

NOAH BUCHANAN

In Light of Solitude, 2011
Oil on linen, 24 x 18 in



COURTESY: THE ARTIST

M. ALLEN CUNNINGHAM

The Sky at Her Back

Mildred was dying, and she regarded as a blessing the fact that she'd had a choice in the matter. She'd observed in more than a few friends what the treatments could make of a person's last months. Better to spend the time preparing, she reasoned. All her days, Mildred had made it a practice to see the best in things. Dwight, though, would not take this easy. He would need her help getting ready. Well, what had she ever done but help the dear man?

In the living room they sat together. On the wall beside the hutch hung a set of small oils they'd found in a consignment store bin years before. That day Dwight had decided immediately to buy them. He'd never been a shopper, but among his peculiarities was an impulsiveness which often dismayed but more often delighted her. In one picture was a young boy. He stood in a field, wearing short pants and cap. In the other, standing with the sky at her back, her hair coming a little loose in the wind, was a girl in pinafore and ankle boots. Mildred wondered, was she on a hilltop or at the sea? These pictures, modest and unremarkable, were never the stuff of conversation. No single guest had ever commented on them that Mildred could recall. Herself, she'd always found them pretty enough in their neat white frames and matting. But beyond the thought that something about the paint-strokes reminded her of a Winslow Homer picture that had hung in the dining room of her girlhood home, she'd never much looked at them. How you notice and enumerate things, though, once the rooms begin to drain of time.

From her chair beside Dwight's she said, "Tell me about the boy and girl."

Dwight sat very still, looking at the oils. "They fell in love," he said. "They ran away and got married. They had three children."

Dwight always knew his own mind, even if he never did grow practiced in explanations. His first luncheon in her parents' house, Mildred's elder sister Winifred assigned the seating. Afterward, outside the front door, Dwight seized Mildred's hand. "That will never happen again."

"What?"

"Somebody putting a table between you and me."

They eloped the following month. And all their time together, as she saw it now, had been a running away. How jealously they'd guarded their days. True, this had meant