

It was early in the day; the gallery was nearly empty when she went in, the sun through the window dazzling. There was one other person in the main room, an older woman, walking slowly between the paintings, sometimes going back to look again. Claire just wanted the quiet. The main piece of the exhibition was huge, a clashing, tangled jumble of pinks and reds, violent against the white wall. She sat in front of it on a cushioned bench.

She looked at it. She *watched* it. It had seemed ugly at first, the gleam of the paint, the inarticulacy of the shapes. Red and pink like raw meat. As time passed though, it started to soften, the initial harshness giving way to lushness. How soft and pretty the pink was, how velvety. How beautiful the strong sloping lines, the way the gleaming shapes seemed about to burst. The jewel-like reds. Empty your mind, just watch, watch this painting that is opening now, opening slowly like an entrance to another world.

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What would she do? The choice was upon her, hovering at the edges of her mind, a darkening cloud, a buzzing. *Tz, tz, tz*. Think of your body, melting against the bench, spilling over it like these shapes, these bright, melting shapes. A couple entered the room, hand in hand. They walked quickly from painting to painting, only slowing when they stopped to kiss, to speak to each other with their faces close together. What did it feel like? She couldn't remember. They were smiling at each other, not looking at the art. She couldn't remember. The pink melting shapes. How long it had been.

She loved the gallery, the quality of the air. His studio was better – she missed it there, the hush, chemical smell, incense. We take too many breaks, she said. He smoked; she didn't. She didn't like that he smoked, didn't like the smell, didn't like the way he looked when he did it. *If you don't make the choice, it will be made for you*. When she saw the painting he had done of her she had to look away. Look, he said, I made you look beautiful, just like you are. It wasn't that, it

was that she hadn't seen herself through someone else's eyes before. Is that me? Is that really me? He stood behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. Warm, the scent of acrylic and, underneath, there he was. She looked.

The couple passed into the next room, she got up and followed a little behind them. In the next room, the colours cooled – greens, dusty browns, one canvas just a washed out grey. That one, maybe; she needed more quiet, more space. He was so far away; her painting was so far away. In this city, everything held her tightly. How could she leave like this, into the blue unknown. The wild blue. *A sea-change, something rich and strange.* The grey made her feel nothing at all. Her mind like paper, blank and starched. She needed blue, she needed violet, she needed them bleeding into one another. She walked through the room, and up the staircase where she found what she was looking for, in the darkened room a film playing, two little girls playing in a garden, running through the sprinklers, eating popsicles, laughing, but everything saturated in a dark blue hue. There was the woman from before, sitting alone in the back, her jaw slackening, eyes beginning to close, head tilting back. Claire sat at the other corner of the room. How cool and dark it was, not like the white rooms below, the sun melting those great big paintings. The laughter of the girls played through the speaker, the splash of water, rustle of the grass, looping, looping. Small, dark space. The other woman started awake, looking around wildly for a moment before making eye contact with Claire. Then, she smiled, laughed a little, and Claire smiled back at her. She got up, left the room, left Claire alone. This little dark space, just for her. Too cold though; her skin raised in gooseflesh.

The choice was between expansion or contraction. Opening your life to someone else, to a new reality, new possibilities that she could not yet imagine. Becoming made new. The wild blue. The laughter of the girls began to grate on her. She got up, moved into the next room, which had no people in it. She had always liked the containment of being on her own. The neatly defined borders. This room was filled with sculptures made of jagged wire, metal, bits of mirrored glass. Some hung from the ceiling, rusted birds of prey. She walked among them. There was very little space; she moved slowly, afraid her clothes would catch, her skin, even. A serrated maze. On the

wall: “Do Not Touch/Proceed With Caution”. On the other wall: “WILD BIRDS”. Wild, sharp things. The light reflected off the glass, the effect sinister. They needed some softness. His hands on her shoulders, warm. Her gaze back at her in the painting, liquid, and the way he painted her lips parted, as if she were about to speak. Once she looked she couldn’t look away, she wanted to reach out and touch the canvas. It seemed that it moved, that it had a heartbeat. Do I really look like that? The colours of her eyes, her skin, her hair. And his hands on her shoulders, his head tilting downwards, his breath against her skin, so little space between their bodies. There I am.

She caught her eye in one of the mirrors and stopped. Oh, it was easy in the end. The answer was right there. She could have laughed out loud. Light, she walked back down the stairs and out of the gallery, into the air that was being warmed by the sun, and the lane bordered by trees, their spring buds just beginning to come.