

In fourth grade, my teacher places me at the end of a pier. There is the water, sky, canvas and a copy of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* taped to the weathered wood of the easel. We paint until lunch and then we paint some more. This is how it goes and I learn the names of Monet, Picasso and Renoir and I copy them while standing on a pier in front of water, sky, horizon. I don't want to know why we're not painting landscapes. I want to know why Picasso puts eyes where knees should be and why Renoir thought people were pink and if Van Gogh went broke buying paint. I want to have one ear and wear paint-spattered clothes.

In middle school, I don't remember learning anything about art.

In high school, my art history teacher turns over his empty Styrofoam coffee cup, stabs a pencil through the bottom and says it's art as a way to introduce modernism and the surrealists. My class revolts and I'm yelling the loudest, but secretly I am intrigued. Later, we are all convinced and pretend that we knew all along. I want to be my teacher and steal his cup idea.

In college, I have a dull art history professor and I'm not getting enough sleep, so you can probably guess what happens every time we look at slides.

While living in Virginia, I stand in line in 30 degree weather in order to see the Vermeer exhibit at the National Gallery, and I get dizzy in front of *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. A few months later, I stumble through a Cezanne exhibit with a fever and I have to look away from the blues because I'm sick and I swear I'm going to faint, but I've driven all the way to Philly from Virginia and the tickets weren't easy to get and Cezanne would want me to have a fever. *He* had a fever every day. A few months later, I discover an artist named Joseph Cornell who made strange little boxes full of marbles and colored sand and jacks and wooden birds. Next, a French artist who taught the Impressionists everything they know and I like him because no one else knows his name. I want to be an expert on the artists of my choice.

Then I move to Austin and make the obligatory trip to Houston and discover Cy Twombly who has the *best* name ever and a whole building devoted to his insane paintings, canvasses he literally threw the paint on, then he would take a pencil and scribble an equation or a Greek word in the corner and what a weirdo and I love him for it. I want to know Mr. Twombly and run frivolous errands for him while he grows old.

And then I'm done. Stick a fork in me because I know art or at least I know enough. I know more than a lot of people and I have the artists to prove it and I have been doing this since the fourth grade. I know how to stand in front of a painting. And my tastes have evolved. I know what I like and I can tell you why if you ask me.

Two years ago, I read an article in the paper about a man named Donald Judd and a town called Marfa, TX. I have a few days to kill so I drive west until I get there and I track down the old army fort that Judd bought in 1972 because some artists need an 36 x 28 inch canvas and some need a deserted fort where German prisoners of war were kept during World War II. Almost thirty years after he bought it, I'm standing in an old artillery shed. The building is huge although I can see to the end of it. There are no walls, just windows and on the floor are 100 aluminum boxes, about the size of a perfect bathtub except you'd need a little step to get into it. Each aluminum box is just an aluminum box except for the fact that sunlight is reflecting off every inch of the boxes' surface times 100, and the few of us there, our footsteps are echoing and answering each other and there's a strange crispness to the air although it doesn't feel like air conditioning even though it should. And outside the sky is massively being massive. In fact, it has taken over so the whole world or at least everything I can see is 90% sky. And there are all these aluminum boxes just sitting there waiting for me to think something about them, or so I think. But I don't know what to do, what to think. What the hell am I doing here? What are these boxes doing here? What the hell? I'm in the building for 20-30 minutes and by the time I exit the far door, the weather inside my head has shifted. My mind is clear, wiped out, erased. Yes, a part of me, the physical part, wants to stay with the boxes, wants to touch them, sit down and lean up against one, climb inside one and go to sleep, but my mind is calm, swept clean. I'm not anxious.

I'm not searching for language so I can describe the art to myself. I am trying to be the box which is only trying to be the sky which is just outside the box that the boxes are in. And while I'm in Marfa, I am the box. I am empty, not a negative blankness but a positive vastness like the sky. This is the only language I know to describe what I felt.

The next day before I leave Marfa I sit in a little park eating cheese and crackers and a train screams by, literally cutting the town in two and I'm thinking about art and about Judd and the bumper sticker I saw earlier—"WWDJD?"—What would Donald Judd do? I have no idea what the answer is and I'm so happy. I don't want anything except what I have.

Now I know something I didn't before I went to Marfa—art can't just be about collecting names and dates and being more appreciative than your neighbor and knowing the right words for the right piece. It has to also be about rebirth, renewal. It has to be about an openness you can't even pretend to manufacture but might be given if you're lucky. It has to be about accident and the subconscious and not knowing whether a box is just a box is just a box. It has to be about wanting to be the art, wanting to be the box, which wants to be the sky and then you wanting to be sky and thinking for a moment that you *are* sky, or at least a little bit like the sky which is something you never knew that you could be.