Two Women Drinking Coffee

Diane Moroff
TWO WOMEN DRINKING COFFEE

Though eye to mouth’s the usual link, a yen for the lemons or liquor on Vuillard’s table, this time it’s eyes to fingers, which tickle and need a good rub; he wants to touch to see if touch will turn a line of lime-green (the hem of linen patting a woman’s knee), to a memory of rabbits in a field from the story his daughter penned like a fence on her bedroom wall, which he can’t understand how he’s forgotten, and knows he should remember

Sleepy in the room’s flush humidity, a younger woman forgets herself and tips forward as if to press glass against canvas with enough pressure to unleash any moisture still in the desert oils; then it’s rimy recollection of a game of Statues, when they spun each other in the green light of early evening into whatever they wanted to be—ferry-captain or fire-eater, say—though the real labor was to resist bath and bed of grass growing dark, easy in their ignorance of this first fall to shapes their lives might fail to keep

But with few failures left, a man old before anything else, and dressed politely in his brown suit for strangers who part the sidewalk, is grateful he can’t touch as the painting startles this morning; through spotted and soiled glasses, he sees what he missed last time: the arousing curve of his girlfriend’s backside, a three-quarter view in muted collage for bone sunk beneath a perfect wave of fat, beneath the only skin on her body un-freckled, and almost green, like the green in flesh that painters see

Olive green for the guard, so it’s the flesh and oil of fruit he imagines Vuillard has turned to wallpaper, and the women’s frocks are mustard, beer-bitter, and coarse at their edges; every day he nibbles at what the painter has left, reaches for the bowl of sweet coffee haunting table and toast, stews over meddlers elsewhere in the house, and listens to the women’s languor. And just before closing, he does what no one else can: warbles bush little ladies, then kisses their fat, sad cheeks a very saucy goodnight.