

# The New Criterion

Poems November 1987

## Unfinished painting

by *Mary Jo Salter*

Dark son, whose face once shone like this,  
oiled from well within the skin  
of canvas, and those liquid eyes  
the brown of rootbeer underneath  
a crewcut's crown, just washed,

his body's gone unfinished now  
more than thirty years—blank tent  
of bathrobe like a choirboy's surplice  
over the cassock's stroke of color,  
a red pajama collar.

Drawn as if it might reveal  
the dotted hills of Rome, a drape  
behind him opens on a wall  
she'd painted with a roller once.  
Everything made at home—

she made the drapes, she made the boy,  
and then, pure joy, remade him in  
a pose to bear his mother's hope:  
the deep, three-quarter gaze; the tome  
he fingers like a pope.

Is this the History of Art  
he marks her place in, or—wait—  
that illustrated Brothers Grimm  
she'd given him, and shows she lived  
mostly by the heart?

Hard to sort out . . . She rarely put  
the final touch on anything  
when he was young. It seems that bringing  
the real boy up had taken time  
away from painting him

(no crime); she'd also failed to think  
of him—back then her only child—  
as truly done, and one child only,  
but marvelled as he altered like  
the light she painted by.

. . . Like, too, the image he's retained  
of the sun in her that now is set,  
her eyes that took him back, and in,  
squinting as he squirmed, appraising,  
praising him again,

so that, when sifting through her basement  
stacked with a dozen such false starts,  
and lifting this one, lighter than  
he thought it ought to be, to frame  
and hang in his apartment,

he saw in his flushed face how she'd  
recreated there what rose  
and fell in hers: the confidence  
she forfeited each time she dared  
think of an audience.

*Who* (she must have asked) *would care?*  
He does: that finished head conveys  
still to him how, sought in a crowd,  
a loved one stands apart—he's taller,  
comes in another shade.

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**Mary Jo Salter** is the author of *Open Shutters: Poems* (Knopf).

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 6 Number 3 , on page 38

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