



[Home](#) [About](#) [Audio](#) [Books](#) [Donate](#) [Events](#) [Get Involved](#)

[Journal](#) [Magazine](#) [Movement Matters](#) [News](#) [Projects & Editions](#)

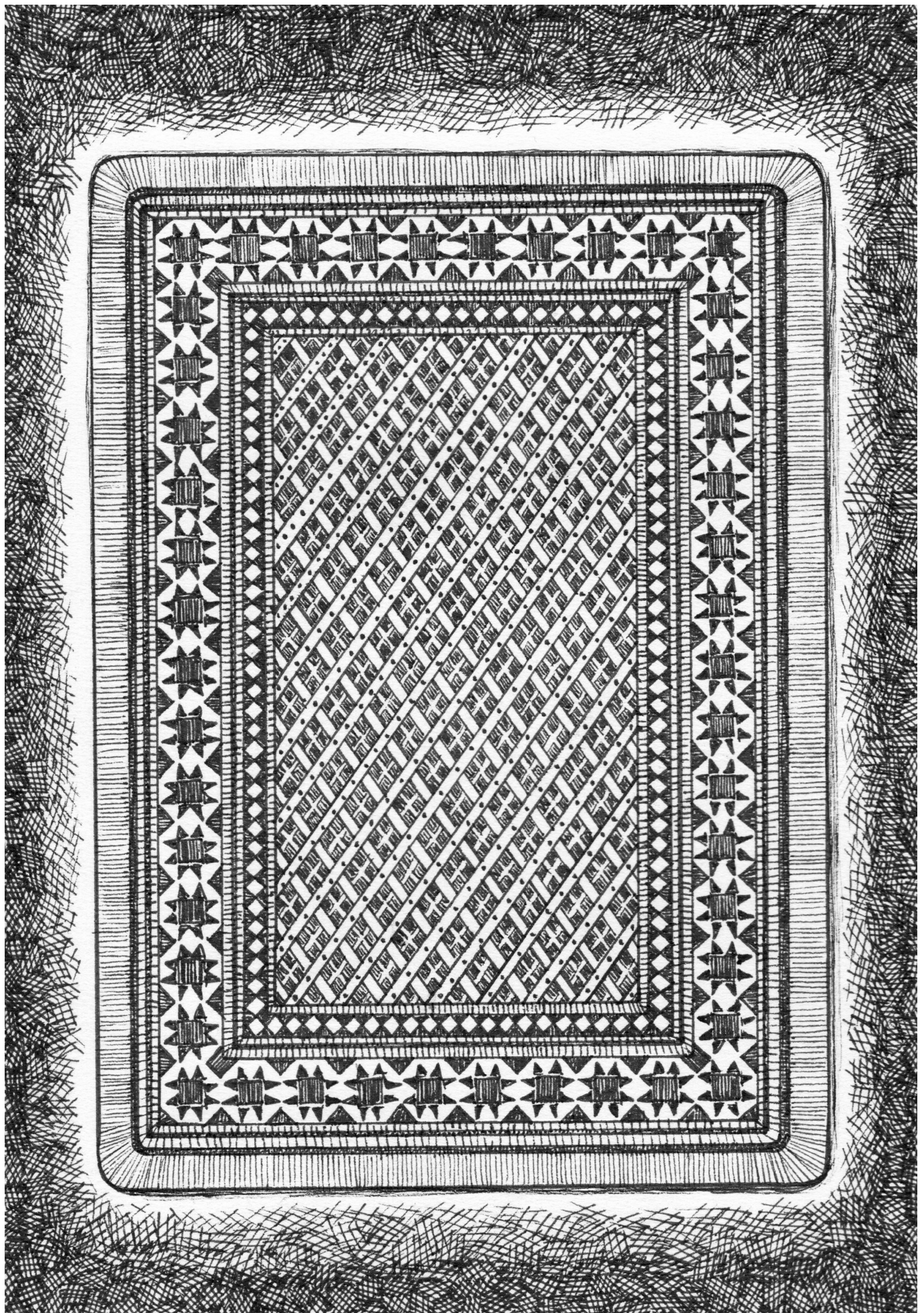
[Store](#) [Subscribe](#) [Video](#) [Your Turn](#) [Member Home](#)

[Login](#)



Beco

## FICTION: “Blessings From the Epiphany Thrift Shop,” by Margaret Hawkins



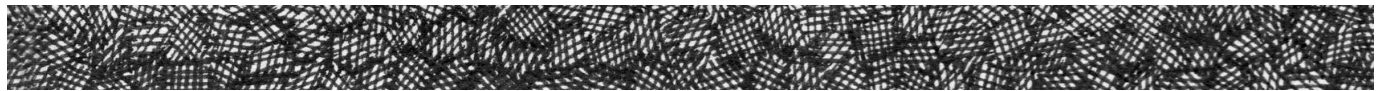


Illustration by Maura Walsh / Black Nail Studio.

**FWD: MUSEUMS POWER / POTENTIAL**

Edited by Therese Quinn & Miguel Limon

A publication of the Museum and Exhibitions Studies Program at the University of Illinois at Chicago, the 2024 volume investigates themes of power and potential.

**Power:** Having control or authority to dictate or influence people and organizations' behavior and actions. **Potential:** Having the capacity to build or develop a positive outcome in the future.

**POWER**



**POTENTIAL**

Power and the potential for power shape the relationships we have between ourselves, our institutions, and our governments. We relate these two words in this issue of Fwd: Museums to highlight how those being unjustly or unfairly treated have the potential to create their own power.

**NOW AVAILABLE** *Click to Order*

**FICTION**

*Blessings From the Epiphany Thrift Shop*

By Margaret Hawkins

I shuffle, quietly so no one will know I'm awake. I deal ten hands, five cards each. One by one I turn up the hands to see the families. Two remaining cards lie on the pillow. The rule is you can add them later to fix a family if you need to, make it perfect. Tonight, even with extra cards, there are no perfect families. Usually there aren't.

Now I sort them, first by suit, then in order of age, and put them away in their box. I say each one's name as I pick it up from the blanket, before I put them to bed. Goodnight sleep tight, I whisper.

Spencer and Susanna, King and Queen Spade, are the father and mother. He is handsome and strong and stern, possibly a little cruel, and she is matronly and stern and probably also cruel but beautiful in a thick-faced, confident way. You wouldn't want to make her mad. They both dress up. Everyone does but especially the Spades. Ace the grandmother is wizened (we learned this word in school but I already knew what it meant), tapered at the top like an A, with brittle elbows and chin. Sometimes Ace is the nanny. Her name is Sue-Ann. Everyone in the family is dark-haired and fair-skinned and severe, and the adults all have deep voices, even Sue-Ann who is the grandmother or the nanny or the aunt or sometimes the baby, when Aces are low.

*Iris?*

Aces are like that, high or low, old or young. Rules change without your knowing.

There is a favorite, the oldest son. He wears even more beautiful clothes than the others – velvet jackets fitted to show off his trim silhouette. He eats with the adults. He is handsome and smart - his name is Stephen-Jack. He is fifteen, so handsome, with his black hair combed back from his pale brow, everybody's favorite. There are nine younger children. The evens are the girls, destined to be wide-hipped and curved and balanced like twos. The odds are the boys, straight and slim like ones. Their numbers are their ages. The ten is Susan and she is ten, nine is Samuel, eight is Sarah, seven is Stanley, six is Sharon, five is Simon, four is Sandra, three is Sidney, two is little Sybille.

Red means yellow. The Hearts are blond and rounded, not fat but lush and fleshy, pleasing to look at. They are the most popular family in the compound, always smiling like life is a joke that only they get. The mother and the father, Helen and Henry, are the most beautiful and friendly of all the parents, their Jack is the most handsome and charming. His name is Hal-Jack. He's musical, he sings and plays the trumpet. All hearts play brass or stringed instruments. These parents are kinder to their children than the Spade parents, their children sweeter and more outgoing and better-liked by other children. The grandmother or the nanny or the aunt is especially kind. She cooks brownies and pies. She doesn't appear to have favorites. Her name is Hester-Ann. The children's ages are the same as the Spades, the same as their numbers. In descending order of age and importance they are Hal-Jack, so charming and princely with his big wide face and clear green eyes and thick pink lips. All the girls have a crush on him, even me a little though I am saving myself for someone else. Then there is Harriet, Huck, Hollis, Hank, Hannah, Harry, Heather, Hans and Heidi, the baby, who is so plump and sweet and beautiful, smiling and dear, with golden curly hair, that she is beloved by all. I imagine her looking like Flossie from the Bobbsey Twin books, the ones I found in the basement that smell like mildew, that were my mother's. Heidi/Flossie often giggles, showing her dimples.

*What's going on up there? I said **turn off the light.***

*Okay!* I wait for my eyes to adjust to the streetlight. It streams through the window. I hear cars pass. Terrifying shapes move across the wall. I tell myself they are only shadows.

The Diamonds are blond, too, but paler and colorless, like me, not golden and ruddy like the Hearts. They are thin. Every Thursday the Queen cooks liver, at the King's request, and the children are made to eat it. Sometimes the Queen doesn't feel like cooking and the children eat what they find in the cupboard, sometimes dry spaghetti. Their skin is sickly white. They don't play outdoors often the way the Hearts do, but when they do they keep score. The rest of the time they sit inside and read library books. Their queen, Doris, is beautiful but less beautiful than Helen because she never smiles. Their king, Douglas, is very handsome and all the other Queens have a crush on him. Diamonds are intelligent and sharp-tongued. Sometimes they have bad teeth. They are clannish and unaffectionate, even with their own. The most likable among them is their auntie nanny Grammy Dorothy-Ace, though she has a waggish, unkind tongue. Even the Diamond Jack, David-Jack, though terribly handsome in his cool elegant way, has a sneering look that makes me dread him, nothing like Hal, who's even kind to children. The younger Diamond children's names are Daphne, Daniel, Deidre, Donald, Denise, Dwayne, Donna, Dexter and Dolly.

Last are the Clubs, my favorites, my own adopted family though they don't know it yet. My in-laws to be. My secret boyfriend, my future husband, Seven, is a Club. His given name is Charles, which has seven letters, but I imagine calling him Chet in secret, though the whole thing is secret. You might wonder how a seven-year-old could be my secret boyfriend and I'll tell you. A seven is usually seven years old but every deck holds one secret hidden card that reveals itself by a special glow visible only to the holder of the deck to be something more – whatever you need it to be. Whatever you want, that's what it is. It can be your dog who died, come back to life. It can be the mother you never had, your best friend or your boyfriend, someone you never met that will be what you want them to be. It can be a ten-dollar bill or the book report you didn't write. It can even be Jesus. It can even change, from one thing to another, if you need it to. My card was the seven of clubs, the secret that needed to stay secret so that on the few terrible occasions the cards got out of my hands and were used as actual playing cards and I was dealt the seven of clubs no one would know what it meant, the way my heart raced when I picked it out of the pile, always a sign of some secret luck to come, even if I lost. Appeared to lose. Losing a card game meant nothing when you held your secret card. That card meant that whatever happened *was* lucky even when it didn't look like luck, if I keep it secret, if I waited until the luck revealed itself. If they found out, something terrible would happen. That was another rule. If they found out I would die or the card would lose its power or they would laugh at me.

*I can hear you whispering.* My brother Mitchell says this through the door.

I try to keep it in my head. The Clubs aren't handsome or regal, like the Spades, or beautiful like the Hearts. But they're smart and funny. They're my clan, or they will be, not because I resemble them – I don't and neither does my other, coarser, flesh family, who are Diamonds - but because they contain my true love.

I hope to become more like them, after Charles and I are married.

Club King Calvin and Queen Constance are the most parental and warm of all the parents. If the Hearts love everyone, the Clubs make their children feel loved most. Their auntie Grammy nanny is Consuela and she keeps many animals as pets, which are played by the jokers interchangeably. Their Jack is a nice boy named Cory-Jack though of course my heart is set on Charles. In order after Cory-Jack, they are Caroline, Curtis, Connie, Charles called Chet by me who was really (here's the big secret) John Lennon, Colleen, Chip, Carmen, Carl and Charlotte, who everyone called Carlotta.

Here are the rules that were sent to me in a dream when I had chicken pox in third grade.

1. A perfect family has a king and a queen who love each other and they're all the same suit.
2. Everyone in the world has true relatives in the Kingdom. Everyone on earth is descended from one of these four families, who came from outer space and are our real families. Our earth families are scrambled, put together by accident, but these suit families are better than blood. The reason you don't feel at home in your regular family is it isn't your True Family. It's your job on earth to find your True Family.
3. Sometimes groups of four are set on earth as perfect examples of the four suits to show how the world really is. The Beatles, for instance. There was one of each: John, of course, Club. Paul without doubt was a Heart, George was a Diamond, though he was nicer than most but you could tell by his teeth, and Ringo – a stretch but it had to be – was a Spade. Things didn't always fit but I accepted there was more to it than I knew, like they said in church

about God. Underneath there's a plan and you'll understand later, they said. I hoped they weren't teasing, like my brother did sometimes to make me look like an idiot. I hoped understanding would reveal itself in its own time, like they said about reading the Bible. Anyway, I looked for meaning in fours. It was the same with the Rolling Stones – Mick was a Heart, Keith was a Club – and the Beach Boys. Carl was a heart, Brian a Club. I always go for the Clubs. The president, JFK, was a heart.

I carry the cards – my family of fifty-two plus jokers for pets – everywhere. No one knows. They think I like to play solitaire.

*She's at it again.* I hear my brother say. We're in the living room after supper. We're watching TV, a show about a woman who goes crazy and kills her children to protect them from the evil in the world. I'm lying on the floor playing with my cards during the commercials. I must be talking to them out loud. My father winks at my brother. My mother says don't be mean but nobody listens to her.

I think we make my mother tired. ("Sick and tired," she says sometimes, and cries.) Sometimes my mother stays in bed all day. I stand outside her room and talk to her or try to get her to sign my Girl Scout handbook to show I did a badge requirement. My brother walks by and whispers Don't disturb Sleeping Beauty. He's trying to get me to laugh at her and it works but I feel bad for wanting to be on his side. I wish there didn't have to be sides. There always are, at school, too. Teams, they call them. Greens against blues. Boys against girls. Smart kids against dumb kids, popular kids against everyone else. My brother's a popular kid.

Someone has to lose so winning has meaning, my brother tells me, serious for a change. He's trying to help me, trying to explain how the world works. He is thwacking a hard ball rhythmically into his mitt when I say why do we always have to keep score. I know I'm whining but I mean it, why? I mean when we play tennis in the driveway, or checkers or cards. Whatever we play I lose. You just have to, he says when I complain about dodge ball in gym. Otherwise, who cares? He means who cares about playing if you can't win. About my mother, and my laughing at his joke, us against her, he says, Don't feel bad. She doesn't care.

He says she doesn't care about anything anymore, so I shouldn't either, although I don't know. She cries a lot. But my brother says if she really cared she'd get out of bed and wash our clothes. Which is a point. Though if you rinse them in the bathtub it gets most of the dirt out. You can hang them outside to dry or in the winter hang them on the register, just be careful they don't fall through the vents into the furnace like my knee sock did.

My father could stop him, laughing at her. My brother does everything my father tells him to. Low and steady my father says punching the glove when they play catch in the yard and my brother does it just like he says and it lands there in the mitt exactly right. Beautiful, my father says. He likes my brother because he Follows Directions. *Does not follow directions* is what my teacher wrote on my report card. She checked the unsatisfactory box for cooperation. I felt bad when I saw that. I thought I did cooperate. I try to but sometimes I get distracted by things in my head.

Follow directions and pipe down are the two things my father says most to me. Pipe down, like it's my name. Be Quiet is my other name. My aunt told him not to. She says it's important for children to express themselves. She said this to my father when she came to visit once. She also told my mother to get out of bed for God's sake but my mother doesn't follow directions either.

Every morning my father puts a flower from his garden in the buttonhole of his suit jacket and goes to work. He calls it a boutonniere and my friend Roseanne calls it a butt in ear. The neighbor ladies like it. Your father is such a gentleman Roseanne's mother says to me with that look everyone's mother gets around my father. She says this when I go to Roseanne's house to pick her up to go to the swimming pool. We roll our bathing suits in towels and put them in our bike baskets and ride our bikes to the pool, no shoes. Or we wear zories sometimes if Roseanne's mother makes us. She says we'll get worms if we don't wear shoes. My mother's too tired to think about worms. I can tell Roseanne's mother has a crush on my father. How's your father she sometimes says, like it's a special concern of hers, his wellbeing. Fine I say like it's none of her business. Roseanne's father never wears a butt in ear or even a necktie.

Sometimes I shuffle the cards and deal them out in piles of seven. Each pile is a situation where they got put together. Like a block party, say, or the school book fair or something like that. Or they're all riding together in a car. Sometimes you can tell by the hand what the situation is, like if it's all face cards it's a PTA meeting or if it's eights and tens and a Queen it's Girl Scouts, which, after a perfect family, is my favorite. If it's a car ride you get to pick where they're going but it has to start with the first letter of the suit of the oldest one – like if the oldest is Queen Constance, they could go to California or Calumet City - and if there are two the same, black trumps red and if they're the same color Spade trumps Club and Heart trumps Diamond. If they're on a car ride and you get a hand where no one's old enough to drive you get three more picks until you get a driver or they can't go. All the face cards are old

enough. And the aces are, though when they're Grammys sometimes they're too old – they might get in an accident like Roseanne's grandma, when she drank too much beer at Roseanne's grandpa's funeral.

I am the director of all the families. It's my job to make sure things go smoothly, like the Girl Scout troop leader. I can help them but only within the rules of the game, like God. I hear their prayers and I feel sorry for them but I don't change the rules for anyone. I expect them to follow directions! Here are some of the rules:

- ∞ - If any cards get lost or destroyed that means the person died. No exceptions. Destroyed means more than half the card is gone or ruined.
- ∞ - Jokers are pets. It's OK to get more, as many as you like. Nobody cares about them like with pets in so-called real life so if you find one it's okay to just take it. I steal jokers from other decks when I can, like in the Epiphany Thrift Shop in the church basement where there's no supervision and if you buy something, they give you a little card that says Blessings From the Epiphany Thrift Shop. But I don't buy I *pilfer*, which means steal in a small way. My brother complains I pilfer his stuff and looks at me sly like I don't know what he means but I do.
- ∞ - There's no limit on how many jokers you can have. It's OK if they are from different decks and look different on the back. It's like how animals look different from people and from each other but really, inside, they aren't.
- ∞ - The pet value of jokers is assignable. They can be cats or dogs or rabbits. Parrots, parakeets, turtles, etc. Hamsters. Almost anything you want.
- ∞ - Pet names all have to start with J. Right now we have Jocko, Jemima, Jingle, Jehoshaphat, all dogs, and Judy, who is sometimes a cat and sometimes a Flemish Giant rabbit.
- ∞ - Regular cards can never be added, only subtracted. Except with special permission from the Galaxy Overlord Dominator. Cards from other decks are from other planets. There are lots of planets not just the nine they tell you about in school. The planet my cards are from is named Philomena.
- ∞ - Damaged cards are sick or crippled. For example, Samuel got stained when my brother spilled Pepsi on him when we were playing Old Maid. Samuel turned brown and when he dried he was rippled. Now he has a skin disease that makes him have to stay home from school sometimes and keeps him from ever going out in the sun. But Grammy Sue-Ann takes good care of him and brings him grilled cheese sandwiches and library books since he is precocious. Also, the two of clubs has a bent corner. This means that Charlotte, who everyone calls Carlotta, is sick. Sometimes she has leukemia and sometimes it's just pink eye and she cries a lot. But everybody still loves her and takes good care of her.
- ∞ - If a card gets torn all the way in half, that's it – they're dead. Or if it gets wet and you can't see the number or face anymore – dead. I had a funeral once for a card I found in a puddle. I put it in an envelope, which is like a coffin for a card, and I burned it in the alley with matches I pilfered from my brother who smokes in the garage and I kept the matches. He couldn't tell on me because he's not supposed to have matches.
- ∞ - You can make up what the people look like on the number cards, within the basic traits of the family. You get to say if they're pretty or ugly, fat or thin, tall or short. Some of the Spades and the Clubs are Oriental people or Negroes, even in the same family. It's that way on other planets, no big deal. Everybody's mixed together.
- ∞ - The number cards can change appearance because they're young. Like if you say someone is fat they can become thin like they went on a diet or just stopped eating like my mother did that time. Especially the lower cards can change. They're still developing, which is what the doctor said about me. *Wait and see* I heard him say to my mother behind my back. *Don't give up hope. She's still developing.*

I hear laughing. It's Mitchell and his friends.

*She's doing it again.*

*Shut up.*

*It's not solitaire. Look.*

*Maybe she's playing poker.*

*Give me a break. With herself?*

*Sure. Like those what-do-you-call-it? Yeah. Those guys who play with themselves. Jagoffs!*

*Shut up, jagoff. You know what I mean. The guys who play chess with themselves. Geniuses.*

*Idiot savants.*

*C'mon.*

*Idiot maybe.*

*Retard.*

*Shut up. My sister's not a retard. She's just weird.*

In the morning before I go to school I take the pack out from under my pillow and say goodbye. Have a nice day we tell each other. I say it to each Queen and King. You look so pretty one of the queens says to me, usually Queen Helen. Thank you, I whisper, feeling myself blush.

I used to say goodbye to every card every morning. But it took too long and they heard me whispering. "Who are you talking to?" my mother said. She sounded sad I wasn't talking to her. I had to make something up about practicing my oral report on sheep.

I need to be careful. When I was younger in third grade I was stupid I took the cards to school, in my pocket, and put them in my desk so I could touch them during the day and Bradley Hammerschmidt stole them when we lined up to go to the lavatory. I didn't even know they were gone. Bradley came up to me at recess. I thought he was going to punch me in the arm, which he did sometimes. But, "Look what I found," he said, waving the pack in front of my face, wagging his butt around, then yanking the cards away. I acted like it wasn't that important but I felt like I was going to throw up. What I didn't do was cry. I'd promised myself I'd never cry at school and I never did. Then the bell rang and we had to go inside.

I felt sick all day. I didn't tell Miss Glowicki. I knew she'd make it worse somehow. She's pretty nice but I didn't trust her. Probably she'd take them away from Bradley but wouldn't give them back to me. She'd say there was a rule about not having cards at school and keep them in her desk along with all the other stuff she confiscated from us. My brother taught me that word, confiscate. Then she'd make Bradley stay after school, and the next day he'd punch me and I still wouldn't have my cards.

I pretended I didn't care. After school he came up to me again. You want your stupid cards? He held them up, trying to get me to grab for them so he could catch my wrist and break my arm probably or kiss me. He knew I wanted them. When I wouldn't try he put them in his front pants pocket and slid his pants around so his pocket was right on his wiener. "You want your stupid cards? Come and get it," he said. So I did! I reached in and took them, just like that, like I was used to almost touching some boy's thing every single day. Who cares. Small price I thought, to get my family back. People have to do worse things every day. He thought he could make me cry, but I can stand a lot.

After, I walked home real fast. I didn't run. Boys are like dogs. If you run they chase you. LL

Mitchell's friends are here again. They're whispering. I hear my name. I put the cards away.

That night I skip TV and say I'm going upstairs to work on my pen pal badge. I call a family meeting. Everybody has to come and bring all their children even the pets, who understand human language just like real pets but even more. I want to deal everyone out on the bed in a big circle but to be safe I keep them in their box. I put the blanket over my head and explain there's a renewed threat of kidnapping and as a result tighter security measures are necessary for the time being. Any travel needs to be OK-ed by me and communications have to be strictly telepathic from now on, no speech whatsoever.

I am their Important Person and I am determined to protect them. ....

When Iris got home from school the next afternoon, those many years ago, later than usual after her Girl Scout meeting, the cards were gone. She looked everywhere. Mitchell swore he knew nothing. She would not cry. To cry was to admit that the worst had happened. Every day she looked, but she never found them.

In the summer she stole a deck from the Epiphany Thrift Shop and resumed what her family called her game but it wasn't the same and soon she lost interest. Her True Family was gone. Her pets, her love, her friends, her future in-laws, all gone – dead or lost or missing. She felt a coolness begin to set in, a comfortable indifference, and she accepted it, and it grew. She became stubborn. In some ways it made life easier.

Many years later, when Iris was fifty-nine years old, her father, who had never moved out of the house, died there. Her mother had died years before. By then, Mitchell lived in a distant city. He had a demanding job and a wife and an adult child who had recently returned home and needed care, and so it was left to Iris to clear out the house.

She took her time. She had nothing else to do, no clients, no one to go home to, not even a cat. Every day she wandered through the house looking for things to throw out or save, although nothing quite fit either category, it all only had meaning inside this house, and she spent days doing nothing but reading small pieces of paper, turning crumbling black pages in albums to study cracked photos of people she'd never met, combing through drawers full of tools for jobs that would never get done, picking up crumpled shirts from closet floors then setting them back down, unable to muster the will to decide whether to wash them or throw them out, looking for something, some explanation of who they were or had been. After weeks of this, making very little progress, not knowing what to save and what to throw out and so throwing out almost nothing, there in the basement, in a cardboard box containing mildewed toys and waterlogged scrapbooks and a layer of mouse scat and one desiccated mouse corpse and broken board games with missing pieces that no one would ever play, she found the deck wrapped in a stiff rag. The cards were stuck together, having been through many floods by now, and the ink on them was blurred. They were almost unrecognizable, reminding her of how her parents had looked to her at the end.

While she could not cry, she felt a great warmth in her bathrobe pocket – it was her father's bathrobe, really – where she placed the cards and kept her hand around them. That night she went to a hotel instead of sleeping in her old bedroom, where she had been sleeping, or going home to her condo. She ordered expensively from room service – a Caesar salad and lamb chops and French fries and a bottle of red wine and a side of horseradish mashed potatoes – and in the morning she began the process of arranging to sell the house to one of those places that will buy the whole thing, no fixing up needed since they only intended to tear it down, contents included.

*Margaret Hawkins' short stories have appeared in the Missouri Review and Minerva Rising Press. Her essays have run in the New York Times, the Chicago Tribune, Brevity, The Perch (Yale) and many other publications. She used to write a column about art ("Galleries") for The Chicago Sun-Times. Now she writes regularly about art and ideas for The Democracy Chain and teaches creative writing at Loyola University and art writing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.*

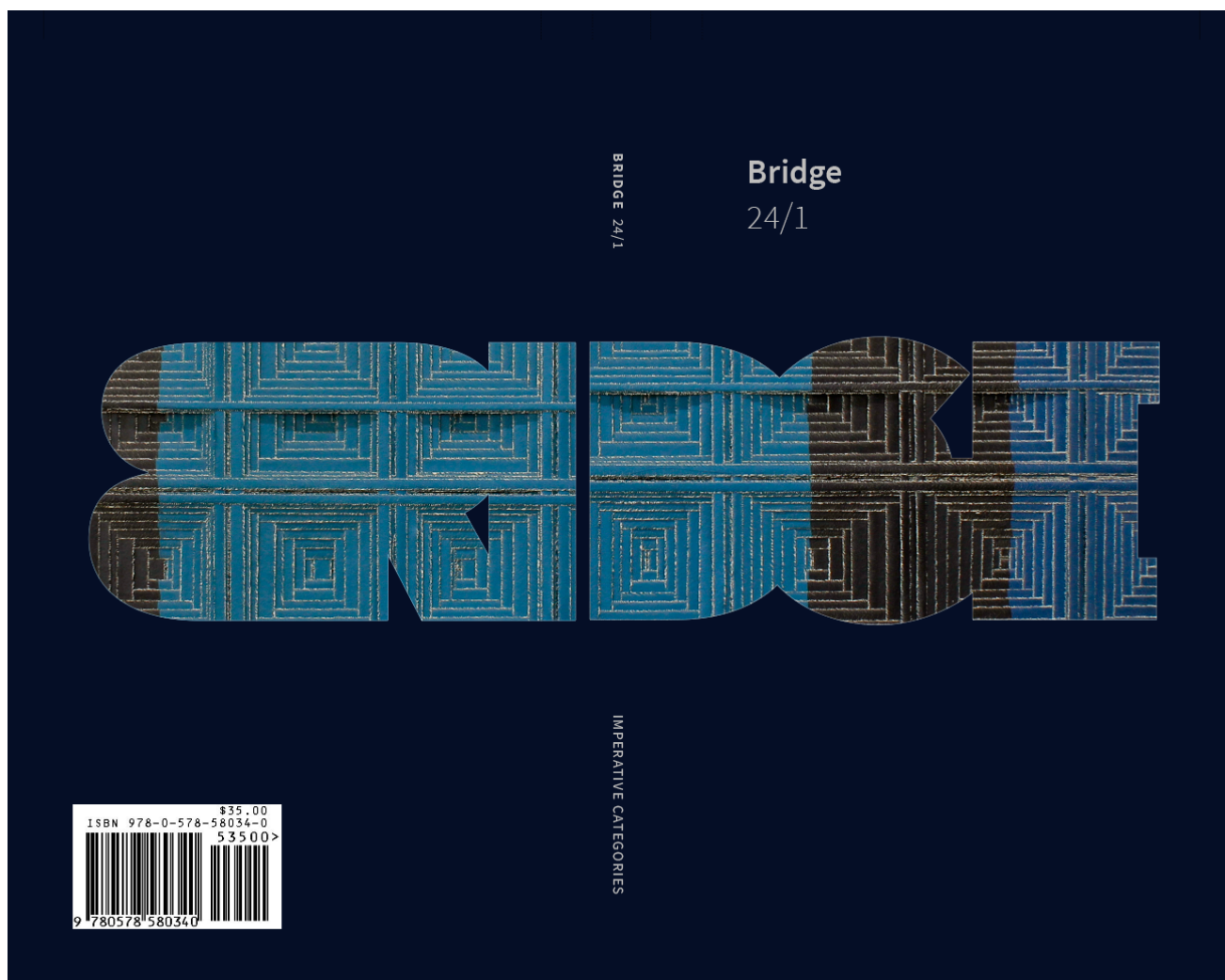
Like what you're reading? Consider [donating a few dollars to our writer's fund](#) and help us keep publishing every Monday.

◀ REVIEW: Lucy Wood Baird, "What do I call you?" at Material Exhibitions      PREVIEW: "Good Night, and Good Luck" at the Winter Garden Theater ▶

Want more Bridge? Get our newsletters sent direct to your email inbox, or purchase merch, editions of the annual Bridge Journal, special projects & Bridge Books by clicking the Bridge Store button below.

Add your email address to receive our newsletter with updates on all things Bridge.





## Bridge Volume 24, Number 1

\$45.00

IMPERATIVE CATEGORIES

AVAILABLE NOW

### SECTIONS & EDITORS

Publisher & Editor-in-Chief Michael Workman

Architecture David Sundry

Couture Kristin Mariani

Dance & Performance Art Michelle Kranicke

Poetry Spencer Hutchinson

Fiction Meghan Lamb

Philosophy Mark Tschaepe

Visual Art Laura Kina

Cover Image: "Anni and Josef," paint on canvas, 50 x 50 in., 2023 by Jean Frater 2023. Image courtesy the artist.

### CONTENTS (In order of first appearance)

Letter from the Editor - Michael Workman

QUIET CHICAGO - A photography exhibition-in-print by Catherine Gass

POETRY - Lawrence Bridges, Vita Lerman, Suzanne O'Connell, Tara Betts, Iris Orpi

FICTION - Zach Braunschweig, Brandon North, Mathew Goldberg

VISUAL ART / FEATURE - "God Damn! 30 Years of Chicago Asian American Artist Collectives" by Laura Kina & YoungSun Choi

HOME SICK - a photography exhibition-in-print by Kathryn Rodriguez

COUTURE - "Letters" by Kristin Mariani w/Dianna Frid; Photography by Mariani & Joerg Metzner

INTERVIEW - "Alternate Futures" with Marshall Brown by Michael Workman

PHILOSOPHY - "Discomfiting Crowns" by Mark Tschaep w/artwork by Sirena LaBurn

OUTCRY - a photography exhibition-in-print by Whitney Bradshaw

#### CONTRIBUTORS

Fiction title page illustrations by Maura Walsh; interior illustrations by Michael Workman

"Women Work" gatefold section designs by Sara Tack

Quantity:

1

ADD TO CART

[About](#) [Contact](#) [Donate](#) [Subscribe to the Bridge Journal](#)