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Mornings, the apartment expanded with light. Light flitted across the walls and curtains, streaked the wooden floorboards, lay dappled on the sheets, as if a luminous brush had left its mark upon my awakening.

From my bed, I could see out onto the small, trellised balcony, lush with the thick foliage and purple flowers of a clematis climbing up a stone wall. White geraniums lined the railing. There was a single forged iron chair and a round table.

Any personal items, if they'd once been there, had been cleared for my arrival. There were no clothes, jewelry, photographs. On the dressing table beneath a mirror stood a green ceramic bowl; in the hallway, the dark, rounded arms of the coatrack were bare.

Still, everything was marked with life, rich and varied. Each room echoed a story of unknown proportion, appearing

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and disappearing out of focus. The sparsity gave the place its character, so distinct and so fleeting.

In the year that I lived there, I had the sense of having stepped inside another life.

There were two paintings in the apartment. One was a small portrait of a young woman against a dark background. She was wearing a loose shirt with a flowing collar. She had an intense, feverish look and wildly gleaming eyes. The painting hung unframed in the hallway, by the stairs leading to the upstairs studio, to which I did not have a key.

The second painting was even smaller, almost a miniature, inside a black frame on the bookshelf in the living room. It was of a crooked tree on a hill, with fields rolling behind it. A wispy cloud hung halfway above the landscape. It was this painting that I looked at most often, gazing at its gray-green skies when I read in the evenings.

The apartment had been advertised in the news bulletin of the art history department where I was enrolled for my doctoral research. It was situated in the city's leafy eastern quarter, on a narrow road leading to a plaza. Yet the rent

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was low, even for my budget. I'd received a year-long fellowship to live in the city and travel to several cathedrals in the region central to my proposed study.

The owner of the apartment, a medieval studies professor, lived some hours away in a prestigious university town. He had announced the flat in various departments' newsletters with the expressed hope that it could be of use to researchers. I was well acquainted with the professor's work but had never met him in person; it was with his wife, Agnes, that I corresponded regarding my stay.

A student coming for a short term would suit her well, Agnes wrote to me; she was a painter and came to the city from time to time to meet with her gallerist. One peculiarity to our arrangement, she added, was that she would stay in the upstairs studio, with a bed and separate bathroom, whenever she came. If I didn't object, she would be careful to keep out of my way.

I was quick to take the offer and moved in some months later.

Within days of my arrival, I had adapted to the changing moods of the apartment, sitting on the balcony during the early mornings, moving my papers to the kitchen as the

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sun ascended, then to the living room. Afterwards I went out for a walk, the work of the day settling into place and gradually fading away.

The city was empty during my first weeks. Streets were filled with dried leaves of late summer, entangled with garbage, all of it drifting slowly like the long afternoons. Most restaurants and shops were closed, with fading paper signs saying that they would open for business the following month, though it did not seem to me that they would ever be open, that the city could be anything other than its somnolent shell. Those who had remained emerged from buildings in the evening, walking to the plaza to sit on the benches around the fountain, in weary disbelief that the heat had passed as the sunlight deepened to gold.

I walked as far as the northern hills, the southern walls, the cloisters past the old city gate, or followed the course of the river inland. I had the feeling that the city had known of my arrival and kept a space for me, whose precise shape and meaning I was yet to discover.

I was researching Gothic nude sculptures of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In my proposal, I argued that

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these nudes had largely been overlooked in art history. There were no studies on the iconography of the naked body in the Middle Ages nor any attempt to understand why the existing nudes—few in number, that much was true—were given place within the medieval culture of dense clothing. My plan was to spend the first months creating an inventory of nudity in medieval texts before traveling to the surrounding towns to see the sculptures themselves.

Throughout the previous year, my adviser had questioned my interest in the topic. My earlier studies, she reminded me, had focused on sculptures of mourners, from which I could easily build a solid thesis. She didn't want me to abandon the topic on grounds of originality—there was still much work to be done on mourning figures. She found my sudden interest in nudes too hasty, and reminded me that the medieval body in art was one cloaked by drapery; if I wanted to study attitudes towards nakedness, she said, I would be better off focusing my attention on all the ways that the body was hidden from sight rather than revealed. Medieval clothing was so symbolic, she said, that inspecting its different forms would elucidate notions surrounding various body parts as well. Nor did it

seem to her that I was able to articulate a very original perspective with which to examine the few nudes at my disposal, abstract in their soft, curved limbs and their unspecified sex. Of course, if I insisted, she would sign whatever documents were necessary for my funding. But she wanted me to understand that there may not be much to investigate.

It was not the lack of originality that had led me to abandon my initial topic but the clear position that mourners occupied in medieval art. I wanted to research an ambiguous topic, whose greatest challenge would be one of consciousness: to view the naked human form as medievally did. Nakedness, in its purely physical aspect, was exactly the same for medieval and modern humans. Yet the perception of being unclothed might hold entirely different meanings, like a thin film obscuring the subject from view. In my studies until then, I'd felt confident in dates, periods, styles; I could make my way steadily through academic theories that cast each subject in a different light. But all this was an external framework when I had no impression of the internal force that propelled medieval life and art. I couldn't be certain that what I found beautiful, exaggerated, comical, or sad in the writings

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and art of the time had indeed been created with those sentiments.

There was no clear course of study for entering another's consciousness, historical or not. This was as difficult a task as undoing one's own mind, unraveling each layer of thought with all its prejudices and assumptions.

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Early September, when signs of life were gradually appearing, I went to the gallery representing Agnes's work. I'd come upon a brochure of a past show in a drawer in my bedroom and wondered whether it could have been left there for me. I was curious about my landlord. The more time I spent in the apartment, the more I admired its sparse aesthetic. There was nothing out of place, nothing that called attention to itself in its restrained elegance.

I walked the hushed narrow streets of the city's chic northern neighborhood, lined with lacquered doorways opening to large courtyards, beyond which I saw the softly lit windows of stone buildings. Everything was deliberate, angled in a stern confinement, revealing only whatever was pleasing to the eye.

The gallery was bright. From a table at the far end, a

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woman in thick, fashionable glasses looked up from her computer then looked back down.

The paintings hung sparsely in two rooms. I walked around, scanning the work for Agnes's name, not knowing what to expect. In her last message to me, checking that all was well with the apartment, Agnes had mentioned she would come to the city soon, to meet with a curator about a new series, inspired by medieval sculpture. She seemed unaware that this was my own research topic, and I could not recall whether I'd mentioned to her the specifics of my thesis.

I was surprised to come upon a series signed by Agnes of bright paintings depicting masks, stacked one on top of the other, covering the canvas in a patchwork of shapes. They looked like animal heads and demons, with horns and fangs. Others were human faces, their expressions sober, not giving away their emotion. The paintings' formal restraint held back a sense of bewilderment, which I felt residing beneath the tangle of images.

This, in a way, was my first meeting with Agnes.

After I left the gallery, I walked up a hill dotted by lamp-posts turning on in the half-light of the evening. The shops

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