

Academic Desires

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My German, a philosopher
who once, in casual conversation
heard me say “cock” and I imagined
he enjoyed my mouth
as I said it, so
I said it again.

He wore too short pants, too
tight, too pleated, and laughed
a comic book laugh, but I imagined
an expletive
ripped from his lips: the things
I could make him say.

He wrote, “in a different universe ‘Aschenella’ might have been translated
as ‘Cinderputtel.’ And maybe that would be a better world than our own.” Who knows
what he meant. I wanted him
to teach me proper nouns – here,
and here, and
This.

*

*Each and every
semantic exchange, be it
in the same language and
even among intimates –
perhaps most sharply there –
comports a more or less conscious, a more
or less labored,
process of translation.ⁱ*

*

In college, the hot new professor
formed a study group on the nature
of desire. We breathless, she sexless
as a blade, anorectic, layered,
those glasses old-fashioned hipster. We waited
for her to say
what we danced around, with the charm

of undergraduates everywhere:
forbidden words, uncommonly dirty, swathed
in the moist cocoon of academic enquiry, of intellectual
curiosity. She knew, it was all curiosity
of a sort. "Isn't the problem," she said,
that we want to talk about *fucking*?" That emphaticism, that
bravado.

*

All my *my's* premature, transparent; desire suggests
but does not denote ownership. Our desires
are always fictions.

*the making of love
is a making
of words and syntax*

this esoterica
this obsolete arcadia
a cartography of not-lovers

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My half-Jew
met me, half-drunk,
at the door, "Did you come over
to sit on my face?" But no,
I was there for the dog
and directions about ear ointment, and its tells. He tells
me about his grandmother, her feigned
heart attack each night during Leno, explains
the differences between reform and orthodox. I am
a Midwestern girl, unschooled.

We watched an Israeli movie, a
dark-eyed actress with impossible legs, gratuitous
sex, and land
on a theological question. He pauses,
and we read
the story of Martha and the unnamed woman. We never finish
the movie.

*

Desire remains truer than memory.

Desire is a persistent othering.

If I were one for pillowtalk, I'd say, "Language constitutes reality in an obvious way: it provides some terms and not others with which to talk about the world."ⁱⁱ

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My last week in England, I have lunch
with my Brit handyman (*my* in the sense he changed
my lightbulbs, oiled door hinges, rewired the bell), his northern accent
unhearable. I'll catch a ride
with the bloke I am sleeping with (someone else's *My*), and he shows
early, worried
I will sleep with this one. He has no right; I have
no right. My recollected
luggage in the backseat, he'll spend the night, and see
me off.

*

Eros, you strange creature
widow-webbed
hoar-frosted. Beauty
only in danger, decay –like writing
this poem, this (almost) naming.

"I" and "thou" are facts of syntax.

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There is a [you], let me address [you], finally –

I keep you

scar tissue, layer
upon layer, strong
and ugly.

Speck of dirt, rattletrap, sliver of bone
mollusking inside me, cancer cell,
I do dream of you
but will not tell. One day,
you will disappear, wrenched open and away
with a knife, biopsied, or passed

with the private fanfare of a kidney stone –
and [I] will feel better.

ⁱ all italicized lines from Steiner, “The Tongues of Eros”

ⁱⁱ *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin