

Giacometti

by Gary Percesepe

Giacometti reclines on the couch. He smokes my last cigarette and points to an object behind me, a spare structure of thin uprights and horizontal beams in which there is something like a flying bird, the backbone of an animal, a female figure, and a hollowed out spatulate shape with a ball in front of it. He tells me that only a few things had happened in his life but some of them he had felt deeply.

"I don't know by what means my father came to terms with his grief," he says. "His sadness was of the kind that is patient but without hope."

My girlfriend enters the room. She crosses herself and kisses me shyly on the cheek. Then sits at Giacometti's feet. His shoes are caked with mud. She plays absently with the mud, scraping it from his shoes with her long unpainted fingernail. Giacometti ignores her, and keeps speaking.

"The artist conserves a splinter of ice in the heart," he says. "After I left my village of Borgonova in Switzerland I was always a tourist, wherever I was."

Giacometti reaches down to play with Maura's hair. In a corner of the dark room stands a statue of Maura. Her body is elongated, thin as a nail and as big as a cigarette pack. When Maura asked why he had done this he had said nothing, but shrugged his slender shoulders. To me, later, he had said, "When I look at a woman the longer I look the thinner they become. I work by paring away what is not essential, work until one touch more and things vanish. But do you love her, this Catholic girl?" I nodded my head, yes. "Very much," I said. Giacometti sighed. "I have no thoughts on this," he said. "All my thoughts are in the clay."

It was spring break in Cambridge. We had traveled two days and two nights to be with him in his studio. There were letters of introduction, which he ripped up and burned in his furnace. Yet when he had answered the door he acted as though he knew us and

had been expecting us for some time. Later he told us it was as if we had always been there.

"The artist must be taken in by his own tricks," Giacometti says. "He must begin by pleasing himself. This is essential. His mouth must be the first that drops open in surprise."

When he says this Maura reaches out her mud streaked fingers and caresses his cheek. She throws open the wide window. In the gloaming, a yawning face appears in the clouds. The sky is painted with a bruised lead and sepia tone that will afterwards haunt me, as too this room, with its objects alive and dead at the same time.

Maura is in his lap. She kisses him, repeatedly, but he makes no acknowledgement of her urgent Irish kisses. He only takes her hand and wipes away the mud.

Now even the farthest windows have gone dark. And it appears that the dark needs us, wants us for itself. We want to lie with Giacometti in his unmade bed on the floor in his studio.

The week before he died I confessed to Maura that I didn't think I could stand it without him. And she said to me, "I've lived with death my whole life. And I know that the people we love we carry with us, always. They are part of us."

