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Interior View: Night

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Interior View: Night

by Eric Stiefel

A thesis presented to
The Graduate School
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
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of Master of Fine Arts

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Eric Stiefel
Washington University in St. Louis
May 2017
The Golden Age
I grapple with my shadow puppet, rest my on the side of a fountain. The lover lights a smoke. Later, she wraps her fingers around my neck, the others around my tongue. Later, I still taste her breath in the air—the streets where I grew up wind through the night—I try to keep my shoulders straight, wander through the fog. Revel in the after. Some days, the birds don’t even share a hymn. The church by my house is quiet. I slip through the spindles in the fence.

I was never consecrated. No holy thing. I was the emptiness at the end of an avenue, the face on the lacquer and metal, the vein in the fault of the wrist. Little changed—I was fragment. I stumble through the porch-light, rest on the wicker. Cold from the glass. Lightning strikes the belly of the oak. There’s comfort, the street a beast with two heads. Cut one off? No, hide in the raindrops, watch from a gutter—the wind made a crown out of silt.

I haunt a feather, the outline of a jaw, the back of the lover’s neck. Lips of an orchid. I was different, yes. There’s no way around that. I thought stillness was the answer, two bodies There was more: ghost at the end of a subway tunnel. Wings from a moth. The bricks across the old bridge. A sacred space, a hollow one. Somewhere for a selfish king to stay hidden. The sky made a chariot out of clouds—What else was there to call this but gone?
The beginning: first snow, then new leaves. I wanted you to be the mirror from which I saw the day. Nothing would hurt, everything fragile— I was in and of, from, and also so-and-such. When touched, I didn’t have any independent parts— bare-knuckle, collarbone, down is also up. You, weaving ivy, evergreen. When my life became an estuary, yours was a garden hidden by trees. What should I call you? Yew, oak, or pomegranate seed—I could tame myself by returning to logic. Always, always, foxglove, between. Two fingers across a mouth. When I watched your reflection, the world didn’t extend outside my field of view.
I built a monument for a ghost, became
Caravaggio’s *Medusa*, unnoticeable master.
This is to say, I broke the oath first (a vase
tucked out of sight). The body reacts. Bitter
today, then tomorrow. I didn’t long to be
a column carved out from a tree, instead a furnace
below ground. I coded myself where I shouldn’t be.
Closer, even, than a fingertip—coarse lines
cut into clay, an impossible mirror. What wasn’t
took on a mind of its own. I called this becomingness,
fell to the bottom of a lake—it would be easy
to stay hidden. Precious wallflower. Petrified bee.

What does it mean to revert back to nothing?
Hunger or breathe, a steady gaze. Gilded lily,
heavy sigh, a serpent sleeping, a stream.
Before I had a body I had nothing—I lean back, and make a list of everything that’s ever been, so I can decide which parts I’d like to eat:

swallows, bees, blues, petals, seeds, and also whispers that wander down the street.

My life becomes a thicket—I prick my thumb, press the wicked interior. What else could I love except for the spider I find beneath Rose’s waist?

What else to know? Rose says we can’t transcend ourselves, but that isn’t true—I push against the borders of the self. Here, there is a place that doesn’t see you. Rose calls it “interiority,” but I call it “love as a dark hallway.”

Sometimes the lights flicker. Rose takes a bath when she doesn’t feel like talking. When I’m alone: a skull or a ghost, a dagger floating through the hall.
Galatea

She lifts her hair  
   from her neck, lets the mirror speak  
its jewel and ennui,  
   remembers ivory, yes, ivory—  

She perches and  
   studies, still as a night’s blossom.  
The softness of  
   her wrist was to be expected, yes,  

she says, there was light,  
   there was silt, the glance  
the ocean made  
   whole again, what little there was—  

Her bare sense of loss—  
   what could be lost was  
not something  
   inherent but a kind of sensibility  

that wrests itself  
   from the pearls she keeps in the  
drawer of her  
   nightstand how she couldn’t hold  

her own to balance  
   anymore—*What else was there*  
to describe this wandering in? she thinks  
   until she lets her  

hair down, watches it unravel,  
   feels  
the smoothest part of her skin—  
   *I couldn’t make myself*  

*all over again,* she says,  
   as if another had ever let her be  
complete, the pearls in her left hand  
   slipping through her fist.
A Voice Cuts Through

A fog crept over the leaves from the storm—
The acre was wounded, moss had mended the limbs
into a web. A word came to mind, and then quietly left,
a poor guest, or a considerate one, back and forth,
the fox in the foliage, the grates, the nest fallen
in the storm. My psyche was an underbelly—The season
should never be this warm, a stranger said, a voice
that didn’t belong. Everything stirred—the memory of
sex before bodies, before marrow and splinter, before hunger
and prey. Before stillness, the wretched, silence, the world.
For a Time

I found you dressed as an acrobat— you had called me from a past life, were my shadow when I was afraid. Not a shadow, but a ghost. *You,* I wanted to say—

We balanced purpose on a tight wire, silver for a leg, a clockwork heart. A spider trapped in a cage—what changed was a way of thinking: I chose to be different than *I,* asked myself for a new name— You were watching from the corner, a pair of dead lilies in your hand. Outside, the pattern you made with a dozen candles, the moon creeping like a sunbeam, standing in front of a mirror nude.
Conversation with a Young Self

You were winged and plated like a hussar,
young usurper, fair, a prodigal thing.
You were quiet when you broke your third finger,
heard you could swim before you could speak.

You obsessed over things and their meanings:
crenellation, marquises, viscounts and duchies,
the golden age of tulips. Windless, you tied
dandelion stems while the other children shrieked
at the edge of the field, built yourself into kingdoms
you imagined hidden behind fog, didn’t whimper
at the slam of a door.

You waited at the edge of the lot, untied your shoes,
stared off to the blankness of the woods, made
what you thought were offerings out of feathers
and petals, until one day you wandered off thinking
no would would ever know I was gone.
First, I Thought

I walked to the foot of a clock tower, a ghost town, light filtering in through dull windows, a copper door, birds turning their heads from their makeshift roosts.

A woman in a trench coat hurried to the top of the stairs, hush, hush, her footsteps, the rain outside, a winter storm. The color blue made the birds seem breakable, the clock still.

Everything else was darkness, a shudder, not a click from a lens, but an explanation that everything perceptible yearns to be reminded of itself. The woman might have said, come with me, but I couldn’t tell. Not that I would have known what to say. Sometimes my eyes are more clever than a kaleidoscope, a voice at the top of a stairwell—

it says, don’t you remember what could’ve been? as if memory could collide back with me, a tea cup still warm on a bedside table, a figure approaching rapidly from the distance of a landscape. What I’m saying is, it doesn’t matter what happened next. What happens is now.
This Time

I’ll be the rabbit, so I can keep from the snowflakes under your palms.

Thistle leaf, the color of dreamtime—I wanted to leave an impression that extended beyond the place where you gather your sheets.

I didn’t know how to be a citizen, so I crowned myself instead.

What else was blue? I’ll be the bird mask, the wrist, the edge of your skirt where I finally let my thinking fall asleep.

Next, I’ll be the fox in winter.
In Order to Be Perceived

This melancholy afternoon leaves me restless— My tea kettle howls that I have forgotten it on the stove. On the counter: mushrooms, a paring knife, wood cutting board. My loneliness summons itself as if from a spell. Outside, mallards, birdshot, an old hatchet— The scars on the wood were an afterthought.

The winter had skipped a season, melted the leaves into a slush. I think of the field and its thunder, trees torn in half. A phantom limb hovers above skin. Chamber music catches on the kitchen’s acoustics— things rise in one form or another— The master warps his violin into a human voice.
Even the lady’s parasol is dark. Painted light hits the blue on her blouse, the black dog on her lap. The wind suggests a kind of bellowing—I wake in the night to realize that it's raining, sit up, lie back down. Don't cry out, the lady says.

But the world could never be that soft. Jagged, maybe, the grass after a storm. Shards of ice. The rye, less fruit than the bourbon. Folds, creases in a book. The dog peeks its head over a dune, the light ground up into cool sand. Don't leave me, the dog says.

You say, I thought about you in the hallway, the wallpaper, the painted sea.
Looking through a Series of Gestures

The argument was that they couldn't agree upon a way of seeing, which is to say that one was, according to a certain way of looking, always the other’s shadow. One watched a video of a young woman flailing about in a pool of quicksand wearing nothing but a sundress, while the other contemplated the nature of control. Did pleasure predicate itself, or was it built upon a complex pattern of wants? For one, the hum of the drying machine caused the most perfect stirring, while the other found joy in the panes of a cold window.

How could one escape the other without becoming something different entirely? The other perched on the end of a mattress, toes pressed firm upon the edge. They took turns, of course, being the other, tying a knot, keeping themselves from view. This process was delicate—the tongue might have slipped, a glass might have shattered in a clenched hand. This was no more fragile than being in the first place, which one saw as a state that constantly threatened to collapse upon itself, but the other felt as a gloved hand, pressed firmly on the back of the neck.
The Eye Is an Amphitheatre

Rose and I climbed through the window in the back of her apartment, over the armchair next to the bookcase, into the garden, hidden from view. I thought that I’d caught a glance of *Paradise Lost* on the way out, but wasn’t sure. About eight feet of worn brick closed us off from the city streets. Sirens cried out, muted by metropolitan fog. A series of large, potted plants lay limp in the breeze. I didn’t know any of their names. We had just left dinner. I was a little drunk.

“I wanted my life to be like that,” Rose said, “a code that only I could decipher.”

I examined the night. Some of the neighboring buildings had blocked us in so that we couldn’t see the skyline. I asked Rose what she meant, because I couldn’t think of anything to say.

“Even when I was younger I wanted to be reckless,” she said. She had picked up a garden hose and had begun speaking in between watering her plants—I imagined what their names might have been: *lemon tree, azalea, various ferns.* “The thing is, if people push past your recklessness, they start to move into your interior,” she said. “And the only way to stop that is to keep changing or to rebuke change entirely. Only you can know.”

I felt the urge to say, “You remind me of me,” but didn’t, so I reached for her hand instead. Finally, I spotted a plant that I knew: a few squat veins of ivy had crawled out from their clay pot and stumbled onto the concrete floor. Rose loosened her grip around my fingers, so she could finish hosing the corners of the garden. She shuddered—I hadn’t realized how cold it was until then.

“Let’s go inside,” I said.

“Go ahead,” she said. “I’ll follow you in a bit.”

I looked over my shoulder on the way back inside. She seemed perfectly content, standing in the soft night glow. I couldn’t tell whether the light came from the city or the moon, and, once again, I began to suspect that I had been thinking things through far more than I should. I climbed back inside through the window and poured another drink, then waited, probably for far less time than it seemed, for Rose to come back inside and lead me to her room.

*
Weren’t we strangers when I first knew you I said which didn’t seem odd until I said it not when we met, but even longer maybe

Rose stood in the bathroom nude trying to brush the wine off her teeth from the night before— I still haven’t risen from her bed and didn’t know what kind of answers to expect but I kept asking questions anyway was it you who addressed my appetite for permanence? I said and then started to stir

no, you were the one who said we couldn’t be more than ourselves I said, clothes strewn about the room— I took a moment to admire the gold zipper on her skirt from its position on the floor. I had always urged away from these inescapable truths: you, your, you’re—it’s so easy to skim the surface without approaching it

Rose didn’t say anything, spat into the sink and turned on the water for the shower, turned around, made eye contact with me, then smiled I glanced back through the mirror— her hair fell right to her shoulders I don’t know she said maybe I was just saying things. I said no, I don’t believe you and then she shrugged, wandered behind the shower curtain, heat falling out through the bathroom door

*
I only knew one way of looking, which was as if things were always beginning to fall apart. Rose and I huddled beneath an umbrella, trying to wade through the afternoon rain. Suddenly, the day felt entirely pedestrian: I had gotten lost in the body and stumbled through to the catacombs of the mind. Another couple sat on a park bench across the street and ignored the steady rain, faces unmoved—they didn’t represent themselves but a type of conflict that I had found myself projecting on the world. What else was there to do but turn away?

Later: a dim-lit bar, old wood, a couple of leather chairs, a chessboard tucked under a coffee table. I wondered if people were always predictable or if I could hide my hunger from view. Rose said, “Did you ever see the play in the theatre that had been built out like a maze?” I hadn’t, and said so, but imagined anyway: pieces, as if from a puzzle, starting to coalesce. The wet from my boots crept in to my socks. We were both dressed as different parts of an argument, wandering offstage, asking the velvet curtain of desire when we could begin.
The Costumes in the Corner
When I looked back,  
the first thing I saw was [ ]

Identity is not  
as important as desire is not  
the tick on the clock

the letters with the name of the street  
the one with the lips the other  
with the shower and the steam  
and the single constant of [ ].

The dots from the ink could be  
comic strips or clouds but their  
skin is wistfully bare. The garden?

No, there isn’t a garden: a gun, a slip,  
the color of rose, the lights and the necks  
stain the trees.

/ 

The last thing that made me cry was the episode on the television show where the famous comedian plays himself but a different version of himself and the famous and eccentric director plays a version of himself where he’s not a director. A smirking devil of sorts. He’s very dashing in a way that reminds me of my ex-girlfriend’s father. It was that or something else. My dog sticks her head behind the blinds and growls at a piece of plastic in the parking lot. A poet tells me I should confess more. I prefer to leave my house at night.

/
The way one woman
doesn’t quite lock eyes with the other woman
implies a kind of danger. Their lips
are both parted but only one shows her teeth.
A string of Japanese characters floats
between them, which I assume is the tagline
for the film. Maybe it says “A Love Story
in the City of Dreams” or something like that.
There’s wonder in not being specific.
You know, that way everything’s a maze.

/Someone told me, “The way you know it’s over
is that it ends.” I gripped the wheel (we were driving
to the airport).

I have trouble admitting when I’ve done something wrong.
I change whenever I think
it’s a good idea to be someone else.
“It’s been blurred together,” someone says. “There’s nothing
you can do.”

/I used to collect movie posters like this one, but it never occurred to me to try to find them in
miniature. The only posters I have in my house are from a wine bar in Paris, which both include
mermaids swimming in champagne glasses. Other great taglines include “Love Is a Force of
Nature” and “In Space No One Can Hear You Scream.” One of my old teachers refused to read
any screenplay that involved a therapist. “Everyone Wants to Be Found,” another movie poster
says, “Who Will Survive and What Will Be Left of Them?”
If you hear a timepiece the usual instinct is to search for it. It’s better than search for arms and legs the gloss on the face the constant and hardening thump.

It’s better not to think about what happens in hazy and dark-lit rooms. Smoke can be figurative or a sign for danger. Sex is danger, isn’t it? Mystery means sex.

Lights frame the trees so they’re stockings. My wristwatch keeps the time but I don’t bother checking it. Every car is suspicious. On a night like this I would beware of the breeze.
Silence in the other room, the ribbon of a pulse
flutter from a wind chime, a tear in a nightgown
the smothered insistence of what?

The first pulse focused on the walls,
which were surprising with their yogurt flush,
their less-than-lavender coax and calm. As if color
had a mouth, doorway panels lined, porcelain
teeth and lips, the far off memory of a threat.
The second impulse was to call this pleasure,
an arrangement of flowers spelled out in a hush.
Another Nude

I find myself insisting on the body as place—
   it’s hard to help myself: some bare shoulder,
back’s cleft, bridge of the hips. My camera face
   cracks— I picture the nude as a park. No,
not there, she says. I am always the wrong word,
   a clouded mirror, bent light. I think of myself
in threes: wanting, wanted, bare. The nude says, I don’t
   make the rules— hold me in place. I become
a fist underwater, a body the weight of the self. Next,
   the nude as a meadow, sunset, sunflower,
one to get lost in, beyond loss. Inside, outside. I didn’t
like being delicate, so I hid myself instead.
Everything is ultimately about intimacy, the nude says,
   but that isn’t true. At least, I hope not. Light
trickles through the length of her limbs.
Self-Portrait as a Passport

The angle holds a kind of purpose, the cursive present, the fissure and fold. I watch the leather, the constant flux, press myself into the page. *Bless something close*, it says. The golden touch derives a sense of purpose. I sink inside the paper crown, the foreign stamps, the barcode speaking of itself. *Become the object*, it tells me. *The night again flares out*, my pockets stained with smoke. The mood could be royal blue. I climb the surface, toil and all, treasure the creases and bends. *I understood, I understood*, I don’t understand at all. Letters fly by as in tufts. I think of myself, close my eyes like they’re shutters. Nothing holds still—eyelid, white feather, a flock of birds toward sun.
Asymmetry, Boyhood

Our animal halves below water, 
back pressed to the metal faucet, your hair 
flush blonde from the sun, grit and saltpeter 
smoke submerged in the youth of the tub.

Other times the scene feels less fabricated—

When your mother tells it, for instance:

I wanted to trace the scar on your waist,

but didn’t, even then, felt a faint tenderness.

My own mother says I hugged you

so hard I squeezed tears from your bird-chest.

Cap gun on the bathroom floor, wrists you could 
wrap a fist around now, parents’ beach house, faded 
superhero, action figure caught in the stripes 
of my boxers, the window-light left to be forgotten,

the habit to reduce such a mystery to love. And then

the memory passes, and I hesitate to think.
The Distant Nude

The nude stands in the distance
   at night in the park, arms perched up,
one of the birches in snow. Hard
   becomes soft. The winter melts.
Not the winter but its rigor. I watch
   from the street, the apricot eye. The nude
eats snowflakes from the air. *Still,* I think,
   *she’s waiting.* I take off my gloves,
conjure the rest of myself. I shouldn’t
   approach this time. Nothing but want,
a refractory glance. Desire for what?
   My jacket comes off. I sit in the grass.
The nude might have shifted her weight.
   I unlace my boots. The nude turns around,
filigree breath. Pine leaves whistle to the moon.
   The nude lifts her ankle from the slush.
It all started with the mismatched dogs, the overheard remainder of magisterial light—The sidewalk pretended to be golden, the garden acted as if it were surrounded by a dignified brick.

People folded into a crease—I stood next to a park bench, tried to name the flowers that rose their heads through the fence, could only think of whirring, plucked from a stem.

Across the street, a young man fixed his glasses to his nose. There was barely refuge in the interior, the urge in hiding from. But there was also the eggshell present, the yearning for—

My obsession with the unblemished—Birds unflinching, a tapestry unraveled, imagination still as a palette. I thought sorrow exposed itself between margins,

so I presented the id as a canvas. Except I didn’t. I couldn’t do that. There was never room for anyone except an argument in reverse: an empty bottle collecting rain, paint drying off on the floor.
Leaves that Have Never Seen
the Light of Day

That’s how I detach from the nest I made
out of yesterday: the white bowl I’ve washed
and cleaned of dirt will cook the other ingredients.

This way the morning becomes dull and uninteresting.
No one wants to be reminded of silt, the river,
decomposing leaves.

It’s better to be twelve slices of
marrow from the femur, the heart still red enough
to yearn for.

Turnips in the cellar twist in the darkness.
The heart is the needle placed on the underside
of ta lip, blood warm, inside a wet bone.

I saw the calf to dust, keep moving, reserve
myself this time. Fold the raw heart to the marrow.
Grate the turnip without its yellow leaves.

I step back— it is important to maintain the illusion
that the body isn’t breakable.
The Nude as a Flower

The nude is an imaginary flower that never fades—
hundreds of dryads and nymphs line up
for hours to watch her bathe in a river by a pool.
She pretends not to notice, tries to seem fragile
when she wanders off. Later, she’ll murmur in her sleep,
horn and pearl, the thistle betwixt. Each night
I count each breath out, parted lips, pale wrist. I could
never sleep, so I spend the darkness instead.
My eyes catch a bird, a red-scaled fish, a moth torn out
from its wings. Enough? The nude says,
until I’m lying with my back to the dirt, searching
for another fist to hold against the night.
Doubt is delicious. I don’t believe in universal truth—

I trust the scar on my thumb, less than an inch from the nerve.

The tongue acts as a vessel, imperfect, until it decides to see the world through its teeth.
The Upright Nude

I tuck my sleeves inside themselves.
    The nude becomes the buttons of my shirt.
I hold them between my fingers. Soft,
    like this. She sits upright. Back arched
into the hips. Just like the painting, her
    turpentine thigh. The nude becomes the tile.
I take off a shoe. She plays with her ringlets—
    Otherwise, I am alone. Bathtub, candlestick,
canvas stretched over the wood. Gray and black,
    off-white. I fall in love with the blur. Hold
the shoulders back, posture straight. Marble
My foot in the water. The nude becomes the head
    of the tub. I go under, I press down.
The heat holds me right to her tongue.
A voice, hoarse through an imaginary stereo set, lights a match, then a candle burnt at the edge of rational thought, becomes inaudible, stirs my breath with a sheet. Bare. the light scent of pillows. Static. The spine shivers. I close my eyes and open them to find exactly what I left behind: a wristwatch on the nightstand. *Silly boy don’t tell me you forgot again,* the voice says—If memory, then time. Words scatter at the sound of reason scattering through the crack below the door. The voice draws a breath and then presses to the top of a dream about brushing my thumb across the button beneath your belt.
Self-Portrait as a Nude

The statue holds my hand to her mouth. My roommate watches from the couch— Later, they’re going to fuck. “You smell like sadness,” she says. I reach through my abdomen and pull out a piece of my spine. My body crumples. I hold it to my ear like a shell.
Interior View: Night

First, the beloved as an abstract concept, the palette the I is drawn to.
The beloved in a museum, Daphne or Diana or Psyche. I pretend the stone was carved for me.
The beloved leaving the lights on in the house when she goes out for the night.
The beloved as distance.
The beloved walking me to the corner.
The beloved shining a floodlight through an abandoned mine.
The beloved opening my letters and stacking them in a drawer.
The beloved dismantling the support beams underground in a tunnel.
The beloved as a solitary figure.
The beloved sleeping through sirens.
The beloved dropping an old mug on the floor while staring outside.
The beloved sweltering in the afternoon.
The beloved cracking open a fire hydrant in the summer heat.
The beloved tearing down the mailbox in front of my childhood home.
The beloved fashioning a spear from a desiccated tree.

It is a quiet scene—I read the chapter in The Odyssey where the goddess of wisdom pleads to the rest of the gods, something about how she can’t undo the work of another god.

I don’t want to think about how long I could spend here.
Faces in a Gallery
I leave a place where I should’ve fallen in love, but didn’t. A stray cat snarls under the underpass at nothing in particular. My name means lonely king, rules alone, etcetera, etcetera—

I would’ve been a jealous prince, burdened by caprice. As if spider’s legs curled up in a cage—I affect the version of myself I wish I could fold into, the rain before it hits the roof.

A dog in a wicker chair says my collar seems baroque—I peak into the window behind the dog: a scarecrow, a tobacco field, treetops haunted by Spanish moss. The dog raises his head to the keyhole of a door I can’t see.

I’m always thinking about the things that are difficult to miss: affection, loneliness, control. The world is layered like that—I want and I want. My want becomes hollow: a granary, half-burnt, some threshers sitting salvaged in the lawn.
I sketched out the wallpaper’s pattern in your living room as a series of crashing waves in my head. You were saying, *It’s not that I never think about you anymore,* *it’s just that*—

I was, perhaps, a needle tracing wax on a record playing in the next room.Isn’t that an odd way to paint a picture in the mind?

I was a gun dog carrying a bird with a broken neck. I was floating off the edge of summer’s tongue.
What do we do with the after
the lilac yes
surrendering of
morning as it opens into
its sickliness
the prairie
uninhabited
by blush
or ardor
knotted limbs
bark scarred
the next day
when the honeysuckle
has opened
from its mischief
What do we remember
before the meadow of yes
skin-brushed ivy
hollow
not hollow
but
remembering to be crowned
by fingers
not my or your
but
the songbird its blue
*hush,
it seemed to say,
*hush,
hush,
above the roots
how it quivered
in the space between us
head
tucked into its own breast
A mutter of wind chimes wakes me up the next morning, everything covered in shade. I cook breakfast without turning on the lights. Leaves crunch wildly while you sleep. Even the old sycamores seem to creak, nothing quite still. I couldn’t begin to welcome what I saw—

You were kissing New Year’s in the bathroom—I watched a bottle of champagne unravel itself then pop, fireworks on the back porch, gunpowder drifting through the house—everyone else had bundled into each other, stirred like a fog. First left, then right.

A grandfather clock pummels the afternoon—I don’t know how to ask you where you’re going, I think. A flock of starlings takes flight out of view.
Finally I Will Perfect

The shadows forming from the beginning
of spring
the shade of winter still bites the base
of the trees
the shutters
the curtains—

No one is going to hurt you
my lover once said
but now
I hold off
from saying her name
for fear of beckoning

her world—

how I wish
I had taken the time
to sink my hands
into a space

where I could be present—
I wonder, still, what she
might say
if I took the chance
to reach out

or if it would be better to imagine
or if I could replace the loneliness—
no, not loneliness— with the
waiting for
aching for

another
no

completion

of some kind

another type of
waiting

that can’t be satisfied until it is
After

I found myself wandering across the surface
of a postcard left out on a nightstand
that didn’t belong to me—for a time,

I became the idea of a place—a memory
of, say, another’s thigh, a wave, shaping
a long strip of sand. I was glass,

the world through a lens—the first thing
I wondered was when I could be whole
again. Sometimes, it’s not enough to be

coherent—foxtail, petals drowned up
to the lover’s neck. I wanted to be alone,
until I didn’t—

the caption read: Please,
keep going, don’t stop because of me.
The body appears a forbidden thing— soft of a stomach, legs bare, the lover asleep in an oversized shell, arms lax, waves walking in, horizon red. The sun sets so the sky becomes a bruise, clouds cotton and pale,

drifting in front of the projector I’ve built inside the weather balloon of the mind. Turtle dove, myrtle tree. Everything calm to the last of it, each moment piled together until one forms anew. The props in the setting whisk and stir, the lover turning their back on the day, each detail falling flat in the shade, a cat wandering the outline of the beach, the psyche an augur saying “let’s keep pretending that we’re gentle.”
The night started out small enough to smother—

There was nothing to discuss:
hushed behind an earlobe,
the sharp expanse of breath,

descent into or out of
what some call constraint—
brick lined the shadow out of sight.

I didn’t ask questions, perhaps, when
I should have—I should have done what, exactly?

Wind snuck in through the windows
the ghost of the glove compartment,
the folded map, the foreign town,

void, whirr and where became the one.
Ornaments covered the porch steps,
velvet, fur-lined, over-indulged.

What was there to do with an exquisite
nothing? It was easier to paint a hollow scene.

The sun returned instead, earnest hurt.
I fell into winter like a glove.
The sun had risen.

I wanted to say, I felt
the wool of her sweater, was disembodied by

bare nipple, dimples in the back, black reading glasses,
the smell of wood. Velvet, cool glass.

The morning bit back. She fumbled
for her keys—Don’t hurt me.

I languished again, again, yes, again,
needed neither
before
because too much
no, not too much

a flutter
and then fail
fingers around a laced
wrist, bent knuckle

further: mist rising up from the street.
Denouement

Pure chance— you text me while I’m masturbating. I imagine your boyfriend is asleep.

My thumb brushes the head of my cock. I stretch my back. You’re terrifying, you say. I like that.

The sheets curl. Outside, the waves from the harbor push in salt. No one stirs. I move my hand toward the base.

Tell me more, I say. The light from my cellphone illuminates a mirror on the other side of the room, floor length.

The rest is dark. The gulls haunt the marsh, the night feels fresh. You brush low on my back once more— Not quite. I wait until you speak again to come. Tell me everything, I say Tell me everything you are.
The pond in the backyard of the house where you grew up becomes a ghost town— you’re sunbathing in the backyard nude, trees warped, dock kissed with algae, everything covered in weeds. I sit in a nearby hammock, sun-bleached. keep tricking myself into thinking about free will. The house is empty, has been for at least a couple years. You tell me the history of everything that’s ever been and then break into the house with a rock, glass shattered, dust on the floor. Almost everything gone, floorboards talking amongst themselves. You show me where your room used to be, the attic, a wardrobe that got left behind. You open the doors to find a part of yourself. You open them to find a dozen glass bells.
“Other times, love is also a character,” Rose says, 
then ties a knot around my finger with a piece of stem. 
I stretch out on her bedcovers— She starts to place petals 
from her garden on the roof of my mouth. I imagine 
there are three of us: Rose, me, the secrets we keep— 
always a menagerie. Sometimes I become the swan, 
other times a stream. A bullheaded finch 
with a broken beak. Rose says “I wanted to be the wild thing,” 
and I wonder what else isn’t true. I pretend to let her pin me down— 
The honey bee, doe becomes the leaves. I take notes 
upon the color red: Sparrow-heart, satyr-hoof. I’ve learned 
to be small. “Let me keep you,” Rose starts to say, 
then doesn’t. Hands instead of mouths, sound instead 
of teeth. Then we turned back on ourselves, and then back 
on ourselves again until we are caught holding each other 
inside the aftermath of an imaginary cage.
Pine Mushroom, Lamb’s Kidney, Pickled Marigold

This time we’ll use soft butter, three of everything else. The mushrooms have to be perfect, about twelve centimeters, peeled with the intimacy of a paring knife.

The rest is simple. The flowers and the buds pickled so they’ll always be less than fertile. Arrange the caps into half-moons, the marigold into a kiss.

The lamb becomes another half-moon—closer, now.

There is no one, the snow on the limbs of the trees. Everything still. The morning won’t bloom, until it does. A cloud of warm breath floats between us.
Always a Game of You

I spent summer breeding lilacs out of a dead land—
past forgetful snow, sex and laughter, a doll
made out of smoke. Each night I hid between
the walls of my room— wasn’t the last time
I saw you in a dream? Wasn’t there an ivory door?
Don’t you remember the way I named myself
after flowers? I only cared about specifics then:
ghost orchid, hyacinth, marigold. Everywhere
the boundary between. Sometimes the center
of the underworld is also a marsh— in some ways
I’m still bound to sleep. You said we couldn’t
be more than ourselves—I grew into a moonflower,
other times erratic. I clothed myself in August,
which is to say there wasn’t any more time to spend
drifting in the river nude, no time for forgetfulness—
at times, I’m afraid of this version of me. Didn’t you know?
Wasn’t it the house within the dream, the last time I saw you? (This time a different you). Outside, I dropped my feet in the river so the fish could eat the dead skin—I watched you from the window to my room. You were more beautiful this time, either more beautiful or more fierce, and also a famous clairvoyant. You knew about the library behind the mirror—I beckoned you to carry me away. How did I end up like this, a frame within a frame? Sometimes I forgot your name and found another one instead: a thousand ships, scurrilous, a deciduous tree. You were also flowering, perennial, borrowed from a forgotten tongue but also the Greek, which borrowed itself from the Old Persian (Avestan, Parthian, etc.). Sometimes an orchard, other times a car all fogged up. You were a memory I hadn’t told anyone yet. I kept you, swimming between the ghost of us as if it were a reflection of me.
Witch-hazel, lotus thief. I brewed a bitter drink. This was after the suicide, of course, when one of our friends died and I didn’t talk to anyone. This was after I left Manhattan, before you left Shanghai, after coming back from Paris, when I thought you were never leaving the garden in Beirut. You came back when I asked you to and left for windy streets (a pair of chrysanthemums pressed between a frame). You’re not the same person every time I picture you in my head. Sometimes you keep fennel in your hair and other times pitch pine, three-faced, a key and a dagger, all the knowledge of good in the world. “My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.” I keep waiting for you to tell me everything’s not at world’s end. “I’m dying.” “Is it blissful?” All of the nymphs have hidden in the wood. The wind plays out to a nocturne— for once, I convince myself that we’re alone.
Tonight you’re the philosopher: Two stories, hardwood, a balcony overlooking the yard. I ask about the god of unrequited love while you’re carving a spear out of holly then mistletoe. You don’t seem surprised when I tell you the basement’s flooding—that’s where I keep all of my impure thoughts. When I return we’ll play a game of you, apple blossom, secret love. You change behind a curtain, crack one of the dishes in the sink. In a different life (my current one) you were perfect. So perfect that my loneliness became a hallway made of trees, dryad, horned god, fleet behind the scenes. Everything a fragment—amaranth, green willow, pear blossom wisp. Brief lives. No one to tell me that it wasn’t real.
Every version of you begins to blur together. Today you taste like plum, yesterday a wreck. Your ribs become the laurel tree, and naiads cross the river to our house. You’re the one who knows the names of all the nymphs—casually, I’m the one who waits for you to tie a knot from the stem of a flower without thorns, as if you were a magician. Maybe that’s wrong—I’ll live my life again and again until I can erase and start again. Isn’t a love letter always a prelude? And isn’t a prelude the beginning to another way of worry? Wednesday, yesterday, today. At night, I sleep without the light, but that too could change. Each day we’ll drink, again and again (maybe from a river, perhaps from a cup) and I’ll ask when it was that you became the astronomer, queen of coins or maybe even cups. Either way I’ll place the costumes in the corner, so they can watch us while we sleep.