

The World-Winning Frame

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It's a long drive from New York to Pittsburgh, about six hours if you drive like a maniac. If you take your time and get distracted by pit stops it's liable to take all night. By the time my brother Andy and I made it through the stuffy madness of the Holland Tunnel, it was already nine. It was late December, but there wasn't any snow. The mild winter wouldn't allow it. We got on the Jersey Expressway and sat back in our seats. There was nothing to distract us now, no jockeying for position in the line for the tunnel, and all we could see was the luminescence of the white lines on the highway suggesting that we drive in a straight line.

A couple of hours later we were driving on the deserted late-night roads of Central Pennsylvania. It went in and out of being beautiful; it was farmland the whole time. I had taken over driving, but the loneliness of the road allowed me to look out the window and watch the hills roll past. We passed through a thicket of trees, and I saw a little house perched on a hill with its light on. I could hardly see it, but the light surprised me. It indicated a life that I couldn't possibly imagine.

We drove on. After a few more miles of pasture I began to see a glow in the clouds at the peak of a hill on the horizon. As we got closer it grew more distinct. It was only a few clouds in diameter. From mile to mile it would seem either orange or yellow, centered on a single bright cloud and dissipating through the surrounding ones. I finally asked if Andy saw it too, and he said he did. Neither of us had any good guesses. It seemed just as likely that there was a volcano on the other side of the hill as anything else; the possibilities fanned out to the very edges of my imagination, uncountable and nearly overwhelming. Dawn was still a few hours away, and the moon was in the rearview mirror. We both shifted in our seats as the spot of light became more distinct, saying, "It's so *weird*," and offering possible explanations, none of which seemed satisfying.

Finally, we crested the hill. At the bottom was a gigantic factory, with structures in bizarre and impossible shapes, silos and piles of anonymous rub-

bish two stories tall. In the center of the fenced-off compound stood a single wooden pole with a spotlight that illuminated both the ground beneath it and the circle of yellow clouds above.

This explanation didn't make the other possibilities less real, and the farther away we got from the factory, the less real it seemed itself. For a while we sat in silent thought.

We drove on and saw a bright green sign fast approaching. It listed the coming exits and their mile markers. We had overshot our exit by about twenty-five miles.

Panic and frustration gave way to laughter as I made an illegal U-turn. The factory seemed less remarkable from the other side, totally mundane, and I forgot that it was a volcano. I told Andy that I wanted to remember the way it had looked when we first saw it.

"You remember last year," he asked, "when I was driving to and from Ithaca every weekend?"

"Yeah."

"Well I had my photography class then, and I would pull off all the way up and down the road to take pictures. It was the only chance I had to get the assignment done, but I ended up with a couple of good reels. You see interesting things when you're on the road."

I thought about it for a minute and realized that I couldn't have taken a picture of the factory. I would have taken a picture of the clouds.

I too have made records. About a year ago, in late January, I made a record in black-and-white acrylics of myself and a girl named Ester. In the painting I look straight at the viewer, shoulders squared. She has turned her body to face mine and has pressed herself against me, but she looks away from me, out of the canvas. We take up the entire frame, and we don't quite fit. My eyebrows are high and apart. She is similarly calm, her lips gently closed and unsmiling. We look stoic on canvas. Her black hair shades the side of my head; in the space between faces it is unclear whose dark bits are whose. The shadows hide the edges of both of us. They make the separation disappear.

I don't have the painting anymore. I saw it recently after having not seen it for a long time and found that it had become a memorial. It's not so much our past selves that are memorialized, but the space where the separation disappears. It ends up being a memorial to the shadows. The last time I was looking at the painting I could only think of everything I had blocked out to create what I eventually recorded.

She was an actress, and to her any audience constituted a stage. In front of more than a couple of people she began to perform—talk became monologue, conversation became dialogue, all with the purpose of furthering any plot she could star in. She was a one-woman show and performing made her shine, sometimes in the faces of a grumbling audience who objected to being made an audience. At times I became just a face in a crowd that had gathered, in her eyes, to watch her.

When we were alone everything was different. She was still a performer, but now we were sharing the stage. She had all the exuberance that I've never had, was as bold as I was reserved. Together we became our average—she calmed, I came alive, and we met anxiously in the middle. But her spirit, what I would teasingly call “chutzpah,” remained. She would never hesitate to, as she put it, “call me out” on anything I said that didn't seem exactly right. If I didn't know what I was talking about, or if I had an opinion based on almost nothing, or if I was letting my frustration taint my perspective, she'd be the first to tell me. Her honesty, frequently brutal, enchanted me. And when we were closest, she laid her affections more bare than any woman I've known. When she stepped off the public stage, she hid nothing. Only when she wasn't hiding her affection was it real to me. When she made it visible she gave me proof, without which it may well have been imagined.

There was a time when we both tried to reverse this logic. When I looked into the layers of our acrylic counterparts on a sunny morning last July, I reminded myself that we were stoic. I saw the expressionless faces, the ones incapable of pain, and made mine match them. I turned and squared myself to look at her.

And I found that she had done the same. She was lying on the bed. Her legs made an approximate V, her knees together at the edge of the dulled-white wall. Her body twisted at the waist so that she was in profile from the bellybutton up. She seemed as if she had fallen, as if she had landed like that but bore no mark.

If the position was painful she refused to show it. The stripe of twelve o'clock light through the blinds fell on a blank slate, a face in line for a train ticket. Her eyebrows were unfurrowed; her lips hung on the verge of parting but were otherwise not troubled; she looked to the left of the sky beyond the ceiling. Her dark curls, the type that trap fingers, were scattered, concealing the pillow. She did not move except to breathe.

I looked from her face to the tops of my shoes, at my half-uncuffed slacks and my just-shifted feet, then around her apartment for the last time. Even for New York it was tiny. Her single twin bed, in which two could sleep only

as lovers, took up an even third of the room, while her narrow desk, scattered with scripts and flyers, took up another quarter. The room was longer than it was wide, narrowing in increments from the window to the door. It was not possible to enter while she chose an outfit or fixed her makeup in the mirror.

“It’s time,” I said, second-guessing the phrasing but knowing no other.

She didn’t blink. Her lips stayed closed, her body bent.

“I’m going.” She didn’t stir as I bent to grab my single bag, nor as I turned to make the three steps to the exit.

The heavy metal door slammed after me, and I wondered if I had slammed it or simply let it drop. I had not decided when, a few steps later, I heard it open.

“Wait.” It was neither plea nor command. I swiveled to see her bare shoulder, her neck and her face edging from behind the half-open door, as if held by some meager force or a sliver of some great one. Her eyebrows had narrowed, and her eyes had widened.

I found a cab on Houston Street willing to take us both to the airport and take her back home afterwards. What remained of her makeup by the Brooklyn Bridge had mostly welled as sediment in deltas beneath her eyes, but a brief river had left vestiges that faded at the top of her cheek. The closed window framed her in front of the East River. I watched her silently crying, and realized that my face was reflected in hers. The stoicism had broken with the first tear.

An hour later I was alone in LaGuardia Airport, trying like hell to shade her tear from memory and out of existence. But there was something in that tear that would cut through any curtain I might toss over it. Maybe the notion that it was as much mine as hers.

There’s something sublime about loneliness. A passing crowd of strangers is unfathomable, as is the idea that nothing will allow me to bring someone wholly into myself. The awe-inspired suspension of breath upon realizing that I was alone; the suspicion that I always had been; the breadth of the universe and my impossible smallness. As I looked out over the planes shining on the sunny runway, my loneliness spread out as far as I could see.

My misery was as profound as its opposite: the love that was its cause, the love that I could scarcely remember, entrenched as I was in my unhappiness. Had you opened my chest you would have found a ruptured sky—that’s how it felt, the separation. It was the near-agony of breaking open, the space between pain and ecstasy in faces like Bernini’s St. Theresa. It was the certainty and the uncertainty that, if I could only bring her close enough, hold her

tight enough, I could get rid of the separation and make us into one. To be in love's throes was unfathomable and nearly unbearable.

When I think of Ester now, I do not think of her stage persona. I have an incomplete version of her lodged in my mind. Memory skims over hours of time we spent with others, through which I sat secretly brooding as an audience member, and lands on the moments of unshaded affection. An entire half of her personality is lost in my version of her. It is not just lost in retrospect. It was missing when we were together.

The lost half of Ester had to be replaced with something, otherwise any honest recollection would have dispelled my image of her. What filled the space was an altered version of her as she pleased me, a version created by interpretation, a constructed version and a false one. When I explained her to myself or to anybody else, I'd twist things: calling her characteristic rudeness "chutzpah," for example, turning indecency into spunk. Filtering her and leaving things out brought her closer to an imagined, perfect person, a person who was in some ways a product of Ester, but still existed independent of her. I have only a vague idea of who this imagined person is, but I've been searching for clues, and I've given her a title. She is my ideal lover. I catch glimpses of her occasionally, and when I do I add them to the file.

I had begun gathering my clues the first time a woman stopped me in my tracks. I was thirteen and sullen, sitting on a low wall in the sun in a small town in California. It was a family vacation, and I had been given a small measure of liberty with the condition that I not wander too far. The town was on the water, and I had been enjoying the view of the ocean. I turned to look at the street, and she appeared. She stepped out of a gelato shop into the sun and looked quickly over her shoulder, making her dark brown hair fly and shine. "*Je ne sais quoi*," she said to her father, who remained in the shop. With a new urgency I tried to spring into action. I needed to say something. I stumbled through my piecemeal recollections of French from a class I'd taken the year before, but what slim knowledge I had of the language had all but faded. The grammar had to be perfect; verb charts and spotty pages of vocabulary words shuffled through my mind. At long last I was prepared to say, "*Je ne parle pas français, mais tu es très belle*"—I don't speak French, but you are very beautiful. By the time I had conjugated it and opened my mouth, she was gone. I ran to the corner and looked around, but I would never see her again.

I have no image of the beauty that captivated me, no memory of it. I recall the words and the momentary flash of shine on her hair, but no feature or inch of skin has made it through the run of years. What has survived as a part of my ideal is the austerity, the elegant unapproachability. The distance

created by Ester's stage persona became, with some interpretive squeezing, that austerity.

I can understand my French girl because I've basically invented her. I saw her for maybe half a minute, I heard her speak a simple sentence—and everything else is made up. Everything else is not a person but what I think a person might be, a two-dimensional representation in my mind. She was a woman made in my own terms, something I could understand.

I may never have understood Ester. Surely, I don't now. To reduce her, as I've done, to an even split between on- and off-stage, is to simplify her. To characterize her so neatly as alternately the antagonist and the love interest to my protagonist is to force the perspective and put her in terms of myself. In painting her, I did the same thing.

Finding pictures to paint should have been easy. A few weeks earlier, Ester and I had been goofing around in front of my computer's camera, and there was a folder full of images of the two of us together. I sifted through them and quickly saw a major problem: there wasn't a single picture that caught us both in a paintable pose. One of us would be blinking, maybe, or she'd be too close to the camera, throwing the perspective off far enough to dwarf me. In a lot of them she was posing. I considered trying to lure her into another set of photos, but I didn't trust us to be picturesque. I knew she'd question my frustration and my clumsy attempts to direct the composition.

Finally, I picked two separate photos. In one, my beard looked the way I wanted it to and I wasn't making a dumb face. In the other, she was both close to me and looking at the camera, and her curly hair had fallen exactly as I liked it without casting too many shadows. The two pictures would fit the composition as I had imagined it. I began sketching onto the canvas, starting with the most problematic spot: where the two images met.

I knew immediately when I had made the final brushstroke—at the moment when any additional mark would have done harm, when things could only get worse. I knew when I had to stop.

When Valentine's Day came and it was time to give her the painting, I was nervous in a way that giving a gift had never made me nervous. I knew that in giving her the painting, I was somehow offering up a part of myself. Maybe I was worried that she wouldn't like it, but it could have been that I was nervous about giving her that much access, letting her that far into me.

She was sitting on my bed when I pulled the painting from behind my back, letting it hang in front of her. With horror, I watched the initial stasis of her face: she was unmoved by the best I had to give. Then her lips parted

without words. As I saw her eyebrows narrow in momentary confusion, I knew I had succeeded.

She was seeing herself as art. She was seeing that I had done what Shakespeare promises to do when he asks, “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” (1). He promises a peculiar kind of immortality, freedom from death and from waning beauty. I did not paint Ester and me, nor does Shakespeare create a replica of his lover. We’re both representing love, a depiction of an ideal—and to do that, we both have to block certain things out. I shade away the space between our faces. Shakespeare shades away his lover, reduces the person to a series of adjectives and comparisons, without a characterizing detail that reveals the actual inspiration. Ester was reduced to a momentary snapshot of what I wanted her to be. I can see, finally, that we push our lovers toward an ideal—or, perhaps more accurately, we leave no room for an actual human being to dispel that ideal.

We make into art things that could not last in the tumult of the world, and in doing so make them enduring. My lost love is eternal in acrylics, Shakespeare’s has grown “in eternal lines to time” (12). We’ve created worlds of our own, worlds from which much of the real has been erased. These are worlds in which a false reality is made visible. These worlds are made of things that once seemed true, even if only momentarily. In the prologue to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde says that “to reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim” (3). He’s got it partly right. What he doesn’t say is that art also conceals its subject—takes its subject and transmutes it into something else.

A painting’s composition is determined not just by where things are placed and how they’re positioned. It’s also a matter of what’s concealed, of where the borders of the painting are set. It’s a matter of rejecting photo after photo until I find two that finally fit. The universe lacks the composition of a painting because it doesn’t have a visible frame. We see too much of the world all at once for it to be beautiful, in our own limited sense of things.

I’ve often imagined taking a picture of the clouds above the tree-lined horizon that night in Pennsylvania at three in the morning. I’ve imagined pulling over the car, maybe even driving through the field until I can’t see the road. My brother doesn’t ask questions because he knows exactly what I’m doing: opening the door, retrieving a camera from the backseat, and finding the shot. I get down on one knee and raise the viewfinder to my eye, and there’s the circle of light in the clouds.

The shutter closes and reopens so fast that I can only hear it. I’ve taken a picture of the factory. I’ve also taken a picture of the volcano, of the end of

the world, and of everything else I could have guessed as I drove along the highway with my brother. I've taken a picture of the beautiful and the sublime that only existed as long as the click of a shutter, but I can't see any of this in the actual photograph. I have to imagine its being there.

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