

MY BODY IS THE PERFECT TEMPERATURE AND I TRY
NOT TO BE SO LONELY

by

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TO THE DEATHS I DID NOT SEE

I found too many feathers
that day in the woods.
I didn't understand at first,

believed that the bird was balding,
or that two birds nipped and pulled
at each other like siblings

pulling hair. The first feathers
were singular, but the rest ran deep
into the tissue, still connected

by skin, death in soft focus.
There was such pain in that jaggedness.
I could not believe the pain.

When, ten years later, I see a vulture
in the cornfield razed for the winter,
its body bigger than I could have imagined

I want to grip the crook of its wing,
perfectly bent like a statue of a standing angel,
and feel its wholeness in my hand.

THIS IS NOT ELEGY / THIS IS ODE

The first time I am truly frightened by the world is when I peek at it through my mother's fingers. I see a child on the TV, possibly my age, hiding between the legs of adults unable to protect him. Behind the boy is a trail of bodies and the man felling them with a sword. Those still living offer him their backs, and he obliges, nape to sacrum. Only the boy's grandmother begs for mercy. She says, take me, but please spare him. He traces the curve of her spine. He does not.

I find this fear again and again, learn that mercy cannot be bargained for. Classmates crouch around a spot in the grass. Even with its torn wings, here is a moth larger than any I thought possible, greater than both my hands combined. I brush its ragged, clipped, soft self. It is no longer interested in flight.

PERSIMMON

petals curl
outwards, unravelling
into a thick shrug,
a soft non-yellow.
stamen and pistil
intertwine,
tending to
the hermaphroditic,
until blossom
becomes ovary,
a sanctuary
inflamed.

ILIAC

I only feel my body when my arms reside above my head—
suddenly the tissue I can't name anything but meat
innervates, my nipples stretch into ovals
and my breasts disappear, an iliac crest
pushes against the other side of my skin,
and I wonder whether I had feared the changes
my body pushed forward to, had I always
been so nonchalant about how I looked,
was I satisfied or petrified, not as in fearful
but as in the mind in stasis, floating in one spot—
not until my child legs became covered in it,
not until I learned of pleasure, not until I found that this
was something I could not change until I could.

MY MOTHER CALLS ME HER DAUGHTER. I WANT TO BE A PART OF
THIS POSSESSIVE.

I mistake a lump for a rib
and it is my rib. Mistake
a rib for a lump and it is still
my rib. My doctor tells me
to pull up my shirt. My mother
is still in the room. My doctor asks
if I would prefer my mother
not to be. She apologizes
for how cold her fingers are
against my skin. She looks away
but does not mistake my rib
for anything but a rib. Her fingers
hurt more than they are cold.

ARTIST

among my parents' / friends / it is easy to tell
who could never / be / an artist / it is anyone
who believes / I take after / my mother
yet I / still / don't quite believe / my eyes
when I mistake / my profile / for my father's
the last time / I went back / to China / my uncle
entered / the room / glanced up / double took
if he / had / a drink / he would have spat it / out
it was / as if / his brother had risen / from the dead
were he not / still / alive

CHIRAL

I call any geometrical figure, or group of points, 'chiral', and say that it has chirality if its image in a plane mirror, ideally realized, cannot be brought to coincide with itself.

—William Thomson

you've fallen in love
and what is it about me
that is so repulsive

is it the pig's knuckles
the gnawing of them
the goose neck wrung
these fleshy chicken feet

should I cut my hair
to look more like the boys
you sleep with

is it a lack thereof,
a self stateless
my unnamed

body clenches
at the sight of yours
the spine ribs
the back of you.

COFFEE

You've been told that she has died
but is she not right here,
right in front of you?
In line for something as mundane
as morning coffee?
There's her hair, still short
even though she wanted
to start growing it out,
plastered onto her scalp
with a slight oily sheen.
That texture, you just know
if it were any longer it would curl
uncontrollably into ringlets.
When she orders,
you mouth the words
just black, please.
God, she even sounds the same,
the slight anxious shiver in her voice.
Is she not right here
every morning, with the same
hair, the same order?
As she steps to her left to wait,
her head turns to look over her shoulder
as if she feels your eyes.
You don't let her. You turn away
and run before she can see your face.

POLYPTYCH

after Richard Siken

I said *please don't do this* and you said *I think I'm going for a walk.*

Don't call me again, I won't pick up.

Don't worry, I'll be fine tonight.

Of course I call anyway.

Of course I know you are telling the truth,
but how can I believe it?

I can't help myself,
I've been sitting on the floor of this bathroom calling
ever since.

I say *please don't do this* and you don't say anything.

You sit across the table from me

as we play Egyptian Ratscrew.

Your body is a collection of stiff angles,

elbow, neck, shoulder, waist, ready to hit the pile, king on top.

There is only one card left in your hand and we both know which it is—

you've been counting cards

but you were always such an awful bleeder.

I say *tell me to leave*.

Tell me to leave but that you'll miss me.

Tell me that I am being so, so selfish.

You draw your king of hearts,

sword through his head.

You slam your hand down onto the table.

Will you love me even more when I'm dead?

I say *please don't* but you tickle me before I finish and until
I can't breathe and your fingers cramp.
You're laughing and yes I want to join you and yes I know you're trying to distract me and
yes, all I want is to forget and laugh
but still I can't seem to
breathe.
You keep tickling
until I scream.

I say *please don't do this* and you say

can we change the subject, please?

We're on the road trip we always wanted to take.

You turn up the volume, lower the windows, and put the AC on full blast.

You step on the gas.

I can hardly hear you when you say

you're really letting this thing consume you.

Yes,

I imagine these things over and over,

a car coming towards us when we're not looking,
the driver asleep, dreaming he's driving,

or perhaps we're asleep, dreaming of him.

All I can see is steel through my orbit,

glass like red glitter in our shattered faces.

I say *please don't do this* and you laugh.

What, you mean this?

FALLING

after James Turrell's City of Arhirit (1976)

In the museum, a quiet sleeps over the spectators. A woman would like to enter the city, but the threshold is winding. The further she walks the more she cannot see. She is guided only by a railing and a whisper, this way, forward now, another step, this way, and turn... enter. The city is light, she gasps blue. Her head spins and she reaches for balance, for a wall which is not there.

This must be faith—
to need, reach for, touch
that which cannot hold you.

PERSIMMON

my mother's fingers circumscribe a persimmon
dimpling its waxy persimmon cheeks
a knife skims just underneath

she hands me four slices and a core
each with two feminine lines
my seedless mouth worshipping

skin softened into honey

FISH HEAD SOUP

use your tongue,
she says.

excavate
the head.
meat white
as bone
which
cradles it.
lick out
its cheeks
and use
its eyes
to replace
your own.

but
mine is
a bastardized
tongue
unable
to understand
that
which is
still
whole.

mother,
how
do i
speak
a language
of sustenance
mouthless.

BALUT

you,
 you peel the shell back;

and I,
 I eat it whole.

SO, THIS WAS THE SCENT...

after Park Chan-wook's The Handmaiden

The handmaiden reaches into the Lady's mouth,
and the sharp tooth which cuts into her cheek

grazes her naked thumb. She is surprised by how wet it is,
how it sticks slightly to her finger.

She retrieves a thimble from the other room,
perhaps while tasting what has been left on her thumb,

her Lady's slightest sweetness.
"Ah," the handmaiden breathes, and enters again.

It is quiet except for the soft scraping of thimble on molar—
she can't feel anything except the thin vibration,

the lip her finger rests on, the arrival and departure of breath.
The Lady's mouth hangs loose, willing,

letting her handmaiden erase a piece of herself
she has ached to be free from for so long.

YOLK

after Itami Jūzō's Tanpopo (1985)

when you kiss me, my eyes stay open
even with the moon between our mouths.

I resist the urge to swallow
your dew on its surface,

a rolling, trembling membrane which suddenly gasps
and pours forth, down my chin.

I'll drip hunger into your waiting mouth.

豆花

your melting
silk-skin

splits open
soft as flower petals
against the tongue.

SILVIA

here: the young trees fractal into bursts.
 thin elbowed branches with soft grey bark, soft
 beige meat underneath. up: black rays shoot out
 from behind a silver-lined nimbus, a blue-grey
 forecast. the sky holding back tears.

greyhound: the arch of underbelly leads into
 sleek anorexic wisps of legs. trotting with
 girl: marigold pollen flickers in the first few
 minutes of rain, flaked gold leaf in her black
 hair: silvia:

silvia: as she passes: skin—teeth—
 viscera—distention—ecstasy: and after,
 despair:

she passes: her perfume shimmering into my pores
 stretching constricting bird skin: pupils dilated
 breathing laboured fainting spell: catch yourself:
 we pass:

I rub nictitating dewy eyes:

we pass: we pass.

YOU WERE

Sometimes, I think of you in the past tense, as if you were already ash, disintegrating earth. I admit that I fantasize about your death far more than I should, but with your sleeping form next to me there's a rigor I can't shake out of my body, as if the breath on my neck were just wind. I think of you, and my whole body clenches, flesh learning its mortality. I turn to watch for the minute rise and fall of your chest when you sleep. I match it, silently. I press my cold toes into your calves just to feel the goosebumps rise in response. I can't be certain how long you'll stay. Perhaps I love you all the more for it. I turn again, finding blue invaded by the lightest yellow over the buildings.

RED

I mean the rouge she used to put on her lips, when her hair was permed. In her hands, the cardioid handles of our household scissors. Spools of thread, needles, in a repurposed mooncake tin. Shared lunar blood, leaving the body. Arms, smeared. Cracking head on pavement. Her hair in the sunlight, on the bathroom tile. Marbled meat, defrosting on the kitchen counter. Tofu in a sea of red oil. Woven knots, upside down luck. Envelopes given to foreheads caressing the ground.

啊 / A

for my grandmother

阿婆 / did you lose your voice / conversing with the gods /
in benzodiazepine dreams / 阿婆, 我想你 / your flower
petal skin / becomes translucent / with aged touch /
children stroke / your buddha ears / into nothing / 阿婆,
你在看什么 / and yet your fingers / are still / reaching /
for a cataract-blurred expanse of newspaper / date fibers and
crystallized television sets / 阿婆, 看我啊 / your alkaline
vision / diluted with others' tears / keeping you / hook-
mouthed / tethered / to this world / 阿婆, 你还认识我吗

FOUR DARKS IN RED

you paint on your legs and arms
only one color,
the one that you know best.

a Rothko on your right knee

and a Mondrian composition
—no blues or yellows—
on your left

a steady laceration of canvas.

you study the strokes, stippling,
and thin the paint
with drink, blurring

the raised white ridges, wrist tallying
how many times you gave yourself
a little love.

A SMILING GOD

god derived Schrödinger, Navier-Stokes, and Boltzmann in six days,
and god saw that it was good.

god ignored the doctor's orders. god didn't sleep. god was manic.
god felt *godly*.

but on the seventh day, he rested—cried—drank—swore—wilted—stared—
and could barely move his godly hands.

he was prescribed lithium or clonazepam—his choice—but miracles
just don't happen on medication.

he tore out Adam's rib, cried for one hundred-fifty days,
and budded off a sonself like yeast.

as corporeal messiah, he tried herbal remedies. meditated with the sheep.
started a pescetarian diet.

upon self-crucifixion and sleeping for three days without waking,
he gave in. started on his meds,

and god saw how good it was.

HOLES CLOSE, THAT'S WHAT OUR BODIES DO,

my doctor tells me,
though my extra mouths
beg to differ.

These mouths are different,
strange in their desires—
they do not lust after
oysters sliding down an unmarred throat.
Tracheal and gastric,
they are only interested in survival,
breathing for breathing's sake,
feeding for feeding's sake.

Perhaps the ones growing in my throat
are not dissimilar, these microscopic
children's mouths with insatiable ids.
Still, I burn my throat until it turns grey,
slice new mouths until I cannot speak,

and repeat to myself, that after all this
holes close, that's what our bodies do

here's mine

PERSIMMON

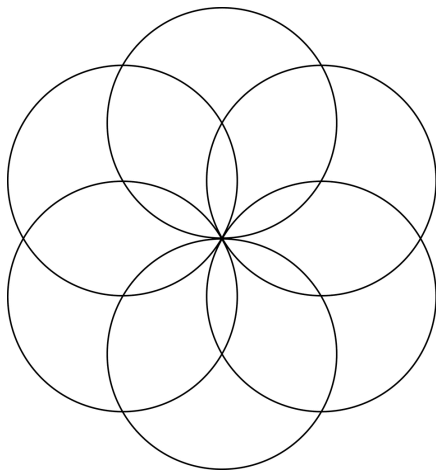
consummate, a persimmon's flesh
is smooth against the lips,
wet and almost swollen.

overripe, it falls apart, blooming, neglected
pulp and nectar running down forearms
saved by a desperate tongue.

but those who do not know the persimmon
will take it before its time,
break their teeth against dry meat,

and after careful consideration, deem it barren.

HOW TO CONSTRUCT A CIRCLE THROUGH THREE NONCOLLINEAR POINTS

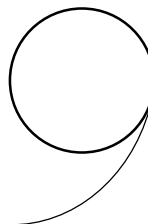


Everything is circular—the straight line does not exist. We eat the prey, who become us. The lovers eat us, who become the lovers. The lovers become the dead(, predators, prey, lovers, the dead, all become the dead), become the earth, become trees, become dead, become lovers.

We want to be greater than Nature.

We seek to break the cycle.
We, who have dreams of plastic, landfills, and immortality.

We keep trying to create the straight line,
curved.



but it cannot be anything but
It kisses our circle,

reaches around, and kisses us again.



HERE ARE THE BIRDS.

Shoaling, swarming, herding. Flocking. They group themselves into a larger being, for fear of dying alone, picked off the edges. The sound of their wings are crashing, sonic undulations. Murmuring. Pointillism rippling into a wisp, a curtain, a coalescence. The smoke of murmuration. The thick and thin. Inhale. Exhale. God's breath.

```
// A basic flocking algorithm: separation, alignment, cohesion.  
// Assume the bird is a sphere ("bird-oid" object). Consider the flock its environment.  
// Implement. Debug. Are you sure you want to run "Boids?"
```

The birds fly at night, enraptured. But when they stumble upon the city, they think, *the light is our love and we have found it at last*. Gone are the stars they were born with, that they have known for thousands of years—but here are the brightest ones, beautiful in their length. Blinded by twin pillars, they continue circling, circling.

NEW YEAR'S EVE

Perhaps they have decided, mid-flight,
to fall, thousands of them,
onto the streets and fields
of Arkansas. Perhaps,
in their exhaustion,
unable to fold into themselves,
the wind, which has been so kind,
snaps both wings.

Perhaps their bodies fit perfectly
into gloved, cupped palms, fingers
tracing lines of dissection,
down the body, and perhaps
are collected, on New Years, in bags,
to be autopsied.

They were, perhaps, found
with blood clots, head trauma,
stomachs empty. Perhaps they are
flipped inside out, just to double check,
and, for a moment, just perhaps,
they swallowed the whole world,
containing it—
the body just air.

CASSIN'S AUKLETS

They simply appeared one morning,
dotting the beaches with thousands of themselves.

They lie on their backs, dashes of mottled ink,
with feet the colour of suffocation.

Look, how they have been torn,
young bodies caked and smothered with sand.

The water, their home, must have been unforgiving.
I'd like to believe that they did not feel

sadness, that they knew home
so intimately as to let the waves envelope

and caress them into sleep, some barely
body, only wing: holy, holy seraphim.

BLOOD HARVEST

we want the horseshoe crab
 its royal blue blood

this creature which has seen the apocalypse
 the great dying
 a strange ocean miasmic
 and still called it home

we take the container
 scrub it hard a rigorous cleaning
 it is then
 bent in half

we find the vulnerable space

bleed it them

this this is the strangest death

THE MIND UNIQUELY EVOLVED FOR THE POSSIBILITY OF
SUFFERING

I wish I had the instinct to know that I was biological
like the cicadas which emerge in prime numbers
(I feel like I have too much choice)
and have weeks before they die

no, it is not sad—they have achieved their purpose—
I wonder whether I, too, have a purpose
and whether I will achieve it sweating on the A line,
texting people I may never touch again

am I as free as I believe, is every decision I make ruled by serotonin,
is it truly a decision if I would make the same one in every iteration,
am I as easily manipulable as the swarming locust, orgiastic
and biblical in its hunger, violently slaking its desires

sometimes, I feel ashamed of this mundanity,
guilty because I do not have to suffer
in the way a gazelle knows the heat of its stomach,
the smell of hot grassy bile pouring down its kicking legs

(or will I also come to understand this through the unnatural trauma
of being saved, the ghost of hands cracking my sternum
remembered through the fog of opioids,
my choking on a plastic tube as I regain consciousness)

ARS POETICA

I wonder how my grandfather managed
such a perfect death in the yellow pages:

this monarch, with only the edge of a fingerprint

visible on its right wing, flattened just so
and framed. Should I be ashamed

of having been the lure, of wanting its beauty

even when I knew it would result in its death—
I was willing to abet pain and to end it

if only to find a kind of permanence.

Having found it, wanting to inflict my own,
I joined the chaos of children

pitting ants together in the woods.

We could recreate for ourselves the death
we had seen, heard so much about. We wanted control

and so we took it away, pushing red and black together

until they misplaced their rage, mistook each other
for our hands which did not allow

for any other possibility than the black maw's

grip on a red leg continuing into death. It was indecent
to be as enthralled as I was.

I had pity, but only after.

SONDAUGHTER

for the gender variant

doe-eyed sondaughter,
do not be afraid.

your second birth will not be
as bloody as the first,

nor will it hurt your mother
in quite the same way.

this world has shown itself wicked—
slit your jugular into gills and tossed you

into the sea. into birthwater
you returned, brine and fish murmuring

rhythmic like coagulated blood and soft
matter. jelly stingers reaching

through sebaceous pores
into your spinal cord. barnacles

growing from your fingertips.
undulations of mollusc tongues

across your chest. this
is a callused body which screams

every time you look down. rather,
gaze at mosaic sunlight breaking

waves into jagged porcelain—
light from which you have hidden,

and air so beautiful it could burn
you like white phosphorus.

yes, they will tear into you again
and again as your mother cries

but you will remember how to breathe
singed air. suture the gills

which have barely kept you from drowning
under the weight of so much life. rise

with the vesicles spewing out your nostrils,
your blossoming lungs.

gouge placental calyx and tear. break holy water.
open your eyes. fill your chest with air.

AND AGAIN I STARE AT MY CHEST AS IF WAITING FOR IT TO BLOOM.

The language we currently use to describe ourselves is a form of Boolean algebra.

I don't want scars to remind me that I had to take a knife to this body in order to call it mine.

I buy a dress shirt and I feel like a child again. It is a men's size S and the cuffs go past my fingertips.

A stranger mistook her left for her right and kissed me on the shoulder instead of her boyfriend.

I hope we evolve into higher beings with 6 sexually dimorphic genders and needlessly complex sex.

My parents watch a video of my nephew. They laugh and say he reminds them of me as a child.

I watch the broad shoulders of the Asian man walking in front of me and feel euphoric.

I don't want to shoot up this body in order to call it mine.

Would I prefer being a fairy in a dress or a stone butch in menswear?

This fear is habitual, unconscious, reflexive.

My optometrist asks me, *Number 3, or number 4?*

SELF PORTRAIT

I dream of contorting my body until I deem it recognizable,
of gnawing and tearing at the too-soft edges,

of shaping it in a way that pleases me.
Sometimes I resume the habit of biting my nails

down to the quick until they bleed,
simply to taste the joy of redistribution,

of taking blood by mouth rather than by vein.
I want this elasticity to carry over and onwards,

yes, I want to mold myself continuously to suit the occasion.
I hope to find an uncommon kindness in my family,

allowing me the vanity of choosing my own skin,
the ability to control what a body

tells another before either has opened its mouth.

MY BODY IS THE PERFECT TEMPERATURE AND I TRY NOT TO BE SO
LONELY

There is hardly any reason to speak anymore
when the sounds of the room can do it for me.
The beeping of this monitor will tell you that,
even if it is not me, someone here
is undoubtedly alive. The TV plays reruns
of shows I did not realize I did not like
until it finished a decade of episodes,
out of order. Conversations crawl up
the side of the building and onto my bed.
Every day I have overheard someone
who sounds like my mother, but isn't,
cry. I know because my mother never cries,
and I know because right now she is grabbing
onto my shoulders and shaking me,
and I can still hear that wail.