

## MILO REICE

*By the Rivers of Babylon*, 2003–2005  
Paint, conte, and wood on paper, mounted  
on veneer board. 90 3/4 x 72 3/4 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## LOLITA PIERCE State of Rest

“Jesus, you’re still such a little thing,” Renata said when she found her niece in the emergency room lobby.

The girl’s hair had not been combed since God knows when and her shirt was twisted into a knot at her waist and secured with a rubber band. She was wet from her shirtfront down to the worn knees of her pants, blighted looking and sour smelling. Though she had to be about ten years old, she didn’t look like she had grown or aged except in her face.

Renata felt bullied by Maya’s vacant gaze in response to seeing her and did not offer an embrace. She dropped her arms in amazement.

“Why you wet?”

Silence.

“This isn’t going to work if you don’t talk.”

A salt-and-pepper-haired nurse approached them, carrying a brown paper bag. She was the shape and size of the refrigerator in Renata’s apartment.

“This the aunt?”

Maya nodded.

The nurse eyed Renata, her lips pinched with reprobation. “I got you a sandwich from the cafeteria,” she said to Maya.

Maya looked at the floor, not even bothering to speak or to take the bag being held out to her.

“Thanks,” Renata said. “I’ll get the girl something to eat.”

The nurse didn’t lower the bag and so Renata took it, pressed it tight to her leg like a bandage against a wound.

“Why is she wet?”

“We tried to help her clean her clothes but she wouldn’t let us.”

“That didn’t answer my question.”

The nurse glanced at Maya.

“Why don’t I find you a doctor so you can find out exactly what’s going on.”

\* \* \*

Coma.

She stood there, trying to listen to the doctor, who was explaining something complicated to her that she was sure only made sense if it didn’t feel personal. Conscious of her face, her shaking hands, and the red sweater that she had managed to put on inside out over a wrinkled blouse, she was nodding like she understood but her mind kept going



back to what she'd been doing before she got the call. She'd stabbed holes in the cellophane of her frozen dinner with a fork and, while it whirred in the microwave, she'd opened a beer and run through the channels to find something to watch while she ate. What had she decided on? And for the life of her she couldn't remember the dinner. She couldn't remember but she missed it already, the last of normal gone and left in her microwave. Her brother was here, again, needing her when she had so little already.

"So you put him into a coma?"

"Your brother presented signs of pneumonia and respiratory failure. He was feverish and very distressed and we needed to intubate him so that he could breathe and to take some of the stress off of his organs."

"So, coma?"

"A medically induced coma puts your brother in a state of rest so that his body can recuperate."

She could see that the doctor was searching her face, looking for some sign that she understood so he could leave. "How long?"

"We can't know. We just have to see how his body responds."

\* \* \*

Renata realized that she hadn't seen her brother's daughter, Maya, in a couple of years. Hervey had decided to make another go of rehabilitation and had needed her to give him rides to the outpatient clinic and then to drop Maya off at school. Her own son, Marvel, had already been born, had already passed away. She was back in the world again where Hervey still needed her.

In a rusted Mercury Zephyr with a sunburned dashboard and a weepy transmission, she had picked Hervey and the girl up on the black side of morning, every morning, for thirty-one days. Hervey's girl was thin too, not junkie thin but invisibly so, and wore a navy uniform shirt, beige high-water slacks and mismatched white socks—one cuffed, one crew—to school every day. GoodGodGoodwill, all of it. Renata and Hervey had worn Goodwill clothes for much of their childhood so she intimately knew the look of the stiff fabric strained and stained in all the wrong places, the musty other smells that never washed out, that your body in the same clothes could never erase.

Maya wouldn't smile, didn't talk. After waving in

Renata's direction, the girl would crawl into the backseat, curl into a ball, and disappear from the rearview until the ride was over. Hervey, by contrast, had been all chat. No gas money or even the promise of it but no apologies or downcast eyes either. He hated looking like an addict when he was going through treatment so he had worn the used sports jacket Renata had bought him years ago. Although it had been the smallest men's jacket she could find, Hervey had so eaten himself away that his arms floated in its sleeves. After a while he would tire himself out talking and fall asleep. Crushed up against the passenger door with his head back and mouth open, he had still been, to her, the boy who would cry in the car on the way to school after their mother had died, hoping that just once his grief might be powerful enough to turn their grandmother's car around. It never was.

When they reached the clinic, she'd sometimes hand him a narrow, brown paper bag that contained a pack of smokes and some matches. She would say to him as he exited the car, whether or not she had the paper bag in tow, "Get your shit together."

Hervey would nod and squeeze her hand. When she heard the car door, Maya would suddenly wake up and bend over the front seat with a dry, pointy elbow angled in Renata's direction and kiss her father goodbye. This was the only time that Renata had felt something for the girl.

From the outside, Renata had probably looked like a woman dropping her husband off at work. It was work and mostly irritable (on her part) and grim (on his) with a few days here and there where he felt just optimistic enough to father Maya before he closed the car door.

"Don't forget to turn in your homework."

*Yeah, Herv, way to parent.*

"Don't forget to stay clean," Renata would respond.

As he approached the line of people waiting to enter the clinic, he would always turn and wave goodbye though neither of them would ever wave back. Renata's stomach always lurched whenever Hervey waved goodbye.

After the clinic rides, she didn't hear from him again until Christmastime. He'd told her he needed fifty bucks to tide him over until his check. But when he'd shown up to her job after work, and she'd seen his face, his hands shoved deep in the pockets of some army surplus jacket that he'd worn over a jean coat to make him look bigger, she'd wished she'd had a gun and some courage instead.

"I can't give you the money," she'd said.

"I'm clean."

"I just ain't got it to give."

"Why didn't you tell me that over the phone?"

"I wanted to see you."

She'd handed him a few bucks. Not enough to buy anything of value.

He'd stopped short of begging . . . a feat for him she knew. In her eyes she'd tried to communicate that she was grateful for his restraint but as he'd wished her a happy Christmas and turned away, she'd shouted at his back,

"Get your shit together, Herv."

He'd kept walking, but had raised his middle finger in salute.

\* \* \*

With Hervey in some holding pattern in the intensive care unit she told the girl they should get some air.

The girl, slumped into a chair at the end of a row of seats, shook her head.

Renata sighed herself into the seat beside her, between the girl and a man holding tightly to his head as though it would roll off his neck if he let go. The scoop of the seat hardly contained Renata's behind and her girth caused her to touch thighs with Maya and the man next to her at the same time. The man kept holding his head and now that she was next to him, she could hear that he was moaning quietly.

"You hungry?"

More silence.

"They are going to call me if anything changes."

Nothing.

"There's a Red Pirate just down the street. That nurse will kill me if I don't feed you."

Maya twisted her shirtfront. Renata reached for her hand but the girl suddenly flinched.

"No!"

The nurses looked up. The other people in the waiting room were too bubbled in their own pain and misery to notice. But the man got up and shuffled away. She was relieved because she could use his empty chair to hoist herself up and grab Maya's arm. She left the bag in her seat.

\* \* \*

Watching Maya flip through the laminated seven-page menu at Red Pirate, Renata had a change of heart. Perhaps it was insensitive to be eating out like some celebration. It was "Shrimp Fiesta Week" and the servers were wearing miniature pirate ship hats and beaming at them like icy margaritas on a sunny patio. Since when did pirates start having fiestas?

When the waitress came to their table for their order after the fourth of Renata's "five more minutes," Maya continued to flip through the menu without looking up so Renata ordered for both of them.

The sounds of people chatting all around them made her feel even more alone.

"Have you ever seen the movie *The Miracle Worker*?"

The girl stared. She hadn't said another word since the *no* in the hospital lobby.

"You're like the girl Anne Bancroft played."

The girl looked agitated.

"Something wrong with you or are you just rude?"

The girl stared through her and then looked back down at her menu. The waitress had taken Renata's but Maya kept a death grip on hers.

"You told the nurses to call *me*," Renata said.

The girl slapped down the menu and pulled something from her pocket and slid it across the table. It was the ripped edge of a paper bag with Renata's number written inside. It had been folded and balled and handled so many times you could hardly make out the numbers.

After she'd lost her job, Renata had lost focus on finding him. Disconnected numbers, the fear of his asking for money always stood in the way. Plus after that Christmas, she'd thought he might never speak to her again. How could she do for him when she couldn't do for herself? She had dropped her community college classes one by one and was still receiving food stamps for a child that was long gone but had not yet made it into the system as dead. Hervey knew where to find her and she knew he would when he needed something. She had never moved; she could not leave the apartment where her baby had been so close to living. It was a necessary prison.

So when she had gotten the call that Hervey was at the hospital and she needed to pick up her niece, she had been done chasing her brother for a very long time. Even the girl was just that one distant memory. But somehow the number she'd scrawled on the ripped edge of a paper bag

and given to Maya before she'd dropped her off at school one of those many mornings had survived the years. She didn't even remember it and yet there it was.

The silence was so much like white noise that she hardly heard Maya speak.

"Patty Duke."

"What?"

"Patty Duke played Helen Keller."

"Well, I know Anne Bancroft was in the movie."

"But that's not what you said."

"Hmm."

"And Helen Keller was deaf *and* blind. I just don't have anything to say."

"Well, you should. Your father is an idiot."

Maya was looking at her hands again. Renata thought she saw the silhouette of tears but quickly looked away before she could confirm. Feeling sorry for themselves wasn't going to do Hervey any good.

"How do you know so much about that movie?"

"Dad liked old movies."

"Yeah, well that's because we were raised by your great-grandmother and those were the only movies she'd let us watch."

"Can you call the hospital?"

"Why do you want to go back there?"

"Why don't you?"

Renata looked at Maya's head, down again. She saw Hervey more in that gesture than anything else in the girl.

"I need to know what happened."

"He's not an idiot."

"He's my brother so I can call him that."

Maya put her head down on top of her two fists.

She reached across the table but Maya did not extend her hand, she didn't even look up. The girl's fists were so tight that she was afraid to touch her. Renata patted the table with her fingertips.

"But I shouldn't have said it to you."

When the waitress returned with their food, Maya kept her head down.

She drove them to Hervey's place so the girl could change and get her things. Flies sizzled over black bananas. The place smelled like vomit. There was a huge, dark stain on the rug and an open futon took up most of the living room floor.

Renata opened a window, found a trash bag, and deposited the bananas inside.

"Change and get your stuff."

"Why?"

"Because you might be staying with me for a while."

"I don't want to stay with you."

"Well, it's not the best time to want."

She saw two Barbies, one with a burned face, and a babel of books beside the futon and added, "Only bring clothes."

"I need my books," Maya said.

"For what? Library is free."

"These are mine," Maya said.

"You can bring the Barbies."

"I'd rather have books than Barbies *or* clothes."

Renata was astounded by her priorities.

"I should probably haul some of this stuff to the trash," she said.

She surveyed the room. The girl had only two pairs of pants and seemed to be wearing the only shirt she owned. All of the underwear she'd come across was dirty and the girl didn't have, but needed, deodorant. All of the books made her head hurt. She was smart but not in school. Hervey had always been the reader. She focused on the empty takeout bags and tissues that were crushed into paper snowballs and overflowing from the trash can. Ants were running relays up and down the side. She was sure she'd see roaches or rats if they stayed long enough. The pile of books was the only thing that didn't make sense—that and no smack kit to be found.

Renata tried to picture his face, the last time she saw him, in the parking lot outside her job. She couldn't remember his face before he'd walked away from her.

"I can't believe this went on for so long."

Hervey had held onto Maya like a lovey. She knew that he'd read to her all the time, made her do her homework, and kissed her goodnight, even while he smashed her insides to bits and stunted her growth on a daily basis. She'd never called Renata, or anyone she'd gathered, for help. Help meant losing Hervey. He was everything to Maya but she was, apparently, not everything to him.

Maya was sitting on the floor turning the pages of a big book, *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*. She was scared to take her home.

"Jesus, okay. You can bring the Barbies and *two* books,"

Renata batted the flies with the trash bag as she spoke and then tossed it to the girl.

But Maya was shaking her head, sliding the big book in first and then the others, two at a time, until the bag was full.

She was going to take the girl to the store to buy change of clothes—she was still wearing that godforsaken shirt—but the hospital called.

\* \* \*

They were throwing around words that she was sure no one had considered how they would sound aloud in a waiting room to a nerve-racked family member. She just wanted to know whether her brother was alive or dead but it turned out to be more complicated than that. He seemed to be in a persistent vegetative state and his heart was weak and erratic.

She took Maya to the cafeteria and bought them both watery hot cocoas just to have something to do with her hands, to bide her time, to find the words.

"Maya, do you remember your cousin?"

The girl shook her head.

"Well, I guess you wouldn't because he didn't live very long. You were about five or six years old and you came to the hospital to visit me with your dad. This very hospital. Your mom was still around then but she was sick and he was pretty much on his own with you then but he was learning how to comb your hair and he was always telling me what books you guys were reading together. Our grandmother would have been tickled to see the Pippi Longstocking braids he would give you on a regular basis but, anyway, he was trying."

She sipped the chalky cocoa, which was just as awful as she had expected it to taste.

"I didn't get the chance to be a good parent because my baby didn't live that long. I suppose I criticize your father because—well, for God's sake—he was a drug user and weak with staying sober and couldn't ever manage to put down one crutch without picking up another. I know he tried but in trying, he failed you."

"I guess sometimes I feel like it wasn't fair. Fair to you mostly but fair in a universal sense. I'm mad at myself that I didn't do something to wrest you away."

"He stopped using methadone. He wasn't using anything, he just got sick!"

"Why didn't he call me? Why didn't you?"

"I did."

"I mean before now. When he got sick."

The girl balled her fists again.

"The doctors said all the years of methadone after all those years of drug use affected his heart when he stopped using both. He has some heart dysfunction. I can't remember the name of it but it's complicated. He already had pneumonia and now he's had a heart attack but he can't breathe on his own. He never will be able to either. Doing the one right thing he'd ever done came too late."

"So he's a vegetable?"

"No, he's your father but he'll never be the way he was. I have to let him go."

She had her hands over her ears.

"He said you wouldn't believe him and he was right. You called him an idiot."

"I didn't know," she sighed. "I didn't know I could believe him."

Maya put her hands down on the table.

"I did everything I knew to do. We had the same mother you know."

The force of the hot cocoa on her face shocked her more than the fist that followed. She grabbed the girl's hands but found herself pulling the table up with them. When they fell to the ground she was burned again by the remaining cup as it splashed them both. Little hands gripped her shirtfront and some of her skin and pinched. She held tight to Maya's fists so the girl started kicking. She kicked and she kicked and they twisted on the floor until it felt like every hand in the cafeteria had to come over and pull them both apart.

"Her dad is dying," she said to the man and woman who were helping her off the wet floor. The woman tugged down Renata's skirt.

"She's just upset."

She clutched her blouse but she couldn't keep it closed. The tiny open cuts on her chest stung in the air. Someone had righted the table so she leaned her palm on it. Maya was wet again and howling, twisting in the arms of a security guard who was holding her head to his chest.

"She'll be okay," Renata said. "We'll be okay."

And then she sat down in the wet seat and closed her eyes.

\* \* \*



Marvel had lived for thirty-eight days. Renata wished she could remember what they had done together his last day but she had been a somnambulist and all the days with a newborn ran together after awhile. It had been just her and him. She couldn't remember how the nurse had taught her to wrap him, when she'd last changed him, and what the doctor had said about the spongy spot on the top of his head. The house had been a wreck but the crib had been clean. Hervey had never had a crib and she remembered how their mother had put him on the couch to sleep at night because he'd scared her. When Hervey had been old enough to roll over, her mother had put a cushion on the floor but Renata had already started sneaking back to the couch at night to sleep with him. She couldn't sleep in the bed with her mother, knowing that Hervey might fall on the floor.

They'd told her not to sleep with him so she didn't. She could hardly sleep for waiting to change him, feed him, bathe him, put him back to sleep, and see his eyes open again a few hours later. Except for a few times when she'd fallen asleep while holding him on the couch, she had always put him down in the crib. She'd done what they'd said. He had breathed so barely and he'd slept so much, sometimes she would tickle his feet just to see him move.

Hervey had brought diapers for Marvel and an Almond Joy for her. She hadn't asked how he was; she hadn't wanted to know. Someone at the hospital had given her a thick baby care book but Renata had been too overwhelmed to read it. She'd handed it to Hervey and he'd sat the book on his lap and thumbed through it with one hand while Marvel was tucked in his arm.

"It's pretty easy right now, Ren. You just gotta keep him fed and changed."

"Is it that easy?"

"In the beginning that's all they need."

"It's *not* easy, Hervey, and he's so fragile and I don't know what I'm doing."

"He'll be fine. We're hardwired to want to live."

But Marvel had gone to sleep in his crib and he hadn't woken up. It didn't absolve her that his death had a name and it wasn't hers. Those doctors didn't know shit. She'd done everything they'd told her and he'd still died. Her grandmother had smoked all of her adult life, even while she'd been pregnant with her mother, and had lived to be

eighty-one. Her mother, who had started smoking crack while pregnant with Hervey, had never lost him or his love, though he'd been a trembling, underweight baby who could never turn his head. She'd died happy facedown across a table at thirty-eight.

She didn't remember giving Hervey the book. She remembered not needing it back.

\* \* \*

Everything was just as ugly as she'd imagined. All the tubes and wires and the bags of liquid suspended over the pneumatic air. Everything keeping him alive was bigger than him. They said he was resting but she didn't see how he could when there was so much at work on his body and his heart was still beating and revolting.

She could keep him, and Hervey might've liked that, suspended like this, a baby again. He couldn't hurt himself here, but he could still hurt the girl. She imagined playing it out—they visiting with books and reading to him, looking for signs of life that would never appear, not even if he opened his eyes—and she felt suffocated. Hervey was wrong. Not everyone was hardwired to want to live. Not everyone should be.

The disapproving salt-and-pepper nurse had come to find her.

"Do you want someone to bring your niece in?"

The girl was smart. She would come to understand.

"No," she said, "she's seen enough already."

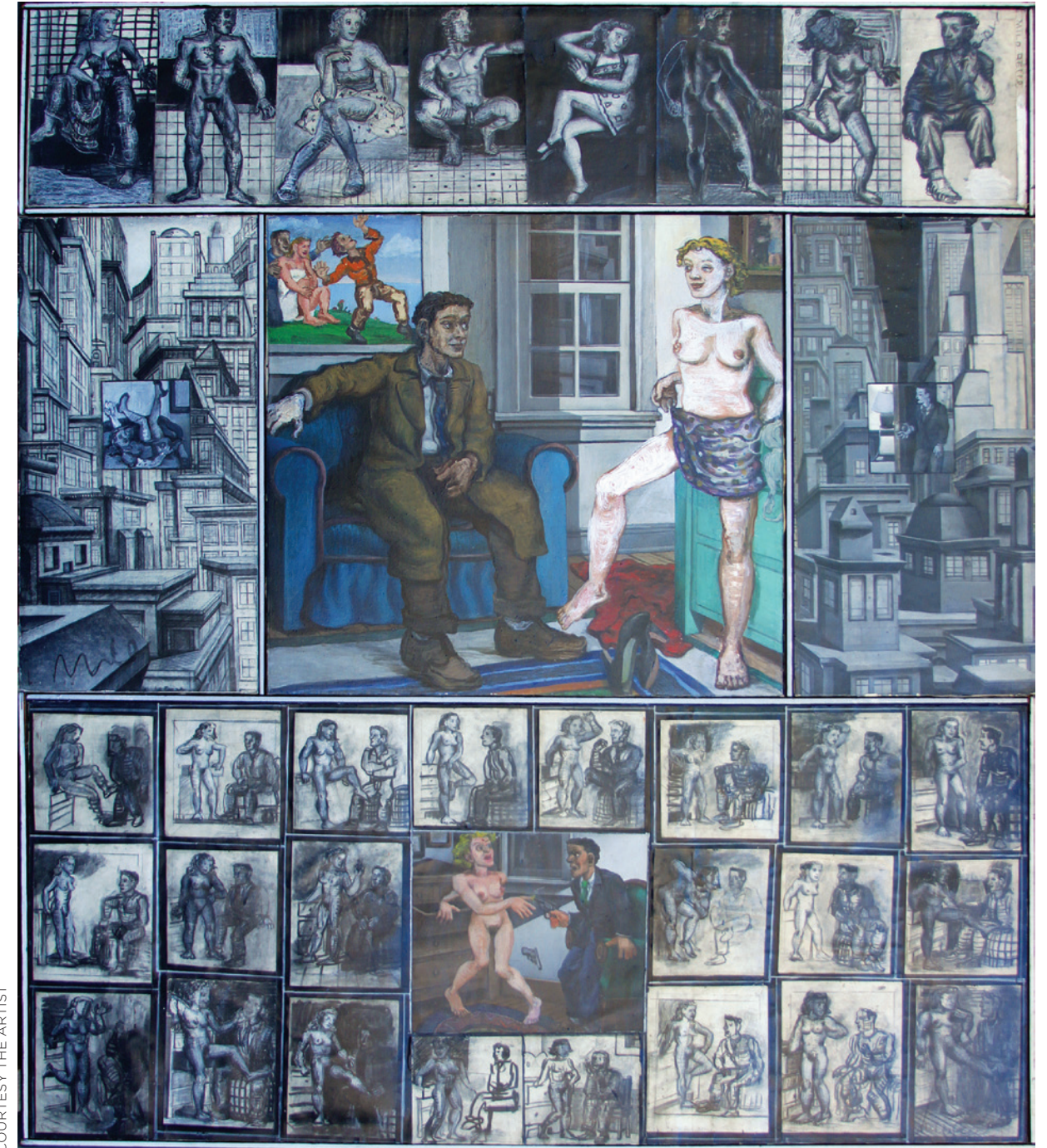
A nurse unhooked liquid bags—one clear and one dark—another pulled a needle from his left arm and then his right; the doctor had a hand on his pulse and then wrote something down. They untaped the wires attached to his chest. She was in awe of how many people were needed to help a man die. The breathing tube came out last and then she could see his whole face. He did look like he was resting. She wouldn't have even known that he was gone if someone in the room hadn't called out the time.

**Lolita Pierce** is a graduate of the Northwestern University creative writing program.

## MILO REICE

*Mike Hammer (I The Jury)*, 1997–2004

Oil on canvas and charcoal on paper, mounted on canvas, 88 1/4 x 79 1/4 in



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