Spring 1979

Two Women with Mangoes

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TWO WOMEN WITH MANGOES

One of them seems to offer her breasts as if they were fruit, though she holds the canoe-shaped bowl of mangoes like a gift received. Her eyes dart off to the right, one hand curving around the bowl’s rim as though to guard what it presents. The other woman holds a small bouquet of pinkish-white flowers, presses them between her palms. In that green dress which exposes only one breast, she looks even more chaste than her friend. Is it correct to call them friends? Certainly the wash of green and yellow in the background is not friendly, implying turbulent weather or a growth of weeds. If these women and their island offer nothing we could say we need, then what should we ask for?

Gauguin, at 17, joined the navy and traveled to Brazil. When he left his wife, five children and impressionism for Brittany and then Tahiti, he must have been aroused by what he found at first—the coppery skin, the bodies uncorseted. But these women do not look like lovers, either for himself or for each other. If the fruit they hold and the breasts they show are anything to give, they’re not for us: we don’t know what to ask for. Perhaps their pose was Gauguin’s own rendition of two women, two refusals—the head of one turned slightly toward the other, as if she were about to speak, or had just spoken.