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A Work Of Art

Catherine Theis

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A WORK OF ART

Catherine Theis

1.

Classic, dead, rotting perfume.

1964. Cypress trees, dare I stare

at Roman aqueducts,

blank-eyed statues.

Getting rid of the thing

after it's made.

Afterwards, a Negroni.

Modernism

my favorite moment.

Is this because I'm patient?

Or because, like Erza Pound,

I don't want to remember anything,

stuck in a tent, eating flies?

2.

Shadows, trees,

single file line,

a French farm boundary.

I had no idea

you could erase the "you."

I didn't realize others

pound podiums

in distress of excess.

Loyal energy,

I desire you, piss-smelling

Naples, the freedom

to confect sweetness

at any old time.

3.

How often does a work of art

register a high bacteria count?

Closed for swimming.

Open for sunbathing.

Just to be safe, I renewed

my faith, apologizing
to no one but myself,
swimming inside the water.
I am not your answer.
The waves backtrack
checking traffic. The avocado ripens
in time for breakfast.

4.

Wasn't really listening
until he said,
"Style is superficial."
Really? Monotone, high arch
all the same
to us ants?
I continued to not listen,
the man
megaphone
who couldn't say synonyms
or facilitator
without a stutter.
Felt the urn within.
It pulsed in my body. It shrank-
blossomed
in alternating breaths,
the museum's marble
more dead than alive,
wicked, excited about ending.

5.

High-crested crane,
the birds absolutely sing
louder here (a red conditioning)
in my mother's garden.
Burdock root salad,
I could forgive
an inhumane act.
Over Japanese food,
we discussed the possibility
of humankind.
Why not, what's the point
of not trying?
I am its only author.

6.

The kids tramp in the waves.

The kids tramp
in the rocks, tramp
in sideways glint sun.

When the sun's out—

a fellowship of others—
a bruise darkening
on my suntanned leg.

The facts of my biography:

I grew up in a teepee,
distilled moonshine
from my tears,
mailed letters
from inside the rough,
left the matches
at the last camp site.

Recalibration,

I get too excited
starting again.

7.

"You gave him the best years
of your life,"

which could have been true
if I were someone else.

A rompy-stomp collector
of paint,
a perfection of hardness.

I move the beach towel
at the last minute, the pink
of my childhood
in the foreground.

The facts of myself
add up to no facts. The facts
of others implied.

8.

Vigor, sexual enthusiasm,
white hairs

in private. To be touched
like Odysseus, bathed and oiled
after washing up

on the beach.

The spirit of hospitality
 creasing my body
in a million folds.

It doesn't really matter
except here.

Just the facts:
You're sentimental,
I'm not. The white billows.
Did I get that right?

9.

Authentic art,
 does it exist
 or spectator art or political or
labor or authentic recycling,
or bemused expression?

You lied!

I didn't let you
 suffer enough.

Authentic life, a grocery store list,
a diary excerpt
 trashed in the car.

The cataracts falling
from my eyes.

See with my eyes,
what women did you miss?

 Broken terra-cotta star,
 airborne in every lifetime.

10.

Courtyard as oracle.

Complaint as oracle.

Castration as oracle.

Couple as oracle.

Crowd as oracle.

Contact as oracle.

Conversation as oracle.

Cassia as oracle.

Compare as oracle.

Coffin as oracle.

Civilian as oracle.

Circumference as oracle.

Catherine as oracle.

11.

One airplane
flies above the lake.
Blue, blue, green.
“I have an idea,”
to be fully open
dilated, generous
rejection,
you don’t scare me.
During the heat wave,
my body relaxed,
“confiscated studies”
a measure of yearning.
I inclined into my appetite,
hungry, insatiable.

12.

Catherine.
Catherine.
Catherine.
Catherine.
Catherine.
Me.
Me.
Me.
Me.
Me.
Me.

13.

Woke up.
Coffee et cigarette.
Yoga et water.
Beach et sun.
Writing at desk.
Reading in bed.
Side ponytail.
Ingrown hair.
Shower, nakedness,
crème.
More bed.

Airplane tickets.
Built the fire.
Back in bed.
Got up to make drink.
Grilled vegetable
dinner.
Desk. Letters.
Cigarette.
Love letter.
Back to beach
to rescue lover
on wayward wave.
Back to bed.
Orgasm.
Back and forth
death dream.

14.

Ate dinner at my desk,
 the quotidian cliffhanger.
The sausage perfectly cooked.
Until next time.
 In the bridle of new forms,
 the world itself cooked.
The fruit washed by hand,
 eaten by hand,
 picked by hand,
the hooks don't care
 if the rapture is forced.
 Remember,
neither should you.

15.

Apologia returned to sender.
 Postage due.
Nine pages worth of intention,
apologia, restatement, then
a clue. Hyperbole. The goddess
Isis mentioned.
Needy, improvised,
 a twist. I don't see
 a twist at all.
"Please pass the mustard
for my sausage."

Sometimes it lies straight.

16.

Candlelite. Canskate.

Candidate. Candente.

A dressing room, a fitting
room, you choose

texture, smokiness, heartiness, elasticity,
a Rogers Park corner coffee shop
before I can go swimming.

Coffee before beer. Singing before
kissing. Sunscreen before sun.

My navy blue shirt without
the bra. My tits shaped
against the wind.

Summer buzzed in.

A happy baby carrier.

Breastfeeding, and body
slings. Slave or straight,
a tuna casserole addressed
to everyone, and beer, cold sprung
chamomile-nettled spring.

17.

Tall willow teeth, tooth
blessing, tooth country, a tininess
described as unwieldy.

My lap.

A vaster plain. Work
where none existed
because that's what I thought
was expected of me.

A wide worthiness
wears the wool of my work,
the tight plaid offspring
warps the wainscoting,
the senses de-sensed.

Not much accomplished
when it's hot outside.

The beach closed, again,
the waves too high. The high
bacteria count. Someone is lying,
that's how political office works.

I hear the mice search

for Parmigiano-Reggiano
a sweep scurrying! Romano!
Faster to crumb!

18.
The swaddling unnecessary.
I talk. I don't listen.
I sit around
in my own room
in my bathing suit
in my pile of money,
interacting less with the world.
Objectively, and historically,
this is an improvement.

19.
Hello, it's me.

20.
From the loaded gun,
a sign read, "To be continued..."

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Catherine Theis is a Provost Fellow at USC, and lives in southern California. Her first book is called *The Fraud of Good Sleep* (Salt Modern Poets, 2011). Catherine's latest chapbook, *The June Cuckold*, a tragedy in verse, is published by Convulsive Editions.