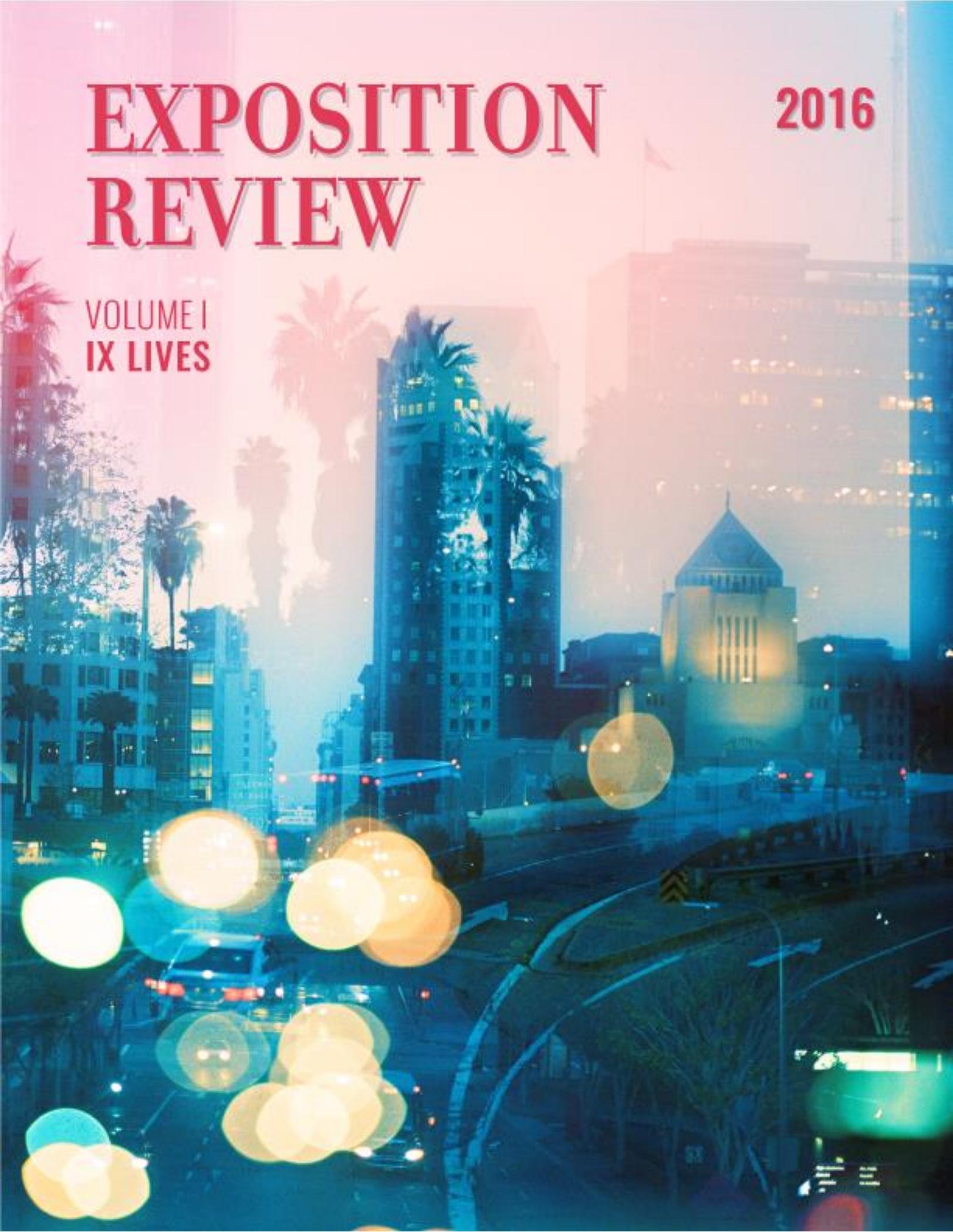


EXPOSITION REVIEW

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Brianna J.L. Smyk

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When we selected the theme “IX Lives,” we had no idea how fitting it would be. The concept of transformation was already on our mind; our beloved Master of Professional Writing program at USC was entering its final year, and without enough students to fill the editorial staff, the ninth volume of its literary journal, the *Southern California Review*, was set to remain unpublished.

Taking on the journal was a challenge, but a welcome one, as we transitioned from a university-based print journal to an independent, online publication. As our editorial staff emerged from among the last graduating classes of the MPW program, from those navigating the fine line between working professionals and word addicts, we found ourselves evolving from *Southern California Review* to *Exposition Review*.

And, though *Exposition Review* is a different beast than its predecessor, at its core, it remains a part of the legacy that MPW left behind, and a home to which its alumni can return.

In choosing “IX Lives” as our theme, we wanted to celebrate that spirit of change and renewal. The work in our new volume reflects the wide spectrum of human experience, and the power we have in ourselves to take control of our destinies and take on new shapes.

We are indebted to so many people who have devoted their time and energy to make this journal possible. We have to thank our team of editors as well as our mentors and MPW teachers, especially our Editor-at-Large David Ulin and MPW program directors Brighde Mullins and Prince Gomolvilas for their guidance, and Richard Rayner and Claudia Rankine for keeping the MPW community alive and participating in our journal. And of course, we are so grateful to our contributors whose words moved and compelled us, as we know they will our readers.

This first issue of *Exposition Review* is only the beginning of this new life. We are so excited to present it to you and to continue to act as a hub of the multi-genre writing community in Los Angeles and beyond.

Jessica June Rowe
Brianna J.L. Smyk
EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

The Magnolia Lock

L. PHILIP DARROW

I met her shortly after I discovered that all of the trees of the Earth were at war. It was a war invisible to the rest of us, conducted entirely underground—roots strangling and cutting through other roots, severing the anchors, as they crashed choking dead onto driveways and motorcars and, with greater strategy and effect, into other arboreal enemies in a splintering domino cascade of wooden death. It was a rather *slow* war, as you could imagine. It had been going on for centuries, and as far as I could determine, none of the parties even remembered the initial cause of the conflict, nor the reasons for their varying allegiances—but it was *real* all the same, and onward they soldiered into the murderous business of murderous business. Now all of that is really a separate story, still under investigation, if you believe in that sort of thing. Personally, I pay no mind to such notions. *This* story, *that* story, who really gives a damn? All stories are the same bloody story, retold ad nauseam; variations of meter, rhyme, plot, and persona shuffled through time and the senses, a welcome trickery of mind set in place to beguile even the most unsanitized of thinkers. We're made for it, as it were. Made to see new stars born in the same dying suns. But regardless, I mention it here so that you may understand why I was there beneath that magnolia tree in late May of 2012, an ear pressed to the dirt near the base of the trunk (listening for signals from the front), when Elana Spring shouted from the nearby patio, "Excuse me, sir, what are you doing on my lawn?!"

I looked up for a moment, and seeing that she posed no immediate threat, quickly resumed my work. As luck would have it, the signals I was listening for lasted only a few more seconds, and so I jotted down the remaining patterns in my notebook, one step closer to deciphering the Magnolia Code, and stood, her burning blue eyes two sharp arrowheads plunging into mine.

"Ah, is it your lawn now?" I replied, searching my pockets for a cigarette before recalling the crushing truth that I had quit seven months earlier. Nothing like the agony of human interaction to make you long for a cigarette, a sideways step out of time. "I apologize; I've been away for a bit. Out of circulation, if you will. My research, you see."

Her eyes grew larger as I approached, no longer burning and pointed, but now two giant orbs of pristine sea—was it nervousness? curiosity?—impossible to say, but she made no effort to back away. I extended my hand, which she ignored, introduced myself,

and proceeded to prattle on about the previous owner of the residence, an elderly Cherokee gentleman who was known around town as Buffalo Bill, and the arrangement we had, wherein he granted me access to the curtilage and the vast acreage behind his home, leaving me free to conduct my botanical inquiries (and pitch a tent when I was, rather embarrassingly, between dwellings), in exchange for my assistance with cultivating, harvesting, and preparing the various herbs, roots, and leaves he transformed into quasi-medicinal concoctions for sale online. I had been away for years, I told her, on a detour down into Mississippi, but now I was back and anxious to resume my work.

“Buffalo Bill?” she asked, punctuated with a perfunctory laugh, before muttering, “How perverse.” She was of the white race, undoubtedly, an Aryan dream of perfect porcelain skin, silken blonde hair and the bluest blue of eyes—*except that she wasn’t*, and in her pulsed a native blood that once drenched the fields of massacre.

Buffalo Bill was her grandfather, she explained, and I expressed my sincerest regrets when she informed me that he had passed away four months earlier. I was momentarily seized with a morbid excitement at the news of his death, thinking that perhaps she was about to reveal my inclusion in the will and the nature of my (one could only hope) grand inheritance. No such revelation ensued, and it seemed rather gauche to inquire, so instead we talked for a few minutes, or rather she talked and I listened, my professed acquaintance with her grandfather apparently forming, for her, a sense of kinship. Two months prior to our meeting she had returned from Boston to this house, where she periodically spent summers as a child. She was taking a “mental health sabbatical from the corporate world” (her terribly clichéd phrase, not mine), and was separated from her second husband, an “ombudsman” (such a stupid word!), who had somehow obtained sole legal and physical custody of their three-year-old daughter, Lana. It was an interesting enough monologue, I suppose, but I had grown weary from my endless toil in the unseasonably warm weather, and excused myself to retire for the afternoon. I walked away, toward my waiting tent hidden in the woods behind the house; she voiced no objection.

Over the next two weeks, she and I would see each other daily as I continued to work on my earthen exegesis, and eventually a true dialogue developed. At first I would catch her out of the corner of my eye, standing at some distance, and slowly she would creep closer—a few steps then a pause, a few more, then the same—until she was right upon me, and even then she waited for several minutes before clearing her throat and sheepishly swallowing her “hello.” I was no stranger to awkwardness, having never been embraced by the brotherhood of man, and so I feigned surprise at her voice each time, the less said about the odd approach, the better. We would talk for a few moments, exchanging unimportant pleasantries about the weather and whatever else there is to say, until she slowly backed away in the same fashion, pausing at the same points in her retreat as she had in her advance. After a few days of this, her pace quickened—and one day she

simply appeared right next to me, inviting me into the house for a drink. I was running perilously low on alcohol, having been forced to suffer the indignity of rationing the few remaining gulps of vodka I still had left, so I gladly accepted, following the thin form draped in a flowing sundress that billowed in the warm breeze.

Disappointment ensued, however, when I discovered that her idea of a “drink” was a glass of pink lemonade. I disguised my irritation with a plastic smile, scanning the kitchen for a bottle of liquor whose absence might not be noticed, finding nothing. She wanted to hear stories about her grandfather, so I obliged, relating a yarn or two about his irascible nature and his venomous shotgun battles with assorted vermin audacious enough to feed upon his gardens. She laughed and poured more lemonade into my glass, even though it was still two-thirds full.

“So why *that* tree?” she asked.

“Which tree?” I replied, knowing full well what she meant.

“The magnolia. You seem to spend more time there than anywhere else.” And as I sat in my chair the day bended and swirled, and to me it seemed that the arrowhead eyes were back, butchering their way through the centuries.

I explained to her that although most magnolias bloomed throughout the spring and summer in the South, this magnolia had a distinctly Northern sensibility, blooming just once a year in the mid-spring, and even after all that wait, the flowering bursts of pink lasted only slightly more than a week before the petals browned and fell, twirling like dead butterflies as they spun to the ground, and the sweet, fragrant aroma of vitality and repose was lost.

Of course, that had nothing to do with my interest in the tree, but I would not reveal my secrets until she had first revealed hers.

She listened, taking a long sip from her straw, staring at the liquid in her glass over dour, sunken lips, then related that when she was “but a girl” she suffered from seizures, epileptic fits of neural lightning short-circuiting the brain, sending her twisting wretchedly to the ground several times a day. The doctors prescribed *this* medication, then *that* medication, increasing and decreasing the dosages for a chemistry experiment made of bone and blood, to no avail. And then—

“My grandmother, my *Elisi*, was in the hospital most of the time. I don’t know why, but I don’t think it was really a hospital, either—I think it was probably some kind of mental place, a sanitarium, or whatever they called it then. My grandfather called her ‘the white Cherokee’—she had been adopted by a Cherokee family, and she certainly didn’t look Indian—she looked like *me*. But she was ‘more Cherokee’ than he was—she dressed in tribal clothing, always with some kind of fur, regardless of the heat. And she talked about ‘the old ways,’ and how so many things had been lost. That is, when she talked—which wasn’t often. When she was around I mostly remember her sitting here, at this

kitchen table, chain-smoking, staring out of this window, emotionless, silent—as lost as those things from so long ago.”

She stood and floated a few feet over, pressing her waist against the frame of the window that overlooked the backyard, gazing out at truncated infinity. The magnolia tree was centered directly in the middle, its placement and the deepness of its greens, grays, and whites making it the focal point of the landscape. It would be blooming soon.

She sighed as the world-weary do, as if breath itself was a burden. Then she continued her monologue, never ungluing her eyes from the window. “I think it happened the first time I was alone with her. I was never supposed to be left alone with her, my dad was clear about that, I remember—he said it wasn’t safe, that she was sick and couldn’t watch me properly. Well, something happened—some kind of miscommunication, but one day there was no one else there, and of course, another seizure. I remember I was trying to get her to play a game with me, and she wouldn’t even look over, just staring out through this window—and then I was on the floor, and she was standing over me, cradling my head and whispering that everything would be fine. There were old ways, she said, magics long forgotten, nearly eradicated by the white man’s treachery. I remember thinking it was funny, even then—her referring to the ‘white man’ as if it was some kind of ‘other’—she really didn’t know who she was. Or did she? And she just wasn’t what she *appeared* to be. I don’t know. The next thing I *do* know is that she was chasing me with scissors, and there was nowhere to go as she held me down and I screamed as she cut off a lock of my hair. Then she dragged me out into this yard. The magnolia had only been planted a short time before; it was just a few feet high, about the same height as I was. She had this kind of small metal *thing*, a drill *thing*, and as she turned the handle, it twisted a hole through the tree. She put the lock of my hair in the hole, then filled it in with crushed-up pieces of bark, and told me as the tree grows, it would take away my sickness, it would be absorbed into the earth and I would feed from the strength of the tree, healing as it grew. She took my hand and traced over my fingers with her own, telling me that the branches were the many fingers in my brain on which the lightning rode—and the trunk was the anchor, the palm and the hand that held the branches in place, that formed the lightning and channeled the lightning and set the world ablaze.” She stopped and walked over to the refrigerator, pulling a bottle of Tanqueray gin from the freezer. I could have kissed her, but instead sat calmly as she brought out two pint glasses and a bottle of warm tonic water. She was no longer truly there with me, anyway—her movements seemed autonomic, mechanical bends and twists of the legs, arms and wrists, devoid of her usual spectral grace.

“They went away,” she said, as she folded into her chair, “the seizures. If only that was all that changed.”

There was no more conversation on that day, as we sat in silence and she nursed her gin and tonic, staring out of the window, while I downed three of the same, and having

run out of tonic water, pounded half a pint of gin. The world was slow and its seams were showing, and so I vanished, feeling buzzed and dry and unsteady, stumbling back to my tent.

And in the morning it was all the same, and the routine resumed, but without any appearance from her . . . and that night and the next morning, they were both the same, still nary a glimpse of her . . . and on again and on again for six more days, until the day that it *wasn't* all the same, that day when the magnolia finally bloomed, flowering whites and pinks softening against the golden, purple swirl of the sky, cusping toward yet another dawn.

It was in this twilight that I saw her standing naked underneath the tree, her back arched with arms outstretched, the tips of her fingers delicately stroking two of the largest branches that crossed above her. She lunged forward and thrust her body against the trunk, pressing her face into the thick stem and wrapping her arms around it, her slender frame caught in some unknown act of eros. I knew that I should turn to leave but I was helpless in the moment, encased in time, and didn't look away when she turned her eyes toward me and smiled—a wide smile of utter joy, eyes radiant with the bliss of harmony, a tranquility of being that I had never witnessed. Unashamed of her nakedness, she began leaping toward me, slight ripples in taut flesh, the smile still rounding her face. I had yet to move as she embraced me softly, the warmth of her body, of her being, burning into mine. She reached up behind my neck and guided my head down gently, kissing me on the forehead with a child's tenderness, then skipped away toward the house, giggling. I stayed there motionless for several minutes, a complete foreigner to the world, unable to even name my feelings, until the rays of the now risen sun melted through my shadowed stupor. And with my heart pounding, and my nerves jangled and raw, I headed into town to steal some cigarettes from the pharmacy.

When I returned she was nowhere to be found, and so I helped myself to the remaining gin from the refrigerator and smoked the two packs of stolen cigarettes, spinning out into nothingness in the squalor of my tent as the sun faded and the earth fell away.

The earth was back in the morning as I coughed myself awake, spitting thick clumps of mucus onto the nylon floor. A truly abhorrent condition, and it pains me to revisit these moments, and describe them as I do—but accuracy must stand above all things, including pride, if there is to be any value assigned to these bludgeoned words. And so I tried to stand but gravity dragged me home, crashing me to the ground in a vile heap of sub-humanity. Dry-heaving, drenched in sickly, sour sweat, I crawled to the corner of the tent to relieve myself, then wheezed back to sleep with the stink of gin still on my tongue and my throat a clump of desiccated, cracking sores. Time ran in fits of sudden consciousness swallowed into long drags of nothingness, until the night was upon me once again, with soft hands and a soft voice guiding me out of the tent, and the night—

“come inside, come inside” said the voice of the shadow in the dark; the voice that pulled me into the house and up the stairs, with no light to pierce its veil, stripping me of my soiled clothes and splashing me down gently into the warm caress of a waiting bath. I rested my head against where the porcelain rim met the wall and closed my eyes, unsure if I was sleeping still and being drawn toward oblivion. When my eyes opened next I was lying on a bed in the dark, and after fumbling against the walls for a light switch, found myself in what must have been a spare bedroom, given its modest dimensions and the dusty assortment of household clutter that had accumulated throughout. I was still naked, and my clothes were nowhere in sight, but at the foot of the bed was a faded, oversized flannel robe that I instantly recognized as belonging to her grandfather. I wrapped myself within it, pulling the fabric belt through the loops and around my waist, venturing forth into the blackness of the hallway, then cautiously navigating the stairs down to the first floor. The drapes were all drawn tightly, shutting out any stray glimmers of light that dared attempt intrusion. I heard a tapping like light rain on cardboard and followed.

She was flitting around the kitchen, enraptured, graceful sweeps of the arms and legs, bounding delicately from corner to corner of the room; naked in body and spirit, gentle laughter flowering into sound. The yellowed kitchen curtains were parted, and the full moon that hung in the window glazed her skin in a shifting, silvery sheen of impenetrable strength that belied her willowy beauty. She noticed me and took my hand, and suddenly I was dancing too, inaudible music piped in straight from the moon and the stars guiding our slender movements, as we circled the kitchen in a twisting, dashing waltz. In a fluid blur she turned and kicked the screen from the window, leaping into the night, still clasping my hand, dragging me out after her—tumbling onto wet grass, then vaulting toward the sky, we raced for the magnolia tree, never missing a step in the dance.

And this misting dream went on for five more days; never sleeping, never tiring, spirits traveling on the breeze and rising from the ground encircling us invisibly as we danced to the rhythms of the sky and of the earth, awash in the forces that formed the lightning and channeled the lighting and set the world ablaze. And then the petals began to brown, and to fall, all within a day. Our movements slowed. Her laughter ceased. The ground underneath the tree became littered with the soiled dead. In an instant the dizzy delirium ended, the music stopped mid-note, and Elana began to cry—a light whimper at first, then violent tremors of tears. She fell to the ground screaming, unintelligible bursts of primal agony that morphed into a searing refrain—“I will not go back! I will never go back again!” It blistered through me as the mechanics of my body abruptly seized, and I crashed to the earth from exhaustion, spun out from the world and devoured whole by the void.

I felt the sun on my face as I opened my eyes again, back in that bedroom upstairs, still wearing her grandfather’s robe. The belt was missing, leaving me rather immodestly on display, so I drew the robe in close around me, clutching it in place with folded arms,

and leapt from the bed. The drapes in that room and all the others were opened wide, and I made my way downstairs in the stinging brightness, trailing through silence.

I saw her from the kitchen window. Hanging there. Lifeless. She was dressed in a tribal skirt and leggings, a sash of thick fur running across her blouse. As I approached the magnolia, I saw the fabric belt from the robe wrapped around her neck, fastened at the other end to one of the thickest branches that jutted off wildly from the trunk. And I felt nothing. No sorrow, no loss. I was empty inside. As empty as the heavens were, sick with the plague of age. And so was she. Whatever bargain her grandmother had struck with the great unknown to cure those seizures had inevitably led her back here, to this place, to this tree, from which she now dangled in the wind. Maybe better to be brought low by sickness, to suffer and know every nuance of pain, yes—but to still feel those moments of true love and joy, naturally interspersed with the anguish. Yes, yes, yes—maybe better that than to be like her, to only truly feel, to only truly *LIVE*, while this magnolia bloomed. Just as she was buried under an avalanche of emotion and yearning, I buried her there, underneath the magnolia tree, covering her gray face in dead clumps of shriveled petals. At least now I had a man on the inside, as it were. Someone stationed underground, at the front. In this life, one must seize upon any advantage, even in the midst of tragedy. There was no time for sentimentality then, and there is no time for it now. Valuable messages had been lost while I indulged in the frail business of human frailty. Perhaps it was all a ploy, a distraction. Perhaps this was when they first learned of my investigation, and feared any further discovery. Regardless, I was undaunted. For there is a war on, you see. There is a war on, and it will be the death of you all.

Evangel

WILLIAM DEVERELL

My seven-year-old son sees a dog with a leg cleaved off lying dead on the eastbound side of the 10 Freeway. He gasps—sucks his breath all in and lifts up his neck and head.

“Look at my new watch,” I say stupidly, just trying to turn his eyes.

“Oh,” John says. “Oh that poor dog, did you see that Dad?”

I drove on. I think John’s crying in the backseat. But he isn’t. He’s just staring out the window with distance in his eyes. I glide to the exit ramp, drive across the overpass and down the ramp so that we are on the westbound side of the freeway, going the other way.

John frowns. “Dad, what are you doing?”

We exit again, drive across another overpass and get back onto the freeway, headed towards the dog. John is frightened. I can hear wavering in his voice.

“What are you doing?”

“I am going to cover that dog.”

“What? What do you mean? With what? Why? What are you doing, Dad?”

I pull over on the shoulder and turn off the engine. The dead dog is thirty feet in front of me. I reach into the backseat. My gym bag is there, on the floor at John’s feet, scrunched with a still-damp towel. I grab the towel and climb out of the car on the passenger side so as not to be near the traffic flying by.

“Stay here.”

John starts to cry. I can see him in the rear-view mirror.

“What are you going to do, Dad?”

“Stay here.”

I walk over to the dog. It’s starting to bloat. A brindled male mutt, one hind leg missing, the stump raw and purpled at the hip. His front legs are splayed apart. I think for a split second that it makes him look supplicant, before I catch myself and think, “This is just a dead dog.” A dog that stinks, stiff dead on an oily patch of filthy asphalt. A crumpled waxed cup lies next to the dog. A straw waves from the plastic lid. I kick the cup away, and my foot rubs up against the dog and annoys the flies. They buzz around its black lips and eyes. One crawls out from a nostril and up the other. Bending over at the waist, I unfurl the towel and drop it over the dog, but the rush of wind from passing cars blows it off. A car horn honks furiously. I have to wrap him. I kneel, and it hurts. The dog is so stiff

that I can hardly roll him over so that my sweaty towel can get under and go round. But after a few minutes of struggle, it is finished.

Do I pray now?

What do I say? Goodbye, dog? I am sorry that you are so ignominiously dead?

John. I go back to the car. My son is speechless and wide-eyed, now in the front seat, unable to figure out what his father is doing covering a dead three-legged dog with a gym towel on a gritty Southern California freeway shoulder.

“Come with me.” To my surprise, he obeys. We hold hands as we walk to the bundle.

“We need to pray for this dog.”

My voice quavers.

“It’s the right thing to do. He needs someone to be here. We are here. We need to say something.”

John just begins without being asked, holding his small hands out in front of him, palms up. I can barely hear him over the noise.

“God please take care of this dog and help him walk in Heaven. Amen.”

* * *

You have to drive the freeways to see the blankets. I’ve never seen them on a street or any of the wide boulevards that cut across the basin. They are always on the freeways, on the shoulder or sometimes up alongside a guardrail. I saw a burnt orange one last month, dirty and crumpled up against one of those commemorative mission bells that mark the El Camino Real on the Pacific Coast Highway. The rust on the bell matched the color of the blanket.

I drive the Pasadena Freeway nearly every day. That’s where I see the most blankets. From Pasadena through South Pasadena, to Highland Park, then down towards the L.A. River and up the southern edge of the Elysian hillside near Dodger Stadium. And back again. 8:30 one way, 5:30 the other.

I’ve seen maybe a hundred blankets over the last twenty years, probably half of them on the drive to work, half on the way home. I don’t think most people notice. At first I thought they were discarded trash, bedspreads or tablecloths blown off the top of a car where it covered something, or maybe thrown from a window by a mischievous child. Some look like those quilted blue ones from U-Haul.

Witness converted to pattern, and the blankets revealed themselves. They weren’t ever flat or billowed out. They were always on the shoulder or the median, never in traffic. Always bundled up and rolled, as if there was something inside that wool or paisley-printed cotton package. Which of course there always was.

In Los Angeles, we all know people who refuse to drive freeways. New drivers or elderly drivers, people who've been in terrible accidents, teenagers. They seem to be mostly women, but that's probably wrong. Men have a harder time admitting it, and truth is obscure.

I meet these people from time to time. They ask for surface street routes to the soccer game. Or they arrive late to events and eventually get around to explaining why. It is a hard way to get around the metropolis, plotting a careful route avoiding the freeways. Maybe we live in two cities, one for those of us who drive and one for those who don't. Those who see the blankets and those who do not.

A friend of mine stopped driving altogether after getting hurt in an accident, even though it happened in a parking lot and she wasn't even driving. A kid in an SUV backed into her as she was putting groceries in her trunk at Ralphs. She was fine, but she nearly sliced her hand off on a bottle of expensive gin that shattered in her shopping bag. She doesn't drive at all. She gets around by bus and Metro, and she just bought an expensive bicycle. Her palm has a purplish scar shaped like a cross.

Her name is Angela. Her grandfather owned the construction company that poured the concrete that made the Pasadena Freeway. That project made him very rich. You can see his name and his company embossed in concrete on the abutments on the bridges that cross that freeway: *Arnold Dove Construction, Pasadena*.

In the spring of 1940, not long after the freeway opened to parades and fanfare, Arnold Dove went with five friends to see the ruins of the St. Francis Dam, about an hour's drive away over the mountains. The dam fell down in the middle of the night sometime in the late 1920s, and the floodwaters killed about 300 unsuspecting people downstream. An entire Mexican labor camp washed away, obliterated in mere seconds. The bodies were never recovered, buried under tons of debris and muck left behind when the flood receded days later. No one remembers these people.

The center section of the dam, called The Tombstone, did not fall. Angela's granddad and his friends picnicking on top of it took photographs the day of their visit. Angela has the pictures. Six friends, smiling and laughing. They have a picnic basket, a blanket spread out on what's left of the dam, and bottles of soda or beer. One picture looks out across the landscape, and, in the far distance and way down below, you can see the boulders and chunks of concrete tossed around by the flood. One picture is of a dead rattlesnake, lying next to the broken bottle that someone had just killed it with. Right after this picture was taken, one of the friends picked up the dead snake and playfully threw it at Arnold Dove. He leapt out of the way and fell 200 feet to his death. Angela lives in his Pasadena mansion with her husband and their two sons, one of whom is named Arnold.

You know this. The blankets wrap dead dogs. Lost dogs or wild dogs, dogs that run onto the freeway and get killed. Who is wrapping them up? I never saw anyone do it. I never thought of doing it, until I did.

I see a bundled freeway blanket vision, a wakeful dream, floats fully made into my head. Pentecostals from Central America, people who see it as a mission to give these dogs cloaked respect in death, are doing this. They drive the freeways in the stillness and the dark, seeking dead dogs to veil. It's much safer at that hour, and they'd pretty much escape being seen on such rare errands.

Poor and devout, immigrants living six across in a thinly-carpeted Los Angeles apartment. Sharing a car, working rough jobs, hanging out at lumber yards or hardware stores, looking for a half day's labor. I see them, soft-spoken and pious, holding tiny crosses rubbed shiny in their palms.

I see them in those shabby spaces, mumbled prayerfulness over rice and beans. An hour before first light, they squeeze into that one car. They have a chosen route. I imagine a map taped as tapestry on a wall in that apartment. They study the map and choose each daily route, each freeway to traverse, a sepulchral pilgrimage bracketed in prayer.

The trunk of the car is lined with torn and dirty \$1 swap meet blankets. They drive, quickly stopping when someone sees a dog. Each dead dog gets a blanket and some dignity. Or, if not that, at least anonymity proven by wool or cotton.

After I had wrapped my first dog, seeing blankets became something other than a curiosity. I know it seems odd, and I cannot quite describe it. Seeing these sad, peculiar parcels should provoke melancholy, right? But that isn't what happened to me—seeing a dog blanket became for me hopeful. I saw redemption and beauty in them, and that beauty radiated outward from each bundle.

I stopped listening to the radio on the way to and from work. For the first time in my life, I bought religious CDs. Verdi for the *Requiem*, Handel, Homilius, Praetorius, and *Canticle of the Sun*. On either side of me people laughed and argued on their cell phones as our cars inched past the Southwest Museum, over the LA River, or through the tunnels on the way home.

I did not talk on my phone. I sang.

All creatures of our God and King, Lift up your voice and with us sing, Alleluia! Alleluia! Thou burning sun with golden beam, Thou silver moon with softer gleam!

I wrapped dogs; I bought cheap blankets. In the space of a week: two pit bulls, a terrier mix, and, improbably, a leering basset hound dead on an on-ramp in South Pasadena.

Don't get me wrong. I didn't think that I had found "my purpose" or a calling. It was all more direct and simple than that. Drive, see a dead dog, pull over, enshroud the dog, pray, drive on. I think I liked the precision of it all as much as anything else. There was no gray area: my car, my blankets, my dogs. Faith and fastidiousness intertwined. The prayers I uttered over the dogs became more elaborate, and, more often than not, I sang them. I took greater care in the way I wrapped.

Two more mutts and a spotted Chihuahua. A Boxer mix.

I craved fellowship in the work, but I kept it secret. Only John knew, and he knew only about the first dog. I asked around, but it was awkward. My pastor looked at me quizzically when I inquired if he “knew anything about people who wrap dead dogs in blankets along the freeways.” I had to laugh to myself—we think ministers have seen or heard it all, and I figured I had stumped him with that one. “No,” was all he said.

Then, I got a tip. A friend told me about a cousin who belonged to a small evangelical sect that cared for the dead—people and animals—and that it did its work all over Los Angeles. That had to be them; my vision of who was doing this reappeared in my head. My friend said that they met at a storefront church in an old butcher shop in Highland Park, and she arranged for me to meet her cousin there on a Sunday morning.

I drove by the church twice just to make sure it was there, and on Sunday, I went. My heart fluttered when I walked in. The little congregation was mostly Latina, with a few men and boys, maybe twenty five people total. Three of us were white, including Joanna, the cousin. After services, I tried to talk to people in my pidgin Spanish, which went reasonably well. I introduced myself, but the translation seemed to get garbled, as it came out (correctly, I later learned) as Bernabé. I’ve never been a Barney, and I didn’t offer that.

One of the teenaged boys, for reasons unknown to me, offered up a nickname. “You are *Paloma macho*,” he said. It was presented in friendliness and with an open smile. I thought it sounded flattering, and I did not mind it. I was so thrilled to have found these people, hoping that they were the dog blanket people, hoping that they would bring me in, bring me along. I stayed all day, each hour an answered prayer. We talked and did chores around the tiny sanctuary, swept up the sidewalk, that kind of thing.

A week later, after another church service, they invited me to go with them, and I went in gladness. Not to the dogs at first. First to the people. I did not know that there were still potter’s fields in Los Angeles, but there are. Cemeteries of the poor, the lost, and the nameless. We spent an entire Saturday at one. We walked among the stones—rough cement stones from crude molds, all laid flush with the soil, no headstones. They were for the most part unmarked save for the occasional number crudely etched in—“976” or “1301.”

The congregation clutched hands, encircled in song and prayer. No one presided, they all participated as one, and I joined them. Afterwards, they brought out picnic paper plates and slender dowels, and I quickly learned that this was to christen the unknown with names. One of them would write a name, or ask me to do it—always an Old Testament name, always in English—with a Sharpie on a plate. Then we would tape the plate to a dowel and thrust it into the soil next to the stone. Across the hours, people unknown gave way to people prophetic and ancient, if only as long as a flimsy paper plate appellation would last. Zenobia. Ruth. Zachariah. Ahab. Ezekiel. Japheth. Job. Maybe because it fit so easily on a paper plate, we named nine Jobs.

It was exhausting, exhilarating labor. Back at the church, over lemonade and churros, I asked in my halting Spanish if they were the same people who wrapped dogs. They knew exactly what I was talking about as I pantomimed the act. Yes, they said, they were those people. I guess I had proven myself in the cemetery. I could go with them if I wished. Meet us here, they said, in the parking lot out back of the church, at 4:30 a.m. the next morning.

A storm arrives at midnight. It is windy and raining hard, and I cannot sleep. I wonder if the work will have to be set aside, but I catch myself. Mission is never obliged to weather. The rain wakes John, and he comes groggy into my room as I am dressing.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going for a drive,” I say.

“Why?”

“It’s just something I have to do.”

He knows. “Can I come with you?”

“Yes.” His knowledge alone nearly brings me to tears.

John dresses quickly in shorts, a t-shirt, sandals. I forget his rain jacket. We drive eight miles to the storefront church. The others are already there, six people drinking coffee under an awning. They nod hello to me, and the teenager Eduardo says “*Paloma macho*.” Someone hands John a donut.

One of the women pulls out a map. They have already decided where to go. She points out the southbound Harbor Freeway. We will drive as far as the Rosecrans exit and then turn around and go the other way. We will start looking for dogs once we get to the Martin Luther King, Jr. exit near USC.

It isn’t far, and we get there quickly. Still, the freeway is starting to get busy with early morning harbor and airport traffic. At Martin Luther King, I roll down the windows, and rain slants into the car. Our two-car caravan spots a big dog right away; what looked first like a tire takes animal shape as we slow down and pass by.

We pull over. John knows what I am going to do. I grab a big blanket and a flashlight from the trunk.

“Come with me, John.”

Four of us walk back to the dog, the asphalt slick and sticky under our feet, flashlights on.

It is a Shepherd. She looks asleep. There is no obvious wound or trauma. The others enfold her in a blanket and slide her over towards the far edge of the shoulder so she won’t get hit again. Murmured prayer begins, and that’s when I hear the pup. Off on the other side of the stubby concrete barrier, down somewhere in the dirt and weeds, a puppy whines.

I peer over the edge of the wall, shielding my eyes from the rain, and scanning with my flashlight. The pup is crying from a culvert where it must have sought shelter after its

mother was killed. John and I are standing right against the concrete; it rides up to John's belly.

"I am going to grab that puppy," I say.

The others look at me, uncomprehending. They haven't heard the puppy because of the rain.

I try my poor Spanish.

"*Está herido.*" It is hurt. "*Le ayudamos?*" We help?

My voice rises over the rain and the dog's meek whimpers—it is lying on the corduroy metal at the mouth of the culvert.

"*Por favor? Por favor?*"

Comprehension opens teenager Eduardo's face, and I think he's going to come help me.

"*Absolutamente no, Paloma macho,*" he says. "*No podemos arar por ellos si no están muertos.*"

We can't pray for them if they aren't dead.

"Oh my god," I say.

Their prayers complete, the congregants turn and go back towards their car, looking back my way as they do. John pulls away from me, climbs quickly over the wall, and moves down the little berm. He reaches his small arm into the culvert like a crook and grabs the puppy, cradling it gentle to his chest. He returns to the wall, and I lift him over.

We walk in wet silence back to the car. John and the puppy are both trembling.

"I'm so cold," John says.

I wrap his shoulders in the blanket and tuck it around the little dog as I do. We get into the car and drive home.

I haven't driven a freeway since.

The *Other* Girl with the Dragon Tattoo

SONIA GREENFIELD

She has two dragons, actually, and they're nearly identical except for small details in the faces and variations in color. The dragons cover the better part of her upper arms with tails that tendril down to her elbows, the bulk of the bodies squat on her shoulders, and the leathery wings, half-raised in flight, wrap towards her back. The faces lick at her collarbones. Both dragons are more tribal than Chinese, and the left dragon, turquoise and black, breathes fire towards the center of her chest; the right dragon, red and black, breathes a swirl of ice towards her chest. The faces, in all their tribal abstraction, are ciphers.

The other girl with the dragon tattoos passes the parlor where her art was made just as the sun dips down below the Mission, and strumming *Bolero* badly, a man with a classical guitar disappears into the darkness of the eyeglass storefront. She hears the high-pitched whine of a tattoo gun while smokers cry uncle and pace during their break. Droplets of blood rise where needles are making a castle out of skin. It's a cover-up, a fixer-up, really. Underneath was art from another life, something like a blackbird with mushy lines, dead and gone, layered over with something solid, like his life now. Like it will stand for generations. The stones are only half-wrought, though, and the parapets are just a glimmer in the eye of the artist. The man with the half-built tattoo thinks he'll finally be the king of his own castle, which will drape with his family's crest. Maybe the sky will wheel with sooty bats, and the artist will use a little white to catch a few with moonlight.

Across town, a koi fish is being wiped clean and wrapped in plastic. It looks as if it's leaping out of the water and lifting off the man's thigh. Some trick with shadows the artist learned as an apprentice in Kyoto. So now the man is the man with the koi tattoo, and the fish is as long as a fish story. The man with the koi tattoo greases up his fish every night until the last of the scabbing sloughs off. The scales are layered in twenty shades of gold, and when he catches his leg in the mirror, he leaps out of himself and for a moment gasps, breathless. Koi, he learned, represent luck and courage. When you consider sixty days and no other needles, he thought, they're slippery symbols. That's a lot of beauty in an unseen place, the woman who came home with him said. As they slept, her hand rested firmly on his cool flank as if she could keep him from slipping back under the murky water.

In the next week the castle was made complete, and it covered his whole chest. The artist raised the flag and dropped the tapestry with the family crest over the edge with what looked like an everlasting flutter. The man said render the drawbridge open, but give me the moat. Every castle needs a moat, so the artist carved a moat into his skin in shades of moss and deep blue. The man's small right nipple shone like a rose-colored moon through the windows of the tower. The man's left nipple wanted nothing to do with its role as queen of Scotland, waiting to be hanged, so it hovered above the castle, hung with a ring. The man with the castle tattoo is now the castle's king.

The man with the castle tattoo leaves the parlor where his art was made just as the sun dips down below the Mission, and strumming *Bolero* badly, a man with a classical guitar disappears into the darkness of the eyeglass storefront. The king wanders down the sidewalk, a little sore, a little like his chest had been scratched open by a cat, past the cheap sushi joint where a man with a koi tattoo pays his check, thanks the waiter with the Kanji tattoo, and wanders out into a night just getting soaked in with fog. And they're just a block apart now, the men with their fresh tattoos, and they both head to the same apartment building just up by Dolores Park, and they can both hear the subway train's long, keening stop. And they're both just jingling their keys against the change in their pockets as they walk towards the same foyer.

Meanwhile, the girl with the dragon tattoos is making her last latte while the diners linger over half-eaten crullers. She wipes the wand and slips it into the milk, which must be cool to rise into froth. And the wand in the milk sends up a column of steam in front of her face as if the dragons finally blew and her heart exhaled its heat. The windows of the café would look out on the park, but condensation and the inside lamps dangling over each table make them wet, black mirrors.

When the last coffee lover leaves, the girl with the dragon tattoos wipes down the espresso machine, puts up the chairs, shuts off the lights. She locks the front door on the way out and walks off to her apartment building under street lights that make the fog green. Down the road she can hear the long keen of the J Church breaks; up the road she can see her foyer littered with yesterday's circulars for Safeway.

Later that night, the man with the castle tattoo, the man with the koi tattoo, and the girl with the dragon tattoos all slept in the same position in their own unique beds: left sides, left hands slipped under cool pillows, left legs extended toward the ends of the beds, right hands curled under their chins, right knees pulled up at ninety degrees. Each of their unique ceiling fans turning in time. The night slipped over their sleep like a canary's velvet cover. And in that moment of utter synch, the koi lifted off the man's thigh, and the dragons churned in the foggy green sky until they found a castle to guard. Until they found a family crest to defend. The koi flopped across the worn wood floors until it found a moat to swim through, and the castle's inhabitants looked into the murky water to find luck and courage churning the water in flashes of orange.





Jordans

HAFEEZ LAKHANI

It started as a slap. Maybe less than a slap. A pawing of the air. Like, ha ha. Funny, Felix, though you don't even ride this bus. I don't even know you. So, seriously. You need to stop.

But somewhere in flight my hand closed to a fist—maybe while man-child Felix, sixteen in eighth grade, his arms moving like a robot's for some reason, marched up the bus aisle, mocking, *Thank you, come again. Thank you, come again.* Never mind that my dad didn't run a convenience store anymore, but a Dunkin now—the facts irrelevant here. The laughter was like fire, sixth graders up front joining, too, while Felix went on—*Here is your squishy. Thank you, come again*—stoked by the kids in back, pointing, *Check out Bitchtits! I think Bitchtits is gonna cry.*

It was then, Felix reaching row eight, and the rage I'd been tucking away for how many years now whenever these kids turned on me, calling me Hoshi Moshi Part II—I don't even know what that means—or pointing out my dollar store Florida t-shirts, not Florida *Gators* but Florida *tourism*, screen printed palm trees under the word Florida in cursive—*Hey, Bitchtits, ha-ha, what state do we live in again?*—the rage rising then, boiling into my ears, I stood up and swung. *THWAP.* Above his eye it landed. A girl's scream, then blood suddenly. Felix's eyebrow cut, thick rivers rolling down his dark cheeks, blood spotting his designer t-shirt. *Fight—Fight—Fight*, from everywhere now, fuel for me, because, no, I had nothing to do with squishies or a Kwik-E-Mart, and what did it matter to Felix anyway—before I lunged at him. Tackled him over a seat back, both of us falling to the aisle, Felix's arms like steel ropes. But then he was on top of me. *Thoof*, a flash to my eye, my glasses snapping. A hot sting at the temple. *Thoof*, side of my head now, the bus swerving onto some grass. His blood dripping into my mouth. Now Anisha, my twin, a hurricane of hair, throwing herself onto him, while another blow came, then another, the world feeling unbearably warm, until the bus driver woman finally broke through and pried Felix off.

* * *

Adnan, *you?* *You punched Felix in the face?*

Tiny, honey-skinned Melanie Cabrera knelt beside my desk and asked me this before Honors History that Monday—two months before the end of middle school. Up front, Steve Feeney, this wide-shouldered kid from my neighborhood, had just told a circle of others what had happened. Steve played club football, sat at the back of the bus, too—the branded clothes club, it felt, Air Jordans on every foot—but thankfully never joined the indignities. Watching the concern on Melanie’s face though, her small shoulders buckling a little when Steve pointed to where Felix bled, I couldn’t help but feel even more endeared toward her. A wish for something small, a little closeness to be exchanged between us, a wish I’d started to control only recently, after some awkwardness in seventh grade.

Dude, check out Adnan just staring at Melanie. Is his mouth open? *God*, that’s creepy.

At least that wasn’t as bad as what I got in the neighborhood.

Flying Machine? one of Steve’s friends said once, about my new jeans, great, baggy jeans, a gift from my uncle visiting from India. *Dammit*, Bitchtits. What the *fuck* is Flying Machine?

As if they were trying to beat the different out of me.

Are you *okay*, Adnan? Melanie asked now beside me. Her gray-green eyes held mine a second, before they shifted reluctantly to the scratch at my temple, miraculously the only visible damage. But all I could think about was that this was the first time Melanie and I were talking like this, just the two of us. Her watermelon body spray pulled at me—made me wonder if it were possible that we could talk like this more often.

I’m okay, I said to Melanie, careful not to touch the mango-sized welt at the side of my head.

Did your glasses break?

Yeah. But my dad got me contacts this weekend.

Cool, she said, before she squeezed my shoulder. The gentlest touch. Feel better, okay, Adnan?

Felix had been suspended three days while I only got three days detention—tenth time offender, first time offender, I guess. So Felix’s first day back at school, I walked from class to class sweating, no longer walking taller, breathing better air, high on that touch from Melanie, high on the glances of respect from kids who’d heard about my swinging on Felix—but anxious now that Felix might want another fight. It was after school then, when Felix stepped onto our bus again, that I almost wet my Flying Machines. In a massive t-shirt that read *Pure Playaz* in graffiti, Felix stood at the head of our bus, scanning each row, looking for me. Across his left eyebrow ran a deep seam of stitches. The bus went silent. A small crowd had gathered outside, too, a dozen kids watching me, and watching Felix. I held my breath. It wasn’t fear that I felt though as Felix limped toward me, past 6th and 7th graders like children, and on toward the changing voices,

changing bodies, changing egos at the back—but a sudden conviction. If Felix wanted to take from me what I'd gained since Friday—that little bit of confidence, that little bit of respect—he wouldn't get it easily. I stood, took to the center of the aisle, and braced myself, while in the seat beside me Anisha whispered *ohmygod, Adnan, ohmygod*.

Yo, Felix only said when he reached me. He was at least four inches taller, muscles like ripples in his neck. He lifted one palm up, as if for a grip.

Yo? I said. Accepting the grip. Bumping the side of my chest against his. Before he held me there a second.

Don't let these bitch ass niggas clown you, alright dawg?

Y—yeah, man. For sure, I managed.

Word, he said, and limped back off the bus.

* * *

My friends were kids who got A's in Honors classes but otherwise only talked about Grand Theft Auto—calling each other *dickweed* on the live chat, though they'd never use that word in person—so it was easy when Felix started to extend grips to me around school—in the outdoor hallways, at eighth grade lunch—to spend a minute or two talking, cautiously at first, but then more easily, about the Lakers game the night before, Shaq's nasty ally-oop, or else mourning the Heat's rough season, and how hopefully things would turn around soon. Before long, off the back of Felix's warmth—I *like* this nigga, he sometimes said, wrenching one arm around me—our conversations grew to include Felix's friends, too, a mix of Cuban, Puerto Rican, black and white kids, all in basketball jerseys or Karl Kani gear, over jeans so baggy the pockets hung like lowriders. All of them wearing Jordans of one style or another. We all loved hip hop, and so I started to join them rapping 50 Cent lyrics at the edges of hallways—I *got the sickest vendetta when it comes to the chedda, If you play with my paper, you gotta meet my baretta*—or else we played imaginary basketball, reenacting a Zo drive, or a Tim Hardaway crossover from the years we made the playoffs, using an EXIT sign as our basket. Once, Felix and I were in the middle of one of these plays, laughing, our sneakers chirping on the linoleum of the lunchroom entrance, when Melanie Cabrera walked by, her golden ponytail swinging softly behind her. She was wearing her maroon cheerleading outfit—she cheered at Pines Optimist, where Steve Feeney played running back—and seeing how her caramel skin glowed against that fabric, I almost forgot where I was. Catching sight of me laughing there, wrestling with Felix under the EXIT sign, Melanie shot me a sweet smile, an almost shy smile, before she held my eyes a second, like a gentle reminder that she hadn't stopped noticing me. That she was paying attention now.

Dawg, Felix said afterward. He probably saw the way I looked at her. Don't take this the wrong way my nigga, but you want some love from the bunnies, you gotta step up your shoe game, dawg.

We both looked down then—past my baggy clothes like his clothes, but his from the mall, mine from Walmart—at my all white, slightly senior citizen looking sneakers. Then at Felix's massive Jordans, Bulls colors, laces loose. The patent leather gleaming like it was spit shined.

Bro, Felix said. If you wanna gank some J's, I know this cat at Foot Action. Give him forty bones and he won't look while you slip 'em behind the sensors.

Man. Forty bones? I said, the doubt cutting my voice. Because since the fight, though yes, I'd received a little more respect—never a mention these days of Bitchtits on the bus, Spanish girls in tight tops and hoop earrings sometimes following me with their eyes—really, I was starving for more. I wanted more of Melanie actually *seeing* me, even while she was talking to her friends, rising to the slightest tiptoe when I walked by, glancing in my direction, like maybe she'd rather be talking to me. Looking back at my senior citizen shoes then, I felt like I was last place in a race. A race I didn't know I was running, yet here I was. Yes, Jordans had to be my next step. But I didn't want to shoplift. And worse, forty dollars was still more than I felt comfortable asking my dad to spend.

* * *

Aww, so cute, Anisha said that Sunday, touching a pair of baby Jordans on display at Foot Locker. But I barely heard her; my attention was on my dad. Behind his gold-rim glasses he just looked worried, worried parking at the mall, worried crossing the automatic doors. Worried because until that morning, when I'd suggested, Could we please just *think about* buying some shoes at Foot Locker, the mall had been like sightseeing for us. We'd come at Christmastime, just to watch the spectacle of shopping. We'd buy soft pretzels, maybe a lemonade, and walk around as a family, play with the cell phones, even, at Radio Shack, but rarely buy anything to take home. So inside Foot Locker, at the center of the crisp smell of so many new sneakers, my dad let his fingers rise immediately to his eyebrow—his stress habit. In his dark slacks and white button down—what he wore every day to Dunkin—his step, his every movement, seemed unsure, and already I felt terrible for it.

Along the wall of shoes, Anisha and I easily spotted the shrine to MJ. Black and red, black and white, Carolina baby blue. Toddler sizes, girl sizes, man sizes. Jumpman logos everywhere, crisply stitched, silhouettes of Jordan flying through the sneaker air. Flying, too, through socks, t-shirts, mesh shorts, hoodies. Wristbands and headbands, hats and jerseys. Taking in all the merchandise, I couldn't help but think of Felix, of Steve Feeney, of the kids with so much confidence at the back of the bus, and remembering all of them, I felt this chill of possibility. Realities merging. The same logo they all owned now

here in front of me—with a real chance of my owning it, too. One less difference to focus on.

These are Jordans? Anisha said.

God. *Seriously*, Neesh? I had to say, because, sadly, she wasn't kidding. She didn't know Jordans. She didn't care, even. She was happy, it seemed, wearing senior citizen sneakers. Florida t-shirts. The attention of others didn't matter to Anisha, the way it mattered to our big sister Amreen, spending all kinds of time on her hair these days, awfully aware of her appearance, especially to her boyfriend, Zubair, this older kid at khane—what in our community we call our mosque—with a bald fade like Felix's. Hoping here to convince my dad to buy me Jordans, I wasn't worried that Anisha would ask for a pair. I was worried she'd be okay shopping at Walmart the rest of her life.

Nice, huh? a Foot Locker referee guy said, nodding at the North Carolina blue in my hands. The shoe *was* nice, of course. Precious, with clean mesh and baby blue stitching and white patent leather. Laces round and stretchy. It felt surprisingly light, but solid, somehow valuable—something like holding a hundred dollar bill.

The guy brought out my size, and carefully then, I slipped one socked foot into a shoe. Then the other. I stood and walked around in those Jordans—like walking on pillows—past all the Heat jerseys and the wall of fitted hats and socks with Nike emblems. As I neared the entrance, I imagined walking out in those shoes, wearing a bit of the merchandise, too, out into the mall, and deep into my new life. The new, confident Adnan. Circling back, and these thoughts circling, too, I must have acquired a swagger because when I looked up Anisha was beaming—They look *so* cool, Adnan—and even my dad was smiling through his wet black eyes. But then he picked up the box, the price label turned to him, and what might have been awe on his face a moment before seemed to drain out of him entirely.

I sat down, looked at the price myself. A hundred and seventy-five dollars.

A minute passed where neither of us said anything.

But they're cool, right, Dad?

Hm. Yes. Yes, beta, he said, trying to smile. Trying to look less uncomfortable in his tucked in button down. Definitely they are cool, beta.

Then, just as I was thinking I might convince him, Anisha saw the label. What the—? A hundred and *what*?

Stay out of this, I said, elbowing her a little, while my dad went on quietly observing other parents. The proud overseeing of kids trying on shoes.

It was then I felt the pinch, Anisha's little fingers twisting hard at my ribs.

Adnan, she said. Let it go. You're hurting him. Just being here—don't you see?—you're hurting him.

You're hurting *me*, I wanted to say. But instead I only bent over and removed the Jordans from my feet.

* * *

I have one idea, my dad said, as we pulled out of the parking lot.

Dad, I said. Please, not Walmart.

Another place, he said, his face full of hope as he merged onto I-75.

At the Coconut Creek flea, in the part of Fort Lauderdale where you forget about palm trees and suntans and only see asphalt and people of color, Dad walked me and Anisha to a Chinese-owned stall shaded by blue tarps. Below all the combing hands there was everything from Palm Pilots to laptops to clothes branded Polo Sport or Tommy Hilfiger—Melanie wore Tommy Girl sometimes—but the tags all reading something in Chinese. Standing amidst that rush, that merchandise, I again imagined myself owning not these weak imitations, but the real things—Nautica, Guess, Polo—plaid golf shirts with a golden crest at the corner, and then catching even more grips at school, getting invited to house parties kids had started having, not just because I knew Felix, but because now I owned my own brand of confidence.

On my dad's request, an old Asian man ushered us to the trunk of a 4Runner, where dozens of pairs of shoes—Jordans from the look of them—lie scattered, pairs knotted together by the laces. Baby blues, black and reds, white and blacks—all with that same flying man logo. Slowly, I picked up a pair of Carolina blues. They smelled like a pencil eraser, definitely not the Foot Locker smell, but the patent leather shined just the same. I pulled off my own shoes, tried on the fakes. On the asphalt they felt different, stiff soles and cushions, not high performance anything. But what mattered was they looked real. The real Jumpman insignia, basketball held aloft.

How much? my dad asked the man.

You want for girl too?

Anisha just shook her loose tangles. Moved closer to my dad.

Forty dollar, the man said.

At this my dad laughed, the first time that day. He bit his lip like he does at Bimal's Boutique, bargaining for Indian outfits for my sisters. Finally, he passed over a twenty.

The stall owner laughed, too—they understood each other—and took it.

Thanks Dad, I said, sort of hugging him, sort of apologizing.

Thanks, beta, he murmured in response, the way he does sometimes, as if it were cause for embarrassment if a kid were to thank his father.

Before we left then, my new fake Jordans already on my feet, I asked the Asian man if he had a card—because I had an idea now how to buy me some real Jordans.

* * *

North Carolina *BLUE*, Felix boomed in the school bus parking lot the next morning. He raised a grip for me from twenty feet away before pulling me in for such an embrace we

both almost fell over. And in that embrace, in his face scarred and nicked from fights, or generally from life, I think I saw remorse—a sort of apology for coming at me only a few weeks back with, *thank you, come again*.

Quickly I found a swagger at school, that extra dose of confidence I'd felt at Foot Locker; fueled by it, I approached Melanie's desk before History class. She probably didn't care about Jordans, but still, something inside me felt ready to talk to her.

What's up Melanie, I said, as I touched her elbow, gently. I startled her, I could see, but when she looked up and saw it was me, her face softened, and a playful smirk came first to my lips, then to hers. H—hi, Adnan, she said, just as the bell rang to send me to my seat. Still though, a tender curiosity stayed written over Melanie's face.

By the end of the week, a week of once again walking taller, breathing better air, fueled by confidence, exchanging smiles and hellos and how are you's and what's up's and playful nods passing Melanie in the halls—it became clear to me I needed real Jordans, fast. I couldn't bear the possibility of getting clowned suddenly, Bitchtits style; I couldn't bear the possibility of losing my swagger.

So I borrowed all two hundred dollars my dad kept under his mattress. Then called up the Asian man from the flea. Got him to deliver, even. Ten pairs of fake Jordans. All sizes eights and nines and tens—middle school boy sizes.

Damn. That shit was hard, Felix reflected, after we'd sold the ten pairs at school. Boojie ass Pembroke Pines. Half these punks live in new ass houses, palm trees fuckin everywhere. Think they too good to buy off the street, Felix said. Felix turned out to be a real salesman, though, convincing the Haitian kids, the trailer park white kids, the black kids using relatives' addresses, as Felix was, to go to our school—Felix insisting to all of them that the shoes were *ganked, my nigga*, not fake. Never mind we had no boxes and the shoes smelled like cardboard. At forty bucks a pop, those kids, and then their friends, slowly bought them all, more than once with forty wrinkled ones. Lunch money saved up, maybe.

That Friday I paid back my dad's mattress, then walked to the mall with Felix. Handing over the one hundred seventy-five dollars, plus tax, I felt myself beaming so hard the sales guy at Foot Locker might've thought I was crazy. Out of that store and into the mall then I wore those real Jordans—Bulls colors, for variety—with Felix laughing beside me, because he could've ganked like five pairs from Foot Action for what I just paid.

* * *

Hey, Melanie? I said, after school that Monday. Suddenly it was the last week before summer vacation. We were outside science lab, the last two kids remaining in the small air-conditioned hallway.

Melanie turned around, her thumbs tucked under the straps of her backpack, the words *Abercrombie and Fitch* printed in neat font across her chest. H—hey, Adnan, she said, looking to the floor while I closed the distance between us, my frame towering now—maybe I'd grown?—over her beautiful smallness. I let a second pass, maybe a few, while the two of us just stood there, a small spark of amusement growing in our silence, nervousness dismissed, each of our half-smirks quickly blossoming to a full playful smile. You have goosebumps, I laughed, touching the top of Melanie's arm. She seemed to melt a little on my touch, her gray-green eyes looking away but then returning to mine, a new clarity in them. She leaned a little bit toward me, as if inviting me to touch her again, inviting me to put my arm around her, as if telling me, yes, don't be afraid Adnan, the two of us just might fit beautifully together. But for the moment I was content, something small but so real just exchanged.

What—uh—what are you doing this summer? I asked.

Cheer camp, Melanie said, all ninety pounds of her rising to her tiptoes. Enthusiasm full in her womanly voice. Thursday nights starting July 1st, we cheer at Pines scrimmages.

It was almost mid-June—not far away.

You should come out, Adnan, she said, in something of a whisper, softly punching my arm.

That little punch helped. Why—why don't you give me your number, I said. So I can call you after school lets out.

She smiled then as she pulled out her candy colored phone, which deflated me, because of course I didn't have one.

I'm—uh—I'm getting a phone this summer, I said, before I scribbled her number on the back of my notebook, and said, if nothing else, I'd definitely see her at those scrimmages in July.

* * *

So the first day of summer—two weeks to prepare to see Melanie, two weeks in which I wanted to burn my Florida t-shirts and Flying Machines and somehow graduate to nicer gear, branded gear, fully confident attire—what else could I do? I borrowed back my dad's mattress money. Called the Asian man again. Felix had got his license and could drive his mom's Geo after he'd dropped her to work, so afternoons and evenings it was in that little car we rode, windows down in the waves of heat, the little speakers crackling; we had 50 Cent turned so loud. *I'm fully focused, man, my money on my mind, Got a mill' out the deal and I'm still on the grind...* And where did we go? With our delivered ten pairs of fake Jordans? Straight to Miami Lakes Middle, American High, Hialeah Miami Lakes, public

parks when school was out, where summer evenings there were swarms of kids, teenagers, young parents, every basketball court filled with people, ten deep waiting for the next game, every baseball diamond in play, every soccer field buzzing with jerseys. At the Miami Lakes Middle parking lot our first brightly lit evening, there was the Italian ice truck with its twinkling sounds, and then there was us, standing beside a little Geo trunk full of Jordans.

Damn! Felix said. This shit is like fire, dawg! This about the interest we saw. Shit is like watching fire spread!

All it took was one kid saying, Yo dawg, for real? Forty bones? Fuck, I don't got that, but Yo, Ricky! Yo Armando, Yo Quaquin! Check out these Jordans! That first day, we sold all ten pairs in thirty minutes, all to fathers who'd fortunately brought cash. Forty dollars a piece. The next day, we brought *twenty* pairs, more bodies crowded around our Metro than around the ice truck. Such a crowd we almost panicked when we saw a police car enter the lot—we dropped the hatch, scuttled off in separate directions—only to see the cop get out in a soccer jersey and run onto the field. Still, we shifted to American High then, sold our last few pairs by the courts there.

Forty pair? The old Asian man asked on the phone the next morning. You know what you are doing? You know risk?

Oh, I knew, I told him. An eight hundred dollar order for him. Some really nice gear coming my way.

Eight hundo? Felix said, when he picked me up that afternoon. *Damn, son.*

It's not that much money, I said, reasoning aloud. I gotta pay back my dad. That'd only be three hundo for each of us if we'd stopped yesterday. I don't know about you bro, but I need some new gear. New clothes, new everything. I'm fuckin tired of being a scrub.

What I didn't tell Felix though was that I was also terrified. Terrified that Melanie might blink suddenly and go back to hardly noticing me.

Look, Felix said, worry in his tone—maybe about the desperation he heard in mine. You know I'll gank some shit for you next time I hit Burdines, right?

I appreciate you lookin out, man. But for me, I want to *buy* my shit.

Twenty pairs in the trunk, twenty more in the backseat, we chose a new park that evening—not wanting to tempt anyone to rat us out—heading to MLK Middle in Carol City, where Felix claimed those thugs would be all over our Jordans. But the moment we pulled into the half-empty lot, a rusting Impala on deflated tires at one end, it was clear this place was rougher than the Miami Lakes parks.

The interest was there, though. *Yeaaaaahhhhh* nigga, one heavysset kid said, a tangle of thin silver chains hanging over his wife beater. He was my age, fourteen maybe, not playing ball, not even dressed for it, in sagging jeans and big Converse, the smell of weed thick in the air. *Fo-ty?* he sang, when I told him the price. Gimme two *per* my nigga. Then he pulled out a roll of tens the size of a fist.

Felix helped him find his size while I counted the money, eighty dollars already, things looking favorable for us, favorable for these changes I felt I needed to make before seeing Melanie—until ten or twelve kids at a bench nearby all began to saunter over.

Yo, I said to Felix. We okay here?

I'll fuck these skinny niggas up, Felix said. He dwarfed me and every one of them, but still.

You got J's, my nigga? a shirtless kid with tight cornrows said from inside the pack. He was a bare skeleton, muscles rippling impossibly over his chest and stomach.

Y-yeah, I said. We got J's.

It came from my side then. A click. The glint of something metallic in the evening light. A terrifying shadow on the asphalt.

And you bout to hook us up for free 99, right?

Yo! Chill out nigga, Felix said, pointing his finger at the kid. As if that were a weapon, too. Chill the fuck out, nigga!

The cold tip of metal touched my face then; my breath fell into sputters. I could feel the sweat between my fingers, between my toes. Something like how I used to feel when kids at the back of the bus ripped on me. Florida t-shirts, Flying Machine, Bitchtits. A feeling like I was completely alone.

Get on your knees, the kid said in my ear. You too, mothafucka, he said to Felix.

I was fourteen, wearing mesh shorts and a t-shirt trying to sell shoes out of the trunk of a Geo. I was shaking. I obeyed, my knees immediately feeling as if on fire, hot rocks from the asphalt digging into my skin. Tears began to fill my eyes. *Check out Bitchtits. I think Bitchtits is gonna cry.*

A wail then. A siren. The thankful blast of a police siren.

Fuck, nigga, the kid said, pressing the tip again to my face. It was a moment of indecision for him, to grab some Jordans, or safely escape. He moved for the trunk, grabbed a pair—Bulls colors—then took off, sprinting in his sagging jeans across the weedy field, he and his friends scattering in every direction. The police car lurched after them, kicking up dust in pursuit.

This while Felix and I jumped up from our knees. Get in the car! I said, the fear still shaking my voice. Go! We gotta go, man!

* * *

When I reached home, I wanted badly to call Melanie. I needed someone to talk to, to confess this awful story to. I went so far as pulling out her number, bringing it to the phone, preparing to dial—but I didn't.

Lying in bed that night, I couldn't sleep. Eight hundred dollars, I'd held in my hands. More money than I'd ever touched. All of it poured then into more Jordans. Maybe I could still get money out of those shoes, maybe I'd still buy the gear I wanted, but after the incident in Carol City, it didn't feel like the Jordans were bringing me any closer to Melanie. I wondered if I would feel differently once I went shopping, if new clothes, branded gear, might buy me another burst of confidence. But I couldn't shop. I only had shoes now, thirty-seven pairs—two sold, one stolen—but hardly any money.

After a few days off, Felix and I returned reluctantly to our circuit, to the same kids and parents we came across initially—some of whom wanting to buy another pair, but not nearly as quickly as they once had. We began to approach kids then, kids our age, in parking lots, at water fountains, in the stands of a rec-league soccer game. *Psst. You need some J's?* Driving slow through neighborhoods, pulling up to groups of kids leaning on cars, rolling joints. *You need some J's, dawg?*

It felt awful, peddling Jordans, but still I did it, I felt I needed to do it. Every night then after Felix dropped me off, I stuffed the money—over fifteen hundred dollars by the end of June—under my own mattress, one of three along the walls of the bedroom I shared with my sisters. Eating dinner then with my family, I sat spent, silent, lost in my plate of soupy dal and rice, trying desperately to forget the feeling of the hot asphalt at my knees that day in Carol City.

Hey—Anisha said as we cleared the table one night. You okay?

Of course, I said, shrugging her away.

Upstairs then, before bed, Anisha cornered me. She shoved me into the bathroom, closed the door behind her.

What the *fuck*, Adnan? she said, holding up the money, all of it crumpled up in her hand.

Neesh—what the? Gimme that—

Anisha threw the money at me, the bills scattering all over the bathroom floor.

Adnan—are you *crazy*? Her cheeks all strained, she shoved me onto the toilet, pinned me there by my shoulders. Are you—are you dealing weed, Adnan?

Mind your business, Neesh, I said, pushing back at her, hard, trying to collect the money.

Adnan, she said, unable to hold me any longer, sobs cutting her voice. Adnan, *please*—

She had my attention then.

When you punched Felix, Adnan, do you remember? Afterwards, did I say anything? Did I criticize you?

I didn't answer, but remembered, vaguely, Anisha on the bus that day, throwing herself onto Felix from behind. Strands of her hair stuck to the small rivers of blood rolling down his face.

When you started running around with Felix to God knows where, doing God knows what, did I say anything? You're dealing weed, Adnan—that's gotta be how you got this money, that's gotta be how you bought those Jordans—but still, did I say *anything*? At all? But seriously—*this* much money—what the *fuck*, Adnan? Are you trying to go to jail?

Neesh, let me explain—

We're *fourteen*, Adnan. What could you possibly want all this money for?

* * *

The evening of July 1st, it began to rain at Pines Optimist a few minutes after Felix and I found seats halfway up the bleachers. The scrimmage was already underway, the cheerleaders on the sideline, rivulets of water rolling down their smooth cheeks while they clapped in unison. The rain'll pass, I told Felix, even as the stands began to empty, because there was no way I was going to leave before talking to Melanie. Felix grumbled but agreed, both of our big jeans soon heavy with water, my new ruby-colored Tommy—part of my shopping spree with the money—darkening with moisture. And below us, down on the track, was Melanie, the smallest cheerleader, maybe, but the clearest voice, singing, *We can't be beat, yeah. We can't be beat, yeah*—her smile vibrant despite the rain.

On the field, Steve Feeny was having a big game, the ball mostly handed off to him given the conditions. He was inching Pines up the field, already up 7-0 and not far from another score, when something strange happened: on a fake handoff, Steve rolled left without the ball, this play not meant to include him, and a Coral Springs linebacker, falling for the fake, maybe, broke through and pummeled Steve as if he were a tackling dummy.

A penalty flag flew but it seemed Melanie reacted even sooner. Hey! she yelled, louder than any parent. Hey! Dirty play, ref! God. That was dirty, ref!

Boooo! The cheerleaders joined, shaking their wet pompoms high.

Melanie, I called to her after the game, running down the track to catch up to her. The rain had cleared and the sun was low now over the trees to the west, making orange and purple streaks in the sky over the nearby everglades. My clothes were drying slowly.

Adnan? Melanie said, the recognition slow in her gray-green eyes. Her face was still moist; a few strands of hair were still stuck to one cheek. Standing that close to her, as close as I had the afternoon she had goosebumps, I felt certain I'd grown, because she seemed even smaller now, in the best of ways. I felt the urge to bring her close. I wanted to smell her hair, wishing that it smelled, too, like her watermelon body spray; I regretted not calling her, not getting to listen to her womanly voice on the phone, not telling her over long conversations about all the craziness with the Jordans. I felt somehow she would understand. On the track, I touched her arm then, in the playful way I had outside science lab when she jokingly punched me in return, told me to come out to one of these games—

except this time, in the cool after-rain dusk, Melanie shrank from my touch. What seemed like an apology formed at the corners of her eyes. Hey—hey Adnan, she just said.

Sorry I haven't called, I whispered. I've, um, been busy, working a bit.

Oh. Um, I've—I've been busy, too. Really busy since school let out.

She didn't seem to register my new clothes, still wet from the rain. She seemed to be looking past me, at something behind me then. Um—I have to go, she said, and with a little touch to my shoulder she took off toward the water coolers, where a muddied Steve Feeney stood waiting, helmet in hand. He'd grown, too, his shoulders and arms bursting through his pads, the sight of him making my heart sink, even before Melanie reached him. But then my heart, and that hope for a little closeness with Melanie, dissolved completely when Steve placed his hand low on Melanie's back and pressed his lips to hers for longer than I could bear. I could have dropped to my knees then, again. I could have let my forehead fall to the track, and I could have closed my eyes to try to forget it all: hitting Felix, the Jordans, the heavy burdens of wanting gear, and confidence, and change. What I felt standing there, though, trying to digest that Melanie was lost, and feeling my confidence deflating again, slowly, was a weakness not unlike what I'd felt so many times before: Thank you, come again. Here is your squishy, Bitchtits.

Tokyo Princess

CONOR TEEVAN

Naddy's bent over a table in the corner and the curtains are drawn so the room's dark, the only light a lone ray slipping through the crack where the curtains don't quite come together, and it, the ray, is filled with floating particles—more particles than usual because we're in some super seedy hotel room, which is called something like Queen Anne's Inn or the Tokyo Princess, at least per the flickering neon sign outside, and it's got those beds that shake when fed quarters and the comforters are all that ubiquitous floral print designed to hide stains from bodily fluids and god knows what else, a print that always reminds me of this story I once heard about a maid who was caught eating dried semen off hotel sheets because she thought she could get pregnant that way, and if only she could get pregnant that way, with the type of man who could afford to stay in hotel rooms, maybe she wouldn't have to be a maid anymore and things would be better—although if you ask me she'd still be someone who eats dried semen and that's got to be worse than being a maid—but none of that's the point. The only point is in rooms like this it's important to strip the comforter off the bed the moment you walk in, which we did, so we were good on that front, except now Naddy's foot is resting half on the nasty Berber rug and half on the discarded comforter, and his foot is positioned perfectly so the lone, dust-filled ray hits it, his foot, and the ray seems to feel good on his skin, the way he keeps wiggling his toes, so I don't say anything and anyway he's not paying attention to me or his foot, his only concern right now being his nose, which is hovering just inches from the table above all that white powder.

Right then someone knocks on the door. It's got to be Arianna because she's been gone a good fifteen minutes when all she was supposed to be doing was getting a Sprite from the vending machine down the hall, but what if it's not? What if it's the neighbor we share a wall with and he's coming to complain about the yelling and thumping and snorting and huffing? What if he's the kind of man who pays women to eat his semen, which is horribly possible because, remember, that's the type of place we're in.

Imagine a TV bolted not just to the dresser but also to the wall, redundantly bolted because one bolting isn't enough. Imagine a place where people steal TVs, even though the sets themselves are bubble-screened with channels controlled by dials, not buttons.

Things, for me, are about to get really bad. But I have this trick for these drug-induced situations: what I do is personify my headspace, the idea being if I can see it, my headspace, in the real world maybe I'll understand it better. In this case, he—my headspace—is walking down some nondescript urban street. It's night and the only light comes from a row of streetlamps stretching into darkness. He moves erratically as if someone's chasing him, every few steps looking over one shoulder, then the other. When he stops at the corner it hits me: he's lost. And as he stands there blinking, I realize he's picturing his own headspace—i.e., my headspace's headspace—to see what his headspace would do, and I'm pretty sure that if his headspace were a person it would be running down its own street, which means it's only a matter of time before my headspace's headspace is thinking the same thing about its headspace, all of which leads to the inevitable question: am I someone else's headspace? Except that rabbit hole is too much of a mindfuck to go down so instead I open the hotel door and there she is: Arianna.

“Wanna hear a joke?” she says.

I pull Sprite-less Arianna into the room.

“You wanna hear a joke?” she says again.

She takes Naddy's shit-eating grin in the corner as a cue to go on. “So a ballerina and a motorcycle walk into a bar—”

“Hold on,” I say, and the only thing I can do to stop whatever's about to happen from happening is to point out how little sense this whole-fucked up scenario makes. “There's no way this can be funny,” I say, before getting into how motorcycles don't walk. Or go to bars for that matter. And even if there were a walking motorcycle and even if, walking, it went to a bar, what next? Does it just sit there? Lean against its kickstand? Rev its engine a few times? Order a drink? Maybe a shot of oil. And what about this bar-going ballerina? As far as I know ballerinas don't walk, they pitter-patter. And how would this pitter-pattering ballerina even push open heavy saloon doors. Wouldn't she be up on her toes—what's it called, *en pointe*?—and could she even get the doors open like that? There's no power there. And what happens when the doors swing back? Do they hit her? Knock her on her ass? Can you think of anything worse for a ballerina than falling on her ass? And imagine what happens once she's inside. Can't you picture the ominous undertones, the hints of sexual assault and abuse and all-around badness, these scruffy guys watching this little girl in a pink tutu with her long elegant neck and her hair pulled back in a bun order a drink. All these angry-looking men staring at her. So, please, go ahead, tell me—what's funny about this?

When I finish, the room's silent, the first real silence we've had all night, which is really two nights. The silence goes on until Naddy grabs his belly and laughs. He laughs so hard he doubles over, falls to the ground, and rolls toward the comforter. Before I can stop him he hits it, face down, and it happens to be the moment he's sucking in oxygen to fuel his maniacal laughter, so instead of air he gets fecal-infested fabric.

I gag.

“You okay?” Arianna says, looking at me. I don’t respond, so she says it again: “Are you okay?” The tone of her voice isn’t really asking if I’m okay, but rather why the fuck aren’t you laughing. So I go, ha ha, and watch as she relaxes muscularly.

Arianna bends over, snorts a line of cocaine, tilts her head back. I step over Naddy on my way to the Timeout Chair. Naddy’s not his real name; his real name’s Andy but one day he scrambled the letters and came up with Naddy, which stuck. It’s not really a Timeout Chair; it just reminds me of the one that my parents used to put me in. The main difference is this one faces the room, not the wall. Truthfully, I’d rather it face the wall. A secret I never told my parents: the Timeout Chair was one of my favorite places. With other chairs you see just what’s in front of you—in my house, a dining room table, an oriental rug, and a dangling chandelier—but staring at a white wall, the Timeout Wall, you can see everything. You can see what your life would have looked like if you had become a doctor, like they wanted; Camille before you ever knew Camille existed; your parents if they had been happily married.

Sitting in the chair now all I see is Naddy on the ground, snot covering his face and Arianna walking toward me. When she sits on my lap she kisses me and my mouth starts to tingle. “It’s okay,” she says. I know she’s only trying to cheer me up but all this does is remind me of how my night began.

Which is like this. There’s a girl on my arm—Betsy or Betty or Bets—and we’re in a hallway about to walk into a party. I remember her saying something inane like, maybe we should knock, but because the music’s blaring FUCK THIS FUCK THAT through the walls, I just open the door. That’s when I see Camille. She’s leaning against the far wall, one long leg bent up underneath her. Having positioned herself perfectly under a floodlight, she’s all shadows and sinew. She looks stunning like that, so stunning I’m certain no one but me notices the little nubby fingernails she holds her wine with. She catches me staring and for a second that’s all it is: two people looking at each other. But then she kicks herself straight, wobbling just enough to show she’s tipsy, which I already know because when isn’t she, and walks right at me. She doesn’t weave or turn sideways to get through the crowd, instead expecting everyone to part for her, which of course they do because it’s her.

All I’m expecting is a *Hi* or *How are things*, but instead she gets up on her toes and leans into me until her breasts are pressing against my sternum and her lips are inches from my face, so close I can feel her breath on my ears, and it is hot with booze, and if you could smell pills, I’m sure it’d be hot with that too. I actually hear the *puh* her lips make as they separate right before she says, I miss you.

That’s when I lose it. I start to turn my head so I’ll be looking her straight in the face when I tell her exactly what she can do with her missing me, but the thing is she doesn’t pull back so her mouth drags along my cheek. As I turn, I catch this whiff of her

hair, some melon-y scent that for the longest time reminded me of weather, no weather in particular, just weather in general, but now the smell reminds me of the day I came home from CVS with her shampoo and conditioner in a bag, just like she asked, only that didn't stop her from dropping the bomb on me about being with other men—not man, but men—and then asking me to leave, which I did, spending the next three days on Naddy's couch, trying to mix the shampoo and conditioner in the appropriate proportions to approximate that weather smell, something I was never able to get right.

So that's what I'm smelling as I turn my head and what I'm hearing is the dragging lips and what I'm thinking is fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, until, *whack*, her lips land on mine. Still, I'm about to tell her to go fuck herself, except of course she interprets the tucking of my lower lip under my teeth to make the 'f' noise as a kissing motion and she opens her mouth. She flicks her tongue in and out the same way she used to, which keeps me from saying what I'm trying to say because how can you say shit with an extra tongue in your mouth? We stand like that kissing, the only noise that rice-krispy crackle of saliva swapping.

I feel a slight tug on my arm, then a firmer one. The tugging feels distant, like it's happening to somebody else's arm, only I know it's mine, which is when I remember Bets or Betty or Betsy. Rachel. Her name's Rachel. It's like Rachel's trying to communicate in Morse code—one long tug, two short. I want her to wait, to see what I got in store for this bitch who's kissing me, but I feel her arm unslide from mine.

Finally Camille and I stop kissing, and before anyone can get the wrong idea, I start saying what needs to be said: “Fuck you this, fuck you that, I don't give two shits about you.” Except what I'm saying doesn't mean anything because what means something is the fact that I've got a big fat fucking erection. There I am two feet from the girl who betrayed me, except that's not even the worst betrayal that's going on because even worse than that is the betrayal that's happening with my own body right then and there. And so bad is the betrayal that it physically hurts. I mean *hurtshurts*, the way my erection is pressing hard against my jeans. It's like the arm that was on my arm has been replaced by an arm in my pants. I'm breathing heavy and seeing stars, and my face is red. So what choice do I have? I leave. It's from that hallway with its FUCK FUCK BANG BANG music where I call Arianna and Naddy, and head over to the Tokyo Princess.

In the hotel, Arianna's still on my lap, only now she's babbling about some condition she has, something she keeps calling *stress orgasms*. Every few words she pauses to chew on the inside of her cheek, which makes this incredibly annoying kissing sound. As she talks, I stare straight ahead at the twice bolted-through television. On it is a silver-haired man pointing to a picture of the sun saying something like, sun, sun, sun. The condition started, Arianna says, sophomore year in high school. At first, it only happened when she didn't know an answer to a test question or was running out of time on an essay. For some reason the stress made her horny. So horny, in fact, she'd have to stop working

on her essay to actually come, and it would happen—the coming would—*sua sponte* after a few minutes of sitting there focusing on how little time she had left. No touching required. But here's the thing: once she started up again, she'd have even less time so she'd be even more stressed and the cycle started over. Which is why, she says, she had to drop out of school. Only once out of school, she found other ways to induce stress—being late for appointments, rolling through stop signs in front of cops—so it didn't really matter.

She must be able to tell that I find the whole thing absurd because out of nowhere she says, "Google it bitch." She even starts offering phrases: "Are stress orgasms a real thing"; "Can you come as a result of only stress even without touching"; "If you come without touching as a result of stress is it debilitating." She's throwing these search terms at me one after another so all that's left for me to do is put up my hands and go, "Okay okay, I believe you." Except what I'm really thinking is not how to Google it, but how to induce the necessary levels of stress to test it out for myself, which is when I remember Naddy talking about how he brought a gun in the car.

When I get to the car, it's there. Silver and heavy. I bring it back to the room and pull it on Arianna. She's like, oh my god what the fuck, and I can practically see her heart beat faster. Red splotches form on her chest. The thing is I'm not sure if this is all happening because Arianna's getting turned on or if it's the result of too many drugs. Still I figure whatever the situation is, it's a highly-stressed one so when she's like, oh my god oh my god, maybe those are sexual oh my gods or maybe they are fear-based oh my gods, but in the end what does it matter? According to her, those are one and the same. I keep waving the gun and she's like, help me help me call someone, and I'm like, yeah yeah do you like it? and as she's screaming in ecstasy or fear or maybe both, the gun accidentally goes off.

After the shot it's dead quiet. I put the gun down and say something like, shit, a smoking gun. Naddy laughs, then I laugh, then Arianna laughs. We're all laughing until Naddy stops and is like, fuck, what if the cops come? Together we look at the drugs.

But then Arianna says of course they won't come because we're in a place called the Tokyo Princess, and we're like, yeah, that's right. Except right then someone knocks. We look around like we're counting each other, double-checking to make sure we're all there, which we—all three of us—are.

Naddy makes his way to the door taking high, careful cat-burglar steps. He turns to me, holding his finger to his mouth, saying, "Shh," then I do the same to Arianna, and she does the same to the door. Naddy leans forward to look through the peephole, then turns to us.

"The manager," he mouths.

I kick the gun under the bed and Arianna stands in front of the drugs. We nod to Naddy, who puts the chain on the door and cracks it open.

All I see through the crack is an eye. The eye's pressed against the door. It moves back and forth.

"What's going on in here?" the eye says.

"Nothing," Naddy says back.

The eye squints. "Nothing's loud," it says.

"We haven't heard anything either."

The eye stops scanning the room to focus on Naddy. "Not what I'm saying. I'm saying it's loud. I heard a bang in here."

"Here? Not here."

The eye bobs. "Here."

"Maybe next door?"

"Look," the eyeball says, which makes me giggle. "Just keep it down."

"Aye, aye, Captain."

As soon as the door closes, we look at each other with big shit-eating grins, except Arianna who's not looking at anything because she's slumped on the floor, eyes closed. Her head's cocked to one side and her skin's pale.

"Arianna," I say. "You okay?"

At this point, I'm certain I don't have what Arianna has in terms of stress orgasms because nothing's erotic about this; all I feel is panic. I'm already picturing how we're going to have to wrap her body in the god-awful comforter, and I'm telling myself, no I can't do it, I won't. But deep down I'm terrified that I will, which disappoints me, but I don't know which disappoints me more—that I may have played some role in killing this girl or that I'm thinking about how much I don't want to touch the fecal-infested comforter—and that dilemma is disappointing in itself.

Naddy rubs his nose with the heel of his hand, then goes over to Arianna and slaps her. At first it's a tap-tap on one cheek, a tap-tap on the other, but each time she doesn't respond the arc of his swing gets bigger until he's really hitting her.

"Naddy, stop," I say, grabbing his arm. "Do it like this." I hold out two fingers and slam them into her sternum.

"No, this is better." Naddy slaps her again.

"This is how paramedics do it," I say, tapping.

"Fuck that, my way's working," he says. It's true, she's getting color back in her cheeks, except you can tell it's only on account of the slapping because the color has fingers to it.

Naddy leans into me to get a better slap so I push back to ensure my pokes get a fair shot too. From there, it's only a matter of time. We lose our balance, falling onto the nasty, fire-retardant rug. But here's the horrible thing: as we fall one of us hits the table next to Arianna, and like that all the drugs are on the floor.

Not the floor.

The comforter.

Which means there's a new god-awful dilemma, one I'm not really sure how to handle. I'm already on all fours and I've taken the dollar bill from Arianna's limp hand. The bill's poised just above a clean-looking pile of powder collected in one of the comforter's folds, and all it'll take at this point is a quick snort on my part. But I know it's more than that. I know it's really a question of values. I've got in my mind a picture of one of those semen-eating maids and she doesn't look all that different than how I look now, both of us on our knees, and if I'm forced to really think about it snorting dried semen isn't much better than eating it. So I get to thinking about who I want to be. About how I came here to get a break from myself but the opposite's happening: this shit's defining me. And how often is that the case—that going to a party to show everyone what okay looks like ends up just showing them the outline of your penis. I get to thinking about how just forty-eight hours ago I was happy and clean and had practically forgotten about Camille, and how I'm only here because I saw her at the party, and how weak it is to let someone have power over you like that. I get to thinking about how I'm better than this and how so much has changed and that it's not too late to go home, get under my clean comforter, and go to sleep—

I snort the cocaine.

Right away I'm vaguely aware of the crusty stuff in my nose, but I'm doing my best not to think about it or what I've become or whether there are flakes of some other man inside me, which is all actually pretty easy, until I glance up and Naddy's staring at me like, what the fuck man. I look over at Arianna and Arianna, god bless her, isn't making any face at all so I'm flooded with a tingly sense of gratitude that she's not being judgmental, even if it's only the result of her unconscious state. I want so badly to show her my appreciation that I grab her shoulders and shake her so hard her head bobbledolls.

“Breathe, damn it,” I yell. “Breathe.”

Naddy's slid down onto the rug and he's leaning against the dresser, head in hands. For a second I think he's gone all Arianna on me, but as soon as I stand he looks up. He tries to speak but his lips are dry. They don't really part, just stretch. “What should we do?” he finally asks as if this situation has become my responsibility. Above him on the doubly-bolted TV the weather man arm-sweeps a map with lots of suns. I'm still breathing fast and shallow so I say something about needing fresh air. But once outside I don't lean against the beige stucco wall to catch my breath or sit on the cold concrete curb to huff and puff. Instead I'm hurrying down the street. I pass the hotel lobby with its dull glow from an unseen TV, then the flickering neon sign. Every few steps I glance back to make sure Naddy's not following. My world flashes back and forth between receding neon lights and an empty street. Only at the corner do I realize how lost I really am. Somewhere above me a street lamp flickers.

An Interview with Richard Rayner

The best storytellers are those who can transcend genre; they can entertain us, humor us, and break our hearts, no matter the form. In this way, Richard Rayner is a master storyteller and a definitive multi-genre writer. He has worked on both sides of the publishing process as an editor and a freelance journalist. He is the author of numerous short stories and nine books, and his first book, *Los Angeles Without a Map*, blurs the line between fact and fiction and was adapted into the film *LA Without a Map*, for which Rayner co-wrote the screenplay. Rayner is the co-creator of the History Channel series *Knightfall*, which will premiere in fall of 2016.

ER: *What shaped your early writing career?*

RR: I sub-edited for a news agency, which was a really useful discipline. It was a lot of retyping. This was back in the days when there was nothing else but a typewriter. Stuff would come down the telex machine, and you'd rewrite it into a story. I remember the news coming down about John Lennon's death. I was there at six o'clock in the morning, and I was sitting there weeping as I was writing these telex stories about John Lennon dying.

That was a very disciplined kind of writing. At the same time, I started reviewing books and movies for *Time Out*. It was a very groovy, sex and drugs and rock and roll kind of place. Eventually I got a job there, which segued into doing a lot of two things: interviews and harder feature writing. While I was doing that, I always had the idea I wanted to write fiction.

ER: *How did you make the shift into fiction and then into screenwriting?*

RR: I met this guy Bill Buford, who at that time had just started *Granta* up at Cambridge. He said, "You should be sending your short stories." So I sent a couple stories, and they got rejected, but Bill was encouraging.

Coincidental with this, I'd met this woman named Michelle, who was a Playboy Bunny at the Playboy Club in Century City. I was pursuing her and inventing reasons to come to LA. Michelle and I ran away to Las Vegas and got married, and it was a disaster.

Then some months afterwards I was talking about it to Bill Buford, and he said, “You talk about this love affair as if it’s a Marx Brother’s comedy,” and that was moment I was like, *okay, that’s the book*. I can write that book.

So I just set out. I was still working at *Time Out*, but I took a leave of absence. I came here [to Los Angeles], intending to write the book that was then *Los Angeles Without a Map*.

My students have heard me say, “We don’t really write what we know, we write what we can.” So I wrote the thing that I could write, and it was that book. For good or ill, that book changed my life. It was successful, there were many translations, it went into many reprints, it was optioned for a movie—although it didn’t get made into a movie until way later—and it took me into a different world. I started writing scripts—I wrote the first script of [*LA Without a Map*]. And it also took me to a job at *Granta*, where I was able to publish more, while also editing. I became a more serious writer, more committed to what I was doing. Even if it would end up being a reckless journey, I was going to be a freelancer: a book writer/film writer/journalist. I was always going to write whatever I could.

ER: What do you identify as the key difference between writing prose and writing screenplays?

RR: I’m basically a prose writer. I’ve always been able to write dialogue, but being able to write good prose and good dialogue and being able to imagine a world does not necessarily turn you into a good screenwriter. [Screenwriting] takes a long time to learn.

Where the genre of prose writing and screenwriting is really different is in the screenplay, you have to anticipate what the audience will think and how they will interact with the scene. Screenwriters immerse you in the world without you even noticing you’re being involved in the story. With a movie, if it’s not getting you to the end with a feeling of *that was great*, it’s not worked.

It’s not quite the same when you’re writing prose. You’re still trying to seduce the reader to come into the world you’ve created. However, there can be something so compelling about the way a book is written, it can be an excellent book even though you only read half of it.

The design of the genres and the way they seduce you is different. But if you choose to try to work in different genres, then you learn a lot of different crafts.

ER: Is there something that unites your writing across genres?

RR: I always lean towards the journalistic. My writing comes from observation of the world out there. I’ve leaned into reality as a basis for imagination; that’s been true of all

the fiction I've written. The starting point is always autobiographical, directly observed, or a real event in the past.

When I research, I'm fascinated by the documents and stuff; that's the real granular. Writers are always looking for the thing that's got that bit of grit that the pearl can form around. And that bit of grit might be the thing you see, or something you feel, or the detail you remember. It's about trying to make some connection between myself and either observed reality or reality as it's been previously written.

ER: Speaking of observed reality: your second and third books, *The Elephant, a novel*, and *The Blue Suit, a memoir*, were about the story of your father. How did the process differ between genres?

RR: In my second book [*The Elephant*], I couldn't control the material. I wrote it while [my dad] was still alive, which was a strange thing to do. That book was hated by everybody. It also didn't do well. It was very ill-disciplined. And then my dad died, and I was working on something else. But I couldn't get away from this story of my dad. The second time I wrote it, I did it as nonfiction. I made a connection I hadn't made before, which was that the moment he arrived back in my life was when my own life went off the tracks badly for about a year. When I filtered the story in different way, that became *The Blue Suit*.

All of which is to say, I always thought about the story; not so much about the mode in which I was going to present it.

ER: What is your advice for writers working in one particular genre?

RR: The smart thing to do career wise is to pick a horse and ride it, i.e. you're David Foster Wallace. What are you going to do? You're going to take your tilt at the great American novel. And you take your tilt at the great American novel. It's *Infinite Jest*. It has some claim to being a great novel. What do you do for the rest of your life? You fail to write another great novel.

But you could commit yourself to become Lee Child, or Gillian Flynn, or the next Patricia Highsmith. You don't have to commit yourself to write a great American novel, you can commit yourself to writing a really, really good crime novel that's not generic.

To decide to write a book like *Infinite Jest* is a very dangerous thing to do because nearly nobody can do it, and it proves to be toxic for the guy who could do it. So to decide to write a book at a more manageable level of ambition is to pick the genre. Why do you pick the genre? Because it's a genre you love. Investigate that genre. Think about what that genre is. Think about what that genre comes from. Think about why particular novels

within that genre, or shows within that genre, work, and write that kind of story as many times as you can until you finally sell one, which you will if you carry on doing that.

ER: *Do you tend to edit as you write or work on many versions of a full piece?*

RR: [Writing] is like dropping through layers of consciousness to find that still place where something semi-decent comes out. For me that has never ever ever happened until the rewrite. So the first draft is always this hacking out of something. It's a kind of shape, but it's awful, and then as I rewrite it, I'm much better able to focus on what is it I'm trying to say. I like to write things, to get the block of clay, and rewrite them quickly. In rewriting there are the moments when the sentence suddenly takes a surprising direction, and a surprising thought appears, or a surprising emotion appears, or the character does a surprising thing, and the writing actually seems to become more alive. I'm always seeking that moment of liberation into the material, and that's the same whether that's fiction or a script, even journalism.

ER: *Have you ever had a project you had to abandon?*

RR: I'd worked on this novel for three or four years, and it wasn't really working out. I did draft after draft of it. A friend of mine in London read it, and she said, "This book is beautiful, but it's like a house that you can't get inside. There are all these little windows, and you want to look in, but you can't actually get inside the book." It was too distant.

Then I was talking to my friend Paul Greengrass, the filmmaker, about this, and he said, "Well you know what you're doing, don't you?" And he went over to a building and he smashed his head against the wall and said, "You're doing this." I said, "He's right." And then he said, "In a little while you're going to realize, 'I don't have to do this anymore.'" And that's what happened.

ER: *Tell us about your latest venture, the television series *Knightfall*.*

RR: I worked on a spec script for a while about the South Pacific Railroad. It didn't sell but it led me to this connection with Don Handfield, with whom I've created *Knightfall*. Turns out he's another history buff, and *Knightfall* came out of this true story. On Friday the 13th 1307—this is why we have Friday the 13th—the king of France decides to take out the Knights Templar. He has them all rounded up and arrested, and over the following years, they get burned at the stake, and no one knows what happened to all the various treasures—potentially even the spirit of destiny, the holy grail—they'd accumulated during the Crusades, and a thousand conspiracy theories flow from that moment.

We decided we were going to fictionalize that true moment in history, what happens in 1307 when the king of France decides to take out the Knights Templar, this hugely powerful trans-national organization of warrior monks, the basis for the Jedi in Star Wars.

ER: What advice do you have for writers trying to make it in television?

RR: The traditional path is you write your spec scripts, and you write enough of them, and then different enough, and good enough, that eventually, even though they may not be selling, you get a job in the writer's room. And the job in the writer's room enables you to a) get a credit and b) start learning the path that might take you towards being a showrunner, which right now, because so many shows are being done, is a target that someone could achieve within in a few years.

Your hope may be that you eventually become the creator of your own TV series and world. But if you don't get to do that right away, with enough experience, you can showrun someone else's show.

ER: You're not native to Hollywood and Los Angeles. When you first came to LA, how did the city influence your writing?

RR: Like everybody who grows up in England, I had a picture of LA that was purely derived from movies and TV shows. This vivid picture started to transmogrify itself after I first came here. Things really popped and I started noticing things and hearing things, and I had that great thing when writing really makes you feel alive because you're capturing something, you're building a bridge between your own psyche and actually reality. The sentence is what allows you to build that bridge, and the sentence might be a line of dialogue that you overhear and write down in your notebook, or it might be noticing that the palm tree has a hairstyle like Rod Stewart. You capture something of the world, and the fact that I was able to capture something of LA, satisfactorily to myself at least, made the city seem fresh to me, and it also made the writing seem fresh.

What makes writing good is if it has that immediate connection to an observation. Whether it's in a scene or in a descriptive passage, you're looking for that charge that travels between yourself and the thing that's being described, whether it's simply the sunset or two people in a room trying to kill each other.

ER: Even after living in LA for twenty-five years, you still don't drive. Does that have anything to do with allowing yourself to observe?

RR: Observing is passive, until you make the decision that you are going to be active about observing and write it down. If I'm on the bus or on the Expo, then I'm in

observing/writing mode, and when I'm in the car even if I'm in the passenger seat, I'm never that.

Ages ago, I did this piece about Danny DeVito. We were just supposed to be talking, and I put my notebook there between us. And he looked at it, and I touched it, and he said, "I get it." And what he got was that this was the thing I needed even if it wasn't open and I wasn't writing in it. I needed it there as a crutch for me before I could start to build the bridge across to Danny DeVito.

So when I'm on the train or on the bus, having the notebook is a way of participating in the world without participating in the world. It's secretive on the one hand and public in another. The simplest way to think about writing is: it's observation of your interior world, or of the immediate world around you, or of some imaginative world you're trying to create.

ER: Part of the inspiration for our new name, Exposition Review, comes from Exposition Boulevard, the street that borders USC. What is your favorite street in LA?

RR: Well for sure it's going to be a street in Venice, and I like the streets that go all the way, like Venice Boulevard or Lincoln. One of the things that's so great about LA is the sweep of one of the big boulevards takes you through so much. You can experience the multitude of villages that make up LA by trundling all the way down Venice on the bus, which is a great scene anyway. If you take the 733 from the coast, the Venice bus will take you all the way to Union Station, and then you see twenty different versions of the city on the way. That was something I used to do a lot, just riding around and watching how the city changes.

ER: If not in transit, do you have place that you most love to write in LA?

RR: Libraries, I suppose, and I've had a series of work spaces that were basically converted garages. I've always liked going out and about to write. When I wasn't teaching, I would often go to the UCLA libraries to write. There's something about being able to create a private space in the world—namely you, the laptop, listening to music, while life is streaming around you—that is less intimidating than sitting down in the apartment or the house by yourself and actually saying, "Now I've gotta do this." No matter the place, one of the tasks is to trick myself into writing.

ER: As a professor, your writing prompts inspired awesome stories.

RR: I like the prompts. I've always thought of them as story boxes. You're given a task: create a certain kind of story in a certain way with a limited number of words. Nearly

everybody can get their head around it. There's something liberating about not having to imagine everything.

ER: *Do you have a favorite prompt to use for our readers?*

RR: Write a scene in which there are three people in a room and A and B have already decided they are going to kill C, but it's A who ends up being killed. 700 words.





After Your Great-Grandmother Tita

STEPHANIE ABRAHAM

Dear Cub,

Your father and I named you while celebrating our one-year wedding anniversary in Hawaii. We immediately agreed that your first name, if you were to be a girl, would be Clarisa, after Bear's grandmother Juana Clarisa Birba. We would call you Risa for short, which in Spanish means laughter, as you would surely have us in stitches, especially if you were to take after your great-grandmother.

His *abuelita*, who we call Tita, believes that having a child is the best thing in the world—“*la cosa más divina*,” she says. Ever since I stepped foot in old her apartment in Miami, six months after we started dating, she's been asking me about you. That was over a decade ago now. She still wants to know what we're waiting for. “*¿A qué esperas?*” she demands, like a child stomping her foot for a Popsicle on a hot summer day.

Tita was Bear's primary caretaker for his first five years as his parents had just arrived from Cuba and were hustling to learn English and establish themselves in Los Angeles. Bear is her first grandchild and her influence on him is obvious. Her love emanates through him when I have a winter cough and he massages Vicks VapoRub on my chest. Or when our puppy Molly has an ear infection and he soaks a cotton ball with medicine and cleans out the gunk every morning and every night.

Tita studied the piano for eight years at a conservatory in Cuba and Bear inherited her love for music. Sometimes he tilts his head and shakes it ever so slightly, serenading me with the island's number one love song, Beny Moré's *Como Fue*, as I've seen her do when she reminisces about the good old days.

Sometimes his behavior mimics hers so much I think he's been possessed—especially when it comes to his devotion to dessert. We were visiting Tita when Hurricane Katrina came through Miami, before its wrath in New Orleans. We couldn't leave the apartment for two days. The electricity had gone out, including her electric stove. Although the fridge was filled with lots of food we could have eaten cold, such as lunch meats and salad greens, Bear and Tita went on a sort of hunger strike together—devouring only the gallons of vanilla and chocolate ice cream in the freezer. “We have to eat it! We can't just let it melt!” they exclaimed in unison as if their gluttony would calm the storm.

To this day, your father can consume a whole carton of ice cream in one sitting. Afterward, he holds his stomach and moans on the couch like he's going to die. "Just like your grandma," I nag. "When are you going to learn?" Then he disarms me by making me laugh. He leaps up and impersonates what Tita used to do to make him laugh when he was a teenager—she'd cross her eyes, stick out her tongue, gather the bottom of her muumuu and hold it in one hand and frantically move the other hand back-and-forth pretending to be a man masturbating. She's the only grandmother I know who loves everything about sex, including joking about it whenever possible.

In the early years, when she'd ask me about you, I'd ask, "But, Tita, don't you want me to get married first?"

"Married? *Pa' que?* What for?" she'd say flicking her hand as if shooin away a fly. "Just give me a great-grandchild. That's the most important thing." Just when I'd start feeling aggravated by her pestering, she'd say something like, "Making it will be so much fun! *Ay, chica.* You should get started tonight!" She'd fan herself and giggle, staring at the ceiling. Then she'd probe, "He's well equipped down there, right? He makes your *papaya* happy? Nice and juicy?" We'd laugh until we both turned red in the face.

She doesn't joke as much as she used to as she's aged quite a bit in the last few years. Bear's mom and her siblings recently moved her to a convalescent home in La Cañada, about 40 miles away from us. We'd like to see her at least once a month, but sometimes several pass without a visit. It's hard on your father to see her now. He says she's a shadow of her old self.

Today, if you asked her, she couldn't tell you where she lives. But she can recount to you in detail how warm the water felt when she and her late husband Orestes visited Miami on their honeymoon over sixty years ago. She still asks when she'll get to meet you, Cub, but increasingly asks for Orestes. Bear usually reminds her that he died of cancer more than three decades ago, which shocks and saddens her every time. Sometimes she weeps. Because it kills Bear to see his grandmother cry, he occasionally dodges the question by changing the subject or outright lies, saying that his grandfather went to the store and that he'll join us shortly.

Tita now dreams of Orestes while awake and asleep, and talks about him as if they have just sat down together to share a meal. My mother says that as people get close to the end, they begin to see loved ones who have already passed on. They stop distinguishing between the living and dead, because the distinction no longer matters. Mom says this happens as the soul prepares to leave the body. They fail to recall day-to-day details and don't hold onto most of their past. They only remember that which makes their hearts sing. Several years ago, your father and I promised Tita that if you were to ever be born, we would name you after her. This, she has never forgotten.

Twirl

ORLI ROBIN

prologue

I was once told that the philtrum—the flesh above the mouth and below the nose—became an imprint on human faces because of an angel. According to Judaic mysticism, in a mother's womb by flickering candlelight, an angel teaches the child everything the angel knows about the inner-workings of the child's soul. Yet, when the child must leave the pre-world of the womb and enter the world to come, the angel takes her finger, places it firmly on the fleshly space above the mouth and below the nose—she says, *Shh*. The child forgets everything learned in the womb, but retains the rectangular imprint of a past.

I have one.

She kissed me.

She kissed You, too.

Here is the paper womb for the Jewish girls.

54¹

It's winter in Ma'ale Adummim. Brisk. Zatar spice, sesame, cloves, and diesel tickle our tongues. Night. Dark. Except for the harvest gold light bulbs of the lampposts. The stars strewn across Jordan's skyline. See the white room with mint rectangles imprinted on bright white walls. My brother's third child—Eleora—dances in a blue tutu the color of a Robin's egg. She dances and I look up at the Jerusalem moon of now in this land and begin to wonder.

53

I think my blue eyes see differently than others' eyes—I think—perhaps. In my world, each letter of the alphabet has its own color. The four letters of my name look bright white and creamy yellow, but the “R” bleeds a midnight purple. I see colors in music. Chords in music have powdery connotations that I cannot explain, and music overtones look like helices. I sense a resonant *hum* and *buzz* that means something and wholly encompasses my heart and my head and encircles my body. Ideas and thoughts look like metallic sparks and strumming and they float from my fingertips.

52

The white van pulls up next to the *makolet*. Eleora steps out first, then me. Two girls rush to meet her before we reach the entrance of the studio where her class will be held. I see the girls and think how one of the girl's purplish sweats looks like the color “C.” Her shirt—the color “L.” The other girl has dark hair. Her shirt the color “R,” pants the color “K”—peach and fleshly pigment pink. “R” and “K” girl asks, “Eleora, *imah shelach?*” I wonder, why did the girl ask Eleora if I am her mother? I am nineteen. Nineteen. Nineteen. Why? Why would she have asked that? It's just because we look alike, right? Right? I wonder and I think. Do their mothers look this young, too?

51

— “*pirouette à la seconde.*”

50

At Kibbutz Lavi, it's quiet. Lush and hushed. Country and soil and flowers on mountains. Even in winter. See pistachio and olive and apple green rectangle farms that seem fuzzy. Let's stretch

apart the sky. The Sea of Galilee looks still from up here. But, now it is night and it is dark. We're standing on the bridge. The one with the glass windows that connects the two buildings of Hotel Lavi at the center of the *kibbutz*. A long and narrow hallway lit with golden light bulbs. I am at one end. You at the other. You composite, young-old married wife. You're dressed head to toe in black. Black *sheitel* with black bangs. No twirl. No spunk. No funk. The tips of my fingers, fumbling. You come closer and conceal the heat of my perfect starry gleams and blinks when my fingers make friction. You come closer, you

¹Here are my 54 Torah portions for You.

shadowy woman. I'm searching. My head turning. Averting Your eyes. Hoping you can't see it and me. Your eyes seem angry. My knees peek and seek. Thing one and thing two. Picture little knees inside forbidden temples. You bore into my soul with the daggers of Your eyes.

49

I think Eleora will need me. I wrote about him and when he will break her and tear up her tutu. He will chop off her blonde hair and cloak her scalp with black fabric. She will be a Deadhead. Sign her life away with a roofless and rootless *ketubah*. But, Eleora will walk to me from far in the distance. On the winding Jerusalem stone paths that cave in, she will see her aunt in a bright berry peacoat. I will take her by the hand. Together we will find the spirit of a kind child her husband calls a dancing whore.

48

I think of You everywhere. When the fingers of my mind whisper and wish and peek through shutters, leafy webs of trees blanket our leaden skies. The leaves look back at me. Beseechingly. When the invisible powers of the shower tick back like a clock, my sun stained hair clings to my Temples. I twist my hair around my soapy fingers and it begins to look black. The silence and steam rise like columns and ghosts imploring me to remember. When I remember the Jerusalem women with black wigs and black skirts, I see a sea. The bobbing women. Always shopping. Always rushing.

Make it stop. Make them stop. Make it stop. Make them stop.

I stand at the center of it all, at the center of the pinwheel created by the bobbing, my colors flushing. Bleeding. I remember and I think and I see water. I see drowning. My brain battles with the women to stop. They rush toward me, with their strollers and with their long skirts, moving to the center where I stand. The women. They are angry and they don't stop, obsessed with the fabric. The length of my skirt, the length of my sleeve. The waves of my brain make more water. The women cry tri-tonal screams and drown with strollers in sapphire blue seas that bleed indigo spirals. They are tugging at my white sleeves. They are tugging at my skirt. But it won't go longer and it can't. I'm starting to drown and You are watching. The composite figure of a woman who looks like my sister, but I refuse to believe it is You.

47

As a tiny girl, I felt like a little majestic and magical person in a land with an ark and a Torah and black hats and tall men. Small. Blonde hair and blue eyes—a tiny spy. With powers and an imaginary wand. This wand. This hand. These fingers—small. My peanut butter hands plucked strings and made harps. Blow kisses with a dozen white petals. Me. Small and knowing. Me and My wand.

46

— *“Plié. Demi Plié. Temp lié.”*

45

Alina Robin is engaged. Alina Robin is engaged to Yaakov Stern. Last Thursday. Last Thursday. Just last week. Alina Robin became engaged. Engaged. She will live in Far Rockaway now. Far Far Far Rockaway. Alina Robin turned twenty on October 25th. It's 2013. It's April 28, 2013. She's twenty. Alina Robin is twenty. Twenty. TWENTY. But, I'm twenty. She's Twenty. Engaged.

She twirled once.

Do You see the berry pink paper napkins? There. On the rectangular table in the middle of the Sterns' dining room. The table with the white velvet tablecloth. The glass vase holding the phlox paniculata² flowers. He brought them for her. For Alina. I am in a room of deadheads. The *Alinas*. Their sisters talking about engagements and proposals and births and lunch boxes and *Shabbos* when life and living is so much more than a house.

44

The Golden Spiral: The spiral that comes from the rectangles. *When you square it, it leaves an even smaller rectangle, with the same golden ratio as the previous.* That's Eleora. *No other rectangle has this capability. If you make a curve and connect the corners of these concentric rectangles, you have the golden spiral.* The golden spiral in the starry sky. That's what I see.

43

“The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles. She walked out. The water was chill, but she walked on. The water was deep, but she lifted her white body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke. The touch of the sea was sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace.”³

42

— *“bras en couronne.”*

41

Here is the photo of me in white tulle. The dress with the white and pink flower petals tucked inside. I wore flowers on my head. White and pink ones. I placed the headband with the flowers right above my eyes to make sure You could see them. You pushed it back up. Away from Your eyes. You wore black. But, You held me. Tightly. I remember Your angel face.

²also known as light pink flames. these flowers have magenta eyes. keep in sunlight. full sunlight. soil. dampish soil. give air. desperately. remember to deadhead.

³kate chopin, *the awakening*.

40

“Remember the story you learned as a child: When the hour arrives for us to proceed into the next world, there will be two bridges to it, one made of iron and one made of paper... The wicked will run to the iron bridge, but it will collapse under the weight. The righteous will cross the paper bridge, and it will support them all.”⁴

39

The shadowy women see a majestic girl make creamy waves of light behind a curtain and beneath a round moon in a Jerusalem winter.

38

Deadheading: to remove the dead flowers; to inspire more flowering.

37

“Please come. Please. Please, Orli. You will love it. Come with me to ballet. Please.”

36

Eleora twirls on her toes and spins colors and music out of thin air.

35

“Mazal Tov, Alina, on your engagement. That is so exciting. I wish you a lot of happiness.”

34

“Orli, you remember Chaya Rivka...we met her at Kibbutz Lavi?

“Sure, of course.”

“She just got married.”

I pace.

“Wait, wasn’t she, like, twelve?”

I pace.

“She’s 18.”

I pace. Rush. Hush.

33

In a white room with mint rectangle imprints, Eleora dances in a blue tutu the color of Robin’s egg.

32

There is the girl dressed head to toe in black, back bent, staring up above, beneath the *Endeavor*. Her face looks silver with hope.

31

“—but it was too late; the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone.”⁵

30

“Happy, Happy Engagement to my beautiful and talented niece Alina and her fiancé, Yaakov! Many, many years of happiness to both of you.”

⁴dara horn, *the world to come*.

⁵kate chopin, *the awakening*.

29

“Here is a piece of the starry sky, Orli. I went up into the sky to get it for you. Close your palm. Squeeze it tightly and dream.”

28

I was once told that dreams about teeth falling out, crumbling, becoming dusty, ashy powder—mean death.

27

Starry brain, flicker. Peek. *Hum. Buzz.* Glow, beseechingly. Stop—where is *Your* flicker? Where is *Your* beseechingly?

26

“Remember the story you learned as a child: When the hour arrives for us to proceed into the next world, there will be two bridges to it, one made of iron and one made of paper.”⁶

25

I mourned Your wedding day—the day You turned blonde to black.

24

Eleora twirls and radiates white and amber yellow helices. When she dances, memories of times when I felt tiny—memories that look like white and yellow helices—begin to flood my mind.

23

Why did the men all look at me like that when I peered through the curtains of the *mechitza*? I could see them. They shook their heads with their black hats. My tiny fingers clasped to my tiny wand making waves in an ocean of Jewish fabric.

22

There are the spirals inside of the rectangles. Spiraling. Towards me. Beseechingly.

21

Hum. Buzz.

20

Pythagoras⁷ saw the spirals in the rectangles.

19

Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha'Olam... where is the blessing for Your souls?

18

There in the crossroads of Geula and Mea Shearim, a white van with black Hebrew letters sits. It has a loudspeaker that calls out the names of the deceased.

17

The spirals come from rectangles. The madness comes from Your death.

⁶dara horn, *the world to come*.

⁷fifth century. greek philosopher. golden spiral.

16

Hum. Buzz.

15

What if Eleora becomes a bobbing head? What if she drowns? No—let us dance and sing and revel in the promiscuity and swirl like the helix spirals of the yellow and white colored thoughts. Let us. Please. Please. Please. I won't let Eleora die like You.

14

I don't know what to do, Orli. I'm nineteen. Nineteen years old. Nineteen. NINETEEN. I defended him. I defended his practices and this house is my whole fucking life. I defended his locking me up. And for what? For the fucking longevity of the Jews? What about my longevity? Didn't He give me a life, too? What about me? It's killing me, Orli.

This is what Eleora will say. I think—perhaps.

13

—“*Plié. Demi Plié. Temp lié. Á la seconde.*”

12

“How'd it go? Eleora, do you want to change, sweetie?”

“No, *abba*. That's okay. I'll wear my ballet clothes while we eat.”

“Are you sure?”

She nods.

11

I see Your little spirit in the ink of my pen—your soul. You're bleeding—I think.

10

Eleora sits at her seat at the dining room table with the white tablecloth—Her back facing the glassless rectangular pass-through to the kitchen.

9

Hum. Buzz.

8

here is the deepest secret nobody knows
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)⁸

7

“Adam, she's good. *Really good.*”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“That's great, Eleora.”

He nods.

⁸e.e. cummings.

She smiles.

6

In the bathtub drain, I see starry nights—stars that blink and look like eyes—eyes that miss You. Starry night, please don't swallow my fingers, or my toes. Just bring Her back—to me.

5

“Adam, I think she could be one of those girls who goes to Juilliard and dances and could be a professional...”

“That's nice. But, she can't. Will you pass the pita bread?”

He sits at the head of the table while we speak.

I stand.

“But, she could if she wanted. She's that good. She has so much potential. I'm serious.”

“But, she can't.”

“But, she *could*. That's what I'm saying.”

“But, you don't understand. She *can't*.”

4

“Its hands rest on its temples, its elbows rest on its legs, its heels rest on its backside, and a lit candle shines above its head. And from behind eyelids folded closed like blank paper, it can see from one end of the world to the other.”⁹

3

With her knees folded in child's pose, she peers downwards at the dining room floor. The fluorescent kitchen light highlights the sunny strings of her hair. Her white headband with five-pointed stars. Her ivory Temples.

2

“Paper is the only eternal bridge. Your purpose as a writer is to achieve one task, and one task only: to build a paper bridge to the world to come.”¹⁰

1

— “*relevé*.”

0

When You defeat the rectangles, We will become free. We will spin and We will twirl.
But, for now, *shh*.

⁹dara horn, *the world to come*.

¹⁰ibid.

The Reconstructionists

REBECCA THOMAS

When we got the phone call that Beth had been in a car accident, that she was in a coma, our first thought wasn't that we could erase Samantha from Beth's life. Eleven years later, our first thoughts are unmemorable, but we still can feel our stomachs dropping, a weightlessness as our brains tried to catch up to the news. After it happened, the four of us, friends from high school, collected details of the accident: someone clipped Beth's car as she got on the freeway, spinning her into the far left lane where a man, asleep at the wheel of a pickup truck, hit her dead on. Her girlfriend, Samantha, was in the passenger seat and escaped relatively unharmed. We laid out each part of the accident, trying to fill in the gaps, like gathering the edges of a puzzle first to frame a picture.

Days after, we went to Beth's room in the ICU at Cedars-Sinai, stared at her bandaged head with a suction tube sticking out of it, and got sick. We monitored Beth's brain activity and marveled a month later when her blue eyes opened. We followed her to rehab, where she practiced walking, talking, where she celebrated her twenty-first birthday. We sat in her house, trying to chitchat, watching for her memory. It appeared in flashes, but there were breaches, spaces to fill, spaces to correct. Samantha was in one of those spaces.

* * *

Five months after the accident, we stood in her kitchen waiting for butter to soften. One of us had made chocolate chip cookies with Beth years before. Beth had taught the necessity of packing the brown sugar in the measuring cup. It was a fact that lingered, how some sugars are scooped like flour while others need to be pressed down until no space remains.

As we worked, Beth moved to get the ingredients. She walked like a Barbie doll, stiff-legged, unsure on her feet, ready to topple over. "We'll get it," we told her.

Beth stood, her hands resting on the counter for support. Christmas music filled the kitchen. Her fingers tapped along. She jerked her hips back and forth, swaying. It was rusty, but it reminded us that she used to dance, that she'd been a belly dancer, and maybe, in time, she would be again. We smiled. We were here, in December, baking cookies with

our friend who we had feared was dead. She wasn't the same, but in the kitchen, we saw some of her old self.

"Remember," one of us said, "we made these before." It should have been a question, but after the accident we spoke to Beth in statements.

* * *

We brought up the cookie-making the first time we saw Beth after the accident. We stood in the ICU as Beth lay unconscious, her face swollen beyond recognition. Her father sat on the folding chair holding Beth's hand to his face, his eyes closed.

Machines spilled brain activity, spoke of her heart, swallowed excess fluid, fed her. Above her a piece of paper told the nurses in thick black sharpie, "Caution, no left bone flap." Part of her skull had been removed to ease brain swelling.

Cords and IVs streamed to Beth from machines like tributaries. We maneuvered around them, avoiding the tubes on the ground as carefully as a child avoids cracks. We tried to focus on her parents, not her bandages, as we talked about baking with Beth. Her ICP score dropped; the swelling in her brain decreased momentarily. Her EEG increased; she was thinking. Her mouth chewed on her feeding tube. "She must miss her cookies," we said.

We began to interpret Beth. Her mouth moved because she was thinking about eating. She knew we were there. And she did. Her brain activity increased whenever we talked to her. "Stop coming, please," her mother told us. "The increased activity creates increased pressure. We need CAT scans for her shattered pelvis. We need gates in her legs to avoid clots. We need her fever to drop. But we can't do anything until the pressure in her brain goes down." So we waited at home, trying to go back to work, trying to study for our summer classes, but our brains drifted to the seventh floor of Cedars-Sinai's ICU, to Beth.

It took one month for the swelling in her brain to decrease enough to wake her from the drug-induced coma. The day the doctors woke her, we whispered, "She's awake. She's awake," like we were reciting the benediction on Easter.

The hospital moved her to a new room on a new floor, one with a view of the cafeteria's courtyard. We sat by the window with Beth on the other side of the room, her body covered in a light blue hospital gown. We made small talk with her parents. Beth stared at us. Her blue eyes open wide like a baby's.

"It's amazing to see her eyes open," we said.

She blinked.

"She's listening. We love you. We love seeing your beautiful eyes."

She blinked again. Her mouth moved.

"She's smiling."

She watched with her doll-like eyes, her head wrapped in white bandages that looked like a swimming cap from the 40s. We went home, not minding the traffic on the way back, our hearts were full. The recovery had begun.

* * *

The nurses taught her to say, “I love you.” They trained her, plugging up her tracheotomy hole for a few minutes at a time so she could speak. It allowed her to practice breathing. It made her use her muscles. It made her use her brain.

We heard the story from her parents: they walked into the room, she was staring at them and said, “I love you.” We took the story for ourselves, repeating it—she’s awake; she’s talking—even if our minds whispered that she was only parroting. We told the story even after we had visited and seen that her eyes were as blank as a bird’s.

In the early months when everything was so hopeful, we filled in the details for her. We are your friends, and this is who you are: you are a lifeguard, a belly dancer; you are good and kind and accepting.

We filled in her past, too. One of us said, “When we went to prom, we took the wrong bridge in Long Beach. We ended up in a strip club’s parking lot near the shipping docks. We sat, trying to figure our way back, worrying that we’d get to the dance too late. You didn’t worry, though.” We said that last part not knowing if it was true.

We were the storytellers, not she, and in the stories we chose to tell, Samantha was absent. We left out the stories of Beth in the last few years before the accident. The stories where we saw her slip from casual drug use to something else. We left out the stories of her parents watching Beth’s eyes go a deeper shade of bloodshot. We left out our silences, the times we wanted to tell her to stop but didn’t. We left out the story of when we all gathered at Denny’s for Valentine’s Day one year before the accident. She arrived without shoes. She ordered a plate of French fries. She mixed ketchup and syrup together as a dip. She paid in change. We didn’t tell her that that memory stuck in our minds like a pebble in a shoe. We never could shake it away.

Instead, we told her, “In zero-period chemistry, your hands were so cold they were purple. You wrote smiley faces all throughout class on your hands.” Who knows if Beth was listening, taking anything in, but she looked at us while we talked, smiled when we smiled, and moved her head with us.

* * *

After she arrived home from the hospital, we visited Beth every Friday. The four of us sat in her living room on a leather sectional. With her parents in their bedroom, it was like a junior high date night, supervised, curfews intact. Most nights Beth spoke of the accident.

She talked it out, either forgetting that she'd said it or else needing to say it again. "I just don't know why this happened to me," she said. "It's so unfair."

We said "yes" and "you're so much better" and "it's brought us all together." And we meant it, happy that we had her home and she was able to speak.

But at times she skipped the accident, looked around the room, listening for her parents, and said, "I just want some alone time with her, you know? We miss each other and want to... you know..."

None of us wanted to know.

We changed the subject or turned on the television. The Country Music Channel was always on, and Beth sang along, a recognizable piece of her from before. If she brought up Samantha again, we pointed to the television and talked about Shania Twain.

Because Samantha was the problem. She had been in the car that night. They were coming home late after a night of partying. Drugs might have been involved. Beth was driving, but Samantha's mere presence was enough to incriminate her. When Beth came home months later after the insurance ran out, her parents decided who could see their daughter. Although they let Samantha in, she was not welcome.

"It's not fair," Beth said. Her parents wouldn't let them be alone. We should have said what we'd wanted to say ever since she'd started dating Samantha—this woman was bad news. Instead, we said, "Your parents just want what's good for you." We hugged her, edging for the door.

But Samantha did not leave quietly. Less than four months after the accident, Samantha tried to sneak in and encouraged Beth to lie to her parents. We were outraged. This was weeks after Beth's release from the rehabilitation hospital. Her bone flap was only recently back in place on her skull. When we talked, Beth nodded, grinned, understood the social cues, but her eyes were blank. She held her fingertips together as if she was trying to hold onto thread. She couldn't walk without someone standing nearby, their hands ready to catch her if she fell. This is what we saw, and then we saw Samantha trying to pressure Beth, mold Beth, manipulate Beth just like she'd done before the accident. How dare she, we thought.

* * *

When I tell Beth's story, I speak in the collective. I think in first-person plural because it felt that way at the time, a survival mechanism. Comprehension on our own seemed impossible; banding together inevitable.

If I am honest, though, I also speak this way because it is easier. I do not know what the others were thinking or feeling, but I can hide my actions, my manipulations, in the crowd of us. I become one of four. If I strip the story of its plural identity, I am exposed.

I wish we could pool our recollections, search through each other's mental pictures. I want to know if my friends remember the Denny's incident like I do. That day, I was fine letting my friendship with Beth go. I didn't want to be friends with someone who left a pile of change and hoped others would make sure it was enough. I was tired of trying to connect with her when she was high. The entire time at Denny's, I wanted to tell her that she made people uncomfortable, that she wasn't fighting the man by not wearing shoes; she was just risking infection. But I kept my mouth shut. The others were closer. They fought for her friendship more, but that day, I was ready to open my fist and let our friendship drop into the sea.

Then she got in an accident. Then she almost died on the 101. Then the doctors released her out of the coma. It seemed like a second chance, and I let my perspective shift into the plural.

* * *

Three months after the accident, Beth had her twenty-first birthday party in the rehabilitation hospital. We helped decorate, a tiki theme. We thoughtlessly bought posters with recipes for Mai Tais and Daiquiris even though she couldn't drink alcohol. We decorated the tables with white butcher paper and crayons.

This is how I remember the party: Samantha sat by Beth near the center of the room, a clear division between Beth's old group of friends and her new ones. Samantha made a speech, tentatively touching Beth's arms and hands, as if she was checking to make sure that Beth was still there. But when I found pictures of the party, untouched for years, I saw that we sat together at the same table with Samantha. There was no separation. In every photograph, Samantha beams at Beth. Her smile stretches her mouth as wide as it will go. We sit just out of frame.

When I first thought of that birthday, Samantha didn't even enter it. It's like she is in the deleted scenes. I only get to her if I search, but when I do pull up the picture of Samantha in my mind, even if it's pixelated, even if the picture is incorrect, I can see her love in it.

* * *

Doug replaced Samantha. I don't know when exactly, but I know this much: by that point in the recovery, Beth had enough of an identity that Doug couldn't be shaped out of it.

Because Doug was problematic too. He had taken Beth to his senior year prom when she was a freshman. They dated, but she broke up with him shortly after the dance. For the next five years, he called her on her birthday, a fact that she used to find disturbing.

He showed up after the accident, devoted, and I found it odd that a twenty-five-year-old would be so happy to date a woman who could hardly carry a conversation and whose parents hovered constantly. She would be dependant on someone for the rest of her life. Doug signed up for that role.

Her parents said nothing. He took her to my wedding in Yosemite. She spent the night at his house. By then, Beth could be on her own more. She knew to take her medication. She could walk easier. She could talk better even if her memory still stuttered. Her parents seemed happy that she found a partner who was so willing to work with them. He didn't sneak around. He didn't try to pressure Beth. It seemed as if Beth really liked him.

We couldn't understand why everyone was so satisfied with Doug. We didn't know why Beth couldn't remember how she'd felt about this guy before the accident. But maybe that wasn't the point. Maybe Beth was happy to find someone who created peace in her life and in her family's. Maybe she was happy to be with someone who wasn't pressuring her to change.

* * *

With distance, my convictions, like my memories, fade. I still believe that Samantha was manipulative, and Doug's relationship with Beth is inappropriate, but time doesn't allow me to clutch to innocence. I wonder why I acted the way that I did. If I was so ready to walk away before the accident, why did I cling to our friendship after? I know that part of it was to recapture the Beth whom I love. She is warm and giving and prone to joy. She lost some of that right before the accident. I wanted it back. Perhaps it was because I was young, and this was my first tragedy. In that murky time, I also think I liked being a part of a clear narrative. I liked feeling the power of a purpose and a collective.

None of us are innocent in this. We all reinterpreted Beth's life and filled in the stories we wanted.

People are trying to keep us apart, Samantha said.

We are high school sweethearts, Doug said.

You are our little girl, her parents said. You never disappoint us.

You are the girl who you were in high school, we told her. Now, I tell her nothing. I used to listen as she talked about Doug. Then I picked up the phone less until I didn't pick it up at all. Eventually, she stopped calling.

* * *

There is a picture of the five of us taken that December, and I like to think that it was from the cookie-baking night. In the picture, we stand at Beth's door, our arms wrapped around

each other, and smile. I look like I'm wincing, as if a fraction of a second later, I sneezed. Beth's smile is her before smile, unchanged, her teeth still perfectly straight. If I put a fingertip over the left side of her face, Beth looks like her old self: her almond eye; her thick, arched eyebrow; her slender nose, but when I lift up my hand, the symmetry is lost. The rebuilt left side, which is fine on its own, does not match. Her right eye is shaped like a football, her left eye like a paper heart folded in half. The reconstructionists did a good job, but looking at all of Beth, something is off.

That night, we hugged Beth goodbye. We opened the door and left. As always, I'm sure we stood around at the end of the cul-de-sac after Beth shut the door. We talked in the chill lamenting the fact that Beth wasn't better, hoping that soon the memories would stick. We were hopeful then, certain that things would work out, that she'd find her way back to being herself, to us. We talked, growing cold. Eventually, we walked to our cars, started the engines, and drove away. We would return the next Friday, talk about the same things, and wish for recovery. In time, I stopped coming back.

Gut Check

JONATHAN ANDERSEN

Another hemlock down
across the river—the river’s song
almost imperceptibly changed—just a gurgle of change
where a body’s snagged in the driven limbs.

You start at this and pad farther down the trail
but at every frothy bend’s a body
(or bodies) caught and clumped.
Panicked like a beast now

you clamber hard up the rise
pull yourself through thickets, get as far
as fast as you can, and still
the river’s song. You stop
to reason this thing out (you’re an animal
with moral reasons—this makes you human):

they’re already dead
the moss is sleepy soft
it’s not my problem
this forest was open field when the world
was black and white
what difference does a little difference make

It seems you might remember
defiant eyes. You might remember someone pleading.
Or did you dream it? You might remember
feeling confident in a stiff uniform.
Nightmare or no, the question is not
what happened here?

the question is not *how long?*

the question is not *what is to be done?*

the question

for you—standing—still but barely

standing now in what you thought was paradise

is *what do they mean to you?*

At the Art-Walk Noir Exhibit

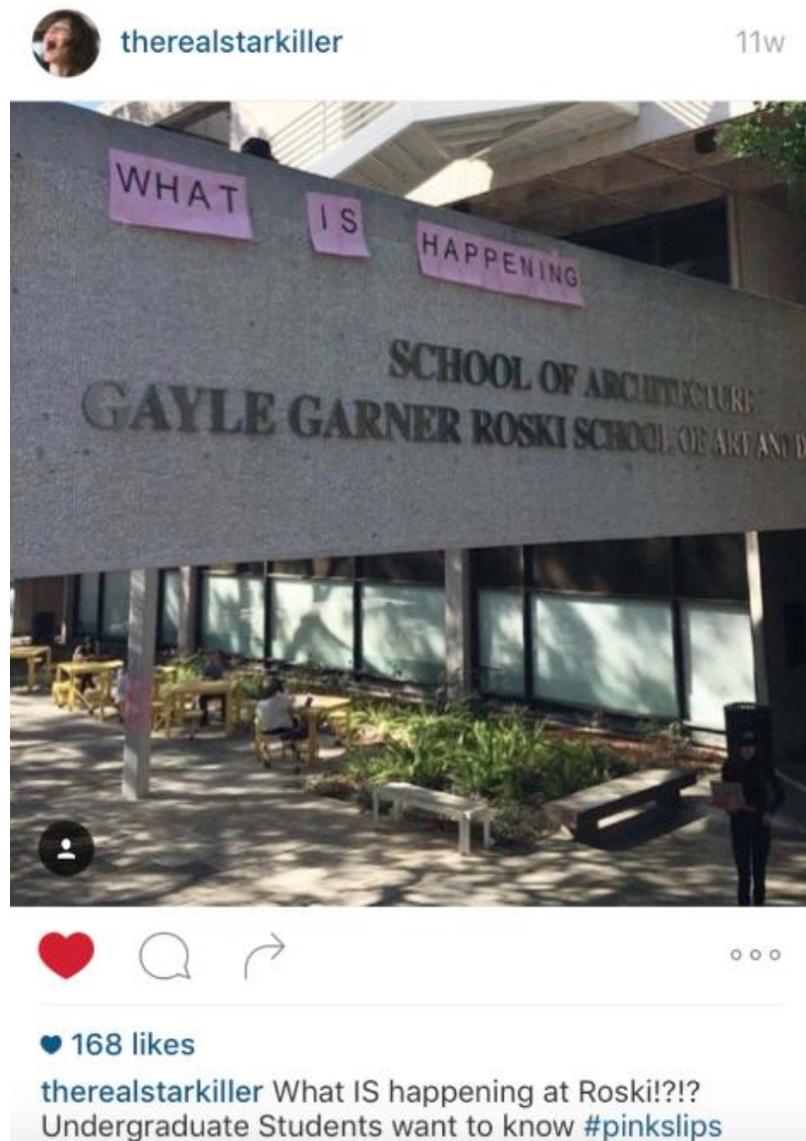
ACE BOGGESS

Lining the walls of a lawyer's office,
many gritty images: hints of Hitchcock
like the first squirt of hand soap,
though where it lathers mostly falls to shadows,
scenes frozen from the old murder films—
never Sam Spade, but often the mystery woman
who crosses his threshold & smokes a long cigarette.
Grace has a piece like that, first on the left
by the elevator: sultry face ensconced in
negative space—the term she used.
She paints the way I write: hours (days)
of *thinking thinking thinking*,
before hands blink & blaze like beams
at a Pink Floyd laser show.
The best parts are mental anyway,
even for Pollack dripping his candle wax,
bacon grease; even for portraits done by cats
smudging a canvas with their painted paws—
someone had to think of that
just as here in the lawyer's hall,
I'm forced, too, to think of shadows,
those adorning red brick walls,
those in locked steel cabinets
hidden away in files that might read
like cheap detective novels
that end—if they ever do—only
when the bad guy gets away with it.

What Is Happening? A Curated Collection of the Art of Frances Stark

Frances Stark (b. 1967) is a Los-Angeles based artist and writer. She received her MFA from Art Center College of Art and Design in Pasadena, and her 2015 solo exhibitions included *UH-OH: Frances Stark 1991-2015*, a survey at The Hammer Museum in Los Angeles; *Frances Stark: Intimism* at the Art Institute of Chicago; and *Sorry for the Wait* at Greengrassi, London. Her works combine and often collage text and imagery and address the issues that shape our society such as literature, language, and communication; what it means to be an artist; celebrity; identity; and culture.

Stark, a former associate professor in University of Southern California's Roski School of Fine Art, resigned from her tenured position at USC in December 2014, only a few months before the exodus of the entire MFA class of 2016, also known as the "USC Seven." With the troubling state of the MFA program at USC, and with the Master of Professional Writing Program—the one that gave birth to *Exposition Review* and its community of multi-genre writers—in its final semester after being terminated by the university, we are left to ask:



We ask not only what is happening at Roski and at USC but also in universities across the country. In this curated selection of Frances Stark's work, we seek to spark and encourage discourse about what the humanities mean to the university and what they mean to our society:



Memento Mori I, 2013. Mixed media, 96 x 60 inches. Collection of the artist



Promotional material for "I've Had it! And I've Also Had It!" (Spoiler Alert), 2010. Paint, paillettes, and paper on paper, diptych, 87 1/2 x 60 inches each. Courtesy of the artist and Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles



“The marginalia or the text written down in the margin was like a bird perching on that thing, on that sentence, or something. And so when you mark up a book, you’re leaving your little trail of where to go back reread. And so I started putting birds in like they were perching on thoughts... You have this complicated phrase that is a deep thing to wrap your head around, but the birds give you that moment [of apprehension]... They also represent the voice, and they represent for Emily Dickinson the poet, and they also represent, generically freedom... I was fine with just the text but most people couldn’t enter it...” - Frances Stark on the use of birds in her work, as said to Tyler Green in *The Modern Art Notes Podcast*, No. 215.

(Text reads: “The torment of aspiration, of interminable apprenticeship or, perhaps, the torment of trying to suppress oneself, exceeding one’s own strength and the resulting torment of general and particular impotence.”)

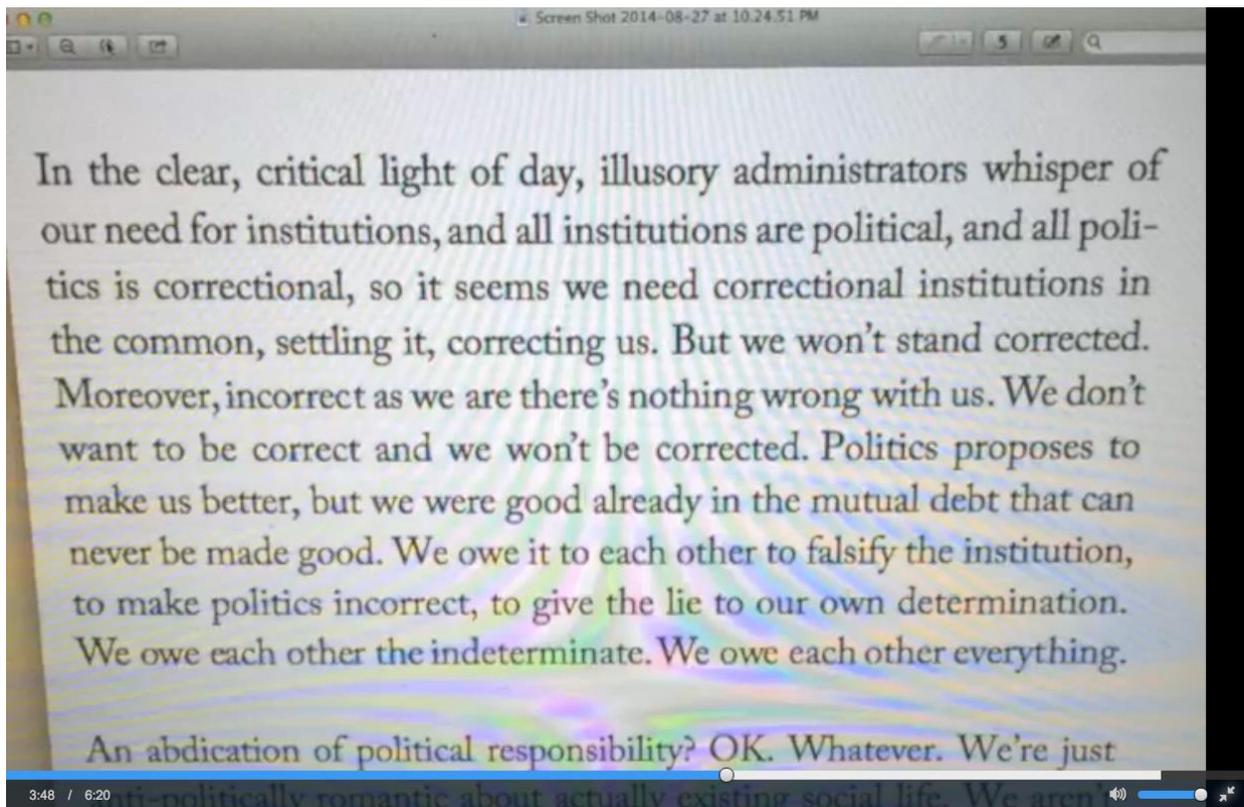
General and Particular Impotence, 2003. Carbon Transfer and collage paper, 59 x 39 inches. Courtesy of di Rosa collection, Napa. Photo: Israel Valencia



The text in this piece is excerpted from an email written to Stark by an editor friend when Stark, because of other commitments and for creative and financial reasons, shifted her focus from writing to visual arts.

Why should you not be able to you assemble yourself and write?, 2008. Rice paper, paper, and ink on gessoed canvas panel, 55 x 34 inches. Hammer Museum, Los Angeles.

Purchase



Film still from *Poets on the Pyre 1*; @therealstarkiller post #1779. An excerpt from Fred Moten's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, p .18

Dick Pic (a self-portrait)

TYLER GILLESPIE

The next
guy
who
asks
for my
dick
pic
will get

this poem.

See
I grew
up in the '90s,
a decade

during which
the House

of Rep
resentatives im
peached the
pres of the US

[Bill Clinton
received
two charges:

perjury
& obstruct
tion of justice]

for, among
other things,

lying
abt "sexual
relations"

w Monica
Lewinsky.

He
was
eventually
acquitted

but
all my
yng mind
under
stood
at the
time
was:

blowjobs

will get
you
fired.

Ten yrs
later,
a guy
on
line
asked
me why
I would

n't send
him
a dick
pic
&
I
want
ed to respond

BLACKMAIL

but instead
typed:
“for my
job”

(although: un
employed
at the time).

And it's,
like, besides
politicians,
now

[in 2015]

tech

nology, all
the apps
have made
us

forget

our
man
ners.

The next guy who
asks for my dick pic
will get this poem:

you
could
tell
more
abt
how I'd
be in bed

from THIS
stanza

than a dis
embodied pen
is.

[Best
angle,
fresh
ly, trim
med, out
of the show
er, light
ing on
point.]

A poet
once
told me
my skin
ny poems
look
lonely
&
selfish.

But still

I try
to be
cool.

Did
you know
some
one on
Tumblr
created

a mosaic
of GOP Candidate
Donald
Trump's
face

out
of

just
dick
pics?

Time
changes
things.

“Dick pics
are no
big
deal,”

[I bet
close to
85%
of gay
men

have one
on their
phones
right
now]

I said
to my
friend.

“In ten yrs
dick pics
will be
so
common,
they’ll
be on
top
of
resumes.”

My friend
looked
at me

*are you
crazy*

&

told me he
did

n’t get a
paleontology
job, last
yr
b/c

the employer

had found
naked
pictures
he took
in his
twenties.

“I just
always
want
ed to take
them,”
he said.

“It
gave me
a rush,
but now
I work
at a grocery
store

&

I’m not
a professor
b/c
of it.”

This poem:
is a dick
pic.

[Blackmail]

If my
employer—
I actually
now
have a

job—
reads this

poem
will I get
called
into HR?

Will I get fired?
Will I be escorted
out of the building?

I'm a fuck
ing poet.

I might
write
a lot
about sex,

but that does
n't mean
I'm having
much
of it.

The next guy who asks for my dick pic will get this poem.

And I'll
most
likely
be
left

looking

looking
like
these
stanzas.

Roaming

ROBERT JACKSON

My phone has a life of its own.
It takes time off,
relaxing for a few hours
at the hotel bar where I left it,
watching the talking heads
on TV spew thoughts about baseball,
or eyeing the maraschino cherries,
wondering how to tie the stems into knots
hands-free.

Once it spent a morning with the avocados
in the produce aisle at the local Kroger.
“My people come from Puebla,”
said one pock-marked fruit,
“but I’m from San Diego.”
“I’d like to go there sometime,” it answered.

And it does, filtering my texts
and messages, clearing my calendar
so that when I’m called to a meeting in La Jolla, I’m free.
“The nearest airport is Lindbergh Field,”
it tells me, “only 15 miles from the Mexico border.”
Over the next few days,
pictures of red turrets and mahogany scenes
from the Babcock and Story Bar at the Hotel del Coronado
pop up in ads on my screen.
There’s even a text to buy tickets
to the Fallbrook Avocado Festival.

Yesterday I left it again,
this time at the fly-fishing store
on the seat of a kayak.
A folded fleece jacket placed a sleeve
over its black case in comfort.
“Where are you from?” my phone asked warmly.
“Patagonia,” the jacket answered.
“Hmmm,” the phone said. “That would be nice.
May I take your picture?”

Stop Me If You've Heard This

DAVID JAMES

Three men walk into a bar.
One drinks Diet Coke with a little extra lime.
One drinks pitchers of cheap beer.
The third orders mixed drinks, one after another,
with shots of Jack Daniels to clear the palate.
None of them walks out.
This is where it gets funny.
One finds out he has cancer and fights it
for years before losing.
One has a heart attack
in the bathroom.
One man's memory crumbles into dust
until his body forgets how to stay alive.
The punch line is death.
The punch line is always death.

I crack up
every time I hear this one.

overexposure

MATTHEW KOLB

The white pine staves of
the west barn stand
against the snow.
It should've been safe

it was built to
hold
& we stood still inside
through the aphotic winter

but with the spring sun
came ivy blossoms pressing between
the crib planks

and an aperture for
the light
to seep through
and ruin us.

The Future/Revision

MAJA LUKIC

The building sleeps
soaked in un-remembered dreams,

blue density outside,
plastic horizons, heavy on urban mirrors,

garbage trucks cough & swallow,
lurch in locked patterns.

I could be sitting in a plane high above the tarmac
or here blinking at the ceiling—

the dignity of 4 a.m. insomnia.

Revelations in coffee sediment,
the special method of today.

I lost a history—it's lost—
why think of it?

Places I left behind—blots on a past—
why record them?

Readers of Turkish coffee grounds
know the future has no forgiveness—

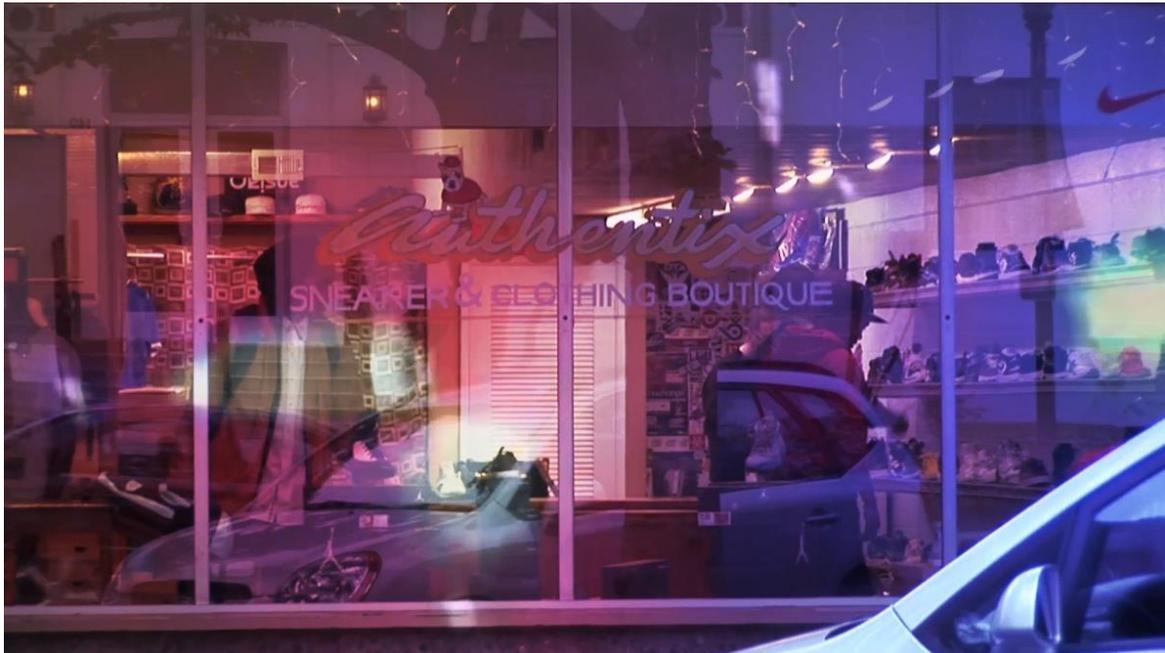
only a wash of sterile sun
& directions chancy—

some loose egg white strands of saxophone notes
or an accordion straining in a Balkan summer,

an orchestra of incompleteness.

Video Essay: Situation 6

CLAUDIA RANKINE & JOHN LUCAS



[WATCH](#)

Stop-and-Frisk

Script for Situation video created in collaboration with John Lucas

I knew whatever was in front of me was happening and then the police vehicle came to a screeching halt in front of me like they were setting up a blockade. Everywhere were flashes, a siren sounding and a stretched-out roar. Get on the ground now. Then I just knew.

And you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description.

* * *

I left my client's house knowing I would be pulled over. I knew. I just knew. I opened my briefcase on the passenger seat, just so they could see. Yes officer rolled around on my tongue, which grew out of a bell that can never ring because its emergency was a tolling I was meant to swallow.

In a landscape that was once an ocean bed, you can't drive yourself sane—so angry you are crying. You can't drive yourself sane. This motion wears a guy out. Our motion is wearing you out and still you are not that guy.

* * *

Then flashes, a siren, a stretched-out roar—and you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description.

Get on the ground. Get on the ground now. I must have been speeding. No, you weren't speeding. I wasn't speeding? You didn't do anything wrong. Then why are you pulling me over? Why am I pulled over? Put your hands where they can be seen. Put your hands in the air. Put your hands up.

Then you are stretched out on the hood. Then cuffed. Get on the ground now.

* * *

Each time it begins in the same way, it doesn't begin the same way, each time it begins it's the same. Flashes, a siren, the stretched-out roar—

Maybe because home was a hood the officer could not afford, not that a reason was needed, I was pulled out of my vehicle a block from my door, handcuffed and pushed into the police vehicle's backseat, the officer's knee pressing into my collarbone, the officer's warm breath vacating a face creased into the smile of its own private joke.

Each time it begins in the same way, it doesn't begin the same way, each time it begins it's the same.

Go ahead and hit me motherfucker fled my lips and the officer did not need to hit me, the officer did not need anything from me except the look on my face on the drive across town. You can't drive yourself sane. You are not insane. Our motion is wearing you out. You are not the guy.

* * *

This is what it looks like. You know this is wrong. This is not what it looks like. You need to be quiet. This is wrong. You need to close your mouth now. This is what it looks like. Why are you talking if you haven't done anything wrong?

And you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description.

* * *

In the landscape drawn from an ocean bed, you can't drive yourself sane—so angry you can't drive yourself sane.

The charge the officer decided on was exhibition of speed. I was told, after the fingerprinting, to stand naked. It was only then I was instructed to dress, to leave, to walk all those miles back home.

And still you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description.

Tidal Friction (The Moon Moves from Earth at the Same Speed Our Fingernails Grow)

MATTHEW WOODMAN

We're here because we love you.

We need you

to know, no matter the orbital
velocity, we respect volition,
we acknowledge internal agency.

But—and this is not easy for us—
the evidence is irrefutable:
you've chosen withdrawal through conservation
of angular momentum, an anchor
accelerating without restraint or
absolute necessity into ... what?
Abeyance? *Vita contemplativa*?

Last night I came to you and couldn't wake.
You wouldn't even try to remember,
the shrapnel of eggshells ensconced even
here, on the kitchen counter, the hangnails
a mosaic salting our hands.

Last night

I sang to the dissolution.

Last night

I swore to the synchronous rotation
and bleached the bloodstains from our marble floors.

No more.

 If you won't slacken the axis,
if you won't arrest the greater distance
or explain the irregularities,
we can't have you circulate the children,
we can't have you illuminate the lovers,
we can't have you wreath our intimacy.

This isn't about bringing you to heel.

This is for us.

 This is for your own good.

The Hilarious Funeral in L.A.

JAN WORTH-NELSON

(So I am not at home here.
Since way back in the Seventies I've been trying,
but then I'll see something, like on the way to
a funeral, along Coast Highway there's
a lone white heron picking at weeds
in the salt marsh, silent apostrophe
in the blunt blocks of condos, new ones every day,
walls of plywood and rebar pushing up
to the edge of the clotted four-lane,
overdone tourists toting boogie boards
and frowns along crowded crosswalks.
How can I love where the heron disappears
into a swamp of teeshirts, yogurt and tattoos?
Jeezus, it's so sad, all the big hard edges, all the
short-lived ripples of the little birds.)

In the lush clubhouse courtyard, where people
line up to parse the departed and
nibble catered chimichangas, I feel my throat
constrict again as it has been all spring with pollen from
the slutty mulberry, walnut and ash. Or is it the bloom
of mortality in the bleached midday light? Or
here's a truth: I was scared of the deceased
until the day he died, which is why I'm here.
When people called him sonofabitch
I sensed they meant it fondly, but I never got it.
I wasn't expecting so much laughter. My old friend Alan
brings me a cold limonata and, penned into the
crowd of mourning raconteurs, everybody telling stories
about everybody else they could think of—for the fun of it,

for being alive when the dead guy's not,
in the grievously glaring sun—I wrap my hand
around the frosty can and I am glad to have it to hold and
my old friend says how he won a prize once for writing a
story about cockfighting and how he just did the whole thing
over the phone. He never set foot in a cockfight and he
says he never would and we are both laughing
like in the old days we shared with the dead guy
who scared me, and my throat is still tight but I
don't care and it feels so good, it's so funny
and I love my old friend and I remember how it used to
feel to laugh all the time when I was afraid and now I'm feeling
great and letting the laughter roll out more, feeling it in
my stomach and my heart at the hilarious funeral,
letting it all go—even the sadness of the fleeting heron.





Cleaning Crew

MICHAEL P. ADAMS

FADE IN:

INT. OFFICE BREAK ROOM - NIGHT

After hours. LAURA, 24, pushes a mop across the floor, humming along to the music in her earbuds: Billy Joel's "Uptown Girl." Physically, she looks very put together, wearing a crisp uniform despite the fact that there's no one around to impress.

There's a little bit of dance in Laura's step, but she's not completely present, the repetition of her job having gotten the better of her.

Suddenly, DANNY, 28, jumps out from beside the vending machine, screams and makes his body as big as possible. Laura screams back, drops the mop. She pulls out her earbuds and smacks Danny on the arm.

Danny's more than pleased with himself, evident not only in his actions but in his overall carriage. He's a loafer and wears his status proudly -- unkempt clothes, tousled hair -- yet he appears to put a lot of effort into being apathetic.

LAURA

(pissed)

Jesus, Danny. You scared the shit out of me.

DANNY

Do you know how long I've been

waiting here? What have you been doing?

LAURA

Oh, I don't know, maybe picking up the slack of the guy who has time to lay in wait for an hour.

DANNY

Almost two. I really have to pee.

LAURA

Great, you can mop while you're in there.

She floats the mop handle in Danny's direction. Instead of catching it, he lets it fall to the floor.

DANNY

Pass.

LAURA

Have you done any work tonight?

As he leaves the room:

DANNY

Lighten up, Laura. As long as the trash cans are empty in the morning, nobody cares what we do here.

Laura shakes her head, picks up the mop, and goes back to work.

INT. OFFICE BULLPEN - LATER

Danny is sitting in an employee's cubicle, multiple windows of porn open on the computer monitor.

Laura pushes her supply cart down the hall, stops at the cubicle. She sees what Danny's watching and scrunches up her face in disgust.

LAURA

What are they doing to each other?

Danny is unfazed by being caught. Without missing a beat:

DANNY

I could show you how it's done.

LAURA

You're gonna feel awful if you get...

She picks the employee's nameplate up off the desk.

LAURA (CONT'D)

...Steve Osborn fired for looking at porn.

DANNY

There's no password on this computer. As far as I'm concerned, Steve Osborn brought this on himself.

LAURA

You're an asshole.

DANNY

Mm-hmm.

A loud CRASH comes from a nearby office. Laura and Danny peek around the cubicle.

A middle-aged MAN staggers out of his office, disheveled, shirt untucked, white dust in his hair and on his shoulders. He walks down the hall, loosening a cord from around his

neck.

Laura and Danny look at each other, wide-eyed.

DANNY (CONT'D)

What the fuck was that?

LAURA

Was he...

DANNY

Trying to kill himself? I'm pretty sure.

LAURA

Go after him. He might need help.

DANNY

You go. You look like the type that swallowed a handful of pills as a lovesick teenager. Give him some practical advice.

Laura ignores him and goes to the man's office. The name on the door says WILLIAM FELLNER.

INT. WILLIAM'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Laura enters to find a gaping hole in the ceiling, busted tiles on the floor. The metal frame that holds the tiles in place is bent and hanging.

Danny shoves past Laura to survey the damage.

DANNY

That guy's an idiot if he thought this ceiling would hold him.

(shakes his head)

And I'm the one stuck being a

janitor. Guess you're really gonna
earn your nine bucks an hour
tonight.

Laura continues to stare at the ceiling, mouth agape,
speechless.

INT. MEN'S RESTROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Laura enters cautiously.

William stands in front of the sink, looking in the mirror
as
he takes long, deep breaths. His shirt is soaked with sweat.

LAURA
(timid)

You okay?

He doesn't answer, doesn't even acknowledge that Laura is
there. Deep breath in, deep breath out.

Then, finally:

WILLIAM
I'm alive, right?

LAURA
Yes.

WILLIAM
Then, no, I'm not okay. But thanks
for asking.

LAURA
Can I-

WILLIAM

(yells)

Get the fuck out!

Laura cowers a bit as the words echo against the bathroom tile. She backs out of the room.

INT. WILLIAM'S OFFICE - LATER

Laura tries to put the office back together as best she can. She picks up the broken ceiling pieces while Danny rifles through William's desk.

LAURA

Stop going through his stuff. It's disrespectful. What are you looking for anyway? Clues?

DANNY

If by "clues" you mean drugs and alcohol, then yes. Trust me, anyone desperate enough to try hanging himself in his office has got a little contraband tucked away somewhere.

LAURA

Are you gonna help me or not?

DANNY

I don't see why we're wasting our time here. It's not like nobody's gonna notice what happened just because we run a vacuum over the carpet.

LAURA

Shut up, Danny. Just do your job.

DANNY

What'd he say to you?

LAURA

Nothing. He...

She looks up at the hole in the ceiling.

LAURA (CONT'D)

He didn't say anything.

INT. MEN'S RESTROOM - LATER

Laura props the door open and enters with her mop and bucket.

She looks around, not sure if William is still inside. At the very least, he's no longer standing at the sink.

She starts to mop the floor, then a voice comes from one of the stalls.

WILLIAM (O.S.)

You came back.

He steps out of the stall, faces Laura. He is decidedly calmer than he was during their last encounter.

LAURA

The mop stops for no man.

WILLIAM

Not even one who tries to hang himself, huh?

Laura isn't sure what to say to that. They make uncomfortable eye contact.

LAURA

What's your name?

WILLIAM

You go into my office every night.
I know for damn sure you've been in
there tonight. You know my name.

LAURA

I'm just trying to make small talk.
I can leave again if you'd like,
but sooner or later this bathroom's
gotta be cleaned.

WILLIAM

(mock desperation)

No, no, don't leave me. Please, I
can't be alone right now.

(normal voice)

I'm not as hopeless as you think.

LAURA

You don't know what I'm thinking.

WILLIAM

Oh, no? You gonna tell me you don't
think I'm an absolutely pathetic
excuse for a human being? I should
be checking myself into a mental
institution instead of hiding in
this bathroom, right?

LAURA

I try to keep my thoughts focused
on things like scrubbing toilets
and scraping the caked-on food off
the microwave walls. A girl doesn't
want to start getting ideas, you
know.

A beat.

WILLIAM

I don't want to be saved.

LAURA

Well, then it's a good thing I didn't bring my magic mop with me tonight. Excuse me...

She starts to clean the floor again, forcing him to move to the side or else get mop water on his shoes. He watches her for a moment, then:

WILLIAM

If I was in your position, I might be a little nicer. What if something you say sets me off and makes me want to kill myself for real?

LAURA

So this time wasn't real? What was it, a dry run? Seems to me like it's just another thing you can add to the list of stuff you probably fucked up in your life.

WILLIAM

Whoa, big talk from such a little lady.

LAURA

Yeah, I'm not much for canned wisdom. I deal with enough bullshit everyday as it is.

WILLIAM

You want to know why I did it?

LAURA

Not really, but I can't stop you

from telling me.

WILLIAM

Well, I wouldn't want to burden you
with something so insignificant.

Laura's annoyed now. She's had enough of this guy and his
nonsensical whining.

LAURA

Oh God, fine, just say it.

WILLIAM

I was trying to get to the better
place.

LAURA

I don't know what that means.

WILLIAM

How many times have you heard
somebody say that when a person
dies they go to a better place? If
that's true, it makes me wonder
what the hell we're all still
hanging around here for.

LAURA

Hanging around?

WILLIAM

Bad choice of words. But
seriously... My life is shit, your
life is shit--

LAURA

Speak for yourself.

She looks down at her mop with disdain, hates to admit to
herself that there's truth in his words.

WILLIAM

The point is we keep being sold this idea that there's something better just waiting for us. I say, no more waiting.

LAURA

You're nuts.

WILLIAM

Am I?

LAURA

Yeah, you are.

WILLIAM

Am I?

LAURA

Look, none of this is helping me get my job done any faster. Are you done trying to kill yourself for tonight?

WILLIAM

I can't make any promises. The better place is calling. You know it is.

From out of nowhere, there's a BANG and William's brains are splattered against the wall behind him.

Laura wails, tries unsuccessfully to catch him as he drops to the floor.

LAURA

Holy shit! Oh my God!

She turns to find Danny standing there with a gun.

DANNY

I told you I'd find something cool
in his desk drawer.

LAURA

Danny, what the fuck did you do?

DANNY

Gave him what he wanted.

He spins the gun around his index finger like a cowboy, but fumbles the move and drops the gun. Danny and Laura both flinch as the gun hits the floor, slides and lands at William's feet. They're relieved that it didn't go off. Danny gestures toward the mess.

DANNY (CONT'D)

I sure as hell ain't cleaning this
up.

Laura, nearly hyperventilating at this point, continues to cradle William in her arms. In her head, the song plays again: "Uptown Girl," her momentary version of a better place. Her eyes focus on the gun in front of her.

FADE OUT.

Where You're From

JEFFREY LO

*A middle school parking lot.
School ended half an hour ago.*

FRANK sits holding his backpack close to his chest.

*FRANK waits.
FRANK straightens up at the sound of a car pulling up but sees
another kid enter the car.*

*FRANK waits ...
... and waits ...
Silence.*

*MARCUS enters.
MARCUS looks around the parking lot then takes a seat.*

*FRANK and MARCUS wait.
Beat.*

MARCUS Hey.

FRANK Hi.

Silence.

MARCUS Waiting?

FRANK What?

MARCUS You waiting?

... for your parents?

FRANK

...
YeahIguess...

MARCUS

...
Me too.
(Pause)
You guess?

FRANK

What?

MARCUS

You said, "*I guess.*"
I asked, "*You waiting... for your parents?*"
And you said, "*YeahIguess...*"

FRANK

Oh. Yeah.

Pause.

MARCUS

So, like, what does that mean?

No answer.

What does *I guess* mean?
That's what I'm, like, asking.
You.

(Suddenly frustrated:)

WhatdoesIguessmean? That'sallIwannaknowgosh!

FRANK

LOOK. It means...

...
Nevermind.

MARCUS moves closer to FRANK.

MARCUS

(Softer:)
What is it?

FRANK I don't know...
 I just...
 I guess what I meant was I don't know if I'm actually going to be
 picked up.

MARCUS Why not?

FRANK Because.

MARCUS Because?

FRANK BECAUSE!

MARCUS (*Matching Frank:*)
 BECAUSE?

FRANK (*Giving up and letting it all out:*)
 Gosh! Because my dad forgets me...
 A lot...
 ...
 Like, all the time.
 Like, most days I just sit here waiting for him to pick me up and he
 never comes. And I sit here and I wait and I wait and I wait until my
 mom comes home from work and realizes that I'm not home *again*
 and she comes here and sees me sitting here waiting *again* and she
 takes me home and when I see my dad he just smiles and says, "Oh
 hey Frank I forgot about you kiddo!" **AGAIN.**

Silence.
 Beat.
 Pause.

MARCUS That sucks.

FRANK Yeah.

MARCUS I'm sorry.

FRANK For what?

MARCUS For that.

FRANK Why? I just met you.

MARCUS I know. But still. I'm sorry.

Silence.

Grown-ups suck.

...

Well, like, not all the time. I mean. My mom's pretty cool. She makes good food.

FRANK Mine too.

MARCUS Cool.

FRANK Yeah.

MARCUS My mom said that when I'm a teenager she'll teach me to make good food myself. That's next year.

FRANK That's cool.

MARCUS Yeah.
Have you thought about just walking?

FRANK It's too far.

MARCUS Oh. Yeah, that sucks.

Beat.

You said your name was Frank?

FRANK Yeah.

MARCUS I'm Marcus.

FRANK Hi Marcus.

MARCUS *(Extending his arm for a handshake:)*
Hi Frank.

FRANK just looks at MARCUS' hand.

I want a handshake. Come on! Don't leave me hanging! I see the grown-ups do it when they meet someone for the first time.

FRANK shakes MARCUS' hand.

FRANK That was weird.

FRANK and MARCUS shake off the weirdness of the handshake.

MARCUS That was weird.

...

Grown-ups are stupid.

(Pause)

I get stuck here a lot too. Waiting by the parking lot.

FRANK Do they forget you too?

MARCUS No. They just can't get me till later. Work.

I hate waiting for them.

I complained to my dad about it—waiting—and he just says to me,

(Impersonating a grown-up:)

*WE PUT CLOTHES ON YOUR BACK, A ROOF OVER YOUR
HEAD, AND FOOD ON THE TABLE.*

(Back to his normal voice:)

So I guess that means he gets to leave me here for as long as he wants.

Or whatever...

It sucks though...

FRANK Grown-ups.

MARCUS The worst.

...
I can't wait till I'm a grown-up.

FRANK Seriously.

MARCUS Everything will be simple when we're grown-ups.
We can drive a car so we don't have to wait for anyone.
We can eat whatever we want.
We can do whatever we want.
It must be so easy to be a grown-up.

FRANK (*Softly:*)
To be able to count on yourself...

MARCUS What was that?

FRANK Oh. Uh. Nothing.
(*Beat*)
What time do they come to get you?

MARCUS (*Checking his digital watch:*)
Pretty soon...

FRANK Cool...

MARCUS Yeah...

Beat.
Pause.

MARCUS (CON'T) So, what are you?

FRANK What?

MARCUS Where are you from?

FRANK I'm from here.

MARCUS But like where were you from *before* here.

FRANK I've always been here.

MARCUS No you haven't.

FRANK Yes I have.

Awkward silence.

MARCUS Are you sure?

FRANK YESIHAVE! IWASBORNHERE/GOSH!

MARCUS You were born he/re?

FRANK YES!

MARCUS Really?

FRANK YES!

MARCUS In America?

FRANK What else do you call this place?
...Dumbass...

MARCUS Whoa, you don't have to call me names. That's mean.

FRANK Whatever.

MARCUS You just don't look like you were born in America...

FRANK **I WAS BORN IN AMERICA!**

MARCUS I believe you. I just... I was born in America too and my whole family was born in America and you don't look like me you look like you weren't born in...
I don't know...

Another awkward silence.

- FRANK *(Almost mumbling:)*
 ... my parents are from the Philippines.
- MARCUS What?
- FRANK The Philippines. My parents are... Filipino. They came here from
 the Philippines and then I was born. In America.
- MARCUS Ooohhh...
 ...
 That makes sense.
 ...
 I never thought of that before.
- Pause.*
- Sorry... I didn't mean to –
 Sorry.
- FRANK Yeah.
- MARCUS So, like, what do you guys eat?
- FRANK Food.
- MARCUS Yeah, but...
 I heard...
 ...
 Do you guys eat dogs?
- FRANK WHAT!?! NOWEDON'TEATDOGS!
- MARCUS Ok!
- FRANK WHYWOULDYOUTHINKWEEATDOGS!?
- MARCUS I don't know!

FRANK WE. DON'T. EAT. DOGS! GOD!

MARCUS Ok! Ok! I just heard once that...

FRANK WE DON'T!

MARCUS Cool! I'm, um, sorry.
Again...
...
I think I should stop talking about where you're from because I'll say things that get me in trouble...

A shorter silence.
FRANK notices MARCUS feels bad.

FRANK Hey.

MARCUS doesn't quite respond. He's down on himself.

Marcus.

MARCUS Yeah?

FRANK You know what we *do* eat?

MARCUS I don't think I should talk about it...

FRANK We eat...
We eat pig's blood.

MARCUS WHAT!?

FRANK Yeah.

MARCUS SERIOUSLY!?

FRANK Yeah.

MARCUS Is it gross?

FRANK Not really. It's sort of just... goopy.

MARCUS Is it bright red? Do you just drink it?

FRANK Nah, we cook it with pork... and it ends up just black.

MARCUS Crazy!
Wow...
...
I gotta try that.

Beat.

FRANK Hey Marcus.
Thanks for making the wait suck less...

MARCUS Yeah. You too.

FRANK extends his arm for a handshake.

They shake hands and again shake off the weirdness of the handshake.

FRANK and MARCUS laugh together.

So weird.

FRANK Yeah.

Beat.

MARCUS Hey Frank.

FRANK Yeah?

MARCUS Let's make a handshake.

FRANK likes this idea.

FRANK Ok!

MARCUS How about this –

MARCUS starts the handshake.

They laugh.

FRANK Ok... And then...

FRANK makes the second half of the handshake. They smile.

MARCUS Yeah.

FRANK Yeah.

FRANK and MARCUS perform the complete handshake. It's odd, a little awkward but fun. It feels right.

MARCUS Nice.

A car pulls up.

That's my mom!

FRANK Oh. Cool.

MARCUS grabs his bag.

MARCUS See ya later!

FRANK See ya.

MARCUS exits.

FRANK holds his backpack close to his chest.

FRANK waits.

A brief silence.

MARCUS runs back in.

MARCUS Hey Frank.

FRANK Yeah?

MARCUS Do you want a ride?

End of Play.



Want to see WRDSMTH's "tattoos" in person? Exposition Review's [interactive map](#) will guide you to the locations of the featured works, though we make no guarantees as to how long these impermanent pieces will remain.

Contributors

Fiction

L Philip Darrow • After fronting several bands that degenerated into abject failure, and writing numerous and un-filmed screenplays, L. Philip Darrow has of late been focusing on short stories. Under his pseudonym Louis Philip DelGiaccio, Mr. Darrow currently resides in upstate New York, where he practices law, to his constant dismay. He is plagued by recurring dreams about dying, about consciousness tricked into being.

William Deverell • William Deverell is Director of the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West and Chair of the history department at the University of Southern California. He writes on the history of the nineteenth and twentieth century American West.

Sonia Greenfield • Sonia Greenfield was born and raised in Peekskill, New York, and earned an MFA from the University of Washington and an MPW from the University of Southern California. Author of poetry chapbook *Circus Gravitas* (2014) and two-time Pushcart Prize nominee, her poems, essays, and fiction have appeared widely, including in *2010 Best American Poetry*, *The Antioch Review*, *The Bellevue Literary Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Cream City Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Meridian*, and *Rattle*. Her book, *Boy with a Halo at the Farmer's Market*, recently won the 2014 Codhill Poetry Prize. She lives with her husband and son in Los Angeles, California, where she teaches writing at USC.

Hafeez Lakhani • Hafeez Lakhani was born in Hyderabad, India and raised in suburban South Florida. His work has appeared in *Crazyhorse*, *Tikkun*, and *The Southern Review*, where his essay "If We Show That We Like They Make More Mainga" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He has won Finalist for the *Glimmer Train* New Writers Award and *The Indiana Review* Nonfiction Prize, alongside a PEN Emerging Voice Fellowship. In 2015 he was recognized with a Notable Essay in *Best American Essays* and was profiled by *The Huffington Post* as one of "Eight Fantastic New Writers To Look Out For." In former lives an NGO field worker in India and a commodities trader on Wall Street, he divides his time now between teaching and writing.

Conor Teevan • Conor Teevan’s fiction has appeared in a number of journals, including *Sou’wester*, *the Portland Review*, *Pinch*, *Sonora Review*, *Flashquake*, and *Prism Review*. He recently finished sailing across the South Pacific with his dog.

Nonfiction

Stephanie Abraham • Stephanie Abraham is a non-fiction writer and media critic based in Los Angeles. Her writings have appeared in numerous publications, such as *Al Jazeera*, *Bitch*, and the Arab American journal *Mizna*, as well as the anthologies *Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity* and *We Don’t Need Another Wave: Dispatches from the Next Generation of Feminists*. She was part of the editorial collective who founded the feminist magazine *make/shift* and the founding editor of the feminist magazine *LOUDmouth*. She blogs at *Feminist in the Suburbs*. Follow her at stephanieabraham.com.

Orli Robin • A poet and synesthete, Orli Robin is an MTS Candidate, studying Religion, Literature, and Culture at Harvard University. She holds a BA and High Honors from the University of Southern California (USC), where she studied Creative Writing, Judaic Studies, and Genocide Studies, and co-founded the USC Levan Institute for Humanities and Ethics’s e-journal, *The Social Justice Review*. In Summers 2012 and 2013, she studied creative nonfiction and poetry at the Yale Writers’ Workshop, and she was recently accepted to attend the 2016 Kenyon Review Writers’ Workshop: “The Art of the Text.” Her work is also featured in *The Altar Collective*, *Adsum*, and *Laboratories Theories du Politique*, University of Paris 8. Currently, Orli is an editorial assistant at *Harvard Theological Review*.

Rebecca Thomas • Rebecca Thomas’s work has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Hunger Mountain*, *The Massachusetts Review*, and other journals. She received her MFA from West Virginia University. Originally from Orange County, California, she now teaches writing in Morgantown, West Virginia.

Poetry

Jonathan Anderson • Jonathan Andersen is the author of a book of poems, *Stomp and Sing* (Curbstone/ Northwestern University Press 2005) and the editor of an anthology, *Seeds of Fire: Contemporary Poetry from the Other U. S. A.* (Smokestack Books 2008). He is a professor of English at Quinebaug Valley Community College in Danielson and Willimantic, Connecticut.

Ace Boggess • Ace Boggess is the author of two books of poetry: *The Prisoners* (Brick Road Poetry Press, 2014) and *The Beautiful Girl Whose Wish Was Not Fulfilled* (Highwire Press, 2003). His writing has appeared in *Harvard Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *RATTLE*, *River Styx*, *North Dakota Quarterly* and many other journals. He lives in Charleston, West Virginia.

Tyler Gillespie • Tyler Gillespie's writing and reporting have been featured in *The New Yorker*, *Rolling Stone*, *Salon*, *The Guardian*, and on New Orleans Public Radio. His poems appear in *The Los Angeles Review*, *PANK*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Juked*, *Hobart*, and the *Wisconsin Review*. He's probably the palest Floridian you'll ever meet.

Robert Jackson • Robert Jackson is a Stanford professor whose most recent poems were published or are forthcoming in *Southwest Review*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, and *Avocet*. He has also published two books of children's poetry with the Highlights magazine group (*Animal Mischief* and *Weekend Mischief*) and has read his poetry on National Public Radio.

David James • David James's third book, *My Torn Dance Card*, was published in 2015. His second book, *She Dances Like Mussolini*, won the 2010 Next Generation Indie book award. His one-act plays have been produced from New York to California. James teaches writing for Oakland Community College.

Matthew Kolb • Matthew Kolb lives in rural Michigan. He is the winner of the 2014 Great Lakes Commonwealth of Letters Poetry Prize. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *Forklift*, *OH*, *The Michigan Poet*, *The Rain, Party, & Disaster Society*, *Missed Connections* and in *The Offbeat* by Michigan State University Press.

John Lucas • John Lucas has worked as a documentary photographer and visual artist for more than twenty-five years. John's collaborative series of video shorts entitles "Situations," with poet Claudia Rankine, have been screened in several venues including The Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, The Sundance Film Festival, and The Pulitzer Arts Foundation. In 2014 he completed his first feature length documentary film, *The Cooler Bandits*, which was awarded best documentary at the 2014 Harlem International Film Festival. John's solo work has been exhibited in museums and galleries both nationally and internationally including the Brooklyn Art Museum; Cleveland Museum of Art; Redcat; Aeroplastics Contemporary, Brussels; and Fieldgate Gallery, London.

Maja Lukic • Maja Lukic's poetry has been published or is forthcoming in *Prelude*, *Salamander*, *New South*, *The South Carolina Review*, *Canary*, *Posit*, *DIALOGIST*, and other journals. Links to selected pieces published online are available at majalukic.com, and she can be found on Twitter at [@majalukic113](https://twitter.com/majalukic113). She lives in New York City.

Claudia Rankine • Claudia Rankine is the author of five collections of poetry including *Citizen: An American Lyric* and *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*; two plays including *Provenance of Beauty: A South Bronx Travelogue*; numerous video collaborations, and is the editor of several anthologies, including *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*. For her book *Citizen*, Rankine won both the PEN Open Book Award and the PEN Literary Award, the NAACP Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry (*Citizen* was the first book ever to be named

a finalist in both the poetry and criticism categories); and was a finalist for the National Book Award. *Citizen* also holds the distinction of being the only poetry to be a New York Times bestseller in the nonfiction category. Among her numerous awards and honors, Rankine is the recipient of the Poets & Writers' Jackson Poetry Prize and fellowships from the Lannan Foundation and the National Endowment of the Arts. She lives in California and is the Aerol Arnold Chair in the University of Southern California English Department.

Matthew Woodman • Matthew Woodman teaches writing at California State University, Bakersfield and has poems forthcoming in *580 Split*, *The California Journal of Poetics*, and *Axolotl*. When he is not teaching or writing, he can be found tending to his garden of California native plants, the most recent of which, a bladderpod (*Isomeris arborea*), is growing quite nicely. More of his work can be found at matthewwoodman.com.

Jan Worth-Nelson • Jan Worth-Nelson commutes between San Pedro, CA and Flint, MI. She is retired from a long career as a writing teacher and college administrator at the University of Michigan-Flint. Her essays, fiction and poems have appeared in *Christian Science Monitor*, *Controlled Burn*, *Driftwood*, *Dunes Review*, *Fourth Genre*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Passages North*, *the Detroit Free Press*, *the Daily Breeze* and most recently *Midwestern Gothic* and *The MacGuffin*. Her autobiographical novel *Night Blind* explores her experiences in the Peace Corps in the Kingdom of Tonga. She is the editor of Flint-based *East Village Magazine*.

Stage & Screen

Michael P. Adams • Michael P. Adams is a native Californian and a graduate of San Jose State University's MFA program. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *New Plains Review* (Editor's Prize winner), *Gigantic Sequins*, *Cardinal Sins*, *Nomadic Journal*, *Chicago Literati* and others.

Jeffrey Lo • Jeffrey Lo is a Filipino-American playwright and director based in the Bay Area. He is the recipient of the 2014 Leigh Weimers Emerging Artist Award, the 2012 Emerging Artist Laureate by Arts Council Silicon Valley and Theatre Bay Area Director's TITAN Award. His plays have been produced and workshopped at The BindleStiff Studio, City Lights Theatre Company, Custom Made Theatre Company and the Orange County Playwrights Alliance. Recent directing credits include *Eurydice* at Palo Alto Players, *Dead Man's Cell Phone* at Los Altos Stage Company, *Some Girl(s)* at Dragon Productions and *The Drunken City* at Renegade Theatre Experiment. Jeffrey has also worked with the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, TheatreWorks & San Jose Repertory Theatre. He is the Casting Associate and Company Manager at TheatreWorks Silicon Valley, a graduate of the Multicultural Arts Leadership Institute and a proud alumnus of the UC Irvine Drama Department. For more about his work: www.JeffreyWritesAPlay.Com

Artwork

Frances Stark • Frances Stark (b. 1967) is a Los-Angeles based artist and writer. She received her MFA from Art Center College of Art and Design in Pasadena, and her 2015 solo exhibitions included *UH-OH: Frances Stark 1991-2015*, a survey at The Hammer Museum in Los Angeles; *Frances Stark: Intimism* at the Art Institute of Chicago; and *Sorry for the Wait* at Greengrassi, London. Her works combine and often collage text and imagery and address the issues that shape our society such as literature, language, and communication; what it means to be an artist; celebrity; identity; and culture.

WRDSMTH • WRDSMTH is a published author, screenwriter, former advertising copywriter, and an emerging street artist. Born and raised in the Midwest, he relocated to LA and started doing time in Hollywood, chasing the dream like countless others. Past and present worlds merged when he came up with the concept for WRDSMTH—a unique combination of stenciling and wheatpasting—and began temporarily tattooing walls in LA with indelible thoughts and phrases. Active in the street art community since November 2013, he's made his mark in Los Angeles, San Diego, New York, New Orleans, Philadelphia, West Palm Beach, London, Paris, Edinburgh, and Melbourne. He's been featured by CBS, *Playboy*, *LA Weekly*, *LAist*, *LA Magazine*, and *The Philadelphia Enquirer*. He was named one of The Art of Elsyum's 2014 Emerging Artists and his work has been sold at Julien's Auctions, Art Share LA, Q Art Gallery, The Gabba Gallery, and LabArt.