

by Maira Kalman

# Poor Rembrandt

It drives me crazy that  
he died a pauper,  
buried in a pauper's grave,  
debts, worries, sorrows.  
Not a good end.  
But then, what is a good end?  
Let's not dwell on that,  
what else do we know?



HE LIVED HERE.



HE SLEPT HERE.



# REMBRANDT'S POLISH RIDER

Xavier F. Salomon

I look  
at you and I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world  
except possibly for the *Polish Rider* occasionally and anyway it's in the Frick  
which thank heavens you haven't gone to yet so we can go together the  
first time . . .

—Frank O'Hara (1926–1966), 1960

Frank O'Hara included these lines in one of his most lyrical poems, "Having a Coke with You," written for his lover, the dancer Vincent Warren, in 1960, and published in *Lunch Poems* five years later. In the painting referred to, a handsome young man on horseback rides across shadowy lands toward the unknown. Atop a rocky hill, a peculiar domed building looms over the figure, and other buildings seem to climb the hill. A waterfall may be on the left. A body of water—a river or a lake—divides the path between rider and town. A small fire burns on the opposite shore, and a few tiny figures gather around it. The rider sits purposefully on a gray-white horse richly adorned with a red bridle, gilt decoration, and a leopard skin over its back. Though emaciated, the animal has a certain nobility as it marches forward. The youth, dressed in red trousers and a white coat, conveys a similar sense of resolve, melancholy, and sophistication. He wears yellow leather boots and a vermilion cap decorated with fur and is armed with two sabers—one at his left side, the other under his right thigh—and a bow (at his left) and quiver crammed with arrows (at his right). With his left hand, he holds the reins; with his right, he flaunts a war hammer, his elbow projecting into the viewer's space. While trooping forward, the rider turns as if to look back.

Fig. 1  
Rembrandt van Rijn  
Detail of *The Polish Rider*,  
ca. 1655  
Oil on canvas  
46 × 53 1/8 in. (116.8 × 134.9 cm)  
The Frick Collection, New York

Fig. 2  
 Albrecht Dürer  
*Knight, Death, and the Devil*,  
 1513  
 Engraving, black ink on cream-  
 colored antique laid paper  
 9 7/8 × 7 3/8 in. (244 × 187 mm)  
 The Frick Collection, New York

The painter captures this movement, shaping the head in a tense boundary between shadow and light.

The work Frank O'Hara adored is the painting known as *The Polish Rider* by Rembrandt van Rijn (fig. 1), and it has been on view at The Frick Collection since the museum opened to the public in December 1935. O'Hara is one of many writers to have been inspired by the canvas. In 1939, Marguerite Yourcenar (1903–1987) referenced the painting in *Coup de Grâce*, a short novel set during World War I in Livonia and Kurland. Based on a true story, *Coup de Grâce* is the self-portrait of a soldier, Erick von Lhomond, and of his relationships with his boyhood friend Conrad de Reval and Conrad's sister Sophie. Following an attack by the Cossacks on Erick's and Conrad's squadron near the village of Novogrodno—"towards evening the last of the enemy horse disappeared, crossing the rye fields, but Conrad, shot in the belly, lay dying"—Erick recalls:

when I think of those last days of my friend's life I evoke, almost automatically, a picture of Rembrandt's not widely known, in the Frick Gallery of New York. I discovered it by chance on a morning of snow-storm when I had nothing else to do, and the impression it made upon me was that of a ghost who had acquired an accession number and a place in the catalogue: that youth, mounted on a pale horse, half turning in his saddle as he rides swiftly on, his face both sensitive and fierce, a desolate landscape where the nervous animal seems to sense disaster ahead, and Death and the Devil infinitely more in attendance there than in Durer's engraving.<sup>1</sup>

Yourcenar's drawing of a direct visual link between Rembrandt's rider and the knight in armor in Albrecht Dürer's celebrated print *Knight, Death, and the Devil* (fig. 2) would be taken up by art historians of the subsequent generations. The writer Iris Murdoch (1919–1999) is also known to have visited the Frick a number of times to admire *The Polish Rider*.<sup>2</sup> The American curator and collector Sam Wagstaff (1921–1987) is said to have claimed that of all the figures he had seen in paintings, the one he would have most liked to be was the youth in *The Polish Rider* (no doubt this had something to do with Wagstaff's Polish ancestry).<sup>3</sup> Artists have also long admired Rembrandt's painting. In 1910, Walter Sickert (1860–1942) saw the canvas in London and declared it "one of the perfect masterpieces of the world."<sup>4</sup> About 1917–18, the young Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966) copied *The Polish Rider*

