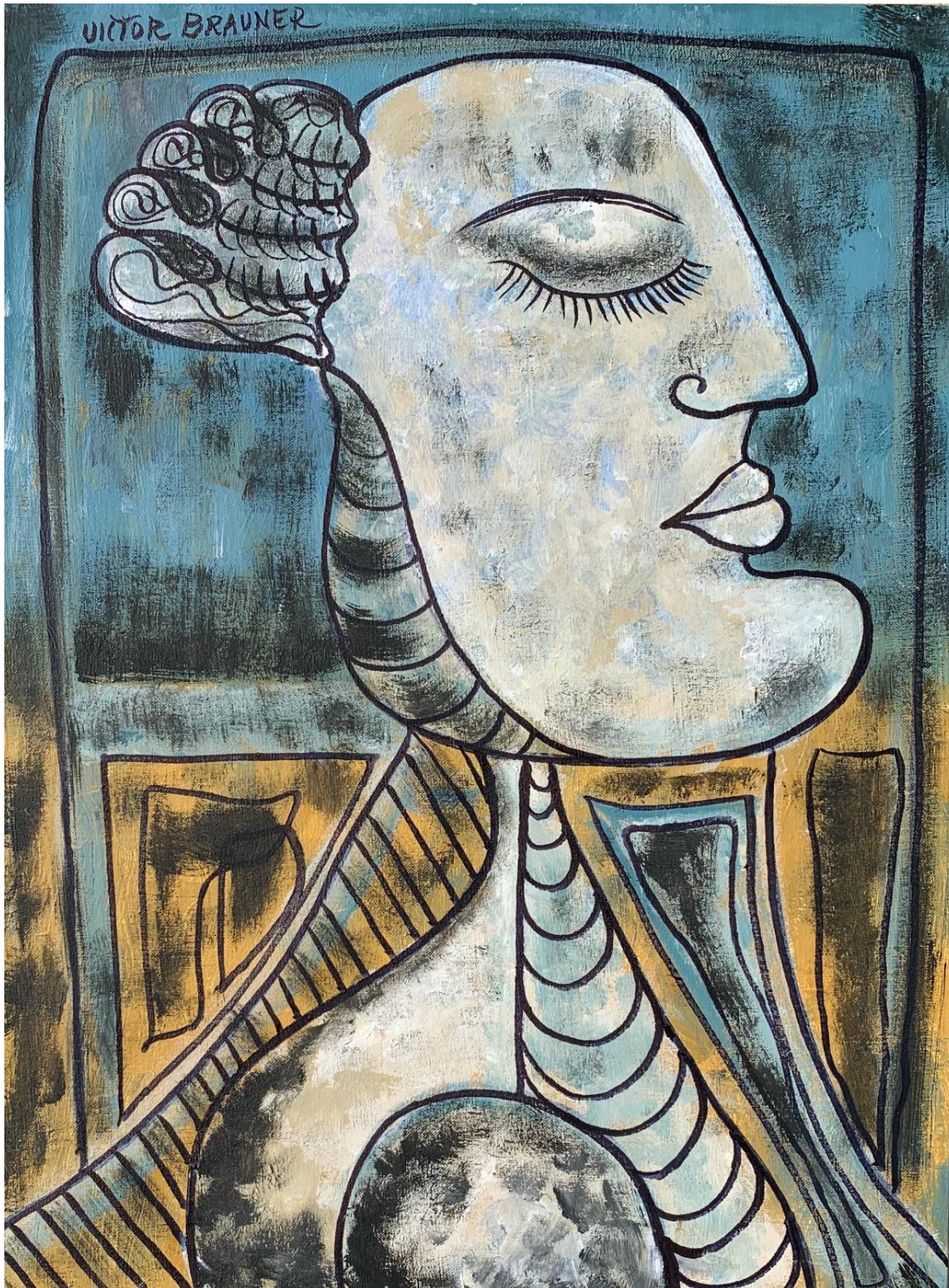


# The Funeral

by [Kirby Olson](#) (February 2020)



*Untitled*, Victor Brauner

**Dali invited us to the funeral** in Herculeana's birthplace of Dime Box, Texas. I apologized about finances and said we couldn't come. He said it was paid for.

Falstaff and I boarded an airplane in Albany, NY and flew to Houston. Mari stayed home with the baby. With just Falstaff, it meant I could visit an art museum. The Menil Foundation in Houston was holding a Victor Brauner retrospective. Brauner was a Romanian painter whose work combined geometrical forms and Romanian mythology with surrealism. In Houston, I was entertained by the billboards. There didn't seem to be any commercial zoning in Houston and as we drove through the town it seemed as though we were driving through the Yellow Pages.

After visiting the Brauner show, we drove out to Dime Box. It was a hundred miles east. Dime Box was a town of 1100. I thought the trip would take an hour and a half but it was raining heavily and the kid had to go to the bathroom thrice. We had tarried in the Menil Foundation so the minister was already speaking. Falstaff and I snuck into the last pew.

"We are gathered to celebrate the life of Herculeana Tittelintuure," the pastor intoned. "And there is much to celebrate. Arising from Dime Box to argue a case before the Supreme Court in favor of religious freedom, Herculeana will be remembered not as a national luminary, but as one of our own. She played in our streets. She went to our school. Everything she did will light this town for fifty years. Even for Texas she thought big. She made us proud when she took the crown at the Miss Texas contest. When she was struck down—but not out—by Lou Gehrig's, we prayed. By the grace of God she saw her thirty-seventh year."

The organist played "Amazing Grace," and the congregation sang. Dali was in a white suit. The song was followed by a version of "Gotta Serve Somebody," with many of Herculeana's family dabbing at their eyes with polka-dotted handkerchiefs. A line of cars with a motorcycle escort took the casket to High Prairie Cemetery. The pastor droned on about life everlasting. Like college professors, pastors had to emit words for a certain period of time.



"There will come a day when Herculeana will walk among us saved. Herculeana will walk in all her beauty like the day she won Miss Texas. As God is my witness, she has been reborn, reborn in Christ Jesus!"

The parents' house was a mansion with German pretensions in the Bavarian roof's cross-stitching. Inside, the predominant motif was white. A white rug, white bookshelves, a white table in the center of white sofas. A white Persian cat with imperious green eyes looked out from under a sofa. Falstaff rubbed his head against my leg. There were hundreds of copies of *Reader's Digest* lined up on the shelves. They went back to the 1950s. I longed to take out one of the older copies and do the vocabulary builder. I did my best to look mournful. A cake was brought out. It was a miniature copy of the house. It was ice cream, and slabs of the house were given out to all the children. Then, to the adults.

Dali came over.

"Good seeing you Norm, and Falstaff. Where's Mari and our baby?" He shook my hands and rubbed the head of the kid, mussing up his hair.

"They need to rest," I said.

Dali ate the roof of the house on his plate and attacked the licorice chimney and ate it in three or four bites. A fire was in the actual fireplace. Outside, the unusual rainstorm continued for an hour. Then the sky cleared, and a rainbow filled the horizon.

Herculeana's parents were probably in their sixties. Her father, dressed in white, shook my hand. His wife had a pretty white dress.

"Thank you for what you tried to do for our daughter," Herculeana's mother said.

I shrugged, and grinned.

Candles were lit, and the pastor put down his cup of tea. He asked us to join our hands. He said the Lord's Prayer. Ten minutes later the more inessential relatives and friends began to depart. As we drove back to Houston, I felt serenity.

We stayed overnight at a Marriott in Houston. In the morning, the kid enjoyed the strawberry omelettes. I was depressed by the state of the silverware. There were spots on some of the forks and at least two of the white plates were not clean. We made waffles in the waffle maker and had tall glasses of golden orange juice. It was then that Herculeana's ghost appeared. She was beautiful like an angel. She put her hand on Falstaff's head and blessed him, then turned to me and waved goodbye.

"What are you looking at?" Falstaff said.

"Nothing."

I finished my omelette and got the kid into the rental van and headed out to the airport to go home to Calcutta. On the way home from the airport, the kid and I stopped at McDonald's and got green milkshakes. After, Falstaff slumped in his safety seat and fell into a deep slumber.

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