

Sixty years ago, Tom Forrestall was a young husband and father struggling to make a living as a painter. Just four years past his graduation from Mount Allison University, he was trying to find his own style of painting, searching for his voice while taking whatever sorts of art-related jobs he could find: private art lessons, portrait commissions, editorial cartooning for the local paper, even taking occasional jobs doing sign painting. He wanted a career as an artist and was working incessantly towards that goal, but whether lasting success was before him was an open question. If he had given up he certainly wouldn't have been unique. Many aspiring artists, whether through active choice or force of circumstance, turn to other, easier professions at about the stage of life Tom Forrestall found himself in that autumn of 1962.

Of course we all know that he persevered. Almost sixty years later Forrestall is a renowned painter, his work held in many major public and private collections, a member of the Order of Canada, and, in his home province of Nova Scotia, a household name. He found that voice he was seeking all those decades ago, and he still paints every day—a working painter until the day he is unable to work.

"I was quite distracted doing editorial cartoons and teaching," he recalls of 1962, and in looking at *Hunter*, it is perhaps not surprising that he chose to depict a moment of freedom. The image depicts a solitary walker in the countryside, alone with his thoughts, far away from the clamour of jobs and cares. The setting—thickets near the edge of a field, woods in the distance—suggests bird hunting, the hunter strolling, alert for the sight of a grouse in the treetops. Painted in a loose, exuberant style with thick blocks of colour and sinuous lines, *Hunter* shows Forrestall still experimenting, still on the hunt for his own style. Hints of the Group of Seven—A.Y. Jackson for instance—can be discerned, as well as that of later landscape painters, Goodridge Robert's paintings of New Brunswick in particular. But Forrestall's landscape is more expressive than the work of these elders, the dense thicket that makes up the foreground seems to writhe into the air, while the barren field along which the hunter walks flows like a muddy river. There are other allusions as well. Despite the stylistic differences, perhaps Forrestall was remembering Alex Colville's similar subject in his *Dog, Boy and St. John River* of 1958. Colville was an important mentor for Forrestall and a reference to the older painter's work would come as no surprise.

*Midday Nap, Near the Fountain* counters a sense of repose to the purposeful seeking of *Hunter*. A figure lies stretched out on a grassy bank which runs down to a pond with a large ornamental fountain. On the picture's left is a large, equally ornamental plant, some sort of palm tree, out of place in this obviously northern landscape (as evidenced by the foliage showing early fall colours on the opposite side of the pond). Where *Hunter* presents a landscape that one could escape into, the more domesticated space here offers shelter rather than discovery. The land seems to envelop the sleeper, almost cradling him. *Hunter* depicts a scene of scrub woods bordering farmlands, a typical sight outside of Fredericton, New Brunswick, where Forrestall was living in the 1960s. *Midday Nap, Near the Fountain* shows a park quite close to his long-time home and studio in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, where he has lived since 1972. The fountain in Sullivan's pond is quite recognizable, and while the palm tree seems fanciful, locals will know that there actually are palm trees planted around the pond. Forrestall has compressed the scene, focusing disparate elements into a cohesive composition.

One would hunt in vain for the actual vantage point of this painting, but it feels accurate, nonetheless. It is also contemporary. The fall foliage against the green grass, the figure's clothing (sweater but no jacket), both situate the painting in the autumn of the year. And the medical mask lying on his chest, crumpled as if it has been tossed there, roots it in our uncertain times. The figure sleeping next to the remains of his solitary lunch also wears the same kind of apron Forrestall does while painting, and the obvious self-referentiality of the image—the artist taking a break from a painting (this painting?) for a quick lunch and presumably short nap—adds to a retrospective quality to the work. There is also a nod to Alex Colville in this painting, both in technique and subject matter. The sleeper's right hand seems to float over his lap, hovering in a space as so many of Colville's figures do. And the subject itself—lunch outside in a modern-day pastoral setting—subtly quotes Colville's serigraph *Fête Champêtre*, 1984, itself a reference to Colville's Renaissance influences. The lonely sleeper in *Midday Nap, Near the Fountain* has presumably found what *Hunter* was seeking and can confidently reminisce on a journey that, while by no means over, is winding to a conclusion. That bird has long since been in the pot. The contented grace of the sleeper lets us assume that it was delicious.

Ray Cronin