DAVID LIGARE

Magna Fide (The Great Belief), 2014
Oil on canvas, 54 x 84 in

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MOLLY GLOSS

Dead Men Rise Up Never

These days, he's famous. You pick up a magazine and there's a story he's written, you open a newspaper and he's covering the Russo-Jap War or sailing around the world, escaping cannibals in the South Seas. But when I first knew him he was just a kid, a "work beast" he liked to call himself, on account of he was up every morning at three delivering newspapers, out again with the late papers after school, working Saturdays on an ice wagon and Sundays setting up pins in a bowling alley. Then a couple of years later—this would have been '90 or maybe '91—he was an oyster pirate, hanging around the Oakland waterfront and pretty often drunk. But I was there too, stealing oysters and becoming pretty thoroughly alcohol soaked, so don't take any of this as judgment.

We were school chums, Johnny and me, which you wouldn't have thought. You'd have thought he was a sissy and a bookworm, owing to the fact he'd plant himself on a bench in the school yard every recess and stick his nose in a book, which was a long mile from my own practice, which ran more to shooting squirrels with a pellet gun and collecting cigarette coupons, trading them for picture cards of racehorses, prizefighters, stage actors, and such. But one time this big kid, Mike Pinella, ground his boot into my best set of Indian chieftain cards, and Johnny just popped off the bench, lit into the kid, and bloodied his nose, which redeemed him in my mind. Then it turned out he collected cards too, so after that we started hanging around together. When his afternoon papers were finished, we'd go after mud hens on the Oakland Estuary with homemade slingshots, or rent a rowboat if we had the price, pull out onto the bay and fish for rock cod, or just stroll along the waterfront watching ships sail through the Golden Gate. And I visited him at home a few times, which was how I first got acquainted with Plume and the rest of that spiritistic realm.

His mother's name was Flora, though she wasn't any pretty flower. She was dwarfish with a skimpy head of dark hair, black squinty eyes, a thin mouth always set in a hard, straight line. I wouldn't say she was ugly, although she came near to it, and she had a savage glare verging on madness. But she advertised herself as a medium holding séances and planchette readings, and in that field of work odd looks were the wonted thing, an inkling of her profession.

I had the idea that the furnishings in Johnny's house might be tattooed with mystical configurations and puzzles kabbalistic, but they were living in a dingy little cottage on Pine Street near the estuary in West Oakland, and the front room had just a coal stove, some plain chairs and bare floors, and a drop leaf table covered with newspaper in lieu of a table cloth—the only time I saw a good linen cloth on that table was when Flora was holding a séance. You wouldn't know you were in an uncanny house except for the half dozen Mason jars lined up on a shelf in the kitchen. Johnny said the dark shapes in each one, small as wrens and slowly turning in milky plasma, were the corpses of dybbuks and poltergeists his mother had taken captive. He said this offhandedly, with a sidelong glance at me, so I didn't know whether to take it for truth or mockery. Looking back, I think maybe he hadn't made up his mind himself.

Flora had been born to luxury—she'd had an education in music and elocution and social graces, all of which she'd lost when her mother died and she couldn't get along with her stepmother. She was always looking for ways to get back to that fancy life, but when I knew the family she was married to a man who wasn't Johnny's daddy, a part-time carpenter and farmer without prospects for improving their situation. Her knack for the occult brought in, at most, a middling income, so she was always hectoring her husband into unsupportable ventures and money-losing schemes one after the other, while betting the household budget on Chinese lottery games. The Work Beast turned over nearly every cent he made to his mother, who had always to be bailed out of some financial hole or other.

Flora communicated with several kinds of spirits—ghosts, wraiths, sprites, even jinni. She'd walk around the house talking with one or another of them, asking their advice, listening to their secrets, whispering hers, and it was those pneumae that she called on for the séances and planchette readings that made up most of her business.

Plume, in particular, occupied Flora's body whenever she conducted a séance. All the clients in those days were set on Indians, and Plume, so Flora said, had been a Blackfoot war chief in his temporal life. Plume spoke English in a growly low voice and he punctuated every séance with wild war whoops. He could get the people holding hands around the table to moan and chant and whoop as if they too were Indians gathering for a war dance, and more than anything else this is what brought Flora her trade.

Johnny liked to put on an air of disdain for his mother's ghosts, but not from disbelief. It was his opinion that none of the spirits she talked to, even Plume, were better than third-rate. They might tell a woman that her uncle had a goiter—information of no particular use to her—or that a man's peach crop would come down with canker, which anybody could guess from the wet winter, but none of the spirits who hung around Flora's house could tell a man where he might nail a job or find a gold mine. When any of them gave advice to Flora herself, what numbers to bet in the Chinese lottery for instance, the numbers would always be off by one or two. And if the messages they sent to her clients weren't outright worthless they were usually cryptic, damn near impossible to make sense of, which Flora promoted as mysterious, but Johnny thought was their canny way of hiding ignorance.

"I don't know why she listens to any of them," he told me. "They never come across with any goods." But it galled him that Flora kept the planchette and her whispered correspondence to herself. In spite of his low regard for Plume and the others, he couldn't help thinking if he ever had the chance to slip a question into their world, he might learn the truth of his parentage.

His father had died before Johnny was born, or so Flora had always said, but in one telling it was a tragic accident in a lumber mill, another time a heroic death, saving his pregnant wife from desperadoes. Yet again, he'd been run over by a wagon in the street. Her vague and shifting accounts left Johnny plenty of room for his own lively notions. He liked to imagine he was the natural-born child of a famous man—it was Muir or Roosevelt, usually—stolen from his rightful family as an infant, while his true parents (Flora not his actual mother) were even now searching the world for him. But I suppose he knew this was fanciful; what he really wanted from his mother's spirits was to be put in touch with his father's ghost.

* * *

My folks moved us up to Auburn right after Johnny and I graduated grammar school. In the letters we passed back and forth after that, he said he was working for Hickmott's Cannery, stuffing pickles into jars for ten cents an hour, which was long hours and filthy work. But he was squirreling away the small change, finding the gumption finally to keep some of his wages out of the hands of his mother, and when he had enough saved up he planned to buy a boat.

He could sail, Johnny could, having taught himself by the time he was twelve, navigating in rented boats across those forty miles of open water thronged with commercial traffic and up the northern end of the bay through all those estuaries and inlets, swift-current narrows and treacherous shallows. He was a natural sailor, and it was his idea to quit the cannery and be an oyster pirate.

The oyster beds all up and down the bay were owned by the railroad. Armed guards protected the beds, and pirating was a felony, so the California Fish Patrol was also on the lookout. But a daring pirate could earn a month's factory wages from one good night's haul, and the way Johnny thought of it, oyster pirates were folk heroes fighting the Octopus. The railroad monopoly kept the prices high, and when pirates undersold to saloons and stores along the waterfront everybody but the railroad came out the winner. It was dangerous business—every nighttime raid was an invitation to get shot or arrested—but that wasn't any discouragement to Johnny, just the opposite. He was a bookish kid who had learned to hide that side of his nature behind a front of nerve and daring. He wrote to me that prison would be an easier life than working at the cannery.

Well, every pirate needed a crew, a fellow or two to drop from the boat and fan out across the mudflats gathering up the plunder; so after he bought his boat, a decked-over fourteen footer with a centerboard, he wrote and offered me a one-third split. I left the factory job I had in Auburn, came down to Oakland, and moved in with Johnny, into his little slant-roofed bedroom tacked onto the side of the kitchen. I told my parents I was taking taxidermy lessons in San Francisco.

We went out only on the darkest nights when the tide was low. Some nights were so dark I couldn't see the boat a couple of yards away, and more than once, reaching down into the black water to grab slippery oysters off the seabed, I'd feel something greasy, something cold as ice, brush through my hands. I guess it was Flora's influence that led me to think this wasn't any fish or eel. She had never said there were wraiths or ghosts in the drink, but

He was a natural sailor, and it was his idea to quit the cannery and be an oyster pirate.

I knew there were drowned men aplenty, and the hardest part of pirating, for me, was reaching down into that oily wet darkness, not knowing what I might touch, and imagining the worst. I never admitted a bit of this to Johnny; I guess I was working up a front of nerve and daring myself, when it came to ghosts and suchlike.

We ran oysters for a couple of years without getting shot. We had some close calls but Johnny had a thoroughgoing knowledge of the water's depth everywhere along that shoreline, and his boat had a shallower draft, was frailer but faster than the patrol boats, plus he had a gift for sailing in absolute silence over still water where any knock or bump could make a shocking loud noise.

Whenever the moon was too bright or the tide too high for pirating, we hung around the Oakland waterfront with the rest of the hoodlums and drunkards and became fairly much drunks ourselves, which I have already mentioned. And we might have gone on like that until we finally got ourselves killed or thrown in the pen—that was the path we were on. But one night after a couple of hours of blind drinking, Johnny had the idea we ought to steal the planchette from his mother's cupboard and try to get in touch with his dead father. I was too drunk to put up an argument, so we stumbled back to his house and he snuck the planchette into the little bedroom we slept in. And the way his life unfolded after that, the whole adventure path he followed—and my life too, as far as that goes, the unhappy, insolvent path I've followed—was more or less on account of that night.

* * *

The planchette twisted under our fingers and began to write.

I don't know if you've seen a planchette—in modern times it's gone out of use in favor of Ouija boards. The one Flora used was a heart-shaped piece of African blackwood supported by two wheeled casters carved of bone, with an aperture at the apex to hold a pen, the needle-sharp tip of the pen being the heart's third support. Flora always pretended to poke the nib into the palm of her hand so the planchette's words would be written in blood, but the truth was, her palm hid a tiny vial of red ink. Johnny didn't want to fake it, he wanted the answers to be real, written in his own real blood. So we spread a sheet of newsprint flat on the floor and set the planchette in the middle of it and Johnny pierced his hand with the nib of the pen. He could be quiet as death when we were out pirating, but he was pretty drunk that night and not seeming to care how much noise he made, which I suppose is why Flora came into the room in her nightdress just as the pen had pulled his blood up into its tip. A few drops fell on the newspaper as she fixed her mad, glittering black eyes on each of us in turn, and I don't know when I've felt such a cold fear. But I'll say this for Johnny, he put on a solemn face and made up a lie on the spot.

"One of the fellows at the docks got killed dead tonight, killed by the Fish Patrol. We weren't with him when he died. We are hoping the planchette will have some last words for us, something from our pal, to guide us in the earth-life. "

This went well with her. She knew his low opinion of Plume and the others, and it must have surprised her that he would wish to ask the planchette a question. She may have taken it as a sign that her son had finally come around to respecting her occult gift. In any case, she pulled her brows together over her nose, considering, and then just gathered up her gown and sat right down on the floor with us and placed her fingertips on the wooden heart.

"You should touch the board very lightly but firmly, and do nothing of your own volition," she said, in a hoarse whisper.

I had spied on her readings a few times, but I'd never touched a planchette myself. There was a little electrical shiver when I touched the board, which maybe was my own nerves, but when Johnny placed his hands on the board the whole thing trembled. And after a long moment, the wooden heart went skating across the paper. We all leaned in, watching the pen trace a line of red words. Then Johnny straightened up and threw me a look, "Oh, that's Herbert's hand," he said. "Isn't it, Frank? I would know his fist anywhere. It's Herbert's, I'm sure of it. Isn't it?"

Well, there wasn't anybody down at the docks named Herbert, dead or alive, but I said, "That's his hand, all right," and Flora nodded solemnly.

"You may ask the board a Question Unspoken," she said, in a spectral voice. "That is, with your mind only. Your friend or his kindred spirit will bring word from him."

So we kept our hands lightly on the board and closed our eyes and I guess Johnny asked his Question Unspoken. For myself, I asked the planchette for a bit of information about the Fish Patrol and what haul we could expect from the next low tide. The planchette twitched under our fingers and began to write. When the heart ceased moving, Flora pulled her arms into her lap with a sigh and seemed to wake from half sleep, and then Johnny and I leaned in to read what was written on the paper: *for the youthful inquirer after truth dead men rise up never seducer astrologer Carquinez* and then a scratchy line unreadable as the blood-ink ran dry.

To my mind the message was just about worthlessly opaque, but it seemed to mean something to Johnny. His face colored up and he threw a wild look at his mother, who appeared flustered, her squinty eyes blinking and blinking.

"Not dead!" Johnny said. "He's some damn astrologer or horoscopist living over on the Carquinez Strait and I'm his bastard child!"

Johnny, of course, had asked the planchette to put him in touch with his father's ghost and he sure as hell knew what the answering message meant: he was the bastard son of a living philanderer. I expected Flora to argue the planchette's meaning, and she briefly did. "Now, do not mind this message, Johnny, such a strange message must not be meant for you, something from an abnormal imagination, a strange zodiacal voice to be sure, and not to be credited." She babbled on, all the while she caught up the paper from under the planchette and crumpled it.

But as Johnny went on shouting—"You're a damned liar! Quit playing tricks!"—she grew boiling mad and gave up all pretense. Her defense became a lurid tale about a faked horoscope and a clever seduction, attempted suicides, a thwarted abortion. She stormed and raved, shouting down her son with the anthems of a sufferer: "Innocent! Abandoned! Destitute! Cast on the mercy of friends! You might never have been born!"

Flora was famous for her temper, and Johnny was no match for her outrage, never had been. They wrangled back and forth a while and then he just took off from the house, cracking along so fast I had to jog-trot to catch up to him. We headed for the Heinold Saloon, a cracker box of a bar built on pilings over the water at the end of Webster Street and open all night. Heinold knew our likes, and we were already half-drunk when we came in, so before long we were thoroughly plastered.

Johnny railed against his mother a good long while and then began pouring scorn on the son of a bitch who had fathered him, and in the late middle of the night he asked me, "How many astrologers can there be in that damn town?" meaning Benecia on the Carquinez Strait. He didn't have the man's name, only that his trade was horoscopy.

"We oughta go on over there and smoke the skunk out," I told him.

So we stumbled down to the wharf and put out in Johnny's skiff. We were somewhere at the upper end of San Pablo Bay where the current runs pretty fast out of Carquinez when Johnny in a drunken stupor missed his footing and fell overboard. There was nothing but a fingernail moon; it was so dark I could only just make out his wan face bobbing on the water, receding from me as the boat sailed on. We shouted back and forth while I fumbled to get the boat turned around, but by the time I got back to where he'd gone over there was nothing to see but a dark glimmer on the water. My shouts went unanswered.

He wrote up the story afterward, the whole account; maybe you have read it yourself. He was thoroughly under alcohol's sway, and when the current took him down the strait, the shore lights slipping farther and farther into the distance, he decided this drunken exploit was a perfect closure to his imperfect life. "A romantic rounding off of my short but daring career."

He was in the water a good four hours, alternately floating and swimming, thinking he might die or wishing to, and then falling into dreams, long, disquiet dreams, he said, and when the effects of the liquor began to fade it dawned on him that he didn't in the least want to drown. But a stiff breeze had sprung up, choppy little waves were lapping into his mouth, and he was beginning to swallow salt water. He was cold and miserable and utterly done in. And then Plume came roaring into his head, into his whole body, and kept him alive.

"The game is worth the candle"—that's what he remembered Plume saying. "I was ready to cash in my chips, but I felt like those were the magic words that banished all the irks and riddles of existence. Those hours in the water, it was one of those age-long nights that embrace an eternity of happening."

A Greek fisherman running his boat into Vallejo pulled him out of the water sometime in the early morning hours, and right after that he signed on with the *Sophia Sutherland*, a schooner headed to Japan and the Bering Sea to hunt seals. He wrote me later that he had given up using the name Johnny and begun calling himself Jack. He said he liked the tougher sound of it.

* * *

In 1906 I was living in Santa Rosa, which, after the big earthquake, was a smoking ruin every bit as much as San Francisco. I hadn't seen Johnny in a few years. He was famous by then and there were plenty of people asking for his time, but I would send a letter, and every so often he'd write back. After the quake he surprised me with a note, in some concern as to whether I had made it through or was burned out. He was living on a ranch up in Sonoma Valley by then, but he came down to Oakland, and I took the ferry over, and he met me at the landing. We spent the day at Heinold's Saloon, knocking back more than a few. Heinold's had always been the place for off-season seamen,

DAVID LIGARE

Still Life With Gold Sphere, 2015
Oil on canvas, 20 x 24 in

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and draymen hauling loads across the estuary bridge, as well as hoboes and other assorted down-and-outers. A few of them happened into the place while we were there, and I saw Johnny slip a dollar into more than one hand.

I asked after his life, and he told a few stories, but he was modest about it, leaving out the perils and escapades. He'd been an able seaman in the Japan Sea, had been a hobo for a while, had gone up to the Klondike with the rest of the gold diggers, that was all he said. Well, he was a big celebrity by '06, and in the stories I'd read, he'd saved a crewman who went overboard in a typhoon out of Yokohama. He'd been jailed and beaten up when he was marching to Washington with General Kelly's hobo army. He'd climbed through the Chilkoot Pass under a heavy load and then hiked from Deep Lake to Lake Linderman three or four times a day carrying 150 pounds of gear each time. Survived on scant rations through a bitter winter in the Klondike and canoed out through the roughest water any man had ever paddled.

When he asked after my life, I told him, "I'm a taxidermist with a wife and five children, that's the short story. The only adventure I ever had was palling around with you." I guess he could see that my shoes and trousers had known better days.

We went on drinking into the night and then he walked me back to the ferry landing. We leaned on the railing along the harbor front, smoking stogies and looking out at the dark water, and after a while he said, "You remember that night we snuck the planchette into my room?"

I remembered it. "The planchette told you the truth and you took it hard."

He gave me a look and shook his head. "Hell, Frank, it wasn't the planchette. I was moving the pen so it'd write something close to what I wanted. My cousin had told me the truth, and I just couldn't work up the nerve to confront my mother. I figured I'd get the planchette to bring it up. I don't know what the hell the pen would have written if I hadn't been moving it around.

"But I hadn't figured on my mother blowing her stack like that, I thought she'd cry and beg me to forgive her." He slid me a half smile. "I never planned it, but it sure gave her a good scare, me rising up from the dead like a drowned ghost, and when I said it was Plume who saved me, that

He'd been an able seaman in the Japan Sea, had been a hobo for awhile, had gone up to the Klondike with the rest of the gold diggers . . .

did the job. She couldn't quit wailing and asking pardon for lying to me all those years."

I wasn't sure what to make of this. "You always said it was Plume who took over your body and kept you alive."

He looked at me sidelong. "She claimed the Chief never conversed with anybody but her. That's the whole reason I said it was Plume. To shake her."

I don't know if he had started out that night planning to tell me the truth, but once he got started he just went ahead. He said when he went overboard he wasn't thinking he might die nor wishing to, he was too drunk out of his wits to hold that kind of a thought. He said he just drifted on the cold current and after a short while washed up on the north shore. Nothing of strange dreams and never a word from Plume. When the sun came up, he swam out from the beach far enough to fake the need of rescue.

I guess it should have burned me up, hearing all this about the planchette and the night he went overboard in the bay. But I just felt myself becoming someone old and feeble, bent under a weight of years.

Nobody in my own family had ever put much faith in spiritism. My mother was firm in her Methodist beliefs, firm in the knowledge that souls abided after death, but equally sure that spiritism might open a channel to the devil. I had come into Johnny's house unacquainted

with the spiritistic world and somewhat in fear of it. But after the planchette told us the story of Johnny's parentage, and after Plume kept Johnny alive all those hours in the cold waters of the bay, well, I swung around to trust in mediums, and the spirit world, and in the years afterward I have more or less lived my life by their advice. The truth is, I hardly ever got counsel from them that did me any good. It would be something I already knew, or purely bad information, or else something so murky I couldn't make sense of it. But once in a blue moon one of the spirits at a séance or a planchette reading would let loose with something shrewd, something bona fide, which kept me on the hook, and I would take another run at it, hoping the answer this time might improve my fortune. Hoping one of them might one day quit playing tricks and do me a modest good turn.

You might say my troubles are due to my own foolishness, and I might not disagree.

* * *

Johnny had inherited a touch of the occult gift himself, being the son of a medium and a horoscopist—that's what I used to think. I always figured his luck, his fortunate career, all the close calls and heroism he'd written about, and the daring escapes from calamity, had come about with help from the spirits. I believed every word he wrote for truth.

I never told him that while he'd been sleeping off his drunken stupor on a north shore beach, I'd been searching the dark water in a widening eddy of guilt and despair. The water in that bay was so damn cold nobody overboard ever lasted long, this was something we all knew. When I tacked back to the Oakland docks at sunrise, I was shaking so hard from grief and hopelessness I couldn't get up the strength to walk over to Flora's to bring her the news. I told Heinold the story and he sent someone off to the house, and I just sat down on the pier and wept. And it was hours before we got word that Johnny'd been pulled from the drink alive. Hours more before he told us all about Plume and "the game is worth the candle."

* * *

Before we split up for the night, I asked if he'd ever looked up the astrologer in Carquinez who might have been his father. He took a while to answer. "Dead men rise up never," he said, in old Plume's spectral voice, which was just the sort of murky answer I was accustomed to hearing from the spirits.

Molly Gloss is a novelist and short-story writer whose work has received, among other honors, a PEN West Fiction Prize; an Oregon Book Award; Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Awards; the James Tiptree, Jr. Literary Award; and a Whiting Writers Award. Her work most often concerns the landscape, literature, mythology, and life of the American West. She writes both realistic fiction and science fiction. A fourth-generation Oregonian, she lives in Portland.

DAVID LIGARE

Man With Crow, 2015
Oil on canvas, 40 x 48 in

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