

Portrait of the Artist at Her Studio Window

Freda, looking out
saw wild things:
a squirrel ravaging an acorn,
a spider devouring her prey
the matronly mourning dove
stalked by the cat,
as she waddled among plantain,
stinging nettle and witch grass
that passed for lawn
in that suburban bend in the road,
that bohemian grove
tucked
among plumbers' homes,
machine tool men,
and stay-at-home moms
aroma of oatmeal cookies,
wafting from Westinghouse kitchens.

Freda, looking out
saw wild things:
a caravan of ants
lugging its cargo through thistle forests
and curly dock;
beetles lumbering
among chickweed;
a hornets' nest lurking
in the eaves;
a swarm of yellow jackets
hovering.
My brother, Freddy and I
mud-brown in spring,
green in summer,
red/gold in autumn,
indistinguishable
from the unruly mass

of maple, beech and sassafras
on that hill that passed
for badlands,
giddyupping our stallions
in hot pursuit of gunslingers.

The praying mantis splayed
across the picture window,
looking in
saw wild things:
paint-smearred carts,
tin cans of brushes,
frames jumbled in bins,
a skelter of books tumbling
from shelves,
a child-sized doll rigor mortised
in red velvet and white lace,
a card table, its thrift shop cloth
stained
with forty years of conversations:
confessions of infidelities,
of husbands who never came home,
of a son without genitals,
a daughter dead from anorexia,
obligations unfilled,
loves unrequited,
all poured out
over cups of tea,
and stale Hob Nobs,
aroma of turpentine and linseed oil.

In the middle of it all
framed in a bell-epoque mirror
a woman, mall stick
between thumb and forefinger,
the other end resting
against the easel,

squinting to catch the shape
of her model's arm,
the grayed
shadow in the curve
of a neck,
cadmium white for
the corner of an eye
An antique table draped
in toile,
suggestion of a potted
plant,
something Sargent
would have painted.

~Sheila Collins