

Alejandra Oliva's devoted attention at the border

A student of mine went to Tijuana to help. She found she could help the most simply by paying attention.

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [March 13, 2019](#) issue



Asylum seekers from the 2018 migrant caravan in Tijuana, Mexico. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Daniel Arauz](#).

When I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago, Martin Marty told us a story about philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer's time there as a visiting lecturer. Marty was in charge of getting Gadamer to the airport at the end of his visit, and Gadamer wanted to go to the Art Institute first to see the paintings by Claude Monet.

“I’ll be glad to take you,” Marty said, “but the museum only has a few Monets.”

Gadamer replied, “I only have a few hours.”

Last summer, I was lucky enough to see an exhibit by the British artist Tacita Dean, on the theme of landscape. Dean’s art often grows out of her practice of close observation of the world around her. On display were her collection of clovers—four-, five-, six-, seven-, eight-, and even nine-leaf ones—and her collection of round stones.

At the center of the exhibit was a work inspired by Dean’s attention to the ancient trees of England. The aptly titled *Majesty* consists of multiple sections of a photograph hand-printed, enlarged, and pieced together to form a monumental whole of an 800-year-old oak in a village in Kent. Once Dean had assembled the image of the tree, she used white gouache to make every twig on every branch visible. To accomplish this, she had to use a small-gauge brush to paint around the intricate lacework of that ancient tree.

She has written about how wonderful it was to get so close to the tree, to trace its every detail while “delighting in my proximity to even the tiniest and most inaccessible of branches.” If *Majesty* were simply a photograph, it would be a powerful work of homage. Dean’s meticulous brushwork makes it something more: an act of devotion.

I thought of these acts of devotion—Gadamer standing for hours before a few paintings by Monet, Dean carefully painting around that gnarled, ancient tree—when I received a message from a student I know, a brilliant writer named Alejandra Oliva. She had just returned from Tijuana, where she had expected to assist asylum seekers with their paperwork, helping them fit their stories of trauma and loss into the 150-word space provided by Form I-589.

What she did instead was to accompany people much earlier in the process, standing in line with them to get a number—which in turn allowed them to wait in a line that allowed them to cross the border two months hence. She listened with families for their number to be called in a plaza 45 minutes away from the camp where they slept, helping them manage the possessions they had to carry back and forth each day. Without the task of filling out a form to organize these interactions, Oliva simply devoted herself to the people before her—playing with children, handing out tamales and cups of coffee, listening as people told her their stories and

showed her their scars. She stood with them in front of a white concrete fence to wait for the vans that would take them to detention centers in the United States. Then she waved good-bye, yelling “Vaya con Dios!” as the vans pulled away.

“Watching those vans disappear down the street,” she wrote, “feels like they’re falling off the edge of the world.” And maybe they are. Because for every person or family that reappears on the other side, there are a dozen or more who don’t show up in the official database.

Oliva is the kind of student you always hope will turn up in your classes: thoughtful, creative, attentive to detail, all of her writing polished until it shines. Her work is marked by the kind of devotion Tacita Dean brought to *Majesty*—a willingness to get as close as possible to whatever she’s working on, to think her way around corners, to follow the words into the spaces between the words. In a class on contemplative prayer last year, she read and reread a Simone Weil essay on the Lord’s Prayer, held each word up to the light, and then wrote a new essay on prayer from bits and pieces of Weil’s. Having gotten so close to Weil’s words, she knows that essay better than anyone I know. She knows it the way Dean knows the oak tree, the way I imagine Gadamer knew those Monets.

Oliva brought this same capacity for devoted attention to those waiting in the endless lines at the southern border of our country. Her reverence for each detail of their lives and their lacework of branching relationships helped her to do the work most vital in this moment: to make visible the humanity of those caught in a system bent on dehumanizing them. She is quick to say that her offering was small. But she is even quicker to say that it is a sin to do nothing because we feel the problem is too big to address.

During Lent, we make small renunciations in the hope of making room for bigger changes. What better moment to practice taking the time to really see another person? What better time to practice reverently tracing the contours of others’ lives, in the hope of bearing witness to each other’s humanity and standing against the dehumanization being carried out in our name?

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Every twig and branch.”