



## Brian K. Mahoney

### Editor's Note

### A Painting (Untitled)

If I were to write my column like I was making a painting, how would it be done? First, I'd need to take a moment: artistic endeavors are not to be tackled lightly. Leave the room. Stand up, turn away from the keyboard, and ponder the absurdity of the proposition: *write like painting?* And while painting, like writing, is not done in stride—it's a sedentary activity, performed at rest; as my mentor, the writer Anthony Robinson once said, "work is done at a desk, not in the mind"—one has to start somewhere, and procrastination is my preferred type of beginning.

I'd need to take a walk and *think about it*. Having a dog around is good for this sort of thing, as the animal's biological needs provide cover for a prodigious amount of lollygagging. (As well as license to peer like a creep into the windows of my neighbor's houses while Shazam pursues his quixotic goal of coating all the telephone poles, bushes, and tree trunks on the block in a fine sheen of urine.)

At the park is where the big thinking is done, so after I let Shazam off the leash, I would do a lap on the park's woodsy perimeter, gaze dreamily at the Hudson like Byron at the Hellspon, and ready my mind for inspiration. As I'm no good at waiting for the muses, however, this exercise inevitably devolves into panic-stricken invocations for one, just one, *any one* of those nine elusive women to show. I'd take Polyhymnia for chrissakes, the muse of sacred poetry, sacred hymn, dance, eloquence, pantomime, and agriculture. (She's quite the Renaissance woman.) I mean, at this point, I'd take a good gardening tip.

Shazam, having gallivanted into the woods, is likely to return with a rotting deer leg locked in his jaws, as pleased with himself as if he painted his own masterpiece. He'll find me hyperventilating and glistening with flop sweat. *Whatever am I going to paint about?* Around this time, I'm likely to remember the late, great David Rakoff's thoughts on the arduous nature of the artistic process: "Writing is like pulling teeth. From my dick."

It's interesting to note how quickly the start of something can turn into feeling like the end of everything.

This will seem like a good time to start taking photos. (The studios of painters I know all have photos taped up everywhere.) For reference, I'll tell myself, though photography in this context is probably just a higher form of dawdling. These will be helpful as I decide what I'm going to paint. Maybe my painting will include tumultuous clouds, tinged with sunset pink, scudding across the rising moon. *Click*. The red and yellow leaves on the green clover in the baseball outfield. *Click*. The final light radiating through the Western trees. *Click*. A boat on the river, its light blinking. *Click*. Maybe that's actually the lighthouse. *Zoom in*. Yeah, that's definitely the lighthouse. *Click*. The empty baseball dugout at dusk, littered with Phillies blunts wrappers. *Click (noir filter)*. Shazam with the bloody carcass in his mouth. *Click*. The discarded Burger King bag. *Click*. Shazam, one foot on the bloody carcass, ripping through the bag and eating the burger wrappers. *Shazam! Drop it Shazam!*

Michael Goldberg, *Sardines*, 1955, oil and adhesive tape on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David K. Anderson, Martha Jackson Memorial Collection



There's got to be a way to get all of these images into the painting. And once that's done, what about all the sounds? The horn of the train as it pulls into the station across the river. The barking dogs. The sound of my mother's voice. How to know what to keep it and what to leave out?

It reminds me of Frank O'Hara's "Why I Am Not a Painter," in which the poet details the painting his friend Mike Goldberg is working on. O'Hara goes by Goldebrg's studio one day and sees painting with the word "SARDINES." A few days later, O'Hara returns to find the word omitted from the painting. ("It was too much," Mike says.) Later still, O'Hara turns up a gallery and sees the painting again, now titled *Sardines*.

I remembered this mostly because the beguiling idea that the content might flow in and out of a work of art, but its echoes would remain, like the title *Sardines*. Like all the photos I took in the park. Like all the footsteps I took between my house and the park. Like all the references triggered in my discursive consciousness. All this would inform the work in some way. If only I could figure out how to begin it. ●