

Allow Yourself to Say, Yes

An Editor's Note

One thing I know about art: *It does not care what you think.* I am paraphrasing a line by the late A. R. Ammons, in his poem “Coon Song,” in which the poet confronts those readers who want only to have their expectations satisfied. Will hounds devour the raccoon, or will the raccoon escape? Art does not care, either way. What is it, then, art wants?

Look closely at the drawings in this issue by Elizabeth “Grandma” Layton. Art delights in undoing our expectations; it turns on us. Do these drawings show the degradation or the courage of old age? In Mary Grimm’s story “Jane, Dreaming,” is the narrator Jane, talking about Jane? Is Jane dreaming about trying to go to sleep? What about Robert Day’s story “My Uncle’s Poor French”? Is the father the father? Is he dead, as the narrator claims? These writers and artists are not just playing around; they are demanding our attention in a new way.

“This playfulness,” says scholar Richard Rorty, “is the product . . . of the power of language to make new and different things possible and important—an appreciation that becomes possible only when one’s aim becomes an expanding repertoire of alternative descriptions rather than The One Right Description.”

When Elizabeth Layton, from Wellsville, Kan., first began to draw, in 1977, she was 68 years old. It was then, staring into

a mirror to “trace” her own contours, she began to win a 35-year struggle with depression. The housewife and grandmother began to see herself also as a feminist, a peace activist, a *femme fatale*, a crusader. Not one of those things was “The One Right Description.” If you look at this art, you will see how wrong it is; how utterly right it is.

We asked Don Lambert, who discovered Layton’s drawings in 1977, to describe his initial reaction to the work and to help us mark the 25th-anniversary of her first solo exhibition—the beginning of Elizabeth Layton’s public life—which Don does later in this issue. I believe that the triumph in Layton’s art is the same triumph of each successful poem, story, or drawing: It refuses to choose between the grandma and the “Seeker of Truth.”

Literary or visual, art puts the reader, or viewer, on the spot. That’s the fun of it, to find yourself in the middle of a poem or story, unsure, if only for a moment, of the rightness of anything. Or the wrongness. As A. R. Ammons said when faced with the dilemma, “What I choose, is youse: baby.”

—Robert Stewart