

THE SETTING SUN

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I'm glad you like it, he said,
since it may be the last of its kind.

There was nothing to say;
in fact, it did seem the end of something.

It was a solemn moment.

We stood awhile in silence, staring at it together.

Outside the sun was setting,
the sort of pointed symmetry
I have always noticed.

If only I'd known, he said,
the effect of words.

Do you see how this thing has acquired weight and importance
since I spoke?

I could have done this long ago, he said,
and not wasted my time beginning over and over.

My teacher was holding a brush
but then I was holding a brush too—
we were standing together watching the canvas
out of the corners of which
a turbulent darkness surged; in the center
was ostensibly a portrait of a dog.
The dog had a kind of forced quality;
I could see that now. I have
never been much good with living things.
Brightness and darkness I do rather well with.
I was very young. Many things had happened
but nothing had happened
repeatedly, which makes a difference.
My teacher, who had spoken not a word, began to turn now
to the other students. Sorry as I felt for myself at that moment,
I felt sorrier for my teacher, who always wore the same clothes,
and had no life, or no apparent life,
only a keen sense of what was alive on canvas.
With my free hand, I touched his shoulder.
Why, sir, I asked, have you no comment on the work before us?
I have been blind for many years, he said,
though when I could see I had a subtle and discerning eye,
of which, I believe, there is ample evidence in my own work.
This is why I give you assignments, he said,

and why I question all of you so scrupulously.

As to my current predicament: when I judge from a student's despair and anger he has become an artist,

then I speak. Tell me, he added,

what do you think of your own work?

Not enough night, I answered. In the night I can see my own soul.

That is also my vision, he said.

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I'm against symmetry, he said. He was holding in both hands an unbalanced piece of wood that had been very large once, like the limb of a tree: this was before its second life in the water, after which, though there was less of it in terms of mass, there was greater spiritual density. Driftwood, he said, confirms my view—this is why it seems inherently dramatic. To make this point, he tapped the wood. Rather violently, it seemed, because a piece broke off.

Movement! he cried. That is the lesson! Look at these paintings, he said, meaning ours. I have been making art longer than you have been breathing and yet my canvases have life, they are drowning in life— Here he grew silent.

I stood beside my work, which now seemed rigid and lifeless. We will take our break now, he said.

I stepped outside, for a moment, into the night air.
It was a cold night. The town was on a beach,
near where the wood had been.
I felt I had no future at all.
I had tried and I had failed.
I had mistaken my failures for triumphs.
The phrase *smoke and mirrors* entered my head.
And suddenly my teacher was standing beside me,
smoking a cigarette. He had been smoking for many years,
his skin was full of wrinkles.
You were right, he said, the way
instinctively you stepped aside.
Not many do that, you'll notice.
The work will come, he said. The lines
will emerge from the brush. He paused here
to gaze calmly at the sea in which, now,
all the planets were reflected. The driftwood
is just a show, he said; it entertains the children.
Still, he said, it is rather beautiful, I think,
like those misshapen trees the Chinese grow.
Pun-sai, they're called. And he handed me
the piece of driftwood that had broken off.
Start small, he said. And patted my shoulder.

Try to think, said the teacher,
of an image from your childhood.

Spoon, said one boy. Ah, said the teacher,
this is not an image. It is,

said the boy. See, I hold it in my hand
and on the convex side a room appears

but distorted, the middle taking longer to see
than the two ends. Yes, said the teacher, that is so.

But in the larger sense, it is not so: if you move your hand
even an inch, it is not so. You weren't there, said the boy.

You don't know how we set the table.

That is true, said the teacher. I know nothing
of your childhood. But if you add your mother
to the distorted furniture, you will have an image.

Will it be good, said the boy, a strong image?

Very strong, said the teacher.

Very strong and full of foreboding.