

## DAVID LIGARE

*Landscape with a Hyacinth*, 2020  
Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 in.



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

## ALEIDA RODRÍGUEZ

### Messages from the Elysian Garden

Finding a path back  
after loss

Everything in the garden is drenched and dripping, as if each drop were saying *green, green, green*. The earth is black and easy to weed, the flagstone patio littered with a thick carpet of wet leaves and spent blossoms from the mock orange tree, though many still cling to the tree and their sweet scent hovers in the air. The sky is a spacious dove-gray train compartment whose windows of ethereal blue offer fleeting glimpses of sunny lands far away. Swirling breezes whip the crowns of hundred-foot eucalyptus trees into whisks. Sunlight comes and goes like a kid toying with the switch. It's finally chilly enough for a sweater, here in these normally temperate Elysian hills of Los Angeles, and I take it as a welcome-home gift, since anything below sixty degrees—especially if accompanied by rain (or threat thereof)—is my kind of weather.

The house is a hurricane-grade mess—it looks like something out of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, only worse. It reflects my interior exactly: I'm restless, scattered, haven't yet properly reconstituted after having been gone from my so-called normal life. For two years, but especially intensely during the grueling last six months, I took care of my mother as she died. In one of those stunning intersections of life events usually reserved for fiction, the news of her diagnosis preceded the announcement of my first book winning a prize by just two weeks. How could I feel the giddiness of success with a stone in my belly? Four weeks after her death, before I could catch up on sleep, much less grieve, I found myself on the road, teaching and giving readings. A Mattel version of my former self stood at those lecterns, while I sat shrouded at the bottom of an empty well. Every cell in my body longed for the golden zero of the surface.

I've heard that the soul takes a while to catch up after a sojourn. Mine is quite probably lost, given how circuitous and relentless my travel. It sank underground when they pulled the zipper over my mother's face, and if it ever surfaced again and looked around, I had already hightailed it. It's probably still there at the bedside, staring into the breathless, yellowish Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters* face of my mother, with her mouth gaping in a kind of exhausted surrender, as if to say, *Whew! Glad to put that load down finally*.

Maybe my soul is still back there, looking up at the ceiling, trying to stitch the holes on the acoustic tiles into a connect-the-dots image of my mother, hovering iconic

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above the hospital bed, flying the way she always did in her dreams. With the same intensity that I had begged for a letter in her own hand while she lived, I stared at the ceiling after her last breath and longed for her to make the dots spell out something, anything. A note left on a counter, even: “Went out, leftovers in the fridge.” But she was never a good correspondent, and the one letter she did write me at college is now lost.

Trailing musical notes like crumbs through a dark forest, trying to coax my soul home, I slip in five Joni Mitchell CDs, arranged in chronological order, starting with the first. “It’s right in front of your nose,” teased my friend Greg in high school, as I stared hard at the album cover’s montage of watercolor painting and slices of photos intertwined like spilling cloth. I squinted and fooled with the focus of my eyes until suddenly the gulls on the cardboard sky arranged themselves into the title: *Song to a Seagull*. Now it’s so obvious, I can’t turn the letters back into gulls.

As the music spools out, each song feels like something I used to wear, a pair of jeans with just the right rip at the knee, a self I carelessly inhabited, then shed. Trying to re-collect who I am, I knot the songs together into a line

I drop out the window, hoping my soul will see it and climb back in.

Each lyric is a dance through a familiar house with my eyes shut, never bumping into the furniture because I’ve moved all of it into my head so I could let loose. Singing and dancing, I invoke my life through the household rituals of laundry and dishes. Rudderless, I spin about the rooms, reading bits of books abandoned on the floor, their edges fuzzy with dust, which sets off a fit of vacuuming, which leads to sweeping the patio and then to weeding, to cutting a zillion narcissus that popped up in the far back garden while I was gone and putting them around every room (so that the house is now downright swoony with their scent), having first cleaned out the old vases of their mucky water and slimy lilies (how decomposed is my mother’s body now?), then gathering up storm-fallen limes, cutting pink and red camellias to float on the dining room table, slicing open mail.

When I look up, letter in hand like a Vermeer, two squirrels are chasing each other all over the yard and up the splintery wooden ladder that leans against the mock orange tree, scampering across high-wire branches, then sliding down trunks like firefighters before exploding over the ground again. *Come outside, the weather’s fine*, they seem to say. One of them stops for a moment on a branch outside the window and meets my eye. With its tail language it translates the message into its simplest elements, asking: ? Then answering itself with a resounding: ! Since Squirrel knows best, I allow myself to be coaxed outside again.

While I am bent over, picking up fallen apples, my bare toes digging into the moist clay, Mrs. Loredo, my back-fence neighbor on this east-facing flank of Elysian hills, calls to me behind the lacy screen of bare bougainvillea. Obscured, veiled as we are from each other, she thinks at first I’m someone else and instructs that person to please give me the envelope she’s holding and waving lightly like a small flag at a parade. But when I come around the fig tree and say, “This is me, Mrs. Loredo,” she says, “Well, of course you are, I can see that now,” in that lovely lavender way old ladies have of putting things. Her words are like the powder puff my mother used to dab at my face before taking my hand and leading me outside, my nostrils dusty with the scent of lilacs.

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Mrs. Loredo has just gotten back from New York City, where her daughter, her pride and joy, gave a piano recital. She hands me the pink program, and in the bio notes I see that her daughter has been playing since age four. I convey my surprise and admiration. She points to the little dirt-colored wooden house between ours and says, “Yes, Mrs. Joos, who used to live right here, was her first teacher. She used to play for the Silent Films.” Her tone puts capitals on the last two words.

While ants crawl up my legs and I flick them off, shifting from foot to foot, I learn she used to be married to a Mr. Nevárez—her daughter still uses this surname—with whom she moved into this very house in 1947, before he died. Mr. Loredo, also a former professional piano player for the studios (I often hear liquid notes spilling from their house, accompanied by her tremulous voice), is her second husband, but the house remains under her name. “When it’s your second marriage, you know, you tend to do things that way,” she says. No further explanation as to why she hasn’t put Mr. Loredo on the deed after forty-some years. I guess one can never be too sure.

She mentions her age again—eighty-five—which she does several times during our chats, and I always act surprised. I am, in fact, surprised, or I *was* surprised the first time I found out. As she speaks, her soft, overripe face is a kind of salve for my eyes, a cool unguent I apply when I yearn to have my own mother’s face before me, animated, telling me some story the way Mrs. Loredo does. When she floats—because that’s what she seems to do, although she’s slightly out of breath whenever we meet—to the rusty wire fence between us, I have that comforting, languageless sense of my mother’s love, empty of our raging, all soft laughter, with the unfocused yet bright eyes of her last years.

Mrs. Loredo looks remarkable for eighty-five, and I always tell her so. She’s smart and articulate and a good listener, which means she’s able to bat the ball back, agile of mind, ever interested in partnering a conversation, possessed of beautiful manners. So few people know how to converse anymore. They come at you with statements like prods and then don’t even listen to what they elicit; they merely want to make some noise and move you out of the way. But with Mrs. Loredo—Amparo, which means *refuge*, she reminds me—when we finish, I feel I’ve accomplished something.

When we drift apart, after I’ve handed over a bag of my apples, I’m struck with how fragile this connection is, and how relatively short our time together will be, given her age (or, frankly, mine). As I move away, I feel as though I’ve just seen an apparition, the Old Woman from a fairy tale come to look in on me, bless me, provide me spiritual refuge. To see if I will offer her, in exchange, some of my apples, before she turns and disappears.

I amble back into my studio, pockets lumpy with apples, and plop down at my desk, gazing absently out the window. How long *have* I been gone? So long, the sycamore across the way dropped the last of its curled brown leaves in my absence. But now the wind, as if in consolation, blows a flock of titmice onto its branches and their restless bodies and pointy crests flutter against the sky like brown leaves returned—the film rewound to the part I missed.

But I know the return is a myth. Nothing ever returns; everything just keeps pulling endlessly forward until *you’re* returned—to the compost heap. Personally, I like this idea: being returned to the garden we created. Isn’t that what Rumi meant when he said, “We hold on to times like this, then, since this is how it’s going to be”? Suddenly something startles the birds and they burst at once from the tree like letters forsaking the gravity of the page. As if to say, *Begin again*.

**Aleida Rodríguez**, award-winning poet, essayist, editor, and first woman to publish a lit mag in LA’s history, is trying valiantly to preserve her historic home as Red Hill House Artist Residence and Living Archives for use by artists in perpetuity. She recently completed new collections of essays (“Desire Lines”) and poems (“Clarooscuro”)—both seeking a publisher.