

NOTES FOLLOWING AND AFTERNOON WITH CATHERINE KEHOE

By Fanny Howe

"The foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners."

— Julia Kristeva

The Emerald Necklace was as white and solid as marble. It was old snow that had accumulated in shapes determined by plows and shade around Jamaica Pond.

The shade from branches and tree trunks and puddingstone determined where the black ice would form.

I had been invited to visit the studio of someone I didn't know and was driving with her along the Jamaica way. It was an area (Jamaica Plain) that contained terrible memories for me.

And I felt a little sick just seeing the white walls surrounding its secret center, as if it had formed a prison in my absence.

However, Catherine Kehoe was a quiet, considerate person and my dread of the inside/outside world dissipated.

We drove through a couple of town centers and into an area where White Flight took place, leaving room now for people of color, wooden two and three family housing that seem particular to Jamaica Plain, Hyde Park, Roslindale.

She lived on top of a hill with a tiny view of Boston's skyline from her studio at the top of her three-story wooden house. The kitchen was the kind I once had with plain cupboards and a small table for two.

The poet William Corbett had described her studio, her techniques, her objects and her family history in such fine detail, I entered the room as if it were a piece of writing, quiet and safe.

But my deeper mind was still reflecting on the whiteness we had passed through, the snow shapes that collected around the streets as familiar to me as a torso. And I had been for days alone immersed in the subject of color and film.

Way too alone, and in aging, unable to ward off a continual sense of failure, dread.

The colors before me, on the canvases, small ones, were bright and tending towards vermilion whenever possible. They looked back at me familiarly, the way paintings can do, thanks to childhood's first impressions that would make one person (in this case the artist) feel delirium on being confronted with a certain green next to a certain pink and another person blur before the dazzle of dark red, like the red in Things.

On a shelf were family pictures of stern Eastern Europeans whose resemblance to the artist and her self-portraits seemed to go back and sideways through history. Wicked difficult history, centuries of snow and footsteps greasy with ice. Meanness and root vegetables, wars with and for Russians.

Kehoe would be the name of the Irish father who passed through these women somehow without leaving a trace, though the Irish face usually bursts out through oncoming generations.

I saw a movie made in Normandy where all the white people had different bone structures, eyes, and mouths, hair and skeletons. I remember noticing those contradictions in Russia, such a variety of genotypes, and the geography recently explored by Malise Ruthven in the New York Review of Books describing a world made of people with entirely different landscapes in their experience and their views of the world and their faces. Mountain people, pasture people, foreign in nature to each other.

A near-stranger is a powerful presence. I like near-strangers, people with whom there is a conversation of sudden depth and purpose and then they are gone. I would not want to die in the arms of a complete stranger, but with someone I had had one good conversation before saying goodnight. Not a friend, not a child, but a near-stranger.

This was the arrangement up in Kehoe's studio. We were near-strangers and outside was the past and nothing but.

Later I thought about mirrors again because it comes and goes as a preoccupation, the whole left-right question, and the inviolate nature of the image looking back. I first thought of it at Mass when wondering if Christ was seated at God's right hand was it the right hand that lies on the left, when God is looking at us, or was it only right when God's back was turned to us.

I think this worry comes with age and failure to have faith in directions.

Am I going forward or backwards in time, when I walk the street. Mirrors and self-portraits then interested certain religious because of their intense experience with "the inner life" that seems to be a mirror swallowed in our mind's darkness.

The mirror is murky until it is wiped clean. Then, we either see clearly the meaning of our dreams or we see clearly the radiant on-looking heavens scattered for our pleasure in the upper world. The mirror is not the river where Narcissus fell in love with himself. It's the way we receive knowledge, by inversion.

Self-portraits, where the face you cannot see all day is the face of a near-stranger, are as if dredged from underwater, Lethe even, half-decomposed. Who is stranger than oneself? The face does not look back exactly, but looks at.

"The summer's flower is to the summer sweet, though to itself it only live and die."

— Shakespeare, sonnet 94

Painting the flower is not the same as "painting the lily" but there is a relationship. The flower is flesh in life, alert and tremulous, open to reproduction, colored for contact by another kind of being, a bee perhaps.

Its dusty yellow pollen is carried quickly away, depending on the light in the branches, and how many leaves are dropping spores.

The painting of the flower as it looks to the painter is a painting of the painter's knowledge of what knowledge looks like: how dependent on sensual contour it is in that particular mind. Sensual memory of the way it felt to be a flower, to show hope in color. Flowers have no eyes or expression beyond the opening and folding of their petals.

A bowl of vermillion cherries, and then yellow beach balls and odd triggering objects gotten at thrift shops and such. These are fixed by the painter in spatial positions and give no impression of a desire to move. The things in the arrangement for still life are haphazard and uninterested in each other, but they are fated, by the artist, to be together.

Chance often feels like a channel to a knowledge held together by invisible spirits. A knowledge that precedes and follows us, then vanishes. Chance placement, the chance of a sunbeam, the chance of black ice or lace snow forming a face on a screen, a friend who suddenly arises.

The objects have come together by chance. They are strangers to each other. Yellow grapes and a red cocktail umbrella.

Correspondence was the term used by Baudelaire. Here the correspondence is in shape and color. In life we have chaos unless we are supernaturally

alert and are waiting for a coincidental overlap between mind and thing. These will assure us that knowledge surrounds us, all will be well. And so it is the mission of the artist to assure us that all will be well.

The arrangement of the painting, with its contradictory colors that stand together, is the sign of a mind at rest in the random presentation before her. It's there, therefore it's in relationship, and is an eruption of hidden structure.

Her face is the same: a stern self-portrait over and over again. Which is her left and which her right, and why does she look so shattered, so suspecting, when she is she and never a he, but in all cases both. She looks impaled by the fine colors and strokes of it across her face and clothes, a prisoner of beauty and her own making.

– Fanny Howe is a poet and writer, whose most recent book of poems is *Come and See*.