

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: NOT VERY FAR, BUT NOT CLOSE EITHER

Tyler Goldman, Master of Fine Arts, 2016

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In “Not Very Far, But Not Close Either”, formal lyrics, free verse poems, and translations from the first century Latin of Martial and Horace explore ideas of distance: the physical distance between bodies, the psychological distance between (and within) human minds, the temporal distance between past, present, and future. A speaker considers his relationship to the image in a foggy bathroom mirror, another to the bird living behind his house, another to the ghosts of his dead parents, whom he asks to watch over a beloved and recently departed child. In exploring these distances—between self and semblance, man and bird, living and dead—the speakers of these poems attempt to locate themselves the only way we can ever locate anything: in relation to something—or someone—else. In this spirit, the manuscript incorporates not only translations and original poems, but poems adapted from and taken after the work of poets who have explored similar themes, questions, and concerns.

NOT VERY FAR, BUT NOT CLOSE EITHER

by

Tyler Goldman

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I

Have You Ever Noticed The Way The Blind Seem To Think With Their Eyes

Is the kind of question I might have asked you
had I been born with a little less vanity.

I meant to tell you that, but what came out was
put your hand over my face.

You did, without a word.
And from your palm:

the faint salt smell of a sea
not very far, but not close either.

What Remains

The smell of rain.

Or, then again,

the smell of an azalea.

Or the sea.

Of salt and flame,

and anise, sesame.

The smell of mint.

Of caraway, the faint

sweetness of wet leaves

in fall. Of rye loaves

in the oven, a cigar.

A ripened ear

of corn.

A rose. A fern.

The smell of stone.

Of shallots gone

to flower.

A drawer

of your clothes,

and dirt, and ashes.

Of charred blueberry bushes

and burnt branches.

Of plums and pears

and years and years

of smoke. The wind

and what I find

when I take the time
to notice it: some

something in the air.
Your skin. Your hair.

The Sunglasses

South Beach, Miami

I saw what I saw
and nothing else

how else
could it be

you
me

the dogwood
filigree

in ink
on your arm

your breasts
your scars

the sun
the sea

the one way mirrors
on your face

reflecting me
to me

and because
I wore them too

reflecting you
to you

I saw what I saw
and nothing else

me seeing me
seeing me

seeing me
forever

how else
could it be

Portrait of a Young Man, Ink, Discovered by the Painter Ten Years After
Painting
after Cavafy

First you drew one line then you drew another
then out of nowhere: a body—revealed

in a posture of such indelibly exquisite
vulnerability that you had to look away.

The back arched just slightly.
The head turned, chin tucked,

touching, or almost touching, the collarbone.
How, after a moment, can there be a body?

How, after so many years can you recognize it
as your own? It's all right there:

The neck, the back, that jaw.
That chin. Was it vanity

or innocence that moved your hand?
Shame or pride that revealed you?

You ask nothing, say nothing.
The wonder of your body replaced

for a moment by the wonder
of your distance to it.

Mirror Image

I knew my face in the stream where I caught trout
with my bare hands. So I knew my hands too.
I knew my feet from walking in the furrows;
the narrow footprints on the kitchen floor.
After I showered, I'd stand in front of the mirror
hanging on the wall. I knew where I was,
I knew what I was looking at, but it was difficult
to see. In a few minutes, I could make out the shape
of a body. In a few more, I could make out the shape
of *my* body. My arms, my chest, my neck.
This image, this semblance, piece by piece, dissolving
into myself until I'd walk away.
Before I saw my mouth, my nose, my eyes
looking back into a stranger's face.

Sleeping Muse

From the neck down:
nothing I haven't seen before.

A weightless form,
similar to air, but

not air. Similar,
perhaps, to empty space,

but not that either.
More like

an invisible husk
that's been broken open to reveal

not seeds,
but the place

where seeds
used to be.

What's missing
in putting it this way

is the effort
to get at those seeds.

The way the body seems
to offer itself.

Put your hand on me.
Now push deeper.

And what is a closing
against you

you mistake
for a closing.

For disappearance.
Do anything you want to.

What The Wanderer Saw

In spring

I saw a woman

weaving a basket.

I saw a boy

slaughtering

a sheep.

In summer

I watched two girls

smear pitch

on bird feathers,

then dip them

into the mud

from the bottom

of a lake.

In autumn

I noticed a horse

grazing

by the roadside

and an old man

turning

the earth

with a sifting spade.

In winter,

when I washed

my face,

the water

would run down
my beard

and freeze.
When I shook it

there would
fall from it

a kind
of snow.

False Spring

After the false spring:
the spring. The ducks (here too soon)
have already left.

There Is Always a Changing at the Root

adapted from Larkin

The year is over.
Above, the sky

is unchanged.
An endless sky.

And the wet streets,
as ever, are empty.

The houses,
deserted. Dusk.

And this decaying landscape
has its uses:

to make me
remember—

to remind me
that memory

depends on chance.
This street.

This window.
This shattered city.

This real world
in which time

really passes—
in which time

really turns things
into other things.

And its message,
a note pinned

to the door, that
there is always

a changing
at the root,

and all
must dream.

Horace: Ode IV.7

The snows have fled, now grasses return to the fields
and leaves to the trees;
The earth moves through its turns, the ebbing rivers
flow within their banks.

One of the graces, with her twin sisters and the Nymphs,
dares to lead the naked dance.
You shouldn't hope for the eternal, warn the circling year
and the hour that drags off the day.

Winter melts with the western winds; summer crushes the spring,
which will die too,
as soon as autumn bleeds out its fruits. And soon
lifeless winter rushes back.

Still, the swiftly changing moons wax once they wane.
When we have gone down
to where pious Aeneas, to where rich Tullus and Ancus are,
we are dust and shadow.

Who knows whether the gods will add another day
to your life's total.
What you give to your own precious soul will escape
the greedy hands of your heir.

Once you've died, and Minos has passed his mighty
judgment on you,
not your noble birth, Torquatus, not your eloquence,
not your piety can restore you.

Not even Diana can free chaste Hippolytus
from the shades.
Not even Theseus is strong enough to break the chains of Lethe
from his dear Pirithous.

II

The Aviary

Sitting in front
of the aviary

in my little
white chair,

in the middle
of June,

in the soft,
softening light

of this late
southern California

afternoon,
a light

every
photon of which

seems
to exist

to say *you*
are the only person

in the universe—
I'm beginning

to feel
like I'm

the only person
in the universe.

A minute ago
I wrote

*our eight
young finches, small*

*as our daughter's hands,
small enough,*

*almost, to fit
in our daughter's hands,*

*are flying carefully
around the cage*

*in pairs, some
collecting seeds,*

*others
gathering strands*

*of burlap
and grass*

*from the
wooden boxes*

*you fastened
to the walls.*

The thing is—
we have

no daughter.
And I left you

a year ago.
Remember?

Because
I didn't want

children—
or I didn't

want children
with you.

I was
watching

two of the
goldfinches

circling the feeder,
and then

I noticed
the light,

and I just—
I couldn't

help
but write it.

A week ago
I found a chick

dead in her nest.
She'd been dead

for days. Her parents
wouldn't move her.

I took her out
and wrapped her

in a cloth napkin
and buried her

in the
garden.

An owl
finch.

The next day
I noticed

the mother,
the father,

and their one
surviving chick

moving
around the cage

together,
in a

group
of three.

I tried writing
that down

but I
couldn't.

Not
until now.

The Magpie

The field was plowed and harrowed, but nothing had grown
because nothing had been planted.

Cool slopes and shallow soil, chalky marl and mudstone,
the magpie when it landed

on a thick branch of the stone pine, stomach full of oak seeds,
feet stained with dusk—

what was it doing there? I couldn't see.
So I'll keep my mouth shut.

Martial I.114

This small farm next to yours, these gardens, these meadows,
they're owned by Telesphorus Faenius.

This is where he buried his daughter's ashes
and blessed her name—ANTULLA—which you read here.

It should be her father's name we're reading.

He should have gone down to the dark ghosts first.

But that wasn't allowed, so he remains
to honor and to tend to her remains.

Martial: V.34

Mother, father, I'm handing you this child,
little Erotion, the one I loved the most,
so she won't be too scared of Tartarus,
his awful mouths, and all the shadow ghosts.
She'd have been six in only six more days.

Let her play with you there by her side, my old,
experienced parents. Let her babble my name.

Let no thick grass cover her tiny bones.
And Earth, don't press too hard on her:
she hardly pressed on you.

Martial: I.116

This forest and all these beautiful, tilled acres—
Faenius gave them to the dead.
His daughter, young Antulla, she was taken
too soon. This is where she's buried.
This is where they'll mix his ashes with hers.
If any of you want this small estate,
I warn you: it will always serve these masters.

The Shell

You who shut the night inside yourself,
who closed your windows when you smelled the rain,
who knew too well the play of light and shade
on a bare wall—I hear you in this shell.
The dappled conch you found and sent to me
years after we stopped speaking. (You always knew
how to find the best shells: when the moon is new
or full, and pulling hardest on the sea.)
Inside this conch a small and foundering ship
is bilged on its own anchor but doesn't sink.
It takes on water endlessly, until
it's indistinguishable from water, the way the shell,
the ship, is air—is blood inside my ear.
The way that it's both you—and me—I hear.

The Goldfinch

She sat alone on the stone wall
of the patio, so bright, so gold,

the light around her seemed
to blister. I opened the window

and climbed outside. Small
breeze in the hedge. I said, *Go*.

I know you see me.
I didn't know.

I thought
I knew, but—no.

I only *felt* seen.
I was a child—when the whole

world seems to look at you.
All I wanted was to close

my eyes, for the space between
her body and mine to grow

long and broad
and deep as shadow,

but I couldn't find it in me
to close them. So

I stood there. It was all
I could do. I froze.

I could feel
the light throw

itself, gleaming, off
of her body and burrow

inside of me.
I could feel it stow

itself deep in my skull:
the golden yolk

of this memory
finding its home.

III

Epithalamion

for L & D

What we imagine shelters us from snow
conceals us—covers us more deeply.

The way that coverture can be the storm
or what covers us from the storm.

Words are so much easier to stretch
than human nature. Words like *covered, woman*.

Tonight, sleep on top of your bed sheets.
Take the words, with your mouths,

out of each other's mouths. Compose yourselves.
Pull yourselves together. Arrive at the same time

at the same conclusion: that what is yours
is also what you never say.

Advice

In spring and summer ride your bike
up hills that seem too steep to climb.

Sleep by a window facing south.
Occasionally burn your mouth

on food too hot to eat.
When wrong, concede

as quickly as you can.
When you make plans:

keep them. Understand
that every lie and

half-truth that you tell
is a refusal

to be understood.
Look

more often at the sky
and into the eyes

of those you're talking to.
Get a tattoo.

Drop in on old friends unannounced.
Write letters. If you can, allow

yourself, every now and then,
to be had. If you have children,

make different mistakes
than your parents did.

Parents are only kids
that happened to have kids.

Forgive them both for everything.
And if you can't, forgive

yourself.
It helps.

Free Will

I watched you stick a button up your nose
and pull it out. So I did too.
A penny, not a button, though I knew
before I did it, as everybody knows
before they put something inside of them
that could get stuck, that this time, maybe, it would,
and that I would in all likelihood
not know how I'd gotten it in my head
in the first place: the coin, or the idea
to put the coin inside my head, each of which
wasn't there and then suddenly was,
like everything that happens in the mind,
deposited as tributes to the myth
of free will—to the me who could have done otherwise.

False Profits

Beside the kitchen table that you bought
for “six or seven hundred dollars less
than it was worth!” I scratched my beard and thought
about the restaurant, *Sushi Express*,
where we’d each taken pictures of the menu,
which lists two prices for each piece of fish:
one price printed in red ink and ~~struck through~~,
the other, half that price, in black beside it.
Sushi Express had called this “Half-off Sushi,”
and we had made a point to slowly savor it,
the cleverness of this ruse, which wasn’t the gimmick
but rather the ease with which we could see through it,
imagine other people taken in,
hooked on the line, our mouths full of raw bluefin.

Martial: II.5

What I'd give to spend whole days and nights
without saying goodbye to you.
But the two mile trip between your house and mine
is four when I walk there and back again.
You're hardly ever home, and when you are,
you're "busy" or you "need to be alone."
Look, I don't mind the two mile walks to see you:
What kill me—are the four mile walks not to.

Singing For Our Supper

We put each other in each other's hands.
Dough that we pressed into each other's palms,
lettuce, cabbage, bacon, hard-shell clams
dug up from mudflats, shucked, seasoned with salt
and lime and fried. We were pie and cream.
We took our dough and turned it into bread.
We were gravy. We were cheddar cheese.
We opened up. We kept each other fed.
We offered ourselves and ate what we were offered.
We kept our palms greased and our bellies full.
And when we grew too rich and sick of each other,
we wiped our hands and got up from the table.
We were tender. Skin and bones. Withdrawn.
We sold each other for a song.

Bird Song

Skulking through the scrub
behind the house,

trill descending,
a little engine—

wrennit,
I'm spent.

And you're
difficult

to pin down,
aren't you?

It's been more than a week
since I brought my books

outside, started reading
on the patio,

and I still
haven't seen you.

You don't get around much,
do you?

I've heard that about you.
I respect that.

Sing clearly,
hide persistently.

I think you're
on to something.

The other day,
on the internet,

I clicked
a little button

and made you sing.
I can't tell you

how strange it was
to hear something

so much like you
that wasn't you.

And then to make it stop.
You—it takes you

just a little bit
longer to get everything

up
and running,

those sharp
peeps

accelerating into that
long wild growl

of a trill.
And suddenly

it made
sense to me.

Something
made sense to me.

About urgency—
the way some songs

feel urgent
because they refuse

to be rushed through.
I know this is strange.

I don't expect any of it
to make sense to you.

It's all a bit
abstract and

you're
a bird.

But here we are.
You singing,

me on the lounge chair
talking to you,

listening
to you,

reading
about you—

reading, as it happens,
that you're "far more often

heard
than seen."

Which is consoling
because I can't see you.

You sing,
it says here,

to "define
and defend

your small
piece

of territory."
Which in this case

is in that hedge.
And I have to say—

I think I might really
be starting to get you.

*Build a nest,
mate for life,*

*stay put.
Define*

*a bit of space
to call your own*

*Defend it
every day.*

Oh, go ahead.
I'm listening.

*Sing
away.*

Senses of Self

This is the last
of what I have

to say.
It's the end

of the line.
In a way,

I don't really
want to say it.

I'd rather
go outside

and lie down
in the back yard

and maybe
jack off

but I'd probably
get distracted

by the heat,
and the dog

whining
in the

neighbor's yard,
and the kids

playing tag
in the street

and not
be able

to get it up.
Which is fine.

I'm used
to that.

And besides,
the air conditioner

is set
to sixty-five

and I've got
a cold beer

in my hand
and nothing

but time,
time, time,

to just
notice

whatever
it is

I happen
to notice,

each
soft explosion

of thought
as it goes off

a thousand
tiny

puffball
mushrooms

all breathing
out their spores

at once—
or what seems

like once
because nothing

really happens
at the same time.

It's a mess
in here.

Every month
I wind up

letting
the place

go.
I like

to think
of myself

as a clean
person, but

none of the
clean people

I know
ever actually

have a mess
to clean up.

You know?
They nip

their messes
in the bud.

Me, I let
my messes bloom.

I live with them
for a while

and then I
pull them up

from their
roots

and I lift them
over my head

one swollen
garbage bag

at a time,
and I

howl
and sing

with the sweet
smell of clorox

and victory
in the air

and my three
herniated discs

on
fire.

My body
hurts

all the time.
Too many

sports
as a kid.

Knees, ankles,
wrists—

six or seven
concussions.

The doctors
asking me

if I was *feeling*
like myself

and me
not really

knowing
how to answer—

even though
I knew

what they
meant.

They meant
are you feeling

*noticeably different
than you*

usually feel?
Sometimes yes.

Sometimes no.
Sometimes

I ask myself
out loud

if I'm feeling
like myself.

And I still
never really

know
how to answer.

The neighbor's
dog is still whining

outside.
I wonder

if he's
feeling

like himself
today.

And the kids
all playing tag

in the street.
I wonder

if they're
feeling

like themselves
too.

One of them
just got caught.

Remember that?
You're running

and running
and running

like hell
and then

you aren't
anymore.

You're
slowing down.

Maybe
you're tired.

Maybe
you know

exactly
what you're doing.

One moment
you're there.

The next:
you're *it*.