

ALBERTO YBARRA

Life Swag, 2011
Oil on linen, 20 x 16 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

MICHAEL ALENYIKOV

Negative Reservations

“What to say? What to say?” Catherine muttered. “Should I write that down?” Emily asked.

“No, of course not, you ninny. I’m thinking,” Catherine replied.

“Oh.”

They were alone in the restaurant but for two sharply dressed businessmen at a window table and a young couple sitting near the kitchen. Emily had noted earlier their entwined fingers; how he then spilled his coffee, soiling the ivory-colored tablecloth, she mopping up the mess with one of the restaurant’s thick linen napkins; their shy smiles.

Emily doodled hangman figures and dollar signs, making pictograms of her initials, EGS, while she waited for Catherine to speak.

Catherine’s chair was slightly elevated, providing her not so much a view as the look of someone noble, a queen or countess, Emily imagined. She wore a large white bib, streaked red and green from pesto and tomato sauce; a queen, Emily decided, from the days of Henry VIII, who could eat with her fingers and make a mess as she pleased. Emily sketched a woman with wild hair, on her knees, neck resting on a block; above her a man, face masked, a raised axe clenched in his meaty hands. *Off with her head*, she wrote in tiny letters.

“I’m not feeling inspired today,” Catherine said, slopping up the last strands of the pasta. She wore a black shawl. Today it covered her head, but it might just as well be worn over her shoulders, depending on her mood. Combined with the whiteness of the bib, she could have been a nun from Emily’s Catholic childhood.

Emily thought that even when she was disgusting, Catherine was fascinating. It wasn’t just that she was blind or that she was a poet—quite a brilliant one, everyone agreed—or, when properly dressed and made up—which she wasn’t, today—still beautiful; well, maybe it *was* because she was blind; maybe that was it, after all—or maybe it *was* her brilliance. Emily had no idea how Catherine could tolerate being alive and not seeing the world. Wasn’t she terrified when she was alone? If she was, she never let on.

She had her memories, Emily supposed; she hadn’t always been blind. Maybe she screened them like home