

MARGARET NIVEN

Timber, 2015
Oil on Paper, 72 x 42 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST. PHOTO CREDIT: R.R. JONES.

DALY WALKER

At the Door

An angry fist beat against the door of Harold's log cabin. The noise awakened him from a recurring dream. In the dream, his deceased wife, Marge, was still alive but for some unknown reason she had disappeared. Harold went from room to room in a big empty house desperately calling her name. But there was no answer. Now the fist banged harder. The window glass rattled.

Since Marge's death, the ninety-three-year-old retired doctor lived alone deep in a hardwood forest on a narrow gravel lane four miles from his nearest neighbor. He slept naked. His once wavy dark hair had thinned and whitened. He had let it grow long, and he tied it back in a ponytail. His body was lank, tough and lean as a strip of jerky. But his pale and ancient skin hung on his frame in pleats like an oversized garment. Harold had been a busy and beloved family physician, someone who saved lives and brought comfort to his patients no matter their station in life. Now he believed his greatest accomplishment was survival. Groggy, Harold thought it must be Marge at the door. She's come back, Harold thought. His heart leapt.

"Wait a minute, dear," he said. "I'll let you in."

But as the haze of sleep lifted, he remembered she had been gone for five years. Harold rolled onto his side. The old doctor squinted at the luminous numbers of the clock beside the urinal on the bedside stand. It was one thirty. He lay still and listened. The pounding grew louder.

"Stop it, for Christ's sake" Harold muttered. "Be quiet and leave me alone."

Normally Harold wasn't afraid of threats from the external world. What he feared were the inner ravages of old age like losing his memory, or becoming blind with macular degeneration so he could no longer see the dogwood and redbud blossoms in the spring, or otosclerosis that would steal his ability to hear the barred owl whose call to him at night asked, "Who cooks for you?"

But now a suffocating dread coiled around Harold's chest. Cold sweat beaded his brow. He sat up and listened. Although he didn't believe in a God who meddled in the lives of individuals, he said a prayer for whomever was at the door to just leave. The knock crescendoed.

Harold thought of calling 911, but his telephone hadn't worked since a thunderstorm a month ago. For a moment, he wished he still had his double-barrel Winchester 21,