

NOAH BUCHANAN

In Light of Solitude, 2011
Oil on linen, 24 x 18 in



COURTESY: THE ARTIST

M. ALLEN CUNNINGHAM

The Sky at Her Back

Mildred was dying, and she regarded as a blessing the fact that she'd had a choice in the matter. She'd observed in more than a few friends what the treatments could make of a person's last months. Better to spend the time preparing, she reasoned. All her days, Mildred had made it a practice to see the best in things. Dwight, though, would not take this easy. He would need her help getting ready. Well, what had she ever done but help the dear man?

In the living room they sat together. On the wall beside the hutch hung a set of small oils they'd found in a consignment store bin years before. That day Dwight had decided immediately to buy them. He'd never been a shopper, but among his peculiarities was an impulsiveness which often dismayed but more often delighted her. In one picture was a young boy. He stood in a field, wearing short pants and cap. In the other, standing with the sky at her back, her hair coming a little loose in the wind, was a girl in pinafore and ankle boots. Mildred wondered, was she on a hilltop or at the sea? These pictures, modest and unremarkable, were never the stuff of conversation. No single guest had ever commented on them that Mildred could recall. Herself, she'd always found them pretty enough in their neat white frames and matting. But beyond the thought that something about the paint-strokes reminded her of a Winslow Homer picture that had hung in the dining room of her girlhood home, she'd never much looked at them. How you notice and enumerate things, though, once the rooms begin to drain of time.

From her chair beside Dwight's she said, "Tell me about the boy and girl."

Dwight sat very still, looking at the oils. "They fell in love," he said. "They ran away and got married. They had three children."

Dwight always knew his own mind, even if he never did grow practiced in explanations. His first luncheon in her parents' house, Mildred's elder sister Winifred assigned the seating. Afterward, outside the front door, Dwight seized Mildred's hand. "That will never happen again."

"What?"

"Somebody putting a table between you and me."

They eloped the following month. And all their time together, as she saw it now, had been a running away. How jealously they'd guarded their days. True, this had meant

some difficulties with the children once they were grown. How does one ever explain the heart’s values? How tell your son and two daughters that you are wife and lover first, that when one is called in this way there will never, ever be time enough for all things?

“Don’t you kiss!” the children had shrieked when very young, and how fun it always was to defy them, so that they’d groan and fuss.

But always, too, Mildred had taken care to practice her attentions on the children. Never neglectful, no, she knew in her heart she’d honored the duties of motherhood. And if Dwight had been somewhat less than nurturing as a father, well, she’d taken pains to make up for that. Sundays in the park, visits to the soda shop, a dog for the children to share.

“They spent their lives together,” said Dwight. “Long lives, and every day of them. They got old together. Time went so fast you hardly noticed.”

He was crying as he talked, this lively firm-shouldered man who’d always known his own mind. He’d known it so well she’d been happy to surrender hers. He was noticing everything now, she saw, and it was the surprise of it that brought him to tears. His love for her, which had never been less than abundant, was becoming a kind of repentance in these last days, as they sat together and viewed their lives like a picture.

He’d taken no issue with her decision about the treatments. On some level, knowing he’d need her help, he knew he’d need her undrugged and lucid—but his assent was more than that: it was a small way to restore to her some freedom.

These last weeks, she’d shown him some things around the house, tutored him in cooking a few simple meals, written out the names of the places his shirts came from. And they talked of women, old friends whose husbands were gone, whose ways and manners might suit him for a little while before his own time came.

He’d begun to cook for her, and do the washing. He cleaned the floors, the bathroom, and changed the linens. And one night last week, telling her of the pains in his back and knees, he’d actually bent and begged her forgiveness.

“Whatever for, dear?”

“For all the years,” he answered. “All the years.”

Strong-minded man, he was becoming a servant now.

And Mildred permitted it, knowing it would help him after. They weren’t running away anymore. He merely waited with her now, and the time was hers.

“Tell me about the girl,” she said.

“She’s high up,” he said, “in the mountains. Higher than the clouds. And that’s heaven behind her, see? See how free she is?”

She closed her eyes. Breathing, she listened to him cry.

“Oh, honey,” she said, for not yet the last time.

M. Allen Cunningham’s most recent novel, *Partisans*, was released this year. He is also the author of the novels *Lost Son* (about Rainer Maria Rilke) and *The Green Age of Asher Witherow* (a #1 Indie Next pick) as well as *The Honorable Obscurity Handbook*, a miscellany about the creative life. He is the founder and publisher of the literary small press Atelier26 Books. Visit MAllenCunningham.com.

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A Night Entrance, 2011

Oil on linen, 26 x 15 in



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