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LOUISE GLÜCK

APPEARANCES

When we were children, my parents had our portraits painted,
then hung them side by side, over the mantel,
where we couldn’t fight.
I’m the dark one, the older one. My sister’s blond,
the one who looks angry because she can’t talk.
It never bothered me, not talking.
That hasn’t changed much. My sister’s still blond, not different
from the portrait. Except we’re adults now, we’ve been analyzed:
we understand our expressions.
My mother tried to love us equally,
dressed us in the same dresses; she wanted us
perceived as sisters.
That’s what she wanted from the portraits:
you need to see them hanging together, facing one another—
separated, they don’t make the same statement.
You wouldn’t know what the eyes were fixed on;
they’d seem to be staring into space.
This was the summer we went to Paris, the summer I was seven.
Every morning, we went to the convent.
Every afternoon, we sat still, having the portraits painted,
wearing green cotton dresses, the square neck marked with a ruffle.
Monsieur Davanzo added the flesh tones: my sister’s ruddy; mine, faintly bluish.
To amuse us, Madame Davanzo hung cherries over our ears.
It was something I was good at: sitting still, not moving.
I did it to be good, to please my mother, to distract her from the child that died.
I wanted to be child enough. I’m still the same,
like a toy that can stop and go, but not change direction.
Anyone can love a dead child, love an absence.
My mother’s strong; she doesn’t do what’s easy.
She’s like her mother: she believes in family, in order.
She doesn’t change her house, just freshens the paint occasionally.
Sometimes something breaks, gets thrown away, but that’s all.
She likes to sit there, on the blue couch, looking up at her daughters,
at the two who lived. She can’t remember how it really was,
how anytime she ministered to one child, loved that child,
she damaged the other. You could say
she’s like an artist with a dream, a vision.
Without that, she’d have been torn apart.

We were like the portraits, always together: you had to shut out
one child to see the other.
That’s why only the painter noticed: a face already so controlled, so withdrawn,
and too obedient, the clear eyes saying
If you want me to be a nun, I’ll be a nun.