



Of Boats and a Virgin

-DANA VACHON

SPEAK OF ART AND, SOONER OR LATER, WE SPEAK OF MONEY, of records set at auction, splits between creators and their brokers, of artists themselves as factory owners.

When I was eight my father found himself in the market for status symbols. He joined in the Old Masters fad of Wall Street in the eighties with the purchase of two paintings at Sotheby's. One, hung in his den, was a shipping scene painted by Ludolf Backhuysen, Dutch fluyts heavy with cargos and cannon, tossed by an oil dark sea. Without speaking too ill of my father, I should say that his artistic appreciation centered around a single prized trait. "Oldness." He would take us through the Met marveling at the age of this tapestry, that suit of armor, moved less by the objects than by the waves of life and death they had traversed en route to eternity behind museum glass. His favorite painting in New York was Holbein's portrait of St. Thomas More at the Frick. He'd seen it in a textbook as a boy, he said, and now I think it must have vouched for his arrival in Manhattan from a small New England mill town, for some place of happy lotus-grazing within his American odyssey. His favorite piece of art in the city was perhaps not art at all but, fitting for a son of the mills, a gigantic chunk of wood. His face would go childlike at the Museum of Natural History, standing before the bisection of a 1400 year old sequoia, a holder of infinite wonders: Napoleon's seizing power, someone's capture of Jerusalem, points of awe all bearing down on time's zero-hour, the birth of Christ.

Bought alongside the Backhuysen was a breastfeeding Virgin, unsigned, a piece of proto-kitsch from the school of Peter Paul Rubens. "A virgin factory virgin" as a friend would later quip. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, we are told, live alongside the twentieth, just like inside of a sequoia tree. So the icon had vibrant and valid meaning for my parents, both schooled in superstition by Roman Catholic nuns. It was, officially, a gift to my mother, one of eight siblings who read the full weight of inherited feminine grief in the text of Mary, the mother doomed to lose her son. She hung it in the living room, where, like the Backhuysen, it existed under strictest anti-touching rules. Which demanded breaking. At night, when my parents slept, I'd run my fingers along the huge waves of the shipping scene. No museum glass here, no alarms, just the quiet of a Westchester night. And I'd touch the pink brushstrokes of Mary's areola, imagining the fullness of the bosom itself, aided in this by Christ's little suckling mouth, gleaning the greater mystery of all breasts that is coded in the male primate's mind. I made light pornography of

the mother of Christ. To touch the paintings was to fathom their "oldness", their lives across time. And also to fathom them as signs within the life of a family: the scene of merchant ships atop wild waves suggested some arrival, sure, as well as the chaos that lurks beyond and beneath prosperity, the mad undercurrents of the market.

The Virgin existed atop her own dark truths. Any good mind wonders, sooner or later, if Mary wasn't just a girl who had slept herself into a bind and fibbed her way out of it. Meaning, in art, develops as it does in life, Polaroid style, with shaking, across time. And so the paintings betrayed their deeper truths as we found ours. The power of the indifferent seas against the taming wish of commerce became real as the flattening bond markets tested my father's sanity. The shipping scene became intelligible, across the nineties and aughts, as a composition of torments: the raging waves swelling up over the sides of the ship where certain of the deckhands have given themselves over to drink. It is, I realized in time, entirely unclear who will prevail, the swells or the men with their lives tied to precious cargos. A similar vying exists between a family's realities and fantasies. Mommy and Daddy loved each other and married and had you, is the readymade creation myth, marked for replacement by more earthly observations: of two young people maybe frightened, maybe foolish, probably desperate, clinging to one another against choppy seas.

The paintings hung in different rooms, separate, another fantasy betrayed as they formed a common canvas. The family ended on the morning when my father was met in his office lobby with proof of an affair by divorce lawyers, professional converters of families into money. A final agreement sees both fingertips, only somewhat degraded by the oils of my younger story, this first tale of money and art. But how could it be, when money relishes in the world, and art aims to escape it? When they have their own shotgun wedding. The Backhuysen still hangs in the den that my father left long ago, the panicked men with their guns and cargos awaiting return to the market. Mary, holder of unbearable secrets, became herself an unbearable sight. She now breastfeeds moths in a hallway closet, wedged between worn-out sportcoats and a broken laser printer. A simple print of blossoming lilacs has taken her place above the living room sofa, a less grand if more honest testament to regenerative miracles.