

dark glasses

for Ron Woodall

The critics remarked on the mysterious depth in the pictures. They seem so simple, even childishly flat, but when you attend to them it is as if you were adjusting large precise binoculars opening up tiny and enormous gaps between nearer and more remote details. In spite of their enthusiasm, they were puzzled.

Twenty years in prison. For a single glance. That is what Hugo told the other prisoners, when he was out of solitary and could speak to them. And it was basically true. He had been arrested for looking impudently and with amusement at the president, so when the president said "get him out of here" his first reaction was to look at the bodyguards to see if they were armed. Of course they took this as a threat and not only beat him up but had him charged with a conspiracy to take one of their guns and turn it on the president. That had not been his intention, though later he wished it had been. The sentence was for a year. Fairly light said the judge, considering its potential gravity. But in prison Hugo's un-respectful glances got him into fights, and these got him into more charges — he was a big man and knew how to damage — and this led to more time in prison. Whenever he was due to be released something would happen and there would be another year or so. Until eventually twenty.

He got to know his two cells very well. There was the regular cell he shared with a changing crew of three other men, and there was the isolation cell where he spent about a third of his time, always the same one. In fact he preferred the isolation cell. Better company, he would say. Part of the company was all the people he had loved. Bev, Gordon, Barbara, Susanna. And while the only window was tiny, opaque, and ten feet up an un-climbable wall, it had a very fine bare wall covered in swirls of mould and marked with moving shadows from the bars on the little window. It was the wall opposite his bed, and he used to sit on his bed and stare at it. Eventually a scene would appear as if projected by a faint light, dim but somehow luminous. It was like the landscapes on the back of his closed lids as a boy when he could not get to sleep. A sort of wild mountainous parkland, with comforting woods and a richly coloured undergrowth. Hugo would look at the scene every morning before a meagre breakfast was shoved under the door and at the end of every afternoon. He would only look at it these two times, but it was with him throughout the day, together with his few special people. And when he was in the supposedly more pleasant cell with the three others — he was inside so long that the three others added up to twenty men — twice a day he would pretend that the wall behind his back was the wall in solitary and would make the landscapes appear there. Hugo's cellmates did not appreciate his turning away from them and staring at the wall any more than they would appreciate his piercing ironical gaze, which led to more fights, which led to more time.

The warden came to see him. "2358, you should be out in a month." To make sure it happened, he had to have a quiet month. He got some sunglasses and wore them at

all times, so no one could see where he was looking or who he was looking at. He taped a pinup to the wall beside his bunk and lay there staring at it but not really staring at it, because he was paying attention to the wall on all sides of it. The pinup would sort of disappear. Then they let him go.

On the outside, with a derisory sum of money accumulated from slave labour in the prison workshop over all these years, no job, and no one to greet him and give him somewhere to live. But he found a room, with smooth white walls, and sat down to consider his future. It was not going to be easy, and the main thing was not to go crazy. He could now roam the city freely, through the park and along the river, and he was certainly not going to deprive himself of that. But his sanity in jail had depended on the scenes on the wall, which would be harder here. No bare mould-covered concrete block walls in the apartment, let alone when he was walking outside. But he could still make things flat. He dug out the sunglasses he used during those last weeks in prison. Very carefully, he dabbed water on their inside surfaces, not so much that it covered everything and not so little that it retreated into little discrete blobs. Then he took a pen and just touched its tip to the water. He left the glasses face down to dry, leaving an intricate pattern of even darker tendrils curling around the opacity of the lenses. That afternoon he went out into the town to explore and get a sense of what work there might be.

The sun was bright, and looking through the glasses he could see what he needed to, constantly finding a way through the real town from between the squiggles. He crossed the park and went to the river, walked down it a mile or so, and came upon a

construction site. The guys there told him that they were picked up every morning at a certain corner, on the days that there was work for them, and paid half of the minimum wage for twelve hours of exhausting labour. No one asked their names or histories. He thanked the guys and went on. This was good news and bad. The work was there but it was barely a living and no one could do it for long. Especially not a forty-seven-year-old man with no background in the business. He headed back to his room to think about it.

He took a more direct route back, through downtown. He found himself in an area of art galleries. Mostly pretty trivial pretentious stuff, he thought. What people with too much money spend their money on. One gallery window fascinated him, though. It was a Jackson Pollock retrospective, twisting lines of many colours tangled around one another and an overall pattern that you both saw and did not see. Just the effect of the squiggles in my glasses, he thought. So he took them off, and the fascinating chaos was still there. He put them on again, and it got deeper and wilder. I could do that. It is what I have been imagining for years.

Hugo went back to his bare white room and made a promise to himself. He would somehow survive for two months and try to turn the images on the prison walls into pictures. If nothing came of that it would have to be the building site.

The first attempts were ludicrous failures. He wished he still had the concrete wall to comfort him. But during that last month in prison he did not have the wall and by shutting out the world and his obnoxious cellmates with his dark glasses he had

found that almost any surface could be filled with fascinating familiar unreal scenes. He put them on again and turned to the plain white wall. The dribbles on the glasses seemed to stand between him and the wall, making a space where mountains, waterfalls, valleys, isolated trees and whole forests could take their places separated from one another. Slowly he discovered how to transfer them to cheap clumsily stretched canvas. Sometimes with dark wiggling lines separating and tying together the parts of the scene, and more often leaving them out because he could just look at it and see where they were. And he felt that Bev, Gordon, Barbara and Susanna were behind the lines, staring invisibly through them.

The end of the second month was approaching, and he had not eaten for days. He gathered up four of the paintings that seemed somehow to work, three from the last ten days, threw a blanket over them, put them under his arm and headed down to the gallery he remembered.

He told the manager he had paintings to sell. The manager laughed, looked over his bifocals, took in Hugo's ragged clothes, and pointed to the door with a twist of his head. Hugo, angry and humiliated, ripped off the blanket, as a first step towards taking the paintings and breaking them over the manager's head. As he moved the blanket a ray of evening sunlight cut through the window and lit up the paintings. The manager gasped. Even a fat old man with bifocals, whose eyes saw price tags better than pictures, could tell. I will give you a show, as long as there are more of them and we get 50% of the take.

The manager set the prices. They all sold. Hugo had enough to live on for six months. He would spend every afternoon staring through his dark glasses at the white wall, finding subtle or dramatic scenes hovering between himself and the wall and trying to paint the way that they seemed to fall in front of, behind, or in between the inky lines. He meant to take them down to the gallery again, but someone who had bought one of the original lot discovered his address and came to see him. He should be asking more, and he should not be giving away anything like 50%. So he approached other galleries. Some of the owners had seen the original show and were happy to offer him wall space. He went with those that would give him most. One of those was visited by the honcho art critic, who told the yearling art critics, and soon there were articles, and articles reacting to articles, in the papers and the magazines.

Mysterious three dimensionality, that collapses to flatness when you least expect it. Depths that you can never see in the real world, scenes that are at once realistic and entirely abstract. A sense of comfort emanating from the frenzied turnings. And they look at you as you look at them, somehow. They all said the same things. But none of them could explain how it worked.