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A Looking of Another

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A Looking of Another

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by Grace Caiazza

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Acknowledgements

To Mary, my friend, my mentor, for bringing me home (in every way)

To Weardseld, my fellow birds—*I will always knock on your door*

N. & N., for Rilke in the rain and Tolstoy at the hospital

To C., for being always and everywhere

To the swoon, who holds

To my family, who have circled it all and have encircled me

I love you all, would not have made it if

For FX

When I was so much younger, I would take off my shoes when I went to the museum. I was secretive and I was fearless. I did it because I like to feel cold marble, or, I guess, at our local museum, cold imitation, on my feet. After walking for a while I would find a painting that seemed like it was important. Not really a judgment on my part because I've never, especially then, had the knowledge to judge such things properly. But maybe from the painting's location (if it were apart from the rest) or from the lights that were pointed at it, or if I saw it on posters or banners on my way into the building, I might know. I would stand in front of it and try to figure out why it was important. I would stand with my head tilted, nodding in the way that meant something was being understood and appreciated.

If all of this failed and I could not understand why a painting was important I would look around me to check and see if anyone was watching and unlace my sneakers. The museums of my childhood homeland are largely unguarded, but onlookers hung around. I would lay my socks flat in front of my feet for easy access to slide back in if noticed, but seeing as I was still a child most people left my strange behavior to be managed by my mother. I would then stand rigid and feel the floor. I would drum on it with my toes as I adjusted to the cold. Staring at my skin for a little I would recognize what exactly I was made of and what exactly I was feeling, being made of.

The portrait of this particular memory, but perhaps instead just the first portrait I can recall, is that of a very fat woman. She was a patroness of the museum, the engorged wife of a country doctor. She had a pale, puckered face and a large spillover chest. I remember that her lips and dress were red.

The dress, barely containing her, had a gold rope twisted around the sleeves and stomach, scarcely visible from underneath her heave, the fat. Because of this there were black creases all over her body, places where she vanished. The artist had certainly attempted to depict the woman as youthful and elastic, but it was clear to me that he could not resist including a few shadows under her eyes—indicating for me the inability of artistic vision to supersede the power of what is given. On the flattened canvas, they appeared as dark pools. Her face then, seemed to be the surface of a poisonous and barren planet, glowing with an ill health that so strangely countered the plentitude of her body, collecting its dark bile in craters around the hillock curve of her chin.

But the bile was not what I was looking for. The bile was for the realm of the painter, a detail in the subject that is so unflattering or miniscule that a painter must first exaggerate it, and then turn it into a symbol so that the detail might be seen by the ordinary eye. I did not let it distract me from her. I instead tried to find the woman inside her pose, where she evaded the artist, where she ran away to. I found her in the splay of her thick fingers, their white casings being the perfect surface for the emergence of blood, pinkish blood, where it collected around her rings. Her fingers did not rest at her side, but pressed into it. Here she was, in the confinement of her body, with blood swelling in her hands, so alive, unlike the resting pools of black. As her palm pressed into her flesh she comforted herself by feeling the depth, the heat, the softness of her weight, her greatest pride and pressure.

When I looked up, the painting was important. I felt as though together we were pulling a very taut net. If anything, this felt like a pact. I understood her infinity and she understood my mortality, which made me seem like the stiff one, the inflexible. It was an

easy and mutual possession. We were equally incapable of holding our histories transparently, though this was more embarrassing for me. In this way I felt I truly traded something, I felt that she and I, in the preciousness of the moment, were accessible to one another. This, in a way that other people had never been accessible to me, especially as a child.

Her effect was disastrous. In our exchange she gave me not only the knowledge, but also the sensation of my body—I had never before known weight or color to be inside myself. She set in slowly, an illness. In the following days I would look in the mirror and lift up my eyelids, ball up the flesh from my thighs that was growing thick as I left childhood, finding a black cove or swelling pink patch in every place. Eventually, as I learned the operation of these phenomena I began to use them in my life for my own gain and pleasure. I learned to tilt my head down to make the darkness slide off my cheeks and onto my chin, to curl my toes as I stood, to create an organic feeling of tension and discomfort when I needed it. I learned through her not only the ways of forcing feeling, but also the ways of recognizing it. I was constantly new, either an invention or discovery. A lifelong of obsession with myself began. I had the feeling of knowing with absolute certainty who I was and what I could achieve. I would say I lived the first years of my true life under her reign, wonderful years wherein I prospered, excelled, became beautiful, tried to drown myself, lectured others on life, lost my virginity, forgot names, ate well.

This is how I have come to love art, and much else.

I have lost this type of looking.

I am undertaking this walk to attempt some kind of clarity. I will walk back and forth between the two portraits of Adele Bloch-Bauer. I had known the first Adele and had seen the second on accident. I asked a bystander if it was the same woman in each portrait and they replied that it was. I then imagined a white room, soothingly infinite, where they hung across from one another. In both versions of the portrait Adele is inseparable from her environment. She is a being born of symbols (golden eyes, small flowers) that seem to be both outside of her and from within her. They are within their own nature. The portraits are each within their own nature but share a body between them; they are divided by the straight back, the thin lips, the curved waist that together form a keystone. The portraits asked if I might move between them as a conduit so that they might communicate. I agreed.

I came to her vanished. But in the aftermath of her, I see that I have built another woman entirely, one who stands with me, made in the image and likeness of myself. I would like to know who this woman is. I feel her whole life as though it is my own, her thoughts and her fears, yet we are separated like these portraits. I must travel to her and come back again.

The speed of her formation and the state of completeness in which she arrived to me require me to be skeptical of her.

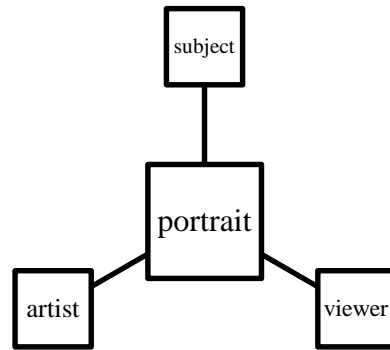
However, I believe her as if I have formed her myself, as if I had spent years forming her. Perhaps I have, and the paintings' power lay not in that they created belief in me, but in that they allowed me to recognize belief, which had been waiting, disguised as temperament and as circumstance, until the moment when belief became necessary for me to live. In the light of her, it was never so apparent to me that I existed as some sort of continuity. Although I still do not think as a continuity might.

In places that are not museums, everyone is allowed to be their second self, a flat self. To find yourself in these places is a constant forgetting. There were those of us who were never formed, who had never taken the time to create someone to hold inside ourselves. There were those of us who once were formed but had since shattered. I had shattered. Or rather, I want to say that I submerged. The physicality of the whole affair is confusing. What is important is that the weight of grief made shelter necessary, and I made my body that shelter. I became my body, the things it wore. I fed it to other people and I fed it to them restlessly.

I have always demanded of myself that if I cannot think then I should at least produce things. I must continue to move forward regardless of quality or honesty or sentimentality or void, or whether or not something feels important or necessary, or whether or not I am feeling anything at all. As I speak to you now, I want to assure you that I am feeling nothing apart from the success of a completed word or a finished sentence. My greatest joy is a single sentence of coherent meaning. My greatest joy is just preoccupation, to be occupied with anything that will have me, anything that I can keep down, digest.

Let it be known that Adele Bloch-Bauer was born with a disfigured small finger, so that the act of her pose is not so much one of absolution as it is unease abided for vanity's sake.

In situations of great stimulus, it is difficult for me to maintain composure. On the street I was eager to get a place where I could hide. I did not experience anything memorable. However, things inevitably impressed themselves upon my memory, and I have since decided that these images are either tremendous signs of higher providence or just metaphors. The most important of these visions: a small child stumbled underneath the spray of a fire hydrant that had been cracked open. He shot a jet of water from a toy gun straight into the air, and looked up from underneath it as it peaked and dropped again, hitting him in the face. The course of these actions, each with a distinct part (the moment the water sputtered up, the moment it wavered suspended in the air, the moment its precarious form shattered on the boy's smiling face and transmuted to drips), gave me a sense of the gleeful inconsistency of things. As I walked past him the air had no smell to it. If I had to describe the traffic I would say that it was canned, that the cars were all immobile, running but paused and humming. I say this because I crossed the streets with impunity, stepping in between the cars and turning to smile through the windshield at the drivers, mocking, but in my eyes sympathetic.



The portrait is at the center of all exchanges. While there are some exceptions, there is no exchange between parties except through portraiture, and each party feeds into the portrait some sense of their own likeness.

For the artist, this is manifest in style, the weakest of the bonds. However, the artist is the person on whom the onus of likeness is most heavily placed, for the artist is responsible for transmitting likeness across space and across time, carrying likeness in the vehicle of their craft.

The subject, then, is the least in control of her likeness, however, the one for whom likeness is the greatest stake. The subject cares less for the artistic work than she hopes for her own memorialization, which is why, in the best cases, the subject will divulge herself through whatever means she can. The subject, perhaps unable even to dictate the positioning of her own body, will give herself away through a charged eye, through a shoulder held awkwardly, forced and obstinate.

Most complicated is the relationship between likeness and the viewer, but this perhaps because I am most prominently, above all, a viewer. The likeness is the engaging quality of the portrait—the portrait must be like life so as to bond the viewer to it, must

cause the viewer not only to seek what is like life within the representation but also to identify in the portrait what ties the life within it to their own life. This is why viewers of portraits, like myself, have chronic weaknesses, have also a tendency for indifference, for we are always searching for the components of ourselves within the bodies of others, bodies as far away from their own images as we are from ours.

On the street I am anonymous. In the museum I am a theme. Can you picture me at the base of the large, white, and triangular canvas, looking underneath it? Can you picture me in the next room with my face buried in my hands as I sit on the bench in front of the bright cluster of green and orange neon lights? Do you see me in the next room as I fervently write in a notebook? To elaborate: I am a complete expression, yet I develop as we are reintroduced. Why am I smiling? Why do I look so quickly away? Do you want to be looking at me?

These gestures are all a matter of place. The place has bidden us: think; the place has bidden us: look.

A painted woman can only provide affirmation. I come to her needy and proud. I ask her to paint a portrait of me, to forgive my faults as her faults have been forgiven. I am fully aware it will degrade her— the deliverance of sympathies has been known to reduce the color of paint by two shades—but I ask regardless, unable to bear my own precision. She herself has been distorted by flattery, but benefitting from its comforts, gives in. I wonder if a painted woman can ever not be kind.

When I speak to you now, I recognize that this is not my own voice, but rather a voice that has passed through the flame, purified. It is a voice that I use when I need to speak lucidly, emphatically, that I use when I need to teach. It is the self that is passed through the flame, and the only self that is suitable for you to hear, the only self I can present with any confidence, without crumbling. I believe it might be temporary.

What you will not know about grief is that it will greatly limit the amount of words that you are able to use, or (I am still deciding this) the amount of words that you would like to use. I'm not sure why this occurs, whether it is that things seem simpler, or that the only things that occur enough to be felt are beginnings and endings and that all words, you will find, are either a beginning or an ending. This lack of middle has made it difficult to look at painting, which is commonly perceived as all middle. But I try. It is not difficult to understand why, considering that I now speak small, murmur, I guess.

When I look at art I feel like I don't have time for a medium although I am not rushing towards anything. In fact, I feel slower. There is something to be said also that paintings do not struggle with velocity.

When it happened, my father spoke simply, saying, “It’s done”.

He may have also said a few other brief things, old things that for the duration of it we had all been saying. However, the words, true at last, or if not true, at least justifiable, continued to sound the same. This moment, which we had told ourselves for years would change us irrevocably, continued to sail past us. Words of comfort continued to carry nothing, or at least very little, of anything that might affect a change, and did what they always had done, which was to sustain.

When I think on it now I he may have also said, “Thank God,” but I don’t remember and don’t want to bother myself with attempting to reconstruct it. It’s still a little too soon, a little too soon.

Museums have a way of incorporating you into them, in knowing exactly how they want you to feel. As the doors open with their vacuum suck, as they become unsealed, you respond to the immediate cool, the immediate heat. Already you feel healed, held, your needs anticipated. The air circulation in every museum is calculated precisely to be at the optimum conditions for the conservation of artwork. The effect of this air on the human body is similar. Your skin does not shed its outer layer, your hair will not fall out. You understand physiologically that you have entered into a place where things are being preserved, but having to account for the thousands of living bodies that pass through them, the place must mask this preservation with a hospitality and luxury, must also give the whole affair a sense of importance. Libraries too attempt to achieve this, however their air is altered by the silence and stillness of the people inside. In the museum you have the airs of both, the living and the sustained life. This explains why museums are great places of memory, why you often do not forget them, because they are, for a time, maintaining you.

There is a story of a woman who, after seeing the portrait of the famous Adele Bloch-Bauer I during an exhibition in Europe, left her family behind to become a famous singer. She was easily affected. During her performances, the lights in the theater would dim and then darken completely. As the audience waited for the stage to light, the orchestra would play what seemed an overture. There was silence. Then would come a thin note, brittle like strand of dried hair. The note expanded into several notes that in turn became words. The voice was alone against the blackened stage. The orchestra would eventually join in, rounding out her sound, but the lights would never go up. Some said that the woman must have been ugly. Some suggested that she imagined the world of music to depend very little on the ownership of a physical body, that the creation of sound from the mouth took place in the area just beyond the mouth, that it came from the air. Some say that the singer decided to conjure the mobility of music, and she believed that music travelled through the air better in darkness, that darkness was like a thick oil. A few put forward that the woman was Adele Bloch-Bauer herself, or if not, that Adele Bloch-Bauer had fled into the woman.

The performance artist, robed, stands in the center of the room.

Come touch me she says as it falls.

The room has maybe twenty others in it.

No one is the first to come forward precisely, many people start in. They are cautious.

Most place a hand in one spot, on her leg or arm, without moving it. They are afraid, mild.

The darkness of her skin reflects the stage light above her. You are across from her.

You reach out, grabbing her shoulder, fitting neatly.

A woman slides her hand onto the artist's ribs and back while the rest watch.

You are looking into her. Is she saying something?

The others slowly become unabashed, they slowly experiment, squeeze and pluck and rub.

You are the only still one, the only stable. The action of the others attracts you but you continue to stare.

They work.

She is looking back, standing as she has been, unchanged.

Her skin, the movement, love and guilt and communion and horror.

You move your hand over her shoulder, down her arm, down.

The boy at the ticket desk could not have been more than twenty-three, but he looked at me with a chill that I have only ever seen in men two times his age, a gaze of informed evaluation, of judgment that undeniably contains authority. This is something I have shared with many young boys who work the counters of museums, and I welcome every angled chin with joy. Their judgment means that I still appear young enough to be examined, that my face is still capable of intimating significance beyond the years of my life. These young haughty boys who have raised themselves on bookish insertions to the conversations of superiors, have had to flatter and invent in front of the splattered canvases of the artists of their age. They come to this desk forecasting ambitious futures past the desk, out the doors, into the city, but instead there I block it—these boys have a way of capturing me.

Without fail, these boys remind me that I am still young enough to have a child. It is a notion that I chase away in all other moments of my life except for this one. The urge comes upon me as I sit in the bath, as I lie wrapped in my bed, as I think of other wombs, and I evaporate it. But as my hand reaches out, exchanging my money for admission, I am struck with both the sense that I might have a child with them, or that they might be my child. I hope that they might approve of me and ask me a question, anything, usually about what I am there to see, or something of my outfit or hair (these boys, the best) and I might stop by the desk as I leave the museum and propose a walk and that they might say yes and that when they are sitting at dinner they look at me in the same ambitious way and that they might continue to look like that until we go to bed and that in the morning they might leave silently and impolitely. When this has happened it has always been the same.

Simultaneously these boys are my children, or my child who has grown and become an observer to look back at me, as I am told children do, and I myself must have done. My child might have a good education my child might one day handle works of art or broker their beholding my child might have the same black shirt my child might one day remind me of a lover too.

The story of the woman who had seen Adele Bloch Bauer II. This woman had only heard of the painting through her child who had gone to see it on a class trip. The child described the portrait like a queen, like a princess maybe, because her face was so soft. The child told her parents that the portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer looked exactly like her mother, that the painting had her mother's voice. The mother was flattered, but curious. She asked the daughter, why does it remind you of me? The daughter replied saying that it spoke with the same voice. Does she have my hair color the mother asked. Kind of, replied the girl. My eyes? Kind of. Is she tall like me? She seemed like a giant. She seemed like she was bigger than you.

The daughter eventually grew old, left the house. The mother kept dozens of drawings of the painted woman, fearing the elegant and sovereign portrait had prevented her daughter from seeing the actual woman before her, the woman who held pencils and corrected mistakes in calculations, the woman who caught the viruses of shared plastic playgrounds and stayed awake coughing. The mother thought of herself some days as royalty, some days as a shadow. She took the bus into the city. She put on a nice hat, she put on a little bit of jewels, preparing to meet a queen, wanting to show up as an equal (although the mother had undoubtedly aged more than Adele Bloch-Bauer). She turned the corner to the portrait, was surprised. This was not the woman her daughter had been drawing. In fact, the mother looked nothing like this portrait, different hair, different face, different everything and all.

The daughter instead must have read the mother into the portrait, must have seen something in this woman that spoke everything, the only woman in her daughter's life. It could have been anything. The woman was comforted, and she made Adele bow to her.

She asked Adele for her hand. She feared, for a moment, that maybe this is how her daughter saw her. The woman was cold and self absorbed. The mother was learned in the art of disappearing—Adele Bloch Bauer was not.

This all being said, I would not call myself living, but a likeness.

If entering a church is a metaphor for entering the presence of the holy, then crossing the threshold of a museum might symbolize an entering into the metamorphic. The ritual acts of metamorphosis, to occur properly, must mimic the rituals of the sacred. Either hands on hips or arms folded, indicating authority and appraisal.

Environment determines identity.

My life had been lived in words, taking long suckings at the sack of their amniotic fluid. I drew them up around me, floated my hands on their surfaces, let them rise and warm. But I think I have come to a place where words do not go. I find, in my times of greatest need that my comfort is in silence. I found painting because I did not know it at all. I did not have words for it and I continue to be unable. I could not tell you either about the significance that a brushstroke contains, nor the whipping up of certain blues. I only understand paintings through the figures within them; figures that like me wait respectfully in place. I am like a painting in that I only hope to evoke in you an unnameable sense, what some call mystique and what some call ignorance.

Here I am now, looking at Adele Bloch-Bauer II. I am curious about her, but she refuses to see me. This is not out of malice, but rather out of her own insulation. She holds herself back from me, asks only to be left alone, saying please. She is so light. To understand her, I look to her mouth, because if it cannot speak to me then at least it might tell me something. As it is painted, the mouth of Adele Bloch-Bauer seems on the cusp of speech, brimming with the held-up, never-bestowed, never-received word. I hate her teeth. The teeth are the only hard parts of her aside from her bones, and those, which dare not make themselves visible, are inferred only from the draping of her cheek. The teeth are barriers preventing me from entering her mouth and down her throat to her softest, her insides. I part my lips like her lips to see what it is that I might be saying. The word I arrive at is a resigned, “And?”

She begs me to continue, knowing the conclusion. I would say she has a disinterested attentiveness, a knife that I too have been known to plunge into my own side.

In front of a landscape we never ask ourselves whether this mountain or that river really is as it is painted there; but in front of every portrait the question of likeness always forces itself willy-nilly upon us. Give a little more thought, therefore, to this problem of likeness—this problem, which, foolish and superficial as it is, drives true artists to despair. You stand in front of a Velazquez portrait and you say: “What a marvelous likeness,” and you feel that you have really said something about the painting. Likeness? Of whom? Of no one, of course. You have no idea whom it represents, perhaps you can never find out; and if you could, you would care very little. Yet you feel that it is a likeness. Other portraits produce their effect only by color and line, and so you do not have this feeling. In other words, the really significant portraits give us, besides all other artistic sensations, also this: the life of a human being who once was really alive, forcing us to feel that his life was exactly as shown by the lines and colors of the painting.

What I have left of my mother now are spectral movements, occurrences that I can remember only when I am doing the same thing as her, when I am in a place where she used to be. I remember with my senses. I walk past the drawers she used to open, and in my arms at my side I feel the memory of another way of opening the drawer, using certain muscles I never used, or perhaps do not even have. I open everything twice, do everything twice, in this way. I lay down for myself but I am also laying down both for someone else and as someone else, simultaneously. I have found that I have some sort of tool for projection, which as I remain immobile casts out some phantom that I am forced to both physically feel, like an itch, but can not actually see or perform. And what the sensation has done for me exactly I cannot say, but I can say that I now live in two distinctly different times, that I live in two distinctly different bodies—one that I am forced to inhabit and the other that I only dream I am able to. The loss of my mother has no longer become a longing for her presence. I wish now that I could inhabit her ghost; I chase it in every gesture, always anticipating, then feeling, and then lagging behind. There are some things that I will never catch.

This would account for my sense of failure. In these phantom gestures I am never lying down, I am never grinding my foot into the pavement.

This would account for my sense of half-ness, of existing entirely inside of the things and people around me. In the exchange of a look or a touch I am able to hide myself inside of you. I think I am best transmitted through the sound of my voice. I travel in invisible waves and curl and harden like a shell in the whorls of your ear. And once inside I dissolve and fill you, and I do not have to worry any more. Unfortunately, it is also as if that substance that I gave, once given, replenishes itself, the water appears again in the vase, pour and appear and repeat. `

This would account for my sense of lost time, but a time I never had. The sensation of this phantom movement occurs a fraction of a second before I approach the object or place that triggers it, but the time that they consume in the imagined enactment of them has accumulated inside of me. I have, I believe, years of them now. I am a storehouse for the incomplete.

This would account for why I was drawn to the two portraits of Adele Bloch Bauer.

I am standing in front of the painting both *as* and *with* Adele Bloch- Bauer I. She is a tease, keeps me on the edge. I say *as* because when looking into her I cannot help but to mimic her, to first want to be and then am standing upright, with a slight curve, and golden. I say *with* because I recognize that I am doing all of these things in a way she cannot. For example, crucially, I emit heat. I put myself in this position because it feels the most like how I live my life, both *as* and *with* myself, with myself *as* both a burden and a companion and breath. I do not yet try to speak to her, because this is a time when we both circle around the other, feigning innocence, feigning virginity, being coy.

The face of Adele Bloch Bauer II is a pale pink, foolishly living. Adele peers into the portrait's face from the platform of her four-poster bed. Her bed is covered in layers of used handkerchiefs and silks, substituting quilts and down, a blanket that functions to keep down the sick, to radiate the sick back in on itself, to heat her body with sick's own thick phlegms and particles.

When she looks down the tunnel that separates her from her double on the opposite end of the room (a double much stronger because it stands erect, but limited as it is pinned to the wall) she will want to pretend she is looking into a mirror. In fact, as she was carried up the stairs to the sick bed where she has since stayed, she said to the servant who was standing on the landing, "Bring that mirror in with me, won't you?" and pointed over her shoulder to the portrait.

She will not be looking at any other parts of her body because those are the parts that ache, those are the parts that lead away her mind. She looks in the mirror (maybe the other woman is stronger, pinned to the wall oh how the blood must flow to the feet) and relaxes.

Think of a memory:

I have spent the entire evening awake, thinking about the most beautiful woman. At this point, I have spent several days without even the sound of others. In my half-sleep, to my pillow, I ask her to dinner, I ask her, if she wouldn't mind, if she were inclined, if she might go out with me for a bite to eat. She is in her usual place, behind the desk where she works with her hair knotted up in a loose bun, where she twists her chair back and forth in a wool-checked skirt, where she is staining the rim of her coffee cup, a half-moon of tacky glittered gloss. She does not respond because the next moment my tongue slips the edge of her nipple and I fall asleep.

I am waking up dully and alone, looking at the papers scattered across my bed, and I reassemble them, shower, dress, walk to the bus. I wait and I do not think of her at all. As I step onto the bus, I see her, smile politely. I adore her but it is not until I sit down, several rows behind, that I remember my many versions of our intimacy the night before. And as I stare at the back of her head, as I imagine her lightly taking in the passing buildings and cars, thinking simple but elegant thoughts about the streets we speed through and people we speed past, streets and people that I see and feel with fear and envy, I relish not only my own vulgarity but also the blessing of the world to bestow on us situations such as these, moments where our most discreet and subliminal desires emerge again in the daylight, seeming sweet and budding, as fancies.

Convert this memory into a color:

The performance artist is standing under an archway of televisions that each display a different saturated hue with wires twisted around his legs and arms. The color reflects back onto our faces, so each of us is tinged with the color of another's memory,

or maybe the color of our faces has influenced the color of our own memories. We close our eyes. I have difficulty keeping my eyes closed, because I cannot fight the urge to catch so many people in their own fidgeting privacy. When I finally think of a color, what comes to me is a shade of flesh pink, the color of blushing. In a moment I notice that shame had been waiting beneath the entire affair, that I had felt in my attraction towards this woman something beyond seediness, more like guilt, for having used her image, her precious and manicured outward image, once then, now again, for my own satisfaction. But the shame fades from my mind as the color blooms, the color being only a shade of the emotion, not the thing itself. And the pink distills the moment enough for me to look on it again without actual shame, but only the desire to decipher this transformation of it, the need to understand why this association had manifested. Before I can do this he speaks again.

Transform the color to sound:

Blush pink drains into a high pitched-hum. I am left behind.

Another woman moves next to me to see the portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer II, standing very close. I step aside, just a little, to put enough comfortable space between us, enough so that our arms will not brush and she will not think I'm trying to seduce her. I fear these kinds of moments frequently, fear them in a way I might also fear an inappropriate toast or addressing someone by an incorrect title, fear them because I have always felt that among people there exists a shared language of signs that I was never taught or otherwise have been too self-absorbed to notice. I like to think that I instead developed my own vocabulary of gestures that express my inner life perfectly. Unfortunately, some of my private gestures bear resemblance to the signs of others and are misread. Because of this, I am always afraid I am performing the gestures of seduction, afraid that someone mistakenly believes that I am asking them to get closer, that I am asking them to speak, that I desire something from them in any way.

Her back is a line, pencil thin, pencil straight. I am forced to conclude that, although most people would argue that she is standing, Adele Bloch-Bauer II must be lying down.

When I become involved with other people, when I talk to them directly, out in the world, anything beyond a glance, I lose control of my faculties. There is too much. There are too many active signs to read, too much tone in their voice, too much movement, and I have no idea how to shape myself. I become an eternal present, every moment falling individually, painfully. Somehow, through all of this, I have managed to have a friend. The only way I am able to do this is through distilling her, making her singular. I average all of her repetitions and make these their only phrase, their only gesture. These, when performed, I will call up in conversation and say "typical."

She was supposed to arrive an hour before me, but ended up arriving an hour late. Unavoidable incidents explained things away. This is typical.

I catch sight of my black-haired friend and immediately fall in:

We started in at the gallery.

"I love this one," my friend said. She was leaning in to a cup spotted with preserved flies that from far away had looked like spots. At the bottom of the cup was fungus. I loved her because as she looked, she became innocent, or rather she created innocence. Sometimes she would mouth the words to the wall label. I would catch her in this and she would change her face, acknowledging that I had seen her attempts at naivety. Vulnerability, even invented, is so rare.

Two complicit faces looking, two furtive and caved bodies bearing backs against the noise and motion. Looking at something with her resembles a close dance with a stranger. I cannot know what she is thinking until she tries to say it, because in the attempt, the premeditation, she has twined her feeling with something appropriate for me. She is giving me a gift.

These hands, Adele Bloch- Bauer I. I am forced between them. I exist where meat of palm meets knuckle. This is my desire to be held, but also my desire to be pressed like stone turned to diamond, the feeling of unworldly weight that will transform me, that will skim me over the cusp of obliteration to clean me and to make my breath be more like the vapor that rises off ice. It seems like her hands should be clasped in prayer, but she, in her vulgarity (defiance?) bent her wrist at the awkward angle, veering from the need to call out, allaying divine assistance. Instead it is as if she's assigned herself penance (maybe the only true prayer) but she is not beating herself with a flail, she is not tying a rope ever tighter around her waist for the souls of purgatory. She is giving herself the penance of odd gesture, of uncomfortable mystery. She has dammed herself by blunting the only body that history could preserve for her, the only thing that holds out against the sweep of gold and black symbols. How it comes up like the head of a swan through her sleeve.

My mother had a lotion, a miracle bronzer, a false metallic glinted gold, squeezed from an orange tube. I would often catch her applying it to her legs and arms in the rare moments of the summer when I crept to her private bathroom to sneak a towel to lie on in the sun, or to borrow a toothbrush, a razor. I would ask her why she had spent hours applying the cream in solitude, only to leave a thin brown rim along the edges of our white bathtub as the lotion was washed off before night. She would reply that if anyone saw her, she would not want to them to think of her as a pale and kept woman, one who stayed inside and never took air. But my mother was this woman.

For years I held it in contempt. When she reached across the window's sunspot on a table to pick up a pen or a fork or a knife it would give me a reminding peck, a flash in my eyes. Gold became a type of women's sickness, a desire to become precious beyond their capacity, to be not just valuable, but a standard of value. It was of her that I learned of my tendency to make the woman in front of me all women, something I inherited from sculpting men. Just as they took a single woman from the street and used her nude form to create monuments to Freedom and Charity and Justice, I took my from my mother and made her the midnight altar set dark within the forest of women's Arrogance and Shame and Envy.

Towards the end I rubbed her skin, a test under the guise of a reassurance, the side of my thumb running over the hill of her joint. I saw the residue left on me, as though taking a layer of her skin for my own. It revealed itself as a continual clawing for life, and when it had not been that it instead revealed itself as powerful. The ritual of applying the gold, when the hair cracked and broken off was on the pillow, when the lips sagged so that words became air pushed in a glug through the lips, remained. In it was my mother.

As a building type, art museums are similar to zoos and aquariums, except that these have living collections. But from a design and construction standpoint, museums as institutions are probably akin to hospitals and department stores. Like hospitals they have persistent and periodic demands to change, improve, and expand their facilities. They deal in specialized systems and have similar security concerns. However, the museum is also much like a department store in its need for oriented public circulation through secured areas housing frequently changing installations.

The man to my right is just about to depart, and I catch him in flight.

The last thing to leave the work of art is the left foot, which throughout the act of looking is leaden. As the allure of the portrait fades the man begins to lean to the right, just after his head turns in the opposite direction. The left foot reflexively moves in order to catch the drifting body about to fall. Leaving a work of art begins as a necessity in order to prevent embarrassment and collision.

On the brink, he might be a dancer with a pointed toe, a gesture of control and calculation. In between works of art, the body must readjust the balance between inattention and acute self-possession. Cycling from piece to piece creates insatiability not unlike a string of affairs in which you never leave a lover until a new one has been found. I leave now (this view of a pale boy with his hands resting on a dove) because in a museum and in the world there is always more, and we are never quite full. I know I have not gained all that I can from this sweet child, I know that in the next moment, had I waited longer, his eyes would swell and his face would change, but I told myself I needed to go. I felt guilty. I got bored.

A new woman comes to stand next to me. She is an older woman, who is not carrying herself but instead seems carried, slumped. It is as though the crumpled museum program in her hand was wrinkled and destroyed in her final great battle with her own strength, which then reached its height and then flew away like a bird from her shoulder. She remains in this posture while she looks at the portrait, admiring it. To this woman I can only glance in reverence and in small fear, for with all women of her age I am afraid that if I look at them for too long I will become attached, that I might find a figure in them, that I will cling to their legs and demand of them to make me whole. Here I am asking her what her name is; she replies with an older name, one that is out of fashion, but has with it femininity of name that spans years, rings of a notion of womanhood that no longer exists. I am asking her what she thinks about the portrait. She is telling me about her long life, that she has lived alone for thirty years, thirty years of adventure, and within the daydream I imagine that the woman is driving high speed with a lavender scarf tied around her neck that whips past her, that flies off before she can catch it, but when I come back to myself I have just been looking at the painting and she has since moved on to the next painting, that of a landscape of three mountaintops in the foreground, a village beyond it.

There are rows of chairs on both sides of the gallery facing towards the center. The performance artist walks up and down the aisle looking the people in the front row in the eye. She is full of what seems to be unaided vengeance. Her feet smack the ground as she walks.

Where does performance end and life begin, she shouts.

Stand up if you want to fuck right now.

Come on stand up.

You stand up, thinking that you might.

Sit down, she says.

Stand up if you are gay.

The others seem uncertain, wobble as they stand or tense muscles as they sit. They look around.

Okay, sit.

Stand up if you've ever tried to kill yourself.

Okay sit down.

Stand up if you've ever stolen money.

Sit.

You look around. You have either revealed yourself or lied to yourself all in the spring of a stand. You obey and identify or hesitate, confused.

Stand up if you hate your partner.

Sit down.

You have or you haven't. Are you ashamed? Should you not represent it, yourself?

Stand up if you hate me.

Sit down

Stand up.

Okay, sit.

The hands of Adele Bloch-Bauer II are white. That, or they are lilac like her dress, and I do not want them to be. I want them to be white so that they might still be hers, that she might possess them instead of relinquish them to her designs, to her shawls. I do not want her body to give her up so easily in favor of simpler, more unspeaking things. I will call them white, and they are her real skin. It would be unfair to give her hands anything but illness. They are curled in aching. The one on the left clutches nothing, but her fingers are bent at her first joints. I cannot replicate it, especially the small finger, which seems the most unnatural of them all, too far apart from the rest, a deformity in addition to weakness of the body. The blood pools around my knuckles, maybe this accounts for her pale hands. I feel pressure in them, a pulsing and beating as though I have been rapping them against a surface. They bulge. Do I feel as she felt yet?

My black-haired friend and I adored many of the same things, were similarly delicate when we rested our head in our hands, when we shifted our weight backwards to one foot. My friend, when she spoke, could bring any two objects to harmony, using botanical words to describe cars, calling the sound of crashing waves 'tufts', all the things hidden within her personal taxonomy being so soft, so tender. For the most part she was concerned entirely with the present, its tastes and its sounds, and found the need, which I always found flattering, to crystallize our time together by combining a totem of a day (say, a congested waiter at lunch) with one of her special words, and calling up this word some time later as a reminder of what the particular day had felt like. This is the way I believe that she cultivated her language in the first place, by finding moments in her life that felt one way, and in encountering a moment of similar feeling, regardless of material circumstance, calling them back.

There is a photograph, an image taken by an older man that we had been travelling with, where we are conversing about a painting, to my memory it is a still life of a green room with a dark blue bed. She was pointing to a window in the painting because at that moment some light from the museum had fallen onto a window in the painting giving it the qualities of real light. I distinctly and clearly remember her telling me that in that moment we had seen a return, that we had been blessed to watch as the light had entered back into the place where it belonged, that it had come home. And she had said to me then that one day we too would come home to the perfect outline of our image, that we would each glance past our own likeness and stop, frozen in front of it for some other onlooker, foreign to us as we were to the light.

One of the ways that I gave myself away was through the performance of rituals throughout the day. Some of these mimicked kindness, stopping at desks, asking after women made of straw about their laminated families hung around computer screens. Some of these rituals seemed like insanity, like pacing in bathrooms. I can speak to these rituals best in terms of sex. They were all extended sex. Life lost none of its physical appeal and in fact was amplified because of all of the forgetting it afforded me. I was able to feel joy or disappointment because I was forced into it, because there were physical locations that when neglected or stimulated could evoke. I would like to say that humans have been given sex, and its greater mode, distraction, because it creates a current of value where there is none.

My body is an improbable palace, here are its flaws:

A cut on my finger by stabbing it through with a pen that is likely infected, my atrial cramps, an infection of my urinary tract, a head cold, stomach cramps, pain in my kidney, a migraine, hunger, my breasts are sore, my feet ache as I sleep with them rigidly flexed.

There is a crowd in front of Adele I comprised of both men and women. They take pictures with their cell phones, with their cameras' big lenses stuck out that I imagine as twisting in their matte black casings, growing outward with a low mechanical whir, like drills lowered to the ground for oil, which sink into the canvas and behind the painting to suck, to drain it.

In my mind the crowd is whispering long into one another, they cup their hands around the ears of their companions to speak about the woman, they fill this cavern with moisture and heat that condenses on the cheeks of their friends and lovers that remains until they part and that is eventually dried from lack of contact, or wiped away in discomfort or annoyance. There is intimacy, and it leaves its trace.

In reality they are almost shouting, their heads all turned to face the painting as they shake their hands out to mimic the splattering of paint, as they draw imaginary lines connecting symbols in her cloak, or there are those who point a single finger to one gleam, one detail, as if pointing to a star in the sky, enumerating the miles of its distance.

Adele Bloch-Bauer I began to become distrustful of Western medicine. She disliked the idea that in Western medicine the patient is the object of care, while in many alternative forms of medicine the sick person has more of an agency, is more of a seeker, a pupil to the master of illness. She began to grind her daily pills into a powder that she disguised as a beauty mask, applying it regularly to her face, breathing in the chalky sterile scent that burned her nostrils. When someone who cared for her asked how the medication had been treating her, if she experienced any ill effects, she replied no and in fact it has done wonders for my skin. The care-giver would agree. When Adele Bloch-Bauer applied the mask she sat cross-legged on a red, straw-stuffed pillow on the floor of her bathroom. She opened up her heart and asked the illness to teach her as the powder of pills dried and cracked on her face, sloughing off at the smallest twitch. It was fair practice for remaining still and emotionless, and in this way, she thought, Western medicine gave her the greatest aid. She continued to try and ask it questions but her illness gave no reply. With every day her pains increased. She began to believe that the pain was the lesson; however, she was not sure what she could understand from it. Within the pain, she could not see that she was multiplying the gift of ignorance, that the pain was teaching her daily different ways of pushing itself aside. I think that in the end she may have realized this, but would have much rather preferred to know nothing and be at ease.

One of the great portraits of my mother is of her stretched out in front of a fire that burned in a furnace behind glass. The flame doesn't die, doesn't wear itself out, but it is not an orange filament flickering in a tube—it is real fire burning without termination. And she would lay there all night, underneath the mantle in our living room, with the fire burning until morning. If I would wake up early I would often find her there, sleeping all night on the ground. And the greatest feeling of sorrow now—but wonder then—was in the way that the flame illuminated the highest parts of her, just the edge. At her head, tucked down, I could see her ear. Nothing hallowed in the upward slope of her shoulder, but along her arms, and down past the curve of her hip there would be the outline of her form in flame. In this way, in these moments, she was painted. Rather, she unknowingly painted herself for me.

I knew that to see my mother there like that had meant that she was giving herself up to something, that there was an arcane grace to her that I could never articulate. I would only be reminded of when I saw her this way. At first her grace felt like great sadness, then it felt like self-preservation. But my mother, whose inner life laid to me as a bare, white shelf, never revealed its mystery to me in any way. She remained a cypher to protect her grace, never sought to adorn her life with outward signs, or to show that it was within her. Her complexity would only appear in this one submission, when she would forget her duty to normalcy, when she would isolate herself on claims of poor circulation or insufficient bedding.

I would move close to her, about two feet away, and crouch down, the cracking of my knees the only sound in our silent and darkened house. It was though the light, by gracing her, had inspired in me ability, a certain type of touching gaze, in which my eyes

could rest in the places where she was carved out and understand her. She was thin, too thin, the product of youthful vanity, the curve of her hip just a necessity of structure. My mother could avoid her nature in the day, cover it with long dresses and wool suits, could stand behind other people in photographs, as she did, flanking them on her right and left, but not here. Now, I could stare at her body for as long as I wanted, as I needed, could feel even then the efforts of containment she practiced. Some nights I would stay awake for hours doing this, and my mother would give no sign that she was knew I was there. I would not know for years later that she had not been sleeping, but was listening to me, eyes shut, as I shifted and watched.

The ritual acts of metamorphosis, to occur properly, must mimic the rituals of the sacred.

The portrait must become a thing in itself, must have no creator.

The portrait speaks on its own if you listen to it, like any other blessed object. The portrait has needs, aspirations, and desires.

It is in a condition, amongst others on the wall of a gallery, where it is frequently neglected or passed over.

It is a singular thing given to us in many.

The portrait, temporarily removed from its artificiality by the act of sustained looking, alerts you to its will.

You want to obey, because it does not speak with a human sound, but a music beyond the human, which rose out of the depths of humanity.

In a way I need the tourists, they are my reason for coming, because without them the museum would not strike a balance between containment and confusion. I need their sweaty skin and their running children. I need their untempered voices and the sound of their shoes. I need them to be absolutely transient, to have no stakes in my world, to be surrounded by people who are not looking with any particular discernment. Among the tourists, who will sit on the ground when there are no more chairs left, who will struggle for direction, turning maps one way then another. I try to smooth my hair, walk confidently to the ticket desk, although I often do not know where the line begins and will occasionally find myself hiding in a dead end corner, pretending to make a phone call in case I am seen, only to emerge moments later, for those that were paying attention to me, from a successful detour for important business. I will typically reassess my situation, wait until I feel that all of those who were previously in the room and might have seen my error have gone on, and proceed to the exhibit. I feel, even in my moments alone, that I need to behave in this way.

Only because we see painters in front of their models fight such a hard battle for this ideal expression—because the look and the cry of this battle are such that it cannot be anything else than a battle for likeness—only for this reason do we give this name to the portrait’s suggestion of real life, even though there is no one in the world whom the portrait could be like. For even if we know the person represented, whose portrait we may call “like” or “unlike”—is it not an abstraction to say of an arbitrarily chosen moment or expression that this is that person’s likeness? And even if we know thousands of such moments or expressions, what do we know of the immeasurably large part of his life when we do not see him, what do we know of the inner light which burns within this “known” person, what of the way this inner light is reflected in others? And that, you see, is more or less how I imagine the truth of the essay to be. Here too there is a struggle for truth, for the incarnation of a life which someone has seen in a man, an epoch, or a form; but it depends only on the intensity of the work and its vision whether the written text conveys to us this suggestion of that particular life.

Adele Bloch-Bauer II took her portrait from the wall and laid it flat on the ground. It was too heavy for her to do this on her own, but this thought did not cross her mind as she lifted the wire away from its mounting nail—the action was an unbroken one, and the laws of linearity and fluidity surpassed those of physical capability. When she first set it down she was astonished to find how supine it was, submissive. She circumambulated, understanding it from all sides. On the right side she seemed like a measuring stick, the different portions of her body segmented off and even, while on the left she seemed more like a piano. From the top of the painting, upside down, the black of her hair, indistinguishable from the wide circular brim of her hat, made it seem as though her body, possessed and placated, was being lowered into a dark and endless hole. She stayed at the head of the portrait for some time, looking into her own face as she descended into the pitch. How it seemed as though a magician had tied together her feet, and how once the last of her had been lowered into it the hole would seal with a pop. Then, her tapestries would rest undisturbed as they had done before she had ever thought to foreground her likeness to them. It was a hole to nowhere.

I cannot remember the appearance of the most beautiful woman, but this is because her beauty and her appearance were far away from each other, sharing an Earth but living in different cities. This is also because I was unable to see beauty in people—or I mistrusted most of the things I was told were beautiful. I have always been suspicious of radical beauty. The people of the world were for me nothing but smoke of different hues. My attraction to others did not seem to come from within myself, but instead came from qualities I attributed to them. These were qualities that more often than not I entirely made up, and read like the flocks of birds over the skies of Rome, interpreting bounty, interpreting war, assuming that I could not know the criteria of nature, but that nature was sending me signs.

We were in a screening room. On loop, a film of shifting abstract colors was playing. I had noticed that she was the most beautiful woman when I caught her standing back from the crowd, breaking away from her friends. They all sat in a cluster passing around a bottle, and after she took her turn, tilting back her head with the bottle, she stood up and sat against the wall. In the darkness she watched her companions and I watched her. Her look was contemplative and sharp and joyous. She had an appealing arrogance.

If she were a gesture she would be a brushing of lips against an ear.

The most beautiful woman turned from the painting, and in the arc of this turn, pulled a curtain over the room, turned the page from the bottom corner so that she was facing outwards, a room full of hundreds of versions of herself. I saw them, but she did not seem to notice that they were all her doubles, for she moved among them with an unfamiliarity. She peopled the room. I watched every version of her as they looked at the paintings in the room, as they grazed each other and mumbled apologies. She looked at

the image of a bird in flight being snapped at by a dog while she laughed a little at the blue-eyed portrait of a baby turning from its mother's breast. I was not overwhelmed as much as I was grateful that I was able to see her all of her like this, right now, so soon, that the entirety of her forms could bend and shrink for me, that I could give myself to this organism made up of all of the things she had been and will be. How good it felt in that moment to see all of one thing, to see a hundred possibilities that were even just the shells of her possibilities, knowing that if I looked close enough, if the copy copied itself again, it would differ in the movement of an arm. I cut through a crowd of her, touching their shoulders like relics.

In the basement of the museum, where the public is not permitted to go, the conservators work. Embalmers of a different kind they mix chemicals with heavy bitter fumes to apply in dabs, to polish open handed with white cloth bronze and steel and copper.

The tapestry of Adele Bloch-Bauer II, the garden the cloth the pink the green. The fabric the yards and yards of fabric, fabric rolled out to for me to wear, fabric that can speak for me. I've heard many things said about clothing, what it makes you. I've heard about it as disguise and I've heard about it as persona, but what will they think of me when I am a roving sheet of fabric, pet it down like furs. The new ladies' style trend is to stuff my mouth full of cloth and to have the cloth wadded just so against the back of my throat so that it comes out in spikes like the petals of birds of paradise. It absorbs all of my spit. It absorbs every fluid inside of me so that the insides of my bones are bare to lay down carpet (also made of her fabric) to keep sounds from echoing, so that the inside of my bones, the white and curved and airy insides, might feel a bit more homey and less intimidating and sepulchral. It might be that I invite guests into the tunnels of my bones and I might lead them treading on the floral fabrics of Adele Bloch-Bauer, walking them to a dinner that I have prepared on a night I have waited months for. I will keep telling them that it is just a ways away, just a little further down and I will keep making excuses and I will get exceedingly more flustered and my updo will come undone and I will break my heel, my yellow kitten heel, but I will keep walking. In order to pass the time, to distract them from the distance I will tell them light and amusing stories and anecdotes about my husband in the tunnels of my bones and my teeth will be white and my lips will be red and all of our mouths will only ever open to a sliver, just enough to breathe shallowly, like Adele saying "And?"

The woman next to me looks at Adele Bloch-Bauer I, fixing her gesture also to match the subject in the golden frame. We are standing there, two mimics, two reflections in an angled mirror (the kind used when trying on clothes), as though the portrait might see what she would look like from all sides of her body. Looking at the other woman, I see that the posture has made it so our backs are turned against one another, that her closest shoulder is pulled away from me. In this way, we have created a barrier, frames of our own to contain ourselves from one another. I don't fear the other woman anymore, but rather, I condescend to her, think less of her. As she mouths the words on the wall label of the painting, I hate her outright. She nods, recognizing the artist, although I am certain this is only a show for me. She smiles, with a false knowingness that I recognize only due to the number of times that I too have employed it, and laughs.

The performance artist has knitted together a single garment out of yarn that fills the gallery.

It is yellow, red, and orange.

Long sheaths for the human body protrude from the yarn, collapsed and limp, waiting for the audience to enter into them.

You pick up a section of the fabric and walk underneath looking for an opening. The net above you quivers and shifts as others enter into it.

What would normally be expressed by speech has become movement.

As you surface, bringing your head through the hole, you look out at the network of the garment from within it.

You see others thresh and squirm to enter, to exit.

As you twist to look behind, and opening is pulled out of someone's grasp.

You feel compliance inseparable from friendship, and feel as though the venture is ruled by an immortal pull, like the tide.

I used to believe not at all in division, but in the coherence and continuity of people and things. My life cast forever into the future. My life was a thread tied to my first memories and holding the thread I walked into the indeterminable distance. Twined into this string were the fragile lessons I had learned, ways of being kind, ways of caring for myself and others, practices that fooled me into believing in their permanence because I had cultivated them, acquired them as time passed. Without realizing it I was hopeful, which is to say, I was hardened, solid and hollow. But as grief came I became something similar to ether, an all-pervading medium, the life-thread uncoiling and fraying, the ends turning to wisps. I wished not only to exist without a body but also to live without an understanding of anything, to suddenly and desperately begin to see all things as mutable, to spare myself all further shock of their alteration. I did not walk backwards, but instead stood still and began to dissolve. I experienced it temporally by realizing on some days that it was years later.

My friend was the first casualty of my loss.

With her I experienced my first intentionless cruelty. As I dimmed, became less, she watched. She stood in front of me, in one sense motionless, in the other looking over her shoulder as she proceeded on, not reaching out a hand as though being helplessly pulled away, but opening her eyes wider, seeing me fully. And I was foolish to think that watching my decline with such proximity, with such pressure on her person to help me, would be anything but gruesome. I myself had watched many women fade away, wandering around eyeless all hours of the day, sitting at the table with a cup of coffee unable to speak of anything but their wounds, insistent in wearing their pain, or worse, on flinging it with considered directness, asking me to catch. And when I met these women,

when I shared rooms with them or traincars, it was I who could not help but to call them selfish. It was I who feared their tempests of jealousy, who would never share a shred of joy for the fear of having cast over it a bitter trump, the woman full of pain either striving in her inner life to violently overpower, to outlive brutally and vividly all women of the ungrieved world, or to poison them, to lift their lips to the cup of an inevitable disintegration.

Early mystics, not educated by language, eliminated their bodies for the holy spirit, threw themselves into icy rivers to free their capacity for love. I do this for Adele Bloch- Bauer.

Adele Bloch- Bauer II has given me enough fabric to upholster everything. I will reupholster the house of my family, I will get splinters as I work at night pulling out beams and tiles and each will be wrapped by me in my new cloth and stapled with the release of a staple gun. I will shoot little metal staples into everything and the gun will have more force than the locked muscle of my arm can control and every time I shoot the gun it will kick back and recoil which will jam my shoulder into place. My mother will find me kneeling, obsessively working on the floor of the house and my hands will be flush from gripping the staple gun and she will kneel down beside me and look me right in my eye. She will look down the line of the islands of tiles I have reupholstered. She will take a swath of Adele's fabric and she will ask me how long I have been down here for. Before I can answer she will tell me the fabric is beautiful and that I have done a great job, and I will say thank you no one else seems to think so, and a lost and forgotten tenderness spanning eighteen years will fall between us and it will be silent during this time and the fabric will fade. I will answer her that I have been down here for about a long time now. She will ask me if I have been sleeping alright she will asking me if I have been eating well and I will tell her no I have not. She will say that she can tell and she will say here let me help you. She will pry out a tile the size of a tortoise shell and take up the fabric and she will tenderly wrap it and sloppily staple the fabric to close. And she will say 'give me your hand' She will cut the fabric around my hand and she will staple it together. Like Adele Bloch-Bauer, my mother will allow me to be consumed by decoration. My mother will not ask but command saying, you're better now.

The performance artist is standing on white tiled floor, pouring dirt from a sack.

She is spitting in the dirt, pouring water, turning it into mud getting down and smearing it.

Join in she says.

She is diving into it, spreading it with her arms and legs.

You, with others, grab a bag from a pile in the corner of the room.

You pour out the dirt and it tumbles in a hush.

You get down, flatten it out with your hands. It is almost like sand. Like the beach. You play. You too roll around.

Everyone is having a great time.

Everyone is feeling very connected to each other and the performance artist. You feel giddy, you feel loved.

After a half an hour the performance artist stands up, covered in mud.

Thank you so much for sharing that with me she says.

You and the others stop and look around at each other's dirt covered faces, smiling and applauding.

Let's all leave together she says.

Everyone stands up, dusting off what they can as the performance artist leads the way toward the exit.

Everyone holds open the door for one another, but you are walking into a dark room. The last of the crowd squeezes in. The performance artist is standing under a television showing a video feed of the empty white room covered in dirt. You wonder what will happen next.

The room is empty for some time.

The door to the white room opens.

A small uniformed woman, tired already, enters with maintenance cart, brooms and mops.

She cleans.

They are crouching down, they are looking under, they are cautious. Their shadows, even if the viewers do not mean for them to, alter the works in some way. Another observer, upon seeing the change, believes it is very poignant, and hums quietly and low. Things are explained, hands are held out in front of the face, palms out, and moved across the body in a straight line, like wiping a foggy glass. Hands are juggled, moving in inward circles as the head bobs from side to side to express an idea that is a combination of feeling and jargon. Each person looks from a different side, reports to the others, they switch sides, report again—no two reports ever align, out of stubbornness. It is my great fear that two things can never align. Worse, it is my fear that alignment is a delusion. They walk closer, closer, closer, pause and hum, further, further, further. Hands in pockets for appreciative moments. Docents explain again and again in one long sentence that lasts an hour, tired and unskilled actors, the remnant of a lost enthusiasm lingering in their pitch and tone—otherwise a parody of elucidation.

She said to me: "I would tell you that I love you, only that is much too easy. I want to tell you that I can help you. I can help you more than anyone has ever been able, I can help you more virtuously than the living."

I accept.

I can do almost nothing for the slight corners of the shoulders of Adele Bloch-Bauer I, which are broken by the jeweled straps of her dress. Those straps which must be heavy with the weight of her chest, with the weight of the material, where do they lead? I think they do not attach to the dress in the back, that they remain loose thin strands that coil into mounds at her feet behind her. I wish: if I could only see behind her, if there was a way that we could paint the full body. Maybe a new form could be developed, in a distant time from now, where instead of painting portraits bodies are maintained at their pinnacle, that we put them upright in glass cases. I dream of a museum of the living in which I can look at others without anxiety. More importantly, I dream that those who I look at are able to understand their own delicacy.

I like to imagine, if I could see her from behind, that Adele-Bloch Bauer I would be reversed. The black and gold of her gown would instead be drapes of skin, pulled up to the elbows of a metallic gold body that screeched at the hinges and joints. Walking around her home, holding the skin tight to her, the gold underside would scratch the floor. She would be massive, the roll of flesh around her neck like a bloated collar, something to keep her warm in the winter. How warm she would have to be if her body was made of metal. Upon finding her husband she would wrap her cloak around him and he would play in the skin, he would rest his head within it, would caress it and lie on it all while she drew a bath and slid herself into it, and she would melt and mix with the water. And then her husband would dip the cape in the bath, it would dye and form the black symbols and eyes and the flesh would melt inwards, becoming body again. She would then rise from the tub, walk down the same hall, to be painted.

The best way to think of me is as a contradiction created by circumstance—thinking of circumstance as something sharp, not without harm. I was once, I like to think, a person of great feeling. But having lost this woman, herself a person of quiet love, I have had to alter myself in certain ways as a means of preserving her, have had to do her the service of emptying out what I used to be so that she, in any way, might be able to come in, might be able to persist. In doing this, I myself have become almost nothing, but what remains *only* remains as a witness to this new self, the other self, one that looks upon her with equal parts great fondness (for she is my mother) and great contempt (for having dissolved me).

And continually, daily still, I lay myself on the tracks with a cloth over my head. I always imagine myself sitting in a wooden chair, talking to confidants, far away people with whom I wish I could have an intimacy with, saying to them, “I am just not alive, anymore.” I am saying this equally for the honesty and the drama.

Having faced immense pain, I feel as though I have swallowed up entirety, that I have eaten all of the gold. It now sits heavy, metallic, and enduring inside of me—but I never open my mouth. I never care to open my mouth anymore; I only spread my lips into a thin smile. This is because I am mostly indifferent. I am indifference that has known and remembers a great love.

Museums have been called “narrative environments”. This is because curators seek to manipulate images and the sensation that corresponds to them so that you might feel them as though they have told you something, as though something static has lead you from point A to point X. A successful narrative environment will prompt embodied perception, physical action and intellectual change or transformation, this may be described as learning or discovery in an exhibition context but could also be described as rewriting your sense of self.

If my body were made of metal I would want it to be like a utility knife, I would want to have a body for cutting, for picking. I would want to have a tool for every situation. I would never been inappropriate and would always be useful. I would extend one long limb out to unscrew the bolt. I would always be needed.

Some children dance in front of the artwork, twisting and turning their bodies as though the portrait is a dropcloth landscape at the ballet, one that enlarges the site of the dance, gives it a kingdom. They curtsy to ladies and bow to gentlemen. They babble: thank you madam oh that's quite kind of you my lady oh hello would you like a spot of tea oh jolly good sport. Others cling to the arms of their parents or nannies, intimidated by the figures, rubbing their faces on the adult's sleeves; whining continuously up and down the scale, low rumbles for hesitancy, high pitches for irritation. One child, small in the semi-circle of adults, stands upright, awake. The guide asks: does anyone know what this is, what it is depicting? The adults look to one another afraid of looking like fools, wanting to see who is most worthy of respect among them. The child raises his hand, the guide says yes very good what is it? The child says well that is the Rape of Europa I think; the guide says yes very good where did you learn that? The child looks up to his mother and spills out oh in a book of my mother's about painting and the mother looks confused, asking, which one? And the group is silent as they listen to the conversation and the mother looks around at them nervous about having all of this attention and taking up so much of the tour's time. The child says the one with the red curtains on the cover that is on your desk all of the time and the mother goes oh. Some members of the group say aw and how sweet but the mother doesn't look at her child and says oh that is so nice of you, twisting her wedding ring again and again on her finger.

I think of her also as a predator. I think of her in the driver's seat of a car and I on the passenger's side. I think of her uselessly smoothing her hair, something she doesn't need to do because her hair is already set, but something she does to prepare herself, a practiced gesture that she will repeat up my thigh, just as vacant; just as false. Her hands are on the wheel for a moment when we park far from the center of town, facing a field that I cannot see the end of, just the jagged wall of tall tan brush illuminated by the headlights with the moon above them, the same color. She turns the car off, she leaves the lights on. I stare into the stalks of wheat, wishing that my skin were washed that way, wishing my fingers as thin, as the same sinewy pulp, if bent would snap. They are a blessed curtain. They glow as a virgin might. I think of the leather seats of the car that she drives, how when the sweat forms on my lower back I will arch forward, sticking out my chest, unaware I am a mating bird. The preen will make the whole encounter spin. It spins faster and it blurs and her gentle gentle palm spins it faster, increases the speed, increases the speed until it moves off the axis, until it starts to tilt and shake. (She knows very well about this shaking, a product of illness.) The shaking too develops its own rhythms. It all becomes bearable.

It all becomes some sort of kindness.

She kisses me on the forehead, pulling her seat belt around her at the same time, when she asks me not to tell.

Is this a memory?

I was asked: And would your mother be proud of you? No, she would not. I am full of vanity and doubt. She, as she was, would not be proud of me. I was then asked: but what about now? Is she proud of you now? And I thought, well, yes. While the question seemed odd, a little to spiritual for my taste, my response was natural. And the woman said: I believe in those things, if you wouldn't mind me telling you, I believe that wherever she is she is proud. And I said yes, yes she is proud. But she is not in a place. I mean, she is in a place. But her location, if a museum in my imagination is a location, has boiled her down, has made her an essence. And in this place she is not just all of the good actions she was in life. She is also the hurtful and the evil ones. She is not a saint. It is just that she is now something that exists only as the feeling at the bottom of things, the pure pit at the bottom of things. She has become entirely her intentions. Rather, a combination of her intentions and my interpretation of her actions. And now a form of pure intention, she must necessarily be proud. Or really, this new form, I feel, emits a pride palpable to me.

I am walking up the stairs to the exhibition. The opposite wall is large mirror. I stare at my reflection as I climb. Just as I am about to exit I notice that another woman has been watching me. We exchange a glance. I had been staring at my reflection for the whole duration of my ascent, I realize. I am embarrassed by my own indulgence and amazed by her humility. She is embarrassed by her humility and jealous of my indulgence. We continue to walk in time, feet landing, pressing off each step, one by one, side by side as though we are familiar. Neither of us says anything. Our relationship grows, moves past its healthy and fertile period (only a moment) and becomes tense. We wonder together if we should say something, if we should say wow what a climb this turned out to be. If we should ask: are you new here? The desire to connect and the futility of connecting do not reconcile.

This form, which springs from a symbolic contemplation of life-symbols, acquires a life of its own through the power of that experience. It becomes a world-view, a standpoint, an attitude vis-à-vis the life from which it sprang: a possibility of reshaping it, of creating it anew. The critic's moment of destiny, therefore, is that moment at which things become forms—the moment when all feelings and experiences on the near or the far side of form receive form, are melted down and condensed into form.

The loss of my mother exists in two ways.

I sat with Adele Bloch-Bauer II, I noticed her hands clenched in tight fists on her lap. They were hands lit like the pale skin of roses, with similar thin veins and pink haloes. It seemed to me that all of her bodily strength was in those fists, the tension being a means to make the pain lighter, so that her hands might not rest on her legs like two stones, but might undergo a constant and even rejuvenation, might erode and blow away. At that time she was in no physical pain, only the pain of waiting a very long time for very small events, some light shined into her eyes, or for someone to give her the news of no change. Perhaps, by straining herself in this way Adele Bloch-Bauer elongated the day, made it feel appropriately infinite, as the woman in the portrait might expand.

On one hand, it was an event that occurred. It occurred in the manner of all events—it approached, it flourished in intensity, it left.

I imagine that there exists in the reserves of some museums a dropper full of a clear liquid known to dissolve any kind of paint. I imagine that there are arrangements made for the nighttime wherein a subject might arrive in a car to the museum where their portrait is held. They are welcomed with a nod by a curator in a black jacket and their combined footsteps click and echo the halls as they enter the conservator's office. The conservator is standing with the vial already and the portrait is on the table. The subject takes the pipette from the jar and fills it with the clearing solution. The first drop falls for a long time. It hits the painting without bubbling, without fuming, but is instantly effective. The subject moves slowly and bleaches the canvas.

On the other hand, it was a formation of a new self. I became a motherless child.

Endnotes:

This work uses quotations from several sources, listed here.

György Lukács, “On the Nature and Form of the Essay: A Letter to Leo Popper”, from *Soul and Form* translated by Anna Bostock. From the collection published by Columbia University Press in New York, 2010. *(Used on pages 27, 52, and 80 of this work)*

Richard Kieckhefer’s *Theology in Stone: Church Architecture from Byzantium to Berkeley* published by Oxford University Press in New York, 2004. *(Used on page 24 of this work)*

Joan Darragh and James S. Snyder’s *Museum Design: Planning and Building for Art*. Published by Oxford University Press, New York, in Association with the American Federation of Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts, 1993. *(Used on page 41 of this work)*

Trisha Austin’s essay “Scales of Narrativity”, published in *Museum Making: Narratives, Architectures, Exhibitions* edited by Suzanne Macleod, Laura Hourston Hanks, and Jonathan Hale. Published by Routledge, in Abingdon, Oxon, 2012. *(Used on page 73 of this work)*