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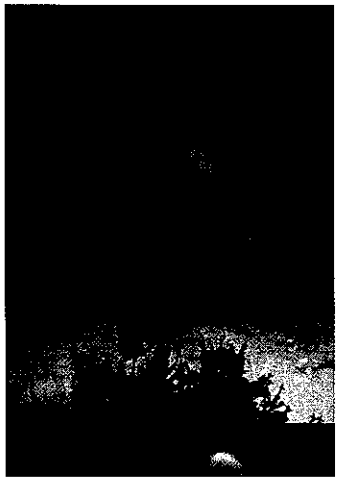

v266 (Ross Farm Series)

Joe Lugara

Joe Lugara took up painting and photography as a boy after his father discarded them as hobbies. His works, often abstract, depict odd organic forms and inexplicable phenomena, taking as their basis horror and science fiction films produced from the 1930s through the late 1960s. He began creating digital paintings in the 2010s; they debuted in a 2018 solo exhibition at the Noyes Museum of Art in his home state of New Jersey. Mr. Lugara's works have appeared in more than forty exhibitions, including the New Jersey State Museum and 80 Washington Square East Galleries at New York University.

The *Ross Farm* series was inspired by an outdoor summer concert. "The crowd began to arrive as the sun was waning. As the darkness came on, the place took on all kinds of lyrical qualities—possession, mysticism, myth, with the torches to give it a hint of the primal, or medieval. Everywhere you looked, you sensed something different. I thought of the line Vincent Price had in the movie *The Raven*: 'You are under an enchantment.'"

The artist makes little distinction between his digital paintings and his paintings in traditional media. "They're two sides of the same coin. When I began painting digitally, the challenge was to find tools and gestures equivalent to what I'd been doing for years with the brushes. Once I had those down, the images came naturally."

View Joe Lugara's work at joelugara.com joelugara joelugara1art @joelugara.

Originating in Victorian England, the moving force and sometimes the solution of a work of mystery fiction was referred to as a MacGuffin. Alfred Hitchcock used the term and stated that "No film is complete without a MacGuffin" because that's what "...everybody is after."

The MacGuffin

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Erica Plouffe Lazure

Verbindung Durch Angst

A funeral photograph of the famous German thinker had arrived that morning in the mail. It arrived protected, wrapped in cellophane and sealed in a white, aerogramme envelope with a black border, marked with a series of colorful cancelled stamps. Air Mail. International Air Mail. All the way from Köln. Caldon, who had moved to his mother's family home in the woods to escape the city and his wife Mary, sorted through the mail that morning as he had every morning for the past two years: on the can, with a cup of chicory coffee perched on the sill of the window.

With the letters on his lap, he kept his penis between his legs, out of the way, angled toward the bowl, a courtesy to both the correspondence and his unpredictable bladder. When he looked down—which he, on occasion, did once it occurred to him—he could not dismiss a distinct sensation that his grizzle might conceal some undiscovered feminine crevice. But he'd always push the thought away as quickly as it came.

The German, Helmut Krämer, was a former classmate and neighbor from nearly fifty years ago, and had eventually made a name for himself at Columbia. Or so he'd heard. As teenagers on the lower east side, Helmut, who came from hearty German stock, had always looked older than Caldon, broader in both shoulder and jawline, even though Caldon was the elder by a few months and the taller by a few inches. Helmut had aged of course, but somehow, even while dead, he now appeared in the photo looking younger than Caldon. *And here I am,* Caldon thought, flipping over the photo, squinting at the light scrawl of German on the back, *still competing with a dead man. He wasn't that old. Same age as me.* The photo was black and white, taken with natural lighting, he guessed, on account of the slight blur and haze and peculiar exaggerated glow about the face, like a spot exposure. Caldon could make out a large, complex ear attached to a long, pillowed lobe, as though Helmut somehow, through the photo, could hear Caldon and his grumblings amid his bathroom business. The ear seemed disproportionate to Helmut's pinched lips and grim, broken-nose profile. Caldon supposed the distortion was on account of the positioning of his head, adorned with trademark, but now useless, glasses. *That bastard always did have big ears,* he thought. A big dick, too, recalling the countless gang showers they'd been forced to take after

gym class at Taft, the whipped towels and idiot horseplay of a bunch of young men who'd never yet even heard the word "homosexual," much less knew what it meant. They didn't have vocabulary for gays back then, but that all changed. How quick had it changed. His own son became a daughter, so who was he to say otherwise? From Joseph to Josie over winter break. Transgender at Christmas. Just like that. He pressed the photo to his face and inhaled the darkroom chemicals, the margin of the thick paper carefully cut to accommodate the handwritten note below. The writing was in German, written in the sloping hand of his ancient mother somewhere in Köln, who, at ninety, likely drank daily the brine of pickled cucumbers and would live the rest of her years, he supposed, buying vegetables and mutton at an open-air market, toting a steel hamper-style shopping cart.

So this is what the dead look like, Caldon thought, taking in the endless leaves, now almost blushed with the season but attached still to branches alongside the scrum of tiny birds that sat in caucus, deliberating their southward migration. The Keith Jarrett album from the other room bloomed in a well of applause and then stopped playing, just as Caldon stood in the silence, the photograph pressed between his finger and thumb, as the bills and circulars and even the aerogramme envelope scattered across the tile floor. He pulled up his overalls and abandoned his coffee on the ledge, thinking only about the dead German in the open coffin, and the fragile, foreign penmanship that conveyed the news that he could not read. He had to talk to Willow.

The house he'd inherited, to the consternation of his elder and now-dead siblings, save for Willow, who got the Manhattan apartment from their mother's will, was little more than a cabin, not designed or properly insulated for cold weather use, but he'd managed. As kids, they'd slept outdoors every night in pup tents, popping into the sweltering kitchen to see their mother, who rarely left it, perpetually cooking for a family of six. But its potbelly stove and snug size gave him and Mary seasons of escape with Joseph, before he became Josie. It wasn't far from a lake, and the one thin power line from the lone post kept the radio going, the coffee heated, and, depending on the season, a fan or space heater whirring full-blast. His mother kept a garden, but he wasn't much one for yard work or lawn care, so the natural bramble of once-maintained blackberry bushes, interspersed with a few heirloom tomato plants, overtook the bulk of what would have been a yard, making the June harvest sweet indeed. So sweet that his fingers for a full month were permanently purple, his hands and ankles still healing from thorns' scratches. The cabin brought him, at sixty-eight, back into his kid element, and so he flipped the

Jarrett album, and let the second half of the concert take him as he stuffed some coins and a few bucks for the paper into his pocket to walk down the deserted tree-lined road, barefoot and still holding Helmut's photograph, to the pay phone at the gas station. He'd read somewhere that the piano Jarrett had wanted for the concert—in Köln, Caldon realized, what do you know—had in fact never arrived, and so he had to play on a tinny backstage practice piano for a performance that would become one of his most famous recordings ever. But how many times had Caldon himself been told to just make do, to wing it, that it wasn't about the materials you were given but what you did with them? The lesser piano prevailed, after all, Caldon thought, as Jeb, the neighbor's dog trailed after him, because Jarrett himself prevailed. Plain and simple. He dug out a fistful of quarters when he reached the pay phone and dialed up Willow.

"I don't understand," he said, absentmindedly petting Jeb's head. Jeb wagged his tail. What did he care that some German thinker died? "Why would anyone send me a photo of a dead man? *This* dead man? What do I care if Helmut Krämer is dead?" Caldon said it, for the sake of stating it out loud to his sister, but now that his words hovered in the air, they sounded petty, idiotic, even to him. He did care, but didn't like that he cared. He'd have been perfectly fine if he never knew Helmut had died.

Willow still lived above the cheese shop in their childhood home just off Mott Street. She'd seen the obituary in the paper. Of course she did. So did the rest of the city.

"I saved it for you. He was pretty famous," she said. "A thinker. Wrote several books about the Orient. And grief." The same black-bordered envelope had also been sent to her, but addressed to Caldon, along with an invitation to the memorial from the Goethe Society.

"It's all in German," Caldon said, pinching one of Jeb's fleas from his wrist. "Why send it to me? We went to school together. Weren't really friends. I hardly liked the guy." He held up the funeral photo of Helmut again. He was still handsome, broken nose and all. "You went on a few dates with him, right?" Caldon asked. "Way back?"

"Who didn't? All the girls did," Willow said. "He was quite the catch back then, if you know what I mean. Ah, Helmut! It looks like that memorial for him? Goethe? is tonight. At Essenszeit. You should come."

Caldon didn't want to come, but wouldn't say no. Willow knew this about him and pressed him. He was in Vermont, after all. It was summer. And he wanted, needed, to be pressed to leave the cool rural wilds for the steamy city.

"I can't imagine what you do out there, hiding out all day in that cabin," she said. "Come home. We won't even tell Mary."

Caldon held his breath, contemplating. If he could get back and air out his suit, and get in the car in an hour, if he could get the car to start in the first place, he'd...just then, the Trailways bus pulled into the station, breaking the silence. The doors opened and there emerged a few well-dressed children with backpacks, likely off to camp, and some grandmother types. Willow got animated as she heard all the way from TriBeCa the rattle of the diesel engine. Caldon inhaled the fumes from the city deeply and put another few quarters into the phone.

"That's the city bus, isn't it?" Willow said. "Just get on it and I'll pick you up at Grand Central this afternoon."

"Shoes," he said. "I'm not..."

"The gas station should have flip-flops or something if you're barefoot. Lord knows they've got everything else under the sun. Besides, we'll find you something. I've got some of Dad's old clothes."

Jeb had looked up at him, worried, but Caldon gestured up the road and said, "go home, Jeb!" in a low tone. And he did. When the bus pulled out ten minutes later, Caldon was on it, sporting a hot pink pair of men's-sized flip-flops, holding the *New York Times*, and unwrapping a plastic-wrapped sleeve of powdered donuts across the aisle from a small child. The donut powder got everywhere—on his overalls, on the seat, on the photograph. His hands were matted with the dense white sugar and he sucked on each finger and wiped them on the pant cuff of his overalls as the child watched, insane with donut hunger.

"You know German?" Caldon asked the child. The child, a girl of six, stared at the donut. He had held it like he would a dog treat for Jeb. She nodded, cake-dazed.

"If you can read this, I'll give you the last donut."

The child took the photograph into her hands. The oil from his fingers left visible imprints on the photo.

"It's a sleeping man."

"What else?"

"He wants to show you what he looks like when he's tired. He is dreaming, surrounded by flowers, and he has a little girl with big hands who picks the flowers and lays one on his shirt so when he wakes up, he'll see the flower and think of her."

She handed back the photo and held out her hand for the donut.

"You think he has a daughter, then?" he said, looking at the photo. He bit absent-mindedly, into the donut.

"Sure he does," she said.

"You don't know German, do you?" he said. He offered the bitten donut to her anyway. She shook her head, angry, refusing his germs. He set it on the armrest, in case she changed her mind, and when the bus stopped in traffic on the Tappan Zee Bridge, the donut lurched

forward and landed under the seat in front of them. Instead of reading the paper, he looked out the window and thought about a daughter. His daughter, Josie, handing out flowers at age six, a boy in a dress, all the way down the Palisades and into the city. *We didn't take a picture of her in her coffin,* he thought.

"Guten tag!" said a redheaded girl in lederhosen.

"We're here for the Krämer memorial?" said Willow, looking with horror at the Essenszeit's tacky Oktoberfest atmosphere. Caldon hung back. He hadn't been in a bar, a real bar—Hugo's in Vermont didn't count—in years. In a wall of mirrors, he caught glimpses of himself: the puffy-white storm cloud of hair, like a fuzzed-out Q-tip, like he'd always wanted when he was a kid, a few days' worth of whiskers, and his farmer's overalls, speckled with donut dust. A first-class hick. The memorial would have to take him as-is, pink flip-flops and all. The bus got stuck in traffic and rolled in just around six thirty. Willow met him at Grand Central and instead of stopping home, she handed him one of their father's old tweed sportscoats, and they hauled off directly in a cab to Essenszeit.

Just behind the biergarten, where a man was on stage actually playing an oompah tune on an accordion, was a quieter function room for Helmut's memorial. Of course the Goethe Society would run the same funeral photograph of Helmut, blown up larger than life, behind a small lectern under one of Helmut's more popular tenets: *"intelligenz durch trauer."* "Intelligence through grief," it stated in English underneath, in parentheses, almost as an afterthought. Another: *"verbindung durch angst."* "Connection through fear." Someone from the Society was handing out bilingual pamphlets of Helmut's key papers.

"What are these stupid slogans?" Caldon muttered to Willow, as someone handed him a bright green trifold sheet with *"Verbindung"* plastered across the top. "Some kind of party favor?"

"Shhhh," she said. "His philosophies. Everyone will hear you."

"How is our grief going to bring us intelligence? Huh. Hey, you know that joke? If you have to tell someone you love them, say it really loud in German?"

"Really, Caldon?"

"So it will confuse—"

"Enough!"

"—and terrify them! It's true! Danke schoen…"

Willow, in her perfect New York mourning pantsuit, slung her purse over her shoulder and waded through the throngs of people to find seats. She fit right in with the rest of the nattily-dressed crowd of thinkers and hangers-on, probably every philosopher and Germanophile who'd apparently read and translated all of his works (*"verbindung durch angst"*), every grad student he'd ever mentored, all

of Helmut's neighbors from his renovated brownstone Brooklyn co-op, generations of grown émigré cousins and their spawn, a few still-there ancient great aunts who'd raised him, and in the front row, sobbing, in a black linen dress and hat to match, was Mary.

It had been a while. Two years, at least. Mary in the front row. He wasn't expecting her. Or the hat.

Mary hadn't seen them yet, but it was only a matter of time.

"I'm gonna find a seat further back," Caldon said. "If I need an escape hatch. Or a beer."

"Okay, you lead," Willow said. Caldon picked his way back through the crowd, trying not to notice the wide berth people gave him, as though he smelled bad, or perhaps on account of his clothes, which were not hipster-retro-shabby-chic-fake-farmer-at-a-funeral, but rather simply *rural* in a space that was decidedly *urban*, to say nothing of his pink flip-flops and the off-season sports coat. Of course the first time in two years that Mary saw him he'd look like a Vermont farmer. When they finally found seats, a set of headphones, courtesy of the Goethe Society—each ear cup stated so in all caps—lay at his feet.

"For the translation," Willow said, setting hers on her own Q-tip white curls, the feminine, upper-class iteration of Caldon's. The memorial started, in German (of course), with Igor Levit himself flown in special from Berlin to play the *Moonlight Sonata*. A flash of cameras fluttered under the dais where Levit played. *What's the press doing here?* Caldon thought as another round of flashes burst like dull dud fireworks. *Didn't he already get his own free news obit in the* Times? He knew personally how expensive a paid obituary cost, even though the details of Josie's death were in all the papers the summer she died. He balked at paying for the obit—fifty dollars a line, with about twenty-eight letters (letters! not even words!) per line—as Mary tended to write long, and in the end her beautiful six-thousand-dollar tribute to their only child was never published, not in the *Times*, at least. And while Josie's funeral was private, a steady stream of her childhood friends and college pals emerged for the wake, and they, the grieving parents, had to stand before their own child's coffin and witness and console the endless line of tear-streaked youthful faces, their promise and their grief, all of it compounding their own.

As the pianist concluded his moody *Moonlight*, the crowd swept into a profound, unified applause—well deserved, Caldon allowed, a forceful rendering of Beethoven's finest, the languid notes lingering with the melancholy of the minor key, filling the room with contemplation, and an odd solitude. People around him wept as the first speaker stood, from the Goethe Society, apparently, but Caldon didn't bother to listen in to the translated German on his Goethe headset. Instead he focused on the back of Mary's large picture hat, Mary in the front row, slim shoulders hunched. He had an urge to sit with her,

to let her lean into him as his arm curled familiar around her, to tell her he'd be there for her, even if he hadn't been these past few years. He'd whisk her back to Vermont and rub her feet and show her how he'd fixed up the place, retiled the bathroom. But really, how *had* she known Helmut, beyond the few times they'd socialized at some event or another, where Helmut was the veritable center of the party? Ever since he'd become the "German thinker," he'd only given Caldon, for all their past times together, a passing nod and a quick "Caldon, my friend!" thump on the back. Mary, who was a magazine editor, always dragged Caldon from one semi-swanky pseudo-intellectual affair to the next, seeking out story angles, sources, the occasional advertiser. She knew how to work the crowd and Caldon was always content to let her take the lead. But after Josie died—Josie, lost to them amid the headlines of yet another transgender woman killed in a hate crime (it was all over the papers that year, an especially awful year), Mary became a shadow of herself. All the awful comments, all the fears that Caldon had said to Mary—never to Josie, he simply couldn't to Josie directly—about their son's decision to become a daughter, a woman, collapsed onto itself and ruined them. Ruined their marriage. Mary threw it all back at him, blamed him for his inability to accept her for who she was, for naming the worry that she'd be killed. And nothing he could say or do would convince her that those early days of adjustment—the memories re-imprinted, from stating "son" to "daughter" in casual reference—were over. Caldon had loved Josie for who she was, and he grew into a better person, a more open person, because of her. After the funeral, he figured Mary needed some space from him, from the vibrant career she'd been building, from the city that took from them their only child; and with as little fanfare as possible, he put in for retirement from the library, pulled the ancient Subaru out of long-term parking, and drove up to Vermont. Because what had he learned, really, from all of this loss? That grief brings intelligence? Willow always told him he might actually benefit from some time away, to account for his role in all that had unfolded—but it wasn't his fault that his son became a daughter, and that some fucko bigot targeted her and killed her behind Webster Hall. Or was it?

But now here was Mary standing—what was Mary doing, approaching the podium? What would she even *say* about Helmut? The black hat shrouded her pale face, and her eyes, while bright and icy-blue, were wet with pain. And as she launched in, offering a throaty, tearful start to her testament, as the projector cast the *"intelligenz durch trauer"* slogan across her body, her silver page boy bob, her black picture hat.

"Helmut and I had known each other for years, but it wasn't until after the death of my daughter that we became close..."

Caldon exhaled deeply and understood. Willow glanced toward him, absorbing his shock by reaching out, clasping her hand over his, like a seatbelt strapping him in. How had she moved on? Whatever it was that had happened, weren't they still—married? Something? Wasn't he showing her respect by giving her space, and yet here she was grieving over this "German thinker" like his mourning lover. Or not *like* his mourning lover, but *as* his mourning lover. His urge to stand overwhelmed him, to speak out to Mary as though they were the only two in the room, but Willow kept her grip on his hand, reinforcing firmly, into his thigh, commanding him further into his seat, now hard and plastic, all angles. The photo of Helmut in his coffin, in Köln, loomed above Mary as she told the story. Apparently, she'd joined him on a brief lecture circuit throughout much of Bavaria and into Wiesbaden, then Stuttgart, before they drove up to Köln so she could meet his mother—"a lovely woman," Mary reported to the audience, "strong, even in her nineties. She'd be thrilled to know how much he meant to New York"—and then Mary had returned to the States, leaving Helmut with his mother in Köln to sort out some family business.

"And then the heart attack. I always thought I'd see him again," she said, "He was one of the most brilliant men I'd ever known."

Oh, brilliant, Caldon thought. Why no mention that she was still married, and where did her old husband, the one who she spent twenty-six years of her life with, who was the brilliant father of the brilliant child who'd also died, calculate into Helmut's *brilliance?* Hadn't he, after all, been the one to introduce them? And how long, exactly, had she waited to bask in his *brilliance* after Caldon had moved to Vermont? The menagerie of questions kept swirling, rendered by humiliation, then ire, then jealousy, then grief, all of it revived anew, for Josie, for their marriage, for his stupid pink flip-flops he thought he'd get away with wearing. And now here he was, the slob of a not-quite-ex-husband in overalls and a mothball coat, showing up to hear how the German thinker—and lover—was, in all imaginable ways, from their days on the tennis court, to romancing his wife, to comforting her after Josie died, to being honored at his memorial by one of the world's foremost pianists, the better man in his tiny shitbox of a life.

As though Willow understood the river of his mind, where the rocks and rapids of his memory would undoubtedly take him, she clamped down even further on his hand, pinning his thigh with her gym-toned biceps into the chair. As Mary sat down, Igor resumed his spot at the bench to play one more sonata—*"Pathétique,"* he joked, "an unfitting title because Helmut was anything but, yet it was one of his favorites. Let us find, together, as Helmut did, the levity in the absurd," Igor said, "as we honor the passing of our dear friend."

Caldon felt Willow's grip on him relax and he took that moment, as Igor launched into the first few bars of the piece—a crashing, lively spray of notes that normally he'd relish getting lost in, hearing each plunk and shine of the piano overlap and trip through the air—he stood, finally, slipping out of Willow's grasp, and headed, not out toward the biergarten, toward the tacky oompah crowd and the lederhosen ladies for a much needed stein and a jag of currywurst, but rather toward the pianist, the podium, toward Mary. Mary. He called out to her as the melody of the song unfolded, and she turned and saw him, her eyebrows arched in surprise, just as the thong of the pink flip-flop loosened itself and he tripped, tumbling, as the air in his chest tightened, then surged up to his throat, closing off his oxygen, freezing his muscles, his heart, before he collapsed on the ground. As the murmur of concern moved through the audience, the well of news photographers descended upon him, the last thing he saw, as the pianist played on, was not the popping flash of cameras or the face of first Willow, and then Mary, standing over him, their faces etched with concern, or guilt, respectively, nor the large funeral photo of Helmut Krämer, or the lingering notes of *Pathétique*, but rather that of Josie, back when he was Joseph, in the earliest part of summer in Vermont, little Joseph in one of Willow's old smocked dresses he'd discovered in a closet. Joseph, standing before the bramble, in the bright of the day, who'd just ate a blackberry green, his mouth puckered with sour and delight, holding out another in his outstretched palm, asking, "When's it gonna change, Poppa? When?"

Trouble with the Painters

Max signs in at the desk, sniffling, and sits down to fill out a medical history form while he waits for the doctor. It's a Sunday in February, windy and bleak, and he is the only one in the lobby. Still, it takes thirty minutes for the nurse to call him back to an exam room.

She looks over his chart, asks him about his illness, makes a few notes. Her name tag says Sarah Graham. She takes his blood pressure, then puts a thermometer in his mouth and presses two fingers to his bared wrist, timing his pulse with the second hand of her watch. While they wait for the thermometer to beep, she flips to the back of the chart and reads Max Davis, Occupation: Artist. Employer: Self. She records his temperature and asks, "How long have you had a fever?"

He shrugs and says, "A couple of days, I think."

When he looks up at her, she sees that his eyes are green as a new leaf.

"You're a painter?" she asks.

He nods.

"What do you paint?"

"Women," he says, and blushes to the tips of his ears. "Big. I like big canvases and I like to paint women."

"Well, you're in good company," she says, trying to ease his embarrassment. "There's certainly a grand tradition…"

She notes his birth date. In two days, he will be forty. Under marital status, he has circled the D.

"What painters do you like?"

He takes a deep breath and whistles it out. "There are so many. I love de Kooning, Bacon, Rothko, a hundred others. Matisse, of course. A great painter of women. But Picasso is the well I go to; it never runs dry."

"That's like saying you love food. You have to narrow it down, don't you think?"

He looks up, surprised. "Okay, so the classical period, maybe 1920 to 1923, those monumental Greek and Roman figures, the mythological drawings. And his earliest work, the blue period, the saltimbanques. But what I love most, his greatest gift, I think, is his expanded vision of the beautiful, of what is beautiful."

She looks at him, and his eyes are completely guileless.