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Description of Light

Kathleen McHale

A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

June 1991

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## ABSTRACT

### Description of Light

Kathleen McHale

Georgia O'Keeffe was a major force in twentieth-century American painting. She died in 1986 at the age of ninety-eight. Alfred Stieglitz, educated in Germany, has been called 'the father of Modern photography'. He supported many artists and introduced them to the North American art milieu. The Stieglitz/O'Keeffe circle included writers, philosophers and musicians as well as visual artists.

The collaboration, at once personal, social and professional, between the two was unique in the history of art.

The fact that they corresponded daily for many years while separated during the summer months is well known. The content of the letters is not. As specified in O'Keeffe's will, the letters and their contents will be revealed in the year 2020.

This thesis is an attempt to imagine these letters, written by O'Keeffe in response to Stieglitz's request for 'more'.

Stieglitz photographed O'Keeffe hundreds of times throughout the years, knew and loved her work probably as much as she did, and lived with her as husband and friend. Yet he felt he needed to know more about her. These letters are her response to his request.

O'Keeffe's style of writing, as evidenced by existing correspondence, is direct, economical and unconcerned

with the conventions of grammar and syntax. She is quoted as saying that her paintings spoke for her; she needed to say no more. I have tried to keep O'Keeffe's voice in mind when crafting the imagined letters.

Quotes from her contemporary critics, friends and members of the Stieglitz circle have been used to 'frame' O'Keeffe's letters; to situate them in the context of her time. The quotes provide an ongoing, objective glimpse of this extraordinary pair, their changing and enduring love, and their remarkable role in the world of Modern Art.

This thesis is for William James McHale and Rita Corcoran  
who gave me a line of credit at the paint store.

Sincere thanks to Gary Geddes whose patient support and continuing professional encouragement made all the difference.

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Alfred:

Your lens wanted everything, then.  
Glass plates demanded exposure. I stood  
before you, turned myself  
slowly became still breath held  
black box forgotten and the shutter clicks  
of your heartbeat soothed shame until  
it fell away and whispered  
at my feet.  
My small reflection showed shadows  
angles and hollows unfamiliar forms suddenly squared  
grey-framed in new pleasure.  
My image appeared clear, steady  
beneath your eye. Emerging and sharpening I  
saw myself. I took on form  
in your hands. You have seen everything, have  
conjured the curve of lip and fixed the point  
which holds the gaze. You witnessed  
the birth of light.  
Sly midwife.

Now you want words black  
and white on paper; you want shapes  
beneath the skin, equations resulting in pulse.  
You want words, lines on paper, navigational charts  
of my brush strokes, maps of my journey.  
The cloudy glass is exhausted. Further forms wait  
breathing, to be revealed.

Yes, Alfred, I will give you words now and  
say the words  
you need to hear.

Into all this, in 1887,  
new Brooklyn Bridge, Eiffel Tower,  
machine visions, black factories,  
soot-skinned workers, restless expansion,  
Indian Wars, I am born. Facts  
I will know about later.

Sun Prairie is far from those facts. Coal dust  
does not settle on my quiet quilt.  
Sun does, sparkling stars;  
bright flowers form  
a rectangle around me.

I hear Leatherstocking Tales in my mother's voice,  
evenings and rainy afternoons.  
Green fields form patches; sewing needle shines  
in Grandmother's fingers. She stitches  
the pattern and border of farm life  
and watches me as  
I sew  
hours of solitude, squares of airy spaces,  
day dreams, other hours laughing  
with imaginary companions in shafts of sunlight.  
Loud hours of games,  
brothers and sisters call each others' names,  
and patient days spent attentive  
to nature's changes  
of mood.  
I shape these into a garment that describes  
the color of my name and  
the measure of my heart.

I see the seasons locked  
in step  
one behind  
before the other.

The certainty of the steps, the beat of the change  
comforts.

The rhythm of repeated squares, familiar forms  
delights.

Ice white and silence at dusk, then  
soft browns and straight green rows orderly and  
almost endless,  
pieces of summer heat and  
full gold edged in crimson assemble themselves  
into a field of common patches.

I sleep beneath it,  
am framed by its symmetry, sized by its dimensions.  
I clutch it under my chin, wrap my bones in it.  
Dark and light survey my days, mark boundaries,  
indicate hours;  
dawn and dusk are chimes  
easy to obey.

Papa laughs  
his arms filled  
with acres of possibility.

Seven miles there and  
seven miles back  
again  
with my sisters through the leafy arch  
to the color house.  
Shapes hid in her cupboards,  
waited between pages,  
napped in corners. Pigments lay pulsing  
in tubes, orderly in their boxes but  
ready to conspire in a riot of color.  
Forms fell  
from her hands and  
were reborn on my patient paper. My brush strokes were  
obedient and mirrored her movements  
for a while. I used the colors she handed me until  
their names and faces became as known  
as my own.  
Her voice sounded in my ear until  
I found a round shaped silence and  
worked there. I had  
so much to do.

My shoes creak on  
hard waxed linoleum,  
precise and measured steps  
all the same  
down the hall.  
All the classroom doors are closed  
seven ... eight,  
through a door window I see  
the backs of many heads  
bent over paperwork.  
No one talks.  
Another window frames a teacher speaking;  
I can't hear her.  
Through the next I see a flower  
and the woman holding it  
for the children to examine.  
She turns it slowly  
carefully.  
A jack-in-the-pulpit.  
One girl's mouth drops open,  
everyone looks at the flower, then  
they pick up their brushes and  
each begins painting.

I am not in that room.  
My fingers ache. The silk  
of petals caresses my lips.

We leave today, Sun Prairie  
remains behind us  
as we travel east  
to Virginia.  
Fixed, there it will stay,  
a continent away from our destination.  
I take my fifteen years with me  
measured out like efficient stitches  
that step neatly,  
hold pieces together; field greens and  
ice whites worked  
into a robe, bordered with shades of soil, with  
the blue you see  
after hours of staring at the sky.  
This cloak is mine, I made it.  
It will cover me in cities, confide shapes  
and shades and tutor me  
in the dialect of color and form.  
My cloak will smell of soil and speak  
of the sudden and sturdy green  
plant risen, unexpectedly,  
from barren ground.

This childhood garment lies light  
on my shoulders. Sun Prairie,  
where I learned to see and speak.



## Typhoid Fever 1906

"But tell me in this strange confusion,  
What is real, what delusion ?

I hear my mother speak and  
dogs yelp. I whimper  
under pounding waves of sound.  
They recede, leave me  
shaking. Shouts  
and murmurs

'Very grave indeed.'

Do we walk with forward faces,  
Or stand and halt with baffled paces ?

My hot breath is  
breathed in again.  
Against the sheets it  
scorches my lungs,  
bloats my tongue. Hands on my chest  
burn.

All things seem to change their places,  
Rocks and trees to make grimaces.

I try to tell them but  
cracked lips won't move.  
Please catch me before I fall  
away and  
sink into ashy pools  
of fallen hair.

I wait. Whispers of neighboring deaths are  
spoken too loudly.

And the lights in witchy row,  
Twinkle more and more they blow.

Words serve me later,  
Goethe tells part of my story.  
I remember much and move slowly,  
deliberately for almost a season.

1907

The train brings me to New York City, the  
Art Students' League, West Fifty-Seventh.  
Manhattan soot  
works its way  
into my pores and between the threads  
of my skirts. Noise never stops;  
horses, trolleys, men move  
with dizzying speed and frequency. Buildings block  
the sun and wind cannot negotiate the maze  
of sidewalks. Everything demands attention  
which, once given, returns nothing.

Inside the school I hear the model sigh  
as he wills twitching muscles still and  
steadies himself for another measure of time.  
Camel hair brushes stroke canvas,  
palette knives push pigment together,  
instructors whisper and  
students nod and continue  
working; looking from model  
to primed canvas.

One canvas a day for Mr. Chase  
a new painting every day, one  
on top of the other. Swift, brief  
'til paint is thick  
with layers of visual memory  
a daily pentimento.

My hands ache  
from the desire of mastery. Only later will I learn  
surrender.

Rodin drawings on display  
at Gallery 291.

We are warned about them;  
stupid lines and simple  
splashes.

Finished work or  
working sketches ? Who is the fool ?

Rodin or  
his exhibitor ?

William Merrit Chase fears questions; he almost  
smells doubt

gnawing silently  
at the roots of his structure.

He will never return to that gallery.

He wants to beg his students not to go.

Is there anything there ? Now  
we wonder.

Alfred, are you smiling  
as you watch  
the gallery visitors stand  
before the drawings, turn  
to each other in mock desperation and  
move to the next framed enigma ?  
The struggle is what you want. The  
question mark printed on the iris  
gives you pleasure.

You are loud in your defense: your duty to perplex,  
your mission to disturb.

( Alfred, I saw you that day  
for the first time. )

If you were young, you had to find  
your own way.  
Yes, I said that. I tried to explain  
why at twenty-one  
I had to leave art school,  
take a job.  
Father was no longer able ...  
Art school out of the question ...  
Why learn copying anyway ...  
I'll make it on my own, I'll never  
never touch a brush again '  
if I can't do what I love.

At the agency in Chicago  
I illustrate embroidery. Draft lace.  
Chase's speed serves me well.  
Daily deadlines, making my own way, but  
my drawings are disposable here.

Then back to Williamsburg  
with measles. My eyes wait in water,  
don't focus enough  
to work. Mother's tuberculosis stronger  
than she is.  
The house is always humid. Our days mold  
in corners where cinder blocks join  
with cold mortar. Dampness clings  
to the back of our necks like  
a dirty grey rag.

I will find  
my own way.

George said in his letters  
he was going to Paris, said  
it might be interesting  
for me, too.  
Museums, galleries and  
painters are all in Europe but  
he sailed without stopping  
in Williamsburg.  
I had a card from France.  
If only he had asked.

Mrs. Willis is to take a leave of absence and  
gives me the opportunity  
to teach  
several weeks back in Chatham  
my old school.  
The girls unpack eagerly  
colors and charcoal; their enthusiasm  
is pleasant.

I learn  
not to wait  
any  
more.  
My eyes are strong enough to see  
my own way. I won't wait  
for  
anyone.

University of Virginia;  
women were allowed  
summer only

to train as teachers.

Alon Bemont teaches there and startles me  
when I visit Anita's drawing class.

No plaster casts or copies  
to be done.

Just new tools, fresh rules flexible enough  
to use.

Arthur Dow had taught him  
to see and teach  
with new eyes,  
the intimate alphabet.

I finger my primer, try to fit my hands around  
these green ideas.

1912 in Amarillo, Texas;  
cattle drives, railways and prairies.  
Fifteen thousand people bent  
against the wind.  
Women routinely sweep sand  
down the steps and  
out the door.  
I walk a wooden sidewalk 'til I come to the end  
of bleached boards and the beginning  
of the prairie flat,  
immense, unbroken horizon.  
Land as charged with sudden fury  
as the sea; still,  
then churned by wind's unseen muscle  
pounding sand  
into every crack.  
People here are wary of the weather; they fear  
the fury.  
I am not afraid  
but breathless.

No maple leaves in Amarillo  
for the children to draw.  
No fruit or flowers.  
The parents can't afford  
to buy them.  
My Dow exercises transplant badly to this arid soil.  
We find stones and hard roots to work  
with. 'Imagine a wall,' I tell them. 'Where would  
you put the door ? Where would it look best ?'

They lead the pony  
up boards onto the table.  
A child's pet animal; the hooves skid on sheets  
of charcoal paper.  
Juan Carlos holds the rope and we draw.  
Their clumsy eagerness  
and laughter scatter  
like the missing maple leaves.

I think I taught them  
to see spaces and  
use them beautifully.  
Ordinary things.  
The studied me and saw  
a new way of looking  
at everyday life.



Teachers learning  
to teach drawing;  
a polite enterprise.  
My sister Anita is among them.  
Obedient 'Nita pleased  
people; her smile softened.  
Instead of sitting beside her  
I stand  
in front of the class, assist Alon Bemont.  
'Nita's work is good but  
she will never be an artist;  
the fear of risk curbs her,  
winds webs around her ankles.  
She walks cautiously.  
When I don' t feel like it  
I don't smile.

Bemont lends me books Kandinsky and Eddy  
Cubists and Post Impressionism. Whispers  
are changing to murmurs in New York.  
He says I should go; listen  
for myself.

Aunt Ollie frees me  
with her gift of money. My mother is dying;  
Aunt Ollie wants me to live.

Back to New York to study  
with Dow firsthand.  
One needs nerve  
to succeed. Yes  
nerve.

N.Y.C. 1914

The Armory Show last year  
Brancusi, Picasso, Matisse,  
Kandinsky and Duchamp spoke the word  
which you breathed in your gallery, Alfred.  
Leaves and voices rise in the vortex and spin  
slowly. Bits of paper  
with important information on them swirl  
in the street and settle everywhere.  
Murmurs are heard even  
in the quiet corners where  
I paint.

One bit of paper informs me  
that I can paint what I want  
even if I haven't been to Europe.  
One quarter million people met the work  
at the Armory, listened to the hint  
become a shout.

Arthur Dow is my teacher;  
his love of flat forms  
comforts me and tells me things  
I already know.  
I shed unnecessary lives and cling  
to the core. I have no time  
or money to waste.

"Art is decadent when designers and painters lack  
inventive power and merely imitate nature or the  
creation of others."

Arthur Dow

Columbia University Teachers' College 1914

Kandinsky tells me

art must be moral and

the artist responsible.

My friend Anita Pollitzer tells me

of the vote, not yet grasped,

for women.

Discussion bubbles,

coffee for everyone.

Freud, socialism, O'Neill and little magazines.

We paint and study,

visit galleries; 291 of course

to see you, Alfred.

You toil and sweat

loud in your labor. You

tell me yes paintings are sold,

money earned and painters sustained.

You beg space from property owners,

nourishment from the powerful.

Pugnacious gardener you tend

with quick and awkward hands,

noisily clear away scrub that blocks

the sun. You step back and search out

new shoots. Fierce eyes turn

to anyone close,

'See it there it is'

New roots in American soil.

"The artist must have something to say, for mastery over form is not the goal but rather adapting of form to its inner meaning."

V.Kandinsky

1915 University of Virginia  
I teach again, assist Bemont.  
He still points out  
markers along the path for me but now  
my footsteps are less tentative.  
I don't hold his hand  
as tightly as  
before.  
I know where to look.  
My subscription to 'Camera Work' reaches me  
even here.  
( Your words are heard from a distance )  
I show the students photos  
of modern art, read them articles  
on Matisse, tell them  
of the ecstasy felt  
when creating.

I take long walks  
with my friend Arthur McMahon.  
He tells me about politics; I tell him  
about painting.  
Soon he's gone again.  
Should a woman write the first  
letter ? I think I will.

I roll some watercolors, send them  
to Anita in New York, wait  
for her reaction.  
They've made it out  
of Virginia; I've sent them  
flying.

August 1915

Summer term over, I have  
decisions to make.

I write to Anita

'Talking of 291-- and New York--

I am afraid

I'll not be there.

I'm afraid of spending  
myself in its fury, of dropping my coins  
in its bright bazaar of possibilities.

I don't want to lose  
my voice in the roar  
of the city, or exhaust the reserves  
I've saved so carefully for painting.  
I won't find my pockets as empty  
as my mind after a sleepless night.

The relentless green  
surrounding the school  
in South Carolina where I must teach  
will surely speak softly enough  
so I can paint undisturbed;  
is surely dull enough not  
to claim my time. The lack of sharp edges  
reassures.

The mirrors here are dusty and  
my voice sounds loud.

The school in Sumpter could be  
on another planet.

Green hills hide  
a dry still life.

In my room when I stop painting  
long enough to listen,  
what I don't hear  
frightens me.

Soon I have nothing to say,  
nothing.

- Anita, there's such emptiness here.

- You're strong, she writes, you'll pull through.

I walk to pass  
the time  
but notice now  
full hills green  
unrolled like a sleepy blanket.  
The pulse of pine forests quickens  
my step. Sky seems  
to fill my lungs with pure air.  
I fall into the familiar,  
pull old patterns around me,  
measure myself to its dimensions.

Now empty hours transform themselves  
to canvases  
lining up for my attention.  
Alone with my paints;  
the conversation sparkles.

Anita writes  
about visits to your gallery and  
life in New York.  
I wonder what you would think  
about my work.  
I hate it now,  
see obedience in every canvas,  
imitation, echo. My mouth  
shapes borrowed words.  
My feet remember the way back  
to my room, to work.

The feel of ground charcoal comforts me.  
My fingers form a space  
a brush fits neatly  
so I continue, dumb  
and compliant. Need  
pushes my hand across the staring page.  
I work speechless until I hear  
sounds riding, vowels  
formed in my marrow and  
wired to my fingertips;  
the dispatch tapped out in my cells.  
An intimate vocabulary fit  
to translate my soul.  
My voice audible now in the charged silence,  
familiar and foreign to my ears.

I've put the caps back on the tubes  
of Grumbacher pigment, flattened them evenly and  
set them in a drawer.

My brushes are washed, gathered upright  
in an old glass and left  
to dry.

My elemental alphabet demands  
simplicity. Black and white.  
Charcoal and paper. Shadows and light,  
dark graphs and pale, hidden skin.  
I will repeat these consonants and vowels  
in variations and arrangements, in  
steps and flight until  
we are both exhausted.

My hands ache from the work. The words  
torrential now.

I roll several sheets into a tube  
and send them to Anita  
in New York. She takes them to you,  
unrolls my soul  
beneath your gaze,  
your searching fingers.

Your voice reaches me  
in Carolina.



Now you have studied them and  
have seen me;  
these are my words, my true  
words. My drawings  
are diagrams  
of my days, charts of forceful currents,  
black and white maps of dreams.

Can you decipher these codes; are the cords  
of your senses  
tightened to this pitch ?  
I've stood before you, Alfred.  
Do you hear my message ?

"Finally, a woman on paper."

You answered, Alfred, yes.  
You heard me and you know the code.  
You distrust words you say  
and know about their fragile capacity.  
They contain significance  
so precariously.

I work all winter and spring, stop sometimes;  
lift charcoal from paper  
and listen patiently  
for the postscript  
to your letter delivered here.  
I know you hear me so  
I continue speaking.

"There he drew out the drawings of Georgia O'Keeffe and  
with passion pointed out the new language in which the  
course of a woman's life was being unfolded."

Herbert Seligmann

A letter from Texas asks me  
to teach there. Says I need to learn  
'methods' first.  
I want to go back  
to New York City to Columbia and  
finish my courses. Am eager to leave  
South Carolina; happy to return to friends  
and movement. I leave  
no notice,  
move to a borrowed room  
on East Sixtieth Street.

All spring I studied, learned  
of Mother's death.

Alfred you unrolled my drawings and  
exposed them  
to crowds in your gallery.  
You didn't ask me  
first.

I went and saw my whispers  
on the walls, bared  
to many eyes. A current of cold air  
made my skin tighten  
even under my coat.

You weren't there that day and missed my rage.  
I remained to look  
at my own work.  
I listened to my drawings  
hum in measured spaces;  
spaces once occupied by Cézannes.  
I turned from one white wall,  
remembered the Rodins  
that once hung there and saw my charcoals  
as if  
they had always been there.  
The right angles reassured me, the spacing  
placated me. The lighting softened  
my gaze.

Then I left  
strangely satisfied.

I went back to 291  
to confront you ( do you remember ? )  
You stood and showed me  
my drawings.

Do you realize what you've done ?  
The question could have been mine  
too. The charcoal sigh building  
to a stutter  
on the walls.

Fragrance spent in the act  
of blossoming  
can't be contained,  
you said.

June 1916

This would be  
my last summer  
teaching in Virginia.

All the corners in my mother's house  
are visible, the rooms empty.  
I need to sleep  
between classes.  
My heart's angles  
apparent, I move  
from room  
to room and forget.  
I can't go outside; the sky presses  
on my eyes.

Then your letters oh  
Alfred. the letters find me  
remind me  
of other regions, other dwellings, places  
I had once charted. You send me maps  
for future use.

I lean on your words,  
wrap myself in them, then rest  
under them.

September 1916

Canyon, Texas; smaller  
than Amarillo

is a tenuous toehold  
on the face of the plains.

Newly civilized and has a school  
where I'll teach unsupervised.

I choose materials, texts and photos.

I talk to them

about how to look

at life, how to order perception  
in a beautiful way.

There are no foundations here.

I have a blueprint

and a group of eager workers.

We are busy and productive.

I almost don't notice the size  
of Canyon's mind; the tight fit  
of its social habit.

I can't be bothered.

Your letters and

the books you recommend

are hammers

clean and hard.

•

I stitch vast plains, walk in lines  
straight to the horizon and  
back after sunset.  
Air vibrates around me,  
empty planes intersect; flat sky hangs  
to the floor  
of the earth.  
My brush is silent, charcoal vision  
turns to ash.  
Black and white thicken  
in my hands.  
I walk to keep moving.

Landscapes suddenly  
suggest sienna or  
sepia. Cobalt blue occurs, colors unexpectedly  
introduce themselves.  
I begin to practise  
color consonants, shape my voice around  
primary tones.  
Colors dress themselves in urgency  
but I have no time.

I send you watercolor notes;  
cerulean blue typeface strikes wet paper.  
Veils of color now clothe my surroundings;  
ochre margins frame  
my message to you.



You hang my 'Blue Lines'  
over your table and breakfast  
in its company.  
My watercolors and charcoals hang in your gallery.  
You invite visitors  
to listen, then  
send me reviews.  
My work furnishes your days;  
you live in the house  
of my color.  
What do you hear  
with your morning cocoa ?

Now when I lift my brush  
at the end of the final curve,  
the wet sheet rolls itself and reaches  
for you.

Classes over I leave Texas  
quickly; a starving animal,  
and arrive in new York  
at 291.  
I stand behind you  
in silence until  
you turn.

My exhibit had been photographed and  
taken down  
but  
you hang it again;  
surround me with my work, your friends and  
your words which wind themselves  
around my wrists;  
hide behind  
my heartbeat.

Your eyes had been closed  
to the camera lens, arms ached  
from the weight of  
the black metal boxes. So the cameras slept  
on closet floors under piles of prints;  
drowsed beside cases of negatives.  
Now you want to see me  
through the glass  
in four inch squares,  
so you begin looking  
once more. You rouse the resting shutters.

In the Manhattan light I am still  
again and again.  
You adjust the focus and tell me  
what you see. Imposed frames form small worlds,  
define an instant;  
fossilize time.

Back in Canyon  
to teach school. I paint only  
when I can.  
I don't own the deed  
to my days.  
On sunset walks with my sister  
I try to touch the evening star  
with my brushes.

You send me the first photographs;  
parts of my self  
in black and white.  
I embrace them;  
recovered siblings.

This war has given my neighbors  
excuses  
for mean hearts and hysteria.  
I find myself standing  
at the meeting demanding  
the man using Nietzsche  
to really read the words.  
My feet don't keep  
the same beat; a friend  
decides not to enlist and  
they blame me.

Soon my mouth is dry,  
my fingers won't bend  
around the paintbrush.  
Ice invades my joints;  
a freezing wind beats  
on my chest.  
I feel like a trapped hare  
legs pumping  
in mute fury.

Into the envelope with  
my images slide shades  
of your solitude: greys and pale silver.  
The vacant rooms of 291 have  
somehow hidden themselves  
in the shape of your letters.  
The silence of the empty gallery  
has etched itself  
into the spaces  
between words.

They want to close the gallery  
you tell me I could breathe  
heat into it. Whisper yes to the ember and  
feed the flame.

When I look at the photos you made  
I see a face I will know someday;  
a self not yet formed.  
The photographs flutter in my hands,  
lean into the wind and  
take flight.

You wear out the most precious things you have  
by letting your emotions and feelings run riot.  
I wrote that to Anita when  
she asked me for advice.  
I should have kept the letter and  
learned the lines  
by heart.

Thoughts of you slip cleverly  
into every minute of my day.

Your letters reach me  
in Texas,  
catch me as  
I'm about to stumble.  
I lean on your words, long  
to see your image in your eyes.

Paul Strand and I arrive  
in New York and find you anxious,  
waiting.  
Paul has done your errand and  
brought me  
to you,  
now he moves  
away.

The only sound I hear  
is words on paper  
as I step onto the turning wheel  
of your world. East Fifty-Ninth Street intersects with  
the lives of so many  
artists and writers; they furnish your rooms and  
inhabit your time.  
They are your creations now;  
your cameras reap dust.

Sunlight through the panes warms me  
after the late chill of Texas.  
Fingers co-operative and strong again.  
Under the skylight my canvases appear  
and turn themselves to you. They are  
filled with my fingerprints;  
chanting my name in three voice canon,  
warm in the ready applause.

"I was born in Hoboken. I am an American. Photography  
is my passion. The search for truth is my obsession."

Alfred Stieglitz

Summer 1918

Oaklawn on Lake George,  
the Stieglitz summer home.

Noise and confusion. Among children, grandchildren,  
cousins, friends, guests and others I move  
ill at ease; find a chair  
at the family table,  
the chair which still remembers  
the contours of Emmeline.

You have extracted yourself only recently  
from her laces and ruffles,  
moved  
from the shade of her parasol.

Simplicity pleases you;  
bare angles and straight lines  
let you breathe.  
My black dresses point  
to my whiteness, let color live  
in the imagination.  
Your fingers find lilies  
under my sheets;  
fragrance released.

They all leave me alone. I own  
all my days here, have time  
for oil colors  
patient, thick, slow-drying;  
mid-summer greens and crimson  
shape themselves  
on waiting canvas. You smile at me and  
color flows.

Fall 1918

You ask me what I want  
most.

To paint, I say. Every day  
all day.

Nothing else. No one  
else.

At night I need to study  
the history of forms and lines;  
to live in the domain of pigment and hue  
in darkness  
and to release the remembered colors  
the next day.

I want to spend my precious currency,  
time and strength  
on the tight white rectangles.

My work is half the dialogue;  
the mirror where I study  
the suggestion of risk  
imprinted on our daily life.

You tell me to step out  
into the space between us,  
fix the line to your eyes;  
to walk the wire  
and don't look  
down.



Light pours in  
through the skylight and  
the southern window, it floods the studio  
with hazy waves and  
shimmers on the fittings  
of my easel.

You cast no shadow, Alfred;  
I never stumble over your shoes or trip  
on your presence.  
The finished pictures know you wait  
for them; they lie quietly  
in your inquisitive caress.  
I meet their reflection  
in your focussed gaze.

Suddenly you say you must look at my work  
through the glass lens;  
ground perspective.  
Closets are emptied, boxes upended.  
The cameras sit  
comfortably between us,  
feet up on a worn davenport.  
They pick instants from the air,  
press them onto silver nitrate.

The secrets I tell you  
in quiet evening hours  
spin tangles between us;  
words sink  
into distilled conspiracy.

My hand shakes just slightly.  
I have to repeat  
the brush stroke, deepen  
the translucent haze of color  
when I remember in daylight  
our night journeys.  
I retrace our steps; pieces of  
our breathless climb catch  
in my throat.  
I feel myself fall, again,  
over the edge into  
shivery dark;  
slow fall into  
folds of silk.  
I think later of the wordless descant  
your tongue wrote  
on my skin.  
If I listen closely  
the last half-note vibrates  
in my brush and  
exhausts itself  
in fading waves of coral and crimson.  
Strings now still  
remember the fingers.  
Colors assemble themselves on canvas  
into the shape you created  
inside me.  
These paintings blush;  
they fear others will hear  
the rhythmic word  
hidden in the pigment.

I am beginning to impose  
rectangular frames  
on daily events;  
it's becoming easy to focus  
on possible paintings.

Wet negatives and  
rinsed prints  
sleep at right angles with us;  
they hang and flap  
against my face  
when I visit you  
in the darkroom across the hall.  
How many do you pull  
until the negative surrenders  
the perfect print ?  
I watch you work,  
look through my lens and  
see you smooth the wet images  
with light and searching fingers.  
Timer ticking we  
embrace;  
dialogue accelerates, no retreat;  
charted surrender.  
Released I return  
to my painting,  
you to the emerging images.

We hurry home  
at exactly two.  
The cameras stand black,  
nod on thin legs;  
click alert at the thought  
of your footsteps.  
Shutters no tighter than  
sleepless eyelids.  
No words are spoken;  
we know our roles in this  
daily dialogue.  
The shape of my soul  
is what you need  
to seize and reflect  
in positives and negatives;  
grey-shaded fingerprint.  
The indifferent lens magnifies  
your greedy gaze.  
An infinite march of seconds files slowly  
into the four minute frame;  
my muscles flutter with the effort  
of willed stillness.  
My skin is aware of the progress  
of your search.  
Filtered light fades;  
you emerge from black-draped intensity,  
eyes adjust aperture.  
'Enough for today' you whisper  
exhausted. 'The work of a life  
time.'

You fix the lens  
in my direction;  
glass eye records  
my creation.  
You place the tutor, then  
praise the bloom.  
You assemble these pieces repeatedly,  
discover empty spaces, unfinished images  
emerging slowly.  
These will need to be documented  
later;  
missing tiles in the black  
and white montage  
that is your creation.  
You ask me to undress  
in front of one of my paintings;  
my work excites you;  
camera is witness.  
You hurry to the darkroom.

The woman forming in  
acid baths and rectangular pans  
is so familiar; closer than  
a sister. We look in the red light reflection  
at each other;  
photographs more faithful  
and perceptive  
than any mirror.

"In a part by part revelation of a woman's body, in the isolated presentation of a hand, a breast, a neck, a thigh, a leg, Stieglitz achieved the exact visual equivalent of the report of the hand or the face as it travels over the body of the beloved."

Lewis Mumford

"He released forces for O'Keeffe that found expression in her paintings, and in him she released the pent-up torments of years."

Lewis Mumford

"No intelligent consideration of his later photographs can be made without mention of his relationship to O'Keeffe, for this remained the center of his life and work until his death ... the 1917-1929 prints especially are like a rich and wonderful flowering of a man: the mature artist at the peak of his eloquence."

Doris Bry

"whenever she looks at the proofs she falls in love with herself. --Or rather her Selves--There are very many."

A.Stieglitz to P.Strand

"Although the Stieglitz portrait of O'Keeffe inevitably has its roots in the photographer and his subject, the series of prints transcends the two individuals concerned and becomes a moving symbol of the range of possibilities, life, and beauty inherent in human relationships."

Doris Bry

"I have not been in Europe. I prefer to live in a room as bare as possible. I have been much photographed."

G.O'Keeffe

1921 Anderson Galleries N.Y.C.

'He's working again.'

That's the breeze circulating  
in the close galleries;

people hurry to see

your new work. The photos of me are part  
of the retrospective

1913-1921;

my body of work is exposed and delivered  
to the curious and

the interested. They ask if I'm the model or  
the maker of paintings.

I see only images, abstract visions of  
our contingent fingerprints.

I like the way my paintings look  
in the photographs.

You invite thousands  
to smell the petals  
in our hands.

A friend suggests I read

"The Song of Songs"

'In his longed for shade I am seated;  
his fruit is sweet to my taste.'

I conjure the honey  
and walk out of the gallery free,  
filled with strength.

1921

you include me in an exhibit  
of 'modern art'  
Pennsylvania Academy of  
the Fine Arts.

One of the organisers said "but  
I don't want any goddam women  
in the show."

You tell him the secret  
that male and female are parts  
of one being;  
my work is part  
of the exhibit.

Your will prevails,  
insistent hands clear debris  
from around shoots,  
assure air,  
and water.  
Bloom is imminent.



Two years later you introduce my work  
to the world  
as you did at 291,  
this time with my permission.

One hundred pieces  
gathered and placed  
carefully on the walls  
of the Anderson Galleries.  
The convocation pleases me but  
I feel like I'm putting my labor  
pains out in the street  
to be touched and inspected  
by passersby on the way  
to market.

The critics have been waiting for you  
to turn the page,  
continue my story.  
What do they mean by 'Freudian imagery' ?  
That has nothing to do  
with my voice or  
my words; my work  
is my own. I'm the painter  
in the photographs.  
You have given me the map  
and bread for the journey.

At sixty you have no interest  
in babies.

You show me the poem  
you wrote;

'The Woman Walks Homeward  
To her Little White Room  
No Longer Alone  
She Carries Dawn in her Womb.'

I can walk only one path  
you say.  
Colors are curled  
completing their term; they wait  
to emerge and thrive.

Marry you, Alfred ?  
Simplify things, you say.  
Emmeline has released you;  
your fingers around my wrist  
tighten.

Yes, we'll marry;  
I'll give you paintings  
to cradle and send  
on their way;  
your legacy  
and mine.

I fit my arms around the air  
between us.

"Alfred Stieglitz brought modern art to America: a great photographer, he was the first to show Picasso, Braque and Matisse in his N.Y. gallery."

"As their dealer, backer, leader, philosopher, and friend, Stieglitz pushed them to fame."

"This memorable man and prolific talker, this evangelist, searcher and seer, sacrificed his own career as a photographer for his painters."

Mahonri Sharp Young

"Stieglitz, according to W.C.Williams, was the one person able to fuse the cultural influences of Europe while at the same time maintaining, supporting, and fostering the integrity of American art."

F.Richard Thomas

"He was almost as important in the history of American art as he thought he was "

Mahonri Sharp Young

They fill our rooms  
with loud conversation;  
ideas crackle in the hearth.  
Music stitches the pieces together  
into warm comfort.  
Voices rise up, take on  
rectangular ceiling shapes, then  
sift down and curl in corners.  
You feed them all,  
empty your pockets  
onto the table.

At the end of the evening they leave  
with another layer of purpose  
folded over the arm  
with topcoat and scarf,  
faces flushed with honest fire.  
You fit a sense of belonging  
on the heads like  
a departing hat, a clap  
on the shoulder, a call  
through the opened door,  
you send them off and wait  
excitedly  
for the return.

Your friends; artists, writers, musicians  
furnish your days,  
frame your evenings.  
You stoke them with your ardor,  
blow slowly on the embers and  
warm yourself at the leaping flame.

In the back room  
at the gallery  
voices are raised like  
flags; voices  
almost heard out front  
among the paintings. Fractured  
planes, shattered points of view  
are debated, defended.  
There's no reason to add  
my voice to the din.  
I decide to stretch  
new canvas for tomorrow;  
the boys watch me work while  
they consider  
dreams and ego;  
pause long enough to notice  
the tacks which step  
in even paces along the edges.  
They remark on the tight white certainty  
of my frames.

I earn a space in that gallery, trade  
patience and diligence  
for the right to be there;  
nothing to do with my place  
in your bed.  
I draw my silence closer;  
my childhood comforter;  
study my hands for shapes, save  
my breath  
for the intimate dialogue  
I hold daily  
with color.

Do you know that Dorothy Brett  
and I let ourselves into  
the closed gallery  
Sunday mornings, unlock  
the storage room and select  
favorite paintings;  
arrange an exhibit;  
critique with serious faces,  
line and technique.  
We lean and laugh.

There are women watching  
me,  
waiting  
for my next painting.  
They recognise shapes that live in  
all of us.

In 1920 the Nineteenth Amendment  
is passed, gives voice  
to womens' quiet lives.

Anita Pollitzer asks me to speak  
at the Mayflower Hotel  
to the assembled women.  
I leave my dislike for words  
at home and hear my voice  
ask them to strive  
and work  
hard.

I hurry home to continue my own search.  
You are already sleeping ...

warm and solid in our bed;  
fierce eyes soft in darkness.  
Gallery walls are waiting  
for tomorrow's work.

It amuses you,  
the interest in me  
separate  
from my work;  
it sells paintings  
you say.

Stories repeated solidify  
into tangible outlines;  
I don't recognise myself  
in the public eye.

Critics think they know me;  
they point with brittle fingers  
at the dark and private source  
of my work.

They seize my paintings and  
examine the abstraction.  
Eyes hard with ideologies,  
they measure my canvases with  
Freudian rulers,  
satisfied  
they have captured  
the hidden heart.

They invade my intimate hours, expose the moment  
of conception.

A friend advises me to ignore these critics.  
They write about themselves; trace  
maps of their own souls, describe  
their own distortions.  
You pull me close  
inside your coarse woolen cloak;  
raise your walking stick  
to the pushing crowds.



The dominion of petals and leaves is  
no small one.

I wrap myself in fragrance  
and sleep in the folds  
of velvet and curve.  
Flowers overpower me;  
ambush me even  
on city streets, in shop windows;  
they hum as they try to pull me  
into the hollows  
and soft openings.  
Flowers grow and thrive  
on my canvas, I cannot  
stop them.

I focus on the edges  
of petals, and trace the statement  
of stem and stamen.  
I notice the shiver and  
shimmer of light through leaves.  
I wonder if they strain and chafe  
under close focus  
as I did  
when I stood before you;  
ground glass eye and  
you adjust the lens.

I stand naked  
before these blossoms;  
I want to hide  
in their secret center.

The heart of the white rose  
pulses;  
if only we'd listen  
with intuitive ears.  
Ice white and white heat  
waltz on the canvas in  
rhythmic complicity.

Black iris unfolds discretely;  
listens to its own system  
and imagines the sanctuary  
of dusk.

Petals of red  
poppies shudder in a sudden breeze;  
its black heart asks  
to be touched  
by careful fingers.

Larkspur dreams of blue  
sapphires and skies  
right after rain;  
the confident buds  
bloom in profusion.

Alfred  
don't let them pull off petals  
one by one, expose  
my secret heart.

At the corner  
of Lexington and Forty-Ninth another  
skyscraper raises itself  
on the New York horizon;  
altering man's landscape  
once again.  
Our rooms at the Shelton hang  
in the sky;  
light from the north  
shimmers brilliant and  
sharp on my palette.  
My brushes sleep in  
parallel precision like  
the steel bones  
of this building.  
Clean right angles and  
the benevolent tyranny  
of geometric certainty  
design my dreams  
and shape my days.  
Blueprint's discipline  
frames my time;  
I work patiently, confidently  
with the authority  
of the bolt's slide  
into measured steel.

White silk stitched  
into clothing  
feels cool against my skin.  
Black wool,  
black cotton, cut and assembled  
is warm in winter.  
Why, the woman asks me,  
do I always wear black ?

Sparks of white illuminate  
mute black;  
skirts, dresses, coats, gloves  
repeat the hushed message;  
the close clutch  
of opposites.

Peering in the mirror  
I hold your negatives to the light;  
see my skin dark,  
and my dress light;  
photographs offer proof  
to the contrary.  
I dress myself as I appear  
inversed in your eyes;  
I crystallise into light;  
black lace branches  
on midnight snow.

I tell the woman colors exhaust me;  
the simplicity of each morning's routine  
soothes me.  
Black is my habit.

Taproot tries  
to pierce concrete  
in a blind search  
for dark moisture;  
it runs fingers  
along edges,  
feeling for fissures;  
breaks in the hard fact  
of asphalt.

Through my window  
in the Shelton  
I witness the sprout  
of metal shoots;  
the window frame adapts  
to various angles and  
I paint.

Then,  
you wouldn't hang it, Alfred,  
in the Seven Americans show in 1925,  
do you remember ?  
I didn't know cities  
you said.  
My cityscape had to wait  
until the next year.  
It was the first piece sold,  
twelve hundred dollars;  
the price of my pride.  
Then they all agreed  
maybe I could paint the city after all.  
Henry MacBride said  
" one of the best skyscraper paintings  
I have seen anywhere."  
But the city soon lost  
its smile for me.

SHE PAINTED THE LILY AND GOT 25,000 AND FAME FOR DOING IT !

New York Evening Graphic 1928

What do newspapers know  
about art ?  
Graphic type talks  
about price and personality,  
wonders what I look like;  
an overnight success.  
Truths quiet and simple meet  
blocked ears.

After much deliberation,  
inquiries completed,  
you send my paintings  
into peoples' homes  
to live with them.  
Not everyone wins  
your approval;  
you tease America  
into buying its reflections  
at prices that demand respect.

My calla lilies  
will go to France,  
mature in waxy dignity  
on walls once comfortable  
with European forms.  
Like Lindberg last year  
my lilies take wing.

I earn my own living, paint  
what I want to paint.

Summers at Lake George,  
relief from city rhythms;  
a simple meter  
of steady work,  
household tasks  
and garden chores  
in preparation  
for mid-summer bloom.  
I find childhood  
pleasures again,  
habits I had  
lost in city's domain.  
Slow cadence  
pulses in my blood.  
Scenes are stored,  
woods remembered,  
flowers filed away  
for future paintings.

Your Graflex and you  
follow and frame me,  
squared memories.  
In the darkroom  
you ask me to help  
spot negatives;  
points of black ink  
applied to white dust shadows.  
We walk in comfortable concord  
until late summer chill signals change;  
the unavoidable fall  
into Manhattan winter.

Summer 1926 Lake George N.Y.

An endless parade  
of people passes  
through the old house.  
Feet shuffle,  
demands increase,  
children shriek and tumble.  
Colors stab at my eyes.  
Duties exhaust and routines  
pile on my back like  
tedious bricks.

My easel wears a veil  
of dust;  
tubes of paint  
won't surrender  
their covers;  
hairs split at the ends  
of my brushes.  
My hands clench and  
open  
in time with my teeth;  
empty canvases stare without  
blinking.

I escape  
to the sea; east  
to Maine.  
Return to Lake George  
much later  
when the family house is vacant.



Lake George.

Hills step down  
from the Adirondacks and  
circle my world; they  
define and tighten  
my days.

The lake at the center  
of a small system.

Relentless green stutters and  
stands in my way;  
exposes itself to me daily,  
branches, leaves, stems and petals  
repeat themselves.

Each new canvas looks  
darkly familiar;  
still lives  
push at the confines of their frames and  
struggle to break  
my close focus.

The large and empty house  
which belongs to your friends in Maine  
inhabits my thoughts.

Your eyes circumscribe  
my world, Alfred;  
you sit, just out of sight,  
pretend not to wait  
for my work.

Soon I stand  
before  
the changing faces and  
vast plains  
of the sea;  
still liquid, then blown  
into solid fury.  
My lungs fill  
with scrubbed air and my arms  
stretch themselves  
to the horizon.

Waves deliver smoothed jewels,  
lay them in the sand at my feet.  
Waves approach, break, and recede,  
discrete and graceful.

I listen for hours,  
then barely hear,  
under the rumble,  
the chanted answer  
to desperate questions.

Lake George.

You leave me gasping  
for air in dense, stuffed rooms;  
in the house that has shaped itself  
to generations of Stieglitz comfort.

I soak shells in seawater;  
help them remember their color and cling  
to wet and vibrant memory  
in a teacup sea.  
I paint their likeness  
in my room  
above the crowded din;  
oils and watercolor witness  
to my plight.

You won't summer at the sea and  
won't build a house of our own  
on the lake.  
Your routine feet can't learn  
new steps, you say.

You have a new darkroom  
instead;  
you occupy all available space.  
There's no room  
for me here.  
Your concern has eyes;  
they watch me work,  
push my hand  
in awkward staggers  
around the canvas.  
I dream fitfully  
of unmeasured space.

You sit in ordered comfort,  
intimate with the forms and  
faces that furnish your world.  
In darkened rooms you  
can dance;  
habit holds you by the hand.  
You move in proven patterns, Alfred;  
old brocade faded by  
the touch of many fingers.  
Burlap shadows on rugs reveal  
the daily path.  
While feet avoid obstacles,  
unexpected wrinkles, the mind  
flies elsewhere  
arcs and soars,  
turns familiar clouds  
inside out  
again and again  
in ritual celebration  
of their continuing significance.  
You sit circled  
by friends and disciples;  
ideas are drawn and sharpened.  
The thrust and parry  
of argument  
is not always bloodless, but  
your passion cuts cleanly and  
without malice.  
You finger chord's echo,  
angling ears to capture meaning  
missed the note before, and  
you smile. Satisfied.  
The familiar frees you,  
you say, it contains the fury.

Your words press heavy  
on my forehead,  
flap around  
like loud and raucous geese;  
scatter feathers and  
raise dust.

The play of ideas tires me,  
a waste of time;  
attacks cut flesh  
sting and burn.  
A pointless exercise;  
I'd rather paint.

I stumble in the maze  
of your furniture.  
I've emptied my room,  
can see all the corners;  
my brushes and colors live quietly  
at the center.

Your illness stills you;  
suddenly;  
you send out lifelines, cables to me.  
I let you lean on me,  
weave webs  
across the distance between us;  
webs you want  
to tighten  
or cut.  
I can't tell which.

Softened, I remember  
why we are together;  
dark eyes tell me  
who I am.

Alfred, the fear and excitement  
are bundled together  
like an invitation to scale the face  
of a sharp and boney peak.  
Critics know I have the tools,  
pick-ax and cables,  
a map to the summit.  
They wonder if I have  
the nerve,  
and desire.  
They dare me;  
and wait.

You and I work  
intense and patient;  
we sharpen the points,  
check the cables for frays,  
graph the map.  
We smile.  
You still hold the end  
of the cable I walk.

Walls fall and  
the box which contained me  
now holds only air.  
Sky inhales and  
lifts me up.  
Texas plains seen from schoolhouse windows  
roll themselves out and under  
my bed like quick carpets.  
The line of horizon cuts  
sharp and unbroken.  
My outstretched arms take the measure  
for new paintings.

I wake reluctant  
to thick thoughts and footworn paths,  
to layers of debris and eleven years of steps  
traced around a fixed center.  
The rope you hold  
frays and chafes;  
I focus on my feet.

Friends bring me back pieces  
of travel journals imprinted with the West.  
I add these to fragments  
of childhood comforts and past pleasures.  
I reap slippery instants,  
assemble and wear them  
pulled close;  
they breathe slowly. ...

Your hands clutch tight, Alfred;  
fear shines in your eyes;  
eyes that still stop my heart and set color flowing.

I leave tomorrow for New Mexico.



Taos, New Mexico, 1929

Here shapes finalise  
their outlines, evolve  
in desert heat and thin air.

A subtle and decisive turn of the lens  
reveals perfect focus.

No haze hangs  
between me and mountains.

Never have I seen slopes  
so clearly. Sand blasts away excess;  
branches, leaves and plants lean  
into scouring wind. A permanent economy of line.  
Heat sears summer air,  
hides nothing.

I paint 'The Lawrence Tree'  
from beneath the pine; top blossoms high,  
surrounded by stars.

Sand shifts slowly inside me,  
alters the balance;  
the distance between us, Alfred,  
is measured by the sand.

"In the magnificent fierce morning of New Mexico one  
sprang awake, a new part of the soul woke up suddenly.  
Never is the light more pure and overweening than there,  
arching with a royalty almost cruel over the hollow  
uplifting world."

D.H.Lawrence

A black Model A Ford  
purchased with the currency  
of my brushstrokes.  
Shell and Shingle VI,  
grey perceptions have given me  
explorer's feet. I graph the landscape and  
follow each road  
to its end.

Paintings wait in dry heat.  
Even here your letters find me,  
remind me of white handkerchiefs.  
They flutter and whimper,  
limp with tears or  
quickly  
resemble white doves;  
they glide and rise,  
wings tense and just out of reach.  
I shiver in a sudden flurry  
of white rectangles;  
they sift and settle  
at my feet. Your mute emissaries  
to my open spaces.

Do I cause you so much pain, Alfred ?  
I pack a few paintings, rugs and artifacts.  
Tomorrow I return to Lake George.

Lake George 1929

Together we mend  
frayed edges and worn garments;  
calm hands bind months of unravelled threads  
and apply the occasional patch.  
We finger breaks in shared solitude, and  
the fire in the wood stove is steady.  
Heat releases long-tight muscles;  
clenched faces loosen and assume intriguing contours.  
New secrets curl on our lips;  
speak of territory explored and  
lessons learned.  
Beethoven from your recent Victrola  
counterpoints the weaver's rhythm.  
Comforting habits wind themselves  
around us.  
I love you, Alfred.

I give shape on sixteen by twenty inch canvas  
to fragments of New Mexico  
stored in my pockets  
like smooth stones.  
They bloom before me, flame  
orange and red in New York November;  
then back to the city where  
rumors of collapse run  
like rats along the bottom edge of buildings.  
Ten million people unemployed.

At 509 Madison Avenue you open An American Place;  
surround me again  
with my work,  
smile slyly at me from the corner.

April 1930 Lake George  
jack-in-the-pulpits hide  
just behind  
newly green trees. Jack in the center unseen until  
viewed from the proper angle.  
Stiff dignity  
rises from sheltering petals.  
Footsteps fall in memory;  
tumble down a polished hall  
to the door-window which frames  
a jack-in-the-pulpit  
turned this way  
and that;  
watched by eager eyes.  
Now I mix pigment slowly, colors bound in oil,  
fix the image  
on the retina  
and turn to transplant  
bloom on canvas.

But soon again there is nothing here to paint, nothing.  
Your eyes a blank mirror.  
Damp repeated green molds and thickens;  
greedily sucks in air,  
a photosynthesis gone awry.

In my room, watched by unblinking easel, I focus  
on distant points. ...

If I'm very still I can hear  
the flat and vast hum  
of empty acres.  
I can conjure the air-filled ecstasy;  
the sky draped feast.

I will leave again, Alfred.  
Again and  
again I rise  
from close and sheltering hands;  
I have no choice.

"I have wanted to paint the desert and I haven't known how. The bones seem to cut sharply to the center of something that is keenly alive on the desert even tho' it is vast and empty and untouchable-- and knows no kindness with all its beauty."

Georgia O'Keeffe

Bones emerge  
from acres of sand; pieces of tooth  
that work their way out  
through the gum  
days after the dentist.  
Bones blasted by sand, wind-driven sculpture  
now indestructible.

Bones wait  
in an ochre sea  
confident of their place in the code.  
They rehearse; limber voices;  
anticipate the arid chorus.  
I rush to gather them,  
examine each and listen.  
Skulls and thighbones, fragments of pelvis  
frame pieces of sky when I hold them up.  
Animal bones, hard bleached survivors, they sing  
in the desert.  
They are like your clouds, Alfred,  
equivalents of the desert.

I paint them daily,  
pack bones to ship back East  
to furnish my exile.

Framed by my Ford I  
look back at you  
from the photographs.  
Evident in my eyes is  
the sound of the engine running.  
Sparks of sun glance  
hammered on the hood like a fist  
forging new forms.  
Hard polished chrome work  
shines in the Indian silver bracelet  
brought back from New Mexico  
to circle my wrist.  
You record my departures, count  
the road signs, indicators of absence;  
note my arrivals  
in strife's notebook. Smudged pages,  
thumbed corners,  
unsteady columns of figures  
testify in the court  
of husband and wife.

In late spring you shiver, dress  
in layers of clothing;  
hurry to close  
the door behind me as I drive West  
with all the windows open.  
In the rear view mirror you recede,  
a small dark form draped  
in mourning crepe.  
Paintings as numerous  
as grains of sand glitter  
before me, mark the miles  
I've travelled.

"There has been one who has stood by me through it all--  
a girl from Texas."

Alfred Stieglitz

"My feeling about life is a curious kind of triumphant  
feeling about-- seeing it bleak-- knowing it so and walking  
into it fearlessly because one has no choice--  
enjoying one's consciousness."

Georgia O'Keeffe



1931 near Taos

I rise sleepless just hours after midnight,  
climb onto the flat adobe roof,  
lie and wait for dawn  
to cover me with cool pressed sheets and  
bound borders.

The bed of desert is immense and empty;  
your even breathing is inaudible, Alfred.

I live in rooms of routine;  
paintings tick slowly  
in hours of solitude.

I want to pull the edges of canvas  
around me,  
loosen in its measured comfort, turn  
back the corners of white rectangles and  
lie with you.

As I wrote to Beck Strand,  
there is something about being with Stieglitz  
that makes up for landscape.

I return early to Lake George this year, carrying  
the desert shaped hollow  
in my arms.

You flee to the city,  
captive to other interests  
as you once were  
to me. Our dance continues;  
advance and  
retreat; pull  
and push; psalm and silence.  
Our feet trace ancient,  
tentative patterns.

A trip to the sea crosses  
in Gaspé.  
They wait, patient;  
arms reach lightly out  
for the sailors.  
White French-Canadian crosses rise  
and conspire with gulls;  
slim fingers touch sea mist,  
a world away from massive black  
Penitente crosses pressing heavy;  
a wooden vise  
on the landscape of New Mexico.  
I bring back paintings,  
worn barns and crosses, farmhouses  
and cold forests  
to add to the bones and sand,  
canyons and cliffs,  
sun colors and arroyos.  
I tie them in strings of need and  
lay them in your lap  
Alfred,  
my heart's parcel.  
You catalogue swiftly,  
smile briefly and then  
speak to someone over my shoulder.

"Donald Deskey was the designer of the Music Hall interiors. His intent was to make the theatre into a public gallery of contemporary art, decorated by first rate modern artists. In the spring of '32 he approached O'Keeffe, offering her fifteen hundred dollars to paint a mural. ... She agreed to Deskey's proposal, in spite of the small fee."

R. Robinson

"Stieglitz had always gloried in O'Keeffe's work. He had seen it, quite properly, as the expression of herself, that core of identity which he honored and cherished. His adamant and violent rejection of O'Keeffe's plan, and his hostility toward her projected work, was a violent rejection of herself."

R. Robinson

"He felt she was publicly betraying him as an agent and as a husband, as a commercial and philosophical partner."

R. Robinson

"The confrontation was part of a continuing dynamic. O'Keeffe was acting as an independent person and artist at some cost to the marriage. Her cool exclusion of Stieglitz from the Music Hall negotiations made a statement that he found subversive and threatening. The case for Stieglitz as the betrayed husband was strong, defensible, and easily articulated. The unspoken subtext, of course, was Stieglitz's public betrayal of O'Keeffe with Dorothy Norman."

R. Robinson

Canvas peels;  
sly and silent, it  
detaches itself  
from wet plaster as I watch,  
hands full of brushes and  
colors ready.  
Cloth edges curl and roll,  
resist mending fingers;  
nervous workmen reassure,  
smile,  
glance as  
upper corners surrender  
to gravity.  
The ceiling wrinkles and sags;  
thin skin falls  
away from bone before our upturned faces.  
Canvas collapses around me;  
the plaster will never dry.  
Everyone watches  
my face.  
They are uneasy witnesses  
to the conspiracy  
of refusal.

Dreams slice my nights  
into damp slivers, fears  
that pulse in my chest.  
Frames warp and snap,  
tacks scatter,  
canvas unweaves itself and molds  
in heaps of tangled fiber;  
others sidestep my brush.  
Pigments pull apart on a shaky palette,  
metal filings to magnets.  
Colors drain and gasp, shapes surrender  
their borders.  
My fingers chase drops  
of mercury  
on twisted planes.  
White pillowslip calibrates sleep's fever;  
I wake to icy wilderness.

You hand me camellia blossoms white  
as the sheets,  
set lilies on the bedstand  
to guard me  
while you're gone.  
You press cold linens of regret  
on my forehead and circle  
my sickbed  
with steps of worry. You arrange my paintings  
Alfred, a retrospective mask  
over the empty spaces.  
Your hands tend  
and till as they did  
years ago  
but  
they can't reach me  
now.  
I'm down too far below the surface;  
white-green shoots wait  
laboring, unable to move  
towards light.

You seem to have given me a strangely beautiful feeling of balance that makes the days seem very precious to me-- I seem to have come to life in such a quiet surprising fashion-- as tho I am not sick anymore. Everything in me begins to move and I feel like a really positive thing again.

Maybe the quality that we have in common is relentlessness-- maybe the thing that attracts me to you separates me from you.

I want you-- sometimes terribly-- but I like it that I am quite apart from you like the snow on the mountain.

I do know that the demands of my plot of earth are relentless if anything is to grow in it-- worthy of its quality... If the past year or two or three has taught me anything it is that my plot of earth must be tended with absurd care-- By myself first-- and if second by someone else it must be with absolute trust-- ...It seems it would be very difficult for me to live if it were wrecked again just now.

When I felt well, though, I had a sense of power. I always had it. ...

It will undoubtedly take quite a period of fumbling before I start on a new path, but I'm started, and seem to settle down to it every day as tho it is the only thing to do. There were talks that seemed almost to kill me-- and surprisingly strong sweet beautiful things seemed to come from them. The days with Alfred were very dear to me in a way-- it was very difficult for me to leave him but I knew I could not stay.

O'Keeffe to Jean Toomer



Sunset's veil falls on desert colors,  
charcoals, red and yellow ochres,  
buff-colored sand and sage.  
Grey green trees, pinyon pines briefly  
wear muted tones, then  
full bright again beneath sheer  
billowing curtains of light and dark;  
a shifting palette.  
Every window frames  
a deliberate composition.

I take off my dress and lie  
on the hot sand when  
no one is near; I  
try to press myself  
into it. I hold the sand  
in my hands,  
use a mortar and pestle to grind soil and  
then mix it with linseed oil  
and try to paint with it.  
Colors here have settled  
behind my eyes;  
wind has driven them  
through my skin, into  
my joints;  
brushstrokes as close  
as my lips forming sound.

Hills sleep  
around my adobe home;  
umbers, greys and shadowy blues lie  
lightly on waves of sand. They seem ...

to draw close then  
fall away.  
Silence breathes evenly in  
silken domain; a vast sea of stillness.

I'll be with you again soon  
Alfred.  
I imagine you  
reading my letters  
in the study at  
the farmhouse. Your day's traces  
echo even here.  
I move with care through my hours  
confident now  
that the chords of my days  
vibrate  
in your inner ear.

Ram's Head with Hollyhock 1935

Ranchos Church 1930

Summer Days 1936

From the Faraway Nearby 1937

" ...ripe with beauty, touched by grace, buoyant  
with vision, sure in execution, clear as to character."

Ralph Flint, Art News

"The directness of transcription from feeling to symbol  
gives the best of these canvases a special and  
distinguished place of their own to which few  
contemporaries, however talented, have access. These  
pictures are not derivations, they are sources."

Lewis Mumford, The New Yorker

1938

The last photographs  
at Lake George  
fall like fruit  
into my hands.  
I sit framed by  
late-summer gardens; a deliberate instant  
crafted from our days.  
Apples fallen from the tree  
near the southeast corner  
of the farmhouse  
multiply in my hands like promises  
made that spring years ago  
when you held the ladder and  
I climbed, and with the saw  
shaped the tree, left only  
fruit bearing branches. The slow growing  
earth guided branches; they bend now  
heavy with fruit, redeemed  
by ruthless pruning.

Your hands cannot hold  
the heavy cameras any  
longer;  
no lens defines us now.  
Your eyes blink,  
adjust to new light.

1938

Alfred,  
the new apartment  
has more space and  
light;  
the balcony looks over  
the East River.  
Sky seems to lean in  
through northern windows.  
There's room for a housekeeper;  
I've had the phone installed.  
I wish I could be there all  
the time  
to settle you in and  
sit next to you in the evening.  
Sometimes when I picture my heart  
stones appear on the canvas.

I followed your map to New Mexico,  
crafted three new paintings today;  
will ship them East tomorrow morning  
to whisper in your ears  
descriptions of my journey.  
I wish you could be here, the same sky  
has wrapped us both in its arms.

"I don't believe she ever did anything contrary to her own inner feeling."

A.Stieglitz

"I believe it was the work that kept me with him-- tho I loved him as a human being... I put up with what seemed to me a good deal of contradictory nonsense because of what seemed clear and bright and wonderful."

G.O'Keeffe

The paintings tick here in  
bountiful hours,  
practised days.  
Wind-driven sand scours,  
leaves only bone.  
Dawn quickens black cliffs and  
sparks ash white sand formations;  
daily I witness light  
and describe it to my canvas.  
Brushes retrace shapes  
imprinted on the eye. I record images;  
the Sangre de Cristo mountains glisten  
miles away and in my studio. The Black Place and  
the White Place tangle in shadows;  
meet on my easel.  
I walk on ground  
sacred to the Navajo;  
part of their rituals.  
Reasons for the consecration  
slumber in cracks, deep  
in centuries of silence.

The Art Institute of Chicago  
assembles a picture of my work.  
I send them messages received  
from the fissures  
pried into mountains;  
cliffs split,  
watered by secret springs.

Pelvis with Moon 1943

Pelvis Series, Red with Yellow 1945

Two Jimson Weeds 1938

"It is my private mountain. It belongs to me. God told  
me if I painted it enough, I could have it."

G.O'Keeffe

Cebolla Church 1945

Black Cross, New Mexico 1929

Black Place III 1944

The Grey Hills 1942



1945

I watch the world  
through holes in desert bones;  
sky, mountains, fabric flowers and the moon  
appear in my telescope  
of pelvic bones. Animal bones I have found.  
I fix images  
one by one  
in lasting frames.  
My artifacts have visited death  
and returned to sandy bloom.  
Sky seen through this aperture  
is a fragile blue sapphire.

Gas is rationed, butter too.  
Los Alamos is forty miles away but  
sifts like black ash  
into shop counter conversations.  
The world beyond me  
is visiting death.

I scrape my palette clean,  
take pigment from new tubes and  
wash my brushes twice.  
The weight of my task sleeps like lead  
behind my ribs.  
I paint a flaming red sky seen  
through gold bones.  
Maria turns on the radio;  
flesh is falling off  
burning bones  
somewhere in Japan.

Arrived today in Abiquiu;  
your letter was waiting  
for me.  
I'm sad to hear  
An American Place  
is so quiet now;  
your garden plot, medium  
for so many, empty now.  
Sturdy bold shoots  
shake soil from roots  
and bloom elsewhere,  
far from the gardener's hands.  
I know you're tired, Alfred, but  
don't cultivate bitter fruit now.

Woven into each of my primed canvases  
are minute squares that frame your likeness;  
strong white threads that carry color  
like cabled dispatches.  
We each hold one end, bound  
in this continuing dialogue.

"Incredible, just incredible."

A.Stieglitz

"O'Keeffe is beautiful. She is beautiful in every respect."

A.Stieglitz

"I see Alfred as an old man that I am very fond of-- growing older-- so that it sometimes shocks and startles me when he looks particularly pale and tired... Aside from my fondness for him personally I feel that he has been very important to something that has made my world for me-- I like it that I can make him feel that I have hold of his hand to steady him as he goes on."

G.O'Keeffe

I watched it happen;  
you ceased  
breathing today  
Alfred.  
The last image fixed  
on clouded eyes  
is mine.  
The curve of cornea  
refracts  
light and shadow;  
dark rectangles on  
hospital bleached sheets;  
pale hands holding  
the black sleeve  
of my dress.

Earlier  
newsprint left witness  
on white walls  
as you fell;  
reviews of my exhibit,  
typeface on rag paper  
clutched in your hand.

Hours of searching  
noisy Manhattan  
yields a coffin  
planed  
by careful hands.  
Straight and silent pine boards  
join flawlessly;  
right angles and corners.  
I tear out  
sugar spun satin and ...

lay white linen  
coarse and unbleached  
in its place.  
I smoothe wrinkles  
with slow fingers;  
make clean corners and  
cool folds.  
Afterwards  
they hand me  
your ashes.

The black bird  
on my canvas  
stitches earth  
to sky.  
It carries the horizon  
on slim wings;  
rises  
in heavy flight;  
holds air  
in hollow wing bones.  
It flies away for  
ever,  
leaves me  
a dark space  
that flows out  
from the slow beat  
of ebony feathers.  
My paintbrush explores  
the frontiers  
of your absence. ...

A sudden snow whitens  
red hills; pearls lie quiet  
beneath sooty shadow;  
paper waits  
for the charcoal word;  
the outline of your ashes  
on ice.

Clusters of crystals  
form  
where light hits hardest;  
silver emulsion  
pulses dense  
and dark.  
Focussed light filters through and  
leaves a white aperture  
on light-sensitive paper.  
You shone on me  
without blinking;  
now I cast  
a permanent image.

Boxes and boxes of prints,  
plates and negatives  
are roused  
from closet sleep.  
Fingerprints  
on time's white pages;  
they identify the man.  
A black and white diary  
of days;  
this description of light  
spoken by a life  
time. ...

A catalogue of instants  
that speaks  
your name.

I assemble my image  
from the deck of negatives  
dealt again and again.  
I hold them up  
to the light;  
search for sharp edges and  
grey-shaded dreams;  
look into the mirror  
of my eyes.

You wanted everything then  
Alfred;  
insistent fingers  
soothed and aroused.  
I made myself transparent and  
shattered your white light  
into a profusion  
of blossoms;  
a brilliant shower  
of forms and colors.

I will whisper  
words to you;  
fluent brushes and  
ready canvas  
continue  
the intimate dialogue.

Although Description of Light is fiction, it is shaped and informed by the following texts. I am grateful to the authors.

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