

A Perfect Circle Rimmed With Gold

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Abstract

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In Virginia Woolf's essay on the Victorian phantom known as the *Angel in the House* (borrowed from Coventry Patmore's poem celebrating domestic bliss) she wrote, "It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality." *A Perfect Circle Rimmed With Gold* is a long-form poem that addresses the question of how a woman may not kill the many spirits haunting her domestic space, but reconcile and learn from them through love and hospitality. In a series of vignettes revolving around a dinner party meets séance, the Hostess and her Beloved entertain a series of former lovers in the form of unruly, sometimes drunken ghosts. Examinations of our relationship to rituals and to our own past are put into parallel. A spirit board communicates and interjects throughout, eventually taking over the gathering to speak as a Greek chorus between courses. Sacrificial spiders lurk in corners of a great reckoning. It is an exorcism as an attempt to love—unabashedly and completely. *A Perfect Circle* plays upon images of hauntings, bodies, ritual, food, and all of the associations those things have within ourselves as human beings.

a perfect
circle
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with
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samantha
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For L.H., my Virgil on this voyage into the depths of love, lust, and dinner.

Kissing the stomach
kissing your scarred
skin boat. History
is what you've travelled on
and take with you

We've each had our stomachs
kissed by strangers
to the other

and as for me
I bless everyone
who kissed you here

-Michael Ondaatje

It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality.

-Virginia Woolf

Hallucinations are always possible and currently likely.

-Lyn Hejinian

An hour yellow, just as how many years ago, when the Hostess and the lover returned home from the lake, the hour of kissing him, as he stood at the top of the stairs, older, warmer than when they had left, was blue—though hours are no longer so vibrant. Somewhere, below them, walls split in sequences of small roses. Bear in mind, to be loved means no longer to be unwanted. But he who dares not grasp the thorn should never crave the rose. The soil was loosened, grew soft overnight like a piece of fruit. In certain partnerships, the meaning of a breaking is at one with the sentiment of pre-breaking. The dirty linens were gathered in a stack. The windows were fattened by fluffy, pink curtains. Here the Hostess refers to frivolity, that pomp which never pesters. Hence, repetitions, free from all ambition. The voice of the briny brain, he said, was oppressive. The tongue must be worn away. Time passes. On her walks, the hostess stepped off sidewalks to pinch berries from her neighbors' gardens. An occasional stain is mirrored on the walls. If only you could

touch, or, even, catch those soft red creatures. She was afraid of the man with the missing thumb, or of his jokes at their expense which were beyond her. The evenings fell, empty and therefore endless. Poisoned, she agreed. It was a twitch, he had the tendency, and now her lover swayed like a toy plastic bird on the edge of its glass, slipping into and shirking from the liquid. But a glass is a bottomless pit. Her lover was in a room with the particulars of which a later memory might be formed, a coddled adolescence. Her lover's history on paper. That morning this morning. A plate, a perfect circle rimmed with gold, represents the rite. The suggestions are a persistent coating in the room characterized by its perpetual readiness, a form of charged waiting, a habitual attendance, of which the Hostess was thinking when she began the poem, "so much of my life is spent in a manner of remaining."

The Hostess and her Beloved arrive bruised. Their ritual to dine where the feast meets the famine. Orphaned tablecloth. What will revive this fallen partnership? Her ritual involves his grace. Six thousand two hundred and five days and thirteen bottles of wine and a bowl of sugar. A spirit board covered in bread crumbs. They are here to bring forth shapes to multiply, to listen. To comprehend their dwelling. The seductive consequences of their ghosts: wounds propelling into shape. The shape of benevolence. The crystal rumbles in symmetry. A placemat, ironed, a ring, a promise, quiet still. Glasses touch, are clinking. Caustically correct plating based on those loved in the basement of the mind. This is how.

The meal is laid horizontally in the dining room, though it must not be touched. Glistening silver. The Hostess explains that after the spirits are conjured, once the candles' flames stretch towards the opening in the ceiling, the lids will be lifted in invitation. This way, the spirits peering onto the table see a corresponding image of her labor. Only at our best do our ferocities transfer into love. Trouble is, a garnish out of place may be cause for disruption. Carve out a corner of the plate and a spirit will instantly fill it. Cold fingers, damp from the otherworld, think, *is this hand my own?* Her nails and cuticles immaculate. Her dress contains embroidery, lace, and no wrinkles. And her legs are long, although the right one seems to be a little out of order, a little wandering, like a lazy eye. To yield to the conflux, to be hazy, until the eyes re-establish focus on the first in the room. Regard a taut breath, a mirror, a tooth. Yes. A mottled red spot, tangled and spreading, crawls up the throat of the Hostess. Igniting all that was seen, felt, and

imagined in the past: a pair of incisors, tawny yellow and peeking; a single cowboy boot, faded by travel and age; and two books inscribed with blue ink. Frozen with the outcome of a guest, crisis of molasses in the brain—cannot be quickened. A visible suspension of disbelief, trust clouds in, and the Beloved can feel the presence in the brain, which contradicts each chair, each plate broken of the past, present, and future. *Spirit, it was nothing. Lover, it was only a game.* As for dinner, it continues without any clear course—a moon leaf memory in the back of the mind, has been excavated, continues to whirl. But no words are perceived. Thus the flutes tremble. The whirl whirrs. The whirl speaks.

He spills the sugar when he lifts the spoon. There is no loneliness. It buries itself in the cake pan. It is as if one lost in the water splashed by one's tears. The Hostess had climbed into the garbage can in order to stamp down the accumulated trash, but the can was knocked off balance, and when she fell there soon was blood. She could only grow pinker. The two had little money but plenty of food. At the cliffside only the gulls were louder than anything they could have imagined. These creatures are compound and nothing they do should surprise them. The lover doesn't care, or he won't care, where the verb "to mind" might multiply. The checker of the little grocery store had forgotten to bag the satsuma oranges, so that when the fireworks of the night in celebration were first spotted, the mystery of their good fortune grew dark. He was opening a bottle and the light was growing dim. A spirit stood at the corner watching the only birds that were visible, circling over the darkened city in search of a hidden nest.

Regrettably, lust seems more normative than love.

Whether breathing or holding the breath, it was the same thing, driving past the cemetery from one cloud to the next under a hot grey sky. By dinner, to close off the windows from the view of the street, he pulled loose the curtains, never shutting the windows, a portal too stiff to pull properly down. The Hostess sat on the counter singing *sunday*

monday tuesday wednesday thursday friday saturday, love.

Outside them is an aging woman who needs a blanket in order to turn her fluttering breath into steam. The broken radio silence. WHY WOULD ANYONE FIND ANATOMY INTERESTING WHEN IT IS POSSIBLE TO LEARN ABOUT

LOVE. What one passes in the hallway. Is it the branch scratching the door? All that is nearly incommunicable to their friends. Impulse and belly verisimilitude. Were they seeing a pattern or merely an appearance of small black spiders in the sink, floating at such a distance from the three that they appeared to be a mirror. To follow the progression of breath, or that particular line of hungering, so full of surprises and unexpected correlations, was somehow to take a smoke break. Still, she had to

wonder where they had gone, since they could not speak of reappearance. An empty room is always bright. It was hard to know this as politics, because it plays like the pain of one person, but nothing is isolated in personal history—certain lovers are certain situations. Are his fingers in the margin? Their random tappings make monuments to fate. There is something still surprising when the red emerges. The first course of harmless introduction. Where is her cream floating. She cannot linger on the lamb. She cannot determine the nature of progress until she assembles all of the ghosts.

Let there be tearfulness—circular drippings; drippings incorporating pauses, daisies. Life in this room, in the confines of ghosts, is a lacking passage for the green-eyed daydreams overwhelming her. To break the chain forged between their curious subjectivity and every fascinating thing. The tracks of blood in the napkin. Always hunger hatching myriads of sinister kicks! The thickness is there when the impossible beauty of anxiety surrounds her. Let open the gush flowing in her lap so that the crack of desire can soften by the dinner bell. The table is a buzz of green chatter, the truthful exactitude of words. Jumbled ghostly foundations, open eyes. Look at each one of them, touch the thickness, amplify the sense of touch at the ends of your body. It is not in there ceremony where the scars dissolve, it is in the belly where the serpents are growing.

Nights of wood set into the grain. A smaller lover wants to find the moment in which the pattern on the rug repeats itself. Blue, and lilac, ditzy. Life in the city is a lacking conduit for the wild daydreams overwhelming you. The cracks in the saucer tricked the eye, compelling one to see them, breathe them, making it impossible to not be them. Though passageways were opened through its alabaster, they were as favorable as sleep masks to wear underwater. She grew docile until flush as the skin filtering the light from the bridge scattered over its bowls through a fading dark. Each piece of cake had been molded in tiny doll dishes, each trembling crumblebit a different shape, but all otherwise identical. The Hostess is urged out foraging into the fog, and the depths increase of black above. The spider and her young were linked from their hatching but faced with instinctual terror, and their scrambling amounted to nothing. This simply means that the imagination is more restless than the stomach. CAN THERE BE SIGNALS

WITHOUT A CONNECTION. The tongue clicks in its synaptic displeasure. If, for example, the invitation said, "Please bring a guest," and, then, one afternoon, you come alone, we may feel you have betrayed our ideals. We have poured into the sink the stale water in which the foxgloves died. Love is so impossibly frayed, all loose ends, don't you think? On that floating morning a lover picked up the candy wrappers from the gutter. With a name like that there is a lot you can do. That doesn't say it all, nor even a greater part. Yet it seems even more incomplete when you were there in person. The Hostess stacked half the ghosts in half the room. The wool makes her itch and the scratching makes the lover warm. The lover is lying on her stomach with one eye closed, walking her fingers along the road she had cleared with her toes. It was a message of departure by which they were called into the room, as if to receive a birthday present given early, because it was much too large to hide, or alive, a puppy maybe, his neck trimmed with colored ribbons.

Snip snip, a voice says, and the Beloved, caught by surprise, shakes at the sound. A step, a ballerina-like tap, however briefly, rips through the heart like the death of a pet, a familiar and graceless creature. The candlewax drips on the tablecloth. Outside, it is raining; the birds flee—moisture exuding from trees: gum, phlegm. IS LOVE A QUESTION OF PERSPECTIVE. A clump of hair is nestled in the sink. Whose hair is it. Damn those clogged pipes.

Araneae, an order of animals in the class *Arachnida*.
Air-breathing, segmented arthropods that have eight legs. Think—"arachnid," think "tarantula" think "Anansi." Think—the myth told by Ovid, Arachne, a talented Lydian maiden, challenged the goddess Athena to a weaving contest. While Arachne's work proved far more beautiful than Athena's, it was ripped to shreds in her jealousy. The Italian dance *tarantella* was a ritualistic dance used to rid young women of the lustful effects of a spider bite. Think from the Latin *Araneus*, orb- weaving, garden, barn, sexual dimorphism. Repeat the expression: *O, what a tangled web we weave*. And thus one must wrap a lover with the finest silks, just as one wraps a Christmas tree in netting. One must bring them home and set them alight.

At the edge of the room, one lover holds another lover's hands upon the planchette. Each figure, distinct from another, exemplifies the history, and all lines intact—veins impeccably rendered, so violet and delicate in the dark. THE CURE IS NOT MAGICAL BUT A NATURAL GROWTH, and a glass shatters. An acrobatic movement. And as this was spoken with the intent of reuniting the dead with the living, the mind now turns to ghosts. Better than butter, the guests spread effortlessly. The grapes are large, dimpled. The room itself accompanied by a series of doors is a brain. Alone at the end of the table, the Hostess feels a hand, a presence, warm to the touch, under the Beloved's clothes. Still in the kitchen, the second lover, *her* lover, is drunk. To withstand the evening, to hate the look of him standing up. The confusion to feel aroused when grief takes hold, nags all night.

A cushion, the pushing of a chair, an antenna hidden by the trees and rooftops. The whole night seemed a kind of holy melodrama. The Hostess watched as the lover ate her pudding in a pattern, carving a rim around the circumference, working her way inward toward the center, scooping with the spoon, to see how far she could separate the pudding from the edge of the bowl before the center collapsed, spreading the pudding out again, lower, back to its edges. The Hostess could tell that it was improvisational because at that point she cleared her throat. Every possibility waits. The darkest thirst, faintly smelling of artichoke hearts, and resembling the sleepiness of summer camp. Nothing could interrupt those given moments. The lover was sipping whisky and wearing her Mary Janes. Then the tantrum broke out, blue, without a breath of air. The lover was but an object of time, filled with trembling voices. The Hostess lifted the pudding ramekin to make certain no spider was webbed in its center. The earnest, quivering effects,

not knowing what you're doing. In Montana do most of the girls do this. A hot but camouflaged hypothesis. The body is a softening. The Hostess rises and pretends to be making coffee. It seemed that they had hardly begun and they were already there. In the school bathroom she vomited secretly, not because she was ill but because she so longed to be her mother. Breathe and bid the holy mess hello. It requires the full table, all chairs in use. And it could destroy you if you let it.

Summers were spent in a rainy warehouse. There are certain lovers that are, as their name suggests, blonde, warm, soft to touch, perfectly pink and white. They are mirages, no different from those that Antoine de Saint-Exupery approached in the Libyan desert, stumbling and dying of dehydration. This certain lover too has flared ears, like an infant's reddened with batting. It is as if the lover were kissing itself, a bodily chain of kisses suffuse with woe. The Beloved lapses, hypnotized by the flux and reflux of the kiss. It is neither narcissistic love nor self-complacency, rather, it is one loss flowing from the cells toward the rest of the wanting, and from there toppling over to the marital bed. The Beloved found himself dependent on a pause, a pillow, a bread roll. In that moment it is clear you really can be homesick in your own neighborhood. A ritual opens between them when they smell the baking bread. So much of the way things were was the same from one day to the next. The lover speaks of how she and the Beloved always had dinner—

salad first on woven straw placemats. It made for a sort of boring mythology. It was there the Hostess met the astonishing figure of her Beloved when he was young. Is it so obvious that we hanker to find ourselves pondering such frivolities amid all this bourgeois memorabilia. Wherever she finds the ghosts, she extends a nightcap. The meal was a sort of protection because it had a better arc. Both the Beloved and the Hostess had to wash the windows in order to see the ghosts distilling in their carnal love.

As if by scratching at the mold one could dig out the source. The ghosts allow the wine to pass through them. Sadness and thirst, and hence sadness and wine, have always been associated in the Hostess' imagination. Their organs look like flowers, an unknown type of flower that feasts on human blood. They were to eventually become one person, gathered up, during a pause, at a comma. The ghosts grow in the utmost darkness and appear to know what they are doing. A plate, a perfect circle rimmed with gold, represents an opening. Microscopic explicit pieces of information come out about them that wouldn't have if they'd just been honest.

As the spirit opens its mouth to the fray, a cellular language rips from the most tightened portions of a chain. Such lemonade—such cake, oranges, dancing. The Hostess tried but could not trust merely the sensation of hunger or the voluntary choices and desires of the guests. Like a cable charged in a summer storm emits dangerous sparks. We may be what we eat but eating and feeding also produced who we are. The groans of the plasmic real obey their reinvigorating function. She felt the sudden triumphant pleasure that comes from linking one thing to another, the thrill of making sense. They were all a witness to a hole. Not shadowy shapes, not mere surface skimmers. Perfect human bodies performing all perfect human functions—replete with flesh, bone, hair, nails, lungs, saliva. If the Beloved's history leads her to the haunted place of rumor, why seek magic charms or spells for the love of words expected to cure those afflicted by passion or envy or the desolation of a body that lives and palpitates? In the liminal

conduits, they can ground their uncertainties on
nothing else.

Learning to listen she was taught not to talk. Could one spirit take captive the bloom between them? The language of shifting chairs. Too few. Too many. If they stand they must be positive. How many could there be now—7, 8,9? A tall lover takes from the center plate, which is damp and white like her waist. One must remember to obey. To break the spell followed by a tiptoe visit. It was the Hostess. It was the bouquet. She discovered the name of her Beloved by plucking daisy petals, jumping rope, or counting the tiny white spots of imperfection on a fingernail. She had always felt self-sufficient except with regard to her feelings, to which she was always vulnerable, always in relation to someone else. Now there were so many. IS THIS A PLEASANT EXPERIENCE. Save her when she brings her dear sober soul to you, furious in her slouching hairdo, licking her lips in smile. It appears the Hostess is throwing herself a birthday party: Coca-Cola, sweet red wine, a cake shaped like Paris—streets, gardens, bridges iced round by

bright blue wavelets. A dear child squirmed in the lap of a spirit but whom did it belong to? Earlier the lot of them had been admiring an inch-high prism set in noon light on the sill. Outflung quick-shifting gouts of color stain. The crystal fruit bowl in the kitchen was covered with mold and tiny black flies that had died in it. The Hostess was a bitch. She was so at ease that her bad manners were graceful. The Beloved literally harnessed in the reins of a spirit. In that evening they had transformed their world through a complex formula. The only form of connection is through the ethereal substance. They smudge, they chant, they feel the possible closeness and the impossible closeness, just as several days ago the Hostess would feign nausea so as to not cook the dinner, spending the long evening in the bedroom counting the pairs of underwear in the dresser. The ghosts were the genius and the warning both. This blissful realization of their true nature.

She only sees the leaves and inlays of the surfaces close in around the house. Those submissive games were sensual. She was no more than short black dress. When alone she would hold her breath not from fear but from surrender until she lost consciousness. The dishes one day deeper. Every kitchen has its own collection of stories, but not every hostess has someone to tell them to. In a small sideways step in a small sideways kitchen, it is her musical expression of growing emptier. Her hand would reach but be a secret. Absence of suggestion: once, and bread alone. The dining room table was in a little room as dark as a closet. It made a difference between the immediate and the sudden in a theater filled with passage. A typical set of errands. A lover stood between them and held their hands as they waded into the gray-blue sacrament, lecturing them on the undertow, more to add to the thrill of the approaching moments than to warn them of any real danger. The lover would continue to grip them by the hands under the table. The curve of the glass,

more, comes over more often. Four courses circle a square year. A napkin set in the lap of her dress was like a hole in the canvas. She could have held that hand forever, or so it seemed, watching the cars go by, alert as to the circumstances of a dream. Ticking clock. She lifts the lid a late sunrise. There are floral appliques in position. Her unease grows before the newly seated. There they are, and she knows it's good, and all they have to do is make it better. A moment no more free than the moment of a mayfly. Her lover entertained them with a lie, a story about an event in his childhood, a catastrophe at a dinner party that never occurred, but he was blameless, unaccountable, since in the course of the telling, he had come to believe the lie himself. A kind of bubbling in the champagnes of inspiration. A pause, a toast, something on paper, the back of a receipt. What follows a strict chronology has no memory. For her, it must exist, the listed items of that empty reality, the objects and ingredients which now she reconsiders. The smells of the house were a peculiar mix of heavy interior air and the air from the outdoors lingering over the lilacs, the camellias, the roses, and the rhododendron. Hard to distinguish

hunger from wanting to eat. The lover was in the kitchen, his hands on his hips, watching a crowd of moths flutter behind the open cabinet of the pantry. These are threads in the terrible distance. They are against the cloth. The surfaces are continually receiving their own shadows.

She conjured a third course for the color of the sky at the late hour. A method of premonition passed down from mother to daughter. The Hostess came as a scrivener to testify that light is a motionless stone. Such love that drowned the room. What brought it there, she did not precisely know. And the man she loved across the table sitting between two others, the remarkable weight of inertia. She could now not imagine him without them. He was waveless white heat glistening in total error.

The scalpel aims its golden eyes at the bone that in time will turn to rot, and the fat slips through life's waters; an incident in the brilliance of dissection pricks up as she winds a hose that like a viper refolds itself after inciting temptation; in this brutal way, the segments make themselves felt, even as death causes bodies to recoil from their unexpected whims; to pull apart the wound is perhaps an uncontrollable desire, or rather, taste can be found in the casting of chairs, like slipping into a gown made of paper that grazes the proximate radiance of skin, with a remote trembling unable to warn against the inevitable removal where claw and fur perform their continuous embrace of rejection-attraction; to be shepherded by the light in the marble, without wine to guarantee future tusk or tussle or rather to let one be sutured by the amazement of not knowing the exact direction of the legs or cardinal points of the two-headed lamb; the setting appoints a certainty with its knife, but there is no indication that this is the direction of

the carving, of the skin, of the body gliding towards
the celestial abyss of teeth.

At night it is undetectable that bones charred to the tip cut and the resin of legs facing you come together; honey gatherers are constricted to beg prematurely their softened materials of various kinds, they germinate countless vibrations of excess in bodies that once loved each other often suddenly, but now repeat it with the clarity of one who knows the moisture should follow; a looping step that peels in the comedown, a sheet of water that erases the years of contorted expansion; so pathetic, gummy white in its smoothness, it comes in waves regardless of whether it disrobes in the perfect yielding of a liquid that savors the holes of intentional hunger; could it be that something loosened from the joint to her inflated body? The drip of acid in the acrobatic movement of a man that lusts like a dog to bite his own tail.

ALL THAT GOOEY OILY STUFF THAT ENVELOPS YOU WHEN THE HEART CANNOT IMAGINE THE WRETCHEDNESS, LIKE THE DOG CONFRONTING A THICKET OF ROSES GNASHING THEIR THORNS, OR LIKE THE POND THAT IN WINTER CREEPS ITS EVER MORE WILTING MARGINS SO AS TO DROWN THE AIR THAT WILL FEED IT; UNNATURAL DEADNESS, THE POND IS DORMANT, YET ITS BODY IS A PERFECT CIRCLE RIMMED WITH GOLD, AS IF THE POND LONGED TO TAKE OVER MORE SPACE: THE THICK OF THIS DIVERSION IS SLIM; BUT THERE ARE SCORES OF INDIVIDUALLY WRAPPED CIRCUITS, FLESH MARBLED ACROSS THE BODY IN SEARCH OF WHAT? TO BE THERE, IN THAT HEAT, AND NOW THE CUT OF THE YAWNING THREAD IS OUT OF SYNCH; TO LOOK BACK IN A RATIONAL INFERENCE OF MEANING, WHILE THE SKIN PEELS BACK LIKE AN ORANGE MADE OF GLASS, OR

BUCKETS OF BLATANT SENTIMENTALITY;
SALT THAT COMES FROM THE ABUNDANCE
OF CORAL, NAVAL FLARE-UP, STRUCTURES
THE STOMACH ADORES OR REJECTS FOR ITS
HEEDFUL FUNK; AND WHETHER YOU LIKE IT
OR NOT THE INNER WALL IS THE MOTHER
OF ALL ORGANS, A DRUNKEN GUT THAT
UNFURLS EVERY EROTIC ROTATION AND
SUBMITS TO ITS OWN FAINT BRUTE DESIRES,
TO THE GLORY OF FINGERTIPS, TO THE
DENSITY OF THE CREAM.

Without joy, the nerves blink through the flesh; the body slowly shuffles to a state it should never have abandoned, smooth like pastures of plenty, it heeds to the smoothness around it; between wolf and sheep, it allows itself to be lured to the gorge, be it lawless nostalgia, divine appetite or submission; recognize the small customs, like the desert spider, she feels the maudlin curtain that surrounds her; there is nothing that governs the measure of this exchange in which only the body is needed; a mass opened not by hymn or prayer but the impossible wound that expands the earth into existence; a mass that in succession gets smaller and condensed into juices that boil and dribble; she opens her arms so nothing of her is left, nothing of that blackish glow; sucked clean from her own tomb, she cradles the constancy of gentle heat approached at birth, she continues to melt and then nothing is kept her mind is sharp and her tactile hairs impel her towards a voice that asks her, who is it? Where does it come from? What does it want? It wants

what is gnawing in the white rhythm, it wants the body spread open in feeding, in tandem, a rendering of moisture exuded from trees, gum, phlegm, it wants a crack in the flatness, longing in the branches, the tongue in teeth, the hordes in the tallow, the tentacles that waltz between the legs and the perfume ducts release; it is a winding tendril, a life that has left without carcass, without form or attribute, without praise, without eyes, without skin, nor open faults or gentle groan, it is fear that has left fearless, without an extreme form of maternal investment, without needed embrace, a god danceless in the water; she defaults to aimless wandering, phantasm that testifies to her sorrow, to the pain of false psychosis, to caress-woven hunger; heaven is a precious liquid, a mixture of wax and pitch; an eye appears, it blinks, stiffened with incredible accuracy: who determines how you touch other women? Its yellow bark dust; nothing in this universe can play its game; she lulls, lulls herself to spilling canyon; the sound cuts to her mottled tongue and nothing is left of the space that confuses her, nothing that dares loosen the meat

without cutting it, balm for the belly that burns
among the weeds.

Slow, the incense trails down the beckoning warmth of a shadow that escapes all reasoning so as to rid itself, by swelling, of its gradual submission to clumsiness. Free to give or free to receive. With vacant eyes, with that same taciturn sanctity of the spirits who throw pleasure onto their arched backs, she who cannot trace the cruelty of past times on her breasts is able to glower. It is so hard to turn away from moving water and impossible to return to it. When a guest alters the coveted place setting (unknown forks are coated by substances that shall confuse them), a silence at the end of the table designs these figures. A gesture as elemental as the weather. As if time had never passed, the landscape of the room superimposes itself over the jealous reading of facts. Bluntly, gross comparison slips back to other gestures. Another is the instance that allows for the void to be filled by a memory, the dark shell that projects its deafening light. A groggy and possibly injured spirit was sprawled just behind the inherited bar cart, wearing filthy pants

that he was now wetting, the urine dripping to the floor. The juices of the flesh are spent in desired blunders—but specters too? It is their speech that covers up the senses, kisses that will never be delivered. *Do not break the champagne glasses or the caresses that your voices insinuate.* As wild birds offer their beauty to the horizon, one crow dares in the cast off field; nothing will stop his feathers' beautiful glimmer to extinguish itself. Yet the evening's brightness will add subtlety to his charms and the pale surface of the skin of the hands of the Beloved, she will pace in her furious dress the parental delight of coddle and *tssk*. Do not respond, tough spirit, to the random uproar of your displacement. To remain passive is to engage in ethical mediocrity. Eyes open to dusk, as if in life it were all dusk and not imperfect registers of days. They are players in a theater of struggling wills. If blood does not flow from their glorious bodies and the flames of older times become lost in favors, feel not that the fervor that overcomes you is a possession deep inside your wearybody.

The light came and went. The substance of a light in its seepage, in the erasures, in the slippery but never enduring solution of tears. They are here in the custody of the house with faces they hardly recognize. It is at this point in the Hostess' dream that she stabs the chocolate cake. Blood on the icing. These visions are the chemical residue of her secretions. In this slice of thought there is a particle of an eye, or of a voice now singing a connection. The Hostess realizes her duty to keep the details of what's immediately moving. That which is conceived is a ghost. How does the extreme simultaneity of ethereal attractions line up with ideals, or with the routine superimposed on contrition? Self-flagellation and ignorance are the options as well as a series of in-between layercakes where design is an unwavering endeavor. To break the resistance of clasped hands that cover table corners with funerary sculpture organized in military rows.

When he sees her mouth he wants to walk away and cut long gashes in his chest. If the turning of hours hides the persistence of the reaping of a former love, it is the heartache of involuntarily deceiving one's self and their history. It is because life intervenes to prevent love from obliterating everything with its sorrowful shadow, and with a cleverness at delaying the pain not ready to reveal itself. All of the sudden the flood. This night will be spent like all others: in the void, simulating one another's past lives. Can sex forever haunt their lonely bodies? The spirit's fingers keep dipping into the access point of the sticky pudding. The awe that their presence inspires becomes accentuated in the Beloved's features. In his hands an unuttered knowledge disintegrates. That putrid scent falls like the head of a slaughtered chicken while gluttonous flies grow drunker with every slurp.

It didn't seem the least bit amazing that they had arrived in the first place. Dreamlike shapes that trudge across the icy staircase. Some have never been revisited, a unique species that cannot be perceived by the senses but instead by the random convergence of what has been and what will be an immense occasion. The two had come a long way from what they had actually felt. What is the point if people always seem to want the runt of the litter? Some peculiar triteness. All the ghosts agreed that the act of writing down was testimonial and that the writing would always be used as proof of what the Hostess held to be true. They, too, were writers. The Hostess stopped serving ribs and lobster not because she quivered at the carcass but because she disliked the mess. What trauma is not a gripping thought? There might be some sort of thematic connection between the love you want and the lover you become. If she couldn't become a housewife, then she could become a flock of birds. Hence, what we see as the body and have

represented in accordance with the organs it contains would in fact be the support of an invisible mother. There was a lover who wrote his name in every one of her books. The things he was saying followed logically the things that he had said before, yet they bore no relation to what he was thinking or feeling. The Hostess and her Beloved had stolen a moment away from the romance of the vanished. They had begun to learn, from the experience of passionate generosity, about love.

As the first knife of the fourth course on the last helping, a hawk against the door. With its beak, trace the letters of their names on the back of the tongue. Stuff the hawk into a vase. The occasion took each one of their ears and carved them as echoes formed in pink, fetal columella. Telling the myth of a lover then admitting you are one lost ghost yourself. The way our lips must trace the same scars again and again. What cannot be understood of the Beloved is that the heart ultimately aches under all that is wistful and the supernatural will allocate what is left. Seven lovers scripted into the web. The mellow burble of digestive enzymes. THAT IS HOW MUCH. How the oven is a tomb and hunger is a hammer ringing in the teeth. Now her life is unimaginable without them.

There are courses served especially slow. The deep-down of the world—but this itself is that. Looking towards, being ready again. *Tissue*, she said, but her Beloved heard this, you: this, you will never stop. It bears no relation to the marvel that is Banquo's ghost, the body of a disembodied king, who does indeed exist now even if only in the form of one who existed previously. The Hostess was embarrassed by the light, or by her trembling hands, and as she looked at her Beloved his image weakened and the world closed in like a curtain. That churning, long table that had become indistinguishable from the void. It is she who is ominous; her lipstick promises nothing. Take the bull by the thorns. They'd like a drink but they can't swallow. It wasn't so much hopelessness as a sense of weakening obligation that made the guests think they too could die again. The guilty aren't as restless as the accusers.

It is a ritual of moments intercepted. And especially for the lost—because time entails inescapability. Along the edges of the tablecloth, where only two years earlier the spirit had called her own, now stretched between them a mass of hurting. At her left, the Hostess helps another to remember. They rowed out on the lake towards the bridge in the midday light. The water dark, cold, smooth, glowing. They stood on the deck in the summertime looking north—a world of cranes and circles. They hiked through the pastel air over driftwood, mosquitos leapt, lighter and lighter, more and more painful—the dog and a funeral pyre. Why not remember their sleeps as well as their dreams? *I can't say for certain*, a spirit says, but she means she has no idea, she feels no gap haunted by the typing of a name she can't quite say. There is no darker secret to dispensation than having succumbed.

The spider sat still in the corner watching them in tranquility. One by one in a circle. The spider watched as drunken ghosts propelled themselves through the foyer, up the staircase, and over the bannister. It perceived nothing but relationships—perception itself is that. The vivid confines of the Hostess' mind. Little was left but the indentation. She herself had wanted to be a spider, but it had been the situation of the fly that most fascinated her, as if the one thing certain was the inadequacy of prior escapes and the one thing to be achieved was the testing of possibility. Perhaps the heart's desire is the same as fate.

There was no need to appear in cloud or vapor. A smaller spirit at once took hold of the Beloved's hand and put one of his fingers into her mouth and pressed it between her teeth, which, to the touch, was as perfect as teeth could be—his warm breath, her prying. If only he knew of the intimate substance that dwells in all of them. The substance of leaves, or of a liquid that he would drink so that eternity instead of fortune became rooted in his neurons. A spirit that withdraws to the cerebral night around the party. A man who betrayed the Hostess appears there, his muscles emerging nude trusting her heart's memory. His body's hunger is simply the distance between her arms at the level of the rest of the body. As if offering nothing. It is not the spell, then, which summons them. It is the alchemy of martyrdom she pours into their glasses.

Without breath, their words blink vibrations through the flowers. They sat along three walls of the room, the middle of which was all windows, and the Hostess, their sole audience, sat facing into the light, blinded, unable to see their faces, so that she was forced to spin inward, to plunge into her role, at which they, her audience gazed in horror.

If there is an end it is a crumb avoided like final remnant on a dinner plate. She scrubs, scrubs the dishes, scrubs the wounds that will not close. The Hostess opens her mouth, wind rustles, and in that gap is proof that a carefully chosen guest list is sometimes necessary in order to sculpt a lasting love. Although these guests have threatened her in the middle of the night, settling into a foaming cluster on her chest. She knows that these ghosts have refused to cohere to her history and its bitterness. But this language of lack no longer sentences her, as if the cork had released the pressure. With a cat's whisker, she cleans the corners of the spider's web, white in its fine contexture of threading. She opens, thinks, expands her own punishment in the dusting. She proves such fretting redundant, now that the pardon of her sentence has begun.

When the pan cradled the smoke. A lurid, all-knowing web, the absolute mystery of chemicals. When sleep is scratching at the radio. When she thought of her mother and her buoyed failures. Death to the hand that rings that bell. When her lover leapt shirtless into the lake on a good bad day. When she walked through the water that was his loss. When with leather belt. When he sat up all night with a ticker tape going in one ear and out the other. When they performed the ritual through a deck of stolen cards. When in the basement at sunrise. When they found themselves bloody and spent before dawn. When the serpent asked her name. When she dreamed of snowy cloth at the verge of foggy fields. When with bottom rung. When she stood on the train tracks and looked up at him through a window, shirtless and sitting on the counter with a dog she did not know. The window expelling the innards of her mirage because it was bursting inside and out. When in the last call. When the tiniest crumbs rest within

an agonized shape and gathering the cloth, a lover's
ribs between the slices of an apple. When dream
wed.

The fat rolls over the bone in the hand of a lover,
palms that push the meat and crackled skin; a
compact green sifts their faces golden while their
dinner rolls are only a celestial secretion in advance.
The company's tales approach the wake and then
their body is just a surface that extends itself towards
the ceiling. With her arms, the Hostess would like to
reach the universe, but the palpitating notion of the
finish line submerges the gaze into a fleeting stain on
the camisole. And again the wolves in the distance
advance their trotting, but expelling so much air
separates her from the spirits and their nothingness.
That is, their depths of nothing else. It is war in that
each side is desperately trying to convince its
audience of the supreme value of what it stands to
lose.

Around the periphery of the kitchen, just outside the cabinet doors runs a translucent thread lined with saliva, connecting eight to four. Doubt is a form of accusation, a putting under suspicion, and regrets? Regrets surmise and some stampede. Months ago, the Beloved stepped across a stream, took up his binoculars, and spotted a flock of tiny birds, but the light was wrong and they flew away, and whether they were swallows or sparrows he was not sure, although their differences had never meant anything to him. The memory of that night is now a mere abbreviation. It was the inclination of the Hostess, her desire to be awakened and thus gratified to “listen to her elders” in the situation— but instead of gratified she felt horror. With that precise threat of loss, the promise of it, there may come a sense of sudden freedom, but only for the losing. These guests are their copies and they ignore them completely. Of course it is pointless to say something that cannot be understood, and yet,

though she does not understand his love for them, it
is not pointless to tell him of it.

It's happening. It is a ritual of reasons. If they were to receive their fate at birth, then the question one would have to ask of a lover how they will behave as they await their fate. It was always easy to press between the barriers that had been set up until they were demolished. Borders call towards barbarism but now they graciously bump elbows. And yet she had the pessimism to crave. For the spider to move from the center of the web toward a stimulus in the web, the spider needs conviction. They had each taken great bites in that moment, great parts of human life to be remembered and distinguished—but love found and love lost, new and old, are never juxtaposed, unless perhaps in the spaces between teeth. There has always only been one meal, and with it they are feeding a lifelong alliance.

Like the oyster shell patiently waiting for the knife that will shuck it, an unforeseen fumble causes the creature of textures to burst open mixed in blood, the glands secreting their effluvia to send the cats a'scatter. The knife at an immortal distance may perceive, amid the evening's fragrances, the sobering supply; at the call of the prayer it will slice unaware of the destination of its random journey until arriving at the site of the encounter; there, beyond quiddity and circumstances, wrapped in the scented half-moon, the guests mate unknowingly, because it is not their bodies that embrace and touch, but the ethereal substance that overflows and contains them; like ten automatons guided by who knows what obscure purpose, the bodies unite again so as to dissolve the vexations that had conjured them in the first place, so that the invisible tether that once united them may now seal the embrace dictated by the ritual. There are spells that disperse spirits, peculiar intimate densities, lovers that condense at the exact boiling

temperature; only this--this determines the curtain
be optimal, this and their tender degree of ripeness.

NOTES

The italicized lines on pages 1 and 2 are from the first chapter of Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*.

The italicized lines on page 7 are from Cherrelle's *Saturday Love*.