



Stories in Paint

50 Moving Artworks
from American Museums

by Luc Travers

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ISBN 979-8-9854604-0-7 – Hardcover
ISBN 979-8-9854604-1-4 – Ebook

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Printed by D&K Printing - www.dkprinting.com
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The cover illustration is John William Waterhouse's *The Painter's Honeymoon* (1864)
Photo of Jean-Antoine Houdon's *Madame de Vermenoux* (1777), Huntington Gallery and Gardens by Luc Travers

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Touching
The Art

Pour toi, Papa

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Preface

Ten years ago, I wrote *Touching The Art*. It was an exploration of the distinctive approach I had taken to appreciating art. It was a how-to book for those who came on my tours and wanted to learn more about the method behind the tours, namely, “reading” art. It’s a book meant to be read on your own, to help you develop your own art appreciation abilities.

After years of leading museum tours, teaching students, and training docents, I started realizing how challenging learning to “read” an art- work could be for many. And while *Touching The Art* explained the steps, it didn’t provide one important element: a plethora of powerful art experiences. That’s where the idea for *Stories in Paint* came from. Rather than a how-to book, this book is meant to provide a feast of memorable art experiences—the kinds of emotionally moving moments I’ve had the privilege of sharing with individuals across the country.

In a sense, *Stories in Paint* is a prequel to *TTA*. It’s a continuation of the art museum tours I’ve led rather than an examination of the theory behind them. It’s the take-home version of those art tours.

The goal of the book is not to teach you the *TTA* method. Rather, the goal is to help you immerse yourself in 50 poignant paintings—to enjoy the *TTA* method in action.

That idea of recreating a tour experience is also what led us to incorporate a digital component to the book. This component, accessed through the QR codes with each painting, leads you to high-definition, zoomable images as well as an audio version of my “readings.” The goal is to give you the option of experiencing the artworks in a more interactive way.

The paintings, selected from tours I’ve led and from classes I’ve taught, are the artworks that have been the most affecting, the most insightful, the most moving during these shared experiences. I draw from those discussions—from the participants’ observations, from their personal connections, from their emotional responses—to help inform the “readings” I share in this book.

Over the years, I’ve learned more and more how valuable the visual arts can be as a social experience. Reading art with friends has helped me bond with them more deeply. Hearing others’ words and personal connections to a painting has helped me see and feel more for myself. My hope is that you’ll enjoy this book with others as well as on your own. Experiencing art can be a very personal experience. And when shared with friends, it can be an opportunity to be open, to be vulnerable, to be yourself. I hope enjoying these 50 paintings will help you know yourself and know those dear to you ever more profoundly.

Luc Travers

Introduction

by Lisa VanDamme

I had always been a passionate reader—easily swept away, easily invigorated, easily moved to tears. But for the most part, the visual arts left me cold. I was the typical museum-goer: I would wander the halls, stop to briefly examine a painting or sculpture, form some cursory, unexamined view, read the information on the plaque, and move on. After a few dutiful hours of this process, I would emerge from the museum—not swept away, not invigorated, not moved—just exhausted.

Then one day I attended an art tour of the Huntington Gallery in Pasadena with Luc Travers, and my eyes were opened to art—or rather, my soul was.

We stopped in front of a bust of a woman. My reaction was typical. “That’s nice,” I thought. And, “It’s not very pretty.” (I am now mortified at the thought that I used to look at art like a philanderer looks at women.) But this time things would be different, because with Luc guiding us, we really *stopped*. We stood before this bust, and he began prodding us with questions. What did we see? A woman. How was she dressed? She was wearing something elegant, delicate, and silky. What else? Her hair was neatly arranged, but tendrils were falling down. How was she posed? She was looking over her shoulder, poised, expectant. Where was she looking? Who knows, but at something...or, at someone? What else did we notice? Her dress was falling from her shoulder...emphasizing a sensual quality...

This was becoming more interesting.

We continued with that process—observant, active-minded, involved—and as we observed, we started making connections, seeing the whole, understanding the precise sort of moment the artist had captured. This was not just a bust of a woman. This was a bust of a particular kind of woman, in a particular kind of moment. Ultimately, after a good half an hour of observation and discussion, we decided that this was an image of a woman glimpsing her lover across the room.

The work had transformed before my eyes. What had at first seemed to me inert and uninspiring now appeared as a dazzling image of an immortal moment, stolen from time and held still for us to ponder. This alone was a revolution for me—Luc had taught me a process by

which I could observe, contemplate, decipher and really understand a visual work of art. But there was more.

Luc then asked a simple question. “When have you experienced a moment like this?”

And after only a brief pause of contemplation, I was moved to tears.

Thanks to Luc, I now know that this is what it means to appreciate art—to see the integrated meaning of the details, to grasp the essence of the moment, to feel its power to shine a spotlight on immortal moments in our own lives. And thanks to Luc’s method, I know how. Far from the shallow philanderer, assessing art for its surface beauty, I can now appreciate great art with the ardor of an earnest lover.

If the ideas of this book took hold in the culture like they took hold in me, this book would not just change my life—it would change the world.

Lisa VanDamme is the founder of Read with Me (www.readwithmesalon.com) and of VanDamme Academy (www.vandammeacademy.com)



How To Read this Book

Dive Right In!

The goal of this book is to provide you with an immersive experience for different kinds of stories in paintings. Unlike many art books, the focus is not on the art history, the style, or the artist’s biography. The focus is not on the story about the artwork, but, rather, the story in the artwork. The paintings in this book were selected because they contain intriguing stories with insightful themes. There may be some you’ll immediately be drawn to, but our hope is that you’ll find meaning in each one of the 50 paintings.

If you are unfamiliar with our process of “reading” an artwork, don’t worry. I invite you to dive right in! Flip through the pages, and when you come across a painting that intrigues you, stop. Look more closely, and immerse yourself into the story with my Guiding Questions and then my Reading. My hope is that the process will feel intuitive and immediately rewarding. As you get more comfortable with the method, I hope you’ll find yourself wanting to read the artworks on your own in more depth. I hope you’ll enjoy coming to your own conclusions about the stories in the paintings and the personal meaning the artworks might have for you.

Reading Together

Another approach I suggest is to share the artworks with others! Open the book up for everyone to see and have someone pick out a painting they’re intrigued by. Then “read” it together. You can pull up that painting on another screen using the QR code for others to peruse. And you can use the “Guiding Questions” as conversation starters. When you feel ready, one of you can read my “Reading” out loud (or I’ll be happy to read it out loud via the QR code).

As you read together, there are two valuable follow-up questions that will help facilitate the conversation and lead to more insight and enjoyment.

1. **“What do you see that makes you say that?”** – This is a great question to ask to help you understand what someone is talking about. It’s especially valuable to ask when you might not agree with what they are saying. Perhaps your friend thinks the character is angry, but you think they look more sad. Rather than defend your position, consider asking them, “What do you see that makes you say she is angry?” Be curious!

2. **“What does that detail tell you?”** – This is a great question to ask to help piece together the plot. No detail in a well-told story is irrelevant, and the same is true for the visual arts. If someone notices a detail like a bouquet of flowers, ask them, “What does that bouquet of flowers tell you?”

Reading with Children

One note about sharing the art with children. The content of this book is directed at adults. But most of the art is suitable for children of all ages. If you are with children (elementary-aged or younger), you might start with the paintings under the “childhood” heading in the directory. However, from my experience, children are likely to enjoy most of the artworks in this book in the same way that they would enjoy reading storybooks.

Some paintings might be a little intense for younger children. Adult discretion may be needed, especially for the following paintings: #4, #11, #22, #23, #29, #33, #35, #36, and #42.

Page Setup

Each painting in the book is accompanied by Guiding Questions, my Reading, and a QR code. Feel free to read alone or share the painting with others.



1. **Guiding Questions** – These questions are meant to help you do your own reading of the artworks. When you are with others, they are a great way of generating conversation about what is going on in the painting.

You’ll notice that the first question is the same for every painting: “What’s your initial title?” This is a quick and easy way to immediately start your reading. And it’s a fun question to ask others. The other questions are specific to the artwork and are meant to help you piece together the “plot” of the story and to help you “immerse” yourself in the setting and the action.

2. **Digital Component** – Scan the QR code to take you to the Digital Component. The Digital Component consists of two primary parts: 1) a zoomable image of the painting, and 2) the audio of the “Readings.” The zoomable image will help you see finer details important to the story that you may not be able to see in the original image. Also, if you are with others, you can put the image on another screen (whether a phone or a television) to make it easier for everyone to view. With the audio component, you’ll hear my voice reading the questions and the “Reading.” You may find this helpful if you’d like to keep your eyes on the painting. Also, I try to read with meaning to make the story conveyed a little more clear and engaging. There are 50 different QR codes, one for each painting, so you can immediately go to the content for the painting you are interested in.

To access the digital component simply use the QR code app on your phone (or, for many phones, simply hold your camera over the QR code and the link to the digital component will pop up). If you are reading the eBook version, the QR code is a clickable link. Just tap it with your finger or mouse.

3. **Reading** – This is my telling of the story of this painting. I’ll essentially be answering the “Guiding Questions.” Each Reading starts with a description of what I see going on as I try to piece together the story. Then, I share the title or relevant background information. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, I propose a question or two that might help you personally connect with the characters and their situation. I encourage you to reflect on these questions. Doing so will help you empathize with the characters and make the artwork more personally meaningful. (If you’d like to learn more about “reading” an artwork, I refer you to *Touching The Art*.)
4. **Artwork Label** – There are two pieces of information on the label: 1) a reference number, 2) the museum which houses the painting. You’ll notice that other bits of information are not here, including the name of the artist. You can find that information in the index located right after.
5. **Painting** – With each page you turn you will see a new painting. The paintings are organized by museum, but as you glance through the paintings, you will come upon all kinds of different stories.

What are you in the mood for?

Sometimes you might open the book and want a particular kind of story. Perhaps you’re with your grandchildren, and you’d like to find an artwork focused on childhood. Or you are enjoying an evening with your boyfriend, and you’d like to share a romantic story. Maybe you’re in the mood for a pulse-pounding drama, or you’d like to contemplate a quieter story. You can choose a painting in much the same way you might decide what kind of movie you want to watch or what music you want to listen to. The Art Directory (on the next page) will help you find the kind of painting you are in the mood for.

Categories include the following: Childhood, Friends/Family, Romance, Private Moments, and Dramatic Moments.

Art Directory



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Art Directory



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What's your initial title?
What's the mood of this place?
What are they doing? Is this an art lesson?
Can you find three clues that show how intimate they are?
What are they primarily focused on? Each other?
Did he come over to her? Or did she go to him?
What could she be thinking in this moment?



A young couple sits together bathed in a golden light. They are intimately close, heads touching, holding hands, and her shoulders drawn into his. But they aren't looking at each other. Their eyes are looking down at the large board he has on his knees where he seems to be writing or drawing.

Did he come over to show her something? Or did she go over to him to see what he was working on?

I imagine he might have been sitting in this corner by the open window, taking advantage of the sunlight to illuminate the sketches he is working on. Then his beloved walked into the room and over to him, curious about what he was doing and wanting to be close to him. He doesn't put his board down, nor does he tell her not to disturb him. Rather, he draws his legs back so that she can pull up close to him.

He tilts the board towards her, and he takes her hand, inviting her to observe what he is doing. She leans over, barely aware of the touch of his cheek on her brow, or even of his hand as her fingers loosen in his. Her attention is drawn towards what her lover is doing. The intimacy between the two is there, but it's not at the forefront of their awareness. What is she thinking in this moment? It's not so much, "You are wonderful!" but, rather, "I see how you are doing that."

What is he working on that is keeping both of their attention? He might be showing her something that she'd be keenly interested in, like plans for their future home. Or he might be working on a project all his own that she might admire. In either case, he isn't presenting to her a finished gift. He is sharing something perhaps more intimate—he is having her observe his process of creation. This is not a pristinely manicured product he displays for her; rather, he invites her to see his thoughts come as he paints.

When have you invited a loved one to experience the work you are passionate about doing? Often that might happen with a parent and child, but have you done this with a romantic partner? When reflecting on this painting, I have usually empathized with the character of the man. I fondly think of moments when I've shared my work with a partner who was keenly interested.

Recently there's another question I've asked: When have you been curious about what your romantic partner works on? He let her into his world, but she came to him. I've started to use this painting as a vision of the deep intimacy that can come from being curious about the work your lover cares about. In the novel *The Fountainhead*, Dominique walks into her lover's studio, looking forward to a romantic encounter. He isn't ready yet, though. He tells her to wait while he finishes an architectural project he is working on—work he loves. As he works, she doesn't leave. She stays, sits, and watches, feeling a kind of intimate connection to him she hadn't before. The young woman in this painting makes me want to be more aware of opportunities to get close to a loved one while they work—to form that deeper connection.

It's hard to imagine a more romantic scene than in this painting: the early-evening sun shining, a secluded home, a cozy corner, the smell of ripe citrus in the air, and a couple who makes me think of what Romeo and Juliet might have been in their late 20s. To add to this mood, I like to imagine a Chopin ballade playing in the background. Yet, in this scene imbued with romance, the intimacy between the two is understated—a subterranean river flowing beneath their shared moment. The title of this artwork is *The Painter's Honeymoon*.



What's your initial title?

Why are all these objects gathered together? Is she setting the table for dinner?

What is the object that she is holding up to the sunlight?

What could she be thinking at this moment?



A young woman in an apron lifts a small object high above her eyes. She holds that small dish with both hands almost as if she were holding up baby Simba (from *The Lion King*)! But, instead of holding this precious object for others to see, she is lifting it only for herself—for her own glance of adoration. Maybe she's holding the delicate, intricately decorated object to gaze at the sunlight refracting through it. She might be turning it, following the beautiful blue decoration against the light.

The apron she wears suggests she has been doing housework. It looks like she might be cleaning the collection of ornate china on the polished table beside her. Has she started to clean or has she finished? I'm not sure, but the fact that she stares with concentrated delight at the blue and white cup (which might be paired with the one on the table) suggests she has finished her handiwork—at least for this cup. She's definitely not saying to herself, "Oh no! I missed a spot." Rather, she could be saying, "My, that is beautiful."

Is this the kind of joy I feel when doing chores? Well, perhaps not all the time. I feel relief more than anything after I take out the trash. I do feel satisfaction when I flatten out fresh sheets on my bed. And I guess I have held up those nice wine glasses I got at Christmas to admire them right after I've washed them. But I can't imagine looking the way she does at the cup, with a mix of delight and reverence.

The title doesn't offer much of a background story. The painting is called *The Blue Cup*. So there isn't much to add to what we see at face value. But I think there's a lot already here in this scene. This is the kind of moment I would like to have: a moment of admiring the beauty of a precious object I take care of. This isn't drudgery—she isn't Cinderella forced to do all the housework. This young lady is enjoying this work! She reminds me of a friend of mine who loved his shoes. He had black leather shoes, and I remember seeing his cleaning kit of brushes and shoeshine. He would proudly display his shining shoes and would even take photos of them. It's been a while since I've thought of those shoes, but the young lady reminds me of the joy my friend took in them.

So, what precious possession do you delight in making beautiful?

She makes me want to wash my car, not because it's dirty, but because I want to be like her—I want to experience her capacity for enjoying everyday beauty.



What's your initial title?

What do you see in this landscape?

Do you notice the two different kinds of places? How would you describe the mood of each?

Put yourself in the beautiful, tropical landscape. What sound would you hear there?

Now put yourself in the barren wasteland. What sounds do you hear there?

Can you find the two human figures? Where are they coming from?



A great, craggy peak splits two worlds. One is verdant, sun-filled, and brimming with life; the other, desolate, grim, and barren. In one, swans glide calmly on a smooth lake. (I can imagine Pachelbel's *Canon in D* playing in the background.) In the other, a treacherous

waterfall crashes through rocks into the abyss below. In one, a host of flowers and trees of every variety—from palms to poplars—fill the sun-drenched valley. In the other, contorted shapes of dead, broken, gnarled plants and stumps cling to the misshapen rocks in the brown somberness filling the world. Deeper into the peaceful world, deer appear, frolicking near a winding stream. Meanwhile, in the world of chaos, there is also a deer, but it's dead, half-eaten, hovered over by a snarling wolf and a hungry vulture. Further into the paradise landscape stands a soaring peak covered in white snow; whereas further into the wild wasteland, the roar of an erupting volcano is echoed by the thunder accompanying the lightning streaks. These worlds are so different, yet they are joined by a cave-like passageway.

From that passageway, a bright light bursts forth, rays shooting outwards into the wasteland. It looks like the fiery beams have even ignited nearby vegetation. And just out of reach of the angry rays, two human figures walk away from the portal into the wasteland.

The figure of a man looks back, raising his arm to protect his eyes.

He holds the hand of a woman who might be casting her eyes

downwards. They both look distressed, disconsolate. The man's

expression suggests he'd rather be back in the beautiful paradise.

Did they belong there? If so, why are they now going into the

wasteland? They have taken precious little with them—they wear only

a few rags. Their departure seems involuntary, almost as if they are

being driven away. Perhaps they're being driven away by the flaming

sun-blast emanating from the passageway.

You may have guessed the background story this scene refers to. It

took me a while, though, since the human figures are so small. The title

of the painting is *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*. So, these

are the moments after Adam and Eve have committed their sin and are now being cast out from the Garden of Eden into the unforgiving "real" world. It looks like one of those grim sci-fi movies where the characters time-travel to a post-apocalyptic future.

So, how do you personally connect to such a grand, allegorical moment? My first question might be: When have you been in a place that feels like a blissful paradise, or at least a place of great comfort? Perhaps you've gone on a wondrous vacation to Hawaii or Paris, staying at the nicest hotels with the best meals? Or perhaps it's your home—current or childhood? Or, more broadly, perhaps there's been a period of your life that was especially comfortable? Now, to add in the second, darker world of this painting: When have circumstances suddenly changed from comfortable to distressing or disastrous? Perhaps your wife loses her job? Or you lose your savings in a stock market crash? Maybe you go through severe medical issues? From *Canon in D*, the soundtrack of your life suddenly changes, and becomes something like *Night on Bald Mountain*.

In the sudden change, it's hard to look forward to the challenges now facing you, especially when they seem so daunting and inhospitable compared to the ease of your previous "Eden."

What will happen to our two lonely protagonists? It looks grim, it looks bleak, and it looks like they are not ready to face the new reality. Their reaction reminds me of Ashley Wilkes from *Gone with the Wind*. The southern gentleman, pining for the aristocratic way of life of the antebellum South, struggles to face the new world, a new world without his old comforts. I won't draw inspiration from Adam and Eve in this artwork the next time a worldwide pandemic strikes, but this image will stay with me as a clear vision of how a sudden change in my life can sometimes seem so frightening and daunting. And maybe I'll reflect on how I might want to approach such an entrance into the wilderness.



What's your initial title?

Where is she? Outside? In her room?

What is the mood of this place? Chaotic? Serene? Dark?

What music do you imagine fitting the mood of this scene?

How is she touching the object near her head? Is she trying to take it off the shelf?



A ghostly young woman, all dressed in gray and black, stands in a dark, gray-walled chamber. Her gown, voluminous and as bare as the walls, covers her feet on the cold stone floor. Everything about this mood is chilling: the pale light, the stark cell, and her ivory-gray arm reaching towards the rustic

pot. What is she doing in this vault-like place with this pot? Her head seems to tilt slightly towards it, which is placed on a ledge level with her face. Her eyes are closed, and her lips are parted, almost touching the clay urn. Her hand delicately caresses the clay surface with two fingers. It does not look like she's about to take this pot to bring it up from the cellar into the kitchen. It looks like she is showing affection to it. While her right hand caresses, her left hand reaches up and holds onto the top ledge. With her eyes closed, and her lips pursed, it looks like she might even be about to kiss the clay. Why is she doing this? What is so precious about this urn that she quietly shows intimacy to such a mundane object? There are a few white roses on the ledge next to the pot. Did she place them there? Is she commemorating something in a solemn, secret shrine?

The young woman is named Isabella, a maiden of a well-to-do family in medieval Italy, with three over-protective brothers. When she fell in love with the lowborn Lorenzo, the brothers discovered their tryst and decided to put an end to it. They killed him. She found his body before they could get rid of it, and to preserve a memory of him, she decapitated him and hid his head in a pot of basil.

In this scene Isabella has come to her secret spot to be with her beloved. His head, placed at eye-level, is there for her to adore alone. She has preserved a forbidden memento of love. And in this moment, she is living in the memory of kissing him.

In his poem called *Isabella*; or *The Pot of Basil*, John Keats wrote:

Pale Isabella kiss'd it, and low moan'd.
Twas love; cold,—dead indeed, but not dethroned.

Despite how macabre this story is, I think it's possible to empathize with her. When have you used a memento to recapture the memory of a lost loved one? Perhaps it's something you've done when you've placed your finger on a face in a photograph? Or maybe when you've sat in an old, familiar room and relived memories that had taken place there? I'm reminded of the character of Jean Valjean from *Les Misérables*, who preserves mementos of those who meant most to him and uses them to "bring them back to life."

What must Isabella be thinking right now? What would she say if she were to speak to Lorenzo? Perhaps, as my friend suggested, she might whisper this to him as she closes her eyes, touches his cheek, and kisses his lips: "I will be back, my love."



What is your initial title?

How would you describe this place?

Imagine you are in this setting. What sounds do you hear? What physical sensations would you feel?

Who is this person? What have they been doing?

What are they doing now? Hiking? Thinking?



A freezing, rocky hillside slopes downwards. Long black beams of rock jut out of the snow-covered tundra like mammoth-sized shards of coal. Over the hill, two fearsome cloud formations rise above the diagonal slope: one dark, stormy, menacing, emanating from a blackened sky; the other, at the base of the hill, white, frothing with accents of blue-green like a giant wave has just crashed. But if it's a wave, the ocean is out of view. Two thunderous forces—the darkness of the sky and the anger of the ocean—break against the inhospitable land. Patches of brown vegetation do protrude, but that's it. The only sign of a tree is what looks like dead branches or barren roots. There is no shelter, natural or man-made, and there is no path. But there is a figure standing there in this desolate and increasingly menacing place.

What is he doing here? He carries a goose on his back and a rifle extended before him. His hunt was successful. And now, what is he doing? Is he walking home? Is he concerned about the danger of the coming storm and wondering what to do? It does look like he's stopped in his tracks, one leg forward, the other standing firmly braced, his chin raised as he looks over at the two cloud forces. He does not seem daunted, but seems to take in the natural spectacle with interest. Perhaps the coming storm is an obstacle on his way home, or perhaps not. But, in this moment, he's not trying to escape it. He seems to be taking it in. He knows how to survive out here. This isn't Jeremiah Johnson as a novice mountain man bungling through his first desolate mountain winter. And not only can this hunter survive out here, he seems to love it—he seems to love the spectacular manifestation of this land's harshness. It's not the maniacal glee Lieutenant Dan exudes when confronting the storm at sea (in *Forrest Gump*), or the over-dramatic exultations of a TV reporter covering a hurricane's arrival.

And it's definitely not the kind of fear that Odysseus and his men feel whenever Poseidon's wrath is billowing the sea waves. Rather, it's a calm, self-possessed attitude.

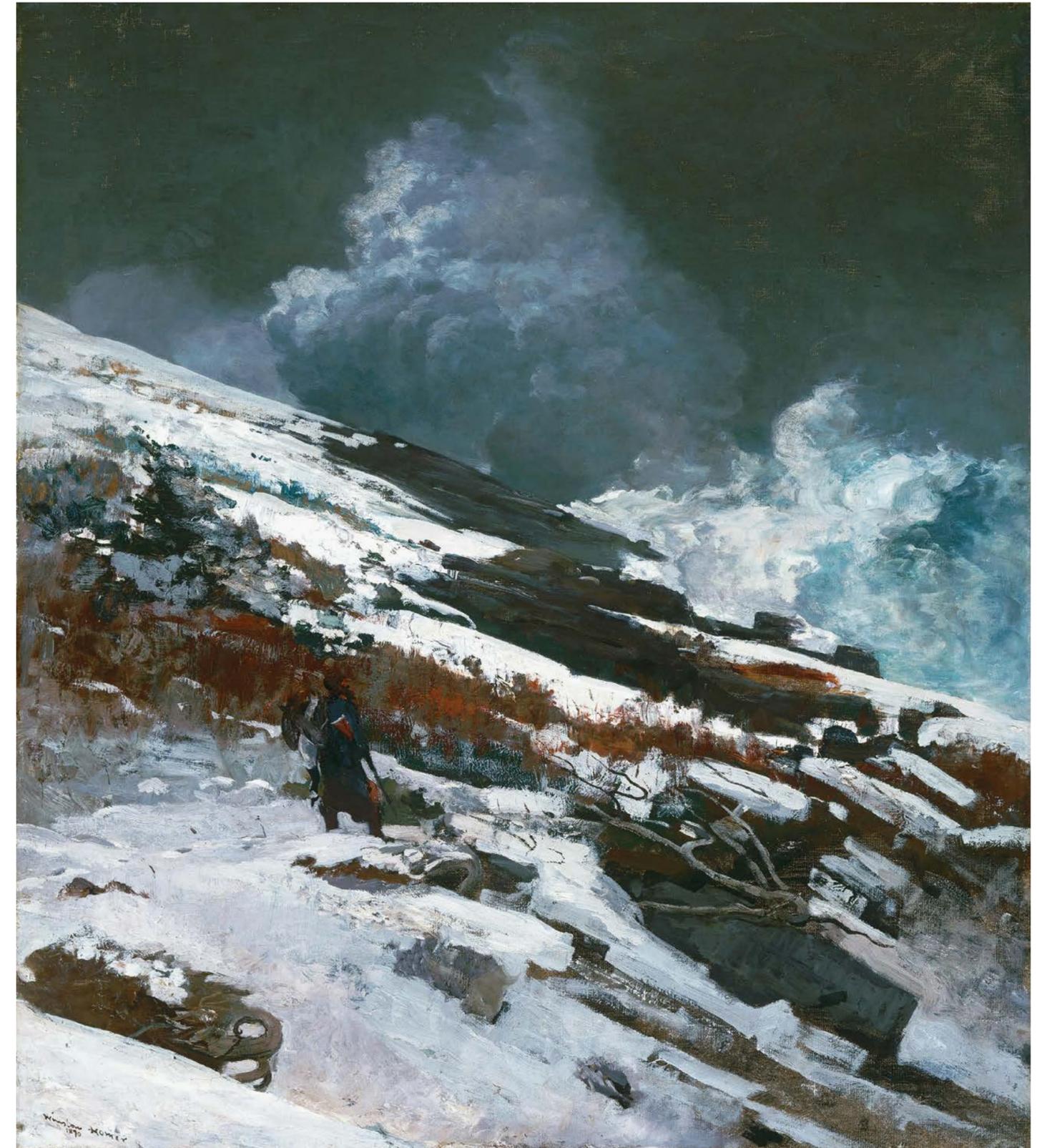
The painting is called *Winter Coast*, and it is meant to be set in a particular geographic location in Maine: Prout's Neck, a peninsula that juts out into the Atlantic Ocean. So, this rugged man, on the way back from a successful hunt, stops on the coast to look over at the ocean and the waves crashing on the rocky shore.

When have you found yourself before dangerous, powerful manifestations of nature? Perhaps you've seen the winds of a hurricane pick up or witnessed the aurora borealis. And how did you react? I remember driving through the barren landscape of South Dakota and seeing the most ominous cloud formation of my life—it was massively green and frequently flashed with lightning. I felt frightened and exhilarated.

There's a poem by Emily Brontë whose narrator is mesmerized by a coming storm. In the last stanza the narrator says with excitement:

Clouds beyond clouds above me,
Wastes beyond wastes below;
But nothing drear can move me;
I will not, cannot go.

I can imagine that our hunter and Emily would stand together looking out at the darkening storm. And maybe he'd turn to her and say, "It's magnificent. Isn't it?"



What's your initial title?

What do you see going on in this moment? What is the girl doing?

What movement is going on around her? What is not moving?

Why have the butterflies and bees gathered around the bowl?

Is this someone who seems at home among wildlife?

Take her pose. What is the attitude of the girl toward the insects?



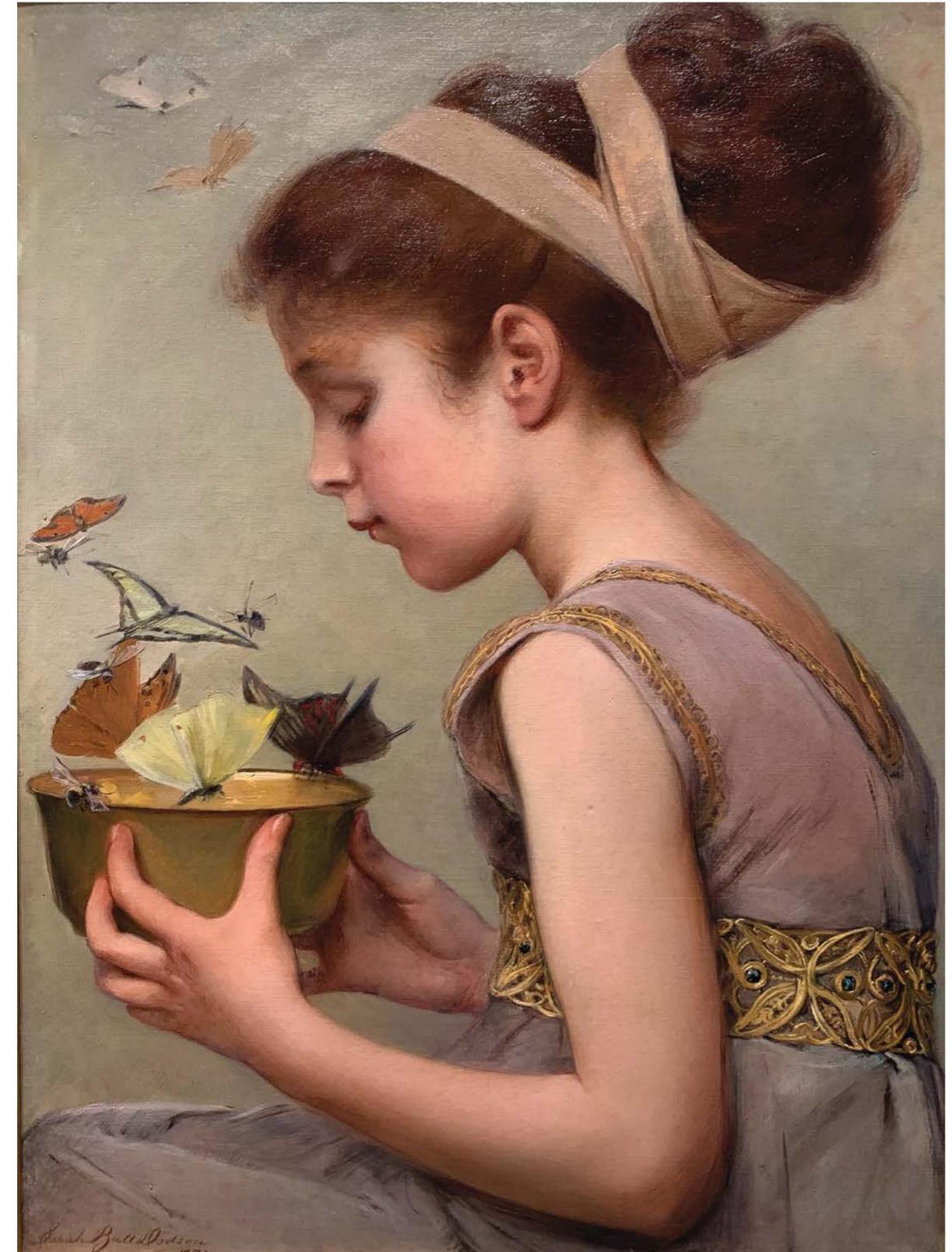
A young girl sits very still; she holds a golden bowl filled with a golden liquid. Butterflies flutter around, then pause to sit on the bowl's edge. Bees buzz over, and in this insect commotion, the girl sits still, shoulders drawn forward, both hands spread to hold the bowl carefully. Her chin is mere inches over the bowl, and she stares down with serene curiosity and a slight smile. What is she thinking as she looks on? Definitely not "gross!" or "scary!" But she's also not being overly analytical. Her expression isn't quizzical or scrutinizing. The insects seem almost to be new pets.

She reminds me of my neighbor's child when he first met my kitten, George. He didn't pet her, like his friend aggressively did. He just looked at her and held out his hand, letting the kitten come to him. There is the same kind of caring fascination in the girl's eyes and in her fingers. She will hold that bowl still for her new companions, and they will flutter to her like the animals drawn to Dickon in *The Secret Garden*. But she is not a child of the wild like Dickon. She wears a dress, embroidered with gold, and an intricately patterned, gilded belt, as beautifully decorated as butterfly wings. She looks like a princess on a playdate.

The title of this painting is *The Honey of Hymettus*. Hymettus, a mountain range on the outskirts of Athens, was reputed in ancient Greece to be a place for the cultivation of honey. I can imagine the sweet aroma of the honey filling her nostrils and adding even more warmth to the scene. As I think about how I'd personally connect to the moment, I think back to my childhood, and I think I might have been scared of encountering the insects. (I still remember being stung by a bee on the palm of my hand when I was seven or eight!) I would have been fascinated by her calm kindness.

As an adult, I really like to think about this child as a student of mine now. I want to help foster this kind of open, tender fascination with the world. Do you know someone like this in your life? Were you like this when you were a child?

As she holds the bowl, I can imagine her staring at the butterflies' beautifully patterned wings and looking at the movement of their proboscises as they drink the honey. Then, if she were to speak, I can imagine her saying to them, "Don't worry little friends, I'm holding the bowl still."



What's your initial title?

What's going on in this story? What is she doing standing there? What could she be looking at?

Take her pose as accurately as possible. How do you feel? Comfortable? Tense?

Look carefully. Who else is with her in this wooded area?

Rewind the scene. Do you see any clues that tell you what she had been doing out here?



A young peasant woman stands by a tree looking intensely into the distance. It's not just her eyes that are intense. Her jaw is clenched. Her neck is strained. One arm juts out awkwardly, her hand absent-mindedly mingling with leaves, the fist of her other hand balled up by her side. Her whole

body seems transfixed. What has caused her to be stricken so? Does she see something? Maybe, but her eyes are not narrowed to notice something specific. Perhaps she is seeing something in her mind's eye.

Behind her there is a rude farmhouse and some kind of loom with an overturned bench beside it. And hovering around that contraption are ghostly figures: one is a knight in golden armor with a sword; the two others are women, one bent down weeping into her hands. All have sad expressions. And all have haloes. Does the peasant girl know they're there? Has she already seen them? Perhaps she has. Perhaps that's why the stool is overturned. She was busy at her work when suddenly the angels appeared, and she stumbled back from her chair in shock. She looks in even more shock now.

Why is she standing there facing away from them? Have they told her something that has caused her to turn and freeze up with the implications of what she's heard? If it was news, it was not joyous news. The sadness of the angels' faces and her shocked state suggest something of great import has been passed on to her. The golden knight does not wield the sword he holds—he seems to be proffering it. Could this sword be meant for the peasant girl?

The young woman is indeed being given the sword and called to take up arms. She has just been told that she will lead her country's armies against the enemy invaders. And more, she will succeed—she will save France. She, Joan of Arc, will be a hero. But the angels have other news too: she will be betrayed by the king she saved, and executed as a heretic.

In this scene, Joan has heard everything. What is her reaction? Is it devastation like the angel crumpled in anguish? No. Joan is standing up straight, and she seems to have turned away to process it all.

When have you received news that would alter the course of your life, sending it on a path full of challenges? Perhaps you've received a discouraging medical diagnosis? Or you've been told that a dear family member has passed away? Or the pregnancy test came back unexpectedly positive? Or you've been promoted to a position of great opportunity that will take you away from your family for several years? In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, I remember the look on Andy Dufresne's face when the jury convicts him of murdering his wife. And in *The Lord of Rings*, I remember when Frodo is told he must be the one to take the "One Ring" into the hellish land of Mordor. As she stands there transfixed, I imagine her looking at her own vision of everything that is to play out in her life—all the implications of the news she's received. And I find inspiration in her unflinching gaze at the inevitable: "This is what it will mean, then."



What's your initial title?

What's going on? What has the man been doing?

Why did the lady come over? To look at what he's working on? To call him to dinner?

What is his attitude to being interrupted?

Whom or what is she looking at? Did someone just walk into the room?

Imagine if she were to speak to us; what would she be saying right now?



A young woman in a full white dress leans over a man sitting at a table covered in scientific instruments and papers. It looks like she has come over to him and, as she leaned over, he paused, quill-in-hand, and looked up at her. "Oh, hi honey!" it looks like he could be saying, pleasantly surprised.

What exactly has he been doing? He seems to be in the middle of some scientific work. The stack of papers suggests he's been taking extensive notes, while multiple glass containers of varying shapes and sizes—objects that remind me of high school science labs—are spread on the table. There is even a bulbous glass ball on the ground at his feet. In this pristine, palatial room, here's a spot of messy laboratory.

It doesn't look like he's currently experimenting—the tools don't look to be in use, and he wears a sleek black jacket with white ruffles puffing out at his wrists. But he does look like he's been in the middle of some frenzied writing! His quill still keeps his spot on the stack of papers that are spreading off the table. His head might have been in his left hand as he bent down in concentration. And his right leg energetically juts outwards, belying the formality of the stately pillars behind him. He's a scientist in the throes of his passion. And he's just been interrupted! What is his reaction? Is it to frown and say, like Ebenezer Scrooge counting money, "Get out, I'm busy!"? Or is it like someone relieved to be pulled away from drudgery? Neither. He looks simultaneously delighted by the interruption, yet still in mid-work.

At any moment he will go back down to his work, but he will not have lost his place. I can imagine a small smile breaking through when the quill's feathers start to flutter again.

So, who is this woman? And why has she interrupted him? Is she a servant? Is she an assistant? She looks too elegant in her wig and chiffon dress to be just his assistant. But there is a chair with an artist's portfolio behind her. Was she sitting there working on something before she got up to interrupt him? And why is she interrupting him? Did she come to check on his work? If she has, I imagine she'd be looking down at those spread papers, but instead, she's looking at someone else. Is she looking at a friend of his or a friend of hers? I imagine it's a friend of hers. (He'd be more interested in the guest than he is if it were his friend.) So, I imagine her walking over to her husband while he works and rather than saying, "Hey honey, the Duchess is here for a visit," she just goes up to him, leans over, and glances back with a look of casual possession and pride, as if to say, "This is my husband. This is the man I love."

Her name is Madame Marie-Anne Lavoisier, a young woman living in the 1780s in Paris. Her husband, Antoine, is one of the most reputed chemists of his time. And she seems proud of that. She did indeed work as his assistant, doing sketches in collaboration with his scientific research. And she's fully at ease with her husband— comfortable enough to openly display her adoration for him to visiting guests. And his attitude is one of delight at being interrupted by her. Who is someone you would be delighted to have interrupt you while you are passionately at work? And if we take her perspective, who is a person in your life you are proud of saying to the world, "They are with me"?



What's your initial title?

What kind of place is this? The ruins of a castle?

What is the man doing inside the ruins? Is he exploring? Plotting? Praying?

What sounds would you hear if you were to come upon this scene in the middle of the night?

Why would he choose to come to this place to read?



The bright pale moonlight illuminates a ruin in the night. Through an arched opening, an orange glow warmly lights the figure of a man seated in the small grotto-like chamber. What is he doing here, alone, in the middle of the night? Is he an escaped convict hiding? Is he a traveler looking for shelter? He is seated, holding a book, and as he stretches one arm into the air, the long folds of his toga billow below his sweeping gesture. It looks like he is reading, but not to himself—rather, out loud. But he has no visible audience, and there isn't even anyone outside. There are only the overgrown ruins, and the clouds filling the night sky. No matter how still and somber the outside hills are, the bowels of this tower-like ruin are alive like the inside of a furnace. And, within, I can hear the voice of the man echoing, ringing through the silent, ancient landscape.

The painting depicts a tomb, the tomb of the Roman poet Virgil. On this night, Virgil has a visitor. An orator has come to this place in the dead of night, to give a speech, to share whatever he is reading, not with a wide audience, but with the single, silent spirit of a great poet. The visitor's name is Silius Italicus. He was born about 50 years after Virgil's death on September 21st, in 19 BC. Silius admired Virgil so much that every year, on the anniversary of the poet's death, Silius would commemorate the occasion by coming to Virgil's tomb to

declaim. Perhaps tonight he recites his favorite passages from Virgil's *Aeneid*. Perhaps he is here sharing from his own epic work *The Punica*. In any case, he is here to commune with an historical idol.

When have you made a pilgrimage to a sacred place, perhaps the home or resting place of one of your idols? And there, maybe you paid tribute in some way? Maybe you've listened to music at your favorite composer's tomb? Or perhaps you've read out loud the words of a great speech given at the monument you're visiting? Or simply just shared a few words with the person beside you to tell them how much the place means to you?

I remember recently reading about how the 20th century painter Norman Rockwell made a trip to Holland to visit the studio of his favorite artist, Rembrandt, who died centuries before. When he was there, he convinced the security guard to let him in after hours, when the crowds were gone, and he could converse with his idol undisturbed.

I can imagine if I were walking through the quiet, Neapolitan Campagna on this night, I would be drawn by the mysterious sounds coming from the tomb. And I would be moved to discover the spiritual tribute occurring.



What's your initial title?

What's going on in this scene? Is it a party? Is it a class?

Where is this scene taking place? A palace?

There are several people who look upset. Who looks the most upset?

What could the old man in white be saying to everyone?



A vigorous old man speaks to a group of agitated younger people gathered around him. He raises his hand, and one finger, with emphasis as he makes a declaration. And with the other hand he reaches over to take a cup from a young man who can't bear to look as he hands it to him. He's certainly not the only one upset. One figure buries his face in his hands; another turns away, throwing up an arm in despair; a third grabs his head, covering his ear as if he doesn't want to hear what is being declared; and one more sits at the foot of the bed, turned away, head lowered, eyes closed, disconsolate. Each figure exhibits a different kind of grief and protest. One figure seems to reflect them all as he sits beside the strong old man looking up pleadingly, his hand in an anguished grip on the old man's thigh. It looks like he could be saying, "Please do not do this, we cannot bear to see you suffer."

Why is everyone so upset? It's not that they're simply angry. It's more like they're upset with concern for him. They are his friends, and they are afraid for him. Is it something he's saying that's triggering this reaction? Is it something he's doing?

He sits halfway on a bed in a large dark, gray stone cell. There are no windows save the ones at the far end of a hall, and those are barred. Is this some kind of basement prison? On the floor beside the bed, there seems to be something to confirm this. There are chains and a manacle. Were they attached to the old man? Is he a prisoner? If he is, then he seems to be freed of his bondage. There is a red mark on his right ankle that might suggest the manacle was indeed just removed. So, if he's going to be freed, wouldn't his friends be rejoicing? Why is everyone so upset?

The background story is riveting. Socrates, living in Athens in the 5th century BC, was a beloved philosopher—beloved to his students—but

a pest to the authorities. He asked too many questions, too publicly, testing the leaders' consistency and their adherence to principles and truth. He irritated enough people in power that he was eventually brought to trial for corrupting the youth of Athens. A jury of 500 of his Athenian peers voted to have him executed for the crime. He was condemned to die by drinking poison from the hemlock plant. And he accepted the verdict. His friends and allies came to him with a plan to escape. And on the night of his rescue, with his friends around him, with freedom and life just a stairway away, he insisted on drinking the poison. As his friends protested, he declared that it was out of devotion to the ideal of Athens and its democratic government that he would follow its edict, though it meant his death. It was a matter of principle. And in this scene, the young man in red covers his eyes and burning cheeks, barely able to hand the goblet of hemlock to his beloved mentor. I can imagine that, in a moment, Socrates will drink from the cup, and lie back on the bed. But right now, there is one last burst of hopeless protest and anguish. "Why do this?" "There must be another way!" "I know you're right, but it's so hard to accept..."

When have you shared a decision you've taken and believed to be right, one that made your friends concerned for your welfare? In the play *Antigone* by Sophocles (a contemporary of Socrates), the young princess will not back down when a law is made preventing the burial of her brother, considered an enemy of the state. When she tells her sister, Ismene, that she intends to bury him, and not hide the fact, Ismene replies with anguished concern, fearing for her sister's life.

Hard decisions are often made most difficult not by resistance from your enemies, but resistance from your friends. It's how much they care for you that becomes the greatest obstacle. When I encounter such a decision, I hope I see Socrates, proud, strong, his hand raised, and I hear the words he might be saying at this moment: "This, my dear friends, is the moment that strength is needed."



What's your initial title?

What is going on? What happened to the man in white?

What are his companions saying?

What evidence do you see of the fight? Can you find three clues?

Who stabbed him? Can you find any clues to solve the mystery?

Why is everyone dressed in these strange outfits?

How is the man who is being led away feeling?



A dying man collapses into the arms of his friends, his grunts of pain filling the dreary dawn of the winter forest. The sword he was fighting with is still in one hand, while his other hand is contorted in a gnarled claw of pain. One companion leans over, head in his hands and brow furrowed in shock. He might be saying, "Oh no! Don't die!" Will he die?

His face is so pale, as pale as his costume, as pale as the mist enveloping the trees around them. And there is one spot of color, crimson, right there where his heart is. Another companion, in an Asiatic costume, fumbles to find the wound. But it looks like he will not be able to do much for his dying companion whose legs have gone limp, whose head has fallen forward, and whose mouth is open in gasps of pain. He seems to be letting out one final resistance against the paralysis of death.

Who killed him? Looking at the scene forensically, there is a sword and discarded cloak lying on the ground. A medley of footprints in the snow reveals the deadly dance that just occurred. And two figures walk away. One, in a harlequin outfit, seems to be soothing the other, who has feathers in his hair. The harlequin figure looks over to his companion with concern, while the latter looks down and away, seemingly walking with a heavy tread. Back on the field of battle, there is one more clue: a few loose feathers.

It seems that a duel has taken place among revelers of a carnival or masquerade. Perhaps an argument occurred inside the party between the Native American man and the man in the Pierrot costume. The way to settle it, they decided, was to take it outside. They procured their seconds and (matching) swords. And what started as a joyous evening of fun and costumes has ended with a man gasping away his last breaths in the cold.

The title of this painting is *The Duel After the Masquerade*. Though we only see him from the back, it is the figure of the victor that intrigues me most. He has just won this fight, but I don't get the sense that he's proud; quite the opposite. With slumped shoulders and lowered head, he looks anguished, defeated.

He has won the fight, but he's not victorious. Maybe the quarrel was petty. Maybe worse: he was close with the victim. He got in a fight over one thing or another and now he regrets it. It reminds me of Romeo slaying Tybalt in a duel. He won, but he killed his beloved's kinsman.

When have you won a conflict you regret having fought? Perhaps it's a fight with your spouse, or your parents, or a dear friend. Maybe you proved your point, beat them into submission. And then realized being right wasn't worth the pain the fight caused. As the winner of this duel walks away, he is not bragging to his friend about having won. Rather, I can imagine him saying softly, "Why did I let this happen?"



What's your initial title?

What is going on? What was she doing before she looked down at the globe?

What kind of news could that letter contain? An invitation to a ball? An investment loss in Mexico?

What could she be thinking to herself as she looks at this spot on the globe?



A young woman looks sadly at a globe as she holds her heart. Why is she sad? And what does the globe have to do with it? Her heavy-lidded eyes are half closed as her shoulders slump and her chin lowers. It looks like her body has lost its spirit. Her right arm seems to have dropped, the open letter landing on the tabletop. Who could that letter be from? It looks like, whatever it is, it's not news she was looking forward to hearing. She holds her left hand to her breast as if she's just suffered a pang of emotion. Perhaps she opened the letter, read its distressing contents, went over to the globe and turned it to the spot that might be mentioned in the letter. A realization strikes her and she pulls back her hand because it is clear to her what this location on the globe implies. There's a ring on her index finger.

So why does seeing the North American continent affect her so? Perhaps it's because she is far away from North America. Looking more closely at the globe, it looks like the landmarks are written in

French, like "OCÉAN PACIFIQUE." If she is in France, then she is looking at a place in the world that is very far away, especially before the 20th century. Perhaps, in this moment, she could be thinking, "Oh, that is where you are. Why does it have to be across oceans?"

The title of this painting is *News from Afar*. There is no particular background story on which this scene is based, but I can easily imagine that her husband is traveling, maybe as a soldier or a merchant. Whatever the case may be, she experiences a pang of longing as it becomes more acutely clear how far away he is.

So, when have you longed for a distant loved one? When has it become clear to you how far away they are from your life? Even as our world has gotten smaller, and we can Facetime each other at an instant from across the globe, there are still plenty of moments when we wish the one we loved was not an ocean away, but were there to hold us and feel our hearts beat for them.



What's your initial title?

Is this couple together or separate?

What attitude do the man and woman have towards each other?

Imagine you are in this setting. What sounds do you hear? What physical sensations do you feel?

Can you find three details that make the woman look bored or despondent?

Does this couple remind you of any you know from movies or literature?



A couple sits outside in the autumn air with each other, but they are not interacting. Both are sophisticatedly dressed, like they just stepped out of *Downton Abbey* to go for a short walk in the countryside. But have they been together on a walk? It's hard to tell if they are even together.

Their similar social station, their similar age, and the fact that they are the only two people in this deserted, park-like area suggests that they are a couple, perhaps even recently married. But their interaction, or lack thereof, also implies they might be strangers to each other, or at least, strangers at this moment.

The young man, with a layered white collar that stiffens his neck in place, seems perfectly content reading his book. His back is set straight against a tree, his legs crossed in a dandyish casualness, and he is elegantly holding his book with one hand while petting a dog with the other. He seems absorbed in his own world, and oblivious to her.

She sits slumped over, her arms on her thighs and her shoulders sagging. She holds her unopened umbrella and the strings of a purse in her hands. She turns her head towards the gentleman as if she might have thought of saying something, but can't even bother to muster any thought as to what to say. Her darkened eyes look tired, bored, and a little sad. She had picked some colorful flowers earlier in the day, but she's not looking at them, or enjoying their aroma, much less making a crown of flowers. Instead her fingers seem to be fidgeting nervously with her sleeve. She might be thinking to herself, "It's no use. He's not going to pay attention anyway."

The sad-looking dog also seems to notice how aloof the gentleman is being. I can imagine him quietly whimpering to get the man's attention, but all he gets is a patronizing pat on the head.

A gush of brisk wind causes some of the yellow leaves to start to flutter down around them, and what was perhaps once a sunny day is starting to look gray and bleak. The lady might need that umbrella soon.

The title of this painting is fitting. It's called *The Waning Honeymoon*. The disconnect between the couple has started rather early in their married life. It reminds me of the marriage of Marguerite and Percy Blakeney from *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. She yearns for his love, but he does not seem to return it, and worse, he does not seem to care that she desires affection. The gentleman in our painting seems content on his honeymoon, but he does not seem to care that his wife is not particularly happy.

When have you felt emotionally disconnected with someone you are meant to be close to? Perhaps you've felt the need to approach them, but they didn't seem receptive. What a difficult situation to be in.

Another way to personally connect to this scene is to put yourself in the gentleman's place. When have you been too absorbed to notice the needs of those who are a close part of your life? I know that I have sometimes done this in my relationships, whether I was absorbed in some project, or simply took the relationship for granted. Seeing this moment from the perspective of the gentleman reminds me of how easily that disconnect can happen. I'll think of *The Waning Honeymoon* if I ever suspect I might be in this kind of situation—from his perspective or from hers. Meanwhile, I hope that when I next spend time with this married couple, I'll see him turn around and, with an affectionate smile, share what he is reading with her.



What's your initial title?

What's going on? What kind of music is he playing? Fun? Soothing?

Who in the audience seems most intellectually absorbed? Who seems most emotionally absorbed?

Look at the woman seated in the front row. What three clues do you see that suggest she is enthralled by the performance?

When have you been mesmerized by a performer?



A young man plays a harp-like instrument in a small amphitheater by the sea in front of a handful of women. The audience ranges in their interest from one who wistfully looks off into the distance, to another, with hand-on-chin concentration, staring at the performer. But there's only one who seems deeply, emotionally moved. A young woman, with dark hair and dark eyes, sits forward, with her arms and chin leaning on a pedestal. Her whole body seems to have melted, and her wide eyes look at the musician like the whole world around her has dissolved away, and the only thing that she experiences is the music... and the musician. Her young friend stands beside her, moved as well, though not as deeply. She's placed one hand on her friend's back in affectionate acknowledgment, as if to say, "I understand. I can see why you're feeling this way."

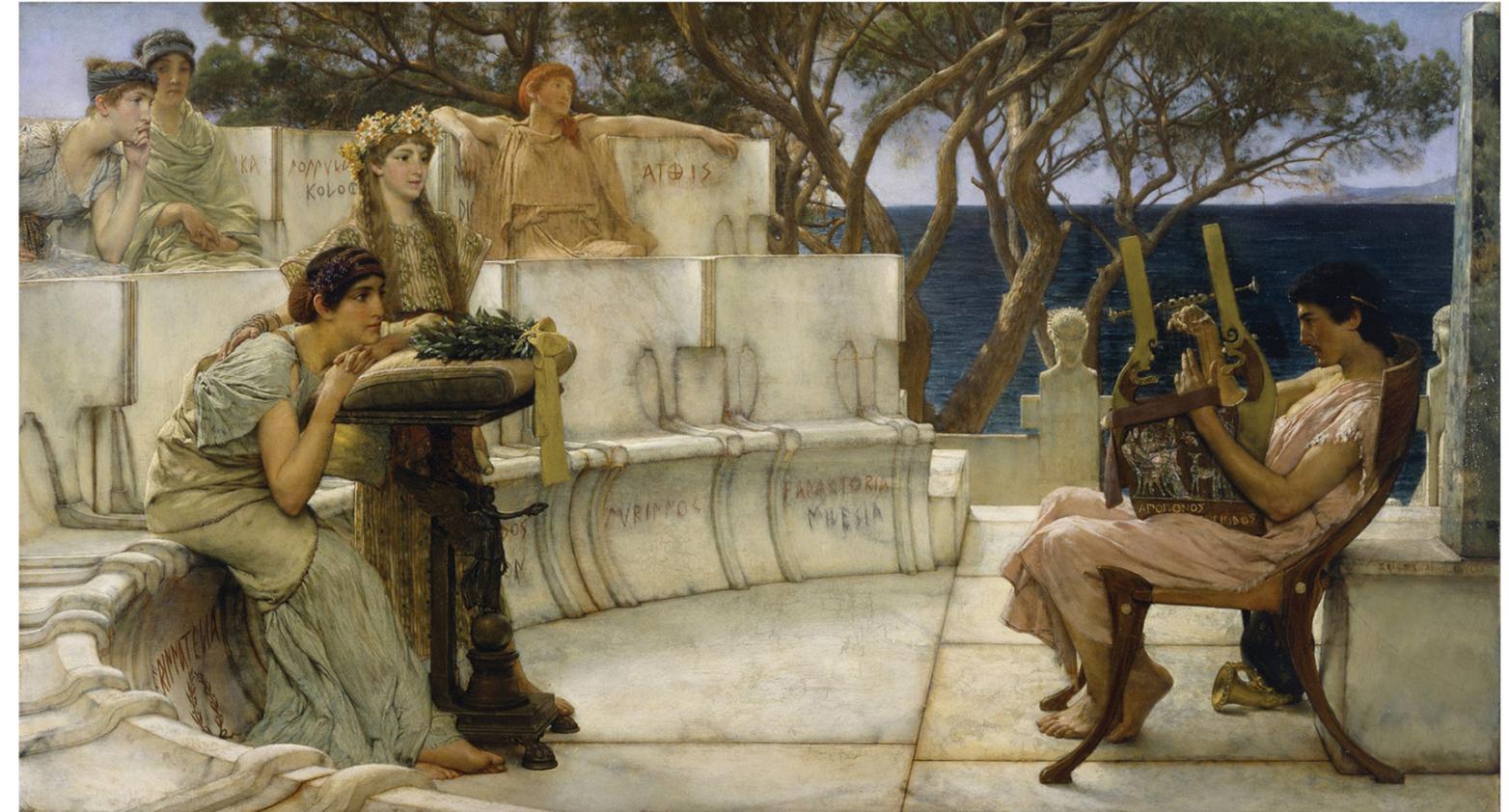
What kind of music could he be playing to entrance her so? The musician leans back in his chair with his elaborately decorated instrument. His hands delicately pluck the strings, while his lips are parted. It looks like he's singing. The delicate notes of the kithara, the harp-like instrument he plays, and the sounds of his song mingle with the soft sea breeze wisping through the branches of the trees. His serene face and relaxed body make me think he is singing a gentle song of love—one that echoes the clear blue sky, the smell of the sea, and the look of total adoration in the young woman's eyes. He stares straight ahead, perhaps looking at his finger placements... perhaps looking past them and into her eyes.

The young woman who is so moved is a poet. Her name is Sappho, and she wrote some of the earliest love poetry in ancient Greece. She lived on the island of Lesbos with her female followers. The young man is a poet as well, Alcaeus.

In this scene, he seems to have started an impromptu performance. And the most entranced person in the audience is Sappho. When have you been mesmerized by an artistic performance? In one of my favorite romantic movies, *Impromptu*, the author, George Sand, falls in love with the composer, Frédéric Chopin. She doesn't fall in love at first sight. She falls in love at first sound. She hears him play the piano, is swept away by the music, and is enamored with the soul who created it. Her first words to him are, "You are in the middle of a miracle. And I'm not quite cured." I imagine Sappho is in the middle of such a miracle. And I want to experience such miracles, myself.

There is another way that I like to personally connect to this moment, and that's being in Alcaeus's place. When have you shared something deeply personal for an audience, but known that it will affect one particular person in the crowd more than others? Perhaps it was a musical performance? Or an exhibition of your art? Or a personally meaningful presentation? Or a competitive event? I love the scenes in the television coverage of Olympic events when, after winning the competition, the gold medalist goes to the stands to embrace the loved one they knew was eagerly watching. Whatever the specific situation, the personal connection shared is not diluted because it's public. It might even be enhanced.

As Sappho and Alcaeus stare across the sun-drenched space at each other, I hear him singing his song, but I see him saying, "I sing this for you." And I hear her reply with her eyes, "You are making the world I want to live in."



What's your initial title?

Where is this story taking place? A park?

Look at the fancy gentleman with the sword. What three details do you find especially fancy about him?

There is a crowd gathered. Who are they? And what are they doing?

Take the gentleman's pose. What is his attitude to the two men rushing at him?



A foppish aristocrat stands tall, his sword out while he surveys a crowd of soldiers that has gathered in the middle of fields of flowers. This elegant gentleman wears a tall, plumed hat, a wide, pristinely ruffled collar, and an equally pristine mustache. His whole person seems adorned

with the most luxurious raiment. His long sword, blade catching the sunlight, boasts an intricately spiraled handle. He looks like some kind of dashing, sophisticated, stylish young lord. His sense of style would make Percy Blakeney (from *The Scarlet Pimpernel*) jealous! But our lord is not effete. He looks sleekly vigorous with smooth, gaunt cheeks, full, stern lips, and a balletic pose that implies profound familiarity with fencing. In a swift, simple turn of the wrist, I imagine that sword could leap up and become deadly. (That sword's tip is placed, curiously, by the small pot containing a single flower.) At this moment, he is not acting, he is watching. And what is he watching?

A crowd of men in matching bland beige and black uniforms and comical, conical helmets are gathered in the spread of flower beds. Two of them are running up to the sophisticated "lord." They seem to be coming aggressively, carrying guns, as they traipse through the pristine beds of tulips. Are they here to arrest him? Why are there so many for just one man?

Most of the soldiers are turned away from the lord, and, looking more closely, it looks like they are stomping up and down. Why are they trampling down flowers? Is the lord looking on in disdain because they are trampling on his beautiful tulips? Is this his estate? If so, why isn't he intervening in this attack? Could it be some kind of police raid? Has he done something wrong and is being punished for it?

I don't see a criminal. It isn't his impeccable style that makes me think he is no criminal. It's his fearless poise standing before the soldiers, and it is his look of righteous disdain as he stares at them. He seems a courageous witness to an injustice being done to him.

But he's not just a witness. He has his sword out, and he stands between the soldiers rushing to him and this single flower. Is he guarding this flower from the approaching menace? He might be saying, "You can destroy the rest, but you will not lay one oafish finger on a single delicate petal of this one."

The painting is called *The Tulip Folly*. In Holland in the 17th century, tulips were all the rage and became an extremely popular commodity. With everyone growing tulips, the market became saturated, and the price of tulips began to fall precipitously. To stave off economic consequences, the government acted and decided to reduce the tulip supply. They sent soldiers to tulip farms to destroy the flowers en masse.

Our young tulip lord is seeing his estate destroyed by authoritarian decree, and he bears it. However, it seems that there is one of these flowers that he will not let the soldiers touch. It is indeed a special tulip. With its distinctive red-and-white stripes, the 'Semper Augustus' was extremely rare and extremely valuable. In this moment, the tulip lord is standing guard over his most precious possession in the midst of an attack.

What precious possession of yours would you stand guard over even while everything else was taken from you? What is your 'Semper Augustus'? In thinking about this question, I immediately gravitate to my loved ones. But if I were to confine this to the realm of material possessions, I think of my mementos, or the drive where all my writing is stored. For Mal in the television show *Firefly*, I can imagine it's his ship, *Serenity*. For Roxanne from *Cyrano de Bergerac*, it could be that letter at her chest.

If I ever have to defend what matters most to me, I hope I could summon the graceful, defiant poise the tulip lord possesses in protecting what matters to him.



What's your initial title?

What is the young woman doing? Is she getting ready for a party? Is she weighing something?

What is her expression as she looks at the balance? Scrutinizing? Distracted?

What is that large painting behind her? Do you recognize the scene in it?



A young woman tilts her head slightly to look at the tiny balance she holds in two fingers. She holds it still, as if she were waiting for it to find equilibrium. But, looking closely, it doesn't look like there is anything in the balance, except glints of light from the window above. What does it mean that there is nothing in the scales? Is this some kind of symbolism?

The light from the small window flows in, sparkling off of the jewels in the box, smoothing the pale wall's surface, and caressing the woman's delicate face. It's a face that looks at once serene, yet thoughtful—possibly too thoughtful for the task she might be involved in. Where could her mind be? It's not as if she is looking in the small mirror in front of her, or at the painting behind her, or off into the distance, or even too closely at the jewels. She isn't saying, "These pearls would fetch me 100 guilder." There aren't even any pearls in the balance! So what is she thinking?

The title of the artwork is *The Woman with the Balance*. That doesn't help shed much light, but there are two details of cultural context that do help me make more sense of what is going on. The first has to do with what she is doing with an empty balance. Before you can use a balance, you've got to make sure that the scales are aligned properly to ensure that each side is level with the other. The jewelry is still in the box, and it looks like there are flat weights stacked ready for use. After she's finished balancing the scales, she'll proceed with weighing her precious stones. So, this means that, in this moment, she is waiting for the scales to stop undulating in order to judge if they need adjustment. (Is that symbolic meaning?)

Personally, I've got buzzers, beeps, and alarms to tell me when something is ready. But I do have to somewhat pay attention when I'm blow-drying my hair. Now, when I blow-dry my hair, my mind starts

to wander, and I start to think about things other than the dampness of my locks. So, if she's like me, and her mind wanders, what could she be thinking about while she waits for the scales to balance? I'm wondering if she's pregnant. Maybe there's a bump there? Perhaps she might be thinking about providing for her child?

Or another clue might be the painting behind her. That's the second piece of cultural context that might be helpful. I thought I recognized the scene of the Last Judgment, where Jesus weighs the souls of each individual in order to determine if they should be cast down into hell or brought up to paradise. Now, *there's* some symbolism! Perhaps the analogy has dawned on her. She might be thinking, "Jesus wields scales of cosmic justice, and I have my own little scales, too. What kind of justice do I wield?" Or, maybe, "This balance is tiny, but, yes, I think I do hold my fate in my own hands."

Whatever specific thought she might be having, it seems clear that her mind has sprung to other thoughts beyond her passive task. So, when do your thoughts become more profound than your task requires? I often do my best thinking when I'm driving. And maybe, to add another layer: when has a mundane act of yours possibly inspired deeper thinking? Like her possibly seeing her scales as a metaphor for her own moral agency. I remember when I was about 14, lying on my back in gravel. After a while, I finally went through the effort of getting up. For several moments I was wiping the chalky dust off of my shirt and pants, and then the thought came to me: "It's hard to sweep away your past when you try to change." And I bet I started pondering the question of free will. I see a kindred spirit in this young woman whose mind wanders to deeper thoughts.



What's your initial title?

What is the young woman trying to do to the young man? Is she hurting or helping him?

What kind of place are they in? A home? A workshop?

Is he planning on staying a while in this place or does he intend to leave soon?

What could she be quietly whispering to him while she leans over?



A young woman leans over a young man who seems to have fallen asleep in his chair. She holds some kind of sharp implement like a long needle or pen towards his head. It looks as if she is about to poke or draw on his forehead! Why is she doing this?

It's strange that he seems to have fallen asleep here, on this chair. His canine companion is also dozing on the floor beside him. Meanwhile, the young woman edges towards him very carefully, her knee propped, her left hand up for balance, as if she doesn't want to rouse him.

What does her expression tell us about her intentions? Does she look mischievous, like she's about to pull a prank? It's hard to tell. But her eyes look heavy-lidded with some dark circles, almost as if she has been crying.

The tool she holds is long, thin, and has a pointy end. The tip is not pressed on the young man's forehead. Rather, it looks like it could be pressed to the wall next to his forehead. It looks like she might be drawing on the wall. If she wanted to draw on the wall, why does she get so close to him?

The tool seems to be pressed on the edge of the shadow of the young man's profile. Could she be trying to trace the outline of his face? It looks like it. She holds the tool in her thumb and forefinger like I'm holding my pen as I write this draft. Why could she be doing this?

Looking around the corner into the back room, there's some kind of arched window with a red light coming through. It appears to actually be the glow of an oven baking something.

In college, I learned a lot about ancient Greek vase painting, so when I see this back room, I'm thinking we're in a potter's shop with rows of narrow-necked amphorae stacked on shelves. But the odd thing that stands out to me is that these vases are not the artistically decorated vases I studied—vases depicting stories of heroes like Perseus or lovers

like Orpheus and Eurydice. Instead, all these vases are bare. But it's clear we are in a potter's shop, and perhaps this is the young woman's trade or her family's.

The painting is called *The Corinthian Maid*. Corinth, an important city in ancient Greece, was known for its crafting of vases. Early vases, however, did not feature stories depicting human figures. *The Corinthian Maid* depicts the allegorical story of the invention of the famous black-figure vase painting, the first depictions of human figures on Greek vases. As the story goes, the daughter of a potter was betrothed to a young man who was about to leave for a long journey. On the night before he was to leave, feeling sad at his departure, she came upon a way of remembering him during the years he would be gone. While he slept, she set a lamp to cast a precise shadow of his profile on the wall and started to trace the outline of his profile—to preserve his portrait.

How do you preserve the memory of someone close to you? With smartphone cameras so ubiquitous, we have a way of preserving memories that would make the Corinthian maid jealous. But there are other ways that we preserve someone's memory. We might have keepsakes, like jewelry, or children's drawings, or locks of hair. And I love the high-school tradition of having friends sign your yearbook at the end of a school year.

I remember talking to a friend whose father had just passed away. She was especially sad since he had died unexpectedly. When I told her that I was going to visit my own dad, she gave me some advice. She told me that I should not only soak in the experience and take photos, but I should also make recordings of his voice. I'd never thought of doing that before. Since that conversation, I've done so, and I've looked for opportunities to preserve as much of my loved ones as I can, so that I can keep them alive when they are no longer with me.

I can imagine the Corinthian maid, implementing her meticulous plan, whispering softly, "Hold still, my dear. I want to keep you here forever."



What is your initial title?
What (or whom) could they be staring at?
How do the two girls react differently?
What could each be thinking right now?



Two women stand at a window looking out towards me. One is in full sunlight, her arms on a window sill, leaning forward with a smile. The other, older woman stands behind her, half-hidden by the propped shutter. She looks more timid, though her half-covered face seems to smile too.

It looks like she's even suppressing a giggle with her headscarf! While the older one is more timid, the younger woman is unselfconsciously bold in her adoring gaze. She leans forward with wide eyes and a broad smile. One hand props up her dreamy-looking face. It looks like she's been watching her favorite musician perform... all day long.

What could they be looking at? Is it a musician? A parade? A beautiful horse? Or the beautiful rider on the horse? Maybe the blush of embarrassment on the older woman's cheeks suggests giddiness at seeing a handsome young man. If that is so, it looks like the young woman may have been there a while staring at him and her older friend has come up to see what is happening. Is the handsome man staring back? Perhaps! That would explain the giddy embarrassment. Yet, the young woman's gaze is so direct, dreamy, and unashamed that perhaps she's just caught up in the spell and he doesn't even notice. At the very least, the young woman is staring longingly at someone she is enamored with!

The title of the artwork, *Two Women at a Window*, doesn't hint at any background story, but I think we've got enough to go on! When have you been looked at by someone like this, with such unselfconscious adoration? How would you react if you were? I usually like to empathize with a character within a painting, but here, I'm finding myself empathizing with a character implied by the scene. And it is so easy to do so, because the young woman *is* looking at me. I like her, and it's fun to think about the moments (many too personal to share here!) I've been gazed upon with unselfconscious enjoyment by someone I like.

I can also put myself behind the window with the two women. When have you been in a situation where someone you are attracted to walked by? What was your reaction? I can imagine the older woman saying, "Oh my gosh, he's so cute! I hope he doesn't see us," while the adoring young woman might be saying, "He's so beautiful. I could just gaze upon him forever."



What's your initial title?

How would you describe the mood of this place?

What do you see moving? What do you see not moving?

What sounds might you hear if you were here?

What could you imagine happening here? A family picnic? An expedition?



A pale sun shines onto the surface of a still lake in the middle of a densely verdant jungle. Plants of all kinds grow all over each other. In the distance, the trees covered in vines look like rocky crags that have been covered in green carpet. Nearby, there is a fallen tree trunk populated by plants and mosses.

There are no paths. And there seems to be no space to move around in—except for the vast open lake bathed in soft, gray light.

I feel a sense of fascination for this eerie place, like I'm a lone explorer coming to a mysterious, primordial land—like I'm Indiana Jones.

Moving through the jungle, I struggle through the dense foliage. And then, I brush away the veil of palm leaves to reveal this fantastical scene—a scene like I might find in *The Jungle Book* or *Jurassic Park*. It's the same feeling I have while listening to Camille Saint-Saëns' "Aquarium" from *The Carnival of the Animals*: fascination with the mystery and eeriness of the setting.

There is little movement here except the white birds gliding across the water, and the dapples of sunlight playing soundlessly on the barely moving water's surface. But, oh, there are sounds in the jungle! I only see a few signs of life, like the two colorful birds on the

branch of a palm, but from my limited experience of watching nature documentaries about the Amazon or of visiting Yoda's home planet of Dagobah with Luke Skywalker, I can imagine the jungle teeming with the sounds of animals, of insects, and the constant rustle of tree branches. There is life in this hot, humid place. And it wouldn't surprise me if the long neck of a *Diplodocus* were to crane up over the tree line.

What kind of story do you imagine taking place in this setting, a primordial forest during a moment of eerie calm? Would you want to be in a place like this? Perhaps you have been? Or perhaps your idea of a good time involves a different kind of setting?

The title of this painting is *The River of Light* and, interestingly, it is not meant to depict one particular place. The artist, Frederic Church, created this years after visiting Ecuador, while he was in his studio in New York.

Looking far into the distance, there is something on the water, and looking more closely, it looks like it might be a person in a canoe, by themselves. What must it have felt like for them to come upon this scene?



What's your initial title?

What is this girl doing here on top of this hill?

Where is she going? Where did she come from?

How would you describe the mood of this landscape?

What physical sensations would you feel if you were standing where she is?

Try taking her pose. What is her attitude towards the wind and the storm?



A young woman braces herself against the wind and dark sky alone on top of a ridge. The wind rushes straight into her face, whipping her gold hair back like the flames of an amber fire. But her gaze is unperturbed; her stance is steady, like the figure at the prow of a ship! Who is she? And what is she doing up here in the cold, gray storm, facing the wind?

She wears a long dark cloak which billows like a loose sail behind her. And beneath that, a red dress and a white shirt, the lacy color of which borders her neckline. She wears jewelry—a bracelet and a ring. She has a hat, but not one you'd wear in a storm—it's ribboned. And she carries books with her. She's in a desolate-looking landscape on an overwhelmingly gray day, and she is exposed to the elements. She's more ready for going to school, or a social evening, not for braving a storm. She has some protection, but at this moment, she doesn't seem like she wants to protect herself.

Has she been here for a while? Or is she just passing through? She does seem to be standing along a worn path, perhaps one that leads her to her ultimate destination. But, at this moment, she's not moving. She's taken off her hat, pressed her books close to her chest, anchored her back leg, and placed a heel on a loose strand of her cloak. She's braced herself for the thrill of the wind enveloping her, rushing around her, and chilling her. And she stares directly at it. Is she looking at anything in particular? It doesn't seem like it. Rather, she seems to be staring at the storm as a whole, moving in her direction.

To summarize, it seems like this girl, going about her day—one that involves books, study, learning, personal growth—has stopped in the coming storm, not to find shelter, but to deliberately place herself against the harsh wind. Now, why did she do this? What is her attitude

to this storm? Is it fear? Is it thrill seeking? It looks like defiance. Her mouth is set, and her eyes are level below a slightly tilted forehead. She looks fierce. I've often stood at the front of a boat to feel the sensation of the wind blowing against me, and grinned with excitement. But here, there are other thoughts going through her mind. This wind is an enemy, and she is undaunted.

The title of this painting brings in some interesting context. It's called *The Girl I Left Behind*. The title refers to a song that Union Troops would sing when they left home and went off to fight in the Civil War. Looking at her, perhaps that ring she wears is indicative of a relationship she has with a faraway soldier. But what is her reaction to being away from him in this moment? She is not pining. She is not wistful or heartbroken. She is living her life, and when the ever-present storm within her is manifested in the physical reality around her, she stands up to it steadfastly, courageously. It doesn't even seem like she's thinking about the soldier who sings the song and misses her. This is her moment, and her visceral experience of her own strength facing life's challenges.

When have you given yourself spiritual strength by standing up to an outward physical challenge? In the novel *Shane*, two pioneers hack away at an old stump. It's a blemish on the farm they are carving out of the wilderness, but there's no dire need to get rid of it. However, the challenge, the exertion, invigorates them for the ever-greater challenges they face in making a civilized home in the wilderness. Fighting the stump takes on symbolic meaning for them. And I think standing against the storm has taken on symbolic meaning for the girl.

I can see her, invigorated, saying quietly, "Keep it coming. I can stand here as long as I need to."



What's your initial title?

Where is this scene taking place? A workshop? A palace?

What is the man cleaning? What are the objects used for?

How would you describe his attitude to his work?



A working man sits in a grand old stone building wiping down a shiny object. He seems to sit in what looks like an old medieval castle or church. To his left is a tall column, to his right is a massive door, and he sits looking dwarfed by his antique surroundings. Around him are metallic objects that look like they belong to a church service—large candlesticks, incense containers, and maybe a large pitcher for the wine of the Eucharist. It looks like there are some liturgical drapes discarded and one used candle still in its holder. Perhaps a service has recently ended. But now, all these objects that were part of the spectacle, the holy experience, adored by a crowd of spiritual devotees—all these objects are now backstage. The glitz and pomposity of the service are now over, and the paraphernalia now needs maintenance.

The person to clean the sacred objects looks like a simple laborer. He wears brown shoes, blue-gray pants, an apron of rustic coloring, and has his sleeves rolled up. What is the attitude of this working man towards these holy objects? He sits with the massive candlestick propped up on one thigh, while he cradles it with his arms. He seems to hold it and look down at it intimately. He carefully wipes it with a red cloth, and the shine is already noticeably brighter than the other candlesticks lined up, waiting their turn.

This is not a celebrated task he is performing. This is not a public role. He performs the work with a calm devotion that honors the holiness of the objects' purpose. And he does not seem to be thinking about anything else besides his task. He's not reflecting on some greater aspect of life while he absentmindedly cleans. He seems to be absorbed in the moment. I can imagine him thinking, "There, just a little more polish and you will look beautiful."

The title of this painting is straightforward, yet filled with subtle meaning. It's called *The Baptistry of St. Mark's, Venice*. The basilica of St. Mark's was consecrated centuries before our scene takes place. No wonder it looks ancient. And it's been one of the most celebrated churches in Christendom. But, here, we don't see the beautiful façade or the impressive domed interior; we see a simple task being performed in a room behind the scenes.

What kind of work do you do alone, behind the scenes, that you devote yourself to? I'm reminded of something I heard about Jeff Bezos' daily routine. The founder of Amazon is known for creating one of the world's wealthiest companies and being one of the first civilians to travel to space. I heard that, every day, he washes dishes.

No matter how technologically proficient we become, I can imagine that simple kind of work, manual work, being part of what it is to be human. There are chores I have to do—take out the trash, clean the car, and wash dishes; I've often been averse to them, thinking of the more exciting parts of my work like leading art museum tours. But this laborer, engaged so intimately with his work, makes me want to recognize the kind of simple tasks that make up my life and to treat them more mindfully.

Above the laborer, there's a relief that I make out to be St. George slaying a dragon. Life has those grand moments, but this scene seems to be telling me that the quiet moments are to be appreciated too. I can imagine St. George spent many quiet hours sharpening and polishing his weapons, including the sword he killed a dragon with.



What's your initial title?

Who's she turning back to look at? A friend? A lover? A victim?

What are three details about her that make her look especially alluring?

If she were to speak, what might she say to the person she's looking at?

See that man in the shadows? What could he be thinking to himself?



A beautiful, courtly lady glides into a dark corner while staring back with a beckoning glance. But there's a man in the shadows holding a knife! Is he a danger to her? No, he's not looking at her, he's looking at the same person she's looking at: me. Is she luring me to my death?

Oh, and she is alluring. Beneath the golden hat of an aristocrat, she flashes a smile and mischievous eyes back, like she's casting a lure. And those red lips are not the only bait. She wears a dress of royal purple and fleurs-de-lys. It's a dress fit for a queen, but the v-shape of the back is so open that it looks like it could easily be brushed off her shoulders with the merest touch. And to accentuate the invitation into the dark, she has dropped a rose, like a crumb marking the path to follow. If that wasn't hint enough, she is walking by with her finger raised indicating the direction her victim should take to find her.

And it is a victim she makes eyes at! Love beckons, and in the shadows, death waits. The eyes of the beautiful lady say, "Come, my sweet, follow me to fulfill your desires." The eyes of the rugged fiend in the shadow seem to be saying, "What a lovely fool you are—so easily duped."

The title of this painting does not offer a background story, but it does sum up nicely much of what's going on. It's called *The Decoy*. The femme fatale, the dangerously alluring woman, has been a staple in stories since Odysseus was lured by the Sirens' song, or when Salome tried to seduce John the Baptist. So, how might you personally connect to this scene? With which character would you empathize? The one in whose place I find it most natural to put myself is the victim. She is staring at me, and I'm already drawn in by my attraction to her. And it will be too late before I realize I've been catfished to my death!

When have you been lured into a bad situation by someone who was enticingly attractive? Perhaps it was that guy at the bar who looked like a good time, but ended up being bad news. Or it was that girl you ended up trusting not because of her honesty but because of her beauty. Whatever the seductive trap, this painting is a titillating reminder of just how easy it can be to be blinded by desire!



What's your initial title?

What's going on in this story? Is the girl alive?

What were the two men doing before they lifted her body?

What's the old man feeling? What about the young man?

What would the young man say if he were to speak?



Two men hold up the pale body of a young woman. Is she dead? Her fingers are interlaced as if she were praying and there's a serene smile on her calm face. But those details might be the residue of a peaceful death, because, at the moment, it looks like they are about to deposit her into a grave. And

if there's anything that suggests she has passed on, it's the anguish of the young man as he clutches, desperately, her legs to his chest.

The shovel they used to dig the grave is still there. After digging in this secretive spot in a cave, the two men lifted her body to lower it into the ground. But as they were doing so, the young man buckled and collapsed, looking like he couldn't go through having her disappear into the earth. His long black hair falls on her thighs.

How did she die, especially so young? There are no wounds, no signs of violence. And her serene face suggests she died without fear or anguish. At her breast, she holds a cross, a cross that is reflected in the light outside. She did not die in physical or spiritual suffering. And perhaps it is that spiritual purity that brought her contentment in her last moments. But it did not bring contentment for the young man who loves her, and has lost her.

This scene depicts a moment from the story of Atala and Chactas. Set in the newly discovered American continent, Atala was half-European, half-native—caught between two cultures. She was in love with Chactas of the Natchez tribe. Earlier, Atala had made a promise to her

dying mother that she would remain devout... and chaste for the rest of her life. But then, having fallen in love with Chactas, that seemed a promise that would be impossible for her to keep. So, rather than break her vow to her mother's dying wish and to her religious beliefs, she committed suicide.

In this moment, Chactas, with the help of an old Christian hermit, buries the devout (and beautiful) young woman in sanctified ground, preserving her spiritual joy and creating, for him, an earthly agony. As he is about to bury her and never see her again, he feels one final burst of anguish—the passionate refusal to let her go.

When have you had to let go of someone you deeply cared for? Perhaps it was a breakup with a lover. Or moving far away from dear friends. Or it could have been saying goodbye at a funeral. And maybe, even after you've prepared to be able to let go, you felt one last pang of urgent refusal.

As I look at Chactas's furrowed brow and snarl of suffering, I imagine him whispering, "It cannot be time yet, my dearest. I'm not ready."



What's your initial title?

What words would you use to describe the mood of the setting?

What time of year is this? The dead of winter? The start of spring? The end of autumn?

Why is she gathering these flowers now? What will happen to them if she doesn't?

What could she be thinking to herself as she gathers the flowers?



The colorful flowers in the white snow look like sparkling gems in the sunlight. Plants, green plants, chest-high, try to stay upright in the frozen, crunching, fresh snow. Clumps of snow cover some of the leaves, many of which droop in the cold air.

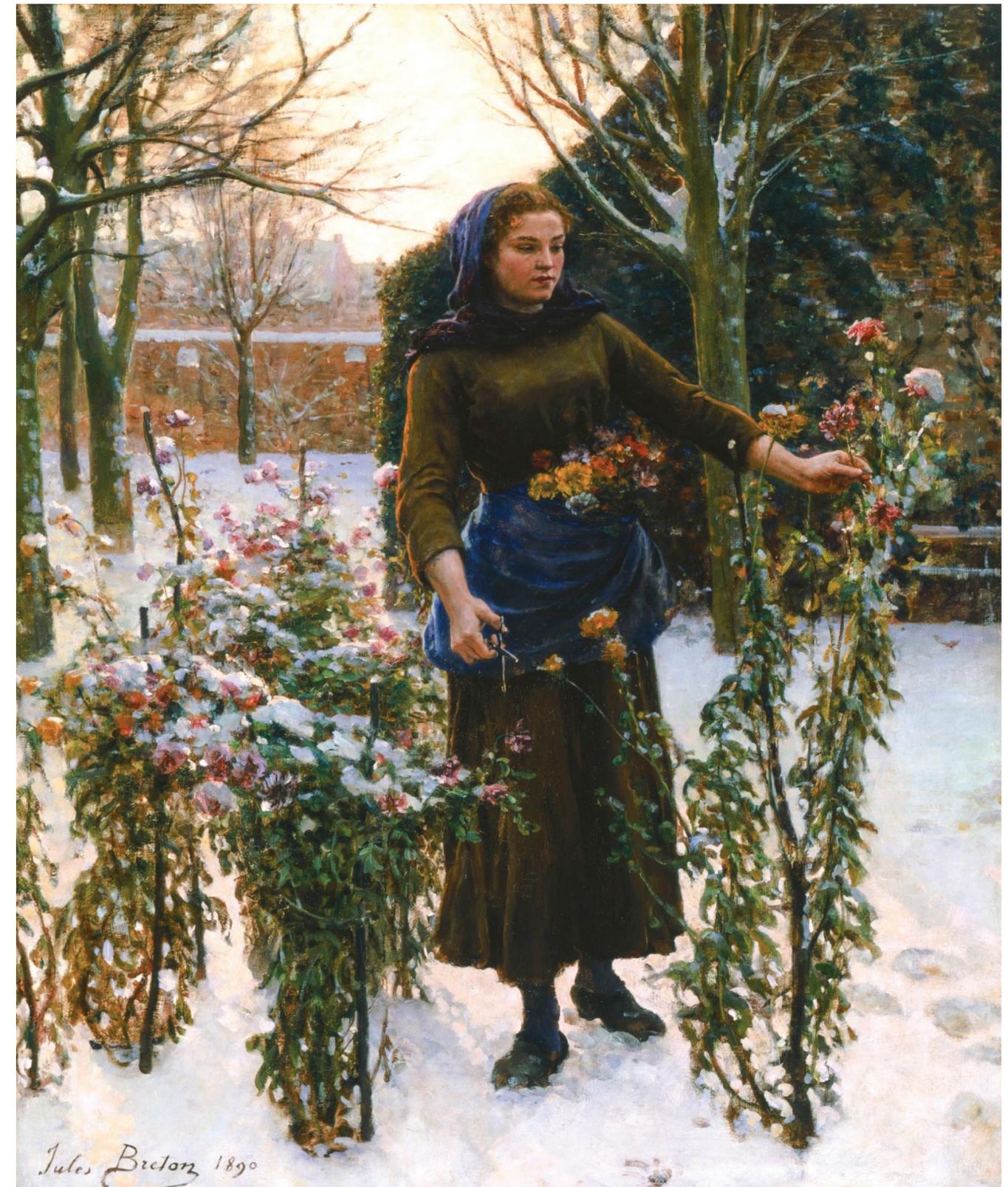
The young woman doesn't look cold, though. Her head is half-uncovered, and her sleeves are pulled up. She's already been out here a little while gathering up the many flowers now in her apron. The sun warms her back and creates golden streaks outlining her arms. She needs no gloves as she holds a stem still and opens scissor blades ready to pluck a flower from the frost. The mood is serene in this early morning. And the aroma of the flowers mingles with the smell of fresh snow.

Why has she come out to collect the flowers? Is she making a crown for her lover? Is she wanting to make a floral arrangement for the dinner table? There is very little to give any clue as to what she intends with the flowers. This might not even be her own garden. Her brown dress and simple apron look rustic, peasant-like. She could simply be a servant in this home with the wall-enclosed garden. But the yellows, reds, blues, and oranges of the flowers and the golden glow around her give her an elevated aura. Though wholesome in appearance, she is also young and beautiful. And it looks like she's even decoratively placed a flower in her hair. Those flowers have survived the frost of the night, but they may not survive much longer, and it looks like she will save as many blossoms as she can.

The title of this painting is *Last Flowers*. So it seems like the snows have arrived, and winter is here. There will be no more flowers, no more abundance of colorful beauty to gather. But she has come out here, one last time, to gather up the remnants of summer. As the song goes, to everything there is a season. When have you done something "seasonal" for the last time during that cycle? Perhaps it's one last swim in the lake before summer vacation ends? Or one last pickup soccer game before the summer heat? Or maybe one last class as the school year comes to an end?

The associations I have with those moments bring waves of bittersweet nostalgia, like one last song by the campfire with friends. But what about for her with those flowers? What is she feeling? Is this a meaningful moment? Or is she just doing some chores?

Her arm is extended as she reaches for a flower, and though the scissors are poised, she hasn't made a movement towards it yet. It even looks like her shoulders are drawn back as she gazes at the flower thoughtfully. What is she thinking to herself? Is it, "Where shall I cut you?" I see something else in her expression; I see her looking at this flower as if it has spurred some deeper thought within her—perhaps, "I know little flower, beauty doesn't last forever."



What's your initial title?

What is going on in this story? Is he staring at something or looking off into space?

What's the mood of the landscape around him?

Who is he? What might his occupation or role be?

How is he feeling? If he were to speak, what do you imagine him saying?



A bearded man sits on a balcony looking out at the dark mountains covered by gray clouds. He seems to be staring at two doves flying off into the sun behind the clouds. But he does not stare at them with wonder or serenity. He looks intensely forlorn. His brow is furrowed, and his eyes look

tense. His hands are also tense, curled up into fists protruding from his overwhelmingly dark cloak. But his body looks tired. His left shoulder is slouched on the railing, as if moments before he had his head down and was using the balustrade for support as he contemplated dark thoughts. But then, he looked up when he noticed the doves, and a mix of longing and despair made him ball up his fists. What troubles him?

It looks like he could be some kind of priest with his long, dark beard, and black cloak. But he does wear an ornate earring, and he sits on a decorated chair, draped in beautiful embroidery, set on an equally intricate carpet. And there's a circular object at his feet. Is that a crown? Could he be some kind of king? But then, why doesn't he wear his crown? Why does it look as if he has removed it and discarded it on the floor?

He also seems to be alone up here, on what may be the roof of his palace, looking over the red battlements of a tower, staring out over his land—a land that seems as dark and tumult-filled as his mind. Is he up here by himself? Perhaps he has come up here, away from the court, away from the public, so that he may be alone with his thoughts, and not, for this moment, have to perform his role as king before his courtiers.

His name is David. He was king of the Israelites when his son, Absalom, decided to try to usurp the throne with an army of his own—pushing the kingdom into civil war. For the sake of his country, David

sent his armies to fight Absalom. News finally came that Absalom had been defeated, and that he was killed by the generals his father had sent.

In this moment we see David after his court has received the news of the death of the traitor. While a victory for the country, it is not a victory for David. He had his son killed—it was his duty as a king; it was his heartbreak as a father. And while the court celebrates the destruction of an enemy, David comes, by himself, to mourn and deal with the anguishing internal repercussions of his decision.

When have you made a decision you thought was right, but came at the cost of hurting someone you cared for? Perhaps you've been in a position of authority and had to reprimand, or fire, a personal friend. Or perhaps, having to give truthful testimony, you've spoken out against someone you cared for in a courtroom or some other public forum. Sometimes a decision you make involves deep personal cost. Such is the case with this king.

David may convince himself it was the right decision, but one part of himself has buried the other part, and he feels the devastation. As he sees the doves fly off, what do you imagine he could be thinking?

In Psalms 55, Verse 6, it is written that David looked upon the doves and exclaimed, "Oh that I had wings like a dove so that I could fly away and be at rest."



What's your initial title?

Who is she staring at? Her mom? Her husband?

What had she been doing?

What could she be thinking as she stares at the person who has interrupted her?



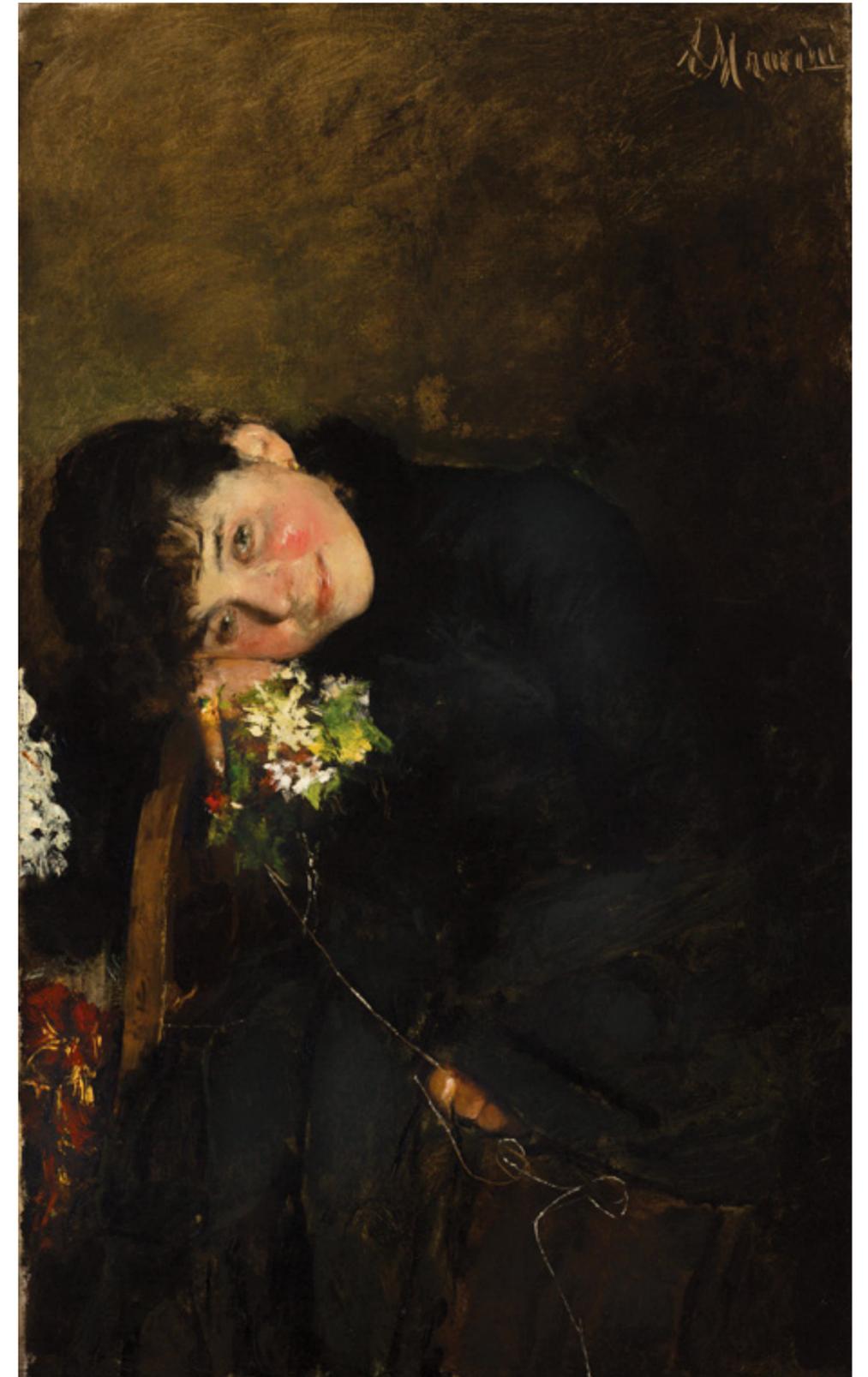
A young woman, wearing black yet rosy-cheeked, sits with her head lying sideways and a smile on her face. Who is she smiling at with such radiance that her cheeks are as pink as her lips? It must be a lover to elicit such a blush! What is she doing here? Is she on a date? She holds a small bouquet of flowers in her right hand while her left hand holds a long string. Maybe this is not a date, and, instead she's been making bouquets of flowers. Are those two bundles of flowers beside her, red ones and white ones? If they are, she could have been picking from those stashes to string flowers together. I wonder what kind of festivity she could be preparing for. At this moment though, she's stopped working and lowered her head onto her propped-up hand. I can see her sigh as she might be thinking to herself, "Oh my, how do I love him."

She wears charcoal black in this rough, brown, dirt-colored room. But there is one small, shining ornament that adorns her. One finger on her right hand extends downwards to reveal a gold-and-green ring. She almost seems to be subtly displaying it to her companion. Whether she is staring at the man she loves or someone she wants to confide in, she, at this moment, is feeling the glow of being in love.

The title of this painting is *On the Eve of Her Wedding*. What joy she's feeling as she prepares to be wed! Tomorrow, she will stand tall beside him, but this evening, she can let her body melt in joyous anticipation. Maybe the fact that she looks so comfortable suggests that she is with an adoring and understanding friend. It reminds me of Jane Bennett intimately sharing her feelings of love with her sister, Elizabeth, in *Pride and Prejudice*. When have you felt such an unselfconscious sense of joy?

When I look at her, I don't see her in love with me. Rather, I see something almost as intimate: her comfort in her vulnerability with me. And in response, I think to myself words I've often said and heard, but have not often meant so much: "I am happy for you." I'm happy for her, and I'm grateful that she confides her joy in me.

You might also think of the personal connection in another way: when have you shared your happiness so openly with someone? And who in your life would you share your deepest happiness with?



What's your initial title?

Is this the first time they have come to this spot together? Or have they been here before?

Can you describe three details that tell us they are very comfortable with each other?

What is the young man doing?

Imagine you are in this setting. What do you smell? What do you hear?

What is the mood of this place?

What might the young woman be dreaming while she sleeps? Of him?



A young couple sits together in an idyllic forest overlooking a scenic sunset. The glow of this place is softly warm. The pale sunlight molds the beautiful bodies of the young man and young woman. They look like lovers. Her head rests intimately on his knee and they are in a secluded

spot. And even though the young man looks like he's in a state of semi-undress, this doesn't look like a moment of romantic rapture. He isn't looking into her eyes. She isn't embracing him. He isn't even caressing her hair while she seems to sleep. He doesn't even seem to be looking down at her, but instead at the wreath in his hand. Is he about to place it on her head? Or is he finishing making it? Has he been making it while she sleeps?

Either way, he is sitting still, not moving his knee, not disturbing her rest. Her eyelids are heavy and carefree. There isn't a smile on her lips. This isn't a moment of great joy she's experiencing; rather, it seems like a moment of peace of mind. I imagine her dreams being of her own life and not of him—perhaps of a seaside cottage or a quiet evening with her family. She doesn't look like she's planning her wedding or the honeymoon. It's almost as if they are already married.

The couple sits on the precipice of what looks like a scenic ocean view, but they pay no attention to it. The hazy, almost blurry landscape gives me the impression that the outside world has faded away for the couple, and what is left is the sound of the brook, the warm air, and the comfort of being alone together.

The painting is called *Daphnis and Chloe*. Their story is based on an ancient Roman myth. Daphnis and Chloe were both orphans who were raised in a simple pastoral life—Daphnis by a goatherd, Chloe by a neighboring shepherd. They grew up together from childhood, and eventually fell in love as a natural outgrowth of their early friendship. That innocent love reminds me of the movie *The Princess Bride*. I'm reminded of the love young Wesley has for the Princess Buttercup: the feeling of an inevitable promise to be fulfilled. Because it is inevitable and unhindered, there is no need to rush it like Romeo and Juliet. In this moment in the woods, Daphnis and Chloe don't have to be in love, they can just be.

When have you had a moment like this, a moment of understated romantic intimacy? Perhaps there is a spot you and your romantic partner visit frequently to enjoy nature, to read, and to just be in each other's presence. Perhaps that spot is just your couch at home as you sit together enjoying your own separate activities, while your feet touch.

At this quiet moment in the scene, I can imagine Daphnis placing the crown on Chloe's head. And when she wakes, I can see her blinking her eyes, realizing that he's there, yet knowing that he would be, and nestling herself back into his knee saying, "... hello, you."

As I finish writing this draft, a sweet song called "Mrs. Darcy" from the soundtrack of the Keira Knightly version of *Pride and Prejudice* comes on. It fits the mood so beautifully.



What's your initial title?
What's this man doing? Is he at work?
Who could the person in the tiny portrait be?
Did he paint this portrait?
What's he thinking to himself as he stares at the portrait?



A warm mahogany glow envelops an aging man as he sits at a table staring at a small portrait. He looks down thoughtfully at the photo of the young woman. He tilts the nicely framed image slightly upwards so that the light of the lamp illuminates her face.

On this shining table, there's a small brush and a small container with the remnants of paint. Is this an artist looking down at his handiwork? Is he inspecting his technique? With his arm crossed in front him, it looks like he's taken a break from whatever work he's been doing. It also doesn't look like he's been doing a lot of painting. There are no paint stains on the table's surface, nor are there blemishes on his coat.

Does his expression help us understand what he is doing? He looks focused, but a slight smile in his creased mouth, and the furrows of a raised eye on his wrinkled brow suggest a hint of wistfulness. Perhaps a fond memory is playing through his mind.

The aging man is named James Peale. The woman in the small portrait is his great-niece, Rosalba. The small portrait was painted by James's daughter, Anna, two years before this moment. It looks like he has

brought the portrait out in order to touch it up, to help preserve the color. And it looks like James, in the midst of preserving this important memento, has paused, and started to reminisce.

What kind of keepsakes do you work on preserving? Think of the times you've organized your photo albums. Or perhaps you've gone through and organized your grandparents' precious possessions. Recently, I went back to my childhood home and started sorting through my memorabilia. I came across old high-school yearbooks, and while I was sorting things into boxes, I couldn't help but stop, flip through photos, and reminisce. (As I write, Dustin O'Halloran's *Opus 23* starts to play in the background. The feeling of nostalgia is enhanced.)

As James looks wistfully on, I can imagine him thinking, "Look at those brown eyes. It feels like yesterday you were a child, and I would hold you in my arms."

I wonder when I stand in front of this painting many years from now, and my hair is as white as James's, what I will be prompted to reminisce about.



What's your initial title?
What's going on? What have these two women just done?
What could the woman in yellow be looking at?
What movement do you see?
What's the woman in yellow's attitude to any possible danger?
When have you thought you heard some disturbance in the night?



Two women are in the shadows inside an elegant chamber with only a candle for light. One stands looking out cautiously. She seems wary, her hand raised almost as if to say, "Hold fast," and she wields a curved sword, gripping the hilt, primed to use it. But she is no soldier! She looks like an aristocratic lady. She wears a satiny, golden dress, and, in her intricately coiffed hair, an elaborate diadem. What is this elegant lady doing with a sword in the middle of the night? Why would she need to be on her guard?

Kneeling by her side is her companion, a woman more plainly dressed, with a simple white headscarf rather than a diadem. And at her feet is a severed head. She seems to have been pushing this rugged-looking man's head into a sack with a blood-soaked cloth when she suddenly stopped to look up. Now all is still, except for the flickering flame. So what happened? Did they kill this man? Are they now on guard, wary of being caught in the act?

The first place my eye goes to in order to solve the mystery is to the blade of the curved sword. And looking very closely, it looks like there could be drops of blood flowing along the edge. The flame is not the only thing in motion in this instance. We do not see the man's body, but this looks like the sword that decapitated him. This elegant femme fatale seems to have severed the head of a man she killed, and now, quickly, her companion is packing the head away, perhaps to take with them. But as they are engaged in their macabre deed, they hear something. Are the palace guards coming?

The scene depicts the story of a woman, Judith, who wants to save her people from an enemy army besieging them. To do so, she decides that she will assassinate the enemy general, Holofernes. She goes to his camp dressed in her best, offering to spend the night with him. And when he falls asleep in his bed, she takes his sword and kills him. To complete her mission she wants to bring his head back to her people so they know they are saved. She isn't a common murderer or a thief. She's risking her life for a righteous cause.

In this moment, Judith is in the heart of the enemy encampment, inside Holofernes' bedroom, surrounded by guards, her life in peril, and she and her maidservant hear something.

It might be a little challenging to empathize with Judith becoming a courageous assassin, but one way that makes me more deeply appreciate her heroism is to think about when I've heard some unexpected disturbance in the night.... Was it just a neighborhood cat? Or was it someone trying to break into the back door? I try to keep a cool head in those situations, but often my heart is racing.

Looking at Judith's reaction, I'm inspired. When she hears the sound, she calmly pulls the sword back and lifts her hand over the candle to block the bright flame from her eyes so she can see in the darkness beyond. Her mouth is held firm and her eyes look calm and focused. Her maidservant, with her parted lips and worried brow, looks like she could be thinking, "Oh my god, what was that?" Judith, though, looks like she could be calmly saying to herself, "Let's just see what we have here." I want to be her whenever I find myself in a tense and frightening moment of potential danger.



What's your initial title?

What is going on in this moment? What is she doing out here?

Push "play" on this scene. What movement do you see?

Stand on that hillside. What do you smell?

Take her pose. Close your eyes and tilt your head back. What is she doing or feeling at this moment?

What music fits the mood of this scene?

Where do you go to drink in the ecstasy of nature?



A beautiful young woman stands tall on a sunny hillside. Her dress billows around her in the wind, sending lavender ribbons swirling while the aroma of the flowers flows over the field. Why has she come out here? It looks like she is by herself.

Perhaps she came out to enjoy the beauty of nature on her own. Her lifted chin and closed eyes suggest she is taking in the sweet scents around her, fully absorbed in them. Her hair is crowned with the purple flowers of the field. It looks like she spent her day gathering them and making herself a beautiful headdress.

As I write this, the soundtrack from the musical of *The Secret Garden* comes on (specifically the track called *Song from the Secret Garden*), and it so beautifully matches the softness, the tranquility, and the poignancy of her private moment. It's sweeping, yet personal, like the sight of her closed eyes against the sun-drenched sky. And I notice a little bit of sadness in her face... just a little bit.

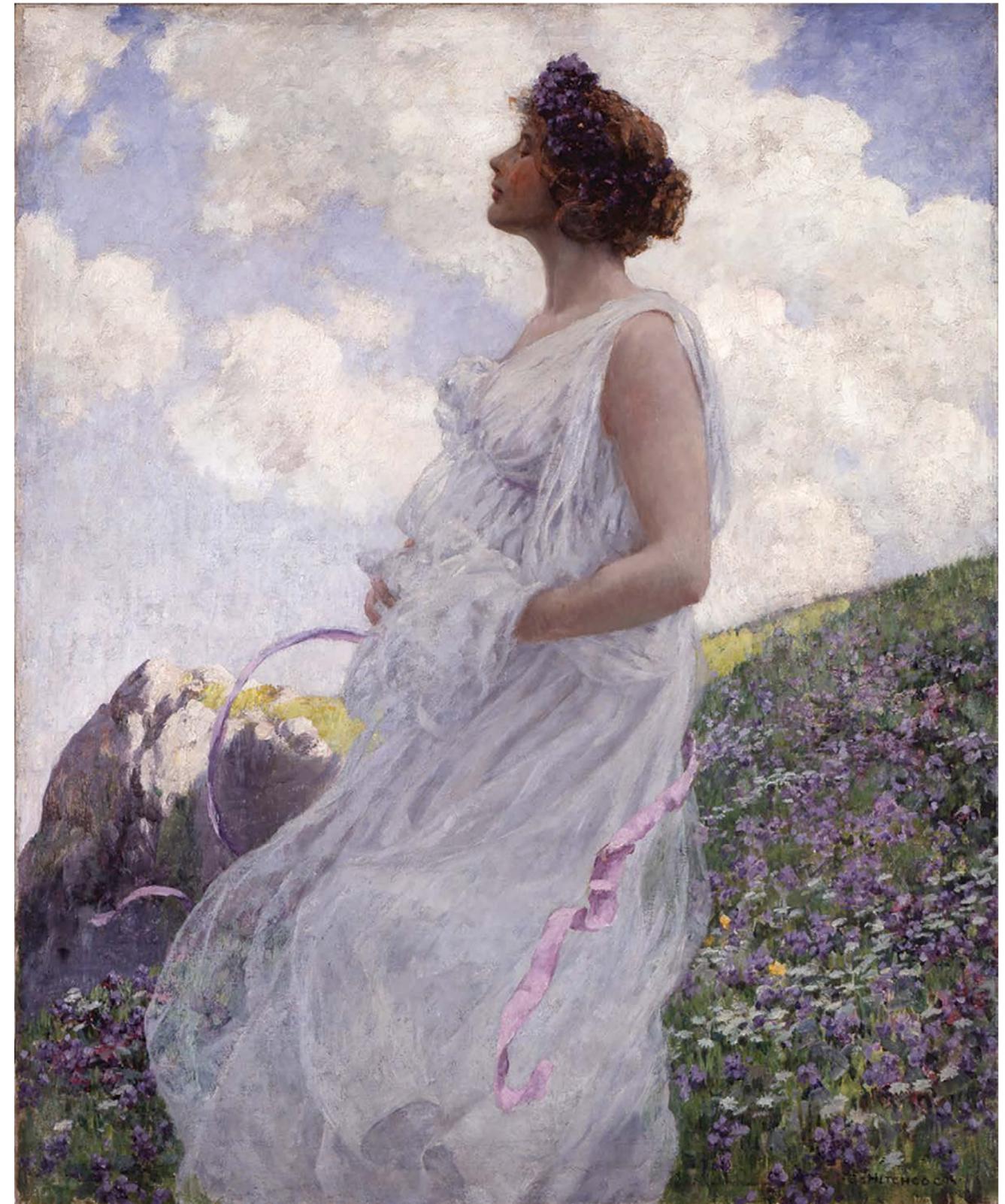
The title of the painting is revelatory for me, both surprising and so fitting. It's called *Calypso*. The wandering hero, Odysseus, ended up on Calypso's deserted island. After falling in love, he stayed for over seven years with her. Then he decided he would leave to go back to his homeland and his wife. And so she was forced to let him go.

This depiction of Calypso is so different from the others I've known. Here, she is not dejectedly weeping among stormy rocks. Here, she is in a beautiful setting. She is soaking in the beauty like Maria from *The Sound of Music* when she heads to the sun-drenched hills. She is not in a desolate, uninviting world that offers nothing because he is gone.

No, she can and does experience the beauty of the world. But, when I read the name Calypso for the first time on the museum plaque, I was drawn to her face, and then, I couldn't help but see the shiny, tear-stained cheek. She has come out here to experience the joy of nature, of the world, but she still carries the pain of losing him.

When have you felt the loss of someone in the midst of enjoying life? Or, as my friend put it, when has your feeling of pain been trapped in a bright, flowery world? I might imagine Rose, from *Titanic*, as a mature, successful lady, looking out over the ocean, thinking of Jack.

Calypso isn't a woman broken by sadness, but she carries it with her—with strength, with poise—as she moves forward to enjoy what the world has to offer her. We each have our share of heartbreak, and in this moment, I can imagine her saying, "I wish I could share this day with you."



What's your initial title?

Is she alive or dead?

Where could the hooded figure be taking her?

Push "play" on this scene. What movement do you see?

What is the mood of this scene?

Do you see the rolled-up paper at her breast? What could be written there?



A boat moves slowly, barely rippling the water. The body of the young woman hardly rocks as the hooded oarsman pushes the flower-laden boat forward. Garlands of roses—pink, white, and red—curve over the side from stern to bow, and at the prow is a small statue of a winged figure bearing a crown. Who is the lady, lying seemingly dead, in this regally decorated boat? Is she royalty? Her legs are covered with a gold-threaded fabric and it looks like she wears a golden headband with red and green gems. For someone so beautiful and beautifully arrayed, the mood of this scene is somber.

Light reaches under the canopy in this dark setting and illuminates her brow and face. She is young, too young to have died. Her body looks pale, and her bare arms betray her lack of concern with the chill in the air that the macabre-looking oarsman feels. The gold-threaded fabric is not a blanket. Is it her funeral shroud? And is this her funeral procession?

She has been laid out in such beauty for others to look upon her as she is ferried to her final resting place. But there is no one around. The pale light on the horizon only reveals a dark grove in the distance and gray clouds in the sky. The only witness is a white bird flying away. Is she being taken to her wake? Or is she being ferried to the underworld? I hope it's the former, and she is yet to be mourned!

How could she have died so young? Looking more closely, it seems that she has a scroll of parchment at her breast and a white flower in her still hand. Are they keepsakes? Are they a message for someone?

As I take in the whole scene, the melancholy mood of the setting and the Charon-like figure makes this beautiful bier even more heartbreaking. This is the last time her beauty will light up this earth, and there is no one to say farewell.

The painting is called *Elaine*. It depicts a moment from an Arthurian legend as told by the poet Alfred Tennyson. The Lady Elaine fell in love with Sir Launcelot, the greatest knight at the court of Camelot. But Launcelot did not love her—he only loved Queen Guinevere. Unrequited in this highest love, Elaine died of heartbreak. Before her death, she asked her father if he would let her be delivered to Camelot to bear a message to the lords and ladies of the court, and to Launcelot. In the note she wrote:

I love you, and my love had no return,
And therefore my true love has been my death.

As you might, I can empathize with the feeling of unrequited love. But in this scene, I don't put myself in her place. Rather, I'm a witness. As I gaze upon her, I imagine I am a passerby who happens upon this tragic scene.

When have you borne witness to a tragic procession? I think of reading in the news about the death of one who died too young—one who did not have the opportunity to live out all the possible joy of human life. (I'm reminded of the tragic death of Princess Diana.) All the promise of what Elaine's life could have been is there around her—the flowers, the gold, and the small statue of Cupid leading the way—and in her beauty. But that promise is not to be fulfilled.



What's your initial title?

Who is she? Does she work in these fields?

What's she paying attention to? Does she see something?

Put yourself in this place. What sounds would you hear?

Can you imagine any music which might fit the mood of the setting?



The sun is a bright pink disc half-hidden behind trees on the horizon. Is it morning or evening? I'm not sure, but the pink light seems to suffuse the countryside with its serene tint. It's only the young woman out in those fields. The village is far off in the distance, and if she has work companions, they are not there anymore (or there yet). She seems to stand still on the narrow path through the field, but she has a lifted heel. Was she walking when suddenly something caught her attention?

She wears simple peasant clothes: a coarse skirt, and a dingy white blouse with short sleeves revealing sunburnt forearms. It looks like she's been working in the bright sun a lot! But she's not working now, even though she holds her sickle. She holds it still. Her whole body seems still, even the curled fingers on her left hand seem almost paralyzed. It's as though she doesn't want to disturb the air. Why is she transfixed? Why is her chin lifted, her mouth parted, her eyes staring into the distant sky? Is her friend calling to her? I don't think so—she would be less awed. Is she having some kind of religious experience? I've seen that expression on the faces of saints before. But there is nothing I can see to suggest the supernatural in these fields. Did she hear something? Maybe, but what could be making any sound that would cause her to turn to the skies, like the prisoners in *Shawshank Redemption* when they hear the sounds of a Mozart opera and stand still in a prison courtyard?

The title of this painting is revelatory. It's called *The Song of the Lark*. [Permit me a quick pause while I find a video of a lark singing on YouTube.] The song of a lark is bright, piercing, and beautiful. And it's

that sound that seems to have stopped her at attention. Perhaps there's toil ahead of her, but, at this moment, she pauses, forgets about her labors, and is transfixed by the beauty of a bird's song.

Looking more closely at her face, there is wonder. She's definitely not annoyed, thinking, "It's too early for that noise!" She doesn't seem curious, thinking, "Is that a nightingale or a lark?" Rather, she seems absorbed. So, when has something beautiful caught you by surprise in an unexpected moment? Perhaps at your place of work? Perhaps on your commute through traffic? Or perhaps on your trip to the grocery store?

I remember once driving out of the parking lot of my grocery store, and as I turned a corner, I saw a couple of children petting a giant tortoise. Yes, someone had brought a giant tortoise to the Harris Teeter parking lot. Granted, a tortoise isn't as light and bright as a lark's song, but it was still a moment of unexpected delight in the routine of my day. I didn't stop to take in the scene, though, like she might have.

The next time I notice a moment of unexpected beauty in the middle of my day, I'll think of her and allow myself to be transported beyond the rush of my routine. As she stares up listening to the song, I can imagine her saying quietly to herself, "How mesmerizingly beautiful this is."



What's your initial title?
What is going on in this scene?
What was going on a short while before this standoff started?
What stillness do you see? What movement?
How would you describe the mood of this place?
What could the young man be thinking as he faces the monster?



A scarily realistic, multi-headed snake monster rises higher and higher, towering over the figure of a nude man. I can hear the snarls, the hisses, the snapping, blood-filled jaws of the six writhing snake heads. The seventh, rising above them, stares steadily with vicious eyes towards the young man. The snake's chest puffs outwards, like a cobra putting on a display of domination.

The young man looks like he's breathed in to expand his own chest. His chin is lifted and his jaw is clenched. He braces for the challenge. He is lean and muscular, but he has no protection for that beautiful body—no armor. Whatever accoutrements he has on seem decorative rather than protective: a jeweled band across his chest, a patterned ribbon across his thigh, and a flaring coronet of green leaves atop his streaming hair. His red bow and quiver look ornate and unused. He looks more ready for a military parade than a savage battle.

And if the mood of this place is any indication, the battle will be savage. The muddied red clouds covering a dimming sunset barely hide the massacre that has already taken place. One young man, in full sunlight, lies dead, stretched on the ground, a pool of blood near his head. His athletic body is not dissimilar to the young hero's. Is this a warning or an omen? Near the pale corpse are more bodies contorted in macabre poses. And as my eyes become accustomed to the darkness, more and more bodies appear—horrible mounds of dead. It looks like the dead have accumulated here over time. Perhaps this is the monster's lair heaped with the bodies of warriors who failed in their quest to kill it. The last one, the lighted, pale corpse, has just been killed—the jaws of the serpent heads still dripping with his warm blood.

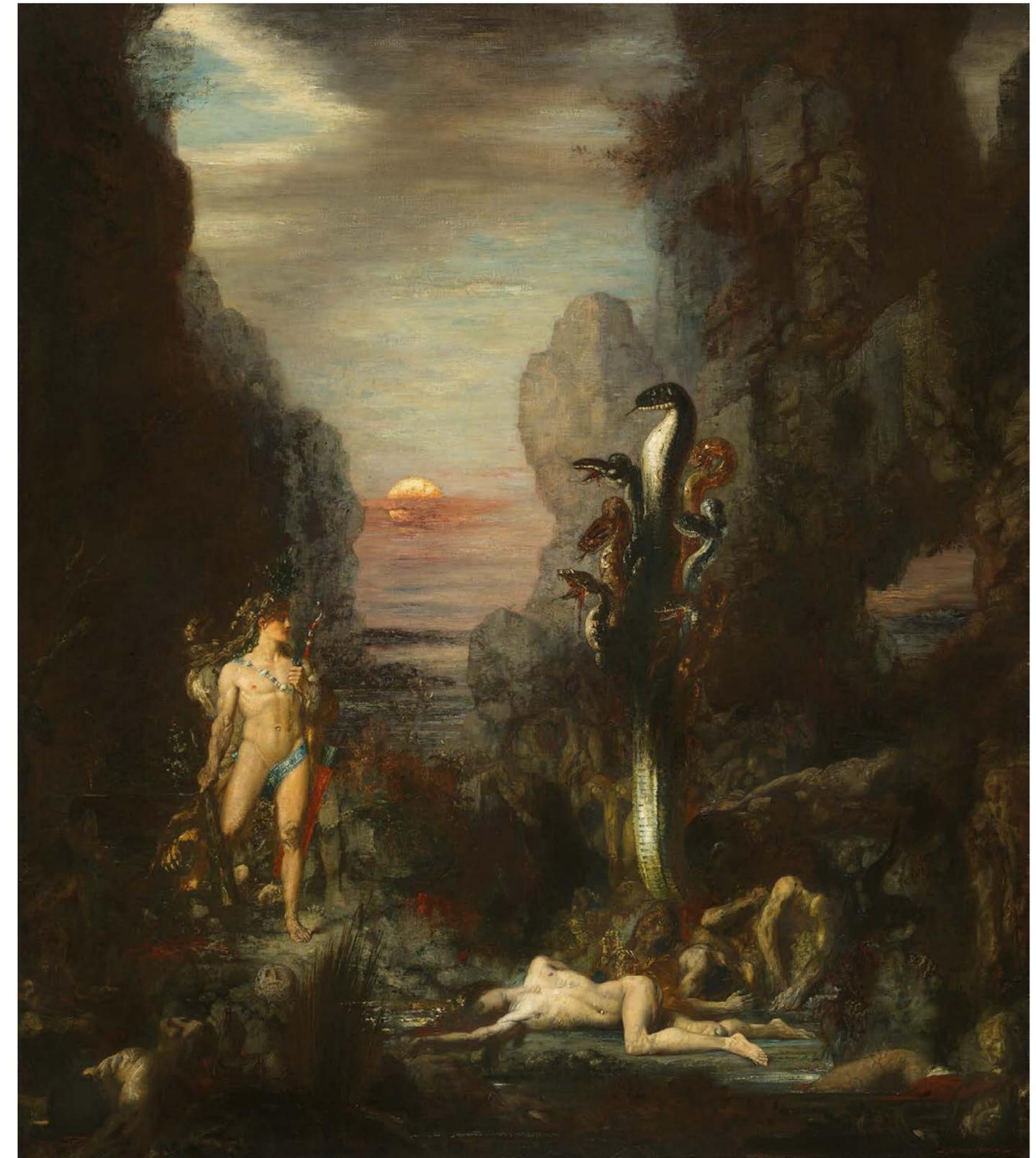
Who is this hero offering himself up as the next victim? The lion pelt and the seven-headed serpent are two clues that make me think of a story from Greco-Roman mythology: the story of Hercules and the Hydra. For one of his twelve labors, Hercules (who had already

vanquished the vaunted Nemean Lion) set out to kill the Hydra. The Hydra was a seven-headed monster, whose heads would regenerate if they were severed—a near-invincible foe. So, what is happening in this moment? It looks as if Hercules has just stepped into the monster's den of death. He must have seen the carnage before seeing the eyes of the creature. And now, the creature rises up from its fresh kill to see the young hero and crane its seven heads over him.

When have you been in the presence of a dangerous, intimidating foe? I'm grateful that I haven't faced anything near as horrific as this monster, but, because I want to empathize as best I can with Hercules, here's an example on a smaller scale. I remember coming home from a long trip and walking into my tree-filled backyard. The weeds and vines had become overgrown, and something frightening had made the place its lair. A giant spider had built a massive web crisscrossing over 10 feet. I am afraid of spiders, and I remember standing before it with a stick, scared, and more than willing to go back inside and let the demon have the backyard!

This painting also reminds me of a conversation I recently had with my car salesman—an outgoing conversationalist, as you might expect. He told me, to my surprise, that he was an introvert. What made him successful, he said, was that he always went towards what made him uncomfortable—public speaking, talking to girls, apologizing to customers—he always went “towards the fire.”

How does Hercules face his dreadful task? He doesn't look eager. But he looks determined: those bulging veins on his right arm as he firmly holds his club, the flexed muscles around his left knee as he braces himself, the firmness of his left hand gripping some leaves. He looks as if he might be thinking, “It's more fearsome than I imagined, but I must stand up to the demon.”



What's your initial title?

What's going on? What was the girl doing before she started reading?

Can you find three clues that show how much she is enjoying this book?

Who just walked in? What are they going to say to her?

What would she respond?

Does she remind you of anyone from your life or from fiction?



A young girl looks towards me with a mischievous glance from behind a huge book. She sits on a stool, her knees pulled up, her back pressed to the wall, and one elbow propped on a small table so as to better cradle her tome. She looks cozy in her little reading nook. With the aroma from the plants, the occasional twittering of a small bird, and the bright sunlight shining directly on the pages, it looks like she's indeed found the perfect spot. And this book seems to fascinate her in spite of how old, worn, oversized, and adult-looking it is. There are no other books around, just that one, and she seems to have been holed up here a while—she's halfway through!

But why does she look up mischievously like she's doing something she's not supposed to? On the table beside her there is a ball of yarn with some knitting that looks like it's been haphazardly set aside. There's no room in her hands for both the book and the knitting. It does not look like an interesting knitting task. Is that a grayish sock she's darning? It's certainly not as colorful as the tablecloth, and it's not as interesting to her as this book that looks like it could be from the "Restricted Section" at the Hogwarts library! Is she just taking a break from her needlework? Maybe... but it's been a long break.

At this point, someone has walked in and interrupted her reading. It appears from her reaction that this person might have been expecting

her to be doing knitting instead of reading. Maybe it's her mom, or her babysitter. Whoever it is, they might have come in and started saying, "Aren't you supposed to...." While she looks back with a glance that says, "I know what I'm 'supposed' to be doing, but I like this book!"

Does she remind you of anyone you know? Perhaps yourself? Or your son? Or a literary character? She definitely makes me think of Hermione Granger!

When I share this painting with children I ask them: When have you put something down that you were "supposed" to be doing for something that you were much more interested in? I then tell them about me playing Legos after being told to clean my room. I'm sure, even as an adult, you can relate to such a moment. (I have to admit that yesterday evening I was staring at a list of work emails, and decided they could wait for me while I went out to play soccer.)

But there's another character in this painting I find intriguing and meaningful to connect with: the person who just walked in and, perhaps, asked her to do her chores. When have you asked a child to do something and caught them in the act of doing something else they were more passionate about? As I open the door and see her look up and smile at me, I'm put in the position of how to respond. What would you tell her?



What's your initial title?

What's going on in this scene? What is the ailing man being offered? Water? Poison? Medicine?

Can you find three (or more) details which make him look sick?

Who are the dark figures in the background? Are they friends?

What sounds do you hear?

What could the sick man be mumbling? What could the other man be telling him if he were to speak?



A pale, old figure is being held upright by a gentleman proffering a glass of... something. The pale figure moans, gropes at his bedsheets, closes his eyes, and can barely hold his head up as it falls to one side. He looks like he is weak and in pain.

This sickly man wears a thick, coarse overcoat-looking robe, maybe a bathrobe. His white undershirt is wrinkled and disheveled, open at his chest. It wouldn't surprise me if he's been in bed for a long time, suffering.

The attending gentlemen has a crisper, better-fitting coat and combed hair. But it's the color in his face that especially stands out. He is living; his companion looks almost dead. It looks like the gentleman came over, sat on the bed, and lifted the "corpse" upright. He holds him up with one arm around his neck and allows the body to lean against the strength of his chest. His head is just a few inches from the gasps of breath and moans. A firm arm brings a glass of red liquid to the dying man's lips. What is in that glass? Is it medicine? Is he trying to help him? Or is he the cause of his suffering? Is he poisoning him?

There is determination in the gentleman's set mouth and his direct eyes. There is no pleading. There is no compassion in that look. It's firm. It's purposeful. He isn't saying, "Oh no, I'm so sorry for you." Rather, simply, directly, he might say, "Come now, drink this."

If he's there to help the invalid, it doesn't look like there is much hope to be found in this place. It's dark, so that nothing behind them can be seen except those sinister looking faces in the shadows: three, I think, who seem to look on. Who are they? And what are they doing here? Are they paying their last respects? Have they been caring for a dying man? Perhaps they're ghosts like those that visit Ebenezer Scrooge? Or perhaps a manifestation of the dying man's own pain and misery? If they are indeed there to help, they seem distant. I hear only whispers in the dark.

Is the sick man going to get better? It doesn't look like he is eager to drink what is in the glass. If it is medicine, this patient is not being cooperative.

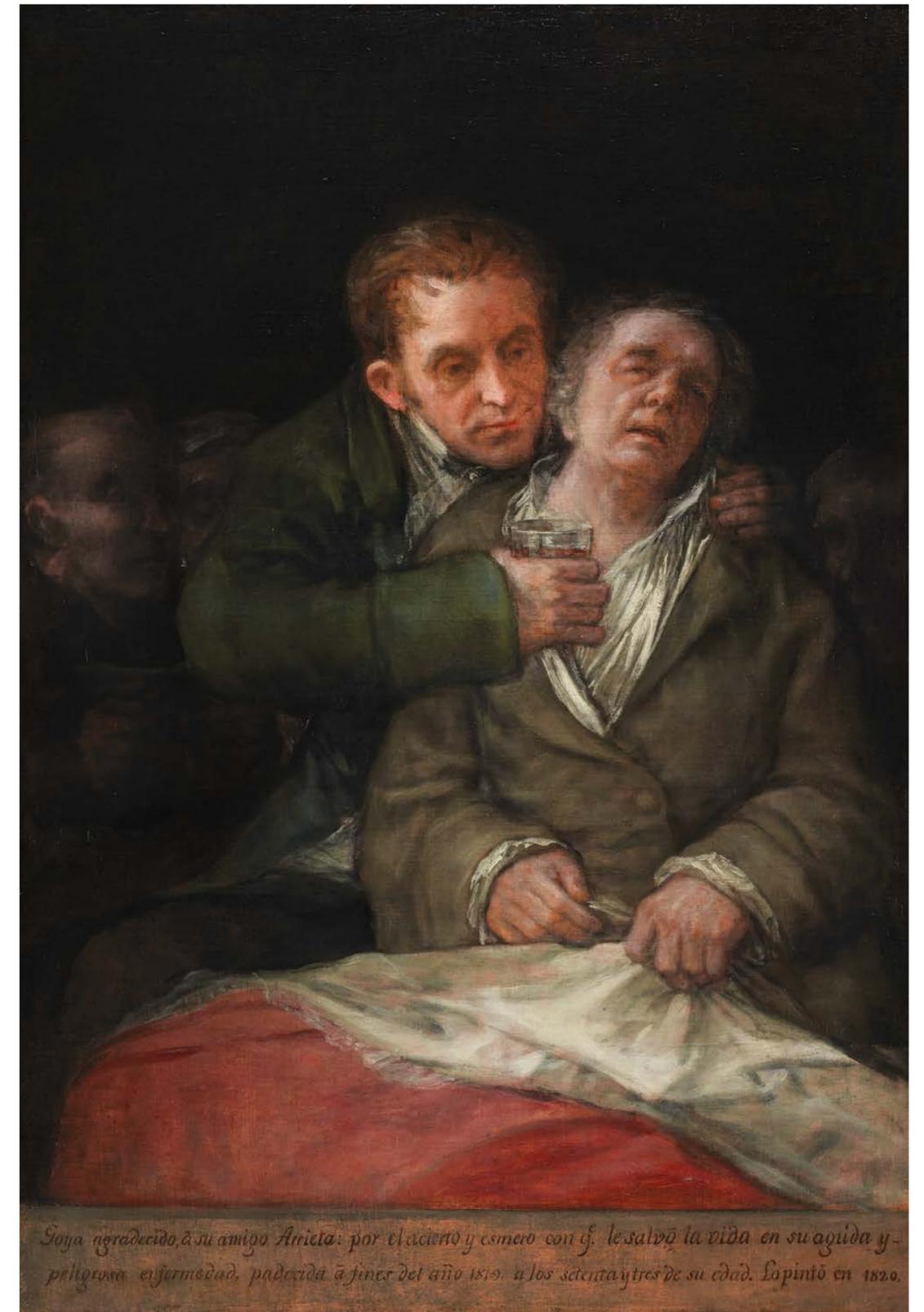
The background story sheds light on the situation. The sick, miserable man is the artist himself. The artist, at the age he painted this, was old and deaf. And he was also surrounded by dark, morbid thoughts, figuratively and literally. On the walls of his home, he had painted large scenes of demonic and suffering figures. He seemed to be a deeply cynical and pessimistic man. When he was about 73, he suffered from a severe illness that would likely have led to his death. (And, in his pessimism, he likely expected it to lead to his death.) However he had a doctor, a doctor who would not let him die. Dr. Arrieta nursed Francisco Goya back to health, and the difficult patient would go on to live and paint for another decade.

Who has been your aide in difficult times? And perhaps, a source of succor even when you could not be a cooperative patient, either in body or spirit?

A few years ago, when I was at the Minneapolis Institute of Art discussing this painting with some families, one child spoke up earnestly. He described a severe long-term illness he'd been suffering, and he described how his mom was always at his side helping him, especially in the most difficult moments.

Francisco Goya painted this as a tribute in gratitude to his doctor and friend. Thinking back to the boy and his mom at the museum, I remember the look on her face as she was experiencing the gratitude from her son, there, in front of this painting.

The inscription at the bottom reads: "Goya gives thanks to his friend Arrieta for the expert care with which he saved his life from an acute and dangerous illness which he suffered at the close of the year 1819 when he was seventy-three years old."



What's your initial title?

What is going on? How did she get this wound? Was she stabbed by someone else? Is it self-inflicted?

This is a very still moment, but do you see any hints of movement?

Why is she holding onto the rope? Is it for support?

If she were to turn her head and look at you, what might she say?



A young, aristocratic woman sits still while a wound bleeds red into her white shirt. What happened? Is she ill? Did someone hurt her? Or did she do this to herself? In her right hand she holds a short dagger. Did she just stab herself in the chest or was she attacked? She does not look around at any aggressor. She does not look frightened or frantic. She looks steady, her mouth firm and her brow drawn. But there are tears in her eyes, and she gazes vacantly, deep into her own melancholic thoughts. She seems alone in a darkened chamber, save the light shining on her pale face and white undergarment. And it does look like she wears a chemise as she seems to have peeled off part of her golden gown to reveal the delicate fabric beneath. Has she done this to make it easier to penetrate her heart with the small blade?

Just as her right hand grips the knife, her left hand grips a cord. Is she steadying herself? Is she pulling on the rope? If I take her pose, I feel how straight her back is, how level her shoulders are, how steady her arm is—steady like her brow. If she has done this to herself, there is no wavering. But she is sad. And why is she pulling on the cord? It looks like it might be a bell cord to call in servants. If that's the case, why is she calling someone? It doesn't look like it's because she wants help. The flow of blood does not seem to concern her at all. She is not staunching the wound.

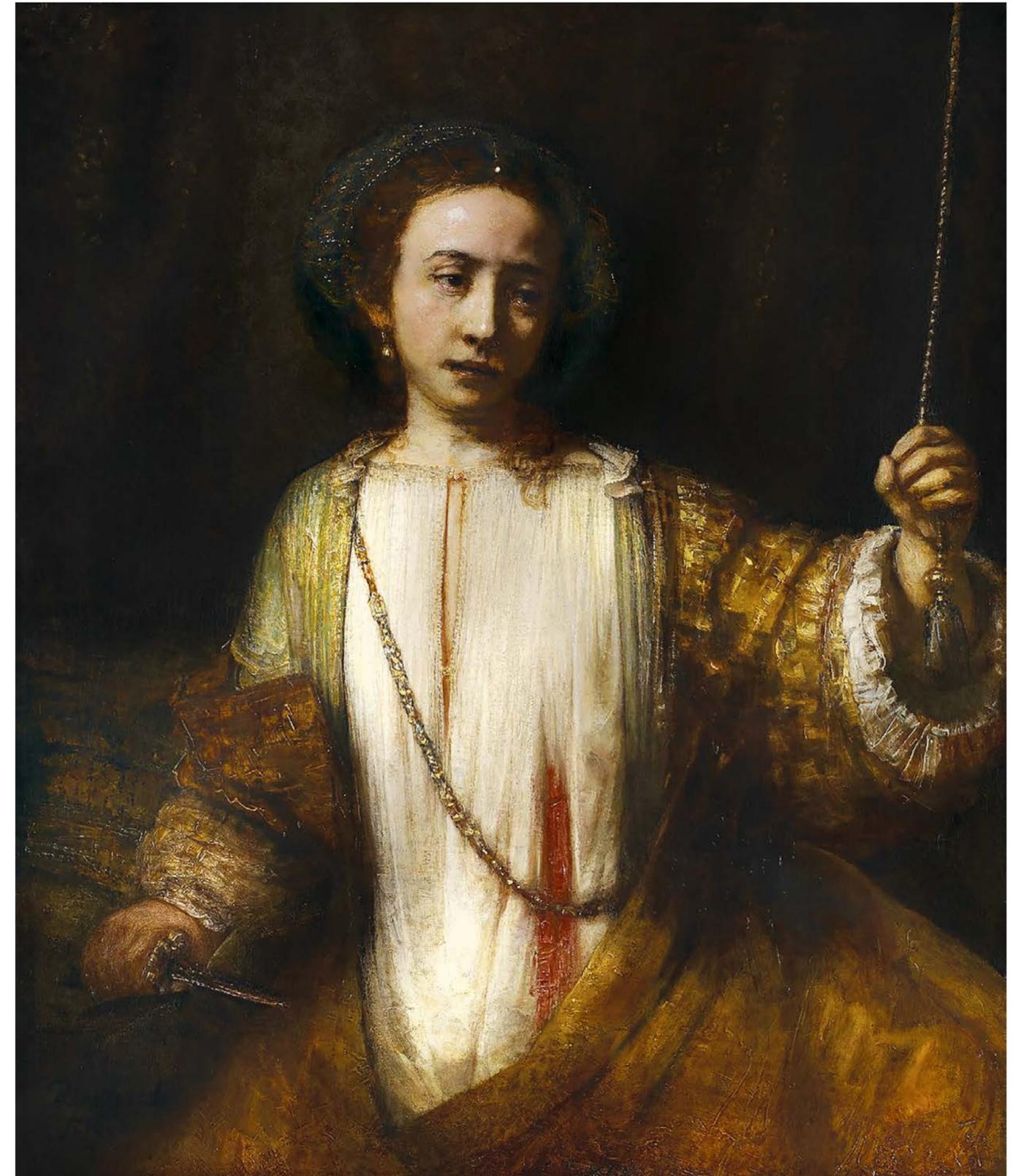
The scene depicts a moment from the story of *Lucretia*. Lucretia was a Roman aristocrat, devoted to her family and her country. One night, she was assaulted and raped by the prince of a rival kingdom.

Anguished at what happened, and considering it a matter of honor, she committed suicide. And before she died, she called upon her husband and her family to witness what she had done.

Is Lucretia's husband there with her at this moment? It doesn't look like it. She would probably be looking at him. Instead, it appears that she has plunged and withdrawn the dagger with no one around, and now, she is calling forth her family to break the tragic news; news that will devastate them. She seems to know it will. She is in the moment right after she's made a difficult, heart-wrenching choice, and right before the anguish will be spread to those she cares for.

This is a delicate situation to try to empathize with, but I've found it moving and meaningful to do so. Here's a question that has helped me to create a personal connection: when have you had to break news to loved ones of a difficult, painful choice you've made? On a less tragic scale, it might be having to tell dear colleagues that you are leaving after many years of friendship. On a more anguishing note, it could be telling your children that their parents are getting a divorce. The moment captured is right before Lucretia is about to break the sad news.

As the bell rings in the calm before the looks of shock and anguish arrive, Lucretia seems to be speaking to her husband already, "I know," she says, "I know, dear. But I had to do this, and I hope you understand."



What's your initial title?

What makes this place look dangerous? Can you find three details?

Is the man on the edge of the cliff alive or dead?

Will he slip down or climb up?

Why would he be here? Is he trying to escape? Is he exploring?



The craggy mountains look like the dwelling of a great dragon! And though there is no visible monster, the fiery red tint of the hellscape and the many crevices suggest the lairs of fearsome creatures like Smaug from *The Hobbit*. The farther you go back into the landscape, the

more dangerous it becomes. It looks as if the great rock formations of Monument Valley have crashed in upon themselves. There is no discernible way through, and though some long streaks look like paths, looking more closely, they seem like lightning flashes emanating from red clouds that blend into the crumbled peaks.

At the base of the mountains, hanging on a ledge is the figure of a man, alone in the vast desolation, clinging to a jutting rock over the edge of darkness. How did he get to this precarious position? Did he slip on wet rocks sprayed by the water around them? Or has he been climbing upwards? If so, why would he want to come here? Is he an explorer like Ernest Shackleton finding himself in distress in the treacherous Antarctic? Or like Frodo struggling to climb up Mount Doom in Mordor? Unlike Frodo, though, this hero has no Samwise Gamgee to pull him up the Mountain. Our hero has to do it by himself!

The painting is called *Sadak in Search of the Waters of Oblivion*. Sadak was a young nobleman who was sent by his sultan on a quest to retrieve some of the miraculous Waters of Oblivion, promising that after he'd accomplished his task, he could marry his betrothed, Kalasrade. However, the sultan wanted Kalasrade for himself and sent Sadak on this doomed quest hoping the young man would never return.

This moment finds Sadak about to get to the destination of his perilous journey—the lake lies just over the ledge. But he's not quite there yet; there's one more effort he has to make.

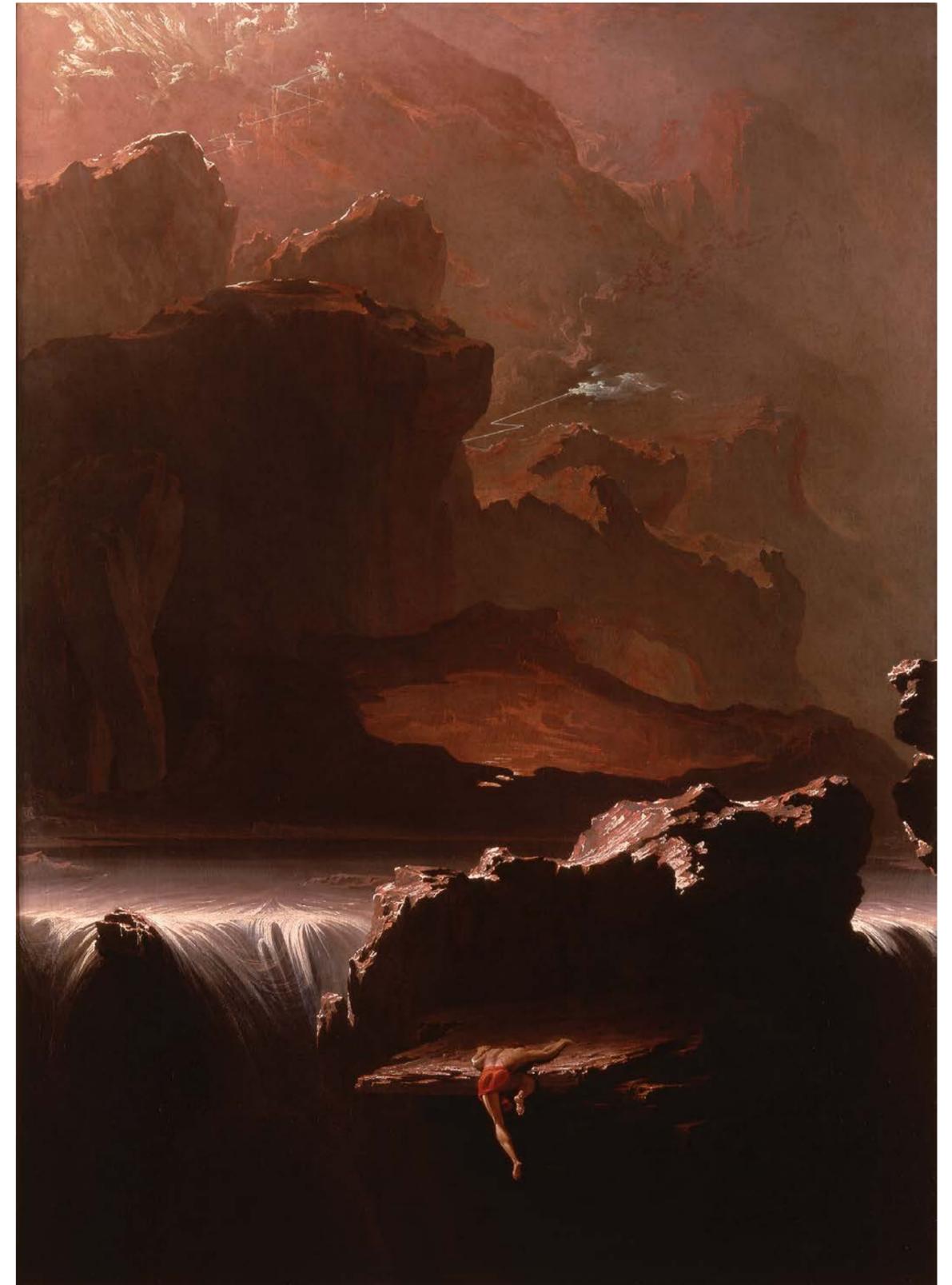
When have you faced tremendous physical strain when trying to accomplish your goals? Maybe you've had difficult rehab sessions after surgery? Or you're on the last mile of your first marathon? Or you're nearing the end of pulling an all-nighter on an important project, and you're exhausted?

Recently I came upon a poem that was written in response to the painting. (The author is not known.) Here are a few verses:

Onward, Sadak, to thy prize!
But what night has hid the skies?
From yon mountains shelter'd brow
Bursts the lava's burning flow:
Warrior! Wilt thou dare the tomb
In the red volcano's womb!

Hanging now on the ledge,
That the precipice doth edge;
Warrior! Take the fearful leap,
Though't were as the ocean deep[.]
Onward, warrior, to the prize!
Till thy woes are all repaid:
Thine, all thine, young Kalasrade!

I imagine that Sadak might repeat these words to himself to help him get over the edge.



What's your initial title?

Where did the bird come from? Did she bring it to the beach or did she find it there?

What did she come to the beach for? To swim? To have fun with friends?

What movement would you see if you pushed "play" on this scene?

What sounds do you hear in the background?

Where is her focus? Where are her thoughts? With the bird?



A young woman stands in the breeze on a seashore. She holds a bird in her hands. Is this her pet bird or did she find it on the beach? It looks similar to the seagulls flying behind her with its gray plumage and black-tipped wings. She might have found this bird as she was walking along

the seashore, and seeing it in some distress, picked it up to care for it. Its feathers are disheveled, its wings are spread awkwardly, and it looks up with its neck bent back. The bird isn't like a gentle little dove with wings tucked in, sitting calmly. I can imagine that it might be squirming, with wings sporadically flapping in agitation. The young woman holds it firmly, but delicately, her fingers precisely spread, almost caressing.

Her attention, though, isn't on the bird, even though it seems to look up at her. Perhaps a few moments before, she was looking down at the bird, petting and consoling it. But then, she looked up, her eyes lifted as a new thought crossed her mind. What could she be thinking now? Her expression is a little melancholic. Her dark eyes are slightly lowered, and her mouth is set tightly. She seems numb to the wind blowing in her face.

It looks like she came to the beach by herself. Why did she come? It doesn't look like she's on vacation. She wears a plain blue dress and a rusty red shirt covered by a dark shawl to protect her from the wind. On her head, she wears a simple bonnet blowing in the breeze. Her practical outfit and sturdy-looking face make me think less of an Instagram model in Ibiza and more of a fisherman's wife in Brittany.

The setting does remind me of cold beach days I've spent in northern France. Perhaps she is from this place and not just visiting. Perhaps she knows it well, and she came here to be by herself—to take a solitary

walk through the smell of the salt air and the sound of the waves. I don't live too far from the sea myself, and I often go for walks on the beach to reflect on my life. Perhaps she does the same.

The title of this painting is interesting. It's called *The Wounded Seagull*. That doesn't tell us much more than we've already noticed, but it does make me wonder if there's more than one hurt creature in this scene. Perhaps looking down at this wounded bird has prompted the thoughts she is now having, these serious, somewhat melancholic thoughts.

What places do you go to spend time with yourself and your thoughts? And while there, when have you come across something that prompted even deeper introspection? Something that might reflect your own quiet, perhaps sad, thoughts and feelings at the moment. The general example from movies and literature that most quickly comes to mind for me is the depiction of a parent, a mother or father away from their own child, who sees random children playing and can't help but be reminded of what is missing from their lives.

I wonder what she might be thinking in her circumstance. Perhaps she's thinking of a lost child, or a lost love, or some family trouble that has hurt her. I wonder if she sees herself in the wounded seagull. If she does, I can imagine her looking down at the bird and saying, "You are hurt, and you wish you could fly over the sea." Then, she looks up, and, as the sounds of other gulls fade into the background, she says to herself, "I am wounded, too."



What's your initial title?

What is going on in this story? What is she doing here?

What kind of place is she in? A comfortable place for a child?

What could she be looking at?

How does she feel at this moment? What do you imagine she could be thinking?



A little girl, maybe four or five, sits on a block of stone all by herself. She is wearing only a simple white undershirt. Her hair is pulled up and looks as disheveled as her shirt. But she looks clean and healthy, despite wearing clothes that are little more than rags. And her large brown eyes look like they have the remnants of tears. Why is she so sad?

This place does not look cozy. She is outside in a rocky area with no green, no flowers, not even a blade of brown grass. The angles of the block she sits on look cold and sharp. They are the only thing that suggest that she is not completely out in the wild. But beyond her we see only what looks like a rocky outcropping, perhaps a cave. This is not a hospitable environment for a little girl, and if there is anyone around, they don't seem close by. It appears she's been sitting here for a while, with the blue cloth placed on the stone to make the hard, cold surface a little more comfortable.

Is she waiting for someone? Has she been told by her mom to sit there and wait? Has she been put in "time-out" by a babysitter? Has she come out here to cry alone after a dispute with a friend? Is she lost and doesn't know what to do? There are few clues to help us piece together exactly what's happening. All these scenarios seem plausible! And all tell the story of a sad little girl who has been separated from those who might bring her comfort and happiness.

At this moment, it looks like she's stopped crying and turned her head to look over her shoulder. What is she looking at? Are there children playing in the distance? Is there a family walking by she wishes she could join? Is she seeing something in her own imagination, like the loved one she wishes were there? There is longing in her eyes, but she's

not getting ready to move towards someone. Her feet are crossed, and her fingers are interlaced in a mesh of anxiety. Her shoulders slouch—it's only her head and her eyes that look up while her lips pout. It does not look like she's thinking, "There you are!" Rather, it seems like her thoughts start with the words, "I wish..." She reminds me of a young Cosette from *Les Misérables* who lives with the abusive Thénardiens and away from her mother, Fantine. In the musical version, Cosette sings a song called "Castle on a Cloud," describing the life she wishes she had, playing, happy, and being with her mom. I see that desire for something she can't have yet in this little girl's eyes.

Do you remember, as a child, wanting to be with a loved one who was not nearby? I remember the feeling I had after leaving my grandparents' house having spent the holidays with them. I'd lie in my bed at home wishing I could be back with them, with the warmth, the presents, and the smell of cinnamon toast that filled the kitchen.

Perhaps there are young children in your life? Have you ever seen this expression before? As I stand before her, I feel sad for her, and I want to know how I can possibly help comfort her. What would you say to her if she turned her eyes towards you?



What's your initial title?

What is the young woman doing? Is she about to go to sleep?

Where is she? Is there anyone around her?

What time of day is it? Nighttime? Daytime?

If you could reach into the painting, what textures would you feel?

What kinds of things could she be thinking about?



A beautiful young woman lowers her eyes in quiet reflection. Her bundled russet-brown hair almost hides her dark brow and aquiline nose. Her full, rosy lips part slightly, while the soft skin of her neck is exposed to the caress of sunlight. Her head and shoulders seem enveloped in a dappled purple

haze, like there's a twilight sunset surrounding her thoughts. But it's not a vista behind her! It's a cushion whose indentations show that her head has been nestled within its softness. She is lying down, not standing up. Is she going to bed? Is she about to go to sleep?

The light around her seems too vibrant to be emanating from a candle. And she is dressed in a multi-layered outfit with intricate small clasps. And perhaps those dark eyes and red lips are still made-up. She's not gotten ready for bed. It looks like she has laid down, perhaps in the afternoon on her cushioned sofa. It looks like this is her spot, maybe a favorite spot because the violets and mauves of the cushion match those of her dress. She doesn't look dressed up to go out anywhere though. She is comfortably alone, on her favorite cushion, in her favorite dress, by herself with her thoughts.

What is she thinking about? She's not excitedly looking forward to the next day, and she's not deeply sad. She seems reflective and melancholic. She's not lying on her back with her eyes facing upward while her mind races with thoughts (like me when I'm lying back in

bed trying to fall asleep). Rather, she's turned to the side, lying on her right shoulder. Her mind is not racing; it's settled on something. Is she thinking about a career opportunity she missed out on? Is she thinking about her parents whom she misses? Or is she thinking about a lover who's not there with her? She looks so beautiful, and the sensuality of all the sensations she feels—the velvety cushion, the warm sunlight, the strands of hair on her forehead, and even perhaps the dab of perfume she might be wearing—suggests to me that she is missing her lover, a lover she wishes could be lying there beside her.

When have you taken a moment of rest in the middle of your day to allow yourself to reflect on what you are missing? Perhaps coming home after a day's work, you go for a walk outside in the late afternoon sun, and stop and lean against a tree, thinking of how much you'd like to be with her.

The title of this painting is *Far Away Thoughts*. I think it's a lovely title. Whatever is around her right now—not the rest of the room, not the world outside, not even the edges of the couch—doesn't matter. Only the purple tint of her longing thoughts matters. I can imagine her thinking to herself right now, "Would it be too much to ask that you were here beside me?" And, perhaps, she'd raise her eyes slightly... hoping to see his face beside hers, to meet his gaze, and to feel his hand reach over and caress her cheek.



What's your initial title?

What's happening here? Is he teaching her something? Or did she come up to see what he was doing?

What could their relationship be? Is this a teacher and his pupil?

What's he thinking as he looks up at her? Is he wondering if she understands?



A man sits at a table overrun with books and papers while a girl looks over his shoulder. She stares down at the desk while the man uses a compass to indicate something on his papers. Is he demonstrating something to her? Perhaps. It almost looks like she may have come up behind him to see what he was doing. She stands straight, and leans on his shoulder with her arm, like she's just come and said, "Hey, what are you up to?" Whatever the case may be, she seems interested.

What kind of studies has he been doing? It looks like several large maps have been pulled out and now lay one on top of another. Then, on top of the maps, there is a stack of books, the topmost one open as if it has been referenced in conjunction with the observations made on the maps. The globe, also on the table, is within arm's reach. It looks like he's been poring over some geographical research. And a large illustration towards the bottom of the pile of papers, with the depiction of a sphinx and a monolith, suggests some study of Egypt.

Is he doing personal research or teaching a lesson to the girl? In either case, it looks like this work is taking place after hours in their comfortable home, where he can wear slippers, and a peevish-looking dog is free to join them. And if he's teaching a lesson to the girl, it's a rather informal presentation. She's not sitting at the table. He's not facing her with a chalkboard behind him. This isn't a tutor who's come to teach her. It looks more like a dad giving an impromptu lesson.

The title given to this painting is *The Geography Lesson*. And it's also actually a portrait. It's a portrait of Monsieur Gaudry and his daughter (and their dog, "Busquet"!) from 1812. Is he teaching her a geography lesson in this moment, as the title suggests? It does not look like he's in the middle of explaining something right now—his hands look like he is, but not his face. She does seem to be looking and processing something he's probably just explained with the compass and the maps. But he's not saying anything to her right now. Nor does it seem like he's looked up at her to check for understanding. His glance is not scrutinizing. Rather, his eyes are wide with interest and his slight smile suggests delight. He is looking at her, looking at her learning, and enjoying the sight of it. His hands are frozen in the demonstration he's been giving, but his mind is not on the lesson right now. He's looking adoringly at his daughter as she thinks and grasps. I can imagine him thinking to himself, "I see you learning, and it's beautiful."

When have you taken delight in seeing someone close enjoy learning from you? Perhaps you were showing your son how to bake cookies? Or you were showing your daughter how to change the oil in her new car? Whatever it is, in those moments, maybe you stopped and thought, "How beautiful it is to see them learn, and to be able to share my knowledge with them." This moment makes me look forward to the next time I'll share art with my niece.



What's your initial title?

What's going on? What is this person doing with a severed head? Protecting it? Displaying it?

Did this person kill the man the head belonged to?

What is strange about the clothing this person wears?

If they were to speak right now, what would be the tone of their speech? Triumphant? Tired?



An oddly dressed young man sits with a massive head by his side, looking rather dazed. He holds a long sword, rather haphazardly, which is dripping blood, presumably from the greenish head. The massive, greenish head is as large as the young man's torso! It looks like this huge head has been set up on a decorated pedestal, turned, and propped up to face forward, almost like a fisherman displaying a prize catch.

But there is no glee in this victor's face. His eyes look sullen and exhausted, and the red rimming the lids suggests the remnants of tears. His whole posture is despondent—his head tilted to the side while his shoulder shrugs. The drapes upon drapes of clothing look too big for him, slipping off his shoulder. But he doesn't care. His clownish appearance is crowned with an odd fur and feather hat. Why is he so oddly dressed? If he is the one who defeated this giant, swinging that sword, then he likely wasn't wearing any of this awkward, dress-like apparel. Did he dress up for the victory parade? Or was he asked to put those on and reluctantly obliged? He looks in no mood to celebrate anything.

The background story is fascinating. This is David—the David who slew Goliath; the same David so heroically depicted by Michelangelo about to take on the giant antagonist. There is more to the story. David was not a great warrior. He was a shepherd boy who answered a call sent out by King Saul to help defend their country from an enemy force. King Saul was looking for a champion to save the Israelites from the Philistines by fighting, in single combat, the champion of the Philistines. Nobody would dare face Goliath, except for the young shepherd boy.

As he prepared for the battle, Saul offered David armor, but he refused, going into battle with only his rustic shepherd's garb, his sling, and a few stones. He made quick work of the giant: one stone

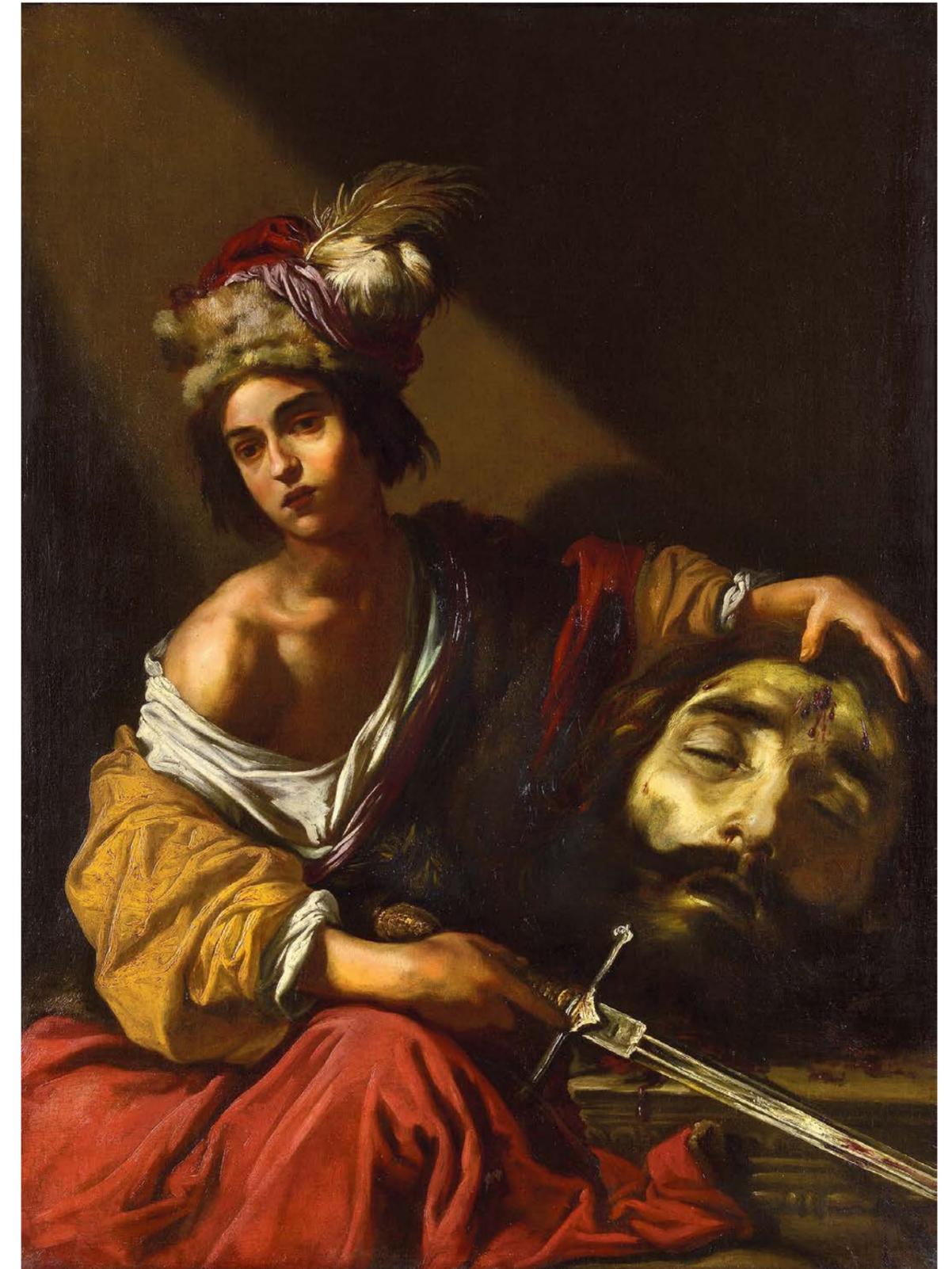
from the sling struck Goliath in the forehead and knocked him to the ground, and soon David was upon him, unsheathing Goliath's own sword and decapitating the helpless giant. With their champion defeated, the Philistines abandoned their attack.

David brought back the head to King Saul and the people he'd just saved. To celebrate, Saul gave David some fancy clothing and asked him to display the head to the people so that they could see the defeated enemy as well as their new hero.

This is not the scene of a victor joyously celebrating with his people. This display of victory looks utterly forced. For whatever reason, David's heart is not in it. Perhaps the slightly affectionate way he holds the head suggests some compassion for Goliath, or, at least, distaste for having become a killer. I can imagine his faraway glance echoing the thoughts, "I wish this had not been necessary." And he might be thinking this even as he is being praised to the public by King Saul, who chose David as the nation's champion.

When have you been publicly celebrated for something you weren't excited about being celebrated for? In war films, I've come across those scenes of soldiers who are being hailed as heroes upon their return, but the trauma of their experience is too deep for them to match the public joy. Or perhaps it's simply that you are not a fan of the way you are being celebrated—too much of a big deal is made for something you don't think deserves it. Or, worse, you suspect that your public celebration is not particularly genuine, and is filled with ulterior motives. I think of Katniss Everdeen, from *The Hunger Games*, who is celebrated as a champion to prop up the ruling elite.

I love celebrations, so this is a difficult kind of moment to contemplate. But I find it a good reminder to be aware of the individual human and not just the public hubbub surrounding them.



What's your initial title?

What's going on? Is this a lesson or a performance?

Where are they? In a backyard? In the school courtyard?

What kind of music do you imagine she is playing?

What could the young girl be thinking as she looks at her friend playing? Is she thinking, "You need to practice more"?

When have you enjoyed watching a friend demonstrate an interesting skill for you?



Two young girls sit in an open field. One plays a small wind instrument, while the other looks on with enjoyment. They appear so comfortable with each other. The younger of the two is sitting right beside her friend, propping her elbow up on the other's knee. Her eyes look up attentively. Her older friend has turned toward her audience of one, and pulled her legs up so that they overlap with her friend's. They are cuddling as much as possible while still allowing the musician to perform and the listener to sit comfortably.

The empty sky looks slightly gray, and the field doesn't look particularly pastoral. There are no flowers. The plant life looks sparse, tufty, dry, and, in some places, prickly. But the beautiful sounds of the flute fill the quiet space around them—there are no other noises around. There is the suggestion of a building far behind the girls on the horizon. But they are far from the schoolhouse, their homes, and the town square. They've left their parents and other friends behind to be alone together.

These two friends, who look like they could be sisters with their chestnut hair and brown eyes, remind me of Anne of Green Gables and her friend Diana (though Anne had red hair and Diana had raven-black hair). Despite differences in hair color, Anne considered Diana her "bosom friend." And I can imagine these two girls being such bosom friends.

But there is something more particular in this moment that intrigues me. Do you see the way the younger girl looks at the flutist? There is absolute delight as she takes in both the music and the countenance of her friend. A moment before, her head might have been turned forward in the same direction as her legs, as she simply enjoyed the music, but at this moment, she's turned to look at her friend. She looks at her with a sense of admiration, as if she might be saying, "You play that song so beautifully."

When, in your childhood (or adulthood), have you delighted in a friend's performance? One where the demonstration was meant only for you? Maybe you watched your friend play the guitar? Or, perhaps, effortlessly draw your portrait? Or maybe they performed a dazzling magic trick? I enjoyed playing soccer as a kid. But I was new to it and learning. I remember visiting my older cousins, who were much better players. One of them started showing me how to juggle a soccer ball with his feet. I was so amazed and delighted. I don't remember that I looked at him with the admiration the young girl expresses. I wish I had, and this painting, called *Childhood Idyll*, will help remind me to do so the next time such an opportunity arises.



What's your initial title?

What is going on? What has this man been doing? Dining? Chatting?

What words would you use to describe his feelings?

Where is he? A nice restaurant?

There seems to be a book on the floor in front of him. How did it end up there?



A man sits at a table with clenched fists and an angry expression. Why is he so angry? He sits turned away from the table in a dank, dark room, while a military figure with uniform and a bayoneted rifle stands with his back to him. The soldier is completely indifferent to the gentleman

and his simmering rage. Could he be a guard, and this place be a prison cell?

If so, the prisoner is not quite in rags or a prisoner's uniform. His clothes look somewhat tattered, but that vest looks like it could have belonged to a sophisticated gentleman at some point. And though the chamber is walled by dirty stone, there is a pristine white tablecloth on the table along with two lighted candlesticks in the center. If he is a prisoner, he is not being treated as a common criminal. And indeed, he seems to be a prisoner. There is one telltale detail that seems to confirm this... on his foot. His right foot is shackled and chained.

No wonder he is bitter, as he stares into the void with narrowed eyes peering from behind a deeply furrowed brow. His jaw is clenched like his left hand. It looks like he could punch someone or perhaps just has.

There is, in fact, evidence of recent violence. On the floor in front of him lies a book, face down, open, with pages in disarray and perhaps torn. How did it end up there? It certainly wasn't placed. It looks like the prisoner threw it to the ground in anger. What is this book that has given rise to such violence within him? It's hard to tell. Perhaps the generic brown cover suggests a Bible. And perhaps the straps suggest a journal, a personal journal. Whatever it is, it's something that mattered enough to him to be the only book around, and that affected him enough for him to fling it to the ground. But why did he get that angry?

One last detail to ponder is the interesting incongruity of the clean, white tablecloth that looks like it still has fold lines. It looks like it's just been brought in, unfolded onto the table, and meticulously lined up. I would expect to see this at a fancy restaurant or a chapel altar, not a prison cell. So what is it doing here?

The title of this painting will shed some light on this dark moment. It is called *The Last Day of a Condemned Man*. This helps to explain the rage, the thrown book, and maybe even the white tablecloth. Is he about to receive his last meal (or his last communion) before the guard leads him to his execution?

The prisoner reminds me of famous literary prisoners like Jean Valjean from *Les Misérables* or Edmond Dantès from *The Count of Monte Cristo*. And though they were not condemned to death, they did suffer terrible, unjust sentences that embittered them. When have you faced the "guillotine?" When have you been handed a sentence that made you question what you valued and dedicated your life to? Perhaps you were served with divorce papers. Or perhaps you were fired from a job you loved. Jean Valjean was condemned to never see his beloved family again. Edmond Dantès was condemned to see his beloved move on.

Whether that book symbolizes the values he's dedicated his life to or happy memories he's recorded, they will all soon be gone to him. Whatever he left behind, hoped for, there is no more future for it. And he is feeling that loss. I can imagine him, after the violent outburst, thinking to himself, "It means nothing now. Nothing."

When I look at him, I feel sympathy. I gain clarity in reflecting on my own "all is lost" moments. And I want to tell him, "Thank you for understanding me." I hope there is someone waiting outside his cell ready to help him escape.



What's your initial title?

What is the mood of the crowd? Are they celebrating?

What's the crowd looking at?

What is in front of the railing? The street? Or something else?

Why is the man on the right disrobing? What is he about to do?

What could he be thinking at this moment?



A crowd gathers with most looking down towards a young man disrobing. This crowd looks agitated. One woman clasps her hands in concern, another holds her hands to her head as her eyes roll back—it looks like she's about to faint. Everyone is craning their necks, leaning over, gasping,

shouting. One villager comes out of a door to see what the commotion is, while two kids run over shouting. What is all this about? Well, it certainly doesn't look like a celebratory occasion or a street performance. The young man disrobing, who seems to be the focus of attention, is not looking back at the people gathered. He's looking away, and he looks straight in front with a mixture of concern and determination. What could he, and the crowd, be looking at?

The crowd is elevated above him while he is on a small platform below. Along the elevated area where the crowd stands there is a railing, a wooden post, and an arch, like you might find beneath a bridge. Could this crowd be gathered at some kind of dock? Is there a canal or river before them? The architecture and costumes of this place make me think of Holland. Perhaps then, these might be the canal-filled parts of a city, like Amsterdam. And, at this moment, something grave has happened in the water. Is someone drowning? Perhaps a child fell in the water? Is the fainting woman the mom?

So far it looks like what happened is that a child might have fallen in, and his cries attracted a crowd. They sent for help, but would it arrive in time? Then, out of the crowd, a young man, a fancily dressed young

man with a bright red jacket, ruffles on his thigh, and a handsome head of dark hair, stepped out of the crowd and started to disrobe, handing articles of clothing to the woman bowing down. In the next moments, he will hand over his shirt and dive into the water to try to rescue the child.

When have you come across the commotion of a concerned crowd? Just a few weeks ago, while I was among tons of people leaving a theater, someone in the crowd collapsed, and there were shouts of concern as people came to her aid. Perhaps you've found yourself in such a situation.

Another question to ask is, whom do you know that you could imagine might step out of a crowd, calmly facing fear or danger, to assist in an emergency? I'm reminded of Jean Valjean from *Les Misérables* stepping out of a crowd to assist an old man whose cart had collapsed and was crushing the life out of him.

Sometimes it's difficult to know if it's your time to act when a stranger is in peril. And often, in crowds, no one acts; they think someone else will. But in this crowd, the young man stepped forward. I imagine him deliberately pulling back his jacket while he sizes up the situation. His body is tense, coiling up to spring into action. He stares with fierce eyes and a furrowed brow, and I can imagine him thinking, "Don't worry, kid. I'll be right there." If ever I find myself in this kind of situation, I hope I'll remember his expression of poised self-confidence.



What's your initial title?

What kind of work is he doing? What objects do you see that suggest it?

Where exactly is he? What is in front of him? A wall?

What time of day is it? Daytime? Nighttime?

Can you find three clues that suggest he is very engaged in his work?



A scholar seems to be working late into the night. The Renaissance-looking gentleman sits before a narrow table with a variety of implements before him in a very active posture of study. His left hand holds a compass open on top of a globe while his right hand holds a candle over an opened book.

He seems to be measuring, reading, and handling his light source all at once. (He reminds me of my dad doing carpentry with a hammer in one hand, tape measure in the other, and nails between his teeth while he contorts himself on the roof.) Our gentleman is doing very active-bodied work, especially for a scholar!

With a single candle in his dark chamber, it looks like it's late at night. It's strange that there are no other light sources, no other candles.... Where is he exactly? Is this his private office? If it's his office, he's got a fantastic vaulted ceiling behind him! And it's strange that he doesn't seem to be working at a desk or table. Rather it looks like his books and tools have been placed on the sill of an arched opening. Is he at a window? The pulled-back drape might suggest that. But why is he working at a window, late at night? Why does it look like he's brought all his materials here to join the little statue of Cupid hanging out on the window's column? Does he enjoy having the night sky in front of him to work? Is he on a deadline and has he been told by his wife to find somewhere else to work? Or is he like a Dr. Frankenstein obsessing over his passion project late into the night?

Looking more closely, there is an important clue in one of his tools: that globe. It is not, in fact, a globe of the world. There are drawings of human and animal-like figures on it, not drawings of continents. What he has in front of him is not a map of Earth, but a map of the stars, a celestial globe.

The title of this painting is *The Astronomer*. So this scholar is working into the night, by a window, in order to see the stars. And right now, he seems to be fully engaged in his measurements and referencing. I can imagine that perhaps, in a moment, he will pull back the candle and

look up at the starry sky in front of him. And after some time passes, according to his hourglass, he might rotate the globe to correspond with the movement of the stars he sees, and check the accuracy of the measurement with what's been recorded in his books. This is the profession he has chosen, and it requires unusual working conditions and hours, but he does it with gusto, even when others have gone to bed, or are out partying late into the night.

When has your work, your passion, taken you to unusual work situations? Maybe your job takes you on trips? Or you have to work in strange places? I'm reminded of a television show called *Dirty Jobs* where the host, Mike Rowe, would visit people in all kinds of unusual jobs human beings do, from shearing sheep to processing garbage – each one with its unique quirks. And the people he meets, with their atypical jobs, love what they do. Perhaps you have that aspect in your work.

Another aspect of this moment I find meaningful is that he has chosen this kind of work, with its intense late-night research. What kind of work do you love enough to want to do it in the middle of the night? I'm reminded of the character of Howard Roark, from *The Fountainhead*. Working on deadline commissions, he would stay up late into the night. Like Roark, this astronomer inspires me to love my work enough to be willing to dedicate my sleeping hours to it.

The astronomer's lids do look a little heavy with tiredness, but his subtle movements are precise, and his whole body is fully concentrating. It looks like he might be thinking to himself, "Let's see if I can figure this out."



What's your initial title?

What is going on in this story? Who do the girls want to be with?

What are three details that show how much the girls want to be with the knight?

Are the girls saying goodbye to the knight or are they being reunited with him?

What can you imagine the knight might be saying to the men he's facing?

Who are the people in your life most precious to you?



A knight in armor stares anxiously at a group of men while holding onto two young girls. What is he going to do with the girls? Is he handing them over? Or is he taking them back? The girls clutch at him, their other hands held by one of the trio of men. But they let their hands drag while they embrace the knight like he's their father. One girl presses her cheek to his armor. The other buries her head into the hard metal of the crook of his arm, and reaches around to poignantly grip his shoulder. There is relief, but perhaps especially yearning for protection in their expressions.

It looks like they are going to be reunited with their father, but a negotiation is still going on. The knight hands over jewels while a bearded fellow with shifty eyes, who already holds one full bag, reaches to grab more riches. The exchange is not done yet. There is still tension in the air. The page, who came with the knight, is reaching into a pouch to pull out more jewels, while the father, whose spread hand holds onto one daughter, looks wary and anxious. Can he trust these men to follow through on the deal and let his daughters go? The creep gripping the girls' hands looks over with a smile that suggests he has his victim exactly where he wants him. He could be saying, "Oh, I hope you brought more. These girls are worth more.... Hehe." The father doesn't trust them, but he has no choice. I can imagine him saying, "This is what you asked for, now let them go."

The title of this painting is *The Ransom*. There is no particular background story, but the scene, with its variety of individual personalities and intricate interactions, suggests plenty of story. Even the kidnapper's dog seems to have a background story. He's stuck with these guys, but he bonded with the girls, maybe helping them to feel reassured and safe. But now that it seems like they are leaving, he looks up sadly at the friends who are going away. Both he and the dad are protective of them.

The dad seems to have traveled a long way by horse to this meeting spot. He came, spurred and armored, prepared to fight, but will put off a fight for the sake of bringing his daughters back safely. And he will keep handing over the family jewels to save them. The tension of this negotiation reminds me of Jean Valjean from *Les Misérables*, negotiating with the vile Thénardiens in order to "buy back" the poor little Cosette who has been a virtual hostage under the Thénardiens' roof for years. Though aware he's dealing with a scoundrel, Valjean will spend any amount necessary to bring Cosette under his protection.

When I share this painting with children, I ask them to think of who would protect them like the knight does his daughters if something dangerous ever happened. The question I'll pose to you is this: who in your life is more precious to you than all the wealth and jewels you own? And who would you hold like the knight does his daughter with his right hand, that right hand whose fingers spread in loving protection?



What is your initial title?

What is she standing in front of? Her school?

What could be happening in front of her? Children playing?

What would you want to say to her if you passed by?



The young girl stands out like a neatly bowed brown paper package left on a pale blue floor. She looks small against the door. Her bonnet is the only part of her that can be seen from inside the door window. Is her mom inside, having told her to wait outside?

Her little black shoes are pressed against the massive door with a smooth river of pavement between her and the person she's looking at. Who could she be looking at? Is it someone she knows? Another child? I don't think it's either. She might be more forthcoming if she saw an ally instead of staying trapped within the frame of the door.

Do the images in the window show what is inside (perhaps a store), or reflect what is outside facing the girl? Either way, it's hard to make out. Perhaps she's on a city street with the bustle of passersby streaming before her. But someone has looked over to her. She stares back openly, but without affection. She isn't enthusiastically saying, "Hi! My name is Anne, 'Anne' with an 'E' from Avonlea!" But she isn't afraid, either. She looks over with a poised, slightly inquisitive stare. She isn't comfortable here—this isn't a playground where her hair and legs would run wild. She's trapped in a bell-shaped coat in this colorless street where the door handle is too high for her to reach.

This is a portrait of a five-year-old girl named Jeanne Kéfer. She reminds me of children who are uncomfortably dolled up, almost like Tom Sawyer in church clothes, though she looks more poised. But this adult world is not her size. This makes me think of time I've recently spent in Montessori classrooms. In that world, chairs, tables, and shelves are made to suit the size of the child. I remember sitting in a miniature chair in the classroom and feeling like a giant. But I was so comforted seeing the children roam around me in that world so easily. And I wish Jeanne had this kind of world.

When I think of personally connecting to this scene, I think of two characters to empathize with. I think of putting myself in Jeanne's shoes, and I remember, as an eight-year-old, my feet dangling while I sat in an airplane seat that was too high for me. The other character I'd empathize with is the adult who is looking at her. When have you come across a child you saw who wasn't comfortable with the adult world around them? And what would you want to say to Jeanne if you came across her?



What is your initial title?

Can you find three clues that suggest the woman in black is the stronger of the two?

What could that note be? A letter from a friend describing their amazing vacation?

What could the woman in black be saying to the person she's just turned to?



Two fancily dressed women sit on an ornate sofa. They look similar to each other—curled dark hair with matching brown eyes—but one looks older than the other. Perhaps they are sisters. They both sit up, but the older one sits up straighter and, with lifted chin, looks directly at someone who has made her turn around. The younger sister sits almost behind the older one with one arm wrapped around her back, not to protect her, but more for her own support. The older sister also seems to hold onto the younger one with one arm, and with her other hand holds out a couple of hand-written pages.

The pages are extended far enough so that both women could have been reading them before they were interrupted. They look like an unfolded letter. Who could that letter be from? What kind of news does it bring? Judging by the women's serious expressions, it doesn't seem like they're receiving wonderful news. Rather, the two sisters look like they might have been bearing themselves up against some hardship while they were reading. And now as they look at me, the older sister, with her look of controlled defiance, might be saying, "Look, we are just fine without any assistance." The younger one might chime in with, "That's right, we are just fine together."

They are indeed sisters. The younger one is named Charlotte and the older one is Zenaïde. Their father was Joseph Bonaparte, the brother of Napoleon. After their uncle, Napoleon, was dethroned and exiled to another part of the world, their father was, himself, exiled to the

United States. With the overthrow of the Bonapartes in France, Charlotte and Zenaïde were forced to move to Brussels as outcasts, without their father. In this painting, they are reading a letter from him, addressed to them from across the Atlantic.

When have you faced troubling times with only close family to truly support you while others turned away? I can think of many times when my family, or close friends, have had to endure some challenges together: the passing of a loved one, a medical emergency.... It's a little more challenging for me to think of a time when the broader support of the community hasn't been there as well. It's easier for me to think of the opposite: I remember at my grandmother's funeral, it wasn't just me and my family there. So many people I had never met came to pay their respects and lend us their support. But Charlotte and Zenaïde don't have their community's support. They seem to have only each other for comfort.

There are a couple more questions you might ask yourself to empathize with the sisters. When have you been like Charlotte, happy to have strong support? And when have you been like Zenaïde, there to provide support in defiance of others?

This double portrait was painted in Brussels, but I wonder if Zenaïde would have really liked for this painting to be exhibited in Paris, so that she could show those who turned against her family that they were not broken, but strong together.



What's your initial title?

What is this person doing out here? Are they on a hike? Are they exploring?

Is this rock formation natural or man-made? If man-made, what purpose could it serve?

What is the mood of this place? Chaotic? Creepy? Tranquil?

Put yourself in this setting. What physical sensations would you feel? What sounds and movement would you notice?



A lone figure stands before a strange rock formation on a cold, dark night. The figure looks like a gentleman, well-off, perhaps scholarly—he has a long, full robe and a plush patrician's hat. And he needs that hat: it looks like winter around him. The spindly-limbed, bare trees, the brown grass, and the long warm fur he wears give me the sensation of being out in the cold. I half expect to see the gentleman's frosty breath.

He stands there by the rock formation. What is he doing there? I don't think he's analyzing the structure—he's not looking closely. Is he walking past it? He seems to be standing still, almost reverentially, with his hands clasped and his head lowered. It's almost as if he is in prayer.

One large rock sits on several smaller ones. What is this structure? It reminds me of some ancient burial sites I saw on a trip to France when I was younger. Could it be a gravesite? Is it the grave of someone he knows? Well, if it's ancient, it's likely unmarked and unknown. So whatever is going through his mind, it's not the memories of a lost loved one or the exploits of a past hero of his. So what is he doing out here in the middle of the night, paying homage to it?

The title of this painting is *A Walk at Dusk*. The structure is a megalithic tomb, probably created 5,000 to 7,000 years before this scholar took this night stroll. He comes to visit this ancient landmark by himself, late at night. This isn't like the group tour I took when

I visited megalithic dolmens in France. He has come here to be by himself, in the solitude of night. And he has come here not to be in the presence of a particular person but perhaps of the idea of death.

One of my favorite places to go when I visit a new city—after the art museums, of course—is the cemetery. Granted, there's often amazing sculpture, but what I find especially meaningful is the opportunity to reflect on my life in the presence of lives lived and left behind. And when I see this scholar, I don't see him thinking, "Is this formation Paleolithic or Neolithic?" He'd come during the day for that! Rather, I can imagine him paying homage to the life that was lived so many centuries before, and to reflect on the nature of life and death. He might be thinking, "Time is vast, and life is short. Even the commemoration of death outlasts life by millennia. And winter will always come." Where do you go to reflect on the nature of life?

I remember, over 10 years ago now, a student of mine sharing with the class his personal connection to this painting. Answering the question I posed above, he described spending time at the beach. He was a surfer, but sometimes, he'd stay behind after everyone left the waves and the evening came. He would sit on the beach; his megalithic tomb: the rolling waves.

Last night, I went to the courtyard garden of a medieval-style church, all quiet, and under the stars, I put in my earphones to listen to some melancholic Max Richter piano, and to contemplate important questions in my life.



Index of Artworks

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Joseph Rodefer DeCamp

Artwork #3: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Expulsion from the Garden of Eden
Thomas Cole

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Isabella and the Pot of Basil
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Acknowledgments

Since I started this book project, I've been fortunate to have support from many people throughout the process. To raise funds I started a Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign. I'm grateful to everyone who made this book possible.

Eric Kalin
Neil and Cynthia Roeth
Sean Jason Saulsbury
Ginger and Chad Mills
Alexander and Conrad
The Cammeresi Family
Garrett Garcia
Carisa, Brian, & Sullyvan
Heather Schwarz
Tom Lauerman
Sebastian Gamboa & Clytze Sun
Barbara M. Schantz
Torunn Andrea Bussemaker-Aamodt
Molly Johnson
Cheryl Hein
Carrie Lee-Rickard
Wende Kriegel
Ron Avni
Duncan Curry
Jason Gritman
Susan Sheridan
Aaron West
Brian English
John Muller
Joseph Hobson
Jason Crawford
Joanne Levitan & Alan Warner
Deborah Antonelli
Lisa VanDamme
Michel Travers
Mairin Molloy Griffith
Rajnish ("Raj") Mago
Bonne Anderson
CAPITALISM.ORG
James Ellias
Jeffrey C. Baldwin
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Michal Kracik
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Jamie Heston
Lisa Connelly
William
Kathleen McCasland
Ashley Karen Roy
Deborah Bitterfield
Jesse Abbott-Dallamora
Jammen Family
Ketan S. Khare

Maryallene Arsanto
A. Hilse
Fred Klingbeil
Leo Hoffman
Will Szent-Miklosy
Outis
Jennifer & Ari Armstrong
Doug & Owen
Matthew Voglewede
Richard Wills
Jordan Smith
Kyle Vafiadis
Don Erbe
Murali Valluri
Frank Olechnowicz
Amy Mossoff
Bill Brown
Naveen Katragadda
Dan Sullivan
Carolyn Faulkner
John Li and Lily Sun
Steven Rogers
Rose W
Maria & Anders Ingemarson
Mitch Michulka
Amy and Robert Nasir
Frederick Seiler
Matan Berson
Josh Huntington
Colleen Smith
April K. Mills
Noah Stahl
Keith Didion
Conrad Lagowski
David W. Sanderson
Angie Killian
Kirah Van Sickle
in memory of artist Kate Williams
Tami K. Lefko
Mark Wickens
Atul Kapur
Shawna D. Frederick
Cody Ellias Wells
Nina Kraucunas Everitt
Jean Greenberg
Pooja Gupta
Kathryn Daley
Ellen and Harris Kenner

Carrie-Ann Biondi
Rachel and Andrew Miner
Gene Walters
Zak Stoddard
Daniel Wisehart, Kat Wisehart
Tonya & Andy Fingerhut
David Maltby
Peter de Laat
Ruthie
John Cerasuolo
Melanie Hoffman Katragadda
Vebjørn Koksvik
Rebecca Wrenn Jones
David Crawford and Stephanie Ault
Kevin McAllister
Jordan Johnston
Jim Ashley
Jay Thanner
Landon Walsh
Kathleen McCasland
Murali Valluri
William
Deborah Bitterfield
Harry Lorenzo
Chris McKenzie
Kirk Barbera
Cienna and Hayes Richardson
Roger Treadwell
Derrick Nantz
Ken and Melanie Mitchell
George Barker
Guy and Alisa Adamson
Roman Gelperin
Veronica
Doug and Hannah Krening
Edwin Mizrahi
Sarah Miller
Matt Bateman
Vicki Genther
Jenny Willard
Todd Carignan
Jeanne Lim-Biz
Mike Gustafson
Amber Brown
O'Brien Family
Fawaz Al-Matrouk



Touching
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