

BEVERLY SKY

The Mind of God: The Big Think, 2014
Fabric collage on canvas, 36 x 36 in



COURTESY: STEVE DUNWELL

JOE MENO

War on Terror

She had been a reporter for six years, first at *The Plain Dealer* in Cleveland, then back in Chicago at the *Daily Southtown*; then she'd landed a poorly paid entertainment-and-culture staff position at the *Sun-Times* a year ago just as several other newspapers around the country had begun to fold. About her were all the obvious signs of a major print medium, an entire civilization, in decline. But she was forty-one, too old to jump the track again.

Before she made it home, she got a text from her younger sister. *Help*, was all it said. She punched the vinyl steering wheel, turned left from the wrong lane, and ended up at her sister's place, a tiny one-bedroom apartment on the city's far southwest side.

Krista was in the bathroom, vomiting. Her son, Brody—six years old—was watching TV on the couch. The kitchen table was filled with prescription bottles, some of them open, some turned upside down—Krista's unorthodox way of remembering which medicines she had already taken. She had been in remission for two years from breast cancer, but recently her oncologist had discovered a malignancy in the other breast. There was now a possibility that some of it had spread to her liver and lungs. She had begun chemotherapy three weeks ago. She was going to have to get another port put in. Now everything was going too fast.

Sam kissed Brody on the head, put the lids back on the prescription bottles, and then went in to check on her sister. Krista was curled up beside the toilet bowl, head on the floor. She looked pretty, even in her red pet store uniform. Her teeth were yellow from chain-smoking, her hair white-blonde with its dark roots showing, the ends brittle and matted from the chemo and from dyeing it so often. There was a round photo-button on her uniform vest lapel, a picture of her son. She lifted her head and gave a false smile.

"Hey, kiddo," Sam said, kneeling beside her.

"I left some of the bottles open," she murmured.

"I got 'em."

Krista nodded. Sam ran some warm water, folded up a dirty washrag, soaked it, and pressed it against Krista's head.

"Where were you?" Krista asked. "I texted you like five times."

"Nowhere. They killed some people in Libya." She scratched her nose. "Do you want to get up from there?"

"No. Will you get Brody into bed?"

On September 11th, 2012, a group of armed men stormed the American embassy in Benghazi and killed four people, including a U.S. ambassador. Sam got a call from a friend an hour after it happened, and watched it all unfold on cable TV in the near-empty break room. It was around seven at night. She flipped from channel to channel, searching for any familiar faces. She had done five years in the Peace Corps, and then two in the Foreign Service Office of the U.S. Department of State. When she was certain no one she knew had been hurt, she strode out of the break room, turned off her computer, and grabbed her purse. It felt like, at any moment, something terrible could happen; at any moment, something could go seriously wrong.

She waited for the elevator, and when it arrived, felt spooked seeing it so empty. The elevator was always empty now that the entire photography staff had been laid off.

Same with the parking lot. She hustled through the deserted lot over to her car—a badly used Honda, its catalytic converter and muffler hanging from the chassis by baling wire—fumbled for her keys, and then looked up. On her windshield was another note, placed beneath the driver's-side wiper blade, the ink bright pink: "You're Dead, Bitch." She crumpled up the note, unlocked her car, and threw the piece of paper in the glove compartment along with the other balled-up threats.