
Senior Projects Spring 2018

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The Estate

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Bard College

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The Estate

Senior Project submitted to

The Division of Languages and Literature

of Bard College

by

Harry Smythe

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2018

Velvet Sofa

The red velvet is worn pale, testimony to years spent supporting tea takers and Manhattan sippers: suitors, mourners, all those who congregated in the upholstered tabernacle of her living room. The fabric is fastened into place with dome-headed tacks, now black with age. Trouser legs and dress hems have rubbed several to a clumsy polish, and the brass beneath is visible, each one a darkly mirrored aperture, a patinated augury already come to pass. The cushion is soft and buoyant despite its yeoman years. From beneath it protrude four clawed feet, each different from its compatriots. The paws of imaginary beasts, chiseled and varnished into docility. The arms roll into cresting waves, bossed at their center with cherry wood worn smooth by the nervous hands of partygoers, the unconscious stroke of a man's fingers as he looks around the room, smokes his cigarette and ashes, accidentally, into the fine lawn of red fibers, and, embarrassed, vacates his seat.



Dragonfly Lamp

A brass column rises from the base like a shoot, growing to meet the splendid shade: four magmatic ranks of glass on which a band of dragonflies repose. Their wings ripple along the vein-lines, an amalgam of kaleidoscopic color. Behind them man-made edifice gives way to alien geometries; the mottled vacuoles of the wings, magnified to an uneasy size, subsume the upper reaches of the shade. Even unlit, it is a flower full of lambent nectar, a sea of phosphorescence.



Blue Pumps

The inside of each shoe is lined with golden crepe-de-chine. Sweat and wear have darkened and frayed it in little patches under the heel and where her toes rubbed; it seems that she walked briskly, even on a four inch heel.

A single strand of fabric runs from vamp to toe, like a blue tendon, or a handrail.

The stiletto, a slender peg of plastic, juts from the bottom like a broken bone, sickeningly perpendicular to the aerodynamic sweep of the sole. The two islands of the shoe are bridged by a narrow waist which, combined with the sharpness of the toebox, gives each shoe the appearance of a velvet wasp, about to fan its wings and fly from the dusty confines of the closet.



Theseus and the Minotaur

Two forms rise from pulsing shadow. They wetly gleam and tangle in the black. A mortal dance unseen; a hand, a quick knife, one topples. A menace bordering on the delicate. The room and beast breathe one final rasp, and with a shudder, fall silent.



Ukiyo-e Print

One of her elbows, swathed in a dusky, indigo sleeve, rested against the writing desk. From the layered collars of her inner garments, she tilted her head in a moment of frustration. Wind blew in through an open window and took hold of a strand of her hair. It lifted the prints hanging on the walls and played at the leaves of her notebook. She took no notice of the breeze. Her brush twirled absently in her outstretched hand, scattering sooty drops of atrament onto the paper, where they obscured that morning's thoughts -- "another fine spring day -- I awoke and walked with Chiyo" and the rest consigned. She noticed her mistake and sighed, then stood to fetch a blotter from her bedroom.



Evening Dress

Poppies grow across the velvet trellis and strangle it, a mask of lace which devours whole its hapless symbiote; a black tree choked by crawling vines, which despite some slick maneuvering -- a cinch at the waist, and an explosion at the bustline -- can do nothing to shuck the vicious grip. Eventually, the row subsides. The new amalgam flows across the shoulders in bitonal rivulets and reaches coalescence at her back, then stops, faltering at the rubicon of modesty.



Tsuba

Pussy willows bow to unfelt breeze. Around the sword hole, butterflies play.



Tsuba 2

Beetle chases mantis while wasp takes flight above. A clutch of flowers goes ignored
in favor of the gilded race.



Tsuba 3

Ranks assemble from the frozen tracery. Each lock yawns towards neighbor strands,
and awaits the command to break.



Bracket Clock

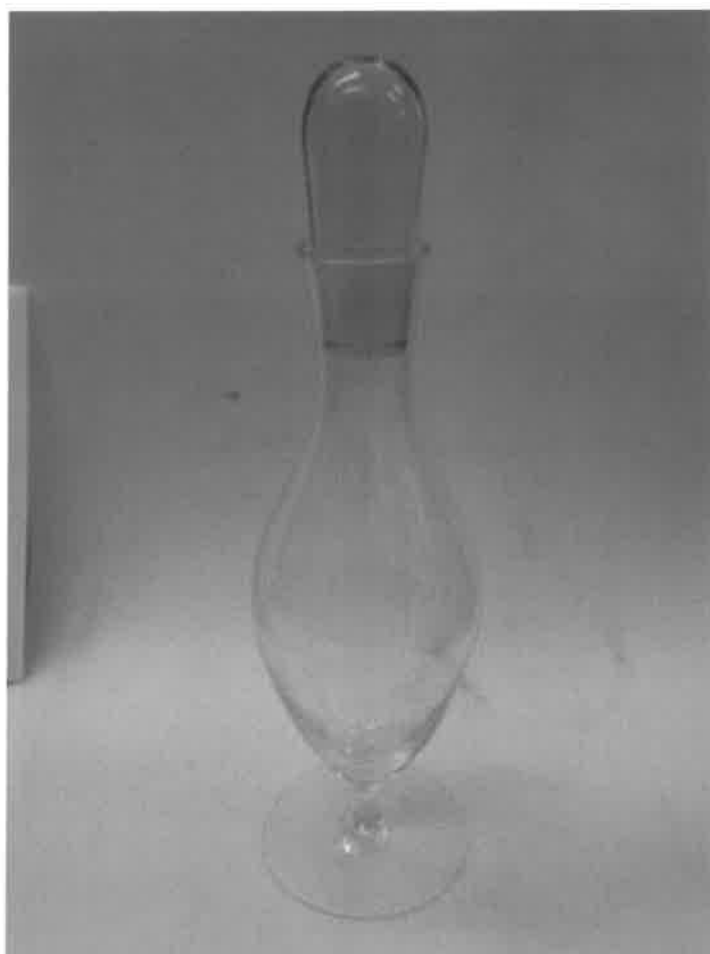
No crowds wait gathered at the door; no masses bustle through to worship. In their place three white dials sit ensconced, their hands unmoving. Behind them, unseen, lies a thicket of cogs stuck in a loop of ceaseless genuflection. The clock is coated in flaking gold leaf, and painted vines of green and red that make their slow climb to the spire, twisting past the etched grills and the buttresses, fingers intertwined to form sinuous arabesques, and hagiographies far too small to comprehend. Four minarets rise above the edifice like stars. Each is capped with a fine crescent moon, bodies of the crystal orrery that once kept time on the mantelpiece.



Decanter

The decanter sits empty, an amber chrysalis on the tabletop.

I last saw it making its way around the salon, ferried from hand to glass, stopping only to refill, contents transfixed by sunrays, throwing prismatic halos on the wall behind.



Slippers

Luminous inkblots danced across the cordovan, cast like shadows by the chandelier.

The leather is not so much sewn as riveted with thread, forming bastions of red flesh.

It has been scuffed to the quick time and time again, repolished back to whole. They have sat in the closet undisturbed for years, collecting dust in sedimentary layers; still, they retain their warm patina. The cork insole, burnished by a slipping heel, shines darkly. The cork is embossed with the outline of her foot, a memento imprinted in the insole.



Hair Comb

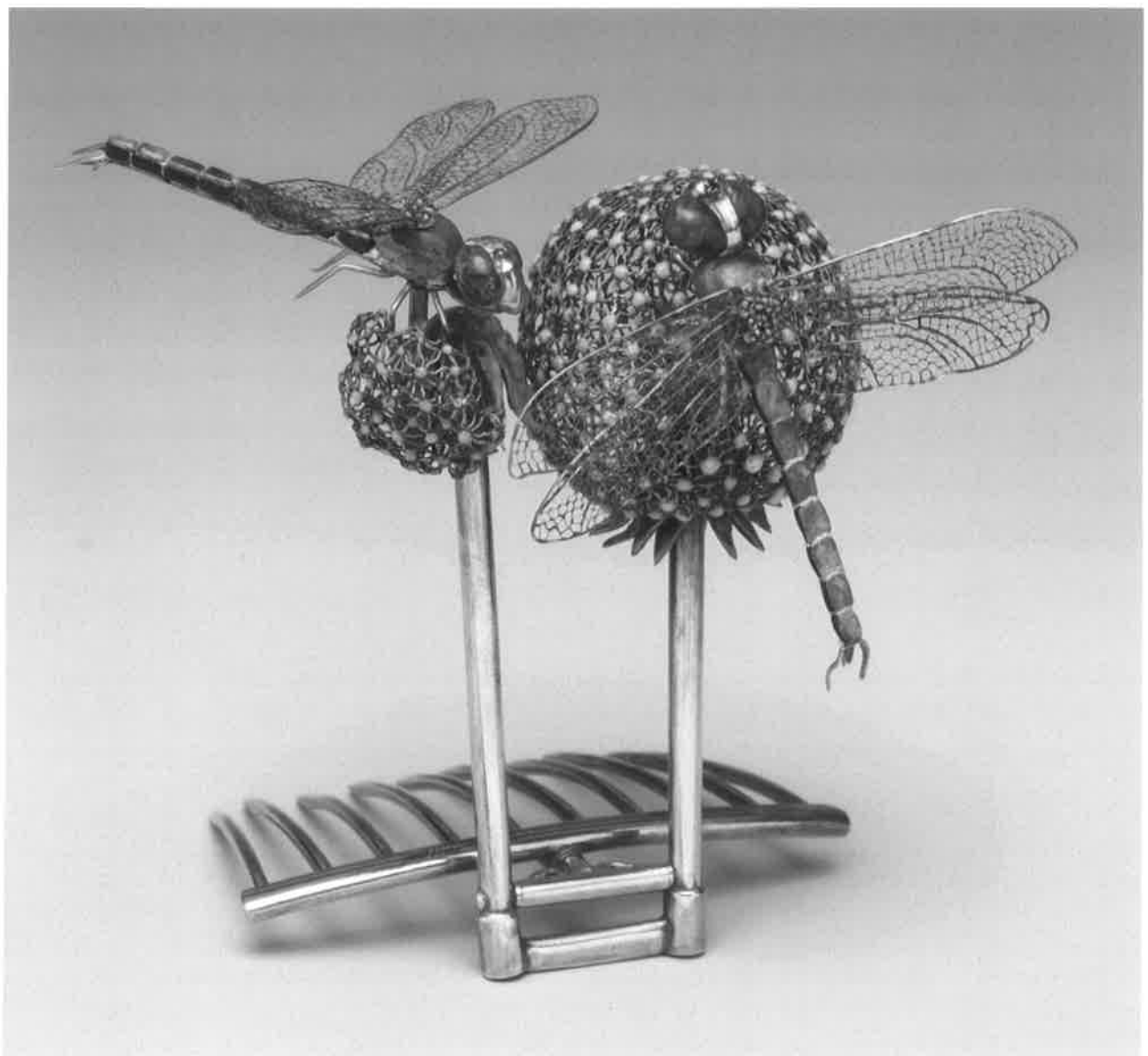
The comb was a tool for redirecting gazes; it arrived with a letter which proclaimed it impossible to ignore, and indeed it was. More than one debutant in a custom ball gown had found herself overlooked in favor of two golden dandelions sprouting from a garden of dark curls.

The flowers shone even in the unlit theatre, possessed of a preternatural luster that faded with neither time nor darkness. The rightmost dandelion has begun to die; its yellow blaze replaced by a seedbulb of woven silver wire. Beads of white enamel dot each vertex like florets ready to be carried by the breeze.

The other flower has just emerged from its bud; a gentle hand of copper leaves brushed aside as it awaits rigidity.

Resting on each dandelion is a thin finger of blue opal. Two sets of tourmaline eyes bulge from beady heads. They flicker imperceptibly, ruled by ancient protocol. The abdomens, each a single garnet, are topped with a nest of golden prongs, each holding

a tiny emerald. From this hub unfurl the wings, bifurcate layers of shining lace which, although still, hum with skittish energy. Sometimes, when she removed the comb and replaced it in its velvet box, she simply sat with it, losing herself in the delicate geometry. Transported to the meadow where such jeweled flowers grow, she rolled in turquoise fields, and sipped lapis from the pond.



Paperweight

In the study, where the advances of central air had not yet penetrated, and an open window was a necessity in the summers, the solution for one's windblown papers was to anchor them with heavy drops of glass; this one harbors a sprawling nebula of color, a molten tesseract encased in solidified miasma, suspended for eternity and seeming, even now, to reach towards unknown distances.



St. George

Warm light against the cheek plate casts jaundiced shadows down his jaw; they frame his scowl, and conjoin in the shaded pool beneath his eyes. Unhurried by the setting sun, he stands at rest, hips askew in languid contrapposto. He carries easily the weight of his cruciform sword, which rests in the crook of one filigreed elbow. From the crown of his head to the tip of his sabatons, his armor blooms with fey tracery, anfractuous coils of steel running light and lithe like its young man it protects. His helmet grows over his head like a Phrygian beechnut, extending past the temples and the neck, where its flesh settles in molten whorls, as if just poured from the crucible. Beneath, the gorget yawns towards the fluted pauldrons, silver sunbursts seeded there by the holy sisters, coaxed from the ore by ageless hymns.

A Bithynian orchid sprouts from his chestplate, a emblem brimming with the same conviction as his quiet gaze; its petals spread like a war fan's ribs, wet with venomous dew.

Beneath his eyes the plain sprawls, and three days of riding. He gathers his sword and calls his horse, and once mounted he departs for unknown lands, undeterred by the throng of doubters gathered at the outskirts. As they broach sight's edge, mount and rider flicker once, then evaporate, merging with the harsh glare of the sun.



I pulled away from the house, my first day complete. I had yet to scratch the surface of her collected wealth; the hours had flown by, lost in the kitchen and the sitting room. Sylvie was the type, apparently, never to part with a possession, and her tables overflowed with trinkets and clothes, languishing, purposeless, in the unlit house. I resolved to return tomorrow -- my work was thankless, yes, but incomplete, and besides, I had started to feel an odd pang of affection for the old lady whose life I was recollecting. Her tarnished spoons and ancient coffee mugs, her dresses long unworn; these swam before me as I drove back to my hotel, and took root in the darkened sections of my thought.

Spirit of the Wind

The face seems cast from frosted air. Its open mouth beckons forth the road's horizon, and screams for increased velocity. Unbothered by the searing wind, she is a jubilant vision; speed's translucent war mask, spurred onward by a V8 engine.

Eventually, Sylvie lost her license. She insisted to all listeners that it was her choice; it was becoming undignified for a woman of her stature, and besides, what passed for an automobile these days disgusted her. No power, no noise -- cheap Oriental toys, nothing more. She'd kept some part of her old charger, though; a memento of the old roads, and the heads that turned as she soared past them.



Urn

The globe breathes a silent whirl. It is an object of unreachable mystery, a system of brass continents conjoined by welted seams. An ifrit's prison perhaps; a mechanized seed, or a sun from Vulcan's hands, borne to the wretched below in an act of compassionate treason.



Hiroshige's Mountain

Paper bodies flutter in the sheer blue. Their trailing barbels flick through lazy supinations as the kites tug against their anchor knots. On the rooftops children roll and carom. Three pairs of eyes flit from kite to kite, then for a moment to a snapping span of line, ready to detect any telltale derangements or loosening, then back to the translucent sails that dance above. Covered in a full season's snow, the great mountain looms behind them; commander on a white plane, a monument of ancient silence, so massive as to go ignored.

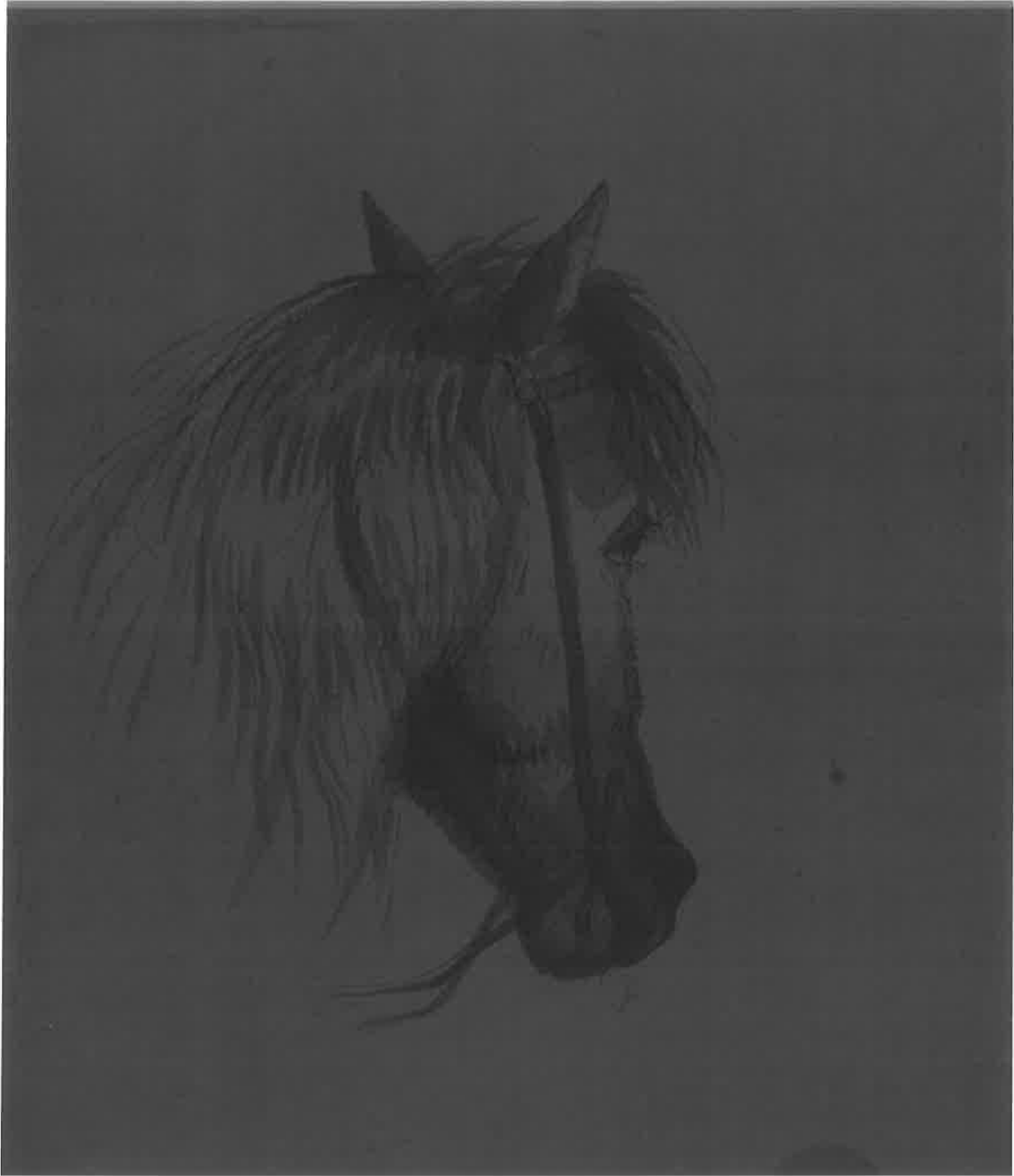
At the top of the page a heavy band of indigo looms, deep as the heavens. As it suffuses the page and fades into the middle sky, the woody coronas of the printing block shift and curl, the very currents of the air traced out in ink.

The kites climb higher towards the ribbon of blue atmosphere, peering through the color's depth and past it, into reaches never cut or pressed.



Sylvie's Horse

Liquid eyes fix elsewhere. His mane falls across a sturdy brow, obscuring it. Fine ochre hairs lined by a pensive hand, each charcoal smear methodical, carving stroke after stroke into the page. The neck ends in thin air, equine muscle giving way to empty white paper. Reins trace the stoic face and fade, their ends curling into the fleshless atmosphere like brown smoke. Shadows play under his chin. Cavernous nostrils flare at the nothing in the distance, as an unseen tail swats at unseen flies, and the days roll away beyond the porch.



Cigarette Case

Expertly milled from a single block of silver, there is little indication of its true nature; the seams disguised, and the hinges hidden, appearing as a solid ingot. Only the hand confirms what the eye does not believe; the box is hollow.

On the front, a Chinese dragon weaves through whorls of rolling cloud, his body alive with a thousand hand chased scales, nostrils spewing smoke. In one taloned paw he holds his orb; a moon sized pearl engraved with "To W.B.B -- from Ching Ling Soo."

The reverse displays a bamboo forest. Slender beams grow at windblown angles, bowing to the weight of newly sprouted leaves.

In the hollows a tarry blackness lingers, in the dents and brushstroke scratches; a gradient of shadow, a byproduct of the decades. Only the dragon and his pearl remain untouched, polished to a luster daily by removal and replacement in the breast pocket.



Hairpin

A dozen wire hoops embrace; a brittle cage of antimony, glazed in white light, pierced by crooked pin and topped with star leaved flowers, which themselves bloom silver filaments.



Footstool

Ochreous leather stretches over the seat like a drumhead, and fastens to the sloping frame by unseen means. Its legs are tapered monopods spanned by wooden scaffolding. The carver has riddled the piece with perfectly placed irregularities -- knobby buttons between joints; channels that separate into bundles of tightly wound muscle, alien and fibrous, flowing into spread fingers. It perches like a massive insect on carpet-leaves, perfectly still to avoid the sweeping gaze of birds or dinner guests, ready to leap to safety at a moment's notice.



Radio

The speaker tapped against the peacock fan. It kept time with the waltz, sending ripples through the grillecloth with each syncopated exhalation. Firelight swam through the wood of the cabinet in shifting knots, tendrils of red warmth. Two lacquered fingers reached to turn the volume knob, lowering the music to a whisper; their dance had outlived the fire, and the hour called for bed. Switching off the static, the pair departed, and left the radio to cool down in the alcove.



Fountain pen

From a distance nondescript; a black bullet on the desktop. On approach, its pearlescent inlays bloom, shedding oily halos. For years it had languished in its wooden box. Now exposed to light, it seems revitalized, shivering with soft breath.



Candelabra

It hides like a polished octopus between the rows of other belongings. The central stalk rises from the concentric steppes of the base, then bows outwards, creating a bulbous gall in the center. It narrows and splits, each branching form making space for itself amongst its neighbors; eight limbs become uncountable in the dim light of the attic; a forest of sloping boughs wrought from tarnished metal, awaiting, once more, their respective illumination. When the candles are lit, I imagine it's a beautiful sight – ruddy flame bouncing between the stems, collecting in warm pools on their roundest points.



Ashtray

High, sloping sides of Bakelite, or ceramic. Four notches around the sides, for holding up to four cigarettes. The color has faded from the years of usage, and the enamel, black and chipped, announces it as the property of one Berger; a restaurant, perhaps a hotel. Sitting on her bedside table it collected mountains of dust, the remnants of multitudes ground into its yellow flesh.

Chess Set

Two hunched silhouettes sat a foot apart, eyes fixed on the space between them. The bunkroom was silent except for one man's ragged cough.

They both wore woolen jackets which, once proud, had pilled and decayed to scraps. Cigarettes burned in both men's hands, the smoke lingering in the still air. At last one makes his move; he snatches up a bishop and removes it, before placing a knight on the vacant square. Spent pieces stand in two lines at the edges of the board; it has been a bloody game, and the lost outnumber the living by a somber margin. The coughing man prepares his rebuttal, plucks his queen from the board with near-parental care.

His blackened fingers trace the crenelations of her crown, and remember how Robson, his squad's medic, had carved them, hunched over an ammunition crate, retracing and reshaping her body's slender lines with his penknife. Jimmy Beck daubed bootblack squares on a sheet of plywood; the files were crooked and clumsy, but there were the right amount of squares. A throat cleared across the table and the room returned to focus. The piece light in his hand, as if to mock the weight of his decision; Her vacant

face offers no solutions. The beechwood is as white and blank as Beck's was, when they machine-gunned him in last week's escape, her body stiff as Robson's, when a rifle round divulged his contents. The queen came down on the board with a soft click.

"Check."



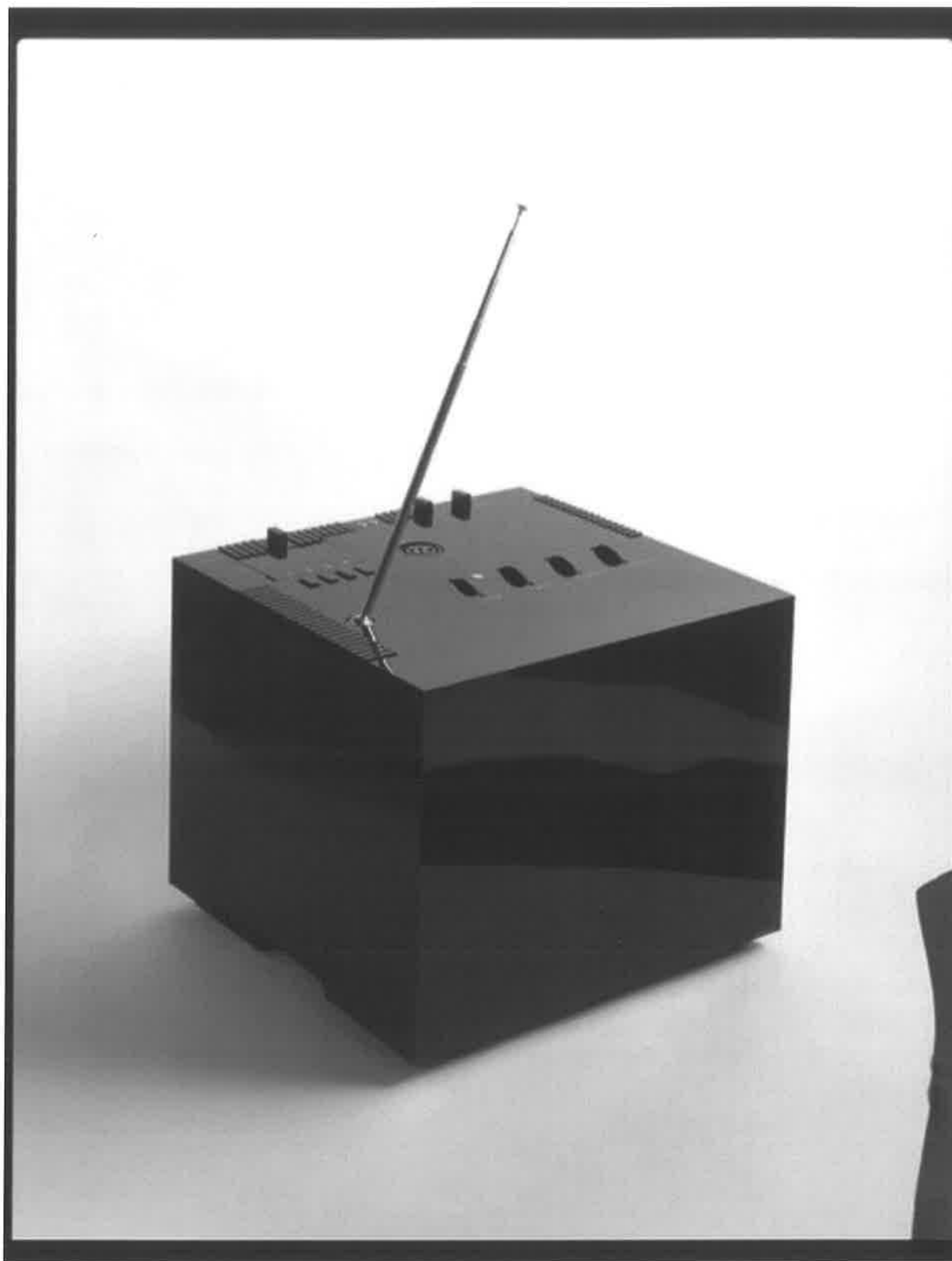
Teacup

Cubist lines of filigree climb the sides like kudzu. They snap and jolt, labyrinthian roots conjoining in a sharp meander. They run perfectly parallel, leaving a bare trench of white china glaring underneath. Having made short work of the teacup, the creepers set their sights on a fresh trellis, and tunnel into the saucer below, riddling the porcelain with golden weeds.



Television

A wiry stalk of aluminum sprouts from the brick like bamboo. With the screen unlit, it becomes an inscrutable block of plastic and glass, false density suggested by the portraits it reflects. A line of silent dials sits embedded in its scalp. Dust has accumulated in their knurlings, and in the speaker pores, a testament to her opinions of this pastime.



Venetian Mask

With its leering beak and painted spectacles, the mask radiates unease. It was acquired on a trip to Venice, and hung impulsively in the living room. It does not resemble a bird as intended, but instead a pair of nightmare lips, extruded in a tortured dream. Its features droop into a wet proboscis, searching darkly at the night air.



Jewelry Box

An inch and a half high, perhaps. Wooden, painted with a hunting scene. Lanky wolfhounds chase alien herds through the woods. A sitting Khan decorates the box top, looking down at his sword and shield, eggshell white the color chosen for his skin, at odds with his flowing blue robe, the gold of his helmet, the red of his riding jerkin. A bird flies above him, clumsily proportioned against the Lilliputian pines.

Pitcher

When she looked across the breakfast table, her reflection glowered back. She fingered her mug and pulled faces, watched her features distort in the makeshift mirror. Her nose elongated and her eyes widened into dewy slits. Her teeth, grotesquely magnified, became a row of crooked white shingles protruding from swollen gums. When she had seen it in the shop the pitcher had seemed the height of modernity. Its prow jutted proudly forward, slicing through the tablecloth like an ocean liner. It was simplicity itself; one sheet of brass, bent into a sharp teardrop and plated in gleaming chrome. The handle was one loop of metal, riveted to the spine. Now, though, it seemed austere. The room was already flat without Bill, and the sleekness of the tableware offered few solutions. Sighing, she imagined crowds packing the pitcher's siderails, waving handkerchiefs and hollering as it departed harbor, steaming across her kitchen to the dining room, dispensing huddled masses to new futures in the china cabinet.



Icarus

A bead of sweat plows a furrow down his dusty cheek. It plummets to the hot ground and vaporizes. He follows its descent with his face, turning it low so his father will not read his doubt. He is naked save a linen head cloth, which does little to deflect the pounding sun. Peering over the edge, he closes his eyes. He feels the weight of the wings. Two rippling bouquets of feathers, fastened lovingly around his arms; the genius of his father, made flesh, and bound to his boy. Icarus begs the wind to lift him, to play over his body like the ocean below and render it weightless, that he might swim in it. He steps one foot over the edge. His mind is transported to the prison tower, to the boat that brought them here, to the many nights alone with the Cretian waves, watching as they broke on shore. He'd spent half his life elevated, trapped between earth and sky. But now his freedom beckoned. He takes one shaky leap and falls, then catches the collar of the wind. As his wings unfurl they find the rising air, and it carries him skyward like the ash from a pyre.



Netsuke

Stiff faced, the rat-catcher bellows in impotent rage. He's powerless as his quarry clambers over his back, delivered from his club by a nearby gutter. The rats have come to know his smell and feel his step -- a marauding *oni*, soon escaped. He wears no clothing but a loincloth -- why sully a perfectly good garment with such lowly work -- and his muscles, hard as rawhide, erupt from ivory skin like welts.



Radio Nurse

Behind her bakelite grill transponders purr. The radio nurse is a consummate professional, and reports each gurgle and cry with full fidelity. Her face is flat and featureless; a Kendo fencer's mask exuding nothing but force of will, a silent promise to duty. Her hair, a single piece of burnished plastic, seems to sigh with patient love; a disembodied crossing of arms.



Nautilus Lamp

There are no nacreous chambers here; no abalone or golden spirals. No; a woman's hands cut each scrap of glass, laid the came and soldered them. Piece by piece she wove the scaffold of his shell, retracing Precambrian logarithms in lead and light, an ouroboran spider web bedecked in scales of green. He is the king of a Favrile sea, floating above the base supported by an aqueous caryatid; a pseudopod extending from the urchinous form below like a Primordial Atlas, an undreamt anemone rooted to the writing desk.



Wedding Dress

Velvet etchings dance the dream swirl through silk. A porcelain maze emerges from the gauze; Verdant feathers take root in the weft. Olive branches roll in contiguous knots, as elephantine branches erupt in milky bloom. On her wedding day she had four to carry the mothwing train. It billowed behind her like a sail as she glided into the harbor of the aisle. The veil was good as lost once lifted, and abandoned when she was carried to the waiting car.



Pipe

I turn the bowl and tap its wooden elbow, then trace the slender barrel with my eyes; I lose them in its nebulous roil. Before I realize, my mouth has closed around its plastic lips. I breathe through it, and it exhales the scent of vaporous ash, one long gone from me.



Lighter

The rake's talisman is a heavy silver lozenge. It is the perfect weight when palmed; the ideal dimensions to be toyed with under the table, drawn swiftly from an inside pocket and with a snap ignited, charming the young woman across from you. You stoop while she extends and the cigarette is lit, and your excuse for proximity has come and gone. She stays. Her beauty is young and unchaperoned. Dark effulgence bounces through her curls, and her laugh penetrates the shell of smoke and talk, rasps away the unfilled space around you. The hours fly and the lighter is produced again and again, a fleeting gleam in the hand, breathing orange flame.



Netsuke

Her body rounds against the weight, countenance grim but suppliant -- she will serve until the bowl is empty. A sheaf of sweat greased hair uncouples from her braid. Ivory strands, a pin's width, fall across her face, reddening from strain and shame.

Her hakama are bundled underneath her knees; her carver has given each trouser leg a hundred tiny flower blossoms, gouged from white bone one thread at a time.

Leisure Suit

Mr. Fish's wrinkled hands held the shears with an assuredness only decades of experience could impart. Inspired by some newspaper photographs he had seen earlier in the week, he set to cutting out the rest of the pieces, tracing their lines with the black handled blades. The shears had just been sharpened and they parted the wool like water. The fabric he chose for this particular construction was, and still is, hideous. Its sedimentary pinstripes reminded Fish of the agates he found in the Kent creekbeds as a boy, variegated lines of red and yellow merging into psychedelic noise. Its colors washed over him as he hewed supine curves into the edifice of the wool, molding it and stitching it, until, at last, it resembled a suit. The collar is flared and exaggerated, until it resembles wings. The shoulders are broad and strong, while the trousers taper to a clean finish, lending the wearer a distinctly triangular silhouette.

Finished, Mr. Fish stepped back from the form and, smiling broadly, began to think about how much to charge.



Medicine Bottle

The yellowed label reads "Veronal -- registered trademark -- Barbitone, Bayer products--" the rest is torn away. The contents long consumed, a chalky cataract remains, coating the inside of the bottle. The neck is wide, and stoppered with a plug of frosted glass; a film of faded fingerprints betrays a set of fumbling hands, anxious fingers unable to squeeze or lift, pawing feebly like a dying honeybee on a cold windowpane.



Box

Colloidal galaxies roll in amber murk. The surface of the casket ripples like fresh cafe au lait.

A band of thin fingers hugging the bottom of the box raises a molding of carefully chiseled lines, which, combined with the stepped lid gives it the appearance of a diminutive ziggurat, or a mouse's sarcophagus.

The thought of what lies inside renders the lid too heavy to lift. Some ridiculous treasure of hers perhaps, a salacious memory long buried; or more unappealing still, nothing.



Kimono

A rustle of wing feathers alights on the breeze and a dozen cranes take flight.

As they fly their breasts shed a rain of golden wildflowers, which, backed by the reddening sunset, glimmer gently with warm light. They are jade fireworks, and never fade from the air; the couriers of heaven, who bear the wisdom of a thousand years.

The dye has not dulled with time and the kimono shines brightly on the dress form. A band of lamplight wells from the silk, and floats there like an alazarin glaze.



Vase

Like an ivory teardrop, the fluted neck stretches upwards and away from its bulbous torso, opening, with an airless gasp, into sedated bloom. Just underneath the lip of the spout wraps a blue band. Rich color grasps at the throat with tightening fingers, as the painted lines erupt in subtle geometries too delicate to approach alone, instead asking to be unwoven, separated into constituent components, traced one strand at time, until, their entangled mystery too much, it draws the eyes downwards, to the farmhouse below. Flanked by conifers, crowned with starling swarms, the rolling grass spills away from the front door towards a distant windmill, perfectly still, waiting for a porcelain breeze.

Engagement Ring

Although entombed for forty years, the stone exudes a virginal hope. Its unblemished face fills with life the moment the box's lid is lifted. Sealed within it are transparent whims and ill considerations; the marriage did not end well. The diamond perches on its bezel like a pale eye, an heirloom which bore witness to the birth of two generations, a silent steward of her every secret and discretion. A companion to her finger, there for every letter, every fuck and argument; a compact bead of memory, sealed away in its velvet box.



Yves Saint-Laurent Pant Suit

A pair of patent leather slingbacks tap a tattoo on the hallway tile.

Above, the wide cuffs of her smokestack trousers sashay in rhythm with her step, sending shivers through twin columns of grey wool.

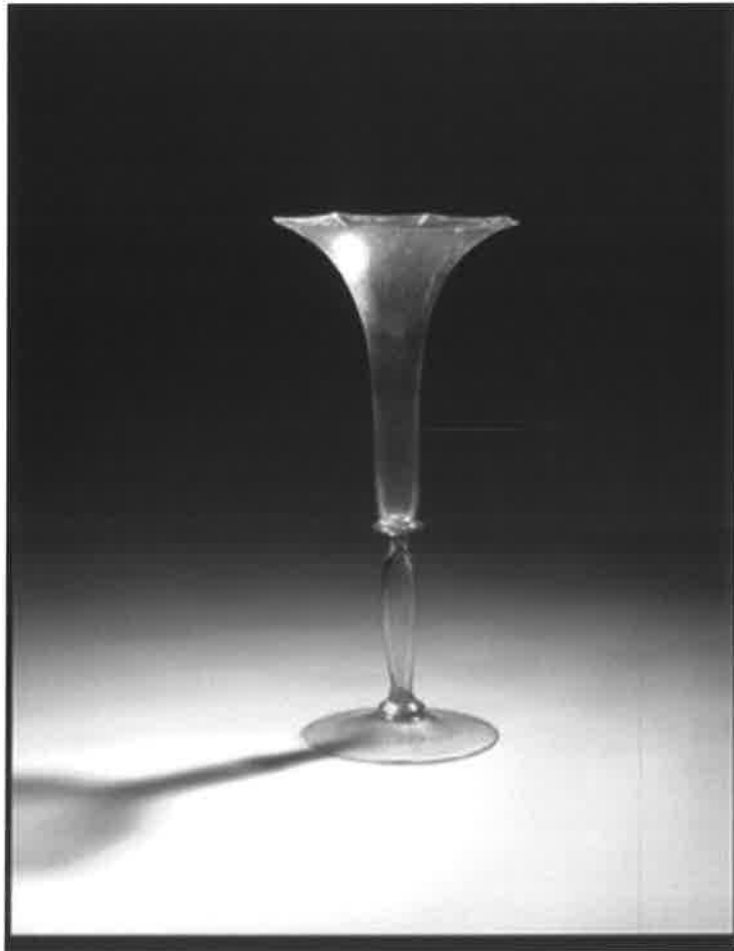
Her jacket is worn like a double breasted cuirass, girding her from the stares of the scandalized and disapproving. It is simply shaped and ornamented sparingly with just four lacquered buttons and a brace of pockets. It fits her like a casket, airplane edges and razored lines not sewn but constructed, engineered to contain her rage, to translate the venomous contours of her body into a language these men might understand.

The secretary buckles to her curtsied nod, and soon after the boardroom door yields to her exactitude. The table quiets at her arrival; noting this, she smiles to herself, and takes a seat.



Crystal Wineglass

A cup.



I did not finish my task. Daunted by the sprawl, I decided to skip town, and let the village handle the remainder. The thought of a personal history so consigned sent waves of heartbreak through me, but there was no recourse; I did not have room for such volume, and in derelict condition, it was unfit to be donated to even local museums. I took my leave, and left Sylvie's memory to fade from my mind.

