

Slow Puncture

by Emily LaBarge

Glass is a rare material that contains nearly all extremes and opposites, poised with potential to heat or cool, fuse or shatter, flatten or billow, transparent or opaque, solid or liquid, rigid or pliant, sturdy or fragile, take shape in moulds positive or negative. For all these reasons, it is, perhaps, very human, at least conceptually — capable of holding hope and fear, amazement and disappointment, curiosity and surprise. (See how it gleams? See how thick here, but thin there? How did it get that curve, that mottled surface, one smooth edge, one ragged? Be careful, don't touch it, don't walk too close, don't shake the ground, don't...)

In the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries — when glass was a valuable commodity and sometimes considered to have magical, alchemical properties — people were known to suffer from an anxious disorder called the “glass delusion.” Those afflicted believe their bodies were made of glass and could smash into millions of pieces at any moment. Famous cases include the late medieval French King Charles VI, who wore clothing reinforced with rods, wrapped his buttocks in blankets so he could safely sit down, and forbade his advisors to come near him lest his body accidentally fracture and disintegrate. As centuries passed, preponderance of the delusion waned, leading some to believe that it was linked to technological developments: how the evolving materiality of the world around us makes us newly precarious in our bodies, feel things we have never felt before, perhaps never even imagined.

Which is another way of saying, as is so evident in Harriet Bowman's elegantly delicate but valiantly durable works, we are relational beings and everything is connected, whether it seems that way or not. What appears rare and refined, carefully crafted — large panels of glass, some cast into circles from objects like old tires, or deflated oblongs from car headrests, some with delicate black swirls in unpredictable designs — is also broken, discarded, a waste product repurposed by the artist to make something shiny and new, unexpected, entirely her own.

It started when the artist noticed, more and more, the preponderance of smashed glass on the street, shattered and scattered from the vandalised windows of parked cars unsuccessfully highjacked. Or maybe it started with her own car, in which she used to drive her wakeful baby at night in the hopes of getting him back to sleep. Or maybe it started with the memory of sitting in that same car in a parking lot at the very moment her mother suffered an aortic aneurysm. Or maybe it started even before that, when in times of difficulty her car was a safe place, a solid version of autonomy in an otherwise fluctuating life. Or maybe it started even earlier, on the Devon farm where she grew up and noticed brackish water sitting around in old tires, murky pools where mosquitos bred infinitely (though only the females bite). Or maybe it started somewhere else, nearer or further, subjective or objective, earthbound or cosmic, because time is malleable and origins diffuse, no matter how we like to trace them for certainty. No event, no object is singular.

Initial forays in glassmaking that used the broken window pieces to constitute new objects proved that the life of any material is as continuous as you want it to be. Bowman, having located an auto shop with scrap glass, found that different kinds of cars had different kinds of glass that produced different kinds of new glass when heated in the kiln, their fragments fusing back together in unpredictable ways and emerging each time a surprise. The sculptures equally surprised the viewer: so slender and slight, transparent and mercurial, their beguiling surfaces pocked and pitted, graceful topographies, are held in place by metal structures somewhere between minimalist modular display strategies and industrial factory line production. Their strange legs and arms recall kinds of readymades, as if they have been repurposed from some previous life in manufacturing or even crash-testing, but here they hold precious objects that likewise hold more than meets the eye.

Bowman's static sculptures hold implicit violence and repair, grief and whatever it's opposite is (the thesaurus tells me that's *joy*, but I believe we might not ever have a word to balance out *grief*, and making art is one way of reconciling with such existential dilemmas). They are animated from within by the potentiality of the former lives of their materials, now turned glittering afterlives. The car — Bowman's car, the broken car windows of strangers, the blown-out tires of a sportscar on the motorway now present as a sea of pungent blue rubber, the aftermaths of collision and disaster — is here but not here, a body but not a body, like a phantom limb that you can feel but not touch, its invisible nerve ends aflame.

How do we hold onto what's gone? Does it have a feeling, a shape, a texture, a story that translates into different shapes and forms that grasp at a novel kind of permanence? In Bowman's freestanding sculptures, dark swirls curl inside the glass like a deluge, shining with a slight rainbow patina here and there. These are strands of horsehair, taken from her deceased mother's more recently deceased horse. It is coarse and thick, but sometimes only present in fine single strands that have taken on a life of their own in the heat of the kiln, their proteins letting off dusky shades that extend like lunar craters or oceans, a world in each panel of glass. Unlike the smashed glass made whole again, the horsehair is finite, its quantities will run out as automobiles continue to be made and destroyed, but here is it now, forever, frozen like a butterfly pinned to a board and carefully preserved — a specimen of a specimen of a life.

In a way we are all made of glass — like we are all made of grief and its enduring talismans, of velocity and stillness, of the organic and inorganic — which means we can also be put back together, reformed into something unexpected. All it takes is some pressure and imagination.

Emily LaBarge is a Canadian writer based in London. Her work has appeared in *Artforum*, *Bookforum*, the *London Review of Books*, *frieze*, and the *Paris Review*, among other publications. She is a regular contributor to *4Columns* and the *New York Times*. *Dog Days*, her first book, will be published in the UK by Peninsula Press in 2025. Excerpts appeared in the winter 2023 issue of *Granta* (and received a notable mention in *Best American Essays 2024*) and the autumn 2023 issue of *mousse*.

This text was commissioned by Standpoint on the occasion of Harriet Bowman's Mark Tanner Sculpture Award exhibition 'Slow Puncture' 16 May - 28 June 2025.