Fall 2023

THRESHOLDS

Shannon Anne O'Neill
Bard College

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THRESHOLDS

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College
by
Shannon O’Neill

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
December 2023
THRESHOLDS

Shannon O’Neill
I am often struck by the obvious fact that the other is impenetrable, intractable, not to be found; I cannot open up the other, trace back the other’s origins, solve the riddle. Where does the other come from? Who is the other? I wear myself out, I shall never know.

—Roland Barthes

We have, each of us, nothing.
We will give it to each other.

—Carolyn Forché
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STANDSTILLS</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFTERMATH</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONTUSION</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDDIES</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CENTO OF QUESTIONS AFTER SPENDING YEARS APART</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANIMAL FACTS</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBJECTIVITY</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FLIGHT TO HARTFORD</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRUTHS</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LATE IN THE GROWING SEASON</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALBEDO</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOW FAR ARE WE MEANT TO GO?</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CONVERGENCE</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHOBIAS</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHERE TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE OTHER’S BODY</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ON ELIMINATING OUR COMPETITION</td>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONVERGENCE</td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUR RELATIONSHIP AS A BOWLING MATCH AT AN ARCADE, 6:00 PM</td>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUR RELATIONSHIP AS A GAME OF DARTS AT A TAVERN, 6:38 PM</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LITTLE MYSTERIES</td>
<td></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MEAL WE HAD TODAY</td>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I REMEMBER THE FORMS OF LOVE</td>
<td></td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUBADE IN VARYING DEGREES OF COHERENCY</td>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The dreams turn all the same if left out for too long, and how to strike the balance between letting go or clinging white-knuckled to each day, March slogging through the last of winter’s snow on the side of the highway to some lonesome billboard, sudden and megalithic, its appearance enough to scatter even the mourning doves. 

Pray tell, Spring, how to pick up the pieces, this year’s new winds blowing bangs off of foreheads with no remorse for said foreheads, steam rising from the hills with no heed for car. 

This steam has never seen a car, and still is so careless in its pursuit of sky, has no knowledge of sap, clinging to the lip of the spile, remembering what happens to anything that decides to spill forth, a risky sweetness but a sweetness still, the trees all huddled close, so close, speaking amongst themselves — how? how do they do it? — This is how, the blood caught in one hand held below the nose, which is not enough, or is but only until the end of the car ride, a brief holding until a better remedy can be divined, till then a purposeful delaying, diverted gaze, a face turned away from the eyes.
Obelisk of grief. For need of putting *something* into the ground. The aura grew hair. Grew legs and arms. There was this feeling— not fear, or sadness, or anger. Closer to casual elusion. As though riding the train next to a stranger. Eyes passing through the body though your limbs move to accommodate its space.

Is the knowledge enough to manufacture presence. Or is the mind just sensitive to it. No evidence needed, just a flickering light in the kitchen and a number of questions asked in anticipation of wordless answer. How much do you really want to know.

The voice box and its frozen tendencies. Your face slackened. Your unshowered skin-smell. Only warm thing in your icy bed. Like anyone else, you are apprehensive. Keep your gaze on your lap. By the time you got to the party, people were already dispersing in throngs. Rotating, levitating, around the specter.
Nowadays we amble around the center of our troubles. Roll their stems against our gums. We lift ourselves from the water. Our hair defrosts.

Soon, enough time will pass that we’ll find other names for those sentiments: The heavy dragging limbs, flakes of rusted metal, the smells of rot, grass, bleach, sunscreen, the world a chemical tang.

Our lives were those of cracked tile and concrete, all surfaces grating and drying the skin. The ground was hot and dry underfoot. We walked all the way home and back in the sun.

Since then, the scabs have learned to crust and peel. In the next town over, a bowling alley multiplies
its parking lot weeds. Grows, unthinking.

Late in the season, the heat still

will not let up. Bacteria begins

to breed. It’s one thing to know not
to scratch. Another to feel the itch.
Out here, there are no warm-blooded lips. Only shell. Water. After half an hour of slime

and grit under the fingernails, a crab is unearthed, ready to bite. Rock. Hillside.

Like then: Being awoken by someone much taller and made to face the moon, buffeted

by the salt air and further than imagination. Hissing at light and touch before withdrawing

into the sand. Tetherless, a boat may go anywhere the ocean pleases. No God but weather


bleeding so thick any submerged surface becomes a permanent scab. All wounds

an opportunity. Bodies stir in late morning light while the rip current

siphons the breath.
Do you know me?

Where are you headed, traveler?

Who’s there?

Are you warm where you are?

Are you you where you are?

What is the opposite of devastation?

How does one decide when to begin grieving?

Where is the wind?
You were just pretending, weren’t you?

What is the metaphor for two animals sharing the same space?

But what if they are poems or psalms?

You believe that?

What more do you want?

Can you see what grows along the lake?
Is it joy?

Does it dissolve slowly?

What are the symptoms of your sickness?

To place these flowers on or in the graves?

Could I help in this?

So soft, yes, but in what way?
ANIMAL FACTS

i. Beavers mate for life, though groundhogs don’t, and one has been used as a name for the other.

ii. All sheep are even-toed ungulates. They can recognize the bleats and faces of every member of a large herd. They’re also good at running.

iii. For wolves, monogamy serves a practical purpose, a singular mate making it easier to fend off advancing suitors.

iv. When asked about her entries in the 2012 Great Salt Lick Contest, farmer Kim Jacobs remarks “I think my cows do an OK job, but I really feel my sheep have brought it home for me.”

v. Some animals are injured by cars while pausing to lick the salts that accumulate on a road’s surface. Some animals remember what the other looks like.

vi. What can be remembered is eventually reduced to shadow, some kind of post-sentiment: The darkness, the heartbeat, the slide.

vii. In July of 2018, an orca gives birth to a calf that lives no longer than half an hour. She carries the body on her back for seventeen days afterwards.

viii. The light changes again. The ants follow their lines of crumb.

ix. Most animals who frequent salt licks do not mate for life, though in Ohio, adult males and females associate with each other throughout the year and often from year to year.

x. A photograph places the mineral lick in Sopot, Poland, dated January 1st, 2007. It is the driest thing—the palest thing—for miles, perhaps new, perhaps replacing a depleted one. The wooden base rises up as though planted, as though there is someone it can fool. Below, the understory,
briefly interrupted, leaves a thin dirt semicircle. A drop of soap in a pool of pepper. Preserved, it remains intact, ready to be necessary, waiting for tongues.

xi. In Norse mythology, the divine cow Auðumbla licks away at the salty rime of the cosmos for three days until Búri, the first of the gods, emerges from the ice.

xii. The gaur, up to their knees in mud, lower their heads to taste.
OBJECTIVITY

In the distance, the trees are such a shock of red
one might mistake them for flames, and beyond them
the mountains, surging and ebbing along the horizon. Here.
The snow is driven thick and heavy onto the canvas.
The pine needles drape like tiered skirts,
cascading downwards. Come spring, rapid snowmelt
will swamp the park. You’ll paint that, too—

the sun reduced to a series
of stripes in the water. Birches tangled
and arterial. You painted because you wanted others
to see as you saw: Hills ash-purple after fire. Trunks
climbing into a smoked sunset. Death turns you
into a monument, all questions unresolved, shadows
running long and thin over the uneven ground. Brother
to all untamed things of nature. Suspended within the photograph,
you’ll stay, afloat in your dove grey canoe. The tamed
rasping the surface of the untamed. Eight days
after disappearing, you’ll be removed from the lake. Strokes of sky
roll blue-yellow-green off the edge of the painting.


FLIGHT TO HARTFORD

I used to fit within a circle of legs.
Upon outgrowing these design specifications,
I sought other forms of organization. I scissored my life into several uneven pieces. Delighted at how each fit when dispersed amongst a variety of zippered pockets.

Later, I would learn as a triumph and ends sent in the opposite direction to be headed.

if I was moving.

that it couldn’t be shut? Why hold onto

Earlier in summer,
to find my belongings in my absence.

with childhood handprints,
tee shirts, notebooks

gone indiscernible. All surfaces sticky,

I wasn’t sure. I washed my hands the spoiled materials in search split upon my touch.

like that surprise glob of ketchup out of the bottle only after a few times, strange water be preserved. Do you remember and then practicing it everywhere, only you had the good sense to claim?

Pasta With Meatballs,

Before you knew they were preferred blank? I wanted to live within my means. They had to check my bag

at the gate.

I had brought something

I could not lift above my head.
I’m always thinking
of you. Both of us dressed
in our mothers’ clothing.

So drop me a line. Last night

I wandered through the place
I used to live, made maze-like
and warped.

There were rooms
I had never been in,
and impossible sunlight,

filling windowless corners. These things
keep slipping away from me:
the end of the hall,
words,

what I was going to do
two rooms

& two minutes ago… I couldn’t tell you what it might mean.

To be fair, some dreams
are easier to interpret than others.
There are

a couple guesses as to why

I’m always fighting
with my lover or flying
upwind.

Though one of these
happens more frequently

than the other. And

of course, when I’m in

my childhood home

it serves as happenstance setting,

never quite

the real thing,
details stretched and molded
to fit the mind’s

every whim,

kitchen growing tenfold in square footage

but the flooring still linoleum, or vinyl,

I don’t know which.

But the carpet still off-green
and scented with stale cat piss.

At least, in memory.

After a decade
of believing otherwise,
I find out that we never
really had any heirlooms,
only toy-store purchases
which my father imbued
with sentimental value and I
with my trust.

After a year
of seeing one another,
I realize you’ve never cried
in front of me, though that one time
I thought
you would.

Then again,
I struggle with refraining
from crying in front of people,
so in a certain way
you’ve got me beat.

What else can I tell you?
I come from a place of toe-breaking sidewalk.

From the bottom of the stairs.

I once had a bad streak of luck
that lasted several months to a year

where I kept accidentally
stepping in cat barf.

The truth

is I wish I could give you more.

I don’t want
to tell you the tale

of when I grew longhaired
and brittle in my solitude.
My teeth cemented
into my jaw.

When I walked backwards
out of the night.

I am hard pressed
to even remember those wintered
days, shadows skulking
from one corner to the next. Instead.

Here is the one

in which I grew so big
and tall all my pants
turned into shorts. Here

is where I had starlight
for dinner. I’m trying to tell you,

this isn’t uncommon. This

is the brain I’ve been given

and these are the last
of my desires: Eating
something warm and saucy.

Buying silk mohair.

Putting Pangea back together.
Some are easier to obtain than others, I know.

You can't just go ahead and cut out the middle man.

Everybody needs friends.

I thought about them all morning.
Today I went to the farm in Kingston with Leila. The Dino kale was incredible. Someone that Leila worked with, Pat, described everything as “lush.” We agreed. It was lush. The kale that wasn’t Dino kale— I don’t know its name— was almost as tall as my shoulders. Looking every bit of the word “cruciferous.” Later, Mom texted the family group chat a picture of something Dad described as “a ghastly skeleton.” Her picture came from Georgia and his descriptor from Ohio. Pat told us that the lushness was also kind of overwhelming, that he was trying not to panic about it, to do what he could. “I’m operating,” he said. Bees of all kinds and sizes bobbed over every open mouthed plant. We picked several leaves of both kinds of the lush kale, an eggplant striped with cream and violet, and two beautiful ruby red peppers, longer than my palms, which neither of us could remember the name of. Admired the bitter melons. Ate stray cherry tomatoes from the vine. In the car, we questioned the possible spiciness of the peppers until finally I took a tentative bite and found them sweet. I hadn’t known my mom would visit a museum, or that she’d find a skeleton “cool” enough—her word— to send a picture of it to the rest of us. The next time we will all be in a room together will be November. “This wasn’t here when I was here,” Leila said. The crops were starker and taller than memory, than the spines on the skeleton. “Lush” was the word for it.
Roughly one in five children have a persistent fear of the dark after the age of four or five. Still, having passed that point, I would sit awake in the hall, armed with a pillow and a book, playing sentinel until felled by exhaustion. Other nights I would tiptoe my way to my mother’s room, path illuminated only by the glimpses of night through her windows. Sound turned me to stone. I learned the noise of a body turning over beneath comforter, of deep breathing turning short. At times there was no square of floor I could step on that wouldn’t creak. For minutes I’d stand, trying to discern if her sleep had gone shallow.

In winter, snow would oxidize the sky. Motionless, waiting to hear again what slumber sounded like, time stretched thin and dissipated. Focused only on her breath, fear became a muted hum, mere background tune. The new shapes sharpened and then grew on me, all traced in such gentle light. I was alone, but not solitary. I stepped into the landscape of the hour. The world whittled down to me and the woolen dark of her room, her breathing, the tawny glow of the snowy night. I must have seemed a figment, hardly noise, hardly movement, slipping in between the dense folds of a dream.
HOW FAR ARE WE MEANT TO GO?

I.

The first time I crossed a street on my own was to see my father at a neighbor’s house. My parents were furious. I was still so small—a delight to dress in florals and plaids, fun colors and stripes of all variety. What had I been thinking? Their reaction upset me, who had just wanted to see Dad. And besides, I had done it just as I’d been taught. When you’re a child, you believe this: That the world has been fixed, or will be; that you are good, or bad; or, you want to.
II.

In June we drive six hours North, passing the wheel back and forth until our eyes fatigue. Our destination a doorway called forth from fog. Gravel gives way to dirt. Dirt gives way to water. We abandon car for boat, and then are left with our feet. A chill drifts up from over the water. Find where the fences are crumbled with rot, pressuring the weak points until they splinter. At times, we bother with the usual pretending. Others, we stagger onto the asphalt, unsuspecting, blinded.
These lines lose their meaning.
Before them, on the downwind:
Something harsh to the nose.
A carcass illuminated ever so briefly.
I am the last of the scavengers,
the one who arrives after the birds
have finished their feast & the people
their gawking.
I will crawl out over the place
where nothing grows,
where rubber thins what remains of flesh
into the blacktop.
I will look both ways.
Wittgenstein was far
and our misunderstanding,
our logic
follows awkward
subtraction,
our lovers sprawling
pleasure,
our language
fallen,
desire only.

Summed up to the limit of flesh
we whistle close
meaning *truth*
meaning *sweet*
meaning *one*.

Our ribs afforded
each other’s mouth
lips drawn
world indifferent.
If this kiss has a value it consists in two things:
   a small vaulted room at the limit
   of philosophy

   and the definitive unrest
   of tongues.

   I am of the natural mouth;
   am the love
   the eyes
   the silent.

If I am mistaken,

may others come

and do it better.
PHOBIAS

All summer long I’d fought off mold in the kitchen, the bathroom, our food. The faucet handles were unendingly covered in soap scum. Thoughts ran tepid until stuttering to a stop. Some days regular conversation came as a slap to the face. *How are you. How have you been doing.* I couldn’t just drift through the world, observing. And there was that smell again, pooling beneath the drain. *What do you like. Where do you want to be touched.*

I tried. I asked a lot of questions. The sink was full of food scraps when I arrived. We were on our way home and you were being really funny and I didn’t want to ruin the night. My hands peeled. Wet carrot peels and rice grains. Hunched over the trash can while I filed away the dead skin. It was so humid the glasses drying by the windowsill would stick to the paint. If there’s dampness, there’s potential for growth.
WHERE TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED

Lately, we have started referring to ourselves as though controlled by the Holy Spirit: “The Spirit has moved me;” “The Spirit is pleased;” “The Spirit needs to go take a shit.” We have begun to seep ever-so-slightly from our bodies, cracked ceramic containers troubled with water. In the early morning I see you doubled by it, body magnified as though filtered through a prism.

While you sleep

I

poke your outline, hovering above, your body unawares.

When you wake I ask what’s for dinner.

“The Spirit is craving some tomato soup,” you reply

your nose an inch above your nose.

Yesterday’s supper in the lower intestine.

In the distance a tone plays so high

30
pitched

that

neither

of

us

hear it.
THE OTHER’S BODY

Immediately, an island:
pieced into several bits:
red, warm, pink, the others
grey, drifting, away, away.
Chasing those furthest—
dreams? lovers? will?—

A mirror, then, and our ponderances;
SEARCH: There is a looking, here, gears,
metal, the tck of the clock, stick,
hands, arms, all continual continuous
moving, there is a large difference between
being alone and that other thing (you guess—
mirror? reflection? mystery?)
The bed just laid there while the droning
grew louder, we melt and harden
once cooled, the dream takes off in
a silk scarf, roll over and there it is
again, warm, red, pink.

It was very quiet: I was alone: the bones held
for eight hours of rest: blossom:
the face, turned, could be unawares—
it turns, still. Without it,
what is there to be seen?

The parts fly off again, the lungs
continued, hold, hold, hold, and rotate.
ON ELIMINATING OUR COMPETITION

Umm. Is it cheating if I’m like, one giant bug.
You know, because it’s all perspective. Every minute
detail matters. You and your chicken aversion. Your
pan-sauce-loving self. Hole in the toe
sockless abandon. You rascal you. This isn’t
some trick I’m playing where you are fooled into
the wrong answer. Come, let us point to our glasses.
And having shown love, the participants
begin to take interest in the contents of their drinks,
grateful for an object to wrap a hand around. No.
Not hand. Palp. If I really was that sizeable, I promise
I’d never trap you in my web. Never cocoon you
in slime. I would hold you in my six-to-eight arms,
each spine and tarsus one of love. I would never eat you.
Hypothetically speaking, of course. However big I would be,
you’d be bigger. Maybe a bird. That way there’d be no question.
Of you I’d expect the same. We’d skip the whole matter
of dimorphism, each our own case study in allurement
and virility. So prolific in the arena of affection,
they’d hang our portraits in all the halls.

The Most Symbiotic Relationship There Ever Was.
There we’d be, youth in amber, me with my shimmery
dogbane shell and you with your proud chest,
your two pennant feathers totally improbable, totally un-
aerodynamic, but so flashy any mate would be stupid
not to come running.
At the library, someone answers their phone and speaks in the low tones of a mother. She wants to know if the person on the other end is feeling better, how their stomach is doing. Asks about what they’ve eaten recently; strawberries, cereal. Wonders where the sour came from.

The day before, I watch someone else receive a call and hear whoever is on the other end greet them from several feet away, a nearby room. The two of them speak as though they’re unaware of this.

Months ago, three of us waited for a train only one of us would board.

When I come downstairs in the morning, my parents are still in their pajamas, hair bedraggled. A rare occurrence, to be ready before them.
My friend and I are in town at the same time twice—maybe three times—an year. After breakfast, there is a moment of silence in which we think up excuses to continue talking to one another.

We are lead through larger swathes of people than I’ve weathered in years and a sea of upside-down legs, toes towards the sky, to ice cream and soup dumplings.

It has been four or five years since we’ve last spoken. We will pretend the distance is easily traversed, as though out in the garden, gloves on, spade sinking into dirt with ease. As though we are not still thumbing each other’s new outlines, wondering who we’ve each become.
I’m still half asleep when you walk in, alarm having failed. The figure at the door, for a moment, could be nothing more than dream shadow.

The last conversation I have with the man who taught me how to swim is about my heartbeat. I’ve just woken up after fainting. He is taking my pulse, his face vacant, shuttered. He says the words *athlete’s arrhythmia*. I’m trying to focus on breathing and counting to four. I don’t know what he means.

She says they should stay home from school tomorrow.

I knit you socks. “You made me *socks,*” you say. As if a miracle.
OUR RELATIONSHIP AS A BOWLING MATCH AT AN ARCADE, 6:00 PM

Sunday evening, gliding slowly down the not-quite-center of the lane to account for an inevitable curve. The floor here is stickier than you’d expect in some places and slippery-er in others. We both want to avoid the gutters but can’t agree on whether or not the bumpers should stay. Is there any way to decide this? Or is it just a matter of how hard you can throw? There are countless materials we could be touching; plywood, urethane, skin…I’m stalling. I want to say something funny before my next turn. I can’t guarantee I’ll touch any of the pins. I talk a bad game. I have no special wind-up. Still, we have come to play. We want what any normal people armed with heavy, spherical objects would want: A strike. A steady hand. Yes. We want one more go.
To be truthful, I’ve never played it. But I want you to be impressed when I throw.
This give and take. This vehicle of love.
Inside, two drivers but one wheel. Bedcover battles lost and Sunday lay-ins gone hard and stale. Having run out of words, we tried deep breaths and sustained eye contact but forgot what the point was. *The beginning of love.* Or something. Said it over and over. Something akin to the little mysteries when they were still little, still mysteries, unthought of, unasked. Not puncture wounds and moth eaten fabric. Having given you the characters of my life, I let you stand amongst them. Time. The center console. A natatorium lobby. Are you still coming over for dinner? I'll let you drive. We can run out of options. Pluck every last petal. Rub our legs together until they chafe.
**THE MEAL WE HAD TODAY**

Woah… Okay. Right now. The hour is late and our mosquito night has stuck. No, no, but it’s also like, a nice glaze. All those seeds preparing to onion up. Today I had leftover love. No method of time. I believe in the necessary nutrients; oats, violence, and whimsy. Last month I took a vow to graze among the cactus. I’d refused to tell the world how tough and chewy my being had become, concerned only with the decadent. My advice is to expect the weird shit. Hold the memory within you before cooking it slow and tender. And remember to have little birds circle around your head! Smell in a cartoonish way, where you start floating afterwards! Basically, I’ve been talking really good this week, having grilled routine into the bread. They say the point is to reduce it to a thin sauce, letting the nervousness sit until it becomes the perfect answer. If anyone asks, I’m just basketball. I’m just summer. It’s all consuming. I’m just kidding. That’s also me.
I REMEMBER THE FORMS OF LOVE

So many years ago I looked almost like the fields
tough as the white grass

I remember we walked
we forgot our way together
no more

saw the invisible beetles beginning
to wonder

the sand
that ancient car
the grass

we walked our bare feet downhill
in the bright sun

the stars a ribbon
a lake

the first of August
all night

we took our heads
ringing

under the old jelly glasses
where June would have wet our feet

and leaving
you said us
Today I awake before any of our alarms, dry mouthed and needing to pee. Cemented into the bed and having slept so sparsely I’ve dissolved the border between dawn and dream. Soon the room will be sliced with sun. Soon I will step into the wind-bitten day

unwashed, face rubbed raw. Flaking sleep in the breeze behind me. Donning nothing more than a thin film of yesterday’s love. We think it worth pretending the curtains are thicker than they are, bed and light separated by more than polyester gauze.

Today I’ll have only as much as two scrambled eggs worth of vigor. I’ll clear the old throats of phlegm. Till then, I’ll slide through these next faint hours. Till then we’ll linger at the threshold before language, the world softer and warmer than we know it to be.

—

Face in your armpit. Nose on the bumps of my spine. I wake and I’m sweating. Lurch up into the still-dark. Put on a shirt and pants. Bid the dream to stay out in the hallway, the sun below the horizon. Is that where we are, now? Up twice to piss, once to shed more clothes.

—

Two truths. Two days we’ll go alone. I’m mad and envious
of your mindless shiftings. Have been skirting the fringes of sleep since four. More frayed than any of your worn hems. But you’ll join me soon. There are one or two more warm things to share.

—

I’ll awake and the dawn the gauze the day of it today I’ll wake today I’ll bed the border today I’ll threshold pretending your needing I’ll today I’ll don the language I’ll soon your soft will separate your world between I’ll wind between I’ll bed your throats I’ll awake between worth today I’ll day today I’ll thin I’ll dry have dissolved so soon I’ll mouth the breeze will step the love will soon till then the old dream vigor clear till then nothing till then the dreams our alarms our needing till then yesterday’s face till raw dawn our soon curtains soon the wind I’ll clear I’ll have till then I’ll awake and mouth

—

Roll over. See your blurred face in the predawn gray. Let the fear grow, unbidden, then close my eyes again. Something’s beneath the covers. I’m here. I list the colors of all the objects in the room, quietly, to myself. Peach. Red. Navy. Cream. Look. Closer. There we are.
“Cento of Questions” features lines from Arkaye Kierulf, Richard Siken, Sanna Wani, Jennifer S. Cheng, Warsan Shire, Dawn Lundy Martin, Donika Kelly, Margaret Atwood, Jack Gilbert, Derrick Austin, Chen Chen, Jericho Brown, Jane Wong, and Adam Zagajewski (trans. Clare Cavanagh)

“Objectivity” is after Canadian landscape artist Tom Thomson and his work.

The term “albedo” refers to the fraction of light reflected by a surface. In cities, the sky will sometimes look orange when it snows due to the reflection of light from street lamps, porch lights, or other forms of artificial light.

“The Other’s Body” is after Roland Barthes’ A Lover’s Discourse.

“Convergence” on page 27 includes language from Diane Ackerman’s poem “Kismet” and the introduction to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.

“The Meal We Had Today” is inspired in part by Bhanu Kapil’s The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers, written using a word bank I generated after conducting a series of interviews with my friends. Our conversation was recorded with consent of the participants. My only rules were to ask the same three questions each time, and to only do it at a dinner party.

“I Remember the Forms of Love” includes language from Anne Sexton’s poem “I Remember” and George Oppen’s poem “The Forms of Love.”
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