

Pentimento

To revive the marriage, we
take field trips to art museums,
listen to experts expound
 genre and technique, explain new terms.
The art historian traced in air
over the canvas the place it was—
a ghost sloop in the ragged sea
 sheered beneath blue foam,
white spray. Time raised
the image from underneath,
a memory in oil blooming
 like invisible ink. Not a mistake,
she insists, as if mistakes
don't haunt even the most
pious canvases. A choice,
 a change of temperament,
a sudden sway angling away
from first course. We listen
to what she says about
 century old pigments, chemical chains
loosening, dissolving, lifting
to light and air. Cyan, titanium,
umber fades to light, molecules
 blending oxygen and time.

Only the impulse remains—
first thought that spurred action,
creation, elevation—the human
penchant for shifting too strong to fight.
What is permanent anyway?
The Civil War soldier turned farmer
swings a scythe against hay,
the vision of those fatal blades
biting the flesh of the past.
His face is shadowed
and if there is repentance
only the painter knew for sure—
his pent-up memento,
leaching through layers,
the underdrawing undoing
the desired scene. And this one—
a farm yard with its dusty barn,
how you study the lively chicken
while a phantom woman rises
beneath the color of dirt
in carbon black, pencil lines.
Who can say what she carried beneath
that layer of paint. Who can know
what she sacrificed to stay there.