

## ROBERT BILENSKY

*Bleed*, 2017  
Oil on Wood Panel, 40 x 30 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

I often left things in the garage that I had trouble throwing away. They'd disappear, and I never missed them. "I've a wooden bowl in my future?"

He squeezed my hand. "Maybe a candlestick, too."

On the way home we dropped off some electronic equipment at the recycling center and three boxes of books at the used-book store. As we turned the corner onto our street, I gasped.

David hit the brakes. "What is it?"

For a moment I wondered if we'd turned down the wrong street. But the Victorian at the corner belonged to our neighbor. The redwood tree across the street was still tearing up the sidewalk. Everything looked familiar, except that our house was gone. In its place stood a sprawling, wood-shingled house, angled awkwardly to fit on the lot. A covered balcony hung out over the driveway.

I leaned forward and peered under the windshield. It was the house in the photo, but I'd never seen it from the side like this. As I watched, slowly our house—green with cream trim—returned to view. A residual shadow of the larger structure lingered and then gradually faded away.

I shook my head to clear it. "For a moment there, I thought I saw another house on our property."

"If there was room for another house, I'd have built a workshop years ago." He pulled into the driveway but didn't turn off the engine. When he turned to face me, his blue eyes looked almost gray. "Are you okay? You're acting strange."

"I'm fine." First Vickers and now the house. I should have let David toss that box unopened.

"If I go to Home Depot will you be all right here by yourself?"

"Stop fussing." I kissed his check and got out of the car.

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As I opened the door and walked upstairs, I noticed the worn carpet. The banister wobbled. The bookcase on the opposite wall was cluttered with books and photographs. One more thing to clean out. I went into the kitchen and heated a cup of coffee.

I was standing at the kitchen counter making a shopping list when I heard footsteps on the stairs. "Did you forget something?" I called.

It wasn't David, but the man in the photo again. I flinched when he walked into the room.

Vickers laughed. "Why so jittery? Besides, it's not like we don't know each other."

"Actually, we don't."

He pulled out the step stool from beside the refrigerator and perched on the top step. "After years in your bedroom, I think I can claim a certain intimacy."

I was annoyed to feel myself blush. "That old photograph hardly represents an acquaintance."

"You yearned for me."

I tried to make myself taller, as if the top of my head was pulling toward the ceiling, the way we practiced in Pilates. "What I wanted was your house."

"That's why I'm here. I came back to offer you a second chance." He took out his pocket watch and compared it to the clock over the stove before clicking it shut. "I understand young women like to say no a time or two before they get to yes."

I crossed my arms and glared. "You understand wrong. No means no."

"A couple more refusals and we'll be off."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"I'm offering a clear upgrade. Bigger house, younger man." He put his hand on his hip, mimicking his posture in the photo. He looked to be in his late forties, but had to be closer to one hundred and fifty.

"Your house no longer exists and you're dead. Doesn't sound like much of an offer to me. Besides, you have a wife. Won't she be at home?"

He brushed aside my objections. "When we pass, we get to choose a decade and a house. Sue wanted that drafty old Missouri farmhouse of her childhood. Los Angeles was always more my home." He shrugged as if to say it couldn't be helped. "I'm prepared to let you decorate. Most everything's in place, all top quality, but we could use some new hand towels in the bath. I never know what to do with those prissy ones with the crochet along the bottom."

"You're putting me in charge of hand towels?" He was impossible. I turned away and started straightening the cookbooks on the shelf above the counter.

He opened a cookbook and frowned at the photo of a broccoli salad. "Dinner, too. A Sunday roast with potatoes. Fried chicken or a chop now and then. Nothing fancy, mind. I'm not a picky eater."

"These days we joke about meat and potato eaters like you."