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Making the Painting · *Jeanne Murray Walker*

I

Like the criminal who waits across the street
for the nurse to snap the light on and undress
he sits before a Rembrandt, sketch pad on his knees.

She breaks from the umber shadow onto canvas,
the right plane of her face leaves dusk behind,
one earring dark, the other bright as a safety pin.

Straining her left shoulder forward, she gathers
amber light from his stare, her green gown
peeling away like ancient moss from new skin.

Skull neat as a cat's, her slender nose
cleared by the smell of turpentine, she craves him.
Their eyes lock into a beam between them.

Aroused to his feet, he stands peculiar for her.
His tee shirt's damp. His hands hang by his side,
ready for anything, veins blue as plums.

Then suddenly as though he'd found that Rembrandt
can be bettered, as though he'd taught the artist
how to see, he shuts his hands and strolls away.

II

I exit, trying to find some meaning in this.
Maybe I am the woman in the picture. It dawns
how the blurred room came clear for the first time

as he stood there. Light. I remember now
waiting through dark years for his blue stare.
All that time I couldn't guess what I was waiting for.

But it comes back. Before he packed his sketchbook
and wandered off, he brushed a fly
from my shoulder. His hand felt curious,

lingering by the secret curve of collarbone.
His voice breathed slang that might have made Eve step
from air. And I remember someone moaned.

But no. We are like drunks, mistaking our own tears for rain.
We see ourselves in everything. Whoever that boy was,
we crossed looks only once, and in an art museum.

His shirt is clean by now and Rembrandts hold their value.
Those two will get along together or apart
without the likes of us. Come. Let's not think of them again.