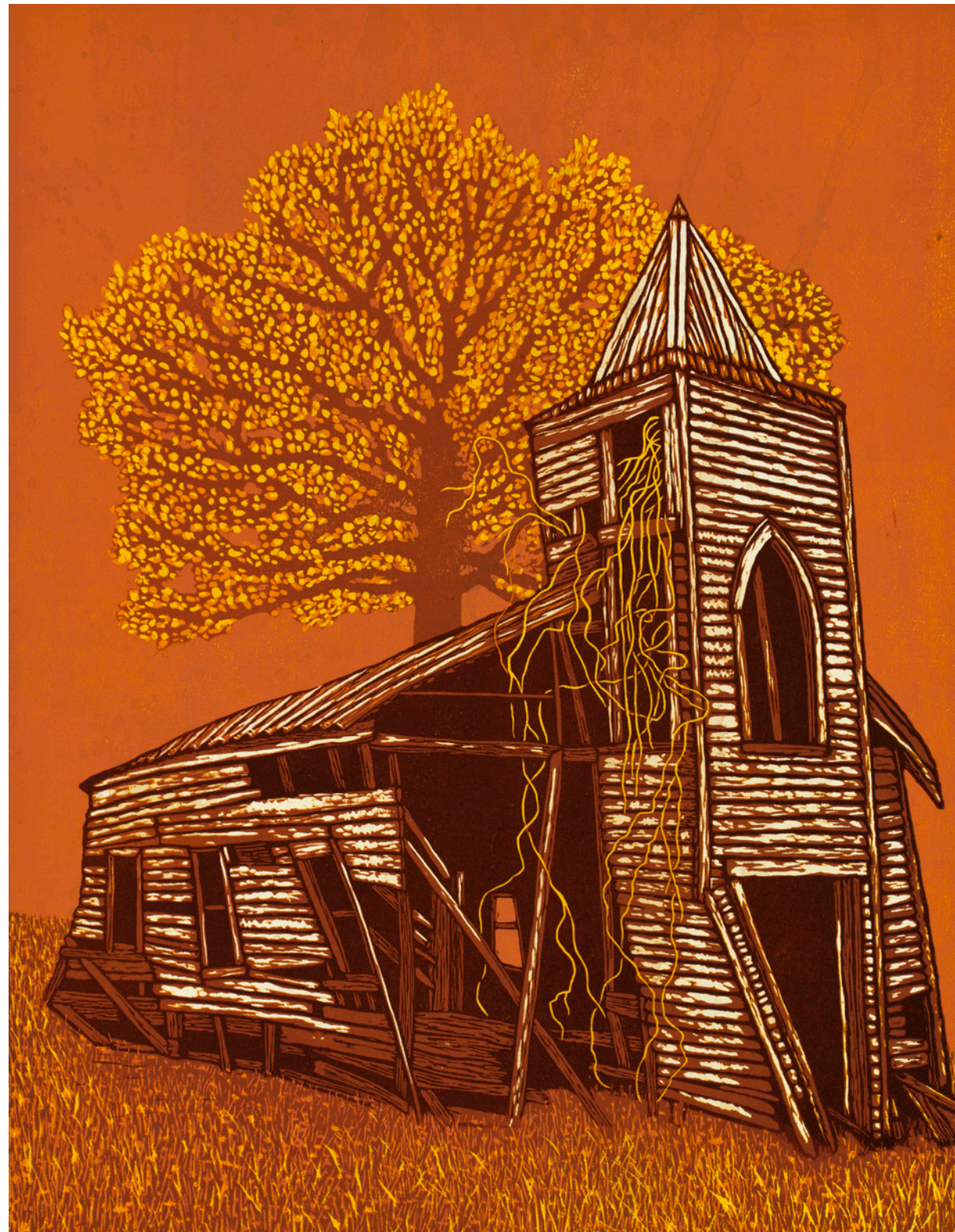


BRIDGIT HENRY

Broken Halos, 2015
Woodcut, 18 x 24 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

LAURA TANENBAUM

Ode to Margaret Dumont

“On stage with the Marx Brothers, and then as a leading lady in their seven films, Miss Dumont embodied the stereotype of the aristocratic grande dame of high society [...] as the mad foursome created low comedy around her.”

—*New York Times* obituary for Margaret Dumont,
March 7, 1965

Just as the gods who love us so
need sinners to make visible
the hardness,
the wrenching wideness of their love,

Just as a girl at eight,
straightening her back,
longs above all to be understood,
and needs above all
to ensure she is misunderstood.

Just so this god of silliness,
god of terrible puns,
god not of the Fathers,
but the god of my father,
needs the ninety-degree angles,
the straightened faces of straight men.

Just so Groucho needed not
Harpo's silent cunning or Chico's cunning hat
But needed Zeppo, the boss's boss,
Needed Gummo, the Jewish dentist,
Walking off the stage, got out just in time.

But needed her most of all:
Margaret Dumont on the couch.

Oh, Rufus! A lock of my hair?
Biting her tongue on a grin.
You got off easy! I was going to ask for the whole wig!
The dowager's grin,
which is not a grin,
the grin of the young widow,
grin of affect,
grin of trilled r's,
grins strung like pearls.
The grin against those who say she didn't get it.
The grin of checks that cash.

Margaret born Daisy Juliette Baker.
Pinup girl of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*.
The Girl Behind the Counter.
There's an art to playing straight.
You must build up your man.

The grin of five to nine,
of never stooping for the sugar heir she married.

At the gates of MGM
Outside the wardrobe hall of pearls
and matching nightgowns.
You have to squint to see the plaque.
Positively no help will be hired on the lot.
The brothers pose in front of the wire.
Squint and you see her grin.
Not that I care but what happened to your husband?
He died.
He's probably just using that as an excuse.
When he jumps, Groucho almost reaches her chin.
Oh Rufus!
The grin of the twenty-year childless widow.

Will you marry me? Did he leave you any money?
Answer the second question first.

Laura Tanenbaum teaches at LaGuardia Community College, City University of New York. Her fiction, poetry, essays, and book reviews have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Jacobin*, the *New Republic*, *Open Letters Monthly*, *Aji*, *Cleaver Magazine*, and *Narrative*.