

*Standard Error (SE)*

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Tørreloft / AGA Works

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*The Prodigal Beholder:  
Dialogues, Reflections, Parables  
Barry Schwabsky*

“I’ve built a house whose roof has tiny holes in it, each revealing a single star in the night sky. Just think! A house whose ceiling is the celestial darkness ablaze!”

“But don’t you get wet when it rains?”

“No, on rainy nights there are no stars to be seen, so there are also no holes.”

\*

She sat with her back to him, writing a love letter. He couldn’t see what she wrote. The sounds of the

pen scratching along the paper were the message he heard. Once he'd heard the message she'd written, she burned the letter.

\*

“The colors you paint with brighten the room!”  
“Really? But the ink you write with darkens thought.”

\*

“He said, ‘I’ve finally made a painting I can stand behind.’ Yes, really. Literally. It wants no wall. He holds it upright while standing behind it, and the best part is, wherever you stand to look at it, he

can hold it in front of you.  
You never see the artist, but  
he's always there behind it.”  
“Yes, but behind the artist,  
there's something unseen  
holding him up too.”

\*

Painter to poet: “I've  
memorized your poem.  
I know it by heart.”  
Poet to painter: “Thank you!  
I remember your painting.  
It's on the tip of my tongue.”

\*

The painting of the painting  
doesn't stop when the  
painter stops painting:  
perpetual motion.

\*

“Are all questions  
trick questions?”  
“Who’s asking?”

\*

Like walking around  
with a sharp, tiny pebble  
in your shoe—just so,  
there are irritating little  
thoughts that get under  
the sole of your brain.

\*

“With this one little word ‘is’  
I can make all the metaphors  
in the world. But painting  
lacks the word ‘is.’”  
“No. It’s there but tacitly.

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It is understood.”

“Not by me.”

“In language, that ‘is’ of yours is an instrumentality for making metaphors, but it doesn’t function metaphorically itself. Painting shows what ‘is’ should be a metaphor for.”

\*

The immobility of an artwork outruns time. Its volatility in perception unsettles space.

\*

“Isn’t the critic rather like a dentist? Always full of words, words, incessant words, as he pokes his instruments around, his probes and little

mirrors, his cures, as if  
he really expected you to be  
able to respond, which his  
attentions make impossible!”  
“ . . . . . ”

\*

Some poems follow you  
along as you go, like the  
moon. Paintings tend to stay  
in place; they wait for you to  
come back to them — the  
prodigal beholder.

\*

“What, they want to *participate*  
in the work of art? As if the  
work would not exist without  
their little action or gesture?”  
“No — as if *they* would not exist

without this donation of self.”

\*

Once, people used to  
say, “In the next life...”  
Apparently, this is it.