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Alternative Lives; Benjamin Robert Haydon (1786-1846) and the Two Blue Glasses

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Two Poems

CONSTANCE URDANG

Alternative Lives

I could not live like a vegetable in the country.

—Isabel Burton

I could live like a vegetable in the country:
Brushing off crumbs of sleep, the rich loam of dreams,
I'd open one sly eye to the far-off, indifferent sky, swell
In the dark soil, fatten under the moon;
I could live earthy as a potato, or climb toward heaven
On a trellis, like these beans; why wouldn't
Such a life be sweet?

I can picture

Myself in a white apron, shelling peas in a dooryard,
Scattering grain for ducks, gathering eggs
Still warm from the nest. September
Would be the best time, picking apples
From gnarled trees where they'd been ripening
Secretly, in their own time, all summer long.

Benjamin Robert Haydon (1786-1846) and the Two Blue Glasses

When his eyes went bad, and the world
Turned blue, then yellow, Monet went on
Painting what he saw, a yellow and blue
Profusion; crippled Renoir strapped
A brush to his arthritic wrist; and I myself have seen
My painter friend, supine on a sickbed,
Transfer vision after vision
To incandescent paper.

It is Mr. Bryant's opinion,
In which the doctors concur, that the disproportions
In Haydon's painting, so difficult
To reconcile with his knowledge of anatomy,
Are accounted for by his manner of work, and by
The growing blindness which he thought to hide
Behind double spectacles, peering at a distance
In the model's direction, then running to the easel
And, nose to canvas, painting. His subjects were loyal.

As for the miraculous transformations
Of the two blue glasses, posed through endless days
While the doctors immobilized my friend,
They will illuminate a wall
Prepared for them in some provincial city.