

Textiles and Minimalism

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Willard Metcalf, *My Wife and Daughter*, 1917–18.

Love is never lost or wasted. It is the very fabric of the universe.

TRAVEL-WEARY, EMILY, SEVEN-YEAR-OLD Gwyn, and I arrive at the San Francisco airport. My in-laws meet us and drive through pouring rain down to Golden Gate Park for lunch. I'm glum; I've just spent four hours crammed on a plane with a needy kid, and as annoyed as I am with Gwyn, I'm more annoyed by my own impatience. The city's hills and traffic make me ill. I don't want to be here for Thanksgiving. That's the real issue; much as I love my mother-in-law, she's not my mother, who died six months earlier, and I'm helplessly, irrationally angry. I want to sit at my mother's table, set with linens she sewed and ironed, spread with a meal she cooked.

Truth be told, were my mother alive I'd have chosen to have Thanksgiving with friends. My longing and regret and the complexity that was

my mother are one big fury I take out on everyone, even on this dreary city, even, doubly, on myself.

We park, race through the rain, and duck into a bustling Dim Sum place where the windows are fogged up. Emily's brother has a table for us. Food magically appears—sticky buns with pulled pork, crispy shrimp, garlicky asparagus, the aromas so deliciously potent they make me dizzy. My mood rises with the steam. But this magic pales next to Gwyn's desire, after the meal, to go home with her grandparents, whom I suddenly adore. Emily, Emily's brother, and I have an open afternoon in San Francisco. It feels like the sun's broken through even though it's still pouring.

We go to the de Young for a Frank Stella exhibit—gargantuan and geometric and brilliant—followed by Danny Lyon photography where I lose

myself in images of forgotten and marginalized Americans through the decades. They remind me of everyone forgotten and marginalized today, each black-and-white face so intimate and open that they stretch me open, too, or maybe I feel them more poignantly because our country is in a spell of having forgotten our simple, shared humanity. Regardless, I am having an immersive, adult experience of sustained engagement that feels religious in nature; it's so different from my normal interrupted life. Even the museum is itself stunning with its bright, clean angles. I wander around, awed by the unexpected gift of it all.

My brother-in-law wants to see an exhibit on textiles and minimalism and I think, *Oh, yes*. I carry my mother's love of textiles, I sleep under her quilt and wear the scarves she knit, and I set our table with runners she bought for me in Guatemala and France and Japan. *Let's go*.

The exhibit is in a single, long room. Fabric is hung in flat cases slicing the space on the diagonal. The far corner has a few more pieces glassed in. All the lighting feels protective and reverent. There are two dozen works of art, max.

"These objects reflect the core principle that there is a beauty in simplicity that is both universal and timeless," I read. I begin with a large one on the right, a modern artist's multilayered rendering of a weave—beautiful but a bit too self-conscious—and then work my way down one side of the display. Here's a nineteenth-century Indonesian woman's shoulder cloth—rich red and orange, utterly simple. Here's a ceremonial shawl from Peru, a Zen Buddhist robe, an American double-weave black-and-white coverlet popping with optical illusions. Moving from each to each I go from awareness that my mother would have loved this exhibit to the eerie sense that my mother is in this exhibit. She's in the contemporary Japanese piece made with strips of fabric and indigo dye, that rich blue that steeped the four

years my mother spent in Tokyo with elegance; she's in the Amish quilt so like every geometric quilt my mother ever stitched, only this one has its requisite intentional mistake and therefore is perfect, while my mother's quilts were so perfect they were consequently, sadly, mistaken; she's in the simple embroidered leaves on the apron from Guatemala, where my parents welcomed grandchildren into our family. My mother invariably held a needle and thread in her hands, cross-stitching flowers. I'm crying now. When I cleaned her sewing desk, I found a small box with her thimble collection: a grass thimble from Japan, a gold-trimmed ceramic thimble from Sweden still in its plastic display case, two Matryoshka thimbles smiling from under their babushkas, a silk embroidered Korean thimble—this exhibit reduced to its tools. There were also the three leather thimbles she actually used over the years, black with hand grease, pocked with holes, one torn, and it seems to me that the mother I knew was an incomplete and clouded self through which she tooled a more magnificent being. My mother loved domestic beauty, women's art, what clothes bodies and gives warmth, and here is everything she poured love into, lifted up with more elegance, mystery, and confidence than she managed in her seventy-six years.

I move back up the other side of the displays, thankfully hidden from the museum guards because now I'm openly weeping. My mother is here. She is this exhibit. Her hands wove this cloth, her body wore it, her aesthetic curated these pieces. My mother is here, unfettered, her love in death having transcended the limitations of her art. She is universal and timeless; she is simple beauty. I weep before this hanging cloth; I weep writing this because my mother is still her particular self with all her loves, just distilled down to an essence. Love is never lost or wasted. It is the very fabric of the universe. ❖