

Adapted

❧ *Carol Emshwiller* ❧

DID YOU SEE my signal in the window, my cornstalks? I wrapped the bottoms of them in brown paper because I don't have the right sort of vase anymore. All mine are too blue or too green or white.

You know, once I wanted to put the whole back yard into corn and I said I would bring the stalks in to put in the vases, for why in the world, I said then, are cornstalks less beautiful than flowers? They are green thick and a big bunch of them in a house would have a wildish look of abundance and when they dried and turned tan they would be like sand, like some of the desert brought inside. Who made all these silly rules about beauty? I said once.

But I was too busy that year to dig up the backyard grass, except for a little patch like most everyone had, for lettuce and tomatoes. You were one that summer and I was chasing after you. You were always bringing the inside out and the outside in and, even if I felt you were right to do so, I swept out the sand every night and brought the toys inside again. Sometimes I found my spoons in the sand pile and now and then something from my underwear drawer. Once I found a vase from the top shelf over the refrigerator. There was nothing that was out of your reach. You climbed like a monkey though you could hardly walk.

I think not planting that corn was a big mistake, then,

when we had our first house. I should have done it, time or no time. I should have not swept out sand a few nights and dug up that tough grass instead, because the real reason I didn't do it wasn't because of the time at all, but because I thought it would look peculiar to have the whole back yard in corn. I thought the neighbors might not like it. I thought they might think I was strange.

Well, I was strange then, but strangeness is not so easy to keep. I shut my eyes and opened my hands as wide as I could and, though it seemed to cling, little by little, year by year, it fell away.

There was a time, when I was your age, when I liked being different. I used to like to look into a mirror and I even did not mind my long, thin nose and sharp chin. I would wonder about myself, staring into my own eyes, and every time I did it I would feel a kind of excitement. I could see how different I was, and I could see a look about me (it seemed to come more and more as I grew older) of something going to happen. I didn't know at all what it could be but sometimes I would think of it as flying. I could fly if I wanted to, I'd think, only what I meant was . . . well, not flying at all but something I could do that had to do with this floating feeling inside me. I knew of children who had jumped from trees thinking that they could fly, but I never tried that. Though I would say to myself, and be sure of it, I can fly, that was not what I meant.

I was rather proud of my looks then, though I wouldn't stand up straight and look at people. "The spittin' image of your father," my mother used to say, always with a kind of fear in her voice and a kind of anger. My father had not been seen or heard from since two months after she met him. "Two months and eleven days of bliss," she would say fiercely and that was all she ever did say about him.

I think I first learned from her to hunch my shoulders and hang my head, though that got worse later. Mother was more embarrassed by my height and my nose than she was of my slumping, so she never told me to stand up straight.

And then, when I was nineteen, your father came, blond and perfect and brown that summer, the crisp, yellow hairs on his chest and down his legs, making him a man edged in gold, in the sun on the beach. I couldn't believe he'd look at me at all, though big eyes were in the fashion then. I slumped, I wilted, and I hung my head. "You have the most perfect eyes I've ever seen," he'd say, but I got so I hated to

look at myself in the mirror. I always wore low heels then, for even though your father was tall, I was taller. And the day before he asked me to marry him I dyed my hair so it was jet black and not a kind of greyish half-black. I always felt it helped and I've kept it this way ever since. You've never seen me with my real hair color. It's like yours.

So we got married and you came along and your father was not like my father. Handsome as he was, certainly handsomer than *my* father, he stuck to me and to his job managing the little grocery store, and soon we got that first house, and that was my chance, really, to be myself for the first time. I was free of my mother and free, by then, from your father in a certain, different way. I could have planted the back yard all in corn. I don't think your father would have cared so much, but I planted tomatoes and lettuce and then rose bushes and zinnias. In the windows I hung green curtains with a white and pink pattern. I remember just once I said that I rather felt like having a bright red ceiling. "At least in one room," I said. And your father said, "And why not paint the floor black and paste silver stars on it," and he laughed, so I did the ceilings cream downstairs and light green upstairs. It almost seemed I purposely did them the colors I disliked the most. But after a while I didn't mind them and the ache I had to have just one red ceiling went away.

Things went along as in any family then, and you grew bigger and went to school and didn't take so much time and I decided to take things up like the other young mothers did and a strange thing happened.

I had decided to try some art and I enrolled in a beginning class in an adult education art course. After the class had gotten into it a bit, the teacher would take us outside in fair weather to do landscapes.

One time we were sitting on a small hill doing a group of young, rather uninteresting willow trees along a new artificial pool. It was hot and there were quite a few ants about, crawling over our legs and getting in the watercolor boxes. The others were restless, talking and getting up to shake off an ant or two and after a while most of them walked across the park to a little drug store to get iced tea.

They asked me to go with them, but I was already started on my picture and I said, no, rather rudely, I think, though I usually take great pains to be sweet to people. You know how I am. I think ever since I realized I was different I've

tried hard to be sweet to others. Well, this time I know I was rude, but this time I didn't care. I had begun to like the stiff, new-looking scene. I had begun to see it in a different way. It was as if it were all moved much closer and I was looking at tiny details and this was an open spot in a forest instead of an open spot in a suburban housing development. I felt thick trees all about in the place of the low, long stores of the corner shopping-center and the split-level houses behind them. This was an oasis of sunlight in a jungle instead of an oasis of shade, and I began to paint it like that, not thinking what colors were right or that the detailed lines I made with my blue-inked ball point pen of the veins in the leaves and the texture of the bark and the bugs could only be made up because I certainly couldn't see them. I felt as if I could.

The others came back, but I had set up my things to the side and no one came to see what I had done. I didn't wake up to it myself until I had finished. I knew it was finished without even taking a last, long look and I turned to wash my brushes and shut up my box. I was thinking of getting an iced tea for myself before we left though I didn't care for iced tea and I really wasn't feeling so very hot. Heat has never bothered me, you know, but of course you do know, for it has never bothered you either.

And then I turned to get my purse and I caught sight of the painting out of the corner of my eye and I looked at it straight on then, really looked, for the first time, and I felt a jolt as if everything inside me had suddenly stood up while I was still sitting there. I've only felt that way one other time in my life and that was yesterday.

The picture was a tangle of blue pen lines and then browns and reds and dots of yellow. It was still a picture of those five young willows and the stiff lawn sloping to the pool, but one sensed the dark jungle close around it. It seemed a scene of mathematical orderliness and lemon-cool sunlight in the midst of hot chaos. In the corner of the foreground there was the branch of a pinish tree. The only part of the picture that was green, almost black. It was done in great detail, even the shapes of the needles drawn with those spider-webbing blue lines, but I had never seen a tree or needles quite like that ever before.

I quickly hid the painting under some sheets of fresh paper

and when the teacher asked to see it, I said I hadn't been able to do anything that day because it was too hot and because of the ants. When I got home I tore up the painting and put it in the garbage and I didn't take any more art classes. I even didn't take music, though that was what I would have liked to try next.

I tried some history courses at the college then, and later Psychology, but after that art class it seemed I couldn't get interested. I wasn't learning anything that I really cared about at all, and I kept having the feeling that everything I was learning and memorizing so carefully was only partly true. Then I decided to go on a reading program. I joined two book clubs and I read all the bestsellers, but there wasn't a single book that I could say I enjoyed except one silly little book, not very well written, about a girl named Sarania who thought she could fly, but in the end she found she couldn't at all.

And then, but I'm sure you remember, I decided to go for swimming lessons. How I loved that. I got caught up in it without even thinking and I'd come home late and we'd have spam or a can of hash for supper. I hardly noticed what I was doing. There was that feeling in me again of something going to happen. I felt like a caterpillar would feel if he could think about butterflies.

It was when the pool was cold that I loved it best. I would imagine I was diving into a deep, black, mountain lake and I would swim and swim while the others would shiver. "How can you do that?" they'd say, and "It's always the thin ones that are tough."

I took you sometimes on Saturdays. You were ten then. I guess those were the last times we felt close to each other. You learned so fast everyone was amazed. You were like a little seal with just your nose out of water and your black eyes bright and your long, dusty-colored hair dark with water and plastered close to your head. We would swim together to the bottom of the deepest end and blow bubbles at each other and then come up and laugh. You, with your sharp little nose and long, thin hands and feet, you were beautiful to me then. And, because I looked like you, I almost thought I was beautiful too.

But after a while your father complained about the meals and the dust about the house. "Now and then I wouldn't mind," he said, "but it's been everyday for over a month."

And I began to think again and I began to have the same feeling I had when I painted that strange picture and I realized my feelings about swimming were the same but had come on me slowly so that I hadn't noticed them.

I stopped swimming then and I wouldn't let you go either. You never would look at me after that, straight into my eyes like we used to when our heads would pop up out of the water and we'd take a big breath and laugh. You've always held your eyes away since then, and you took on my slouching walk, my hanging head, and I, I never told you to stand up straight.

It was after the swimming I began to do nothing. "I guess I'm just a housewife," I'd tell my friends and laugh and I did try to keep a nice house. I always have, tried, but it was even harder to do the housework when I had no classes to think about, even ones I didn't particularly like, and not much to do with you. About all I did for you in those days was to chauffeur you to your piano lessons and back. How you hated the piano, as much as or more than I did when I was your age. Remember how you begged to play the oboe at school? And your father said, "Why not, even if it is peculiar for a girl. After all, someone in the band has to play it." But I said no, and your father was used to me then and didn't bother to ask why. He knew I wouldn't be able to give a good reason but would only get upset and talk nonsense.

You didn't know, but every morning, first thing in those days, I'd take three aspirin. That was before Dr. Wilton got me the tranquilizers. Somehow I would get through each day, portion it out in cigarettes and coffee and aspirin.

Then I got what I felt was a wonderful idea. I would have my face changed. That, I thought, would put an end to my strange thoughts of being different, those crazy night-time ideas that I could fly or do something equivalent to that. If my face was like other people's, then, I felt, I would have a new beginning and really *be* like other people instead of pretending. I could relax then and just be my new self.

So then I got that job in the department store because I couldn't ask your father for all that money. I was quite happy—not with the job, but just sure that I was going in the right direction and that things would soon be better.

I worked almost that whole year and then (you were thirteen and it was spring) I went to New York for three weeks and had my nose changed and a little taken off my chin. I had

them widen my nostrils so no one could say they were either wide or thin and some taken off the end of my nose so that no one could say it was either long or short.

When I came back, it was the first of May, you gave no sign that I was changed. You never spoke of it and you never looked at me.

But your father loved my new nose. He said it was the most perfect nose he'd ever seen. He said it matched my eyes now and that he couldn't stop looking at me with my perfect nose and perfect eyes. And I could see that, for he was always looking and pulling me to him. "It's like having a new wife," he said. "A brand new, beautiful wife."

It was like the honeymoon again for a few weeks, but I remember that first night after I came home I got out of bed alone around midnight and went to look at the moon and there was a dog barking in the park and our young fruit trees, just in blossom, looked frail and silly to me because I was thinking of the forest, and I forgot, looking out at the night like that, that I was only tall like my father now. I forgot I no longer had his face and I felt again that peculiar thing about me. I could fly if I wanted to, I thought. I could fly. Yet I didn't really want to, and never *had* wanted to except sometimes at night like this. And just as I was thinking it, then, I remembered my new nose and chin and I stopped looking out of the window and curled up on the floor and cried for a long time. I've never cried again, not even yesterday.

It was soon after that Dr. Wilton got me tranquilizers, I had quit my job. I did not enjoy it for its own sake and extra money meant nothing to me, so, about three weeks after I had my face changed, I went to see Dr. Wilton and he said I was fine and got me the tranquilizers.

And then I sort of discovered nuts. Of course I'd had nuts before, and always liked them, but now they became my passion like candy is to some people or alcohol to others. I could not be without a box of mixed nuts near me and I ate as I worked and I grew into this thing I am, this giant, tall *and* fat, my perfect nose looking small and my carefully carved chin hardly there at all. And my real self, tall and very thin and long nosed and with mud-grey hair, my real self seemed like a dead twin sister. One who had some great talent that was never realized. I took a tranquilizer every morning and every afternoon and I laughed over bridge with neighbors and I

said, "I guess I'm just the house wife type," but I don't think I will ever say that anymore.

You see, yesterday I saw a man and seeing him was like everything sitting up inside me just like that time when I painted that picture. It was like love, too, love at first sight, only it wasn't exactly love.

He was very, very tall, and thin as you are, he had a long nose and sharp chin and his hair was the color of soft, dry dirt . . . like yours.

I held the grocery bundle and leaned back against the car. All the years seemed to fall away and I was back before I met your father, and wonderful things were going to happen, things I could see when I looked in the mirror, and this was it. This was the time.

He was standing on our walk and he seemed to be looking about the house for some sign, looking at each window as if to find a room inside with a bright red ceiling, or cornstalks in brown pots showing at the windows, or perhaps a yellow pane of glass in one. And he looked at the lawn as if searching for the little round suns of the dandelions, but I had pulled them all out. He looked up and down the street then, as if for some other house that might have some sign, and he took a paper out of his pocket and looked from it back to our house, and then he turned to go.

I took a grip on my grocery bag and started towards him, my legs like willow branches, and I walked right to him looking into his eyes. I asked with my eyes, I begged, but I could not bring myself to speak. I kept thinking, in a minute he'll know me, in one moment more. *We*, I thought. I can say *We*. I'm his kind. But I walked up to him and past him and he didn't recognize me. Dressed in my fat and my dyed hair and my new face I passed him. He looked right at me, my whole surface, and didn't recognize me at all.

Going up the steps I saw him walking away, on down the street, watching houses. "Father," I whispered, though he was younger than I (more your age) and seemed also husband, brother, son. I went into the house and sat a long time in the hall and I could not cry. Then your father came in, and you later, and I made supper and we ate and afterwards you studied and practiced the piano and your father read and we heard the news on the radio and we went to bed and then got up again in the morning and ate breakfast as we have done and done and done. But I did get cornstalks and put them in the window. I don't know anymore if it's the right sort of

sign. I have tried to think in other ways so long that my mind no longer flies away of itself.

But it's for you, and you'll know what to do. I knew better at your age than ever again. And he, or someone like him (our kind), will come back, sometime for sure. And when he comes, or someone like him, I want you to go with him and I'll stay. I'll stay with your father and be what I've made myself into. But you, Darling, sit up. Don't slump so any more.