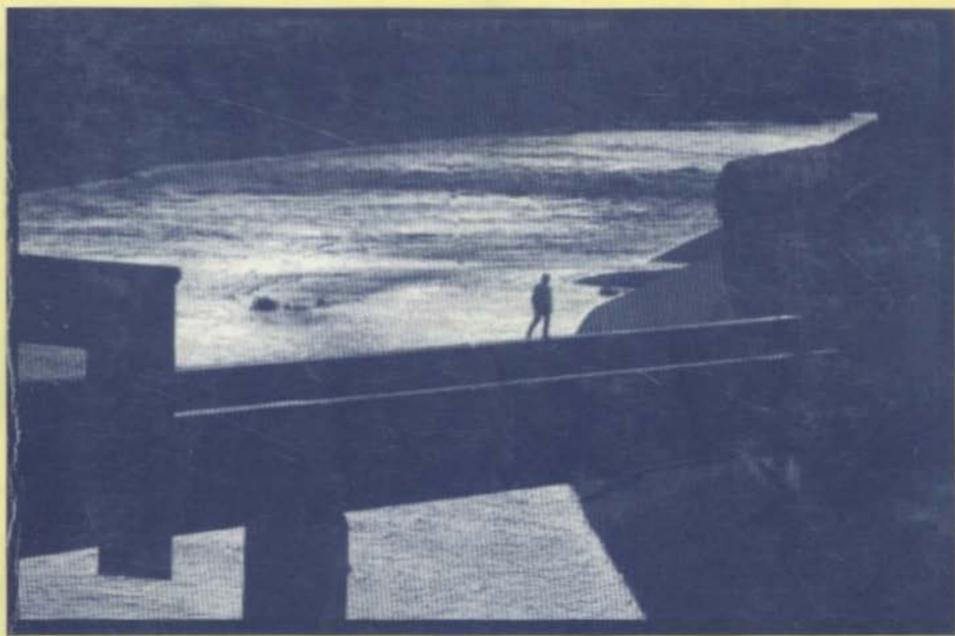


BORDER SENSES

Poetry • Fiction • Art



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Drawing on Neruda

From *Two Rusted Doors*

Some latent desire within me to sketch has finally surfaced, and with force. I've been drawing feet and tiny people and light posts and buildings, copying detail from paintings in museums or from a catalogue I bought at Shakespeare and Company of Van Gogh's work. I look around the city at windows and doorways and human figures in the distance among hundreds of other souls in the distance and I try to follow the line and curves that allow my eyes to perceive the image, and how light and shadow and proportion of parts gives the image depth. I'm preoccupied with line and curve. I pull out my Neruda book of poems, which I take with me everywhere, when I see something that I want to try and capture. I sketch on the pages where the poems are short, where there's a lot of white space. Sometimes I'll be reading a Neruda poem and one of the lines I encounter is so powerful I want to draw it.

Apareció una flor como una gota
de sangre anaranjada.

I draw my version of the image next to Neruda's words that make the image.

Sometimes, in the middle of the night, I suddenly wake up with an image in my head, the curve of a woman's smile or two rusted doors in a tin building at night, light spilling from one of the door frames.

An image I encountered two years ago keeps returning to me, stronger than ever. It's an image that led me to experiment with literary etudes in my graduate fiction workshops. Two years later, I want to draw this image from memory.

I'm walking in Paris at night on a narrow pedestrian-only street. I walk past crowded restaurants and bars and night clubs and shops where they specialize in expensive kitsch. The narrow street is packed. Light glares in windows and from flashing signs, sparkling off the

white teeth of laughing women, off the bright clothes of people standing in line at the discos. Music blasts, and red light spills from the doorways onto the street and spreads its rose onto the curve of my arm. The street is so narrow that there are no outdoor tables—there wouldn't be enough room.

I see two black men standing in the street. They're looking at a third man who is standing under the archway to an alleyway, a young man with dread locks and a round face. They both look at him, disappointed in him, one of them shaking his head as if to say, "How could you?"

The black man framed by the alley entrance holds out his arms, shrugs his shoulders, as if to say, "What's done is done. What can I do now?"

He turns his back to the other two and walks into the alley, which is even more narrow than the pedestrian street, lined by the back doors of apartments. Only one light shines at the end of the alley, a porch light hanging over cement steps and a door.

The other two watch the young man walk away, getting smaller and smaller as he disappears into darkness. Then they look at each other. One shakes his head.

I thought of Vermeer's *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*. The image itself contains the narrative, and although we don't know from whom the woman in blue is reading a letter, it doesn't matter. Only the image matters. I don't need to know why the other two were disappointed in the third. How can I, as a fiction writer, create a single image which contains all that the reader needs to know? And how can the ability to do this help me with the novel I'm working on?

Now I want to draw that image, but when I try, the converging lines at the vanishing point of my alley look like two poles sticking up in the air. I need practice.

This morning, while Josh and Louise were still sleeping, I walked to the grocery store and bought coffee, bread, and a cheap pencil to

sketch with.

When I was a teen, I wanted to play guitar. I asked my parents to get me an electric guitar and amplifier for Christmas. I had this fantasy of me on stage at the junior high dances, my fingers sliding up and down the shiny neck of my Gibson, making the guitar wail. I wanted the best guitar. My father laughed at me. "You're stupid, boy," he said. "You need to start with the cheapest guitar there is. If you learn that, and the guitar can't contain your genius, then you'll need a better one. You don't start off with the best."

He didn't understand, I thought. I need a good one. I'm going to be a rock star.

He was right. In less than a year, I quit playing the guitar he had bought me.

So this morning, I bought cheap pencils.

I've been concentrating on only a few images, over and over again, little etudes to learn how to create people and depth. I'm learning to release souls with a sketch. Yes, release souls! That's what it feels like when you draw a figure of a person and it takes on life, personality, as if you have released a dead soul from purgatory, so they can live again. I can imagine the painter channeling in front of the canvass, images appearing from the tip of his or her brush, faces the artist him/herself has little to do with. This happens to the fiction writer, no? Are we releasing souls? Do our fictional characters become so real that they *are* real, coming into our work from some place whose existence we have nothing to do with?

The sensation in creating something real and good is like a drug. I want more. Van Gogh writes to his brother:

"Si tu avais dessiné qu'une seule chose comme il convient, tu prendrais un gout irrésistable à t'attaquer à mille autres choses."

I've been drawing doorways, at the end of which I draw an African woman walking near the vanishing point, holding a bag on her head. I draw a bridge over a river and in the water I draw the reflection of the bridge. There are so many images I want to draw, but I

don't yet have the skill, like when I was a beginning fiction writer wanting to tell stories too big for my limited control of language. But I'll keep trying. I'll keep drawing. I have an idea for an oil painting: A giant pair of red lips surrounded by black space, and inside of the mouth, in the sparkle of the white teeth, I want a sliver of red moon. It's from Neruda's Soneta 7, "y nadie vio en mi boca la luna que se sangraba."