

The woman walks across the large lawn, over a stream where trillium grow and into a meadow. Her long skirt billows in the wind. Under her arm she carries a large blue blanket. She unfolds the blanket, extends her arms and the blanket balloons, then waves, then settles on the grass. She sits on the edge of the blue square and looks at the summer house she loves, just opened for the season. She is waist high in grass.

I know by the trees, the gentians at her feet, the quality of light, that it is spring. This is the Berkshires and spring comes slowly here, not like in the cities. Here there is some holding back, the sense that we are on the verge of something, a promise of some sort. There is something vaguely sexual in the air. In the laugh of the woman.

She breathes deeply and sighs. She is in love with light. Her eye caresses each blade of grass, each lavender shadow. She stretches her legs out. There are ants, I'm sure, the first ones of the season, now near her ankle. Does she hum a song? Something about her suggests to me she's not from our time. What? A glance? A way of dressing? I think she sings a Bach cantata and its high alleluias rise up and float across the field. Her daughter waves to her from the edge of the field, calling her name, calling her back over and over to this world.

The woman smiles as the girl bounds down the steep farmhouse steps and runs across the lawn to her, carrying a basket. The man emerges from the house crosses the lawn, the stream, the meadow to his family. Only the older daughter is missing now. One suspects, I suspect, she watches from far off, like any teenager. Soon she too will descend the steep stairs and join them for a picnic in the meadow. There is asparagus from the garden, salmon and fiddleheads. Chèvre and pears.

One wants to keep this family well. Seeing them this way from some distance I can tell they are talking, but I can't make out what they say. They laugh and their laughter is carried toward me on the breeze. The teenage daughter, holding bunches of lilacs, crosses the stream now, crosses the meadow, kneels down, putting her arms around her father's neck, and gives him a kiss. The family come no closer than this, they hang back, keep their distance. But I have faith in them. And so for now the light is what I notice most, and certain familiar gestures. The jug of wine being lifted over and over. The mother pointing to the sky. The younger girl pinwheeling around the family doing cartwheels, her legs blurring. The man reclines in the purple grass. I can almost hear their mild laughs, their swoonings. The mother saying "comet" under her breath. I can almost smell the evening as it arrives.

They are still just a lovely picture, a word picture of a family really, picnicking in the meadow near their summer house in Massachusetts, though it is not yet summer. And while the figures appear static, they are not in fact —it is only my wish for them: that they sat together, that the light remain. Dusk comes quickly. Still there is laughter, sighs, rapture, a jug of wine, enough love to last.

I cannot guess yet how remote I, the onlooker, I the one who is telling their story, have become, how cautious. If there is a clue in this scene of something about to go awry, I do not see it. I overlook it. Or perhaps I prefer not to see it. If I could tilt this tableau, flip it so that the house and the lake are nearest me and the family becomes small in the meadow, perhaps what I would see is the city of sand collapsing now, the overripe sunfish gone to the bottom of the lake for the night, the white house ghostly and luminous in this light. But something prevents me

from doing this. Only one thing stands out now, dwarfing everything—the family, the beautiful pink of the salmon’s head in the grass which is so green, the Berskhires themselves, which look like an ocean in this light—oddly, in all of this there is only one thing that cannot be ignored—and that is the enormous starburst in the arch over the farmhouse door.

The Art Lover, a novel
Carole Maso
A New Directions Classic, 1990