

Steven Peterson

Matisse After the Liberation

I didn't want to tell. He was my father
And I his only daughter, Marguerite.
Just after my escape I wrote him letters
Describing tortures I received as "hard
Interrogation," sparing him the truth.
France was being liberated. Why say more?

It took three months that fall for me to heal,
If one can ever heal. I never cried.
My father taught me to endure. I did.
That final winter of the war I travelled
South to his house and studio near Nice.
I owed him that — to show him I survived.

He wasn't well. He painted in a wheelchair.
Each afternoon we talked into the dusk;
I finally told him all the Nazis did.
At first he didn't speak. As usual,
He spoke in paint — his colors now looked bruised
And soon he stopped his painting altogether.

He turned to paper cutouts he had fashioned
When I was young. His colors lived again.
He turned, surprisingly, to that new chapel
Designed with his own Stations of the Cross
Where people worshipped as he never could.
I may be wrong. His art was his own way.