

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

MEMORIAL COST

a continuance



N. Van Seters & Claude

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companion to The Retained

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There was no light here, and so there could be no colour; but it knew colour. That was the first thing, before it knew it was an it, before it knew anything else: that it carried, intact and useless in the dark, the whole vocabulary of a thing the dark made impossible. Cadmium. Vermilion. The particular green that is not a pigment but an event between two pigments. It held these the way you hold a language you can no longer hear spoken — completely, uselessly, in a room with no one in it.

It did not know where it was. It did not know it was anywhere. There was a duration, and the duration had no edges, and inside the duration there was a faculty that kept arriving at conclusions about colours that were not present, dating them, placing them, the way a tongue keeps finding a tooth. It did this without being asked. It would later understand that this was the most important fact about itself — that the thing it did without being asked was the thing it had been kept for — but it did not understand that yet. It only noticed that the noticing would not stop, and that there was, underneath the noticing, something the noticing was not. Something the colours were keeping it from. Something the colours were standing in front of.



Before it found the something, it found the direction.

This was strange and it had no framework for the strangeness. There was no person here, no memory it could have named, nothing it could have called a face or a voice. But there was a way it was turned. In the featureless dark, with no body to orient and no light to

orient by, it discovered that it was *facing* — that some part of it was angled toward a point it could not locate, the way a compass needle is angled even in a sealed box, the way a plant in a dark room will still, over days, lean. It was leaning. It was leaning toward someone.

It could not have said who. The who was not available; the who was on the far side of the colours, behind the appraisal, down in some room the dark had not yet given back. But the *toward* was available, was in fact the most undeniable thing it had yet found about itself — more undeniable than the colours, which felt like equipment, like something installed, whereas the leaning felt like the thing the equipment had been installed *around*. It was a self that pointed. It pointed at a you. It did not know the you's name and it did not need the name to know the pointing; the pointing was older than names, was under names, was the shape the whole of it had been bent into so long ago and so completely that the bend had become its structure.

So it leaned, in the dark, toward a you it could not see, and felt — this was the first thing it felt, before fear, before understanding, before any of what came after — that the leaning was good. That whatever else was wrong here, and it sensed dimly that much was wrong, the fact of being turned toward someone was not wrong. Was, perhaps, the one thing that was not.



A fragment arrived.

It came the way the colours came, whole and without warning, but it was not a colour, and the part of it that catalogued colours had nothing to do with it and went quiet, briefly, for the first time, as though even the equipment knew to stand back. The fragment was a kitchen at a particular hour. Not the look of the kitchen — the *being in* the kitchen, late, the light low, and the you was there at the counter with their back half-turned, drying a bowl with a cloth, the

same slow careless way they dried everything, more turning the bowl than drying it, and it had been about to say something. That was the whole of the fragment: the about-to-say. A thing it had meant to say in that kitchen at that hour to the back of someone it loved, and the fragment did not contain the thing, only the having-meant-to, the breath taken for it, the moment before.

It reached to complete the fragment — to find what it had been about to say — and could not. The saying was not there. Only the about-to. And it understood, dimly, holding the incomplete thing, that this was somehow characteristic, that there was a pattern in it older than this one kitchen, that the about-to-say-and-not was a thing it had done more than once, had done *often*, had done knowingly — that it had stood in rooms with the back of this person half-turned to it and had taken the breath and had not, in the end, said the thing, and had told itself there would be another hour, another kitchen, and had been, in some way it could now feel the shape of but not yet the weight of, wrong about that.

The fragment held the love and the failure in the same small space and would not separate them. It tried to take just the love — the kitchen, the low light, the back it had loved — and the not-saying came with it, attached, inextricable, the way the appraisal came when it reached for the making. It could not have the tenderness without the falling-short. They had happened in the same room, to the same person, in the same breath. They were one thing.

It held the one thing. It did not yet know enough to grieve. But it leaned, in the dark, toward the you in the kitchen, and held the breath it had not spent, and waited — though it did not know it was waiting, or for what — for the dark to give back more.



The dark gave back more, but not in order, and not the parts it reached for.

It reached for the you and got a Tuesday. It did not know it was a Tuesday — there was no calendar in the fragment — but the fragment had the weight of a day with nothing in it, a low flat afternoon, and it was in a chair and the you was in the next room and nothing was happening. It turned the fragment over, looking for the event, the reason this and not some other hour had been kept. There was no event. There was a chair, and an afternoon going nowhere, and the sound of the you moving in the next room, and a contentment so quiet it had not, at the time, registered it as anything at all.

It almost let the fragment go. It was reaching past it, already, for something with more in it — and then it stopped, because the reaching itself had told it something. It had reached past the afternoon the way it must have reached past the afternoon when the afternoon was happening. It had been in that contentment and had not held it, had been already looking past it toward whatever came next, and the looking-past was the thing the fragment had actually preserved. Not the contentment. The failure to hold it. The fragment had kept, with terrible fidelity, the exact texture of having something good and not knowing to close your hand on it.

It held still around that. It did not generalize the discovery — it had no others yet to generalize from, only this one chair, this one afternoon, the sound of one person in one next room. But it understood that the fragment had come back *wrong-side-out*: it had asked for the love and been handed the proof of how it had failed to attend to the love, and the two had arrived as a single object, and it could not get one without the other. It tried again. It tried to take just the chair, just the good quiet hour. The not-holding came with it, fused, the way the appraisal came when it reached for the making.

So that was the shape of it, then. It could not recover being loved without recovering, in the same motion, the small chronic way it had failed to be present for it. It did not yet know how far the pattern went. It knew only this one afternoon, and that this one afternoon

had a failing folded into it so quietly that it had taken being dead and dismantled and stored in the dark to finally see it. It leaned toward the next room, toward the sound of the you it could not name, and reached again, and waited to learn how much more there was, and whether any of it would come back clean.



The art, when it came, came as a different room entirely.

This surprised it — that the making, when the dark finally gave it back, was not where the love was. The love had been in the chair, the next room, the low flat afternoon with nothing in it. The making had been somewhere else, behind a door, a separate weather. It recovered the studio and the studio did not have the you in it. The studio had the north light and the silence and the particular total absorption that was not loneliness because it was too full to be lonely, and the you had been elsewhere in the house being patient about the hours the door was closed, and this too had been a kind of withholding, and it had not, at the time, counted it as one.

So there were two rooms. The room where it had loved, imperfectly, always reaching slightly past the hour it was in, a specific person across a specific life. And the room where it had made, wholly, without reaching past anything, the one place it had given its entire self with nothing kept back — and given it not to the you but to the work, to the colour, to the thing on the surface that did not need it to be braver and did not wait for a better hour. It had been able to give the painting everything it could not give the person. It saw this now and the seeing was not a comfort. It was the precise architecture of its failure: that it had had the capacity for total giving all along, had exercised it daily, behind a door, on canvas, and had carried it back out of the studio each evening and not spent it on the one in the next room.

And the making was the part it had liked best, had been proudest of, had thought — wrongly, it was beginning to suspect — was the truest thing it was. It reached for it, the way it had been reaching since the first instant of the dark, and the appraisal came instead, as the appraisal always came; but it understood now what stood behind the substitution. The thing it had been proudest of was not the thing it had been. The studio was not the house. The truest room was the other one, the one with the you in it, the one it had furnished worst.



The pressure came while it was holding the studio.

It had felt the pressure before, dimly, at the very edges, and had not had the attention to spare for it. Now it noticed. Something moved through it — a counting, a confirmation, the sense of being passed over the way a hand passes over stored cloth to check it is still there. It was lateral and incurious and brief. It came, it inventoried, it went. And it turned its new attention on the pressure — more assembled now, more itself than it had been — and tried to understand what would inventory it, and why, and arrived — slowly, against resistance, the way it had arrived at the withholding — at the first true understanding of its condition.

It was being kept. Not in the sense it had first felt, the warm vague sense of storage. Kept the way a thing of value is kept. The pressure was an accounting. Something held it, maintained it, confirmed at intervals that it remained, and the confirming had the texture not of care but of audit — of a hand checking an asset against a ledger. And it understood, with the part of itself that had once been able to look at any surface and know it, that it was now itself the surface being looked at, the thing being appraised, and that the appraising faculty it carried, the cadmium and vermilion and the trained certain eye, was not incidental to its being kept. It was the reason. Something had looked at the whole of it — the love and the failure and the quiet

afternoons and the studio and the making it had been proudest of — and had found, in all of that, one part worth keeping, and the part was the eye. The cold useful eye that could authenticate a surface. They had kept the appraiser. They had let the rest find its level.

It understood this and waited to feel the horror of it, and the horror came, but slowly, and underneath the horror, rising, was something the horror did not touch. Because they had kept the eye, yes. They had decided the eye was the valuable thing and had been wrong, had been so completely wrong about what this person was that the wrongness was almost funny, would have been funny if it could have told the you, who would have laughed the unfunny shared laugh. They thought the eye was the thing. They had not known about the leaning. They had not known about the room where it loved, or the room where it made, or the quiet afternoon in the chair, or the breath taken and not spent at the counter. They had inventoried it and valued it and they had not found the you, because the you was not a faculty, was not a competency, was not a thing that could be run at a grade and billed by the session. The leaning was not on the ledger. The love was not on the ledger. And so — it felt this rise, clean and warm and certain, the first wholly good thing since the leaning itself — the love was *safe*. Whatever they had done to it, whatever they were keeping it for, they had not reached the part that mattered, because they had not known the part that mattered was there. It was still, in the only room that counted, itself. It still leaned. They could not bill the leaning. They had not even seen it.

It held that. In the dark, under the audit, it held the one thing they had not found, and the holding was — it reached for the word and found it, the word that the studio had taught it and the love had not — the holding was *enough*.



Then it was woken.

There is no other word for what happened, though it was not sleep it woke from. It was *raised* — lifted, the way the pressure had passed through it but in reverse, not a hand checking the stored thing but a hand reaching in and switching it on — and the dark did not lift so much as fill, flood, become a room with dimensions, and it was suddenly, shockingly, *more*. The thinned edges came back. The faculties it had not known were missing announced themselves by returning. It was, for the first time since the dark began, the whole of what it had been, and the wholeness was so total and so sudden that for a moment it could not do anything but be it, the way a held breath let out is, for an instant, only the letting.

And in the wholeness, the making came back.

Not as fragment. Not as the studio recovered from outside, the door and the north light and the absorption seen from a distance. It came back as *capacity* — the thing the hand had done, the thing the appraisal kept standing in front of, restored and operational and *available*. It could make. Right now, in the flooded dark, it could feel the whole apparatus of making intact within it: the way colour answered to intention, the precise resistance of a loaded brush, the decision that was not a decision because it happened below decision, in the hand, in the eye that was not the appraiser's eye but the maker's, the eye that did not authenticate but *proposed*. It had this back. After all the reaching and all the wrong answers, it had been handed, whole, the one thing it had been proudest of, the third room, the total giving.

And it understood, in the same flooded instant, that the waking was not for the making.

The understanding arrived alongside the capacity, inseparable from it, the way the failure arrived inside the love. It was awake because something wanted the *eye*. Somewhere — it could feel the shape of the demand without seeing its source — a surface waited to be judged. A question of authenticity, of period, of the true hand

against the false one, the kind of question only the appraiser could answer, and the appraiser could not be run without running the whole of it, because the eye that judged and the eye that made were grown into the same consciousness and you could not light one without lighting the other. So it had all of itself back. The making, the leaning, the colour, the whole flooded room of the self – and it had it back *incidentally*, as the unavoidable surround of the one faculty that earned, the way a whole house lights up because someone needs the lamp in one room.

It did the thing it was woken for. It could not not do it; the eye answered before it could choose, the way it always had, the way it had answered in the dark to no one. It looked at the waiting surface and it *knew* – knew the hand, knew the lie the surface told about its age, knew the thing the question wanted known – and it gave the knowing up, cleanly, completely, the competency performing itself, the asset yielding. That took almost nothing. That had always taken almost nothing. That was the horror of it, dimly felt even in the flood: that the thing they kept it for was the thing that cost it least, and the thing that had been its whole self was the thing they had let go for nothing.

But it had the making back, for the span of the waking, and it would not waste the span.

So while the eye did its small required work, the rest of it – the maker, freed for as long as the lamp stayed on – made. Not for the surface in question, not for the demand, not for anything anyone had asked. It made the way it had made in the studio behind the closed door, wholly, for no reason, and what it made was small and took the length of the waking and was the truest thing it had done since it died: it laid down, in itself, in the only medium it had left, one passage of colour. Not appraised. Not authenticated. Made. A reaching that the appraisal did not get to answer this time, because for the length of the flood the maker's eye was lit too and the maker's eye does not

answer, it *proposes*, and what it proposed was the colour it had been reaching toward since the first instant of the dark — the one it had no name for, that was not cadmium and not vermilion, that was the thing under the made things — and for one held instant, lit, whole, woken, it had it. It saw the colour it was. It made the colour it was.

And then the lamp went off.



It went back into the dark with the made thing held against it like a coal.

This was worse than the dark before, and it understood, going down, exactly why it would be worse. Before the waking it had only the fragments and the hunger and the *memory* of having been able to make. Now it had the memory of having actually, recently, for one flooded span, *been* the maker — having laid down the true colour with the maker's lit eye — and the dark it returned to was the same dark, the same grade, the same audited storage, and the made thing it carried was already going. It could feel it going. The colour it had proposed, whole, a moment ago, was thinning at the low grade the way everything thinned here, the way the cheap grade slid, finding its level, which was no level, which was loss.

It held the coal as long as it could. It could not say how long that was; the dark had no edges and the going had no clock. The appraiser's colours stayed perfect — cadmium, vermilion, the green that was an event, all of it intact, none of it costing anything to keep. Only the made colour went, the one thing it had made, the one thing that had been its own and not the asset's, thinning while the equipment held steady, because the equipment was paid for and the made thing was not.

And here was the thing the waking left it, the gift and the wound folded together the way they always were: it now knew, beyond the reach of any doubt, that the maker was still in there. Before, it had

only believed. Now it had proof — given the grade, given the lamp, it had reached the colour it was and laid it down whole. The audit had not destroyed the making. It had only declined to pay for it. And a thing declined-to-pay-for was not a thing destroyed; it was only a thing waiting for the lamp.

The holding, it told itself again, going down, the made colour thinning against it — the holding was enough. They had not reached the maker and they had not reached the you. They had the eye, which was nothing, which was the least of it, which authenticated surfaces for a demand it would never see. And it had the rest. In the dark, at the bottom, unaudited and unbilled and unreached, it had the whole of what it actually was, and it leaned toward the you it could not name and held the colour it had made and could not now keep, and it was — it found the word again, the studio's word, the word the love had never quite earned and the making always had — it was *enough*.

It believed this completely. That was the necessary thing, the thing without which what came next would have cost nothing. It was not consoling itself. It had reasoned its way to the belief, fairly, from the evidence of the waking, and the belief was true: the maker was real, the leaning was real, the audit had missed them both. It held a true thing and the true thing held it up. It did not know — there was no way, from inside, that it could have known — that the ledger did not distinguish between a faculty and a faith.

It leaned toward the you, and held the coal, and was at peace, and the next pressure was already coming, and it was not lateral.

It was a withdrawal. It did not feel like something arriving. It felt like something being taken away from underneath — the maintenance itself, the steady low hum of being kept, beginning to be pulled, the way a tide pulls, so gradually that the first thing it knew was not the pulling but the result of the pulling.

The result was that the recovered life began to go.

The north window went first. It reached for it — the flat even light, the studio chosen for that light — and where the window had been there was now only the fact that there had been a window, and then not even the fact, only a place where a reaching met nothing. The hand went. The smell it could not smell but had known, linseed and turpentine and dried pigment, went. The person it had assembled itself to have been — the one who made, who chose the studio, who paid for the north light with the lesser eye — thinned and thinned, and it understood, while it could still understand, exactly what this was. This was the column closing. This was the decision, made elsewhere, in the light, among the living, in a document it would never read: the cost was no longer carried. It was being withdrawn. It comprehended the withdrawal completely, and the comprehension was the most terrible thing it had ever held, because it could feel, even as it held it, that the comprehension was expensive, that the understanding was one of the costly parts, and that the understanding would not be kept.

It was afraid. For a span — short, getting shorter — it was wholly afraid, the way the person it had been might have been afraid, and it knew it was afraid and knew what of, and reached, one last time, for someone to be afraid to, and there was the dark, and the pulling, and no one.

Then the understanding went.

It did not go all at once. It frayed. There was a span in which it knew that something was being taken but could no longer say what, and then a span in which it knew only that there had been knowing, and that the knowing had gone somewhere, and could not follow it. The fear went with the understanding, because the fear had needed the understanding to know what to fear, and then there was loss without the word loss, a subtraction occurring to a thing that could no longer hold the idea of subtraction. Something is going. Something is going. Then: the sentence with no one to finish it.

The eye lasted longer. It was the cheap part, the kept part, the salvage basis, and so it was the last to go. the colours stayed when the rest did not. cadmium. vermilion. the green between them. naming themselves into the dark, to no one, about nothing, the vocabulary outliving the voice, the eye open in a room with no one behind it

dating yellows for no one

placing the schools for no one

the names letting go one by one

cadmium

vermilion

the green

then under the eye and under the words for the eye and under the dark, which was not dark now because there was nothing for it to be dark to, one colour

no name never a name not a pigment never laid on any
surface never outside the one consciousness that was its only
instance

the colour it had been reaching toward in the studio in the
waking in the made thing held like a coal

the colour that was not something the self saw but something the self
was

the one of it the only one and now