

The View · *Evan Harris*

I LIKED MODELING at the art school. The rooms were large, with tall ceilings and a good bit of even sunlight all day. I've since learned that they call that light a northern exposure, and that painters dream about it. Maybe the right light makes success look better, or maybe it makes success. I don't know, but sometimes he'll mention it, damning the darkness of his studio, a small airless room.

The students at the school kept a pot of coffee hot all winter and opened the windows at the first hint of spring. They cleaned their brushes thoroughly and made sure their easels were in the same position week to week. They were generally quiet, graceful people who kept their distance from me. Although I'm not breakable, I prefer it that way. I'm not a painter, and it's unlikely that we'd have much to talk about. Once I met a student from the school on the street. He recognized me vaguely, but not my place. Maybe my hair was different, or he only knew me from the angle at which he was painting, it isn't clear.

In the spring of the year that's just passed, I was posing for a portrait class. My pose was very easy, not painful at all. There was a small twist in my trunk, to the left, so that my shoulder was leading and the bone structure of my neck was exposed. Otherwise I was straight, facing front and looking ahead. The students normally want more from a model, poses that emulate your life as a human being: sitting curled the way you might with a book, or twisting head over shoulder as if fixing your hair. These poses are to be avoided. They will make you ache and wait for the time to pass. Your head will become stiff from a tilt someone called beautiful, or your wrist numb from an angle someone called graceful. You will latch onto the points of your pain and get locked out of yourself.

I was set up on a pedestal, the students in a semicircle around me. There was a brief skirmish over my profile from the left, and the loser took the view from full front. I suppose he decided to challenge himself. He was in my direct line of vision, so there were moments when we linked eyes. He may even have felt I was looking at him. I know they do sometimes, although properly speaking, they are disrupting your view.

The view of what, someone might ask.

The view which can become anything.

I can't say the time went quickly when I was posing, because it didn't go in the usual way at all. Time fell into and away from itself. I would begin with an image, or a passage from a piece of music, or words I'd overheard on the street. A red checked cloth from a picnic in my childhood would bleed to the dress I'd like to buy, to an image of myself in the dress, dancing with John. I may add inches to my height and grace to my movement. John would become the man I knew when I first moved to this place, who took me to restaurants and looked at me as though I reminded him of somebody he'd loved. I would become that woman, sitting down as the waiter spreads a cloth over the table in a café. I am wearing a finer version of the dress I'd like to buy, and I am someplace new, someplace else.

It's different now, the way my thinking goes. The view which can become anything is eclipsed, primarily by the pain in my body. I know he damns me silently if I move. That's only fair. My job is to be still and let him breathe for me.

Last spring the group measured me with their thumbs and paint brushes, finding miraculously that I fit onto the canvas. You know they feel like god for that instant, having scaled you into fictional space. I appeared only ghost-like for the first sessions, colorless on the scale from white to black. The instructor had them painting in the old fashion, where color is laid on at the very last, and sparingly.

I liked to look at the emerging paintings. A semicircle of myself. Rather, a sampling of the possibilities whispered into a living object.

You are a container.

That is why you can be inside yourself.

You are a container.

That is why portraits are not of people, but of painters' ideas. Don't make a mistake and believe that ideas are like water and take the form of whatever vessel they find themselves in. In fact ideas are heavier and more substantial than any of the elements. Ideas are not in the periodic table, which lists everything, because the periodic table is an idea.

It was very early spring when the class began its sessions. The weather was chilled and rainy, but as the season progressed, it turned. The air became easy to navigate through, mild and breezy. It made you feel like a willowy girl, like the girls in photographs of picnics and at outdoor dress up parties. I began to walk the mile or so in city blocks home from the

school, took off my jacket and let the wide folds of my skirt swish with long steps.

The affair with John began on a particularly sunny day. He caught up with me, offered to walk me home. It was all very old-fashioned. He carried my jacket and made polite comments about what beautiful weather we were having. His arm hovered near my waist as we crossed streets and stepped up onto curbs. I could feel it. At first you might think that feeling is a thing of sense perception, but it's chemical, really: a mix of chemicals that makes the field between two bodies alive and tingling.

It may be more proper to say that the affair with John began when he lost the squabble over my profile, or when he converted his sketches of me to paint. I have chosen the beginning to coincide with our first meeting as equals. Not equals. Our first meeting each as similar entities, our first meeting each as people. After all, John does not have love affairs with the rotting oranges, the tables and chairs in his still life compositions.

My choice may be more logical than truthful. I may have chosen it through the logic of vanity.

We made love in the afternoons after the class, John describing my body to me in intricate detail. He told me he could see me with his eyes closed, that painting me, he felt like a clairvoyant. I was not as interested in these kind of statements as I may have appeared. I was not, in fact, sure what he was talking about and preferred it when he touched me physically, and not with words that hung on me like clothing I hadn't chosen for myself.

In the evenings we sat in a small park near John's apartment, drinking coffee from a thermos, pointing out children and elderly couples. People passing by liked to look at us. We complimented each other well, I suppose, by virtue of being opposites. Once a family of tourists asked us to snap their photograph. We obliged them, in many combinations in front of a small statue in the center of the park. The elderly grandmother insisted on taking a picture of John and me. She had me write my address on a paper napkin so she could send it from her home in Minnesota. I received it some weeks later. The pose is typical: man behind woman, encircling and framing her. I am a series of dark points collected against John's light hair, his pale pale blue eyes. When I squint, the photo looks as if it was taken in black and white.

The painting class continued into summer. Most of the students achieved a fairly good likeness of me. This is primarily a thing of measuring.

Instructors are fond of saying things like, an inch is a mile on a pretty face. You know this is said partly for your benefit, and you ignore it. Vanity won't do you any good at all.

John's painting won quite a bit of approval from the instructor. He praised John for the feeling of intimacy about the piece. He listened intently as John explained his reasoning, his idea, for choosing a pale pale blue for the model's eyes, for emphasizing the lighter highlights in her hair.

There are lines in the painting that touch me like his hands have done. They lie gently on the canvas, warm, cupping around and descriptive of the form. I admit his work is beautiful. I admit it, I do, but I do not like the picture. I resent that he calls it "Girl with Blue Eyes," that she is weightless like the girls in dreams, light, blue, heliotrope and summer drinks. I resent that the painting is not about me.

John entered that portrait, along with some other work, into a competition. It won him a ticket to Europe. He'll be there long enough to travel some, to look at the originals of everything and be confounded by their beauty. They gave him a studio to work in. Maybe it has a northern exposure.

It's late fall now, cold. I work for a painter who drinks coffee straight from the pot and pays for his paints ahead of the electric bill. He walks the slanted floor as I slip out of my robe quickly, like I'm peeling off a band-aid. It's a little warmer when he's finished working. He'll lay his big hands on me and rub my ribs, counting out loud. Or at least he'll pull the drapes over the window so it isn't quite as drafty.

The pose he has me in is difficult. I'm lying on a blanket spread over two chairs, propped up on my elbows, shoulders back, my chest and head inclined upward. At first I found the cracks in the ceiling made images, but now they are properly cracks again, from being looked at too often. I occupy myself by thinking about the places in my body that are aching, and rotate concentration so that the limbs won't fall too deeply asleep.

He paints my back and shoulders straining, skin full of veins. My heart shows beating in the pictures. That's what the last one was like, and this one, and the next one, I would imagine, because he does what they call highly anatomical painting. You know what he wants is to see what's underneath. You know he must have enjoyed looking at the skeletons in art school, maybe even cadavers. He has been tearing at me for some time now, loosening bits of flesh. Peeling. I am the first solid object he hits on the way to his idea.