

Susan Terris

In the Familiar Tense

When Mary's Belgian griffon died, Degas wrote letters,
begging friends to find, at any price, a new one
Mary Cassatt. When she and Edgar Degas met,
she was thirty-three. Autumn, Paris...
and send it to Paris parcel post. She wants a young dog,
a very young one that will love her.
Degas loved her. Forty years of intimacy,
yet both too restrained
Careful not to nudge his elbow with hers, Mary
held the new pup in her arms and leaned forward
for sex without marriage.
A marriage, instead, of minds:
so he could feel the heat from her breath.
That autumn we met, she murmured, then-
as he proposed her for
the 4th Impressionist Exhibition,
Don't, he cautioned. I'm just an old man who likes horses
as you like dogs...
and she brought him to American collectors,
gave him her money, her touch.
Stroking the dog's dark muzzle, Mary let his silken warmth
soothe her. When we met, then I began to live.
And when he lost his will to live,
she found a niece to care for him.
Degas leaned back in the bentwood chair. Closed his eyes.
Tais toi, he said. *Be still*.

The Iron Handle of Innisfree

Innisfree: not the bee-wattled glade of Yeats
but Wisconsin by fast-moving water.

Our tents were up. Dinner was squaw corn
and Ritz apple pie from the campfire oven.

And that night, before the bear came,
my counsellor-careful not to touch her body

to mine-leaned toward me under inked pines
and kissed me full on the lips.

Later, after the bear, after morning coffee
with eggshells, we swam the white river across

from Innisfree; and as we-naiads on boulders
ringed by water-lounged, I found the handle,

a heavy iron oval its shaft sunk deep into rock.
Open sesame, I told myself. With a twist,

hidden places might be revealed. As my counsellor
eyed me in my 2-piece cotton suit,

I took hold of the handle and slipped into the river,
held fast and twisting, tethered yet free.

Then, without looking back, I uncurled my fingers
and let the current fly me downstream

away from rock, iron, and flesh: elements that
beggared revelation.

Playing the Bear

On shards of an ancient vase: girls of ten
running through woods with a bear.
Little Sisters of the Bear, Greeks called them,
sent to the mountains and taught
to know the feral yet contain it, to have

honeysuckle breath, feet that shiver grass
but bruise no blades. To gather fruits,
reel in a meadow of crocus
and asphodel, follow bees to honey,
run with wolf and roe deer.
But, as Pan piped of wide-hipped pleasure,
they also learned to be hunted, to
yield wildness yet retain its imprint.

In myths, Atalanta, who was raised
by bears, will marry only the man
who can catch her in a race; and the oracle
tells the childless Kephalos to take
the first female he meets. That female,
a bear, gives birth to a son whom she
suckles reclining as humans do. Then beneath
olive trees, at the darning-needle hum
of midday, she becomes a woman, as do we

under brown hair, under swelling flesh.
Yes, like the girls on the vase we're schooled.
So ring your handbells, offer mead and honey.
But have no fear. Our teeth are
sharp yet careful: they know submission
and how to gentle live flesh.

A Question of Rabbits

It's a question of rabbits. Who sees them,
who doesn't. From Bath to London
by train, the man and woman
ride next to the Kennet and Avon Canal,
she forward, he backward.
He can see the canal, its narrow boats,
white horse of Uffington pawing the hill,
but his eye can't catch the rabbits.

She notes birds' nests jacked into forks
of trees, last year's burnt thistles.
When she points, he sees pheasants
regal in fields, black-and-white magpies.
Hawthorn draws her, early tulip,
how deckled willow crochets
late-day shadows. Beneath her window-
buttercups, pink cherry, and rabbits.
Dozens and dozens of them chomp grass
in evening sun: cottontail, jack rabbit,
outsized hare. Bucks, does, colonies of

newborn kits. And, beyond the rabbits,
beyond dry-stone wall and winter wheat,
there must be hedgehog, mole,
badger, shrew, dormouse,
prowling, grazing, fur-hackled, curious
as they wait for him to blink yet trust
she will nod
when they cameo before her eye.