

MINERVA ORTIZ

Pig Man, 2007

Oil on muslin-coated masonite, 30 x 36 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

JUSTIN J. ALLEN

Eternal Life

She was standing in her nightgown on the deck with coffee steaming, brightly rimmed by the morning sun.

“Kevin,” she said. “Are you all right?”

He came up the path to the house from the woods that the house sat on the edge of, clutching his left shoulder with his right arm. His face, already gaunt, was tight with pain.

“Drive me to the hospital,” he said.

She did not move or respond right away. As he climbed the stairs to the deck, he couldn’t see her face with the sun behind her. He felt a terrible, irrational fear that his wife would refuse to help him.

“Vanya,” he said at the top of the stairs, “please.”

She stepped forward and put her hand on his other shoulder. “What happened?”

“I passed out. When I was running, and fell down. I think I’ve broken my shoulder.”

She walked with him to the car. Then she went into the house and got the keys. He sat in the car sweating from the pain. She seemed to take forever.

* * *

Even at this early hour on a Tuesday, the emergency room in Palo Alto was scattered with people waiting—the poor, uninsured, usually African American or Latino, who the hospital could not legally turn away. Visits to urgent care, Kevin reflected, reminded you of how inefficient the health-care system was. *These people should be taken care of*, he thought, *but is there any reason why I should have to wait with them?* Why on earth wasn’t there an express-lane system for those with premium insurance plans, similar to the elite status system that let him jump the registration line at the airport? His shoulder was an alarm, a signal that rose and fell, but wailed without relent.

Vanya sat silently beside him. He closed his eyes, waited, took deep breaths, opened them.

The minutes dripped. Vanya left to go to the bathroom. A woman in her fifties sat across from him. Kevin, without trying to, made eye contact with her. With a slight smile of sympathy, she asked, “Is it cancer?” She had a story ready to extend, he could see. Maybe someone she loved. Maybe her own. Kevin almost regretted shaking his head no. “Broken shoulder,” he forced out. He saw the knot of confusion pass through her—“Oh!” she said, and looked away.