

STILL LIFE WITH OYSTERS AND LEMON
MARK DOTY

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for Robert Jones

... life which is so fantastic cannot be altogether tragic.

Virginia Woolf

A sharp cracking cold day, the air of the Upper East Side full of rising plumes of smoke from furnaces and steaming laundries, exhaust from the tailpipes of idling taxis, flapping banners, gangs of pigeons. Here on the museum steps a flock suddenly chooses to take flight, the sound of their ascent like no other except maybe the rush of air a gas stove makes, when the oven suddenly ignites, only with the birds that sudden suck of air is followed by a rhythmic hurry of wings that trails away almost immediately as the flock moves into the air. Their ascent echoes back from the solidity of the museum's columns and heavy doors, the wide stairway where even in the cold people are smoking and shifting their chilly weight from side to side, eating pretzels, hunching over blue and white paper cups of coffee.

I have a backache, I'm travel weary, and it couldn't matter less, for this whole scene—the crowd and hustle on the museum steps, which seem alive all day with commerce and hurry, with gatherings and departures—is suffused for me with warmth, because I have fallen in love with a painting. Though that

Mark phrase doesn't seem to suffice, not really—rather's it that I have
Dory been drawn into the orbit of a painting, have allowed myself to
4 be pulled into its sphere by casual attraction deepening to some-
thing more compelling. I have felt the energy and life of the
painting's will; I have been held there, instructed. And the over-
all effect, the result of looking and looking into its brimming
surface as long as I could look, is love, by which I mean a sense of
tenderness toward experience, of being held within an intimacy
with the things of the world.

That sense has remained with me as I moved out through the
dark stone lobby of the museum, with its huge vase of flowers
looming over the information desk in the center of the room,
and out into the sudden winter brightness—the gray bright-
ness of Manhattan in January—onto the museum steps. There,
stepping outside into the day, where nothing is framed or
bounded as rhings in the museum are, suddenly the sense of
intimacy and connection I've been feeling flares out, as if my
painting had been a hearth, a heated and glowing place deep in
the museum interior, and I'd carried the warmth of it with me
out into the morning. Is it morning still? The sky's a huge crys-
tal, cracked and alive with fractures, contrails, cloudy patches,
huge distances.

But nothing seems truly remote to me, no chill too intracta-
ble. Because I have stepped from a warm suspension out into
the shatteringly cold air, something of that suspension remains
within me, or around me. It is the medium in which I and my
fellow citizens move. We are all moving, just now, in the light
that has come toward me through a canvas the size of a school
notebook; we are all walking in the light of a wedge of lemon,
four oysters, a half-glass of wine, a cluster of green grapes with
a few curling leaves still attached to their stem. This light is

enough to reveal us as we are, bound together, in the warmth
and good light of habitation, in the good and fleshly aliveness
of us.

How is it possible?

It's a simple painting, really, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*,
by one Jan Davidsz de Heem, painted in Antwerp some three
hundred and fifty years ago, and displayed today—after who
knows what places it has been—in a glass case at the Metropoli-
tan, lying flat, so that one bends and looks down into its bronzy,
autumnal atmosphere. Half-filled *roemer* (an old Dutch drink-
ing glass, with a knobby base) with an amber inch of wine,
dewy grapes, curl of a lemon peel. Shimmery, barely solid bod-
ies of oysters, shucked in order to allow their flesh to receive
every ministrations of light. It *is* an atmosphere; the light lov-
ingly delineating these things is warm, a little fogged, encom-
passing, tender, ambient. As if, added to the fragrance evoked
by the sharp pulp of the lemon, and the acidic wine, and the
salty marsh-scent of the oysters, were some fragrance the light
itself carried.

Simple, and yet so firm in its assertions.

I'll try to name them.

That this is the matrix in which we are held, the generous
light binding together the fragrant and flavorful productions of
vineyard, marsh, and orchard—where has that lemon come
from, the Levant?

That the pleasures of what can be tasted and smelled are to
be represented, framed, set apart; that pleasure is to be honored.

That the world is a dialogue between degrees of transpar-
ency—globes of the grapes, the wine in the glass equally pene-
trated by light but ever so slightly less clear than the vessel itself,
degrees of reflectivity.

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6 That the world of reflection implicates us, as well—there, isn't that the faintest image of the painter in the base of the glass, tilted, distorted, lost in the contemplation of his little realm? Looking through things, as well, through what he's made of them, toward us?

That there can never be too much of reality; that the attempt to draw nearer to it—which will fail—will not fail entirely, as it will give us not the fact of lemons and oysters but this, which is its own fact, its own brave assay toward what is.

That description is an inexact, loving art, and a reflexive one; when we describe the world we come closer to saying what we are.

And something else, of course; there's always more, deep in art's pockets, far down in the chiaroscuro on which these food-stuffs rest: everything here has been transformed into feeling, as if by looking very hard at an object it suddenly comes that much closer to some realm where it isn't a thing at all but something just on the edge of dissolving. Into what? Tears, gladness—you've felt like this before, haven't you? Taken far inside. When? Held. Maybe that's what the darkness behind these things, that warm brown ground, is: the dark space within an embrace.

 Intimacy, says the phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard, is the highest value.

I resist this statement at first. What about artistic achievement, or moral courage, or heroism, or altruistic acts, or work in the cause of social change? What about wealth or accomplishment? And yet something about it rings true, finally—that what we want is to be brought into relation, to be inside, within. Perhaps it's true that nothing matters more to us than that.

But then why resist intimacy, why seem to flee it? A powerful

countercurrent pulls against our drive toward connection; we also desire individuation, separateness, freedom. On one side of the balance is the need for home, for the deep solid roots of place and belonging; on the other is the desire for travel and motion, for the single separate spark of the self freely moving forward, out into time, into the great absorbing stream of the world.

A fierce internal debate, between staying moored and drifting away, between holding on and letting go. Perhaps wisdom lies in our ability to negotiate between these two poles. Necessary to us, both of them—but how to live in connection without feeling suffocated, compromised, erased? We long to connect; we fear that if we do, our freedom and individuality will disappear.

One would not expect to turn to still life for help with these questions. But I think of the familiar phrase about there being “more than meets the eye”; in these paintings, the “more” *does* meet the eye; they suggest that knowledge is visible, that it might be seen in the daily world. They think, as it were, through things.

In my Jan Davidsz de Heem, for instance, there is a spectacular spiral of lemon peel, a flourish of painterly showing-off. The rind has been sliced in a single strip, and it curls in the air, resting atop the *roemer*; one of its coils dips inside, toward the wine, so that we see it now plainly, now veiled by the slightly gray cast of the glass. Now the pebbly yellow, as it twists through air, now the white pith that lay between that outer skin and the body of the fruit. Shadows lie in the twisting helix, in the curling hollows—like the socket of an armpit, or the hollows at the base of the neck, the twin wells of the collarbone. These are fleshy, erotic shadows, and they stand in contrast to the brilliance raking across the peel, cut so thin as to be translucent, a slice of the warmth and energy pouring into this room we'll never see.

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This is by no means the only bravura lemon in Dutch painting of the seventeenth century. They are, in fact, everywhere, in pictures by Pieter de Ring, Abraham van Beyeren, Willem Kalf, Jan Jansz den Uyl, and Adriaen van Utrecht, to name just a few. These lemons seem to leap to the foreground; the stippled, textured surface of the paint—noticeably thickened beside the glazed surface used elsewhere for silver cups and pewter plates, or bowls of porcelain—gives the eye a focal point and therefore makes the peel appear closer to us.

They are, in a way, nudes, always in dishabille, partly undraped, the rind peeled away to allow our gaze further pleasure—to see the surface, and beneath that another surface. Often the pith is cut away as well, the fruit faceted so that we can see its wet translucence, a seed just beneath, and sometimes another seed or two is tossed to the side of the plate on which this odalisque rests, diminutive seeds just as precise as the fruit and its pulpy sections; nothing is too tiny for the attentive eye.

The lemons are built, in layers, out of lead tin yellow, which the Italians called *giallo di Fiandria*, a warm canary made by heating lead and tin oxides together, which was also the preferred pigment for the petals of daffodils, and out of *luteolum Neapolitanum*, or Naples yellow, and of a glowing but unstable pigment called orpiment. Often these colors are glazed with yellow glazes made of broom or berries. Alchemists' work, turning tin and arsenic and vegetable juices into golden fruit painted with a kind of showy complication and variety that suggests there must have been competition among the painters of lemons. How to paint a lemon with a freedom and inventiveness that sets it apart? Jacob von Hulsdonck specialized in citrus partially ripe, the stippled surface of the fruit blushed with that acid green which indicates the peel's only recently yellowed. Whose half-peeled fruit could be most complexly faceted, like a

gemstone, in order to reveal nuances of transparency and reflectivity, the seeds resting within the revealed sections? Who could give the coiled peel the greatest sense of heft and curve, or spiral it down from the edge of a table, with the most convincing sense of gravity's pull? In Cornelis de Heem's *The Flute of Wine*, a swoop of lemon peel occupies the very center of the picture, looping down into the space below the edge of the table and back up again to end in a flourish of curl, impossibly long, as if the little fruit had yielded an unlikely bounty of peel to serve the painter's purposes. Whose peel could be cut the thinnest, barely there at all, a translucent yellow interruption in the air?

In another canvas of Jan Davidsz de Heem's, the lavishly wealthy *Nautilus Cup with Silver Vessels*, the painter seems to strut, to take the lemon competition as far as it might reasonably go, even a little farther. Here a strip of peel is shown alone, detached from its fruit, at the corner of a table shrouded in a dark cloth. The peel coils intricately, impossibly—a baroque bit of ribboning made to show us exactly what this painter could do.

Lemons: all freedom, all ego, all vanity, fragrant with scent we can't help but imagine when we look at them, the little pucker in the mouth. And redolent, too, of strut and style. Yet somehow they remain intimate, every single one of them: only lemons, only that lovely, perishable, ordinary thing, held to scrutiny's light, fixed in a moment of fierce attention. As if here our desire to be unique, unmistakable, and our desire to be of a piece were reconciled. Isn't that it, to be yourself and somehow, to belong? For a moment, held in balance.

To think through things, that is the still life painter's work—and the poet's. Both sorts of artists require a tangible vocabu-

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Mark lary, a worldly lexicon. A language of ideas is, in itself, a phan-
Doty tom language, lacking in the substance of worldly things, those
10 containers of feeling and experience, memory and time. We are
instructed by the objects that come to speak with us, those ma-
terial presences. Why should we have been born knowing how
to love the world? We require, again and again, these demon-
strations.

My first resonant, instructive thing?

Hypnotist's wheel, red swirl blazoned on a hard white candy
ground, spinning even when it isn't moving; that's the life of the
spiral, it seems to whirl even when it's at rest. Peppermints, each
wrapped in a shiny square of cellophane which twists at the
ends into little flourishes. They emerge, one after the other, end-
less, pouring out; perhaps they come into being the way matter
is said to do, from the collapsed bodies of dead stars, streaming
out into the world. But the dark from whence they emerge is
the unfathomable void of my grandmother's glossy black pock-
etbook.

Her name is Lona, though I don't know that, and won't for
years. Because this is East Tennessee, in the second half of the
nineteen fifties, she is called Mamaw, and that's the only name I
have ever called her.

Mamaw wears a thin flowered dress of rayon or some other
slippery stuff, and a white crocheted cardigan sweater, also thin,
that keeps riding up her skinny, intricately mottled wrists; the
sleeves of her sweaters are never long enough, and somehow this
underlines the fact that everything about her is thin, both deli-
cate and peculiarly sturdy at once.

Those wrists are a wonder: veins and splotches, just at the
back of the hand, rhyme with her liver-colored "age spots." To-

gether we've heard a commercial on her radio for a cream that
claimed to make them fade and then *vanish* (magician's verb:
something pops out of sight, out of being, like a silver dollar or
a dove). The adjective the radio chose for the spots was "horrid":
interesting clear sound, immediately calling up, for some rea-
son, a chain of scents—vomit, calamine lotion, peculiar odor of
a cigar box filled with rubber bands, girdle folded in a drawer.

When Mamaw stands up with the sun behind her you can
see through the dress to her legs, and I am the perfect height to
study the outline of the elastic stockings she wears, folded over
at the top into a kind of cuff, which makes a darker band be-
neath her knees. My grandfather wears these, too; they seem
part of a vocabulary of age, one of the assembly of items binding
what would otherwise sag or separate or fall: elastic things, rub-
ber things, corsets and belts and lifts, stays and trusses. All tend
toward the beige region of the spectrum, and though they are
called "flesh" they're the color of no one's skin, but the hue of
mannequins or dolls. Beneath her stockings are thick black
shoes; their chunky short heels bear the hallmark of necessity
rather than style.

Her ensemble is completed by the pocketbook; the word
seems as capacious and black as the thing it represents, which is
square, shiny, carried by a double strap, and closed with an ir-
resistible pair of prongs that must be snapped one over the other,
so that the pocketbook opens and closes with a satisfying click:
slight reverberation of metal, the nice feel of fingers firm against
patent leather.

What can't the pocketbook contain? Certainly it holds far
more than I know; it is not for me to delve into its contents,
many of which I doubtless couldn't name if I saw them. But she
brings things up and into the light as they are needed, or simply

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Mark in order to entertain with their startling variety. Which includes
Doty a plastic rain bonnet of see-through vinyl that folds up, growing
12 increasingly opaque as it is doubled and tripled into a tiny rectangle and slipped into a plastic envelope. A paper fan, the stiff oblong sort printed with a religious picture and mounted on a wooden handle. These change periodically as new ones are provided in church, but this week's scene—the week we are going to see the bears!—pictures Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. His face turned upward, long hair flowing, he kneels at a convenient stone, pale countenance tilted toward the moon. Or is he suffering the children to come unto him? Maybe it's Easter, and everything is lilies and lilies. Whatever the case, there is more: an exquisite little change purse, whose labial folds increase to catch and sort coins, its top sealed by another of those tempting closures. Doan's Pills. Lavender water. Smelling salts in a tiny glass ampule, to be broken when absolutely needed. Round tin of snuff, since she likes the occasional pinch. A tiny red edition of the New Testament, tissues in small packets, a sparkly pair of multifaceted earrings whose clasp has long ago broken; short, dull-tipped pencils; a cluster of the ubiquitous, potentially useful rubber bands; a scrap of ribbon snipped from the flowers at whose grave? And then, the item to which my attention is repeatedly drawn, to which all the other items are merely ancillary: those red, pinwheeled peppermints.

We're in the backseat of the green Studebaker, driving to see the bears. It isn't a long drive, really, from our house up into the Smokies, but, heavens, the preparations and consideration, the work of getting everyone ready for the Sunday drive. I am in the backseat with my grandfather, who has his cane standing upright between his legs and is wearing a brown felt fedora with a black ribbon above the brim. And then me, in the middle, though I do not turn toward him but toward Mamaw, who has

the window seat (as well as a cardboard box from the store in which she last bought one of those flowered dresses) in case of car sickness. She has a brown paper sack containing pears, some pieces of fried chicken individually wrapped in foil, her Geritol, and a quantity of triangular sandwiches, consisting of nothing but butter on white bread. These she loves. For me there is apple butter, dark and resinous, on the same white triangles—like little sails or game pieces.

Memory, which has so thoroughly costumed and illuminated the aspect of the old woman to my right, has not had resources left over to do much with the rest of that automobile's interior. My father's driving; my sister is beside him, probably thirteen or fourteen, and the metal bar dividing the windshield in half seems to spring right out of the center of her blond head; my mother is in the right-hand half of the view. Certainly there is discussion, perhaps songs, does someone turn from the front seat to the back and tell me to be still? No narrative here, but suddenly we're in Gatlinburg, whose salient feature is bears: little stuffed black bears, toys the size of my head or my paired hands, each wearing a vest or belt of red vinyl. They are lovable in their multiplicity, rows and rows of bears hanging from shelves, porch rails, the sides of tables of souvenirs: snow globes, ashtrays, thermometers, salt and pepper shakers, plaques of sliced and varnished wood with mottoes inscribed beneath the glaze. Boxes of candy, shaped like leaves or snowflakes. I want a bear.

Which I cannot have, because we are going on to see the real bears. The mountains are pale blue, in memory, like those misty and indeterminate landscapes in the backdrops of Leonardos; we are driving and driving on curving roads, we are stopping for vistas, we are lined up and photographed, in my face that lingering regret for the embraceable entity of the furry black toy with

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Mark its vinyl vest and its small and friendly gaze. Then we are parked
Dory at a turnout, on the side of the high, two-lane road, not on the
14 slope side, which is all air and distance, but on the side where the
trees are, cool and towering, and out of the dark spaces between
the pines have come the bears. They are walking toward us,
coming on all fours in a scamper or standing up, on two legs, a
bit less gracefully, lumbering a little, but their faces are open
and eager; they are coming to see us, and suddenly I know I have
been so lonely. That is why I wanted my parents to buy me that
small bear; I wanted to embrace the animal, wanted to carry the
lustrous black beast in my arms, sit him beside me on the car
seat. And now, I think, I want to live with the bears, want to be
back in their company—why “back”? Was I in their company
sometime before? It seems like a homecoming, to be with them,
and maybe Mamaw feels it too, which is why she opens the
pocketbook and produces the beautiful candies and lays them
out on the low stone wall that marks the border between the
turnout and the woods. Does she unwrap the peppermints? I
can't recall—only the red swirls set out on the rough surface of
the piled stones, and the gesture of her hand reaching down into
invisibility and coming up with two or three of the little pin-
wheels and holding them out toward the eager black faces draw-
ing nearer.

And soon we were in the car, all of us, with the windows
closed, and the tall figures standing around us, rocking back
and forth a little, their forepaws raised in the air, their tongues
touching their teeth and lips, and Mamaw was still rummaging
in her pocketbook saying, *There must be more in here some-
wheres.*

In memory's theater, those years are restored and distilled. Here
is a plain table, laid out in a space dark as the interior of the

pocketbook. A curtain's hung behind it, perhaps to indicate that
behind these visible things—each set particularly, lovingly, in
the light of recollection—is a boundary, a veil. What we can see
of the lost world is exactly this: little vials of medicine, a tall,
slender bottle of a dark tonic (*Remember*, says the voice of a dis-
tant announcer in my head, *Serutan is Nature's spelled back-
wards*. Isn't all space full, by now, of broadcast voices, inton-
ing their slogans and pitches and absurd fragments of human
speech? Has our babble penetrated as far out into space as it has
within?). And here are all the beautiful contents of my Ma-
maw's purse, each laid out, barely touching the other, each made
poignant with distance and time. Here in the center, in a footed
silver dish brought back by one of my aunts who was a mission-
ary in Korea, a cheerful dragon circling its rim, the peppermints
anchor and glow, sparkling in their little skins of cellophane.

I have friends who actually own a painting that feels like this,
a panel from the seventeenth century. A physical fact, historic,
material, but still like my construction made of memory in that
it represents a poetic field of objects arrayed against the dark,
things somehow joined in a conspiracy of silence, some whis-
pered communion between them, a dialogue we cannot hear.
An old, collegial conversation, taking place not in the time of
earth, from which these things have been plucked, but in the
time of art, which is a little nearer to the time of eternity than
our poor daily gestures. Unlikely circumstance, it seems to me,
to possess such a picture, like owning a mountain or a great pub-
lic building. How strange to own such a compressed vision of
domestic interiority, such an artifact of intimacy. A vessel of
feelings whose subject has long since vanished, but which re-
mains, a fixed distillation of emotion.

The painting is by Osias Beert, and it dates from early in the
great century of Dutch still life. Beert died in 1623, when the

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conventions of the genre were just being articulated. And so in his paintings—which are performed in inky browns and blacks and lustrous grays—dishes are always arrayed on a table arranged horizontally before us, a single, simple plane. The table extends on both sides beyond the edge of the canvas; behind it is only darkness, and arranged in each of these pictures are repeated elements Beert must have been fond of, and felt he'd mastered: a shallow bowl, of Chinese porcelain produced in the Wan-li reign of the Ming dynasty; a footed, elaborately chased silver dish filled with intricate little candies, white and spiny as shards of coral. Some delicate beakers of wine. A simple pewter chaser, usually displaying a clutch of halved oysters.

When it came to oysters, Osias Beert had no peer, I think. In the National Gallery of Art in Washington there is a platter of his oysters that seems the ultimate expression of light playing on the slightly viscous, pearly, opalescent, and convoluted flesh, its wetness distinguishing it from the similarly sheened but hard stuff of the shells' interior. Their liquidity makes me want language to match, want on my tongue their deliquescence, their liquefaction. Beert's is a demonstration of virtuosity so extreme as to be explicable only by means of love: this is a testament of falling in love with light, its endless variation, its subtlety and complexity. I try to imagine coming to this kind of knowledge, a very specific, long practice of perception alloyed with a knowledge of materials—how to commingle oils and pigments just so, to the right texture, how to apply them in particular layers so as to translate this knowledge of the appearance of a particular gleam into paint. It is a sort of knowledge that must be wordless, incommunicable, so precisely does it depend upon a long context of looking and practice, and so specific is its aim. I doubt it is something anyone has done before, or will again; perhaps no one wants to, really. There is neither willing nor accounting for

such a love, a passion perfected through discipline and obsession—and perennially demonstrated by this ravishing, transfixing platter of shellfish.

Which do not appear in my friends' Beert, an odd and poignant painting—bowls of cherries, of sweetmeats, of berries, a *roemer* of wine, characteristically arranged on that wooden table so that they hardly overlap, as if we're meant to see each thing singularly. Therein lies a large portion of the painting's poetry; these things form not a single whole but a concert, a community of separate presences; we are intended to compare their degrees of roundness, solidity, transparency, and opacity. They are each a separate city, a separate child in a field of silent children. They speak back and forth—do they?—across the distance between them. At dinner at my friends', I was seated with my back to the painting, but I felt its magnetism; I was trying to converse, I was conversing, but I felt still its pull, the strange silence of these separate things refusing to form a singular composition, as if it wete my work to complete them, as if they needed and demanded me. The wineglasses at our table rose above the white tablecloth into the brightly lit space between us; in the painting, the wineglass rose up against a field of lustrous gloom, its contents merging with the dark.

Because this painting has never been restored there is a heightened poignance to it somehow; it doesn't have the feeling of unassailable permanence that paintings in museums do. There is a small crack in the lower left, and a little of the priming between the wooden panel and the oil emulsions of paint has been bared. A bit of abrasion shows, at the rim of a bowl of berries, evidence of time's power even over this—which, paradoxically, only seems to increase its poetry, its deep resonance. If you could see the notes of a cello, when the bow draws slowly and deeply across its strings, and those resonant reverberations

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Mark which of all instruments' are nearest to the sound of the human
Doty voice emerge—no, the wrong verb, they seem to come into be-
18 ing all at once, to surround us, suddenly, with presence—if that
were made visible, that would be the poetry of Osias Beert.

But the still life resides in absolute silence.

Portraits often seem pregnant with speech, or as if their subjects have just finished saying something, or will soon speak the thoughts that inform their faces, the thoughts we're invited to read. Landscapes are full of presences, visible or unseen; soon nymphs or a stag or a band of hikers will make themselves heard.

But no word will ever be spoken here, among the flowers and snails, the solid and dependable apples, this heap of ruffled books, this pewter plate on which a few opened oysters lie, giving up their silver.

These are resolutely still, immutable, poised for a forward movement that will never occur. The brink upon which still life rests is the brink of time, the edge of something about to happen. Everything that we know crosses this lip, over and over, like water over the edge of a fall, as what might happen does, as any of the endless variations of what might come true does so, and things fall into being, tumble through the progression of existing in time.

Painting creates silence. You could examine the objects themselves, the actors in a Dutch still life—this knobbed beaker, this pewter salver, this knife—and, lovely as all antique utilitarian objects are, they are not, would not be, poised on the edge these same things inhabit when they are represented. These things exist—if indeed they are still around at all—in time. It is the act of painting them that makes them perennially poised, an emergent truth about to be articulated, a word wait-

ing to be spoken. Single word that has been forming all these years in the light on the knife's pearl handle, in the drops of moisture on nearly translucent grapes: At the end of time, will that word be said?

When my Mamaw died, which cannot have been so very long after our visit to the bears, my grandfather was shipped off to live with another of his children, and I was given my grandparents' old room. She had died in the night, in that room, flinging the window open and calling for more air, poking her head out the window into the chilly winter night even though she wore just a nightgown, convinced that there wasn't enough air inside the house to satisfy her and that she needed a deep cold breath to fill her lungs.

I was four or five; this was my first death. She herself had filled my head with religious depictions of the afterlife, the next world, a deeper and truer world behind this one, where we would dwell when the veil was lifted. She was a fountain of imagery, both from songs and from scripture, which she used to read to me while I dreamed in her lap in the swaying of her green rocking chair. We listened to Oral Roberts together on the radio; we drank the pure clear waters of the Living Word. (Somewhere—on television, at the fair—didn't we see something called the Dancing Waters? A display of fountains, playing in colored lights, rising and falling, wonderful in name and in anticipation but disappointing in actuality?) For her, all the visible world was a veil thin as the slippery fabric of her dresses, or the Dancing Waters' clear and mobile jets. Last Days, End Times; the world before us was all about to be swept away.

But she was swept away instead, and however this was described to me—gone home to Jesus, there among the lilies, already in heaven, a bright and shining star—there was also the

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fact of my father crying at her funeral, something I had never before seen him do, and the odd waxen presence of her, in her pleated lavender shroud, eyes sunken and closed, utterly and deeply still among the gladioli. If I could have described how I felt about all this, I believe I would have said that the strangeness of her body's arrest and disappearance was what occupied my attention most. Though what began to occupy my imagination shortly thereafter was her room. There was her presence and her absence all at once. Now it was my room. Had I ever had a room? I think not. I am aware of the height of the ceiling, the dark of the wooden bedstead and bureau, the green rocker empty now, a strange pleasure in the prospect of occupation. My mother helps me to ready the room; there are only a few things of Mamaw's left here, Bible and rocker and a store of rubber bands—dresses and old church hats and the white cardigan have been taken away, along with the store of old pocketbooks, supply of paper fans—and now we are engaged in making something new, which partakes of the old but is also now my space, what I will occupy. In Sunday school I've learned to make ships, little paper ones, and I have named them for the three ships Columbus sailed, the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa María*. I place them sailing across a crocheted bureau scarf—something that must have been Mamaw's—as if the knotted cotton were sea foam, and the dark oak were the ocean across which these travelers set out. These are the focus of the room—in my memory, at least, a green room, walls the color of the green of cantaloupe rind, though maybe what I remember is the color of light through old green window shades filtering the sunlight into the room my mother and I are claiming as mine.

This was my first intimation that style had something to do with death.

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At first still life seems so entirely of this world—a clarification and celebration of what is—that it can have little to do with mortality. But in truth, the secret subject of these paintings is what they resist. What they deny is also the underlying force, more potent than lead or tin or orpiment, that makes these lemons glow with life.

Everything in the field of our vision is passing. And some of these things will be here just the briefest while; these opened oysters, this already-spotted quince are right at the edge of corruption even as we catch sight of them.

And yet, in the suspension these paintings, they will fade no more slowly than the hobnailed glass *roemer*, or this heap of rifled books; everything floats on this brink, suspended above the long tunnel of disappearance. Here intimacy seems to confront its opposite, which is the immensity of time. Everything—even a painting itself—is evanescent, but here, for now, these citizens of the great community of the disappearing hang, for a term, suspended.

There is a poignant and beautiful picture in the Rijksmuseum by Martinus Nelliüs, a dark and atmospheric piece called *Still Life with Quinces, Medlars and a Glass*. It has a peculiar warmth, its few elements emerging from a deep darkness as some soft, unifying source of light binds them together: two small medlar apples, a beechnut, an opened walnut, two large yellow quinces, a quarter of a pomegranate, all eaten save for this remaining section, some drying leaves plucked with the quinces, and tall in the background, a simple, delicate Venetian glass, a flute half-filled with red wine. Warm yellow, madder, ocher, garnet, all against a brown dark. It must have been an emotive painting to begin with; some lamp-shine of intimacy

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Mark Doty fires the whole thing, some sense of autumnal community, harvest-tipe and complete, the season moving to an ending.

22 Yet the painting is even more moving now, because on the large quince, where a single fly is poised—reminder of the mellowness of these fruits, the lovely moment on the cusp of dissolution—is visible a strange kind of powdery whiteness. The restorer's text notes "a somewhat crumbly texture. The cross section of this paint shows that the yellow pigment has a rather cloudy appearance at the surface."

The glow of this fruit was achieved with the bright and lemony mineral orpiment, which, ground in an oil medium, produced a live, golden tone. The arsenic sulphide it contains has undergone a kind of chemical transformation caused by three hundred years of exposure to light; the sulphide's become an oxide, in the process releasing a cortosive gas, breaking up the linseed oil and tree resins that bound the pigment in place. And so the paint of the quince has crumbled, at the surface, breaking Nelli's illusion, and making the sweet autumn sheen of his painting—brandy-warm, tinged with smoke and the scent of ripe leaves—that much sadder and that much more alive.

When I was nineteen, something of Mamaw returned to my life, in the form of another old woman, one whom I met only once, for a few days, in the summer of 1972. Bertha Cudd was my new wife's mother, and she lived in Boyce, Louisiana, the town where she'd spent her entire life. From the moment I walked into her house—into the high-ceilinged long hallway that ran all the way through the center of the place, where above a dark mahogany table hung a sepia print of Jesus kneeling at that same rock, those same long locks curling back over his shoulders as he turned his face toward the night sky in which he

seemed to expect to see the face of his father—I was home. It was partly that familiar image, which carried so much of Mamaw with it, and of the gone world of East Tennessee I'd left behind as a child, when my parents and I moved away. But it was also the smell of the house, a subtle compound of the musty insides of drawers or the mildewing edges of old prints sealed in their heavy frames, and furniture polish, and PineSol, and rosewater, or odd bits of sachets stuffed into drawers, and of the sort of inexpensive bottles of scent favored by old country ladies, perhaps the tang of it smoked a little by the faint back-odor of bacon grease, too. I would like to have that scent now, in a bottle; I would like to be able to breathe it at will and return to that lost atmosphere. Is it still out there, in the houses of old women somewhere?

Bertha herself was at the fat end of the hallway, bent over the sink in a little bathroom whose opened door framed her, wigless and bald as she was born. She was putting in her teeth, preparing for our visit, and was so happy to see us that she quite forgot the wig and came storming forth from the back of the house, her stringy old arms spread wide, tears streaming down those mottled cheeks, and as soon as she had greeted us, saying she was truly blessed, and that what she had wanted was to see her daughter again before she died, and see her daughter happy—she remembered the wig. *Oh, I have lost every hair on my head,* she cried, and hurried to don the crooked gray frill of a thing, and then hurried back to usher us into the high-ceilinged old kitchen to sit at the table while she set to making coffee, warming biscuits, bringing forth jars of jam, attending to me in particular—because hadn't it always been her work to make men happy with food?—as if there were no more pleasurable or important task in all the world.

I felt, truly, that there was one Grandmother, whom God had

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