

**Richard Foerster**

**Sitting for the Portraitist**

Belly, jowls, her sagging breasts  
pencilled, shaded, then erased.

His eyes are knives, she thinks,  
the way he slashes at the canvas.

Gravity's the least of it at fifty-five.  
Her posing naked's not an exercise

in pride but in humility. Frozen,  
crocodilian, some part of her's submerged,

escapes his capturing. She knows she must  
compose herself, focus on the vase of lilies

he's set across the room with its heady  
scent of cloves from Zanzibar. Oceans apart,

still she can see the anthers jiggle like pendants  
on a chandelier when a door opens onto dark

vistas, a susurrus of waves, the tidal heave  
of a lover's breath. Now she is adrift.

Oar-stroke. Brushstroke. The pollen's orange-  
yellow, like saffron robes on Buddhist monks . . .

so many minuscule immolations—  
her every thought a flame, martyred

for his cause, this torture when her mind  
re-moors and she suspects there's nothing

of her now he can't dissect. The blood-flow  
pulsing at her wrist, tiny seismic

spasms, tickles, her fear she'll need to sneeze.

The body's a jack-in-the-box, self-cranked.

It frightens her the lid can pop—*Surprise,*  
*you've got cancer, diabetes, HIV*—uncoiling

its garish face and ragged hair, a future  
no scumbling could ever soften, no reticence deny.

When at last she takes his hand to ease her  
from the sofa, what radiance could be more brutal?

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## What the Larch Tree Told Me

*after Antonio Ciseri*

Nights when I leave the window cracked  
a mere fissure but it's enough for the day's  
undecipherable hiss and spume to shiver through,

when wordlessness chills me into awareness the dark  
has seeped up all around me, soaked my sheets with worry,  
it's the larch I try to listen for, how it brunts the wind, its boughs

rabbled and whipped, bent back and brinked. A contortionist in  
every gale.  
How it casts wide its long arms. But tonight it says, *Better to yield  
than break.*  
No easy lesson if by yielding one can't see to mend what's yet  
more deeply broken.

*Tamarack, hackmatack*—my garden's axis mundi, like Trajan's  
chiseled column,  
my mainmast and yard—syllables an oracle might utter as cryptic  
comfort,  
a warning and guide. You dissembler of ever-green, I've watched  
you

surrender your needles each fall in molten showers of gold, stand  
bare-sticked and humbled, limbs hobbled with snow.  
*Yield?* Is this all to be threshed of the wind?

Nothing but passive gestures and this  
spiked crown you'd bid me  
likewise wear?

**Late Light**

Late light where I'm reading, then a flurry,  
like moths at the sill, and I see in the soot-

dark panes the wintery white of a beard, the flash-  
back of spectacles into the room. —And the man

I'm yet to know bares a glint of nothingness  
about his eyes: a shard, a shiv that plunges in,

leaving a bloodless wound, the long dull throb  
of awareness. Minutes, years press against the glass

between us; their rattling taps begin to melt and flow . . .  
no, not like tears, no, not like that at all.