

TOM BOTTOMS

Venetian Mirror,
Restaurant "Al Peoceto Risorto," 2012
Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST. PHOTO: RR JONES.

POTTER WICKWARE

The Day of 17

Zhi never lost his temper. If you took something away from him, he didn't get angry or upset. He might be sad but soon he'd forget. He made trouble that summer at Woods Hole when he took the people's bicycles, but Vivian was able to smooth it over.

The professor had an uneasy feeling in his throat. He paused on his way to the elevators and turned toward the fourth-floor restroom. As he pushed open the door, he suffered a spasm of coughing. With some effort, he broke loose a ridge of phlegm that had built up somewhere below the soft palate. He cradled the substance in his tongue and proceeded to the sink and spat.

Zhi's vocabulary topped out at about fifty words. He reached his peak in speech at eighteen months. When he learned a new word he forgot one he had learned before. The psychologists called it turnover of words.

The professor stood in front of the mirror, breathing heavily. His hooded eyes blinked slowly back at him. His forehead gleamed in the fluorescent light. Sparse strands of hair marked off his scalp in sectors, like the carapace of an old tortoise. His hearing aid began to squeal. A postdoc entered and approached one of the fixtures. One of Finley's people. The professor looked away and rinsed his mouth and spat again as he controlled his breathing.

Teachers were supportive, but there were no friends. There were people he liked, but none whom could have been called friends. Vivian taught him how to ride a bicycle. She took him to the long sidewalk at the beach and ran behind him in case other cyclists or pedestrians

came along because he didn't know how to use the brake. It was such an accomplishment when he learned how to brush his teeth. No physical problems, the tongue too big for the mouth, heart trouble, nothing like that, as with Down's.

The professor exited into the corridor. A centrifuge moaned from one of the labs. A freezer alarm beeped. Bergson's poster pinned up in the announcement case caught his eye. Tau plaques. Derivative stuff. A pair of students approaching from the lobby made room for him. Bergson's people. He ignored them.

Oh, my poor boy. An accident. Undoubtedly it was her negligence. But one is yoked to a wife for life. Ah, success is a bitter thing.

Passing the conference room he heard Finley's voice from behind the partly open door. The professor peered in past the jamb. Finley was speaking to a group in the room, students, not all of them youngsters, one a man in his thirties. People take a long time to find themselves in this culture, settle on a life aim. Time is a luxury they think they can afford.

Finley, with wild hair, in a tweed jacket and hiking shorts, was holding forth. "The catalytic base, the direction of water attack, the role of the substrate . . ." The man had been on beta-lactamase for years. Someone in the rear of the room, behind the door, said something the professor couldn't make out. But in reply, Finley's voice began to vibrate in a higher register.

"It's like a Christmas tree covered with ornaments! You shake it here and it shimmers over there!"

There was a low murmur of laughter. Certainly the man had mastered the skills of charisma, of public relations.

"Every day when you come to the lab it's like working your way inside a big Christmas stocking!"

Yes, and how do you support it? A twinge prodded the professor under the breastbone, but he suppressed it. Things have a way of taking care of themselves, he could imagine Finley answering. The results will speak for themselves, a generation later. Or maybe not.

The professor had been against Finley, against advancing him to associate. A man like Finley might fit in at a state school. Not here. It was not the quality of his science, which was mediocre, to put it kindly, that kept him here and helped him advance. No, it was his personal skills, his