

Self-portrait, unknown artist

It was the third time he had been to the museum that week, right at opening hours. The young artist stood, huddling in a puffy sweater that curtailed past his knees. Somehow, even in this oversized outfit, the ticket agent perceived him yet again as a 'lady.'

He loosened the sweater around himself.

Ducking behind the crowd, the young artist ran toward the stairs. Something other than the cold colored his cheeks rosy. His steps slowed as he admired the smooth sculpted muscles of the Greek statues, heroic in their poses—but he hurried on.

With his heart gathering in his throat, the young artist rushed through a small hallway that led to an exhibit at the farthest corner of the museum: "Curves and Lines Through Time." And there, at the very back, in a corner partly hidden from the rest of a gallery and wholly unextraordinary to anyone who was not already in love, was a small painting of a boy reclining on a sofa, nude.

The label read, "Self-portrait, unknown artist."

The young artist went up to the painting, breath almost misting its surface. He wanted to reach out, touch the soft lines of the boy's lips and the hard curves of his lean muscles. He imagined his fingers tracing the boy's body the way he traced his own body

at night, drawing the invisible lines where he would cut from himself if he were a surgeon or sculptor or painter or poet, someone capable of self-portraiture.

He stepped back, almost falling backwards with dizzy-headed euphoria, and sat down cross-legged in front of the painting.

He stayed like this until his legs fell asleep, then he pulled out the blanket he brought and reclined on it, mirroring the boy's pose imagining that the plain cloth knit by his mother bunched up around his legs was drapery that settled across his bare hips just so.

He imagined that the boy could read and reciprocate his gaze. That the boy's sultry look belied tantalizing thoughts dancing through his mind like the sunspots on his torso.

Hours passed by as they traded glances.

Then, in the drowsy afternoon sunshine, mere hours before the museum was set to close, the artist started sketching into his notebook. It was full of dismembered body parts—thighs, lightly veined hands, a nipple against a flat chest. Somehow, he never found himself capable of drawing an entire body. The closest he got to was a shadowy outline of a back and an arm dangling across the back of a divan.

He traced the lines in his notebook with his fingers and he traced the lines of the boy's body with his eyes, stealing as much of the boy as possible for sleepless nights.

Then, in the hazy near-twilight hours, when he was growing sleepy, the young artist could swear the boy winked at him to keep him awake. Teasingly, with a small quirk at the corner of his lips.

The young artist blushed, and suddenly felt a need to cover his own body.

Just like every other time that he visited, right before the museum closed, the young artist stood up and flashed a page of his notebook at the boy, like it was his dirty little secret—*their* dirty little secret.

He built an image of the boy in his mind: sarcastic, gentle, and more than a little vain. "I swear I'm a little perkier than what you drew," the boy had once said. "Nice ass," he drawled another day. "That's pretty," he remarked this time.

"You too," the young artist said, stammering a little. Then he twirled on his heels and half-jogged across the gallery, cheeks as rosy as when he first came in.

He could swear the boy watched him walk away.

On the days he did not visit the museum, the young artist rode the bus for fifty minutes to help his mother in her nail salon, where they both wore dresses that hugged their hips.

His mother begged him to shave. He wore a dress that covered his legs instead.

When he dropped a bottle of nail polish, she called him careless and selfish, said that he didn't care about himself or her.

The dress was drag, he reminded himself as he pinched his arm to stay grounded. Everything was drag. Nothing felt real.

He blacked out when they started fighting again.

Back at his dorm at the art school, the young artist collapsed onto his sofa and felt he was finally waking up from a nightmare.

In between the museum visits, when it got harder and harder to *be*, he hid himself in the bathroom, drowning his body with hot water in the dark. Steam mingled with tears and sweat, and he imagined that he was turning into gas.

Hours later, when he felt solid enough to open his notebook, he traced the lines of the boy's body again and again, rubbing his fingertips raw.

On nights like these, the young artist did not sleep in his bed. Instead, he closed his eyes and imagined him and the boy falling asleep on the sofa together, their lines

intertwining to make something whole. Fingering himself in places that his mother deemed forbidden, he snuggled into imagined shoulders while moonlight caressed their exposed shoulder blades.

On the days he did not visit the museum or work in the nail salon, the young artist went to class in a hoodie and sweatpants. He sat in the office hours of his advisor, who was simultaneously nice and disinterested enough that she never inquired too much about his puffy eyes. When she did ask, he mumbled something about family keeping him up late, which was as true as anything else.

He knew he produced work that felt like it was choking itself. But his advisor, infinitely more interested in his art than in him as a person, struggled to find the language to describe his particular case of artistic block because she liked his 'restrained articulation of the body.'

She said self-erasure was his style. She praised him for it.

Everything was self-portrait. Nothing felt real.

So the young artist complained about his advisor to the boy the next time he visited the museum. The boy must have seen a lot of these types of people in his gallery, where pain is labelled as exultation.

The artist lay down on the floor, his notebook propped open against his chest, and peeked over the edges of his pages.

The boy caught his gaze again and winked. "Look, that guy is as in love with the sorrowful stripper as you are with me."

The young artist turned his head to see a middle-aged man in a beanie feigning a studious pose as his eyes devoured a photograph of a girl with her legs around a pole and an affecting look casted over her shoulder.

"Have you ever thought of doing your thesis on me?" the boy asked when it seemed that the artist was paying more attention to the middle-aged man than to him.

"But I don't know anything about you," the young artist said, apologetic. There really was nothing about "Self-portrait" or its unknown artist at all. Not even a signature or date of creation. The young artist had only been able to establish, after repeated emails to all the museum's collectors, that the work was contemporary-ish and it had been donated as a private gift.

The boy pursed his lips. "You know too much already." He gestured at his nude body, not shy at all.

The young artist blushed. The boy blew him a kiss.

“Narcissus,” the artist muttered. He meant to appear gruff but couldn’t hide his wide smile. He didn’t need a witty retort from the boy to know that the young artist probably loved his boy more than Narcissus loved his own reflection.

For the new year, the young artist’s mother gave him a new dress. It was her way of saying they should start the new year on the right foot. Another year where she attempted to stuff a wayward son into the body of a perfect daughter.

He left before the salon closed.

Back in his dorm, he tried three times to call home.

“I’m not your daughter, I’m your son,” he practiced saying in staccato breaths. All he managed was a cracked whisper that ended in a half shout, “I can’t do this anymore—”

His mother hung up first, not caring for the tone he used and that he had left without thanking her.

In the broken silence that followed, the young artist. How far he could disappear into unreachable places. How small he could break himself. How much of his body he could slice away.

He wished he could find a scalpel somewhere.

He got up. His hands shook. His eyes darted to different sharp objects around the apartment and—

There he was, leaning against the young artist's door frame, drapery over one shoulder, looking at the artist with soft eyes like he understood everything.

The boy held out his hand, palm upwards, inviting. There was no teasing, no twinkling laughter from him this time, just the gentlest silence that gave way to the warmest hug and the steamiest breaths as the boy brought their faces near.

The boy held the artist close, so close that their eyelashes touched, so close that the artist could feel every line of the boy's body through a night shirt.

The boy led the young artist toward the sofa. They fell together onto it together, the boy more gracefully, and pulled the artist's shirt over his head.

When the boy's fingers reached the artist's binder, he whispered, "Wait, wait." Tears ghosted his eyes again.

The boy leaned closer and kissed his tears away like the morning sun drawing away dewdrops that gathered in the night.

"Don't worry, let me?" The boy whispered back, voice low and warm, "I've seen your body."

Even as his mind was hazy with heat, the young artist couldn't stop himself from asking, "H-how?"

"I'll show you in the morning." There was a hint of teasing in the boy's voice again. And so the artist could no longer resist anything else the boy was doing.

The boy reached out again, caressing the artist's body in ways that he didn't know how himself.

The two tumbled together, their lips teasing and tasting each other, finding new grooves and curves and ridges in their forbidden places.

The two boys fell asleep together, bodies pressed into one.

In the morning, the boy had left, but there, slightly crumpled amidst drapery, was a page torn from his notebook drawn with the young artist sprawling across the sofa, with a flat chest and toned legs and angular jaw and that persistent too-wide smile. There were details that the artist himself had never even noticed, so long had it been that he stared at himself in the mirror.

The young artist took the sketch in his hands and traced his fingers over his new lines. The lasting touches of the boy ghosted across his skin, telling him that all of him was his.