

Boxes

after Eva Hesse (1936-1970)

1. *Art Talk (Art)*

...but I feel so strongly that the art,ⁱ you could
push it.ⁱⁱ And he loved me with this thing that was
almost incestuous.ⁱⁱⁱ Within

the circle I remember^{iv}
this clinging, literal kind of thing,^v
this straight perfect form and then putting a hole

in the center
and dropping out a very, very flexible
surgical hose.^{vi} If you like to keep it

very thin and airy, you have to figure that out,^{vii}
because rubber needs more strength
than rubber alone.^{viii} He said he saw it

and he really thought it was good.^{ix} It is also
so extreme and that is why I like it
and don't like it.^x If you didn't

follow their idea,^{xi} this little piece of steel
comes out of this structure^{xii}
[and] it wasn't an idea.^{xiii} And it comes out a lot.^{xiv}

2. Interview

Literal questions. Literal questions. Literal questions. Literal questions. Then some honest answer. I'm trying at honest. I'm getting more honest. As I talk I'm getting more honest. Then telling some serious shit. About plastic and light through the plastic. The family that died in the holocaust—nothing. Let's talk about light through the plastic. Then feminist questions. And feminist questions. And feminist questions that strangely are literal questions. Then yes and my father. And trying at honest. And dismissive also but trying at honest. Incestuous—sort of. And phallic—I guess so. And plastic—the light through the plastic. And is that the womb? Is that hurting? Is that like the voice that was taken away? No. No. No, no voice here

is taken away. It's like writing a sonnet. She says, but a man's sonnet though. Didn't men first write sonnets? And literal questions. And wire coming out from the frame that I made. And I'm trying to talk here of something. The artists you like best are male, though. You see it? The male with material gone soft, the humor. The sweet child before it is born. And the tubing inbuilt. And so would I like it, if I could see into the future. I'll die at age thirty-three, liking it still in soft sculpture, where I'm only trying to see my way through to the plastic. It holds light. It gives light away.

3. *The Bather (dream of the past)*

Could my mother keep a secret I had told her from my father?
She was in her bedroom, face still flushed from the rich heat
of her bathwater, just wrapped in her robe which in the low electric

light of her shaded bedside lamp was the color
of the inside of a honeydew, but smooth against my small hand
with the silkworm's raw gelatinous threads, and I was telling her

about the radio program I'd overheard that day. Some announcer's low
and gently teaching voice, trained to speak as if
these things he said meant nothing, or as if they were—weather,

soldiers, what they saw—all equal. She tried
to hold me. I resisted. Something would come for her.

Then this morning, decades later, decades after she had died,
was a piece in the newspaper on a new show of paintings
of women—women bathing, you know the kind, towels slipped

conveniently to their waists, what, from the soft sounds of water
in the basin, leaned over what the painter likes to think
is the work of preparation or of comfort, or a loosened

kind of thinking, as if born to be this greyed out reproduction
in the paper, like something she embodies but she'll never know
the total import of, the kind of interest-article she'd read once

she stepped from the tub, in her damp silk,
to what she thought she'd always be, frail in an ignorance
reaching to hold me back.

4. *Yogi*

I watched the man in front performing something

called the butterfly. I tried it too,
seated like him, my bottom spine-nub rising from the rug
that he'd unfolded and invited us to gather on.

And it pulled in me new muscles, ones that made me think
of childbirth, which I hadn't done, not even yet imagined,
though not for the obvious reason, that my legs

were parted: his were too. It didn't part what's literal
in me. It just pulled. The way I'm trying to get tubing to,
or placing it to look like it's been pulled, which means

perhaps it has been. A deep balancing
tension. Star placed in the sky, centripetal,
centrifugal forces in some new coherence. I was dying. A friend's son had asked

in my earshot what does density mean. The obvious answer
says ratio of weight to size. But what if it could be defined
sans ratio. My forehead

touched the floor, I felt its finest points
of grit, I felt my thoughts pulse in the ridges of my back. I thought of owl
about whom I'd just heard my friend read to her boy,

the moon that seemed ingenuously
to follow him, the heart's soup turned to ice,
then back to soft soup once he'd closed the door

again, against the winter. Such a sleep, his huge eyes shut,
for all his questions.
I would never have children.

5. After Darwin (for a future)

Through the lens of his long view of course this child, children
make sense. You're just parts of one long qualified sentence
of time, braided like river water. And so
what's continuous, bigger, more lasting
than us, can't understand
differences much,

which has the effect of one's squinting, or tears. Which favor the "which"—the close
stream
of thought, linking argument where this child makes sense, or not.
Like the seed in the whole that explains the eventual
twelve-petaled blossom. There's nothing but sameness,
both distance and intimacy in
the shared bed now before fully woken, and with his small body

tunneled between yours and one
you first loved, or loved first. How both yours are displaced by this movement
that now seems a love more essential, some spring. These striped
green pajamas you helped his arms into
the long night before. The small body inside them
like yours. The prescriptions one's lovingness

tries at maintaining. Your best. How you hold back
or try so intently those moments, his
small bared loose ankle
asleep in your hands, your mind half awake
in these blankets you share, kept in dreaming
as if held on lens-glass and watched, as if

going nowhere.

6. *“Conditions of Possibility,” 1967*

A sort-of friend, sitting on bare wood floor, some black night in December,
describing what Foucault said about epistemes and I didn't quite buy it.
Something about Velasquez too. I know Las Meninas just from reproductions,
an image in my art history that was larger, yes, than a half dollar
but smaller than the icebox, I thought, where I then rummaged to refill his drink,
cracking the ice from its metal canoe with the lever it freezes itself all around,
collecting up extra shards from the tabletop with my small finger
and letting them melt on my tongue. Which is to say, I haven't seen the painting myself
as large as it actually is, but still the way most interested people like me
would have come to know it, and I don't think it sounds like how he says it is.
He lit up another and came over to watch me make his drink.
I added too much vermouth, I know, I could see him taking note.
The glass in the windows rattled in the high-up wind. I felt it at
the back of my neck for a moment and thought a lover had passed through the room.

But I didn't buy it, I thought to myself. It's not like I'm into the absolutist stuff so deeply
but there seems some consistency across time in the way we all make sense.
What we have to do is meet the fact that our environment is changing—our doing—
but that doesn't mean we're making things new. It's more of a shifting. I dug out my olive
with its bitter strip of red at the center, some wound laid there for our kink.
My finger still wet from its second ice dip he leaned forward to kiss me and I turned away.
He was doing his graduate work. I wasn't sure quite why he liked me, he more seemed to like
to know that I was there hearing him talk. What liberation is that, that he's growing
his hair to my length. Earlier, I'd wondered at the presuming small bulge at his zipper,
an ordinary thing, as he stood at the doorjamb, chatting with my new neighbor
and me coming up the stairs to my own place, and wondering how he got in.

7. *Robots (for a future)*

Your youngest son makes robots out of the little bricks
that snap into stacks of brightly colored plastic.

I don't know this toy's name. I would

if I had lived. Each robot is about the height of
his index finger, made from remarkably few elements
to register so clearly

as what they are, or what they just look like they are,
since they do nothing but stand upright,
two flat neon eyes.

The one you like best (kept at your bedside till it splits)
appears to have two penises, one stiff from his belly
and a matching one below, pointing straight out like a plug

or a joke from his body's lightweight chimney. On another
your son puts a stiff plastic leaf
at the end of one arm, upright torch. How is it that I seemed

to know what would happen, this futility
of matter? — Yet that, however bad
it gets, we still want to see the face inside

the fire, what's recognizable
inside the stilled abstraction?
—that robot with his green unmoving

hand of liberty,
like some smiling from an open space between
my stiff spread arms,

time's shell before I realized it was empty.

8. *Art Talk 2 (Talk)*

The light is there by its nature.^{xv}
It is about ten or eleven feet out.^{xvi}
No one in my family has lived.^{xvii} I'm not

too concerned with it.^{xviii}
[And] I can't wear a mask.^{xix} From what I understand
it's toxic and I've been too sick to really take a chance.^{xx}

The light does beautiful things to it.^{xxi}
There were a few things I said
to one of the people that I worked with^{xxii}—color

is whatever comes
out of the material
and keeps it what it is.^{xxiii} I said I wanted a pole.^{xxiv}

He made a perfect
pole.^{xxv} It wasn't what I meant at all.^{xxvi} Layer
over layer over layer^{xxvii} [and] now the material I am still

really eager to work with^{xxviii}
is rubber.^{xxix} The rubber only lasts
a short while.^{xxx}

9. The City Wall (for a future)

And I read in one of your parenting books about boys' bent for object displacement.
To be frank, this is sometimes exactly what it feels when my boyfriend nails me.

The uses don't bother me, I'm still wry, smiling, like in the old photos you know.
What upsets me is his own displacement, how he loses himself to exterior worlds,

relocating some purportedly solid emotion in my body's frame, or beyond.
He can't sit still and just talk about intentions like I'm trying here.

I found the book by your bedside, I paged through it one morning when you weren't home.
I don't think you ever knew I was there, light on your white coverlet.

But that stuff about space, do you buy it?—this is still from your parenting book—that naturally
boys are more drawn to objects existing in space—trucks and such—because

I have trouble with that. I feel I am actually much more attuned to space
than most men I know. He makes so-called love but he has to move it

but I make the hanging thick sheets in the room that want to be touched but can't
because they were made instead to be watched except by myself in the photos you know

where I stand and smile around the edge of one as if it's a curtain,
this heavy translucent texture that hangs and turns, almost funny, to dread.

Space and place are two different ideas, and though I'm a woman I will claim space
as my own. Space is a more flexible thought, place hinges on some sense of here or of true.

I think, actually, there are blinders on men—maybe biological, or whatever—
that keep them from seeing change across time so they focus their longing on absolute place.

Space can do its own thing anywhere, it has multiple poles. But place—like the displaced—has only one pole, which extends, and then men persuade us of its logic and right:

on the ramparts surrounding the city, long spear upraised, our god-aided Achilles,
as hard as we've known, closes in as if Hector—not loss, history—were his target.

10. *Robots 2 (Aesthetics)*

There's a photo of me
before I died where my arms —
I'm grinning, young — look somehow like a robot's.

A soft paper tube that I've taped up connects
and hides my hands
like an elongated muff.

I wear a mini-dress and pumps.
It's like I'm asking you, what could we do
like this, without our hands? Leaning so deep

to the side of the studio's armchair
that balance shifts and all our heels kick up.
I always liked things longer than

they should be, some initial
more organic attraction
gone too far, roughed up, past use.

11. *Reproduction*

You showed me in the heavy book
the beautifully resolved
image of the woman at a table, gaze cast

down, her eyes almost closed. Her head
is wrapped in white cloth. You didn't mean for me to wonder
like mine. You know my shaved scalp is happier inside it,

wind held by a sail. Is that
poetic, do you think. When the nurses came to take my hair,
I told them take it all. You haven't seen the stitches

since. I never liked half-way,
I always liked harm further than it seems
to need to be.

But she's not working, the woman, which is dangerous. She appears here
to have nothing to take up—no sewing, no pewter
or whatever to polish, what makes days' reproductions

seem not idle
but with purpose. So there's nothing in this one slant
of daylight to attend to except thought, which spreads imperfectly

for much of the foreground,
so the moment seems all foreground, a knotted rug tactile
and awkward, its thickly patterned

colors seen as through held tears,
like how this roughly washed
blue blanket at my legs in this mechanical bed is just the color

of that Brighton Beach sky
on that one rainy day in June
my father took me the bakery,

the feeling that will never in and of itself
return, oil on the palate and the pastry
coming shattered in my mouth.

12. *Hamburg (dream of the past)*

The outside's shadowed brick—my mother, she could see it
from the bed—was the color, that morning,
of turning red roses. The baby fixed its wild gaze
on nothing. Veiled in wordlessness, it worked hard
to drain her breast instead. She'd wrapped him
in the patterned sheet that also clung to her, in her new fever,
its translucent fingers flexing. Another possible outcome
stubborn in her mind: how could she tell it
from the self's helplessly leaking rock, though, softening
to sand with a relief she wanted desperately
to hate, objectively, to bracket off this feeling of a moving,
moving piece of water caught, and how can water be
a body and be caught so moving? She was crying
as the sunlight turned the parted curtains gold.

13. *Boxes*

I didn't know how latex
turned to issue more like honey
crystals through time, insect color
of amber. Or the East River

on a Monday morning
in the fall.
Life's nonsense going brittle,
no longer the wax-covered

wick, so soft, it used
to seem in its youth.
Which I had lengthened absurdly
with the pleasure of an inner piece

pulled out before its time, beyond
rational use, from inside the ragged
rubber cylinder I'd made for it
as home,

formed like a squat
and crumbling candle for a tabletop
or gallery, unspooling
in one test piece still unbroken. Listen: the new

tubing was yielding and see-through
when I found it. But it still—
and how could it?—
did not know what I had wanted

it to do. Isn't that always
the way?—the body losing its
control of the material—though
for a time it worked. Then

younger ones are hired
to do the work it can't
any longer, by itself. I was growing
ill, more ill, growth in my brain

making me slowly
speechless, as they elsewhere
did my thing,
making me wet around the edges

of my mouth as I stared
at the lit window, box gone
opaque in this new change of degree,
or was it kind.

14. *Soft Sculpture*

the nicest part of abstraction to me is it's not about accuracy
that short conversation with whatever's real in which the real always wins
the made resinous grid answers to a more moving kind of truthful

the shape of the animal waste in the gutter and spring waters running around
the tang of city metal on my hands like well-used places I hold in the subway
the peopledust I pick up with my shoes and imprecise folds in my skirt

I didn't count among important people in my life any men in my life
I didn't count among important people in my life they were all dead
they were all dead so by the time I was born it was like I was already dead

in New York the old high-up floors where I worked walls were layered with thick white paint
drops of the thick stuff melted into the wooden and women-worked factory floors
enough above trees you could see the sun rising above the old Pan Am

at the end of the street one old high-rise was like a ship's tilting mast
abstraction draws metaphors to other things only close to their utmost material forms
the exercise keeps the mind from obsessively wishing it could live forever

I saw snow falling from the hospital bed and how it would melt as it fell
the constant night light of the city snow is what I hate most about this my city
I hate the country more though for silence when crystallized meanings appear

there was a night when I was a child when there was no moon in the country
I realized I would die young as I heard the wind move among endless pine needles
I couldn't see my own hand there in front of my face though I felt my breath on it

15. *Honey*

Honey is both mutable
and not. The whole family
died in the holocaust. Do you have your tissues?

In a pharaoh's tomb sometime
this century some archeologist
found an urn full of honey still pliable

and glossy. One wonders if he stuck his finger in,
took to his mouth a coating of its elemental
resin, pure unworldly

matter. It absorbs the scent of lavender,
you know, if the bees who'd made it travelled
to feed on the wide waves

of that sad grey-purple
with its lengthened grey-green stalks
and slender leaves like velvet, the blossoms' clinging seeds

of the family that died
left piled into soft ruffled cones that bend in a low wind.

Note:

These poems imagine Eva Hesse both before and after her death. Only two—both titled “Art Talk”—make direct use of Hesse’s language, scrambled and pieced back together from her late-life 1970 interview with Cindy Nemser and published in 1975 in a book titled the same as these two poems. Citations to that interview are below, in my endnotes. The other poems in this sequence are purely speculative, less faithful to the letter than to my interest in the spirit, in all senses of that word.

Endnote (Eva Hesse, 1936-1970)

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