

THE TOKYO MARATHON & OTHER PAINTINGS



By Henry Felsman

The Tokyo Marathon
& Other Paintings

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Self-Portrait at 27

I am looking straight at the viewer. Nothing to hide, I am telling you. Look at my face; it's not angled slightly to the side, like it's a yearbook photo, or a classic Medieval portrait i.e. Albrecht Durer's *Self-Portrait at 26*, but instead is aimed directly at you, more like a passport photo, or Albrecht Durer's slightly later work *Self-Portrait at Twenty-Eight*, or more precisely, a portrait that not only follows in the tradition of Durer's *Self-Portrait at Twenty-Eight*, but just as demonstrably, departs (as Durer himself did) from the tradition of Durer's *Self-Portrait at 26*. Because this is *Self-Portrait at 27*, you're looking at now. And at 27, like the great self-portrait artist at 28 before me, I'm looking ahead, straight at you, to the future.

I am not wearing my glasses that (for those of you who know me) you know I sometimes wear. This is my only self-portrait, my first and possibly my last, so the stakes are enormously high; I can't risk wearing glasses. If a person views a portrait of a man with glasses, the first detail that person absorbs are the glasses, out come all the unconscious associations that glasses evoke, and from then on, the glasses become inseparable from the identity of the subject. For this is not simply a man, the viewer can't help but think, but a more specific man: a man with glasses. All other details, little hairs, wrinkles or scars in his face, seem to diminish in importance, his whole identity reduced to his sex and single accessory. And I can't have that. Should this portrait be my lasting image in history, I would like my face to be remembered not as the face of a man with glasses, not as a face you can already picture upon reading "man with glasses," but as the face of a man with many features.

So here I am: neither shaven nor bearded, but stubbled. About five days' worth of stubble. Stubbled mustache, stubbled beard, and stubble on my neck that thins out around my throat. My hair is long, not long like Albrecht Durer's lion's mane in *Self-Portrait At 28*, (not yet), but long like I could be on the cover of The Beatles' *Rubber Soul*, or to make a reference more relevant to my own generation, long like Harry Potter's hair in *The Goblet of Fire* movie, or to make a reference more relevant to me, as I've never seen *The Goblet of Fire*, only read it, and this is, after all, a self-portrait, then I should say that it's actually like Stephen Malkmus's hair on the cover of his debut solo album, the self-titled *Stephen Malkmus*.

I am smiling slightly, not enough to show my teeth, and certainly not enough to show my only dimple, but enough to show that I am pleased to be here, pleased to sit as the subject of a portrait, anybody's portrait, even a self-portrait.

It doesn't look like I chose my clothes carefully. True to character, I'm dressed more for basketball than anything else: white t-shirt with red writing on it, indecipherable and evoking blood stains, sleeves torn off at the shoulders revealing a lifelong farmer's tan.

My eyes are blue, my left eye a little bloodshot. At least more so than my right.

A brown birthmark on the right side of my neck. Some would say a mole. I say birthmark.

And on the white wall behind me, over my right shoulder, is a print of Albrecht Durer's *Self-Portrait at 26*. Over my left shoulder is a print of Albrecht Durer's *Self-Portrait at Twenty-Eight*.

And on my left shoulder, not so subtly, painted in a different style (which style this is, the artist may decide) than everything else, is the slim hand of a woman, who is a step behind me and off page, to the right (my left). In real life, it's no one's hand, no one yet, or not hers anymore, but I can put it in here because this is a painting, after all, not a photograph.

The Tokyo Marathon

Enormous painting. Flow of marathon runners facing us, passing us, from off-page middle right to bottom left. Many, many colors, colorful characters. Beautiful colors, in unexpected places. A parade of individuals. Tags over their stomachs identifying them as runners no different really from automobile license plates, rectangular and blue, a series of six or so English letters and Western numerals attached to their running shirts, soccer jerseys, Pikachu costumes, (each individual runner in the foreground is depicted in great detail), black shirt of a man wearing a yellow afro-wig that juts out from each side of his baseball cap like huge yellow earmuffs, who has strewn a teddy bear (*a teddy bear!*) into his shirt just below the license plate; next is a man in a hot pink wig in the straight-hair-and-bangs style, something an exotic dancer would wear, (or a ten-year-old girl on Halloween), complete with matching short pink skirt that puffs out erratically like a cheap, costume ballet dress, (who you know is a man because the mustache and goatee look real). A woman wearing a poncho over a tracksuit, normal enough, but with purple underwear over her track pants, like her superhero alter-ego, or a popular Manga character you don't recognize, and a blue baseball hat, and big red ski gloves. And a cardboard box, big as a refrigerator, two feet sticking out the bottom of it, holding it up, trudging it along...

The eye moves across the canvas, towards the middle right. The individuals get smaller and smaller, and depicted in less and less detail, gradually blurring into one mass of runners in the distance, heading towards us. Shoes, hats, accessories of every color, every shade. Blurring.

In the distance yes, but close enough already, at this moment, so as to close that distance within seconds. Because these are marathon runners, we're watching, remember that; every second brings a brand new painting.

Buzz Lightyear. Spiderman in a poncho. A penguin waddling past. A man in a baseball uniform wearing foam fingers (and a poncho). A stuffed turtle on the head of an old woman in a wheelchair, Princess Peach pushing her, gaining on the penguin.

In the background, behind the runners closest to us, across the street, gray buildings of different shades (one almost green, one almost brown, one a shade in between) rise up and off the page. Near the middle of the canvas, the row of buildings end, and we see the gray sky. From the sky, we see an overpass below, under which the mass of runners enters the page. Beyond the overpass is the next block of buildings, the first of which is a light gray building whose side we see spotted with little black squares that are most certainly windows, but could also be televisions, or microwaves.

Everything is painted realistically; the Tokyo marathon is really like this.

Except for one little surrealistic detail. Between the ponchos and the gray sky, and the absence of shadow amongst the runners, we can deduce what kind of day it is. Dull and drizzly. But in the top right, above the last building, where the sun might be on a brighter day, the artist has painted sunglasses. No sun wearing them, nothing like that. Just sunglasses floating in the gray, Japanese sky. Silver-rimmed, star-shaped, and tinted pink. Very strange and powerful, by itself, but in such an enormous painting of such diversity, such colorful characters, it almost gets lost.

The Third Bird

The painting is two, as in a split-screen.

On the left, we have the view from the railroad tracks of a train that is about to trample us, the split-second before we die. The face of the locomotive takes up more than half the left painting; its front two windows look like the giant eyes of an insect, right before it eats you. Headlights like ears, or little sensors, whatever protrudes from insects. Shark teeth for pilot bars. Otherwise, it's a beautiful day. Big fat sun rays coming from the top right, off page. Grass and green weeds protruding upwards from between the five to ten feet of tracks that lie between us and our death. Flimsy tree branches that hang over the tracks react to the train rushing by.

And witnesses — two birds present, perched to the left of the train about to kill us. A fence lines the tracks, and there are trees beyond the fence, and on those trees, there are branches, birds... They could be two crows. They could be two sparrows, or a sparrow and a pigeon, or an eagle and a condor — ultimately, it's up to the artist to decide. But there are two of them. One of them is looking at us, watching what is about to happen. And the other one, perched right beside the first, is looking away. Looking away... as if looking to see if anyone else is seeing this, a third witness, a third bird. Or maybe, it's not looking for anybody. Maybe it just knows what's going to happen, it knows it's going to be ugly, and it can't bear to look.

That's the image on the left.

The image painted on the right is an overhead shot of a train passing, presumably the same train. The train passes horizontally and covers the

length of the entire second image, effectively splitting this second image into two more. Top and bottom. Trees on both sides. Almost symmetrical, as if the crosscutting train were a mirror — or rather, the astute viewer recognizes, a Mira (the red plastic reflection tool you used in geometry class, remember? Your life flashes before your eyes, before the perched birds' eyes, and yes you do remember).

The most glaring consequence of this — of the train filling the tracks from end to end — is of course that we don't see whatever it was on the tracks in the first image on the left, whatever was about to be hit. Was it a bird? Was it us? Was it anything? The bird in the image on the left — it's looking at us, or it's looking at whatever it is that is about to be hit. So something had to be hit. That's what the first painting suggests is about to happen. But now that it's been hit, we can't see what it is. We can't see what had been teased. It's a major disappointment. And yet, at the same time, isn't it a relief? We've been spared the horror of witnessing our violent death. We feel deprived, but really, we've been spared.

And so we blindly go. Like scavengers, never satisfied, we hungrily scavenge on. For truth. For evidence. For changes. A split second has elapsed between the two images, it seems to us, but what evidence of this slight passage of time is here for us to see? What evidence, even, that the trains in each image are the same? Verify our death. Verify the timeline. Scavenge the woods in the "After" painting for our witnesses. There: the two birds in the first image also appear in the image on the right. We feel something like relief. They are perched in presumably the same position on the tree as before. Only now, from this vantage point, this bird's eye view, they are depicted more like little dots in the tree. And (we feel a piercing jolt in our gut, a final reminder that the scavenger's relief is always temporary) there are three of them. Three little dots.

Hyuna's Self-Portrait

Square canvas. Bust of a young Korean woman looking straight at you. Big, dark, semicircular eyes. Flat at the bottom, round at the top. Almost black.

Pink, sealed lips. Almost smiling. Orange-black hair, up in a bun, and bangs that fall to her eyebrows, framing her pale, smooth face. Relaxed everything. Bare shoulders. Shoulders and bottom half of head supported by a white pillow. A loose, low cut black tank top, and a single, loose beige bra strap, over her bare right shoulder. A light golden chain around her neck.

The painting cuts off right above where the tops of her breasts would otherwise begin. The viewer's eyes are constantly drawn back to the woman's eyes in the center of the canvas. Look at me, she says. Look me in the eye. Tell me you want more.

Her left shoulder is slightly opened. We see her arm disappear off the page, and then her left hand reappear at the top right of the canvas. Fingers on the top of her head, not quite posing, more so fixing her hair. Hand a bit blurry, implying movement. Right shoulder closed. The right hand does not reappear. Why? Is she touching herself? No, the astute viewer understands. (Though to be fair it's easy to think this, because everything about her is lovely and sensual and we want it to be true). The right hand disappears below because the right hand is taking the photograph. The selfie. Yes, this painting, *Hyuna's Self-Portrait*, is a painting of this subject's selfie. Hyuna's selfie.

Behind the white pillow, ruffled by the weight of her head, is a

sturdier, darker pillow. Purple-gray. And behind that purple-gray pillow, an off-white wall. So behind the Korean woman sitting up in bed, there's no detail that tells us anything of note. Again, the eyes are drawn back to hers.

Her gaze is at once inviting and threatening.

Look at me, it says. Look me in the eye. And tell me you want more.

And we do. There's more than just this. Why did she take this selfie? That's the first question. Who is it for? Too revealing to put on social media. Personal use? What would be the point of that? That leaves one answer: she took it for an individual. A lover. She took it to entice, or tease, a lover. But also in a very safe way. Revealing nothing of her body below the neck and shoulders, in the frame. Telling whoever she's sending the photo: "So far, I like you exactly this much."

I don't trust you, but I'm not pushing you away, either.

I'm pulling you in, at my speed. You see, I'm holding the ropes.

So there's her motivation. But what about the artist's? Why depict this in a painting? Well, whatever the artist's intent is, whatever hidden meanings, or personal meanings, may lay behind it, *Hyuna's Self-Portrait* is, at the end of the day, a painting of a beautiful woman. And that makes it a beautiful painting.

Maybe that's enough.

Crucifixes Before Telephone Poles

Three crucifixes stand in the foreground at a viewpoint, in front of a short concrete wall less than half the crucifixes' height, but tall enough to keep a child from tripping and accidentally falling over the edge. Behind the wall, we see the city, a sea of towers and telephone poles. And beyond the city, we have a mountain range that stretches the entire length of the canvas.

The peak of the mountain, at all points, all across the canvas, is white: covered in snow. It looks like a cloud, elongated, stretched from one side of the canvas to the other. It competes with the line at which the city meets the mountains, a second horizon, if not the first. Its whiteness draws the eye as a sharp contrast between the gray distant mountain and the deep blue, cloudless sky. The eye then follows this line across the canvas, from right to left, over the city, to the crucifixes on the ledge.

The three crucifixes are all colorful and different. Painted Jesus appears in three different outfits: beige loincloth; purple loincloth; blue robe. His arms are depicted in three different positions: nailed to the cross; down at his sides; palms up, elbows bent, as if checking for rain. And the decor behind him depicts different symbols: blood and skulls; the sea and the fiery sky; abstract geometric patterns that evoke an uncertain spiritual energy. Three different crucifixes, and the implications of this are clear: there are an infinite number of ways to depict this historic event. Infinite interpretations. Three implies infinity.

Beyond the wall, telephone poles stand out amidst the sea of towers. They shouldn't, we know that no telephone pole is taller than a tower, but

they do. So we look closer, and we realize that the telephone poles are actually in front of the sea of towers. Perhaps they are right at the base of the mountain from which we are looking out (opposite the majestic snow-capped mountain in the distance). Their design is simple and familiar; they are each a cross. A tall wooden beam, with a shorter, horizontal beam towards the top.

Telephone poles bearing the design of the crucifix.

Among the towers in the great expanse below, a few stand out as taller than others. Each resembling a crucifix, or telephone pole, without arms. But each faded, gray, very much a part of the background. The telephone poles are in much greater detail.

An art critic who cuts no corners might consider the children's game Telephone. You know the game. A row or circle of children, the first child thinks of a word and whispers it to the next child. The next child whispers the word he's heard to the next child, and so on down the line, until the last child, who says the word, except that by now, that word has changed, been mutated as it had been passed along, from child to child. "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11, English Standard Version) becomes "Give us today the food we need." (New International Version). Crucifixes become telephone poles, become pillars that raise up and hold together the fabric of our modern world.

And but, Christ almighty, those mountains! Those beautiful mountains! Without those mountains, would we even be looking in this direction right now? No. Without those mountains, this is just another city, and these are just your average crosses.

Pigeons Eating KFC

A brown, paper KFC takeout bag leans against a curb. It's daytime. The logo on the side of the bag facing us is torn in many places. It's the torn face of Colonel Sanders, and if it weren't torn, it would cover the whole face of the bag. Two pigeons inspect the contents of the bag. One pigeon stands on the curb, over the torn-open bag, facing us, head bowed in our direction, into the bag. Without the bag, it would look like the pigeon is bowing at us. This is the artist's intent. It's what everyone thinks when they look at this painting — that the pigeon is bowing at them. Thanking you for the KFC.

The other pigeon stands in the street, to the left of the bag, facing the bag. We follow his fat body's profile down to his bowed head, to his beak, to the fried chicken leg he's pecking at in the street, just in front of the base of the bag.

Also leaning against the curb, to the left of the pigeon, is other assorted litter: a crushed red-and-white paper cup (that if we look closely can tell is a KFC cup), a paper airplane made out of a napkin (that might be a KFC napkin), a dirty pink sock (that could be a faded red sock, and could be older than any pigeon or chicken that has ever lived), and of course cigarette butts and broken glass. To the right of the bag is a grated sewer. There is also what appears to be writing engraved into the curb, too small to read.

Behind the pigeon bowing to us, we see the back half of a bike, chained to a street tree, and missing its back tire. Behind the bike frame, we see another bird, a smaller bird, a speckled sparrow, facing us and looking down (at something indistinguishable on the sidewalk), but without giving

us the impression that it is bowing at us. The sidewalk is cement, with tufts of weeds and clovers growing out of the cracks, and a few green leaves strewn about. We presume these leaves are from the tree to which the bike frame is chained. None of the clovers are four leaf clovers.

There is a basement window where the sidewalk meets the building, no other windows. Nothing is reflected clearly in the window. The building is brick and takes up half the picture. The street is the bottom quarter, the sidewalk is the next quarter up, and the brick is the upper half. There is graffiti on the brick that appears mostly meaningless at first glance, like the cigarette butts and broken glass, except for a large depiction, to where the eye is led by the surrounding colors and shapes, of Colonel Sanders (looking almost Lincoln-like, with his beard and KFC top-hat) on a see-saw, and a pirate on the see-saw's opposite side, classically caricatured with eye-patch, bandana, hook, etc. A chicken on the pirate's shoulder, wings raised, head forwards, eyes angry, and coming out of its open, angry beak: fire.

And this reminds you of the KFC, the titular scene in the foreground. The pigeon bowing to you is really just eating the greasy fried chicken, you tell yourself again. His beak disappears behind the torn brown paper, into the dark contents of the bag. What's inside? A wing? His friend, the fat pigeon in the street, is eating the golden leg without a trace of recognition. Would it recognize a wing?

The astute viewer takes a second look at the writing engraved in the curb. Writing is not commonly engraved in curbs, you think. Sidewalks, maybe, but not so much in curbs. This must be the artist's signature.

Heaven as a Room

A small round table pushed up against the window. Sunlight beaming in. Cheap chairs on either side. The woman is on the left, down to her underwear, no top, sitting on the chair with her feet up on the edge of the chair, her knees up in front of her like twin monuments, like arches of triumph, spread out enough so that, between them, we see clearly her left breast. Her right breast is closest to us, on the outside of her right knee. Her left hand holds her knees up on the chair, and her right hand holds a smoldering cigarette a finger's length (a cigarette's length) above a glass ashtray. She is smiling widely at the man across the table. Her teeth show. She could be laughing, or in love.

The man is sitting in the other chair, leaning against the wall on the other side of the table, facing us. His left arm rests on the back of the chair. He is naked but for his boxers, his legs extended, knees straight, heels on the hardwood floor, toes angled up slightly, naturally. He is skinny and hairy. He looks to be laughing, eyes cast down and to his left (our right), away from the table and the woman's gaze. His right hand is on the table, making a fist around a green bottle of beer. A single glass of water sits on the table, halfway between our lovers, just to the right (our right) of the ashtray. The floor in the foreground is strewn with various articles of clothing, including a red pea coat, a black puffa jacket, a gray scarf, and a white wool cap.

To the right of the man is a desk. On the desk, there is an open laptop. There are papers stacked jaggedly, as if hastily, or rather, as if accrued over time without any urgent need for order, in fact with the opposite of haste. A coffee mug. Two plates stacked on top of each other. A bottle of Evan

Williams. A red plastic cup. Under the desk, there are a few dust-stained papers, pushed back against the wall, as if with a foot, or blown by a breeze through the window, or induced by human movement from within the room. A highlighter. One half of a broken pencil. Cheap sunglasses with green plastic temples and one lens popped out of it and this lens nowhere to be found, not by us.

To the left of the woman is the bed. An oddly shaped mass of messy, dark blue sheets. A queen size box spring supporting a twin size mattress. White light shining onto it through the window in patches like constellations in the night sky. No pillows.

Boy at Trailhead

A little boy stands with his back to us at the water's edge, facing a path of stepping stones, such that his next step would be on the first stone. He is looking back, over his shoulder, all alone in the picture. But the picture is not all that wide; he could be looking at his parents, off the page. And they could be just a few feet away. We don't know.

But we assume so. We can't help it. What else could he be looking at?

The water is a narrow creek. If we split the canvas in thirds each way, a three by three array of nine rectangles, the creek begins at the bottom left corner of the middle rectangle and runs diagonally upwards and to the right, disappearing at the top right corner of that same middle rectangle, under tree branches that extend over the creek on either side. The stones run down the creek, one after the other, like teeth. Or piano keys. Dominoes. A shark-tooth necklace laid out flat and straight. All gray and roughly rectangular, very obviously man-made. The creek itself might also be man-made. There is grass and a few small plants on either side, and then the line of trees begins, and the creek disappears into it. The leaves on the left are light green and forest green. The leaves coming from the right side of the creek are orange, yellow, brown. The sky above is a light bluish gray.

The boy is Asian: short black hair. He's wearing a light blue down vest, hooded with the hood down. A long white sleeve coming out the left side of his vest. (He's turned slightly to the left, looking over his left shoulder, such that we do not see his right sleeve). Left fist clenched by his side. We wonder what he's thinking. Does he want his parents to watch him? Or follow him? Carry him across? Or is he looking back for the opposite reason, to make sure he isn't being watched?

This stepping stone path that continues into the woods, further than we can see, is, needless to say, not the type of walking path that you see every day. There's no real element of danger; if you take a wrong step, into the creek, maybe your shoe gets wet. That's it. It's that shallow. But still, one must think before he walks down it. Even adults. To walk one foot, one step, per stone? Right. Left. Right. Left. Right. Left. Or to walk one, two feet per stone? Right and left. Right and left. Right and left. One must focus. One must always watch their step. Even adults. And should you encounter another person on the path, walking in your direction, how will you react? How will you share the path? A mild challenge, even for adults.

But for the little boy, this could be his greatest challenge yet.

Structure in the Sea

Some distance — a hundred feet, say — from the rocks we are on, a mysterious structure protrudes out of the water. Far, but close enough to see in detail, if we look closely, which paintings invite us to do. A structure in two sections, about the height of a two story building. The bottom half that comes out of the water is a rectangular block. Some 15 x 20 x 15 feet high. Concrete. Black where the block is damp: from the water's surface, up to the many heights of passing waves. The rest, an algae green gray.

And sunbathing on the block are some 15-20 sea lions.

The upper half of the structure is made up of concrete beams raised vertically, spaced out incrementally along the perimeter of the block's surface, and capped up high by a horizontal rectangle of four beams, (running parallel to the water's surface, parallel to surface of the block). In a phrase, the whole structure looks like a block with a cage on top. Or the Lincoln Memorial, should we neglect it for centuries. Or the ruins of the Parthenon — the beams like columns, the block like the flat-topped hill that rises from the sea level city of Athens.

And perched atop the columns, along the horizontal beams of the structure's "roof," some 50 birds.

A dense pack of sea lions, and a dense pack of birds, resting peacefully on this mysterious, mostly concrete structure.

The viewer naturally wonders what this structure is. What it once was. Perhaps it once supported a pier. But what happened to that pier? What did that pier look like, or what did whatever was there before look like? You cannot tell just by looking at this picture. Just as, if today, you were to

visit the ruins of the Temple of Zeus, you could not tell what it once looked like there just by looking at it. Too many clues have been cleared away. You would need to be told, shown an artist's interpretation, visit the Acropolis Museum.

You wonder what the sea lions think. Do they realize this "island" is the ruins of something man-made? Do they care? What do they think of man, who hunts them for their fur, and yet who inadvertently creates for them the perfect oasis of land in the middle of the sea?

The birds — seagulls, Peruvian pelicans, and more — that aren't perched atop the structure, glide around it. Up and down, round and round. Look for fish. Wet your head. Caw-caw your friends. Fly back and rest at any time.

A ship far off in the distance, behind the structure, near the far right side of the canvas. From the left side, the coastline extends, and then terminates halfway across. A ship along the coast that says SOCIBER. Another ship that says MSC. Rainbow houses on the hillside.

What a paradise for birds, this port city of Valparaiso!

But how about for these sea lions, in this concrete temple, in this rare, man-made structure that they may call their own? Does paradise exist for them? Or is this the closest they'll ever get?

Anyway, to hell with existential questions. That block's pretty high — how'd they all get up there?

My Campfire

The white flame nearly reaches the top of the canvas. White, traced out in yellow, and that yellow, traced out in orange. Faces around the campfire, and more, come to life in the night.

To the left of the flame, a young man strums a guitar. His head is turned away from the fire. Eyes squinting. Not necessarily because he squints his eyes when he plays, and/or sings (we can't verify he's singing, of course; no sound waves are painted as coming from his mouth, or anything like that), but because he, like everyone else, squints his eyes in the face of smoke. To the right of the flame, another young man sits, staring into the fire. Not squinting; he's facing less smoke. Leaning forwards, towards the fire. Elbows on his knees, hands clasped together, dangling a bottle by its neck.

The flame illuminates the fire pit, a short stone wall. A perfect circle, just about. Tin foil reflecting the orange light. Little balls of tin foil. To the left of the guitar player, a third man stands, feet squared to the fire. His head is turned to his left, away from us, away from the fire. His left arm shields his face, and from that same arm, in his hand, he holds a bottle of Old Grand-Dad, its label nice and clear. His right hand holds a stick to the flames.

It's unclear what he's doing with the stick. The fire is doing well, very well, without whatever it is he intends to do. No more sticks are needed. No logs need be repositioned. Maybe he's going to check on the tin foil, on the potatoes presumably inside them. Or maybe his standing is preemptive. He's drunk and anxious to do something. He's standing with the

expectation that poking the fire will soon be useful.

In any case, he's an amateur. They all are. Their fire is big, but at building and maintaining fires, all these guys are clearly amateurs. Their fire is *too* big! Think about it. They're just cooking potatoes, not burning a man at stake. They're trying to chill, to drink whiskey and listen to the crackling of the fire mingle with the strumming of the guitar. But at this rate, they'll burn through all their wood before the second bottle (implicit, off page) is opened. They don't know what they're doing. But it could be worse — their fire could be too small. Too weak to admire. Yes, it could be worse; their effort is commendable, actually, certainly commendable, and their fire is certainly admirable. Because these are men from the 21st century, men from contemporary Western civilization, men raised on electricity and processed foods, television and sugar, men who drive automatics, who jerk off more than any other generation of men did ever — and here they are, my friends, sitting around a fire. Joining the generations of men that have sat around campfires. That have sung to the fire, whiskey on their tongues, though few whiskeys as consistent as Old Grand-Dad. Smoke in their eyes. Or not in their eyes. A skyscraper of a construction faltering in the flames it helped create.

Rectangles in Nature

It's a portrait of a goat, and as we are when we look at the Mona Lisa, or at any portrait done right, we are drawn to the subject's eyes. And if you know anything about goats, you know that their pupils are rectangles. If not, well, you see that now.

He's staring at you, the goat is, you think. But you can't be sure; you've never focused on a goat's eyes for so long. In fact, they've already stopped looking like eyes to you, the way your nose will stop looking like a natural part of your face if you stare at it long enough in a mirror. With those rectangular eyes, and the ability to horizontally scan its surroundings without the slightest turn of the head, this goat you're staring at could be looking seemingly anywhere. It's disconcerting. You look away.

But there's not much else to look at. Behind the goat, there are a few background details, a meadow and a barn, and a few more goats in the meadow, mouths full of grass, and some trees, clouds in the sky, but you're not ready to turn your attention to them just yet. You think of the painting's title, *Rectangles in Nature*, and you find yourself dwelling on the eyes you're staring at more so than you would in another portrait. For the goat is not the subject; the rectangular eyes are. The rectangles in nature. And in the painting, the *only* rectangles in nature; the barn is man-made, its door and windows are man-made, its chimney is man-made, the trees are cylindrical, its branches cylindrical, its leaves round and flat with tips at acute angles, the clouds appear round, and the sky is the inside of a sphere. There are no other rectangles in nature, in this painting, other than the pupils of the goat.

And from this, we wonder what if any other natural rectangles exist, not just within the frame of this painting, but in all of nature, all the universe. If we can think of any at all, we will find that there are very few examples: certain volcanic rock formations, under special conditions; plant cell walls, if we ignore the rounded corners; the head of a hammerhead shark, if we detach it from its body. Long story short, not too many. And this makes the eyes of the goat truly unique.

Oh, and lastly, though it almost goes without saying: the painting, and the frame of the painting, are both rectangles.

Ukulele in the Snow

A woman kneels in the snow before a broken ukulele. She is crying. The ukulele is lying face up. The hollow body has a long crack in it that runs from the sound hole to a depression further down that could have been caused by something like a fist, or a knee. The neck has been severed from the body and lies in the snow at a ninety-degree angle from it. Only the strings keep the neck and body together. And only two strings. The other two strings have snapped, and splay wildly from the head.

The kneeling woman is wearing a long dark coat that ruffles where it meets the snow. She's sitting on her boots, which we can't see, but can assume are boots. At the same time, her weight is slightly shifted forwards, towards the ukulele. Her two hands are both submerged into the snow on either side of her. It seems like she's leaning on her fists, and we imagine this is so, because if she were leaning on her open palms, then she would have to be leaning further. But she's not really leaning at all, is she? Her back is pretty straight. She's more... melting.

Her crying also lends credence to the idea that her hands are in fists. She is not looking directly at the ukulele. Rather, she is looking a bit to her left, a bit more towards us, as if looking for someone to blame, or someone to tell her that what she's experiencing is not real — just a dream, joke, or hallucination. In that stage of grief called anger, where you reject reality, where you'd rather be told you're going crazy than believe your eyes. This woman found a broken ukulele in the snow, and it has shaken her world. She pounds it with her fists, gets nowhere, and now she's just clenching

them, looking for something else, some other reality to latch on to...

The viewer who tries to make sense of the painting asks two questions. The most obvious one is what the ukulele is doing in the snow. Ukuleles are summer instruments. Hawaiian. A subconscious relative of hookah on the Quad, of youth hostels in Buenos Aires. The other question is why the woman is crying. And the two questions, the viewer who thinks about it long enough will realize, are inextricably linked. If we answer what the broken ukulele is doing in the snow, we can figure out why the woman is crying. And vice versa. But one path, we see, is far clearer than the other — that which starts with the crying woman. Because we've seen a woman cry before. We have a lifetime's worth of clues for why a woman might cry. For a ukulele in the snow, we have only the clues in this painting. Only this woman.

We start with the basics. She looks middle-aged. Mother-aged. She's a daughter herself, yes, possibly someone's sister, too. Sure, yes. But would her elderly mother or father, or her middle-aged sibling, play the ukulele? No. Not very likely. Only a child, a teenager, or a young adult who is young enough to be the woman's child, would play the ukulele. So, as the painting now quite clearly suggests, the ukulele belongs to a child. The woman's child, or a child the woman knows. But likely her own child.

We move on. Having established this important new premise, we can now aim for a new conclusion. What happened to her child? What does the broken ukulele in the snow tell us about what brought his mother to her knees, what horrible thing could have happened to her child? Was he kidnapped, beaten, did he freeze to death, what? Did he use the ukulele in a sword fight, as a weapon in a snowball fight, and now he's in danger, or dead already, or someone else is dead, he killed someone, killed them with the ukulele...

We don't know.

We only know what the mother knows. And clearly she has no idea.

Schoolchildren in Space

The side of a fountain in the foreground to the left. We are gazing out past it, across an empty brick plaza around the fountain, to a grassy field. At this moment, the moment the painting depicts, a class of 25-30 schoolchildren play on the grass. They are 3rd or 4th graders. Maybe 5th or 6th. Maybe a mix. They are all African-American, and they are all wearing white polo shirts and khaki pants, their school uniform.

We see the whole field, where it begins and ends on all four sides. It's not very big, and there's nothing besides flat grass and a few trees on the outside looking in. The boys appear to be playing football — there are about fifteen boys, and one football, and they are all either watching the ball that is in the air, or they are running towards it with their heads down. (Football, American football: America). The girls sit on the side, under the trees, in the shade. One teacher, standing with a clipboard, stands all the way to the left, looking over the girls' heads, watching the boys. There's no one else on the field.

Now, about the four sides. The road to the right of it has more lanes than we can see, as it is cut off at the top right corner of the canvas. The road to the left is a four-lane, one-way road, on which we see the back of a truck, and from which a cab is also in the process of turning onto the road behind the field. Above this road behind the field is an overpass. Behind the overpass, a tall building that rises off the canvas.

The brick ground from which we view the scene is the fourth side.

We see that this is a small field surrounded by wide roads that heavily

favor automobiles. (A gifted artist would create the impression that such a road also exists behind us, completely enclosing the field). Schoolchildren have been brought here to play, because this field, existing only within its ring of orbiting automobiles, is often empty. Often available. When the children leave, it will be empty again. Available again. The children will not return here after school, for the roads are not safe to cross. Pedestrians won't walk across it leisurely, as a shortcut to get from one place to the other, for this is not an area of the city that pedestrians normally, casually stroll through. And so people who like to people watch won't stop to sit here. Nor will those looking for a quiet, remote place to sit and read a book — it's too noisy here, there's too many cars.

Thus it occupies a strange space in the community, this urban field. Here is a place both good and bad — useful from 3 to 5 pm on lovely afternoons, useless otherwise. Though always, the people all agree, aesthetically pleasing.

Manga Players

Manga posters cover two walls that converge. Colorful, Japanese characters. Anime schoolgirls with high skirts and pink hair, ninjas with big watches, etc. No windows.

Two tables along (and perpendicular to) the back wall. One near the corner. Four seated on each side. Colorful manga cards spread all over the table. Cards in stacks. Cards in play. An identical, second table. Four seated on each side, here as well. Not too much room between the tables; the four seated at the end table with their backs to the second table, and the four seated at the second table with their backs to the end table — the backs of their chairs touch. A third table is hinted at, off the page. Besides just the cards on the table, the sheer number of players gathered here and the posters on the wall suggest that this is a tournament taking place in a manga store. The absence of windows, that we're in the store's basement.

The manga players all look Japanese, about the age of high schoolers. Most wear dark blue or light blue down jackets. Others wear fleece jackets. So it's cold in here. Lending further credence to our theory that this is the basement. Most are boys. But some are girls. The eye is drawn across the page, and slightly upwards, towards the end of the corner table, where a boy sits at the table squeezed into the corner. He is wearing a maroon fleece, and glasses. He's turned to his left, towards us, smiling at the girl sitting next to him, who is looking away from him, at the cards on the table, also smiling. Across from her is another girl, with her hands over her mouth. Trying not to laugh. Next to the laughing girl, and across from our

smiling boy in the corner, is another girl. So this boy is surrounded by three girls, and smiling. Distracted by girls, and smiling. All other players are boys. A dozen or so. Serious expressions on their faces. Looking at the cards on the table, or the cards in their hands.

But there is one person standing. And there is one adult. And they are one and the same. He is a man in a plaid shirt with round, wire glasses, leaning over the second table from the wall. His right hand on his hip, his left hand on his chin. A slight smile. He's old enough to be the father of the boys he's watching play, but more likely, he's the shopkeeper, or tournament director. The teacher observing his students. The master and his apprentices. A man old enough to have perhaps lived through World War II, when he was their age. And these manga players, playing at war, who will never know real war, or no war like that, as long as they live.

"This is how kids ought to learn," thinks the old shopkeeper hosting the manga tournament.

Subway Stairs

We are outside, on the sidewalk. A dark, gray day. In the foreground to the right is the top of a staircase. The subway stairs. F and M in orange circles. J and Z in brown circles. 4 and 5 in green circles. 9 in a pink circle. All lined up in a row, beneath where it says, in white letters, against a black background, “Stillwater St Station.” The railings to the stairs are silver. A fluorescent light shines invitingly at street level over the stairs. For it to shine on you, you must descend. This is where you’re being led. This is most of the picture. The title subject, it seems, at first glance. The dominant, detailed structure in the foreground.

A woman looking at her cell phone is walking up the stairs. It doesn’t matter how she’s dressed. She’s dressed unspectacularly. Urban, but unspectacularly. There is no meaning in her clothes; the cell phone is her defining feature. Hers, everyone’s.

To the left of the stairs, on the sidewalk, is another woman running towards us. She is wearing dark, skin-tight jogging gear. Long sleeves rolled up. Leggings. No cleavage, gentlemen. Hair pulled back tightly in a ponytail. White iPhone-style headphones that stand out against her dark, synthetic running shirt and the gray sky behind her, hooked up to the cell phone in her hand.

In the street, there’s a bike lane, and a biker is biking towards us. No biking gear. A city-bike, for public use.

Next to him is a string of cars, headlights on, coming our way. There’s just the one biker, and a whole row of cars, and yet one still imagines that

the cars are all moving faster than the biker. That the biker must heed them, for they are many, and his kind are few.

There are streetlights at the corner behind the biker. A red beside a green arrow, across from a yellow and another red. A smaller blur of red and green further down the road. Streetlights above the street. Building lights, but not all of them; it's still daytime. Just a dark day. A plane visible far off in the sky, very small, in the space the sun usually occupies in drawings by 4-year-olds.

We realize that everything is coming towards us. The woman on her cell phone, coming up the stairs. The woman wearing headphones, jogging on the sidewalk. The biker. The cars. The other side of the street is cut off. There could be more lanes. There could be a truck lane, a light rail, for all we know. Only you, the viewer, and the artist before you, only we, are facing the subway stairs.

Sunset Over Ancient Civilization

A large, long painting. Lots of detail. The kind of scene that can only be depicted in a painting, rather than a photograph, just because there's so much detail and yet everything is in focus. We don't know where to look. The barrage of information overwhelms us. We try to make out what is going on, what has brought this scene together.

We take a step back, and what we see is a crowd of tourists watching the sunset. They are situated on the side of a large, ancient structure. Few will recognize this structure — the ancient temple-mountain Phnom Bakheng, in Angkor, Cambodia, built as a Hindu temple in the 9th century, later rebuilt as a Buddhist temple, and today, a popular destination for tourists to watch the sunset after a long day exploring Angkor Wat and the rest of the ancient city below. Few will, but this hardly matters. What matters is that it's an ancient structure, and that it's a tourist destination. Half the tourists sit, and the other half stand because there's not enough room for everyone to sit. Almost everyone (though the general impression is that it is in fact everyone) has their cameras or camera phones out, all facing the sunset. Trying to capture the perfect shot of this daily occurrence, from a temple they'll never see again.

There are more people than we can count. They wear white t-shirts, and pink t-shirts, lime green t-shirts, panama hats, baseball caps, backpacks backwards over their bellies, cardigans and sweatshirts tied around their waists, khaki vests, fanny packs, huge camera cases that look like huge canteens... They're all interchangeable, all tourists are. Interchangeable,

and yet, individuals. Depicted in detail rather than as a blur. Depicted not as the crowd in the background watching the game, but as the crowd in the foreground, as the players themselves.

The red sun to the left, across the burning sky, over the darkening green and the tourists and their shadows on the temple, and over the temple's stone towers, pine-cone towers, spiky sea cucumber towers, porcupine bishop towers, studies for the Petronas towers, and their shadows hinted...

But there's more. A surprise for the viewer who searches the painting a little longer. A baby. In a little carrier pouch that the baby's mother wears in front. The mother is standing and, like everyone else on the west side of Phnom Bakheng at this hour — everyone in this painting — is watching the sunset. Everyone but the baby, that is. Everyone is facing the sun but this baby, who is perched against his mother's chest, facing his mother, and facing all that's behind his mother because, and only because, he has no power to turn around and see what's behind him, what everyone else is looking at. Instead, he watches his mother watch the sunset. Or perhaps, he is watching everyone, the whole crowd of tourists behind his mother, watch the sunset. Or perhaps, the viewer imagines, he is not watching anybody, but is rather more interested in the ancient temple itself, the temple everyone is watching from. The temple they have all come to see, but have already forgotten, distracted by the sunset.

The viewer checks again, studies each tourist. And it is confirmed. The baby is the only one.

Sagu Players

The billiards room is full of Asian men, and Asian men only. They are all wearing white dress shirts and dark ties, all except two: one who wears a green, plaid dress shirt; another who wears a dark blue fleece jacket over what is likely another white dress shirt. There are billiards tables arranged in a grid over the floor (a dark and light green checkerboard carpet), spaced apart from each other by about the length of each table's shorter side. The same blue cloth playing surface on all of them. Frames and legs that look wooden, but could just as easily be another material with a brown finish. On each of the tables we can see, we see three or four balls: two red, and one yellow or white; or two red, one yellow, and one white. There are no pockets on any of the tables.

The game they are playing is called Sagu. We know this from the title of the work. They are not playing American billiards, or pool, because the tables have no pockets, have only three to four balls on them that are always red and yellow/white, and are all blue on top, instead of the classic American green. It's a game most of us have never seen before. And if we fall in that majority, we might take a longer look at this painting, and try to learn for ourselves what the heck is going on, how Sagu is played.

But of course we can't do that. We can't learn a game just from a snapshot. So what then, we ask, is the artist's intent? Why show us a game we do not know and cannot learn without further research? We explore the rest of the painting, the rest of the room.

On the wall, on the left side of the canvas, there's a "No Smoking"

sign, written in English and Korean. The sign uses the “No Smoking” symbol commonly used in Western cultures, the red circle with a red diagonal line over a cigarette. Funny, you say. Cigarette smoke abounds here in the room. This windowless room. This windowless billiards hall in, presumably, a basement. You count three men in the room smoking cigarettes. There could be more, resting their cigarettes in ashtrays while it’s their turn to shoot. You look for others. And then you notice something in the back. One of the Sagu players wearing a white dress shirt doesn’t look so much like the rest of them. In fact, he may not even be Asian. He could be a foreigner. And in fact, you might think, he is not only a foreigner, but a very specific foreigner indeed. That’s right, you astute viewer of paintings who has never played Sagu, you. Like Diego Velazquez, Alfred Hitchcock, and others before him, the artist Felsman has inserted himself into his work.

That said, for Koreans (or the rare foreigner) familiar with the game, there is an alternate reading. If you know how Sagu is played, you’re more likely to look closely at the table in the foreground, the placement of the balls, and the shot that the Korean workingman is now lining up to take, and less likely to find the hidden artist.

The shooter is aiming his cue ball straight into the cushion. This seems like a strange choice; there is an easy way for him to hit both red balls if he just turns around and aims his cue ball the other way, at the first red ball with a little bit of spin, but instead, he is aiming straight at the cushion. Why? Well, you know Sagu. And you know that in Sagu, on your final shot, you must hit at least three cushions, along with the two red balls. So this Sagu player must be on his final shot, cigarette defiantly in mouth, going for the win.

Woodsmen of Privilege

Three men are in the woods, in their dirty parks department uniforms. All wearing gloves. One wearing a backwards baseball cap. Another wearing sunglasses. Another with a beard, wearing neither.

To the left, the man with the backwards hat and the man with the sunglasses are working together to move a fallen tree. There is an axe at the feet of the man in the sunglasses. Naturally, we wonder whether it was used to chop down this tree, or used only to trim branches off this tree that had already fallen on its own, so as to make it easier to carry. The clues lie in the details, in how the fallen tree is drawn, but the painting is not meant to be that complicated of a mystery. It can be, if you know your botany and/or are willing to perform a kind of forensic study on the behavior of branches, but it doesn't have to be. The fact that the men are wearing parks department uniforms should be sufficient circumstantial evidence enough.

But the viewer is not meant to dwell on this point. The true intrigue of the painting lies in the relationship between the scene described above and what the man with the beard is doing. To the right of the men moving the tree, and closer to us, in the foreground, the bearded man is kneeling beside a baby tree. The base of the baby tree is painted white. The bearded man is planting a wooden support beam into the ground. A hammer and a pile of wooden support beams at his feet. Behind the baby tree is another baby tree painted white at the base, supported by three wooden support beams that have been planted into the ground; and these wooden support beams are connected higher up by three smaller, horizontal, wooden

pieces.

Dead wood guiding young wood.

Dead wood on the left. Dead wood guiding young wood, on the right.

This, the viewer thinks about. The immense trees on the left are natural. The baby trees being planted on the right are not, insofar as they did not spring up here on their own accord, but by the work of these woodsmen. These baby trees were chosen to be planted here by people. The privileged human race, remodeling the woods.

Or ultimately, you might say, growing more support beams.

Goals

A slightly overhead view of a recreational athletic complex, seen from the height of a small building's rooftop, or an overpass. Pavement in the foreground, beyond it a grass field with goals of all shapes and sizes, and then the sea. No people at all.

The pavement is a reddish brown, with faded painted yellow lines that don't clearly correspond to any immediately recognizable game. Puddles that have yet to dry. Puddles like grease stains. Two white volleyball nets (or badminton nets) are up, next to one another, parallel to the bottom edge of the canvas. The poles holding them up have very little base, and therefore appear to be permanently cemented into the ground. A chain-linked fence encloses the pavement. Along the fence are small soccer goals, or perhaps hockey goals, all chained up except for two: two red-and-white striped little goals, red-and-white like candy canes, pushed up against the fence, facing us. It's the most conspicuous color of the painting, this red-and-white, and immediately draws the eye. They're touching, side by side, almost as if to form one big goal, these two candy-colored goals are. But life doesn't work like that; it doesn't look like one big goal, twice the size of the two smaller ones; it looks like two separate goals, side by side. Kick a ball right down the middle, and it will hit the goalposts, where the two goals meet.

On the other side of the chain-linked fence is the soccer field. Big and small goals, but the big goals can only be for soccer. The big soccer goals are parallel to the base of the painting and white like the volleyball nets on

the pavement. Their geometry, white and rectangular, and the volleyball net's geometry, somewhat echo each other. Connecting pavement to grass. The smaller goals on the grass are the same as the twin red-and-white goals on the pavement. On the grass, there are four of them, perpendicular to the base of the painting, spaced out two-by-two to form two fields. Two small goals facing each other to form one field, and then two more goals facing each other to form another. And then...

Enclosing the field on the right are low, yellow buildings with red rooftops. Trees at the end, by the sea. Enclosing the field on the left is a white wall, and beyond this wall, a long white building. Trees where the long white wall meets the pavement. The sea on the far side, and the pavement on the near side. It could almost be a schoolyard, enclosed as it is. Or the facilities of a private academy, considering the real estate values of waterfront properties. We don't know. We just know it's a big field with lots of goals, for all kinds of games, and it's in a beautiful setting, and the sky is blue, but cloudy, sunless, so it can't be all that hot, and the goals themselves are attractive and new, especially the ones that look like fresh candy canes, what kid wouldn't want to shoot on those? It's a young soccer player's dream. It's any kid's dream. What kid, whose playground is this, would grow up not dreaming of soccer? All that, and yet, not a soul.

Why? Maybe everyone's like the artist, the astute viewer admiring the painting thinks. Maybe everyone is standing with the artist, admiring the view. Thinking how pretty it is with no one on it. How pretty it is when there's no one to distract you, and you can just meditate, and think about the goals.

Jogger Pushing Stroller (Father Time)

A man is jogging, pushing a stroller. He is wearing iPhone headphones, or knock-off iPhone headphones, and serious running attire, including sports sunglasses. In the stroller is his young boy, maybe two years old.

They pass from the middle left of the canvas to the bottom right. They're on a bike path. Behind them is grass and then a river. On the other side of the river is an expressway raised over an old railroad yard. Skyscrapers line the horizon further out, in unremarkable detail — here simply to establish an urban setting, if nothing more than that.

Rather, it's the look on the boy's face that attracts our attention, our gaze. Look: the look on his face! Eyes wide and supremely alert, the lad exudes alertness, but he does not look afraid. Alert, but unafraid. The viewer smiles, cute kid, funny expression, and wonders. What does he think about being pushed in a stroller this way, at this high speed? How does he feel? He looks like he's performing a task his life depends on, as if widening his eyes, increasing alertness, just a bit more, could make up the difference between living and dying. Because surely the kid, on some level, believes this. It's the instinctual God complex. If you pray for sun, and the rain stops, then it was God who stopped the rain; if the boy widens his eyes, and he lives, then he doesn't dare blink, no way. He's his own puppeteer. The fact that his life is actually in the hands of his father? Too complex a thought to cross his mind.

Is this good parenting? We ask this instinctually. And our instinct

answers: yes. Yes, of course, why not? Being present in a child's life, father time, is important. Is good. We smile. This is good parenting. This man is a good father. Fathers having fun with their kids is a nice thing to see. The kid's got to go outside, it's good for the kid, and the father's got to run, it's good for the father, so what's the harm? And the kid's two years old. *Two!* He's not doing much talking these days anyway, so why not let the young father, who works his tail off all day, and who hasn't taken a night off from parenting in just about forever, listen to Pearl Jam or the Planet Money podcast while his kid takes in silently the great outdoors, why the hell shouldn't he? Good for him.

But the gaze of that child. Something disconcerting. This might be, after all, good, a beautiful scene, involuntarily causes us to smile, but at the same time, the viewer wonders, is this how father time always is? Perhaps the first time, the first stroller-jog, the boy really was afraid. Kicking and screaming. Now he's gotten used to it, the speed — the kicking and screaming have passed, the tears have dried — however, physical remnants of the boy's original disconcertion still remain. The wide eyes; this heightened awareness. A defense mechanism. "Slow down," the brain reacts. "You're two years old." It's the same alarm the brain has always rung, ever since this father time began months ago. "Slow down. You're two years old." The same warning. Through the kicking and screaming and crying, the same alarm every time. But now the boy has realized something, a real mind-fuck: the brain had been wrong. He was not going too fast, *is* not going too fast. He can handle the speed, after all. The brain had acted, in a panic, wrong, as if it had never considered a stroller being pushed by a jogger before. As if it had just assumed that the boy speeding through the wind could only be falling from the lethal height of six feet. But the brain was wrong, the boy is learning. It is okay to go this fast, no matter what the brain says, no matter what the body tells him. It's okay. His brain was wrong, *is* wrong, and Daddy is right. Yes, Daddy will keep him safe. Daddy will keep him safe, no matter what. Daddy is right; I'll be all right.

Just don't go any faster, Daddy.

The Young Poet

We look down upon a beach, from the side. We see the water's edge on the right, and we see a city behind the beach, on the left. The beach is empty, except for one figure, depicted in profile, who the painting's title tells us is our young poet. He is sitting down, holding a big umbrella over his head with one hand, for it's raining, and holding up a book with the other. He is facing the water.

The time of day is unclear. It is dark, but that could just be the weather. It's light enough to be daytime. The pale gray sky is easily illuminated, by what could be the sun shining from somewhere off page, by all the city lights, the cars on the road between the city and the beach that have their headlights on, the array of faint lights in the generic towers behind the beach, all the lightning (a great long cartoonish lightning bolt, fat, yellow, and zig-zagged like the Gatorade logo, strikes a lightning rod atop a tower in the distance surrealistically. Behind it, more natural looking bolts abound, thin little purple and white illuminated waves vibrating through the sky like a string Earth's puppeteer is rattling), and all the bright stars that stand out in the sky and suggest that perhaps it's nighttime, after all. (Because stars come out at night, only at night, and always have, dear friend). But at the same time, it's light enough for the boy to read. So that must mean it's still daytime.

But the average passing viewer is not so concerned with the time of day. What seems to matter in the painting, what concerns you, is what this boy is doing out here on this beach, in the rain. Reading, sure. But why?

Why here? Why now?

The young poet is here facing the sea, the viewer like yourself who has paused to face the painting muses, because he likes to look at the water. It's pleasant for him. (If true, this is another strike against our theory that it's nighttime. At night, the sea goes black, and there's not much to look at). Or he likes the smell of the saltwater, or the sound of the crashing waves, or the feel of the sand beneath him, but whatever it is, whatever the reason, he likes the beach, like a normal human being. And like a normal human being, he's come to the beach to read, as so many do, so many who would tell you, if asked, that the beach is the *best* place to read. So to the young poet, what's a little rain, if you've got a big umbrella?

It's a rhetorical question; it should be the end of this nonsense, but I'll answer it anyway, just for you. It's everything. A little rain is everything. That's why he's here now, and that's why nobody else is out here with him.

Nude with Crossed Eyes

A naked woman is sitting outdoors with her knees up in front of her, a backpack balanced between her legs. She is holding up a notebook and a pen close to her face, studying a butterfly that has just landed on the tip of the pen. Her eyes are crossed, the butterfly is that close. Her expression is serious, careful so as not to scare it away. Behind her is the rock she's sitting against. Her hair is wet.

Together, the front and back cover of the open notebook, from our perspective, resemble the shape of a butterfly that has spread its wings. But only in shape, in the symmetry of its shape. For in terms of color and content, the notebook's front and back cover bear no such correlation to each other: the front is a dizzying blend of colors (that could be just a blend, or could depict a more detailed scene we can't make out); the back cover is all black.

The notebook is being held up by the woman with her left hand. She holds the pen in her right, up close to the notebook. The butterfly perched atop it we see in profile, facing the notebook, its wings tucked up behind its back, unmajestically unspread. On the wing facing us, pointing upwards and near flush with the plane of the canvas, is a complex pattern of colors with one exception, one big black dot in the middle of it. The left wing not facing us we assume looks the same, because this is a butterfly we're looking at now, not a notebook, and butterflies, for all their complex patterns, are always symmetrical.

But we don't see this symmetry. We didn't see it with the notebook,

and we don't see it now with the butterfly. And that's all that matters in the end, with a painting: what we see. And what do we see in this painting, at base, if we look past all the little details? We see a woman. Naked, with crossed eyes, the viewer thinking about symmetry thinks. She who is the butterfly embodied, the notebook come to life. Life like the butterfly, facing us like the notebook, in full naked XX/XY chromosomal (naturally symmetrical) display. True, if we look closely, her symmetry is not totally exact. A birthmark here, a rosiness there, a shadow here. Wet hair tucked behind ears unevenly. A single right earring versus a plurality of earrings running up her left ear like a zipper. But seen from afar, or glanced at briefly from up close, she does appear to take on the symmetry of which we are deprived by the butterfly whose wings are not spread, and by the notebook whose covers are night and day. Because seen in this passive manner, it's her nakedness and eyes that triumph. Her momentarily crossed eyes, each turned equally inwards, that distract us from all the other lovely features of her face, that lead our eyes, with hers, towards the butterfly in the middle of the canvas — these, and her undressed body, its lack of possibly asymmetrical clothing, that we see above all else. Nakedness and crossed eyes; crossed eyes and nakedness. These are the two elements that give her this air of symmetry, and this is an aesthetic quality that is not so easily produced in realistic portraits.

But let us linger. There's more here. The details tell a story. This young woman with crossed eyes had been writing before she had been disrupted by the butterfly. But what had she been writing? Her wet hair, we think, suggests she'd just gone swimming. Swimming, of course, naked.

And then sat down to write about it.

Umbrella Beach

A long painting, in four horizontal sections: a busy Turkish beach, the sea, a Turkish city across the water, and the sky.

You're immediately struck by the beach — umbrellas everywhere. Not the beautiful, empty beach you would expect to be depicted in a painting. No sand; just umbrellas, and underneath, beach chairs, people. Swimmers out in the water, floats in the water, and boats yet further out. But again, no sand on the beach. And yet it's a beach. A highly densely populated beach, with these umbrellas up like domes, or let down and taking on a conical or pyramidal shape. A beach like a city. A city of umbrellas. We examine.

Instead of sand, the ground is a perfect green, like a putting green on a golf course. Too perfect, we astute viewers think. This must be fake grass. The kind found on a diving dock to keep barefoot people from slipping. Squares of fake grass, overlapping each other, forming a carpet that covers the entire length and width of whatever is under it — a wooden platform perhaps, certainly not sand. But this green base only shows in spots, in slivers. What we mostly see are the tops of umbrellas. Blue and white striped umbrellas. Brown and orange and yellow and white striped umbrellas. One next to the other. We hardly see anything underneath. We get glances here and there, of empty chaise folding lounge-chairs, or of shirtless men, or of women in full body hijabs resting in the shade, but mostly we just see the tops of umbrellas. No sunbathers, now that we think about it. For the women in the full body hijabs, it's against their religion. For the less conservative Muslim women, those in bathing suits, it's more

fashionable to be pale.

Our eyes are led across the water, where children play on inflatable docks with inflatable ladders, and some with inflatable slides. The water is crowded. The inflatable docks, not so much, perhaps too hot to stand on with bare feet, even for a second.

Beyond the swimmers is a floating lane line designating the end of the swimming area. Beyond the swimming area are boats of all shapes and sizes. But all motorboats. No sailboats. Motorboats of all shapes and sizes.

And then, we have the skyline across the sea. Brown and red. A dustiness. Towers and mosques. A cityscape that extends from end to end of this long, carefully detailed painting. The tops of the mosques mirror the tops of the umbrellas in the foreground. The skyscrapers mirror the umbrellas that have been let down, especially those closest to us. (The closest of which dominates the foreground like the tree in Van Gogh's "The Starry Night"). The beach is the city, and the city is the beach — not a reflection, but a refraction over water. One is a model for the other. Mosques like beach umbrellas like palm trees. Skyscrapers like the common sword that both defended and sacked old Constantinople. Like an umbrella pole planted in the ground, minus the umbrella. Like the trunk of any tree.

Boy Walking Bike By Cops

Two cops are standing on a well-lit sidewalk at night, talking to a black man. To their left is a corner store, and further left, the cross street. To their right, a black boy walks his bike on the sidewalk, away from them. One of the cops appears to be arguing with the man. But the other cop, while standing beside his partner, has his head turned away, down the street, his eyes on the boy with the bike.

The sign above the corner store says “Lotto,” and underneath, “Cold Beer.” Coupons and posters that look like blown-up coupons cover the windows completely. In the doorway, a woman waits for a man to exit before entering. This man has a black t-shirt and gray beard, and he is looking at the woman in a way that suggests he is deciding on whether or not to let her pass first. The woman has her back to us, and nothing about her clothes tells us anything about what her face might look like, nor her age, state of mind, nothing.

There is a mural on the wall to the right of the store, behind the cops and pleading man. The mural depicts a big blue whale underwater, surrounded by turtles, starfish, clownfish, jellyfish, rocks, and coral, and a naked woman floating horizontally in front of the whale, gently pressing her forearm against its nose, as an angel would bless a child. Needless to say it marks a stark contrast between it and the scene playing out in three dimensions on the sidewalk, the two cops teaming up against the man.

The viewer follows the second cop’s gaze to the boy walking his bike. What is it about this boy that has caught the officer’s attention? The easy

answer is that he's watching to see if the boy will stop walking his bike and start riding it on the sidewalk, which would be illegal, and allow him then to run after and ticket the boy. This makes us think of the crime itself, of biking on the sidewalk as a ticketable offense. This is a city they're living in, and the boy's no more than ten years old. Would it really be safer for everyone if he rode in the street? In any case, he's walking his bike on the sidewalk now. He's not riding in the street, but walking it on the sidewalk, there's a reason for this, and this is perhaps what has caught the officer's attention. The officer is not asking: "Will I have to run after this kid when he starts biking illegally?" Instead, he's asking: "What's this kid doing on the sidewalk, walking his bike?"

We look more closely at the kid. He is wearing a backpack, and the backpack is open. He's got blue stains on his white tank top. We glance back towards the officer, but we noticed something along the way. Between them, the boy and the officer, lying on the ground, is a black canister with a blue cap.

"The boy must have left it here earlier, after working on the mural, and had only just come back for it," the cop could conceivably hypothesize. "Only, there were cops."

A Red Light in Western China

A mass of motorcyclists waits at a traffic light. They are bunched together like pedestrians, for the lines on the road have been painted for the cars, busses, and trucks of the world — the vehicles made to transport entire families, whole stocks and supplies — not for the pedestrian or motorcycle. At least, not this many motorcycles. The traffic light is not pictured.

Their faces are all Asian. (When the light turns green, the traffic will flow from the middle-left of the canvas towards the bottom right; in this way, the motorcyclists are more facing us than not). They wear bright summer clothes. None wear helmets. A few have umbrellas attached to the back of their motorcycles, for shade. Most wear sandals. Most share their motorcycles with at least one other passenger.

On one motorcycle in the foreground is a pregnant woman with two children. Her right foot, the foot we can see, is in a sky blue sandal and planted on the ground, balancing the motorcycle. Her right hand grips the right handlebar. In front of her, sharing her seat, is a young boy no more than ten years old, perhaps no more than six. The mother rests her chin on the back of this boy's head, staring ahead, while the boy looks away from us, to the left, at all the motorcyclists around him. His hands grip the twin rearview mirrors that stick up from the head of the vehicle like the ears on a deer that has just stopped in its tracks at the sound of danger. Behind the mother, holding her waist, is the daughter. Somewhere between ten and fifteen years old. She wears white glasses and is looking down, and to the

right (towards us), at something on the ground, perhaps her mother's foot, perhaps something smaller that we can't make out. She has a pink bow in her hair, a bright blue shirt the color of her mother's sandals, cherry red sandals of her own, and a colorful, flowery knee-length skirt. She has her right hand on her bare, right knee, and her left hand on her mother's shoulder.

Just beyond them, an old man sits on his motorcycle with an old woman behind him. She's holding his hips, leaning on his shoulder. A pink umbrella is attached to the back of their motorcycle. The old man is wearing sunglasses and a sleeveless undershirt. Two hands on the handlebars. Cigarette in mouth smoldering invisibly into the thick urban smog.

A green and yellow umbrella also sticks up from the mass. A blue and orange umbrella, too. Others in the distance. Many, many colors. Many motorcyclists. Many more passengers. A cosmic impression: a sea of traffic and little drops of motorcycles.

And above the umbrellas, a monolithic, gray overpass. Truly monolithic. For, in the painting, it replaces the sky. Bottom third, street. Middle third, motorcyclists waiting for the light. Top third, overpass. Roughly, these thirds, (considering the diagonals, the depiction of perspective). Only a faint hint of sky is shown above the overpass, between passing wheels.

Hanging from the side of it, the massive overpass, are two billboards and a sign. The sign says something in Chinese characters, with numbers spliced in, Arabic numerals in the Western (or modern universal) style. The billboard on the left is black and white, with the face of a white woman with light, messy hair staring out at us sensually, not smiling, mouth slightly agape, like she could be currently having sex. Chinese characters, and the French brand's name underneath. The second billboard advertises a Japanese car. The ideal viewer will recall the Rape of Nanking, but conclude, in the final analysis, that the painting is more about contemporary Chinese street life than about making any political statement or historical analogy. Simply a snapshot.

Argentine Metaphysics

From opposite sides of the canvas, two hairy arms (implicitly, the arms of a man) converge on a notebook. Behind the notebook, two knees in jeans are bent and pointing up towards the sky. So the subject is wearing jeans and lying down, writing in his notebook. And you, the viewer, share his point of view. You see what the subject is looking at, almost exactly.

Though not exactly. Because you see the whole canvas. You see everything in the subject's field of vision, all the possible things he could be looking at. But the subject, let's call him the artist Henry Felsman, can only be focusing on one thing in this painting, in this moment frozen in time, and your best guess as to what that is has to be the notebook. But your eyes, not frozen in time, but (to extend the water metaphor) carried by the river of time, move across the canvas, drawn away from the notebook towards another powerful image: a *second* subject in the painting. This, the second subject, is a woman smiling down at you, which is to say, smiling down at the first subject, and you can see her face. And this is significant, because hers is the only face shown; in a way, she's the first subject. The only subject, really. And you, the viewer, (or Felsman, the phantom subject, the artist), are just the frame accentuating her shining face.

In terms of depth, the woman is behind the notebook, but in front of your knees. It's kind of an odd position — she appears to be leaning back a little bit, away from you at an awkward angle — but she has to lean away from you in order to look at you, because probably your head is resting in her lap. She has olive skin and brown hair with blonde highlights. In her

right hand, she's holding an accessory that some might recognize as a *mate* gourd. It is brown and shaped like a drop of water, right before it drips, and sticking out from it is a silver-colored straw with a golden-colored mouthpiece. Her teeth are white and straight, sparkling white and Vitruvian. Besides smiling, you think, she could also be laughing. But since this is a mute moment frozen in time, you can't tell the difference. Nor can you see her left hand. But for some reason, some hint perhaps written in the lines of her lovely face, you get the sensation that she's touching you with it. Caressing you. You smile.

Then you take a closer look at what you, or the first subject, or the artist Felsman, is writing in the notebook. It's not scribble, as in a cartoon image of a letter. The letters are real, detailed. Upper and lower-cased. Paragraphs. In fact — that's right — the words are this very description you, the viewer, have been reading all this time.

And depending on how familiar you are with Felsman's work, you may be able to recognize the woman in the painting. If not, that's okay; he will tell you: she is the same woman as the young woman depicted in his misunderstood masterpiece, *Nude with Crossed Eyes*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS











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