Sam Grieve

My Glasgow Girl

One of my earliest memories is of an oil painting, a painting that to this day hangs in my parents' home. It depicts a bucolic rural scene. The artist sat on a riverbank and painted what lay before her—an expanse of water, gray and glinting, smudged yellow reflections. Gilt trees, shaped like assegai blades, stand motionless on the far bank. A hill, riven in two by a track, rises toward a chalky sky. And if you look carefully, you can make out figures, wending their eternal way toward the water, bundles precarious on their heads. With all the sky above and the water below, you might imagine a picture in which the dominant palette is blue, but that is not so. This is an autumnal landscape, brown, umber, the color of the South African bush. Open your mouth and you might just taste the cold berg wind on your tongue.

* * *

The picture has always hung in my parents' living room. Throughout my life it has remained a constant, although the living room itself has metamorphosed beyond recognition. First it was part of a one-bedroom flat that lay in the shadow of Table

Mountain and sported seventies furniture in varying shades of mustard that harmonized perfectly with those painted poplar trees. From then the living room took up residence in other cities in South Africa, under the flight path in Johannesburg, overlooking a subtropical garden on the coast, back to Johannesburg to a small wisteria-clad house, and then, over the sea to England, where it encountered paneling and ghosts. From there the journey continued west, to a suburban American home of theatrical grandeur and walls so thin you could knock a hole in them with a hammer. Then on to Belgium, to a turreted Rapunzel house set in woods, then back to England, and thence to a flat in London. And soon the picture will be crated up again and begin that dark journey over the sea back to South Africa, where it was created.

* * *

The artist was my great-grandmother, and for the most part this is all I can tell you about it. I don't know where to find that hill, or the river. I know very little about my great-grandmother either. Her youngest son, my grandfather, died when my own father was fifteen, and by then my great-grandparents were already so long gone it was hard to believe they had ever existed at all. My father never met his grandparents and neither did his mother, although she retained snippets of information that were eventually passed on to me. My great-grandmother's name, I was informed, was Anne. She came from Glasgow and as a young woman had attended the Glasgow School of Art. She married my great-grandfather, a Presbyterian minister, and they relocated to Zululand. She had four sons. She was a landscape painter, particularly of the Drakensberg Mountains. And there you have it. Fifty-five words to summon an entire life.

* * *

I have always been interested in old things. I like to collect, feel the past in my hand. As a teenager, when my friends were papering their bedroom wall with Duran Duran posters and spraying Sun-In in their hair, I rode my bicycle along hedgerowed lanes tangled with blackberry and hawthorn to church halls holding bric-a-brac sales. I would slip in among the old ladies, shuffling

about in a fog of Yardley lavender soap and naphthalene, and rifle through the boxes behind the tables. I bought old books mainly, and sometimes—when I could afford it—old things too: a pair of earrings with tiny seed pearls set around a flat lozenge of opal, a tortoiseshell cigarette holder, a £2 watch that I suspected, with shivering delight, was gold. I rode home in twilight, my bicycle basket filled with teetering volumes of poetry, the leather as soft and tissuey as a bat's wing. The watch hung on my wrist; the air was filled with possibility.

Why was I like this? Was it being born in a country with a shallow past—ankle-deep in terms of my ancestry at least? I have no idea. All I do know is that old things stirred me. They held secrets. They were inscrutable sources of memory, of history, of journey.

* * *

With such a draw to the timeworn, perhaps it was inevitable that sooner or later my curiosity swung homeward, toward that familiar painting and the artist who made it. Unlike my other great-grandparents, who lived on in my mother's and surviving grandparents' minds, the story of Anne had not survived the crossing of the generations. I had no idea whether she liked to make her own jam, or jumped ship, or was related to Old King Cole, or signed her name with an X, or had accepted to marry a man who lived over the sea. What color was her hair? Her eyes? No photographs of her have survived, nor letters or diaries; nothing, in fact, bar her paintings. And yet, had she not been an artist, would I have been so interested in her? Probably not. Her paintings, you see, carried her into my world. Not only does her choice of subject say something about her, but the paintings are physical items that she envisioned, touched, labored over. They are like windows into her soul.

* * *

And so, in my early thirties, I began ghost hunting. I wanted to own one of her works. I contacted a couple of auctioneers in South Africa. Yes, her paintings did come up for sale occasionally, I was told, but despite leaving my name, nobody, to this day, has

contacted me. Not long after, I crossed the green in the village we lived in, in London, to buy a Sunday paper. It was a bright March day; battalions of indomitable daffodils lined my path. On that particular morning, a free DVD of a genealogical computer program was included in the paper. It enabled the user to build a family tree online. I set it up and before I knew it, Anne, who had until then been a cipher, a smudge, stepped out of the miasma. Her name, I discovered was not even Anne. It was Agnes.

I was hooked. Over the next few months, whenever a calm moment descended upon our household, I would sneak off to the sanctuary of my front room to search for her. One public record lead to another, occasionally with ease, more often with difficulty. It was like stumbling across an ancient path of stepping-stones in a stream. I would leap ahead but then be unable to locate the next foothold under the moss and silt. But some facts did emerge. Agnes was born in Edinburgh, and as a young girl had lived in Deptford, London, where her father practiced as a surgeon. By 1891 she was fifteen years old, and on the census she is listed as living at home in Glasgow and is a "painter of porcelain." It was the first piece of tangible information that separated her from her parents, that made her *her*, and seeing those words was oddly moving. At my parents' home is a selection of her decorated teacups, yellowed now with age, the glaze cracked in places, but still beautiful. Now, at last, I was able to summon her, this young woman at the turn of the last century, her hands flecked with paint, the darkness of a winter afternoon pressed against the windowpanes. She adjusts her feet, slipping them right out of her shoes. From the kitchen she can hear pans clattering, a cry of outrage from her youngest sister. She screws up her eyes, applies color to the side of a plain white china cup, and a rose begins to take form.

* * *

One thing was clear from my research. Agnes was a Scottish girl. Hers was a damp landscape of horizontal rain, and darkness, but also long summer nights, the sun barely submitting to the upward lift of the horizon. But she was also young at a time when Scotland was changing. The Glasgow School of Art, which Agnes attended, was celebrated for its enlightened approach to women.

The female students were energetic, highly creative, and finding their voices. They pushed the boundaries, both artistically and socially—many were active suffragettes. I have no direct evidence as to whether Agnes was one of these "Glasgow Girls" or not, but she would have attended the school in this period and borne witness to the creative and social energy that surrounded it.

But then her life changed immeasurably. Somewhere, somehow, when she was on the wrong side of her mid-twenties and probably beginning to feel the dust gathering, she met the man who was to become her husband. I have not found a marriage certificate yet for Agnes and George, so do not know whether they married in Scotland or in South Africa, but I do know that soon after the conclusion of the Second Boer War, Agnes, aged twenty-six or so, left her family and all that was familiar and sailed nearly 9,000 miles by sea to Zululand, South Africa.

It must have been an overwhelming experience to step off that boat into that strange country of heat and color and noise. Did she sit in her new home and continue to decorate teacups? Somehow it is hard to imagine it. She was a reverend's wife now, and moreover, she started having babies, producing four sons in fairly quick succession. What I do know is that at some point in her mid-thirties, she laced up her boots and headed west a hundred miles or so, to the mountains the Zulu people call uKhahlamba. She would paint them on and off for the next fifteen years.

* * *

In the early twentieth century, the Drakensberg Mountains (or *uKhahlamba*, "the Barrier of Spears," as they are named by the Zulu), were just being discovered by the European mountaineering community. Remote and inaccessible, it was only after the end of the Boer War that climbers began heading out to tackle the peaks. Weather conditions could change rapidly, there were few or no places to stay in the wilderness, and climbers had to camp in tents or in the numerous sandstone caves. Even accessing the mountains was a challenge: the few roads that approached them were rough tracks subject to deterioration. But the mountains beckoned. They possessed an unreal mythical beauty, with their carved battlements that soared eleven thousand feet into the blue. While the upper slopes were covered in a pelt of tussocky yellow grass, or

smothered in snow in winter, the lower were a wonderland of wildflowers, native pines, and cascading mountain streams.

The mountains felt empty, but they had not always been so. For thousands of years the San people had lived on the slopes, hunter-gathering, but also filling innumerable caverns with their exquisite, joyful paintings. The images of animals—from the preponderant sketchings of eland to elephants, lions, and even flying ants—are marvels, but it is the depictions of the people hunting, cooking, dancing, playing, caring for each other, and engaging in sacred ceremonies that are the poignant reminders of rich lives once lived. To enter those caves is to trespass, and perhaps this was even more pronounced at the turn of the twentieth century, when the last of the San in that region had died out a mere thirty years prior. Hiking in those mountains, among these painted memories, felt sacred; the visitor was not only reminded of his or her own inescapable mortality, but many commented that when faced with those majestic peaks and valleys, they were filled with an exultant, overwhelming awe. It was like discovering the land of the gods.

* * *

Is that why Agnes was drawn toward them? She was a vicar's wife; could she not have found God at home? In the missionary work one assumes she must have shared? The care of the church, the bake sales, Sunday school. Probably she did, but these were not the things she recorded through her painting; it was those far summits that called her. I shut my eyes, reel her in, this redoubtable middle-aged Scotswoman, waking before the sun came up to tramp into the valley with her easel. The stamp of her boots on the track, skirts flapping around her legs, birdsong raucous in the conifers, always on the lookout for snakes. Was she courageous enough to go alone? Or was she with her husband? Or another artist? What I think I may understand is how she responded to those mountains. How painting them was like trying to capture the ineffable, the eternal—they reiterated her place in the firmament. And while she may not be visible, in the paintings, she is omnipresent. The view has been sifted through her eyes.

* * *

Over the next few years, as my Internet searches continued and the net's tentacular reach grew, more nuggets emerged. One afternoon, while looking at a 2009 exhibition by the Tatham Gallery, Natal, I recognized one of my great-grandmother's paintings, the sunlit parapets of the mountains, sky at dusk. The picture is there online, hanging in a gallery in South Africa, but what is peculiar is that the artist's name is given as Alice, although my grandfather's name follows in parentheses, and there is no other information about her. Anne, Agnes, Alice. Why this obfuscation? This double life?

* * *

A couple more years fly by. I move to America. And on a day when the ground is covered with a snow so thick and burnished it resembles royal icing, I run my usual Internet search. And like a hand touching down from above, I get a hit. There, on a secondhand-book website, I come across a book: *The Glorious Drakensberg Mountains of Natal*. There is no picture. The book costs $50 and is located in Washington, D.C. I press in my credit card details with quivering fingers, buy it. A few days later a package arrives. I cannot open it at first; it sits on the kitchen table among the detritus of our family life: a pile of mail, a box of crackers, a dirty mug my husband forgot to put in the sink, the dog's lead. It is like getting a package from a ghost. For a whole day I leave it, and then finally, when the house is quiet and I am utterly alone, I take out a knife and sever the tape. A book emerges, soft-card stitched covers, laid-in postcards—twelve copies of Agnes's oils, from various locations in the Drakensberg. I drag out a map. With my finger I can trace her journey. I can hold up her paintings, with their muted palettes, their ethereal illuminated peaks. But I cannot see her. She is standing where I am standing as I view these images. We occupy the same space, disentanglement is impossible.

* * *

I do possess a picture of George, the reverend, her husband. A tall, long-lipped, white-haired man, softer in expression than I might have envisioned. I also have a picture of her four sons as

young boys, standing in descending height order in Graham kilts on a bridge somewhere in Natal. It is a poignant and frustrating image. Agnes is there, I sense, standing just out of reach of the lens. She is behind the photographer or off to the side. Was she telling her sons to stand still? To behave themselves? Or was she just looking at them, her four magnificent boys, and marveling at what she had done? Time has given me a vantage point she could never have on that day. One hundred years on, I know what lies ahead for those brothers, how their lives will unfurl. That one will be immensely successful, the second utterly respectable; that the third will die young in a suspicious accident, and the fourth, the youngest, my grandfather, will decay away into a life of alcoholism and horror. And so the picture pivots between being beautiful and terrible. It reflects a mother's pride, her love for her children, her sense of history and family and blood, but for those of us looking at it a century later, it speaks also of tragedy, knee-buckling despair.

* * *

As a writer, the Internet is one of my best friends, but also my worst enemy. Need to know the name of an obscure flower, or what type of money was used when, or when Charles the Fair married, and voilà, it is all there at the touch of my fingertips. I can sit in my bedroom and explore the whole world, swoop in like an angel and stand invisible on a street in another country. It is an omnipotent feeling, but also a false one. Not everything is discoverable, and the dead, most of all, are an elusive quarry. We must sew them together out of fragments, if anything at all. Each new discovery arrives like a gift, and sometimes I suspect I am being toyed with. That they only reveal to us what we need to know.

A few weeks ago, a search churned out another snippet in the life of Agnes. A newspaper cutting from Glasgow, 1928. A Mrs. G is exhibiting her South African landscapes in the city. The exhibition receives great reviews—the artist, the article mentions, had attended the Glasgow School of Art. And she works under the name Joncleur.

I am sitting at the kitchen table with my husband, drinking a cup of tea. I laugh.

"What is it?" asks my husband.

"My great-grandmother," I tell him. "It seems she had another pseudonym."

Joncleur. It means nothing. Or it means "juggler." A juggler or a clown. I look around. At my children's homework, the dog hair floating like seaweed around the corners, my to-do list tacked on the notice board, the bulbs I have been meaning to plant for a month still on the counter.

A juggler. Like me, I think. Living as a stranger in strange land. Being a wife. A mother. Struggling to be an artist.

* * *

Agnes, Alice, Joncleur. She is like a chimera. A mirage. She is just out of reach and yet forever beyond me. How much easier it will be for our descendants, I muse, how much enjoyment they will gain as they reel us in, page after page of our cyber litter—our selfies, Facebook profiles, texts, our e-mails, videos, our criminal records, our house purchases, our YouTube videos of cats and babies tumbling out of swings. But inevitably they, too, will be disillusioned, perhaps even more so. We will be names attached to the files, which our curious relatives will examine in the hope they might understand us, really *get* us. But all they will find is shadow puppetry. Our essential selves will be gone.

Agnes left no profile for me to uncover. But she made and sold things, things that moved her, things that traveled out into the world, and those things have left a trace, a wake. Like the San paintings in those quiet caves, her work lives on in people's homes in South Africa, Scotland, Australia, perhaps loved, perhaps ignored. Her personal interpretations of the glorious.

Alice, Agnes, Joncleur. Painter, mother, missionary's wife. She is out there. I pour myself a cup of Earl Grey, open my laptop. I sense her pushing against the veil. Show yourself, I challenge her. Throw me a bone. But all I get in return is silence. I sip my tea. I can wait. Such are the games she plays, my teasing, paint-smudged Glasgow girl.

—

Sam Grieve graduated from Brown University and gained her MA in English from King's College, London. She worked initially as a bookseller, and then moved into the antiquarian book business. Originally from Cape Town,

South Africa, she now lives in Connecticut with her husband and two sons. Her work is forthcoming or has recently appeared in 10,000 Tons Of Black Ink, A cappella Zoo, Amarillo Bay, Cactus Heart, Crack the Spine, Daily Science Fiction, Forge, Grey Sparrow, PANK, Qwerty, Saint Ann's Review, Sanskrit, Sierra Nevada Review, Silk Road Journal, Southern Indiana Review, Storyscape, and Wild Violet.