From *The Frog King* by Garth Greenwell

There was so much to see, too much; I walked around in a daze of looking. We moved in and out of churches crowded with paintings, huge and smoke-darkened, the ceilings crammed with color, I got tired of trying to see them. R. was full of zeal, he wanted to see everything—who knows when we’ll be back, he said. The dilemma of vacations, the exhaustion of the last chance. Everything became unremarkable, nothing moved me, it was all a blur of perfection. I wanted to get the bus back to the hotel, I wanted to rest my eyes. But just one more thing, R. said, paging through the guidebook we had bought, and he led me to a small museum, a house converted after the artist who had lived in it had died. There were just a few rooms, open and uncluttered, the walls painted mercifully white; it wouldn’t take long for R. to make his circuit. I followed him barely looking at the paintings, which were small and unremarkable, or remarkable only for their plainness. They were quiet and unambitious, minor, I thought at first, still-lifes and modest landscapes, interesting mostly for having so little to do with everything else we had seen; the painter had spent his whole life in this city but seemed indifferent to the examples it offered, to the virtuosity and gorgeousness it prized. I found myself looking longer, looking more slowly, I let R. walk on ahead. The same subjects appeared again and again, household objects, plates and bowls, not filled with flowers or fruit but empty, set against a plain background. I stopped in front of one that showed a pitcher and cups, white and gray on a tan surface, behind them a blue wall. Something held me there looking, something made me lean in to look more closely. The cups were mismatched in color and in shape, the pitcher rose oddly elongated behind them, the whole painting was eccentric, asymmetrical. There was a kind of presence in the painting, I felt, I could sense it humming at a frequency I wanted to tune myself to catch. I liked the seeming naïveté of it, the way the simple figures had been simplified further, purified or idealized to geometric forms almost, but rendered bluntly, imperfectly. And the brushstrokes were imperfect too, visible, haphazard, the paint distributed unevenly, inexpertly; but that wasn’t right, really it was striving for something ideal, that was what I felt, the frequency I wanted to catch. What I took at first for blocks of color dissolved when I leaned in, were modulated, textured, full of movement somehow, not the movement of objects but of light, which fell across them gently, undramatically. But that’s not right either, it didn’t fall across them, there weren’t any shadows; I couldn’t locate the light at all, or tell if the scene depicted morning or noon. It was as if the objects emanated their own light, which didn’t move from one quadrant of the painting to another, as real light would, but vibrated somehow, so that there was a sense of movement and stillness at once. There was a promise in it, I felt, I mean a promise for me, a claim about what life could be.