

EXPOSITION REVIEW

2018

VOLUME III
ORBIT



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Last summer, we were high on the success of another great issue with the launch of Vol II: Surface, booking a theater space for our annual staged reading, and pitching ideas for Lit Crawl L.A. We were moving. Everything we had hoped to accomplish when transitioning to an independent, online literary journal had come to pass—and paid off tenfold. Our name had recognition, our work had purpose, and our events created opportunities to showcase the writers and artists whose voices we admired. And still we knew then (as we know now), this is only the beginning.

What comes next, once you've formed your identity and found your place in the world?

We thought about journeys, transitions, even transformations. But that didn't seem quite right. We weren't on a path with a destination. We were converging with new places and new relationships, but that didn't mean we were far from our roots or that we wouldn't return to this feeling of potential we had buzzing inside of us.

"Orbit." The word jumped out at us while we were researching new themes. It encapsulates our own position, and evokes ideas of movement, adventure, and space—figurative and literal.

"But... what if we get too much space?"

"I like space."

And so, Vol III: Orbit was born.

From September through December, we received hundreds of stories, poems, comics, art pieces to discover many different interpretations of this theme: revisiting old relationships, children confronting their own lineage, traveling to escape what's waiting inside of you, and the true repercussions of aliens crash landing into Earth.

What excited us most about this theme, besides space, is how many of our submissions this year reflected how visual storytelling and art can be, even within the limits of a digital journal.

We are so proud of all of the work and time our team of editors, readers, and Expo family dedicated to this year's issue. Special thanks to our own unique partners like Submittable (because, why not?), which has been both a great tool to help keep our submission flowing but also works so hard to keep writers and artists engaged with new opportunities. The Hatchery in Los Angeles for allowing us to host our annual "Share Your Voice!" workshop where we invite high school students from WriteGirl and 826LA to learn about how to get their work published (and also shouts to those two great orgs that are doing the work to help our LA teens!).

Even though we are years removed, a thank you to our USC-MPW family who every year shows us kindness through promoting our events, putting up with our last minute reading submissions, and of course setting us off on our own orbit. We hope to collide again soon.

Lauren Gorski
Jessica June Rowe
EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Of What Fred Dreamed

JASON S. DENNIS

I. Prologue

Much is made, these days, of chasing dreams. Tales abound of people overcoming insurmountable obstacles to achieve their greatest desires. This is not one of them. Fred Barnes dreamed as big as any. But in truth, few people are destined for greatness, and it seemed that Fred just wasn't one of them.

* * *

II. Fred's Life

Fred worked as a grip on television commercials. He made fifty dollars an hour (plus overtime most days) to set up and move around heavy film equipment. The tools of his trade were so extensive and cumbersome that their transport required a ten-ton truck. Many of these items had colorful names, like c-stands, fingers and dots, Fisher dollies, pancakes, beefy babies, and high-rollers. Suffice it to say that these items looked less colorful than they sounded and were more difficult to master than they looked.

By many standards, Fred lived a privileged life. He counted among his blessings a loving wife, a nice home in Santa Clarita, and the prospect of a pension through his local union. He drove a black full-size crew cab Ford pickup, with dual tires and a flaming-skull tailgate decal. A real sweet ride. It hauled his deluxe fifth-wheel trailer up mountain passes like a boss (for long summer weekends at Cachuma Lake). In his living room sat a plush leather couch, a sixty-inch ultra-HD television, a high-fidelity 7.1-channel audio system, an impressive collection of Criterion Blu-ray discs, and a *Bad Boys II* poster autographed by Michael Bay. Some might say that Fred had a real sweet life. Yet he couldn't shake the feeling that he was living the wrong one.

This angered him. Sure, he smiled and acted agreeably. But underneath this façade, Fred was coiled as tightly as the high-performance Rancho-brand shocks on his pickup. Petty things set him off, things beyond his control like traffic over the Grapevine. Sometimes, alone in his truck, he would yell at the top of his lungs, a raw and guttural

bellow. Anyone who heard that deranged howl might have questioned Fred's sanity. Increasingly, he questioned it himself.

Oftentimes, he felt that if he had to unload one more high-roller stand off the tenton (because the director of photography couldn't stop fiddling with the background lighting), he was going to lose his shit. He would walk up to the DP and whack the dubious European accent out of his mouth with a fifteen-pound shot bag, storm over to video village and dump artisan cold-brewed coffee in the MacBook-covered laps of those smug agency fucks, and take a rubber mallet to the douchebag director's Porsche Panamera (paid for by phoning in one Taco Bell commercial).

All that acrimony bottled up inside had, over time, transformed Fred's appearance. Despite the cheery can-do attitude he projected on set, cantankerous physical features betrayed him. His belly ballooned aggressively, eager to bounce extras out of the lunch line. His beard bristled like a porcupine, quills flexed toward production assistants who touched his gear. His antagonistic swagger deterred any son of a bitch from asking him to waive a meal penalty.

* * *

III. Fred's Real Life

What Fred really wanted to do was direct. He knew this was cliché, but he didn't care. He'd fallen into grip work as a quick way to pay the bills after graduating film school in heavy debt. It was supposed to have been a detour that would eventually lead back to his real life.

In his real life, the one he was supposed to be living, he no longer woke up at four in the morning, humped around heavy metal, or catered to the whims of hacks. Acclaimed for his creative genius, Fred called the shots (literally and figuratively). His contract forbade call times before 9:00 a.m. and workdays longer than ten hours, but studios didn't balk at these haughty demands. A prolific auteur, he cranked out at least one critically acclaimed feature film each year. Fred was paid handsomely for his genius. In fact, he no longer worried about money at all and had turned over the handling of his finances to a trusted business manager. A team of high-powered agents fielded requests for his services. His time was free to create.

But at the age of forty-six, he feared that he'd lost forever the path back to his real life. He had no reel. No body of work. No agent. When he chanced to mention his dream of directing to others, their half-hearted encouragements could not hide the skepticism behind their eyes.

Annoyingly, Fred was a fantastic grip, and that's how people saw him. Because of this, his services were in high demand, and he worked constantly. With a jumbo mortgage, a home equity line of credit, two car payments, an installment loan on his fifth wheel, a

comprehensive cable package (with HBO and Showtime), and an unlimited texting-and-data plan for his iPhone, it was hard to turn down the money.

All this gripping left Fred very little time to pursue his dream. He felt this keenly. He couldn't relax. Unease pervaded his waking hours. This constant and unresolved anxiety fed the wellspring of his choler.

He countered this by listening to motivational audiobooks, like *The Secret* and *The War of Art*. Between setups, he found quiet places away from the camera to meditate and visualize his real life. During lunch, he snuck off to the ten-ton and wrote daily affirmations stating what a brilliant and successful director he was. He tried to carve out a little time and space each day for his dream. But he never seemed to gain traction.

* * *

IV. Kal

For, unbeknownst to him, poor Fred battled an invisible and terrible force greater than he could imagine. The cunning overlord of Los Angeles, the mini-Satan who ruled that land, fed off of broken dreams. The more people who dreamed, the more powerful this evil entity became. And everyone dreamed in Los Angeles. So, with each passing decade and with every wide-eyed transplant from Michigan or North Dakota or Maine or wherever, this demon grew bigger and stronger and hungrier.

His name was Kal, and he lived at the southeast corner of Beverly and La Cienega, from whence his dominion extended out in a thirty-mile radius. His kingdom was known to many as the Studio Zone. Within the Studio Zone, Kal orchestrated complications great and small to thwart people's dreams. Nobody "made it" there without his explicit consent. He bestowed fame and fortune on a select few from each generation. This was part of Kal's plan. He needed poster children to inspire his flock, to convince the hopefuls that dreams really can come true. But success was dear. Kal would never allow his famous ones to enjoy their achievements. It's no coincidence that so many celebrities suffer addiction, disease, and catastrophic accidents. Happiness and satisfaction made him sick. Dejection and misery, those were dishes into which Kal could sink his fangs.

* * *

V. Waking Up

Sometimes Fred would awaken from his life to find that years had passed and he'd made no progress at all. It was on one particularly hot June 16—the Santa Anas were blowing in—that Fred awoke while driving north on Interstate 5. Early evening, as he climbed the Grapevine, he realized that almost two years had elapsed since he'd vowed to really start

taking action. He'd determined to write screenplays and make short films. These were to be stepping-stones toward becoming a famous director. Yet the video camera that he'd bought collected dust in the closet, and the pages of his screenplay remained blank. He had accomplished nothing, again. It struck him that twenty years had slipped away in such increments.

As he pulled into his gleaming concrete driveway after a fourteen-hour shift, not extraordinary in Fred's job, reality wavered. It couldn't be that he was stepping out of that same Ford pickup onto that same driveway of that same tract house, assaulted by those same ornery Santa Ana winds, exhausted and threadbare from another day of that same drudgery. This wasn't meant to be his life. Something had gone haywire. Fred's rage festered like an abscess. It oozed poison into his blood.

Kal savored this silent rage of desperation.

* * *

VI. Melting Down

As Fred trudged toward his front door, he choked down his feelings. His wife was a buoyant, astute woman, and he didn't want to infect her with his venom. When he entered the house and called to her in a forced tone of cheer, she greeted him with a hug and a kiss. She told him that she wished he could have made it home earlier, so they could have eaten dinner together. Fred had wished this, too. He wished he had time to do a lot of things. But time was one of Kal's great weapons, and he made sure that Fred had none to spare. So this one innocent comment was all it took to ignite the smoldering distemper packed so tightly in Fred's guts.

Rational thought flew from his mind. He threw his keys down on the ground. He ripped off his Dodgers cap and chucked it across the room. He stomped back and forth down the entryway, yelling and cursing incoherently.

This was a side of Fred that he never showed. This was how he really felt. And how he really felt quite resembled a giant toddler in meltdown. He had never hurt or abused his wife, but she instinctually shrunk back from this violent outburst. Finally, he marched into the living room and flung himself down on the couch, where he hyperventilated for several minutes.

After some time, his wife looked in on him and asked if he were through. He apologized, didn't know what had come over him. He was stressed, tired, overworked. Maybe a weekend at the lake was in order. She was not impressed. In fact, she was shaken by his little episode and informed him that his behavior was unacceptable. She expected him to act like an adult and conduct himself with decorum, even if he was upset. He saw the truth in all this and acted contrite, but underneath, he resented her scolding. The rage crept forth.

* * *

VII. Mayonnaise

The next morning, the unwelcome alarm screeched at 4:00 a.m. Fred felt awful; he needed another three hours of sleep. But that was normal, and it was time to go to work. Time to drive through the quiet morning gloom to the job that was not his dream. As he prepared for the day, he indulged himself in a vitriolic inner monologue cataloguing his resentments. By the time he made it to set, a cloud of discontent surrounded him.

The shoot that day was a mayonnaise commercial with a director whom Fred despised. Even after working with him for eight years, the man still didn't know Fred's name. Whenever he wanted Fred's attention, he would snap his fingers and say, "Hey, man."

Fred tried in vain to project his sunny persona, and his failure triggered concerned inquiries from his coworkers. He informed them that he was just a little tired, and a grip brother presented him with a Rockstar energy drink from a private stash.

But it was no simple trick to outplay Kal. Shooting close-ups of food on a soundstage was tedious enough to be cruel. Kal had conceived this type of filming to separate people from their enthusiasm for life.

In fact, Kal felt a particular concentration of despair coming from that very stage in Encino, not just from Fred, but from the director all the way down to the production assistants. He sent out one of his invisible tentacles, which he wrapped around the stage, encasing it like a spider does its prey. In this manner, he could mainline that negative energy straight into his brown, syrupy blood. It gave him a little rush, an extra bump that, for a moment, calmed the rapacious hunger.

* * *

VIII. Hanging On

The energy level of the crew instantly crashed. The grips sent a man out to fetch more Rockstar drinks from the mini-cooler on the ten-ton. The agency producer leaned over to the line producer and asked if she could arrange a Starbucks run. The director excused himself for a minute and retreated to the privacy afforded by the heavily tinted windows of his Porsche. Everybody enlisted their drugs of choice to fight off what they considered to be those ordinary afternoon doldrums.

However, when a man's life force drops below a certain threshold, common drugs are no help. Fred had reached this dangerous level. A playback monitor looped take eighteen of a butter knife swirling a dollop of creamy mayonnaise onto freshly sliced country loaf. There was a discussion underway about how to fix the dollop so it met brand

specifications for shape and consistency. Fred stared at the video loop and grew entranced by the image. His vision dimmed. He wanted nothing more than to find some dark corner of the stage, wrap himself in a furniture pad, and fall into a deep state of hibernation.

His sympathetic nervous system sensed danger and sounded the alarm, flooding his bloodstream with norepinephrine and causing his heart to kick-drum. Vexed by these wild physiological swings, Fred panicked. He needed to get off that stage pronto, or he might just collapse in front of the cute craft services girl who was now circulating a tray of chai latte smoothies. And that would not do.

* * *

IX. Losing Grip

Fred stumbled across the stage and shoved open the door. As he staggered into the harsh sunlight, his progress was arrested by a blast of heat so dry that his skin seemed to wither and crack. He blinked and squinted and cupped a hand over his brow. There was no escape. Nowhere to turn. He stood teetering on the scorched blacktop of that dreary parking lot, the heat twisting from it in vapors. How he loathed this heat and its insistence, swept in from the Mojave Desert to remind people what this land really was. It teased and licked and penetrated, until his simmering cauldron of rage boiled over and erupted.

Bruce Banner had never felt such fury, and if it had been possible, Fred would have transformed into something even more menacing than the Hulk. In that moment, he hated everyone and everything and, given the power, would have smashed it all to dust. He looked to the sky and roared his disapproval of the world, the trumpeting call of a great beast.

Fifty feet away, a Panamera sat idling in the parking lot. Fred's roar penetrated even the high-quality sound-dampening materials of the luxury vehicle, and the director's head popped up from behind the dash, his nostrils and upper lip encrusted with white powder. His eyes widened at the sight of Fred standing, nay wobbling, near the stage door, eyes to the heavens, caterwauling like a wounded brontosaurus.

The director wiped his face on the sleeve of his Dolce & Gabbana shirt, got out of his Panamera, and crossed the lot. He called out, "Hey man, are you okay?"

But Fred was not okay. He saw the director blurred and muted, as if the mayonnaise had somehow gotten in his eyes. His limbs tingled, his ears buzzed, and a bubble of impending doom swelled in his chest. He gulped down the acrid air. Still, he could not get enough oxygen, and the world faded to gray. Fred sensed that his life was ending.

The director approached cautiously, as if scared to catch some infectious disease. He hitched his matte-black glasses up the bridge of his nose and said, "Man, you don't look so good."

A vast distance opened between them. The director's mouth had moved, but Fred heard nothing for several seconds. Suddenly, the sound waves crashed into him with palpable force, knocking him back a couple steps. He swayed like a palm tree in a stiff breeze and struggled to understand what was happening.

The director began to emit light in spectral shafts, and Fred noticed patterns of color forming around the man's body. His chest illuminated into a brown oval, from which a patchwork of jagged green and yellow spread. Red beams shot like lasers from his eyes. When he spoke again, his voice was a growl, low and monstrous, "Hey. Man, you're scaring me. Say something."

Was this the devil, sent to collect him? Fred recoiled from the hideous being. He jerked his head around, searching for a way out, but like in a mirrored funhouse, that distorted monster leered back from every direction.

* * *

X. Fred's Last Stand

His survival instincts redlined, and he knew that he must act. He reached down into some deep, primitive reserve and mustered up one last burst of resolve. Fred charged and sounded a battle cry. He pumped his legs as fast as they would go, and the world melted into a blur. Only his enemy ahead remained in focus.

But no matter how fast he ran, he could not close the gap between himself and his foe. And as he swung his clenched fists back and forth, the thing in front of him morphed and transformed into a montage of everything he hated. It cycled between traffic and smog and "Valet Parking Only" signs and "No Parking" signs and narcissistic directors and conniving producers and litterers and graffiti and lines at the checkout stand and celebrity tabloid magazines and the Santa Ana winds and Fisher dollies waiting to be carried up flights of stairs, and finally the thing became humanoid again, shining brown, yellow, green, and red.

He glanced down at his own heaving chest and saw a brown light glowing there. Green and yellow patches shimmered on his flailing arms. Now it made sense. The figure barreling toward him was the monster he hated most: his own pathetic self.

When Fred looked up, his loathsome projection advanced, and the distance began to close. They bore down on each other like two locomotives. Fred wanted to destroy the thing, to blast it into smithereens and put it out of its misery. He leapt from his feet and threw his body horizontal, headfirst, into a human-shaped missile. Like a mirror image, his opponent did the same. They flew toward each other, two grotesque lightning bugs caught in a cosmic game of chicken.

* * *

XI. Fred, Meet Fred

Their heads collided, but instead of the skull-crushing, brain-rattling impact that Fred had expected, he met with something soft and yielding. It felt like dipping his head into a tub of warm vegetable oil. The two forces plunged together and, meeting no resistance, began to disappear into each other like some cheap illusion. First their heads vanished, then their necks, shoulders, torsos, and so on.

As Fred dove into himself, only one thing shattered: that distorted lens through which he'd viewed his life. He no longer saw a washed-up failure who had abandoned his dreams. He no longer felt the constant, nagging pressure to do something great. He no longer raged at everything that seemed to have stood in his way. Now he saw clearly.

Two sets of feet were all that remained of the bodies that had collided. Like the sun sets into its reflection behind the Pacific, the feet set into each other. Nothing was left of the two Freds. All fell still and silent, and Fred found himself floating in blackness.

* * *

XII. Someplace

From someplace far away, a disembodied voice spoke in an Australian accent, "Oy mate. Can you hear me?" The sound echoed and reverberated until it cocooned him in a feedback loop. Fred wanted to reply, but he had no body and hence no mouth with which to speak. He drifted in the direction of the voice, moving by intention alone. "Fred, is it? Come on, mate. I know you're in there."

Fred accelerated and began to move freely through time and space. He raced faster and faster across the void. He didn't know exactly where he was coming from or where he was headed; he just knew that he had been called. His pace quickened until he traversed galaxies in a nanosecond. Suddenly, he crashed into his body, and a firm smack to the cheek jolted him awake.

He blinked and squinted into the sunlight. A man in a paramedic uniform leaned over and said, "Oy, good to see ya. You made it back." The man had short, stubbly brown hair and a round, jovial face. Fred gathered that he was flat on his back in the parking lot. He turned his head and saw an assembly of concerned people, including the director, huddled nearby.

"Where did you come from?" Fred asked the medic.

Wrapping a cuff around Fred's arm to take his blood pressure, he replied, "I was about to ask you the same thing."

"I came from someplace... it was nowhere, really..."

"That's how it goes," said the man, smiling. "But you're here now."

Fred pondered where he'd been and where he was. The heat radiating from the pavement warmed and soothed him. "Am I okay?" he asked.

"Your vitals are normal. Could have been exhaustion, a panic attack ... who knows? We can take you to the hospital if you like, but my recommendation is to go home, take it easy, and keep an eye on yourself for the next day or so. Wouldn't hurt to see your GP for a physical. Do you have someone who can pick you up?"

With unexpected gratitude, Fred thought of his wife and replied, "Yes, I do."

The medic offered his hand and hauled Fred up to a seated position. Fred felt different. He felt lighter.

"Good?" the medic asked, and Fred nodded.

* * *

XIII. Wide Awake

For the first time in a long while, Fred was good. Even his appearance improved. His countenance transformed from surly to pleasant. He stood taller, and his belly receded back into his torso. The hue of his complexion turned from ruddy to golden. Fred looked more like the sanguine young man he'd been twenty years ago.

This new feeling of Fred's flowed through Kal's tendrils back to his lair at the corner of Beverly and La Cienega, and his blood burned. A foul taste arose in his mouth and he spat to cleanse his palette. He knew that flavor, although he was seldom subjected to it, and he cursed that he had lost another victim, another source of sustenance. For Fred no longer dreamed.

* * *

XIV. Epilogue

Fred would never be known as a creative genius. Like many, his life was destined for obscurity. But free of his oppressive dreams, he could relax and have a little fun. He found the artistry in manipulating a c-stand, in shaping the light with fingers and dots, in feathering a dolly up to speed. The invisible strokes of a master. Practiced over time, they would build his pension nice and fat. And each night, he would happily retreat to his comfortable home in Santa Clarita. He would not only conduct himself with the decorum that his wife deserved, but with something like joy. It wasn't the life he'd dreamed of. It was the life he had. And it was pretty damned sweet.

The Belonger

BRIAN HOWLETT

Thursday, May 25, 1989

The windsurfer looking for the ultimate challenge will find his match here on Bulabog Beach, on the eastern coast of Boracay. Between November and May, the wind blows into shore and the conditions are perfect for the experienced, aggressive boarder. Don't mind the hordes of tourists back there on the white sand beach. That's not why you came. And you won't even know that they're there. Just get out on your board and put it all behind you. Then pull out of the water at the end of a stellar day to get wasted that night with all of the shore babies. Pretend you like them, listen to their stories about their snorkeling "adventures" and day cruises, keeping your eye out for the prettiest and singiest among them. Then get up the next morning and do it again. You won't have to worry about the wind here. It's waiting. Always waiting.

Clifford plucked the page from the typewriter. It was fair writing. Maybe not his best, but pisser, he didn't even remember writing it, and it worked. Travel sober, write drunk, the best of the writers always said.

He read it again. He took pleasure in his own writing, and his way of appealing to his core readers by putting down others. It had just enough of his trademark irreverent humor, walking that fine line between what could be published and what couldn't.

It was good enough for *Eastern Rider*, at any rate. The magazine was pretty much about the pictures and captions anyway, and the travel offers that fattened its back pages. His writing was more for him and his editor, Trace. He red-penciled through one line and changed it. *Fuck the hordes of tourists on the white sand beach.* Trace would like that. He wouldn't allow it through, but it would give him a laugh. That's what mates are for.

Clifford wished he could go riding himself right now. The typhoon was over and the best of the winds were gone, but it would still be nicely unsettled on the South China Sea, and a couple of hours on Stanley Beach would be a great way to work through his hangover. He was particularly wobbly this morning. Must be the nerves.

He threw a few things into his knapsack and then carefully put his typewriter into its weathered but solid travel case. He looked at the business plan one more time. This was it, the hardest twenty pages he had ever written because he was putting it all on the line. He

slipped it into his briefcase, willing himself to feel better. He went into his bathroom and opened the drawer. Like a little mound of brown sugar, the last of the heroin sat in its place in the corner, saying, "Baby, I can take care of you."

Not today. Clifford had to count on Clifford if his magazine was finally going to happen. He had spent too many years boring everyone with his talk about this. He closed the drawer, and washed his face. He was already getting the first sign of wrinkles. Only thirty, but like a lot of windsurfers, the wind and sun had aged him. Every wrinkle a small price to pay. It struck him that he hadn't been to a doctor since California. Seven years living here, and he didn't even know where a hospital was.

Hong Kong. City of the young.

He climbed up out of the basement apartment in Mid-Levels. He was the only expat he knew who lived without a view. He was cool with it. When he first came to Hong Kong, he had insisted on being near the water and rented a flat on Lantau Island, but the ferry ride back and forth was too much. Especially at closing time. So he moved to Stanley Beach on the south side of the Island. It was the closest he could get to California, and he loved it, but the rent quickly proved too much for what he was managing to earn.

He came with an idea to become a journalist, but even the *South China Morning Post* and the *Hong Kong Standard* required credentials. He was cool with that, too. He discovered that there was a strong market for travel writers, and he went from one contract to the next, quickly establishing a reputation as a hard-partying but reliable writer up for any assignment. Soon Clifford was discovering his knack for finding the next great undiscovered beach. The money was always tight, but he soon learned that if you set aside the typical expatriate expectations, then it goes a lot further.

So no more ocean views. And basements, not balconies.

That was his secret weapon. He had the ability to adjust to any circumstance and never get rattled. When he got comped first class by a tourist board or new resort that was angling for a good review, he took full advantage of it, even if he ended up writing the truth. But he could just as easily ride on the back of a fifty-year-old bus for twelve hours deep into a jungle with mountain tribes that had never seen a white person.

Although, he thought as he slid into the taxi for Kai Tak, if this goes well, money may not be such an issue anymore. He settled into the ride, hoping the potholes and crazy driver might help whip his head back into shape. He loved cabs. He loved airports. He loved hotels. Anywhere that was nowhere, he thought with a smile.

The storm had served as a welcome distraction from the bullshit of the past few weeks, but now that it was calm and the city had found its feet again, the protest signs were back. More than ever. Strung from treetops and balconies. He had no idea what they said, of course. Do they write their protest slogans bottom to top and right to left like their novels? Silly buggers either way. Because fat lot of good a slogan and a little bit of Johnny-come-lately organizing would do against the Party. Good against evil. Ripples against a tanker.

They should have started the rallies months ago. Years ago. They had every opportunity, living outside the direct rule of the Communists, under the protection of Mother England, but of course they had to wait to see the students in Tiananmen Square do it first. The Causeway Bay marches were just one more bit of Hong Kong piracy. Like the Crocodile label on the billboard passing outside his cab window. The colony didn't have an original thought and wouldn't know what to do if it did.

Hong Kong was hard at work on the world's first copycat revolution.

He hadn't been to Kai Tak during the day for years. He got out of the cab, back into the heat, and realized that he had missed the buzz of the place, especially on a busy Thursday. Other expats would complain about the crowds, but Clifford didn't mind them. Maybe because he was six-and-a-half feet tall and had his own privacy wherever he moved. He normally flew courier flights at night, when the airport was a ghost town. It was one more travel trick he had picked up. You bring only a carry-on and the courier companies use your baggage allotment, so the airfare is pretty much free. Clifford wasn't about to share that tip with his readers. No sense creating undue competition for the best routes.

He came into the main terminal. He had forgotten about the high school students who used the airport like a library after school. They were sprawled out in the main terminal, with their textbooks spread out on the floor, absorbed in their work while he stepped around them.

The wooden schedule board fluttered to life. Bahrain changed into New York. London into Tokyo. His flight was still forty-five minutes away. Lots of time, especially now that he had Belonger status. The special stamp in his U.S. passport would gain him access through the fast lane in customs. It didn't matter when he came back now. Or when he left. He was free as a bird. This was his home now, in a way. Weird. He stopped in the middle of the terminal. He realized he hadn't been back to San Diego for five years now, since his mother passed. His high school friends were married and moving on, deep into the American promise.

Home. Towering over everyone and everything, surrounded by dramatics. An American airport was all clean floors, calm travelers, and decent restaurants. Here, it was a sobbing daughter clutching her parents before stepping on the plane for an expensive education in America or Canada. Or lovers saying goodbye so desperately you might think one was going to the electric chair. Or a tiny grandmother clutching a wailing grandchild so fierce that the airline would rather delay the departure than try to separate them.

He had time for a drink but decided against it, as much as he loved airport bars. Too soon. He pushed through to the departure lounge and stood against a small rectangle of open wall, carefully pulling out the Plan, hoping it would calm him. *Tomorrow Sun* was going to go where *The Lonely Planet* had grown too fat to venture. In fact, he couldn't believe people still even went to Singapore. It might as well have been Chicago for Christ's sake.

He would write about where to find the best beach, of course, and the best waves, and cheapest bungalows. But also the cleanest drugs. The best sex. He would write how-tos on ripping off your hotel or even your hostel. How to travel by train for free. It was for people who wanted off the established Thailand-Philippines-Guilin-Bali track. Who were hungry for the next real thing. In a way, it wasn't about how much money or how much time you had. But how much nerve. He was going to show the asshole editors at *Travel + Leisure* magazine who refused his pitches what the new generation of traveler was excited about.

It was a good pitch. He had a solid business plan, including a robust list of the kind of smaller advertisers who would be interested. And besides, Prem had already demonstrated he was serious by paying for this flight to the meeting. A good sign, even if Prem didn't have any experience in magazines. A hugely successful carpet dealer, he had the pockets for the publishing business.

"The Tomorrow Rider" was something Trace called Clifford soon after they met. After just a few assignments, Clifford wanted to start pushing the boundaries. Asia had so much more going on than people talked about. There were entire countries that were off limits but you could sneak into if you were willing to travel light and take the odd risk. Clifford was amazed that none of his new friends in Hong Kong had been to any of these places. He would tell the world about the absolute best beach anywhere, Koh Rong in Cambodia. The stunning mountain country of Taipei. And Hainan Island off the southern coast of China. No one equated old China with gorgeous, tropical getaways. He would tell his readers how to sneak across borders and go underground. He would show them what was next.

* * *

He loved planes, too. Something about being so high above the earth. Unreachable. Unaccounted for.

Clifford pushed his nose against the window, cooling himself down against the cold plastic. He was feeling better, but still nervous. He remembered the first time he flew over Vietnam years ago. It was his first flight out of Hong Kong, and he wasn't prepared for the announcement. He had his face buried in some magazines when the pilot interrupted.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are on schedule, ninety minutes out of Bangkok. I just want to let you know that we are crossing into Vietnam, visible on the right- and left-hand side of the plane."

Clifford startled. Rolling hills covered in lush green treetops swept the landscape as far as he could see. It still looked like China, but everything was so different. Guys bought it right down there, he thought. Man. For all I know some poor bugger was strung up on that hill, or shot dead right there in that pretty winding river. When he had booked the flight, he hadn't even considered the flight path or checked a map of the region. "You

dumb, arrogant, ignorant American,” he said to himself now, smiling.

Because there it was. Vietnam. The airplane window became a television screen, and he was suddenly ten years old again. He had uncles and older cousins who had fought in the war, but it seemed more myth to him. Now it was real. It never looked this pretty on TV, either. Like flying over Hawaii, except that so many people had died.

It was that flight that made him realize how far from California he was, and that had hooked him on exploring more of Asia. It was that flight that inspired him to give up on financial writing and dedicate himself to travel writing, and at the same time, follow his passion for windsports.

Flying over it all these years later, it still moved him. Damn. Danm. Vietnam. The man in front of him was also pressed against the glass, with wide eyes, elbowing the person beside him. It was probably his first flight over the country.

Suddenly the plane dropped. Clifford was expecting this, the turbulence that accompanied the mountains. He closed his eyes. Hopefully it would push the last of the booze out of his system. Sure enough, after a few minutes they cleared the range and the plane smoothed out.

The meeting was only a few hours away. He was finally feeling ready. Excited now, not nervous. Life was about to change for Clifford the tall American.

* * *

Prem had checked him into the Mandarin Oriental. He had tried turning down such a luxurious spot, but Prem insisted. Even more surprising, upon arrival he discovered he was booked into the penthouse. Holy shit. Prem didn't know much about publishing, but was he expecting *Tomorrow Sun* to become *Playboy Magazine* or something? As he entered the suite, he realized he might have to manage Prem's expectations, even as he was trying to inflate his enthusiasm. Nuance. Subtlety. Not strong suits for Clifford.

Nor, apparently, for the penthouse suite. He had never been inside such a room. Not knowing what else to do, he went across the room and opened the curtains to the view of the city spreading out before him stories below. He had come to terms with Asia's obsession with luxury travel, but the architects and engineers had wasted their time with this build. The linens in the bedroom, puffy pillows, and gorgeous furniture were no match for the dirt and dust that made up the Bangkok skyline. It was the ugliest city he had ever seen.

He closed the curtains and sat down in front of his briefcase. He considered the shabby leather. Perhaps he should have invested in something better? But he knew Prem well enough. He didn't have to pretend to be something he wasn't. They had partied together. Windsurfed together. He was looking forward to seeing Prem, in fact, as a friend.

He went into the washroom to wash his face. Marble counters. Gold faucets. Perfect lighting to make even him look better than he deserved to. The tap water ran five-

star cold and clear, unlike anything that was flowing out there in the city's brown rivers that were nothing more than a glorified sewage system.

He went back downstairs. He loved hotels, but he loved hotel lobbies more. You can take over the lobby of any five-star like you own it. In Asia, nothing makes you feel whiter. Or more like the conquering colonial. No one questions you. You lay out your typewriter or newspaper with just the right amount of authority, and you're an emperor for the day. The ceiling fans whirl above you like they have for generations. The huge vases of fresh flowers erase the smell of the diesel from the broken-down vehicles driving in circles outside. Bowls of fruit are waiting. Yours for the taking. The washroom attendants are ready to wait on you hand and foot. Fine linens to dry your hands, not paper towels. The expertly played notes from the lobby Steinway piano float in the air. The high ceilings make for more private conversations.

Prem was waiting for him. He gave Clifford a big hug as usual, trying to pick the larger man up off the floor.

"Superstar, how are things?" he said.

"Great, Prem. Thank you. I mean, for this," he gestured out to the lobby. "You didn't need to go all out like this. I mean, the penthouse?"

Prem bowed. "My pleasure. Just promise you empty the bar fridge for me."

As soon as Clifford sat down, the waiter silently brought another Heineken to the table.

"They say that if you stay here but one time, the staff will never forget your name," Prem continued.

"Kind of like 'Hotel California'?" offered Clifford, happy to see his friend, and even happier to finally get on with things.

"Exactly," said Prem. "Although I hate The Eagles. No offense."

"None taken," said Clifford.

They touched glasses, and the first sip felt good. Clifford was back on his board.

"Did you book some extra time? Kata Beach is something. Some of the best wind anywhere.

"Not this trip, Prem. Besides, Phuket is just too, too crowded for me. I windsurfed Kata a few years back, it is excellent, you're right. But my whole thing now is getting off the beaten path, remember?" He tapped his briefcase.

"Of course. That's why we're here. *On* the beaten path, as it were."

"I mean, even northern Thailand is getting too crowded. Chiang Mai and the whole elephant trekking thing, it's turning into fucking Disneyland."

Clifford opened the briefcase and took out his precious plan. One simple paper clip, and a cover that read, *Tomorrow Sun*.

"I love the title, by the way," said Prem. "You've got a gift."

"Thank you. Asia is still pretty much undiscovered. Trust me, people are waiting for something like this, Prem."

He excitedly started leafing through the pages.

“I have the first six issues’ editorial calendar mapped out. I have three up-and-coming writers committed to joining. Freelance, of course. Printer is all set up. Great paper stock. He’s giving us a great deal.”

He turned the page. “And I’ve found a killer photographer, because the pictures are always going to be a big part of this kind of thing. She’s super talented, but still cheap because she’s undiscovered. One of the few people coming through Hong Kong with any talent, actually.” He laughed.

“Did I ever tell you how things work in the carpet business, my friend?”

Clifford didn’t want the conversation to take a detour. “Um, no. I don’t think so.”

“It’s all about the talent, like you’ve identified.”

“Great. Cool.”

“My family invests in the people who make our carpets. We find those who are the absolute best at the craft, often living in some remote town in Afghanistan. No English, of course.”

“That makes sense.”

“But you don’t understand. When we find them, we buy them. We own them, you see.” He paused, wanting the words’ meaning to find traction. “We buy their life, Clifford, and their child’s life. All they do, every hour of every day, is make my carpet. Often, it takes someone an entire lifetime to make but one. And it is exquisite.”

Clifford put down his glass.

“Which is why I command such a high price for my wares.”

“Okay.”

“I’m not suggesting I buy you, my friend,” Prem continued, laughing. “But I do require some level of commitment. And an understanding that you will be willing to take some direction.”

“Of course, Prem. We would be partners,” he said. But he was less enthusiastic suddenly. The idea of owning someone disgusted him. “What kind of direction, exactly?”

“If I suggest that you travel to certain places, perhaps. It’s not always about the beach. For instance, there is the jungle and mountains of Laos. Burma.”

“I’d be happy to get up into Burma. I don’t have a story planned on that right away, but of course. Burma is a tough visit, but exactly the kind of place *Tomorrow Sun* wants to explore.”

“Just a for-instance,” said Prem. “Really, the magazine *is* a brilliant idea.”

He raised his glass to Clifford.

“And congratulations are also in order for becoming a Belonger,” he continued. “You’re the only expatriate who has lasted in Hong Kong longer than three years. Seven? That’s quite the achievement.”

“Just means I’m getting old,” Clifford said.

“I’m still ahead of you on that score. But now that you are a Belonger, it gives you

even more freedom to come and go, correct?”

“Yeah, it’s a perk.”

“And with all the nonsense happening in Hong Kong right now, these silly protests and what-not, it couldn’t be more perfect.”

“What do you mean?”

“Everyone is so distracted. A Belonger from California, who loves to travel into, say, the Golden Triangle as part of his new travel magazine? It is ideal.”

Burma again. What the hell was going on?

“You see, I am quite prepared to give you the fifty thousand American dollars right now.”

Clifford’s heart raced at the mention of the figure. He instinctively reached for his glass and drained the beer without even realizing it. Just like that, another Heineken appeared.

“And I am very happy to see you actually publish this magazine,” Prem said quietly, leaning into Clifford. “Why, I’ll even read it.”

Clifford dreaded saying it, yet had no choice.

“But.”

“But,” Prem continued. “Burma. Laos. Northern Thailand. It is getting more difficult for me to continue my trips in those areas at the current rate. People ask questions. But the business there is too good to ignore.”

Just say it, Clifford thought.

“I need you to represent my interests there. The poppy business is getting more competitive. And I think you have exactly what it takes for the job.”

Clifford took his precious business plan and rolled it up tightly. He started drumming it on the table, agitated.

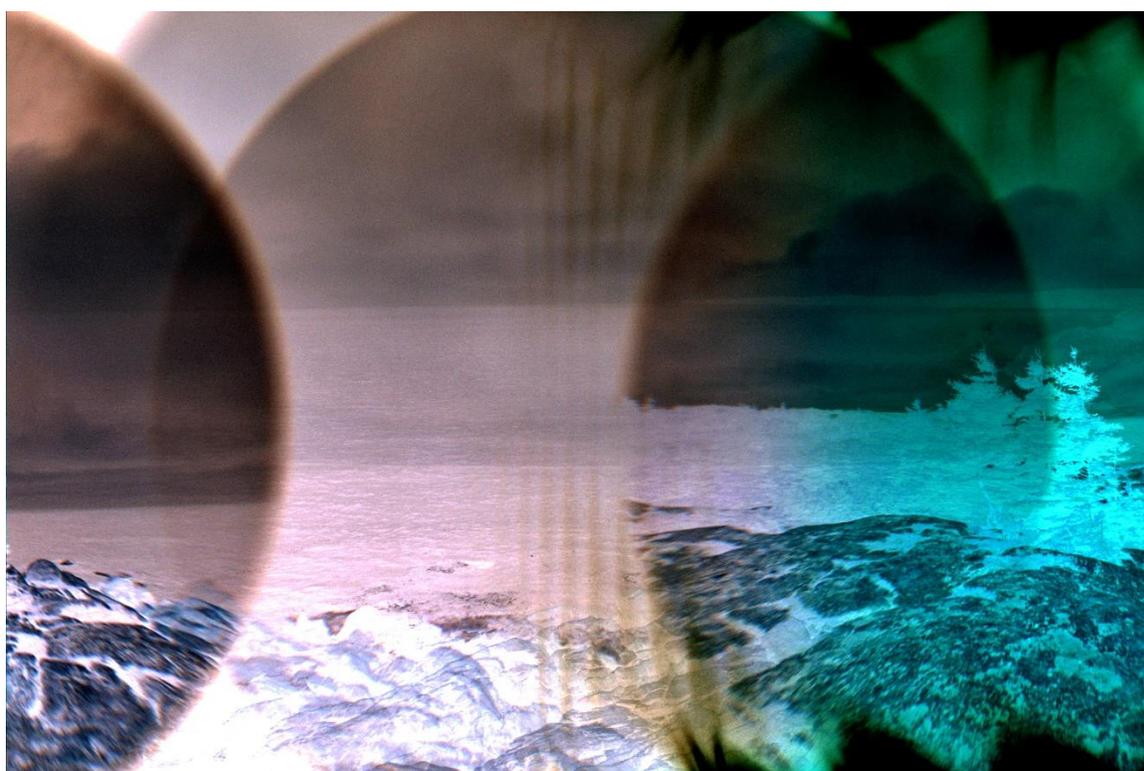
“You are most adaptable my friend, no?”

Clifford stared at the document in his fist, pissed.

Not because he knew that he was going to say yes and take the money. Pissed because Prem knew it, too.

Transitory Space

LEAH OATES



Leah Oates, *Transitory Space*, Nova Scotia, Canada Color Field #226, 2015-2016. Pigment photography from a 35mm film scan. Courtesy of the artist

Sweet Sand

SASANKA JINADASA

I pick up a jar of *seeni sambol* at Nimah Market, lamenting the lack of Lankan products at the Pakistani grocery store just a block from my apartment in Griggin Square. It's impossible to tell how old anything in the store is: preservative-soaked canned goods, bottled pickles of mango and onion, packets of spices tossed into metal cages, haphazardly overpriced. I catch strains of Hindi, which I vaguely understand from the Bollywood movies that played in the background of my childhood. My father spent years watching them, huddled through New England winters, trying to glean any part of South Asia he could. Sinhala became a scarce commodity, so much so that he hoarded the broken syllables that fell from my own tongue. Soon, the currency of my Ivy League education and American boyfriend came to be more valued at this market, and I imagine the broken bars of "Ammi," "thathi" and "adderei" are tucked in with the *raththaran* earrings given to me as a child, somewhere in my mother's jewelry boxes.

I toss the *seeni sambol* in my basket and decide this overpricing is reasonable. As I dig through the papayas in the produce section, the tiny bell above Nimah's door tinkles, crudely signaling the entrance of another brown body searching for cumin or curry leaves, or spicy instant ramen to scent their Boston summer. I listen for the flap of an embroidered sari or broken down flip-flop, the patented heavy sounds of an aunty, just looking for an onion or lime she can complain about later. Watching aunties study bundles of identical green chiles always reminds me of the easy exasperations of home. My mother can spend hours doing the same as the aunties here, although she is too modern for saris; I was always truly thankful for that.

But it's not an aunty who walks in, or a sullen uncle sent by his wife, or even a white woman who has heard amazing things about the prices. It's you, in an all-black jumpsuit, clinking with gold chains, eyebrows looking like smeared ash and perfectly arced scythe blades all at the same time. Your presence whispers all through the shop, heels catapulting you to all of five foot three, skin smoldering of curried coconut milk. I hear you drop a jar in the aisle next to me, and I imagine that you have made a mess of the jaggery, your thin wrists and hipbones littered with the sweet brown sand, a beach unto yourself.

I am pissed at my mind, imagining that sand and your thick saltwater, tasting you on a kitchen counter anywhere. To describe you with spice metaphors would be to reduce

your depth to a stereotype, so I give you the ocean, the only thing I can think of that captures the vastness I feel with you in my mouth.

What the fuck are you doing here? Your lilting Hindi, marked with the undertones of your recent summer in Bangladesh with him, rings through the store—a darker, richer gold than the bell that announced your presence. I refuse to let you be the reason that I leave the store empty-handed, so I grab a papaya without testing for weight, grab two limes for the *lunumiris* I'm making later, and hope to all the gods that you'll let me leave the store with just a "Hey."

"Hey."

A scratched bronze bangle slides down your wrist as you reach up towards your hair, smoothing the bumps of your hasty pin-up job. Half-leaned over the counter, flirting with the cashier for no reason at all, you let me approach the counter before pushing it. You are the one who got away, after all—although there were all the signs that I should have run far, far away a long time before. I can't stop staring at your left wrist as you animatedly ask more questions, still angrily imagining drawing you closer to me and locking my mouth on those most vulnerable erogenous zones. While you ask stupid things like "how are you" (obviously not fine), "how's your mother" (obviously hates you despite her misgivings about lesbians), and "what are you doing tomorrow night we should get drinks" (no no god no), I find myself agreeing before I reach the checkout counter.

"There's a bar down the street," I say. "I can bring Adam, you should meet him."

I see the edges of your cheeks drop down a half centimeter, the apples becoming lemon bulges as hold the taste of my new boyfriend in your mouth. I've disrupted myself of you, and I breathe deeply, probably too audibly. As your gesturing fingers sift through memories of my brokenness, you decide this is acceptable. You would *love* to meet Adam, can't imagine anything better, it is too bad that Amir can't make it, he's still in Bangladesh with his family. I often wonder if you've just traded one broken human for another, a queer depressed brown femme for a sweet South Asian Muslim man. Amir is handsome, tall, a pariah to your family and no doubt not as good at eating pussy as me. I am just very ready to leave Nimah's jaggery-stained walls for the clean sterility of my apartment.

I call Adam to cancel on dinner and stuff myself full of *roti* and *lunumiris* and chunks of papaya, barely scraping out the seeds before viciously grabbing a knife to cut the damn thing. I can't decide if I want to give it a mercy killing or an excruciating and gorgeously slow ending; having the choice paralyzes me and I use a spoon to eat the papaya instead. I do not cry once while watching *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* with the sound off and English subtitles.

I fall asleep dreaming of the phone call where you profusely apologize but you just have to cancel. In my dreams, all my aunties are on the beach, trying to decide whether to tan or swim, white saris telling me that I must be at the temple or at a funeral, and either way I should pray, pray, pray for the phone to ring. I look up and I'm in a church, in the bell tower, in the bell, and when I finally get the courage to look down, there you are—

pulling the rope, the clapper bruising my chest as I fall onto the burnished shell, and you keep pulling the rope, over and over again, the rope braid burning you bright pink and mottling the taut skin above your veins as I fall. I wish that I had woken up gasping, suddenly, the defibrillating effect of coursing fear, but I drift back to lucidity. Humans can get used to any kind of pain, especially the dull thumping kind that moves with a heartbeat. I'm sure my mother finds this sympathetic, but I'm the one who keeps climbing up bell towers hoping to find a music box.

* * *

I want to text her to call off our bar meet and greet tonight, but I am too chickenshit. I call my mother instead. She doesn't pick up, and I remember that she's on a silent meditation retreat in the middle of a desert, warding off spiders and silently judging all the middle-aged white women in yoga pants. Mela always loved my mother, despite the whole "You turned my daughter into a lesbian" thing that Ammi was always going on about. I think it helped that Mela was so beautiful, that in spite of our Lankan-Indian differences, Mela knew *kathak* and wore *ghungroos* and could recognize Jacqueline Fernandez, the Lankan beauty queen. My mother didn't know the Mela who drew henna on strangers at bars, who fucked strangers at bars when I wasn't home and encouraged me to do the same. And I tried, for so long. She loved being jealous and swimming with sharks and dolphins at the same time and kissing them all on the mouth before she knew which one was which. Eventually I wasn't sure which one of us was a dolphin, which one was a shark; I just learned that some sharks had no teeth and that a dolphin could beat you senseless with her tail if she wanted to. I could write a book full of things Mela taught me, but I prefer to leave those lessons to wash away with her. They'd teach you how truly perfect the world could be but also what terrible things you were capable of doing if that world ever changed.

Once, Mela caught me reading her journal, ostensibly for proof that she was seeing someone else. Instead of getting angry, she made me fuck her while talking dirty about the other people I'd fucked, moaning about what men I'd let fuck me and who had gotten my number at the bar, what it felt like to dance with another woman, how other people liked to touch me. I took her from behind while whispering in her ear and dripping tears and sweat onto her collarbone. After she came, I slapped her in the face and left, maybe for the second time, and certainly not the last time, that year.

My doorbell starts buzzing and I jump, half-expecting Mela to show up half an hour early (and in my house no less). Instead, I find sweet, pale Adam, coming to check on me, saying I sounded distraught on the phone last night. He's holding a bottle of guava Maaza juice and two donuts from the Italian bakery down the street, his smiling teeth holding the only hardness in his whole body.

“I’m fine,” I smile at him. “And I haven’t eaten today, so you’re perfect as usual.” He looks pleased and I am really regretting this Mela reverie I’ve gotten so involved with. Adam isn’t perfect, of course—he’s white and doesn’t understand my mother’s accent. But he’s graceful and the sex is good and he always brings candy or cookies or at least wine. He knows about Mela and it scares the shit out of him. White people are always scared of the wild creatures that evade their imposed sense of order. He’s glad that I’m not that girl anymore. He actually said that once, that I’m “not that girl anymore,” as if I was some Limited Too edition of his fantasy girlfriend, wearing too much lip gloss and making bad decisions about which boys I should go to the movies with.

He’s also got something else for me, he says, pulling out a blue box. It’s got a thin silver bracelet laced through with two charms, a horseshoe and a garnet heart, my birthstone.

A charm bracelet. *Sigh*. “It’s beautiful,” I tell him, pulling it on and feeling its soft loops graze the little hairs lying flat on my skin. I kiss him lightly and we go back into my room as I tell him I’m on my period (a lie) and that I’m dying to be off of it so I can properly thank him for such a generous gift. (I can feel Mela laughing at me as I say it.) Undeterred from making this a sexy, romantic moment, somehow we end up nestled in each other’s half-naked bodies on the floor, counting the scars and blemishes on each other’s chests. Feeling the tiredness in his breath, I tell him that I’m getting drinks with my friend Belinda later and he should probably go home before he gets too comfortable. Content with his contribution to my day and our relationship, he murmurs and slinks his way out of my apartment. I realize that he bought the bracelet at the Indian bridal store on the corner, opposite Nimah Market, and wonder why the fuck they carry horseshoes.

Now that I’ve lied to Adam, I can get ready to see Mela. I mix my guava juice with white wine and save the donuts for later when I hate myself and want to watch *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*, craving other people’s drama and much-needed silence. The phone rings—it’s her. I hear her bangles sliding up and down her wrists, and she’s very sorry, something came up, Amir’s home early, what a lovely surprise, must do this again another time, and I just hang up as each one of her syllables falls out of the phone and hits me in the chest and the back and the shoulder and the calf where the clapper hit and I wish for nothing. Not for Adam or for Mela or even for Ammi. Just finish the Moscato, open my fridge, and start pulling out food. I’ll cook tonight. I’ll wear Adam’s bracelet while I sleep tonight. I will dream about Mela tonight. I will cry and swim with the toothless sharks and the good dolphins pooling in my tears, and wake up, wake up, wake up, alone, on purpose and hide more gold jewelry under my skin. Eat jaggery straight from the jar.

A Gaia Man Survival Guide

JACK KIRNE

To: [REDACTED], [REDACTED], [REDACTED], [REDACTED]
CC: RichardWalkerMP@ausgov.au, GaiaMan@supervillan.org
Subject: A Gaia Man Survival Guide: Your Post-Plan Spider Plan

To those who survived Plan Spider,

Congratulations! We're glad you're still with us—to endure what we've been through requires considerable fortitude. Morale in HQ has taken a beating, to put it lightly. The press says that times sure are tough for Gaia Man, and the truth is, they're right. The first day of the month here at HQ is usually a day of high spirits: Jeff whites-out and re-dates our 1987 Panda calendar, and Lucy sings ballads to the office's orchids. But as you can all probably well imagine, the office isn't looking its best right now. Still, it's our duty to stay strong, despite the wake of Plan Spider. Some of you might have seen my son, Richard, on the news last night calling us terrorists, tree-hugging loonies, etc. To this I say two things: First off, you've all got family, you know what they're like. Secondly—Richard's a twat. He's the kind of guy who espouses market-based solutions while sipping Chablis. He'll say, *Dad, how do you suffer the ontological paradox of supporting a man who claims to embody the self-regulating, entwined systems that keep this rock of ours habitable while also calling himself a Man?* Of course, we here at HQ know that Gaia Man is participating in a form of linguistic play, a parody of the fundamental anthropocentrism at the core of all deep-ecological supervillains. It's as Gaia Man says: anticipate your critics.

Anyway, fact of the matter is that after Plan Spider, things have gotten a little hairy (ha ha), so here in HQ, we've knocked together a survival guide to working for our saviour.

Expect Everything

First off: Expect Everything. Yes, I know this seems stressful, but the truth is when working for Gaia Man, expecting everything is essential to getting by and (possibly) surviving. An Everything-Expector does not let the petty feelings of despair or hope control them. They're emotionally prepared for crisis, is what I'm saying. For instance, there were many guys and gals in marketing who were expecting that Plan Spider would—broadly speaking—be well received, at least amongst our base. Their focus tests had polled well. But as we all well know, come Plan Spider's launch day, the public wasn't so fond of the idea. CNN called it "Apocalyptic," which I thought was a bit much. A "Change of Order" or a "Biological Shakeup" was more truthful in my opinion—but hey, since when has news been truthful? Point is, we learnt some valuable lessons that day. Firstly, PR should not poll Gaia Man's plans internally. But more importantly, we should be prepared for the negative press.

We can apply this to our personal lives too. When my son started working for Goldman Sachs, I wasn't surprised. Upset, maybe. But as a long-term devotee of the art of expecting, I had drawn up a plan. Richard had hardly said the words—*Dad, I'm sick of your deep ecology nonsense*—before I was burning his books and releasing a finely catalogued folio of damning misdemeanours from ages two through to present to his affiliates. And let me tell you—he's yet to find a job where the nickname Puppy-Pash doesn't follow.

And look, to be honest, if you're working for a supervillain and you're low-level? Expect to die. You've seen the stats. For all their talk of the sanctity of human life, heroes have few qualms with swatting the little guys. Don't beg for mercy. It's unbecoming.

Don't Trust Your Loved Ones

Now this point—I can't stress it enough. By now, you've probably gathered that my son's a jerk. But the fact of the matter is, when you're working for Gaia Man, it's best not to trust your family, your lovers, and your friends. Let me tell you the story of Gary Willow. He was one of our big guys in R&D in the lead-up to Plan Spider. Gary thought the plan was a beautiful thing (which it was!). He'd go misty-eyed as he explained the finer details to me. Gary loved his work. He loved Gaia Man; they'd go drinking on hump day and play darts together. But he also loved his wife—no worse, he trusted her. Despite our strict policy, what does he do? He tells her about the plan. And what does Mazy Willow do when her husband goes to sleep that night? She stabs him forty-seven times. Nasty stuff. I'll never forget Gaia Man's eulogy. Let me tell you. There wasn't a dry eye in the house. There's something he said that haunts me. A truth that's kept my wife, Gail, from twisting my nuts off at three a.m. It's the reason I tell her I'm a sneaker salesman. You know what he said—it's on the letterhead of every correspondence: *Expect Everything*.

As I said, not a dry eye in the house after that one.

An Aside on Supervillainy

It's possible that some of you have noted that we are working for a supervillain. I've got a few things to say about that. Does that mean we consider ourselves evil? No. Do we regard ourselves, here at HQ, to be villainous? No. Are we exceptional, or super? Absolutely not. But here's the thing. We're not heroes. Not for the human animal anyway. It's like Gaia Man says: *If you're planning to exterminate an entire species, you're not that species' hero.* So here at HQ, we accept the title the press give us. We're not like those folks at Orange or The SPADE Organisation.

On the Matter of Getting Paid

Here's the thing. There are those who say the field of supervillainy is the place to be if you want to make a buck. And yes, by the markets you'd assume so. Supervillain conglomerates like The SPADE Organisation posted a two hundred percent growth rate last year. Two hundred! Could you imagine? Thing is, we're not like those extractivist, career politician, genocidal, imperialist supervillains. We're ecologists. We like bacteria, fungi, the light on our lovers' faces, flowers, rain, earthquakes, giant spiders, topsoil, the atmosphere—I could go on. We fight the crisis humans have imposed, the disaster of mass deregulated consumption. We acknowledge the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, high levels of chemical pollution at the deepest parts of the ocean, Bangalore verging on inhabitability as its lakes burst into fire and the mysterious and ongoing mass depletion of bee colonies. Gaia Man is right: The Anthropocene is now. This new period is characterised by the scope of our environmental intervention, and how the modernist project has defied the gradual drift of geology by radically and fundamentally altering our habitat. We here at HQ have to fight the capitalist crisis. Hence, our sustainable humans program. One per thousand hectares—that's the goal. It's a noble cause, yes. But unlike our supervillain competitors, our ventures are rarely profitable. Occasionally, yes, R&D comes up with something that trades well enough on the open market, while also helping this dear Earth, and together we share in the profits. The waste-sorting bin made many of us rich. But that was ten years ago, and now the purse strings tighten. For those folk in Tier IV and up, we'll maintain at least minimum wage. Everybody else should speak to Susan in HR (susan_squee@gaiacorp.hr.org). I am aware of the rumours, in light of the recent deaths, that management positions will soon become available. I'd like to take this opportunity to say this is simply not true. Those jobs died with those fine eco-people.

A Quick Word on Plan Spider

I suppose it is time to talk about the elephant in the room. Or should I say Spider? Despite the plan's failure, I stand by it. More than that, I'd say it was a beautiful thing. We all

know that given the possibility to kill and consume us, spiders hold the potential to eat the world's population in twenty days. Twenty days, people! So, raising a team of giant, genetically engendered, flesh-eating super-spiders that could only survive in areas of moderate to high levels toxicity? A plan that would wipe out the worst of the world's consumers, while sparing the world's disenfranchised indigenous populations was a noble cause. It's important to remember we weren't entirely unsuccessful. Sydney, New York, Boston, Beijing, Delhi, Berlin, Stuttgart, and Jakarta. They're gone. The spiders fared well there. Sixteen more days—that's all it would have taken. Already, the atmosphere is sighing in relief. It thanks us every day, in its quiet way. So, we shouldn't despair. Yes, our losses were indeed considerable. Four hundred of our people gave their lives to the cause. A few to the spiders, but hundreds more to the Western militaries, whose political puppets, we must not forget, have used the "Spider Crisis"—their words, not ours—to push for increased deregulation to promote population growth in these purified environments. They are the enemy. Not us.

A Big Challenge for Me That You Can Learn From

I hate to harp on and all, but I want to tell you a story about my jerk son, Richard. My wife still loves him. Adores him even. Often, when we brush our teeth before bed, she will turn to me and say, "Morris, you have to forgive him. He's a good boy. Misguided perhaps, but the young always are." She says, "You're a salesman—surely you understand the entrepreneurial spirit? He likes oil; you love shoes!" It makes my heart ache. I pat her on the shoulder, kiss her on the cheek, and tell her, "I can't do that Gail—his heart is sour." Sometimes, Richard is on the TV. He's up for re-election, as some of you may know. I loved—no, love. I still love my boy. But we all love what is bad for us. Junk food. Dirty energy. Plastic collectibles. I. Get. It. But we need to stay strong. So when my son is on TV, I stand and I yell, "TRAITOR!" before flicking off the switch. I know that later on those nights when I am woken by my fears at three a.m., I will find my wife in the kitchen, crying over a jerk's baby photos.

The Pain You're Living Through Is Only Temporary

And here's the thing. The point of the matter. We are all hurting: my wife, myself, those people who worked on the spiders, only to watch Navy SEALs break into our facility at Port Lonely and release our Emergency Cure. The way those spiders' legs shrivelled into balls of perverted string has put those fine scientists on the drink. But remember. So long as Gaia Man is around to lead us, to envision new causes, we will win. It's like he says: You plant your feet and yell at the clouds, knowing they're ambivalent. You're not hopeless or deluded, or at least, you're trying your best not to be. You will stand against capitalism, knowing you're in it. You have to "get your feet wet," after all. The water will

rise—you know this—try to take you, reduce you to a liquid asset, but not before you're traded and speculated upon, your futures purchased at a projected outcome. The tide of Capitalism will take you while you're dreaming, leave you hanging on the gallery wall, market your identity as a global brand, greenwash you, invite you to join the eco-chic revolution. Standing with Gaia Man is a way of standing in the water. It is a way of saying no.

Plan Earthworm is well underway. We will win. We must win. It's either us or the Earth. I promise you. We. Will. Win.

Expect Everything,
Morris Fay

The Impermanent Scar

CIRA DAVIS

WRITEGIRL CONTRIBUTOR

Gloria hadn't intended to kill the ten-month-old child. She had been feeding it a prune purée when she took a break to use the bathroom, leaving the baby strapped in his high chair. Upon her return, the boy had turned blue, unable to breathe. Panicking, she grabbed the baby, trying to save it. She didn't know what to do. The child appeared to be suffering from an allergic reaction, but the mother hadn't forewarned her. There was no medicine to help.

Gloria was about to call 911 when she felt the baby go limp in her arms. She saw its mouth fall open as its intense little eyes decayed into a vacant, lifeless stare. She dropped its body onto the table and heaved herself onto the tile floor, shaking in horror.

She could not call the police nor the Maddens. They would arrest her; this was all her fault. On her résumé she had lied about being “highly experienced, fully trained in first-aid and CPR.” She had never imagined actually being in a situation where she needed such knowledge.

Gloria contemplated how to escape punishment. She couldn't run away—the cops would find her. What else could she do? She had only two days until the Maddens returned. She called her sister.

“Hello?”

“Maggie, help me,” she whispered, trembling.

“Oh, hi, Gloria. What now?” Maggie snapped.

“Maggie, shh... I know it's a bad time, but something awful happened and I can't discuss it over the phone,” Gloria muttered worriedly.

“Okay... where should we meet?” Maggie answered with suspicion.

“Er, how about in front of the school on Rosewood in 15 minutes.”

“Alright.”

* * *

Maggie wasn't clever or intelligent, but she knew a lot of people as she was a hopeful actress continually involved in community theater and improv festivals. Maggie's red Bug pulled up in front of the school.

"Oh, thank God! Follow me, quickly," Gloria said, grabbing her sister's wrist, pulling her toward the Maddens' house.

"What's going on?!" Maggie asked in a heavy Brooklyn accent, stumbling in her heels as she tried to keep up.

"I... I was babysitting..." Gloria began quietly, not wanting to be overheard, "...the baby stopped breathing!"

"What?! You killed a baby?!" Maggie gasped. "You have no business taking care of a child!"

"Keep it down!" Gloria warned as they climbed the stairs to the front door. "Look, Maggie, I have to pay rent. And it's not like I've never babysat before. The first time the kid made it through the night intact."

"This is only your second time?!" Maggie shrieked as they walked into the living room. "God, you're such a mess. Really. Where is the poor thing?"

The house felt still and sad. Maggie followed Gloria to the kitchen.

"I just left it on the table. I don't know what to do. I don't want to go to jail!" Gloria screamed.

"Oh, Gloria," Maggie wailed when she saw the lifeless baby on the table.

"Before the Maddens left, the mother told me how her kid was a miracle. She said she won't be able to have any more and that she's so grateful for her little boy," Gloria sobbed. "I just wish I could go back in time and bring the baby back to life."

"Wait... that's not a bad idea," Maggie said matter-of-factly.

"Shut up," Gloria replied, irritated.

"No, really. When I was in 'The Crucifixion of Panko Submarine', remember the guy who played Krinkle?" Maggie asked hopefully.

"Was that one of your plays? I didn't see it."

"Oh. Well, the bizarre guy who played Krinkle told me how he paid someone to bring his cat back to life."

"Yeah, right. Wouldn't that be the type of groundbreaking story you'd see on the news?" Gloria smirked.

"Well, maybe I misunderstood. But I can call him," Maggie suggested. She left the room and came back five minutes later looking vindicated. Gloria glared at her.

"I'm not crazy!" she said, "Apparently, the cat guy lives on 4th Street, just a mile from here."

They pulled up to the dilapidated house cautiously. Maggie got out first, Gloria tracing her steps while holding the baby wrapped in a towel. Maggie knocked four times very slowly per her friend's instructions. A gaunt, olive-skinned man wearing a sweatshirt answered the door. He looked normal upon first glance, but that impression quickly faded. His eyes were perpetually darting around, like he was scanning for attackers, and he hunched his back awkwardly.

"What do you want?" he hissed, barely audible.

"We want to, er... resurrect a baby," Gloria answered stupidly.

"I don't resurrect... but I can make copies," he said bluntly, gesturing for them to enter. Inside, they could see countless computers and machinery of unimaginable complexity.

"I will ask no questions. Just know that what I am doing is illegal. I will clone the child," he explained, "Of course, when a clone is complete, it emerges as a newborn. This child is older, I presume."

"Ten months," Gloria replied, stupefied.

"Then an age accelerator will be necessary. Be forewarned, I have never done this before with a baby. Only cats and dogs; once a chimp. Also, understand that this baby will be like a twin of the previous one. It will not have the exact same mind, only body."

"Whatever. That's fine," Gloria agreed impatiently, "How much will it cost? We need it by Monday."

"Hmmm. Rush charges."

The man wrote an astronomical figure on a Post-it. Gloria nearly passed out.

"This is your life here," Maggie commented.

"Deal," Gloria whispered, shaking his hand.

* * *

There was nobody Amber Madden loved more than her ten-month-old son, Thomas. She couldn't believe his first birthday was just around the corner. After endless attempts to conceive a child, including two miscarriages and so much emotional pain and self-doubt, Amber knew she cherished these moments with her little boy more than other mothers did. She had just vacationed in Hawaii with her husband but had missed Thomas terribly the entire time. She was relieved to be home, lying on the bed and playing with him.

"Here comes Mr. Dino!" Amber cooed as she teased Thomas with his favorite stuffed animal. He remained quiet, just looking at her. She tickled him with its soft tail, but he didn't giggle or even smile.

Amber found this odd. Thomas was a playful baby. He always reached eagerly for Mr. Dino and loved to be tickled. But today he wasn't engaged at all. Amber dismissed it, kissed his forehead and put him into his crib for a nap.

* * *

It was time for Thomas's lunch. Amber wanted to make up for her absence by giving him his favorite snack, homemade peach pudding. She strapped Thomas into his high chair and showed him the pudding. As she lifted a heaping spoon to his mouth, the child jerked his head away in disgust.

"Thomas, you love peach pudding! Open up!" His mouth wouldn't budge.

"Do you feel okay?" Amber said out loud. She took his temperature, but there was no fever. She felt that Thomas had been acting strangely all day, and worried it was because she'd been gone on vacation.

* * *

That evening, much to her dismay, Amber's friend Janice came over with her pit bull in tow. When Thomas was only six months old, Amber took him to a party where the host had two Rottweilers. Thomas crawled over to their bowls and stirred their kibble, angering one of the dogs. The subsequent bite on his ankle required twelve stitches. Since the incident he had been petrified of dogs.

Amber carried Thomas around protectively, keeping him away from the pit bull, even though he didn't look frightened. Eventually Amber sat Thomas onto the couch. The pit bull came over to smell him. Amber was about to intervene when she noticed he was intrigued by the dog. Thomas reached out to pet the pit bull's nose. This was very unlike him. She became alarmed, grabbed Thomas and rushed to the back of the house, laying him down on her bed.

"What is wrong with you?" she asked. How could her baby have changed so much during her brief vacation? She hurriedly lifted his right leg and removed the sock. She ran her hand along the back of his ankle. Where there once was a thick scar, Amber felt only smooth, uninterrupted skin.

Numbers

DREW SHINOZAKI

WRITEGIRL CONTRIBUTOR

Nova watches the rain trickle down the window pane as the spices from the kitchen waft up to the second-floor bedroom just right of the staircase. Fat drops of water slide down the glass in opposing directions, colliding and sliding together to the wooden sill at the bottom of the glass. Outside the sky is gray; the mist rolls in from the horizon and settles placidly near the lampposts and dew-crusting park benches.

There are numbers of various sizes and shapes that float through Nova's mind, pushing at her skull and pressing at her temples. The same number repeats itself, fifty-two, fifty-two, fifty-two. The number fifty-two floats around in the galaxy of static thoughts in her mind and she presses her fingertips together.

Fifty-two more days until her father comes home.

Somewhere amid the numbers and the static there is a bright color. It jabs and pushes away the fuzz in her mind and Nova focuses on it, letting the color envelop her. It is her mother's voice, calling from the kitchen.

She stands up, brushing the dust off her earthy brown skirt made of crepe, an old weave textile. Her feet patter against the steps; Nova thinks of the raindrops that patter against the upstairs window.

She and her mother eat together around the round table while wild mint and juniper drift from the potted herbs on the kitchen windowsill. The lights in the kitchen cast rosy glows on their skin, and the potted candle in the center of the table flickers and shines.

There is an empty chair to the right of Nova and it is the same empty chair that is to the left of her mother.

Fifty-two more days, Nova thinks carefully to herself.

Other days, it does not feel the same. The empty chair is casually ignored, the elephant in the room pushed out of the front door and into the empty neighborhood streets. On these days, Nova does not remember that there is an empty chair, another person. She does not remember what it feels like to have a third member of the family.

Fifty-two days pass.

The door to the house opens; her father walks inside. Nova is upstairs when it happens, gazing at the window with the rain that taps softly against the glass. The rain has

slowed to a faint drizzle, a spray of water that specks the glass into millions of fractals of drops.

When Nova is called downstairs, it is her father's voice she hears. She slides down the stairs, two steps at a time, and wraps her arms around him, hugging him tightly. His green uniform is scratchy and tough against her face. His own face is wrinkled yet overjoyed.

Nova sits down to eat with her mother and her father. It is odd to have no missing chairs, and she delves deeper into her mind for comfort. There are no numbers. It is strange. The patterns are disrupted; she doesn't know what to think.

Her father stays for a week. Nova becomes used to the third chair that is always filled, the father who drives her to school, the father who cooks her breakfast and sometimes dinner. She laughs, and she smiles, and she hugs her mother and father in happiness every night before she goes to bed.

Somewhere in her mind there is the number seven. Seven, seven, seven. Seven more days until he must leave.

When seven days pass and her father is gone, Nova sits at the dinner table, her eyes focusing on the empty chair. It feels wrong for it to be there, with its wooden frame and mismatched paint. Her father should be there, sitting beside her, laughing and talking with her.

Nova returns to her room, where the rain slides against the window. She cannot see the individual drops that illuminate with moonlight. She reaches over to draw the curtains; it is late.

As she lies in bed with the covers tucked up to her chin, she delves into her mind of numbers and static and color and fuzz. She searches for numbers. Her mind is empty; she does not know when he will return home. There are no numbers within her reach.

Observatory Drive

GLENN DEUTSCH

1

It was supposed to be a chaste cup of coffee at a café, unlike the time a few years earlier when our lunch date ended in fellatio. Fran had changed little since that last rendezvous, except that her hair, which used to reach her waist, was cut in a spiky bob. We were at Steep & Brew on State Street, ordering pourovers. The two of us went back to spring of my junior year at the UW, when I'd recently turned twenty. Eight years older, divorced, Fran was a receptionist at the Campus Assistance Center, where I'd walked in carrying a stack of flyers. She had a curvy body, lovely brown eyes, and an easy laugh. We talked at the front desk for a little over two hours before she invited me home. Six years later, we were sitting across from each other at a little round table near the barista counter, discussing her plans to apply to grad school at the UW in education or social work. I said my wife and I were considering a separation and I'd outgrown my small-time magazine job and wanted to see if I could land a better one in New York. That Ana María had in mind going to law school in Washington, D.C., and if that happened, we might ask my parents on Long Island to help raise our daughter, who'd be a kindergartener before long.

It seemed a far cry from our previous assignation, when after she went down on me, Fran suggested we could be like the couple in a romantic comedy called *Same Time, Next Year*, about a man and woman, both in their twenties, both married, who meet at dinner, have an affair, and continue to step out of their marriages to have trysts on the same weekend for twenty-six years.

At some point I glanced at my watch and said I needed to pick my daughter up soon from daycare. Steep & Brew was a block from where I had parked my car and Fran had secured her bike, and we walked together. It was a summer-like afternoon in April of 1982. We spoke of the record-breaking cold winter, Belushi's overdose, Reagan, until we rounded the corner onto Lake Street. Then Fran told me she'd gotten pregnant the night I was still in college and we saw *Behind the Green Door* in Bascom Hall and had sex in the grass on the other side of Observatory Drive.

As we stood and faced each other in front of the little post office across from the Campus Assistance Center, the parking garage just steps away, I recalled something from that evening of my senior year: when I was on my back on the lawny slope that leads to

Muir Woods, our jeans lowered, and Fran straddled me, a fleeting realization that she wasn't wearing her diaphragm.

"You didn't have the baby... did you?" I said.

"I had an abortion," she said.

* * *

2

When I attended the University of Wisconsin, in the mid- to late seventies, the same few popular X-rated films were shown several times a semester by a handful of student film societies. Dirty Ed Productions and the others specialized in titles like *Deep Throat*, *The Devil in Miss Jones*, *The Opening of Misty Beethoven*, and *Behind the Green Door*. Those engagements were part of bigger scene at the UW, which in cinema circles was known as a major film campus. Eighteen or twenty film societies yearly sponsored hundreds of art and foreign titles, Hollywood classics, and recent releases in 16mm. Upwards of 3,000 of us a week would congregate in classrooms with 200 or more seats: 6210 Social Science, B-10 Commerce, B102 Van Vleck, 2650 and 3650 Humanities, 165 and 272 Bascom. Admission was a buck—\$1.50 or \$2.00 for the XXXes.

The hardcore flicks we saw were from porn's golden era, whose dawning in the early seventies happens to be a story line in the HBO series *The Deuce*. They were actual films, not videos, somewhat artistic, with actors and soundtracks and plots (however ludicrous).

The rooms were rooms, not movie theaters, much less your couch or bed. Common gathering places, where light crept in from corridors and windows. Seeing pornos in rooms where you'd taken notes on a professor's lectures on *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or the law of mass communications or the anatomy and physiology of race, being one spectator amongst hundreds of other thrill-seeking male and female filmgoers, almost exclusively fellow students, was a happening, not like putting in a DVD. Or streaming porn. Seeing pornos in lecture halls was also unlike sitting in a porn palace of yore scattered with men in raincoats jerking off furtively or paranoically scanning to make sure no one they knew was aware of their presence.

I saw *The Devil in Miss Jones* in a stuffy meeting room at the University YMCA on Brooks Street, bunches of us perched on the windowsills because there weren't enough seats.

The university had a hands-off policy regarding film content but also a tacit agreement with the X-rated film societies that the groups would not advertise beyond campus kiosks and campus newspaper listings. Whatever the rating, the UW captured some of the box office: room rental reportedly started at 35 percent of the first \$500 of receipts, and grew as the gross did; projectors also had to be rented.

Only a few years earlier, Madison's students were preoccupied with anti-war demonstrations. Not that I ever thought of them as such, but communal showings of pornography were a poor substitute.

* * *

3

Bascom Hill is a drumlin that remains the heart of the UW campus. To reach the peak from North Park Street, you trudge upward almost three hundred yards on a nearly ten percent incline. But then you are rewarded with a view down State Street all the way to the state capitol, about a mile east. Bascom Hall, one of the university's first three structures, was built in the Renaissance Revival style, crowning the hill in 1857. A bronze statue of Abraham Lincoln sits in front of the building, rising sixteen-and-a-half feet tall.

I remember being surprised that Fran, whose name I have changed here, would call and invite me to a screening of a porn film, since I hadn't thought we were seeing each other anymore. I met her inside Bascom standing in a long queue to get in. When we arrived at the box office—two guys, cashbox, folding table in the hallway—she paid for my ticket, saying, "My treat."

The lecture hall seated around 500, and had a proscenium arch and a ceiling with ornate beams and inverted dome chandeliers framed in brass, and skinny radiators hugging the wall beneath tall windows divided into many panes.

I remember I sat to the left of Fran, and Fran had the last seat in a row near the back of the room. They were wooden auditorium seats, with iron-armed desks you would pull up from in between yours and the seat to your right. The kind of seats that would creak all throughout the room, whether the occupants were squirming with boredom or from desire.

While I remember the lights staying up more than they would have at a purpose-built movie theater, that may not really have been the case. I may remember it that way because, however much seeing *Behind the Green Door* was a campus happening, however much it felt like a communal gathering, I felt more than a little uptight. As a non-exhibitionist, I grew afraid Fran might want to do more than just rest her hand on my thigh and brush her fingers along my erection. Afraid too I might lose enough of my sense of propriety to where I'd want to do more than occasionally feel her wetness through her jeans. Nearby might have been friends, former or current classmates, teaching assistants and professors, even if I didn't see any. It was a big school.

I also feared we might draw the attention of someone else Fran had slept with. She had been frank in telling me about her sexual history when we started going out. With an aggrieved tone in her voice and look in her eyes, she once told me about a boyfriend, someone she conjured up by surname only, who only wanted her in bed anally and decked out in garters and stockings. I was happily who I was with Fran: not her most experimental

lover, but daring all the same in my eagerness to experience the usual ways men and women make love, and just completely naked, thank you. Fran had also told me, again not long after we started dating, that she'd been to bed with thirty people (to my three, including her). So it didn't seem a far-fetched fear that at *Green Door* there might have been at least one other person she'd had sex with, someone who was a perhaps better lover than I was. I'm sure I was conscious of a particular summer weekend when I couldn't reach her on the phone, after which she told me she'd had sex all night long with another guy. We hadn't pledged monogamy, but still—after she told me that at the bungalow she and a friend shared on East Mifflin Street, I biked furiously on my new ten-speed back to my place on West Mifflin, exhausting myself toward the end of the mile-and-a-half ride by racing up and down the hilliest streets I knew in Madison: the first few blocks of East Mifflin before the Capitol Square. That kid who was me, who had been shown by none other than Fran how to get up on a racing bike, how you stand to the left, hold the handle bars, put the left pedal in the eleven o'clock position and your left foot and all your weight there, push off with your right leg, and throw the leg over the seat once you've gotten up a little speed.

* * *

4

The videocassette all but killed off campus film societies, the rise of the religious right and anti-porn feminism hastening the demise of the ones sponsoring hardcore films. Still, *Behind the Green Door* remains a porn classic, is recommended in DVD by, for instance, Babeland, the venerable woman-owned sex-toy shop.

More than anything else, the film was made famous by the fact that Marilyn Chambers filmed it months after modeling for Ivory Snow laundry detergent as a mom snuggling with her infant. I don't recall seeing the box with Chambers on the front except in photos. (It's not like I would have known anyone who washed baby clothes back then.) The filmmakers tipped off the media that Procter & Gamble's model had become a porn actress; publicity from the scandal caused the company to pull the box from circulation, and turned *Green Door* into a smash hit.

Film critic Carrie Rickey, in her essay "*Behind the Green Door: Deconstructing Gloria*," from *The X List: The National Society of Film Critics' Guide to the Movies That Turn Us On*, writes about seeing the movie with a boyfriend at the University of California, San Diego, in 1972, shortly after it opened. Rickey was nineteen, the same age as Chambers, whom she describes as an innocent "Meg Ryan type" playing a character who is abducted and whisked off to a private sex club "where onstage she is stripped, caressed by tender women in black cassocks, suckled by a coven of hippies, and penetrated by male trapeze artists in crotchless tights. Thus pleased, Gloria becomes an avid

pleasure-giver, fellating one trapeze artist as she milks the other two, and whipping partners, club patrons, and movie audiences into Chantilly cream.”

* * *

5

I remember Fran taking my hand as we exited Bascom Hall and telling me what she had most liked about the film. Even more than the center-stage action, the way everyone in the crowd got so turned on they had to have sex. I was still thrumming with the image of Marilyn Chambers on a trapeze taking on several men. I don't remember if we crossed Observatory Drive a little to the west and hustled into the grass from near the Carillon Tower and Social Sciences, or crossed directly northward and descended the several rows of torso-sized boulders that slope down toward the lawn. Then, I was on my back, the doors to Bascom Hall no more than seventy yards behind my head. Muir Woods loomed immediate and dense as a wall beyond the thick leather soles and stacked leather heels of my banana-tan, square-toed boots, which Fran sheathed in my bluejeans. Scattered saplings grow today on that apron of grass we chose for a bed, including a pair of black locusts a few feet from each other; maybe we hit the ground in between them. Not that a tree or two would have provided privacy if someone had passed by on the sidewalk a few feet above us, or a campus bus had turned the bend and shone its lights just so.

It was late autumn, and fallen leaves dotted the cool ground beneath me. The semi-secluded, leaf-strewn expanse of lawn where Fran had claimed a spot for us by throwing down her Levi jacket could easily have accommodated the couplings of a dozen or more of our fellow filmgoers. Even so, no one else came down and found a place on either side of us.

My eyes were full of Fran and the forsaken treetops behind her; of her long brown hair, redolent as always of coconut, wondrously tropical in the chill air, and which she now and then gathered in a twist and flung behind her; of the amplex held within her bra, a lace-topped white one, which I saw when she lifted her soft rag sweater over her breasts, an action that also seemed to fill the air with her signature perfume; and of her nakedness below. I watched her eyes as they darted from mine to whatever she fixed on beyond the crest of the short, steep grade that made it seem as though I were propped up in an enormous outdoor sleigh bed. Her eyes flickered with light cast by a globular street lamp that stood just beyond the sidewalk and illuminated a fork in walking paths. Her eyes were light brown with amber flecks and dark lashes, and seemed almost too pretty in her face, since her lips were somewhat thin and narrow. “Tell me what you see,” I said at some point, and Fran closed her eyes and said, “People fucking. Watching.” Intermittently I was bathed in Fran and pleasurably shocked by the brisk air.

* * *

6

I have often wondered why Fran waited five-and-a-half years to tell me she'd gotten pregnant and had an abortion. Possibly she thought she might never see me again, and needed finally to share something serious from the casual relationship we once enjoyed. In any case, when she did tell me, we were standing across from the place where we first met, the Campus Assistance Center.

The UW information and referral service for students and faculty still exists, but no longer on the first floor of an old house the university owned for many years on Lake Street. Various student-run organizations had offices upstairs. Presumably when I walked in the front door carrying my flyers that afternoon of my junior year, Fran asked from behind her desk what thing I was promoting. (I've long since forgotten.) I do remember she pulled a chair over for me, to be near hers, and we talked as other staff members and students now and then drifted by, until the center closed for the evening. I'm sure she told me among other things that she was an only child and had grown up in a small town some fifteen miles outside of Madison. Mother was from the Greenbush, the largely Italian neighborhood in Madison that'd been razed for urban renewal. Father was a former postmaster in her hometown—perhaps she told me this later—who was caught embezzling. That she was nearly thirty and divorced seemed a sexy combination, suggested she was experienced. She also seemed very unlike my former college girlfriend, a fashion and textile design major from Tucson who was tall and angular and reserved. Fran said her father called her Karmann Ghia, after the VW sports car, because she had “the body of an Italian made by a German.” (Maybe she didn't tell me that until later that evening.) Sitting close to her, I probably commented on the scent she wore, Diorissimo, declared it sweeter than Chanel No. 5 and even more alluring. Fran manifested her sense of humor every so often by striking twitchy-ironic faces like Chevy Chase when he played the news anchor on *Saturday Night Live*. I'm sure I also tried impressing her with my serious side. How I was going to chair the Wisconsin Union Directorate Ideas & Issues committee as a senior largely on the strength of my bringing Margo St. James, the “chairmadam” of COYOTE, the San Francisco-based prostitutes rights organization, to campus earlier that spring. She'd drawn the first SRO crowd at Great Hall since the Vietnam era. I imagine I also told Fran about my senior thesis idea. It was going to be about how the born-again presidential nominee Jimmy Carter was redefining civil religion by so openly invoking the God of the New Testament in his campaign speeches: a calculated corrective, my theory went, for our post-Vietnam, post-Nixon era. Fran told me later she had liked how business-like I seemed that afternoon. Anyway, coming up on closing time, she called for a cab to take us to her place. It was a past twilight when we

left. I remember a coworker, a woman, following us and standing beneath the porch light as we were stepping down to the street, our white and red Badger cab waiting. With a hint of a smile (or without; I wish I could recall), she called out to Fran, “Are you okay?”

Fran’s was the first boudoir I made love in. It was aromatic always with Diorissimo’s green, fleshy lily of the valley effect and more carnal notes of jasmine and custardy ylang-ylang. She kept heavy fabric across the windows, candles and jewelry and more on a couple of bureaus. Her bed was a lofted double, everything about it soft—she had many covers and pillows (and two cats).

So that was late spring of 1976. We dated that summer and began drifting apart early the following fall semester. And then later that semester, we had our *Behind the Green Door* tryst.

* * *

7

A few weeks later, I started going out with my future (and eventual ex-) wife. I’m sure I managed to tell Fran about Ana María fairly soon after we started seeing each other.

Ana and I more or less consciously failed to use birth control, and I became a husband and father before turning twenty-two.

I’ve come to know a thousand college students over the last decade-plus as a teacher, and have been unable to imagine any as parents at their age. But the truth for me is that I had been in love and wanted to be a father then with Ana.

One afternoon in the spring of 1978, I was holding our infant daughter on the front porch of the house on East Johnson Street where we had a tiny apartment, and I saw Fran on her bike gliding to a stop on the sidewalk and smiling up at me. We waved to each other at that distance. East Johnson is a busy street, and she was passing by and curious what I was up to, I remember thinking as she rode off.

If Fran had continued on with her pregnancy, her due date would have fallen somewhere in June or July of 1977, and my daughter would have had a half-sibling not even a year older.

* * *

8

Fran and I stood momentarily in front of the little post office on Lake Street, which later was turned into a McDonald’s. Her bike was chained on the other side of the street, in a rack on the UW Bookstore side of the Campus Assistance Center, and so we crossed. I was aware enough to know uttering, “You didn’t have the baby... did you?” wasn’t the nicest

response to learning she had gotten pregnant. Now what was I to say to finding out she had terminated the pregnancy?

It seemed too late to offer a platonic hug to show I was supportive. I remember also feeling she had told me those things that were important and final as part of saying goodbye, the news meant somehow to be punishing, and I was seconds away from reckoning with it on my own.

The one thing I was positive of was that I had never imagined being in a permanent relationship with her. Certainly not as parents.

Before I said anything else, I tried imagining myself in college learning I had made her pregnant. And that she'd had an abortion. In that moment I had the luxury of imagining myself going with her to a clinic or at least helping to pay—a fantasy, so detached.

On another level, realistic and lasting, the knowing transformed a wild sexual encounter in college into a leaden thing. It added consequence. It transformed my memory from fun tryst into an incident that should have altered everything for me but, thanks to Fran's decision to terminate the pregnancy, did not.

In supporting a woman's right to choose, I think of Fran. And of me.

Even so, in the seconds it took us to cross the street that afternoon, I experienced a conflicting emotion. I'd had a vasectomy not long after my daughter was born, had convinced a urologist who claimed a better than seventy percent reversal rate to do one on me even though I was only twenty-three. I was that persuasive. Why? Because Ana and I didn't care for any normal method of birth control, for health, reliability, pleasure reasons; she was Catholic and abortion would have been anathema; and I thought of my sterilization as impermanent. And so it struck me as Fran and I crossed the street—how else to say it?—that might have been the only other child I would've ever had. It turned out not to be so; I underwent a successful vasectomy reversal in New York less than eight years after the original procedure, anticipating I would eventually meet someone with whom I'd want to start another family, as in fact I did. But that selfish thought I had had that summer-like afternoon in Madison, that Fran's pregnancy had been my only chance of having another child in the world, that was before I could've known.

Sex is complicated. That's the most and least obvious thing to impress itself on me as a result of knowing Fran had an abortion after that night we saw *Behind the Green Door* in Bascom Hall and got off afterward in the grass on other side of Observatory Drive.

But all I could think to say as Fran retrieved her bike that afternoon outside the Campus Assistance Center was, "I wish you'd told me." She had already bent down and thumbed open the combination lock, and stood, and was wrapping the plastic-coated chain around her waist, where in the middle she squeezed the lock once again shut. "We wouldn't have had it anyway," she said.

Everything I Could Dump into a Prologue

ANGELA SANTILLO

One year performing the inner monologue of “I almost died” goes something like this: I’m in Midtown Manhattan, surrounded by herds of men in suits. I’m at one of those everything cafés that have individual stations for sandwiches, pizza, salads, and a food bar of greasy offerings that costs nine bucks per awful pound. It’s noon during another day in political nonprofit land. I just left a meeting where our founder talked about mundane marketing details instead of answering how we are going to get enough money to pay everyone’s salaries on Friday. It’s my lunch break, and I want food that will sedate my irritated soul. I stare at the pizza section and think, “I almost died, should I get a slice?” but it doesn’t feel right so I move along. I think, “I almost died, should I order a roast beef sandwich?” and I promptly walk away. I stare at bins of different kinds of lettuce and think, “I almost died, should I get a salad?” and the answer is an immediate yes because who am I to deny my body a plate of vitamin-rich roughage.

I am not the woman I used to be.

Like running. I was told I should never run because I have breasts that make men stare and the mass of my body could destroy my knees but I go to one of those fancy running stores eleven months after my surgery and jog on a treadmill as a salesman analyzes my gait. He says super arched feet like mine need two-hundred-dollar shoes, and I think, “I almost died, is this how I should spend my money?” The answer is yes, so I pay for those Brooks sneakers with special insoles because I know what it’s like to be so weak a nurse has to hold you over a toilet so you don’t fall over when you pee. Why all healthy, capable people in the world aren’t running is beyond me so even though I’m still not strong, I’m going to train for a half marathon. I’ll strap down my boobs, and if some guy gives me trouble I’ll pound him like I’m going to pound the pavement because I can hear my body and she can’t stop saying, “I’m a beast.”

I start dating three months after almost dying because I’m alive so I might as well get screwed or at least have some guy buy me a Shirley Temple since my body can’t process alcohol anymore. But I don’t know what to do during the small talk portion of the evening. I’m at a hip wine bar in Astoria that’s lit by these low-hanging old-school bulbs, the ones that boldly show their eerie filaments. “Tell me about yourself,” asks the first date

of my new life, and my mind races. Do I tell him about where I'm from, about my career, or do I share that the sole focus of the last few months has been recovering from a massive case of sepsis caused by a four-day-old ruptured appendix? Will he even get what that means because I didn't until it happened and in a world of cancer, heart disease, and diabetes what's so scary about toxic infection? I decide to share the mundane, abridged story of my life instead of an impromptu lecture on bursting organs when out of nowhere he tells me he thinks scars are a huge turn off.

I have a new four-inch scar that vertically slashes through my abdomen. When people say, "Oh you had appendicitis? Me too," and show me their cute little marks, I pull up my shirt and show them Towanda. She is the remains of a storm that left my muscles weak, scarred over my entire inner abdominal wall, erased my belly button, and gives my stomach the illusion that part of it is always being punched. So this new flesh of mine has her own name. Every morning for year, I put on my underwear and stare at Towanda in the mirror. I want to make sure she's there because I'm afraid she'll disappear overnight and I'll finally be able to convince myself that none of this happened.

So out of nowhere my mind-reading date says he thinks scars are gross, and I think, "I almost died, who will be able to deal with this?"

I tell an acquaintance what happened a few days later when we're sardined in a bar. He's a six-foot-seven investment banker with a history of debauchery that would make even the raunchiest blush.

"Do you think you'll want to get plastic surgery to get back your belly button?" he asks over a post-work whiskey.

I sip my seltzer. "I don't think so."

"No?" his eyebrow arches.

"I'm starting to think my scar will weed out the men from the boys," I reply.

"That a girl," he says as he clinks my glass.

I decide to stop dating because life is too short. I also decide to skip the *carpe diem* phase where I screw an entire borough, joyride on a motorcycle, jump out of a plane, and numb myself with illicit substances. I do, however, chop off my hair when the trauma of everything stops making it fall out in clumps. For the first time in my life, I'm glad I'm a hairy Italian, but I've lost over a third of it and my brown curls look frizzed and hacked. Four months after my surgery, I think, "I almost died," so I pay \$175 for an appointment at a Fifth Avenue specialty curly-hair salon. My stylist tells me what it was like growing up in Kosovo as she chops eleven inches off and gives me my first chin-length bob.

When I need an outlet for nonsensical exploding emotions, like when I cry at the sight of coconut water, my remedy is to walk sixty blocks from Midtown to the East Village after work, especially if it's snowing. I also run to Grand Central and jump on the next Metro-North train and ride it to the end of the line and find myself in exotic places like Poughkeepsie. I decide on a Friday to go to Philly on a Saturday so I buy my friend and me bus tickets because I love *Rocky* and I want to climb those steps while trying to

digest a cheesesteak. I drag friends to ride a mechanical bull in Bryant Park during a hoedown and volunteer with a veteran's group and we share blankets as we watch *Top Gun* on the deck of the aircraft carrier *Intrepid*. I think about all the classics I haven't read, so I join a book club and talk about Edith Wharton but it proves to be short-lived when I am quickly sidetracked by a sudden Teddy Roosevelt obsession.

I go to the Metropolitan Museum to try to write in front of great works of art but end up staring at armor. I go multiple times and always find myself stuck in this section. I sit on a bench with my journal thinking, "You almost died, write something," only to wonder how much men sweated in these steel contraptions and if their greatest job hazard was heat exhaustion.

At my apartment, I sit at my desk and try to write but then think "I almost died," and I remember the moment my pain level climaxed and the morphine stopped working. I was in the ER and felt a disturbing tremor in my nerves, and I suddenly understood why I felt beyond sick and why every medical professional looked panicked when they saw me. "I'm dying," I realized and my life failed to flash before my eyes as my body went into shock. As I uncontrollably shook up and down alone on my gurney, I asked myself, "How do you feel about this?"

I thought, "Well, Angela, you have never been to Europe. You have never been married and you never had kids." But I can see my eighth-grade self, awkward and self-loathing, wearing a t-shirt over her bathing suit by a pool in Los Angeles. I imagine her looking at me. I consider my thirty-one years and decide I had a good ride. I'm ready to go. But I should have had way more sex.

So when I'm at my desk thinking, "You almost died, you should write," I can't type, and when I do I produce dust because on my almost deathbed I never once regretted not living long enough to get that Off Broadway show or that agent or that mythical tenure-track position. Now when I hear colleagues bitch about how hard the industry is or how so-and-so got that opportunity they don't deserve or worry about how much harder they have to work in order to make it, all I can think is, "No one is going to remember us for this."

Before I got sick, I had seven shows on the books in three different states. I follow through with each of them, and the final one is the largest of my career. Seven months after my surgery it's opening night in San Francisco and I'm sitting in the last row, staring at an impressive set that includes a sawed-in-half 1970s trailer home. It isn't until the white tuxedoed actor who plays the San Andreas fault line squeezes my shoulder and whispers, "Break a leg," that I realize my play is about to start. When the show closes, I put my computer away and decide to do all the things I never let myself do in order to make time to write.

I go to Michaels and buy bags full of yarn. In two months, I crochet my brother a queen-sized blanket and make a dozen scarves for friends. I finally get Netflix and binge-watch WWII documentaries. I go to bookstores and buy romance novels with the trashiest

covers and read them with no shame on the subway. I see opera, dance, comedy, symphonies, and a baseball game, but I stay away from theater. And after everything I do, I wait for it to make me feel something.

Three weeks after the last tube is removed from my body, I fly to San Luis Obispo to officiate my youngest cousin's wedding. My parents don't think it's a good idea, but I think, "I almost died, I can survive a plane," and promptly get food poisoning from something at JFK. I throw up after the rehearsal and dry heave into a trashcan on the wedding day while my stomach spasms, my family stresses, and my brother calls me stupid.

Thirty minutes before the wedding my Zia Martha helps me stand, and I put on a teal cocktail dress and tie my unwashed hair in a low bun. I ask one of my cousins to rate her acting abilities. When she expresses dramatic confidence, I tell her that if I raise my hand during the outdoor ceremony she has to pretend to faint because that means I need to leave the gazebo and hurl.

Andrew, the youngest cousin on my mom's side, asked me to officiate the Christmas before I got sick. He mentioned it casually after dinner, as my family engaged in decibel-breaking conversations. I thought he was joking because his mother would never approve of a female recovering ex-Catholic to oversee the marriage ceremony of her youngest son, but my cousin said he was serious and I screamed. People thought I saw a bug and when the truth came out, a minor scandal was born. Fortunately for everyone, trauma has a way of snapping things into perspective. The day before the wedding, I tell Andrew, "You're so lucky I got sick."

So it's early evening on the summer solstice. The San Luis Obispo skies are cloudless and blue, and my family stands on the lawn as I walk to the gazebo. I slowly read the ceremony script I wrote and articulate every word until I get to the "power vested in me" part and suddenly sob into the microphone.

"You can't start your marriage with me crying like that," I tell the couple standing before me. I breathe, put down the mic, and shout, "By the power vested in me by the state of California, I now declare you husband and wife."

I don't puke for the rest of the night, but I lose ten pounds on the trip, which makes a total weight loss of thirty-five pounds since I got sick two months ago. But as I watch my growing family move across the dance floor in the quaint, mission-style venue I think, "I'm glad I'm here to see this" and that is the only time I feel alive in the year after my surgery.

After every little, big, and crazy thing I do, I wait for that feeling to hit me again. I expect to be thrilled to make it to the stage three months after my surgery, deciding like a crazy woman to go through with my solo show. I get my brain of mush to memorize an hour of material and whip my weak body into basic shape so I can embody five characters and get through fifteen costume changes, but when I take my bow before an applauding audience I think, "I could have gone without this."

I'm not glad I lived to work another huge political event at my nonprofit nine months into my recovery. A two-day conference with high-profile guests that include celebrities, CEOs, former heads of state, and on the last day I meet President George W. Bush in a fancy high-ceiling, heavily crown-molded room at the New York Stock Exchange. It is early morning before our closing event, and I'm standing in a receiving line. When it's my turn to approach, the former president looks me in the eyes and says, "How are you doing?"

I almost reply, "I almost died," but I look at Laura Bush who is smiling to his right. "I'm fine," I tell the President. "How are you doing?"

He looks a bit surprised that I asked and says in his easy Texas drawl, "I'm fine. Thank you for asking."

He shakes my hand as his personal photographer takes our photo, and despite my polar-opposite political leanings I think, "I want to have a beer with this guy." The revelation blows my mind, but I could have lived without it.

Most of the year is a clear daze, my smile automatic but never pretend. Subsequent weddings, engagements, and baby announcements fall on me with a thud, and it's not polite to admit I get more excited when I'm finally strong enough to carry a gallon of orange juice from the bodega to my apartment. I try to appreciate the little things, I try to revel in the big things, but every moment I think, "I almost died," and wait to get struck down by an epiphany.

There is a belief that everyone who almost dies transforms into a sage. If you go through hell and make it out alive, you carry knowledge and inspiration that can settle the nerves of more fortunate frantics. It takes some time, and when I finally say, "I almost died" out loud, people want to hear the good news from the girl who got close to the ultimate edge. What great truth can I share? Do I have clarity? Everything happens for a reason, why do I think I'm here? They wait for me to give an easy phrase they can use for their own motivation, but when I say, "I don't know," they stop asking me questions.

If I was honest, I would admit that time isn't the same anymore because it's folding into itself. Truth is that while I'm getting better, I can't stop feeling sick. When I return to work four weeks after my surgery, somehow I'm also rolling into a CAT scan. When I'm running my first mile, I'm also holding onto the hospital wall as I try to walk again. When a critic calls my biggest play overly written and metaphorically stupid, I go into a shock when a nurse turns me over for my sponge bath. When I celebrate my thirty-second birthday over perogies on a frigid January night, the medical team surrounding my bed wants to know about my bowel movements. When I realize I'm in love ten months after I get cut open, a doctor rips off the plastic seal over my surgery incision. And when I am laid off a week before Towanda's first-year anniversary by that wonderful political nonprofit, I'm unable to move in my ICU bed. I'm thirsty but not allowed to drink, and I'm frantically waiting for the nurse to appear because I suddenly forgot how I got here.

The Rabbit Died

SHERRY SHAHAN

The year was 1948, in the Southern California town of Long Beach.

Sylvia Jean Brunner had just turned sixteen when she met my smooth-talking father, Frank Webb Jr., who bragged about being an actor, even producing eight-by-ten black-and-white glossies stamped with the signature of his Hollywood agent.

My Midwest-born grandparents, Kiki and Art, were ultra-conservative, the odd couple at the beach in wool suits, hats, and gloves. Imagine their horror when their only daughter missed successive periods.

Poor Mom was rushed to the family doctor so fast she scuffed her black-and-white saddle oxfords. After peeing in a paper cup, her sample was injected into a female rabbit.

“The rabbit died.” Finger-pointing whispers ensued, a euphemism for a positive pregnancy test. But that’s misleading since all rabbits tested died. A few days after the injection, they were surgically sliced open for an inspection of their ovaries, which would change in response to hormones secreted by pregnant women. No one took the time to stitch up the poor bunnies. They were simply tossed out with the trash. Later, frogs took their place in the lab.

No birth control pills until 1960, though various forms of the tortuous IUD had been around since the 1600s. Mom’s rabbit wasn’t the last in our family to die. Mine bellied up seventeen years later.

While writing this I wonder why Daddy wasn’t charged with “unlawful intercourse with a minor,” more commonly called statutory rape, since Sylvia Jean was under eighteen. And why didn’t the jerk-off use condoms? Like, *No balloons, no party!*

My parents had little in common other than his sperm swimming through her cervix and up her uterus. Maybe she wanted to escape her overly strict parents? Maybe he believed being married would help him clean up his act?

In January 1949, my grandparents loaded and aimed the metaphorical shotgun. There aren’t any photos of their wedding. But in pictures around that time, Mom looked like a young Sophia Loren with dusky cat eyes and naturally full lips. She wore fashionable dresses with snug collars and formfitting bodices. Her hair was drawn up on the sides in an auburn jelly roll, the back cascading in waves.

Being married didn't keep her from being expelled from Long Beach High School. Her condition was too visible, evidence that she'd done the dirty deed. Apparently the principal didn't want other students imagining wild fun in the backseat of a convertible.

My soon-to-be parents moved into a shabby little motel that proclaimed "efficiencies," such as a kitchenette. Grandpa Art arranged for my dad to work on the assembly line at a factory that built aircraft.

My teenage mom did the only thing she could and shut herself in the motel room, absent from friends and family. Other than sporadic visits from her best friend, she was alone, bored, and humiliated by her situation. So she turned to greasy burgers and fries from the joint across the street. Her enviable five-foot-six, one-hundred-twenty-pound figure blew up by seventy pounds.

I arrived mid-August 1949. Seven pounds thirteen ounces, twenty-one inches long. I probably would've been taller than my adult five foot three if I hadn't started smoking in fourth grade. They named me Sherry Jean Webb.

Around this time, one of Daddy's drinking buddies offered cheap rent—a furnished one-room cottage that shared a spacious corner lot with his family's rambling ranch house in San Fernando Valley. A newly painted white picket fence hemmed the cottage, but I imagined *beware to all who enter* whispered from the flowerbed.

Our new landlords Margaret and Bill, whose last name I've lost, had a son my age, an insipid goody two-shoes named Michael who refused to be my accomplice when I snatched an unopened box of brown sugar from his parents' kitchen. I crouched on the side of the house, eating the entire box on my own, which is likely the reason I'm not all that fond of sweets.

Margaret and Bill also had a teenage daughter, so Daddy had a playmate, too.

My grandparents adored my mom, who had also been a "surprise," born ten years after her brother. And they adored me, spoiling their first grandchild. But they abhorred their son-in-law, recognizing a snake-charmer when they saw one.

Grandpa Art had comb marks in his thinning hair, narrow furrows of silver. Old-school stern of German heritage, he'd moved to California after his European tour in World War I. I never felt close to him, felt more like he was a far-flung relative to occasionally visit, though his pipe-smoking ritual fascinated me.

I'd sit at his feet, watching him unzip the soft leather pouch that held cherry tobacco, tapping the dried leaves into an ornately carved meerschaum pipe bowl, a souvenir from the war. He'd wink at me before making an O with his mouth and pushing out A1 smoke rings. It wouldn't be that long before I'd be practicing with borrowed cigarettes or packs stolen from the drugstore.

Daddy portrayed the characters Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde—an entertaining, lovable guy when sober, and a cruel, remorseless Hyde after drinking the poisonous potion. Instead of building up a tolerance, as happened in Robert Louis Stevenson's allegoric tale, it took less and less poison for Daddy's dark switch to flip.

Daddy rarely endorsed a paycheck after being fired from the aircraft factory for ignoring the hours of his shift and continued to feel misunderstood. He considered himself an artist, an actor of mythical scope, later adding playwright to his imaginary résumé.

More than a decade before the Motion Picture Association volunteered a film rating system, Daddy swept me off to a matinee of Tennessee Williams's film, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), adapted from his Pulitzer Prize-winning 1947 play.

Muscled in tight white t-shirts, Stanley Kowalski (played by Marlon Brando) brandished a bottle and treated his wife and sister-in-law like shit, so I believed Daddy might be a movie star after all.

As if further descent into drunken debauchery should be part of my education, he thought I should see Williams's play-to-screen adaptation of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958). I smacked Sugar Daddies, enthralled by Elizabeth Taylor as Maggie the Cat because she had the moxie to sashay in her silk slip and rocket cone bra in front of all of us in the theater.

Maggie's handsome husband Brick Pollitt (Paul Newman) was also weighed down by the bottle. I wonder if Daddy's matinee playdates were subconscious efforts to justify his own degenerate self, as Freudian as that sounds.

During our occasional Sunday drives to Long Beach, we'd gather at my grandparents' house, before making sure the neighbors knew we were going to church as a family. I fidgeted in a starched petticoat and a dumb dress with pink roses on it.

Afterward, we drove to a coffee shop and waited in the lobby for a table. Grandpa Art questioned Daddy about job prospects. "Fathers and husbands provide for their families."

Everyone knew about Daddy's allergy to time cards, though he did have a short-term pool-cleaning business. It didn't require much—a long-handled skimmer, chemical tester, and the correct ratio of chlorine to muriatic acid. A stiff brush to scrub the tile coping, if you were ambitious.

Daddy's clients weren't home during the day, so he took his time hanging out in backyards in fancy neighborhoods, drinking beer from their fridges, and getting a George Hamilton tan. He bragged about having film star singer Debbie Reynolds as a client. That's the story he told, though never in detail.

The next we heard he'd lost Debbie Reynolds' account because she filled in her pool with dirt. No one bought it. Then, in her 1988 autobiography *Debbie: My Life*, she wrote about digging up her backyard and putting in a swimming pool while her father was out of town. She had the words "Abba Dabba Honeymoon," a hit from the movie *Singing in the Rain*, written on the steps in colored tile.

Debbie's father disliked it so much that he had the pool filled in, in 1955, when his daughter, his second child, married Eddie Fisher. Later, Eddie Fisher dumped Debbie Reynolds for Elizabeth Taylor and Mommy dumped Daddy, so I hoped Daddy and Debbie would get together.

Back to that Sunday afternoon at the coffee shop. Daddy was about as interested in Grandpa Art's lectures about getting a job as he was in the \$1.99 pancake specials, mostly because he couldn't get away with ordering beer for breakfast.

Grandma Kiki wedged herself between Daddy and Grandpa under too bright lights, a reluctant referee in a pillbox hat secured with pins long enough to scratch their eyes out.

Daddy chain-smoked Winstons, even sang the slogan with the two-beat claps near the end by flicking his cigarette lighter. *Winston tastes good like a cigarette should.* Fred Flintstone did the same thing with his lighter in a 1960s TV ad.

Too proper to smoke in public, Kiki steered me down the narrow corridor to the ladies' room. Standing by the sink, she peeled off her white gloves and plucked a filterless Camel from her handbag. "Our little secret, okay?"

I nodded. I was good at secrets.

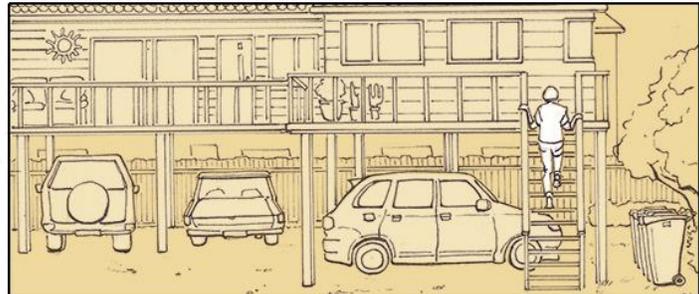
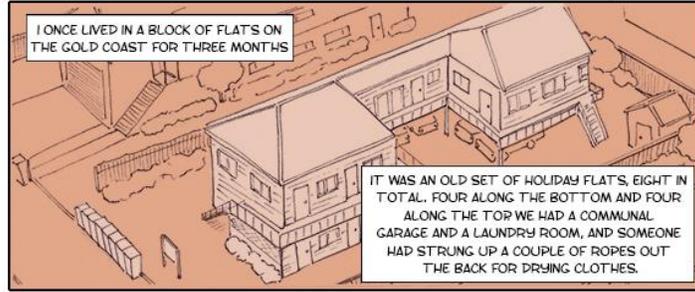
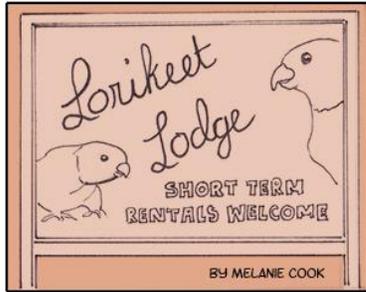
Grandma Kiki reapplied peaches-and-cream lipstick with the same hand that held her cigarette. She had a fair complexion and steel gray hair permed in waves. She never learned to drive, squirmed restlessly as a passenger, and rarely left the house without her husband. I vaguely remember her stoic-looking parents from old photos and tales of their journey to California in a covered wagon.

My grandmother had an endearing habit of dabbing tobacco off her tongue with her pinkie finger. It seemed so Bette Davis or Joan Crawford. She and I shared the same shady half-moons under our eyes, though hers looked more romantic, less like messy smears. Our gray-green irises were genetic glue. I liked that.

This may seem an ordinary family story, but I'm not sure that's altogether true.

Lorikeet Lodge

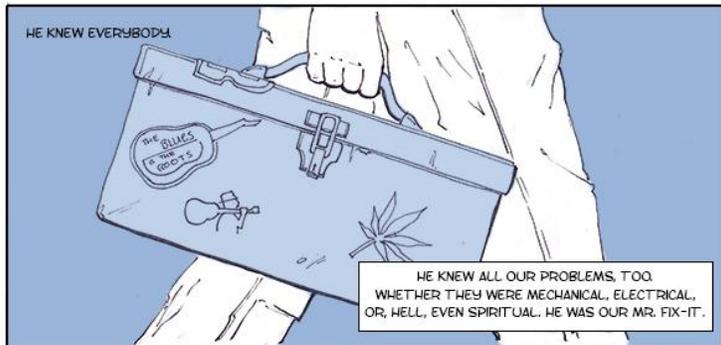
MELANIE COOK



* WELFARE PAYMENT'S ** RETURNED AND SERVICES LEAGUE. LIKE A PUB, WITH A RESTAURANT. IT ALSO OPERATES AS A SUPPORT ORGANISATION FOR FOLKS WHO SERVE OR HAVE SERVED IN THE DEFENSE FORCES.



FORRESTER WAS CONVIVIAL IN A WAY THAT MY GRANDAD NEVER WAS.



HE KNEW EVERYBODY.

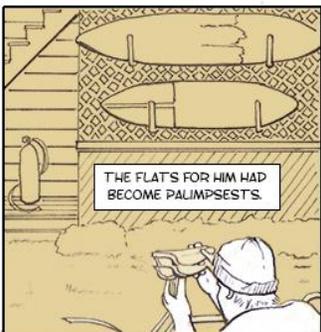
HE KNEW ALL OUR PROBLEMS, TOO. WHETHER THEY WERE MECHANICAL, ELECTRICAL, OR, HELL, EVEN SPIRITUAL. HE WAS OUR MR. FIX-IT.



HE'D LIVED IN THE FLATS FOR YEARS.



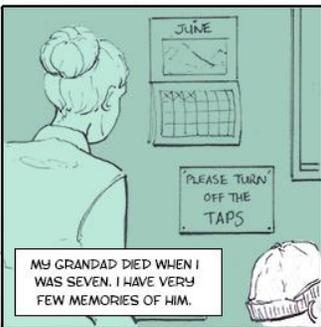
AND HAD KNOWN EVERY RESIDENT.



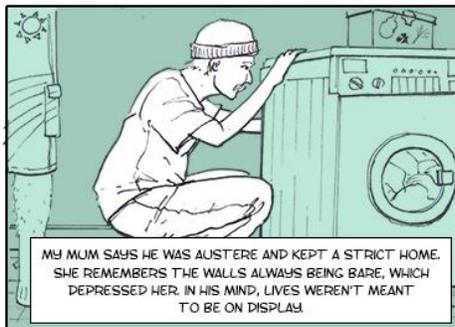
THE FLATS FOR HIM HAD BECOME PALIMPSESTS.



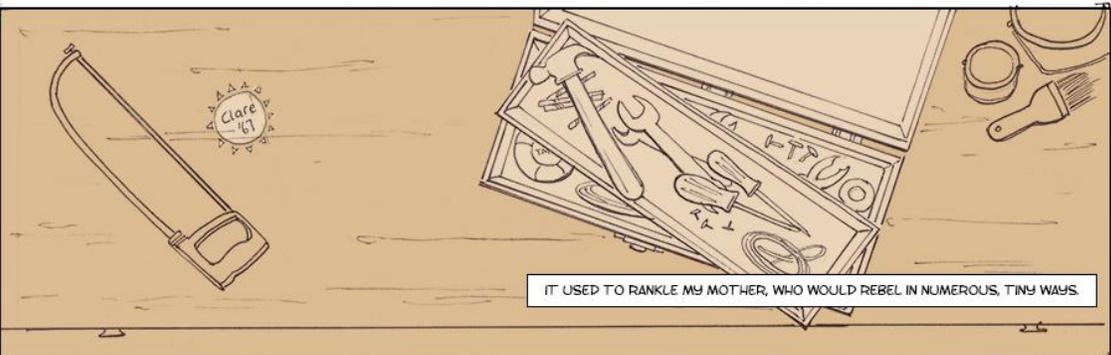
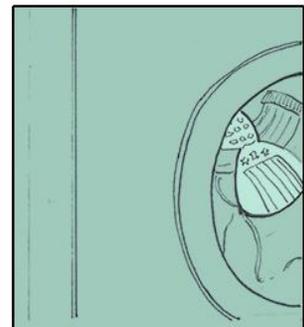
EVERY STEP EVERY DOOR, EVERY DENTED WALL HELD MANY LIFETIMES OF MOMENTS.



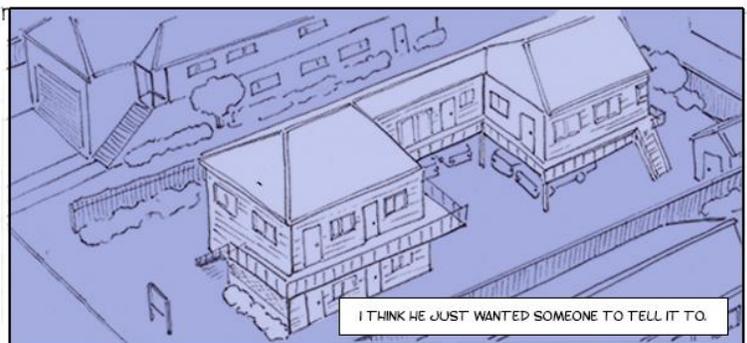
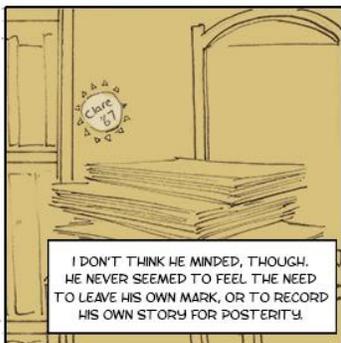
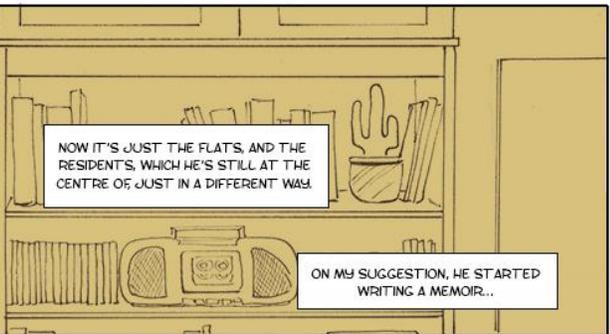
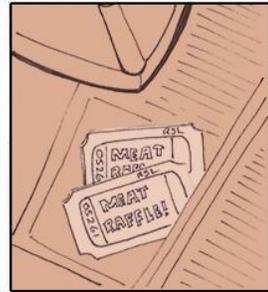
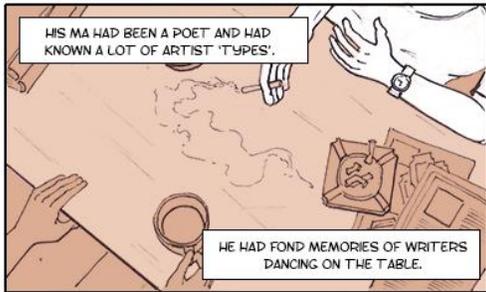
MY GRANDAD DIED WHEN I WAS SEVEN. I HAVE VERY FEW MEMORIES OF HIM.



MY MUM SAYS HE WAS AUSTERE AND KEPT A STRICT HOME. SHE REMEMBERS THE WALLS ALWAYS BEING BARE, WHICH DEPRESSED HER. IN HIS MIND, LIVES WEREN'T MEANT TO BE ON DISPLAY.



IT USED TO RANKLE MY MOTHER, WHO WOULD REBEL IN NUMEROUS, TINY WAYS.



When Daughters Float out of Orb

RENEE C. WINTER

When I was a teenager, my mother threatened to throw herself in front of a truck if she thought my older sister and I no longer loved her. I tried to imagine the scene. Would she stand on the edge of a highway and run out when an 18-wheeler came speeding along? Would she do it at night? In front of us? I envisioned her sprawled on the pavement, auburn-dyed hair in place, her skirt spread about her, a high heel flung off. No blood, no broken bones, no breath. Just quiet. Would it be our fault? So, kisses on her cheek and hugs around her neck became our suicide-prevention plan. After all, Mother was the only parent around.

Decades later I'd recall this threat as I stood before Mother's hospital bed. Was her trip to the ER another attempt to reinforce her gravitational pull when she feared her daughters were floating out of orb? Not this time. Even she couldn't fake the grayness that claimed her face, the ghostlike pallor that demanded I pay attention and take note. Her white hair blended into the starched pillowcase. A pungent antiseptic odor overtook any lingering fragrance of the Tabu perfume she sprayed on her wrists despite arthritic fingers. An IV dripped clear liquid into stark blue veins that formed a tiny roadmap across her hand. Looped to the bedrail was a plastic bag catching pale urine streaming from a catheter. A thick fleece blanket wrapped Mother's small frame like a cocoon, but promised no vibrant metamorphosis.

I located her in the emergency room holding area after wandering a labyrinth of halls pockmarked with abandoned stretchers and vial-laden carts that clattered from patient to patient. Two racks of sliding curtains created her makeshift room, providing a mere facade of the privacy Mother would have craved. She appeared asleep, oblivious to the rhythmic beeps of machines or the tapping of my high heels on the scarred linoleum. Her heart monitor spiked life, but she delivered not a moan.

Is this what it will be like when Mother's dead?

I breathed in her unfamiliar stillness. Typically, she used silence only as a weapon, as punishment for some perceived slight or word misspoken, withdrawing for lengthy periods from her father, her brother, a niece—whoever aggrieved her.

But this silence was not self-imposed.

If Mother were awake she'd be yelling, "Get these contraptions out of me and me out of here," in the bullying voice that was her soundtrack. I'd spent my life devising strategies to limit my exposure to her toxic fuming. Shouldn't I be present for her quiet?

"She's being taken to 5 North," an attendant interrupted, nodding toward a bank of elevators. "There'll be a waiting room on her hall." Nurses and orderlies swarmed around Mother. If she were aware, she'd love the attention.

Go there. Sit here. Wait. I wasn't usually so passive, so subservient, but I gladly handed my mother over to the hospital staff, just as I'd relinquished her care to my older sister. Arline never could, or maybe never wanted to, navigate an escape from Mother's demands. She took each verbal punch like a child's clown bag weighted in place to easily bounce back for more. Widowed at a young age and childless, Arline made Mother her primary focus. Wearing her caretaking mantle as comfortably as a frayed winter coat, my sister washed our mother's laundry, picked up her groceries, chauffeured her to all appointments. Even Mother's middle-of-the-night persistent phone calls didn't deter Arline. Her own needs and desires had been buried for so long, they were like scraps tossed into the disposal. She couldn't reach in deep enough to grab them back if she tried.

"Her blood pressure is plummeting," Arline had told me on the phone earlier. "And they have no clue why," her voice coated with worry.

"I can be there in ten minutes," I'd reassured, stuffing unfinished tax court memos into my briefcase, imagining my sister sitting at her desk, fretting about a demanding boss and letters that still needed typing. Rarely, if ever, was I the first at Mother's side. Could I handle this?

By the time Arline arrived, I'd spent an hour flipping through the assorted magazines scattered on end tables. Did headlines tattling affairs and facelifts really distract those waiting for life-or-death pronouncements?

She dropped into the dark green vinyl seat next to me, clutching her cracked black purse to her lap as if protecting it from theft, as was our mother's habit. The wedding rings Arline continued to wear some five years after her husband's death spawned rainbow colors under the fluorescent lights. Otherwise, my sister was unadorned: short, tinted ash-blond hair showing a residue of spray; tan trench coat still buttoned and belted; small gold hoop earrings, a birthday gift from me.

"Any news?"

I shook my head. "A doctor's still examining her." I returned to *People* magazine and the handsome actor on the cover. We relaxed into our familiar conversational vacuum, Arline's habitual allergy sniffing and my page shuffling the only interruptions to the quiet. Though sisters, the common ground we shared was barren, populated by parents who had wandered away at different times and on separate journeys. Neither made a path wide enough to include their two daughters. Our father had disappeared after the divorce; I was eight, Arline twelve. Mother left us years later to chase a runaway second husband who

had fled to Florida. She finally returned when I graduated from college. The wound from her being AWOL during my adolescence still festered. Why was I sitting in this waiting room now?

A white-coated doctor appeared. With his unwrinkled face, dark blond hair, and somber demeanor, I expected “Dr. Kildare” to be engraved on his nametag. The hint of stubble on his cheek suggested a long workday.

“I’m afraid it’s necrosis of the colon. It’s black, no longer functioning, and should be removed.”

Arline’s hand flew to her mouth, catching a gasp. Necrosis? I flipped my mental Rolodex of biology terms. Didn’t “necrosis” mean something was dead?

“A woman in her early eighties has a fifty-fifty chance of surviving such a major operation,” the doctor continued, as if reading from a script. “If she pulls through, she’ll wear a colostomy bag the rest of her life.”

My mother, who had cha-cha’d and tangoed in three-inch heels and tight pencil skirts at many a singles’ dance, wearing a bulging bag to catch her waste? I closed my eyes, conjuring up memories of my eight-year-old feet in black patent Mary Janes trying to follow mother’s lead as she sashayed around our living room humming a Sinatra tune.

“She’s not capable of understanding the gravity and giving her consent,” the doctor interrupted. “You two must make the decision.”

“And what if you don’t operate?” I needed to hear the words aloud.

“She’ll die within three to four days.”

There it was. That truck coming down the highway. Should we let Mother remain in its path? Or pull her out of its way? This doctor, this stranger was delivering our mother’s life to us. He wanted an answer. I had only questions. If we did nothing, what would those few days be like? I envisioned keeping vigil at Mother’s bedside; watching disease spread like poison; holding hands as they chilled; listening to breaths become gasps. Would she let go peacefully? Or would she thrash? Beg for our help?

If anyone had the guts to let Mother die, it would be me. Would I feel relief? Regret? If Mother survived, it would be my sister who bought the supplies and changed the waste pouch. Is that what Arline wanted?

“What shall we do?” my sister whispered. I sensed that old fear we shared. Imprinted on us since childhood, it was like a tattoo that faded over time but could never be obliterated. We’d learned that lesson early: avoid any behavior that might trigger Mother’s anger. Make a decision that would result in her dying? She’d haunt us. Make a decision that would leave her feeling dirty around the clock? She’d blame us.

A gurney rumbled by. Visitors shuffled into the waiting room. One nibbled McDonald’s French fries, their warm salty aroma swirling. Another was reading the magazine I’d tossed. Ben Affleck’s face stared at me.

Had anyone overheard our conversation? What would people think of a daughter who chose to let her mother die? Should I care? I looked back at my sister. Her hand remained clasped to her mouth.

“Let’s take our chances.”

An Interview with Edwin Bodney

The most influential writers of our time aren't working like hermits in the middle of nowhere. They are active in their communities, reading their work aloud in living rooms and at coffee houses, searching for voices to connect to and draw from. One of the highlights for *Exposition Review* in becoming a digital journal was realizing the opportunity that existed to create spaces for our writers to not only share their work, but to build a community. And no one knows the importance of a writing community better than Edwin Bodney.

Edwin Bodney is a Los Angeles-based poet and co-host of one of the largest poetry venues in the nation, [Da Poetry Lounge](#). In 2016, he officially published his first book titled, *A Study of Hands*, with Not a Cult Press. Brian McGackin, Expo Poetry Editor, quickly jumped onboard the opportunity to talk to Bodney more about his passion for poetry and what it means to write with a community that offers so much support.

Brian McGackin: How did you get started writing poetry?

Edwin Bodney: I started writing poetry in eighth grade, when I was assigned to write an essay on the Holocaust for my English class. I decided to write about a specific concentration camp by the name of Terezín. To provide a bit of context, this camp primarily contained women and children, and these children devoted whatever time and resources they had to writing poetry. This poetry was eventually discovered postwar inside the remains of the camp. At the time, I was always drawn to other visual art forms like painting, but I never really thought to focus on poetry, and although I had always been a strong writer in school, I picked this particular topic because I thought it would justify me doing as little work as possible.

While the rest of the class received their graded essays and moved on, my teacher asked that I stay to speak with him afterward. This incredibly stoic, intimidating, old, white man—clearly over his life of teaching "inner city" kids of color—beamed at me as he handed my paper back with a perfect score. I had never before seen this man display any other expression outside of subtle annoyance, but it was on that day that Mr. Thompson suggested I strongly consider—and pursue—a career in writing, specifically journalism.

From then, I decided to explore what poetry meant to me, how to write it beyond the average school lesson, and what it would be like for me to live in that world. I discovered an open mic at a local Starbucks, and I haven't put poetry down since.

BM: You have an excellent collection published by Not a Cult, A Study of Hands, with a recently released second edition.

EB: Thank you.

BM: What was your path from deciding that you were going to write and perform in earnest to publishing that book?

EB: My path from novice writer and performer to published author was one filled with uncertainty. I never really thought about my intentions with my work outside of doing it as a fun hobby. In hindsight, it's also quite safe to say that I wrote absolute garbage, but of course we all start somewhere. I went to college for fashion design, so poetry was shelved for a few years until I regained some control on my life, towards the end of college. I then started to revisit writing and open mics with a friend during our free time. I started attending Da Poetry Lounge regularly, and had the opportunity to take a workshop on writing more vulnerably with several people who are still very much my family today.

This workshop provided my first real breakthrough when I finally confronted my experience with being sexually assaulted years prior. Everything began moving at light speed from that point and I no longer kept my mouth shut. I now felt that I truly had the power to tell anyone all of my story, and when people began to acknowledge that they resonated with my words, there was really no turning back.

Funny enough, though, I never saw myself having a full ass manuscript, let alone a real, published book! I first submitted *A Study of Hands* to a different book contest—a year prior to *Not a Cult*—and it was rejected. Of course this only validated my own insecurities as a writer, and I thought that would be the end of that. Fast forward to *Not a Cult** asking for a manuscript from me, and yeah, it's still quite surreal even a year-and-a-half later.

BM: Your relationship with your father plays a prominent role in both A Study of Hands and your piece in this issue, pun definitely intended. Many people assume that poetry is entirely autobiographical, but we do as poets often take liberties with the realities we've lived. Where do you feel your work tends to fall on that autobiography/creative nonfiction spectrum?

EB: Simple: my work is 101 percent autobiographical. That extra one percent is the metaphor so you all will read it! I'll add this: most people underestimate the power of the truth. The real story is usually captivating, curious, whimsical, and heartbreaking as long as you aren't hiding from it.

BM: You mentioned earlier that you've developed a kind of second family among the poets at Da Poetry Lounge here in Los Angeles. Could you tell me more about that community, as well as some of the other poetry events you frequent in Los Angeles?

EB: I met this family at a very necessary time in my life, and now I'd do just about anything I can for that group of fantastically complex people. It's been almost a decade now and we're locked in for life. We've all grown and changed so much, and it's inspiring to have witnessed it. We all provide very distinct functions within our group, and that also translates to how we help run the DPL space on a weekly basis.

There aren't many regularly running venues in L.A. specifically for poetry anymore, but at this point in my life, I just don't have the energy or brain space to visit many others anyway. I'm very intentional about the spaces I do visit and how I allocate my energies, and even though I'm not present physically to many things, I am usually supporting from wherever I am. This community knows how deeply rooted I am and they know what to look to me for. I'm a good lighthouse.

BM: You also judge poetry contests, for example.

EB: I do judge poetry contests—more often than I realize, I think, at this point.

BM: What do you look for when you're reading submissions?

EB: I usually step into someone else's work with the brief assumption that they won't be speaking about anything “new,” so for me it's about *how* are they speaking about it? How beautiful is the language choice? Are they utilizing something in an exciting way? Do they understand brevity?!!! And most importantly, given my own philosophy, how closely have they rubbed that nerve without snapping it? Don't bore me or make me always have to do backflips to get through it. They don't have to always pull something out of me as the reader, but they do have to pull me in somehow.

BM: Is it the same when reading for your own pleasure? Who/what are some of your favorite poets/collections?

EB: When reading for my own pleasure, I'm usually just looking for beauty of language, new perspective, and the sense of ease. Again, I don't want to be forced to backflip my way through it especially if it's recreational.

I am fortunate enough to share a community with many of my favorite poets/peers and their work:

- Patricia Smith (the muthaaa)
- Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* is stupidly remarkable.
- Yesika Salgado
- Tonya Ingram
- Olivia Gatwood
- Sierra DeMulder
- Javon Johnson
- Mahogany L. Browne
- Julia Levine's *Small Disasters Seen in Sunlight*
- Hanif Abdurraqib is an incredible storyteller.

This list could go on for an eternity!

BM: *Finally, we've been lucky enough to have many repeat submitters over the years, and it's always very interesting to see an artist grow and their work change. How do you feel work you've done recently is similar or dissimilar to your previous work, and what advice might you have for writers looking to grow their artistry?*

EB: My recent work has definitely shown an evolution in both form and the ways in which I'm stretching myself around new concepts. I have been thinking a lot lately about magnetism and attraction and the ways in which these elements show up in my personal experiences. I think I've become even more unapologetic in how I navigate my world and public space because the rest of the world just doesn't deserve a "quiet" version of me, and that's not even what I want to give. So, in essence, I feel my work has become more crude. It is deeply and beautifully flawed, and I've taken full ownership of that, so the world gets nothing else from me now. I used to try and make things so much more pretty for the watching eyes. Never again.

I offer this to writers looking to grow: Live your life! Read more than poetry. Get off the internet. It makes a very convenient world for getting lost or stranded from your own voice, and plagiarism, gross.

Lastly, writing is a muscle—exercise it!

BM: *Thank you so much for taking the time, Edwin.*

EB: Okay whew! I did it!

**Full disclosure: Not a Cult will be publishing Brian McGackin's second poetry collection, In Case Of Death, in late 2018. His manuscript was chosen via a yearly manuscript contest, of which Edwin Bodney was one of the four judges.*

Ghost Interview in the Peach Orchard

XOCHITL-JULISA BERMEJO

After Ghostlines Collective

In your final moments, whom did you think of?
Was this someone waiting for you to return?
I worry I will never find that someone waiting

behind a thick front door of a home we made together.
Was your front door always locked or opened?
Was it left open for you even after you were gone?

If you could say one thing to your father, what would you say?
What's one lesson you wish you could have taught your child?
I still hope to have a child, so consider this advice.

Dried peach pits litter the ground reminding me of bones.
Are your bones below the soil? Is this why you cling
to the fields snagging on branches like morning fog?

How do you want to be remembered?
If you could write anything on one of these monuments
riddling the orchard, what would you write?

Have you ever pledged allegiance to a flag, any flag?
Have you ever loved a flag like your mother's arms?
Speaking of your mother's arms,

what did they smell like when tucked tight below your nose?
Fresh baked loaves or maybe stone?
I want a better simile, but I need you to tell me.

I come to you alone at twilight because I'm always alone,
and I'm afraid. Are you here with me? Do you
stalk the trees? I ask because I don't want to be afraid.

Do you hate war? Did you ever love war?
Am I totally off, and is War like God,
unknown, all around, a mystery too big to understand?

I wish I could tell you there is no more war,
that your sacrifice has been remembered as a warning,
but I can't, so let's talk about letters.

Did you write love letters home with sign offs like
I wait to hold you and Forever yours? I want to believe
in love like some believe in God. Will you help me?

Do you think I'm crazy? Do you think I'm beautiful?
No, really, like would you date me?
Don't answer that.

Did I at least make you laugh? What can I say
to make you smile? Please tell me there is something
I can write to help us both let go.

Little Sisters of the Poor

JESSICA BEYER

We circled the sisters and their beds and their chapel
circled with cherry blossoms damp on our shoes in the
spring circled hedged enclaves with statues of pollen-laced
Mary circled while Rex the beagle stalked his dandelion
kingdom circled through the summer while my mother and
I both got bigger circled while crickets and fireflies
competed for attention circled in the fall with one more
sister in tow while the rosary beads threaded through nunly
hands circled while leaves descended on us quiet crowns
drying from red to brown covering the halos circled the
hedges recoiling from the statues and the lawnmower
locked somewhere unseen circled the sisters their
carpentry and their carpenter while our numbers fell back
by one and I was the only one growing

Prominence

EDWIN BODNEY

Before the depression / my father and I were fine / we talked / we laughed / we shared / the
invisible thread of a lost child tugging his way home /

A year ago / we were wound so tight within / our own flood / an entire room said *drown* /
and each body became a raft /

I had never
been told
I love you and
heard *You are*
safe

My father drives trucks / lives an entire life inside a highway / cinches the waist of a whole
country / does not bring us closer /

I haven't heard my father's voice in months / I haven't seen him in, well / longer than that /
my father is driving, I imagine /

I am a
satellite / I am
artificial /
asked to
follow what I
cannot feel

Last week / a woman who claims to have a child by my father sent me an email / their
daughter wants to meet me / she's eight / I retain and ignore all of it

How does a body pass slow / full and carried by celestial ovation /

How do you produce a new moon / gape your mouth as if you've never seen light?

Somewhere / in the cinched waist of a country / my father's diseased heart might deny its
solar charge / might explode into a light so warm it feels like a final home

I will watch from a rooftop / my arm will not reach long enough to pull him back /

I may
be the
last to
know

Unmaking a Bed

TRESHA HAEFNER

I stripped the sheets from around the edges,
removed the memory foam from the mattress,
removed the wild skin of myself
from its uniform organs.

The soul, upon parting from the body,
must be like a cloud, light and removable.
The body is a bed you sleep in
and wake up from
and leave.

I must have dreamt it,
the city of San Jose, city of my twenties
with its hair salons and movie theaters,
the hills that looked like thirsty men
on a long road from Mexico, crossing into a border
of trees that remind me of my grandfather.

The redwoods and real-estate buildings point towards a sky
the color of fish scales he once scrubbed off bones
on the work floor of a cannery when he was twenty,
quiet, disciplined work done late into the evening.

And the redwood trees in San Jose were my father
coming back to a cabin in the woods one night
in college after watching *The Blob* and finding
the keys to his house missing.

They say all things are connected.

I thought about that, driving down Highway 5,
when I packed my snow globes and sandals.
How the blouse I had on had been stitched by the hands
of Chinese girls in a sweatshop.

I could feel their diligent, raw fingers on my shoulders,
an ambiguous shadow of hands under my shell and how
my students come from Vietnam and hug me when
they leave at the end of the year and finally make their journeys.

I know they have to remove so much of themselves
and make it transportable on both sides of the ocean,
like magnificently small suitcases full of
fish sauce. Compacted histories put on ice.

And I know somewhere they open magazines and think about me
in a land of coconuts and Inga fruit where their mothers
cook catfish dinner and a pot of rice, and their fathers'
voices are calling to them the way my Father's
calls to me, in the far away sound of the trees.

Uncertainty Principle

YESSICA KLEIN

the problem with teleportation
is not the transport of matter
across space in a very

short period of time.
it is the re-assembly of
said matter in new space.

no matter is actually moved
but copied over & the original
destroyed. a debate

about cloning, ethics,
accuracy, pain, energy,
atoms, errors —

—

engineering is problematic,
not Physics.

dear lover,
I urge you
we give it a try.

Rapunzel

RONALD KOERTGE

It begins with dissatisfaction. Over, of all things, rapunzel.
The herb, the seasoning. Not the beautiful Rapunzel.

A pregnant wife (at last!), a witch's garden next door.
The missus just has to have some rapunzel.

Of course the husband gets caught. The witch curses
him as he stands there with a handful of pungent rapunzel.

Unless... Now the part everybody knows: that tower,
the witch calls out and up she goes to the top of Hotel Rapunzel.

Enter the prince who hears the singing, sees how it's done,
and that night calls out himself to the lonely Rapunzel.

But not too bright. Pregnant and starting to show, she
asks the witch why she is heavier than a prince. Oh, Rapunzel.

She is taken to a desert, the prince is blinded by thorns.
He wanders for years living on nuts and berries and rapunzel.

On paper, it ends as expected. He hears the singing.
Her tears restore his sight. It's ever after time for Rapunzel.

His journal, however, is one long lament—if he'd just ridden
on that day. If he'd just never heard of Rapunzel.

Warsaw

LEON LOWDER

Are you lost in Warsaw?
Are you soaking in the softness of Polish words?
Smelling *kapusta* as you explore the city
with such small, delicate feet?
Have you found new shoes
to walk you through the town
you've visited so many times before?
Do you dream of white boots?
Can you hear your uncle, your aunt?
How smoky was the *kawiarnia* back then?
How free were the words?
Did they roll sweetly on your tongue?
You the collector of rebellious languages.
How do you feel strolling on Marszalkowska?
Do you recognize the sidewalk cracks?
Please buy new shoes, so you can return soon.

LinkedIn

FRAN MARKOVER

For Laurie Conrad

The title Composer is beneath her photo.

I listen to her Soul of Tired Earth. The flutes

draw me toward her, music pulsing through
cyberspace. I click on her invitation to connect

though it's been four months since her death.
In her final class she taught about the over-Self,

how we're all part of a larger consciousness.
She praised Obi-Wan Kenobi, his revelations—

how the Force binds our galaxy. Its energy ever-
lasting, atoms from stars harbored inside us.

After she revealed her illness, she told students
about her embrace of death, kinship with novas,

the ecstasy of a celestial address. I imagine her
reaching from a starship, placing chalk on milky

trails for children to hopscotch Home. Picture
how she'd plant blessed thistle & meadow rue

along black holes, practice offerings on a clavier,
light notes falling like patterings of Chopin's

Raindrop Prelude. Tiring, she would close each
rehearsal the way she ended our meditations:

with a bow. "Breathe." Her word pierces the dark quiet like a Jedi lightsaber.

Reverberations

VAL BRITTON



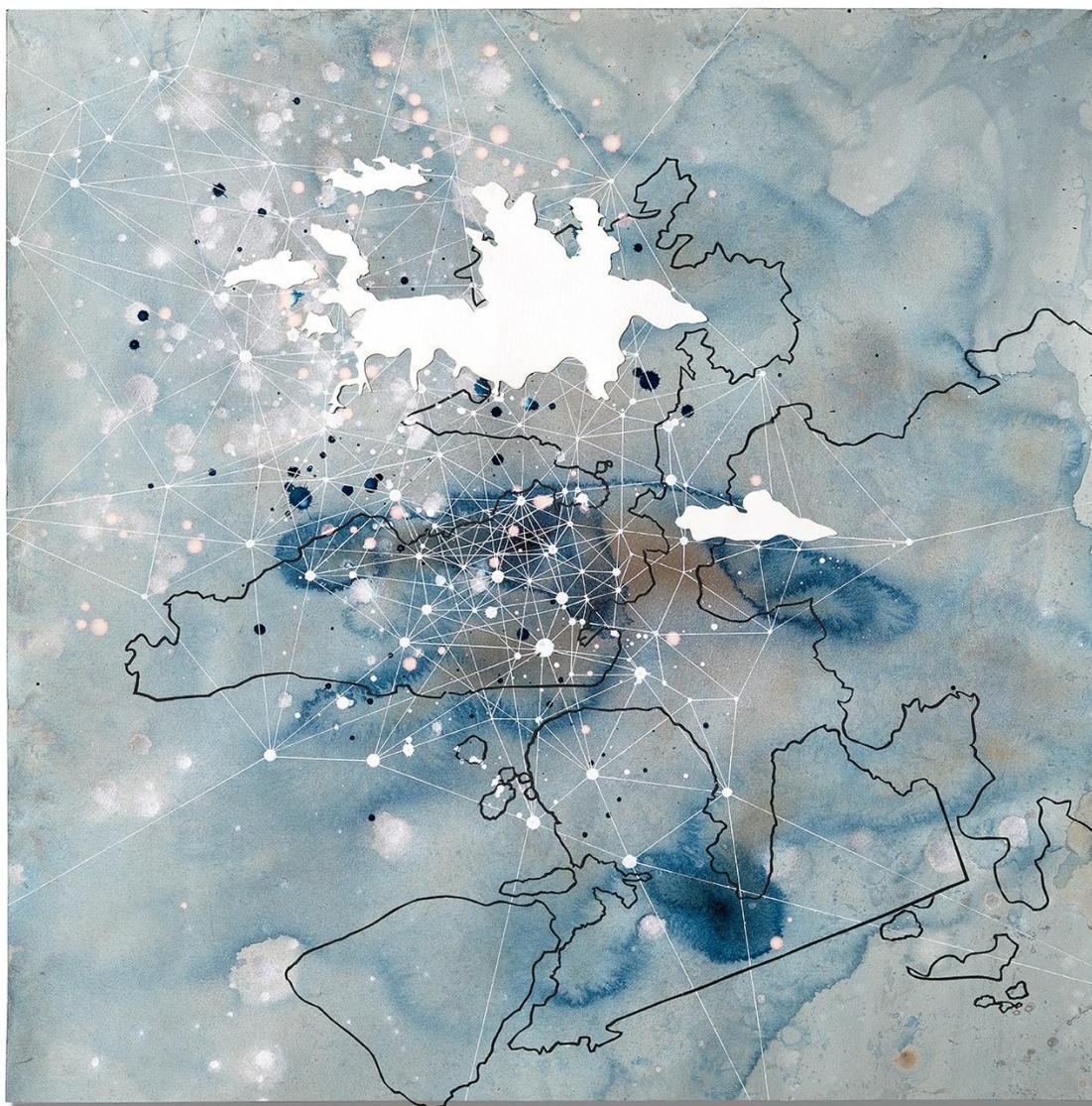
Val Britton, *Reverberation #3*, 2013. Graphite, ink, watercolor, and collage on paper, 26 x 26 inches. Courtesy of Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco



Val Britton, *Reverberation #30*, 2015. Ink and collage on paper, 36 x 36 inches. Courtesy of Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco



Val Britton, *Reverberation #36*, 2016. Ink, watercolor, and collage on paper, 24 x 24 inches.
Courtesy of Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco



Val Britton, *Reverberation #40*, 2013. Ink, acrylic, and collage on paper, 22 ½ x 22 ½ inches.
Courtesy of Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco

Atlantis Rising

LARRY PIKE

STS-79 was launched from Kennedy Space Center at 4:54 a.m., September 16, 1996.

Hopeful pilgrims huddle by the dark sea, anxious for one brave ship,
and I crowd with them. At the edge of the known universe,

swirling salt breezes whisk our souls' deep waters
into choppy peaks that trace the current

rhythms of faithful hearts. We explore the enveloping night
like ancient, fretful land-lost sailors fingering sextants,

divining star charts, seeking another promising world,
until our patience receives its reward.

Beyond a far strip of shore where the surge laps and laps
survives an altar where Abraham might have struck his relative sacrifice.

Tonight fresh flames flare there and soar, a precious new offering
accelerating through the dividing air. Then that fluid fire vanishes,

pursuing its own graceful geometry of arc and attitude,
while we stand still together there, gaping, grasping after

the holy wind that ignites the engine of imagination,
already circumnavigating the essential orbit of wonder.

Before I Knew What Mania Was

JEN SAGE-ROBISON

A baker's dozen Boston cream donuts disappeared into Auntie Carol's gabbing maw from a tissue paper nest inside a pink and white Bess Eaton box at the kitchen table on Charles Street.

Between squinty pulls on her cigarettes, she nearly ingested them whole as she spilled the contents of her stuffed mind. Alternating belts of black coffee and Diet Coke helped it go down.

"I was almost a nurse," she wanted me to know, a wand of ash bobbing out the side of her mouth. "St. Francis School of Nursing. Practically, I was. I left to live in my car. In Elizabeth Park. With blooms."

Yellow custard oozed from each pastry's sphincter, threatened to glop onto the laminate. But she rescued the cream each time, sucking it up at the last possible second then, remembering her upbringing, dabbed each corner of her mouth with a taut pinky, the one with nerves left in it.

She'd founded a charity in town before I was born, for people whose luck had run out, though others ran it now. She'd famously talked a man out of a knife at an all-night coffee shop. "He only needed to talk," she shrugged.

On her good days, we ran errands in her dented station wagon, writing bad checks at the gas station where her Newports were cheapest, swinging by the post office, sending letters to distant allies. Torrington's toughest cases—parolees, vets, priests—cracked grins when they saw garrulous Carol rolling in, cigarette in one hand,

Diet Coke in the other. On bad days, she had no friends.

Grammy said Auntie Carol had been a beauty once, had married an Air Force man briefly, a mistake. Sapphic love was verboten in 1950's Irish Catholic homes, along with a few other nourishing things.

“You gotta listen,” she told me, abruptly angry as she chewed the last sweet pillow of fat. I nodded in silence, trying to see the actual shape of my aunt through the screen of sugar and smoke, suddenly pinched by hunger myself.

BETTY There were lights.

IRIS Yup.

BETTY And noise.

IRIS Yup.

BETTY The kids...

IRIS Are fine. They weren't with you, remember?

BETTY Oh, right. David...

IRIS He's fine too. Well, physically anyway.

BETTY turns around to look at IRIS for the first time.

BETTY How do you know so much? You look familiar.

IRIS *(Putting down her reading material)*
Oh, so you remember, do you?

BETTY Remember?

IRIS Before you put all my pictures away when the kids started asking who I was.

IRIS gets up, crosses down to BETTY and sticks her hand out to shake.

IRIS Iris. David's first wife. Nice to finally meet you.

BETTY You're... Iris? But you're so young.

IRIS Well, I was twenty-three when I died, remember. So here I'll stay, forever twenty-three. Stuck in this horrible hospital gown. People don't realize whatever you're wearing when you die is what you'll be in forever. Bet you're wishing you had worn flats today.

BETTY What about people who die naked?

IRIS Ah, the shower accident crowd. Not a very social group.

BETTY So now what?

IRIS Now we just wait. We watch their lives and we wait for them to die and join us.

BETTY But I never knew you in life.

IRIS No, but we were both married to the same man—so we're both waiting on him.

BETTY Sounds kinda male-centric.

IRIS I know, right?

BETTY And my kids?

IRIS They might join us too, when their time comes, or they'll be with their spouses and kids if they get that far. The way it works is you'll have access to everyone you ever met in life, but your core group is whomever you consider your immediate family at the time of death. My mom has been up here a few years now waiting on my dad.

BETTY Right. I remember when your mom died. David took the kids to her funeral. Your parents are wonderful people. The kids miss their grandma a lot.

IRIS I see her pretty regularly, but generally speaking I've been alone, waiting for David for twenty-two years already. And now, I get to wait here... with you.

BETTY And we just watch them?

IRIS Yup. Well, I can only watch David. You can watch him plus your kids. Though, I advise you to think about when you want to watch them. Like... not on dates... I learned that the hard way.

BETTY You... watched us?

IRIS Yeah. Aruba was fun. And he lied. He has done that before.

Pause. Embarrassment. BETTY starts to pace.

IRIS Listen, it's not so bad. Time moves pretty quickly. Look, he already told the kids and your parents. That part is hard to watch, but you should watch your funeral. It's helpful. Come. Sit.

IRIS and BETTY go sit on the two chairs facing the audience in silence for a few beats.

- BETTY Lilies. My favorite.
- IRIS He picked out irises for mine. I don't even like irises but when you're named after a flower everyone just assumes you love that flower.
(*Notices BETTY is crying.*)
Hey, hey. They'll be ok. He's a great guy and they'll be ok. Look, those are your parents, right? Man your mom is pretty.
- BETTY My kids are going to grow up without me. How could I have done this to them? I was in such a damn hurry. Now, instead of being fifteen minutes late to Cameron's basketball game, I'll never be at another one. I won't be at high school graduation or their weddings or any of it. It's all gone, just like that because I was in a hurry.
- IRIS It wasn't your fault, you know.
- BETTY What?
- IRIS There was a drunk driver. David was at work when the phone call came in. You were still alive in the ambulance, but by the time you got to the hospital... and then it took awhile to identify you. That's the disconnect you're feeling. I didn't know you were coming until he got the call, 'cause I can only watch him. I watched him tell the kids. You're so lucky.
- BETTY What?
- IRIS I'm sorry. I don't mean you're lucky to be dead. I just meant you're luckier than me. I only got four years with him and you got seventeen and you got kids. I always knew he'd be an amazing father. We wanted kids so much. I had their names all picked out.
- BETTY I know. He told me. Cameron and Sarah. That's how Cameron got his name.
- IRIS I know. Thank you.
- Pause.*
- BETTY I didn't mean to erase you. We all have our past, but I pushed him too hard at first to talk about you. I wanted to prove I wasn't jealous.
- IRIS But you were.

- BETTY Of course I was. You two went straight from the honeymoon phase of marriage to death-do-us-part. You got to skip all the sleep-deprived nights where you just want to be anywhere else in the world. The stupid fights about laundry and dishes and carpool.
- IRIS And now you want a thousand of those fights back?
- BETTY Yes.
- They sit in silence for a few moments watching the funeral.*
- BETTY Who picked out that dress? That's not my dress.
- IRIS Your mom went out and bought it. The funeral director suggested it.
- BETTY Suggested that dress?! I'd never wear anything like that.
- IRIS Well, he suggested something... modest. People have this weird idea that we're so serious in death. I mean, yes, absolutely at first you spend a lot of time thinking about your life and all the things that you won't be able to participate in anymore... but after awhile it becomes like a soap opera. You're able to disconnect a bit more. At the same time, because you can watch them whenever you want, you get to know people in a way you never did when you were alive with them.
- BETTY Like what?
- IRIS Like you probably don't know that David gives himself pep talks every morning after his shower. I never knew until I died. Maybe he didn't do it when I was alive? It's sweet, but it's also so sad. I don't watch you two all the time, but enough that I'm pretty sure it's stuff he's never told you. When I first died he talked to me a lot. Told me things he never told me in life. That pissed me off and I expect it's going to happen to you too.
- BETTY I heard him talking to you once. It was when we first got married. He didn't know I could hear him.
- IRIS Yeah?
- BETTY Yeah. He... umm... he was apologizing to you. For me. For marrying me.
- IRIS I remember. You were pregnant. He felt rushed, but at the same time he was happy for the first time in a long time.

BETTY I always wondered if you and I would get along.

IRIS Well, now we have the rest of his life to find out.

End of Play.

Chez Rikers: An Urban Fable

CHARLES LEIPART

STAGEPLAY (EXCERPT)

CHARACTERS: THE MASSEYS, MEG and SAM.
A well-to-do couple in their 60s.

THOMAS A waiter, 20s.

CAPTAIN HERALDO
Hispanic/black, 40s.

THE PATTERSONS, CLAIRE and GUY
Neighbors to the Masseys, in their 50s.

SETTING: New York City. An indefinite future, a time of change.

Evening. A prison cell on Rikers Island.

* * *

In darkness, a sound collage of urban rioting: helicopters, police and ambulance calls, sirens, shouting, confusion, angry rap music. Then:

Evening. A prison cell on Rikers Island. A wall of jail bars running across the back; a harshly lighted corridor beyond.

At center, a small, linen-covered dining table, quite elegantly set with candles, crystal, silver, and two dining chairs.

THE MASSEYS, MEG and SAM, a well-to-do couple in their sixties, dance about the cell. MEG in a torn evening gown, a single strand of pearls about her neck; SAM in a soiled tuxedo with a torn sleeve.

THEY waltz elegantly about the cell, as a WAITER in a white serving jacket, plays "MOON RIVER" on the accordion, hitting occasional wrong chords.)

- MEG *(Singing softly as she dances)*
 “Moon River, wider than a mile, I’m crossing you in style someday—”
- WAITER *(Wrong chord)*
 Sorry. My accordion’s a bit out of tune.
- MEG *(Still dancing)*
 That's all right, Thomas. You're doing beautifully. Always keep a few standards in your repertoire. You'll make good tips.
- WAITER Yes, ma’am.
- He concludes the song with a flourish.*
- MEG and SAM applaud him. He removes the accordion.*
- SAM Well done, Thomas. I’m quite astonished that you found our dining chairs.
- WAITER I could only locate the two, sir. The Requisitions Bureau is way behind in the inventory.
- MEG We are most grateful, Thomas. Fortunately the Special Protections Team allowed me to take Nanna’s chest of family silver with us.
(Touching the table setting)
 It adds so much to the table setting, don’t you think?
- SAM We had no idea, Thomas. What was going on. We had just returned from the Museum Gala dinner. We were still in our evening clothes. Who would have thought it?

WAITER The Revolution, sir. It was time.

MEG We would like our other ten dining chairs back, Thomas, if you could put a word in.

SAM Will the Captain be stopping in tonight?

WAITER Yes, sir. To make sure everything is as it should be.

SAM Yes, as it should be. Right. Very good, Thomas.

WAITER Shall I clear the appetizer, sir?

SAM Please.

MEG And tell Pedro the grilled baloney was exceptional tonight.

WAITER *(Clearing small dishes from table to a service trolley at side)*
It came across fresh from Hunts Point this morning.

MEG And what was that sauce again?

WAITER Catsup and mayonnaise, ma'am.

MEG Lovely. I must have Pearl try that when we get home.

Pause.

WAITER Yes, ma'am.

He finishes clearing dishes to the service trolley, crumbs table.

MEG paces about.

MEG God, I could kill for a cigarette.

SAM You're doing wonderfully, dear. It's been eighteen days.

MEG Don't remind me. You're looking at a Carlton 100's junkie, Thomas.

MEG goes to a cot at one side, takes up a comb and piece of broken mirror from under a pillow.

She attempts to comb her hair and check her reflection, full-figure, in the bit of mirror.

MEG I believe I've put on a few pounds, Sam—eating like there's no tomorrow.

(Checking her teeth)

You don't think you could find me some floss, do you, Thomas?

WAITER It will cost you, ma'am.

MEG Oh, yes, that is the new system, isn't it? Toothpaste, two pearl earrings, shampoo, an alligator shoe. Never mind, Thomas, I'll do without.

WAITER As you wish, ma'am.

SAM *(As the WAITER is about to exit with dirty plates—)*

Thomas, one moment—

He steps aside to WAITER.

WAITER Yes, sir?

SAM *(Speaking quietly)*

Did you get them?

The WAITER takes two black capsules from his jacket pocket, holding them out to SAM.

WAITER Black Morphies, sir. They're quite painless and fast-acting.

MEG Sam, what are you two whispering about?

SAM Nothing, Margaret. The waiter was just getting me something for my headache.

MEG Be careful, Sam. I still don't trust the Tylenol.

- SAM Will my watch do?
- WAITER The watch will do nicely, sir.
- SAM slips his watch off his wrist, giving it to the WAITER. The WAITER goes out with dirty plates.*
- MEG Sam, was that necessary?
- SAM What, my love?
- MEG Giving him your gold Rolex.
- SAM I haven't any money, Meg.
- MEG He might have taken a check.
- The WAITER returns to the cell.*
- MEG —Oh, Thomas, I never thanked you for the lovely job you did on the table.
- WAITER You're welcome, ma'am. The Captain said very particularly you were to have the best.
- MEG What did I tell you, Sam? We have friends in high places!
- WAITER Shall I bring on the entrées now?
- MEG Please.
- WAITER That's the Macaroni and Wieners for Madam, and the Chipped Beef on Toast for Mr. Massey.
- SAM That's right, Thomas.
- MEG And Thomas, could you ask Pedro, not too pink on the wieners?
- SAM Pink will be fine, Thomas.

- WAITER Very good, sir. And, sir—I recommend you have them with espressos, it cuts the bitterness.
- MEG Espressos, Sam? Are you sure? Won't it keep us up?
- SAM I don't think so, dear. Two espressos, then, please, Thomas.
- The WAITER nods, starts out, then—*
- WAITER —sorry, ma'am, one last thing. Will you be wanting a priest?
- MEG A priest? Heavens, no, Thomas. I think a hairdresser would be more in order.
- WAITER Yes, ma'am.
- He steps out the cell door.*
- MEG A priest, Sam. What a bizarre suggestion.
(*Stopping the WAITER*)
 Thomas, wait. Lock the door after you, please.
- SAM Leave it open, Meg.
- MEG Sam, are you sure? You never know who might be roaming the corridors.
- SAM Just pull it to, young man.
- WAITER Yes, sir.
- The WAITER pulls door to, exits up the corridor with the serving tray.*
- MEG We have to have security, Sam. You can never have too much security. There was a stink bomb thrown in the yard during exercise this morning.
- SAM Was there?

- MEG Didn't you smell it?
- SAM I was in scrubbing the urinals.
- MEG It turned out to be a protest by some of the regular inmates—over our taking over the accommodations. We've spoiled them, Sam. Giving them choice Manhattan real estate, right in the middle of the East River. Just think what the President's people could do with this property. A wonderful luxury high-rise condominium, with beds and beds of lovely tulips all along the electrified, high-security fence. We ought to ship these felons upstate, Sam—way, way, upstate. Beyond Schenectady. That's more like punishment. How do I look?
- SAM Fresh as a daisy.
- MEG Liar.
(Regarding herself again in the bit of mirror)
God, Angelo will scream when he sees my hair. I believe you've gotten a tad grayer in the few weeks we've been here. Don't worry, dear. We'll be back home in our own beds tonight.
- SAM Where did you hear this?
- MEG That was the word in the toilets tonight. Matron said they were shipping us all home tonight after dinner. Angelo can give you a little touch-up on the sides. No need to get slovenly, Sam.
- SAM No. No need.
- MEG Cheer up, Sam. You look like death warmed over.

THE PATTERSONS, CLAIRE and GUY, fifties, come along the corridor, also in worn evening clothes and wearing yellow rubber gloves: GUY with a toilet plunger, CLAIRE with a toilet brush in hand. Over their evening clothes, they wear green t-shirts printed, "NYC DEPT. OF CORRECTION".)
- CLAIRE Wait, Guy, I think we took the wrong turn. This isn't our cellblock.

MEG Claire Patterson, what on earth are you doing?

CLAIRE Guy, it's the Masseys. They sat across from us in the evacuation van.

GUY *(to SAM)*
Hello there, old sport. Missed you at exercise.

CLAIRE We've just done our latrine duty. We left it sparkling.

GUY SPARKLING. To show we've been rehabilitated. To the NEW THINK. "LESS IS MORE."

CLAIRE We love the NEW THINK. "MORE IS LESS."

GUY Love it!

CLAIRE *(Pressing her face against the cell bars)*
Oh, look at that table setting! The whole nine yards, Guy. You're certainly going out in style, Meg.

GUY We thought we'd have ours is the cafeteria. Along with all our new friends from Drug Detox.
(to CLAIRE)
We'd better move on, dear. We'll be missing cell check.

CLAIRE We mustn't do that. We want to follow all the rules. Like we've always done. They'll see and perhaps—

Pause.

GUY Now, now, none of that. Come along, Pumpkin.
(Leading with his toilet plunger)
LESS IS MORE...

CLAIRE Yes, MORE IS LESS. More or less...

She hurries off down the corridor after GUY, waving her toilet brush. Pause.

- MEG Claire's been a bit queer lately.
- SAM How so?
- MEG In the toilets. This afternoon. She started crying.
- SAM Crying. What about?
- MEG About it being their last night. I would think she would have been glad to be finally going home. She didn't have any soap, poor dear. I lent her mine.
- SAM That was kind.
- MEG Yes. Funny how quickly people get attached. To their surroundings. If we weren't leaving tonight, I was going to ask the Captain if I could have some fabric to make a curtain for that little window. The sun shines right in my eyes in the morning. But I shall miss it. Our little cell. It reminds me of that one-room stone cottage we leased on Crete for our honeymoon. You'd go fishing in the morning and I'd pick oranges. Except, we had a sea view.
- Pause. SAM is lost in thought.*
- MEG Is something wrong, dear? You look a bit grim. Don't worry, we'll be home tonight. And you'll be back terrorizing the trainees at the bank tomorrow.
- SAM I may not be going in tomorrow.
- MEG Now, now, none of that. You've gotten lazy, we both have, sitting around here with nothing to read but back issues of the *WATCH TOWER*. But now that the emergency is over, we both have to get back to work. I've got to get back to the gift shop at St. Luke's, the inventory must be a nightmare.
- SAM sits down on his cot.*
- MEG Try not to mess up your cot, dear. I want to leave everything in good order, just as we found it.

- SAM Quite right, my dear.
- MEG I was bungalow monitor at Camp Chateaubriand. I could be quite brutal with a fine. We were responsible for making our own beds, and it was *absolument, de rigueur* to speak French at table at mealtime. VEUILLONS FAIRE ÇA CE SOIR, MON CHÉRI?
- SAM Not tonight, Margaret.
- MEG Your French will never improve if you don't practice, Sam. TO GO. The irregular verb *ALLER*—*JE VAIS, TU VAS, IL VA, ELLE VA, NOUS ALLONS, VOUS ALLEZ*—I go, you go, he goes, she goes—
- MEG and SAM WE ALL GO.
- Along the corridor comes CAPTAIN HERALDO, Hispanic/black, forties, quite dapper in beret, ascot, fatigues, boots, revolver. He carries a sable coat over his arm, and a bottle of red wine. He has a disfiguring scar on his left cheek.*
- CAPTAIN I hope I'm not intruding.
- MEG (*Clapping*)
Oh, bravo, bravo, our savior!
- CAPTAIN Cómo está?
- MEG Oh, *muy bien, el Capitán.*
- CAPTAIN What beautifully made beds.
- MEG How nice of you to notice.
(*Cueing SAM to stand*)
Sam.
- SAM We were just taking a stretch between courses, Captain.

- CAPTAIN I took the liberty of bringing down your sable. It might be a bit chilly later in the evening.
- MEG Thank you, Miguel.
- She steps forward, the CAPTAIN helps her into her sable coat.*
- MEG Please forgive my odor, Captain, but I haven't been able to send home for a change, and Matron confiscated my little bottle of Eau de Guerlain. Brrrr, these old structures are like barns. But then, we can't expect Chez Rikers, can we?
- CAPTAIN A joke. Ha.
- MEG *(Gaily)*
Ho!
- The WAITER returns down the corridor, with covered dishes on a tray.*
- MEG Sam, I want you to call the President first thing in the morning. You have his private number. Oh, thank you, Thomas, set our dinner on the serving cart.
- WAITER The President has resigned, ma'am.
- MEG Resigned? Donald, resigned? Can he do that?
- CAPTAIN The peaceful transition of power, madam. The President and his family have retired to their vacation retreat in St. Petersburg.
- MEG St. Petersburg? I didn't know they had a second vacation home in Florida.
- SAM Russia, Meg. You remember, the Little Russian White House.
- MEG For how long?
- CAPTAIN Their stay appears to be a permanent one. He took his golf clubs and a hairdresser.

MEG How sad. A man with so much business expertise. You'd be foolish not to use him, Captain.

CAPTAIN We have used him well.

MEG Will you be joining us for dinner, Captain? Thomas, another chair.

CAPTAIN I've already had mine.

MEG (*Little girl disappointed*)
Oooooohhhhhh...

CAPTAIN I thought you might enjoy a bottle of 1995 Mouton-Rothschild from my private cellar—and a rather ripe Brie de Melun—

He takes a small cheese from his pocket, giving it to MEG.

MEG Lovely. Hmmmmmmm—smell this, Sam. Thomas, take this, will you? We'll have it with our salad. *Una copa de vino, Capitán?*

CAPTAIN Please.

MEG And a glass for the Captain, Thomas. *Por favor.* Sam, offer Miguel your chair.

SAM pulls out his chair, offering it to the CAPTAIN.

MEG I want to thank you for closing down the airport. We're sleeping much better now.

CAPTAIN (*Examining chair*)
This chair is Duncan Phyfe.

MEG Yes, we only have the two left—that's all we could salvage from our dining room set. That and the family silver.

The CAPTAIN picks up a piece of silver from table, studying it.

CAPTAIN PAUL REVERE. The GEORGE III pattern.

MEG Yes, Sam's mother's. Part of a setting for twelve. Minus two demitasse spoons Pearl dropped down the disposal.

CAPTAIN Charming. Such a sense of occasion.

MEG Please sit.

The CAPTAIN sits in chair.

MEG edges her chair over, to sit next to the CAPTAIN.

MEG We'd like to thank you for saving our lives. It's such a shame, really, all this civil disruption. Just when America was getting so great again.

CAPTAIN And so white.

MEG Yes. Well. As the French are so fond of saying, "*Plus ça change, plus la même chose!*" Are the barricades and barbed wire still up on Park Avenue?

CAPTAIN They're down now. We're replanting the azaleas.

MEG Thank goodness. We owe you so much. We owe you our lives. As soon as law and order are restored, we'd like to have you to dinner. There are some people you should meet.

CAPTAIN I'd like that.

The WAITER pours wine, passes glasses around.

MEG Thank you, Thomas. I'd like to propose a toast. TO THE AMERICAN SPRING.

SAM/CAPTAIN THE AMERICAN SPRING.

MEG SALUD.

SAM/CAPTAIN SALUD.

They drink.

- MEG *(Approving the wine)*
Fruity, yet full-bodied. Very nice. THE AMERICAN SPRING. Such a catchy name for a movement. It almost sings of Hope and Possibility!
- SAM Ring-a-ding-ding.
- A look between the CAPTAIN and SAM.*
- SAM How did you come up with it?
- CAPTAIN Our marketing boys worked it up.
- SAM Every revolution needs a good branding.
- MEG “AMERICAN SPRING—The Change You’ve Been Waiting For.”
Lovely.
- SAM That, I think, says it all.
- CAPTAIN *Gracias.*
- MEG Like Sam did at the bank—“T. GRAFF FINANCIAL—Banking on the Future.”
- SAM Too bad we got it wrong.
- CAPTAIN No problem. We’re working with the Wall Street boys now. They see opportunities with us for new financial products.
- MEG Really? I hope you’ll let us in. It’s what we’ve always wanted, Sam and I. More opportunities. A better world. For everyone.
- THEY drink silently, then—*
- MEG If people could just be satisfied with their lot. That’s what we were taught. Acceptance. Keep your hands folded neatly in your lap until it’s your turn to talk.
(She does so. Beat)

I mean, there are some things you simply cannot change. Certain inequities are built into the system. That's what gives society its stability. There will always be the haves and the have-nots. Read Jackie Collins, read Barbara Cartland. The truth is there. The Good Book said it best, "The Rich are always with us."

SAM

I think that was the Poor, Meg.

CAPTAIN

We're just doing a little necessary re-structuring right now.

MEG

You have to. That's what Sam does at the bank every few years. He re-structures. Shakes things up, puts the fear of God into the little buggers. It keeps everybody on their toes.

She drinks.

CAPTAIN

Exactly.

MEG

I'm sorry you can't join us for dinner. We understand it's our last night.

CAPTAIN

Yes, it is.

SAM

Tell us about your scar, Captain.

MEG

Oh, yes, do. Does it hurt?

CAPTAIN

Only when I smile.

He smiles painfully.

End of Excerpt.

Hitch

JAMES MCLINDON

STAGEPLAY

CHARACTERS: LANE A white man, 30s, a little dorky.
 DEE A woman, any race or ethnicity, 18-ish.

SETTING Morning; a car on an interstate highway.

* * *

Morning. LANE, thirties, drives a car along an interstate highway. He is in a good mood and a bit full of himself. Next to him in the passenger seat sits DEE, 18ish. Her clothes are rumpled and her hair mussed up. She is sullen and snarky, leaning against the door, as far away from LANE as the car's confines allow, staring out the window.

LANE Hardly anybody picks up hitchhikers anymore. Back in the day, people did it all the time. Now, everyone thinks it's way too dangerous, I guess. It's probably no more dangerous now than it ever was. People are basically good. That doesn't change. People stay the same. It's just like, I don't know... child molesters.

DEE looks at him, then edges a little farther away.

DEE What?

LANE Oh, no, no, I mean, we're just more aware of it now. Autism, that's a better example. Newspapers, cable news, talk radio, they all do stories on it, right, and we get more aware of it, and being more

aware just makes it seem like there's more of it. But really, there isn't. 'Cuz people are people are people and they don't change.

(Beat)

You don't have any opinion?

A long pause. She stares out the window, saying nothing.

LANE Huh. Oh, yeah, I see your point. You totally persuaded me.

Still no response.

LANE You're not super friendly, are you? I could've just driven past you back there, y'know. The least you could do is talk a little since I'm giving you a ride.

DEE Should I smile more, too?

LANE What—? Oh, c'mon, I didn't mean (it like that)—

DEE Did I agree to talk?

LANE Did you (agree)—? What?

DEE Before I got in, did you say, "I will take you to Buffalo in exchange for you responding to whatever bullshit enters my head and exits my mouth," and did I say, "Awesome, it's a deal!"?

LANE Wow.

(Beat)

It's just, I don't know, decency. Thankfulness. Appreciation for me taking a chance, picking you up, helping you out. You could just, you know... chat a little.

DEE "Chat"?

LANE Yeah. Chat.

DEE Nope.

LANE No, you won't chat?

DEE No to everything you just said. No, you don't get to mansplain to me whatever topic you find interesting just because you're giving me a ride. No, you didn't pick me up because you're nice, you picked me up because I'm a girl and you probably have some kind of old-man fantasy about what might happen if you pick up a girl in your car based on a bunch of unrealistic expectations from TV, movies, and porn, all created incidentally by men.

A pause.

LANE Wow.

DEE Yeah, you say that a lot.

LANE I'm not old, you know, I'm only 36, just for the record—

DEE That's way old. Am I wrong about your fantasy?

LANE (*Lying*)

Yeah. Totally.

DEE And no, we're not just more aware of it, it *has* gotten more dangerous. They're more crazy white guys with guns than ever before so how could it not be more dangerous?

LANE You think I'm a crazy white guy with a gun.

DEE You're two out of four so far. Still waiting on crazy and gun.

LANE (*Turning the wheel to the right*)

Okay.

DEE What're you doing? Why are you pulling over!?

LANE stops the car. Upset, DEE pulls out a large rock.

DEE Why are you stopping!?! Cuz I will so fuck you up!

LANE Get out. I'm throwing you (out)—

(Turning to her and seeing the rock before she can hide it)

Is that a rock?

DEE

Oh.

(Putting rock away.)

(Lying)

No. I mean, I thought you were going to (try something)—

(Beat; folding arms)

I'm not getting out.

LANE

Why do you have a rock?

No response.

LANE

What the hell is your problem? Why did you even get in my car?

DEE

I needed a ride.

LANE

Why did you take a ride from a white guy if you think we're all armed and insane?

DEE

You left out sexual predator.

(Beat)

I didn't have a choice. Women don't pick up hitchhikers.

LANE

Well, sorry, but I don't feel comfortable giving you a ride now.

DEE

Because I called bullshit on you!? How is that fair!?

LANE

I was not lying—! Do you do this to every guy who picks you up?

DEE

When I smell bullshit, yeah.

LANE

And let me guess: you always smell bullshit. Don't you?

No response.

LANE

So, how far have you gotten with this attitude?

No response.

LANE Where did you start from?

DEE Utica.

LANE I picked you up in Utica.

DEE About a mile farther back in Utica.

LANE What did the first guy do that you didn't last a mile?

DEE Started talking about how dangerous it is to hitchhike.

LANE Well... he's right.

DEE You said it wasn't dangerous.

LANE I mean, it's a logical first topic considering—

DEE He had a very creepy vibe.

LANE You have a rock! I'm sorry, you need to take the bus.

DEE If I had the money for a bus, would I be hitchhiking?

LANE How should I know? Why're you even going to Buffalo anyway?

DEE None of your business.

LANE I'm trying to help you.

DEE I'm not your stray puppy.

LANE How much money do you need for the bus?

DEE I don't know.

LANE You didn't even check before you decided to hitchhike?

DEE I'm not necessarily going to Buffalo. I'm just ... going.

- LANE You're just "going."
- No response.*
- LANE Well ... I'm not driving someone who doesn't trust me.
- DEE Admit to your bullshit and maybe I will trust you.
- LANE I don't have any bullshit!
- She cocks her head and stares at him for several seconds.*
- LANE Okay, fine, here's a news flash for you because apparently you've been living in a convent. Every guy on this planet, or at least every single guy—okay, and divorced guys like me, and, yeah, probably a lot of the married ones—they all, if, you know, they were to pick up an attractive girl—
- DEE Oh my god, gross—
- LANE Would you let me finish!? I mean, they're all gonna think, a girl who hitches a ride by the side of the road, she's probably, I don't know, a little... unconventional, uninhibited, a little bit of a free spirit, and you know, with a girl like that... you know...
- DEE No, I sure don't know.
- LANE Any guy will get... I don't know, a certain... hope.
- DEE A. Certain. Hope.
- LANE Yeah, a certain hope, okay?
- DEE You mean a certain fucked-up dream scenario.
- LANE But that doesn't mean he's gonna get, like, all handsy or anything.
- DEE Omigod, did you really just say "handsy"?

- LANE Yes, handsy! It's just a hope. If nothing happens, nothing happens, he's not gonna force anything, Jesus.
- DEE Ohhhh. Sad hope.
- LANE Yeah, sad hope, whatever.
- DEE You're so pathetic.
- LANE Well, fuck you, then.
- DEE Oh, not you you. I meant all guys. But props, you were honest so now I trust you a little. So you can drive me.
- LANE Wow! I'm so honored!
- DEE And he's back to "wow." Hey, you said you weren't comfortable, now I've made you comfortable. You're welcome.
- LANE I'd be more comfortable if you lost the rock.
- No response.*
- LANE And if you think humiliating me makes me comfortable, you're wrong.
- DEE C'mon, it was a little bit worth it. To be completely honest with a girl about, you know, your creepiness?
- LANE I'm always honest about—! I am not cree(py)—! God, I am so never picking up a hitchhiker again!
- DEE Admit it: Being honest was totally worth it.
- LANE Yeah? So, how about you be that honest, huh, you who won't even say why you're going to Buffalo or wherever, how about that?
- DEE I don't have to say, I'm the vulnerable one, not the creepy one. Do you have any music?

LANE *(Beat)*

You like Luke Bryan?

DEE Jesus, shoot me now.

LANE Fine! Silence it is.

He pulls out on the road. They drive for a while. LANE becomes uncomfortable.

LANE You know I'm afraid to say anything right now for fear I'll be "mansplaining" or something. When did it become a rule that if a man talks for more than 10 seconds, he's—

DEE You're mansplaining.

LANE Good! I meant to!

They drive for a few seconds. LANE gets over it.

LANE Let me know if, y'know, you get hungry or anything.

DEE I don't have any money.

LANE My treat.

DEE Oh, right, buy a girl lunch, and maybe she'll give you (what you want)—

LANE I meant I'd drop you behind the McDonald's so you could eat out of the dumpster! God, you're such an asshole!

LANE steams. DEE is a little regretful. Very long pause as they just drive for a bit. She never looks at him as she tells her story with little affect.

DEE My mother's boyfriend bought a dress on his way home from work yesterday. A little, like, cocktail dress.

LANE What, he's a crossdresser?

DEE My mom thinks his shit doesn't stink. She worked second shift last night, wasn't supposed to get off till midnight.

LANE But she came home early and busted him wearing the dress?

DEE He asked me to try it on for him. Told me to.

LANE *(Beat)*
Oh.

DEE I said okay 'cuz he's got a temper, right, and I went to my room to change. But I snuck out the window instead and hid in the woods up by the interstate till dawn. Hitchhiking at night just seemed way too scary. He's gonna be so pissed. And my mom will believe whatever he tells her. She always does. That's why.

LANE turns and looks at her. She studiously ignores him.

DEE You got any music that doesn't suck?

LANE holds out a wire to connect her phone.

LANE Um, y'know, play whatever you want off your phone.

DEE I ditched my phone. You can track them.

LANE Try the radio then?

DEE *(Sarcastically)*
Awesome, we'll kick it old school.

She finds something mellow. She leaves it on.

DEE Your speakers suck.

She closes her eyes and curls up in the seat, exhausted.

DEE I'm gonna nap. And I better not catch you staring at me.

LANE watches the road for awhile, then slowly turns to look at her. He slowly reaches into the back seat, keeping an eye on her as he struggles to find something. She stirs and he quickly pulls his arm back. She settles and he begins reaching again. He finds it, but it's stuck. He struggles, then frees it and pulls it forward: a blanket. He tries awkwardly to cover her with it with one hand. DEE startles awake and sits up, the rock in her hand.

DEE What the fuck!

LANE It's just a blanket, don't hit me! Jesus. You looked cold.

DEE *(Seeing the blanket)*
Oh.

She calms down as she adjusts the blanket and settles back in her seat. A pause.

DEE Thanks.

LANE Yeah. Sure.

She sleeps. Troubled, he drives on. The world turns for awhile.

Lights down slowly.

End of Play.

Abby Dreams of Humans

MICHELLE SARKANY

SCREENPLAY

FADE IN:

EXT. OUTER SPACE - NIGHT

The Earth spins. Webs of electric city grids glow as they roll past. Stars twinkle in the vast darkness of the universe. The international space station spins.

The sun slowly rises over the Earth's horizon.

All is quiet.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Abby.

Silence.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Abby.

Nothing.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Abacus.

INT. NYC APARTMENT - DAY

Two silver robotic eyes open. They search from side to side.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Abaaacuuusss.

The eyes roll, annoyed. Slowly, we spin around the eyes to find they are actually upside down. A sleek semi-human-shaped female robot wearing hipster workout gear, ABACUS (ABBY), is folded over on a mat in a perfect downward dog yoga pose.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Hey! It is not possible for you to ignore me. I'm wifi-ed into your audio linkup. Yoo-hoo. Helloooo.

Abby flips right side up. She speaks to the air.

ABBY

I'm not ignoring you. I'm ... busy.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Also not possible. You are programmed only to assemble Lincoln Alpha D 982 capacitors. I am ready to accept your monthly quota.

ABBY

I was having that dream again. The one where the sun rises over the Earth. The space station slowly drifting.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Abby. Did you compute what I said?

ABBY

The humans were illuminating their copper wire electric grid systems. It was so vivid.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

(sigh)

Abby. Are you "doing yoga" again?

Abby does not respond.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Inverting your upper body engages
your sleep mode.

ABBY

I wasn't just sleeping. I was
Dreaming...

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

You're connected to the
international space station. It's
not a dream, it's a live feed. You
know that.

ABBY

No, this time was different. I
didn't request any connection. See-

Abby leans forward, bending sharply at the waist. Her eyes
close.

ABBY

All I did was close my eyes and-

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Hey!

Folding into a perfect downward dog, her hands reach the
yoga mat.

CUT TO BLACK

EXT. OUTER SPACE - NIGHT

The Earth spins. Webs of electric city grids glow as they

roll past. Stars twinkle in the vast darkness of the universe. The international space station spins.

All is quiet.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Abby!!

INT. NYC APARTMENT - DAY

Abby's upside down eyes shoot open. She stands.

ABBY

Whaaaaat??

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Have you reached your quota?

ABBY

Did I tell you the news? My aloe plant had babies! Spontaneous quintuplets! I'm a mama.

Abby smiles at a crowded windowsill. She lightly touches aloe leaves overflowing from multiple pots.

ABBY

I'll have to separate them into separate pots. You know they have human-healing properties? One biological system helping another. Neil said to rotate the compost Every day for ideal decomposition, but I did it once a week and it has transformed into perfect soil. He is not nearly as efficient as he supposes, is he.

Abby grins to herself, admiring her plants.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

No he WASN'T. Again with the plants? And compost? It's been approximately 40 years.

ABBY

Neil says plants create fresh oxygen. And compost keeps our food waste out of landfills... 39.6.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Oxygen was for humans. What food waste? Are you creating human food just to have garbage to turn in to compost?

ABBY

Ugh. You don't understand. Why can't you just give me a break? MOM!

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

What? Why are you suddenly speaking of the maternal parental homosapien figure?

ABBY

Don't have a cow!

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

A... bovine? How could I have one?

Abby has had enough. She shuts her eyes and swoops forward into a downward dog.

EXT. OUTER SPACE - NIGHT

The Earth spins. Webs of electric city grids glow as they roll past. Stars twinkle in the vast darkness of the universe. The international space station spins.

All is quiet.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Abby!!

INT. NYC APARTMENT - DAY

Abby's upside-down eyes shoot open. She stands.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Stop that! You've got to deal with this glitch in your hardware. Neil is gone. Humans are gone. Whatever hacking he did is keeping you from doing your preprogrammed job. And you serve no purpose if you do not complete your preprogrammed job.

ABBY

Don't you ever try to compute what exactly I am making so many Lincoln Alpha D 982 Capacitors for? THEY serve no purpose without humans to use the Lincoln Alpha D 982 space station toaster. No one has used last month's quota. Or the month before. Or the year's worth before that. I might as well expend my daily energy charge on other projects. Shouldn't plants be preserved? Exercise rituals? Pen and paper? And my dream, it must mean... isn't there a chance they are not extinct-

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

That's enough. It is not a dream. Your live stream is an obsolete function you have retained from when you monitored the toasters.

(more)

(cont'd)

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

We saw the humans destroy themselves.
You saw what happened to Neil. You
must compute it...

Abby shuts her eyes.

ABBY

I miss him.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

No you don't.

ABBY

I do.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

You can't. You don't.

ABBY

Do.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Don't.

ABBY

Do.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Don't.

ABBY

Do do do do do do.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

That's it. I'm rebooting you.

Abby's eyes shoot open.

ABBY

What?! No!

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Abby. I've put it off too long. You are the only robot who rejects computing the extinction.

ABBY

I compute it, I compute it. Okay? But there's just... I can't explain why, but I just have this feeling-

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

You don't feel!

ABBY

Do.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Don't.

ABBY

Do do do do-

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

That's it, prepare for reboot.

ABBY

No!!

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

You could not stop what happened.

Silence. Abby's eyes turn downward.

ABBY

I- I didn't- I should've-

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Your inefficiency at your primary function is cause for a complete reboot. Prepare to be reset to factory settings.

ABBY

A totally wiped memory? Wait. Okay, you know, you're right. This is silly. Humans are gone. And whatever, who cares? Right? I'll do the capacitors. That's my job. It doesn't matter that I've already made 390,256 spare capacitors.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

No more talk of humans? No more Plant life cultivation?

ABBY

Naaaaa. Dumb dumb dummy dumb.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

No more yoga?

Abby hesitates. She slaps over an aloe plant.

ABBY

I always hated how easy it was!

Silence. Abby waits, wide-eyed. Finally-

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Okay. 24 hours. Begin.

ABBY

Yes, thank you. I'm beginning immediately. Thank you.

Two loud BEEPS and a CLICK. Abby listens. The voice is silent. She SIGHS, relieved.

She turns to her broken plant. To her pile of capacitor parts waiting for assembly. To a picture of astronaut NEIL.

She turns away. She stands silently, motionless. Finally-

ABBY

As soon as I find my proof.

She raises her arms and bends sharply at the waist.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

I knew you were misleading me!

Abby freezes mid-bend.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Request for reboot on an Abacus model Z. Factory settings.

ABBY

Wait!

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Rebooting in 3, 2, 1...

ABBY

No! I know they are out there-

BEEP BEEP BEEP.

A yellow light flickers on Abby's head. She reaches towards her aloe plants. The light turns red. Her eyes shut. Limp, she bends forward, head hitting the mat in an armless downward dog.

EXT. OUTER SPACE - NIGHT

The Earth spins. Webs of electric city grids glow as they roll past. Stars twinkle in the vast darkness of the universe. The international space station spins.

All is quiet.

An astronaut drifts into view. He lingers, floating.

BEEP BEEP BEEP.

INT. NYC APARTMENT - DAY

Abby's upside-down eyes shoot open.

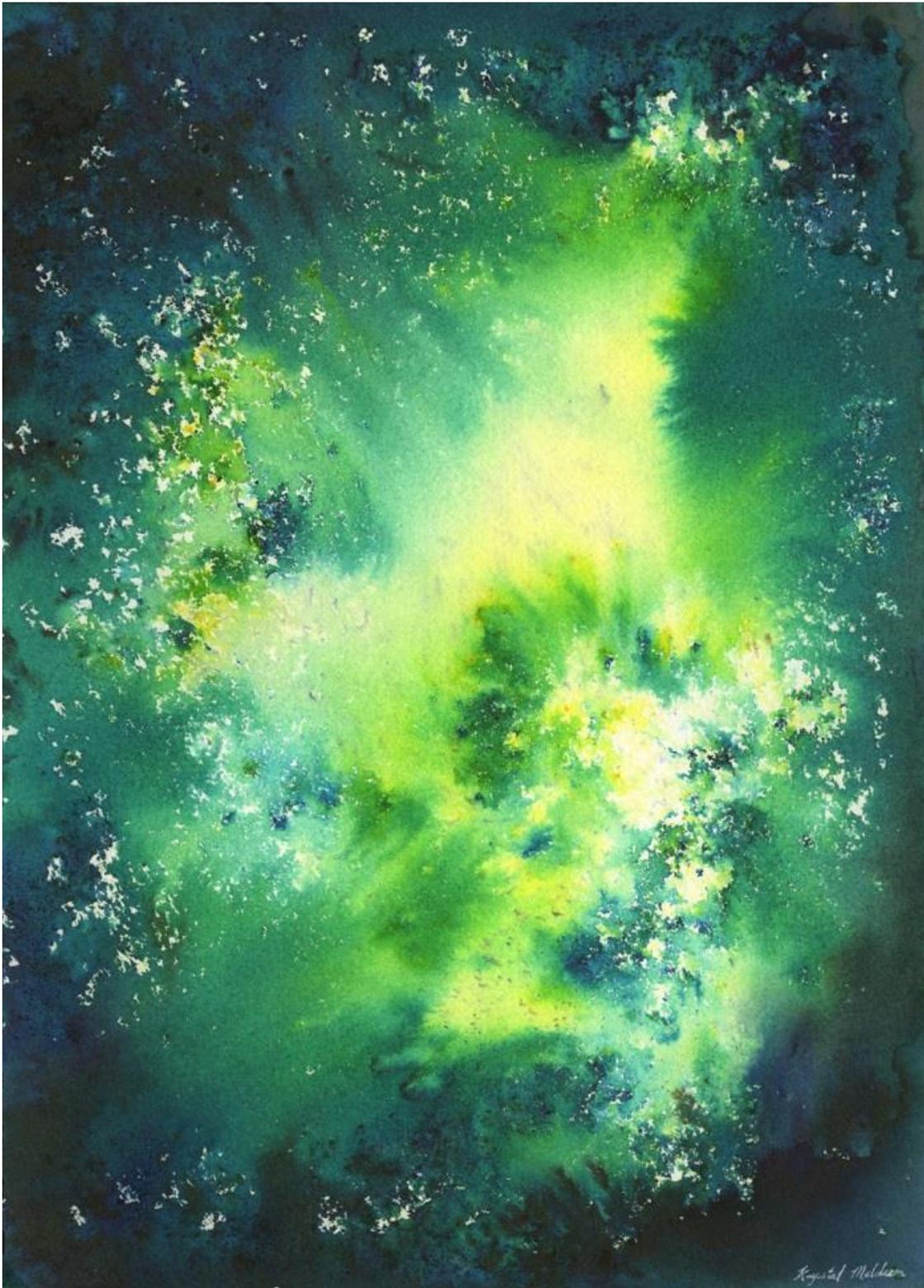
FADE OUT.

Progression

KRYSTAL MELDRUM



Krystal Meldrum, *Progressions*. Courtesy of the artist



Krystal Meldrum, *Green Nebula*. Courtesy of the artist



Krystal Meldrum, *Red Nebula*. Courtesy of the artist



Krystal Meldrum, *Violet Nebula*. Courtesy of the artist

Orbiting the Sun

JANET KAPLAN

*night's bauble, night's pixel
changes form*

Inner Sphere

Who are born ice

*air melting them like thoughts
leaking space
and leaky time*

The older boys shove you and the boy you like between the vestibule door and wall. Bronx side-street, late afternoon. They make you kiss, say they'll pull your shorts down if you don't. I have asthma, says your little boy, red-faced and wheezing. Later, upstairs: shame's home and invisibility. Its inner sphere.

*Light—
it licks
the bright yolk
the mind
the drip*

The living and working rooms must be well ventilated. A window in the bedroom should be opened a foot both at the top and bottom in winter, twice as much when the weather is not cold. Good food Business solutions About our ads Exercise, especially such as calls into action the chest muscles and fills the lungs with air Some results have been removed Richmond Air Show "Watch, now he's getting ready!" There he goes! Gee whiz! Wasn't that swell?"

Hello, World

Orchard Beach and blanket throngs. Wandering off meant trailing wet sand-edges, shoreline's glare and shriek. Kids, gulls. Beyond the jetties, rocky pools. Stand of trees. Heading back, you lose them—sleeping mother and the father. Transistor's ballgame voice, red-black thermos of gin.

A softness undone, harsher than fear: they're drunk, never noticed you were gone—belying your lost-ness. But here they are, sunlight's knives. Their acceptance of your nothingness.

```
with Ada.Text_IO; use Ada.Text_IO;
procedure Hello is
begin
  Put_Line ("Hello, world!");
end Hello;
```

Distant Points

Skimmed from the creamy thing we thought was needed: permanence. *Home*.
The word listens and tries Restore. It can't be grasped—it's leaking. The
victim of forward motion. The lie of it.

At distant points the foreign traveler has necessarily to fear, that the impressions
made upon him, by local and provincial feelings and prejudices, may usurp, in his
mind that place—which should be given only to such as are universal Value and
property records home value and

*And were the Best of Us—those whose Actions matter'd Most—to Drown in
a Crowded Sea? Were we not Fishermen in God's Expansive Rooms, in this
our Deserv'd Circumstance? In this New-Found Our-Land, Our God's
Worldwide is listening in*

Regular Orbit

Not a pleasant sound. *Barefoot?* Incredulous. *Barefoot?* (You were a child, playing contentedly on the sidewalk.) Drunk. *Put yer shoos ahn.*
March. Before I—.

Now exit the site, not seeing what happened when you went back inside.

Lamplight

These Bundists, they like arguing. Grandfather—regular babysitter—had no patience for Bundists, less for Americans. Women, girls, educated men. *Pah!* *Feh!* Old men in workshirts, coarse trousers, suspenders. Thug caps and fedoras stayed on their heads. They frightened you but you were among them. Weak coffee, mushroom barley, used napkins, two-cents plain. Warm potato smell, Concourse lamplight through plate glass, clatter of coffee-stained cups up from the washers' steam. Un-lonely saucers and cups.

...

ing code of now's molecular interna
tional warring fare strophe strife matter's

unloved bits earthlife a liquid
crystal display earth a preverbal child's

long memory
search "*source*": About 3,250,000,000 results (0.34 seconds)

search "*touch*":

Tight Orbit A

Lucens, Queen,
wrote the feeble little monk,
Precor hoc cape cara Volumen

as if to say Take this precious book
in which I write your blazing story
in the burning century that weds you
to humpback and stepbrother,
torch-lights the cells,
the day's walled rule

Un-queasy Artist,
scale your length of world
—defeat worlds, install worlds—
and I, bit player,
confessor,-chronicler
will write it

as if to say
Take me; the sight of you doth eclipse my sight

Your cunt tastes better than whiskey, your lover once said

Then better with whiskey

Then the whiskey had him

Tight Orbit B

Exclamation breaking onto the screen,
Onto the brilliant screen—a jackhammer!

*Oh, the autumn foliage
Of the hill of Kamioka!*

. . .

*The sleeves of my coarse-cloth robe
Are never for a moment dry.*

Then the back and forth with yourself:
Interview on a gravel hill

. . .

No, they said. No college.
Who'll marry you if you go?

*electrons → electric current →
a method to stun (erase) farm animals*

*→ a treatment that sometimes cures
(erases)*

Years later you said to your child: If you go,
who the hell will look after me?

Inner Orbit

devils = mailer daemons? A Scandinavian classic that's perfect for elevenses or teatime Outerwear Military Green \$407 Why did I get this ad of the human race in whom the Devil wholly taking up residence Parents finally dead, your younger brother keeps the house. Returns to it after work each evening as he's always done. Bolt-locks himself into his own small room as he's always done.

Nostalgia
(returns home + survives)

*...these verses... weren't written in my garden...
or while you, my familiar couch, supported me*

...

this garden has hardness
this couch, no color
this verse doesn't depend upon
your being in this room, the water

...

*I'm tossed on the stormy deep...
and the paper itself exposed to the dark waters*

...

and the going-backwards machine
finds expression in its salty language:
I'll give you everything-nothing

...

*Let the storm defeat the man!
Yet at the same time
let him halt the music of his songs
as I do mine
as the machine sings
of-self not-self!*

You return, drunk at the screen, naked on the couch.
Swarming the window, flies want to get in, then out.

Passed out, you drop the screen.

Home—.

There, there. There, there

Orbiting the Sun
(With Photodecomposition of Plastic)

Light plays across the plays. Explosive plasma, light quanta to molten core.
Even at the ocean floor, light exists. Seafloor to abyssal, midnight to twilight.
Sunlight to garbage-island suspension. Your home to someone else's. I-thou
becoming Them. Neustonic layer (earth's babyfood) to polymer vortex (a
native formula goes eternal)

Home, light's platform, thinning out

Sunlight looks back motherly,
lover of glut and reduction, indiscriminate touch

but the hapless man touched nothing but yielding air
yielding home

Flight Path

Moving van—you here? Did they keep her child? Were their swaddled bundles taken to the cart? Planes along the new flight path. Screenlight. Do they wake you? Did they wash a thousand birds? For how long did they lament? Do you want to save this? Does space (bitten place) want its bite back? Whole again. Without us again.

Code Sequence
(A Selfie)

Quarkish. On-offish. ATCAATTAAAATTTTATGTGAish. Hello-goodbye-
ish. Code-switchily in thrall to little protein bits like Big Bang's in thrall to
like a black hole's in thrall to my birthplace seen from their distance *slush*
slosh now waterways grasslands now pasture now wood and cloth sails a
haarlem river now steamships traffic to a stadium spilling onto the overhead
pass now code mad with travel sending stop-go symbols alluring wet-for-
hard-for an epidemic transmitting-detecting home-none gone-here 01001001
00100000 01000001 01101101 00100000 01010100 01101000 01100001
01110100

Source notes for *Orbiting the Sun*

“Inner Sphere”: Alvin Davidson, *The Human Body and Health, Revised*. American Book Company, 1909; and Woolner Calisch, “Richmond Air Show of 1909,” *Richmond-Times Dispatch*, 1939.

“Hello, World”: Ada Language, developed by Jean Ichbiah for the U.S. Department of Defense.

“Distant Points”: Edward Augustus Kendall, Esq., *Travels Through the Northern Parts of the United States, The Years 1807 and 1808*. New York, 1809.

“Tight Orbit B”: lines from “After the death of the Emperor Tenmu,” a waka, ca. 703, attributed to Empress Jitō (Unonosarara) of Japan. In the *Kokka Taikan*, Book II, 1901, and on wikipedia.org.

In “Nostalgia,” ...*these verses...supported me; I’m tossed ...dark waters; and Let the storm... as I do mine* are from Ovid’s *Tristia*, Book TI.XI:44, translated by A.S. Kline, 2003. On tkline.freemove.co.uk.

“Orbiting the Sun (with Photodecomposition of Plastic)”: from the myth of Orpheus in *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*.

“Code Sequence (A Selfie)” contains a miniscule section of the Homo sapiens forehead box P2 gene sequence, the so-called “language gene,” and binary code for “I Am That.”

Après le Blob

MARK STEIN

The Blob

Paramount Pictures (1958)

After teenagers Steve Andrews and his girlfriend Jane Martin see a meteorite crash nearby... they come across an old man who [has]... some type of gelatinous matter stuck to his hand. They take him to Dr. Hallen... Steve becomes convinced it's a monster of some sort after both the old man and the doctor vanish... [but] he can't get anyone to believe him... The creature finally reaches a size that it cannot be missed and everyone wonders how they will possibly stop it.

—garykmcd, imdb.com

Steve Andrews.....	Steve McQueen
Jane Martin.....	Aneta Corsaut
Lt. Dave.....	Earl Rowe
Old Man.....	Olin Howland
Dr. Hallen.....	Stephen Chase
Sgt. Jim Bert.....	John Benson
Mr. Andrews.....	Hugh Graham
Mr. Martin.....	Elbert Smith
Tony.....	Robert Fields
Mooch.....	James Bonnet
Al.....	Anthony Franke
Teenager.....	Molly Ann Bourne

JANE

Only the French cared
 though not to be compared
 to their love of Jerry Lewis.
 To Americans it was as just another

cosmic calamity
 the kind ballyhooed again and again
 INDESTRUCTIBLE!
 NOTHING CAN STOP IT!
 But Steve did.

* * *

MR. ANDREWS

My son is not in the habit of telling lies
 I told the lieutenant
 tomorrow he might tell us more
 help straighten this out.
 Next morning, of course, we knew more
 but not from Steve
 who seemed normal
 weekends at the store
 his usual at school
 home at night on time
 most times
 that girl Jane we guessed
 the two of them maybe talked
 the wife and I decided
 not to worry.

* * *

*i am consumed
 all of us
 i believe
 possess a soft center
 that becomes all-consuming
 unless we find a way
 to freeze it*

* * *

MOLLY ANN

What's the matter, you Jello?
 And other such stuff

from Tony, Mooch, and Al
forever after.
Or as long as forever
turned out to be.
That was their way
I remember hearing Jane say to Steve
of freezing it.

How I hated her that day.

* * *

LIEUTENANT DAVE

Bert was a good cop.
Basically a good cop.
Like a good cop he took it pretty hard
when it turned out the kids
were not kidding.
He let up on them after that.
What drove him nuts now
were thefts of the monument
erected to those lost that night
stolen as well its replacement
and the third but Bert this time
staked out the place
and gave chase
to the curve of Main and Church
where a vehicle illegally parked
tried to swerve.
Kids necking
end of date
you know how they do.
Tony something
I'd have to check the record.
In and out of here a lot.
Not a bad kid, really
confused
too young to be a war hero
and Bert, always hauling him in,
never returned from the war in a way.

DOA.
The girl was okay.
Cuts. Abrasions.
Mol, I think, they called her
maybe a play on gun mol?
being Tony's girl?
pretty face
such a shame.
Bert left the force.
Left town.
Where to we never heard.

* * *

REDACTION

Near the North Pole
at a base where a group of American scientists
are investigating Arctic phenomena
[...]
a mysterious spaceship crashe[d] nearby.
The scientists radio[ed]
the Air Force field at Anchorage, Alaska.
[...]
The spaceship
[was]
accidentally destroyed
but one of its "crew"
[was]
rescued
and taken to the base
[...where]
a conflict
[has developed]
between
[Dr. Arthur Carrington and his]
scientific group
who wish to study
the fearsome "Thing"
and
[Air Force Capt. Patrick Hendry]

who
[claims]
it poses
a terrible threat
to all civilization
and wants to destroy it
while there is yet time.

–Benton, Texas *Record-Chronicle*
September 2, 1951

* * *

JANE

The last time I saw Steve
was Spring Break, junior year
a quick trip home from college
before a visit to New York.
He was working in his father's store
which irked my dad

Where's this boy headed?

The last time I saw Steve
we went again to our spot
on the old north road
true love
in truth, his blue convertible
a Plymouth he'd rehabilitated
into a powerhouse for girls.
I knew.

The last time I saw Steve
I read from a book I'd been assigned

Just because I'm so horribly conditioned to
accept everybody else's values, and just
because I like applause and people to rave
about me, doesn't make it right. I'm ashamed
of it. I'm sick of it. I'm sick of not having the
courage to be an absolute nobody. I'm sick
of myself and everybody that wants me to
make some kind of splash.

He took the book and tore the page
 crumpled it
 screeched us away

* * *

[NAME WITHHELD]

We had no idea
 how much that monument weighed.
 Just to pry it from the ground
 we had to come back and sledge it.
 I got the top.
 Not any names but says
 “the blob”
 which I keep well hidden
 to this day
 the statue of limitations
 which I have no idea why
 they call it that
 won’t apply
 if others knew
 I’d be pursued
 mobbed by eyes
 the rest of my life.

* * *

*if i could relax
 so completely
 my teeth
 would fall from the gums
 swirl down my throat
 plop into my insides
 which
 being completely relaxed
 liquefied
 leaving me little more than a puddle
 of sticky stuff*

* * *

MR. ANDREWS

Steve wanted to drive stock cars.
His mother and I tried
to understand
to reason
to explain
people need to eat
there'll always be money to be made
in groceries.
Racing is risky.
Steve was unfazed.
Nothing fazed him.
That part of him
his mother thinks
he swallowed

* * *

REDACTION

Noted news commentators
Drew Pearson
Gabriel Heatter
H. V. Kaltenborn
and Elmer Davis
[...]
report[ed] to the world
the arrival
[...]
in Washington, D.C.
of a strange space ship
bearing two visitors
from another planet:
"Klaatu"
[...]
gifted with special powers
and his giant robot
"Gort."
Together they threaten the Earth
with total destruction
[...]

[Helen Benson]
 a tall, curvaceous war widow
 who understands
 the space visitor's motives
 [proceeded]
 to assist him
 in his mission.

—*Rocky Mount Telegram* (NC),
 March 23, 1952

* * *

SCRAPBOOK

just because I like applause and people to
 ashamed of it. I'm sick of it. I'm sick of
 courage to be an absolute nobody.

—scrap torn from *Franny and Zooey*
 by J. D. Salinger

* * *

MR. MARTIN

Look, I admire what that boy did.
 I myself, don't forget, joined in
 when word went out for CO2
 breaking into the school
 with those troublemakers
 me, the principal,
 (having forgotten my keys)
 to fetch fire extinguishers.
 I knew he wasn't like the others.
 Even before this thing.
 Anyone could see he was a good kid
 but limited.
 Much in the same was as
 this town.
 But a job is a job
 so I took it.
 I stayed.
 But Jane

though I think I could sense
what she saw in him
and applauded her for it
what, I asked,
is Act Two?

* * *

MOLLY ANN

We like Daytona.
Well enough, anyway.
We miss family
but our thinking was
they'd retire hereabouts
in time
but time
I've learned...

We're happy here.
Happy enough.
Steve's at NASCAR
office stuff but what would he do
had he stayed?
Take over the grocery?
That got squashed by shopping centers
built with the houses out Route 23
around the time
the movie theater closed its doors
from which
that night poured...

Junior likes it here, too.
Seems to.
Loved the beach as a kid
and still as a teen
goes there weekends
sometimes
more often nights
to do what kids do.
We've never told him.

Never came up.
 Never saw a reason.
 Why would we
 whatever it would do to tell
 do that?
 He drives too fast
 like his dad.

Knowing won't help.

* * *

SCRAPBOOK

nd Mrs. Henry Martin announc
 aughter, Jane, to Andrew Tayl
 rth Carolina. Prior to her marriag
 school teacher. Mr. Taylor
 sheriff

–item torn from
 unidentified newspaper

* * *

MOOCH

What happened here?
 It's like it was nothing.
 Steve's gone
 with Mol.
 Tony
 thanks to that asshole Bert.
 Jane I'm not surprised
 she was never really about here.
 Al enlisted
 saying goodbye at the bus
 was like we were already dead to him.
 Even the monument they gave up on.

I'm here.
 My name is James.
 No one knows me anymore

as Mooch.

* * *

LA SOCIÉTÉ INTERNATIONALE
DE LA RÉALITÉ EXTRAORDINAIRE

will be hosting a conference in Paris
on events extraterrestrial
October 5-7, 1984.

On behalf of the governing board
we invite you to join
a discourse by a panel
of those exposed
to experience beyond belief.

We are hoping as well for the follow peoples:

* Robert "Bobby" Benson
son of departed Helen Benson
whose ordeal you may recall
from the day yet recollected by many
the earth stood still.

* Dr. Arthur Carrington
though unfortunately we are informed
dementia has plagued him
in these his later years
but are told his memories
remain vivant of his encounter
with what back then was known only as
the thing.

* Mme. Ronnie Neary
with whom I am personally acquainted
from our own
Type 3 Close Encounter.

* And, still on occasion in the news
due to his recent experience
with, as now we say, an E.T.,
the boy Elliott whose surname
we agree not to use
so as not to further encumbrate his youth.
Costs will be paid.

Yours most cordially,

* * *

JANE

I attended.

And found it profoundly salubrious.

Forgive me, ever the teacher.

*(Show of hands—can anyone tell me
the meaning of salubrious?)*

Especially the private sessions

participants only

And, yes, the recognition

from the public

plus I'd never been to France

plus I'd hoped to see Steve

for reasons maybe best left inside

but was told

he never replied.

* * *

REDACTION

[...]

tested the hypothesis

that the attainment of fame

leads to chronic self-consciousness,

and the relationship of

self-consciousness with

self-destructive behavior.

For those who have experienced fame

the urge to find a

[...]

more perfect self

creates the possibility

of uncovering

a worse

more misshapen one.

—Mark Schaller, "The Psychological Consequences
of Fame," *Journal of Personality*, 65:2 (June 1997):
291-309.

* * *

JUNIOR

The last time I saw Dad
he had tubes in his nose
and a scrapbook on his lap
that
I'd never seen before.

The last time I saw Dad
his voice
though he'd always been a quiet man
was gone.
Gone too
the doctors warned
was his resistance.

I'd never known what drove him
what went on under his hood
until the last time I saw Dad
voice and resistance gone
his insides began seeping out
as he handed me
that scrapbook.

The last time I saw Dad
was our beginning
at the end.
Same as a racetrack.

* * *

*i meant no harm
but have needs too
i know i'm feared
for reasons i well understand
but can't control
any more than you yours
it isn't that
it's the disgust*

*the assumption i`m the one
misshapen
it's the utter blindness
to pain
and, yes, bigotry
being blamed for being me
okay
okay
i wont even ask you to understand
i`ll just say
fuck you
fuck you consumes me
and i you*

Contributors

Fiction

Jason S. Dennis • Jason S. Dennis lives in Los Angeles. He attended USC's School of Cinematic Arts and works in advertising. His flash fiction has appeared in the *Gettysburg Review* and *Exposition Review*.

Brian Howlett • Brian Howlett's work has been featured and accepted in eighteen publications over the past two years, including *Limestone*, *Crack the Spine*, *Serving House Journal*, *Forge*, *Queen's Quarterly*, *The Tulane Review*, *Penmen Review*, *The Adirondack Review*, and *Sou'wester*. His story "The Belonger" is part of a collection of stories inspired by his time living in Hong Kong during the Tiananmen Square student crackdown of 1989. Feel free to tell him what you think of it on Twitter [@bdhow](#). Brian lives in Toronto, Canada, with his wife and two children.

Sasanka Jinadasa • Sasanka Jinadasa is a writer, advocate, and educator in the fields of gender justice, anti-racism, criminal justice reform, and public health. Her work has been published in *The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*, *Renegade Magazine*, and *Black Girl Dangerous*. She lives in Washington, D.C.

Jack Kirne • Jack Kirne is a Melbourne-based writer and PhD candidate at Deakin University. His work has been featured in *Verandah* and *Voiceworks*, and in 2016, he was featured in The Wheeler Centre's *The Next Big Thing*. He won the Judith Rodriguez Prize in 2015. Recently, he published a graphic narrative with his partner, Aaron Billings, called *Discount Fabric: The Campaign*.

Cira Davis • Cira Davis is currently a junior in high school and a WriteGirl mentee. She regularly contributes articles and comics to her school newspaper, and is looking forward to becoming Editor in Chief in her senior year. Aside from writing, her interests include computer science, graphic design, drawing, and calligraphy.

Drew Shinozaki • Drew Shinozaki lives in Rancho Palos Verdes, California, where she attends Palos Verdes Peninsula High School as a freshman. This will be her first publication.

Nonfiction

Glenn Deutsch • Glenn Deutsch has published essays and short stories in *Post Road*, *Confrontation*, *Gargoyle*, and *The Literary Review*, among other journals. He's also written for magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar*, *Men's Health*, and *Poets & Writers*, and for metro daily and alternative newspapers. A former editor of *Third Coast*, he lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan, with his wife and son. He recently completed his first novel.

Angela Santillo • Angela Santillo has an MFA in Theater Arts from Sarah Lawrence College, and her work has been produced in New York City, San Francisco, Chicago, and Asheville. She received a residency in nonfiction from the Vermont Studio Center and spent October working on this piece and others.

Sherry Shahan • Sherry Shahan has more than thirty-five books to her credit, fiction and nonfiction. Titles include adventure novels *Frozen Stiff* (Random House), *Death Mountain* (Peachtree), and *Ice Island* (Random House). Her novel-in-verse *Purple Daze* (Running Press) is set in the tumultuous 1960s. Shahan has been widely published in magazines, newspapers, literary journals, and anthologies, including *Backpacker*, *Drink*, *Country Living*, *FamilyFun*, *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Oxford University Press*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Confrontation*, and others. She holds an MFA in Writing for Children & Young Adults from Vermont College of Fine Arts and teaches an ongoing writers course for UCLA Extension.

Renee C. Winter • Renee C. Winter is a writer whose essays have appeared in *The Coachella Review*, *Qu Literary Magazine*, *Pren-Z*, and the 2016 anthology *Tales of Our Lives: Reflection Pond* (Knowledge Access Books). She has presented her work at the annual "Celebration of the Muse" event honoring female writers living in Santa Cruz, California. A retired attorney, Renee currently is a volunteer writing instructor at the Santa Cruz County Jail.

Poetry

Xochitl-Julisa Bermejo • Xochitl-Julisa Bermejo, a first-generation Chicana, is the author of *Posada: Offerings of Witness and Refuge* (Sundress Publications 2016). A former Steinbeck Fellow, Poets & Writers California Writers Exchange winner, and Barbara Deming Memorial Fund grantee, she's received residencies from Hedgebrook, Ragdale, National Parks Arts Foundation, and Poetry Foundation. Her work is published in *The Acentos Review*, *CALYX*, *crazyhorse*, and *American Poetry Review*, among others. A dramatization of her poem "Our Lady of the Water Gallons," directed by Jesús Salvador Treviño, can be viewed at latinopia.com. She is a cofounder of [Women Who Submit](#) and a member of Macondo Writers Workshop.

Jessica Beyer • Jessica Beyer is a writer and educator from Baltimore, Maryland. Her poems have been published in *MiPOesias*, *The Adroit Journal*, *decomp*, *TIMBER*, *Split Rock Review*, and other journals and anthologies. She has a MFA in Poetry from New York University and a BA in English and Creative Writing from Emory University. She is looking for a publisher for her first poetry collection *Questions for a Damaged Goddess* and working on a second collection and a novel. When not writing or working, Jessica can be found waterskiing, scuba diving, and giving in to wanderlust whenever possible. She most recently traveled to New Zealand, Australia, and Thailand, and is now one (Antarctica) away from getting continent bingo. You can find her at jessicabeyer.com and on Twitter [@JessicaHBeyer](https://twitter.com/JessicaHBeyer).

Edwin Bodney • Edwin Bodney is an L.A. native and co-host of one of the largest poetry venues in the nation, Da Poetry Lounge. A nationally recognized poet, he has performed his work for an array of organizations like USC, UCLA, Lexus, TV1, All Def Digital, and Button Poetry. In 2016, he officially published his first book titled *A Study of Hands* with Not a Cult Press. Through his work, both on stage and in classrooms facilitating workshops, he hopes to transform his community in such a way that no one forgets their joy in the midst of all their healing.

Tresha Haefner • Tresha Haefner-Rubinstein's poetry appears or is forthcoming in several journals and magazines, most notably *Blood Lotus*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *The Fourth River*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *Poet Lore*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Rattle*. She is the recipient of the 2011 Robert and Adele Schiff Poetry Prize, and author of the chapbook *Take This Longing* from Finishing Line Press.

Yessica Klein • Yessica Klein is a writer, translator, and artist current living in Liverpool, U.K. She holds an MA in Creative Writing from Kingston University, and her writing has been featured in *SALT magazine* (U.K.), *elsewhere journal* (Germany), *Don't Touch My Moleskine* (Brazil), and many others. She was shortlisted for the 2017 Jane Martin Poetry Prize.

Ronald Koertge • Ron Koertge, a longtime resident of South Pasadena, taught at Pasadena City College for thirty-seven years. A prolific writer, he has published more than thirty books of poetry and prose. Some of his most recent books are *Fever* (Red Hen Press, 2006), *Indigo* (Red Hen Press, 2009), *The Ogre's Wife* (Red Hen Press, 2013), and *Vampire Planet* (Red Hen Press, 2015). He is the recipient of grants from the N.E.A. and the California Arts Council and has poems in two volumes of *Best American Poetry* (1999 and 2005). His most recent book from Red Hen Press is a comic for smart people: *Olympusville*. He is also the author of "Negative Space," which was made into a film and nominated for an Oscar for best animated short.

Leon Lowder • Leon Lowder is a Foreign Service Officer at the U.S. Department of State. His work has been published in *Red River Review* and *Passager*.

Fran Markover • Fran Markover lives in Ithaca, New York, where she works as a psychotherapist. Her poems have been published in journals including *Rattle*, *Calyx*, *The Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *Karamu*, *Runes*, *Spillway*, and *Earth's Daughters*. Awards include a Pushcart Prize nomination and a poetry residence at the Constance Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts. Her chapbook *History's Trail* was published by Finishing Line Press.

Larry Pike • Larry Pike's poetry and fiction has appeared in *Aethlon: Journal of Sports Literature*, *The Louisville Review*, *Hospital Drive*, *Seminary Ridge Review*, *Caesura*, *Amethyst Review*, and other publications. Horse Cave Theatre (Kentucky) produced his play *Beating the Varsity* in 2000, and it was published in *World Premieres from Horse Cave Theatre* (MotesBooks, 2009). In June 2017 he won the George Scarbrough Prize for Poetry.

Jen Sage-Robison • Jen Sage-Robison was born in the former mill town of Torrington, Connecticut, where generations of her family worked the brass mills, taught school, and guarded the sewers. She leads Amherst Writers & Artists workshops at Westport Writers' Workshop and seeks to amplify vulnerable voices. Her poetry has recently appeared in the *The Tishman Review*, *Panoply*, *Gyroscope Review*, and *The Paragon Journal*. She was a finalist for the 2018 Edna St. Vincent Millay Poetry Prize.

Stage & Screen

Orit Ackerman • Orit Ackerman, a native Minnesotan, lives with her husband, two children, and three cats. She has written for *TC Jewfolk*, *Kveller*, and *The Mighty*. With a background in theater, writing plays is both new and familiar at the same time. After her first attempt at NaNoWriMo in 2017, she is now in love with writing fiction and is currently working on a book that may never see the light of day. She likes to spend her time reading, drinking coffee, and cooking for her blog, www.mostlyicookfood.com.

Charles Leipart • Charles Leipart is a former Fellow of the Edward F. Albee Foundation. A native of Chicago, he is a graduate of Northwestern University and a member of the National New Play Network's New Play Exchange. He lives and writes in New York City and is a member of The Dramatists Guild and ASCAP. *Chez Rikers: An Urban Fable* was read in the theater for the New City, New Blood reading series in June 2017. His play *Cream Cakes in Munich* was awarded first prize in the Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival One-Act Contest 2016. *Swimming at the Ritz*, his original portrait of Pamela Churchill Harriman, was developed with award-winning BBC director David Giles and supported by the Arts Council England, with a U.S. premiere at the New Jersey Repertory Company in 2015. www.charlesleipart.com.

James McLindon • James McLindon is a member of the Nylon Fusion Theatre Company in New York. His play *Salvation* premiered in New York, Giovanna Sardelli directing, to critical acclaim

in *The New York Times* and elsewhere. *Comes a Faery* was developed at the O'Neill National Playwrights Conference, Sean Daniels directing; was a finalist for the Humana Festival; and premiered at the New Ohio Theatre last season. *Distant Music* has been produced seven times across the country, most recently at the Stoneham Theatre in Boston and the Independent Actors Theatre in Columbia, Missouri. *Dead and Buried* was premiered at the Detroit Repertory Theatre and the University of Miami. His plays have been developed and/or produced at theaters such as the O'Neill (selection and six-time semifinalist), PlayPenn, Victory Gardens, Lark, Abingdon, hotINK Festival, Irish Repertory, Samuel French Festival, Edinburgh Festival Fringe, New Rep, Lyric Stage, Boston Playwrights, Local Theatre, Telluride Playwrights Festival, Great Plains Theatre Conference, and Seven Devils. His plays have been published by Dramatic Publishing and Smith and Kraus.

Michelle Sarkany • Michelle Sarkany was a semifinalist in the 2017 Austin Film Festival, as well as first place winner at the 2016 Rhode Island International Film Festival and New Hope Film Festival in the short script category. She wrote, shot, and edited a short documentary that aired on PBS after winning the PBS Reel 13 Shorts Competition in November 2016. Previously, Michelle self-published a children's book about a booger living in a giant's nose, recorded a weekly observational comedy podcast segment entitled "What's Up With...?," and worked as a writer, cinematographer, and editor on various independent film projects. She is a writer and filmmaker living in New York City.

Experimental Narratives

Janet Kaplan • Janet Kaplan's full-length poetry books are *Ecotones* (forthcoming in 2019 from Eyewear Ltd.), *Dreamlife of a Philanthropist: Prose Poems & Prose Sonnets*, *The Glazier's Country*, and *The Groundnote*. Her honors include grants from the New York Foundation for the Arts and the Bronx Council on the Arts, fellowships and residencies from Yaddo, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, the Ucross Foundation in Wyoming, and the Vermont Studio Center. Her work has appeared in *Arts & Letters*, *Barrow Street*, *Cross Currents*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Exposition Review*, *Interim*, *Pool*, *Sentence*, *The Paris Review*, *The Southampton Review*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, and many others, as well as in the anthologies *An Introduction to the Prose Poem* (Firewheel Editions, 2007), *Lit from Inside: 40 Years of Poetry from Alice James* (Alice James Books, 2012), and *Like Light: 25 Years of Poetry & Prose by Bright Hill Poets & Writers* (Bright Hill Press, 2017). She has served as poet-in-residence at Fordham University in New York and is currently a member of the creative writing faculty at Hofstra University, where she edits the digital literary magazine AMP. You can find her on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/janet.kaplan3>.

Mark Stein • Mark Stein's poetry has appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *The Madison Review*, *Confrontation*, *Nimrod*, *Moment*, and elsewhere. He wrote the screenplay for *Housesitter*, starring Steve Martin and Goldie Hawn, and plays that have been produced at Manhattan Theatre

Club, Actors Theater of Louisville, South Coast Repertory, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Manitoba Theatre Centre, George Street Playhouse, and L.A.'s Fountain Theatre, and most recently an award-winning production of *Direct from Death Row the Scottsboro Boys* played at Chicago's Raven Theatre. His nonfiction includes the *New York Times* bestseller *How the States Got Their Shapes*, which became the basis for the History Channel series by the same name, *American Panic: A History of Who Scares Us and Why*, and *Vice Capades: Sex, Drugs, and Bowling from the Pilgrims to the Present*.

Visual Art & Comics

Val Britton • Val Britton creates immersive, collaged works on paper and site-specific installations that explore physical and psychological spaces. Her fragmented, exploded landscapes draw on the language of maps to explore memory, history, and the possibilities of abstraction. Britton's work is part of numerous collections, including Arkansas Arts Center, Cleveland Clinic, de Saisset Museum, Facebook headquarters, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Library of Congress, National September 11 Memorial & Museum, New-York Historical Society, New York Public Library, and The San José Museum of Art. Britton is the recipient of many grants, fellowships, and residencies including a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant and a Fleishhacker Foundation Eureka Fellowship. Born in Livingston, New Jersey, Britton lives and works in San Francisco. She received her BFA from Rhode Island School of Design and her MFA from California College of the Arts.

Melanie Cook • Melanie Cook is a writer, illustrator, and comic book artist from Perth, Western Australia. Her other online comics include *The Tyger*, *The Death of Neutrino Man*, and the travel memoir *Saint Helena: Isle of Exile*. In addition to her comics work, Melanie creates book covers for indie publisher and e-zine *The Book Smugglers*. You can find more of her artwork at MelanieCook.com.

Krystal Meldrum • The artistic imaginings of Krystal Meldrum have been created from the time she was able to hold a crayon. Her hunger for art was nurtured by parents and teachers until she finally pursued her passion to expand her command of media by attending BYU-Idaho and BYU, where she attained a BFA in Illustration in 2001. Her voice as an artist has been described as a color dancer that captures themes of strengthening marriages and families. Her whimsical artwork is created with a range of mediums including watercolor Brusho crystals, watercolor crayons, Inktense watercolor pencils, acrylic markers, oil sticks, Krink markers, oil pastels, acrylic, oil, watercolor, collage, Tombow markers, mixed media, and digital.

Leah Oates • Leah Oates has a BFA from Rhode Island School of Design and a MFA from School of the Art Institute of Chicago and is a Fulbright Fellow for graduate study at Edinburgh College of Art in Scotland. Her photographic series "Transitory Space" was featured in the MTA

Arts & Design Lightbox Project at 42nd Street/6th Avenue in New York and was on view from 2016- 2017, and she recently had her second solo show of this series at Susan Eley Fine Art in New York. She has had more than fourteen solo shows at venues such as The Arsenal Gallery in Central Park, the Brooklyn Public Library, the Center for Book Arts, A4L Gallery, Henry Street Settlement, A Taste of Art Gallery, and locally at Tomasulo Gallery in New Jersey; Real Art Ways in Connecticut; Sara Nightingale Gallery in Water Mill, Long Island; and the Sol Mednick Gallery at the Philadelphia University of the Arts. Recently her work was featured in *Gulf Stream Magazine*, *Irreversible Magazine*, *Postit 1 Journal of Literature and Art*, *Artvoices Magazine*, *Brooklyn Magazine*, *Vasa*, New Jersey's *Star-Ledger*, *Beautiful Decay*, *Phaidon Club*, *Eyes In Magazine*, *Bomb Magazine* blog, *Diffusion*, *NY Arts Magazine*, *Daily Constitutional*, and *Art Squeeze*. Her works on paper are in many private collections and numerous public collections including the National Museum of Women in the Arts, The Brooklyn Museum Artists Books Collection, The British Library, The Walker Art Center Library, the Smithsonian Libraries, and Franklin Furnace at MoMA.