

Basil King

LEARNING TO DRAW/A HISTORY

SHORT STORIES

Antoine Watteau came from Belgium, he settled in Paris, and died of consumption at the age of thirty-seven. He loved the theater, the minuet. Watteau painted gardens, actors, skies without rain, courtiers... We see them acting, playing. He shows us a silken torso, nature's anomaly? Experience the gestures of a feather, Pan's territory? Nature's anomaly? Sing *La Vie en Rose*.

Pause

I knew a woman who sang in French with her back towards the audience. She wore a knitted cap and a pale blue coat and held her handbag on her right arm. She was sixty-five or maybe seventy. In her left hand, she held the mike. Martha and I heard her in a restaurant one New Year's Day. She sang "La Vie en Rose." In her handbag she carried what all migrants carry - the past. She will not face the future. She sings "La Vie en Rose." Her voice does not betray her; she hides under her coat a path to where brambles, thorns, and uncultivated grasses lie. Her experience has made her angry and she wants to empty the museums of their artifacts, strip their walls, wash their floors, and return all the stolen properties.

Pause

There was an old man who sold potatoes in the Essex Street Market in the early 1960s. He never smiled. He might have been born in Europe; he might have been born in America. His long face looked like a potato. El Greco elongated the flesh. El Greco might have been born in Greece and he might have been born a Jew.

I first painted "The Potato Man" in 1970. In the 1970s, I smoked three packs a day. In the 1970s, Soutine and Giorgione shook their heads when I told them that the old man had no teeth and that his eyes, small and grey and watery, hadn't always been that way. When he was a little boy, his big generous ears covered the sides of his face. Later, when he played ball, did he play ball? I painted him in 1988 as "Herman the Ballplayer" - as a ballplayer who wore his uniform as a judge or cleric wear their robes. By the 1980s, I was giving the canvas more than one or two sizings. By the 1980s I had stopped smoking.

My potato man never played piano. He accepted the fact that the potato originated in America. In 1995 I did another painting of him.

The Moon had me tread lightly on the path behind the trees. There brambles, thorns, and uncultivated grasses say what the young Essenes said as they trekked into the desert to cleanse themselves, "There shall be no more lies." But I have to say, this is not my experience, El Greco might have read the Cabbala and he might have adopted the occult; he might have believed the words of the Essenes: "God will deliver Israel. He will refine for Himself the human frame by rooting out the spirit of falsehood from the bounds of the flesh." The distance between El Greco and Watteau is measured in experience. Black Mountain. Oranges. "La Vie en Rose." Watteau invented French painting.

Get rich. Be rich. Get rich. Be rich.

Liberty show me your breast. Show me justice. Show me *TEMPEST*.
Giorgione's farewell to his loved ones.

Pause

The ballplayers were on the field warming up. As they exercised they performed a Martha Graham dance. It was then that I saw Martha Graham, with her arms raised out in front of her. She was stretching her back, and had her left leg extended behind her. She was looking fierce. She turned to Nijinsky who was leaping as he had done many times before. He put his hand on Merce Cunningham, Viola Farber, and Ralph Lemon. The stadium was slowly filling up. Japanese tap dancers and students with fans were slowly filling the stadium.

The Pitcher turns to first base, checks third, looks at the catcher, turns. Beethoven wrote into his Pastoral, "Democracy is yet to come." The runner returns to first base. Nerves twitch, who will falter? The Pitcher? The runners? Or the man at the plate? The Pitcher stretches, kicks his leg and releases the ball. Beethoven wrote into his Pastoral, "Democracy is yet to come." Liberty showing one breast sails down the avenue and strikes. The batter having swung and missed steps away from the plate. Following the avenue that has been made by avoiding justice the batter recovers his dignity and returns to the plate.

The Pitcher raises his arms. I draw a left leg. The batter looks around the field. Pastoral, French painting began with Watteau. Pastoral, the Pitcher's arms are above his head. Pastoral, the city between the trees is an avenue where I strut my art. The Pitcher does not look as the batter I draw rights a leg. The Pitcher's body is coiled I draw his back. The Pitcher releases his intentions, I draw his face, the Pitcher is trying not to think, not yet, he will wait. He must control himself, and the batter, and every player positioned on the field. Sixth inning, no outs with a man on third the Pitcher's team is winning 6-4. The Pitcher reads the catcher's sign. He waves his head, turns to third base, and looks at the runner. The third baseman looks like a bullfrog squatting over the base. The Pitcher leans over and takes another sign. First base, third base, an avenue stretches before him. He sees three people sitting having lunch in the middle of the avenue. A second woman in a shift stands in a pool toying with the water. Behind her the avenue continues an indefinite length.

Get rich. Be rich. Get rich. Be rich.

Luncheon on the Grass, 1863

An engraving after Raphael's *Judgment of Paris* encouraged Manet to use the same arrangement for his three central figures. Like Giorgione and Titian, Manet lived in a city. Manet in Paris and Giorgione and Titian in Venice. Manet's painting has two men clothed and seated. The third member of the trio is a naked woman. She holds her right hand on her chin; her right elbow rests on her right knee. A mature woman, she is no *Olympia*, she services no one. Is someone taking a photograph of her? It's hard to tell because she looks out and we are forced to look at her. Her white body, her intelligent face, her knowing eyes. Oh, darling, you, like Bizet's *Carmen*, know: Purity is the curse of the twentieth century.

Why would any woman go out to the countryside and sit naked with two men who are fully clothed? Why would two men who are fully clothed sit and talk to each other when there is a naked woman between them? Is it because they have finished eating their picnic? And what of the other woman she has some clothes on. And she's standing in a pool of water. There is a boat, and you can see by its oars that it might have been used a few hours ago. It's peaceful now. But is it? There's a plot to all of this. Watteau taught the French to be cheeky and always have good table manners.

Bizet's *Carmen* would consider all of this a waste of time. Sitting naked with two men who are talking about things that she is not concerned about. *Carmen* wants to be paid attention to. She takes what she wants and gives in return everything that she has. She wants results.

There's a mystery novel quality to all of this. We can guess one of the outcomes. The women will put on their clothes and they will clean up the remains of the picnic, and they will all go home. But what if there is another plot? The woman in Manet's painting is looking at Edgar Allan Poe. He knows she likes being photographed. He's seen prints of her that Nadar has taken. He knows that she is unknown to her own time. When she crosses the street she is seen as a monster. She is gorgeous. She is a woman who faces the future. She is a modern woman. She can read and write and she is not afraid to go home alone. She knows Poe grieves, that he asks questions that he can't answer. She would love him if he would have her, but she knows Bizet committed suicide because the opera, *Carmen*, failed.

Pause

We came home and put down our bags and opened up the house and went into the garden and sat in the green chairs that surround the green table. The grass needed cutting and some of the potted plants needed water.

Except for an unusual number of crows screaming, everything seemed the same. Martha commented maybe this was the year of the crows, and we went inside to unpack.

The phone rang and Martha answered it. It was the young woman with the baby, who lives on the top floor of Carol's house. She and her baby look like a medieval mother and child. She is a small woman and her baby looks large. Family photos. There is one of my mother holding me. We are smiling and I look large, my mother also being a small woman, we have taken on the appearance of an icon. The young woman on the phone said there was a crow with its leg caught in our old watering can. The crow was hanging Tarot-like by one leg. It was the Hanged Man, and it was fighting to get loose. I had no intention of touching it. The young woman said that she had been watching the crows all day, that the crow that couldn't fly had been stumbling around the gardens, getting through the cracks in the fences. She thought it was a young bird because the other crows were larger, and they had been diving at the cats to keep them out of the gardens or from walking on the tops of the fences.

We went out to dinner, and when we returned it was dark. The next morning, the crow was hunched next to the wall, with its head between its legs. I decided again to leave it alone. Hours later, I saw the crow flapping around and I thought it was getting better and would fly away. But it didn't. Again, it began to stumble over the plants and go from garden to garden. I said, "It will die overnight," but it didn't. And the next morning, I chased the crow with a long stick into the garden next door and boarded up the cracks with stones. We went out. When we came back that afternoon, the crow was in our garden again, stumbling over the lilies and crushing the impatiens. I again chased the crow, this time up against a fence and there I crushed it. I killed it. It was the third day, and I killed it.

There are no photographs of this unholy happening, where a young mother witnessed what she thought were parents trying to protect their young. I didn't document my thoughts. But I know I didn't want to kill the crow. I wanted something else, something else to happen, something Dada-like to objectify, to detach me. I wanted the crows in the trees to surprise me. I wanted religion, all religions to mean what they say. I wanted patience. I wanted to wake up and say I had been dreaming. But instead.

Two young women are arguing.
They are buying a loft.

Which one will buy the left side.
Which one will buy the right side.

