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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

no grove // no sound

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Sabrina Piersol

Committee in Charge:

Professor Amy Adler, Chair
Professor Danielle Dean
Professor Page duBois
Professor Monique Van Genderen

2023

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University of California San Diego

2023

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

no grove // no sound

by

Sabrina Piersol

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2023

Professor Amy Adler, Chair

Collapsing inner and outer vision onto canvas, Sabrina Piersol investigates the value of the fragment as it relates to Sapphic poetry through her environmental abstractions. This thesis paper explores related questions surrounding desire, memory, the natural world, and speculative provocations. Framed through reflexivity that mirrors the making process of the paintings, *no grove // no sound* situates itself within a contemporary painting dialogue that yearns for connections beyond the material world and a more comprehensive understanding of individual interiority.

INTRODUCTION: no grove // no sound

Sappho Fragment 94

I simply want to be dead.
Weeping she left me

with many tears and said this:
Oh how badly things have turned out for us.
Sappho, I swear, against my will I leave you.

And I answered her:
Rejoice, go and
remember me. For you know how we cherished you.

But if not, I want
to remind you
]and beautiful times we had.

For many crowns of violets
and roses
]at my side you put on

and many woven garlands
made of flowers
around your soft throat.

And with sweet oil
costly
you anointed yourself

and on a soft bed
delicate
you would let loose your longing

and neither any[]nor any
holy place nor
was there from which you were absent

no grove[]no dance
]no sound
[

*Trans. Anne Carson*¹.

¹ Anne Carson, *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (London: The Folio Society, 2019), 184-187.

1. Must fragments be sharp, splintered shards of a whole? Or can these remnants find agency, fluidly exist in harmonious relation to one another without the burden of having to be ‘complete?’

2. I contemplate this in my thesis body of work, *no grove // no sound*. The title is inspired by Sappho’s Fragment 94, above, a record steeped in despair as Sappho separates from a lover. The use of the first and third person here suggests the kind of intimate relationality that produces such heartache². Sappho recollects moments they shared and perceives her lover as wholeness, especially in the final two stanzas.

3. Without her lover, those spaces are empty. There is no precious grove, no dance, nor sound that Sappho will encounter where her the traces of her lover are lost. Ubiquity. This is painfully beautiful to me. My paintings attempt to communicate presence and impossibility, just as these lines do so justly.

4. *no grove // no sound* — I condense this fragment further into a pair I feel represents the tone of my work. Multiple readings, all correct, can be garnered.

5. If there is no grove, there will be no sound. Neither this grove nor this sound will ever be. This grove and its sound are impossible spaces. It is not a grove, it is not a sound.

² Page duBois, “Sappho in the History of Sexuality,” in *Sappho Is Burning* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 136-137.

FRAGMENTS

6. Everything I've ever learned, claimed to know, believed or discovered has surfaced via fragmentary detail. Memory, too, fails to be anything but an incomplete manuscript that the mind edits and revises without conscious intention. Visual, visceral, vital fragments.

7. Abstraction doesn't need to be all-there, available— the meaning of it, anyway. What abstraction does need is a logic, even if one created by patterns that emerge from hastily-situated fragments. Each is full of information; they are containers. I don't believe that fragments must be fractured shards with threatening, hazardous edges. They are in themselves whole. They take on circumstantial identities and behaviors and meanings in every constellatory variation. Carson's translations of Sappho feel unabridged, sure and complete even with flagrantly deep voids. One understands a fragment as such when its partial nature is clocked, its edge met. A fragment provides a perfect vignette, an interior somewhat decorated yet not entirely prescriptive. Vacant moments tense against the fragmented wholes. It's the silence that allows room for speculation, a moment when the unexplained activates and informs.

8. What's been removed?

9. Fragments challenge my own tendency toward projection upon the uncertain. I practice fielding thoughts, also fragmented and fleeting, and attempt discernment between those which contain insight and those which are narratives conjured by old wounds. Fragments are essential, at least in some way exemplary. They are headlines for stories that my brain or gut constructs. Few feel worth a close read.

10. My own painting practice is a whole fragment situated within an organized history. At present, it points to particular moments in the tradition, namely contemporary landscape, representational abstraction and some aspects of surrealism. No one art practice can do everything all at once, answer every question or critique all the things that necessitate judgment, thank God. There's a deterministic peace and freedom in knowing this.

11. I think I have an argument for how the fragmentary can still be soft and organic rather than sharp and splintered. It's a spectrum. Perhaps some fragments are so far removed that their essence is blown out. Others can be strung together into some assemblage with a fresh footprint. That is the special capacity of the fragment— its potential for rebirth. A fragment is a free agent in discovering a newly ideated context.

12. Breaks are cushions. They provide support and comfort and peace between fragments. They stitch together fractured bits into a mosaic, like tesserae positioned and upheld by an ethereal but reliable, ever-present grout— silence.

PIECES OF SPECULATION

Perhaps if we accept the necessity of fragmentation, the ways in which our access to any past is limited, our access to any narrative determined in part by our own desires, we can contemplate a new relationship between ourselves and the archaic past, one that focuses not only on its irretrievability, but also on what pleasures it offers, what identifications or estrangements it allows, how it can be used in contemporary debates about community, subjectivity, the place of art, what kinds of empowerment or utopianism or imagination of the future it enables³. *Page duBois*.

³ Page duBois, "Aesthetics of the Fragment," in *Sappho Is Burning* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 54.

13. A longing for what's lost presents itself in the inability to uncover what's "missing" from this poetry, and the poetry itself is written from the perspective of one who is yearning for another. Coming to terms with the fact that everything in perceived existence is piecemeal empowers the imagining of new futures, spaces, and narratives using these fragments as base units of creation. The fragmentary provides the space for unique projection of narrative, and to do so through a critical lens, with a level of self-awareness, and the confidence to explore how these containers of information might relate to one another in varying situational contexts.

14. I am inspired to analyze my own painting practice as a speculative endeavor that relies on some amount of pre-established organization. The first time I heard "projection of narrative" as a term was when I worked at an "experimental" design firm where my coworkers were either code engineers or speculative designers. We made a video game full of provocations— a great in-between of narrative and agency. I think my paintings are more distilled, and they aren't linear, but they do offer suppositions and a place to imaginatively extrapolate.

EMBODIMENT

15. Two days ago I again noticed that when I walk, I tend to step using the outer edges of my feet. It goes heel, outer edge of foot, pinky toe, then maybe my big toe. I was somewhat aware of this aspect of my gait evidenced by how my shoes wore, their outermost edges of tread falling prey to the grit of sidewalks beneath my strides. Since then, I have focused my awareness on walking with intentional balance. I feel better when I do this, maybe because I feel personally responsible for facilitating a mental and somatic dialogue rather than operating automatically. So much of my life is already mechanized, it seems. Maybe I just feel better because my lower back pain subsides so long as I walk how I'm meant to.

16. I love my body. I just feel fortunate that it generally works in all the ways it needs to. I mean that I do and practice things to love it.

17. A concept as old as the medium itself prevails: painting is physical. Physicality in painting is actually necessary in order to get any painting done, as there's a direct line from body to brush to canvas. Kinesis is the catalyst. The depth of movement indicates how any stroke lives in the piece. Each mark is a record of motion. Micro-adjustments I consciously make in my physical experience translate to a more confident and aware painting experience. To be able to respond to anything first requires an awareness, like in yoga. An excellent yoga teacher will remind students where they should feel sensation, and what adjustments they can make to experience the posture more fully. It's the student's job to notice and respond accordingly, even if the shift is invisible. This is embodiment. The state one achieves in yoga or painting has primarily to do with embodiment— when physical and mental expressions work synergistically.

18. Reacting and responding are two different things. Agnes Martin says, "It is from our awareness of transcendent reality and our response to concrete reality that our minds command us on our way—not really on a path or to a gate—but to full response."⁴ *Agnes Martin*.

19. I spend time interacting with my own body as a way to feel more present and engaged in my day-to-day existence. At times it feels confrontational to be consciously physical, but most often it's a welcome encounter. Knowing both pain and pleasure is ultimately pleasure. I have been an athlete at various life stages, primarily during my prepubescent and adolescent years, but still I enjoy a relationship with my body self through physical practices as an average being. I

⁴ Agnes Martin and Dieter Schwarz, "What Is Real?," in *Agnes Martin: Writings* (Ostfildern: Cantz, 1991), p. 95.

think athleticism is an art; consistent training allows an athlete to act with informed reflexivity. I've heard people say that games are beautiful and that players do beautiful things while playing them.

20. Painting is something that I can never have, but that I can practice.

21. Fragment 31 by Sappho is perhaps the first recorded instance of embodied female subjectivity and desire. This poem, remarkably complete, describes what it actually *feels* like in the body to hold emotion— desire, arousal, longing. A fluttering heart is a felt experience here. Vacillating heat and cold physically affront Sappho as her emotional self suffers in pining anxiety. Sappho's positionality is a feminist one, especially compared to Plato's writing on eros where the commonality of many men's speeches is idealized transcendence of the physical body. Her radicalism questions stereotypes in philosophy, gender, and poetics.

Sappho Fragment 31

He seems to me equal to the gods that man
whoever he is opposite to you
sits and listens close
to your sweet speaking

and lovely laughing— oh it
puts the heart in my chest on wings
for when I look at you, even a moment, no
speaking
is left in me

no: tongue breaks and thin
fire is racing under skin
and in eyes no sight and drumming
fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking
grips me all, greener than grass
I am and dead—or almost

I seem to me.

But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty

*Trans. Anne Carson*⁵

22. The feeling is felt and heard and held.

INTERIORITY

23. I grow tired of feeling like all my thoughts are swirling, gaining speed as they circle one another toward the upper-most part of my skull. It's here where I feel like a nebulous mess existing in a topical, surface-level state. Expressing these unmoored almost-ideas through movement or very conscious physical awareness is how I get ahold of them, or at least quiet them until they emerge as clarity. At moments, it feels so overwhelming and loud that I don't want to interact with my interiority at all.

24. Sometimes it feels good to imagine my interiority as a room full of furniture, or even as a landscape.

THE ACTUAL AND THE POSSIBLE

We have looked at some of the tactics of incompleteness by which Sappho sustains desire and desirability in the poem. We have looked at similar tactics penetrating lovers' logic and contracting upon a solitude unknown before. They are tactics of imagination, which sometimes turn upon enhancing the beloved, sometimes upon reconceiving the lover, but which are all aimed at defining one certain edge or difference: an edge between two images that cannot merge in a single focus because they do not derive from the same level of reality—one is actual, one is possible. To know both, keeping the difference visible, is the subterfuge called eros⁶.
Anne Carson.

⁵ Anne Carson, *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (London: The Folio Society, 2019), 62-63.

⁶ Anne Carson, "What Does the Lover Want from Love?," in *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton University Press, 1986), 77.

25. I love this quote by Anne Carson from her text, *Eros the Bittersweet*, which is a reworking of her doctoral Classics thesis on eros. It illustrates well how I understand formal and conceptual dichotomies within painting. The formal and conceptual are deeply intertwined—technical application is in service to the meaning, inherent or perceived, of a work. Edge relationships in painting mark the collision, parting, or even unemotional meeting of forms in a composition. Dragging a dry brush with a bit of paint across an area numerous times eventually produces a haziness that allows tones and colors to gradually shift into one another, it's called *sfumato*. It comes from the Italian word for smoke and it fits into the greater painting vocabulary perfectly well. Referencing Carson, these areas are what I might define as the 'possible.' This space contains information that does not ask the viewer to be defined either visually or metaphorically. Pigments that play together on canvas and produce a complicated color experience speak to the unexplained moments of human experience that need not, or refuse to, be reduced to an easy, singular expression. Sfumato is sexy but cold, open but difficult to interpret. The possible is heavy with swirling, kinetic breath.

26. The possible is difficult to locate without its complicator, the actual. The 'actual' refers to that which relies upon establishment, legibility, and logic. The actual is rife with structure and confidence and presence and it also tells us what isn't there. According to Carson, what drives desire is lack. "That which is known, attained, possessed, cannot be an object of desire," she writes⁷. Emptiness is ideal for the opportunist lover to ascribe their own anticipatory fantasy, thereby propagating their desire further. Imagination helps here. I would visualize the actual in painting as forms with smooth, clearly defined edges whose boundaries are distinguished by

⁷ Anne Carson, "What Does the Lover Want from Love?," in *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton University Press, 1986), 73.

way of confidently applied wet paint. This kind of paint handling has a level of finish to it, even when the form itself is modeled by loose, painterly strokes.

27. Painting the actual doesn't mean producing illustrative representation, as representation or abstraction could occur within either of these techniques. Rather, what is painted is what is. I like to paint with a compositional logic that is complicated by moments of possibility. That is, I seek to employ some structure in each painting that grounds it in some sort of reality. The possible shows up through less formulaic painting strategy, what is self-reflexivity. This is the same tension that Carson describes in her discussion of sustaining desire— the two exist simultaneously but are at odds with one another. Binary thought is unnecessary even within this dichotomy. An 'actual' form can be possibly actual, and a 'possible' form can be actually possible, both tantalizing options from where I stand. Differences between the actual and possible are visible, undeniable, and are exactly what give a painting its vibrational life force. I am mostly talking about painted texture here, but the actual and the possible are reinforced by thoughtful use of color, especially, and other formal applications.

THE EDGE

28. Recognizing that an edge exists implies that its form also be recognized. An edge marks where the actual ends and the possible begins. Edges have to do with boundaries, and boundaries certainly have to do with desire. Physical and emotional edges constitute my entire being. When I desire you, I see what I lack. Am I a fragment?

29. We are in bed and our hair tangles into sfumato'd disarray. Limbs like tree branches overlap and sway and cross. Was I whole before you? Now I know where you begin and I finish.

30. *Naked Lady (2019)* (Fig. 1) by Shara Hughes (b. 1981) has what I'm talking about. This painting is saturated with pigment and luminosity and direction. The petal-like shape in the bottom right corner is a walking contradiction even in its abstract form. Orange-peach haze glows outward before it's respectfully consumed by deep violet. This edge relationship is about color and texture. In the bottom left, a loosely rendered shape appears to be a playful painting experiment until it's met with a serious shadow that props the aforementioned shape into an elite class. This edge relationship contributes to the painting's emotional tone. The main character of this painting is undoubtedly the purple floral-like form in the center of the piece. Each moment of contrasting paint handling and thoughtful edge dynamics within dynamizes this element and communicates its rejecting of directed perception. Shout-out to the upper right-hand corner where languid lines dance in their living room— it adds texture and levity against the weight of the larger forms. Hughes' paintings are visible spontaneity calibrated by painting prowess; here are the actual and the possible. How the bits and bobs all constitute a singular energy has everything to do with how they meet one another compositionally.

31. It is so absolutely tense and exhilarating to see edges butt up against, melt into, or vibrate alongside one another in painting.

32. It's joy to resign myself to another's competence so I follow yours. You've painstakingly planned out our route and I feel grateful. We shuffle down and through a bible camp's acreage and into more privately owned lots. It is the morning and it is hot. You help me over a rushing creek and we move toward a waterfall that is gushing with brown, mud-laden water. It's surprising this late in the summer and we say so. There is a structure next to the falls where it looks like someone has maybe been living. We scramble up to the trail and for five hours we

climb what feels like straight vertical. We haven't yet seen anyone until a perspiring white man points out a huge shelf of mushroom growth (Figure 2). We love it.

33. On a different hike, when we finally encountered another being after deep silence, I said, "finally, we found you!" to him and I think it embarrassed you but also made you love me more.

34. There are tiny purple flowers and yellow flowers scattered about the trail. Everything is still verdant and lush because the summer has been wet but we both know this so we don't say it. Periodically during our ascent I look behind at our footsteps and see the mountains grow in the distance. Swaths of darkness sweep across their kelly green faces. The pieces that jut out are sun dials in the high-noon light.

35. Georgia O'Keeffe's (1887-1986) edge relationships are direct and forward-facing. Her edge relationships create the possible rather than just allude to it. They produce obvious passageways for a viewer. *Red with Yellow (1945)* (Fig. 4), part of the Pelvis Series, exemplifies an astounding combination of starkness and fluidity. The yolk-yellow center glows thanks to slight gradation to white toward the bottom of the form. It oscillates between a flatness and an immense depth, a characteristic often seen in O'Keeffe's works. Terracotta red encircles the golden, ovular form and clarifies the golden oval's role as a portal. The orangey-red form is structural and volumetric as described by its color gradations throughout and dimensional, hard edges in the top third of the picture. The top-left corner continues to play with these motifs, adding necessary variety in texture and scale. While she was alive during the early 20th century, O'Keeffe employed a careful finishing technique with a large brush to deftly smooth transitions between colors, as seen in the painting at hand. Clean, deliberate delineation between the golden and red-orange forms creates immense visual impact. The content of this piece is

explicit in its wanting, its desire. O’Keeffe’s paintings balance clarity and mystique. Edges in her works are as consequential as cliffs that fall into luminous, unknown spaces.

36. The trees feather out, becoming less dense as we continue. I silently choose the point where the terrain changes as a resting spot and now it’s my mini-goal. We reach an abandoned mine and enter the shadow of its cave. Once I realize how chilled I am from my sweat against the cooler air, I step out of the mine and back onto what’s now a suggestion of trail.

37. There are huge, jagged, white boulders everywhere (Fig. 3). My optic nerves nearly malfunction as the rocks gleam with such forceful luminosity. It is a field of raw marble thrown onto the mountain like a bunch of dice onto a beanbag chair. We are quiet.

38. The energy transforms and renews as we traverse the colorscapes, meeting green again, blue later, then a deserted, alien pink. You scrawl our names in the log kept inside a glass jar that’s tucked in some rocks at the summit. You add another line and I forget what it says.



Figure 1. *Naked Lady* (2019). Shara Hughes. Oil and dye on canvas. 78 x 66in.



Figure 2. Mushroom shelf.



Figure 3. Calcium-rich boulders close to the marble field.



Figure 4. *Red with Yellow* (1945). Georgia O'Keeffe. Oil on canvas. 36 x 48in.

39. *Aureolin Canopy with Opal Clouds (2022)* (Fig. 5) by Tennessee-Native Laurie Nye (b. 1972) is an image created rather than recorded. The surface almost looks dyed as the painting brims with movement and form rendered by many thin layers of pigment that the canvas soaks up. Nye expands memory and landscape into vibrant tangles that promise the viewer a bit of peace and a bit of play. Acidic yellows, greens, pinks and blues steep *Aureolin Canopy with Opal Clouds* in psychedelic possibility. Nye distills the aura of a place through her considered use of line and its relationship to more weighty forms. I'm drawn to her brazen palette, inspection of memory, and willingness to let the painting present its own, perhaps non-preconceived, provocations to the viewer.

40. Another early twentieth century painter who informs my work is Agnes Pelton (1881-1961). A Theosophist, her paintings are primarily concerned with spirituality of the interior kind, especially after her 1932 relocation to the California desert. Her oeuvre oscillates between vivid landscapes and mystical abstractions. She is a painter poet—both her writing and painting practices are vehicles for her spiritual expression. Often her poems, inspired by such romantics as Keats and Wordsworth, accompany her paintings⁸. Her pieces, like *Messengers (1933)* (Fig. 6), are informed both by her landscape surroundings and her commitment to painting as a spiritual, transcendental act. The notion that visualization is a greater power than perception is central to her practice; imagination is a creative act that encourages daydreaming and conscious projection⁹. This aligns perfectly with the idea that Sapphic poetry is whole whilst fragmented. In both cases, what's explicitly available allows for a more fully-expressed experience through individual projection of narrative.

⁸ Pamela H. Simpson and Michael Zakian, *Woman's Art Journal* 18, no. 1 (1997): pp. 65-66, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1358693>.

⁹ Michael Zakian, *Agnes Pelton: Poet of Nature* (Palm Springs (Calif.), CA: Palm Springs Desert Museum, 1995).

41. Stylized rock features ground the bottom edge of *Messengers*. A cerulean blue semicircle rests behind them, meeting the arms of an ovular, golden light suspended like a theremin's note. A crown of yellow palms rests atop it. The dark night blue background dissolves into a lighter shade from top to bottom, suggesting a setting sun's final breath. The surface of the painting is incredibly smooth and radiant, likely from the numerous layers of glaze Pelton applies.

Messengers is familiar but otherworldly, contemplative, self-embodied yet inviting.

42. Pelton's work became relevant again recently, especially following the highly acclaimed 2018 retrospective of the Swedish mystic painter Hilma af Klint (1826-1944) (Fig. 7) at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. In Chloe Wyman's 2020 ArtForum article on Pelton, "Divine Reality," the author draws parallels between the two artists' relationship to the natural world and alternate realities and self-proclaimed role as spiritual mediums through painting. She goes on to note that the contemporary reception of these painters indicates an "exhaustion with the art-historical canon and a hunger for meaning outside the domain of empirical data and official institutions (Wyman 2020)." As broad a statement as it is, I can't help but agree. As a painter it feels futile to translate my human experience in a one-to-one, representational way. Painting pure abstraction has also become less enticing to me as I strain to tether myself to my surroundings, no doubt in an effort to resist overwhelming isolation and a swelling pessimism. Access becomes an antidote. I myself am not a spiritual medium, but rather, a question-asker.



Figure 5. *Aureolin Canopy with Opal Clouds* (2022). Laurie Nye. Oil on linen. 59 3/4 x 59 1/4in.

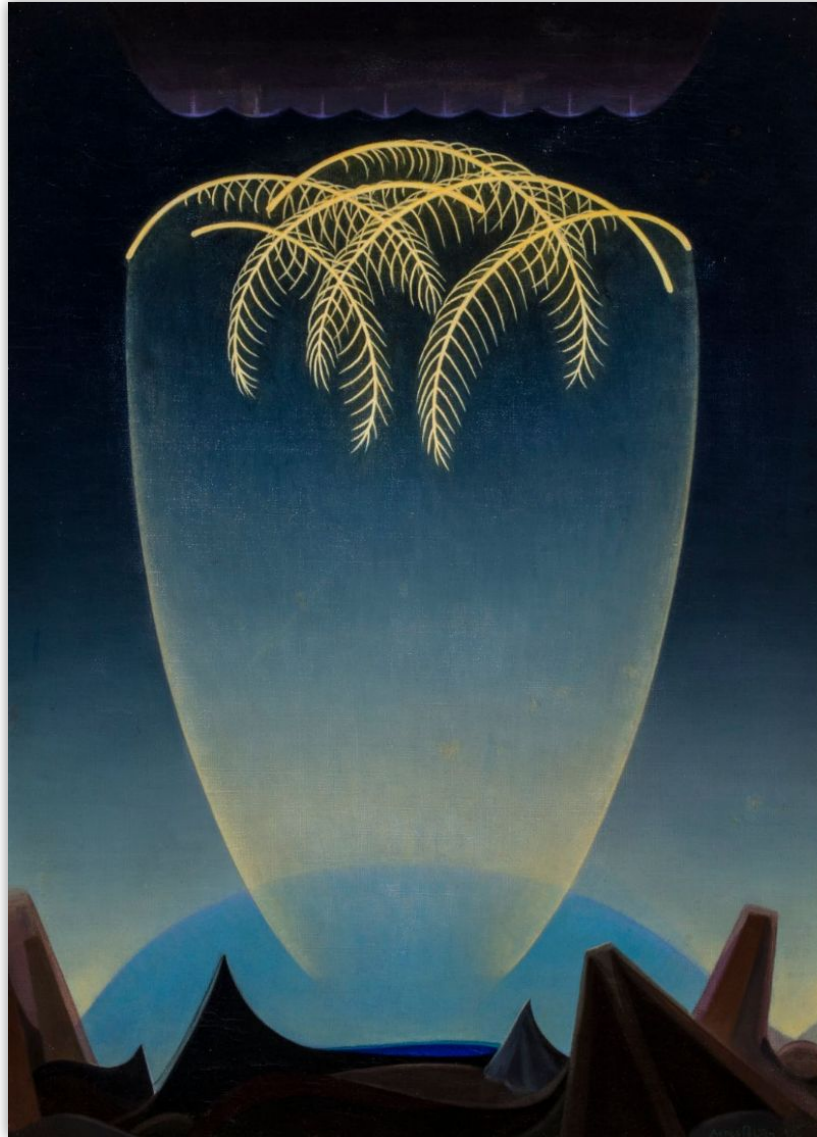


Figure 6. *Messenger* (1932). Agnes Pelton. Oil on canvas, 28 x 20in.

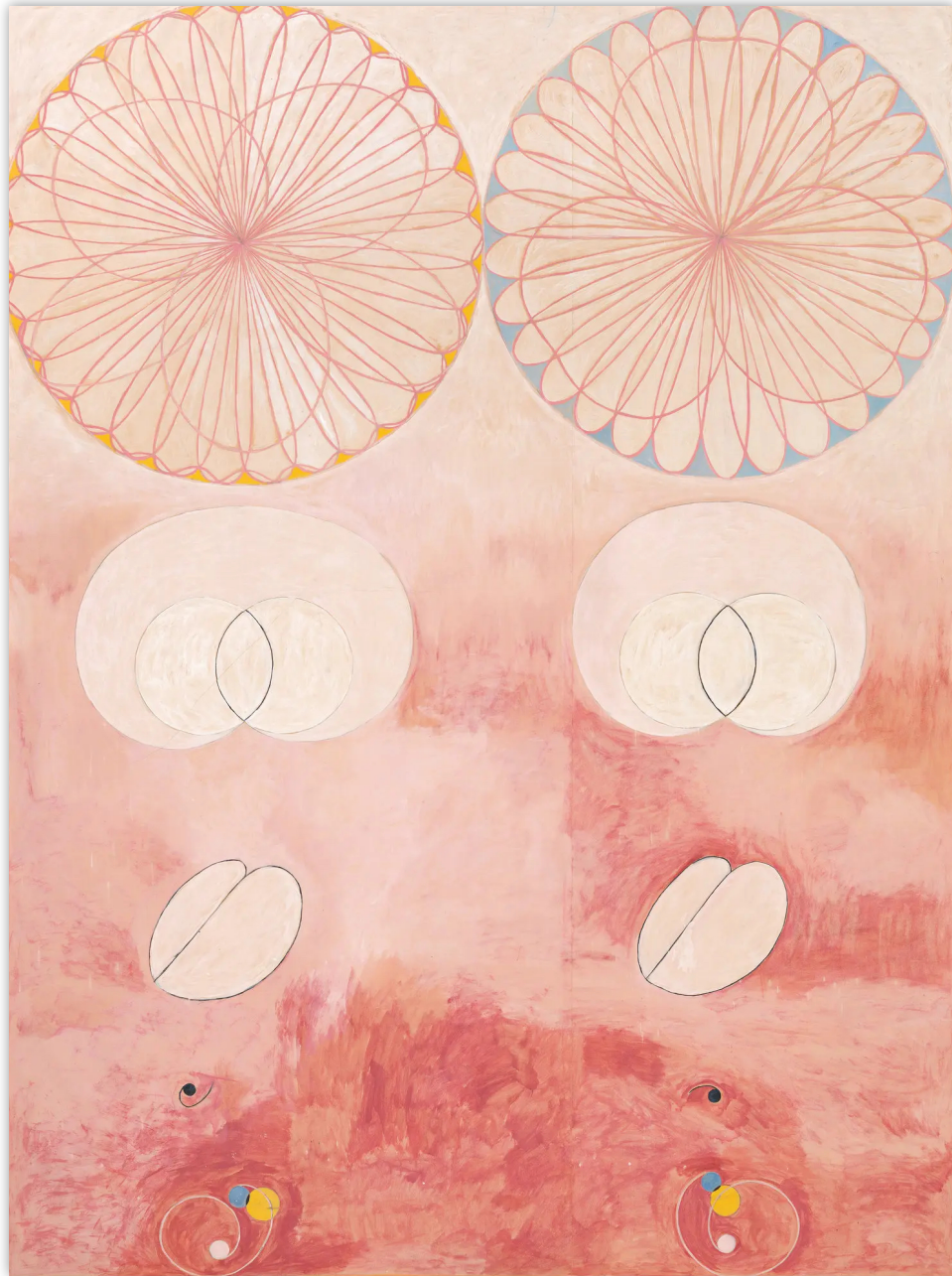


Figure 7. *Group IV, The Ten Largest, No. 9, Old Age (1907)*. Hilma af Klint.
Tempera on paper, mounted on canvas, 126x 93 11/16in.

STRUCTURE

43. Does a landscape desire? Does it ever know its lack? Illustrating a landscape involves preference, sometimes arbitrary, for the sake of the composition. Aside from human interventions and waste, the landscape that is, rather than just what's perceived, is completely intentional and functional. Landscape ecology recognizes spatial entities, territorial properties, perception and experience, organization, scale, and, importantly, its dynamic nature and the inevitability of change.

44. Natural topography is deceptively dynamic. Memories of mountains, valleys, depressions, mesas, gorges, lakes, rivers, canyons that I have visited fail to represent any of those features' eras of existence. I will never witness millennia of erosion smooth the earth. That's because my life is very short and also because even these colossal, seemingly-unmoving structures of the planet never arrive. The rocks and I, we meet at a point in time where neither of us will ever be again.

45. In college I took a geology class and we went on a week-long trip to study rocks in New Mexico. Besides examining glittering minerals, my favorite part was constructing a "geological story" about what had occurred over millennia based on bits of information. Ancient fossils, particular mineral depositions, types of rock formations provided evidence for speculation. I wanted to major in geology after that class but I nearly failed chemistry.

46. The change has happened, the change still happens.

47. *Words begin as description. They are prismatic, vehicles of hidden, deeper shades of thought. You can hold them up at different angles until the light bursts through in an unexpected color*¹⁰. Susan Brind Morrow as quoted by Ellen Meloy¹¹.

48. I find Morrow's adage to be especially true in poetics, where language is frequently overdetermined so that a reader might experience multiple meanings simultaneously. Ancient Greek language is special because even the sounds of the words contribute to their content—lovely things get beautiful words and despicable things require disagreeable throat function.

49. Sapphic poetry has its own logic: four-line stanzas with three metrically identical lines, eleven syllables long. The fourth line is shorter with just five syllables. Sapphic stanzas are rhythmic on purpose as the oration of the poetry is meant to accompany the lyre. It is truly lyrical poetry. The structure of the poetry itself infuses with its meaning.

50. Fragmentation has abstracted much of Sapphic poetry; the structure of the poetry itself is transformed through its breakage. Not only is each prismatic word a garden to discover, but the absence of information further allows a reader to project their own narrative or meaning.

51. I try to achieve something similar through intentionally employing similar abstraction logics that catalyze meaning-making and whose structures, at times, conflict with themselves.

¹⁰ Susan Brind Morrow, *The Names of Things: A Passage in the Egyptian Desert* (Riverhead Books, 1997).

¹¹ Ellen Meloy, *The Anthropology of Turquoise: Reflections on Desert, Sea, Stone and Sky* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2002).

52. In my paintings, I intend to architect an imaginary logic that pulls from the metaphysical and the physical. Their logics dispute the permanence of linearity and instead rely on modularity that can be infinitely reconfigured. The absences between that which is present are offerings, not prescriptions for some spiritual experience. Some of my paintings are meditations on the tension between desire and withholding, but none attempts to inflict transcendence upon its viewer.

53. Similar to what occurs in fragmented Sapphic poetry, there is also balance of access and withholding within my paintings. The two together are what catalyze desire. There is an obvious play between presence and absence in my work that I do not attempt to reconcile, for the space between them is where I believe lies the most fertile ground for viewer engagement. This interchange mirrors that of desire and withholding, access and obstruction, and representation and abstraction.

54. As a painter who works primarily in abstraction, it's my conviction that abstraction should be accessible. I achieve accessibility in my work through designing compositions that make use of visual motifs. These motifs are explicitly landscape-informed, like flowers, plants, skies, bodies of water, and atmospheres as inspired by my own sense of place within Southern California, Colorado, and the American Southwest. The visual motifs I employ create a logic that provides entry points into each of my works. Not only are they examples of the familiar, but they are situated relative to one another so that movement in, across, between, or through each composition is journeyed with ease and a playful sense of discovery.

HALCYON POUR

55. The moon is always full here. It has risen in the past hour or so as the night descends. At dusk, everything glows, sparkles, glitters with potential. Crepuscular activity materializes in sonic bloom.

56. *halcyon pour* (Fig. 9) is first of the *no grove // no sound* body of work. I contemplate the idea of the arch as it relates to ceremony. Unlike an altar on which sacrifices are made, underneath an archway is where promises are made (Fig. 8). It brings togetherness forth or, more fatalistically, the euphoric ignorance that sprouts under the duress of romantic enchantment. The arch in this piece provides a sense of structure to the composition— it leads the eye of the viewer around the canvas circularly, almost melodically. This mapping might suggest the ouroboros, the potential for the everlasting, or the inevitable disappointments inherent to agreements made under eternal pretenses.

57. This painting balances abstract forms, such as the arch, green wands, and floral suggestions, with more explicitly plant-like imagery and a heavily-stylized flowing river. The top right quadrant is built using numerous transparent layers while the river and arches are modeled with fattier paint. Formally speaking, this piece and the others in this series attempt to calibrate the tension between weight— both in the varied surface qualities of the paint and within the composition itself.

58. The title, *halcyon pour*, is derived from the interesting history around the concept of 'halcyon days.' The sounds of these words first intrigued me, reminding me of a Weyes Blood song I listen to when feeling either wistful or self-pitying. The word 'halcyon' comes from the Greek story of Alcyone, who throws herself into the ocean following the death of her husband in a

shipwreck. They are both transformed into kingfisher birds and the gods grant her a week of calm waters each year during which she lays her eggs. ‘Halcyon days’ is a term understood today to describe pastimes of nostalgic tranquility. Past and present converge in this language and in this work.

I’ve come around to the conciliatory quality of untruths. Memory fans out from imagination, and vice versa, and why not. Memory isn’t a well but an offshoot. It goes secretly. Comes apart. Deceives. It’s guilty of repurposing the meaning of deep meaning and poking fun at what you’ve emotionalized. And besides, it feels more covert to have no evidence. To believe that something you’ve experienced will build on your extent—your extent as a person who sees things, and is moved by things—without ever having to prove those things happened exactly as they happened. Substantiating is grueling, monotonous. It’s what life expects of you¹². *Durga Chew-Bose*.

59. *halcyon pour* points to the fluidity of memory and the human propensity to paint the past, and envision futures, with gentle optimism. “Memory is trust open to doubt,” Chew-Bose muses.



Figure 8. One of the arches at Arches National Park, Utah.

¹² Durga Chew-Bose, “Heart Museum,” in *Too Much and Not the Mood* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 31.



Figure 9. *halcyon pour* (2022). Sabrina Piersol. Oil on canvas, 59 3/4 x 47 3/4in.

FLOWERDEEP SOJOURN

60. An untimely frost, an air of pink dusk. Mountainous forms that peter into abstraction. The sense of promise in transition.

61. flowerdeep sojourn is an experiment in reflexive painting informed by artistic research.

Loose, sometimes crude ink drawings litter the walls of my studio, iterations of compositions I

might want to explore. They feel like the letters from lovers past that I stuff into a box labeled 'OLD' in my closet. These letters are full of inaccessible potential in this present moment. Some of the drawings function similarly— they are both possibility and relic, deserving of analysis but unavailable to what is now. Attempts at recreation beget performance which begets too much thinking and not enough being.

62. I make several drawings before beginning this piece in earnest, even going so far as to use some colored pencils in the initial sketches, which I don't typically do. The increase in scale from halcyon pour to this piece is intimidating. The finished piece resembles the preparative drawings only loosely, which is typical of my reflexive painting practice.

63. Reflexivity in painting is a tool I exercise regardless of momentous confidence or doubtful anguish. It's what maintains the development of a work and guarantees that there will always be another visual problem to solve. What I mean by reflexive painting is the collective act of making marks on the canvas, looking at the paint that's been put down, and then reacting and/or responding to how that initial mark has impacted the piece as a whole by adding a secondary mark. This sequence repeats itself at varying speed and volume depending upon how challenging the painting feels at any given point. Reflexive painting works well for those who do not require the finished piece to represent any prior studies or preconceived visions of the painting's final expression. I go in with a bit of a plan, make notes along the way for possible resolutions and document its progress in photos, but ultimately the painting manifests itself.

156. "Why is the sky blue? —A fair enough question, and one I have learned the answer to several times. Yet every time I try to explain it to someone or remember it to myself, it eludes me. Now I like to remember the question alone, as it reminds me that my mind is essentially a sieve, that I am mortal.

157. The part I do remember: that the blue of the sky depends on the darkness of the empty space behind it. As one optics journal puts it, 'The color of any planetary atmosphere viewed against the black of space and illuminated by a sunlike star will also be blue.' In which case blue is something of an ecstatic accident produced by void and fire¹³. *Maggie Nelson*.

64. In prose writing, Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* best exemplifies the kind of reflexivity I'm after in both the making and viewing of my own work. Vis-a-vis a list format, one that directly inspired the structure of this writing, Nelson illustrates emotional contemplation with remarkable fidelity. It is discursive, explores ideas on the lateral plane, and its focused discussions point to universal truths. It feels akin to Sapphic poetry wherein connections are implied via interstitial silence.

65. Reflexive mark making in *flowerdeep sojourn* provides the aesthetic character of the painting. The mountainous forms are loose applications of color and line. Shapes that appear become spaces to fill. A pattern like piano keys spreads northwest across the canvas from the bottom right quadrant. Grassy vertical strokes on the lefthand side oscillate in and out of abstraction. This painting is energized quiet.

¹³ Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (Seattle, WA: Wave Books, 2019), 61-62.



Figure 10. *flowerdeep sojourn* (2023). Sabrina Piersol. Oil on canvas, 60x72in.

FREIA FAIN

66. A cool twilight air greets me as I settle into my preferred smoking position. I romanticize my lonesomeness. A swath of cumulonimbus cloud overtakes the sky to my left, interrupted only by a few silhouettes of the tallest, skinniest palm trees. Another plane seconds away from landing sounds like train overhead, but the softness and fullness of the clouds dull the cacophony. It appears to be mid-bloom, this cloud, and I yearn for spring.

67. The arrangement in the sky that evening is in my mind as I begin painting *freia fain* (Fig. 11), a piece that wonders at the life force of these watery, airy giants. I draw it quickly a couple of times on paper then immediately jump into the painting. The stamen— that’s what I’ve decided to refer to these shapes as— are also blocked in straight away. Removed from their contextual flower, these forms are stylized abstractions of something generative.

68. Feathered margins accentuate the energy of the sky forms bursting from within. A mesa-like form grounds the piece in back-lit repose. ‘Freia’ comes from the Norse goddess of fertility, Freyja, but whose spelling I prefer in combination with ‘fain,’ which means “with pleasure.” The sound of ‘fria’ is wild and loose and brings shining rays to mind. Simple florals rendered with reductive marks echo the cloud interiors’ floral motifs. I develop this technique first in *freia fein* and it becomes another element of my visual vocabulary repeated in subsequent paintings. These softer marks rest somewhere between the actual and the possible.



Figure 11. *freia fain* (2023). Sabrina Piersol. Oil on canvas, 60x72in.

NOW AGAIN / EFFLORESCENT

69. *now again / efflorescent* (Fig 13) is made in response to what's learned in making *freia fain*; the arrangement of forms in this composition is an approximate inverse of its predecessor. Compelled to continue exploring cloud forms and more pointed reductive mark-making, I centrally position three flowing forms with delicate floral interiors. Propelled forward by the brightness of the canvas white, the flowers pop against the lower-key hues of blue around them. Rich, dimensional color gradation achieved by layers of softly modeled paint give life to the cloud forms. The color says that they could be vignettes of sky while the shape suggests the

contrary. This provocation collapses the relationship amongst what's all involved in photosynthesizing flowers. It is a living collage where the seams are hidden, mostly.

70. You're wearing those brown pants you hemmed yourself. The bottoms of my jeans match.

71. We go to the Harwood Museum in Taos, New Mexico, in February, around my birthday. On view is an exhibition by William Herbert "Buck" Dunn (1879-1936), a Mainer who's planted in Taos by 1915. His figurative landscape paintings are romantic, mythologizing snippets of what visually suggests cinematic narrative. His sense of light and color are especially swoon-inducing, as is his approach to rendering sagebrush (Figure 12).

72. And I can't get enough of them. There is a heat and lightness to the sagebrushes despite being blocked in as opaque organic geometry. I play with organizing similar brush in now again / efflorescent towards the bottom edge of the composition. Light pokes through from behind their wispy tops. Blues balance the weight of the cloud forms above while greens give way to thin stems sweeping up towards the west.

73. This painting is spring. An energy pulls the brush, the clouds, the poppies towards the proverbial setting sun. An orange-yellow glow lights up beneath a throng of heavily-impasto'd flowers that are at once environmental and atmospheric. Stamens radiate from their pink centers.

74. The title now again / efflorescent points to the recurring rebirth of spring. My mother's perennials. The crocuses yellowing the field in front of Second Congregational Church. The colossal magnolia tree across the street that shimmers for three days before its petals drop into

a sudden pink disaster. Poppies is a Californian choice, I know, and I'm obvious about it. I once had a picnic beside a field of poppies and felt warmed by their chromaticity.

75. I use a forward slash in some of my titles to indicate a line break, as is done when a line of poetry ends and a new one begins. I don't capitalize letters because I prefer the continuity of lowercase words. They better represent the fragment, vignettes into a whole that could continue forever on either side. I became accustomed to reading Ancient Greek which is all in lowercase save for proper nouns. It lends itself to the canorous nature of the language.

76. Blossoming.



Figure 12. *Romaldita* (c. 1922). William Hebert Dunn. Oil on canvas, 30x25in.



Figure 13. *now again / efflorescent* (2023). Sabrina Piersol. Oil on canvas, 60x72in.

INLAND ECHO

77. Again the brush burgeons. Again the arch cambers over the meandering river. The moon dazzles, full, as it was the day I was born.

78. *inland echo* (Fig. 14) is a fickle recollection, a malleable memory that surrenders itself freely to my barbarous confabulation. It is late summer, perhaps, and the days are bleary until the falling night sings us back to attention.

79. Nearly central, the edges of a bright, brushy cloud taper into the receding tale of a flowing river shape. Their points meet in a balanced embrace and each form pushes into its full expression in opposing directions. This subtle double effect occurs elsewhere in the painting, such as the pair of arches whose bases kiss one another. A bushel of green floral wands echos its rosy counterpart set beneath the right-most arch. Ribbons of alternating color repeat in the lower left and middle left areas. White desert wildflowers, Sand Blazing Stars maybe, parrot each other in the upper left and bottom right quadrants. The deep blues throughout are more sisterly than identic.

80. The implication here is that when memory is in fact open to doubt, it becomes a ripe space for imaginary thought. Can dreams be cultivated, or are they thrust upon me? Memory is where multiple realities can converge either consciously or by the natural order of one's shifting emotional perceptions of events in time. Unfounded truth is easy.

81. Creeping branches in the background allude to the shadow side of memory, namely suspicion, or the persistence of aching grief.



Figure 14. *inland echo* (2023). Sabrina Piersol. Oil on canvas, 60x72in.

DESERT SUPER BLUE

82. The super bloom in California has just withered to its end when I move to Los Angeles in May of 2017 from Colorado. A ‘super bloom’ occurs after heavy rain seasons in the typically arid climate of California— wildflower seeds lie dormant in the soil and only germinate with adequate precipitation. Timing, moisture, temperature and locale must align synergistically for an explosive florescence.

83. In 2020, I approach Antelope Valley Poppy Preserve and see honey being sold on the side of the road. The country is in lockdown so I decide it's a fine time to drive to the hills. I keep missing the 'super' blooms but on this April day I am not disappointed. Orange, purple, and yellow silks drape over the undulating topography. It is green and orange and blue all over. Careful not to step on any delicate friends, I approach the flowers cautiously. I listen to the wind tenderly whisk the poppies into dance (Fig. 15).

84. There aren't any scientific particulars for a bloom to qualify as 'super.' If it's extraordinarily dense and abundant, well, there you have it.

85. Auspicious whispers abound after a rainy season as wet as this past winter. Nearly May, my social media feed is evermore saturated with images of blooms from all over the state. The algorithm even delivers targeted ads for poppy-inspired fast fashion. Even so, I remain fully enveloped in the thrill of the season and see to my canvas.

86. *desert super blue* (Fig. 16) is a song for a super bloom. Hills on the right side cascade into glowing flowerbeds. Gradient colors suggest the slopes are quite a distance away. A peach Rocky Mountain and a mesa akin to Cerro Pedernal confuse the exact location of this environment. Scale exaggerations, too, collapse any specificity. A rusty arch soars above and through the expanse. A cottony orange wisp blows along the horizon as flurries of diaphanous Baby Blue Eyes ride the sky's currents. This composition tests plausibility against possibility through its subtle contradictions.

87. It's like there's glitter in the air when I catch the moon rise against that Los Angeles, Colorado, Taos blue.

88. The swaths of color can be seen from space.



Figure 15. Antelope Poppy Reserve.



Figure 16. *desert super blue* (2023). Sabrina Piersol. Oil on canvas, 72x108 in.

LIGHT + COLOR

Alpenglow Pink

89. What's the opposite of a shadow? Whatever that is, its light plays against the waxy prickly pear shells and reddens their already-blushing fruits as the sun sets.

90. Color in my cheeks as we walk home from the graveyard in town in the autumnal dusk. The town's founder's marble funerary stone reads in Latin, "if you seek my monument, look around."

91. Red rocks come alive— glow— add texture to dry, thin air.

92. Dusk epitomized. We walk inside a film photograph.

93. It's sparkling wine frosting the glass in Adam's garden on the first night. There are herbs and weeds and chamomile flowers everywhere that I will pick one morning a month from now.

94. Washed in it, your hair turns into a golden peach.

95. It's a bloated, fleshy face of fresh desolation.

96. It shines through vermilion sunglasses and softens the harsh concrete floor until I reset my gaze.

The Western World's Blue

97. A proposal for the infinite, "that blue that will always be there as it is now after all man's destruction is finished." *Georgia O'Keeffe*.

98. Paul Newman's wet, blue eyes.

99. Terse, unknowable familiarity. Western films are horrors that happen in daylight.

100. It lures me into a stretch of storm after I've just promised my faith.

101. Alpine crowns amongst chem trains.

102. I have always known you.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

103. I believe that we can.

104. Fragments are all that I have. There is no choice but to accept them, rearrange them, and trust they are as true as perception.

105. For I exist in the in-between, the silence, the break in the line. There is where I will flourish, under the moon in an eventide blush.

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