Versions of Now

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Robert Balun

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“Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts of the City College of the City University of New York”
"We as viewers and readers do not receive answers; instead we are implicated as accomplices in the conspiratorial search for meaning."

-Alice Fogel

“I am losing my because.
I said I was
the new species: no one.”

-Alice Notley
and remember it’s easy to

     stay suspended in

     cloud and breath
     delivered

if you make room
make empty

     don't look down

we are nowhere and it's now

I know I borrowed that

     but you said it so
     perfectly in
     the shape of

my never thrown out fantasy of
what I was

     promised I could
     imagine to become

dream enshrined

     piece of the collected
     symbol and myth

an energy that fit
in the place I left hollowed out—

from time to time
for what it’s worth
it’s worth it

and if I find you
I would promise I will tell you
remind me to consider

the landscapes I really love

and how to look for

something really worth it

doesn’t this always start with fever

drug or dream

is memory not the same

I take your story and it becomes mine

our sky hung in wrought
iron relief

we make it an artifact

no we call it a brightness

an empty we can reuse

you said you
had seven
bottles of time

I had a cigarette
a dead ship sailing your fey mouth

we look to the door for recognition

you ask if the river runs or carries
maybe sickness can be our mystery

my cup dissolves into a bubble of spectrum
I’ll bring you back some rain
in this vision of floral
    patterns / remember

to cover up what needs to be covered

a lived in diffusion
put around

your construction
    of sacred objects

    of essential motion

    resonance and recurrence—

wrapped / in a code
a pattern to keep
hidden all day
I paste petals
I put me in a keepsake
   the icon
   totem of
   your mirrored gaze

inside the skull
analogy
   ruined spacial
   echo chamber

you smell like the sunset

you smell like the dusk

I always forget
   how you fit in my hands

as this name erases the other
make it your little universe

put it in your pocket

the night hung on our heads like a bow
in the backyard shadow
I sit and listen to the
    war cries of
    the neighborhood flung
    against the looping night

the new ritual is called don’t look for the come down
there is an emergency outside
we can’t see the neighbors
but we can hear their guns

I do a version of this noise

    I call it the branch of science that studies a perfect movie
    the hero is a hero / the flag is a memorial

    let’s go get stung by bees after this
    let’s sew ourselves into the memory / a song

    you wrote / the equation of never sleeping

    a mouth blooming
    feathers plume
    tongued practice

I love you but only like a lover

I don’t want you to feel ancient

    we met in a dream bought with borrow
I do a version of this noise

I live in a house with knives
    now I’m sure it’s bones

there are no degrees of tragedy

only light leaked in
through the weak parts of skin

    a kaleidoscopic hole in my hand

    the sound of the missing never crystallized

    why is one more lost than another
    among those who have lost ahold of their dancing flowers

I swear I’m not trying to put a time in your room
bloom and bring me
ritual newness

spirit deal

I want your persona

something to put inside my organs—

the dream came rushing through the window

everything’s been all wavy since—

   did I finish telling you what I was laughing at before
all serious inside your tiny toy castle
you obscure

    a tomorrow room

understand I am the same hymnal
I give you your pilled out tension

(here) the cloud kingdom
skull city

(here) stay obtained
inside your dream
composition

your gospel
    cloud-
    watch

the projected new
body light

(here) I brought you

your favorite
sugar
water
flavor

I promise I'll bring
along the clouds of your growing up

    I promise I’ll touch

your face like a secret

all serious inside your tiny toy castle
Self (Map of a Napkin)

I follow your memory
against the busy world

push back

no we
made way
for you
made up your place for you (here) so we wouldn’t get lost

first you thought
an ocean
then you swam inside it

called it the birthplace of vessels

we haven’t become sandy beaches
we are still being worn
away
inside the surrounded by
prismatic
inflecting
morass of time
spent (here)
there is always
someone trying to get
out of the body

an ambulance drives by and the bar looks like an artery
I wake up:

and my leg hurts
the achilles specifically
I wonder if the body is finally eating itself

I drink old water
and never catch up
it pous

I switch and ask if this is the coffee
promised to us by the management
during the labor dispute

I switch to outside
smoke a compulsion
litter that piece of breath
give that part of myself back to the ground
and look for your pieces

I find it’s been years since
I’d seen you and you still have on
that army shirt
so we sat and talked about our wars
everything was a salvo
and simultaneous:

how is my missing son

I had to incorporate you

and I said fine dad

make you a thought and a motion

where are the caterpillars I sent

so we could talk again

they were supposed to keep you vibrant

like light switches
safe through the winter

and wiring connected

steady shipments of new (would-be) butterflies

I had to make lessons on the minor
timed perfectly so they’d blossom through

visions and how to find them inside

the papered-up peace—

the daily muck

a perception

how to make this place
an elysium if you’d like

(I let my body slander its shape
my limbs are yours
and we are made whole in that way

perched above
a billboard reads us
elija menos sodio
I know it is warning my health
but I don’t know what elija means
and I just keep repeating
elija elija
elija until it means anything
until it means an elysium if you’d like

until it means where
the parenthetical ends
and the interiority begins

until it answers—
when do I stop inhabiting you / when do I burst into ancient particles
when does this end
Self (Cultivate Tendency)

I linger in prayer
head bowed to the sun god

conscious effort

keep our orbits from inevitable decay

I never think about what this does to my head

the process of building or forgetting

I sink deeper into my coat
the best part of winter

fever
drug or dream

is memory not the same

a soft light diffused and bloomed—

flowered into a cup

how do you get the glass to twinkle like that
how do you get it to laugh in your hand

we ring and ring like a call to mass

a dull corona burns on the front lawn
we’ve got to get you to the coast before all the light is gone

how do you look for something really worth it

call me an augur and I’ll tell you
Self (I/II)

be careful with that brain of yours
always keeping it filled with glitter
  ideas bought

from the falling
  sea of recent data
    acclimated

though the installation doesn’t seem to be going happy
just laughing and laughing

stuck dealing with our heat
  we want motility
    we want to
meticulously dictate
  each moment of frame per second
    since the ether flooded
      this world and we called it time

no one lives there anymore

(sidewalk closed)
I died / walk close

I don’t want to melt
I watch you disappear and know I’m up to the same thing
we eat the god particle
and every second is
accessible inside
the wild lung
the breath of any
drug to feel normal
I always knew I
wanted to be a
memory but
am now just the sound of
you behind you
trying to get
closer to
the center of heat
I don’t want to impose
but I will see you in
one hundred years
after this american
century of scurry
for now I will be
washed out on the lawn
the laundry on the line
hung like prayer flags
me covered in sun
Self (Prayer)

I’m so happy I found you
/ filled with
all flavors / inside the ritual
I’ll ask you how to spell the voice /
a power resides
in its true name / but you know that
you were made / by me /
pulsed with elegy /
I snap in half / I recombine into any
shape of wonder / or
no / distraction / anyway
this prayer will dissolve
tomorrow / my tongue
long gone into /
the sweet mess of lips / of the faithful
it has always been easier
to inside the prayer
fantasy of sweet lick / remember
I want this world to be a construct-
a place where I can gather
Self (Ascension)

your soul cycle

the echo in cloud (cloud) (cloud)
bounced around
the sound of breathing through
the long days of rain

look around and make sure you have all your problems

even though I know
I know we are dreams

let’s say we are not
because I prefer the clutter

I prefer you open my mouth and pry

spin the sound into light
hear me melt inside the SMiLE

return to our primordial
residue the amino
acid soup
my cells once knew jellyfish

inside the repetitive weather
system same
same-same

let’s walk and be unhappy

circle the ghost hole

let’s smoke those

forget mechanisms
poison and wonder
be filled

with the feeling of empty

alive inside the loud
surrounded by
exactly
suddenly
now

the sea gull's scratch and caw
to garbage heaven

by the time you arrive

remember to glitter
inside the world memory
a million cloudy doppelgangers—

    I don’t know why I took the snack food with me
    I feed it to the sun
        the sky looks like drugs

my air luxurious
    cut from cloud and always new

I feel spacey and great—

I always forget everything about you
Self (Nothing That Has Happened So Far Has Happened So Far)

I guess we have ghosts now

you pour water from your bag
while I get flooded with moths
and crushed by that softest ocean

we can’t talk (here)
our speakers slowly crackle

I threw two things
two times
each made of snow and filled with shatter
waited for the breaking
to see if this was

the garden made from pillars of glass
filled with those who lost ahold of their dancing flowers

(here) the new is the endless
you have you forever like a theory or a dream

I look for something to find
left in the woods
my pockets stuffed with snow and pine
Self (Think of Distance)

rare irregular
my loveliest data cluster

my head filled with
orbits of I want

that elevated blood
like anything else I see through a window

the synopsis of
ritual filled with essentially

film exposed briefly
on a watery pane of glass

I followed a memory (here)

inside a room full of shapes
a second so small and sudden

frozen against
this epoch

touched like frost on vegetation
a flower bursting into silver linen

this dream culture is instant and old
too full of life
a flower

bursting into ribbons
and forgetting

the kind of song
you lived inside forever

your memory (here)
sonorous and ebullient

I’ll name it

a holding on
a grab at a surface

    a figure
    you want to lose yourself inside instead

(here) lamps slung up like graffiti

    sweet anxious then
    still—

    a pilled out
    blue dream

I drew

    your drawn-on
    shadow features

    my refracted tag

    set beneath the way
    the provinces are run—

    in searching plurality
    ubiquitous identity

in a prayer or a cloud

    this pretty little drunk

    an irreconcilable
    fire

too much
in the throat

    you have you forever
    like a theory or a dream
Self (Versions of Now)

I am always in the ether
always in the voluminous
cloud

each day curating
this personal museum
someplace big to sort through

with no maps
the fields are breathing

you know that I am (here) for the taking
it’s such a lovely excuse
to be nothing but distance

find me and dose me
heavy
slow
hits of gravity
it’s easy to disappear
(here)
or there
I don’t remember
exactly
I remember:
you told me an incantation:

draw breath
cover us in noise
make it loud and worship
our lives forever
until we’ve had enough
until we fall through
our punctuated timeline
sprout flowers
bursting out
buried in ecstatic descent

and all your volume
fell into me
a memory of white noise
left to be filled with stories
    each one flowering into sound
each one a version of self
    asking to be
    authentic
    and with skin

***

I pour cuts in all my smoke—
    an offering
    sunk and spectral
    all light and buried
like a piety

I sift through old coats
    full of electrons
    and technically
    mostly empty space
    I gather
    all this sentiment
(here)

again

(here) your sediment

compressed and reconstructed

to matter

one particle at a time

a memorial

***

someone wanders by with wind on their cheeks and it is almost you
Self (Here)

drifting off and out
and this will always be for the waterless

moments we were married at the spine of the world
feeling the nervous system
then scattered like electrons

to the swamp where I ate fishbones in the reeds
with magnolias leering beauty from leather escarpments

I send smoke signals
to the other mountain
between the state line

where you are cast away in ancient places
and covered with green and creeping stillness

only seeing night stitched across the fenceposts
Self (City)

it feels earlier than it is
no it feels later
let’s just say it’s never the time it is supposed to be

let’s just say I am way behind on all this new breath

let’s not say I can’t catch it
it lingers

it’s easy to disappear
(here) or there

it’s never the time it is supposed to be

I don’t remember when
  exactly

I ate the dream
  you
    left in my pocket

the luster of those years shimmering away

let’s just say I’ve never left the woods
Self (Invocation)

time moves in more than one
direction at once

happens together

an ancient
memory code

I want this
all dream
always and always
now

we absorbed
the floor with our bodies
put dust in our teeth
and mote away

the last prayer to this home

a colony collapse
in the ghost of drifting void
left by

the wake of waking

I feel like I have no time
like I need to feel it all
happen now

I don’t care what you call
this I just want it

and if time is an instance
of existence
colliding

I will keep your night on its own
cut from the ether and set like a precious stone
you’re my big idea
a neighborhood of burgeoning alcoholics
the student loan generation

it’s easy to look at other people

behind a
half smoked
unlit
cigarette—

the idea of illumination
the map from lung to heart
blood and rush

you push the idea of smoke into a
galaxy shape

we go to the bar to disappear

***

you’re my excuse

repetition makes sense

it’s easy to stay hidden
you can crack me open and play with the interior

we can trade songs in the morning
seal them inside
a sunlight totem

let the luster of our years shimmer away

***

you’re my spectral disorder
my optical malfunction

a place to be hidden and covered in light
eat paint and vomit murals
spit confetti glamor
it’s easy to look at art
I’ll promise to never be real if you will

***

we dissolve
into something larger
I’ll promise to scout a way to the rainmaking if you will
I have to remember my keys
who I am in each lock

    my mirror symmetry

    absorb today and
    pray into a cup of water

put on some noise

put some asleep inside me--

    a season made of memory

    something to put around yourself
    a task or a dream

when I find it I’ll be well wrought
and you’ll feel exactly how you are supposed to
sit across from you in twenty years
remember or project this landscape
each repetition of the same
    same hungry eyed
    happy exercise
    the myths you make to fill each day
now tell me the character of these mountains

and soon we’ll reach the other
this prayer we’ve been digging up
    that sunlight totem we left inside
you and I are entitled
to loss and be lost

in this winter draft

in the finery of machinery
the home we inherit

I’m just thinking about what I’m going to wear
to the unstable world

you cover your mouth and I
want to cover mine

because I need the echo

the painting of shadow
cast through a window

the room full of too much last night

I’ll wake up made of sand
and walk along our fragile bulwarks

hoping to hear you
sing and give me
something to cling to

a perfume cigarette
a perfume river to swim through
I’ll wake up
carved up
from the songs you’ve been singing
each note dropped and dripping
worn to
cathedral space

I keep hidden
sculpted one
memory at a time
carry this offering
this sunlight totem—
a story that goes
exactly how it is supposed to

in and then out of render
cold air compressing
smoke or song into viscous
falling through
water to
the shape of uncertainty—
a room full of green buzz
in a hotel that still smelled like smoke

on the floor of a hot summer
my idle youth washes
over and away
satiated in the feeling
of innumerable remainder
not quite wanting it to end
not quite expecting it to—

and when these days are gone
you will not remember
the feeling of never
knowing they would ever go
this is a good pill

   like walking through

   a garden of coral

for now is enough
to be unmoored

post-hope
you reach up and pluck

the sky resonates
you eat a piece of rain—

      the dream I
      left in your pocket

I defined as imaginary unit

      the desire of matter

      to be pulled back
      into ribbons of light—

it stays in you like a prize or a color
on a fake spring day
the song wavers in static and sometimes

the noise of another life
a soft dancing in another room

a two-step
you fill—

until the idea breaks down to senescence
carries the tune away

and the city is emptied
my pockets stuffed with [render]
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“all serious inside your tiny toy castle” is a phrase stolen from Eileen Myles’ *Inferno.*