

JOEL BROUWER

Vermeer's Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window

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Where did they hide her that winter
 firestorms guzzled every molecule of air
 and thousands drowned on dry land, breath
 lifted from their chests like white silk
 from a conjurer's hat? No book I know
 will say who used a liter of gas to carry
 and bolt of cloth to cloak her
 as the city wailed for evacuation and bandages,
 but here she is—tight diadem of curls,
 neck of lit milk—reverie
 uninterrupted. While blockbusters
 crushed the Frauenkirche and burned
 the bahnhof full of refugees, Delft light
 glowed on through her open window,
 set her reflection neatly in the glass
 fast as a pearl in a ring, and scorched
 the page she reads to an ache of white.
 A love letter. We know by the bowl of fruit
 spilling toward her in a lavish rush.
 She's the single reason we've traveled
 to "Florence on the Elbe," this city beaten
 to coma by bombs, then Soviets, just now
 beginning to wake, and we've been with her
 just seconds when a student appears,
 sets up an easel, and draws from his case
 a nearly-finished copy. He begs pardon.
Quite all right, we lie. Through a window
 we see the steel racks on Töpferstrasse

where the bomb-blackened arms and heads of saints
who once glared down from the cathedral's roof
now lie tagged like dinosaur bones.

A waste of canvas. I wish I knew the words.

The student's window is a golden heimat ooze,
and who could read by that light?

Vermeer's is unblinking, blinding white.