Lynne Tillman is a creature of the New York art world, and reading a new collection of her stories is a little like walking through a gallery show. Here are twenty-one discrete works, in a sequence. Knowing that someone, the artist or her curator, has decided to arrange them this way, you might observe the order of presentation. Several of the pieces are complex and demanding. Others are smaller, simpler in their beauty or their charm. This one might give you an awkward feeling. That one might just leave you cold. You might be tempted to skip around.

There is no single narrative arc to follow through *Someday This Will Be Funny*. Even within the individual stories, the matter of plot seems much less important than the concepts and questions that Tillman finds herself thinking about. A few lines from her best book, the 2002 collection *This Is Not It*, might come close to providing a statement of her approach: “Stories, in fact, are contained within thought. It’s only a story really should read, it’s a way to think.” A story, for Tillman, is not a morality play or a tale.

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*Someday This Will Be Funny*, by Lynne Tillman (Red Lemonade, 160 pp., $14.95 paper)
of the passions. It is not primarily an occasion to engage in politics, through allegory or social critique; “I’m not good at being a pawn of history,” one of Tillman’s narrators acknowledges. Instead, a story is a conceptual exercise. An experiment in the capacity of language, used with care, to bear the weight of a restless, sometimes troubled mind. A mind which understands that this support is imperfect and precarious, but which also knows that there is probably no better one. “To be honest, love, sometimes words are all I need.” A way to think.

Tillman works in prose, occasionally in a collage form that includes verse, quotations, and aphoristic fragments. Her pieces invite the kind of thinking that is usually associated with poems and pictures; they seem not so much developed in time as composed in space. In *This Is Not It*, she prefaced each story with a reproduction of another artist’s visual work, encouraging readers to think of her writing as a form of commentary or collaboration. There are no illustrations in *Someday This Will Be Funny*, but there are many reflections on images and image-making. In “The Original Impulse,” for instance, an exchange between a writer and a photographer raises a lingering, unanswered question: “Outside, the bare branches of February trees looked like what he was saying, an image she might have shot once – recognizable metaphors, a formally interesting composition – but what did it really do. What was it a picture of.”

One of the most fascinating pieces in Tillman’s new book is “Impression of an Artist, with Haiku: A Portrait of Peter Dreher.” The subject is a German painter who, since 1974, has made several thousand images of the same simple object for a series titled *Day by Day, Days Are Good*. Dreher has long been a source of fascination for Tillman. She interviewed him for *BOMB* magazine in 1996, and his pictures are featured in *This Is Not It*. In “Impression of an Artist,” she imagines her way into his mind. “By now he was in his studio, staring at a water glass. He had looked at it for more than thirty years, the very same glass. Some people thought he was crazy. But he was only beginning to see it, or he kept seeing it differently and he tried to depict that, how it changed, how his capacity changed, and he himself changed over the years. He didn’t mean to paint an autobiography, but he was, also.” An image, no less than a story, is a way to think. The painter does his
best to represent the changing character of the object, which reflects the transformation of his own character as an observer. He finds himself telling his own story. The water glass becomes a looking-glass.

Although Tillman is not really a storyteller, in the old-fashioned sense of the term, such passages do make use of the peculiar power of her own medium, narrative fiction, to explore the thoughts of characters who belong to a recognizable social world. Tillman’s people are mostly educated, middle-class men and women of the present. They read The New York Times, listen to love songs, and watch a lot of HBO. They worry about money and discuss their problems with their analysts. They fall in and out of love. At least one, the poet at the center of “The Recipe,” is embarrassed by his own tendency to fantasize about the simpler lives and moral certainties enjoyed by workingmen: “As usual he rebuked himself for romanticizing their labor.” His painful self-consciousness, naturally, does nothing to bring him closer to the butcher or the baker.

In “The Shadow of a Doubt,” a man slips away from the wedding of an ex-lover and, disconsolate, watches images forming and deforming themselves on the surface of a pond. He thinks of “Narcissus’ attachment to himself, to a reflection, all surface.” Again and again, Tillman returns to the uncertain relation between the observing subject and the observed object. When they look at things, her characters are always looking, as well, at their own reflections. At the same time, when they try to express themselves, they discover that the self is shaped and misshapen by the words and forms they use to make it visible. Tillman’s awkward, self-conscious poet is at his best when he becomes one of her artist-figures, reckoning with his medium: “We don’t determine what words mean, they determine what we mean.”

The least successful pieces in the collection, in my appraisal, are the few that dramatize episodes in the private lives of celebrities – Clarence Thomas enduring the racist taunts of legislators behind the scenes of his confirmation hearings; Marvin Gaye and John Lennon sitting down together at a piano in a hotel room in the 1970s, high on coke. Part of the trouble is that Tillman is not especially illuminating on matters of race and national politics. She is much better on the city of New York, a place that is intriguingly animated, in her stories, by its paradoxical mixtures
of the cosmopolitan and the parochial, the rush into the future and the wish to hold onto the fleeting past. “This might sound strange to non–New Yorkers,” Tillman admits in the opening story, “That’s How Wrong My Love Is.” The book concludes with “Save Me from the Pious and the Vengeful,” a meditative piece provoked, in part, by the trauma of 11 September 2001. “Memory is what everyone talks about these days. Will we remember, and what will we remember, who will be written out, ignored, or obliterated.”

The author of a book on Warhol’s Factory scene, Tillman writes lovingly, without sentimentalism but with a touch of nostalgia, about the creative relationships that take shape in collaboration, and about the city that nurtures them. These days, the pursuit of experimental literature is itself falling out of fashion. The avant-garde writer is, curiously, something of an anachronism, contemplating the prospect of obsolescence. One of the genuine pleasures of reading Someday This Will Be Funny is the way it invites you into New York’s circles of artists and intellectuals, people estranged from much of American culture, who are doing what they can to build a fragile working intimacy, a sense of common cause, among themselves.