

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

SIDELINGWISE

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by

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DEDICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

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by

Carleen Tibbetts

Master of Arts in English

The concept of the “gaze” is a trope that frequently manifests itself in Postmodern poetry especially. As both reader and writer, I find myself fascinated with the gaze and its implications, namely the agent of the gaze and the object holding that gaze. My preoccupation with the gaze stems from questions of authority and agency. For example, what preconceptions or does one who looks upon an object deflect onto that object? Given that the personal comes to bear on the gaze, can there be an unadulterated way to truly see a thing?

There are several permutations of the gaze that interest me: the eroticized gaze, usually involving a woman as the object of lust or desire; the scientific and intellectual gaze; the curious, contemplative gaze; and, in general, the gaze implied by the relationship between the observer and the observed. These poems dissect and subvert the gaze in all its aspects, give voice to women subject to the male gaze, and invert the viewer-object dynamic. In addition, this manuscript explores the notions of the distorted gaze, the sidelong look, and the oblique nature of the gaze. Ultimately, the problematic and beautiful nature of perceiving yet not really *seeing* underpins this collection.

Waterstriders

I.

Cognizance is fever breaking.
Objects lose their way.
How do I pull them back,
words like thread unspooling
from some peripheral synapse?
Elusive—the tide pulling sand
smooth over my arches, between my toes.

I am the noticer of aftermaths,
ruins, wreckage. Lover of quirks, minutiae.

II.

When I look a moment longer at a body
of stagnant water, I see waterstriders.
Four littler circles moving in synchronicity
and then tiny bodies suspended by wiry legs.
Jetting small distances, they are hovercrafts.

Hovering, fearlessness, ease.
I want this. To skim the surface and
peer down below without
my weight breaking the fine skin of water.

Solstice: Pre-Dawn

These hours bring wet.
Bring burrowing into salt-sopped pillows.
Easing into and out of visions.
Of futures and pasts imagined.
Or real.

These hours are pages.
In lined notes,
in sketch books,
graphite and ink re-imaginings.
Precognitions.
Residual memories of
Ever-waking to this world.

Have you ever dreamt fire?
Dreamt past?
Have you ever left body behind?

She Said Sever

her hangnail of a mess
hinging
somewhere between her good judgment,
and the malt liquor,
and Rite-Aid ice cream in a box.

Ditch-dug cuticles.
Dark circles.
Just keep bleaching over the
dirt-split ends.

Strip-mall bar sloppy seconds:
cue motorcycle boots.
Cue mascara.
Enter regret.

Said the Pre-Raphaelite Girl

*I am half-sick of shadows . . . The curse is come upon me.
The Lady of Shalott—Lord Tennyson*

Through a glass
and darkly I weave
what I see not.
Turned perpetually from light,
from air, eyes riveted to
my watery mirror, I
mustn't turn round,
mustn't behold color and all
that light eeking
'round the corners of velveteed curtains.
And him who would undo me.

(un-gaze me

un-think me,

dark continent that I am
immense as astral light

this time I will look you

head-on unfaltering you will

notice the upturned corners of my mouth

you will see that shimmer and you will make note of it)

Bad luck.

This is how I am remembered:

tethered, waters gently rocking the docked boat,

wind chilling the reeds, knotting my hair.

My glance fearful, sidecast.

The last of the candles flickering.

My pretty face and I ready to depart,

blanketed in diaphanous gowns

and all my ageless finery.

Unattachedness

deeper in yet
and deeper
still
tissue tucked
under
[into]
itself
rippling
labial
enveloping
consciousness trails
haphazardly
as if a tornado
seen at a distance
a wandering
placental
yet attached
to the earth
by
a
cord

Androgynous Taffeta

after Dawn Mellor's "David Bowie"

Coat your nails
and vamp up your Tang-hued mullet.
Gooooolden Years. Goooooold.
Your eye, skewered through
the back of your head,
dangles on the end of the stick.
Demurely feline, one lithe shoulder
a coil of sinew.
The other, plume
of cornflower puff.
That thin-lipped but smoldering sneer
of a scheming Dandy.
Does John know you're only dancing?
Does he know that (s)he turns you on?

Spectacle

disproportionate female to male genitalia in . . . beer commercials

some guy getting chased down on COPS

Jerry Springer and his beads

Baudrillardian real of reality TV

bald Britney vs. paparazzo at San Fernando Valley gas station

the men of Jackass light dynamite . . . in the rectum of celebrity shotgun weddings

top models, American idols, but the biggest loser is
an obese monkey on Xanax and wine shredding a woman's face unrecognizable

Metro Amtrak fastrack deaths

the Octo-mom who asked her plastic surgeon for Angelina Jolie's face

Warning: some material may be unsuitable for viewers under the age of _____
DISCRETION ADVISED

Lowest common denominator:

as the race car engulfs on the speedway,
we crane our necks back to the tinder flaming just off to the side.

But for the Absence of Tinder

Thousands of tiny fires
 wait to be set off
in the tight crawl space
 of the chest cavity,
fanned like the chimney flu.
 Each updraft parches,
takes a little more life with it.
 I brittle, curl inward.
Mulch kindles falteringly.
 I would engulf
but for the absence of tinder
 you have given me.
Stack me inside the debris
 of our mutual malice.
Let go the spark
 that will take me.
Slow burn
 to radiant pyre.
Let past ashes flit away
 up into the summer night wind.

Lapsed Catholic Inside Saint Patrick's Cathedral

I came in off the street
bombarded by a fireworks ceremony of digital flashes
and the honeyed hum of many languages
sounding as one. I did not look ahead as I walked,
but up at the vaulted, gothic space, windows
saturated blue and yellow.

I visited a sepulcher
of saints in private grottos.
Racks of prayer candles spat fatty wax
onto the cool marble. Stone cooled
the air inside to the slow crawl
of a fading pulse.

I lit a candle and prayed
what I knew was prayer.

I watched the flame waver inside its red glass.
I thought of sparkling sand,
glimmers in concrete sidewalks,
how I look down as I walk.
I wondered how humanity was in its angelhood,
and why the altar was closed off,
fenced like a tiny, separate house.

"No photography beyond this point," a sign read
by the Blessed Virgin's shrine
where the Sacrament was kept.
Scaffolding constricted a section of columns and
drafts of dead, chilled air billowed in the tarps.

Inside the altar's woodworking—intricate shamrocks.
I traced their contours and outlines.
I thought of defaced Sheela-Na-Gigs scowling at The Church.

Bacchfemaleian

after Cindy Sherman's "Untitled #224"

You were expecting someone else?
The new, improved hermaphroditic
she-male party machine!
Muscled, de-breasted body,
the warm face of a mother.
You there,
yeah, *you*, bub!
Some Cuervo?
Some Jager?
Wanna arm wrestle?
Wanna see what's under the toga?
Between my legs
lies white noise,
pure light almighty.
Between my legs
is joy.
Is I Am.

Imago

when I think me

I think black eyebrows defined

think slack, black ink hair that obeys my touch,

breasts dainty and pert as crab apples

think ribcage

wrist.

clavicle

angles fluidity

ninety pounds buried beneath sweaters

under eyeliner

and angst

pixie cuts that work

but I am in this chrysalis instead:

pale eyelashes

rotund at the hips

irises greens that resist naming

breasts pudding-spooned into bra

porcelain and peach

thick gold waves shorn

thick calves

thick

I exit

breech

dimpled

ass-first

brown boots

plum flapper hat

a smirk on my

Cupid's Bow

mouth

Somewhere Between Unsayng and Forgetting

As if to build cell by cell a fabric that could take the weight of eternity into it—like human tissue—Jorie Graham

When lovers do not speak,
they look--
no, *gaze*--
at each other.
Pupils expand
at the task of processing beauty.

The delay occurs in the process
of constructing thought,
of making it into sound that
tumbles out,
riding the air from the body.

Language attempts to circumvent
this impasse,
this stilled moment.
We cannot say anything
that moves beyond it.
Words
unstitched, dismantled.

Fragments of [insufficient] expression.

Flesh can be penetrated—
but not the realm of possibility
waiting
in the synapse
that tells the mouth

move these thoughts out, slow like honey on the lips.

The Cosmos in Her Eye

after Marilyn Minter's "Purple Haze"

This time, it's not women's tar-scummy feet
stuffed into high fashion glossy peep-toe stilettos
or a mascara-streaked face from the nose down,
cherry-funked lips and coffee-stained teeth
chewing on a strand of costume pearls:
patina thrown over them like dog shit spraypainted ornamental.

Instead, skin beglittered with lilac galactic dust,
faint traces of eyebrow and lash show through.
Contour of nose shaded stark black
against shimmering violet chimera.
The camera's light shows in the pupil,
like a small, unknown planet hovering
at the far end of an interstellar landscape.

Chalcedony-and-teal-flecked iris,
its murky aural haze loops and mesmerizes
like a swimming pool drain.
Tiny worlds spin far off into oblivion
in the cosmos in her eye.

The Old Mind in Us

emanates
from womansoul
moontime
precosmic
prevision

gives itself over
to attunement
instinctive logic
the glow in the darkling

keens our eyepaths
with uncanny foresight
widens our thresholds
for bearing
for receiving

seeks to cultivate
harmonize
infuse spirit
conjoin
accept

does not let us
sleep the night
always restless
trailing the moon
and mind that leave us
in waking hours

The Entrapment of Marie-Hortense

*She never understood her husband. The feeling was mutual. Cezanne
didn't understand women at all and she was no exception.
She didn't like his pictures much, either*

--WebMuseum, Paris

*Madame Cezanne offers herself in homage with its various uses
with its curve and blank stare*

--Lyn Hejinian

1. Madame Cezanne In a Yellow Chair, 3

Yes, I'll sit for you.
I said I'd sit for you, didn't I?
This is so silly, so ridiculous.

I look nearly like an Asian man!
Dear God, my eyes don't look that way!
What have you done to my hair?
You slicked it and parted it
down the middle
like an uptight businessman.

You got my hands right.
I clenched them tight.
Nervous and bored,
I pressed each thumb
into the opposing hand
that waited to receive it.

2. Madame Cezanne In Blue

Where have my breasts gone!
Paul, this just isn't good.
You've made me look
like a young Gertrude Stein!

Disappointed, I married badly.
My face tells that accurately.
You have left hardly any space
for the whites of my eyes.

And damn that oily bowl cut,
I look like a sad, boxy,
sloe-eyed lesbian
about to bawl.

If only you did something useful.
If only, divorce.

3. Madame Cezanne With Unbound Hair

Well, now I don't have
a bun matted to my head.
I like this better,
a little more feminine.

But, my mouth.
Sad, morbid, clownish.
I don't make that face,
I am not constantly
in the throes
of melancholy and despair.

The hair is the only part of me
that remains unbound.
I'm not a willing subject, Paul.
Not after this unlikeness.
From now on, I will have
to fight not to make this face
when I sit for you.
You have thrown some
smear of rouge
to make me look
sanguine, complicit,
warming to the idea.

Crystal System (Lithium)

chemical

structure

webbing

like

crystal

lattices

layered

over

over

and

backlooping

elliptical

recursive

fission

is

binary

a fissure

duality

yet

disunity

of

mind

smoothed

over

and

(re)

sutured

Country Music and a Beard Full of Bees

after Dawn Mellor's "Nicole Kidman"

I suppose the public should pity you,
having been
holed up
with lunacy for so long.
Maybe we just want to
see you get weirder now,
uglier.
Put that Virginia Woolf nose back on again.
We are waiting
for your freckles to lesion,
or for a flicker of life in your cyborg eyes.
We want that gummy smile of yours to peel
across teeth stained cherry-red.
You gnawed on a delicate animal
prior to a premiere.
You've bitten
your tongue and pursed your lips so long,
the blood had to show sometime.

Writerly Impulse

It lies unsuspected: sleuth tick
in the underwire of your bra.
It burrows like a foxtail into
your sock at the ankle,
snagging the flesh.

Give me glossy gossamer words,
pregnant with possibility.
A lovesynthetic: plasticized attempt at the real.

It is still there: small open sore
that you finger, pressing to feel the sting
of your skin against itself telling you,
this pain means it's real.
You return: a dog
licking its paws bloody.

Senses quicken, images are electro-shock:
it is like picking up a shell and
instead of hearing the ocean,
you hear blood rushing through you
as it grows so quiet the rush becomes deafening.

The Possible Christ

At an intersection nearby the promenade,
a man, you know, *that* man,
who just might be Jesus undercover
in a soiled blue ski jacket inappropriate
for the summery Santa Monica streets
asked me, "Are we in an M&M's commercial?"

He rides the bus up and down Lincoln and across Pico,
or up and down anywhere
days on end, ferrying flattened boxes
held together by twine,
bags, carts of recyclables,
whiffs of soured milk, excess sebum,
hands greased with dirt.
His illness carries him out
to its furthest vanishing point.

The mind and body are reciprocal spider and prey,
spitting up digestive bile, devouring one another,
leaving only the spindly carcass sucked dry.

Housed inside the Metro,
transported
(Alpha and Omega).
Incoherencies blur tangential:

*I have a time capsule full of material, my jokes,
so nobody steals them. Want to hear?
Okay, what's the difference between screwing
a Jewish woman and a pastrami sandwich?
I mean, have you tried the pastrami?
You got fifty cents? A Famous Star costs a dollar seven,
and I'm about halfway there.*

He thrusts these ramblings
upon bystanders, commuters,
and vacant seats nearby.
As the gloaming becomes nightfall,
cheap bus lights hum and flicker,
stark and unforgiving.

Morphic Paradox: Implosion/Explosion

after Nicoletta Comand's series of photographs, "The Food I Ate Turned Into Flesh"

As a small child, she preferred to handle her food
rather than eat it. Potatoes, partially chewed beef,
applesauce, graham crackers soaked in spit--
all excellent materials to work with.
Giddy, she mushed
and squeezed strained vegetables in baby fists.
She flung pulp about the table, all over the walls.
As the girl grew,
she was not allowed to violate
uneaten food.
She was not allowed to waste.
She turned to Play-Doh.
She made blue cupcakes and green pies.
Sometimes she forgot to put the doh back
into the can. It hardened,
impossible
to unshape.
She watched her mother bake fudge,
flour dough,
weave lattice crusts,
sweeten.
The girl-becoming-woman denied herself.
She saw glass in chocolate-frosted cakes,
strychnine in fruit tarts.
For a time she stopped eating all together.
Then, like Alice, the girl read EAT ME on nearly everything.
She gobbled.
She grew.
She hid chocolates and toffees around her house,
ate pasta with cream sauce when nobody was around.
She dreamed her cheeks fattened and expanded
while her eyes and mouth sealed shut, drowned
in flesh, and receded into dimpled lard.
She could be svelte,
bovine,
hollow,
incandescently plump.
Like us,
she was desirous to taste.

To Kill the Unicorn

for Lucie Brock-Broido

What creature, what figment was it that eluded
Men, their arrows, and their lust?

By some accounts, it could
Detect the guilty and the criminal and

Pierce straight through their hearts
With its horn.

This whinnying litmus test
Of character, gentle and feared judge.

To think this beast of legend was mistaken for
An elephant or rhinoceros, rough and unelegant.

In the West it was white, gamine, shy--
Hunted for the strange alchemy and power in its alicorn.

The creature could only be coaxed into view
By young and beautiful virgins.

It approached a pure woman and laid
Its head in her lap, her maidenhead.

The virgin ran her fingers through
The snowy mane, patted its ears and muzzle.

She stared at the spiraling horn and wondered
Whether to signal the hunters poised nearby

Or to lean in and whisper, lovingly, "Go."

Butcher's Special: Floor Length Cut

after Jana Sterbak's "Vanitas: Dress for an Albino Anorectic"

Big meaty meat meat pattern.
Lovely brickish-brackish-red
with pink white swirls of fat.
Would you like a fitting room?
It would look perfect on you.
Bloody.
Heavy.
Heavier.
Than you.
Walk around a bit,
get a feel for it
in the tri-paneled mirror.
Wear what you have let waste away.
Anything will look good on your
collage of bone and joint,
your sewn-sullen mouth,
your jaded and sleepy eyes,
your dragon spine.
Oh, but in that tri-paneled mirror
you still see you
fat as me.
You hope to feel prettier
as you forget how to chew,
as you lock your jaw
in sad, rigid defiance.

Sidelingwise

In that moment (blemish and blossom) we are gaze

Karen Volkman

Oblique the vantage point,
the focal point, the point
from which you focus.
Become outlier.
Become fringe.
Become unreliable witness.
Look now, heavy-lidded
from the day, from the soul's
slow grind up against the world.
Treat minutiae as main event.
Pay a little more attention.
Flies on their backs, legs folded,
in coffee shop window caulking.
The insignificant is ostentatious-
an actor's pores,
an editing feau pax.
Pan in, pan out.
Use the zoom function.
The happening off-camera,
beyond the immediate scope of vision.
Plot becomes secondary in life.
Life--a tapestry of imagistic detail,
each fiber of each thread
seemingly immaterial
until studied under magnification.
No detail is inconsequential.

From Bone to Story and Back Again

This is the grit that grinds into pearl—Gail Wronsky

I.

The night that my mother went into labor with me,
she could not reach my father.

He was in his company's bowling league.

She paced the house, wet and waddling,
as her two stepsons watched.

My mother called the bowling alley.

She had my father paged several times.

No response.

A member of his team went out to the parking lot
to find him.

My father was in the backseat

of a female bowler's car,

in the middle of making it.

"Hey," the guy said, "your wife's having the baby."

I came into the world already betrayed.

There were those few years

when I thought he was amazing,

before rage settled inside him.

Heart-damaging, artery-constricting,
feel-it-in-the-whites-of-your-eyes rage.

He withdrew

into classic Chevy cars,

the musk of strange women,

his narcissism.

Couples therapy.

Family therapy.

Nobody wanted to be in the room with him.

We couldn't fit there

with his seething fog of apathy.

Once, he refused to take my brother

to the hospital after a severe allergic reaction.

He grabbed my mother by her throat

as she choked out,

"He's your *son!*"

I screamed snot

and hate

and why

was I bone

of his bone.

II.

They split up.

Finally.

My father told us that he was moving in
with a coworker and her husband

who was sick with Leukemia.

Actually, the woman wasn't married.

Her husband had died long ago.

My father had been fucking her
for a year before he left.

With this lady he:

rescued cats,

put our child support up his nose,

bought antiques,

became "disabled."

Now, my father talks about his rehabilitated cats
as if *they* are his children.

He gives me a play-by-play
of their comings and goings,

personality traits, culinary preferences.

He defaults on all promises--

it no longer stings.

He is not the familiarity of father,

the tie of flesh,

the permanence of bone.

He exists as myth,

a story so darkly twisted,

I have to laugh it off.

Dynamiter Odalisque

after Karl Gietl and for Luce Irigaray

Karl Gietl thinks young women
prefer to eat ice cream in the nude.
Thinks they "recline"
splayed open and spread-eagled,
their Georgia O'Keeffe's prominently displayed.

Women are told to
cross their legs,
told not to show their flowers.
And then
let's see it
let's see the money shot.

He must think all women are ready to drop trau,
eager to gingerly part their lips for him.
All women are waiting
to be depicted, spelunked.
Mere probable tunnels and folds
that lie dormant until uncovered
by the colonizing male eye.

I think of Luce
when I think about my first
reduction to the meat between my legs.
The doctor giggled.
He told me I had an unusually long
outer labial lip. Funny?
He tugged on it and smiled.
His body too close inside
my legs that shook in the stirrups.
The nurse stood against the back wall,
clipboard against her chest,
to make sure I wasn't assaulted.
She said nothing when I looked to her for reassurance.

He cranked the cold, jellied speculum like a car jack,
cranked me open.
I wondered what it would be like to see me
the way he saw me,
to have a clear shot to where life begins
at the center of the world.

Unattachedness (doubletake)

attached
to the earth
by
a cord

a placental wandering
seen

at a distance tornado
of consciousness trailing

haphazardly

enveloping labial
rippling

tucked [into] under

tissue

and still deeper in
yet

deeper

Skinful

after Mandy Harvers' "Framed Figure" and Rembrandt's "The Flayed Ox"

Pliable plight.
All your underneath unsheathed.
Limbs hewn at the joints.
Dainty, intricate wrists,
ankles, hooves.
Your shanks peeled and flanked.
Muscle glistens under ligament
and incandescent fat.
Man and meat pinned, suspended.
Displayed for autopsy.
Taut abdomen begs
to be burrowed into.
Torso with bloodied nubs,
like a chicken carcass
inside the bag
swimming with its blood.
Fasten the flesh.
Hold it back.
Determine its grade.
Ebony shining thighs
trail off at the kneecaps.
Head severed.
Steel rods and hooks
hold the pulp of the neck
to the surgical table.
The breadth of the ox's chest
magnificent, thinks
the butcher's wife.
You lie there, mangled,
all underskin
with the exception of your
perfectly intact phallus.
Yet untouched tenderloin.

Thrifting

hasten the loosening of it of everything

particles thin and soft and very nearly transparent
find the urban in the urbane
pigeons scratching at crusts waiting
for the clearing of a table to present itself
the pecking (at crumbs tucked) in-between cobblestones

not crumbs but strewn ash like
tiny volcanos had been there
or perhaps no? that is the nature of it

are we so different from back alley divers
collectors of the seemingly arbitrary refuse oddities
rats making nests from storehouses of hair
work it piecemeal snip at it snip (carefully) like a frugal widow
who keeps a catalog of coupons or

splurge on something like: incandescent irises mottled bus stop bench
(bird droppings sticky runs of mcdonald's orange juice)
refraction of ambulance siren catching
you off guard
like ventriloquism
squishing deep into tar mud in your best heels it is like that

stringing it together stringing them along you
know how to do it (already you do) as a child decorating
the christmas tree with fluffs of popcorn
you had to fill in spaces but still leave
room behind the kitsch (enough) for
lights to peek out

Honky (Tonk)

after Jo Brocklehurst's drawing, "Don, The Urban Cowboy II"

Tight black jeans on those chicken legs,
Goddamn!
Yes, sir!
Keep that whiskey flowin'.
Shufflin' to Cougar-Mellencamp
and that belly dancin'
over your studded belt.
Whydontcha rub
those scaly arms
and crusty flat-nailed fingers
on me. Do the hustle.
Take off that felt hat, wipe the sweat
from your half-dome head,
and fling stringy hair grease on the pool table.
Line-dance me.
Arch me over the felt.
Buy me hot wings.
Call me darlin'.

Witness: Lot's Wife

I just could not resist
a good smiting
in your name,
Lord.

My husband offered
our daughters' virginity
to the men who desired
your angelic messengers
and destroyers.

I said nothing.
I questioned nothing.
I fled at dawn.

A glimpse, a remembrance
of those messengers burning
up land, livestock,
homes, valleys,
and the men
who lay with one another,
men to whom my husband
would give my daughters
to satiate their lust.

And so I looked
my last look.
A particulate pillar
holding form long enough
for fire to take the land,
for smoke to blow me
through the mountain pass
where my family,
spared for their righteousness,
turned to shameful desperation.

Tableau

You
will
not
encumber
keep
statis
constant.

I
will
break
form,
character--
unparalyze,
extricate
myself
from
your
perpetuance
of
shit.

You
will
look
back
and
see
not
only
have

I
changed
position,

I
have
hit
the
ground
in
flight.

Ocular Perversity: Edgar Degas, a Study

1. Je t'aime, petite filles

He loves little girls.
Nymphettes flit across the stage en pointe.
Tulle skirts are dandelion wisps,
sheerest gauze giving way
to taught thighs, hips
at the brink of curvature,
buttocks and breasts budding and
Oh oh oh!
He cannot stay away.
Intensely delicate man in the theater,
sketch pad in hand, gripping his seat
in orgasmic joy
as his girls pli  ,
bend, split,
arch their spines and feet.

2. Boredom in the Brothels

Here he studies used up ladies,
tired, sore, broken women
too apathetic
for costume,
corsets,
undergarments.
They lie naked
on filthy couches
save for their stockings
and feathered hair pieces.
He notices cellulite,
thick and wild pubic hair,
sagging breasts, bellies misshapen
from the weight of men.
Too much rouge, he sighs.
They lack the promise and fluidity
of his nubile dancers.
These women remain
roughly sketched,
carbon and graphite.

3. A Perfect Excuse for the Female Nude

Bathing at home is so now,
so bourgeois.
He commercializes women
who clean themselves
in private.
He makes it unprivate.
Slick-haired women who
swaddle themselves in towels,
reach artfully to dry their crevices-
backs of the knees, armpits,
backsides, toes.
Personal ritual,
a study of shapes,
a flow of lines.
They put on their robes.
He can leave.

4. *The Interior (The Rape)*

This may have been
what he wanted to do.
No longer content to be
observer, strictly.
Ominous muted light
spills over the room.
Up against the door,
the man waits,
readying himself
to unmake the woman,
to unmake the bed.

5. He Turns His Gaze on Himself (Self Portraits)

Sloe-eyed slip of a man,
impotent onlooker,
dandied artiste.
Fly on the wall
pondering some decadent suicide.
Always his right side.
Sinister petulance.

6. Things Fall Apart

He didn't like to paint
outdoors.

Sunlight bothered
his increasingly
feeble
eyes.

It was agony for him to draw.

He could never see the spot
where he was looking,
only everything else around it.

At one point, he couldn't
identify the colors in his palette.

He sought treatment from nuns
And oculists.

Various sets of spectacles:
tinted, designed for
mild myopia and astigmatism.

Eventually, he feigned blindness,
his failing eyes an excuse
to avoid art shows,
to dismiss bodies.

Fussy recluse, content to dream
about his ballerinas,
his whores.

Watching Myself at My Old Kitchen Window, 1998

The veins in your hands plumped and rose under hot dishwater. You looked up from the soap to watch the hummingbirds at the feeder outside the kitchen sink window. How their bodies bent and wiggled, yet stayed so still. All torsos, winged metronomes counting impossible beats. The wet back of a hand smoothing hair caught against your dry lip. The neighbors and their fascist Schnauzer on the sidewalk. Leaves in the courtyard clustered and curled under the rosebush.

You contemplated rust patterns on the mailbox. How the wind moved from one corner of the swimming pool, fanning outward, encroaching stillness. Your old angora rabbit in the yard, fur like flocking left in the grass. The muscle cars that used to sit in the driveway. The oil that collected in pans as he worked on his cars. The dog cowering when he yelled at her. The opalescent patterns you would find in that oil. The toys he would bring home from work and how you remembered them happy--remembered them before. The jasmine blooming in the courtyard walls.

The monarch too big for your hands that you caught in the front yard and let go, its dust on your fingers made you cry. The times you first heard the words "cunt" and "fuck" and them directed toward all of you. The bush full of bumblebees moving like drunken bomber planes. Lemon juice in your hair to get the chlorine out after you swam for hours. Tonka trucks and figurines and games. His threats of suicide. The creaks your grandmother wore into the linoleum when she paced the kitchen. Sunday visitations. The china tea cup that broke against the wall when he narrowly missed her. The time he came home drunk and finally left. This house you grew up in. This house you lost.

Trajectory of Failure

Backward blooming.
Black blooming.
Blowback unfurling.
Hurling shards of what may have been.

Some unholy inertia tugs.
Derails me.
Pull to my push.
This infertile flowering.
These dank roots will be torn out,
loom rethreaded,
perception recanvased
in the absence of unwieldy expectations.

Trigger Finger

after Cindy Sherman's photograph, "Untitled #175"

sprinkles and icing and vodka
don't really mix with pre-made
barbeque in a bowl or chocolate cupcakes
but 4:30 a.m. beer and stuffed shells
feel good until they're in there
I don't like fullness and even
talking makes it come up
or crying, too
laughing with you on the balcony
I hosed clear orange bile over
the edge
skip work
skip cat box
skip collection messages on the machine
festering altars in the fridge to
foods I will never digest
I watch them curdle
outside my body
lose myself with each
shower, every time I kneel
gurgling onto the carpet before
I can make it to the bathroom
the trigger isn't my finger anymore
I am there inside
the rum-soaked pop-tart
screaming back at myself

Last Wash and Dry on a Sunday Night

When our dryer broke,
my mother and I hauled baskets of wet clothes
to the nearest Laundromat.
We pulled up next to cars patchworked
navy blue and Bond-O, cardboard and cellophane
for windows.

In the darkened nail salon next door,
that generic 80's pop art female
decaled to the storefront window snickered--
long pink talons, red lips, moussed black hair,
tiny dots for nostrils,
slit almondine eyes.
In her upturned hand,
the word
NAILS.

We searched out working dryers, dumped
clothes in, and waited in our car.
Inside, young mothers in translucent white
terrycloth lounge pants took clothes
out of yellow-handled Hefty bags
while their children jumped on
mucous-colored seats by the door
and ate small handfuls of
fruit-shaped candies from the machines.

A woman made old from drugs or smoking--
she wore a tank top, jeans, and drugstore flip-flops--
draped her delicates over the bar of the wheeled laundry cart.
She pulled the cart over to the seats by the door,
got a Diet Coke from the vending machine and
flipped through a gossip magazine while
the dryer hummed on.
This was her fluorescent, lonely church.
She didn't have to profess or confess,
shake anyone's hands,
or worry about where to sit.
She drank her own bitter wine
and meditated in the barely audible whir
of her spirit.

Imaginary of _____

I glint sunlight

bringing day and defrost

to a grocery store parking lot

6 a.m. and seagulls warm themselves in dumpsters

fight for rotted fish sticks stale bread old yogurt

I cloaked like some ethnographer of the real
stand gleer-eyed early wind stinging

forcing me to blink to tear-over

and each time I see the same yet

differently like a Viewfinder

or the optometrist asking

“Better one or two? One or two?”

and I have no idea how to answer

Re: Solstice: Pre-Dawn

These hours bring wet.
Bring burrowing into salt-sopped pillows.
Easing into an out of visions
that glimster crystal dust in a jaundiced fog
or fireball like bomb flashes.
Pure nuclear light.

These hours are pages.
Precognitions.
In lined notes.

(salvaged dreamwork from September 10, 2001:

I'm in a building that looks like my dorm room and it explodes it blows out I jump over a couch and I'm flying out with glass breaking out of a tall building then I'm on the 405 and I have a glowing green race car on my wrist the paper kind you get when you go to shows at small venues and then a car that looks like my friend's VW Rabbit is in the far left lane up ahead it can't stop spins out crashes into the divider and erupts into flames)

(real life: The phone wakes me up. It's my brother telling me to turn on the TV. The towers are falling, the towers are burning. I write the towers as Humpty Dumpty)

In sketch books.
Graphite and ink re-imaginings.
Ever-waking to this residual world.

I have dreamt fire:
flint, crackle, spark.
Blackness, then flame encircled me.
Smoke and smell of my burning
tore me from sleep.

I have dreamt past.
I saw my family
before I became a part of it.
I dreamt cold stone, chain metal,
women of lore, guile, and war.

I have left body behind.
I have spun out and up
into the language of light,
my energy untethered.
Last of a long line of astral wing walkers and plane travelers,
I sleep in a southern direction
to keep myself inside the body.

Squincing

squincing, *ppl. a. Obs.*: (Probably a purely fanciful formation without definite meaning.)

--The Oxford English Dictionary

Apprentice fingers are not confident
enough to administer shunts
or tie off tourniquets.

Unsteady hands make for
unsteady veins
and blood unstoppable.

Culture demands precision of us,
a pixilated precision
a high-def mess, askew at close range,
until you back up to a safe
standpoint of parallax.

Purely fanciful formations:
theories, figure eights,
unicorns, the ether of spirit,
worlds on either side of this one.

Make friends with the murk of the psyche.
Let mystery keep
some things to herself.

Clarity is overrated.
Don't make me say
I told you so.

The Stuff This Body Is Made Of

A pigeon lying on the sidewalk. A dampened spot next to a young tree. A struggling. A crumpled heap of wing and feather. Just a soiled fast food burger wrapper, stained with traces of the asphalt road. Orchids are held in too high an esteem for creatures that exist so fleetingly. The warm reassurance of people with stray pet hair on them. The endurance of that loving and rubbing and giving it right back. Slivers of dark chocolate up against the roof of my mouth deformed by my tongue until they dissolve and thicken my spit. I want to believe that people are good. Do not disregard the small or everyday rituals: dish washing, counter-wiping, tweezing, filing, smoothing, coverup-ing. Honey all over my pantry shelf liners, but bugs haven't come. Self-medication asks too much of me. I have to tell it, "Some other time."

A shopping cart outside my apartment piled with bags of recyclables. In the middle was a still-fresh bouquet rising from the trash. Las Vegas is good only for its lighting and Cirque du Soleil. Highlighters go unused because underlining is more effective. Wish and worry and too much. Take news headlines in small doses. Be superstitious of mirrors. You never know what you might find in them. The best is: running fingers over sketch paper before tainting it. Spiral and filigree. Art Nouveau. Knots and illuminated script and oh oh oh so feminine.

Books in the kitchen cabinets because there is nowhere else for them to live. How much of life can be neatly and orderly boxed? The dogs in the next apartment run down the alley, their chains jingling to offset the strained sqwawk of a bark. Western Union's down again and the manager at the grocery store has a hickey on her neck, gauged ears plugged with The Virgin Mary, and spiked hair. What is a crisis of faith, exactly? How long does one last? Rain is good, but too much is funk-inducing. Misty rain is sweet, a kiss. Bus lines are stimulating. Don't disregard outsider musings--Jesus talk, performance art, propositions. Haunted by an empty box of condoms I found in the theater when I worked as an usher, I thought, "Why the front row?" and "How many times is coitus possible in an hour-and-a-half?"

High school was glitter and dance and an aching under the veneer. I'd go to the beauty supply store, buy a pot of glitter gel and put it anywhere and everywhere. Best friend's diet of protein and anti-seizure medication lost her 50 lbs. for her wedding in the fall. She is sad. I think young. I think younger. Wheaton. Chicago. Fireflies and crabapples, well-water and no sidewalks. Leaf-raking and the rich colors. Piling the leaves and stacking them up in the yard and then moving them into wire trash cans on the side of the road to burn them. The smell will never leave me.