

Performer 1.

Slow. soft.

She limps across the room, dragging a chair behind her.

Stop.

She is startled by the noise of the trash bag as she shakes it open.

Briefly, a jellyfish, a hot air balloon, something aloft.

She pulls a long ribbon of tape, sticks the bag to the chair.

Slow. Soft. She pulls back her long hair.

Dyed the same strawberry blonde she imagined years ago,

When they used to spray on lemon juice and lie in the sun.

Slow. Soft. But here the curtains are drawn.

Slow.

The fan circulates dust and sour, wood chip and wet cement, multivitamins and wet sand.

Faster. Soft. She tiptoes over the piles, arriving on a folder. Inside, a photocopied certificate for a class on chemical safety. Six weeks, every Thursday afternoon, before they leave for home, before the shift starts.

Slower. She remembers the training, how they sat in the break room and talked about Charles, before Shondra was fired for using facebook on the floor.

The ceremony

where the nephew of their boss mispronounced the names of half of their friends.

The trinket

he presented to each of them:

a small clock

emblazoned with the company logo. It must be ticking somewhere in this stack.

Stop.

She hears a voice:

“Life truly begins only after you have put your house in order” (preface, Kondo).

Faster. Dense.

She takes the folder, wipes her face, and places the certificate on an empty spot of the floor.

Her hair sticks to her forehead in salty strands.

Slower. Strong.

She drags another chair across the room, close to the next stack. She winces as she bends to sit.

Faster. Floating.

Up next, a plastic bag: photocopies of an obituary, photographs stuck together with tape, Sunday fliers from last year's sales:

Faster. Bursting.

Mushroom soup. French fried onions. Yellow American cheese. Pounds and pounds of dirt-caked yams. Small, salty-sweet cornichon pickles. Black olives, canned. Elbow macaroni, one pound, boxed. Bleached. White. Flour. Plastic forks. Waxed paper plates.

Slower, falling.

Another voice admonishes:

"Making decisions about whether to keep and how to organize objects requires categorization skills, confidence in one's ability to remember, and sustained attention. To maintain order one also needs the ability to efficiently assess the value or utility of an object" (31-32 Frost).

She adds to the new pile.

Faster.

Over hours the topography shifts. It groans and shuffles; waits on one leg, sprawls out, takes up space.

Faster.

The papers are mortar, the papers are bricks, the papers are weeds cracking the foundation, the papers are flowers, sconces, contracts, promises, evidence, wallpaper. They are wet and sticky and they cling to your feet. They are paper airplanes. They are darts. They are peeling.

Pressing,

They are labyrinths. They block air and sun. They are intruder-proof. They trip silent alarms. The walls are cocoons. They are feather boas, boa constrictors,

They coil—

Slowly, tightly.

They hug.

They are feather boas; they are boa constrictors.

Faster, slipping.

Soon you can't keep up. You follow her through the path; it breathes and crumbles, it girds itself; it breathes. It gasps. It hugs.

Stop.

You come to a corner. As far as you can tell, she is gone.

Stop.

Performer 2.

Slow. Solid.

She stands at the wall: piling on another shoe box.

Slow. Solid.

Payless called. They have dozens if she can get there before closing.

She adds it to the list.

Faster. Collected.

She'll hang her cell phone number on the door. She can swing by after picking up the plastic bins from the library, and maybe grab a bite for mom. She needs to ask Tania how the surgery went, and how her son's trip went; the time will come, and go, until it came, and went.

Faster. Floating.

Sometimes she finds she has climbed stairs she didn't notice. A box will be sealed tight, ready for shipping. A fraying hem hot-glued. A bill, paid. Something heavy, lugged, all the way down the stairs, already stored on a cold metal shelf, another box in her arms, lugging, all the way up the stairs, to be put on display.

Sometimes the only way she knows she did it is the ache in her knees.

That's the work.

Slow. Solid.

There is too much to do, but impossible is a story you tell yourself when you want to stay quiet, when you want to stay small.

For the first time in months, she sits, twirling her finger through her hair, waiting.

Later, she knows she will smile as the white people compliment her braids. They never notice her rolling eyes.

These people, those who were once the kids who laid their hands on the yellow metal of the school bus, who spat at her feet and drew lines around the world they would inherit.

Faster.

Today they will say

How cute!

You do this all yourself?

I never knew this was here!

Stop.

And she will smile, because she knows so much that they don't.

That's the work.

Stop. Tense. Resolute.

You can either sit at home and twiddle your thumbs while the streets burn, while the streets bleed, while they mix bleached bones with lead-laden water and build tight spaces around your arms, your chest, your lungs.

You can sit, and you can call it a hug.

Faster. Solid.

Or you can slap duct tape on shelf. You can shop for paint and plastic buttons. You can call in favors, make the rounds, steel yourself, steal time, steal space, make space, make worlds.

That's the work.

Faster, floating. Running.

There were years where tendrils—bright green and yellow tendrils, aphids, biting gnats—wrapped around her ankles.

There were years when men in neckties—false prophets—offered lemonade, offered respite from the rowing, offered rest in the rot, in the saltwater, on the asphalt, in the closet, the attic, the satin sheets.

Sometimes the only way she knew she escaped were the scars on her feet.

Stop. Calm.

Tomorrow she will stand at a podium—chipped wood, semi-gloss paint, recycled rusty nails---and they will sit on folding metal chairs and benches—sun-bleached, water-stained pallets, rented industrial sanders, semi-gloss paint.

Tomorrow she will have them look where she points,
follow her lead,
nod at her knowledge.

Tomorrow she will captivate them, hold them captive, forgive them. Serve them wine, cheese, honey, lemon, cayenne, vinegar. Plastic utensils.

That's the work.

Today she will get ready.

That's the work.

Performer 3.

Stop. Proud.

He stands at the wall, interrogating the mirror. His hair is white, slick, sharp. He is butch. He is top. He is master. He is a portrait in oil, short and stocky, clad in leather; he does not bend; he does not break.

He is the “bull dog at the door.” (Rawson interview)

Slow. Softer.

He is a tableau in watercolor, a fraying couch, a fat, fluffy, sleepy cat, sagging bookshelves and—everyday—a cup of tea.

Slower. Tired.

On his kitchen table he spreads out manila folders and affidavits, affixing labels, commemorating the dead. Custodian and excavator, guard and scribe, narrator and witness. Over the detritus of parades, raids, birthday parties, and board meetings, he conducts autopsies and types up post-mortem reports.

Stop.

His dead name is still printed on his business cards.

Stop.

In someone else’s words, he does not pass.

Faster. Flying.

Some days he is a king, gluttoned on adrenaline, cross country road trips, pick-up trucks, trimmed nails, pulp novels, protest signs, the red outline of his hand on his lover’s ass. He lights bonfires at the solstice, naming the goddesses, collating the newsletters, reading the minutes, howling at the moon, taking names.

A single slip of paper could bring down this castle.

Slow. Dense.

The last time he left home he carried seeds in his luggage. He planted them at the bend of a river. Part eulogy, part lullaby, he laid them in a cradle of peat and stone and brittle newspaper. He wiped the dirt from his forehead and said goodbye to the crumbling village, the place where they once set bras on fire, planted arugula, and passed around magazines in brown paper bags.

Faster. Wary.

He knows his enemies will come in simple clothes, making modest demands. He can hear these wolves, sometimes, scuffling at the doors. He recognizes their rage; he shares their hunger. The people he once promised to protect are long dead, but he carries proof that they once lived in a bag on his back.

“Never again the silence,” (SMA Website) he recites. “Never again.”

Stop.

The old things still smart.

Stop.

How each time he found a piece of himself—in a copy of Stone Butch Blues, an editorial from the Village Voice, a glance of recognition across a sticky bar...

Each time he found a piece of himself—in a piece of language, a new representation, a possible path...

Each time he found a piece of himself another piece died.

Slower. Solemn.

Decades earlier he received a letter in the mail, addressed to a different name. Lou told him, “I know I’m going to be the only one dying, and thinking of how I spent my time here... We ourselves are the only ones we can count on, the only ones we must ultimately answer to, in the end” (Sullivan letter). He told him to look in the Yellow Pages under Wigs and Hairpieces. He said to send pictures.

Most of all, Lou stressed something it took a lifetime to learn; he would wait forever if he needed someone else’s affirmation to grow.

Stop.

If he could reply, he might type,
“Dear Lou, I’m still waiting.”

Stop.