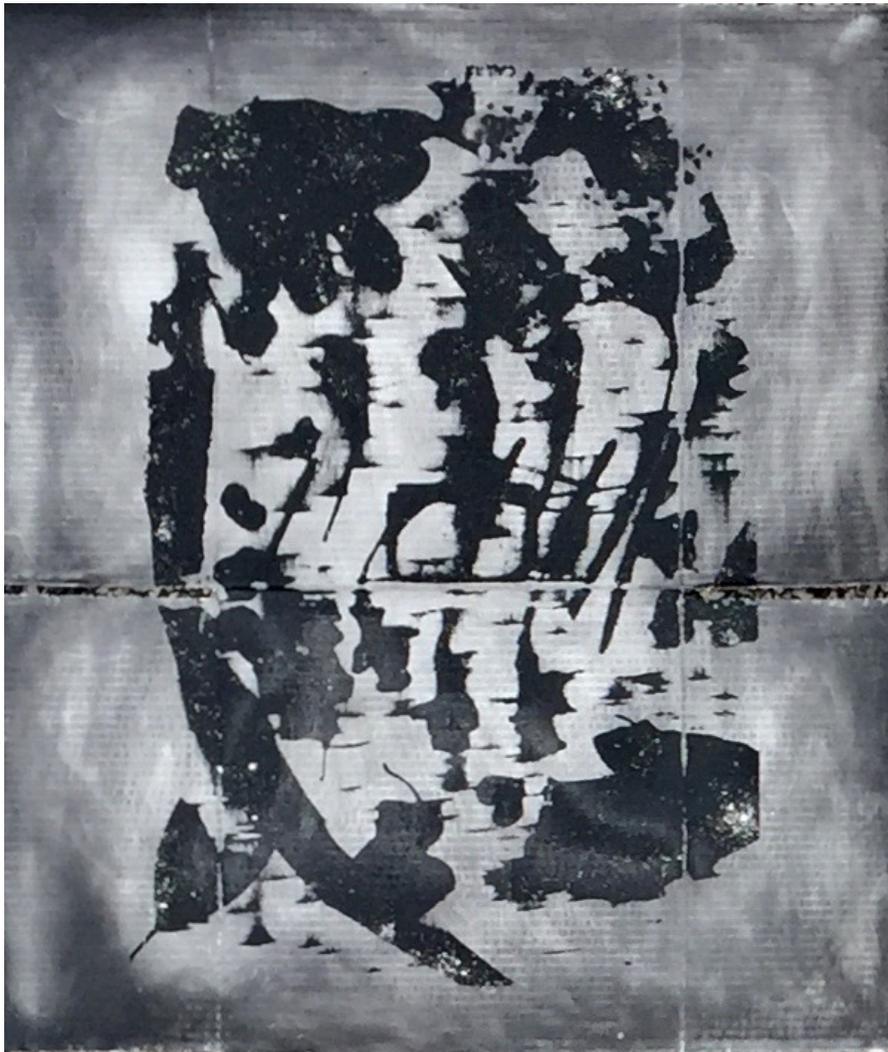


Dead Narcissus: a sequence with found objects

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Words by Reilly D. Cox



My mother and I walk back from an abandoned townhouse that has a sign out front of it, off Baltimore's East 36th Street, listing it for public auction. Somewhere behind us, my brother and friend walk, discussing art or coffee or just laughing, and it would be a lie to ask. My mother and I had been imagining if we were to buy it, and fix up the broken windows and the rotting frames, and be a part of this neighborhood with the good gardens and the clean sidewalks, but we know—we know—that the house has already been sold, years ago, and that the sign just will keep hanging there, until the house collapses, or disappears into something sleek and renovated. We move on to talking about her uncle. He grew narcissus, or daffodil.



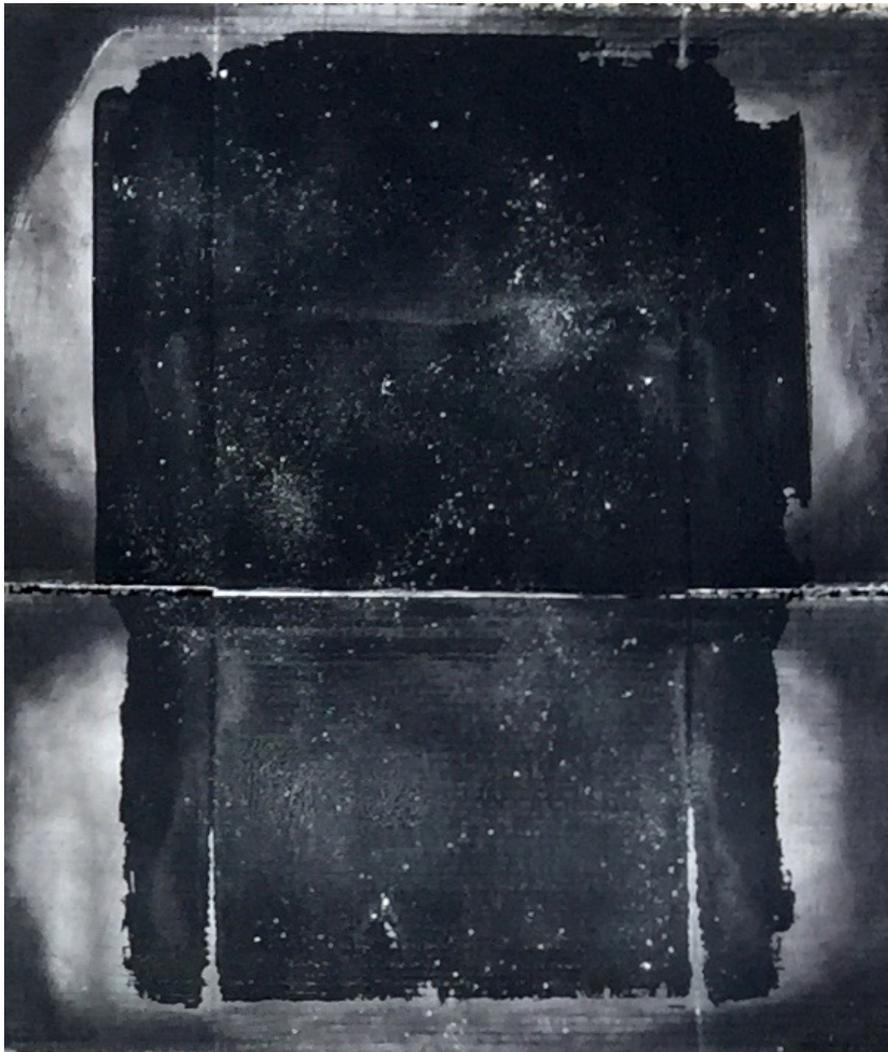
It's uncertain why her uncle grew narcissus. I ask her and she doesn't know. She says that narcissus is poisonous to animals and that's why the flower is so common in nature—the animals let it bloom or they die. She says that he kept entire fields of daffodils, but why, and whose fields, and what happened to them when he died? And she doesn't know. But we can see them, easily enough, if we think about them: fields of yellow heads, bobbing solemnly, little eruptions of spring out of Virginian winters. In Maryland, the flowers marked March, and how sorry they must have been for that: no one knew when the snows would end, and daffodils were just as likely to be buried under snow again as late as June. But by that time they would have wilted, and died, and the yellow drop away and turn brown on the soil, and even in the Silver Run, or Westminster, or Chestertown, or any of the countless houses, it was never enough to last.



I'm told I'm like that uncle, her father's brother, but I never know what to say to that: I don't want to be him. It has nothing to do with him as a person: he wrote about Faulkner, and was generous with his students, and was well-acquainted with the poets who came to his school in the hopes of having one known poem, but I don't want to be a Him. It's not his fault, though. He died, without ever having met me, and his children left his papers in boxes, and they were destroyed in the flood, and then we only had what writing he had left: some articles on Faulkner, and a few scattered children's books, but even then I might be lying—there are many dead writers in the family, all of little claim, and good Catholics all around.



Back on the walk, my brother was eying trash. Or perhaps it was the next day, when we walked up and down the neighborhood, I looking for flowers to steal, he looking for discarded gloves and plastic bags and packaging. This was before the death of the grandfather but after the death of the father. That's how we remember houses at this point: who is dead? who is still living? Aaron was the last to die in the duplex, but then father was the first in the farmhouse; poppy died when we moved into our mother's in Lauraville, but Cindy was not murdered until I moved to Tuscaloosa. But still, all the while, consistency: two brothers, one sexless, going on walks, picking up various forms of trash, whether for prints or preservations. I don't remember where he found the daffodils: they either were at a corner, withered, or stolen from our own yard, stubborn in their resilience to the snow. Only one dead came from that home, a fiancé, but she wasn't mine.



In Alabama, the narcissus bloom in early February, almost to the day of the anniversary of our father's death. Or rather, when he was found. Like so many dead, it is an act of finding that marks the day, or the hour: we give them time, say they must be running late, or overslept; and then something changes and we are banging down the door, we are calling the police, we are climbing through the windows. It doesn't snow in Alabama, or it rarely does, and what were blizzards in March is a grey and muddy day in February. It was the kind of mud that pulls drunks in rivers, or lets my car slide down the length of the yard and sit trapped in the backyard. It took two days of sun and gathering scrap wood before I could rock it out of its ditch. Afterwards, I drove around, looking for daffodils, as there are so many different kinds. Around the corner from my house, where they're going to expand the road and demolish the neighborhood, an overgrown acre is breaking into clusters of yellow, little nested bulbs ever dividing into greater and greater clusters. I dig some up and bring them back to my own yard and plant them there. I can only imagine what the next tenants will find.