

Claude Monet, “The Artist’s Garden at Vétheuil,” 1880

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Today I thought I’d just take a lie-down, and drift. So here I am listening
To the tick of my mechanical aortic valve—overhearing, rather, the way it flits
In and out of consciousness. It’s a wonder what goes on below the threshold.
It’s quiet up here, just the muted swoosh of the cars on the Antrim Road,
And every so often the shrill of a far-off alarm or the squeal of brakes;
But yesterday some vandal upended the terra-cotta pot of daffodils
In our little front garden, that’s not even as big, when I consider it,
As the double bed I’m lying on. Behind the privet hedge, besides the daffodils
There’s pansies, thyme, and rosemary. A Hebe bush. A laurel. Ruefully
I scuffed the spilled earth and pebbles with my shoe and thought of Poussin—
Was it Poussin?—and his habit of bringing back bits of wood, stones, moss,
Lumps of earth from his rambles by the Tiber; and the story of him
Reaching among the ruins for a handful of porphyry and marble chips
And saying to a tourist, “Here’s ancient Rome.” So, here’s Glandore Avenue.

So different now from thirty years ago, the corner shop at the interface
Torched and the roadway strewn with broken glass and rubble.

There was something beautiful about the tossed daffodils all the same.
I’d never really taken them under my notice these past few difficult weeks.
It’s late March, some of them beginning to turn and wilt and fade, heads
Drooping, papery at the tips, desiccated, or completely gone, reduced to calyx.
So many shades of yellow when you look at them. Gorse. Lemon. Mustard.
Honey. Saffron. Ochre. But then any word you care to mention has so many
Shades of meaning, and the flower itself goes by different names. Narcissus.
Daffadowndilly. Lent lily. So we wander down the road of what it is we think
We want to say. Etymologies present themselves, like daffodil from asphodel—
Who knows where the “d” came from?—the flower of the underworld.
They say it grows profusely in the meadows of the dead, like a buttercup
On its branching stem. And I see a galaxy of buttercups in a green field,
And the yellow of the tall sunflowers in Monet’s “Garden at Vétheuil” that flank
The path where the woman and the two children stand commemorated.

Strange how a smear of color, like a perfume, resurrects the memory
Of another, that which I meant to begin with. “Asphodel, that greeny flower.”

I’d just found the book I had in mind—“What Painting Is,” by James Elkins—
When the vandal struck. *Thud*. What the . . . ? The gate clanged. I looked out
The bay window to see a figure scarpering off down the street to the interface . . .
What a book, though. I have it before me, open at this color plate, jotting

Notes into a jotter, which I'll work up later into what you're reading now.
"The detail I'm reproducing here is a graveyard of scattered brush hairs
And other detritus," says Elkins. "At the centre left, glazed over by Malachite Green,
Are two crossed brush hairs, one of them bent almost at a right angle.
Just below them are two of Monet's own hairs, fallen into the wet paint."
Brushstrokes laid down every which way. Jiggles. Jabs. Impulsive
Twists and turns. Gestures that "depend on the inner feelings of the body"
And "the fleeting momentary awareness of what the hand might do next."
You listen to the body talking, exfoliating itself cell after cell. I saw it
Happening just now in the dust motes drifting through this ray of sunlight.

So everything gets into the painting, wood smoke from the studio stove,
The high pollen count of a high summer's day *en plein air* by the Seine.

The detail is so magnified it is impossible to tell what it is of, if you didn't,
Like Elkins, know. The visual field looks like a field. Shades of umber, khaki, mud,
And other greens beside the Malachite. It could stand for anything, it seems,
In Monet's garden—or "Garden," rather—as Poussin's handful of porphyry
Is Rome and of the days of the fall of Rome. I want it to go to the stately tune
Of a Poussin painting, "Landscape with a Man Washing His Feet at a Fountain,"
Say, where a woman sweeps by, balancing a basket on her head, and an old man
In blue dreams full-length on the grass. There are milestones and tombs,
And puddles on the road, and you can just imagine the whispering of the cistern.
A line of blue hills in the distance is contoured like a monumental sentence.
It's beautiful weather, the 30th of March, and tomorrow the clocks go forward.
How strange it is to be lying here listening to whatever it is is going on.
The days are getting longer now, however many of them I have left.
And the pencil I am writing this with, old as it is, will easily outlast their end.