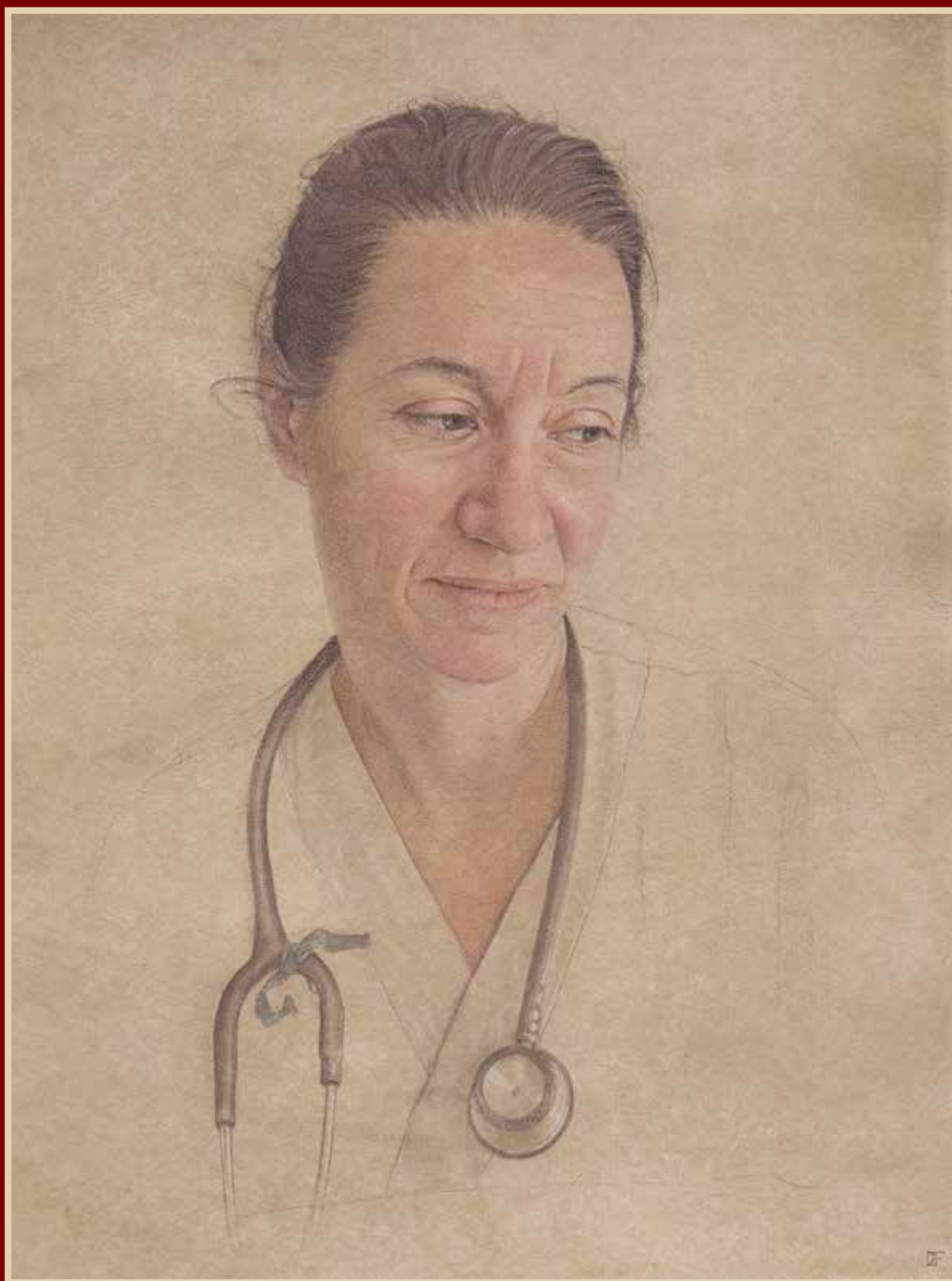


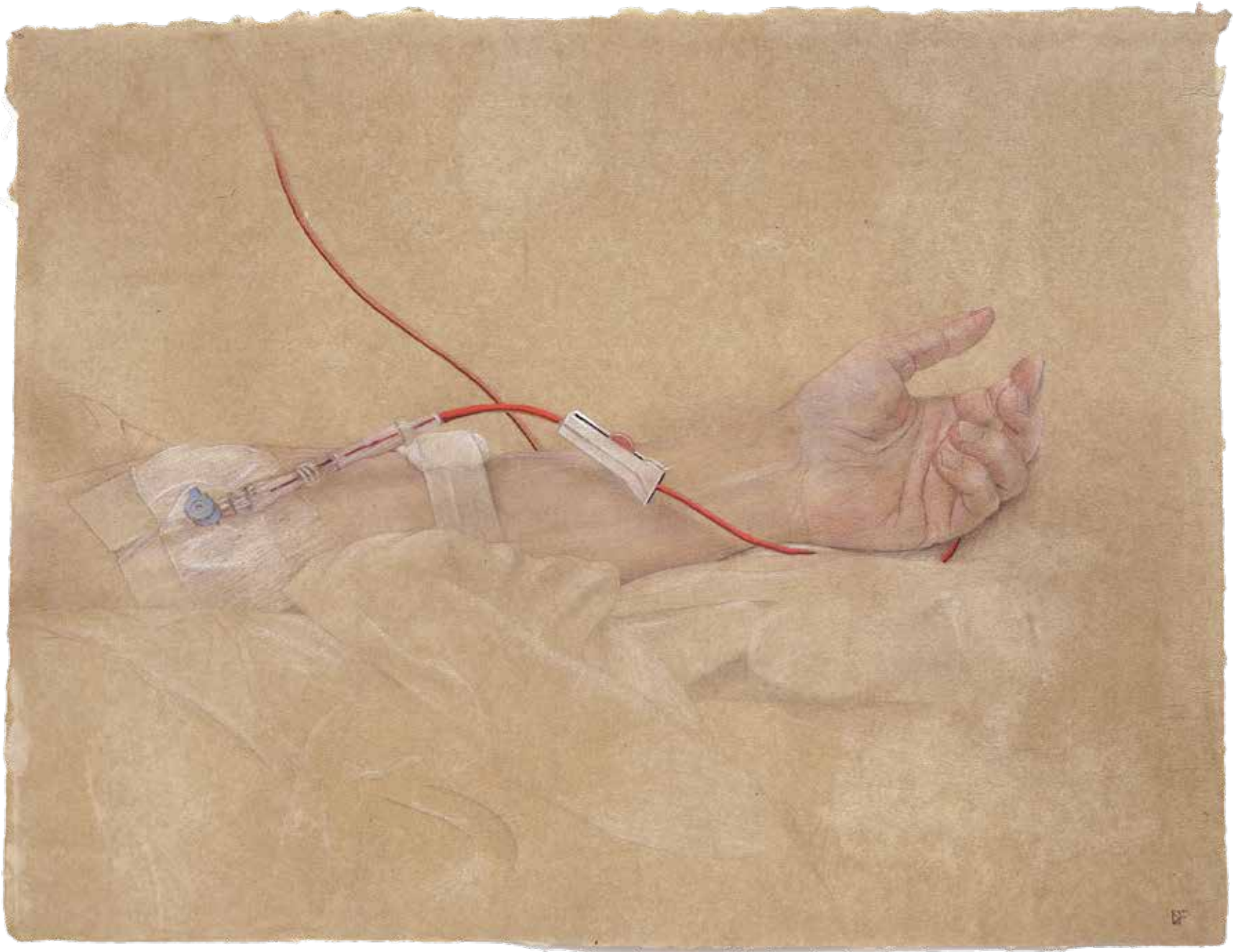
The Parma Portraits

La Gentilezza degli Sconosciuti



Donald Farnsworth

THE PARMA PORTRAITS



EF

Receiving Italian Blood, winter 2022.

The Parma Portraits

La Gentilezza degli Sconosciuti

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MAGNOLIA EDITIONS
Oakland, California



*I wanted to write a love letter to my wife
and to the physicians, nurses, and staff
who devoted their time and energy to see me
through to the other side, whether life or death;
these drawings are the letters.*

DONALD FARNSWORTH

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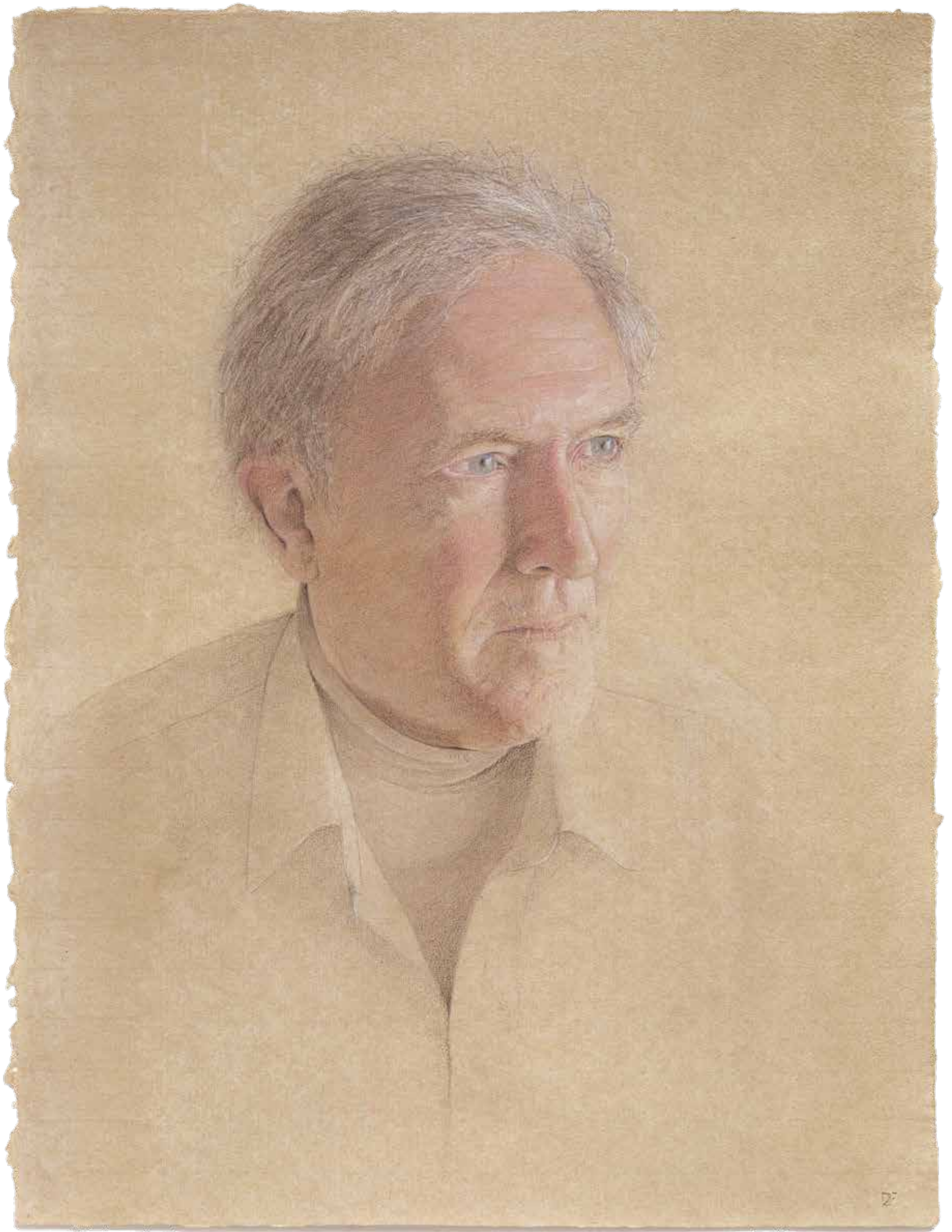
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Commemoration of Care

The good physician treats the disease;
the great physician treats the patient who has the disease.

—*Sir William Osler, MD*

Many decades ago, in the chapel of an abbey under renovation, a monk was struck in the head by a beam that fell from the ceiling. In critical condition, he was rushed to Saint Vincent, a Catholic hospital in nearby Worcester, Massachusetts. There my father, Dr. Robert Andrew Johnson, a neurosurgeon, was tasked with trying to save his life.

Despite the man's severe injuries, my father was able to stabilize him, and over several days, his condition went from critical to out of danger and on the road to recovery. One morning my father stopped by to check his patient's progress. A nurse, who was a nun, rushed up to my father and excitedly exclaimed, "Dr. Johnson, Dr. Johnson, it's a miracle. God has seen fit to save Brother Timothy's life." My father listened quietly but then replied with the dry wit he was known for, "Sister Marie, you are incorrect. I was responsible for saving Brother Timothy's life. It was God who struck him with that beam in the first place!" I am happy to say that the nun could do nothing but see the logic of my father's argument and laugh.

Doctors, nurses, first responders, police, and firefighters are a somewhat anonymous group in our consciousness . . . until we need them. They, in turn, spend their professional lives anticipating crises in which their skill, judgment, and calm demeanor under pressure are necessary. They rarely receive individual recognition once a crisis has passed. Performing in such circumstances is simply part of their job.

It's not that people don't appreciate the care they receive in an emergency. They do. It's just that once the crisis is over, a generalized thank-you to the "medical staff" for their care and concern seems to suffice.

The same could have been true for Don and Era Farnsworth after experiencing a medical trauma in the fall of 2022 in Parma, Italy, but that would not have been in keeping with their character. Don and Era were keenly aware

that the medical staff in Parma were individuals who, despite being strangers in a foreign country and despite a language barrier, were doing everything in their power to restore the health of this American who was, without warning, put in their care. For the Farnsworths, these doctors and nurses had distinct personalities, and their caring was personal and needed to be recognized as such.

Even while in distress in his hospital bed, Don conceived what he hoped to do. He photographed everyone—including his fellow patients—who accompanied him from sickness to recovery, to memorialize them later through a series of portrait drawings. As those doctors and nurses tended to this ill American, little did they know that their patient was making the deeply personal choice of removing the anonymity of his caregivers by commemorating them in portraiture.

I can think of only one other instance of an artist recognizing a generally anonymous group of individuals who serve the common good. The British artist David Hockney has a great love of London's National Gallery and the paintings it contains. He also is aware and appreciative of the dutiful security necessary to keep them safe undertaken by vigilant but, to the public, essentially faceless guards. From December 16, 1999, through January 11, 2000, Hockney drew a series of guards at the gallery titled *Twelve Portraits after Ingres in a Uniform Style*. In honoring these dozen guards with formal portraits, Hockney bestowed individuality and respect for their profession.

In the aftermath of his medical crisis, Don Farnsworth has done the same. For Don, a heartfelt acknowledgment to an anonymous medical staff was not enough. Instead, he offers these poignant renderings of doctors and nurses, plus fellow patients and friends, who shared his journey from trauma to recovery. That experience will now not fade into memory but will have a permanent visual record of a community in Parma that displayed caring and compassion, inspiring those in the future.

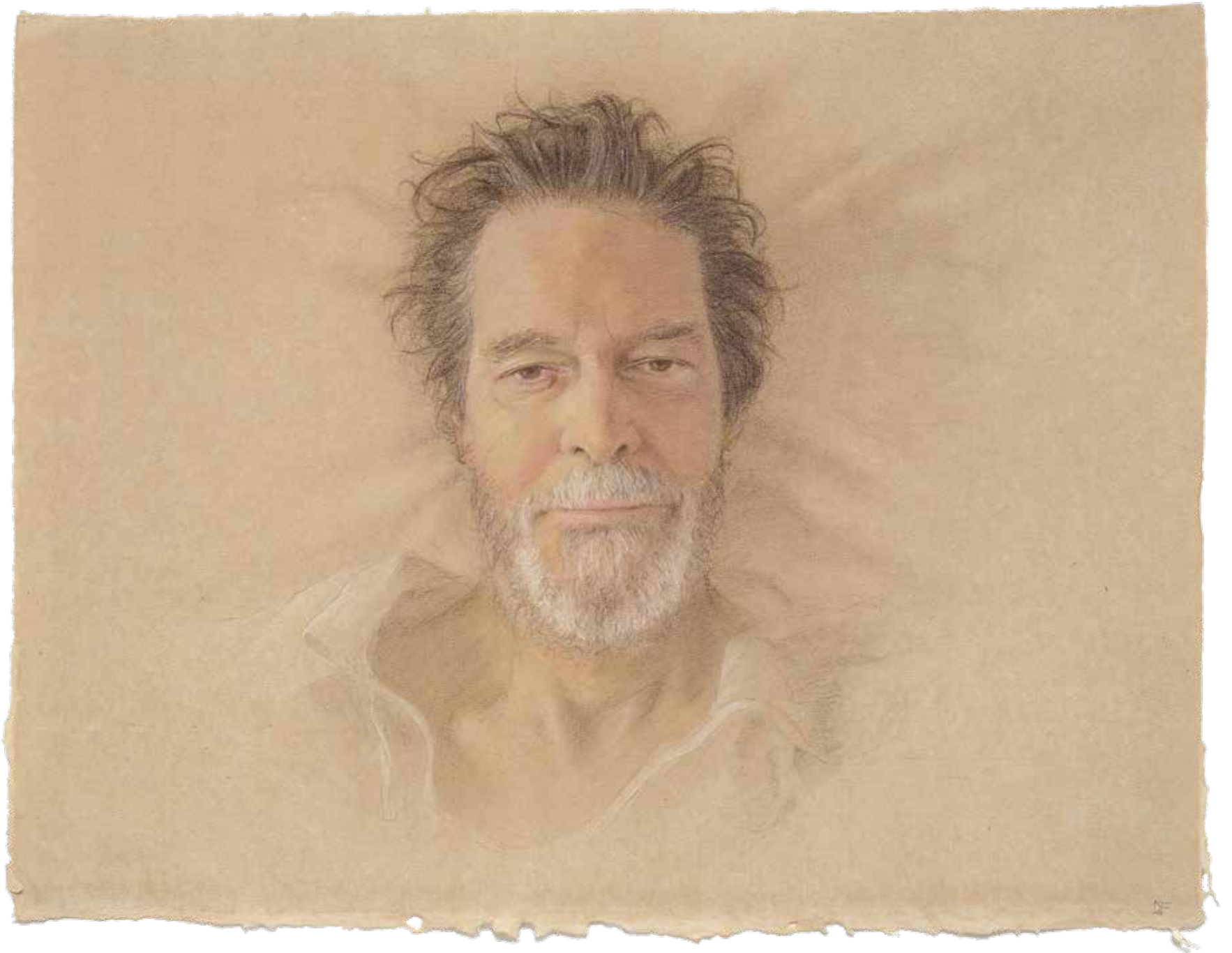
ROBERT FLYNN JOHNSON

Curator Emeritus

Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

THE PARMA PORTRAITS



Self-Portrait in Maggiore Hospital, 2023.

Extended Life

IT WAS THE TIME OF COVID-19, a time fraught with danger. Inside Maggiore Hospital in Parma, Italy, I was not the only one whose life was hanging in the balance. One wrong encounter, one viral mutation—and doctors, nurses, patients, and visitors could be infected, reinfected, and devastated by this novel coronavirus. Consumed by pain in my shoulder and neck, bedraggled and drained of vitality, I lay lifeless in my hospital bed as if washed up on the shore of a foreign land, a supplicant at the mercy of my generous caretakers.

On a journey that included London, the Lake District, a presentation in Cambridge, Paris, hiking in the French Alps, Rome, Parma, and Venice, I had contracted Covid. After testing negative for almost one week, I thought I had left Covid behind. But in Parma my condition had worsened overnight; and my wife, Era, accompanied me to the emergency room. On my arrival, I staggered from the cab and collapsed on a gurney. I told the English-speaking doctor that I might be having a heart attack. They took blood samples, swabbed my nose, hooked up EKG wires, gave me a CT scan, and checked my vitals in short order. The doctor came to my gurney in the modern, curtained ER space and said, “The good news is your heart is fine; the bad is you still have Covid, you have pneumonia, and you are extremely anemic (a hemoglobin of 7.0)—you need a blood transfusion today.” The Maggiore Hospital Emergency Department issued a no-fly order for me. Within a few hours, I was in a bed in the Covid ward on the third floor of the pathology building, with Italian blood flowing into my arm, receiving treatment from some of the most competent and compassionate people with whom we share this blue planet.

Five weeks earlier, on September 13, 2022, Era and I had bid farewell to our home and art studio (Magnolia Editions) in Oakland, California, and

🍷 Some patients are easy to diagnose. Their malady is written on their forehead—one look and the physician knows the precise problem. My rare disorder had to be carefully and methodically reviewed, ruling out the trivial in pursuit of the life-threatening. In the process, the clinicians in Parma found pneumonia, Covid, and the remnants of my angiomyolipoma; they also discovered and biopsied two nodes on my thyroid. They filtered these and other more or less minor red herrings to find the serious cause of acute anemia: a monoclonal antibody, one that originates from a single progenitor, that was destroying the membrane of my red blood cells.

set out on our journey. Landing in London, we found ourselves entangled in the throng of mourners hoping to attend Queen Elizabeth's memorial. Not knowing her personally, we extricated ourselves from the crowd's singularity of purpose and focused on the cornucopia of art offered in the historic city. We threaded our way through the madding crowds to the Royal Academy to see the William Kentridge exhibition, then to the British Museum and the Tate, where we stumbled upon works by Faisal Abdu'Allah, a longtime collaborator at Magnolia Editions. We called and congratulated Faisal right from the gallery. Extricating ourselves from the melee of royalty followers, we traveled by taxi, train, and rental car to the Lake District for some hiking and a visit to Mark Cropper of the Paper Foundation in Kendal. The Paper Foundation, in the old Cropper family estate, houses a collection of ancient European and British paper equipment and other historical papermaking items.

Back in London, again skirting closed roads, the Royal Regiment of Horse Guards, and a million visitors looking to get a last glimpse of the queen, we made our customary pilgrimage to the Victoria and Albert Museum's Works on Paper study room. When we had satisfied our desire for communing with Old Master drawings, we took taxi and train to Cambridge, where I was giving a talk at the British Association of Paper Historians' annual meeting at Madingley Hall, set in magnificent gardens that cast long autumn shadows on lush, well-manicured grassy knolls. There, I described my seven-year quest to recreate Renaissance-style paper.

The next leg of our journey, London to Paris via the Eurostar, is where things got dicey. Mask wearing was common in California but not so in all foreign lands. As lone mask wearers, Era and I stood out on the overcrowded platform. Boarding the train with only sixty seconds to spare, we sat directly across the aisle from a family of four who were desperately ill with a definite overabundance of mucus. We kept our masks on and reassured ourselves that we were fully vaccinated. When the food arrived, we doffed our masks to eat with gusto.

We walked everywhere in Paris, save for a bicycle ride around the Parc du Grand Trianon in Versailles, and we visited the fabulous Musée de Cluny in Paris, remodeled and improved since our last visit. Dining with Deborah Hoffman, a childhood friend of Era's, we ate to our hearts' content. Life was good—but a sharp twist in the road unknowingly lay ahead.

On our way by train to Gap, France, for hiking in the Alps with artist Squeak Carnwath, her husband, Gary Knecht, Tom Andres, and his wife, Jan, I felt uneasy about my health, with a vague electrical glow radiating from my chest. Since I was not feeling perfect, we all masked up. Then, in our host's minivan, we opened the windows for the half-hour drive to the chateau, where I tested positive for Covid. As careful as we were, I managed to infect my wife, Tom, and Jan. Squeak and Gary got off scot-free. Era, Jan, and Tom recovered in a week or so and completed some of our scheduled hikes and fine dining. I, on the other hand, did not do well. My energy was nonexistent,

♥ I enjoy showing and explaining photos of Renaissance paper surfaces and techniques that differ from those of the Industrial Revolution papers found in art stores and the handmade papers of today. At the Cambridge Library, we listened to well-considered presentations by conservators, librarians, and historians and enjoyed a tour of the rare book room and paper conservation studio. To me, seeing, touching, and learning about ancient codices and papers is riveting and enlightening.

♥ As I sat in the very back seat of the minivan, away from my friends, the cold air of the French Alps blasted from the open windows on my neck; my California attire did not keep me warm. Herein begins my downfall into the pit of misery.

my neck and shoulders were in utter pain, I had no interest in food; all I did was sequester and sleep.

Saying good-bye to our friends, Era and I flew to Rome, where I continued to rest, oddly in pain and exhausted even though I was testing negative. I remained in bed while Era ventured out for food and museum visits. Leaving Rome, I staggered through the train station, dragging my luggage like a hundred-year-old man straining under a heavy burden. Many Italians sprang to help when they saw my predicament and graciously carried my suitcase to the train platform. We made our way to Parma, where we planned a three-day stop on our way to Venice to see the Biennale and hang out with our good friends Michael and Jill Wild.

However, on the second day in Parma, October 28, despite the tests, I had not improved. I ate little, and the pain in my neck and shoulders persisted; I could barely stand, and lifting my head was difficult and painful. Consulting the internet, we read that shoulder pain is associated with a possible heart attack. We called the Maggiore Hospital emergency room that night, and they advised us to come in the following day.

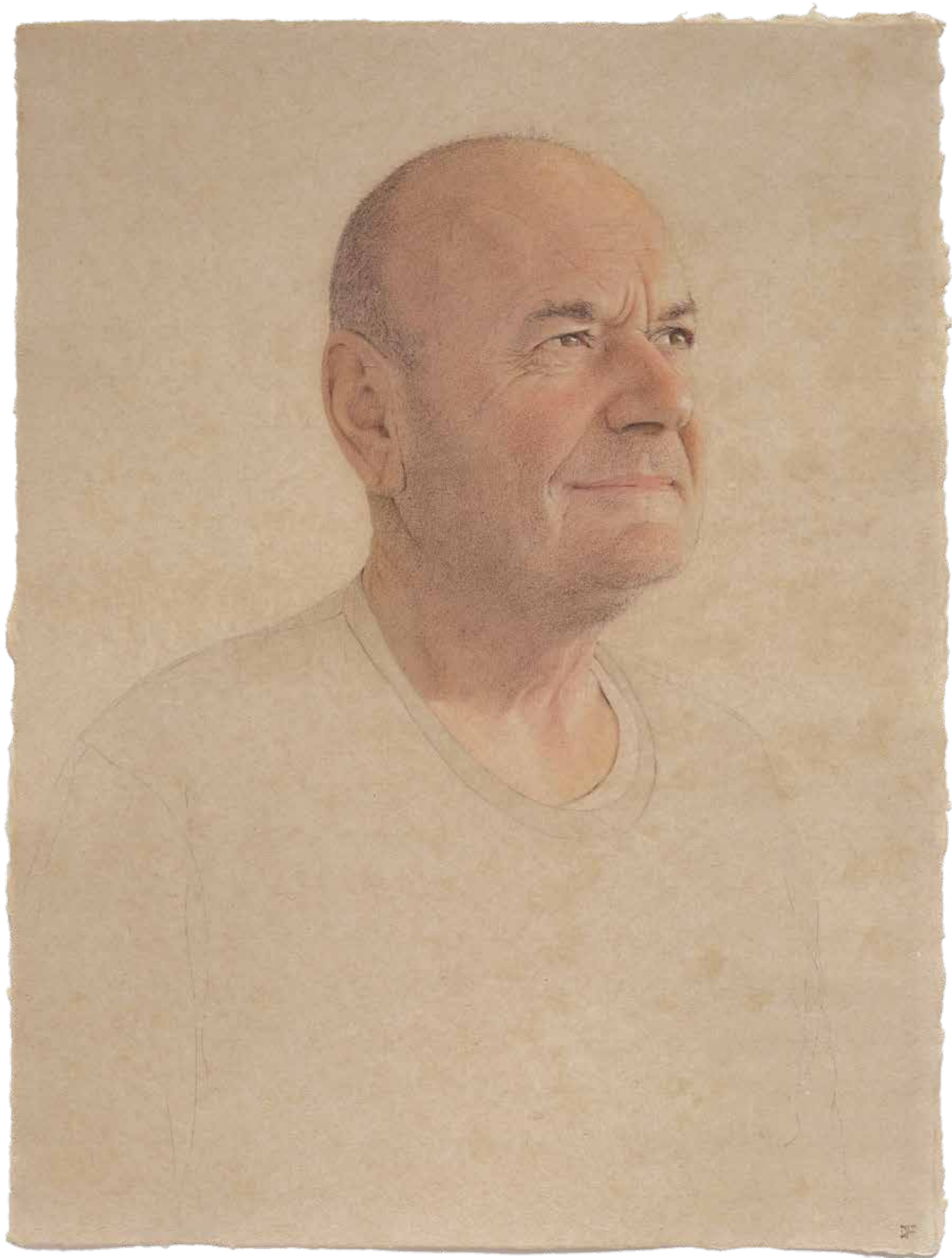
The Maggiore ER is housed in a modern, circular building with eight or so curtained sections. I was in “Box 7.” I was wheeled to the CT scan, and many other tests were performed in my curtained Box 7. Being informed that a heart attack was off the table was bittersweet, since death by cellular oxygen starvation was a good possibility. I was grateful for the draconian cycle of regular transfusions that began to pump life and vitality to every cell in my body. Dracula was on everybody’s mind, and Fausto was my first roommate. At first I mistakenly called him Faustus . . . not that Dracula and Faustus are related.

The only American in memory in this 1,047 inpatient-bed university hospital, I found everything as foreign to me as I was to everyone. In a semi-alert state, I understood my situation: a supplicant in a hospital ward, where pretty foreign words were spoken. Most of the nursing staff and my roommates spoke no English. I developed new communication skills with the help of a two-way instant translator app I found on my iPhone. Replenished with regular transfusions of fresh blood, I was soon caught up in a cycle of daily activity. As the days passed, I learned hospital life’s patterns, sounds, and regimens, made new friends, asked questions, cracked jokes. And, with my cellular phone in hand and with just enough strength to text my wife and take photos, I started capturing photographic moments. These photographs became the basis for the drawings that comprise *The Parma Portraits*. Texts to and from my wife as well as the photos document the entire episode.

My first few days and nights were soothed by the gentle sound of a babbling brook, which turned out to be oxygen passing through water, picking up hydration on its way to my Covid ward roommate Fausto’s lungs. I later learned Fausto lived off the grid, in a cabin with his dog only thirty minutes south of central Parma in Rivalta. Happily, after a few days, Fausto’s lungs improved, and his oxygen was discontinued. Sadly for me, the babbling brook was silenced, and the mechanical cacophony of hospital technology filled the

📍 One of Italy’s leading health-care centers, Maggiore Hospital (aka Azienda Ospedaliero-Universitaria) in Parma offers a full range of diagnostic, therapeutic, and rehabilitation services. The hospital provides 1,047 inpatient beds, with 3,850 dedicated staff and 171 academic doctors; in 2022, the emergency walk-in service registered 115,726 patients.

Several of the hospital’s departments follow a “hub and spoke” organizational model, in which high-complexity centers (hubs) are supported by a services network (spokes). Patients may then be connected to more specialized services if their situation becomes more serious.



♥ I have experienced good medical practice in the United States, and any medical intervention able to cast out an affliction is welcome. However, optimal treatment, in addition to diagnosing, prescribing, and curing, delivers care with compassion and preserves human dignity. Our corporate, for-profit health care, with its lack of empathy, apparent indifference, denied treatments, hasty and sometimes brusque interactions, mazes of phone calls, and online barriers, seems to overlook the principles of the Hippocratic oath. In contrast, the public health-care system in Italy empowers doctors to prioritize patient care over corporate interests and provide the empathy, individual attention, love, caring, and compassion that makes life worth living. It is time we pay attention and learn from medicine as practiced in Italy.

♥ Kala Art Institute is an important nonprofit in Berkeley, California, that promotes and teaches printmaking of all varieties. Its mission is to help artists sustain their creative work over time through its Artist-in-Residence and Fellowship Programs, and to engage the community through exhibitions, public programs, and education. Archana Horsting was its co-founder and is now director emeritus, having led the organization for more than forty years.

◀ Fausto, 2023.

void. Seven days after my admittance, Fausto left to go home to his cabin and dog. He was smiling ear to ear. We had bonded.

The Pathology Department doctors, specialists in infectious disease, conducted an aggressive investigation, working hard and diligently with kindness and compassion, distinguishing the trivial from the life-threatening, always looking for the elusive answer to the cause of my low hemoglobin, and never complaining about an outsider occupying a valuable Italian hospital bed, or using the tests and ten bags of Italian blood. They left no organ unchecked (CT scan, PET scan, EKGs, sonograms, thyroid and bone marrow biopsies, urine and feces tests, and over one hundred blood tests) and no disease untested (malaria, hepatitis, cancer, and more).

From the third floor of the Maggiore Hospital Pathology Department, I was taken to my various scans, EKGs, sonograms, and a thyroid biopsy by an ambulance that would thread its way across the campus to one building or another. Apparently, the ambulance crew didn't get the memo that my body was not distributing oxygen efficiently—I was weak but looked okay. They asked me to walk alongside the rolling gurney, which I would eye, longing for a ride, while my pride kept me walking. I would prop my elbows at the end of the rolling bed, pretending to push but actually using the gurney as a walker. On the ride up the freight elevator on the way back from one scan, I slipped down, collapsing in the corner, and a technician had to help me to my feet. Another day, for a thyroid biopsy, the ambulance pulled up to a building with eight steps that I just barely managed to scale. Trying to keep up with the healthy ambulance technicians in the long hallways, I trailed about eight meters back. When they stopped to ask directions to the thyroid office, I took the opportunity to catch up. Sadly, we had walked down the wrong hallway and had to backtrack.

As the hunt was on to identify the cause of my underlying ailment, it did appear that I, a suffering stranger in a strange land, might very well be on my deathbed.

My wife, scared and alone in Parma, could only visit me for five minutes a day, while masked and dressed in head-to-toe plastic hospital garb. Loving family and friends' directed thoughts and energy flows seem to have miraculously brought Era together with Gail Nanao, a Berkeley artist friend. Gail, strolling the colonnades one day, appeared before Era as if beamed down from the Starship Enterprise. Gail kindly provided empathy, good company, and comfort for Era. KALA Institute director emeritus Archana Horsting and her husband, Greg Harper, veered from their Italian travels to reach Parma to support Era, taking her mind off the harrowing situation with fine dining in beautiful Parma—another compassionate gesture for which I am eternally grateful. Because of an auto accident, Archana wore a patch over her left eye. Italian children would ask if she was a pirate, "*Sei una pirata?*" And to their great excitement, she would say, "*Si, sono una pirata.*" My daughter Marisha and granddaughter Mia flew to Italy from California, cheering me up immensely. In a fantastic show of friendship, our friends Annie and Jono Salt

drove over eight hours from Pepieux, France, to Milan, to meet up with Marisha and Mia. A long flight delay caused Annie and Jono to wait at the airport for ten hours before the two-and-a-half-hour drive from Milan to Parma.

At the end of the first week, I tested negative for Covid, but since no beds were available on the third floor's recovery side, I remained in the Covid ward with precious few visits and now with my new roommate Giancarlo, a retired schoolteacher. He was weak and frail like me.

Even after my diagnosis, at the end of the second week, of Covid-induced cold agglutinin disease with positive DAT (an autoimmune disorder in which your own body attacks the red blood cells), daily testing and monitoring of my vitals continued. A weekly treatment of four infusions of Rituxan (a chemo drug) was prescribed. In the middle of the first five-hour Rituxan infusion, a bed became available outside the Covid ward. Once the infusion was complete, my bed was rolled to the other side of the third floor, out of isolation. As I was rolled in, the other bed in that room was just being vacated, and in short order, who did they roll in? Giancarlo! Both of us had made it out of the Covid ward. We were both now able to receive longer visits: I from my wife and Giancarlo from his wife, family, and friends.

Shortly after my first treatment, inexplicably, my hemoglobin number dropped dramatically to a dangerous level of 5.0, and the staff rushed to give me yet another blood transfusion. In total, the staff would give me ten bags of Italian blood. Requesting, warming, and receiving bags of blood takes time. I survived the wait and, like a vampire, relished the life-saving infusion. In the following days, my hemoglobin numbers began to improve and continued to improve—for the first time without the help of Italian blood. The Rituxan therapy was working.

I became conditioned to a scheduled regimen of food, pills, room cleaning, injections, infusions, meals, monitoring of blood pressure, temperature, glucose, oximeter levels, and blood and other bodily fluid sample extractions. Because my blood was low on red blood cells and hemoglobin and thus low on oxygen distribution, my body kicked into energy conservation mode. At 9:00 every morning, my bed was made and the sheets were changed. For this, I had to get out of bed. Since every muscle was screaming for more oxygen, rising from my bed seemed absurd. One evening I had to strip off my underwear to alleviate chaffing caused by constant bed rest. The next morning, as I stood by while the sheets were changed, the nurse who earlier had told me she liked Americans asked, "Do all American men sleep without underpants?" Amused, I replied that I did not know the answer to this query, as I was not in the habit of sleeping with men.

The hospital food was nothing to write home about—even in Parma, the city of prosciutto di Parma and Parmigiano cheese. Stranded in bed, where I was wasting away with zero appetite and no desire to eat the hospital cuisine, I asked my wife, Era, for bizarre, almost unexplainable items, as if I were pregnant and had strange dietary cravings—sending her on a quest in an exotic land for hard-to-find items (persimmons, chocolate with almonds,

💔 The four Rituxan infusions would remain effective and active for six months, essentially reducing my immunity and making me more susceptible to disease. Happily, I have remained healthy. Until that diagnosis and treatment, my caregivers kept me alive with transfusions to maintain my hemoglobin in a semi-safe range. Without hemoglobin, the cells in your body receive no oxygen, and heart attack, stroke, and organ failure are not uncommon.

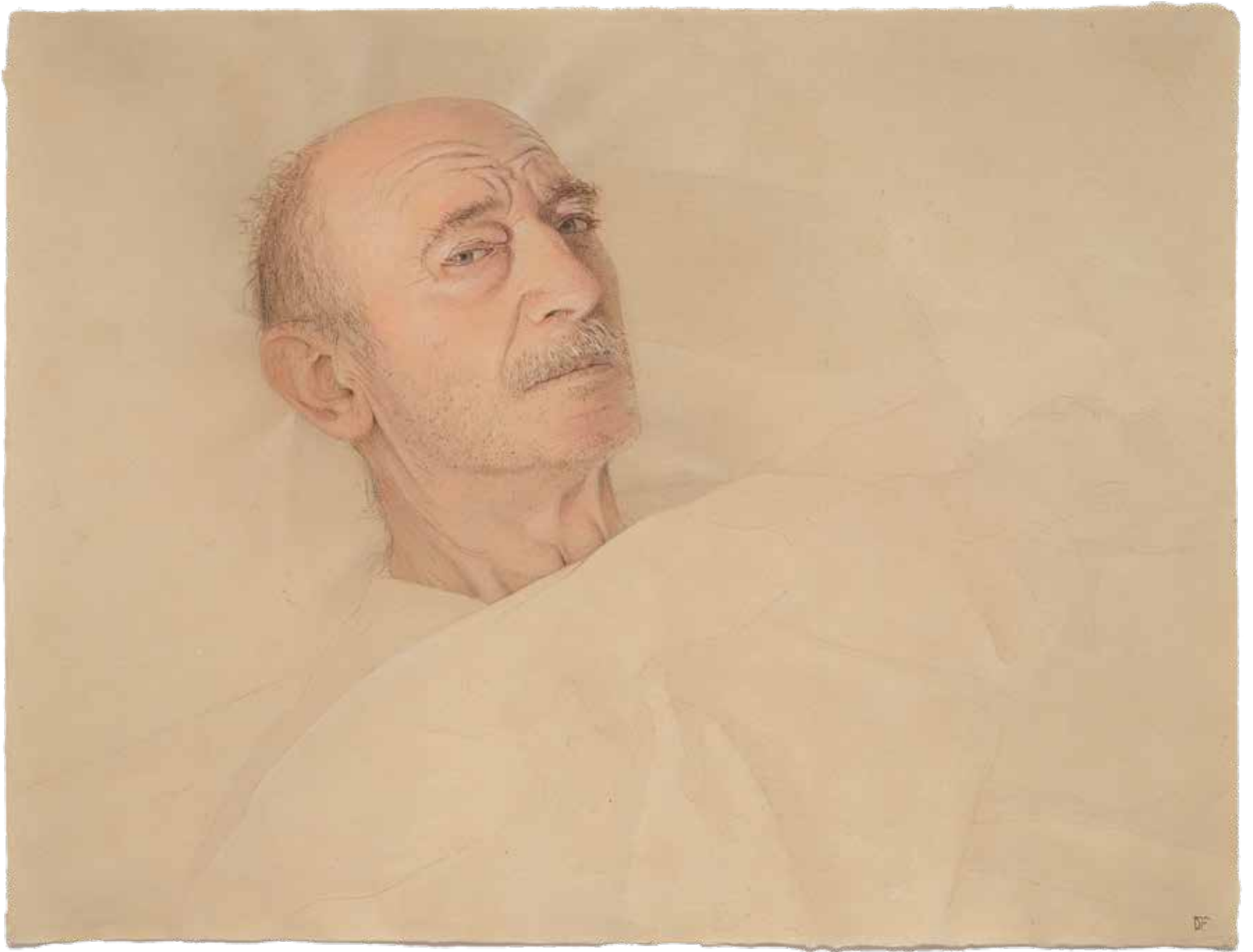
☞ I ate the breakfast of flavored milk and sugar cookies for a week or so before I realized I could control at least this aspect of my predicament. I feared if my ailment didn't kill me, the sugar-cookie breakfast would.

Japanese take-out, and organic granola). Like Hercules and his labors, she always prevailed.

Part of my eating survival was to modify the meals offered. The default breakfast in the Covid ward consisted of hot milk with a hint of coffee flavor served in a paper-thin plastic bowl with a sugar cookie. With supplies delivered by my loving wife, I soon created a customized breakfast, much to the amusement of the hospital staff. When asked what I wanted for breakfast, coffee or tea, I would ask for a cup of hot milk, a cup of hot water, and an empty bowl—“*Un bicchiere di latte caldo, un bicchiere di acqua calda, e una ciotola vuota,*” in my appalling American accent. Then, imagining myself a master chef at work, I would carefully pour rolled oats into the bowl, add half the hot water, let it soak, and then top it with granola and a portion of the milk. I added instant coffee to the remaining hot water, and then mixed in the remaining hot milk. Perfect, and better than a sugar cookie. Nevertheless, I shed so much weight that, like in a medical diagram, I could clearly see the radius and ulna bones in my forearm and the protruding, angular hip bones clearly outlined beneath my skin.

Now, months past, I will often make this oatmeal/granola morning meal and think of the orderlies in Parma, especially Maria, who often brought me my breakfast and sometimes would sneak me a *ristretto* coffee in a tiny paper cup from the staff canteen, and Corina, a loving and caring nurse originally from Sibiu, who was an ace with needles, ports, extractions, and infusions, and who walked all the way down from the third floor to the lobby café to bring me a latte. I was and still am overwhelmed. When I was strong enough to open my power-hungry computer, Corina gave me scissors, gauze, and surgical tape that came in handy (like duct tape). I used the surgical tape for strapping my adaptor and power brick to the outlet located high on the wall behind my bed. The many layers of tape looked like a spider web restringing a well-fed frog. Was I suffering? How can one suffer surrounded by so much love and affection? Just possibly, a dying man is easy to love.

One cold winter evening, Era arrived by bus, walking her usual twelve-minute route through a large parking lot and by the construction sites surrounding my location. She brought home-prepared food from her favorite *salumeria* and various items I had requested in my self-centered delirium. She laid out a picnic dinner on my bed, and we feasted. We lost ourselves in conversation, and soon it was past 7:00 PM, long after visiting hours. Using sign language and simple Italian, I asked nurse Maria (who jokingly enjoyed calling me “George”) how we could arrange a cab for Era, as it was too icy cold and dark for walking and taking a bus. Maria generously used her personal cell phone to call the cab and spoke rapid-fire Italian, describing our location in the middle of the sprawling university hospital campus. She indicated to Era the imminent arrival of the cab that would only wait one minute and leave if Era was not there. Struggling to communicate the arrival location, she took Era by the hand and walked her down three stories to a building entrance unknown to Era, where the cab was arriving.



Giancarlo, 2023.

The long shade that covered our industrial-size, three-panel picture window was inoperable in my new shared room. These windows played an essential role in the lighting of my photo subjects; when my stamina allowed, I hooked the bottom shade roll over the window handle to allow in partial light—a technique I learned by watching a hardworking staff member, who would wipe down surfaces and wet-mop our floor with disinfectant every morning at the crack of dawn. Early in the third week of my convalescence, I left our window open a crack to allow in fresh air, and a fly entered our room. The fly was relentless, flitting back and forth between my roommate, Giancarlo, and me. I felt it was my fault and my responsibility to find a remedy. Calculating and conserving my strength, I eased out of bed with a short bath towel in hand and, summoning my energy, took one swat at the beast. It fell, buzzing in circles on the floor. Giancarlo lifted his head from the pillow, his neck muscles straining, shouting: “È morto? È morto? È morto?” “Si,” said I. “Bravo!” was his retort.

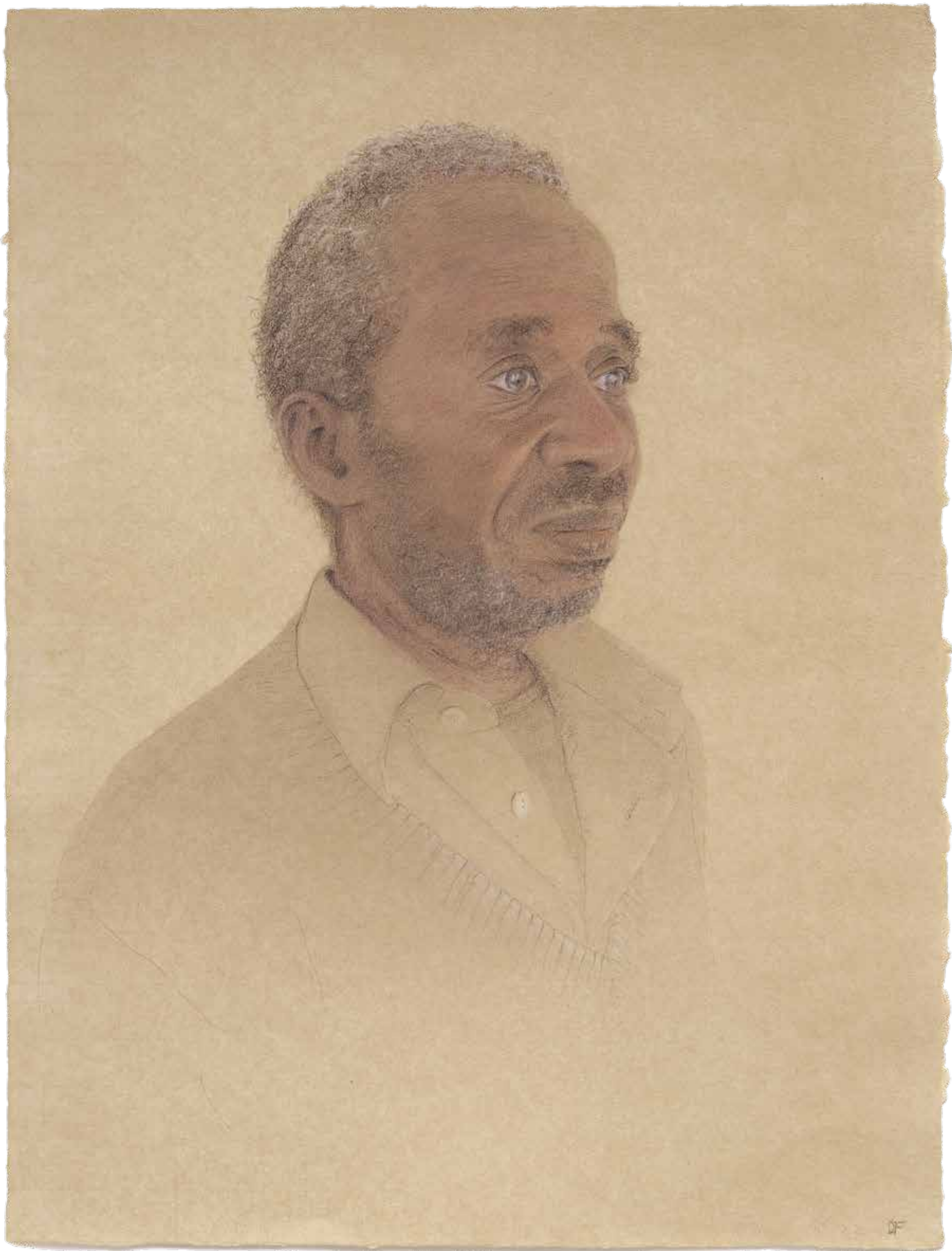
Giancarlo was a fabulous roommate; we communicated via grunts and sign language. I often pressed the call button on his behalf when he would call hoarsely to me in the middle of the night, “Americano, Americano . . .” A nurse would arrive and ask me in Italian what the problem could be; I would shrug and point to Giancarlo, and he would be looked after. One sunrise, when young morning light streamed through our picture window, illuminating Giancarlo and casting a long shadow on his pillow, I dragged myself out of bed to capture the moment; he had a sympathetic face. I took more photos of Giancarlo than of any other hospital community member.

When bedridden, sequestered, and immobile but mostly sound of mind; when battling pneumonia, remnants of Covid, and critically low hemoglobin; you have a finite number of activities: sleeping, eating, contemplating life, adjusting the bed controls, making epic journeys to the bathroom, writing texts, listening to audio books (*The Odyssey*, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, and a pivotal work for these portraits, Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass*), and, for me, most importantly, taking photos. The doctors, nurses, and staff graciously posed for me and did their best not to laugh. Imagine me, the patient, asking the doctors to take off their mask and telling them how to tilt their head, and so on . . . what good people.

I found myself in awe of the dedication, compassion, and professionalism of the doctors, nurses, and staff—their extraordinary solidarity and united purpose in tending to me (and others). Despite the lack of circulating oxygen in my body (or because of it), I judged I had better capture photo studies of my caregivers so that, if I survived, I could remember their kindness and express my appreciation by producing visual letters of gratitude. Their selfless acts of generosity cemented my resolution to reciprocate in some way and focus on a tribute to their empathy and charity. Remembering these moments triggers that grateful feeling we all get in the tear ducts.

Once settled in my beige room with wide blue trim, graced by a crucifix that served as the sole decoration aside from a small, dormant TV, and

☕ Before succumbing to Covid, I was reading Dumas, in my mind’s eye swashbuckling my way from the UK to Paris. Once Covid arrived, I became more sedate and serious, turning first to *The Odyssey*—my literary comfort food—and then to the reverent words of Robin Kimmerer, whose tribe called trees “standing people,” a sentiment I share. I was also reading a book on mushrooms, as I intended to take, and have taken, micro-doses of psilocybin to open my mind for drawing better portraits.



DF

receiving deep crimson Italian blood in my veins, tending toward life and away from death, I started meeting the doctors and nurses who led me to this body of work. I vividly remember (and photographed) the day seven medical professionals huddled around my bed, mulling over my situation. Dr. Arianna Alfieri responded to my lingering question about whether my anemia was simply a common post-Covid symptom. She gently touched my shoulder and softly replied, “No, Don, your situation is . . . different.” I waited for more words, but none came. I could discern the shimmer of tears in her eyes, indicative of profound, uncommon empathy. This heartfelt moment resonates within me just as strongly today as I recount the event, with a warmth in my heart that mirrors the tenderness of that day.

Expressing gratitude to the doctors, nurses, and staff became my passion. I wanted to use the photographic portraits I had taken to draw my caretakers’ portraits on the ancient Renaissance-style paper I had been researching, making, and testing these past seven years. Could there be a more fitting canvas for an Italian love letter? Even if my portraits fall short of the mark, I hope they will imbue my most sincere sentiment in the viewer. I echo the sentiments of this fragment of a medieval love letter:

♥ The extraordinary attention I received was also lavished on the other patients on the third floor. Although I could not understand the conversations at my roommate’s bedside, I sensed the staff’s concern and devotion to creating wellness.

*So if I express something
less elegantly than I’d like,
I don’t want you to laugh at me,
as long as you perceive tenderly,
together with me, what I long for in my mind . . .*

. . .

Postscript

Five days before my release, when I could see light at the end of the anemia tunnel, I started walking the hallways, electronically counting my steps, breaking daily records, beginning with 50 paces a day, and achieving 2,000 by my release date. Hoping to put more meat on my upper body bones, I fashioned a free weight from two water bottles and surgical tape and made some progress in that department. On Friday, November 18, I had enough energy and stamina to make it down to the café three floors below and purchase coffee. I was in heaven. Sadly, for the next two days, the café was closed. My next good coffee would be in central Parma.

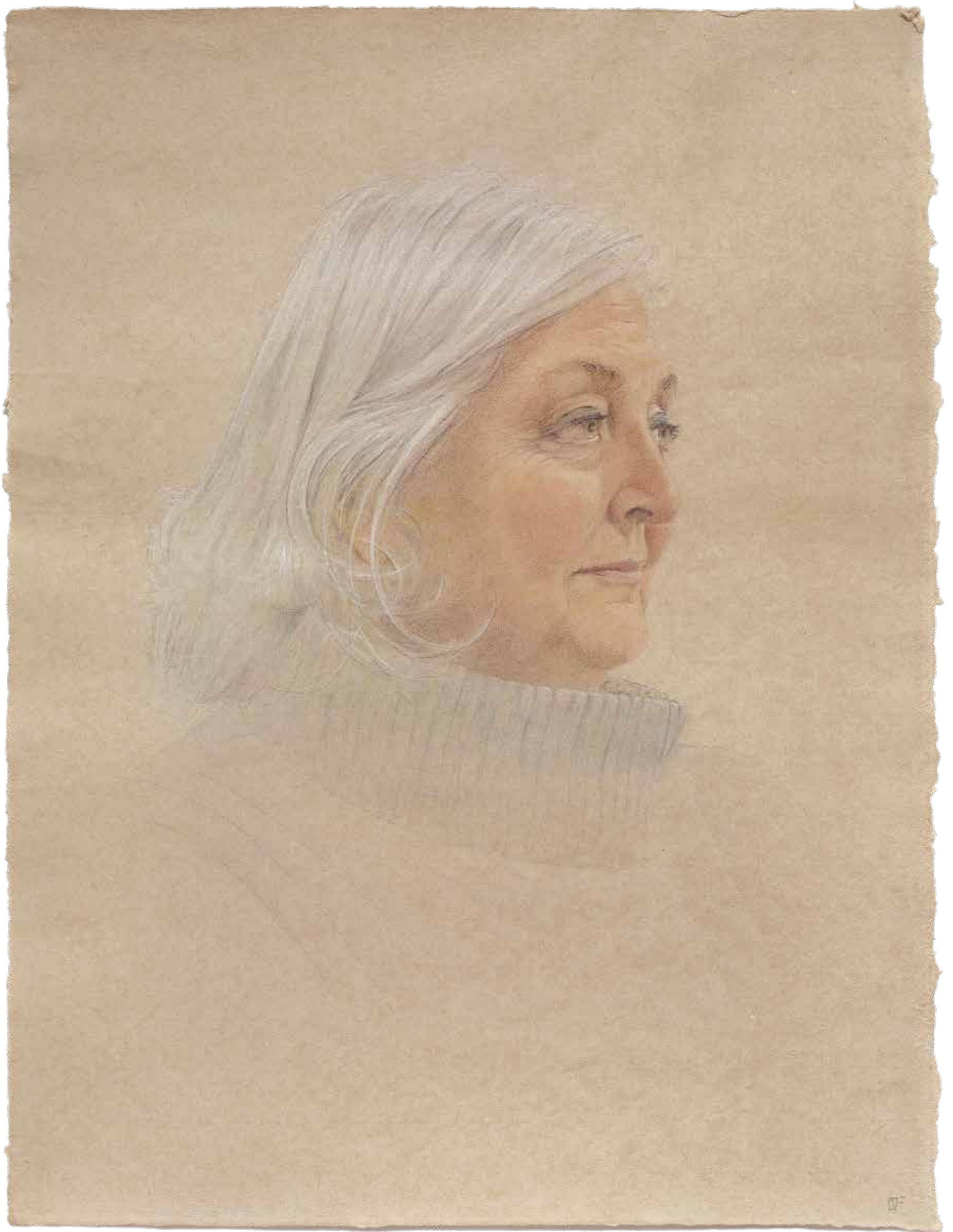
On the afternoon of day 23, I was released—along with my last roommate, Sal. An outpatient, I was weak but ready to experience Parma at long last. My family, Annie, Jono, and I had a celebratory dinner at Trattoria Corrieri—Parma ham, traditional deep-fried bread, pasta, salad, seared meat, and bottles of wine—the works. My second day of extended life in our Parma apartment was a joy whose declaration here would fill pages. Family love gives life meaning.



A fifteen-minute walk from our apartment was L'Arca, the shop of Alessandra Chiari, who had become Era's Parma sister, dining and consoling my guardian angel. Alessandra, a kind, gentle, and energetic woman, had one oversized red leather chair in the corner of her shop, where I could collapse, regain my strength, and chat with her and Era while patrons came and went. I soon realized that her dear friend Filippo Alpi was king of that chair, and he would, on some days, beat me to that comfortable throne. Filippo, a well-regarded clothing designer and father of their movie star son, Giustiniano, is charming and urbane, a compelling example of kindness, formality, and consideration demonstrated by the older generation of central Italy. Furthermore, he and Alessandra possess engaging faces I wanted to draw. It seems they know everyone in Parma and where to procure a haircut, handmade Italian slippers, or the best prosciutto di Parma. Era and I loved meeting Alessandra at the close of the day to enjoy negronis and appetizers in the company of her good friends, among them Cecilia Rosso (a translator and now our friend) and Filippo.

Living in an apartment in central Parma with my family and meeting Era's new friends proved to be an intoxicating, fabulous rehab, reaffirming the joy of life. After my last Rituxan infusion, we were in possession of a good-to-fly and diagnosis letter. We returned to the hospital one last time with boxes of chocolates and heartfelt good-byes. We took the train to Bologna and, from there, flew home on December 11, 2022.

DONALD FARNSWORTH



17

Memories in Lines

Each stroke upon the page recalls a day,
Memories sketched in lines of black and white.
From hands that tremble, yet still find a way,
To paint a testament in morning's light.

A face, a gaze, a moment held in time,
Familiar strangers drawn from life's grand play.
Through illness's tempest, to recovery's climb,
Their kindness etched within the artist's gray.

In shadows cast, each portrait bears a name,
An honor given, recognition due.
Their care, compassion, forever to claim,
A tribute rendered from a point of view.

May art and life together intertwine,
In every memory sketched in life's design.

ANONYMOUS

The Portraits

Don's beautifully executed portraits are a unique, heartfelt homage to the Italian physicians and their clinical colleagues who collectively focused their skills, both scientific and humanistic, on saving Don's life. The clinicians in Parma displayed the empathy that is the core of the "art" of medicine. That was a critical connection into which Don and Era were able to tap and from which they received reassurance and comfort during a time of great stress and fear. I have always felt that the desire to help people as a physician is only born out of an appreciation of what human beings can achieve when given their health. Don's portraits are the quintessence of such human achievement.

MARC GOLDYNE, MD, PHD
Clinical Professor Emeritus, UCSF

The portraits are drawn with mixed media on 18 × 24-inch handmade antique laid paper that was made from linen, flax, and hemp.

The paper, sized with animal gelatin, shows coarse felt-hair marks.



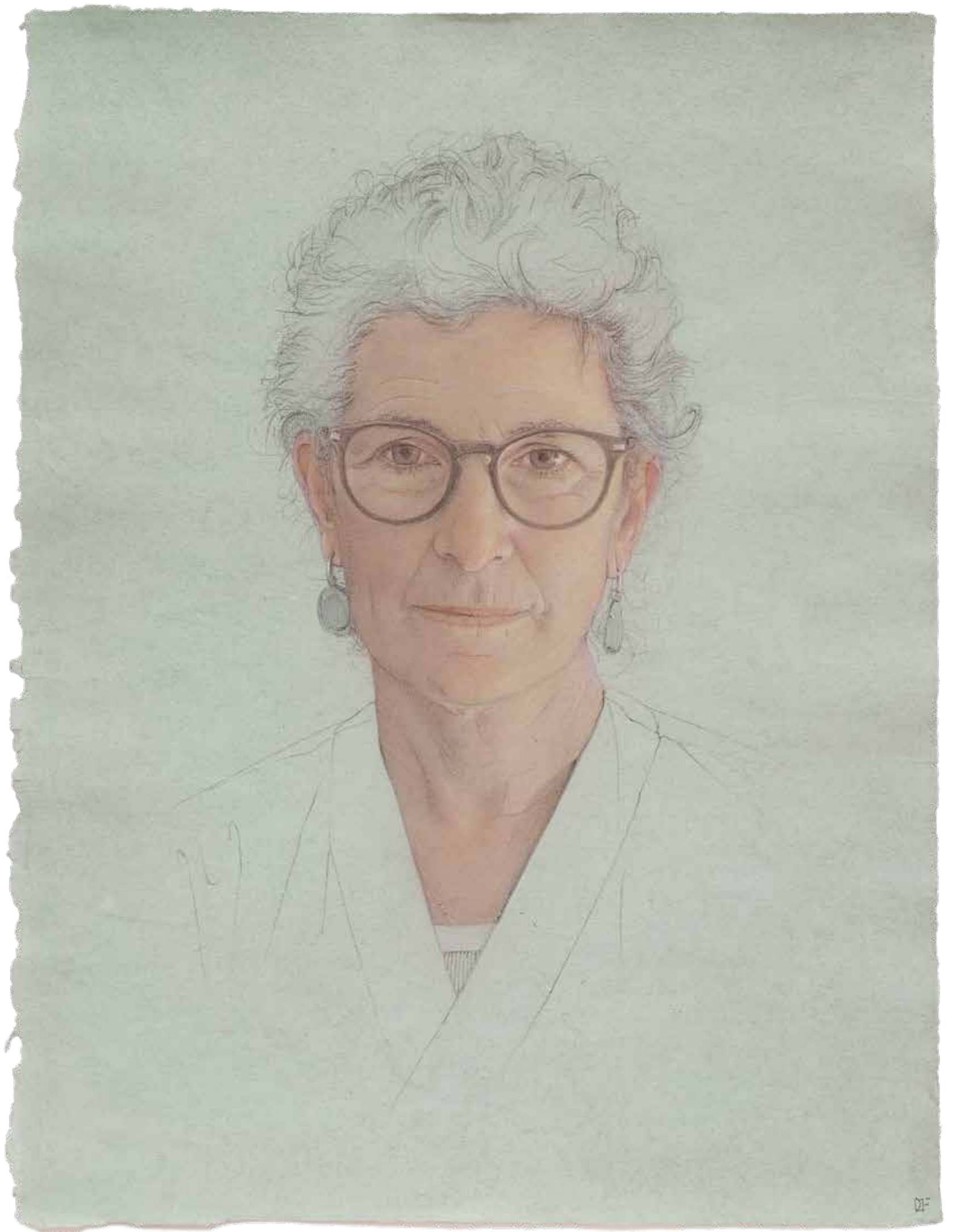
Atim, 2023.

Physician. Infectious disease specialist.



Arianna, 2022.

Physician. Infectious disease specialist.



Claudia, 2023.

Physician. Infectious disease specialist.

October 30, 2022

Hello dear friends and family,

Don is in the hospital here in Parma. He has, as a consequence of Covid which we both contracted earlier on the trip: pneumonia, anemia, very low blood pressure and extreme fatigue. The good news is that he seems to be in good hands, at least being taken care of by caring people, which is so important, and also that he is feeling better. They have given him blood transfusions after a CT scan and a battery of tests. He has been pleasantly surprised at the time and attention the doctors give to him.

Covid hit Don hard, but instead of recovering, even a slow recovery, he seemed to get worse. That was probably as a result of the pneumonia and whatever caused him to lose blood.

The hospital gave him a PCR test, and it came out positive, so they put him in the Covid ward, which he says is in a nice room with one other person. As a result I am not allowed to visit him, although I brought him a care package yesterday and will again today. I can hardly believe he has Covid after testing positive now weeks ago, and at least two negative rapid tests spaced several days apart and almost a week ago. But I can't blame the Italians for being very skittish about Covid after what they've been through and I'm grateful that they are taking care of him as he was very ill and felt like he was dying.

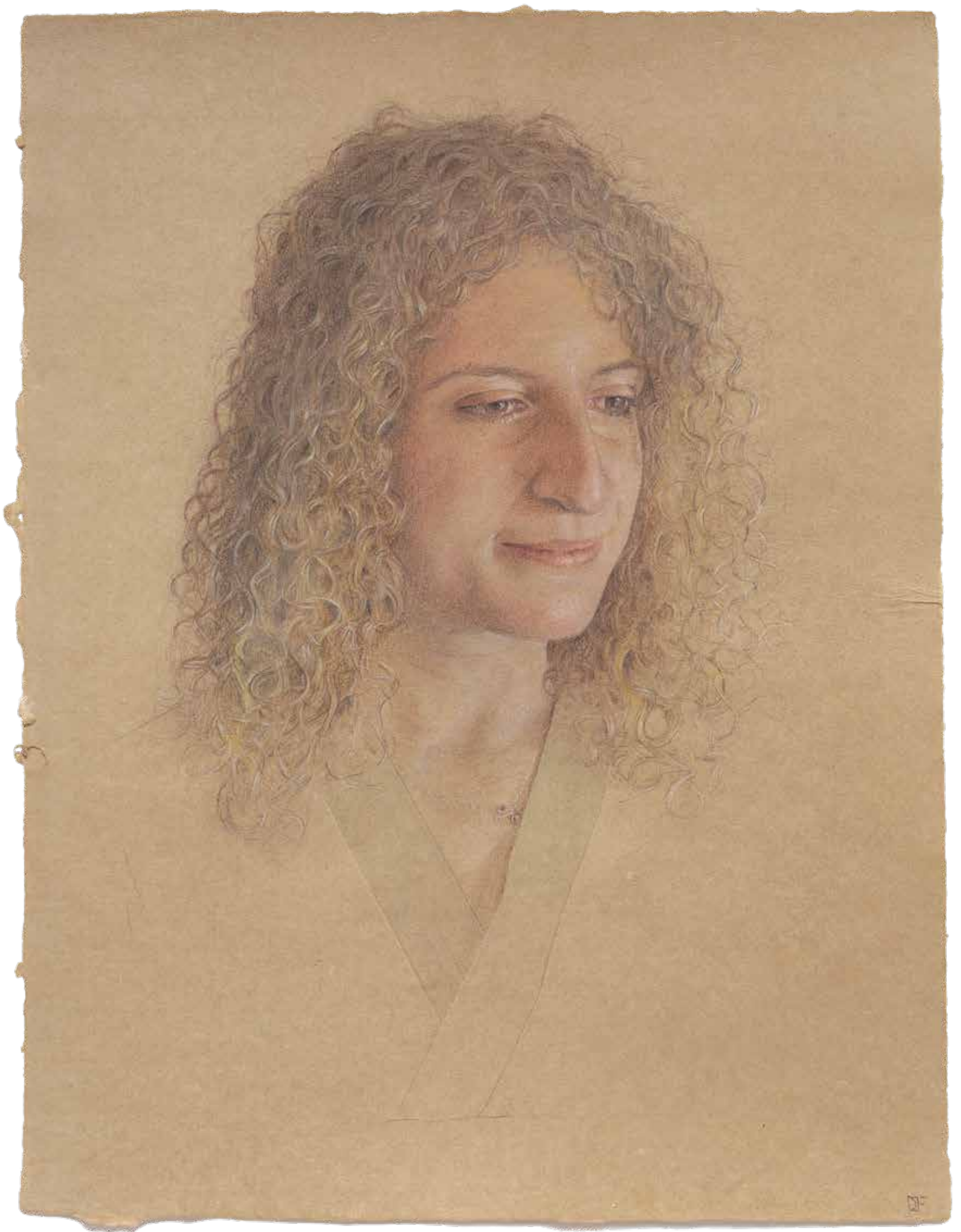
So I am haunting the streets of this beautiful, elegant city like a ghost, not knowing a soul, although I have met some very nice shopkeepers. Please send Don some healing thoughts, energy, prayers, if you do that kind of thing. I believe it often does make a difference, especially from a group effort.

Thank you, and love and good health to you all,

Era



Monica, 2023.
Physician. Hematologist.



Federica, 2023.
Physician.



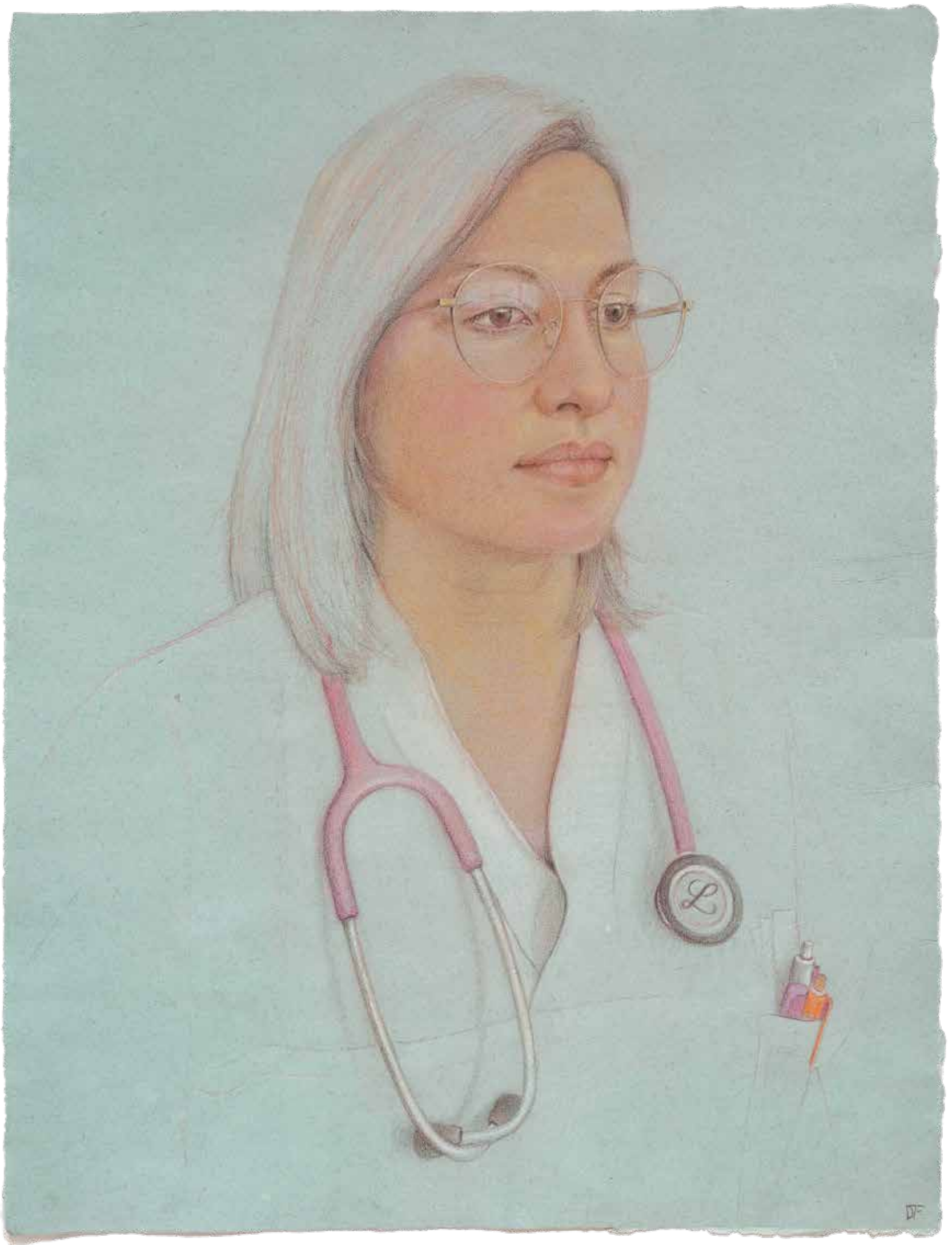
Giuseppe, 2023.
Physician.

Spending full-time in a hospital bed allows for retrospection and the contemplation of life. Memories percolate into my dreams. I listen to the bubbling of air through my roommate's breathing apparatus, which paints pictures of a stream turning a waterwheel that powers the trip hammers, beating rags to a pulp. Should I live, I will follow the flow of the water, make the paper of the Old Masters, and draw portraits of my family, friends, and caregivers.

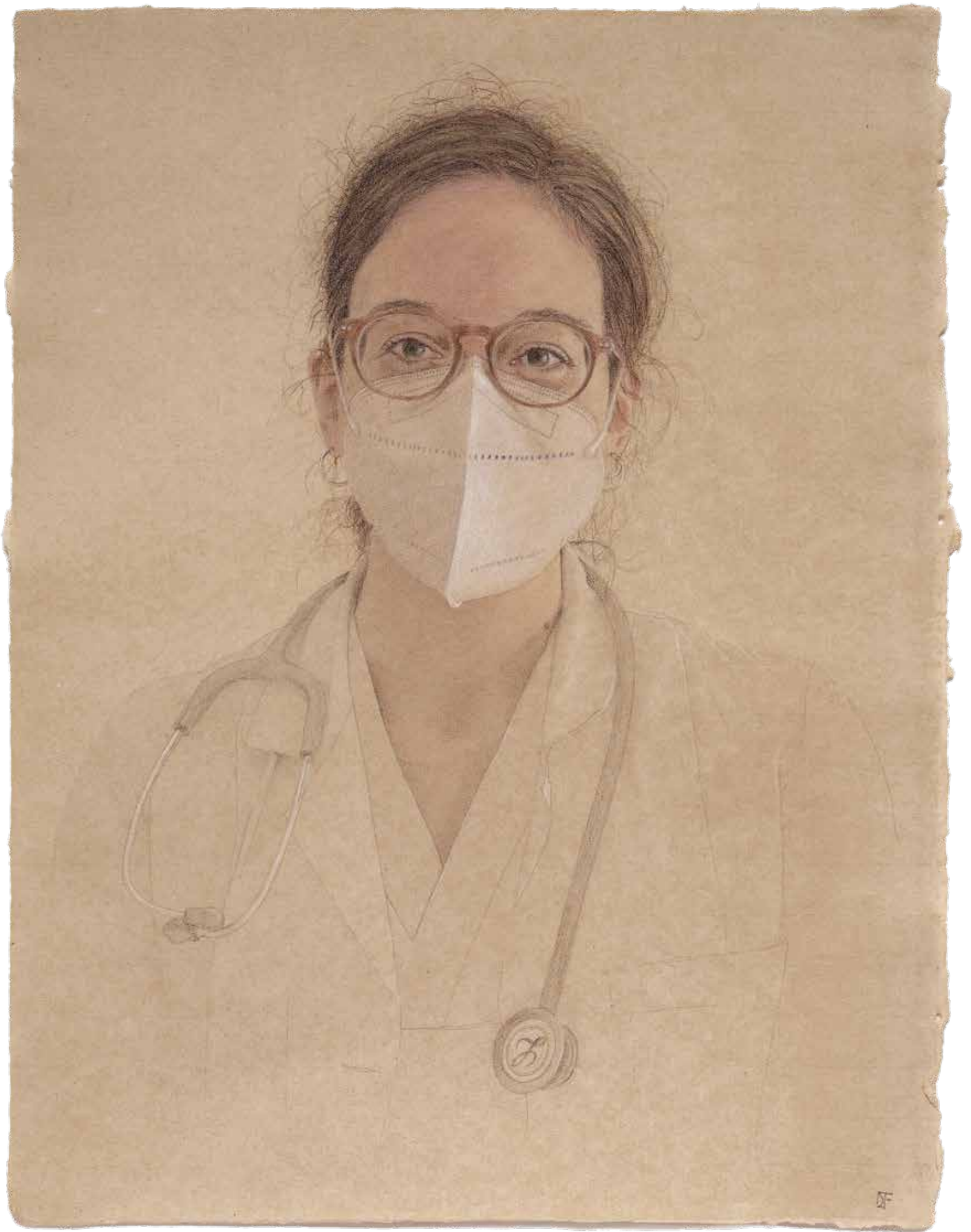
D.F.



Laura, 2023.
Physician.



Adelina, 2023.
Physician.



Chiara, 2023.
Physician.

October 31, 2022

Dear Friends and Family,

. . .

I went to the hospital today, getting lost, as per usual, as the Map programs are not accurate for the area around the hospital—showing some streets as not going through and showing other streets as thoroughfares when they are blocked off.

When I got to the hospital, I handed over the cappuccino and the chocolate croissant to the nurse who brought it to Don. Maybe not the best diet for an invalid, but he was craving that cappuccino, as I would be. Hospital coffee, even in Parma, Italy, is swill, Don says.

I had a long talk with one of the doctors—long for a doctor. . . . Then out of the blue she asked me if I would like to visit with Don for a short time. She said two minutes. My friend Elizabeth Wholey, who lives in Italy, said the doctor must have been pretty certain Don was not contagious or not very, as the Italian hospitals are being so careful about spreading Covid. So I got to visit with Don for what was far more than two minutes. . . .

She also told me that Don can't be released until he (A) tests negative—I guess this is completely negative on a PCR test or (B) he has no symptoms for 14 days. I asked her if she thought Don had Covid symptoms now and she said no. They are also trying to figure out why he is anemic and what has happened to his blood—where has it gone?

Don definitely seemed improved. He has gotten a translation program on his iPhone to work, so that he can talk to his Italian roommate, Fausto, a retired engineer, and some of the nurses who don't speak English. He showed me a photo of his doctors, who all seemed young and female, and his nurses with his roommate. He's invited them all to come visit us in California.

. . .

Love,
Era



Federica and Giorgio, 2023.

Federica: Physician. Infectious disease specialist.

Giorgio: Physician.



Gabriele, 2023.
Physician.



Federica, 2023.
Physician.



Simone, 2023.
Physician. Endocrinologist.

November 4, 2022

Dear Friends and Family,

. . .

What is keeping me sane over here (esp. when Don is having a bad day): the kindness of strangers, making new friends, running into an old friend. . . . Some of our friends and family seem to have some anxiety about Don being in an Italian hospital. I asked some of our friends who have experience with Italian hospitals to write some thoughts which might help ease this anxiety.

. . .

A friend of ours, Dr. Marc Goldyne, who practiced at UCSF for many years and did a residency in Sweden where he befriended some Italian doctors, with whom he remains friends, tells us that “there is a Covid associated anemia that can be seen in up to 60% of Covid patients.” So it is not a rare condition. Perhaps getting pneumonia also and becoming so ill is rare. He also said that the Italian doctors are very experienced with Covid.

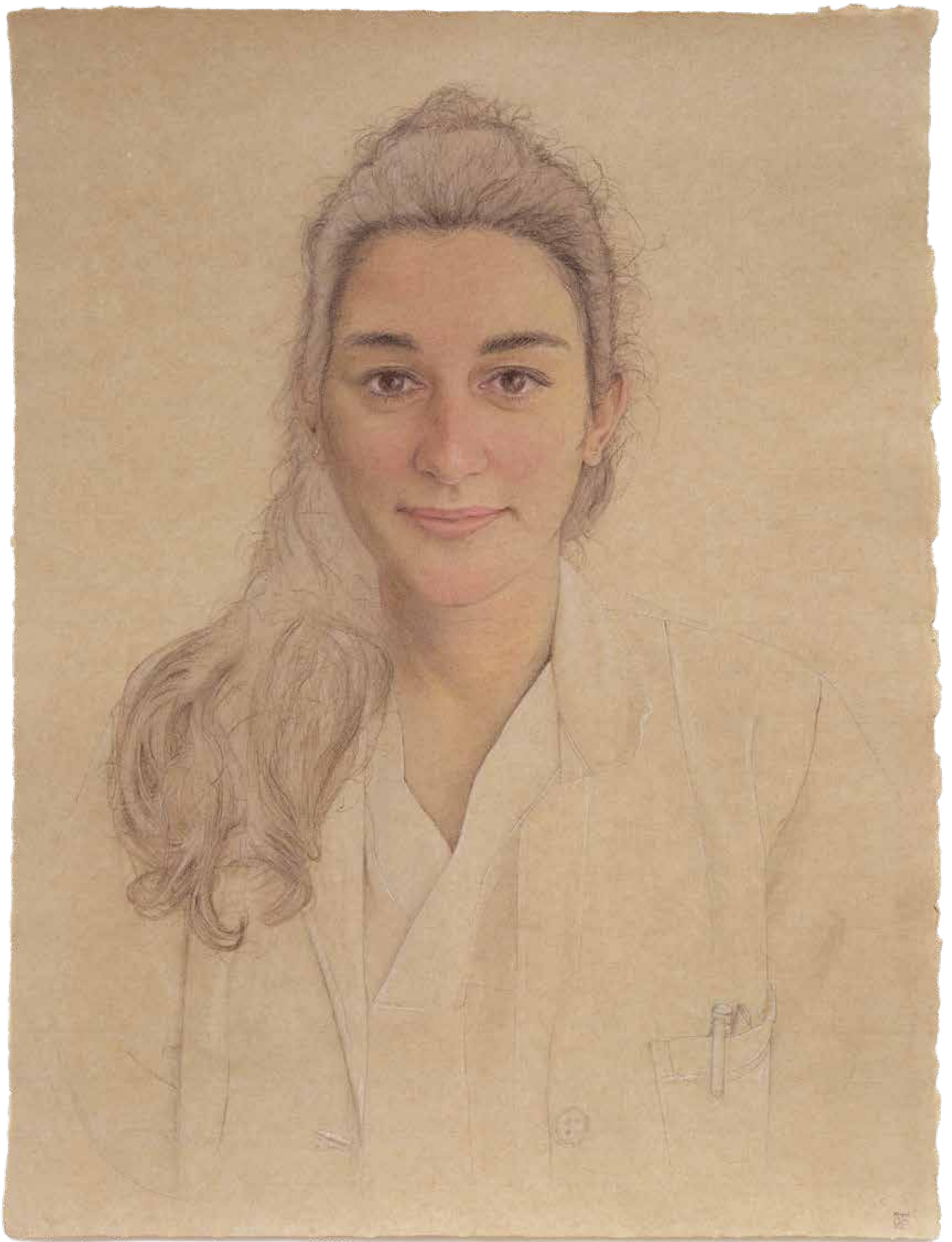
“There is a misconception that every other major nation in the world is ‘third world’ medically compared to the USA. My time spent training at the Mayo Clinic, my forty years on the medical staff at UCSF, and my 10+ years doing private practice and telemedicine taught me that there are great medical groups and hospitals all over the world. In regard to Covid, one of the more informative articles on Covid-related anemia comes from a 2021 cooperative study done by a group of Italian physicians from Pavia, Italy (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33728538/>). They have had a lot of experience with Covid-related health problems, one of which is anemia. So I feel that the group taking care of Don currently are perfectly up to the task. Getting Don back to familiar surroundings is obviously a goal we all want, but nursing him back to good health is primary and in my experience, he is in a good place with dedicated physicians.”

. . .

Love,
Era

I approached these portraits carefully, concisely, methodically, as I imagine an architect might: wanting the sitter's character to come forward through my hand in collaboration with the paper. Rediscovering and recreating the papers of the Renaissance was challenging and rewarding. This sixteenth-century-style paper inserted its presence in these portraits; the coarse, hair-marked tooth informed my pencil, interrupted my intention, and initiated the reworking of many passages. Five hundred years earlier, this kind of paper imbued every stroke of Old Master drawings with a unique texture.

D.F.



Alexa, 2023.
Physician.



Francesco, 2023.
Physician.

November 8, 2022

Dear Friends and Family,

Don had a bad day today. It really affects my mood and throws me off balance. I feel so badly for him and, of course, worry about him immensely.

His hemoglobin levels are very low. When he gets a blood transfusion, they go up a little but then come back down. When the levels are low, he feels exhausted and weak. They've drawn, he thinks, over 40 vials of blood and have done so many different tests. All his organs appear to be in good shape; they can't find anything else wrong with him. Finally today they did a bone marrow and bone tissue biopsy. He said that despite the pain reliever they gave him, it was pretty painful. He also said their kindness during the procedure was very moving. They held his hand and were physically so supportive. They are not, generally, able to speak the same language.

It's very moving to think about these doctors and nurses putting out emotionally over and over for their patients.

• • •

Much love,
Era



57

Corina, 2023.
Nurse.

November 10, 2022

Dear Friends and Family,

I was pretty depressed yesterday (now the day before yesterday). There is a new policy at the hospital that they are not allowing visitors into the Covid ward, period. I went in the morning and was told to come back after 12:00 by someone who didn't speak English, so it is very possible I didn't catch what she was trying to tell me. When I returned I was told that there is a new policy at the hospital: No visits at all in the Covid ward. A sign was posted on the doors (in Italian). I took a photo and put it through a translation program, so again, I may not be getting everything.

EXTERNAL USER ACCESS TO NON-COVID-19 WARDS IS PROVIDED:
FROM 12 PM TO 1 PM EVEN BEDS; FROM 6 PM TO 7 PM ODD BEDS.
ACCESS IS ALLOWED FOR A MAXIMUM NUMBER OF ONE VISITOR
PER PATIENT AND ONE VISITOR PER HOSPITAL STAY.
EXCEPTIONS WILL BE MADE IN CASES REQUIRING SPECIFIC
ASSISTANCE, AFTER EVALUATION BY HEALTH PERSONNEL.

• • •

They agreed to let me go in, but for the last time. Don was very weak and subdued. It's hard to be up when you're feeling nauseous and exhausted.

• • •

Don called this morning and said the plan is they are giving him a PET scan, then 3 days of cortisone—(not the greatest, in my opinion, but he is really very ill). He said they have determined that the hemoglobin in his bone marrow has been damaged, which was caused by the Covid. That may be extremely dumbed down or mistranslated. It wouldn't be the first time.

They are moving him out of the Covid ward, which is a good thing, as it means I can visit him.

Love to you all,
Era



Domenico, 2023.
Nurse.

Looking back at the making of this body of work, I realize its creation is profoundly associated with my near-death experience in Parma. Katsushika Hokusai had a near-death experience at age fifty when he was struck by lightning. I am amused, inspired, and heartened by Hokusai's comments on age, as I completed these portraits at age seventy, the same age Hokusai had reached when he made *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*. Parodying Confucius, Hokusai wrote, "Until the age of seventy, nothing that I drew was worthy of notice. . . . At seventy-three, I learned a little about the real structure of animals, plants, birds, fishes, and insects. Consequently, when I am eighty, I'll have made more progress. At ninety, I'll have penetrated the mystery of things. At a hundred, I shall have reached something marvelous, but when I am a hundred and ten, everything I do, even the smallest dot, will be alive."

D.F.



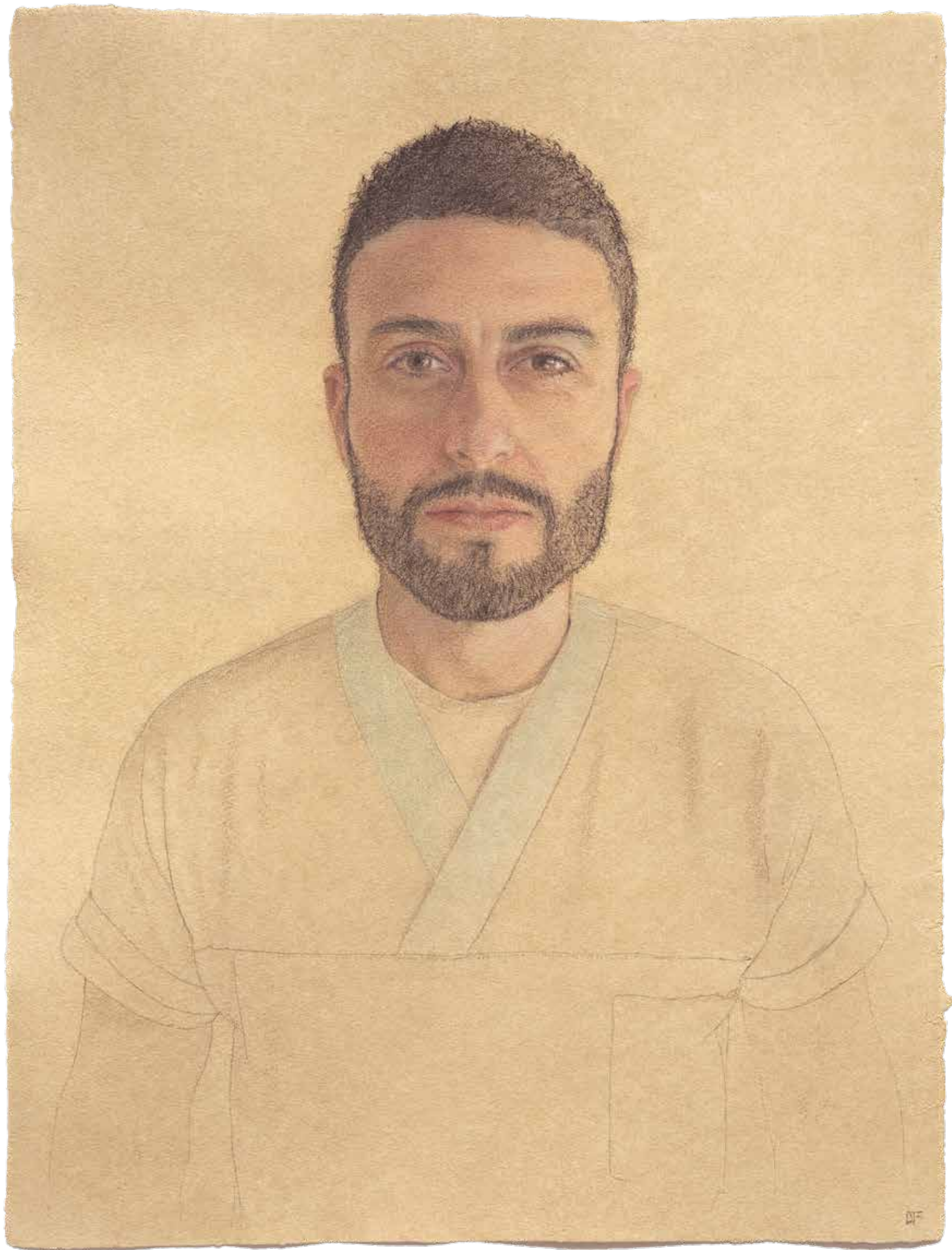
Salvatore, 2023.
Nursing orderly and aide.



Maria, 2023.
Nursing orderly and aide.



Letizia, 2023.
Nursing orderly and aide.



Gaetano, 2022.
Nursing orderly and aide.

November 15, 2022

Dear Friends and Family,

Thanks to all the powers that be, including all of you, that Don seems to be getting better. And let me not forget modern medicine and the wonderful doctors and staff at Maggiore Hospital in Parma and doctors elsewhere and medical researchers who have helped us. I say all this a bit tentatively as Don has seemed to improve in the past, only to come crashing down, but this time it seems more stable and the highs seem higher and the lows not so low. It was so hard to see lively, vibrant Don slumped in his chair and completely immobile because he didn't have the energy to sit up, with a crashing headache and neck ache. Only being able to walk a few feet at a time, and both of us planning our route across a train station because he wouldn't be able to make his way across without collapsing and he needed a resting place. It was really bad.

. . .

Below is a message from Don from about a week ago to all of you which got lost in the flood of emails from everywhere.

This morning (after receiving two units of blood the previous evening), I had a small spike of energy (thanks to the generosity of others and my Italian caregivers); taking advantage of my newfound strength, I showered (for only the second time in my 9-day hospital stay) and lay, my now slender body, back down, reclining in a meditative state. I was thinking about all the love, healing thoughts, Reiki, prayers, and kindness I have received from my friends, doctors, and family and the outpouring of support for Era. As I reclined with these tender feelings I took deep slow breaths, focused, and opened my heart chakra sending reciprocal love you all so richly deserve. It would have been the middle of the night California time, so maybe your sleeping spirit (those of you in the USA) felt a little tickle, I hope so.

xoxo,

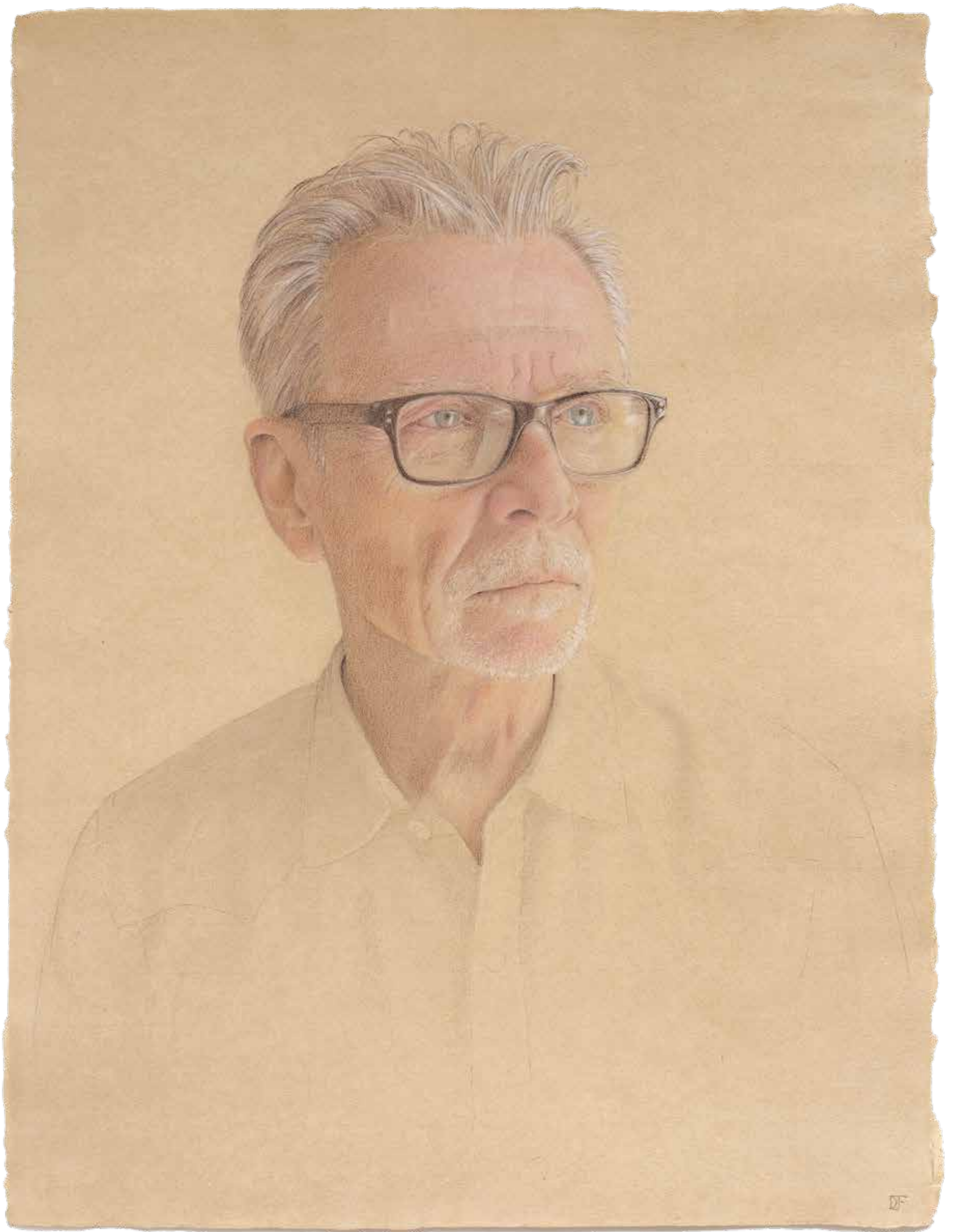
Your ever-grateful friend, Don

. . .

Much love,
Era



Angelo, 2023.
Nursing orderly and aide.



Memories

Recovery's art blooms,
An echoed thank-you in lines,
Memory's gift blooms.

—*Seiko Mori*

MEMORIES CAN BE POTENT in times of danger. When Era informed me of Don's hospitalization in Parma, Italy, I initially downplayed it, suspecting maybe a twisted ankle or a batch of bad clams. Believing the trouble to be minor initially, it was distressing to discover his condition was quite serious.

Recollections of our decades of collaborative art projects at Magnolia Editions filled my thoughts during the anxious waiting period. Despite the distance, I found solace in assistance from my neighbor Dr. James Ryan, who provided invaluable insights on Don's Covid-induced cold agglutinin disease. His reassurances about the proposed treatment and recovery offered much-needed relief. (Dr. Ryan's assessment paralleled the information Don and Era's friend Dr. Marc Goldyne had provided.)

Soon after returning home, Don resumed his work at Magnolia with an unexpected project—portraits. He decided to honor the health-care professionals and patients who helped him recover. This deep respect and gratitude manifested through every drawing, each one a token of his journey back to health.

In our thirty-plus years of friendship, I'd never seen him so devoted to a personal project. These portraits not only showcase his skills but also act as tributes to the team that saved his life. Each sketch, a testament to their care, immortalizes his gratitude.

Don, may we continue cherishing life's memories and the adventures that foster them.

GUY DIEHL

Artist



The Visible World

Chapter IV of the haiku book written by R. H. Blyth contains a Wordsworth-like description of wordlessness.

*This is a time
When the light of sense
Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed
The invisible world*

October 31, 2022

. . . I was walking through downtown Parma, and there was Gail, an artist friend of mine who lives in Berkeley. She used to be married to Kenji Nanao, an artist and professor. She looked like a vision and almost seemed to be glowing. We could both hardly believe our eyes. She is on vacation with her son and his family, who live in France. We talked for quite a while, and she invited me to go see a tour of the Parma opera house (Teatro Regio) with her tomorrow. So thanks again for those good vibes. . . .

Era

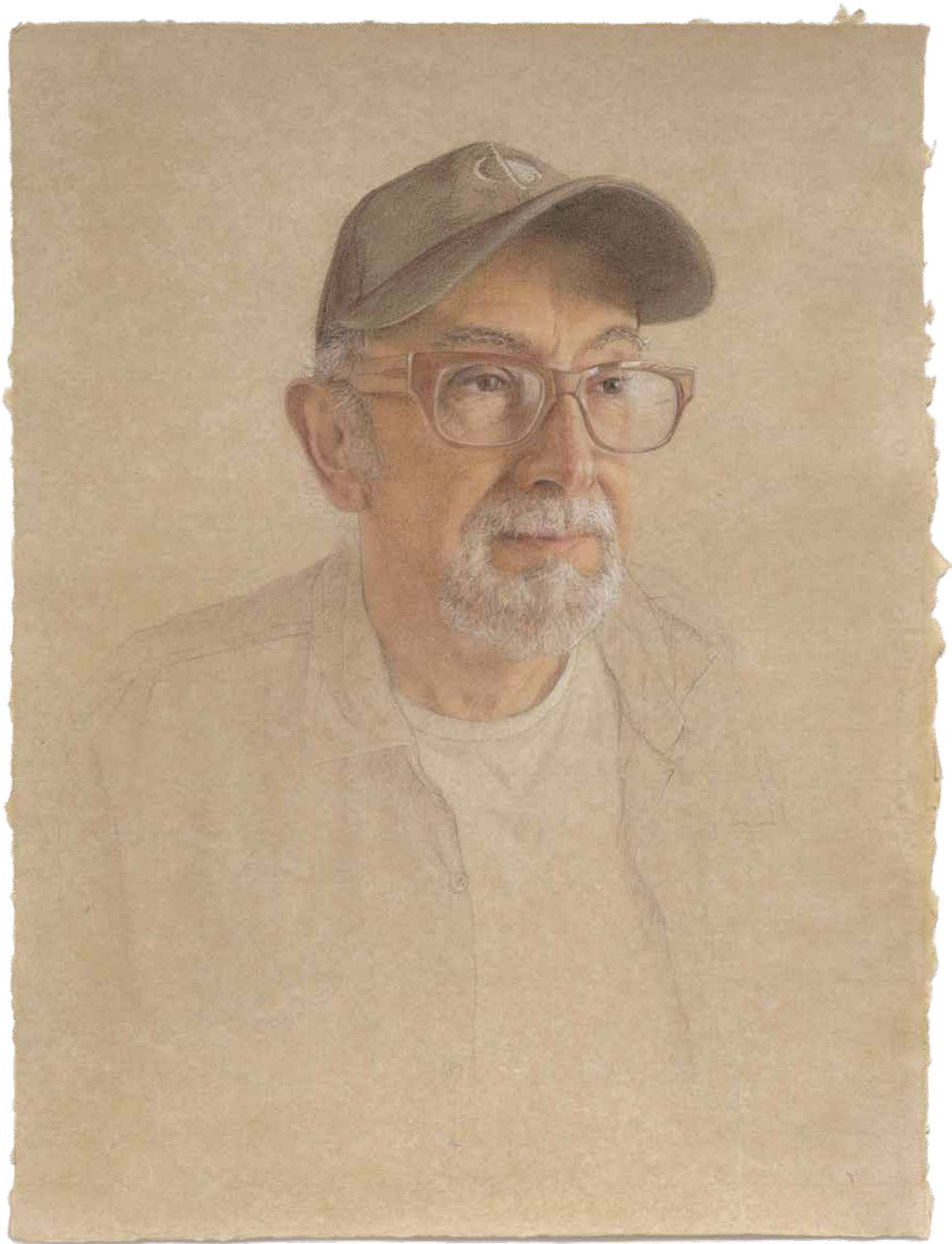
I INDEED HAVE DIFFICULTY finding the words to describe the serendipity of the moment when Era Farnsworth and I literally almost ran into one another in Parma. I had been walking on my own, absorbing the cacophony of smells and sights, having just returned to the main thoroughfare after getting hopelessly lost in the ancient streets of the old city. There was a flash of a woman coming toward me. As she came into focus, her face unblurring from the sea of other faces under the arcade, I experienced an almost uncanny instant. I knew her. Or, at least, I thought I did. In the time it took for us to look at each other, we simultaneously recognized one another.

Era was alone because her husband, Don, was isolated in Maggiore Hospital with a life-threatening case of Covid. We agreed to meet the next day for lunch, and I invited her to go on the tour of the Parma opera house with me. During our meal, we discussed her plans for a delicious repast for Don as soon as he could receive visitors and eat real (i.e., not hospital) food.

Meeting Era by chance on the streets of Parma seemed almost too random to be believed. Although we did not see it in these terms then, I believe we both felt our meeting that day was one of Blyth's flashes in which the invisible world momentarily becomes visible.

GAIL CHADELL NANA O

Artist



Fearing for a Friend

DON SCARED THE CRAP OUT OF ME and his friends in the Bay Area and beyond when Era reported that he was in the hospital in Parma with Covid in an email on October 30, 2022. The anguished message described serious, mysterious, hard-to-diagnose symptoms and an unclear outcome of his treatment, which sounded complicated. On top of that, Era was unable to stay with him due to the hospital's Covid isolation rules (even though she had just recovered from Covid and was probably immune). It was a Babel Tower crowd, with neither Era nor Don speaking Italian, and with very few Italians speaking English, and without any local friends. I worried very much for Era, too, being alone in such an uncertain, sleepless nightmare.

Thankfully, after many amazing doctors and health-care practitioners working on him, after many gallons of well-seasoned Italian blood transfusions (the envy of any starving vampire), and after many hours of loving-kindness meditation we all sent his way, he got better. The invisible powers that rule life in the universe sent him back to Planet Recovery and Don and Era back to Planet Oakland.

Don took nice pictures of everyone around him while he was in the hospital, and what nobody predicted is that those images in his phone would become astounding drawings of his doctors and nurses, plus Era and several new Italian friends. Now the wonderful portraits can be appreciated by anyone who turns the pages of this book. Some of us were lucky to have witnessed the progress of those drawings at the studio during the last few months. Now that Don has finished them, we see many beautiful people, and every single person in those portraits seems about to talk, including a very sick patient who is no longer in this world. The portraits could hang proudly in the corridors of the hospital in Parma to give peace of mind to any patient in their care.

Secretly, with my wicked humor, I worried that we would miss some of the best espresso coffee in the world! That's the coffee Don makes like a Nobel Prize chemist in the kitchen of Magnolia for everyone who works at or visits the studio, using a digital gadget to weigh the coffee beans per cup (organic fair-trade beans roasted in the back of the studio), grinding the beans just before brewing each cup in his super-espresso machine, and serving each in a glass etched at Magnolia with the atomic structure of coffee around it. Just like there is an Italian Roast and a French Roast, there is a Magnolia Roast and a Magnolia Blend (dark- and medium-roast beans from Mexico, Central America, Kenya, and Ethiopia, as far as I know) negotiated with studio collaborators. None of that coffee experience would exist without Don.

But this is only a tiny sample of Don's approach to making anything (paper, prints in all media, and what not), like a mad genius child who enjoys life and his artistic collaborations with the virtuosi: Era, Nicholas, Tallulah, Max, Alyssa, and dozens of local, national, and international artists. Many inventions happen here, like Mexican *mameyes* growing in a tree in Switzerland.

ENRIQUE CHAGOYA

Artist

🍌 Mamey sapote is a tropical fruit native to southern Mexico and Central America. Sweet as papaya, it is a relative of the avocado, with pink-salmon-colored flesh and a hard brown skin. Due to its fragility, it is very difficult to export.

November 8, 2022

Dear Friends and Family,

. . .

I had a surprise visit from two friends of mine, Archana Horsting, founder and former director of Kala, and her husband, Greg Harper. They were in Bologna, a city about an hour away, and heard from Elizabeth Wholey that Don and I were in Parma and that Don was in the hospital. They had been traveling through Italy—Archana speaks Italian and had gone to high school for several years in Padova, I believe it was. Archana said they had several days unplanned in the middle of their trip; she said, “It was almost as though it was meant to be.” Yes, that seems to have been happening lately.

. . .

Unfortunately, Archana and Greg never got to see Don because he was in the Covid ward and even after he tested negative, the hospital had no spare beds for him or anyone. I’ve asked if I could take him “home” and he could continue treatment as an outpatient, but they said out of the question with his hemoglobin at the level it is.

Greg was sooo kind and helped me move our luggage (wheeling it) from my last place, which was perfectly adequate, but I didn’t love the neighborhood. I felt uneasy walking by myself after dark. And I am now in this fabulous place, across the river, which is absolutely superb, well-located, and reasonably priced.

. . .

Today I had to say good-bye to them and had a very hard time holding back my tears. I didn’t want them to regret coming to Parma (if I went into hysterics), but they said they had a wonderful time.

I walked through the Parco Ducale, it was a beautiful time of day, and crossed the bridge to the back of the Pilotta. I walked through the massive arches. Where I’m staying is just a few minutes away.

Much love,
Era



What's Left to Say?

What was agony for Don and Era was an easy, if bittersweet, task for us.

When we heard that Don was in the hospital, we hurried to Parma to be with Era.

How strong and brave Era is. How capable of finding beauty and goodness in any circumstances. How she nurtured Don every day in Parma despite the many barriers at the time and in the circumstances.

The whole art world is thrilled with Don's miraculous return to health. We artists need our own mad scientist to continue his research and path of discovery with Era by his side.

The exquisite portraits Don created out of his Parma experience have to be seen in the flesh to be believed. The seven years he researched how to make Renaissance-style paper has paid dividends and made these remarkable portraits possible. Although Don couldn't have known what was in store for him in Parma's hospital, he was in some sense preparing all his life for this, his most creative response to a life-and-death challenge. Given the artwork that resulted, we're all the beneficiaries.

Parma, the city and its citizens, especially the doctors and nurses, rose to the occasion when Don was so very ill. We thank them profoundly from here in California.

ARCHANA HORSTING
*Founding director
Kala Art Institute*



Why Make Paper?

Why make paper? Paper shows us the in-person fleshy actuality of the world. The world's animistic reality, filled with irreducibly unique parts, is under constant siege by skeptics of all stripes. They flatten all things into ideal types and interchangeable parts. The result is a suspicion that the things we see are not quite what they appear, and that the world might be something less than real.

A sheet of perfectly smooth machine-made paper seeks to disappear from view and be forgotten, like a transparent background in a Photoshop file. Handmade paper can never disappear for the artist. He or she is confronted constantly by its materiality. Any desire to subdue their materials must be discarded. The textured surface of the sheet, a permanent feature from its birth between coarse woolen felts, creates the horizons of possibility. Handmade paper jolts us back into the world of real things.

People in all epochs presume their time is special. So maybe it is a personal prejudice to attribute fault to computers for our suspicions of unreality. Computer files are, in fact, completely interchangeable. A duplicate is exactly the same as its predecessor. This gives us the illusion that the files do not really live in our world. We reflect this in our speech: they descend from The Cloud like bodiless angels. Their life in the world, in physical cobalt and silicon (wrenched from the earth with picks and shovels), is obscured from our everyday experience.

Computer files and programs are, within their domains, perfectly interchangeable parts. But the concept predates them by centuries. A computer program might take the firing pin of a mass-produced rifle as its archetype. But interchangeable parts cannot be the origin, either. The writing of a JPEG more closely resembles a scribe with tremendous speed and accuracy. Written language, too, is interchangeable. Could this be our genesis?

Must we go back to the commandment: believe not your lyin' eyes, for your kingdom is not of this world? Monotheism demands a contempt for matter. God spoke the world into existence, and The Word is the only truth that can be relied upon, they say. You must reject the little gods you find everywhere, whether you see them in the unquenchable will for existence found in fruiting mushrooms, or the unique and irreducible essence possessed even in stones.

Do not think secularism escapes this impulse so easily. The adherent of naive scientism, more common these days than the monotheist, might tell you that the universe is information—that matter's essential composition can be discovered as information and therefore be recordable. They even imagine their own minds as a collection of quantifiable traits awaiting upload to the cloud. Laws of physics and properties of elements, quantifiable and recordable, are all that substance is. So they might say.

These properties hint at the real essence of things. Cobalt, atomic number 27, behaves completely differently from number 26, iron. There's a reason why you can't make cobalt-blue pigment or lithium-ion batteries from iron, and you can't make iron-oxide red or steel girders from cobalt. These things contain, in their essence, properties that can't be faked. Science can tell us some of the how, but the why is completely untouched. Why should one more proton create this galaxy of difference? That's just the way it is.

Here I take my leap of faith. I exhort you to do the same: believe your eyes when you find fleshy, living matter in front of them.

So why make handmade paper? It is a transformation that enacts the wonder and mystery of the world. With stinking, worm-eaten, moldering rags, we make something beautiful and unrepentantly unique.

When the second and equally unlikely transformation occurs—the creation of a drawing or painting with crushed stones and bones—handmade paper does not permit you to forget its origin or to presume its interchangeability. The texture of the felts can never repeat. The unique flaws and features of any particular sheet can never be recreated. Handmade paper brings the work of art down from its rarified heights back into the world.

MAX THILL

Artist and paper conservator

Technical Notes

Back in the studio in Oakland on December 12, Max Thill and I beat linen, flax, and cotton fiber and made paper for three print editions by Calida Rawles, a Magnolia publication Tallulah Terryll and Nicholas Price (Magnolia's master printers) had created in our long absence. They were anxious that I survive and return to work, since many of the prints had pre-sold in advance of completing the editions. While the handmade sheets were drying, I found the time to begin work on the Parma drawings. The cold water of December papermaking caused a bit of a downturn in my hemoglobin levels because the critical tenet of cold agglutinin disease is to stay warm—I quickly learned to do that, and we now religiously keep the papermaking vats warm. By New Year's 2022, my first two drawings indicated the project was afoot, but those drawings I rejected. I soon found myself struggling to achieve the vision in my head. As with all art-making attempts, I realized this would be my continued education in the arts, a struggle of process, experimentation, re-examination, and making.

In these drawings, a face is evident at first glance, and abstraction is discovered in the paper texture's minutia (with up-close viewing). The opposite is true in the portraiture created in my collaborations with artist Chuck Close, in which abstraction at first glance resolves into a face at a distance.

I began working with Chuck at Magnolia Editions twenty years ago, creating weave files, Jacquard tapestries, prints, and ceramic murals. A large-scale tapestry and ceramic portrait of Lou Reed by Chuck Close was exhibited at the Museo d'Arte in Ravenna, Italy, in 2019. The ceramic piece was similar to the pieces we at Magnolia Editions created with Chuck for the New York Subway Second Avenue line, 86th Street Station. Our collaboration came to a heartbreaking end this year with the design of his headstone (*Self-Portrait Yellow Raincoat*), fabricated in glass tiles by Mosaika.

Without a doubt, collaborations with the many artists who have worked at Magnolia play a role in these *Parma Portraits*. Tapestries we created with Kiki Smith graced the walls of the Pitti Palace in Florence, Italy, also in 2019. She and other artists I have worked with—Hung Liu, Mildred Howard, Enrique Chagoya, Alexandre Arrechea, Rupert Garcia, Guy Diehl, Mel Ramos, and Squeak Carnwath—have significantly influenced these portraits. Key as well has been the work with my wife (on miniature portraits on actual dollar bills).

This Parma series allowed me to study the nuances of a sitter's face, pose, and lighting—although the lighting was dictated by the windows in my hospital room and the changeable northern Italian winter weather.

In this series, I coupled these personal character studies with my seven-year pursuit of recreating ancient paper, a paper with a unique surface that influences every chalk and pencil mark, breathing life into any drawing. The fibrous patterns embossed on the paper's surface come from the ancient DNA of heritage wool and make possible the drawing's texture, color, values, highlights, and black point. Above all, the paper warms the image as I endeavor to encapsulate the thoughtfulness and tender care I received from those who so kindly posed for these portraits. The drawings imprint the memory of my loving caregivers and a place and time (a hospital room in Parma, the winter of 2022), expressing the emotions usually found in letters of gratitude and love.

Before drawing, I manipulated the photos in Photoshop, using solarization and modifying the foreground and background. Solarization, inverting some of the darker values to enhance core shadows and altering the balance of light and dark (tipping my hat to Man Ray), helps bring the Old Master aesthetic to a more recent century—that, and the stethoscopes and the pocketful of pens and markers, the standard uniform for our contemporary medical professionals. Displaying the photo on an iPad as a reference enabled me to zoom in and find my way around the fantastic varieties of facial details.

The key drawing is graphite in the later works, and red polymer chalk in earlier drawings. I use every kind of pencil imaginable, quarried chalk (from Florence), colored pastel pencils, white chalk (Generals), Prisma (wax pencils), oil-based color pencils (Lightfast Derwent), polymer chalk (American and Japanese), and acrylic. My erasers are Mono Zero (thin and extendable) and gum.

Every drawing is a learning experience that helps me evaluate the Renaissance-style linen, flax, and hemp paper, sized with animal gelatin, which changes with every batch (run) of paper we make.

D.F.

☞ It's difficult to comprehend all that is necessary for these portraits to come into existence and to map what we have gained and lost, but this particular year looms large.

The year 1795:

- The hydraulic press was invented, and the coarse Renaissance, felt-hair-marked paper disappeared. Since the hydraulic press provided more pressure for squeezing felts and paper, finer felts could be used. (For these works, I have had to resort to custom-made coarse wool felts between which the paper is pressed.)
- Conté crayon (compressed chalk) was invented, and the quarried chalk that the Old Masters used began to lose favor.
- The first human-to-human blood transfusion took place. (My survival in Parma was, in part, due to life-saving blood transfusions.)

Acknowledgments

I received the highest-quality care and experienced powerful solidarity at Maggiore Hospital in Parma, Italy—a clinical collective with empathy and understanding, striving to heal individuals, empowering them to live, prosper, and, hopefully, make meaningful contributions to society. Reflecting on my hospital time in Parma, I recall the pervasive sense of compassion, dedication to collective problem-solving, and embracing of scientific medical progress. These elements encapsulate the essence of solidarity, wherein a group focuses on an individual. With gratitude, I acknowledge that, in this case, I was that individual. Their concerted efforts extended my life, making the work herein possible.

I want to thank my wife, Era Farnsworth, for her unending compassion and support. Were it not for her, these pages would be blank. I am grateful to the Parma doctors Arianna Alfieri, Claudia Schianchi, and Monica Crugnola, and their fellow doctors, interns, nurses, and staff whose portraits are pictured here, who cared for a stranger as if we were long-lost friends. Thanks to my friends and essay writers for taking the time to write down their remembrances and thoughts: Marc Goldyne, Robert Flynn Johnson, Enrique Chagoya, Guy Diehl, Max Thill, Gail Nanao, and Archana Horsting. And thanks to Gail, Archana, and Greg Harper for deviating on their vacation to comfort Era in Parma. To Jono and Annie Salt, who drove day and night from France, rendezvoused with my daughter and granddaughter, and continued to Parma, giving comfort and help to Era and lending a hand in my recovery and care as an outpatient in Parma. To my daughter Marisha and granddaughter Mia, who traveled from California to comfort us both in a time of crisis, providing love and uniting the family. Mia (who gained the age of four while in Parma) would take my hand and pull me down the street, calling for me to walk faster and thereby gain back my strength. And to Alessandra

Chiari, who, like an Italian sister, befriended Era, who loved hanging out in Alessandra's shop, L'Arca, in Parma.

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I will sincerely strive to reciprocate to all our family and friends who sent loving thoughts and kind wishes for my recovery, supporting Era in a time of crisis.

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