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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS
Department of English
Writing Program

Interior View: Night

by Eric Stiefel

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

May 2017

St. Louis, Missouri

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks go out to everyone who helped in the process of composing, compiling, and writing the manuscript to this thesis, especially Washington University in St. Louis's Writing Program and Department of English, Mary Jo Bang, francine j. harris, Carl Phillips, Danielle Dutton, Emily Pittinos, Claire Askew, and Bailey Spencer. Their support has been invaluable throughout the composition of this manuscript.

Eric Stiefel
Washington University in St. Louis
May 2017

The Golden Age

Self-Coronation

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?

Becomingness

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.

The Golden Age

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.

Human Interaction: Subspace

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.

Setting in Which a Landscape Reflects the Present

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

Miniature Film Poster in a Foreign Language
with a Crease in the Middle

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.

Americana

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.

Pop-Up Image of the White House Folded
in a Letter Signed by the President
(2012)

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 a 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.

An Eye for a Mouth

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
breast. Muted lips. The color? Taboo.
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.

Other Times the Mind Wanders Across

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

Crown

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.

Counterpoint

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.

Effigy

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
has opened when the honeysuckle
 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

Waiting Becomes Its Own Landscape

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
of the trees
the shutters
the curtains—
the base

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— foxglove, 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.*

Until

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."

Errata

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.

Human Interaction: We Go Out

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.

Melancholia

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.

Nude Figures in an Imaginary Cage

“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.

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