The Medium: A sequence of Ekphrastic sonnets.

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The Medium:
A Sequence of Ekphrastic Sonnets

by

Julie Dennison

A Creative Writing Project submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research through the Department of English in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at the University of Windsor.

Windsor, Ontario, Canada
1996

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Foreword

A girl, born into a family of psychics, is urged upon reaching puberty to follow family tradition, to become a psychic medium. She is appalled. Louisa thinks that to sell her occult powers would be tantamount to prostitution. She refuses to comply, but she cannot deny her heritage.

*The Medium* is a sequence of seventy unrhymed ekphrastic* sonnets that address woman’s cultural identity, alterity, and representation from within the fictive frame described above. Unbalanced by her paranormal sensibilities, plagued by intrusive entities she neither understands nor wishes to encounter, Louisa struggles for control. These poems figure her reluctant inner odyssey—from fear, through anger, arrogance, resistance and defiance, ultimately to a satisfying reconstruction of the role of medium—in a series of encounters with well-known, often iconic works of art.

A sequence of ekphrastic sonnets is, it seems to me, an ideal medium for cultural critique. Although the speaker of these poems "sees" key moments in Louisa’s life, the logic of the vision is intuitive: in *The Medium*, Enlightenment ideals confront contemporary Canadiana. Quattrocento realism queries an expressionist abstraction, a madonna questions morals of annunciation angels; visions that originate in the akashic records are not ordered by the master narratives of history, geography and patriarchal domination. *The Medium*, poised as it is between the visual and verbal arts, has the advantage of a not this/not that, almost mystically distant point of "view." As the project plays between the image and the written text, between conventions of the narrative, the sonnet, and fine-art history, archetypes of power common to both traditions are revealed. Power can be used, abused, ignored; it all depends on who is in control.

*I follow James W. Heffernan's definition of ekphrasis as writing based upon a work of visual art.*
Not a Bawdy House
Jupiter and Io

after Correggio, 1532

They told you it was necessary to be ore and ether, solid as the flesh, diaphanous as dust, if you sat down in grandma's velvet armchair, and, although you used to beat the old cloth, you had never dreamed so many musty syllables as now, when, with your own clouds billowing, you grasp the difficulty hidden in your heritage. Voluptuary Io sits ecstatic: you, the medium know she must not feel Jupiter's caress. They told you there was metal somewhere, needles buried in the dark sfumato you could thread yourself through, if you knew the system. You must yield, but only to the sharpest inner eye. *Three times on sentence, twice on word.* Delete the armchair travels of a god, and you can be the pulse of influence across the sky, the medium, the message. *Click.*

644. LEONARDO DA VINCI. MONA LISA. c. 1503–5.
Oil on panel, 30¼×21¾" (77 × 53.5 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris
La Gioconda (Mona Lisa)

after Leonardo Da Vinci. 1503

Ah, Louisa. I've been waiting for you. Come dear, sit beside me in this nice, soft, velvet chair. What's that? You're trembling.
Mustn't let the dark disturb you. Here, I'll light a candle. Yes, I promise. Now, you come to grandmother, my dear. It's time.
Oh, bother. Look, she's crimped your hair. Ribbons are a nice touch. I concede, the red dress even passes—but a pinafore? And starched?
My guests do not like artifice. Your mother, child, is one of those the angel skipped right over. Hopeless. Never understood. But you do,

I can see that. You are one of us, Louisa. And your grandmother is going to show you something very special. Close your eyes. Yes. Now when I place my finger in the middle of your forehead, does it tingle?
Isn't that nice? Doesn't it feel—no, don't be afraid, don't squirm, he isn't going to hurt you, child. You have to let the vision come. Hold still.
Ow! You beastly child. She bit me. Ran off. Didn't even smile.

Woman With Gloves

*after Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. c. 1892*

The first time she is truly clear about the threat, she lights the thirteenth candle, hears her daughter scream: *This is a cardboard world, with matches everywhere.* She can remember mother’s warning: *One day, you will have to leave the child with me. This errant Horror skips a generation. You are free; but she, as clipped as feathers, needs to learn the ways of spirits. To protect herself. Oh, that “with me.” The tenor could extinguish a maternal star.*

That is the very day a painter finds her irresistible: sitting on a park bench in a muslin gown, gazing so far off she seems transparent. As he brushes through a veil that doesn’t hide, a glove that doesn’t warm, he wonders how a woman so contained as this would fare, were she committed to the medium.

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715 ALBRECHT DÜRER. SELF PORTRAIT 1500.
Oil on panel. 20⅛ × 19⅜ in. or 51 × 49 cm.
Pinakothek, Munich.

716 ALBRECHT DÜRER. ADAM AND EVE 1504.
Engraving. 9⅜ × 7⅜ in. or 23.2 × 19.1 cm.
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
Self Portrait; Adam and Eve

*after Albrecht Dürer. 1500 & 1504*

You haven't seen your own reflection since the day she took you to the south wing, sat you down before a shimmering tapestry and tossed its images aside. *Look*, she said, *into the mirror.*

*Never come into this room alone.* But frantic figures raced.

You stood, next day, intent before the panorama, had to know what all those men and dogs were doing. *Hunting unicorns,* a voice like Grandma's whispered from behind the tapestry.

And that was when you stepped through, first time into ripples—

—bearded man, and older, one who hadn't eaten, slept or spoken for so long words curled in on themselves and twisted strands of his exquisite hair into a portrait fine enough to hold your gaze. Had you then caught the fingers' serpentine pursuit of mink trim on his housecoat, they might not have snaked through, bitten apple, taken you for ever. *Had* you caught them, *seen.*

4. (opposite-upper) ALBRECHT DÜRER. *Self-Portrait.* 1500. Oil on panel, 26.25 x 19.25".


5. (opposite-lower) ALBRECHT DÜRER. Adam and Eve. 1504. Engraving, 9 7/8 x 7 5/8".

632. ANDREA MANTEGNA. ST. SEBASTIAN. C. 1455–60.
Tempera on panel, 26⅞×11⅜ (68×30.8 cm).
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna
St. Sebastian

*after Mantegna.* 1455

The morning after Grandma speaks to spirits, someone has to set the room right. Windows must be shuttered, candles snipped, the motes of dust and wonder aired. Having seen behind the tapestry, you are prepared to wrestle flying teacups from the air, wrench chairs and damaged figurines down from ceiling, even mend the velvet covers. But repair the hanging? You'd as soon submit the needlepoint to classic columns, egg-and-dart yourself into a tempera-on-panel block of two dimensions, be a cushion for the pins and needles someone else will use to prick his name. *Sebastian.* Burning in your forehead, arrows piercing from below but not within. And always ropes and ruins, figures in the clouds. On horseback, someone in the distance, flying where you can't see.

The Book of Urizen

after William Blake, 1794

Lemon-polished hardwood, beeswax dripped upon the floor and iron shackles mingling with gasps of last night's candles—you are not sure what will burn into the ether when you squat beneath grandmother's table, only that there is a caustic something out there. Flickers, gusts, sulphuric traces, lingering. And then the unexpected, intimate caress. You shudder. Pulsing in your forehead is a knot of viscous pity, swelling, threatening to burst; it bites into the polished copper surface of your mind. An acid links your blood to his, your bearing to his glowing foetal posture. Corrosive sweat, the manacles of his infernal method—only these compare to sitting under dark mahogany, crouched in the abstract service of so many bearded men. Uncertain what will burn. There are so many guests.

Prima Ballerina

after Edgar Degas. 1876

One thing to submit, another, for a seer to be flung
from an accustomed lookout into mannerist expansion.
Flames. A Prima Ballerina taking final bows. You'd like
to sink deep into velvet, smother voices, block out everything
but mother's mother's chair, that single candle burning
at the---flicker---centre, reaching---agony, charred flesh---the ultimate
impression. If, that is, it ended in applause. But arms stretch,
whispered wings, to seas of faces: you become the dancer,
pirouetting too close to the frame. A flash ignites you,
chignon, tutu, leotard and velvet ribbons; you are blazing
in excruciating limelight, tulle and roses catching fire. Panic
chars the flesh, bursts into conflagration. Even as you run
your fingers over the familiar---curtains---you, the psychic
vehicle in flames, the message, can't stop screaming.

691. EL GRECO. THE BURIAL OF COUNT G. S. GAZ. 1586. Oil on canvas.
16\"×11\"/(4.9×3.6 m). S. Tomé. Toledo, Spain
The Burial of Count Orgaz

after El Greco, 1586

You are turning in your sleep when something cuts through dream stuff: *Hurry, I need help tonight,* you hear, *so many.* And the back stairs creak and rattle. You tear into a scratchy something, tight about the neck, and black—but everything is black—and everyone is waiting, so you bolt down hall, up stairs, in door, through empty parlour, right up to the gleaming tapestry before you notice that the eyes are closed: the voice was not grandmother's.

And the hanging falls. You look—not up, not down—but back into a ruffled and bearded mass. And torches. Have to twist what wisps of will remain into a thread and, if you would not snuff, then weave, shroud, guide the mannered through the difficult midwifery of angels, quick, before the air congeals and you awaken, tired.

105. J. M. W. Turner, Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory) - the Morning after the Deluge - Moses writing the Book of Genesis. Oil on canvas, 76.3 x 78.5 cm. R.A. 1832, with the caption:

"The ark stood firm on Ararat; the returning sun
Exhaled earth's humid bubbles, and emulous of light
Reflected her lost forms, each in prismatic guise
Hope's harbinger, ephemeral as the summer fly
Which rises, flies, expands, and dies."

Lines of Hope, M.S.
(Bj 405)

881. JOSEPH MALLORD WILLIAM TURNER. THE SLAVE SHIP.
1840. Oil on canvas, 35¼ x 48" (90.5 x 122 cm).
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
Henry Lillie Pierce Fund (Purchase)
The Slave Ship; Morning After the Deluge

_after J.M.W. Turner, 1840_

A dark raft washed in cobalt slowly roils as bloodlight seeps through eyelids, and you are reluctant to awaken. Someone, somewhere, screaming. But this morning's quick chrome, pulsing orpiment and cold-drawn oil ensanguined—Goethe's buoyant _plus_—whirls a tinted steam of choristers who can't decide between a shark's tooth and the seventh circle's endless spin. A hazy beardless patriarch, whose pale-washed verditer and smalt flash-flood the lower abyss and shatter heaven's windows, bursts in rippling, echoing light through all the fallacies of hope you ever entertained. With pen—or is it brush?—in hand, it's so much more than mourning. Water turns to blood, to gesso, canvas, pigment. You, the drowning slave of painting after painting, always slipping through the evanescent portal, always going under for the last time.


MARY CASSATT (1844-1926)

GIRL ARRANGING HER HAIR, 1886
canvas, 73 x 62.5 cm (29 x 24 1/2 in)
National Gallery of Art, Washington
Chester Dale Collection
Girl Arranging Her Hair

*after Mary Cassatt, c. 1891*

Habits are so hard to break. Grandmother said you must take care of your appearance for the clients, but with someone always waiting in the mirror, wanting to reach out and—*What is this you’re doing?*—touch, run fingers through the thick, dark, chestnut flood of hair, you want to snood it back or cut it like a boy’s, or better, shave your head, do anything to make you less a vision to the stranger in the glass. Afraid he will sweep puberty right off its feet. Each time you look, another man is looking back, a figure always changing, stretching, straining to achieve the perfect contour of your full lips. Hair and brushes. If your skin were not so vivid, if the clavicle were less pronounced, you think, you might just smash the mirror in the face.

EDVARD MUNCH. THE SCREAM
1893 (figure 928)
The Scream

after Edvard Munch, 1893

A cardboard dream is schizophrenic fire
redding rage across a mockery of sky
an underdraught of emerald and purple
hills that heedless gush under a footbridge
wind and river draining under guardrail
steam a train is racing so toward you
hands no longer hold on to the earth sky
water scream there is no need to scream

the glut of strokes a torrent wax resists but
you can only hold your ears the couple who
stroll gingerly toward the hot macabre do not
hear the pigments do not know without the aid
of apparitions getting closer closer to the core
that rage they are about to detonate a world

13. (opposite) EDVARD MUNCH. The Scream. 1893. Oil and casein on cardboard, 36 x 29".
KEY MONUMENTS IN

JAN VAN EYCK, WEDDING PORTRAIT
1434 (figure 533)
Wedding Portrait

*after Jan Van Eyck, 1435*

Focus on the liquid eye, the clear, austere, innately viscous centre of a cryptic glass, smooth as leisured fingers, unobtrusive as a candle burning in a chandelier. A single candle: how symbolic. Pregnant reds, fine velvet greens, the veils of deep mid-winter stiff but balanced by a silver cord. A world of spirits, civil and contained, one thinks—until the others, vaguely rippling on the wall, within the mirror, catch the eye. Atrocities bound by twist and turning Passion scenes depicted in medallions, iniquities of circles, signs, your-hand-in-mine arrangements: there, yet not there, sullenly significant.

998. PABLO PICASSO. **LES DEMOISELLES D'AVIGNON** 1907. Oil on canvas, 8' × 7' 8" (2.43 × 2.33 m).
Les Demoiselles d'Avignon

after Pablo Picasso. 1907

Who, you wonder, flakes the tain? Who scratches there? And if the end of provocation is desire, why should the red-brown rush of you, deep as a chill spring, soothing, be caught up in twisted ice and angles, as-you-like it tight, because at any moment grandmother expects another mirror-man to lunge at you? Must every image shatter? Must banality geometrize? Each time you pass by someone else is groping but, who dares to speak this

body into shards, who is it that insinuates an almond stare into so rippling a reflection? You are more intent on what you see than on the militant dimension he is spinning in the back of you; you find it most unnerving when he cups your chin, and wrenches. Facing both ways, suddenly the still-life chunks of you solidify, and you begin to rage.

835. SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS. MRS. SIDDONS AS THE
TRAGIC MUSE. 1784. Oil on canvas. 93 × 57\frac{1}{2}'' (236.5 × 146 cm).
Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery.
San Marino, California
Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse

*after Sir Joshua Reynolds. 1784*

The first time that you see her in a vision, grandmother is ice and ivory and spotlit bone, bewigged and gowned in rustly taffeta. Enthroned upon a book of shadows. She insists you join her musing. *You must thunder through, Louisa. There are gentlemen with gifts who grow impatient.* In the dark behind her is a ruddy figure who demands you swallow from an angry chalice, and another quiet sort who contemplates a bloody dagger in his hand. You say,

*my mind is not a bawdy house, Grandmother, turn to leave, but Look,* she says, and you see she has pearled and stringed and knotted strands of you about her neck, that velvet from your favourite gown is spread out wantonly upon her lap inviting most illicit touches. Cannonballs begin to roll down wooden chutes as you declare: *No more. Now it is mine.*

Then There Are the Gods
PLATE I. Constance Marie Charpentier, Mlle. Charlotte du Val-d'Ognes. 63½" × 50¼". Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The Mr. and Mrs. Isaac D. Fletcher Collection, bequest of Isaac D. Fletcher, 1917.
Mlle. Charlotte du Val-d'Ognes

after Constance Marie Charpentier, c. 1801

It is summer, hot and very close. You think: *I need a lesson*, but with aisle set and palette poised, Madame insists you take the pose. *Soleil, Jardin, Chapeau de Paille.* You want to please, but having seen so much dissimulation disregarded by so many, in a fit of temper, you tear off that nuisance of a sunhat and discarding feathers, ribbons, wild across the well-clipped lawn, you dash, half-naked, shouting: *Follow! This way!* She is panting by the time she makes it to the attic, and by then you've changed into a simple muslin, something of a goddess in the folds but sleeves short, fitted, functional. The room is bare, the window cracked. A Flemish glow, brighter than the sun on lovers you will later sketch, illuminates. No man could have--has ever--made so fine an offer.

842. ANGELICA KAUFFMAN. THE ARTIST IN THE CHARACTER OF DESIGN LISTENING TO THE INSPIRATION OF POETRY. 1782.

Oil on canvas. circular 24" diameter (61 cm).
The Iveagh Bequest. Kenwood, London [English Heritage].
The Artist in the Character of Design
Listening to the Inspiration of Poetry

_after Angelica Kauffmann, 1782_

Cascades of carmine eddying about her ankles,
the muse of poetry lights fleetingly between a pair
of columns and your own ingenuous white form.
She coaxes--_Let me just reveal a little._ Fine georgette
slips fetchingly from your right shoulder. Why,
you wonder, when you are light, the very shadow
playing on her lyre, did you paint laurels in her hair?
You bolt up, slap her hand, brush madly, shrieking out:

_Is this the art you call "admornment?"_ She cries: _Sister, it was
just--then silence. Since the sketch was a preliminary,
it will be forgotten, just as easily as false notes are
forgiven. You need not display your underpaint.
Why should you when you have the pleasure of
your pencils and a private room in the Uffizi?

[English Heritage]. Figure 842. H.W. Janson. _History of Art_. 4th ed. New York: Prentice Hall. revised
The Kiss

*after August Rodin, 1886*

Late one night, you fall asleep in grandma's parlour, waken to a smell of ginger, cinnamon and fennel wafting up the back stairs: someone's making *chaï*. You can't believe you left the window open, you forgot to draw the curtains, after being burned so many times that you were fool enough to let the sun's lips kiss your fevered mouth, again. Masala. Fingers on your thigh, like chilies, blistering the skin. Arms about his neck but you are stiff, unwilling, and if you can't pull your marble self away from him, you know you'll never see another chisel, never knit another brow. Teeth clenched, tongue aflame, you wonder if the milk has boiled yet, whether grandmother has even thought to dip her scoop into the tin of mountain tea. You shudder. Red cayenne, his eyes. And you remember.

---

Judith and Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes

_Artemisia Gentileschi, c. 1625_

La Pittura draws from life. To draw this bleeding instant of the split from body—one of you a fury and the other—is to feel at once the plague of a persistent phallus and the thumb screw, the enormity of being severed and the borrowed sword. You are a servant of a servant, at the beck and call of rage, and you are raging at the voices clamouring outside the frame. His weapon fits your hand; his armour never will. A metal tear dangles from the lobe of an assaulted ear, a scarlet ribbon blushes in a bow. You shade your eyes. The candle flickers. It and edges are the only comforts you will know this night.

775. PETER PAUL RUBENS, THE GARDEN OF LOVE, c. 1638. Oil on canvas, 6'6" x 9'3½" (2 x 2.8 m). Museo del Prado, Madrid
The Garden of Love

*after Peter Paul Rubens, 1638*

Black enough to swallow light, and with a nap so deep it almost buries fingers, yards of silken velvet trimmed with fine Etruscan lace drape lavishly about your form. *You need not be so shy, the painter says, with charms this adequately covered.* But a gentleman across the courtyard has engaged your eye. His head is haloed with the same dark pigment as your gown, his gaze is red as Rubens', and you can't ignore the cupids swarming in the garden, playfully assaulting women fully clothed; they tickle darts through heavy gowns. And Rubens' arm encircles you; his hand in yours reminds you there is something in the shadows of a temple he would have you enter, something caught in stone. Amphitrite is emptying her breasts into a fountain, and her face seems troubled.

---

Daphne and Apollo

*after Gianlorenzo Bernini, c. 1623*

There are the fools a woman suffers gladly,
them are the gods. Apollo, for example,
who insists a hand upon the belly until flakes of
flame begin to spark breath caught between a
shimmer and the paean of your softest skin.
The pace of a subtractive process. Even as
he takes, a god is taken by the stiffest breeze,
a marble trunk becomes essentialized within

the *Galleria* of the mind. He is as light in stone,
as he is heavy-handed. Lust—Apollo's sport, and
Daphne's—scabs your flesh into a bark, twigs out
from ends of fingers; you wear laurels in a form
even a nymph could never love. The victory
of chisels? The eternally erotic? Not a new pursuit.

22. (opposite) GIANLORENZO BERNINI. *Apollo and Daphne*. 1622-24. Marble, height 96". Galleria
Women Running on the Beach, 1922
Oil on plywood, 13 3/8 x 16 1/4 in.
Musée Picasso, Paris
Women Running on the Beach

after Pablo Picasso, 1922

What is it startles you, this sun-split morning, shattering the certainty that you are mistress of the gaze? What leaps, what crashes? Only when the dust begins to settle can you see, caught in shivers on the floor but beaming, what you thought forever lost. A mirror is an open window. Listen: waves. The ones you always wanted—two, too solid women running out of space and time and out of all proportion on the blasting beaches of desire. All quick stone, glazing-over breasts, and skin so pervious to sense—your very eyes are silvered—that distortion in the blood runs freely to an open sore, is wild salt, stiff, exhilarating in the breeze.

I and the Village

after Marc Chagall, 1911

You know that you are not a white cow—but the way green light illuminates his face, you'd think he thinks he is the very grass you need to grow. It's dizzying. Before you even cross the fine line into empty eyes you have to draw the circle of your iris closed, know that its magic pupil is protected from whatever toxic rays the flowers might emit. He has been known to crystallize an udder in the middle of a milking, stellify the most vertiginous of moos. But you are not a bovine dream, don't follow milky paths to fields of colour; you do not hallucinate diagonals between the teeth, grind planes that swallow only to regurgitate, chew sentimental cud. The token that the little man above your head is offering the girl, as you can see, is not a nosegay but the village scythe.

The Sower

*afer François Millet, 1850*

You think the fall of darkness and a sloppy hat disguise you, that a peasant's muscled thighs distract me from a flock of screaming crows that springs up out of seeds you scatter into fading light. And while the prospect of a field to harvest might have fogged my mirror, loose limbs might have rushed me willfully Romantic once, I find I am no longer tyrannized by veneration. Mist is relative. The moment, black-winged, is a scavenger. It cries:

*Why are we faceless? Why so monumentally alone?* I watch you from a distance–seeding, indeterminately lit by what is left of summer. If you turned to me and squinted, features might begin to sharpen; you might hear, might smell the hazed and ruddy cliffs, the sea. But you think, *She is just a figment.* Shake your head. As always, blink.

Sower with Setting Sun (After Millet)
Aries, June 1888
Oil on canvas, 64 × 80.5 cm
Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo
Sower with Setting Sun (after Millet)

*after Vincent Van Gogh, 1888*

A practiced figure sowing ravens in a field all violet and gold-vermilion shadows—only you would plant when all the neighbours’ wheat is ripe and writhing for the scythe, and only you—Who are you?—dare to cast between the figure and its ground. A canvas, listening: the engines of a not-so-subtle sun. What do you sow between the pigments? How small is a raven seed? Can vehemently brittle hues root into a blue haze,

break the earth and, rising—if I knew no better, I would swear I heard this—call, call, call themselves flapping up out of the earth, as black as these? Once so indifferent a sower, now you are this pastose disk of minerals and seed oil casting light in all directions, beaming straight into my eyes. We are so consummately mis-matched.

The Kiss

*after Gustav Klimt, 1907*

You know that if you gaze upon the sun it can destroy your vision—even its reflection is anathema, burns so thrillingly you cannot tell your wake from sleeping—but you happen to forget. One sultry night, you squint at shadows on the perfect lady moon; she has her darker moments, and they burst into a gilded flood, embrace you. *Come,* she coaxes, *dream with me.* And caught up in a kiss you can't decide if you are giving

or receiving, you become his crown of laurels, *her* forget-me-nots, *their*—old log cabin and a crazy quilt all cells and squiggles—patterns mingling, meshing, pulsing amber light. Upon a bed of nails? Of flowers? Do not be concerned. You are the sun, the sun's lips and the lips he kisses. You, the swimmer with the open eyes.

929. THOMAS EAKINS, WILLIAM RUSH CARVING HIS ALEGORICAL FIGURE OF THE SCHUYLKILL RIVER
1877. Oil on canvas, 20¼ - 26½" (51.1 - 67.3 cm).
The Philadelphia Museum of Art. Given by Mrs. Thomas Eakins and Miss Mary A. Williams.
William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River

dan after Thomas Eakins, 1877

Naked to the chill of some ascetic goddess who agrees to stand in one place, all her weight on one leg for eternity, you find you can endure the click of Mother's knitting needles if you close your eyes. Doves outside the window then begin to chant Greek myths and each flake of the sculptor's marble strikes a perfect C before it hits the floor. You root into a stump beneath your feet and, seeking water, tongue and groove your way across the hardwood to a chair that holds your dress and underthings, then over to an open light. Your skin, so liquid from a distance, satisfies a thirst you didn't know you had, and you are eager to enjoy whatever flight of form the medium might next propose.

Portrait of Mäda Primavesi

*after* Gustav Klimt, c. 1912

Long and straight and oh-so-neatly combed,
you stand up to the blue for boys and pink for
promises in stiff organza mother cut as white and
shapeless as your bones; you know your set lips,
steady hand on hip and feet securely anchored
to an air of pigments slowly coalescing counter
any predilections: this is not about the hair. He
wants to fluff your fine potential, sweep you up

and down—he would do anything to get you down—
to pound rare earths against you, wave on wave of
hats, mufffs, feathers, a kaleidoscope of flowers. Rose
of feldspar, pale of quartz, oh brittle chip of mica on
imagined shoulder: satin knotted awkwardly above your
car may one day slip, but granite is a rock that never will.

29. (opposite) GUSTAV KLI MT. Portrait of Mäda Primavesi. c. 1912. Oil on canvas, 150 x 110.5 cm.
213. Astarte Synaca.  
Oil on canvas, 72 x 4  
Manchester City Art G.  
Manchester, England  
1908.
Astarte Syriaca

*after Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1875*

You are as still as you are moving, as alive as you are fictive, as unbearable as you are never to be born: he sanctifies you, strokes between the sun—not this—and moon—not that, between the god and goddess, art and life, between not this/not that, the copy of a copy and the absolute of eyes. Grey-greens and vegetable shadows, dusk and dreaming glaze over a rose and pomegranate flesh.

He is the painter and he is the painted; torch in the hands of Venus' ministers, he writhes under his own gaze. Try the weight: a phallic metal, pulsing in the hand—a man, but what a man. In what a body. What a head of hair.

Too Much Tradition
47. Beata Beatrix, c. 1862–70
Oil on canvas, 34 x 26 in.
Tate Gallery, London

50. Found, 1853
In and brown ink, brown wash, and some India ink with white washes on paper, 8 3/4 x 7 1/4 in.
The British Museum, London
Beata Beatrix; Found

After Dante Gabriel Rossetti, c.1850

Mornings after spirits call, a silver figure of Our Lady
must be set beside a lily and a white rose in a silver vase,
precisely in the middle of the table, with the window open
to a chanting of the mass and cooing doves to still the wagon
wheels, a strange man's voice and heavy boots, a bleating like
a calf, so loudly from behind. Last night, your Grandmother
thought fingernails would lance her seance client's hand.
But fees were paid, he left, and now, as ruddy sunset dusts

the room, her daughter's daughter dares the chair. The one
who drew another's eyes wide open with his pencil, shuts yours
with his oils: a pressure on the wrists, a poppy, ring of linseed
oil and pigment—*we were lovers once*—a dove. But it's another life,
and you don't want to go back with him, not now, not when
rapt in grandmother and breezes, you are quickening the sun.


635. SANDRO BOTTICELLI. THE BIRTH OF VENUS. C. 1480.
Tempera on canvas, 5'6½" × 9'1½" × 1.8 × 2.8 m. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.
The Birth of Venus

*after Sandro Botticelli, 1480*

More and more you find it pleasant to surround yourself with goddesses and ferns, the crystal tink of squirrels scolding from the trees. And brambles. Gauzy visions that would violate the pastoral are caught, their curses muffled, rasped by berry canes into a thousand pink and sky-blue shreds. You love this pastel revery. Could be traumatic, then, to waken on the half-shell, naked on the open sea

with Zephyr breathing down your neck—had you not long since risen from the waves. But Venus, you know contrapposto's score. Blown to the shore by lust, you wrap yourself around, absorb, contain him—roses—lift a dainty foot to step ashore. A robe awaits you. Blossoms tipped with chrome. A model of indifference.

Galatea

*after Raphael, 1513*

Laurel wreathed and wretched, most ridiculous of monsters, he'd have called the cloth he draped about you purple minx, but, *Crimson*, you insisted, and he lost you in the splash and shout of figures you could sense but not see clamouring. At first you were alarmed. Trance gelled your limbs so vigorously twisted. But the vision telescoped, and you could watch your own shape, then, shift from a sea-nymph into tantalizing whispers. Skin like wind, and hair so breezing it could try the patience of a god, mists into porcelain the moment that he touches. Arrows whiz and putti bowstrings snap; they resonate in sympathy with something taut. Uncertain whether you have chosen or been chosen by the myth, you shower centuries of apples. He sees well enough with one eye, mourns the wisp of you, drawn safely, ever out of range, by dolphins.

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799. DIEGO VELÁZQUEZ. THE MAIDS OF HONOR. 1656.
Oil on canvas, 10'3"×9' (3.2×2.7 m). Museo del Prado, Madrid
Las Meniñas

*after Diego Velázquez. 1656*

Linseed oil and pigment, canvas, palette, brush, a wraith of toxic fumes—he would prefer to still its form, but settles for its dignity. It's all life seems to offer. Still light caught in the divine Infanta's hair. And roses, tensely crimson, which adorn the stiff brocade precisely fitted to the Princess Margarita's infant bosom, fixed in thick impasto. Taut as his expression, heavy fabric skirts a rigid frame, concealing frail mortality. A prisoner of liquid glaze, of writhing solvents? Of design.

You love to tease Velázquez. You, the paradox of unencumbered spirits that refuse to be confined—now maid of honour, bride of god, the mother, father, sister, painter—even, yes, the family dog—you are the artist in the court of love, my dear; and he, court jester, is your dwarf, in transitory velvet. Only on the canvas are you ever his.

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Venus of Urbino

_after Titian, c. 1522_

You learn, so long as you remain engaged inside
the walls of this estate, that you can smother wails
and whimpers of the most tempestuous of spirits
with a feather boa, and that smoky, stale patchouli
longs to dissipate into a fernspice frame of cool,
luxurious obscurity. A brook—its satin overcloak,
its weeping undersong—runs behind the house,
its smooth green plea so like a wanton fountain's
gurgle through the open window of your mind
you can remember Guidobaldo's stone palazzo,
find yourself the odalisque. Completely naked.
Pearls that were his sighs now dangle from your ears.
Invulnerable in your seeming skin, you are a wraith
about to step into a velvet gown. Almost eternal.
863. JEAN-AUGUSTE-DOMINIQUE INGRES. ODALISQUE.
1814. Oil on canvas, 35\frac{1}{4}\times63\frac{3}{4}'' (89.7\times162 \text{ cm}).
Musée du Louvre, Paris
Ingres' Odalisque

_after J.A.D. Ingres. 1814_

Something foreign drifts into the sea of you and
drapes you all about in liquid blues. It stretches--
fur, silk, satin--feathers out into a peacock fan,
urging you to grasp it by the--longing, longing--
handle, pearl fictive vertebrae that filter in and
out of intimation, cloak your thighs in notions.
But are you the shell or, quivering, its soft dynamic?
Does decorum disengage the pertinent desire?

A woman likes to choose. Tumescent hips
are built for breeding; pearls are currency,
your turban, a sarong. You see the chamber has
no door, so callous up those feet and gangle off.
Or better, look. Your flesh is light as any shade.
The painter painted feathers. You could fly.

37. (opposite) JEAN-AUGUSTE-DOMINIQUE INGRES. Odalisque, 1814. Oil on canvas, 35 1/4 x
63 3/4". Musée du Louvre, Paris. Figure 863, H.W. Janson. History of Art. 4th ed. New York:
The Merode Altarpiece

after The Master of Flémalle. 1425

I am kneeling in another time, the panel to the left;
and in another space, a carpenter is building mousetraps.
You don't notice when your candle snuffs, neither see nor
hear what curls up from the wick; but how can you ignore
the subtle humour riding light into your chamber, glazing
through the window on a mote of dust? It is just as well
you cannot see me, but I wish you would take notice of
the angel. Then you might consider how a veil of curls,

like tears, so like your own, streams into velvet shadow,
how such repetition feathers into wings. Disguised, we are
symbolic; and the symbols jostle one another, weightless
in a close room swept by inner breezes, thin, translucent
films, and figures so foreshortened that no matter how
transparent their response to light, the medium prevails.

38. (opposite) THE MASTER OF FLEMALLE. The Merode Altarpiece (Annunciation). c. 1425-30. Oil
on wood panels, centre 25 3/16 x 24 7/8". The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Figure
PARMIGIANINO. THE MADONNA WITH THE LONG NECK

c. 1535 (figure 684)
The Madonna with the Long Neck

*after Parmigiano, 1535*

In a room that is no room—all glazes, browns, and old rose velvets draping from what must be brass rings hung on rails anchored into nothing where there should be walls—you perch upon a throne of air before a purposeless white row of columns, contemplate the nature of the perfect puzzle you have given birth. A brittle nub that nestled in the belly long enough to drain the ocean of you dry has fallen out and flamed into a prophet. *Sunburned Lips.*

*O Clear Light, Muddled Fluid.* Who, you wonder, is this calling from behind? The mannered child—its limbs all loose, unruly lines; its form, distended—in another place would be abomination, but in your lap, angel eyes adore. As thin silk floods the length of you, their winged hands feather forth: *Distortion has a face not only mothers love.* Hold your head up. *Smile.*

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39. "Ecce Ancilla Domini!"
(The Annunciation). 1850
Oil on canvas, mounted on panel.
28\% x 16\% in.
Tate Gallery, London
Ecce Ancilla Domini

after Dante Gabriel Rossetti. 1850

A narrow cot, unwrinkled sheets, one pillow, very thin; the tedium. The spare, confining room in which you study shadows by an open light. And when they fall—as many do across your bed—when winged, they whisper Ecce Ancilla, it is uncanny. Mother had you prick a lily into scarlet cloth, and as it glows upon its frame the shadows flicker, falter, draw the unseen interloper screaming in upon themselves, then writhing, slowly burn off into sun-bleached linen.

Do not shift your gaze. If even one flame-footed androgyne dares intimate mortality, the white-daub will bespeak its petals; seeming angels must be let to fall. Your freedom is a small but ample room, all white-wash, tiles and empty space. You never burn the lamp. But how you ache to hear one pinging, crystal Domini. To shatter with the walls.

961. HENRI ROUSSEAU. THE DREAM. 1910. Oil on canvas, 6'8½" x 9'9½" (2 x 3 m).
The Dream

after Henri Rousseau, 1910

In the heat of summer night, when moonlight shimmers through the curtains, you recall a thick, green smell of too much vegetation teeming in the afternoon, how running water soothed you as you lay beside the brook, behind grandmother's house. Now there's a cricket playing Clémence on a violin. It's midnight. Candles titter on the table. You remember as you drift: they told you second sight should be confined within the basket of those matriarchal walls lest, like a snake, it turn on you, and bite.

but no one told you such naïveté as his could waken in you, whisper Chérie, I have need of you to guide my brush; that then, reclining on a velvet moss divan, you would be compelled to reach out and oblivious of lions, elephants, and strange dark creatures howling in the jungle night, permit a charmer's flute to leave you helpless. Could he ingratiating you so, and yet be innocent of how the gift burns?

867. EUGÈNE DELACROIX. ODALISQUE. 1845–50.
Oil on canvas, 14 3/8×18 3/4 (37.3×46.5 cm).
Delacroix's Odalisque

after Eugène Delacroix. 1845-50

Of summer sun and new-mown hay within
the harem of the mind, you are a passionate
oasis eyes of the beholder stroke—Oh, have me,
hold me, lock, stock, barrel me—with brushes. Lie
there, dark with incense, stale as stale perfume,
listen to the droning on the other side of curtains
not quite closed: a myth of ecstasy reclined.
Abjection, blurred as satin eloquence is stained

by semen-spattered sheets, the fine line drawn
between the squalor and the squalled, the scholar
and the slave: at once a scrap of linen draped
over your shame and Venus' shadow darkening
the wall. Delirium. You dive into the sea of her,
surrender to a depth of sunlight endlessly deferred.

42. (opposite) EUGÈNE DELACROIX. Odalisque, 1845-50. Oil on canvas, 14 7/8 x 18 1/4".
Cool—no, cold—with ice-blue icicles and buried in a snow-bank caught in traffic in a blizzard with the wind so blasting somewhere frozen everything could shatter if you move a muscled turquoise centimetre bracing pupils in his eyes will slip your hands will everything is turning into something else—eyes mouth his shoulders mummy gagged and bound with blazing fingers slash. Yes, fingers, and a brush, a palette working biomorphic welter slash and carmine burnt sienna you are managing to keep your full breasts covered slash the jagged surface is alive with spit slash wine and vinegar the sense of too much pillar slash in everything is too much camouflage is too much salt

Rokeby Venus

after Velázquez, c. 1640

A goddess is immortal but the image of a goddess is subjected, eyes as fingers leaving greasy trails, the body in a body-suit all slick with grey and rose light. Cupid is no longer in the belly, holds a mirror that reflects you hiding—what? from whom? from modesty, a scrap of ribbon barely long enough to wrap around your neck, hang from the ceiling, if there were a ceiling—but the frame prevents; the frame within the frame suggests a mortal face. The image has been altered. How the furtive miss the art of this, devouring uncanny length, the arms, legs, torso, flesh with an obscenity as smooth as cultured butter. Someone out there wants to cut it, spread it further than a knife.

Olympia; Déjeuner Sur l'Herbe

after Édouard Manet. 1863

How long can a medium endure the smoothest satin, heady fragrance, of the most attentive lover's flowers, when a scent she longs for—crushed moss, unimpeded running water—is to be denied her, motionless, reclining on a feather bed? Might just as well be nettles, sharp and green. Too much tradition. *Pas encore, Monsieur.*
you hiss, and watch his eyes go wide. You shudder, stretch, sigh, lift the hand he'd placed between your legs

and kick off slippers, throw your head back, laugh. *Let's try a little turpentine,* you giggle, grab his rag, wipe wrist clear of its bracelet, velvet ribbon from your neck, pearl earrings and that pale ridiculous camellia from behind your ear. Amused, the painter offers you his hand. You smell wet leaf mould, hear a splash behind you, know now you will never look back.

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Stirring Sunrise
Femme à L'ombrelle

*after Claude Monet, c. 1880*

Before the brush is loaded, still your bristles; gaze must
chill its fascination with a wind-whipped vision, howsoever
bustled into sheer cerulean; mask features, not the rippling
focus. You—with tickling intensities of shadow-flapped white
muslin muttering about the ankles, with a parasol poised
to augment what cumulus relief the image offers—cannot
yet determine whether you are lost in half-tone difference,
between a breathless voile and blue delirium, or found

within the mind-swept weeds that rearrange themselves
into an incantation of desire. You nod. He dips into alizarin.
Hot hues exhilarate the grasses, whisk your skirt folds, then,
accelerating, lick into a crimson burst. You pin the beating
complement discreetly to your waist. *Skies could contain such
tumult,* you reflect. *Ah,* the mirror sighs, *but never fragrant blooms.*
Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat

*after* Elizabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun. 1782

If you are lips, a wild red zinnia wet with mischief of white lead; if you are nose, cheeks, neck, and shoulders; you must be the blooming breasts beneath a dusty pink moire, that tousle fine lawn ruffles as they rise and fall. As lightly as a single plume, the flesh you wear curls under a taut brim; the hat and not the woman must be made of straw. *Voilà! Un VRAI chapeau de paille.* Rare earths and metals twist; you pound the pigment out of powdered wig into a saucy turn of phrase: you—even as the satin wrap you drape about you, edged with stiff Etruscan lace, is known to have scratched out eyes of those who dared transgress the picture plane—you are a loaded brush beside a gleaming palette, still as delicate as petals, fresh alizarin, and fluid as blood.

Black Iris III

*after Georgia O'Keeffe, 1926*

Flowers are a good place to begin. They're small enough to cradle, large enough to think themselves across the sky. And they associate, so one can symbolize. Take irises. Gaze into the pupils' glass, and as the blue-black muscle dilates, opens and invites—don't know who or what but—something peppery, expansive, sweet-sour with the juice of plums and purple haze, begins to fold its palms and, in a rush of crimson tempered with capricious blues, to greet you—as you should be greeted—irising so wide and welcoming the metaphor begins to stiffen. Black hole at the centre of the eye, it's stirring all the limpid colours of the goddess, focusing her petals in a place of pigment, full of light. The flower of the sky, disguised this thinly. Makes you wonder why you haven't yet been swallowed.

A BAR AT THE FOLIES-BERGERE, 1882

canvas, 91.4 x 110 cm (36 x 43 1/2 in)
Courtauld Institute Galleries, University of London
Chandeliers, champagne, a crystal bowl of tangerines, and orchids waiting from the bosom of a fitted jacket cut so open at the neck that, even trimmed with lace, it will command a tophat, tails, moustaches—all that separates the marble surface of the table you are leaning on from how you pose, proposing vagaries to the unbending mirror set before (or is on the wall behind?)—to shift politely in and out of this intriguing, unconventional arrangement.

Silvered glass. A glazed perspective. Everything abbreviated, values so much closer. Slip the gaze discreetly from your pupil to the gentleman's in question, find him blatantly accosted by a smell of spirits. Ladies in their feathers. Full moons, many moons, all shimmering. Somewhere there must be an open window. Would that such reflections were enough to make a gentleman tea-total.
Le Moulin de la Galette
after Auguste Renoir. 1876

Little cakes and kisses circulate as hands-in-hands and check-to-checkings turn Moulin de la Galette. And light, the way it dapples leaves, the way they spin. Your eyes whirl—pleat, to tuck, to lace, to someone winking—as a leaf that thinks itself a straw hat with a band—but no, a bowler with a beard—no, top-hat, tails, with one arm purled about the waist of Claire, Hélène, Estelle in hissing taffeta—a windmill at the centre of the sun—

it all begins to wheel. A hand upon your shoulder, low-life tapping time. You squint. The cord of something domineering snaps; it cracks its dance-hall dazzled blur of leaf-light. Shift, and you are leaping, face to form to jet-black joie de vivre, misting in and out of Sunday brushes: set to canvas, yes, but oh, so fancy free.
The Three Dancers

after Pablo Picasso. 1925

A hand, a claw; a breast, an eye—a man and woman shadowed in a circle dance; his eyes stroke fingers with a candy-floss pink gesso swallows eagerly, but skin is ice. He blinks. A mouth tight as a turtle’s; hers is full of teeth. White heat shoots up from left toe through his leg, sex, nipple, to the shoulder of the seething model, into barely touching tips of fingers, shifting what he thinks into distraction. Dancing

with distortion, he is dancing with himself. And thus, night empties shadows. Bound within the door frame, flat dispassionate observers of the g-string air who long for something—charmed? possessed?—are sharp as shallots, salt as blood, and red as red wine vinegar. In shades of shards, the blues are overwrought, but achingly familiar.

962. PAULA MODERSOHN-BECKER. SELF-PORTRAIT. 1906.
Oil on canvas, 24×19¾" (61×50 cm).
Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Kunstmuseum, Basel
Self-Portrait

after Paula Modersohn-Becker. 1906

Something in the "no" of negative is ether, water, air, is pliant as it is complicit with the fire that strengthens clay; you tell them how a giant, strong but heavy with the gentle sense that she is toothless and declawed, must lumber in the medium; an archetype without defense must hide from enemies and live on garbage since she can no longer dig out grubs and scratch for berries. So they bring you flowers. Here, in this place of transit, symbols are as chisels cheating rock of stone. You want the paste of oil, the smooth of elements, the fine lines, density of hues. You tell them, when the painter is a bear expression may be primitive, but it will never be naive.

La Danse

*after Henri Matisse, 1910*

The sky is blue, the grass is green, and you are ring-around-the-dizzy, romping with so many naked types of you it's easy to forget that there are pipers—all gone sanguine with the who knows what of jigs, rounds, reels; their horns, tails, cloven hooves gone missing, who knows why? The fiddlers are charging you with rhythm, gazes fully fixed. You bounce with breasts and jiggle with the toes, you are a living, loving, livid red. Why separate the music from the dance, the dancer from these fingers? Hairs? Your very days are numbered. Note how, vital to the figure, even though your back is turned, a daemon self whose hand has slipped is straining to recover yours—ever, almost touching.

891. JEAN-BAPTISTE CARPEAUX. THE DANCE. 1867–69.
Plaster model. c. 15' x 8'6" (4.6 x 2.6 m). Musée de l'Opéra, Paris
The Dance

*after Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux. 1867-69*

Livelier, and so much more precise than stone, you leap out from the centre of yourself—as free of breasts and genitals and all the many selves who prance about you, leafy crowns and tresses curling free of robes, limbs that could be strained cast loosely—gaiety drawn from her garments. Naked, yes, but not a nude; a plaster phoenix rising from the child you were in blazing wings so many steps beyond the small Rococo, you embarrass what was once held throbbing. Beat the rhythm of that child upon the mythic tambourine; spring up over arms, legs, hands, the body of tradition. Woman not a woman, wind and sky, you are the spirit of the dance.

17. SALISBURY CATHEDRAL FROM THE MEADOWS. Oils on canvas. 1831. Lord Ashton of Hyde
Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows

*after John Constable, c. 1821*

It's not so much a plash of hooves and wheels against the surface of the stream you're drawn to, more the scent of straining horseshoes, men and mud—and yes, an indeterminate, but clearly doggy form that watches from the shore. Absorbed by distance from a tree's crown, by how far, from this perspective, it outreaches Salisbury Cathedral, you mark how meadows draw the eyes that draw chiaroscuro clouds. You don't know how you ended up on all fours, panting by the river Avon, but eyes skim across its rippling surface, white-in flashes of anxiety across the sky and rainbow down to rushes, swallows, wooden bridges, oscillating fields. You feel so much a part of ordered chaos that you can't resist a wagging welcome to *I live by shadows*, and a lolling tongue seems so appropriate you almost bark.

943. PAUL CÉZANNE. MONT SAINTE-VICTOIRE SEEN FROM BIBÉMUS QUARRY. c. 1897–1900.
Oil on canvas. 25½ x 32" (63.9 x 81.3 cm). The Baltimore Museum of Art. The Cone Collection, formed by Dr. Claribel Cone and Miss Etta Cone of Baltimore, Maryland
Mont Sainte-Victoire Seen From Bibémus Quarry

after Paul Cézanne, 1897

He knows it is the nature of a mountain to be still,
its cone to draw eyes swirling from the base to nipple,
flames to airy reaches of the sky, and yet the painter
is afraid to ask the genius loci. Someone else must pose.
So you are ordered through the glass, despite the
clash of reds and greens, blue skies and hot vermilion
shadows tickling your skin, to hold that parody of
an exhausted odalisque as long as tilted planes and
flickering hues endure—but why, you wonder, when the
fields are blazing cylinders of invitation, apple trees are
green globe artichokes are breasts so humbly disguised
that summer is intangible. You smell the fragrance of a form
you've never seen, know someone, somewhere is commanding
this geometry, and how you wish he'd show his face.

57. (opposite) PAUL CÉZANNE. Mon Sante-Victoire Seen From Bibémus Quarry, c.1897-1900. Oil on
canvas, 25 1/8 x 32". The Baltimore Museum of Art. Figure 943, H.W. Janson. History of Art. 4th
Wheat Field with Cypresses
Saint-Rémy, late June 1889
Oil on canvas. 73 × 93.5 cm
Private collection, Zurich
Wheat Field and Cypress Trees

_after Vincent Van Gogh, 1889_

The neighbour's wheat field is the safest place you know. So many tawny heads so close together that their windblown, frazzled seething into difficult accord with something that a halo used to symbolize makes it seem as if each berry is a black note and so difficult to hit one has to strike beyond the limits of the keyboard into purple shadows, clouds, dark catachismic hills. They chant what used to writhe about your head into an absolute transcendent flow. And cypresses. You love their sunlit mystery. The first time that you gazed into their mirror of a spirit driven to dispel the diachronic breeze, you knew the one behind it was as undemonic as a blade of grass. Perennial. With lips set, burning eyes determined to illuminate the whirling pool of darkness.

Vera

after F.H. Varley. 1931

Who would have thought so red a rock
could keep incessant sun, wind, stinging
rain within you pounding, drive night from
the day, beat day from its beating light into
a pigment fine enough to tread the water in
your eyes? Could you refuse to dive into such
emeralds, could you draw rubies through so
violet a breath if you thought you were anyone

but she? Inviolate? You are the burnt sienna
sweep that synchronizes doubt with verdigris.
He strokes, and all of the akashic others,
whale-song urgent with desire to break you
through the surface, add their keening. What
a pleasure, finally to hear the pitch of green.

59. (opposite) F. H. VARLEY. Vera, 1931. Oil on canvas, 61 x 50.6 cm. National Gallery of Canada,
Ottawa. in Anne Newlands, ed. The Group of Seven and Tom Thomson. Willowdale, Ontario: Firefly
In your later years, finding his amber glow resistible when lying late into the morning, you not surprisingly affect an Attic grin. But as a girl, there were the tears. Before each trek to grandma's parlour, long fasts, sleepless nights and predawn shivers, creaking up three dark, deserted flights, alone. And shuddering, you held yourself as still as death when—Sit down. Open to my music—ordered by the cold, hard, necessary angel.

That your limbs can still be heavy, that his smile, so sweet a dart, still drives organ thunder through the marble chapel of your heart; you ought to stop gilt beams' descent, their pressure threatens to disfigure your white brow. But slack-jawed, blissfully immured, Theresa's listening for stone's whir, angel's wings. She's stirring sunrise with her toes.

Face the Sideways, Straight
J.E.H. MacDONALD
THE TANGLED GARDEN
The Tangled Garden

*after J.E.H. MacDonald, 1921*

I used to worship East to West, imbibing light, air, water; forming seeds too heavy for the wind and, sturdy, rough, a firm stalk, an unconscionable desire to burst into the sky. Thick with ochre now, and umber, thirsty for the water I no longer have the strength to bear, leaves parch and rustle. Turn a countenance that used to rival Sol's from sunlight to the medium in which I root: see zinnias, still scarlet, blooming.

Orchards bow and apples dream of falling. I am spent and crackled, dry but full of seed; I hear the clamour of a tangled germ of voices from within. The earth demands ascetic posturings: I bend, but wryly—only from the neck—not to soil but to the fallen smell of shrivelling leaves, to summer's end, the mother of decomposition, to necessity.

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1912. OIL ON CANVAS. 80.4 x 101.6 cm. ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO, TORONTO. GIFT FROM THE ALBERT H. ROBINSON MEMORIAL SUBSCRIPTION FUND, 1912.
Dhārāna

after F. H. Varley, 1932

You have to let it work. The heat within that de-, re-, op-, in- presses night upon the waiting—night without a moon, watch without a sentry, sound without a sense, and kneeling, almost mad with predawn nipping at between—you have to let it work: you are the vessel, gems enclosoumolé to skin. The veritable boom of decibels that are

not decibels, you are an almost pixellated breath of phthalocyanine, magenta, aqua, ultra-deep marine. You never dreamed the porches of your ears could teem this loudly, that the earth, a screen, could opalesce, or eyes could strain the howling through silence.

They carved his massive beak into the sky, 
cut wings against his sides, and bound him 
to the earth with claws. They thought because 
they had forgotten feathers, he would never fly. 
But green flames licked his totem perch and 
years of teeming rain, rain seeped so slowly 
through a sodden moss that grew upon his back 
your wooden mate at last collapsed into decay.

You have resisted brooding. He was old. 
You stood so much, so long, so formally together. 
Now you must begin your own disintegration. 
Native bones that once contained the wind 
and shafts of so voluminous a light they dazzle 
chant in unison, and what was smothered is released.
Arthur Lismer  *Cathedral Mountain*  oil on canvas  48" x 56"  1923  Montreal Museum of Fine Arts
Cathedral Mountain

_after Arthur Lismer, 1928_

So think a gothic mystery, a mountain,
challenge spruce conventions, look down
upon little lakes and trickles, seek out faults,
the origins of inescapable horizons. Think
an air so empty nothing breaks the ground.
The weight of distance. Pillars thrust and glaciers
embrace their towering prey, your buttresses
display their buttocks; everything is adoration,
cut glass, lead and lust through coloured windows
in a hopelessly erotic sky. Compose a deity and
clouds sing rocky praises, figure into ground bass,
booming, monotone; you soar, a paean whose
almighty form escapes the seeing. _Mountains
don't bend in the wind_, you say. How very modern.

64. (opposite) ARTHUR LISMER. _Cathedral Mountain_, 1928. Oil on canvas, 48 x 56". Montreal
Museum of Fine Arts. Plate 16, Lois Darroch. _Bright Land_. Toronto & Vancouver: Merritt Publishing
Co. Ltd., 1981.
Grey

*after Emily Carr, 1932*

Night falls and the forest darkens; paths that lead into the forest ought to darken, too. But you know you did not dream sanguine dust and grey-green thunder through the bark and needles, nor imagine traces of what once were skin, blood, flesh, bones, pulsing in and out of twilit forms. Where do they come from, why are colours born? If incandescence beckons, must one follow? One needs so high a vantage point to see things hidden in the trees. They hide that skilfully. A sharp-tipped douglas fir who guards

the entrance to the wood begins to glow and, eerily, to slice through its enfolding layers to reveal a delicate, bright, single eye. He fears you will be like the others, blind to what is not quite what it seems, but you are not about to blink. The threshold is self-luminous, a tear-drop pearl. You enter cautiously. There must have been a time when clouds would gather here.

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The Solemn Land

after J.E.H. MacDonald, 1921

I have never let a man think he can think me,
never let the hills forget who blocks their light,
the lakes ignore my passing—but if I had not
gazed into the ruddy glass as I was blowing by
above this sketchy prospect, it might not have
burnished; spruce might not have thrummed;
the river might have flushed, but never liquid rose.
A most misguided scumble craved Cathedral light.

The mass was crippling his eye, composure bleared
the greens to grey and purples blue. I pitied, caught
his leaves before they fell, pinned scarlet ribbons to
a solemn ground; I lit the breaking sky with cloud.
My shadow set the sun. Gold is the colour of a muse's
mist. So much for free brush. So much for the painter.

65. (opposite) J.E.H. MACDONALD. The Solemn Land, 1921. Oil on Canvas, 122.5 x 153.5 cm.
In the Northland

_after Tom Thomson, 1915_

Earliest to leaf, the last to drop, canoe-birch striplings drive their pearl-bones up and ever into overdrive, as rivulets of shadow gush down quick vermilion slopes. _The maples are about all stripped of leaves now, but the birches—crack and I am falling, see myself, so near, so far-felt, cut a firm diagonal across the custom of the bush._

_I am a white canoe across the black and blue-fresh waters, sinking, even as I swim, into the far off pigments of another shore. I burn into an umber trunk and crimsoned greens marooned in hollows._

_Mine were heart-shaped, these are barbed, but leaves are leaves. We might not otherwise have met._

_A birch fell in the Northland. Did you hear me?_
135. Lake Superior III, c. 1928
oil on canvas
34 1/2 × 40 1/4 in.: 87.6 × 102.2 cm
Collection of The National Gallery of Canada
Lake Superior III

_after Lawren Harris. c. 1928_

Nothing is more clear than northern azure, nothing more abstracted than desire. The stumps of it, galed smooth and branchless as the beating stone within the breast of an insouciant ascetic—one on either side of two dead trees in need of shelter—squat close by lest one forget how fragile limbs can be. Flames drew me to this bleak arrangement; now the blaze has mellowed, coupled. Fire is in the world, not of it, and I lean toward what little passion wood provides. A tempest blew me here; inviolable as its polished surface seems, a strong Nor-Wester rages still. But lines are drawn between sky, water, and the sculpted hills. I am no more a rooted thing than purple's yellow complement; the glow I answer to the setting sun is pale but warm.

XVI  The West Wind
The West Wind

after Tom Thomson, c. 1918

Not fond of northern lakes--the chill is too intense and Zephyr can't be trusted--but when this painter jabs his loaded brush so pingingly the West Wind howls, glowlines that contain the distant, placid hills ignite an elemental roil and, rising from the underpainted swell of scarlet lake and poppy oil, Venus Anadyomene takes on the bark and needles of a lady jack pine. She will condescend to step ashore. Within a tree.

The sky can scud itself now, bloodlit shadows bleed. Tall, erect, so fully fixed in scumbled rocks that wave on wave of pigment courses up his trunk, he shoots straight out of the frame. His limbs enclose her. Rooted by his side, she strainst against the wind to hold him. Gods, they say, inflict no greater punishment.

F. H. Varley  Stormy Weather, Georgian Bay  oil on canvas  52" x 64"  1920  National Gallery of Canada
Stormy Weather, Georgian Bay

*after F. H. Varley, c.1920*

You chose this vantage. Run with it. The wind--from frail and clinging to the rock, to whatsoever face a rippled world insinuates--yes, run. Swirl the cloak of many needles, green it green and reeling greener, swing your sweeper to the far off white-capped cohort curling sage and wily olive strokes into a spatter, flat against the split-rocked shore. An azure streak? A scumble? Never roots beyond the blue horizon. Clouds must know their place. The same blast whipping white mist into a frenzy of philology, wraps limbs about you in a coat it is impossible to tear. As close as you have ever been to scudding, fixed into the stippled grey of matter, sunning on the outcrop, you are running on the spot.

Blue Passage/Island Suite
SERICRAPH
Blue Passage/Island Suite

*after Toni Onley, 1986*

To come this far, and yet to breathe unsullied,
one must have a mind of blue depths, aeronautical
propinquity to paper, and a good supply of oxygen.
Would you, otherwise, have set this silk-screened
mystery of grey mass deliquescing into morning
light as warm and creamy as a memory of Naples
yellow, set it weightlessly upon a prussian pigment,
were its isolation not enhanced by frazzled nostrils?

Nothing? Vaguely haline. One must have adrenalin,
be cracked and sizzled by a static only nerves remember,
to endure a line this sharply drawn between what is and
is not sea. A quiet mountain looming in the distance
presses one to still incessant engines, leave the fragile
light and sensibilities to breathlessly converse with sky.

71. (opposite) TONI ONLEY. *Blue Passage/Island Suite*, c. 1986. Serigraph, 22 x 38 cm. in Toni
144 Arthur Lismer  Rain in the North Country
23 1/8" × 29 3/4" c 1920 McMichael Conservation Collection
Rain in the North Country

*after Arthur Lismer*, c. 1920

On days like this wind can't decide
if, driven like the rain, it wants you
tall and cool, or flat out, splintered
on the rocks. It simply blows. Grim
blusters sweep and sheets of freezing
splat. If he had limned you flexibly,
you'd shiver; cellulose, you face the
sideways, straight. This is a still-wet
season, calm before the brush—no-time-
to-dry-it—blends a rise and setting sun,
insinuates its red-gold into grey-green
ecstasies where leaves are needles. Cold
light pricks the skinless finger, colour
pricks the eye. It wants to shake things.

WREN S. HARRIS: NORTH SHORE, LAKE SUPERIOR. 1926. OTTAWA, NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA
North Shore, Lake Superior,

*after Lawren Harris, 1926*

White and dry boned, satined, weathered free,
a ghost sits gaping, mystified. And were it other
than an empty cage, were rock less rocky, sunset
less refined, the clouds might howl themselves
into transparent bears and wolves. But listen.
Millwheels. Stark against nirvanic skies,
an archetypal treeshell—me, mine—cast-off
ligneous confinement grinds against particularity.

One needs a mind of lifeless roots to grasp this
icon of iniquity, not to be caught up in glaring
northern hues. *My liberty.* If Sol's rays made the
stones whir, yellows were illumination's source,
could light shoot out of the barren, thus, and would
the stump of everyday be so self-luminous, so white?

73. (opposite) LAWREN HARRIS. *North Shore, Lake Superior.* 1926. Oil on canvas, 40 x 50".
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. in Jeremy Adamson. *Lawren S. Harris.* Toronto: Art Gallery of
Midnight Sun, Baffin Bay

after Toni Onley, 1975

In a watercolour world, muted cloud that makes it possible to bear the midnight sun is an idea, glycerine that keeps your medium from freezing is a hard fact. Only light is unstained. Wet on wet, what you choose not to paint is so intoxicated by the rough tooth of the paper, cold bites edges clean. What used to flow is solid now, what's solid, boneless, and a berg begins the exquisition. This, your trial,

is by variations on infinity that wash an arctic air, by clarity so blue-grey it is frozen in the eye before you even grasp the brush. An ice cake floating past reminds you, with the last stroke you must toss that brush into the icy waters, watch it drift into the too-salt, never-setting sun.

Poems Listed by Artist

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Vita Auctoris

Since 1980, Julie Dennison has made her home in Victoria-by-the-Sea, Prince Edward Island. She lives there, in a very old, white clapboard house, with her husband and two woodstoves. In the summer, there is gardening; in winter, there are long, exhilarating walks along the iced-over Northumberland Strait.

In 1987, Mrs. Dennison began part-time study at the University of Prince Edward Island, in order to upgrade her certification as a kindergarten teacher. One thing led to another. She soon found herself more interested in literature than education; Mrs. Dennison decided to give up teaching, and to attend university full-time. Watercolour painting had been her expressive medium, but a course in Canadian Poetry changed that. She discovered, when a painter finishes a painting she is finished with the work, whereas a poet can engage the finished project over and over again. This ongoing relationship with the created work was irresistible.

The Medium is Mrs. Dennison's first foray into ekphrasis. It has been a most rewarding project. It has successfully integrated academic and creative interests, and opened up a field of fascinating theoretical inquiry. Three of these poems will be published in a forthcoming issue of Grain; others wait expectantly on desks of journal editors.