

GRAHAM NICKSON

Sun in House III, 2014
Watercolor on paper, 18 x 24 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

STEPHEN GUTIERREZ

The Count

Family myth,
meshed cultures,
and shots of whiskey

My *nino* The Count made me proud to be his godson. He exuded nobility. Not many people have it. Even at the young age I speak of, my early elementary school days, I knew it. And I knew a special day when I lived one.

And I vowed to preserve this particular one and set it down in words once I became adept enough to handle them. I do not know if I am. I am just ready to try. I am game, because I have a streak of courage gained from a fierce shot of whiskey, followed by a slowly imbibed glass of the same amber-colored fluid. What bigots call “Mexican courage” isn’t mine, but memory’s richness is. Isn’t that where the treasure lies? Where what we need to endure exists when the day seems blank and awful, and the future bleak? I have known those soulless times. Maybe this piece is written against them on this pleasant blue afternoon, against the paralyzing fear to live well and honestly when all the lies have caught up to you—I have a few secrets—and it seems useless to go on. Simplicity at work in the complicated world—that’s the ticket. I have a basic urge to communicate quiet strength and share what I have found moving in the world, no matter how small or uneventful the moment.

My *nino* was an extraordinary man. That is, my godfather The Count radiated a larger-than-life aura. He seemed descended from another race of men, not like the men around him, who were good enough. He came from another breed entirely, not pitifully human, cramped in spirit, practical and judgmental and guarded. Not like the mass of men when you break them down, the regular guy who is decent enough, but not kind enough to make the world bearable for the sensitive. Oh, that’s me! I loved The Count, my godfather.

“How did he become Count? Did he always go by that?” I asked my mother once.

“I think so,” my mother answered. “I can’t remember a time when he wasn’t The Count.”

She mused in her kitchen. “He was a magnificent man, wasn’t he?”

“Yup, nothing special on paper. Just grand. But no more.” He was already dead and buried. They all were, my older relatives who had played a big part in my life, raising me unconsciously by their actions, by their selves. I watched them carefully and picked up what I could of