

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: SHOW

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“Show” is a collection of poems concerned primarily with sight, both in terms of looking and being looked at. These poems tend to find their subjects in the physical world, the world of and around the body—and the elements at work between the two. Broken into three sections, “Show” moves from a meditation on the natural world to a chronological reflection on childhood events, still often situated in or contending with the natural environment. As these events become more personal, the poems begin to spin out into a different kind of meditation, fixed mainly on various aspects of the human body. Still engaging the natural world, the third section echoes the first, but in a less conventional way: here the poems often take the grotesque as their subjects and find a lure in the distorted and perverse. This course of looking in “Show” culminates in a series of ekphrastic poems.

SHOW

by

Rita Bonny Chin

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for Larry

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I

DEPARTURE

I loved a tree. A thick sycamore,
its expanding branches higher than I
could reach or even see without pointing
my chin at it. To touch it meant always
shade. I felt its brown wrinkled skin,
looked in the crevices of its cracks,
watched things crawl and nest inside.
Don't you want, I asked it, to see the world,
the places where the sky meets the ground
in colors spreading upward—umbers
loving corals loving indigos? To
see other trees, how they grow on delicate
slopes, short and contorted, twisting up
out of the yellow snake-filled grasses,
sometimes at angles leaning toward the horizon
instead of the sky? But the tree stayed
in its spot, heavy like an elephant's leg.
You never move, I told it. Don't you get tired
of the same view—a few houses cresting up a hill,
the square of the split-rail fence, the small strip
of road you can never follow?
But the solid trunk stayed stoic,
while its limbs kept spilling things,
letting go of what would always return.

PATIO

Tonight we are content to have our sight
stopped by fog, still and unstirred
by the friction of a freight train passing,
shaking its weight through the lengthy dark,
the delicious dark you can taste with each
breath of earthy vapor, surrounding
everything at once, like the single porch bulb
and its touchable fuzz of light. How easily
I could lose you in this cloud—a few
steps either way. But you won't leave
the iron chair you've inched closer to mine,
so close even mist can't come between them.
Here, in this slippery skyless night,
I will pull your hand closer and feel the wet
spread of air, how it lingers on the skin
and in the throat, and how, even
when it goes, it leaves nothing dry.

CROSSING

There they are, crossing into traffic,
the day heavy with rain waiting to
happen, tires against the hot black,
and him, pushing up his shirt
as summer pushes into fall,
the fine line of long nights canopying down.

So fast, now in my rearview mirror,
still in the street, his hard abdomen,
its dark line of hair going down,
as if it were some last protest
against the dying heat. She looks
windblown. (The air doesn't move.)
He probably just fucked her,
the cool sour of beer on his breath;
she's probably still wearing the wet
salt of his sweat—neck, brow, breast.

The road curves down, erases them.
Against my windshield, a raindrop explodes.

HALLOWEEN

spins in with a blustery spill of trees,
blasts of air that bleed through the pores of sweaters
to chill paling skin winding steadily away from summer.
Earth's skin hardens; surfaces mask over:
heaps of leaves hide creatures we uncover.
Things flash deeper, grow in layers.
Wishing to be frightened, we fixate on what's under,
what propels the twisted grimaces on latex faces,
what force spooks spirits, sends witches alight on broomsticks.
Yes, let there be something to scare, to haunt life with reason.
Watch for one day how a small world lives in black and orange,
pulls the sticky sweetness from its teeth, and waits for darkness.

DURING A SPACE STORM THAT SPARKED AURORAS
ACROSS THE EARTH'S MAGNETOSPHERE:
THINKING OF YEATS' LAPIS AND THE OLD MEN CLIMBING,
WAITING UNDER HEAVEN, THEIR EYES STILL GLITTERING

When I was ten I filled a cedar box with rocks,
repeated their names when I was alone—
malachite, pyrite, feldspar, lapis lazuli,
which I always mispronounced la-ZU-li.
Blue heaven, they once called this
metamorphic stone created by proximity and heat,
chiseled from mountains into mountains,
embedded in Egyptian death masks, deep seas
around the eyes of King Tut, powdered to pigment
at the hands of da Vinci and Michelangelo,
forged by some who color jasper and sell it
as the heaven stone, but the trick
is to find the pyrite flecks burned in,
gold bursts like stars.

CHIAROSCURO IN VERMONT

Hurrying out of the old hotel
with our camera ready to catch
the sun setting over the mountains
we discover we're late.

The yolk of the sun has slipped
down and broken, splattering itself
under pink and purple clouds. We
walk toward it down the narrow road,

shoot pictures of the mountains going
up in autumn flames before dimming,
receding into darkness as the valley
beneath it cools. Usually I know what

you're thinking, but the falling night,
like last year's falling snow, has
separated us in silence, and I can't
think of anything but this road's end

and the dark space past it:
what we keep moving toward.
Who has words when the ledge appears?
We keep walking, and I wonder

when we'll stop.
Look—how tall these trees are, how ancient
this life is, how this quiet star flickers
madly, leading the way.

STARGAZING IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

Tonight the cold air broke summer's spell,
though summer's turned, been buried under leaves.
He clunked his telescope and boyish will
to this hill's edge, determined not to freeze.
I stood beside him, shivering and watching words
spread out from him in white, then disappear:
Orion, Saturn, here. I thought I heard
the whisper, close as grass frost, of stars,
but that's ridiculous: stars don't hiss,
they blink, flash red and blue, yellow, white—
illusion, atmospheric turbulence.
The cold slowed me, began to cloud the night.
More stars than sand he told me, breath as smoke,
and then from sky to foot they fell. Snow.

THINKING OF THE ASTRONAUTS AT THE SPACE STATION

So many days inside a day, your sun keeps rising like a pulse.

Here, the snow keeps muffling sound, enclosing our words.

My dogs are short and shake in the snow.

Kids push a boy in the mud under sun. Night sky loses the illusion.

We who clamor toward light are born first from darkness.

Without water, how did it first find the land, seeing behind for the first time its blue?

On the frozen lawn, he points the telescope at Saturn.

The life we find will change everything.

This whisper: the yogi does not hold his breath, he stops it.

Counting time, I'm counting time.

A young girl sleepwalked from her home, the night filling up with hands.

What I know of levitation I learned from the ground, vacant below me.

MISSING SPRING

Mid May and the weather confuses.
These are the breezes of autumn,
cool blasts that love a sweater.
All winter I watched the heavy snow
of old movies outside my windows,
and once in its cold muffle I lay
flat-backed, staring into static.
To die here, in all this white.

Today's not supposed to be cold,
the wind having already done its work,
the pollen gone for blooms.
One small flower bends in whips of air,
face to dirt in the gray of a sun withdrawn,
purple petals shaking like a voice:
Where am I?

SPRING VIEW

translated from Du Fu

The country lies ruined; mountains and rivers thrive.
Trees and spring grass grow thick, deepen the city with color.
This season brings sadness, splashes tears onto blossoms.
A bird startles me, alone in silent grief.

War flames have burned through three moons.
A letter from home is more precious than gold.
My hair, like snow, is white and keeps falling,
so thin it no longer holds a hairpin.

CIRCADIAN RHYTHM

Having closed it in darkness, they found the green
opening to an invisible sun.

The leaves, fans unfolding, marked the minute,
though time's tick had been taken with the light.

In the focused light of labs, they named it;
not only cerebral, but genetic.

There in the living code of everything,
an internal tide—physical phasing.

At the ease of the turning, darkening
sky, her lover always leaves her dreaming.

While the earth is heavy with sleep, she blinks
watching all that is still, no stir of wind—

only the persistent machine
of breath, like a motor that keeps us spinning.

She stares, listening to crickets, waiting
for the night when she can sleep as they sing.

STATE FAIR

When you're clenched between so many people,
some slow drawl of movement not at all like a sea,
you find that there's no place to look but up.
How could I know how thankful I'd be for the old
cliché of a balloon, unhitched and puncturing
the sheer sky with its freedom, like this white one
shrinking into endless blue? Follow it, I thought, and

then I remembered setting bunches free with classmates
who could write just enough to send their scrawled
messages off to Someone: "I like woollybears and grasshoppers"
and "Write me if you get this." In their slow squirm away,
I felt like something might cross over. Part of me
was leaving. The way the white balloon is leaving now,
though still present on my retina. Against the roar of rides
and voices, it glides so silently up, rising, rising.

Reaching for sleep, I still feel the din's vibration on my skin.
I see the lily I've neglected, drooping beside me.
On my way to dreaming, I pour water into soil.
I lie on the broad leaves of plants as wide as sky: so much green
waiting for rain. When it comes, they are against me, lifting, lifting

QUIETING THINGS

Tonight, summer's fugue crescendos
in our front yard—frogs, crickets,
cicadas—emergent, loud,
invisible. A single breeze promising fall
sweeps in from the dark through
the window screen and rattles the blinds.

Darkness disguises, brings to life
the sleeping, the unfurling of possibility.
So I pretend the stirring grass is a sea
whose reaching lip would wet
our feet if we stepped out. The sycamores'
canopies are galaxies, bowing to touch.

There is no fence, no neighbor's house,
no black mailbox at the end of the drive,
nothing but an expanse of water stippled by stars.
Say you believe, and that, the only thing
that matters. The aqueous night is quiet now.
Our boat awaits.

II

COLLECTING GRASSHOPPERS

She's old now, tired and crooked in his new chair.

The young doctor casually reports that with chemo
she won't die as quickly. He says *die*.

She says nothing, but tells us later

she doesn't want to lose her hair.
I go back twenty summers,

feel her steps behind me, following quietly

through green hills wet with morning,
as I explain, jar in hand, how to catch a grasshopper.

Hopper, she says in an accent layered with countries.

The sun slants through the trees but is still
too early to dim the cool smell

of damp earth. Not all things change.

I find a grasshopper. It spits in the jar, clicks against the glass.
I let it go. My grandmother catches none.

We are alone against the tree line.

The moving light keeps tangling in her hair.

TREE

Tell me about the berries, I say,
ignoring the thin sheets of breath
my grandmother struggles with.
I know the story; she used to tell
it at the table over farmer cheese
and rye, while her husband ate
heartily, dropping crumbs for her
to sweep up later. So many stories—
their parents waving from windows;
the cut of trains through countries,
the bumpy thrust always either cold
or hot and always smelling of skin
grease and sweat; the way they met,
both running, and married two weeks
later, sharing their virgin bed long-ways
to fit so many siblings; how hunger
burned in their stomachs, so that
when she saw the tree studded
with all those white berries,
she angled her small bones through
the branches until the tree was picked
clean. I know about the heaving
after, the cramps that curled her
while she spat blood. I know
the story, but now, I want to hear
the climb of her voice the way
it used to sound when she told us:
They were sweet. And I was full.

CATERPILLARS

The neighborhood was only half built
when we moved in and continued

to change the landscape—the smell of fresh
wood and the transient color of dirt.

The sun leaned on flattened land, so quiet
you expected to hear dust motes, not birds.

I wandered once. I knew nothing
about love. There were no others

in the newly carved playground, so I swung
beside him. He told me to keep my shoes on;

if I stepped on a rusty nail, I could get lockjaw.
What's lockjaw? "When your mouth gets stuck

and you can't speak." I followed him out, beyond
the fence, beyond the empty homes, until

we found a small nest of woods undisturbed.
He picked up a stick and led us back.

A twig scratched my arm, and I watched, proud,
as the blood spotted out along the line. "Look,"

he said pointing at a tree, a sagging womb of white
between branches. "Caterpillars."

They moved beneath the gauze, blackening it in breaths.
I checked to see if my mouth still opened. He leaned

forward, and with the stick he split the nest.
Hundreds spilled out; they turned the bark to fur.

AFTER HOURS

I used to watch movies from my parents' doorway, long after they'd tucked me in for the night. My father had a way of encasing me in my blanket, pushing it under on all sides until I was a cocoon slated to hatch in the morning. But many times I carefully undid his wrapping, slowly stepped into the cool air and prowled my way to the opening of their room, where the screen flicked in the dark and their feet made peaks in the blanket. A woman rode naked on a turtle, her hair a black current through blue; a man rammed another man's head through a fish tank, the blood like lightning on the glass; people loved and didn't, cried long into chests, clicked shoes against endless sidewalks as cars kept driving away, tore into stillness, like the stillness in my parents' bed, the stillness of my body as I perched quietly in their doorway, their voices never more than a whisper, my body never quite in or out.

XENOGENESIS

I'll try to explain: the break was unintentional.
The way the glass pierced the hum of anticipation,
the way it opened my skin, faster and redder
than in movies—it was an accident.

Over my hospital bed, the question moved
between them. What had they created? There,
I imagined the layers of flesh as strands splitting—
the unwinding double helix—then fusing again, new.

My mother called it a Sunday of beginnings—
a gathering of people I didn't recognize, relatives.
I spoke to no one. The gray sky filled the air
with its scent, and the sounds of others laughing

broke through like sun. I squinted
and kept expecting my father's dark voice,
vanished, like a magician who disappears
only to return. But no space held him.

Just past the static of the backyard children,
I found an alley, vacant and dipping,
and felt its length in my legs. Its speech beat inside me:
there are other places.

But I stayed, and as they say, it happened so fast:
half a family hovered around a grill waiting
for the lava-red glow of charcoal nobody could light.
That's why I ran in for matches. I didn't see anyone

close the door. I didn't see the door, either,
when I shattered it face-first, running, ready to start a fire.

CARS

My mother is afraid to drive at night.
Last night she called me, flustered
by her dimming vision and the constant

empty seat beside her. She hit a curb
again. *It's the new moon, it's the new
moon*, she told me. I hung up.

When we were children, she called us
to our coats on school nights when my father
was away on business, and she drove.

We were always waiting for those trips,
secretly excited by the unknown
and the songs that beat and moaned behind us.

Sometimes the drive would last
for hours before we found him
at a restaurant, hotel, or the woman's house.

Sometimes we didn't
find him at all. Most disappointing was
when we found him right away and then

had to turn home, not ready for sleep,
wired and quiet like stragglers
left at a party ended too soon.

But every time she drove, it was dark,
and as each street lamp shot its pale picture
of my mother's jagged profile, I knew

it wasn't absence
she wanted to find, but my father's Cadillac,
inanimate as an open diary,

a five-thousand-pound prize she had no place to put.

SECOND WEDDING

On the night he married her, the lights
went out, wind creaking wildly, before
the priest pronounced them. The former wife,

my mother, in her new-found satisfaction,
knowing that the winds of that unexpected
storm almost stopped the procession,

would have said, see, that's the omen
you deserve. And who knows, maybe she,
too, lit candles that night, alone

in the shadows of her apartment, knowing
nothing, while somewhere else, candles
flickered in the mountains as rings

were exchanged in front of guests who
whispered in the near dark, while the man
she spent nights winding through

miles of black highway to find, his car
parked and cold outside the house
of the woman she could no longer

call paramour, was turning around
with his new bride as the cool currents
of wind kept blotting out the sounds

of happiness, smacking against the outer
walls, as the candles melted in both places,
joining the three of them in fire.

MYRELLEN'S COAT

at the American Visionary Arts Museum

It was her husband who led her in, her hands
bound in metal, to the locked hospital.
She *must* be crazy, they thought, to be that
beautiful and abandoned still.
Yet the women sometimes collected her
long hair like October leaves

and braided it, hearing only her breath.
With a single needle, she unraveled
thread from bed sheets and laundry rags
to sew a coat patched in scraps
of faded colors, embroidered in childhood
scenes, past friends' addresses,

news headlines—her life pressed forth
from her fingertips through steel into stitch.
Her hands moving as a mantra, she built
cloth for years, forgot to eat, spilled from sleep
to sew while the ward dreamed.
She swallowed white-cupped pills and let blue

current ride her brain, until the needle fell.
I never learned to sew, not even a button.
Teach me, I told my mother, pulling her
her crayon-colored spools from their bin,
letting a thimble dangle on my thumb, but
she was always snapping doors shut.

Once, under the dark dusty wood of her
sewing table, I hid among the unfinished fabrics
and told myself a story about a woman
who threaded life into puppets. They listened.
When I made one with a sock, I used markers
to draw the round black eyes and red lips.

I gave him a crumble of black hair, too,
and soon he knew everything—even when
he lay limp and wrinkled on my bed or the floor.
After years since I've forgotten the faces
of playmates, my puppet's small easy face emerges,
rising from memory, riding my arm,

victorious, and I feel sorry for losing him.
With her I have ridden the alive unreal.
Though I can't hear her, her voice is my voice
falling over the same words—
a mixing of fluid that flowed from a single sea
where we came up with pearls in our hands.

HAIR

When I was five, my mother cut it off, or, rather,
had a barber do it behind a shoe store. Shorn,
my head shocked my hands—nothing left to gather.
Still, no mirror image was enough to mourn,
until the next day when a boy called me ugly.
Who cares what you think?, I muscled back,
but his voice pushed through years like a bully.
What is the lure of the sway across the back,
the desire for strands over skin like a cape?
Had Ophelia's hair not fanned under current,
if it were close to the scalp, clipped to the nape,
who would remember her, skin dead as sediment?
When I let my lover brush my hair, he listens:
waves splitting. I hear the Sirens: *the water glistens*.

WHY I FLASHED CRIMINALS IN A PADDY WAGON

I was alone. The right song was on,
the kind that reminded me of being
younger, of desire. The day was
illusory, a warm winter afternoon that felt
like spring—a false sense of thawing.
I was behind them.

See me younger, maybe in the same
white truck, cuffed to strangers.
Besides our clinking against the road,
we're silent for the ride, though
thoughts of last acts almost have volume.
All I did was run away.

Here, space redefines itself: a constant
struggle between motion and gravity.
I stare out through the grated window,
see how I never appreciated trees,
search for one face in one car that will
say *I understand*. No one looks back.

Sewn shut in a cell, I traded stories
with a girl. We were virgins. One night
she sat on my bed in the darkness
and kissed me, then left.
It was my warm secret, unmentioned,
and I always remembered it pink.

The story of the girl in the hall's last cell
scared me. How had she broken through
the bars? What strength told her to fly before
the ground slapped her to her end?
Did she, like me, smell the snow melting
in the cornfields? Who would she have kissed?

Understand that it was sunny,
that they would smell the mirage of spring
between the wagon and the cell, that
I was behind them, returning their gaze,
that against the steely colors of traffic,
it was all I could offer.

OVERDOSING ON COCAINE

The first time I watched someone shoot up I threw up.
The liquor didn't help, I'm sure, but it was the blood—
not the stick of skin—curling like red smoke in the syringe
that sent me heaving, my heart knocking. You know
how these things go: the bubble of revulsion, the pop
of curiosity, the red line of desire—I had them all.
The first time I shot up, I turned my head, let a man
sneak through the pale thinness of my arm, and I was surprised
at how I didn't even feel it, how easy it was, how clean.
Wow! I kept saying, while he kept saying *shhhh*.
Wow! So *this* is happiness, I thought, and there's so much to do.
So much to do, so much to love, so much—and yet suddenly
I'm tired. You know how these things go: the tumbling into a love
that fooled you from the start, the shedding of selves
in a diminishing apartment, among the unanswered phone,
closed blinds, dirty spoons in the sink. I had been up for days
when it happened, jabbing into scabs, trying to pull one more ribbon
from my vein, but it stopped giving, no matter how
I prodded, tilted, or pumped my arm—until finally it relented
and someone saw the swirl of color— *just bang it*,
which is what I did, pushing the plunger in as you would cap
a jar of something sweet, finishing it off without thought.
And then I felt my knowing draining down, felt my face chill and fall,
tried to see what was being swiftly smudged out, black,
and before the last patch of blackness blocked me from the world,
I saw the ice cubes hit the floor, their clatter a closing door.
The others' startled faces hovered over mine when I awoke,
the ice cubes melting on my chest. No ambulance,
no epiphany, just questions—*How many fingers do you see? Can you speak?*
And then mine—*Is there anymore?*

THE WORDS

Let me see it, c'mon, once more, I beg,
but he wants to play tag, to chase me
and thrust his open palm into my back.
Yes, yes, we will, but first just do it
one more time, so he pulls out his
five-year-old penis and pees
against the building, darkening the red brick.
Make a design, I tell him, so he tries
something abstract and the bricks
look like they're bleeding.
Later he gives me plastic rings from
gumball machines: they all say I love you.
Touch here. That's later, and then the girl
in the neighborhood. Someone said her privates
look like scrambled eggs, so I look—
everyone shows—and I don't understand.
But maybe I haven't seen scrambled eggs,
just softboiled and upright in egg cups,
slave to a table, I am slave to a table,
gagging on egg slime. My father's hands
are long, can reach me, knuckles against skull.
So I swallow. And I run, I run, the grass is dark, the night open,
and I run. I am the dark fallen from a moonless sky
specked with eggs, and my legs are other animals.
Police will handcuff an eleven-year-old
and bring her back, and she leaves her eye
at the door from now on. She opens it
when her father takes a shotgun to his head
and leaves circles of blood on the floor.
Not blood, ketchup. Not dead, a test. We pass.
I run and line my eyes in black. Men do chase,
have extra room for runaways with braces.
She learns to give head to a taxicab driver
for five dollars and buys herself Twinkies
and keeps walking into a lowering sky.
People pass like headlights and a girl can
keep walking, keep waking to the same walk,
and the children ride on buses with clean paper.
No one spoke of God, but she speaks to him
in a staircase. You can find me.

Police ask questions to a girl who wants more
cleavage, who learns the pull of the subtle line between.
No tattoos. Yes, a scar. I ran through a glass door.
Sleep comes sideways in a cell, and then you
scrub floors in the still dark morning, and you
tell the judge you need help. You are a ward.
A ward of the court in a psychiatric ward,
and you escape through a window, and you run.
You find Arabs from Kuwait who fold pita
into hummus, everyone sharing on the floor,
and you drink tequila until your face flushes
and you say thank you for sharing, and then you share.
They take you to the city, where the owner sits
in a back room and waits for you to finish undressing,
but you leave your panties on, and you like him
because he lets you. He likes you because your tits
are firm, and if you could just learn to dance
you'd make him a happy buck. A girl hangs
upside down on a pole, not pretty like a bat.
I say No. A hand burns worms into my cheek.
Outside the door, they wait in ambush,
anguish, anger. An anchor talks about it at six,
the Arab man and the dancer from D.C. now
behind bars, charged with the abduction of a minor.
The minor lies in a bed, lip fat, ear black,
and listens to the voices that move against the walls
like smoke. Not the words, just the sound.
She calls her mother, speaks to her sisterless sister
in gibberish: uh-the-guy luh-the-guv yuh-the-goo.
The ride through mountains, court-ordered, is a lesson
in movement, and she thinks she can hear the roar
of shifting, erupting—ontogeny and the slow spread of green.
Let the summits show you a good time.
A new place, all doors unlocked, and a therapist
with a beard and a gentle eye. She doesn't run,
instead draws pictures for the bearded man
and walks like a peacock with so many eyes on her.
I'm not green yet, or even blue.
At night, the girls shower, and I shower with a girl.
She closes the door to my room and shows me.
We're still learning, let's whisper.
Let's remember the words.

III

NIGHT THOUGHTS WHILE TRAVELING

translated from Du Fu

Falling wind bends grass along the riverbank,
ruffles the sail of my boat, alone on the water.
The sky swells, spills stars into endless fields.
Moonlight sparks against the surging river.

My poems have brought fame, but now what?
Even government eludes me, aging and ill.
The water's current carries me as on wind,
a lone gull fluttering between heaven and earth.

FROG RAIN

She brought buckets of them from the marsh
where builders trudged through in boots,
sucking out with water the last of the living.

She often came to me mid-mission with things half
dead, like those tadpoles floating sideways in the sun-
stoked water, before we dropped them

into my cool pond. After, we'd sit under the web of an elm
before the back lights of her pickup began their red trail
through the night. She loved me, she said, so

I always made space for the leafless plant,
the muddy box of unborn bulbs, the scratched turtle—
always something to bury or bless.

And those tadpoles—hundreds lining the water
in lumps—they sprouted limbs like tongues, as if tasting
along the top ledges for where to begin again.

She never came back to see how, as frogs, they darkened
foliage either moving or still, toes splayed,
as they watched me keep coming home,

their smirk-lined mouths silent. To forget them
was to be surprised by one, springing suddenly from
an unnamable direction. And I had forgotten

them the day I finally moved the quarry rocks she left
and planted one on the porch. There, from the flattened space
between: two pale legs against the brick, spread ahead of the stone,

poised, they seemed, to fly. I don't know why I ran then, kept running
until the dark sky lowered and spilled a steady summer shower,
but when the gray rain quickened and the wind began to wake

the wet leaves, spiraling green from their snapping
branches, I turned back. Against the gusts,
I imagined the spinning winds that died

in Villa Angel Flores, how that town must have thumped
under a muddy sky dropping frogs by the hundreds,
how prayers rose like spirits, indecipherable against the earthy bang.

When it stopped, what did the villagers think as they stepped
out past the lithe bodies and looked up to find a clearing sky,
clouds parting like lids across a single yellow eye?

GIRL IN A SHINY DRESS

photograph by Diane Arbus

She leans forward,
 offering her shoulders to you,

the left one, its sleek strap fallen
 would be a perfect fit

inside your palm. In her bend,
 her small breasts send a line of wonder

down through your chakras,
 and you know she'd let you

pull the other strap, too,
 then both a little more.

Every time you turn to her,
 she smiles that same smile—

half shy, half inviting—and you know
 she'd fill the quiet of your room,

animate the air so still beside you
 with her scent

and keep looking,
 always looking at you always looking.

Her kiss would show you how
 the darkness is no more

than the easy closing
 of both eyes.

TO DIANE ARBUS

*After looking at photographs by Arbus
including "Sharon Goldberg"
and "Girl sitting on her bed with her shirt off"*

Italics by Diane Arbus

I think you liked
women best,
like this one you call
a beauty, furred in
black, coarse hair twisted
across her spine, eyes
dark as childhood;
or this one, white girl
with an afro, her open mouth
dry-lipped clicking
if she spoke

*her kiss
seals a thousand
small bargains*

Her dirty nails (will they
venture down?)
below her shallow chest
have their own story —
she's giving something,
let's not forget that

*the more so
because she is ugly*

I imagine myself under
the sound of your shutter,
worrying about that look
you have, often
verging on disinterest
or dissatisfaction

I don't press the shutter

There in my own room,
my own wrinkled sheets,
I would have shown you
what I could: a boomerang
scar on my knee, my right eye
with its single splash

of orange, my breasts
like a young girl's, my . . .

The image does

What use?
Thinking of your women,
those kaleidoscopic bursts
sparkling in your spyglass,
I fear there would have been
no pose for me,
no pleasing you

*like the very irate lady
who appears at night
pulling a red kiddies express wagon
trimmed with bells
and filled
with alley cats in fancy hats
and dresses*

Still, know this:
I would have done
whatever you would
have asked

THE CONVERSATION
(Couple on a Pier, N.Y.C. 1963)

photograph by Diane Arbus

*"...a thing is not seen because it is visible, but conversely,
visible because it is seen..."*

--Plato

(underlined by Arbus in her copy of The Works of Plato)

Yes, of course it feels good here,
loose as water with my head in her lap,
while I keep us mood-right in music,
which, incidentally, I'll keep close
to my crotch. I may be young,
but already I know all her dreams
I'll never make come true, even
though she never told me that
when she looks at me, she imagines
my eyes growing inside her womb.
I just know it the way I know
she'll always answer the phone
or make me breakfast or help me
with my zipper. But you're not
interested in her, her face gray
as a cloud, and, to be honest,
either am I, though the wet breeze
and the water moving below me
can sometimes make me forget,
especially with her breasts so close.
But I'm looking at you now—
your pupils spreading back at me.
Tell me, are you thinking
what I'm thinking?

BRAIN OF RAT,
BRAIN OF CAT,
BRAIN OF ORANG-OUTAN

photograph by Arne Svenson, Mütter Museum

I figure my twenty-pound dogs
don't have much on the cat
in terms of size. I look at them
now both sleeping, curled
like waning moons, waking
only to bark randomly
at the audible tick of a clock
or a car squeaking quickly by,
and think about how the smaller
female tricks her brother
out of his treats by running
barking to the door. Loyal dog
he is, he always hastily follows
her, also barking even though
he doesn't know why, until she
darts back to steal his unattended
bone, which she'll add to her
hidden collection, leaving him
poised and alert at the closed door,
where I lean down and kiss him
on top of his small head.

ALBINO SWORD SWALLOWER AT A CARNIVAL, MD 1970

photograph by Diane Arbus

The year I was born, the pink-eyed
lady stood outside the carnival tent,
spread her arms into a crucifix
like the sword in her mouth,
and swallowed. The metal,
cold from the breeze billowing
her sleeves and folds of skirt,
pushed past her epiglottis
like a second spine, opened her
snake throat. People waited for a slip—
a stabbed stomach, some inner offering
of blood. A few worried
she'd pierce the clouds in vertical
ascension, like an alien going home.

Thirty years later I watched
a man who called himself the King
of Swords surrender to steel
while the women pointed
their knees at him and dreamed
of his secrets. He told us
his breed would soon be extinct,
and then he popped a balloon inside
his esophagus. So I married him
to the albino woman, imagined
their children, trying the plastic play
swords first, learning to push
past the pain of reflex, extending
in communion to the sky.

SHOW

You can hardly find them, save for a dime museum
or capped in formaldehyde jars in medical museums
and an occasional carnival. A breach of beauty,
so some thought, without knowing what beauty could be.
Crowds paid to see them: the florid half-girl who wed
the American Giant, his knee angled over her head;
the sixty-pound thin man, who in love took the hand
of the fat lady eight times his weight; Prince Randian,
the Human Worm, limbless and famous for rolling
and lighting his own cigarettes—after marrying
he mused (he fathered five) he would build a house
with his lips.

A view of them can arouse
anew the thought of skin against skin, the geometry
of difference—dimming now into memory.
I imagine the man-girl, her boy hand tilting
the tip of her skirt up and up until...
or the Mule Woman whose bubbling face burned
below the hips of her suitors before they learned
the smell of her, the rest of her. Thigh
against thigh, what did they touch? Or find? When I
was a child I ran from a two-fingered boy—a lunge
from the gut. And for nights in my bed he was the one
who turned me with touch, half-handed. I heard he
married a beauty; not once did he notice me.

IN THE OPERATING ROOM

I've come to watch him work, perform
a craniotomy, an opening of bone to brain.
The patient's face is hidden, stuck

with hoses spreading out from the drapes like arms,
just as my lover is hidden, masked, capped,
all eyes and hands. And here his hands

know everything: how to split this pulsing brain,
wet, asleep, soft as custard; how to find
the mass that grows and grows, and sever it.

Once I thought I, too, went through skin—
my friend's big brother on Halloween.
I stuck my hand between the buttons of his shirt

to feel his "guts." And though I learned his organs
were no more than grape pulp, bagged and wet,
my hands could not forget intruding there.

To watch now, his blood-gloved hands beneath the light,
is to remember: how he first touched my head,
caught his hand in my hair; how his fingers opened me

one night without routine, so soundless and naïve;
how in the push and swell of flesh, I feared
his learning, what his hands might bare, or take away.

CRANIOPAGUS

*Now, since their natural form had been cut in two,
each one longed for its own other half,
and so they would throw their arms about each other,
weaving themselves together, wanting to grow together.*

--Plato, "The Speech of Aristophanes"

What would Aristophanes declare
if he saw them, these girls skull to skull,

forever poised to walk away, one east,
one west; the hardened bone and meat between

them, the roots of vessels joining them
in blood and life; how they'll never see

the other's full face or eyes in real
time—only pictures or in pieces, glints

in mirrors they hold up in sad attempt
to see the one they hate the most; how they

beg for separation, knowing death
would be the cost, or maybe the reward?

HEAD SLICE ON A TABLE

photograph by Max Aguilera-Hellweg, Mütter Museum

If the table cloth is crooked, does that mean the meal is over?

In a basement, beside the pipes and old lockers, the white brain flower grows.

The black shoes wait on the floor for the sound of their own tap against the wood.

His fingerprints are everywhere.

Just past the chair is a door we can't see; its light belongs to him.

He kissed a girl at a wedding, their mouths wet with wine.

Once, when a janitor dropped him on the floor, his half-eye looked up patiently.

Any minute, he'll part his lips, tell us about numbers and atoms and stars.

After the photographs, the street lights will glow on the dark ride home.

Night air tastes alive as you pass the slopes of trees, and you'll never stop wanting more.

DRIED PREPARATION OF THE HAND

photograph by Dale Gunnoe, Untitled, Mütter Museum

It's not so much the missing skin
or the blood-slick bones of the hand,

which could be hailing a taxi or waving
goodbye, but the shadow of two hands

where there is one.

The pair, rising in the flat black fuzz
of shade, barely touching,

like first kissing, could still be
flesh-bound, round with life, unlike

the hand in full light, still strung

with veins and ascending with the shadows
in spindly agreement.

My father once tried to catch a falling
glass, but it exploded in his hand,

opened it like a pomegranate,

and I watched his hardness turn to pulp.
Later, I, too, would shatter glass, learn

again the thinness of the membrane
between minutes, one minute holding you

on a porch rocker in a thirsty summer,

the next inside an ambulance behind
two rectangles of sky. My father would

make the trip home that night,
stroke my head with his numb hand,

and for the first time I remember, I'd reach

my small fingers into his, hovering
between dreaming and waking,

the way the hand hovers with the shadows,
no longer alive but not yet dead.

PROSTHETIC LEG IN HALLWAY

photograph by Max Aguilera-Hellweg, Mütter Museum

Straighter than my own, it stands, black shoe
shined and otherwise unused, except
for once—a father's labored walk past pews,
to guide his daughter through smiling guests.
See the sock, its white and wrinkled cling
below the calf, its love of solid wood.
And the stainless strap—a buckled ring
to fit the limbless side where air floods.
Behind, the hall is nightmare dark, the leg
emergent, smooth as plastic, light as white
wings. I dream of flight—wind instead
of stepping, ground-bound. An acolyte
of air, I am a simple line through space,
like a single balanced leg—unbraced.

TORSO NO. 3 (CURVED SPINE)

photograph by Gwen Akin and Allan Ludwig, Mütter Museum

It could be a fish, fleshless
but swerving through some sea
with bones for fins, or feathers—
a bird, white, shooting up
from its nest toward the wet
sky, the sickle moon,
the long night curving into
morning, the way my own bones
curve, the line of my spine
straight as the lid of an eye,
your eyes as I bend to show
you the slight push against one
side and you tell me about how
the vertebra could be shingles
on a roof, but in my case
it's a crooked roof, and as
your fingers climb, I imagine
the perch of something small
there, ready to glide into blue.

HEART

photograph by Olivia Parker, Mütter Museum

She saw the museum heart, shot it against black,
and perhaps was happy when it reflected itself
in labial designs—a specimen suspended.
What do we know of this heart, its tissue
now transparent, its vessels injected with vermillion,
glowing behind the glass? Whose heart was it?
Whose spread of nerves ignited, galaxies
making it rise and fill the ears with the bang of blood?
Who looked down at her left breast and watched it throb,
or lay head to ground until the earth pulsed inside her,
she inside it, along the long roots of trees, strata of rock?
Here, no answer from this anonymous gift that goes on
inventing itself inside its sealed cube, where it will never
beat like your heart, filling now, wet in your chest.