

"To say that Kelsey's luminous new book contains intricately layered poems might sound like a truism until you realize that such poems (hyper considered and taut, yet dazzlingly expansive) aim to exceed their bounds in more ways than one. Kelsey posits that looking inward is but a way of looking out, or is it the other way around? *Of Sphere* renders the question mute. All points on a sphere are equidistant from the center. This strikes me as particularly radical in regard to the notes accompanying—but never elucidating—the poems. Inquisitive essays in themselves, they provide, like the poems they refuse to reduce, 'a lyric instruction for counteracting forces that pull multiplicity into a unified image. Herein find the glorious chaosmos.'"

—Mónica de la Torre

"Through her challenge to dug-in patriarchal logics, Kelsey choreographs a contemporary vision that follows in the experimental tradition of earlier modern feminist essays, including Woolf's *Three Guineas*, H.D.'s *Tribute to Freud*, and Hélène Cixous' 'The Laugh of the Medusa.' Kelsey brings an urgency to this tradition through her attention to the destructive human impact on the earth, ecological crisis, and her vision of another way to inhabit the world."

—Carla Harryman

"Karla Kelsey's *Of Sphere* buzzes with worlds. Moving between prose and verse, from gas station to grove, from the lyric to the analytic, Kelsey leads us into a sensory place where light and motes and windows shimmer, where gardens and art and you and I are something more, or less. Who are these people? Who is that child? Where did that thought slip? Kelsey asks: "What happens when landscape erodes beyond recognition, its name a ribbon of text embedded in my skin?" Then a book appears within the book, where the scholar-poet turns to speak to us more directly. A turned lens now tumbles the library into focus. *Of Sphere* swarms and then disperses—clouds, then clarifies. Kelsey's dreamy yet lucid lines tie the porch to pastoral, the chain link fence to the links of time, the daily to the diaphanous. Here, omnipotence of thought is the norm. In Kelsey's *Of Sphere*, the things we see and the things we know, the people and places of all our worlds (material, ethereal, and historical) stream through one another boundlessly and glowing, the way they do."

—Catherine Taylor



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OF SPHERE

KELSEY

Of Sphere

Karla Kelsey

Of Sphere

a winner of the **2016 Open Book Contest**
selected by Carla Harryman

Of Sphere

Karla Kelsey

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INTRODUCTION

“Art is the revelry in the excess of nature, but also a revelry in the excess of the energy in our bodies,” remarks philosopher Elizabeth Grosz in an interview in which she discusses her sense of the most elementary materials and conditions for art. Karla Kelsey’s *Of Sphere* sets in motion a critical poetics of relation and habitus that draws from such basic, philosophical inquiry. Its variousness, intensities, and decorative expositions align with Grosz’s pairing of nature’s and the body’s excesses.

In an ornamental fashion, Kelsey’s essay interleaves a profusion of concepts and descriptions reminiscent of the poetic, psychic elaborations of place and scene in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*; and, like Woolf’s novel, this essay expands the field of its genre. It is also a work of astute observation in which the inside-outside binary that places the feminine in the object position is not only challenged but becomes something other to how we normally understand the binary. One notes for instance the portrayal of interpersonal dynamic through the “I-you,” which not only replaces “he-she” grammar but becomes a medium for re-conceptualizing relation. Through her challenge to dug-in patriarchal logics, Kelsey choreographs a contemporary vision that follows in the experimental tradition of earlier modern feminist essays, including Woolf’s *Three Guineas*, H.D.’s *Tribute to Freud*, and Hélène Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Kelsey brings an urgency to this tradition through her attention to the destructive human impact on the earth, ecological crisis, and her vision of another way to inhabit the world.

Through her attention to variety—the multifariousness of the like, the proximate, and the unlike—Kelsey constructively queries the desire for unity. Her interest in unity is one that incorporates the vexing contradictions embedded within the aesthetic objects that we share in common. This provocation, which links the wish for with the critique of unity, is illuminated

in Kelsey's choreography of sentences and the relation of sentences to kinesthetic as well as visual fields:

Take a photograph, terrain in a blur synced with your hand in a blur, invisible things, parts of everything else, determining us.

Here movement and vision blur together as if we were experiencing the abstract traces activated in a photograph, from the initial point of taking the picture through the flows of presences and absences that the captured image evokes. While Kelsey explores such realms of abundance and excess (e.g. "parts of everything") as a continuous, open field of exchange that unifies all aspects of an event, she simultaneously recognizes the determining limits of objects, desire, and events. In a passage of comedic eroticism in "Geosphere V," dream-like concatenations of taffeta and tulle, dog collar and peek-a-boo bra, leather and thong, disperse into the waking-moment bell sounds of small satisfaction and absence:

In dream the bell continues, the ring it makes upon the hour always attended, held until its fade. I suppose this will have to suffice for the day's release regardless of my desire to rut in the field before you part.

Limit does not have one meaning or value; the comedy of erotic intimacy and imperfect connection will be entwined with other limits: those delineated in the dynamics of power within the social and political spheres that impose their values of identity and behavior on the subject, who then reproduces and/or resists, consciously and unconsciously, the form. Kelsey's prose emphasizes the destructive dynamics of the engrained gender binary as she considers what, beyond the recursive rigidities of the

sex-gender system, can create conditions of liberation. One has the sense that she is attempting a kind of magic through negative critique—a critique that would redirect energies from the death drive back into the pleasure principle. Toward this, in profuse endnotes, she refers to the work of powerful women artists and intellectuals—from Ana Mendieta to Pina Bausch to second-wave continental feminism and Carrie Noland’s theories of the gesture. A note referencing a declaration of the modernist poet Mina Loy startles for its sheer relevance to our current moment of misogyny and patriarchal protectionisms. Kelsey cites Loy’s statement that women must “destroy in themselves the desire to be loved” and abandon the need for protection. Women must replace this need with curiosity and courage. Kelsey embellishes Loy’s straightforward decree with sensual elaboration:

Loy’s writing floods the mind, becomes a sensation of electrified power coursing under skin, tones of purple-black velvet streaked with garnet and ruby, a combination of softness and serration.

Within the system of Kelsey’s work, abundance and limit are constructs that can be joined as well as separated. The intellectual concern for limit and its significant role within the philosophical essay as one of ethical inclusion and openness to the future is addressed in a number of instances including in this note on “choice”:

The experience of “to choose” becomes different from standing before a vitrine saying “I would like to have *this* and *this* and *this*. Or nothing here is good enough for me.” It cascades, a process of interaction, a gesture *toward*, which is always entwined with its substance...

One cannot discuss this text without making a note that the prominent word “sphere” implicates a conceptual scheme of non-identity as it crosses between disciplines and knowledge systems. The domestic sphere is not the same realm as the atmosphere, and yet they are entwined in a fashion that, if recognized, could change one’s feeling of relation to the world. The work is arranged under the subheadings of the four earthly subsystems, “Geosphere,” “Biosphere,” “Atmosphere,” and “Hydrosphere,” to which are added the “Celestial Sphere” and interludes of more fragmented, poetic language titled “Cosmogony.” These subheadings along with the cosmological variant key into the interpenetrating realms of Kelsey’s most critical interests.

“Interlayer” is another term she deploys in order to instantiate the connections among violence, ecological destruction, the garden of earthly delights, and the desiring systems of life-world or habitus—which is constituted by the particular physical and abstract spaces of Being and the modes through which a person reflects on these. The actual places of Kelsey’s habitus are numerous and include the Eastern United States countryside, the cosmopolitan city, parts of Eastern Europe, the childhood bedroom, and the valleys and farmlands of her native Southern California. A striking passage placed in this region demonstrates Kelsey’s consciousness of the interlayer as it is construed in colonial violence, linguistic community, agri-business toxins, man-made water systems, and historical and geological matter:

Because interlayered I cannot break fish from pesticide,
cannot break *Iviatim* from *Cabuilla*, Salton Trough from
San Andreas Fault, agricultural drainage reservoir where
Imperial and Coachella valleys meet.

Of Sphere is a remarkable contribution to the essay as form in its commitment to the most writerly and experimental potentials of modern and contemporary feminist literature and art. In its address to the pressing ecological problems of the present and its refusal of reductive answers, it is a work of critical curiosity and admirable courage:

What if instead of a mathematical puzzle with an answer, we considered a problem as a promontory, a headland, a landscape you've woken to realize might be approached in a number of ways.

– Carla Harryman

PROEM: *INTERACTIONS OF SPHERES*

At the Salton Sea or eastern coal towns
and midway on the stair or in Central Park
or Bucharest between light and dark
each gem-like Orthodox church its anti-
concrete morning insists on solitude, what
remains. Or in Midwestern cul-de-sacs
I understood lingering, the right-hand self
devoted to architecture the left-hand self not
devoted to anything at all as what remains

fissures stone embankments, scatters salt
over ice to make a little future to refer to
walking over frozen rivers mind alternating
like an eagle, one eye watching as the other
points to the sky waning, wanting because
what a possession the feather-armor of eagles
they seem never to be cold or to long for July
as I long for the fondly phrased dog days
of summer, Caesar's birth, spring lambs sold
at market before the 1st. As if distant heat
might make sense of interior's glittering icons

one body nestles to the side of another
become animal even as the lyric figure revolving
the mind's eye for some reason, for no reason
costumed Pre-Raphaelite is led to the cliffs
musked and bound but still so devoted as if
light's heart had just broken against its glass
bridge lights tinseling blue river hue because yes
even now I aestheticize you I aestheticize loss—
soft murmurs of being-animal cannot save us.



OF SPHERE

“...to understand dung chemically and spiritually and with the earth sense, one must first understand the texture, spiritual and chemical and earthy of the rose that grows from it.”

– H.D. *Notes on Thought and Vision*



GEOSPHERE I

Our house dismantled, I weave myself deep into countryside fields, roots, stones, searching for traces of lost animality while you spend day after day in a museum looking at, rather than through, windows as if in a window museum. And then looking out of, rather than at, paintings as if they reveal a journey with you in the lead, I behind, your daughter with her dog trailing at the back. I don't blame you, for a sense of home, of ground, might figure as a globe charm suspended from a child's heirloom bracelet worn long after the favorite ribbon was folded and stored in a little gilt box. And the trees near leaflessness increasingly unable to hide the power poisonous berries give to bald light. As eyeglasses extend our eyes do we understand ourselves as figures in a triptych, actor and actress hypothesizing apocalypse, enacting apocalypse, ending in a shock of white?

Such forces, unspeakable, structure conventions of who can I call, are you free to talk though it's Tuesday with our standing at the sink eating quick breakfast and no time for the dog's hurt paw or careful backing down the drive. I admit to expecting answers from the number of butterflies, orange and blue, swarming where the house had been. From our Airstream parked at the periphery I wait for a sign: should we rebuild in grand manner or caravan bohemian away? They swarm, creating an image of your lapels, my pearls strung over lace. We flicker in the field as if wanting to be photographed.

Is the pronoun "we," then, to become little else than acquiescence to inherited flight pattern, circadian clock, position of sun in the

sky? This isn't the way we intended to make decisions, "you" the sensate blur of touching in the dark, unsettling sight's certainty as pretending to be wind through goldenrod "I" aspires to a form of clarity streaked with berry juice and running naked through tall grass.

This differs from the take-it-all view: after dismantling the house at the edge of the field the aboveground pool is all that's left, ladder leading up, slide leading down. The groundcover roses approximate weeds, emanate as you practice the script again and again turning on your heel to perfect the walk-away—*Fort! Da!*—though we both know the bus station's too far to reach by foot. With each cue I gape as if slapped while still admiring your finesse, pea coat with matching felt hat.

If the mandate was *return* why take the most painful path? Bramble-out, the last time we ventured this way we were on horseback and so the sweeping vista was to-be-taken. Now I've arrived by car, occupied with clouds rushing east until looking down I recognize the robin body, entrails ruby. Dirt path the dream had not been like this, had spiraled into statuette with no parental imprint, no social order, no etching of experience away. To be made instead a little effigy of self inscribed on the bone cover of a pocket watch. Imitation antique on display in an exhibit about whaling, environment, and abuses of colonial power.

GEOSPHERE II

You sit in the coatroom checking and rechecking your phone while the dancing begins outside under globe lights. We arrived here together but only externally, which is why in dreams I wake cold, wanting to dance, planning the periphery of a garden laced with continual blooms produced in Denmark. I concede to the nesting texture of camel-hair coats, leather, brocade cape giving way to nostalgia for grandfather's cigar-smoked study and so perhaps I should call you from Paris, which is what we call the patio. I could pretend to be the Fawn producing old-fashioned English-style blooms, soft pink in such absolute profusion they completely cover their own mid-green foliage, so let us dance.

So let us dance for it would be difficult to disguise the voice of someone who has actually begun dancing. If the scene is set liquidly we will come upon the party by noticing first shadows on the lawn and then differentiating orchestration from what the owls do. Or coming upon something floral as leaves shake gold and bronze. Nature viewed as a shop getting ready to close, the street asserting itself against the notion it might as well not exist if existence is to be useful to commerce, that is to say, to subject-formation and point of view. I might be shallow, or perhaps just primal, but I love the blooms.

I love because a phrase, heard before, cradles. But what's the point if one is to be just a statuette fitted so nicely in the palm of a hand? And you, preferring to stand outside the scene as if someone appointed you keeper of the terrarium, clutching your interlocutor close in the glow of your phone. I exaggerate, but

what else to make of your story where the chick's pushed from its nest, not yet dead when insects begin their devouring?

Dancing was much easier when it commenced in formal fashion. A thick black line formed by men in proper dress, women unfurling their floral. And thus I could have been the Fawn in dusty rose with private knowledge of thong and peek-a-boo bra hinted by the shock of pheasant hair plume. But we don't live in such a time and talk to each other internally, communicating remarks by text message and gesture as we walk down the mall. I would like to have *this* and *this* and *this*. Or nothing here is good enough for you.

When you point toward the trees asking after my favorite I understand this as a test. Because what is not to like about a tree? This one willows as if longed for. This one flames out, nonplussed. And the Magritte trees lining the periphery begin so very slowly their suburban illumination.

GEOSPHERE III

Because we must navigate both forward and backward I pause at a description of the little desk. Antique with chipped white paint, ink well, drawer with lock, key strung around my neck for years and then somewhere, lost. Imagining a scene such that it will overtake memory, far strains of a song, sister's damp hand as she jimmy's the lock. Here a devotion to materiality strides in before turning, as when matching paint we must decide if the color should blend with what has been weathered. Or should we correspond to the object we once had been? Written at the world's beginning then cut down, grafted back up, cut down, grafted back up. Here flower, there follower, I seem to be commanded of rivers whose orchestration doesn't entail the dancer's sway and dip, but if you take my hand we'll accomplish some form of awkward grace.

Or we might begin with day breaking across itself. Earthen with a Freudian *is*. I am. You are. The camera follows a sequined shoe flung into the river and I come to speak from a position of diving-after. Up to my waist in murky water then plunge and then up. To no avail. Like moths flinging themselves into lamplight we vilify uncertainty until there's no longer any connective tissue left. Which means we begin with mistake, turquoise let in only along edges, the day only along slats of mini-blinds. I pull the cord and someone like me speaks into too-blue air.

My entrance hesitant: not as in I had no idea or longing to impart but knuckle-bare and holding on to reins for dear life. This, even if decked out in rhinestones and prom-blue taffeta which perhaps I should be embarrassed by but a lone bird crying into



rain, sycamore infested with squirrels, we don't always command what we wear. As a method for comprehending the animal world I distrust statistical data but follow your experiments with more than moderate imagination. I'm entranced by your period of sitting before still lifes, oysters shucked and exuding, lemon touched to test quivering and then undone with little forks. This, compared to time-lapse photos of retrograde motion, Venus appearing at first to be caught coursing backwards through sky and then, upon reconsideration, creating the illusion of stasis upon the moved.



Which did nothing to augment the dancing, but in all honesty these small gatherings feel as if they take place not under globe lights but as some philosopher's *bildungsroman* presented before a presidential tree. At one with the audience we watch the sun traverse, nothing celebratory in fighter jets passing, echelon formation. This is not a choice location from which to understand the self, complete only after it surfaces into the world. We are sure of this but have yet to propose an alternative: what other world, what other manner of surfacing? In some situations the possessive just doesn't ring true though under certain constellations I want to be the dumb beast shivering with breath and sweat beneath your body. Our condition must be a result of too little dancing, too much pretending to be the Fawn, too much listless floating in the aboveground pool unattached, as it is, to any house.



GEOSPHERE IV

I return without you to the museum, sit before the painting of your little pink daughter unfolding in time, born first a sack of blood and soft bones then aging into a four year-old who matches her mother, though her mother always wears gray. It's not difficult to analyze such an image. They sit in a public square defined as an aspect of time, mother and daughter surrounded by trees depicted between October and November. We're strangers except for our participation in this moment, the three of us slightly more gold than we otherwise would have been, folding into the fountain, the cloud of the mother's skirt.

Then falling into the mother-dress I'm still singular but blurred with humidity, consciousness held by a scorpion clamped at the base of her-my skull, poison ready to knot down her-my neck. Metallic singing river bugs. This condition of pain cannot be soothed by fennel but we long to become fennel nevertheless, which is as close as the mother-dress ever comes to wanting to dance. Drawn to your little pink daughter I was not her mother but our hair was painted with the same shock of white.

On the ground beneath us: a tiger-skin rug, head with glass eyes, mouth open to reveal teeth. We exist as part of the public square, fountain in the center, kids zooming by on scooters, mothers talking on phones, on benches eating lunch sit the fathers of sons and daughters who attend other parks. An airplane drifts slowly above. Trees project their lace and I, no longer able to fall into the mother-body, fall into the tiger. It was stun dart then fur heavy-cradled onto the mattress on the floor. And a soft night spread until I was revealed, like this, to the public square.

This is collective interior and no amount of effort could tear me from looking. My body feline wanting dank mattress and sex even as the scorpion clamps, muscles knotting down my neck, fountain sparkling out. As the mother-body floats away I hold onto your little pink daughter by the knot at the back of her sash. An interior condition, the ascenders and descenders of letters lift, feathers in the trees, the dress soft with humidity.

GEOSPHERE V

Visual imagery reveals our habits of belief: lantern-like flowers compose English sentences while fuchsias depreciating in soil thrive on fish emulsion. Which perhaps accounts for the quiet gold hurt although it was only leaves pulling light through windows. You don't need to tell me you intend to depart for the city while the afternoon's still new: it would be stupid to wait for this meadow's permission, sulky mud embedded with animal bones. And so over your shoulder a long view can be retained by a glance: a glass globe surrounding birds, stars, gods. A glass globe surrounding cornfield and aboveground pool, rangy weeds where the house had been.

Some of these objects are by experience confirmed: birds, stars, pool. And some disconfirmed: gods, the taste for formal dance carried off by music pouring from open windows of the biker bar, studded leather jacket and dog collar replacing taffeta and tulle though the thong and peek-a-boo bra maintain the same appeal. I understand: we only come to awareness when the familiar world recedes. In dream the bell continues, the ring it makes upon the hour always attended, held until its fade. I suppose this will have to suffice for the day's release regardless of my desire to rut in the field before we part.

Yes, society's distorted reflection often creates pain, but denial of self-reflection means both social and physical death. This is the way one ascends to the status of imaginative object: the turquoise pendant so light one might forget one was holding it in one's hand. And so with a gesture flung into the meadow when I meant

merely to indicate the location of the aboveground pool, its water green but swimmable. This particular variety of painting is now extinct but the work itself still lives, never accosted by switchblade or flame. And its viewer changed only in external presentation: reeds woven into her-my hair, rib cage a terrarium for plants grown from the center of the earth.

COSMOGONY

a gesture insists
on repeating: dying moth tiny crystal bell
glitter swirled around Statue of Liberty
in her snow globe

left a video
of a woman walking through her house
it's all I could offer re-film the film
from her point of view

small camera
strapped to my forehead electronic
coronet
where she paused sails
in wind worn corduroy lover's
warm palm

the consequence
of relation depends on outline blossom
inlaid in cement
eyes closed: lawn
mower refrigerator airplane

eyes open:
house torn from body
ivy from walls building flung become
a temple in the sky
 earth ground into
sand this was all

my mind a center of quartz

trees screen the river pitch
pine tamarack ash gesture

so sea becomes cloud
becomes rain becomes sea
variation cycling: what is world shifts

sky gods overriding
lyric interludes thigh's soft flesh

acanthus leaf from its column broken
placed in a museum becomes artifact

tucked into backpack appropriation
climbing out of the skylight

camera switched off
shoulder blades pressed together
play at having wings

my body might arc
through layers of smog and cloud

speed dust into dust

NOTES

“I was looking at the flower bed by the front door; ‘That is the whole,’ I said. I was looking at a plant with a spread of leaves; and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower.”

– Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”

GEOSPHERE I

...*Fort! Da!*—though we both know the bus station's too far to reach by foot...

In the famous second section of his 1920 book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Sigmund Freud turns from the “dark and dismal subject of the traumatic neurosis” he had been addressing—railway crashes and shrapnel, disasters of technology and the First World War—to examine the psyche at work in “normal” activities: in children’s play. Freud’s objects of study are the games of little Ernst, the son of his beloved second daughter, Sophie. In this text Freud refers to Sophie not as “Sophie” or as “my daughter” but as “the child’s mother,” refers to Ernst not by name or as “grandson” but as “the child,” thus reinforcing the signature objective tone of modern foundation myths.

The child’s game involves a simple toy, a little “wooden reel with a piece of string tied around it...what the child did was to hold the reel by the string and very skillfully throw it over the edge of the child’s curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it.” Upon the disappearance of the object the child would utter “o-o-o,” thought by Freud and “the mother” to be baby talk for *Fort!* (German for “gone”), and accompanied by “an expression of interest and satisfaction.” When the child reels the object back into view the child utters a joyous sound approximating *Da!* (German for “there”). Freud notes but does not take up the idea that “As a rule one only witnessed [the] first act, which was repeated untiringly as a game in itself, though there is no doubt that the greater pleasure was attached to the second act.” Yes, no doubt.

Freud reads the child's action of "staging the disappearance and return of objects within the child's reach" as "compensating" for allowing the mother to go away without protesting—for suppressing the broadcasting capacity of the body, the physical grasping-after that the intimate other's disappearance evokes. When wondering how the act of departure, in particular, operates within the pleasure principle Freud notes that when the mother leaves the child falls into a passive, overpowered position. When repeating the disappearance in the game, however, the child takes on an active role. This is not only an instinct for mastery, Freud asserts, but of revenge and defiance, the child later developing the habit of sending toys with which the child was angry "To the fwont!" that is to say, to war.

With this comment we notice Freud's return to the subject of war and death despite himself. Ashes, ashes, we all fall down. This inevitability crescendos in section five of the essay when Freud posits the "death instinct" as primary over all other drives, for "the goal of all life is death." Even drives that we consider "life-preserving" function only to protect life so that we can die "in our own way," which we might assume to mean by natural causes rather than by trauma of accident or war. Do we see proof or contradiction in Freud's own life? He was to deny the danger he was in as a Jew, not leaving Austria until Hitler's invasion in 1938 even though in 1933 his books had been publically burned in Berlin. Four of his five sisters would die in concentration camps as the 82 year-old Freud, ravaged by cancer, was driven into exile. He was to die within the year, assisted by his doctor into death with a heavy dose of morphine.

Children's games—and acts of imagination—transform what is unpleasurable into an entity that, instead of exceeding the self (as all that is unpleasurable is wont to do), becomes a mental object that can be recollected and worked over. An object of pleasure even if akin to the pleasure of worrying a loose tooth, the pain it evokes reminding the self that the mouth is alive.

An act of imagination, the essay, as form, provides a theater of actions over which its writer has considerable, yet nevertheless limited, agency. Is this incompleteness an instance of fidelity mimetic of the real? *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* was published the year Sophie died of the post-war influenza epidemic and includes the note, "When the child was five years and nine months old, his mother died. Now that she was really 'gone' ('o-o-o'), the boy showed no grief over her. Indeed, a second child had been born in the meantime and had awakened in him the strongest jealousy." Did Freud's objective use of "the child" rather than "my grandson Ernst," of "the child's mother" rather than "my daughter Sophie" save his teeth from aching, protect his skull from splitting as he skimmed through the published volume of his text, alighting on the domestic scenario he had recorded in his description of the game? Alighting upon his own conviction that no doubt the return of the lost object—of the little wooden reel, of the mother, of his daughter—would be, although impossible, the greatest pleasure?

GEOSPHERE III

...I'm entranced by your period of sitting before still lifes, oysters shucked and exuding... Venus appearing at first to be caught coursing backwards through sky...

The pearl oyster contains a treasure, a planet, a pearl. The edible oyster contains a delicacy, an aphrodisiac, a sensation of eating the ocean, sex cradled primal in the mouth. Hesiod writing his cosmology in 700 BC associates the origins of Aphrodite with the oyster in a time before Zeus when the first god, the sky god, is castrated by Cronos his Titan son. Cronos flings the sky god's testicles into the sea and from this foam Aphrodite is born. From *aphros*, aphrodisiac, erotic origin, symbol of fertility, pleasure, sex rising upon an oyster shell, Eros her constant companion. The Romans translate Aphrodite into Venus, the maternal-imperial, and Julius Caesar claims descent as she comes to symbolize Roman power, sexual allure, and martial dominance. And in this time Eros becomes Cupid, often portrayed as Venus's child, pleasure shifting from mother to son with the precision of an arrow arced from an exacting bow.

Roman astronomers named the planet Venus in our sky. Similar in structure and size to Earth, Venus spins in the opposite direction without moons or rings, thick atmosphere trapping heat. Volcanic, this planet's greenhouse effect renders surface temperatures hot enough to melt lead. In naming the planet Romans couldn't have realized these traits, would not have known how acutely they illustrate the condition of desire. They understood only the planet's distant brightness—diamond, utterance, pearl—

not her swampy heat or that she spins nearly upright and therefore doesn't experience seasons, just as (love-sick, and consumed with thoughts of the beloved) one might walk barefoot over frost-ridden grass. Interior metal melted, molten, language fused to weather system.

In visual art the oyster remains a symbol of Aphrodite and Venus through antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Baroque. As Liana De Girolami Cheney discusses in her article "The Oyster in Dutch Genre Paintings: Moral or Erotic Symbolism," Renaissance paintings taking up the popular "feasts of the gods" theme depict oysters in scenes when Venus, reclining almost always nude and sometimes wearing pearls, makes merry with other gods and mortals at a banquet in a grove. Dutch early-Baroque paintings, 1610-1630, take up this same theme but instead of cavorting gods and goddesses we find affluent mortals well-dressed and dining in rooms fitted out with spoils of colonization: gilded leather wallpaper, Turkish carpets, silver ewers, heavy goblets, plates piled with meats and fruits and oysters—always abundant oysters. According to Cheney, from 1630-1660 the oyster disappears from feast scenes but then reappears, made popular again by the 1658 Dutch domination of pearl fisheries in Indian waters. Among these later paintings emerges a new genre of intimate interiors: two or three people share a plate of oysters, exchange knowing glances in lamplight glimmering a dark room. During its 1630-1660 hiatus from feast tableaux the oyster persists as a central feature in Dutch still-life paintings, a genre that began and flourished in the Netherlands at the beginning of the seventeenth century, popular in the new state of abundance created by the rise of industrialization and colonization. These "advances" gave humans the power to regulate plenty and lack, and to separate resources from the land and traditions that had held them. Oyster shucked and then pearl. Oyster sucked and swallowed.

My first encounter with the exceptional Dutch still-life tables featuring oysters had been a grainy reproduction in Norman Bryson's *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Paintings*. While each oyster painting is unique, in canvas after canvas Willem Claesz Heda and Pieter Claesz, both masters of the form, evoke harmony in the perfect framing of the table, in the symmetry of ewer and goblet, in the repetition of oval shapes: oyster, lemon, pewter plate, and glass. The graceful helix of a peeled rind, tobacco falling from paper twists. Most of Heda's and Claesz's tables are depicted after the feast has been eaten or as if the diner, always singular, has just stepped away, goblets in disarray. Yet, even so this harmony appears effortless, as if a byproduct of consumption.

Or perhaps there is a harmony in objects that persists despite humanity's chaotic disruption? "In a certain sense," Bryson writes, "the harmony requires a certain degree of *forcing*, and this is very clear in Claesz's use of 'monochrome' technique.... Claesz deliberately evens out tonality and expands the middle range of greys, while at the same time filtering all colors through a distinctive brown-green. The natural tones and colors of the objects are keyed to the translucent bottle green of a glass beaker or *roemer*."

Intrigued by Bryson's description of the painting (objects keyed to translucent bottle green) and of his concept of "forced harmony" dependent not only on arrangement but on color, I Google Heda's and Claesz's oyster paintings (*Still Life with Wine Glass and Silver Bowl*; *Still Life with Oysters*; *Still Life with Turkey Pie*, etcetera) and am immediately overtaken by their mood. The solitary scene, the gleam of light off silver. In one painting a wine glass is tipped, shattered. In another the oyster plate precariously balances on the edge of the table. In all of the paintings the oysters glow as if internally illuminated leaving a taste of silver in my mouth, a taste like stepping from a quiet Bucharest street, blue-light snow, into the metallic shimmer of an Orthodox church.

Intoxicated by this taste but far from Bucharest, I visit the Met's gallery 635 where Heda's *Still Life with Oysters, a Silver Tazza, and Glassware* hangs next to Claesz's *Still Life with a Skull and Writing Quill*. Claesz's painting has the weight of earth while Heda's oysters pulse through a darkened room with white lead light, a luminosity picked up by the window reflected in the curved surface of the glass *roemer*, prunts on the stem to steady a greasy-fingered drinker's grip on the glass at a time when forks were not commonly used. And the white illumination of the oysters echoes out in stippling along the edge of the silver tazza, beading the glass ewer ghosting at the back.

Still-life painting complicates the long-standing question of what the image should do. Should it strike us viscerally (see the oyster in the painting and your mouth waters. See the curve of a shoulder in lamplight and your shoulder then softens, a beautiful back revealed and your back burns and the heavy knife in Cronos's hand becomes a heavy weight in your own)? And so you become seeing, move into the interior of images as the images move into you. Or should the still life challenge the mind, engage the viewer in a self-consciously symbolic system, a discourse of pattern? The poem says *oyster in my mouth, pearl in my belly, gleaming lamp in my hand*. The essay says *sign* and *sign* and *sign*. What emerges between says *yes* and *more* and *both* as she licks salt off her lips, eyes wet with so much looking.