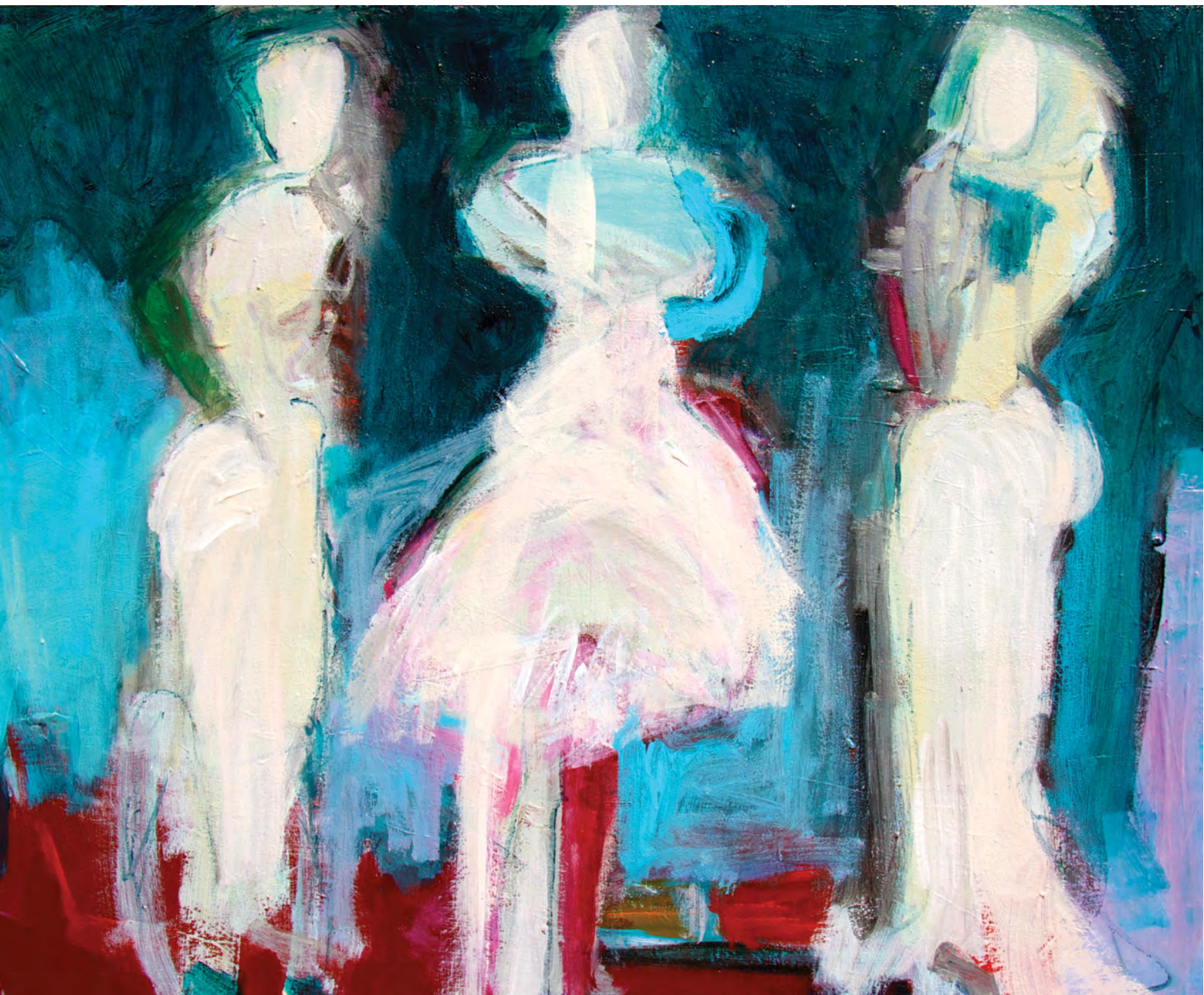


RONNA SCHULKIN

Three Ghosts, 2013
oil on canvas, 36 x 40 in



courtesy: the artist

HELENE WECKER

The Mechanics of Falling Stars

For Ray Bradbury

The baby is having trouble sleeping. It might be a tooth cutting through, or it might be the heat. Whichever it is makes little difference—the mother has grown tired of the guessing game, has decided the guessing game is beside the point. The point is to make the baby feel better. The point is to sleep. So she retrieves the baby—standing, crying—from the crib, and down they go to the playroom, the baby’s wet face pressed to her neck. She makes shushing noises. *Too hot for tears*, she murmurs.

The playroom is cooler, and set to nighttime. She lies back on the cushioned floor, the baby’s head on her arm. A tiny hand goes to her chest. Slim fingernails press moon-dents into flesh. She flinches, but doesn’t move the hand away. The baby seems to need this contact lately, skin to skin. A holdover from nursing? Did she wean too soon? The guessing game, again.

Her fingers in the dark find the remote. The ceiling flickers. Large spheres appear, one after the other, and begin to slowly rotate. This is the baby’s favorite. She watches the baby watch the spheres. The baby’s cheek is a deep blue curve. The dark lashes blink. In daytime the baby is an unstoppable force, evading all attempts at control. At night the baby is a calmer creature, watching, listening. She thinks, a little guiltily, that it would be nice if the baby were like this in the daytime, when she could enjoy it.

Mercury, she whispers to the baby. *Venus, Earth, Mars. Luna. Phobos, Deimos*. She wants to say more. She wants to point out oceans and forests, craters and ruins. She could click the remote, and the spaces between the spheres would sprout red pinpricks, a network of rockets, their ruby trajectories scalloping the black. Another click, and each rocket would blossom with data: crew and cargo manifests, trajectories and intercept vectors. The nearest way stations in a crisis, the quickest rescue points.

But this is her work, the vocation of her days, and she has labored hard to protect her hours with the baby. She has been firm on this point. The baby will learn everything in time. So she lies still, and lets the planets just be planets, the moons just moons.

The baby stares up, up. Then, at last, a yawn.

She tries to relax, to be patient. As she waits, a memory surfaces, one that’s always close at hand. She is ten years old, and lying in the long grass behind her grandparents’ house, in the heavy night air of an Illinois summer. The