

Quartet

Mary Shaw

start with poldy
she's a vacant
shiny surface
story can't be
told in first person
poldy is an idol
in the mirror i
saw her in the
shop window
had never seen
someone like
that before
and she wasn't
doing anything
special was just
fixing every
one's chairs
and exposing different
angles
of her body
which was thin
but round in
amazing long
curves going
up and down
except for the belt
of here i am
right around the
hips and then
protruding really
full breasts
clothes nothing
special the usual
these days
jeans black
t-shirt showing
glimpse of belly
skin and under
wear the crazy thong
more or less
matching the
slinky slides
insolently
shuffling along
none of this
for sure would
have mattered
if it weren't for
poldy's face
god is it
fair a woman
like that with such

the i who's
seeing this is sarah
it's me who's
watching poldy
strutting i'm the
one who's
writing here
the one who
thought of this
quartet it all
came on one
day in august
when i was
sitting sweetly
as usual dealing
with the fact
that i have
hair in the
corner at the
beauty shop
when you look
close you'll see
i'm beautiful
but nothing
about me stands
out except for
very often my
hair that's soft
and brown and
messy curly
everybody likes
it just like they
like me and
wonder what
i'm all about

i live in
an apartment
in brooklyn
i'm trying to
figure out
what to do
for now i am
still going to
school trying
to become
a writer studying

there's a man
across the aisle
johannes who's
looking both at
me and poldy
he's a customer
i guess of poldy
in any case she's
fixing his chair
he's struck for
sure like i am
by her beauty
and wondering
what she's doing
shuffling round
the shop when
she could be
a top model
making billions
in a deeper
hall of mirrors
johannes can't
help thinking
things like that
because his job's
about exchanging
values you
guessed it
he's a kind
of banker the
upscale kind
that's always
wearing suits
to no one knows
just where
anyway he's
thinking poldy
on his shelf
that would be a
nice trophy
but at the same
time there's a
nagging thought
nipping at his
sandy brown

i'm tom i
am afraid of
hairdressers
but have decided
i should cut
my hair i've
come here 'cause
it looks decent
calm composed
concerned with
only form
removed a
bit from all
the frenzy my
hair's too long
to be a real
composer's
everyone will
think i want
to look the part
of someone
really dreamy
when that's not
what i want
i just want
to make things
sound right
stand up to what
i need to know
but can't express
or find another
way i don't
much care how
good i look
except i do not
want to look
flaky or spaced
out the work
i do in life is
serious i care
only to look
clean-cut move
through the
world so i
can make my
music within
i hear things
but i can't say
what they are
i only can
identify their
timbres their
notes then i
assign them

pale skin pale
lips pale eyes
smiling teeth
and strong but
messy long
natural looking
silver blond
hair eyes
blue of course
thick shaded
and set off
by ashy lashes
perfect brow
and cheeks
well somehow
opposite to
body's shape
more roundy
open than long
drawn

poldy lives
in a small
apartment
on the upper
west side
around 86th
and broadway
carpet powder
blue a queen
size mattress
on the floor
mirrors on
the wall
lots of closets
the kitchen's
in the corner
it's a studio
with not much
light but a
big white
bathroom
down the hall
it's paid for
by her boyfriend
marc who lives
in rome an
older guy a
record producer
he's married but
he's mad about
poldy (everybody
is) but he hardly
ever gets to

to get a ph.d
i teach english
at a great university
that makes
me feel both
big and small
i'm happy
i've a job
i like but
it doesn't really
feel like the
right thing to
do i don't
connect with
the person i'm
supposed to
be and i feel
like i'm not
following my
destiny instead
it's like i'm
always putting
everything on
hold waiting
for my right
moment which
i realize might
well never come
and my life
will be a big
wasteland
the desert
the emptiness
from which i
sprang instead
of a delicate
monument
a whisper of
comfort to
all who come
saying yeah
this life is
worth it not
for itself like
my mom once
said but for that
something which is
magical singing

hair what good
to me is all this
money?
what's the point
of all her gold?
that's when
his gray eyes
get glimpse of
sarah
who sits there
like an answer
to all questions
he's decided he
should put on hold

johannes is
in fact from
germany i
heard him
saying that
to poldy
when he
first struck
up a conversation
that first day
when she sat
him smiling
in his chair
he noticed that
she had an
accent even
by the way
she said hello
and figured
she was
scandinavian
gorgeous blond
more delicate
than girls in
germany far
prettier than
most in usa
he thought she
didn't realize her
own worth and
set out from the
first moment

my rhythm
my dynamics
i guess those
are the parts
that come
from me
i match what
i am feeling
up with what
i hear and
what i hear
well i don't
know where
it comes
from but i
know that
it connects
to me and
makes my
life make sense
worth living
i never have
lived without
music i didn't
always think
about it in the
same way
at first i only
liked to play
it repeat on
the piano
tunes i liked
to hear and
could manage
with my fingers
and the notes
my teacher
taught me how to
play i guess
i was a kind of
monkey then
but i was always
a monkey
with feeling
everybody
noticed my
light touch
and that made
me feel happy
and alive the
rest is kind
of hazy
i don't like
to think much
about the past
am afraid my
decisions

new york any
 more he's got
 too many irons
 in the fire so
 poldy who's
 from denmark
 lives her own
 life got a job
 at the shop for
 something to do
 doesn't really
 need the money
 just needs some
 where to go
 people to see
 so she won't
 be all the time
 alone the first
 time she went
 to the shop
 was just last year she
 was herself
 a customer
 wanted to get
 her hair cut short
 but frank the
 owner wouldn't
 do it said he
 couldn't it was
 just too gorgeous
 he'd pay her
 not to cut it
 off to come into
 the shop parade
 around take people's
 coats sit them
 in their chairs
 get them something
 soda or coffee
 while they wait
 to get their hair
 done poldy thought
 why not ? she
 hadn't anything
 to do just liked
 to see herself
 reflected against
 the backdrop of
 the city and to
 check her silver
 face all day long
 make sure it still
 was there making

in the air
 something
 unforeseen that
 can't be touched
 but holds
 everything
 together
 sometimes in
 great moments
 it comes to
 me in words
 sometimes i see
 it all around
 trees sometimes
 for days i forget
 sink into fear
 obsession with
 details and
 warding off
 death but then
 i'll get a break
 somehow open
 up and that's
 where my hope
 and my heart is
 my writing
 is a witness
 that's why i'm
 here to keep
 track of everything
 that happens
 here in this shop
 where everything
 like poldy is
 materially firm
 shiny hard metallic
 or soft and pink to
 touch where the
 magic is well nigh
 invisible but
 the world we can
 grasp looks so
 shiny and real
 that we can't help
 abandoning the
 other i guess
 it is this idolatry
 that brought

first appraising
 glance to win her
 for her own sake
 more than his
 he never
 really clinged
 to property
 had less the
 urge to own
 than to close
 the deal the
 thing that could
 lead to something
 better something
 that might grow
 that's why he was
 a very good wall
 street banker
 everything he
 touched turned to
 gold but the gold
 never really stuck
 to him he never
 had to figure
 out what to do
 with what he
 earned just pour
 his all and every
 thing into the
 next deal at work
 at home and
 in his love life
 of course he'd
 had a lot of
 girlfriends
 usually the
 prettiest any
 one could get
 all shapes and
 sizes all
 nationalities
 with some he'd
 been entangled
 more than others
 and when he was
 fourteen

haven't all been
 right but i decided
 to stick with
 music to make
 it my life and
 go to music
 school of course
 i was admitted
 to julliard i'm
 good at what
 i do and i have
 worked hard
 practicing hours
 since i was twelve
 impossible
 to count them
 all day long
 i worked on
 this and that
 kind of music
 till music was
 my whole language
 hardly said or
 thought anything
 else but i was
 never a child
 prodigy i didn't
 have a special
 image of myself
 as someone
 artistic a genius
 or even as a
 person with a
 special gift
 composing-wise
 i started rather
 late i just became
 so full of music
 so good at handling
 the instruments
 and notes that
 i began to
 translate simply
 the things i
 heard in the
 time when i was
 not playing music
 i liked that and
 started playing
 less and less
 and listening
 around me more
 and more and
 the music somehow
 just came to
 me and comes
 as long as i'm

people feel
surprised and
happy that any
one could be
so pretty and
just be kind of
standing there

it's been some
time since
i have lived
with jo i'm
working for a great
photographer
ten people want
to be my agent
i've shot more
than a dozen ads
and even played
a small part
in a film but
nothing really
is happening
except i'm
wearing thin
i want for
something different
to be happening
and that is why
i'm leaving him
i think that things were
better back
inside the shop
someone else
i should have
looked for
something better
not the same
reaction to my
pale pink skin
but something
like a transformation
i shouldn't have
gone in for
multiplying mirrors
i should have
tried to make the
mirror thing stop or
blocked it so the
world could turn to
something else
a place where
i could be inside

me in the shop
looking to be
more like poldy
trying to include
something in my
life like what's
going on between
johannes and her
a measured
and controlled
exchange

i wish i weren't
always noticing
thinking what are
other people doing
i wish i could be
centered on myself
but ever since the
first day i came
in here i realize
that i hardly
fill my chair
i'm too busy
watching thinking
staring and then
trying to be
nice cover up
the fact that i
hear every word
that's said and
note
each look like
i was jealous
it's like it's not
about me but
if ever i'm to
be a writer the
world will have
to turn around
me more for
now let's say
i'm just taking
notes trying
to develop my
hand so it's
okay if i just
ogle poldy and
write down all

he thought he was
in love but
then the girl
he wanted
moved away and
he started on the
path of choosing
substitutes better
than the one that
slipped away
that's always what
he told himself
as soon as he
got free and
started working
on the next girl
deal that's what
he thought when
he saw poldy
and planned her
future starting
from his loft
a very nice
place in soho
the third place
he'd lived since
moving to new
york the first
was a kind of
dorm uptown
for all kinds of
students
from all over
the world
he lived there
while earning
his mba then
had a small
apartment on
the upper east
side while he
worked for
a while at a
city bank then
moved when
he switched to

not anxious and
when it does
my job's to
write it down

not everything i
hear is dark
you know it's
just that darkness
is easier to float
in to get your
bearings in and your
grip it feels well
more substantial
and deeper than
light
that never really
shines from some
thing within you
have to get empty if
you want to feel
light
so it's always kind
of permeating
chasing you out
of wherever
you have been
that's why we
musicians like to
linger in
the dark it's
easier to walk
around down there
pick up sticks
and relate to other
people's ...
sympathize with
others' beleaguered
lost souls who
just like our own
have been
rummaging
not knowing
where to go or
just not wanting to
move forward
in time darkness
is a place to stop
i know when i
feel nothing
perfectly okay
it has to be an
overcast gloomy
day with some
thing really bad
threatening

there was i think
 i saw one man
 in the shop
 who didn't ever
 really see me
 no matter
 what time
 of day it was or
 how many times
 he came in
 it was weird
 like he was
 blind didn't
 have eyes except
 maybe to worry
 about his hair
 and shy away
 from what that
 small woman
 thought with her
 dark and judging eyes
 always
 hiding in her
 fluffy bangs
 if i could maybe
 go back make him
 look at me then
 perhaps i could
 start something begin to
 step away from surfaces
 think and feel
 i'm real instead of
 only standing like
 a statue happy
 just to be projected
 never thought i'd
 feel so hollow
 would need somebody
 else
 to fill me from
 inside but now i
 think i do his
 name was tom

i wonder how
 i'll make him
 notice me
 i've dressed
 myself in
 simpler clothes
 today hoping
 that he'll
 see inside

the moves the men
 around her make
 i knew that when
 she quit working
 at the shop it
 had everything to
 do with johannes
 they started going
 out the first day
 they met and
 now i know
 she's back here
 looking for tom

i can't believe
 she wants to
 get under his skin
 he doesn't care
 a thing about her
 beauty i thought
 at first he had
 a crush on me
 but then i figured
 out he was just
 worried wondering
 what i thought
 about the way
 they cut his hair
 he smiled at me
 shyly that first
 day when we
 crossed the street
 and invited me to
 hear a concert
 tell him what i
 think of his
 music which
 he says he's
 writing just for
 women like me
 not for experts
 nor dummies not
 for artsy types
 nor hicks just
 normal feeling
 people who like
 things that sound
 good so i went
 and i did think

wall street to be
 closer and to have
 more time air
 space

poldy she was
 great but she
 was boring
 i would never
 hurt a girl like
 that but i don't
 mind that
 she left because
 in fact there
 wasn't much
 between us as
 soon as she
 began to make
 money on her
 own there wasn't
 much for me
 to do we ate
 and exercised
 together we
 made love out
 of habit more
 than happiness
 she was pretty
 everyday really
 gorgeous but
 never any more
 or less than on
 the day we met
 so there wasn't
 anything for
 me to look for
 or watch it was
 like keeping
 track of weather
 where the sun
 always shines
 and that's all right
 but can't go on
 forever once it's
 been established
 that it never
 rains

giving the horizon
 an edge only
 then can i cough
 up a comment
 on the world
 and it's only in the
 dark within where
 the folds meet
 that i am sure that
 i myself am really
 something as
 opposed to maybe
 nothing at all
 that's why i tend
 to shut the good
 times out and have
 not spent much time
 with women i'm
 afraid that one of
 those or what she'd
 make of me could
 undo my carefully
 fingered knot turn
 me into something
 regular a space
 in which the sun
 might shine and
 then i would be
 nothing but an
 interval i've always
 thought it best to
 keep that one truth
 veiled conserve the
 world of complex
 layered forms but
 at times i get the
 courage to be honest
 think ahead or
 maybe on a
 somewhat grander
 scale and then
 i know enough
 about dust the
 pain that every
 creature sinks to
 this is enough to
 keep the shadow
 world connected
 no posturing of any
 kind's required
 it always cinches
 end of tragic plot
 perhaps a greater
 depth then and
 something true
 could grow if
 i myself would

i need for
 him to make
 something out
 of me something
 that's not
 tangible firm or
 real something
 that will float
 and carry him
 carry him into
 my arms i
 heard his voice
 his throat pained
 me i wanted to
 clasp my hands
 around his neck
 i saw the shifting
 darkness in his
 eyes i wanted
 to fix them with
 my own i can't
 abide his looking
 elsewhere any
 more i need for
 him to come
 to me supposing
 that i risk everything tell
 him with my eyes
 how i'm feeling
 why i came back to
 this bloody shop
 would he reject
 me for some
 other plainer
 girl who he
 thinks would
 have more heart
 or will he always
 simply want
 to stay aloof
 loving only
 shadows god
 and music last
 night i listened
 to his music all
 night long and
 pictured him
 beside me years
 long gone a
 father to three
 earthly children
 he was gray
 and all those
 coals burning in

it was beautiful
 and i kind of like
 tom but i think
 he's too caught in
 himself for me
 he never even
 noticed poldy
 so maybe he's not
 really interested in
 girls anyway he's
 got to be strange
 i wonder what
 has happened to
 johannes
 i wonder if he's
 found a new
 girlfriend
 he smiled at me
 the last time i
 saw him in the
 shop and once i
 thought he had a
 question that was
 meant somehow
 for me but i really
 do not know that
 guy from adam
 maybe i'll ask
 poldy how he is
 and why she's
 back here working
 at the shop

she could not
 believe her good
 fortune the day
 that she was going
 to ask poldy he
 was right there
 standing in the
 shop giving poldy
 her messages
 and mail but he
 didn't seem to care
 about poldy no he
 kept turning his
 eyes toward sarah
 looking at her
 smiling at her

that everyday can
 be as productive
 as the last even
 poldy noticed
 this and wanted
 something else
 to happen i guess
 that's why she
 went back to
 the shop it made
 things look like
 she'd been
 through a crisis
 a depression
 or a spiritual
 awakening of
 sorts at least
 if she moved
 backwards
 she moved
 somewhere
 instead of always
 standing around
 i think i'll go back
 there tomorrow
 look for her and
 ask her how
 she's doing
 give her all her
 messages and mail
 maybe even cut
 my hair and see
 if i can buy some
 pot off frank
 maybe i will
 see that small
 brunette
 who was always
 staring hard at
 poldy i wonder if
 she ever smiles
 her little body's
 interesting
 i think she's
 there a lot
 she always looks
 mixed up like

let the sun in
 let my whole
 insides be gilt with
 gold forgot about
 containment and
 dark spirits and let
 my body live in
 light that's when
 his eyes caught
 their first sight of
 poldy who had
 helped him many
 times before to
 settle in with
 milk and coffee
 he saw that there
 was milk also on
 her lips that parted
 in a tiny brilliant
 smile

he was minding
 his own business
 yes he was
 when he saw
 her at the shop
 that morning
 those clothes
 those shaven
 eyebrows milk
 drops on her
 lips at first he
 thought she
 must be there
 to clean how
 else could
 someone there
 look so unkempt
 but then he
 couldn't keep
 himself from
 staring she
 looked familiar
 standing there
 but like no one
 he'd ever seen
 she smiled just
 a little when
 she wiped her
 mouth and looked
 at him well kind of
 helpless her hair
 was weirdly pinned
 and her big black
 shoes were clunkier
 than mother's

his eyes
were gone
their fire faded
with my beauty
they became softer
and softer and
softer till at last
all the shininess
was gone we
were toned down
to nothing together
there was nothing
to us left but smoke we
had turned inside
to something other
than ourselves
together we were
ashes we were gone

and when she
left the shop
he followed
she asked if he could
drive her home
she didn't want to
say yes to that
but did say he
could have her
number maybe
after all i'll get a
life she thought
but before i
ought to write
it down

there's a problem
something really
messing with her
maybe it's an act
or maybe she's
got something
on her mind
i see her there
writing in her
little black book
i wonder what
she's writing

but that look that
she kept giving him
was so intense
her pink-rimmed
eyes were pale and
flecked with gold
he wondered what
her body looked like
tall he guessed and
thin in that big sack
he never saw
a girl look so strange
and beautiful yes
her image got seared
inside his brain
that night he didn't
feel like working
he went out walking
late wishing he had
poldy at his side