

Nature Morte

Nineteen ninety-eight, already more than fifteen years ago. Writer then age fifty-three, recently finished with a second book of nonfiction about the Pacific. Thinking he'd had his say about warm ocean, he became obsessed with representations of the female nude. Voraciously reading academic and feminist discourse about such art, he thought he'd write essays about controversial paintings and photographs, take on the intense arguments then prevalent.

A friend in Honolulu, learning the writer had never been to a strip club, offered to be his guide. All for art! Writer promptly showing his ignorance by ordering scotch. Risible, in joints where you nursed your one beer.

Strip clubs weren't the writer's thing—he felt sorry for the women, couldn't stand sight of the patrons, or to be one of them. But then it occurred to him that he could do what visual artists do. He'd "paint" figure models in words: these sketches would illuminate how he read the works of art he was discussing. And so it began. Despite many sessions with models and pages of notes, however, this project never materialized. Instead, the writer started a novel in which photographs two lovers take of themselves are the engine and record of their passion.

During the writer's study of images of the female form, he came across a late-nineteenth-century photograph of a young French woman. A beautiful nude, and, inescapably, image of

someone long since no longer alive. Of course, photographs are always a record of something past, if only just past. Perhaps having survived a heart procedure in that period brought this home to the writer. But there it was—the young woman’s great beauty, and that she was long dead. Any photograph thus a still life, *nature morte*, in French—dead life.

Recently, this was again made clear to the writer when he was given a picture of his parents he’d not seen before. Though the writer recalls a Kodak Brownie box camera during his childhood, he doesn’t remember his family much using it. Nor, so far as he knows, are there even ten photographs of his two parents together. No wedding photos, for instance. When at eighteen, just married, his mother broke with her own mother and her mother’s relatives—forever, as it turned out—perhaps she destroyed them. But also no photographs of the writer’s parents together in their twenties or thirties. None, though each had studio portraits of themselves done by noted Boston photographer Fabian Bachrach.

About this snapshot. The license plate on the car reads 49 MASS.1949. The writer’s mother is thirty-nine, his father forty-five. They’re vacationing on Nantucket. They’ve been married more than twenty years, have four children, the youngest age one. His mother’s a celebrated performer doing lieder concerts and theatre, a poet soon to publish the first of more than thirty books. Professor of medicine, his father has recently announced a pioneering discovery in the chemotherapy of leukemia, is building the first hospital in the world for the care of children with cancer.

The two people in this photograph are tall and strong, standing close together. His left arm along her side, hand on her forearm. In coat and tie—even on vacation!—he’s looking across at

her with bemused affection. She's gazing past him into middle distance, smiling, confident, happy. This is how they've posed, very much who they are.

The writer was five in 1949, these people younger than he recalls. His visual memory dates from later on, when he's perhaps ten, when they are older.

What to add? The writer finds it hard to believe his father died forty years ago, his mother nearly thirty years ago. Sometimes jokes he must have dreamed them. Or that surely they've been gone long enough that they, as in a game of hide and seek, must now return.

In this photo, the writer's father has twenty-four years to live, the writer's mother thirty-five years. Neither can know this, though both are all too familiar with mortality. Starting soon after they married, his mother survived tuberculosis and years of semi-invalidism, and his father's vocation as pathologist meant a quest to save life by the study of disease and death.

"Dramatic irony": we the audience understand a situation in a way the characters do not. While Sophocles' Oedipus searches everywhere for who's responsible for the misery in Thebes, spectators understand he should be looking closer to home. For the writer at seventy, to witness his parents' vitality and affection in this photograph taken more than six decades ago is to see them as he could not have viewed them as a child. Also, however, to see them as they could not have seen themselves. At the moment of this photograph, among the things his parents do not know is how they will age, how they will die—all that their strength and love cannot, will not, spare them.



About *The Peregrine*

Several days ago, writer up as usual around 6:00 a.m.. Eight hours later, kind of ready for a nap. Instead, his weekly twenty-minute walk to the University of California campus. Office hours at 2:30, then a three-hour seminar. He likes to get there by 2:00, sit outside Wheeler Hall for a few minutes watching the flow of students. Infants or grammar school-age children rarely seen, and only a few of the old(er), of whom the writer is surely one. The age-segregated country of the college-age. A foreign land, though so familiar. Exotic, coming to it from “off campus...”

Toward the end of seminar, the writer handed out Xerox copies of the introduction to J.A. Baker’s *The Peregrine*. The fourteen students then read aloud a paragraph or two each. Seriatim, round and round the seminar table. Good to hear the words spoken, and from each of their voices.

Baker’s book describes a single year of a long obsession with the peregrines near his home in eastern England: “Wherever he goes, this winter, I will follow him. I will share the fear, and the exaltation, and the boredom, of the hunting life. I will follow him till my predatory human shape no longer darkens in terror the shaken kaleidoscope of colour that stains the deep fovea of his brilliant eye. My pagan head shall sink into the winter land, and there be purified.”

And, “Cold air rises from the ground as the sun goes

down. The eye-burning clarity of the light intensifies. The southern rim of the sky glows to a deeper blue, to pale violet, to purple, then thins to grey. Slowly the wind falls, and the still air begins to freeze. The solid eastern ridge is black; it has a bloom on it like the dust on the skin of a grape. The west flares briefly. The long, cold amber of the afterglow casts clear black lunar shadows. There is an animal mystery in the light that sets upon the fields like a frozen muscle that will flex and wake at sunrise.”

Baker must have been about forty in 1967 when the book was published. His first, though it seems he’d been preparing for it for years. Praised on publication, *The Peregrine* was nonetheless not well known in the United States, often out of print. The writer encountered it in the early 1970s, both at his mother’s suggestion and, more insistently, because of the woman he then lived with. Together they spent un-clocked time on ranches and beaches and in remote rural towns, wandering, wandering, a tribe of two. In those years, *The Peregrine* was one of her touchstones, articulating how intensely she wanted to be able to be in and to perceive the natural world. Baker’s book was the kind of company she yearned to keep, to be equal to.

The Peregrine, thought of which always brings the writer back to their time together. To a story he’s still telling himself, as if to get it right, make it right.

When she and the writer met, she greatly valued that he was already a published author of nonfiction. During the seven years they were together, he wrote his first two works of short fiction, working hard at his *métier*, taking what seemed to him great risks. But, though she never put it in these terms, for her neither book measured up to *The Peregrine*. Baker, of course, had the exaltation of writing about—identifying with; anthropomorphizing—a wild

creature. The writer, however, had as his obsession fallen angels, human beings mired in the here and now.

Still, the writer couldn't disagree with her. Despite larger-world confirmation of critical praise and fellowships, he hadn't set out to have a literary career, aspired to something more. And Baker, in *The Peregrine*, had written the book of a lifetime.