



G. DANIEL MASSAD

Providence, 2016

pastel on paper

9 1/4 x 18 inches

There I was, in the fall of 2015, crunching leaves and acorns underfoot in my ambles around the house of our friends Dennis Teepe and Jan Howard in Providence, RI. Their daughter Kathan, our unofficial goddaughter, was working that year at an organic farm just outside the city, and on our visit to its roadside market I found myself threading a labyrinth of bins full of pumpkins, apples, gourds, and squash. A Hubbard squash caught my eye, the way some objects occasionally do, and I bought it to take home - "To eat, if not to draw!" I said, knowing that one way or the other it would end up in our kitchen pantry. It was a keeper, the woman at the register told me, and that would make it a perfect subject for the slow pace of my imagination. As it turned out, it was mid-February before I took the still unspoiled squash into the studio and photographed it huddling in a nest of bricks with an orange- and green-spotted acorn squash, a passion fruit, and one of the acorns I pocketed at Dennis and Jan's. I was excited by the "vegetable palette" and the "intimacy of the up-close photos," as I wrote in my journal, but I had "no picture yet." I told myself: "Sit on this."

Not to worry. Mulling things over has been in my skillset for years, and the photos would keep much longer than the squash.

In May, a familiar picture structure appeared in a thumbnail sketch: a square of wall below a rectangle of black, a heap of gourds and squash in the foreground, a stem curling up out of the heap and "something lurking behind the wall." But it was just a warm-up for the full-scale preliminary drawing that in mid-July seemed to "tug at me fiercely:" an angular construction, ala *Falls* (2003) and *Yield* (2005), that caught the intimacy and compression of the photographs, "a kind of close-up inviting close gazing." The nest of bricks had turned into "a skewed niche of bricks, no soothing horizontals anywhere," and the dark atmosphere had widened dramatically to the left: I wanted to balance a strong sense of shelter with a need for shelter.

And I wanted this change, this less stable environment and its deeper, darker color range. Change was in the air. My journal had turned into a paper cemetery: all of our remaining aunts and uncles had died within the year, along with a handful of friends. And Scott's mother, the last of her generation on both sides, would reach the quiet conclusion of her long decline at the end of August, the new picture already on the easel, "...the big Hubbard tilting back toward the dark, its delicately ridged and bumpy skin an indescribably complex gray, layers on layers of grays, pinks, greens, ochres."

In September, weighing possible titles, I asked Scott if he could recall the name of the farm where I'd found the Hubbard, the farm near Providence, and he said, "Oh now, that's an interesting word." Ah, yes, divine Providence. God's hand in all things. Great Nature's intricate plan, in which every part matters, large and small. And there are other meanings that also derive from the Latin root, *providere*, to foresee: prudence, thrift, wisdom in the management of one's resources. But for the two of us, now that there's no one left, generationally speaking, between us and the cold wind, it's the Oxford Living Dictionary's definition that hits home: "providence: timely preparation for future eventualities."

Providence framed and under the lights, I stepped back and was struck by the depth of its overall darkness. But it seemed to lure me in, its deep ember glow growing brighter as I edged closer. There's nothing overtly autobiographical in this image. No buried information to pore over, no maps, constellations, names, symbols, not even a vestige of the golden ratio. Only, up close, the minute detail the world is replete with, which I've never tired of, never not been hypnotized by. And yet, despite its lack of covert self-description, when I thought about selling it and never seeing it again I wrote in my journal, "I will grieve a little, I will."

- G. Daniel Massad