

Oz Speir

*everything
leaks into
everything
else*

Each morning, I wake to find I am already in motion, already reaching out for something:

the crying alarm clock, needy and mean; my thick lensed glasses, vague with fingerprints; a cup of water, cradling the cold of the room, dust skating on surface tension.

The urgency of the coming day leaks into my sleep,
drip
drip
dripping till it overflows.

I am thinking about trees, and rivers, and invigilating in art museums, and leaking water, and rotting walls, and holding my breath, and being trans, and I cannot separate any one thing from another. I am instead going to ask these things to hold hands and concentrate for a moment, hoping an image can be summoned up for me to catch and squint at.

The outside is leaking into this flat, damp slowly encroaching, meeting and mixing with our insides as they too make the walls softer with every exhale. Year after year of paint revealed in reverse, in layers that slough off like shedding skin. Black mould appearing, being washed away, appearing again. Bitter vinegar to slow its advance; incense to mask the smell that pauses in the doorway, as if it is waiting for you to ask it to stay. A dehumidifier provided by our landlord hums in the corner, trying to limit the marks our bodies make on his walls.

It should be a melting, sopping opposite to the museum I work in. Everything there is powder white or polished stone or heat-sealed wood, chosen to be smooth and impenetrable. But even in a building like this one there are areas where the outside starts to find its way in through the pores of the building. Smooth white corners bundled up into draping archways start to bubble and flake, greys and beiges start to blush beneath painted surfaces.

These areas are treated, with more care and urgency than my rented home is afforded, but on occasion they make a reappearance. I am to touch nothing, but keep an eye on known problem areas and be ever vigilant to signs of spreading damp. And then I go home, squint at my bathroom ceiling, and wonder if those marks were there yesterday.

Today though, I am mopping the floors of this oasis of air conditioning, not because they are dirty, but because it has been an unusually dry weekend, and an attempt is being made to leak some water back into the air.

I am mopping, but I am also pausing and looking at the things this place holds; I am pausing and looking at Jordan Baseman's I Love You Still.

A tree branch splitting off into two directions, carefully amputated and brought indoors. A capital Y, a fork in the road, a body with outstretched limbs, a dowsing rod. Its bark has been degloved from just below where it splits, up to its grasping ends, pale softwood suddenly exposed to air. Thick bark coats the bottom half; it has the dry shine a well-polished shoe does. Human hairs sprout from the skinless

upper half, beginning as stubble at the dividing line and gradually becoming a finger-length second silhouette fixed around its two-pronged ends.

I Love You Still.

The word *Still* hangs behind my eyes, enduring, stretching the phrase *I Love You* out through time indefinitely.

Or maybe it pins the phrase *I Love You* down, depriving it of motion, freezing it in place, shackling it to passivity.

I'm not sure it has to choose.

When I'm not mopping, or avoiding mopping, I speak about this piece as part of a free tour aiming to drum up engagement with contemporary art. Every third Saturday, to whoever I can persuade to listen, I say that this artist was interested in vulnerability, in exposure, in love. I describe how the piece was named, how Baseman plucked it from a wall near to where he made his art, where *I Love You Still* had been written by an anonymous graffiti artist. I project an imagined version of this unnamed writer for us to compare with what we can see here, describing someone recoiling from love but desperate to share in it, redirecting their feelings into declaring *I Love You Still* publicly, but indirectly; sidestepping intimacy to lean into spectacle -

and I feel myself start to leak,

drip

drip

dripping into how this work is being received, speculation and interpretation soaking through into fact, washing away simplicity.

I can't remember how this is supposed to look, without all this water damage. Were those marks there yesterday? I wonder if this is irresponsible.

I originally pulled the story that I tell and retell about this piece from an online gallery label accredited only to the museum itself. I often wonder about who wrote this label, and when and where, and whether any fluid parts of them too started to leak into what they chose to say. I may work alongside them, but I wouldn't know, nameless as they are.

Greedy as I am, I have two names at the moment, and only really enough space for one. There's the name I was born into, given lovingly and at the last minute, as an uncharacteristic and sudden change of mind from my mother.

And then there's the name that caught my eye from a riverbed, glinting amongst silt, carried to me in the belly of a fish, only released when I was ready for it.

I saw it and knew it was mine, but knew too it would take time for most people to see how much it suits me. So, I still use the former, the more legal, more socially acceptable name, and when I'm working this name hangs heavy around my neck on a lanyard. I tug at it absentmindedly and fix unfocused eyes on *I Love You Still* and-

everything leaks into everything else,

water soaking into plaster walls

needing someplace to go;

osmosis outside the body.

*My foot is wet, the unwrung mop resting against
my well-polished shoe,
water needing someplace to go.*

*I think of branches just like this one, reaching up and out,
pushing in and down,
root systems buried from sight, dredging up water to be put to work.*

The river that runs through the village I grew up in laps at the trees that line its bank.

*It licks away the dirt that wraps around their roots,
leaking riverbeds into treebeds, creating gaps
for any curious child
to reach into and feel around in.*

*I am pushing down and feeling around, wrist deep in a bucket of plaster, hands reaching out
and scooping, and –*

I am thinking about reaching into my own body and scooping.

I see trans-ness in this artwork. I know though it is me who has put it there.

I feel close to this artwork, have spent countless hours circling it, have directed attention to it, have spoken at length about it, repeat the same story about it, find myself building a myth around it.

I look at its hair, triumphantly bursting forth through skin stripped raw and vulnerable. It is not about transness, not about queerness even. Not until things placed in proximity start to reach out towards each other, start to leak.

So much of transitioning is visualising, so much of artmaking too, giving form to something you haven't yet seen. I sometimes feel that until I have my hands up to the wrists in those buckets of thick plaster, I am unable to properly access what I'm making. I need to use my hands to feel my way forward. My hands, which are more honest than I often am.

They swell and shrink, shed and bleed, ache and shake in response to every internal tension and external irritation. I have an issue localised to my hands where bubbles of interstitial fluid rise to the surface of my skin, pushing their way up through already dry, cracked cells, itchy beyond relief and popping if interfered with; slick, bulbous, leaking insides out.

It begs you to touch it, and if you lose focus, you might find yourself whittling your fingers down to bone wrapped in seeping rags.

It is thought that, perhaps, it is brought on by stress; nothing more than clumsy symbolism, authored against my will by the body supposedly under my control.

It starts to surface, white and pink bubbling up, colour flooding into my skin, hot and itchy. I am to touch nothing, but keep an eye on known problem areas, and be ever vigilant to signs of spreading irritation.