## DANIELLA WOOLF

*Bundle 4315*, 2014
Paper and Thread, 8.5 x 8.5 x 1.5 in

COLLECTION: WAX WORKS WEST. PHOTO: RR JONES



AÍFE MURRAY

# Bound and Stitched

## Books as a life and death matter

When you're on a nonfiction reading streak, you somehow don't question it. For me it started with Margalit Fox's *The Riddle of the Labyrinth*. I was fascinated by Fox's resuscitation of Alice Kober, the little-known linguist who laid the painstaking groundwork for the decipherment of Linear B. Margalit Fox's vocation is the "rescuing of lost souls" like Kober, as she is lead obituary writer for *The New York Times*. That's an occupation I've harbored a secret desire for, and in my own way I practiced it, when I exhumed stories of the household staff who once worked for Emily Dickinson. At this moment, though, with my small tower of nonfiction deliciously perched on the round copper table in the living room, *I* was the one who needed to get lost. I demanded rescue from souls going missing. I picked up *Labyrinth* and was happily captured from page one.

* * *

"Allan," I said when he walked in on Sunday morning with his book bag slung over his bony right shoulder. He stood on my living room rug in his stocking feet, his army-green T-shirt hanging loose from his shoulders like drying laundry pinned to a line.

"Well, then," he said, smiling in that slant way that meant *what have you got new*, his hand out, palm up, urging me to say more or put a book in it. I waited for him to sit down. He always chose a corner of the couch, folding his large frame into the smallest possible space. I bounced down next to him, in the wide center of the couch. Because I had to. Big motion. Noise to balance his quiet. I welcomed him the way a large dog might.

He eyed my stack of books, most of them covered by thin cellophane with which the library wraps its cloth-bound books. These were titles I couldn't hang on to if I grew attached. I liked it that way. The anonymous sharing. Turning a page to find the slipped-in photograph of a Bulgarian man in traditional hat, slightly blurry; or the previous reader's check-out list topped by *The Merry Misogynist* by Colin Cotterill. "How could you?" I thought, speaking to my predecessor. "And the new J. K. Rowling," I said reprovingly. I scolded in my head, but I was excited by these traces of someone else in "my books." I suppose it was much the same way men felt at the baths, before the city closed them down in the 1980s, when bodies were

shared, anonymously, and traces lingered from someone else's pleasure.

Allan, on the other hand, needed to own books, to live in a library, because at any moment of day or night—especially night—what if he needed to think about something Nancy Scheper-Hughes said because of something that Adorno wrote, or to consult Auden? He was hunched forward on the couch waiting for me to tell him what I was excited about in this stack of books.

"*The Riddle of the Labyrinth*." I couldn't keep still. I shifted back and forth on the seat next to him. "It's about Linear B." He nodded. No need to explain, ever. He took the book in his wide hands. Does anyone have fingers quite that long? Palms so wide? Made to hold books like one of those wooden stands they use in libraries that make it easy to consult the dictionary. He read the back, turning it reverently, as he'd done with thousands of books.

He'd come with a book bag, now curled beside his pigeon-toed stocking feet. In it were always four or five books along with his hardbound notebook and fountain pen. At least two would be poetry. Maybe this time it was A. R. Ammons and Anne Carson's *Red doc>*. There would be a post-postcolonial book or something in cultural studies and maybe a South Asian novel by an author Michael had turned him on to. I couldn't leave Allan alone to read the books he brought while waiting for Michael to get ready for their hike. Getting ready was more than filling the water bottle and grabbing pieces of fruit and cheese. It meant Michael pulling several books from the shelves in the next room first.

"Did I show you this?" he asked Allan, standing in the doorway of the double parlor, his dark hairy hand holding up the bright yellow-and-orange cover of *Open City* by Teju Cole.

I was pleased because I had read *Open City* first and recommended it to Michael. The narrator is a flaneur wandering the streets of New York. Teenage Michael, with his friend Tim, often walked from one end of Manhattan Island to the other and back, talking feverishly all night and into dawn. Now, when he returns to New York as a visitor, ambling those same blocks, all the layered historical moments—his and the city's—surface in a beautifully coherent tangle, just as they do for Teju Cole's narrator.

"What else?" Allan said, looking at me as Michael placed *Open City* in his hands.

"I'm reading *The Living Mountain* by Nan Shepherd." I added, "who spent her whole life living and walking in the Cairngorm Mountains."

"Oh yeah?" Allan said softly, rippling with pleasure, and bent his whole narrow torso forward—awkwardly, because one of his arm joints was impinged upon by a long-ago infection—to pick up the Shepherd from the copper table. It had taken me a while to find it. When I couldn't get the book in the local library and the library couldn't get it from the college libraries up and down the state, I had AbeBooks mail me one of the two copies findable in the U.S. Written in her youth, left in a drawer for decades, the slender book described Shepherd's relationship with mountains she walked each day of her life. She had the kind of patience that comes from searching out changes that are eons in the making and respecting the mountain's abrupt cataclysms. Like her, Allan never tired of treading the known trails, alert to difference. He thirsted for it. Once, in hospital delirium, he asked, "Are we in the Sierras?"

He reluctantly placed *The Living Mountain* on the table when Michael announced himself ready by appearing in the doorway with his green pack on his back. I liked Allan best in hiking boots, following his legs as his boots planted firmly on uneven ground. Michael smiled because they were leaving together. They didn't yet know their destination, and that was part of the deal. Allan smiled back as he stood up. "Well, then," he said, "more to come."

Lita was dying. We knew that, and Allan made sure to ask about her, stopping on the landing before he walked down the stairs. There wasn't much to say. I was glad he asked, but I also felt like I needed a shield to ward off the pricks of pain. It came at me from surprising places, like when I was a child and my mother fit me for a dress. It was impossible to slip the half-finished thing over my head without getting stabbed by pins holding together unfinished seams. I never knew when and where they would get me. Some days, with Lita, I could ward it off. Ordered my mind to go elsewhere. I still hadn't metabolized Charlie's death. Pretended he was, as usual, strolling along West Cliff watching the sea. I could do that. I did.

When I spent time with Lita it was like before: her acerbic humor; her short gray-blond hair spiked in all directions. When she laughs at something really daft, she leans her forehead into the heel of her hand. Like a blotter that rolls a signature dry, she rocks her forehead from side to side, and for emphasis, with the other hand, pulls hanks of her hair. Now, she was a bit more tired than before. Sometimes oxygen was needed, so she wouldn't cough while we talked, and we'd wheel it with us into the library. On my card I checked out a half-dozen Spanish novels for her along with some light fare from Alexander McCall Smith. He was the mindless reading when a full day of tests and doctor follow-ups made her head too fuzzy for Spanish. Cara Black was another. I piled up the three more I had at home and brought them to the hospital once she told me she liked Black's *Murder in the Rue de Paradis*.

A woman detective in the African Bush. Murder mysteries set in Paris. Series that would continue, from book to book, with their intricate, fine spooling, inch by suspenseful inch. Lita was ravenous for story, for falling into someone else's narrative, now that so little was left of her own. "My case is pretty textbook." She'd read every journal, looked carefully at the PET scans on her computer before meeting with the radiologist and all of her other specialists. Like Cara Black's protagonist Aimée LeDuc, she was quick-witted and brave, knew where to look and what to look for. Lita often watched our brains work to deduce what she had reasoned long before. She loved the novels of Roberto Bolaño, but his *2666* was too highbrow for me even in English. I couldn't keep up with Lita, but it made me happy to try.

If I wasn't on this nonfiction streak (and hadn't lent all the Cara Blacks to Lita), some engrossing murder mysteries might have suited. I'd ordered a slew of novels (including Kushner's *Flamethrowers* and Atkinson's *Life after Life*). They were added to my pile. I kept renewing them but not opening them. Michael found me a softcover reviewer's advance copy of Adichie's *Americanah*, and then, by mistake, brought it home in hardback from the library-steps sale. I didn't touch those either. Instead I threw *The Living Mountain* in my bag and headed to the fourteenth floor of the hospital.

The next day, Tuesday, I shot Allan a brief message telling him I had been to the hospital to say goodbye to Lita.

"I'm sitting with you," he wrote back.

*In the parking garage, four of us made arrangements to return all the library books Lita had checked out on every one of our cards in two different cities.*

"Sweet company," I replied, and signed off "XO."

On Wednesday morning, by the time I woke, she was gone. We had a small service at 7:30 by her bed. In the parking garage, four of us made arrangements to return all the library books Lita had checked out on every one of our cards in two different cities. In my daypack I was carrying around a slim book of poetry by Susan Howe called *Souls of the Labadie Tract*. Allan had given it to me five years earlier. Maybe I'd understand why if I opened the cover. I didn't.

That Friday Michael took Allan to the hospital for a complicated procedure to see if a repeat test would reveal anything about his stomach pain. It felt futile, but this was the next step in a series of question marks and shaking heads and wringing hands.

I tapped "Cheryl Strayed *Tiny Beautiful Things*"—a compilation of her "Dear Sugar" online advice columns—into the library catalog the following Monday. I picked it up the next afternoon. Every night when I came home, whether I went to the hospital that day or not, I was pulled into one of Dear Sugar's tender, wise letters. I could, curled up on my couch, get teary-eyed about someone else's anguish. I read each night until my head was bent forward and hurting, waking me, or until it lolled backward. Most days I shifted from couch to bed by nine.

The first time the library put aside *Finding George Orwell in Burma*, I only read ten pages before it was due back for the next person in the hold line. I'd read enough

*The first Burmese man Larkin meets with has a fortune: 1,000 books, each one wrapped individually.*

of Emma Larkin's book to know that I needed more background in Orwell before I borrowed it again, so I ordered *Burmese Days*. Larkin's claim is that *Burmese Days*, *Animal Farm*, and *1984* form a trilogy about modern Burma. But what stuck in my head, from those first pages, was the fragile conditions for books in a tropical country of readers. The first Burmese man Larkin meets with has a fortune: 1,000 books, each one wrapped individually and kept in trunks as insurance against mold and the march of paper-hungry insects.

John Flory, the protagonist in *Burmese Days*, who is isolated in a far-flung post at the edge of the jungle, says *the need to talk is the greatest of all needs*. We understand him to mean the kind of talk where there is a meeting of minds. He is deprived of any of it by the remoteness and the rot that eats away, like book-eating tropical insects, at the foundations of Britain's imperialist project. Talking was something we were denied, Allan and I, as he swept up on the shores of pain and receded again. All the apparatus of oxygen and flexible tube and high silver barricades of the hospital bed robbed us of the proximity that coaxes intimate conversation. *Burmese Days* trifled with my nonfiction-reading streak. It was the first novel in months. It sneaked in because it had to, and that made me both sad and happy.

Michael went to the hospital every day. He could be counted on to choose the right books, and brought Allan "crap" (his word) to read because the medications made it impossible for Allan to wrap his mind around theory. But he did want Basho. His wife was dispatched, and then his sister, to search the house for the volume of Basho he had just bought. A new edition or translation. But where was it? His house is up in the hills, a three-bedroom ski-chalet-like place, big enough, or nearly so, for his 14,000 books. In a bathroom closet are piles of poetry. In the shed, where the boxes are neatly categorized, one carton I noticed is labeled "male beat poets." In the back room, meant by anyone else to be their master bedroom, his homemade bookcases on every available wall are filled several levels deep. The books that don't fit on shelves, in stacked, loaded boxes, are devoted to analytical philosophy, liberation studies, ethnic and racial theory, literary criticism, music and art, cultural studies, Jewish thought. Every book written by Alain Badiou—and anyone else, for that matter—Allan has. I wasn't sure who Badiou was as I read his name on spine after spine. "No one left out. No one left behind," is Allan's approach to his social justice work. It's the phrase in the signature of every e-mail he sends from his health education office on campus. He reads like that too.

I spied a Geertz title I didn't know on a high shelf in the guest room closet—several anthropology books by and about Geertz, in fact. Allan told me to read Geertz's "Deep Play" when I was busily uncovering the story of Emily Dickinson's maid. I don't know, even after finishing the article, if I fully understand how it related to what I was working on, but I was glad to have been pushed out and beyond. In this room and every other room, everything is stacked or boxed or shelved in findable categories. He knows where everything is. Except Basho.

The fourteenth floor of the hospital is where you go to die. Lita died there on a Wednesday morning at 4:00 a.m., peacefully, while her husband repeated the names of everyone who loved her. The list was inexhaustible. There, too, Allan came quietly into a room, and slipped away from us. It was the middle of the night. His wife and sister were asleep beside him when that indomitable spirit lifted and left. At 2:00 a.m. we raced back to the hospital we'd departed from four hours earlier.

A week later Michael and I spent the day with Allan's books. Friends had come and taken some of them, but not the esoteric stuff—the deep, dense books where his mind had once dwelled happily. In his living room shelves I came across *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* by Colleen McDannell, and was de-



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*Cut Out 4397*, 2013
Journaling, Watercolor and Cut Paper, 8.5 x 11 in

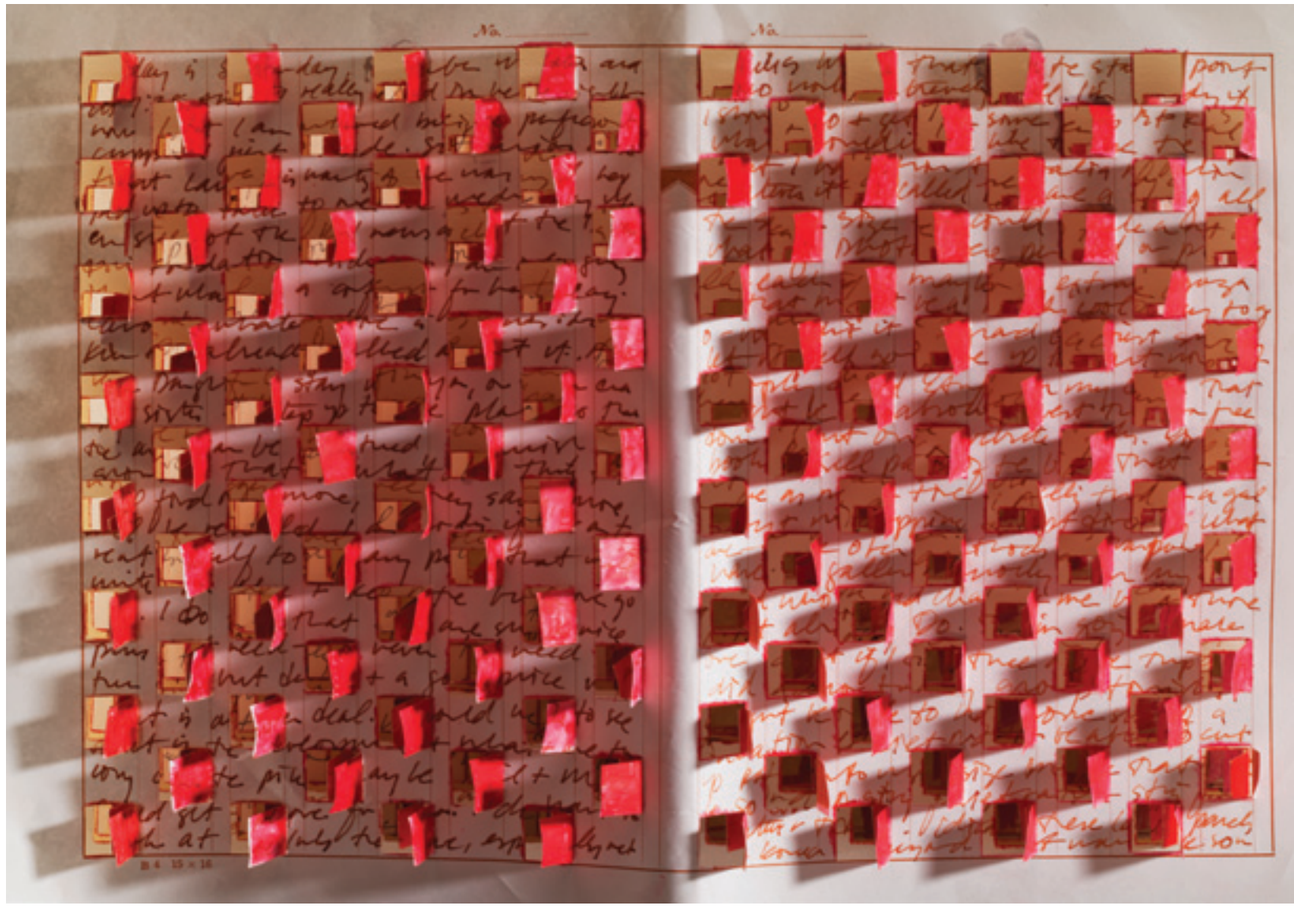

PHOTO: RR JONES

lighted that such a book existed. There was something else, another university press book, Cambridge or Harvard or Chicago, about death.

"Oh, this could really help me right now," I thought, but when I opened it I kept coming across references to Heidegger, and I knew that Heidegger was not going to help me that week. Allan's wife and sister made sure we left with some books. It was hard to take them and hard not to take them.

I found Basho. Two, in fact. *Narrow Road to the Interior* and *Basho's Haiku* (Barnhill's edition). I took both, not knowing which was the one Allan had been seeking in his last weeks. I took them with me to a cabin that clings to a high bluff on the Sonoma Coast. I had finished *Burmese Days* and was digging back into Larkin's *Finding George Orwell in Burma*. It's brilliant, I thought. I'm jealous about what she brought off.

I had spent a week there thirty years ago: early days, it now turns out, in Burma's total grip by an oppressive military regime. I sat in my chair in the window that looks out on a river bluff, thinking about the Israeli who gave us a ride in the blackest of nights after an overnight train ride north from Rangoon dumped us in the middle of nowhere. We had no idea how we would push on, but it was a relief to watch the train pull away after spending hours under blared lights and train speakers emitting unrelenting, deafening propaganda. Only the deaf and truly exhausted slept. Days later we bounced across the hardpan of Burma's sun-bleached interior on the wooden slat-boards of a 1940s school bus, eating sweet potatoes, hoping to get to the border before being thrown in jail.

*Finding George Orwell in Burma* is about finding his books in the place that made them. Locating story and place; locating a man and his reading. Like Orwell, surely, John Flory thirsted to talk with someone about what he really saw. He was a curious man fascinated by Burmese life. He wanted to befriend and know it and discuss the contradictions of being a *sahib* in this place oppressed by his kind. He embraced it yet was clear-eyed, this character who recognizes talk as *need*.

Michael was sitting beside me reading as I recalled our own Burmese days. There had been the cab driver who drove us from the airport in a 1956 Chevrolet. By the time he deposited us at a Rangoon guest house, our trade, of Johnnie Walker Red Label and a carton of cigarettes, left us with all the Burmese currency we would need. The fog was sweeping up the river and wrapping the cabin in cotton wool. All that penetrated was the sound of a cow lowing on the opposite shore. Larkin described a time when, devastatingly, the Burmese educational system was dismantled: it had meant the end of critical thinking. It became impossible to have a conversation about what really mattered with someone who would appreciate all of the layers.

Into the silence of the cabin I said aloud, "I'd like to talk to Allan about this book."

Michael didn't say anything. My words hung in the air between us like something stretched taut that you know you mustn't pull.

**Aífe Murray** is a transdisciplinary writer interested in stories that have been erased. She writes across genres incorporating images, installation, maps, performance, and artists' books. Her published writings include *Maid as Muse: How Servants Changed Emily Dickson's Life and Language* and the hand-made artists books *Art of Service*. *Stand Up and Be Counted*, her current work-in-progress, is a literary nonfiction book and digital mapping project about one white working class family's response to acts of white supremacy and civil rights.



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