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April 2, 2018

Material

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2019

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An abstract of
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Abstract

Material

By Nathan Blansett

Material is a collection of poems about sexuality's relations with artifice, knowledge, history, and difference. Henri Cole has told us that the composition of poems comes out of the composition of lives. In the same way that James Merrill was once described as a poet who "became willing to grapple with things themselves, rather than the intellectualized or aestheticized symbols of things," the arc of my book's changing art reflects a changing life, as its youthful speaker moves from the abstract to the concrete, to the actual and real, the materiality of love and self-knowledge. Beginning with "self-portrait," it ends with "myself."

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This book is for Daniel Crooke.

Table of Contents

I

The Art Historian	2
Terrarium	3
Royal Hunt	4
The End of Abstraction	5
Symmetry	7
First Apartment	8

II

America	10
Cliff House	11
Drawing with My Father	23
The Ersatz Parents	14

III

Sentimental Education	16
Germinal	17
Perception	18
A Day Before Leaving	20
Farewell Performance	22
Hausmann	23

Notes

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THE ART HISTORIAN

The self-portrait of Vigée Le Brun in her straw hat
on page 11

is like eighteenth century athleisure
and like him: the book itself,

a reminder of him: academic, frilled,
ornate, I take one page and turn it

on the plane, while clouds
efface the low country's sky, like the grief of having an idol.

Orange automatic doors at Franprix
open onto the street.

The armed officer
halts me. When he gestures to cross

I do, obvious to me
he has sole license. My lungs breeze blood

and air in this city where I know my idol
lives, elicits, where

I insist my customs are to be more
his, where

in wire glasses
and white tennis shoes he poses

for a photo, with his hand at his chin, in the manner
of the Comtesse. Whatever.

TERRARIUM

The two of us naked in bed.

Pointing at the ceiling,
he tells me when my apartment was built.

Only sparingly will I have someone touch me like that; it is

the only secret my art has,
how resistant I am to pleasure.

The window is before me but makes no noise.
The mind changes to hear noise.

ROYAL HUNT

My lover sleeps with women
but sometimes acts on other urges.

I shave my balls
as one way of considering his tastes. He jerks

the hair on my head.
The light smells in spring—

swords in the thawed
grass—like the silver

jewelry he touches in my ear,
evidence of the way we both understand power.

Morning, I stop to hold their faces
in my hands, their pelts

white-blond
to copper, these slender dogs

unleashed, running together—
the deathly, the fawn—

THE END OF ABSTRACTION

He broke
 his right
 arm falling
 off his bicycle
 so he had
 to paint with
 his left:
 the rowers lurching
 in their
 white attire
 while the river

*

the sound of it—

 chestnut trees
 assuming tan, politesse
 shapes, like a

*

pleat, in the white sleeve
 an arm bent over chair-back...

*

over the sound

here

the rowers' eyes closing

to hear

*

as the speaking

voice speaks too

quick to be taken

down by one's

pencil, where

features are penciled more

deeply,

*

the veined

aspects of the

leave-shapes

adjusting

themselves, keeping

themselves, not

throwing away

their waste

SYMMETRY

The wind floats in like your voice,
same as mine

speaking. Our socks
rub the old wood floor.

It fills my apartment—
the light in long aurora shapes,

an ambulance passing,
no narrator with a memory

of a beach, no frieze
of people passing on bicycles

while the waves make their non-contact,
no snow whirling

but the thought of it,
the zipped vest with a lining

like raw silk,
when I wander from my door,

into the cold, even if
there will be no coupling, no

morning coffee. The wind
moving, halting, then settling over that couch where we finish

at the same time
is called “Changed Desire.”

FIRST APARTMENT

I sleep on the carpet. The sun burns my forehead
in summer, fall, winter
and spring. Olivia and I sniff drugs in a black bathroom.
A park, locked midday.
Male bankers vape outside,
accessorized in silk,
probably committers of fraud
as I say I understand my intimate
thoughts. Unforeseen snow flattens on the shrubs, grass,
through the dark glass, the untruffled
snow like self-inflicted pain. The snow deafens
the apartment's occupants for a night.

||

AMERICA

Sun debuts without frailness.

Towers bore themselves deeper into a burning screen of blue
and crumble on mute—
but to turn backward, as through a rear window,
oil fields on fire at night
though the earth continues moving sentimentally

in relation to the sun. His weekends, Dad and I
laugh and lick sour candy at the movies.

Men and women remind themselves of the specialty of their romance.

The hard blue atlas given to me
is only a few years old
but already outdated. No one
seems to be moving in a pantomime,
speaking to each other
about me, even when I hear him sleeping, and look at his underwear
in the open dryer.

My first friend chases me on the Presbyterian school's
secular playground. We match in white polos.

People other than my parents
call me "Nathan."

CLIFF HOUSE

Two of every server like the same person
halved. Indeed they go inside

and out. Each bread bowl steams
like beach-grass

when rain-fed,
rain that passes through

—like a stream that one must pass through,
as a ray must pass through—

to here.

The servers seem to walk evenly together

until slowly one goes behind the other,
patches of artichoke grow in wire ringlets,

one germinal field absorbs completely,
innocently, without idea

of a role. The bay explodes on the cliffs.
The windows near the table

where everyone is the family of my father
frame it. Just to touch it I fold

the playbill, one handsome
page from the matinée. The bill my grandfather pays. Alone,

my other siblings not here, alone
in the parking lot I see those servers go out to be alone

and my breath constricts as the wind
starts, facing the ruined baths

where water carves. In the Chinese markets we tour,
extraordinary pink evenings

where sheets of plastic
partition each vendor, the workers' pale sneakers

suck the red tile
grated with metal drains, where water will exit

one day when I am an adult man—
when the gradual

fluency of my erotic life,
the disciplining

of my oeuvre,
and the specificity of my beauty

are all outweighed by the true
deviant I appear to myself—

some colorless morning.
I walk to get coins for laundry.

Leaves whirl via the earth's material.
The hilly park has people walking then not.

What wafts in the ivied trees of the neighborhood
is something fishlike, enveloped

in dark plastic and thrown in bins
onto the street,

nowhere near
the seascape and markets we toured

but indeed. Divorce is so interesting.

DRAWING WITH MY FATHER

I trace my hands Take the weird
 papery crayon
 Smudging the sketch
 graying Paper touches
paper In winter when the sun is
 closest At the table his
 pen across silent hatching
 depth His
 are better My ears
 know what his paper
absorbs Dad what are you
 doing show me I can
 not see

THE ERSATZ PARENTS

Then it was still light out;

the light was lasting longer.

We walked to dinner, where the adults ate duck.

We passed the tiled market-fronts
that gave off the cologne of squid.

My aunt's apartment was pastel
and seemed old to my sense of time,

and inside it a faucet pink and rusted,
a bread box on the counter.

When the light still lasted that long
the three of us took the same evening walks.
My aunt's boyfriend

wore yellow and red running shorts.
He was born in Venezuela, where I hadn't been,
though I told him every fact I knew about the capital.

I watched my male, my female relatives
make pizza from scratch.

They grated white cheese
and touched each other's arms when they laughed.

|||

SENTIMENTAL EDUCATION

That room was aired out
by a gust of snowless wind
as a man pushed
open the deli's green door—
dark cakes, hard and lustrous,
raw slices in wax paper
passed on. The day
was bright, standard, readable.
While he slept beside someone months later
another occupant of the apartment
turned the heater's dial—leg hairs
lissome, faintly wet. Snow
collected on the San Gabriel peaks.
The private vulgarity of sexual passion
and the sweetness of romantic gestures
had met. *Sentimental Education*
opens with a ship sailing down a river
further, further for many pages
which must have once felt dangerous.

GERMINAL

Two small plates outside for dinner.

Construction up the street.

Men walk past a few pleasure
themselves to look back

perfect day.

Long moment of nothing neither of us. Rawness

of the food the table without cloth late
sun ribboning the trees

PERCEPTION

The door swung open
 and he was not there.
 I looked at books for pictures

 and to compare. This photo
 of a young man seaside in France—handsome. No
 him, me missing him.

So? Somehow
 I go out and speak.
 Terrace topiaries in wind

 like shoulders
 entering a shirt. Light
 excruciates through the leaves,

a phone call, him in Dallas, I in my real city
 with real people all who fret
 they are not real. But one day

 reader I woke up and knew
 and despite reservations—
 there's a ten minute wait,

yes that's fine, I showed up late
 and there's no need
 for me to go on, to describe

 the delay. Even here
 I wonder how the hiding
 begins. Sometimes

I fall asleep thinking of it.
 It must end
 at Métro Pont Marie

when I walked up the steps
as everyone must do
once the doors shut.

A DAY BEFORE LEAVING

In a river-town I zipped my suitcase.
 I could hear
 the sun-murmur on a river in Pennsylvania; I took off my glasses to hear.
 His running shoes

*

slid in the grass, his body went up and down the hilly paths.
 I could hear his eyes closing at night
 with his back to the bark

*

the orange waistband of his shorts
 damp from his run.

*

I smelled like him.
 Low-hanging trees enflamed with insects,
 the dock extending over the humid river—

*

the day before.

In the light a style of breeze the light no longer jesting.
 In the grass the page on PLACE

and the just-turned page before:

so hot out

one's eyelids began to fall

*

there, on the oak bark, the minute
he rewet his finger, pushed it in

*

not like clouds aspiring
to a scene, a backdrop for a play,

*

but like clouds
he and I saw in daylight once over the prairie

*

at the end

*

of the day. What

*

will I be when I return?
The sea-swell, rolling images of the skies.

*

Are you packed,
he said.

FAREWELL PERFORMANCE

The work says nothing of storm.
My idol who is perfect—

when I wish
for perfection, I wish

for his arrangement.
There is nothing else

more silent. Feeling, I teach
myself, arrives from omission.

When I turn in the mirror
it is no longer him I see.

HAUSSMANN

Every day at work the curators act as themselves
on our glass tenth floor, while I abandon my post
wielding a book whose jacket is the Prussian
twilight of the neighborhood park where my shadow
goes absent. The tan bookpaper—
sketched with faint drawings of eyes—sees
me open, long before August goodbyes
at home where I am poor but live alone at the beginning of the real
shadows which annex each apartment aging
open and bare-faced. Laissez-faire coffee-goers.
Runners turning to see who they pass. “I had never seen
such a gay child, not since myself.”

*

NOTES

"The End of Abstraction": The lines "the speaking / voice speaks too / quick..." are borrowed, in a slightly different form, from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*.

"A Day Before Leaving": The line "The sea-swell, rolling images of the skies" is borrowed from Emily Leithauser's translation of Charles Baudelaire's "La Vie Antérieur."

"Farewell Performance": This poem shares a title with a poem by James Merrill.

