

Imaginary Painting:

Dr. Thomas Garvin and His Wife · Charles Baxter

An unflecked scene: clothed in blue,
a young woman gazes out a curtained window,
while her husband sits self-composed across the room.
He watches nothing, this ancestor,
in a lost, forgotten place like England,
and no one gives them more than half a glance:
in the gallery the kids run past
toward the exhibit of Van Goghs,
where the crazy sunlight is lacquered gold
with heartsick energy. Back here,
the Garvins' room is dark, Victorian,
dedicated to its shadows.
See how they sigh each quarter hour
like tired clocks, and see the hole
between them, open like an ashtray.
The way she waits there, he can't think:
she expects a glimpse of B _____,
who once stood across the street
to give a lover's sign. His open letter
is face-up on the escritoire.
The doctor, as is apparent from his lines,
has lived a decade longer than his wife
and is not her match for passion,
as is this B _____, with his top hat
and perfumed hair. See her body,
curved expectantly, with shy breasts.
His pain is prose.
Notice how this half-lit scene
is feasting on subtractions:
the words and colors drain away, discarded.
The dim lighting sputters from two gold candles.
Here are the missing dog and cat,
here is brandy that is not set out,
here is fire absent from the fireplace,
and over there are spines of books no one can see.
Notice? nothing visible at all.
Near the cut flowers, painfully symmetric,

is Dr. Garvin, who stares and stares
after closing *The Journal of Anatomy*
with a tired snap. Damn all this learning!
They are separated, this darkened couple,
by the space between his journal
and her dress, and by the marriage
that made them both into a story
their friends would tell at dinnertime
to painters, who would see it all
as gestures wove the air, to illustrate.