

Grotesquerie.

slow pan of lakeside, our dark kingdom beyond the chapel walls.
the old reel is torn, but we've fast-forwarded what we could parse
of the digital reconstruction—a tower narrative borne

of someone else's apathy & only slightly leaning. too many ways
I could tell this story, i know, but never enough light to spill over
the uncertainties. in our haste to redefine, do we become

what ails us? from the edge of the painted wood, coyotes
skirt the line on hind-legs, bile-stained petticoats fanning behind
them in tatters, like ribbons of so much flesh. & then the deer,

trailing ostensibly behind, their wide-wet eyes like cilian murphy's eyes.
spines bowed so low that antlers knuckle the ground in supplication
or search of pity, the soil a suckling mouth that reaches up to grasp

at bone, blood. like night they come, lunging through the trees
until the foliage shakes with sound. every soft & vicious thing that has ever
trampled death—zooming out—a dreadful horde of howl & writhe—

vultures with their hooded faces, the litters of red-black flies tendriling
above their bulbous heads like halos—

—but the pond. *here*. where light hits a drowned man's magnolia
& from one terrible angle, seems to be swallowed forever. one,
by one, by one—purging itself, the forest, until the clearing is swollen

with improbabilities, their hook-sharp mouths, & I am only naked,
paunched belly retreating as i stoop over the edge of the blue-black mirror,
searching for my cousin, the ghost that left me all these teeth.

Exhibit One.

i cannot speak to you without first wrapping my hair around my body like mosquito netting, & i worry that had you known that before i invited you out, you would not have come. my purse is a noose around the swan's bend of my neck. we stand in the middle of the Alienation & Isolation exhibit with our backs to the wall, trying not to think about what that means. a technicolored horde surrounds us, & the corners of every

mouth are flecked with kaleidoscopic spit; that, or the first of too many cocktails. Egon Schiele, his many muted self-reflections. all of your loves within arms reach. my teeth keep catching on the bend of your elbow whenever you move to roll your sleeves up, or down, which is too many times to count. i wonder if you've guessed that i know that it tastes like salt. most of my thoughts were planted beforehand by others, braided into these

yawning plaits that drag, sepulchral, on the checkered tiles—*for security purposes, of course*. like most things, i don't want you to know that about me. a passing guard looks through us, through the paintings, bends the light away so that he can appear in the next room. i warn you against getting close; my scalp has been known to bite. your collar is too tight. fingers stretch up from the floor like hungry weeds, whispering

through the tile. after one cacophonous shattering of that terrible, self-inflicted silence by the other guests, you turn to me, mouth silvering, to chant in some ursine language i cannot translate. whiskers ruffled, i stare back at you with my black hole eyes until you switch to common.

***this installation is cool.
illusions. you know.***

what about them?

***well. maybe that they make us into different
people. or that we aren't really here. it's more
fine than i thought it would be. i like it.***

i can't tell if you really mean that or not.

i do.

why?

*sometimes it feels good to not exist.
or, like. to be eaten alive.*

yeah? sometimes. when you can turn it on & off.

the exhibit moves around us, sculptures warping away from their mantles & into the arms of starry-eyed patrons. on the other side of the room, a young child clasps hands with a throbbing gray mass & is, for lack of a better term, lit up; their parents watch on in shameless awe. we are close enough now for our arms to touch through my hair. the whole of me is an exposed nerve.

When you move next to pull your sleeve down, again, it catches against my fur.
like a robin clipped mid-flight,

i tremble.

BREANNA.

on the dance floor, she throws ass
like an arc of golden light. hips harpooning
a whirlwind of sweat & summer around us,
even in the darkest room. when it is too hot
to breathe through the smog, her blowout
bullied into submission by the tongues of men,
their murdersongs, the bitch bounces back
impossibly—she, halo-headed Judith,

—leaping,—

from the mouth of Holofernes to deliver
a mutinous sermon to all god's darker children.
under blacklight, we miracle & burst. O,
Muse! harbinger of mudslide & rain, patron saint
of the electric slide. i look to you & forget
my breath. how could I have witnessed the hands
of god in motion, the tender curve of the

breast a clipped wing in the palm
of your linen tanktop, & remained still?
the room, running black with ash, or smoke,
or secrecy. us, arms linked like irish twins
mothered by the same wet-eyed moon.
black skin runs blue. thighs crash & break

untethered, as if by sweat-soaked afterthought
to let the night pour in.

KYLE.

the boy with hands like catcher's mitts faces two whole blunts
before he has the courage to surrender to me. straddling
a backwards chair, he watches me flick ash into a flowerpot
while all the light in the room pools under my eyes.
he says, i want to tell you a story. says it so quietly i cannot see
what is dark & sprouting in the sinkhole behind his teeth.
i am too busy playing magician, making the tiny gray molecules clench
& wink, so when i say *ok*, it signals that i have opened my face
for the drinking, & in rushes a gift of black water
louder than any ode. he says,

i didn't mean to kill her. my skin balloons to fill the room,

blanketing his twisted mouth in shadows large enough
to cover the holes in this story where the grief eats through.
the stars, in shame, annul themselves, & in this apocalyptic fog
i make myself a boy like him, weedy, sprinting past the trees
in search of silt or something holier. three of them
in all, not including the girl, trotting dutifully paces behind
(—i can't remember her face, he says, so imagine instead
how it could be air there, rolling along her scalp,
above the pearls of her eyes—)

each of them a victor in his own right, but it is her who throws
a wrist & signals the clearing, that birth of their carriage
in 3pm light. & they are so beautiful, standing there, bleached
pink & full up with need. he says, it was my dad's car.
waves his hand & the truck's spartan blooming is magnified
in the eye like a peony. envision, if you will, four dirty teens
climbing into the mouth of the devil with bare feet. pay attention
to the swallowing. all that red in the teeth, & he doesn't have
to say anything more. we know where the story goes,
because someone else is at the helm & they are looking back

to shout at us. not me, or him. not even god, who sits in the branches
because he is tired of getting grass stains on his shoes. kyle kneels
on the swath of carpet between us, moving from the couch to the floor
again like a woman possessed by the weight of her knowing.

what was her name? the joint i carry a spear between my fingers.
me, leaning out of the fog to read his eyes, the notches
of his spine in prayer; were it not for the sound trickling in
from the kitchen, i would forget that there were others here,
that it is not just us. the lights are so low—or is it the dark lengthening,

stretching its spindly arms to tower above my head and render my
seeing implausible? the imprint of a cushion on kyle's cheek makes him younger
than my eyes need him to be. but rewind to the clearing, where the light
has been devoured by muck, and young bodies are ricocheting
through time with their skins blown off—or perhaps only
their senses. kyle's hands begin to shake, & so do the details.
i make off with my creative license how eve might the snake
in another story. it is as much my tale as his, so maybe i *am* the boy
hungried, stretching my hand out towards a pretty girl,
but she is not looking at me: rather, one of the many hims
in the passenger's seat with the orange on his collarbones,
in his philtrum rinsing him clean.

could it be kyle, with the hat backwards & the bright eating his face
away like acid? maybe. she looks so long & hard that she does not notice
the hot plastic rushing up to greet her mouth, her exposed cheek,
salted meat sabered away from the bone. maybe there was too much
dirt in the wheels. either way the truck is in air, is alive. look. see
how it devours clouds & women. see how the gloved fire catches
legs spread-eagled as if they mean, too, to kindle, & the logic of tears

cannot dissuade them. i say *i am a boy* but perhaps i am the air
that blankets her—only to avoid seeing the grief that paints
his face when he realizes that there is no way to staunch the red
erupting from her throat. blood spots the leather seats where her teeth
have planted themselves, & kyle envisions uprooting them
with giant hands, even his sight spotting, the red running black
through the gaps in his fingers where her flesh clumps, limp as a tern's
blue meat. & what about the other—*boys*, i say, so i can get it right later,

where did you put the rest of the bodies? but the words only live
this life in my head. i pose them to sit kinder in the mouth
when i speak, but even still it eats at him. i watch kyle move
& be moved by his mouth, feel the commensurate dread as spit,

tired of this dancing, settles at the corners of his lips.
he says, i don't know. i think. i know we left the truck
in the field because. the wheels wouldn't move we couldn't

get them to go i think. in the trees. blake hid the body in the trees
& we couldn't get it down. *her* down. she was just air. we didn't
have enough fingers to hold her. remembering this,
he holds his hands out in front of his face like they are wide
enough to net the past through. *drain the black water so i can see
everything through the holes*, i want to say, but kyle is too high to speak
now, his freckled back to the door and his eyes tracking the moon's

waning paleness—like someone who has lost
their lover in it, like someone still looking for their shape
in every incoherent, wet glimmer.