

EXTRACT: LIZA DIMBLEBY

It is a large room.

It is a room she has been to before?

Yes, only then it was filled with enormous paintings – huge clotted fields, great Middle European rucks and fallows of earth cupped and ridged in heavy oil paint; ochre and black, Naples yellow in a fat sandy paste. There are pieces of straw in them and the tangled pencil lines of the poet, Celan, in the painter's seductive handwriting. In front of the paintings the painter had loomed, filling the space, commanding attention, himself tall and solid as his work, in black trousers and white shirt, alert and confident, genial and attentive. His hair black, in his prime, as he laid out his fields for viewing.

Once she had wanted to make paintings like this, large scale landscapes, that she could step inside, that might take her inside them. A landscape that you might enter in to, and walk around.

When she returns, this time, the walls of the room are empty. The light comes in from the curved glass roof. It is a safer place. A hall or school gymnasium, painted out white. Two hesitant lines of chairs have been laid out half way across the room. She sits down just in front of the chairs, on a space of varnished wooden floor. She sits crossed-legged, then kneels to one side and waits in silence, as she had done in years of school assemblies.

It is still. There are no paintings on the wall.

A small woman walks out. Her hair is thick and reddish, tied back in a single plait that reaches below her waist. Her face is solemn and set, grave and knowing. She is drawn in on herself, into the full intent of what she must do. She commands a quiet concentration.

In this white room, a small woman, standing straight, her long plait straight down her spine.

How does she appear?

She frowns. She does not smile. The woman stands, she walks with precision, across the empty space in front of the chairs. The woman sits down at a table. Elbows on the table, she leans forward and picks up thick grains of salt from the table surface with her index finger and lets them fall. She looks down, utterly absorbed by her actions, utterly precise. The salt falls. It crashes down.

The woman picks up a painting from the floor. It is a smallish painting, just the right size for this smallish woman to hold in her arms. The painting is a little wider than the woman, she holds it across herself, between her hands, it fills the space between her chin and the most prominent part of her ribcage. It is a house with a path running by it. The house is a country cottage, two stories, it has a fence outside and leaves, and a grassy path in front. It is an old fashioned, almost childlike painting, it is somehow familiar.

In her mother's bathroom there had hung a similar painting; a rural scene, a cottage and a fence and a path, only in that one there were children running past, and geese, and perhaps goslings. That had been a pale painting, a watercolour, perhaps a reproduction. It sat easily with the primary yellow walls and the cork tiles of the floor. The painting now held by the silent woman is darker, painted in oil, viridian and magenta, the hues of her own great grandfather's paintings from the 20's and 30's.

Viridian, magenta, and perhaps some sienna; cadmium red for balance.

The woman begins to speak. She speaks rhythmically, like a poem, looking down at the painting as she looked down at the small pile of salt, contained by her downward gaze:

Now I am in the painting, she says. Now I am on the street.

Now I am in the house, now I am on the path.

Now I am in the house.

She points, without looking up, and we see her there, walking through the painting.

She commands our belief and so performs the trick of changing scale and she is there inside the painting. She is walking along the path. She is in the house.

She is in the painting. She is in the house.