

THE FACE IN THE WINDOW

Clifford Garstang

It is the middle of the night, a dark, moonless night, when a man—a small man who, though past forty, has never been as fit as he is now, his days filled with running and the endless lifting of makeshift weights—removes a painting from the lobby wall. He intends to be noiseless, but the painting is large, an awkward size that exceeds one man's grasp, and a corner of the canvas bumps the wall.

In the apartment behind the wall, another man stirs in his sleep, not knowing what has disturbed him. The man wakes, listens, tries to focus his hearing, to tune out the city, the distant sirens, the rumble of night traffic on nearby New York Avenue. When there is only silence, no imminent threat he

can discern, he drifts back to sleep. In the morning he will not remember that he woke. No one else has heard.

In the lobby, which in reality is just a wide hall shared by the vintage building's twelve condos, the small man maneuvers the painting through an open door and leans it against the wall. He steps back into the center of his apartment, a spacious, open loft, and gazes at the work.

The painting is abstract, but the man knows what it depicts: the rooflines of a barn against a winter-blue sky. A thick, white silo stands just off center. There is a face in the window of the barn, but that might as well be a shadow, reflected light, a smudge, an accident. The man has a hunting knife at the ready, one he has sharpened for this purpose, and he means to shred the painting, to return it from whence it came, to nothingness, his imagination, to eliminate that face, that smudge, that accident. But there's no hurry. The rest of the building sleeps, and so shall he.

The man whose sleep has been disturbed, a young lawyer named Aloysius, now rises, at his usual hour, to the familiar voices of the morning news on his radio, no memory of the midnight thump, and leaves for work at his office on K Street without noticing that the large painting is gone. Likewise, the schoolteacher in Number 1, Craig, half of the gay couple that seems always to be on the verge of calamity, exits his apartment with his

arrogant pug for their morning walk. This man pauses in the hall as if aware of an imbalance, a new scent, a change he cannot identify, but shrugs and leaves without further examination. The Chinese man, Mr. Zhang, and his two young sons—sadly, their blond mother has been taken from them in a Beltway accident—emerge from their unit chaotically, ahead of Mr. Zhang’s ancient father. The boys race to the front door, the men hurry after them, and no one sees the gap where the painting of the barn—if they had ever stopped to realize it was a barn—once hung.

The small man—his name is Calvin—also rises, but has nowhere to go. In the corner of his apartment that is dedicated to his work, he stares at a blank canvas, imploring a picture to appear. But he sees nothing. There is no image in his mind that will emerge in paint for the world to see, and so all he can do is stare at nothing, as he has been doing now for weeks, maybe months. Nothing new will come; it is finished for him. He has only the bones and blood of the work he has eviscerated, kept like sacred relics, work returned from the galleries, work that will not sell, his life’s work that was garbage, and is now garbage. Only the painting of the barn remains, and when that is gone, when there is nothing left of who he was, when he has reduced his existence to dust and ashes, he can be reborn. He can begin again.

He holds the knife aloft, but he cannot bring himself to do the deed. Not yet. It is irreversible, this erasure of the self, and, after all, there is no rush. Whatever lies beyond will still be there tomorrow.

Calvin dresses to run and flees the apartment. He ran also in school, as a boy. He was fast, small and fleet, dazzling, and it pleased him. Not the performing, not the races, not the attention, not being on a team—which he was persuaded would endear him to his fellows who, before that, had taunted him for his stature—but the running itself, being absorbed into his subconscious, without will, an instrument of thoughtless motion, streaking across the landscape like a brush.

And now he runs again because he cannot paint.

He heads down M Street. Despite the presence of urban pioneers, like the residents of his own building, it is still a neighborhood of struggles, of broken families in decline, and his appearance—the bare, white legs, his freckled, gaunt cheeks and red locks—is an oddity. A heavy woman with a toddler in hand stops and they both stare at Calvin as he passes. A bald man, wheelchair-bound, watches from a dark window. But these days when Calvin runs, he doesn't see; he doesn't think or feel, and so he doesn't know that he is watched. He only knows that he must run.

He turns south on 4th Street and disturbs a transaction in the alley, detects voices, words that might be angry, but do not register. Both men in

the alley, members of the gang that rules this triangular section of the Lower Shaw neighborhood, have guns tucked into their belts. One of the men is an undercover policeman from the city's anti-gang task force, the other a career thug, but both will die violently, if not today, then on another day like today. They have already vanished from Calvin's awareness as he flies down to Massachusetts, heads east over the freeway, to the Capitol steps, back along the Mall, soaring between monuments and museums, invisible to the tourists he does not see, who feel only a faint wind as he passes.

While he runs, a breeze through an open window of his apartment lifts the barn painting away from the wall. It teeters on the brink of tumbling forward where it would be impaled on the sharp edges of his crude barbell, the one he made with cement-filled coffee cans as a desperate teenager, praying for bulk against his oppressive stepfather. But the breeze subsides, and the canvas settles back against the wall.

The man is gone for hours, or it could be days. Racing past the Lincoln Memorial, he approaches two other runners, Marines detailed to the Pentagon who jog daily across the river into the District, one a head taller than the other. They will both one day fight in Iraq and the taller man will die in a helicopter crash. Each observes Calvin, his powerful stride as he catches them and pulls away, surprising in someone his size, and they are compelled to pursue. He doesn't notice that he has passed them, doesn't realize when

they fall off his pace, doesn't miss them when they fade, their energy sapped, and stop, short of breath, in the shadow of the Vietnam wall.

When Calvin returns to Nanking Mansion (his home of two years and a vast improvement over the space he once shared with another painter and that painter's girlfriend), he shuts his eyes to the empty wall that no one else has noticed. But inside his apartment he cannot tear his eyes from the painting of the barn.

He remembers this work, can still feel the resistance of the canvas to his brush strokes, the shudder of the surface beneath his hand. He'd been invited to a community of artists, a colony in the foothills of the Blue Ridge, and the work flowed in his bright studio. Day after day the work came to him, pouring from images in his mind, through his fingers to the canvas, as if he were only a conduit for a creator he could not name. Meals were served to the artists and he would sometimes eat, sometimes not, because there was work to be done, more work than he could grasp, a universe of work, and he would return to the studio even in the dark to let the pictures come.

He spoke to almost no one there. He was something of a joke among the others, especially the writers, so solemn and dark and oblivious he was that each of them, independently and without sharing the idea, resolved to write about him, to let this odd character emerge in words, this short, silent man with the paint-stained hands. When he did appear at meals they would

stare at him, extracting details they might use, the spread of his nose, the squint of his eyes, the shiny trace of a scar on his wrists, and he wouldn't notice them noticing him.

Except for one.

There was a woman who spoke to him, and he painted for her. The pictures came through him because of her. She opened him. It is her face in the window.

He now stands before her, before his portrait of her, stripped of everything, the blissful agony of his run coursing through him. Sweat floods the red thatch on his chest and stomach, drips off his penis, pools at his feet. He lifts the barbell, curling his sculpted biceps. He lifts again, and again, and again. The veins in his arms swell as he lifts, dark, pulsing strokes against his pale skin. He lifts, his penis engorges, the sweat pours, and he stares at the face in the painting until he can lift no more.

It is the two little boys, Simon and Wesley, the only children in the building, who notice that the painting is gone. When they come in with their grandfather—Simon fresh from school and Wesley from the park where the old gentleman, recently arrived from Shanghai and still unaccustomed to such things, has watched the boy frolic with children of many colors—Simon stops and stares at the vacant wall.

“Where’s the big picture?” Simon asks his grandfather.

The old man doesn’t understand the words, his English being still rudimentary, but he now sees that the crazy painting that was there is no longer there. He lifts his hand to the outline on the wall, a product of grime and faded paint, and traces with one finger the dozen strokes of the Chinese character “huà,” meaning art. When the boys’ father comes home from work, the old man tells him in Chinese that the painting is gone.

The men inspect the hallway, note the vacant space, and examine the remaining artwork as if for the first time: a cluttered collage by the tall, skinny sculptor in Unit 3 who, at this moment, is cutting clay from a block that will become a bust of his father, distorted and wrinkled in a way the man never was in life; an impressionist piece, provenance unknown, reminiscent of Monet, portraying the Tidal Basin ringed by cherry trees in full blossom; and an insipid watercolor of the Washington Monument surrounded by red blobs that apparently represent American flags, painted by the talentless and amorphous woman in the front apartment, Susanna, who takes inspiration from her loutish boyfriend, the latest in a string of loutish boyfriends, who is always by her side and who has, just now, in judgment-clouding ecstasy, while the Chinese men study the hallway gallery, ejaculated inside her without protection.

Other residents, just home from work, are notified of the disappearance, although Calvin, who is aware of the commotion in the hallway, does not answer when the knock comes to his door. No one knows, or perhaps no one remembers, that the missing painting is his creation. They knock because he must be warned. Everyone must be warned. Calvin listens to their voices. He lies naked on the floor before his painting and listens, stroking himself, summoning the woman in the window.

There have been thefts from the building in the past. It is, after all, a neighborhood in transition, not the safest in the city, although far from the worst, and all of the investors in the building's renovation have the impression that crime in the area has abated. They are wrong, but no one will tell them so. Craig, the high school English teacher, who fancies himself a poet and reads Whitman every evening, is the current President of the Condo Association, and he checks documents, reviews insurance records. Calls are made, the police notified. Doors are examined for evidence. Residents are questioned.

The knock on Calvin's door is insistent now, but still he does not answer.

He knows the theft has been discovered. Eventually someone will remember that he is the artist. They will realize what has happened. They will guess what the odd little man has done.

In the morning, before he runs, he stands before the painting again, knife in hand. Her name was Sook-ja, small, Korean, a violinist and a poet both. She wanted to be called Sarah, while she was in America, such a short time. Like him, she barely spoke to others in the colony. She came to his studio, she posed, she undressed, they fucked on the daybed, on the floor. He knew this wasn't how she ordinarily behaved. She spoke of family, of church, of God and sin. But having come to America and adopted a new name, she was also trying on a new life, like a department-store sweater, a life in which artists did this, they were destined to come together, to meld, to inspire one another, and then part.

He can't yet bring himself to destroy the painting, to erase Sarah, Sook-ja from his life, but he knows it is only a matter of time before the painting is found. Still, destruction is so final, and he isn't ready. He shrouds the canvas with a drop-cloth.

As Mr. Zhang is leaving for work, he walks past Calvin's door and hears something inside the apartment that sounds like the flapping of wings. He wonders if the small man is home. That's how he thinks of him, the small man.

And as Mr. Zhang's father is herding the boys, his grandchildren, out of the apartment on their way to school, he sees the building's front door swing shut and the small man in running shorts leap off the stoop.

The run is the same as always. Calvin doesn't vary his route, although he has on occasion reversed the flow, finishing with the Capitol steps instead of beginning there. This morning, though, living deeply inside himself, his mind blank, he lets his feet guide him. He is unaware of his path.

Until, that is, he passes the building where he briefly lived with the other painter and the painter's girlfriend, Cynthia. He realizes now that the woman in the window isn't Sook-ja, or not only Sook-ja. It's partly Cynthia, too. The skin, dark, the face, round—they're both Sook-ja, they're Asian, exotic. But it's Cynthia's hair and, although they aren't visible in the painting, hidden as they are below the window so that only he can see them, in his mind, Cynthia's breasts, her nakedness.

He slows as he passes, gazes up at the loft. Is there movement? It was a game for Sook-ja, a masquerade. Was it the same for Cynthia? Did it mean nothing to her? He speeds on, lets his thoughts ebb, his mind empty.

Jeremy, the painter, was his friend. Or not *his* friend, exactly. A friend of a friend, from the dark days, the hospital. When he came to D.C. from rural Virginia in search of an art scene, a haven, a place to recover, he needed somewhere to crash and Clark, just out of treatment himself, phoned Jeremy on Calvin's behalf. There was a cot and it wasn't going to be for long. Temporary. Fleeting. He hadn't counted on Cynthia, or on her lovemaking

with Jeremy while he lay near them in the dark. He hadn't counted on Cynthia climbing into his cot while Jeremy slept.

When Calvin gets home from the run, sweat-soaked and finally emerging from his depths, like the horizon when dense fog lifts, there's a cop car parked in front of the building. The lights aren't flashing, there's no crowd, the sort that seems to materialize around a crime scene, no agitation of any kind. Inside, there's no sign of the police and, as he enters his own apartment, he wonders if they might not be waiting for him.

But they are not.

As before, he unshrouds the painting and stands naked before it, this time looking for Cynthia in the window, her breasts, her body, visible only to him.

Now it's evening. There is still some stained light in the sky but the apartment is filled with shadows. Calvin sits cross-legged in front of the painting. He lifts a bottle of red wine to his lips—cheap, all they had at the corner store this afternoon, the surly Korean clerk, reminding him of Sook-ja, caged behind hardened glass and bars—and tilts it high because it's nearly empty. He is no longer a drinker, and he knows he will suffer for this. There was a time, though, during a brief stab at college, less a stab than a poke, when it was nothing. It was nothing and everything and it consumed him. It

made all the pain worse, it made the scars appear on his wrists, he barely remembers how, although he remembers his knife, and then one day he stopped. One day he stopped and the next day he painted.

There is a soft knock at the door. He's forgotten the painting, which still stands uncovered. He's forgotten, too, that in the past, even before he removed the painting, he rarely came to the door. Not that knocks were frequent. He barely knows his neighbors, in fact knows no one's name and only a few of the faces. But now he stumbles to his feet, the bottle in hand, and he is just about to open the door when he is aware of the face in the window.

"Minute," he says, and sets the bottle on the floor, where it spins and totters before finally tipping noisily. He flings the cloth over the painting, comes back to the door, and opens it.

He doesn't recognize the woman standing before him in her formless shift.

Susanna sees the lack of recognition in his blank face. She is embarrassed, but not surprised. In the time that she and her boyfriend have been living in the front unit, rented from the world-traveling owner, she's rarely seen this small man and spoken to him just once, on a day when she

held the door for him as he came in from his run. She asked him something inane then, about the heat or the rain, and he grunted a reply.

“I’m sorry about the painting,” she says, pointing behind her toward the blank wall. “I love it. I love standing and looking at it when no one’s around. It’s like being alone in a museum.”

Calvin leans against the door jamb to steady himself.

“The little one of the monument is mine.” She lowers her eyes. Her painting is childish, and she knows he knows. “Yours, though. It’s perfect.”

The air is hot and Calvin feels his throat tighten.

“Anyway. I just wanted to tell you that.” She backs away, turns toward her own door. He watches her, the way she moves on tip-toe in her bare feet, how her calves harden with each step, how the hips sway.

“You liked it?”

She stops. She faces him. She nods.

Her face is round and dark, her black hair short. She’s not Asian, she isn’t Sook-ja, but she might be Cherokee. It could be her face in the window. The more he looks at her, the brown eyes, the flat nose, the more certain he is.

“Would you like a drink?” He bends to retrieve the empty bottle, and rises, dizzily, waving it in his hand.

She lowers her eyes, nods. Although she doesn’t know it yet, only fears it because of her boyfriend’s carelessness, she’s pregnant. She’s not sure

what will happen if she is, and so she sees no reason not to go with him. She wasn't lying about the painting. It makes her feel alive, makes her skin tingle, how that silo looks like it might rocket into the sky at any moment. She would go anywhere with this man.

Now there is a second bottle of wine, and glasses. Unsteady, he spills while pouring the girl's glass. This is how he thinks of her, the girl, because he doesn't know her name.

"I don't know your name," he says. He thinks he might have only thought this because the girl says nothing and, in any case, it wasn't a question. He doesn't need to know her name, doesn't want to know her name, can't possibly remember her name. She can be Sook-ja, or Cynthia. It doesn't matter. He gulps his wine.

"Susanna," she says. "You know? Banjo-on-my-knee? Susanna?"

He's staring at her face, picturing it in the barn window, wondering how it is that he's already painted this girl Susanna's face.

"You're Calvin, right? I asked Mr. Artoyen about you." She's looking away again, blushing.

He doesn't know who Mr. Artoyen might be, doesn't recognize the name, although the man is the building's developer and also Calvin's landlord, but he laughs at the sound of his own name, at the idea of anyone talking about him when he isn't there. It doesn't seem possible. It implies an

existence outside of himself, one that he doesn't control and that therefore has nothing to do with him, and the absurdity of it begins to drag him back into his own cloudy depths.

“What happened to the picture?” She's seen that there is a large canvas covered by a drop-cloth and her eyes flit to it now.

Calvin pours more wine. The air is hot. He stands up and strips off his shirt. She notices his wiry build, his sturdy arms, the film of hair on his chest. He retrieves a sketchpad, sits and begins to work.

“You're drawing me?” She blushes again, tries to hide her face behind the wine glass while, at the same time, watching the image develop on the pad.

It's a furious process, painting. For him it's almost physical, like defecation. And that's what he feels now, for the first time in months, for the first time since Sook-ja. His torso is relaxed, there is a draft that feels cool on his bare chest, he can let go of what's inside, and the work flows. He's holding nothing back.

Susanna doesn't know what to do. Calvin—this is how *she* thinks of him, never “the small man,” always “Calvin”—isn't really looking at her anymore. Or, he is: he glances up from the sketchpad now and then, steals a piece of her, that curl of hair that loops under her ear, or the dimple in her chin she's always hated, and then dives again into the sketch to preserve it there, like

an insect in amber; but he doesn't see her. Should she be still? Should she move closer? Should she unbutton her dress and let it fall? Should she touch him?

She touches him.

And now he looks at her.

Susanna's boyfriend is in his Contracts class at the Georgetown Law Center a few blocks from Nanking Mansion. Time drags; the professor drones. The boyfriend watches a large-breasted blond in the row ahead and imagines sex with her, rehearses the proposition, pictures her reaction, her acquiescence.

It is the blond he will think of when he enters Susanna tonight, and it is the blond he will think of when Susanna tells him about the sketch Calvin has made of her and, almost as an afterthought, that she has let Calvin fuck her.

Aloyisus, the neighbor who heard the painting thump against his wall in the night, will hear more thumps, against a different wall, and shouting, unintelligible. A door will slam. There will be a final thump.

Calvin rises early. He stands before his painting of the barn, marvels at the reflection of early light in the whorls of his brush strokes, the barn at dawn, red-tinged. And there is Susanna in the window—Sook-ja, Cynthia—

her face calling to him. There is a bed in the studio behind her, hidden from view, but she begs him to come to her. She has promised to visit him again today, to pose for him again, to please him again.

In her own apartment, Susanna is locked in the bathroom, where she has slept curled on the cold tile. She hears her boyfriend's curses, books flung, broken glass. She waits for the front door to open and close so she can go to Calvin. He will protect her. He is her salvation.

It is a crisp morning and Calvin flies toward the Capitol on his run. He comes to the building where Cynthia lives with Jeremy and he gazes up at the window as he passes. He sees her there, thinks he sees her pale face, like the moon, full of longing, and he hardens at the thought of Susanna, who has promised to return. He is aware of the hardness, painful in the tight pouch of his shorts. He is aware of the sweat on his chest, the sweat on his forehead dripping into his eyes. He is aware of traffic, of uneven sidewalks, of gravel and pedestrians. There is a twinge in his right foot, a sharp, distinct jab that he can visualize, one of the tiny bones aggravated by repetition, and he knows that the pain, at this moment a deniable annoyance, will spread.

At this moment, Susanna's apartment door slams shut, followed by a silent vacuum, the deep quiet of absence. She rises from the bathroom floor, gazes in the mirror at her face, at the glowing red welt.

For the first time since he resumed running, Calvin counts the Capitol steps as he jogs up, counts again on the way down. He falls in behind a pair of Marines, the same men he has breezed past on other days. He sees that they are in stride, right, left, right, tiny explosions of dust at each footfall. He hears the flap of their loose t-shirts against their bodies, the faint hum of chatter passing between them as he flags, and they pull away.

The boyfriend waits for the echo of the slamming door to subside. He knows which door belongs to the painter, the bastard who has fucked his Susanna, and his broad, rough hand engulfs the knob. The door is unlocked. He enters. He's seen the little man and he burns to confront him, to warn him to stay away from Susanna, aches to fight him. But the painter is gone. The boyfriend sees the crude barbell, the empty wine bottles, the red crust at the bottom of a lipstick-stained glass. But there is no one to fight, no one on whom to focus his rage, and so the fire dies. He turns to leave. He's preparing to return to Susanna, to apologize, to beg forgiveness if that's what it takes, to seek absolution in her body for the sins of his, when he notices the big painting of the barn, with the face in the window.

The pain in Calvin's foot is almost unbearable now. He hasn't felt pain in so long he barely recognizes the sensation, but it extracts memories he's suppressed, a step-father, young love, the scars on his wrists and the agony

of the before and the after, until he found redemption in the brushes and paint. But now the pain brings him to a stop.

Back in Calvin's apartment, the boyfriend is motionless. The face in the window is dark, but clearly it is Susanna. How long have they been hiding their affair? How long has she been cheating on him with this ... *little man*? He flexes his hands into fists, feels heat rise into his chest, his neck, his face. If the little man were there now he would beat him into sludge. He would beat him until he felt nothing.

Calvin has stopped running. He heads home, limping, feeling, too aware.

The boyfriend looks around the apartment. On a table next to a vacant easel there is a hunting knife, spattered with paint. Like blood, he thinks, the bastard's blood, and he seizes the knife.

It takes hours, seems like hours, for Calvin to get home. He can barely make it up the front steps, struggles with the key, leans heavily into the door to push it open.

Inside his apartment, although he senses something is wrong, he doesn't notice immediately what has happened. But he feels glass underfoot, smells the sweat of an intruder, and then he sees. The easel, its legs and spine broken, lies in a heap, embracing the homemade barbell that has crushed it. Tubes of paint bleed into the wood floor, amidst stained

shards of the wine bottles that have been used to flatten them. His back is to the painting, but he already knows. He must turn to see it. He begins to turn and then stops, begins again and then turns just his head, lets the rest follow when his eyes see. The painting—the barn, the phallic silo, the face in the window—is whole. The face mocks him. Blood, or perhaps it is paint, is smeared at his feet.

The old Chinese grandfather, alone in the apartment at the end of the hall, removes the pyramid of oranges from the family altar, dusts the framed photographs of his wife, of his son's wife, and then returns everything to its place. He lights incense, bows, and speaks to the dead.

In the front apartment, Susanna has emerged from the bathroom. The boyfriend is sitting on the floor, his arms and face awash with red. She sits next to him and puts her hands in his.

And Calvin. Now there is no hesitation. He finds the knife, feels its heft, and lunges at the painting of the barn, slicing through the canvas as if it were skin, through the silo, through the angles of the roof, through the half-open door, through the window, the shadowy face in the window.

He steps through the rubble of the studio, pushes aside the shattered easel. He locates an unbroken bottle of wine and uncorks it. He drinks. He

feels the pain in his foot abate, feels his mind clear. Blood pulses in his fingers, throbbing through him, engorging him.

He locates the blank canvas that has tormented him and sets it upright against the wall. Brush in hand, he peers into its emptiness. It is like snow, a blizzard that once seemed as though it would last a lifetime but now looks sure to end. Behind the blizzard will be an image that only he can see, that only he can render, his destiny. Perhaps a glittering mountain peak, or the tops of trees. Perhaps a snow-etched roofline. A violin. A banjo. A dark, round face.

Clifford Garstang, a former international lawyer, earned his MFA from Queens University of Charlotte. His award-winning linked story collection, *In an Uncharted Country*, was published in 2009. A novel in stories, *What the Zhang Boys Know*, is forthcoming in 2012 from Press 53. Recent work has appeared in *Blackbird*, *Cream City Review*, *Los Angeles Review*, *Tampa Review*, and elsewhere. He is the Editor of *Prime Number Magazine*.