

Richard Scott //
Woman Peeling Turnips; A Portrait of my Father
After Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge

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1

Woman Peeling Turnips – anti-rococo, anti-narrative, anti-intellectual – I insert myself into it.

My eyes have a kind of psychic vision with which I see the little ghosts of doubt, the draft smears of vegetables, her shifting apron.

The angle of a knife directs me into darkness.

Some ghost particles of varnish and lead are popping out and pressing themselves onto your lips. Are these quantifiable feelings?

So giddy, I'm spun back to the kitchen with women – Joan, Janette, Rhona, Linda, Hilary, Olive – singing while we peel and kneed and pat; a near-absence of men.

Can it be that my fingers are a little damp from vegetable sucrose now and the little curly-wurly skins are gathered at my feet?

Pinking up and bone-bright, they bob in the bowl of water. The peeled little turnips, flayed and raw and bobbing – and daddy raging behind the door.

2

What is it about these difficult men that get into my thoughts and expand because things discolour, nuance.

Such a sweet little face – a bit rouged and rhyming with coppers. Her thoughts, hermetic, travelling into the off-canvas world.

In the darkness there is my daddy, punctate-man, playing on the dirt floor – rolling a neep like a cannonball.

Monotone contours on the shining face, a little trail of red about this meat cleaver – prismatic innuendos of so much violence.

I am very tired of all these men who say they love me only their love is about making my body do things like rack with tears or get onto all fours.

You have such a sweet little face daddy, pale and red-cheeked – rhyming with a little of that dried blood.

The boy's body goes ragged when grabbed – he is not afraid of you but he is crying.

Your skin crumbles up all lace-like.

3

The flayed and bleeding flesh. The tumbling bodies upended into the molten furnaces. The raped bodies stacked on saddles on horses. The stretched flesh. The broken flesh. The lanced flesh. The eyes rolling upwards in pain or knowledge. The mouths of the men shouting then gurning. The fingers that are coming for you through the transparent fourth wall. The queer and arrowed flesh. Small, mostly sepia and saccharine genre painting, *O Woman Peeling Turnips* – you are a kind of salvation!

4

Maybe these are wild winter radishes, builder's coin, petit oases in clay.

I implore you turnip show yourself to me was a kind of Grecian line.

Albino aliens, tuber'd stowaway pips, so many leagues away from your familiar loams.

If I remember anything about being in the womb it is the shades of light – pinks and peaches filtering through – O the imagination of the poet who lies nostalgically!

Not phallic but still a little phallic, the turnip is being worshiped with the knife and I feel the wound.

Well-boiled turnips make good soup, should we read more into it?

This painting is not a still life, but it has still life elements to it – pumpkin, copper pans, turnips, the knives.

Tubers have connotations – bulbus and tapering. I form a pattern of radiating diagonals.

These turnips are transitional objects – they are not-her, they are not-me.

You have been digging up all these rooted things and placing them into the light.

Woman Peeling Turnips, are you castrating me?

5

You slapped me because you thought I'd shaved my chest. You told me I was only good for something if I made you proud.

When you read someone writing about their daddy do you think poor them or poor me for having to read this?

The space behind us, this shadowy kitchenette, is formed by neural lag. We are the afterimage. She is the distortion.

I don't want to have a son. Even the thought of giving birth to a poem is too much.

Turnips are like little bodies sometimes with wiry hairs and worn patches and sometimes a double root like legs or arms. A little vegetable doll, smooth, warmed when held.

I want to live stereoscopically!

Can you apologise to me because I think I might need it.

6

Funny how things in nature often look like other things in nature – bronchioles like the aerial mouth of a river, fungi spores like flashing and wired synapses.

Chardin, this painting was key in your self-individuation.

The highlights of this canvas are starched apron, cap, a little bit of lace, sclera, the flank of a rapa and/or root – where the sepia has been rubbed away underneath to illuminate.

O Chardin, you are illuminating the darkness and some of the darkness is within me, this rhetoric.

Her cap which demarcates the space for psychology. I am beginning to look a lot like you daddy.

A son is the epitome. A word is the epitome.

I slice the soft and warm turnips and steam hits my mouth a little bit.

Vision is my speculative structure linking disparate points, her, in spacetime, not-her.

Funny how every word is a metaphor because turnip is not a turnip.

I am learning and inhabiting a lot of already known things. I am information gathering.

7

So many half-rhymes: the pumpkin, her lap, bowls, pans, the bestiary of bumpy and clotted turnips, the hemispherical chopping block, her thoughts, her lace cap which is a baking powder white and fizzing!

She is looking to the right of the canvas, which is to her left; there is a whole world out there – feudalism and the beginnings of revolution in every kitchen.

She is trans-dimensional! X-ray her and she is shifting like you are closing one eye and then opening it, depths and averages, and your dad is saying *You'll go blind!*

We are students of shadow and the phenomenal differences.

A daddy and a son are a kind of Ouroboros. A thumb is a replacement for the paternal body. A transitional object is a replacement for the thumb. A dick is a replacement for the transitional object. You get the idea . . .

Chardin was branching out by drawing people but what about permissions – a woman is not a knife. Chardin, you are caught paint-handed!

O the somatic safety of a lap! Full of revolution but I am trying to get back to you daddy.

I want to live in a post-confessional framework!

The quantum mind is making the shadows behind her deepen and burn with a bright darkness. I cannot see the candle, light-giving and nourishing, but it is there. I am lighting it with my thoughts.

Deep time is in effect here.

When I am sucking you off it is because I am no longer part of the paternal body and I am mourning that with my mouth and your dick.

I am caught poem-handed.

8

Hickory. Beige. Umber. Taupe. Russet. Chestnut. Sepia. Faun. All these browns ground up and bleeding.

My daddy's hands under the water peeling back my stitched-up foreskin – this itching aching and something dissolving.

What kind of brown is the brown of dried blood? What prismatic?

He does not know if his father loved him but he cleaned the wound after that sensitive operation, applied a translucent ointment – $C_{15}H_{15}N$.

The peeled flesh of my penis raw; scabbed ribbons running up the shaft. The manipulation of these transitional objects. The turnips are her art. She is mid-making.

He always talks about how his work costs him a great deal.

Writing poetry can take your skin off.

O this dumb turnip between my legs with so much ancestry and so much shame.

Her hands raw like a florist's in the turnip water and wrinkled-up.

My body is my daddy's poem, but he cannot have my mind. There is another candle being lit.
Another knife in the deep pocket of her smock which is also red.

Not all objects are symbols, I caution you.

I am on the butcher' block, my entire body, and the cleaver has fallen.

9

We don't know the names of a lot of people who have died and were or were not painted.
Servants, slaves, scullery maids, prisoners, homosexuals, women.

Did he idealise her face? Fruited cheeks, coy lips, the crisp and cutting angle of a lobal
shadow.

Time peels intention and injustice away like a rind. She was his maid.

Formally her figure exists solely to utilise the still life objects but the sore and bothered mind
rushes in to rescue and solidify her and I'm sorry.

The turnips do not belong to you any more Chardin. They are not your complex
carbohydrates.

She is the artist, a sculptor. Making each round and sweet and tapering and bumpy object so
beautiful.

Am I as un-self-aware as Chardin? Daddy, shifting and becoming, are you my father or my
poem?

O to write a poem as practised and as beautiful as her vegetable sculptures.

The quantum mind is as still and useless as the cleaver stuck in bloodied wood. A hovering
and blunted violence.

Did he even say *s'il vous plait* the day he came down to the kitchen with his easel and
palette?

Such a stillness and creativity, photons, to this edible arrangement.

The varnish, sandarac and spirit, crackles. Inauthenticity blooms inside the mind of the viewer.

In response to her neither sadness or joy, mirror neurons are firing.

My daddy wanted me and all I wanted was to escape. I am stepping inside the pumpkin at midnight and am off into the dangerous world of men.

These turnips, this pumpkin, are transitional objects too; they are not-her, they are not-me.

I am my daddy's not-me. I want to release my daddy from this poem but I don't know how.

Rectangular repository of primordial queerness and grainy. Craquelure. She is performing transcranial magnetic stimulation on me.

Axons, fibres are connecting all of these still life objects and us.

The grandmother figure moves in the subdued shadows and predominantly browns. She is on her way.

My pineal gland is turnip-shaped. I have one foot outside of the kitchen.

I am pricking over and poled. I am iron filings bristling. My hormones are replaced with sucrose and phytonutrients. We are in the ambiguous plane of being and experiential – inferior frontal and superior.

I am the son you wanted, only queered. The turnip hits a rock in the soil and forks beautifully. Brighter than sepia is the internal and somatic firing.

I have a turnip for a third eye. Nothing is sudden or jarring. I peer back into the kitchen with industrious longing.

I had this operation to make me like other boys, anatomically, but I don't think I ever really healed.

How can we understand this brown and dirty space? I am always feeling unclean, short circuit, in the pit of me.

Chardin painted his possessions.

She is resonant. Turnip scrapings caught in the hem of her red skirt which might be rayon, might be linen.

Energy and matter crystallise in her slight slope, this momentary breather in all our works.
Her physics is very beautiful.

I find myself in front her in Munich. I find myself in front of her in Washington. I find myself
in front of her on Google images.

Not even the still life painting can be said to own its objects.

Happiness does not exist just the contentment of this painted pause.

Can a copy, this cartoon, be authentic? Is colours and disturbances on the magnetic resonance
image.

She is a kind of invader, a queer colonist wearing the colour of blood.

A quantum burst of neurons, pentatonic and tonal, transforms her to hopeful and bright –
hewn out of all this grubbiness.

I am a scale played and ticking over by such arch pigmentation. Chardin, was she a whole
kind of woman, actual, or in memoriam?

12

Scab-coloured kitchenette or courtyard where the peeling takes place, I am walking in the
gallery of my mind towards you.

Add to this rectangular space the interior untouchable spaces of her mind.

Place a smoky quartz crystal over my third eye, I want to see further into this.

Time deepens through the canvas. I feel the slippages of ancestry and inheritance. A
squeaking shoe, a clicking heel in the art gallery.

She had to say *Yes* to this sitting, *Oui Monsieur Chardin*, it was her job to peel.

I am a cross section drawing of igneous rock and magma. What lies beneath the dirt of the
kitchen's dirt floor – all those radiant browns – the brown pencil sharpened and ready.

But you cannot paint her thoughts, she is free from the confines of your art; she guards
against you Chardin with her erect knife.

My daddy's best poem is my dick.

I had to be born but I am reborn in her knife.

My body is a lens through which you can see all of this. Time is the brightest and burning
brown, this crystallising, these enflamed pigments!

She moves through my subconscious untangling, unpeeling the trauma of being born to a straight man – curly and wet skin coming off in white ribbons.

The rind of me, these turnips peelings, a kind of artefact.

13

My grandmother Olive was a maid in a big house in Kent. Am I my daddy's transitional object? To help him move away from her?

Ideas, like vitamins, are close to the skin.

She was a kind of idea of a woman, peeling neeps and tatties for his tea, in the half-light of a candle-lit cob house.

Her lips are moving in song or in prayer.

Some days I feel as if every good part of me is discarded somewhere on a dirt floor, these casings, this skin.

If someone you love dies are you always then painting their face?

The virtuous keep quiet – believe and obey – do not argue against. Is this what Chardin painted into her?

Paring knife, cleaver, these are the instruments of separation – differently shaped and shining. How can I cut you out of me daddy?

She'd only say *I love you* to my daddy after three sherries and prayer.

The poet's eye colonises the father's body.

I can never make you proud.

So, what do we do then with this pause, this still, this hiatus?

Chardin's daddy made billiard tables – filigreed legs of oak leaves and acorns – unreal forest.

Disconnect!

14

You will yourself be a Chardin, wrote Proust. He thought that the viewer falling in love with objects and genre scenes became, through looking, inseparable from Chardin who was in love with objects and genre scenes and looking so intensely.

Things are slipping, becoming molten, fluxional.

What is it about these difficult men that get into my thoughts and expand because things discolour, nuance.

Proust saw a woman filled with the past. What am I filled with?

I don't think I love myself very well Daddy because you were distant and difficult and raging and anxious. A livid genre scene of a father.

She, her off-canvas look, implies suspension – but for how long?

The turnip dangles precariously. I grew up in this space of dreaming. This queerness. I wanted to be elsewhere.

She has punctured my space – her knife, her gaze. She is looking into me.

The water, greenish glaze, evaporates into the air of the kitchenette.

She sees me and I am nothing. I did not make you proud so I am nothing. I am separate from you so I am nothing.

Chardin, are you my daddy?

All this talking only to unearth a void, soil-scented emptiness, the smell after digging. Such disappointment.

How long can we be in this moment? She is serious but distracted – a poet's mantle – a narcissist dreaming.

This is the negative hallucinatory space. I am so lost.

None of you witnessed the empty tears which were a kind of varnish to the face.

15

The baskets of lemons, the bright and marmalade-coloured lobsters, the wilting tulips which are lifting up their variegated petals like undergarments, the roses which are like little pale fists, the wet-look oysters, the big fish hanging up on a hook looking like a kind of ghost, the bird nailed through its beak to a wall, the green plum, the freckled apricot all long for this kind of unpeeling, this forensic theorising, this end to loneliness, this unanswerable questioning.

Things in the gallery are seen and not seen – abandoned becoming false perceptual experience – a shifting and split phenomenon – still becoming dead.

The handle separates itself from the knife with an unbearable snap and such a sigh.

16

Turnips are flushing, impossibly, a kind of skin-pink in this pause.

The brown shadows are a consciousness holding all these ideas. Suspension is a shared cortex.

I don't want to speak for her. The theory of her mind is my pressing myself into it and I am sorry.

Daddy I am reaching across the demarked space to you – my thoughts are quantum and your hand is suddenly there and open.

Silence is visible in the eighteenth century.

This pause evokes deep time. I am already dead. No one will ever paint me.

Her face is becoming my daddy's face. Her hands are becoming my daddy's hands. These turnips are becoming my body, sucrose to cytoplasm, my scabbed penis.

She is peeling. She is cutting. She is sculpting. She is making something beautiful out of the ugliest and most scarred part of me.

I am not virtuous. I do not keep quiet.

It is the expression of what was most intimate in his life and of things in their most profound aspect, and so it addresses our life, comes to touch upon it, slowly inclining us towards things and bringing us closer to the heart of them.

My heart is a genre scene set in aspic. My heart is a knife.

17

Soon, she will go back to work – this continuing on, this preparation, this unravelling – is all there is.

I grew up in this space of dreaming and longing – O for a little queerness in this kitchenette!

Or she will not go back to work, ever – this pause, this oil still, is all there is.

Olive, you are peeling. Olive, you are a kind of Chardin, fashioning a person within the brown kitchen shadows.

I find myself immovable now – so much dreaming and I am stuck! Varnished, made, shaped, peeled – some kind of bastard creation – little monster of vegetable and flesh and psychology.

Or she was never working – always mid-thought and caught in the amber of his pallet.

Who speaks for us? The lonely, the stuck, the queer, the very beautiful but broken things which are catching the light in the gallery.

I part your lips with my words. I press my lips into the mask of your lips. I move my lips to form your name which I did not know before.

A near-absence of men is become a near-absence of myself.

18

I am a difficult man. I do not know how to love myself.

Open the box of this world! Don't just respond to the box, with its painted lid, its sparkling and sepia genre scene!

Where did you go daddy, inside of me? You are a ghost-draft drawn in oil shifting behind me – brown and molten and shining! I x-ray the canvas of myself to see another figure!

The father in art is a kind of martyr. His wounds, the body of the child.

Well-boiled turnips make good soup, should we read more into it?

I see my penis in every object. I cut open a turnip to see your face daddy like a kind of vegetable miracle.

A woman is so beautiful and trapped and I thought I could free her but maybe I only freed some part of myself.

Ideas depart as ghost particles onto the skin of the boy who is looking at all these things and turning himself inside out.

Is every object transitional? Is every hurt a poem being written?

Why do I see *Woman Peeling Turnips* and not just a woman peeling turnips?

I am empty but for a time you filled me up, Chardin. Thank you, daddy.

Notes:

Woman Peeling Turnips, sometimes referred to as *The Kitchen Maid* or *Woman Scraping Turnips*, is a 1738 painting by Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin. The work was popular and Chardin made four copies; three of them are in public collections in Munich, Washington and The Netherlands.

I implore you turnip show yourself to me is a quote from Sappho's poem 'Kélomaí se Gongúla'. The translator is unknown.

Well-boiled turnips make good soup is a quote from Philips Angel's 'In Praise of Painting' – an encomium delivered to the Leiden guild of painters and published in 1642.

'*You will yourself be a Chardin*' and '*It is the expression of what was most intimate in his life and of things in their most profound aspect, and so it addresses our life, comes to touch upon it, slowly inclining us towards things and bringing us closer to the heart of them*' are quotes from Proust's essay 'Chardin and Rembrandt', translated by Jennie Feldman and published by David Zwirner Books.

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