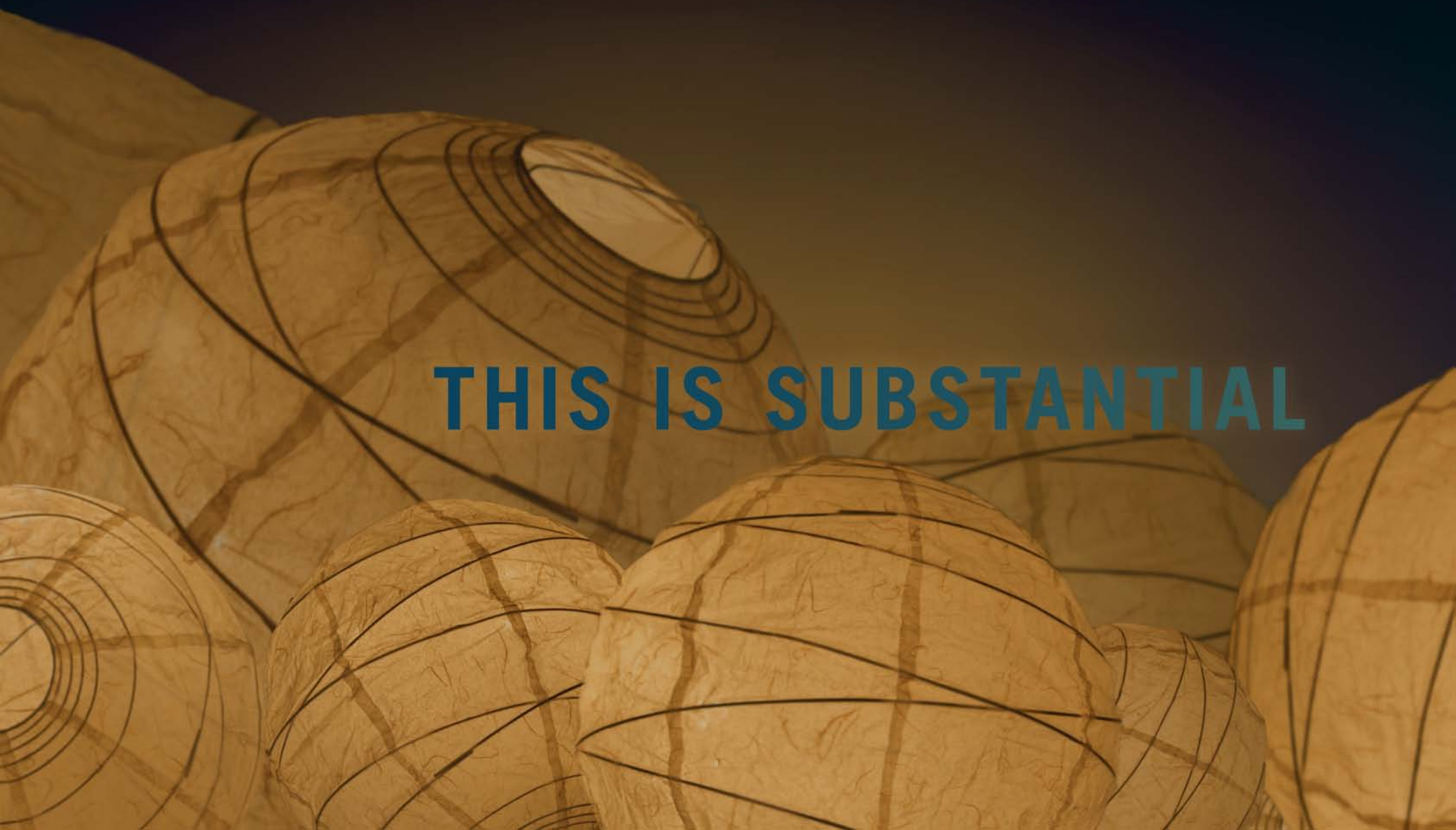


GRIMANESA AMORÓS

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ESSAY

The Incident, The Gift, and an Artist

by **Kóan Jeff Baysa**

The town of Peekskill, in Westchester County, New York, sits on the east side of the Hudson River, a wide and majestic waterway that is aptly nicknamed the “Rhine of America.” Subjected to quick changes of the wind and sun, the river shifts from blues to grays and browns with tidal fluctuations and fleeting clouds. George Washington considered the region strategically located and key to the nation’s defense. Peekskill was part of the escaped slave underground railroad, housed a branch of the Black Panther Party, and was the landing site of a fragment of a meteorite. It is the birthplace of several notable Hollywood actors, former state governor George Pataki, as well as the home of the remarkable women known as “the founding mothers of Hudson River HealthCare”: Reverend Jeanette Phillips, Mary Woods, Willie Mae Jackson, Pearl Woods.

In 1971, years after fellow citizens and personal friends marched on Washington and were both moved and empowered by Martin Luther King, Jr.’s impassioned speech of 1963, Mary Woods had a dream of her own, born of a disheartening, dehumanizing incident. At the time, access to health care for families in Peekskill was hindered by a long bus ride to the county medical center in Valhalla, about 20 miles away or meant going downtown to a shabbily outfitted basement-level clinic for well child and obstetrical care. Travel back and forth to the county health center plus bus transfers with children in tow frequently consumed a full day. In the fall of 1971, after a medical checkup of one of her four children at the Valhalla health center, this single mother missed the last bus and was “standing on the corner with no ride” for her and her increasingly restless children. In the failing light of the autumn day, after hours of distressful waiting, she finally got a ride, but resolved to never have this happen again to her or anyone else. In the following days, joined by three other women friends, Willie Mae Jackson, Pearl Woods, and Reverend Jeanette Phillips, with 27 children between them, Mary Woods, “answering her calling,” galvanized her friends to action and set in motion a chain of events focused on having an affordable, accessible health center closer to their homes in Peekskill. They canvassed door to door for petitions and letters, held cake sales and organized dinners to raise money. Four years later, on the first of July, 1975, the dream was realized and the Peekskill Area Ambulatory Health Care Center, now Hudson River HealthCare, opened in a former department store on the town’s Main Street. In just thirty years after the fateful incident that left Mary Woods and her children stranded, this wonderful gift from these courageous women to their community has become a major health care provider in the nine county region. The leader of the founding mothers, Rev. Jeanette Phillips, reflected, “Health care was a right for us. Tenacity, hard work, and faith brought us to where we are today.”