

Advance Praise

for

NOSTALGIA'S THREAD

"I believed—before reading these wonderful poems—that I knew a thing or two about nostalgia. About how 'a painting invites you to step into/its frame and complete the story...' Which Randall Freisinger does. And, as with all essential 'telling,' this collection reverberates in ways so wholly unanticipated that I hauled out the art books, enchanted, really, by the remarkable transformation that had just occurred."

—Jack Driscoll, author, *How Like an Angel*

"Randall Freisinger's beautiful suite of poems on—or really from—Norman Rockwell's iconic *Saturday Evening Post* covers is a moving interrogation of longing and loss. Together, the poems form a meditation on innocence, its reality and fantasy in personal and public life. It's a classic American subject, rendered here with passion and immediacy."

—Patricia Hampl, author, *The Florist's Daughter*

"The poem 'Freedom of Speech (1943)' alone is worth holding onto this small book forever... Other readers might say the same of any other poem here, each one a song to the tough, sweet, enjoyable, and painful battles of our lives. Read this. Freisinger's lyricism, narrative drive, and wit of language make sure we understand that this book is less an art critique than it is a literary tour de force."

—Robert Stewart, editor, *New Letters*

Nostalgia's Thread

Ten Poems on
Norman Rockwell Paintings

Randall R. Freisinger



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NOSTALGIA'S THREAD Randall R. Freisinger
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[UNCORRECTED ADVANCE SAMPLE]

*Anyone who can handle a needle convincingly can
make us see a thread which is not there.*

E. H. Gombrich,
Art and Illusion

*[B]elow the surface of even [Rockwell's] most charm-
ing children lie the anxieties and fears of the future.*

Thomas Hoving

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For my sons,
Ian and Quentin

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Freedom of Speech (1943)

*To live free a man must speak openly: gag him
and he becomes either servile or full of cankers.*

OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION, 1942

At the gallery, you watch a man pause
before one of Rockwell's famous Four Freedoms,
the centerpiece, your rented headphones tell you,
of this retrospective for and about
the American people. In the frame, a man,
by appearance common and perhaps unaccustomed
to speaking in public, has risen to his feet
at a small town meeting to say
what is on his mind to his fellow townspeople
who have turned their gaze on him with
obvious respect and affection.

And just as a painting invites you to step into
its frame and complete the story, so do those
who stand before a work of art in still and silent
witness. The man who has paused,

for example. Because of the time
of day and his careless choice of clothes, perhaps
he is recently retired. Perhaps he has come
to a point in his life when he feels invisible
to the rest of the hurly-burly world. You see
how he wears fatigue like an enlarged heart
on his sleeve, the sleeve he perhaps pressed
free of wrinkles this very morning
because habit is most of what remains
of a life once full and busy. Or say his wife
has recently died. For him, then, the painting
is less about speech than it is about grief,
about the way words have failed to convey
the pain in that swollen heart on his sleeve.

Perhaps the painting is about the longer and longer
pauses he suffers as one half-formed sentence
jostles against a nervous herd of others, the way
interstate traffic at day's end slows and narrows
to a single and inexplicable lane. For him,
the younger man in the painting who has risen
to speak might just as easily be saying nothing
at all, his tongue still tangled in the barbed wire
of memory while those waiting to listen
prompt him with expectant eyes.
You suspect this man in the gallery is thinking
that, if pictures are worth a thousand words,
then a single word can bear the burden of countless
pictures. If you were to tap him
on the shoulder, grab his sleeve, ask him to confirm
your imagined story, he would probably flee.

On the other hand, perhaps it's you with the heart
on your sleeve, and it's you who really needs
to tell someone—that stranger perhaps—
what you have come to believe about speech
and its exaggerated freedoms. You might begin
with that morning long ago when police in riot gear
surrounded you and others protesting
in front of the Student Union, how they loaded you
into buses from the local schools. You might tell
this stranger you are now holding by the sleeve
that you were all still children really, taught by home
and church and state to cultivate a conscience
and trust in freedom to speak freely.

You could tell him you knew other children
like you had just been murdered on another campus
and that others less like you were dying every day
in jungles and rice paddies from napalm and fire,
friendly or otherwise, for reasons that no one
seemed able clearly to explain. You could tell him
you had done your homework, that you knew war,
like human history itself, was ruled by the law
of inertia, that something moving keeps on
in an undeviating line unless disturbed
by an outside force. You wanted to be that force,
so you marched, you carried candles
at vigil after vigil, you chanted and sang, you stood
in the way of nightsticks and tear gas.
You inflated yourself to the point of bursting
with righteous sounds and furious rhetoric,
and when your hour of fret and strut had ended
and you were on your way to be booked

and printed, you and the others found yourselves bound
suddenly together by a vow of silence as the cop
in front of the bus schooled you in the latest law
of the land, the sacred right to say nothing.

The Runaway (1958)

In the restaurant, a man excuses himself
from his wife, his friends, his rack
of lamb, the drinks that have finally begun
to plane smooth the day's splintered edges.
In the lavatory, while his lame, diminished
stream delays its advent, he stares as he has
for years at the framed print hanging
above the urinal. How many times,
the man wonders, has he pissed brooding
beneath this same picture? Recalling
its steadfast presence through the deaths
of two friends, the near collapse of his marriage,
the slow-to-heal estrangement of one
of three children, he knows this simple
framed image has been one of the few constants
in a score of persistently shifting years.
He knew whose painting it was
and he also knew he was not supposed
to like it. Such sentimental looking back
to a past mostly mythologized, such a varnished

view of America: this is what so galled true
 connoisseurs of beauty. But he was moved
nevertheless, as if a neurosurgeon's probe
 had stumbled upon some uncharted declivity
in his brain, one that contained all his pleasures,
 real or imagined, from childhood.
Now, looking again at the picture's fixed
 moment, the man feels at once both exiled
from and pulled into the story: a towheaded boy
 and a cop sitting together in a diner,
talking, while the cook behind the counter
 leans close, smiling, listening to what
the boy and cop have to say. At the boy's feet,
 what little a runaway needs wrapped in a red
bandanna and tied to a stick. The narrative
 line, the man guesses, is supposed to be clear,
reassuring, but it leaves him feeling vaguely unsettled.
 Most of his life he's dreamed
about running. From family, from friends,
 from the angina-like press of routine
that often wakes him at night and leaves him
 frightened and barely able to breathe.
There in the dark he wonders what of value
 he might fit into a bundle. What destination
would set him free of his own querulous
 soliloquies, his mind's non-stop interrogations?
As a child he had come to the end of books
 that made him want to fade away
from his own constrained life and enter
 plots he knew must continue somewhere after the last
turned page. His bladder empty, he continues
 to stare at the wistful little vignette

in front of him. One voice urges him to go
back to his wife, his friends, and his now-cold
meal, and a second cajoles him to trade places
with the boy in the painting, to be young again,
to ride his thumb toward every selfish whim.

But a third, the one he knows best, asks
the kinds of questions that freeze a failed Romantic
like him in his tracks, as if he himself
were nothing but a static image captured in paint
as he stands before this urinal. Would the wedge
of apple pie that must lie on the counter in front
of the boy taste sweet or bitter? Would the glass
of milk before him be half full and cold, or warm
and half empty? Would the cop's eyes be distilled
with kindness or shifting and distant?

Who but himself will miss him if he chooses
to run away? Who but himself will love
him if he decides to stay?