

ROLAND PETERSEN

Picnic With Red Flower, 2009
Acrylic on canvas, 67 x 85 in



COURTESY THE STUDIO SHOP

book when Pablo stuck it back in his duffel coat pocket. A poetry collection, she recalled. That was it! Verses.

A disagreeable association came to mind. Her sister-in-law, the teacher, reciting some Amado Neruo verses before the apparently admiring eyes of the entire family. And the jokes she was the object of the moment her head was turned. The young folks imitating her. One thing you had to admit, though: her sister-in-law had an exceptional memory. She, on the other hand, had only once made an effort to memorize “The Pirate’s Song,” which, in turn, reminded her of her cousin Ramón’s reciting that poem and challenging her because it was a poem “for guys.”

And then her, making fun of him, triumphant, because having learned and recited the entire poem, with gestures, she asked him, what? “Asia to one side, Europe to the other, and there, in front of him, Istanbul. Where was the pirate?” Humiliated because he didn’t know how to answer, her cousin Ramón never teased her again.

As the scarf grew longer and longer, dangling more and more heavily from the needles between Emilia’s arms, Pablo helped out by providing conversation, coffee from the thermos, and company. They talked about music, places they both knew, corners of the city that had a different meaning for each of them, something that had always fascinated both of them. And they talked about trips, about those Emilia would have liked to take but couldn’t. She had only traveled on her honeymoon and to some popular beach or to the mountains on summer vacations. They talked of the trips Pablo wanted to take: to different lands, exotic, solitary, and remote.

On one occasion they spoke of books, and Emilia seized the opportunity to ask to borrow *Leaves of Grass*, since she hadn’t won the bet. But Pablo didn’t have it with him because he’d finished reading it. He said: “Besides, I won’t lend it to you because you’re not old enough to read certain things.”

Emilia blushed, thinking that the book’s contents might be smutty, one of those with stories of sex that young people often read eagerly and with delight, she imagined. And so she didn’t dare probe further, much less ask about it in her neighborhood library, lest they take her for something she wasn’t.

Spring was advancing with great strides now, not exactly chicken hops; the sun beat down warmer every day

and afternoons grew longer, though in Pablo’s case, his time in the park was ruled by the school bell. For her part, Emilia no longer felt like lingering once he had gone, so she left too, taking the long way home. Gradually she had changed the rhythm of her task.

In the first place, because when they chatted about some subject that really interested him, she laid her knitting aside so as to give her complete attention to the young man’s words. And in the second place, there were afternoons when she never even took it out of the bag. One night she awoke from a dream in which she had waited hours and hours in the park with the scarf finished, and Pablo never came. So she involuntarily slowed her pace as though the end of the knitting would also mean the end of his friendship.

There were times, of course, when Pablo himself caused delays in the completion of the scarf, like the day when Emilia arrived at the park and found him with a worried expression. When she asked him what was wrong, he said tersely: “Problems.” She felt an urge to say, Tell me about it; can I help you? or something like that, but her shyness overcame her and she didn’t say a word, though she didn’t take out her knitting either, as if she was waiting for something.

She acted wisely, because after a while he said, as succinctly as before: “I have to go to a wedding.”

“Oh,” Emilia replied, not knowing if she should ask who was getting married or what the wedding had to do with the young man’s problem.

“Emilia,” he suddenly said, “how are you at dancing? I mean the old-fashioned kind, slow dancing, waltzes, and all that,” and for once it was he who seemed uncomfortable.

For the first time in ages she felt authentically needed by someone, and with a dash of pride and an insouciant air that she emphasized by sticking her hand in her bag and pulling out a package of cookies to offer him, she said: “I won a few dance contests at neighborhood festivals—well, my husband and I won.”

“Then that’s that,” said Pablo, standing up. “Teach me to waltz. My sister’s getting married, and my parents are bugging me and telling me I have to dance a waltz with her and all that stuff. You know, I’m the oldest, and I’m her only brother.”

Emilia looked at him as if she couldn’t understand what she was hearing, but of course she understood, because she