

BARRY NEMETT

View from Montecastello, Tryptich, 2018
Gouache on paper, 83 x 67 in



COLLECTION OF JIM AND CAROL TRAWICK FOUNDATION

ROSE MARY SALUM

The Aunt

—Translated from the Spanish by C.M. Mayo

Zeina, name of cedars, of queens and princesses. Zei-na, with a zzz in the z, may air flow between the teeth, poisons filtered, producing a deepening in the valley of the *i*, and germinate a pure name. Zeina.

The call at eleven thirty in the morning. She would be born on the twenty-first of December and, forty-four years later, she would die. The masses would have to be delayed, as her medical treatments were delayed, and her divorce, and her madness. No one was prepared, these were days filled with bustle and celebrations, days of drinking and parties, appointments and trips. Impossible. The praying of the rosary would have to be postponed. What everyone agreed on about her passing was the feeling of relief. It was like winning the lottery, especially for her closest family members, the ones who had had to deal with her whims, with the people who took financial advantage of her and all the rest of her friends, who blamed her for wasting her money. So when they got the call they all exhaled in sweet relief and a bit of guilt. Guilt for having lived a life better than hers, for not having included her in family activities at the end of her days, for having taken a good part of her inheritance, but above all, for not having had her treated after the civil war, when, with a stray bullet lodged in a fold of her brain, she fell into a world of madness. At least that's what they called it. It wouldn't have cost them anything to take her to a doctor when, after her surgery, she started to show signs of deep apathy, changes in her speech. She's just going deaf, no big deal, Auntie's fine, that's normal, there are some people who take a while to get back to themselves after an operation. Any objection was in vain. In that environment, life was always experienced as a kind of spasm. When Zeina turned thirty, the family began to look around their society to see who would marry her. She was a good person, she didn't bother anyone, she wasn't envious, she was so nicely behaved that any man would feel honored to have her. The dowry was substantial, any defect could be excused with a modest quantity. Months went by, the ideal candidate arrived, and Zeina was married. Now, the two sons, the same ones who were secretly relieved by her death and who had put up with her confusions for so many years, celebrated in silence.

Zeina, strange name in a land of strangers. Zeiiii-na, with an emphasis on the *i*, so it is pronounced correctly and it not confused with the *y*.

The wake was held on December 21 and only two of her brothers showed up. The bitterest of all of them, the eldest, who believed he had who knows what rights, as if the day-to-day life of the family belonged to him and he was advancing in the ambience of a dynasty. There couldn't have been anything further than the truth; the family was ordinary among the ordinary, but these feelings of grandeur were born of his paranoia. Indeed, he was also mentally ill, but his illness was from birth. But his parents always hid it, more out of ignorance than good intentions. His, together with Aunt Zeina's recently acquired illness, deranged the family atmosphere in her last days and to such an extent that these abnormalities affected even the in-laws. Maybe this is why her parents pretended not to notice, to cycle through life as if everything were normal, to go on with their routine, get together every Sunday, in the same restaurant . . . for eighteen years. Indeed, on the day of the funeral, until the oldest brother arrived, nobody could start the funeral mass. He had called to give instructions that, like always, nothing could start until he was there. As if he were king, poor ruler without a country, without a crown, a poor devil with delusions of grandeur.

The casket was not opened at any point in the ceremony, and neither when it was taken to the cemetery. They had found the body late, when it was already decomposing, crumpled in the breakfast room of her house. It was not possible to show it.

Zeina, name of loneliness and sadness. The inconvenient daughter of a wealthy family. An unlucky name with a lucky turn. Zei-na, syllables of unconscious generosity, Demeter, goddess of beauty, feminine aspect of Morpheus.

Zeina's mother was another one of those fortunate ones who took the twenty-first of December as a dispensation from God, this easy way out of so many years of inconveniences and social challenges. To put it one way, there was no glory in having two sick children in her care. She was a woman without any power in the family, so she had to use gossip and intrigue to exercise whatever bit of control

she could and not end up suffocated among her children, both sick and normal, and a possessive husband. At the wake, everyone around her embraced her and gazed upon her in sympathy, and she played the role these gazes assigned to her: cry and cry until the swelling could hide, in a very dramatic and convincing way, that this was a day to celebrate, for finally this round and round of frustrations had ended, this cycle of bothers, of having to go out at two in the morning to retrieve her, drowned in alcohol, from some bar; of phone calls and lies to cover for her promiscuity; to no longer have to know about her. She cried from the moment she arrived at the wake and until she returned to Tripoli. It was vacation, everything was paid for and she wouldn't think of canceling hotels and restaurants. She had worked out all the details of this trip. So she had confirmed her traveling companion, as she called her maid, and they would go ahead as planned. Her husband agreed, they were older and as soon as they could finish up with the funeral, the better. In their last years, with a paranoid son, they had more than enough for Zeina to have embarrassed them in this way. If they had only been able to keep their mouths shut. At the conclusion of the burial, everyone wanted to know when the funeral masses would be held, but that did not matter too much. At least for now. The main thing was to come out of trance and go back on vacation, to a place where one could escape, for now and evermore, the gossip. She did not think of letting the extended family know about Zeina's passing, she wouldn't think of talking to them now to give them such news. They knew nothing, in fact they seemed to admire her and they always sent her regards. Especially Ivette, that young girl who liked her so much. Zeina's mother never understood Ivette's admiration for her aunt, the affection her nieces and nephews had for the stories she told and her way of telling them. For the moment, Zeina's mother had already decided, she would focus on her own affairs. She would let them know another time.

Zeina, coat-hanger woman, table woman, invisible woman. Zeina, personality of a chair, character of an outcast, voice of Scheherazade. Zeina, name of the teller of stories, voice of melody, colleague of imagination overflowing.

Her mental illness was evident the day she came home from her operation and told her first story. Abruptly that

winter she started to tell of the most extraordinary events. At that time the family controlled a consortium, Solidere, as it was baptized in the wake of the civil war, for the commercial developments of the sidewalks in the city's historic center and main avenues. They fought with the city's working class and the more defiant mafias, but there was plenty of money and in the end that was what mattered. The day Zeina went out with her first man and told her stories, Ivette and the rest of her nieces and nephews were the first to listen to her and celebrate her imagination. But very soon a dark shadow fell on her territory, for she confessed that it was "the voices" that dictated to her this or that episode. At first her comments passed unnoticed, but as time went by and people recognized themselves cast as evil or ridiculous figures in her stories, they started to hate her. Truth has never been welcome, and this was not going to be first time it was accepted. Little by little the cousins and the rest of the family began to distance themselves, and whenever they could, they would leave her out, an exile that would soon end in disgrace or, perhaps, the most gratifying surprise for her family and the rest of its friends, her death.

Zeina, name for a queen, for a teller of the most extraordinary stories. Zeina, Arab name that likes to play with the truth. And with men.

The day Zeina finally finished recovering from that terrible accident, she decided she would never go back to her life of gossip and banalities; she would no longer lose one minute of her time. In particular, during the war she saw so many innocent people die, among them thousands of children, that her heart changed. She was never the same again.

Neither was her physical state, which went on declining as she understood that her new mentality did not match that of the rest of the family, of her social circle, of the country as a whole . . . despite the fact that she had received the same wounds and vexations as the rest of her fellow citizens. Reality entered her with the bullet and from that moment her health became the metaphor of her sadness.

Zeina, name of unspeakable truths, of unheard voices, a Cassandra.

"The Jews, the Catholics, the Muslims, the Druze, the Maronites, the atheists, and the Orthodox Christians, all the legions who live in this region are victims of the conglomerate arms dealers and the instability will not end as long as these groups' ambitions for power go unsatisfied." That was the sort of thing Aunt Zeina would say on a Sunday morning after the tragic accident that changed her life and her way of thinking. She would meditate for some hours and then her voice would ring out in all the green area around them. The first day people reacted with curiosity, but it wasn't long before the neighbors complained about her prophetic messages and political ideas. Although her mother and her children tried to quiet her, she was stubborn, she would go back and shout in the square, saying things, even that the media were manipulated by these corporations that control the world. "Someone has to call things by name," she would say, "enough with life, with silence, with pretending nothing's happening," but people were appalled that she would help the Muslims, others that she would help the Jews, and the least argumentative could not understand why she wanted to talk about the big corporations when what everyone in the entire country was suffering from was a chaos of instability and insecurity. The embarrassment Zeina's parents endured caused them to enter a state of stupor that became passivity. It was not long before they left all responsibility for the new Cassandra to her children and they, as we know, could never control her.

Zeina, name of names, giver of light, poetry, and truth. Zeina, name cut short by anguish, of lack of understanding. Zeina, the unnamed.

The parting of the seas in her life, as we have said, was that horrible accident that took her to an operating room to suffer a surgery that would last over twelve hours. They were trying to remove the bullet embedded in her hypothalamus. Her life, but above all her speech, changed forever. She never returned to being that housewife interested in French fashion and family gatherings. That infamous projectile would be her undoing. Her obsession for speaking the truth caused no end of irritation to those around her: Your husband has a lover, I know her; the minister of education just embezzled the budget for the country's schools;

my children are waiting for me to die so they can take the money I've saved all my life; my parents have spent their lives fighting and they're ashamed of me; Ivette is my favorite niece, for the rest of them I don't give a damn. Wars are planned years in advance and they go on as long as they do so the powers can sell their cluster bombs. Archbishop George only wants money for his own benefit, he's an opportunist. Simon cannot keep up with Ivette, he's much too immature; if they marry, Ivette will suffer for the rest of her life. The oldest daughter hates me, but what she doesn't know is that I'm not leaving her one cent, everything will remain in my partner's name in turn.

A *z* unsheathed in the present, a name with the essence of prophecy that does not fit into the past. Zei-na, with a *zzzz* in the *z*, may air flow between the teeth, poisons filtered, producing a deepening in the valley of the *I*, and germinate a pure name. Zeina.

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One day, a time when the most angry rejections had become a thing of the past, after having spent a splendid afternoon with Ivette's mother, Zeina once again changed her mind. The money she would leave upon her death had to go to a different heir, she told me one morning when we were having breakfast together. After having thought about it for a long time, she had come to understand that her heirs should be the members of her family, and especially Ivette, for whom she was felt such a deep sympathy. I remained quiet, I made no comment. In a few more days I could go to America—that had always been the dream in my family, for many generations. The call came to the other side of the continent at eleven thirty in the morning. On December 21 she would be born and forty-four years later she would die. The masses would have to be delayed, as her medical treatments were delayed, and her divorce, and her madness. The will had been read and the war was closing in.

Rose Mary Salum is founding editor of the bilingual literary magazine *Literal: Latin American Voices and Literal Publishing*. Among her works are the collection of short fiction *El agua que mece el silencio* (Vaso Roto, 2015), which won the International Latino Book Award and the prestigious Pan-American Carlos Montemayor Award, and an anthology *Delta de las arenas, cuentos árabes, cuentos judíos* (Literal Publishing, 2013), which also won the International Latino Book Award. Her short fiction and essays have appeared in *Catamaran Literary Reader* (2017), *Origins* (2016), *The Body Subject and Subjected* (Sussex Academic Press, 2015), *Stirred Ground: Non-fiction Writing by Contemporary Latina and Latin American Women Authors* (Hostos Review, 2015), and *Profession* (2009), among other journals and anthologies. She is a member of the Academia Norteamericana de la Lengua Española.

C.M. Mayo is a noted translator of contemporary Mexican fiction and the editor of a collection of twenty-four Mexican writers, *Mexico: A Traveler's Literary Companion* (Whereabouts Press, 2006). She is also the author of several books, among them *Meteor* (Gival Press, 2019), which received the Gival Press Poetry Award; *The Last Prince of the Mexican Empire* (Unbridled Books, 2010), named a *Library Journal* Best Book; and *Sky Over El Nido* (University of Georgia Press, 1999), winner of the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. In 2017 she was inducted into the Texas Institute of Letters.

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*View from Montecastello,
Night Scene, 2013*
Gouache on paper, 17 x 26 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST