

Thinking Through Flower Box 3D

A conversation between Alpesh Kantilal Patel (AKP) and Tsohil Bhatia (TB) over a Zoom call while watching a YouTube video of the Windows 97 screensaver, Flower Box 3D.

TSOHIL BHATIA
ALPESH KANTILAL PATEL

TSOHIL BHATIA: After you agreed to do this interview, you suggested I read part of your book *Productive Failure: Writing Queer Transnational South Asian Art Histories* (2017). Maybe we can start there—what connections were you seeing between your thinking and my work?

ALPESH KANTILAL PATEL: My book (like your work I believe) considers “South Asian” as an elastic category that is not necessarily tied to bloodlines or genealogy (where someone is from).

TB: Yeah, in the introduction of the book, you speak about bloodlines. I thought it was really valuable to start thinking beyond bloodlines and to think about that impulse as an impulse towards productive inauthenticity or productive disidentification. Are you able to speak more about the idea of the productive aspects of disidentification?

AKP: José Esteban Muñoz’s idea of “disidentification” isn’t something I explicitly bring out in the introduction, but the concept is very much at the heart of my discussion of “productive failure.”¹ Drawing on Jack Halberstam’s “queer failure,”² which reconceives what constitutes the notion of failure, each chapter of my book attempts to write a queer transnational South Asian art history through a specific framework (such as form or authorship), but I fail to do so. In the process, I succeed in writing multiple histories, ones which include the works of a white artist like Cy Twombly and a cisgender artist like Natvar Bhavsar. I effectively disidentify with the work of both to fold them into queer transnational South Asian art histories.

TB: When I’m personally trying to dodge the classification as a South Asian queer artist, it’s only because I don’t want my genealogy to be the primary or only way of reading my work. Of course it is important to be aware of that genealogy but to view the work from that lens can often omit or overwrite the other concerns of my practice. I think of the writing of Gordon Hall³ who writes about the queer artist’s work being read as queer art and the Black artist’s work as Black art. Only the white artist’s work is seen as unmarked art. And that was partially my motivation to bring in the Windows 90s and early 2000s screensaver Flower Box 3D as something for us to discuss instead of talking overtly about my practice and its ethos. It might allow for me to “suspend” conversations about identity and open up a different way of talking about my work.

I wonder what is the “objective truth” of the flower box, which is just a digital sculpture or simply a 3D rendering that changes from a cube to a sphere to a spiky flower to a star on loop. And so its identity is constantly in flux, and that is very interesting to me. And then, we could look at it not only as an image, but also think of it as an object that constantly changes and moves across the x, y, z axes. This dynamic structure remains divorced from its author (if there were any single person) but of course attached to its *corporate author*. Its detachment from a person becomes a very generative space and it is a space that allows multiple meanings and none. And that’s also something you write about: not producing objective truths, but using the space of meaning making as a space of generative, generous and multiple meanings. So how do we write Flower Box 3D into art history?

1 Alpesh Kantilal Patel. *Productive Failure: Writing Queer Transnational South Asian Art Histories*. (Manchester University Press, 2018).

2 Judith Halberstam. *The Queer Art of Failure*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

3 Gordon Hall. “Why I Don’t Talk About ‘The Body’: A Polemic.” *MONDAY*. Accessed June 24, 2021. <https://monday-journal.com/why-i-dont-talk-about-the-body-a-polemic/>.

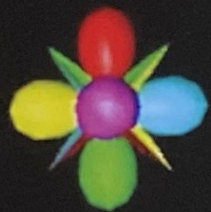
AKP: This is also a screensaver, an image that is not meant to be seen or is meant to be in the background. It’s always on the periphery. I don’t think I’ve set a screensaver for my computer, so it uses a default one. When I come back to my computer after having left it for a while, it is completely surprising to come upon this screensaver. Ironically, the screensaver is not ever meant to function with the kind of attention with which we are discussing it right now. There is a connection for me between how the flower box functions and your practice: your works deal with identity but it’s always on the periphery as your approach is often non-representational. As viewers we are required to have to think about identity in a different way than we might normally. What do you think about this?

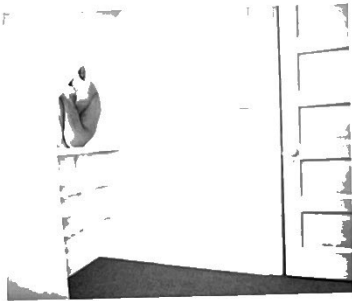
TB: Over the last few years I’ve been thinking about what “nothing” is made of and ended up studying images, objects, actions that perform a certain absence, or more accurately lie at the periphery of meaning. And through that endeavor I’ve arrived at this screensaver. Not because the image is impotent but because it is an image for an intermediary time. I don’t think I ever looked at it when I had it as a screensaver; it was successfully able to perform its absence. It’s only now that I’m looking at it to study it that I engage with the act of making meanings of it. And like you said earlier, this is not an image to be viewed. I’m also really interested in how its obscured authorship is liberating. Even though it’s an image that a lot of people might have seen who had Windows 97 and XP, it’s more at this point a nostalgic nod, the image never generates curiosity about its maker. So when the author is divorced from the image, the people looking at the image have all the agency to contribute towards making meaning.

AKP: Your point about how authorship here is not clear is intriguing. As you say, you only have viewership left. A typical problem with thinking about identity, especially in connection to artists who are of color, queer and/or women, is that a lot of viewers think they know the authors and project this idea onto their artworks. This can really restrict what’s possible to view in the work when you’ve already limited meaning in this way. Your work, I think, prevents this kind of problem given it is not representational and in so doing, there might be a way to look at identity through a slightly unusual or different lens.

TS: To open the scope through which my work can be seen is very important to me. A lot of the work I have been making studies the periphery of productivity. I’m interested in mundane activity and spending time with the unproductive and learning from it. Time is such a valuable tool for constructing meaning and the key is to enter that time without a preconceived or desired output. The goal is to be actively present with the thing, to do nothing in its presence and then learning what’s happening without some instant answers from the *it* in question. I often say “I’m doing nothing.”

The series of photographs *Winter Sun: Body Clock*, 2017, depicts my lying in the sun, in the quadrilaterals of light that my window makes on the carpet, as it moves across my apartment. In a way, it is an act on the periphery, not to be given meaning to. It wasn’t for anyone to see but I did it so often that a time of rest became generative. It is the time spent doing something that gave it meaning, made the nothing—something. The moment when I was able to make work out of what I already have, was a wonderful moment. This is what I am doing when I say I’m doing nothing. The time of inactivity is immediately converted into a time of activity as I make photographs.





This page: *Winter Sun — Body Clock*, 2017. Inkjet print, series of 36 photographs
Previous spread: *Flower Box 3D*. Screensaver still.

I'm approaching this particular screensaver similarly. The screensaver is to protect the screen from burning. So there is a constant image that loops itself and serves a purpose mostly neglected by the viewer, but the screen is active. It is actively constructing a time of inactivity and we're trying to make meaning out of it perhaps.

AKP: Yeah, that's a really nice observation. The screensaver's function is not to be seen. It is meant to keep the screen from burning out. It is doing a work, even if unseen at times. I think that's a nice way of thinking about your artwork with the doors *Untitled (Doorways)*, 2020. There's not a lot there in terms of signifiers to give you a sense of what's going on. I mean, there's all kinds of metaphors for what a door can be. It could be open. It could be closed. It could be a place of entry. It could be a place to also keep things out. There's those kinds of things. Doors do work, one could say, but this is often implicit.

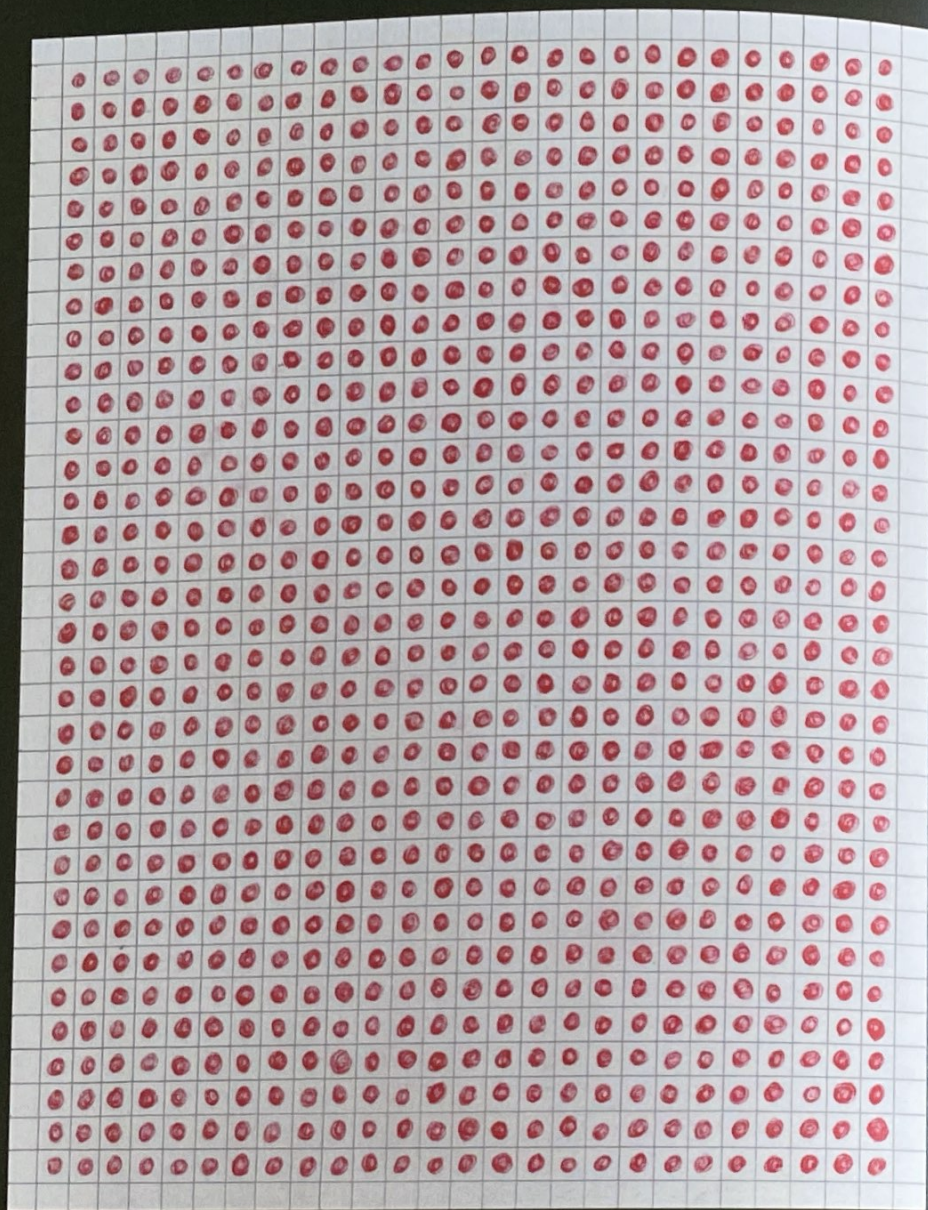
Now, another thing I'm thinking about is just that this screensaver is on a loop. Therefore, it's not clear what the beginning and ending is and there's something potentially liberatory about this. You can choose for yourself what the beginning might be—it could be when you first look at the screensaver. I guess the point is that it's never fixed.

Typically identity, when we're talking about it, is fixed. We think it is defined by its borders, but this is not really the case. Identity is changing all the time. The idea of an origin or a genealogy doesn't always make sense.

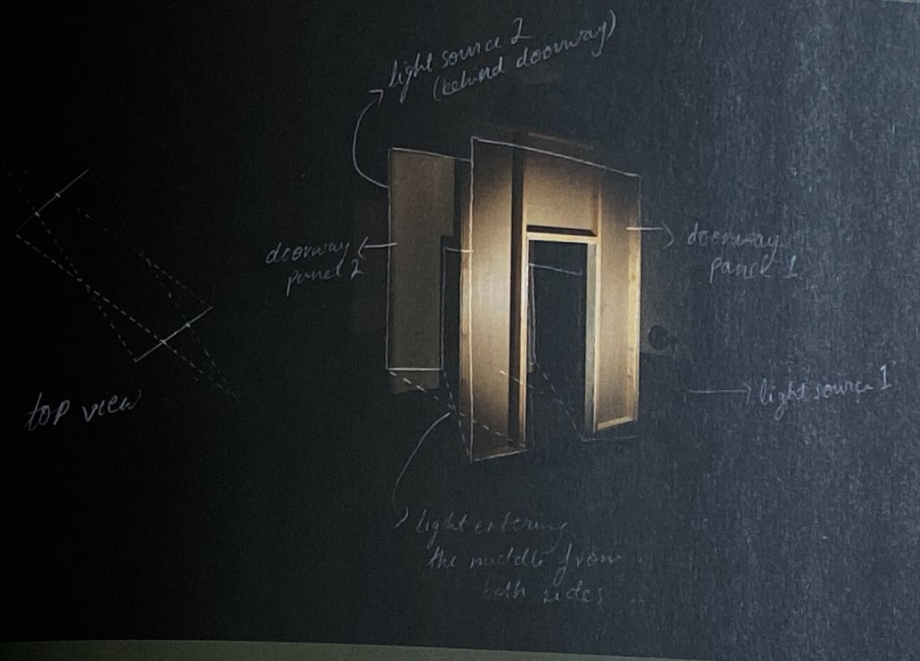
TB: I'm thinking about how you talk about meaning making. When I thought of the doors it was because I wanted a sign that could have multiple signifiers. At the same time, it was so ubiquitous in a way. Everyone would still be able to make associations to it. When I do the writing about the door, I call it architecture and not-architecture, site and not-site, sculpture and not-sculpture, and object and not-object. By doing that I'm trying to make the structure more dynamic through language. There are a lot of meanings from the door that I'm not able to extract, which I think rely on the subjectivities of the viewers and the way they encounter it. It also becomes so different for viewers if they encounter the installation with another person. There's a physical distance between these two bodies as they walk around these two doorways; there's a lot of shadows and the doorways themselves masking the bodies.

AKP: How do you use language in a way that doesn't close down the meaning of the work or how can you get to these nuanced kind of points you're bringing out? The writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty on phenomenology are, I think, pivotal to discuss⁴. He writes about how there are only subjects and no objects. And this idea repositions one's thinking about the doors. They are no longer objects, but subjects. And so now the conversation becomes more about the relationship between subjects. Merleau-Ponty is really interested in the interconnection between subjects so that there is actually no division among them: they're all intertwined. He uses the phrase "chiasmic intertwining" to elaborate how subjects and objects are interpenetrated. I did discuss Merleau-Ponty in the chapter I gave you. In my text, I make it political in a way when thinking about bodies and how

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining—The Chiasm," in *The Visible and the Invisible*. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 130–55.



The Length of Daylight-III, 2020. Graphite and ink on paper.



Untitled (Doorways), 2020. Sketch for installation.

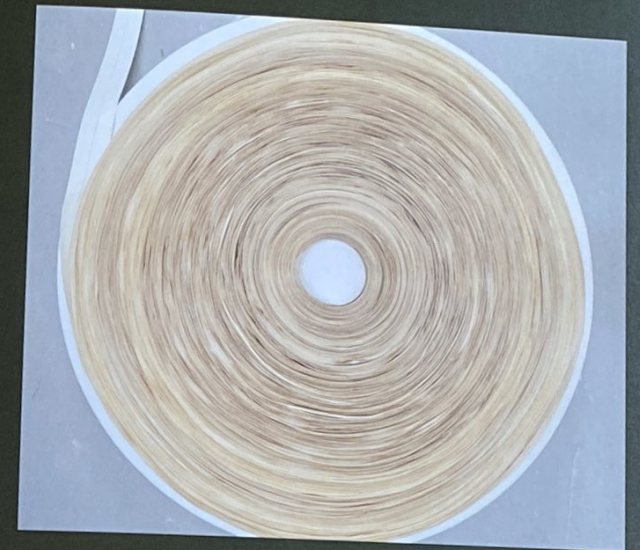
bodies are being read by others. I'm curious what your responses are to chiasmic intertwining and subject-subject relationships.

TB: Merleau-Ponty definitely complicates this installation in a productive way. I think about the "flesh" of the object and the subject and since he calls the flesh the means of communication perhaps language is what resides in that flesh. I'm inclined towards the thought that when the subject and object encounter each other, their individual ontologies are destabilized. I've always tried to make work that destabilizes the subject-object relation as a way of destabilizing the object and its identity—to use the word to protect the object and to allow a multiplicity of meaning.

In *Length of Daylight-III*, I draw a dot for each breath that I take from sunrise to sunset. The work finally ends up as fourteen drawings, and they're very simple drawings but at the same time, they are performance documents. And because each of those dots in the drawings are synced with breath, I also like to start thinking of those as the choreography or as a score for breathing. My instruction for the performance was to draw a dot every time I took a breath. But stepping into that performance, I realized it is really hard to count your breaths. Eventually I was only taking a breath when I drew a dot. So the process had to reverse itself. It felt like I was writing a score for breathing. But it's also not really a score for breathing, because both the inscribing and breath



The Length of Daylight-I, 2018. Still from performance document.



The Length of Daylight-I, 2018. Graphite on paper.

happen almost at the same time, so it is somewhere between a score and a document. And by that, I situate the work between the past and the future and each dot contains the information of its present. And that has been something that I've been thinking about a lot in relation to *Length of Daylight-1*, where I'm drawing a straight line from sunrise to sunset. A part of me thinks that now I have, like, 58,200 inches of a scroll of graphite on paper. The work is a drawing, a sculpture because of its large mass, and a performance document. And this scroll is also a clock because it is an archive of twelve hours, and each divisible part of the line has its present.

AKP: I like what you're talking about in terms of how the work is both a 2D drawing and a sculpture and the idea of a document as being performative. In my contemporary art classes that I teach, I make it clear when I have the information whether we are looking at an artwork or documentation from the perspective of the artist. I'm thinking of Ana Mendieta's work. Much like you do, she explores an in between space through her *Siluetas 1973-1977* series. It's not always clear what's an artwork and what's documentation.

TB: I mean, I think of her work a lot, actually, and it does this thing of making potent absences as presence, which again, kind of brings us some of the things that we're talking about. How do we talk about the body without the trappings of identity? And I'm talking in particular about the *Siluetas* series. The fact that we see only the impression and not Mendieta's body also suggests a resistance to the visibility of her body.

AKP: This might be a good moment to bring in Edouard Glissant's "opacity."⁵ He writes that a subject should have a right to opacity or a right not to be known, in contradistinction to how the West functions. I think your work could be framed through opacity in that you don't reveal everything. For people of color, in particular, it is difficult not to be seen. Actually, this goes back to my book when I was writing about the Brazilian electrician Jean Charles de Menezes, who was misidentified as a terrorist after 7/7 in England and killed by police. Where was his right to opacity? He really didn't have one. Even after death, his image circulated heavily online and print journalism that only seemed to further erode his subjectivity and right not to be known. In my book, I discuss British artist Mary Edward's memorial to him and how it provides the possibility of returning his right to opacity. How does opacity connect to your work?

TB: In (the work about the doorways) there are these two pieces of writing that accompany it: one is a back and forth meaning making of the doorways and the other is abstracted autobiography (footnote the poem). By presenting an abstracted biography as poetry, I think that is how I'm enforcing my right to opacity, by building that text. And it's something that I've been increasingly doing with most of the work. I think the work certainly withholds some information in its visibility, but a new set of abstract information gets imparted through the text and the two together is very much the cumulative artwork.

AKP: In *Productive Failure*, I toggle a lot between visibility and invisibility of South Asian-ness. Is this relevant in your practice?

⁵ Edouard Glissant. *Poetics of Relation*. Trans. Betsy Wing. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

TB: I would never go to the extent of saying that my South Asian-ness is not important to me, yet if my South Asian identity is summoned, it will alter a lot of meaning making of the work.

AKP: Yeah, that's what I'm thinking. South Asian-ness is not explicit and therefore that discussion doesn't really happen unless, you know, someone like you or me wants to read that into the work. I want to get a sense from you how important is it for people to know that you are of South Asian descent or is that even necessary as a point of departure?

TB: The work from 2017–2020 followed the Sun very often. And I didn't even realize that for years I've seen my grandfather praying to the Sun every morning. And it's something that I've experienced so often in my life that when I'm engaging in these acts of choosing the sun or, you know, structuring these performances that are around the sun, it just happens. It just slips itself in. There is no escaping my history.

AKP: I think what's great is that I think we're in a place in art criticism where somebody can discuss your work in multiple ways: that's productive failure.

TSOHIL BHATIA

Tsohil Bhatia is an artist and homemaker based in Lenapehoking. They work with their body and its ghost to contemplate the latencies of quotidian objects, images, and phenomenon revealed in the quietude of their home. They studied Performance Art at Srishti School of Art, Design, and Technology (Bangalore, India) and were awarded the Regina and Martin Miller Fellowship from the School of Art at Carnegie Mellon University, there they received their MFA. Their work has been shown at the University of British Columbia, Bezalel Academy, Hair+Nails, Phosphor Project Space, and the Andy Warhol Museum. They've participated at Franconia Sculpture Park Emerging Artist Residency, Ox Bow School of Art, HH Art Spaces Residency in Goa, Shergill-Sunderam Shanthi Road Residency in Bangalore, and will be at residence at the Chautauqua School of Art and MASS MoCA. They're represented by Blueprint12 Gallery in New Delhi.

ALPESH KANTILAL PATEL

Alpesh Kantilal Patel is an Associate Professor of contemporary art at Florida International University (FIU). His art historical scholarship, curation, and criticism reflect his queer, anti-racist, and transnational approach to contemporary art. He is the author of *Productive Failure: Writing Queer Transnational South Asian Art Histories* (Manchester University Press, 2017) and co-editor of the anthologies *Curatorial Impacts – the Futures of Okwui Enwezor* (1963–2019), a special issue of the journal *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* (2021), and *Living and Sustaining a Creative Life: Storytellers of Art Histories* (Intellect, 2021). Patel is the editor of *Modern Times: mounir fatmi* (2016), *Concrete Feet: Tom Scicluna* (2016), *CauseWay: Paul Donald* (2016), *This Too Shall Pass: New Work by Saravanan Parasuraman* (2014), published in conjunction with the eponymous exhibitions he organized for Miami Beach Urban Studios (MBUS)-FIU. He is a frequent contributor of exhibition reviews to *frieze*, *Hyperallergic.com*, *Artforum*, and *Art in America*. In 2022, he will be a residential fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies, Loughborough University, England, where he will work on his new monograph, tentatively titled *Multiple and One: Global Queer Art Histories*. He received a Bachelor's from Yale University and a doctorate from the University of Manchester.

EXCERPT FROM UNTITLED (DOORWAYS)

by Tsohil Bhatia

Sometimes I hold my breath
And swim to the bottom of the pool.
I stay there till I can
and always an extra second;
just an extra moment.
I perform a progressive shutting of body,
to a very silent silence.

And then like I'm suddenly restored,
I rush back with heavy limbs,
swimming through this viscous medium
with a body that knows no water underwater,
And in that moment is the birth of word.

I gush back to the surface
to take in that large breath, a word
that fills me up.
And from shrunken fruit, I'm full again,
full of air, able to float with my body to the sky.

The sun pierces into my eye
a burn; blue, dark blue like the night,
a burst of pink and then green
with a thin yellow glow;
an amorphous non image-image
I see nothing.

Sometimes in my tire
I lay bare to the ceiling,
so grateful, so small,
so full of gratitude.
Slowly sinking into the ground
like the ground was water and
I could breathe under it.
Descending in slow motion
to a comforting underwater silence.

The ceiling of the room sublimates
to expose me to the light of the Sun that
contains me and warms me.
My body oscillating
between weight and weightlessness
leaving nothing behind
but earth that I'd pressed underneath.

When did I forget Earth
where light fell to give fruit.
and the large mirrors of lake
that sent light back to the sky
in invisible beams, yet
burning my eyes like the Sun.

When did I forget that the Sun was still
and it was the earth that moved like a dervish
And I, in my oblivious stillness
saw the spectacle of this Sun
rise and set through the window in my
apartment
decoding its motion,
counting the seconds on my fingers.

The beam of light made drawings
on the surfaces it confronted.
It climbed on things
and slipped off them
until it was a spot like a star that glimmered
until being swallowed by the surface.

When did I forget that the moon wasn't light
but a celestial mirror
That returned light perfectly onto the earth
And everytime I looked at it,
I was looking at the sun, colder.
And my body eclipsed the earth
with its modest shadow.

Sometimes the light from the moon
wakes me up
and I find myself lit in perfect quadrilateral
made by the window
that glides on my body like a slipping blanket
And the only sound is a leaky faucet,
a surrogate clock. I muffle my ears
Until it's quiet and I can't help but hear
my heartbeat that mimics the clock
and reminds me that I'm here.
A whistle interrupts that sound
I run to the window to find that little crack
that squeezed the wind
but the gush is gone.

It gets so quiet here
That you can't help it sometimes
But find the music in the refrigerator buzz.
I know this will pass
and my body knows time
better than my mind.

I regret no one photographed
my first sunrise and to make up,
I photograph so many, like they're my first.
Each one, a new one
because each one is my first,
Unlike the previous one.

I lay bare to the sky often
and wait for the grass to grow taller.
I hear it whisper a motion
that I can't see.