

Paraphrase on the Sighting of a Bird

Yaniya Lee

to accompany

Beth Collar

The Unforgiven

8 Oct - 19 Nov 2022

at Sundry, London

For “The Unforgiven”, Beth Collar has made a series of drawings on a set of seven plaster livers. When we talked, early on in her making, we discussed haruspicy, the ancient art of reading the entrails of animals – commonly livers – to divine the will of the gods; augury, the study of the behaviour of birds for omens; Gabor Maté, the Hungarian-Canadian trauma specialist; Thoth; hawks; the downtrodden; the unforgiven, and this one pterodactyl from the German artist Max Klinger’s ten -part etching series, “Paraphrase on the Finding of a Glove” (1877-1878).

Beth also told me she was searching through images in her old notebooks. Thinking of Beth’s larger body of work and researching all these components together, I began writing, and what I ended up with, in lieu of a traditional exhibition text, was the following short story, written in conversation with this exhibition but by no means meant as a deciphering key for it. If anything, the character in this story occupies the negative space of “The Unforgiven.”

Paraphrase on the Sighting of a Bird

by

Yaniya Lee

Cold Bath (i)

I have seen the bird several times throughout my life and it is only now, this last time, that I finally know what it means. Of course too late for it to matter, for fates can neither be changed, nor avoided.

I first saw the bird when I was a little girl in Germany. My earliest memories are from an orphanage in Saxony, when I was old enough to walk but not yet able to speak. I remember the heat of the fire in the kitchen, and the smell from the spitting cauldron that bubbled over it. I remember walking through the cool mist over the field to feed the pigs at dawn.

The room for bathing was on the very top floor of the orphanage. On the afternoon of my arrival, they set me up in a hot bath, speaking to me in German, which I did not yet understand. They left me alone and I just sat there till the water got cold. I did not move. I was scared in that big room and scared in the water, scared of their large faces, ears and hair tucked away out of sight. My teeth chattered and my limbs shook, but I didn't get out. I stared up at the windows and the snatches of blue sky beyond. A bird came and perched on the sill. It had an iridescent sheen and seemed to be looking right at me.

Next thing I knew I was swathed in wool blankets in the dormitory downstairs. I must have passed out. As the nun leaned down to touch my forehead I saw a bird at the window behind her, and knew it was the same one from upstairs. They told me later that I almost died. Almost.

Hard Floor (ii)

When I was twenty, my boyfriend beat me so badly I almost lost an eye. If you look closely, you can see how my left lid droops slightly more than the other. I had left the orphanage and found my way to Leipzig, whose population had recently quadrupled, and where the architectural aftershock of an industrial boom had given rise to new buildings all over the city. After a decade in the orphanage, I had developed the robust idiot

confidence of someone who has survived. I had never been to the city and everything there was wonderful to me, from plain street lamps and concert halls to botanical gardens and museums.

I was brave and naïve. I had no parents; there were no expectations of me: I was free. I quickly found a family with a group of street urchins who occupied the second story of an abandoned foundry by the central train station. I could read, which was my contribution to the group. Some of us begged on the street. Antje, who had a beautiful voice, sang by Augustusplatz, the main square. The dishwashers in the area sometimes set aside leftovers for us outside their kitchen doors. If the rats and mice didn't get there first, it was a decent meal.

I met Louis at a figure-drawing class where I worked as a model. I would lay naked on a platform, surrounded by concentric circles of easels for three long hours and earn enough money to buy drinks for all my friends. Louis, wearing a long black moleskin jacket and good leather boots, would show up and hang around after class. He sold laudanum and other substances of pleasure that could be difficult to come by to the would-be artists who peaked out shyly at me from behind their easels.

Almost immediately after meeting him I moved in with him to the rooms he occupied on the other side of town near the Rosenthal park. He brought me anything I asked for. I was never hungry or cold. After the orphanage, and the foundry, this life seemed luxurious, more than I deserved or could have imagined for myself. He loved me, he said, and the best way he could take care of me was if I stayed home where he would always know where I was. This was ok for a while, but I soon missed the warmth of my friends and started going to see them again. This is when the other side of Louis made itself known.

One night, coming home from a concert I had gone to with my friends, I was singing softly to myself as I walked through the illuminated circles beneath the row of street lamps along my path. A bird with a silvery, iridescent plumage appeared and hopped alongside me. Over and over it

followed me into the dark and back into the light. I was so lightheaded I hadn't the capacity to think how unusual this was. I got back to the apartment, fumbled with my key and stepped through the door. I felt the ground beneath me before I registered the blow that dropped me there.

Louis began to kick me and as he did I curled up into a ball and my eyes focused and unfocused on a bird perched on the windowsill. It was the bird from the park. I felt grateful for its presence. I concentrated on the two little holes on its beak, the wings of white and dark grey feathers were folded across its back, and the white triangle at the top of its chest. The bird never took its eyes off me, and I kept looking back at it, doing my best to shut everything else out, until I passed out from the pain.

Peace Solitude (iii)

When I was thirty, I went looking for my parents. I lived in the countryside manor of a baron who had taken me as a companion. He travelled frequently and whenever he was gone, my friends from the city would come stay in the house. On one of his trips, the baron overheard that they were shutting down the orphanage where I had been raised, and he offered to try and retrieve my paperwork and track down my birth parents. I had never allowed myself to think openly or hopefully about finding my parents. The men he hired were only able to find the name of the woman who had dropped me off when I was a child, and her location in an asylum outside of Leipzig. She was probably my mother, but they had no evidence to confirm it.

When I went to the asylum to see her, I met a frail woman with a vacant stare. She did not seem to know me. I knelt in front of her and explained who I was, and why I had come. I was certain she could hear my voice, but her expression remained blank. Her silence was like a dagger. I got up and started to leave. She pointed at me then and said: "Your father abandoned me. It was his idea to have a child. I wanted peace, solitude, and to be able to think. All that is denied to women. I wanted to come to terms with

myself, with life, but I couldn't. I only wanted my own life. I never wanted to be a mother.”

Back at the manor, I sank into an overwhelming lethargy. I took to bed and stayed there. My limbs became so heavy that the slightest movement took great effort. They thought it was melancholia, but they were wrong. I didn't really feel anything at all. After a while my friends stopped coming by to check in on me. The baron was away more and more frequently.

A single clear desire pierced through the numbness: death would be a simple end to this awful stasis. The bird appeared then, and this time I recognized it. It came back, day after day and sat on the windowsill, as it had at Louis's, and at the orphanage. The window was tall and faced south, so in the evening I could see the setting sun on the forest beyond. The bird never came in, just paced back and forth along the windowsill. It watched me. I watched it back—the tufts of feathers protecting the tops of its reptilian legs, the tiny little claws on its feet, the jagged way its head moved. This interest was novel to me after the numbness I had felt for so long, and it was the beginning of my recovery.

Divination (iv)

I recovered shortly after and found the baron had taken up with my old friend Antje. I didn't care. I had become obsessed with birds. I took off back to the city and found a set of rooms in the narrow streets of the old town. I sold my clothes or my jewellery whenever I needed money.

I felt strong and capable and content. I did not have a family - no children, no husband, and though it set me apart from others, I preferred it this way. I started to seek out people who claimed to be able to read prophecy. I believed that the bird was an omen, and I wanted to learn more. One man's name came up again and again. He was said to be familiar with many divinatory practices. I went to see him.

The Schrebergärten where he lived was a large, maze-like community garden of cosy beds and tool shacks. His was a small house on a plot near the edge of the grounds. It was June, almost harvest time, and the long days seemed to bleed into the nights. I knocked on the door and a voice called to me from within.

Inside it was dark. My eyes adjusted and I made out the silhouette of an old man by a hearth. He was wearing moccasins and a tunic with long sleeves that covered his hands.

It's taken you a long time to come. His voice sounded like it was being squeezed out between two soft things.

You knew I was coming?

He nodded.

Do you know why I've come?

He shrugged. He stood up and invited me to follow him back outside. We sat facing the small plot, a long skinny rectangle with a row of trees on one side and hedges on the other. From inside his tunic, the old man pulled out an oval object with a mound-like protrusion covered in tiny marks. He put it in my hand and began to tell me the story of his life.

When he was a boy in Volterra, Tuscany, his parents sent him to a monastery where a friar taught him the Etruscan discipline of reading animal entrails. The practice had originally been developed to understand the plans and desires of the gods, but that had changed by the time he learned. What they taught him were ways of reading omens and discerning prophecies.

He left the monastery and moved to Rome, where he became a stone mason. He travelled north, into the Germanic regions. He worked in Graz and Salzburg and ended up in Konstanz, at the Bodensee. That's where he started noticing birds, and how they had the capacity to be prophetic.

He took the object from my hands and slipped it back into his pocket.

Look up, he said.

At that moment a bird was soaring by in the open sky above us.

He told me he had arrived in this region because he followed a bird from Italy. When he started really seeing them, and watching them move, he saw birds everywhere. The bird he followed had dark grey plumage and a white triangle under its chin. As he went on describing it something clicked.

That's the bird I've been seeing! I said.

Oh, he seemed startled. More than once?

Three times that I remember, I said. And the last time it stayed with me for a long time.

He asked me what the bird was doing when I saw it, and I explained the appearances, what it looked like and how it had behaved.

What does it mean? I asked. Is it coming to tell me I am going to die?

No! he said. It's so much more complicated than that.

...

Some time after I met the old man, I was contacted by an attorney who informed me I was to receive a small inheritance from my father's estate. I had never known who my father was. He seemed to have been able to find me so easily, and yet had never contacted me. I was angry, but I took the money anyway and enjoyed the independence it afforded me.

I bought a building in the centre of Leipzig, rented out the front shop,

and made a space in the back where people came to see me for guidance. The old man had shown me augury and other forms of divination. And alongside what I learned from him, I taught myself new things, different methods that allowed me to read a wider variety of omens. Objects, creatures, and other matter are all prisms through which to read omens. I came to understand that divination is a practice defined by how you see, not what you see.

Open Field (v)

This morning at dawn, I came by train to the outskirts of Puchauer Wald, a forest a few hours from Leipzig with stunning birdlife. Since I met the old man, all those years ago, I have come here once a year to observe. I wandered for hours and then I tripped and fell and badly injured my leg. I am not so young anymore; my body isn't as resilient as it once was: I haven't been able to stop the bleeding. I'm propped up against a tree, near a clearing. I tried crawling but it's too painful. I feel myself coming in and out of consciousness.

I open my eyes and notice the bird that has been coming to visit me throughout my life stepping back and forth, about 10 feet away. I take in the familiar iridescent dark-grey plumage. Its small black eyes on me as it paces. I know what it means now, but it is too late. I can't bear to think how, with all my practice, I had not foreseen this. The sun has set and darkness is falling. I take deep breaths of air into my lungs. The pain recedes as I focus on the bird. I begin to hum, as I did when I was a child. The bird chirrups along with me. Our song stretches up and melts away into the trees. I marvel at the colours and textures around me, at the vastness of the sky. I close my eyes, I hear the bird singing and I do not feel alone.

Artworks in the exhibition, clockwise from left:

Double Yellows, 2022
pencil on plaster

Salvation, 2022
pencil on plaster

Ängste, 2022
pencil on plaster

Triumph, 2022
pencil on plaster

Yearnings, 2022
pencil on plaster

Silence, 2022
pencil on plaster

Rock Face, 2022
pencil on plaster

SUNDY

2022