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A LITERARY MAGAZINE :: SPECIAL ISSUE, POP CULTURE

the **NoRMAL SCHOOL**

A LITERARY MAGAZINE :: SPECIAL ISSUE, MAY 2020 :: POP CULTURE

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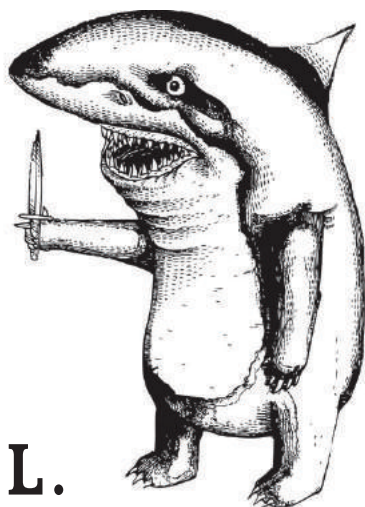
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REWATCH VALUE: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY



MARGIE SARSFIELD

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THE SHINING

A family heads to an isolated hotel for the winter where a sinister presence influences the father into violence, while his psychic son sees horrific forebodings from both past and future.

My mother loves this movie. So do I. In it, Jack Nicholson plays my father, if my father's name was Jack. Danny Lloyd plays Danny and Jack Nicholson plays Jack and Shelley Duvall plays Wendy. Shelley Duvall tells the doctor that something good came out of Jack breaking Danny's arm: he's sober now. Stephen King hated this adaptation of his novel; in the book, Jack gets redeemed at the end.

The father is the hero. In the movie, Jack Nicholson is a shithead from start to finish. He's a wannabe writer, like my father. Scatman Cruthers tells little Danny that the hotel is full of pictures that can't hurt him. Danny sees dead twins in a hallway and there's no booze at the hotel but Jack manages to get drunk anyway. Shelley Duvall takes care of almost everything while Jack Nicholson plays wallball and writes the same sentence a thousand times, then he yells at her. Kubrick yelled at Shelley Duvall constantly on set, and told everyone else to be mean to her, too. He wanted her to act exactly the way she did. Jack has a nightmare about killing his wife and child. My father once had a nightmare about a burglar and he woke up choking my mother. Kubrick told Danny Lloyd that the movie was a drama and used a dummy in his place during a scene that would be too scary. Jack Nicholson gets tricked. The father is the hero. In the movie, Jack Nicholson is a shithead from start to finish. He's a wannabe writer, like my father. Scatman Cruthers tells little Danny that the hotel is full of pictures that can't hurt him. Danny sees dead twins in a hallway and there's no booze at the hotel but Jack manages to get drunk anyway. Shelley Duvall takes care of almost everything while Jack Nicholson plays wallball and writes the same sentence a thousand times, then he yells at her. Kubrick yelled at Shelley Duvall constantly on set, and told everyone else to be mean to her, too. He wanted her to act exactly the way she did. Jack has a nightmare about killing his wife and child. My father once had a nightmare about a burglar and he woke up choking my mother. Kubrick told Danny Lloyd that the movie was a drama and used a dummy in his place during a scene that would be too scary. Jack Nicholson gets tricked into making out with a gross old lady, and then she laughs at him! He needs a drink. In the bathroom, Grady the Ghost tells Jack Nicholson that he's always been the caretaker at the hotel. Once, I lodged a protest regarding my father's hitting habit and he countered by yelling about how much worse he had it growing up, and no one has ever talked about it since. Grady the Ghost chopped up his wife and daughters. Shelley Duvall talks to herself, pacing and smoking a cigarette in their bedroom, while their son screams *redrum! redrum!* That's murder backwards. That's not a spoiler. Stephen King didn't like Shelley Duval. He said she wasn't the blonde cheerleader-type he'd always imagined her character being. He compared her to "a screaming dish rag." Jack Nicholson destroys the CB radio. Scatman Cruthers gets on a plane from Florida because he senses something wrong. Jack Nicholson types, types, types, Scatman Cruthers rents a car, Shelley Duvall and Danny Lloyd watch cartoons. She takes a bat with her when she goes down to confront Jack Nicholson. Some dude on a podcast I heard once complained that Shelley Duvall acts too helpless, frantic and weak, in this scene. Some dude on another podcast said: "does anyone not wanna see her get an axe in the head?" She waves the bat back and forth and snivels backwards up the stairs while Jack Nicholson mocks her, mimics her. For several years in a row my father gave my mother the exact same birthday card and each time she didn't notice, he laughed at her for not remembering. Shelley Duvall loves her husband even after locking him in the pantry. Even when he gets out, even when he kills Scatman Cruthers, maybe even when he chops a hole in the door and says his famous line. It took three days and sixty doors

to film that scene. In the hedge maze, Danny runs through the snow with Jack limping like a minotaur behind him. To escape his father, Danny has to hide in his own footsteps. He has to go backwards. Danny Lloyd didn't see the full version of *The Shining* until he was seventeen. Shelley Duvall swung the baseball bat forty-one times over the course of the film. Shelley Duvall ran up a staircase thirty-five times for one scene. Shelley Duvall said she "had to cry twelve hours a day, all day long, the last nine months straight, five or six days a week." Shelley Duvall played a battered woman and men didn't like it. Once, playing a friendly charades-style game, my father pretended to hit and choke my mother but his hands actually did hit her cheek, actually did clasp around her neck. When I try to remember this memory, I try to remember my mother's face when his hand hit her and I can't. That's the thing about memories: they're not very reliable. Every time you remember something, you change it.

My boyfriend asks me, if we were caretakers of the Overlook, who would be Jack Nicholson. Obviously, we both agree, it'd be me. I don't like when he interrupts my writing.

That's the thing about memories: they're not very reliable. Every time you remember something, you change it.

Urban Legend (1998)

A college student suspects a series of bizarre deaths are connected to certain urban legends.

Creepy men always end up being helpful. If the first dead girl had listened to the gas station attendant, she wouldn't have been killed by the man in the backseat, but the gas station attendant was creepy. He had a stutter, like my ex, Drew, did. I hear he doesn't anymore, though I didn't hear it from him. We don't speak much anymore – you'll see why. They wanted to use a Land Rover for this scene but it's impossible to swing an axe in a Land Rover. Alicia Witt's friends are all dying. Her friend leaves her in the car when they hear a noise, then gets hung from a tree. She thinks her roommate is having sex when really she's being murdered. The killer forces pop rocks and bleach down a guy's throat. They put the dog in a microwave! Tara Reid is killed live on the radio while a girl at a party says that there's a real scream in "Love Rollercoaster." The killer is a girl. That's a spoiler, but studies show spoilers aren't real. *Urban Legend* takes place at a fictional college; translate its Latin motto and you get "the best friend did it." Translate Jared Leto's band's motto and you get "launch forth into the depth." A Long Island urban legend: drive down Mount Misery Road at night and your headlights might flash over a shadowy figure sitting up. The killer hates Alicia Witt for being involved in the death of the killer's boyfriend. Tara Reid had nothing at all to do with the death of the killer's boyfriend. Tara Reid was a sex-positive talk radio host. If your roommate kills herself, you get A's in all your classes.

Alicia Witt owned the car that killed the killer's boyfriend, and even though she wasn't the one driving, she gets punished the most. The killer is doing it for a dead man. She's also doing it for a live man, Jared Leto. She wants Jared Leto, and who doesn't? His band Thirty Seconds to Mars is still a band. In 2014, he told Ukrainian protestors that "there's no price too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself." The music video for their hit song "The Kill (Bury Me)" is modelled after *The Shining*. Tara Reid's death scene takes a long time. She almost makes it so many times. Sarah Michelle Geller was supposed to play Tara Reid's character but her *Buffy* schedule wouldn't allow it. Tara Reid was born in Wyckoff, New Jersey and I grew up on Wyckoff Avenue, and we both went to high schools named after John F. Kennedy, and we were both born with uneven boobs, although Tara Reid had surgery to make hers even. We're both Scorpios, which means we hold grudges for a long time. Another Long Island legend: put your car in neutral on Sweet Hollow Road and it will roll. Becky and Rachel and I tried it out one night in high school. It's hard to say what they thought about the black eye I said Drew didn't give me. Tara Reid once said "I like when a guy makes me feel like a woman and a little girl at the same time." Loretta Devine shoots the killer but Alicia Witt delivers the final blow. Or so it seems. Loretta Devine and Alicia Witt were both born on August 21st. Alicia Witt rides off with Jared Leto to get help for Loretta Devine bleeding out on the floor. Jared Leto asks, "if this is an urban legend, then what's the twist?" The killer isn't dead, duh. The killer hits Jared Leto on the head with the flat side of an axe. The killer and Alicia Witt are on the floor. Jared Leto hits the brakes hard on the bridge and the killer flies through the windshield and into the river. Her body is never found, because she doesn't die. The creepy professor is not the killer. The callous newspaper reporter is not the killer. The weird janitor is not the killer. Loretta Devine is not the hero. And Tara Reid is not the female lead. In this essay, I am the female lead.

What Lies Beneath (2000)

The wife of a university research scientist believes that her lakeside Vermont home is haunted by a ghost - or that she is losing her mind.

I spend most of the movie wondering what decade Michelle Pfeiffer was an It Girl, because I thought it was the 90's but Michelle Pfeiffer is middle-aged in this movie. The rest of the movie, I wait for the scene where Michelle Pfeiffer seduces Harrison Ford with an apple, with a red dress, with legs spread. I saw it at Carissa's sleepover in fifth grade. *What Lies Beneath* was the tenth highest-grossing film of 2000. Lots and lots of people watched Michelle Pfeiffer say "forbidden fruit" and straddle Harrison Ford on a desk. An emergent moment in my sexual development. On IMDB, user elle-10 said that "Harrison Ford is certainly in fantastic shape for a 58 year old, and with a nice tan, was very easy on the eye; mine anyway! While my husband enjoyed looking at Michelle Pfeiffer." They're a rich couple, with a sailboat named "Good Genes." Michelle Pfeiffer has a great best friend with a cool car, a divorce, a psychic, a good sense of humor, access

to books about ghosts. Harrison Ford is the killer. One day I said something mean to Carissa outside the gym, on purpose, because I couldn't be her friend anymore. I don't remember what I said, and I wonder if she remembers. The problem with being friends with Carissa was that I was afraid I was gay because I liked her so much. I imagined how she and the other girls we were friends with would react to learning that I was gay and in love with her: disgust, laughter, exile. Michelle Pfeiffer thinks the woman next door needs to be saved from her abusive husband, but of course it is Michelle Pfeiffer whose marriage is a violent lie. It is Michelle Pfeiffer who is being haunted by the ghost of the student her husband killed. It is Michelle Pfeiffer who gets paralyzed and drowned in the bathtub once she figures it all out. Michelle Pfeiffer would have been better off being gay for her cool best friend. Michelle Pfeiffer and Harrison Ford cross a bridge several times over the course of the film. This bridge, the Crown Point Bridge, was built in 1929 and torn down almost exactly eighty years later, in 2009. It was replaced in 2011 with the Lake Champlain Bridge. The new bridge cost a little over \$78,000,000, less than the budget of *What Lies Beneath*. If I had stayed friends with Carissa, I probably would never have dated Drew. Michelle Pfeiffer watches her dog's face appear over the rim of the bathtub where Harrison Ford has laid her stiff but still-feeling body. The dog whines. At Carissa's slumber party I hid upstairs in the kitchen for what seemed like a long time, waiting for someone to notice and come upstairs so I could scare them, but no one did. It turns out that I have been confusing Michelle Pfeiffer and Sarah Michelle Geller. It also turns out that I'm not gay. I've had sex with women but I prefer sex with men. It's still possible that I was in love with Carissa. Michelle Pfeiffer fights and lives to watch her husband dragged to the bottom of a lake by the corpse he dumped there. As of 2019, Harrison Ford has died four times in movies. Michelle Pfeiffer has died six times, more if you count her eight deaths as Catwoman. In the final scene, Michelle Pfeiffer drives away in a pick-up truck with the sailboat attached; on IMDB, "one viewer claims that the boat disappears when she turns a corner, but another disputes this." I found Carissa's Facebook recently and learned that we were at the same Passion Pit concert four years ago.

The Messengers (2007)

An ominous darkness invades a seemingly serene sunflower farm in North Dakota, and the Solomon family is torn apart by suspicion, mayhem and murder.

Drew and I saw this movie on our first date. He wanted to see something else. I think it was *Notes on a Scandal*. I can't remember, so I looked up what movies were in theaters around the time of our first date and that's the only movie that makes sense. Anyway, it was some serious drama, which didn't sound like a fun first date movie to me, so I insisted on *The Messengers*. I had to apologize for it after because he was upset we sat through a bad movie. But we also made a joke of it, our very first inside joke. Kristen Stewart's family moves to a farm because they're broke and she's been in trouble. The house is haunted and she is very skinny. Her dad is Dylan McDermott. He put everything

they had into this land. Sunflowers. Kristen Stewart had already been in *Speak* and *Catch That Kid* before she starred in this movie, but it wasn't yet her *Twilight* years. By now we all know that Kristen Stewart dated Robert Pattison, but back when it was just speculation she said "I wouldn't tell you anything about anybody I cared about because it becomes entertainment for other people, and it sort of just cheapens everything in your life." In the farmhouse, a bird flies into a window, then Kristen Stewart finds a bird drawn into the dust on the windowpane. A toy moves on its own, and there's a stain on a wall. We walked to the movies that night and on the way, a carful of boys yelled "nice ass!" at us, presumably meaning my ass. Kristen Stewart and Dylan McDermott are a father-daughter duo with a special handshake. The baby boy can see the ghosts, but no one else can. He sees the grey legs appear under the billowing sheet. He sees the pale figure crab-crawling around the ceiling. We don't know what kind of trouble Kristen Stewart got into, and we don't care. She's a teenage girl, it doesn't take much to be branded bad. Dylan McDermott wants his daughter to date a cute boy she meets in town. My father once stood in a doorway while I watched TV and said he didn't want me "doing drugs or doing sex" and that's all he ever said about that. When my mother knew that Drew and I were having sex, she told me that I should make sure I'm enjoying it, too. Dylan McDermott offers room and board to some guy who walks onto their property one day and shoots at some crows.

This is something I've noticed happening sometimes in friend groups: there's one that gets lost. Too wild, too crazy, can't keep up because she's running an entirely different race. That's me.

Guess what, he's the killer. Cue the acoustic country guitar, the farmhouse life montage, the fields going green, until pale grey corpse hands pull Kristen Stewart into the basement and no one believes her. The next movie Drew and I saw in theaters was *The Bridge to Terabithia* and he made fun of me for crying. On our two year anniversary he sent me a DVD copy of *The Messengers* with a love letter. Tonight as I watch the movie my dog starts growling at shadows outside and I remember how far away I am from that place and time. I put my hand on her back and feel the ridge of risen fur. But I still envy how skinny Kristen Stewart is. They enhanced her boobs on the DVD cover art. I'm watching the movie on Amazon Prime, not on the anniversary DVD. The anniversary DVD is long gone. Crows attack the hired hand. The stain on the wall spreads until it becomes a girl. Kristen Stewart solves the mystery: the ghosts are actually the wife and children of the hired hand. It used to be his farm, but he killed his family, and now he's going to kill Kristen Stewart and her family. Kristen Stewart gets help from the cute boy from town, but then the hired hand knocks him out. Dylan McDermott takes a pitchfork to the torso. Are the crows the messengers, or the ghost family? The dog is trying to warn me that the neighbor's flower pot exists. Kristen Stewart got her handprint outside Chinese

Theater in Hollywood on November 3rd, 2011, the day I turned 21. In the end the hired hand is pulled down into mucky water by his dead family, presumably all the way to hell. The movie is not actually as bad as I remembered. I'd still pick it over *Notes on a Scandal*. Dylan McDermott lives despite the internal bleeding, and Kristen Stewart smiles. "Hey babe, happy anniversary...sorry I'm not a poet or a musician or anything that might entertain you. Instead, I'm just a lover (a loser). I love you. I miss you with all my heart. I wish you were here. Two years since we saw this silly movie together. Two years since we could only speak through writing (lol, omg). You've done so much for me, but you know that already (and do an excellent job of not letting on). I've cherished every moment I've had with you, and cannot believe you're there while I'm here. I could write and write, but I've already written what needs writing. You're gorgeous. You're fantastic. And from the bottom of my heart...I love you."

Teeth (2007)

Still a stranger to her own body, a high school student discovers she has a physical advantage when she becomes the object of male violence.

People talked about this movie when it came out. Boys laughed, girls too. The movie is about the pussy with teeth. You probably don't know the star, Jess Weixler. Not by name, anyway. In the first scene, her stepbrother puts a finger inside her and it nearly gets bitten off. They're both children, but he's a little older. No finer lines than that. In first or maybe second grade, I willingly kissed JJ on the bus. It was all tongue, very wet. Then, at some point, it wasn't willing anymore. What I remember is him pinning me down and forcing his mouth onto mine while other kids on the bus laughed, but maybe that's not how it happened. Maybe it didn't happen at all. People make up memories all the time. Maybe it's not a made-up memory, just an embellished one. There's no one I can ask to confirm that this happened the way it happened. Jess Weixler is in high school and actively invested in keeping her virginity. She goes to elementary schools with a Christian club and speaks to the kids about purity rings. Her purity ring is red plastic. She wears baggy jeans and a long-sleeved purple shirt underneath a short, princess-sleeved light purple t-shirt. The t-shirt has a scooped collar but the long-sleeved shirt has a regular neckline. Her stepbrother listens to metal, smokes cigarettes, has tribal tattoos and fucks his girlfriend - but only in the ass. He's afraid of pussies because one nearly bit his finger off. I was the first of my friends to lose my virginity; also to drink, do every drug. The last time I saw Becky and Rachel was in college, when I invited them over to party but then abruptly decided to take ecstasy. I started coming up and they freaked out and left and I never saw them again. Except on Facebook. They got married first, bought houses first, developed careers first, built families first. In class, Jess Weixler says that girls "have a natural modesty." She has a crush on another abstinence guy but she won't let herself masturbate. Then he tries to rape her and gets his dick bitten off. Jess Weixler is the hero, but historically, she'd be the antagonist. In South Africa, a fanged fish swims into the terrible mother's

croch. In Japan, a woman asks a blacksmith to forge a steel dildo on which her pussy teeth will break. The gyno takes advantage of Jess Weixler's naivety and tries to put his whole hand up her pussy. He gets his fingers bit off, then lies on the floor yelling "vagina dentata!" The next guy drugs her, but he's nice and she comes and the teeth stay sheathed. But then she finds out he made a bet to sleep with her and that pisses her off. Another dick hits the floor. *Teeth* is brimming with dismembered members. In the credits, it says "no man was harmed in the making of this film".

When Becky and Rachel and I watched the movie in Rachel's rec room, we thought it was a little ridiculous that every guy Jess Weixler met wanted to rape her. The movie implies that the teeth are survival tools. The brother sucked the whole movie, so she fucks him for revenge, then his dog eats his dick, piercing and all. The piercing was made of sugar, so it wouldn't hurt the dog. The Rape-aXe is a female condom that will really fuck up a dick. I dream about Becky and Rachel a few times a year. We re-unite, they forgive me. They want me back. When I wake up, I feel grief. This is something I've noticed happening sometimes in friend groups: there's one that gets lost. Too wild, too crazy, can't keep up because she's running an entirely different race. That's me. They were each other's bridesmaids.

Fear (1996)

When Nicole met David; handsome, charming, affectionate, he was everything. It seemed perfect, but soon she sees that David has a darker side. And his adoration turns to obsession, their dream into a nightmare, and her love into fear.

Reese Witherspoon's dad thinks her dress is too short. She's a teenager. Her dad calls her his little sugarplum. My dad used to call me butternut squash. At a rave, Reese lets her bff Alyssa Milano, also sixteen, go off with some adult man. When a riot breaks out, Mark Wahlberg is there to save her, bring her to the roof. No friend could have ever stopped me from running drunkenly after something I wanted. Marky Mark moves too fast, grabs a boob and Reese says no, then apologizes. "Comedown" by Bush plays over their first date, making out against a brick wall. He's charming but her dad doesn't like the way he demands she bring him a coke. Her dad is distracted by Alyssa Milano in a short skirt talking about bumper cars. A true story: Alyssa Milano's father ran back into a burning house to save the family dog. He was injured and the dog died. A cover of "Wild Horses" plays while Mark Wahlberg fingers Reese Witherspoon on a roller coaster. I really think a roller coaster seems like a great place to orgasm. She has a silver bracelet that says "Daddy's Girl." We don't know exactly how much older Marky Mark is when he and Reese have sex for her first time ever, but in the very next scene he beats up her best dude friend and accidentally smacks her in the face and gives her a black eye. I got called into the guidance counselor's office after Drew gave me a black eye. I don't remember what I told them. I don't remember what I told anyone, other than that it was an accident. I don't think it was an accident, but I could be remembering it wrong. I think he hit me

with a beer stein, one of these two big ones he had in his room, out of which we drank warm Budweisers in the early afternoon. I think he hit me because I poured beer on him. I was recently so worried about the possibility that I was remembering this wrong that I e-mailed a high school teacher to ask if she remembered me ever coming in with a black eye. She didn't. Am I an unreliable narrator? Reese's dad is onto Mark Wahlberg. Alyssa Milano tells Reese that sometimes men hit women as a messed up way of showing they love them. Eventually, after the abortion and the college suspension and several mysterious wounds, my father said something disapproving about Drew. Once, I called Drew after my father hit me and he said I was too old for that. Reese's dad confronts Marky Mark, but it's a bad idea. Marky Mark responds by hitting himself on the chest until it bruises, then telling Reese that her dad hit him. There are two occasions on which my father and Drew interacted without me. Once, they went fishing. My father loves taking my boyfriends fishing. "Wild Horses" plays again while Reese and Mark neck in his car near a lake. Reese says her dad will kill her if she doesn't get home but we already know she's got it backwards. Marky Mark is the killer. And he's a rapist and a cheater, which Reese finds out when she follows him home and watches him pull Alyssa Milano's hair until she agrees to be carried into his bedroom. Reese goes home and tells her father it's over. He tells her the pain will go away. The day of my first abortion, my father made me soup. In the scene where Reese and Alyssa confront each other, Reese wears a silky

**More likely than memories being repressed is
memories never being made in the first place.
Trauma interrupts the memory-making process.**

purple button-up blouse tucked into red velvet pants. Alyssa tries to explain that Mark forced her but Reese doesn't care. Marky Mark tattoos Reese's name on his chest, kills the dude friend, takes a baseball bat to the dad's Mustang and leaves a note saying "now I've popped both your cherries!" He finds Reese at the mall and pulls her into a bathroom stall and tells her that how she feels about him isn't in her ears which hear what he says, or in her eyes which see what he does, but in her pussy. It's a pretty hot scene if you like rape fantasies. Mark Wahlberg was nominated for the MTV Movie Award for Best Villain for his performance in this film. The dad's always calling the cops and they never help. Mark kills the dog! He and his friends break into Reese's house and take her family hostage. Dad gets to punch Marky Mark in the face before the tables turn and he gets dragged upstairs with a gun to his head. Mark tells Reese to kiss her father goodbye before she and he run away forever. Meanwhile, the younger brother I haven't told you about basically saves everyone by climbing out the window and calling 911 on his mother's car phone, but you know Dad ends up being the hero, literally coming between Mark Wahlberg and Reese Witherspoon and throwing Marky Mark out the window. Daddy's Girl runs into Daddy's arms and the credits roll. The second time my father and Drew interacted was the night

I tried to kill myself, when Drew came to tell my father what I'd done and my father told him that I was lying for attention and didn't come upstairs to check on me.

Gothika (2003)

A psychiatrist in a women's mental hospital wakes up one day to find herself on the other side of the bars, accused of having murdered her husband.

A ghost possesses Halle Berry's body and makes her kill her husband. Halle Berry's husband, that is. Don't worry, he's the killer. Meanwhile, Penelope Cruz was raped by her stepfather, but claims it was the devil and also that it's still happening. About this, we are told that repression is a survival skill. That's not quite right. Repressed memories may not even be a thing that exists. More likely than memories being repressed is memories never being made in the first place. Trauma interrupts the memory-making process. Later, the ghost releases Halle Berry from her cell in the psychiatric penitentiary, but Halle Berry doesn't manage to escape the asylum. In real life, Halle Berry suffered some hearing loss in one ear after a "physical encounter" with a boyfriend in the 90's. Halle Berry almost choked to death on a fig on the set of *Die Another Day*. Robert Downey Jr. is in this movie playing a condescending prick. He broke Halle Berry's arm during filming, grabbing it the wrong way. Out in the yard, we learn that the mentally ill are bad at volleyball, and Penelope Cruz tells Halle Berry that "he can have my body, but he can never have my soul." Even institutionalized, they manage to keep Halle Berry sexy. Midriff, white panties. Halle Berry was the first Black actress to win an Oscar for Best Actress and the first actress to ever show up in person to accept her Razzie Award for Worst Actress. Different roles.

In real life, Halle Berry suffered some hearing loss in one ear after a "physical encounter" with a boyfriend in the 90's. Halle Berry almost choked to death on a fig on the set of Die Another Day. Robert Downey Jr. is in this movie playing a condescending prick.

The ghost attacks Halle Berry in her cell, and then a security guard helps her escape for real, even gives her the keys to his car. I didn't tell Becky and Rachel about the two weeks I spent in the psych ward the summer before college. I told them something else, some lie. Now I tell everyone, anyone who will listen. Let me tell you about my private life. Help me cheapen it. I need it to cost less. Turns out Halle Berry's husband kidnapped the white girl and kept her chained to a bed in a basement. You know what he did to her there. Everyone hates this movie but me, I guess. Halle Berry realizes there are two killers. The one who isn't her husband has a tattoo of a woman burning on his chest: *anima sola*. She

knows this because she has a vision of Penelope Cruz being raped in her cell. Some of my memories don't exist. I can't tell you what it felt like the night my father attacked me, only that he did it because I was annoying him and the next day I had to accept his apology. I don't remember what Drew sent me into the kitchen to retrieve, sticky and naked and briefly untied, before I returned to the bed where he raped me. I can't even remember if I ever remembered these things because memories have almost no rewatch value. *Anima sola* means lonely soul. It's purgatory, but also escape. The woman's chains are broken, her reverent hands lifted as though to grab a holy buoy to save her from the fiery flood. The second killer is the husband's best friend. The sheriff. He has Halle Berry locked in a cell, violence ensues but don't fret, the leading lady usually lives. In this one, Halle Berry hugs Penelope Cruz and whispers "we made it," then the Limp Bizkit cover of "Behind Blue Eyes" plays over the credits. Halle Berry and Penelope Cruz both have brown eyes, but mine are blue. Do you think it's about me? ❧

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TO MEND HIS TROUBLED MIND

Emma Bolden

He had a wrench & a hammer & a will to be
a mind getting into the idea of without.

It was the cool thing. It was the flag flying
successfully over the business of being

wrong as its own success. His jacket
was open. His pants were open. His body

was a boat invested in open waters.
Of course there were shocks & sharks &

of course his hands were as good as a gun.
He was comfortable with the idea of murder

as the best kind of mistake. A fist of foreboding.
The mind is a place where intention becomes

a body dumped into the sea. He didn't want to
hurt her, just to find the way finality becomes

an end. Finally. He walked out of the room,
white as any interrogation. He just needed

& carried a small gun. The nerve of that
recorder, garbling the best parts of the plot.

*Constructed with language from Dateline: Murder on the Mind,
originally aired Dateline NBC on Aug. 1, 2008.*

Emma Bolden is the author of *House Is an Enigma* (Southeast Missouri State University Press), *medi(t)ations* (Noctuary Press), and *Maleficae* (GenPop Books). The recipient of an NEA Fellowship, her work has appeared in *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, *The Best American Poetry*, and such journals as the *Mississippi Review*, *The Rumpus*, *StoryQuarterly*, *Prairie Schooner*, *New Madrid*, *TriQuarterly*, *Shenandoah*, and the *Greensboro Review*. She currently serves as Associate Editor-in-Chief for *Tupelo Quarterly* and as an editor for the *Screen Door Review*.

POISON OAK, HALLOWEEN

Andrew Kane

It's Halloween and I say I'm dressed as Johnny Cash
but all I'm wearing are the black clothes
I bought to work catering gigs down the street.

The urushiol rash barely visible on my cheek,
a sickle, a thin whip that conjures the plant itself.
Not part of the costume, it itches like campfire smoke.

You're dressed as Marilyn Monroe. People are easiest.
The mark on your face is drawn on.
We make up who we are tonight.

In a year we'll be in a bathroom in a bar in Chicago,
in two years you'll begin to gather the empty bottles in the kitchen
but start crying so hard you have to leave.

This is before shoplifting becomes a habit, like running, like moving away
before *b* gets sober, *c* stops heroin, *a* can't stop so the drugs stop for her.

It's when I'll say I'm dressed like Johnny Cash
even though I'm not really sure what Johnny Cash looked like.

I tell myself I can still tramp through a woods and not watch for poison oak
but I never shoplift anything anymore.

Andrew Kane is a writer and editor living in Brooklyn, NY. He currently writes for NPR's *Ask Me Another* and reads for the *New England Review*. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Rumpus*, *The Rupture*, *The Huffington Post*, and elsewhere.



EVIE HEALS

Allison Pinkerton

Photo on Foter.com

St. Zelda's School for Spiritual Journeys ("We'll take you where He wants you to go!"), didn't follow the rules of any specific American Christian denomination. Girls who came here confessed like Catholics, prayed out loud like Baptists, wore long hair like Pentecostals, and were generally embarrassed by emotive displays like Lutherans. Some of us belonged to those strip mall churches (The Bridge, Illuminate, Ignite), whose congregations had splintered over a disagreement—some people staying put, others following the pastor to a new church next to a Planet Fitness or PetSmart.

On my first day, St. Zelda's cafeteria reminded me of a fellowship hall because it smelled like stale cookies and half-melted sherbet warming in punch. A confessional booth sat in the corner where a line of girls waited to divulge their secrets. Some had rosaries, some didn't. Catholicism wasn't required, just an honest desire to be cleansed. The confessional was open 24/7 like CVS, in case, at 3 am, our sins started bothering us like canker sores.

My roommate Leah, who *supposedly* had lunch this period, was MIA. I scanned the tables of girls who texted, tweeted, picked at their food, took pictures of their food. No Leah. One girl looked at her phone, squealed, and then blushed when everybody at her table started laughing. Maybe she'd gotten a DM from someone at St. Marco's, our brother school. Following St. Marco's Twitter account was a major pastime since they claimed one of the students—a hot senior—could walk on water.

The confessional was open 24/7 like CVS, in case, at 3 am, our sins started bothering us like canker sores.

Doubts were unacceptable here. In Bible class just this morning, the teacher had side-eyed Leah for asking: So, like *what's* the Trinity? *How* does it work? The teacher's response: The more you ask those questions, the closer you move to heresy.

We were in for a fun ride here.

Mostly my doubts had to do with my sister Evelyn, who was YouTube famous for faith-healing. I filmed while she healed, and so I saw everything, and so I questioned God's benevolence. I was all here for his omnipotence—I knew that he knew things I didn't, but I wasn't sure if he was 100% good. Like, for example, why would He give Evie a gift that ostracized her, made her the butt of jokes at school, or made people worship her so much that she had no option but to disappoint them with her humanness, with how much she sincerely cared about if she'd worn the same outfit twice in back to back videos for her channel?

Why would He give Evie a gift that made our family life so awkward? That pulled Evie and Mom together (in prayer, in shared purpose), and left me standing on the outside? Did He want me to feel alone? Was this part of something larger I didn't understand? So far, it wasn't worth it.

My doubts only multiplied—like those loaves, like those fishes—after Evie left our family, and Mom sent me here because she was too sad to deal with her shit. People had theories about why Evie left—too much pressure to perform, or a creepy fan. I didn't really care about theories. I just lay awake wondering why she hadn't asked me to come with her.

I started crying in church during worship, and Mom somehow knew even though we didn't sit together—she was onstage in the praise band and she said the audience blurred under the stage lights. My grief embarrassed her because it was showy. (Hypocritical, since

her faith was showy—she praised God when she found a parking spot outside Starbucks).

I headed to one of the lunchroom's only empty tables, one below a painting of a Roman Colosseum where a bunch of Christian martyrs were burning on upside-down crosses. I got to the table, took a picture of the painting, and posted it to Twitter: #me.

Where was Leah? We'd said that we would meet up at lunch when I saw her before Algebra II. Had she forgotten? She was literally my only friend here. When we met this morning, I made some joke about gyros and the Lamb of God, and she laughed. And she didn't ask me about Evie, even though I looked at Evie's subscribers later during class and she was on the list.

I set my lunch down and opened my Joan of Arc book—I'd always kind of had a girl-crush on her, on how fierce she was. One of the cool things about St. Zelda's is they let me continue my 8th grade obsession with Joan into my 9th grade Saints and Culture class.

After a minute, I stopped reading and looked for Leah again. No luck. Instead, a girl with tiny fake jewels on her long fake nails stood in front of me.

"You're *not* sitting at the martyr table," she said.

I frowned. The saints had just appeared to Joan, she hadn't yet been captured or killed. There was hope, still. This chapter was underlined and dog-eared and chocolate-stained—I'd read it every week since Evie left, so, eight times. Eight times, St. Michael had come to Joan. Eight times, she was strong enough to recognize that faith didn't always work the way you thought it would.

"The martyr table is for the *unchurched*," she whispered. "Obviously, not you."

This girl had no idea of my religious history, but she wasn't going away. Some girls from another table were staring. I put my book down. Joan and her battles smashed onto the plastic tablecloth.

"You work the camera for Evie; we saw your bio on her page."

I hated being recognized. I'd told Evie I didn't want my info on her page. She didn't listen, and wrote a bio for me: *Jules, servant of Christ, uses her technology skills to bring Him glory.* Majorly embarrassing. And she omitted the most interesting parts: *Jules, maybe a servant of Christ, probably a servant of the world, spends time thinking about YouTube subscriptions when she should be reciting the Apostles' Creed.*

The girl tapped her jeweled fingernails against the back of her phone. Probably not used to being ignored.

Was she part of another first-day welcoming committee? I'd had enough of those. This morning, the last girl who showed me around, we just ended up staring at each other when she told me that all the girls here got spiritual gifts to mark their maturity, like periods marked their womanhood. The popular girls got mystical ones—speaking in tongues, seeing visions, healing. The rest of them (that girl included, I'd guess, judging by her wistful tone and bad haircut), got lame gifts: teaching and service.

The bejeweled girl guided me across the cafeteria; she walked slowly, like she wanted everyone to watch. Some did. My face flamed until she pushed me into a seat at her table and sat down next to me. She introduced herself—Brooke, Baptist, and the other

girls followed: Mary-Katherine, Pentecostal, Yazmín, Presbyterian. The jewels on Brooke's fingernails flashed as she pointed everyone out.

"Jules," I said. "I'm, um, here."

They glanced at each other.

"Ta-da!" I said, dryly. I threw up some jazz hands.

They laughed, definitely a pity laugh, and there we were, off on the wrong foot. Those girls had no idea I was fucking hilarious.

I looked back wistfully at the empty martyr table. The line at the confessional snaked around the perimeter of the lunch room; rumors claimed a lot of bulimic girls went to confession during lunch. The wave of purple curtain on the confession booth swayed with each new anxiety-heavy girl.

Brooke, Mary-Katherine, and Yazmín watched Evie's channel on their phones. The most popular videos were Frozen Yogurt Girl: Healed!, where Evie healed the girl in front of the frozen yogurt place, and Old Church Lady: God's Mystery!, where an old lady passed out during a healing at church, and people started laying hands on Evie because they thought she'd lost her gift.

"We love Evie," Brooke said.

I should probably sit somewhere else. I looked around for Leah. I didn't need a group of girls who obsessed over my sister while I was trying to adjust to a new school because my sister had bailed on me.

"Why hasn't she posted in two months?" Brooke asked. "That girl helped me get through having to spend the whole summer with my *brother*."

My summer, with *my* family: Mom opening the fridge and then forgetting what she wanted to get out of it, Mom trying to pray with me, lay hands on me. Mom dragging me to church when every time we went I pictured Evie kneeling at the prayer stations during communion. All summer, she was gone. She'd told us not to call.

The girls were practically cooing over the posts and comments on Evie's channel. What people said to her, what she said back, what it all meant. It was giving me a headache. They didn't get her. Maybe I'd never gotten her. My phone vibrated through the front pocket of my jeans, where it was wedged even though it barely fit. Why didn't girl's jeans have bigger pockets? I had metaphysical problems to solve, here.

I glanced at my phone. Evie's name, and the star emoji after it, and the notification: one new message.

I looked at Brooke and those girls. They'd eaten precisely half of each thing they bought for lunch, and now they were arguing about Evie's past. When she'd gone to prom, if she'd gone to prom, who'd she gone with, what she'd worn. Had she really helped deliver a baby in the girl's bathroom during the dance? (No. She was a faith-healer, not an EMT). Had she really helped some girl walk again? (Yes. It floored me just as much as it floored everyone else. Evie didn't get out of bed for a week after that.)

But, I had Evie's future in my pocket, the phone warm against my leg. I excused myself to the bathroom so I could read her text.

In the bathroom, Leah splashed her face at the sinks. She looked like she'd been crying. Had she been at the confessional? Next to her, a girl waved her hands underneath one of those motion detector paper towel dispensers.

I pulled Leah into the handicapped stall. I texted her so the other girl couldn't hear us. Evie texted, I typed.

Leah's phone vibrated. But she didn't look at my text right away. She scrolled, probably through Instagram. Commented on something. *Then* she looked at my text. I nudged her shoe with mine. Why was she being weird? This was *so* important.

What?!?!?!? She typed. And?

My fingers hovered over the keyboard. I haven't looked at it.

She frowned. So, do it, she typed.

I looked at Evie's message. "The gift's gone," it said.

I yelped, and then froze, hoping the girl trying to dry her hands hadn't heard me. The gift was gone? Was she serious? Is that why she left last summer? What did she mean "gone"? Like, she couldn't heal paraplegics anymore? Or she couldn't heal sunburns? Did it flicker? I needed details.

Leah leaned in so she could see my phone. "Dude," she whispered.

So *now* she was with me. Maybe she was a gossip like I was scared those other girls were. But, I let her slide. Bigger problems. Bigger fish. Etc.

"I know, right?" I whispered back.

I sent Evie a smiley emoji with a monocle and a tilted head. I sent her a GIF of a confused cat with floating question marks above its head. I texted her, but moved my phone away from Leah: "What are you going to do? Why didn't you tell me?"

The three dots that meant she was typing. I held my breath. The three dots disappeared, but no message arrived.

A knock on the stall door. A girl hopped from one foot to another. We didn't move. She knocked again.

"Seriously?" she said.

Leah and I came out of the stall, apologized, and left the bathroom.

"We'll talk about this later, yeah?" I asked. Leah paused and then nodded. Sharing secrets felt good. There wouldn't be a weird vibe in our room tonight, each of us separately trying to adjust to this strange new place. We had a mission.

Leah went to the confessional line when we got back to the cafeteria.

What was she trying to confess? Why during lunch? Would she tell everyone Evie's gift was gone? I didn't know Leah that well. Was I stupid to have trusted her with this?

I walked back to the lunch table with Brooke and those girls.

They'd moved on, had started discussing the gifts they had—or wished they had. It was hard to tell, coming in mid-way into the conversation. I zoned out.

Leah stood in the confession line behind a girl I knew from last period who'd done a YouTube make-up tutorial during class. I gripped Joan harder, strength by osmosis, so I wouldn't tear up, even though I knew I was being irrational. No wonder Mom was embarrassed of me.

Leah seemed fine this morning—her hands didn't shake when she applied the mascara she'd borrowed from me. I Snapchatted Leah a selfie with Brooke and her friends in the background: These girls. Help. Angry emoji. I sent her another snap right after because it was funnier—a picture of Brooke and those girls on their phones. I drew a heart and googly eyes. Caption: Evie's fan club. They don't even know. Winky face.

She didn't look at either snap.

Was I wrong to have pulled Leah into the Evie-text-fiasco? Had I misinterpreted her friendliness? I imagined future awkward evenings in our room. We no longer talked about Evie's mystery text or any mission it might send us on. Instead, Leah went to sleep while I was in the shower, without saying goodnight. She went to dinner without asking me to join.

Well, I wasn't going to tiptoe and cringe the whole year. Joan wouldn't—not even around the English army or the Catholic Church. I walked over to confront her with Joan's army behind me—spears and chainmail and medieval French.

“Hey,” I said. She looked up from her phone, and we watched the girl with almost perfect eyebrows get into the booth.

“We don't talk here,” she said.

Was she in the confessional line to avoid me? Maybe I really screwed up by showing her Evie's text. I didn't really know how to do friendship—I scared her, maybe? I never really needed to worry about scaring people at my other school. They were so focused on being terrified of Evie that they didn't really notice me.

“You OK? You mad at me?” I asked.

She frowned. “I mean, I like you fine, but—” she looked at the rosary that dangled from her hand. She seemed way more anxious now than she did when confronting the teacher in Bible. “You're a bit much. We're not on some quest together. We just met, Jules.”

We watched the girl come out of confession. The stars she'd applied with eyeliner were smudged.

“Leah,” I said, “that's not, I didn't mean—” She looked at her phone. “I'm sorry,” I said. “I know we're not—uh—questing.”

I should have kept Evie's text to myself.

She blushed, and I was mortified. I was not the kind of girl who begged people to be friends with me. I had Evelyn, I didn't really need anybody else. I didn't want to need Leah. It probably scared her. It scared me.

Leah turned back to the line. I didn't really have any options—I wasn't going to stand there like an idiot—not only would Mom be embarrassed, but Joan would laugh herself back from her charred stake if she knew. I didn't want to be that needy girl, and also I'd left my chips and guacamole at Brooke's table. I left Leah standing in line with her sins. At Brooke's table, all the girls were still talking about Evie's most recent post, which really wasn't all that recent.

I told Brooke I didn't know anything about Evie's posting schedule. Evie hadn't posted anything since I'd uploaded the video of the time her gift failed. It didn't make me believe in her less, but maybe she believed in herself less, and that's why she left.

"You have to join us," Brooke said. "We might or might not have a secret society."

"We do," Yazmín said.

Why would they tell me about their secret society? Did they want Evie to be their guest speaker? Also, if Evie's gift was gone, I needed to spend my energy on figuring that out, not on trying to figure out what to wear to a meeting held in a dark chamber where we sang songs or some bullshit.

Leah inched closer to the confessional. I was a loner, a one-or-two-friends-max kind of girl. And I liked Leah. I didn't have to be Evie's PR team in front of her.

"I don't do secret societies," I said.

Like I'd ever had a chance to decide whether I *do* them or not. The public school I'd gone to with Evie hadn't even had a Model U.N. or a Glee Club. They'd even shuttered the school newspaper due to funding issues.

And I was already behind because I'd gone to a public middle school—here I had to take Bible and Church History and Rhetoric of the Epistles.

The girls looked disappointed. I liked the power it gave me. I wasn't used to power. I was used to being power-adjacent, in limited circles—I might or might not have made out with a guy once because he was an @evicheals superfan. Maybe I would go to a meeting of Brooke's secret society.

The pastor came in and we said grace. Every head bowed, and peace settled over the cafeteria—a peace I recognized from one of Evie's successful healings: the little girl with the twisted ankle outside the Walmart, whose mom had cried to Evie that she couldn't afford the urgent care bill.

I was not the kind of girl who begged people to be friends with me. I had Evelyn, I didn't really need anybody else. I didn't want to need Leah. It probably scared her. It scared me.

"Do you heal, too?" Brooke asked. She spooned yogurt out of a plastic container.

I shook my head. I'd tried. I'd wanted to, to feel closer to Evelyn. When I tried, I could feel all the people judging me—"This'll be interesting," Mom said when I came to the dinner table one night with hands red and chapped like Evie's. So I stopped trying. I was weak. Evelyn didn't worry about people's opinions. She focused on being an instrument of God's healing grace, not on whether her healing anybody in the school parking lot would keep her from getting asked to prom. She was a better person than me. And the time her gift failed, I filmed and uploaded it to her channel.

"She posted!" Mary-Katherine said, an angelic harp chiming through her phone.

Somehow, I think this was meant unironically. I put my forehead on the table.

Everyone picked their phones up. Brooke jabbed me with her elbow and stuck her phone into my face. A new comment, at the bottom of the thread on one of Evie's early healing videos—she'd soothed a cigarette burn on the arm of some stoner kid in the school parking lot.

#tbt, the comment read, *to that time I won the war on drugs.*

Evie's followers were not into vintage political wit. She wouldn't post that. She'd tell me privately, but Evie knew her audience. She understood the performance of the whole thing.

"She didn't though," I said. "That kid kept smoking; his arm just hurt less."

And that wasn't her post, I wanted to say. *Tbh*.

Who had control of her account, though? She kept those passwords locked down.

"What's she like off-camera?" Brooke asked.

"Same as on-camera," I said too quickly, heat splotching my cheeks. Brooke noticed I was flustered and said nothing.

I didn't tell them about how Evie would lie awake at night, wondering why she had a gift, and what she would do if the gift ever left her. Evie recognized that a gift was not a power she could command. She used it when she could, as a ministry, but she didn't use it to try to get out of class or the SAT. At public school, the gift made her less popular. Here, people loved her like I loved my girl Joan.

The other girls—my first-day guide with the bad haircut included—idolized Brooke and her group. After Evie, they had the most social media followers in the school, the girl said. And now Brooke and her friends were indebted to me. If I needed to sneak out to find Evie, they could cover for me. They could help me with Rhetoric of the Epistles.

But I also knew Evie trusted me, and I couldn't betray her more than I already had, as irreparably as I already had. I decided to keep some secrets.

"When did she get her gift?" Mary-Katherine, Pentecostal asked.

"Fourteen. Summer camp," Brooke said, like she was reciting some IMDB profile.

"When she was twelve," I said. Brooke glared at me. "She healed a gecko that hatched too early." Evie with her teal-painted pinky on the gecko's tiny head, whispering. She'd worn that polish for the rest of the year, until she realized it was unnecessary—the gift couldn't be summoned. Then she wore the nail polish anyway, for her brand, the way Taylor Swift used to write 13 on her hand for concerts.

Mary-Katherine looked from me to Brooke, waiting for another blow-up. I was quiet—I certainly didn't have to prove anything to these girls. Brooke took her phone out, but her indifference was a total sham. She was seething.

Mary-Katherine leaned forward. "Was she scared when her gift came?"

I could do some damage here, to get back at Evie for bailing on me. Or, I could continue Evie's performance. I could keep up her fan base, to apologize for posting the video when her gift failed. I could show Evie I believed in her, even if I wasn't so sure about God all the time.

“No,” I said. “She sent me a reaction video.”

Yazmín’s hands fluttered at the tabletop. Mary-Katherine could barely contain herself. Even Brooke looked up from her phone.

“I deleted it,” I added quickly. I hadn’t, but it was private—the joy, the wonder, the faithful certainty. Secretly I wanted that, underneath all my pseudo-intellectual snarky jokes.

Yazmín put her phone down. I told another story—about the time when Mom brought her praise band to the house to show Evie off. I worried that she’d fail, and she didn’t. She healed all of them—the guitarist’s sore throat, the drummer’s blistered hands, the bassist’s swollen knee. They wrote a song for her.

Someone inside the confessional started crying. Leah still hadn’t checked my snap.

“Well, I can interpret tongues,” Brooke said, petulant.

Red flag. The attention had waned on her for a second and now she’s saying she had a gift. I should have known something was up then, but I didn’t let the idea fully form. I focused on the fact that Mary-Katherine and Yazmín wanted to worship Evie like I did, that they might miss her almost like I did.

None of the girls paid attention to Brooke. They kept asking questions about Evie: Did she have a boyfriend? What did he think of her gift?

“I was saved when I was two months old,” Brooke said, panicking. “When was Evie saved?”

Evie hadn’t been saved. Both of us were baptized when we were babies before we transferred to a church that believed in adult baptism. Evie was thinking about a public affirmation before she disappeared. I explained this.

Mary-Katherine and Yazmín scooted toward me. Being saved as young as possible, they told me, was a status symbol here, a mark of a mature Christian, and Evie was upending the whole system. I smiled, close-lipped, and kept silent. As if maturity in faith had more to do with time than it had to do with kindness and quiet certainty.

“We need to go,” Brooke said. The other girls didn’t move. “I’ll give you guys the answers to the Church History test.”

Everyone got up from the table.

I should have known something was up then, but I didn’t let the idea fully form. I focused on the fact that Mary-Katherine and Yazmín wanted to worship Evie like I did, that they might miss her almost like I did.

“The Council of Nicaea is confusing as shit,” Mary-Katherine said, an apology, kind of. Everybody at the other tables watched them go, and then turned to me with a mixture

of pity and contempt. It was good to know where you stood, I guess. People hated Joan, too—whole governments, whole empires. I could handle a cafeteria.

Leah slipped into the confessional, pulling the purple curtain shut behind her. A few minutes later she came out, cheeks red, and rushed out of the lunchroom without glancing at me.

I texted Evie.

People are fangirling over here, I typed. Heart-eye emoji.

No answer, even though I hadn't expected any. I put my phone in my pocket so I could feel it vibrate. Nothing. No tweets or snaps or texts or notifications the whole walk back to the empty table near the Christian martyrs. Joan's heavy chainmail left red marks on my skin. I was alone. ❄

Allison Pinkerton was the 2017 Kathy Fish Fellow at *SmokeLong Quarterly*. Her work was recently acknowledged as a “Distinguished Story” in *Best American Short Stories 2019*. Her fiction has been published in *Image*, *Passages North*, and elsewhere.

BATGIRL ELEGY

Kate O'Donoghue

She is plural, girl-beast, myth. Burn one cowl and another grows in its ashes. The night sky, dark with pollution, is a tapestry of capes. We flutter / in the dank Gotham breeze, cracking like hundreds of fist-sized flags staked in a field of dandelions and crabgrass. // Batgirl is dead. Long live Batgirl. // Long live her shadows, her blades, her hatred / of guns. Long live her longing, her lies. We: her many. We: her / prolonging— her glamor. She the rotting brain; we the fists. She the Christ; we the maudlins, the Marys, the immovable / rocks with their poisonous moss.

Kate O'Donoghue, a first-generation college grad, is an MFA candidate in poetry at Purdue University. She earned her BA at Muhlenberg College, and she is the recipient of a fellowship from the Bucknell Seminar for Undergraduate Poets. Her work has appeared in *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, *The Tangerine*, (*b*)*OINK* zine, and elsewhere. Her tweets have appeared @kate_odo.

MIAMI IS MY TIPPERARY: AN ESSAY IN EPISODES

Julie Marie Wade

*It's a long way to Tipperary,
It's a long way to go.
It's a long way to little Mary
To the sweetest girl I know!
Goodbye, Piccadilly,
Farewell, Leicester Square!
It's a long long way to Tipperary,
But my heart's right there.*

“The Mary Richards Years”

In my thirtieth year, Mary Tyler Moore turns seventy-three, the inverse of her symbolic thirty-seven. She publishes a second autobiography titled *Growing Up Again*, and the phrase blossoms as I turn it over on my tongue. What is there to do but grow up again—and again? In this cyclical world, we keep finding ourselves at new starting lines, no matter how far into the distance we have already run.

Consider that I began watching *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and reading the Mary Tyler Moore story nearly two decades before. Consider that I carried these women like two halves of the same heart alongside my own heart all those years. Consider that the heart is heavy. Even when it is light, the heart is heavy.



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Consider that, at the conclusion of the series to which she had given her name, Mary Tyler Moore teetered on the brink of becoming Mary Richards—single (after her second divorce), childless (after the death of her son)—a shadow-version of the woman she had spent so many years portraying, now a decade older and steeped in deeper griefs. It was another starting line, and this time she would have to run toward the future knowing precisely what she had lost.

Consider that, at the conclusion of my proto-Mary Richards years, these words from Mary Tyler Moore were posted on my bulletin board, included in my email signature line: “I’m not so fearful anymore. I’ve already seen the darkness.”

MTM had seen more darkness than MR, for all her empathy and compassion, could have imagined. I wondered if there were times she envied the character she played.

Season Highlights: Age 30

Since Pittsburgh was my Minneapolis, I drove back for the celebration and invocation of my Mary Richards years. It was both, of course. My beloved came with me, of course. This was a pilgrimage to kneel on old turf and draw a new starting line in the pliable earth.

At this time, in theaters everywhere, a film called *Julie & Julia* is playing. It’s a classic juxtaposition story, the twining of two women’s lives. And to my great delight, the narrative is nonfiction. Julie Powell wrote a memoir, subtitled *My Year of Cooking Dangerously*, in which she endeavored to cook—in 365 days in a tiny New York apartment—all 524 of Julia Child’s recipes from *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*.

Angie and I buy our tickets online to ensure they won’t sell out. She enjoys the film

well enough, but I am enraptured. “A name is a door!” I declare as we step out into the warm September air. It’s my birthday eve, when I’ve been known to wax poetic or simply ramble. “I love the way Julia Child, without ever knowing it, props open the door for another Julie in a future place and time!”

Angie kisses my cheek in the car. “Maybe someday you’ll write the memoir that braids your life with Mary’s.”

Here’s the part that sounds like a fairy tale, almost too serendipitous to believe. On my thirtieth birthday, Angie and I are wandering through Phipps Conservatory, one of our favorite places on earth. Perhaps it is an enchanted garden after all. Sunlight streams decadently through the windows. In one room, butterflies alight on our heads and hands.

When I stop to retrieve my bag from the locker in the lobby, my cell phone reports one missed call and a message. We sit on a bench outside, drenched in that same decadent sunlight, as a new voice spills into my ear: “Yes, I’m trying to reach Julie Marie Wade. This is Sarah Gorham from Sarabande Books. I’m calling in regards to the manuscript you sent us some months back.” She leaves her number and asks me to call her, the editor-in-chief of my favorite literary press.

It was another starting line, and this time she would have to run toward the future knowing precisely what she had lost.

There is a photograph of the moment just after, when I’ve dialed the number and am listening as the woman on the other end of the line tells me she is going to publish my book. I don’t remember Angie taking the picture. I can’t imagine how she found the wherewithal to document this moment that has given *momentous* its name. But I’m struck most by how young I look for thirty, how novice to be talking contracts and timelines with a publisher who doesn’t even know it’s my birthday as she gives me this most extraordinary gift.

Neither Mary is mentioned in my memoir, but I live in a subjunctive mood after all, where both have underwritten every line.

Season Highlights: Age 31

Remember the episode where we learn (it shocked me as a teen) that Mary lied on her résumé about having a college degree? This is one of the secrets our heroine hides in that capacious closet of hers, and Rhoda, who keeps secrets poorly and makes no secret of this fact, outs her friend to everyone in the newsroom. The revelation causes Mary much shame and dismay—in part because she only completed two years of college and in part, perhaps in larger part, because she was caught in a lie.

For viewers, the revelation reminds us of Mary’s vulnerability, her essential humanity. Like

us, she sometimes overcompensates, second-guesses herself, doubt that she will really make it on her own.

I thought about this plot point a lot in relation to my friend April. She never graduated from college either, and in many ways, her Mary Richards years resembled Mary's more than mine did. April had her own apartment, worked at a retail job downtown, and if Facebook was any indication, seemed to enjoy plenty of leisure time going on dates and out with friends from work. In all her posted snapshots, she was beaming, well-dressed and pretty and popular.

By my own thirty-first year, I had completed three degrees, and only one semester of coursework remained for my fourth. After that, the multi-lane highway of scholarly exploration narrowed to a single road: comprehensive exams, followed by dissertation preparation and defense, followed by the academic job market. Then, the road would fork dramatically. One route led toward unemployment or underemployment, years of working "outside the field" or "beside the field" while interviewing for positions "within." It was a painful version of nearby. We all knew people who had earned their doctorates only to begin adjuncting for multiple schools while managing their neighborhood Starbucks, struggling to pay down ever-compounding student debt. We all knew we could easily become them.

The other route was the coveted one, but daunting nonetheless: a tenure-track career at a single institution, a lifetime on the other side of the desk.

Angie and I were driving across town discussing this very conundrum—the way the long pursuit of a particular destination can become more frightening as its proximity nears. You're so close, but you feel so far. Then, you get closer still, and as the longing grows, so does the fear that courts it. You want to cover your eyes, but at the same time, you can't bear the thought of missing it; neither can you bear the thought of meeting it head on.

Suddenly, she switched lanes and said, "Let's go see Carol."

Carol was Mary Richards at fifty with a rock-and-roll band. Carol was Mary Richards with three dogs and a pick-up truck and a funky old house in the Highlands. Carol was Mary Richards on her third career, revving the engine for her own final showdown with those comprehensive exams.

This part, too, sounds like a fairy tale, but I promise it's true: When she opens the door, Carol is not alone in her funky old house with her collection of globes and her books water-falling from the slanted shelves. No, tonight she is accompanied by everyone we know—peers and professors, neighbors and friends—and there where the dining room table once stood is the band. A name has proven too hard to choose, so they go by "That Band." The placeholder title stuck like super glue.

Matt, a semiotician who styles hair for a living and writes songs on the side, is working the snare drums with a soft, steady beat. Elijah, the philosopher who studies autodidacts like Rafinesque, strums his acoustic guitar. As everyone is shouting "Surprise!" and "Happy birthday!" he leans into the mike and begins to croon—yes, *croon*—a song he has

learned by ear only the day before, listening to crackly YouTube uploads:

Who can turn the world on with her smile?

Who can take a nothing day and suddenly make it all seem worthwhile?

Well, it's you girl, and you should know it,

With each glance and every little movement you show it!

Now everyone is clapping and singing along as the song crescendos to its glorious promise and premonition:

Love is all around, no need to waste it

You can have the town, why don't you take it?

You're gonna make it after all!

“They chose the second season lyrics,” I whisper to Angie, “the ones that sound so much more certain about everything.”

“Well,” she whispers back, “this is your second season.”

I am still wiping my eyes when Carol, who is an art therapist and a caterer-turned-drama teacher and Humanities scholar, says, “May I interest you in a Brandy Alexander?”

The tears resume, and I nod and cry all the way into her kitchen where she places the cocktail, which I have never tasted until this night, into my trembling hand. And for a moment, everything is absolutely right with the world.

Season Highlights: Age 32

Now let's return to the second half of that episode where we learn that Mary has lied on her résumé. After some inevitable ribbing, Mr. Grant escorts Mary (“if that's even your real name”) into his office and explains that he didn't hire her because he thought she had a college degree. This rings true to the viewer at home. After all, we remember how it began. We were there, watching Mary hand him the sheet of paper, watching him peruse it casually as he offered her a drink. We laughed when she asked for a Brandy Alexander, then again when he was forced to offer coffee instead.

We all thought Lou hired Mary for her spunk, even though he claimed he hated it.

But here we are, several years deep in the series, and Lou reveals something that happened outside our purview: “I hired you because on your way into my office, you bumped into a desk and said excuse me. I thought, *There must be something special about a person who's kind to an inanimate object.*”

I was touched by that scene the many times I had seen it until, as a thirty-two-year-old

woman with a newly minted Ph.D., I went out on the job market hoping to be hired for my credentials, not for how nice I could be to a piece of furniture.

During my first interview of the new era, I sit in a hotel desk chair while two faculty members recline against the headboard of a bed and the third perches awkwardly on the radiator. They each hold a clipboard and take turns asking questions from a standardized list. “This is for the EEOC,” one woman on the bed explains. “We have to ask each job candidate the same questions in the same order, so please excuse any redundancies or non sequiturs.”

I recite my strengths and weaknesses; I imagine myself into difficult teaching scenarios; I describe my writing practice and plans for future publication. Everyone is cordial and professional, but there is no spark. When the timer rings, and I exit the room, I cannot even recall their names. I doubt by the end of the day that any one of them will remember mine.

On another interview, I am flown to a college in eastern Pennsylvania during a light snowstorm. I wear my Mary Richards-inspired boots and coat, and I ride the long distance from the airport in a town car driven by a man in a leather cap.

“Do you mind my asking what you’re interviewing for?”

“It’s a professorship,” I say, “at the college. If I get this job, I’ll teach poetry and creative nonfiction for a living.”

He eyes me in the mirror. “No offense, but you look a little young for a job like that. Aren’t professors supposed to have elbow pads and silver temples and walk around muttering to themselves?”

“Well, give me time. We have to grow into our foibles, I think. Or maybe we just have to earn the right to show them.”

The snow is coming down harder now, but softer, too, those big storybook flakes I associate with *It’s a Wonderful Life* and scene transitions from *Mary Tyler Moore*. The driver has been instructed to drop me off at a bed and breakfast on the outskirts of town where I’ll check in and have a couple of hours to relax and freshen up before the official campus interview begins.

“Good luck!” he offers, tapping his cap and placing my suitcase on the wooden porch beneath the eaves. A steady curtain of snow surrounds me on all sides as I knock on the door and attempt to peer through the lacy curtains. That’s when I notice a sign taped to the window:

B & B IS CLOSED BETWEEN 12 AND 2 DAILY. CHECK-INS PLEASE RETURN AT AN APPROPRIATE TIME.

I slide up my sleeve: 12:05, the watch-face reads.

First, I stand and gaze out at the road: No sidewalks. Cars are beginning to skid. It’s a two-lane highway with rusted guardrails; beyond them, miles of newly flocked firs.

Next, I pace the length of the porch, rub my hands together, wonder what Mary Richards would do. *Maybe this is part of the interview? Maybe there’s a camera in that Christmas cactus that’s recording me now. Am I patient enough? Am I rugged enough? Do I have the*

kind of stamina a job like this will require? And am I kind, most importantly, to the flower pots and the wind chimes and even the doormat that proclaims its dubious WELCOME?

At 2 PM sharp, when the student worker arrives to unlock the door, he's plainly shocked to see me there: a young woman perched on her suitcase, a book splayed open on her lap, and her ears nearly as red as the lone fire hydrant at the foot of the drive. No wonder Mary Richards wore a hat.

But in fairy tales as in television and sometimes in real life, magic belongs to the province of threes. We don't know how many jobs Mary Richards called about before she came to Minneapolis—and remember, the original secretarial position at WJM had already been filled before she arrived.

A few weeks later, I'm waiting in the lobby of the Palmer House in Chicago, a hotel so fancy I'm certain I don't belong. That's when I see them, though they don't see me: the faculty who are here to interview me for this job. They've just flown in from Florida, and they don't know how to dress for the cold: sneakers instead of boots; hoodies instead of coats. They look ragtag and rumpled with wind-burned faces, but they are animated, too—three men talking with their hands.

When I'm summoned to the suite, I find no clipboards. John sits sideways in his chair, thumps the packet of papers on his lap. "It's your application," he says. "Lots of good stuff in here." I love the Massachusetts in his voice, the snowy-white wonder of his hair.

Les is fiddling with the thermostat, and Campbell is filling a pitcher with water, and someone calls out, "By the way, we do have women in our department! You wouldn't be the only one!"

I nod. I'm familiar with the faculty. In fact, my favorite poet teaches there. For months, since I saw the job posting, but truthfully long before, I've been dreaming of Miami, doodling palm trees in the margins of every draft. It's dangerous, I know, to want something so much, to yearn for this job the way I once yearned for Mary Tyler Moore's autographed picture.

"Before we get started, can we offer you something to drink? Water? Coffee?"

Their faces are as open as three envelopes, their lips unclasped and smiling. "I'll have a Brandy Alexander," I quip. And before I can add the "Just kidding," I hear John laugh.

"Nice one. Mary Tyler Moore." He nods, and we all settle a little deeper into our chairs. I'm at ease here in their presence, surprised by how naturally we fall into conversation. And John's words linger in the air, as if he had dubbed me ceremoniously: "Nice one, Mary Tyler Moore."

Season Highlights: Age 33

Mary Tyler Moore was thirty-three the year *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* premiered on television. Christians I knew called it "the Messianic year" because Jesus was thirty-three at the time of his Crucifixion and Resurrection. That life and death stuff was rough, to be sure, but Mary's return to television couldn't have been easy either.

The show's producers were worried that viewers would have trouble separating Mary Richards from Laura Petrie. Mary herself must have worried about "making it on her own" without Dick Van Dyke by her side. They looked so good together on screen, so seamless in their depiction of a husband and wife who loved each other madly and knew their way around a song and dance. Their son Ritchie had always seemed an after-thought to me, like maybe the producers of the show worried that viewers wouldn't accept a happily married couple without a child.

Laura Petrie had one son named Ritchie. Mary Tyler Moore had one son named Richie. The spelling was different, but I wondered if the name choice was a subtle homage. The two boys would have even been about the same age, and names, as we know, are a way of carrying someone with us.

When I was thirty-three, I began a tenure-track job at a Research One university, knowing much would be expected of me. Christians I knew said this was always the case when much had been given to someone. It seemed such a great leap to begin working with graduate students on their own manuscripts when, at thirty-two, I had still been a graduate student myself, just finishing a manuscript of my own.

"But remember," Angie said, "they don't know you as the student you were. They know you as the teacher you are now, the teacher you'll be for them. It's not like Laura Petrie. They didn't watch you on another series first."

A little joke, in the spirit of Rhoda: *What's the difference between a fresh start and a trial by fire?* (Do you give up?) *Smoke.*

Before my first class, I smoked a cigarette, something I hadn't done in years. I learned to flick a lighter when Nancy at Lamonts let me light cigarettes for her on the loading dock. She took deep drags and cautioned between them: "Make sure you never start this shit."

Maybe this was how mores always changed: slowly, by the power of omission. First, we stop looking for it, and eventually we don't even notice the thing that isn't there.

On *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, everyone smoked. It wasn't a big deal. The cigarettes seemed natural, elegant without being contrived. A decade later, on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, no one smoked. It would have been a different show—grittier, grimmer somehow—if anyone had. Maybe this was how mores always changed: slowly, by the power of omission. First, we stop looking for it, and eventually we don't even notice the thing that isn't there.

In 1991, Nick at Nite released *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, and then *The Mary Tyler*

Moore Show the following year. I was already primed to receive them, already watching everything that aired on that singular blast-from-the-past station, yet it took several weeks before I realized the two female leads were played by the same person.

“Dad!” I called him into the room, feeling proud but incredulous, too, like I had just solved a caper but didn’t yet believe what I had learned. “The voiceover says Mary Tyler Moore right before her husband trips over the hassock—” that’s what we called it in our house, a *hassock*—“and that’s the same name the screen shows right before we see her in the car.”

My father laughed. “Well, no kidding, Smidge! First, she starred on his show, and then she did so well she got her own show after. That’s called working your way up.”

This memory returns to me in the Publix parking lot, where I’m smoking an American Spirit before I minty-fresh myself and drive to school. How had I forgotten something like that? Even after my dad confirmed they were the same person, I refused to accept *The Dick Van Dyke Show* came first.

“Just look, Dad. She’s obviously older there. She’s all grown up,” I said, pointing to Laura Petrie. Her figure looked fuller to me, and her voice sounded deeper, perhaps from all that smoking. (Kent cigarettes were a sponsor of the show!) Everything about her, from her wardrobe to the way she moved to the way she spoke, made her seem older to me than her alter ego.

And now here I was, in my thirties, smoking like a twenty-something in my car, feeling younger and less prepared than ever. Perhaps I needed to channel my inner Laura Petrie, the woman who *seemed* older, who came across as confident and poised. (And Laura wasn’t known for her disastrous dinner parties either...) I stubbed out my cigarette and started the engine. I would walk into that seminar room, smile at everyone, and do my best not to burn anything down.

Later in the year, I’m talking with some students after class. This ritual now feels as natural as stars lighting up on 1960s television. One student asks, “Did you always know you wanted to be a writer when you grew up?”

I nod. “The writing part was always a given for me, but not the teaching. I didn’t have any idea about teaching until I was granted a fellowship in my twenties.”

“So, what did you think you were going to do—you know, to earn a living?”

They are looking at me with such anticipation, waiting for me to pass down a piece of my own story, which might somehow be useful to them as they continue assembling theirs. And how can I deny them anything, my students, when I have spent my whole life with a tiny Steno pad in hand, a pencil tucked behind my ear?

“Well, my parents wanted me to be a doctor—the medical kind—and I wanted to be a private detective or a spy.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Your parents are probably proud of you anyway, right? I mean, you have a good job, and people call you doctor sometimes.”

“Let’s put it this way: Me not going to med school is *not* the most disappointing thing my parents have had to face.”

They laugh, but I can’t tell if they know what I’m really getting at. Some part of me doesn’t want them to know.

“Well, are you ever sad you don’t get to solve mysteries as your job?”

“Who says I don’t?” We’re standing in the breezeway, and I can smell jasmine flowers now and also the salt from Biscayne Bay. “Everything we read, everything we write—all of it turns out to be an ongoing investigation—into the world and into ourselves.”

On the last day, one of those students brings doughnuts and coffee to share. “To fortify us for the stakeout,” she grins.

Season Highlights: Age 34

When my mother was thirty-four, she had a daughter. People were always asking her, “What took you so long?” She didn’t want to say, “Cancer.” She didn’t want to say, “Heartache.” She didn’t want to say, “For the longest time, I feared I would never get what I wanted most.”

I never wanted to say to my mother, “See? You still didn’t.” But my actions spoke for me.

When I was thirty-four, the laws changed, and a door long closed, padlocked even, suddenly creaked ajar. “Marry me?” I asked Angie. “Marry me?” she asked me. We planned a small ceremony at an old haunt, a place we used to frequent in graduate school.

That’s when I sent a letter to my parents. I told them I was stepping off the page into a story I never expected to inhabit. Marriage was not for people like me, for lives like mine. But then, just as suddenly, it was.

Before Angie and I left for Washington, a graduate student stopped by my office. “I wanted to give you something for your wedding,” Jan said. “There’s a scarf I knitted for Angie, because I know it’s going to be cold there. And for you—” she made a grand gesture—“it seemed only fitting that I should knit you the Mary Richards tam.”

There it was, in my hand, what could have been mistaken for the original artifact: all the same colors, the perfect patterning of blue and black and green. “Jan! I don’t know what to say! Maybe for the first time in my whole life—I don’t know what to say!”

“Say you’ll wear it in good health and toss it every chance you get.” I slip the tam onto my head, slant it at a jaunty angle. “See?” Jan says, mirroring my grin. “It’s your Mary/merry/marry tam. Any way you say it is true.”

Jan is older than I am. She has already lived through her Mary Richards years and proceeds in the world with grace. I bet she has even hugged and mended some furniture in her day.

I tell Jan the story of Mary Tyler Moore’s aunt, wanting her to be warm in the Midwest. “She didn’t make the tam, though. She bought it for Mary. And Mary loved it so much

that she kept it all those years. Then, after her divorce, she moved back to New York City, and it was stolen from the storage locker at her apartment building.”

Jan gapes at me. “You mean, nobody knows what happened to the tam? I just figured it must be in a museum or something.”

I shake my head. “Julie!” Jan exclaims. “*This* is the mystery you’ve been called to solve!” It snowed on my wedding day, and I wore the tam. My parents never wrote back.

Season Highlights: Age 35

When I am thirty-five, I fall hard. Most of my falls have been hard, it’s true, but most of my falls have also been metaphors: falling in love, falling from grace, falling asleep or in line or out of fashion. I fall all the time.

But this is what they mean by “slip and fall” on billboards at bus stops and during commercials on live TV. Nothing metaphorical about it. I slip on a flooded tile floor. I fall over a ledge, land upright like the letter L. A shattering sound followed by a more alarming silence. Something inside me has severed.

I tell the paramedics the Miami Book Fair is tomorrow, that I’m scheduled to read with Roger Reeves. “Superman?” one of the young men asks, skeptical.

“In a way,” I say. “He’s a poet of prodigious abilities.”

“I’m afraid you may have to sit this one out,” another says as he scoops me up on the board, then lays me flat on the stretcher. His metaphor has a dingy, literal cast to it, and for the first time since falling, I cringe.

“Are you in pain, ma’am?”

“Not physically, no.”

I am not thinking of Mary now, my faithful touchstone when traveling an unfamiliar path. I am not thinking of Mary at all. Angie is holding my hand over the silver rail of the hospital bed, and soon our friends John and Cindy appear.

“What a way to spend a Friday night!” I say, and then we are chatting as if nothing is wrong, as if this room is a perfectly natural place for us to gather. I keep asking John for a coffee, and he keeps saying it might interfere with the morphine, and then a woman comes in wearing the telltale white coat with the stethoscope around her neck, and I giggle—the morphine riding through my veins like a trolley car now—“I’m a doctor, too,” I tell her proudly.

“Is that a fact?”

“Ph.D.,” Angie clarifies.

“Which means I’m better at metaphors than real life!”

“I see. Well, I find it remarkable that you broke both leg bones and came to us smiling. Most people would have come to us screaming.”

“It didn’t hurt,” I say. “*Really.*” The morphine was just to numb me for a series of X-rays.

“Be that as it may,” she says, “I’m getting the feeling you’re one of those glass-half-full kind of people. Life gives you lemons, you make—”

“Lemon bars!” I beam. And now, for just a moment before they wheel me away, I think of Mary—the way I didn’t have to think of Mary to find her manifest within me, like the secular saint she was.

“I still want to read with Roger Reeves tomorrow!” My voice is close, but my body feels very far away.

First, there is a cast, but not the kind that anyone can sign. Then, there is a surgery, followed by a blue vinyl wheelchair on loan from Campus Health. For a few weeks, I get to take a turn as Ironside. I tell my students I’m out to crack the case, but no one seems to catch the reference.

“Raymond Burr?—Anyone?—*Bueller*?” Can it be they don’t recognize the second reference either?

Then, there are crutches and a walking boot. John takes me to pick it up at strange warehouse space called Hanger Prosthetics. The way Mary and Lou would do, no doubt, we stop for Jackson’s famous chocolate milkshakes on the way home.

Then, physical therapy: weeks and weeks of trying to climb “the stairs to nowhere”: three on one side, then a landing, three on the other side. I pretend I’m looking out the window at something grand, but it’s just a Subway and the biggest speed bump in the strip mall parking lot.

“You can take this at your own pace,” Chad says. “Recovery is never a race.”

“Oh, but it is, in my case. I’ve got Minneapolis in just one month.”

Even more than the Miami Book Fair, I was looking forward to a writer’s conference in the Mary Richards city. I’d had it starred on my calendar for more than a year.

“Minneapolis, huh? Never been. What’s so special about it?”

“It’s the city where *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was set.”

He shrugged. “Never heard of it.”

Chad was older than I was, but not by much. Sometimes I forget that I am older than I am, too.

“And you’re going to be doing a lot of walking there?”

“Around the famous lake, of course, then all the way to Mary’s apartment house.”

Chad nods and holds my ankle steady. He wants me to practice putting all my weight into my left foot again. “It’s good to have a goal,” he says, “so I’m going to pretend that I have some idea what you’re talking about.”

Of course there is no 119 North Weatherly, that lilting address Mary recites on the show. The real house is a multi-million dollar, single-family dwelling at 2104 Kenwood Parkway. (What’s in a name indeed!)

“Are you sure you’re up for a walk like this?” Angie asks when we map the distance from our hotel to the landmark I’ve waited more than twenty years to see. “GPS says it’s 2.8 miles each way.”

“Let’s do it!”

The air is brisk for April, and I’m thrilled to see my breath. I tell Angie how I wanted to apply to Carleton College as an undergrad, how eager I was to study in the Mary Richards city.

“So, why didn’t you?”

“My parents, you know. They were against me going anywhere out of state.”

She stuffs her hands into her pockets. “I think your parents were against you going anywhere out of *sight*.” Of course she’s right.

We walk on together, and our bodies cast long shadows as the road ahead of us begins to rise. “You still good with this? I think it might be a bit of a climb.”

I think but don’t say—because I think it might be too saccharine to say—*everything worthwhile is*.

Before the fall, I could walk three miles in forty minutes, easy. I could walk three miles without thinking about it, three miles without chasing a breath. This time it takes two hours, and my ankle swells to a boulder inside my shoe. I can feel the place where my leg is bolted back together—the tightness in the joint and the way the cold has climbed inside.

“I can call a taxi any time,” Angie says. “Want me to download the Uber app?” When I shake my head, she intercedes, clasping my wrist with her hand: “I *really think* that’s what Mary Richards would do.”

But then, before I can refuse her again, the house appears—all 9500 square feet, 7 bedrooms, and 6.5 baths of it—and no one is circling the block or congregating on the corner. No one is gawking and loitering but us. And on this quiet weekday afternoon, I ask Angie to take my picture from every angle, especially beside the FOR SALE sign.

“You could tell everyone back home you bought it, that you’ll rent out the place for writing retreats and other special occasions.”

And because Angie is a poet, too, she knows exactly what I mean when I exclaim, jubilant despite the throbbing: “This is the thing I came for—the thing itself and not the myth!”

Season Highlights: Age 36

When I am thirty-six, my beloved and I move into a high-rise apartment on the beach. We’ve been dreaming of a place like this since we first arrived in South Florida, and now, three years later, the rents are right, and a unit comes available just as our old lease expires.

At the new place, we can stroll out to a backyard of sand and surf. Our balcony faces the city lights, overlooks the Intracoastal Waterway. Far below us, cars glide past, pearlescent on the narrow string of Ocean Drive.

For thirteen years across four different states, we’ve lived in funky old houses converted to apartments that favor charm over modern convenience. We’ve had a single bedroom, a single bath, a fold-out couch in the living room for visitors. If they’re friend enough to be staying with us, they know I’m bound to mention Mary Richards as I stow the sofa cushions and produce a pair of pillows from behind the closet door.

The episode “Mary Moves Out” was written at the beginning of season six when the owners of the house at 2104 Kenwood Parkway grew weary of all the MTM fans loitering on their corner, driving by slowly and around the block again, posing for picture after picture outside their famous home. They posted IMPEACH NIXON signs in the yard and hung them from the now-iconic Palladian windows to prevent MTM camera crews from gathering new footage.

This practical need for updated exterior shots was channeled in more symbolic ways into Mary’s character. Rhoda and Phyllis had both moved out and on in previous seasons, and as Georgette told Mary in her sweet, literal way, “If you move, I might have to stop coming here all together.” We don’t know if Mary likes her new neighbors, but we know she must miss the camaraderie we all associate with that warm, bright space, its high ceilings and low bookshelves and the pleasing step down into her living room.

Angie and I were excited to try out the anonymity, or at least the greater privacy, of high-rise life. The hallways in our new building were so long and quiet, the appliances so new and shiny, and the glass was storm-resistant in every unit, too—a luxury in coastal Florida.

There were other amenities as well, similar to those Mary raves about when she describes her new place to Mr. Grant. Our building had a pool, a sauna, a hot tub, a gym. It was more urban and contemporary than any place we had ever lived before.

I thought of Mary—how could I not?—when the movers had finished unloading our furniture and stacking our boxes inside the front door, when I could no longer hear the last hand truck rolling away. Angie was still at work that day, so it was just me with our kitties, alone in the cavernous room, alone with the spectacular view.

Even without the IMPEACH NIXON signs, I reasoned, wasn’t it time for Mary to enjoy a few perks of her middle thirties—earning a little more, paying a little more, updating the interiors, too? Like hers, our balcony faced other high-rises across the road, and I chuckled at the thought of Ted encouraging Mary to “sunbathe in the nude out there.” When she resists, he counters, “So you’ll do it at night!”

Yet despite everything favorable about the move, Mary confides to herself (we are merely eavesdropping now), “I don’t like it.” This is another way of saying, “I don’t like change” and “This is going to take some getting used to.” And while I’m sure we too are going to fall in love with our life at the beach, I sit down on the bare floor and feel—what is it exactly?—something poignant and imprecise.

Mary explains to Lou: “I felt this way about my old place when I moved from my old old place.”

Then, she hangs her letter M, of course. Her friends come to take her out to dinner, but Mary tells them all to go ahead without her, that she’ll catch up soon. That’s when she takes the hammer, holds the nails in her teeth, and makes that first resolute mark on her new wall.

I don’t have a J of my own—not even on a mug or a Christmas tree ornament—which strikes me as strange after all these years. Was Mary’s M a gift? Why had no one ever

thought to give me a J? But on further reflection, it seemed more likely that Mary made the M or bought it for herself as celebration or invocation of some personal milestone. Maybe I would make myself or buy myself a J when I got tenure, *if*.

For now, I reach into my satchel and take out the books that bear my name. Publishing is always a bit like moving into a new place, forging a new relationship with the work that once belonged to you and you alone. For all the exhilaration, there comes a moment like this one, a moment in a quiet room, just you and the letters you once put down upon a page.

I make a crescent moon of my own volumes, touch their covers one by one. I have never written the book I thought I was writing, never the book I set out to write. This, too, is a poignant, imprecise feeling, but I remind myself that I have lettered in something after all.

Season Highlights: Age 37

My friend Linda sends me a birthday card with a bright 37 on the cover. Inside she has written: “Here’s to your milestone! Are you any closer to solving the mystery of what happens at the end of those Mary Richards’s years?”

I write back: “This is my fifth year teaching in a tenure-track job, which forces the issue: either they decide to keep me, *permanently*, and I become an Associate Professor—sounds a lot like ‘Associate Producer,’ don’t you think?—or they have to let me go.”

Unlike Mary, who was fired without any warning, I’ve always known my day of reckoning would come, that my hiring at the university was provisional in terms far more carefully controlled and enforced than Mr. Grant’s grumpy proviso: *If I don’t like you, I’ll fire you!* (But they do! I know they do!) *If I don’t like you, I’ll fire you!* (But I do! I have found, as they say, “my people”! I have found, as I say, my WJM at last!)

The tenure application process is slow and methodical, consuming most of the academic year. It requires me to provide extensive documentation of my publishing, teaching, and service over the last half-decade. As I scan poems and essays at the copy machine to create the requisite PDFs, I’m reminded of the girl I was at eleven, twelve, thirteen, hoarding her change to feed the great behemoth called Xerox in the back corner of the library. Though everything is uploaded now instead of collated with folders in three-ring binders, compiling a tenure file requires the same tenacity and comprehensiveness of a young fan building her tribute archive.

On January 25, 2017, I am teaching my afternoon poetry course, followed by my evening multi-genre seminar. It’s a precious time away from texts and emails, those eight hours of face-to-face and voice-to-voice exchange. But while I’m packing my bags to travel from one classroom to the next, I notice the red numbers rising on my phone. There are 16 texts so far, no make that 18, 20...

I’ve either won a major literary prize, or someone I love has died. The thought is so clear I fear I have spoken it aloud.

I touch the screen and wait for the words to rise. *I'm so sorry* is all I see. Then, I scan them. I search for my beloved's name. She has written, too: *I just heard...* Now I can breathe again, but I can't face the unknown, not yet. As I climb the stairs and greet my students, I'm thinking of Georgette at the passing of Chuckles the Clown: "Funerals always come too late." It was funny how she said it, but the sentiment was no less profound. I was late already, to whatever loss it was, and I would have to be a little later.

I remember, too, how I used the computer in class that night, which was uncharacteristic for me. There was a screen that slid down and a digital projector, and as I dimmed the lights and lowered the screen, one of the students exclaimed, "Movie time!"

There was a certain cinematic feeling to the space, and we were writing ekphrastically after all, writing in response to images. I had prepared a slideshow, but I encouraged my students to seek out images on their own that inspired them. "It doesn't have to be a well-known work of art like Monet's water lilies or Degas's ballerinas," I said. "You can write in response to any visual text that moves you—paintings, photographs, film, even television."

"Can you give us an example?" someone asked.

"Sure." I nodded. A quick Google Image search, and there she was, on the big screen that spanned the width of our white board—Mary Tyler Moore as Mary Richards, tossing her tam high into the air, the iconic moment captured on film, then frozen in time.

"Does anyone recognize this image?" I asked. They weren't sure. They wanted to check their phones, but I wouldn't let them. "It's not a test," I said. "It's OK if you've never seen it before. Just tell me what you see. Better still: write it down."

My students look younger tonight than usual—something about the screen-glow perhaps—and I wonder if I look older, too—unfathomably old to them. Soon, I realize, I will have students born in the twenty-first century, with no recollection of any time at all before the new millennium. Unless they make a conscious practice of looking back, the 1970s will seem as far away and irrelevant to their lives as the Middle Ages.

"She looks jubilant," a young woman says about Mary.

"Did she just graduate or something?" a young man chimes in.

"There's a neon sign in the background, but I can't quite make out what it says. Maybe the Krispy Kreme doughnuts are hot, but I'm kind of doubting they had them back then."

"Is that what they mean by a pea coat?" This is Florida after all.

"She's older than you think, but she still has a youthful spirit."

"I think she looks like someone told her to just throw caution to the wind."

"She has a pom-pom on her hat. Is that significant?"

"The color scheme is almost patriotic, like they're trying to say something about an all-American girl."

"She looks Latina to me." This is Miami after all.

"She looks like she had a secret, and then she let it go. It's out of her hands now."

Cristian, in the back row, Cristian who never volunteers, raises his hand. When I call on him, he says: "Prof, she looks like you."

The room grows quiet as they regard at me, and I in turn regard the image: Mary, me, juxtaposed. A few of the other students concur.

I tell them to go home and write their stories, their poems, their personal essays inspired by something they have seen. Keats had his Grecian urn, and Carole Maso had Frida Kahlo, and Mark Doty had the Dutch still-lives (or are they *still-lives*, which makes me think of that which is still living), and Brenda Miller had Edward Weston's photograph that became the cover of her book *Season of the Body*, and Rick Barot had the Madonna holding the child who in turn was holding a tuber fresh from the earth in the poem I love, "Child Holding Potato."

"There is no telling," I tell them, "what might inspire you. But once you find it, make your readers see it, too." But that's not enough, is it? "Make sure we *feel* it."

"And can we write about her if we want?" Audree asks, pointing to the screen—"you know, *ekphrastically*?" I nod. "Great! There's something like old-timey about her but also appealing. I was thinking maybe she could be a vampire or something!"

When everyone has left the room, I am still standing in front of the screen in semi-darkness. We're the last class of the night, and the building empties quickly. Sometimes it's creepy. Sometimes it's peaceful. Tonight it's hard to tell which.

I reach for my phone, knowing I must face the loss at hand now: 48 messages, 50. There are voicemails, too.

I click the first text, which is the most recent in a long row: *She was a legend and a comic genius. You were the first person I thought of when I read that she had passed.* And there it was: *RIP MTM.*

My hand finds its way to my heart again.

She turned the world on with her smile, and you do, too. Thinking of you tonight.

I look over my shoulder, and she is still there: Mary, full-screen; Mary, indelible.

Linda wrote: *You have my deepest sympathies. She was an inspiration to many people, but she passed you a special torch, and you've carried it all these years.*

How could I bring myself to turn off the screen now, to power down like the laminated instructions insisted I should?

She was 80. That's a long, good life, especially for someone with diabetes. Still, I know this fact doesn't make it any easier to lose your heroine. I don't like to think of a world without Mary Tyler Moore in it.

So I leave the screen on, knowing that later tonight someone will come into this room—to clean it perhaps—and will flip the switch that turns everything dark, quiets the hum from the high projector.

I knew you'd be teaching today, and I thought maybe that's for the best. Mary found her calling in television news, and you found your calling writing and teaching. The classroom is your WJM.

But whoever comes, I am hoping that person will catch a glimpse of Mary, perhaps remember her from another time or simply remember her going forward.

April wrote: *Oh, Julie. It breaks my heart, as I know it breaks yours. This was never the ending we wanted for your Mary Richards years.*

And I don't know how it took me so long—a quarter-century is no brief spell—but when I saw “Richards” there at the end of her name, I recognized for the first time the implicit tribute to Mary's real-life son. *Of course!* She kept her name as the character's first name, and she took Richard, her son's name, and made it the last. Mary Richards was another way of carrying him with her every day into the role she played.

Director's Note: *Tonight a thirty-seven-year-old woman opens the moon roof in her Honda CRV and lets a well-known theme song pour its full-pitched elegy into the clear Miami night. The woman is not praying, but as she drives north on Biscayne Boulevard, she imagines Mary in the seat beside her, riding shotgun to her very own story. She may thank her. She may even speak the words of gratitude aloud. If she had a hat, she would toss it through the open portal over her head, but this is Florida after all, where it is never cold, so she tosses a brightly-colored kerchief instead.*

“Series Finale”

When the final episode of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* aired, our eponymous star was forty years old. She had, without knowing it, exactly half her life ahead of her.

I marvel as I think about it now: what we most often celebrate of Mary Tyler Moore comes from the first half of her life. Ahead were so many new starting lines, critical acclaim in dramatic roles—the film *Ordinary People*, the Broadway play *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* She would dance with the Russian ballet. She would travel to Rome with her mother and have a private audience with the Pope. And yes, her marriage was going to end and her son was going to die, but she was also going to find love again in her forties and spend the rest of her life with the person who saw her most clearly.

Robert Levine once said in an interview that he remembered watching *The Dick Van Dyke Show* as a kid and having a crush on Laura Petrie. Of course he never dreamed he would grow up to marry the woman who had portrayed her. Life is funny that way. I too remembered watching *The Dick Van Dyke Show* as a kid and the great relief it was not to have a crush on Laura Petrie. But maybe, just maybe, I would let the walnuts spill from my own closet someday. I would find the sparkling one that held my own strange and mysterious power. Then, I would put on my Capri pants and dance with abandon.

The night Mary Tyler Moore died, I went home to my high-rise apartment and watched with my beloved Episode 168, aptly titled “The Last Show.” Rhoda and Phyllis return to comfort Mary as she prepares to produce her final newscast for WJM.

The cast rehearsed all week delivering their lines without emotion so that, on the night of the live taping, their tears would be real, not forced. The actors wept through into their parts. Is it Lou Grant who murmurs, “I treasure you people,” or is it Ed Asner, or both? Two men visible at last in one body. And of course, there is Mary—MR, MTM—alone in the newsroom one last time. She's making a memory of this moment, of this workplace that both the character and the actor have shared for seven years. No script is needed anymore.

In a few months, at the tail end of my thirty-seventh year, I will upload and submit a completed tenure portfolio: many PDFs, more than a thousand pages in all. Then, I will wait. *What happens next?* I won't know the answer until my Mary Richards years are over, until the next season of my life has begun.

Recently, the dean's office added an opportunity for faculty members under consideration for tenure to stand before their departments and speak briefly on their own behalf. Here's what Mary said to her colleagues on the final episode, words I find are no less true for me, even as a married woman. Family is capacious after all. Family is more capacious than a closet can ever be:

Well, I just wanted you to know that sometimes I get concerned about being a career woman. I get to thinking my job is too important to me, and I tell myself that the people I work with are just the people I work with and not my family. And last night I thought, What is a family anyway? They're just people who make you feel less alone and really loved. And that's what you've done for me. Thank you for being my family.

But I won't speak these words out loud. Instead, I will hold them in my throat as I type my full name into the box to "certify that everything I have presented here is true, to the best of my awareness, and without any intention to deceive":

Julie Marie Wade

Three names, five syllables, fourteen letters—just like Mary's name. We become ourselves through other people after all.

Mary Tyler Moore	Julie Marie Wade
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Mary Tyler Moore	Julie Marie Wade ☼

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BROKEN WATERS

Julietta Vitullo

Glass basins crowded the narrow space. Gentle humming and occasional beeps originated from the few that were occupied. An almost pleasant scent mingled with the harsher smell of disinfectant that filled the hospital, the lamps in the ceiling shedding a softer light than the fluorescent tubes I'd become accustomed to. Small bodies wrapped in white cloth rested in the concave immensity of their transparent wombs. The body inside the basin closest to me had no cloth around it, just a diaper barely visible through the tangle of cables that criss-crossed from the machines like eels nesting in a cave. "Say goodbye to Eliseo before we proceed," the doctor had said minutes before.

Ten years later, in early 2017, just before my forty-first birthday, I stumble across a piece in a 2011 issue of *The New Yorker* written by Francisco Goldman, a novelist and journalist of Guatemalan and Jewish-American origins. The piece, titled "The Wave," is a memoir about the death of his wife, Mexican writer Aura Estrada. The name rings a bell; I'd come across it before somewhere. I Google 'Aura Estrada' and soon arrive at the website of *Boston Review*, and remember where I'd seen her name: a literary prize established *in memoriam* of this promising Mexican writer. I read the biography provided on the webpage. Her life span is short, so much so that she was born a year after me and has been dead for almost a decade already: Aura Estrada, 1977-2007. Her picture shows a girl smiling to the camera, head slightly tilted, glossy cheeks. I feel a heightened version of the curious sensation I get in my stomach whenever I learn about the death of my contemporaries. The webpage directs me to one of her pieces. A certain disposition in her words reminds me of my younger self. Overcome with the morbid curiosity that possesses us when we learn someone died too soon, I Google her name again.

I discover that Aura was born on April 24th, four days before me; she had begun a PhD in the Spanish department at Columbia, at the same time I started mine at the Spanish department at Rutgers; she had come to the U.S. on a Fulbright, as I did; she used to take the subway at the Borough Hall station in Brooklyn to go to school in Manhattan, the same station I used countless times to get to my job at a farmer's market during my summers off; she was a prolific and precocious writer, as was I until I let academia beat it out of me; she distrusted the cynicism academics felt towards fiction and knew that she wanted to be a writer above all, so she started an MFA at Hunter while she continued her PhD (I never had the courage to do that but some days I wish I had); she had a toaster that branded each piece of bread with a Hello Kitty logo (how cool is that?). I

learn many of these things through the *The New Yorker* piece written by her widower, Francisco Goldman. The piece is an adaptation from Goldman's autobiographical novel/fictionalized memoir *Say Her Name*, which I check out from the library.

Goldman tries to make sense of the tragedy by describing how he and Aura first met: twenty-two years her senior, he fell for her immediately. She moved into his apartment in Brooklyn. Eventually he proposed, and they got married. They wanted to start a family, but one day, while they were vacationing together at a beach in Mexico, Aura was killed by a wave.

Aura was not a surfer, although Goldman mentions the surfing lessons they took in Puerto Escondido the same weekend he proposed. While she and her husband were spending their vacation in Mazunte, on the west coast of Mexico, Aura attempted to body surf the wave that killed her.

I was a surfer for most of my teenage years and part of my early youth. The wave that didn't kill me I had decided *not* to surf while spending my vacation with my then-boyfriend in Pichilemu, on the Chilean coast when I was seventeen. I never wrote about it because it scared me too much to think back on it. But if Goldman could write about Aura's killer wave, how could I not write about my merciful one?

After studying the behavior and size of the waves for several days, I finally felt brave enough to venture in. With my bodyboard under one arm (I wasn't experienced enough with the surfboard), I measured the distance between the shoreline and the white foamy crests adorning the otherwise uniform smoothness of the water: The smell of putrefying seaweed and the frigid temperature of the water pumped more courage into my veins.

Water surged down my throat, salty and cold, as the breaking wave tossed me around like a discarded piece of litter.

Waves about ten feet high crashed and curled at the surf zone—a small size for that beach, so going in didn't seem dangerous. But as I approached the sandbar a hundred meters off the coast, the waves revealed their true form: moving mountains, ephemeral and timeless and high above my head. Their gravitational pull made it clear that I could no longer change my mind; I kicked my flippers frantically in a bid to stay ahead of them.

But then a huge wave approached, faster than the others. I let go of my bodyboard, curved my spine like a cobra, and kicked as hard as I could, squinting against the glare of the sun bouncing off the yellow bodyboard into my eyes. I glanced behind: the wave had swollen so high that climbing it had become an impossibility, and it was too late to get away. The wave crashed upon my back with the mighty power of its everlasting waters, pushing me under.

Water surged down my throat, salty and cold, as the breaking wave tossed me around like a discarded piece of litter. I felt the roughness of the seabed on my face and heels. I wondered if I would make it out alive.

I raised my head out of the water and saw that I was now much closer to the coast. I felt the wave retreating, depositing me in a flatter, less bloated, drier place. “Mamááááá!” I yelled in a primal scream.

Why did that wave forgive me? Why did Aura’s wave not forgive her, instead breaking her spine? Why did my water break when I was six months pregnant with my son Eliseo? Why was life so unforgiving to him?

Eliseo’s story starts, of course, with his mom. Me. Me who decided to go to spend a week in some remote islands in the South Atlantic following two years studying the Argentine fiction produced in the aftermath of the Malvinas/Falklands War, and wishing to see the islands with my own eyes. I intended to write an epilog in the form of a travel narrative to finish my doctoral dissertation, and requested a grant to go to the islands. Shortly after reaching Port Stanley, a town of 2,000 people on the island of East Falkland, 300 miles off the coast of Argentina, I met Carlos and Dacio, two Argentine ex-combatants who had returned to the archipelago after twenty-five years. I asked if I could follow them around with my DV camcorder and record their journey. We spent the entire week together. Carlos and I got close.

In *Say Her Name*, Goldman describes the agony of the day and a half or so that followed his wife’s accident until her death. Goldman’s story keeps me in a state of bewilderment. Every few pages I find a piece of anecdotal evidence that makes me believe our lives are inexplicably linked. As these anecdotes mount up, it’s hard to ignore their... should I say calling? How many Latin American women born between 1976 and 1977 came to the New York/New Jersey area on a Fulbright to do a PhD in Spanish, were informed by a Peruvian professor in their admission interview that they were getting a full scholarship for their graduate studies, discovered Oscar Wilde at age thirteen, vacationed at the beach in Tulum, dated older men, enjoyed the sea, bought a Cuisinart ice cream maker, loved *dulce de leche* and hosting dinner parties for friends, went to Cuba in their early to mid-teenage years, listened to Charly García, Soda Stereo, Pixies, The Smiths and Bjork, had hundreds of unfinished stories within the labyrinth of folders in their MacBooks and a childish attachment to an everyday object with a pop culture character in it? (While Aura grew fond of her toaster that branded the bread with a Hello Kitty logo, I became attached to a notebook with pictures of Wonder Woman given to me for my thirtieth birthday).

I’m comforted to learn about the similarities of the grief process of a person I never met and probably never would have, but the more I read, the more bewildered I become; the more I relate to the mourner, the closer I feel to the mourned. Why is life so unfair

and arbitrary? Why are some of us doomed to an early death? What if I *had* crossed paths with Aura? We must have been at the same conferences at the same time, known the same people. I suspect my advisor at Rutgers, who later moved to Columbia, may have also been Aura's. Did Aura and I ever meet?

Goldman cites entries from Aura's diaries as if trying to figure out parts of her that he didn't know—parts, in fact, that he wouldn't have known if it were not for her death which had led him to open her diaries.

In the almost ten years that I had my Wonder Woman notebook sitting on a shelf by my desk, I peeked at it only a few times, each time closing it right away, either bored by the painstaking detail with which I described life in an obstetric intensive care unit, or dismayed by the optimism and sense of humor I expressed in all the days leading up to Eliseo's short life. I read my notebook again and fail to recognize some of the anecdotes inside. Instead, I see clearly in my mind other stories of those days.

At the hospital in Buenos Aires I stayed in a room with seven other women dealing with complicated pregnancies of various levels of severity. I must have seen at least thirty women come through there during my four-week stay—the longest in the whole unit. I joked that I had become an “obstetrics intensive care unit veteran,” as everything during those months seemed to refer to the topics of my doctoral dissertation: epic narratives, nationalism, war, veterans. The women would leave as soon as their cases ceased to require hospitalization due to their conditions improving or their babies being born or dying. As soon as patients left, new ones would arrive so that all eight beds were occupied constantly.

A fifteen-year-old girl in a twenty-week pregnancy with premature rupture of membranes lay in the bed opposite mine. The danger of having an open amniotic sac is that bacteria can come in and create an infection, which may be life-threatening for both the fetus and the mother. With an open sac and the constant loss of amniotic fluid, the fetus is unable to develop. Even if drugs can prevent premature labor and the pregnancy can get close to full term, the baby may not form normally. It's like baking a cake for the right amount of time but at too low a temperature. The acronym for this young woman's condition, which was the same one in which I found myself at twenty-seven weeks, is, in Spanish, RPM: *Ruptura Prematura de Membranas*. I discovered that both she and I were being referred to as the RPMs by the doctors and the residents—no name, no last name, only a synecdoche that explained us. The young woman talked about the baby in the future tense, as if she thought it would be born and continue to live. I felt sorry for her and her deception. I wondered why nobody had told her that with a breakage in the mother's waters at that stage the fetus doesn't stand a chance.

Diagonally across from my bed lay a woman whose two-year-old son was battling brain cancer at a different hospital. When I found out the son's story directly from her I didn't know what to say. What I didn't know either is that soon people would not know what to say to me.

One morning I woke up and felt an emptiness. I looked across my bed to the right and

she wasn't there. The nurse told me the woman's son had just died. They had discharged her so she could attend the funeral.

For a couple weeks, I had the company of a woman in the bed next to mine. She was a hypertensive mother of five and spoke softly, her dark skin and hair glowing. Every day the doctors would tell her, "You need to stop getting pregnant. You and your husband have no money to feed the kids and your pregnancies will always be high risk." She'd turn to me after they were gone and shrug. "I just love having babies," she'd say, "It's the one thing I can choose to do." When she vacated her bed, a younger, loud, jittery woman came to take her place. A diabetic, she insisted on regulating her sugar lows by having Coca Cola and *alfajores* (Argentine chocolate-covered mini cakes filled with *dulce de leche*). The sudden burst of carbon dioxide releasing from the bottle and the crinkling of her wrappers would startle me awake at nap time. The doctors tried to explain that spikes in her sugar levels put the baby in danger, becoming exasperated every time she insisted that some Coca Cola and a bite of *alfajor* were the way to go. Sometimes the exchanges turned to screaming contests.

These poor or lower middle-class women didn't have a prepaid health plan. They would end up in this city hospital in the middle of a fancy neighborhood, a rundown building filled with top-notch doctors and students from the state university medical school. Those prestigious doctors split their time between two worlds: half their week they worked in decrepit facilities like this one, caring for low income patients and training the future generations of doctors; the other half they worked in private hospitals or their own practices. They weren't sure how to treat me because I was light skinned, highly educated and, like them, a middle class *porteña* (the name for the people of Buenos Aires). They'd raise their eyebrows at the mention of my PhD studies back in the U.S., and the rumors of a trip to the Falklands and an ex-combatant baffled them. In contrast, the darker skinned nurses and orderlies lived in some of the same neighborhoods the patients came from. Most of them treated me harshly at first, irritated by the privilege imprinted in my skin, but eventually grew fond of me.

I hold my diary at arm's length and take a peek at random pages:

June 11th, 2007: I must keep a diary while *Big Brother* watches me from the TV. The nurses refuse to turn it down. My life isn't a reality show.

June 12th: The hospital's Doppler isn't working so the scheduled ultrasound has to be postponed.

June 14th: It's the 25th anniversary of the end of the Malvinas War, "Liberation Day" for the islanders. But Eliseo keeps battling! My mom's friend came yesterday and told me that she sees *un aura blanca*, a white aura, around me, and that's supposed to be a good sign.

June 20th: National Day of the Flag. *Sé fuerte, renacuajo*, Be strong, polliwog.

Find this on page four of *Say Her Name*: “Axolotls are a species of salamander that never metamorphose out of the larval state, something like polliwogs that never become frogs.”

In the same section Goldman writes about the time he and Aura went to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris in search of the axolotls. Aura had recently discovered Argentine writer Julio Cortázar’s short story, “Axolotl,” about a man who is obsessed with these strange looking creatures and goes to Paris’ main botanical garden every day to watch them swim until one day he becomes an axolotl. Being an Argentine, I came to know Cortázar’s story earlier in life than Aura, and being reminded of it makes me think about a creature I haven’t thought of in a while: *renacuajo*, polliwog, which is what I had nicknamed Eliseo.

That line in my diary of the weeks at the hospital, “*Be strong, polliwog,*” throws this memory back at me as if to say, “This is what you called Eliseo before he was born: Have you forgotten all these years, too busy getting on with your life? Has becoming stepmother to another child, who is about to turn ten just like Eliseo, made you forget? Does being a mother to another child of your own, one who was also born premature but healthy and without complications, make you forget what you used to call Eliseo?”

Halfway into Goldman’s book I learn about the novel that Aura was writing during the last year of her life, tentatively called *Memoirs of a Grad Student*. Her protagonist, a young Mexican woman pursuing her PhD in Literature in New York, is named Alicia. I recognize the gesture of the writer who chooses an alter ego whose first initial is her own: Aura/Alicia. It’s not an unusual device for writers to choose but I’ve always found it to be somewhat amateur. I did the same in the novel I finished writing recently. The main narrator of my story is called Jimena and she shares some things in common with me; for example, that she studied literature and lives in a town in the Puget Sound that resembles the town where I live. Jimena receives a letter from an old acquaintance, Blanca, and tries to trace back the story of her life. To some extent, Jimena is to me what Blanca is to Jimena: a double, a shadow, a subject of our imaginations. On the next page of *Say Her Name*, I discover that in Aura’s novel, Alicia’s mother, who would presumably be based on Aura’s mother Juanita, is called Julieta.

I happen to be reading this on April 24th, which turns out to be Aura’s birthday. She’d be turning forty. Happy birthday, Aura. You’ve been dead for almost ten years. Next July, when I go to the beach and send paper boats out to the sea in my yearly ritual in memory of Eliseo, I will send some out for you too.

Aura	Aura
Alicia	Blanca
Julieta	Aura blanca
Jimena	

Some other place in the book, I read about the time when, after Aura's accident, Goldman, walking in his Brooklyn neighborhood, saw an old lady standing at a corner waiting for the light to change. He realized that Aura would never get to grow old and look back on her life. This image is like "a silent bomb," Goldman writes.

After I left the hospital, I couldn't stand the sight of a baby. Only a few weeks before Eliseo's death I would walk next to store windows and check out the reflection of my belly, a very modest profile, as the bump never got to be too prominent. After his death I would cross to the opposite sidewalk whenever I saw moms and babies approaching, and would avoid parks and certain areas of the neighborhood where the baby density is high—minefields of silent bombs. Thoughts of the injustice inflicted upon Eliseo and me crowded my mind.

As the days and weeks went by, the older babies were the ones I was most bothered by. I felt no tenderness towards them. Mostly I felt rage. I would never get to hold him, or nurse him, or dress him in the cute orange, green, yellow, blue trendy clothes given to me at my baby shower (a group of my mom's friends who worship all things American threw an early baby shower for me a few days before I ended up in the hospital, not long before I was scheduled to return to the U.S.). I would never teach him how to peel an orange (I had become particularly interested in the notion that a kid needs to know how to peel his own orange, and this image turned into an obsession). I would never get to push his swing or read him a story at night. I would never teach him how to catch a wave or he would never get to teach me. I would never pick him up from school like those moms who stood at the school gates as I walked by, waiting for their kids to get out while they waved their cigarettes in the air and bitched about their stressful lives.

What hits me the hardest when I first read "The Wave," and then again, as I devour *Say Her Name*, is when Goldman writes about the optimism he felt while they were flying Aura out of Oaxaca to a hospital in Mexico City, her vital signs seeming to improve. He goes on to describe how the optimism vanished right after they landed and Aura's vital signs started to decline. "Now I can't say whether I am grateful for those last moments of hope and relief, or whether I feel that we were cruelly deceived," he writes. Although I know from the start that the story ends on a tragic note, I can't help but feel hopeful when it seems that Aura's condition could improve. It's easy to forget that I'm reading a memoir. But am I really? The book cover doesn't say it's a memoir, but neither does it say it's a work of fiction. The jacket explains that the things Goldman narrates happened to the writer Francisco Goldman. Yet the more we get into the story, the more the borders between fiction and reality start to blur. To me, Aura and Goldman are at times literary characters floating over a dubious fog of reality, and other times real people drifting through a magical and unsettling fictional realm. Therein lies the profound truth of their story.

I am crushed when I learn that Aura had two heart attacks the night at the hospital in Mexico City, and that she entered a coma and died on July 25th, 2007.

Twenty days before that, on July 5th, Eliseo was born and I was finally allowed to walk and roam around the facilities I had only glanced at briefly when I was admitted on a cold and moonless night a month before. With my freedom regained, the first noises of the morning echoing in the long, gloomy hallways of the hospital were a pleasant reminder that life existed beyond the walls of the intensive care unit where I had stayed. Despite that fact that I was pregnant and not ill, all I had been allowed to eat was an insipid rotation of low-fat chicken broth with overcooked vegetables and, on the lucky days, gooey mashed potatoes with a shoe-sole-type of steak—a real affront in the land of beef. My mom would bring me salads and other dishes loaded with nutrients, but the nutritionist on staff had gotten it in her head that raw vegetables were bad for me. I craved junk food and caffeine, so that morning I told my sister to head down to the cafeteria with me. I glanced at the menu and picked a ham and cheese sandwich and a cup of coffee, feeling bold and mischievous. Two dry, thick, semisweet pieces of bread enclosing a single bit of cheese and a suspiciously greenish slice of ham stuck to my palate but I was in Heaven. I chugged down the coffee, set the plates aside and took a nail file out of my pocket. “I’ve been wanting to do this for days,” I told my sister while I filed my nails on the Formica tabletop. I had written in my red Wonder Woman notebook: “I must file my nails so I won’t scratch Eliseo when I hold him.”

I never held him.

When I returned upstairs to the intensive care neonatology unit, the echoes of my incursion into the real world still resonating in my ears, a doctor approached me. I didn’t like the look on her face. “Things aren’t going well,” she said. “Eliseo can’t breathe on his own. He has developed a hyaline membrane disease, common in premature infants, and is in respiratory distress. We’ll keep working on him for a little longer. But at this point you need to know that, even if he makes it, he could turn out blind or severely disabled.” My heart sank.

How long was a little longer? Who cares if he turns out to be disabled? I just wanted him to live.

I know now that I had been holding on to an unfounded optimism despite the discouraging statistics that doctors had repeatedly cited throughout those weeks. But who thinks about life in terms of statistics?

When I first started having complications early in the second trimester of my pregnancy, my mom had told me that everything would be fine: we’d already had the death of a baby in the family when my sister Carola died at the age of eighteen months. “Fate has more mercy than that. It’s happened once to us already and it won’t happen again,” she said.

She was wrong.

How could I dare think of having coffee and filing my nails as if my son weren’t dying just a few flights up the stairs?

During that week in the Falklands in December of 2006, I shot ten hours of raw footage: interviews and casual conversations with the two ex-combatants, Carlos and Dacio; a long walk from the town to the old airport where they had been sent on April 2nd of 1982, twenty-five years earlier; a visit to Mount Two Sisters, where they spent most of their time waiting for the enemy to attack and watching other eighteen-year-old conscripts like themselves succumb to British artillery; the candid moments of drinking beer at the end of a long day, or dancing with a couple of drunken British soldiers in their barracks.

Despite the lack of proper mics, the wind howling almost relentlessly, and my often-shaky hand, there was real magic in this footage, so much in fact that it ended up playing a big part in the documentary *La forma exacta de las islas* (*The Exact Shape of the Islands*), which I made with my friends Edgardo and Daniel five years later, in 2012. The film was first thought of as the story of the two ex-combatants in the aftermath of the Falklands War, but it quickly changed into the story of me as a single mother-to-be, a researcher and a PhD student in the aftermath of my trip. Eventually we had to discard all the materials in which I spoke, pregnant and happy, about the exciting new situation I had found myself in after my trip. We rethought the movie completely. That required a second trip to the islands, in 2010, with an entire film crew. This time around, it was *my* return to the islands. In the end, *The Exact Shape of the Islands* is the story of those islands fought over by different powers, the grief and trauma of the ex-combatants, and my own grief and trauma.

There's only one scene in the entire footage where I film myself. I'm dancing in front of a mirror, Carlos behind me. This moment arrives shortly after Carlos shares with my camera the experience of one of the soldiers in his platoon dying in his arms. His name was Ramón Orlando Palavecino. He was from the northern Argentine province of Chaco and was eighteen like Carlos. The mirror scene is how the film, in its temperance and restraint, shows that Carlos and I became involved. The audience is given enough clues to figure out that Carlos is Eliseo's father. The film communicates nothing else about our involvement, nothing explicitly intimate or sexual, because everyone knows how babies are made, sometimes deliberately, sometimes fortuitously. Sometimes they are made out of love and the desire to build a family, sometimes because two people counter Thanatos—the death drive, the drive of destruction and annihilation, the drive that century after century has made it possible for adults to send their kids to die in wars—with Eros, the sex drive, the life-producing drive, the survival drive, a drive able to duplicate the world as a mirror does.

I never talked to Carlos after Eliseo's death. I don't know how he experienced all of this: re-signifying a place of loss by conceiving a life in it, only to later lose that new life. I know that he was ecstatic when, back in New Jersey a month after my trip ended, I told him on the phone that my immediate worries had been confirmed and I was pregnant. Around

that time, we still talked on and off. But I had begun to cut ties and change the tone of our relationship because on the very last day of the trip, just as we were about to embark on our return flight, Carlos' friend Dacio had told me something: Not only was Carlos not single, as he had led me to believe during that whole week, but he had six children and a wife waiting for him back home.

Several people came by the hospital to visit me that July 5th. At the beginning, I received happy faces—eyes and smiles celebrating the arrival of a new life into the world. But as the situation rapidly switched, those features became tense—eyes and smiles attending a funeral.

I can never remember for sure who visited and who didn't. A friend from high school, Sebastián, visited a few days before the birth, and yet my memory places him there by my bed in the haze of the hours *after* Eliseo's birth. We weren't close as teenagers, though we had a lot in common. He showed up in the hospital as a surprise after finding out through a mutual friend that I'd be stuck there for an uncertain amount of time. He brought me a clip light that I used to read after the 10 o'clock curfew. I saw Sebastián once more and for the last time at a concert in a small neighborhood venue after I came out of the hospital. He gave me a CD of the band that played that night, *Pequeña orquesta de reincidentes*, which he knew well and I was seeing for the first time. I still have the CD but I can't listen to it because it hurts; less than two years later, he hit his head on a rock while surfing in Brazil and died. His wife had been expecting a baby.

I know for certain that one of my mom's girlfriends, the same one who said she saw my *aura blanca*, was there on the 5th. She told us she had a psychic friend who was able to predict outcomes by working with a pendulum. The friend provided my mom's friend with some over-the-phone advice and said that, according to the pendulum, everything was going to be alright. He didn't think the name Eliseo was a good idea though: "Too heavy! That baby needs something lighter." Her friend, of course, had no idea what my reasons were for picking that name. I had thought of it because of a poetry book the author of which, Mario Montalbetti, had given me months before while I was touring university campuses interviewing for jobs, secretly pregnant. The book is titled *Llantos Elíseos*, which literally means "Elysean Cries" but also resembles the words Campos Elíseos/Champs Elysées. Montalbetti had dedicated the book to his son Eliseo, who was a baby when Montalbetti started writing it. Several of my own friends had opposed the choice on grounds that the name, which is pretty unusual, reminded them of a corny and uncool movie director of my parents' generation. But the more people resisted the name, the more I defended it.

My pregnancy had become an open forum for friends from North to South America and either side of the Atlantic. Facebook wasn't quite a thing yet so this was all happening by phone, email and live conversations. Eliseo had been claimed as *El bebé del pueblo*, the

People's Baby and, given that I had no partner with whom to share the joy, I was okay with over-sharing the main events of my life with the masses.

Desperate to cling to hope as Eliseo's condition became more unstable, I followed my mom's friend-of-a-friend's advice and wrote the name "Valentín"—"strong and brave," yet light enough—next to "Eliseo" in a sign I placed next to the cables and paraphernalia around his basin. Was he covered in plastic wrap, like a dish ready to be taken to a potluck? Or is my memory playing tricks? Am I mixing up his image with the descriptions of other premature babies whose stories I learned later? I know for sure that he was hooked to countless cables and monitors. I wasn't able to hold him but they let me touch his arms and feet. At some point they said that I should stop coming to the room because every time I did his heartbeat quickened. I hadn't been able to hold him right after the delivery either, because they took him away immediately despite his first cries being vigorous and the initial vital signs all positive. To this day, I wonder if that quick separation was necessary. Did he, in his budding newborn consciousness, feel abandoned? Did the environment where he spent his last month before coming into the world feel hostile? Was there enough fluid in those broken waters? Would he have screamed, had he been able to, "Mamáááá," as I did fifteen years earlier when the water of my wave retreated?

The last time I saw Eliseo alive he had a hole in his trachea and a tube inside it. A few remnants of the doctors' last working session surrounded his body, inadvertently left behind: a bit of gauze, a syringe without the needle, a small section of a plastic pipe.

After they stopped trying to keep him breathing, they asked me if I wanted to see him the way he was or if I had any clothes I wanted them to dress him with. An impossible decision.

I slowly walked into the room full of basins and saw him lying in his, all the traces of the fruitless work gone, his lips parted, the tip of his tongue sticking out.

When my dad embarked on a series of bureaucratic procedures at the hospital, the civil registry, the morgue and the crematorium, dealing with simultaneous birth and death certificates and inexplicably difficult paperwork, he wrote my son's name as "Eliseo Vitullo." I'm glad that he did. Eliseo's short-lived middle name had been a doomed last-ditch effort and, had it stuck in any official way, it would have been an unnecessary reminder that in moments of desperation we latch on to things we don't believe: friends of friends, trickeries, and pendulums.

Five years later, when Eliseo's brother Martín was three, I had to explain to him why a certain teddy bear named Tomás had to be treated gently. "Please, *bebote*, don't spin Tomás by the leg or you're gonna break it again." Martín had started to ask questions about his brother and, despite my efforts to play it cool and not let the death of this baby become a burden in Martín's life, Eliseo had developed quite a stature in his imagination. I've always been afraid that I would transfer my grief to him in the same way my mom transferred to me her pain over the death of my sister Carola. Not too long ago, though, I realized that to some extent Martín has turned Eliseo into a character of his own making. It took me a while to realize that, in Martín's mind, his baby older brother's name wasn't

Eliseo but Iseo. He's always heard me talk about El-iseo and, capable as he is in Spanish, he decided the noun had to be separated from its article, as if he were tracking back the remnants of an Arab name that entered Spain during the Reconquista.

Before my world was rocked by those early broken waters, I had accepted a job offer at Oregon State University. I traveled to Buenos Aires so I could spend the second trimester of my pregnancy in my hometown close to my family while I finished my dissertation. April 2nd was the twenty-fifth anniversary of the beginning of the Malvinas War and I wanted to be there to witness the commemorations. I planned to return to New Jersey two months later, defend my dissertation at the end of the summer, give birth in early September, and move with the baby to the two-bedroom apartment I had secured in Corvallis, Oregon.

But nothing went as expected, and life became unbearable.

I screamed a lot during those days, and also spoke profusely about my shitty luck. One time, my friend Edgardo said, "When I had cancer at age nineteen, I didn't just think I had bad luck. I thought I had been peed on by the dinosaurs. But look, I'm still alive."

Then something magical happened: On July 9th, three days after I left the hospital, while the country celebrated Independence Day, *porteños* saw their city covered by snow. It was the third recorded time for such an event in the history of the city and the first snow on that day in eighty-nine years. People gathered at the plazas, laughing, kissing and holding hands, utterly inexperienced in such meteorological matters and not quite sure what to do with the thin white blanket forming on every piece of concrete and patch of grass. I heard the laughter and squeals of joy coming from the mouths of adults and children. The light bouncing off the white streets, a color I'd never before seen on this ever-gray asphalt, dazzled me. Tiny white sculptures formed on the edges of parked cars, on the grilles of sidewalk drains, on top of store awnings and sunshades. The cold smell of fresh snow starting the world anew filled my lungs.

This was the lovely part of the dream from which I would awake only to be reminded of the fucking nightmare my life had become.

Would it have been easier if I'd had a partner to share the pain with? I recently wrote a short play in which a married couple reenacts the death of their baby year after year as a way to deal with their grief and guilt. But they each carry a baggage that seems to be very much their own. I don't think that sharing the pain with your loved one necessarily decreases the grief. But if two people stay together through the loss of their offspring, like the characters in my play do, then their love for each other must surely enter a new dimension.

Without the advancements of modern medicine, not only would I likely not have survived my first pregnancy, but neither would I have been able to bring my next one to an impressive thirty-five-week term and become a mother to a healthy child. When Martín announced himself early in December of 2009, I was relatively calm. It surprises me even now how confident I felt that everything was going to be alright.

I was in Buenos Aires again, and this time I purchased a health insurance policy. When after the initial skin-to-skin contact, a doctor took Martín away from me to do all the things they do to newborns, I panicked. I don't remember saying anything, but the doctor who came to take him must have seen my face. She came close and said, "Julieta, don't worry, Martín is not Eliseo. He's a different baby." I was baffled. How did this person know Eliseo or me? Her hair was covered and she wore a facemask so I couldn't make out her features. I asked how she knew and she told me she had been there at that other hospital. This was the nice private facility that the good doctors got to go to after they did their time at the crappy hospital. I immediately remembered: she was the neonatologist who came to tell me the news about Eliseo's unstable condition that morning when I returned from filing my nails at the cafeteria.

I dove in and something tingled my body: a colorless and odorless element, neither dry nor wet, neither cool nor warm, and neither soft nor hard.

In a time before modern medicine, women suffered these kinds of losses at a much higher rate. Being pregnant and giving birth entailed a considerable risk of death for the mother. Miscarriages and premature deaths of infants were probably looked at differently than they are today. But I doubt that this means women didn't suffer the pain of such losses or that they grieved them less. Some women may have cried in silence while others may have been declared crazy when, in fact, they were just mourning the death of their children.

I felt like I was living in another place and era when, after giving birth to Eliseo, I returned to my bed and a strange apparition materialized at my bedside. I'd been napping that morning of July 5th after an excruciatingly painful oxytocin-prompted labor. When I opened my eyes, I saw a nun standing next to me. She wore all white, a big wooden crucifix hanging from her neck. She held a book, probably the Bible. She gazed at me intently and said a prayer. I was startled, yet comforted: the short, silent interaction felt familiar even though I don't believe in God and have never been to mass. For a while I wondered if this had been real or a dream.

I now think that it was real and that the nun was there to give the last rites to that part of me that was going to die twenty-four hours later.

Right after my return to New Jersey from the Falklands, my friend Macarena and I flew to the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico. We had ten days before school started again and we wanted to get some sun and relax on the white beaches and in the turquoise waters of Tulum, overseen by the remains of the only city the Mayans had built on the coast. I suspected I might be pregnant. I'd been worried about it since day one but had made the decision not to take the morning-after pill and simply let things happen. I had taken a couple of store-bought tests that had come back negative, so I was pretty convinced that I was not pregnant. It wasn't until I returned from that trip that a blood test came back positive.

One day, Macarena and I went to see one of the many cenotes of the Riviera Maya. Cenotes are sinkholes produced after limestone bedrock collapses and exposes the groundwater underneath. The Mayans regarded them as sacred and today tourists flock to them. This being my first time in Mexico, I had never heard of cenotes. I stood on a high rock and watched the round body of water underneath, absorbing the mystifying sounds of the jungle. I dove in and something tingled my body: a colorless and odorless element, neither dry nor wet, neither cool nor warm, and neither soft nor hard. I had no reference points to describe the attributes of those waters but it didn't matter: I floated and let the womb-like shape of this substance cuddle me, my thoughts whirling back to a time before thought. I finished my swim and sat on a lower rock, letting its familiar warmth absorb the water on my skin. I observed the subtle and hypnotic undulating ripples created by ancient movements from within those subterranean rivers.

Then I saw it: Me, walking on a rocky beach on a rainy chilly day holding the hand of a child. I couldn't see the child's face or mine but I knew that it was me and the child was mine. The child had a green scarf that stood out in the grey and blue background of the immense rocks and the Pacific Ocean. The vision was brief, but vivid. Soon I came out of whatever trance the surface of the cenote had put me under, and although I had never been to Oregon, the rock formations reminded me of pictures I had seen. I didn't know where I would be the following year, but I had applied for a job at Oregon State and had received a call for an initial Skype interview, which I would be doing when I returned to New Jersey.

Eventually I received a job offer from Oregon State and moved there, alone. I don't normally believe in supernatural phenomena and tend to be skeptical of anything that seems fantastical in a "New Agey" kind of way. However, for all the months I was pregnant I had been convinced that I had experienced a vision into my future: the child in the green scarf had been Eliseo and we'd been strolling on a beach on the Oregon coast.

If I had to find any explanation for this event now, other than that the water might have

had overly stimulating properties that excited my imagination, or that the pot our friends gave us was extraordinary, I prefer that of a parallel universe.

I write down this idea the day before I get to the part in *Say Her Name* where Goldman mentions the idea of cenotes as portals. Yes, he and Aura also went to see the cenotes when they vacationed in Tulum. By now I've gotten accustomed to feeling, experiencing, thinking, and writing things that Goldman's book later throws back at me, so I feel I shouldn't make too much of this. But I do want to believe that perhaps cenotes are portals into other universes.

Universes in which I am, in fact, living in Oregon with Eliseo.

Universes in which Aura and Francisco live in their apartment in Brooklyn with their kids.

Universes in which Aura's mom, Juanita, doesn't lose her only daughter to the fury of a wave.

Universes in which my mom doesn't see my baby older sister Carola die.

Universes in which Carlos' friend Ramón Palavecino doesn't get sent to die in a war so far away from home.

Universes in which I get to meet Aura.

And she meets Eliseo. ☼

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IT'S A SMALL WORLD

Tex Gresham

You watch a woman panic. She talks to a teenager who's probably her daughter, saying *Hang on, we're missing your sister*. She shouts the name *Blossom* into the crowd. No one notices her. A park worker walks past her and she grabs his arm. Before you can see anything else, a crowd of ear-hat-wearing tourists wedges a gulf between you and the woman's worst moment, and you are lost to her grief.

You grip your daughter's hand tighter. She doesn't see the woman—didn't see her.

She says, "Ow, you're too tight."

You tell her sorry. But you're not sure if you've said it because what's popped into your head is the documentary you watched on CNN's YouTube channel about abductions, and how those abductions lead to sex slavery, and how most of the abductees are children, young girls, like Blossom and like your daughter, Daisy. Which makes you think of how similar the two names are: Blossom and Daisy. Flowers. Plucked—withered and dying.

"I want a turkey leg." She's looking at you like she always does when she knows you're not there, when your mind's got the best of you. It doesn't happen often—you've been trying to convince yourself of that.

"You just had popcorn."

"It was a pretzel."

"Yeah, a pretzel. But, like, that's a turkey leg. You know those things have like 2,700 calories in them. They're meant to feed full grown men or an entire family. Not an eight-year-old who doesn't even weigh 60lbs."

"So."

"So I don't think you'll eat one."

"Are they really turkey legs?"

You already know what she's getting at. It's the start of a joke that she insists on hearing at least once every trip to the park. It's been funny from time to time, Daisy always bringing it up when a little lightness is needed. But right now, the joke comes at a moment that's so unfunny you're having a hard time taking the next step. But she's looking at you, waiting for the completion of the ritual.

So you go, "They're the legs of kids who get lost in the park. Now hold my hand."

She laughs while you cringe inwardly, realizing how unkind that joke's always been, especially when telling it to an eight-year-old. What does that say about the mentality of a child that they find humor in the mutilation and cannibalism of children? How can a child like that find joy in a place like this if they find such dark things funny? You raised her, helped shape the fleeting identity she has now, so the real question should be *What does that say about you?* This is supposed to be a happy place, not a place for sick jokes—or

a place for missing children. Yet that hasn't stopped you before. You make the joke because you made up the joke, both to make her laugh and to plant some fear that the child who doesn't hold her mother's hand becomes lost and is turned into food to feed the good children who stay with their mothers. A modern version of *Hansel & Gretel*, where the witch is now intangible, representative of disobedience at the heart of the child—the threat of getting lost. Undefeatable, only managed by staying close to her mother. Daisy always holds your hand.

“I don't want a turkey leg.”

“You sure?”

“I want one of those mouse-ear ice creams.”

“If you really want one, let's hurry and get it. The parade's going to start soon, and people are already waiting. We want to get a good spot or we won't see anything.”

“It'll be quick.”

“You think so?” Because you know nothing in the park is quick.

“I *believe* so.” And then she yanks your arm in the direction of the ice cream vendor. You're shocked at her strength, but is there anything stronger than a child on the hunt for ice cream?

Maybe a mother on the hunt for her daughter.

But you don't want to keep thinking about that. You want to hold onto the way Daisy said *believe*. It's the magic of this place and what this place represents that she believes in. For some it's not a place; it's a state of soul. They crave it like communion, dedicate every breath to it. They worship. You're certain Daisy doesn't worship the magic, but she still believes in it, believes it exists. Adults don't. They know better—that's why most of them are angry here. Same with young people who are desperate for adulthood. They're almost angry and annoyed at being in the park. But they have to force themselves to ignore the magic, to willfully have a bad time. If they continue, they'll trick themselves into the idleness of adulthood and suddenly find the magic no longer there and the realization that it never existed at all.

You want to hold onto the way Daisy said *believe*. It's the magic of this place and what this place represents that she believes in.

Daisy orders the ice cream and you give the cashier twelve dollars and the two of you walk away, your daughter's hand in yours, her other hand holding the mouse-ear ice cream that seems genetically engineered to never melt.

As the two of you head over to the path of the parade, pushing past the crowds, your daughter busy eating, you think back on the mother shouting *Blossom* to a crowd ignoring her panic. You don't want to think of the possibilities of where Blossom exists now and in what ways it's different than when she was with her mother. You don't want to think about

this but again your mind goes to the documentary, and you think about this Blossom in the hands of a stranger, a man, transmitting her, rearranging her identity into that of a victim. If only you knew what she looks like you could be a second set of eyes, the only one aware that this mother and lost child exist. What does a child in distress look like? You've never seen Daisy caught in life-or-death energy, so you wouldn't know even if you did see Blossom. You imagine she would be crying, hysterical even. The atmosphere around this child and this captor would be uncomfortably obvious or at the very least obviously uncomfortable, wouldn't it?

A child cries.

You stop and look back toward the cry. There's a little blonde girl on the verge of hysterical. A man has her by the hand, pulling her along in the direction of the park's main exit. She's looking back, reaching her hand out to grab at something in her past she's trying to get back. You're reminded of when Daisy would scream and cry and reach out for a toy or a snack she wanted but that you wouldn't get for her. The man pulling the little blonde girl is probably her father, the one taking her away from the thing she wants. But is that what's happening or is that what you're trying to tell yourself to ignore the evidence that points to the possibility of that little blonde girl being *Blossom* and that man being one of those takers they talked about in the documentary? The man's face doesn't show the routine exhaustion of a father struggling to get through another one of the endless meltdowns that children have. His face is a mask of passivity, an unnatural calm that's desperate to let anyone interested know: *there's nothing to see here*. At least long enough for him to get her out of the park, into a car, and into a different life—even though that different life began the moment his hand took hers and pulled. You want to go running after them but the crowd surges and they're gone. And if you could run and catch up and confront this man, what if you're wrong? What would that experience be like for a child, to witness their father accused of being a villain, him having to defend himself and prove his parental property? But what if this fear is keeping you from saving Blossom's life? Though none of this matters anymore because the child and the man are gone and your Daisy has led you to the Main Street area where the parade will begin any minute.

Daisy says, "If I can't see, can I sit on your shoulders?"

"Yes," even though she's too heavy to sit on your shoulders anymore. Maybe if you still had Steve around to help you with these kinds of things, but that would only be possible if Steve were around and not living with another family he now considers his more than he ever did you or Daisy. He could carry Daisy on his shoulders. He also could've held Daisy's hand while you went after the little blonde girl and the man pulling her away. So in a way you want to blame Steve again, this time for something more important than holding you back from pursuing a PhD in philosophy or making your hair turn gray faster than it should've with how much he gambled—and lost—in online poker. You'd be blaming Steve for the loss of an innocent child—not that he would care much. He already contributed to an observable loss in Daisy when he left. She looks at the ground more often now. But he wasn't able to take her innocence. She still has that, is lost in it

right now, her face flush from the ice cream and her excitement for the parade. All the characters in one place. All eyes focused on something loud and distracting. And that's what the parade is: a distraction. It distracts the crowd from their exhaustion, from their anger and irritation, from their on-the-vergeness of losing belief in the magic of this place.

Your ears, now tuned to a frequency of paranoia you've never experienced, perk up to the sound of a child's cry. Your head moves and you see the source. A little brunette girl. Older than the blonde girl, but not by much. She's in the arms of a costumed character, the goofy dog hurrying through the crowd in the opposite direction of where the parade is supposed to start any minute. The goofy dog's slapstick face paired with the hysterical crying creates an image similar to a nightmare you'd have had as a child. When you couldn't sleep your father would tell you to dream of the very place you're standing in now—though he never took you here and the first time you ever visited this place was when you were thirty-three and with a daughter of your own. So with no point of reference as to what the park looked like all you could think of was the mouse and the duck and the dog. And they would all laugh this very false laugh, the laugh of someone trying to convince others they're human—or that they're not a demon. And the mouse would always end up in a blender and the other characters would laugh as the blender went to work on the mouse. Your mind used to go to some bad places. Used to. You're trying to change that.

"It's starting." You've never heard Daisy shriek like this. It grates on you, feels like a nail digging at the base of your skull. Fills you with a quivering energy.

And that's what the parade is: a distraction. It distracts the crowd from their exhaustion, from their anger and irritation, from their on-the-vergeness of losing belief in the magic of this place.

Like you but in a way that's pleasurable and not pure panic, Daisy bounces and vibrates. The crowd does the same. Everything in their lives put on hold as floats themed like popular movies overloaded with popular characters crawl into existence from the park's netherworld. The crowd claps to the beat of the music. You can tell the park devotees as they sing along to the songs, never missing a word. Your daughter lets go of your hand to clap along. She grabs onto the bars of a waist-high metal fence that surrounds a princess's garden. You're okay with Daisy holding onto the fence. It's solid, stationary, and secure—not as much as your hand, but close. Your palms are sweating so bad that Daisy's likely to notice, and if she notices that then she'll then notice how deep you are in panic right now and that realization would ruin the magic for her. And as the parade crawls down the perfectly structured paths in the park, you see it again for what it is. Everyone's distracted from the goofy dog running away with what could be Blossom. Again, you're frustrated that you don't know what Blossom looks like and so every little girl that isn't

Daisy becomes Blossom. You can't rule out any ethnicity or age. This Blossom could be an adopted child or stepchild from an interracial marriage. You really can't rule out that Blossom could be what you traditionally think of as a boy, that *he* has now taken on the identity of *she* and the family is okay with it. Or maybe the father isn't and that's why he wasn't there to watch out for Blossom. Or maybe the father was the one who ran off with Blossom, taking her to a private place where he can try and connect Blossom back to the boy—*Jake John Cole Chris*—that she used to be. And if not the father then—and your mind puts pieces together so fast that you scream. Daisy doesn't notice, nor does anyone in the crowd around you. They're all distracted by the event, the spectacle, your scream drowned by the techno-heavy sweetly-psychotic anthem pouring from the floats. But your scream isn't joy. It's pure goddamn terror. Because you're seeing these pieces fall into a shape unnatural. The goofy dog with the screaming child. The terrified mother. The missing Blossom. The magic. There's a banner above your head that says *Celebrating 90 Years* with the mouse in black and white wearing a birthday hat in full color. And you think back to the other times you've been to the park, the other times you've seen one of the costumed characters holding a screaming child. Have you ever noticed parents in near panic, screaming for a child they've misplaced? Have you ever seen one of those characters running away with a child? Has there ever been a Blossom? Or was there always something there to distract you? You want to ask yourself how long the park's been open, how long have there been costumed characters, or how long have there been these parents screaming for lost children, how long has there been a distracter, but you don't think you can handle the answers. Or at least for someone to confirm what you already know are the answers. Because all these pieces have taken the shape of a conspiracy involving these characters, these missing children, the magic. At the center of this shape is the mouse, or maybe the shape is mouse-eared. And you know with everything that you're right, that these children are taken to a place, their identity rearranged, their shapes changed to fit with the magic. You know there's a place in this park where they keep the children, where they process these children, mold them to not only believe in the magic, but to worship it, to believe the magic is obtainable, and that obtainable magic will dictate their energy, will dictate the way they see themselves, their goals, their ideas of love and happiness and success, will govern their morals, their possibilities of redemption, of villainy, of truth and fucking fairness. And in this place and through this processing you know the children will be lobotomized, a little mouse-ear shape of their brain scraped out and made into ink to draw the mouse or goofy dog or sassy duck or some new character that will cull in the next generation to be lobotomized and used for ink to draw a new character to cull in the next generation to lobotomize and use for ink to draw a new character. A surge of primordial energy racks your soul and you want to grab the person closest to you and scream *They're taking the children* but you know they're all distracted. Your mind trips and falls, pinballing down a rabbit hole where at the end there isn't a fantasy world of magic and wonder but rather an endless psychotic nightmare that you know is true but that no one else will ever believe. That energy propels you, forces you to reach out and grab for

Daisy so you can pick her up and carry her out of the park, to run and keep running and never come back, never look to the mouse ears for an answer, to show her that the magic of this place is a big fucking curse. But when you reach for Daisy all you feel is empty air. You reach again and grab the fence you'd put your trust on moments before. But it wasn't moments. You know this because when you finally look beyond the rabbit hole in your mind to the parade, you see the last float pass before the crowd. It's over. Atop the parade's final gesture is the mouse, smiling and waving to the distracted crowd, him being their ultimate distraction, their joy so rapturous it almost resembles fear. They see their god. And the mouse waves to the crowd, his disciples. Not a *Hello* wave, but more a culling, a *Follow me* motion. And you watch as all the children in the crowd step out and into the street behind this final float, following it, their faces turned up to the mouse, trusting him, believing in him. And that's when you see Daisy out in the street, her smile so big it looks painful as she looks at the mouse in a way she's never looked at you. And you scream *Blossom* so loud your vocal cords rip and you taste blood. And your daughter turns around, sees you, and waves. And the parade's now almost gone, the mouse now a silhouette against the sunset-colored sky. And then the crowd shifts and separates you from the parade, from the fading Daisy. And you can't move. And she's almost gone. And all you can do is wave goodbye. ❧

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ODE TO ARM BARS

For WWE Superstar Otis Dozovic or, as I know him, Niko

Jacob Lindberg

That first time I came over, you led me to the basement,
unrolled the wrestling mat and said, *we'll call you Lindbergular.*

You took the camera, slipped in the tape, threw me over
your shoulder, and said, *call me the worst name you think of.*

and, *when I throw you, fall into it.* All day, we stayed downstairs,
smashed metal chairs across our backs. Upstairs, hoses

in your mom's nose kept her breathing. Your dad slept
on the couch between cleaning offices on Tower, the warehouse

on Stinson. I know hands we're dealt. You know long hair
whipping back and forth, circled by shirtless men in a roped ring.

Friendship forged with slick limbs, a slab of flesh you told me
to hold with my legs, *like you're gonna pull the fucker out the socket.*

You'd let me win, keep the script interesting, explode from
the floor shaking and growling and tearing at the air. Niko,

you're the largest man I've held. In the white light, when men
and women stomp the bleachers, do you remember

those mornings? 4 AM, streaming through unplowed sidewalks
to the little gym on Belknap. Your body tearing—your heart

pumping you bigger and bigger. Or that summer you ran
mountains in Colorado, a year before they cut wrestling

from the Olympics. That summer, you came home,
and we stared across the great black lake, chew fat in our lips.

Between beads of sluice, rotten mosquitos, we talked of growing
up here. I can trace every face you make on stage. Eccentric,
bright-eyed as your mom carrying a party platter of tacos down
to you. Pure celebration. After you won state, you caught me
by the shoulder, *I did it, brother. I did it good.* The fabric
of your forehead stretching. Now, nine years later, I'm watching you
on a computer screen dovetail an elbow into a man's stomach.
Pixels barely keeping up. Still, I know he's bound to find
your arms after the match. Open, wide, and sweating. Man,
there are so many stories worth telling, but I've settled on this:
Us, spitting dip over the lake. Calling this catching up.
Your hand on my back in August. *Lindby*, you say,
it'll get better if we believe it.

Jacob Lindberg is an MFA candidate at the University of Arkansas. Currently, he serves as Editor-In-Chief of *Up North Lit*. He is the recipient of the 2019 Carolyn F. Walton Cole Fellowship in Poetry from the University of Arkansas, judged by poet Todd Davis. His poems have appeared in or are forthcoming from *The Adroit Journal*, *Sycamore Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Rattle*, *Salamander*, and more.



**THANK YOU,
KERMIT**

Joshua Elwand Smith

There's a video on YouTube that you should watch called, "Big Bird at Jim Henson's Memorial." Growing up, Jim Henson, like Walt Disney, was more of an aesthetic to me than any actual, living person. Like the backwards-G-shaped 'D' in the Disney logo, I had a sense for what it was without understanding the logic behind it. And my first experience with Jim Henson's Creature Shop was probably *Fraggle Rock*.



It was never Jim Henson's most popular show, but it was the one I could call my own more than any other, if only because it was so difficult to get the episodes that none of my friends had even heard of it. This difficulty stemmed from one simple fact: it was on HBO. My family never had much money growing up, but our next-door neighbor, Linda, had HBO, which even now, in the days of on-demand and high-speed broadband and Netflix, I still get a little giddy whenever I see a motel advertise that particular premium cable channel as 'free of charge.' Linda was a heavy smoker, with a craggy, ashen face, short, high-and-tight hair, and enough gravel in her voice to open a quarry. Her usual attire consisted of white cut-offs and a dumpy t-shirt, and the fact that I still associated her as being well-off either illustrates my family's hard-up socio-economic status at the time, or simply points to how classy I thought HBO was. And though Linda may have had more money than us, her dwelling suggested none of that. Linda's house was always dark and cluttered, with musty stacks of bills and papers and junk spread over any and every flat surface. Anytime someone wanted to sit anywhere, it took a good five minutes to restack everything before they could take a seat. Looking back, it's obvious that she was a hoarder, with veritable walls of VHS tapes organized as haphazardly as the stacks of file folders and literal trash everywhere else. Some of her collection was purchased cassettes, but a good number of the tapes were home-recorded. Sometimes even re-recorded, with scotch tape over the square hole where the little, black tab had been removed, because otherwise you couldn't record on it again. I still don't understand how the physics of that taped-over square worked, but it seemed like anyone who had HBO and a Blockbuster card in those days also had an extensive collection of bootleg movies, with a sheepish shrug ready whenever someone pointed out their small-time piracy operation of two VCRs stacked on top of each other. It's a shame to think about how much work went into those collections, only for it all to come undone when the powers-that-be up and invented DVDs, but then again, the Great Wall of China didn't exactly keep the Mongols out, so I guess sometimes in life you just gotta cut your losses and move on.

Purchased and rented movie cassettes used to come with a very official warning against dubbing and duplicating, with a threat that INTERPOL itself would get involved to take you down. With DVDs, this warning makes a little more sense given how easy it is to disseminate digital media, but with video cassettes, the threat rang just a little hollow. It wasn't abundantly clear who this warning was for, or how ready INTERPOL was to break down Linda's door and confiscate her grainy copies of *The Witches of Eastwick* and *Death Becomes Her*, but the implied danger of it all was enough to both scare and excite 5-year-old me into quiet compliance whenever I went over there to watch something. I never particularly liked being in her house for how not-kid-friendly it all was, but it was only through her that I could watch and record episodes of *Fraggle Rock* (I had to bring my own blank tape and 'sit on the floor, kid'). Then, like any normal child, I would take the tape home and watch it *ad infinitum* all week until I could record over it again with the next episode, getting all the premium cable, rich-kid media in the comfort of my family's lower-class, two-bedroom apartment. I still sat on the floor right in front of the

TV to watch it each time, possibly out of habit when watching it at Linda's place, so I guess I didn't mind the clutter all that much.¹

Though *Fraggle Rock* was important in its own way, most kids and I cut our teeth on PBS's *Sesame Street* in the morning and *The Muppet Show* in the afternoon.² Despite seeing the name every day, I never knew what Jim Henson looked like, or could even tell you that there was a single man behind it all. All I saw were Kermit and Grover and Oscar and Big Bird,³ and they were all I needed. Jim Henson doesn't need someone like me to espouse his virtues, but he gave me and the generations around me an appreciation for puppetry that on the surface feels very strange, and is still tough to talk about in any meaningful way without getting the ol' side-eye. In any other context, the idea of people making dolls move and speak is kind of off-putting, and rightly so. I mean, there's a reason one of the most iconic horror franchises is about a doll coming to life, and it's not because we all secretly want to be ventriloquists. Sure, there may be a handful of enthusiasts out there in the world, but not many people think highly of the medium, and usually go out of their way to avoid it completely. Part of this anxiety may stem from the very attempts to make puppets more lifelike. The theory of the Uncanny Valley posits that as creatures approximate humanity, they ironically arouse a sense of discomfort or revulsion, until the point where they look 'human enough' and we're at ease again. Spiders and zombies are both scary because one looks nothing like a human and the other is only *just* missing the mark. Dolls and puppets tend to fall on the 'zombie' end of the spectrum, and I suspect this is part of why they are so maligned. Imagine Kermit with actual human skin and you'll see why Jim Henson went with green. But even those people who dislike ventriloquists and puppet shows on principle will still give Jim Henson a pass, or claim that it's something completely different, making it okay to like. And when I think about it, I'm inclined to agree with them. Nowhere else in my life do I ever claim to enjoy or

¹ In writing this, I called my mother to confirm some of the details regarding Linda. What I got instead was a terrible re-remembering of all the awful things surrounding Linda's life in the brief time that we knew her, including, but not limited to: going to her daughter, Crissy's, wedding (I was ring-bearer) only to have Linda's ex-husband (Crissy's father) show up with his new wife, who happened to be one of Linda's other daughters from a previous marriage (this took a few minutes of discussion to clarify satisfactorily, as it kept sounding like my mother was saying that Crissy was getting married to her father), as well as a terrible incident where Linda's son went back to East Tennessee to visit family, subsequently went missing, and was later found in a dumpster, a victim of an apparent murder, with violent scrapes against his knuckles suggesting a fierce struggle. All this has very little to do with the contents of this essay, but it's amazing how my brain let me forget almost entirely about all of this awfulness, but could still have given you a rough approximation as to which movies Linda did and didn't have in her pirated collection.

² I'll cop to also watching *Muppet Babies* from time to time, but only when there was nothing else on and I needed a quick and dirty fix.

³ I refuse to put Elmo in this upper echelon, despite his enduring popularity. If I remember correctly, he debuted on the *Adventures of Super Grover*, and I disliked him from the get-go. Here was some firetruck-red upstart pandering to the toddler demographic on a show that was clearly geared towards my pre-K age group. I felt annoyed and betrayed, and still kinda do.

seek out puppetry. When I think about ‘puppets’ in the strictest sense, my mind goes straight to *Punch and Judy*, and in terms of quality, it only goes downhill from there. But ‘Muppets’ are somehow something different, something almost resembling *cool*, and it was maybe this propensity to write-off puppetry that was the genius behind rebranding them ‘Muppets.’ It’s easier for me to say I like Muppets than to say I like puppets, and people will probably give me less weird looks for the former than the latter. It doesn’t completely buck the stigma, but it at least gives it a good shake.

But even with memorable personalities and iconic voicings, what really sells the Muppets, really makes them believable, is the meticulous care concerning their design and locomotion.

Part of this collective and unexpected enthusiasm for Muppets stems from how alive and autonomous Jim Henson’s characters seem. They genuinely don’t feel like puppets, but don’t try to ape humanity, either. For instance, there are numerous reports of celebrities coming onto *Sesame Street* or *The Muppet Show* and genuinely forgetting that there’s someone operating the Muppet, compelling these celebrities to speak directly to the Muppets as opposed to their Muppeteers (again, branding). For the viewer at home, who doesn’t have much of an opportunity to interact with or see the Muppeteer, the illusion is even more compelling. But even with memorable personalities and iconic voicings, what really sells the Muppets, really makes them believable, is the meticulous care concerning their design and locomotion. The engaging faces go a long way to sell it, but all the animatronic eyebrows in the world can’t compare to how fluidly the characters move about. This holds especially true for the bigger monsters of the Creature Shop, none more so than Big Bird.

Big Bird is roughly eight feet, two inches tall. To put that into perspective, the tallest NBA Star, Yao Ming, only came up to about 7’5”, and on the court he looked like a dad joining his son’s pick-up game. My point is: Big Bird is BIG. And, save for a couple understudies, the same man, Caroll Spinney, has been operating and voicing Big Bird since *Sesame Street* started in 1969. Spinney achieves Big Bird’s staggering height by sticking his right hand above his head to operate the mouth and neck, meaning he’s been putting his hand in the air for almost 50 years. And while his right hand moves the mouth, Spinney’s left hand operates the left wing, which is connected to the right wing by a small piece of fishing line, so that when his left wing goes up, his right wing goes down, and vice-versa, like a see-saw. There’s no place from which to see out, so they strap a small TV to Spinney’s chest displaying a live video feed of the scene he’s in. The heat inside the suit has been described as ‘unbearable,’ though after 50 years of standing in Big Bird’s talons, Spinney may beg to differ on the meaning of ‘unbearable.’ As if that wasn’t enough, throughout the years, Big Bird, and in turn Spinney, has been called on to dance, sing, ice skate, roller

skate, and even ride a unicycle, all the while in the suit. My point in mentioning all this is to illustrate how much work goes into just moving Big Bird, on top of which Spinney has to act, be cheerful, *unicycle*, and do the voice; all at an age when some men decide that getting up to use the bathroom isn't always worth the effort.

I can joke about it now, but Big Bird was *ahem* a *big* presence in my early life. Big Bird is almost always posited as the avatar for the child sitting at home, asking questions of the other characters that the distance and medium of television precludes the viewer from doing themselves. And as he learns things, so do you, and without all of *Dora the Explorer's* desperate pandering for engagement. There's not really a main character on the *Street*, but Big Bird is the closest thing to it. He's written to be six years old, inquisitive, and very satisfied with dropping a good bird pun now and then, a collection of quirks that very much resonated with me 26 years ago, and in some ways, it still does. Like any strong trait, his persistent curiosity allows him to butt heads with some of the more cynical members of the neighborhood, including Oscar the Grouch, the only other character voiced by Spinney. It's strange that Spinney operates such polar opposites within the *Sesame Street* universe, but one can imagine that the clear differences between the characters allow for a very easy shift between the two, and become a kind of built-in break from each other in the course of a work day. It's tempting to paint the two characters as ignorance vs. experience, but that would be mistaking Big Bird's naïveté for blanket illiteracy, which wasn't always the case. And that assumed dynamic has the potential to set up a damaging precedent for kids encouraged to see themselves through Big Bird's eyes.

The writers of the show recognized this aspect of Big Bird when they decided to make Mr. Snuffleupagus (Snuffy) real. Up until the seventeenth season, Snuffy was Big Bird's large, imaginary friend. But instead of a cool, fun, Tyler-Durden type to help Big Bird play out his repressed fantasies with reckless abandon, Snuffy was often more dopey and dumb than Big Bird himself, as if Big Bird created a loser alter-ego just to make himself feel better.⁴ Big Bird insisted to the human cast, on numerous occasions, that Snuffy was real. A human cast, who were very accepting of an 8'2" talking bird and a green trash can monster, would somehow deride Big Bird for believing in a moderately-sized, tuskless woolly mammoth with eyelashes some women would kill for. So why did they decide to make Snuffy real? Well, the writers' anxiety in having Big Bird continually disbelieved was that children who were victims of sexual abuse might be convinced into remaining silent for fear of not being believed. Seriously. That's the actual reason behind why they eventually made Snuffy real. Now, it's a bit of a logical leap, and one I'm tempted to write-off as overly cautious, but that decision at the very least demonstrates a deliberate attention and obligation to their target audience; a responsibility one doesn't always imagine most children's show writing rooms to have.⁵

⁴ This is almost a Fight Club quote.

⁵ That isn't to say that *Sesame Street* had a monopoly on deliberateness in children's educational programming, sometimes called 'Edutainment,' or to say that *Sesame Street* was always correct in

Despite the impact and consideration Big Bird and Kermit had on my development, even now, I don't know much about Jim Henson, and my guess is that there's not a lot that would surprise me. I'll cop to having watched a ventriloquist special once, and near the beginning of the performance, before the puppets came out, the puppeteer demonstrated singing the US National Anthem without moving his lips, after which he said, with a deadpan expression, 'That right there represents five years of my life.' And I'm inclined to believe him. Basically, show me a group of successful puppeteers, and I'll show you a group of people who spent most of their college years sitting in a room talking to themselves. But what I do know about Mr. Henson is that, after successfully employing puppetry through numerous shows and movies, he died very suddenly in his 50s from streptococcal toxic shock syndrome, a terrifying combination of words that make me never want to share a soda can ever again.

Which brings me to the video: 'Big Bird at Jim Henson's Memorial.'

At the risk of sounding belligerent, funerals are already their own type of pantomime.⁶ This isn't meant to be disparaging so much as just a fact. Funerals may center on a particular guest of honor, but the event is mostly for everyone else. The person in the box doesn't need the ceremony; we do. And these ceremonies and memorials are one of the many ways we process our grief at a person's passing, as well as allowing us time to meditate

⁵ That isn't to say that *Sesame Street* had a monopoly on deliberateness in children's educational programming, sometimes called 'Edutainment,' or to say that *Sesame Street* was always correct in the philosophy behind their decisions. Big Bird once had a scheduled guest appearance on *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, possibly as part of PBS's push for an MCU (Muppet Connected Universe) before the big team up against Thanos (Reagan). This meeting between Mr. Rogers and Big Bird sounds fairly benign until you consider Mr. Rogers's strict approach to the difference between fantasy and reality. Mr. Rogers was a kind man, but intensely principled, and for him it was important that children be taught the clear difference between fantasy and reality, which naturally hits a bit of a wall when you want to interact with an 8'2" talking canary. Mr. Rogers's proposed solution to this was that, after talking to Big Bird, they would then take him apart, piece by piece, showing off all the hoops and feathers and everything inside, eviscerating him like a giant turkey at Thanksgiving. As you can imagine, this didn't exactly sit well with a show that had just gone to great lengths to prove that their dozy, little wooly mammoth was actually real. *Sesame Street* encouraged children to think of Big Bird as more than just a guy in a suit, and systematically tearing apart that concept in a literal way doesn't exactly assist in that. The shows never fought with each other for ratings or anything, but imagining they did takes Mr. Rogers' proposal into very sinister territory, as we're then encouraged to think of Mr. Rogers gleefully tearing apart his competition's flagship mascot while screaming at the camera: 'See, kids, it's all fake! There's nothing in here! Nothing at all! They've been lying to you! Gordon, Susan, Mr. Hooper: they've *all* been lying to you!' The eventual compromise consisted of taking Big Bird to 'The Magical Land of Make-Believe,' Mr. Rogers' own personal gulag for all things fake, while another puppeteer showed off his puppets' inner workings, encouraging the more astute kids at home to put the pieces together themselves. I'm not sure which side of the fence I stand on, as both shows were important to me in their own way, and the differing philosophies point to a much bigger discussion on child-rearing that's outside the scope of this essay. But for as much as this clash has the potential to get into the 'Should we tell the kids about Santa?' territory, it's encouraging to know that these discussions were even being had.

⁶ I know this video is more of a memorial service than an actual funeral, but the point still stands

on what their life meant and means to us going forward. And as the dark, grainy video continues, you already know what's going to happen. Like most YouTube videos, the title has given some of the surprise away, a necessary tactic in order to get you to watch the video in the first place; like its own little spoilery trailer before the movie. But in this case that title is necessary as a kind of primer. Mention the name of this video to anyone in my generation and you can almost watch their heart break: 'Yeah, we knew Jim Henson was dead, but why'd you have to bring it up, man?' Which means the title is enough to get someone my age to suspend their skepticism for a more reverent frame of mind and dedicate the necessary 2:46 to watch it. Like the rebranding 'Muppets,' Jim Henson's name doesn't entirely buck the stigma, but it does make room for the benefit of the doubt. The other part of the title means that you're waiting not for Jim Henson, but Big Bird. Already, this situation feels contrived: we've lost an artist, albeit a commercial one, but an artist nonetheless, and now they're parading one of his most iconic and innocent creations before you at the acknowledgement of his death. One can imagine James Cameron passing away, with somebody getting the bright idea to shape his coffin like the Titanic before lowering it into the ground, and on the surface, this doesn't sound much different from Big Bird being here. But again, my unrelenting cynicism comes up against the genuine tug on my heartstrings. I can never decide whether I'm more like Oscar or Big Bird, but in my later life, I tend to favor the trash-monster. Given how quickly my generation is given over to nostalgia,⁷ we're also quick to bash anything that doesn't fit our exact conception of how this old media should be repackaged to us. In other words, we want to be the yellow canary again, but we're too much the trash-monster now to accept it.

What I'm saying is that I should hate this.

From the grainy shadows emerges a plodding bouffant of feathers that I could spot from a mile and 26 years away. As I mentioned before, having Big Bird paraded around at a funeral should be awful and unwelcome, but there's a couple factors at play here that keep my judgment at bay. First is the video quality, which reminds me that this all happened a long time ago.⁸ My nostalgia goggles have already kicked in, and I'm inclined to let the video keep playing because it was from a time before my own cynicism was

⁷ This penchant for nostalgia is followed by some very smart film producers recognizing this impulse and giving me the same stories and characters I enjoyed as a kid, only now beefed up with millions of dollars and a modern sensibility, which was kinda cool at first, but like every subsequent Transformers film, further steeled me to the fact that I was once a target market that had now been strangely bypassed in the name of obscene amounts of profit, and has turned me bitter and cynical to any further attempts to cash-in on my nostalgia goggles, even as I happily consume that same media from when I was a kid, to the point where I think calling us the Phantom Menace generation wouldn't be too far off. I feel like this also reflects a trend in restaurants to offer premium versions of the crummy things I really liked to eat as a kid, whether it's homemade Pop Tarts, gourmet corndogs, or an entire restaurant devoted to the art of the grilled cheese sandwich, complete with an option for them to cut the crust off for you in some sort of savage infantilization you not-so-secretly craved.

⁸ May 21, 1990

fully developed. It's a deeply-flawed notion to assume that the rest of the world was as incapable of impure motives as I like to think I was at six years old, but it's a notion I have a hard time shaking. Secondly: it's Big Bird. Again, this speaks to the power of Henson. It's very difficult to look at Big Bird, who is simply a puppet made with all the constituent parts of a bird, yet simultaneously resembling no bird found in nature, and not find yourself smiling. As soon as I see those droopy eyes and curious expression, I'm taken back to a much simpler time and conception of myself. If I'm being honest, who I really want up there processing Jim Henson's death is the jaded trash-monster, because that's more of who I am now than the curious canary. But even as I know that there's a team of people working together to make Big Bird happen, looking at him now, all I see is the Bird. While I could easily be mad at some imagined studio head for coming up with the manipulative idea of having Big Bird come here just to make me sad again, I'm not gonna criticize Big Bird for showing up to his dad's funeral. It would be like getting mad at a preschooler for not filling out his taxes correctly. So I let it go.

This is where whoever organized the service had the potential to make some serious missteps. Big Bird could have taken this moment to act out discovering that Jim Henson, his creator, had passed away. As sad as the idea of a creature outliving its creator is, the farce would have probably gone too far, as Big Bird would have conceivably found out Jim Henson had died well before attending the funeral.⁹ Jim Henson's forte was believability, and this would have taken things beyond the point of credulity, to the point where I'd know I was being manipulated. Alternatively, Big Bird could have given a eulogy. Though I'm sure there's an alternate universe wherein that very speech erased all our differences and border walls and finally brought about world peace, this too had the potential to become maudlin and terrible and exploitative. Instead, we hear a plinking piano picking out a melody we're struggling to recognize, from a pianist who looks like your friend's dad growing up, and who has just enough of a bald spot to be noticeable in VHS camcorder resolution. Big Bird steps out from the crowd onto center stage, dressed in a bib made to look like tuxedo ruffles. But instead of black, the bowtie at the top of this bib is a bright, neon green. The way Big Bird steps out onto the stage is slightly surreal, if only because, for all his big, plodding feet stamping along, there's no sound but the piano. There's an ethereal quality to a large being walking amongst the lowly mortals, yet making no noise save the heraldry announcing him.¹⁰ Something resembling awe. What Big Bird ultimately approaches isn't a microphone, because why would Big Bird need a microphone, but a clearing, where he starts to sing. And the song he sings isn't "Tears in Heaven" or

⁹ That being said, the *Sesame Street* episode where they discuss Mr. Hooper passing away is impressive in its handling, and yet terribly sad in the best way possible. You should probably watch this YouTube video as well at some point, but maybe give it a couple days if the current video affects you the same way it did me.

¹⁰ The closest approximation I can think of is Klaatu's robot from the 1951 sci-fi *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, though the idea of Big Bird shooting disintegrating lasers from his eyes is maybe a little too jarring to contemplate.

any of the typical songs and hymns that funerals seem to bring out of the woodwork, but a Muppet song. Arguably THE Muppet song. And this is where the YouTube title has hidden the twist. You knew it was going to be Big Bird at Jim Henson's Memorial; that much you'd signed up for. What you didn't know is that he'd be singing "It Ain't Easy Being Green." Like any good plot twist, it's clever because it was hiding in plain sight (e.g. The video wasn't titled: "You'll never believe what song Big Bird sang at Jim Henson's funeral. It *ain't easy* to listen to ;0").

It's a curious choice for a couple reasons. Sure, Big Bird is given to the occasional song, but this isn't one of them. And unlike so many songs, this song has a very particular singer in mind. To hear anyone else but Kermit the Frog sing "Green" is like hearing anyone but Frank Sinatra sing "My Way." No matter what they insist, it's not their way, it's Frank's way, and you'll always be pretending.¹¹ It's a song so much about Kermit's own predicament, namely being *green*, that having a big, feathery, and specifically *yellow* bird, green bow tie notwithstanding, lamenting and pondering the condition of retaining a verdant hue, renders the song almost silly.¹² But again, this is precisely what's so disarming about the situation. Jim Henson famously voiced and operated Kermit. To have someone else come in and be Kermit and sing THE song so soon after Jim's death wouldn't feel right. Yes, the character should continue, but not without some space to bookend Jim's time playing Kermit. And so the task of singing falls to Caroll Spinney and Big Bird. It's unexpected, but it all comes from the same place: Jim Henson. Nobody is adding anything to his words or characters except context and arrangement. What this all effectively does is divorce the song and Big Bird from their usual auspices and *Street*, creating a situation so strange and distracting that it centers you, allowing you to focus almost solely on the words being sung. And not just anyone's words, but Jim's.

As I mentioned before, there's no microphone. This seems like a minor detail, but for me it highlights another part of the magic trick. Caroll Spinney, the man inside the big

¹¹ The other song they could have chosen in this vein was "Rainbow Connection," another favorite also associated with Kermit. Though one might be tempted to say that Kermit is the only one that should sing this song, too, The Carpenters actually do an alright version. I'm genuinely surprised they didn't go with this song for the service, even as I acknowledge that "It Ain't Easy Being Green" is the more inspired choice.

¹² The other mistake they could've made was to make Big Bird green for the occasion. This isn't a mistake on principle so much as on precedent. In the Big Bird movie *Follow that Bird*, Big Bird is treated like a wayward foster child and forced by a council of bird elders to be grouped into an appropriate foster bird family. This scenario is maybe a little too close to home for some of *Sesame Street's* intended demographic but I digress. Once the social worker assigns him to live with dodos, Big Bird runs away, and it's up to the Sesame Street crew to find Big Bird before the persistent social worker does. Before Big Bird is returned to Sesame Street, thus learning the importance of family despite genetic differences, Big Bird is at one point captured by a carnival, put in a cage, and painted blue. For a lot of kids, this was the point in the movie where they would bawl their eyes out, not just because Big Bird was sad, but because he was changed and held against his will. If we accept the theory of Big Bird as an avatar, this is possibly the worst time out a little kid could ever imagine.

bird suit, stepping around the stage, is having to operate the suit while also singing, with the hand up and the fishing line arm pulley and everything else. He can't see out, meaning he's doing all this while watching a tv of himself doing it in real-time. It's another point of removal, which ironically reinforces the feeling. Just like us, the singer is watching this emotional moment all unfold for the first time, and at the same time has to create it and sing along to it. Not just with all our feelings of losing Jim Henson as an artist, but with Spinney's additional feelings of losing Jim Henson as a friend. It's easy enough to sing along at a concert when the band's playing and everyone else is singing around you, but imagine that same concert, with the same crowd, but where your words have been amplified to the point of not just being the main attraction, but the only attraction. You're the audience *and* the band; the reflection in the mirror that everyone else is looking at. And all the while, you're fighting back tears. For anyone with a phobia of public speaking, this would be something of a worst nightmare.

I brought up Frank Sinatra before intentionally. I've never been a big fan of his, but part of his unique style of singing was really torturing the rhythms and syncopation of the syllables with regards to the music, forcing the band to play to him and not the other way around. There's some of that here as well. A large part of this is the conversational nature of the song. Like John Lennon's "Imagine," "Green" is one of the few songs you could read out loud with no melody and not sound like a crazy person.¹³ Without warning, the trembling nature of Big Bird's voice shines through, and it's not clear where the intention stops and the emotion begins. Is Spinney acting out Big Bird's sadness, or are these genuine feelings we're watching as they unfold? And what does my assumption say about my mindset? Am I still a curious canary somewhere deep inside, or have I completed my full conversion into the cynical trash-monster? If we take Big Bird as the avatar I posited him to be, and a role he clearly fulfills on *Sesame Street* for millions of children around the world, then we are watching in real time as both he and Spinney, and ourselves, process Jim Henson's death using only Jim Henson's words. Kermit could be plaintive, but was never especially innocent, so now we're watching a six-year-old child as he contemplates life without a father. I mentioned this pretend 'discovery' earlier as a thankfully avoided *faux pas*, but that's only if that intention is made explicit. As it stands, we get the feeling of loss by way of the song, an impression made more resonant because it doesn't come across as intentional; like a small figure casting a large shadow, the suggestion can be more powerful than the tangible form it stemmed from precisely because our own mind is the one building the perception.

The emotion builds, and it's right around 1:31 that Big Bird sings that 'people tend to pass you over,' and there's something so sad about that idea. Not just that he used the word 'pass,' a euphemism that in this context takes on a whole host of other meanings, but by describing the dynamic where who you are is so uninteresting, so ordinary, that

¹³ Red Hot Chili Peppers is a particularly egregious offender in this respect, though Pitbull gives them a good run for their money.

people will unintentionally overlook you, a feeling that plants itself early in your psyche and can only grow as you get older. And that notion is so affecting that you start to cry. Or at least I did. If the opposite of love is indifference, then what Big Bird qua Kermit qua Jim Henson is describing is a world that will do anything but love you, simply by sake of virtue of who you are. And the worst part of it is that they won't even know they're doing it. Not hate, but indifference.

The shaky voice builds again and now there's little doubt that it's not just Big Bird qua etc., but Caroll Spinney qua Big Bird qua etc. Spinney, one of Jim Henson's good friends, who now has to watch this like we're watching it, and who is adding to Jim's words and Kermit's plaintiveness and Big Bird's innocence with his own palpable grief. And you can hear him race to get through the lyrics about 'flashy sparkles on the water' just to hit those lines about 'stars in the sky' without breaking down completely, and when he actually hits it, you feel something akin to relief.

At this point comes what we already know too well from previous iterations of the song and subsequent studies of Shakespearean sonnets: the turn. Sometimes called the *volta*, it's the hinge of thought in the piece, where the issue or crisis presented is given a rhetorical shift or dramatic change in thought and emotion on its way to some sort of resolution. If the first half of the song is the inhale, this second part is the exhale, and this *volta* is no different. Anytime I'd heard this song before, this was the fun part. At the risk of inflating my own ego, I have been told I do a fairly competent Kermit impression. My guess is that this ability was cultivated through repeated listenings of The Smiths catalogue, but suffice to say, performing "It Ain't Easy Being Green" in Kermit's voice has always been one of my Karaoke Everests.¹⁴ But instead of triumphant, we're reminded of the context. This is Jim's memorial. Kermit's victory, not over but through color, turns pyrrhic. How can one celebrate his individuality when the very creator, the one who gave him his character and personality and physique and movements, not to mention green skin, is gone?¹⁵ Who cares what he thinks of his skin at this point, when there are so many bigger issues to process? This is again where the removal of context works to its advantage. It's Big Bird

¹⁴ A Karaoke Everest is that one song you dream about getting up to the mic and bringing the house down with, but just haven't mustered up the courage to get up and try yet. Though given my added context of having watched Big Bird singing this song at Jim Henson's funeral, I may have a difficult time getting through all of it without getting the kind of emotional that, if you ever see someone at karaoke getting *that* into a song, you can only assume that they're working through some heavy shit right now. And this deep emotion exhibited by the singer would terribly confuse you if the song wasn't some torch song or triumphant anthem, but instead a kind of jokey song originally performed by a puppet frog concerning the perils of his skin color, and without the context of the singer's personal essay concerning the YouTube video he saw prior to this emotional breakdown at dive-bar karaoke, you would be tempted between laughing or gasping, thus settling for uneasy pity and another whiskey, please.

¹⁵This kind of complicates the song a bit, given that the creator gave Kermit his green skin, then made him sad about it, only to then make him happy about it. Though if you believe in any kind of benevolent creator of an imperfect world, then this might be a very handy analogy.

singing it, who has never had green skin and would be the center of attention no matter where you dropped him. We're left only with Jim's words, which aren't really about being green at all, but instead are there to remind us that sometimes our biggest flaws can also be our biggest strengths. Where the notion of loving or caring too much can be seen fully for both the burden and blessing that it is. Spinney struggles to tell you that green can be 'big like a mountain,' stumbling on the plosive 'b' in a way that you believe, despite everything else in your mind telling you it's fake, which overall was what made Jim's creations so impressive. He could throw conventional believability out the window and still make you feel something for these creatures. Because if there's one thing humans do well, whether it's attending funerals or watching Muppets, it's projecting our feelings onto others as a way of processing the feelings within ourselves. As long as the Muppets are almost human, without being too human, then it works. We may be watching the show, but we're really thinking about us. And Jim Henson knew that.

At the last two lines, after Spinney says 'When green is all there is to be,' he squeaks out 'you may wonder why, but why wonder, why wonder...' trailing off like the song always does, but speaking to a much deeper struggle, asking why things are the way they are and why bad things happen and why the people we love always seem to leave before we can tell them how much they mean to us, showing us how meaningful it can be to say 'I miss you' with no hope of a reply. And instead of trying to cover up all the struggles that being green presents, Big Bird ends with the plainly stated, 'I am green, and it'll do fine. It's beautiful, and I think it's what I want to be.'

And if that wasn't enough, Big Bird lets the piano notes peter out as he looks to the sky and whispers, 'Thank you, Kermit,' an equal tribute to both Jim and everything he created, before bowing his head.

And because you're in the bedroom by yourself, you let out a big, ugly cry.

Meanwhile, Big Bird exits stage left in complete silence of the church, its immense size suggested by all the dark corners hiding the buckets of people who have come out to pay their respects to someone they maybe only knew by his art. And even in that moment, as I think about writing this piece, explaining all the difficult feelings I have surrounding this recording, I realize that it could become yet another media for you to sift through on the way to Jim's words. But I can only hope that, as this essay maybe adds yet another layer to the artifice, that Jim Henson's message can penetrate through so much separation and media and humanity and still hit you somewhere inside your chest, where emotions and feelings seem to wake up from hibernation and spread to your fingers. Where you start to think about how big and scary the world can feel, even when you're supposed to be big enough and old enough now to handle it, and how much easier that world is to live in when there's someone else who understands what it's like and doesn't try and lie to you about it. When the same person can invent the curious canary and the crabby trash-monster, and not force you to have to choose. Even as you see the handlers come to help Big Bird down, the simultaneous feelings of love and emptiness don't go away, and they shouldn't.

The video ends like they all do: a bunch of suggestions for what you should watch next, like 12 friends all telling you how to distract yourself from the next five minutes of your life. But the silence feels better, the lingering sobs reminding you that it's 1 a.m. on a Sunday night and, as an adult with a job and a *very* underfunded 401k, you're bawling your eyes out to a video of a big, yellow puppet lamenting about being green in song. Because you want to be the kind of person where people will feel deeply about your death. It's not entirely out of ego, but because, if people do care when you die, it hopefully means you did something significant and meaningful, even if it's just that you were caring and considerate to those around you. And if someone can achieve something so important through something as silly as a talking frog, then maybe it's not so hard to do after all. ❧

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I'VE BEEN COMING TO WHERE I AM FROM THE GET GO

Brian Simoneau

—*Adam Yauch (1964-2012)*

Scratch a record and again I'm an acned kid
in Adidas and baggy jeans, every f-bomb
teetering funny to fury, always anxious
and the way to fake not giving a shit: flip it
quick, funky bassline to power-chord scream.
These days I hear them pass the mic, complete
each other's rhymes, and sometimes, yes, I cry.
MCA gone and me gone gray, I'll never be
cucumber cool, b-boy, Reddi-wipped cherry pie.
It hardly matters why I cry. Snuggled in bed
one night, my daughter asked if I wanted to go
to Brooklyn and not sleep till we got there. Fuck yes
I was tempted to say. The answer is always
the same. Because you can't, you won't, you don't stop.

Brian Simoneau is the author of the poetry collection *River Bound* (C&R Press, 2014). His poems have appeared in *Boston Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *The Georgia Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Salamander*, *Third Coast*, and other journals. Originally from Lowell, Massachusetts, he lives near Boston with his family.



DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

CAROLINE DE LACVIVIER

Photo on Foter.com

Mom says the only way to tell a happy love story is to tell it backwards. So let's start here: December 31, 1999, Fright Night on planet Earth. Kevin and I dragged ourselves to a tame party down the street. It was thrown by one of his more radical friends from Bible Study, a quick-to-preach, slow-to-listen guy who hadn't ruled out the possibility that Jesus might descend on horseback at midnight to melt the skin off nonbelievers with eyes like flames of fire. We hadn't planned to leave our bunker, but the spaciousness of a two-bathroom triple-decker was too much to resist compared to the studio deathtrap we were rotting in. Truth be told, as the seconds ticked by, we didn't really want to spend the end times in a sixth-floor walk-up in the middle of Boston's combat zone.

At that very moment, our apartment was—between you and me—stocked to the gills with dried beans, powdered milk, packets of rice, ninety gallons of water, and a generator that had put us about \$6,000 in the hole.

At that very moment, our apartment was—between you and me—stocked to the gills with dried beans, powdered milk, packets of rice, ninety gallons of water, and a generator that had put us about \$6,000 in the hole. Leonard Nimoy said only Chaos Theory could

compute the complex ramifications of what may occur at the stroke of midnight. Bill Clinton said this was the real deal. This wasn't one of those summer movies where we could just close our eyes during the scary parts. I, for one, was keeping my eyes wide open, which was exactly what I said to Kevin when he accused me of being "a little too much." We were standing out on a moldering balcony that groaned and buckled under our anxious weight as we argued in year 2000 glasses, eyes flashing behind the two middle zeros, drinking punch and waiting—hoping—for the end of civilization.

Kevin was a tender-skinned, tender-hearted redhead who dressed solely in short-sleeved button-downs of assorted colors. When he was upset or embarrassed or aroused, he turned deep red, and oh boy, was he red that night and not in the good way. He was angry about the generator because, okay, I went behind his back and spent the last of our savings. It was for the greater good, I explained. "Just wait to see how grateful our neighbors are when the power grid goes down and they have no place to plug in their dialysis machines."

Kevin laughed. That was the nice thing about him. Even when we were arguing, he could laugh. "How many of our neighbors do you think are currently on dialysis?"

I shrugged and said, "A few?"

He smiled, but then turned suddenly serious. If his moods had a shape they'd be a tight figure eight. "If you're wrong about this, we're done."

From inside, Kevin's polite friends were politely counting down to midnight. My heart clenched up like a fist and I felt a tickly feeling in the back of my throat. I said, "What do you mean by 'done?'"

Neither of us talked about how we were draining all our savings—savings that were notionally to be spent on our future home, on the clothing and feeding of our future children—on water purifiers, fire escape kits, emergency blankets, and a complete bite and sting first aid kit because you just never knew.

He took me by the shoulders and squeezed them hard as if he were concerned I might float away.

"Five," a chorus of voices said dully, sounding ready for midnight to come so they could go home and pay their babysitters. They all started having kids in their early twenties and seemed confused that, at twenty-seven, Kevin and I weren't even married yet. On the bright side, none of them seemed too concerned about the second coming, which was just as well, since the break-down of the modern world was scary enough without Jesus arriving with glowing eyes and furnace feet and a double-edged tongue.

“Four!” they chanted. “Three!”

I squeezed my eyes shut. I couldn't look.

“Two! One!”

My eyes flew open. The power was still on. Inside, people were cheering and kissing. Cars sailed passed. People shouted, “Happy New Year!” out their windows. Civilization cracked on. I felt a little something like Wile E. Coyote speeding toward a tunnel that was—SPLAT—painted on a brick wall. Kevin and I locked eyes. There was something naked, something stripped bare about his expression. It was like we were actually seeing each other for the first time.

I think our happiest days were spent preparing for the apocalypse. Never were we in such perfect sync. At first, Kevin just thought I was being paranoid, which was not entirely unreasonable. Those were the days when I worked two part-time research jobs at different hospitals and got it in my head that they were secretly communicating with each other, building a case to get me fired. But this was different. The government was involved, along with the world banks, and the UN. When the “Big 6” auditors joined the hysteria, Kevin got really spooked. For him, the antithesis to the crackpot conspiracy theorist collaging newspaper clippings and packing bug-out bags, was an accountant in a turtleneck sweater.

The night he came home with a solar-powered flashlight, I got teary-eyed. When he saw my reaction, he reddened and said, “I was thinking I'd get headlamps too.”

Suddenly, we could talk about the future without fighting about children (who wanted to reckon with my motor-mouth offspring?). Instead, we started planning the meals we would eat if the supply chains broke down. We folded up and stored the futon to make room for 30-gallon storage bins, which negated any arguments about whether my hyperactive mother should stay with us for a whole weekend. Sunday became canning day, which meant Kevin stopped mildly suggesting we go to church together. Instead, we got up early to peel and chop forty-eight pounds of peaches, plopping their candy-bright flesh into boiling pots of water. Neither of us talked about how we were draining all our savings—savings that were notionally to be spent on our future home, on the clothing and feeding of our future children—on water purifiers, fire escape kits, emergency blankets, and a complete bite and sting first aid kit because you just never knew. Never had I felt more loved, more seen, more supported, than when I grabbed that bright yellow box off the gas station shelf, and Kevin said, “Maybe we should get two.”

I ruined everything with the generator. When it comes to disaster preparedness, I can get tunnel vision, I'll admit. It's my mother's fault. For a time, she was so deep in the bramble of her delusions, every pothole was left to turn into a sinkhole. Envelopes piled up, looking more and more alarming: first white, then yellow, then pink, then red with

“FINAL NOTICE” printed on the front. When they shut the water off in our apartment, she didn’t understand. She just twisted and twisted the knob until it came off in her hand. That was *not* going to be me.

I didn’t want just any generator. I wanted the *best* generator. One that would keep the lights on in our whole building or at least our whole floor. That generator cost \$10,000.

“Don’t you think you’re taking this a bit too far?” he said.

“Are we in this together or not?” I shot back, feeling wounded by his doubt.

Then Kevin more or less took out a gun and shot me in the chest. He said, “I’m worried you might have what your mom has.”

Maybe it was a sign of Kevin’s love that he went along with it as long as he did. Poor guy didn’t have much choice after we moved in together and, shortly after, a spore in my brain bloomed into an exotic flower. It made the world pop and crackle with a mysterious, bright, and smooth energy that seemed to sizzle off every surface.

If ever there was a good time to go crazy, it was 1999, when the whole world was going crazy. Over 600 billion dollars were spent worldwide to address the bug. Sober voiced newscasters listed the systems that would collapse under our feet: the power supply, satellite communications, water, healthcare, transportation, distribution of food and every other item we depended on for survival. In that context, it didn’t seem all that strange that I began to suspect my boss at Boston Children’s was making covert calls to my boss at Mass General, telling him I’d taken an hour-long lunch break even though I was allotted only thirty minutes. Sure, I was talking a bit too fast, knee constantly bouncing. But, in those days, nobody could keep still.

Kevin seemed like a mild-mannered gentleman, but he could gut you like a fish in an argument. It had to do with the calm way he showed you to yourself.

If Kevin noticed, he kept it to himself. I think his parents suspected something. The first time he took me home to meet them, I licked my bowl of frozen yogurt clean and said that it tasted like the cool underside of ice giant Neptune. His mother smiled mildly. His father’s gaze flickered to Kevin, who laughed and said, “Sounds tangy.”

We had a fight in the car on the way home. It started when I said his parents made me feel like a big, ungainly giant stumbling around a delicate rose garden.

He frowned and said, “Is my family supposed to be the rose garden?”

“What’s wrong with being a rose garden? Rose gardens are nice, you know, fragrant. They symbolize youth and stained-glass windows and, uh, fairytales with—”

“I hate it when you do that.”

“Do what?”

“Say something like it’s a compliment when really it’s an insult.”

“How is it an insult? All I said was—”

“All you said was that you’re interesting and we’re boring.”

Well, that caught me by surprise. Kevin seemed like a mild-mannered gentleman, but he could gut you like a fish in an argument. It had to do with the calm way he showed you to yourself. I don’t really remember my dad, but Mom said he would refuse to ever fight with her. He’d get extra sunny and cheerful and ask why she was so upset. He was from Alberta.

I said, “I don’t think you’re boring,” which was the truth, but still the wrong thing to say because I was insulting his parents by omission. “I mean, boring can be good. At least your Dad didn’t take the family car and drive until he hit the west coast.” Manifest douchebag destiny, Mom called it.

“I don’t mind your Mom’s...situation.”

“I didn’t say anything about my Mom’s situation.”

He sighed and said, “What are we doing?”

“Right now?”

He pulled the car over and turned off the engine. I couldn’t meet his eyes. He said, “You don’t take anything I care about seriously.”

“I care about you,” I said, then rolled my eyes and made a gagging noise because that sounded so lame.

Kevin did not crack a smile. He looked at me without blinking. “You can’t even take this conversation seriously.”

“Come on, babe. I have ee-shews.”

“We’re having a fight. Why are you talking in a French accent right now?”

I slumped down, turtling my head into my shoulders. “I don’t know.”

He rested his head against the steering wheel. “Do you even see this working out long term?”

My knee started bouncing of its own accord, upsetting the dashboard hula dancer. “What does long term even mean these days?” I said. “Can’t we just enjoy this year before the whole world goes to Hell?”

Then I leaned over and kissed him, which wasn’t all that fair.

When Kevin and I were first dating, about three years before millennial Armageddon, he drew me little cartoons and left them hidden around my apartment. They were long-faced, knobby-jointed people with big sad eyes. The first time he spent the night, he got up early, all hair-tousled, to leave me a surprise in my tin of coffee. Tucked in the grounds was an old man with twig-thin legs struggling under a giant sign that read: “You make my knees weak.”

I was surprised whenever I heard from him. At the end of each date, I was sure that my too-muchness had scared him off that time. Surely, he must have some limit, some breaking point. Maybe when the first sparks of mania started singeing at the edges of my psyche, inducing an irrepressible urge to collect single-function devices from the Home Shopping Network: Grab-its, Egglettes, potato scallopers, star-shaped apple corers. Unsure how to wash them, I'd leave them all to soak in cloudy bowls of water. Maybe when I became obsessed with Peggy Lee and played "Is This All There Is?" on repeat while getting mournful-drunk on vodka tonics. Maybe when I decided shampoo was an invention of the haircare industry, and I went two months without using it to rediscover my natural sheen. Maybe when my landlady decided to renovate, and I asked if I and my single-function devices could move in with him.

But Kevin just seemed to keep on loving me. Even after we had our first fight, which started innocently enough as a discussion about the ingredients in New Coke and escalated to a discussion about capitalism, which escalated to attacks on character, which escalated to questions about Us—with a capital U—I woke up to discover a cartoon in my Corn Flakes. A pot-bellied dragon with a snaggle tooth was holding up a sign that said, "Sorry for being a monster."

It seemed safer to brace for the worst than hope for the best. Mom was blindsided when Dad left her. She thinks I don't know the reason, but I do. It was her condition. I don't remember him leaving, but I remember the space he left. We had mac and cheese every night for a month. The TV was always on and always blaring. Heartbreak is joined in my mind with spastic commercials for "No Mess, No Stress" dish soap and "Turn on the magic of colored lights" Lite-Brites (batteries sold separately).

I wasn't going to get blindsided, no sir. I had my eyes wide open, especially after Kevin met Mom. She needed a place to stay because her house smelled like gasoline or maybe burnt popcorn. It was fine at first. We all made dinner and played "One Week" on repeat. Mom knew all the lyrics and it was nuts to see her sing along to that part that went: *Gonna make a break and take a fake I'd like a stinkin' achin' shake*. But we woke up in the middle of the night to her removing our living room wallpaper. When we discovered her in her pajamas, holding a huge chunk of the periwinkle blue toile, she said, "What is this, Versailles?"

I apologized for like a month straight. Kevin said it was fine, but his face said it was not fine. He had that look my friends from school had when they stayed over. Like: holycrapwhattheheck.

Kevin and I met at the birthday party of a mutual acquaintance, my very religious coworker and his normal friend from Bible Study. I suspect she was trying to set him up with a nice enough girl in a peasant top who brought a tray full of rice crackers smeared with cream cheese. I was the inelegantly tipsy girl who made fun of his beaded necklace.

He was smitten from the start. We later joked that we fell for each other while eating the appetizers of his intended. Drifting from the kitchen out to the balcony in a gauzy pink bubble of mutual attraction, we talked with an intensity that must have seemed outright hostile to other partygoers. He asked me in an indirect, just casual, no-big-deal kind of way if I was seeing anyone. I said I didn't do relationships.

"Really?" he asked, looking struck. "Why not?"

I thought about that a while. There was the Yellowstone volcano. That was one thing. There was that huge fault line under California that was going to swallow up half the country. There was El Niño. There was the hole in the ozone. There were the midnight phone calls from my mom saying she was going off medication, and me saying she had to stay on medication, and my long-suffering love interest asking what time it was, and me saying don't worry, but still getting out of bed and driving to Vermont just to make sure Mom didn't go off her medication.

I said, "Why get on a plane that'll probably go down?"

He thought a minute, squinting into the distance like a romance novel cowboy, then said, "Haven't you been watching the news? We're on that plane either way." ❧

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