

A few ghosts, a little chaos, the playground of a rich youth



Melissa Favara

Melissa Favara teaches English in Vancouver and lives and writes in North Portland, where she parents Ramona, age 6, hosts a bi-monthly reading series, and counts her husband and her city as the two great loves of her life.

"This isn't garbage. It's totally useful," says Marshall, the father of my child and my partner in crime, life, and everything. "It's not garbage."

Our back gate is open to the alleyway, and a borrowed box truck full of lawn debris, rotten lumber, and sundry other trash is mostly full, mostly ready for a trip to the city dump. Marshall is holding what remains of a rake that has just about given up the ghost: rusted, bent tines, no handle. "Okay," I say, "please explain what use it might have that the new rake that is not bent and that still has a handle does not."

Nothing.

The ex-rake goes into the truck. It's the weekend before Memorial Day, the traditional Sunday for clearing the slate as much as possible in our home, which is haunted by its previous owner, a gentleman who, after he retired from a career as a railway porter, embarked on a life of yard-saling and became, as Marshall notes, "the Noah of knickknacks," only getting like 14 of everything instead of only two. Marsh bought the house semi-furnished, which is a euphemism for full of the stuff Mr. Russell, God rest his soul, didn't feel like moving. That several of the ceramic yard owls persist and that we only got rid of the Electric Belt Exerciser last summer is testament to Mr. Russell's shade still persisting here on North Kerby Ave.; I think he'll still be here in spirit as long as we have his orange faux-leather bar and the dismantled pool table and the stacks of weathered 45 RPM records that were apparently sometimes used as drink coasters in the basement where he once ran a private after-hours club.

We have a complicated relationship with the Mr. Russell aesthetic: We're both clutter people by nature, prone to saving unmated socks for theoretical future art or cleaning projects that never materialize and baby clothes because we remember Ramona wearing them, and random other things simply because they have always been there. It's difficult to take things away

because they are part of the portrait of our home that we recognize.

We live in a midden heap. An online dictionary defines this, one of my favorite terms, as: "a refuse heap; specifically: a mound marking the site of a primitive human habitation." A site on archaeology advises that archaeologists love midden heaps because "they contain the broken remains from all kinds of cultural behaviors." Should the world end tomorrow, we would be much beloved by any alien researchers that might zip by our fair planet; we've perfectly preserved a slice of American life in North Portland, layered like sedimentary rock — the 70s in the basement and the early 21st century further upstairs; those theoretical future aliens might reach erroneous conclusions based on my vintage typewriter collection being located in the dining room above the good dishes, but I'll leave it them to sort out whether the old Underwood Noiseless was used to prepare some kind of ritual feast.

All of which is to say that we, and Marshall particularly, have begun to seriously wonder about whether we should be giving Ramona a more orderly environment, modeling sanity over chaos, etc.: a home space that's more intentionally curated and less random, and we have gotten a start. The dump run Sunday included about a million lawn signs from elections past that were moldering beside the house, metal trellises that had grown to resemble medieval torture devices (Hey aliens! What would you have made of those?), and a sizeable load of too-small kid clothes to neighbors and Goodwill. We also brought in good dirt and planted this year's tomatoes and peppers where weeds were holding court and trashed the hand-me-down wicker chairs on the front porch that probably didn't merit handing down and struggled briefly over what to do with the iron and canvas wing-back chair I've been carting around since college, which had deteriorated to the point of dumping my friend David on his tail when he sat in it at a

book club meeting last summer.

You would think, given my merciless attitude toward Marshall's beloved rake, that I'd have let go of the wing-back more easily, but no: It was my turn to be recalcitrant. And I couldn't even explain why I wanted to keep it except that I owned it and I had since before I even moved west from Michigan. I'm not very good at letting go, and this is one of those places where my mate and I line up a little too well — there's no adult in our house who is, and if Ramona's insistence on keeping the empty Kleenex box I tried to recycle from the bathroom is any indication, we've spawned another pack rat.

And yet — not only archaeologists love a midden heap; alchemists did too — so do you, if you compost. There's something lovely about the way that what we no longer need, amassed, can generate something new — fertilizer, in the case of compost, maybe creativity in other instances. It was Ramona who pointed out, as I was, with some resignation, carefully folding the canvas seat of my old chair to consign it to oblivion, that the metal frame looked like a tomato cage. And so it did.

While Marshall and the packed truck rumbled away, Ramona and I fitted the chair frame over a newly planted Purple Cherokee start and patted dirt around the base. It looks a little weird, but it's going to work, I think, and it has the advantage of having been free. We're also talking about dusting off Mr. Russell's bar downstairs and bringing back the after-hours club as a kid hangout — Ramona could benefit from exposure to the great hits of decades gone by in that record collection. We will never live in elegant minimalism, I'm pretty sure. But trying for balance will get us somewhere closer, perhaps — and I think I'm OK with Ramona growing up among a certain number of things that are waiting to become other things, a certain number of gentle ghosts.

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Lost

By Abraham Vinzant

We come and we go.
Just not knowing
Which way to go.
Do we go left
Or do we go right.
Do we go forward or
Do we just go back
To sleep.

My New Girl

By E. Vizenor

I found you on Craigslist
and at first sight my eyes did mist.
You were afraid of everything
but soon our hearts began to sing.
I love your colors of red and white
with your eyes so bright.
You are my Molly May girl
who came into my life to give it a whirl.