

AARON PECK
THE LACK IN EACH: A FICTION

DAMIAN MOPPETT
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I was already willful and obstinate then. My only thought was to do something good at all costs, for if I failed to convey my impression exactly as I had conceived it my statue would be ridiculous...

—Auguste Rodin

1.

In the corner of the security guard's eye, in an out-of-the-way part of the Met, there's a room whose walls are painted with the image of books. It's called *il Studio*, a reconstructed interior of a Renaissance study once owned by the Baron di Profundici. The walls are of imported cherry wood, embellished with the finest quality paints and gilded highlights. *Il Studio* passed furtively between the hands of robber barons, until Rockefeller purchased it in 1924, had it shipped piece by piece to New York, where it sat neglected for nearly a decade until it was reconstructed in the Met. Placed in a corner so that no light would erode it, *il Studio* signified the contemplative life, a backroom of possibilities, where di Profundici would take guests or retire from society alone. Now, vitrines of gilded books, scepters, and necklaces filled the room adjacent to *il Studio* all bathed in the tentative light of a museum. Two European tourists entered the room. The guard's eyes

were far from askance. There were now five people in *il Studio*, a capacity crowd, to which he would have to monitor, but his attention had other purposes. He watched the tourists, specifically the young woman, enter *il Studio*, the way she walked, revealing the curve of her hip under the bright bulk of a windbreaker, her form darkening as she entered the room. If anyone else entered, the guard would have to ask them to leave.

But I, an irascible wanderer, watched the guard from yet another corner of the room because I'd had enough of *il Studio* for the day, a place I would often go for moments of contemplation, such as a museum affords when there are little crowds, but this was not that time; it was all fake anyway.

2.

I sat next to Damian while he lit a cigarette pensively. We had finished looking at the work and were waiting for our ride in his studio off Venables in East Vancouver. There was something awkward about the place, something that invited lack. Perhaps it was the light flooding the room from the east. Damian looked away as he exhaled. There was a series of paintings of his studio on the north-facing wall.

3.

I haven't slept much lately. The windows, compared to the basement wherein I usually sleep, are much brighter here. Which reminds me: I've never asked Matthew how he feels about dreaming, but I'd like to. He told me about *sleeping* but that's a different story being, as it is, a different word. The Dutch, he said, once slept in small cupboards, coffin-like, in the walls of their homes. He told me this after he'd crashed on my couch, and I wondered if he had slept badly. Matthew is fond of talking about the Dutch, he lived there once, but I'm certain he

lies, he's like a werewolf. I don't know that much about sleeping, or dreaming for that matter, but I've always felt you knew if you loved someone by the way you watched them sleep. Most people look horrific, monstrous, lacking grace, drooling with pillow creases. Water, my lost and so ridiculously named love, so reflective, would never let me photograph her. We spent four years of our lives together, and the only photographs I have are from official ceremonies or birthdays. I don't have a single photograph of her alone. Her black cable-sweater of some soft wool — what was it? — cashmere, linen, or silk. She refused to let me photograph her and now she's slowly fading from memory. Almost as if she never existed. Perhaps that's what she wanted. To be forgotten so that she could forget me. One afternoon she was asleep on my bed. She had never looked so beautiful as she did then, the soft afternoon light against the curve of her lips, her black hair fallen over her face. I wanted to photograph her, I could hardly control myself but I didn't release the shutter, I didn't want to upset her, she looked so gorgeous, sleeping. She would have been angry had she awoken to the sound of a camera. And that was my failing: I didn't anger her enough.

4.

Over coffee somewhere on Pender Street (as I conducted that research known as friendship) Linds, the wide-eyed curator, and I discussed Brancusi's photography.

"Yeah, but, I mean, what man isn't angry?"

Brancusi saw photographs Stieglitz took of his exhibition in New York after which he asked Man Ray to help him learn how to take his own pictures; he said something like *'those are beautiful but they don't represent my work.'*

"So he was trying to control it?"

"No, not entirely. I think he was concerned with

his studio. He spent hours, days, months, working on a particular sculpture. He wanted to get it right, and there was something about the quality of light there, the way they looked in a particular space, that led him to photograph his own work, an interesting body of photographs in its own right; so more importantly, I think, Brancusi understood his studio to be a work in itself, which he hoped would remain as it was, an almost proto-typical installation of junk."

Perhaps this is why Damian had lent me books on both Brancusi's photography and a monograph of Rodin in preparation of this text — sculptors for whom the studio played an important role in their process. I smiled at Linds, and she smiled back. Cars rushed by on Pender, a view blurred by the fogged windows of the café.

5.

In the mid-summer heat, in air both dry and full of resin, near the shed behind the cherry orchard where I would light matches as a child, an old potter's wheel sits unused. Much later in a summer wasted like so many others, out of boredom I tried my hand at making a bowl. I fired up the kiln, modeled the clay, but my hands were unsteady and the bowl quickly lost its form, flapping pathetically on the wheel. Pottery was something I could never get right although I tried and tried, and so it fueled my rage. I was hopeless with potter's clay, but maybe that's the point. Damian's work reminds me of the opposite of that rage — there's an emphasis on process, on trial and error, as much as there is the finished product, although the finished product, and the conceptual apparatus surrounding it, also succeeds — hardly the experience that I, an irascible wanderer, had as a teenage slacker and amateur potter. But, as Jenifer Pappararo has written,

Damian takes on the role of the amateur. When Damian's work fails to achieve some kind of end, such as the array of pottery in last year's *The Visible Work* at the Contemporary Art Gallery, it does more than exhibit unfinished work: it considers process, and there's something both exciting and vulnerable in that, partially because it exposes a certain lack, and partially because it allows that lack to be. In *Progress in Advance of the Fall*, this new work, he continues to explore process, this time focusing on the studio as a space. As for my early attempts in pottery, I had neither the openness nor fortitude required to continue.

6.

As Damian exhaled again, I awoke from reverie. The windows cast chiaroscuro light over his face. He had a sinister eye, like one who had woken up on the wrong side of day and liked it. We were still in his studio. The objects in his canvases were each painted in different qualities of light — faces, sculptures, lamps — each revealing something that wasn't there. The windows faced east, and as I glanced toward East Van I was reminded of the lines from an old song, or perhaps a song that felt much older than it really was,

*My friends are all within reach,
And the sunlight highlights the lack in each.*