

## ROBERT BHARDA

*The Argument in Your Face*, 2018  
Digital image from organic collage, 36 x 18 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## THERESA DUVE MORALES

### The Sewing Lessons

**W**hen Rosemary Bramble was in the sixth grade, her mother enrolled her in sewing lessons. Rosemary was already taking ballet lessons to remedy her tendency to slouch at the dinner table. Her math ability, her mother hoped, would correct itself in time.

“Not to worry,” her mother said as she ironed her husband’s white dress shirts. “The boys will be better at math by the time you’re old enough to date.”

Rosemary remained slumped over her homework at the kitchen table and pretended not to hear.

Mrs. Bramble set down her iron and bent over her daughter to get a peek at her work. She brushed back her daughter’s wispy brown hair with her fingertips and tucked it behind her ears. “They get smarter than the girls by the time they reach high school, dear.” She smiled and gave Rosemary’s back a gentle push upward. “In the meantime, let them win at board games. You’re such a pretty girl, Rosemary.”

But Rosemary did not feel herself to be a pretty girl. As she walked to her first sewing lesson at the convent across from Saint Therese the Little Flower of Jesus Parochial School, she lagged behind the other girls, clutching at her book bag and trying not to slip on the ice. She was clumsy by nature and her new snow boots—bought slightly over-size by her father in the hope that they would last two winters instead of one—added to her lack of confidence. She slid and shuffled, reaching out for the support of a wall or a hand that was not there.

Rosemary followed her classmates through the side gate and around to the small concrete patio at the back of the convent. The girls stepped over plastic Cool Whip tubs holding kibble and icy water. Cats, overstuffed and fluffy from sheltering outdoors in the Iowa winter, jumped off electric heating pads set atop rusty, overturned garbage cans or the shredded, broken webbing of old lawn chairs. They rubbed up against the pant legs that the girls wore under their uniform skirts and brushed over their vinyl boots.

As the girls each in turn read the sign, “Cats Not Allowed Inside the Convent,” they kicked the cats off of their legs, pushed through the back door, and sat on the basement stairs to pull off snow-covered boots and replace them with shoes from their plastic book bags.

Thick-soled, orange-and-turquoise patchwork suede, butterflies embroidered on soft, purple backgrounds; their shoes clashed with their plaid uniform skirts. The girls did not care. Their shoes were the only visible articles of clothing not regulated by the school and thereby became statements of individual self-expression: a small, budding rebellion that they wore on their feet.

As they marched down the stairs, Sister Claudette directed each girl to take a seat at one of seven sewing machines. “We will start, girls, by learning how to thread the machine.”

Seven girls, thought Rosemary, seven points to run the thread through, seven deadly sins.

She picked up her spool of purple thread: Pride—set the spool on the spool pin; Greed—run the thread through the top thread guide; Envy—wrap the thread around the tension disc; Anger—hook the thread through the tension coil; Lust—run the thread through the uptake lever; Gluttony—run the thread through the bottom thread guide; Sloth—thread the needle.

They threaded their bobbins, brought up the bobbin thread, and then they hesitantly pushed the pedals beneath their feet and began to sew on scraps of fabric that Sister Claudette had handed to them.

Maggie Olsen’s bottom lip quivered. Rosemary looked across the table at the bunched-up fabric caught in the needle of Maggie’s machine and saw the problem immediately. Maggie had skipped envy and anger and gone straight to lust.

Rosemary raised her finger and pointed, but before she could help, Sister Claudette was there at Maggie’s side. “What nice straight lines, Rosemary,” she said as she rethreaded Maggie’s machine.

With some difficulty, Rosemary understood that this was a compliment. She secretly hated Sister Claudette. Neither the adopted cats (she kept a donation box outside her classroom door with a sign, “Thank you for helping to feed God’s creatures”) nor her midyear switch from habit to street clothes (she said she was just not ready when the other nuns made the switch at the beginning of the school year) had helped to raise Rosemary’s opinion of her.

Sister Claudette lacked Sister Pauline’s soft brown bangs that framed her ever-gentle eyes or Sister Patricia’s hourglass figure that stimulated even the boys with their

cracking voices to sing as she strummed on her guitar. She had neither delicate wrists nor graceful neckline.

Instead, her unveiling revealed arms and legs covered with raised purple veins and a rust-colored helmet of hair, which never moved even when she crossed the blacktop and the wind pelted it from all sides. An all-over droopiness—below her chin and around her neck and elbows—gave Sister Claudette an aura of always being sour.

But more than this, Sister Claudette had been Rosemary’s classroom teacher in the third grade, when the incident had occurred, and it was Sister Claudette more than anyone else that Rosemary blamed for her current predicament.

Because in addition to the social isolation created by her clumsiness—she could not do a cartwheel like the other girls or hook one knee over the high bar and flip herself over and over in circles; she could not jump onto a moving merry-go-round nor run fast enough to be considered an asset on any team; she could not steal the red ball from the boys’ kickball game and get away without being caught or feign enjoyment if she were—Rosemary Bramble had committed the gravest of all grade school transgressions, greater than any deadly sin, unforgivable and insurmountable: Rosemary Bramble had wet her pants.

And even though the pants wetting had happened three years prior, this particular pants wetting was so unusual in scope, so horrific in detail, it was remembered as if it had happened yesterday. It had not been the kind of pants wetting that could be concealed after drying out a bit and finding a seat alone in the back of the bus. This was a reputation-destroying pants wetting; a puddle on the floor beneath the desk pants wetting; a fingers pointing pants wetting.

This was a pants wetting that caused Sister Claudette to raise her hands next to her ears and exclaim, “Now, children, now, children . . .”—meaning perhaps, “Get back to work,” or meaning perhaps, “Understand, children, that Rosemary is new to our school and does not yet know the bathroom rules,” or meaning perhaps, “We will be good Catholics about this and not mock or taunt or call names”—but since her sentence was left unfinished, the children were left to do as they saw fit, which meant they whispered and they pointed and they talked about how this was way worse than when Sammy Sorensen farted so loudly during

his first confession that the entire class could hear it outside the confessional, and then, when it became clear that Sister Claudette had taken away Rosemary’s uniform skirt and underpants for washing and drying and that Rosemary was wearing nothing but her winter coat, the story of Rosemary’s pants wetting became sealed as legend; a legend that her classmates—adopting the vicious mentality that sometimes overtakes groups of children or those not strong enough to think as individuals—chose to never forget.

Every time a lesser infraction occurred and there was a need to say, “Well at least he didn’t . . .” or “It’s not as bad as when . . .” and every time a new student arrived to the school, the story was retold and each retelling became grander, more horrible, more freakish than the last and there was absolutely nothing Rosemary Bramble could do but survive it.

And so it did not matter that her seams were the straightest and that she was the first to understand how to adjust the tension so the stitches on top were not tighter than the stitches below. It did not matter that she understood Maggie’s threading mistake and could have been of help, and it did not matter that Sister Claudette paid her a compliment and smiled at her through her sagging, flabby, deflated balloon of a face; because after the lesson ended—as Rosemary climbed into her father’s Oldsmobile station wagon—she was not included in the goodbye waving and the promises to call later, and after dinner was over and the table cleared, she was not on the telephone pretending to do homework while secretly whispering about the friendship ring that Kenny Novacek had given to Bernadette Trevisani when they were hiding in the coat closet at lunchtime.

So, it surprised Rosemary and the other girls when, the following Wednesday, Dilly Deere, new to the school that very day, walked with them to their second sewing lesson and sat directly across from Rosemary, forcing Maggie with her quivering bottom lip to move to the additional machine that Sister Claudette had set up under the stairwell.

“Oh good,” Sister Claudette said, making it impossible for the girls to argue the change in seats. “Rosemary can show Dilly how to thread her machine.”

And Rosemary did, and very quickly, she and Dilly finished the seams of their throw pillows and were, therefore, the first to be handed the bags of polyester stuffing, which

meant that they used just a little extra, so that their pillows were just a little fluffier than those of the other girls, a detail that did not go unnoticed by Alice Flatte, who glared at Rosemary and then whispered “greedy pig” to Christy Mouser; but of course it wasn’t a true whisper, because Rosemary heard it, even though Sister Claudette did not.

And then the next day at recess, Dilly surprised Rosemary a second time, approaching her where she sat on the bench next to the school wall. “I like science fiction, too,” she said.

Rosemary flipped *The Other Side of the Sky* by Arthur C. Clarke over on her knee, so as not to lose her place, and looked up at Dilly suspiciously. She had seen Alice and Christy pull her over between the parked buses before school and Rosemary knew that Dilly knew. She also had found the only spot on the wall that reflected afternoon sun and she wasn’t keen on sharing it.

“Thanks for helping me yesterday,” said Dilly. “At the sewing lesson. That was really nice of you.”

Rosemary looked past Dilly to the far end of the playground. Robby Reese had just disrupted a girls’ game of fox and geese, sneaking up behind Becca Feeken and dumping a handful of snow over her head. Now all the girls were tackling him to the ground.

“I like the story ‘The Star.’ That’s my favorite. Have you read that one? Have you read ‘The Star?’” Dilly asked, stepping closer.

Rosemary looked up at Dilly. Her face wasn’t right. She had noticed something odd at yesterday’s sewing lesson and now, here in the light, she studied her more carefully. One cheek curved inward at exactly the spot where it should have puffed outward and one eye was just a bit lower than the other, causing Dilly’s smile to droop on one side. “Yes, I’ve read it,” Rosemary said.

“I mean, we’re not really supposed to read that story, do you think? I mean, a sun—which turns out to be the Star of Bethlehem—exploding and destroying a planet and killing millions of people?” As Dilly shook her head, Rosemary studied the strange indentation at her jawline. “Do you think God would do that? Sacrifice a whole planet so a star could shine on the baby Jesus? I mean, I guess they were aliens, not people, but still, you’ll get in trouble if the nuns catch you. Don’t you think?”

“I don’t think they’ve read it,” said Rosemary, glaring.

Dilly's white snowball cap held her hair in place, preventing Rosemary from resolving the mystery of this odd girl's face.

"Hmmm." Dilly got quiet for a minute, then sat down next to Rosemary and put her face next to hers. "They say that in third grade the nuns took away all your clothes," she whispered.

And there it was. Rosemary looked at Dilly and narrowed her eyes. Dilly wasn't really interested in her book. She wanted confirmation. She wanted to report back to Christy and Alice. She wanted to be part of that circle of girls that laughed and giggled and then got quiet whenever Rosemary approached. Maybe the girls had sent her over. Maybe this was Dilly's ticket in.

"I only have one ear," said Dilly.

"Let me see," said Rosemary, and Dilly plucked off her cap, pulled back her hair, and there was no ear there.

Dilly, it turns out, was born with two ears—one working, one not. The nonworking ear was not where it should have been and the doctors removed it from her chin, leaving her with a little scar that she pointed out to Rosemary. "Someday, when I'm finished growing, plastic surgeons will fix my jaw and attach an artificial ear, Dilly said.

Rosemary, it turns out, didn't know that she could have simply raised her hand and asked to go to the bathroom. At her previous school, there were scheduled bathroom breaks during which the entire class left the room in two straight lines. Everyone took care of their business during bathroom breaks and recesses. "Nobody told me it was different at Saint Therese's," Rosemary said. "Nobody ever explained the rules."

And as Rosemary and Dilly talked, the February sun reflected off the snow and the wall behind them and warmed them just enough that they could have continued sitting there on the bench long past the time when the bell rang. They both found they had so much more they would like to say.

In the days that followed, during recess, Rosemary and Dilly could be seen heading across the blacktop to a circle of pine trees growing on the lawn behind the church. The other girls noticed, but did not follow. Christy initially suggested spying on them, but Tina True shut the idea down, joking that maybe Christy was a lezzie just like they were and only wanted to see what the other lezzies were up to, which caused Christy to pull her thick blue knit scarf up

over her eyes to hide teardrops and wipe them away before they froze and clung to her eyelashes.

There, in the pine tree circle, Rosemary and Dilly took turns wearing Dilly's mood ring and discovered that it most often turned amber for Rosemary (gloomy) and violet for Dilly (cheerful). Dilly told Rosemary that her real name was Delores, after her grandmother (deceased), but she was often called Pickle by her grandfather (living). They found pine cones and arranged them around themselves in a sacred protective circle. They pledged to be friends forever and when the bell rang, they walked back to line up on the playground holding mittened hands, something Christy noticed but looked away from quickly so as not to be noticed noticing.

"How beautiful," Mrs. Bramble exclaimed when Rosemary brought her finished throw pillow home and handed it to her. She rubbed her forefinger over the black letters *D-A-D* that Rosemary had stitched on the front in a series of *x*'s and did not ask Rosemary why—since her birthday was coming up in just two weeks and Rosemary's father's was not until summer—she had not stitched the letters *M-O-M* instead. Mrs. Bramble did not mention that it was she, not Rosemary's father, who had noticed Rosemary's despondency, her slowness to smile, her lack of invitations to birthday parties and sleepovers. She did not mention that it was she who had noticed that Rosemary needed something special, that it was she who woke up in the night worrying about these things while Rosemary's father slept soundly at her side. She did not remind her daughter that the sewing lessons, after all, had been her idea.

Instead, she turned quickly to hide the hurt on her face and set the pillow on the living room couch. She picked a little bit of fluff off the velvet armrest and thought the gold piping and tassels of the pillow looked just lovely against the avocado green of the couch and that she really did not get enough credit for loving as hard as she did.

At dinner, Rosemary did not share that she had a new friend at school. She sat quietly watching her little brother pull the peas out of his mixed vegetables and line them up on the rim of his plate. When Mr. Bramble complained that the meatloaf had no flavor, Rosemary jumped up and got the ketchup from the refrigerator. When he grumbled, "I'm sure glad somebody around here thinks about these things," her mother got up from the table, walked into

the bathroom, and sobbed so loudly she could be heard through the wall.

The following three Wednesdays, sewing lessons were cancelled. Miss Crabbe, a young, pretty teacher whose blonde hair flipped up and bounced off her shoulders as she walked down the hall, took over the third grade class and a rumor spread that Sister Claudette was dying; a rumor started in no small part by Rosemary Bramble and Dilly Deere.

"Tell them, tell them," Christy Mouser demanded as she pushed the pair toward a group of girls huddled for warmth between the school buses.

"Well, we . . ." Dilly began.

"What happened," Christy interrupted, her fur-trimmed gloves flying like Sister Patricia's hands directing the choir. "What happened is that they went to the convent and they saw Sister Claudette and she was bald."

And it was true. Dilly and Rosemary had snuck over to the convent at lunch and Christy had watched them from behind a snowbank. Christy didn't know that Dilly carried pieces of bologna from her sandwich and Rosemary bits of deviled ham; she did not know that they had befriended Jasper, the fattest of the cats, who, Dilly had discovered after the last sewing lesson, had six toes on each of his wide front paws. She did not see the girls crouching beneath the windowsill patting Jasper's tummy nor notice Dilly's mouth drop when she glanced upward. She did learn, however—when she confronted the girls on their return and threatened to report their truancy—what they had seen.

"Sister Claudette's hair was on the kitchen table," Dilly said quietly, first to Christy and again to the group of girls now. "She was cooking something at the stove. Her head was soft . . . Like a baby's."

"It wasn't like a baby's," blurted Rosemary suddenly and with unexpected malice. "It was pointy like an egg, dry and scaly with little tufts of hair. She looked ugly. I'm glad she's not at school."

The girls were silent. This information seemed big and important to them somehow. They thought they might laugh and then they thought they might pray and since they weren't sure which response was the better fit, they stayed quiet—briefly, until Dilly said, "Rosemary, I think Sister Claudette might be very sick."

"Of course she's sick," shrieked Alice. "She's dying.

You're a monster, Rosemary Bramble. Just a monster." And the girls nodded in agreement, not really knowing what they were agreeing to, and then Alice—whose own grandmother had died of cancer and screamed so loudly at night that Alice and her younger sisters could not sleep; Alice, who, in the two years since her grandmother's death, woke at night, certain that she heard her screams still—pushed past Rosemary hard enough that Rosemary slipped and fell on the icy ground, where she stayed watching as Alice put her arm around Dilly's shoulders and led her away, the other girls following, not one of them offering to help Rosemary pick up the schoolbooks that lay around her in the snow.

Sister Claudette did not die that year and although she would before the following spring, that particular February she returned to Saint Therese's and the sewing lessons continued; and although Dilly and Rosemary were still partners and although they sat together on the basement floor of the convent piecing together patchwork quilts, pulling their skirts beneath themselves to protect against the cold linoleum, crossing and uncrossing their legs to reawaken their tingling toes—something had changed. Dilly still held a finger on the speckled yarn that Rosemary pulled through layers of batting and fabric to help her tie a knot, and Rosemary still smiled when Dilly sewed one of Jasper's whiskers to Rosemary's quilt and told her it was magic; they still fed Jasper tidbits saved from lunches and on some days still visited the circle of pines; but more often now at recess, Rosemary was seen sitting alone against the wall, reading a book, and Dilly was seen sitting on the edge of the merry-go-round next to Alice, their heads tucked together in whispered conversation, coaxing the reluctant merry-go-round in slow circles with their feet.

February passed and March blustered in, blowing fresh white powder over the piles of car-fume-blackened snow. The sewing lessons ended and the girls took their quilts home. Rosemary did not give hers to her mother, but instead pushed past her outstretched arms and carried it up into her bedroom, where she curled up with it and refused to come out until dinner.

And then on an afternoon that smacked of spring, the unexpected warmth melting the piles of plowed snow on the blacktop into great slushy puddles beckoning to be kicked and run through, Rosemary noticed something new

about Dilly's face—a small pearl earring had replaced the simple gold stud that she usually wore.

"Alice gave it to me for my birthday," Dilly said when Rosemary asked at the very same moment that Sammy Sorensen zipped past and plucked Dilly's snowball cap from her head.

Rosemary and Dilly both chased him, Dilly's hair flying, her arms stretched upward; but when Sammy tossed the hat to Robby, who held it out, taunting, "You want it? You want it, Dilly Deere with one ear?" and then pulled it away and tossed it over her head, where it landed in the snow, Rosemary did not hand it back to her friend after picking it up. Instead, she looked at Dilly's outstretched arm and her pleading brown eyes and the earring beneath them, and then tossed the hat back to Robby, who then threw it to another boy, who then threw it to another, and as the circle grew bigger and the chanting grew louder—"Dilly Deere, Dilly Deere with one ear"—Rosemary watched Dilly jump. She watched her body arch. She watched her hair bounce in and out of the naked, punched-in side of her face. She watched her lopsided mouth grimace and the more her arms stretched in the air, the more she jumped, the more Rosemary thought that her friend looked like a freak.

Years from now, Rosemary will see Dilly again and she will remember the time she played keep-away with her friend's hat. Dilly will not recognize her, but when she says, "Excuse me," and reaches past Rosemary for a napkin in the crowded student union, Rosemary will notice a faint hairline scar on her chin. She will watch her carry her tray to a table and as she sits and talks with other students, Rosemary will notice a familiar tilt to her head and will think, this is Dilly, who moved away from Cotton Creek after sixth grade. This is Dilly Deere.

And in that moment, Rosemary will remember things she has not thought about since childhood. She will remember the sewing lessons and the icy sidewalks. She will remember the cats and the pine trees and Sister Claudette's bald head. She will remember the cold linoleum floor and how beautiful her quilt looked as she and Dilly pieced it together. She will remember lying on her bed and sobbing into her quilt while she pondered what it meant to be good and what it meant to be horrible and what it meant to be misunderstood. She will remember that she has the quilt still.

And when Dilly laughs, her hair will fall back and Rosemary will notice the fullness of her face. She will see that she's inserted an earring in the new ear that matches the earring she wears in the other. She will notice that when Dilly smiles, her smile is broad and level. Rosemary will remember that it was lovely to have had a friend. She will look at Dilly and smile and be truly glad that she is whole.

**Theresa Duve Morales** recently launched two beautiful daughters into adulthood and retired from teaching middle school art. She lives in Woodland, California, in a not-so-empty nest with her husband and a menagerie of geriatric pets left behind by her children. Her stories have appeared in *CALYX*; *American Fiction, Volume 12*; the *Adirondack Review*; and the *Rumpus*. Her work has been honored on *Glimmer Train's* top-25 and honorable mention lists and has won the *Adirondack Review's* Fulton Prize for Short Fiction.

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*Spreading Her Ashes on the River*, 2018

Digital image from organic collage, 24 x 18 in



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