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TW Column by Judith A. Ross

An Artist Records Her Past and Present

When I was a child, my best friend and I snuck around our suburban neighborhood, hiding in the hedges, slinking under windows. *Harriet the Spy* was our bible. Unlike Harriet's paved Manhattan beat, however, ours had more poison ivy than drama.

As I got older, my curiosity about other people's lives extended well beyond my small New England town; books and movies replaced first-hand snooping. Yet, as Harriet writes in her diary:

> YOU CAN'T BE TOO OLD TO SPY EXCEPT IF YOU WERE FIFTY YOU MIGHT FALL OFF A FIRE ESCAPE, BUT YOU COULD SPY AROUND ON THE GROUND A LOT.

Fortunately for this aging spy, there's no longer any need to crawl under open windows or climb up fire escapes. I can simply track down my subject's blog.

I started following *Lost in Arles* by Heather Robinson, a featured artist in the Fall 2013 issue of *Talking Writing*, because it evoked my fantasy of living the creative life in France. I kept following because she engages in an active conversation with her readers. Robinson and I have since developed an online friendship, which led to an interview I conducted with her by email last summer for this column.

After two years of reading her thrice-weekly posts, I've noticed that her words have become more precise, her voice stronger. Her earlier posts now seem like the equivalent of rough sketches hanging beside a well-known work of art in a museum. Her photographs, although always intriguing, were smaller, with words often interspersed in between. The mix of text and images on the page didn't strike the eye as one cohesive piece, as it does now.

Robinson's developing body of work indicates why illustrated blogs can be an art form. The medium itself conjures constant shifts in perspective, inviting readers to keep moving forward, from one day to the next. With Robinson's posts, a "spy" reader like me does get a peek at her life. Yet more important, I'm reminded that artists are always in creative motion, too.

In a December 2012 post titled "Leaning Towards Twilight," she follows her opening image (shown above) with four spare paragraphs of centered lines that describe an outing with her dog. Here's an excerpt:

> I walked up the hill that I always do and looked for lines instead of objects to calm my pulse. At just past five, the light was in its laughing run, so I leant into it and let it push me pulled.

After her poetically charged text comes a series of photos that she snapped during this walk.

As a reader, I can practically hear her footfalls as she headed out into the twilight, trusty dog Ben at her side, street lamps glowing yellow under a purple-gray sky. Robinson captures the dread I feel during the onset of early winter as the days get shorter. But by the time the virtual journey comes to a close, I've also gained insights into my own situation and a renewed appreciation for small, ephemeral joys.

It's moody posts like this that take me beyond mere eavesdropping. A life in the South of France that at first seemed like a fantasy instead feels real. Still good, still interesting, but rooted in experiences that she and I share. That's what art does: It educates, fosters empathy, sparks curiosity, and refocuses the lens through which I view the world. It's not gimmicky, and it demonstrates a mastery of the medium.

This summer, when I asked Robinson straight out if she thought blogging could be an art form, her answer was an enthusiastic yes. Then she emailed back:

> Haven't you sobbed until your heart wrenched from things that you have read on blogs? Or really changed the way you thought about one subject or the other? Or been so visually dazzled that the hair stood up on the back of your neck?

I have, indeed. Blogs have incited me to action and inspired me to elevate my own work.

"I have acted, sung, danced, and written poetry—and now I have the blog," Robinson notes. A former New Yorker, she moved to France in 2001 after falling in love with French photographer Remi Benali. The two became a writer-photographer team. Her own work has appeared in *Grands Reportages, Le Figaro* magazine, and *Le Monde des Religions* in France, as well as in publications in Europe and Asia.

Like every committed artist, she is constantly learning. She's become well schooled by assisting Benali with his photography assignments over the years. But while learning to shoot in manual mode for her blog (a process she's still mastering), Robinson says she's had many "photos *ratees*"—or "missed" photos:

> But I found some beauty in them, and it shifted my perspective to be looser and more poetic. And that gave me permission to do the same in my writing. I stretch ideas out, I cut my phrasing short, I make words up! Is it 'too much'? Sometimes, and it definitely isn't everyone's cup of tea, but often I feel like I take my biggest steps forward by not holding on too tightly to a form or an idea.

I'll admit that sometimes those made-up words and grammar ("push me pulled") make my own inner wordsmith cringe. But it's also true that the way she loosens up traditional forms transforms the mundane complaints of daily life. "In a rut," many of us would say of feeling stuck, but Robinson conveys it by referring to her recent travel-less summer as "Suspended in Amber," including photographs of walls and shadows that emit a golden glow.

In "The Jangle of Time's Keys," a September 2013 post, she turns a few moments of waiting by the car with her dogs into a reverie about the history and patina of a nearby building, guiding readers through its nooks and crannies. The photographs evoke the old building's textures and locked-door mysteries so successfully that I've returned to them again and again. She writes:

> I take one last look at the nameless, faceless building, one that becomes more so by the minute with distance until it resembles a blank slate of nothing. And yet I know its tiny secrets and feel quietly reassured by having read through their layers like Braille. 'On and on and on, we keep going,' they whisper. I listened. I nod. I know.

Robinson places her text before most of the photographs in this post as well. Her combination of text and images to build each blog entry is akin to the way a painter or sculptor uses negative space.

Lost in Arles, a record of this artist's creative work and life as it constantly moves forward, also includes her past selves, like pentimento—traces of an earlier painting that leak through the surface of a canvas into a more recent one. Haven't we all set aside or simply forgotten who we were in the past? I have, and yet as I age, it feels more crucial

than ever to touch base with my younger selves.

In inviting readers to witness both her internal and external journeys, Heather Robinson encourages us to pay attention to what we've left behind, to savor where we are, and to anticipate where we might be heading. With her blog, I'm no longer just a watcher on a virtual fire escape; I find myself in motion, too.

Publishing Information

- *Harriet the Spy*, written and illustrated by Louise Fitzhugh (Dell Publishing, 1964).
- "Leaning Towards Twilight [4]" by Heather Robinson, *Lost in Arles*, December 10, 2012.
- "Suspended in Amber [5]" by Heather Robinson, *Lost in Arles*, August 23, 2013.
- "The Jangle of Time's Keys [6]" by Heather Robinson, *Lost in Arles*, September 3, 2013.

Judith A. Ross is a contributing writer at *Talking Writing*, where her "Talking Art" column appears regularly.

"It occurred to me, as it did when I married my husband and birthed my children, that here was yet another event I wouldn't share with my mother. I'd never witness her body's natural aging process—her bones becoming brittle, her hair turning white. She would again be absent, not there to show me the way." —"Porcelain Bones [7]"

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