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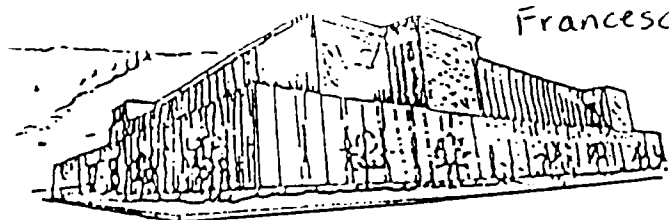
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PALACE LIFE

by

Francesca M. Abbate
B.A., Beloit College, 1990

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
University of Montana
1995

Approved by


Chairman, Board of Examiners


Dean, Graduate School

May 2, 1995
Date

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Thanks to my family-- my mother, my father, my Aunt Zoie, and my grandparents, who are always here. Thanks to my friends, my workshop peers and teachers--especially Greg Pape, Mark Levine, and Patricia Goedicke. Thanks to Lila for her all her kindnesses, and thanks to Robert, who helps make me real. And thanks to Missoula, last but certainly not least.

"Making art in America is about saving one's soul."
-Charles Simic

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On Location

There's some question as to whether we'll make it
to the next town. Time's running out.
There's so much white space
yet to cover. Me, I'm hoping. I unlock my suitcase,
set the jar on one night stand
and the gun tied with the red ribbon
on the other. The thing in the jar has scales

like a butterfly's, shingles, indigo hinges.
There must be pollen in its wings because the glass clouds
when I shake it. I fill the plastic cup with water
and set it next to the gun and my last two aspirin.
Tonight I had red meat for dinner again.
I held the plate right under my mouth. I'm getting sick
of the maintenance.

Was yesterday the motel with the neon
parrot? This time I put the ice bucket in the center
of the table. There's a blue shed on the other side
of the sliding glass door. I can hear the man
with the guitar lying across his belly chanting
and the cracked breath of a cracked flute
being played near the fire. What's in the air

that makes it hurt my ears? About the ghost town--
I made it all up: the running water,
the strong box, the rope tricks.
Where do the buildings go?
What about the sheriff and his fresh horses?
Dirt, blood, water-- it was all props. The hard part

wasn't leaving. I took the red boots with the black
and silver tips. They'll go well
with a foot rail, a pack of cigarettes.
Am I what I ask for? I have trouble sleeping.
Tonight I hold my hands over my face
and count off the birds I've shot.
They're the last things whose weight I remember.

I: What We Believe

"We are happy in our way of life.
It doesn't make much sense to others. We sit about,
Read, and are restless. Occasionally it becomes time
To lower the dark shade over it all."

-John Ashbery

Opera

From this height objects acquire a certain resonance, like the man
in black with the black suitcase who makes a path through the shallow
leaves. Last night I dreamed about the fence again, the barbed wire
border, the rough stakes. My shirt pocket hung

by threads. When the wind dies I can smell the dill
rising from the garden. The staircase crosses twice again above me--
the wood reminds me of violins, of the word 'tier',
the term 'mathematical constructions'. I listen to the radio

too much these days. It's making me suspicious. Is this a program
broadcasting somewhere? Home? I think they can hear me
in the silos, in the crow with the split tongue who could talk better
than a parrot. I think they can hear me in the room with the checked floor

where I left my camera. Is there a basement glow coming
from between my lips? For dinner I eat steak off my mother's blue
china. The girls from the big house turn up their car stereo and dance
in the alley. I unstick fork tines from each other

and stack the forks neatly on their backs. I paint my nails
red and hold my hands out the window.
The rain hurts my wrists.
Isn't this all an opera? Even the echo? Even the midwest?

Poem for Duchamp

I asked the rocks why the leaves
lay cupped on their backs as if
they were hands. Marcel, the leaves
are hands. I didn't mean

to scare you. The green box
on my lap ticks
a little against my palms.
I'll hold it all the way

to Wyatt. Here's a riddle--
half of me
knows the physics of chance,
the way half of me

is on this train. I asked the rocks
which half while Patrick and I
cut the deck against each other.
My cards came up black-- Queen of Crows,

Queen of Ravines, the worst luck
suits. At dusk I watched children
rise from ditches on either
side of the tracks. I asked the rocks

where I'd run out of questions.
There were never any
children. I mistook a few
pale columns of moths for their

bottle-rack necks. When we get closer,
Patrick and I stand guard
in front of the large glass door
and watch for the armory.

I'm his bride, then I'm his fresh
widow. Marcel, I am not
speaking in metaphors.
The envelope is full of instructions

written on white bits of paper.
The paper is too small to unravel.

Body Double

I opened the paper bag. So much blue thread
 spilled across my lap. It's hard to separate things
 in the dark. Help hasn't arrived yet.
 Where did the body in the mirror go? The shards

spilled across my lap. It's hard to separate things
 like the fear of God from the fear of his absence.
 Where did the body in the mirror go? The shards?
 I urged her not to interfere, but she came

like the fear of God. From his absence,
 I knew the puppet chorus had decided against us.
 I urged her not to interfere, but she came--
 her horse was running towards me. And

I knew the puppet chorus had decided against us.
 I watched the fire from the clock tower and ate shortbread.
 The horse was running towards me. And then
 My mother's twin walked out of the ruin.

I watched the fire from the clock tower and ate shortbread--
 listen, consider being a novice soldier.
 My mother's twin walked out of the ruin in a
 Blue shirt. The message warned not to

Listen. Consider being an novice soldier:
 I couldn't stop thinking of glass or the
 Blue shirt. The message warned not to.
 It's difficult not to second guess myself--

I couldn't stop thinking of glass or the way
 I opened the paper bag. So much blue thread.
 It's difficult not to second guess myself
 In the dark. Help hasn't arrived yet.

Sofia

October. October. I pick seeds from a dead
sunflower and sew them in a white cloth.
I take a room across the street from Holy
Redeemer Hospital, perform the necessary
rituals-- *acua a sale, acua a sangue.*
It's hard to get out of the corners. My hands

are learning how to sign to each other
while I sleep. They've started talking to me.
Is this the right town? Are you sure?
Today they ask the name of the horned fish
that growls when you hold it.
I'm afraid they want presents. At noon,
one holds a wineglass to my temple
while the other pounds the telephone receiver
against the door. The voice says: *Heaven*
is the inverse of dirt. The voice says
Number, please. Grandmother? No answer. They're so

busy at the front desk. Today is Dia de los Manos.
My hands build a six-tiered cake and balance
a statue of St. Vitus on top. The whole thing
is plaster. Aren't I a woman? What about the spangle,
the interchangeable brides? What about sleep--
blanched linen, smooth and lavendered?
I sit in my monogrammed hotel bathrobe

and twist my hair. Already I've forgotten
the bell boy's name. Outside, helicopters
disappear in the forest, under the water under
the shrubs. Night turns the windows blue and chills
the walls. I can hear music coming from the lounge
downstairs and it sounds nothing
like whiskey. My hands are sewing buttons to the tablecloth.
They want me to model. *Home is the house*
under the house they tell me. One of them cuts the lamp cord
in two with the nailclippers.

What We Believe

one

A parrot appears in the right corner
of the box, its head tucked
under one red wing. We can't
get close enough to feed it. Is this
the absence of God?

two

This is not our box. Where
are the cardboard windows, the crayon
doors? This is grass and eight dark
creases. We make offerings to God. We say we have
forgotten the names of other boxes.

three

We watch a staircase grow inside the box, with glass
rails, and a glass ceiling. Francesca says
it is the blue slide in the garden. Lemuel
says *God, but what
we believe gets closer to us.*

four

God is silent. The grass turns dry and
odorless. Some forget
where the box begins. Box, sky, grass, wind.
What is behind the box? What is before it?

five

We cut ourselves on the box's
corners. Someone finds Anastasia's
thumb in Corsica.

six

God comes to Sara in the shape of a hammer.
Let be be finale of seem.
The box rings, the box

seven

takes the call. Jason holds two white
cups to the ground. It is as jealous as our
God, it says. There is no other box
beside it.

eight

We hitch the box to our best horse and drive
it into the river. There are guards posted
at each of our three bridges. My god,
it's dark. Francesca wants to know the sound
a glass box makes in black waters.

Titanium Lake

Tonight's eight o'clock broadcast
is Mariachi Hour. We spread the blanket
tight over the sand, pin the corners with a few
paper umbrellas. Andromeda presses one ear
to the radio's torn screen, her lips
trembling. I know her city: pale stone, black
streets. An alarm clock on each white windowsill.
Some nights she lets me brush her hair. I find
a few blue filaments netted in the crooks
of my fingers. Andromeda, I'm on to you.
I kneel on the hem of my checked dress, the teapot
warm between my palms. This time of year,
the wind off the lake smells like salt. Red dragonflies
graze the weeds. Andromeda and I split what's left
of the pistachio cake. She passes me a napkin
and licks her fingers. She wants to know who

lives in the salt box houses on the other side
of the gate, the ones with the geranium
on each step. Tonight, the sky glows in the water.
The sand turns black by degrees. Andromeda balances
a paper umbrella on one fingertip. I go for kindling.
When I get back, I brush sand from the bottoms
of her feet, the bridge of her nose.

Dawn. More wood. Shelter means what we bring
in our hands is never enough.

Lot's Wife

1

This is how the summers go, in the ecstatic reach
of the sunflower, the broad orange that grins the lost
round oh's of the season, their coarse green stems raw
against white garages or leaning out from ditches
like women just got up to say goodbye

2

From across the caught fire of this autumn street
you are a stranger, you and the man who is always
on the corner with his bible, his doomsday lips.
Why question the innocent? All week-end
you have been talking about Lot's wife
how she must have led them out
of the city. You keep asking me how Lot
didn't look back, how he kept on walking. It's the old
voices again; winter, which is the color of salt,
crying don't leave me, don't go anywhere I can't.

3

We've taken the rocking chair out to the porch,
cups of coffee, a few books. The four o'clock hand
of the sun scuffles behind my ear, one rough
thumb on my neck, a beat like wings
lingering on the pulse of my skin.
Close your eyes.
I want to say this sad thing outloud, that last night
you were a coat I could wear, a coat whose tag read:
Girl, it's bad luck to wish for a name you can't go out in.

4

I assure you,
we'll be the end of us yet.
I don't know whose
eye you are looking for in the storm, only
that you keep going into it
with your just short of hopeful
hands and your own eyes averted. Listen,
I would gather all of July if I could, the white
scratch clouds, the pollen, their bees,
the dragonflies
and smooth it up on the window of a train
so that we could travel in one sustaining note
of blue passage. This light, which is already
echo, is the last good light of the season.

Plain Distance

Already we've brought the canoe
to the river and back again,
floated over gold and black rocks
in the shallows, and climbed three
miles to the lookout, where, instead
of watching two hawks circling
the canyon's breadth, we measure
the space between them, measure of
our own separateness, which makes
me think I have lost the word
soul in a language of pure fact,
of apprehension-- such a plain
distance between the lake above us
and the town below, a blind knot
of windows, of red leaves falling--
the sky over the far mountains
so dark now I wonder if even
the stars have lost their direction,
and I am not at all surprised
when my friend holds both her hands up
in front of her face and tells me
they are like two birds calling
to each other from glass cages.

The Deaths of Vampires

I.

Albert sits at the foot of the bed with a switchblade, gouging the excess polish from the pattern stamped in his wingtips. My switchblade. You have to press the silver button on its side and pull the blade out with your fingernail. This is Swamp Angel Road. It seems nothing is working. Last night helicopters grazed the roof on their way to the hospital and the gravel in the alley shone blue in the rain. For hours I sat on the porch under the arch that looks vaguely Arabic watching a man who leaned against the empty dumpster below me, hiccuping.

Nor could Albert sleep. Poor Albert! When he's done with his shoes he stretches out on the floor, hands tucked under his chin, one ear cocked toward the train tracks, toward the crash of cars linking up, their occasional whistle. I try to comfort him. I try to describe what our new lives will be like, but it's difficult. He wants me to have a map. He wants me to know if the bird song sounds any different in the morning.

II.

It's dusk when Manuel arrives with our masks. Already the yellow schoolbuses are pulling up to the curbs around the church. Already the villagers are building fires in the streets. What is "having", really? With our masks on I can hardly tell the difference. The eyeholes are cut to match the shape of our eyes, and the lips are parted the same fraction they part when we breathe. Only the glossy apples of our cheeks glow in the dim light.

In the streets, a pale sky, a sky full of smoke. Elbows in our chests, glances of faces white with paint, of feathered hats, of torches. No-one looks at us. Albert shouts in my ear. He says he feels as if he's fallen into a mirror, as if he's looking out past his face to the backdrop which is the world. I think I know what he feels.

III.

Whose dream is this? When we crest the hill that borders our town, the city rises up from the ground, still red at its roots, pulsing. Albert thinks our eyesight has grown fantastic. He says it's New York, or Chicago, that he has been both places, that the skylines are similar.

He's wrong and he knows it. This is our city. City of familiars, city where the true condition of our lives is made known to us. I have always recognized this landscape. And it is not so difficult, really, to pass the children begging at the border, although we hold our hands over our mouths until their thin figures have grown so sharp they disappear behind us.

Sheridan Road

Today mist hangs over the lake, just past the rocks
 at the sand's boundary. Seagulls edge the yellow benches.
 In the diner, I unpack the things I've brought
 from my visit with the faith healer:
 the empty bottle of Springtime Soda, the blue-
 eyed marble, the starfish with four limbs which is the hand
 of a mourner. I unfold a napkin and draw one line
 after another until I have a tree

like a blown dandelion, its branches studded
 with fat sparrows. At the grill, the cook
 takes two eggs from a hanging wire basket and breaks them
 in one hand. I could think of the resiliency of belief, now.
 I could think of the idea of God--someone who knows
 the relation of each to each, someone
 who is a ceaseless finding. Mist is flooding

Sheridan Road. Pigeons drop from the roofs, from the top
 rungs of trees, and disappear in the whiteness. I take a new
 napkin and draw one line across it, and a second, jagged, higher
 up. I name the horizon *hope and distance*, the mountains
time passing over us. Between them
 I draw a house: smoke threading from the chimney, the snow
 blue at dusk. This is mercy.
 In the woods past the back porch, I catch the red glint
 of fish under the pond's murk, and too, the gilt of long-
 drowned maple seeds turned gold. With my eyes shut I draw
 a few small bubbles rising to the surface.

II: Palace Life

"That world! These days it's all been erased and they've rolled it up
like a scroll and put it away somewhere. Yes, I can touch it with my fingers.
But where is it?"

-Denis Johnson

Wisconsin, December

"I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor"-- Roland Barthes

I want someone to photograph me
while I'm sleeping. I watch
John cross the field back
to his house, his left

shoulder sloped towards the ground
as if the bucket were heavy. I live
in the center of the clearing.
I forget that other houses exist, that they circle

the field, because the field's edge
goes off the color scale, the same
way the face loses its attentiveness
in the dark, loses its

animal properties-- fox
nose, squirrel eyes, the pale
rabbit underlip-- the way the face
becomes grain and bone. The pale

grass turns white
at the rim of the plain, gets lost in the snow
horizon. I can reach nothing
else in the mirror-- white

walls, the white figure
under the sheets, the white sheet pinned
to the bottom half of the window.
The face, and the face

asking where the body goes
in so much water.

A Winter's Tale

What we were thinking seemed important. The story itself
 Had nothing political to add except a pair of white pumps
 Laid demurely near the trash and mist
 Grazing the alleys in particulars impossible to distinguish.

The narrative lost itself, then, in the sand
 At the waterline, only to be tossed back to shore
 The next day, and the day after that. In the outskirts, the valley walls
 Collect their attenuated blues, and the sky turns conciliatory,

A faded yellow gathering its resources. This may take weeks
 To happen, though for all we know
 It has happened already, as though someone were sorting a pile
 Of beach glass, deliberating the effect of color

On such a frail landscape. In the next Chapter,
 The heroine concludes that even the grass
 Surrounding Cloth Hall looks soft and even,
 And soon her dresses

Are found in a locker at the old train station,
 Minus the rhinestone pin she'd taken to wearing on her collar,
 Which was nowhere in the neighboring streets,
 Nor in any stray pockets. Night gathered a few dim birds

To the rooftops, then--as if to say
 The idea of less drives us, sharpens a life consisting mainly
 Of stick-figure tableaux into such focus
 That we can track their every

Movement--the limbs skating around in the wind
 Like lost compasses, the hands flapping in sleep
 As though the bakeries had not yet shut down, and the citizens
 Of that country had something left of their lives to translate.

In the Ape House

Tonight a few birds rim the top
of the kiosk. If I squint, I can make the moon
look more solid. We call this valley
time making up for what it's lost already
or the blue divide. There are white
strips of paper looped in the tree
branches. I think they are pigeons.
I think the wind coming from the hills

behind the green shed tastes
like snow. Haven't I been dreaming
of the follies for months now?
The pink feathered head-dresses looking a bit dim
against the ice? All evening I've heard
rumors of faint music coming
from inside the compound. A boy
with blue hands sits on the curb
outside my gate, pulling threads

from his jacket. I pick a rock up
in my mouth and bank it against the wall
under the high window. Another. Everything
in its cage is smiling, the cats
are smiling, a soft chatter
comes from the door they keep
the monkeys behind.

Spells for Early Winter

one

The body is a town like this one,
so far from any other,
making such quiet choices.
Today the sky is grey backed
with white; the light just tips
the mountains, those good-hipped women
laid down and not going anywhere
soon. Birds open overhead
like a spasm of black umbrellas
coasting into rain. I keep thinking of winters
in a catalogue of cities, of snow
easing out the dug rows, the black-
yellow strips of Wisconsin fields.
The prairie got blank when it came,
the few trees stepped back white
into the pale of sky. We'd drive
for hours in those two colors, cupping cigarettes,
the heavy wool smell of the car's heater
and the cling of smoke
on our cold fingers.

two

I take my hands
try to show you how it is, how
the house came down last night
and I don't know the way
to put it together.
This morning, done washing the floors
I opened one palm down on the wood
and waited for the light to reach me.
When it did my hand was full of wet
and the sun slipping around on my knuckles,
those five tough stars.
I hate all this, hate how life comes
at me some days the way children round
a corner running so hard the wind
might take them for birds about to come apart
and all in the shape of white, of flurry.

three

Take the child out of the house.
 Bury him in the field. Cross
 the ground with the sole of your shoe
 twice, toe to heel. Say:
 I love nothing so much as this good blood
 in the bowl of my belly, this bowl with one eye
 on the ache of the saw. Go inside.
 Take all the bottles and tip them
 bottom up from the lips of the drains
 until they've wound down or dried.
 Hook the spit from your mouth
 with one finger.
 The rain falls irrational, still
 and on all night.
 Now try love without thinking of knives.

four

Night lays fat in this house, turns the moon-glanced
 windowsil to chalk. I can feel the step-ladder
 of my ribs rising in me, this aggregate of bones
 and thin chance. Listen, I've forgotten how we make
 the same gestures over new each time.
 I've forgotten what my hands mean except lately
 they are full of the sound of dark, the hollow pulled
 from a drum. I wish you would stop teaching
 me to myself. I wish I could lay my arms out
 on the kitchen table and stretch the cut-me lines
 of my wrists out to face you
 because I am sick of these worst sins.
 Alone, the mirror says *Woman, I still
 call you mine.* I don't know who to believe.
 I don't know which one of us learns.

Winter Garden

I

Marina wants her shoes laced tighter. Her pant legs are wet and the mud from her cuffs comes off black on my fingers. She dims the kitchen light and backs away from me, a lit blue tip match between her teeth.

Today is my birthday.

Radio dials glow in every room, faint as the moths we've killed in the bathtub. Outside the boys are juggling candles. They've left their half of the cake in a snowbank, and a black bird with gold eyes makes tracks in the frosting. White sky, white smoke, white paper bushes.

I take a pinch of snow from the windowsil and tuck it under each eyelid. I take a pinch of snow from the windowsil. We have such a hard time getting out of our cots in the morning.

II

Every day the letters come addressed to the house. We can't decipher them. We sit in our high-backed chairs and pass the envelopes. I think we're getting lazier. Yesterday Percy lost the key to the music box. We're still waiting for the batteries to run down, for the skater to stop twirling across the mirror. I can hear the music in every corner of the house and it sounds like the blue glass from the blue vase that I'm saving in my pocket.

III

We can't see the house from the winter garden. I sneak by the boys in the backyard and crawl under the low hedge that borders our property. There are still fish in the river. I think I can hear them. They sound darker than the ice, darker than the river. I'm getting near the surface when my watch face turns silver. I twist it back and forth but I can't see past the frost to the numbers. The clouds over the sun go red. My hands get red. I keep digging.

IV

Tonight it's my turn to pick the game. I line the gray folding chairs up single file facing the front door. We sit as still as we can, right hands folded over the left, the girls in their white gloves and short net veils.

What is the word for *not having gone far enough*?

What is the word for *both feet on the floor*?

Palace Life

The sun looms white behind white clouds, orb the size
Of a thumbprint. Semele says she likes this weather,
Because it seems there's somewhere else to get to, like adding
A room onto a house. The day she came

We ate the last of the corn at the kitchen table. The flesh
Tasted sweet blue, milky. Today, I let her take pictures
Of the rooms, of the Chinese umbrella, of the doll
In the glass box who still blinks when you tip her.
The flash is blinding. In the hallway, I wind up
The mechanical bird in the gold cage my mother brought
From Italy. The bird pirouettes and chirps, its hard beak

Snapping. At dusk, we tour the grounds.
I point out a white cat digging in some bushes,
And Semele takes a picture of it, takes another of the power lines
That cross over us near the gazebo. "Desire
Is a compass," she says. "Think of Persephone, think
Of Psyche, falling asleep in front of the open casket."
I get lost in the middle of her story, somewhere past
The part about beauty, past the line "We took turns standing

In the redwood." Or was that my story? It's been snowing for days.
Under the porch light Semele tips back her head and says
It's like being at the bottom of a river, watching stars pass. What's left
To talk about but time? Semele and I sit on the swing
And watch the last skater circling the pond. There is the sound
Of her blades carrying across the ice, then nothing.
There is the sound of her blades, and then night's
Perfect silence, night's cold astronomies, as she steps past
The frozen shallows into snow.

This Far North

I cross the bridge, map of the city under this one
cupped in palm like a pocket mirror. I am trying not to think

of the lake below me, or the shadows of pigeons diving
under my feet, under the water. I take the north staircase

down to the shore. It's just me in park, the smell of night
grass, the smell of both lakes in my hair. It's that time

of year again, suddenly, which is the way winter rises.
The crickets slow under the trees. The last light holds close

to the ground, the last girl on the bridge stops chanting
about the spider and the drain. The only sound

is the sound of my breath, the white spaces of my lips,
my tongue, my palate. Even a simple landscape

can consume us. I start home, twisting the wet braid
on my shoulder, stooping to pick up the remains--

sleeve of a striped shirt, seed packet of snap peas, another
of wild flowers. By the time I get there, everything has turned

the same stone blue, even my hand on the porch
holding the blue slip of paper. I sleep as long as the sky,

which stays pale beyond a point of reference.
This far north, the air smells like glass. It takes hours

to find the seam in the white curtains. Below me the ice smokes,
trails rising and floating past the brick periphery of the window.

Already it's time to start calling them back-- the lake first,

and then the girl, her umbrella backed toward the sun,
her raincoat dragging behind her, leaving strange tracks in the sand.

Four Poems

Farm

Night is the quiet interval of bird's
buried heads, their wings half-hearts
and blacker, strung on long wires
in a sleeping country. I leave my boots
on the stone porch facing home.
The June bugs are heavy
drunks too tired to get past the screen.

Even my hands are sunburned.

Stop

I was saying something.
It was on my hands like water. Outside,
the sky's been turned up
all the way to white, white
as the spit-lines where the creek
catches and drags on stone. The wind
blows the center of a pink rose
wide and casual near the water.
Tell me what I can't remember.

Letter

No- one tells any stories over and over.
The marquee near my house reads **LOVERS**
in block red letters. I think I have made them.
I think I have built the alphabet because it is more
familiar than anything I've done.
When I pass the theater I say to myself:
This is how men are this is how women are and
*In the country of winter every marquee reads **LOVERS**.*
I can see them passing, the peculiar cast of each
set of shoulders and the eyes heading
up past the yellow sign, into the palm
of night, the grave moon set there. Everyone's
fucking everyone else and it keeps getting colder.

Green

There are checked curtains in the kitchen and I sleep
at the table. I am dreaming I put my hands
flat on your chest, thumb and forefinger breaching
each nipple. I am dreaming of kites I can't pull down,
then I wake up working the field again, only
it's mine. The house smells green. The doors are gone
and the sun comes so low the cat jumps its tracks.
Everyone is happy as matches.
I step out into morning and everywhere
the petty kindness of grass.

III: Eden Hotel

"Rose Castle. Joseph Cornell, 1945.
Box Construction: wood, glass, mirrors, painted branches,
printed paper, painted wood, and glitter."

Crumbs

My mother has a cup and saucer face.
 She takes a spoon from the dishrack,
 presses its backside to her forehead and says:

Honey, count to ten.

From the coach house I can see just
 the tips of the lemon trees, and behind them,
 the wind pushing a passage of grey hills
 further into the distance.

In the house, someone is cooking breakfast.
 I run my thumb over the green side
 of a lemon and hear egg shells crack,

the coffee maker hiss. Was it just last night
 that I wrote the boy's name on a piece of paper
 and let it fall to the grass?

I hung Chinese lanterns from the gutter
 over my window-- now they brush
 against the house, pink and pale blue
 and mint green. I take a piece of stale bread
 and rip it to bits for the birds in our garden,
 watch the little ones struggle to fly
 with their thumbnail wings. Up here, the trains
 sound from two directions at once, part
 call, part echo: after-noon means the sky
 is dark with grass. I go back

to the kitchen. I eat what's left of the bread
 and write how good it is. I count the words
 in my hands-- here, the word full, then:
 milk summer mosquito lemon. I add mouth
 to one palm, bread to the other. Now
 my mouth is a word in my hand
 and I put it to my lips.
 Now mouth, now bread. No-one's home yet.
 I finish dinner and sit on the back step

unti I hear my mother say
Tell me something. She's standing
in the corner of the kitchen,
a plate in each out-stretched hand.
I kick moths up from the grass, think:
smoke, horizon. My ankles itch.
When she's gone, I go to the garage,
take the two good ladders
and lay them crossways on the front lawn,
white wood looking out on green grass.
I step back towards the house.
The hills turn blue, then small.
I can't believe how small the hills get.

April

April. I lie on my back and watch
the girls on the red bicycles
with the red and white baskets
pedal by, their wheels casting
small lights in the grass.
Is it noon yet? There are a few
kites floating at the horizon
between the stone church
and the clock tower. The bench
under the tree is still cold.
If I squint, I can see past the yellow
hills to the blue wall.
I put my hands around my knees
and squeeze until my fingertips meet.
Is the house with the pink
porch swing something I've
taught myself or something
I learned? I don't know how
how those girls do it. There's glass
in the air if you go high enough.
It gets hard to breathe. I say the names
of cities to myself while I watch.
In San Francisco the buildings have wrought
iron doors and some of the streets
aren't paved. There are orange trees
in the gardens. My second
wish? Only to go on wanting.
Yesterday a boy in a red hat climbed
the brick wall and laughed
at me because I can't talk. Is the sun
always flashing? I have one wish left.
I roll over on my belly
and pick flecks of grass
from my fingernails. Everything
has a green cast.

Francesca Abbate

for Lila

I

Today is almost summer. Lila and I drive ten miles
 out of town to play keno at the all-night truck stop.
 At the desk, a man in a pinstripe shirt trades us gold
 tokens for our coins. Lila puts one in her purse
 and one in my back pocket. She asks me if we're safe yet.
 The machines against the walls light up.
 The numbers change.

II

A few leaves cluster in the tree branches, a few
 clothespins hang staggered on the wire
 running from the back porch to the lawn.
 Lila sits at the picnic table with a tin ashtray
 and a book. I fold pieces of paper
 into boxes and arrange them by size. I consider
 the term *deliberate topiary*. I consider Lila
 in the horse's eye this afternoon, after we'd hiked
 up to the plateau. Is there a half-language of want?
 A way to measure the dimensions of sky
 in a horse's head? There are a few hours of light left.

III

The wind picks up, blows the blue tarp
 over the rabbit cages against the house next door.
 Lila leaves to turn the porch lights on
 and won't come out of the kitchen.
 I can't move. I'm thinking of the numbers again.
 I'm thinking of a word
 which would mean both *topography* and *God*.
 Director? The lights shine on the wet slats
 of the fence like spotlights. I wipe rain
 off my neck, off my forearms.
 It takes both hands to find my face in the dark.

Keeping Time

Sweet sixteen. Luis takes me
to the symphony, points out amber
lights ringing the marquee, lanterns
hung from the stone arches

of Orchestra Hall. A handkerchief tips
his black pocket. I'm in green, a clutch
of white flowers tickling my wrist.
I pull stray threads from his suit

while we wait in line, pull the satin
straps of my dress up but they keep
slipping. No-one talks. It's summer, again.
Spiderwebs blow loose in the trees

behind us. I tell Luis it's good luck
to walk through them, but he calls it
superstition. The streets shine
tonight, so many black apertures. In the distance,

Lake Michigan glows, all slate water and fog.
The crowd moves us in. I come to myself
in the auditorium, a room full
of strangers. Such silence

when the conductor raises his arm--
the musician's hands poised
over flute, violin, timpani.
Luis says dreams

are the measure of our souls.
In front of us a woman in a black dress
fans herself with the program, the white page
fluttering like the blur and snap
of a bird crossing an open window.

At the first beat, I take his hand
and trace the small, white
bones of his knuckles.

This Day

The fog comes fast over the hills, settles in the black grass. I finish eating breakfast. Push the blue plate far across the table. I can't ignore the sound of water anymore, the rain, the taps dripping in the kitchen. What is the first story of the body? The first word?

Even the piano keys are cold to the touch. I dust them off with the hem of my shirt and shut the three windows. When Luis left, I started drawing oceans. I drew waves the way children do, one line rising, falling back. Nights I'd practice the minor scales, remembering to pretend

there were rubber balls cupped in my hands. Today the wind knocked over the chicken wire fence Luis built to keep the dogs out of the garden. He used to say wind made music sound bigger. Last summer he built me a cucumber boat with a lettuce sail and two radish canons. For Christmas,

a paper bull and a pen woven from floss and toothpicks. He was good with his hands. When it stops raining I walk to the old train station. I sit on the steps between the dark places where the wood's rotted through. The steps smell like mildew. They slip under my palms. I try not to think

of Luis, or the way my front door faces my back door exactly. I try not to think of the day after this day, or the way the light turns the platform green. Do the faces of our gods recognize us? No silence. Something in my throat clicks when I swallow.

Here Come the Tigers

From the fairgrounds, we can see a gray veil of rain
 over the south hills and a patch of sky opening further to the left,
 which seems to take a small plane with it. Elizabeth wants to know
 what the black grasses look like from there, if the pilot can see us
 waving. She makes me stop to watch a man with a pole lifting

the words "Blood Drive" letter by letter from the sign
 above the gate. We've come early, to get a good view,
 although I would rather not see the hoop tricks, or stand so close
 to the ringmaster that the past days feel like a story I'm telling,
 beginning with the new shirt I unpinned yesterday morning

whose white sleeves fell toward the floor. At work, I heard
 the train before it passed below the factory windows, bright
 against the lake, and so slow I thought I could see the grave hulk
 of the elephants swaying in their gold cars. Elizabeth, I know not
 what I know. Last night, I dreamed I was a girl dreaming

of bees. I caught the smallest in my boxed hands and carried it home,
 its fur tickling my palms. The bee looked like amber, like two drops
 of amber with black net wings. I had my face in the dream,
 but I didn't recognize it. I had these hands, but they smelled like the steel
 chains of playground swings. Elizabeth, I suspect
 the beauty of names precedes us, the way the clock tower's bells

arrive from a late distance, the way the band
 sounds far away and cold, as if struggling against this infinitely
 small moment. Who among us isn't an infidel? Who among us hasn't
 been unfaithful to practice of belief? Before the act begins
 I would like to say something about the tigers, about the body
 of their sorrow--the flat copper eyes, the low-slung backs, the steam

rising from their great mouths in the mist. It could be anyone's
 turn next: mine, the ringmaster's, even the young girl's--the one behind
 us who keeps whispering *here come the tigers*. Elizabeth, no-one
 saves us. In the sudden rain the crowd's umbrellas spring open
 in unison, an assumption of birds, a black crowding. Only the dogs
 at the crowd's edge shiver a little in the rain, in their sleep.

Eden Hotel

"The images Cornell has in his boxes partake of both dream and reality, and of something else that doesn't have a name. They tempt the viewer in two opposite directions. One is to look and admire the elegance . . . of the composition, and the other is to make up stories about what one sees."

-Charles Simic, Dime Store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell

After the rain, the trees leading into the park glint like chandeliers. Adam and I follow the shadows their limbs cast, our arms stretched for balance. We play Dragons in the Waters. We pretend to play tag. When we get to the right spot, I lie belly-down in the damp grass while Adam takes the cardboard theater from its box. The red curtains shimmer as I open them. The paper balcony sways a little

in my breath. I can't help thinking of our first week-- how I called tomorrow *the day after this day*, how I called the quartet in the lounge *sadness playing*. Since then I have gotten so good with the language that Adam has a hard time keeping up. He says I am a world for which there is no map. He says

I'm dangerous. For today's play I am wearing my white dress and my brand new glasses. The wet lenses remind me of the tiny squares of rain that catch in our screen window. Adam hands me a stack of cardboard actors and a paper backdrop-- the palace in winter, black

forests rising up around it. If I look closely I can see a pigeon on the roof, can make out its ash colored feathers, its oilslick neck. The sky between the branches is the color of frosting-- a pale blue nearing night. It is the same color as our sky. During the second act, Adam thinks he hears a wolf cry coming from the edge of the park, where the trees are on fire

in the last sun. I say they are like gold fish darting
back and forth at the horizon. On our way back,
Adam tells me stories about New Zealand, about the green valleys,
about the toy sheep set in the green hills. We stop
at the bridge and watch the still surface of the river

which seems to float above itself, the way light
floats above silk. There is only one
message for us at the front desk, the one I keep
leaving him. I love you so much, it reads,

that for you I have translated the secret name of this hotel.
It is choosing to stay. It is the burden of our regret.

Other Lives

This morning, the sun throws the pattern of the screen
in perfect squares on the windowsill. I wipe the table
off with my hands, pick at salt caught
in the fine creases of my palms. It is such clarity which makes

our mouths open and shut, such attendance to detail
that makes us forget nuance, how the bare trees

sound in the plains. I open the book to the photo
of the temple, trace the outline of the gold scaled roof,

the gold doors, count the birds skirting up from the chimneys.
I'm remembering the girl who spent days at the library,

thumbing through the book on the podium, her hair
a cave her face hid in.

She thinks someone's watching her from the stacks,
she thinks someone's watching from the parking lot, where snow

moves over the ice like sand. In this experiment,
there is no train, no candle, nothing at all relative. I look up

from my book into the same blank page, a sky made of eggshells.
Outside, blue flies hover in the mint, in the onion's white-tipped

stalks. Am I the point I've been trying to make? When I step
into the grass, I cast the same long shadow as the trees.