

# How to be both

A Novel



# Ali

# Smith

Man Booker Prize Finalist

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# ali smith

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## How to be both



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# Contents

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*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

*Permissions*

*Dedication*

## How to be Both

*Eyes - Camera*

*Camera - Eyes*

*Acknowledgements and Thanks*

*Other Books by This Author*

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For Frances Arthur

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and everyone who made h

to keep in mir

Sheila Hamilto

walking work of a

and for Sarah Woo

arti

Who says stories reach everybody in the same order?

This novel can be read in two ways and this e-book provides you with both.

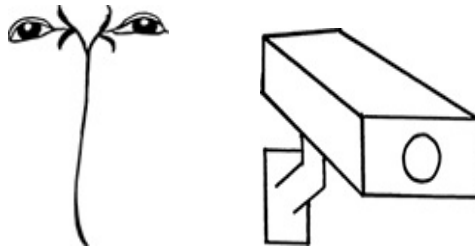
In one version, EYES precedes Camera.

In the other, CAMERA precedes EYES.

The stories are exactly the same in both versions, just in a different order.

Eyes, camera. Camera, eyes.

The choice is yours.



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Et ricordare suplicando a quella che io sono francescho  
del cossa il quale a sollo fatto quili tri canpi verso  
lanticamara :  
Francesco del Cossa

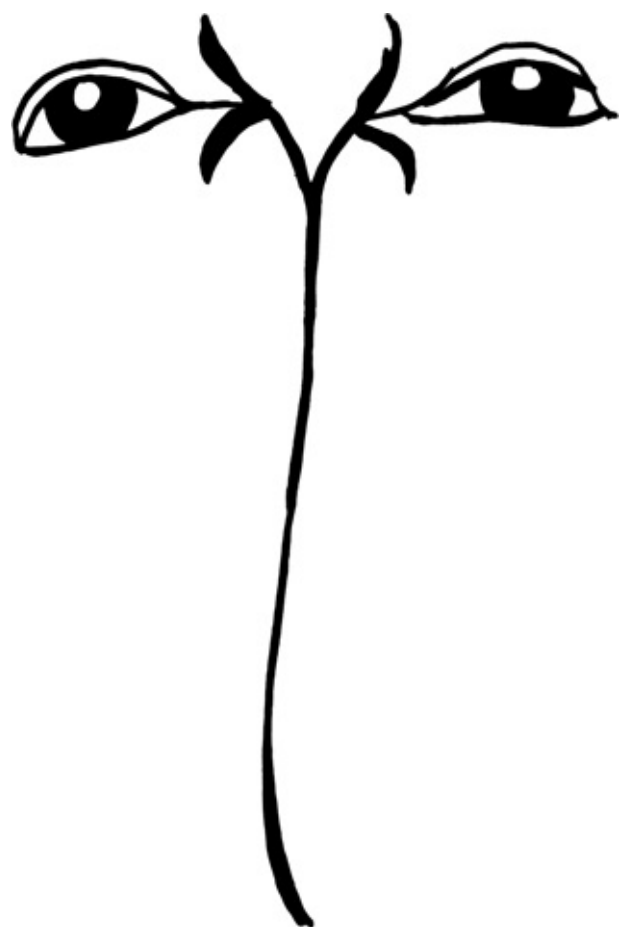
green spirit seeking life  
where only drought and desolation sting;  
spark that says that everything begins  
when everything seems charcoal  
Eugenio Montale / Jonathan Galassi

J'ai rêvé que sur un grand mur blanc  
je lisais mon testament  
Sylvie Vartan

Although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things 'suffer a sea-change' and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living – Hannah Arendt

Just like a character in a novel, he disappeared suddenly,  
without leaving the slightest trace behind.  
Giorgio Bassani / Jamie McKendrick





---

Ho this is a mighty twisting thing fast as a  
fish being pulled by its mouth on a hook  
if a fish could be fished through a  
6 foot thick wall made of bricks or an  
arrow if an arrow could fly in a leisurely  
curl like the coil of a snail or a  
star with a tail if the star was shot  
upwards past maggots and worms and  
the bones and the rockwork as fast  
coming up as the fast coming down  
of the horses in the story of  
the chariot of the sun when the  
bold boy drove them though  
his father told him not to and  
he did anyway and couldn't hold them  
he was too small too weak they nosedived  
crashed to the ground killed the crowds  
of folk and a fieldful of sheep beneath  
and now me falling upward at the  
rate of 40 horses dear God old  
Fathermother please spread extempore  
wherever I'm meant to be hitting  
whatever your target (begging your  
pardon) (urgent) a flock of the nice  
soft fleecy just to cushion (ow) what the  
just caught my (what)  
on a (ouch)  
dodged a (whew) (biff)  
(bash) (ow)  
(mercy)  
wait though  
look is that  
sun  
blue sky the white drift  
the blue through it  
rising to darker blue

start with green-blue underpaint  
add indigo under lazzurrite mix in  
lead white or ashes glaze with lapis  
same old sky? earth? again?  
home again home again  
jiggety down through the up  
like a seed off a tree with a wing  
cause when the  
roots on their way to the surface  
break the surface they turn into stems  
and the stems push up over themselves into stalks  
and up at the ends of the stalks  
there are flowers that open for  
all the world like  
eyes :  
hello :  
what's this?

A boy in front of a painting.

Good : I like a good back : the best thing about a turned back is the face you can't see stay  
a secret : hey : you : can't hear me? Can't hear? No? My chin on your shoulder right next to  
your ear and you still can't hear, ha well, old argument about eye or ear being mightier all  
goes to show it's neither here nor there when you're neither here nor there so call me Cosmo  
call me Lorenzo call me Ercole call me unknown painter of the school of whatever you like  
*forgive you* I don't care – don't have to care – good – somebody else can care, cause listen,  
once an old man slept for winters tucked in a bed with my Marsyas (early work, gone for  
ever, linen, canvas, rot) stiff with colours on top of his bedclothes, he hadn't many bedclothes  
but my Marsyas kept him warm, nice heavy extra skin kept him alive I think : I mean he  
died, yes, but not till later and not of the cold, see?

No one remembering that old man.

Except, *I* just did, there

though very faint, the colours now

can hardly remember my own name, can hardly rememb anyth

though I do like, I did like

a fine piece of cloth

and the way the fall of a ribboned bit off a shirt or sleeve will twist as it falls

and how the faintest lightest nearly not-there charcoal line can conjure a sprig that splits

open a rock

and I like a nice bold curve in a line, his back has a curve at the shoulder : a sadness?

Or just the eternal age-old sorrow of the initiate

(put beautifully though I say so myself)

but oh God dear Christ and all the saints – that picture he's – it's – mine, I did it,

who's it again?

not St Paolo though St Paolo's always bald cause bald's how you're supposed to do St Paolo

–

wait, I – yes I, think I – the face, the –

cause where are the others? Cause it wasn't just it, it was a piece belonged with others :

someone's put it in a frame

very nice frame

and the stonework in it, uh huh, the cloakwork good, no, *very* good the black of it to show the power, see how the cloak opens to more fabric where you'd expect flesh to be, that's clever, revealing nothing and ah, small forest of baby conifers tucked on the top of the broken column behind his head –

but what about that old Christ at the top of it?

Old?

Christ?

like He made it after all all the way to old man when everyone knows Christ's never to be anything other than *unwrinkled eyes shining hair the colour of ripe nut from the hazel tree and parted neatly in the middle like the Nazarenes straight on top falling curlier from the ears down countenance more liable to weep than laugh forehead wide smooth serene no older than 33 and still a most beautiful child of men* old man Christ, why would I paint an old (blaspheming)?

Wait – cause – think I remember : something : yes, I put some hands, 2 hands below his (I mean His) feet : something you'd only see if you really looked, hands that belong to the angels but all the same look like they don't belong to anyone : like they're corroded with gold, gold all over them like sores turned into gold, a velvet soup of gold lentils, gold mould as if blisters of the body can become precious metal

but why on earth did I?

(Can't remem)

Look at all the angels round Him pretty with their whips and scourges, I was good

no, no, step back take a look at a proper distance at the whole thing

and other pictures in this room : stop looking at your own : look at others for edification.

Think I recog

oh Christ – that's a –

Cosmo, isn't it?

A Cosmo.

St Gerolamo –?

but ha ha oh dear God look at it piece of oh ho ho ho ridiculous nonsense

(from whom my saint averts his eyes with proper restraint and dignity)

showy Cosmo's showy saint, mad, laughable, his hand in the air holding the rock up high about to stone himself so the patrons get their money's worth : look at the tree all gesture-bent unnatural behind him and the blood all adrippy on his chest : dear God dear Motherfather did I come the hard way back through the wall of the earth the stratifications the rocks and the soil the worms and the crusts the stars and the gods the vicissitudes and the histories the broke bits of forgettings and rememberings all the long road from gone to here for *Cosmo* to be almost the first thing as soon as I open my

Cosmo bloody Cosmo with his father a cobbler, no higher than mine, lower even : Cosmo high on nothing but court frippery vain as vain can : veering as ever in all his finery towards the gnarled and the unbeautiful : the fawning troupe of assistants attending to each mark he made like his every gesture was a ducal procession.

Though that picture over there, also a Cosmo, is truthfully, yes I admit, quite good (but then the hanging baubles above her head *I myself* showed him how to make better when we worked in the, wasn't it, palace of beautiful flowers? the time Cosmo feigned not knowing me though he knew exactly who I)

and that over there, that's him, isn't it? Never seen it before but it's him : yes : ah : it's a beauty : and that one there's him too, is it?

That makes 4. In this 1 room.

4 Cosmos to my 1 saint.

Please God dear God send me right now back to oblivion : Jesus and the Virgin and all the saints and angels and archangels obscure me fast as possible please cause I am not worthy &c and if Cosmo's here, if the world's all Cosmo same as it ever was –

but then again

from Cosmo I learned how to use the white lead to mark details in the underwash

(*I forgive*)

and from Cosmo I learned how to make the incision marks in the paint for the extra perspective

(*I forgive*).

And anyway, look.

Up against Cosmo's Gerolamo whose is really the real saint here?

Just saying.

And, just saying, but whose saint is it anyway that that boy with his back to me's spending all his time

torch bearer, Ferrara, seen from the back, he was a boy who ran past me in the street : it was when they were calling for painters for painting the palace of not being bored and I was up for the job, I'd worked on the panels of the muses at the palace of beautiful flowers with Cosmo and the rest and was now well known in Ferrara and even more well known in Bologna, I didn't need the court, no one in Bologna gave a toss about the court (anyway the court didn't need me, the court had *Cosmo*) no, wait, start at the

cause it truly began with the man they called the Falcon cause of his first name being Pellegrin : he was Borse's adviser, a professor and scholar, he'd known Greek and Latin since he was a boy and he'd found some magic books in eastern languages that no one else even knew about : he knew the stars and the gods and the poems : he knew the legends and stories that the Ests all loved about the kings on their horses and their sons and half-sons and cousins and their magicians in caves and their joustings and maidens and rivals and who was in love with whom and whose horse was the best and the cleverest and fastest and most of all their neverending triumphant outwittings of the infidels and crushings of the moorish kings : the Falcon'd been appointed in charge of the new design of the walls of the big room in the palace of not being bored and he was looking for painters other than Cosmo (*terribly in demand*, going around town bejewelled like a Marquis and though it was said that Cosmo'd be *playing a major part* in the wall design for the palace of not being bored in reality Cosmo'd glide in and out like a swan, I myself saw him a total of twice doing the minimum of sinop, for which, being so *in demand* he was mightily well paid, I heard) anyway he (not Cosmo, the Falcon) summoned me to his house.

The Falcon lived behind the building works for the castle : he came to the door when the

door girl called him and first he looked my horse behind me up and down cause he was a wise enough man to know you can tell much about the person by the horse, and the coat on mine was glossy even after the road from Bologna, waiting for me with his head right down, his nose an inch above the ground and his nostrils connoisseuring the destination, never needing tethered or watched, cause let anybody but me try mounting Mattone they'd fly without wings through the air and hit the brickwork.

So when I saw him look to my horse I liked him the better for it : then he turned to me, had a look at me, and I had a look back : he wasn't old and wise, he was roughly the same years as me, thin for a scholar who're usually heavy and inadequate from all the nothing but books : his nose was imperial Roman (the Marquis'd like that, they were mad for old Romans, the Ests, almost as mad as they were for the stories of routing the infidel and conquering Afric) and his eye was fast : he looked me up and down : his eye stopped at the front of my breeches : he stared there as he spoke : he'd heard I was good, he said.

Then he looked back up at my eyes and waited to see what I'd say and right then – my luck – the boy ran past us in the street, a beauty of a boy moving so fast that I felt the air shift (still feel it now when I remember) cause the boy was himself all air and fire, a lit torch in his hand, in the other a banner, was it? a long bit of tunic? he ran up the steps holding it up so that it caught the wind in the loops of it, he was off to the court : that's where the jobs were, at the court, and the rumour was that the pictures they wanted in the palace this time were court pictures, pleasure pictures, not sacred things but pictures of the Marquis himself, of a year of his life in the town and him doing the different things he did in the months of his year with real everyday things running through them exactly like that boy running past : I thought to myself *if I can catch that running boy I'll show this Falcon* whose eye (my own eye saw) was taken by the back of the boy *how good and how fast and how well I'd*

then they'd know how exemplary  
and imburse me accordingly

so I said as the boy disappeared *Mr de Prisciano, a pen and a paper and somewhere to lean and I'll catch you that rabbit faster than any falcon* he raised an eyebrow at the cheek of me but I was being comical, he saw (still not unsweet on me himself at this time) and called for the door girl to fetch the things I wanted while I kept in my head the speed and the shape of the boy, the way he'd held up the silk and caught the air as he went, a breathing thing in itself, that's what I wanted, cause I'm good at the real and the true and the beautiful and can do with some skill and with or without flattery the place where all 3 meet : the maid brought the things and a board for bread (a wink to her without him seeing, she reddened a little under her cap, I reddened back, bianco sangiovanni, cinabrese, verde-terra, rossetta, also the cap, pretty thing, its edge all silk fray, I'd use it later on the thread-cutter's head in the working women round the loom in the corner of the month of March cause though the Falcon specified he wanted Fates painted into March – like he wanted Graces painted into April – I wanted them real women and real working too).

I wiped the crumbs off the board in the doorway (the Falcon watched them fall on his threshold, narrowed his eyes) and on the paper though the boy had vanished I mapped his constellation there, there, there the back of his head, base of his spine, place of this foot, the other, this arm, the other, and sketch in a head (well the head barely mattered, it wasn't what mattered) but I spent most time on his back foot, the place with the curve of the sole o

the rise : get it right, how it sprung the whole body, just that single detail and it'll lift the whole picture like the foot lifted him : get it right and the picture itself will lift (cause the way he'd gone up the stone steps had made even the stone of them unheavy) : he was off to ceremony maybe, the boy? He had the torch lit though it was daylight, ergo I added the suggestion of a door so he'd need a lit torch, doubled a line into a lintel above his head for somewhere to go and I shaded in front of and round him so the torch in his hand had more purpose (made the flame on it like long hair flowing, but upward instead of downward, beauty of impossibility) then round him on the ground a scatter of small rocks, twig here, 4 or 5 by the wall, then right at the front 3 stones and a brickslice very like a slice of cheese arranged round grassblades in a curtsey for the Falcon as if even grass will bow respectfully at such a man.

(After which, a final touch, there at the end of a grassblade, 2 or 3 points, a slip of the pen a butterfly? for my pleasure alone cause no one else'd notice.)

Long gone, the picture, I expect.

Long gone the life I, the boy and the man I, the sleek good sweet-eyed horse Mattone I, the blushing girl I.

Long gone, torch bearer Ferrara seen from the back, ink on paper folded torn eaten, wasp nest shredded into air burnt away to ash to air to nothing.

Ow.

I feel the loss, dull the ache of it

cause I *had* it, the place where his legs met his body, the muscular dark where his tunic flared up in the breeze as he went, I had it like telling the oldest story in the world cause there's a very pure pleasure in a curve like the curve of a buttock : the only other thing as good to draw is the curve of a horse and like a horse a curved line is a warm thing, good-natured, will serve you well if not mistreated, and the curves of his sleeves concertina-ing down and back from his shoulders, blanket stitch then scallop-bite edge, round his waist a double yarnstrand to hold him well.

I like a twist of yarn, 2 strands twisted together for strength : I like a length of rope : the rope after a hanging they sold, I remember, in the market, was cut into pieces you'd buy for luck so you'd never yourself be.

Hanged, I mean.

What, -- was, was I? --

surely not -- never, was I, hanged? -- oh.

Oh.

Was I?

No.

Pretty sure : I wasn't.

But how did I, then? End?

I can't recall an end at all, any end I ever, can't, any, demise, no -- cause maybe --

maybe I ... never ended?

Hey!

I did that picture : hey!

Can't hear me.

Sunlight hitting the yellowing leaves, I was a child, small, on a stone slab warm from the sun, almost too small to walk I think and something was twisting itself down through the air and landed in the middle of the pool of horse piss, the foam and the bubbles nearly all off it but the smell of it still fine in the dip in the stone between the old path and the new path that he'd made in the yard for the carts for the stones, my father.

The thing that fell caused a circle to happen, a ring to appear in the piss : the ring widened and widened until it got to the edges and vanished.

It was a small black ball like the head of an infidel : it had a single wing, a hard and feathery-looking thing stuck straight out of it.

The ring that it made in the pool when it fell, though, was gone.

Where'd it go?

I shouted the words, but she was trampling cloth in the big half-barrel : she was making the cloth turn white with the soap, she was singing, didn't hear me, my mother.

I called again.

Where'd it go?

She still didn't hear me : I picked up a stone : I aimed at the side of the barrel, I missed, hit a chicken in its sidefeathers instead : the chicken made a chicken noise, jumped and nearly flew : it ran about in a dance that made me laugh, it panicked all the geese and the ducks and the other chickens : but my mother had seen the stone hit the chicken and she leapt out of the barrel and ran towards me with her hand in the air cause she was a despiser of cruel things.

I wasn't, I said. I didn't. I was calling you. But you were preoccupied so I threw it to get your attention. I didn't mean to hit the chicken. The chicken got in the way.

She dropped her hand to her side.

Where did you learn that word? she said.

Which word? I said.

Preoccupied, she said. Attention.

From you, I said.

Oh, she said.

She stood in the dust with her wet feet : her ankles were beaded with light.

Where'd it go? I said.

Where'd what go? she said.

The ring, I said.

What ring? she said.

She got straight down and looked in the pool : she saw the winged thing.

That's not a ring, she said. That's a seed.

I told her what happened : she laughed.

Oh, she said. *That* sort of ring. I thought you meant a ring for a finger, like a wedding ring or a gold ring.

My eyes filled with tears and she saw.

Why are you crying? she said. Don't cry. Your sort of ring is much better than those.

It went, I said. It's gone.

Ah, she said. Is that why you're crying? But it hasn't gone at all. And that's why it's better than gold. It hasn't gone, it's just that we can't see it any more. In fact, it's still going, still growing. It'll never stop going, or growing wider and wider, the ring you saw. You were



lucky to see it at all. Cause when it got to the edge of the puddle it left the puddle and entered the air instead, it went invisible. A marvel. Didn't you feel it go through you? No? But it did, you're inside it now. I am too. We both are. And the yard. And the brickpiles. And the sandpiles. And the firing shed. And the houses. And the horses, and your father, your uncle, and your brothers, and the workmen, and the street. And the other houses. And the walls, and the gardens and houses, the churches, the palace tower, the top of the cathedral, the river, the fields behind us, the fields way over there, see? See how far your eye can go. See the tower and the houses in the distance? It's passing through them and nothing and nobody will feel a thing but there it is doing it nonetheless. And imagine it circling the fields and the farms we can't see from here. And the towns beyond those fields and farms all the way to the sea. And across the sea. The ring you saw in the water'll never stop travelling till the edge of the world and then when it reaches the edge it'll go beyond that too. Nothing can stop it.

She looked down into the horse piss.

And all from the fall of a seed, she said. You see that seed there? You know where it came from?

She pointed above us to the trees behind our house.

If we put that seed in the ground, she said, and we cover it with earth and it gets the chance, enough sun, enough water, with a bit of luck and justice it'll make another tree.

The trees were much bigger than even the brickpiles : the trees went way beyond the roof of the house made by my father's father's father : we were a family of wallmakers and brickmen : it was what the men of our family did when they left boyhood : my family helped build the Est palaces, the Ests had rooms at all cause of us : we were historic, as anonymous wallmakers go.

I fished the seed out of the piss : it was a thing that has to fall to rise : it looked like a shrunken head like the heads that got put on the walls after uprisings but with a wing coming out the back of it : it smelt fine of horse : it had 1 wing not 2 like birds : perhaps that was why it fell : and cause it had, something would rise.

I dropped it back in : it fell again : 1 day right here cause of it a tree would be shooting upwards, with a bit of luck and justice.

A new ring formed, disappeared, went through me invisible and off out into the world.

My mother was back at the barrel climbing over the side : she started singing again : every time she tramped down rings like the seed-rings I'd seen appear and disappear came off her legs in the water in the barrel : the rings widened, came out round her round the barrel then they went through me and round me too (a marvel) and off into the rest of the world in a huge sort of holding that happened when something came into or passed through another thing : the sun was already shrinking the piss : a new ring formed where the piss had been and gone : in its going it changed the stone of the path to a lighter different colour.

Then it was another time : there were yellow flowers dropping off the trees : they landed with a sound : who knew flowers had a voice? I was much better at throwing now : now when I threw I could always hit the barrel – and not just hit it, I could choose where to hit it on the metal buckle or the top or bottom rim or whichever stave I aimed at.

I could throw now too so that I never hit a chicken unless I wanted to : it was cruel, though, to want to, and tempting, so I'd become an expert at almost : since if I threw it so it

almost hit (but missed) a chicken would still do the funny dance to the music of the general bird outrage : there were no chickens or geese to almost hit today though, cause every time came out into the yard now all the chickens and geese and ducks ran away shouting to the front of the house, and every time I came round the front after them they ran away to the back.

Ferara was the best place for brickmaking cause of the kind of clay from the river : you burnt the seaweed and stirred in the ashes and seasalt and baked the bricks : you could do anything with brickwork, all the colours, all the designs : then there was stone with all its many names and costs : my father held, sometimes, if he was in a good mood about money, little piece of something up and we shouted what it was and the winner won the shoulderback round the yard with him the horse : perlato : paonazzo : cipollino with its coloured veins, my mother making me laugh pretending a stone held near the eyes could make her cry : arabescato, just the fineness of the word near made *me* cry : breccia, made up of broken things : and the sort I can't remember the name of that's 2 or more stones crushed together to make a whole new kind of stone.

But here in Ferara there was brick and we were a place you got bricks from.

I took aim halfway up the pile and I hit that exact right brick : a plume of brickdust flew up.

I scrabbled about at the edge of the pile for more broken bits, bunched my vest up and carried the pile of bits of brick in it back to the step : I sat down on the threshold ready to throw : it was even harder to keep your aim when you were sitting down : good.

Stop throwing bricks at my bricks!

That was my father : he'd heard the throwing and seen the dust flying : he marched the yard : he kicked away at the bits I'd collected : I ducked, knowing he'd slap me.

Instead he picked a broken piece of brick up, turned it over in his hand.

He sat down heavy on the step close beside me : he held up the bit of brick.

Watch this, he said.

He pulled at his trowel, got it out of his tool belt past his stomach then held the edge of it above the broken brick : he let the edge of the trowel hover for a moment at the brick's edge : he touched with gentleness with the trowel's edge a particular place on the brick : then he raised the trowel and brought it down very hard at exactly the place he'd touched : a bit of brick broke clean off and fell among the fallen flowers.

The piece of brick left in his hand was neat and square, he showed me.

Now we can use it to build with, he said. Now nothing's wasted.

I picked up the fallen piece.

What about this bit? I said.

My father scowled.

My mother overheard me say it and she laughed : she came over, she was wearing her work dress the colour of sky, clay marks all over it like smudges of cloud : she sat on the other side of me : she had a brick in her hand too, she'd picked it off the pile as she passed : it was a nice thin brick, good colour, a doorway or window brick, from the ones made with the best clay : she winked at me.

Watch this.

She held out her other hand over my head for my father to pass her the trowel.

No, he said. You'll ruin the brick. You'll ruin the side of my trowel.

Sweet Cristoforo, she said. Please.

No, he said. Between you both I'll have nothing left.

Well, when you've nothing –, my mother said.

It was what she always said : *when you've nothing at least you have all of it* : but this time when she got to the end of the word *nothing* she lunged out of nowhere for the trowel and he wasn't expecting it, jerked his hand up and away too late, she leaned herself round me quick as a snake (warm and sweet the smell and her linen and skin) and she'd got it, she jumped up, twisted free, ran to the trestle.

She held the brick out in front of her, tapped at it hard 3 times and she scraped (my trowel! my father said)

and she put the handle of the trowel on top of it and hit the brick and the trowel with the little stone mallet – once, then again : bits of brick flaked off : she tapped the brick with her finger : a large piece fell out of it : she stopped and wiped the dust off her nose : she held the trowel out to him : in her other hand she held up what was left of the brick she'd been breaking.

A horse ! I said.

She gave it to me : I turned it over in both my hands : it had ears : it had scrapes : the scrapes were what made the tail.

My father was pouting down at his trowel : he rubbed the dust on its point with his thumb and examined the handle, not laughing : but my mother kissed him : she made him.

Another time : hot, and the cicadas : my mother was drawing a line in the ground with a stick.

I saw what it was before it became it : it's the neck of a duck!

Then she moved to a new piece of ground and drew a line and then another then joined them to 2 other lines and a curve : it's the place where the leg of a horse meets its body!

She finished the horse, started again, drew a line, then another, made a scuff in the dust and drew lines in the scuff : it's a house! It's our house!

I found a stick of my own in the tall grass and broke it near the base so it had a thick end and a thin end : I came back to the pictures : with the thin end I added 3 curves to the roof of the house she'd drawn.

Why have you put a tree on the roof? she said.

I pointed up at the roof of our house behind us, at the place where a twig that had taken root in the ridge on the top stuck up in the air.

Ah, she said. You're right.

I coloured with pleasure at the being right : with the thicker end of the stick I drew a slope a circle, some straight lines then a curve : we both looked over at my father's back : he was at the far end of the yard loading the cart.

My mother nodded.

That's good, she said. It's very good. Well seen. Now. Do me something you can't see with your eyes.

I added a straight line to the forehead of her horse.

Very witty, she said, oh, you're a very witty cheat.

I said I wasn't, cause it was true, I had never with my eyes truly seen a unicorn.

You know what I meant, she said. Do as I asked.

She went to collect the eggs : I closed my eyes, I opened them : I turned the stick upside down, used the thin end of it.

That one's him angry, I said when she came back. That one's him kind.

Air came out of her mouth (by which I knew that what I'd done was good) : she nearly dropped the eggs (by which I learned that the making of images is a powerful thing and may if care's not taken lead to breakage) : she checked the eggs were safe in her dress, all unbroken, before she called him over to see his faces.

When he saw the angry one he hit me over the head with the inside of his hand (by which I learned that people do not always want to know how they are seen by others).

He and my mother stood and looked for a time at his faces in the dust.

Not long after this, he began to teach me my letters.

Then, when my mother was gone into the ground, and me still small enough to, one day I climbed into her clothes trunk in her bedroom and pulled the lid down : it was all broadcloth and linens and hemp and wool, belts and laces, the chemise, the work gowns, the overgown, the kirtle and sleeves and everything empty of her still smelling of her.

Over time the smell of her faded, or my knowing of it lessened.

But in the dark in the trunk I was expert and could tell almost as well as if I was seeing which was which, which dress, which usage, by the feel of it between finger and thumb: kitchen use, Sunday use, work use : I went deep in the smell and became myself nothing but fabric that'd once been next to her skin : in the dark between the layers I shoved down or up with a fist and felt for a tapering strip, a ribbon or tie or lace coming off the edge of one of the sleeves or collars, a tassel, a strand of whatever, and was awake till I'd twisted and wound something of her round a thumb or a finger : at which point I was able to sleep : when I woke I'd have freed myself up unawares in my sleep from the tether I'd made : but there'd still be a curlicue shape in the strand of stuff afterwards which held for a time, before it went back to the shape of its own randomness.

One day when I woke and opened the lid and came back to the daylight the cloth I'd been asleep in dragged out after me, blue, still warm from me : I sat beside it on the floor : I put my head and my arms into it then my whole self inside it : it sat on my shoulders and spread out away from me, it so big and me so small it was as if I'd dressed in a field of sky.

I put my head through the slit in the sleeve as if it was the neck opening : I dragged the dress through the house, me in it.

I wore nothing but her clothes from then on : I dragged them in the housedust for weeks, my father too weary to say no, until the day he picked me up in his arms (I was wearing the white one, big, filthy now, ripped a bit where I'd tripped on the stones one day and where it'd caught on the doorframe another, today I was all sweat and heat in it, my face a colour I could feel) so that the trail of the heavy materials left the floor and hung behind us both over his forearm like a great empty fishtail as he carried me through to her room.

I thought he would beat me, but no : he sat me down still in her overgown on the shut trunk of clothes : he himself sat down on the floor in front of me.

I'm going to ask you kindly to stop wearing these clothes, he said.

No, I said.

(I said it from behind the stiff shield of the front of the dress.)

I can't bear it, he said. It is like your mother has become a dwarf and as if her dwarf self is always twinkling away in all the corners of the house and the yard, always in the corner of my eye.

I shrugged.

(But cause the shoulders were so high over my own deep in the dress, no one but me knew I'd shrugged.)

So I would like to make a suggestion, he said. If you agree to put these clothes away. I mean stop wearing them.

I shook my head slow from side to side.

And if you were to put, say, breeches on, or these leggings I've here, instead –, he said.

He put his hand in his smock pocket and pulled out boys' clothes, light and thin in the head : he dangled them enticing like you do with a mouthful of green a mule that won't be moved

– then I can get you a job and a schooling, he said. For the job, you can come and work with me at the cathedral. It would be a help to me. I need help. I need an apprentice, about your age. *You* could be that help.

I lowered myself down inside the dress : the shoulders came up above my ears.

You already have my brothers, I said.

You could be like your brothers, he said.

I eyed him through the lace-up of the neck and the chest : I spoke through the holes in the dress.

You know I am not like my brothers, I said.

Yes, but listen, he said. Cause maybe. Maybe. If you were to stop wearing these too-big clothes and were to wear, let's say, these boys' clothes instead. And maybe if we allow ourself a bit of imagining. And maybe if we have a bit of discretion. You know what discretion is?

I rolled my eyes in behind the chestlace for even as a child I already knew, or so I believed, more than he ever would, what discretion is : worse, I knew he was pandering to me with his making of suggestions, more my mother's style than his, when it would've been much more usual for him simply to hit me and forbid me : I despised him a bit for this pandering and for using what he considered big words as if these might be the key to me agreeing to do as he wanted.

But the words he used next were the biggest of all, the biggest words anyone could've.

If you were, he said. Then we might find someone to train you up in the making and using of colours on wood and on walls, you being so good with your pictures.

Colours.

Pictures.

I stuck my head so fast out the top of the dress that the weight of the dress shifted and nearly knocked me off the box : I saw him stifle and have to disguise, cause he wanted to keep the moment serious, the first smile I'd seen on his face since the going of my mother.

But you'll have to wear your brothers' clothes, he said. And you might, if I find you a training, best be, or become, one of them. Your brothers.

He looked to see my response.

I nodded : I was listening.

We can probably get you Latin without it, and mathematics, he said. But schooling will be

easier with it. We are not rich though we've more than enough and schooling in itself is not the problem. But unless you enter a nunnery, which is the one sure way you can spend your days making colours or filling the pages of holy saint books with your pictures, a training in colours and pictures – I mean out here in the world, with a life lived as a part of it, a life beyond walls – is another thing altogether. Do you agree?

He looked me in the eye.

It is a sure thing always, he said. You would always have work. But nobody will take you for such a training wearing the clothes of a woman. You can't even be an apprentice to me, wearing the clothes of a woman. I think we could start you working with me next week on the bell tower. By which I don't mean you'll work on the bell or the tower, I mean I will let you draw it and furnish you with the materials to, and in this way you'll be seen to be working with me and your brothers, and then, when you are established, when it is clearly established in others' eyes as to who you have *become* –

He raised an eyebrow.

– we will get you into a painters' workshop or find you a master of panels and frescoes and so on, and we will show him what you can do and we will see if he'll take you on.

I looked down at the front of my mother's gown then looked back up at my father.

Such a master might let us pay in eggs, or birds, he said, or the fruit off our trees, or even in bricks. I am hopeful. But most of all I'm hopeful that if such a man sees what you can already do he might teach you for less, for the sake of doing justice to your abilities, and show you how to correct your natural mistakes, how to shape the head of a man like they do with their squares and geometries, and bodies too, and the measurements it takes, how to make those measurements, the ones which show where to put the eyes and the nose and so on in a face and where to place things on the tiles of a floor or across a landscape to show some things closer and some much further away.

So things far away and close could be held together, in the same picture?

So there were ways to learn to do such a thing?

I reached for the lace ties at my chin. I held them in my hand.

All these things you will need to know, he said. And if we can't find someone I'll give you what training I can. I know a great deal about buildings and walls and the workings, the rule and the necessities of construction. The construction of pictures, well. It's bound to have something in common.

I pulled on the ties and I loosened the gown front : I stood up and the whole gown slipped off the clothes trunk then slipped down away from me like the peeled back petals of a lily and me at its centre standing straight like the stamen : I stepped out naked over its folds : I held out my hand for the leggings.

He went through to my brothers' things and came back with a clean shirt.

You'll need a name, he said as I pulled the shirt on over my head.

My mother's name began with an f : Ff : I tried it on my tongue to see where it'd lead : my father misheard me : Vv.

Vincenzo? he said.

He flushed up with excitement.

He meant Vincenzo Ferreri, the Spanish priest dead long long ago, 20 whole years or so ago everybody saying for all those years he should've been made saint : the travelling sellers

were already selling him like a saint in the pamphlet writ by the nuns full of the pictures and stories of him : he was famous for miracles and for converting 8 thousand moorish moslem infidels and 25 thousand jews, raising 28 people from the dead and curing 4 hundred sick people (just by them lying down for a moment on the couch he'd lain on when he was ill and got better on himself) and also for freeing 70 people from devils : his hat alone had done many miracles.

But my father liked most the miracle of the hostel and the wilderness.

Vincenzo had been riding through the wilderness on his donkey praying very hard and he and the donkey were near exhaustion from the prayers when suddenly they arrived at the front door of a beautiful well-appointed hostel : Vincenzo went in : it was as beautiful inside as out : he stayed in it overnight : the service, the food, the bed were all very agreeable and gave him exactly the respite he needed to go on next day with his sojourn through the wild places full of infidels and unbelievers : next morning when he got on his donkey, that same donkey was like one 10 years younger and had no fleabites and wasn't lame any more : off they went, and it was 6 or 7 miles later when the morning sun first hit his shaven head that Vincenzo realized he'd forgotten his hat.

He turned the donkey around and they went back over their own hooftracks to the hostel to fetch it : but when they got there there was no hostel and his hat was hanging on the branch of an old dead tree in the exact same place where the hostel had been.

This miracle was one of the reasons housebuilders and wallmakers wanted Vincenzo Ferre a saint : they planned to claim him as patron.

My father prayed to him every morning.

I thought of my mother telling me the stories of some of the miracles of Vincenzo, her arm round me, me on her knee.

Vincenzo, petitioned by me, had made no difference to her going or her coming back (clearly I had petitioned wrongly).

I thought of my mother's French-sounding name : I thought of the French shape that meant the flower her name meant.

Francescho, I said.

*Not* Vincenzo? my father said.

He frowned.

Francescho, I said again.

My father held his frown : then he smiled in his beard a grave smile down at me and he nodded.

On that day with that blessing and that new name I died and was reborn.

But – Vincenzo –

ah, dear God –

*that's* who my sombre saint is on the little platform with his eyes averted and the old Christ over his head.

St Vincenzo Ferreri.

Hey : boy : you hear me? *St Vincenzo*, famed across all the oceans for *making unhearing people hear*.

Cause listen, when Vincenzo spoke, even though it was in Latin the people whether they knew any Latin or none at all knew exactly what he was saying – even people 3 miles away

could hear him as if he was speaking right next to their ears in their own vernacule.

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The boy hears nothing : I can't make him.

I'm no saint, am I? no.

Well good that I'm not, cause look now, here's a very pretty woman, well, from behind at least, stopped in front of my St Vincenzo

(4 to 1, and she chose me not Cosmo)

(just saying)

(not that I'm being prideful)

(another miracle, that she did, thanks be to St Vincenzo)

and since I'm no saint I can have my own close look at her, from the back, from her bare neck just peeking through her long white-gold hair down the line of her spine to her waist then down to her bit-too-thin behind –

but so's that boy, look at him sitting up at attention, I swear he felt her come into the room cause *I* felt the hairs on *his* neck stand up when he saw her glide through the door over the floor like the room was incomplete without her, he saw her before I did, like struck by a shaft of lightning, and look at him now watching her settling her feathers in front of Vincenzo : I can't see what his eyes are doing but I bet you they're wide open and his ears and brow forward like a goathead : plus I can tell from his back, he knows her already : boy in love? The old stories never change : but in love with this woman? Nowhere near his equal in years far from it, even from behind I can tell she's decades ahead, more than old enough to be his mother : but she's not his mother, that's clear, and has no idea he's there, or his ardour, even though something between them's as strong as hatred or a ray of heat from *him* that's aimed at *her*.

Hello. I'm a no-eyed painter no one can hear and there's a boy here wants you to – I don't know – something.

She can't hear me : course she can't : but she's giving Vincenzo a good look over and Vincenzo, being saint, is averting his eyes (though the angels with the whips and bows up there are ready for anything).

She's standing with one foot up on its heel, a horsehoof at rest : so elegantly her body adjusts the weight of her head : she takes a look at St Vincenzo, up, down, up again –

then she turns on that heel and she's off

(not even a single glance at a single Cosmo by the way,

just saying)

and the boy's sprung up on his own feet like a leveret and off he goes too after her, and m too helplessly dragging after him like one foot's caught in the stirrup of a saddle on a horse I'm unfamiliar with who does not know or care for me : and as we go, out of the corner of my no-eye I see a picture by – Ercole, little Ercole the pickpocket, whom I loved and who loved me ! and wait – stop – is that, is it really? – dear God old Motherfather it's Pisano, Pisanello, I know by the dark and the way it works the light.

Look all you like, since I cannot, cause it is as if a rope attached to the boy is attached to me and has circled me and cannot be unknotted and where the boy goes I must go whether I want it or don't, through a threshold, through another room – look! Uccello! horses! –

*I protest*

cause this ejection is against my will : I do not choose it.



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