

STEVEN CARRELLI

Letter From the Storm (#3), 2008
Egg tempera on panel, 5 1/8 x 7 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

SEAN STINY

Rita's Love

From Wartime London
to Pebble Beach

My grandmother rests inside my parents' closet. The one with the baseball cards we used to collect and the bedsheets my mother gets out in the rare occurrence my brother and I are home.

It's not her, but she's there. In that closet. Next to those dusty baseball cards, some she gave to us herself. She's in a box within another box. About four pounds of ashes. I've looked at it. Once.

She died in 2008. I saw her have a stroke at a Carrows Restaurant while we ordered breakfast. I talked to the 911 dispatcher after signaling a hostess to make the call. We were visiting her after going to a concert. She had a few more tiresome months before her health relinquished. She was eighty-one.

She called everyone *Love*. Everything was *love* because once it had been *war*. Once it had been darkness and rubble and fear for her faraway family. And a rap on the hand when you spoke out of turn. And that speck of mold on your daily bread. Everything after the war was color and life and beauty. And vibrancy. And her children. Even when one took his own life.

Her name was Rita. She led a hard, sometimes wonderful life.

She grew up in London in the 1930s. She described a blessed childhood. Her father worked at Lloyds of London, the wealthy insurer. They owned the first car in their suburb. Neighbors looked in wonder at their four-wheeled contraption.

The youngest of three, she had two brothers. One with a mental disability. Injured by forceps at birth. She was protective of him. Outside of this, these years are a mystery to me. When she left London at age twenty-seven, she never saw her family again.

We lived four hours from Rita. A long drive across the dreaded Bay Area roadways and down the coast. Or down excruciating Interstate 5, then cut over to the coast. She'd come visit from time to time when we were on break from school. She always took Amtrak up and over the Central Valley to the train station where we'd pick her up near the State Capital.

The train ride, and car ride she'd coax to get to the train, would take her most the day. Hours bumping along hypnotically. The train marching to a slow halt at every major municipality. She loved it.