

LETTERS

ISSUE #3 SPRING 2015



LITERATURE/VISUAL ARTS & THE SPIRIT

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LETTERS

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Martin Jean, Director of Yale ISM, Melissa Maier, Albert Agbayani, and Founding Editors: Abigail Dunn and Kai Hoffman-Krull

FROM THE EDITOR

FEARED & GLORIFIED

Scholarly discourse sometimes reminds me of the strings that the Lilliputians used to tie Gulliver to the sand. So many words strung valiantly across a sleeping giant in hopes that the creature will not wake. Everyone knows, but few admit, that when the huge eyes open, the diminutive bonds will be revealed in all their inadequacy.

The words to be found in this journal do not assert the correctness of a premise and so I find them less brittle in this Lilliputian sense. If they have a rhetorical motive, it is not to pin down a definition but to describe a mystery—to move within a shifting landscape.

Consider Susan Osgood's painting on pages 36 and 37—a watercolor that replicates a sketch from Egypt, more than three millennia old. A human figure is seen walking on the meandering length of a snake—a creature that is “both feared and glorified.” This *Wandering of the Soul* embodies the spirit's poetic struggle—an undulation of archetypes leading we know not wither. What do we know? Nothing but the reptile's fearful asymmetry and the watercolor's glorious blue.

—Mark Koyama

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LUKE HANKINS is the author of a collection of poems, *Weak Devo-*

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TOM HANKSY calls himself “a subpar artist with a subpar vocabulary.” His art appears on walls in New York and in other cities across the United States and Canada.

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M. E. MACFARLAND received the 2014 Southern Writers' Symposium Emerging Writers award in poetry. His poems have appeared in *Newfound Journal*, *Cheat River Review*, *Barely South Review*, *Emrys Journal*, and elsewhere. He lives in Charlottesville, Virginia, where he attends the University of Virginia MFA program.

D. S. MARTIN is the author of the poetry books *Conspiracy of Light: Poems Inspired by the Legacy of C.S. Lewis*, *Poiema*, and *So The Moon Would Not Be Swallowed*. His poetry has appeared in such publications as *Canadian Literature*, *The Christian Century*, *Christianity & Literature*, *Dalhousie Review*, and *Sojourners*. He is the series editor for the *Poiema Poetry Series* (Cascade), and is known internationally for his blog: *Kingdom Poets*.

SUSAN OSGOOD is a painter who enjoys drawing and printmaking as well. Growing up in rural New Hampshire, she developed a deep love of the natural world and a great desire to travel. She received her BFA in painting from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1978. Touring Egypt the following year gave her a taste for a culture rich with layers of history and art. In 1985, Susan began working as an archaeological artist for the University of Chicago's project in Luxor, and has spent her winters drawing the ancient monuments and artifacts there ever since. This experience continues to fuel and inspire her artwork. In 1993 she received an artist grant from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation. Her work is widely exhibited and is in private and corporate collections around the world. For more of her work see www.susanosgood.com.

TANIA RUNYAN is the author of the poetry collections *Second Sky*, *A Thousand Vessels*, *Simple Weight*, and *Delicious Air*, which was awarded Book of the Year by the Conference on Christianity and Literature in 2007. Her book *How to Read a Poem*, an instructional guide based on Billy Collins's "Introduction to Poetry," was released in 2014. Her poems have appeared in many publications, including *Poetry*, *Image*, *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, *The Christian Century*, *Atlanta Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Willow Springs*, *Nimrod*, and the anthology *A Fine Frenzy: Poets Respond to Shakespeare*. Tania was awarded an NEA Literature Fellowship in 2011.

JON SEALS is a master's candidate in religion and visual arts at Yale Divinity School and Yale Institute of Sacred Music and teaches a course called "Exploring the Arts of New York City" at The College of New Rochelle. He holds an MFA. in Painting from Savannah College of Art and Design.

ALBERT DOV SIGAL was born in 1912 in Transylvania when it was part of Hungary and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Almost all of his family perished in the Holocaust. Sigal achieved international acclaim as an expert in the art of enameling and renewed interest in this ancient craft of applying finely crushed glass to metal, heating

it until it fuses with the metal, then painting it with special paints. He died of leukemia, on May 30, 1970 at the age of 58.

JOSHUA SULLIVAN studied printmaking and painting at the Rhode Island School of Design earning his BFA in 2007. Currently, he is a 2016 master of divinity candidate at Yale Divinity School and the Yale Institute of Sacred Music.

MARTHA ANNE TOLL'S fiction has appeared in *Wild*, *Poetica Magazine*, *Referential Magazine*, *Inkapture Magazine*; her book commentaries in *NPR*, *The Millions*, *Narrative*, *Tin House blog*, and *Washington Independent Review of Books*. A graduate of Yale College and Boston University School of Law, she directs a social justice foundation. "American Seder" is from a novel in progress. For more about Martha Anne Toll please refer to her website at www.marthaannetoll.com

WILLIAM KELLEY WOOLFITT is the author of two books of poetry, *Beauty Strip* (Texas Review Press, 2014) and *Charles of the Desert* (Paraclete Press, 2015). His poems and stories have appeared in *Shenandoah*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *The Threepenny Review*, and *Tin House online*. He teaches at Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee.



Mother's Hair
by Jon Seals.
40" x 30"
Charcoal on Paper

M. E. MacFARLAND

A HALO AND SOME DOVES

Henri Lévy's The Death of Orpheus, Art Institute of Chicago

Dirt and grass in violent repose
under the pale, separate body.
Above, white birds kite over the water
with an air of distribution. But still
you are what gleams most
in this dusk, extinct words
(neck-from-neck, red-of-distance)
in a halo above you.
The women with rabbit bones in their hair
cry like cicadas downhill.

In the next town over,
they've wondered at your absence.
But I knew to seek you here,
below the painted ridges
at water's edge.
It is not too late to kneel in the shallows
and gather you back up.
Already you have seized this new quiet
and filled its rooms with honey and rain.

LINDSAY ILLICH

SAY IT BACK

To the God of wallpaper
and gold filigree--

To the great God of Kimye,
Rimbaud and washing machine--

God the giver of sleep
and single stream recycling--

God Who says Iloveyou
in the very elegant code
that downloads the latest
issue of the New Yorker--

How do we mention you
without sleeves of embarrassment,
hearts on them

omg like a girl who got sunburned
after filling an empty Suave bottle
with Mazola and basting

her big white thighs with oil,
coating every inch of them,
laying out on the driveway
until braised and blistered

How embarrassing
(come on
every good girl
deserves a Jesus)

God, we don't know how else
but to hash it out online while POTUS speaks

To like everything our mothers
post, a nod to inspired living

God we're trying to say it back
despite how it looks

Look at the air
Look how full of our voices
the stratosphere, all of us

sending up our words, our
pics, our lustrous links to stuff,
bowed, typing incessantly

CAROLINE KESSLER

I'VE KNELT IN A LOT OF PLACES

not nearly as nice as this one
 an accordion of rivers gathering in a note, spilling out
dewy grass drenching my dress

Like most things, this started as a letter to you
 We're in a drought, you know—
Conserve water, every state-mandated sign seems to tell me

In another life, we stumbled around a west coast town, collecting plums
 from blankets tied to tree branches, staining our hands a bruisey color

I know, I'm the most selfish, swimming through this ocean
 eyes only for a freckled buoy, something to make me feel weightless

Oh—was this supposed to be about us?

I'm trying to just receive, I'm trying to wear more wool to wick
 away the sweat, I'm trying to put my mouth only where my mouth belongs

Little Bittern



MICAH CHATTERTON

NEGLIGENT AVOCADICIDE

Isn't there tragedy enough
for a poem in the small passing
of an avocado, its meat waxed black
and thready around the skull
of the seed, lifted too late
from the gutter of the basket?
I was searching for a smell.

I chose that fruit with every hope,
had it brought from Hemet or Chile
to sit cubed in tortilla soup
or spun into rich spinach drinks
as I have brought pineapples from Thailand,
red bells from Holland, bananas from Ecuador
to play other parts in other dreams,
but I did none of those things
because I was tired.

Isn't there emotion enough for art
in a mealing honeydew, the sudden snuff
of sour dribbling from the drills in a coconut,
yellowheaded broccoli crowns, garlic bulbs
shrunk in chaff, weeping grapes, an onion sat
in its own milk, lettuce leaves like wet newsprint,
plum-eyed potatoes, tomatoes turned soft
on their faces, and mouthfuls of pear's flesh,
spots and all, turned to sand on my tongue?

Yes, there are only so many hours
on the counter, so much heat and humidity
a body can take. I know the world withers
in parts and pieces, pome by pome,
each in its own way and moment, and yet
I always trick myself into believing
there's more time, there's life left.
Then I reach for a week-old avocado,
hard when I picked it. The skin gives
in under my thumb. Then I drive a knife
through the rind, down the middle,
split around the pit, and for a second
I imagine Cain, hands wet, so confused
as he searches for the fault in his offering,
the fruits of his soil and bent back
sitting spoiled in a hot heap on the table,
to which the Lord had not respect.

TAYLOR BRORBY

THE CYCLE

And where were you when the first leaf fell
from the branch of knowledge
into a pool of sin and succulence?
As it flopped and floated on its descent
the field shifted to gold
dressed in autumnal regalia.
I stood as I watched you quiver
as the first fall chill cut across your skin.

As winter folded its cold grip around your core
the slashed red of dogwoods gave you
hope that grace stumbles through in the small moments--
like a prayer in crossing a frozen creek.

In spring when the tulips pressed and pushed
in the garden you got on your knees
to coat coal black soil around your flowered imagination.

And as summer brought the light of long days
you stood in awe at the web of things--
loons whimpering in twilight
frogs in their gurgling chorus
and the stars hitched to the depths of your soul.

TANIA RUNYAN

WARNING: IN CASE OF RAPTURE, THIS CAR WILL BE UNMANNED

One day he would vaporize me through the windshield,
allow my Corolla to plow into the goths

smoking on the street corner as I blasted off.
No way to save the screaming smudges down there.

Persecution was Charles Darwin on the bio study guide.
Depeche Mode. The Mapplethorpe exhibit in LA.

I had to tell myself that heaven would be so much better
than driving down Pacific Coast Highway,

peaches on the passenger seat, salt wind on my neck.
I would tan till lunch then realize I hadn't thought

of him once. Was I keeping watch? Would I be ready
if he sucked me from the sand? I would turn on my back

and swear to keep my word when I had nothing
to say, nothing to be saved from but a hell I couldn't see.

I held fast to an open door or, rather, the space
it left behind, driving home with coconut oil on my skin,

the sun in the mirrors, the uneasy hope of the saved.



Marble
by Joshua Sullivan is a response to
"The Sculptor" by Luke Hankins.
Digital Media, 8"x10"

LUKE HANKINS

THE SCULPTOR

Here again in conflict—
a block of stone—
the task:
to make a permanence
fitting tribute
to what dissipates—
a hand,
a gesture
a gaze,
affixed
in broken stone.

And what are we
and by whose hand?

The inverse
of what I create,
I am a temporary likeness,
a fading image
of something eternal,
making
until I am undone.

R. BRADLEY HOLDEN

AN ARTIST'S ENVY

Calvin said the fragments of the cross,
Those relics he despised, were so numerous
One could use them to construct a ship.
Piety demanded the false wood.
But it wasn't this kind that interested me.
Not the instrument of torture,
The scattered, bloodstained slivers.
But the relics no one sought.
I wanted the furniture.
Those chairs and tables the carpenter made.
I wanted the handiwork of God.
To see the perfection of craft,
To learn just how close a man
Could come to the Idea.

D. S. MARTIN

MATTHEW

Yes I knew Matthew
the best tax collector Capernaum ever had
I know that sounds more like an insult
but it's true It wasn't his fault
his skills were in demand & Herod
was willing to pay a good price

He wasn't like the rest Rome usually employs
vermin sell-outs whose pockets clink
with the fishy stink of dishonest scales
like a monetary meat-cleaver that hacks us

When he threw parties he didn't notice
the wealthy tisk-tisking his guest list
swelling with the names of the hoi polloi
even those unable to pay their taxes

I was one of the so-called sinners
at his retirement party when he left
his business to follow Jesus I laughed
when I heard his young rabbi tell the Pharisees
*It isn't those who think they're healthy
who are eager to get well*

KAREN AN-HWEI LEE

PRAYER AT THE VANISHING POINT

On holiness or a salt echolalia
of waves in Mono Lake. Praying *sotto voce*
until the soul is a jot
of moonlight on a boutique rail,
the last words
a loved one spoke before I left
for the west coast --
a flight
into decades --
How odd I looked in a cloche hat,
a woman who vanished
into the sky with a flying glossary.
Wait until the Holy Spirit utters
veni Creator spiritus
a trio in one breath.





THE LORD
IS GOOD
TO ALL
PSALM
149:9



Motorcycle vs. Fixed Object Mishap



HET LAATSTE INZICHT

↳ The Latest Insight
↳ is to repeat my mistakes

Don't Look Back
by Jon Seals
6" x 10"
Mixed Media
Collage on Found
Book Illustrations

WILLIAM KELLEY WOOLFITT

BROTHER ALMOST

1907: Algeria

At last, a fellow-monk says that he will come to me: Raphael of the flaxen hair, dainty lips and facial twitch, many sneezes and groans, who gives me this pledge: "I have no other course." We ride the train to Colomb-Béchar, then walk south, into the desert. Each day, he mumbles and fades. He winces at the scalding light; when I teach him to mix ink from charcoal and camel piss, he clamps his nose.

•

I imagine Raphael embracing his vocation and his life with me: he perks up when *he joins my work, lodges in my mud-house, becomes with me a Targui, that we might gain the Tuareg. He imitates me, becomes all things to all men, words living in skin. The server's duties pink his cheeks; for the good of me and all the Tuareg, he arranges the water and the wine; at last, I am permitted to say Mass again.*

•

Stomach cramps halt Raphael at In Salah. He turns back. He never sees the dear Hoggar tableland, the leather tents of the Tuareg pitched among scant grasses and sand pools, the frozen lava fans, basalt turrets and heaps of metamorphic rock, proof that all things change. To return home, I must cross the Tanezrouft, the last and worst desert, where nothing lives or grows.

STRONGHOLD

1916: Tamanrasset, Hoggar, Algeria

Mon Père, I am ready for all, I accept all, and this too, if I must: Jean helps me serve Mass to myself, but he refuses to partake. And those far light-pricks, red stars that flare,

falter, flare again: campfires of the Senussi, rebels breaching the Hoggar's edge. To save the Tuareg, I draft and raise a stronghold of sheet iron and earthen bricks—

walls pride-tall and vainglory-thick,
bullets and carbines, moat and bridge,
chapel, water-well, manuscript room.
I abandon myself to You without measure,

with infinite trust I climb the parapet, look
across the dry riverbed. I watch Dassine,
Lalla, other Tuareg women who pack fast,
flee to the mountains with children

and elders. There, they will tie their goats
to the myrtles, bed down in caves.
Foolish, they call my fortress. *A trap.*
Day-shadows spill in like clouds of ink.

I don't know when to say the hours.
Whatever You make of me, I thank You;
I thank You for these high muddy walls,
though they cut off visitors, block the sun,

confuse the passing of time. My eyes fall
to these crabbed hands, shift to the altar,
sink again. The moon, a pale fish, chokes
on the swill at the bottom of the well.

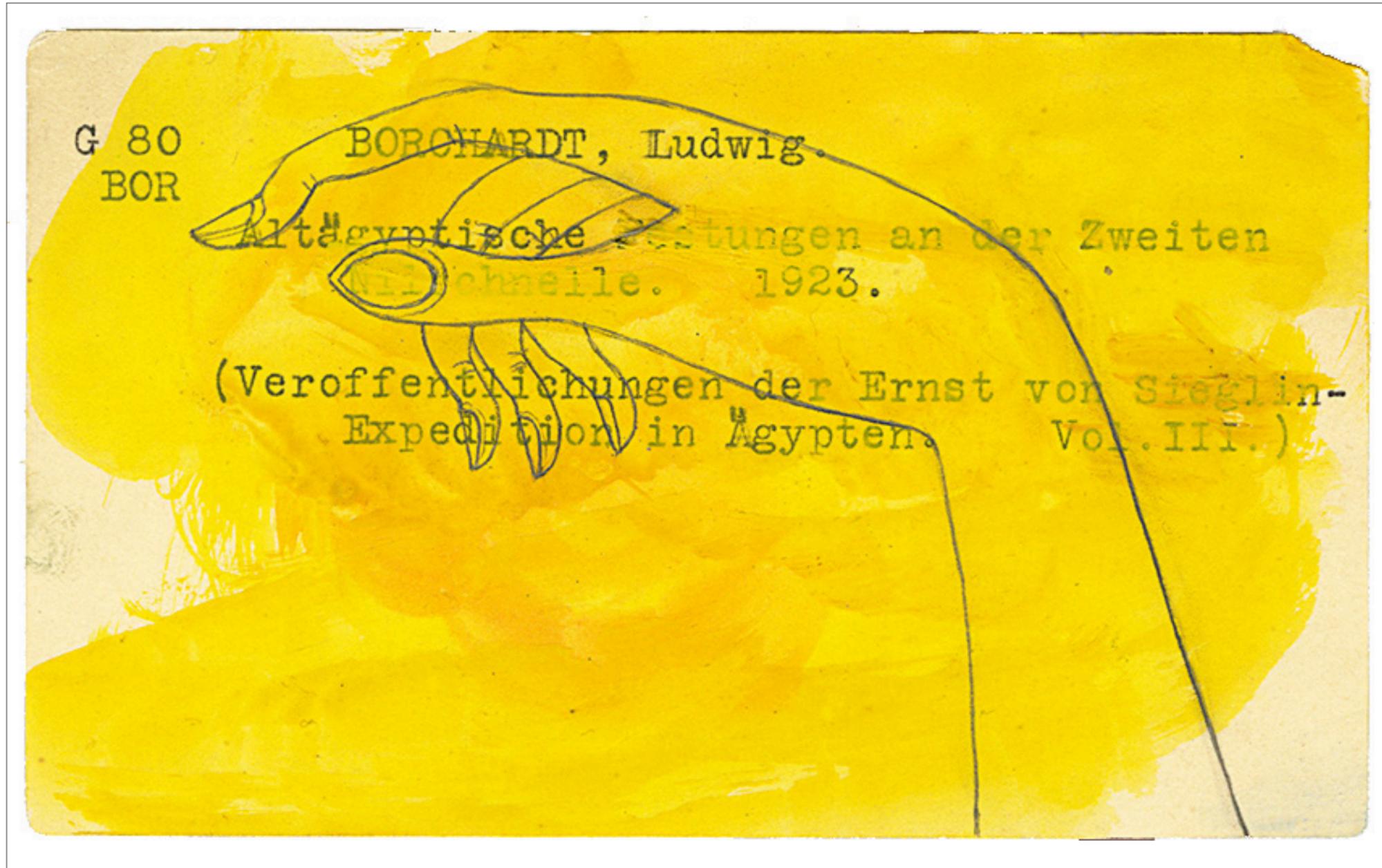
Negga Seftimi

In Tomba



Old man w/ his brown
burnouse draped over
his left shoulder, off-
white cap, scarf and
robe with blue &
white argyle socks
and red slippers

S U S A N O S G O O D



“Wait a second,” Susan Osgood said, her voice lifting. “I’ll open the window so you can hear the call to prayer.”

She disappeared from the Skype screen and a moment later a keening chant, both siren and song, came through the laptop. It was the muazzin from a neighborhood mosque summoning Muslims to evening worship. Osgood hears the call five times a day as it coruscates over Luxor, Egypt, the heart of Egyptian archeology and her home for three months of the year.

Since 1985, Osgood has been an archeological illustrator at the Epigraphic Survey of the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute, where she documents the reliefs and inscriptions of temples and tombs throughout Egypt. Her base is a university compound called Chicago House, a ten-minute walk to the Luxor Temple. Karnak Temple is ten minutes in the opposite direction, and just across the Nile lies the Valley of the

P O R T F O L I O



Kings, famous for the tomb of Tutankhamen.

Last year, when the Chicago House library changed its cataloguing to the Library of Congress system, Osgood became enchanted by the discarded catalog cards. “For us who’ve used them, these cards are like a sacred thing. So many people have touched them, sometimes the corners are ragged, and I thought, you just can’t throw these away. They’re too good.”

She culled a foot-high stack and returned to the library to thumb through the most interesting titles, in search of images with which she transformed the small rectangles into interpretive miniatures. The water-colored drawings, some of which are seen here, are at once an homage to Egyptologists past, a nod to colleagues today, and a revel in archeological glamour. The yellow card with the hand remembers Ludwig Borchardt, excavator of the famous Nefertiti head. Osgood gave the finished piece to her Survey director, who (she hadn’t known this) recently discovered the identity of the elegant relief hand, carved in the same period. In the text with the images below, the artist describes the layers of meaning in her own words.

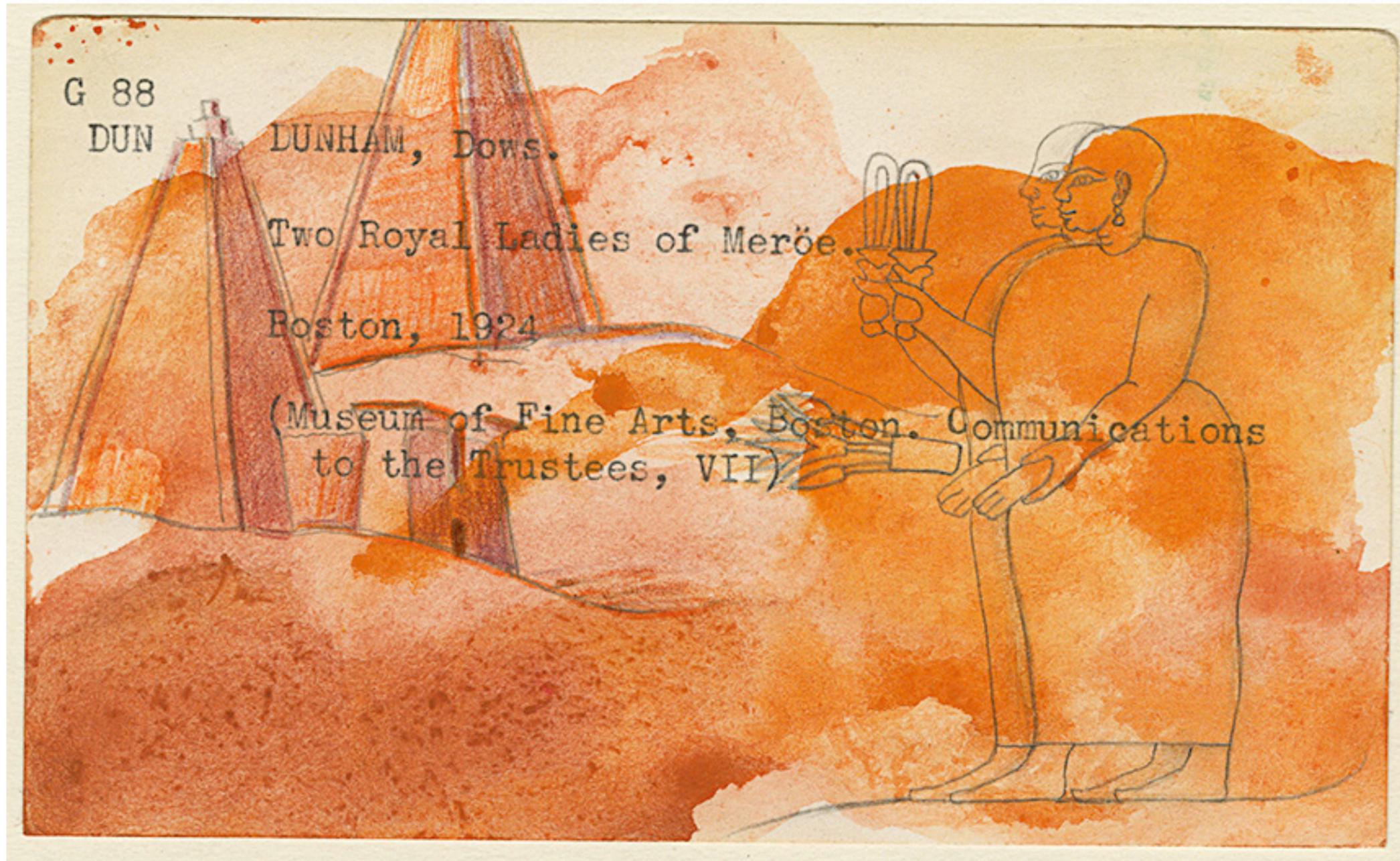
The prayer call led our talk to questions of faith. “It’s interesting for me to be in this culture,” Osgood said of

the Middle East, “where every other sentence people say, ‘If Allah is willing’ something will happen, and when it happens, ‘Praise be to Allah.’ ‘If Allah is willing, we’ll go to work today,’ and then you go to work and, ah! the electricity comes back on—well, Allah did that: ‘Blessings from Allah.’ It’s such a way of life, and when I’m home I find I want to say Inshallah (‘God willing’) or lhamduliallah (‘Praise be to God’), but we don’t use those kind of words. Instead I’ll say ‘Hopefully, we’ll do such-and-such’ or ‘That’s great that we were able to do such-and-such.’”

Osgood has a degree in painting from the Rhode Island School of Design [RISD], and works on her fine art both in Egypt and at home in Vermont. (Her painting and printmaking are on her website, susanosgood.com.) She’s not overtly religious, but allowed that the sacred does inform her work, however indirectly. “The whole process of painting—I’ll say this to you; I might not say it in general—is a spiritual process, a process of going within. It’s meditation, it’s being open to whatever comes, and trusting in whatever that is.” Or, said another way, faith. “Yes,” she agreed. “Where do we get inspiration anyway? It comes from on high somehow.”

—Timothy Cahill

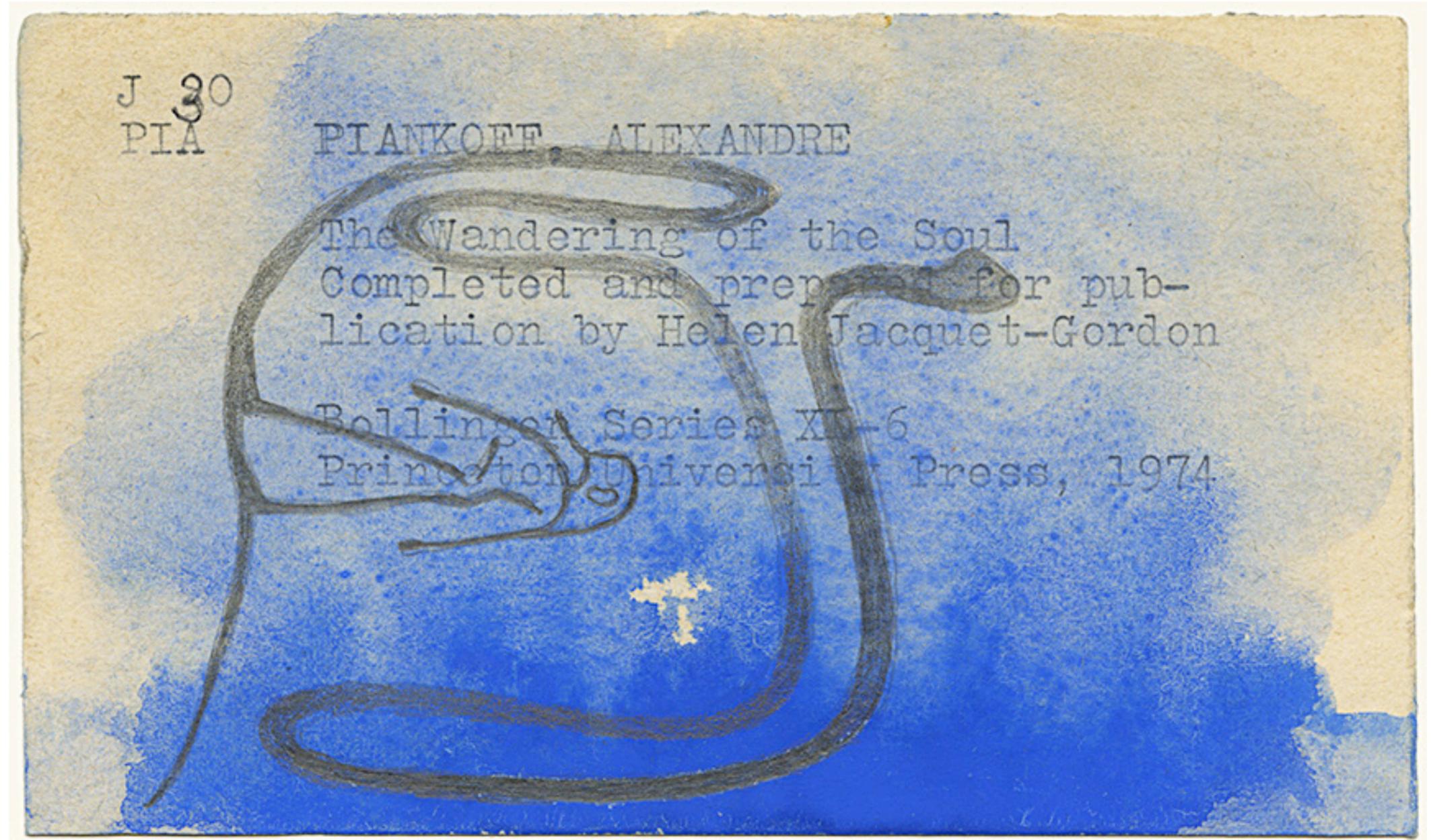
TWO LADIES OF MERÖE



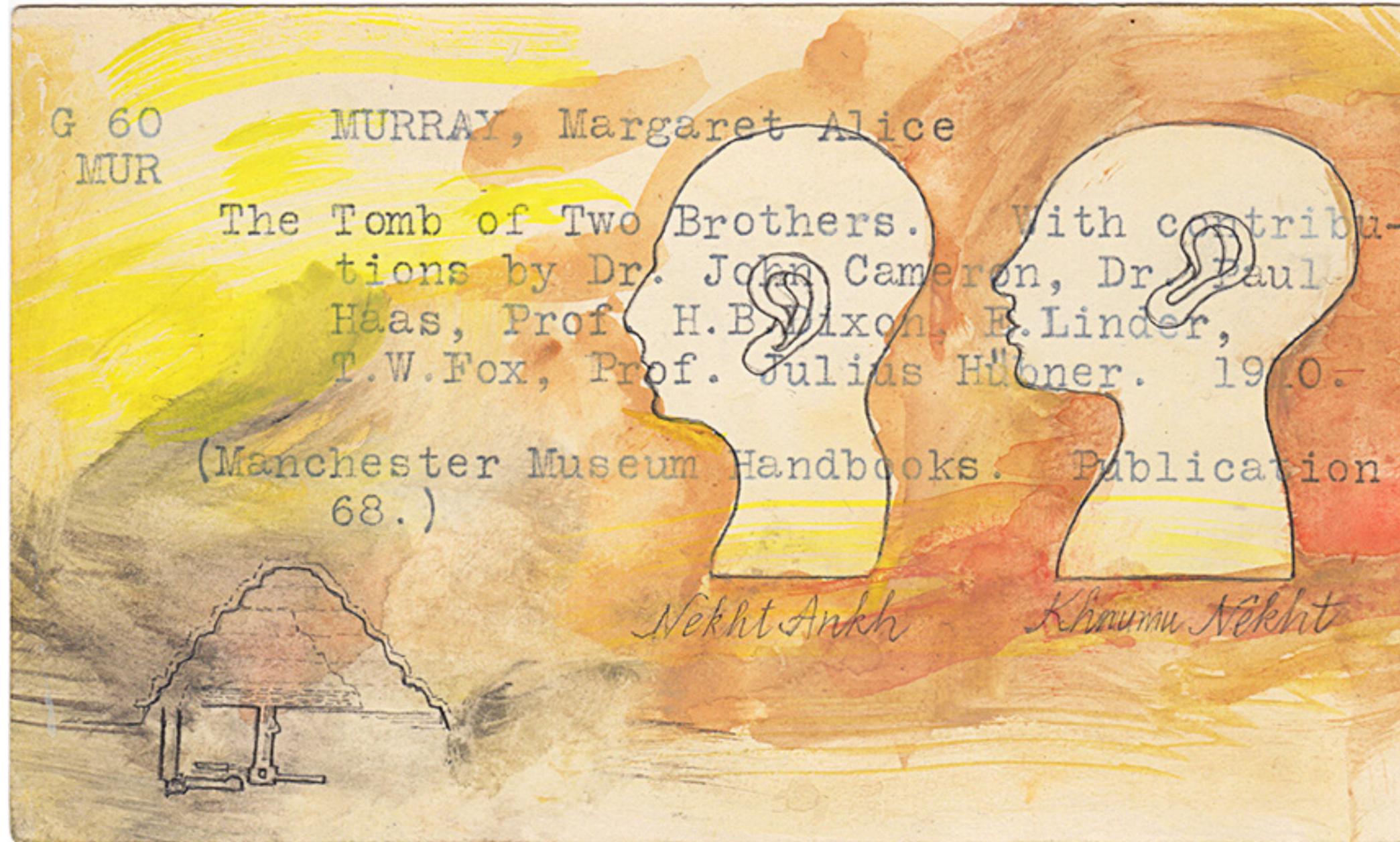
This is a relief from the third century BCE site of Meröe in the Sudan. They are, as you can see, huge women, which was and still is considered very beautiful in Sudan. Behind them are the very tall, thin pyramids of that area. I gave this card to a friend who is one of the few woman Egyptian Egyptologists.

WANDERING OF THE SOUL

This three-thousand, five-hundred-year-old ancient Egyptian drawing is copied out of the book. In ancient Egypt, snakes were both feared and glorified. It's a beautiful concept, the wandering of the soul: the snake is wandering, the man is walking along the path ... Helen Jacquet-Gordon was a dear friend, an Egyptologist who worked in Egypt for many years.



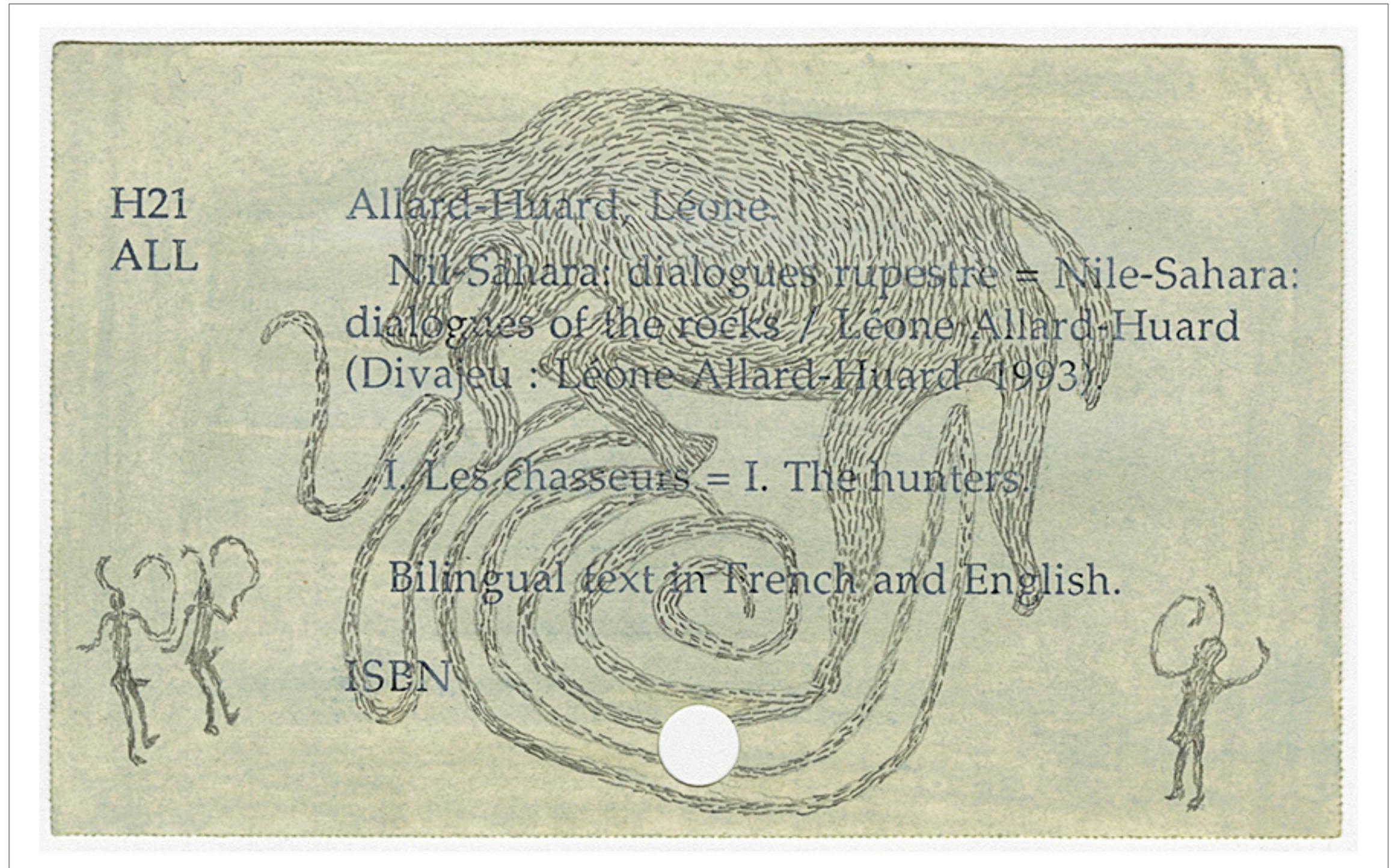
THE TOMB OF TWO BROTHERS

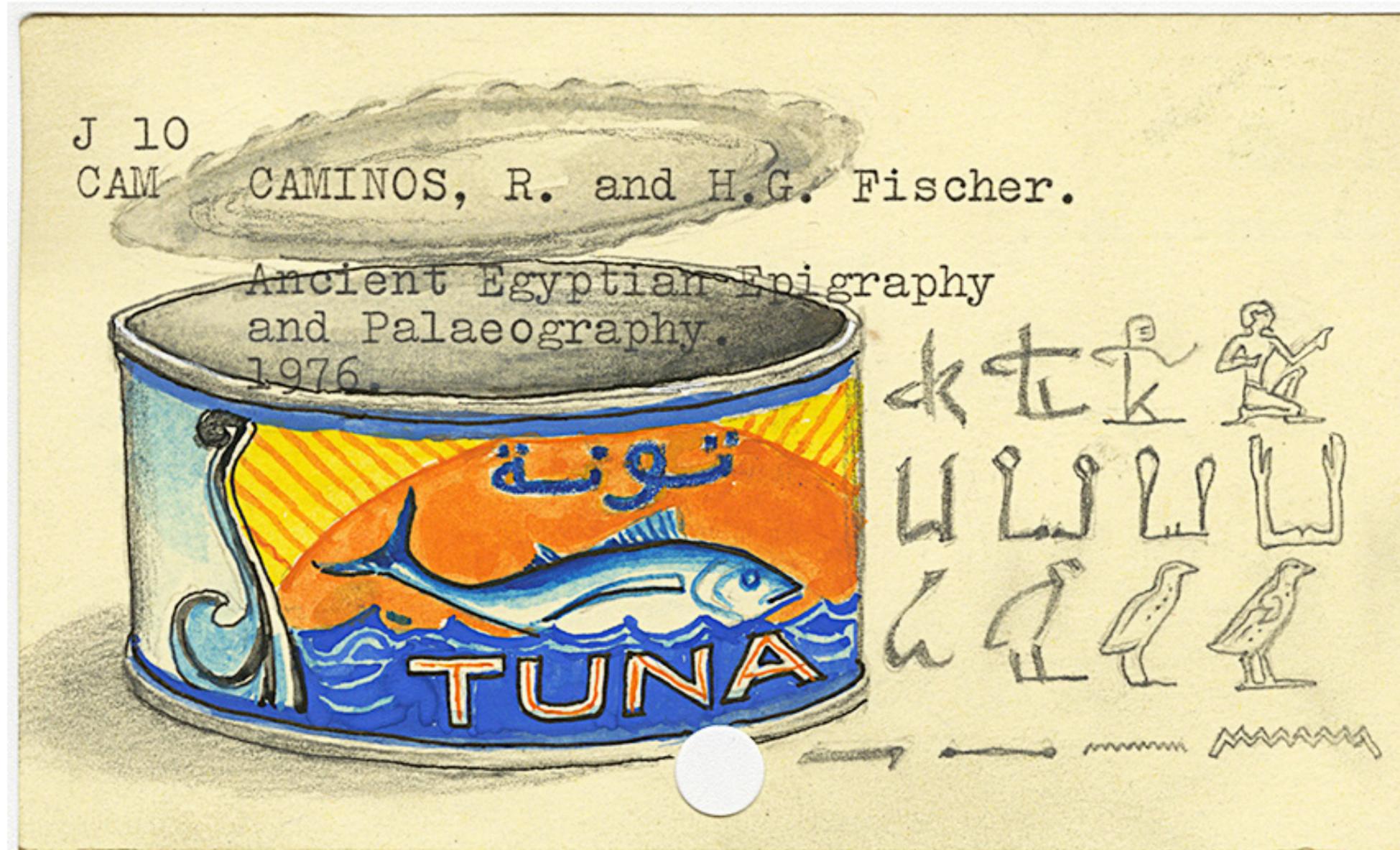


This is an interesting tomb that I visited with a friend who worked with us here for many years. In the book are two sculptures of heads found in the tomb—these are the ‘two brothers.’ They look quite different from each other. They’re said to have been royal hairdressers to the king, and it’s questionable, were they actually a couple? Nobody really knows. Down in the left corner is a little sketch of the Step Pyramid from the area near the tomb.

DIALOGUES OF THE ROCKS

The French archeologist-author of this book traveled throughout the Nile valley recording the rich variety of rock art and petroglyphs. I love the title: Dialogues of the Rocks. There are the little men against this great animal, they've got their swords in their hands. I'm not sure what the curving maze-like thing underneath the animal represents, but it is a beautiful shape.





When I was at RISD, I met the Argentinian Egyptologist Ricardo Caminos at Brown University, [where] I took classes from time to time, and I asked him, “Can I work with you in Egypt?” He said, “Oh no, I’m just a one-man project, but you should contact Chicago House.” I gave this card to a colleague who worked with Caminos in the quarries in the south of Egypt. Ricardo lived the classic early archeologist’s dig lifestyle, and for a meal he’d share a few crackers and a can of tuna. He was a very small man,

but my colleague was not—he lost a lot of weight eating this minimal diet, and once was out on a rock ledge mapping and had passed out or fallen asleep when he heard a whoosh go by his head. He looked up and it was a vulture, circling over him, thinking, “Is this my next meal?” So I felt the can of tuna fish was appropriate. The sketch shows the progression of Egyptian writing: the hieroglyph is on the right, and it becomes more pared down into Hieratic on the left. You can still see the image. It’s like an abstracted hieroglyph.

A BALLED UP YELLOW KNIT HAT

Short fiction by Brian Robert Flynn

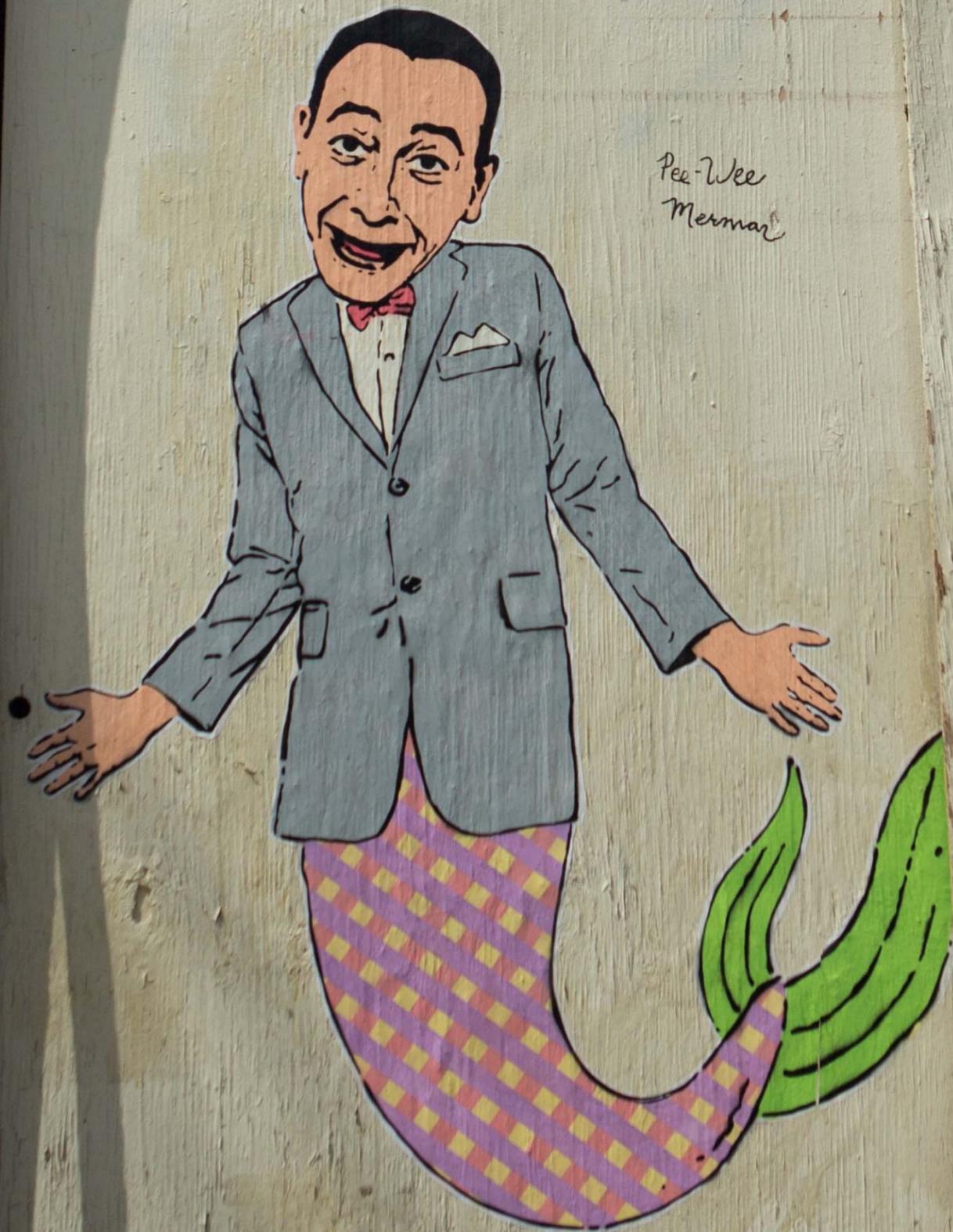
Matilda wasn't going to budge. Her anecdote was tantamount to her immediate purpose. She'd identified it as one of her brother Axel's yarns. Axel Explosion's *Modern Myths and Folklore* had never made the bestsellers list, but it was always checked out when Max looked it up at the library.

Softly timbred yet confident and brash, Matilda's truncated New York honk came fast through moist lips impeccably painted pink, a pink the snow-white morning turned to red. She enunciated with chorus-like skill, a talent honed over four decades of Shakespeare in the Park-styled pampering.

"Once upon a time," she began, "a Merman with an emerald green hat and a sailor who lived in the bungalow up the cobbles from the Merman's harbor became buddy-buddy. Whenever they met, the Merman and the sailor spent hours drinking grog and bragging of their exploits, throwing up tall tales of maritime adventure. Their friendship endured for more than a decade until one day, the sailor's ketch vanished at sea and he never returned.

"Upon receiving word from the sailor's grieving widow, the Merman sent her an invitation to join him for a supper in her husband's honor. Of course, she accepted and went to meet the Merman at the end of the quay. He even gave her a yellow hat that allowed her to breathe underwater."

"Nice touch," said Max, extending his hand, an offer to take Matilda's cap. Static electricity gently zapped his fingers on the transfer as he set it on the counter beside his paper sailor.



Tom Hanksy
Pee-wee Merman

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The work of shovels echoed through the giant storefront windows. In step with the steady snowfall and Lexington Avenue's wintry buzz, its cadence reminded Max of poetry—or more to the point, of his recent inability to compose poetry.

Sun-up Monday made for a full weekend of fruitless effort and, having never suffered from writer's block before, Max was stumped—three days may as well have been three hours, three weeks, or three months. He likened it to going unexpectedly blind or deaf, and from his end of the echo the great aural mysteries of the universe had been rendered indiscernible.

"I can't think myself hear," he said aloud.

The scraping stopped, if only for a moment.

Without ever having given it too much thought, Max had long dismissed writer's block as an affliction of the lazy; but by Saturday evening, his capacity to transmit even the slightest of perceptions into verse—both the mental foray and the physical act itself—had digressed to the point of daydreaming. He looked out the window at the falling snow and imagined a big white room, the cool drool oozing from his lip, a dispassionate nurse standing by (her washcloth at hand), and irksomely untied his apron.

Surely he wasn't crazy, and laziness wasn't an option; the weekend inventory he'd just signed off on would at least attest to that (he scanned the spreadsheet once again and cursed his brother's sloppy handwriting).

Before long, the morning's first blast of onion, garlic, and cinnamon would envelop him. Max folded his apron into a neat little triangle before pulling his coffee close and removing his hat—a disposable hat resembling a sailor's, soft and crisp with papery crunch, sanitary and uniform to a desired degree.

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"Everything under the lake was beautiful. The Merman's home was like a palace and naturally, he led the sailor's widow on a grand tour. Half a dozen bathrooms, two grand halls, a movie theater, a bowling alley, and the paintings. Oh, the paintings, Maxie! The Merman even had a Cha-

gall."

The bagel men emerged from the kitchen to listen, always up for a pretty girl or some morning color (or both). Matilda was animated in her telling, strolling the grand hall and bowling the sunken lanes. Behind her tiny frame, a brief beam of sunlight rolled across the gold-flecked tabletops, but the flurries kept falling outside.

"As the sailor's wife she'd always been drawn to the Merman's emerald hat," she continued, "and as a widow she'd become weak in his presence. The Merman was like any other man, except a lifetime at sea had dyed everything as green as his hat. He had green eyes, but his lips were green, too, and when he parted his green lips the sailor's widow noticed a green tongue behind his green teeth. The tour ended in the Merman's green bedroom, where he dropped his green pants and out crawled his green schlong—as long as the night in his long green bed was satisfying."

A mumbling rose from the bagel gallery.

Max crossed his arms and shook his head. "Axel didn't write that," he said.

Matilda cut him off with a wave of her forefinger. "Just listen to the story, Maxie."

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Thursday, just before lunchtime, a delivery truck spilled a load of premium olive oil all over Lexington Avenue, the slippery stuff and broken glass making hazardous the approach to Max's only venerable East Sixties rival. On Friday, Mario the kitchen manager—out of position and strolling the dining room in the heat of the noontime rush—performed the Heimlich on a damsel in distress, a Manhattan heiress whom, after catapulting her party with a barrage of disgorged cinnamon-raisin, pledged her bagel-buying allegiance (in good swallows as well as bad) to Max's. Then out of the blue, Saturday's Post ran a snapshot of Mario's Creamed Spinach Bisque under the headline "Best Soups Upper East Side" (a top-notch plug, and without the honking gaggle of bagel-starved reporters to remunerate).

In the meantime, Max's bagel men—all duded-up in their white

creased hats—had somehow conjured the spirit of Popeye the Sailor Man. Not just his guise but the intangibles—the good-natured bravado and the witty one-liners (not to mention the ten minutes of swashbuckling adventure that accompanies, well, Heimlich-ing a lanky, large-footed Manhattan heiress). Certainly curious, Max wasn't sure what to make of it, or wherein to find the poetry. Normally his staff liked to keep things loose and team-oriented—no name tags, no hairnets, no glitzy Maximilian's Bagelry tees or monikers on their pinstriped aprons; while "No Popeye" seemed like a no-brainer, the tissue-topped lids oozed with unmistakable coolness.

A deliveryman described the shift in headwear as "inspired."

Max laid flat his paper sailor and contemplated inspiration. An old flame—also an infrequently-published Brooklyn poet slash Manhattan restaurateur—often cursed inspiration as "A four-syllable waste of time, impossible to identify much less indemnify." She'd branded herself an imagist, whereas Max wasn't married to anything.

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The snowy autumn pallor spread through the tall windowpanes, its dull cast mingling under the subtle sheen of embedded fluorescent lighting; through the ceiling's maze of ancient pipe and the whirling industrial fans; over the white tables flecked with gold laminate sandwiched between shiny black vinyl booths; all the way down to the black and white-checked floor stretching toward the communal tables in the back.

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Max whispered, relishing his old words as he read. His eyes moved across each line, then from the ceiling to the floors as he verified each detail. An excerpt from the previous November's daily journal, he'd penned it to commemorate last year's first snowstorm; he'd nailed the

setting, but reliving the past hardly seemed the cure for whatever ailed him.

He made a note to have Harry call the plumber about the ancient pipe. Thanksgiving's condensation duly morphed into a leaky New Year, its moody pitter-patter dripping restlessly toward springtime.

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Regarding her enjoyment of verse, Emily Dickinson once exclaimed: "If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry."

Max adored her words and even had said quote sewn on an old-fashioned quilt hanging over the front exit sign. As he admired the patchwork, a rap on the glass announced the paperboy's expected arrival.

Brass chimes tolled and frosty air flooded the vestibule as Max reluctantly ventured into the weather. Wind and snow muffled the usual bustle of traffic and, in a matter of seconds, Max's arms were covered in thick flakes. Bundle in hand, he pulled the door shut to the popping of his ears, flexed his jaw to the ever-present chimes, and dragged his feet to test the traction on the new wet weather mat. After dealing the morning dailies across the bar, as he stopped to give his restaurant a final once-over, everything appeared as normal—save the mosaic adorning the lunch counter, which glistened like he'd never seen and beckoned a closer inspection.

The mosaic's artsy tiles tended to vanish during lunchtime, but when the dining room was empty you couldn't miss it—the one-of-a-kind black-on-white rendering of 1930s-era Manhattan splayed majestically across the front bar-turned-lunch counter. Minimalist etchings of the Flatiron and Empire State buildings loomed like modernist icons as fedora'd gentlemen took to Model Ts, their sundressed counterparts strolling Central Park, polka-dotted parasols in hand.

With poetic urgency, Max glimpsed the mosaic aglow in the reflection of a morning snowscape all its own. Taxicabs, police cruisers, and a Honda SUV slid right past Mr. Ford's Model Ts, while the tennis-shoed secretaries dashing to work ducked flurries beneath pointillist parasols. Max breathed easy, engrossed in the glossy particulars as the ceramic

glaze absorbed the soft light of the snow. While the gap in his poetic disconnect had widened, Max could still spot a bit of magic in the everyday. And to be sure, Maximilian's Bagelry and Deli Upper East Side looked more than presentable enough to open (and although Max was pleased, it was nothing to lose his Dickinsonian head over).

Above the mirage, Mario emerged from submarine-windowed kitchen doors with the first of the day's covered stockpots.

"Sopa matzo ball," he announced, lowering the massive pot into the back bar's entrenched soup station. "I make two pots extra for the snow."

Inclement weather gave Mario a thrill. He'd kept his eye on Good Day New York each morning for 25 years, loving it whenever a bleak forecast warranted a tweak in the daily menu.

"Two pots extra," repeated Max, ladling a small cup to taste. "That's all I can stands, I can't stands no more!"

Mario sidled nearer, puffed his cheek, and squinted his eye. "Aye, Captain," he said, keenly aware of what distinguished an "aye" from an "aye aye."

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"After their amazing sex, the Merman showed the sailor's widow a small room covered with lobster pots. The pots were upside down, bottoms pointed upward, their openings resting on the floor.

"When she asked what they were and why they were there, the Merman replied 'Those are the souls of the drowned. I keep them under the pots so they won't be lost.' The sailor's widow didn't know what to say. In the morning, she ascended to the surface.

"The weeks turned into months, and the drowned souls bedeviled her so much that she decided to seek out the Merman again. This time, at her place, the sailor's widow filled the Merman's green belly with red wine. As soon as she had exhausted all of his virtue, she left him and took to the cobbles and the end of the pier, where she stripped down and dove to the Merman's abode. Luckily, she'd kept the yellow hat.

"She remembered the way and quickly found the little room of drowned souls. She turned the pots over one by one, and although she

didn't see her husband the sailor, she hadn't really expected to. An almost unspeakable pressure suddenly lifted from her heart. And so it was that the water's sunken spirits bobbed from the depths to be delivered."

The restaurant froze silent in the glow of the snow. Matilda stood staid and kept her eyes to her red boots.

"She's like Olive Oyl," said Max.

"Sí, it's Popeye and Olive Oyl meet the long-peckered man-fish," said Mario through the pickup window.

The bagel men laughed and clapped as Matilda took an exaggerated bow.

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Max was finishing his coffee when the brass chimes jangled. The horns of passing taxis broke through the snowy quietude behind the morning's first guest. As Max swung around, five foot nothing of Matilda Miller née Explosion stood small and curvy wrapped in a Dodger blue cashmere pea coat. Reddish-brown curls unfurled past her shoulders as she doffed her yellow knit hat.

Max figured he hadn't seen her in fifteen years. It must've been twenty since they'd met during summer school nearby on Long Island. Matilda was a drama student at NYU, while Max spent his days bouncing back and forth between Brooklyn College and the bagelry. Back then, every coed in the city picked up cheap credits at SUNY-Stony Brook via the L.I. Railroad. Alphabetized and cater-cornered to each other on a forgotten adjunct's seating chart, lingering glances were made known until the waning days of their Survey in Modern American Lit, when Max finally presented her with a daisy.

"Blessed be the one true Judge," he said as casually as possible.

Matilda didn't quite roll her eyes as she smiled, emoting thanks with a single graceful nod. The fresh powder from her hat covered her red gloves and sifted over her red leather boots and the new wet weather mat.

"Theirs is the kind of love that could have seasoned pastrami," Max's grandfather had once said, "long before He let there be pastrami."

For five years, Max and Matilda were inseparable. Following her

teacher's certification, however, she accepted an offer at a parochial school up in Buffalo. Having never discussed their breakup in advance, they agreed to let things unfold as they may. Keeping in touch didn't come naturally so they didn't, and their common friends were kept in check through their steadfast devotion to never mentioning each other. Matilda's quick marriage made it official, if not more natural. When his grandfather fell ill, Max had plenty to keep him busy. Upon her return to the city, she respected Max's space and kept her own without any trouble. Their indifference proved efficient; however complicated or painless their efforts turned out, they'd only known love.

"My mother told me to go get some bagels," said Matilda.

"In the snow? How many?"

"I like the snow." Having no idea how many bagels her mother needed, Matilda fiddled with her hat. "Two dozen?"

Max hadn't been keeping score as much as keeping up his end of the deal, but going cold turkey paid off more for Matilda. She'd been married for a dozen years and up until the last few days had more going on, a husband and kids. That she paid the visit that would break their silence was fine, too. It allowed for the calm maturity they'd both once fallen for to intervene.

If Max's bagel men knew she was coming, they'd stayed mum. Mario had pointed out a brief article in Saturday's Post (opposite his Spinach Bisque) concerning an alleged drowning, but there was no way to be sure if it was Matilda's husband or his boat. There were a thousand Michael Millers on Manhattan Island alone, perhaps even more, but the article hadn't mentioned his wife or any children. Matilda's braving the snow for bagels, of course, confirmed her solemn state.

"Make it three dozen," said Max.

Mario started toward the kitchen.

"Two right out of the oven, and get her some soup. Want some soup? Want some chopped liver to go with the bagels?"

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The following morning, Tuesday morning, Max awoke a few hours early. The snowstorm continued through the night, and it was getting colder.

The living room was dark and his brother was still dozing in the glow of an old western.

"Wake up and go to bed," said Max. "And be careful with the inventory, Harry. I almost ordered pounds instead of pats."

Harry nodded.

"Tilly Explosion says hello."

Harry wasn't much interested; he grunted "Goodnight" and retired to his bedroom.

Max started a pot of coffee. He slipped Bitches Brew from its sleeve and made sure to keep the volume low. He tore through his daily stretching and meditation regimens in his usual spot before the great wall of mahogany—a half-dozen federal bookcases lined with centuries of poetry (most of it old Maximilian's) and decades of the family's vinyl (most of it Harry's or his own).

After a quick shower, Max took his coffee into the dining room, where he kept a small office. His grandfather's matching mahogany desk, bruised and coffee-stained, made a tidy home to an open notebook, a few pens, and Max's old bust of Shakespeare digital alarm clock.

The Clydesdale remained vivid in his memory, but Matilda's eyes would earn the bulk of his attention.

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Her eyes were bigger than Max remembered, darting around the deli, revisiting familiar surroundings. The vein above her temple pulsing tenderly seemed her only symptom of stress. Max wondered if this was her first excursion, if Matilda had not yet wept and was about to let it all out on the deli counter. Somehow reminiscent of his writer's block, he noted. She did not.

"How's your brother doing?" she asked.

"He's probably asleep. Harry's always asleep. Your mother's in and out pretty often."

"Pinky says you're the best," she confirmed.

"She's been very friendly over the years," he added, "considering."

"Pinky always loved you," said Matilda. "She's with the twins."

"A boy and a girl?"

She nodded. "Just started kindergarten."

Max refused to force any words of comfort and instead, opted to eye her up and down. For some ladies, nearing middle age brought on a classy beauty Max couldn't help but validate in Matilda; she wasn't typically attractive but possessed a delicate balance Max had forgotten about, an alluring olio of precision he probably hadn't noticed since their first days together years ago. Her cheeks were soft, her smile confident; her eyes were as playful as ever despite her tragic weekend.

"I'd have helped with the arrangements," said Max. "Watched over him or something, if you'd asked."

The faint clapping of hooves barely reached through the glass as a Clydesdale led a carriage past the storefront. Its passing wasn't out of the ordinary but since they both pined for anything but each other to linger over, all eyes escorted the wintry scene across the lunch counter's reflective white tiles. Matilda's neck bobbed as the horse's reflection halted before ceramic Central Park.

"His mother took care of that," she said, "but you might have read him some poetry." Her not so nasally voice trailed off as she unbuttoned her coat; underneath her shell of primary colors, she mourned smartly in a black palazzo pant suit. As she inspected the mosaic, her voice deftly regained its mark. "Still waking up at all hours to write, Maxie? Still have my Shakespeare alarm clock?"

Max wanted to tell her about his writer's block, about how it really didn't matter.

"Only if it's something I need to get down," he said (he'd told her the same a hundred times), "but not so much lately, no." He dipped his head to glimpse all he could of the Clydesdale. "So Michael liked poetry?"

Matilda still held her hat, but as the huge horse trudged out of view, she'd buried its obvious yellow in the palms of her dark red gloves. "He had a book of sonnets," she started, but she interrupted herself. "Did you hear the one about the sailor's widow and the Merman with the green hat?"

Her grin was nothing new to Max, and it had little to do with poetry. Her family's passion for myths and folklore—tales of mermaids, unicorns, and damsels in distress—had been groomed by her late father. A

city attorney, he'd related his whimsical allegories to wide-eyed juries in the stately confines of the New York County Courthouse. Matilda would cut her own chops over the ruckus of her high school drama students. Both venues, as it happens, are next to impossible to escape.

Matilda's fifteen-year hiatus didn't make the subject matter any less weird. Again Max imagined himself drooling, but out of respect for the dead he prepared to suck it up.

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Max felt the urge returning.

Static from speakers calm with trumpet and guitar summoned Matilda unbuttoning her cashmere coat and the tip of her red boot on the lunch counter's silver foot rest.

He envisioned her fifteen years ago and at last formed two lines in his head. Turning to a fresh page, he detached himself from the burdens of the world for as long as it took, concentrating on the blank page, knowing nothing else would ever matter more.

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Big brown eyes, wet and wise if not confident—
She's not tired, but she blinks with subdued
exhaustion. In a yellow knit hat, she was sent
for the morning bagels. "No cream cheese, nude
and uncut if you have them," she says

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to the stout counterman's "What will it be?
Matzo ball soup is the special today."

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She politely declines his routine.

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"Nude," he repeats. "Uncut." His eyes smile.

She toys with wording by habit, with ease.
Nude, to make plain, just sounds more worthwhile.
Her world, not just his, needs the tease.

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"Chopped liver on me?" ... Her refusal surmised
by eyes green and dry, confident if not wise.

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Forty-five minutes later, his bust of Shakespeare read 4:40. Side one
of the Miles Davis record was finished, but Max let pass the silence as he
copied the fresh iambs to his tablet.

He considered his edits as he mulled over the past and present tens-
es. "This will never be finished," he whispered.

His third cup of coffee emptied fast. The snow kept falling, but the
steady beams of headlights twinkled across the Verrazano-Narrows.

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"You're holding up well," said Max.

"I'm holding up," said Matilda. "What about you, Maxie?"

The chimes sounded again; before them stood the inspired delivery
man, his dolly stacked high with cases of root beer.

"Deliveries in the back," said Max, "in the alley."

"A truck's blocking the way."

Max nodded an okay. "How long's the shiva?"

"Three days only, no thanks to his mother. The funeral was yesterday.
My mother wanted you—"

She paused as Mario reappeared from the kitchen.

"We wanted you to come, Maxie, but everything's happening so fast."

Mario set two large gift bags on the counter and held his hand over
his heart. "Baruch dayan emet, Señora Tilly."

"Gracias," she replied. She perched her boot on the foot rest and

leaned over the counter to hug Mario.

"You're the best," she added.

Mario let loose a good-natured guffaw as she pawed the pointy crease
on his hat.

"I am what I am," he said.

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Max scoured his wardrobe for his black tie, one of only a fistful of ties
he'd ever owned. In the foyer coat closet he located an old pair of dressy
black gloves and commandeered Harry's black wool scarf.

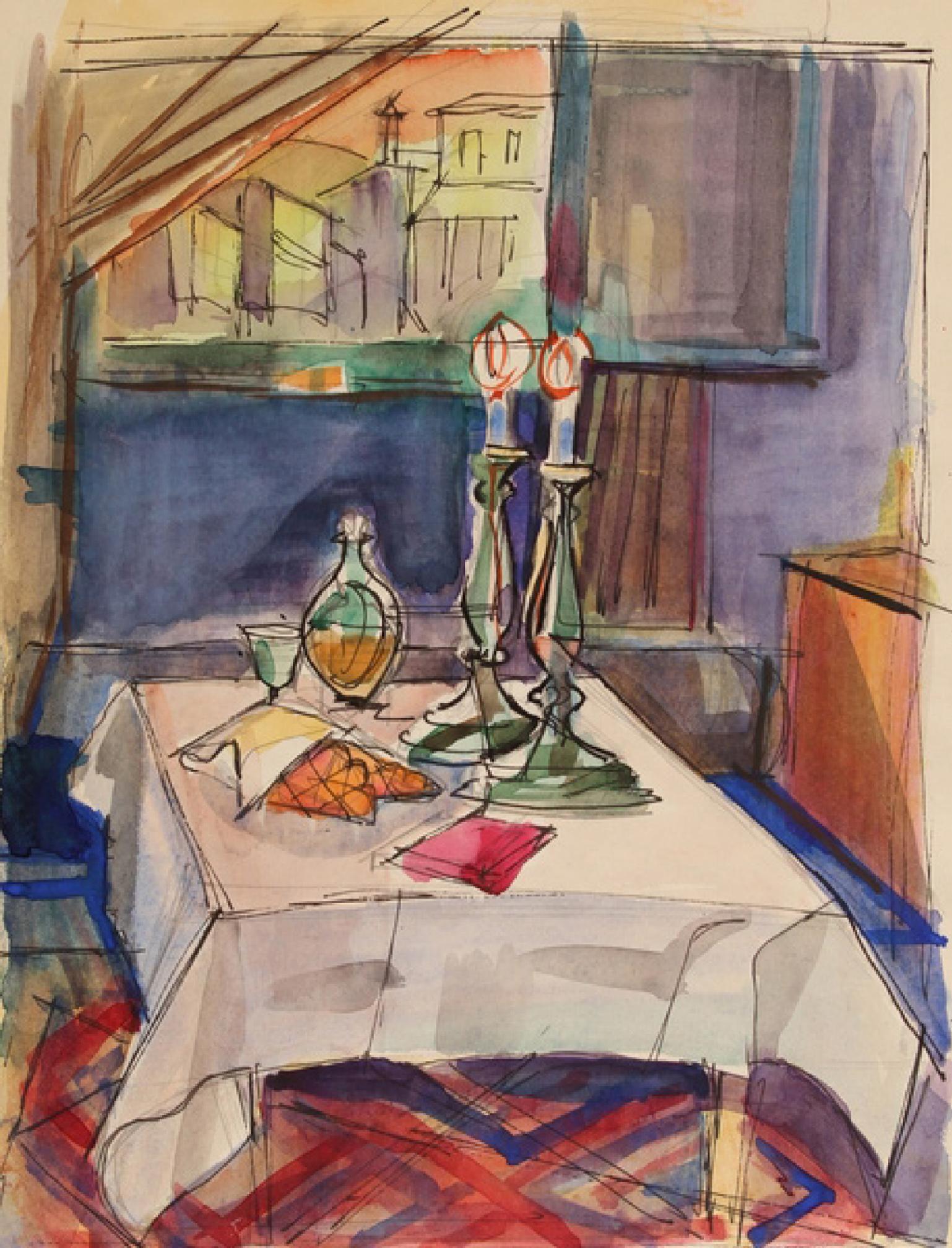
Lastly, Max checked his pockets to make sure he still possessed Matil-
da's golden headwear. He wanted to get it back before it smelled like ev-
erything else, like nutty malt and flour and salt. The bright acrylic yarn,
soft to the touch, lit up the dim passageway.

Tuesday's soup, Max called to mind, was Cream of Spinach.

Returning her knit hat to his overcoat pocket, he dug up a fresh paper
lid. Outside, he pried it open and popped it on his head; it was perfect for
the snow.

Pintail





AMERICAN SEDER

John heard a knock. "I hate to interrupt the young scholar here," Barney Katz said, dragging in the stepstool, "but when Selma gets going, there's no stopping her. She's started her annual assault on the kitchen cabinets. Down there brandishing the scrubbing brush. Hunting chametz. Woe to every last breadcrumb." Barney angled the stepstool inside Buddy's closet and disappeared up it. Buddy had been killed in combat in Sicily.

"Time for the Passover dishes," Barney said, straining under the weight of a quilted plastic container filled with plates. He handed the stack to John. John had come to them in 1948, straight from a DP camp. Fifteen years old. "I'm sure there's more." Barney's voice was muffled above the clothes.

They carried the dishes downstairs. "Put them on the dining room table," Selma said, drying her hands on a towel. "Why don't they call Pesach the housewives full employment act?" she said, wiping sweat off her forehead. "Though there's plenty of work for you gentlemen, too. You can bring the everyday dishes upstairs. Now, where was I? Oh yes, stock for the matzo balls." She lifted the lid off a pot of simmering chicken soup.

The smell was Mutter's embrace. John remembered waking to the aroma of Mutter's soup wafting under his bedroom door. And walking sleepily down the dark corridor lined with family photographs to the kitchen. He was Janko Stein then. Mutter was already in a frenzy of activity. Papa too. Shining the Seder plate and the silver carving set. Instead of "good morning," Mutter told him to stay out of the din-

A NOVEL EXCERPT BY MARTHA ANNE TOLL

Watercolor sketch of a Shabbat Table
by Albert Dov Sigal. 14.620 x 10.620
paper, watercolor, graphite pencil, ink.

ing room. "I've just set the table and you're not to play in there." He wouldn't dare.

He turned around to face the newly laid table, covered in white damask with a stack of Haggadahs at Papa's end. Each place was set with a crystal wine glass and the silver that Mutter used on holidays. Long white candles, smooth as swans' necks, were mounted in the candlesticks. The table was formal and grand.

Papa dressed for the Seder, gold watch chain tucked into his gray flannel vest, a black yarmulke on his head. When it was time to start, Oma rose from her rocker in the corner of the living room and hobbled over. She was wearing a lacey white shawl. For once, something light over her dark clothing. The relatives kissed Janko and pinched his cheeks before they sat down. There was only him. Max hadn't been born yet.

It took forever. The reading and the singing. Going around the table, everyone reciting. Oma nodded off until it was time for the Four Questions. Papa had been working on them with Janko for weeks, sitting at the dining room table until bedtime with the Haggadah open. Papa had his own special book, annotated with his notes for conducting the Seder. He moved his index finger along the Hebrew letters tracing the words. Janko was too young to read. Instead he listened to Papa and memorized each of the questions phrase by phrase. At the Seder, as soon as Janko started singing, Oma lifted her head, a smile on her lips, her face more animated than usual.

By the time Papa put his Haggadah aside and announced the end of the Seder, Janko was starving. Behind the kitchen door, he could hear china clinking--Mutter ladling soup into the bowls she had arranged earlier on a tray. Aunt Ella gingerly carried them in and set them before each guest. It tasted so good! The matzo balls were a special kind of squishy. Pieces of onions floated translucent in broth. Bits of carrots too. Papa gave Janko a look that meant don't slurp. But Janko couldn't help it; if he wasn't careful, he would burn his tongue.

"Is that okay, John?" Selma sounded exasperated.

John shook himself. "Sorry?" He had chosen his name with the help

of someone whom he thought spoke English. John Curtin. The idea of a curtain falling on his life across the ocean appealed. He could start fresh; he could erase memory.

"You and Barney bring up the dishes from the kitchen," Selma said. "Pots, too. Before the Seder tomorrow, you can bring up the folding table and chairs from the garage."

"Of course." So why was it that every resuscitated morsel of memory felt like a tiny, hard earned victory?

The Seder table extended through Barney and Selma's narrow living room most of the way to the front door. To keep the legs of the folding table from wobbling on the carpet, Selma had weighed it down with a pitcher of water and a carafe of wine.

Rachel arrived early. "I'm glad you're here first," Selma exclaimed, putting her arm around her niece and bringing her over to John. "We'll make sure you two sit together." John put his heels together and bowed. Rachel was a short, big-breasted girl of nineteen. She blushed furiously under her crown of black curls. Had he done something wrong? Maybe he wasn't supposed to bow.

Barney's pharmacy assistant and his wife came in with their two little boys. The next-door neighbors, Moe and Gertie Horwitz, arrived. John was struck by the informality, everyone on top of each other in the Katz's cramped living room. "Careful, it's still warm," Gertie said, handing Selma a steaming casserole of tsimmes. "I hope I didn't overdo the carrots," she added, looking for a place to put down her handbag.

"No more room to stand," Selma said. "Barney, have everyone come to the table." She pointed to John and Rachel. "Put them together," she said. Clasp the tsimmes to her bosom, she negotiated her way through the crowd.

Barney pointed to the end of the table nearest the kitchen. "Rachel, then John, then Moe."

"Nice of you to share the young people with a seventy-year-old bald guy," Moe said, lining up behind Rachel and John. "You're charitable, Barney."

John and Rachel walked sideways between the table and the wall. He

pulled out Rachel's chair and helped angle her in.

"What a gentleman!" Moe said, slapping John on the back. "I see they taught you some nice European manners over there."

"Go ahead and get started," Selma said, opening the oven door and removing the tin foil covering the capon. "I'll just be a minute."

Barney passed out the Haggadahs and tapped a glass. "Let's begin, otherwise it could be a long night," he said, winking at the two little boys. "A special hag sameach to John, who joins us for his first American Seder."

"And let us remember those who cannot be with us tonight." Barney looked over to the picture on the living room wall. Buddy stood brash and confident in his army uniform. John thought Buddy resembled Selma. He had her big open smile and looked as if he enjoyed a good laugh.

Barney paused for a moment before clearing his throat. "First we light the candles and say a prayer for Yom Tov," he said. "Selma, are you coming?"

"Let Rachel do it," Selma called from the kitchen.

Barney handed Rachel a box of matches. She stood up. "Baruch Atah Adonoi," she sang in a quavering voice. The Seder guests joined in a chorus.

John recognized the prayer. Of course. It was jarring. The same as at home; the tune identical to the one his family sang. Friday night dinners in Mainz, before everything ended.

"Eloheinu melech ha'olam." The whole Seder table was singing the blessing over the candles. John opened his mouth to join them, but his throat was parched. To sing was to grind corroded gears. Nothing came.

The singing ended. Selma came in and squeezed into the chair on the other side of Barney.

"Gertie," Barney called down the table. "Can you read the prayer in English?"

"Blessed art thou, oh Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who makes us holy by Your good deeds, and commands us to light the festival lights."

"Now the shehecheyanu. John?"

Selma glanced at John and took in his blanched face. She elbowed Barney. "I'll do it," she said. John stilled himself for the next prayer, the one that Papa had them sing at Hanukkah. The one that thanks God for supporting us and protecting us and bringing us to this day. John squeezed his palms under the table until he cut off the circulation in his fingers. Papa was a man of impeccable integrity. He would never have sung for the Commandant. He would have sealed his lips and suffered the consequences. Barney held up his silver Kiddush cup and intoned the blessing over the wine. So many blessings at this table. The singing, it seemed, would never end.

"Let us remind ourselves what we have on the Seder plate," Barney said. "Shank bone to recall the offering at the temple, boiled egg, haroset." He pointed to the ritual objects and explained them. "Haroset represents the mortar the Israelite slaves used for building. Parsley, horseradish—bitter herbs to recall our struggles." He started around the table, assigning a reading from the Haggadah to each guest. The Passover story unfolded. Moses left in the bulrushes by his mother to escape Pharaoh's edict to slaughter the firstborn. Saved by Pharaoh's daughter and raised in royal splendor. His people enslaved. His God inciting him to the grueling, thankless task of leadership.

"Time for the Four Questions," Barney said. "We call on our youngest member."

"Mah nishtanah halailah hazeh mikol haleilot."

The little boy at the end of the table sang the familiar melody in a high-pitched voice. "Why is this night different from all other nights?" John's head throbbed and his ears pounded. The pain was excruciating. He could hear Max's whimpers and see the tears streaming down Max's face as Mutter held him in line, the one from which Janko had been pulled. There was no air, only choking smoky stench. And bitter cold.

John had done as he had been told. He had sung. But his voice had dried and splintered. Barney and Selma wouldn't have taken him in if they knew what he had done. He would never be able to tolerate singing again. Or music, for that matter. They had every right to banish him from this benevolent table. John looked again at Buddy's pho-

tograph. The Katzes had had one child, a good son, and he had been killed. Crushing his face in his hands, John pictured his grief: a chain of hammering jackboots extending to forever.

"Great job!" The table erupted in applause.

"Blood, frogs, lice." They read the plagues out loud. "Beasts, cattle disease, boils." They dipped their pinkies into their wine glasses for each affliction. "We take these drops out of our wine glasses so we will have less to enjoy. 'Hail, locusts, darkness.'" Dip. Dip. Dip.

"We remind ourselves of the suffering of the Egyptians too," Barney said. "Death of the first born." He closed his Haggadah. "And we remind ourselves of suffering the world over. Even now." He took a deep breath and sighed. "Pass up your books," he said, and excused himself to carve the capon.

Selma and Gertie brought out bowls of matzo ball soup.

"What did you think of your first American Seder?" Moe asked John.

The broth was liquid memory. John could hardly focus; he was submerged in childhood. "It was over so quickly," he said.

Rachel angled around the table to help with the gefilte fish. Moe laughed. "My kids never thought Barney conducted a short Seder. They used to dread it! Maybe you're just older."

John looked at Moe. Tonight he felt older than time.

"We're not a religious family," Moe said, "but we thought the kids should have a little something at the holidays. There are different ways to be Jewish, right?" Moe said.

John nodded, wondering what his was. He was trying hard to fit into Barney and Selma's version—a feast at the holidays, brisket on Friday nights. Beyond that, what did it mean to be a Jew? A branded member of a herd, to be taken in cattle cars to the slaughter. Was that a way of life, or a belief system that contained anything redemptive? Belief was beside the point anyway. The "chosen" had been skeptics and zealots alike, equally condemned to die.

"Aunt Selma says she's helping you," Rachel said, as she sat back down.

"She's very patient," John said, fighting to concentrate. Selma had been tutoring him at the dining room table. When she got excited, she

flung her glasses chain over her shoulder. She wore a faint touch of rouge on her peach fuzz cheeks and smelled of face powder. "I learned a new word for English," John said, "'inscrutable.'"

"Ha ha, that's a good one," Moe guffawed.

It was strange that you could put 'un' in front of anything and make it its reverse. 'Unhappy.' 'Unspeakable.' 'Unbelievable.' What was the difference between 'there' and 'their?' How come no two 'gh's' were pronounced the same? "It's hard not to trip over the silent endings," John said. And false beginnings. "I don't like all those past tenses," he added, smiling. Too many nuanced forms of time gave him a headache. "Fortunately, Selma gets me to laugh. She says if I work hard enough I can get into CCNY," he said.

"What are you kids studying?" Moe asked, pushing his empty soup bowl toward the center of the table.

"I'm going to be a teacher," Rachel said.

"Nice profession for a woman," Moe said. "And you?" he asked, turning to John.

"Barney and Selma want me to study medicine." Barney had not had that chance. They had saved for Buddy's education and wanted to give it to John.

"I wanted to be a doctor," Moe said. "But I only got as far as chemistry. No more money. I made out okay at Carlisle Textiles though. What kind of doctor you want to be?"

"I didn't know there were different kinds," John said.

Moe leaned in. "If I were you, I'd look into psychiatry."

"What's that?"

"Take it from me, kid." Moe put his palm over his chest and tapped up and down. "You got a heart full of tsouris and a keppe full of nasty memories. It's written on your forehead like a headline in the New York Post." He leaned in closer. "Be a brain doctor. Unleash your dreams."

Street Contingencies

Nonfiction by Maria Bowler

It's difficult for everyone. And the streets contain blood and dirt. A wet winter in New York follows with no appreciable transition from the hot garbage August except fewer jackhammers drill; some remain, insistent. The sidewalk has gone slippery with slush from the gray sky. As for me, I am stuffing envelopes. Then, I am mailing the envelopes I stuff. I am waking very early and knocking on my neighbour's wall when their phone wakes me at four a.m. because it won't stop buzzing. I usually go to sleep early because of the waking early. As far as keeping up goes, I'm surviving. It could be worse obviously.

In Midtown the Christmas lights remain sparkling and they're the best in the whole city, because of the tourists, and all the money. These lights and their charm are undeniable. Harry Winston's outer walls look like the innards of a jewelry box and though the store is not for folks like me, this display is democratic. For everyone to relish. Near Harry Winston: a stretch of little trees on the sidewalk lit with white and on the building to the left, giant candy canes. How kind for someone to make the effort because for a minute it's pretty magical when you walk between those trees and those candy canes. But don't tell me "beauty will save the world" on a tote bag because that's not



Photo: Michael Huitt 2008

enough to make sense of all this. That's not even how Dostoevsky meant it. How imperative it is to think, but how impossible to say in good faith.

It is more than poor manners to refuse to account for the rest.

We duck underground in the subway cars where it's warm and when we rise out over some bridge, the train takes a breath. On one such stretch on my morning commute, I feel like an asshole when I see the sun rising over Brooklyn because it is stunning and real yet here I am under the car's fluorescent lights. Can't I appreciate the sight? Rather, I'm reluctant to take the sight—glory?—at face value over the commonplace moments on the subway where it is dismal or, even more difficult, prosaic. Which is far more insidious. It's just past the longest night of the year, the city's in silhouette and I want the orange and red sunlight to give us a hand, to animate every one of us in the car with oxygen but then it doesn't. Of course it doesn't.

Just a block from the 125th stop a woman trails me and asks my name, then calls me "a cunt" because I don't tell her. "Who would dare be a visionary while staring out an icy train window on the way to the 125th station, with work to do, people to face, converse with, speak honestly to." Soon after, in a coffee shop on 123rd, I read that sentence by Fanny Howe in *The Winter Sun*. "Well, there are such visionaries." She imagines these visionaries in the cold, the cold being the risk of seeing the world flat out, but in hope. Without a sure shelter to keep them contained, they huddle together and forge on. At least I think that's what she means. She's a proper mystic so she says a lot more in the piece than that but let me focus on the winter. Outside there's a golden retriever chilling the hell out on the sidewalk, all rich fur on frigid concrete, breathing deep. "Son of God / Love's Pure Light / Radiant beams by Thy holy face..." Tinny in the headphones. It's Christmastime and the door opens and closes to allow hits of wind.

What can be named beauty in the mutilated world, and who has the audacity to find it then say it's inevitable, as if it's the conclusion to all this? "Praise the mutilated world / and the gray feather a

thrush lost, / and the gentle light that strays and vanishes / and returns," writes Adam Zagajewski. If the light that strays does return, it needn't have; it's not as though that is what light simply does by its nature, or on our account. Let's not make the argument aesthetic.

Beauty has to be contingent for it to appear just, and not an impending result of evil. Yet we cannot formulate what beauty is or does based on injustice either, or that would make suffering, sin, the stable principle. Which is it that stirs the world?

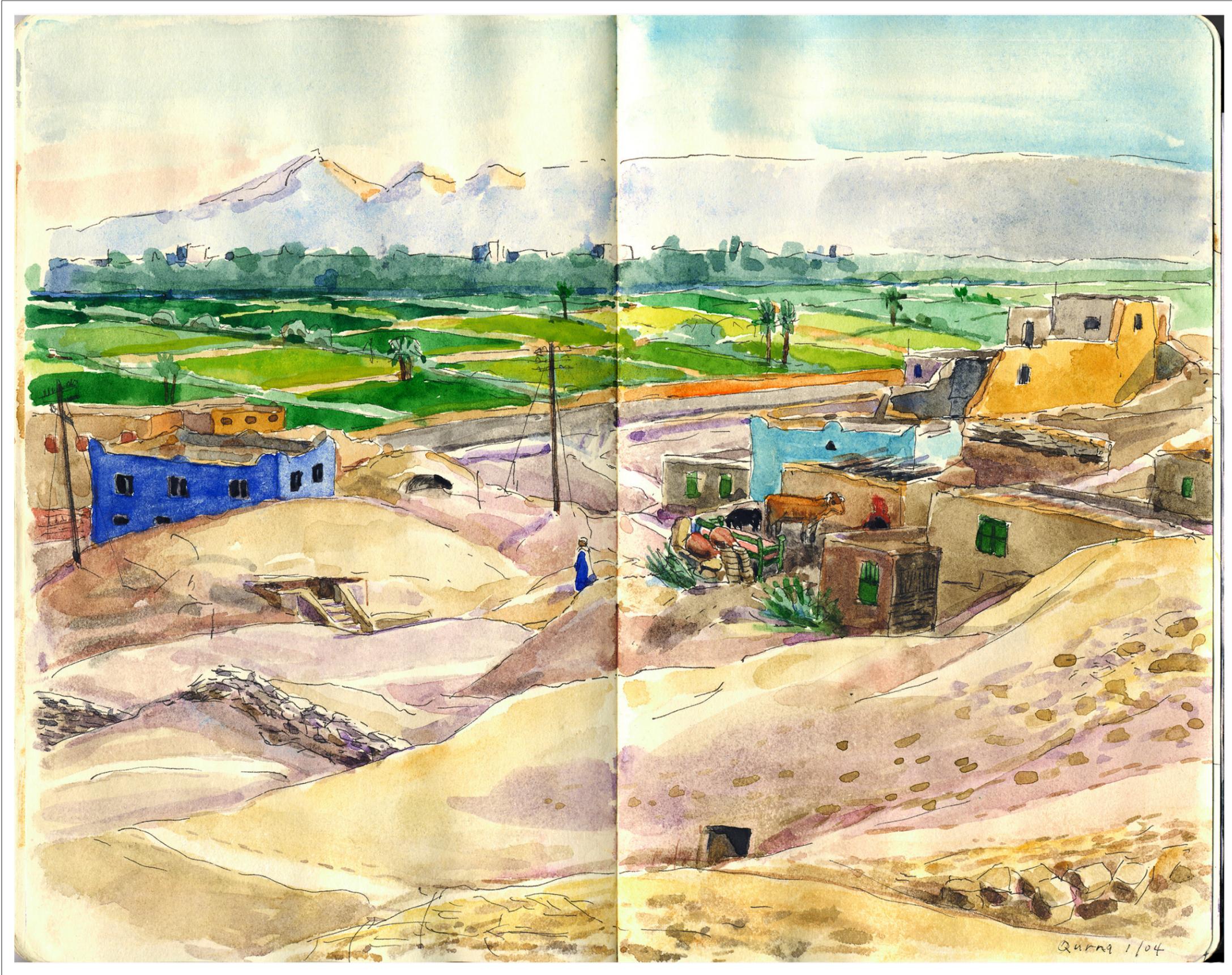
How to call it like we see it, the transcendent alongside the dead and dying, without explaining either away? We have to deny that if only we scratched the surface of each day, or life, enough we'd find it's all alright, but we also must deny that we'd only find suffering. While we're in time, we might find only one event that hinged on another. Not necessity but just what occurred.

I was seven years old in a January playing in the backyard with a friend, bundled, collecting icicles and putting them in a pile in the snow. After some time, the supply of icicles ran low, and she wanted to go inside to get warm, but I wanted to find more. Then I remembered something and showed her — "there" — at a shorter side of the house, a leafless bush where a translucent coating covered every bit of twig. Its thin branches suspended ice of varied sizes and textures. Some clear and others cloudy. We stayed out a little longer, snapping the spikes off in our mittens.

I don't know at what age a mildewed glaze came over my eyes and I started to think mechanistically in either direction: that we were moving toward Good or Nothingness. I tried prayer and travel to feel awe again, but it wouldn't come. I stared at paintings but nothing could surprise me. Everything was already a symbol that all is right or that we are lost.

If I were to think otherwise, I could be like a dog with its front crouched low, haunches poised and ready to leap. Expectant but uncalculating. Instinct and hope. The hazards would not have names yet. If contingency is the prevailing, needed word for grace, so be it.

P.S.



Sheik Abd el Qurna View
Susan Osgood
Watercolor