

## SARAH BIANCO

*Take Me Home, 2017*  
Acrylic, graphite, polyurethane,  
and oil on wood panel, 72 x 48 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## EVA FREEMAN

### In Flight

Our home was filled with wood and art. There was a tie-dyed banner hanging on the wall just above the turn in the staircase to the second floor. It was a blaze of black with explosions of orange like the irises of deranged tigers. Gold weight figurines from Ghana marched across the Moroccan brass table in the living room. A pair of Masai spears gritty with age leaned in one corner. Across from them hung a portrait of a beautiful black woman behind the perfume counter of a department store surrounded by brown and gold perfumes glowing amber in the soft light. Her hands were crossed, and the expression on her face was caught somewhere between serenity and resignation. There were Ethiopian Coptic crosses nailed to the white walls and on a small bookcase rested a leather-encased dagger, a horse whip with real horsehair as a tassel, and a lacquered box filled with a Russian general's medals. The record player was held in an antique sewing machine crate, the useless pedal flipping beneath the spinning albums. Carved ebony figures twisted in African poses. Our house was a monument to all things eternal.

By contrast everything in Klara and Ward's home was new. It was even situated in a newer development in the heart of our historic town. At its entrance hung a simple sign, Crawford Estates. The main road snaked through the complex, passing each home set back from the road at a respectable distance but close enough to showcase their grandness. There were Georgian mansions with Greco-Roman columns and buildings that seemed to multiply in on themselves, sprouting wings and towers. There was even a duck pond in one front lawn. Their house was tucked back from the road, up a steep incline. It was a modern wooden and glass structure that at every opportunity let in the black-barked woods that surrounded it. The kitchen, her domain, was on the second floor and sported, above the sink and adjacent counter, a wall of glass that stretched into the dining room and overlooked the long twisting driveway and a patch of green front lawn. Her living room was cream colored with a cream-colored leather couch, cream-colored wall-to-wall carpet, a coffee table made of a sheet of glass supported by a cream-colored marble base. A piano, never used, almost an afterthought really, was tucked into the far corner and above it hung Ward's portrait, painted by my father. He wore a brown suit, his hands

crossed sedately in front of him, and his hair blooming like a dandelion's white seed head, a graying Afro ringing the blandness of his face.

My father had also painted a flock of green crows on our dining room wall with just an additional few at the joint turning onto the next one. Beneath them at our secondhand table one August morning, Klara sprouted wings and bristled beaks, the multitude engulfing her except for my father's favorite, the lone crow pointing away from the group. She wept, smearing mascara and laughing, laughing and weeping, the birds roosting on her shoulders, watching her like my mother and me, also seated at the table. Everything Klara wore was brand new, the crisp tennis shorts, the spaghetti strap tank top, the gold hoops at her ears. Her wide sunglasses were perched on her head, the roots of her dark hair hinting at silver. She dyed it regularly. She had the sensuality of an ageing movie star, her skin soft with knowledge. The birds hovered. A sudden movement, a clap, and they would be in flight. They would leave this room in a home perched beside a two-lane highway running in and out of town, a four-bedroom colonial, clinging to Crawford's edges, blessed by truck exhaust and the thunk-thunk sound of wheels bouncing over a divot in the road.

All through town and sometimes at night Klara drove a cherry-red Mercedes-Benz that gleamed with Old World glamour. Inside the white leather interior glowed brighter and cleaner than day. It drank only diesel, which meant she refilled alone at the edge of gas stations, shining like a movie star against the backdrop of big rigs. Her arrival in our driveway was always heralded by the deep-throated rumble of a Teutonic engine. Klara in that car was nothing short of divine, and Ward had sold it out from under her, replacing it with a newer model, a heavier sedan that lacked the gift of flight. It was a thick custard color with tinted windows that seemed to conceal members of the criminal underworld. But the worst of it was, he was hiding the keys from her until she read the car manual from cover to cover and passed a quiz of his own making. She wept, I think, not just because he had sold her precious car out from under her, but because she no longer believed herself capable of meeting this challenge.

My mother and I glanced at one another. In that look was an understanding that had never, ever been articulated,

but watching Klara weep and laugh, we both understood to be true. No black woman would ever put up with Ward's shit. We assumed that was why he had acquired her from abroad. Even though I was only fourteen years old, my mother had shared the tale of Klara's acquisition. Ward in his late twenties had already established himself as a genius. Invited to speak in Stockholm at a spine surgeons' conference, the invitation morphed into a yearlong residency during which Ward, a Memphis boy, learned to speak Swedish fluently. He answered Klara on the flight back to the States in her own language, and the eye that had skipped over his beige countenance returned. Until the moment he had spoken the rounded vowels of her native language, he had blended into the plane's monochromatic decor. Back then, before the sexual harassment laws had been placed on the books, flight attendants were chosen for their beauty, and here she was, a dark raven of a woman serving coffee and tea out of a metal cart. Perhaps she sensed within him the possibility of disembarking the plane, walking onto foreign soil, and becoming a citizen. Thus effecting a transformation that she had dreamed about growing up on a farm outside Gothenburg. Perhaps she only sensed but did not fully understand the potential within the curve of her hips, the arc of her neck. But Ward did. Once he had her he would not let her go, which is why she sat at our table weeping beneath the blooming crows.

Somewhere between the flight and Crawford Estates she had lost something fundamental and no longer knew where or how to find it. Whatever raven-black certainty had ignited the possibility of her dreams had dissipated in the face of Ward's unrelenting reasoning. He would not let her get a job outside of the house or go back to school. He crushed her day in and day out with only the mild compensation of things, and we watched it happening, as helpless as she was to do anything about it.

Our front door was fire-engine red. Not the sedate kind that harkened back to a Yankee past but the bright hollering kind that shouted, "Hey boo," to its Caribbean cousins. On the driest, hottest summer days, it gleamed as shiny as a rain-drenched fire engine, a lacquered Chinese glaze that slammed right against the Atlantic-gray of our home's wooden exterior. All day and all night that door hollered, ringing for joy in the leaf-dimmed neighborhood. It offended the eye, the neighborly eye that rested on tradition,

announced a rupture of some kind and the vitality of freshly spilled blood. No wonder Klara found sanctuary behind it, weeping and laughing at the same time.

The weeping continued months later after she lost the baby. They'd done some sort of scan, and it was horribly disfigured. Ward drove her to the procedure and afterward dropped her off at home. He had to get back to work or so he said. She called us, and we went to comfort her. In their master bedroom, my mother took Klara into her arms and whispered again what she had been whispering for years, "Leave him, Klara. Take your things and go." I found Amelia, Klara's only child, out back on the deck, balancing a plastic plate with her after-school snack of toast and Swedish honey on her bare knees. Her hair, as usual, was a dark tangled mass and the tiny scar under her right eye made her more woodland creature than child. We had gone to preschool together, after school together, elementary school together, separating only that past year for me to attend private school. I sat down beside her on the deck's splintering surface. She stared into the woods, the honey congealing along the toast's surface. In first grade they'd held her back for being nonverbal, but after visiting her summer house outside of Gothenburg, I had come to another understanding of her silence. Their home, shared by a bevy of aunts and uncles, overlooked a wooden-boat-filled harbor. In the distance the Norwegian coastline bubbled up like the crust of freshly baked bread. Nothing stirred below, and it seemed as though the stillness that surrounded us was something that Amelia absorbed and carried back with her to the States. She picked up a twig from the deck, twirled it in her fingers, and said, "I love him because he's my father, but I don't like him."

We left Klara with one of her sleeping pills and on the drive home, my mother wondered aloud again how Ward and my father could be friends. She had so few herself in that town that she poured her worries and concerns into me. I knew, for better or for worse, nearly everything, although I grappled to put it all together and make sense of it. For instance, both couples, new to the suburb, had met nearly eleven years before at the town pool, the haven of Crawford's less fortunate, those without pools or friends with pools. Ward was already first in all things: first to have graduated from UPenn Medical School, first to sit on Yale's faculty, first chief of orthopedics at Mount Sinai.

By contrast, my father knew what he wanted to be but had yet to achieve it, and so on that first meeting fell back on a familiar persona: spoiled child of an international businessman. He told them long stories about bodyboarding on Labadi Beach, traveling down the Volta River in a canoe and breaking into the hut of a juju priest who wanted to sentence him to death for his curiosity. Klara and Ward so uncertain of themselves had been charmed, both couples had been friends ever since. We took the scenic route home through the town center, a collection of mom-and-pop shops. There was the Crawford pharmacy where you could still buy items on credit, the convenience store with its inventory of potato chips and plastic-wrapped desserts and a sweating air-conditioning unit over the front door that gave it a much seedier feel than its neighbors. The barbershop, a hardware store, a dry cleaner, and the Triple A grocery store, referred to as "The Triple Gyp" by the mothers who shopped there. And that was it. You could pass in and out of Crawford without even knowing you had arrived, and the village elders preferred it that way. Ward and my father played against them, a collection of investment bankers, doctors, and lawyers, every Monday and Wednesday at the Crawford Tennis and Racquet Club. As they moved in unison covering the court with their athletic socks pulled high up over their hairy calves, the two of them could easily have been mistaken for twins. They congratulated each other after points, referring to each other as "brother," creating an intimacy between themselves that existed nowhere else in their lives.

While my dad battled on the court, my mother and I, once home, retreated as we did every evening to the back room, a desolate space that was part study, part guest room. Neither of us sat at the computer table or on the trundle bed, choosing instead to spread our index cards and spiral notebooks on the floor. Like me she had also started a new school, deciding to forsake her career in social work for the law. We were both now one of a handful of African American students, shattered like disoriented refugees on a foreign shore. In the half-light of the room's only lamp, sharp shadows accentuated the flight of her cheekbones. Unlike Klara, my mother favored muumuus, large, billowing, tentlike dresses that hid her form. She was just as pretty as Klara if not more so, but she hid her beauty now as though she no longer had any use for it.

It wasn't always that way. Her looks were legendary in her hometown. She had won a national contest and appeared on the cover of a teen fashion magazine. A salon in her hometown had even used her likeness in its advertisements. I'd found the sign with her face painted on it in gold like some Egyptian goddess up in the attic while searching for wrapping paper. At its feet was a white box with my parents' wedding album inside. A newspaper clipping folded between the title page and the first leaf boasted four hundred guests at the wedding. A shaft of dusty sunlight fell on the wedding portraits as I flipped through them one by one. The bridesmaids wore pink satin dresses covered in white polka dots with bows at the waist, and the groomsmen wore white tuxedos. The best man, my father's closest friend from Ghana, Bill Hicks, leaned crookedly against the groom, clearly drunk. Anchoring this circus, at the center of it all in her white lace gown, was my mother. She was regal. In each earlobe was a pearl. In one photo, my father's mother, a renowned socialite, grinning like a Cheshire cat, gripped the arm of a handsome groomsman. She couldn't have been more pleased with her future daughter-in-law. She had a college degree and parents who, although newly arrived to society, had achieved a great deal of success in a short period of time. In essence, my mother explained once I deposited the album in her lap, they all shared the same values. And unbeknownst to everyone, my father had dreams of becoming an artist. On his twenty-first birthday his parents had given him twenty-one singles and a set of luggage. The message was clear: they would help him if he got into trouble, but he would have to make his own way. What they didn't tell him was that there was no money. All of it was being spent on the thin veneer of their lives—the costume jewelry, the note on the car. They were, in short, penniless.

Those first few years in Crawford, my mother kept their secret. She helped my father steam layer upon layer of wallpaper from the walls. She got down on her hands and knees and retiled the kitchen floor. She sewed curtains for the windows. They had barely made the down payment on the house—come up five thousand dollars short and were saved by my grandfather. They were living on a hope and prayer. But they owned a piece of the country now, this house in Crawford, the most exclusive town in the state.

Even if it fought to regurgitate them like some foreign body, they would remain. It was all they had.

My mother didn't come with us a month later on the ski trip over Christmas break. She was too tired. More and more she, like Ward, existed on the periphery of our shared lives. That first morning on the mountain, Klara handed me a canary-yellow ski jacket with butterfly collars in the foyer of her ski house. "Here," she said, "This is for you." My father and I relied on the Sullivans' generosity to piece together our ski outfits, but this bright, hollering thing seemed too awful to bear.

"Thank you," I said, taking it from her. My father burst into the foyer already padded up in layers of clothing, long johns under his jeans that were tucked into his wool socks.

"Let's go. Let's go," he chanted, clapping his gloved hands, and then he stopped and stared at Klara. "New snowsuit?" he asked. She twirled for him, her arms outstretched so he could appreciate how well it conformed to the curves of her body, tapered into the dimple of her waist.

"Very nice," he said. She handed me a pair of battered goggles with a triumphant grin. Amelia marched through the mudroom in her navy suit. Unlike her mother, she had no use for prettiness. She hauled her skis onto her shoulder and carried them out the front door. I followed her up the driveway the short distance to the slope. We could see our breath. The air was sharp in our lungs. We slid the poles over our wrists and leaned on them to snap into our skis. "Race you," Amelia said, locking her final boot in, and I struggled with the rest of the gear, knowing full well that I had already lost. For Amelia there was only the mountain, and for me there were a thousand pairs of eyes. Perhaps it would be the canary-yellow jacket that first drew them, but then it would only be my darkness.

All four of us struggled onto the chairlift. Amelia shook her skis, trying to dislodge ice and snow onto the unsuspecting heads of skiers below. Klara and my father picked up the conversation where they had left off.

"Did your instructor like your new snowsuit?" my father asked.

"He did," Klara said.

"What was his name again?"

"Nils."

"Swedish?"

"Norwegian."

I looked across them to see if Amelia was listening, but she was staring down at the slope, waiting, I presumed, for her intended targets.

"And did you enjoy skiing all day with Nils?"

"I did," she said and laughed. "But he was just a boy."

Once at the top, Klara skied bent at the waist, her knees also bent as though committed to getting the job done and nothing more. My father sailed down the slope with arms spread wide for balance, his skis far apart for steadiness but pointed straight forward for maximum velocity and recklessness. Amelia carved the side of the mountain with her edges, the sound of sawing ice rising up from beneath her, and I tried to remain upright, steady, and inconspicuous. At the bottom of the mountain, Amelia issued her final indictment. "You ski too pretty," she said.

That evening after a full day on the slopes, Klara made us dinner. We sat around the dining room table and laughed. Everything expanded—our adventures on the mountain, the lengths of our daring runs, the equipment-flinging devastation of our worst spills. We grew as large as our feats, as tall as the shadows we cast along the walls. Klara served my father his favorite strawberry crême cake, and he ate it as pleased as a satisfied child.

"Have you heard the one about Three-Fingered Willy?" he asked Amelia.

"Three-Fingered who?" she said.

"You guys live this close to the woods and you don't know about Three-Fingered Willy?"

"Okay," I said, "Get on with it."

"Well, he used to be just like you and me until he had a terrible wood-chopping accident. Now he roams these woods every night searching for his missing fingers."

"This can't possibly be true."

"He's probably out there right now, this very second. Wait," he said cocking his head to one side. "I think I hear him." Amelia covered her mouth with her hand and tried not to laugh. And then he howled long and low like a wolf at the full moon. We cracked up, drunk on sugar and our love for one another. After dinner, Amelia and I sprawled out on the living room floor and watched a rented movie on the VCR. My Dad and Klara laughed in the kitchen while she wiped down the counter, rinsed the dishes, slammed the dishwasher door shut with her foot. She still wore her blue long johns that hugged her hips and rounded the

curve of her thighs. She moved with unconscious grace, the way priests lost in ritual see by touch, hear by feel, doing all the things my mother had now given up, and my father eventually grew quiet and watched her.

A week later, Ward greeted us at his front door. "Come in. Come in," he said, limping aside on an old football injury to let us pass. We stepped up into the living room. It had been freshly vacuumed, the tread marks still evident on the weave. The glass-topped coffee table sparkled, and the smell of cleaner, slightly antiseptic and floral, reassured us of the absence of filth. Klara was there wearing a halter top dress, her bare neck and arms a winter surprise. The heat had been turned up to compensate. AJ Pastor, a former Celtics player, was there as well. My mother, tented in her muumuu, hugged them both.

"Let me show you what we've been up to," AJ said and stooped slightly to hand her a key chain with a small viewfinder attached to it. She raised it to the light and peered inside, murmuring her approval. My father also took a turn with it and announced, "That's great."

"Well," AJ said, clapping his hands, "I was just here to show Ward the prototype. I'll let y'all get to it." While he shook hands again with my father and Ward, I picked up the viewfinder and held it to the light. And there was AJ in 3-D, his long body extended before the hoop, his hands like two spread wings. The ball was just flying from the tips of his fingers. In the background, blurred but distinct, was the crowd, row upon row of spectators. On the table was a hardcover book with that same photo of him in flight. I opened it to the first page and read, "It was the third game in the playoffs and there were only ten seconds left on the buzzer. The crowd chanted my name, 'AJ, AJ, AJ.'" I closed the book. He'd retired a year before and with a Crawford mortgage and three children in private school, my mother explained one night during our studying, no steady income at thirty-five years old was a frightening prospect. The key chains were supposed to be the start of something. Amelia came upstairs drawn by all the commotion. "What do you think?" I asked, showing her the viewfinder. She shrugged. Klara came out of the kitchen carrying two glass mugs covered in silver filigree. Inside was glogg, a traditional Swedish drink made of port wine, bourbon, and rum. At the bottom was a treasure trove of raisins and blanched slivered almonds, all of it warmed and heated to a deep

purple. We only got half a glass each, but we made it last, sipping it slowly downstairs in the family room that boasted a thirty-six-inch television set with a remote control and cable. A large rectangular coffee table took up most of the open space, and Amelia leapt onto it, using the edge, as we always did, as a kind of balance beam. She made her way around it on tiptoe, crouching low to do a spin we'd learned in gymnastics and then back up again for an arabesque. I sat on the floor sipping the glogg, ignoring her flips and turns, completely engrossed in Music Television. Amelia stopped mid-*plié*, turned to me, and asked, "Didn't you hear them?"

"Hear who?" I said, refusing to take my eyes off the set. We didn't have cable television at home, and a video had just started playing. A black man in a white tuxedo and matching top hat peered into the window of a basement apartment to the opening bars of the song.

"My mom and your dad."

"When?"

"On the ski trip."

"What are you talking about?" The camera followed the man's gaze into the apartment where a party was taking place. A blonde woman in a black strapless top with heavy purple eye shadow was singing and dancing with several men.

"And you're the one who goes to the fancy school," she said. It was the tone that finally drew my attention. She hopped off the table and went upstairs. I followed her, intent on getting to the bottom of whatever was bothering her. Recently, we had grown apart. I didn't think she could understand the pressures that were on me to do well socially and academically or what it felt like to find the "right" clothes unaffordable. I had begun to envy her coordinated outfits, and she'd obviously taken my newfound reserve as a sign of misplaced superiority. I was intent on clearing the air, but the sound of my mother's voice stopped me. "How do I know that, Ward?" she asked. "I *read*. That's how." I cringed. She had never in all those years mastered the art of acknowledging yet ignoring Ward, a trick that allowed the rest of us to partake in the fruits of his labor while holding him in utter disdain. I retreated to the kitchen and placed my dirty glass mug into the sink. At the dining room table, a few minutes later, he still wore the sweet indulgent smile he reserved for her and her

alone. He stood behind his seat and drew himself up as though preparing to address a room full of residents. "I have something for all of you but especially for our young ladies," he announced and held up a plaque. "I saw this in a gift shop in Houston and realized that it had everything I ever believed on it." He paused to settle into his seat. Once situated, he picked up the plaque again and read, "Number one, avoid making mistakes at all costs. Number two, fill your mind with positive input. Number three, set goals and achieve them. And number four, strive for excellence." My mother sat back, crossed her arms, and smirked as though all her suspicions about Ward had finally been confirmed. He was indeed a simpleton. Amelia stared out the window across from her into the dark woods. My father took a sip of ice water, his hand trembling as he replaced his glass onto the table.

"No," he said, "No. I'm sorry, Ward, absolutely not. I don't want these girls thinking they can't make mistakes." Ward looked confused. If it had been one of us to question him he would have trotted out that sweet, indulgent smile but this was my father, his closest friend, and to our knowledge, he had never challenged Ward or commented on the way he treated their girls. He frowned and toyed with the salad on his plate. Klara stood up from the table and went to the kitchen. I remembered her twirling in the foyer of her Vermont house, turning like a spinning top, chaos and control, chaos and control.

"Well," Ward said, "I think numbers two, three, and four have some value." Klara returned with a steaming plate of Swedish meatballs. She dished out some for my father, her bare arm brushing against his shoulder.

"Excuse me," my father said, standing up, nearly knocking her aside. A few seconds later we heard the upstairs bathroom door shut. Amelia finally turned away from the window with a look of pure triumph on her face. Her question, "Didn't you hear them?" echoed in my head, and my father's position on mistakes took on new meaning.

"This looks amazing, Klara," my mother said. Klara sat down at the other end. She seemed to have forgotten that she was serving us.

"Thank you," she said. I reached for the platter and passed it along to Ward. He murmured his thanks. My father returned to the table. He sat back down and reached for a casserole dish. "It's just that if I don't make mistakes

in my paintings," he explained, ladling out the slivered potatoes onto his plate, "then I don't know what works."

"Ahh, the creative process," Ward said. The indulgent tone had returned. At my father's gallery openings, he always stood off to the side, a hand in his pocket, sipping the cheap white wine from the plastic cups. He knew he was supposed to appreciate the work on the walls, but it was clear from his expression that he found the crowd and the art frivolous. Perhaps my father sensed that in his tone and, as ingratiating as ever, changed the topic to one that Ward could appreciate.

"I like what you're doing with AJ," he said.

"We think it has a lot of potential," Ward said. "We can do them for all the players, create a whole line of viewfinders."

"Is Yvonne still doing those jewelry parties?" my mother asked. AJ's wife was also trying to bring in income. She hosted gatherings in her friends' homes where she sold expensive pieces while they ate dinner and drank wine.

"She's having one next month," Klara said.

"Isn't there a story about one of those parties?" my father asked.

"Something about asparagus?" Klara laughed.

"I got the wrong kind," my mother said.

"What's the wrong kind?" Amelia asked.

"I have no idea."

"It was too thick," Klara explained.

"Too thick?" my father repeated, and Klara laughed again.

"I'll never go grocery shopping for her again," my mother muttered. Klara wiped a tear away and covered her mouth with her hand. Ward watched from the sidelines, incapable of joining in. Amelia and I had always wanted to be sisters, I thought, slightly sick to my stomach.

"I'm sorry," Klara said, laughing and crying at the same time. "I'm sorry."

**Eva Freeman's** nonfiction has appeared in Quincy Troupe's *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire*. She graduated from Yale University with a BA in English and spent nine years working in network news. After her work in broadcast journalism, she received an MFA from the University of Maryland, College Park.