

## MILO REICE

*By the Rivers of Babylon*, 2003–2005  
Paint, conte, and wood on paper, mounted  
on veneer board. 90 3/4 x 72 3/4 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## LOLITA PIERCE State of Rest

“Jesus, you’re still such a little thing,” Renata said when she found her niece in the emergency room lobby.

The girl’s hair had not been combed since God knows when and her shirt was twisted into a knot at her waist and secured with a rubber band. She was wet from her shirtfront down to the worn knees of her pants, blighted looking and sour smelling. Though she had to be about ten years old, she didn’t look like she had grown or aged except in her face.

Renata felt bullied by Maya’s vacant gaze in response to seeing her and did not offer an embrace. She dropped her arms in amazement.

“Why you wet?”

Silence.

“This isn’t going to work if you don’t talk.”

A salt-and-pepper-haired nurse approached them, carrying a brown paper bag. She was the shape and size of the refrigerator in Renata’s apartment.

“This the aunt?”

Maya nodded.

The nurse eyed Renata, her lips pinched with reprobation. “I got you a sandwich from the cafeteria,” she said to Maya.

Maya looked at the floor, not even bothering to speak or to take the bag being held out to her.

“Thanks,” Renata said. “I’ll get the girl something to eat.”

The nurse didn’t lower the bag and so Renata took it, pressed it tight to her leg like a bandage against a wound.

“Why is she wet?”

“We tried to help her clean her clothes but she wouldn’t let us.”

“That didn’t answer my question.”

The nurse glanced at Maya.

“Why don’t I find you a doctor so you can find out exactly what’s going on.”

\* \* \*

Coma.

She stood there, trying to listen to the doctor, who was explaining something complicated to her that she was sure only made sense if it didn’t feel personal. Conscious of her face, her shaking hands, and the red sweater that she had managed to put on inside out over a wrinkled blouse, she was nodding like she understood but her mind kept going