

Mesándel Virtusio Arguelles - Kristine Ong Muslim

## Fourteen Pictures

1

The mouth of the old man  
remains open  
to speaking as if repeatedly  
breathing on the words  
so as to relinquish them wholly  
to the wind while earnestly  
listening nothing is heard

by the old man in the middle

2

In the hollow of their mouths  
the hymn for darkness seems in tune  
Marked by eyes that roll back  
in extreme terror  
while huddling in front  
in an inexplicable urge to congregate  
when traveling to Saint Isidore

Night crawls past sanity's remains

Left behind by a dwindling sanity

3

Crashing any moment now is

the blade

against whoever invites to the dining table  
this widow, who volunteered to redeem  
the Israelites, according to the Apocrypha  
Her expression is meek  
yet intent on fulfilling what she took upon herself:  
behead the enemy without faltering

There is no need to rinse  
even when the hands are bloodstained  
4

A combination of terror and madness  
is on the face of the god swallowing  
his offspring

As if aware of his utter depravity  
yet lacking power  
even in his divinity

to overcome an immense hunger  
like that of a beast  
His eyes nearly bulge out of their sockets

in intense craving and incredulity  
The hollow of his mouth is vast  
Swallowing the insides

5

The witches convene  
The two main characters  
are on the opposite sides:  
the great he-goat to the left

and the maiden is seated  
on the right side that had been lopped off  
during restoration, according to the note  
the over fifty-inch distance across

The edge of what was painted had vanished  
You disappeared in the middle of the canvas  
6

Discovered upon close examination:  
the veil was painted only at the end  
It cast a pall over the docile face  
of a lady who leaned against a rock  
her slightly bent body

The arm rests against the head  
The piece of cloth is so light  
but cannot be lifted  
7

Nothing else can be uncovered  
except for what's in the beginning:  
orphaned dog in a piece of land  
Only the head is visible overhead  
Deeply unsettling  
is that gaze from the pit  
where only the eyes can be seen  
Whatever's in front is at the brink  
of exclusion and salvation  
8

Where were the two going—  
to a nearby mountain  
where horsemen  
were likely to go  
or somewhere much farther than the unknown  
places the painter visited as he succumbed  
to isolation at Quinta del Sordo  
with his demons  
the creatures wrenched from silence  
and perhaps, with the precious Leocadia  
9

Compared to the figurines at the threshold to the right  
the long queue on the left is more prominent  
at the back: those who were hazily sketched  
The blurry-faced ones in the procession  
They make up most of the artwork  
if not the loss of the painter  
who chose to distance himself from the public  
without ever leaving the public behind  
The shadows could not leave him  
10

What is concealed by the hand  
that was concealed by the hands  
that created the fourteen pictures  
on the walls that spanned  
the entirety of his sanctuary

What the paintbrushes insisted on

What was held by the form

in his hands kept secret

from everyone

11

The only one looking up

among the men reading

from the same book appears not to have time

for knowledge that can alter

any condition

Filling a blank that has been reserved

Ending in the unseen

12

The two strangers wield something for beating

each other and are likely bloodied from the brawl

even though the painting shows only one of them

to have bloody streaks on the face

Both are knee-deep in mud

in a duel where there's no retreating

until the end. Whoever will win

stays locked up where he has escaped

13

They seem to float in air:

The Daughters of Night

Doling out destinies to those on the ground

like the person they're with on the canvas

The hands were tied

yet he was still able to paint

those who tied his hands:

Clotho, Lachesis, Atropos

14

Along with owls and bats

also common in his works

are the witches

Depictions of the deterioration of form

like the senile folks before the dinner table

in the picture. The gaze and the grin etched

on the face of the old man at the center

you take to mean as his readiness to feast



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