Thinking of Etel, in August, 2011
Megan Pruiett

I.

To write, I wanted to remember—some of those moments and exchanges that make up my time spent with Etel. I found this in my notes for *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country*:

"So she said something to the effect that a poet is a human the way a cat is a cat. And it felt like the best compliment heard all day, like sun on skin. To be human before all else. It feels good."

And then:

"The magic of this book is the authority she gives to personal reflection, to the act of observation, what moves us, the splendid green of a traffic light, the play of light on the sea, a rose, the weather. I found myself thinking, I too have thought the traffic light beautiful, I too... So we return to our own thoughts with dignity, and assurance of their value. Thoughts, private ones, have immense value in her work, and they are to be shared. The sharing of private thoughts is an unquestioned right of anyone, and it makes us more human to do so."

I remember: I was writing a review. Why did I never complete it? Perhaps because the book encompasses so much more—even as it appears in simple paragraphs beneath unassuming words such as "place" or "people." Which is rather how I would describe Etel: a small, approachable person (pictured now in plaid pants and enveloping sweater) containing an enormity of witness: history, war, myth, philosophy, the sweetness and violence held within each day—she seems never able to look away, for looking away

brings her close to something else.

II.

I first met Etel through her absence. I began working for Post-Apollo in 2004, and spent many afternoons in Sausalito, alone in the office on Marie Street, surrounded by her paintings. Small canvases, large canvases, covering the walls and stacked carefully in corners. Thickly textured and intensely colored, they communicated a language I could see but not read. And here and there, the decisive gestures of an ink brush painting. Sometimes, a fax would scroll through for Simone, written in French and signed with a bold ETEL. Unseen, unheard, she was nevertheless our genius loci. Who was this pervasive person? I wandered through the storeroom stacks, browsing through boxes marked "The Spring"; "Of Cities"; "A–Z"; "Apocalypse."

When I at last spoke with Etel, it was over the telephone. Nervous to dial the Parisian number, I was buoyed by a soft, French-inflected voice that set me down gently on the other end of the line. And so I learned that the confidence and presence of mind expressed in her work was matched by a generosity and frankness of feeling that invited one in to have a seat, relax, and stay a while. Which I did.

What else I remember: transcribing the title story for *Master of the Eclipse* while Etel sat next to me in the office, patient with my stumbling fingers, recalling her now-distant job as a typist. Reading aloud from *Seasons* at a Poets Reading Poets event, and her pleasure in the photograph my husband took of her there (as the sweater looked so beautiful). Receiving encouragement to start my own press ("Call it Alamo Square Press," she said). Her congratulations on my wedding, and the birth of my baby. Taking tea with her and Simone, gazing around their art-filled rooms at magazines and CDs containing Etel's work—and then finding one pressed into my hand to take home.

There have been many kindnesses pressed into my hands to take home. Above all, Etel and Simone have given me the gift of example: They've shown me the artist's life, with its routines, commitments, and glorious idiosyncrasies. A life both private and shared. The way a cat is a cat: human before all else.