Just Looking: Paintings of Owen Merton

Kathleen Baker

'When [my father] wanted to study art...it was not easy for him to convince his people that that was really his vocation.' The Seven Storey Mountain

I.

Riwaka, 1908

I have begun now to feel the dark trees pulling the scene away from foreground and from past. A fence is evidence of waiting, the land is docile, trained but what of trees billowing up to the soft, soft unnoticeable clouds? Here is where I make a stand.

II.

Village Pool with Palms, 1924

You may have felt like this before: the world receding and yet so clearly there that you want to hold the limpness and the impetus together. I am in conflict and all the world poses for my own reflection.

Pieces of Home Owen Merton Paintings of 1910

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I.

At an Auction Sale, 1910

Lean closer.

Never underestimate
the power of your looking.

Distinguish slowly
the painted squares
as you stand upon the
tempered floor of reason.

The walls themselves
are not meant for notice,
but the floor beneath us breathes.

II.

The Second Hand Shop, Paris, 1910

My collection sings of waiting, a ripe time to feel the treasure; I let the darkness come, the stillness, and feel with hand and eye each gift's belonging. The piles weaken, merge; I remember every form and figure, every painted image brought within the confines of my home. III.

St. Ives, Barnoon Hill, 1910

Our view is all a rage of washed glass until a sad joy empties us from our names. Then each element is softer, and held together by a density of corners. Gentle people come to understand that we climb a long hill, rising.

IV.

St. Ives, 1910

Low houses huddle, patient and enduring; a boat will sit content upon the water; but you must attend to shadow.

Like wisped trees growing lanky from dark hulls, reflections live on calligraphic layers of riffles held secret by the sea.

This will be your love.

Kathleen Baker is a member of the International Thomas Merton Society and an avid poet. She works as associate professor in the Department of Geography at Western Michigan University, developing disease risk models for use in agriculture and the biological sciences.