

## LEWIS WATTS

*RCA Shiny Door*, 2018  
Archival print, 36 x 36



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## RENEE C. WINTER

### A Golden Ticket

Finding lost relatives  
at a family reunion

**M**y father's house was off-limits. Invitations to visit ceased when I was nine. The house stood firm in my memory, taunting me like a cookie jar on the top shelf with no step stool in sight. I recalled every brick and feature: its licorice-black shutters, chimney top hat, tic-tac-toe garage door. The expansive front picture window dared me to press my face against its cold, hard surface and peek inside. I imagined seeing my father with his new family, playing Clue, laughing at Sid Caesar's *Show of Shows*, eating bowls of chocolate ice cream. Things he no longer did with us. Surely if someone caught my gaze, I'd be invited in. So I memorized the bus route to my father's house from the one-bedroom apartment I shared with my mom and sister. But I never made the trip. What if my father saw me and looked away? He had put himself off-limits too.

\* \* \*

Decades later, on the afternoon of my father's funeral, the front door to the house was wide open, like an outstretched arm. I'd mourned his loss since childhood, but Mother never permitted me to speak my grief aloud. It nested in my core, clawed at the hardened shell of rage that contained it. When I learned my father had died, I decided to let my grief fly into the open. I'd mourn in public, return to his house after thirty years to sit shiva, a daughter's obligation under Jewish law. First, I would go to my father's funeral. Alone.

No black-cushioned front-row seat was saved for me. No one pinned a torn black ribbon to my chest or offered me a mourner's prayer card. The rabbi did not mention me or my mother or my sister, only the new family who had taken our places. I stood behind rows of metal chairs facing an open grave, my shoe prints in the moist June grass the only evidence of my presence. Mourners shoveled piles of damp dirt onto my father's casket, each scoop sounding a soft plop as it landed, mixing with the mumbled prayers and the sniffled tears. Some of the tears were mine. Afterward I joined the parade of cars heading to my father's house.

The redbrick colonial loomed before me. An oak tree stood tall, protecting only a portion of the massive parched lawn. Gray-haired, stout men walked up the uneven concrete path, dabbing hankies to their sweaty necks and holding the hands of women in black and rhinestones.