

ANNA SEGNER

The Self-Portrait

I woke to the morning call of the Baltimore Oriole cutting the silence of my cramped apartment. Instinctively, I tossed my colorful quilt off my chest and became aware that I was clutching a palette knife. It wasn't until I sat up that I realized I was starving and incredibly hungover. I carefully stepped out of my bed to avoid the several books and coffee mugs scattered on the floor. On my way out of the bedroom, I hit a stack of ceramic sculptures, and the clatter hung in the air like the smell of stale coffee.

I stumbled past my singing bird clock to the bathroom where makeup was sprawled across the counter, and an overwhelming amount of clothing was scattered on the floor. Evidence of last night was staring back at me in the mirror, sparkling actually—my face was covered in silver glitter. Last night was an art department party celebrating the leave of Angela, a once-loved but recently-disliked artist. Angela was notorious for never returning borrowed supplies and for over pronouncing words to sound more intelligent.

Looking like a terror with dark strands of hair plastered to my sweaty and glittering forehead, I lumbered into the kitchen and struggled to find a bowl that hadn't been used to mix paint. I poured myself a bowl of Grape-Nuts. The old school desk was the only seat in the kitchen that didn't contain a cat or a pile of books, so I dropped myself in the school desk and cleared the faux-wood surface. While shoveling Grape-Nuts into my mouth quickly, without breath, I had the sudden need to look behind me. I turned my body and head to glimpse into the ominously lit hallway. I don't know what I expected, but there wasn't a creepy man in the

hallway and there wasn't a ghost child haunting me, so I happily returned to my breakfast. But as I dipped my head to slurp another spoonful of cereal, I saw it.

I saw her.

On top of my bookshelf was the painted self-portrait of Angela. A chill ran through my hungover body. I dropped my spoon, splattering milk.

Before she came, I had been the cherished painter of the art center. The moment she showed up with her mixed media shit, everyone was mesmerized and said, "Angela, you are so unique" or "Angela's work is so edgy." Everyone said these things, except for me. She was a phony. She would crush the butt of her cigarette into her painting and throw soda at her canvas, but I knew she only did these things when people were watching. She once threw her painting in the snow and stomped on it until the board had cracked. It was no coincidence that she put on this show right outside the window of a gallery reception. It wasn't until she had gallery and teaching responsibilities that people realized that there was no substance to her. Eventually, her incapacity to get along with others caught up with her, and she was voted out. But I couldn't forget, and there, propped up against the television, I saw her crazed, vituperating eyes. The eyes were disproportionately large and shining dark like wet, smooth stones. The painting as a whole was disturbing, but the eyes were painted in a swirling circular motion, creating a crazed and mesmerized expression. The eyes were so miserable that I shuddered from fear.

The rest of her face completely contrasted the overwrought eyes. It was a combination of confident inexperience and egocentrism that painted the rest of the face, for her nose appeared straighter and gentler than it did in reality's harsh light. Her cheekbones were painted with a prominent, pale pink stroke, the same pale pink used as the lightest light of the lip. Her countenance was a confident acceptance of crazy. A stab went through my stomach as I remembered my watercolor landscapes in the gallery replaced by her mixed media paintings.

I must have drunkenly stumbled home with the painting after the party last night. We had set up a sound system in the studio that used to house Angela's enormous mixed media paintings. Where her gallons of black and maroon paint used to sit, there sat bottles of bourbon, trays of jello shots, and various other drinks. I overdid it. There were many instances from last night that I couldn't recall. I did remember that Angela's studio cupboards were opened, revealing the few things left behind: a mannequin (with unnaturally bent joints), a few plastic palette knives, the art department's Christmas photo, a few blank canvases, and the eerie

self-portrait.

While staring at the painting, I sat stirring my Grape-Nuts to mush. I spent the rest of the day disturbed by the fact that Angela was in my kitchen, sardonically scrutinizing the mess of my two cats and piles of shit.

All weekend, I couldn't bring myself to move the painting. Instead of ridding myself of it, I became obsessed with proving to Angela, in the middle of my kitchen, that my life wasn't a damn mess. I cleaned the kitchen, did dishes, and moved stacks of books into different rooms. By Sunday evening, my bathtub was filled with paint brushes, old picture frames, and the other art supplies that used to be scattered around the wooden kitchen floor.

Come Monday morning, my bedroom floor was completely scattered with the things that used to be in my kitchen, and my cats now rested in piles of clothing on the bedroom floor. I found a pencil skirt and a wrinkled chambray shirt in my closet, and dressed myself quickly while walking to the spotless kitchen. Everything had its proper place, except the painting. It still sat on the bookshelf leaned against the old television. As I ate my cereal and drank my coffee, I faced away from the painting. As I dashed out the door with a trench coat slung on and a scarf in hand, I never once glanced at it.

When I got to my studio, I began to prepare for the Monday morning figure study class I was to lead at 10:00. As I was searching the Internet for examples of master artists' studies of the hand and foot, I heard Sylvan's fancy shoes tap down the hall, eventually stopping in my doorway.

"You are a hot mess," he laughed. "You should answer your phone. I've been meaning to ask about Friday." He had a pink polo and a pair of gray dress pants hanging neatly by a black belt with a silver buckle.

"I guess you aren't teaching ceramics today, are you?" I said looking him over.

"No, I'm not teaching ceramics today. It's Tuesday," he said in a serious and concerned voice. "Rachel, are you okay?" It couldn't be Tuesday. It had to be Monday. I never left my apartment this weekend. Surely I could not have spent three straight days in that cramped little apartment. "Rachel?"

"I'm...fine. It's not my fault," I began to mumble. "If it wasn't for Angela...she's always there. I...I, I can't get her out of my mind. She showed up, and I can't make her leave."

"What?" he asked.

"It's her painting. She's always there," I said looking down.

"Rachel, why do you have one of her paintings?" Sylvan inquired. "Is it the self-portrait that you kept cursing at Friday

night? Did you take that? You really shouldn't be drinking." As he said that, Jerry, an older resident artist, came in.

"You have a drinking problem, Rachel?" Jerry questioned nosily.

"No, Jerry. You really aren't involved in this," I snapped. It was mean, but I didn't care.

"You should take the day off. I can take over your painting class for the day," Sylvan said. "In fact, this is not a request."

I didn't have a choice. I argued, but Sylvan insisted. I packed a bag of paints, and as I exited the door, Sylvan said, "If you stole that painting of Angela, just get rid of it."

When I left the art department, the wind violently whipped my face, so I wrapped my scarf over my mouth and began walking through downtown. Every window presented autumn tones of oranges, mahogany, rust, burnt orange, and vermilion. I passed crafty gourds, pumpkins, fake leaves with rakes propped against the display windows. I got to the door of my apartment building, and I couldn't bear to step inside or take one step closer to Angela's self-portrait. I pulled a cheap cigar out of my purse and took a long draw while brewing a plan to rid myself of Angela.

I needed to get rid of the painting. If I brought it back to her empty studio, I would always know it was there, waiting. In throwing it away, there would be a possibility that it would return. Burning it would be bad luck. The only way to fix this was to erase its existence. Cover it up. Resting in my bag were tubes of paint. Grasping the paints, I stepped out of the late morning sun and into the apartment building.

The next thing I knew, I was standing on the coral bathroom tiles, leaning against my aqua-colored easel. On the easel sat Angela's face with the horrible eyes.

I pushed all of the things off of my bathroom counter and squeezed the tubes of acrylic paints directly onto the smooth stone counter. My hands began to swirl the red, yellow, and blue with white, mixing pale caramel flesh tones of my own skin. I began to lay the pale paint on Angela's cheek, and her face began to twist and look tortured. Her upper lip snarled at me, and the eyes were unchanged: fixated, angry, and crazed. Seeing the expression, I swirled the paint faster and lathered it on thicker until the eyes settled into a hypnotized stare of resentment. I painted over her straight nose. After studying my face in the mirror, I mixed the tones of my chapped lips and smudged the paint over her plump lips. When the counter space was smeared with pools of paint, I began mixing paint over the floral wallpaper surrounding the mirror. I painted dark strands of my hair over her wavy hair. I painted until I realized the day's sun was no longer shining in

from the small window and no longer provided sufficient light, so I turned on the light switch.

The bathroom wall was my palate. Everything from the toilet to my toothbrush was covered in paint. I decided my face on the canvas was almost finished. The face was no longer Angela's; the face was mine. Everything but the eyes. I hadn't touched the eyes. The eyes still had the same disturbed expression.

I scrounged around, desperate for the right tool or paint to fix it. As I looked around the cramped room, I stopped my glance abruptly at the mirror. Angela's eyes were staring back at me from my very own face. Those horrible, crazy, dark, swirling eyes. When I blinked at the mirror, the horrible eyes blinked back.

When I turned to the painting, I was disturbed to find that my face in the mirror looked exactly as it appeared in the painting. I grabbed the painting and threw it back against the easel. Paintbrushes darted out of my hands violently against the canvas. I beat the painting against the wall while shouting atrocious things until I fell to the floor crying. Out of fear of what rested upon my face, I never wiped my tears.

I grasped the easel to pull myself up from the coral tile. I grabbed the painting and rushed into my sparkling kitchen, where I threw on my trench coat and scarf. After a flight of stairs, the sidewalk and the brisk winds of evening struck me. I tucked the painting into my trench coat. A homeless woman came up behind me to ask for money, but she drew back in fear after looking at my eyes. I took my scarf and wrapped it over my head and face, so I could only peek out of a slit. I rushed back past the same autumn displays until I found myself outside of the art department. The door was open. I raced through the hall towards my studio.

"Rachel?" I heard someone ask from the ceramics room. Sylvan popped his head out. "What are you doing?"

"I'm not doing anything. I just came to drop off my new painting," I said quickly.

"Can I see?" Sylvan asked.

"No," I said readjusting my scarf, so he couldn't see my eyes.

"Dammit, Rachel, stop acting so strange," he said.

"I'm sorry. It's just, I don't..." I stammered. "It's horrible." I let out a little whimper.

"A painting of yours could not be horrible," he said more calmly.

I gave in and grabbed the painting from under my trench coat and displayed my revolting creation. His face did not draw back in disgust or fear, only a careful thoughtfulness.

I lifted my scarf off my face. His expression didn't quiver.

"Rachel. This is beautiful."

MARISA DONNELLY

To Exist in This World

Inspired by "Legend," a lithograph by V. Torrence

There is a boy in the sand
He sits on juted grey stones
a precipice of Earth
along the edge of the shore
He thinks
about common things
the capacity of a human brain
features and fissures
pointed nose, thick plates of bone
sliding together
The earth
and its marble shape
countries like patterns of stars
across wind-whipped skies
Tornadoes and black clouds like granite
The unnamed children
standing voiceless
on invisible ledges with
hollow, open mouths
The key to a map
of a lonely, sunless beach
And a boy
like a single grain of sand at his feet,
small.