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nt, lilting and emotionally true. . . . Urquhart [creates]
a spell with language that shimmers . . .
spirited, sprawling Irish tale." *—Chicago Tribune*

aging and moving exploration of love: mother-love,
ic love, love of country. . . . *Away* is a melancholy
llad sung on foreign soil, its words and
ill the sweeter for being heard
way from home." *—The Washington Post Book World*

JANE URQUHART

THE UNDERPAINTER

VIKING

The Underpainter

urquhart

AWAY

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behind me, following me on my promenade. I did not miss the significance of this.

I have travelled this route many times before. By the time you have reached my age, everything has repeated itself at least once. The Silver Islet house was not my first inheritance, for example. And Superior was not my first north shore.

From: The Underpainter

by Jane Urquhart

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I was born in 1894, in Rochester, New York, a city of ravines and canals, rivers and waterfalls, inventors and industrialists, preachers and psychics; a city so chock-full of the turmoil connected to rampaging waters and vicious cycles of weather that the Gods sought revenge by making it, ultimately, famous for giving almost everyone the ability to create fixed images, the ability to stop action in its tracks. George Eastman had already opened his State Street factory by the time I entered the world, and, by 1900, he was distributing his Kodak Brownie camera from coast to coast: a fitting beginning to the current century.

At the tail end of the last one, while I played on the floor with my toy soldiers and tried to avoid outings with my mother, my future teacher, Robert Henri, returned to America from France. According to my friend Rockwell Kent, Robert H. burst into the studios of New York City, preaching the idea of visual art as a response to the life and to the energy of the world, shouting the names Renoir, Cézanne, Pissarro as if they were vegetables he was desperately trying to sell at market.

My own artwork at the time focused on a series of military campaigns waged by stick soldiers wielding stick swords. America, I believe, was at war with Spain; there must have been talk of Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders. And then there was my Louisiana-born grandfather, on my father's side, who had fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War and who visited us for a week or so once a year. Sometimes, to my great delight, he would deliver the "rebel yell" at the dinner table in our otherwise dark and solemn household, between courses, making my mother jump in her seat and causing my father, who was not the least bit inclined towards spontaneous outbursts, to swear under his breath.

While Robert Henri was for the first but not the last time hectoring his students, insisting that, like his adored Cézanne, they paint the landscapes of their own continent and the streets of their own cities, I was attempting to discover a way to avoid contact with the streets and landscapes of my own neighbourhood. My mother was unusual; a gifted Gothic narrator and not at all interested in facts. But she was strictly accurate when it came to setting, and researched her material well. Drawn to the sublime in nature, she particularly admired high vantage points – look-offs, I called them – and, as a result, she was impressed by the great number of chasms and gorges that cut their way through the city we lived in. It was her fondest wish that I be delighted by these geological oddities as well.

As a young child I was always looking down into landscape, never across it or along it. In church the congregation droned, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help." I had never looked up at anything, except for architecture,

and even that was mercifully low in those days. Moreover, the depths into which I would have had to descend in order to watch rocks and vegetation climb skyward were filled with tombstones, on the one hand, and murderous rapids, on the other. The Genesee River rampaged angrily through the centre of town generating the power that drove the industries of our prosperous city fathers. Darkly romantic pillared and gargoyleed tombs created valleys of death out of the series of ravines that became Mount Hope Cemetery. The long footbridge crossing the Genesee and the serpentine avenues that wound around and above the huge, deep graveyard were my mother's favourite destinations. I feared and hated both places. I was certain I would be drawn down to death one way or the other as, holding my mother's hand and decked out in my sailor suit and straw hat or wrapped in layers of quilted clothing, I approached these lofty spots.

When I mustered the courage to complain, my mother assured me I was fortunate to have access to such spatially interesting scenery. Daughter of a market gardener from Hilton, a hamlet situated in the uncommonly flat lands ten miles or so from the centre of town, nothing, she maintained, could please her more than to look from on high into landscapes both wild and dangerous. A fear of heights, she told me, was nothing more than a fear of depths. She, however, feared predictability, boredom, and certain distant, fixed horizons. Flat land, she said, was like a dull story; one where you were able to determine the middle and the end right at the beginning. Large bodies of water were different in that you never quite knew what they were going to do even when they were frozen, and that alone made them

interesting. We talked about such things on our promenades, or rather she talked about them. I said very little. I was just a child.

I now realize she was quite a lot like my friend, the painter Rockwell Kent. She should have been given a boat and a sail and set adrift to bump up against one steep, forbidding shore after another, though the monotony of the long journeys from departure to landfall might have put her off his style of adventure. Still, they had much in common and, had they ever met, Rockwell might have fallen in love with her. He was a man obsessed by dangerous landscapes, by women, and the north. He stopped travelling only long enough to begin painting; he stopped talking only long enough to start writing; he stopped womanizing only long enough to attempt to repair his disintegrating marriage. His brain, like his painting, was controlled by polar forces. The north was with him always, regardless of where he hung his hat. By the time I was nine and setting forth on what would turn out to be my last series of walks with my mother, Rockwell would have already survived the vagaries of the eccentric Abbott Thayer's freezing outdoor school, would have been enrolled in Robert Henri's life class for two or three years. Having been born at the tail end of the century, it seems to be my destiny to walk into the finale of every drama I encounter. By the time I met Rockwell, by the time I met Robert Henri . . . but I am getting ahead of myself. Suffice it to say that I missed the Armory Show, modernism's notorious *début* in North America, by one year, though now I don't regret this for a minute.



My father left our ordinary house on Atkinson Street each morning promptly at 8:15 in order to walk to George Eastman's State Street factory where he worked as a clerk. As a child I was quite taken both with the factory itself – seven storeys high! something to look up to – and with the objects that emerged from it. Cameras. Photographs. Images still and calm and dependable. I assumed that my father was responsible for these reliable pictures, despite the fact that there were only two photographs in our house: the first showed my parents thin and grim in their wedding clothes; the other was of me as a baby, silly and girlish in my christening gown. We owned a Kodak Brownie camera – everyone in Rochester did – but my mother forbade its use. “They stop things,” she would announce whenever the subject of cameras arose. “They interrupt the normal flow of events. Furthermore, they eliminate things. If I take a photograph of this,” she would say, pointing to a beer factory across the Genesee River, “I obliterate this and this.” Even now I can see the way she gestured as she spoke, her arms sweeping back and forth, conjuring the rest of the world, the world that a photograph might have obliterated, the world of the stamped-in river, the world I was afraid of.

Father told me much later that she had begun her walks to the river and the cemetery while I was still in my pram. In the beginning these outings were, as far as he could remember, sporadic and made some sense to him in that babies should be “aired.” By the time I was six, however, the journey had become a daily routine. Regardless of the weather, pressing household chores, invitations to ladies' teas, my own feeble objections, we set forth. If it were raining, my mother would carry a huge black

umbrella. If it were snowing, she would bundle me, and herself, in scarves and mitts and quilted coats. Only severe illness, hers or mine, could keep her home. I was severely ill as often as possible, loving the quiet of my room, my books and toys spread around me on the pale-blue blanket, the "Land of Counterpane" so gorgeously described by Mr. Stevenson in my favourite poem. Essentially, my greatest ambition at the time was to be a sickly child, as sickly as the author in question had been. But just as soon as the thermometer from Mr. Taylor's instruments factory indicated that I was well again, off we went, over the roaring river, to the edges of the valley of the shadow. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," the congregation chanted, "I will fear no evil . . . thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." I was convinced the revered rod was Mr. Taylor's thermometer, comforting me, keeping me from shadowed valleys, causing me to love the word "fever."

Mother claimed we were related to Mr. Taylor, but then Mother claimed we were related to all of Rochester's prominent citizens. "Just you and me," she would say conspiratorially, "we are related by blood to Mr. Taylor. Not your father, he is not related to anyone."

I was too young at the time to remind her that my father was, of course, related by blood to me.

According to my mother, when she was a child her distinguished relatives had driven her in their magnificent cabriolets to the much more fascinating water and beaches of the Great Lake Ontario, which was closer than you might think to the flat lands around Hilton. They had gone to the lakeshore in all kinds of weather, and it was this that must have instilled in her the idea

that outings were good for children. Sometimes there was ice, she explained, and then there would be ice boating and skating. The ice was white near the shore, then grey, then darker grey. It turned black just before it disappeared into the liquid, inky churn of Great Lake water. It resembled an oversized polished ballroom floor and, as one grew older, one danced upon it arm in arm with a partner. I could barely imagine this. For me, ice was something that appeared overnight, startling and silver on the bare limbs of trees near a waterfall, or hung like angry, dripping fangs over the gorge through which the Genesee River tumbled.

Rockwell Kent would tell me years later that he loved ice, insisting that it was more interesting than mere soil; that it created itself out of available, sometimes invisible materials, then disappeared again; that it had a mind of its own.

He would have worshipped my mother.

It is no surprise to me now, given the abysses in the surrounding geography, that men famous for mail chutes and elevators should have flourished in my native city. James B. Cutler and L. S. Graves, respectively. Mother claimed that we were related to both of these gentlemen, as well as to a certain Jonathan West, who had invented a celebrated kind of water meter. The accomplishments of the great men of our city, all of whom were apparently related to us, figured largely in the words my mother chose to describe the landscapes through which we wandered.

"Down you'd go," she once said, staring from a bridge that spanned the frothing Genesee. "Down you'd go, just like a love letter in a Cutler chute."

Another time, when we were walking around the top edge of the graveyard, she announced darkly, "These paths curve, this way and that, just like one of Henry Strong's whips flung down in the grass." I wondered what these long whips would be used for and what kind of large animals they might be meant to subdue.

At Mount Hope Cemetery we stood under arbours and sat on stone benches. We paused to admire the impressive mausoleums of one alleged relative after another. We examined marble statuary – marble that was sometimes brought all the way from Italy, my mother told me – and which ranged from small urns to realistically rendered life-sized family groups.

"That certainly is a good likeness of cousin Reginald's dog," Mother would say, looking fondly at a marble beast curled at the feet of a bearded marble entrepreneur who was himself seated comfortably in an armchair on his own tomb. "Its name was Mergatroyd."

I don't believe I have ever been intimately involved with a woman as young as my mother was then. She had married my father at sixteen and had been – if one did not take into account our afternoon outings – more or less housebound ever since. As far as I knew, she had no friends; even her own parents, my grandparents, were dim, shadowy people who never appeared in our house and whose small clapboard house in Hilton we rarely visited. Whether they disapproved of the marriage, or were themselves disapproved of by my father, I wasn't ever to know. His own family was far away in a place called Baton Rouge. I had met only my Confederate grandfather, who came to visit once a year.

It was a claustrophobic world that, more than my mother's

flat, pedestrian girlhood, may have explained her need for imaginary relatives and dramatic scenery. I remember the darkness of the house during the day, the murky lamps at night, the silent suppers and punctual bedtimes. My mother and I had little in common with my father; as she had said, he was, at least in the metaphorical sense, related to no one. She and I, however, were related to the alternative worlds connected to childhood. Pretty and delicate, bored and prone to fantasy, she was, I suppose, just a little girl. I became her playmate; her sometimes unwilling playmate. By the age of nine I adored her and was perplexed by her; coveted and occasionally felt smothered by her company.

Most people, I understand, remember only bits and pieces of any particular day in their childhood. Only certain static images, much like the photographs my mother so disapproved of, cut through the recalled atmosphere of being six or nine or five years old. I am not, as I have pointed out, so fortunate. Robert Henri maintained that the wondering eyes of a child see everything, but when childhood has passed, much of what they have seen is lost. I carried everything I saw on a certain day in 1904 with me into adult life, either because of what happened later or perhaps in spite of what happened later. Yet this visual intensity is still only a matter of optics. I can see the way the snow moved through the neighbourhood, the colour that the cold placed on my mother's face, the icy, shining wires swinging in the wind, snowdrifts against the outer walls of mausoleums, but I cannot see myself, the boy I was then; at least, I cannot see his face. And there are no photographs. My mother would never have allowed photographs.

It was late January. I was nine and in school by then, but that didn't prevent my mother from insisting on the walks; often she would be waiting at the gate when I emerged from the school door. But this was Saturday, a holiday from that particular humiliation, a day that I would have preferred to spend drawing my now fully fleshed-out soldiers waging their fully fleshed-out battles. And colouring them. Poster paint had entered my life.

The previous night an ice storm had coated everything in silver and we had awakened in the morning to a tinsel world.

When we left the house my mother exclaimed at the beauty. "This is what happens," she said, "when you live in the north. Everything can change in the most magnificent way, completely, overnight." We were walking slowly because of the ice underfoot. "We live as far north as possible," she said. "Aren't you glad?"

She had either forgotten, or was choosing to ignore, Canada.

"We are northerners," she said proudly. "We like the cold."

Huddling in my woollen coat against the increasing chill of the wind, I wasn't quite sure that I agreed with her, but I dared not voice my opinion.

"Our river runs north," she announced as we inched our way over the slippery footbridge. I was trying not to think of the river, the long, deep distance between me and its swift current. "The north is the birthplace of spiritualism," my mother continued cheerfully. "The north is where spiritualism lives." She paused, admired the view from the end of the bridge, then added, "Thanks to my great-aunts, your great-great-aunts, the famous Fox sisters."

I was treated to a full description of the Rochester Rappings, the knocking and pounding from the beyond that, according to my mother, had visited these ladies at all times of the day and night. Mourners lined up for blocks to keep appointments with the famous Fox sisters because they could put absolutely anyone in contact with the spirit of absolutely anyone else, provided that the person to be contacted was thoroughly dead. I imagined white ghosts with hammers lying beneath wooden floors, angrily demanding attention from the living. But my mother corrected me when I told her this. The mourners, she said, cherished such bangs and thumps, such requests for attention. And the ghosts themselves would knock and rap only if one or more of her great-aunts were present in the room. The ghosts, she assured me, were very fond of her great-aunts, who were dead themselves now and had been for some time.

"Do *they* rap?" I asked. "Does everyone?"

My mother laughed then, put her arm around me and pulled me close. "I've never thought of that," she said.

I loved her. I remember loving her. I think. No, I'm certain of this. In my early childhood she was my whole world.

By the time my mother and I had reached the graveyard it had begun to snow for the second time: soft, gentle flakes, large enough to be examined on a mitten.

"No two are alike," my mother said. "But then no two of us are alike either, even if we are related."

Later, Rockwell would develop the same theme. He was a great believer in the relentlessness of character, of originality. You could not get rid of it, he once told me, even if you wanted to.

There have been times when I have wanted to.

As we moved deeper into the graveyard, my mother reminded me that her great-uncle, the Reverend Pharcellus Church, delivered the inaugural address when Mount Hope Cemetery was opened in 1830, praising its magnificent views, its "bottom lands" and "abrupt declivities." It had been his favourite spot for a stroll in his declining years, and now, seventy years later, it was ours.

"He was an admirable man," she told me. "You should be proud to be related to him. I was going to name you Pharcellus when you were born, but your father wouldn't hear of it. He wanted something more southern, so we settled on Austin."

Even at nine years old I was grateful for this.

We watched the bottom lands and abrupt declivities fill with snow for quite a while, long enough to see the slate and stone roofs of house tombs in the valleys become covered with white as we crept along the icy paths above them. Then, just as we reached the centre of this fearsome place, the old oak trees began to whine and creak as the wind shifted, increased in velocity, and stirred up a blizzard more blinding than any I had experienced in my short life.

"I think we'll have to wait this one out," my mother sang above the storm. "I believe we will have to take shelter."

We were standing near a mausoleum that looked like a miniature cathedral. My mother squinted at the lettering above the door and said, "I'm certain cousin Slattery won't mind."

She scraped the snow from the threshold with her boot, pushed open the protesting wrought-iron doorway, and beckoned me inside.

No one had been to visit cousin Slattery for a long time, I decided, when my eyes had adjusted to the gloom. His checkered marble floor was neither swept nor washed, all his flowers were dead, and Jesus, who had fallen from the cross, lay smashed upon the altar. A pointed stained-glass window at the rear of the room was broken and missing one or two panes; a good thing, I thought, since this allowed some light and air to enter the structure.

"It appears," my mother said disapprovingly as she looked around, "that cousin Slattery was a papist." We were Episcopalian, a denomination whose name I had never been able to pronounce. I had no idea what a papist was, and when I asked, my mother's subsequent descriptions of saints and martyrs led me to believe that the famous Fox sisters must have been papists as well. We had settled ourselves down on prayer stools, the needlepoint upholstery of which had decayed long ago, and dried bits of straw were pushed out of them by our weight. My knees came up to my chest in such a position, my mother's almost to her chin. Outside, the squall wrapped itself around our little dwelling, and I imagined it flinging itself into the declivities we could no longer see.

I don't know how long we stayed in cousin Slattery's chapel, but most likely, though it seemed like forever, it was little more than an hour. Squalls, such as the one that raged through Mount Hope Cemetery that day, rouse themselves to a great fury, then evaporate, a function in this region of what is now called "the

lake effect." I do remember, however, that at some point I became cold and began to complain. I remember too that when my mother took off her coat and wrapped it around me, the heat of her body was trapped in the cloth, and I could feel this warmth, even through the quilting of my own coat, and it comforted me.

It was shortly after this day that my mother died of scarlet fever, a disease with a beautiful name. Oddly, there was never a hue with this designation in an artist's paint box until at least the 1940s, and then it was called quinacridone scarlet, the cumbersome first word smashing the brightness and delicacy of the second. Still, almost any time I used red in a painting I would think of my mother as I uncapped the tube. Cadmium, vermilion, Venetian, madder, alizarin crimson all brought our walks in Mount Hope Cemetery to mind, despite the fact that she is not buried there but sleeps instead in the little graveyard of Hilton.

It saddens me to think of her in Hilton, with flat fields stretching out on either side and neither marble statuary nor extreme geography to honour her brief life, decorate her death. But Lake Ontario is nearby, and it was of this frozen lake that she spoke as she lay delirious and dying. She believed that she was skating far out on the bay; she believed that there was someone on the shore calling her back. "I can't come in," she said over and over. "I've gone too far and the ice is turning black." Filled with energy until the instant of her death, her hands groped among the bedclothes as if she were looking for something in the dark, something she would recognize by touch. I,

recovering from scarlet fever myself, was barred from her deathbed, but, looking through the keyhole and listening at the door, I knew she was trying to find me, that I myself was on the shore she couldn't return to. I called and called, silently of course, though sometimes I whispered her name.

It is alizarin crimson that I now associate with my mother, her life, the disease, her death. A colour so unreliable it could practically be called fleeting, it disappears in less than thirty years. No amount of varnish can protect it. Turn it from the light and it still fades with a determination that is almost athletic. And yet it is the most beautiful of the reds; dark, romantic, and fragile, it is an outburst of joy among the other colours on the palette, though chances are the artist will live to see it weaken, deteriorate, and finally vanish. It is impossible to keep.

In my child's mind, the colour of the disease was a band of red on the ice my mother spoke of, and I could see her, actually see her, move across it to the place where the ice turned from grey to black, until finally I could see her enter the inky waters of the Great Lake.

She had joined all of her relations. She had gone as far north as she understood it was possible to go. She was never coming back.

people once in a while, maybe you wouldn't make so many mistakes. Maybe you'd actually finish one of those pictures."

Pictures. Mistakes.

As I said, I take nothing from the world now.

All the water in this city runs urgently towards the north, hurries towards the Great Lake with the name of a Canadian province. The city itself, however, looks east and west from the two sides of the Genesee River, as if its citizens had one day decided to curl inward rather than admit to the existence of another land, an opposite shore with rivers and farms and cities of its own.

The country across the lake never really takes shape in the collective imagination here. Cold, distant, separated by enough water that the curve of the earth makes it invisible, the far shore disappears swiftly from the memory – despite excursions, or even complete summer vacations there – as quickly as a trip to an amusement park might, after daily life is resumed. The impression left behind is as vague and fleeting as the various intensities of light over the lake, which change before they fully register in the mind, before anyone with watercolours and a brush is able to capture them on the paper in his hand.