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My Father's House: On Will Barnet's Painting

Thomas Dumm

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In *My Father's House*, the political philosopher Thomas Dumm explores a series of stark and melancholy paintings by the American artist Will Barnet. Responding to the physical and mental decline of his sister Eva, who lived alone in the family home in Beverly, Massachusetts, Barnet began work in 1990 on what became a series of nine paintings depicting Eva and other family members, as they once were and as they figured in the artist's memory. Rendered in Barnet's signature quiet, abstract style, the paintings, each featured in full color, present the ordinary and extraordinary aspects of a twentieth-century American family.

Dumm first became acquainted with Barnet and his paintings in 2008. Given his scholarly focus on the lives of ordinary people, he was immediately attracted to the artist's work. When they met, Dumm and Barnet began a friendship and dialogue that lasted until the painter's death in 2012, at the age of 101. This book reflects the many discussions the two had concerning the series of paintings, Barnet's family, his early life in Beverly, and his eighty-year career as a prominent New York artist. Reading the almost gothic paintings in conversation with the writers and thinkers key to both his and Barnet's thinking—Emerson, Spinoza, Dickinson, Benjamin, Cavell, Nietzsche, Melville—Dumm's haunting meditations evoke broader reflections on family, mortality, the uncanny, and the loss that comes with remembrance.

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