

★ **The Perfection of Things**

Peter Nash

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In his atmospheric, evocative *The Perfection of Things*, Peter Nash uses a small canvas to frame far larger themes.

Neurasthenic American professor Adam Rebeira has come to Petrópolis, Brazil, in hopes of finishing a nineteen-years-overdue biography of Stefan Zweig, the Austrian writer who was one of the most internationally known names in literature in the 1930s. It was to Petrópolis that Zweig and his wife fled in 1942 to escape the Holocaust; there, they committed suicide together.

Rebeira sublets an apartment overlooking the Zweig house. Uninhabited since the suicides, the house becomes Rebeira's obsession. He conducts midnight trespasses to wallow in the abandoned space.

The story is told as an extended reverie, deliberately slow and often dreamlike. Petrópolis, surrounded by mountains, jungle humidity, and colonial architecture, seems as magically redeeming as Zweig believed it to be. Gracefully drawn metaphors abound, as when the narrator confesses to trying to capture Zweig's past as his own, saying, "Of that I stuff my pockets full; each night I cram it like soft, sweet pastry down my throat."

There are also riskier passages: paragraphs that run for pages, single sentences that occupy most of a page. Numerous quotes from Zweig's work appear, including several pages from Zweig's biography of Marie Antoinette. These unconventional choices build the book's emotional atmosphere and illuminate themes of dislocation, loneliness, and despair.

As the book unfolds, the narrator's backstory slowly comes to light; each revelation is a tiny bombshell. Other characters are also tantalizingly revealed. Besides Rebeira, the only physically present main character is Lurdes, the landlady whose deep nature and deeper perception don't come completely into view until the end. Other characters are ghosts or memories, but nonetheless fully present.

The Perfection of Things is a beautifully braided story, simultaneously lush, melancholy, and moving.

SUSAN WAGGONER (September/October 2018)

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