

ROBERT THOMAS

Reading the Cherry Blossoms

I'm one of you: I'm a reader, too. More of us than you'd think haunt the alleys of this city. Of course there are more of just about everyone than you'd think. A third of Americans believe in "lucky numbers." Ten percent believe that Elvis Aaron Presley is still alive, maybe in a secret wing of Graceland recording a forty-five-minute version of "Mystery Train" that will bring democracy back home to America beyond the most radical dreams of Occupy Wall Street or the Tea Party. Is it so hard to believe that one percent of Americans might read *Train Dreams*?

You've noticed I'm carrying a book. You were meant to notice. Its blue cover with the title turning its back on you. I make it easy for even the shyest dork at the dance. How hard can it be to come up with a line like "What are you reading?" I tease him for a while, holding the title snug against my hip, but my reluctance is real. A book is the wardrobe that leads to Narnia, a secret you don't give up lightly. That was one of the first books I loved. Guess what I hold in my hand now. The cover smooth as a silk sleeve and the pages just slightly rough, like the skin underneath. Here, I'll show you my *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

I've read books all over this city, in places you probably don't know. I've read with my legs crossed on a stack of tires at the gas station south of Market—way south—where

they towed me when I got a flat and didn't have a spare. Just once in a library—the Chinatown branch. I ran in to avoid a cloudburst and felt conspicuous because I was the only person reading a book. Everyone was at a computer or reading foreign newspapers on those split wood rods. I've read on the pier at Candlestick Park, shielding the pages from the wind with my back while men baited their hooks with anchovies and prayed for perch.

There are a couple places, though, where you might have noticed me. I've read on a stone bench in Golden Gate Park during cherry blossom season (which seems to last about one morning), and when a couple petals fell on the page, they were so much more than words that I wanted to tear and scatter all the pages into the flood of blossoms on the ground. Once I finished a book on Ocean Beach, long after the warmth had drained from the sun, and I loved it so much I did tear it to shreds and walked into the tide dropping page after page and finally the embossed hard cover into the water because I wanted the book to belong to something bigger than me. Do you know what I mean? It was too early to see any stars in the sky, and the ocean was so large and cold around my ankles.

Robert Thomas's latest book, *Bridge*, is a novel published by BOA Editions. His first book, *Door to Door* (from Fordham University Press), won the Poets Out Loud Prize. His second book, *Dragging the Lake*, was published by Carnegie Mellon. He has received an NEA fellowship and won a Pushcart Prize. He lives with his wife in Oakland and is an alum of UC Santa Cruz.

SHERIÉ FRANSEN

The Heaven We Chase, 2014
Oil on canvas, 80 x 70 in



COURTESY DOLBY CHADWICK GALLERY