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Durability of Bone

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Claremont McKenna College

Durability of Bone

Submitted to
Professor Henri Cole

by
Blake Lapin

for
Senior Thesis
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Art

Art, properly viewed, makes Death seem like that neighborhood boy
Watching over his younger sister running through the yard,
Ready to pick her up and hold her tight, should she fall,
And remind her how easy it is to stand.

Part One

Mourning in the Evening

It's your birthday so I smoke three cigarettes for you, a habit I've subdued and revive for this day as if it's a favor: one for the walk away from home, another for the field I arrive at, a final for retracing footsteps.

Your death is when someone peels an orange and the whole room is fragrant. I still haven't learned how to mourn; I have all these vignettes in my head that play and replay. I'm uncertain how they string together, when each is appropriate. None are of your overdose.

Artificial light

has trouble letting go: purgatory seconds between flipping a switch and solemn darkness. No new light flutters but the old lingers as if

needing to consider what it was

before discovering what it will be. Whenever I return home and commune with our friends, we nearly laugh through the whole dinner

before remembering why we are there.

I count my age in grief-begotten epiphanies. Which part of a past makes a person a friend? Only your girlfriend witnessed your body tremble at five in the morning. She, sensibly, thought it was an early morning shiver, a body battling away the oncoming day. I suppose it was that.

I was almost killed by an ocean wave

and am so glad I did not join you. I listen to music and compel the tears onward.

You and I brought on the rebelling age: telling and retelling our young compatriots how to smoke, what to drink in well-furnished basements, when to run from suspicious flashing lights. You are and shall remain a tempest,

hiding in the tall grass.

It's your birthday, February eleventh; the last cigarette thrown away barely finished.

I Can't Help but Observe the Roaming Gnats

Colliding above the William Carlos Williams book in my hand,

Spring and All.

Those flying friends are above the sun & skin mixture,

the meandering wind,

a meadow of paved grass.

Today, like every day, you remain a plum,

weeks from turning.

I wonder where your ashes coalesce with the soil

and how you know this ripe brightness.

Petrichor, Midnight

Basement full of bodies,
Something missing:
Our childhood friend,
And he's skipped (selfishly)
2 years of our lives,
Simply refusing
To ask permission
No matter how many of us demand
Consultation before departure.
We plummet during our last drink
Of the night, ruminating on *Mike's Hard*,
Fireball, *Vanilla Coke*.
Is our friend,
Who is our past and our learning,
A mere collection of brands,
3 a.m. tears, and suburbia's petrichor?
Is that how I summarize my childhood
& teenhood? This whole adult thing is a myth—
I've just become accustomed to grief
And tender silence.

Come Home for Dinner

Reflecting on your death,
In this foreign country,
I compare dinners.

I, too, must be
home for dinner, as
you, in our childhood,
were required. They
wait for me: demand
this one small demand
to feed me full. As
you, once, needed to
be home for dinner and
fed full. Goodbye,
my friend. We who remain
will eat at *Dominos* or
Taco Bell, maybe order in
so the video games
are fresh. You'll return,
hungry again, for you
were full before the meal,
having eaten *Kraft Mac*
& *Cheese*, *Nacho Doritos*,
and *Vanilla Coke*.

I, personifying you,
eat before the meal: *Chitato*
Potato Chips because they
treat me so nutritious,

my host family.

I must (*harus*) defile myself,

As you defiled yourself.

First with food. Then

with treats more tasty. You

walked our streets, our

teenage streets, chips

and soda in hand, before

coming home for dinner

and returning to the night,

hungry for no vegetables,

no force-fed diet. I call

Father, "I am coming home

now, sorry," (*Bapak, "saya*

datang sekarang. Maaf.")

I spoiled my dinner

but still eat the sticky

rice, the fried bananas,

the cucumber. I drink

black tea to wash

it all down.

This Hour

After a poem by Li-Young Lee

This hour is 5 a.m. and my friend is dead of an overdose.

This hour is noon and what is alive is each one of our moments
moving quickly enough to outrun forgetting:

The blunt wrap cups tobacco and marijuana.

We are in your trap-garage, fitted for the movement
and consumption of storytelling and silence.

There is a cardboard-covered table where games occur.

Two metal lawn chairs serve as goal-posts,
a love seat and Chevy Volt are sideline bleachers.

I am red-faced, birthing tears

and the sound of strangulation, it's been 7 hours since your exit.

It's a Vermont stone road:

2 p.m., two boys each with a thumb up,
too young to even drive themselves.

You take with you certain lightness

that lifted our faces when plans were unfinished
but had already begun:

Plastic sled melded to a Jeep with twenty feet of rope.

Snow canceled school, started the car, *we* are in session.

The moment was even light when the car turned too quickly,

Trailing sled hit a light post, so driver and rider traded positions.

This hour is midnight, 5 hours before your death.

I imagine your girlfriend lecturing you.

You feel soft; the entire world is soft.

I remember you telling me that's what the high is like.

She is saying: "Why are you nodding off?" and

"Where did you get it?" and "Are you high again?"

And you, high, answer in the verse of Gwendolyn Brooks:

"Naw girl/ we real cool/ we skip school/ we real cool."

And somehow your verse is persuasive.

This hour is one week after you leave, Saturday morning.

Gravity holds in place my miss, her hurt, and the funeral home floor's wet splotches—
only in spots.

This hour is sometime in the evening.

I just got my license and I'm borrowing my mother's car.

I don't tell you I'm coming over, I just arrive.

The windows are open and we have two more to pick up.

We take the long way along Highland Road.

We'll get a view of the city and I can drive faster. Windows are down.

It's winter. I look at you instead of the road.

I see you without time.

This is the hour no one is dead; we are young and everlasting.

Part Two

What is Tender

What is tender is so easily broken and turned coarse:

raw chicken that is chopped and then fried,

washed kale that is oiled and then baked,

that thing of mine that was once yours.

Raunchy Love Poem

I've never outgrown the glee of neglecting authority. That's what it feels like to lock the door and begin to pull hair. To descend or ascend into grabbing waist. To take a face and hold it so desperately near my own. To, organically, throw or be thrown, by the chest, to some unexplained corner of the room. But, that exuberance and flushed color quickly fades, like fall into winter.

Tonight, tea steams on a tile coaster above the linoleum table.

The placid steam seems to smirk at the locked Schwinn bike, two Adirondack chairs, a folded tarp: all objects outside the window subjected to winter's sediment and sentiment. How I resemble that formless steam; we watch her who brought the chamomile tea, who caused our boiling incipience, and wait for her to take a sip. From another part of my interior, I laugh at all those beyond the living room who may not delight in this indelible silence. I want only the courage to confess that I am not whole to this woman

whose name

returns to me each day.

Sharing a Meal

Green curry

Sits

Between us.

You speak in

Thai

To the waiter and

I am overcome.

A stilted

Plank of wood, the Berlin Wall,

Separates you from me.

We are high,

Hungry,

Wanting a subterranean tryst

And the food that is arriving,

which will sit

beside our

Thai iced tea

Coloring the table

Like a still life.

Donuts

We (you & I) play a baleful game:
watching ash rise
in the ashtray,
paying attention to the ratio of ash & filters
; to the ratio of laughter & silence.
We like to cater to its intestines, peered through the glass.
We measure liminality
: air & smoke, burning & burned.

Vestigial plant & paper
Gather in the vessel.
We are reminded how difficult it is
to distinguish filters
from bottle caps
within a bloated mason jar
chosen at random.
And after the brimming
of waste over vessel,

there is only one aspiration—
donuts creamed and glazed,
to celebrate
an evening untarnished,
thinking of crust sweetening, crumbling glaze
, and soft interior.

Opining

I return and am uncertain
What brings me back.
Masculinity? Malice?

Maybe it's something
Inherent in ordering,
In the structure of events,
In the structure of time,
In droplets of rain.

It must be something about masculinity.
It must be something about malice.
I remember but only slightly:
A bird from an entire day,
A face from an entire night,
A woman from an entire past.

There are tracks
Where there was once rain
& pavement,
Where there is solid, liquid, no viscosity.
I turn around to see
The imprints. Memory
Of seeking *bonhomie*.

I bring groans like
Before or after kissing.
Like slow ventilation,
Homeostasis.

Foreigner in a bed,
Gradual irregularity.

Of ears & neck,
Of ankle & heel,
Of someone just young enough
To stain another.

These bodies, quilted & patched
Upon a visage,
Upon a frame.

I hold them,
Weigh my resolution.

Before Saturday Brunch in the Summer

Ink ruins her toes.

Left ankle tucks under right
revealing the under toe
to him who lies on the couch,
pen in hand,
slouched horizontally
adjacent to the woman
whose outstretched toes
gather on the coffee table.

He plucks two dots and draws a curved line (a makeshift smiling face),
a perseverance to illustrate joy,
on her big toe.

The ink runs dry after the two dots,
so he licks the ballpoint pen's summit before again striking.
Repeatedly dabbing the pen's tip on his tongue's pallet
and returning to her toes.

After he finishes the big toe, he moves one down the line,
his left-hand thumb and index finger holding the foot steady.

She feels the edge of his palm against her foot.
She is only knitting.

A third is at the door, ready to accompany him and her to brunch.
The three leave and the toes stay pickled.

Tongueless

He sits in class alone but for peers,
Yens for one of the women to be abrupt,
To take his hand as if she *spills* into it,
To look impulse in the eye and smirk.

He would press his forehead to the table,
Contextualize his hand,
As Milton does Satan, and imagine
How it's sealed against the air—

Front-and-back— by table and meat.
His not-hand flesh becomes carnage,
He's struck by its weight.
He is only hand and carnage that is body.

He wonders if she, too, feels the dichotomy
Of hand and carnage, of rampant juxtaposition,
Of the body beside, of beholding,
Of mutuality, of pores, of object, of forfeit.

Part Three

On Being & Body

*No noise, I say to myself, no noise
no noise, no noise. I clasp my ears
closed. Quiet. You are hearing too
loud. Javanese karaoke is 30 meters
away, or is that the call to prayer?
I'm learning Indonesian, nearly conver-
sational. I study by the sea and will never
know its lapping tongue. Maybe
it's the sound of face-planting into it.
But what sound is that? My body erupting
surface tension, like a super bloom?
Airborne water meeting the wind?
The sough of meeting one's self after a
journey? Perhaps the carbonizing air
in my lungs deep. Maybe my shoulders
shimmying through waves like salty vinaigrette.
Either the sea is reacting with itself, or I am
reacting with myself. Innards are so loud
considering their suffocation. I would
feel more comfortable in this body if
it was non-present. If I didn't have an
aura. If my soul didn't move things.
That's the only way to quiet these sounds
which only I self-consciously imagine:
feet on sand, denim pants on leather seat,
tires on grass. Don't cry for me.
I've finally realized my only wish
is to watch and be thankful.*

Humans and Their Creations

If extraterrestrial beings arrived in Kansas at this very moment,
 blasting *Fords* and *John Deeres* out of their way,
 just for the theater of it all,
 I would hope they stop a moment at a museum—
 the Guggenheim, MOCA, the Broad—
 in a semblance of human form,
 and listen to conversation during reprieve of destruction.

They could hear praise, and awe, and so much quiet.

 They would perhaps hesitate
 long enough to start a conversation of their own,
 staring at a Giacometti or Rembrandt.

 Become bored in the presence of some and,
 at others, emotional.

 At day's end, each may choose a favorite.

They would see hands clasped or resting on collar bones, mouths forgotten.

 Our Green Friends would hear gasps
 before they have even begun killing
 or seeming like ones who will, inevitably, efficaciously, kill.

“We have translated each language and these softly uttered reactions are unintelligible,”
 they complain, and their intensions pause,
 becoming restless and cute.

In Baltimore

They are up all night— giving and taking pleasure. They ride their motorcycles up and down the streets awaiting morning but thinking they are only running in the night, not towards anything but within. They drink until there is no more to drink and walk long after, when the birds wake and green sparks through the black. Not a sharp tortuous green but a green that platforms all other greens, a type of quiet and ubiquitous green, a green that welcomes the day, their beds, and the proximity of sleep.

One Finite Body

Frustrated from his life in the city,
 he sojourns to the mountain.
The man walks the switchbacks,
 hip to subtle hip of mountain,
and feels the strain of climbing
 cause each leg to split into two,
and then four. He distinguishes
 calf from tibia, thigh from femur.
He trips on a root, catching himself
 with a pushup. Shoulder pulls
against its blade, pectorals
 tug against sternum.
Coming to his knees, anger rushes,
 and he is unsure why.
He pummels the pinecones, the decay,
 autumn.
His fingers become tendons and ligaments.
 He is nuclear: one object divided
into encumbered parts.
 Fingertip skin sliced so blood releases.
Bark and branch and ant stick
 to palm. Mountain begins to share.
He wipes vestigial life into cheek,
 heartbeat a rhythmic pace setter.
Once at the peak, he listens to the joints
 in his fingers creak closed.
His muscles ornament his bones. Identifying a breath,
 he uses it to sing.

Cathedral of Saint John the Divine at 110th and Amsterdam

High, smelling dank of weed and ambivalent towards the whole project of religion, two summer men enter the cathedral.

It towers in its grandiosity. They knew nothing of the expanse. The church ran out of money and left the 38-meter spire an unpaved, unbricked, unpainted gathering of God.

They stand underneath and look up, seeing nothing but expanse. They have never before seen such a quantity of black ascending. They are unsure which planet they're on, somewhere before or after perdition.

The men attempt to view the sparse historical exhibits around the circumference: latent information they didn't know or now know or want, perhaps, to sometimes know. But still, they keep returning to the incomplete center.

"Saint John," one says, I'm sure you are Divine but not as Divine as this cathedral; this specific love is clandestine.

Crypts cover one of the walls, each a square foot. Notes jammed in the clefts, from the living on Earth to the living elsewhere, mimicking the Western Wall. One message has fallen, open, to the ground, "I miss you. I will see you again in the place with no eyes."

One of the men sees the message. He wonders what kind of place prohibits its inhabitants eyes. "How wonderful!" He exclaims, in the cathedral. There would be no reason to stare blankly up, no questioning expanse, no way to know the vastness is vacant.

Shocked at their near religious conversions, they reunite with the fluorescent outside universe.

Wading Through Troy

“When I was working at the Bank of New York Mellon...”

I see the bottom of his polished *Santoni*'s.

“I focused more on what my coworkers didn't say
Than on what they did say
In the meetings with the head honchos,

The big guns,
The merger and acquisition team,
This is in 2008, of course,” his nostalgia shines.

I think of Seneca referencing Virgil's Aeneas,
Overanalyzing danger
While carrying his father

Through the battle of Troy,
Saving his patriarch from becoming gore—
Muddied and red.

Aeneas is not a coward.
He is courageous;
He is thrill-seeking.

It's the 170 lbs of meat he carries—
This increased awareness, this fear,
The potential energy for loss.

I peer again at the banker's soles:
My father's shoes.
I wonder what he carries

through the sacked city of Troy.

A Sentimental Moment from a Suicidal Afternoon

The story was told
By how the man
Walked.
Expediently.
Refusing to stop
He hopped the fence,
Scaled the park,
And reached the bridge's precipice.

He did
However
Reach out his hand
As he walked by me
To feel
The leaves
On the elm.

That coarse, pinnate leaf,
the reminder, the whole universe,
simplified in a pattern
would never dissuade
his resolute leap.

Yes, a Reflection on the Word & Concept

Say *Yes* once and without refrain.
Someone rub it on my back in places
I can't reach,

like lotion after a shower
runs too hot.
Yes floats.

Happenstance keeps it light,
just dense enough not to sink,
just dense enough for me to take it,

to lift it from the water in cupped hands,
to paste it to my lips,
to learn how it was formed,

to create it each and every day,
each and every hour,
mutilating it, asking it for favors.

Glue my fingers together with it
so it stays awhile, so I may make a mess
of myself. And hold another culpable.

While it's here, I repeat it on top of bodies,
one more substance I can mold.
Yes, we say once and without refrain.

Throw it on one another, catch it and drop it,

carry it in our palms, place it in our mouths,
give way to laughter, to more *Yes*.

Part Four

Defenseless

A primitive and ancestral calling, barely defensible, invoking the word “sea” in a poem.
 Still, I do not know my own intensions when using this word or its synonyms.
 Professor asked me what was at stake in one such poem, written in third person.
 I, like a shirt rinsed in a foreign hostel’s sink, am wrung dry for an answer.

The salt water collects itself in a wave from the shallows of beach. The sandy seabed clears,
 leaving translucent the smooth and matte stones, indistinguishable grains of sand,
 pallid feet digging in. Rising is a wall of momentous weight: four five six feet high.
 Truth, usually so simple to avoid, accompanies this juxtaposition. The wave, the sand,
 both indifferent to the potential carnage between them.

Finally, a force I can’t persuade,
 no matter my plucking observations and coy exploits.

Only a plummeting to the surface
 just left abandoned and exposed.

The Ocean Wave Came

before he could prep his bags,
before he could get a headcount,
before he could count to five Mississippi,
he was submerged, directionless,
knowing the boulder he was clinging onto
would be his pacifier
and reveal the durability of bone.

In the Hospital

Mother sleeps below the portrait of a heron
ankle deep in light green water.

The TV sings something about upcoming elections,
tame sea can be seen from the window.

My leg hurts, but I'm no longer screaming,
clutching my femur, like a terrier acting dead, in my palm.

Friends are on their way over, probably driving the I-10 to the I-5.

I only relay the most poignant facts
from this corrupted (codeine, morphine, ketamine)
stillness & reflection.

Am I my only witness?

7 a.m.

I examine the marble counter as I do many objects:
As if we've conspired together.
I've constructed the perfect machination,
Palms behind me on the bathroom sink,
My triceps lifting my whole frame into the air,
My newly developed core bringing both legs high
To sit on two inches of marble, a suspended scale and
Trace the opening of my pant leg around my right leg,
The one that can bear no weight,
Next my left leg,
Measuring the slow release of weight from my bottom
To my triceps, to my abdomen.
I press my left leg to the ground
And pull my pants high,
Hanging from mid thigh, to my waist.
Once again, I have dressed
And tired for the day.

“Writing and Reading and Eating A Lot,”

I assure my mother,
And oh, I am lonely,
I want to addendum,
but how can she respond?
The sun will rise
in just a few hours.

College Peers See Me & Say

“sorry” &

“can’t believe you’re still here, sticking it out.”

The sun shines, as it must. Praise.

Books abundant in bags,

stuffed between sentences spoken & no, I disagree.

I am unafraid of living

with a limp.

I use a walker,

need help carrying dirty dishes to the sink

& filled glasses to the table

but will not shy away from re-organization:

plotting time to dress,

hobbling around the room in search of some trinket.

New Paltz, New York is for Rock Climbing

The shirtless monkeys and apes screaming for height
And muscular liberation.
Each climb as if a single fluent yawn.

Now, I can't risk a fall's impact on my titanium leg.
I've returned with five suburban friends,
Car laden with *Costco* incongruities,

We snack on brie, crackers, honey crisp apples.
This entire evening is ours.
These friends, my brothers and sisters,
For which we have shared ten years— ages twelve to twenty-two.

I spend pensive hours these days— reading poems, journaling, watching
Documentaries, mixing colors in drawing attempts— avoiding the burden
Of being a helped man crutching through streets.

Tito's Vodka is on the table and some doubt we will finish it all.
I drink, for I may not climb. It's not quite as exhilarating
Yet, with the loud music, the elevated value of each moment,
The enumerable reasons for laughter, I gain an excuse to yell just as loud,
Find my human in the air.

I Took a Step with No Crutches

I was exalted,
For no one was around
To pity this wide smile.

Especially Now

This human form is divine.
I lay myself outright on the lawn
And let each distinction bulge,

Trace a finger around my obliques, my triceps, my pectorals.
Pink and white clefts remain on the skin.
What part of this trauma will scar?

That ocean wave has not so completely vanished.
It's akin, maybe, to a rat's lasting decision years ago
To sneak into the heating oven
As my mother began baking dinosaur chicken nuggets,

In a tiny New York City apartment:
She, my mother, opened the tempered glass door
To find it too fried to lament.

Part Five

Generation Speak

I naturally prefer new
To old
And ask the walls,
Stone that was once boulder,
If it's a fault.
I raise my hand
To the cement cleft
Separating one carved block
From another.
No, I suppose.
What's old is often and especially
Brilliant
Before the touch, the asserted agency,
The taking
Which is so often excluded
From the eulogy.
I will appreciate the word
Long before
The poem,
The mother
Before the son.

Cold Cuts

Cooking in this suburban house requires no open flame,
No sputtering oil, no singed knuckle,
Just the pressure of pushing the toaster on.

It demands the will to cleave turkey kin apart.
Tendrils hug together
And I resist the magnetism, tell it no;
Tell it it's here for me;
Tell it it's mine.

The cheese submits, supplicates itself
As a complement would. The turkey fights.
Maybe my role is gruesome;
Maybe I'm attracted to the turkey's resistance;
Maybe I want to build an appetite.

Maybe I remember the audible loudspeaker,
Half-static, half-oration. Before words are spoken
Each and every head spins on its axis,
Primed as they were the day before.
Again? Mrs. Murphy asks me.

She, I, the whole class knows I've been
Delivered lunch
As it has been announced for retrieval.

I'm allergic to cafeteria food, is all.
My mother sleeps late, is all.
I cook like her, is all.

I tear slice from parted slice,
Wrap it in cheese, name myself full,
Cook for my mother, as she once cooked for me.

“The Semites Destroyed the Sumaritans Sometime Between 5000 BC and 3000
BC”

“The Aztecs were permitted to practice artistry for a thousand or so years
Before facing any imperial threat,” I read.

Stella, my Yorkshire terrier, is gold, silver, black in her hue.

She lies on my lap and she’s smiling,

Tongue out &

Content.

She, I, a sun bloating the grass, the suburban porch,

The mint leaves and basil practically

Embracing.

“Stella,”

She peers up. Eyes black and nearly closed.

“Did you know boats were first created in the Mediterranean?”

There was hardly wind

So all the boats used only oars.”

She doesn’t care &

I love her for that.

My shirt is off and there is still reticent yoke on the corner

Of my mouth where lips meet.

Salt and pepper wafts.

The book on my knees is heavy and it protects me as armor

Blankets a knight.

“Hm, Stella

Look at this,

Those rowboats were used in the North for Atlantic Travel because the adventurers
Didn't yet know the efficacy of sails."

Stella leaps from my lap, walks as she always has,
A hop with her front leg and follows with her back two.
She trails through the grass, head bent and curious.
A cardinal or two pass us.

Ars Poetica: Chasing a Poem Down the Hall

Our dalliance is aubade. It exists temporarily,
As I am trying to detail what they are,
How they interact with air and carpet and teak doors
They pass. They are wearing a backless dress.
The world is split in two: back and air
That is not back. The details I don't record now
Will stay unrecorded. I am locking each thought,
Each impression with the ring of truth,
Into a vault. There is no thing of fact, truth
Has transcended such a concept.

I am so damn intrigued I cannot stop
Following them through this ornate hallway.
I cannot discern if we are in an office building
Or a manor. I arrived late to the party. I was deciding
Who I should pretend to be my whole drive over.
The best part about knowing nobody is not knowing
Any body. Before I made a decision,
I arrived and before I came upon
An identity to don, they were taking my hand,
Leading me away from the rest. This
Is why I call the act of writing an act of
Following. I am holding their hand and it is

Particularly warm. The longer we walk,
The more I can discern the features of my guide.
Their scent is petrichor. Their gait is all in
One stroke, a wolf cascading forward, four
Legs compressed first then lunging for unpawed

Land. This masked guide is wearing heels
 But seems barefoot. Their step
 Is gentle. Although we walk on carpet they walk
 Like they respect the wooded ground, the eroding
 Life. I am scared. I want neither to turn away,
 Nor to arrive at our destination.

The hallway ends, timely. I'm panting. They turn
 Around, facing me, and step away from the door.
 I take their place, try the handle, and it unlocks. "After
 You, Poem." I hold it open. They grin and
 Enter. I follow as I have been, as I've been trained.
 There is a couch, as I knew there must be, and
 A pot of tea with two cups. It is caffeinated; we have
 Much to speak about. There will be no sleeping.
 I tell them all I've noticed, all I've felt on the
 Journey: tattooed back, fragrant instep,
 Wolfishness walk. I sip tea, cross my legs,
 Say *please*. They laugh as one laughs
 When one relearns oneself. When another
 Speaks of a *seeming*, and they unhinge their mouth:

Constructs an *are*, builds an *am*. I enter their critique
 Into my vault. They appreciate my thoughts, but
 Some err, how can we make a conception *whole*?
 We sit up all night, drinking
 Chai tea, tea tea, crafting a body.

Far away, down many corridors, perhaps in a manor or
 An office building miles away,
 People populate a party, glance at one another,

Afraid to take the other's hand.
Instead they make noise, chatter.

Gratitude

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