

Marvel had lived for thirty-eight days. Renata wished she could remember what they had done together his last day but she had been a somnambulist and all the days with a newborn ran together after awhile. It had been just her and him. She couldn't remember how the nurse had taught her to wrap him, when she'd last changed him, and what the doctor had said about the spongy spot on the top of his head. The house had been a wreck but the crib had been clean. Hervey had never had a crib and she remembered how their mother had put him on the couch to sleep at night because he'd scared her. When Hervey had been old enough to roll over, her mother had put a cushion on the floor but Renata had already started sneaking back to the couch at night to sleep with him. She couldn't sleep in the bed with her mother, knowing that Hervey might fall on the floor.

They'd told her not to sleep with him so she didn't. She could hardly sleep for waiting to change him, feed him, bathe him, put him back to sleep, and see his eyes open again a few hours later. Except for a few times when she'd fallen asleep while holding him on the couch, she had always put him down in the crib. She'd done what they'd said. He had breathed so barely and he'd slept so much, sometimes she would tickle his feet just to see him move.

Hervey had brought diapers for Marvel and an Almond Joy for her. She hadn't asked how he was; she hadn't wanted to know. Someone at the hospital had given her a thick baby care book but Renata had been too overwhelmed to read it. She'd handed it to Hervey and he'd sat the book on his lap and thumbed through it with one hand while Marvel was tucked in his arm.

"It's pretty easy right now, Ren. You just gotta keep him fed and changed."

"Is it that easy?"

"In the beginning that's all they need."

"It's *not* easy, Hervey, and he's so fragile and I don't know what I'm doing."

"He'll be fine. We're hardwired to want to live."

But Marvel had gone to sleep in his crib and he hadn't woken up. It didn't absolve her that his death had a name and it wasn't hers. Those doctors didn't know shit. She'd done everything they'd told her and he'd still died. Her grandmother had smoked all of her adult life, even while she'd been pregnant with her mother, and had lived to be

eighty-one. Her mother, who had started smoking crack while pregnant with Hervey, had never lost him or his love, though he'd been a trembling, underweight baby who could never turn his head. She'd died happy facedown across a table at thirty-eight.

She didn't remember giving Hervey the book. She remembered not needing it back.

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Everything was just as ugly as she'd imagined. All the tubes and wires and the bags of liquid suspended over the pneumatic air. Everything keeping him alive was bigger than him. They said he was resting but she didn't see how he could when there was so much at work on his body and his heart was still beating and revolting.

She could keep him, and Hervey might've liked that, suspended like this, a baby again. He couldn't hurt himself here, but he could still hurt the girl. She imagined playing it out—they visiting with books and reading to him, looking for signs of life that would never appear, not even if he opened his eyes—and she felt suffocated. Hervey was wrong. Not everyone was hardwired to want to live. Not everyone should be.

The disapproving salt-and-pepper nurse had come to find her.

"Do you want someone to bring your niece in?"

The girl was smart. She would come to understand.

"No," she said, "she's seen enough already."

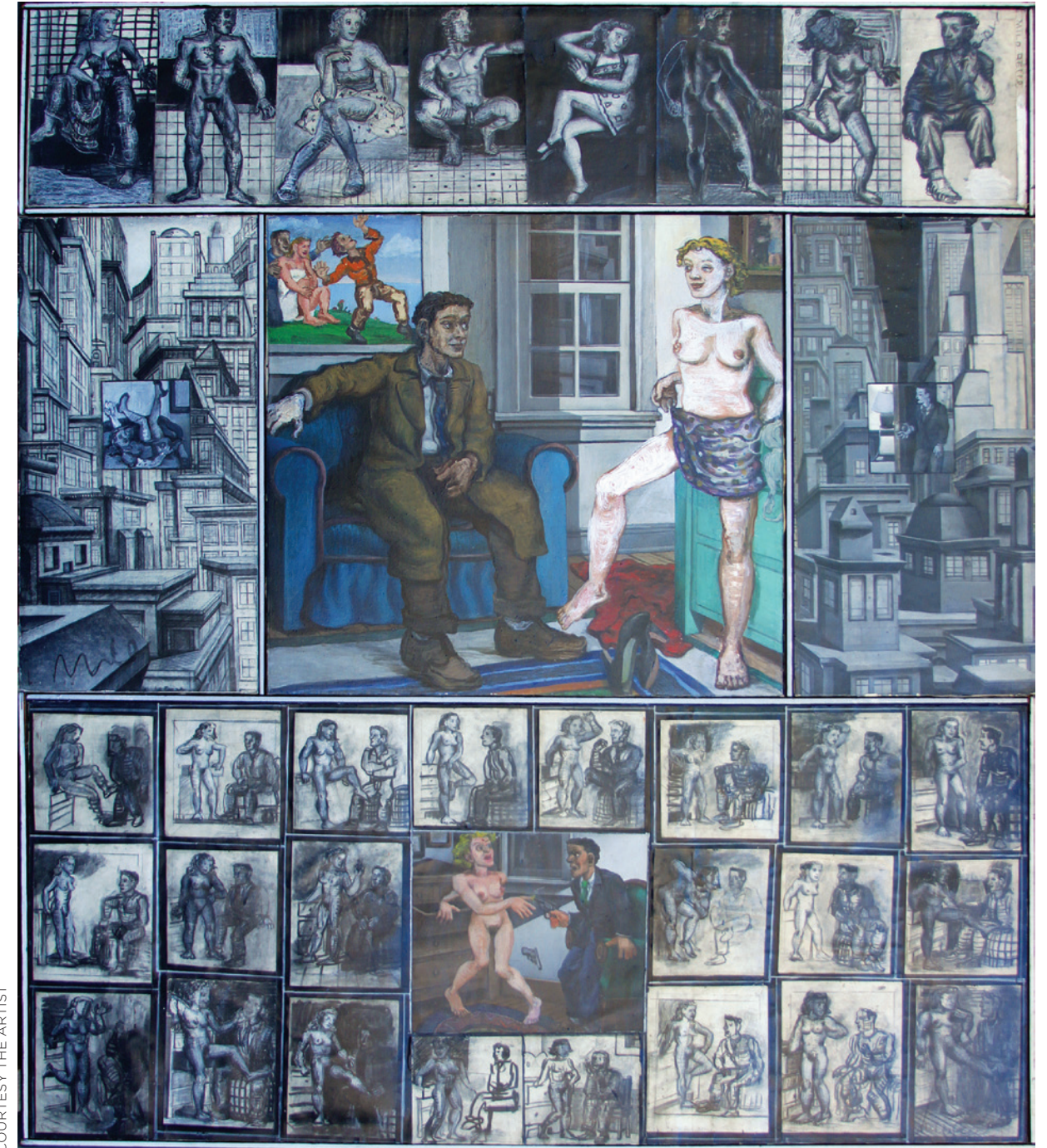
A nurse unhooked liquid bags—one clear and one dark—another pulled a needle from his left arm and then his right; the doctor had a hand on his pulse and then wrote something down. They untaped the wires attached to his chest. She was in awe of how many people were needed to help a man die. The breathing tube came out last and then she could see his whole face. He did look like he was resting. She wouldn't have even known that he was gone if someone in the room hadn't called out the time.

**Lolita Pierce** is a graduate of the Northwestern University creative writing program.

## MILO REICE

*Mike Hammer (I The Jury)*, 1997–2004

Oil on canvas and charcoal on paper, mounted on canvas, 88 1/4 x 79 1/4 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST