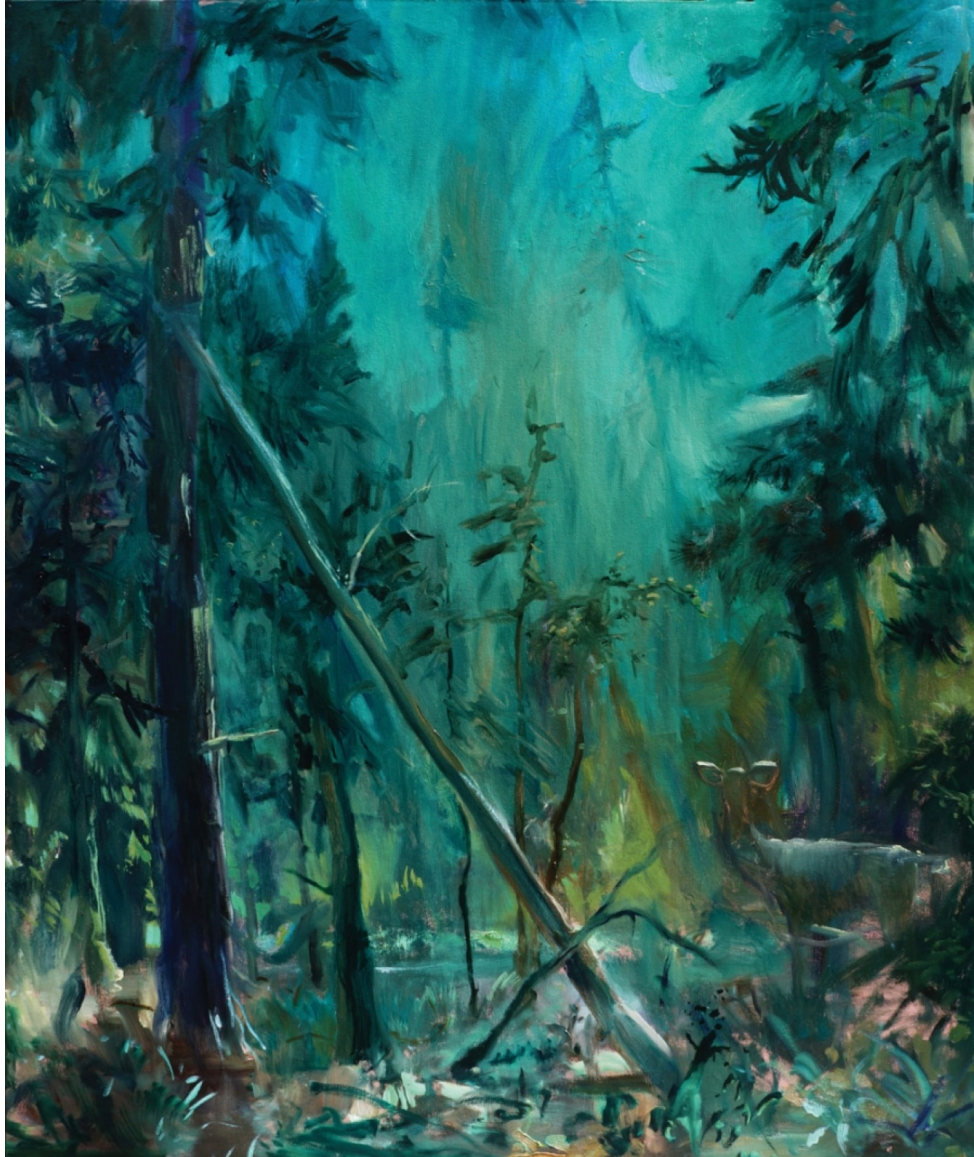


A Search

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"Even When You Aren't Sure, Something Out There Knows Right Where You Are," a painting by Johnny Defeo. Courtesy the artist and Visions West Contemporary

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FINE ARTS

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The journey to Alexandria would be nigh onto a week. Amadu kept the brake pole engaged and leaned against the slant as the buckboard lurched on the narrow trail down the mountain. She pulled hard on the reins in the dawn light, voicing a series of hums and clicks. Hey up, Hawss, hey up. Here now, hey up. They gained the valley by full daylight. Tossing a few grains of corn to either side from the pouch at her feet, Amadu turned the horse from the town, east and north toward the Potomac. Over three year he'd been gone. The high ridges were refuge, but she had to bring him back before the weather turned. Lost to himself, the heart of him in shadow; he could not know them, find them. All summer she'd waited, but storms could be early in the mountains, the trails impassable for wagon, a struggle even on horseback.

Here she was Amadu, known to her few. The girl, Eliza, that she'd raised from birth. Eliza's child ConaLee, born months after the baby's father had gone—lost to the War he claimed was his. Not his, she'd told him; he owed no debt. Eliza begged him to stay, for the child she was carrying. He must go, he said, that no man would force them nor Amadu nor any of their kin from this place. The War would be short, winter to spring—the Federals were so massive a force. Amadu would help birth the child and they would send him word. They'd winter provisions to last and he'd return a free man who needn't hide, with the Burnside Carbine allotted cavalrymen and a fine mount the 8th Cavalry would provide. Eliza said she feared he would not be free under a false name. The name he'd fled was the false one, he told her; it was only another scar, a mark on him. He held out his enlistment papers, with the name he'd chosen. Here was his name—a soldier's name no one would question. Better a Union soldier than hiding here, waiting for a victory that could free them. They were all nameless now, but

he would earn his soldier's name and come back to claim this wilderness they worked. So he'd walked off to the War, leaving them the horse for the buckboard. Amadu saw him even then, in steam risen from roots she boiled over summer cook fires, move through flames in a swirl of cloud riven with splintered trees. But she could not dissuade him.

No news of him in two year now. It was as though the soldier carte de visite he'd mailed in late '61 had broken apart, his uniformed fellows scratched out, his direct gaze and proud visage an empty outline. Amadu knew every detail: the Yankee military jacket too small to fasten across him, his own breeches, shirt, a broad-brimmed hat. Shaved but for a razored mustache, hair cut close. Another marksman Federal, he'd checked all caution to stand for the Union. The small tin image, four soldiers posed outdoors with their long guns, was dear to Eliza. Amadu hated it, though she'd wrapped it in muslin and brought it to show Union commanders, or doctors in Alexandria. A city of hospitals, Eliza had read, evacuees from the Virginia battlefields, ferried by train and boat. There'd been a list in a broadside: dozens of hospitals. The biggest held five hundred wounded—the hamlet at the foot of their mountains was home to fewer souls. He would be changed from the image left them. Likely no one truly saw him, senseless or damaged on a cot among many rooms of such, but the scar on his chest would mark him if Amadu found him. She'd rolled his enlistment papers into a tight scroll, wrapped in rawhide cord against any harm—the name might call him to her if she said it, showed it. Even hurt, wounded, he would surely know her, were she near enough. Sense her, if he were blind or bound with bandages. He was strong; naught turned him aside.

She'd felt his strain and peril across distance, through the long War years, as she felt winter sunlight, or sudden shade falling across her hands.

But no sign had come to her since early May this year.

She was tending a cook fire outside in what Eliza called the summer kitchen, rocks built high enough around a firepit that they could sit together for warm weather meals. It was just dusk. Amadu kept old customs—throwing a few grains of rice to either side before cooking at an open fire, entering a graveyard, or summoning those who'd passed. Rice was scarce here so she threw a few grains of ground corn as the fire blazed. Chickens uncooped to forage rushed after, never mind that she grabbed one to ream with the spit. She sat to pluck the limp hen, a young one, and set it over the fire pit, feeding the smoldering embers into a low blaze with twigs and stripes of dried, pungent bark. Then, almost by habit, she closed her eyes, opened her hands to call him, wherever he be. She told herself he shared their daylight, their moonlight, no matter uniforms and distance. Such a spring eve had marked their first vision of this open clearing behind the empty cabin he'd shored up for Eliza. As though in answer to the girl's name, the fire suddenly cracked in a great sear of explosion, throwing blazing pieces into the tangled vines hanging from a balsam. The vines flared in a quick circle of flame and dropped, burning.

Eliza ran out with her rifle as though to meet an attack. She looked at the fiery vines on the ground. Is he dead, then? she asked. Say, Amadu, if you know.

No, Amadu told her. He is not dead. He tells me so.

Tells you and not me, then?

You are here. You see.

Before them, the tangled vines guttered like a candle and went out. A circle of spark lay glittering.

Look how the glow stays. He calls me.

You can't go, Amadu— There will be more summer battles, terrible ones—

He won't be fighting them, Amadu said. He gave all but his death. He is hurt bad, Eliza, but we must wait a time. See if he come back to us.

They'll let him come back? she asked.

If he heal. This wound—needs time. It's like fire sunk in, burned deep.

The girl uncocked her rifle and leaned it against her. She covered her eyes with her hands and stood as though struck.

In the cabin, ConaLee, frightened, cried out.

Go to her, Eliza. She's feared. She knows, like I know.

Amadu, she's but three years old! Don't speak of what she knows! Better we don't know, that he suffers, alone, so far from us—Tearful, the girl turned and took up the rifle.

Amadu waited until Eliza was inside, then stood over the ashes of the vine. She felt of the heat that rose to meet her palms, unsourced heat, for the sparks had finished. It was a grievous wound, then, a heat she could feel from so far. Rebels would not take a gravely wounded captive. They would have killed him, but this message held a bare glow, a senselessness. The circle of ash lay still, as though silenced and alive. He would come to them if he could move, but he could not. She went to the shed for a flat of greased paper and knelt to slip it between the ground and the oval of burned green. The warmth rose hotter, though the ashes had cooled. She breathed upon them, pressed them to a mounded line with her fingertips. Rolled

the paper tight and poured the ash into a small drawstring pouch she'd fashioned of deer hide. She put it next to her skin and pulled tight the sash at her waist to hold it.

She turned the chicken roasting on the spit, a pot beneath to catch the drippings. They must put by extra stores. He would come back gravely weakened, or she would go for him. In the buckboard, made up for his bed. She would wait as long as she could, mid-September, to assure warm weather enough to make the trip. The buckboard needed clear passage.

Eliza came out with the vegetables and flatbread, ConaLee trailing after. She sat the child down and tied a rag around her neck. ConaLee was three and had to eat with a babbie's sterling spoon from her own wooden bowl. The girl clung to mannerly customs, to her books that she read aloud at night. She'd made the child an alphabet from sticks and resin and played at spelling out rhymes. Amadu, her own cabin a ridge above by footpath, saw them near every day in the endless work of putting up provisions, seeing to the animals and gardens. Eliza had learned hunting, dressing, and butchering, but Amadu did that work after the birth. Eliza sewed buntings lined with rabbit fur, planted and tended her gardens, cooked, preserved vegetables and berries. Game was plenty in their mountains—rabbit, squirrel, turkey, deer. Amadu trapped bear near a vast oak full of honeyed hives. The female black bear were no bigger than small cows and her dogs could bring them down. She stewed the salted meat with spring onion and their own potatoes and carrots; she fleshed and tanned and smoked the hides on tree frames. Venison made better jerky, and Eliza wore the lighter, smoother deerskin sewn in her winter cloak and skirt. He'd taught her woodcraft, homecraft, woods medicine, even cooking and planting. Amadu was prideful of him. She'd taught him all, but his understanding knit one thing with another. She was not one for the phrases of the faithful but found him in the words, *His strength was legion*; he did not have nor want what folk called *magic eye*, did not believe in it. Nor did she. But they were so close at heart that Amadu could see him, feel his quiet or the mayhem he moved through, until that day when all fell silent.

Wending her way on the valley road, she headed northeast toward the lower

Seneca Trail. Federals controlled western Virginia, now the free state of West Virginia, and all the Potomac region. Eliza read aloud any newspapers or circulars Amadu brought from town. Union wounded went by wagon and boat to hospitals in Alexandria. Amadu made her preparations; years past the dictates of the womb, she was lean, sinewed, strong with the physical work of woodcutting and hunting. She dressed as a laborer in loose overalls, jacket, farm gloves. A broad-brimmed farmer's hat, pulled low, covered her bundled hair. Tall enough, she drove and sat and moved on the buckboard like a man, and spoke little on trips to the town, but she would need help and direction in Alexandria. She would find the largest hospital, once a fine hotel, with columned entrance and big windows facing the street, and know it; Eliza had shown her a newspaper illustration. He was there; Amadu had glimpsed the place in a fragment of a dream. But once she spoke they would know she was not a man, nor seeming kin to the injured. She would show the tintype and his enlistment papers, say she was sent by the boy's father—an old man too sick to make the journey.

The horse surged forward in the traces. Amadu clicked and hummed encouragement and had in mind to go straight on, through moonlight. The way leveled on valley ground; the dirt track widened. The pistol on her lap, easily gripped under a length of burlap, was welcome weight. The War was far South now, but few had the means or will to traverse the roads. Anyone she came across would see she'd nothing but blankets and bedrolls in the empty buckboard, though some wayfarers were lost and hungry, thieving or worse. But the road opened out before her, clear and empty.

Late, she would look for a sheltered copse, a spot of woods with some trickle of creek, to rest and feed the horse. No need for a fire. Biscuit, jerky, hard cheese for respite. Sleep on a blanket

roll, hidden from view in foliage dense enough to shield horse and buckboard. Saved for him, the rolled mattress stuffed with new straw, the animal furs, the feather tick tightly wound and roped, to pad the buckboard when she laid him in it. She had to find him, and said the words in clicks and hums, song for the horse, a marsh tacky come to this place, like her, near seven year ago. The beasts never panicked in marsh or salt rune or tidal sink, and they proved as sure-footed on mountain trails and mud; this one had carried Amadu into these mountains. They'd kept her, a yearling back then, now so versed, Amadu wagered, she'd find her way home from anywhere. The one she sought had helped birth this horse, had fed and gentled her far from here. He'd found their way in urgent flight to the abandoned cabins highest on the sheltered ridges. They'd shorn up hewn log walls, chinked the gapped wood with mud daub and dried hides, built up slanting hearths with flat stones. Dug a root cellar deep into the side of a viny hill, for storage and refuge. Planted a winter garden in the sunlit swaths. Her own cabin just the ridge above, near hidden in blackberry and pine, was a second habitation if anyone approached too near the first. And Amadu declared she would live separate. To boil her herbs and grind her powders in peace, he'd smiled. He'd a quick ear and could speak as they did in the mountain town below, and sold the other two horses for purchase of tools, nails, rifles and powder, oil lamps, cast iron kettle and pots. Fashioned wooden shutters they could bar with indoor planks against storm and snow. Rolls of greased paper, tacked and sheared to size above every casement, admitted a pearly light, winter or summer. He traded game for cornmeal and flour, for the chickens they cooped at night. Amadu and Eliza stayed to home before the War. Better they weren't known, nor seen in company.

One day he came back with the marsh tacky hitched to a buckboard. The trail to Amadu's ridge above was a footpath too narrow for wagon track, but she mused aloud on harvesting roots to sell or trade when he bartered. They all stood admiring the buckboard, feeling of its length and depth, its spoked wheels and leather strapping.

The three sat that night on the porch of the lower one-room cabin, looking into the dark beyond lantern glow, singing rounds, querying one another on what range of vision the sliver of new moon allowed. Firefly light, sweep of bat, sigh of murmurous breeze. The shadowy porch and four broad steps he'd built to the open ground before them were mere outlines, glimmering up. He stood to see deeper. Her height had bled through in his stature, his broad shoulders and stance, in his feel for animals and plants. His mind worked at locks or journeys or survival in these mountains as though all were puzzles to solve, but even he could not read the towering evergreens and forests that night, or name the flared canopies that formed their realm of sight. All became looming planes of darkness. Miles of vine and creeper, foxes, owls, preying bobcats and painter lions, the sweeps of dense forest beyond what clearing they managed, seemed endless. Yet the vast mountains were sustenance and safety.

That was early spring, '61, before War fever broke out.

Amadu felt him near again in the sound and creak of the buckboard, the balance of the spoked wheels, the rise and curve of the dirt road. She went on, bright in her mind with sense of him.

Hours on, the darkened sky boiled up with yellow clouds. The air took on a green scrim and thunder echoed far off, a storm rolling down from the mountains she'd traversed. Woods to either side of this valley road were too scant for cover. Amadu negotiated a rattling low bridge over a brook and urged the horse to speed, licking the mare's haunches lightly with the reins and calling softly, Gee up, Hawss. Go now. The smell of the air was tell enough. The horse needed little urging as the late afternoon light ticked down, darkened to a dusk-laden brown. Hurricanes didn't happen in these mountains, though storms might rage near as hard, and cease as sudden as they began. Amadu saw the green thrashed limbs of an evergreen

grove as lightning cracked over them. She let the mare have her head until they were off the road, into the trees. The needled ground was layered soft and she slowed the horse to a walk, got as far in as she dared in the time allowed. Rain fell in haphazard cupfuls.

The storm broke as she hobbled the horse and tightened the oilcloth cover over the buckboard. Drenched, she crawled beneath the tarpaulin itself, fearful for the horse still in the traces. The rain whirled over them, roaring. She cast her mind to calm the mare eye-to-eye, felt in thought the horse's dripping lashes, bade the animal sleep in cadenced, whispered phrases. So the horse stood as the storm poured down. Rain pelted the oilcloth like rattling gravel. Amadu crouched on hands and knees, arched her back to turn the fill of the wagon, and heard run-off slap the ground under the ratchet of rain. Wind shook the cracking, flailing trees and rose to a shriek, and she felt herself near those who'd passed—deaths in fields and dwellings, the dead babes she'd brought, the babes she'd birthed alive that howled their mother's grief and then went still. Disappeared. Souls, called to the womb like voyagers, set suddenly adrift. Amadu had turned many, with remedies, not conjure—herbs, teas, ground bark meant to stop a soul from crossing. Her own soul warned them off, to save them a suffering passage. So many cries, searching, robbed, turned away, beat against her, howling in this wind and rain, sheets of rain that slashed and rocked her. Hail pelted down, marbles of ice like shot gravel. Then, sleeping as though stunned, blinded, she dreamed the turkey vultures of these mountains, gliding in flight over dying prey, and scattered them from her. She called the sea birds of her youth, the long-legged stork, ibis, egret, smelled the sea and salt on their wings. Saw the terns, plovers, skimmers, sliding along the sand in lines and clusters where the rice fields met sea marsh and bracken. The low sway of the marshes cast a shadow odor, like new milk spoiled with spunk and seawater, rotten, fetid as the turned yolk in broken eggs. Here, cleansing rain curtained the forests and sheer rock knobs of mountains. Winters, the months of cold and snow, froze decay. No swarm of diseased mosquitos, no shaking fevers and ague. Rivers and

falls swelled with icy snowmelt. Rivulets, freshets, streams in abundance, so clean and cold the water ached in the mouth.

She woke at first light, thirsting. The sound of running water was so close and loud that she imagined the buckboard gentled, trembled as though riding a flood. Quickly, she pulled loose the rawhide ties that held the oilcloth firm and saw first the marsh tacky, turned toward her in the traces as though to rouse her. A swollen rivulet tumbled down a gully just below them, pulling at wet earth, widening its way. All around lay evergreen boughs blown from the trees in the storm. She got down from the buckboard, fetched feed for the horse, calculated how to turn her in the harness on this spongy ground, back up to the road. Collecting the larger, flattest boughs while the horse ate, she dragged branches to the far side, turning their thick swoops of wet needle inward to make a wide, layered path. The tacky found her footing. Amadu led her, coaxing, urging, up the slant of ground, the weight of their passage releasing a scent of fresh, wet pine. The smell clung to the wheels, to the horse's mane and hooves. The moistened dirt of the road unspooled, letting rise a fragrance of bower. For some little time, Amadu let it draw her forward. The long past, full of whispers, souls, cries, and distance, traveled with her.

"A Search" is excerpted from Jayne Anne Phillips's novel-in-progress.
