



## Inheriting Light

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My father worked in darkened theaters using light to construct landscapes, interiors, and cities. He breathed life into characters and stories through lamps that gave off the heat of the sun.

When my father’s designs required equipment that didn’t yet exist, he built what he needed — strange devices that resembled the machinery of a nuclear physicist. Theatrical lighting instruments and accessories grew into a brisk side business that included hundreds of different gobos: thin discs of glass or cut steel that cast abstract textures and familiar images onto a stage; the dappled shape of an elm, snowflakes, a formidable Chinese dragon with its ribbon tongue waving across a glowing scrim. The summer I turned eighteen, I earned a secondhand hatchback by counting gobos at my father’s London office. An inventory of endless metallic circles, each one descriptively

named — Bare Branches (Reversed) or Reflected Water 4 or Barbed Wire 2 — and tucked into a translucent paper envelope that smelled faintly of glue. Each with the capacity to reveal a forest, make rain, propel a flock of gulls, or erect the Eiffel Tower in so many photons.

Gobos, like most theatrical tools, require comparative dark. During a production’s most intense stretch before opening, my father assumed a mole-like existence. He would rise early, depart for the theater before dawn, and work all day at a production desk set up across the orchestra stalls. Someone would run out to get food at the appropriate mealtimes. My father would make his way home at midnight and fall into bed for a few hours before getting up to do it all again.

To recover from working in prolonged darkness, filtered air, and the artificial color of lighting gels, my father periodically took

to the water: real water — vast, salty, and full of life. Through spaciousness my father refueled. He became a part-time oceanic nomad on a succession of sailboats, one of which he painted black and christened *Caravaggio* in homage to the Italian painter’s ability to “do wonderful things with light.” The Mediterranean, with its reliable sun and tideless teal water, became a second home.

Growing up, I was immersed in my father’s life during summertime visits and school vacations. Because of the miles between London and Boston, and because I did not share a permanent home with my father beyond infancy, the time I spent with him was as brilliantly lit and carefully observed as an actor in a follow spot. I wanted to assume a place in my father’s life and within his family, but I held tentatively to the edges, scrutinizing everything and scribbling notes in my subconscious.

## Fons et Origo

for Eugene Fracchia, 1939 - 1988

People would say things like:

Oh, you designed the lighting for such-and-such restaurant?

That's where I got engaged!

You lit so-and-so? I love to go there. The lighting makes me look so good!

Sweet. But not what I wanted to hear.

In interviews if someone asked:

What would you like to light, that you haven't yet?

I'd say — a freeway.

You'd stay awake on my stretch of interstate —

there'd be color, gesture, inclination — flux.

You'd wonder how did this happen? Turn around.

Want to do that again.

Or the marsh grass at Louse Point:

To illumine those cattails kinetic — (in secret) — without permission;

washing indigo to vermilion to scarlet — psychedelic light trip — for one night only.

(Then run) like a tagger.

My friend Eugene was the one who asked:

Want to light my restaurant?

I did. Everyone came — the place caught fire. A star was born.

There I go again — dreaming gesture, inclination —

waking to fire, star instead.

My encounters with illumination:

Exquisitely framed tableaux recalled

in a museum, like Vermeer still lifes on a wall;

still, all I really want is the ultra-white Dutch door, upper-half

ajar, slice of fluorescent blue bleeding through.

**CELESTE GAINEY**



Searching for familial inheritance, I try to impose clichés onto my father and his work — light as metaphor for truth, for life, for God — but they are threadbare and he shrugs them off easily. My father is a pragmatic atheist who acknowledges only that his work is an emotional response to what's happening on the stage. I consider what it means to create art that is fleeting, ephemeral as the changeable sea. My father's work was a performance. When the heavy velvet curtains swished closed across a stage, there wasn't anything left. No gilt-framed canvases hanging in museums. Photographs can't capture the kinetic painting of light, and video is even more inept. What survives of my father's art? The images in the mind's eye of his audience, his equipment, the shiny awards that become amusing paperweights.

In contrast, I cling to words on a page, words that might outlive me if I squeeze them tightly enough, as if intense pressure will transform the carbon of my print into tiny diamonds. Yet I admire the existential pleasure of letting go into process and impermanence, a lesson ritualized by Tibetan monks in the complex sand mandalas they create and blow away. I pause. Perhaps my father dwells more easily in presence than I do, despite my practices of sitting and breathing and metta. The idea takes me by surprise. This realization is an unexpected gift, an illuminated map of the geography I want so very much to traverse. 