



Rafael's Good-By

When the Paintings Return

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Uncompressed Thinking

The Witness I Cannot Be

I am not trying to know what no one can know. I am trying to stay close to the possibility that, near the end, the life of a great artist may become clearer than ordinary life allows, because the body no longer has the strength to distract him from what he has already placed outside himself.

I wish I could say I was there.

Not there as a doctor, not as a priest, not as a biographer waiting for a last word, and not as a historian checking the date, the room, the cause, the witnesses, and the documents. I wish I could have been there in the only way that matters for what I want to understand: quiet enough not to disturb the room, close enough to see his face, and open enough to see what perhaps no one else in the room could see — the moment when Rafael's creative life came back to him before leaving him forever.

Because I do not believe that the final hour of a great artist is filled only with the body. The body may be failing, the fever may be rising, the attendants may be frightened, the sheets may be wet, the voices may be lowered, and the city outside may continue in its ordinary indifference. But somewhere under all this, or above it, or perhaps inside it, another event may be taking place. A painter does not live only in the flesh that breathes. He also lives in the faces he has made, in the

hands he has arranged, in the bodies he has lifted or lowered, in the children he has placed against their mothers, in the women he has watched too carefully ever to forget, in the men whose power or intelligence he has forced into stillness, and in the unfinished works that still look back at him with the pain of interruption.

So I do not want to imagine Rafael's death as the departure of a physical human being alone. I want to imagine the good-bye of the master, of the young man totally consumed by art, of the painter who had lived through his paintings with a force perhaps greater than the force with which ordinary people live through their days. I want to imagine that near the end, when everything secondary had fallen away, the works came back to him, not as public masterpieces, not as commissions, not as objects now belonging to churches, palaces, museums, collectors, catalogues, or reproductions, but as living constructs, each with its own enclosed life, each with its own tragedy, each with its own emotions, each knowing that this was the last chance in this world to be with the one who had made it.

I do not imagine formal conversations. I do not imagine Rafael speaking in polished sentences, or the paintings answering like characters in a theater. That would feel false. Paintings do not speak that way. They speak by continuing to do what the painter made them do forever. A child keeps reaching. A woman keeps looking. A saint keeps listening. A body keeps being carried. A pope keeps sitting under the burden of his own power. A friend keeps restraining speech. A young man keeps turning his face with the dangerous knowledge that he is beautiful. A Madonna keeps holding a child she cannot release. In that room, these actions would not be symbolic anymore. They would be present. They would be happening again, in real time, for Rafael alone.

And there would be nothing to hide, because at that point there would be no embarrassment, no correction, no need to improve the story, no need to explain away desire, ambition, vanity, tenderness, exhaustion, pride, or sensuality. The paintings had lived with him. They had known him at the age at which he made them, and now they had come to meet him at thirty-seven. Each of them carried two Rafaels: the young Rafael who stood before it in the heat of creation, and the dying Rafael who could no longer touch it. Between these two men — the maker then and the maker now — the paintings had lived their separate lives, but not fully separate, because the life he placed in them had never stopped being tied to him.

They Would Not Enter by Fame

If I had been there, I think the first thing I would have understood is that they did not enter the room according to fame. Fame is for us. Fame belongs to later viewers, museums, historians, postcards, books, and crowds. Rafael's paintings would not have returned in the order in which the world admires them. They would have returned in the order in which they belonged to his life.

The Young Architecture of Order

The first presence I see is young, almost architectural. It is The Marriage of the Virgin. Rafael is about twenty-one again, though the man in the bed is thirty-seven, and the distance between those two ages suddenly becomes visible in the room. The young painting does not bring drama. It brings order. It brings the belief that space can be arranged, that people can stand where they belong, that a ceremony can unfold under a calm sky, that a temple can rise in the background like proof that the world has a structure. The figures do not rush toward Rafael. They continue to stand in their measured places, and this is how they speak to him. They remind him of the time when harmony was still not a memory but a promise.

The dying Rafael looks at this young Rafael inside the painting, and he must feel both affection and sorrow. There is no need to laugh at the young man's faith in order. That faith was necessary. Without it, perhaps none of the later freedom would have been possible. But at thirty-seven he knows more than the twenty-one-year-old knew. He knows that bodies do not always remain in harmony, that patrons have tempers, that Rome tests every gift, that love does not arrange itself in perspective, that power sits heavily in chairs, that grief has weight, and that death arrives without asking whether the composition is ready. Still, the young painting is not naïve in a foolish way. It is innocent in the way a beginning must be innocent, before life teaches the artist how much disorder beauty will have to absorb.

Mothers, Children, and the Human Weight of Tenderness

Then the mothers and children begin to gather, not one by one at first, because they have always belonged to one another in Rafael's life. Madonna del Granduca, Madonna in the Meadow, Madonna of the Goldfinch, La Belle Jardinière, the Canigiani Holy Family, and later The Alba Madonna and Madonna della Seggiola come as a human weather of mothers, children, knees, hands, shoulders, small bodies leaning against larger bodies, children held, children allowed to move, children protected and already not fully protectable. I know their subjects are sacred, but I do not want to begin with that. At Rafael's deathbed, I imagine them first as human scenes, because no sacred image can live if the human body inside it is false.

These mothers must have entered the room softly, but not sentimentally. They are not sweet decorations. They know what mothers know, or at least they feel what mothers feel before they can say it. The child presses into the body of the mother, and the mother adjusts almost invisibly. The arm must hold. The shoulder must bear weight. The face must look down, outward, or inward, and in each small movement there is the truth that a child is never only a child. The child is warmth, burden, future, danger, joy, and loss before loss has happened. Rafael, when he painted them in his early twenties and then in his Roman maturity, was not merely repeating a religious type. He was learning how tenderness behaves in the body.

If I were watching this scene, I would not see them as paintings on walls. I would see the children moving in the way children move even when painted still. The child with the goldfinch holds a small sign of suffering without knowing what he holds. The children in the meadow occupy that terrible human interval when the body is innocent and destiny is already nearby. The mother in La Belle Jardinière bends not as an icon, but as a woman who has learned that attention itself is a form of love. Madonna del Granduca enters more quietly, almost out of darkness, with deep tenderness that does not need a landscape around it. The Canigiani Holy Family brings a fuller domestic density, more people, more relations, more of the living complication of family life, where affection is never only one line between mother and child but a network of glances, bodies, generations, and shared presence.

What would they say to him? Not "You painted us well." Not "You made us famous." They would not speak in the vocabulary of praise. They would remind him of hours in which he watched the living world more carefully than people usually watch it. They would return to him the fatigue of the model holding a child too long, the small impatience of the child, the turn of a wrist, the pressure of a hand, the difference between a mother who displays a child and a mother who actually holds one. They would show him that his tenderness was not an idea. It had passed through the real weight of bodies.

And Rafael at thirty-seven would see the younger Rafael inside each of these mothers. In the early ones he would see the painter still close to the serenity of Florence, still discovering how calm can be

made convincing. In *The Alba Madonna* he would see a larger, more monumental circular tenderness, a world gathered around the mother and child with a fuller confidence. In *Madonna della Seggiola* he would see something almost private, almost crowded with warmth, the mother and child held so close that the circle feels less like a composition than an embrace. These paintings had lived with him for years, not in the same room perhaps, not physically, but in the more serious sense that the problems they solved never left his hand. Once an artist has learned how a mother's arm holds a child, that knowledge remains in the body of the painter.

A Young Woman Turned Inward

Then Saint Catherine of Alexandria comes, and she does not enter with the mothers. She comes as a young woman turned by an inward force, graceful but not passive, devotional but still intensely human. I do not want to overstate the saintly content of the painting. What I see is the human body at the point where feeling bends it toward something beyond ordinary life. She has youth, softness, and movement, but she is not merely available to the eye. She turns away from being possessed by the viewer. Her grace has direction. She tells Rafael, without saying it, that beauty can look upward and still remain a body.

Perhaps this mattered to him more than we can know. He had seen women as sacred, maternal, sensual, noble, mysterious, and near. But Saint Catherine is neither mother nor lover in the ordinary sense. She is a young woman whose body has become the visible trace of an inner decision. At the deathbed, she would not come to explain doctrine. She would come to remind him that he had once painted a human figure at the instant when the body and the will are no longer separated.

When Grief Becomes Weight

Then the room darkens with human weight, and *The Entombment* enters with the quiet of the mothers broken by the work of carrying a body. This is a different truth. Here tenderness has lost its power to prevent loss and has become labor after loss. Men and women gather around weight. A body must be lifted, supported, moved. Cloth tightens. Arms strain. Faces do not float above grief; they are pulled into it. Rafael was about twenty-four when he painted this, young enough to be ambitious and strong enough to test himself against tragedy. He must have known that he was attempting something larger and harder than the calm Madonnas. He was asking whether beauty could survive the pressure of a dead body.

At thirty-seven, he sees the painting from the other side, and the imaginary conversation becomes almost unbearable. The carried body in the painting is not Rafael, but now Rafael is the body that will soon be carried away. The men in the painting continue their terrible work, and he understands what the young painter could not fully understand. When he made the painting, grief was something he could organize, intensify, and hold within the discipline of form. Now grief is no longer only a subject. It is entering the room for him. The action he painted is no longer safely inside the panel. It has crossed the distance. He is lying there, not yet carried, but already belonging to that knowledge.

And yet *The Entombment* does not come to frighten him. It comes because it has a right to be there. It was one of the moments when Rafael entered the heaviness of life and did not turn away. Every artist who loves harmony must one day meet the fact that bodies become helpless. The *Entombment* tells him that his art had already stood there before him. It had gone into the place where tenderness can no longer save, but still refuses to abandon.

Interruption and the Larger Room

The unfinished Madonna del Baldacchino follows, not as a failure, but as interruption made visible. I imagine this one coming less confidently than the others, because unfinished works have a different kind of pain. They do not possess the final stillness of completion. They remain open, altered, historically complicated, stopped by circumstances that later viewers can study but never fully feel. For Rafael, at thirty-seven, this painting would have been almost a mirror. The world might have expected more decades from him. The line should not have stopped. The hand should not yet have been removed. But life, like a commission, can be interrupted before the artist has given it its final balance.

The unfinished painting does not accuse him. It simply stands near him as one incomplete thing beside another. In that moment Rafael himself is unfinished, not because his work is insufficient, but because his life has been cut while still in motion. There is mercy in this visitor, because not everything has to be complete in order to belong. Some works remain partly open, and perhaps some lives do too.

Then Madonna of Foligno arrives with a larger public air, with the sense of a great composition and a world more complex than the intimate mother-child pictures. But again I want to see the human event beneath the religious one. I see people looking, presenting, interceding, standing in relation to something larger than themselves, and I see Rafael learning how to arrange not only tenderness but attention. In the earlier Madonnas the human relation is immediate: mother, child, family. Here the human beings are placed inside a wider field of dependence. They look, gesture, wait, and hope. Rafael had entered Rome by then, and Rome was not only beauty. It was hierarchy, ceremony, scale, pressure, and the need to make private feeling legible in a public image.

The painting says to him that he learned to move from the room to the world. He learned that tenderness alone would not be enough, because the artist who makes small circles of intimacy must also learn to stand before larger spaces where many eyes, many authorities, and many needs enter at once. Rafael listens, and perhaps he remembers the Roman years not as a sequence of triumphs, but as a sequence of rooms where he had to become larger without becoming less tender.

The Men of Rome

Then the men enter. Portrait of Pope Julius II comes first, because power rarely waits politely. But this power is seated, tired, inward, and mortal. The pope does not arrive as an office. He arrives as a man whom Rafael had made unable to hide completely behind office. The robe is there, the chair is there, the authority is there, but the face is not ceremonial in the simple sense. It is heavy with thought, age, suspicion, pressure, perhaps impatience, perhaps loneliness. Rafael, still not old, had painted an old power in a way that made power human.

At the deathbed, this portrait must have carried a strange comfort. The powerful man in the painting and the dying artist in the bed are no longer so far apart. Both have bodies. Both are contained. Both must submit to being seen. Julius had sat before Rafael, and Rafael had found the human being inside the papal presence. Now the portrait returns the favor. It looks at Rafael and finds the human being inside the master. It reminds him that art can take even power and make it mortal, not by humiliating it, but by seeing it too clearly for costume to protect it.

Beside Julius comes Castiglione, and the room becomes more restrained. The Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione does not bring power but measure, intelligence, friendship, and self-command. He is a man who could speak, but the painting holds him just before speech. He does not need to demonstrate himself. His dignity is not loud. Rafael must have known him not only as a

sitter, but as a mind, as a presence belonging to a world where grace, conversation, judgment, and restraint mattered deeply. In the room of death, Castiglione does not console by emotion. He consoles by form.

I imagine Rafael looking at him and remembering not only the face, but the atmosphere of a friendship between cultivated men, the kind of friendship in which much is understood without being spoken too directly. Castiglione tells him, by continuing to be Castiglione, that not everything must be released into disorder at the end. A person may be shaken and still remain composed. A soul may approach departure without becoming theatrical. For Rafael, whose paintings so often made intensity look calm, this must have felt like recognition.

Then Bindo Altoviti turns toward him, and youth enters the room in a sharper way. Bindo is not a child and not an old man, not sacred, not maternal, not grieving. He is beautiful, magnetic, aware of being seen, and not fully surrendered to the viewer. The portrait carries the electricity of youth when youth has begun to know its own effect. For Rafael, this would be a difficult visitor. The young man remains at the age of the painting. Rafael has moved beyond him toward death. The sitter is protected by the painter's gift, while the painter himself is not protected by anything except what he has made.

Bindo says nothing, but the turn of his face is almost enough. It asks Rafael to look again at the cruelty of painted youth. The artist can preserve another person's beauty, but he cannot preserve the body that preserved it. Perhaps Rafael feels, in Bindo's presence, not jealousy, but something more complicated: the tenderness of the maker toward the preserved image, and the knowledge that art gives permanence outward, not inward. Bindo will keep turning, keep shining, keep being young, while the man who caught that youth is leaving the world.

When Sound Withdraws

Then Saint Cecilia comes, and sound withdraws. She does not enter like the others. She changes the air. The instruments, the broken music, the lifted attention, the listening beyond ordinary listening — all this makes the deathbed room quieter without making it empty. Cecilia does not need to speak because her whole being is organized around hearing something that others cannot hear. Again, I do not want to make her primarily religious here. What matters to me is more human and perhaps more final. A person near death begins to leave the sounds by which life usually announces itself: movement, cloth, whisper, breath, the little noises of people who do not know what to do. Cecilia brings another listening into the room, a listening that is not panic and not explanation.

Rafael, who had spent his life making things visible, is now visited by a painting about what cannot be fully seen. She tells him, by being silent, that art may prepare the senses not only to receive the world, but also to surrender it. The painter who had watched faces, hands, and bodies so intensely is now asked to listen without possessing. That may be one of the gentlest and most severe gifts any of his works can bring him.

The Women and the Honest Room

Then come the women, and the room must remain honest. I do not want gossip to enter with them. I do not want the smallness of rumor to reduce the largeness of what Rafael saw. La Velata and La Fornarina are not footnotes to scandal, and they are not merely beautiful women serving the story of a famous man. They are part of his creative life as fully as the Madonnas, because the sacred Rafael and the sensual Rafael are not two different painters. The same eye saw both. The same hand made both. The same young man who could paint maternal tenderness also knew the warmth of

fabric, skin, breath, exposed flesh, guarded eyes, and the charged distance between painter and sitter.

La Velata comes with softness, fabric, dignity, and nearness. She is covered and revealed at once. The veil does not erase the body; it slows the eye and makes looking more serious. She has the calm of a woman who has been given form without being made cold. At the deathbed, she does not arrive as an abstract female portrait. She arrives with the memory of sittings, adjustments, fatigue, patience, perhaps trust, perhaps tension. The fabric had to be arranged. The hand had to rest. The face had to remain alive while becoming still. Rafael at thirty-seven sees not only the finished woman, but the living person before the painting closed around her.

Then La Fornarina comes, and with her the intimacy becomes more dangerous because the distance seems smaller. She is more direct, more bodily, more openly present. There is self-possession in her, and a kind of knowledge that does not need to explain itself. She has been surrounded by stories, but in this room the stories fall away. What remains is the human fact that Rafael saw a woman's physical presence not as something outside art, but as one of the forms through which art becomes alive.

Here, nothing should be hidden. At the edge of death there is no reason for embarrassment. If sensuality entered his art honestly, then it belongs in the room honestly. The body is not the enemy of the sacred; it is one of the places where beauty becomes real enough to matter. Rafael does not need to apologize to these women, and they do not come to accuse him, but they do come with the burden all painted women carry. The living women moved through time. They aged, changed, disappeared, or were forgotten except through the images. The painted women cannot do that. They remain at the age Rafael gave them. Their beauty does not decay, but it also does not escape.

This is one of the quiet tragedies of the room: Rafael can die, but they must remain available to the eyes of strangers.

The Works That Already Know the End

Then The Alba Madonna and Madonna della Seggiola, if they had not already fully entered among the earlier mothers, come closer now with a more Roman warmth and completion. The circle in them feels important. A circle does not simply arrange figures; it holds them. In The Alba Madonna, the circle is spacious and monumental, as if tenderness itself had learned a larger architecture. In Madonna della Seggiola, the circle is more intimate, almost pressing the mother and child toward us, making the embrace feel near enough to breathe. These works do not talk to Rafael about doctrine. They talk to him about enclosure, about the human need to hold and be held, about the impossible wish to keep what one loves inside the arms.

At thirty-seven, Rafael understands the impossibility of that wish. Nothing can be held forever, not by arms, not by circles, not by paint. And yet the attempt to hold is not meaningless. It may be the most human gesture art preserves.

Then the late works begin to gather with the knowledge of ending. The Transfiguration is not gentle when it comes. It is too large, too divided, too close to the end. It contains radiance above and human disturbance below, and though its subject is sacred, the human truth of it is what matters here. The upper world is lifted, luminous, almost beyond touch, while below there are bodies, needs, confusion, gestures, people who do not know what to do with suffering. That division must have felt to Rafael like the structure of his own last hour. One part of him was being pulled away; another part remained among the living, among hands, faces, helplessness, unfinished requests, and the ordinary disorder of people who still have to continue.

Because The Transfiguration was still so near him, I imagine it not as a visitor from the past but as a presence still warm from his hand. It does not come from far away. It is almost still in process, still carrying the pressure of recent decisions, recent fatigue, recent ambition. Rafael sees himself in it not as the young painter who believed in perfect order, but as the master who had learned that no radiance cancels human anguish simply by appearing above it. The painting does not tell him that everything is resolved. It tells him that unresolved things may still be held in one vision.

This may be why it gives him strength without giving him easy peace. He is not allowed to pretend that the world he leaves is healed. He is not allowed to pretend that his own work has completed everything. But the painting shows him that he had reached the point where human confusion and upper light could exist in the same field without either being denied. That is not an answer. It is a capacity, and perhaps for a great artist near death, capacity may be enough.

The Madonna Who Must Wait

Only after all this can the Sistine Madonna come. She cannot enter earlier, because if she comes too early she takes the room before the others have had their last chance. The world may put her first, and the world may have its reasons, but in Rafael's final room she must wait. She has waited for centuries in our memory; she can wait a little longer beside his bed. When she finally comes, I do not want her to arrive as fame. I do not want the famous angels to arrive first, or the public adoration, or the endless reproductions, or the museum certainty that this is the Rafael everyone knows. At his deathbed, fame would be almost an insult. She has to come stripped of that.

She comes first as the woman in the painting, holding the child, moving forward, grave, tender, and not decorative. Her face does not flatter the viewer. The child is not simply sweet. The whole image seems to know more than it says. But Rafael knows what no viewer can fully know. He knows how she was made. He knows where the living observation ended and the image began, where the woman before him became the Madonna, where the child became not only a child, where softness almost became weakness and had to be strengthened, where beauty almost became too easy and had to be deepened by seriousness.

Then the strangest and most intimate thing happens, at least as I imagine it. She is no longer only the Madonna. She is also the woman who once posed, or the memory of several women, or the concentrated form of womanhood and motherhood that Rafael had gathered through years of looking. I do not know her age. I do not know whether, in that final room, she should appear young because the painting has kept her young, or aged because she has already begun to carry the future centuries of being looked at. Perhaps both are true. Perhaps Rafael sees her as she was when he was painting her, alive in the studio air, and also as she is at the moment of parting, still outwardly young but inwardly burdened by immortality.

The Conversation I Wanted to Reach

This is the conversation I wanted to reach from the beginning, not a conversation in words, but the last recognition between the painter and the being he made most impossible to release. He sees himself as he was then, younger, full of force, still able to stand before her and demand from his hand the exact relation between living woman and sacred image. He sees himself now, thirty-seven, weak, finished, no longer able to touch the surface. And she sees both Rafaels. She sees the young master who watched her with the total hunger of attention, and she sees the dying man who must now leave her behind.

There is a touch of sensuality in this, and there should be. Without it the scene becomes false. Before she was a sacred image, there was breath, skin, posture, fabric, fatigue, warmth, proximity, the human patience of being looked at, the strange intimacy of letting another person transform one's presence into form. Rafael could not have made her live if he had not seen the living woman deeply enough. But there is also tragedy in this, because the transformation that made her immortal also trapped her. The woman could move on. The painting cannot. The woman could age. The painting cannot. The woman could step away from his gaze. The painting must keep receiving the gaze of the world.

And now he is leaving her to that world. Others will come. They will admire her, study her, misunderstand her, sentimentalize her, reproduce her, pray before her, pass by her, use her angels, rank her, explain her, and sometimes look at her so carelessly that looking itself will become a kind of damage. But only Rafael knew the private origin of her calm. Only he knew how much living woman had to remain inside the Madonna so that the Madonna would not become empty. Only he knew the exact tenderness and the exact restraint by which she had been made.

He can leave, and she cannot.

What the Works Return to Him

And yet I do not imagine Rafael leaving in horror. I imagine, perhaps strangely, that after the torment of this recognition, he relaxes. Not because he is indifferent to her being left alone, and not because the tragedy disappears, but because he sees that his life has not remained trapped inside his fevered body. His life has gone outward. It is in the young architecture of *The Marriage of the Virgin*, in the mothers and children, in the goldfinch, in the meadow, in the garden, in the dark tenderness of *Madonna del Granduca*, in the human density of the *Canigiani Holy Family*, in the strained arms of *The Entombment*, in the unfinished openness of *Madonna del Baldacchino*, in the public scale of *Madonna of Foligno*, in the aging power of *Julius*, in the restraint of *Castiglione*, in the youth of *Bindo*, in the listening of *Cecilia*, in the veiled dignity of *La Velata*, in the warm danger of *La Fornarina*, in the unresolved height and disturbance of *The Transfiguration*, and finally in the Madonna who remains when everything else in the room has begun to fade.

Perhaps this is what every great artist is given, if mercy exists for artists: a moment when the creative life returns in total clarity, not as success, not as reputation, not as a list of works, but as presences that have lived with him and now come to say good-by. They do not ask to be corrected. They do not ask to be defended. They do not ask to be explained. They come as they are, with everything included, nothing hidden, nothing silenced, nothing left for revision. They carry his youth and his maturity, his tenderness and desire, his discipline and ambition, his unfinished questions and his completed forms.

If I could have been present, I would not have wanted to interrupt that room with knowledge. I would have wanted only to witness it. I would have wanted to stand there quietly and later say that Rafael did not die alone, because his paintings came back to him, and that the final good-by was not between a man and the world, but between a creator and the beings he had made alive enough to outlive him.

After the Good-By

At the very end, the others recede, not because they matter less, but because one presence must remain closest. The Madonna stays by him. He sees her young, because that is how he made her. He sees her aged, because being left inside beauty is its own aging. He sees the woman who once

breathed before him, the mother who holds the child, the image the world will keep, and the living construct that knows he is going where she cannot follow. Rafael, at thirty-seven, leaves almost peacefully, perhaps even with something like happiness, because the works have returned his life to him and shown him that death cannot take back what he had already placed outside himself.

But she remains tormented, not loudly, not theatrically, not in any way that would break the beauty he gave her. Her torment is quieter and deeper. She remains because he made her remain. She remains with the child, with the curtain, with the clouds, with the eyes of strangers waiting in centuries not yet born. She remains after the fever, after the room, after the bed, after Rome's night, after the hand that made her can no longer rise.

I do not know how to leave this room either. I entered it as an imagined witness, knowing that I had no right to call the scene a memory, and yet, after standing there with him and with them, I feel that pure imagination is not the right word either. Perhaps the deepest works of art create their own kind of evidence, not documentary evidence, not historical evidence, but human evidence — the evidence that a painter once saw life so intensely that the forms he made can still return to him, and to us, with the force of living beings.

Rafael leaves, the Madonna remains, and the paintings, having said their good-by, turn back toward a world that will never know them as he knew them.