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In Favor of Ramps at Art Schools

By Steven Jackson

“You’re an aesthete, Arthur,” she said to him as he smiled and pointed at one of Van Gogh’s self-portraits.

My mother named my brother Arthur to assure that he would “possess a certain nobility.” before he had been born, my parents and I knew he would make use of his name. Even now, after his sixteenth birthday, it is one of two words he repeatedly slurs when he’s hungry or tired. Four years ago, my mother introduced him to a word which would stick with a fervor, a title into which Arthur directed all of his talents.

“You’re an aesthete, Arthur,” she said to him as he smiled and pointed at one of Van Gogh’s self-portraits. Several months later, after parrot-like attempts to recreate the word, Arthur added it to his title: “Arthur the aesthete,” became the title of which the family was proud. Arthur senses this pride and smiles, babbling, drooling, eyes crossed at the ceiling.

I wheeled him to a gallery once, and he lived a thousand strokes of varied brushes and temperaments. Reproductions of visions created by passion and care, anguish and pain, danced and withered before him and tears pooled in his eyes. The effect of the blur which this caused humored Arthur, and he began to laugh and snort. His senses take in and hold that which should be shared, but he hasn’t words, he hasn’t a canvas before him, demanding inspiration, inviting visions. As he watched shadow and balance in the displayed work, his surface tension quivered, spasms; he smiled with crossed arms, tilted head, and large tongue. I love him for this.

Now, at home, he stares. A bad oil hung years ago to conceal a crack yields to dismal light. The television plays. The radio in the kitchen crackles. Arthur -- my brother, the aesthete, critic-cannot create, but the milk he has spilled on his tray has balance, good contrast, and form at which he smiles.