

GOXWA “Graffiti of Eternity”

Readers of the mock-modern novel *V* by Thomas Pynchon will remember the Metro, a nightclub on the Strada Stretta (the Street Called Strait) down by the docks of Valletta in Malta, with its statues on the stairway and its ghosts in the cellar, as a favorite hangout of some of the more incompetent seamen of the United States Sixth Fleet. It was no novelistic fancy, the Metro existed in real life, in fact it still exists (though currently empty), and was owned by the father of Goxwa Borg, who spent the first few years of her life in a little room in an apartment just across the street.

Goxwa, with a dot over the G, pronounced Joshwa, is the Old Maltese form of Josephine; in her childhood and on her first passport she was called Josette because that was the name her father used when she misbehaved; when she was a waitress in Boston she was plain Jo.]Her earliest precise memory is of a day when the usual cacophonous mixture of brassy music and drunken laughter and angry shouts down below in the street swelled to a level which blew her out of her bed, and she toddled over to the window and hoisted herself up to the sill to see what was going on. The Strada Stretta is indeed a narrow street, if she had been bigger she could have leaned out and locked fingers with someone leaning out of a window in the Metro house. These houses, like almost all the houses of lovely sixteenth-century Valletta, had a wall of the local creamy-white limestone glazed to a delicate honey shade by centuries of sirocco winds blowing sand over the sea from the Sahara. At the foot of the wall was a great tangle of sailors who had been thrown out of the Metro for over-rowdy behavior and were continuing to punch and kick and howl and trample upon one another in the narrow space outside. Her tiny eyes were fascinated by one particular sailor (perhaps it was Thomas Pynchon himself) who received one mighty blow in the chops that slammed his head back against the wall, and for a frozen moment the head was motionless, as if pinned to the wall, and then it began to slump, black hair white cap and all, slowly down toward the pavement, followed equally slowly by a great blotch of bright red blood. It was an image that was to remain with her when in the course of time she studied art, resolved to become a painter. It might have spurred her on to mere picassoid celebration of violence, but her childish vision went deeper than that. She was to remain forever fascinated by walls, all the world's walls. the silent witnesses of all our pleasures and passions and ceremonies since such things began. "If walls could speak..." goes a common saying. oxwa has been trying to listen all her life. The walls of the narrow rectilinear streets of Valletta were ideal ones to grow up with. They have looked out on an unusually rich pageant of events. When oxwa went down with her little friends to play in the old ruins of the temple at Tarxien not far from her home, they built doll houses of the stones they found lying about, or occasionally they threw the stones at each other, innocently unaware that a few years later Professor Colin (now Lord) Renfrew would prove by radio-carbon testing that these stones were

fragments fallen off the weathered battered but still upright walls of neolithic temples which are the oldest free-standing buildings to be found anywhere on earth (they are more than a thousand years older than the Great Pyramids of Egypt or Stonehenge in England), and they came to be inventoried by UNESCO among the most priceless treasures of mankind, and are now a major tourist attraction in which little girls are no longer allowed to play with stones.

The past seeps out everywhere in Malta, from the prehistoric tombs and altars to the limestone battlements which helped save western civilization twice, by holding out against the cannon-balls of the Turks in the 16th century and the bombs of the Nazis in the 20th. This is the cross-roads of the Mediterranean and look anywhere with the inquisitive eyes of an aspiring artist and you will find traces of all the wandering peoples that have come here on their way to bigger conquests or have stayed here to scratch a living out of the stony soil and build walls and paint pictures and fight each other and die: neolithic herdsmen, Phoenician traders (the Maltese like to insist that the Semitic language they speak today, though full of English and Italian words, is basically ancient Phoenician), Roman legionaries, Christian missionaries (Saint Paul was shipwrecked here, and there might never have been a Christian Church if the local inhabitants had not rescued him from the waves and treated him kindly), Byzantines and Vikings, Arab pirates and Turkish pashas and crusading Knights of St John of Jerusalem, Caravaggio, Napoleon Bonaparte, Horatio Nelson, the U.S. Sixth Fleet. And Malta was more than the past. In the 1960's and 70's it was an exciting present to grow up in as well, an independent nation for the first time in the six thousand years of its history, waking out of the colonial torpor in which sixty percent of the population worked for the dockyards of the Royal Navy and turning into a global showcase of entrepreneurial thriving, with dozens of brand-new industries popping up (with no natural resources to speak of, it has practically no unemployment), Hollywood production crews and stuntmen pouring in (the Titanic hit its iceberg in a Maltese studio), the streets bustling with computer-chip manufacturers and offshore bankers while the rest of the Mediterranean remained on prolonged siesta, a hundred thousand cars registered for a population of barely a quarter of a million (and a total of ten traffic lights) in a territory not much bigger than Westchester County. It was not necessarily exciting, however, for an ambitious young woman growing up in a society which remained deeply committed to conventional, medieval, male-chauvinist family values..Physically transformed into an enormous suburb, Malta remained at heart a cluster of villages huddled around the 365 churches which tower over the land. Woman's place was firmly fixed in the kitchen, the nursery, the church. Goxwa's great-uncle was a priest who worked for years in the Vatican and might, they said, have become a cardinal if he had not preferred to come home to teach Gregorian chant. It was he who insisted to her father that she should not be brought up in the rough brawling world of the Strada Stretta, and at the age of four she was sent off to a boarding-school to be taught a proper English accent (which she can imitatate very well to this day but never uses in serious conversaton) and proper English rules of behavior by nuns.

She had no clear idea of what a nun was, but she was disconcerted to find that the one who greeted her at the school door had a very deep voice and a big mustache. "Are you a man?" she asked, and was disciplined for her insolence. But she has always been persistent, and that very evening she sneaked into the nuns' undressing-room to make her own investigation. She would have been expelled on the spot, but Great-Uncle Albert's high repute, not to speak of the fearsome one of Uncle Cenzu who was goalie on the national sation as well as bodyguard to the Prime Minister, won her a reprieve.

Great-Uncle Albert encouraged her and her sisters to cultivate the arts, and she accepted the encouragement eagerly. She was always sketching, from the day when, aged five, she was attracted by a smell which she later learned was oil paint to the door of a cell through which she could see a nun all in white painting a portrait of the Virgin. Her father considered this a harmless pastime, and allowed her to purchase paints and brushes. He was more impressed by the fact that she was an accomplished swimmer. The Maltese government was impressed too, and made plans to develop her into an international athletic star. For years her father got up at five every morning to drive her to the pool, to train for three hours before school started. A hard regime, with certain satisfactions. Once she went down to the docks with her little brother Chris for a swim in the Mediterranean, and a bigger boy began bullying Chris unmercifully because he stuttered. He was twice as big as she was, but she knew how to handle him: she picked up the clothes he had left neatly folded on the dock and jumped into the sea, he followed, bellowing details of what he was going to do with her limbs once he had broken them off, only to learn too late that she was more at home in the sea than he was, and soon she had his head under water and would have kept it there indefinitely if some passing adults had not intervened. And since most of her training was in the pool of a big hotel, there was a chance to meet movie people of all sorts, like the director Alan Parker who hired as a guide to village life, and to be greeted one day, as she climbed out of the pool, with an enthusiastic "Great backstroke, girl," from a well-built fellow who was revealed by later investigation to be Robert Redford. At the age of 15 she tied the Olympic record for the 100-meter backstroke. Fortunately, the government's budget for Olympic training was limited, and set a high priority on training sons of government officials who had dreams of becoming international tennis champions. So Goxwa never made it to the next Olympics. But she learned, as she says, the value of discipline. She went to art school for four years, though she prudently also took courses in fashion design which she hated.

Malta was soon too small for her ambitions, and at the age of 19 she did what thousands of Maltese boys but precious few girls have been doing for hundreds of years, she escaped abroad -- using traditional techniques by climbing a rope of twisted sheets down from her bedroom window while her father was waiting for her to bring tea in from the kitchen -- to seek her fortune. She headed for swinging London. There she enrolled at St Martins Art School, took odd jobs in restaurants and in

fashion design, met odd people, lived in a mews down the way from Lady Diana Spencer, rebuffed offers from a handsome profligate Arabian princeling who offered her a luxury apartment as well as a well-paid job as a Bunny at the Playboy Club, with a chauffeur to take her home at five o'clock every morning. Returning once from a nightmare vacation in Italy, she spotted and was spotted by, a handsome young man at the Genoa airport, and by the time they reached London they were in love. He later came back to London, and they got married and he took her to MIT, where he was doing postgraduate work dissecting the retinas of turtles, lizards and cats. They lived for some years in a ground-floor apartment on Beacon Hill where they gave great parties, she waited on tables in well-known restaurants, she studied directing at Emerson College where she met people like Dario Fo and other celebrities, she worked on a documentary film about the Amazon rain forest, she almost drowned surfing at Santa Cruz... And all the while she was painting, good art-student work which began to attract some attention. Her first solo show was at the Harvest Restaurant on Brattle Street in Cambridge in 1985. During a scholarship semester in Virginia in , 1991 she began to experiment with the wax-based medium, applied with a palette knife, which she has used ever since and which gives the unique mottled dramatic texture to her surfaces. In 1993 she won a scholarship for a year at the Cité des Arts in Paris, he decided to live in Paris, but all she could find was a dinky apartment which she shared with an Argentine viola virtuoso whose ambition was to rescore Gregorian chant in tango rhythms, an apartment with a view of a giant brick wall across the street, and a classical French lady who would burst it any hour of day or night to make sure no one had burned holes in her sofa. Then a series of lucky chances beginning with picking up a copy of the lonely-hearts-and-realestate magazine FUSAC in a café resulted in her finding a home in the old studio of Pierre Tal-Coat -- another self-taught artist from the back woods, Brittany in his case, who had gone to become President Pompidou's favorite painter -- in the 14th arrondissement with all the magic carpet of the roofs of Paris spread out before her. And there she has been working away ever since, quietly, determinedly, untouched by local cliques or fashions, developing a personal distinctive style which began to attract attention, people began to buy her works.

At her first major show, in 2001, at the Galerie de l'Europe on the rue de Seine, they bought every painting off the walls, and at her second show in 2002 they did the same. Then in December 2003 a major show opened at Axelle Fine Arts gallery in Soho in New York. There was a fire in the gallery the night before the opening, but the damage was quickly repaired. There was a great blizzard on the day of the opening which dumped eight inches of snow on New York. But crowds braved the snowdrifts and the slippery sidewalks to make the show a great success. As would be a tripartite show in New York , San Francisco and New Orleans in May 2005, and a more recent one at the Galerie Felli in the Marais in Paris.. People are attracted by her dynamic patterns of colors which seem both subdued and extravagant, earthbound and winging away to an unknown destination, irreverent, perky and deadly serious. Today's painting may be pastoral, elysian; tomorrow's may be ferociously witty. I know

of no other artist who has produced a Last Supper without a Christ figure, only twelve faces caught at the precise moment when the words are uttered, One of you shall betray me, at that moment of shock and fear and doubt when all those grave disciples stare and gape like little boys caught doing something naughty in a closet. Over the years she has developed a mature style which is a happy marriage of age-old tradition and modern sensibility. The wax-and-oil-based medium she uses demands rapidity of execution because the paint dries quickly. It also provides a more solid-looking coat of paint, one which suggests the permanence of a wall as well as the fragility of what decorates it, and permits a richness and a liveliness of color that recall both ancient Mediterranean art and modern Mediterranean scenery.

It might be the world preserved in the memory of walls like the time-stained time-tattered walls of the Strada Stretta.

Walls, she says, are like masks, simultaneously concealing and revealing the living beings behind them. The backgrounds of her paintings are mottled with splashes of color and seemingly disordered scratchings, And looming out of each them are figures, faces, trees, boats, bowls of fruit, sometimes cracked and spattered, but all of them solid, unmistakable, individual. They may be portraits of old friends or of a dear dead cat. They may be reminiscences of paintings in museums, of Byzantine or Russian icons. But they all have that double nature which it is this artist's special gift to illustrate. They all have had their own separate histories in the hurly-burly of mortal life, and they all also hover in another timeless world where past and present and future are one. It is the kind of art which Yeats found in the ruined palaces of Byzantium, and which he called the artifice of eternity: such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make Of hammered gold and gold enameling To keep a drowsy Emperor awake; Or set upon a golden bough to sing, To lords and ladies of Byzantium

Of what is past and passing and to come.. Yeats of course was a dreadful snob ("Who are all these people, Lady Gregory?" he asked once when every seat at the Abbey Theater was taken to see one of his plays. "What can we do to get rid of them?") and the only people he cared to share his eternity with were drowsy drunken aristocrats. The walls of Goxwa are more democratic, you will see everybody there, from Adam and Eve and the Three Fates down to bicyclists and gossips at yourn street corner, legendary figures, religious figures, next-door-neighbor figures. The walls are accurate observers but they have no concern with specific dates or specific social customs. Their images belong to all places and all times. Eve is poaching in a prehistoric Mesopotamian park but has the outward form of a woman in Munch's Oslo. There is a bird which might have come singing yesterday out of the Amazonian rain forest or out of a wall painting buried for eighteen hundred years in Pompeii. There are faces out of the Fayum tombs in Egypt and Andrei Rublev's Moscow, there is a countrywoman carrying two buckets who walks straight out of Millet's Normandy. There are boatmen on a dark and dreary Nile who might have rowed out of the Book of the Dead. They all are flushed with youth and creased with age, and wherever they are or come from, they belong. Yeats might have called them graffiti of eternity. ©2005

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