

Denise O'Hagan

The Icon Painter of Constantinople

After the Virgin Eleousa or Virgin of Tenderness, c. 1131

His instructions had been clear,
but the kernel of the idea, which had long lain
limpid as an innocent pebble in the pond of his mind
was clearer still.

Night after night he sat,
face dipped in shadow, back curved as a walnut,
pouring his vision onto a panel of wood

birthing passion from pigments
ground to a dust-fine powder bound with egg yolk,
dripped in with the precision of an hourglass

until he felt himself falling
through translucent veils of wash, the slow accumulation
of what would be perceived as depth and shadow—

the build-up of a tiny cheek nestled into hers,
the maternal round of her shoulder, his upturned foot, his arm
laid around her neck, her earth-dark eyes.

He felt the slow spread of gold
harden, burnished to a sheen as though he could see

his own anguished candle-licked face peering back at him

and no longer knew where his paintbrush ended
and they began, or when he'd last had his meal
of salted fish and bread from the tavern next door,

nor even held his wife close,
or felt the other earthly hooks that tugged at him, hopelessly
—belonging, as he did, to the delicate production
of a luminous tenderness.