

Author's Note

The following sample of ruminations, souvenirs, anecdotes, conversations, flights, captures, voices, and futile opinions has been written down to provide a view of an American artist who for nearly half of her life was an international one by reason of living abroad. That such a pattern of space and time is decisive in shaping late thoughts is indisputable. That it shapes the artist's inner vision and fundamental worth is of course absurd. Such a view can only apply to thirsty talents ever ready to soak up the colored inks of their peers no matter where they find them.

The other reason for the book is Max Ernst. An obsessive desire to talk of this very great man, to evoke our shared thirty-four years, to bring him into focus, to brush aside for a little the enigma that he has presented to most people, in short, to make him available and alive as I knew him to be. This, and the firm belief that only I can provide certain fundamental truths about us, have kept me happy in the telling of them.

Dorothea Tanning

Birthday

Birthday

I *Snow and Voices*

The snow was falling softly, a gentle white blanket covering the landscape. The voices of the children were heard in the distance, their laughter and shouts echoing through the air. The scene was peaceful and serene, a perfect winter day. The snow had stopped for a moment, allowing the children to play in the fresh powder. The sun was shining brightly, creating a beautiful contrast with the white snow. The children were running and jumping, their faces lit up with joy. The snow was falling again, a soft and steady rain of white. The children were still playing, their voices filling the air. The scene was a beautiful sight, a perfect winter day. The snow was falling softly, a gentle white blanket covering the landscape. The voices of the children were heard in the distance, their laughter and shouts echoing through the air. The scene was peaceful and serene, a perfect winter day. The snow had stopped for a moment, allowing the children to play in the fresh powder. The sun was shining brightly, creating a beautiful contrast with the white snow. The children were running and jumping, their faces lit up with joy. The snow was falling again, a soft and steady rain of white. The children were still playing, their voices filling the air. The scene was a beautiful sight, a perfect winter day.

Every second of our lives up to then, and before that and before that too, is when we met.

The prism of consecutive events: a great day or a failed one, a leap, a bound, a stumble, a gulp of patience to survive the wait; all are dropped beans on the forest path leading back to the beginning. The moments immediately preceding our first gaze weren't really more decisive than, say, a day twenty years before when he was perhaps composing with glee and with Tzara a dada manifesto, while I in my eleven-year-old optimism was trying on a bra which, receiving nothing, was as wrinkled as a fallen parachute on the breast of the earth.

So the beginning is an impossible place, as meaningless as that dot on my drawing in a class perspective lesson, the spot in the middle of the paper where all lines—roads, streets?—came together at a place called Infinity. Only, supposing out of curiosity you tried to go there, you'd never make it. The spot would have gone, would have streaked ahead, and you would have to start all over again. It was a trick not only of the eye but of fate itself, for the point was neither beginning nor end, just a stupid black dot that would retreat endlessly.

Now on this diagram of my own devising, the lines, instead of converging, open to reveal a middle distance where we contend, Max and I, with all kinds of ardent ferment: headlong risks crowned with quiet victories; prickly defeats relieved by entrancing vistas. Making contact with great space, my antennae go wild as, later, the dazzle dims to confusion. I make excuses. And yet the confusion may be a camouflage for bounty. Maybe what is coming in these pages is not a hash but a banquet. You needn't make excuses for putting on a banquet and inviting one and all. Going to all that trouble, rummaging in the finished days, the half-nights; remembering things unclearly, looking up dates when you're not sure—was the marriage really in 1946 when I could have sworn it was in 1948—

sitting alone with only a dictionary for company when you could be at a movie, a concert, a party, or just among friends, shaking the kaleidoscope.

This is definitely not the best start. It is sullen, on the defensive. I shouldn't get so worked up. All I want to do is to share everything—fears, fantasies, fundamentals. I just don't want to forget, for example, that nest of miniature newborn mice that the housekeeper and I found behind the sack of chicken feed one day when the mistral was blowing in that faraway barnyard and which she immediately clubbed to death (was it with a hoe or perhaps it was a broom) just as if they were bugs, beetles, tiny Kafka creations, while I turned away, feeling some sort of mammalian solidarity, a kind of awed bafflement at the reality of their perfect little pink bodies, the feet too minute for my eyes to count the amazing toes. And all for nothing. NOTHING.

But no. How trivial. I want to go very deep into this maze, my life, our life, and I start talking about mice! I could as easily mention the toad we found one morning in the garden with its hands chewed off, a feline amusement surely. What a way to die. We had greeted each other every day. Our toad. Our friend, on hand, in the same place, maybe glad to see us. Until that morning on our usual round. "Don't look!" Max said, and tried to turn me away. But I saw and must forget.

That was in Huismes, France. Le Pin Perdu, our second house and second garden, a steamy green tamed by paths and without chickens, a wise geometry. No wire fence to lay down the law, no foolish barnyard creatures—those came later—with their eternal pecking, strutting, dropping, mounting, egg laying. Their glassy eyes as they sat pushing out eggs, and the shocking voices of triumph that followed. Their long afternoon ruminations, sounds more terrifying than the roar of doom, expressions of their collective boredom, sounding on the bucolic life we strove to believe in, like inane reminders of eternity, and making us wonder if urban living wasn't preferable for such as we who couldn't kill a rabbit, but did not wince too much at taking it to the butcher to do the job.

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We will look at Sedona, Arizona, Huismes in Touraine, France, Seillans in France too, chainlinks of our years, far from New York and Paris. The innocence of country living had us in thrall: the crystal air, the charming weeds, the true mud. Even the power failures had their elegant side, with the lighting of candles and chimney lamps that were carried from room to room, pushing back the immensities that hung around the nights.

In Sedona we cooked outdoors on stones, flaying scrubby desert twigs to get a blaze. Playing house. The artist's way, he knows best, he knows the true values, the value of true mud. He can recognize poison turnip just like the friendly cowman down the road who, being a native, is authentic and wise from his leather cheeks right down to his scruffy boots and who, being a cowman could not possibly be a bore.

That was certainly a false start. It should introduce the middle distance, as promised. Mud, weeds, poison turnip indeed. Merely a dipping into an area of quagmire, one of Mother Nature's favorite haunts.

Still, it may not be all bad. Adventurous experiments need quagmires. They bubble and simmer like enzymes and make things happen. The fact is, then, if faced squarely, we are not at all pastoral, most of us mentioned here. Our beginnings are, at the very simplest, small town, more or less urban. We know fenced lawns, fresh house paint, town lanes supporting cars carrying the nondescript. So few of us ever know the true mud, the mean weeds, the furrows. But oh, how we know the collectivities.

The rural is collective too. Implacably garrulous as to voice, unashamed, in league with the maternal deity mentioned earlier. Friendly when possible. And irresistible, a magnet, a siren leading us out of towns and into vistas. So we wait, we in the city, we wait patiently until we find each other before we flee together. You do not do it alone, like Thoreau. You do not ask for that much solitude.

It is probably the tomorrow they announced yesterday. We are all on hand listening to the news. The fires, the slaughters, the economy, the coups. Discussions with the Russians. They are

never terminated, there will always be enough for the day after. Do not think too much about it, only give them a little attention, a kind of praying, like an answer to the muezzin's call with a rug-flop. So, watching the news of the world on TV is for everyone everywhere an urgent gravity, our prayer. We spin the dial instead of lighting a candle. Listening, listening, watching.

At first there was only that one picture, a self-portrait. It was a modest canvas by present-day standards. But it filled my New York studio, the apartment's back room, as if it had always been there. For one thing, it *was* the room; I had been struck, one day, by a fascinating array of doors—hall, kitchen, bathroom, studio—crowded together, soliciting my attention with their antic planes, light, shadows, imminent openings and shuttings. From there it was an easy leap to a dream of countless doors. Perhaps in a way it was a talisman for the things that were happening, an iteration of quiet event, line densities wrought in a crystal paperweight of time where nothing was expected to appear except the finished canvas and, later, a few snowflakes, for the season was Christmas 1942, and Max was my Christmas present.

It was snowing hard when he rang the doorbell. Choosing pictures for a show to be called *Thirty Women* (later *Thirty-One Women*), he was a willing emissary to the studios of a bouquet of pretty young painters who, besides being pretty, which they couldn't help, were also very serious about being artists.

"Please come in," I smiled, trying to say it as if to just anyone. He hesitated, stamping his feet on the doormat. "Oh, don't mind the wet," I added. "There are no rugs here." There wasn't much furniture either, or anything to justify the six rooms, front to back. We moved to the studio, a livelier place in any case, and there on an easel was the portrait, not quite finished. He looked while I tried not to. At last, "What do you call it?" he asked. "I really haven't a title." "Then you can call it *Birthday*." Just like that.

Something else draws his attention then, a chess photograph pinned over my drawing board. "Ah, you play chess!" He lifts the phrase like a question and then sets it down as fact, so that

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"Then let's have a game

We play. It has grown
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my yes is no more than an echo of some distant past exchange. "Then let's have a game," pause, "that is, if you have time."

We play. It has grown dark, stopped snowing. Utter silence pervades this room. My queen has been checked twice and is in very bad posture. Finally I lose. What else could I do under the circumstances? All thoughts of defense, counterattack and general strategy are crowded off the chessboard and I see only the room with two pieces in it, my space challenged, my face burning.

There is something voluptuous, close to the bone about chess. "Your game is promising. I could come back tomorrow, give you some pointers. . . ." So the next day and the next saw us playing frantic chess. Calycine layers of an old husk, decorum, kept me sitting in the prim chair instead of starved on the bed. Until a week went by and he came to stay.

It took only a few hours for him to move in. There was no discussion. It was as if he had found a house. Yes, I think I was his house. He lived in me; he decorated me; he watched over me. From one hour to the next my plain, echoing floor-through was packed like a series of boxes so that our voices, when all the moving and hefting was done, stayed close to us as indeed they had wanted to from the beginning. I watched, in an agreeable state of mild vertigo. It was above all so natural and right, I thought; the long wait on the station platform was rewarded by the arrival of the train, as one knew it would be, sooner or later. In no time at all, the last picture found a place by the door and the last mask was hung over my desk.

That we were both painters, visionaries, did not strike me at the time as anything but the happiest of coincidences. In fact, so unbelievable it was, so touched with a kind of graceful humor, that, weighing the imponderables, I told myself, yes, if it lasts three weeks it is still all right.

A glory of pictures expanding my rooms, making other worlds out of my walls. And as if that was not enough, the Hopi idols, Northwest Coast wolf-mask, New Guinea shields. There was a totem pole that just touched the ceiling. A little dog named Katchina came and sat trembling under the potlatch that stood