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## Artemisia in the Metro

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# Artemisia in the Metro

## **Abstract**

The “art poem” is an intriguing form of poetry. In writing about something that is inherently visual, a poet must remold a work of art into new material, drawing upon the work’s elements of form such as color, line, use of light, contrast, and composition to make his or her own reflective statement, beyond simply describing the artwork’s own content. In my poetry I aim to take this model of the “art poem,” and, through extended experimentation with this idea of ekphrasis (writing about art in a poetic context), intend to suggest a more intimate connection between art and language.

This collection of poetry was inspired by the life and paintings of Artemisia Gentileschi, an Italian Baroque artist studied frequently by feminist art historians for her professional success in a predominantly male art world. Of particular examination is her rape trial in 1611, when her father and mentor, Orazio Gentileschi, charged her painting tutor Agostino Tassi for taking her virginity. It is often noted that, in giving her testimony, Artemisia was subject to thumbscrew torture in order to “verify” to the court her claim of rape. The case was ultimately dropped, and she was married off to Florentine artist Pierantonio Stiattesi, subsequently moving from Rome to Florence and later to Naples. The character of Artemisia as an artist, traveler, woman, and mother is a voice I revisit in my poems, using both her life and my own experiences as a foreigner abroad to reinterpret her legacy in a modern context. Other themes I explore from this storyline include the emotional complexities of family, the relationship between nature and art, and the place of the female traveler as an “other” in the global community.

## **Keywords**

poetry, Artemisia Gentileschi, travel, art

## **Disciplines**

Creative Writing | English Language and Literature | History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology | Poetry | Women's History

## **Comments**

English Honors Thesis

**Artemisia in the Metro**

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Class of 2014

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**i.**

## Epitaph for Artemisia

After Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, painted in 1620. Presently located at the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence, Italy.

It was too terrible, the duchess said,  
too terrifying for a woman  
to be caught in the murderous act  
of slaying her lover.

She did not want to see  
the gentle spray of blood,  
the tenderness with which  
the heroine severed her enemy's head,  
cutting her village from tyranny  
like the trimming of cloth.  
They say the artist painted  
herself in the picture,  
grasping the long dagger  
in a burning hold of passion,  
there, in her simple golden dress  
and her intricate cameo bracelet,  
the sword its own muscle  
in rhythm with the stains of  
crimson that bless the two women  
like holy water.  
Even her servant flinches  
from the body, hesitantly holding  
the sleeping man down  
for her mistress, feeling  
the droplets of lifeblood  
stain her own wrists —  
spots, she fears,  
will forever taint her loving hands.  
Yet the artist-heroine  
bears an expression of ferocity,  
determination, duty, a lust to end  
her own suffering, her own Holofernes,  
the bearded face of her mentor  
blanching like the pale sheets  
he lays upon, a gasp of revelation  
upon his lips not unlike the gasp  
of when he ravished her,  
the ignorant expression of lust  
painted on his face and neck

like the red spilt across the canvas.  
It is the shadows that give the women  
their blessing, the melancholy contrast  
of light and dark absorbed in the drapery  
that give witness to the carnal sin  
as it lingers in the glowing oils.

## Lessons in Tourism

### i. *At the Center*

I remember the first night  
 we saw the grand Duomo,  
 how brilliantly the street lamps  
 gave the piazza its sheen,  
 how the shadows carved every  
 intricacy of the façade—  
 but it was the crowd that lit  
 the streets ablaze, as if to  
 say to the baptistery,  
*We made you. We define you.*  
 We sat on the steps, a crowd,  
 our backs to the cathedral,  
 not one of us gazing at  
 the dome, none of us praising  
 the herring-bone brick,  
 the pink and green stonework,  
 the marble faces of the saints.  
 We had become tourists, simply,  
 living here, yet not living,  
 seeing things, whilst not seeing,  
 praying to the majesty  
 of vendors with light-up trinkets,  
 as gypsies thrust stemfuls of roses  
 into our American hands.

### ii. *While Learning to Cook Gnocchi*

He shows us how to peel  
 the boiled potatoes

in one smooth motion, brown skin  
 shrugging off the precious white meat

like a chrysalis.

The bare oval is soft and sacred  
 in my palm, pillow of an egg ready

to hatch into a delicacy  
 we've waited months to prepare,

the way the desire to become Italians  
has somehow become the desire

to cook like Italians,  
the overwhelming foreignness

and sweetness of our new diet  
making us forget the language

of American cuisine –  
we seek only the words

of pasta and prosciutto,  
mozzarella, gorgonzola.

We squeeze spaghetti-like tendrils

from the potatoes with an iron-  
cast grater tool we've never

seen before, clamping the metal  
handle down on each orb to press

the softness through.  
So many we mash –

when we finish, there is  
a mountain on the table –

and so the chef tells us  
to knead the mound *just so*.

So we stuff our hands in,  
feeling warmth and softness,

and we let it seep into our flesh.  
We caress vegetable-meat as dough –

kneading "the wrong way" –  
then try to knead like

Italians, pushing from  
the top (not folding out).



At last we tenderly  
chop the dough into its

tiny, almond-shaped bits,  
brush the bits with the scrape

of our fork, drop the bits  
into boiling water.

We wait for our potato-pasta  
to rise to the top, for we think it means

we, too, have been cooked;  
we are finally shedding

our American skins,  
molding our ideal

Italian selves, the simple recipe  
of flour and potato.

*iii. After Giambologna's Sculpture "Rape of the Sabine Women," in the Loggia dei Lanzi*

A foreign woman must never be alone in Florence,  
but the Italian woman knows how to behave,

with her proud neck, stern stare, emotionless stride,  
repelling the hungers of male passersby.

Botticelli painted his Renaissance woman in a box,  
hand on her frame with a slight door in the background,

a grey portal of receding space,  
her home, an entryway without exit,

muddled colors of brown and white and black  
furnishing a domestic prison.

Filippo Lippi gave her confessional without grace,  
a captor's face pressing through the window,

(more of a square hole in the wall) –  
occupied online by that singular profile,

her husband, her only link to a world outside,  
 peering in with a yellow-and-black crest of lineage  
 in his hand, passing the symbol through the hole,  
 reminding her of her duty inside, the laws she must obey  
 as a lady of the home, forbidden from seeing  
 the brilliant hues beyond her walls.  
 Only the easels of men linger  
 in these modern streets —  
 watercolors-in-progress sold beside posters  
 of Mona Lisa and the Birth of Venus.  
 Should a female *artista* pass by,  
 she may glance at his fine work,  
 but must hurry, return to her haven of privacy  
 to paint in secret, confined still  
 by the brushes of Renaissance fathers —  
 and so I watch from the steps with my sketchpad,  
 wondering still how the curves of the marble figure  
 seem to breathe in its steadfast, permanent quiet,  
 the Sabine woman forever barren in the grasp of her Roman,  
 who clutches her white back with the grip of a master.

*iv. At the Conservation Demo*

Today rabbit-skin glues are still used for restoring art objects and paintings.

The conservator paints spots on a canvas  
 with animal glue, as if it were salve of aloe,  
 healing scabs of bare, ripe linen  
 with the medicine of chemistry.  
*A poco a poco*, little by little,  
 an Umbrian halo is reborn,  
 alchemized by the blessing of the sacred hare.

## Apocalisse

“The water was more sombre far than perse;  
 And we, in company with the dusky waves,  
 Made entrance downward by a path uncouth.  
 A marsh it makes, which has the name of Styx,  
 This tristful brooklet, when it has descended  
 Down to the foot of the malign gray shores.”

- Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, Canto VII

In 1966, the city of Florence flooded  
 from wall to wall, the Arno spilling  
 into piazzas, as if making  
 drinking basins for the gods.

The water was brown like cappuccino,  
 froth lapping at green-shuttered windows,  
 swirls of chocolate and white  
 seeping into the stucco.

Our guide speaks of panic, the Florentine fear  
 that the city would drown,  
 its Madonnas and Venuses  
 suffocating in the waves.

Not the birth of a goddess, but a death—  
 the death of great art and great beauty.  
 It would become a new Venice—  
 rivers and streams replacing the streets

and alleyways, piazzas transformed  
 to oceans, threatening ornate palaces  
 with the constant undulating sequence  
 of waves— but without that Venetian order,

no structure of azure waterways, simply a city  
 steeped in ruined pigments and dissolved masters,  
 a murk of ruins protruding from the depths  
 of that brown, purgatorial crease in the earth.

The stucco buildings remember,  
 stained walls dirtied by the past,  
 the taint of silt mixed with floodwater  
 becoming a crude beacon of buon fresco

as the layers of grey mortar are revealed  
in haphazard scrapes upon the walls,  
the river's violent step in the process  
of painting a master's mural –

the pigment lies unfinished, never fused with the plaster,  
color never brushed to its tender, wet surface.  
The Florentines memorialize all that was lost,  
swallowed by Neptune's centennial purge.

## At an English Cemetery in Florence, in September

The trees here burst from the earth  
 like Corinthian pillars,  
     supporting an invisible temple  
 to an unknown divinity, perhaps  
     some mortal goddess inhumed  
     in the hill of Florentine soil.

*Libby*, in grand cursive text,  
 and below it,  
     *Elizabeth Russell Jarves*  
*Wife of James Jackson Jarves*  
     *Of Boston Massachusetts*  
     *Died in Florence 1861.*

It is true about snails and graveyards,  
 that they linger on stones,  
     pebbles, rocks clustered about  
 the dead,  
     feeding on the lasting  
     sentiments of decaying flesh.

Libby, whoever she was,  
 may as well have been my cousin,  
     grandmother, mentor even,  
 now ashes and minerals left as  
     sacred remnants in a reliquary coffin of marble  
     two centuries beneath my feet.

The predecessor to my Italo-American existence,  
 born of my own harbor  
     thousands of miles away,  
 she bequeaths me her final assimilation  
     in the form of little white  
     flowers along the path,

dusty green sprigs of some violet plant  
 – not quite lavender –  
     and the imprint of an orchid  
 upon cold granite.  
     I can feel her sigh a breath  
     of homesickness as I sketch the blossoms,

quiet rhythms of line and soft charcoal shades,  
like the gentle forming of new memories,  
my own heart sculpting a place for itself  
in the warm autumn earth of Florence,  
my mind still yearning for the comfort  
of black New England waters.

## The First Sacrament

I read online that there are few beaches  
in Pisa – some private, some public –

but the Marina di Pisa is  
*set in wonderful scenery,*

with a *curved shoreline*  
and *azure horizon,*

surrounded by an *urban fabric*  
of many *Art Nouveau buildings*

overlooking the *once-resort-style* beaches.  
It is there that we taste

the salt of the Mediterranean  
for the first time, where we stumble

over dunes of ocean-scrubbed stones,  
diamond-white and unforgiving

to our bare feet,  
where we catch the undertow

and are hypnotized  
by the undulating waves,

carrying us in  
and out, a siren's call,

the blue of the sea whispering  
from its foreign depths,

alluring and filled  
with the mystique of one

who has witnessed  
the history of the world.

We long to plunge  
our ignorant bodies

into that all-knowing blue,  
make love to the place

we are visiting for just a day,  
feel as if we are a part

of that omniscient something  
so very far from home.

In a few short hours,  
our bathing suits will dry

and the salt-dust will fade  
from our skins,

but on this rocky beach  
and in this moment,

our minds ebb with the pulse  
of the turquoise waters –

yet, in our briny skins  
we feel as static as the sun-bleached

rocks we lie upon,  
waiting for the ocean

to weather us in its depths,  
our European baptism.



**ii.**

### Artemisia Leaves Home

In truth, she left because  
of her father, because she  
couldn't stand the way

he'd let the men question her,  
eyes obsidian beetles dressed  
in suits that barely shifted

as they pulled the thick cords  
tighter, tighter around every  
precious, warm finger,

the courtroom's weapon  
crushing her hands in disbelief,  
searching for a word from her, as if

the squeezing knots could draw  
more than blood, could draw  
liquid confession from her

lips, her tortured body a  
tube of paint dried in the middle  
that they kept pressing for one last

viscous drop of consent.

*Slut. Liar. Whore.*

It was he who had started

the ordeal, he who watched them  
break down his daughter's honor  
in the name of his own,

he who had pursued "justice"  
but ignored her pleas  
of silence, of handling

the thing quietly.

He watched as the men slowly crushed  
her tender painter's fingers,

fingers he had taught how  
to render *chiaroscuro* as if it were

a light on a stage, to brush gesso

to canvas like a holy salve,  
to blend colors and glazes  
in combinations that could only be

alchemical in nature,  
jeweled pigments a royal  
emblem of legacy.

Yes, he had watched.

And so she left – and later,  
she would dance alongside the Arno  
for her wedding, pearl earrings

glimmering with her white  
satin dress as she spun  
in the moonlight, her figure

like a pillar of water  
burst from some spring  
below in the earth.

She married a Florentine,  
another artist, bore him  
her own daughter,

precious and sweet and young,  
honeyed hair shimmering  
in the Tuscan sun as if it were

gold leaf from one of her  
father's ornate frames, only  
more intricate and fragile

than anything he could ever have made,  
gentle expression unlike  
her mother's in every regard.

When her fingers, raw and crimson,  
finally healed, she painted anew,  
commissioned by royalty beyond Rome,

gathering her reputation in her *cassone*,  
a wooden chest filled with lover's  
trinkets she'd never received.

And in every brushstroke, she always found  
that same tenebrous tone, dark background  
behind the glow of her figures,

the looming presence of sentiment  
always overtaking her composition,  
cool and black like the unfathomable,

layered secrets – like that hidden  
man in the darkness who waits,  
reaching through the canvas

as if to shatter her unending coats  
of translucent glaze paint,  
splintering into brilliant fragments

of the blackest onyx.

**Birthright in Celtic**

Because of an unknown great-grandfather –  
nameless and long vanished from photographs  
like a literary specter,  
but who my parents say gave me my blood –  
I decide to go to Dublin,  
where I eat loaves of warm,  
brown bread for breakfast,  
walk along the Liffey river,  
cross the Ha'penny bridge  
and listen as a tour guide named Peter  
explains the Easter Rising in heavy brogue  
to a crowd of students.  
I skip lunch to admire the Book of Kells,  
ornate weavings of monks' patterns  
snaking forever into my brain,  
then explore the tourist shops downtown  
to finally buy myself a Claddagh ring,  
its emblem of crown, hands, and heart  
cast in brilliant silver, with surrounding band  
etched with sacred trinity knots.  
I think of the spectral hands  
that grip my own heart,  
pale and forceful, pressing  
the legacy of Irishness into my  
existence, clasping my soul  
with the thought of a life here,  
the fingers pressing bruises  
into the corners of my insides  
like memories, individual pangs  
in my chest as though the chronology  
is catching up with me,  
each death and every loss of a friend  
tightening its hold on my spirit.  
I consider how tight the ring feels  
on my left middle finger,  
legends and rumors of the symbol  
muddling together like the blood lineage  
of my family, an endless labyrinthine path  
of Polish, Swedish, German,  
Welsh, and now Irish.  
We call ourselves mutts like  
the melting-pot landscape

we were born into,  
cross-European hybrids  
with a past as foggy as the  
storming Cliffs of Moher.  
I sit in a pub with my pint of Guinness  
and mull over my family tree –  
knotted, tangled, and chaotic,  
as decipherable as a Celtic book-painting.

## On Language

It's the exhaustion of words  
that kills the body,

every salt-tipped consonant  
and bulleted vowel

a struggle to wield,  
weapons given to an ignorant youth,

the gun of syntax more  
likely to be turned inward

than outward to an opponent.  
Lessons can only do so much—

walking to the immigration office,  
my brain mixes translations

together like a stew of leftovers,  
every Italian syllable a soft, mushy carrot

and every French article  
a bone of frozen *poulet*,

the flavors slipping together  
in a broth so murky

that the thought of conversing—  
forming sentences, making dialogue—

is repulsive, nauseating to my weak senses,  
fragile in their new environment.

One sip of the broth,  
and it is already rising in my throat

like bile, the phrases coming out  
in jumbled fragments, chunks

of knowledge I knew yesterday  
in a classroom of seven,

now expelled from my esophagus  
in frantic sprays of, "Est-ce que vous parli—

parli inglese?"  
Drowning in the prose,

lost on the way to the *questura*,  
my romantic *Firenze* disappears,

and I see only a city of acrid yellow  
and sordidly brown buildings,

monotonous shapes taunting  
my American eyes with the blunt honesty

of reality, that I am alone  
in this place called *Italia*,

mute and stranded  
as a migrant pigeon,

so eager to flock to a new metropolis,  
flying abroad to seek fresh

pickings from the rabble,  
to feel foreign rain

graze my wings as I bathe,  
but instead, I find myself desperately

nipping at the shoes of strangers,  
hoping, begging, pleading for a single

crumb of guidance  
for my foreign tongue to swallow.



## Kalchas the Seer

After an inscribed Etruscan mirror from Vulci, currently held at the Vatican Museums. The back of the mirror depicts mythological Greek figure Kalchas practicing the art of hepatoscopy, a form of divination involving the reading of animal livers.

i.

In a darkened classroom,  
a professor clicks through slides

and stops at a bronze talisman,  
a flat disk weathered green

with a slim, brittle handle protruding  
beyond the edge of the photo.

*Suthina*, he says. Grave goods.

ii.

Etruscan women were buried with  
mirrors, the most intricate of which  
date to the Hellenistic period —

one bronze side highly buffed  
and polished, the other etched  
and illustrated —

seen as portals to the next world,  
the mythological characters beckon  
souls into the beyond.

Here, a *haruspex*,  
soothsayer and interpreter of the gods,  
holds a liver,

the offering of a supplicant  
seeking to hear her fortune told,  
hoping for blessings of marriage,

the growth of a family,  
signs for a future  
of success, beauty, prestige.

Thought to be the precious miniature  
rendering of an ancient sky,  
the liver was the organ of fate and answers,

each area diagrammed to understand  
the symbols for positive  
and negative forces,

constellations reflected in the microcosm  
of animal flesh. Any blemish  
is important; any markings

on the slick red surface  
mean a god is involving himself  
in the events to unfold,

channeling powers of good or evil,  
explained in the tender meat  
fixed by nature to hold meaning.

The professor tells us an Etruscan adage:

*Things do not have significance  
because they happen;*

*they happen because they have significance.*

iii.

Lightning, birds, livers –  
all symbols ascribed with meaning  
in order to find meaning,  
and so the haruspex  
becomes an intermediary spirit,  
his likeness trapped on bronze,  
in the middle of life and death,  
body inscribed in metal  
as a cold token of the dead,  
with only the pulsing oval power  
in his hands lingering as a tribute  
to the prophesies written  
in the creases of crimson skin.

## **In the Black Room**

After the work of Korean artist Kimsooja, whose work was featured at the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale.

First, the removal of shoes,  
a number given to every visitor,  
like clients in line to witness  
some glorious spectacle  
as we enter the pavilion,  
a crystalline house of iridescent  
glass and mirrors. The light of  
a sun, emerging from the faded rain,  
seeps through the walls,  
soaking us with warmth  
as we wait transfixed  
by the glimmering chamber,  
so much that our eyes are hyperactive  
with the energy of rainbows  
when they call us in.

*You will be in the room for one minute.  
Do not speak.  
You may sit, or stand,  
or lean on the wall  
as you are compelled to do so.*

Warm darkness, followed by a  
singular cough, then silence,  
a gradual syncopation of breathing,  
the harmonious confusion of visitors,  
invisible heartbeats quietly  
pounding in the dark,  
eyelids painted over by the black.  
An anechoic chamber —  
a room with no echo.  
There's an inversion of color,  
the absence of texture and light,  
of movement and sound —  
no chiaroscuro here.  
We are in the umbra itself,  
the shadow of the soul.  
A taste of death  
with no echo.  
Introversion, reflection,

fear, and yet—  
ignorance for a solid  
sixty seconds.

*You may exit.*

**For Auntie**

My godmother said that when she died,  
she wanted her ashes scattered  
three times—  
in the Gulf of Mexico,  
for her mother, and for the dolphins;  
on the Atlantic,  
for us, the family, the Bostonians;  
and upstate New York  
for her birthplace, her childhood, her soul.  
We did as she wished,  
but I still dream of her fragments  
wandering like pixie dust,  
specks of gold on the wind  
and in the tumultuous gray currents,  
always shifting,  
never settling,  
restlessly lost in travel,  
not knowing home from heaven.



**Artemisia Accompanied on Lufthansa Flight 0161**

On the plane home  
he calls me *stranger*,  
three years past on trains  
and flights over thin-lined,  
fragile European borders,  
penciling in our itineraries  
with expatriate dreams,  
discussing Kerouac and T.S. Eliot,  
yet somehow he never knew even  
my fondness for rain –  
standing in it, drinking it,  
cupping the viscous wells  
of liquid diamonds in my palm,  
collecting my ideas  
(city rain the favorite) –  
metallic, grey like the taste  
of painting a figure in shadow,  
slippery highlights in brilliant white  
like tendrils of thought in storm,  
some deity-muse pounding  
leaden motivations in my ear  
from above, singing from  
the corner most  
cumulonimbus in the brain.  
My companion calls my ramblings  
too lofty for reality –  
but what is reality then  
but a tapestry of cold wire,  
stern and yet fluid  
as the pigment mixtures  
I ache to hold in my bare hands?  
He does not care for me,  
for my starving wish  
for him to understand  
the way the night clouds  
outside our window look like  
a poem to me, like the cosmos  
projected itself solely for us  
and for this aircraft.  
Supposing travel unravels  
these singed copper threads,  
fraying the negative space

between us like a blanket  
of charred filaments,  
out of our blindness we let  
the contact-lens revelations  
slip into our naked eyelids  
like second nature.  
He orders another free glass  
of wine and I sip my black coffee,  
admiring the pools of jetlag  
in his pupils that bleed into  
those dark irises,  
saturated with distance  
and air miles.



## Matters of Modernity

In 2013, the theme of the Venice Biennale was *Il Palazzo Enciclopedico*, or *The Encyclopedic Palace*.

i.

*The theme of the 2013 Venice Biennale:*  
art made by those who did not initially

consider themselves artists.  
*Outsider art*: meaning, made by outsiders –

craft borne out of otherness,  
out of obsession,

the need to create something  
beyond our limited horizons,

an art sculpted from  
everyday relics.

In one room, a Christian altar,  
but atomized – crumbled and electrocuted

into pale silt that piles in the center  
of the room as stately ashes

like an alchemy of form,  
solid to dust –

and no gilding, no rectangular  
symbol of religion,

just a mound of grey,  
like remnants of tired pigment

swept cleanly from the corners  
of the gallery, devoid of color

yet still labeled as art,  
still considered a statement

of the utmost politics.  
In another space –

knickknacks and cluttered spaces,  
documents of obsession

like the implications of the show,  
*Encyclopedic Palace*,

an archive of everything created  
or collected in the world.

From the ceiling hang  
elaborate contraptions and

planetariums of wire and string,  
the found objects of a hidden narrator

who could not throw a stone away,  
filing and stashing and assembling

her life in these trinket installments  
of metallic sentiment.

An encyclopedia of the contemporary  
cannot define what is contemporary.

*To be modern*: meaning,  
of the present moment.

Progressive.  
*To be progressive*: meaning,

to question the present.  
To be a modern artist is to question

the intricacies of the world  
like collections of bejeweled waste,

each token an indicator  
of what has been

and where we will go,  
the modern people —

back into the ceaseless archive  
of sacred paper, paint, and dust.

**Connection**

I once saw a deer's corpse on the highway  
in the back of a green

pickup truck. Its antlers  
were marked with yellow tape,

and its still-moist mouth  
slipped open, a tiny

cavern of black, dripping  
cold saliva on dusty fur.

I watched its legs splayed  
on the metal bed,

flanks once full of  
fervor and haste,

lying there, silent.  
The car sped past, yet

a single thread connected  
me to it, an iridescent vein,

linking my pulse  
to the empty body.

Speak to me, I begged  
through the windshield.

Tell me your secret,  
your long-forgotten story.

### Art and Artlessness

It seems sentimental,  
but I can't help but remember

that I once built a puzzle-Duomo  
years ago with an old boyfriend,

before travelling the world was an option,  
before history was tangible,

and all he and I had of Europe and of intimacy  
were eight-hundred-and-two pieces

of false *I love you's*  
compressed into impossible,

minute fragments of foamcore.  
It was an old souvenir present,

a prize bought by his  
travelling father,

the one who had *been places*,  
who had *been to Florence before*.

My seventeen-year-old self  
scooped up handfuls of the puzzle,

thrilled at the challenge,  
but he, sixteen-years and melancholy,

only frowningly acquiesced –  
he'd *put it together before*.

*Can we do something else?*  
Constructing the *campanile*

was easy, I learned,  
its patterns of pale rose,

deep green, and grey-veined  
marble triangles, among other shapes,

somehow harmoniously forming  
the immense rectangular pillar,

a bell-tower of Giotto's handiwork.  
The basilica, the dome,

our *Santa Maria del Fiore*,  
that was the hardest part.

The colored foam pieces —  
machine-screened to mimic the

cathedral like a photographic façade —  
they were hodgepodge,

fragments barely fitting together like  
uneven stones in a crude mosaic,

roof tile for roof tile a struggle  
to replicate.

Our clumsy young fingers  
weren't nimble or skilled enough,

hadn't seen the real Duomo to know  
what it truly looked like,

hadn't known that it couldn't possibly  
have been built by teenage hands;

its Tuscan bricks and rosy  
marble, its grand gilded cross —

they were too ancient, too  
Renaissance for us to understand.

Back then, it was the year  
we would elect the first black president —

it was the year of change,  
of pioneering the body,

of gay rights debates  
and abortion obsessions,

of searching for solutions;  
*Take us out of the Middle East*, we said in the U.S.,

though what part was middle and  
what was east, I couldn't say at the time.

Obama was a character on television,  
an unreachable symbol on a poster

that we, the youth, somehow,  
could love without knowing

what love was.  
Just the same, I finished

the puzzle somehow,  
even after my friend folded,

and simultaneously, I found  
my own Middle East —

*middle*, the red, burning place in my stomach  
for both knowledge and loneliness,

and *east*, the direction on the compass  
that would lead me to find

my Renaissance self,  
eastward over the Atlantic

and toward the orange sunrise  
of the Mediterranean,

to the land of Giotto  
and Michelangelo,

where every green stone  
and pink brick fit into place.

## Naturalia e Artificialia

I took a class  
on how to paint as they did

during the Renaissance,  
to prove that I could still be an artist,

a painter of Madonnas  
and mythologies

with my ashen brush,  
ground to a powder

and scattered years ago,  
forcibly discarded by the allure

of the lab over  
the studio.

An Italian couple taught me how  
to prepare the animal glue—

rabbit, pig, cow, fish—  
stirring the fetid scents in a mason jar,

*artistic chemistry,*  
the substance looking more like shimmering

spirits than diluted fat.  
I made a canvas panel by hand,

brown, scratched linen plastered  
to a piece of scrap wood,

gessoed properly with glue and gypsum,  
and sketched the face of an angel

to its surface.  
They taught me to apply silver leaf,

a small squat brush  
of squirrel hair my tool to

adhere paper-thin sheets of the  
glimmering metal for my angel's halo.

The oil from my skin, as instructed,  
became my new adhesive

with every touch of the brush  
to my cheek, followed by a touch

to the precious foil,  
divine magnetism clinging silver to squirrel.

By the time I was ready to paint,  
my panel was already an artwork —

it had become a subtle merging  
of organic and inorganic,

the animal glue conversing  
with the oil from my skin,

minerals greeting minerals  
on the underside of my gilded project.

Still, the paint strokes, I finally learned,  
were of minerals too —

crushed stones and precious ores  
ground to pigment and mixed

with egg yolk, an odd solution  
of textures that somehow

stirred gracefully into tempera.  
On canvas, I touched strokes in thin lines —

hatching, not blending —  
crisscrossing, not daubing —

each mark permanent, fusing with the canvas  
like a portable fresco.

There could be no change,  
only progress, more layering.



I wanted some miracle of  
DaVinci's spirit to overcome

me, or perhaps Giotto's would do—  
some revelation, artistic possession,

passion, any feeling of wonder  
to pass through me,

but I only thought of  
those layers, the work built

from wood to icon  
like a microcosm of the world,

sediment upon sediment,  
pigments upon pigments of labor

forming strata across the Earth's surface,  
man's history manifest

in the image of a grinning seraphim.



### Artemisia in the Metro

The hardest part is the sitting  
hours on end, back against

the dirty Roman cement of a wall,  
and her daughter, five years old,

blushing with crimson pigments  
and seated in her lap,

dressed in her cleanest,  
most innocent of pink t-shirts,

sleeves too big for tiny shoulders,  
elbow-sleeves resigning

a sigh of adulthood.

Because she is the mother,  
the dish and sign are for the girl

and her sharpie scrawl  
reads: *Aiutate per favore*

*mia filia ha fame.*

She doesn't think  
of lost commissions,

her sold brushes,  
the father who would scorn

to see her live like this —  
she doesn't think

of the artist-husband  
who let her leave,

content with the docile model  
who became Aphrodite in his hands

as he caressed her form  
with titanium white,

burnt siena, cadmium yellow  
from the studio –

and she does not think  
of the businessmen rushing past

(more men in suits)  
as other mothers with shiny strollers

push their young ones the way home,  
those who skirt their eyes forward,

intent on personal train-track itineraries,  
her alms dish ignored, feared,

avoided like a plastic symbol of their fate  
in five, ten, twenty years.

It's the warmth of her daughter's  
sweaty t-shirt that keeps her there,

makes her feel like she is still  
an artist, rhythm of her tiny legs

bouncing in her lap,  
a synesthesia of palettes

harmonizing with the  
clattering of metal travellers

on the platform below.

## On Defeat

After *Laocoon and his Sons*, the original Greek sculpture possessed by the Vatican Museums.

Is this death,  
                   the gasp of fear  
                   in the father's eyes,  
 the pulse of the jugular  
                   and abdominal muscles  
                   arching back, into no plane at all,  
 empty space caressing the limbs  
                   of marble as he falls backward  
                   (sculpture in the round) –  
 all tangled limbs, no bed  
                   of violet porphyry,  
                   (the stone of emperors)  
 veined with ropes of white  
                   to catch his body as the serpent  
                   throws him into the void.  
 The boys, barely frowning,  
                   bear furrowed brows, fearful lips,  
                   yet no exclamation of agony,  
 not a gasp of pain  
                   nor the grimace of fear  
                   carved into their cheeks,  
 only surprise, then acceptance  
                   while Apollo's pet thrashes his ivory jaw  
                   into their father's hip.

It is as if this is no death at all,  
    only a dream, pictorial representation  
    as it is — like they know they are but a story,  
and assume their descent  
    into the negative space of myth,  
    that blank unoccupied hollow  
between object and life,  
    like their father before them  
    falling into the bleak air  
with purpose, only  
    calmly sacrificing physical lives  
    in favor of fictional ones,  
suffocating the limbs of history  
    in the trembling scales  
    of an undulant monster.

## Nature Morte

After a still life by Dutch artist Rachel Ruysch (1664-1750) exhibited at the Palazzo Pitti in Florence.

How gently the salamander  
laps from the egg-milk,  
  
the orange peel of yolk  
revealed like an oasis  
  
broken from the cracks  
of white shell,  
  
a tender moment, I feel,  
and yearn to enter the scene.  
  
I become the dark, clumsy fly  
hovering towards a peach  
  
while nearby paper moths land  
on grey foreground,  
  
a singular snail  
slipping out of the frame,  
  
as if in migration—  
fleeing from the pantheon  
  
of creatures, flora and fauna.  
The colors of the fruits—  
  
pale yellow, mauve, deep indigo—  
remind me of the cosmos,  
  
each peach a swirling Jupiter  
and every plum a radiant,  
  
violet-and-crimson moon,  
and I notice everything here  
  
is ovalescent, rounded, circular—  
petals of an intimate daisy,  
  
translucent bubbles of grapes,

moss of a bird's nest.

And yet, I cannot determine  
whether it is more about

the *circles* or the *cycles* –  
caterpillar hatching from a corner leaf

as my salamander sips  
the once lifeblood of a bluebird,

and so, simple as a fly,  
I mentally touch every plant,

feeling every pearl of a shape  
before they vanish into the varnish.



## Day Trip to Liscannor

When we visited the Cliffs of Moher,  
it was a Saturday,

and the wind was stronger than it had been  
in years, we were warned.

Five miles long and still these rocks endured,  
Druid air purging off unwanted visitors

like some mystical force field,  
flinging tourists about

like the long, dark grasses of the cliffs,  
heads bending in pain from the wind

as if one false move could tear them  
off the edge, as effortless

as plucking a dandelion from the earth.  
It was a test, a way to determine those worthy

to look upon the edge of the world,  
and from the moment we glimpsed

the tumultuous waters below,  
my body felt an army of invisible

sprites on the wind, pulling me  
toward the edge in one instant,

and in the next, pushing me away from the view  
as shards of ice and battalion gales

threatened with the promise of an  
oncoming storm.

With helpless exhilaration  
I pushed my way to the top,

up a path with no barriers,  
no stones, just dirt, grass,

and the looming edge.

It was there that I found myself

accidentally blessed

by the grey portal of sky,

looking out upon the god-hewn

cut of earthen crust

sliced into the Druid sea.

Everything became a shade of grey then,

the landscape of water, earth, and sky

more vibrant than any stained glass window I'd seen,

Irish nymphs painting the ocean this time

in soft, mysterious washes

of muddy green and blue-black,

a misting abyss of myriad hues.

I turned for one moment,

and suddenly without control

began to run along the path of mud

down the hill,

back to my bus on the gusty wings

of some elusive spirit,

banished for seeing too much.

## Driving Past Dead Sunflowers in October

Crippled and brown, as if burnt,  
shriveled from weeks of thirst,

yet still they are as tall  
as scarecrows, thin roots

staking the dirt with some unfeeble  
strength, heads sagging

in a downward glance  
as if to make sure they are still there,

the legumes that tie them to the earth,  
gossamer umbilical threads yet to be cut.

Though I know this is how it is here,  
this is how the harvest is done

(by killing the golden crop in late summer),  
still I feel an internal companionship

with these bodies as they wait,  
solemnly, for the black gems

to slip from their mouths,  
seeds tokens of another year gone,

one year closer to the inevitable turning  
of the field to fallow.

**v.**

## The Aftermath

*After Judith and Servant with the Head of Holofernes* by Artemisia Gentileschi, currently exhibited at the Galleria Palatina of the Palazzo Pitti in Florence.

How sudden the women turn their heads,  
as if startled by some metallic

clang of footsteps in the dark,  
as if the Caravaggist dark will fade

and reveal some figure of a witness,  
a decapitated king, perhaps,

chasing lady and servant  
through the incriminate,

sinister passage of hero into shadow,  
chiaroscuro on soft flesh eroding

into a burnt contrast of  
black dirt and sallow skin.

It is not the invisible visitor  
that frightens the pair,

but the abrupt realization  
of a completed task,

servant's hand grazing the tyrant's  
bloodied hair as she clutches

the scarlet-drenched basket to her hip.

*Where do they go,*  
*these baroque, biblical daughters of Nike,*

when the deed is done?  
*To Rome, Florence, Naples –*

like the artist who fashioned them,  
hiding in the bright, feminine light of solitude,

safe from the hauntings of man,  
yet condemned to forever paint

their own regal images  
until death, carving regret into every golden  
skirtfold with the flat steel of a pallet knife.

**Pilgrimage**

I was told once  
there was a man who lived

beneath the highway  
in the secret passage

I would walk to school,  
right after the neighborhood creek,

city-grey and gurgling,  
and just past the morning market,

fragrant and bustling  
with the aroma of paper euro.

My roommate and I,  
we slipped through

curtains of European clothing,  
grazing the soft fabric

with our foreign fingertips,  
passing the alluring smells of

earthy *patate* and sweet *fichi*  
to find your tunnel,

the underground path  
not quite a subway,

but an intersection  
for bicyclists and walkers,

*italiani e americani.*

The first time we ventured to visit you,

you had left poems for us by the entrance,  
paper leaflets of Italian prose

pasted over graffitied walls,  
words I did not yet understand,

and they sank into the earth  
with the pavement

as our concrete sidewalk  
became a ramp downward,

guiding us below.  
Under the highway

and within the dim-lit passages,  
we found your paintings,

spraypainted friezes of brightly  
colored animals and movie stars,

bohemian calligraphy and  
modern landscapes,

and we remembered  
you were supposed to be a curator,

guardian of the city's  
most hidden gallery,

hiring Michelangelos to fresco the  
underground, even painting the ceiling

with caricatures of bloated figures.  
We thought we saw you once,

twice, maybe three times,  
but each time you were different.

First, you were a slim Latino,  
quiet and mopping the asphalt,

pausing only to call a "Ciao, bella"  
as we passed.

The second, you were a tanned, Italian uncle  
handing out ribbonless balloons

to a family of five,  
chattering with the children



and smiling at the parents.  
The third, you were a greying artist,  
  
sitting solemnly in your fold-out desk and chair,  
watching us pass through while your radio  
  
played the local orchestra,  
your greeting to us, the two American girls.

But we never saw *you*,  
the secret hero of modern Florence,

guardian of the jeweled halls  
between our apartment and

the rest of the city.  
We never saw you touch the walls,

only witnessed the transformation  
of one mural to another,

a cartoon of dogs painted over  
to become a black abstract sky

filled with hyphens of brilliant yellow,  
exclamation points of cadmium red,

touched with stars of Russian blue.  
Our visits merely became

a daily rhythm,  
always searching,

always wandering the curious path  
into the tunnel and out—

### At the Antique Market

In one stall, mingled among trinkets  
I find boxes of images,

clipped memories from  
some age-worn camera,

long retired from use  
and forgotten by the vendors.

Each photo I thumb through –  
imprints of silver-tinted breaths,

portraits of faces blurred by  
mountain air, the sea, a backyard,

snapshot colors fading  
like cheap makeup.

Still I feel the heat of the yellows,  
the coolness of the greens,

the fragility of the black and the white  
as if they are what make

the people in the photographs smile  
at the tourists who buy them,

fifty cents apiece,  
immortal faces somehow knowing

they will be carried overseas,  
displayed to foreign faces,

their likenesses tokens of trips  
to an *extraordinary place*.

How *extraordinary*, I think,  
between the age stains on the back

of every one, the softened, round corners  
of the frame, the slim white border

that hugs the image,  
and the cursive, brown notes

with dates in the margins —  
that these fill three, no, four —

five boxes full, as the seller brings out more,  
five boxes full of printed memories,

paper people who, without the pictures,  
may have never even existed.

**The Return**

Ugly, the first word that comes to mind,  
buildings made of gray cardboard,  
the angles of their rooftops too  
sharp to hold wisdom, too blunt for regality —  
such is my landscape of gray;  
*gray*, spelled with the rotund vowel  
for *apathy*, the color of the new city,  
not *grey*, the hue of foreign mists,  
the hue marking clouds of ecstasy  
and enlightenment.  
Brick, no rusticated yellow  
do I see, the muddy red  
almost brown from just a few  
centuries of wear, and I think of  
other rooftops, the brilliant  
terra cotta not yet faded  
from days of sun, nor slurried  
from rain-filled afternoons,  
afternoons when I walked home  
after class alone,  
pondering the collecting pools of  
crystalline city water on the stones,  
wondering if this same water  
touched the ancients above,  
if they could hear my solitary thoughts  
as I placed my foot in each puddle.  
The colors there never faded —  
yellows, browns, pinks —

all saturated by the people  
    who walked its streets,

stories bonded with the walls  
    like layers of wet fresco,

still damp and moldable,  
    but destined for permanence.

Back here in the grayness,  
    permanence is a fairytale aspiration –

my Crayola-clay streets will not live on,  
    nor will the cardboard buildings,

fragile and naïve as American eggshells –  
    How, in our unquiet resilience,

will we last, the new people of the West,  
    when we watch our paper fortresses

disintegrate every day,  
    slippery molecules gradually dissolving

in the rainwater,  
    and the universe learns to forget?

## Artemisia in Ecstasy

After *Saint Mary Magdalene* by Artemisia Gentileschi. Currently exhibited in the Galleria Palatina of the Palazzo Pitti in Florence.

Is this she,  
                   the woman of golden skirts,  
                   one who clutches at her breast

as if tormented by some  
                   innermost burst vein of longing,  
                   black room lit from beyond the frame

(because agony is best felt in the dark) —  
                   she who cut her long golden tresses  
                   in penitence,

frayed ends threads of hair  
                   hanging like shredded sinews  
                   by the ears —

I can see her, gilded dress  
                   falling from her shoulder  
                   in an act of spiritual freeness,

her bare collarbone blessed  
                   by the sacred unseen flickering flame,  
                   and it is to me she glances emptily,

woman-hero of my Old Testament,  
                   tortured paintress,  
                   humble barefoot *Maddalena* —

my Judith in repentance,  
                   frail and yet calm,  
                   cool in the wake of her lifelong turmoil.

The lips part,  
                   and in that singular silver  
                   breath of piety,

(or perhaps it is regret)  
                   she becomes the afflicted,  
                   no longer a face of fortitude,

yielding instead  
    to the aging of womanhood,  
her likeness fading

into the company of feminist progeny,  
    another heroine lingering  
in paper-worn textbooks,

legacies inscribed on a page,  
    but still emblazoned on canvas –  
and so her story is exhaled

before me and into my lungs  
    with the sigh of longevity,  
and it shimmers –

saturated with the thick,  
    iridescent narrative  
of one who has endured.