

“Long Time Passing / A Campfire Story” - A Personal Account

When I first started writing the essay for “Long Time Passing / A Campfire Story”, my thoughts began to appear in verse. This did not surprise me. As someone who has known Jeannine Bardo for many years, I have grown to expect a certain degree of magic. When one spends time around her, friendships are cultivated, awards are granted, bodies grow stronger, hearts grow deeper. On one occasion last summer when, among our friends on a lovely Long Island beach, I remember Jeannine’s looking out onto the sea and remarking what a wonderful moment it was, to be there among good friends, on a beautiful day, before the mighty Atlantic Ocean. What would make this day even more perfect, she mused, would be if dolphins appeared. And - this is true - they did.

This is not to say that Jeannine can summon nature with her mind. Perhaps she can. But it is more to note that nature, in her hands, feels cherished, welcomed, safe. I believe the same is true of her art. The materials that she uses, materials drawn from nature, are, with Jeannine, in good hands. She manipulates them, expresses gratitude for them, and offers them back in new form through her work.

In preparing for my essay, I met Jeannine at her gallery. She showed me *Depressed Vessels 1,2,3,4,5,6,7*, a canvas of plaster molded and adhered directly onto the gallery’s wall. It is punctured in several places by seed pods whose impressions are then gilded with aluminum leaf. The impressions represent the *Pleiades*, the constellation also known the *Seven Sisters*. The metaphor of the pods seemed fitting - heavenly vessels guiding seafaring vessels, as they had done for thousands of years. But the name that Jeannine had considered for the piece, *Depressed Vessels*, had me curious. Why *depressed*? A ship sinks into water, laden with goods, as the pods had been made to sink into the plaster through the pressure of Jeannine’s fingers. And *vessel*’s evocation of the feminine, its reference to weight carried, also seemed to be part of the story.

Still, I wanted to account for the word *depressed*. I try to be an optimist. Why, I wanted to know, would the *Pleiades* be sad? At home that afternoon I looked up the word *depression* to see if its etymology might offer me a more nuanced understanding or, perhaps, a way out of what most people understood the word to mean. The fifth definition of the Oxford online dictionary read, “5. *Geographical Astronomy* / The angular distance of an object below the horizon or on a horizontal plane.” When I texted Jeannine with this discovery, her response was not “Yes, I knew that” or “Of course, I intended to represent that meaning in my work.” It was, instead, a GIF of Patrick the Starfish with his mind - or, in his case, little starfish arm - being blown away from his head. It is that way with Jeannine. One, like the dolphins, feels safe to show up and exhibit one’s unique flourish in her presence. She is the consummate cheerleader.

Still, I was trying to avoid the word *depressed*. The fact that it confronted me, unavoidably, in the exhibit was something I had to concede and consider. The show’s largest work, a mural titled *Lifelines*, inhabits the entire long wall of *Stand4* gallery, and represents the tragic deaths of over 1800 hundred women killed in 2015 by human hand. The work, colored entirely in Prussian blue, displays slender silvery strands, painted from a midpoint along the wall’s width and descending towards the floor. That each strand embodies one of the women is striking when one sees how closely they are drawn and how far the row stretches. When I learned that Jeannine’s initial plan for *Depressed Vessel 1,2,3,4,5,6,7* was not to press but punch the plaster, it occurred to me that the sadness of both works was something grave and important which she needed to express.

When Jeannine first told me about her idea for “Long Time Passing / A Campfire Story”, she did so by referring to a book she had been reading. “It’s soooo goood,” she gurgled, as one might do with a forkful

of piping, oozing, lasagna in one's mouth. "I want to buy this for everyone I know", she said, dreamily and sincerely. *The Overstory*, which weaves together the lives of trees with the multiple generations of humans who live and die among them, moved her. Her impression of the novel, as evidenced by the gurgle, was no clinical observation. The same trees past which our group ran regularly on Shore Road were those Jeannine had climbed as a child and whose shade she had continued to enjoy. They, like her, have grown, but at a pace much slower than that of humans. If one were to believe her, as I do, these trees have spoken to her. They, according to one of Powers' protagonists in the novel, also communicate with one another, especially through their underground network of roots.

The work in "Long Time Passing / A Campfire Story" that appears to speak most directly to Powers' story is *The Rightless Thing*, a life-sized tree trunk that, like *Depressed Vessel 1,2,3,4,5,6,7*, is sculpted and mounted directly onto the gallery wall. This was Jeannine's intention, to include the gallery itself in her exhibit. The gallery's place within Bay Ridge holds, for Jeannine, a degree of magic. So much of who and what she loves seems to appear there, as if through force of gravity, and take root. In its exaggerated billows, *The Rightless Thing* feels feminine, aged, weighed down - a depressed vessel, laden with stories of generations. Its absence of color and leaf portend aridity, which occurs through disregard and indifference. Like the other works that echo female sadness, this laden tree seemed in contrast with Jeannine's own strength and optimism.

But Jeannine is an educator. And it is perhaps this very concept that she is aiming to teach. "Long Time Passing / A Campfire Story" is, in many ways, a cautionary tale. It warns of what happens to both those around us and to the Earth when they are neglected and unloved. Our elements - air, water, earth, fire - require care in our hands, as do our human relationships.

That Jeannine chose to install *Ghost Story / Tales from the Mothership* on a lower corner of one of the gallery's walls is significant. A small spherical stone nestled into a tiny acorn seed cap is mounted onto a tile painted thick with Prussian blue and glaze. The stone had been given to Jeannine by her mother as one of a pair of earrings. Her mother had been to Jeannine a guardian and source of strength. Not a coddler - Jeannine climbed trees and played sports under her mother's sanction - but a protector against real dangers, such as those that had befallen the women in *Lifelines*. The work's position from the wall's corner suggests encouragement rather than dominance, a whisper to be strong and to cherish what is good.

In its gaze across the room, *Ghost Story / Tales from the Mothership* seems to summon the silver strands of *Lifelines* upwards. Their tight formation allows them, like the members of a phalanx or strands of sinew or rope, to guard together what is worth preserving.