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OFFERINGS
by
Alison Maeser

"The attitude that nature is chaotic and that the artist puts order into it is a very absurd point of view, I think. All that we can hope for is to put some order into ourselves."
— Willem de Kooning

There was a time when he had liked nothing more than coming home to an empty house. Not because he didn’t like to be at home with his wife. Only because it was refreshing, for a moment, to be alone.

These days he used his wife’s name like some people use the name of God in vain. Only it wasn’t in vain, it wasn’t in anger, it wasn’t a curse. But when a buttered knife slipped from his old, clumsy fingers and clattered to the floor, he would sigh, “Oh, Christine.” And when he tried to lower his aching, quaking body into the big bathtub and lost his grip on the porcelain, he plunged into the scalding water crying, “Christine.” It was an “Oh, Christine, look what’s happened now.” A “You see, Christine, what’s becoming of me without you.” He did not realize he had
developed this habit until he let her name slip after losing a card game to his son. He had never done this while she was alive.

“What did you say?” his son said, making a bridge with his cards and then letting it collapse.


His son did not believe him, but he didn’t bother with a contradiction either. “Do you want to play another round?” the younger man said, drawing all of the cards toward his chest in grand scooping movements.

The man nodded, and then the phone rang. He hated that sound. If his son had not been there, he would not have answered it. He made a labored show of scooting his chair back and hoisting himself out of it, but his son sought to spare him the trouble. “Let me get that for you, Dad,” he said.

He interrupted the phone, mid-ring. “Flagg residence. No, this is Sean. His son. Yes, just a minute.”

Sean stretched out the telephone cord to where Frank sat and handed him the phone. “This is Mr. Flagg.”

The woman on the phone sounded young and competent and busy, and through all of her hurried formalities it took Flagg a few moments to understand that she was asking to make a movie about him. He fumbled with the glasses on a slim rope around his neck and pressed them onto his face, as if he would need them to hear her better. “A documentary film, outlining your incalculable contribution to the art world and the projects you’re involved with now,” she said. “I think fans of yours and anyone at all involved in the visual arts would be very interested in this kind of a project.
I've been a huge fan of yours since... oh, I don't know, since I was born, it feels like...”

Flagg looked at his son across the long dining room table, shuffling cards. “I’m sorry. What did you say your name was?”

“Theresa Nesbitt,” she offered.

By this point in his life, a whole year after Christine’s death, Flagg had almost completely adopted the persona of a cantankerous old man. The stereotype had been so clearly laid out by films and TV shows that it had been easy for him to slip into, once he found himself old and infirm in a tall empty house. And as a cantankerous old man, he felt inclined to bark at Theresa Nesbitt, tell her never to call back—the stinging command “Let this old man live what little is left of his life in peace!” flew to his mind—and slam down the receiver, or rather offer it forcefully back to Sean. But as much as it would have thrilled him to deny the girl, Flagg felt greater excitement at the prospect of allowing her to film him. He had never been ashamed of his work, the good work that came out of the old days, after the war, and always felt his—what had she said? his incalculable contribution?—too little appreciated. Perhaps a good film about Frank Flagg was just what everyone needed.

“They’re going to make a movie about me,” he told Sean, setting down the receiver and picking up the hand of cards Sean had dealt him.

“No kidding?” Sean said. “Who’s going to play you?”

“Me. Myself. It will be a documentary film. The film crew will be moving out here in three weeks.”

And Flagg scanned his cards, resisting the urge to joke aloud with Christine, "A prophet is not without honor, huh?" Anyway, he smiled. He had never read those words from the Bible himself, but that was what Christine used to say when they were young parents and the mundane duties of a family man would pull him from his studio, or one of the children would look at the product of months of work and say, "That doesn’t really look like Mom." A prophet is not without honor, but in his own house and his own country or something.

The film crew moved out in three weeks. It was less of a crew, actually, than a team, Flagg thought when Theresa Nesbitt and her three assistants stood before him one raining morning in the tall, many-windowed entry to his house.

She picked up on his surprise. "I’m a recent graduate of --'s film program. This is my first film, post-grad. We have a very small budget. This is Tim Washburn, Tim de Soto, and Rodrigo," she said, pointing in turn to each of the three men at her side, who carried suitcases, boom mikes, and cameras. Then she showed him the shooting schedule. Flagg was nervous. He didn’t think he could talk about himself and live a film-worthy life for that long.

The first day, Theresa, Tim, Tim, and Rodrigo pinned a microphone to the collar of his plaid shirt and followed him around with a camera for ten hours. They filmed him making soft-boiled eggs in the morning, driving to the rec center pool for a swim (which he rarely did anymore), putting his bed sheets in the washing machine, and making a bologna sandwich for lunch. By four o’clock
in the afternoon he had run out of things to do for the camera, so he sat down in the den and turned on Jeopardy.

“You really don’t have to film this part,” he said.

“It’s okay,” Theresa said.

“Usually my son comes over Tuesday evenings, but he has a presentation to make at work tomorrow.”

“It’s okay,” Theresa said.

Flagg was in the habit of calling out the answers when he knew them and the contestants didn’t, which was often. He hoped Theresa would include these shots of him, confidently murmuring “What is the Boxer Rebellion?” and “Who is William Tell?” He sat in a swivel chair next to his computer, and when someone gave an answer he knew nothing about, he searched for it on Wikipedia, which Frank Flagg considered the greatest invention of the twenty-first century. Today, when the answer to double jeopardy was “Leni Riefenstahl” Frank typed the phrase into the search bar, reading and clicking hyperlinks until dinnertime hunger gnawed in his swollen old man’s gut and he had to prepare a microwave dinner. Some, like his own son Sean, distrusted the information supplied by online encyclopedia articles that anyone could write, but Flagg had never been misled. The scope of its knowledge, the dedication of its editors astounded him.

Theresa and the crew had made reservations at a hotel downtown, but Flagg said there was plenty of room for them in the downstairs bedrooms. More room than he knew what to do with. “I won’t bother you down there,” he assured them. “I don’t even go down the stairs because I can’t get back up.” At first, they politely refused, but the lure of free lodging was too strong to resist.

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Flagg did not worry about his children putting him in a home. He had insured himself against that, unintentionally, by being a famous-for-a-time artist and building himself a one-of-a-kind house. His son would never make him sell it and his son could not afford to buy it; the house rested securely in Flagg's possession and was unquestionably willed to Sean. It didn't matter how incapacitated he became; Sean would wait it out; Sean would drive out to nurse his father every day, move in with him if he had to; Frank Flagg would die in the house he built. He refused to think about whether the house had more value to Sean as a piece of his heritage or as a Frank Flagg original.

He changed out of his plaid shirt and into his plaid pajamas, and they filmed him getting into bed and switching the light off. They said, “Thanks, Frank. Good night.” When they and their cameras and soft puffy microphones had left the room, Flagg had a prickling, guilty urge to do something he had always avoided with ease. In the dark he stumbled out of bed and switched on the computer, clicked open Internet Explorer and typed in the search bar, “Frank Flagg.” He clicked on the first link that appeared.

The Frank Flagg Wikipedia page was surprisingly long. He read, “Franklin Flagg (1925–) was a painter and central figure of the abstract impressionist movement and the New York School. He has been cited as an influence by many painters including Mark Rothko.

“Frank Flagg was born in Brooklyn, New York, USA. He attended Columbia University as an architecture student for two years and spent his third year studying visual art with professor Walton Trimble before dropping out in 1946. He married folk singer
Christine McLeod in 1948. Flagg spent the next ten years as a prolific painter in New York City and then began a teaching career at the Art Institute of Chicago, where he worked and taught until 1964. He and his wife then moved to Seattle."

There was more, about how much people adored his work. It was almost funny to read, Flagg thought. It was like an obituary, and it could have contained the exact same information had he died in 1964. He flicked off the computer and crumbled back into bed.

The next day was set aside for interviews. Theresa, Tim, Tim, and Rodrigo spent the morning repositioning armchairs, paintings, and knick-knacks in the living room, opening and closing the blinds on the floor-to-ceiling windows to create an interview corner they must have hoped movie critics would term "visually arresting." Flagg made himself a soft-boiled egg and changed into his nicest plaid shirt.

"This is how it's going to work," Theresa said. "I have a series of questions I'd like you to answer here. I'll ask them, and you answer. Don't worry about rambling or anything; of course we'll edit it later and keep only the most important things. Say whatever comes to mind. Ready? Three, two . . ." And the little red light on a Tim's camera glowed.

"What is art?" Theresa said.

"What is art?" Flagg repeated. "Well. You get right to the point. Art is a method of expression, I suppose. Self-expression. Art was a hobby of mine. And it has to look good, when you hang it on a wall."

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Theresa waited for more, but Flagg had said everything he could think of. Names flew to his mind, prominent names, artists that had tried in their ways to define art; he had studied them in his single year of art school at Columbia, but he had never really agreed with any of them then and now he barely cared what they'd said. “What is your art?” she pressed.

“My art is all of those things. I don’t know. I painted because I liked it. I wasn’t trying to start a movement or change anybody’s life. I wasn’t trying to influence anybody.” He choked on the word influence; would they be able to tell he’d been reading about himself on Wikipedia?

Again, she waited. Silently, Rodrigo scratched the beard hairs that grew all the way down to his shirt collar.

“Okay,” she said. “In your opinion, does life reflect art, or does art reflect life?”

“Both,” he answered.

“Why do you say that?”

“Well. I think that artists strive to represent the things they see around them—sometimes in abstract ways, like in my case. In that way, art reflects life. But people also get their ideas of what life is like from the representations of it that they see, and conduct themselves accordingly. So in that way, life reflects art.”

She asked him about the role of art in the world, the role of art in his life. She asked about abstract expressionism, about its supporters and its critics. He hadn’t thought about these things in years. Maybe he had never thought about them—but then he knew that he must have. It would have been impossible for him to give that much of his life to something whose purpose he had
never contemplated. But now he could not conjure up a word to say about any of it, and he wondered if his mind was finally going or if he just did not care anymore.

Theresa turned her head, just slightly, toward a Tim, and the red camera light flicked off. “Okay, Frank—you’re doing really great. This is great stuff. Just remember—these questions are really simplistic, I know, but they’re just a starting point, a place to jump off of. Don’t be afraid to go wherever you want with them.”

They took a break for lunch. When they returned to the interview corner, the questions were different.

“You used to spend a lot of time with Milton Resnick, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline. Tell me about that.”

“They were older than me. They were already well established, it seems like, when I was getting my start. I admired them—Resnick, especially—I thought his stuff was really beautiful. They hung around Tenth Street at some of those galleries where I hung around, and we all really admired them.”

Theresa waited for a moment, leaned forward in her chair and fixed her intense gaze on Frank. Frank looked past her, into the green beyond the windows. “Do you remember any specific encounters with them, or anyone else whose work you admired?” she said finally.

Flagg knit his eyebrows; it was as if he could feel the teeth of a comb going through his brain, searching desperately for a bit of a conversation, a glimpse of a face. Surely he had picked off the ground and stored away forever a precious word fallen from the lips of an idol, a friend, but there was nothing there. “No . . .” he said. “No.”

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The only thing he remembered clearly now was Christine, and seeing her for the first time on stage at the Village Vanguard in October. He didn’t remember which of his artists friends had brought him there, and her music was not the kind of music he liked, really—he preferred avant-garde jazz or something to her banjo-accompanied protest songs. But her voice was so pretty and she was so nervous; she hid it well behind her smooth face and black curls that didn’t move as her head swayed with the music, so Flagg felt like perhaps he was the only one who knew how secretly nervous she was, and then he felt like they were friends already. After the show was over, he waited till the crowds had dispersed a little and then approached her to tell her how much he had enjoyed the show.

“Thank you,” she said, and then sighed, “I need a drink.”

The opportunity had handed itself to him, fallen upon him like rain, burned him from the inside out. “Let me buy you one,” he said, and they were out the door, shuffling down the Greenwich Village nighttime streets. He let her walk a little bit in front of him so he could study her shape with his artist’s eye: full skirt jutting out from the waist and a black banjo case on her back. He had forgotten the friend that brought him to the show. They stopped for drinks at a place he recommended; she admitted she didn’t know where anything was here yet. She’d just moved from Tulsa, she said, and he laughed at her. Tonight was her first real show. He feigned incredulity. He was a painter, he said. She wanted to play with Pete Seeger, she said. “I’m Frank,” he said. “I’m Christine,” she said, and he said, “I know.”
By the end of the night, Frank would later tell their children, they were in love. By the end of the year they were married.

Frank had forgotten then that Theresa had asked him about Kline, de Kooning and Resnick, not his wife. “Christine read the Bible,” he mused abstractedly. “Every night. She believed she was going to heaven, and that’s what makes it difficult for me not to believe in heaven now that she’s gone. You know, I guess some people lose their faith in times of trial, but me . . . I don’t know. I guess you could say I’m going the other direction. She took good enough care of me while she was here that I didn’t need a god.” He chuckled. That was what serious people did when they said something revelatory, right? To take the revelatory edge off. “All I know is she’s gone from here, but she’s gone somewhere . . . As much as she was, she couldn’t have built heaven herself when she left the earth the way that she and I built this house when we left Chicago. You see? I don’t know. It’s far-fetched, I guess, but anything less seems a little unbearable.”

Theresa asked more questions about the Village, the Tenth Street galleries, teaching in Chicago. There wasn’t much to say about any of it; only facts, which Flagg couldn’t remember.

“Cut,” Theresa barked finally, and offered Flagg a rigid smile.

The next day they wanted a tour of the studio. Flagg hesitated, in part because he didn’t think he could ascend the staircase. Tim took one arm and Tim took the other; Rodrigo and Theresa carried the equipment.

The studio took up the whole top floor of the house. The whole north and west walls were a pane of glass, and the sprawling wood floor held them up among the top layers of the Connecticut forest.
Mostly the room was wide and clean and empty, with only one large easel and one smaller one, and a pile of blank canvases in one corner he had stretched and cut decades ago. "When was the last time you used this studio?" was Theresa’s first question when Frank was prettily situated in the right half of her shot, beside an easel. Her voice had had a good night’s rest; it was eager and interested again, where it had been thin the previous afternoon.

"1969," Frank said, pulling year from his head that sounded about right.

"Why haven’t you painted in over 40 years?"

Then, oddly, Frank was able to pull words of wisdom from a professor all the way out of 1945, his single year of art school. You know you’re an artist when it’s easier to paint than it is not to paint, or something like that, and upon hearing it Frank had heaved a sigh of relief, instantly validated, because that described him. From age seventeen to age forty, it was easier to paint; he couldn’t not paint. Every sight and smell and feeling he longed to expel from himself and flatten on canvas; each bubbled up and out of him and took on round and sharp and big and small forms in color on a white cloth. Now they demanded no expulsion. For a while afterward he had pressed forward anyway, pressed his brush to canvas anyway, tossing out things that were very bad and very self-indulgent and he knew it. So he stopped, and he didn’t feel bad or empty.

"I don’t need to. I used to need it, and I don’t anymore."

"Did you... Do you think something else took the place of that?"

"Well, perhaps. I couldn’t say what, though." He passed his eyes over the light wooden floors and the corner of canvases and said, "I
suppose I had my house, and that was like a work of art, I thought. But I couldn't say."

"I don't suppose there's anything here you could show us," Theresa said.

"Look for yourself. It's pretty bare," Flagg chuckled.

Theresa shuffled quietly through the papers in her lap, and then looked up at him and dropped the papers to the ground. "One of the things that I've always loved about your work is what it portrays about the artist; there's this churning, this inner life, this perspective that is so evident. Churning is the word I'm always coming up with for you, right," she said with a grin, and Tim, Tim, and Rodrigo nodded their assent, "I'm always saying, 'That's churning—it betrays a real churning.'"

She waited for a response, and Flagg said, "Well. Thank you."

"My favorite painting of yours has always been Exodus. That whole series, I think, is incredible; among all of the abstract stuff of that period, that series really stands out. It's beautiful. Can you tell me your feelings about that series? What inspired you?"

Flagg cleared his throat laboriously. "I... someone else always named my paintings for me. I called them all *Untitled*. I don't remember that one."

Theresa's face twitched, and Flagg thought he heard Rodrigo murmur something under his breath. "The monochrome series," Theresa said. "The peachy, kind of salmon one... Exodus..."

"Right," Flagg said, aching. He read in her face the strange disappointment of having to explain his own artwork to him. "The idea of monochromes intrigued me. How to differentiate those shapes without a whole lot of contrast. Exodus was about a

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journey," he tried, but he had no idea why that pink painting had been called Exodus. Theresa ran her hand through her hair.

“It’s beautiful,” she said flatly. Rodrigo, Tim, and Tim shifted uncomfortably.

She cast her lines for anything about the other paintings and, catching little, asked about his house. Flagg offered his joke about the house as an insurance policy. Finally she directed Rodrigo to switch off the camera and stalked toward the stairs with her eyes on her shoes.

“What are we filming tomorrow?” Flagg asked casually. “I just like to know in advance.”

“Well, that depends, Mr. Flagg,” Theresa declared, turning the full force of her gaze on him.

“On what?”

“On whether you’d like to say anything or not.”

Flagg was accustomed only to her passive aggression; he wasn’t sure how to respond, and he seemed unable to summon his cantankerous old man persona in his defense. “I’m sorry,” he began, “I know I’m not a good talker.”

“It’s not that. Terseness I can handle; shyness I can handle; simple speech I can handle. If it were simple and profound, Mr. Flagg, that would be a dream come true, that would have been expected. But you have nothing to say. I don’t understand. I was prepared for a crotchety old man; I was expecting an inaccessible, reclusive artist; that I could have handled. That at least would have been something to watch on film. But you have nothing to say.”

“I’m sorry.”
Theresa let out a sigh, quick and percussive. “No. I’m sorry.” It seemed as if the words were causing her physical pain. “You’ve been great to let us into your home like this. It’s just, I’ve graduated, and I’m worried, because I could have picked anything and I picked this. This is my project, my film, you know, and—”

“Well it’s his life, Theresa; it is what it is,” a Tim said.

Flagg felt a brief gush of gratitude to Tim that quickly gave way to aggravation. Flagg didn’t like hearing his existence dismissed so readily by a man who hadn’t changed his t-shirt all week. “Shut up, Tim,” Theresa breathed, and resumed her determined trek out of the studio.

That night, Flagg showered and put on his pajamas and stood looking at himself in the mirror as it slowly unfogged itself. Surely that face was too old to be his own. It was like someone had taken trimmings of skin and draped them over him, pinning them up in the corners of his eyes and mouth like curtains. It was not fair that his face should have to become unrecognizable.

How old am I? he wondered, and Christine, he thought, supplied the answer: eighty-six. Well, Picasso lived to ninety-one, he told himself, but I am not Picasso. Flagg was old, he was going to die, and so he understood why Theresa was mad at him.

In the morning Theresa informed Flagg that she was out of money and had to take an editing job in California. She and the crew would be back in a few months to record Flagg’s narration. He did not expect they really would come back. They didn’t.

Except a Tim came back, only a moment after he had left the house, claiming to have forgotten his razor. Flagg was standing in the living room, where the crew had left him. “Will you tell Theresa...
I'm sorry,” he said again, before Tim could leave the house for good.


But it wasn't just that he was boring. Flagg knew that now. “I'm dying. She wanted to catch me before I expired. She wanted my conclusions, my lifetime worth of wisdom, whatever I've been brewing up out here in the woods by myself all this time.”

Tim had been backing slowly but surely toward the door. Now he was almost outside. “I don’t know, man. Maybe. She never told me that, but…”

“Perhaps if I died now, it would be better. Then all my boring words would have a little value and you could make a cent off all your hard work, huh?”

“Aww, no. Don’t worry about it.”

Flagg’s feet ached from standing. He leaned against the end table by the sofa. “Well, thanks, Tim.”

“Hey—see you around,” Tim said, but that was a lie, and he offered Flagg a farewell wave from the side of his head, like a salute.

Flagg switched on the computer in the den while the rain dropped outside, pulled up Wikipedia, and typed his own name in the search bar. When his obituary article came up, he clicked “Edit” in the top right hand corner and erased everything. Then he typed “Frank Flagg (1925–) lived his life in two halves. The first half (1925–1964), in retrospect, seems largely a waste, and as for the second half (1964–), he does not have much to show either.” Then it seemed that something was missing, and so he added, “On
December 30, 1948 he married Christine McLeod,” and clicked “Save”.

He looked over his handiwork, proud to see his own words immortalized in pixilated type behind the hard clear wall of his computer screen. He turned away from it and leaned over as far as he could to reach the TV remote. “Christine,” he whispered, and something full and wet seemed to rupture in his eye. Two tears slid over his puffy old face and settled in the crease that connected his nose to the corner of his mouth while the Jeopardy music played.

He woke up the next morning, made a soft-boiled egg, and while he ate it longed for the satisfaction of rereading his words, now forever a part of the growing, living, nurturing Wikipedian organism. But when he typed in his name, angry words in a yellow banner at the top of the screen announced, “Your edits have been classified as vandalism,” and all the former bibliographic bile had taken its place under his name.

In a different way, though, that was satisfying.