

The Immortals

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Rick Bursky

In the painting of the young couple kissing
on a bench in a museum hallway
I'm the subject of the portrait
hanging on the wall behind them.
I'm wearing the blue velvet jacket
of an eighteenth-century Prussian cavalry officer
standing beside a white horse that's too large to be accurate.
Though I'm rendered with lifelike precision. Obviously,
I couldn't have served in the eighteenth-century Prussian cavalry.
I don't speak German, and was born centuries late.
I'm not the first person to pay
a famous artist to be in a painting.
Though I wanted to be the man being kissed.
Unfortunately, my famous artist didn't believe
a girl that lovely would kiss me in public.
I offered photographs of previous lovers
but unless one was kissing me on a bench
in a museum hallway his answer was no.
That's unfair. Otherwise I'm pleased
with the painting. The couple kissing,
I suspect, also paid to be in the painting.
Though I'm certain they were strangers.
Her eyes are open, peering at where
we might stand admiring the painting.
Instead of resting on his cheek, the palm of her hand
is pushing, proving that while she desired
to live forever in art, her desire didn't include him.
I once fell thirty-seven feet
from a railroad bridge into a river.
Riding the ambulance to the hospital
is when I decided to pay a famous artist
to put me in a painting.

What brought the woman to the painting
is something I've often fantasized about.
The oxygen mask's elastic strap
pinched the back of my neck.
I kept the discomfort to myself.