

Poetry Study Guide

“The Painter Fabritius Begins Work on the Lost *Noli Me Tangere* of 1652”

The title of John Burnside’s poem “The [Painter Fabritius](#) Begins Work on the [Lost *Noli Me Tangere* of 1652](#)” does not only identify the poem; the 13 word title tells a [backstory](#), giving information that would be lost, like the painting in the title, if the reader skips ahead to the poem before finding the backstory.

The title backstory can be broken into four questions. It is important to answer these questions before moving on to the [Poem Overview](#), [Structure and Form](#), [Literary Analysis and Summary](#), and [Literary Devices](#), explaining Burnside’s complex poem.

Title Backstory

Question 1: [Who was the Painter Fabritius?](#)

There were three Dutch painters named Fabritius who lived in the seventeenth century; they were brothers Carel, Barent, and Johannes. Carel Fabritius, a student of Rembrandt’s, is known for his experimentations with light and perspective. Like Carel’s paintings, Burnside’s poem experiments with light and perspective.

Question 2: [What is the *Noli Me Tangere*?](#)

In Christian narratives, this [trope](#) describes the moment when Mary Magdalene meets the newly risen Christ and reaches out for him (John 20.17). Depending on the translation (Latin or Greek), the phrase can mean something like “Touch me not” or “Stop holding on to me.” Many painters depicted the moment that Mary reaches out, and Christ says “*Noli Me Tangere*,” including: Fra Angelico, Martin Schongauer, Fra Bartolomeo, Titian, and Hans Holbein the Younger. Poets also adapted this trope; for example Sir Thomas Wyatt in “Whoso List to Hunt.” Without this trope in the title of Burnside’s poem, the reader would not know that the woman in [Strophe I](#) (line 20) and [Strophe II](#) is Mary (lines 29-54).

Question 3: [How was the painting lost?](#)

Most of Carel’s paintings were destroyed in an explosion of the Delft gunpowder magazine on 12 October 1654. Only about 12 of his paintings survive. Because it was common for artists to paint religious scenes at this time, and because of the popularity of the *Noli Me Tangere* scene, Carel could have painted it, but if he did, the painting does not survive. Burnside invites the fiction that Carel did paint it.

Question 4: [How is the date 1652 important?](#)

How is the date 1652 important? 1652 was two years before the explosion that killed Carel and destroyed most of his paintings. In 1652, Carel would have been 30 years old, a painter reaching back some 1600 years into the past to capture a moment when the newly risen Christ was about the same

age. Like Carel Fabritius in 1652, in 2006 the poet Burnside also reaches back some 350 years into the potential of the moment when Carel could have created a *Noli Me Tangere*.

Poem Overview

“The Painter Fabritius Begins Work on the Lost *Noli Me Tangere* of 1652” explores the haunting contradiction that artists can create meaningful and beautiful art, but neither the artists nor their artworks can fully capture their subjects or their full meaning, in paint, words, or memory.

For the painter Fabritius and the poet Burnside, their subjects and meanings are lost before their work begins; however, this does not mean their work is futile, unexpressive, or unbeautiful. Their paintings, words, and memories remain as ghostlike objects – like ancient Greek urns, seventeenth century paintings, and old family photographs – that mark both the presence of cultures, individuals, and families and their absence.

Structure and Form

“The Painter Fabritius Begins Work on the Lost *Noli Me Tangere* of 1652” is a free verse poem of 135 lines divided into five major sections of varying line numbers.

Free verse has no regular meter or line length, so the words in free verse poetry flow in ways that reflect the poet’s own rhythm and tonality, or the author’s unique style and sound.

In free verse, major poem sections are called strophes rather than stanzas or verses, because the number of lines in each section varies.

Free verse and strophes are part of what allows Burnside to experiment with light and perspective, just like the painter Carel Fabritius did.

In Burnside’s poem, each section or strophe is marked by a Roman numeral from one to five. Strophe means “turning” in Greek, so each Roman numeral turns the reader in a different direction, changing their perceptions and perspectives.

[Strophe I](#) is 28 lines (1-28).

[Strophe II](#) is 25 lines (29-54).

[Strophe III](#) is 20 lines (55-72).

[Strophe IV](#) is 32 lines (73-105).

[Strophe V](#) is 29 lines (106-135).

Literary Analysis and Summary

Strophe I (lines 1-28) describes the creative process of what will be left out and what will be included on a blank canvas or a blank page.

The poet Burnside imagines what might have happened if the painter Fabritius had decided to paint a new take on the old *Noli Me Tangere* trope.

The first line begins with a decision to do without the *Noli Me Tangere* myth that Christ and Mary did not touch when they met on the morning of his resurrection. This decision is reemphasized and clarified in Strophe II: “and this is what we choose to do without/ this testimony: upright men and true/ speaking an authorised version: sexless; untouched” (lines 40-42).

After that decision is made, Burnside imagines Fabritius sketching in the landscape of the garden, starting with the “blue-green and mandarin” light of dawn. Burnside begins with the light because “The painter cares for nothing but the light” (Strophe IV, line 73). Unlike his teacher Rembrandt who favored darker backgrounds, Fabritius is known for complex, lighter backgrounds. Like Fabritius’ paintings, Burnside’s poem flickers with the same cool blue and warm golden light; for example, the “gold light” of dawn in the garden (line 20) to the fire-lit “gold cell of the attic” where Fabritius lives (line 112), and the “blue spark of a fly” flickering into “water, moonshine, flecks of dust” (lines 102-104).

Next, come the unnamed trees and plants with “improbable fruits/ and blossoms” (lines 3-4) where unnamed “patient birds” await (line 4); the trees and plants cast shadows that are personified as holding their breath in anticipation (line 5) of what will happen in this new take on the old *Noli Me Tangere* trope.

While continuing to describe the landscape of the “lost” painting, Burnside acknowledges that an artist, whether painter or poet, draws on their own imagination and experience; their passion and nostalgia infuse the landscapes of their paintings and poems. In this way, standing in front of the easel or sitting in front of the page, no one else is “in the foreground” but them (line 7); they determine the foregrounds, middle grounds, and backgrounds of their paintings and poems. This point is emphasized through two repeated phrases: first, “surely the painter imagined the garden he shows” (line 2) and “surely he imagined it” (line 6); and second, “It seems so much a pretext for the real” and “It seems so much a pretext for the given” (lines 11 and 16). Representation in painting and poetry is a sort of fiction or pretext, a creative but moving inaccuracy that is “less gospel than the brilliant commonplace/ of all we take for granted” (lines 16-17).

Without the title backstory on the *Noli Me Tangere* trope, the “woman and man” (line 20) would be unknown, their names ‘lost’ to the poem. Christ and Mary arrive “at this moment” (line 21) like the painter and poet do: “not by chance, and not quite by design” (lines 21-22) but by a curiosity or “puzzlement” (line 22) that drives them to take their first steps in finding out the limitations that frame what painters and poets can or cannot express (lines 23-25).

In reworking the *Noli Me Tangere*, the painter and the poet challenge readers to consider what art “can and cannot touch” and “what goes unspoken and what must be told” (lines 24-25). Telling, like everything, is “a local sound” (line 26); only those within earshot can hear, so what Christ and Mary talked about and whether or not they touched is only observed by the birds, the shadow and light, trees, flowers, and a beekeeper (lines 4,5, 12, 18-20, and 27). Wearing a veil and shrouded by buzzing bees, the beekeeper would not likely see or hear what happened clearly, if at all.

Standing at the end of Strophe 1 are Christ whose wounds have “closed” but are still apparent and Mary whom Christ had “healed” (line 28). With the landscape roughed out around them, Strophe 1 breaks off, pausing with “this” (line 29). Christ and Mary have this last moment together.

The last line breaks off, like Christ and Mary do. This type of line break off is called enjambment; the “this” is left hanging, incomplete. “This” what?

Strophe II (lines 29-54) resolves the tension of the enjambment with the single word “afterlife” (line 29), to read “this” (line 28) “afterlife” (line 29) or “this afterlife.”

Unlike the authorized versions of the story, Fabritius and Burnside shift the perspective back to Mary and how her firsthand witness has been “retold in altered form” (line 52). No one will believe what she says about meeting Christ in the garden: “Nothing she sees is true until a man/ confirms her story . . . a man to echo everything she says/ a man to write it down and make it holy” (lines 31-32, 34-35). Because of this, “what we hear is always second-hand” (line 36).

In the *Noli Me Tangere* trope, Mary’s story takes on an inaccurate afterlife told by those who did not witness it. This “testimony” of what these men did not see is “what” the painter Fabritius and the poet Burnside “choose to do without” (line 40), because these “upright men and true” spoke an inaccurate but “authorised version: sexless; untouched” (line 42).

The authorized version says “Touch me not” or “Stop holding on to me” to Mary, while allowing Thomas to “dip three fingers in the wound/ to feel the warmth” (lines 50-51). The authorized version also repaints the landscape to include “the empty shroud; the angel in the tomb” (line 48).

Shifting the perspective to Mary highlights just how “much of the whole had been omitted” by the authorized versions (line 54). Through the painter Fabritius, Burnside draws attention to the ways that Mary’s story has been erased, without putting words in her mouth as others have done.

The artist and the poet know “what they can and cannot touch,/ what goes unspoken and what must be told” (Strophe I, lines 24-25).

Strophe III (lines 55-72) directly challenges the *Noli Me Tangere* trope that “the dead cannot be touched;/ nothing is carried over, nothing is held” (lines 55-56). Such a perspective is both soulless (lines 61-62) and uninformed of how different forms of memory work.

Those who are long dead remain, persisting in DNA, in paintings, in poetry, in spirituality, and in memory. In these ways, the dead touch living things every day: “as seeds remember trees, eggs conjure flight” (line 65).

Mortality is built into living beings; that memory is stored for future use: “tendon and bone remembering decay” (line 64). This knowledge of “how the spirit brings itself/ to step aside” from the body (lines 61-62) affirms that – while the soul may lose touch with the body it was part of – the soul goes on.

As something dies, the soul separates becoming a “newborn stranger . . . away to other facts, unhindered by desire” (lines 67-68). Burnside imagines souls to be “some bright parallel,/ a purer logic drawing out the form” that someone cradles in their “chest with each held breath” (Strophe IV, lines 85-87).

As newborn strangers, souls are open to sensation: the smell of smoke, the sound of a song, the clang of bells (lines 70-72). So they are not unhindered by desire, though their desire may take a different form.

The “lost” painting of Fabritius and Burnside’s poem document what the authorized versions do not.

Strophe IV (lines 73-105) describes how painters and poets chase souls and memories, trying “to catch a glimpse/ of how the soul continues, how it steps/ from one life to another, almost touched/ by what it leaves behind” (lines 78-81). This is how Fabritius and Burnside rework the *Noli Me Tangere* trope.

Like Mary, the painter and the poet are touched by the memory of a moment that leaves them behind; they cannot grasp it, but they feel it; this feeling inspires their art.

In Burnside’s poem, the self and the soul are tethered, until death, when the soul moves on. If the self is a noun, the soul is a simile: “what soul there is/ is like a voice before it starts to speak” (lines 96-97). In this way, the soul is a person’s potential. The painter Fabritius feels “that other self” (line 85) or potential, and Burnside tries to realize how this potential goes on through another medium: poetry.

The title date of 1652 is poignant, as it is just two years before the painter Fabritius’ death at 32 years of age. Burnside considers how the painter’s soul potential continues on in various forms, recognizable by the light and perspective Fabritius was known for: cat, bird, spider, fly, water, moonshine, and dust. Each transition punctuated both with flickering light and “a smaller goodbye” (line 105).

Strophe V (lines 106-135) focuses on the moment when the painter Fabritius got his inspiration for the *Noli Me Tangere* painting, which “he’d almost abandoned” (line 107). Like Mary, he tries to approach the apparition he sees, and she vanishes.

He has neither had the time nor the inspiration to work on it until “one hard December morning: not quite dawn” (line 110). With his neighbors asleep, Fabritius makes tea in his attic room, and seeks inspiration. His unspoken question is how to paint Mary. What does she look like?

Fabritius recalls a time “he saw a girl/ on the frost-whitened rink of the green” (lines 108-109). These “ghosts” he sees might be inspiration, and he has not seen this particular ghost before (lines 113-116).

Like Mary in the garden, Fabritius tries to get closer (lines 118-119), and she vanishes, like Christ did. “Nothing was there” (line 123). Yet this absence touches Fabritius enough to set to work on the “lost” *Noli Me Tangere* painting.

Unlike in the authorized versions, Fabritius would not say *Noli Me Tangere* to this “half-girl; half-frost” apparition, should she ever return. He would say the reverse. Her potential return is another “resurrection waiting to begin/ in flesh and bone, in touch and self-forgetting” (lines 134-135).

Tragically Fabritius did not live to see this resurrection, like Mary did. If he did, the painting documenting it was “lost.” Burnside, however, is a “relict of this fire” (line 103), helping Fabritius to return not in the form of a painter, but in the words of a poet.

Literary Devices

Backstory: History leading up to the current plot.

Ekphrasis: Something written about a real or imagined work of art.

Enjambment: Incomplete syntax at the end of the line; this creates tension, by holding the meaning until the next line.

Free verse: Has no regular rhyme or meter.

Strophe: Means “turning” in Greek; it describes the sections of free verse poems.

Trope: A trope is like a riff, loop, or phrase that goes viral, inspiring other artists to repurpose, creating their own new takes.