

## DENNY HOLLAND

*Etude 10, 2019*  
Oil on panel, 12 x 12 in



COURTESY THE STUDIO SHOP GALLERY

## CHRISTIE COCHRELL

### Moroccan Spices

**A**t the party Sarah ate almost nothing. The just-published young author with the irritating voice was holding court all night next to the food-and-drinks table, wreathed in a pomegranate pashmina, clearly from her travels, undoubtedly handloomed in some dusky back room by a blind virgin, and Sarah couldn't face elbowing her way through the crowd of adoring readers, many of whom had brought copies of the glossy paperback for the author to sign. So she made do with the dregs of a bottle of lukewarm Barefoot chardonnay that somebody had left out on the deck and sat in a spill of light out of the open door of Jane and Barry's dining room.

In a breathless voice, the author told her audience about the Tibetan Buddhist monks she'd interviewed for her best-selling book, describing the trip she'd taken with her boyfriend to Nepal two years before, on her twenty-first birthday, when he was wiring the monastery for the internet. When someone offered her some of the skewers Jane had threaded lovingly with perfect Red Flame grapes grown by organic farmers in Sonoma or Rohnert Park and Niman Ranch pork, humanely raised, marinated in spices overnight—a blend of cumin and paprika, ginger, cloves, and just a smidgen of cayenne—she said, “Oh no, I don't eat *pork*,” with childlike horror, as if someone had suggested cannibalism. She'd eaten roasted barley flour with the monks in the thin air of the Himalayas, got up at 3:00 A.M. to work out with hand weights before meditation.

On the deck in the half dark, Sarah drank the warm wine from a paper cup and felt it sour on her tongue, not eating pork either—in her case not from any noble convictions, or on cue from her publicist, but from her usual inability to act, to brave the crowd and go get herself some.

When the wine was gone, she made a brief foray into the kitchen for some of the Sumatran coffee Barry had brewed in a fancy new pour-over machine. Taking it back outside into the pleasant North Bay night, she found somebody sitting on the steps to the garden and recognized the studiously messy curls of the Byronic realtor who had attracted her when he had first arrived and Jane had introduced them. The son of some big California artist, one of the abstract expressionists. She thought he was alone now, as she was, moon gazing, breathing in the smell of

sage and mint from the herb bed, communing with the oracular spirits of Jane's brilliant blue delphinium. But when she thought of something witty and profound to say to him, with just a shade of irony inspired by the wine, he waved her off impatiently, and she saw he was focused on a cell phone.

While Sarah was helping Jane wash dishes sometime around midnight and dodging her friend's questions about her dull administrative job, the *Infantessa* author retrieved her bright pashmina from a counter stool to drape over her bony white shoulders and confided in one of those stage whispers that carries to the balcony, "We're off to Bodega Bay to wake my friend Mack on his boat and make him take us out in it, though I have no idea where he's moored, or if he's even in the country. You know those journalists—he might well be in Nicaragua again. Not that he'd bother to tell me." She and her entourage made a grand exit.

With a pang of self-disgust, Sarah realized she hadn't done anything reckless like that since college—stayed up all night; driven down to Santa Barbara with Jane and their friend Miranda on the spur of the moment just to have breakfast at Sambo's on the beach; camped out illegally on Mission Bay with a drummer from Malibu and his brother. She remembered changing into bridesmaid dresses for Miranda's wedding at a public rest stop on the coast where she and Jane crashed for an hour just before dawn, remembered the uneasy sensation of sand in the feet of her pantyhose.

So she defiantly refused Jane's offer of a bed for the night and, with her rations of Moroccan pork-and-grape skewers and a bottle of Aquafina, determined to recapture the spontaneity she'd lost somewhere along the way, the feeling of having all the time in the world to track the moon to its lair out in the Pacific or farther oceans. From Tamalpais Drive she got on Highway 101 south, the first leg of the drive to Santa Barbara, which she'd loved so much. She'd find the blue hills and orange groves that conjured far islands she'd never seen, Corfu or Cyprus or Capri, visit the mission with the ravishment of bougainvillea on its pure-white walls.

But by the time she'd made her way across the bridge, through San Francisco's western neighborhoods, down the peninsula, and over to the coast, Sarah's eyes were getting heavy, the moon had set, and she had no idea what she

thought she was doing. Some forty-some Doña Quixote in an aging Honda—how ridiculous. So she pulled into the parking lot at Pescadero, above the rocks with all the nesting cormorants, so much more ordinary than the kind she'd seen in photographs of China, silhouetted on poetic fishing boats at dawn. A short rest to recharge, reengage in her small brave adventure.

At daybreak, Sarah was stiff and chilled through, ruing her impulse. She would have given anything for a thermos of coffee. Instead, she mechanically unwrapped and chewed the cold meat, hardly noticing the smoky Moroccan spices, the contrasting sweetness of the grapes.

She wondered if the infant author in her miniskirt and self-important shawl had found the friend with the boat. She thought of her own abortive journey, the places she would never get to or even back to, diminishing like a small, sad glimpse of something precious in the foggy rearview mirror. She wondered if she'd ever finish the novel she'd started a few years after college. It was to have been about a man who slept among the broken arches of an abbey in the Pyrenees, sweeping its ruined chapel and its wind-scoured arcade in self-imposed penance for something terrible he'd done, some great wrong. Like her own failure to help when Meg, Miranda's young daughter, was killed on a scooter two years ago—no, three—on the coast road not far from here. She hadn't even found the words to give her friend. She hadn't done any of the things she'd intended, even the most essential. The novel was going to be so fine, her life a bright conflagration like that cicada in Basho's haiku that sang itself utterly away. What happened? How had everything gotten so far beyond her reach? She'd somehow let herself become frozen in place, like the sad house she saw through the condensation on the windshield across the highway from her car, perched in the hollow of a coastal hill, worn down by weather, abrasive salt air, unrelenting gray.

Before turning around to drive home, Sarah walked down to the pair of turquoise public toilets. She was tired to the bone, her spirits sodden as the spread wings of the seabird carcass washed up on the beach below with long garlands of kelp. Walking against the icy wind, lost in her misery, she tripped over a tangle of ice plant intruding on the path. Catching her heel in it, she felt the earth give under her and couldn't stop herself sliding down a crumbling

slope of loosened sand and pebbles to the very edge of the sheer drop to the ocean.

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Concussed, she knew nothing about getting to the hospital in Redwood City. She woke disoriented and muzzy. A man with sandy hair in a flannel shirt and worn polar fleece vest sat in a chair beside her bed. He was leafing through the copy of Herodotus she'd bought along with everybody else who'd loved the notes and cuttings the Hungarian cartographer kept in his notebook in the film of *The English Patient*.

"So what is it about this book?" the off-duty highway patrolman asked, bemused, seeing her awake and watching him. "My ex-wife had a copy too."

He'd found it on the seat of Sarah's car when he'd spotted the night-dewed vehicle that morning on his way home—ready to fry some eggs, to take off his boots and thick socks, to walk his Boston terrier. Always watchful, he'd stopped to satisfy himself nothing was wrong. But the body in party skirt and moth-holed raglan sweater lay sprawled on the crumbled slide of sandstone off the parking lot. He'd been intrigued by the book, and by the spicy aroma that had reached him on the chilly first-morning air.

Sarah couldn't remember that either, remember why she'd been drawn to the tales of travelers in far deserts, or why the slightly nauseating smell of strange spices was on her skin, under the rubbing alcohol and latex smells of the hospital room and something achingly homey like mashed potatoes on adjoining dinner trays.

She had a singing memory in her bones of being carried, being held, but more importantly, of having come to rest, lulled by the low voice of the sandy-haired patrolman, who she'd learn lived happily, snug as a bug, in that gray boxy house she'd spotted on the coast, who never left it but to let his dog off leash at Pulgas Ridge on Sundays and make the same judicious rounds up Highway 1 and back and round again over and over for his job. He'd talked to her during the hours she'd been unconscious, entrusted her with his modest life story, all of the quiet, inward things his wife had never wanted to hear.

She'd be laid up for months with the torn ligament in her right knee. Between his visits, which grew longer and more frequent, she would write a meditative essay weaving

together El Niño, middle age, and the mysterious deaths of brown pelicans on California's northern coast—immensely taken by the charms of not moving, not going anywhere at all.

**Christie Cochrell** loves the play of light and time. Her work has been published by *Catamaran Literary Reader*, *Orca*, *Lowestoft Chronicle*, *Tin House*, *Cumberland River Review* (with a Pushcart Prize nomination), and a variety of others, most recently *Mystery Weekly Magazine*. Awards include a New Letters Literary Award and the Literal Latté Short Short Contest. Once New Mexico Young Poet of the Year, she moved from Santa Fe to Northern California, worked mostly at Stanford University, traveled voraciously, participated in a little archaeology in far places, and has now settled by the ocean in Santa Cruz, California—too often lured away from her writing by others, pelicans, and seaside walks.