



# A Handbook for Healing

## Art and Reflection for Patients and Caregivers

Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia Museum of Art,  
Slought Foundation, Penn Medicine, and  
Health Ecologies Lab, Philadelphia



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Art and Reflection for  
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*A Handbook for Healing: Art and Reflection for Patients and Caregivers* has been produced by the Rx/Museum initiative (<https://rxmuseum.org/>), a consortium of individuals and institutions interested in exploring how art and reflection contributes to healing. Learn more online at [rxmuseum.org](https://rxmuseum.org)

We wish to acknowledge the financial support of the Family Caregiver Centers at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania and the Department of the History of Art at the University of Pennsylvania in making this publication possible. Special thanks to Ella Comberg, Emily Gleason, William Perthes, Teya Sepinuck, Ty Vanover, and students in Dr. Aaron Levy's Fall 2021 Spiegel-Wilks Curatorial Seminar for their editorial contributions.

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Cover image: Pierre Bonnard, *Young Woman Writing (Jeune femme écrivant)*, 1908.  
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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hoy, Lyndsay, 1985- editor. | Levy, Aaron, 1977- editor.

Title: A handbook for healing : art and reflection for patients and caregivers / Lyndsay Hoy and Aaron Levy, editors.

Description: Philadelphia : Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Slought Foundation, Penn Medicine, and Health Ecologies Lab, [2022] | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "Rx/Museum seeks to meet patients and caregivers where they are, bringing the healing dimensions of an arts experience to the bedside. We invite you to use this handbook, featuring world-renowned artworks from the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Barnes Foundation, and Slought, to support healing and reflection. We offer these artworks as a daily antidote to uncertainty—a kind of prescription for finding connection, meaning, and hope"— Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022045425 (print) | LCCN 2022045426 (ebook) | ISBN 9781936994168 (paperback) | ISBN 9781936994175 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Art therapy--Handbooks, manuals, etc. | Medicine and art. | Art--Miscellanea. | Meditations.

Classification: LCC RC489.A7 H36 2022 (print) | LCC RC489.A7 (ebook) | DDC 616.89/1656--dc23/eng/20220928

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022045425>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022045426>

# A Guide to Art and Healing

Lyndsay Hoy, MD, Aaron Levy, PhD

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Looking inward and outward  
at once before and after  
seeking a now that can breed  
futures

—Audre Lorde, from *A Litany for Survival*



## A Guide to Art and Healing

Throughout our lives, we all undergo a variety of experiences related to health and illness, the care of others, and our own vulnerability. These experiences may challenge our ability to express ourselves and fully communicate and connect with friends, family, caregivers, and other members of the care team. Indeed, many of us are often socialized to not seek support in these moments.

Engaging the arts can allay some of the uncertainty, fear, isolation, and loneliness that we may feel. The arts aid our capacity for reflection and expression and help us navigate the otherwise invisible struggles we may face. They are a means to reaffirm the meaning and dignity inherent to life and embrace the complex dimensions of experiencing profound illness and suffering. Marked as we may be by scars and loss, the arts can be a powerful antidote to disillusionment and help move us forward in hope.

It is with these considerations in mind that we developed *A Handbook for Healing: Art and Reflection for Patients and Caregivers*. Inspired by arts and healing programs in hospitals and health care facilities across the country, this handbook features twelve works of art that support healing through a humanistic lens. Whether you are a patient or a caregiver, we invite you to experience these renowned artworks from the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Barnes Foundation, and Slought Foundation and learn more about how the arts can be a catalyst for healing.

The works of art in *A Handbook for Healing* have been thoughtfully selected by the Rx/Museum team, a group of patients, physicians, educators, and students at Penn Medicine and the University of Pennsylvania. Our work and process build upon the growing consensus that art in spaces of caregiving can be transformative. Infusing the arts into everyday spaces can provide a meaningful, if momentary, reprieve and increase patients' and caregivers' capacities for reflection and resilience.

Each artwork in this guide is accompanied by a brief description, historical context, and several questions to help you reflect on your own healing. For example, reflections on van Gogh's

painting *The Postman*, a portrait of his close friend Joseph-Étienne Roulin, consider the kindness and solidarity that friendship affords. It asks, “If a friend looked at you in the way that van Gogh painted Roulin, what might they see?” Pierre Bonnard’s painting *Young Woman Writing*, which depicts an intimate scene of passionate letter writing and intense reflection, invites us to think about “Who might you consider writing to at this time? What other rituals have you developed for maintaining and nurturing strength and dignity in the face of illness?” A discussion of Philadelphia painter Henry Ossawa Tanner’s painting *The Annunciation* engages the painting’s characteristic warmth and the theme of renewal with questions such as “Where is the “light” in your life? What people, places, or ideas inspire or revitalize your life and daily practice?” In the spirit of these reflections, we encourage you to share and discuss this handbook with friends, family, and members of your care team.

Visiting a museum may be an inaccessible experience for many. Likewise, finding space for reflection in healthcare settings can be challenging. Pairing works of art with introspective prompts, our intention is to bring the healing dimension of an arts experience to the bedside in an accessible

way, meeting patients and caregivers where you are. Whether you are in the hospital or at home, we hope that *A Handbook for Healing* fills your everyday moments with time for art and reflection and is a daily antidote to uncertainty—a kind of prescription for finding connection, meaning, and hope.







# Art and Reflection

# Day 1 / Family

If a man knows nothing but hard times, he will paint them, for he must be true to himself.

—Horace Pippin

## Supper Time

Painted on bound, repurposed planks, *Supper Time* is an intimate vignette of everyday African-American life and an affirmation of the value of family, memory, and relationships. Horace Pippin (1888–1946) singed prominent horizontal and vertical lines into the wood with a hot poker, creating a strikingly balanced, grid-like composition. The labor of the art-making process reflects the labor depicted: a coal or wood burning stove at the right of the frame is topped with a sputtering frying pan. Frost gathers on the window panes and the door is slightly ajar, highlighting the warm or perhaps even hot interior. Frayed laundry dries against mismatched wooden planks. Two figures are seated at the table, a steaming coffee pot, glass of milk, and cup with a saucer before them. The unpainted wooden grain of the woman's forearm and elbow blends seamlessly into the scene outside the window panes and offsets her crisp white apron. Her cerulean dress is purposefully darkened near the underarms, suggesting perspiration and repetitive wear. The coral hue of the seated man's shirt compliments and counterbalances the woman's blue dress.



Horace Pippin, *Supper Time*, 1940

Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia (BF985)

A descendant of slaves and born into a family of domestic servants, Pippin was a native of West Chester, Pennsylvania. He served as a member of the famed all-African-American 369th infantry in France during World War II, where he sustained a bullet in his right arm. Painting was a means of physical therapy for his paralyzed limb. He was never classically trained and eventually drew the attention of Albert Barnes, a prominent Philadelphia art collector at the time, who was

particularly interested in the self-taught artist. Pippin's artistic success is remarkable given the fraught racial tension in the United States at that time and the many barriers facing Black artists, particularly in museums.

## Reflections

This depiction of an ordinary scene, rendered by an artist with a disability, invites us to reflect on memory, relationships, and resilience. Pippin utilized painting as a means of healing and sharing his own experiences.

What are other ways of expressing or commemorating parts of our lives with others? How might this feel particularly significant or therapeutic when we are vulnerable or ill?

What aspects of your everyday life does this painting remind you of? What simple moments are you most grateful for?

# Day 2 / Friendship

A faithful friend is a strong defense,  
and he that hath found such an one  
hath found a treasure. . . . A faithful  
friend is the medicine of life.

—Ecclesiasticus

## The Postman

In 1888, Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) moved to Arles, France where he struggled with isolation and loneliness. One of his few reprieves was a close friendship with a postmaster by the name of Joseph-Étienne Roulin.

*The Postman* may have been created from memory after Roulin and his family moved away. In his absence, van Gogh praised Roulin through this painting as a paternal, reassuring figure. Roulin is squarely centered in the decorative composition, shown from shoulders up, his gaze meeting the viewer. In what van Gogh described in a letter to his brother Theo as a “modern portrait,” he portrayed Roulin through the vivid independent life of color. Unusual color choices unify the composition—the acidic green of the background that unexpectedly appears in Roulin’s mustache and beard, for example. Thick lines of green, bright blues, and lavender swirl around one another, each stroke distinct and unblended. A floral design explodes in the background. van Gogh accentuates Roulin’s distinctive facial features with great care—the ruddiness of his nose and cheeks, the



Vincent van Gogh, *The Postman (Joseph Étienne-Roulin)*, 1889

Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia (BF37)

slight irregularity of one drooping eyelid, his lopsided nares. Slightly raised eyebrows convey a gentle inquisitiveness. As art historian Martha Lucy explains, “In the palpable energy and nur-



turing spirituality emitted by the sitter, we recognize the connection between this man and the artist depicting him.”

van Gogh asks us to gaze with duration and tenderness at his friend, and at friendship itself. In this portrait, friendship is portrayed as essential to our well-being—it can move through adversity and expand communities, cross class and racial divisions, contest hate and segregation, and provide a kind of kinship and solidarity. We are also reminded of the ways friendship sustains us in moments of vulnerability. Acts of kindness can become especially meaningful during personal or widespread crises. In other words, friendship plays a powerful role in creating a sense of belonging and helping us thrive.

## Reflections

How have your friendships been transformative and empowering for you?

Think of a time when a friendship brought you respite. How can we view our relationships as models of care and caregiving? If a friend looked at you in the way that van Gogh painted Roulin, what might they see?

# Day 3 / Faith

When I stand before thee at the day's  
end, thou shalt see my scars and  
know that I had my wounds and also  
my healing.

—Rabindranath Tagore

## Bishops and Saints

This late medieval panel painting spotlights three saints who were believed to offer protection from the plague and illuminates the path toward healing. At center, Saint Roch gestures to a scar from his own illness. He recovered with the help of a faithful dog who licked his sores and brought him bread. An angel affirms this miracle by extending a hand in blessing in reference to the Eucharist. To the right is the early Christian martyr Saint Sebastian, depicted in two different chronological moments: in the foreground, we see him in the afterlife holding a bow, symbolic of his martyrdom and immortality. In the distant hilly background, we witness his execution by a volley of arrows. The bishop to the left—likely Saint Remigius—suggests this panel was commissioned by church patrons to solicit the saints’ protection against plague or to express gratitude for their survival. At a time when literacy was rare and a resurgence of the bubonic plague was spreading across Europe, visually sharing the stories of the plague saints through this artwork would have strongly resonated with viewers.



Unidentified artist, *Bishop Saint, Saint Roch, and Saint Sebastian*, c. 1460–1480

Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia (BF418)

In the post-Byzantine church, religious art was a vehicle to bear witness to the burdens of the world and a way to navigate one's own suffering. The viewing experience was both emotional and instructive, a demonstration that faith could be

protective and restorative in illness and crisis. Similarly, the arts make visible the powerful forces that we cling to for support in moments of uncertainty. Like the saints in this panel, the arts mediate between despair and hope, the intimate and universal.

## Reflections

How can this depiction of Saint Roch, regardless of your spiritual beliefs, help us find meaning in suffering and afflictions?

What lessons from this image can you use to guide your own path to healing?

How does this painting bring solace to you right now?

Can we see our physical or emotional scars not as symbols of weakness, but as symbols of strength?

# Day 4 / Reflection

When we write, we bring what is inside to the outside; we put words, however indirectly or metaphorically or imperfectly, to what's inside of us, feelings or experiences that previously were not concrete.

—Nellie Hermann

## Young Woman Writing

In Pierre Bonnard's painting *Young Woman Writing*, pearlescent gray light streams through the window in this daytime scene in Paris. Wavy, linear brushstrokes give the interior space a gauzy, atmospheric quality. The walls and furniture at the far side of the room—the armoire, wall, window, and chair—seem to melt into one another. We see an intensely focused woman sitting alone at a long crimson covered table. She writes hunched over, face anonymous, hidden behind her hair. Scattered papers across the tabletop create rhythmic punctuations across the field of red, skittering out of the picture frame on the left.

As curator Cindy Kang explains, “Bonnard’s placement of the papers seems purposeful. The artist left gaps in the red tablecloth that he later filled in with saturated, urgent strokes of white paint that have a messy, impasto quality. . . . He conveys a sense of urgency in this ephemeral moment of daily life.” There is a tangible immediacy and intimacy to the composition, not unlike the first draft of an impassioned letter. Bonnard’s domestic interior compels us to take notice of the beauty of our daily rituals. There is depth and



Pierre Bonnard, *Young Woman Writing (Jeune femme écrivant)*, 1908

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richness, even mystery, to be found in the everyday—if we slow down.

*Young Woman Writing* was painted after the artist traveled to the Netherlands, where he was inspired by seventeenth-century Dutch paintings of letter writing. A common subject of genre painting, letter writing symbolized the interior of a person, the process of capturing one's innermost thoughts onto the page. *Young Woman Writing* also explores the relationship between writing and reflection. In the face of illness and loss, letter-writing can be a



way to process grief and record one's experiences. It can help us understand ourselves, contemplate the world around us, and share our memories and lived experiences with others.

## Reflections

Who might you consider writing to at this time?

How can writing serve as a transformative experience that helps you cultivate meaning and fortify your connection to others?

What other rituals have you developed for maintaining and nurturing strength and dignity in the face of illness?

# Day 5 / Renewal

Light was Tanner's expression of God that radiated in his paintings to provide guidance and safety for humanity and offered comfort in the face of struggle and oppression. . . . When art became a "drudge," Tanner saw light that reinvigorated the process that he loved.

—Kelly Jeannette Baker

## The Annunciation

In this late nineteenth-century depiction of the Annunciation, Philadelphia painter Henry Ossawa Tanner gives a familiar biblical narrative an unconventional treatment. Mary, portrayed here as a young Jewish girl in Palestine, appears plain and unassuming—she wears peasant’s clothing and is without halo or other holy attributes. The archangel Gabriel appears before her as a luminous shaft of light to announce that she will bear the Son of God. Mary looks on with reverential contemplation as the celestial beam illuminates her simple home with a sacred presence. In this extraordinary yet intimate meeting of the secular and the divine, Gabriel’s presence evokes a powerful otherworldliness, while Mary conveys an informality often missing in other artistic depictions of this moment.

In 1879, Tanner enrolled as the only Black student at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art (PAFA) in Center City Philadelphia. Of his time at PAFA, he wrote, “I was extremely timid and to be made to feel that I was not wanted, although in a place where I had every right to be, even months afterwards caused me sometimes weeks of pain. Every



Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Annunciation*, 1898

Philadelphia Museum of Art: Purchased with the W. P. Wilstach Fund, 1899  
(W1899-1-1)

time any one of these disagreeable incidents came into my mind, my heart sank, and I was anew tortured by the thought of what I had endured, almost as much as the incident itself.” Like many Black American artists and writers at the turn of the century, Tanner eventually moved to Paris in 1891, maintaining that he could “not fight prejudice and paint at the same time.” Given his suffering in conflicts with a secular world “disjointed” by racial injustice and inequality, light emerges

as a central theme in many of Tanner's religious works. Scholars speculate that he may have found strength and solace in visual mysticism and the comforting warmth of light—an analogy for God.

## Reflections

Where is the “light” in your life?

What people, places, or ideas inspire or revitalize your life and daily practice?

How can these sources of light and warmth illuminate everyday moments of connection?

# Day 6 / Presence

If we depend on sight—which seems to offer a frictionless domination over reality—we may avoid the pains and uncertainties of living, but we also lose our involvement with life.

—Gabriel Josipovici

## The Laying of Hands

In this vibrant print, blue, red, and yellow avian forms gather in the center, surrounded by spiraling patterns of punctuation-like forms. Blue cursive at bottom right reads, “The laying on of hands is a time-honored ritual regarding the awakening of insight. Its motion is the inexorable twiness of the serpent and its wisdom is the ability to see what’s hidden in plain view.” Carefully melding textual and expressive elements, Philadelphia-born printmaker and artist Edgar Sorrells-Adewale’s *The Laying On of Hands is a Time Honored Ritual* represents a ritual of its own. Notably, the handprints’ tactile imprint calls to mind the repetitive labor and care inherent to lithography, the form of printmaking that Sorrells-Adewale utilized in this work. In a lithograph, the artist etches a design into limestone and then presses paper onto the stone. Because this print includes multiple colors, each layer would have been engraved and printed separately, laying atop one another to create the combination of elements we see.

Sorrells-Adewale’s handprint imagery calls to mind different acts of touch. The “laying on of hands” could evoke a priest or other spiritual



**Edgar Sorrells-Adewale, *The Laying On of Hands is a Time Honored Ritual*, 1997**

Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of the Brandywine Workshop, Philadelphia, in memory of Anne d'Harnoncourt, 2009 (2009-61-81)

Photograph provided by Edgar Sorrells-Adewale



figure who physically touches a person or object of concern in a symbolic or formal act of healing or blessing. Or perhaps the handprint evokes the tactile process of printmaking or being touched by a caregiver or loved one. Touch is a way to understand our connection to others and is integral to healing. It can help us be present, strengthen empathy, and make others feel recognized and seen. Amid a pandemic that has altered our ability to be close to one another, many have come to experience touch differently.

## Reflections

How do you remain connected with loved ones in the absence of touch or physical presence?

Has there been a moment when touch was particularly meaningful for you?

What other sensorial experiences have been, or could be, important in your healing process?

What are the creative rituals or self-care practices that enhance meaning in your life, just as printmaking was for this artist?

# Day 7 / Inspiration

[A]rt became an antidote to the scientific method. . . . the real truth –if there is such a thing–that you can learn from science is how little we know about reality. Art seemed to address this more openly.

—Jess

## The Sun: Tarot XIX

In this collage by the California counter-cultural artist known simply as “Jess,” human anatomical diagrams stand in tandem with a dense tapestry of images referencing art, history, technology and pop culture. In contrast to dominant fine art sensibilities of the day that prioritized hierarchy and simplicity, this dense collage celebrates randomness and excess. Jess was known for these so-called “paste-ups,” which often took him years to produce. In his collages, Jess utilized hundreds of images from books, old magazines, puzzle pieces, steel engravings, and newspapers to produce works that reference mythology, the occult, and the immaterial world.

Originally trained as a chemist, Jess embraced uncertainty in his art as an alternative to scientific knowledge. In *The Sun: Tarot XIX*, the artist draws inspiration from tarot cards, which people have turned to over the centuries for existential reflection and contemplation. Whereas the Sun card traditionally represents spiritual alignment between individuals and the universe, Jess’s depiction of human bodies enmeshed within an intricate and unknowable system introduces infinite



Jess (Jess Collins), *The Sun: Tarot XIX*, 1960

Philadelphia Museum of Art: Purchased with the SmithKline Beckman Corporation Fund, 1984 (1984-78-1)

© The Jess Collins Trust, courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York, used by permission

interpretations. As Jess insisted, “[c]ollages must . . . remain in flux so that no single story dominates.” Indeed, many overlapping stories coexist in this collage. We might see *The Sun: Tarot XIX* as an embodiment of the complex and entwined, unfolding nature of our lives.

## Reflections

Which stories would you weave together to tell the narrative of your life?

How can we reconcile the contradictions and incompatible stories that span our lives?

How might we learn to embrace and find meaning in the unknown?

# Day 8 / Memory

I do not pose my sitters. I do not deliberate and then concoct. . . . Before painting, when I talk to the person, they unconsciously assume their most characteristic pose, which in a way involves all their character and social standing—what the world has done to them and their retaliation.

—Alice Neel

## Last Sickness

*Last Sickness* is one of four portraits that Alice Neel painted of her ill mother, Alice Hartley Neel, while they lived together in New York. She completed it a few months before her mother passed away in 1954. A tender mother-daughter dynamic is captured as Neel lovingly—if awkwardly—documents their relationship. Her mother's expression is disarming, with raised eyebrows, off-kilter eyes, and crooked glasses hinting at her reluctance and amusement with being painted. The vibrant citrus in the background contrasts with the sitter's discolored cheeks, wispy white hair, translucent veins, and arthritic joints.

Neel is both sensitive to and frank about her mother's condition; she does not impose judgment or affectation. Rather, she invites the viewer to see her mother with dignity, to remember her, and to confront old age head on. With an unwavering commitment to capturing the full breadth of life in her portraits, Neel's work offers a penetrating yet tender gaze into the human condition.



Alice Neel, *Last Sickness*, 1953

Philadelphia Museum of Art: 125th Anniversary Acquisition. Gift of Hartley S. Neel and Richard Neel, 2003 (2003-148-1)

© The Estate of Alice Neel

Courtesy The Estate of Alice Neel and David Zwirner



## Reflections

How can looking to the arts, with its portrayals of human relationships and means of representing people through the highs and lows of lived experience, comfort us in challenging times?

Can we apply Neel's approach of seeking beauty and of documenting and recording memory to our own lives?

How does *Last Sickness* teach us to look at life as it is, even when it is difficult?

In the same way that Neel memorializes her mother, how would you like to be represented and remembered by those closest to you?

# Day 9 / Joy

The amazing thing about graffiti is that it exists to market only itself. You see something in a place where it doesn't belong. . . . You're seeing an adventure, and it's not a Kool-Aid ad, it's not a cigarette ad, it's something that's giving you strength and life and vitality and it's telling you something about the lengths that people will go to make you aware that they're there.

—Steve "ESPO" Powers

## Love Letter

Best viewed from SEPTA's elevated Market-Frankford rail line, *Love Letter* is an iconic project by former graffiti artist turned muralist Steve "ESPO" Powers adorning fifty rooftops and walls across West Philadelphia. Here, an enlarged painted Post-it at 4915 Market Street disrupts the urban landscape, otherwise inundated with unremarkable corporate advertising. Spanning 45th to 63rd Streets, each unique, massive "love letter" delivers uplifting declarations in bold, large-scale typography and punchy colors that challenge conventional narratives about urban life. As it snakes around storefronts and residential facades, *Love Letter's* visual language variously recalls 1950s signage and '90s R&B. The sometimes-cheeky but always sentimental messages read, for example, "Miss you too often not to love you," and "If you were here, I'd be home now."

*Love Letter* foregrounds love—between lovers, an artist and his hometown, and residents and their community. The murals offer momentary, if recurrent, encounters meant for commuters on the E1—whether suburbanites passing through or West Philadelphians traversing their own neighborhood.



Steve "ESPO" Powers, from the series *Love Letter*, 2009

Photograph provided by Steve Powers

By creatively repurposing time and perspective, *Love Letter* elicits joy.

## Reflections

How can artworks like these interrupt routine or anxiety-filled moments in the hospital and provide opportunities for reflection, inspiration, and healing?

Where have you experienced beauty or an uplifting message in an unexpected place?



# Day 10 / Community

Creativity is the power to reject the past, to change the status quo, and to seek new potential. Simply put . . . creativity is the power to act.

—Ai Weiwei

## Fairytale

In 2007, Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei initiated “Fairytale,” a massive conceptual and logistic undertaking that brought 1,001 people from across Mainland China to Kassel, Germany. While there, they lived in communal housing, photographed life in Kassel, and visited Documenta 12, a global art exhibition that occurs every five years. Ai Weiwei installed 1,001 wooden chairs at the exhibition as “a symbolic gesture of memory and our past.” For Ai Weiwei, the chairs represented both the collective whole and each individual’s unique dreams and memories. The participants, in turn, left behind tens of thousands of photographs, interviews, and other traces of their time in Kassel, all archived online. The project’s title is a reference to the fairytales authored by the Brothers Grimm, who were born in Kassel in the 1700s. Because Ai Weiwei selected people who would not have been able to travel otherwise, the project was a kind of contemporary fairytale. It enabled laid-off workers, farmers, and villagers from the countryside who had never left their provinces to experience another culture and country.



Ai Weiwei, *Fairytale*, 2007

Photograph provided by Ai Weiwei Studio

These memories of traveling through new, unfamiliar spaces, however, continued to transform the participants' lives even after their return home. Similarly, illness, suffering, or hospitalization can displace us from normal life and can be profoundly foreign. Perhaps you feel you are in survival mode or navigating feelings of isolation or fear.



## Reflections

How can you sense the community of others in the hospital even if you can't see them?

Like the travelers in "Fairytale," how can you document your experiences and share your struggles with others?

How can your time in the hospital be transformative for you?

# Day 11 / Love

The first time, ever I saw your face  
I thought the sun rose in your eyes  
And the moon and the stars  
were the gifts you gave  
To the dark and the endless skies  
my love

—Performed by Roberta Flack (1972), with  
lyrics by Ewan MacColl (1969)

## The First Time

In this photograph taken at The Colored Girls Museum (TCGM) in Germantown, Philadelphia, Christen Harvey holds a portrait of her younger self painted by her mother, the artist Channell Phillips. The portrait lovingly captures a fleeting moment of Black girlhood. As Harvey stands behind her portrait and beside a dress that no longer fits, we are invited to see her through a maternal lens—as a daughter maturing before our eyes.

The portrait was featured in the exhibition *The first time, ever I saw your face* — a reference to a folk song of the same name popularized by Roberta Flack in an iconic 1972 recording. Curator Vashti DuBois explained the impetus for the exhibition was to elevate a particular way of seeing black girls through the eyes of black women artists. “*The first time, ever I saw your face* is a love letter to the ordinary colored girl and an exercise of having black women look at black girls to elevate their girlhood. Black girlhood is not a protected space. Black girls are not ascribed the humanity that we provide other people’s children. No matter how young she is, she is evaluated



Channell Phillips, *The Muse: Christen Harvey*, 2020. Photo by Zamani Feelings. From *The first time, ever I saw your face*, a collaboration between the Colored Girls Museum and Slought, curated by Michael Clemmons, Vashti DuBois and Ian Friday with video installations by Erica Hawkins

Photograph provided by The Colored Girls Museum, Philadelphia

through the lens of adulthood.” An alternate view of young Black girlhood is offered here, one that preserves tenderness and intimacy and elevates a particular way of seeing Black girls with love. The exhibition helps us recognize our shared responsibility in seeing, honoring, and ensuring the safety of the “ordinary colored girl.” We can sense the love and care that suffuse Phillips’ portrait of Harvey.

## Reflections

How can we cultivate more space for love and sanctuary in our lives?

As DuBois asks, “What happens to us when we look long enough at someone to see them? What happens when we look long enough to see ourselves? What can we see when we look with love?”

As a patient, who has looked at you with love?  
How can you find strength in being seen at your most vulnerable moments?

# Day 12 / Connection

The fact of being at a crossroads, at the frontier of two separate identities, underlies all my work on film.

—Adrian Paci

## Turn On

This film still, taken from Albanian multimedia artist Adrian Paci's 2004 video artwork *Turn On*, shows a group of unemployed men waiting for work on the steps of the city square in the artist's hometown of Shkodra. In this staged scene, Paci visualizes everyday life in a city marked by political and economic turmoil. Electrical generators, a necessity in a country with daily rolling blackouts, serve as a reminder of the region's instability and its citizens' vulnerability. The collective hum of the generators becomes relentless and overwhelming, underscoring a sense of tension and hardship. As the generators turn on and the camera pans out, the men's faces are illuminated and the steps become aglow. Each person is at once isolated from and tethered to the others by a delicately shared line of electric current.

Although intended as a commentary on post-Soviet Albania's political and economic shifts, the scene Paci has staged here may feel familiar to many of us. Like those on the steps, we have all found ourselves waiting for a better future that, at times, may feel out of reach or beyond our means. *Turn On* also reminds us how societal upheaval,



Adrian Paci, film still from *Turn On*, 2004

Photograph provided by Adrian Paci

personal loss, or illness have the power to shape and reshape our lives and undermine our sense of stability. As a patient, waiting can often lead to loneliness and the feeling of being disconnected from support and routines.

## Reflections

What does the condition of waiting illuminate for you?

Where have you found unexpected forms of community?



What networks of support have persisted or emerged for you in moments of crisis?



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