



**At the Cape Ann Museum in Gloucester, Massachusetts, looking at Fitz Lane's *The Western Shore with Norman's Woe*, an 1862 oil painting of a cove, water, a few clouds, a boat. It is distinguished by its palette, by what critics in the nineteenth century would have called middle tint—that is, the grays, the browns and blues and dull brick reds, not bright; the colors that do not sing out for your attention; the colors you might not notice if you are not looking for them. They are the gray curve of Lane's rocks, the enormous expanse of ochre sky. They are the putty of buildings that dominate a canvas but do not draw the eye. Middle tint makes the shadows in your painting; without it, your canvas would look flat. Standing here in this museum before Lane's great landscape, you might**

not linger on the middle tint, but without it, you would not be able to see the bright sharp clouds, the curve of stark black earth that holds your eye.

John Ruskin, the nineteenth-century art critic, said that the truly skilled painter devoted most of his canvas to middle tint. In a great landscape, there is “excessively small quantity, both of extreme light and extreme shade, all the mass of the picture being graduated and delicate middle tint. . . . The middle tint is laid before the dark colors, and before the lights.” The painter should follow nature, said Ruskin; nature’s landscapes are mostly all “middle tint, in which she will have as many gradations as you please” and only there in those miles of humble, sleeping green and brown does nature “touch her extreme lights, and extreme darks, isolated and sharp, so that the eye goes to them directly, and feels them to be key-notes of the whole composition.”

Perhaps middle tint is the palette of faithfulness. Middle tint is going to church each week, opening the prayer book each day. This is rote, unshowy behavior, and you would not notice it if you weren’t looking for it, but it is necessary; it is most of the canvas; it is the palette that makes possible the gashes of white, the outlines of black; it is indeed that by which the painting will succeed or fail.

“Upon the strength of the middle tint depends, in a great measure, the general look of the picture,” says one nineteenth-century handbook for aspiring artists. “The management of light and shade, as relates to a whole,

ought to be always present in the student's mind, as it is from inattention to this alone that a work is often destroyed in its progress."

Maybe now in the middle, after the conversion, after ten years, on into twenty years, faithfulness is about recognizing that most of my hours will be devoted to painting the middle tint, the sky, the hillside on which no one will comment, the hillside that no one, really, will see. Maybe this is prayer most of the time, for most of my life; I will barely notice it; you will barely notice it; against this landscape of subtle grays, occasionally I will speak in tongues, occasionally I will hear an annunciation.