

## CORDA EBY

*Metal Pot with Yellow  
and Red Flowers, 2006*

Oil on panel, 18 x 24 in



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

## CHRISTIE COCHRELL

### Vagaries

Dinah was on a dogged hunt for Aunt Jane's recipe for purée Léontine. The day was sodden gray, as the past several weeks had been, and she had her heart set on the green soup—the concoction (wonderful word!) of springlike things that always raised her spirits. Green peas and lettuce; spinach, leeks, parsley, and mint. She'd exhausted the cookbook shelves, checking inside each book in turn and there finding old tickets for Midsummer Mozart and a flyer for an exhibition of Leonardo da Vinci drawings at the Legion of Honor in 2008, as well as a pressed petunia that had lost its deep indigo color and half its petals. Then she remembered she'd stuck some handwritten recipes into her battered copy of *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* in the alcove between the kitchen and bathroom.

On her way to find it she stopped dead in her tracks—transfixed by the red Christmas cactus, in wholehearted, gladsome bloom. *Transfixed* was not a word Dinah used lightly (or actually at all), but it was a word Sally Larkin, her seventh-grade art teacher, had used one snow-muted morning about a painting she showed them of a rhapsodic Saint Sebastian, nude, against a marble pillar, in one of the big glossy art books she propped upright on the old wooden drafting cabinet between a coffee can of paintbrushes and an Archaic terra-cotta goddess with her features blurred in a way Dinah so identified with, even all these years later, seeing herself as oddly blurred as well.

The fact that the cactus was blooming at the end of February, not at Christmas, did nothing to diminish her delight at its beauty, at the joyful fulfillment—and much more!—of its plantly mission. Its sense of time had always been a little off, since it was no more than a baby shoot. She remembered the chilly Christmas Eve she'd carried it home in a jam jar swaddled in her gray-striped scarf and gently tucked into her deep winter coat pocket. Unmarried then, she'd eaten good New Mexican posole spiced with chile pods and cumin and oregano with Edna Avery, who once taught Dinah piano. The persistent tardiness of the cactus had endeared it to her, a fellow tardy soul, besides its being Edna who had given the cutting to her. Grown-up Dinah marveled that her teachers, wise and adult, should want to be friends with her, once they were no longer obliged to ask her to *try those triads one more time, dear*, or not to use so many exclamation marks in her

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American history compositions. That they regarded her on some kind of equal footing made her grateful and proud.

And when her daughters, Becky and Abby, reached school age, and then college, their teachers, as often as not younger than Dinah, had called her Mrs. Farquhar and talked to her with respect, even those who taught tricky things like calculus, physics, computer this-and-that. One, Theo Ruskin, a kindly older professor of Portuguese (which Abby needed to complete her paleobotany project in Brazil) had admired her Gudrun Sjöden forest patchwork dress and told her she might like to take a fabric printing class at Cabrillo College from his neighbor Eileen, who had a good eye too for fun clothes.

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Dinah had rescued the cactus in the move to Santa Cruz the year before last after Dorian, her attorney husband, had left her for his acupuncturist, Sapphire—an energetic and decisive woman with two haughty French poodles. While she was packing and preparing for a new life in a new house in an unfamiliar town, she'd been pushed by friends to get rid of most of her things, which she saw as the harvest of the years. She'd felt hounded even by Becky and Abby since those books started appearing everywhere, insisting you must clear your clutter now—or go straight to the hell of hoarders. A place that would, she imagined, look like one of those coastal antique stores where you can't turn sideways without dislodging a troop of staring glassy-eyed dolls, one of those hideous art deco clocks, often lime green, or a scaly old taxidermy crocodile. She'd very carefully taken a cutting of the now matronly cactus with her, as she'd done from Edna's all those Christmases ago. She'd kept it in a jar of water on one of her new living room windowsills for the best part of a year, letting its roots get long and tangled, fine as corn silk, before transplanting it into a pretty pot she'd found that would be perfect for it, Talavera blue ceramic.

Dinah didn't believe in letting too much go. Well, much of anything, really; the moving van had been quite full. She subscribed to the theories of a writer from the Santa Clara Pueblo whose article she'd been given in a pottery class in the early nineties and had found again recently when looking for the program from *The Lion King* in her desk. The writer, Tessie Naranjo, said the pueblo dwellers

visited the ruins on the mesa where their ancestors had lived to find the remnants of the things the old ones had had around them every day.

"We visit and revisit our ancestral homes to connect with the past and with the spirits of those who have passed on. Prayerfully, silently we thank those spirits that, in their quiet way, welcome us to their place. If the day is good, if an extra nice pottery piece is found, it tells us that we have been 'living right,' that we are remembered, and are one with our ancestors."

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The things Dinah collected were what she had left of people she had loved, people who'd given her whatever definition she might have. Her parents, Sally Larkin, Edna Avery, Aunt Jane—her mother's fey sister who wore moonstones for healing energy and made brilliant green soup.

Which made Dinah remember the recipe, and this time get as far as *Mrs. Beeton*—another old friend. She wanted the soup for her Wednesday dinner with Becky, who would be full of news about her startup company for eco-friendly body care and distracted throughout by incoming text messages, but Dinah's recipe for parenting had always been to try to show the girls delight. Color-drenched picture books, Pepperidge Farm Goldfish in tomato soup, cinnamon-pumpkin bath fizz after full days snowboarding at Tahoe, ruby-throated hummingbirds—luminous djinni, as Dinah saw them—drinking from salvias in the garden.

Her daughters humored her in turn, in an exasperated way. She always felt muddled, out of breath, and not quite sure of anything, but happy to be told, and happy just to be in the same room with them, watching them text, admiring the gleam of lamplight on Abby's blue-highlighted hair, wondering if Becky wouldn't like some of the cute ankle-wrap espadrilles out of the J. Jill catalog to wear to the opening of her boyfriend's Asian-fusion taco bar in Capitola.

"Mother!" her elder daughter protested in that put-upon voice, rejecting her suggestions outright, always one of the sure ones. How had she come by that, Dinah often wondered, proud and bewildered, Becky too, when she herself had always been so vague?

She felt a tug in one pocket of her terry-cloth bathrobe and pulled out the little Roman spoon, its bowl gently engraved with a panther, which Abby had brought as

a careless souvenir from her July dig at Hadrian's Wall last year. Dinah had spotted it yesterday morning while putting away clean silverware and with a small cry of delight had taken it out of the drawer where it had been tucked after the move. She'd been distracted at some point and left it in her pocket. So there was the Roman spoon—but where, oh where, the recipe? Sometimes, like now, her imprecision rather worried her, her thinking things would turn up, when they didn't. But when poor sainted Dorian had called her "ditzzy" every time he growled at her distractions and her dithering, the bright arrows that pierced her heart and left her stock-still, wondering, arrows as mystical as those the Renaissance painter stuck into the nude Saint Sebastian, Dinah had never felt particularly martyred. It didn't bother her. She'd after all agreed with him, and thought it was just fine.

"We're worried about you," Becky said, when they came by unexpectedly with takeout from Falafel late Saturday afternoon. "You seem at loose ends."

"Rather lost," Abby added, looking up from a field report she'd brought along to edit between bites of pita bread dipped in hummus. "Poor Mammy. It's no wonder, of course, considering all the baloney this past year with Dad and Poodle Lady . . ." Or Our Lady of the Poodles, as Becky called Sapphire, the acupuncturist neither girl liked, no matter that their father had long since moved into her sleek townhouse at Pleasure Point and commuted without complaining over Highway 17 twice every day.

Dinah was bewildered by their concern. When hadn't she been at loose ends? So much better at loose ends, surely, than bandied about by poodles! She'd have no idea how to take care of such silly, condescending dogs, always looking down those haughty noses at you.

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But still, she didn't want them thinking she wasn't okay. She worried for days over their worrying, always hating to cause any fuss or trouble. And she was disappointed, too, at never having found the recipe from Aunt Jane. She had to serve Becky a rather tedious vegetable soup instead—not at all what she'd had in mind.

She'd take a class, Dinah decided. They wouldn't see the point, of course—she couldn't paint or even make a simple pencil sketch look anything like it ought to, despite

Shirley Larkin's kindest efforts those years ago; couldn't remember how to fumble through "Für Elise" on the piano she'd given to a neighbor with small children when leaving Menlo Park, however patient Edna Avery had been, setting her metronome, giving her Mexican hot chocolate with chile and orange after that awful recital, to cheer her up. She'd never learned to make pots, or even funky lopsided bowls. She couldn't ever have learned acupuncture—and why in the world would she want to? But she did so enjoy studying things, collecting bits from here and there and weaving all of them into her varicolored life. Like a bird's nest, or one of those crocheted coral reefs. Nothing ever lost, really—just momentarily misplaced. Was it fair to call the gathering of mementos clutter? To say it had to go?

She looked up sewing and fiber arts classes in the Cabrillo College catalogue she had picked up outside the market and found what looked like the one Abby's professor had mentioned. Fabric painting sounded like good fun, and having a project like that might keep the girls from thinking their mother too ditzzy to pick herself up and move forward.

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At the end of the first class, when she was walking to her car (parked *somewhere* along here, she knew) and humming a John Denver song from the cassette Dorian had thrown away shortly after they'd married and she'd had to buy again when CDs came along, looking up at the lovely, welcome winter sunlight through the eucalyptus trees, instead of where she was going, she barreled into somebody coming the other way, his nose down in a paperback. He looked up, startled; steadied her. Dinah backed off, apologized.

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“I’m always doing that, my daughter Abby says.”

The big man with a baggy heather fisherman’s sweater and amiably craggy eyebrows laughed and looked at her more closely. “Abby? Not Abby Farquhar?”

“Yes—why? How do you know?”

“I didn’t recognize you in those ordinary clothes.”

Theo Ruskin remembered Dinah’s Papagena plumage, the brilliant-colored dress, the bright aura she’d cast the gloomy afternoon she came by with Abby to pick up one of José Saramago’s novels from his stark office in the Language Department.

They talked some more and laughed at the coincidence of their meeting, both lost in wayward thoughts, and Dinah told him of the cloth she’d stenciled with petroglyph suns in shades of parakeet and mint and seafoam, guided by his friend Eileen the textile artist whom he’d come by chance to drive back to Soquel after his day prowling used bookstores in Pacific Grove and Monterey.

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And when they became friends, and more, and were married at Sand Rock Farm in Aptos, where the Grateful Dead were said to have jammed with Santana in an old barn in the sixties, what Theo loved most about Dinah, always, was the brightness she carried with her—sometimes a Roman spoon, sometimes a Vivid Violet Crayola for jotting down shopping lists, sometimes a bowl of fragrant bright-green soup she often made on gray days from a family recipe, which had turned up inexplicably inside a tattered old tortilla warmer in a cupboard by the sink the evening of the day Dinah had almost run him down,

he’d tell people, laughing, with his kind, rumbly chuckle. The day she’d hit him like a feather-fletched arrow, sharp and decisive, piercing him straight through.

**Christie B. Cochrell** is an ardent lover of the play of light, the journeying of time, things ephemeral and ancient. Her work has been published by *Tin House* and *New Letters*, among others. She has won the Dorothy Churchill Cappon Prize for the Essay and the Literal Latté Short Short Contest. Once a New Mexico Young Poet of the Year in Santa Fe, she now lives and writes by the ocean in Santa Cruz, California.

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*Plums Stones Olive*, 1994  
Oil on Panel, 7 1/2 x 9 in



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