

There But Not There

On my bedroom wall hangs a pencil drawing of me when I was twenty years old, a nude. I am seated with my hands in my lap, though the image captures only my upper torso. My hair is pulled back in a low ponytail, parted in the middle, and I am gazing off to the left. The lines are wispy and faint, so delicate I seem to be only partly there.

William Bailey gave me this drawing as a wedding gift in 2000 when I married my college sweetheart the summer after graduation, a union that would last twelve years. I have treasured it through divorce and remarriage, turning to it to remember—what exactly? The girl portrayed is inscrutable and seldom reveals anything but gazing at her does remind me of a time in my life when I looked almost exclusively to others to tell me who I was.

I did not have the easy movements of other models I encountered – the sense of how to arrange my limbs in interesting angles, to move fluidly through poses as the artists drew, to hold my body to create negative space. I was rigid and unnatural in so many of my efforts as students scrutinized me, dividing me into segments to practice proportion, squinting at me through rectangles they made with their fingers until I was reduced to an abstraction, an object to render, a blur of shadow and light. But sometimes I would notice one of them looking more closely at my face, trying to see beyond the surface.

Part of me wanted to be seen, wanted the attention and validation of visibility, but I was also fearful of being so exposed. The feeling I got disrobing in front of a room of strangers was not unlike the anxious thrill when a man catcalled me or tried to pick me up in a grocery store. Being unseen had saved me more than once from danger and humiliation, but there was an appeal to the risk of visibility, too. There was power in being seen. I observed this in other girls and women around me – the ones who knew how to inhabit space, to tilt their heads just-so, to raise their voices against the shushing insistence of society's expectations. They did not shrink when men eyed them up and down. They would not be relegated to shadows.

Unlike them, I was never confident in my body. Since early adolescence I had an adversarial relationship with food, and during my freshman year in college, I hardly ate anything, subsisting on lettuce and olives from the dining hall, cigarettes, weed, and a nightly package containing two Mrs. Fields chocolate chip cookies I bought from the Wawa near my dorm and ate ravenously in my extra-long twin bed. Even when my disordered eating regulated into healthier consumption by sophomore year, my body seemed to me a terrible inconvenience. I wanted to be smaller, to disappear completely.

Why, then, did I apply in the spring of my freshman year to be an artist's model? To put my problematic body on display? To invite the gaze of strangers to assess my too-small breasts and my too-thick waist, my ordinary face that looked like so-and-so's neighbor from Iowa or third grade teacher or distant cousin? In part, the physical difficulties of the job suited me and my self-flagellating nature. I always pushed myself to stay still beyond the ding of the timer, to ignore the pins and needles in my limbs, the throb in my outreached arms. This kind of punishment is not unlike the deprivation of food, the challenge of getting through the day, delaying meals longer and longer until it is time to sleep, the cavern of my stomach screaming a sure sign of my success. Modeling was, at times, my hair shirt, my penance for having the gall to take up space.

But it was also empowering. I was drawn to modeling, at least in part, because a favorite writing teacher of mine had put herself through college modeling. She was voluptuous and bright and full of life and

confidence, and I couldn't imagine her ever entering a room without all eyes fixing on her. Perhaps I could be like that too.

The studios in which I worked were often either so cold my skin pimpled like raw chicken or hot enough to unsteady me. The smell of linseed oil and turpentine and cigarettes permeated the entire building. Most of the students were aloof. Physically, the job could be difficult, but what I lacked in experience I made up for in discipline; I became a statue. I held poses through conversations students either thought I couldn't hear or didn't care about me hearing, through a black lab sniffing me as he pranced wildly through the studio, through complicated postures that required me to arc my arms above my head and hold them there long minutes at a time. Standing poses were especially challenging, and I learned early in my tenure as a model that I had to be careful not to lock my knees or I risked passing out in the middle of a session, a fact I came to the hard way when I had to cut a pose short just in time to hurry out of the studio to a stairwell where I managed to collapse without injuring myself.

Working as a model created the strange dynamic of being present for the sole purpose of being looked at while simultaneously acting as if I was not there at all. This was familiar territory; it was a magnification of the experience so many young women have – being looked at and appraised, but rarely being seen beyond the exterior. I was good at it, and this was enough to keep me coming back despite the challenges.

Checking the artists' progress during the breaks was inevitably disappointing, but I couldn't help myself; I wanted to see what others saw, and the artists often were eager for me to see their work. I was always too fat or unrealistically thin; my breasts either pubescent or pornographic; my face as generic as a dinner plate. If students ever tried to flirt with me, I felt both violated and vindicated. Once I worked a drawing class with another model – a man – and during the breaks he came on strong with lines like, "Boy those students are lucky today," his eyes unfettered, his breath so close I felt its heat on my face. I had nothing to protect me but my flimsy robe.

Late in my sophomore year, a grad student I had worked for since I first started modeling (he was painting a large portrait in which I half-reclined, dressed in a floral sundress) asked me to come to his apartment instead of his studio. He was handsome and all the models I knew from around the art school had crushes on him, a fact which made me even prouder that he had chosen me as his regular model. I agreed to the change of venue. I also agreed to pose unclothed this time. In his attic apartment, I let him arrange me in poses mimicking the works by Egon Schiele whose paintings are known for their explicit sexuality. When his hands moved up my inner thigh, I finally understood what was happening. I grabbed my things and left without getting paid, angry at myself for being so naive.

Not all men in the art world, however, were to be avoided. William Bailey was professional and kind. He was also, as living artists went, famous. Not in an Andy Warhol way – or even a Matthew Barney way – but the way some poets are famous – people who knew about contemporary art knew who he was. My parents had long been art fans and collectors of 19th century landscape. They didn't own any contemporary works except a few pieces by an artist friend of theirs – but I knew William Bailey's hyper-realistic still lifes from books they owned. My father loved them. Serene, almost cold, arrangements of bowls and vases and eggs on horizontal planes rendered in terra cottas and ochers, so lifelike and austere, at first glance commonplace but soon becoming other-worldly. Bailey himself used the word "abstract" to describe his style, and indeed the reality he portrays is uniquely his own, so precise— but precisely what? We think, in looking at his work, that we know exactly what we are seeing: a vase, an eggcup, an egg. But

the shadows of these objects are wrong. The surfaces on which they are so carefully arranged are unidentifiable. We are nowhere familiar after all.

I had no idea Bailey's paintings extended to figures until I received a call from him looking for a model. I was thrilled. Out of the notebook full of Polaroids in the art school office, he chose me. Remembering the depth of my need back then, I feel both embarrassment and a maternal sense of protectiveness for the girl I was, for how alone she felt, how invisible. Just eighteen years old, I think I believed that I might somehow more fully inhabit myself if only I could be validated by a person of "importance."

He picked me up outside the Yale Art School in his Saab to take me to his studio. I was nervous, excited. I gushed about how I admired his work, how my father loved him, how I was thrilled to pose for him. Bailey's studio was large and open and lined with drop cloths, everything pale and airy. I marveled at seeing the bowls and jugs in real life, the eggs plastic, the actual objects less real for having appeared in so many paintings, having lived so long in my own imagination. Their representation in Bailey's fine strokes rendered them more real somehow than the objects themselves.

Throughout his studio hung works, both completed and in-progress. The still lives had the eerie familiarity of something lost and found again after many years. The figure paintings and drawings reminded me a little of Balthus, a painter I'd only recently become aware of, but without the sexual charge. They had the same absent eyes, the same austerity. I couldn't quite locate them in time or space. They were cool and distant and unafraid as they stared straight at me, accusing almost. Like I was interrupting something. Who were they? Was I to become one of them? Did I want to?

I don't remember the particulars of our first session together, though I do remember that I saved that first check - \$30.00 for 3 hours of work - and gave it to my father so he would have Bailey's autograph. There was more to the gesture, I think, an underlying message about my worth, though even in the nineties ten dollars an hour was an ambiguous statement at best. I don't know whether my father kept that check or whether Bailey ever noticed it was never cashed, but there would be many more checks over the next few years, and my mania over meeting a famous artist would subside into genuine affection that I believe was mutual.

I don't think it was in that first session that I learned Bailey never painted from life, that the girls and women in his works were all amalgams of models and women he knew or of whom he dreamed. These women and girls had never existed beyond the paper and canvas Bailey used, beyond his own imagination; this is part of their elusiveness. He did draw from life, though, and there are sketches of me that capture a likeness, maybe even something of my spirit, but when I look at those today - the ones reproduced in his show catalogues - all I see is a girl so incredibly young. She is as strange to me as the faces rendered in oils, the faces that are really no one at all.

I was crushed at first when I learned that I would never *really* be the subject of one of his canvases. It seemed a cruel twist, a punishment, almost, for my hubris in thinking someone like Bailey would ever put someone like me in his work, that this man could be my salvation. But eventually I accepted it, tried to feel good about being a part, however small, of his process. Still, when I look at pictures of his paintings, my muscles remember the particular bend of a leg propped on a chair, the style in which I wore my hair, the spacing of features that reflects my own face. Sometimes I am certain I see myself, but then will note that the date of the work precedes my time in New Haven altogether or is so long after I left Connecticut, my likeness, at best, is a ghost.

I worked for Bill Bailey over the course of three and a half years, and in that time, we developed an easy rapport. I felt love for him in the way young women love men who are fatherly in their tones and gestures. I told him about my father, my then-boyfriend and eventual fiancé, my poetry. His best friend was a painter-turned-poet, and he told me about their early years in art school. Once he suggested I could join them in Italy some summer, a fantasy that never came to pass, though even the suggestion had me thrilling at my good fortune for days.

I not only worked for Bill, but a few months after meeting him I also began to work for his wife, Sandy. She, too, was a painter and met a group of other women artists once a month in her studio in their home in Branford, Connecticut. I remember the drive to their house as a scene from a movie: curving roads along a cliff above the Atlantic Ocean. It was beautiful, coastal new England, moody and unpredictable. The waves, the briny air, the wind against the marvelous wooden house. It was like a Hopper painting, all light and shadow and hard angles. In their kitchen, the objects from Bailey's still lives appeared on shelves and in cabinets, the sacred hiding in plain sight.

The women I posed for were smart and talented, and now (though I am ashamed to say the question never occurred to me back then) I often wonder what might have been different for them had they been born later or had they been born men. We always took a break in the middle of the session for tea and snacks. They asked about my classes, my plans after graduation. They asked each other about spouses and children and grandchildren, mutual friends, upcoming travel. If they harbored resentments about their more successful male counterparts, they did not reveal them in my presence.

One day, after I'd worked for Bailey a couple of years, he told me about a model who sat for him early in his career – the woman who inspired the painting, "Portrait of S," that appeared on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine in 1982 for a feature about American realism. That cover led to quite a controversy over the fact that the figure was topless, something that seems so trivial and quaint today, but triggered outrage and boycotts back then. The model, a young woman for whom he had great affection, had moved out west where she was brutally murdered. He called her death his first great loss.

I wanted to ask him, is the painting really her? I wanted to ask him, would you mourn me, too?

By the time of my graduation from Yale in the spring of 2000, I was engaged, a fact that shocks me when I think of it, seeing now how incredibly young twenty-one is. The wedding was set for August of that year. As a wedding gift, Bailey said I could choose one of his drawings from our sessions together. He would have it framed for me. I chose a detailed portrait in which I thought I appeared dignified, a bit like Sandy, who was beautiful in a refined and restrained way.

When my father emailed me Bailey's obituary in the spring of 2020, I was saddened beyond what one might expect for the death of someone I had not seen or contacted in at least a decade. We did keep in touch those first ten years after I graduated. I sent both Bill and Sandy letters and cards at the holidays. I sent them pictures when my son was born. I attended a couple of his openings at the Betty Cunningham gallery, thrilling at the sight of myself in his drawings – and echoes of me in his paintings – up on the walls for collectors and arty New Yorkers to admire. But over time I stopped writing to him. I thought less and less of those days back in college when I spent afternoons with him or with Sandy, those hours during which I somehow moved deeper into myself as I focused on staying still.

I don't know whether William Bailey would have remembered me all those years later. More likely, I was a memory merged with the models who came before and after me, girls and young women with vaguely similar appearances. All of us had inner lives barreling against our insides. All of us had stories and hopes and disappointments that may or may not have been visible on the surface, and whether William Bailey or our fathers or our husbands or our friends could see our pain and our hope and our sadness, ultimately, changes nothing about who we are. I know this now.

I moved to Baltimore with my fiancé after graduation, and I continued modeling at the art college and for some local artists for several years, but when I began teaching at a local high school, I worried too much that in this small city somehow someone would discover me, and I didn't want to be seen – at least not for so much of me to be seen – as I adapted to my new role, my new life.

I have several drawings and paintings of myself from artists I worked with over the years, but of course none is really me. If they ever were, they are not now. Our past selves are part of us, but not the whole story. Bailey's renderings showed some part of me, but only if I look hard, and it is more likely in the gaze itself that I find whispers of who I am, in all I project onto those mysterious figures. Perhaps I was always located in that gaze; the reflection in the mirror is inconsequential; my perception of what I see is what counts.

I have books and show catalogues of Bailey's work, and I look through them from time to time the way one looks through old photo albums, trying to understand something about the past. I love the dreamy half-me eyes of the girls in his paintings. How remote they are. How disengaged. How altogether somewhere else. They are not thinking about their weight or the stupid things they said or the time they've wasted. They are wholly themselves, these phantom girls with pale limbs and renaissance eyes. And in the drawings? The ones that are really me? They also are so impossibly young, so ignorant of everything that is to come. How lucky they are to stay frozen in that long-ago moment, in that in-between space of imagination and memory.

The young woman who led me to those studios, the girl who wanted so desperately to be seen, still lives inside me. I feel her cowering when a man scans my body with leery eyes and I grow impatient for the invisibility that I know comes to women, whether they want it or not, as they get older. I catch glimpses of her when I check my figure and hair in store windows. She speaks to me each morning when I step on the bathroom scale. And when I remember to look, I find her on the wall in my bedroom, rendered in fine pencil strokes in the drawing William Bailey gifted me back in 2000. She gazes into an invisible distance, so improbably calm and certain, protected beneath the highest quality UV-filtered glass, so even exposed to the light, she will not fade.