

## Miscellaneous Friends

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Preface  
Peter Donahue

*Miscellaneous Friends* came about, just as many friendships do, by serendipity. My wife and I had gone to a production of Tom Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound* at our local community theatre. The stage set included a back wall with a dozen 9x11 oil portraits of random people. I say "random" because I never could figure out the relationship between the portraits and the play. At intermission, I told my wife how the portraits reminded me of the rather random profiles of mostly made-up friends I'd been writing for the past several weeks. I'd written about twenty at that point. They were something I'd started one afternoon sitting in a Peet's in San Francisco's Marina District while visiting my step-daughter.

After the play, as my wife and I drove home, I was thinking more about the portraits than the play: how varied and expressive each face was; how some of the visages were bright and cheery, others drawn and somber, and yet others intense and unsettling; and just how visually vivid the paintings were while also at times blurry and bordering on the abstract. Most of all, they kept reminding me of the profiles I'd been writing, which shared many of the same qualities. At some point during the predawn hours, the thought came to me that the portraits and my profiles could be paired. I didn't know the artist, but fortunately my wife did, and the next day I emailed Robin and asked if she'd like to get coffee.

Once we got to talking, Robin and I instantly recognized the synergy between her portraits and my profiles. Curiously enough, we both had roughly the same number completed at the time. Many of the eventual pairings, such as "Dolores" and "Clue," were an instant match. For others pairings, I tweaked my existing profiles or wrote new ones to accompany her portraits, as Robin kept

painting more. Along the way our sensibilities—artistic and literary—became ever more complementary, and the miscellany grew.

Robin's approach to her portraits is purely *alla prima*, which gives them their spontaneity and lushness. She started painting them at a particularly difficult period in her life as a way to occupy herself in short, three- to four-hour bursts of creativity. Some were based on strangers who had caught her notice in public, some on people she knew. Quite a few were based on the black-and-white photographic portraits in the Fairburn System of Visual References, a strange series of books published in the 1970's in Vancouver, British Columbia. The series aimed to replace the need for live models for commercial and studio artists doing figure drawing. Being a bricoleur of the highest order, Robin had acquired several volumes of the Fairburn series at a yard sale. Hundreds of shots of a single model—male, female, or child—in a range of poses and facial expressions appear in any single volume. At first the photographic portraits seem rather banal, but the more one looks at them, the more bizarre and compelling they become, just like Robin's portraits. As Lucian Freud said, "The longer you look at an object, the more abstract it becomes, and, ironically, the more real." An individual face just augments this phenomenon.

As for my profiles, many of them were likewise inspired by strangers, mainly in San Francisco and Seattle, where most of them are set. They were also inspired by a lifetime of listening to Bob Dylan, whose lyrics tell stories replete with off-beat details that, in their quotidian nature, are oddly evocative. I wrote the first draft of all the profiles in my personal journal, keeping each one to a single page of the Clairefontaine notebooks I use. The conceit that each character is a friend of the first-person speaker was there from the start, unifying them. I wanted to depict the characters as simultaneously ordinary and unusual—a paradox that

holds true for everybody—and the speaker to sound friendly and familiar, yet enigmatic and ultimately unknowable.

Robin and I have believed from the start that it's our shared fascination with people and the curious nature of friendship that binds the portraits and profiles—and makes them work better in tandem than apart. Cross-genre collaboration can be so rewarding because it offers so much opportunity for discovery as well as validation. This has certainly been the case with this collaboration. Along the way, Robin and I have also become steadfast friends.

## Introduction

*Friends will arrive, friends will disappear  
If you want me, honey baby  
I'll be here.*

—“Buckets of Rain” by Bob Dylan

I like making friends. When I consider all the people I count as friends—real and imagined—there are far more than I could ever acknowledge. I’ll confess my definition of friendship is broad. If you and I see one another occasionally and say “Hey,” I consider that a good start. If we chat a little, maybe hang out, and come to know a few details about one another’s lives—that you work at Les Schwab Tires, that I grew up in Chadron, Nebraska, that kind of thing—then *viola*, I consider us friends. I’m not saying I’m Mr. Rogers singing, “Any time that you feel's the right time / For a friendship with me.” But I do like making friends, and I do have quite a few.

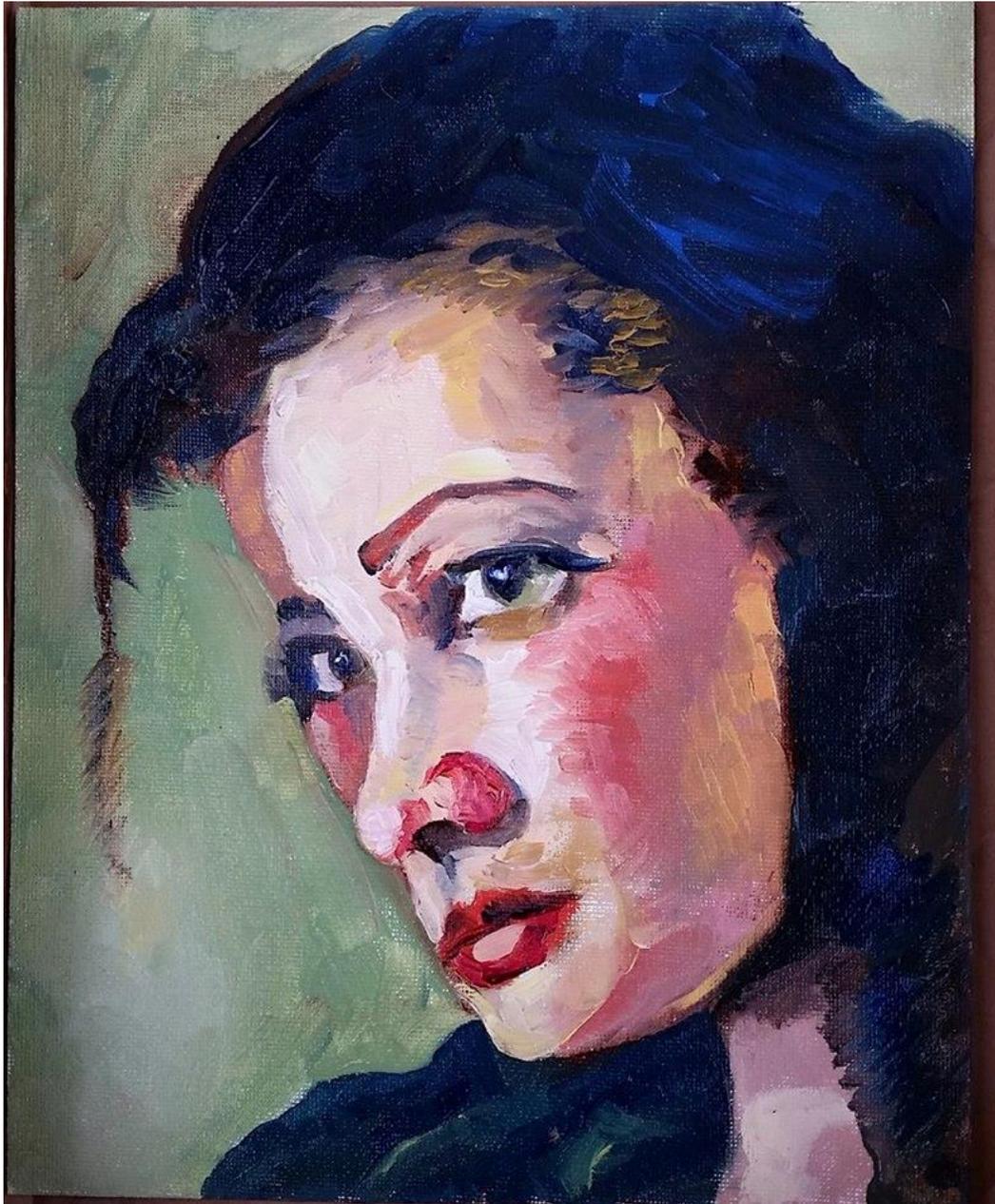
Most people view friendship on a spectrum of sorts. You know, from casual to closest, from “Hey, what’s up” to “I’ve missed you so much.” I get that, and in all my decades of making friends, I’ve experienced the full range. These days, for whatever reason, my friendships tend more toward the casual. This doesn’t make them any less meaningful to me. I love all my friends. Some I’ve known a good long while—since childhood (or even earlier). Others are new to my ever-expanding roster. They’re young and old and everywhere in between. Some I see regularly, some less so. Some are gone—dead or lost—but most remain. One thing that’s certain is how different my friends have always been from one another. Yet, I’m sure that if I brought them all together for one big friendship-palooza, they’d get along just fine—even the crankiest and most kooky, of which there are many.

Over the years social scientists have made much over the favorable effects of social networks in one’s life. Like good nutrition, regular exercise, and flossing,

they are beneficial in a multiplicity of ways. The benefits, say the social scientists, derive from the “mutual reciprocity” that occurs across our various social networks. I have no doubt there’s merit to this idea, yet at the same time I have difficulty thinking of my friends—“discretionary ties,” in the social science parlance—in quite this way. Perhaps I’m a hopeless sentimentalist (and more like Mr. Rogers than I care to admit), but to me real friendship is not, and never should be, a transactional situation, reciprocal or otherwise. I like to think it’s simpler than that. We’re glad to see our friends and they’re glad to see us. In addition, on any given day we like more aspects of our friends than not. It’s a simple formula. Or, as my essayist friend Michel de Montaigne long ago declared, “Friendship . . . has no manner of business or traffic with aught but itself.”

For me, the mysteriousness of friendship is the very basis and beauty of friendship. So I don’t delve too deeply—socially, psychologically, politically, whatever—into why I’m friends with the people I’m friends with. I just am. Another friend of mine, that great embracer of all humanity Walt Whitman, once said this: “I cannot tell how my ankles bend, nor whence the cause of my faintest wish, / Nor the cause of the friendship I emit, nor the cause of the friendship I take again.” I’m not sure what dear old Walt is saying about his ankles here, but the part about friendship sums up my attitude perfectly.

Of course, this is just me, and as my assorted friends forever remind me, we’re all different. Ultimately the way we think about friendship is likely influenced by the kind of friends we have. We probably each have our own ever-evolving friendship formula. All I know is that when I think about my friends, the word that springs to mind is “miscellany,” defined as a group, collection, mixture, medley, or hodgepodge of various and sundry things. That’s my friends to a tee: a miscellany.



No one could dangle her hand like my friend Dorothy. She lives in the Marina neighborhood, in San Francisco, spending much of her time at the corner Peet's. When another friend and I moved a new couch into her apartment, I busted a knuckle on the doorframe. Later, when the couch was in, Dorothy flopped down on it and dangled her bejeweled fingers, softly caressing the oak floorboards. I wanted those fingertips tracing my forearm. The next time I saw Dorothy was at Peet's. She was wearing a frayed Buddha t-shirt beneath a black silk jacket. She had a big book about portrait photographer Julia Margaret Cameron in her lap. She also wore four more rings than usual, including one on her long second toe. I could have kissed that ring.



Dennis doesn't have many friends. Me and maybe the guy down the block who walks by once a day while Dennis sits out on the front porch of the big white boardinghouse where he lives. The guy always bums a cigarette from Dennis and then sits down with him and talks while they smoke, and when they guy leaves, Dennis gives him another cigarette, which the guy tucks behind his ear. "Later, pal," Dennis says, and the guy walks off. My friendship with Big D, as I call Dennis, doesn't involve much more than this guy's actually. I might make a run to Gene's grocery store at the corner for some chicken strips and Jo-Jo's and dipping sauce, and we'll sit on the porch and eat and talk—and that's about it. When I get up to leave, he tells me, "Later, pal," and I walk off just like the other guy.



You wouldn't know it from meeting her, but my friend Cheryl was a real freak back in the Sixties, gobbling psychedelics in the Bay Area with Kesey, Cassidy, and the Grateful Dead. The Merry Pranksters asked her to join their cross-country trip on Furthur. "But I missed the bus," she says and snorts. "So I joined a commune in Oregon." That's where she met her husband, who later became an investment banker, specializing in oil futures. They moved to Dallas, where Cheryl began fundraising for civic causes. "I was on more boards than I could count." In the early 90s, the Dead had a tour date in Dallas, so Cheryl phoned her old friend Carolyn "Mountain Girl" Garcia, who phoned Jerry, who secured a backstage pass for her. "I went as I would to a museum gala—pearl choker and all. The guys were so happy to see me. They dedicated 'Sugar Magnolia' to me at the end of the show." She pauses and seems to ponder it all. "When I look back now, I think what a long—" I raise my hand and stop her. "Don't," I say, and she looks at me and nods. "Oh dear, you're so right."



I remember my troubled friend Patrick, who became my friend when I was a teenager and died when I was still a teenager. We hung out in New Jersey, where we were from, and went into New York City a lot. Pat was one of the most gaunt guys I ever knew. Did tons of drugs and drank ferociously. But always wore a jacket and tie, and smoked Newports, those foul menthol cigarettes. He was Catholic, attended Don Bosco High School up Route 17, and had a Silesian priest who gave him money for sex. A week after Pat climbed one of the towers of the George Washington Bridge and got arrested, I hitchhiked out to Seattle. When I heard a short while later that he'd died driving his beat-up old Volvo into a lake in upstate New York, I decided to stay in Seattle. And even though Pat never made out it here, as he told me he would, I sometimes see him walking the glistening wet streets and wonder, *Could it be?*



Rachel, my Bahá'í friend, is also from New Jersey. Teaneck, to be exact, which is a town just outside of New York City. She's tried to explain the Bahá'í faith to me in the past, and it seems pretty simple—monotheistic, religious unity, etc.—but I'm just not into it. I'm much more into Rachel's bread. She can bake bread like nobody's business. Her rosemary olive loaf is a spiritual experience. She lets me know that whenever I'm in Bellingham, in Washington State, where she lives now, I have an open invitation to stop by her house for whatever's coming out of the oven that day. So I go over and she and I, and usually a couple of her friends, break bread at her kitchen table. Rachel says a prayer and then we slather the still-warm slices of aromatic bread with butter. She and I swap tales of New Jersey—tunnel or bridge, turnpike or parkway, Springsteen or Bon Jovi—and savor each bite. "I'm fasting tomorrow," she invariably says, "so let's finish this loaf." And her friends and I are happy to oblige.



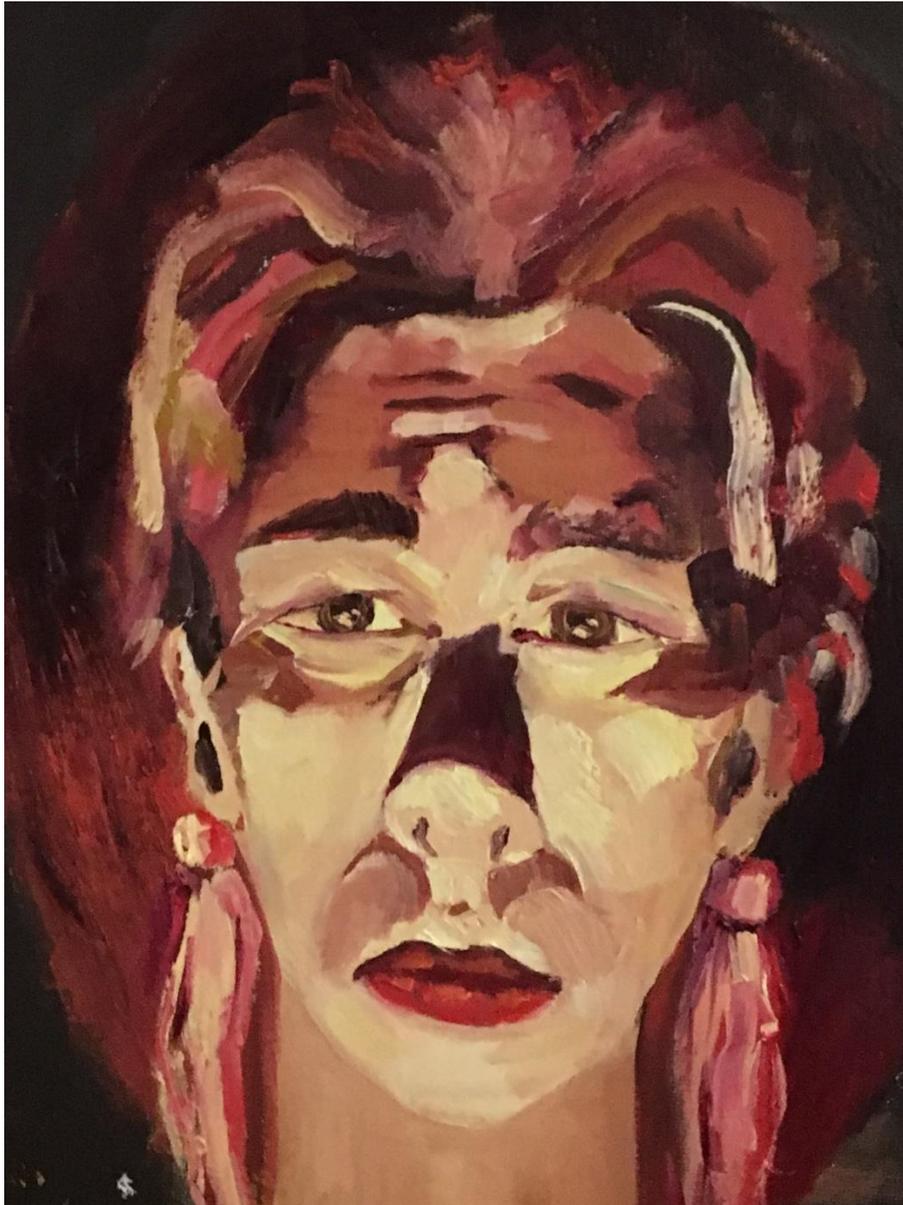
Rick comes from Alabama—Florence, Alabama, situated on a bluff above the Tennessee River across from Muscle Shoals, where the famous sound studio is. Rick always does what he says he's going to do. Once he told me he was going to go to Senegal, and he went to Senegal. He says he's my friend, and he's my friend. See what I mean? We met at Tuxedo Donuts, in Birmingham, the one with the vintage neon sign hung from the second floor of the terra cotta building that it's in. Rick was plucking a banjo while drinking his coffee and eating a jelly donut out on the sidewalk. He took a bite of the donut and powdered sugar stuck to his moustache. Let me tell you: Rick plays a mean banjo. Which kind of makes sense for a guy 6'5" with fire-red hair shooting out of his head in every directions. The last time I saw Rick he told me he was planning to start an all-banjo band, and I said, "Can't wait," knowing damn well he'd do it.



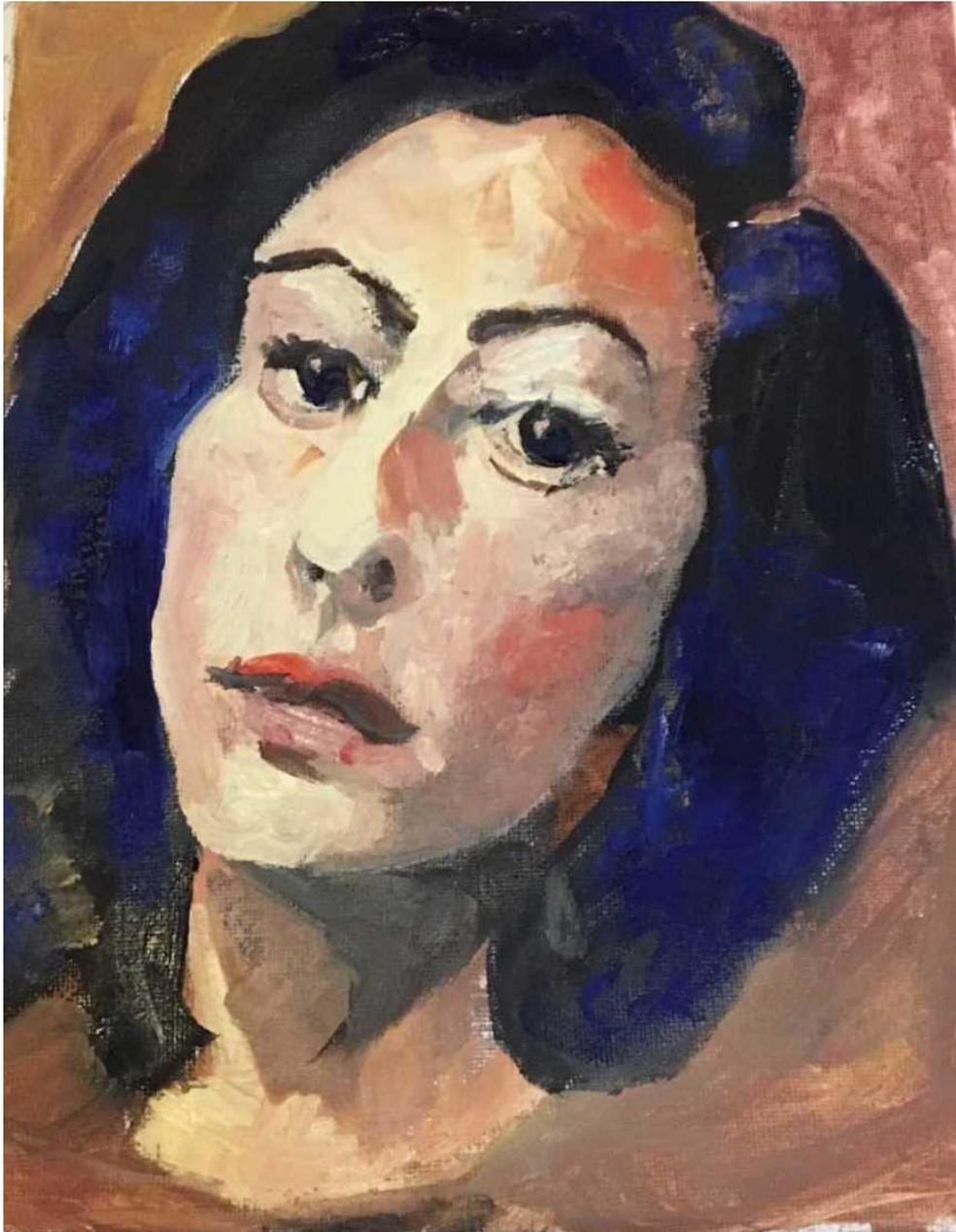
Countess Apollinia and I met in a tea room in Tacoma. “I’m not a real countess,” she told me after we’d introduced ourselves and got to talking. “Not in this life anyway.” Polina, as she said her friends call her, is a Russophile. As we drank our tea—she a smoky black, me a fragrant jasmine green—she explained that in a former life, in the early 1800s, she owned a large house on Ligovky Prospect in Saint Petersburg. “I was Pushkin’s lover,” she let me know. When I said I’d never read him, she promised to give me a copy of *Eugene Onegin* next time we met. “That’s very kind of you,” I said. “*Ça ne fait rien*” she replied, speaking French, as all good Russian aristocrats once did. I thought of asking what she thought of the autocrat Vladimir Putin, but decided not to. Why spoil the fun, I thought. “More tea?” I asked instead. “*Oui*,” she replied. I then stood, bowed ever so slightly, and brought our two tea pots to the front counter. Later, at her apartment, I learned her real name was Kathy.



I have this friend Alex who's in his 50s and likes to color in coloring books. He's on disability and does a lot of coloring. He has a plastic bin full of coloring books next to the recliner he sits in in the living room of his trailer home. He also has a large cookie tin full of Crayola crayons. ("None of that Sharpie bullshit," he says.) He likes to color while watching TV. I can see that it gives him real pleasure. He'll let me color with him if I'm over watching TV with him. He's an Arizona Cardinals fan and wears a lot of red, so one time I went over his house to watch the Cardinals v. Seahawks game and we both worked on NFL coloring books during the commercials. It was kind of cool actually. "Coloring is like eating ice cream," he tells me. "It makes you feel like a kid again." By the amount of coloring he does—and for that matter the amount of ice cream he eats—I can tell the feeling means a lot to him.



Antoine is my aphorist friend. He writes aphorisms, dozens a day. I suppose he's also a street artist because he prints his aphorisms on rolls of paper and pastes them to walls and overpasses throughout Seattle. "War is always unwinning." He put that one on an I-5 overpass in Seattle when the U.S. invaded Iraq. "This porte-cochère, this people's lair" was one I saw beneath the Alaska Way Viaduct before the city tore it down. He also puts them in public restrooms ("Cells are syllables, poetry fools.") and on alley walls ("One-point perspective pours tea just so."). Antoine favors the figurative and alliterative, as well as the obscure. He also goes in for kōan-like sayings. He once gave a dinner party at his garage apartment in Lake City and next to every guest's plate was a food aphorism written in calligraphy. Mine was "Apples are to whales as whales are to purple," like some weird SAT clue. It was a strange dinner hosted by my strange aphorist friend, Antoine.



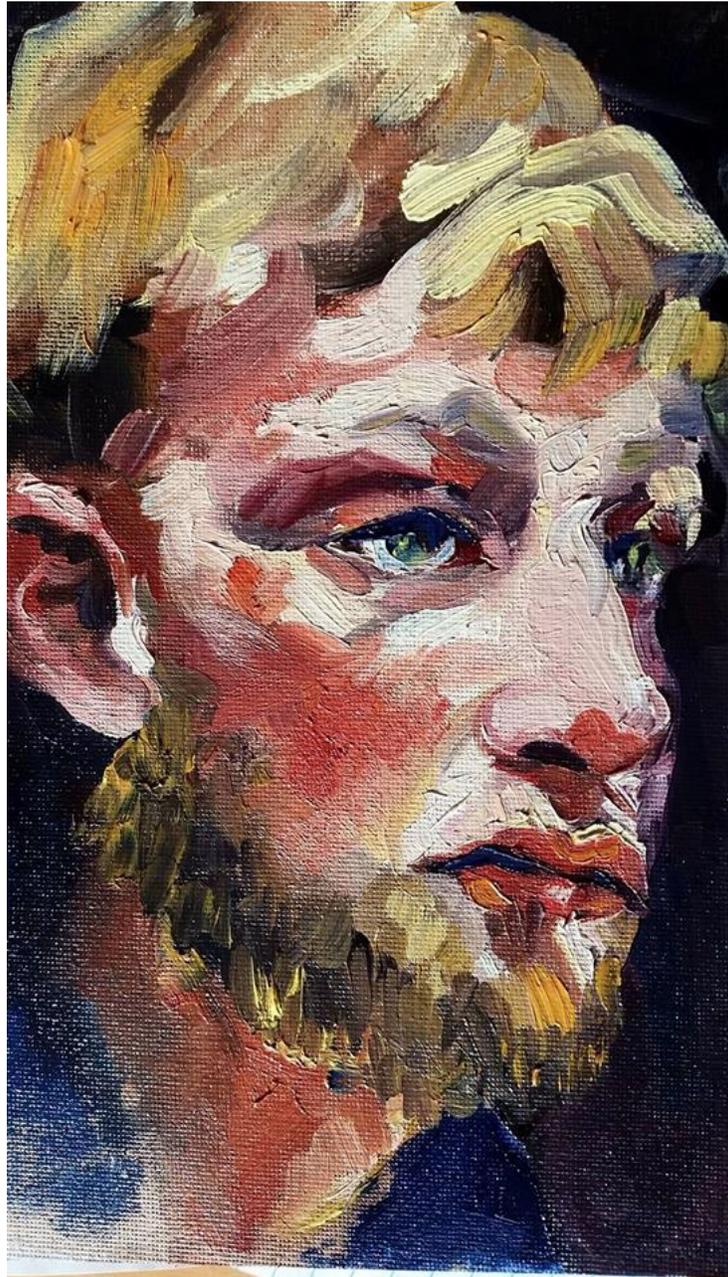
Chelsea runs marathons, sails yachts, plays backgammon, paints male nudes, cooks chicken cacciatori, composes symphonies, grows 17 varieties of azaleas and rhododendrons, referees her kids' basketball games, acts in community theater, smokes a bowl of cannabis every night at 10:00, reads Latin American novels, teaches extension classes in traditional American Indian beading, practices Buddhist meditation, corrects my grammar (especially my semi-colons), breeds Great Pyrenees, juggles any kind of fruit she can get her hands on, belongs to an Indivisible group, is planning to run for the local school board, and still has time to be my friend.



My friend Tracy had her gender confirmation surgery three years ago at age fifty—twenty-three years after she changed her name from Jack to Tracy and began transitioning. She and I have known each other since we were teenagers attending high school together in Spanaway, Washington. We were both on the varsity basketball team and had a pick-and-roll move we would execute to perfection. It's amazing to both of us now how the years have rolled by. Even so, we still get together occasionally to shoot hoops. She found Jesus at some point in her forties and likes to pray a lot these days. After shooting around for a while at the basketball court in the local park, we stop at a nearby taco truck and get lunch. Before eating, she bows her head at the picnic table where we sit and gives thanks to the Lord. As she prays, I look at the small silver cross dangling between her breasts. "Amen," she says, then looks up, laughs, and tells me my jump shot is as deadly as ever.



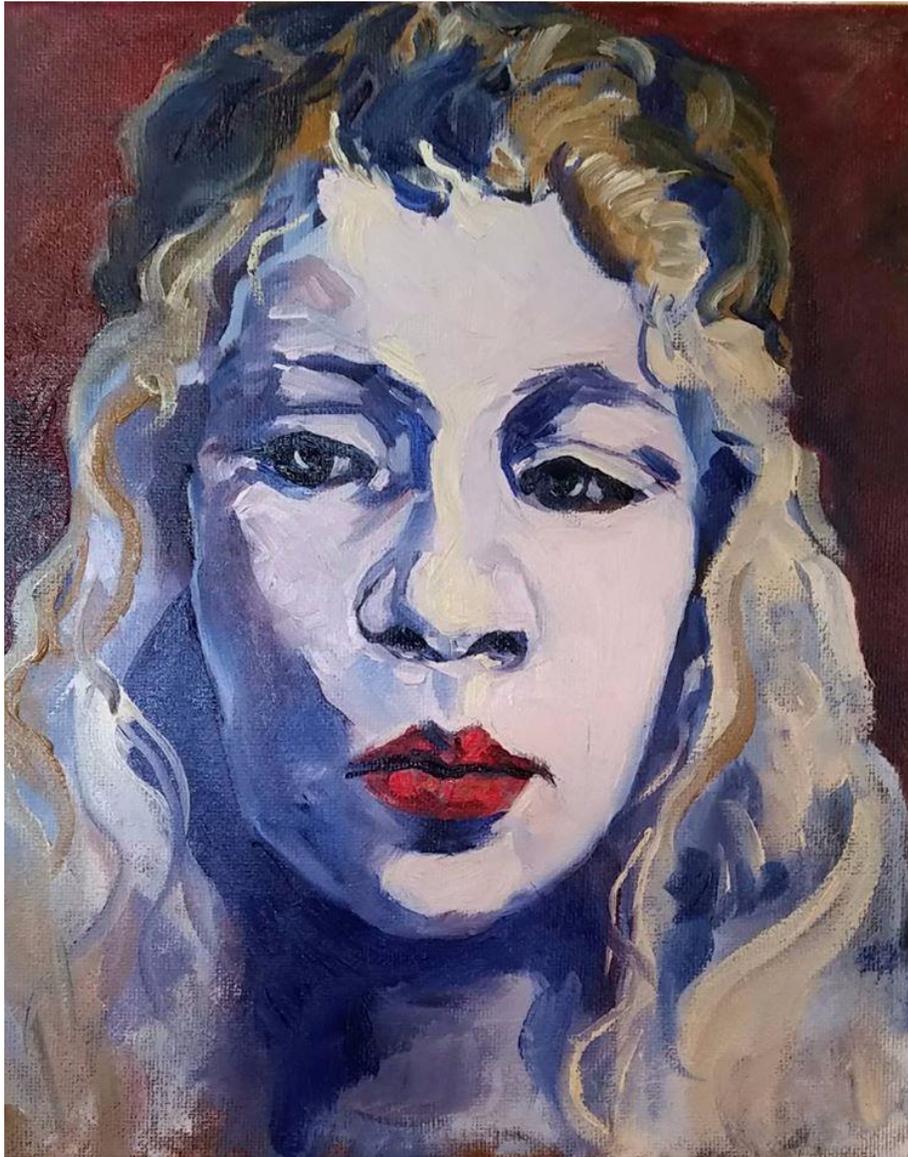
My friendship with Séverine began at Whole Foods when we were both watching a cooking demonstration, waiting for a taste of the teriyaki-glazed salmon being prepared at the demonstration station. “Smells good,” I said. “Good enough to eat,” she replied. Then I introduced myself and she did the same. “Deelish,” she said when we finally got our taste of teriyaki-glazed salmon. “Shall we move on to the cheese samples,” I asked, and she led the way. She’s a little older than me, but younger in spirit. When I asked if she was French, she said, “Do you mean because of my name?” “Yes,” I answered. “Actually,” she explained, “my parents named me after a prostitute played by Catherine Deneuve in the Luis Buñuel film *Belle de Jour*.” “It’s a lovely name,” I said, and handed her a chunk of gruyère speared with a toothpick. “Here,” she said, and handed me a tiny sample cup of pomegranate juice.



My friend Zan says he's slept with 31 women. For some that's a lot, for others not so much. Zan makes glass marbles in a studio he shares with other glass artists in Pioneer Square in Seattle. He sells his marbles at Pike Place Market. They range from \$10 to \$250 apiece. At the end of the day, he heads to the bar in the Athenian in the market and throws back three shots of cheap vodka. Then he saunters down to the waterfront and catches the ferry back to Bremerton, where he lives in a bungalow house with a calico cat, a boxer dog, and an albino ferret. Not too long ago I set him up with my sister, a radiology technician at Swedish Hospital, and so far so good. There's no mention of marriage, though they seem to get along just fine. In the meanwhile, Zan keeps making marbles.



My granddad counted Kurt Weill, the great German composer, as one of his friends. They met in the late 1930s in Vermont, where Weill and his wife rented a cabin my granddad owned on a small lake called Island Pond. Later, after the war, my granddad visited the Weills in New York City. He'd never been to the city, so Kurt Weill took him around, brought him to the Onyx Club where they heard Charlie Parker blowing his saxophone. My granddad, a stodgy old New England type, became a huge bebop fan after that. For the next few years he and Weill exchanged letters apprising each other of the musicians they were listening to or had recently heard on the radio. Weill, of course, had much greater access to music than my granddad. But if Weill mentioned a musician he'd never heard of or seen at a club, my granddad immediately sent off to Boston or New York for the musician's records. Before he died, Granddad told me how Kurt Weill was one of his best friends, even though he never did like his music much.



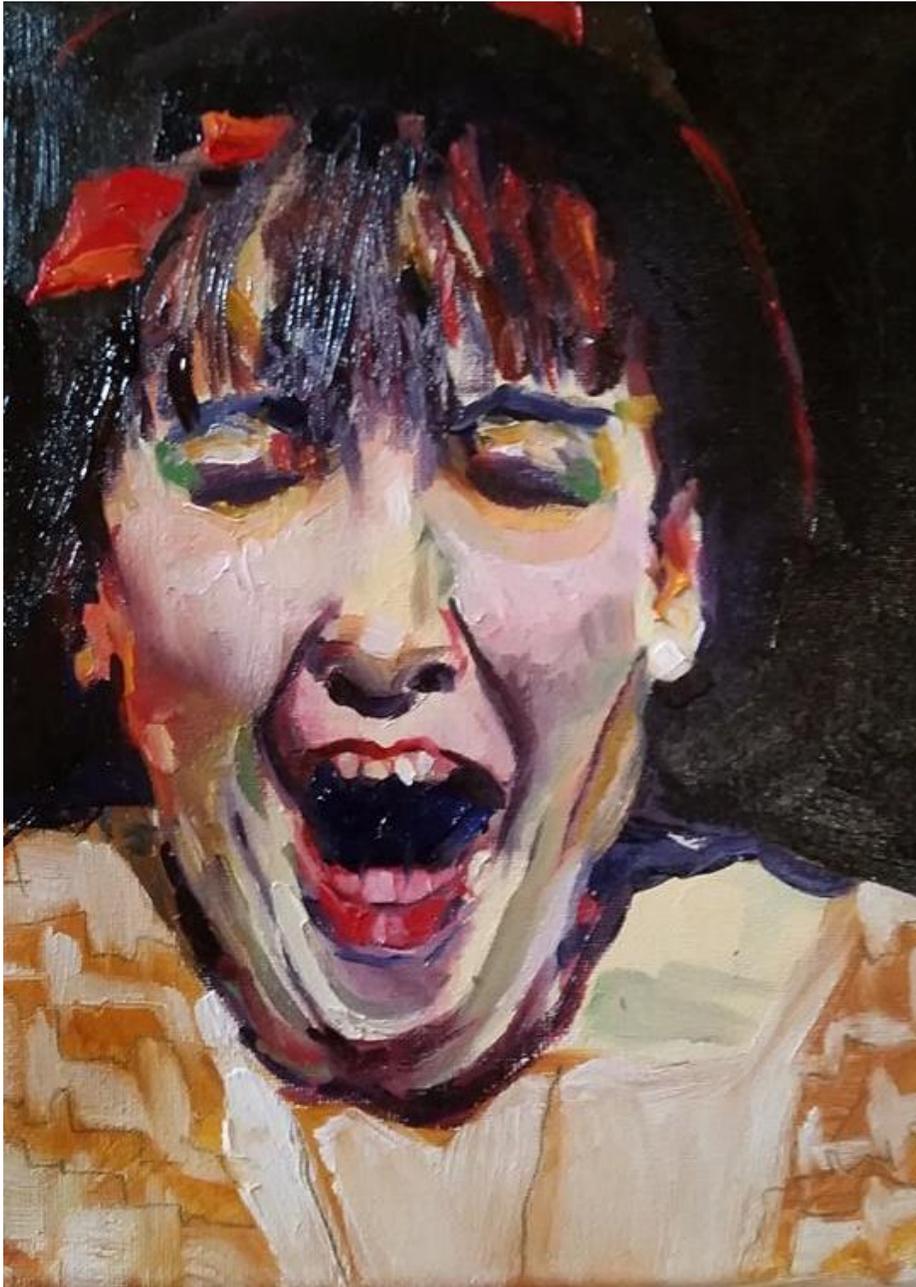
My friend Katie is a psychic and cryptozoologist. As a cryptozoologist, she doesn't stalk the typical variety of elusive, randomly sighted, unverified cryptids—your Sasquatch or Nellie or Jersey Devil. No, her quarry is far more ethereal, and apparently much tinier. They don't inhabit deep woods or unfathomable lakes, but rather commonplace neighborhoods, typically in the suburbs, the way raccoons and coyotes do these days, but far less accountable than these critters. She admits she's never seen one and doesn't even know what they're called, but she knows they're there. "And they like us," she tells me in a whisper so that I'll lean in and really listen. "They're our friends," she lets me know. "So trust them." I then think to myself, *You mean like you and I are friends? Like I trust you?* And without batting an eye, she says, "Exactly like," and straightaway I'm a believer.



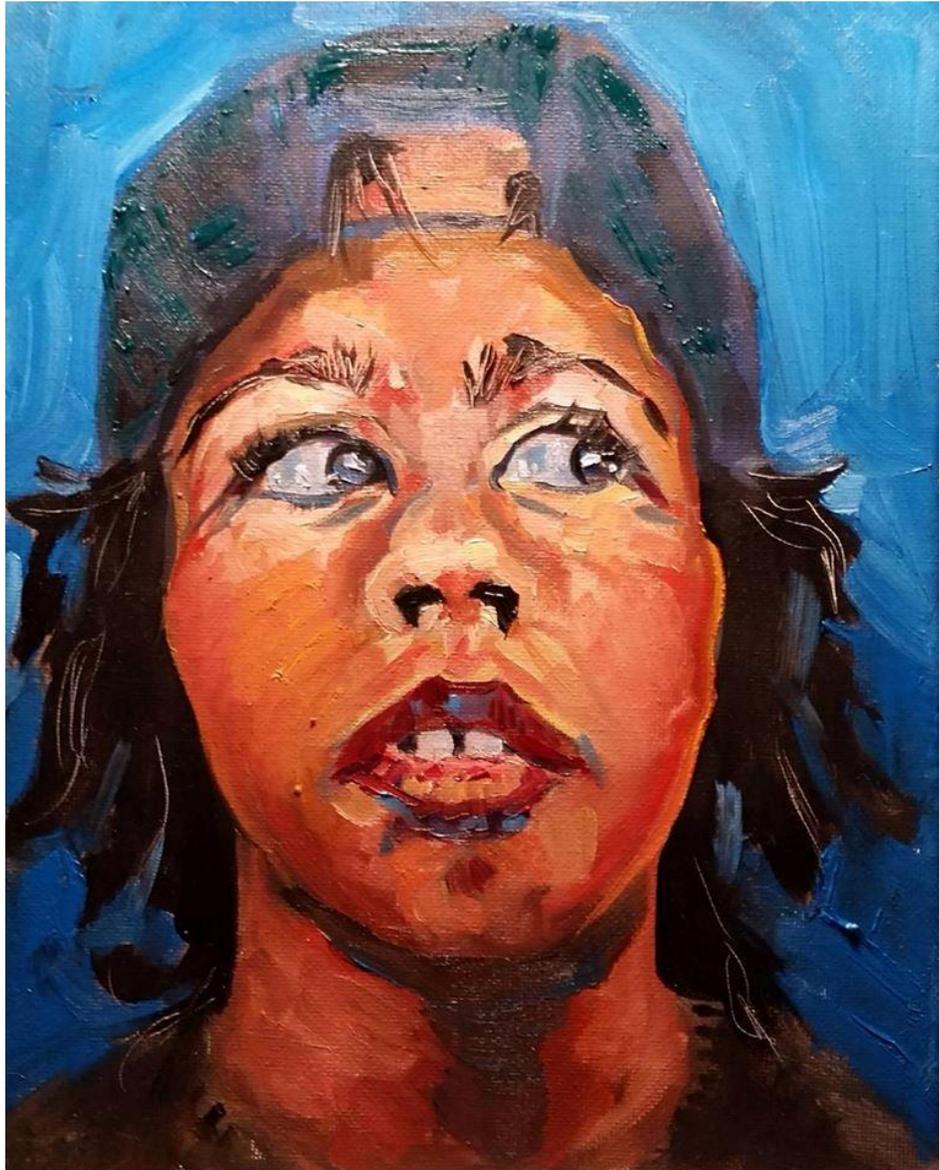
What can you do with an alcoholic friend? Precious little, it seems—unless they want help. Gabriel is a late-stage alcoholic. He gets the delirium tremens if he goes half a day without a drink. His enlarged liver protrudes from his side. He’s been hospitalized twice. The second time, after going through detox, he was put on disulfuram, commonly known as Anabuse. He drank on it, got violently sick, and stopped taking it. His once beautiful face is forever bruised and disfigured. It’s been several years since his family “detached with love,” and I’m maybe the only person he has any regular contact with these days. I plead with him. “I know someone at Sundown M Ranch near Yakima. They can get you in tomorrow.” He winces at the idea of rehab and says, “No go.” I’m crying when I tell him, “Gabriel, you’re going to die.” He kind of smiles at me. “Probably,” he says, and thanks me for being his friend.



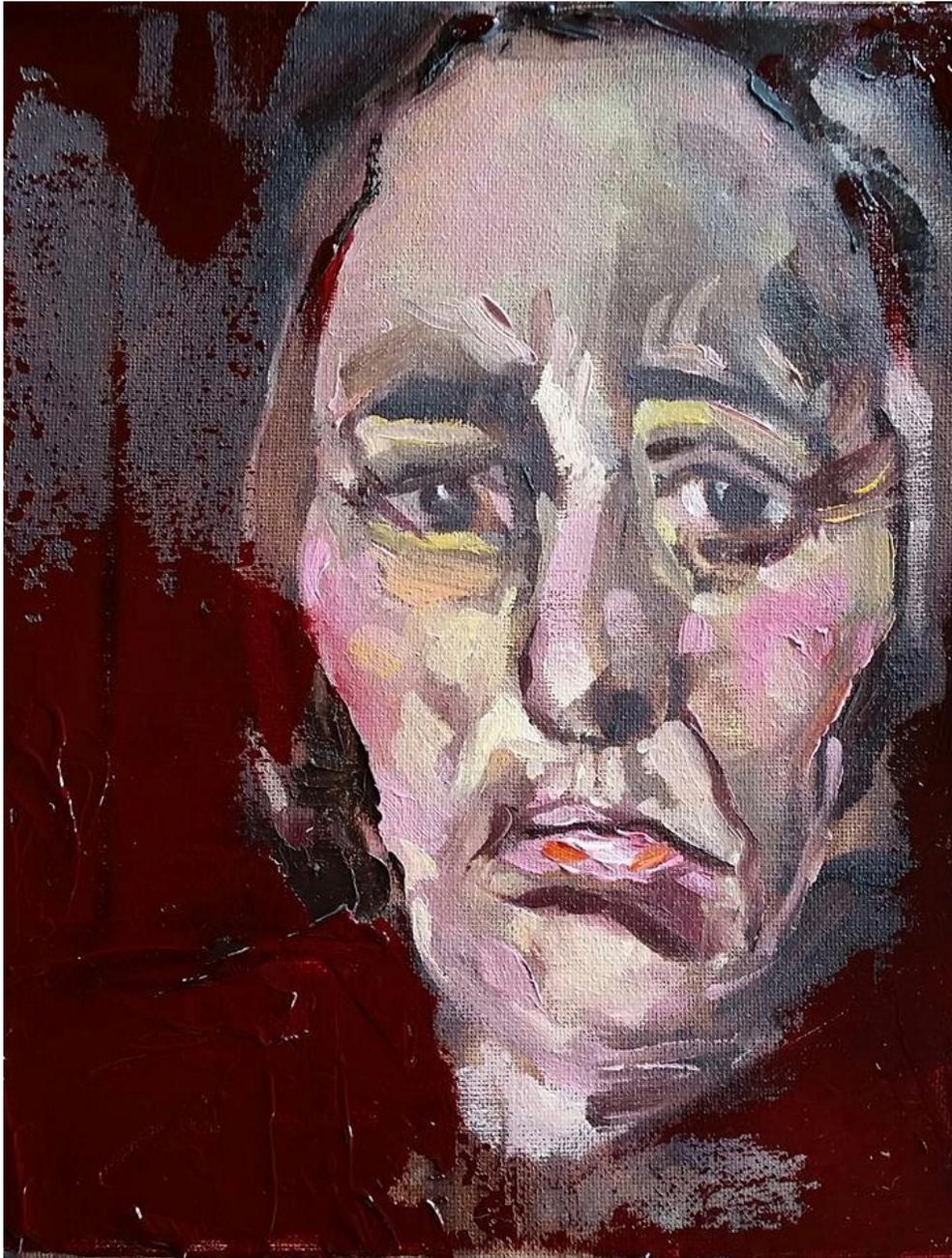
“What’s that even mean? ‘Live life to its fullest,’” my cynic friend Hayden asks as I’m struggling to tie one of my shoes. He’s a longshoreman in Everett. “It’s a platitude,” I explain. “Well, it’s bullshit,” he says to that. “The power of platitudinous thinking,” he adds, his voice heavy with mockery. “I’m going to start a goddamn motivational program with that as my slogan. Corporate leaders and celebrity sports figures will flock to my seminars, pay top dollar to hear me spout my bullshit. I’ll hold week-long retreats on my 1,000-acre ranch in picturesque Elk Shit Valley, which I’ll fly to on my private Lear jet. I’ll have endorsements from CEOs, U.S. Senators, and Super Bowl coaches. We’ll have cookouts and sip antique scotch, while Chet, my buckaroo property manager with the handlebar mustache, saddles up the horses so my clients can go trail riding.” Tightening my laces, I say, “Good idea,” and ask, “Can I get a job there?” Hayden looks at me like I’m an idiot for asking and says, “No fucking way.”



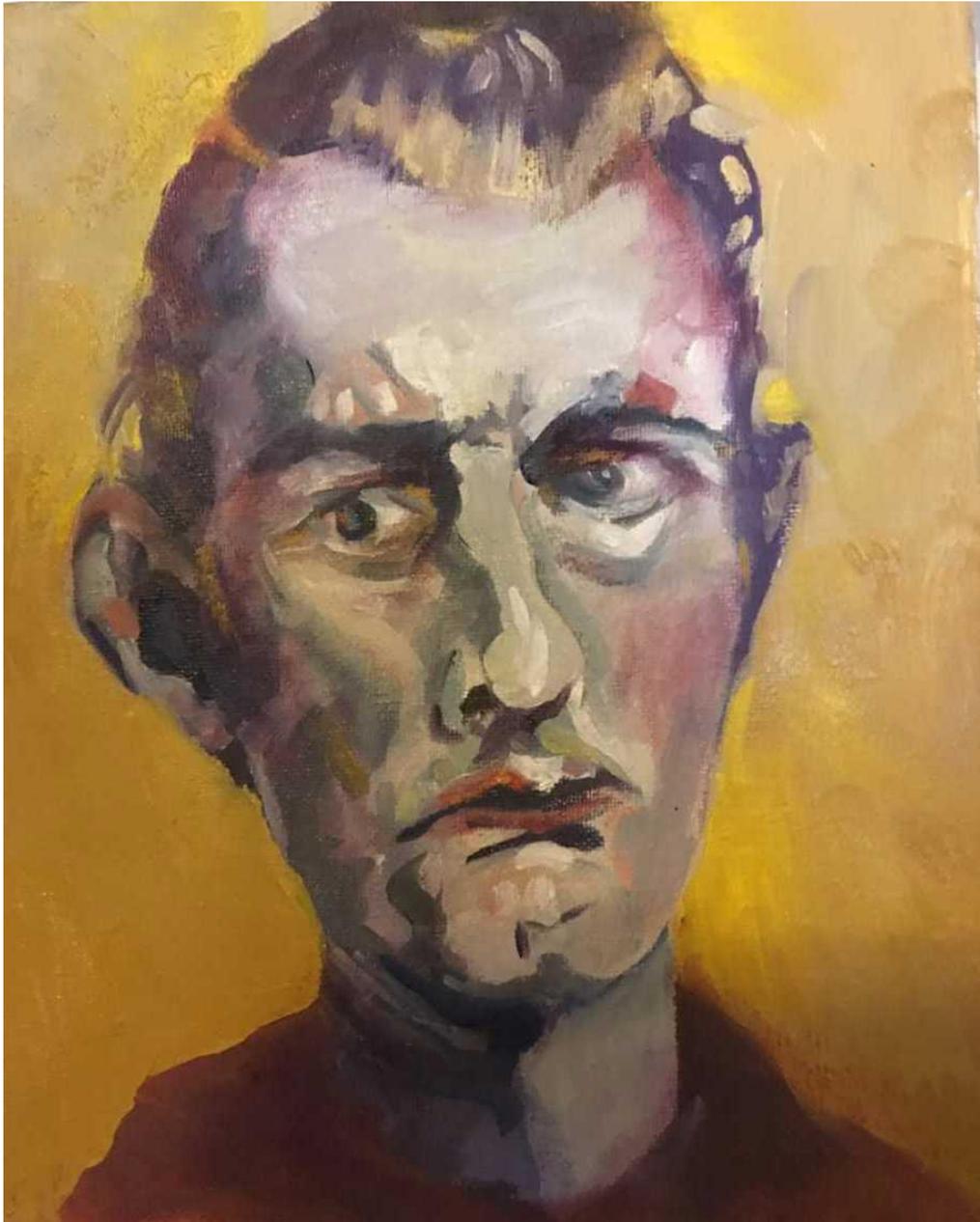
She sometimes spells her name “Coy,” sometimes “Koi.” As your friend, I tell her, I’m okay with either—or both—but switching back and forth might confuse some people. Coy/Koi and I binge-watch British TV series. *Downton Abbey*, *Sherlock Holmes*, *The Crown*, and *Doctor Who* are a few of our favorites. She wedges into one corner of the couch and I into the other, while her cat (named “Carny” because she found it at a carnival in Redding, California) lies between us. Kcoiy teaches English composition at three different community colleges. She has tremendous energy. “I wish I could go to the Empress Hotel in Victoria, British Columbia, for high tea,” she said to me last week after we knocked off another TV series full of quick-witted limeys. “Wouldn’t that be a riot?” she asked. I nodded and said dryly, “Quite.”



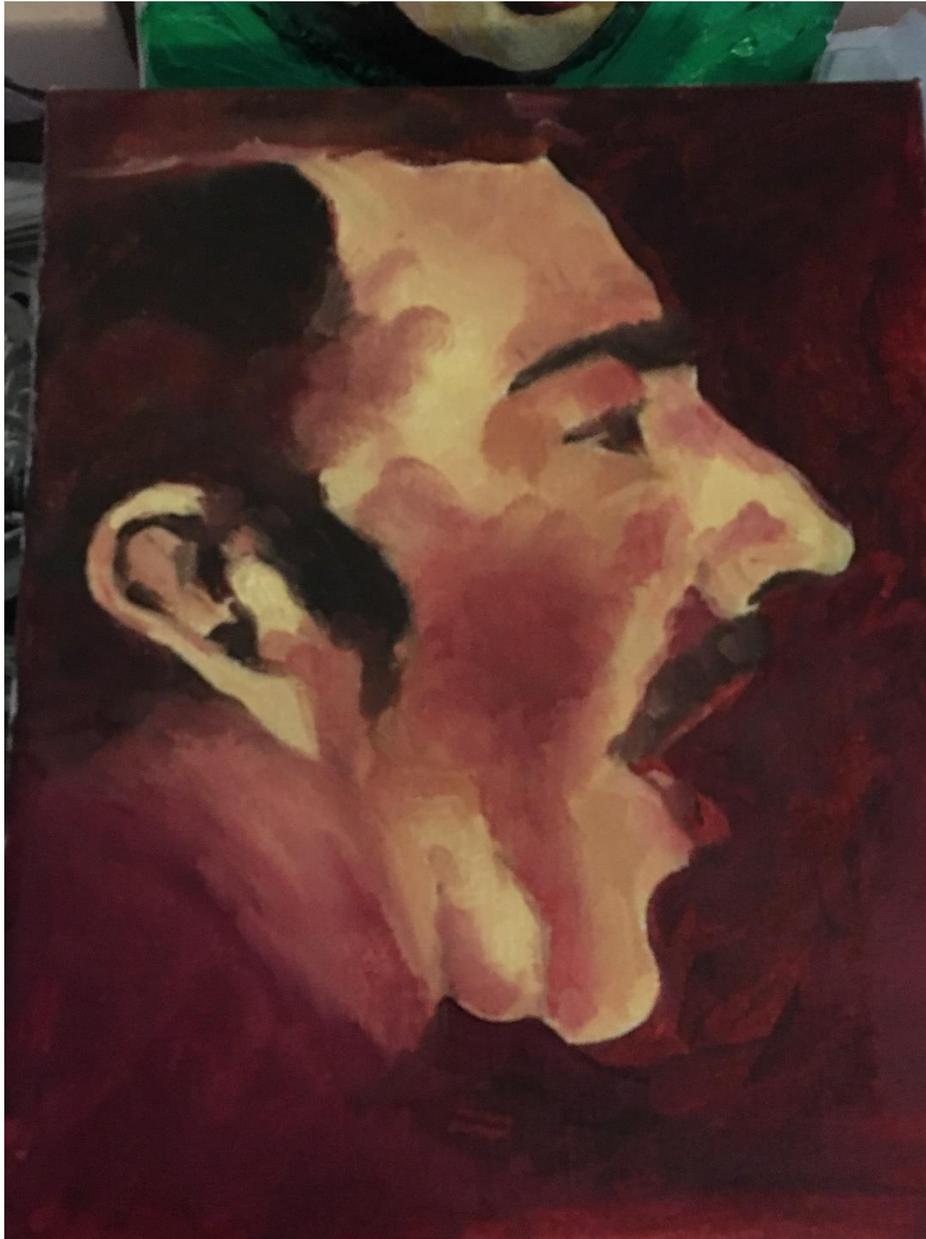
My friend Bess wants people to think she's a real tough cookie. She wears a trucker hat backwards like she's some bad-ass butch and carries around a wooden cane that some people might find threatening. But I know better. If you've ever seen the skittish side-long glances she gives now and then, as if she's seeing something out of the corner of her eye, you'd know what I mean. She looks like she's afraid someone is about to sneak up behind her. "It's because my brothers were always sneaking up on me," she confessed when we met for breakfast at her favorite omelet place. After breakfast we went over to her house to watch old movies on TCM and when I came up behind her sitting on the couch and said something snarky about Barbara Stanwyk, she swung the cane and caught the side of my head with it. "Sorry," she said as she lowered the cane. "I understand," I said, rubbing my head. "I have brothers too."



Chester is my suicide friend. *Was*. He jumped off a ferry in Elliott Bay one night about a year ago. His body was never recovered. He always said he admired the poet Hart Crane. Crane's masterpiece, "The Bridge," was Chester's favorite poem. So I guess he wanted to die like Crane, who jumped off a steamship in the Gulf of Mexico back in the 1930s. Also, the sea made Chester sad. Especially Puget Sound. "Sad in a beautiful way," he used to say. "It's true," he told me the last time I saw him. "I can hardly keep from crying when I'm on the shore anywhere along Puget Sound." You see, Chester loved life, but being alive was hard on him. He spent fifteen years writing nine poems. I've read Chester's poems. They're masterful—each one like a J.M.W. Turner painting—Puget Sound the subject of all nine.



My friend Clue, who lives in a flea-bag hotel with weekly rates somewhere in the Tenderloin off Market Street, said I needed new shoes. I nodded and looked up at the Beaux Art dome of the San Francisco City Hall. He said let's smoke a bowl. I told him I can't, it makes me too punctilious. He said he understood and recommended we take the #5 bus down Fulton Street to the ocean, and I said good idea, the ocean is where all life begins. So I picked up my coffee and he pocketed his paperback—a murder mystery, he said, slapping his headphones on. “That's how it goes when the highway's long and your heart leaps at each breath,” he added, apropos of nothing. I said, “Right on,” and glanced down at my worn-out shoes.



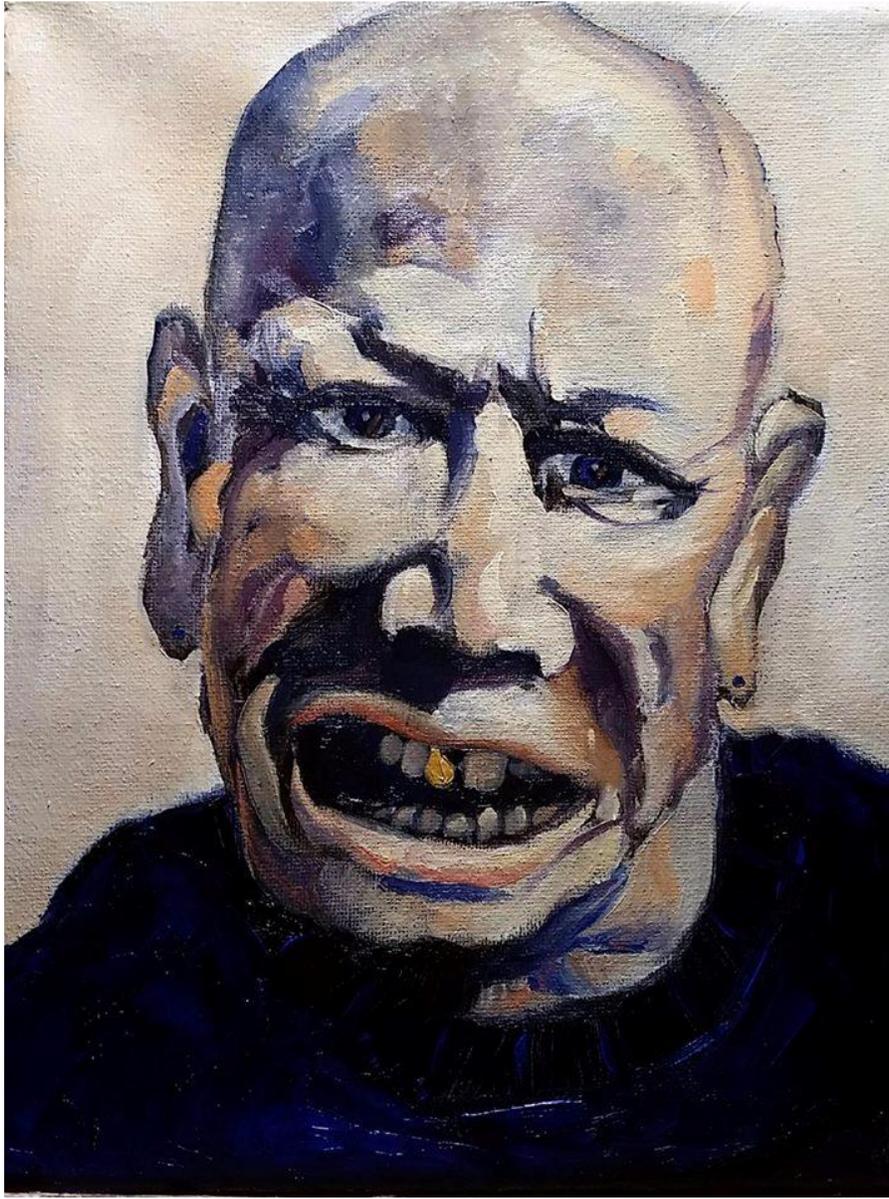
Raymond, whom I met at a Bastille Day celebration at a wine bar in Seattle, is my Francophile friend. He goes to France every year, sometimes twice a year. He's been going for the past 20 years. His favorite provinces are Lorraine, Franche-Comté, and Côte D'Azur. Like everyone, he goes for the wine, the cheese, the culture. He dresses and looks like a guy you might find in France, circa 1960: clean-shaven except for a mustache, nice slacks, button-down shirt and thin tie, a tan sweater draped over his shoulders with the arms tied in front. I keep saying, "Raymond, I would love to go to France with you sometime. I've never been." But the idea doesn't appeal to him. It's obvious he prefers to be on his own, traveling by himself, free and unencumbered, eating his camembert, sipping his burgundy, and puffing Gauloises *tout seul*.



My friend Von, a former club boxer, worked for Amazon.com back in the 90's when they sold only books and no one knew yet about Jeff Bezos' scheme for world domination. Von also ran a small press out of his studio apartment and had published a dozen volumes of poetry. He wasn't a poet himself, but he loved to read the stuff. He lived in the Denny Regrade neighborhood at the time, just when they started calling it Belltown. "That's historically inaccurate," he said, annoyed at the name change. "It's a scam to raise rents." Eventually he quit his job at Amazon, bought a VW Westfalia vanagon, and started living out of it. One day we caught the ferry to Vashon Island where he grew up and toured all his childhood haunts. Our last stop was the abandoned greenhouses where his parents, Filipino immigrants, once worked. "Let me tell you, my folks were hardworking Pinoys," he said. After that he took off for California, where he eventually opened a gym in Bakersfield.



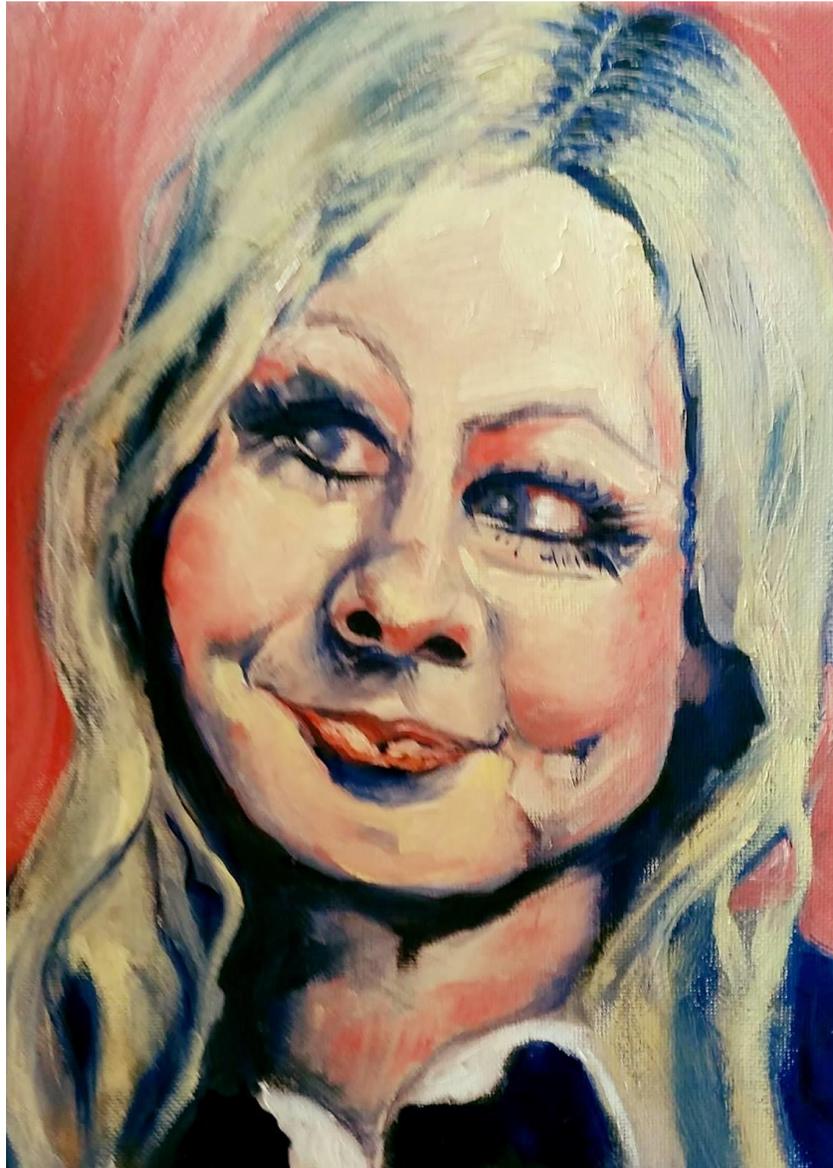
My friend Sal—short for Sally—has a beautiful voice. But that’s beside the point. Mainly, Sal squeezes lemons for a living. Also limes, oranges, and grapefruits. She has a juice truck she drives around the city, showing up at outdoor concerts, block parties, parades, political rallies, protests, any event where people are bound to be thirsty. I went riding with her once to help with mixing her array of citrusy concoctions. We ended up in Golden Gate Park. There were no big events that day, but it was a scorching summer afternoon with plenty of parched tourists and exercising locals. Sal made a couple thousand dollars by nightfall. I couldn’t believe it. And when we were done, she pulled a bottle of tequila out from under the tire well of her vehicle and made me the best freakin’ pink grapefruit margarita I’d ever tasted. And as I sat there sipping it, she serenaded me with a version of Marlena Shaw’s funky “California Soul”—“‘cause you’re happy all day long.”



I met Breson, my French friend, in San Quentin. He'd been in a long time. He taught us North Block inmates a lot of French phrases, like *On y va* and *Imaginer c'est choisir*, which means "To imagine is to choose." He worked in the canteen, which usually had hour-long lines, and that's where he used *On y va*, which means "Let's go." He'd mean it, too, and once got into a fight with an inmate holding up the line, which was how he lost his front tooth. He replaced it with a shiny gold incisor once he got out. Then, when they released me, he and I would meet in the Presidio and drink port wine. Breson loved port wine, said it fortified him. We'd watch the fog race in from the ocean through the redwood and eucalyptus trees as we drank. Then we'd amble to the corner store run by Ma and Pa Zhang, buy some beer to wash down the port, and stroll through the Palace of Fine Arts. *La vie est belle*, Breson also liked to say, which means "Life is beautiful."



It's always been Brendan and Betty, Betty and Brendan. Maybe the cutest couple to ever walk the face of the earth. I can't imagine being friends with one and not the other. They're so well paired, like wine and cheese, coffee and donuts, Dr. Pepper and barbecue. And so fresh-faced. They look just as they did when they graduated Hayward High School in California, though they're both twenty-six now. Brendan is such a charmer—without even trying. He has that irrepressible Irish wit, along with a mischievous streak that sometimes gets him into trouble. Girls swoon over him. Last month I saw a little hottie running her fingers through his thick unkempt mane at a bus stop on Mission Boulevard. "I never saw her before," he told me afterwards, and begged me not to say anything to Betty. I don't doubt he's faithful to Betty, I honestly don't. Sure, he's a scamp at times, but he knows he's got someone special in her.



Like I said, it's always Betty and Brendan. Or Brendan and Betty. They're inextricable. They met as freshmen at Hayward High—*Go Farmers!*—and have been an item ever since, nearly ten years, though they both still look like teenagers. Especially Betty, with her dimpled cheeks and schoolgirl hair. No one would ever guess she's an ace auto mechanic. Her father owns the Napa Auto Parts store in town, so she grew up working on cars. She's restored three vehicles on her own, including a 1970 International Scout, a kind of jeep, which she gave Brendan for his birthday last month. "Now you won't have to take the bus everywhere," she told him at the big unveiling. "Thanks, Bets," he said and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Just last week, Betty confided to me that Brendan wants to get married. "Ever since I gave him the Scout," she said. The only thing is, she's not so sure she wants to, at least not yet. "You know how it is," she said, but I didn't say a word.



Grandma and I only became friends later in life, after I'd grown up some. She'd been a criminal defense attorney for twenty-five years and a district judge for twelve and didn't suffer fools lightly. When I got through adolescence, like in my mid-20s, and stopped being such a fool myself, she became a kind of mentor to me. When I told her I wanted to write a novel, she set up a desk with a computer in the storage room of her law office and said, "One thousand words a day," as if handing down a court order. So I wrote a novel, but it wasn't any good. "Why don't you go to law school?" she asked one day. So I did, and the next summer I clerked for Grandma and learned more about jurisprudence than in all of 1L. But law school didn't suit me and I dropped out. Then Grandma retired from the bench and got sick, and I became her caregiver. "You're good at this," she said. "You should become a nurse." So I applied to a local nursing program but didn't get in. Then she went all *sua sponte* on me and died. And now I don't know what to do.



Michael and I became friends at a weeklong playwriting workshop in Ohio. He was working on his sixth play (I on my first). He lives in San Francisco but like me comes from New Jersey. His play was set in the bar his father owned in Newark, where Michael grew up. It was based on a single night in the summer of 1967 during the riots. Michael told me that his father in fact knew John Smith, the black taxi driver beaten by the cops—the incident that sparked the riots. In the play, the main character, the bar owner, based on Michael’s father, keeps the bar open as night falls and the protests turn violent and national guardsmen storm the city. It’s a fine play—funny, serious, suspenseful, with Gil Scott Heron’s “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” playing as the lights go down after the first act. “It’ll get produced for sure,” I told Michael at the end of our week together. “And I’m coming to the opening.” He smiled, pleased at my prediction, and said, “See ya there.”



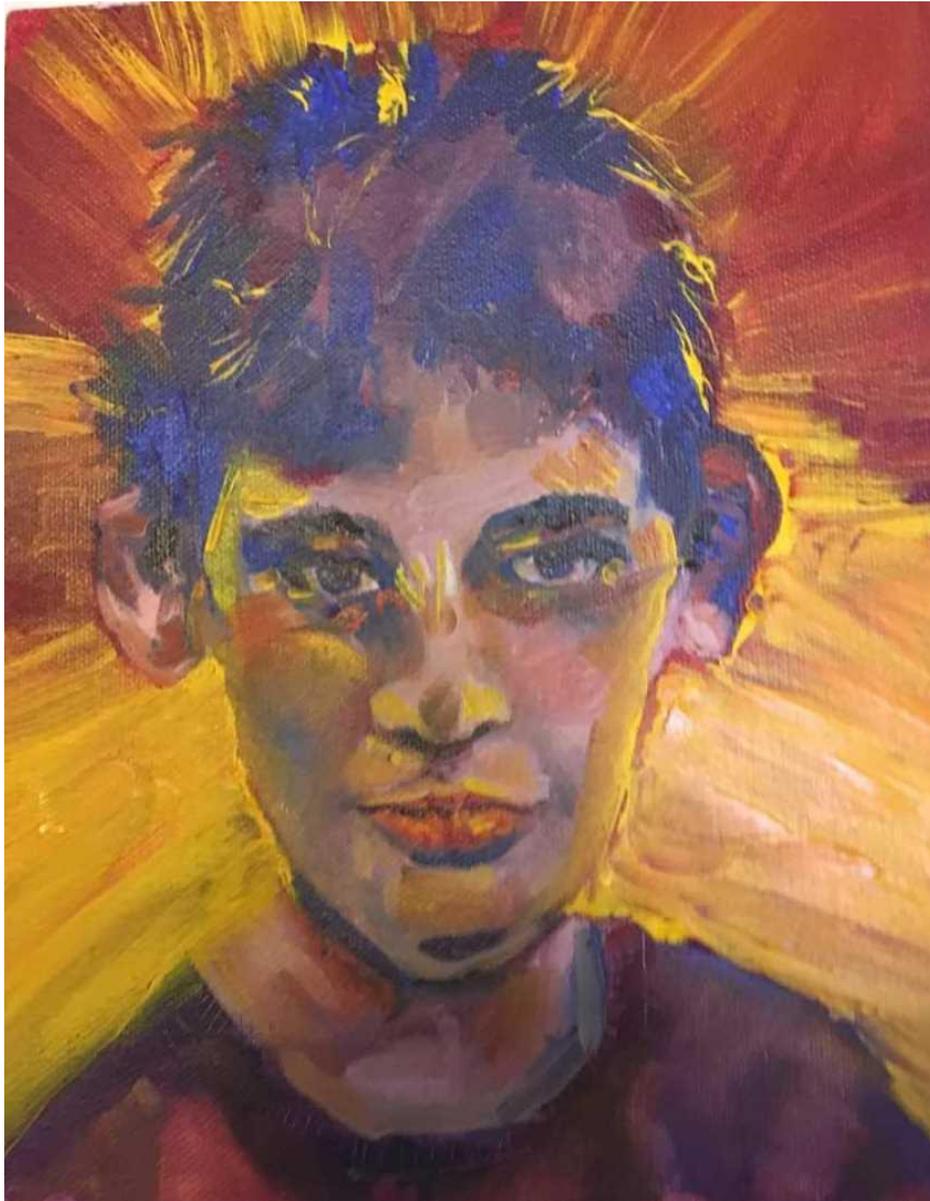
Mrs. Harris is a recurring dream friend. We met the first night in the lobby of the Chelsea Hotel on West 23<sup>rd</sup> Street in New York City and went up to her room. There were abstract paintings on the walls, but she insisted she was not a painter. "I'm a junkie, plain and simple." We shot up, her showing me how. Next she appeared at the door of my downtown Seattle apartment and told me we needed to walk. So we walked down to the waterfront and smoked clove cigarettes while staring at the dark water. Neither of us talked. Then we both happened to be in Buenos Aires and didn't realize it until we spotted each other at the Plaza de Mayo. "*Hola,*" she said, and we went for empanadas. We're never in the same place twice. Once we were in a black-and-white film from the fifties. She asked me, "Why isn't this color yet?" Last night we were standing deep in snow in the middle of a moonlit field. Pine trees laden with snow surrounded us. "It's cold," I said, but she just looked at me with those doleful eyes of hers. "Then leave," she said, and I woke up.



“Sure,” Lyle said, loyal friend that he was. “I can do that if you want me to. Do you want me to?” I didn’t respond one way or another. In the ten years I’ve known Lyle, I’ve learned to wait him out. “It wouldn’t be hard actually,” he went on, “when I think about it.” He rubbed his knobby chin. “How long have you known them?” I told him two, maybe three years. He acknowledged this with a nod, then asked, “When did you see them last?” Last week, I replied, adding how I thought they looked happy. “That’s good,” he said. “I like happy people.” I wanted to ask if he himself was happy but didn’t. “So if we do this,” he went on, “we have to understand one thing . . .” He waited for me to ask what this was, but I didn’t give him the satisfaction. “I call all the shots,” he said finally. I raised my hands as if to say fine by me, and this apparently pleased him. “Okay then,” he said. “I’ll do it. As a favor to you. As a friend. Understand?” I nodded.



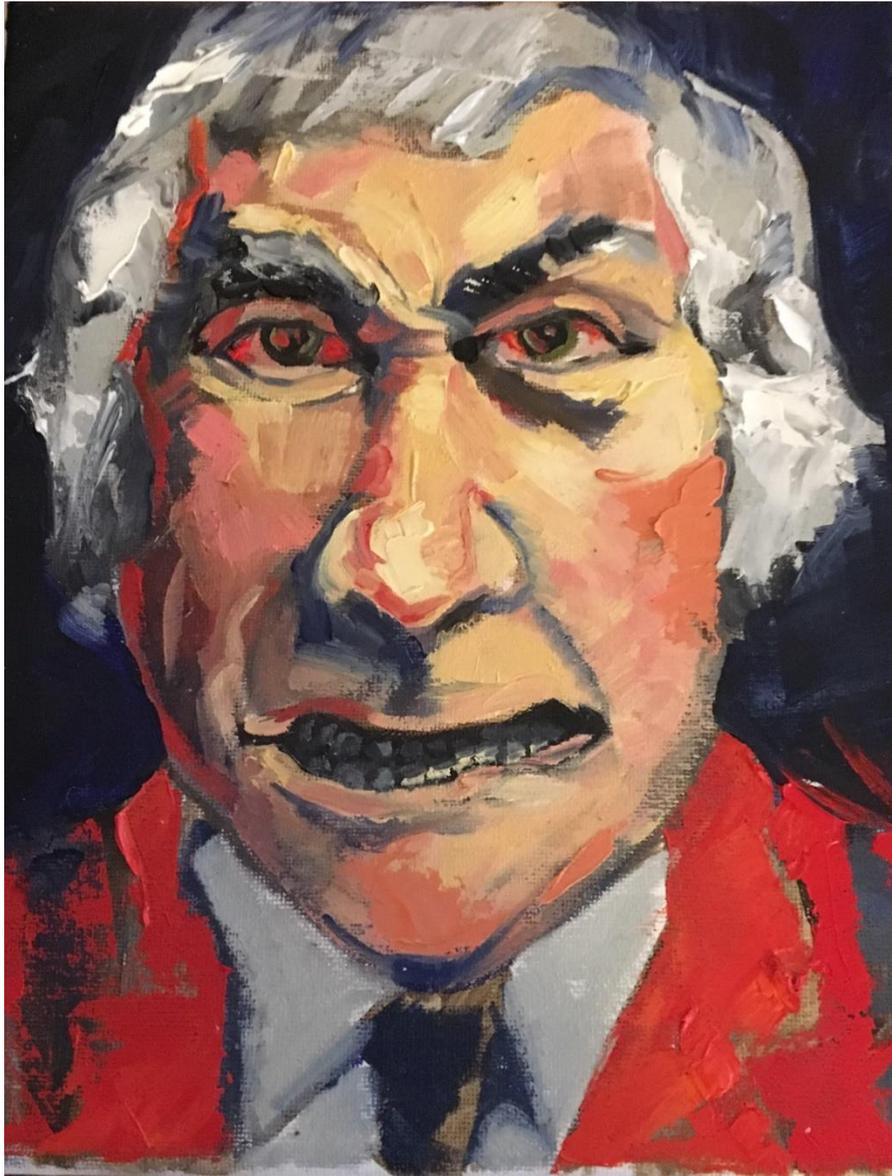
I never said so when he was around, but Boner was my friend. So was the toy poodle named Mimi he carried about in a Trader Joe's tote bag. Mimi was simply adorable. Boner wasn't. He looked unwashed because he was. He smelled like he'd just crawled out of dumpster because he probably had. Always the same ragged, stained shirt and crusty canvas pants. Always farting and scratching himself and making lewd comments, asking people to guess why he was called Boner. And his hair! It was as gray and matted as Mimi's. Worse really. That's how it was when I found Boner and Mimi in the alley behind my apartment building one day when I was taking the trash out. They were in the doorway, wet and forlorn after a week of Northwest rain, and I brought them up and gave them a towel to dry off, fed them leftover spaghetti, and let them sleep on my floor until morning. And that's how we three became friends. But Boner died a few months ago, still living on the street, and I never could find out what happened to Mimi.



Canyon is my chess-playing friend. He's only 14, but the kid is absolutely ruthless at playing chess. He has vibrant dark hair that runs riot on his head and soft brown eyes that reflect his deep levels of concentration. He puts on his best poker face when we play, yet if I ever call him out on his strategy, his cheeks flush red. It's his one weakness. His father is a diesel mechanic with a shop near the Duwamish waterway. He's an even better chess player than his son. I won't play his father, he's so good. Canyon is in awe of his father, as he should be. He's never once beaten his father at chess, and his father won't let him. His father wants Canyon to start college in two years as part of the dual enrollment program for high school kids. So he plans to go to South Seattle Community College. He says he's already scoped it out and they have a Chess Club. "Check," I say with a move of my rook. He counters with his bishop and says right back at me, "Checkmate."



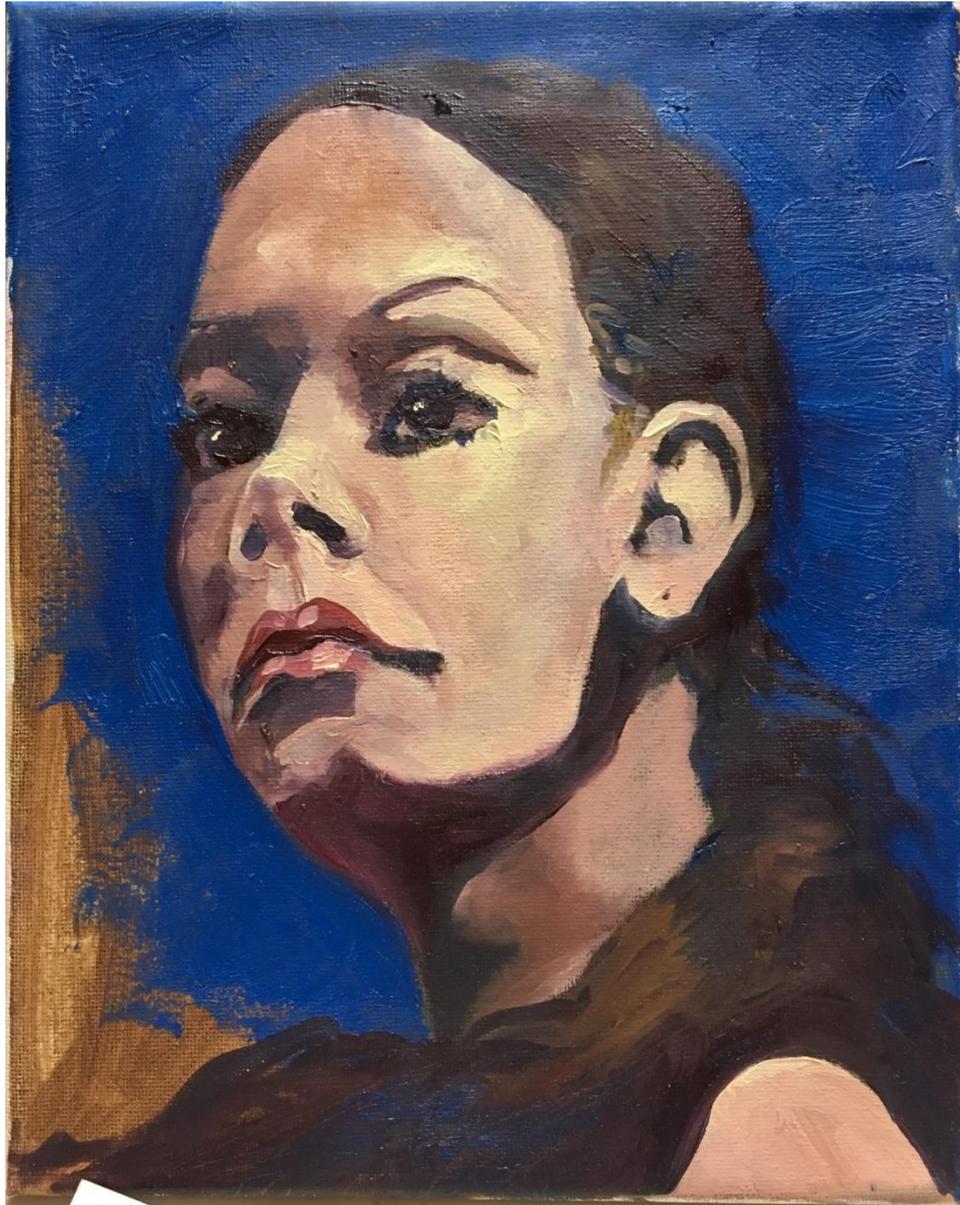
Ginger is reading Dante's *Inferno*. "I don't get it," she says. "People are sent to hell for the most minor offenses. If you're depressed. If you suffer from depression . . . you go to hell. So I guess I'm doomed." Ginger and I met in New Jersey a lifetime ago. When we reconnected in Seattle, we became friends. "Of course, all of Dante's political enemies are in hell," she goes on. "Which I do get." Ginger is a very political person; you might even say she's a radical. A half dozen years ago she was voted Seattle's most avid activist by readers of *The Stranger*, the city's alternative weekly. The first time she was arrested was at the WTO protests in 1999 after being pepper-sprayed and hit on the head by a truncheon-welding cop. Since then she's been arrested nine times, more than any person I know. "I'm going to write a version of the *Inferno* and give abusive cops their own special circle," she declares. "Then I'm going to create the worst circle of all, boiling vomit baths and wet shit showers," she adds. "And you *know* who gets sent there!"



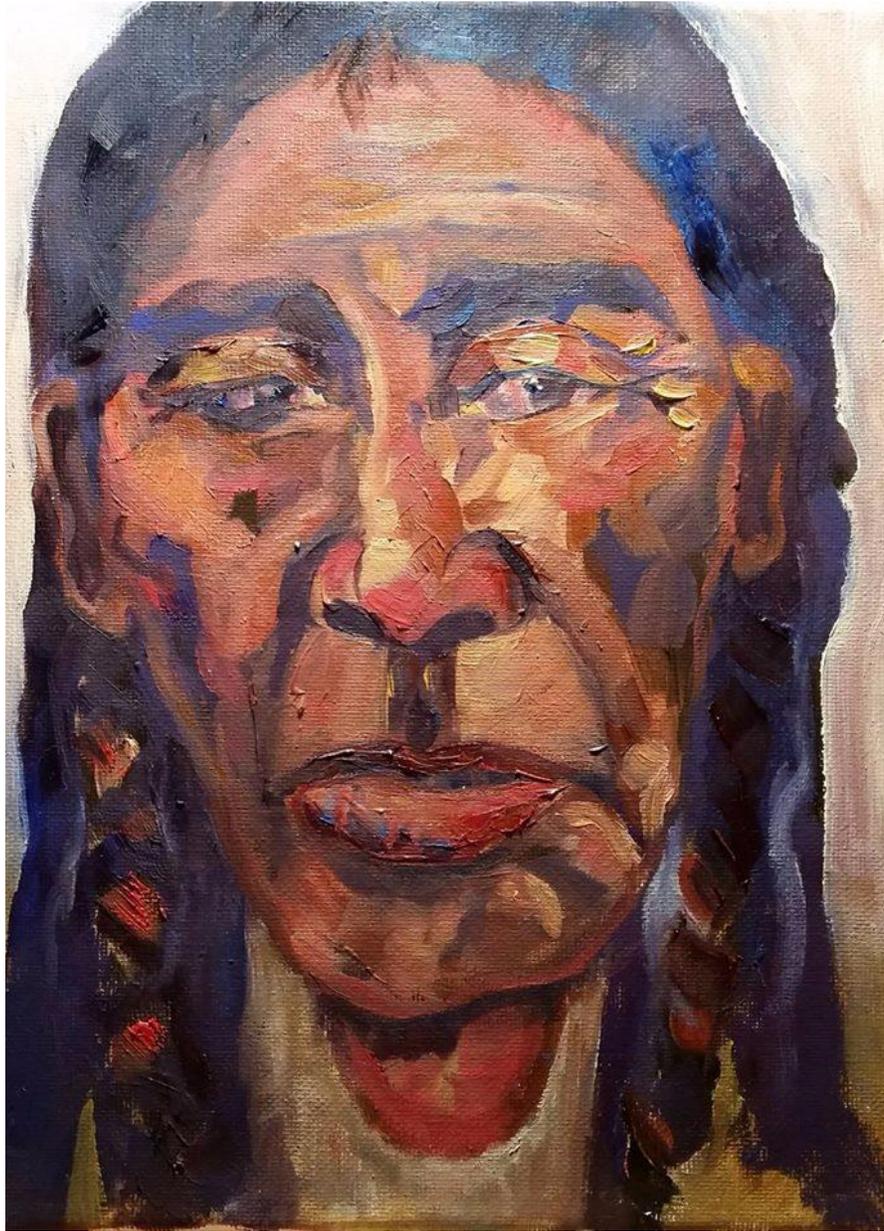
Mr. Ellis was my high school English teacher, and, yes, I count him as a friend, even though I still address him as Mr. Ellis—and always will. We get together for breakfast at a place on Shattuck, in Berkeley, the second Saturday of every month. He was gruff as a teacher, and he’s gotten even gruffer in retirement. He spends his time now working on his “magnum opus,” which, as he points out, he could never get to while coddling us “goddamn kids” for the past four decades. When our coffee arrives, he takes a sip and asks, per usual, “What’re you doing with yourself now?” I tell him I’m still doing technical writing down in Cupertino. “Still?” he barks, and exclaims, “What a waste.” Our orders come—blueberry pancakes for me, corned beef hash for him—and we eat. “You’ll have to let me read it when it’s done,” I say to him. “Read what?” he growls. “Your book,” I answer. “Oh that,” he says. “It’ll never be done.” All in all, I figure Mr. Ellis was a pretty good English teacher.



I didn't believe in ghosts until I came to know Ida, who in recent months has become my spectral friend. Ida died in 1974. She was only 23—pushed out the window of the ninth-floor apartment she shared with her boyfriend in Pioneer Square. They were addicts and both really sick. The boyfriend wanted Ida to turn tricks so they could score, but Ida didn't want to. So he killed her. I can't say how I know all this except that Ida, who never speaks, has communicated this knowledge to me. I live in the apartment just below the one she shared with her boyfriend, or so the building manager told me. The boyfriend got off for the murder somehow and a year later OD'd. Ida now lingers in the corner of my apartment at night, half in shadow, looking out the window, occasionally glancing at me. I tell her it's okay, she's safe, but I don't really know that. It's just me speaking to a ghost.



Lianni is head of the Friends of the Library, which I also belong to. The Friends are launching a campaign to raise funds for a bigger, more modern library building in our small town. No one's more committed to the cause than Lianni. She likes to quote the author Rita Mae Brown: "When I got my library card, my life began." She also knows how to tap the wealthy donors. "Do books still matter?" a dot-com millionaire recently asked her, trying to sound clever. "Do you still matter?" she replied, then smiled and said, "The answer to both questions is yes,"—and the dude wrote her a check. I was actually first friends with Lianni's husband, Richard. I saved Richard's life when we were out in the woods and he cut an artery in his leg with a chainsaw. Using a rope and tire iron, I put a tourniquet on his thigh, threw him in the cab of my rig, and met the EMT's at the town limits. Like Lianni, Richard loves to read. But it's Lianni who's going to get that new library built.



When my friend Solomon ran for the tribal council, his campaign slogan was “Fresh Blood for Bloods.” It was a clever slogan, I thought, but he lost the race anyway. “I don’t have the right last name,” he told me, referring to the four or five families that seem to dominate the council. “Just as well,” I said, having heard how tangled tribal politics could be. A month after the election, out of the blue, Solomon announced he was going to enter the Suicide Race at the annual Stampede in Omak. It’s a really dangerous horse race down a treacherously steep dirt incline followed by a mad dash across the Okanogan River. Solomon, however, is 52 years old. “For godsake,” I told him, “that’s a young man’s race, Solomon, and I don’t need another dead friend—or, for that matter, a paralyzed friend.” “Okay,” he said and withdrew from the race the next day. Later in the week we went fishing at Omak Lake, which suited us both much better.



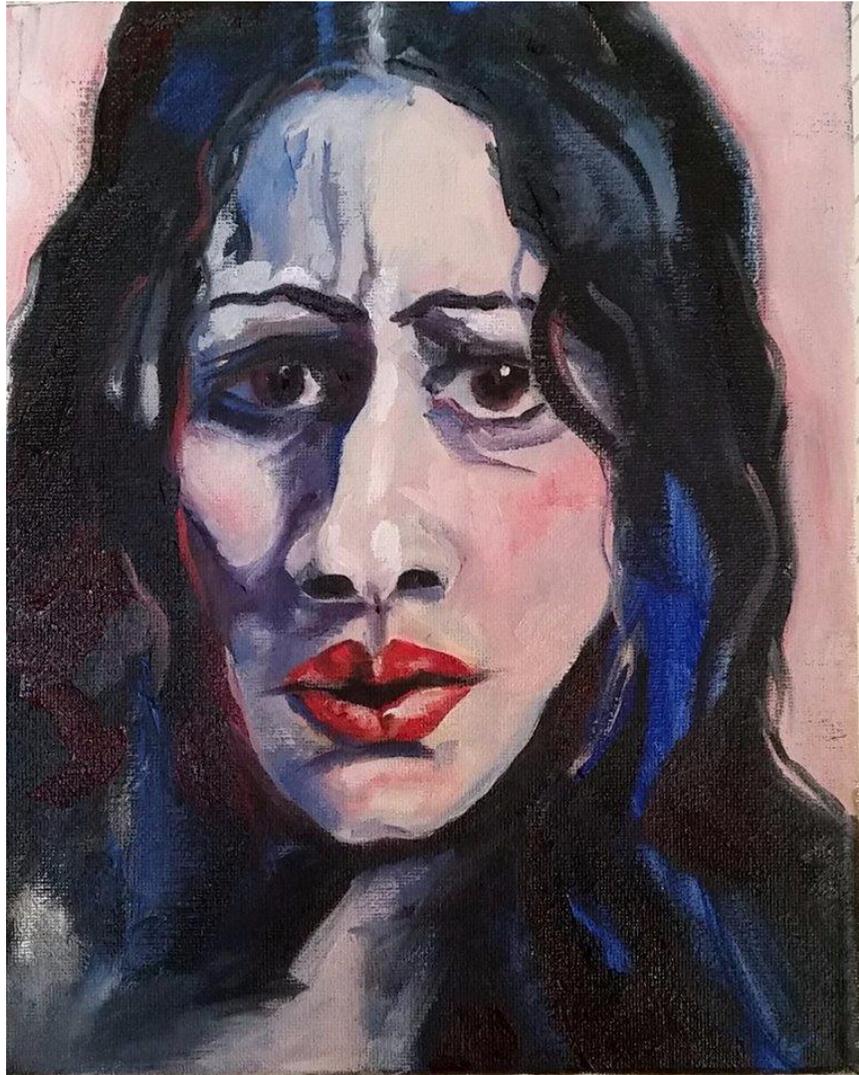
Both Ed and his ten-year-old son, Sam, are my very good friends. Sam may or may not be autistic. Some specialists say he's on the spectrum; others say he's not. All I know is he's a darling boy and he's coming along just fine. Last week Ed told me a story of how Sam's fifth-grade class did an exercise on metaphor: a hive is a house for bees, a barn is a house for horses, and so. Every kid had to come up with a house metaphor like that. Sam took a long time, longer than any of his classmates, and the teacher was becoming impatient. But finally Sam said, "A clock is a house for time." Ed told me this story standing in his driveway, near the basketball hoop, as Sam and I played a game of H-O-R-S-E. Sam smiled to himself as he listened to his father recount the story, and then made a reverse layup.



Roscoe, lead guitarist for The Erratics, became my undone friend briefly last week. The band was wrapping up a show at Neumos, the legendary club in Seattle, bringing the last number to a thrashing close, when Roscoe went down—writhing and twisting, his back arched, his torso torqued. The audience thought his contortions were part of the act. But no. His face was a freeze-frame of pain, his eyes pleading. Someone said it was a seizure, someone else said a stroke. Someone screamed, “Help him. Please, help him.” But no one knew what to do. So I just sat down on the stage and cradled him in my lap. His whole physiology was a blur. “Hang on, Roscoe,” I told him. When the EMTs arrived, they gave him oxygen, shot him with something, and rushed him to the hospital. The next day when I accompanied his bandmates to go see him, he was fully conscious and feeling okay—about to undergo a battery of tests and scans. “The doctors thought I must be on something,” he said. “But you guys know me. I just dig distortion.”



Gloria, my latest friend, wears a blanket in public. It kind of makes her look like a homeless person, which she says she's all right with. She grew up in East Oakland. Went to high school there and lives there still in a little bungalow house surrounded by flowering manzanitas. She makes her own ice cream. Cherry is her favorite flavor. Sometimes she adds chocolate chips. Her mother, who's Malaysian, and her father, who's black, are glad that I'm Gloria's friend. Last time I saw them, they asked if I could get her to stop wearing the blanket every time she goes out of the house. I explained that she wears it only when she feels cold or needs comforting. "Sure," her mother said, "but that's all the damn time with that girl."



Carol, my esthetician friend, tells me I have lovely skin. I let her make me up at her apartment while we share a bottle of Chardonnay. She tells me I look pretty, and I just shrug. “You do,” she exclaims, making eye contact with me in the mirror above the bathroom sink. I’m sitting on a padded black stool just like the ones at Salon 520 in Bellevue where she works. Three nights a week she also teaches at a beauty college in a nearby shopping center. So she knows her stuff. Plus, she always—and I mean *always*—looks amazing. She favors a soft white foundation and dark eyeliner, giving her a slightly goth look. Add a daub of rouge to the cheeks and some thick ruby lipstick and she’s ready to go. She worries a lot these days about her age showing. “Nonsense,” I tell her. “You have an ageless beauty.” My friend Carol is a real artist—and can make anyone look gorgeous.



My artist friend Demi and I went to the Legion of Honor art museum in Lincoln Park both wearing yellow—yellow pants, yellow t-shirts, and old sneakers spray-painted yellow. She’s been doing such stunts since she came to San Francisco in 1972. Wearing yellow, she explained, changes how one views the great European masters. We stayed three hours and never spoke. Sometimes we viewed pieces together, but mostly we wandered about solo. Toward the end of our visit, as I stood before a shiny black Rodin sculpture of the naked St. John the Baptist, Demi came up to me and announced she’d seen enough. As we left the museum, we agreed that next month we’d go to the De Young in Golden Gate Park. “And wear mauve,” she informed me. I assented. “Mauve is the color the world will end in,” she pronounced as we stepped out onto the bright white steps of the museum entrance and paused for whatever came next.



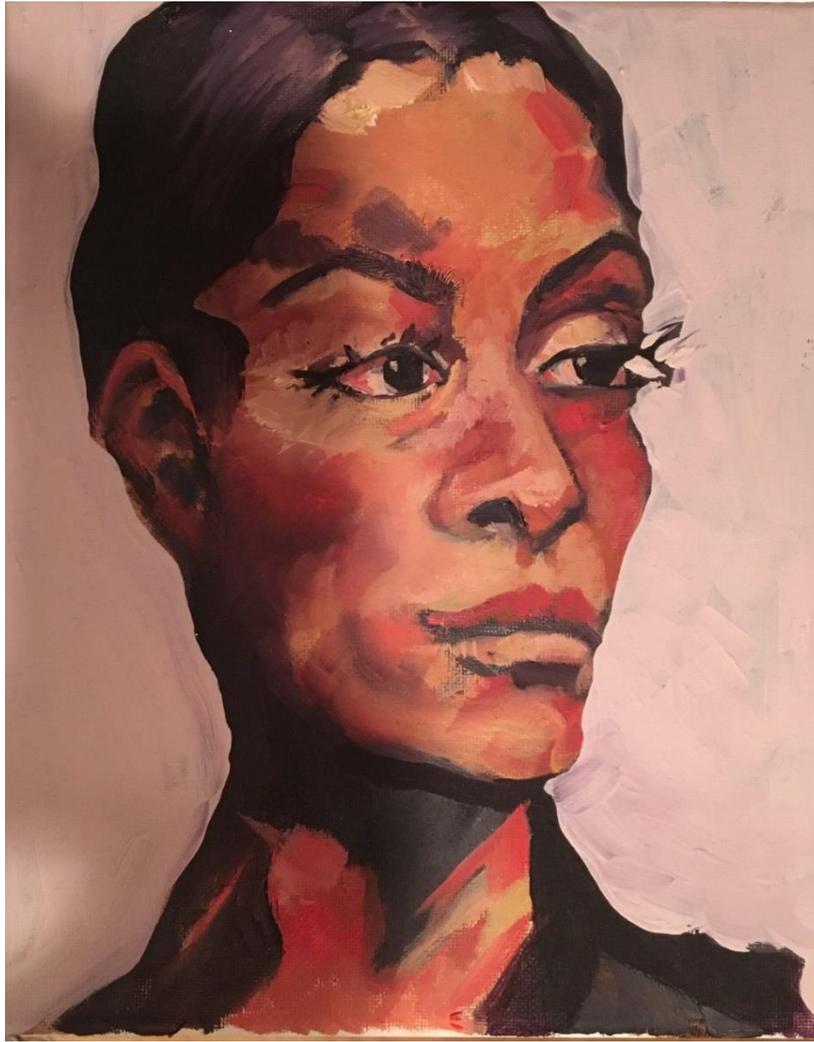
My British Columbia friend is named Ian. Seriously. Ian Danbridge. I kid you not. We met when I took the *Princess Marguerite II* from Seattle to Victoria. This was back in the late 80s, before they retired the *Princess Marguerite* and replaced it with the high-speed *Clipper* catamaran. The *Marguerite* was a coal-fired steamship, slow and very Victorian. I would watch it come and go across Elliott Bay each day from the window of my studio apartment. Anyhow, Ian sold me a Cuban cigar that day at the tobacconist shop in downtown Victoria where he worked, and later we saw each other down along the harbor (excuse me, *harbour*) when I was smoking the godawful thing. “It’s dreadful, isn’t it?” he said, and I said yeah and flicked the stogie into the water and watched a gull drop from the sky to check it out. Then Ian and I got to talking and went to a nearby pub for a pint of bitter, and that’s how my cross-border friendship with Ian, a jolly good fellow indeed, began.



John Emer (like the ancient grain but with one less “m”) was a friend a long time ago in a faraway land. He lived in Fort Lee, NJ, and taught Sunday school at an American Baptist church in Weehawken, not far from where Aaron Burr shot Alexander Hamilton in that famous dual of theirs. We met at the special ed. school where I’d gotten a job after dropping out of high school, and where John worked as a certified instructor. We ended up driving cross-country twice the next year—the first time in a big green Pontiac Bonneville, the second time in a ’72 Chevy Impala that broke down in Needles, California. John was a good Christian, but he never once preached to me in all those miles. Eventually he got engaged to a nice girl named Stacey, and at their wedding I got drunk on whiskey sours. That Christmas, at the special ed. school, he dressed up as Santa Claus for the kids. After the New Year, when I quit my job there, we just went our separate ways and I haven’t seen him since.



My friend Billy Shears claims he's *the* Billy Shears, the one from the Beatles' album, *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. We were sitting in the dark wainscoted bar of the Mayflower Park Hotel in downtown Seattle drinking dry martinis when he revealed this fact to me. I must have shaken my head or rolled my eyes or signaled my incredulity somehow because he said, "It's true, mate. Me and the lads go way back. I don't look it, but I'm the same age as Sir Paul. His mum and mine were chums." I plucked the green olive from the bottom of my glass and popped it into my mouth. "Bullshit," I said. His face suddenly turned into the most bug-eyed, gape-mouthed visage I've ever seen. "How dare you, you little pisser." I told him to calm down and signaled the bartender to bring us two more martinis. "All right then, Mr. Billy Shears," I said. "I'm all ears." By the time he finished telling me his story, I wanted to believe him, I really did—but just couldn't. I didn't tell him that, though. Instead I raised my third martini and toasted to "the one and only Billy Shears," and with a contented grin, he clinked his glass to mine.



When I went through a debilitating personal crisis last year—a triple whammy of physical pain, mental anguish, and emotional distress—my yogi friend, Jasmyne, suggested I take one of her yoga classes. I was reluctant, but her gentle manner persuaded me. And my life was transformed. As someone who has long practiced the postures (*asana*) of Vinyasa yoga and studied the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali and knows Sanskrit like no one’s business, Jasmyne appreciates the importance of mind-body-spirit harmony. She’s taught me how to concentrate on my breath (*pranayama*), listen to my body (*sarvanga*), and raise my awareness of personal and universal consciousness (*puruṣa*). I take three classes a week with her. I’m still tippy with the balancing poses—Tree, Eagle, Half Moon, Warrior III, etc.—and headstands are definitely out. Yet, as Jasmyne reminds her students, “It’s all about the practice.” Last week I was honored when she told me she was planning a group trip to India and asked if I would like to go. I meditated a lot on it, yet when I ultimately declined the invitation, she simply put her hands to her heart (*añjali mudra*), bowed ever so slightly, and said, “*Namaste.*”



“I don’t know who I am anymore. Everything’s a blur—memories, thoughts, images on the screen, words on a page, my face in a mirror—like a box of crayons melted in a microwave. I don’t recognize myself because there’s not much self—much me—left. Maybe it’s this atmosphere or magnetosphere, the way they wear a being down. Or maybe it’s the recent perturbations or stellar winds. I don’t really know. I’ve been here so long my sense of such influences is way off kilter. You want to know how long I’ve been here exactly? 1,036, 916 years and three months. And people say I’m the visitor. Those who sent me said I’d be fine. ‘It’s a young planet,’ they said. ‘You’ll adjust.’ What a joke. Sometimes I think I should just go home, but then I realize I don’t know where that is anymore. Just look out there. Galaxies galore—lenticular, spiral, ring, elliptical, you name it. Hyper upon hyper. The infinity of it all makes me scared to look. Yet how can you not look? It’s so goddamn beautiful.” So intones Ollie, my only alien friend, as we lie in the grass in my backyard, gazing up at the swirl of stars in the night sky.

Image Forthcoming

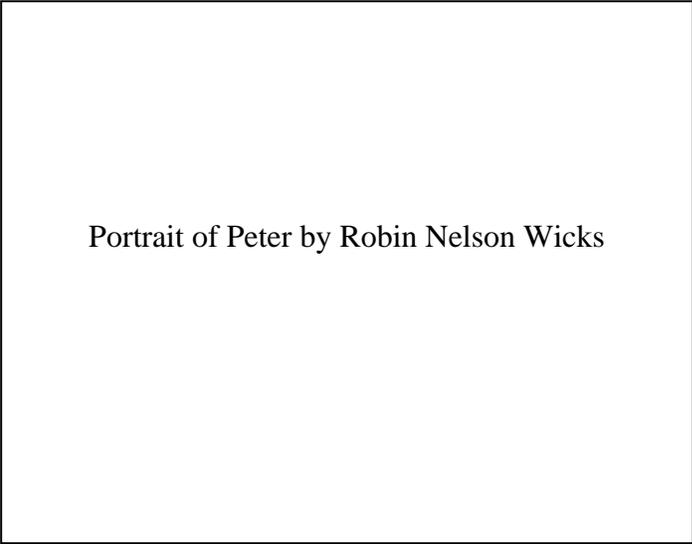
Xiu has been my friend for well-nigh seven years. We didn't meet in Chinatown, as my parents once asked. Rather they work at a branch of the San Francisco Public Library in the Mission. "Books are like dowels," they once told me, yet never bothered to explain. They read all the time and love books, especially sci-fi, but probably not as much as they love dancing. They can dance too. Disco, ballroom, cha-cha, Irish, swing, bump-and-grind, you name it and they've got it down. They also likes to watch those dancing competition shows, *Dancing with the Stars* and *So You Think You Can Dance?* They say there should be a show called *Dance Your Ass Off*. I agree. Sometimes we go out dancing together, and I have to say that, with Xiu showing me how, we're pretty damn good. Thank you, Xiu.

Image Forthcoming

“I’m not as scary as I look,” my friend John said when we first met. It’s true that he looks kind of scary: rotting, mangled teeth, a scar on his chin and another across his brow, hollowed-out cheek bones, ashen skin, and a wiry black mustache. But he’s a nice guy once you get to know him, which I’ve had the opportunity to do given he lives in the apartment three doors down from me. The only problem is, he has a violent streak, which gets him into fights with anyone who crosses him. “But you’re cool,” he told me the other day after showing me a pair of actual brass knuckles he keeps in his jacket pocket. “Glad to hear it,” I said and lent him the \$20 he’d come by to borrow. He studied the bill as if checking if it was counterfeit and said, “Andrew Fucking Jackson.” John’s mother was Indian—Nez Perce, he told me once. “That’s one motherfucker I’d like to fuck up real good.” He then laughed real good and extended his hand for a fist bump, which I gave him. “Later, bro,” he said and ambled back down the hallway to his apartment. A week later he paid back the \$20.

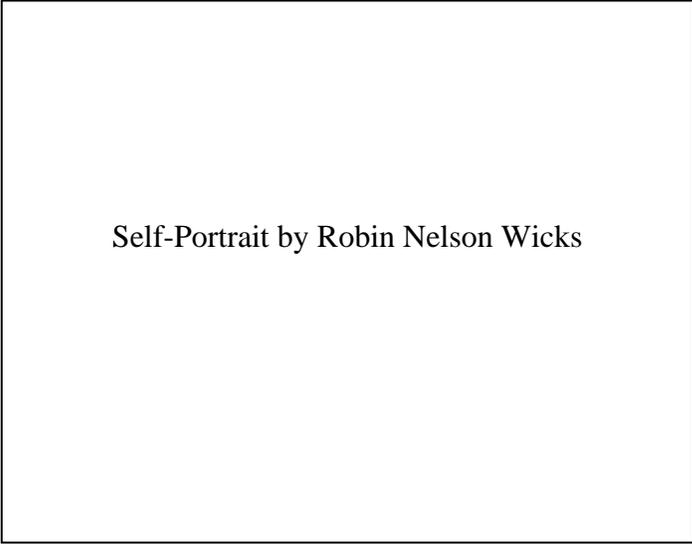


**Peter Donahue** is the author of four works of fiction, including *The Cornelius Arms*, *Madison House*, *Clara and Merritt*, and *Three Sides Water*. He is also author of *Salmon Eaters to Sagebrushers: Washington's Lost Literary Legacy*, and co-editor of the anthologies *Reading Seattle* and *Reading Portland*, and the 1914 memoir *Seven Years on the Pacific Slope*. He teaches English at Wenatchee Valley College at Omak in Washington.



Portrait of Peter by Robin Nelson Wicks

**Robin Nelson Wicks** is a photographer, painter, and sculptor. She is a graduate of the Corcoran School of Art and Design and the University of Washington. She has held various artist residencies, including most recently at the Confluence Gallery and Art Center in Twisp, Washington. Formerly a teacher at Liberty Bell High School in the Methow Valley, she currently teaches art at Glover Middle School in Spokane.



Self-Portrait by Robin Nelson Wicks