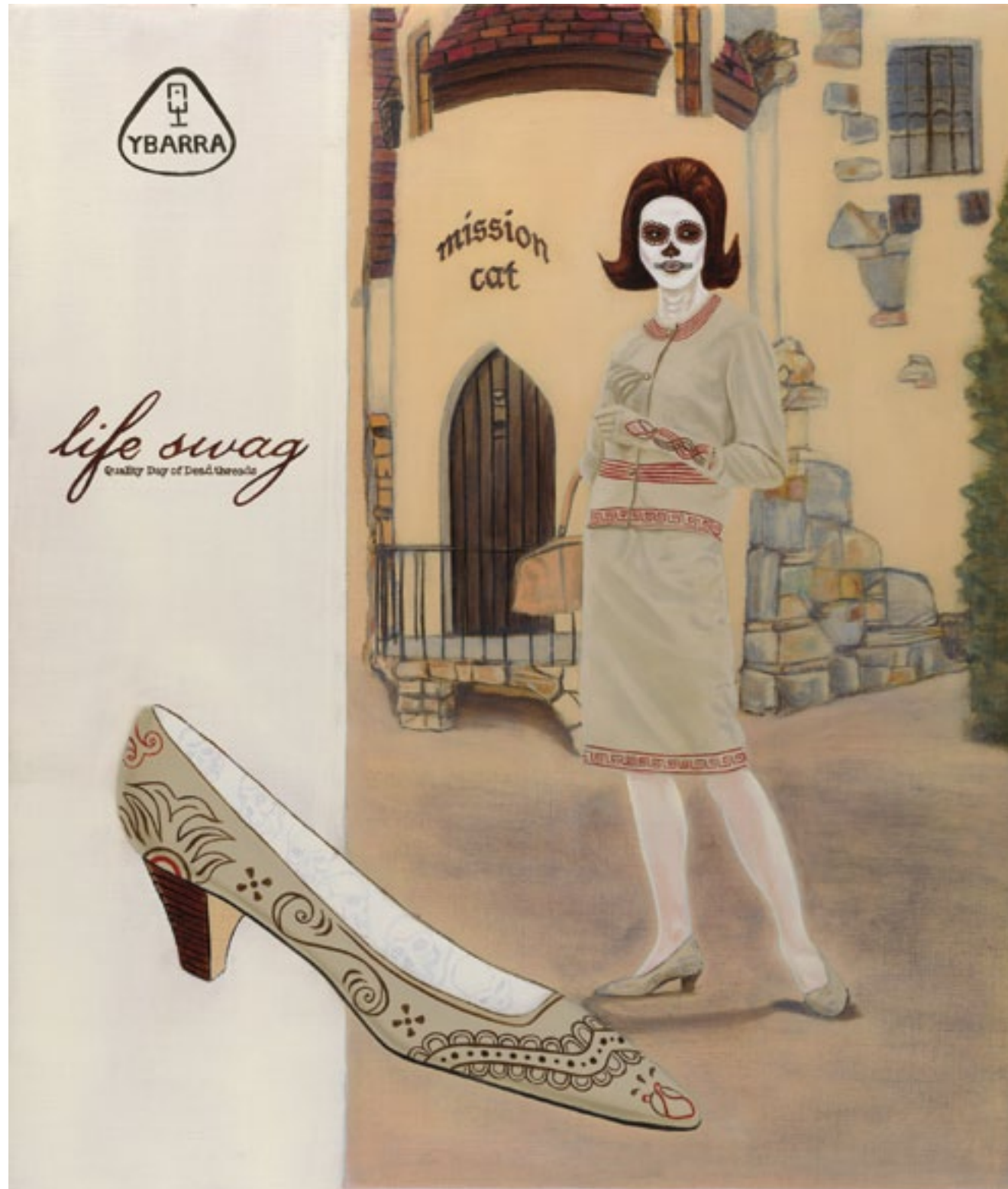


ALBERTO YBARRA

Life Swag, 2011
Oil on linen, 20 x 16 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

MICHAEL ALENYIKOV

Negative Reservations

“What to say? What to say?” Catherine muttered. “Should I write that down?” Emily asked.

“No, of course not, you ninny. I’m thinking,” Catherine replied.

“Oh.”

They were alone in the restaurant but for two sharply dressed businessmen at a window table and a young couple sitting near the kitchen. Emily had noted earlier their entwined fingers; how he then spilled his coffee, soiling the ivory-colored tablecloth, she mopping up the mess with one of the restaurant’s thick linen napkins; their shy smiles.

Emily doodled hangman figures and dollar signs, making pictograms of her initials, EGS, while she waited for Catherine to speak.

Catherine’s chair was slightly elevated, providing her not so much a view as the look of someone noble, a queen or countess, Emily imagined. She wore a large white bib, streaked red and green from pesto and tomato sauce; a queen, Emily decided, from the days of Henry VIII, who could eat with her fingers and make a mess as she pleased. Emily sketched a woman with wild hair, on her knees, neck resting on a block; above her a man, face masked, a raised axe clenched in his meaty hands. *Off with her head*, she wrote in tiny letters.

“I’m not feeling inspired today,” Catherine said, slopping up the last strands of the pasta. She wore a black shawl. Today it covered her head, but it might just as well be worn over her shoulders, depending on her mood. Combined with the whiteness of the bib, she could have been a nun from Emily’s Catholic childhood.

Emily thought that even when she was disgusting, Catherine was fascinating. It wasn’t just that she was blind or that she was a poet—quite a brilliant one, everyone agreed—or, when properly dressed and made up—which she wasn’t, today—still beautiful; well, maybe it *was* because she was blind; maybe that was it, after all—or maybe it *was* her brilliance. Emily had no idea how Catherine could tolerate being alive and not seeing the world. Wasn’t she terrified when she was alone? If she was, she never let on.

She had her memories, Emily supposed; she hadn’t always been blind. Maybe she screened them like home

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movies or videos and lived in a world of images long vanished.

The young couple paid their bill. They smiled at each other, conspiratorial smiles. Emily thought: they’re having an affair, they’re both cheating on someone who trusts them.

“Would you like dessert?” Catherine asked.

“No thanks.”

“You’re starving yourself, Emmy: thin as a rail. Won’t do. I like my women with flesh on their bones,” she said, with a laugh that was like the braying of a horse. She always spoke a bit too loud—well, really, sometimes embarrassingly loud. It must be wonderful, Emily reconsidered, to not see anyone, to be blind to raised eyebrows of disapproval, people staring daggers of hate at you, or people not seeing you at all: that was the worst for Emily, not being seen.

“I’m full, Cat,” she said. Emily had a whiny voice. Catherine had told her so. Catherine was, as she often said, exquisitely sensitive to sound, to taste, to touch.

Emily stared out the window. Light snow was falling. Across the street, another restaurant had left on their Christmas lights, strings of small bulbs that flickered on and off like a piano keyboard, unseen fingers playing a sultry jazz riff on—she could almost hear it—*These are a few of my favorite things*. If she were blind, what might she hear that she otherwise missed? She closed her eyes. To her surprise, she heard the soft scratching of her pen on the paper, and Catherine breathing, shifting in her chair; the rattle of dishes somewhere in the restaurant—she couldn’t place

where, exactly; footsteps clicking on the hardwood floor; the closing of a door—and a moment later she felt a chilly draft. She opened her eyes: the businessmen were gone.

“Well, I’m having the mousse,” Catherine said, looming above her—a crazy lady, anyone might think, the way she waved her hands wildly. Emily touched Cat’s thigh. “Let me get the waiter.”

“I hate it when I’m not inspired to write. Hate it. Hate it. Hate it.” Cat looked piercingly at Emily, as if she could see. “You’re not being a very good muse today.” She laughed, so Emily couldn’t tell if she were angry or joking. After their first night of making love, she’d said, “Be my muse,” laying her head on Emily’s breasts. “I need a new one badly.”

“What happened to the old one?” Emily had asked, timidly curious.

“I fired the wench!” Cat had brayed.

Emily had signed on to be Catherine’s assistant one long year ago—a terrific honor, she’d thought at the time. Catherine’s poetry, famed for its errant, unexpectedly perfect adverbs, full of images of caves and shadows, rain-speckled lakes, streams quiet and raging, and dreams of violent birds that ripped the flesh of tormented lovers, had won Emily’s heart well before they’d met.

And to be her muse—the words, the request, was an erotic shiver—delight slow-dancing with fear. Emily clung to Catherine that night as if she were the one who was blind and Cat the one who could see.

They ate an early dinner here at New York’s Union Street Cafe four, maybe five nights a week. They never called ahead, as Catherine had a “negative reservation”: she’d bought a place at the table, so to speak, for two, for any time she’d want to show up.

She was, after all, blind and rich and an admired, envied poet among people who counted. She’d won coveted awards, several of which came laden with cash. There was an ex-husband, too, from when she was young. He bestowed upon her more money than she knew what to do with: to support the arts, he’d said; but there was guilt, too, as he’d been driving the night of the crash and had been at her bedside during the coma, from which she awoke, all her senses primed but one.

“Chocolate mousse,” Emily said to the waiter, who smirked at the mess that was Catherine. “For one.”

“For two,” Catherine boomed to the large empty room.

“Too skinny, I say,” she then declared, turning towards Emily, poking at the air with her fork.

It pleased Emily that across the street Christmas lights were on well into January. In the space of that thought the restaurant began to fill, people milling in, in groups of twos and fours, a single person here and there.

“Too skinny, I say,” Cat hissed.

“What?”

“Write it down, Emmy.”

“Why? What is it exactly that you want from me?” She felt the eyes of people staring at them, their oddness.

“It’s the first line of a poem, dearie: *Too skinny, I say.*”

She kissed the top of Emily’s head. “My muse, I love you so, so much.”

Emily hurriedly finished her sketch, the queen’s head fallen onto the rough ground, a crowd of onlookers gaping.

Spine erect, Cat’s muse wrote the words “Too skinny, I say,” then froze.

“But I’m not, I’m not,” the muse retorted.

“You are, you are,” said Cat, all flustered, her preternaturally pale face reddening.

“Mere words,” spat the muse, “Mere, mere words.”

“That’s good.” said Cat, “Very very good. Are you writing?”

And so a poem was written that night—poet and muse, each in turn, alternating lines. *Their magic*, the alchemy of poet and muse. “Mere Mere Words, Ma Mere,” Emily titled it that night as Cat snored fitfully; then the muse slipped into bed and curled up under Cat’s arm. Emily felt herself to be one of the smallest of God’s creatures, but blessed, truly and completely. Mere words: the magic that rekindled, *extended* their love for one more night.

Michael Alenyikov is the author of *Ivan and Misha*, which won the Northern California Book Award for Fiction and was a finalist for the Edmund White Award for Debut Fiction. He is also the 2013 recipient of the Gina Berriault Award from San Francisco State University. His stories have appeared in *The Georgia Review*, *Descant*, *The James White Review*, and other literary magazines, and in several editions of the *Best Gay Stories* anthologies from Lethe Press. He was raised in the outer reaches of the three large outer boroughs of New York, with several years in Phoenix and LA wedged in between the Bronx and Brooklyn. One way to be clear about what he means by “outer reaches” is to note that he lived on Avenue Z along the shores of Gravesend Bay in Brooklyn. He now lives and writes in San Francisco.