

## LINDA CHRISTENSEN

*Greenhouse*, 2019  
Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## TYLER WOMACK The Remainder

It was easier to focus on the things that Janelle had left behind than to dwell on events that had transpired, or mistakes that Luke had made. Things had totemic value, sure: like the drab beige quilt Janelle had purchased at an art fair on their second date, upon which they'd made love for the first time one week later. But things could also be sold, thrown away, or destroyed. Luke had felt melodramatic as he burned that same quilt at a park-side fire pit in the Santa Cruz Mountains, but the next day, after he'd laundered the smoke from his clothing, he welcomed the realization that a small part of their failed relationship had been exorcised from his life.

When Janelle had walked out on him, she'd taken two suitcases full of clothes, her laptop, most of their camping gear, and a deluxe CD wallet filled with burned versions of albums she'd liked back in high school. It took Luke three weeks to figure out that she wasn't coming back and another week to realize he couldn't afford to stay in their airy two-bedroom apartment in Willow Glen. He left Janelle several increasingly desperate voicemails about her remaining things before contacting her mother, Ellen, in Mendocino.

"Between you and me," said Ellen, her voice annoyingly matter-of-fact, "Janelle can be a little stubborn when she's made up her mind. Wasteful, if I'm being honest. I just don't think she's interested in any of that stuff." Luke had hoped for some sense of commiseration from Ellen but instead was left with the distinct feeling that she was just trying to get off the phone.

From that point onward, he'd taken great satisfaction in cataloguing the things Janelle had left behind: separating them into piles of *useful things* and *superfluous things* and subdividing those piles into *things to store*, *sell*, *donate*, *recycle*, or *throw away*. He sold her college textbooks and threw away her half-used art supplies. He recycled folders of old phone bills and thank-you cards. Just about every day, he'd winnow those piles away, turning their love from an absence to be mourned into so much detritus to be discarded.

Little by little, Luke forgot that gut-punch feeling of being abandoned, the nights spent helplessly pleading with her to return, the weekends of not knowing what to do with himself, and the weekday mornings spent staring off in meetings. There was activity, instead: lists to make, things to disassemble, donations to bundle together.

In the last few days, he'd succeeded in moving his things into a small, somewhat sterile studio apartment in a big complex in Santa Clara. Now it was 6:30 a.m. on the thirtieth, and he was back at the old apartment, tying up loose ends. He arrived half-dressed for work, carrying cleaning supplies.

The last pile of Janelle's personal effects lay just inside the front door, consisting of everything of hers that Luke couldn't recycle or sell on Craigslist and that wouldn't fit in the apartment's modest trash can: a cracked Eames desk chair, an antique floor lamp, several flower pots, a box of old *National Geographic* magazines, and two black plastic trash bags filled with the clothes she'd left behind. These included turtleneck sweaters, athletic leggings, and six orange summer dresses, which still bore the roses-and-baking-soda scent of her deodorant. He took them down to his hatchback, one trip after another, pushing down his seats to make room in the back.

He'd tried to sell the clothes at Buffalo Exchange a week before, but the tattooed girl working the buy desk told him that since they clearly weren't his, the store's policy was not to take them. Even for donations. So he'd sheepishly brought them back to the apartment and added them to the pile of *things that don't go easy*.

He took off his work shoes and socks before beginning to clean. He wanted the floors—hardwood in the bedrooms, white linoleum in the kitchen—to shine when the management came in to inspect the apartment later that afternoon.

As he swept, he filled a white kitchen bag with dust, kitchen crumbs, a few forlorn clothes hangers, and some derelict paperclips. He catalogued these as well, making mental lists of *types of dirt found when cleaning* and *office supplies that are easy to lose*. Doing so, he tried to avoid picturing the apartment as it had been when he shared it with Janelle. He knew that the good memories—whether sexy, playful, cozy, or calm—tended to turn into loud, bitter recollections when he focused on them. Janelle had been messy where he'd been clean—in decorum, action, and thought—and his many corrections and observations inevitably led to pride-filled fights and silent, fuming afternoons.

"All in all," he'd said into her voicemail a couple weeks after she'd left, "I don't think we were any worse than most other couples. Obviously, some of it was just in your head."

An 18-by-32-inch rectangle of dust marked the spot

where Janelle's sewing machine had stood, and Luke meditated on the day she'd found it at the San Jose Flea Market. It was a heavy, gray, 1980s vintage Brother sewing machine, built into a small laminated-wood-and-aluminum table. They'd lugged it up the stairs, pausing to rest their arms at the landing. It hadn't worked when Janelle first plugged it in, and Luke fiddled with it for ten minutes before declaring it broken. But Janelle was persistent. She spent two hours reading the manual, tightening bolts, and disconnecting and reconnecting various spindles. At around nine at night, Janelle concluded her repairs, pressed her right foot upon the pedal, and coaxed forth a buzzing railroad beat of needle and bobbin. The sleepy apartment was filled with the soft thrum of a machine in productive use.

And productive Janelle was, for three or four months: buying patterns at the store, sewing them Halloween costumes (Tin Man and Lion), and hemming skirts. By January, Janelle had lost interest, and the sewing table became just another shape in the room's topography: a new surface to set things on instead of putting them away.

After she left, Luke read the manual, realizing how simple and ingenious the old sewing machine was. He researched how it had been invented in 1844. Before the bicycle. Or dynamite. He would occasionally pause in front of it, beer in hand, and think on how truly useful the old machine was. Luke put the sewing machine on a list entitled *wondrous devices you eventually lose interest in*.

He'd sold the sewing table on Craigslist for fifty dollars to a middle-aged Vietnamese woman. Now, in the quiet, timeless twilight, he swept away the rectangle of dust, removing its shadow from the front corner of the living room. As though it had never been there at all.

And onward. Luke dusted the windowsills and cupboards, adding soiled paper towels to the trash bag. He cleaned the kitchen, wiping down the glass shelves of the unplugged refrigerator. Neither of them had been much for cooking, but they were connoisseurs of Thai takeout and the odd falafel joint. Luke resolved, silently, that he would learn to cook in his new apartment.

He filled a bucket with soap and hot water and mopped, reflecting on Janelle's interest in starting over. Something she'd talked about in dreamy tones whenever he brought up the future. A clean slate, she'd said. She refused to believe in the one-act nature of American lives. Didn't

she know that every second act is defined by the first? He wondered how she was surviving out there in a world of loose ends and half-finished plot lines. He seriously considered deleting her phone number, forestalling any future overtures.

Insistent yellow sunlight was filtering through the blinds as Luke poured the mop water into the toilet and flushed it down. He tied the trash bag and put on his socks and shoes. Standing on the threshold, he viewed the big, airy apartment as it was when they'd moved in: no great gulf of emptiness; just a blank-slate canvas of new possibilities. In the pine-scented sterility of the rooms, there was no trace left of Janelle. No trace of Luke, either. And just as well.

He locked the door and dropped the keys through the mail slot, leaving the big shared apartment for the last time.

It was 7:30 a.m., and Luke estimated that he could drop off Janelle's last few things at the transfer center and then make it to work before his 9:00 a.m. meeting. The transfer center was the closest thing San Jose had to a city dump. It was a solution to the final remainder that seemed more dignified than placing those items on the curb to be gawked at, evaluated, picked through, or urinated on. Luke put the directions into his phone and started driving.

The city was awake by then, and Luke navigated toward Almaden Avenue while keeping an eye on traffic heading the other direction: a spill of dusty cars and insistent drivers squinting in the new daylight. The freeway was always a slog on weekdays, but today Luke would approach his drive differently. He would be disburdened. Buoyant, even. Not quite happy, but en route. There was a wry smile playing across his face as he exited the freeway into a neighborhood of dilapidated houses, family-owned auto shops, dispensaries, and the odd cardboard box plant.

The Leo Recycle Transfer Center was a long, low brick warehouse that had been painted beige and kelly green. Gaping bays had been cut in its side, and through them an inky gloom awaited, pierced here and there by big yellow support beams. The building sat in an expansive concrete lot filled with old white trucks, gray port-a-potties, and, further on, piles of rubble—mostly wood from construction sites. An industrial crane diligently sorted items from one pile into another.

Luke was daunted by the immensity of the operation

and the impression of disorder within. But he figured it would be worth it to fully close the door on Janelle.

He nodded at a trio of Hispanic workmen in yellow safety vests drinking coffee at a picnic table. He drove through the gate, across the lot, and onto the truck scale. There was an aluminum shed next to the scale, and a young man in jeans and a T-shirt came out to see what he'd brought.

"Got any e-waste or green waste? Household cleaners?" he asked, peering in the back window.

"No, no. Just trash," Luke said. "Nothing to recycle."

The young man apologized and said that even with this small amount of stuff, he'd still need to pay the minimum sixty dollars to leave his items. Nodding to himself, Luke paid and took his receipt. The young man told him to drive to the big entrance and park his car backward.

He put the vehicle in gear and made the short drive to the front of the transfer center building. He turned in his seat to peer past Janelle's things and into that gaping maw, picturing it closing its teeth, swallowing him whole. He felt a pang of the old, forlorn hopelessness of his situation and decided to push it down. Be brave, he said to himself.

A tall man in a yellow vest, hard hat, and gloves came out to guide him further in. Luke backed the car slowly into that darkness, where the ground was a muddy brown and where, to one side of him, a whole wall of rubble emerged, slumping toward the entrance like it was attempting to escape. As he crept backward, he spied crushed boxes and old playground equipment, colonies of trash bags gone gray with dust. He couldn't help but mentally catalogue these items, along with broken kitchen appliances, corroded car parts, soiled plastic shopping bags, and discarded drywall. He titled his list *things we return to the earth*.

The man was hard to make out in the rearview mirror. He directed Luke past a parked pickup truck whose driver was trying to ease an old freezer from the tailgate. He steered him around one of those massive yellow steel beams, and Luke cringed as his car tire crunched over unseen debris. The backing up continued, almost impossibly, the building's far-away entrance shrinking moment by moment. Luke harbored the irrational fear that, by venturing too far into this Kingdom of Unwanted Things, he risked becoming one of its subjects.

He stopped when the man raised his gloved hand.



Luke put his car into park and stepped out into the soft gray purgatory of the transfer center proper. It smelled of mud and dust and rotting garbage, and he could hear the buzz of a power shovel working way off in the distance. He opened the door of his hatchback.

"Speak Spanish?" the man asked.

"No, I'm sorry," said Luke.

"Here," the man said, pointing to the wall of rubble.

Among the pile, Luke could make out crates, file cabinets, dismembered electronics, and old stuffed animals, everything covered in a thin rime of dust. He could imagine each of these items in offices or entertainment centers, filling the childhood bedrooms of modest single-family homes. By manifesting here, these objects rendered their former residences indistinct. Unlived in. Together, they signified a world of clean slates and remade lives.

He turned back to see the man stalking off into the gloom.

He took out the trash bags full of sweaters and leggings and summer dresses. He hurled one toward the wall and stepped back as a cascade of dirt skittered down the rubble. After that, he worked more gingerly, setting the next bag down with care. He placed the flower pots and the antique lamps against the bags. He staggered under the weight of the *National Geographics*, placing them flush against the wall. He added Janelle's cracked Eames chair and antique floor lamp on top, wondering when they, too, would acquire that fine layer of dust. He stepped back and looked at the items, labeling the collection *things you leave in the darkness*.

It was much easier driving back, Luke's headlights shining the path ahead of him. He piloted his way around the yellow beam, steering clear of that same telltale crunch. He spotted the old freezer now standing by itself in the middle of the transfer center floor. He spied a heavily laden forklift skirting the far wall of the building. He swung his car back toward the entrance, a bright portal framing old white trucks, gray port-a-potties, and, beyond, the road back.

He emerged into the daylight and the dirty concrete lot, past the workmen still drinking their coffee, and onto the road. Luke parked his car a few blocks down. He rubbed in hand sanitizer from his glove box, and then he stepped outside to put on the starched white button-down work shirt that had been hanging in the car. He checked his

tires to make sure they hadn't been punctured, and then he started the vehicle once again.

By 8:15 a.m., he'd joined the spill of traffic heading toward the peninsula. The sun was bright in his rearview mirror, and he allowed himself a small, self-satisfied grin. If a second act is a continuation of the first, his was a new story, one whose ties to the previous work had been severed, string by string. Luke thought about getting a haircut and going shopping. He would put art on the walls. And soon, he'd meet someone else: Someone who could stick with it; who didn't change with the tides. Someone tidy.

Luke found a parking spot close to the front door of his office and badged himself in, nodding to the security guards and a few people he saw loitering around. He walked through the grid of cubicles, where he could hear the soft clatter of keyboards and smell the early-morning smell of coffee-machine cappuccinos. He grabbed his laptop from his desk and entered the clean carpeted hallway. Smiling, he greeted his manager at the conference room door.

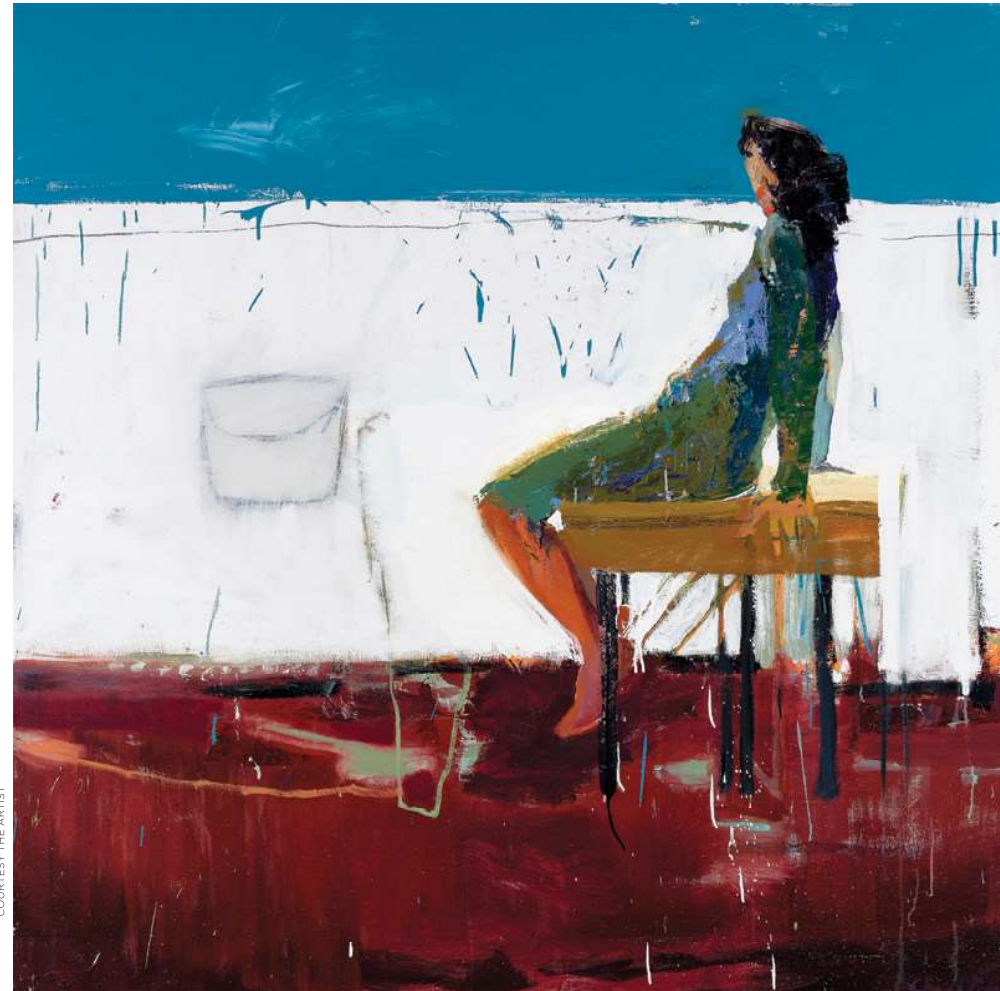
She stopped him with a furrowed brow, her eyes on his feet. "Your shoes, Luke!"

He looked down in dismay to see that they were ringed in dark-brown mud from the floor of the transfer center. Turning, he saw that the dirt and detritus had dogged his footsteps all down the hallway.

**Tyler Womack's** fiction has appeared in *Jet Fuel Review*, *Across the Margin*, and *Corvus Review*. A native Texan, he resides in San Jose, California, where he writes about hipsters growing up and the tragedies of creative employment.

## LINDA CHRISTENSEN

*Generous*, 2019  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 60 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST