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Holland Cotter (b. 1947) is one of the most sensitive and insightful chroniclers of contemporary art, paying special attention to art by racial and sexual minorities, as well as from other cultures. Throughout the eighties and nineties he contributed to *New York Arts Journal*, *Arts*, and *Art in America*. He started freelancing for *The New York Times* in 1992, became a staff writer in 1998, and is currently the paper's cochief art critic. He received the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in 2009.

Holland Cotter

I want to start by talking about your early life and your relationship with poetry. How did that connection with language begin?

It started at home. I grew up near Concord, Massachusetts, outside of Boston. My parents were a very young postwar couple. My dad had just started medical school when I was born, so there was no money to speak of, but they were resourceful. They were book readers, museum goers, and they loved music, especially jazz. While my dad was in school at night, my mother would read my younger sister and me poetry at the dinner table—just a routine thing that she did. Her taste in poetry included Emily Dickinson, which she thought would appeal to us because her poems were short and had references to nature, but also the language is so startling—it wakes you up and makes you listen. I got a lot of Dickinson early on.

My dad had worked as a lifeguard at Walden when he was in high school, and I biked over there all the time, so Transcendentalist figures were in the air. Thoreau the abolitionist, Bronson Alcott the utopian—all those people were neighbors in my mind. Also my aunt Helen was in her eighties when I was about eight, so she was alive at the same time as Emily Dickinson. Because she was a Victorian she had memorized vast amounts of poetry, Longfellow being a favorite. She knew *Evangeline* [1847] and *Hiawatha* [1855], which has all these wonderful special effects in it—that semi-invented Ojibwa that Longfellow got out of lexicons and incorporated into the poem. The birds and animals *talk*, and Aunt Helen had mastered the art of impersonating them.

It's so strange—about three days ago I was talking about that poem, and how incredible the sounds in it are.

Yes, they are! So I was getting that, what language can be and do. I became an early reader from all of those things.

At what point did you decide that you would be a writer or a poet?

It just followed. Dickinson was my model, because her hymn rhythms are easy to imitate. My grandfather, bless his heart, would take my poems and have them typed up at his office, and then put them into little folders, and my parents kept them for a lot of years.

When you started moving into high school and then college, were you already involved with art, or were you mostly focused on poetry?

I was also into art at that point because my parents regularly took me to the Museum of Fine Arts and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, in Boston. Their routine was to drive into the city on a Saturday morning and leave me at the MFA. They'd just plunk me there and go on their way to do their city thing. In those days, in the 1950s, museums were empty and silent. I knew the guards because they saw me so often, and they let me just wander where I wanted to go. I went everywhere, on self-curated tours. My tastes changed over time, and my interests. But I always loved the Netherlandish altarpieces that were like windows with shutters, and the big wood Buddhas sitting in a circle in the walk-in Japanese temple hall, which is still there. But it all started with mummies—

It always starts with mummies!

I was there for the mummies. And because this was Boston, with its possessive sense of local history, I would go to look at *Paul Revere* [1768], the John Singleton Copley portrait. I loved history—the idea of history—and the idea of art being historical matter, that objects were containers of information, lost but discoverable stories. I don't think I reacted to art objects primarily in terms of beauty and form—I probably did unconsciously—but my interest was, *What is this about? What is going on here?* You go to see Copley's *Watson and the Shark* [1778] and there's this astonishing life-and-death narrative happening in front of you: *Why is this guy in the water? Who put him there? Why don't they pull him out?* It just

fascinated me.

So you were doing this around the age of fifteen?

Oh, younger—ten or eleven.

And did you ever write poems in relation to the artworks you were looking at?

I don't remember doing that.

Once you went to college, what was your intent?

I went to Harvard with the goal of studying poetry with Robert Lowell. I had written a review of his book *Life Studies* [1959] for the high school newspaper, many years after the book had come out. My grandfather had a Robert Lowell connection of some kind and sent him the review, and I remember getting a note of thanks—as you can imagine, I couldn't believe it. So that's where I went to college and that was my only goal.

And what was it like working with Lowell there?

It was good. He only taught a graduate writing seminar, and I was a sophomore, so I was this little kid in a room with these older students. I was completely tongue-tied. He was in good shape that year. He had some psychological disabilities that meant he sometimes left halfway through a semester. But this year, 1967, he seemed okay. He spent much of the class time talking about poems by other, older writers—and he was a wonderful out-loud reader. He critiqued our work in class. But I was too shy to give him much. I waited till the end of the semester, and then I mailed him a batch of things.

Were you also studying art history?

No, although the first course I took in college, sort of by accident, was an art course. As freshmen we had a science requirement. I didn't know what to do about that. I'd flunked high school chemistry twice. So I combed through the catalogue and came up with an anthropology course, which qualified as a social science or something. It was called "Primitive Art," and was cross-listed with the art department. And that's what I took. It met in the campus ethnology museum, which has great collections of West African and Central African masks. As part of the class our instructor would show us films of masquerades and

then send us out into the museum to track down the masks we'd seen danced. That was my first formal education in art. I loved it. It was also my first exposure to African art—the “encyclopedic” MFA didn't have any—and to art as an interactive phenomenon. It doesn't just stand there; it *does* something. It doesn't just exist in space; it happens in time. I eventually began to understand that all those altarpieces and Buddhist sculptures I'd been looking at for years were interactive too.

You have written continuously on African art over the years, so it's interesting to realize this was your first introduction to art history. How did you start becoming engaged with contemporary art?

Well, then there was a gap. I graduated from college in 1970—by that point my college roommate and I had become lovers and we lived together as lovers for a year and a half at school. He was a preacher's son and a history major. He'd spent time in Africa before we met, and was studying modern African politics. So along with my seeing older objects at the Peabody, he was telling me about what was going on in Africa right then, in the present. And this was the sixties, the postcolonial liberation moment, a very exciting, volatile time. He was on top of all that.

Were you always interested in politics?

I had a cushioned upbringing, for sure, but I was a fairly observant kid, and a few realities made their way in. Like everyone else in 1963, I saw the news: African Americans being fire-hosed by police in Birmingham. A year later, when I was in high school, I took a bus through the South with a friend, and that was a serious eye-opener. Also, thanks to older friends, I was reading James Baldwin in my teens. And being gay made me aware, very early, that the larger world I lived in was unfriendly to difference of any kind, period. That sensitized me to a lot of things. It scared me, and pissed me off.

Did any of your political interests specifically relate to gay rights?

Not specifically, no. Politically, Harvard was way behind the times about many things. News of Stonewall just didn't get there, or didn't get broadcast until long after the fact. There was probably a gay community on campus, but I didn't know about it. Anyway, I've never

really felt part of any community, including an art community. I'm not at all unsociable, just not much of a joiner.

What did you do after you graduated?

My partner declared himself a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War and was required to do alternative service. My father, who was a doctor, got him a job in a hospital near Boston, in a factory town on the Charles River. During high school summers I'd worked in hospitals as an emergency room orderly, so I took a job there too. We rented a small apartment nearby and lived there for three years.

That sounds very romantic.

In retrospect, it was. We listened to lots of music—we were both into opera—and read. And every day we were involved in these care-taking situations. Hospital work was paycheck work, yeah, but it was much more than that—it was human contact work. *Hands-on, you-me, we'll do this together. When I tell you to lift, lift, and we'll get you into bed.* That kind of thing. I still think of it as the most satisfying job I've ever had, the one that felt the most worth doing, every day. And in a way that school wasn't, it was a moral education, a lesson in first and last things. Basically, it was the same education that Walt Whitman writes about in “Specimen Days” [1882], where he records the experiences he had as the equivalent of a volunteer psychiatric nurse in army hospitals during the Civil War. His job had a lasting effect on him; mine did on me. I think art schools should require all students to do a semester of similar work as part of the curriculum. If they did, new art would look very different from what it does today.

After the job was over, we went to Europe. We just had to get out of this country. We traveled around for a year or so and, among other things, went to tons of museums.

So this puts us at 1974?

Right. While we were in Europe, my partner decided to do graduate work and got into in a program in North Carolina. I wasn't ready to move there, so we went separate ways geographically. I didn't want to go back to Boston either, so I flew to New York. I stayed first with my sister, to whom I'm very close, then crashed with friends, and I've been

here ever since. I did odd jobs—temp work, stuff like that. I was a bank messenger for a while down on Wall Street. I worked in a daycare center. I taught English as a second language at City University of New York at Borough of Manhattan Community College. That was a night job, and a great experience.

Why?

The students were older adults who worked days and came to this two-year school in the evening to get college degrees, then went home to take care of their families. They were smart, dedicated, and, by the time they got to me, *tired* people. I was helping them with written class assignments. The teaching felt completely collaborative, the way hospital work had. I'd never really examined the mechanics of language before: how you can organize it efficiently, make it persuasive, communicative. Working with them taught me that. I hope some of my teaching helped them.

So, how did you start writing about art from there?

In, I think, 1975, on the subway, I bumped into an old friend who had just moved to New York to go to graduate school at Columbia. Back in Boston he had started a tabloid-format arts magazine and was trying to get a version of it off the ground here. He asked if I wanted to help edit it, and I said, *Sure*. It was a multi-arts publication, so it included poetry, interviews, fiction, book reviews, music, and art reviews. We needed an art writer, so that's how I started. And this was my introduction to the New York art world.

And how did New York and the New York art world look to you?

The city was a wreck. A class war, directed at the black and immigrant Latino population, was underway. Really, it's still underway. By that point, I was living with someone new, an artist, down near Wall Street, in an old tenement a couple blocks below the World Trade Center. Many of our neighbors were artists of one kind or another. Some of them worked with Robert Wilson. And people were constantly coming through. My upstairs neighbor periodically had Bread and Puppet people down from Vermont camping in his living room. Through him I met Ray Johnson. My next-door neighbor brought

Harmony Hammond and Paul Thek around. Creative Time was doing installations and performances on World Trade Center landfill. Technically, SoHo was the contemporary art world, but there was this whole other world further downtown. And history was rich there. Great ghosts. We lived near where Herman Melville was born; Edgar Allen Poe and his teenage bride had stayed in a rooming house a couple doors down; Coenties Slip, where Ellsworth Kelly and Agnes Martin lived in the 1950s, was a short walk away. Anyway, I started to write about art while working on the magazine, which was called *New York Arts Journal*.

It was like learning on the job.

Totally.

How long did you do that?

The magazine lasted just a few years. There was very little money. We initially distributed it ourselves, lugging it around to bookstores. My friend and I were the staff, along with a few Columbia students getting course credit as volunteers. When you called our "office" you were calling a dorm.

As you were teaching yourself to write art criticism, who were your models for how to do it?

The critic I was reading the most was Edwin Denby, even though he was mostly writing about dance. I liked Jill Johnston a lot too. So in general my model was dance criticism. To some extent, it still is.

Of course, Denby was also a poet. Did looking at Denby hip you to the entire tradition of New York School poets writing art criticism?

Yes. I didn't know about it until I started to read him. Somehow through him I got turned on to John Ashbery's criticism in *New York* magazine.

That period of Ashbery's poetry is among the most dazzling in the English language, but it took me a long time to see the virtues of his art criticism, which just seemed so much more grown-up or something, in a way I didn't connect with.

Because the critical language was more functional, expository?

It was just so *clear*, and it took me awhile to understand how hard that is to pull off.

I've always thought that his criticism was absolutely crucial adjunct material to the poetry, if in no other way than in the sheer variety of subjects that he covered as a critic. He'd write about standard modernist shows, the stuff any critic in a mainstream publication has to write about because it's what readers presumably want to read about. But he'd also focus on off-the-radar figures like Jean Fautrier, and Anne Ryan, and Jess—and on unusual subjects like Japanese folk art, and Émile Gallé vases, and the Prinzhorn Collection. And he wrote about it all the same way, with the same enthusiasm, as if it all mattered equally to him.

That could equally describe your own criticism. Going through the archive of your writing, it's like, *Oh! Korean ceramics and Bauhaus weavings and historical African carvings and gay performance art*—and they are all done with the same level of care.

I learned from his example. As time went on I started to ask for something more and different from criticism, but it was certainly encouraging to read him in the early 1970s. Your other weekly mainstream choices then were Harold Rosenberg in *The New Yorker* or various disciples of Donald Judd. And that was all, essentially, formalism: you know, *This a good painting; that's a bad one*. This kind of writing could be made to sound tough and sexy, but if you gave any thought to what actually was being said, it was bogus. It was mostly about, *Look at me*. Young critics often start out from this place; I did. It can make you feel powerful. Later, you figure out that wanting power is a problem; *the* problem. Generosity is the answer.

Anyway, apart from very early, essentially self-published reviews, I got my start as an art writer with *Arts Magazine* in the early 1980s. By this point my then partner and I had broken up and I'd moved to the East Village—we'd been together for seven years.

That's a twenty-five-year marriage in the gay world.

Breaking up was devastating. It always is.

Did it affect the way that you wrote, either poetry or criticism?

It made me write more, because I needed now to make a life for myself, which partly meant keeping busy. By this point I'd published

a couple of things in *Arts Magazine*, so I asked the editor, Richard Martin, if I could do a monthly reviews column, with the East Village, which was then having its moment, as my beat. He said, *Do it*. The *Arts* experience was eccentric and interesting. They had a minute office on Madison Square Park, and, as far as I knew, almost no one was ever in it. And it was hard to get anyone on the phone. So you either mailed in your copy or slid it under the door. The next thing you knew, it was in print—

Unedited!

Yeah, pretty much—misspellings, everything. Here's how I'd communicate with Richard: I'd write him a note saying, *I'd like to review the following shows*. By return mail, I'd get the same note back with a handwritten annotation: *Great!* That was it.

That sounds so sketchy!

It was good, easy—I liked that mode of communication, the way I like e-mail today. *Arts* paid next to nothing, but always paid immediately, first of the month, before an issue was even out. This was important, not just financially—though, believe me, we needed every cent we could get—but psychologically. It meant that in some small way you were being treated like a professional, not jerked around, and made to wait and beg as happens too often to critics now.

Then after awhile I started writing for *Art in America*. The painter Stephen Westfall, who lived in the East Village and wrote for the magazine himself, advised me to wait until I'd assembled a year's worth of *Arts* clips, then send them to Betsy Baker, *Art in America's* editor in chief. I did exactly what he told me, and Betsy invited me to write, gallery reviews initially. The first time she asked for a feature-length article, I said no. I felt I wasn't up to it. I knew how much I didn't know.

Is this around the time you decided to go back to school for art history?

Right. But first some other thing happened. I found a full-time, sort of secretarial day job at an academic computer center. I always liked having a nonart day job. And at this one I loved the people I was working with. I mean, some tech nerds were on their own very remote

planet. But it was also a racially mixed group of gay/straight/trans ex-hippie, pro-union social worker types. I've stayed close to them, which is one reason I've never felt the need of an art-world social life.

And there was a lot of time free for traveling. I went back to Europe, and then to Japan, where I stayed mostly out in the countryside, visiting small-town temples and shrines, with Tanizaki and Simone Weil in my backpack. I was learning where all those Buddhas I'd hung out with at the MFA came from and seeing equivalent images in their temple-homes, where people left fruit and water for them, bathed and dressed them.

How old were you then?

Thirty-something. I was getting restless writing only about contemporary art and felt I needed to expand my reach if I was going to continue with art writing at all. So I dropped by Hunter College and talked with the head of the graduate program in art history. She said, *Why don't you take one course and see how you like it.* I did. Ancient Greek art. I loved it. I nose-dived in; total immersion. In, like, two months, I reread Herodotus, Hesiod, Homer. I spent my weekends taking notes on pots at the Met. Then I signed on with the master's program. And, being the committed generalist that I am, I took courses in everything.

One course was in Islamic art, taught by a professor named Ulku Bates, who is Turkish. By that time I'd been to Turkey and North Africa, so I'd seen Islamic art in situ. Now I was learning about its content: what it means to people; how and why they connect to it. After the course was over I said, *I know this is the only Islamic course you teach, how can I study more?* She said we could do an independent study. When I asked her to suggest a subject, she said, *One thing that really fascinates me is Mughal pavilion architecture in Kashmir, up in the mountains—the topic is wide open, almost nobody has been doing work on it.* So I went to Kashmir and it was glorious. This was '84, just before it became impossible to go there—during the trip Indira Gandhi was assassinated and a lot of trouble started. From Kashmir I went to Nepal and India, where I visited some very early Buddhist sites, which intensified my interest in that area. I wrapped up the CUNY degree and went into the doctoral

program at Columbia to concentrate on South Asian art.

And did you become involved with Buddhism philosophically or spiritually, or was it just an aesthetic interest?

No, I'm not a Buddhist. Louise Bourgeois once said something like, *I don't believe in God, but I have a religious temperament.* And that sounds right to me, going back to when I was ten, sitting with those Buddhas and feeling they weren't just objects. They were animated with the energy of the people who made them, and worshipped them, or just plain loved them, like me.

Also, I've got to say, the more I studied non-Western art in school, the more I became aware of how utterly unchill the idea of "spiritual" was within Western academic precincts. It wasn't just ignored. It was disdained. Ad Reinhardt a "spiritual" artist? *Don't even think that thought.* Which automatically, for me, made the thought absolutely worth thinking hard about.

So in the eighties and early nineties you're writing articles for *Art in America*, and you're starting the PhD on Buddhist art at Columbia, but it's also the time of the AIDS crisis. How did that impact your thinking and life and work?

It's still hard to talk about this. AIDS pervaded everything, daily. Friends got sick. People went through cycles of despair and denial. My old college lover tested HIV positive and died. Although we had long been with different partners, we had stayed close. The day he got his test results he called. This is before there were life-extending medications.

With your history of working in hospitals, what kind of activism were you engaged with?

I wasn't attached to GMHC or any organized program. I just did what everyone did, one on one: visited apartments, brought food, took people to clinics, spent time with them, fed pets, wrote checks. The loss is still incomprehensible. The East Village today is a ghost town for me. My faith in the American government, what little I ever, ever had, was shot to hell and never recovered. Thanks to ACT UP, some faith in activism, and art as activism, survives.

You often write about marginalized communities and art of other

cultures. I wonder if during both the AIDS crisis and the culture wars that focus was intensified or clarified?

Again, being homosexual, and knowing it practically from infancy, shaped my view of the world. I have had all the benefits of white male privilege, but I stand outside the range of heterosexual privilege, which is so taken for granted in American culture as to be all but unspoken of, yet is at the same time aggressively protected and promoted. For this reason, for as long as I can remember, I've identified with outsidership. This goes way beyond the intellectual. It's temperamental. I don't *think* it. It's ingrained. And I identify with outsidership wherever I find it, not just when it's related to sexual preference, but also to class, race, gender, disability, belief, and place of origin.

And I know this is a factor in determining my interests in art. My interests are very broad, as is my definition of what is art. But I think that what attracts me, in a general way, is art that's made under pressure, emotional, or social, or political. And often—though by no means always—this art emerges from “marginalized communities,” including marginalized communities of one. Within a Western secular context, such communities would include religious cultures, present and past, across the globe.

So I'd say it's personal experience, more than a sense of deliberated ethical responsibility, that makes me choose what I write about. My frequent starting point is: *Wow, this is stuff is fabulous; I should tell people about it.* And writing gives you a chance to dive *into* fabulousness, take a crash course in it—every week! I always say that my job at *The New York Times* is a salaried form of continuing adult education, and I mean it.

Did you stop writing poetry?

Pretty much. No time. Maybe later.

You were writing these long articles for *Art in America*, and then you start writing reviews for *The New York Times* in the 1990s. The forms of those publications—not only the length, but the context as well—are very different. What was that transition like?

It was hell. Betsy was always very generous with word lengths. I remember working on something and calling her in a panic and

saying, *I've got six thousand words and I'm not near the end, what should I do?* She said, *Keep going till you feel you're done.* And she ran it. I'm so grateful, for many, many reasons, that I got to write for her—it was a high point.

How did she help you learn to write?

Mostly through encouragement. I don't remember her doing much line editing. She would make occasional comments—*You might want to expand this*—then leave it to me to self-edit. But having her read it, and approve, was huge, in terms of giving me confidence. In a way, she's still the audience I write for. She knew what kind of writer I am—I'm not going to hand in a rough draft, because I'm too insecure, or controlling, to let anyone see something unfinished. I have to hold on until I've polished this thing as much as I can, and that means it's going to be late. It just *is*. I can't do it any other way.

So I get my first assignment at the *Times*—this was in 1991; I was a freelancer—and it was to write about a show of South Asian art at the Met. The show had maybe fifty objects. I was told I could have six hundred words and needed to file it in three days. I thought: *Six hundred words—that's the size of, like, an extended photo caption—and I won't be able to even get started on what there is to say!* It took me seventy-two almost sleepless hours to write, rethink, rewrite, recount, reduce. It was very tough, and it kept being tough for a while.

If we were to diagram one of those reviews, would we find a set of strategies that you use to tackle them?

Fortunately, but also unfortunately, you do develop strategies, which can easily harden into formulas. There are certain conventions in newspaper writing that you pretty much have to stick with, like coming up with an establishing statement that lets readers know what you're writing about and makes them care enough to keep reading. There's more pressure on the top than ever now, with people on cell phones reading fast and itching to click on the next item.

What is the role of description in your criticism?

Important, because basically that's the “language” part, but I wouldn't say it's my main interest.

What would you say is your main interest?

Ideas, content, including history. More and more my interest is in how the past relates to the present—how old art is pertinent to what is happening in the world, and in my life, now. Whatever the date, there are the same basic human stories. It's built into the art phenomenon: *Somebody made this. Someone was here.* Our big museums, the ones that have the resources for broad-spectrum views, should use their permanent collections to tell difficult, comparative, and inclusive stories. Instead, they lean on the “beauty” button and keep you moving. Art doesn't speak for itself. If it did, the Met's African and South Asian galleries would be packed every day. They aren't.

It's hard to explain, but it seems like there is a strong ethical sense in your criticism.

I do think that art is, fundamentally, about ethics. We keep getting told it represents humanity at its best. But it also represents us at our worst. Many works of great beauty were designed as ideological assault weapons. Many are the equivalent of empty-calorie junk food, meant to neutralize us with pleasure. This is as true in the past as in the present.

And of course, who gets represented and who doesn't in museums is an ethical matter. The “encyclopedic” Met has no African Americans in senior curatorial positions. The Whitney Museum of *American Art* is only now acknowledging the existence of South America. MoMA, after a certain amount of critical shaming, has taken to cosmetically plugging in a few non-Western items here and there to keep us squawkers quiet.

How do you feel the climate of the art world, and of art criticism, has shifted over your writing life?

As for the mainstream art world, the changes I can think of offhand are the same ones everybody's aware of. In the forty or so years I've been around, it's grown unimaginably huge, rich, and professionalized. It's a giant product generator. One result, people say, is that criticism has been drastically smallized, made irrelevant. I do think this is to some degree true of the old thumbs-up-thumbs-down model as applied to individual artists or formal categories—painting, say. For me, the most interesting writing now tends to be aimed at larger targets: institutions, political developments, modes of thought. Conversely, though, I find

there's more room now for the personal voice. This shift may have roots in the AIDS years, when any divide between personal and political became impossible to sustain.

How did you bring your personal voice into criticism?

Maybe after I came out in print. In 1994, for *Art in America*, I did a bunch of interviews with gay artists and I identified myself as gay, not because I thought I “should,” but because emotionally I couldn't *not*. I needed to. That's all. This was a time when theory-driven writing had gained traction. In general, I find theory hugely interesting, a real vista opener. But as an off-the-shelf literary style it's restrictive, like legalese. And it's addictive. I've mentored some young critics and encouraged them to wean themselves from it, to try to find a voice of their own, a personal vocabulary, plain or not. I say: *Don't be afraid of “I,” which doesn't—does not—mean indulging your ego, because who cares about anybody's stand-up ego? Just own the art you're writing about. Make it yours, and ours.* Figuring out how to do that can be your ticket out of the art factory.

For me, an art experience is defined by the consciousness of the person who made it disclosing itself to you through the decisions involved in making it. That is kinda spooky. And that entails a level of belief, and if that's not there, I'm not interested in it as an art experience.

I agree. And I feel that way about art writing. I think it can channel some sense of the consciousness that goes into the making of art. And it can convey a writer's “level of belief.” There's nothing hifalutin, or mystical, about this. It's basic. An art writer can translate an art experience into words, into a reading experience, the way Denby and Johnston did with dance. Yeah, the translation is a different experience, a lesser one maybe, but it's the experience of people who were *right there* for the original, nose to the glass, the way I was as a kid looking at Van der Weyden's *Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin* [ca. 1435–1440] at the MFA. I was thinking, *Okay, I know this scene is made up, but it's also real. The curve of the baby's fingers—Van der Weyden must have seen that. Saint Luke must be someone he really knew. Mary's house, with the rug and pillows, must have been his house.*

In a painting, everything in it is there because somebody wanted

it to be there, and furthermore, they wanted it to be *precisely* like it is. There is a class of artists I think of as “gateway drugs” to art, where the artist’s mind and heart are so foregrounded that you can look at their work, even as a child, and get some sense of what art is—for me it was being seven years old looking at reproductions of Van Gogh and thinking, *It’s like a sunflower but it’s also someone’s feelings, and I can tell that by how it looks.*

My version of your gateway Van Gogh was Matisse’s *Blue Window* [1913]. When I was in grade school, we were given boxes with postcard-size reproductions of lots of paintings. The one that stopped me was this Matisse—the most abstract picture of all. I got that it was an image of the real, everyday world, but filtered through very strange eyes. The sense of depth was off. The shapes were weird. I could name some of them—table, window, trees—but some I had to guess at, invent—play with, in other words, the way I was already learning language could be played with in poetry. And this was at a time in my life when play was realer than reality and helped me deal with reality. It gave me a place to retreat to, and to look out from, free from fear. When you don’t feel fear, you see everything more clearly.