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# The Uses of Art

dispersed holdings

### This Mutual Dreaming

So, how to begin? From this unpromising beginning, what?

Arguably, the simplest and most important gift you can give the painting is time. Just that. Stay.

Here's what happened between that painting and me, unlikely pairing that we were. My friend Jac had suggested something: that I come to the painting as if it were my own dream. If I had dreamed her, what did it say about what I desired? Desire is a twisty thing in dreaming, appearing disguised and inverted, mirrored, metaphored. But that day I wasn't feeling twisty—symbols and reversals didn't occur to me. Instead, I was having, on the simplest level, a bad day, with waves of uncharacteristic resentment at the smallest obstacles.

So, in that moment, I took his instruction rather differently than I might have otherwise: dream as wish, as

undisguised desire. I looked at the painting, and because it was a dream, stopped seeing it as a painting. It wasn't a made thing; it had no maker. The idea that I was dreaming let me fall in, forgetting the room, the frame, the wall, the sounds of the people around me. The stillness and quiet of the painting came out to encompass me. I let my gaze roam the lit surfaces, the bright lamp, the bedpost, the cap covering her hair, the fabric at her shoulders, the child's round cheeks and white sheets, but most of all her face held in profile, mostly in shadow but marked with a glowing line that traveled brow to nose, picking out her upper lip and chin. I watched the expression on her face, and found that yes, I did desire this. The clarity of her task: the boy was sick, someone had to sit up with him, the sweater had torn or unraveled, it needed mending. The girl's life at that moment seemed comprised of necessities rather than choices and her demeanor seemed to express a sense of repose in those necessities. I saw tenderness there in her attention to her work and alertness to any movement from the child. I saw acceptance. I saw a moment when it seemed that intention, action, need, and feeling all clarified into one gesture. She held the needle high, thread taut. I could imagine the stars unseen overhead, wheeling slowly around that stillness, that still point. I could imagine myself, from where I was in space and time, held equally in the clarity of that long moment. My own desire settled, aligning to match my action and circumstance.

I stepped away for a little while, breaking the dream, looking around the museum gallery, listening to voices and conversations, seeing feet and coats and faces. When I came back to the painting, I flipped the game: I wasn't dreaming her, now she was dreaming me.

*She is standing in an elegant red-walled room where paintings are hung in spacious order. She has just come in from the street, and she wishes she could go back out, to pause in a crowded intersection and stare up at the sky. All the life around her, all the variousness, a whole city spreading in every direction, hurrying with innumerable purposes. In such a city, you could do anything, be anything, be always becoming.*

She is dreaming that she is me, remember, so she is dreaming not so much her own naïve startlement (as I might imagine it) but rather a full dose of what, on this particular day, is a hot mess of dissatisfaction, a spike of crankiness. And I ask myself, as I try to do this flipping of perspectives, how could she possibly be wanting this? Could she desire resentment, confusion, moments of urban rage, a critical eye cast over the display of wealth and power the room represents?

Suddenly I feel I know just what she wants. She wants to stand up from the chair in which she had been sitting so quietly, to step up and away from all that certainty. She wants to be in a city, free to leave, to walk outside, to turn her face to the sky, to wear jeans, to be with friends talking and drinking coffee or a glass of wine, to be able to alter the trajectory of her life, go to India with no phone, climb the Himalayas, move to a small town in Alaska and start over, work in a diner off the highway. She wants to be too hot instead of chilled, she wants to be resentful instead of accepting, she wants not to love, she wants to be able to turn away, put down caring like you could put down your sewing; she wants to doubt, to be angry, free.

And in that moment, the sense I have of my own life shifts. A strange sense of doubling, of being separated

from my life, which I had been aware of all day, falls away. Frustration itself becomes something worthwhile, connected to life. All the bad feelings inhabiting me, by becoming something I imagine she would choose, and choose gladly, also become something I choose gladly.

Obviously, this set of imaginary gymnastics has as much to do with me as with the painting. I bring my own life to it, the city I live in, the historical time I inhabit, my moods, dispositions, preoccupations, my way of perceiving the space in which the painting is hung, the body sensation of being overheated, my social world, scattered bits of knowledge about art history, *filmy layers of past* experience looking at and making art, everything.

But it's not as if the painting itself isn't there. I do my best to perceive it, to observe and notice its attributes, to register its temper. I give it a long look (very long by museum-going standards). How much does it matter—or in what way does it matter—that I don't know much about Millet? Even what little I do know, I've largely put aside in this mutual dreaming. The painting and I have had an encounter, we have meant something to one another. I have no way of knowing if anything I experienced or imagined aligned with the intentions or desires of the artist. I had an encounter with myself as much as anything. And yet there were aspects of the experience that could have never occurred without the specific physicality of the painting.

What would it be like to keep going? What would it mean to put aside for a time the canons of art criticism and art history, to forget omniscience, judgment, and being right, and instead look at art idiosyncratically and personally, as if it were part of lived experience, part of the dream of the self?