

## *Heartwrecker (2019), Oil on Canvas*

Truth is, I've never really taken a good look at my own feet. I imagine I've modeled parts of myself for myself over the years—I know I have, even if in some telephone game, second-cousin-once-removed way, my imagination and some other base crafting me in effigy—but I've never used my own feet in a painting, so far as I can remember. Christ, I haven't ever really examined them before, at least not like this—the delta light through the long east windows cutting across their width, the imperfections of the hand-blown glass in hazy relief against the veined surface, the gentle peaks and valleys formed by all the small bones underneath. These two shapes so responsible for getting me from here to there—all my ascensions, all my errs—yet still so alien to me. *Knobby wings*, arrested in their development.

The bleached-yellow light, though, doesn't stop. It doesn't stop at the edges of me—in fact, it barely registers the slight tremble where I end and space begins—negative space, we say in the business, though I can see the dust floating across and through it, as if this were some swamp-friendly snow globe, and can imagine all the molecules I can't see, the very gravity of the world around me, in these dark blue walls. *Beyond*.

The broad knives of light cut across the room, tight against the floor, an army crawl, until they hit the far wall, sprout like stalks of electric current. Skinny-leg lightning. I watch the sunlight on the absurd wall like a television—too passive in some way, as if their intermingling has something to impart unto me, rather than giving me some lesson to chase. I suddenly notice how the stark contrast mimics my most recent work, even accounting for the more sudden light,

and then I am instantly and quietly ashamed, aware of how the universe doesn't give a good goddamn how it relates to my most recent work.

The absurdity is like the light—it does not end at the color of the walls. This whole too-big room is absurd and has been since the day I bought it. Long before that even, I imagine. As is the inherited, disparate furniture, the little that has even made its way in here. *A transitional style* would be the most generous of terms, something she might have said not too long ago. It's strange to think, after all the whispered promises—she may never set foot in here to soak in it firsthand. With me.

She had answered an advertisement, and the first time we met, I could tell her smile was a practiced thing. This is not to say that it was *forced*—it was not an expression of tension, a pushing of one thing through another; her smile actually alighted on her, a fluttering songbird that landed at particular beats in the otherwise mundane conversation, not quite fitting the moment—but not quite *not* fitting the moment, either. Our initial meeting was just that, as it always is when I canvas for models—somewhat necessarily superficial in terms of the physical, but also a deeper, and somewhat more subtle, dive into the undertow of the artist-subject relationship—exploring comfort zones, of course, but also a kind of compatibility. The painter does not have to be friends with the figure he paints—he doesn't even have to particularly like him or her—but, just like a predatory creepiness in either direction, a nails-on-a-chalkboard type of low-grade annoyance can never fly given the hours and hours the participants must spend alone in a room with only each other.

In terms of the latter, there were no red flags, save for those tied to the former, which I will get to. Though it was clear we came from two distinctly different worlds—I the transplant artist, she the married mother of two, a debutante native of the Garden District who somehow

managed to still marry up—conversation traveled easy between us, as did the inevitable silences. She gazed around the study and I left her to it, watching where her eyes fell, but holding back the natural urge to narrate, to guide.

I have a strict policy of not hiring models to whom I find myself overtly attracted; parallel to that, I have an equally strong habit of rationalizing my own behavior all the way to the comfort of its natural home: justification. She was clearly beautiful, but what was even more striking than the whole was the asymmetry of the parts. The cheekbones and forehead were a little too high, the oval eyes almost too big, their darkness accentuating their size, the precarious promise of caves. There was a small but noticeable hook at the end of the nose, and her nostrils were set wide in an almost perpetual flare. Her jaw, teeth and neck—all elongated beyond the rigid, high-gloss stockade the 21<sup>st</sup> century has applied around the concept of beauty.

And yet, without a doubt, she was extraordinarily, devastatingly beautiful. The scale of her disparate pieces made their own kind of logic, and within the larger context of the rest of her—the long, thin arms attached to small hands attached to long, thin fingers—a melody, a chorus. The impossible legs that were perhaps the defining feature of her height, yet somehow almost melted into the subtler curves of her hips and the apex of her ankles. She wore a faded cornflower blue dress, classic and almost girlish in its cut, but there was a fluidity to her figure through the folds of the material that veered more toward symphony than knobby, the notes carried from instrument to instrument—beside each other, over one another, through all—beginning at her exposed toe only to finally emerge through those midnight eyes.

It was this almost cellar-door inroad to beauty that allowed room for my rationalizations; this wasn't attraction, but professional curiosity: a spark to spark my creative urge. This was business. The tremble in my hand, heralding the one hidden behind my rib cage, was just the

excitement to get to work. I asked her to come back the next day, and to wear the same dress and sandals. She demurred, instead promising she could come the next week. Then she quickly left.

I feared I had scared her off somehow, that my body has somehow betrayed a tell that triggered some internal alarms, but she arrived promptly at the same time on the same day the following week, wearing the same pale blue dress. Her skin seemed a shade darker, it being late spring in New Orleans, the sun a blazing, close thing, but it hadn't mitigated the contrast with her eyes; they seemed as dark as ever, the polar inverse of a flash—a teeming dark hum.

She had been playing with her two young children the past few days, she said, mostly in and around the pool behind her house. She was almost apologetic at first, but betrayed a grin; I could almost see the memory of some fond little moment, an errant silliness. You would think, perhaps, that such talk would have served as a deterrent of some kind, a caution light to warn the libidinous artist, but it proved in fact the opposite; she sat in pose, and spoke incessantly of her young daughter and younger son for the entire three-hour session, and she never seemed more alive. Love surged through her, taking all those almost off-putting features and cooking them down to a hot glow, a simmer of pride and vivacity. By the end of the session, my hand had become the *only* thing I could hold steady, and I knew that if she ever turned and looked at me with her dusk, I would be lost forever.

This was back in the old studio, where the walk from the window with the best light to the small pseudo-hallway and the front door was not a long one, but as she gathered her things and prepared to leave, time seemed to take leave of its senses—or at least uncouple itself from my perception. It was as if she were hardly moving, while at the same time careening away, every tick of motion too slow and too fast in my state of agitation. I needed her to leave, to not

gaze up, and I needed her to stay—I willed the floor to slide under her in perfect time with her step, so that she would never know that I had trapped her here, with me, for eternity.

The funny thing is that I was like a baby in a way, but also brutally cognizant that we all are. We travel so many miles, but in the end, how far do we really go? How much do we ever really understand about need and gratification, and where love fits in between the two? How is our fear at the end that much different from our fear in the beginning?

*Heartache* is one term we use, and this makes the whole thing feel medical, but also childish, like a tummy ache, and though it is both, or all three—medical and childish and a pain right in your gut—it is none of those things at the very same time. Nor is it the kind of malaise one might associate with achiness. It is not a low-grade fever; it is a house fire. It is arson.

This is when she stopped, right as the space of the main room bottlenecked toward the entrance, now her exit. She stopped, pressing herself back against one wall to regard the canvases strung up along the other. The air was heavy and acrid with the stink of oil paints and turpentine—even that old studio was relatively, comparatively well-ventilated as a piece of architecture, but that architecture sat in the middle of New Orleans regardless, a city shaped like a bowl.

And it was just as heavy and acrid with us, with ozone, and I remember thinking only *please, please don't turn this way* over and over, like some sort of half-developed koan. *Don't look at me with that murky, pulsing stare.*

*Heartbreak* is probably more popular as a term, but just as infantile. It's poetry, I guess, but the poetry of teenage pop songs, of a world that still depends on its dualities, switches that are either off or on. It is jagged, but superficially so; the heart, which is nothing like a real heart,

of course, cut at hard angles, steps and their inverse, two became one to become two to become one to become two, too. Always becoming. Always wish-fulfillment.

And then she turned from the canvases, and back to me, black eyes flickering as she exhaled. Her right foot slid up the wall a few inches— admittedly cartoonish, pulpy, yet the way her exposed knee caught the light from across the room tore a hitch in the seam of my own breath. I'd have exhaled if I could. In the real world, with real hearts fashioned of muscle and fat and lots and lots of blood, it's not the stab that hurts, but trying to pull the hilt-deep knife out. That's what drops you to your knees.

I had only a surface idea how much of a pawn of time and space I was—looking back, how much I must have been willing myself to be—until I realized that I was already close enough to smell the faint trace of rose petal along the edge of her wrists, wrists that were now in my hands. My grip. I held her wrists in my grip, and the shadow thrumming against the wall— around her shape like a halo's negative—played as an effigy of a transfiguration, though it was me that was manifestly changing form. I recall no embarrassment, no shame, naked as a clothed man could be; her long neck stretched even more dramatically in its thrust, up and toward my face, her eyes unblinking in hers, smoldering like hot blacktop. Somewhere in the world, a boy played with matches and it surely was—like that moment for me—everything that ever was, is or ever shall be.

I kissed her, or she kissed me—it was a tussle from the start, and neither of us dared to close our eyes, the condensation of both challenge and forfeit collecting on our skin. The only fear I felt was the prospect of whatever charge we were riding suddenly dissipating; it was a kind of shared imposter complex—we didn't know where *this* came from, so we didn't know when or how *this* would leave. Asteroids are basically rubble, random, but become reckonings when they

come too close, when you can't track their trajectory. Our teeth clanged against each other until we caught a—*our*—rhythm. And there on the floor, unblinking, the sun cutting across us, across the acrid, chemical smell of my medium, we became lovers, all the levees broke like kindling.

*Homewrecker*. It's not a word I've ever really identified with before, fair or not; it's not a role I've often filled, despite my many appetites; there were some boozy bad choices in my teens and twenties, back when I had a full head of hair and immortality, where I merrily served as a kind instrument for the mothers of a few friends and classmates. A boy pretending to be a man. No one was ever caught. No homes wrecked, or wrecked any more than they already were. I was not something, apparently, that could strike down a load-bearing wall.

It is also chauvinistically applied; a woman—a textbook screaming jezebel of a tawdry vixen—is a homewrecker. A single man seducing a married woman, though, is, at worst, an opportunist. A rascal. A dirty bird. A boy who—say it with me—will be a boy.

Either way—the woman bears the shame. She wrecks the home, whether that metaphysical abode be a man's shared with another woman or her very own. And, here—more aptly *there*, scattered paint brushes digging into our backs, chests heaving, my unbuckled pants crumpled around my shins, her skirt hiked over her hips, the fabric resting on her flat stomach, exposing a Cesarean scar—I could pretend that the I had not thought of her family, of her husband and children less than two miles and a million light years away. But of course I had. I had thought of them the entire time. Not in some sick way, or the easy sick way to which the modern American brain probably defaults, but my own sick way, perhaps the even sicker way: with each gnash, each thrust, I grew more and more excited by what she was offering me—all she had to lose. She was choosing me and *this*. On the dirty floor. I knew she was risking everything she had built and conjured out of time and air and there is no greater aphrodisiac than

that for a man whose whole life is built around capturing things, as in amber. Later, after a second, more languid coupling, we snapped almost chaste kisses into each other, like fed wolves.

We continued our weekly standing appointment, and split the time between painting and tracing our fingers along the edges of each other—between art and its antecedent. I convinced her to sit for me a second time each week, though this second appointment was always more erratic—she didn't want to tell her husband she was modeling with the same man so often, lest what he deemed a frivolous and vain lark coagulate into something more substantive that he would have to consider further, chew on. He didn't care about her, she contended—only about the appearance of things and his own pride in some combination that she had neither the need nor the inclination to track closely anymore. When she said these things, I focused on the steel of the words, rather than the quiver they were built on. Music is made from vibrations—the little shake made it all that much more enchanting. Made her all that much more stunning.

She came up with a variety of excuses for those added sessions, none of them too similar or contrived, but this forced her to arrive sometimes at strange times: late at night, after the children were sleeping, or climbing into my Murphy bed early in the morning, before I had even awoken—I was living in that studio at the time, as well—over the pool hall on Tchoupitoulas. When she was eventually betrayed by an errant smudge of paint, she played up a pouty disappointment—she had commissioned another secret painting for her husband's birthday. Her perceived vanity triggered his and he was both thrilled and agitated by the gift—but wholly bought the story. By that point, I was already into my fourth or fifth painting of her—once I had discovered my muse, I was more proficient than I had ever been. I gladly donated one to the cause if it meant keeping her safe—and keeping him blind.



The husband loved the gifted painting—it was a smaller one her of at three-quarters profile, this time wearing a yellow and dotted dress (never the faded cornflower—that was not up for donation, or even sale) before a heavy, almost sopping, drapery of shadows, just a hint of hunter green over an imaginary mantle where the light touched. The black of the background was the same pitch of her eyes, and the way the high tones of her skin contrasted against both made this version of her look like she was levitating from some hidden swamp, a baptism in reverse. An escape—the manufactured, on-the-nose wish-fulfillment of a man in love lost on everyone else.

What came next, on some level, should never have been a surprise—the husband, a talented braggart by both nature and nurture, hung the trophy in a place of prominence, showing it off to friends and investors and friends of investors every chance he got. One of those was a fairly visionary and accomplished art collector connected with the Galerie Rue Royale, and within days I found myself on the phone with a very soft-spoken, yet strangely assertive man saying the most ridiculous things, that he had a famous Hollywood actor interested not only in my existing work—somebody had done their due diligence, because it was hardly easy to find at that stage—but also a possible commission. And with the name recognition of such a Hollywood actor, this soft, ridiculous voice was telling me, there was the distinct possibility of a one-person show if I could flesh out my portfolio a bit by the fall.

We made love on the roof of the Mercantile Hotel. After, we sprawled across a blanket and dozed, lazily pointing out made-up constellations and making promises to run away from our lives—mostly hers—like urchins playing house. “I want to have your child,” she declared, and though it was not something we had to that point talked about, it seemed wholly right, and I realized that in the lowest floors of me, I wanted her to, too. I understood the transaction—how

something given to me must be taken from others, that even if her love were an infinite thing, her time and attention were not—but I didn't care. It wasn't pure selfishness, or at least I couched it as something slightly more noble: a rescue. It was not that the universe owed me happiness, but it did owe it to her, and if I could be the vehicle for it, than that was the mission to which I was beholden. And if it all brought waves of pleasure and contentment down on me, well, that was just collateral. Joy embedded in righteousness.

We snuck down through the service entrance and walked back to the studio with our temples touching, arms draping shadows over each other, a lurching beast. She showered, and as I stood outside the door, moonlight trailing in through one long, far window, I caught a glint of shiny plastic protruding from her purse. Without really thinking, I ambled over, and took the pill bottle in my hand. The name across the label was not hers. The drug was a powerful sort, from what I heard from friends and the news. I stared at it for a moment, then put it back and tucked it in. Before she left, I let my kiss linger longer than usual, pretending I could be the medicine to make it all better.

The gallery show was an instant, meteoric success, and she was there, of course, the polite, slightly drab sidekick to her husband—not much like the painted versions bejeweling the gallery at all. She hardly spoke, to me or anyone else, and she looked wan, exhausted. I instantly thought of—and just as quickly made myself forget—the pill bottle. The thing about being a figurist is that you just aren't fashioning bodies; you're telling stories with each stroke—you are an author, and as such, you are in the habit of creating your own little horse-blinder worlds, dead ends just where you need them, blurring convenience with necessity just as paints run into each other.

She canceled the next sitting, saying she didn't feel well, and the next. I spent as much time on the phone with potential clients as I did actually painting, and so I was able to rationalize without obsessing. I was burning off the fuel of our old rooftop promises, splitting differences; I had come to realize in some inspired moment of clarity that she would not leave her children, the boy and girl who both took after her so much, and so the running away landed, catlike, more like a running *to*—a hiding in plain sight at worst, a recalibration of the New Orleans social hierarchy at best. A pipe dream perhaps, but one grounded in the most stable of investments: I bought a severe white house in the Garden District, a block away from the traffic of St. Charles, but still close enough to enjoy the attending cache. The artist's prayer: *Don't look at me. My God, please look at me.*

"I can't see you anymore," she said, sitting next to me on a sunlit bench in Audubon Park. I glared straight ahead, hopeful she could not see whatever my face was betraying. I had grown so good at reading others that I could not imagine what tells I myself loosed upon the world every minute, every second. Or, rather, I could imagine, but chose not to. I keep telling myself that I am my first, best model, but I keep being surprised by how little I know. Truth is, I avoid mirrors except to shave, and self-portraits entirely.

I could feel, rather than see, her shake beside me, and I understood that she was sober—that whatever *this* was, why-ever it was, it was a kind of bravery, and that made everything worse, this elegiac admiration that was blossoming even as she was ending our affair. Clichés are clichés because they are inevitably true, and the arrow, like the knife, hurts so much worse when torn out than sliding in. The head snags on tissue and memories—fantasies lived and those vowed—rends and pulls and saws, in slow, torturous motion. *Heartaches* and *heartbreaks* and *homewreckers*; so many terms of art, none hitting the mark. This was a *heartwrecker*, a total

ravishment, my hotel pillaged and then flooded with saltwater, me alone on the roof, making up lullabies with the stars.

“I have money now,” I said, my voice hoarser than I wanted it to be. “A house. A house with a blue room, like we talked about. Remember?” I finally turned to find her regarding me like another of her children; I was hunched over and she sat upright, her head cocked along the fault line of her own frown. She lunged at me then, kissed me on my bald head like a mother, a lover, a friend, a vanquisher. She was the one who won the war, who drafted the terms, but she was also the one that walked away bawling.

And here I am now, alone in my blue room, staring at my own alien feet and comparing them to aborted wings like a precocious child with too much time on his hands. There is another opening this evening, and the husband has just left a voicemail promising he will be there. *With her*. With his lovely, but not too lovely, wife. I haven’t seen her in months. Haven’t held her. I imagine skipping it, feigning illness myself—but I realize almost immediately how silly that is. How childish. I am not a child, after all; even if I am not her man, I can manage to be *a* man.

I stand before the mirror to shave my face and skull and after, for the first time in as long as I can remember, I linger, practicing poses. Trying to act normal. It is all hideous, but I know it will play well enough for anybody besides the two of us. And that is the bar. That is good.

At the opening, I camp out near the back of the show with a steadily refilled glass of merlot. My stomach drops every time a brunette turns the corner, but none turn out to be her. I see him first, the husband, and then she is trailing behind in a black dress, hair up and smoky eyes, and it is not until she turns just so—three-quarters—that I see the round curve of her belly. I visibly flinch and the husband chortles, grabbing her by the waist.

“What can I say?” he offers, still laughing. “I shoot torpedoes.” A passing matron winces, but I can only study my muse; I have stared at every fraction of her face for so many hours—days of hours, *weeks* of them, doing nothing but exploring her highlights, her shadows—that I can instantly read the crooked smile that breaks across her lips, and how it intermingles with the sneer of her eyes and the sovereignty of her furrowed brow. It is a smile that is meant for me, not him, and it tells me everything about why she left and why she’s here. It tells me that the child inside her is mine, and that if I can manage to stay away, to allow her this gift, she will love me forever, love me like no man in this universe has ever been loved before.

“You should paint her like this!” The husband exclaims, pointing at her protruding stomach like a used car salesman—which, basically, is what he is. He is also a hopeless cuckold, and now, a razor-blade inside joke. I nod politely, tell them they have my number, and turn away.

“This all went to his head *fast*,” the husband whispers a degree too loudly, and I spin, aggravated by revelations and wine, to confront him; I catch her resting her too-long fingers between his shoulder blades, though, and it stops me. When she turns in profile, the gallery’s track-lighting swathing her dark hair in a harsh halo, I know I have my next painting, the one for which I’ll be best remembered.