



Ladies of the Sewing Circle
of the First Baptist Church
Album
Made in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States
1846
Cotton: Hand appliquéd, hand pieced, hand quilted
International Quilt Museum, 2008.040.0004

A fictional entry from the diary of Ann Rhees upon receiving this quilt

“By the Ladies of the Sewing Circle of the First
Baptist Church of Philadelphia in 1846”

November 26, 1846

Amanda DeNatale

As I sit near the hearth at the end of this Thanksgiving evening, I am in awe of the blessings provided this harvest season. The whisper of wind tickles the windowpane while the wood beneath the fire crackles like soft popping corn, and I sit here gratified yet humbled.

Mrs. Hoff and Mrs. Harrison rode down today and surprised us all this Thanksgiving afternoon. Scents of sage and rosemary wafted through the house as the robust turkey roasted in the hearth. Sally Rice’s sons Henry and Robert hunted, defeathered, and prepared a bountiful bird yesterday for us all.

“Oh my, to what do we owe the pleasure?” I said, rising shakily from my rocking chair to greet two of my dearest friends. They arrived carrying a quilt that I immediately assumed was a donation to the society. I smiled, thinking how happy a family would be to receive such a substantial quilt for their home right before the depths of this winter season is upon us.

“Mother, take a seat! They have something for you—a gift!” My daughter, Eliza, entered the main room hastily, a cooking apron tied around her waist and her auburn hair tied up in a bandana. She helped lower me down into the rocking chair and brought the oak bench from the kitchen for Mrs. Hoff and Mrs. Harrison to sit beside me. The ladies removed their boots and hats and joined me by the fire, and Mrs. Harrison removed a thick, beautiful quilt from the bag beside her.

“Thank you so much. Oh my!” I clasped my hands over my chest. “You know, I know just the young family. Polly Rice’s next-door neighbors will be having a new babe this Christmastime—” I began to thank them, on behalf of the ladies of the society, for their time and generosity in making such an honorable donation. Mrs. Harrison cut me off.

"No, Ann, you are not to give any part of this quilt away, not a single panel. This is for you! In honor of fifty years of service to the church and this community, we are here present you with this quilt made by the ladies of the Sewing Circle of the First Baptist Church of Philadelphia." Mrs. Hoff unfolded the quilt across all of our laps, so that I could look at the detail more closely. I gasped, tears welling at the corners of my eyes. "I—I—how? What?"

"We all made this for you, Ann," Mrs. Harrison explained as I admired the beautiful stitching before me. "You have been the heart and soul of this community for so many years. You brought us women together. And look at us now! Our daughters and granddaughters feel the closeness of this community you have created, as well."

"This may be the most intellectual and moral quilt that was ever made for and by this society," Mrs. Hoff adds.

"Father would be so proud of the work you have done for this community." Eliza had come up behind me to admire the quilt. "Think of all the children and families who have benefited from you carrying on the Sunday school tradition after his passing—not to mention your work with all of the ladies of the sewing circle and their families. Mother, you are at the heart of this, and we want you to remember how cherished you are by us all!"

There is nothing that comes to my mind to provide more warmth in this world than friendship, making this quilt I hold this evening the warmest quilt I will ever know. I run my hands over the flawless stitching, likely finished by Mrs. Hoff and Mrs. Harrison, and admire the album panels now that I am alone. Before leaving, the ladies also gave me a stack of letters and notes from the women who contributed to the artistry of this quilt.

There must be over one hundred panels here, and each one designed just for me. At the top corner I notice a panel from Rachel Bliss, the daughter of my dear lifelong friend Weltha Bliss, who passed last month. Her stitching is as refined as her mother's, but her patterns are much more vibrant and non-traditional.

Moving along the top row, I gasp; Weltha must have embroidered her panel before her passing. As tears well in my eyes, I dab them with my rose embroidered handkerchief to protect the quilt. The integrity of her stitching and embroidery is a testament to her character and the depth of our friendship. I run my finger over the intricacies of the of the golden wreath and white flower petals and remember Weltha and I watching Rachel and Eliza frolic through the wildflower patches when they were girls, spending hours weaving flower crowns for all of us. There is no doubt in my mind that Weltha was recalling the same memories when she chose her design for this panel. My dear friend, may you rest in peace.

Tomorrow, I must urgently make a list and write to these women to thank them for their honorable efforts and share my utmost appreciation and gratitude for what is the greatest honor I think I could ever receive. Days may pass before I can read every panel of this album quilt, but I know its warmth will hold me and my family for the rest of my days—and for generations to come.

—Ann Rhees



M. Gingrich
Princess Feather
 Probably made in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania,
 United States
 1854
 Cotton; Hand appliquéd, hand pieced, hand quilted
 International Quilt Museum, 1997.007.0774

Princess Feather

Brianna Thompson

If she twirled in the expanse of the grass field, when she collapsed gleefully on the dirt to look up at the cartwheeling blue sky nobody could see her. The field of wild grass came to the hips of a grown man, so if she laid down on the hot packed earth she was invisible. Free. Unaccounted for and rogue. A land fish at the still bottom of a sea of grass. These private stolen moments of her young adulthood were selfish pleasures on a busy homestead where all children’s labor was necessary to survive. The first child of seven, Mary would periodically be possessed by the urge to walk out far past the barn and stable into the silent waves of grass as they rippled grasshopper green in the wind. She would spin herself under the sun, right foot back, left foot forward, right back left forward, rightbackleftforward, until she imagined herself a dust devil, her body blurred into pure motion. Her stomach would drop as the cabin, the cows grazing, and the line of white-blue horizon smeared together, her life temporarily erased.

Delighted by the sensation, she would flop onto her back, disappearing into the sharp roasted smell of the stalks as the grass canopy cartwheeled above her. Like little feathers backlit by sun, the grass above her turned, wheels or rolls of wheat, tendrils rotating and radiating from the center point of sun.

“Keep turning. Don’t stop,” she’d beg.

Ssss, the seed heads would whisper, barely audible.

“If I stay here, will you tell me a secret?”

Shakashaka, shakashaka, went the stalks as they bumped their skinny, shiny hips.

“You can tell me anything. I’ll keep it to myself until I die. Do you know how lovely you are when you spin? You make wagon wheels, carrying me somewhere.”

The wind died, bringing the motion of the grass to a standstill. Then two grass heads slowly nodded as the breeze picked back up.

"What's the secret?" She felt the hardpack beneath her, a clump of dirt under her shoulders. Young blades of grass not tall enough to reach the sky tickled her fingers and neck.

The undulating canopy above her parted like lips and the grass spoke to her clearly. Her eyes, amber in the daylight, brown at night, widened, comprehending. Her fingers twitched, dusty. She blinked. She had promised to keep this to the grave. It was astonishing.

Years later, a grown woman with four children of her own and a household to manage, Mary ran her tongue over the back of her teeth. In the dead of night, when her husband snored and the children murmured dreams, she took up her scissors, scintillating in the candlelight. On the kitchen table lay her scrap bag, three quilt squares, her thread, and a needle. Her eyes widened. Her fingers twitched as she reached for the curled yellow feather shape she'd cut last night. Tacking it onto the quilt next to a red feather curled the same way, she looked at the dull purple squares she'd already pieced. This months-long nighttime ritual was the last bit of stolen time that remained in her life.

She'd kept her word and never uttered the secret to another soul. But, her vision spinning for a moment, she couldn't keep something so audacious entirely unshared. She threaded the needle, then pressed on her cold thimble. The candles burned as she stitched the grass's secret into the quilt, the only place it could live forever but remain—mostly—untold.



Maker unidentified

Album

Made in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States
1846 - 1849
Cotton; Hand appliquéed, hand pieced, hand quilted
International Quilt Museum, 2009.006.0001

Sunset Hours

Brianna Thompson

We summon needlework nights, white muslin mornings
to wrap you in pink peony applique,
bluebonnet curved stem.
We have quilted instructions
lest you forget in your sunset hours the
Mantle Spells

“Keep warm, sweetest.”
“Be cozy in your fading light.”
“As you tumble slow motion, my dearest,
chintz-wrapped head over split dry heels
toward the unparalleled
shiver,
we offer
Loving Cover.”



Poet's Note: This poetry project started out free verse, then moved into form. I chose the ghazal form for its resemblance to a quilt: it is centuries old, and it consists of isolated couplets (like quilt squares). I included both versions of the piece in order to celebrate the creative process, and to offer readers a peek at the metaphorical underside of the poem.

Maker unknown

Album

Probably made in New York, United States

1849-1854

Cotton; Hand appliquéed, hand pieced, hand embroidered, corded/stuffed, hand quilted

International Quilt Museum, 1997.007.0654

Care Work

Leah Hedrick

Not for praise. Not for prestige. No
 thought of building the résumé. Not
 for clout. Not to stand behind a podium
 before a room of fawning young
 wannabes and colleagues who whisper
 behind their hands. Only to block and
 stitch and make. To adorn this house
 with more softness, more color. Only to pad
 the work of care, whose edges are so
 often splintered. To brighten the bedsteads
 of all my sisters' daughters. To lasso
 holiness in loops of thread. Here, the fact
 of me: eye and hand and taste, bound in a red lattice.
 That when I am lost, one might pull a part
 of me from beneath the footboard.

Art for Art's Sake: A Quilter's Ghazal

Leah Hedrick

Heap praise on the podium; an art man
 beckons doe-eyed girls into his red hands

Colleagues and wannabes crowd, admirers
 whisper of his works behind well-bred hands.

At home, the quilters block and stitch and dye.
 Pad the drab with color in its stead. Hands

rough and deft. Lend women pride for something
 other than a child's clean and fed hands.

In the footboard: the fact of Mary's life.

What pulled to earth this latticework of thread? Hands.



Friends and Relatives of Susannah
'Susan' (Butts) Adsit Boots
Album
Probably made in Dutchess County, New York,
United States
1860-1870
Cotton; Hand appliquéed, corded/stuffed, hand quilted
International Quilt Museum, 2007.001.0002

The Work of Your Hands

L. N. Holmes

Here is the work of all your hands. Of your sister's hands. Of your mother's and mother-in-law's hands. Of your aunt's and cousins' hands. Of your friends', your chosen sisters', hands.

After your humble wedding in the little Lutheran church by the Hudson, your husband helps you fold the quilt, smoothing out its wrinkles with gentle caresses from his calloused palms. Together, you tuck it inside a slatted wooden crate. Your husband loads it near the back of the wagon, right behind your seat. He says nothing as you waste precious daylight squeezing each and every woman you love, patting the coarse woolen fabrics stretched across their backs, entwining your fingers in the soft ringlets at their napes. Tomorrow, you will only have your quilt to clutch.

Leaving Dutchess County will prove to be the hardest journey of your life. Through the mountains and forests, the road is unforgiving, jostling your wagon up and down like your mother used to fling out wet sheets into the wind, flapping each with rapid, violent heaves. It is only at night when you wrestle your sore body against the wagon's hard wooden slats, or when you take your turn listening to the hoots of owls outside, praying the sound isn't covering the soft rustle of human footsteps, that you take out the quilt and hug it to your chest. Your husband's Irish Terrier, Milo, snuggles against your legs. He was supposed to be your husband's dog, but Milo is smart enough to know you need him more right now, and he's decided to be loyal to you both.

In the daytime you ride in the covered wagon out of sight, for everyone's safety. Bandits lurk outside the small towns along your route. In these tiny settlements you can buy only a few items at a time from the meagerly stocked general stores. Your husband is a hired farm hand and neither of your families are rich. There's nothing you can afford to lose.

When men with bad intentions see a woman . . . The rest of the warning is left to your imagination. A mercy, your husband thinks. In truth,

a torture you endure in silence.

You pass the time by poking your fingers through the slats of the crate to stroke your quilt. You gaze at the mismatched embroidery, each square a different, loving reminder of home. Your mother-in-law's ox, your sister's horse, your mother's cats. Each image a story that will elicit fits of laughter when retold. The many different floral designs allow you to recall your friends' gardens packed full of silky and colorful Dutch tulips, hyacinths, and lilies. The stars signify the Moravian faith of your aunts and cousins, and you think of their lovely brick schoolhouses for women and girls, much nicer than the dilapidated wooden schoolhouse you were permitted to attend. Your fingers trace this static language of memory, reading it over and over like worn letters kept hidden under the floorboards.

It takes Milo hopping out of your seat and into the back of the wagon for you to snap out of your trance. He comes to rest his bearded chin on your knees. You thank God that Milo is with you to guard the quilt from vermin, to cheer you up with his inquisitive brown eyes and wiry red hair that you've grown accustomed to petting. He may be a friend to the farmer, but he's also friend to the farmer's wife.

Milo sighs into the fabric of your dress. You close your eyes and daydream of the place called Green County, of the town called Xenia where sizeable farm estates sprawl over coveted pastoral lands. Your husband will tend to sheep on one of those farms, Milo at his side, the blue sky above them free from city smog. Your husband will build your house near the edge of the woods, on land allotted to you by your employer. He will build you a rocking chair and a blanket chest. You will all sleep together in the bed, the work of your husband's hands, the dog at your feet, the quilt shielding you from Ohio's icy winter cold.

You will not think of how north of the town, the Shawnee people whisper about Xenia as *the place of the devil wind*. You will not think about how your husband will leave the house during the day with the dog. How you will be all alone, your quilt conjuring up phantom people now living only in your mind.

You will instead make your own blanket, one much smaller, one that will pool softly against the growing bump of your abdomen. A blanket you can embroider with promises, not memories. This work of your hands, established.



Elizabeth Northrop
Whole Cloth
Probably made in Lithgow, Dutchess County,
New York, United States
1824
Wool; Hand pieced, hand quilted
International Quilt Museum, 2020.063.0001

The Color of Disobedience

Meredith Allison

Henry is tall and comely and wholly accustomed to bending the wills of those around him in order to serve his own. Calculated appraisal dances behind his crystalline eyes as he sizes up those with whom he engages to determine what he can get from them—their regard and admiration are his favorite currencies—but those who look upon him see only the twinkle of friendship and deem his self-serving acts of generosity as those of a true gentleman.

Lizzie knows differently. She abhors Henry.

Henry is to be her husband.

His current victim is her father, who appears to hang onto her betrothed's every word at the other side of the grand oak dining table—and Henry always speaks so many words. Though Lizzie has mastered the art of composing her face into placid, interested lines, as he drones on about his favorite subject—himself—she spins a fantasy of grabbing one of the piping-hot biscuits baked for supper and cramming it into his mouth to shut him up. Envisioning his eyes bugging out in alarm, a steaming biscuit bulging from his gaping maw, threatens to bring on a fit of giggles. But she fights them back; such behavior would bring on a stern and assuredly humiliating reprimand from her father, and her mother would likely take to her bed for the rest of the evening.

Henry's family is attractive to Lizzie's. She wasn't born into gentility the same way he was. Her father fought for every penny he earned and instilled in Lizzie the value of hard work, especially that done with her own hands. Henry was born on a golden platter with a silver spoon lodged firmly in his haughty mouth. He has only ever known the taste of butter, the feel of silk upon his back, the touch of soft leather against his palms. His hands, she observed contemptuously upon the occasion of their first formal meeting before the announcement of their betrothal, are softer than hers.

Henry has political aspirations, and given the way he gathers

favors from gentlemen in the hamlet like a child collecting pebbles for jacks, she has no doubt he will hold some seat of power someday soon. As his wife, she will be a mere trophy for him; a pretty dressing for his arm at parties and dinners. She will be expected to produce offspring, preferably boys, in rapid succession. She is not of old money, no, but she is young and fair and healthy, and Henry is generously willing to overlook that smudge against her.

“Elizabeth’s quilt is nearly ready for the bazaar,” her mother says, a note of hope in her voice. It’s the same tone she takes with Henry every time he calls, as if she’s afraid he’ll break off the engagement at any moment and must dangle tempting bits in front of him to keep him interested in her daughter. A quilt would never be particularly tempting to any man, much less one like Henry, but his family is hosting the town bazaar next week to raise funds for the church—and to elevate Henry’s stature in the community—so in this case, he has taken a keen interest in Lizzie’s quilting talents.

“I’m pleased to hear this, Elizabeth.” Henry turns a smile full of artificial pride on Lizzie, the appraising twinkle ever-present in his eyes. “I’d love to see it after supper.”

When the meal concludes, Lizzie leads him to her crafting room. The quilt for the bazaar is draped on a rack, ready for a final check of loose stitches. It’s sedate and boring—white with a floral embellishment in yellow and green. But the red border and tiny red flowers, striking like cardinal feathers or the first bloom of a poppy in spring, are her favorite parts. The color made the quilt feel alive. As though it breathed beneath her hands.

Henry clears his throat. “The . . . craftsmanship is lovely.”

Lizzie frowns. “You’re displeased.”

“Elizabeth,” her mother hisses.

“Oh, my sweet,” Henry says with all the breezy arrogance of a spoiled prince, “please don’t mistake my hesitation for a lack of regard for your undeniable skill.”

Lizzie fights the urge to curl her lip.

He points an elegantly tapered finger. “I can’t help but notice you’ve used an inordinate amount of red dye.”

Lizzie is perplexed. *Red dye?*

“My mother isn’t fond of red,” Henry continues. “She feels it’s too bold. Unfeminine. Ungodly.”

“I told her the same,” Lizzie’s mother lies quickly. “Worry not. She’ll dye the quilt. Perhaps a lovely pale blue.”

Lizzie turns to her, eyes wide in disbelief. Like Henry, her mother takes little interest in her creations and clearly has no idea what dyeing the quilt—from red to pale blue, no less—will entail.

“Wonderful.” Henry smiles, oblivious. “One more thing.” He gestures toward her quilt again, the center of it, where a patch bears her name: *Lizzie Northrup*. “This seems a rather ostentatious display, wouldn’t you agree? Also, ‘Lizzie’ is an inappropriate name for a woman your age. You must use your Christian name.”

"That is my preferred name," Lizzie says evenly.

"We'll fix it." Her father pats her shoulder. "Won't we, *Elizabeth*?"

"My dear." Henry steps forward, taking her hand between his. He squeezes, gently at first, then with enough pressure to make her meet his hard gaze. "You're my responsibility. You're soon to be my wife. You wouldn't want to reflect poorly on my family, would you?"

Embers of rage stir inside her.

"No, of course not," she says demurely, winning her mother's approving smile and her father's suspicious glance. "I shall fix the quilt."

Lizzie carries the quilt, wrapped carefully inside a box, into the cavernous town hall, decorated with flowers and candles. A string quartet plays lively music. The bazaar is in full swing. Townspeople mill about, viewing the wares on display. Roasting meat, hot cider, and mulled wine perfume the air.

Henry and his family stand on a raised dais at the head of the hall, accepting the bows and curtsies of their subjects who approach with greetings and compliments. His mother simpers. His father looks on with smug pride.

Her family soon, Lizzie reminds herself with a wave of revulsion. Henry catches her eye and beckons her. There's no warmth in the gesture; it's a command of owner to property.

She approaches, hating each step toward him.

"Mother, here is Elizabeth." Henry pulls at Lizzie's elbow to present her. "With her quilt."

Lizzie dips her head and murmurs socially acceptable greetings.

"Good evening, dear." Henry's mother sniffs, her gaze already fixed on the mayor and his wife near the entrance. "I'll forgive your tardiness, as you're still learning. Hang your quilt with the rest on the east side of the hall."

Lizzie grimaces, hoping it resembles a smile.

The quilt display area is out of the crowd's way to protect the textiles but positioned to be seen by all from most areas of the hall.

"I've set up a rack right in the front for you." Henry looks at her expectantly.

"How thoughtful," Lizzie responds automatically. "Thank you, Henry."

Satisfied, he guides her to the only bare rack, front and center. The surrounding quilts are all light-colored—shades of cream and pale yellow and periwinkle. Floral embellishments are done with needlework, not dye. There is not a drop of red on any of them.

Henry sweeps a hand across the display. "As you can see, no one has signed her quilt. Tonight isn't about highlighting the makers, Elizabeth. It's for the good of the cause."

"Whose cause?" Lizzie asks sweetly.

Henry's right eye twitches, but his placid smile doesn't fail. "The church's, dear."

"Of course." She lowers her gaze.

“Allow me.” Henry finally takes the heavy box from her and places it on a nearby table. “I’m eager to see your corrections.”

Lizzie slides the box back toward herself. “Please. Allow me.” She removes the box’s lid, then unwraps the cheesecloth wound around the bundle. The corners of her mouth curl up as she unfurls it.

Henry gasps.

She has re-dyed it, as he ordered.

Red. Boldly red. Unfemininely red. Ungodly red. Ostentatiously red. Deliciously red.

As red as Henry’s face is now. He stammers, unable to form words.

Lizzie carefully drapes the quilt on the rack, ensuring the middle patch bearing her name—camouflaged, but not concealed—hangs at eye level. Her fingers skim the fabric with care. It glows under the hall’s sconces like blood and courage.

Henry’s initial shock has transformed into fury. She’s disobeyed him and made him look a fool—it’s hard to tell which is the more grievous sin—and his family and their subjects will hold him responsible for her actions.

She has *reflected poorly* on him.

She’ll pay for this, that’s certain. She’ll pay dearly for this betrayal, this transgression, maybe for the rest of her life.

But for the moment, she thrills at the wicked rush flying through her. The pride at the sight of her name on her quilt in the color of *her* choosing.

Lizzie’s choice. Not Elizabeth’s obedience.



Friends and Relatives of Permelia Eavy
Papercut Appliqué
Probably made in Pennsylvania, United States
1847
Cotton; Hand appliquéd, hand pieced, hand quilted
International Quilt Museum, 2009.039.0050

The Patch Unwritten

Meredith Allison

Soft hands fold me gently, with the same love and care that stitched me whole.
My lining—the back of me—is heavy and warm with inked wishes, prayers, and dreams,
for you, their beloved friend. A patchwork of hopes
that you might be happy with him.
That he, your husband-to-be, will be kind to you.

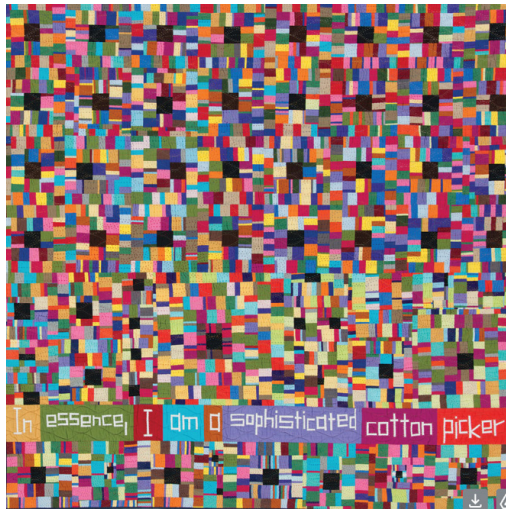
I am tucked into a small chest, carved by one of their kind husbands—
polished smooth, so no splinter might prick your finger and draw blood.
I am warm with love staining my back,
but there is one lonely, barren patch where a cold breeze slips through
and invisible pain is etched, never to be seen by you, who needs to see
it most

One of your dearest friends approached me, a droplet of ink on her quill
trembling.
She ached to pen warnings—of the same pain speckling her wrist, her neck.
Longed to beg you: *think twice, then thrice, then once again*,
because, as she well knew, a husband would not be kind,
no matter what he promised.

But it was a patch she could not write.
Not when all the others thrilled at the nuptials.
Not when *he* might see her protection mistaken for protest, and correct
her.
So she wrote empty verses of friendship and honor.
And when her quill ran dry,
she traced her wards and whispered spells across the blank patch,
staring until even the impressions faded.

Countless seasons pass. Weddings. Funerals. Joy and sorrow.
I am folded and unfolded and refolded; stuffed and crammed and
sometimes allowed to breathe.
Now, I am unfolded to lie beneath glass.
Hands point to my patterns and bypass the pain pressed deep into my
stitches long ago.
Always unseen, but never unfelt.

Still, I hum with her spell.
Still, I carry her silence.
Still, I hold her greatest wish—
That someone might hear what she could not say.



Chawne Kimber
Cotton Sophisticate
Made in Easton, Pennsylvania, United States
2015
Cotton; Machine pieced
International Quilt Museum, 2021.050.00002

Creature Comforts

Sadé Ayorinde

One of my white friends nicknamed me Bubbles. Cute, right?
I remember being stunned, then confused, then concerned
I needed insight
Inward sight
For what had become of me?
This was an offensive description of my personality
I'm serious, calm-cool-collected, and generally underwhelmed. Not the cheerful one.
No
This was a misnomer that had to be undone
And time was of the *essence*. Pointing, I said, "Now look here, *I am—*"
Wait . . . slow . . . sly . . . smile
I had done it.
So well, in fact, that I forgot the ruse myself for a while
This was a *sophisticated* operation
The infiltration of white spaces. The trick I had to pull to make them comfortable
The recipe is simple enough:
Two cups toothy smiles, a dash of small talk, a handful of sparkly eyes, a splash of deference, season with a bit of intelligence—
I know it's tough
But not too much
Never too much
You have to be small though you're hyper-visible
And nice though you're perceived as angry
And light though your presence is heavy
But I must've done it right 'cause they let me
Enter in and then
My friend
And this name . . .

I messed up
It's code-switching run amok
And I'm *caught on* "minstrel mode"
I blurred the line between the performance and me
In search of the peace that I'm owed
I never really had control in this game
A truth of which I am sure
She has to exist for black women to survive
So she is me, but I didn't *pick her*



Rosena Disery
**Sampler made at the New York
African Free School**
Made in New York, New York, United States
1820
Silk on wool
The New York Historical Society, 2011.9

O Truth

Sadé Ayorinde

Mom used to take me to museums to search for inspiration. She said, “Those who made before us are the lanterns to our dark path.” She would state this regularly as she marched me along curated walls. I didn’t take that seriously then, but today I’m feeling . . . lost.

I push open glass doors and walk under words promising history and culture etched in the gray stone facade. In the gallery I smile at the security guard. I always do that. I want them to feel seen.

I wander.

“Look how perfect these stitches are. You know, this was done by hand. Probably by a girl just like you. Look at the date—before sewing machines were invented,” an older woman says to a blond kid with a bored expression. They move away. I approach.

A doll-sized pillow and quilted blanket sit inside the case. The threadwork on the sky-blue wool is impeccable, just as the woman said. I’m transfixed by tiny identical silk stitches that bind and adorn the fabric with strawberries, wispy florals, and block letters that spell “O Truth.” I’m disappointed to see the label lists the maker as unidentified, but it describes how young girls often prepared for “women’s work” by practicing on smaller versions of household textiles for their toys.

I know not to, but I graze the acrylic cover with my fingertips, which are tingling now with inexplicable anticipation. My imagination shows me small mocha-colored hands and the glint of a needle forming the X pattern of cross stitch. Up through the upper right corner, down through the lower left. Up through the upper left corner, down through the lower right.

I snap from the vision.

The gallery alarm blares. A robotic voice orders, “Please step back!”

About the authors

Meredith Allison is the author of seven published novels, including the *Scalisi Family Saga* series (Persnickety Publishing LLC, 2018) and the *Agent Provocateur* series (Persnickety Publishing LLC, 2018), as well as over six dozen published short stories under various pen names. She has worked as an editor for nearly ten years and designs book covers and manuscript layouts on the side. Meredith received a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Creighton University and a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She lives in her hometown of Lincoln, Nebraska, with two incredibly pushy Pomeranians.

Sadé Ayorinde is a scholar of modern and contemporary African American art. She is a curator at the Columbia Museum of Art in Columbia, South Carolina. She received her PhD in the History of Art and Visual Culture from Cornell University and a Master of Arts and Bachelor of Science and Business Administration from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. In 2023, Sadé co-edited *Unnamed Figures: Black Presence and Absence in the Early American North*, which exhibited at the American Folk Art Museum in New York City. She is currently working on an article on a series of landscape paintings by Rodney McMillian.

Amanda DeNatale holds a Bachelor of Arts in English and a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, both from Creighton University. She has worked as a fiction editor for *F(r)iction* and a nonfiction editor for *Blue River Review*. Her creative work appears in *Toasted Cheese*, *Crack the Spine*, and *CALYX*. Amanda is currently working as a server at the Committee Chophouse in Omaha, Nebraska and pursuing her dream of “an artist’s life” on the side.

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