

SUN DAMAGE

Kate Colby



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a finalist in Cleveland State University
Poetry Center's Book Contest



#88

ESSAY PRESS NEXT SERIES

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Introduction

– Caryl Pagel

What are the proportions of the self, and to what extent might one measure the blur of the body through self-observation, self-erosion, or self-reflection? Kate Colby gracefully gathers evidence of the self's fading ("Cognition is the mist on the mirror I write in with my finger, but it always disappears in the time it takes to see it") via serial mini-essays—a series of "dark questions"—which accumulate as shards of contemplative rage, violent static, and threatening strength. These are mirror moments: sharp, clear, and uncanny, as well as deeply curious of art's ability to satisfactorily replicate anything authentic.

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The Proof

This morning I knelt in a buzzy linoleum corridor and looked my daughter in the eye, asked her to do her best to keep her underpants dry. This is a terrible thing to say, isn't it, when I excuse only my worst infractions by saying I'm doing my best? On the way home, her tortured pink mitten on the seat.

At the kitchen table with a bowl of cereal, unlit votive, dusting of pepper next to it, I lack the vaunted ability to take pleasure in small things. To smooth crumbs and creases from the well-washed tablecloth feels like complete defeat, only whose completion fills me with pure pleasure—a personal best on the closest scale.

With the name for another decade to my age, the shape of my whole life has changed, like a paper crane unfolded into a crumpled list. I ball it in my fist and hold to the capacity of a piece of paper.

When I look at myself in the mirror without expression, I don't seem so bad. When I catch my crumpling face in the car window, tensed against a cold morning, I receive a shock. When I see a shape of more than two dimensions rendered in lines on paper, I wonder: Does a shape become more or more of itself when a square goes six-sided, a triangle four-? Every now and then my life appears to me to add a dimension, with more edges to contain it, but a commensurate decrease in my ability to understand how they work to enclose it. I am conflating the lines on my face with the parameters of perceived reality, but I do think of them as proportionate and what's the difference?

When I was younger I saw my life as a string of beads whose purpose it was to lengthen and then fasten with a clasp. Now it feels like a burning thing that is condensing and intensifying to a degree that confuses me, in that the position and relative importance of its elements keep changing, like an animate diagram of nuclear fusion. I'm okay with this instability, for the most part, so long as I can't see the sun damage.

Dark question: What is the capacity of a life and do I owe it to mine to fill it? I ask this of the dark, that is—the dark being all around me. Work matters and I feel fortunate that mine is to mean. My head sees itself like a crystal ball, wondering: What more do I need to experience my flesh?

There's a gallery in her Boston museum, which was also her house, that Isabella Stewart Gardner kept closed to the public during her lifetime. It's mostly full of medieval pietàs and other non-perspectival depictions of the Christ child, but in the most prominent corner Gardner placed Jonathan Singer Sargent's enormous portrait of her—bare-armed, hands clasped, voluptuousness rendered extra dimensional with a pearl girdle.

Gardner's husband hated the painting and once wrote to her about it, "It looks like hell, but looks like you." Across the room, a flat Virgin leaves her own gold girdle with St. Thomas as proof of her ascent to heaven.

Writing is receding. I gauge its distance from my face.

Gift of the artist: Hold your whole life to leave it.

I study the backs of old women's heads at church, note how they carry themselves down the aisle. When you're in your fifties you can start looking good for your age. In your sixties you can say, "I was once a great beauty" and it doesn't matter if it's true. Is only having been happy the same? Fine lines make mass graves.

I'm squinting at the line between my vision and appearance. They seem to me to be a circuit, even though I mostly can't see myself. I might tear out my eyes to better know my flesh, only the feeling of fingers is insufficient—I need to see to contain the experience, wince at its tangled fist in my hair.

Where I used to feel others' eyes now I feel mine, writhing like live wires tethered to my head, hissing—

Proximity can make or break a difference. So I figure.

What it all comes to: a head.

I recently read an ethics column about a woman's daughters concealing from her the fact of her impending death. To not know the answer to the question that haunts your whole life,* even if you never think about it, leaves you forever incomplete.

Dark question: How often do people know how they die and how often when? Which would I rather know less?

I remember studying missing kids' grainy age-enhanced faces on milk cartons in the 80s. They were off in a way I couldn't put my finger on, illustrating the as-yet-unspannable difference between nature and the hermetic perfection of computation.

Evidence of absence: You can't see your own eyes move in the mirror.

To do:

- 1) Write a poem then erase the space around it, with words.
- 2) Complete the black part of the crossword.

Little star: How and when it will end?

Now I lay me down to sleep in the uncanny valley of autobiography.

Women's talk shows speak of faces' experiential capacity, say it's greater once they lose elasticity, in the way that deflated balloons are arguably larger than when they started—"laugh lines," wizened=wisened.

Physically, I contain atoms and the space of their configurations. Experientially, I only lay claim to what I know that I know. Self-reflexivity requires language, which is temporary, but for how long it lasts I can't say.

There's a myth that babies are born with full-sized eyeballs, which do in fact grow with their faces. The proportionate growth of living things—I think about it all the time. But as my own face settles back into its bones, I think of Michelangelo, chipping away at bright round forms, dark veins coursing.

Incessant portrait: a Virgin's blank dish face, forever turned away from space, turning.

Twice now I've heard the interim minister at church read what he says is his favorite quotation:

We are here to abet creation and to witness it, to notice each thing so each thing gets noticed. Together we notice not only each mountain shadow and each stone on the beach but we notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature so that creation need not play to an empty house.

—Annie Dillard

If our primary purpose is to notice—to see—then it seems to me that we are less creation's audience than the mirror it mugs in. But to what degree are we beholden to its face?

Isabella liked to place portraits of the same subject facing one another. She hung a self-portrait of Rembrandt across from a seascape in which he'd embedded his own image as a sailor on a storm-battered ship. But the seascape was stolen in 1990 and now Rembrandt beholds himself in an empty gold frame.

Gilt portrait: Look out what you wish for!

Language is the made-up face we make back at it.

Double self-portrait: broken feedback loop, snapped clasp, pearls roll into the corners.

I'm undone by C.D. Wright's recent death, even though I didn't know her. What bothers me most might be that after having written so much about dying she went suddenly in her sleep. Which is the dream.

Circle one: Is to neither see nor say to see forever perfect or perfectly incomplete?

The woman whose daughters concealed her dying was losing her memory at the same time. They figured she wouldn't retain the information.

Statement: Is each moment more a sequel of or serial with the previous?

Reason: "Never" and "forever" are the same without a frame.

Metaphoric portrait: late-stage Isabella lying on a divan, shrouded in something gauzy. Across the room, a foxed mirror in which she's further diffused. Her face is where the eyes go.

(The painting is of Isabella on the divan. The mirror is near me and the eyes are mine.)

Occasional axiom: Words are a matte-black mirror to look back at/with.

Does knowing you're dying make the bucket list? It does mine, since the time in which you know it is not the time it takes to happen, and to know that schism is to swallow and pass your clasp, cross out the black part of the crossword.

(In the above passage, by the first case of "know" I mean to understand; in the second, I mean to experience.)

(I mean at least three things by "passage.")

Words are boards to a broken window. To keep the specters in.

That I perceive myself as distinct from everything else makes me a broken mirror—not cracked, but in the sense of a broken record, out-performing its role, silently turning into the night.

Cognition is the mist on the mirror I write in with my finger, but it always disappears in the time it takes to see it.

We use foreign phrases for the beauty of imperfection—*wabi-sabi*, *jolie-laide*—but I can't think of one in American English, as though we won't assimilate the notion. (*Faux ami*, I know, but *jolie-laide* literally translates to "pretty ugly," which is just a wishy-washy way of saying "ugly.") Factual *faux ami*, I'm sure, but our language's puritanical primordial milieu accommodated cognitive dissonance (e.g., hard work=predestination), just not interpenetration.

But even in less reductive cultures than our own, these words are compound, juxtapositional, unlike, say, the emotional mashups of *ennui* or *duende*.

The imperfection of beauty is that it's temporary in two ways—its inherent evanescence and the beholder's acclimation to it. So far, language is only temporary in the second way, unless evanescence can be retrospective, and the word folds in your face.

Whether math is invented or discovered no one can say. Is this a conundrum? A conundrum is a semantic impasse, not an actual condition of the world.

Proof lets the truth out like a missing dog.

("God" is names for light.)

Conundrum: If writing replaces its impetus, like a photo does a memory, then what does writing about it do to your whole life?

I love the kind of penny candy that contains itself—wax shapes you bite through for a sugary solution, wafer saucers full of crunchy little balls, strips of colored dots on which a layer of the paper comes off. There's a great satisfaction in ingesting the flavorless container.

Absence of evidence: If my eyes invent what words contain for me to see, do I sleep more vividly in my dreams?

Which is the truer portrait: What I consume or what consumes me?

There are chewing-wax lips, neither candy nor container and also both, with a vague taste of wintergreen, which I hate, in spite of its beautiful name.

True/false: This is me, night-blinded by my headlights

and/or

if/then: watching my penny fall into the fountain I wished for.

Is the purpose of art to mimic or mirror the experience of being alive?

Given: I'm not sure of the difference.

In the fifteenth century painters discovered linear perspective—the more realistic rendering of objects as proportionately smaller with distance from the eye. With it, the visible world, rather than the ethereal and conjectural one, took center stage in European art. Now zoom out to the turn of the 1970s and the simultaneous rise of the seemingly opposed photorealist and conceptual art movements, in which creation has left the premises and the empty house plays to itself. Whether the house is thereby rendered a vessel of containment or a vehicle of vehicularity and/or if in which respective case I can't say; but in any case, the material object is replaced by mirrors and language, whose ultimate function might be the same.

Correlative *faux ami* (I know that's at least half redundant), but my birth coincided with this twin apotheosis and antithesis of representation (which's which?), and now here I am in the mirror, trying to believe that my face doesn't matter. That it exists in three dimensions but I've only ever seen it on the picture plane is a schism whose depth and capacity I only know as far as words go.

My daughter's beauty haunts me. Hers and mine don't coincide, but they do overlap—it's her eyes in the back of my head that I see in the window behind me.

Humans assume that our brains can grasp the extent of what they have access to—that if we could just perceive everything, we'd know what it consists of.

So far, the infinite and the infinitesimal are irreconcilable. Is this impasse semantic or actual?

Theory of everything: To frame is to size.

Clarification: I mean to treat the canvas.

All I need is complete scale and to see myself on it.

If there were a legal standard of ugliness I couldn't wait to meet it—the less others look my way, the more I know my eyes grow, like saucers sloshing with spilled content, all the better to see with.

(The midpoint of my life will be the midpoint of time one day. Is it ahead of or behind me?)

(Ad in the dermatologist's office: *Inject this to remove your parentheses.*)

Making mountains of mirrors, whatever I see turns to me.

Gorgon portrait: In a cramped gallery two paintings of Isabella face one another. In one she looks down into an open book, her face veiled in black net. In the other her arms are flung, spanning doorjambs, announcing, here I am!

Her museum contains 11 portraits of Isabella Stewart Gardner. At the center of the central courtyard, into which you see from every gallery, is a panoptic mosaic of Medusa, saucer-eyed, head writhing with 11 snakes.

(This is me, per usual, applying the method to itself—whether there are exactly 11 snakes I can't say.)

(I'm pretty sure there are 11 snakes!)

This is me, meeting my eyes containing my face.

As others' gazes fall away, I unpin from the wall and curl into my contents—play myself a full, hot house.

To smooth the wrinkled list with my fist, excise: At least I tried. I am only here but for my eyes.

Vents

Our dark corners no longer contain us. Don't tell the children. A brightness bears down.

I tell the children how trenches knuckle down from the ocean floor, dark water the opposite of mountains. Inside, kissing the earth's core, hydrothermal vents host colonies of creatures.

Suppose the sun died and all life on the earth's surface with it. Orange tube worms and white crabs would still wave and scud in hot currents underneath the black frozen sea.

We were in a field. Our children ran ahead, laughing, whacking tall weeds at the perimeter with sticks. Fescue and sharp thistle. Soft green timothy.

We begin to fade in the bright, thick heat. Above and all around us, two-way holes are healing.

At night, by the fire, we take turns telling made-up stories. And we talk of the vents. "There are eyeless shrimp, bumping in hot eddies."

Eyeless! We've heard of blind spiders that evolved in the dark of deep caves, but they have eyes, at least, even if useless. To adapt to a place with no light...the idea consoles us as the shadows curl in from the edges like *trompe l'oeil* wallpaper.

And still, in a lightless, even eyeless place, things have color—orange worms, white crabs. Black mats of limpets. The swaying arms of anemones are translucent, even lacking light to filter through them. To our faith in these traits we cling like limpets.

The fire subsides into low, quavering coals. We stroke the children's heads with our upper lips, push our noses in their hair. A sweet, overripe scent suffuses us.

Self-sufficiency is a sieve. You drain and leave yourself behind, thinner and more concentrated each time, free of texture and indigestible bits of spice, string and gristle.

Yes, we are making it, sandbagging our extents, adapting to the dark and mistrusting any stray forms of light. At night we gasp beneath the projected stars, whose brittle sparkle seems to fill our breathing holes.

We withdraw our heads, admire our thickening chitinous parts, are so intent on our hermitic facilities that the children worry they will forget to breathe. We leave sticky notes to remind them:

*Inhale, exhale,
repeat. Blink
if you can
blink*

There is a lot of gray area when it comes to light. Of this we warn the children. For instance, we are accustomed to calling light that is not furnished by the sun “artificial,” but many life forms create their own.

In a bioluminescent sea at night, motion lingers in lambent swashes.

The green flash at sunset is attributed to a variety of phenomena, including a “mock-mirage” effect, which is so outside-in we wish we could live in it like hothouse tomatoes.

So, there is mock-mirage light, too. Whether it’s fake or not we haven’t figured.

But we have to distinguish the different kinds, or we might find we were mistaken about everything.

Once there was weather and people just lived with it. If you were planning a picnic or an outdoor wedding, say, you’d have what was called a “contingency plan.”

The Eyewitnesses are laughing. We’ve heard this one before—dozens of times—but are no longer able to turn them off.

We fortress ourselves with blankets, but can’t help the sound, and pull the blankets aside whenever we hear mention of class-action suits that might behoove us, rare exsanguinating illnesses, and remarkable forms of extinct life.

So we teach the children to scoff and throw things at the screen. But we don’t want to break it, so replace our rougher projectiles with tissue-paper missiles we make especially for this purpose. It starts to feel like love.

Weather caused all kinds of inconveniences. Sometimes it was so cold you could see your own breath.

We grow tired and let the children nod in the glow, which begins to feel like weather. It spares us the uncomfortable reminder of our own exhalations, however.

The vents grow famous. We had thought our interest was exceptional, but the Eyewitnesses begin haunting the trenches with submersibles and so much light that we worry for the dark-dwellers, even the eyeless. And the bioluminescent—what will become of their implicit radiance?

The insistent introduced light shifts our fixation to fluorescence—the borrowed wattage of coruscating fish and brittle stars in the shallower aquatic zones. Luminous jellyfish like gibbous green moons.

In all the effulgence we grow confused, like moths bumping in a sea of porch lights. In time we trade our locked-in syndrome for Stockholm, begin a slow, effervescent ascent toward the littoral.

Some light disarms its objects.

Between the glittering pelagic and the cut-off depths of the trenches life relies on marine snow. Necrotic bits and bacteria from the teeming light-filled layers above slowly fall and nourish the inhabitants of this place between surfaces.

We can't fathom having no horizon. At night we look up and marvel at the space between stars—millions of light-years we can pinch between our fingers. This act of possession gives us hope that the children might find a way to survive there. Whether this would constitute compromise or capitulation we are not certain.

Fluorescing in the flicker from the screen, we incline our heads and catch its rotten confetti on our tongues.

...this they'd call "white-out conditions."

Whether we have walked in an actual field is neither here nor there. What's here is a dusting of digestible flakes backlit on the meniscus of the nearing surface, our gaping lips, the glowing projection we can see our heads in.

At last there is only light. Without any shadows it is difficult to see and our eyes fuzz over like milk glass. Our remaining vision consists of glints and flashes. We rely on the Eyewitnesses who assure us there's nothing to see here. We move on.

We keep our faces inclined toward the screen. The still discernible flicker of the children's faces fills us—their intellects will not want for anything in this exhaustive world.

Even a fish will not survive the sea. Here on the surface it is bright—scintillating, really—and getting brighter by the minute. We emerge from dissipating dreams of the vents. Our cataracts contain us.

Acknowledgments

Thanks and love to Mary-Kim Arnold, Darcie Dennigan, Joseph Massey, Kate Schapira, and Todd Shalom for their incisive attention to this work.

The Proof is for Elisa Gabbert.

An earlier version of *Vents* appeared in *Eleven Eleven*.

Author Bio



Kate Colby's seventh book of poetry, *The Arrangements*, is forthcoming from Four Way Books in 2018. *Fruitlands* won the Norma Farber First Book Award in 2007. She is a founding board member of the Gloucester Writers Center in Massachusetts and currently lives in Providence, where she was a 2012 fellow of the Rhode Island State Council for the Arts.



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