

## Telling Stories

*For Charley*

You don't mind talking to strangers  
to pass the time. Freely admitting  
you were not born here.  
From back East, originally, but that  
was a lifetime ago, man. A life-time.  
You don't mind telling them you've still got family  
in the cities. But you make sure to note  
your family doesn't matter nearly so much as your heart  
which beats strongest out here.

You've even come to like the curious ones,  
the ones who aren't afraid to ask.  
Young women, mostly, coming up to you as you paint,  
staring intently at your desert pastels  
as if critiquing the textures.  
But you know they're waiting for you to turn, to talk  
and when it pleases you you oblige them. No harm  
in giving a story to entertain. It's what they expect.

You don't mind hinting at the darkness of it all,  
the things you've seen, if they only knew.  
You shake your head and they might pat your arm  
in sympathy. If they only knew.  
Later, you imagine their blue-green-brown eyes  
nearly filling with salt at the thought of whatever it is  
you run from. They, too, are running  
and wanted to hold you tight.

It's easiest this way: letting them think what they will.  
It doesn't slow your progress  
through the desert towns. One after the next,  
hitching rides with your easel and oils wrapped  
tenderly, tucked in the center of your pack.  
At dusk when you're dropped on Main Street you'll unpack them  
and begin the work again. Perhaps this is the town,  
the one with the stranger who stops to stare  
but doesn't have to ask.  
She will recognize the bigness of your sunset reds  
and know just what you meant.

*R. Avy Harris*