

Dalí and Rockwell:  
Two More Poems on Artists

*by John Willson*

I have a bias in my work toward the visual element—it's important to me that a poem produce an image on the mind's eye—so I'm drawn to the work of various visual artists and regard them as companions in my pursuits as a poet.

“*The Persistence of Memory*,” a poem named after Salvador Dalí's iconic painting, has its origins in my visit with Dalí in 1975, when I was a forward young poet, and he a gracious host.

Part one of the poem sets the stage for the genesis of the painting *The Persistence of Memory*, as recounted in Dalí's autobiography, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*. Part two tells the story of my first encounter with Dalí, when I presented him with an abalone shell from my home town, San Diego.

Part three is written from the perspective of a retreat I took at a beach cabin on the Oregon coast. This section includes an incident from Dalí's childhood having to do with his later fascination with the image of the crutch, and also some details of my visit at his home, during which he showed me a painting in progress, *Gala Contemplating the Mediterranean Sea Which at Twenty Meters Becomes the Portrait of Abraham Lincoln: Homage to Rothko* (1976), a piece that later became known simply as *Lincoln in Dalivision*.

The poem concludes with reflections on Dalí's final years as well as a few thoughts on how he inspired me as a poet.

Like “*The Persistence of Memory*,” “What Next” originates in a canvas, a self-portrait by a very different artist, Norman Rockwell. In the poem I pay pretty close attention to the details within the painting, while trying to zero in on a basic problem shared by poets and visual artists: how to get started from absolutely nothing.

*The Persistence of Memory*  
To Salvador Dali, 1904—1989

*Take me, I am the drug;  
take me, I am hallucinogenic!*

i Paris, 1931

You sit after dinner with a headache  
the table cluttered and Gala out to a movie  
train your eyes on ripe Camembert  
softening over the edge of a plate

lengthening under your gaze until it  
almost touches the table.

The pressure builds. Time for bed.  
First you rise and enter the studio

turn the lamp on the unfinished canvas—  
Port Lligat at twilight—

                  Mediterranean blue  
darkening from the top of the sky

and the edge of still water along  
a deserted beach. From the left  
a dead olive tree extends a single branch.  
Just as you reach for the lamp

you see two pocket watches  
                                  stretched out of compass  
one draped over the olive branch  
hanging like the tongue from a tired dog's mouth

the other's hands still straight  
but lost on a dial  
                                  melting at five to six.

You mix oils and begin with the faces  
knowing where every hour will fall.

(cont.)

ii Port Lligat, Spain, June, 1975

Two fishermen talk quietly  
mending their nets on the beach of soft watches.  
Terraced olive trees  
    slope down to a white stucco house  
whose roof bears two giant eggs  
    standing on end.

My hand sweats around a plastic bag  
that holds an abalone shell from California  
as I watch the dark blue Cadillac below me  
Gala's knees through the smoked window

your hand reaching over to pat them  
when the engine starts and shifts into gear.  
Leaping from the wall to the front of the car  
I flash the shell

like a stop sign at the chauffer  
then at the back seat: For you! For you!  
You nod and your window slides down:  
*Thank you. Is very beautiful.*  
*You speak the English? Yes.*  
*You paint? No, I write.*  
*You come see me and the Madame*  
*tomorrow at seven. In the morning?*  
*No, the evening.*

The window slides up to encase you  
and your car disappears in a cloud:  
dust settles on the empty plastic bag.

iii Copalis Beach, Washington, February 1989

Against a pewter sky  
a juniper tree with one dead limb  
thrown up in praise of its punishment by the wind  
blasts the silhouette of a crutch.  
It is the crutch you discovered in an attic when you were nine  
    (cont., stanza break)

the day you found your pet hedgehog lying dead in grass.  
Holding the bottom end of the crutch  
you fit the crook around the bristled back  
and gently turned it over to see a swarming  
fist of worms in the belly. You ran

horrified to the mill stream  
and held the crutch beneath the current  
then carried it to the linden orchard. A peasant girl  
on a ladder cut blossom-covered branches  
tossing them down to a white sheet spread below her.  
Intoxicated by the perfume

and the girl who reached with her pruning hook  
you placed the crutch on the blossom pile and waited.  
After it was buried you pulled it out  
lifted it by the bottom end toward the girl  
gently fit the crook to the small of her back.  
Dali—*desire* in Catalan—

you tapped me playfully on the head  
with the handle of your crutch-shaped cane  
the evening I came to your home. Your eyelids drawn  
back to reveal terrifying whites  
your moustache the horns of a Catalonian bull  
you said, *Now you will see the Gala  
nude*. I followed you to your studio

and there she was  
full-length seen from behind  
radiating gold from a Mediterranean sunset  
the canvas almost covering one wall.  
Thrusting binoculars into my hands

you said, *Here, you look through the wrong way,*  
and the painting turned into the face of Lincoln.  
*Is fantastico, no?*

Thirteen years later the painting  
flanks your tomb. It isn't the painting  
I remember most. It isn't the polar bear

(cont., stanza break)

umbrella stand, the candles drooping  
upside down from candleabra, the wax  
image of Christ on the Cross  
you worked on, humming off-key, glasses  
perched at the end of your nose. It isn't the time  
you stopped to read my poem  
look at me and say, *Bravo, bravo*  
or your comment, *You look like the Warhol*  
*only much younger and thousand times more beautiful.*

It isn't the sweep of your hand  
as you drew a shooting star beside your name  
and mine in the copy of your novel. It is one  
translated sentence from that book:  
*Inspiration is something one possesses*  
*by the hard and bitter labor of every day.*  
It is my sentence

to accept or deny every day  
a sentence that lasted me through the time  
following your feigned kisses of farewell  
on my cheeks that summer evening:  
first, Gala's death

drawing in the life without desire.  
Then your bed sheets in flames,  
the wheelchair, Parkinson's disease  
animating the watchmaker's hands,  
feeding tubes through your nose, your eyes

now terrified, eyes that once  
saw an inkstand in a loaf of bread, Venus  
de Milo as a chest of drawers—your vision  
reminding me of the pearly  
brilliance inside an abalone shell.  
Here in a cabin on the bluff

at land's end, I turn on the lamp.  
Sky darkens toward the ocean, leaving me  
desire, blank sheets, a wrack of words  
and my reflection in the window.

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*What Next*

*Blank Canvas*

Norman Rockwell, 1938

Seen from behind, your ears curve into question marks  
as you scratch your tousled head. A cowlick  
exposes a dot of pink scalp—the painting's  
vortex—while your lanky frame—arms and legs  
bowed outward from the swivel chair—poses  
a larger question: in the mirror one morning,  
what if we found whiteness, like the canvas

in front of you, instead of our own reflection?  
Your inspiration: a deadline—August sixth—  
pinned to one corner, and nothing seems to help,  
not the pencil drafts rumped by your saddle shoe,  
the sketch book splayed on your right thigh,  
the rusty horseshoe hanging from the easel's crossbar.  
This is the zero, from scratch, the staring

at nothing, the terror between poems,  
your palette lying on the floor, handle  
of a brush stuck in a glob of white.  
Yet this day, you make of yourself and the void  
below the banner—*Saturday Evening Post*—  
a figure of perplexity saying *This*  
*is where I start*, briar pipe's  
empty bowl peering from your back pocket.

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