

Jean L. Kreiling

Watching from the Passenger Seat at Night

It was a film noir sequence with a cast
of one: my mother stared ahead and gripped
the wheel, her profile grazed by lights we passed,
then veiled in shadow as they quickly slipped
behind us. Underneath a streetlamp's beam
for just a moment, half her chin and cheek
would glow, then darken, hinting at some scheme
or romance. Or she'd turn her head to seek
direction, and a billboard's floodlit glare
would flash half-threateningly across her eyes,
her once-maternal gaze assigned an air
of mystery. I'd barely recognize
what light and dark would draw and then erase:
a chiaroscuro, movie-worthy face.

Ovillejo: Vivace

after Louise Farrenc's Piano Quintet, op. 30, movement III

A rippling riff, a knot unwound,
the sound
of gravity swiftly undone,
of fun
that art aligns but no one tames
and games
that no one loses — custom names
this all vivace — lively, yes,
but also full of sly finesse:
the sound of fun and games.

Staircase Stories

In the late nineteenth century, the sisters of Loretto Chapel in Santa Fe, New Mexico, maintained that St. Joseph himself had built the spiral staircase up to the choir loft. It “was innovative for the time . . . The staircase has two 360 degree turns and no visible means of support.” “Staircase,” <https://www.lorettochapel.com/info/staircase>

I.

We look up to its art and mystery —
this staircase summoned by nine days of prayer,
steps leading to a place where piety
was sung, where chanting sanctified the air.
The nuns believed that their novenas brought
the nameless carpenter to them. More deft
than most, he toiled for weeks and never sought
remuneration. When the stranger left —
his staircase swirling skyward as if meant
to dance toward God — the sisters found no bill
and no trace of the man whom God had sent.
They called him saint, and through his selfless skill
we tourists learn that anonymity
may bless and heighten generosity.

II.

The staircase isn't really — as some claim —
a miracle, for any architect
can explicate the physics. But its fame
persists: the spiral rises to connect
with something past the highest step. Beyond
the ordinary work of carpentry
climbed faith, and though some say that we've been conned,
that there's been no defeat of gravity,
such doubters miss the shifting shape of things:
how painfully reality can twist
a soul, until its safest wanderings
wind artfully, in order to resist
despair, dodge sin, elude the base and mean —
a path miraculously serpentine.

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III.

For years the staircase had no rail; it wound
from floor to choir loft — more than twenty feet —
with stark, uncluttered grace, its coil not bound
by any nod to caution. But its neat
geometry of midair curves unnerved
the nuns, some of whom anxiously ascended
on hands and knees. Though their faith never swerved,
the test was steep. And so the steps that wended
so sleekly toward salvation were enclosed
by balusters supporting arcs of wood
for striving hands to grip: a frame imposed
upon an arabesque, protecting good
intentions, making safe a holy space —
an emblem of the Savior's own embrace.

IV.

But God need not be found here. Reverence can rise from heathen hearts; one need not pray to grant profound respect to elegance, devotion, and hard work. In Santa Fe, art calls to us from churches, galleries, and sidewalk stalls — in clay and silver, bare adobe and bright fabrics, novelties and relics, treasures commonplace and rare. And when a sculpture or a handmade pot or bracelet pleases us, it may well gain in value if the seller shares the plot behind its making. Sacred or profane, the story of the staircase, bowl, or bangle weaves life and art into a splendid tangle.

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Dooms of Love

“my father moved through dooms of love . . .” — e. e. cummings

I'd found him downstairs in his workshop, wielding a balky wrench; some tough nut wasn't yielding to his strong arm. And suddenly he hurled the wrench — about the last thing in the world I thought he'd do. He'd always been so calm, his six-foot frame a fortress of aplomb, his shoulders broad and patient. When he turned and saw me, what I saw was grief; it burned in his blue eyes. Something beyond repair had creased his brow and made his graying hair look grayer; he himself appeared half-broken. And then, so quietly he'd barely spoken, my father muttered, “Kids'll break your heart.” No tool would fix this problem, no spare part. He looked back toward the wrench, but let it lie, then grinned at me. I wish I'd asked him why he'd said those words, but I was just thirteen, and rattled, and whatever they might mean, he let that lie as well. He followed me upstairs to lunch, and cheerfully gave ear as four kids vied for his attention, his laughter, his applause, his intervention in crises. We knew he was on our side, but now my sense of that was amplified. I'd figured out that since our every win and loss was his, what we took on the chin bruised his jaw, too — and maybe his words meant that he was doomed to suffer for us. Bent by love, he still stood tall, his shoulders sagging so rarely that his strength appeared unflagging — but in his workshop, I think he'd confessed how much it cost to carry what distressed his kids. I don't know who had creased his brow that day, and I don't know exactly how; *I don't know why he shared with me the ache I heard in that confession — “Kids'll break your heart.” But once he did, I found more room in my own heart. There is no finer doom.*

Mary Cassatt's Mother and Child (1890)

i.m. John Heller

The painter never bore a child, but knew
just how it felt to hold this girl, and how
our eyes would hold her, how each painted cue
would light up her pale arms and sleep-flushed brow.
The mother's dress recedes into a blur;
blue smudges on the shelf were probably
fine china, but we don't care what they were.
All our attention is — can only be —
directed at the little girl. Cassatt
knew which details would matter, which would not:
she knew the texture of a toddler's skin
and how a small hand strokes a mother's chin.
She never would know motherhood, but knew
this moment, and ensured that we would, too.

(Online image at <http://wichitaartmuseum.org/acm/detail.php?action=v&id=1286372571596751>)