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A Conversation with Jessica Jacobs
author of
Pelvis with Distance

Books about Georgia O’Keeffe could fill a small library—three biographies, volumes of correspondence, innumerable monographs, coffee table books, even children’s books about her. So what made you decide to take such an iconic figure as O’Keeffe as the subject of your poems in *Pelvis With Distance*?

Though I can’t remember a time I wasn’t aware of O’Keeffe, I’d mentally filed her work as visual Muzak—eroticized flowers stamped on postcards and totebags. But during a visit to the Indianapolis Museum of Art in October 2011, I came across her *Pelvis with Distance*—a blue sky and bluer mountain range with a section of pelvis surging past the frame—and that seventy-year-old painting knocked me out. There was such power in that compression of space and time, and it was compressed into something that could be held in the hand as easily as she held the small pelvic bone she used as a model. I stood in front of it and began to write in a voice that felt like not quite like my own, from a place of power and longing and loneliness. That day, I wrote a complete draft of what would come to be the collection’s title poem. So I guess, in a way, the subject of this book chose me.

But how would you say your book is different from what’s already out there about O’Keeffe?

After writing that first poem, I read everything I could find by and about O’Keeffe. In these readings, I saw O’Keeffe either lionized or reductively labeled: first as an oversexed ingénue Eliza-Doolittle-d by the famous photographer Alfred Stieglitz; and, later, as a de-sexualized desert “wise woman”—an image she painstakingly curated as a corrective to the initial Freudian-fueled conceptions of her.

The one thing I kept coming back to was O’Keeffe’s correspondence with Stieglitz—over 1,000 pages—which began in 1915 when she was 27 and ended with Stieglitz’ death in 1946. Though discussions of art are woven throughout, the early letters were also wonderfully silly and lovesick and far sexier than I’d imagined. And it was fascinating to watch her grow from a sometimes tentative young woman, flirting and trying to please a much older man, into a confident artist and more-than-equal partner—one who loved her husband but who also pushed back and asserted her view. I tried to use her voice as a guide to get beyond the mythical surface scrim that now obscures her, to find the woman beneath.

Besides reading about O’Keeffe and studying her paintings, you also traveled a great deal in order to do your research firsthand. Could you talk about that?

As a writer, my strength lies far more in close observation than in creating unseen worlds whole-cloth. Fortunately, I’d lived in New York for a number of years, so in a way, I had a sense of the place she was in during the early part

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of her life. But I needed to remedy my spotty knowledge of the Southwest. In December 2011, I hiked and camped in the Palo Duro Canyon, where O’Keeffe had frequented when she lived and worked as a schoolteacher in Canyon, TX, and then I spent a chilly few weeks hiking to the sites of her paintings in Central and Northern New Mexico. The next summer, I returned. At the O’Keeffe Museum Research Center in Santa Fe, I spent time with her letters and photographs, and I was privileged to open drawers and drawers full of her collected materials—everything from a beat-up leather valise she used to carry supplies to collections of found rocks and bones and shells. I also visited her house in Abiquiu and camped to the north in the eerie malpaís that gave rise to her “Black Place” series.

Finally, I holed up for a month to write in a small primitive cabin nestled into an Abiquiu canyon, thirty miles from the nearest town, five miles by foot to another inhabitant. No cell service, no internet, no electricity. All that was mine for the month of June was a propane stove, a crate of books, and a vast expanse of land and time. From my research, I had a detailed outline of the artistic and personal periods of O’Keeffe’s life I wanted to explore, each paired with a painting or photograph. Though I often combined these points, rearranged them, or wrote about something entirely unexpected, this novelistic, narrative-driven approach to poetry was incredibly generative for me. Being that alone for such a long time was one of the more difficult things I’ve done, but I left with the first draft of my manuscript.

The O’Keeffe poems in your collection are braided with an intimate sequence of lyric prose poems titled “In the Canyon.” Did this month of solitude you’ve mentioned give rise to those pieces?

Alone in that canyon, with no one to talk to but my dog and the small band of nocturnal rodents living in the roof, I found myself writing letters directly to O’Keeffe. Again and again, she made difficult choices in favor of her art: even when her work sold well, she expanded and changed the boundaries of her subject matter. She married Stieglitz, and though she missed him when they were apart, she felt more fully herself when in New Mexico and so built a life for herself there. I wanted to understand what inspired her to live like this and what gave her the strength to see it through. These epistolary poems to O’Keeffe—the “To Find You” series—gave rise to the “In The Canyon” sequence.

You see, the whole time I was also asking myself if it was possible to be true to the O’Keeffe I had found in her letters and paintings. How could I imagine and write beyond myself? Each canyon day became a practice in secular kenosis—emptying myself to then fill myself so full of her words and images I could speak in a version of her voice. But, of course, I could not erase myself entirely. Within the vessel of her experiences, I stowed my own concerns, explicating them with a distance and perspective I often find difficult when writing autobiographically.

But these personal concerns would not be ignored. They bubbled up to create the “In the Canyon” sequence—poems that charted my time in the canyon and fixated, as I did, around two primary concerns: a renewed sense of spirituality, arising from what amounted to a month-long period of intense isolation, and thoughts of a woman I had loved and lost and how I might find my way back to her.

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