

TATIANA GORBACHEVA

Ripened, 2007
Oil on Canvas, 14 x 18 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

STEPHEN WOODHAMS

Garden of Verses

One summer when Uncle Edward was in town, during the walks we took around Land's End and other scenic out-of-the-way San Francisco locations that my uncle specialized in, he spoke at length about writers he admired, especially Robert Louis Stevenson, who, it seemed, was much on his mind. This was partly because Uncle Edward, as a retired English professor, brooded over such matters, and partly because, as a social bon vivant, he had once met Stevenson's stepdaughter at a tea party in San Francisco where she had lived for some time.

This oblique proximity to the great man had forged a lasting bond. My uncle seemed to see himself in Stevenson. They were doppelgangers of sorts, perhaps because of the time during the war that my uncle had spent on Samoa where Stevenson had lived. On a leave, he had hiked to Stevenson's house at Vailima, and pronounced the spot gloomy and the domestic arrangements there dubious—but still, the man himself emerged even more heroic for having been able to put up with it. There was also the time that Stevenson had spent in a cabin in the Silverado Hills of Napa Valley, drinking, by his own account, a great deal of local wine.

One day we'd driven to Calistoga looking for some trace of the author. "Stevenson's time here was very brief," said my uncle; "apparently of little consequence"—this despite the nearby museum housing the world's most extensive collection of Stevenson artifacts, which seemed to only mystify him. It was as though these manuscripts and portraits and exhibits had little to do with my uncle's connection to the author, and were but a superficial gloss on how he felt. Or maybe it was because the museum was empty and showed little sign of visitation. "You see," he said on the drive home, "I knew him rather well."

The fact that Uncle Edward suffered from something called "mastoids" as a boy may have also linked him to the chronic tubercular suffering of Robert Louis Stevenson. My uncle was not one to ever admit to sickness—"I have never been ill a day in my life," he used to say—but he may have seen Stevenson in the same light: someone who soldiered on without complaint.

All of this qualified him to issue this judgment: "You will find no finer purveyor of the King's speech than RLS."

Over a lifetime, Uncle Edward had associated with