

## **December reflection—** Barbara Putnam

Today is December 3rd, two days after My Mom's birthday. Had she lived past April she would have been 102.

My sister and I collected light in mason jars just like these, on warm June evenings at my grandmother's house in Osipee NH. The light in our jars came from fire flies, their flashing patterns of light, pulsed unexpectedly like old camera flash bulbs. In the jar we could study the yellow-white light, beyond our hands in the field we could see little sparks of flying light. My Mom wanted us to experience the wonder of nature. Had we not seen these beetles close up we never would have believed her telling us that the light emanating from their abdomens was how they communicated, asked for a mate, and how they have come to symbolize finding light in darkness.

Two Sundays ago Reverend Timothy Ensworth observed that we stand between memory and imagination. This is an empowering concept, particularly for people in the arts. I appreciate the distance as well as the interdependence between these points, the contrast between the slowly shifting, tectonic plates of memory and the surge of imagination, which invites risk, failure, discovery, and responsibility, all guided by patience.

We all know Dutch Post Impressionist painter Vincent Van Gogh. His wonky sense of proportion comes from a solid background in observational drawing. His unique departure from the past showed me a new approach to landscape. In *Starry Night* VG shows us an undulating, flashing, tidal surge of night sky high above a sleeping village described in cool tones of blues, deep greens, and purples. It's a dreamlike composition, attached to observation but letting go of it simultaneously. The sky is alive, moving,... the unseen world is the painting's subject. Moon and stars, light above darkness below. VG asks us to leave the familiarity of the sleepy village in the lower foreground and scan the beauty of his imagined evening sky. If we are open to seeing through another's eyes, Van Gogh

illuminates the wind along with the unknowable. Memory joins imagination in this work painted in June of 1889, during the peak of firefly season.

Anticipating a respectable snow, drifting, the sound of plows at night, and hard-edged blue December shadows on the fields yesterday, I brought a print about winter made a while back in the woods behind our house. I also brought the block and some tools and sketchbooks for you to see later if you are interested. And some cookies as a reward for anyone who expresses interest, real or imagined.

Contrast is the language I speak through my work, the variation between extremes of white and black, zero and one to computer programmers. As with the combination of two digits, I think it is impossible to exhaust the ways that light creates texture and sculpts form.

I draw on site, outside first sketching, then draw directly onto the block. When I return to my studio to carve I go there to learn.

Taking you into the process, I draw at different times of day to look at light and the weight of shadow. How a tree “works” — where branches connect, how snow leaches through the prickly branches of the white spruce, finding symmetry and asymmetry together and I wonder about the logic and genius of how this tree is put together and has adapted to its surroundings. At a certain point I know enough to draw directly onto the wood, but never enough to be assured of anything.

A Prussian blue crayon does not show easily on top of a sheet of wood stained black, ensuring that I will not be restrained by its outline when carving. The colored pencil communicates pressure from my hand, which tells my carving hand something important is going on in a particular spot. This process bypasses the brain completely.

I love the sound of wood when I carve, and I purposefully work faster than my mind can think, important because I would otherwise second guess myself and the

carving would be tight and predictable. I feel like I am sculpting on a flat surface, and out of a black sheet with indistinct marks on it, comes light. As soon as the knife scoops out material, I see the warm tones of the wood against the black, so I think that with woodcut I am actually carving light.

By closing my right eye, all distractions are eliminated, including pencil marks, and it easier to see what I am doing as if I am standing and looking from a distance. At my arms length what I do is just a mess of lines thinly connected to an unspoken intention. I use photographs to document process and place but rarely refer to them, the pleasure as well as the tension comes from letting the wood, and the contrast revealed as I go (faster than I can think) access what I saw.

The Japanese printmaker Shiko Munakata (1903-1979) is one of Japan's National treasures, he received his government's Order of Culture in 1970. Munakata's bold woodcuts have always had special importance for me in their directness, as well as his comfort in describing the observable in abstract terms. In his work sometimes the white is the subject, the black of the print the foil. At other times the white is the background, as active as the subject. His prints also include poetry and calligraphy, and for this to be convincing you need to remember that a print is a reversal of what is carved on the block. Munakata's writing is also instructive, he said "the essence of *hanga* (woodcut) lies in the fact that one must give in to the ways of the board ... there is a power in the board, and one cannot force the tool against that power." Anybody who works with materials realizes that the hand and the material have an uneasy and sometimes harmonious relationship. For the woodcut artist Munakata wrote, "carve out only what is necessary, but everything that isn't."

When he was about 17, Munakata was gifted a reproduction of Van Gogh's Sunflowers by his teacher Tadaaki Ono. Later in his life visiting Europe he went to VG's grave and his own grave in Aomori is fashioned after the artist who first spoke to Munakata's imagination.

Art is a mysteriously connected conversation, illuminated by and through people across time and place. Light is a fundamental part of that communication moving

among all of our own creative efforts as an idea, an understanding, a risk worth taking.

I'll Close with my second favorite poem, (My first in all time is Thomas Hardy's The man he killed). Robert Frost, takes us from the recognizable, the ordinary and transports the reader into their imagination. In winter.

### **Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening**

BY ROBERT FROST

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.