

Pietro Costa's *bloodworks*

By Albert Mobilio

Deep within the human tree. Even though it is still very early on this cloudless day, the sun's heat can be felt in the soil around the stems of the tomato plants. His fingertips work small circles in the dirt, taking measure of the moisture there. The row along the back fence, where the sun bears down all morning, will need some water, but around the plants closer to the house a trace of last night's watering remains cool to his touch. He lets the hose play across these plants careful not to pock and gully the ground. His thumb regulates the flow from its open mouth—the nozzle, with its finely graded settings of mist, rain, and downpour broke last spring—and, anyway, he believes he can squeeze out manually even finer calibrations of intensity. Flow deep within the human tree. The yard is just below where the subway train climbs high on a trestle after emerging from a tunnel and when he works in the garden he sometimes looks up and can easily see passengers' faces, see them shielding their eyes from the sun as they look out over the rooftops. A rich, wet smell fills his head as he surveys the garden. Patches of red are scattered among the shining leaves; the ripening tomatoes are beginning to bend some plants. When he eats them—sliced thickly, sprinkled with salt—he thinks, they will taste like this air does now. But that won't be for another week or two, depending on the weather. Today, there is other work to do. This morning the collector has an appointment.

“You've got good veins,” he says. His guest laughs a bit uneasily and flexes her arm to accentuate the effect. “Some people are hardly visible. But yours stand out. This will be easy.”

It's true. Her veins are very visible. Almost achingly so. Just below the surface of her pale skin they are like blue-green fault lines that divide her slim arms into a skein of prospective cataclysm. It is impossible not to look at them and not be aware that her body—that anyone's body—is a pneumatic machine governed by pressure, release, and the possibility of rupture. Washing at the spigot, she clasps and rubs her hands. The collector takes notice as her veins—ever so slightly, in fact, no one else would see it—pulse outward when she tenses.

He stands by the sink gathering supplies from the shelves there: sterilizing pads, syringes, and collection tubes.

“How long does it take?” she asks, holding her wet hands out as if she were typing in mid-air.

“A few minutes at most.” He offers her some paper towels and she uses only one, and barely uses all of it, as she carefully daubs her hands dry.

“Great veins,” she says, nodding. “Well, don’t let the Red Cross find out. They’ll come looking for me.”

They sit down facing one another at the corner of a long metal table. Sparse and scrubbed, the room looks like a medical facility. This is intentional; it’s meant to reassure. His visitors often require reassurance. Around them, pinned to the walls, floating inches from the surface so that light filters through them, are perhaps a dozen pale red colored panels. These are the specimens. The collector collects vials of blood from the visitors to his house near the train tracks. When they leave he pours out the blackish-red liquid allowing it to pool on a sheet of a couple of square feet of vellum. Then he presses another vellum sheet on top of that. The blood spreads out and is flattened in between in the same way as a specimen in a microscope slide. It’s an Oreo, he once joked to himself. An Oreo cookie for a vampire. Once this treat is made—the blood fully spread to the edges of the sheets—he leaves it alone for a certain length of time so the blood can do its work. It will coagulate and then dry into a variety of identifiable patterns—swirling arcs that resemble photos of tropical weather systems, striated bands reminiscent of geologic layers of sediment, or bloodless pinholes which pit a dark wash of translucent blood like the last stars in hazy red sky at dawn.

He takes her arm, cupping the elbow in his latex-gloved palm as he swabs the skin just below her crook with an antiseptic pad. The alcohol, it strikes her, is the first thing she has smelled in this room. It brings her into focus: She is here, her arm being held and cleaned, a syringe and rubber hose on table awaiting use.

The collector detects some stiffness in her elbow—no one likes the sight of the needle. Something about the cool bite of alcohol in the air always reminds his visitors of the steel’s icy pinch. The whiff of alcohol is the needle’s calling card. He ties a short length of rubber hose around her biceps, giving the knot a good yet gentle tug. Functioning like a tourniquet, the hose blocks the passage of the blood and raises the veins as the fluid builds up. In a few seconds, she watches as a ripe blue vein swells out invitingly, damp and glistening with alcohol. He straightens her arm so the soft crinkled skin at the joint pulls taut.

“Lots of people look away or close their eyes,” he offers, by way of suggestion.

“Oh,” she replies, barely audible as she continues to study the targeted spot, the vein now clearly beating in time to her heart. “Do you want me to?”

“It’s up to you. If you don’t think you’ll twitch or jerk your arm when you feel the needle, then go ahead and watch”

“I think I’ll be alright.” She straightens her back and takes quick hold of her breath. She’s done often at the doctor’s office but this time is different. This isn’t a test for medical reasons, something she needs to do. Instead, she’s here to give her blood to . . . well, to see it. To see it dried out and hung up. The cells cracked and split into burst-star patterns. The geology of the rusted flakes unearthed. To have something made from it. She’s giving her

blood to the collector so he can watch what happens to it for years to come—outside her body, decaying slowly, changing hue over the years. Like planting a flower but in reverse. Instead, they're uprooting something living. Burying it in vellum. Awaiting what beauty it's decomposition will bring when it's incessant rush is still. No, this is voluntary. But not for the sick and needful. It's being done out of curiosity. What does the part of me look like when? And so this time she wants to watch.

The needle is attached to a receptacle—a kind of test tube in which the blood can be stored. When he pushes the point into the vein she feels the expected sharp sensation and then a dull, almost muscular throb. Nothing happens. Then the tube begins to fill. The dark liquid begins pooling at the base of the receptacle and soon it moves upward. She doesn't feel the blood flowing out. There's no sense of pressure relieved, as if she'd sprang a leak. What if, she imagines in a panicky flash, the tube were a long hose leading, say, to the sink. Would she sit here unaware, unaffected by pain until her body emptied itself entirely? Is this why some suicides choose the razor blade and the hot bath? Because the passing is so quiet? Strange to think that pinprick in the vein might be enough to drain away a body's life, a body that otherwise can seem so strong and resilient to much bolder onslaughts. The tube fills up and the collector removes the needle, and in a dexterous, much practiced move, sets a patch of gauze on the spot and bends her arm to immediately staunch the flow. He picks up the scarlet-colored tube—a sort of magic wand, she thinks—and he removes the needle and seals it. He gives it a small shake and he smiles, as if he were amazed as she is at this transubstantiation—of living blood into mere liquid to be measured in millimeters not in heartbeats, a splash of color dancing in someone's hand. She smiles, too.

“Medieval doctors thought of blood as the sap of the human tree,” he says, handing her the warm vial. “One of them wrote something like, ‘Blood flows deep within the human tree.’”

“So, you've broken open my branch.” She removes the gauze to reveal the perforation which is already acquiring a purplish halo.

“Let's put a bandage on,” the collector says and he affixes a label with her name on the blood-filled tube. “And then you can take a look at my garden.”

The sun is high now and the ground is dry; the water from the morning watering long since having percolated down into the roots. She winces in the bright, unclouded light. Her arm has become to hurt a little. A bruise-like pain—blurred, deeper than it seems it should be.

As a train grinds up the incline, she thinks she can feel its high-pitched vibrations register against her tiny wound. As if it's become an antennae for any and all motion. Even though it's hot, she has a chill. She hugs her arms to herself and notices her skin is prickled with gooseflesh.

“When you come back to see what we’ve done, you can take some of these tomatoes. They should be ripe by then.” The collector moves among the plants checking the sturdiness of the stems, the condition of the leaves. If the sun stays this strong through the day, they will need another good watering at dusk.

“I’ll take you up on that.” She tries to sound bright, to laugh but instead she pulls her arms even closer to protect her punctured skin from air suddenly so alive that it seems to be able to bruise her. “A good tomato is worth a little blood.”

The collector is kneeling, his hands—ungloved now for this earthwork—once again prodding in the soil around the plants.

“We never think about it,” he says, looking up her. “Then we see it—see actual blood—and that usually means something awful has happened. And so we think of blood as something awful.”

Another train slowly squeals past overhead—a few passengers can be seen at the windows, some resting their heads on the glass, some even looking out at the long rows of houses. But no one, it seems, takes notice of the man and woman in the yard below. But they know, too, each in their own time, how the air on the blood can be felt.

Albert Mobilio is a poet, critic, and co-editor of *Hyperallergic Weekend*. He is the recipient of an Andy Warhol Arts Writers Grant, MacDowell Fellowship, Whiting Award, and the National Book Critics Circle award for reviewing. His work has appeared in *Harper’s*, *Black Clock*, *Bomb*, *Cabinet*, *Hambone*, *Open City*, and *Tin House*. Books of poetry include *Bendable Siege*, *The Geographics*, *Me with Animal Towering*, *Touch Wood*, and most recently *Same Faces. Games and Stunts*, a book of fiction, was published in 2017 by Black Square Editions. He is an associate professor of literary studies at the New School’s Eugene Lang College and a former editor at *Bookforum*.