

## ETHICS

In ethics class so many years ago  
our teacher asked this question every fall:  
if there were a fire in a museum  
which would you save, a Rembrandt painting  
or an old woman who hadn't many  
years left anyhow? Restless on hard chairs  
caring little for pictures or old age  
we'd opt one year for life, the next for art  
and always half-heartedly. Sometimes  
the woman borrowed my grandmother's face  
leaving her usual kitchen to wander  
some drafty, half-imagined museum.  
One year, feeling clever, I replied  
why not let the woman decide herself?  
Linda, the teacher would report, eschews  
the burdens of responsibility.  
This fall in a real museum I stand  
before a real Rembrandt, old woman,  
or nearly so, myself. The colors  
within this frame are darker than autumn,  
darker even than winter – browns of earth,  
though earth's most radiant elements burn  
through the canvas. I know now that woman  
and painting and season are almost one  
and all beyond saving by children.

*Linda Pastan (b. 1932)*