by.

And when the youngest child is a girl, she is always  
wandering, trying to find her own way, always  
waiting for that time when she won't need  
anyone, not even a man, to rescue her.

## Education

“All boys want is sex,” I was told as a child,  
the phrase esoteric, a haunting philosophical doctrine.

And in middle school, they would teach me about protective  
pills and pituitary glands, show me a live birth, camera zoomed

on the vagina, crown of a head tearing it apart,  
a woman’s screams echoing in the background—

this was raw pain, copulation’s product  
for a girl, cyclical drops of blood her only saving grace—

This would scare me, but still, I would hear nothing  
of a drive-based dichotomy between the sexes.

And maybe there isn’t one. Maybe it’s just what  
women have to tell themselves sometimes,

like when a physical act feels less daunting  
than the shattered image of the self that follows.



## Lascaux Caves, 2001

He sprayed the limestone,  
pumping chemicals with

a gun to kill algae and fungus—  
the cave's modern dwellers

who wed and reproduced  
slowly. For nearly fifty years,

thousands had come to marvel  
at the mammoths, bison and ibex

colored and accented  
with minerals ground from

the hands of Paleolithic  
ancestors. Now these were

damaged from excess breath  
and body heat, spotted with green

and black fuzz. His job was  
to erase the present.

## Erased de Kooning

Back and forth, back and forth with clenched  
wrists, these pink, rectangular erasers burning  
synthetic rubber against de Kooning's drawing.

A systematic, rhythmic murder of an artist's essence  
turned Oedipal—this kind of thing always happens,  
when protégé aspires to outshine master.

It would take Rauschenberg more than two months,  
the charcoal and lead layered thick and dark  
as desire—rubber after rubber after rubber worn

out, and even then, it still wouldn't be finished.  
But de Kooning wanted it to be this way—hard  
to destroy, work he would regret giving up so fast.

## Deposition

My parents once gave me a puppet  
from Mexico: guitar in hand,  
mariachi suit, a woven sombrero  
shrouding its thick, dark moustache,

a black string fastened to every  
hand and foot, each connected to one  
of four points on a wooden cross.

It was a ritual practice to grip fingers  
between the right angles so he danced  
clumsily before me, and when I tired,  
lay his limp body to rest between a cloth.

But one day I raised the x to find  
the strings cut, hopelessly watching  
the toy remain motionless beneath me.

“I didn’t do it!” I declared.  
“Don’t lie to us. It was in your closet!  
Of course it had to be you!”

No evidence for contradiction,  
I would hold the testament of falsehood  
in my hands, even now, letting the nails  
of this mystical betrayal dig deeper.

## Windsor Castle

On the train ride there, I could barely  
notice the bright yellow flowers  
of the rapeseed, the dotting sheep fields  
and cottages of the countryside dashing by—

“Worthless, pathetic”—*no I’m not, no I’m not*,  
this internal rebuttal lulling me like the engine.

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” a stranger said,  
“But I’ve had a lot of relationships in my life.  
The best thing to do is take what you’ve learned  
from this one and use it in the next.”

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The castle was a foreign world to me,  
chandeliers lining grand halls adorned in plush  
red drapes and Victorian-patterned carpets—  
a scene from the pages of childhood fairy tales,

the kind with knights on horseback who would  
sweep a defenseless woman away from misery.

That night, I returned to the world I came from,  
but it would take time for me to learn that  
with you, I never really left the castle,  
never stopped clinging to the imaginary.

## Hero Considering Leander

I look out towards the horizon  
and the sea. Beneath my balcony, piles of rocks.  
Their surface battered with green moss. In my room,  
the bed unmade, sheets crumpled together  
like crescents. And in my hand, an oil lamp,  
its wick no longer burning—

In this tale, the elements  
each play their distinct roles.

Water: separator of  
two lovers on Earth, traversable  
through summer nights.

Fire: a guide through  
oceanic darkness.

Wind: a propellant.

—It is morning, the green moss glistening  
in the sunlight, and I am still waiting  
for him. Trying to deny  
that there could ever be  
tragedy in simplicity. But I am  
built up now, fire, water, earth, wind  
indistinct, crumpled together  
like the sheets of my bed, unmade  
because I have no one  
to lie in it with me.

## View from Trevi Fountain

Neptune has traveled through water for our protection,  
surfing through darkness and rough currents,  
treading along with two winged sea horses  
and triton messengers. Here, he is gazing  
rightward at some unknown distance,  
intently, the way the eyes daydream,  
focused yet aloof at the same time, twisting  
his muscular torso forward. As one horse flails  
front legs with the spirit of a hurricane,  
the triton tries, to no avail, to tame  
its rebellion. The other horse holds his head  
proudly to us, piercing eyes a serene testament  
to the calm of a storm. God of the sea,  
Neptune stands before me on a seashell  
altar, as if I am meant to obey  
his commandments. Following his line of sight,  
I look to the distance in this city of romance, asking,  
what then is love without harmony?  
A resistant horse desirous to extricate itself  
from reigns of constraint?

## Dachau

There was a phrase  
beaten into my mind as a child  
of the Jewish faith: never forget.

At the camp's entrance, rusty  
iron gates, a message melded  
between the bars: arbeit macht frei—  
work shall set you free.

I walked down an isle with you that day—  
a long, gravel path between pairs  
of barrack-sheds, fence of black  
barbed wire in the distance.

Only the first two were reconstructed:  
flat fronted, white and tin-roofed,  
plain, unremarkable.

Then, further along,  
the markers of what once was:  
rectangular-shaped outlines,  
foundations laid with wooden planks.

It was then I thought  
we might find solace in each other,

might see beyond destruction's remains,  
the struggle for control gone awry,

but the path between continued  
to grow silently, hands  
tucked in our sweater pockets.

It was too late.  
We were too feeble to escape  
all the bad, just as we had been taught.

## Ghost

It was late when I returned home. Silence, darkness  
in this apartment except the gleam of lampposts  
through its windows. This was a kind of lighting I had  
grown fond of—sometimes things are better left obscured.

In my room, documents of all my poems opened, the emails  
from someone else I was dating. A toilet seat  
left standing, and a necklace given to me on the floor.

A message.

The sound of his name from my lips—no response.  
In my closet, clothes. Blankets sprawled across couches,  
but no figures laying beneath them. The balcony  
vacant, touched only by the chill of November's air.

I was alone again.

The next morning, sunrise made its way into my room.  
Laying next to me in bed, a strand of his hair.



## Blessed

Imagine if after tears fell  
from your eyes they somehow  
hardened into diamonds  
Yes teardrop-shaped and all

To think all those nights spent  
crying alone in your room could  
have been worth something  
Could have made you rich

And the sadder you felt the more  
the stone would sparkle and the  
bigger it would be And you  
wouldn't dare question any of it

You could make yourself a two  
carat ring for that time your  
boyfriend of three years dumped  
you for your best friend

You could even prance around  
your room in a diamond crown  
You're no queen but it would  
be fun to pretend for a little

You could also bathe in diamonds  
if you cried long and hard enough  
And you could buy anything and  
everything all because you were sad

## An attempt to coat a void

Behold! A grapefruit!  
It fell from a tree,  
no longer wanted  
by its stem,  
patches of dirt upon  
its orange crater skin.

Savagery—there is nothing  
graceful about it.  
Nothing beautiful  
in these pink, veiny  
insides I have gutted  
with no restraint. I don't care.  
I wanted it. Needed something  
substantial. Consumable  
in my hands. I always  
need something  
to hold. Weight to squeeze.  
To swallow away. Until  
only excess juice  
remains. Slipping through  
my fingers. A pool  
at my feet. Formless.

Nothing. Nothing again.  
Insatiable groping. Arms  
flailing. Desperation. Running  
through this grove of trees,  
endless rows. Over  
and over. All the same.  
Bittersweet taste  
forever on my lips.

## Darkroom

You're alone in the dim room, tinted as if  
red scarves draped the lamps, scrutinizing  
the projection of the negative: an aerial view  
of rose stems and leaves in a circular vase, their forms  
abstracted in the water's reflection. It is suspended  
underneath a spotlight, laid out on a flat surface,  
a contrast filter rendering the light pink.  
Chances are you'll be here for hours,  
exposing the image onto paper  
in two-second intervals, trying to find  
the right developing time. At first the whole thing  
is too light—all you see are muted grays,  
the stems and leaves only a faded reminder  
of what they once were. With a higher contrast  
filter come the blacks and whites  
you were searching for, but now,  
the flower parts that were rippled in water  
are blotched away in darkness.  
And so you try again, using your hand to cover  
the area contained in the reflection,  
preventing light from overexposing it.  
Still, it is too dark.

Isn't black and white supposed to be simple?  
You wonder, then, why making progress  
requires so much control.

## Aphasia

I was printing photos in the darkroom  
when they told me: *grandma had a stroke*.

A few weeks later I returned home,  
rolls of black and white film packed in my suitcase.

Sometimes I enjoyed taking a break from words,  
especially when I struggled to find the right ones,

or when I wasn't ready to say them out loud.  
With my camera, the only thing that mattered

was what I could see: that moment when a butterfly  
spreads its wings along a branch, sunlight seeping

through slits of leaves, the fan-like pattern of a palm frond—  
life captured in a standstill, and I didn't have to render

anything other than a beautiful nature. Eventually I'd want to think,  
talk about what I had seen in these images. Eventually.

When I saw her, she looked the same as always—five foot nine,  
light brown hair cut to her face, dressed in all black

as New York women do—but she had changed;  
for a time she would struggle to find the right words.

Then his name came up and for a moment  
even she didn't struggle to say what I couldn't: *jerk*.

## A Bar at the Folies-Bergère, Édouard Manet

She's wearing a tightly buttoned  
black velvet corset, white lace  
adorning the cuffs and neckline that scoops  
just above the curve of the breasts. She wraps  
her fingers underneath the gray marble  
of the bar, palms pressed lightly  
upon it. She has the look of purity—  
skin a creamy white porcelain, cheeks  
like pink champagne, strawberry  
blonde hair pinned back, thick bangs  
sweeping across the forehead—but her mouth  
pouts with regret. Her large brown eyes  
are fixed to the side, not looking at anything  
in particular. She is busy contemplating  
the moment she finds herself in, at Paris's  
most posh nightclub, meant to be servicing  
a customer who has just emerged  
from the crowded room behind him,  
where there are crystal chandeliers  
sprouting from the ceiling, women  
in long gloves and berets, and men  
in black top hats. She knows that like  
the trapeze artist—the nightly entertainment  
—she is just a simple formality. The most  
expensive thing she owns, a gold locket, hangs  
on her neck, held up with maroon fabric.  
Before this, she'd had a husband.  
She remembers how she could always smell  
foreign perfume on his overcoat,  
could sense he was lying. Yet, all she could do  
was hope the thing would run its course—  
if there was a thing at all—but it didn't. Now  
she is stuck in a man's world, unable  
to divorce by law, and what kind of man  
would want to get involved  
with a woman like her anyway,  
a woman with baggage? And so she took a job  
at the Folies Bergère, where all she knows  
is the scent of expensive colognes  
and liquored breath of men  
kissing her, unbuttoning her,  
running their hands up her thighs,  
touching her, making an exchange with her  
when it's all over. She tells herself

it is all part of the job. But now she must confront the familiar man opposite her at the bar, the one from whom she is presently turning her eyes away. He wears the same top hat he always wore, and she remembers his brown eyes, though he has grown a moustache and goatee since they last spoke, six years ago. She has changed too: her hair used to be chestnut brown, her forehead visible, no bangs spanning across it, and she wasn't as thin then, either. In all respects she looks like a different person, and the man, her husband, apparently thought so too. At first he did not recognize her or the gold locket around her neck. He approached the bar to ask: *how much?*

## Girl Before a Mirror, Pablo Picasso

She stands before us  
at a profile, alone in some room  
with walls patterned like fences.

She is as bright and shining as  
any twenty-two-year-old  
might be, a white halo surrounding

her blonde hair. Much of her figure  
has been painted a lavender pink  
like girl's fantasy world. And yet,

it is as if, in this abstract rendering,  
the artist intended to leave room  
for contradiction: he has run

a crescent down the center  
of her face, half of it that same  
lavender pink, half of it yellow

like the moon, perhaps a glimmering  
of womanhood, of sexuality, just  
like those lips of hers, lathered

in crimson, and her breasts  
that dangle like fruit from a tree.  
Her back is striped with black

body paint, Picasso's recalling  
of the tribal, desire that is calculated  
yet impulsive. In this moment

she is wrapping her hands around  
an oval, full-length mirror, getting  
a glimpse of herself: a negative

x-ray version, her black eyes  
hollowed out brown, moon  
yellow face turned sickly purple,

black stripes a pale green.  
She is *that* girl, the one who  
can't *really* see herself, who

has to rely on others, like men,  
for validation. She has chosen  
Picasso to fill this need,

this longing, but what kind of man  
is he? The one who sees human  
anatomy as something disfigured?

Who has painted countless women  
in the cubist model, turning her  
softness, her curves, her symmetry,

into a superimposed, primitive  
reconstruction? The one who sees  
women exactly like she does.



I tried to scream

I tried to scream but only  
bubbles came out of my mouth—  
soapy spheres scintillating rainbows,  
elusively defying the gravity of my speech,  
the anger I huffed and puffed  
only to find it trapped  
in these magical concoctions,  
these childhood fascinations.

I watched you watching them, watching me,  
wide-eyed at such a garbled expression  
that floated toward you ever so cautiously,  
waiting to break upon your skin,  
and yet, when it did,  
the thin casings spewed in all directions  
like my ferocious spit might have.  
The feeling was almost imperceptible  
to you, a cool peppering.

Oh, if only you could know  
how hellish that air was! Oh bubbles,  
liquid chambers of heat and pressure,  
harborers of all vituperative attacks,  
why do you appear so playful and light?  
Surely it must be me who has made you  
turn out this way, me who was too naïve,  
too young to know that in staving off  
the density of my emotions,  
it was inevitable they would burst.

## Homage to Succubus

I have wings like a bat and a lion's tail.  
I wasn't always such a monster.  
I'll kiss you hard with my serpent tongue.  
I'll ram my devil horns into your you-know-what.  
I'll bite your neck with my fang teeth.  
And you'll love every second of it because I said so.

I was an innocent girl once, never seductive.  
I wasn't always such a monster.  
I tripped and fell down stairs in heels.  
I danced awkwardly by myself like a buffoon.  
I talked as if someone was there to listen.  
And fell asleep pretending fairy tale love was real.

I like things that are bad now—it's more fun.  
I wasn't always such a monster.  
I take shots of liquor till my world starts spinning.  
I wear red lipstick because blood is the scariest color.  
I smoke cigarettes so I can burn buds on your arms.  
And wreck havoc on men who hate women—men like you.

I am wild, free flowing like spring's flowers.  
I wasn't always such a monster.  
I rule the underworld in your dreams.  
I am your dominatrix—prepare for mental bondage.  
I'll pillage testosterone from the depths of your soul.  
And make sure you'll never be the same  
when I'm through with you.

## Blackjack

I've placed a bet.  
Here it is on this green  
felt table, all the journals,  
all the pages I've ever written.

Now, deal me the cards, sir.

These neon lights are blinding.  
And the merry cash register sounds  
from slot machines too optimistic.

But I'm ready.  
You heard me.

*Six of hearts, eight of clubs.  
Hit or stay? Hit or stay?*

Because being twenty-one  
years old like I am  
means being foolish enough  
to think a piece of paper  
could change everything.

## Creation

The saliva's flooding into your mouth now—  
warm yet uninviting—and suddenly you know  
it's coming, that moment when your body decides,  
without your permission, to retaliate  
against all that's been done to it. You kneel  
like a slave to yourself, letting vulnerability  
take hold, bearing that grotesque image of  
your insides until you can't bear anymore.  
And when the process is over, there is always  
that brief moment of examination—what is floating  
in the watery reflection this time? The pink remains  
of childhood's innocent strawberry shakes? Perhaps  
flaky cigarette tar for all your secret  
addictions, or a tinge of brown from the dark  
rum, a resurfacing of intentionally forgotten  
memories. But it is putrid, and although  
letting it out made you feel a little better,  
what are you supposed to do with it now?  
Could anyone bear to look at what you've done?