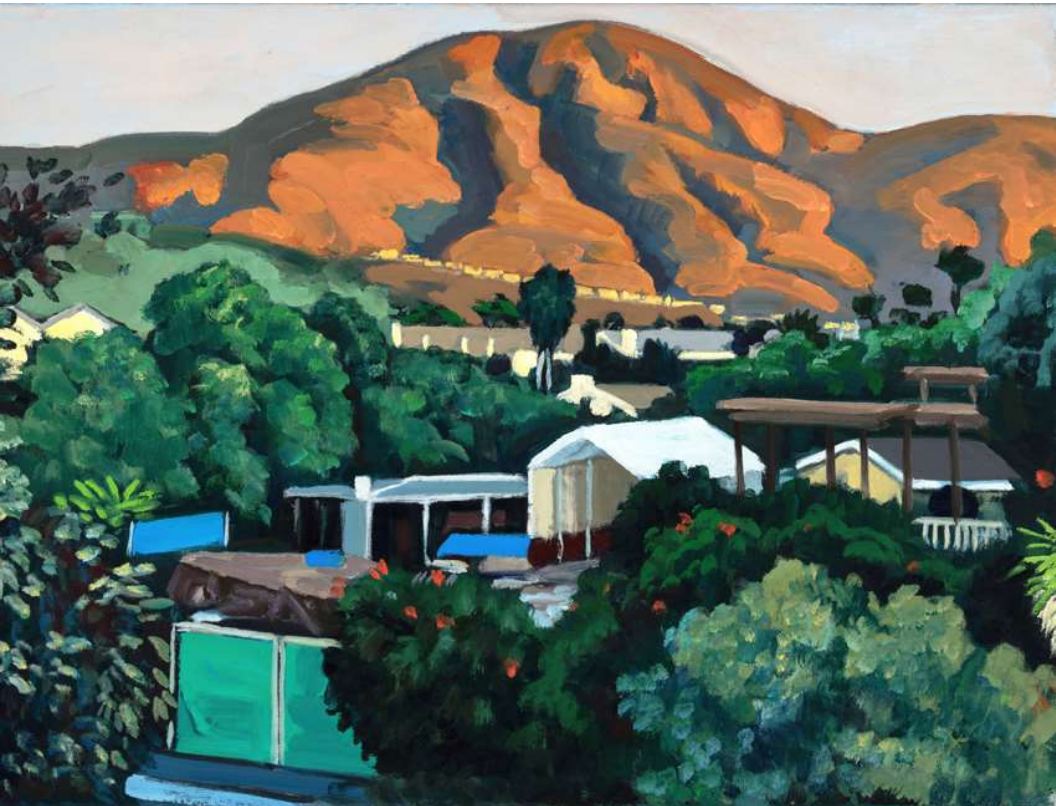


## JEFFREY CARR

*Sunset on Mt. Miguel, 2018*  
Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## LAURA HEFFINGTON

### Dear Thomas

**D**ear Thomas,  
I put myself into detox. I wanted to explain to you where I went, because I disappeared all of a sudden, just as you were asking me a bunch of questions about moving here. I'm afraid of what you'll think, but I can't stand worrying about it anymore, and the story you'd come up with on your own might be worse than the truth.

Maybe you'll want to know how this happened, since we just spent a week together in Michigan for your brother's memorial, and you either didn't notice anything or didn't mention it. Sometimes it's hard for people to know what's going on with me, at least that's what people say when I start answering my phone again. But now the more I think about it, the less of an explanation I seem to have to give you, so I guess I'll just say whatever I can think of.

Most people who go into treatment these days are there for drug addiction. I don't do any of that stuff. I just drink, that's all. Plenty of people drink, for all kinds of reasons. Even when people drink because they're sad over a break-up, or because they're anxious on a first date, or when they're on vacation with their family and still can't seem to relax . . . when they drink for any of a million feeling-altering reasons, no one will look sideways at them. It isn't like heroin, where you're totally outside of society and you have to go to some seedy part of town and creep around searching for some other miscreant to sell you something you both could get a felony for. No one goes to Target for shampoo and finds themselves face-to-face with a multi-aisle display of methamphetamine when the elevator doors open. Grocery stores are full of alcohol, restaurants are full of alcohol, people's houses. Normal people drink.

And when I drink, most of what I'm trying to apply it to is normal stuff. Phone calls, to-do lists. I don't drink to have fun. It's like I was born a brittle old woman and have to infuse myself with artificial tolerance and elasticity so that I don't begin to calculate how many more times I will have to wash the dishes over the course of my life. I fold laundry, I pay bills, I pull weeds. I once came out of a blackout and found I'd filed my taxes in a timely manner. I have a continually regenerating sense of outrage about the amount of time we're all supposed to spend cleaning things, filing things, reorganizing clutter, getting our oil changed, getting our teeth cleaned, mailing bills, filling out forms, answering emails, clearing up cobwebs, taking

*I've always had  
this problem with  
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from the outside.*

in trash cans and taking them out. I wish I could say that I become a tempestuous, exciting figure when I drink, but I'm probably about as boring then as I am sober, except with more resistance to what I perceive as the soul-sucking demands of adult life and with an increased likelihood of stomach bleeding.

I've always had this problem with feeling like I'm watching myself from the outside. When I was a kid I couldn't seem to get involved in things, I had no clue how I felt about those things, and on the rare occasions when I did make contact with my emotions, it wasn't my choice, and they might leak out at irrelevant or inconvenient times. I was always afraid of being asked how I felt about something because I'd feel on the spot to come up with a response that sounded like the right one, the one that I assumed that people were expecting. I could interact with other people, but I couldn't present or even identify what should have been my "true self." It wasn't as though I was being rejected or "didn't fit in." It was more like I didn't exist at all, except as this thing that this other disembodied thing was watching.

Most of my strong emotions have revolved around an intrusive and helpless tendency toward romantic obsession. I've hoped desperately that my attention wouldn't somehow land on a suitable male, and pretty soon it would happen anyway, and the hook would go in, and I would spend months tortured by his every move and terrified to take any action lest it be the wrong one. And then one night at a Mexican restaurant the man over whom I had been wringing my hands and dieting for two years, had been

twiddling my thumbs and ineffectually getting pedicures and new hairdos while reading psychology books about persuasion, this man asked me if I wanted to have a beer. I didn't even like beer, I still don't. But that didn't matter.

"I never realized what great chemistry we have," he said. "It's like the air is electric!" From then on I had to drink every time I saw that man, and I drank to get through the monotony of chores, and I drank to feel like I was a real person, and pretty soon I drank every day.

And all that would have been fine, but the trouble is that sooner or later I wind up crawling around on the bathroom floor with the door locked, blubbering apologies to loved ones over the phone, or vomiting into a trash can while praying to a god I don't believe in.

So this is why I went to detox.

I've never been to any kind of addiction treatment before, and I always had a fantasy that going to a place like this would be a sort of vacation and I would lounge around reading books, being enriched by equine therapy, and having meals prepared for me, and everything would be taken care of by other people whose only job was to help me feel better. I used to get resentful about your brother going to rehab, because I thought, oh, here he goes, off to a nice rest, while I'm stuck in the real world with all of my adult "privileges" and associated responsibilities, try as I might on some subconscious level to eliminate at least a few of them.

He tried to tell me how soul-crushing rehab actually is, but I figured if he hated it so much, then he ought to stop doing drugs. I didn't need any of that stuff, I got sober on my own. We had a kid! Anyone who continued to get loaded when they had kids was a disgusting asshole, and I never missed an opportunity to say it.

So many times he had to go back in. So many times that we lost count, and after we split up over it, it kept on. I feel awful about that now. I should've listened. It wouldn't have killed me to listen, for god's sake. And please don't tell me that it's understandable or that I did the best I could. I wasn't doing the best that I could, and nothing about it is understandable. It's a big sad mess, that's all.

Anyway, rehab makes a person feel like an utter failure, with nothing but time to contemplate it.

You probably already know for one reason or another, given the collective family history, that a detox isn't the same thing as an inpatient rehab; it's shorter. It's just the

place where you get whatever it is out of your system, and then you either continue on to residential treatment or you try your luck in the outside world. I used to have a hard time remembering the difference, back when none of it applied to me, so I'm clarifying it just in case. I'm supposed to be here for five days.

I'm not sure where I am in relation to the city of Los Angeles. I don't really remember much about the drive over here. I know that this place was once a house and tries to continue to appear as such, although the high turnover rate of occupants as well as the frequent visits from ambulances probably tip the neighbors off. I guess they put treatment facilities in houses sometimes so that people can feel "at home." Because everyone's home is filled with paramedic techs and urinalysis cups, and everyone gets their toothbrush and cell phone taken away and has to make all their calls in front of someone, on a landline, and their roommate is actually *in* their room and is someone they've never met before.

During the intake process, I had to give a lot of information that most likely no one will ever read. I was asked if anyone in my family had diabetes, how tall I was, whether I had food allergies, how many drinks I had in a day on average. I didn't know, because I don't have "drinks." I just drink out of the bottle. I was asked for the contact information of my son's other parent. "He's dead," I told the intake person. I hate telling people that, for so many reasons, but especially in this situation, for these forms. She didn't have any visible reaction.

After that they showed me to what was probably once the master bedroom of the house, where I slept for a few hours in one of two beds before jolting awake at around five thirty in the morning as if someone had poured ice water on my head, wondering what I'd missed, which is how I always seem to wake up. As it turned out I'd missed nothing whatsoever, since no one here wakes up until around eleven at the earliest.

So now I'm back in the bed, waiting for something to start happening out there. On the ceiling is painted, "Rest, and know that with each passing moment, you are getting better." It's painted on the wall as well, except that on the wall the lettering has shading behind it, and on the ceiling it doesn't. Somebody made a mistake.

A sliding glass door opens out onto a back yard patio

of incredible depressitude, with two struggling, leggy geranium bushes and a lot of concrete. In one corner is a mini fountain surrounded by LED votive candles that do not turn on (I checked) and containing rocks with the words *serenity*, *tranquility*, and *peace* printed on them. The water must be hard, because all of these things are covered in mineral deposits. There are also a lot of ashtrays. There are probably more ashtrays than anything else in the place.

Proceeding on with the bedroom, there are five framed photographs on the wall opposite the bed I have been assigned, all of people engaged in what appear to be rewarding activities, without, I assume, feeling the need to enhance their situations by drinking or smoking crack.

The first is of a chef, dribbling what looks like a tomato-based sauce over a square plate load of shrimps. The second is a close-up of hands on a potter's wheel. The third is a smirking female painter in an eccentric vest holding two paintbrushes (two brushes at once?) while considering a canvas. The next is a bearded man holding an electric bass in a recording studio. And last but not best, the most interesting photo of all, because I have no idea what it is and have deliberately avoided going closer to find out.

From here I can discern two major elements—a metallic tubular thing ending in a smoochy part and a fleshy thing coming into contact with the other part at the lower left corner of the frame.

My first guess would be that it's a human hand crushing a slim-wristed and misshapen robotic hand with a bit of water dripping from the bottom. At any rate, some sort of crushing is almost surely going on, and the fleshy part seems to be doing it. The other part might also be a Mylar balloon or a roll of aluminum foil with a splayed and divided end.

In this place each resident has a box marked "contraband," which contains whatever they came in with, minus clothes and plus detox-dispensed toiletries. My contraband consists of one (1) toothbrush (mine wasn't good enough, it was too old, they said, so they threw it away and gave me a replacement; I guess people who aren't drinking themselves to death can devote attention to the age of their toothbrush) and one (1) package of temporary rainbow tattoos. I don't remember its origin story. Just now I asked for my toothbrush and I saw the package sitting there in the bottom of the box, looking small and alone, and I wonder

how I got ahold of it and why. I thought of how you would have brought more stuff, because you worry so much and therefore would think ahead.

In the middle of my first night, a girl was brought into my room who seemed to be made almost entirely of scabs. Her hair was bleached blond, but had grown out and showed the dark-brown roots. She slept well into the next day before being woken up and told that there was a problem with her method of payment, which was that there was no payment. The man who had brought her there, promising to return the next day with insurance information, had never come back, and the number he'd left was no good.

She made a few calls from the house phone (because she had no phone of her own), but she was from Florida and barely knew anyone in L.A. The people she did know wanted one hundred dollars to pick her up. She didn't have one hundred dollars. She didn't have any dollars. She paced around for a while and then just walked out into the neighborhood. She didn't have anything to take with her except a purse and her shoes. She told me she had three kids somewhere. I don't know what will happen to her next.

I'm not sure how to indicate which day it is in this letter, because I'm writing it over multiple days. It seems to all run together, so maybe it doesn't matter.

In the mornings at 11:00 A.M. we have a group, but many people are still asleep, resting, and knowing that they are getting better. Today in the group the counselor wanted each of us to write one word on the dry-erase board describing how we were feeling. I thought of when we were at the lake and you said, "This weather is making me feel weird. It's so mercurial." I wrote that word down. *Mercurial*.

A guy named Taylor was nodding out on meds and burning a hole in his shorts with a cigarette, so he didn't see me write down *mercurial*. Another guy, who was a drinking a Gatorade, said, "What's that?"

Gatorades are in second place here, behind ashtrays. The whole house is crammed with empty Gatorades. It's a real problem, getting people to clean them out of their rooms. They pile up in drifts all around the beds.

"I don't know," said the counselor. "So I guess you get to start us off. What does your word mean?"

"It means changeable. Mutable. Unpredictable. Fluctuating. Erratic."

I always seem to want to make sure everyone knows how smart I am.

I reached over and put out Taylor's cigarette, which prompted him to open his eyes for a moment like a drowsy child being carried to bed, and then he lit another one right away.

Most people in the group chose the word *tired* or something similar. The incidence of people talking about being tired in this place seems to be keeping pace with the number of ashtrays and Gatorade bottles.

I'm certainly not tired. I'm having a hard time sitting still. The only books are twelve-step literature, Sherlock Holmes, and a *Seventeen* magazine filled with index cards on which someone wrote out a long and emotional apology to their girlfriend. That was good but I read it within a few minutes and had to find something else.

I'm personally pretty angry at twelve-step books at the moment, because when Asa died and I went to get the stuff out of his car, it seemed to be about half full of twelve-step-related books and pages of associated writing assignments. He practically died on a pile of the shit, and it was not a good death, from what I can piece together. So I'm reading Sherlock Holmes by process of elimination. I'm about three hundred pages in.

I have a new roommate. She's nineteen years old and also sleeps all day. Her name is Maisie. She looks like someone took care of her growing up. Maybe they moved to a better school district or bought her chewable vitamins. Who knows. Someone must be paying for this place.

Now and then she rouses herself and pours out a bowl of Froot Loops, then covers it in sugar. When she's awake, she's angry.

"I can't stand it in here," she says. "It's driving me fucking crazy. I'm an active person. This type of a situation is very bad for me."

She says she knows an abandoned building where she could live. This, she claims, would be amazing. She told Taylor that they could leave this shithole and that he could pimp her out. They could make a lot of money in such a way.

Taylor was putting Oreos in a stack, very slowly. Then he closed his eyes and felt the stack with gentle fingertips. After a while he put the entire pile into his mouth at once and tried to chew. He didn't seem to hear her.

Seeing that Taylor was ignoring her, Maisie turned to one of the techs. "Why won't you let me call my fucking boyfriend?" she asked. "Why does she get to call her kid all the time, and I can't call my boyfriend?" She poked her finger in my direction, and I shrank down on the couch next to Taylor, who silently proffered a small pack of Oreos.

"We have doubts about whether your boyfriend is a good person for you to be talking to right now," the tech said. He seemed unruffled by her criticisms. He wrote something down on a Post-it note and stuck it to a big wall-mounted calendar. I had known a few of these techs, people who worked at rehabs, and I knew they didn't get paid enough to deal with this kind of horseshit. I thought he was doing a fine job.

"Fuck you," Maisie said. "I'm going to kill myself."

I talk more to the employees than to the other clients. I like to think of myself as not fitting in here. I ask questions about what degrees the counselors got and how long it took. I tell them I had once planned on getting into that type of career. Maybe I still will. I also make my bed first thing in the morning and wash everyone's dishes. Today while I washed dishes, one of the EMTs told me all about how he used to work as an ambulance driver. He said it was easier back then to tell if he was helping people.

"Someone has a broken arm, you set the arm and you've fixed it. Here I'm not sure what I'm doing. You patch people up, they go back out, and they do it all over again. At least people with a broken arm don't go out and break the thing again two days after you've set it."

I was wiping down countertops.

"Oh, that's right," he said, watching me. "You're a mom, aren't you?"

"Yeah," I said, "but I've always been like this."

A guy I'd never seen before came in wearing a tank top and Gucci slides. He looked like a robust, strapping frat boy with a golden tan. "Do you work here?" he asked me. "Do you know if there's any lunch meat?"

"No," I said.

"This is Bendan," said the EMT.

Bendan rummaged in the refrigerator.

In group I found out that Bendan had certain things he liked to say. When he related to a remark someone made, he would respond by nodding with vigor and shouting "Facts, bro! Facts!" regardless of the speaker's gender.

*The only books are twelve-step literature, Sherlock Holmes, and a Seventeen magazine filled with index cards on which someone wrote out a long and emotional apology to their girlfriend.*

"Facts, bro. That's facts," he said after I explained that I was here because I had a drinking problem. "If I could manage it on my own, I wouldn't be here." I said, because it sounded like something I should say.

"That's facts." He nodded.

The other thing he likes to say is that he hates lying.

"If there's one thing I can't stand, it's lying," he said today. "That is one thing I cannot stand."

Taylor popped his head up for a moment. "Me neither," he mumbled. He had another cigarette burning. This one was touching the faded top of the picnic table around which we all sat. I moved his hand so the cigarette was over the ashtray.

Then Taylor asked if he could have my cigarette ration. Everybody is allowed one pack of cigarettes per day, and I'm the only person who doesn't smoke. It wasn't the sort of thing I would usually do, breaking the rules and giving someone extra cigarettes, but Taylor was beginning to grow on me.

"I have Nutter Butters," he said. I don't like Nutter Butters, but I said yes.

*“I’m going to kill myself,” said Maisie. “I’m a very sensitive person. I’m an empath. I can’t tolerate this type of situation.”*

After the cigarette handoff we sat down in front of the tv. His medication seemed to be wearing off. He perked up and started talking about how he used to be a kickboxer and tutor people in trigonometry. Right around then a tech came and told him it was time for his meds.

Last night I had a dream. I dreamed that I had run out of stamps for some bills I needed to mail, and then one of the bills fell behind the couch where I couldn’t reach it. Another night I dreamed about trying to get over to a friend’s house for dinner, and I wanted to bring a camera, but then I spent such a long time searching for the memory card that by the time I got there, dinner was over and the camera had gotten really tiny. These are the kinds of dreams I have. No wonder I’ve tried to liven things up a bit here and there.

There’s only so much Sherlock Holmes I can read in a day. Your brother loved Sherlock Holmes. I was hoping to love it as much as he did, not only because it would give me a way to pass the time, but because it would give me some sense of connection to him. That hasn’t really happened.

If I had been thinking more clearly before I came in, if I had planned things better, I would’ve packed some books instead of just lying on the bathroom floor crying. I would’ve done all kinds of things differently. But if I had that much agency, I wouldn’t have to be here at all; I’d be out getting a master’s degree or something. So today I went to join Taylor on the couch.

He was eating chocolate chips and watching a movie called *Snow on the Bluff*. He mostly had his eyes closed. That movie is very depressing, and it’s all about gang members shooting the heck out of each other or putting drugs into baggies in front of their kids. We aren’t allowed to wear shirts that have beer logos, but we can watch this.

Then a counselor came in to do the group. Maisie made a loud groaning noise and lay down, taking up an entire couch with her gangly kid legs. The counselor turned off the tv.

The topic was “triggers.” The counselor, who had recently revealed that she had a lesser psychology degree than myself, wanted examples from each of us. I wish I hadn’t asked her about her degree, because it made me bitter and defiant. No one volunteered, and I was tired of volunteering all the time. I folded my arms and didn’t say anything.

So she asked Taylor: “What kinds of things make you want to drink or use?”

Taylor sat up all of a sudden. “My girlfriend was five months pregnant and she died.” He lay back down.

“What?” I said.

“That sucks,” said the counselor. “Maisie, what triggers you?”

“This is such bullshit,” Maisie said.

“Wait, did you just say your girlfriend DIED and she was pregnant?” I said.

“Yeah.”

“Have you had therapy for that or anything???”

I felt like I was about to burst into tears.

“We released some balloons,” Taylor said, and at the same time the counselor began talking over him.

“Maisie, can you try to give me one example? Just one? Thanks.”

I remembered an article I had seen at one point but hadn’t read. The picture was of a harried-looking woman in a nurse uniform, and the title said, “Compassion Fatigue Is Real.”

“I’m going to kill myself,” said Maisie. “I’m a very sensitive person. I’m an empath. I can’t tolerate this type of situation.”

“Is that an actual threat of suicide?” asked the counselor.

“Yes, I’m going to fucking kill myself,” she repeated.

“We’ll have to call an ambulance then.”

“Good,” said Maisie. “Anything to get out of this shithole.”

She sat on the couch and waited while the counselor achieved something, gotten one over on somebody.

Once Maisie was gone, there was space for a new girl in my room. The next morning while I was lying on my bed reading Sherlock Holmes, the employees flung the door open with a bang and couple of techs carried in what looked like a like a blow-up doll. One tech held her under the arms and the other had her ankles, and they draped her onto the bed and started checking her vitals.

She had long hair extensions and her mouth was open like an O, with red, swollen lips. Her eyes were closed and her eyelids fluttering. She wore a halter top covered in sequins and a skirt that was more like a wide belt. Her shoes were four-inch heels of glittering gold. Her legs stuck straight out, stiff. She wasn’t talking or moving.

“She’s dying!” yelled one of the techs. “Call 911!”

So the ambulance came again, and that girl was gone.

Now I’m sitting here waiting to be discharged. I’m not sure how long it takes for a thing like this to work on somebody, to fix the problem I’ve got, but five days is as many as my insurance will pay for, so that’s how long they kept me. I suppose they’ll have to give me back my rainbow tattoos now; I can be trusted with them at last.

I just had to fill out a “relapse prevention plan.” Maybe you’ve had to do that before, I don’t know. It had questions like, “What will I do the next time I feel like drinking/using?”

I made something up for that part, because I still don’t know what would work. I think everyone makes something up for that, but who knows.

After your brother died, when I went to the tow yard to collect whatever was left in the car, in addition to all the twelve-step stuff and evidence of other attempted spiritual remedies, I also found one of these relapse prevention plans in a folder. There was a photo of him taken upon admission, shortly after the last time I saw him. He didn’t look well but he was smiling and seemed cooperative. He was wearing a shirt I’d given him after he’d sold most of his clothes. The shirt just happened to have belonged to the man I drank those beers with years ago. Anyway, I read through this plan and saw how he’d had to answer a lot of questions to prove that he was okay to go back into the world, that it would be different this time, because now he had the answers to these questions, about how he felt and

why, and what to do about it. And I remember that it said, “Who do I know who will be supportive of me?” And on the line where the answer should go, he had written my name down.

If he were still alive, I would’ve written his name down too. But he’s gone, so I wrote yours instead. I hope that’s okay.

**Laura Heffington** was born and still lives in Los Angeles, California. Her stories have appeared in *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Fifth Wednesday Journal*, *The Skeeve*, and *Catamaran Literary Reader*. She also published a photography book called *Highland Park Architectural Tour (and Elements of Design)*.