Moving Stillness

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There are moments of my life that I remember as gerunds. I am falling from the tire swing into crisp, white snow. I am lying in chilled sand late at night as lightning rips through the clouds offshore. I am hiding my mother’s whiskey. I am kneeling next to my grandmother for the last time, and she winks at me. These words extend beyond the moment they were lived, as if those moments were still alive, as if they never faded. These words assert, “I am,” and flourish this claim with proof and inspire action. Something, someone, after all, must be behind the doing. Yet gerunds are at once malleable and non-specific. They allow moments to endure; they allow them to grow. The present progressive tense is just that: both present and progressive. For a memory to endure in this tense is for it to be molded by time and perspective, instance and progression. It is appropriate that a painting should immediately come to mind. The word “painting” is, by definition, a verbal noun, a thing in motion. Harmoniously both the action and the moment, a painting is a thing—but it is also so much more.

It is three o’clock in the morning, and there is a portrait before me. A figure reclines on a bed of pillows. The right hand lies over the belly; the legs are turned to the side, clasped together and drawn to the hip. They seem bound, forced into the frame, locked in place. Indeed, within the frame, the entire body is contained by a looming darkness overhead, but the figure asserts a faint glow. Warmth emanates from a delicate, white bosom that precedes a flushed neck and a rosy face. While the torso is soft—a gradient of gentle pinks and inviting flesh—the face grows harsher: lines of black from the cosmos above seep into the figure’s eyes and lips, hardening them, closing them. Even in technique, this contrast persists: the carefully blended colors blossom this figure out of darkness, shield him within their glow, yet sharp strokes of a palette knife smear and cut the paints to harsh points. There is almost an androgyny about this figure, a confusion or, then, a fusion. A fusion of soft and hard, light and dark, mind and body. This last pair I must linger
on: body lying limp and cuddled in warmth amid darkness, this figure could be sleeping, yet I know that he is not; eyes shut, the world invisible to him, this figure could be dreaming, yet I know that he is not. This figure could be many things, yet I know that he is, most obviously, me.

I know because I held myself on my childhood bed for hours to see him come to life. I know because I lived this. I felt sensation depart from each part of my corpse. First my legs, then my back, then my arms, each in its turn until it was only my face that was soft and not buffeted by rigidity. The blood left all non-essential appendages. In the end, it seemed no part was particularly essential: each cried out a final hum before fading into numbness. Viciously aware of what I could not sense, feeling the numbness, I found it strange that our word for “dulled feeling” warrants an entire sensation of its own. Feeling my entire body strained, focusing on nothing, and yet able to feel everything, a queer wholeness made itself known: though the parts of my body fell, each in its turn, to a deliberate stillness, each was now unified by this feeling. Just as a painting inhabits both an instance and an action, so, too, does a feeling, it seems. It is both an instantaneous impulse and a long, drawn-out echo, changing in time, progressing. Yet this figure in the painting now before me is, at once, not me. He is not the experience that I have just lived, the feeling I have endured and even now hear the echo of. He is something else entirely.

He is the skin that someone else wears; the entire work is this skin. There is another in this painting, though not represented obviously or outright. Rather, this shadow figure is in everything, lying beneath the obvious. The image of “me” is a boy as seen by someone else, a painter whose sight was morphed by love, morphed by fantasies of a boy purer than I am, purer than I was. The psychic forces that conspired with and against this painting are vast and varied, but understand that though colors and strokes have been arranged to bear a striking resemblance to my physical order—androgyny not excepted—I am not the only subject of this work. Rather, the one wearing my face, the one glowing back to me, is another: Brittany. After four years of notes, letters, sweet-nothings and ugly-somethings, I can write her name unconsciously. It seem s that she can call me from her paints just as easily. Just as every letter I penned was written in my hand, so, too, is her painting wrought in hers. It lingers as her essence, her watermark in dried paints that even now shimmer as if they are still wet.

She has, perhaps without trying to, painted herself into this portrait. At the outset—and I do not mean any offense to her—she has given me her breasts. Subtle as they may be, the curves and tenderness there do not mesh with the results of hours of my own self-observation and vain indulgences in
the mirror. For her, what needed no personalization was my most substantial part, the filler of the frame, my torso. She falls, perhaps, into her default and paints the breast of one of her female models, some other impulse than what I see in the mirror. My legs, shoulders, and hair are also left impersonal, vague, as if she were painting from memory rather than life. She focused instead on two parts: my hand and my face. My hand, so frequently a bond she and I would share in the world outside this encounter, and my face, the source of so much conflict in both. Enlightened by roaring colors, flanked by cheeks and nose nearly red with intoxication, the face erupts from the rest of the portrait. Yet the eyes and the lips, both sealed in blackness, ground all of this fury. They are the only places where the aura of darkness above penetrates.

Surely, I cannot suppose for her some deep-seated anxiety about my gaze, often mistrustful, and my lips, so often the source of empty sweetness as well as honest affections. I can, however, suggest that she has not painted me. She had resolved to paint her idea of me; regardless of whether or not I happened to be physically present, stiff on the bed, her painting would have come into being. The contradictions and inconsistencies now begin to fall into line: my soft breast, not born of a woman but instead a pillow for her head; my shoulders, only vaguely firm, a sign of the timidity she found attractive; my hair less a crown than hers to ruffle. When I see this portrait, I do not see myself. Rather, I see her. I see her hopes, her anxieties, her feeling of capturing me in art and, perhaps, in love. This image is far sweeter than any naked boy could ever be.

But I query this analysis softly as if it were a thought I dare not accidentally accept. For all the presumption and diligence I might commit to this work, I must see that in “seeing” her “seeing” me, I am myself “seeing” an imagined Brittany: one of my own design, one who worries about my gaze and my lips, but wants to project herself onto me as she has with my bosom. For all my presumed authority on what is “me” and what is “her,” for all my attempts to break down our encounter and arrange it, piece by piece, those pieces will never add up to a whole. This, I suspect, is because the pieces are infinite and do not fit together as puzzle pieces do. They are ever-changing; even as two pieces fit together, they melt apart, re-form. Inevitably, those notions of “you and I” melt as well. They morph and blend, separate again, rejoin. They flow like waves on a shore or paint on a canvas. Except this paint does not dry—it is ever multiplicitous and often beautiful, even if only for a moment as the perfect color comes and just as quickly goes like a swell stopping for an instant at the height of its surge. Such is the nature of ever trying
to know someone, even oneself. I thought I knew myself: the look of my face, the width of my wrist, the slight curve of my hips. But somewhere in the hours of painting, that instantaneous idea of “me” fused and intertwined with the action. Somewhere we became something different from the sum of the parts.

I am sitting in a conference discussing the virtues of a proper history paper. Hanging over the heads of six other writing tutors, a woman I have never seen gazes down at us from the wall. It doesn’t feel right to call her a woman; she’s not formed of flesh or bone but of paint and time, here reprinted and framed. It doesn’t feel right to say she “gazes,” either: her eyes are closed, her head nestled in her arm. Sliced from time and superimposed over a conference room wall, it is strange to imagine the woman lying for this work, *Le Repos (The Rest)*, in front of Pablo Picasso. Picasso captured this moment—this woman—decades earlier in a Boisgeloup studio. As I bask in her glowing presence, however, she seems very much present and alive.

Her flesh is a creamy purple, her hair a rich, wheat-yellow, like the high noon sun. Black intrusions hold her together at the edges of her being, but an indigo blue enchants these lines, breaks these corporeal boundaries. It is easy to imagine her dreaming, as if the moment we see now were the very instant she fell asleep. I begin to wonder if she truly was sleeping. I begin to wonder if it matters. That woman is gone; the fascination of this moment, with this painting, remains. Though the subject rests, the strokes are active, the colors vibrant and alive: the stillness nearly breathes. The model is perhaps not the present being I have imagined her to be, but this moment is nonetheless eternal. The frame draws focus to head; she lies on a swath of red, and an eerie green looms to the left. These encroaching colors are aggressive, inching nearly over her own form, just as the black in my own portrait sewed my lips and eyes together. *The Rest* is perhaps the perfect title for this piece: by her stillness, by her dream, the harshness of the red and the souring green are held at bay, held, at least, from her vulnerable eyes. They are closed; they are safe; they are wandering in the unconscious and the surreal, escaping the onslaught of reality. For all she cannot see with eyes softly shut, this dream state has freed her. With vision obscured, this is a moment of clarity. Perhaps we can only hope for an instant of stillness in this tempest of variability. Yet the painting continues.

My eyes flitter back to the conference at hand. I grin at the thought that this print of *The Rest* has indeed been a respite for me, if only for a moment. I take a breath. I look around to the others at the table, gauging whether my
distraction has been noticed. Signs point to yes; my grin fades. It seems we live our lives just as a painting does. We are at once present and infinitely progressing, always moving forward from one thing to the next, and yet only ever able to experience the moment. Whether “it” is the moment of the painting or the moment of experiencing the painting, it is undeniably an attempt to recognize the constant flow by holding it constant. Esse quam videri. In seizing the moment, the moment is truly something; it does not just seem to be.

The sun is shining down on jagged limestone; I am fastened to a rock that binds the sky above and the waves below. I wear only a bathing suit and a chalk bag; simplicity drives the climb. I am climbing barefoot across Blowing Rocks Preserve, one of the longest stretches of open rock on the Florida shoreline. The waves have mangled and sculpted the alcove I am in now, have made it somehow seem both unreachable and inescapable. In a state almost entirely at sea level, I take my thrills where I can get them. I am cinching meek holes in weathered slabs with hardened fingertips coated in opaque white chalk. My hands appear as ethereal creatures, almost a bridge connecting me to the world of the dead. The rock is made of the ocean’s skeletal remains. Its composition is truly a marvel: millions of years of organisms crushed and compacted so that they are no longer disparate parts adrift in the ocean, but a wall, a mausoleum, now facing the thrash of the sea once more. Here, their presence lingers; with my ear close to the wall, I swear I hear a briny coo.

Forcing my feet onto rigid pointe to catch the feint edges afforded me, my calves burn. My toes are wrapped in climbing tape, the skin beneath torn apart. Each step is pain; each grip is gritty. Yet, as conscious as one must be about the fragments of his body—about his limbs, toes, and fingers—in the heat of climbing, my body becomes just like the limestone I crawl across: the disparate parts are unified. Why should I want to do this? I am not entirely sure. It is a curious drive that holds me here. There is no comprehensible reason I should hang here; it is rather something intrinsic that fastens me, something within me that needs an outlet into the world. My first thought was the sport of the climb; then I thought meditation was the motive; then I thought you could use your body to dominate something so much bigger than yourself. Just as soon as I think I have found an answer, the reason changes or falls flat or is complicated by some new facet or shortcoming. If we are always in flux, so too, it seems, are our motivations. But if our reasons are fleeting, they are also permanent. Each vibrates in our grasp, but grows with us, progresses,
never truly leaving, only changing. The search is, at once, both an instant realization and the progression of meaning; it is beauty. I plant another foot, twist my knee inward to leverage my hips closer to the wall, and climb on.

Yet nature has no sympathy for such a fluid drive. Even the tide conspires against me. Earlier in January the inward flow consumed this rock face later in the day; later in the month, the swells froth forward earlier and earlier. Even now, I have been here for only an hour and the sea is already catching my feet in its incessant crash. My toes burn as the saltwater seeps through the bandaging and gnaws at the stripped flesh. The adhesive cotton begins to saturate and peel away, and I begin to understand that I am, in a very real way, alone. I thread my left arm through the crescent formed by my right and back up again to grab a solid spire. My left hand envelops it. The dog-toothed edges grip my arm, and, for a moment, my nerves, through their own silent screams, feel the rock. The pain fades as I parcel and explain it away: an uncalloused palm catching, defying, the momentum that would, unimpeded, cast me to the swell below. For all its discomfort, the caustic motion is deliberate; it is my own, and that is a comforting thought. My fingers field no such complaints; they’ve long since been petrified in layers of dead skin. They have become like the limestone they hold fast to: organic rocks, compacted by countless crashes, deadened and unified. And yet, just as time and persistence have chipped these monoliths down, I am worn; I am raw; I am falling.

I am underwater. I think I have hit the sand below, but I cannot tell. The churning and swirling would make me sick if my body were not locked at the core, trying to right itself. I open my eyes to the incendiary saline surroundings. There is nothing; there is everything. Dense swaths of sea bend and suck me under. Flecks of sand whip around, muddying the turquoise hue. A bubbling tempest of captured oxygen sprints for the surface. In this moment, I am nothing but the fierce and burning urge to beat back the entire ocean and breathe the sweet air into my lungs; I swear it would taste like honey. The sea takes me, lurches me forward, as if it wanted to spit me out. And so I go where it wills. My right shoulder is first to impact stone. It buckles into my chest as the rest of my body flips over. My left hand blocks the rest of me from slamming into the boulder, but my knees jerk forward into the uneven rock. Something hurts. The tide surges back, satisfied by my beating, as if heeding an unseen master’s call. Erupting from the pool, I cough, unsure of where the air has come from. With a final, visceral saltwater-and-phlegm explosion, I suck in the air at last and prop myself up. The current floats gently now, as if I’m not worth the effort. A calm sets in.
The water now at my waist, I stand up. I feel a pulse in my fingertips; I see it pounding in my breast. I am living viciously in my own flesh; I am thinking nothing. I am not a son, a brother, a student, or a climber; I am, for a moment, nothing but this moment. This blissful abyss just is. I just am. In this moment of failure, this is the reason. It will not be the reason forever, but it is the reason now. It will not be the moment forever, but it is the moment now. Blood begins to drip down my back. I look down: my skin has been ripped off, but I will become a bit more callused for it. I look up: the sun is shining in my eyes, but it can no longer blind me. The moment is gone, yet it remains. I reach for the first ledge. I begin climbing again.

WORKS CITED
