

All My Dresses

My father appears at a wedding dressed in a fine suit. We brought him to Santo Amaro,¹ intending to surprise my mother with his arrival. I am running late, after washing my face and discovering it full of white paint.

Titanium white can function in painting as an editing tool like *Wite-Out* over typed words on a page or brush strokes over a graffitied wall. I am able to find form through those kinds of layered marks. It is about destruction as well as the attempt to fix failures and it tends to produce hybrid marks, which have always interested me. But now a single line on a bare canvas has the power to stop me. This is uncomfortable. It feels unproductive. There are long stretches of nothing.

*We prayed we prayed for rain
I never wanted to see the sun again
All my dresses you made by hand
We left behind on the road²*

It is winter, presidential primaries are kicking up, and the doctor draws lines in my heart. I feel like I'm going to destroy things today. The studio is bitter cold. Anxiety dogs my body. I am looking for composition as a crutch but I don't want to solve or resolve a compositional problem. It's not that painting shouldn't be aesthetic. It's that I don't want to make decisions based on formal aesthetics because we already know what that is. I want to think. I want air but I can't paint air except through gesture. It is somewhere in the fabric.

The subject of American painting has been thought, assumed, or believed to be on the surface of the painting (in its ultimate conclusion), but, in fact, the subject is on the surface of the wall.³

There is a canvas in storage that was given to me by my teacher. It is well made, with heavy stretcher bars, but very large and cumbersome. There is a newborn baby in my care that my son lays down near the storage area. I am weighing whether to paint on the canvas or have him dismantle it for the wood when I realize that I forgot about the baby. I ask him about this. He is calm and tells me we will find it but I am panicked.

It was the second time she drew lines. The first time failed. Isolation is exhausting but, despite periods of grief, I am settling into its rhythm, experiencing new things like the taste of blood oranges from the farmer who delivers weekly fruits and vegetables. Work comes almost as a side issue. Impeachment failed. The primary starts today. I notice friendly hand-written signs in windows as I walk alone in the middle of deserted streets.

¹ A village on the north-east side of Pico island, Azores (Portugal), where both of my parents were born.

² Patti Smith, *Blue Poles*, from the 1997 album, *Peace and Noise*

³ Richard Tuttle, *A Fair Sampling: Collected Writings 1966-2019*, pg. 52.

What causes a man to fear [solitude] is the anticipation of the presence of a witness who awaits him only if and when he goes home. Shakespeare's murderer says: "Every man that means to live well endeavors... to live without it," and success in that comes easy because all he has to do is never start the soundless solitary dialogue we call 'thinking,' never go home and examine things. This is not a matter of wickedness or goodness, as it is not a matter of intelligence or stupidity. A person who does not know that silent intercourse... will not mind contradicting himself...⁴

I am sitting on a hospital window seat reading Patti Smith's *Year of the Monkey* and watching the waning light over Piedmont Avenue. An ancient neon sign offers flashing messages: Doubt is not a barrier to painting. Doubt is the path. What matters is nothing. Read more poetry.

*If you came this way,
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,
At any time or at any season,
It would always be the same: you would have to put off
Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel⁵*

On September 9 the sun disappears. Wheels spin. Time passes. I do nothing. Painting begins to approach life. The other day I made one meaningful mark and that was enough. Everything else that day was habit – the mindless habit of producing something. Three new suburban houses on the next street have sunk into the ground after a land mine exploded. The whole block is being rebuilt. We have a new president and vice-president.

Marlene Simas Angeja, 2021

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, p. 190.

⁵ TS Eliot, "Little Gidding," in *Four Quartets*.