

* * *

“WHAT WILL BE THE focus of your research,” she asked me in Spanish, but I didn’t know the word for “research.”

“The focus,” I repeated, as if thinking.

The fellowship required that a professor certify I was at least a proficient Spanish speaker. She had taught me the one semester I took Spanish. She had taught, and become close with, my older brother, who had graduated from the college a few years before. They remained friends. She had always been kind to me. She wanted to advance my application. She wanted badly to get it over with.

“What will you do in Spain,” she asked me, a full stop between each word.

“I read books about the civil war and write and translate poetry.” I couldn’t remember the future tense.

“Why Spain,” she said, happy to offer a question it required no Spanish to understand.

Here I delivered the answer I had memorized, a long answer composed by a fluent friend, regarding the significance of the Spanish Civil War, about which I knew nothing, for a generation of writers, few of whom I’d read. It was an answer of considerable grammatical complexity, describing the significance of my project in the conditional, the past subjunctive, and the future tense. I heard myself using what I assumed was the word for “research” several times in my response.

“Good,” she said in English, and stood up smiling. I hadn’t even gotten to the part about my own development as a poet, what the experience of Spain could teach us about our own cultural moment, etc. She kissed me quickly, once on each cheek. Which is what they did in Spain, I guessed.

* * *

THE FIRST PHASE OF my research involved waking up weekday mornings in a barely furnished attic apartment on Calle de Huertas, the first apartment I’d looked at after arriving in Madrid, or letting myself be woken by the noise from La Plaza Santa Ana, failing to assimilate that noise fully into my dream, then putting on the rusty stovetop espresso machine and rolling a spliff while I waited for the coffee. When the coffee was ready I opened the skylight, which was just big enough for me to crawl through if I stood on the bed, and drank my espresso and smoked on the roof overlooking the plaza where tourists were congregating with their guide books on the metal tables and the accordion player was plying his trade. In the distance: the palace and long lines of cloud. Next my project required dropping myself back through the skylight, shitting, taking a shower, my white pills, and getting dressed. Then I took my bag, which contained a bilingual edition of Lorca’s *Collected Poems*, my two notebooks, pocket dictionary, John Ashbery’s *Selected Poems*, drugs, and left for the Prado.

From my apartment I walked down Huertas, nodding to the street cleaners in their lime green jumpsuits, crossed El Paseo del Prado, entered the museum, which was only a couple of Euros with my international scholar ID, and proceeded directly to room 58, where I positioned myself in front of Roger Van der Weyden’s *Descent from the Cross*. I was usually standing before the painting within forty-five minutes of waking and so the hash and caffeine and sleep were still competing in my system as I faced the nearly

life-sized figures and awaited equilibrium. Mary is forever falling to the ground in a faint; the blues of her robes are unsurpassed in Flemish painting. Her posture is almost an exact echo of Jesus'; Nicodemus and a helper hold his apparently weightless body in the air. C.1435; 220 x 262 cm. Oil on oak paneling.

A turning point in my project: I arrived one morning at the Van der Weyden to find someone had taken my place. He was standing exactly where I normally stood and for a moment I was startled, as if beholding myself beholding the painting, although he was thinner and darker than I. I waited for him to move on, but he didn't. I wondered if he had observed me in front of the *Descent* and if he was now standing before the painting hoping to see whatever it was I must have been seeing. I was irritated and tried to find another canvas for my morning ritual, but I was too accustomed to the dimensions and blues of the *Descent* to accept a substitute. I was about to abandon room 58 when the man broke suddenly into tears, convulsively catching his breath. Was he, I wondered, just facing the wall to hide his face as he dealt with whatever grief he'd brought into the museum? Or was he having a *profound experience of art*?

I had long worried that I was incapable of having a profound experience of art and I had trouble believing that anyone had, at least anyone I knew. I was intensely suspicious of people who claimed a poem or painting or piece of music "changed their life," especially since I had often known these people before and after their experience and could register no change. Although I claimed to be a poet, although my supposed talent as a writer had earned me my fellowship in Spain, I tended to find lines of poetry beautiful only when I encountered them quoted in prose, in the essays my professors had assigned in college, where the line breaks were

replaced with slashes, so that what was communicated was less a particular poem than the echo of poetic possibility. In so far as I was interested in the arts, I was interested in the disconnect between my experience of actual artworks and the claims made on their behalf; the closest I'd come to having a *profound experience of art* was probably the experience of this distance, a profound experience of the absence of profundity.

Once the man calmed down, which took at least two minutes, he wiped his face and blew his nose with a handkerchief he then returned to his pocket. On entering room 57 which was empty except for a lanky and sleepy guard, the man walked immediately up to the small votive image of Christ attributed to San Leocadio; green tunic, red robes, expression of deep sorrow. I pretended to take in other paintings while looking sidelong at the man as he considered the little canvas. For a long minute he was quiet and then he again released a sob. This startled the guard into alertness and our eyes met, mine saying that this had happened in the other gallery, the guard's communicating his struggle to determine whether the man was crazy—perhaps the kind of man who would damage a painting, spit on it or tear it from the wall or scratch it with a key—or if the man was having a *profound experience of art*. Out came the handkerchief and the man walked calmly into 56, stood before *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, considered it calmly, then totally lost his shit. Now there were three guards in the room, the lanky guard from 57, the short woman who always guarded 56, and an older guard with improbably long silver hair who must have heard the most recent outburst from the hall. The one or two other museumgoers in 56 were deep in their audio tours and oblivious to the scene unfolding before the Bosch.