

January 2021

Autumn Morning, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Norman Waksler

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/yr>

Recommended Citation

Waksler, Norman (2021) "Autumn Morning, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston," *Yalobusha Review*: Vol. 19 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/yr/vol19/iss1/6>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Yalobusha Review by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

AUTUMN MORNING, MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

Norman Waksler

The museum is quiet. You've come at an relatively unfrequented hour mid-week, taken a day off work. Sometimes things happen, and you have to get away from friends, family, colleagues, your lover, escape complicated interdependencies where there's always a chance that a miss-step could drop you into a momentary crisis that will need explanation, clarification, rectification — the contingency in other words underlying all human interaction. The museum's the place. With paintings the contingency is all yours. They always remain the same, you just have to give yourself up and meet them.

You wander, and after a while plant in front of a Whistler "Nocturne". *Blue and Silver: The Lagoon, Venice*. Deep night, blackness of bare-masted sailing ship, ghostly gondolas, slim black bell tower, black dome, bubbles of gold on land and lagoon, and, as advertised, deepest silver-blue/bluish-silver sky and water. A perfect paradigm of melancholy solitude. The museum viewer could just as easily be a disconsolate Venetian standing on a bridge in the dark escaping his sense of the complications of interdependency.

A woman's voice behind you, "Jim," aimed at your back. Funny how you know that. However your name is Barry. Nonetheless you turn. It's almost unavoidable. A voice directed at you, not your name, but still you turn, with the inescapable illusion that maybe the voice means you anyway.

A woman in her late twenties perhaps, with the build of a Gothic saint, strikingly thin, a large sharp nose, sharp cheekbones and wristbones, black hair in coils of curls, black slacks — every woman seemed to be wearing black slacks this season — a hip length top in deep ultramarine blue. All that and a smile — an affectionate happy-to-have-come-across-you-Jim smile, mixed with tender concern, as if something has happened to Jim and she isn't sure how it's affected him.

Of course as soon as she sees, not that it's you, Barry, but that it's someone not Jim, away goes the smile. Then she's a bony faced woman with too thin lips and some blend of disappointment and embarrassment.

You try a smile of your own. Not a come-on. It's, Hi, contact, another human

being here, let's acknowledge mutual existence. And also: I recognize your embarrassment, sympathize, am unoffended by your mistake, understand.

That kind of a smile.

But she just turns up the far ends of her mouth, one of those movements that are all voluntary muscles, and veers off across the gallery on practical rubber soled black shoes.

You feel badly for her disappointment, even a little responsible, as though you could have been Jim if I you wanted and have perversely chosen to be Barry. You try hearing again how she said Jim. Not a question. Jim, is that you? Not expected: a flat, Jim. More surprise and pleasure. Jim! You? Here? How nice! You wonder who he is exactly, old friend long missing? ex-lover? one time possible lover in an unconsummated affair?.

You wish you could have been Jim for her, for your sake too. The pleasure of being found, of being smiled on, of knowing someone is delighted to come across you isn't granted very often. Even though your long time lover and you are usually happy together, though you're generally satisfied in your work, are only occasionally disgusted with yourself, things you've done, people's responses to them, you could always use a treat like that. Oh, well. Just another urban encounter. Birds of a different feather meet on a tree branch and fly off in different directions. Back to *Nocturne: Blue and Silver*.

You can look at a painting forever, you know, if you care for it enough. It just stays there and lets you. Eventually the museum closes, but that's not the painting's fault. So ten minutes later you're still looking when you hear behind you another woman's voice, jolly and excited, "Hey! Robby!" Theoretically too loudly for the quiet gallery.

You turn, more slowly this time, amused but dubious. Could this be happening again? Apparently so. Another woman, another smile. She's short, mid-thirties, ruddy as a Hals tippler, untidy hair in shades of cadmium yellow; a scarlet Henley shirt hanging over baggy black pants; big running shoes; a general air of rough and readiness, as though she's just rolled a bowling ball and as soon as the pins decide where to land, she'll roll another one. The smile: someone who's come upon a drinking buddy already beers ahead in a bar and she anticipates a happy evening of competitive catching up.

The smile immediately replaced by the sort of lip crumple consequent on biting into a banana and finding it's a plantain. "But what the heck, you're not Robby."

"Well, not this week, at least." You attempt a convivial smile meant to say, "This is an odd little encounter, hey, but you seem likeable, I'm likeable too, so let's

acknowledge each other's likeability, and while we're at it, the harmless humor of all this."

Possibly your smile doesn't convey exactly what you mean it to, because she raises her left hand, short fingers, many rings, palm outward: a warding off gesture. She turns and hustles off across the gallery, an odd right slant to her body, as though cradling a bowling ball at her side.

You think it excessive of her to act as though you've made a crude pick-up attempt. "Well, pardon me," you mutter "for not being Robby." But you understand what's ruffled your feathers: You've acknowledged her likeability; she's denied yours. A merry old soul she is, just not with an imposter like you.

You know it's foolish to resent. An encounter of that kind with a stranger, that sort of immediate reaction, doesn't mean anything. The other person doesn't know you. It's just the circumstances, nothing to make you feel badly about yourself, nothing real.

But that 'back off' gesture. People use it on religious nuts and street hustlers. You wonder if you're looking less normal from the front than the back, off-key, out of focus, because obviously your back view must've been just like Robby's, and Jim's. You're wearing dark blue chinos, black shoes, a blue striped oxford shirt, your hair cut short, with a few streaks of gray. Medium height, posture straight, shoulders back. You have no idea how common this is. Perhaps there are styles in men's backs, a set of three or four types that made each group indistinguishable within itself and explains how you could be mistaken for someone else, twice. Perhaps other people have passed and not seen you as a Donald or a Fred or a Sam because their backs were from groups one, two and four.

You try to shake off discontent, return to the picture, but you've lost touch with it. Think of moving on, obstinately decide to remain, and after a few minutes begin to regain that state of aesthetic balance where you and the painting seem to be in a silent bubble together.

"Tom!"

You absolutely refuse to turn around.

"Tom!" Insistent, demanding, assertive.

You stay firmly in place facing *Nocturne: Blue and Silver*, though your back and shoulders stiffen the way they did when you were afraid of being hit by a snowball in winter as you walked home from school late afternoon.

A light perfume almost too delicate to be sure you smell it, a small hand on your arm, and you're pulled sideways. "Tom, what is your problem? ... You're not Tom!"

This is an extremely elegant, extremely beautiful, extremely angry woman.

Her black slacks lines by Matisse, her short sleeved blouse as simple as a parochial school girl's except that it's pearl gray silk, a pendent of two twists of thin silver indicates her cleavage. Her pale blonde hair is cut in one of those inexplicably self-maintaining sideways sweeps, and she has perfect cheekbones, an exquisite jaw line, and an odd little flat spot on the bridge of her nose that allows you to finally understand the notion of the exception that proves the rule.

At any other time her looks would reduce you to stuttering masculine idiocy as you tried to demonstrate what a brilliant and virile specimen you were, worthy to mate with her immediately behind the first sarcophagus you could find.

Now however you say, "That's right, and that's the exact reason I didn't turn around when you called the name 'Tom'."

"But you knew I was talking to you. It was simply rude of you not to respond."

She has her fists on her hips and appears to be gearing up for a long and serious fight about the rules of politeness in force when two strangers encounter one another. She strikes me as the type who'd crash her car into yours if you tried to scoop her parking place. You say, "Excuse me, but I'm not responsible for your errors of identification. If you can't tell your friend Tom from any other guy, maybe ..."

She's not listening to you, or looking at you, any longer. Her gaze has shifted over your shoulder. "Ah. Tom," she says. You glance back and see through the doorway to the next gallery a blue clad leg just going out of sight. The woman steps past you, the imperceptible perfume fluttering under your nostrils, and she crosses the gallery with a restrained pacing horse swiftness, disappears into the next.

You feel curiously deprived, not of her looks, but of the argument the two of you were about to have. Undischarged anger of course, but more than that. She at least has paid attention to you. If you weren't worthy to mate with, at least you were worth a fight. But not in comparison to catching up with Tom. Tom, Robby, Jim. All of them more important than you. Well, sure. Naturally. You're a momentary stranger. But these things leave their mark anyway, and that deadly duo, anger and depression, stand between you and the painting, an *oscuro* without *chiaro*. You eye *Nocturne* dully, inhumanly, as if it's nothing more than splotches of color on some treated cloth.

"Barry?"

Once again you refuse to turn. It's no doubt some other Barry required here, and you're not going to be tricked into making a fool of yourself with eager response followed by yet another repulse.

"Barry? Is that you?" A dry, not very penetrating woman's voice, footsteps,

flap, flap, flap, then the voice off to your side. “It is you. Have you gone deaf?”

Cautiously you sneak your eyes leftward. A tall, slouch-shouldered woman; a face with the long practicality of a Winslow Homer fisherman; loose black pants, hard and serviceable, as if she’s about to bait a line, and they’re meant to protect her from hooks, as is her sand colored two-pocket shirt. Bifocals, no make-up, her hair, gathered into a loose pony tail, mostly gray. In short, your cousin Belinda – second cousin once removed that is, on your mother’s side. Ten years older than you, a reserved, overly critical individual, she’s never been one of your favorite relatives. Though you two share certain political and social views, there’s always been some tension between you, that kind of unspoken familial dissonance that arises as much from difference in temperament as from outlook on the way one should live.

But you break into an enormous smile, hook your arm through hers and say, “Belinda, you have no idea how glad I am to see you.”

She says harshly, “I heard that you...”

“Yes, yes. But please, let’s leave it for later. Just tell me, what do you think of this painting?”

Turning our backs to the world at large, we face *Nocturne: Blue and Silver* and stare in silence together a while before beginning to share impressions.

--

Norman Waksler has published fiction in a number of journals, most recently, *Epicenter*, *The Tidal Basin Review*, *The Valparaiso Fiction Review*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Thickjam*, and *Scholars and Rogues*. His most recent story collection, *Signs of Life*, is published by the Black Lawrence Press. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His website is NormanWakslerFiction.com