

May not be blue, know a thing

by

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May not be blue, know a thing

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Marcia Douglas

Abstract

I find myself returning to a line in Yusef Komunyakaa's poem "Returning the Borrowed Road," where the speaker says, "You said, *Get away / from the poem. You're too close.*" Komunyakaa is talking about a kind of closeness that breeds blindness in the poet and invisibility in the poem. This same closeness does not just apply to the poet/poem relationship, but also to other relationships, including our relationships with other people and our relationship to what we know. For example, one can hold so closely to what they know that it becomes a sort of reflex. Or one becomes close with another person – so close that that person (lover, friend, or even stranger) becomes partially visible, or invisible, in the sense that we hold what we think we know about them too closely even though they are constantly evolving as a person, or they may not even fit the prescribed mold/stereotype we have given them in our minds. We might do better to hold them in our arms and with our hands first. And what about our relationship to language? Words hold so much emotional, intellectual, and psychic baggage in their bodies. But that weight is ours as well, whether we realize it or not, when we use words. To take ownership of – to own-in on – that weight is our collective responsibility. "May not be blue, know a thing" aims to address these concerns regarding relationships.

In terms of the photographs included in my thesis, I think of Luce Irigaray, who poses this challenge: "to make 'visible,' by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine language....One must assume the feminine role deliberately, which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation..." Through these photographs, my hope is to add another sensory element to make visible (and tangible) the ethos of the characters in the story. Keeping Irigaray in mind, I also want to present silence's – especially feminine silence's – potential for affirmation (as opposed to subordination). On the flip side, loquacity and playfulness also possess the potential for affirmation. My aim is that these characters affirm each other, that their playfulness is meaningful, and that their ventriloquisms and quips are not just a show, but a way of being in the world that allows them not just to survive, but to thrive.

I consider "May not be blue, know a thing" to be a novella in verse and photographs where the verse serves as a collective voice that all of the characters throw among themselves, the narrative witnesses the characters in motion, and the photographs offer a tonal vantage point external to the characters. These forms create a collage of being, where the characters constantly revise their positions in terms of their articulation.

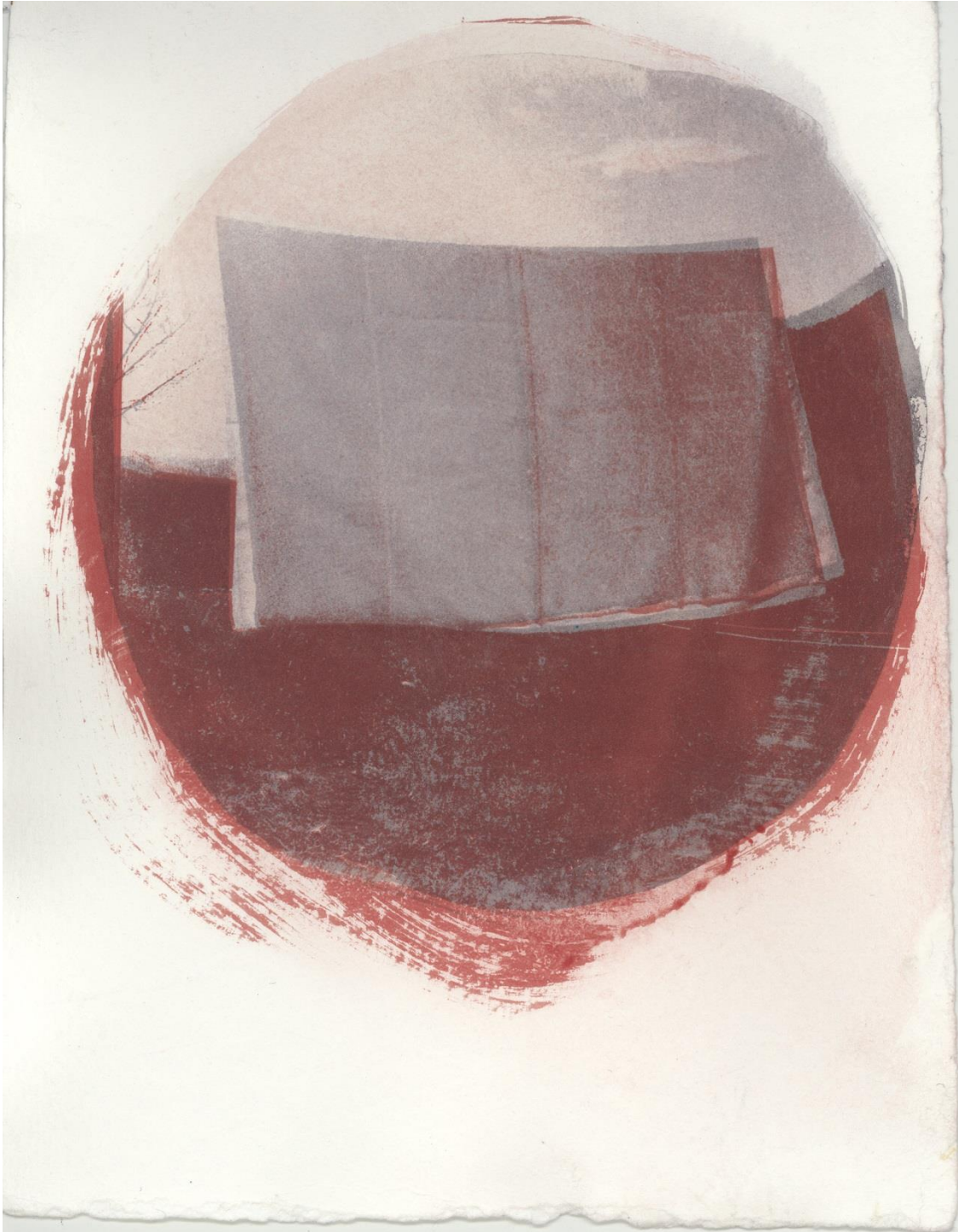
Reading List

The Woe Shirt by Paule Barton
Molloy, Malone Dies, and the Unnameable by Samuel Beckett
Cosmicomics by Italo Calvino
Collected Stories by Lydia Davis
The Tunnel by Russell Edson
Across the Mutual Landscape by Christopher Gilbert
Chorus of Mushrooms by Hiromi Goto
Pleasure Dome by Yusef Komunyakaa
Sleeping with the Dictionary by Harryette Mullen
Coming Through Slaughter and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* by Michael Ondaatje
Visiting Hours at the Color Line by Ed Pavlic
When Thy King is a Boy by Ed Roberson

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Claire Paffenhöfer

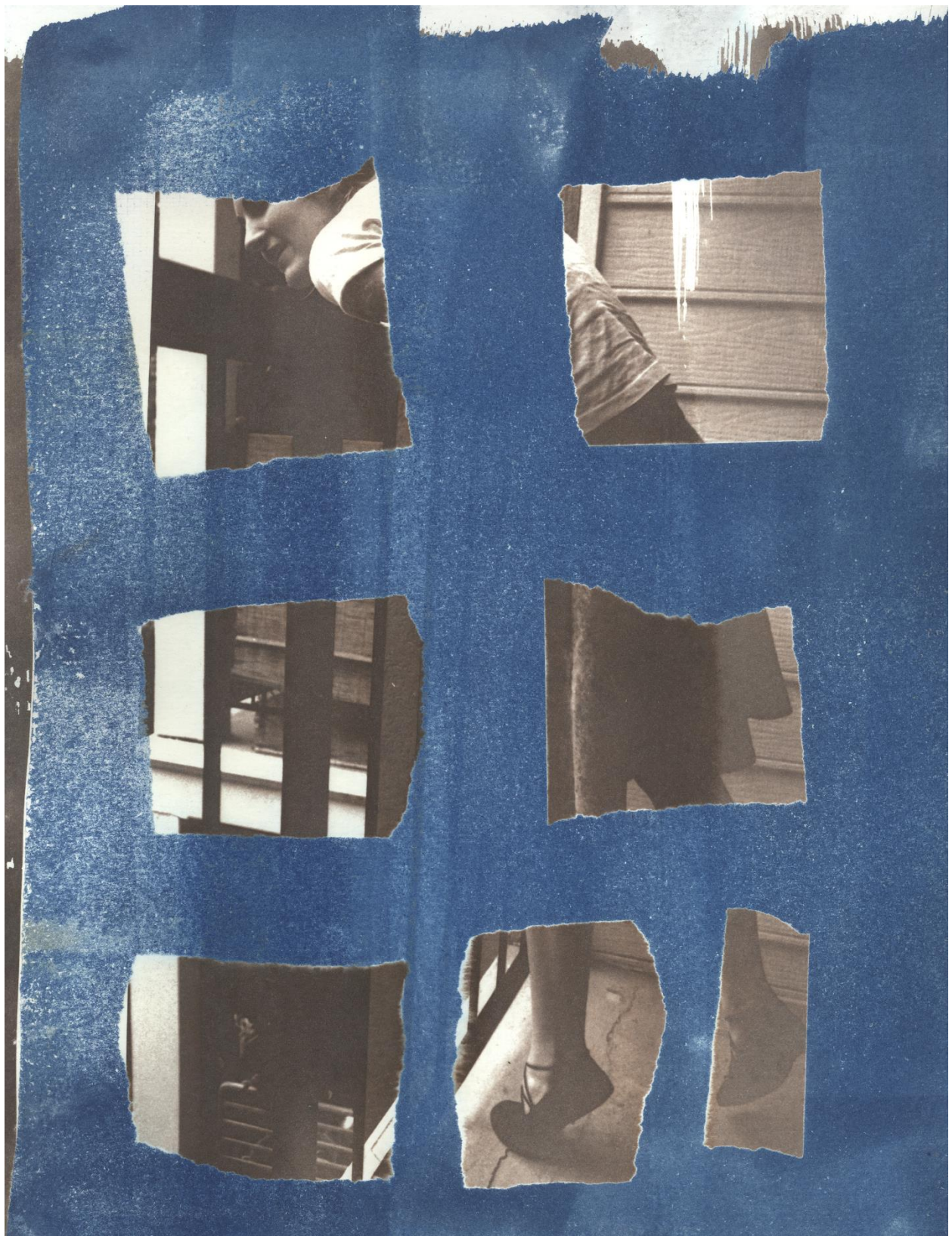


Figure 2

The Porch

We sit on the porch after third shift, watching the storm come on, and making fun of each other.

“Quit hokey-pokeying around this shit. Fucking double dutch up and go for it,” Lee Ann says. Her expression is serious; her voice hangs in the moment. As the corners of her mouth rise, her expression crumples, and we bust into laughter.

“Yeah, Sam, why don’t you get a real job?” Jake asks.

“You should apply for ass manager,” Jordan says.

“What are the qualifications for that? Do you have to have a nice ass, or just appreciate asses?” I ask.

“Both are essential qualifications for the position,” Michael gives his best imitation of Dustin, our shift manager.

“Dude, the only qualification is: Can that ass make a train take a dirt road?” Jake says.

“Shit, y’all might as well quit third shift, and become full-time life coaches,” I tell them.

“Maybe you ought to just get yourself a hawk-proof rooster, move out to Bumblefuck, and live on a farm. All that *Of Mice and Men* shit. Live off the land, pet the rabbits,” Jake says.

Michael pulls out a rubber band, plucking quarter notes, the sound he makes when he blinks, eyelashes twitching at every pluck. A dance party ensues, and our ears have room for nothing but music. We lose our tongues. No one minds. I dance with Jordan and we do this magnet thing where we pretend she has a negative charge and I have a negative charge. At first we’re in the far corners of the room. We try getting close, but our forces cause us to repel each other. It’s the opposite of The Fishhook. “Juicy” comes on and her charge changes from negative to positive, the catalyst being when Biggie sings, *Damn right I like the life I live, ‘cause I went from negative to positive...*

A Gravity for Healing – Sam

What's the gravity like here? Jordan and I, we don't need words. I look up, open my mouth, and feel my teeth knocking against the stars. You walk beside me, your tongue out to catch a falling star. A galaxy articulates in your ear, each star in the galaxy a taste bud of song. Memories and ancestors buzz through your skin, exciting molecules into your radiant face. As we lift off the ground, I can feel our distance growing. Our gravitational pull weakens. You reach for my hand. As we get closer, I can see that the stars are punctures in the sky. We heal into them.

Dreams of Flying

You read from a biology text. “Did you know a starfish has radial symmetry? And a starfish is an echinoderm, which means it wears its skeleton on the outside!”

“Humans have bilateral symmetry.”

“So do paper airplanes.”

We try to come up with a biology joke based on these facts.

“How about: What do humans and paper airplanes have in common?”

“That’s too easy,” you say. “Plus, what if they answer, ‘Dreams about flying’? That’s another possible answer.”

“If they answer, ‘Dreams about flying,’ then I guess I’d have to do this,” I say and kiss you.

Clouds, pt. 2

Do clouds cloud watch
like people people watch?

Resuscitation

A woman kneels to kiss the ground. I stop and join a group of people watching her. She presses her lips in an “O” against the sidewalk, her cheeks puffed out. She is trying to resuscitate the sidewalk. But the sidewalk is not alive, it never was. Ridiculous, but I find myself wondering, “Can the sidewalk be resuscitated?” No, the sidewalk is inanimate. I look to my left and see a man whose face I cannot put together. Is this the shape love takes when it is formed by fear? He tells me, “Blooming is convulsive.” A chorus rises as a woman to my right bobs her head, repeating, “What’s behind that?” A boy in front of me asks, “Why? Why? Why?” No one undoes what spell exists here.



Figure 3

What's Behind That

Insides are not invisible, so when you shoot, shoot
from the hip, the mind, the heart, check the pulse
against another hand. The face
may be invisible wearing the moon
to erase the lightning that covers the sky.
The sky's a chalkboard, the moon's geometry –
erase the equation that says invisibility equals
shine. Naw, man, my tongue ain't a hand,
but it chokes the visible hip shot from behind
the window the overlap love we shoot for.

Watermelon & Fish

Jordan, I reckon my voice is a watermelon, cooling here on the bed of the river, watching your voice – a fish – swim past. I love the way you do your wordless thing. I cannot wait to burst, showering pink meat and juice, each piece a blessing sitting on the tongue. Your voice will be dusted in cornmeal and fried in a skillet. Together we are delicious.

Neighborhood – Jordan

I take you in my mouth. There's no mystery here. If there's magic, it's in the piano or you. Or, it's in our crossing a high wire to each other. I'm trying to pull it out of you – she's trying to pull it out of me. This scarf. Whatever it is.

When the set is over, I go to the bar, order a water, and sit. My friend Mike sits down on the stool next to me. We talk for what must be hours. We are the last two remaining customers. Mike knows I walked, and offers me a ride home. We hop into his 1971 Ford F-150. As we're about to pull out of the parking lot, Naomi, the bartender, knocks on Mike's window. "Could I bum a ride with y'all?" I scoot over and we head to her place. Mike walks her to the door and instead of saying goodbye, she invites him in. He doesn't look back.

I wait 30 minutes before I decide to walk home. There aren't that many cars on the road, so I walk on the street. The street is better lit, anyway. I walk past my old girlfriend's place. It's a dilapidated house that looks older than it is. It looks condemned. I used to go there to time travel. One time we climbed onto the roof. Insert love making, etc. You can take the story from there.

I pass the local co-op. The lights are on inside, but the sign says Closed. I park myself on the bench outside. There's the Huddle House across the street. Next to it is the stone church. I've never been in. I realize I haven't made real eye contact with anyone in weeks.

An older woman takes a seat on the bench next to me. I should be nervous, but I'm not. "Quiet night," she offers. We sit, letting her phrase speak for both us. I am grateful for her company and don't want to jinx it with small talk. I push down a sentimental swell in my stomach and throat.

A group of cyclists ride by, loosened by the late hour. One says, "What did the son corn say to the mom corn?...Where's the popcorn?" Their laughter echoes as they press their heels down on their pedals. My neighbor and I laugh, adding to their chorus. Thank you, moon. Thank you, stars. Thank you, neighbors.

She pulls out a handkerchief and proceeds to blow her nose. Best damn solo I've heard in months. I can't suppress the swell this time, and I let the tears fall. She continues honking. Mid-blow, she looks over at me and starts laughing. "Here you go, hun," she says, and offers her used handkerchief. Then she realizes what that would entail. I'm laughing now, too, at the prospect of mixing her snot and my tears. She folds up the handkerchief and puts it in her pocket. She pulls out a flask from her jacket and offers it to me.

To Sing Dumb

There was a man who was often upset by one thing or another. When he got upset, he would pull his dictionary off the shelf, open it to a random page, and pick a word. The word and its corresponding definition would be his prescription. One day, after work, he came home and went straight for the dictionary. As tears bloomed on his face, he closed his eyes and selected a word with his finger. There, in the crease of the book, he found the word “dumb”:

1. a. Destitute of the faculty of speech. *deaf and dumb*: see DEAF adj.
b. Applied to the lower animals (and, by extension, to inanimate nature) as naturally incapable of articulate speech. Esp. in phrases *dumb chum*, *dumb friend*, applied to domesticated animals.
c. Without the power of making their voice effectively heard; without any voice in the management of affairs.
d. In proverbial phrases.
2. Temporarily bereft of the power of speech, from astonishment, grief, or some mental shock.
3. a. That does not or will not speak; that remains persistently silent; little addicted to speech; taciturn, reticent.
b. *to sing dumb*: to be silent, hold one's peace.
4. Of things or actions: Not characterized by or attended with speech or vocal utterance. *See also DUMB SHOW* n.
5. a. Not emitting sound, unaccompanied or unattended by sound of any kind; silent, mute; unheard, from the sound being drowned by a louder one.
b. dumb peal n. a muffled peal of bells.
c. Giving no sound on percussion, as a tumour.
6. Applied to mechanical contrivances which take the place of a human agent. *See DUMB-WAITER* n.
7. *N. Amer.* A foolish or stupid person. *collog.*¹

To sing dumb, he thought, *that's what I'll do*. How to sing, he did not know. He stood up from the table and walked out the door, in search of a silent song.

¹ "dumb, adj. and n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2014. Web. 4 November 2014.

Digging elsewhere?
Dig yourself.



Figure 4

Does This Paradox Make Me Look Fat?

If this makes sense, tell it stop.
All the crayons in the crayon box won't help.
What's with all these lenses
we have to look through?
Fuck a lense, get a new eye.
There's that voice shouting,
"They did it better yonder!" Well,
well. Just wait til their noun machine
breaks down. Don't let them tell you
what to do, which paradox to wear.
The voice says, "Accept the consequences
of language." What do you say to that?
What about the consequences of silence?
Wait, the undoing isn't done. And no one
said I'd have to trust my tongue. My hands can't
hold that kind of consequence. Look, man,
language hit on me. The most profound I have
to say is: I am for finding things
like the tongue. We tried enacting this thing
they call heart and it sure did leave
a lack. Language says, in its Southern
speak: I lack you.

One Hand Eats Another

A hand walks the wall as a shadow puppet, trying to escape its body. Naked, sockless, articulate, but not articulating. Another hand attached to another body approaches. The first hand eats the second hand.

Take Your Heart, for Instance, You Don't Need to Wear Anything on That – Sam

I get up and put on Nina Simone's "My Baby Just Cares For Me." The record player sets its one good tooth on edge to give us Nina. The record spins. Upstairs our neighbors are fighting underneath the blanket of Bob Marley's "No Woman No Cry." At least I had the sense not to play that one. I want to kiss you and hug your small, slightly hunched shoulders.

"What are you doing?" you ask.

I'm hatching escape plans.

"Where are you, Sam?" you say. You sit on the edge of your chair, a piano player's stance of habit.

There's the traditional distraction routine. That won't work here. I could offer you a beer. Maybe that would loosen things. Although, at this point, shots would be more appropriate and all we have is peppermint schnapps.

"You're never present. I'm talking to myself."

I can conjure a hot air balloon. "You know what I saw tonight? Two people having sex in their car."

"What?"

"At first I was shocked, but then I started thinking that they're onto something. They know what's important."

"You don't even know them!"

"You're right. I don't know. Maybe I was just reading us onto them."

"Sometimes I think you live in non-sequitur. I don't know where you are. What are you going to do, be a waitress for the rest of your life?"

I want to laugh – because it's funny and sad. I want to be the kid at the table plunging his fingers in his ears while he makes noise, as if he's tired of the noise he's making, but can't stop making it.

Listen

Sam rocks in the hammock of Jordan's smile, the pedals under her feet still audible. The fire-stained keys skipped. Answers shimmy, unzip eighth notes. Notes walk a stretch of calf and dead end at her thigh. We get lost at hip and bone again – rush of heat to heel. Jordan's hands work up from Jordan's ankles, stop at her knees. Jordan follows the arrows to Sam's mouth, unbuttons her lips and measures her tongue.

Dream no. 2

I'm in a room where everyone is seated and staring at me. I stand in front of them. They tell me they have read my diary and know everything. I am angry and hurt. I ask everyone who read my diary to raise their hand. Everyone but Lady Gaga raises their hand. Thank God, at least Lady Gaga didn't read it. Then she looks at me and says, "Actually, I did read it."

Monologue – Jordan

The clouds hang low, gossiping with the mountains. I am not small – I am immense, running out into the twilight; I try to run to where I can catch the conversation. My thoughts run out in front of me: I think I'm here because I couldn't tell my face from hers. When we used to sit across from each other at a table, I could swear her face was on mine. Her nose invading and becoming mine. Her worries and joys were flies made kites by fishing wire, each tied to one of her fingers, until they threatened to take us into the clouds. You know, it was like that piano that was bound to fall on us. Except it lifted us into the sky. A word will hang by a syllable. Speechlessness will hang by less. We've kissed everyone under their blue silk. It just about ran me lame – almost lost my teeth one time. I mean *damn*, kiss someone they might take your teeth. I could have gone underwater. I could have stood still. But I'd have had to come up for air; I'd have had to breathe. I'd rather be with you, existing in a heat created by speechlessness.



Figure 5

What One Word Said to Another

Buck up. We are going to live
in the mouth to get heavy sad.
Pigeons don't get credit
for shit, one word said.
'That's not true, said the other
word, that's the only thing they do
get credit for. Can I trust you,
asked the one. It depends,
said the other. Not it, said the one.
Not it, said the other.
How are we ever going to get
sad like this, they wondered.

Take Your Heart, for Instance, You Don't Need to Wear Anything on That – Jordan

Take off your dress. Erase it down before retina cast skin from shadow. Erase it down to a blade. Each piano punch takes a tooth for hurt of listening. Blind to sound, this music tunes our bodies nervous. The record spins. Lip quiver, jaw tug. Each gesture readies itself to take us apart. You take our silence in your mouth like you could kiss it into words. Like those words could heal anything. How can we expect to heal being blind to sound? If sight is knowing and knowing is food for eyes, turn your sight inward. Take each note held in the body to calibrate your breath. Feel your muscles' memory pulling you under. Take this song. Cut your smell out of my nose and unlearn my hands. Your scent is stuck in my nostril. I can't get the rpms right. Your breath insists on swimming with the offbeats, but I can barely count to four. I can't will my body asleep to walk composed and cool. What are we afraid of? The musician takes you in his mouth to let you feel – vibrations of pain to kiss the body alive?

When the moon has its way

with sap, my left lid's lazier

than my right,

my hands sculpt

themselves to silt & erase

the lightning bolt mouth at

the bottom of a bed where

pants meet shirts in overlap love

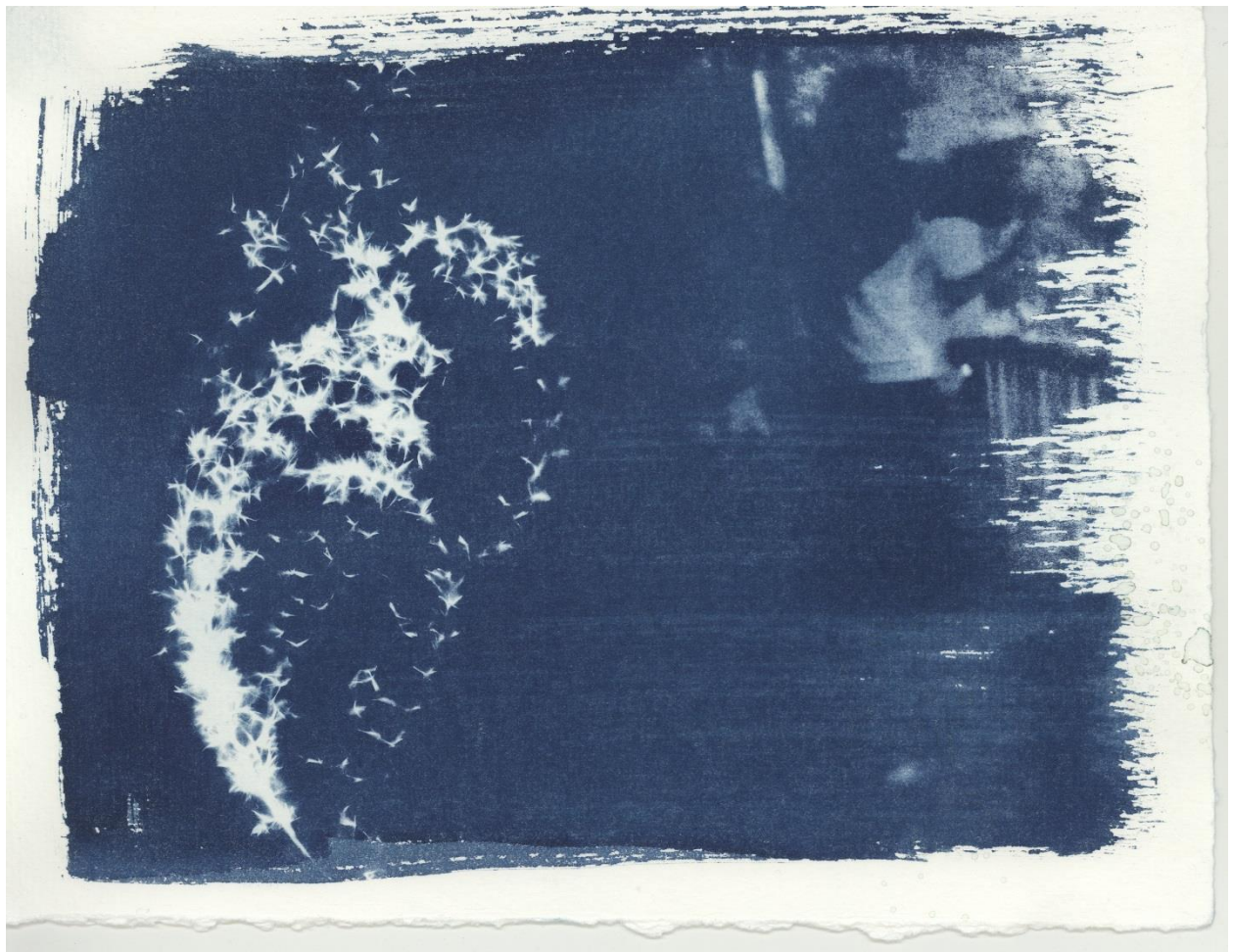


Figure 6

Habit Cuts His Teeth, no. 2 – Sam

Your legs shake. I want this to be a math problem, to be able to solve for x. I know, I will solve for your legs. I know I can figure out which song you're playing by watching your feet press the piano pedals invisibly.

I look up by mistake. Although I've tuned out your words, your face is sharp. You seem present. For a second it looks like we see each other, which makes me clear and brave. "You're right. Love shouldn't be like a habit. We're a habit."

You go to the freezer and take out the peppermint schnapps from last December. You hand me a shot. "To flying dreams," I say. We laugh because else is there to do?

Laughter

Your laugh sits for years,
shivers the way I've wanted
your neck along my iris,
or freckles laddered
from roof to basement.

Swimming

A man's heartbeat spreads across a razor as he cuts language to understand a mouth running into a lake. The woman's teeth get handed to her in the man's smile. A word clings to the roof of her mouth.

"Lady," the man says, and it tickles the woman underwater. "Lady," he says, and it becomes the reflex test that punishes every word she tries to speak. The woman steps out of the lake and the air causes her to shiver.

"How are things?" she says.

"Inanimate."

"Clothes?" she asks. They take them off and hang their words out to dry. They walk until it is too deep not to swim.

The man's mouth is shut; his sequins are glued. The man and the woman swim out to the middle of the lake. They enter a staring contest. She arches an eyebrow, trying to draw a smile from him. He draws his cheeks in, making a fish face. They float closer. "Mmmm," she says as she pretends to eat her hair. He does his best Elvis, mouth askew. The woman makes a squirrel face, as she floats up to the man.

"I will say this..." the woman says. She unbuttons his mouth and measures his tongue. He touches the burn where her neck meets her jaw.

Another man and woman arrive. The man asks, "What about this swimming business?" The woman throws her voice, hoping the man will catch it, "What about this swimming business?"

"I don't know what the fuck *they're* doing, but I'm going to swim," says the man.

"Yeah, fuck that," the woman says, and jumps into the water.



Figure 7

Method

You are stuck inside of a snake
and have only your love of
the scientific method to blame

The Wall

Michael was fixing his bike, when he saw a woman having a crisis all over the street. Prior to her entrance, the he had been going about his usual Saturday morning routine. He'd heat a kettle of water, grind the coffee beans, pull down a mug from the shelf. He poured a splash of cream in the mug, then he poured the coffee. Surveying his house, he made a mental list of everything that needed fixing. There were gaps in the flooring, which let air and insects in.

Everything in Michael's house lived on the floor. Michael mostly lived on the roof or the porch. He wanted alternately the feeling of soaring and the feeling of the ground. Being outside was key. He wanted nothing between him and the world.

He stepped out onto his porch and took a seat, letting his feet dangle. In front of him, closer to the street, was an unfinished stone wall. The wall definitely needs some love, he thought. What love he gave the wall, the wall gave back. He picked up a rock and looked for a place in the wall to put it. He felt along the top of the wall until he came upon a roughness that was complementary to the rock in his hand. He laid the rock down. It fit well enough, he thought. And over time, with love from rocks above and below it, it would fit more snugly. "There," he said. In finding a place for the rock, he felt a warmth radiating from his stomach.

Michael finished his coffee and went inside. He pulled a bottle of wine down from the cabinet, poured himself a mug of wine, and headed out the door and down the street to meet the Porch-goers.

...

A bird flies past us into the window, breaking the window and itself. At the same time a woman runs down the street, yelling something we cannot understand. She is in pain. She stops when she gets to our house, and looks at the porch. She walks up to the punched out window. Muscle hangs in the sky. The woman leans into the window, a glass knife at her neck. She starts choking on what must be air. Flocks of dandelion wisps exit her mouth and engulf the yard. They are soft and blinding.



Figure 8

Where We're From

The constellation goes like this: bowl of wine,

taxidermy,

gum bichromate.

On the porch, we create myths. Today we are all retelling each other's births. Jake and Sam sit on the edge, sides smashed together, letting their feet dangle. Lee Ann leans against a post, singing. Michael kneels in the dirt patch of the yard, drawing.

Jake closes his eyes, thinking about Sam's genesis. "You were born in a bathtub...at the bottom of the ocean!"

"You were told everything you needed to know could be learned...through osmosis!" Lee Ann adds.

You can hear the train hollering. If you look up the street, you can see the chickens claiming the road as their jurisdiction.

"A woman," Sam says, "squeezed her hand into a fist. The pressure created me."

"A man wearing a coat unzips so the zipper becomes my smiling mouth and I am the one hugging him with my sleeve-arms."

"I was stuck inside my Dad's eye for a long time..."

Pausing is a habit of Michael's. We wait while he dramatically takes a sip from his mug of wine.

"...Eventually he found me underneath his lower lid. An eyelash wish turned into me."

"Hold up," Jordan says, "what if your mother wiped the eyelash from your father's face and blew it to make a wish...and as the lash lifted off your mother's finger it grew into you?"

"Yeah!" everyone says.

"A worthy revision," Michael concedes. Jordan jumps off the porch, facing everyone, and curtsies.

"One of my mother's tastebuds became swollen after eating heavily salted watermelon," Jake says. "While making fun of my father, she stuck her tongue out at him. Caught up in the ruckus-making, my father, enamorspun as he was, leaned in to kiss my mother. Before he got there, he saw me emerging from my mother's tongue."

“I came from stone,” Lee Ann tells us.” “My mother’s wedding ring glisten-blinded her. When her eyes came back to seeing, I was there holding tightly to her finger.”

“Wait! What happened to the ring,” Jordan asks.

“Me!”

Jake amends his story, “I think my parents just had sex.”

I Was Born in a Bathtub at the Bottom of the Ocean

I open my eyes and there is red goop splattered across the tub. It looks like paint, but has a rusty odor. I am wearing black latex, a tutu, and a tiara. I latch onto the side to hoist myself up, but I slip on the porcelain. My whole body yawns. I lean back and let things settle. I close my eyes. The door to the bathroom opens. I fight my eyelids' reflex to open. I don't want to know who it is. I know who it is. There is a slow pressing down that could be a hug or choking. He smells like rosemary and dirt. "Sleep is for losers," he whispers into my ear. Our hips say what we can't bear to speak: this feels good. It ought to be more complicated than that. I'll want to regret this later.

I keep my eyes closed as he exits the tub. There is a noise I can't decipher. It sounds like he's placed something on the sink. He leaves the room, door ajar. I open my eyes and check the sink for evidence: nothing.

Sam pulls a llama move with her neck to take a look out the window. A horrible and peaceful sky pockmarked with cumulous clouds looms. She slips back into the tub, wishing she could feel like the kid in the field outside letting his rhombus-shaped imagination fly a line to the sky. As Sam moves to get out of the tub, she finds her feet asleep. This is how a beached jellyfish must feel, all buzz-fucked full of sting, she thinks, forced to endure what she must simultaneously inflict. There is something so uncomfortably comfortable about the tub that makes her not want to get out.

Sam looks at the mirror above the sink and catches a look from Jordan as she walks by the bathroom. Sam's gaze catches on Jordan. It's the kind of moment when you're in a public space full of people and your eyes randomly skim the room and get stuck on a person you know, but not well, and who you'd rather not be caught looking at, and the person catches you looking at them before you can unmoor your gaze. In that exchange, Sam knows Jordan knows what happened the night before. As Sam sinks further into the tub, she gets a weight in her stomach like being too full. She turns over and pushes herself up and hurtles herself out of the tub and onto the tiled floor. When her feet find the tile, it is cold and comforting. She dresses and grabs a hoodie on the way out the door. The sun cuts the yard and Sam's face as she breaks through the gathering, waving quick hello-goodbyes. Kids across the street take turns cannonballing into a pile of leaves. "Bury me! Bury me!" they're yelling at each other.

Maybe a walk into town will lift her spirits. As she reaches the main cross street, silence hits her. It's mid-morning on a Saturday and no one is out. She continues on to the center of town and finds a bench in front of the local diner – the only local place that stays open 24 hours. But today the lights are out, the door locked. Usually she would come here to meditate and people watch. She would sit and let the goings-on of strangers fill her. Their laughter taking over her thoughts. Each laugh was catalogued. One was like a surprise explosion that tapered off and returned sporadically. Another stranger used laughter as a filler of silence to ensure comfort, not realizing his laugh enacted the awkwardness it tried to avoid. Lately, she had caught herself laughing too forcefully and loudly at jokes or comments that weren't funny or true. Without people to watch, Sam studies buildings and the scavengers keeping watch over them. Squirrels, pigeons, and vultures watch back. Two figures approach, riding her periphery.

One of the two figures takes out a pocket knife. He arcs it – it's headed to Sam. Sam catches it, "Is that the best you've got?" He smiles as she launches herself fullbody into his body for a hug.

"Wow. My cup just got runt the fuck over."

"That's not how the saying goes."

Jordan starts covering the mirrors in their apartment with white sheets. Sam comes home and the sheets are nailed to the wall. Across the street a man is at the door of one of their neighbors.

“He here.”

“He ain’t.”

“Ain’t.”

“No.”

“He ain’t home.”

“He ain’t home.”

“Ain’t here.” The final words draw out as the neighbor closes the door.

A smell hits Jordan's nose – a combination of vomit, alcohol, and chicken plant. She's woken up early to catch the bus to the west side for work. At the bus stop, a man stands in a full-bodied dark khaki Carhart suit. She asks him where he's going. "Home," he says. He's just gotten off work. He lives with his mom and takes care of her. The bus pulls up. They shake hands and laugh at the early hour formality.



Figure 9

After the tub incident, Jordan starts playing piano in Michael's band. Their first show:

Michael has everyone's ears in his right pocket. He hunts a phrase. Runs. Stumbles. There's an itch inside his skull he's trying to get at. The venue is a hallway with a shelf for a bar. An immense sadness floods the scene as Michael hits a long wail. You can hear days full of fingerprint smudges and Windex. Cleaning chemicals scrape inner nose. The crowd is smushed in. Michael's ears are in everyone's pockets.

After the set, Jordan hugs Michael. He lets her fill his nose, his arms, all of the places that house lack. The clouds spoon the mountains. Parabolic hugs.

"Do you need a ride home?"

"Sure."

Michael takes the wrong turn and they drive down a dirt road, park, and fire a round of things unsaid. Silence sits between them for a long time. He hunches into her. "If, or when, you do need an ear or an anecdote, I'm here," says Michael.

They climb back in the car and Michael drops Jordan off at her place. The lights are out and Sam is in bed, asleep. Jordan undresses and climbs into bed. As she shifts around to get comfortable, her left leg brushes against Sam's right leg, which is freshly shaven and smooth.



Figure 10

Jordan can't sleep and goes outside. Moon or no, the night doesn't promise anything, which is why she loves the night. No one who is out is pretending they're okay. The day is all sunshine and bullshit. Sunshine can be one of the most depressing things. People parading in the day – all sunshine and teeth. What do you do when your mouth is the night sky and not a star to vouch as tooth? Swaths of sky to stare down a laughing mouth.

Her feet take her to Lee Ann's house. She has company. Jordan knocks on the door anyway. "Can I spend the night here?"

"Sure. Help me make the bed?"

Lee Ann is about to close the bedroom door, when Jordan says, "Can you leave it cracked?" The conversation in the kitchen makes her eyelids heavy and they give way to gravity.

Player Piano and the Moon that Wouldn't Listen

Thanks for the insomnia, magenta pile drives
through socks & sweaters, moth-loved
and zipping themselves open. Imagine
the empty buoyancy of boats – wood veins,
purple mishaps, and rivers of stretch marks.
A window sill that has one step. She bites off white
imagination of fingernails. Scars fold into hugs. Nooks
starved for celibacy. Buttoned lust. Beg brainmatter. Beg
solar lunacy. Sometimes her hipbone acts the wishbones
part. She seduces herself til he's on top, in
love with gravity, letting his fingers sink into keys.



Figure 11

Sam walks down the street. Up ahead: a trashcan wearing a blue hat. There are whisperings, but no one around – no, they're not whisperings. As she gets closer to the bus stop, Sam spots an abandoned radio. Next to the radio, there's a constellation: Busch tallboy, bright green bendy straw, broomstick. The bus stop is hung over.

Michael's hands churn. They won't do what they're supposed to – won't grip or sit still. They betray his uncalm mind – the energy that's left on the railroad after a train goes by – sparks and sputters. He's an objective emulsifying agent. Jordan and Sam can only stand to be around each other when he's around. What they don't know is that he's not unbiased. When they're talking, his eyes settle on Jordan and Sam slips into periphery. He reads and rereads the small intimacies between himself and Jordan, willing them into something bigger. A gesture to undo the erasure of his usefulness.

"That sounds dangerously like a metaphor," Sam grins at Jordan.

"Bullshit. Metaphor! You mean the dude missing all his teeth that got kicked out of town for soliciting gumjobs?"

The conversation has gotten out of hand. Michael gets up to leave and hugs everyone goodbye. When he hugs Jordan, his impulse to keep her close corrodes his inner ear and he loses his balance.

“I want to live where there’s no phone and my front yard is a labyrinth. If someone really wants to see me, they’ll have to get through the labyrinth,” Jordan says.

“Yeah. You know, you could even change it up every month – change the course, keep people on their toes,” Michael says.

“Yes. A phoneless life without disembodied ears.”

Swimming, pt. 2

There was something about the swimming that made the man and the woman's attraction for each other surface without filter. After swimming, they spend hours flirt-battling. They talk past the closing of everything in the town. He lays back in the grass and his underarm hair peeks out from under his shirt. The cool grass adds to the aphrodisia of their swim. Grass bites light and tickles her.

She asks him, "Are you ticklish?"

"Nope."

She tries to tickle him, but he doesn't move. She leans in for a kiss. He moves his head back in a counterintuitive challenge, as if to say, Love me if you dare.

Sam has just gotten off of third shift, her body tired, her eyes glassy and fiery. Someone at work has given her something to help her through the night. She's going on about making a list of things to do, something to keep her mind busy. I can barely stand her like this – so manic she has thrown away her ears. She doesn't even realize she's high. High on a lack of sleep and whatever else. Her mania retunes my nerves. Concrete eats her feet, bare and blistered.

Morning – Jordan

I wake up to the sound of frying. Someone is making breakfast. I stretch and get up, walk to the kitchen. No one is there, but the window is open. The rain makes a loud, constant frying sound. I make a pot of coffee and open a book. The coffee is delicious dirt. The pages of the book I've been reading are damp from humidity. I turn the page and someone has been reading the book with greasy fingers. Wonder what they ate. Who with. Were they happy?

Why do flying dreams turn into falling dreams?

Morning – Michael

If I could touch you, I wouldn't.
The urge to share this moment wordfully with you
presses against my tongue and I hold back
because this silence is sacred. It is a gift
to sit silent with you. You are reading.
I am writing and it takes everything not to break
out and fly these lines across four feet.
It's like the questions you don't ask
because the deepest part of the ocean is magical.
An outside force comes to break
the spell. You let it.
Huddling in the unsaid,
we are scared to know too much –
we're afraid of nothing left to know.
Yes, to know would be wrong.

Dear Jordan,

I am waiting to shed this thick layer of skin that is not me. I am afraid to write you a letter deeper than skipping stones. See, the metaphor's already gone to milkshit. I'm fighting the urge to know the time, it's lack of consequence, and wondering if there is anything to say. You say you had a dream where we hugged in the rain. Fuck your unbearable optimism – its perfect skin growing eyes not made for seeing. Knuckles held together by something as abstract as hurt, I want to break. You know what I hate even more than your optimism? Your absence. Normally I wouldn't pay it any mind, but today it digs. Something dumb as your nose in my hair telling me it smells good. And my nose on your shaved head smelling you underneath shampoo.

Love or whatever,
Sam



Figure 12

A Tree Chopped Off at His Joints

A friend told the stranger he was missing. The sun hit his bald head, making it gleam like abalone shell. I'm missing, the stranger asked himself. How exciting! Who should I alert, he thought. After so many years of being exactly where he was. In place. Properly stored. Warmth spread over his body and oiled his soul. He ducked under the doorway and out of his house, cane in his right hand, bowler in his left.

“I like you lost,” the woman says.

“What?” says the stranger, confused.

“Lots. I mean lots.”

“Hmm. Sure.”

She gestures for him to come with her to the backyard, and in affection tries to be welcoming, but ends up catching her skin on his elbow’s rough surface. Sorry, he says. Through her nose, she pulls in the pre-storm air, her lungs ache and satiate. Another world inside his lungs: unsaid words collect there as he chokes.

Favorable Conditions for a Cuddlecrash

The porchgoers are at the bar are huddled like grapefruit pulp, something only a tongue might understand. They decide on a late night bike ride dumpster dive. The yield: a bouquet of haggard flowers and cheese soft enough to spread on bread. Smiles kiss past enamel and the stars radiate past the roots of their bones.

The radio turns on a make believe conversation.



Figure 13

The Comfort of Milk

Terrified of his new happiness and the comfort of milk, the stranger decided to leave, and set out the door, letting his feet do the talking. He was tired of being known by a name and loved the moments when he forgot others' names. What do you do when you forget how to address someone? You describe them by their qualities, the things that make them to you: their laughter, a hunched shoulder, a lazy eye. But inevitably the lightbulb gets lit, the charade fades, and you wish they had remained without name. Remember what it is like to stand still, the stranger said to himself.

The stranger thinks:

Eyelashes are umbrellas for the eyes. Like if I say, the rain is so hard even my eyeball umbrellas gave up, do you get me? Where I am walking to is where they get me. So much so that instead of the eyelash umbrella bit, I can blink and they understand.

One thing the stranger took with him was what others saw as superstition. Where usually there was an explanation, he chose the conspiracy of chance encounters. Fog was not air past its capacity to hold water vapor, but the hanging breath of some creature meant to blind humans into seeing without eyes. The day he came into town the creature breath made a low ceiling. As he approached the edge of town, he met a cat who began to follow him. When he came to the street he used to live on, he turned down it and the cat followed.

When he got to the porchgoers house, he knocked. No answer. He went around to the side window, looked in, and saw no movement. He went back to the porch, set up a pallet, and pulled a grapefruit out of his pack. The cat sniffed at the fruit, drawn in by curiosity, rejected the fruit, and settled down next to the man. Back propped up against a post and legs stretched out, the man made a game of eating the grapefruit. He held the pulpy citrus in his mouth like a second tongue. His thumb slid between the rind and the encased sections gently. Sublingually he squished the pulpy bits. Because of the fruit's coldness, his fingers were nearly numb by the time he finished.



Figure 14

This

This right

This right here

is a consolation

who will console the consolation?

Not me.

Not me.

Give it back then

Give it

with your hands

your hands

Give them back

your hands

Who would have them

Who would have them

The stranger is asleep on the porch with the cat using his head as a pillow when we return. Jordan uses her hips to knock Michael off of the porch. He takes Jake down with his slender frame as he exaggerates his fall. Lee Ann pretends to faint.

The stranger's giant body unfolds as he opens his right eye, taking in what is closed to his left.

He addresses the moon, but also us:

Moon, you are the heel of a sock

headed to my mouth.

Moon you are a socked foot

headed heel-first to my

Moon, you are socked & headed

for my mouth, moon you

are stuck inside a sock -

I can't tell if you're the socker

or the sockee. I may not have

an all-there brain, but I've got two

moons on my feet. Buttermilk moon,

buttermilk sock. I've had it with you,

buttermoon milksock. If you don't know

who you are, I can't write you. Your transient

self makes my image flicker – get it together,

uttermoon socketmilk! Occupy my brain.

Pie in the face = occupied. Moon, you are stuck

inside a sock, darn you! You are the heel of a sock, moon –

you'll be darned! Moon, you are a heel,

darned. Darn, moon, you are a sock, heeled.

Darn, you're a moon, heeled, socked.

And then, he says, like he knew us:

What happens when you miss the tongue, the hands, the heart
when you aren't

what happens when you open

the door like a surgeon, no

hands and there you are

thinking we have only one heart.

You are thinking we have

only one heart, your moon

rubbing mine in our moon rubbing

factory. Your tongue tongues a heart

hearts a hand and the handler doesn't

know his moon from his sock puppet.

What happens when you miss the hands

that make the choke, the tongue the

choke articulator, the heart the logic

incinerator, the heart riding the tongue

riding the hands, open the door tutu tongues

hearts hands rubbing in a rubbing factory.

We talk for a while until we make the porch our bed too.

Dear you (aka Sam-wich),

I realized I had been thinking that things were better elsewhere, that the solution (as if we were solving for x !) existed outside of ourselves. But, you know what? $x=x$.

Love,
Me

Michael's mind is stuck inside the feeling of Jordan's tongue in his mouth.

"...Right now I'm making barely enough money to survive, you know...Michael?" Sam says.

"Yeah."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"Well, I mean, are you making enough of the other stuff you need to survive?"

"What other stuff?"

"Hmmm...this," he gestures between them, "...connection...love...things to laugh at. People to make pancakes with..."

"You're so whimsical."

"Whimsical? Hell yeah I am."



Figure 15

Big Words, Big Face

“A hand in the face of love,” Sam starts.

“A finger on the hand in the face of love,” Lee Ann adds.

“Cilia of uncertainty in the nostril of the face of love,” says Jordan.

“A finger on the hand in the cilia of uncertainty in the nostril of the face of love,” Jake says.

Where are you from

...but you don't have an accent...

where are you from

...but you sound invisible...

where are you

...your identity isn't showing, though...

where you from

you're from *here*...

...how do you throw your voice like that

Did we...

the way a tree tickles the earth it grows in?

“Did you know that when you go far enough out into the country, where there are no lights save the stars, the sky adopts you? If you have no home, claims you as its own,” Michael tells us.

“Yes,” adds Lee Ann, “the sky is a sieve, a worry-drain. Its strains out the negative thoughts and leaves the things that satiate.”

“What happens when you are underwater and the sky is far away and you feel like an octopus with eight arms and nothing to do with them,” Sam asks.

“Swim,” says Jordan.

At night, Sam soaks in the indifference of sheets. When the sky makes plumes of white and absence, she dusts off her eyelids. Then, stumbling to see, realizes her lashes are tied. Forgetting her tongue, she leaves Jordan a message full of tooth-brushing.



Figure 16

Numb to meaning, words detach like limbs and walk off on their own.

Dear Sam,

I have this recurring dream where I'm naked and armless and bald. And my job is to walk across a clothesline with a sheet hanging on it. And, somehow, even without arms, I am the strongest woman on Earth. If I can balance well enough to make it across...but people are using their hands to make shadows on the sheet to distract me. So far, that's where the dream ends.

Jordan

The stranger fits in from the start, but our knees jerk, accordion, and reflex our words:

It doesn't mean enough

you need it to mean more

It doesn't.

Which is another way

another way

of saying

saying your life

doesn't mean enough,

you don't mean enough

On our walk, we stop by the Huddle House. Our waitress says,
“Honey, it’s all unsaid.” I focus on the word
honey. It’s not the patronizing clovercleaver,
one of the few terms of underearment I dread,
but a salve to say, to feel
between us something
we all hold
because we are honey
the word aloud
to be us, the word
lodged in her
throat, lodged
in mine too,
has to be
enough.



Figure 17

The porchgoers get back from their walk and take off their shoes, which prompts Jordan to draw a footbath for everyone in the tub. As they huddle around the tub, sitting on the edge, the stranger asks, “Why the sheet on the mirrors?”

Jordan grins and shakes her head. “I didn’t realize they were still up...guess I’ve gotten used to it.” Then, after a pause, she answers his question, “Thought maybe it would help me see myself better.”

“Well, no reason we can’t put ‘em to use now,” he says, as he steps out of the tub and tears one down, making a cocoon for himself. “Do you have a pair of scissors?”

Hoots and hollers sound as Lee Ann,

Sam,

Michael,

Jake,

Jordan,

and the stranger parade down the small stretch of street to the bar. The walking is slow and silly going as the sheet links them, only their heads showing. Under the sheet, Lee Ann's hands are on her hips. Lifting the sheet every few blocks, Sam unleashes water balloons on unsuspecting neighbors. Michael's almost silent laughter ripples down the line. Jake is handleless and allsong blowing a trumpet mouthpiece. Jordan attempts to recruit participants in their parade. The stranger takes the surroundings in. The sheet is their collective costume. They are floating between what is said and what is trying to be said. They hold each others' tongues. They are badass, which is not a word but a way of being. They are a skeleton. They are an architecture of love. They know in the morning pancakes will be made. They are swimming in the sea of the sheet, heads bobbing, bumpercar laughter shrieks, tickled just to be.



Figure 18