

MYRA EASTMAN

*The Great Migration from El Salvador
to Santa Cruz—Water Jugs, 2018*

Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 46 in



NIKITA NELIN

Nu Means “Well”

Our immigration
from Russia to
the United States

It is 1995. I am fifteen. We are in Florida, and now you know where we're going. You know where we will land, and so you know that geography is only the context for this story.

I am by my mother's bed, restraining a fury that is failing me. I am trying to pull her out of bed. I am making speeches with the conviction of a revolutionary about how this is our chance at life again, how this, “this,” I wave my hand at the window to exaggerate a future outside beyond what we're living, “this can change everything.” It can get us out of here, this place we were never supposed to land. It can set things right.

She barely moves.

I am packing her bags and mine. I try to pull her from the bed, by her leg, but my effect is nothing. There are plane tickets waiting for us, to a new place, away from where we had been beached for all of my adolescence. I am yelling. I am convinced that this is the moment, this is the moment to go. But she cannot move. There is nothing physically broken in her. The trauma is deeper than even my knowledge of our family stories.

Having exhausted my anger, I sit down on the bed next to her. Bill Clinton plays the saxophone on the TV and the background noise is supposed to make us feel less alone in what is otherwise the beached state of nomads. I can sense the light setting outside and between us into dark.

“Nu . . .” I say.

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Nu means “well.” As in, “Well, here we are.” It never means “we are well.” You are never “*nu*.” It is never a commentary, though it can be a pause—“*nu . . .*” It can't be a “so,” because you can never be “*nu* and *nu* and *nu*” like you can “so and so.” *Nu* immigrated to Yiddish, not the other way around—*nu* was slowly cooked in clay family stoves to kill its bitter root. *Nu* finds its origins in Russia's horse-whipping serfs—*Nu*, thank you, Gogol. *Nu* is mostly gentle, mostly spoken by a friend, by someone familiar with your soul, unless they are packing a sidearm. If someone packing a sidearm says *nu*, they are demanding papers.

My mother admits that, *nu*, she does not remember much of that first train ride when we fled Moscow in November of '89. She had had a molar removed three days before we left. By the rules of Soviet dental barbarianism,