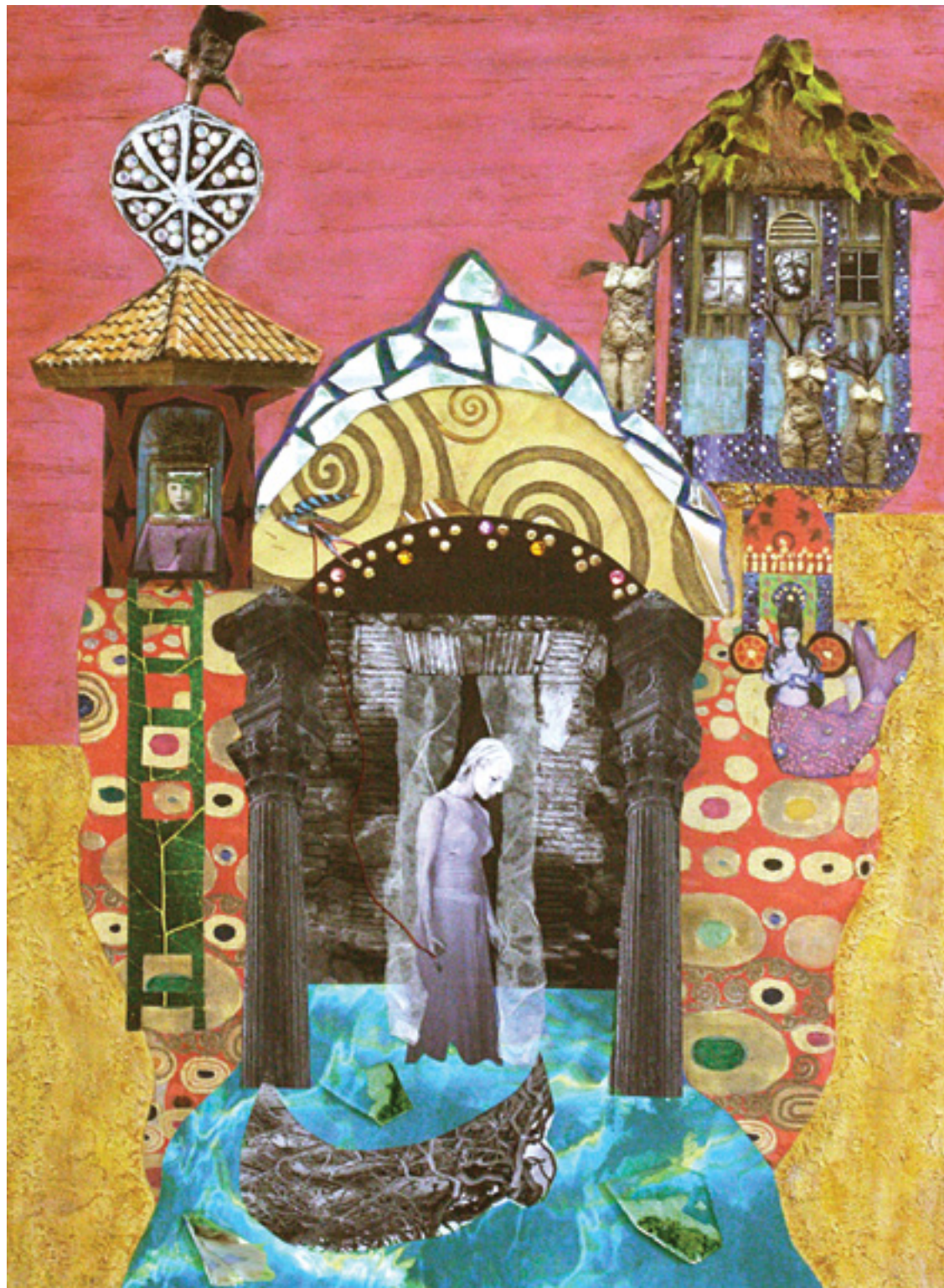


## CAROL GAAB

*Strength in What Remains*, 2014  
Acrylic, collage, glass, rhinestones, on wood,  
12 ½ x 17 in



CREDIT: PAUL HENRI IMAGES

## PANIO GIANOPOULOS

### Girlfriend

Neither handsome nor outgoing, of unknown employment and shabbily dressed, Nicholas was a poor candidate for infatuation. It was weeks into the school year before Hannah even noticed him, though her disinterest had less to do with any specific absence of appeal than a disregard for men in general. Since her divorce four years ago, she had gone on a number of dates—a few set up by friends, the rest arranged online—but regardless of initiative or responsibility, the results had been similarly disheartening. It was not just that most of the available men her age professed themselves uninterested in commitment. She, too, when newly divorced, had had little interest in resuming the chain of oppression and suppression that had characterized her eleven-year marriage. It was that when these men did at last decide to commit, and they almost always did, they chose partners who were eight, ten, even twelve years younger. Dismissing everything that they had learned through the agonizing collapse of a marriage about the necessity of parity and mutuality, they scooped up a twenty-nine-year-old and blithely started over. Had it not been for her son, Hannah would have written off the entire male half of the human race. Thanks to Ethan, she merely seethed at it.

She first met Nicholas during parent volunteer pickup duty at Corsair Private Elementary. Pickup duty did not

actually consist of willing volunteers: the school ran and enforced a random selection process—a lottery in which you won an inconvenience, like jury duty, or a cancer scare. On the day that it was Nicholas's turn, he stood by the chain-link fence waving children through the gate, a red-and-white-striped electric bullhorn dangling by its strap from his wrist. As a new parent, he did not know many of the families, and his failure to quickly match the children to their parents was holding up the line of approaching cars. In the midst of this slowdown, a third-grade boy snatched a girl's knapsack and, hooting with triumph, scrambled up a tree. Hannah watched Nicholas hesitate, besieged on one side by impatient drivers, and on the other side by an eight-year-old girl already well acquainted with the influence of tears.

"It's okay, we'll get it back," he reassured the crying girl; but the instant he took a step away from the gate into the schoolyard, he was blasted with a honk. "Hang on," he called out. As he hurried to the base of the tree, additional honks followed him like little goslings.

Hannah slipped her phone into her purse and walked over to the contested tree. She grabbed the bullhorn, still attached to Nicholas's wrist, and yanked his arm upward so that she could comfortably reach the mouthpiece. "Get down, Jackson. Right now. Or I'm calling your mother." As the boy scrambled down the trunk, proclaiming his innocence, Hannah led Nicholas back to the gate by the wrist. She swiftly dispatched the waiting students while Nicholas stood on the library steps, using the 30-watt bullhorn to wish the children a good afternoon.

"Nice sneakers!" Nicholas announced, startling a fourth grader en route to the afterschool soccer program.

"Give me that," Hannah said, and reached for the bullhorn. "And your vest."

He shrugged free of the reflective orange vest and handed it to her. She wrapped it around the bullhorn and tucked them both into the volunteer bin.

"Thanks," he said. "I'm Nicholas, by the way."

"Hannah."

"That was good teamwork," he said.

"You didn't actually do anything."

He laughed uncertainly, straightening his back. He was taller than she had first thought, and his bottom teeth were crooked, like a foreigner's. He had thin but persistent