

PART TWO

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Mattress on the F-r-e-e-w-a-y way way way

By Adouria Macglashen

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes ••Here's to elevating your social conscience. But don't raise your glass to high, else you find yourself under a bar to low...*

Mattress n the Freeway

I see it every day,

The Mattress on the freeway

A tent, a cart, and some cardboard too.

Is this new?

The mattress on the freeway will always stay.

I pray for the one who sleeps on the mattress on the freeway.

Why does it seem so taboo?

A problem unsolved long overdue.

Doesn't it take your breath away?

What can be done about the mattress on the freeway?

THE POET SPEAKS: *I'm highly aware of my surroundings. "Mattress on the Freeway" is inspired by a mattress I saw while driving on the freeway. I live in downtown Los Angeles. Downtown is comprised of historic buildings, one-way streets, and makeshift shelters. It's hard*

to ignore the reality I see every time I leave my building. I want to use irony in a profound way that calls to the bigger issues. Jonathan Swift, Sophie Mousset, Anna Maria van Schurman, and Mary Shelley are all writers that inspire me (to name a few). Each of them, so ahead of their time and creating change whether or not they intended it. When I write I want to yield change. If that change is in one person (and their thinking) or a hundred people, it will have been worth it.

I think high school English nearly ruined poetry for me. Common core education defines poetry one way, it needs to fit in a box where the author can only be communicating one thing. I used to think poetry was so inefficient, using big words and elaborate phrases to say something simple. "Why not say what you mean?" I always thought. Now I think the opposite. Poetry is beautiful in its simplicity and ability to allude to greater ideas while being concise. The poet may be focused on conveying one specific thought or theme, but it can be received in so many different ways. I think that is very unique to poetry.

AUTHOR'S BIO: "Adouria is 22 and lives in Los Angeles. She is a poet who hopes to use irony in a way that pushes people to ask big questions."

ALGURF & other poems poems poems poems

By Howard *Brown*

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... Howard Brown lives in Lookout Mountain, TN. Lookout Mountain seems a tad tautological to me...how could you miss a mountain and who other than a longsuffering spouse in good standing and the right seat would feel obliged to admonish you for driving straight at it? I confess the human condition mystifies me, but Browns observations narrows that divide, "this baleful abyss" He has been here before and, as ever, a good read, but it is teatime at the Scretch house, I can hear her holler, and she got the good biscuits so I shall leave you to it and take mine. Settle in for some Smokey Mountain wisdom...(Spacing, format & font are poet'*

Augury

There was an old man sitting in a ragged-out, rusting wheelchair beneath an overpass, just up the street from the Y.

Anticipating he was begging, I fished around in my pocket and pulled out a couple of bucks. But he didn't ask, no, he just sat, staring into space, nursing a bottle partially concealed in a brown paper bag.

Unshaven, hair long and tangled, a string of snot oozing from his left nostril, his clothes in tatters. *Oh my*, I found myself asking, *what have we here? Another down*

and out stumble-bum. Too far adrift in an alcoholic haze to care, or do anything about it even if he did. Who knows how he found his way into this baleful abyss? But I read his image as an augury, a prophetic foretaste

of what my own existence might be if certain things played out even a tiny bit differently in the largely charmed life I lead!

7/13/2020

Another Monday

Monday morning rolls around, Monday number four thousand and thirty-three—give or take a few—since I came into this world. And I ask myself, where did all those Mondays go?

One by one they've slipped away, one-seventh of my entire life of which I have so little recollection. But if today's an exemplar, there must have been a shit-load of bad ones along the way;

The inevitable consequence of weekends filled with too much revelry. But why, at some nebulous point between sunrise Monday and sunset Friday afternoon, is that realization inevitably doomed to abnegation?

11/23/2020

Elephantine

They were big boys, and when I say big, I don't mean just a tad obese; elephantine would better capture the essence of their physiques, like characters out of a *Far Side* cartoon.

They lived with their parents, both also super-sized, in a drab, two-story, house on High Street, just South of the Frisco railyard; bordered by a bus station and a funeral home to the East; and, to the West, by a pair of billiard halls, one for Negroes and the other for whatever country peckerwoods happened to wander into town.

Willem was the older of the two; Caleb his younger brother. They were consummate loners and, except for school, seldom appeared in public. At times, we'd see them playing in their back yard, or out-front of their house, thundering down the sidewalk on their enormous tricycles; but it was always just the two of them. And when they saw us, they'd go mute, neither uttering a word as we passed; nor would we—a bit cowed by their monstrous size—say anything to them.

Willem was a couple of grades ahead of me and, by the time I was in junior high, he was a freshman in

high school. He still wore short pants to school in warm weather, and was teased unmercifully by the schoolyard bullies. He was also caught in the boys' restroom one day, pulling up a pair of pink panties, thought to be hand-me-downs from his mother, which only added to his shame. And rumor had it that he went straight home from school each day to sit in front of the tv and commune with Buffalo Bob and his goofy little wooden sidekick, Howdy Doody.

Caleb was four or five grades behind me and I don't remember much about him, except that he stuttered, would frequently piss his pants when flustered and wore glasses so thick he looked like an owl. In short, as with his older brother, he was a ready-made object of derision.

So, toward what were their wretched, fractured lives moving, one might ask. Perhaps they were merely eccentric, but fated, sooner or later, to come into their own, their hidden brilliance finally emerging and putting all the rest of us to shame. Unfortunately, that was not the way things played out.

They might well have been closet geniuses, but neither ever elected to reveal their purported sagacity, ultimately choosing (without explanation) to take their own lives, dying as they had lived, alone and wrapped in enigma.

11/18/2020

THE POET SPEAKS: *“You cannot defeat darkness by running from it, nor can you conquer your inner demons by hiding them from the world. In order to defeat the darkness, you must bring it into the light.” — Seth Adam Smith, Rip Van Winkle and the Pumpkin Lantern*

I generally tend to favor the more upbeat poetry of authors such as David Whyte and Mary Oliver. However, these five poems have a decidedly dystopian tone about them, more reminiscent of the work of Charles Bukowski, who I read in my youth. I've worried about this issue over the past several months as I wrote and again when I put these particular poems together for submission to the wider world. However, I think the pieces reflect, both literally and metaphorically, the dark time in which we've been living since the onset of Covid-19 and the related lockdown. And their composition has been a catharsis of sorts, an exorcism of my inner demons so that, hopefully, I can put it all behind me and move on.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Howard Brown lives in Lookout Mountain, TN. His poetry has appeared in *Fleas on the Dog*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Printed Words*, *Blue Collar Review*, *Tuck Magazine*, *The Beautiful Space*, *Pure Slush*, *Truth Serum*, *Poetry Super Highway*, *Old Hickory Review*, *Devil's Party Press*, *Tiny Seed Literary Journal* and *Lone Stars Magazine*. He has published short fiction in *Louisiana Literature*, *F**k Fiction*, *Crack the Spine*, *Pulpwood Fiction*, *Extract(s)*, *Gloom Cupboard*, *Full of Crow* and *Pure Slush*.

Dystopia

The *dark winter* spoken of during the recent presidential election is upon us. In fact, it arrived before the epithet was ever uttered. The sun may well be shining, yet we find ourselves engulfed in darkness of a different kind.

Ravaged by a virus no one can quite wrap their mind around; with the ensuing isolation, where you think twice before going anywhere, concealed behind a mask when you do, becoming just one more amorphous figure among many.

Yes, the vaccine is here. But will it be the panacea for which we've hoped; don't viruses inevitably mutate, adjusting to whatever stands in their way? And how optimistic can one be when there's still no antidote for the common cold?

So, as the casualties continue to mount, I'm reminded of Robert Oppenheimer's quote from the Bhagavad-Gita, after witnessing the detonation of the first atomic bomb in 1945:
Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.

12/19/2020

Willie Roscoe

Who remembers Willie Roscoe, decrepit, old baggy-assed bum? Rumor has it he was once a carpenter, but somewhere along the way his mental plumb line began to sway, then swung totally off-kilter and, ultimately, he found himself adrift in a parallel, alien world from which there was no return;

I recall him shuffling down Main Street in a battered slouch hat, thread-bare suit coat, khaki work pants and a pair of cast off, black, high-top tennis shoes; reeking of b.o. and urine, pausing here and there to pick up a cigarette butt from the sidewalk, strip away the paper, then empty the tobacco into a Prince Albert can he stowed in his jacket pocket;

Go to hell, go to hell, go to hell was his mantra and, sotto voce, he would repeat it endlessly to anyone who'd stop long enough to listen. Main Street was only a few blocks long and after he'd trod its length a time or two, he'd reverse course and begin the long trek back out to the County Poor House, which he called home;

He'd also show up at the First Baptist Church from time to time, especially if they were holding a revival, ignoring the frenzied efforts of the ushers to walk him back out the door, his odor preceding him as he traipsed down the aisle (so that the congregants began to scatter before he even came into view), invariably taking a seat on the front row, hoping for some sort of divine intervention, I suppose, which would deliver him from his misery; but it was all for naught.

Now he lies in an unmarked, pauper's grave, his dismal life having passed like a loose sheet of newspaper blown about in the wind; and, sad to say, you'd be hard pressed to find much of anyone in this, his old hometown,

Who remembers Willie Roscoe, decrepit,
old baggy-assed bum!

10/31/2020

She WAnders the NigHT

By Heather SageR

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... Sager is possessed of a fluidity that beguiles me, an unlit, inky-dark, enchanting candescence casting the shadows she chooses. "A cadaverous breeze caresses me." "The dark backs of houses whisper secrets." Mixed with evocations shaken and stirring; a revenant's relevance: "With his voice like a kind violin / and eyes like a song." Listen. Hear her deathly silent whispers in requiem? "I walk in my grave among the living." Beauty transcends remorse, extends condolence. (Spacing is the poet's own.)*

Heather Sager

27 lines

She Wanders the Night

The misty moon high above
is my old friend
and the scraggly bare-branch elm
my dear companion.
My gait quickens upon the walk.
A cadaverous breeze caresses me.

You are not lost, it says.

You have always belonged here

in the misty, serene dark.

My gait quickens upon the walk.

The dark backs of houses whisper secrets.

The fronts of houses glow yellow.

Yet their inner shapes remain unknown to me;

I stay distant from the life that plays out within them.

Once, I found love within four homely walls.

Such a passion we shared, he and I,

a love greater than delight we shared.

With his voice like a kind violin

and eyes like a song,

together my prince and I were found.

But death came, parting me too soon

from my forever-love. Somewhere he lives,

and today I walk in my grave among the living.

I belong out here: the moon, high;

the elm, bare;

the breeze, cadaverous—

the night, dark.

THE POET SPEAKS: *When writing this poem, I wanted to create something different. Poet-influenced, with a dark, spooky effect. It began simply, after I walked on a moonlit night. I thought about the feeling of being alienated. Eventually the poem collected more imaginative notions. I started out making the poem musical, but later I stripped away a lot of that. It became more about the story that was beginning to take shape, that and atmosphere. I peered through the poem's dark window, asking, who is she? Why is she doing what she is doing? and let my imagination help me find the poem's beating heart.*

Each time I write a poem, the poem is its own thing. Whether the poem is light, dark, or shades in between, I treat the poem as something unique that must be explored and brought to the most expressive form of itself that it can be.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Heather Sager is an Illinois author. Her most recent poems appear in *Sein und Werden*, *Words & Whispers*, *dreams walking*, *Door Is a Jar*, *Bluepepper*, *Visitant*, and other magazines. Heather also writes fiction, with recent work appearing in issues of *The Fabulist*, *Words & Art*, *Slippage Lit*, and others.

The SIMON Says poem and 2 others

By Elijah Vasquez

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes...Vasquez 'Simon Says Poem' just might be the first and finest syllogistic soliloquy I have ever read. Eat your heart out Socrates. And the other two he throws in by way of addendums are as delightful also too... (Spacing & format is poet's own.)*

The Simon Says Poem

Read this first line.
Simon didn't say,
But we'll try again anyways,
Simon says...
Read this fifth line.
Good,
You are doing just fine,
Simon says...
Look up,
I wasn't finished,
Look upside down,
Still not finished,
Look upside down,
And close your eyes,
Your eyes are open now,
Surprise,
Simon says...
Read the first line outloud.
Congrats,
You did it twice,

You must be proud,
Now, don't stand.
Good,
Simon didn't say,
Well planned,
Simon says...
Stop reading.
Not good,
You were reading,
Still are,
Anywho,
Stop reading.
Good,
Simon didn't say,

You are exceeding,
Now Simon says...
Say "Simon says".
What, is it now my turn to play?

The Hot Dog Haiku

The sun is so hot,
Making my buns so soggy,
Yet my tail still wags.

The Break *Up* Poem

I promised I would never let go,
But the next thing you know,
The string slipped,
And I looked up and said,
" Uh oh".

THE POET SPEAKS: *I love poems that are witty, quirky, and a little out of the box. I grew up loving Suess, Elliott Silverstein, because they simply caught my attention more with their writing styles. Lengthy, hyper-descriptive, naturally metrical, poems always bored me. Artistically they are not discounted in value, but for me they were never my cup of tea. I think poetry possesses a unique power to instantaneously gratify. It's like eating a candy bar, short lived, and very sweet. That's what I want to do for readers. I want to instantaneously gratify them with a smile, a laugh, an idea, a gasp, whatever it may be to satisfy and engage them in that particular moment.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Elijah Vazquez is an Orlando based playwright who graduated from Niagara University with a B.F.A in Theatre Performance. Some previous experience with playwriting

includes completing an advanced playwriting independent study course focused on the dramatic form, the Theatre of the Absurd. He has taken many philosophy classes that influenced his writing as well, along with a theatre criticism class which he analyzed and commented on many theoretical manifestos from Brecht to Grotowowkis to Hugo to Esslin, which helped provoke thought about the essence of theatre and the structure of a play.

Colo R

By **W**hitney Rein**hA**rt

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... Whiney Reinhart is a peach. 'Newly come to the writing for others to read world,' as she says, without a hesitation of hyphenation. 'A happy [pandemic enhanced] recluse who lives in Arkansas.' Her poem 'wormed its way out of [her] head and onto the page.' To me it reads like a most transcending testimonial to and for anyone who has lost a loved one to some form of dementia. I just can't fathom why she confesses to disliking them both in the end... it is as worthy a read as I am easily confused; and I just wish she or someone could throw me a line and explain her last two...*

Colo R

When I heard she had died,
I said, "Thank God."
She was my mother.
I despised her.

I loved the woman before.
I loved her laugh.
I loved her strength.
I loved her attitude.
I loved her ferocity.
She was murdered.

The woman who died was an imposter.
A poseur. A false version.
Papier mâché.
A cheap shell of air and disease.

The woman before,
She was a giant.
She was invincible.
She was music.
She was flirtation.
She was life.

The woman who died,
Murdered the woman before.
Her disease,
Murdered the mother I knew.

I despised them both.
And they are both gone. Thank God.

THE POET SPEAKS: *I am a writer who occasionally produces a poem or two. I don't think in terms of poetry. Instead, I focus on the story which needs to be told and allow my inspirations to determine their own shapes. If they emerge as a short story or flash-fiction or poem, that's how I send them out into the world. I have noticed however that the prosaic stories often feel therapeutic during gestation whereas poems are born out of nausea and a sudden burst of catharsis. And I mean actual nausea, not the hyperbolic kind. The honesty of a work is far more important to me than how it looks on the page. I am inspired by what makes us uncomfortable, challenges us, and the lies we tell ourselves. As my bio says, I'm not a huge fan of 'poetry' in the upper-crust, impenetrable sense of the word but rather, feel it is an important facet of the literary landscape which must be cultivated for interest. After all, beauty is often found among the weeds, no?*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Newly come to the writing for others to read world, I am a happy recluse who lives in Arkansas, just the other side of the Mississippi from Memphis with my husband and two spoiled Siberians. I am an unpublished MFA student with the intention of teaching creative writing. I believe I am a better reader than writer but others often say otherwise...even though I am a very good reader. I'm not a huge fan of poetry but am learning to consume it, like asparagus or brussels sprouts. Does anyone really like those? At any rate, this piece wormed it's way out of my head and onto the page so I figured why not go ahead and send it out into the world.

suffocate the sky & (2) others others others others

by brooKE jean

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... Can you imagine a job where all you did was simply vet one genius from another? And lamely explain why? What could possibly be sweeter? Just call me Lucky. As hard as it is to take anyone serious, why are we so filled with desperation? At least Brooke Jean's, 'suffocate the sky' is tastefully tragic, delectably denouncing and constructively destructive. She is mighty mind you: "probing ancient thoughts / not so prehistoric," "lying larynx lyrics locked and loaded," "there's no chaperone when isleep" and "heart on a string in hope of a bite" "waxing and waning the desire of light." For me, I do just fine with a host of broken dreams and empty-pocket jeans; I just don't believe septuagenarian should be paying environ-mental fees. Yes, I realize it was our mess, but nor am I so far from going back to having someone change my nappy. (Spacing & format poet's own.)*

suffocate the sky

prosperity and unprecedented times!
if only the present would stay, if just for a moment
just enough time before we
suffocate the sky
skip in the sea with plastic rocks
curse the wind for pushing our
plans and plummet to the landfill graveyard.

it signals by dead leaves we
play and prance in the rotting of life
they built that park in staten island
the pilgrims would be proud of all we
accomplished despite the challenges –
human, inhuman, unamerican.

but it's all the same everywhere
as it is and always will be
smoke even smothers the amazon
selfish consumption for which we
never pay a more difficult price: our
individual fates are
quite inconsequential.

chaperoned acid trip

a chaperoned acid trip
the eastern-european instructor brought a bottle of pepsi to every class
an awkward giggle and a calming presence
probing ancient thoughts
not so prehistoric
constructingde-constructingre-constructing reality
one by one blink touch taste smell sound *syllable*

in that room
a raised hand is always right
a thought is proof of existence
the table is not a table it is a collection of wood and other materials that we arrange and call a
table and
don't we do this every day

Miss, Mrs., Mr., Dr., Atheist, Christian, Muslim, Queer, Expert, Terrorist
i've wondered what's in a name since seventh grade
there was a time before symbology
before weaponized words
lying larynx lyrics locked and loaded

why do we name hurricanes and illnesses
does it make it more real and
will we ever escape this grasping at identity?
meaningless names etched into stone across the world for who to see?
there's no chaperone when i sleep
there's no names in my dreams
there's no more

see you next week

a switch

i feel it is a constant fray
a temperamental lightswitch
without warning i shift
longing for more or less or a balance
i cannot strike
but it will find me and i will know

the infinite furlough is but
fleeting though i suspend mine –

heart on a string in hope of a bite
a premonition that is right
my eyes dart toward the clockwork hands
persistent and undefined

the liability is not yours nor mine
but outside our control the hesitant finger
will flip and release while
we sit in the dark
waxing and waning the desire of light.

THE POET SPEAKS: *These poems were written in the dismal year of 2020 amidst the outbreak of a pandemic and, thus, were inspired by the absurdity in which I found myself. I am generally inspired by existentialism and absurdism in all my creative writing. 'suffocate the sky' was inspired by a morbid photo of the ocean littered with trash that my Creative Writing professor presented to us as a prompt. I wanted to invoke the energy and voice of 'Ozymandias' by Percy Bysshe Shelley while also bringing a touch of modernism with political lingo and a different poetic structure. And, if you couldn't tell, I really like alliteration. 'chaperoned acid trip' focused on the absurdity of both labels and definition, related to my studies in philosophy. 'a switch' was a play on my purgatory in love and life as well as an experimentation with rhythm. I love reading and writing poetry that is seemingly 'easy' to read but could mean something different to each reader. I appreciate poetry for many of the same reasons as philosophy: it leaves you with more questions than answers.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: I'm Brooke Jean -- a Chicago-based amateur poet, writer, and artist whose work has been published by Fleas on the Dog, iO Literary Journal, and Voice of Eve. As a recent college graduate with an English degree, I find myself grasping... for a job? Mostly. For meaning? Always. My current hopes are to become an English teacher or anything at least slightly more fulfilling than waiting tables or pouring drinks. Until then, I'll be scraping my brain for anything that's left in it.

Mantra n.o.t Tantra

By Edward Zahniser

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... EZ is a real caution, "even when / as a teenager I could corrupt / most any idea during that richly / liminal time" He is as refreshing as a Lime Rickey at an old fashion soda fountain. Read 'Mantra not Tantra,' "her loose blouse / sort of fell forward, to reveal / not a bra but her breasts" There's gold in them there hills "themselves" ...*

Mantra not Tantra

"Put that in your hope chest,"
my parents used to say when
something special happened
material or even experiential
or sometimes just the odd idea.
This stuck with me even when
as a teenager I could corrupt
most any idea during that richly
liminal time as body and mind
began to differentiate in ways
conscious of themselves even
if sometimes I was a bit slow
to catch onto myself, as when I
fell for Lora down the block,
one year younger than I, but

both in the same Zodiac month.

As I have recorded elsewhere,
this happened at her back steps
on which she sat as I stood to
face her when her loose blouse
sort of fell forward, to reveal
not a bra but her breasts—I
almost added “themselves” —
with my first impulse not lust,
not, e.g., tantra but a mantra:
“Put that in your hope chest.”

— Ed Zahniser

THE POET SPEAKS: *My “Mantra not Tantra” poem irrupted from my remembering the “put that in your hope chest” mantra my parents often prescribed for their four kids. This was memorably secular, given they were both children of evangelical Christian ministers in the Free Methodist Church — and the “Free” don’t mean liberal! In fact, my father’s father and all four uncles were Free Methodist ministers. One would serve as Bishop of the Free Methodist Church. The brothers are now memorialized in a Free Methodist museum chapel. My parents met when one of their fathers was invited to preach at the other’s home church.*

I, the youngest child, was raised in the Presbyterian Church because the church was within walking distance (during World War II gasoline was rationed), and it had a choir—which Free Methodists still deemed sinful then. My mother was a trained singer in need of some respite from four children. I was the fourth child in my parent’s planned family of three kids.

My above outburst of religious memory reminded me that, as a high school student, what “hope” I had in whatever “chest” was not so much salvific as corporeal, embodied. Think: female breasts. Hence the poem’s near addition of the word “themselves.” The tantra (literally “woven together”) comes from Hindu and Buddhist meditative practices of sexual union. (Hence the Mantra not Tantra!) In Sanskrit, mantra is a form of psychoactive speech — repetitive sacred words, sounds, or phrases chanted in meditation.

AUTHOR’S BIO: Ed Zahniser was a founding member of Some Of Us Press in Washington. DC in the 1970s. His seven books and seven chapbooks of poetry, co-edited anthologies, and exhibit catalogs

of two gallery shows of poetry as works on walls were recently accessioned by the University at Buffalo Special Collection of 20th- and 21st-Century Poetry in English. He is the poet laureate of Shepherdstown, WV. Ed retired as senior writer and editor of the Publications Group of the National Park Service in 2013.

“Flight”

By I. B. Rad

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes: I.B. RAD has been here before. I am a poor observer, so imagine my delight went he took the time to describe and interpret this work; for the same reason, I cannot attend a gallery without a guided tour—staring blankly is a specialty of mine. Luckily it is sometimes appreciated as absorbed admiration. Here, RAD is transfixed upon an object, deep in contemplations and transporting us there: NO ONE NEEDS TO DRAW ME A PICTURE, but I do prefer it. I find his insights into Amen’s “Flight” carving almost as engaging as his verse. Quite the erudite ekphrasis, RAD invites us to read what he sees, from your eyes to his words—Spread the RAD...(Spacing and format are poet’s own.)*

"Flight" by Irving Amen, 1948*



"Flight"
I.B. Rad

In Amen's black and white woodcut,

"Flight,"
wide eyed and open mouthed,
a couple clings to one another,
she glancing backward,
he peering ahead.
Rendered in early 20th century
expressionist mode,
wavy, acutely angled lines
form a backdrop
suggesting conflagration
yet also seeming to thrust the pair forward,
while underneath the duo
curved lines impel a downward trajectory,
and on the couple's right
horizontal lines
complete their set's framing.
Bearded, he's donned a wide brimmed black hat,
trousers, and dark overcoat;
whereas, clothed in long skirt and coat,
a kerchief covers her hair;
in short, it appears likely
they're from a shtetl,
and, as bare feet testify,
expeditiously skipped town
to dodge a looming pogrom,
their reckoning for being Jews.
Perhaps, it might aid some readers' understanding
to mention
a bush burns
at the couples right,
having just been struck by lightening,
and that this woodcut
was completed in 1948,
the year Israel's statehood was declared.
Well I suppose you've got the picture;
it's got to be something like this:

'Persecuted Jews
shepherded by their God
from bygone Europe's
perpetual pogroms,
cresting
with an industrial-scale "Holocaust,"
to that sacred sanctuary,
the "promised land."

*Irving Amen (1918 - 2011) is an American artist who worked with a variety of printing techniques and styles as well as with painting, sculpting, and stained glasswork. His art is widely collected and is owned by major museums. "Flight" was first

printed in 1948 and later reissued in 1975.

THE POET SPEAKS: *I must admit when I first purchased the print, "Flight," I bought it as a superb example of early Expressionist style. I understood it depicted a Jewish couple fleeing one of the many European pogroms. But why the small tree or bush being struck by lightning? I analyzed the woodcut and after I found it was completed in 1948, I later remembered that 1948 was the year the state of Israel was declared. I also analyzed the artistic techniques used and decided to write this poem as a kind of detective story (I think it makes the poem more interesting.) As to why I write poetry, it's because I enjoy writing and it makes me think as well as perhaps some of my readers. I have no particular artistic influence, though I admire a wide variety of them.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: B. Rad is an independent New York City poet. Much of his more recent work is available on the internet. His latest book, "Dancing at the Abyss," was published by Scars Publications and is available from Amazon or it can be downloaded free of charge from the Scars' site (scars.tv). He believes a wide range of subjects can be accommodated by poetry, from potty training to love to war and peace and accordingly, stylistically, his philosophy is "Let the punishment fit the crime..." or, to put the matter *another* way, "Form follows function" (but that still leaves "more than one way to skin a cat" – a rather gruesome thought.)

the staNdar **frog** rate & two (2) others...

By J. D. Nelson

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... I find J. D. Nelson surreally inspiring. I have always preferred absurd to sublime: "why is there no paper in your hat / nothing in your room with soup," "the voice of the comma / the fred of three eyes" "the wooden puzzle is the king of the ordered fawns / we glow for too long with that salad" J. D's poetry may just be my new Acid Test to edit anyone who doesn't get it out of my life. Now if I could only find my Tom Waits' Greatest Hits 8-Track tape.*

the standard frog rate

ample earth was a fad
the forest is the measure now

the prowler means that you can say yes
nothing will be the good grape

the streaking foot of the flute
the stereo ice was a normal day and we hear the sword

the taco yak
the power to muffin the hanging huck

why is there no paper in your hat
nothing in your room with soup

the game of the good goose
to name a spiralled toe

the dinah shore tooth of the cake again

a scabbed scarab
a wall of the pork potato
yes a chili bean

the singing horse of the entire world
the clean-cut april of the news walk

to show us a flute down from the dream
the country hurt of the symptom reef

that alpha after
to row a new boat and that hahaha

the voice of the comma
the fred of three eyes

the goof to gold one goblet a gore
after this foot dot to win rex the royal pig

your cloud was a baby gnat to reek of the surf
a sure-fire way to lend a clam to the sun

that northern yes to char a basket of eggs
if we see that slip of the hum to meet one

I was the robot and I am the robot

salmon is the trouble for the clock now
bring me a remote of the canceled forest

the dollar ball was a wound up ice of the friday
the duck of that law after that night of eggs

a bottle of pi or piers
in that garden tonight for sheep

sauce was the lucky eyelet
pepper tea tree shop

the sock panther
the spearmint voice to glow

the wooden puzzle is the king of the ordered fawns
we glow for too long with that salad

moisture pt king and kinsman
earth rows a bottle of the *gupp*

the bright now for the pizza creep
the howl of a cookie

THE POET SPEAKS: *My work is influenced by the Beat writers, especially the cut-up techniques pioneered by William S. Burroughs and Jack Kerouac's spontaneous prose techniques. Most of my work is created through the cutting up and collaging of my own daily freewriting. My work is also influenced by the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, Dada, and Surrealism. Poetry is important to me because it allows me to express myself in ways that I haven't found to be possible in visual arts and music.*

bio/graf

J. D. Nelson (b. 1971) experiments with words in his subterranean laboratory. His poetry has appeared in many small press publications, worldwide, since 2002. He is the author of several collections of poetry, including *Cinderella City* (The Red Ceilings Press, 2012). His work has recently appeared in *E·ratio*, *Maintenant*, *Otoliths*, *BlazeVOX*, and *X-Peri*. Visit www.MadVerse.com for more information and links to his published work. Nelson lives in Colorado, USA.

DROP the CHALUPA & (n)ine (9) others...

By Robert Beveridge

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... Nor was Jesus a teetotaler, hence the quest for the Grail and just what with which to fill it? For now, let us sup from the chalice of Beveridge. That's right. I am paid quite handsomely for this tripe. Robert is each oblique, obtuse, acute, and askew; I hope you love him too. "...hailing Satan / for spare quarters." "The ocelots / have stolen your keys again," And man's best friend in 'IT'S A LONG WAY TO TIPPERARY' "Put the barbecued chicken / to bed, pull up the omelet / blanket." "BP normal, pulse normal, / but the oompah band / is so out of tune" I could go on and on, so why don't you? He's worth a long draw, but try not to gulp—(Spacing & format poet's own.)*

DROP THE CHALUPA

in the darkest corner
where even the roaches
have given up
on the discovery
of a single crumb

the legend of the meat hose
is told around 2AM campfryers
to disquiet the initiates

the new hires no one thinks
will last out the first week

for the ones who seem
as if they might have
a little more resolve
they break out the tales
of those franchises
that disappeared in banks
of seven-layer fog,

left nothing behind
but a faint scent
of guacamole still fresh
long after it has any right to be
but where the 1974 Gran

Torinos still line up,
day after day, wait
for someone, anyone
to recite the benediction

“may I take your order?”

and respond with a preference
for hard
or soft

I LOVE YOU, RANITIDINE

I dreamed you were in a black metal band called The Devil's Knickers and you kept showing up to gigs around the country and somehow they were always in the same venue. It wasn't all that big but bikers were between you and the stage and they couldn't hear when you asked them to move because they were made of stone. So instead of the headliner you found yourself in the lobby, a skull at your feet, hailing Satan for spare quarters.

IT COULD HAVE BEEN WORSE, YOU COULD HAVE SEEN *THE EMOJI MOVIE*

Your grandchildren call you from the local watering hole, too strapped for Uber and too drunk to walk. The ocelots have stolen your keys again, so you beg off, tell them you'll see if Violet across the hall is home. You hang up, watch that annoying back brace commercial for the fifty-seventh time today, wonder if Violet is, truly, home, if any of us are.

IT'S A LONG WAY TO TIPPERARY

You asked around for the best
price on doghouses, decided
the world would look down
on you less if you built your own

THE MOLAR FLIRTS

You can't help it that your
acting ability drowned
when you were four. A survivor
who witnessed the capsizing
reported to you that it
had in fact made contact
with its man in Macao
and that the deal was going well
before it went down. Now
you can't help but wonder
about the price of coffee in Berlin
and whether it would affect
the outcome.

Too many variables.
You have decided
to eliminate a number
of ocelots. Right-size.

PUN GOD

Ra, I would call
upon your holy name
if the lions hadn't devoured
it last June. So instead
I search dark tomes,
forbidden tracts, letters
to the editor for excised
phonemes, things we must
make right. This language
cannot die, cannot die,
saints and words preserve us.

SANDSTORM

Put the barbecued chicken
to bed, pull up the omelet
blanket. Lullabies of pickled
plum await as night washes
over the land. Now is the time
for rice to soak up its weight
in stock, mackerel to dance
a jig. The pistachios await their
turn in the spotlight. Tonight,
everyone is as important.

SOMETIMES I AM CERTAIN THE MUZAK IN HELL'S ELEVATORS IS HARSH NOISE WALL

BP normal, pulse normal,
but the oompah band
is so out of tune patients
prefer the cafeteria's chicken
a la king. There's snow
on the ground, but it's contained
in the maternity ward. Trash
day is here and you've
forgotten what procedure
you came in for. You wonder
how related these things are.

STONISH¹

birds on swings

shards of teeth
clutched
in your left hand

sunset clouds
like a burnt
tongue

train whistle
in the distance

crunch crunch
crunch fainter
and fainter

unconsciousness

1 The “a” is left off intentionally. When not Shunn-formatted, the title should be all lowercase.

YOU MAKE ME SICK

One of these days
I'll learn not to try
to match you drink
for drink anymore

'cause I'm the one
who always ends up
in the bathroom

THE POET SPEAKS: *I considered reusing the first one of these I did back in 2019. I also considered just asking “but what if the poet is mute?” over and over again for a page and a half before realizing someone’s probably already done that and it wouldn’t be nearly as funny the second time around. So instead, and with an eye towards rectifying the error of not doing this the first time round, I’m going to play raconteur with the genesis of each of these little nuggets.*

“Drop the Chalupa” was one of my shameless attempts to break into Taco Bell Quarterly. I know I’ll never be as cool as a televised chihuahua, but a boy can dream.

“I Love You, Ranitidine” is part of a very loose (to the point of being unconnected) series of pieces I’ve written over the last year or so—I tend to write when I’m in bed, that just being the kind of horrible person I am—that have arisen from the abject pain and horror I feel both on a personal and a societal level when I find myself subjected to ambulance-chasing-lawyer ads (I know they’re endemic, but in my case, I always see them sandwiched between terrible horror films).

“It Could Have Been Worse, You Could Have Seen The Emoji Movie” is, I am sorry to report, a true story. My friend Jay Gambit (of Crowhurst, Executioner’s Mask, etc.) was indeed sent to see The Emoji Movie by the blog Toilet ov Hell. It turns out the movie is much more bearable when you’re very, very stoned, at least. [<https://toiletovhell.com/we-sent-jay-gambit-of-crowhurst-to-see-the-emoji-movie/>]

“It’s a Long Way to Tipperary” was a riff on Snoopy’s long quest to take down the Red Baron combined with the weird double-sidedness of the respectability of DIY culture as it applies to creativity and the horrific use the rugged-individualist trope has been slotted into.

Like “Jornada”, which appeared here back in 2019, “The Molar Flirts” was part of an attempt I made in 1994 to take the titles of the poems in John M. Bennett’s chapbook “Was Ah” and write completely unrelated pieces with the same titles. (I never did finish the project.)

I am embarrassed to report that “Pun God” is about a nu-metal band. If you’re enough of a nerd to remember them, I’m sorry.

“Sandstorm” is a Japanese hangover cure—omurice, umeboshi, pistachios, chicken for protein. I highly recommend it.

“Sometimes I Am Certain the Muzak in Hell’s Elevators Is Harsh Noise Wall” is the beauty of chronic pain washed in a veneer of incipient dementia. (They keep telling me the incipient dementia is actually a side effect of severe ADHD, but I keep not believing them completely.) Harsh Noise Wall is far more comforting than chronic pain, though. Just one of thousands of examples here (it’s a playlist): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Wnl0mVMhww&list=PL7wzKS46RzQPTMyKg776sYcvdj_aCLdSH

“stonish” feels like a nightmare, but my nightmares are never quite that lucid. So I’m going to assert that it’s a nightmare where my subconscious filled in pieces minutes or hours later.

“You Make Me Sick” is a jumble of dozens of different memories of my college experience in the late eighties (and the two or three years of trying to be Charles Bukowski that followed it).

On the importance of both reading and writing poetry: I find it helps make sense of the world in a way that other types of writing don’t. Sure, there is much to be said for essays and articles and novels and all those other ways of conveying information. There is, however, something quite different about the lens we use to look at the world when we do this thing—something that uses both definitions of the

word “cleave” at the same time, allowing us to delve into areas of the truth that straight factual reportage cannot while veering off into weird symbolic realms in order to do so.

AUTHOR’S BIO: Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in Mawth, The Stray Branch, and Counterclock, among others.

BrOKeN Doll & other poemS...

By Donna Dallas

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... Donna Dallas is absolutely fabulous. "he's snoring / boogers a century old heave in and out" "There's a vicious disease / called malaise" She is both surprisingly soothing and curiously profound. "I wanna be / awanna be – I am" Who can resist self-deprecating humor in others, "my muffin top holds the batter / of the universe" "stir the ice / that clinking sound seduces our anomalies / I wait / encrusted in your eyes" While Dolls our fragile and doubtlessly breakable, her verse is sanguine, intrepid and roundly redoubtable. (Spacing & format poet's own.)*

Broken Doll

The wound is open
she cries
endlessly
cries
I want her to stop
I long to heal her
I cannot
I can only
cry with her

Heart's a Half Dead Beat

6:50am heart's a half dead beat

he's snoring

boogers a century old heave in and out

I creep out of bed a wandering mole

like where am I going?? I've

abandoned myself to kids to teenagers to

wanna-be adults a long time ago

drop my teenager off at work feel like a monotonous wretch

there's a boy mowing the lawn out front

(I would have pined over this one in
my day)

I ask my daughter who's this? he's cute

she sneers and replies *he's gross all men are*

hmmm way smarter than I was at her age

I vape home

stare in the rear view mirror

at myself

what am I doing?

or what was I doing?

There's a vicious disease

called malaise

I skip to the front door

giddy as a child

(it's temporary insanity from boredom)

trying to tear my frame

out from its rut

I wanna be

a wanna be – I am

because I dripped to empty four

decades ago

my muffin top holds the batter

of the universe

yet I cannot locate

the source

Promise

I want

to make

her proud

I want her to exit

knowing

she did good she raised me right

I wasn't a bad seed

not a mistake

nor a wrong turn...

Jane

Cigarette Smoke
baptizes me
I heard it kills germs
bubbles
enlighten me
I have my smoke
my drink
I'll read you
through you
stir the ice
that clinking sound seduces our anomalies
I wait
encrusted in your eyes
I am your mother
your lover
your ass-wiper
the wind a spindle
between us
the trees
so overgrown with gossip
have forgotten they are trees
and I
so lonely for even your shadow
babble to no end

Take this drag
from it
we are one
the smoke seeps into us
the moon has crept
into the frame of our sky
through the fruit slice window
that smart architect placed
in harmony with the sky-scape
every night around 2 or 3am
the room is flooded
with moon beams
and if I wake to see this explosion
I shake with excitement as a child would

I think of you
sitting in your chair
I think of us running through the trees fast
and wild
just running
Squandering
Here is the squirrel
the dove and the cardinal
pecking and gnawing at this

morning's givings – I can give
what else is available
from my slaughtered life?

It's as simple as bread
I think
therefore I am
I think myself
into a gorge
a valley
it swallows me
I am the bird
pecking for something
a spec or crumb
surviving

I don't want to
survive
how awful
there's a good living in this shell
nestled somewhere deep in this body
worth trying
to salvage
worth giving everything
to give
and give again

Trait

I think
he is
my father - I have
his hands
and my son
has his hands
long
defined
fingers that are
timeless....
steady
surgeon hands that
will pry
bone from
bone
to learn
if we are
in fact
one in the same
hand

THE POET SPEAKS: *I write of the past mingled with what may come to be. Without getting so caught up in what others want to hear, I humbly pull from someone's pain, and then siphon the rest from my heart. Perhaps I'm a broken romantic since I enjoy writing about things that 'break' me. While writing Broken Doll, Jane and Promise I cracked open. Then I simply recover and start all over, it's a dark and wonderful cycle.*

Heart's a Half Dead Beat, Squandering and Trait were born from scenes and events.....confessions perhaps, not just mine alone. Along the years, I've documented people growing up poor, witnessed drugs, prostitution, overdoses and death. I bundled stories of lives that fell apart in front of me and with me. Writing is in my DNA, I can't NOT write, so simple yet it takes over like a demon. 5th avenue, 6am there is an old woman feeding a storm of pigeons, her scarf falls to the concrete and hence, a poem boils in my gut - Squandering. I recently uncovered an unbelievable family secret; Trait is a small opening up of this mysterious discovery. Later on, I will write The Water Tumor, to take the complete story public.

In the meantime, I travel the world looking for pigeons, for pieces, stuff that will set me ablaze. What else is there to do?

AUTHOR'S BIO: I studied Creative Writing and Philosophy at NYU's Gallatin School and was lucky enough to study under William Packard, founder and editor of the New York Quarterly. Lately, I am found in Horror Sleaze Trash, Beatnik Cowboy and Zombie Logic among many other publications. I recently published my first novel, Death Sisters, with Alien Buddha Press. I currently serve on the editorial team for Red Fez and New York Quarterly.

Hemingway's Sunroom & Two (2) otherS

By John Maurer

WHY I LIKE IT: Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... *How could anyone resist a work entitled 'Cheap Thrills and Expensive Coffins' Now I ask you? "Dedicating our minutes and the cents we get paid for them / to those who told us that's what we are worth" Maurer may not be a product, but I love his brand. "I shot gunned a beer, put a shotgun in my mouth as a joke / Pulled the trigger as a prank, died as a goof / At least I assume, I didn't hear the applause" Guess his name within three days. Maurer's the imp that spins straw into gold! Get this: "Being paranoid when you are in actual danger is so annoying" "Like right when Christ got the nail through his second hand / he realized that he did leave the oven on" Okay last one: "Being yourself when you are actually everyone else is impossible" I just hope Maurer never changes for ANYONE... (Spacing & format poet's own.)*

Cheap Thrills and Expensive Coffins

Swedish automobiles, Chinese food, and fatherless women

We do live in a time of endlessly delicate delicacies

Dedicating our minutes and the cents we get paid for them

to those who told us that's what we are worth

I am not the products I purchase

I am myself a product on a shelf

a product labeled defective

A product labeled returned

a product labeled waste

a product no one wants to buy

So, I cut a line of cocaine with the razor
then cut a line in my skin with it
as I snort through a chopped fast-food straw

Hemingway's Sunroom

I shot gunned a beer, put a shotgun in my mouth as a joke
Pulled the trigger as a prank, died as a goof
At least I assume, I didn't hear the applause

But I bet they applauded, I bet they slapped their knees red
The calico river of reeds and grass that I smoked
Under their feet exactly like my coffin is

I dropped out of college
three times
and they were all different colleges

My parents weren't going to be proud anyway
of their slut-fucking, dope-smoking, obituary-writing mistake
Their namesake who changed his name and never had a son to pass it onto

Mixed-Episode

Being paranoid when you are in actual danger is so annoying

Like when I'm getting shot my parents will walk in and say

they knew I didn't really take the trash out

Like right when Christ got the nail through his second hand

he realized that he did leave the oven on

Being sad when you are actually happy is fucking frustrating

Like when my girlfriend is fucking me senseless and I can't sense a thing

Like when I saw myself in a gallery and in my mind, I saw my own funeral

Being yourself when you are actually everyone else is impossible

Like when I say I am different, in the same tone everyone says it

Like when I say I am crazy, and the voices in my head say *I know*

THE POET SPEAKS:

AUTHOR'S BIO: John Maurer is a 26-year-old writer from Pittsburgh that writes fiction, poetry, and everything in-between, but his work always strives to portray that what is true is beautiful. He has been previously published in Claudius Speaks, The Bitchin' Kitsch, Thought Catalog, and more than forty others. @JohnPMaurer (johnpmaurer.com)

Don(')t  fre **T** & Others
By Hezekiah Scretch

WHY I (sort of) LIKE IT: Senior Editor CHARLES writes... *The only reason we're publishing this shit is because before going into surgery for his/her/its **SEX CHANGE(!!!!)** Hez reminded me I owe him a truckload of \$\$\$\$ and then accused me of using the money to buy drugs!!! (once a narc, always a narc). Read them and weep, read them and wretch (I did), WTF just READ them. Seriously, if they were submitted to FOTD anonymously they'd be dumpo-ed faster than you could say 'can't wait for my new labia!'*

WHY I LIKE IT: Senior Editor TOM writes... *I know there's something good somewhere in these poems and I'm determined to find it!!!*

Five Stars

DON'T FRET

How would you propose to choose?
Once lost the ones you couldn't lose.
The do's-and-don'ts, and doesn't do's,
. . . Light a candle, douse the fuse.

But that's not what, it still is more,
We grind the flesh to scoop the core.
No less than this has come before.
Un-shuttered windows slam the door.

And flames, inflamed engulf untamed.
The selves remain a name unchanged.
It alters features, addles brains—
from repertoires to same refrains.

But what if we could raise the fog?
Mistaken in the dog our god,
It's easy as a memory jog,
Unspoken words . . . fall off the Log.

HEARTBROKEN INCANTATIONS

What if this was all there was?
The humming bird and bees' that buzz;
I'll always think of you because,
There's some that do as he that does.

I only want to be with you,
And if you're sure you can't be true;
It doesn't matter once we're through,
But be assured, I'll be there too.

What's the sense in our devotion?
Continents without an ocean,
Don't you think I'd mix the potion?
If I thought you had the notion.

What would be the sense of poison?
If we couldn't be rejoicing,
All the noise becomes so noisome,
Maybe we should cease our sourcing.

THIS AFFAIR

Where were you when I was there?
That time you gave me such a scare.
Did you do it on a dare?
Or was it that you didn't care?

All the years that we had sworn,
Memories seared and pictures torn.
And what about the ones unborn,
Wouldn't they feel as forlorn?

The greatest loves are less than lore.
The annual balls become a bore.
It's better not to keep the score,
Forgetfulness is what endures.

Lo-and-behold we find someone,
Mooning at our setting sun,
You softly say, 'all right you've won.'
But this affair is hardly done.

WHAT IT ISN'T

An architect had longed to sculpt,
As long as sculptors cried for help.
Poets recite and want to write.
Authors taut, with prose as tight.

And yet the jailor holds the key,
Just as love imprisons me.
They each attempt inspired space,
Despair, and gone without a trace.

HEART-SHAPED HARDSHIPS

There's a puddle in our laneway
That makes a heart-shape when filled in,
A little dip that signals
When the rains come we're shut in.

So when the days are gloomy,
It is harder to complain.
The house is hardly roomy,
But some days I pray for rain.

If you want a heart-shaped puddle
Just look through your window pane.
It'd be a sin to fill it in.
A life with one less strain.

Scattered verse from an entirely unacceptable manuscript (AROH)
...a Speculative, Romantic Friction

MISS TROUT'S OPUS

Nestled below, a slumbering soul
Awaits a flickering flame,
To light the way
For sheep that stray,
Who've wandered far from home.

Dreaming in a Slipstream

*He leapt from hilltop to hilltop atop of the town.
Soared in airfoils and updrafts and drifted around.
Lost searching for something that could not be found,
He shouted and screamed but could not make a sound.*

*As the lake was on fire and scorching the ground,
He hurled himself headlong and woke as he drowned.*

THE MILLION DOLLAR COBBLER

“Leather, glue, cork and nails,
Buckles, beads and bows,
Thread and needle stitching
Rubber-tipped-heels and open toes.”

‘What does a woman do to fight the blues?
She can take a pill or buy a new pair of shoes.’

THE GARDEN

*. . . Sharing the magic of fading mornings
as shadows waded back into their objects of devotion.
Preparing to stretch out again, against the afternoon sun
and disappearing under the night sky.
Stars sparking the darkness,
Reigniting the dawn to the moon's vanishing delight. . .*

THE RELUCTANT LOOTERS

With the master of the house in supernal repose,
They left empty handed both holding their nose.

Gravediggers Chorus

*Nothing planned had been arranged
The day before seemed just the same
So no one thought to think it strange
As no one came, REMAINS UNCLAIMED*

Pithy Ditty Epilogue

*What if we could wave a wand?
Fish the moon out of the pond.
Walks and talks and growing fond,
Sipping cocktails on the lawn.*

THE POET SPEAKS: 'Lkiju neegpoqx wha whaa. Dbzean shawhma di gyros.'

HIS/HER/ITS PATHETIC BIO: Degrading: HS is a seventy-nine year old grandmother of eight living in a senile residence (off her bordello residuals) nestled in a gated community locking from the outside. She enjoys bored games, macramé, corking, knitting, crocheting and petty-pointing; simply put: all things stringed and knotted. Doing puzzles with missing pieces (swallowed and passed), playing one-handed pee-knuckle; and, spending time with her parents, when she's canned, and their pet ferrets, also named Kevin, in Last Chance, Newfoundland—

begrudgingly becoming part of the Dominion in 1940-something. He continues to disgrace FOTD as its Poetry Editor.

The **O**bjects of Wor**S**hip & other p**O**ems

By **B**en **N**ardolilli

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes...When your favorite poets are Theodor Geisel, Ogden Nash and E.V. Rieu you gotta pay tribute (mob)—tithings (church), tips and gratuities (stewards, attendants, footman)—to Nardolilli. “20% off Lasik” is just how I feel. Who else would discounts elective medical procedures unless they weighted at the expense of forfeiting valued accessorizing—Laser eye surgery is Vanity’s Paradox. Ben, such an introspective fellow: “My hands are a rust belt...” “All manner of well-dressed experts and criminals...” Little long for an excerpt, accepting exceptions—“I’ve exhausted Christianity and wrung out / About all I can get from the likes of Judaism, / Islam is tapped out too, and Hinduism / Is a dry husk...”—without apologies. “Heroes, history, and hamburgers...” Have at it.(Spacing & format are poet’s own.)*

The Document Configuration Manager

The aim of this poem, is to look at the different approaches that can be taken to bring new insights

It looks at new ways to find subjects, write, edit and publish poems, and it will be written online over three weeks

The poem will be looking at relevance, authenticity and voice as cornerstones for producing future poems that engage with change.

During the course of the poem, readers will be asked to respond using a variety of techniques. Full feedback will be given

Consideration of an Offer (Possibly One Time)

20% off Lasik, should I take the plunge?
Right now I’m sick and sneezing
And every other achoo sends my glasses off my head,
Wouldn’t it be better not to worry about them?

I only pause when I think of what I'll lose,
Who will mistake me for an intellectual then?
And I will lose an important shield
That covers up the circles underlining my eyelids

There's no guarantee of an improvement
And I still might need glasses in order to read,
Which means no change in the end,
I'm reading all the time today, especially when I write.

Dermatology

My hands are a rust belt: bleeding, peeling,
Spotchy and pale where free of abrasions,
Some people think it makes me look
Like the owner and/or lover of cats, and I laugh,
No, mother nature and general winter
Did this to me, cracking my skin open
So the blood and pus might seep out and glisten
In the light of the office, the bar, and my room,
Where I sleep alone because these hands
Keep every soft body away from me,
There will be no love until the spring comes
And I can look normal, at least from a distance
Where my face is clear and my hands
Are blurry extensions, their wounds not in focus.

They Owe Their Civilization to Being Conquered

Much uncertainty, what will we owe our future to?
What happens today creates a debt
That will be repaid, perhaps tomorrow, perhaps
In a century the flames we sent out will finally return

Retribution may come in the form of revenge,
It may hit targets here that are empty
Making ruins out of ruins that once housed
All manner of well-dressed experts and criminals

We will be able to withstand that kind of retaliation,
Especially if all of us will be dead by then,
Life can go on as it did before, only with more dust,
God help us though, if it is justice that comes instead

End of Blackout Notice

I've got to make sure my name gets down
On some tablets, hopefully
With common era dates attached and titles in italics,
My works named along with me
Even if neither of us survive into the future

Relying on ink and paper is foolish,
It will burn, crinkle, and eventually dissolve
Within the expected eras and epochs
Of literate human existence,
And computer files need electricity to reincarnate

The trouble is, no one is making tablets,
And no one is writing on them,
All of our clay goes into making bricks
For the walls of suburban homes
Too expensive for to buy and too far to drive to

The solution I see is clear and unfortunately illegal,
Go up to a house, and chisel away
Until my name and immortality are assured,
In the end, human eyes will see it
Even if it is just held as evidence for a trial

A General Release

Judge Ark says he'll sign off on my breakout role,
Whereas previous invaders disgusted him,
He's read my work, likes the general thrust of things I do
Wants to retain my services, as part of a greater struggle
Against forces he says he knows better than me

Judge Ark has the friends, he has the influence
That will keep me going, and better yet, living on my own,
No need to worry about things hourly,
The dollars are taken care of, and the lucre is clean,
Or so he tells me, I just need to keep writing, and I do

I can be kept in the dark from now on, it's fine,
The light at the end of the tunnel will be replaced by one
That glows overhead, so I go on ahead,
Battling day after day in what seems like the night,
As part of a force Judge Ark says will win sometime soon

The Objects of Worship

Currently doing research into the Minoan religion,
Maybe there's something buried in those texts
And hidden in the ruins that I can use,
I've exhausted Christianity and wrung out
About all I can get from the likes of Judaism,
Islam is tapped out too, and Hinduism
Is a dry husk I've left behind in my spiritual travels,
Buddhism is gone, and the rest of China's
Traditional paths have been worn down,
As for other paganisms, they have been mined
Endlessly for the obvious myths
I can append to my life and the story I tell myself,
But I've reached nearly the end
Of faiths I can turn to for keeping me comfortable
Here in 21st century America, in my time
Of affliction and endless wanderings,
Maybe these old drawings and battered statues
Of the Minoan geniuses can help me,
Providing an outline for conduct, a taste of hope.

The Moon Is Down

Every account seems probable,
Who am I to judge?

It must be remembered we do not know
The future at all

Or know what happened in most
Of the past as it was lived

Even in the present there is little
We know beyond the planet

So be it, and laugh at the fact,
We are ignorant and reduced to feeling

Move On

This could be the moment everything changes,
or not, it could be the precise moment
there is a change that turns off changes going forward,
so things stay the same, forever,
which so far in history, things have never done

This could be the moment changes themselves
change as well, it could be
we see changes that happen and then change right back
to the way things were, status quo antebellum,
and making time appear to be on a loop

Or it could be the moment everything changes
and nothing at all stays the same,
making comparisons for progress at a later date
difficult, since nothing will be set in stone
and whatever resists will be flipped into an apocalypse

Life and Legacy

Play at being a king, help clear Lee Highway,
Start the year off right
Make the traffic move like on Columbia Pike

Learn more about vision zero,
The department of health has partnered with experts

For a cleanup to avoid confusion

Heroes, history, and hamburgers, your chance
To give online feedback,
Watch to learn more, then play on Lee Highway

THE POET SPEAKS: *The poem “Move On” was inspired by the emails I get from the organization with the same name. I often use emails and subject lines as an inspiration of my work. The subject line of this particular email was the same that I used for the first line of this poem. I built upon that for a meditation on the nature of political change itself.*

“The Moon Is Down,” “The Objects of Worship,” and “End of Blackout Notice” are based on passages I read in Bertrand Russell’s The History of Western Philosophy. It’s not exactly the best work for understanding philosophy, but he has many interesting digressions, turns of phrases, over-simplifications, and passages giving historical context. It is mostly out of this I have assembled poems like this and many others. They end up becoming ruminations on civilization and the fate of great cities.

Finally “They Own Their Civilization to Being Conquered,” well, I’m not sure where this one came from. I don’t know what I owe a debt to here.

Generally speaking, my stylistic influences have been the Modernists and the Beats. I take inspiration from my spam folder and inbox, as well as from album covers, song titles, cut-up engines, paintings, indexes, and appendices. Poetry is important to me because it is a way to take over-used and forgotten language, and put it to magical use. It transmutes feeling to sound, sound to image, and image to word. I do confess I still need to get better about reading more of it instead of just writing.

AUTHOR’S BIO: Ben Nardolilli currently lives in New York City. His work has appeared in Perigee Magazine, Red Fez, Danse Macabre, The 22 Magazine, Quail Bell Magazine, Elimae, The Northampton Review, Local Train Magazine, The Minetta Review, and Yes Poetry. He blogs at mirrorsponge.blogspot.com and is trying to publish his novels.

A.I.-V & other pOems... ..

By **G**ary Beck

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes...On a clear night, if you travel far enough north, you can see all the stars in the firmament. If you go even further you are treated to the Aurora Borealis. I believe Galileo coined the phrase back in the early sixteen hundreds. (Good friend of mine but a bit of a late-sleeper.) Here is a constellation of poems that burst into colour like a magnetic midnight. Beck's poetry is present, yet speaks to The Ages. The man is a light pillar in the night sky...coming to Sudbury soon. Any critique of mine would appear obsequious and remain sycophantic—get your own licks in. (Spacing & format are poet's own.)*

A.I. - V

Automated cars
will take the drinkers home
from restaurants and bars
without killing anyone,
a welcome change
from DUI, DWI,
hit and runs,
when drivers need protection
to get home safely.

Ravages

The fabulously wealthy
in their insidious way
are almost as dangerous
as the horde of Atilla
that looted, raped, burned,
totally destroyed
everything in their path,
while the lords of profit
indulge the middle class
with privileges,
until indulgence
is inconvenient,
then cherished comforts
are abruptly removed,
recession, burst bubble,
economic adjustments
that crush the vulnerable,
while the protected 1%
continue their excesses
like aristos of old,
confident that we the people
are not revolutionaries.

Christmas

There is little peace on Earth
less goodwill to man
in a ritual celebration
in less than half the world,
so materialistic
the biggest activity
shopping, gift giving,
while those with insufficient means
to participate in spending sprees
fester with frustration,
as tv and the internet
show the prosperous
buying, buying, buying,
alluring goods, delectable foods,
none of them recognizing
the decadent signs
of the end of empire.

Corroding America

My poor country
beleaguered by enemies
at home and abroad,
all cooperating
in the cruel destruction
of the American Dream,
once proclaimed
the light of the world
with the unique promise
of liberty and justice...
opportunity regardless...
And for a short while
many flourished like never before,
couldn't imagine how easy it was
for the lords of profit
to take it all away,
leaving ravaged lives
consigned to the underclass,
who they never noticed
until they joined them in poverty.

The Anti-President

Elected in a tainted contest
that fooled the frightened
into thinking they'd get jobs,
get rid of dirty immigrants,
do away with healthcare for millions,
break down the international order,
cancel plans to address climate change,
triumphantly cut taxes on the rich,
in short, do everything
to fracture democracy
and injure the country
with a tapestry of lies, lies,
and more lies.

The caretaker of the nation
abused responsibility for the people,
only concerned with his swollen ego
and blaming the past administration
for everything that went wrong,
but braggingly took credit
for everything they did right.

If he wasn't dangerous for our future
President Trump would just be
an offensive buffoon,
braying loudly to his followers.

But he's too ignorant to understand
the complexities of the world
making the old Know Nothing party
look intelligent.

Despite his injuring us,
we have to hope he lasts four years,
considering the line of succession.

If there's any future left
after his depredations
we'll get someone new in 2020,
hopefully a little better.

THE POET SPEAKS: *More than fifty years ago, at the age of sixteen, I began writing poetry. My first efforts were imitations of the Romantics; Shelley, Keats, Byron, my favorite, who brought order and structure into my chaotic life. School so far had been depressingly sterile, offering me little in the way of knowledge that I could not glean on my own, even less exciting was the pathetically sterile challenge of learning. So without a guide to direct my efforts, I plunged into the English Classical poets, having already read diversely in English drama and*

American fiction. I had memorized large chunks of Byron, Grey's Elegy and many others who delighted me, which was consoling as I struggled to find my path. After careful reading and evaluation of my poems, I found that I appreciated the developmental process, but concluded that they were wanting in originality. I burned them ceremoniously and reassuringly, this did not launch a career of book-burning. I did not regret their destruction and never looked back and said: 'If only I had saved them'!

I moved on to reading the American poets and devoured Eliot, Pound, Cummings, many others, who I found more timely than their English predecessors, sometimes almost as elegant, but never as beautiful. Beauty seems to be less compatible in the torment of the industrial age. Then, at the age of seventeen, I hitchhiked to California. I lived in San Francisco and discovered the Beat poets, who were just erupting in the formerly more tranquil landscapes of literature. I admired their vitality, but was turned off by their colossal naiveté. One of their loudest voices proclaimed that he saw the best minds of his generation destroyed by madness. I knew the best minds of my generation were preparing to send men to the moon. An immense and irreconcilable difference of opinion. Their movement offered me no safe harbour.

For the next few years I kept the semi-noiseless tenor of my ways, finding college almost as drab intellectually as high school, with virtually everyone focused on career. Whatever happened to the love of learning? Several slightly compatible companions helped keep me anchored, which let me endure in the wilderness of poetry. I, an emperor of impracticality, wanted to be a poet. I dreamed of tasting the immortal fire. I was ill-equipped for the academic environment, the protected haven of many poets, so I wandered aimlessly in an unknown land. One of the few benefits of my education was enough mastery of french to read the symbolist poets, then the more moderns, particularly Mallarmée and Apollinaire, from whom I rediscovered the invention of free verse. (French also allowed me in later years to translate Moliere for my theater work.) I read more and more of the younger American poets, looking for kinship. At the same time, I read the Russian, Japanese and Chinese poets, always feeling that the language barrier mandated translations, which altered the fabric of the writing. I began a search for my natural voice, an aspiration that imposed strenuous difficulties, since I was on my own and had to reinvent the wheel daily, a complicated task when working without blueprints.

The more American poets I read, the less connected I felt to their concept of poetry, however much I admired their artistic accomplishments. I saw a world aflame with constant upheavals, disasters man-made or natural, and progressively more destructive violence. Yet I found poets increasingly seeking esoteric metaphors, cherishing style above substance, placing form above content. Suddenly, all the poets were college graduates, many with advanced degrees in the field of poetry. I definitely did not belong in that company. I was the classic loner, but was sufficiently self-sustaining, or ego-driven not to seek entry into the networks of poetry. There was a corresponding classic irony. I, the consummate outsider, had been a theater director for most of my adult life. I had started in theater at the age of seventeen in San Francisco, plunging into an arts discipline that mandated group involvement! I found a curious symbiosis to the world of poetry, since I translated and directed the classics, as well as writing and directing new plays that dealt more and more with political and social issues. My poetry began to reflect the broader range of world problems, with the subject being my primary concern, not the expression thereof. This further distanced me from the practitioners of the art of poetry.

As the years went by, I found myself more concerned with the message, rather than the 'poetic' quality of poetry. I saw the arts begin to turn progressively inward, not in the nature of profound meditation, or seeking deeper understanding, but more in the aspect of flaunting personal

agonies and confessions. This is what our culture has wrought. It satiates the consciousness with an endless stream of pictorial imagery that stupefies the visual sense and degrades the uniqueness of verbal description. So poets, increasingly shunted aside by a growing public preference for non-stop tv, turned to baring their guts in anguished revelations of childhood abuse, or indignation for their neglected feelings. This type of indulgence and I are incompatible. To me, poetry is greater than my personal sufferings. I feel there should be room in the chambers of poetry for alternatives to academic products and disclosures of angst. I have chosen my own direction and have evolved to expressing thoughts and feelings about issues. And if I may have abandoned metaphor and simile, it is not that I despise them, but I must deliver what I believe to be a necessary blunt message. In an age of increasing insecurity and danger, we must still cherish poetry. But the guardians of the gates of poetry should allow examination of the problems of the world, with direct communication, in order to extend the diminishing influence of poetry on the events of our times.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Gary Beck has spent most of his adult life as a theater director and worked as an art dealer when he couldn't earn a living in the theater. He has also been a tennis pro, a ditch digger and a salvage diver. His original plays and translations of Moliere, Aristophanes and Sophocles have been produced Off Broadway. His poetry, fiction and essays have appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and his published books include 28 poetry collections, 11 novels, 3 short story collections, 1 collection of essays and 2 books of plays. Published poetry books include: Dawn in Cities, Assault on Nature, Songs of a Clerk, Civilized Ways, Displays, Perceptions, Fault Lines, Tremors, Perturbations, Rude Awakenings, The Remission of Order, Contusions and Desperate Seeker (Winter Goose Publishing. Forthcoming: Learning Curve and Ignition Point). Earth Links, Too Harsh For Pastels, Severance, Redemption Value and Fractional Disorder (Cyberwit Publishing). His novels include Extreme Change (Winter Goose Publishing). and Wavelength (Cyberwit Publishing). His short story collections include: A Glimpse of Youth (Sweatshoppe Publications). Now I Accuse and other stories (Winter Goose Publishing) and Dogs Don't Send Flowers and other stories (Wordcatcher Publishing). Collected Essays of Gary Beck (Cyberwit Publishing). The Big Match and other one act plays (Wordcatcher Publishing). Collected Plays of Gary Beck Volume 1 and Three Comedies by Aristophanes translated, then directed by Gary Beck (Cyberwit Publishing). Gary lives in New York City

Dear **Heart** & otheR poems ooo

By Ken W. Simpson

WHY I LIKE IT: Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... *Simpson's musings are cynically soothing; striking and cording notes to my liking. He writes in short store, leaves me wanting more: "Selectivity skims the surface of reality like a razor sliding over glass..." If that line isn't 'the cat's ass' it's a whisker away. "...violence is a winner." "The flavour of moments / tasting the solitude..." Savour in sips, the words from his lips...*

File number 81

Dear Heart

Selectivity skims the surface of reality
like a razor sliding over glass
avoiding platitudes and TV quiz shows
cliches and political speeches
sermons and protestations of true love
blackjack and roulette wheels
myths, miracles and biblical prophecy.

Savages

The brutality of boxers
or cage fighters
delights the spectators
who love blood
applaud the conquerors
and sympathise
with the humble losers
not to weakness
so violence is a winner.

Muses

The flavour of moments

tasting the solitude
left behind in the twilight
like a vintage wine
to forever sip and savour.

THE POET SPEAKS: *I began writing short stories - but switched to writing free verse poetry - which I immediately loved. That was before my first collection was published in January 2015. I told myself I was inspired by T S Eliot - but no poet really inspired me. In fact I preferred to read prose - to reading poetry. I wanted to use words to express my feelings in the best possible way - and that has always been my aim. I love to write - in particular - essays as well as poetry - but writing a satisfying poem is much more difficult. My main theme has been socio/political. I became fascinated with the history of US politics since WW2 - and have written extensively about it - in poetry and prose. I began writing late in my life - after a career as a teacher. I wrote a lot of short stories - most of which was rubbish - but I did learn how to write - by trial and error. I have had a relatively short - but arduous - apprenticeship as a poet. When I began I imagined I was writing great stuff - but of course I wasn't. I was on a long learning curve - and I'm still learning. I also love good literature. I was brought up on the novels of Dashiell Hammett - Raymond Chandler and Ross McDonald. I could keep on - but I'd probably bore you to death.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: An Australian poet and essayist - educated at Scotch College (Melbourne) and Swinburne Art School - taught art - began writing short stories - switched to writing free verse poetry and essays - with a poetry collection - Patterns of Perception - published by Augur Press (UK) in January 2015. 43 Allamanaa Blvd - Lysterfield - Victoria - Australia - 3156.

My *love* Letter to the bay & other poems

By Claire Champommier

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... Claire has some rare notions, but I dare say, no scarcity of words. If you like your life in the raw, Champommier's works are well done. It only stands to reason that freethinking leads to original thought and she has more than her share at what I suspect is a tender age. "Forgive me, I only expected / miracles..." "Like you, I am an estuary of confused foreign and familiar emotions." "Grandpa died and left / a mess in his wake." "My mistress' eyes are glassy and wide set; / Coral is just as crusty as her hole;" "I visited the version of me the day before / I became pregnant with myself for the first time..." "I crawled out through my cervix and realized / I couldn't stuff the butterfly back into its cocoon." Many, many gems here and not so much mining... "a blinker in the turn lane / is the courtesy of saying /goodbye." (Spacing & format poet's own.)*

My love letter to the bay

Today I am asking you, a place, to forgive me.
I've come back – your haunted
houses and hillsides don't scare me anymore
because I reminded myself of how
I'm the one who colored you in this way. Forgive me,
I was younger
than I already am.

I walked to the edge of you, thinking I'd find something
waiting for me. Forgive me, I only expected
miracles, and it made me disappointed
in you. I've come to breathe

with every wave of you today. It is my peace offering,
to let myself be held between your rocks and cigarette butts today,
in your edges. The last time

I was here, I loved looking out to you

and imagining I was somewhere
at the bottom. Far under all the noise from
a homeless shuffle
and yacht club parties,

but still
living in the bay. Now I look at you
and I just love you.

I want to ask, in this moment,
are you ready to forgive me for everything
I thought you were? I colored in your skyline. I couldn't help it.
I missed out on you. We are not so different.
Like you, I am an estuary of confused foreign and familiar emotions.

Before I leave, I draw a heart with my finger
on a dirty car window
so you can see the space I've left behind. In some time,
someone will wash it without thinking.

Not holding hands

Just touching the hand of the departed.
Grandpa died and left
a mess in his wake.

At the mass, the priest wore an earpiece microphone like
a sports referee in a stadium
speaking softly and heard

through the speakers in the back, now broadcasting
the post commentary.
Some people want their bodies

to be stuffed
with chemicals, herbs, and good
smelling things

and put on display, like a

Thanksgiving turkey you're not allowed to eat.
Everybody says a prayer,

Says thank you,
even if the turkey doesn't look like grandpa anymore.
The chefs tried their best.

The first time I touched the hand of the departed, I was seven.
I pulled back, afraid
from the emptiness I felt. I became aware

that grandma had once been
inside. I was looking into an abandoned house.
So when grandpa died, I prepared

myself for the cold. My hand on his stayed
still. That night, I dreamed my hand cut off from my wrist.
I picked it up with my other, and was shocked

I couldn't feel it. Instead, I felt its full dead weight.
I woke up panicked. Come back to me.
Some people, you hold hands with. Others

just touch you
and leave without knowing you felt it.
We watched the gravediggers bury him

with loud machinery. A crane. Sacred.
And then they slung their shovels over their shoulders and left in a hum.
Grandpa didn't try and get things in order at the end.

He thought he was going to live forever.
Looking down, my stilettos are dipped in graveyard dirt, and I think of
Achilles. Don't you wish you could have done the same.

Some people want to be a Thanksgiving turkey,
put into sacred tupperware and left in the fridge.
others want to be obliterated and

put on a mantle
cast out to sea
disappear in a garage.

Sonnet One-Dirty

My mistress' eyes are glassy and wide set;
Coral is just as crusty as her hole;
If snow be cold, her underboob has sweat;
If hairs be long, they hide her large back rolls.
I have seen healthy cheesing, clean and white,
But no such hygiene see I in her teeth;
And in yankee candle is more delight
Than in the cunt that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak and wield a knife;
That makes people's heads turn and hit the ground;
I've never seen a penguin in real life;
My mistress, when she walks, waddles around.
 And yet, by heaven, you think my love as funny;
 I don't care – she has a lot of money.

Self-revision

I didn't know how to bounce back from broken promises I made to a younger version of myself. Nervous and wanting to be wrapped in something strong, I tried casting spells to keep the knowledge of hurt away. But

wishing dangers to disappear didn't help any version of us. Call it bound to, call it unlucky. You fell out of our home because the door was left open, and not even my golden book intentions could have prevented it. I became crazy

for explanations and wanted to rest, so when you came back to let me know I look like shit when I blame myself for being dealt a bad hand, I laughed at how right you were. I didn't expect you, my ghost,

to help me stand again. Before I promised I'd never let them touch you, but the world is a painting without seatbelts – at the end of the day I will track paint on the rug, and I cannot bear to hate it forever. I was not made to

be a home for all the right answers, so thank you for reminding me that I can edit my promise. Oh, I am sorry. I forgot I could open the door again. I promise, I will never give up on you.

For once, a somewhat serious love poem

I told you that going down
on you and coming up again to

your mouth is like when you soak
in the hot tub and then jump
in the pool. You laughed

because you said it was like I was
saying it was hot, and yeah. It was.

Before and after that I look up
online:

when do people say I love you
because I need a timeline
and you messed up my schedule.

We went to Sauvie island
and fell asleep there

the hydrangea fields

on the beach, I had the idea that
this might be the best thing yet.

We just needed to keep
driving a little further to find it. And

the Hereford cow that startled us.
Flies all around
it, and when it turned around

to look at us once it passed
I think it saw us. She disappeared
into the bush, and took the buzzing with her.

Pregnant with myself

I visited the version of me the day before
I became pregnant with myself for the first time

and finally started caring about the baby. I'd been
a depressed caterpillar, stumbling every night my freshman year,

but I still forced myself to eat for the premonition of myself.
Sometimes, it's easier to have empathy for the person I will be.

I didn't wake and realize there were two of us. Instead, I waved goodbye
to the last friend returning home. That morning, her car left

a stillness that said *now we will begin*. The first trimester we were alone
in a college dorm, and I was still a baby myself. I learned to treat the mourning

sickness with hours spent focusing on the springtime outside of me.
I took us for walks and showed you how life would be

if we blocked everyone out – only the voices of taxi drivers to catcall us,
and every so often, we would pick up our dose of face-to-face,

mask-to-mask socialization at the gas station counter. *Have a nice day*.
I was a baby having a baby, so by chance we met

an old classmate to almost fall in love with –
she was a traditional eggshell and always somewhere colder –

I was attracted to the familiarity of this, because
so had been my mom. I learned how to leave even when I was wanted.

The last day I saw her she cried that the stars said we were meant to be, and I figured
I should listen to the signs inside myself.

I carried us for nine months through a pandemic, the whole world advising us to go home
where it is safe. In our last trimester, we went back to our family,

and I stood up for you. For the first time. You were afraid to be there,
I remember. I would not tolerate them

bullying a child for knowing their history. I could see it more clearly
with you there. I knew I could never undo the love I'd shown you, because

you made me proud. My mom said
the night I was born was quiet, snow fell

gently, the room dimmed like an expensive restaurant. On the menu was
placenta and first connections. I looked in her eyes and asked if she was my mother.

But when I gave birth to myself, I left my body
panting as amniotic fluid spilled out of me

like a runny egg. There was blood – I painted the inside of my thighs
with the care and crudeness of a cavewoman, and our screaming –

one for the struggle, one for air –
merged. After crowning myself,

I crawled out through my cervix and realized
I couldn't stuff the butterfly back into its cocoon. So

I hugged and thanked my own leftovers,
the skin that used to shield me from all this,

noise and weather, and I was hit with the knowledge that I will give birth to myself
for the rest of my life. Forever feeding and returning

what I never got. Because unlike butterflies that know they have arrived,
I am in flux, always becoming my next child.

I watch myself stand and leave my body
the same way I watch who I was grow younger every day.

When I ask her how she did it, how she got out of there

to arrive in me, she breaks my heart when she says,
somehow. ‘Somehow.’ It makes me sad
in a proud way. That’s how I know it could be, as I am, a type of strong.

Fever Dream

I dream of coming home again.
I was in a place that has passed away.

I am six hundred miles away;
A little further and I’ll rest.

Always a little further, I say, and then I’ll rest.
I forget why I fought to get out of there.

I remember. I promised my cat we’d get out of there.
I wrapped her body in a green jacket before I left.

I buried her in an orange morning before I left.
I promised her soon no one could even touch us anymore.

For a while, I said I didn’t want any of it anymore.
I knew there had to be another way.

I wish I taught myself another way,
But all I knew to do was run.

Review the reasons why I run.
Today I’d just like to let myself go.

A poem is something you let go
But first I’d like to feed out of its hands.

Until I hold it in my hands,
let me dream of coming home again.

Flying from the nest, again

Crosses and bouquets
zip tied, duct taped, or

pinned to trees and hillsides,
to freeway dividers

between this road and the next.
I start to see the cars

moving the opposite direction
as me
as no longer going places

but specifically returning
to where I just came from.

I start to believe
they are going to fill the spot
I left. I turn on

my headlights, and my dashboard
blinks on me, so I eyeball
everyone else's speed. I try to rationalize

it doesn't really matter
if I can't tell how fast I'm going
if we've all decided to go

whatever speed this is.
Then, the pause from the rain

under the freeway bridge before
I look to where the boy fell asleep

at the wheel last year.
A mother cries on
the side of the highway. In passing,

she looked like a
babybird,

waiting for the worm.
I turn my head and remember
I'm supposed to be looking at the road.

Driving back and forth
I remind myself that people understand
this lonely highway. One thing ends,

but everything else goes on.

At the four way stop
I acknowledge who came before me, and
understand

a blinker in the turn lane
is the courtesy of saying
goodbye.

Breathe again

Mom says to take off
my necklace, my earrings – and

rings, too. She leaves hers on
the kitchen counter, even after she's done

washing the things we can't
put in the dishwasher.

I like to keep my necklace on, I told her
because when it's not around my neck

it always finds a way to get tangled. Yes,
she said, but doesn't it choke you when you sleep?

Before I stopped wearing bras, she told me to
unhook them. We'd sigh. Doesn't that feel better?

She takes off her wedding ring.
Doesn't it feel like you're being unchained? Maybe,

I think. If it wasn't a gift you gave
to yourself, I could understand that.

But once she said that to me,
I couldn't unhear her –

and now I can't sleep anymore
with a band around my finger.

Do they see me as a stranger in a strange land

Though I've never heard it, I heard
my aunt, screaming, the moment we
learned my cousin was dead. Zac,

I've outlived you now. I think of
the other girls, who had nicknames
you'd give a pony for being

cute or some shit. "Peanut butter"
was my nickname, for my skin
was interesting enough to

give me a crayon's name. A girl
pointed at the nat geo page
and laughed at the African tribes.
I told her to stop, so she asked,

oh, is that *your people*? Peanut
butter coats my throat. Hard to tell
if my voice hurts after chanting
Black Lives Matter, until I hear

Black Lives Madder, and it hurts, that
I've lived on either coast, but I'm
still not sure – have I ever lived

in the America I say
I'm from? I've been to Maine – is *that*
America? Tell me, is it

the topless ladies in Times Square,
because then I've come to know that

tits, painted to give Mickey Mouse
a nose, might be America.
I heard our constitution is

the oldest living document.
It told me last night it wants us
to pull the plug already. I

hear from a different cousin from
the other end of the phone line
sitting in some jailhouse. Damn it

America, you had to suck
5 years out of him just to prove
you could lose to something stolen.

Meanwhile, I hear the melting pot
is boiling me alive. We learned
about how frogs don't realize
that they're being boiled alive

until it's too late. I laugh, since
I guess that's what America
has been cooking up this whole time:

frog soup. Yum. I think about this
and all the things I've never seen
but know. Police without badges.
I think about how a man was

lynched today, and yesterday, and
tomorrow. Someday, we'll find you.

THE POET SPEAKS: *I always wonder where this will go. I like to write about things I've dreamt and others I've seen, I'm trying to reach something I can sit with for a little while, hoping others will sit there too. I hope to make people laugh most of all, I admire comedians the most. I've been finding my voice for a while now; I love talking even when my face turns red. I was an actor first, that's how I see the world. I've always been fascinated in connections, projections, and the stories we tell ourselves.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Claire “Champagne” Champommier owes \$5.20 to her local library. She is a proud Asian American creative and activist. Currently a student, she has studied writing at Lewis & Clark College, where her professor, Mary Szybist, has encouraged her to keep doing so. Her work has appeared in *Otis Nebula* and *SPLASH!* from Haunted Waters Press, and she intends to keep writing. She’s sending hugs to her friends and family from her room in Portland, Oregon.

F OUR (4) (4) Poems poems poems

By Tonya Suther

WHY I LIKE IT: Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... *Tonya Suther is nothing if not accomplished...She writes through peephole what she calls a “fisheye.” Like what she writes, it’s ‘an ultra wide-angle lens that produces strong visual distortion intended to create a wide panoramic or hemispherical’ view of the world. “Who can tell...?” Well she can: “my mouth teeth, eight of them / scattered on the road” “the first responders robbed me / as I lay bloody unresponsive in the gravel” Contrast: “...a smile as wide / as the vinyl moon and stars pasted / on her bedroom walls.” “I remember the avocado / countertop, the full ashtray, the empty / Mateus bottle in the trash.” Next: “He’s awash with grief / and the black beans I served for breakfast.” “I refuse to count the pixels on the big screen / or the episodes till that woman / dyes her hair and removes her blouse.” I know, so many quotes and so little time, but the imagery if too divine...*

Poems are published per page to maintain author integrity. (Eds.)

Mother

There was your coral lipstick
I borrowed, smudged sparingly
matte in the bathroom mirror,
my mouth teeth, eight of them
scattered on the road
among the shards of glass and unspent
cash, the money I tucked
after lunch in the breast pocket of
my shirt above my midriff
tiny and taut,
the first responders robbed me
as I lay bloody unresponsive in the gravel
(but what is \$90 when you
robbed me of more?), my hair washed
jet black, curled for the first time
You look like a French whore.

Eye Sore

From the door, I can see her walking her dog. Or maybe
the dog's walking her down the mortared path. Who
can tell through a fisheye?

Her legs look limber, but they must ache—
arthritis protruding from her right knee—a
giant egg sac clinging to the stucco
of my front porch. I should take a broom to it,
dislodge this neighborhood
eye sore. I know they talk in circles
around these parts. Curb appeal, rock walls,
no ragweed. Did you not read the covenants?
It's hung there since the rocks were first laid. Actually,
it started to manifest the moment I signed the deed to the house
while you were in Colorado digging up anything evergreen.

Avocado Mornings

From behind the bedroom door, I heard her loud and clear,
as she whispered into the phone. My mother's voice,

boastful, as it ran down the line to greet my father,
who stayed behind. They spoke every night,

during her Winter visit when I tried so hard
to make my house into a home. Their nightly

conversations were sweet, one of those things
that make a child smile, a smile as wide

as the vinyl moon and stars pasted
on her bedroom walls. I can't see her

behind Saturn's rings, but I can smell the
Folgers down the hall. I remember the avocado

countertop, the full ashtray, the empty
Mateus bottle in the trash.

I don't miss those empty mornings waiting for the bus,
but my brother continues to crack jokes

despite the times she's told him he and his boyfriend
are going to hell. *It's always so much work when I come here.*

No Coming Back

I've crossed the meridian and can feel the burning tide.

How long before he tumbles?

He's awash with grief
and the black beans I served for breakfast.

They've stained his breath, and he's choking on the vowels padding his throat.

How long before he pushes back from the table?
Before he changes the channel?

I refuse to count the pixels on the big screen
or the episodes till that woman
dyes her hair and removes her blouse.

"This won't end well for her," he says.

THE POET SPEAKS: *I never plan to write about anything specific and not all of my work is autobiographical. I begin a poem recalling a phrase, thinking about an image, or imagining a situation. I rely on alliteration and assonance to create pace and mood, and the lines come mostly intuitively based on associative sounds and images. I tend to write about feelings of loneliness and loss. These four poems surprised me in their eagerness to vent.*

A UTHOR'S BIO: Tonya Suther is a two-time recipient of the Ruth Scott Academy of American Poetry Prize (2020 & 2021), her very first sonnet can be found in *WestWard Quarterly*, and her very first chapbook is forthcoming from Dancing Girl Press. Currently, she works as a graduate assistant at New Mexico State University, where she teaches Professional and Technical Communication and serves as a coordinator in the English department's Writers in the Schools program. She also interns at Zoeglossia, an organization for poets who identify as disabled.

PLAYS

Dash cLIMBS a R..O..P..E...

By James Still

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

I love this play. To start with, there's the versatility of a play that can be performed with several actors or as a one-person show. But that's just an entrée into a world of possibilities in a coming of age play that takes place in the past and the present, adolescence and adulthood all at once. James Still's DASH CLIMBS A ROPE is introduced by Dash (named to be a runner but isn't one), in a first person monologue to the audience that gets us right into his voice and his head. Then other characters come forward giving their spin on the seminal event of the play, when Dash climbs up the rope in gym class, but doesn't climb down. These characters include gym teacher Mr. Smith and Fireman Joe (yes, a FIREMAN!). There's also John Ransom, everyone's junior high school crush and future Homecoming King. While most of the story is told in monologues through the fourth wall, there's a scene of dialogue that's as loaded as a first kiss. This play is such a good read it could easily be in the fiction category. I can't say enough about DASH CLIMBS A ROPE, so I won't. You'll just have to experience it yourself.

Here's Dash:

Wait, again, being completely honest --
when I say "crazy sex" I don't really know what I mean
because it's 1973 and I haven't had crazy sex.
Yet.

DASH (CONT'D)

Or any sex.

Yet.

I've just had dreams.

Five Stars

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *What inspired DASH CLIMBS A ROPE... hmmm. All stories are a gift to the writer (even when you don't know it) but some stories come at you with such force that you can't say no, you simply must put your ear to the ground and let it bloom everywhere in and around you. Since my writing career has been inspired more by curiosity than*

by ambition or strategy, I said “yes” to this play almost as soon as it announced itself. I had had an unremembered dream about a guy named “Dash” and I let him lead the way into the story that needed to be told. Looking at the play now I’m struck by Dash’s confidence as a storyteller so maybe I was writing about the ways that strange and scary experiences can sometimes shape us in positive ways. What could have been a story about shame is instead a story about tenderness and triumph. I remember also immediately sensing Dash’s sexual energy and how he ravenously wanted his future even if he wasn’t sure what that future might be. And influences? If I get stuck and don’t know what comes next I just say to myself “What would Caryl Churchill do?” I’ve always loved her fearless theatricality and the artistic restlessness that seems to connect all of her plays. The short story writer Alice Munro has taught me about the art of telling complex and moving stories in fewer pages. The fiction writer Louise Erdrich has taught me about point of view and structure. And my own 4 year-old self continues to teach me about determination and playfulness.

AUTHOR BIO: JAMES STILL's plays have been produced throughout the U.S., Canada, Europe, Australia, South Africa, China and Japan. He is an elected member of both the National Theatre Conference in New York and the College of Fellows of the American Theatre at the Kennedy Center. Four-time Pulitzer nominee, five-time Emmy nominee, the Playwright in Residence at Indiana Repertory Theatre and an Affiliated Artist with American Blues Theater in Chicago. He is proud to call Los Angeles home

where he continues to shelter in place. he/him/his

Vodka

By Doak Bloss

WHY I LIKE IT: Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...

Doak Bloss' acerbic one act is just about as close as you can get to the experience of recovering from a lifetime of alcoholism without having to drink yourself - or get chlamydia from your toxic ex. The play is a dream, but not in the "it was all a dream" cop-out way, rather, as a rare spin on the time/space continuum in relation to 12-Step meetings, where the line to recovery isn't necessarily a straight one. With razor sharp dialogue that cuts through the bullshit of any haze, alcohol-induced or otherwise, the play uses the idea of dreams as a way to frame clips from the past and distill them into the sober reality of the present.

Tanner, the alcoholic protagonist doesn't know whether he's been sober for three months or nineteen years. He's struggling to reconcile himself with the responsibilities of adulthood as well as (surprise!) parenthood. He's afraid of drinking. He's afraid of dreaming about drinking. His dream drink of choice?

TANNER: Vodka tonic, usually. Smirnoff usually, sometimes Stoli. Yeah, I'm just out somewhere, at a reception or a party or a bar with friends, or with you, and I just...have one, or several. And I wake up cursing myself that I was so stupid, I blew all those weeks of sobriety. And after a minute I realize, no, I didn't blow anything. It was a dream. I'm still okay.

Vodka, is a multi-faceted retrospective with the cast of Tanner's dream serving as narrators and participants through tightly a tightly woven fabric of ex-capades and sexcapades. The conscience of the play lies in the paradox between dreams and reality, between taking a vow of anonymity and divulging secrets as a mandate, and in making amends for the past in order to survive the present. Five Stars.

SARA: Oh, Christ. You're amendsing me. I honestly didn't see this coming.

(Spacing and format are playwright's own.)

Vodka

A play in five scenes

by Doak Bloss

CHARACTERS:

Tanner, 42, an alcoholic

Sara, 42, a woman he once fell for, hard

Robert, 39, his friend

Erin, 19, his biological daughter, a surprise

SETTING: Various places in Tanner's mind and memory. June 17, 2018, or thenabouts.

Scene 1

A dream. Lights up on Tanner walking across the front of the stage, speaking to the audience. He might be a cheerful master-of-ceremonies at a community fundraiser. The other characters are also positioned around the stage, not in full light.

TANNER: *(walking)* This is the entire story of my involvement with Alcoholics Anonymous!

(beat) I'm not sure if I'm an alcoholic, and I'm not sure whether my talking about AA with you all, here like this, violates the Anonymous part.

(beat) That's it, that's the whole story.

SARA: *(at a table in a restaurant, holding a martini)* Cute. Tricky, but cute.

TANNER: It's not the whole story.

SARA: I know that. So do they.

TANNER: *(in a restaurant with her)* You came. Thank you. Hi, Sara.

SARA: You said you were paying. I had to come, for the novelty alone. Hi, Tanner.

ROBERT, ERIN, and SOME OFFSTAGE VOICES: *(perfect unison)* "Hi, Tanner!"

TANNER: *(drawn into an AA meeting; to the audience)* Right. I mean, "My name is Tanner. I'm an alcoholic."

He waits.

ROBERT, ERIN, SARA and SOME OFFSTAGE VOICES: *(out of sync this time, some mumbling, randomly overlapping)* "Hi, Tanner"... "Hi, Timmer"... "Hi, Tom"... "Hi"... "Welcome"... "Hi"... "Hi, Andrew"... "Hi, Tanner..." "Hi"...

TANNER: Seventeen months sober.

Everyone applauds. Someone whistles.

TANNER: Thank you!

ROBERT *(with a golf club)* Ah, no...Three.

TANNER: Excuse me?

ROBERT: It's been three months. Your esophagus blew up on March 17th. You've been sober three months, not seventeen.

TANNER: No...wait... Nineteen.

ERIN: *(with a phone in her hand)* I'm nineteen.

ROBERT: You're mixing the numbers up. It's been three months since you last had a drink. On March 17th. Today is...

ERIN: *(checking her phone)* June 17th.

TANNER: *(to Sara)* I haven't had a drink in three months. Three months, no alcohol.

SARA: That's serious. So you, like, do the meetings and everything?

TANNER: Yes. Every...week. Or more. They have this thing, 90 in 90. You commit to going to 90 meetings in 90 days. *That's* serious.

SARA: And no one minds that you're actually not an alcoholic.

TANNER: I am, though. I think I am. It's been 17 months, no alcohol—

ROBERT: Three!

TANNER: —I mean three.

SARA: Three months, seventeen months, who cares? That doesn't prove you're an alcoholic. You could never taste vodka again and still not be an alcoholic.

TANNER: Never?

SARA: Theoretically.

TANNER: But, see, I couldn't. Not "never". I could never do that. To never feel that...release...relief... that cold wash with the sweet undercurrent of heat—warmth—as it goes down. I could never do never.

ROBERT: But you can. Three months... why not seventeen months, why *not* nineteen—?

ERIN: Years.

ROBERT: What?

ERIN: I'm nineteen *years* old, not months.

ROBERT: (*lost*) Okay...

TANNER: Nineteen years, I could never do that. (*to Sara*) Hell, I could be *dead* in nineteen years.

SARA: Alcoholic or not.

ROBERT: She makes a good point.

Robert sets an imaginary ball on an imaginary tee, prepares to swing.

TANNER: (*to Sara*) But it's the dreams. I want to talk about the dreams. (*beat; he stares at her*) My god, you're beautiful. I forgot... No, I never forgot, but when I saw you again after five years. It was so real.

SARA: It's been *five years*? That just doesn't seem possible.

TANNER: It was just so unreal. It wasn't a dream, but it felt like a dream. Just like...being at my first meeting. Saying what I... wondering what I should say. Robert set it up.

Robert swings.

ROBERT: Sweet. I didn't set it up. I told you when and where it was. I offered to go with you.

TANNER: But I wanted to go alone. Without a crutch.

Suddenly a waiter, Erin carries a tray full of stuff to a downstage table and gradually sets out: a glass, tray of ice cubes, a lime, a knife, a bottle of Stolichnaya and a bottle of tonic water.

ROBERT: It's not a crutch to take a friend to your first AA meeting.

SARA: You called them vodka dreams, in your message. I thought you meant dreams you had after *drinking* vodka.

TANNER: No. Dreams I have *of* drinking vodka, since I quit. I have them every night.

ERIN: (*swinging by Sara and Tanner's table*) Can I start you off with something, Mr....?

TANNER: I'm Tanner. I'm an alcoholic.

ROBERT, ERIN, SARA and SOME VOICES OFFSTAGE: "Hi, Tanner!"

TANNER: And I'm three months pregnant. I mean—

Everyone laughs. Erin moves upstage and pulls out her phone.

TANNER: I mean three months sober.

SARA: So what does a dream like that look like? You're just sitting around, sipping a martini?

TANNER: Vodka tonic, usually. Smirnoff usually, sometimes Stoli. Yeah, I'm just out somewhere, at a reception or a party or a bar with friends, or with you, and I just...have one, or several. And I wake up cursing myself that I was so stupid, I blew all those weeks of sobriety. And after a minute I realize, no, I didn't blow anything. It was a dream. I'm still okay.

SARA: You are okay. You'd be okay if you had a martini, too.

TANNER: Did you notice that I said you're in the dreams, sometimes?

SARA: It's practically the only thing I heard.

TANNER: Yeah, well. It's more than sometimes.

A phone rings in Robert's pocket. He pulls it out, looks at it, sighs.

ROBERT: Sorry, I gotta take this.

TANNER: Is it...?

ROBERT: Yes. We might wanta let these next guys play through.

TANNER: They're a foursome! No, wait. *(He counts)* Oh my god, there's twelve of them!

SARA: Oh, wait. I get it. This is one of those step things. You're doing one of your—oh, crap, what do they call it?

ROBERT: Amends.

TANNER: No.

SARA: Oh, Christ. You're amendsing me. I honestly didn't see this coming.

TANNER: You're not coming—! I mean, *I'm* not coming. Nothing's coming. The amends are like six or seven steps away still. I haven't got past the one that says you're powerless to alcohol, that only God has the power to keep you sober.

ROBERT: This is only the second hole, a par-five dogleg to the left.

SARA: What are you doing golfing when you should be working on your character flaws?

TANNER: You gave me chlamydia.

SARA: *(beat)* I did? *(she thinks)* Oh. Sorry. *(beat)* I'm the only one you've...?

TANNER: Since then, yeah. Since we broke up. Or, I mean. Since you told me you never wanted to see me again.

SARA: I said that? You know I didn't mean it.

TANNER: You were seeing five other guys—at least—during those six months you said there was no one like me, that no one could ever be to you what I was.

SARA: Tanner—

TANNER: And I believed it, because that's how I saw you, too. I couldn't believe I was so lucky, finding someone so perfect, who wanted me as much as I wanted her. You.

SARA: Tanner—

TANNER: And in the dreams, you're always there. There's always you, there, with the hot and cold feeling of the vodka down my throat, and it's like a waterfall. You're the waterfall. In the dream.

SARA: I don't know what to say.

ERIN: *(on the phone with Robert, but pausing to cover it)* Which is not true, because you just said that.

TANNER: You said that a lot. That, and...

SARA: *(almost crying, suddenly)* I never meant to hurt you!

TANNER: Yes! And you'd always almost-cry like that. That stupid, trembly Katherine Hepburn... "I never...wanted...to *hurt* you! *(He moves from the restaurant table to the vodka table. He is back in the AA meeting.)* You know what I said, at that first meeting, when it was finally my turn to share?

ROBERT: (*emerging from the phone call*) Like it was yesterday.

TANNER: But you weren't there.

ROBERT: But you told me. At our next session. (*His phone rings. He answers it*)

TANNER: Session? You're not my therapist. I don't pay you. You're my friend. Right?

ERIN: (*both she and Robert are back on their phones; to Tanner*) He's busy.

TANNER: (*to the audience*) That first meeting. No friend, no crutch. Trial by fire. It was crowded. Maybe 35 people crammed into this little conference room where the table seated 12. They all knew each other. One at a time they took a turn, telling who they were...

SARA: I'm Sara, and I broke his heart.

OTHERS: Hi, Sara.

ROBERT: I'm Robert, and I'm the reason he's sober.

OTHERS: (*more enthusiastically*) Hi, Robert!

ERIN: I'm Erin. I'm his daughter.

Dead silence.

ERIN: (*setting aside her phone, taking a seat*) Relax! Biological. And no, he wasn't a donor. It wasn't like that.

ROBERT: (*continuing, to the audience*) ...and what they were addicted to, and everybody did the 'Hi, Fran,' 'Hi, Bruce' thing and then they'd tell what was going on with them today, usually with a lot of zingy catch phrases like... It works if you work it... Let go and let God... You're only as sick as your secrets... And a lot of them—a LOT—talked about the STEPS, which was all foreign to me because I hadn't read the Big Book yet.

I still haven't.

ROBERT: (*abandoning his phone and the golf club, moving closer to Tanner*) I'm the first to admit it's not for everyone. The Big Book was written nearly a century ago, for Christ's sake.

TANNER: It's arrogant. It's sexist. And so *Christian*.

ROBERT: You're not comfortable with God.

TANNER: No one should be comfortable with God. That's why he's God. If she exists.

ROBERT: Look. I'm not your therapist. If I were, there would be boundaries, and we'd have a mutual agreement not to cross them. Or at least notice it when we do.

TANNER: He's the friend who decided I'm an alcoholic just because I was finishing off a fifth of Smirnoff a day for five years.

ROBERT: That was an important first step. You chose to tell me you were doing that. I was honored.

TANNER: He's not an addiction therapist. Mostly the broken home, broken marriage kind. I think he's gay. I think he hopes I am, too. I think he hopes sobriety will shine a radiant light on my latent longing to caress a cock, and that the lucky cock that catches my eye will be his.

I'm *not*, by the way.

ROBERT: Not what? Alcoholic?

TANNER: I don't know.

ROBERT: You were pretty sure, a month ago. It's only since you talked to Sara that you've—

TANNER: Don't bring Sara into this.

ROBERT: She abused you. She cheated on you and she broke your heart. She's in it, brother, whether you want her there or not.

TANNER: I know that. And I want her there. She was the first person who ever made me feel...

ROBERT: It was just social drinking before that. I watched it happen. You started spiking your orange juice at breakfast. You started making Red Bull cocktails in the middle of the afternoon because you figured the energy boost would disguise the effects of your old friend, Vodka.

TANNER: Who, it so happens, fucking kept me alive. *Brother. (long pause)* I don't know if I would have followed through with it, or if I *could*, even... God. Some people say it's cowardly to take your own... It's not. And after a year of her coming back, then leaving me again, and coming back, and making me think it was *my* doing, all the crazy shit in my life.

SARA: Yeah, it was all me. I'm responsible for every bad choice you ever—

TANNER: You know what it was like. The shouting. The crazy. Sometimes you kicked me out... in the middle of sex, sometimes, or right after...

SARA: And sometimes you just left, all proud and empowered, and usually with an ultimatum.

TANNER: That fucking word! Ultimatum? I tried to set some rules, some...

ROBERT: Boundaries.

TANNER: Thank you. *(Robert gives a "thumbs up".)*

SARA: Boundaries? Are you kidding me? You wanted no boundaries, none. You said you hated your own skin, and mine, because they kept us from losing ourselves completely inside each other.

ROBERT: Did you say that?

TANNER: Probably. I was drunk. Oh, fuck. I need to talk about these dreams. I don't get it, I'm clear now, no vodka, three months. Why do I still have these fucking dreams every night?

SARA: What's the problem? They're reassuring, right? You wake up scared but you remember it was just a dream and you're still sober, and you feel relieved.

TANNER: They aren't all like that.

SARA: Now we're talkin'. They're about me, aren't they? The sick ones. The violent ones.

ROBERT: You're right, I am gay. And you are, too.

SARA: He is?

ROBERT: Just a smidge. I think.

TANNER: Bullshit. It's all bullshit. You're all just figments of my sobriety. You're all bullshit!

Pause. Erin takes the stage.

ERIN: I'm not.

Tanner stares at her a moment, then retreats to a chair.

ERIN: *(to whomever)* He fucked my Mom on some nature retreat in Oregon when they were in their twenties. They were there to take pictures of nature. Birds. To hear my mom tell it, they took more pictures of each other, high on weed in his tent.

SARA: I didn't see this coming.

ROBERT: Neither did he. Look at him.

ERIN: I found the pictures when I was twelve. My mom didn't freak. Before that, she told me she'd gone to a sperm bank, and knew nothing about the guy, and neither could I because there was this confidentiality thing.

TANNER: Jesus.

ERIN: "Well, what's his name?" I asked, looking at his half naked body in the creepy light of that tent. He had a good body then, and it was freakin' weird being turned on by a picture of...*(deep breath)*... my dad!

TANNER: Bio.

ERIN: My bio dad! Mom didn't want me to contact him. She said that *she* would, and then maybe, if it was okay with him, it'd be okay with her. But she never did. So I did the research and DM'd him and told him who I was, and who he was in relation to me. I DM'd him eleven times before he responded.

TANNER: *(texting furiously)* "Cut this...shit...out!"

ERIN: Then I told him stuff he knew I couldn't possibly know if I was just some random kid pranking him. Then I took a picture of the picture of him half-naked in the tent and sent it to him in a text and said, "Is this you?"

TANNER: Haaaa....

ERIN: And a few weeks later, I asked him if I could come to Michigan and meet him.

TANNER: Ha haaaaaa.....

ERIN: He offered to pay for the ticket

TANNER: The least I could do?

ERIN: But I wasn't gonna let him buy off his guilt that easy. He was a lot older than I expected.

TANNER: I'm forty-two.

ERIN: You were 39 then.

TANNER: You seemed so angry. So harsh. I wasn't expecting that.

ERIN: Am I in them? The dreams?

TANNER: *(beat)* No.

ERIN: Liar.

TANNER: Okay. You're in some of them. The hard ones. The scary ones.

ERIN: You're scared of me.

TANNER: Yes. No. I'm scared *for* you. You're in danger, and I'm driving, and I've been drinking.

ERIN: I'm in the car?

TANNER: No. Not usually. But I'm trying to get to this house, and I'm blitzed, and running into parked cars and mailboxes left and right, and I figure the two cops that have stopped me three times already are on their way again, but this time, no, damn it, they're not going to let me off even though I'm white.

It's your mother's house, which I've never seen before, and you're inside. And I either crash into the house or I crash into you, running from the house, and I see you tumbling down this sloping lawn, and it's winter, and windy, and if I don't do something you're gonna fall into this really deep snow and never be found again...

ERIN: *(waits, then)* You don't rescue me?

TANNER: Don't sound so disappointed. It's a dream. And it's horrible. I wake up and I can't breathe.

ERIN: *(beat)* Is this really the dream, or just your tragic hero spin on it, to impress the audience?

TANNER: It's my fucking dream, stay out of it. I barely know you.

ERIN: Is that my fault?

TANNER: *(prying ice cubes into the glass, cutting the lime, squeezing the lime over the ice)* At the meeting, I didn't want to say anything, I almost passed. But all of them went on and on about what Step they were on, and how hard it was, and the helpful affirmation they'd read that morning, all this self-indulgent, touchy-feely psychobabble, and so what am I gonna say? The same kind of shit?

ROBERT: *(easing him away from the alcohol)* They knew what you were going through. They'd all been there. They weren't judging you...

TANNER: Hell they weren't. They'd all talked about their "character flaws" and "shortcomings" and I knew *they* knew what I was supposed to say. That Alcohol is a villain—this cunning, sleazy trickster that only GOD and his Twelve Steps could protect you from...

ROBERT: "However you choose to conceive him..."

ERIN: *(approaching the vodka table)* I have your genes. That means I'm probably predisposed to alcoholism, too.

TANNER: No! No one in my family drank. If it's in the genes, I started the bloodline. That's why I thought, no. Not me. I can't be an alcoholic.

ERIN: *(during this, she pours a little Stolli into the glass, then she stops and reaches for the tonic water)* You were drunk when I showed up at your door. I couldn't believe that. You knew I was coming.

TANNER: *(during this, he stops her from pouring the tonic water, and pours more vodka into the glass instead)* I wasn't drunk! I was drinking.

ERIN: But why would you *do* that if you knew I was coming?

TANNER: Some questions answer themselves.

SARA: That's so true.

Needing to finish making the drink, Sara picks up the bottle of tonic water. Tanner stops her, sets down the tonic water, and pours another inch of vodka into the glass.

ROBERT: Oh Christ, just finish your damn story!

Tanner sets down the Stolli, caps it. He fills the glass with tonic water, although there's hardly any room for it.

TANNER: I decided to tell them the truth. I told them I didn't think I was powerless and I didn't believe in God. *(The vodka is waiting.)* And I didn't think alcohol was a cunning bastard waiting around every corner, ready to ambush me. I told them vodka was my friend. Cuz that's what I said the first time I tasted it, right after she left me...

SARA: See? All about me. I'm always the scapegoat!

TANNER: *(lifts the glass)* I sipped that Bloody Mary the morning after. You were there, Robert. You invited me to lunch.

ROBERT: Brunch. I could tell you needed someone.

TANNER: And I sipped it, and this sweet, warm feeling wafted up inside me as the liquid flowed down, and... Oh, I said. I have a new friend. *(To Erin)* The friend that saved my life.

SARA: You would have killed yourself over me.

TANNER: Go away.

Sara retreats upstage.

ROBERT: I know why you dream about vodka. You want to know why you dream about vodka?

TANNER: Yes, tell me, please.

ROBERT: Because you're a drunk. Like her. Like me.

ERIN: That's dumb.

TANNER: No, it isn't. Thank you, Robert.

Robert retreats upstage. Tanner holds out the glass, regarding it.

ERIN: I'm glad you didn't kill yourself.

TANNER: Really?

ERIN: Yes. *(Robert starts to set down the drink.)* But...

Robert stops setting down the glass, holds it, stares at it

ERIN: This is a dream, remember. This isn't really happening *(beat)* Are you going to drink that?

TANNER: *(maybe a small laugh)* I don't know. Three months. *(He sets the glass down on the table.)* I don't know.

Lights fade.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *A few months after I entered sobriety on April 17, 2019, after suddenly*

vomiting a gallon or so of blood, I started to have frequent dreams in which I would be in a social setting and nonchalantly imbibing. I would wake up from these dreams wildly disappointed and deflated because I thought they had really happened, and that I had to start the sobriety clock over again (which in turn meant that I was probably not ever really going to quit drinking). Within a few minutes, I was filled with the gush of relief that it had just been a dream. I was still sober.

But was I an alcoholic? Would an alcoholic have such dreams? Were these unconscious creations really a message that I was a normal drinker, just one who needed to moderate my intake in order to protect my health? The contrary view, held by anyone in a formal twelve-step or clinical program, was that these thoughts were instead the machinations of that cunning villain, the usurper Alcohol.

I decided to try to work out this tension as a quick play set in an artificial dreamlike setting: our hero Tanner presenting himself to an undefined public audience, a table of recovering alcoholics, and three characters representing the major forces impinging on the question of whether he should drink or not: Passion and Rejection (Sarah), Friendship (Robert), and Responsibility (Erin). I wrote a first draft that took place in a kind of TED talk setting, built around a broken narrative of self-justification. After a reading with some bright friends providing feedback, I trashed that idea and focused on the dream itself, jumbled and surreal, with the three supporting characters weaving in and out, interacting and disagreeing with each other.

*After writing the version presented here, I realized that *Vodka* probably needs to be a full length (one hour-ish) play with the dream as the prologue, another dream as a denouement, and separate (undreamed) scenes with Sarah, Robert, and Erin respectively in between. In these scenes, we will see them presented as real people, not Tanner's reductive versions, so that they can apply real pressure to his self-delusion and force him to make a choice.*

I'm not yet sure whether, in the full-length version, he takes a drink at the end, or rejects it. But I'm having a blast writing the three interior scenes.

Who has influenced my style? Probably the playwrights I most admire: Arthur Miller, Lanford Wilson, Yasmina Reza, and the lyrics of Stephen Sondheim.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Doak Bloss is a writer, actor, facilitator, and public health advocate from Lansing, Michigan. He has written many plays and novels but made very little attempt to get them published or performed. Recently he appeared in a recorded performance of his own hourlong play, *Pass the Ducks*, available on YouTube if you send him your email address. Much of his career in public health was dedicated to reorienting public health workers to a social justice framework, recognizing racism and racial privilege as a determinant of health and illness.

BETHESDA

By BOB STEWART



Draft #1/7/17
Writer's Guild Of America East.

CONTACT:
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WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes... This play isn't going to be for everyone, but if you can stomach it, it's extraordinary. I'm not one for trigger warnings, and c'mon, ' if you're reading Fleas on the Dog, you've gotta have some thick skins, so I'll just*

let you take off the kid gloves and read at your own risk. The soldiers in this story have been through hell. They speak of unspeakable things. They use unspeakable language. They are both damned and damaged. Their mothers are left to reconcile themselves with their son's traumas as well as their own – and we're along for the ride. The play hits a level of outrage and outrageousness that could cause a laughing fit at a funeral. For all its aspirations to show the human condition, modern theatre is in danger of tilting into the PC and the palatable. Not this! Fuck that noise. One wishes the language and situations in this drama were merely relegated to the stage and less tolerated off of it. That said, a production of this play needs to be handled with care. One false step, and the whole thing could explode, and we're talking IED's, PTSD, the whole bit. Therapy not included.

Five stars.

GEORGE
(Celebrating) Friggin' crazy-

BARRY
(Celebrating) Crazy!

GEORGE
(Excited) And we are great! *(Delight-HE convinced BARRY.)* We're in fucking Bethesda, man! I think in the bible, even Jesus did some good shit in Bethesda! So, we are great!

BARRY
(More Excited) Who-Ya!!!

((Spacing and format is playwright's own.))

BETHESDA by Bob Stewart

SETTING: A hospital room in Bethesda Navel Hospital. Now.

CHARACTERS:

GEORGE: 22-year-old. Marine Lance Corporal. Angry, uneducated, lower-cass, young man from Corpus Christi, Texas. A Leader but of weak men. He has a vulgar mouth. Protective of BARRY.

BARRY: 22-year-old. Marine Lance Corporal. Uneducated, A lower-class, young man from Bozeman, Montana. He's a Follower. Sensitive but hides it with laughter and a vulgar mouth too. Adores GEORGE & looking for his approval.

GEORGE'S MOM: 50's, heavy-set, tired and full of regret. Lower-class/White Trash woman from Texas. She seems centered but it's just a deep exhaustion about her life choices. A sober drunk. Been at Bethesda Hospital for a week.

BARRY'S MOM: Mid 40's. Lower Class/White Trash woman. A Clean Addict. Dresses sexy but cheap. Deeply regretful and very emotional. Been at Bethesda Hospital for 24 hours.

(Two men lie in hospital beds that are side by side. BOTH are in THEIR very early 20's. THEY are in hospital gowns & have THEIR eyes closed. One man opens HIS eyes and peaks around. HE smiles and whispers to the man in the next bed.)

GEORGE
Barry? Barry, get up!

(BARRY opens his eyes and pushes down his covers.)

BARRY
Hey George!

GEORGE
(Sitting up) -Thought they'd never friggin' leave!

BARRY
Yeah, but it's nice that they're here.

GEORGE
Yeah, but all the time? Jeez! Now, where were we?

BARRY
I was up! OK, OK, OK! *(Excited, HE tries to remember the game)* "You're mom... sucks Satan's dick while he's... munching Lt. Nancy's muff in Hell, while-

GEORGE
Wrong, Barry!!! It's "Fallujah!" We changed "Hell" to "Fallujah," asshole! *(Laughs)*

BARRY
(Pissed) Fuck me-

GEORGE
I'm up! OK, *(tries to remember the game)* "Your Mom... sucks Satan's dick while he's munching Lt. Nancy's muff in Fallujah... during a Towel-Head/Faggot Pride Parade. As Jesus & Mohammad eat out each other's asses-

BARRY
(Laughs) Not asses, George! "Man-ginas!" We changed it to "Man-ginas." Like that faggot in Germany! *(Laughs)*

GEORGE
Damn!

BARRY
-My turn! *(Tries to remember)* "Munching Lt. Nancy's muff during a Towel-Head Faggot... *(trying to remember)*

GEORGE
Pride Parade!

BARRY
(Defensive) I was gonna say "Pride" George! OK... *(remembering)* "during a Faggot Pride Parade as Jesus & Mohammad eat-out each other's 'man-ginas,' while your Dad-

GEORGE
(Laughing) Don't got no Dad!

BARRY
Even bastards like you have a Dad! *(Pride fully tops HIM)* –As, “your Dad shoves his cock down Satan's throat!!!” *(He beams w/pride.)*

GEORGE
(Disbelieving) That's all you got? “My dad shoves his cock down Satan's throat?”

BARRY
(Excitedly) Yeah, but...when your Dad cums, he... grabs Satan's ears and says...
(excited, HE delivers the punch line) “Wow, you're mouth feels just like my son, George-

GEORGE
Son of a bitch-

BARRY
Got cha- *(Laughing)*

GEORGE
(Starts to get out of bed) Butt-munch-

BARRY
(Warns HIM) Don't get out of bed or I'll tell the nurse!

GEORGE
(Falling back in bed) Bite me, double-time! *(Beat)* Damn, I wish I had a cigarette!

BARRY
When the window's open, I smell the nurses smoking outside.

GEORGE
Man, I don't know what is worse; smelling those Nurses as they lean over me or smelling the cigarettes on their breathe! *(Rubbing HIS crotch)* Damn, I love to get a hold of that Mexican one-

BARRY
With the big titties?

GEORGE
Yeah! *(Demonstrates)* Spread those thighs and munch her like some watermelon! Slurp, slurp, A-h-h-h!

BARRY

(Laughing) Commanding Officer would kill your ass-

GEORGE

(Defensive) Fuck him! He was fucking Lt. Nancy the whole time we were in Fallujah. Hate him & that bitch!

When I worked at Blockbuster, the manager was fucking this girl there. Then she started acting like a bitch too! Fucking disgusting!

BARRY

(Lewdly) “Fucking” is, if you do it right! *(Laughs)*

GEORGE

(Suddenly very worried) Wait, wait, wait... its nighttime, right? I get confused sometimes.

BARRY

It’s got to be nighttime. Food tray is gone and so is my Kool-Aid.

GEORGE

(Relived) Yeah, yeah! It’s all good. OK, where were we? OK, so... *(back to the game)* “My Dad face-fucked Satan, screaming *(mocks)* “your mouth’s just like my son, George’s and”-

BARRY

(Laughing) Stop! You can’t top my last one. Don’t even try-

GEORGE

(Trying to top it) But Satan had his... guts hanging on the outside of his body!!!

BARRY

(Shocked) No! Damn-

GEORGE

(Laughs, remembering story) Just like that Towel Head when we were under fire? He pulled up his robe and his intestines are all hanging out! *(Laughing)* I kept saying, “We’ll get you a Medic,” but he kept yakking! “I need a job! I just need a job!” *(Laughs)*

BARRY

(Memory sobers HIM up) That was messed up!

GEORGE

(Still laughing) MoFo just walked away. Just walked away into a sand storm with his kids!

BARRY

(Suddenly sad) I don’t wanna... I don’t wanna think ‘bout that.

GEORGE

Ah come on! (*Tries to cheer HIM up*) Hey at least we're walking. We walked away, Barry!

BARRY

(*Convincing HIMSELF to not be sad*) Yeah, we walked away! Hell yeah! (*HE becomes relieved. Suddenly becomes excited.*) Hey George, how long you think we got here?

GEORGE

Gotta pass Evaluations 1st. And then, we are "gone!"

BARRY

(*Gets very excited*) Man, I can't wait! Once I get my VA check, I'm going to buy me a Dodge 150! And then I'm gonna take every highway Bozeman, Montana has! Then I'm going to take every dirt road & every fucking trail! Maybe drive by my Dad's trailer and see if he wants to ride shotgun. Maybe smoke a Jay with him. (*Frustrated*) That's if his girlfriend will let him!

GEORGE

(*Tired of hearing this*) Fuck him-

BARRY

Naw, he's cool-

GEORGE

Fucking Pussy beat you and your mom & kept leaving for Skanks-

BARRY

(*Defensive*) Not a Pussy!

GEORGE

Fuck he ain't! (*Convincing BARRY*) Corpus Christi had some Free Counseling shit, once. And when Child Services came down on my mom again for drinking, they sent me to a Shrink. And he said... "It was OK to call my Dad a Pussy 'cause he left!" Call my Mom a pussy too! 'Cause they're fuck-ups! Anyone who fucks up like that is a pussy!

BARRY

(*Confesses*) Yeah, but didn't we fuck-up...?

GEORGE

(*Cutting HIM off*) We are not fuck-up! We picked up all our officers, drove them to Base. Everybody survived! Officer Molloy & Koliba are two flights up!

BARRY

(*Getting mad*) I know it was that fuckin' kid who did it-

GEORGE

(Tired of hearing this story) No, you don't!

BARRY

-(Mocks the kid) "What's I. E. D. stand for? What I. E. D. stand for?" *(Pissed@memory)*
Sand-Nigger Motherfucker!

GEORGE

(Reminding HIM) Chill! We got Mental Evaluation to pass too, fool! Molloy & Koliba promised us that we're going to have a big fucking party when we all get out! So, fucking, chill!

(BOTH kick back. BARRY gets worried.)

BARRY

(Cautiously) How come they don't talk ever about it? Officers come down, but they don't talk about it!

GEORGE

(Irritated about this topic) Molloy's hearing came back. So did Koliba's!

BARRY

But, shouldn't they be mad...?

GEORGE

(Convincing Him yet again) They come down & share their Weed and Stoli, almost every night after lights out! They ain't mad!

You want them to fucking, what? Forgive you? Like some... "Healing Like Jesus With Some Water," shit-?

BARRY

Well?

GEORGE

(Angry) No one saw it coming, Barry! Towel-Heads planted it right in their own fountain! Their only source of water for 50 fucking miles and they blew the son of a bitch up just to get us? Well, fuck them and their 72 Virgins, 'cause we all walked away! Walked away, getting out, it's all good!

(Satisfied HE proved HIS point, GEORGE kicks back. BARRY is sad. GEORGE sees this.)

GEORGE

(Getting mad) Ah Jesus, you ain't doing that "sad shit" again, are you?

BARRY

(Defensive) No-

GEORGE

'Cause I can't do that "sad shit" again-

BARRY

(Topping HIM) I'm not! I'm not!

GEORGE

(Lecturing HIM) We did our job, Barry! Shit hit the fan, OK? Officers ain't pissed, everybody's cool! So no more "sad shit!"

We are "War Heroes" man! And we don't have to take shit from nobody anymore!
(Listing) Not my mom or her broke-ass family! Or your mom & that Meth-Head she's with-

BARRY

Hate him-

GEORGE

'Cause we are back with medals and stories, & Uncle Sam's cash! And let our families beg us for money now!

(Mocks) "You couldn't come to Base when I got shipped out, but now you want some of my Army Pay? Then get rid of that scum your living with and I'll give you some! Respect me and I'll give you some-"

BARRY

(Convinced) Hell yeah-

GEORGE

(Encouraging BARRY) Now you got it! And hey, we're not bullshit, "Chauffeurs for Officers" no more either! *(Prideful re: their new rank)* We're "Marine Lance Corporal Barry" and "Lance Corporal George" now! War Heroes! Don't take shit from nobody!

BARRY

(Inspired, HE shouts) Hell yeah! Hell yeah!

GEORGE

(Topping HIM) Bet your ass!

(THEY both lie back, convinced & satisfied. Admiring GEORGE, BARRY studies HIM.)

BARRY

(Sincere but embarrassed) Hey George, um... could we hang out after we're discharged? Ain't ever had much family and shit. 'Cept a cousin who's in jail.

We were a good team driving them, so... could we hang, maybe?

GEORGE

(Charmed by the request) Every night, buddy. We'll hang every night! I promise!

(BARRY grins from ear to ear at GEORGE. GEORGE grins back. OFFSTAGE noises are heard.)

GEORGE

(Giggling getting under the cover) Uh-oh, "Mom Alert at 10 O'clock! Mom Alert!

BARRY

(Getting under the covers, delighted) Man, I hate the way they hover! Like stink on shit-

GEORGE

(Delighted getting under his covers too) Never did that when I was little!

BARRY

Me neither! *(laughs)*

GEORGE

(Celebrating) Friggin' crazy-

BARRY

(Celebrating) Crazy!

GEORGE

(Excited) And we are great! *(Delight-HE convinced BARRY.)* We're in fucking Bethesda, man! I think in the bible, even Jesus did some good shit in Bethesda! So, we are great!

BARRY

(More Excited) Who-Ya!!!

(THEY grin with delight. THEY lie back & close their eyes.)

A Lower-Class Older, heavy-set WOMAN enters in Her 40's. SHE's exhausted. SHE goes next to GEORGE. A Lower-Class WOMAN in her 40's follows close behind & goes

to BARRY'S bed. SHE has been crying & turns off HER cell phone. The Older WOMAN looks at GEORGE sleeping.)

GEORGE'S MOM

(Sadly, watches HIS face) Rapid Eye Movement.

BARRY'S MOM

(Trying to hide HER upset) Doctor says that means they're dreaming.

GEORGE'S MOM

(Sadly, studying HER son w/ disbelief) Lost half their brains. Won't ever talk, walk, feed, or clean themselves again, but... they dream.

(GEORGE'S MOM sits in the chair next to their son's bed. BARRY'S MOM reads her phone & wipes HER tears. GEORGE'S MOM watches.)

GEORGE'S MOM

So, how'd it go with your boyfriend?

BARRY'S MOM

(Upset) Told him finally to... get out! And hung up!

GEORGE'S MOM

Good girl.

BARRY'S MOM

(Convincing HERSELF) I got no future with him! Going to take my Trailer and move it closer to the hospital here! And I'm going to get another generator to help out with all the machines Barry will be needing! I need the entire back rooms for Barry now! So, I told him to "get out" & stay out!

GEORGE'S MOM

(Sadly remembers) Never had a good one, either. And all of 'em hated George. *(Turns to GEORGE)* Well... *(she beams & takes his hand)* he's a Hero now.

(BOTH are lost in pain & regret.)

BARRY'S MOM

Decided... I am going to go to Arlington for the funerals of the Officers, the boys were driving. I am.

GEORGE'S MOM

(Exhaustingly happy about this) George liked driving them.

BARRY'S MOM

(Touched) Barry did too! I'm going to bring Barry's photo with me to the funerals. I know he'd want to be there too, you know?

GEORGE'S MOM

(Touched) Would you bring George's too? Nurses and I will take care of Barry while you're gone, promise! I'll even give him sips of Kool-Aid, like you been doing.

BARRY'S MOM

(Touched by HER offer to tend to HER son) OK.

(BOTH women smile at each other in confirmation. THEY fight tears. THEY turn to their sons. GEORGE'S MOM holds HER son's hand & stares out w/exhaustion. BARRY'S MOM strokes BARRY'S face and smiles down at him like he's a baby.)

BARRY'S MOM

That's right, I'm going to take care of you Barry. I'm going to take care of you. You're my future now!

GEORGE'S MOM

(Quietly realizing) My future is my son. My future is my son. *(Sadly)* Finally.

(GEORGE'S MOM hears her last words, puts her face in her hands & quietly weeps.)

BLACKOUT

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

I wrote BETHESDA because I became very inspired by a memory I had as an Army Brat. My father took me with him to visit the local Veteran's Hospital. I was left in a hallway as my father dealt with his business, and I overheard many wounded soldiers talking in a nearby lounge. Many were severely wounded, but they were all dealing with it with rage-filled, vulgar jokes, competition, and lots of cussing. I based BETHESDA on that memory. I also wanted to explore the idea of a modern tragedy in a short form and to comment on the social and economic issues of our modern soldiers and why they joined the military. Meanwhile, I worked into the play my fascination with the repercussions of "bad parenting" and how it effects the children and adults. I love so many modern playwrights, but I have been influenced as of late by Tony Kushner, David Mamet, and Paula Vogel's plays. Also, by Charles Beaumont and Eugene O'Neill's short,

disturbing, dramas too. They constantly inspire me. I hope you enjoy BETHESDA. Even with its vulgar language and games, it was written from the heart, for the heart. Thank you. -Bob Stewart.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

BOB STEWART: Graduated from UNCSA in NC. His JESUS IN A BEEHIVE! (Pick of the Week by The New York Times) Performed Upstairs@ The Duplex and @Philly's Gay & Lesbian Theater Festival. His A MEMORY PLAY: performed @NYC's WorkShop Theater Co.'s Main Stage Season and it was chosen as "Best of the Fest" by The Mid-Town International Theater Festival. His AMERICAN INHERITANCE as a finalist for the Kennedy Center's Fund For New American Plays & an Industry Reading w/Tom Wopat and Angelica Page. (Optioned by Tony Winning Producer, Michael Rubenstein) His CHICKEN & EGG SOUP: Performed in NJ, GA, KY, RI, and even as a Radio Play in WA. His FABULOUS DARSHAN: "One of The Top Plays of the Year" by Indie Theatre Now, and was used as a Fundraiser (with the original NY cast) for The Schenectady Light Opera Company's Rainbow Access Program in Schenectady, NY, and recently in The Celebration Theatre's Reading Series in L.A. starring Co-Artistic Director-Michael A. Sheppard. He just completed ALL YOU CAN EAT, (A sequel to A MEMORY PLAY.) Also worked with one of the Woodstock Concert creators on a musical book based on the 1969 Woodstock Concert called THE UNTITLED 1969 MUSICAL PROJECT with co-writer, journalist Jeff Zelmanski. Currently working on a new comedy inspired by his late friend called CAROL OF CARROLL GARDENS which was chosen for BROADWAYCON's READING SERIES, The Clamour Theatre's Writer's Retreat in FLA, THE DEPOT FOR NEW PLAY series in CT, an Industry Reading with Tony-Winner Karen Ziemba in 2019 and as a Zoom Reading with the Clamour Theatre again in Aug 2020. Just finished an epic-theater piece with co-writer Jeff Zelmanski called NEW YORK STORIES FROM MY UNCLE ELLIOTT! IMMORAL, ILLICIT, ILLEGAL, about searching for our "Queer DNA," by using the history of homosexual men from of the past 120 years in New York City. www.emaproducton.net

THE MO...VE...MEN . . T

By Stanley Toledo

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes... The Movement by Stanley Toledo is a cunning living room drama with more than enough bizarre twists for a miniseries. Toledo sets the genre on its head by playing with our expectations in a stylish play that is neither farce nor typical family drama. Toledo's exceptional script exploits a familiar premise of dinner with the boss, starting with wine and formalities (after a setup that's practically subliminal), and then quickly moves into something more scintillating – and far more sinister.*

AL

There is a special reason for your being here tonight.

KEITH

I wondered if there was.

AL

Keith, what do we do in the office?

KEITH

We serve the public.

AL

Exactly. We serve the public. And you do that very well. But I need you for something else.

The, beat changes are seamless, the characters complex, and the stakes are ever so high as Keith tries to make a good impression and his boss promises undying support. There's a catch of course, but I'm not giving it away. You'll want to read it again.

Five stars.

(Spacing and format are playwright's own. Eds.)

THE MOVEMENT

A ten-minute play

By Stanley Toledo

Characters

Keith - 20s, employee

Al - 40s, boss

Chris - 30s, boss's wife

Synopsis

A young employee dines at the home of his boss. The only invited guest, he endeavors to make a good impression. Then the evening takes an unexpected turn.

At rise: with a wine glass in hand, CHRIS sits in the living room. She is dressed in an evening dress. AL enters, carrying two glasses of wine. He crosses to the coffee table, sets down the wine glasses. He sits. He is well dressed in an expensive suit. The living room is beautifully appointed but may be staged in an impressionistic manner.

AL

Where is our guest?

CHRIS

Bathroom.

AL

What is your impression of Keith?

CHRIS

He would be a good soldier.

AL

But will he make the right choice?

CHRIS

I think so. Our movement is growing like crazy.

AL

We will know in few minutes.

(Beat. KEITH enters, sits. He is dressed for the occasion, although he is unsure of what the occasion is)

AL

I poured you another glass of wine.

KEITH

Thank you, Al.

CHRIS

You seem to like this wine as much as we do.

KEITH

It is delicious.

AL

I will send a case of it to your house.

KEITH

No. Please.

AL

I respect a man who knows how to enjoy fine wine.

KEITH

But it must be awfully expensive.

AL

Not when you know the right people.

CHRIS

Excuse me, gentlemen. Don't get up.

(CHRIS stands, exits)

KEITH

Your home is beautiful.

AL

Someday you will have one just like it.

KEITH

You think so?

AL

A person who makes wise decisions in life will attain all he desires. Remember that.

KEITH

I shall. I thought dinner was excellent. Never had frog legs before.

AL

Chris works magic in the kitchen.

KEITH

Al, you have been my supervisor for a year now, and I am very thankful. Not many bosses are as civil as you.

AL

Civility is important on and off the clock.

KEITH

Please know you can count on my total support in whatever direction the office goes.

AL

I appreciate your vote of confidence. Excuse me.

(AL stands, exits. As he exits, CHRIS enters. She wears only a bra and panties. She sits; KEITH looks at her, trying not to react)

CHRIS

Al is impressed with you. He feels you are trustworthy.

KEITH

I like your husband. He is a great boss.

CHRIS

Where are you from?

KEITH

Kansas City.

CHRIS

The City of Fountains.

KEITH

Have you visited Kansas City?

CHRIS

No. But you can't get any more middle America than Kansas City, right?

KEITH

I guess so. Yeah.

CHRIS

I hope to get there some day.

KEITH

Uh, do you feel warm?

4

CHRIS

Not particularly. Do you?

KEITH

I am comfortable, thanks.

CHRIS

I heard you talking in the hallway on your way to the bathroom. You must have run into our daughter.

KEITH

We talked briefly. I introduced myself.

CHRIS

She is beautiful, isn't she?

KEITH

She is lovely. High school?

CHRIS

In her junior year. Excuse me. Don't get up.

(She exits as AL enters. He sits)

AL

There is a special reason for your being here tonight.

KEITH

I wondered if there was.

AL

Keith, what do we do in the office?

KEITH

We serve the public.

AL

Exactly. We serve the public. And you do that very well. But I need you for something else.

KEITH

Something else?

AL

Yes. Oh, you did not tell me if you like my wife.

5

KEITH

She is nice.

AL

Attractive?

KEITH

Extremely so.

AL

You can have her for the night whenever you want. You can take her home tonight.

KEITH

(Off balance)

I, I, I live with my uncle. I mean he lives with me. I take care of him.

AL

Did you meet our daughter?

KEITH

Very briefly.

AL

If you are interested, you can have her. That is okay too.

KEITH

Thanks, but this is not a good time.

AL

Maybe another day.

KEITH

Maybe.

AL

You can also have Chris and our daughter at the same time.

KEITH

Like I said I am taking care of my uncle. He needs constant care.

AL

Just know those options are available.

6

KEITH

Al, you said something about needing me for something else.

AL
We want you to join our team.

KEITH
To do what?

AL
Would it matter?

KEITH
I am unsure.

AL
JR is on the team.

KEITH
JR in our office?

AL
Yes.

KEITH
Wow. That guy is flush with brains and good looks.

AL
You can take him home.

KEITH
You mean -

AL
I do.

KEITH
Thanks, but that is not my style.

AL
He is not your type, you mean.

KEITH
No. Yes. I mean my uncle.

7

AL

JR is going far. You want to go far too, right?

KEITH

Sure, I do.

AL

You can take me home. But not this week. I am busy with public matters.

KEITH

I understand.

AL

Being on the team is different than being on the office team but just as important.

KEITH

Different how?

AL

The hours are different. Sometimes you must be accessible at midnight, sometimes at 5 a.m. in the morning.

KEITH

Those are bad hours at our house. That is when my uncle needs me most.

AL

Keith, I thought you want to go far.

KEITH

I do, of course.

AL

A change of allegiance is essential in order to realize a brave new world.

KEITH

What's your daughter's name?

AL

You want her? That can happen tonight.

8

KEITH

No. No. I am sorry. I don't know why I asked.

AL

Then you are turning down this opportunity to join the team?

KEITH

Can't I think about it?

AL

I only ask once. You only have one chance to make the right choice.

KEITH

See, my uncle -

AL

The hell with your uncle.

KEITH

He has always been good to me.

AL

You are allergic to bee stings.

KEITH

How do you know that?

AL

I know what I need to know.

KEITH

(Nervously)

I grew out of that allergy. My reaction to bee stings is normal now.

AL

Are you lying to me?

KEITH

That is the truth.

AL

We will see. Chris! Bring it in!

9

(CHRIS enters. She wears a bee protection suit, which includes a helmet/hat with a veil and gloves, carrying a white wooden

beehive box. KEITH sees her, feeling immediately threatened.
Note: CHRIS can wear helmet/hat with veil and gloves along her
bra and patties instead of a bee suit)

AL

I forgot to tell you Chris and I are beekeepers by hobby.

(CHRIS crosses to the coffee table, sets down the bee box.
KEITH looks at it with fear)

AL

If you are wondering if that bee box is full of bees, it is.

CHRIS

Keith, come closer and look at our beautiful bees.

AL

We love every one of them.

(He turns and looks at AL, seeing that he is now wearing a bee
helmet/hat with a veil)

KEITH

I am going home.

AL

You are staying right here.

KEITH

(Not hearing AL)

Thanks for dinner.

CHRIS

Keith, here is a nice one. Try to catch it.

(CHRIS picks up a bee and pitches it at him. KEITH reacts with
alarm)

KEITH

No! I hate bees!

10

CHRIS

(Pitching another)

Here is another.

KEITH

Please, don't do that!

AL

What a big scary cat you are.

CHRIS

How about one more for the road? Oh, perfect. This is one of my favorites.

(She happily pitches it)

KEITH

(Flailing his arms)

Stop! Stop! Oh! My neck! My God! It stung me! It stung me! Wait! Wait! I cannot breathe. I can't. Help me, please. Call 911.

(KEITH falls to the floor, gasping for air. AL and CHRIS watch unemotionally. KEITH goes into shock, then stops breathing. Beat)

AL

(Taking off his bee helmet/hat)

He's finished.

CHRIS

(Taking off her bee helmet/hat)

Yeah.

AL

How about some dessert?

END

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

The Movement comes out of a crazy dream I had about an alien creed that invades people's minds in this country. The creed dictates that there are no truth/lies, no honor/dishonor, no fairness/unfairness, no morality/immorality. Oh, they exist; they just don't matter. Like how you dress for dinner doesn't matter. All that matters is winning or losing.

Why I had such a dream I am unsure. Maybe it was something I ate.

I like to think I wrote *The Movement* after reading another Harold Pinter play. But it has been a while.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Stanley Toledo's short plays are performed in theatres in the U.S. and abroad. His work has been published in Ponder Review, Santa Ana River Review and The Martian Chronicle. He lives in the California delta.

The Body Washer o o o o o o

By Rosemary Frisino Toohey

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes... It's the rare playwright who can make monologues transcend their form and become more than just talking. Rosemary Frisino Toohey does that and more in The Body Washer, weaving personal monologues together into a narrative that's a transformative theatrical experience. In this play, three young women speak from their perspectives about the death of another young women - an event that has deeply impacted all of them. Toohey's characters keep the heaviness of the subject bearable with the strength of their unique voices and their ability to speak their truths. This is powerful writing that builds on itself and works on the audience in tone and mood. And like a piece of music it lingers in the air even after the last note is played. Damn.*

Five Stars.

(Spacing and format are playwright's own.)

THE BODY WASHER

SETTING

A war zone.

CHARACTERS

MARA.....female, 20s, Middle Eastern, a body washer. Accustomed to the daily stream of

dead women's bodies brought in for ritual purification, Mara approaches her work with dignity, struggling to keep her private pain in check and praying for strength.

NIKKI.....female, 20s, Black, a soldier in the National Guard. Although she never expected to be deployed to a war zone, Nikki is trying hard to do her job and do it well. Her training and her love for her daughter back home keep her on an even keel.

AMY.....female, 20s, White, a reporter. Only a few years out of Journalism school, Amy is eager to justify her editor's decision to send her to a war zone. It is her ability to read people, perhaps more than her writing skills, that makes her a good journalist.

TIME

The present

N.B. The play is a series of interrupted monologues. Each character stands in a separate space.

THE BODY WASHER

Lights up on MARA, NIKKI & AMY.
MARA is at center.

MARA

Washing the bodies of the dead is a very important part of Islam. It is a purification and it's an honor to do it, to prepare the deceased for going to god. I have a feeling of accomplishment when the work is done. A sense of peace that comes after I have cleaned the body with water and soap, scented it with camphor, tied the shroud.

NIKKI

It was all about my education, you see. That's why I'm here. You know, join the National Guard a couple of years and get tuition money to get a degree. I want to make a better life for me and my little girl. Thought maybe I'd like to be a pharmacist. They say there's a big demand for them and I guess there's always going to be a big demand. But this...it's sure not what I signed up for.

MARA

The women of my family have been performing these rites for many years. My grandmother did it and then my mother before me. A body washer is prepared to see the old and the sick. That's expected. But the bad things, the brutal things we see now...

NIKKI

Some people here, they worry a lot about their kids. We all worry, of course---but I know Shawna is fine. She's with my mom. I'm very lucky in that. My mother is crazy about her and

they get along really well. Shawna just started pre-school. She's very bright. I read to her...well, I was reading to her every single night.

AMY

In Journalism school we learned that the easiest way into a story is to start with the facts, the figures. And when you're focusing on military conflicts, there are a lot of numbers to talk about. The US combat mission officially ended in Iraq in 2010. It came to a close in Afghanistan in 2014. But three thousand US troops remain in Iraq, with another four thousand still in Afghanistan. Though the numbers have dropped dramatically, it looks as if Americans could remain in both countries indefinitely. For the National Guard, of course, everything changed after nine eleven. Units from every state were deployed to both countries in the wake of that disaster and Guard units continue to be sent overseas today.

MARA

The rules are very clear. If the deceased is a male, then only men should wash him. If the deceased is a woman, only females should wash her. For a child, either men or women may do the washing. According to Islamic rite, burial should take place within twenty-four hours of death. But the way things are, that's not always possible. By the time the police found this woman's family, we didn't get the body until late in the day.

NIKKI

Shawna has every one of my letters stuck up on the wall behind her bed. At first, my mom didn't want to let her do it. You know, she was thinking of the wallpaper I put up. I got it done just before I left, it's really cute, all flower gardens and bunnies. Pink, of course. Shawna loves pink. I guess maybe all little girls love pink.

AMY

If you're talking about war, of course, the biggest numbers are the fatalities. The US military has lost more than twenty-four hundred troops in Afghanistan and more than forty-five hundred in Iraq. As far as civilian deaths, it's pretty much a given that more than two hundred thousand Iraqi civilians have died since the start of the war in 2003. In 2016 alone, eight hundred of those were children. Of course, every death is huge...to somebody.

NIKKI

With most of us, the talk is about the people we love back home. Like Tara's little boy. He won a blue ribbon for running a race at school. So we put together a big card with a blue ribbon on it, and we all signed it. "To Tara, a blue-ribbon mother." She cried.

MARA

In the mornings they bring the bodies of those who have died of illness, of old age. But by the middle of the day the vans and the trucks come in with the others, the ones who have been shot,

the victims of bombings. There is so much dirt, so much blood, and often, so much that is gone. I do the best I can with what is left.

AMY

But a good reporter is supposed to go beyond the numbers. That's why I'm here. To find the stories and send them back home. My Mom said to me before I left, "You're going on a journey, Amy, but don't let it change you. Come back the same girl you are." Too late, Mom. You look at all this, no way you don't change. No possible way.

MARA

My friend thinks I should find another job. Mara, she says, isn't it upsetting to see these things, to deal with all of this day after day? She's right of course. It is. But I tell myself, if not me, who will do it? Who will make these women whole?

NIKKI

When Shawna grows up, I'm going to see to it that she gets an education, a good education so she can get herself a good job. You better believe I am never, ever going to let her do anything like this. I am going to knock myself out to make sure she doesn't need to join any National Guard to pay for her college. Nothing is worth this. Nobody...nobody on earth can pay me enough to do what I did yesterday. But I signed up, I put my name, Nikki Jordan, right there on that line, so, here I am.

AMY

Most days, I follow the patrols as they leave camp and head out for their checkpoints on one of the roads leading into the city. When the cars approach, I can almost feel these soldiers tense up. There's a kind of rigidity that seems to take hold. Of course, when you talk to them, they all say the same thing. They're just doing their job.

MARA

The hardest part is dealing with the families. Like the mother who came in with her daughter's body yesterday. The girl had died of a very bad head wound. The family arrived here with the body but the mother refused to leave. She wanted to wash the daughter herself, so we did it together. I wanted her to cry, to shed tears over her dead child. It would have made it easier. At least for me. But she didn't.

NIKKI

A lot of what we did in the Guard before we came over here, it was all about forging a team, making us a unit. We heard that over and over again in training. You know, we're bonded, welded together. Like sisters and brothers. Close. Really close.

AMY

The routine is the same with every car. Whether it's one old man in a beat-up wreck, or an open truck with seventeen guys, all of the papers have to be looked at, all of the bags inspected. It's tedious work but it's a nervous kind of tedium.

MARA

I begin the washing by preparing the water. It must be lukewarm, not hot, since that would cause discomfort to the deceased.

NIKKI

The way we work it at the checkpoints, two of us stand on the road, one checking the driver, the other, the passenger side. The other two are up on the tank, watching for any kind of movement, anything that says, this one's carrying insurgents, or maybe somebody with a bomb. And we're always on the alert. We're looking, we're just looking so hard. My eyes ache sometimes.

AMY

It's crazy, though. Whether it's a war zone in Iraq or Afghanistan, my sense of things is that there's a sameness about it all. And there's something...something horrible in that sameness. That's why I decided to focus on the story of one young woman.

MARA

When they bring the body in, I pull away, sometimes I have to cut away what's left of the clothing. But it is part of the ritual that the washer says nothing about the body of the deceased.

NIKKI

So Ryan's looking into the car. Checking the papers, the I.D.'s. Are they who they say they are? Cyndi, she's on the passenger side. Jake and I are up on the tank.

AMY

Her family lived on the outskirts of the city to the east. The mother said the daughter had come to town to register for classes. The university had just opened enrollment to women and the daughter wanted very much to go, to get her degree.

NIKKI

Cyndi was standing back from the car, her gun trained on the guy in the passenger seat. And then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ryan jump back.

MARA

I wind a cloth around my hand to clean away the impurities and I begin by saying, Bismallah, in the name of Allah.

NIKKI

All of a sudden, she was just there. Like out of nowhere. This figure in a veil. I'm not even sure which direction she came from. You could tell she was young.

AMY

She had just turned twenty. Her name was Khalila.

MARA

I wash the hair and braid it in three braids, placing them behind the back of the deceased.

NIKKI

Now, Ryan is a big guy, and he's holding an M-16, locked, loaded, aiming right at her. But she just keeps coming. She keeps on walking toward him. Why would somebody do that? Why would you, how could you walk into that? Man...

AMY

I interviewed the mother but she didn't have a lot to say. Then I got to talk to the younger sister. Sixteen years old. That's when I heard a mouthful.

MARA

I clean the teeth and the nasal passages with a wet cloth.

NIKKI

Now, I don't know why, but Ryan's just standing there. Like he couldn't do it. Or he wouldn't do it. I don't know.

AMY

The sister is a real beauty, deep brown eyes, gorgeous long lashes, clear, caramel-colored skin. And then she launches into this tirade about how everything that happens over here is our fault. The US, she says, is to blame for everything.

MARA

With powdered soap and the water I have prepared, I wash the upper parts of the body before the lower ones, and always the right side is done before the left.

NIKKI

I'm thinking, why doesn't Ryan shoot her? Why doesn't he just take her out? What's he waiting for? Why in the name of Christ is he waiting?

MARA

The head and the upper body must be raised slightly to make sure that any exudations from the body flow down and do not run back onto the body.

NIKKI

Ryan's doing nothing, it's like he's frozen. And her? She just keeps coming, straight at him, she keeps on coming.

AMY

The US doesn't care, the sister says. Americans don't care who we are and they don't care who they kill. They just want to own everything and control everything so they can drive their big cars and live in their fancy houses.

MARA

Special care must be taken with the private parts. If the woman is in her menstrual period or having childbirth bleeding, padding is used to prevent the blood from leaving the body.

NIKKI

What could I do? What the hell was I supposed to do?

AMY

It was so strange, this sixteen-year-old kid, this beautiful young thing in an abaya, filled with such hate, such venom for America and all things American.

NIKKI

I fired. I had to.

MARA

It is preferable, of course, to wash the body three, five, even seven times. But if there is a shortage of water, then the entire body must be washed at least once.

AMY

I asked her how she felt about her sister being shot down at a checkpoint. Those dark eyes looked right through me. She said she wished Khalila had been carrying a bomb.

NIKKI

I told myself, afterwards I need to ask Ryan, why he didn't shoot her, what stopped him. Was it because she was young? Because she was pretty?

AMY

And that would make you happy? To know that your sister killed herself? Well, if she did, she said, she'd have taken those soldiers with her.

NIKKI

So I was going to ask him, but then I figured...what difference does it make? What the hell is the difference? If it was my bullets or his that stopped her. It's all the same.

AMY

What about you, I said. Would you do it? Would you blow yourself up? Yes, she said. If I could take Americans with me. I got out of there pretty fast after that.

NIKKI

The thing is, that girl could have had something under that veil. She didn't. We found out later this one just had some prayer beads. But that's the thing. We don't know. We never know. You can't tell with these people.

MARA

As we washed her daughter's body, the mother spoke to her. Khalila, she said, this is wrong. You should be washing me. Children should bury their parents. But in war, parents bury their children.

AMY

So. Today I'm back to focusing on the numbers. It's a lot easier to write about numbers than about a teenager with a death wish.

NIKKI

This is a crazy place all right, everything's crazy. And not one of us wants to be here. So far away from home.

MARA

In the final wash, I use camphor to perfume the water. Then, the body is dried with a clean towel and wrapped in a shroud. Finally, the body is covered in plastic and wrapped once again. On the final shroud are written words from the Koran.

AMY

It's much simpler to think about statistics than some kid with suicide on her mind and murder in her heart.

NIKKI

Every day I tell myself, Nikki, all you're doin' is your job. You're just doin' your job.

MARA

The work is difficult, but I pray that I can continue. Someone must. As long as the trucks keep bringing the bodies, today, tomorrow, the day after that...

AMY

Better to focus on numbers than on a woman of twenty, shot dead at a checkpoint.

NIKKI

That's all this is. That's why I'm here. I'm just...doin' my goddamn job.

MARA

Perhaps I stay because I am like them...these women they bring on the trucks. There is a saying...I, too, have a dead heart.

Lights slowly down.

END OF PLAY

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

There were two prompts for The Body Washer. First, I came across a newspaper article about the Islamic ritual of body washing. The laws are quite strict as to how it is done, and of course, one can recognize that washing the bodies of the dead in peacetime, dealing primarily with the elderly and the ill, would be vastly different from doing the same thing in wartime. It must take a strong will, a determined heart.

The second trigger for this play was the idea of women in war. Russia had put women in combat as early as World War I, but the US did not do so until 2013. As a woman, as a mother of daughters and sons, I'd be the last to tell my daughters, no, this is a role you cannot play. But I must admit it's a role I would not want to play. I chose to make Nikki a mother to emphasize the awfulness of the job she faces. As someone who has given life, she is faced with the terrible decision of whether or not to take a life. Finishing the triumvirate, I chose a young woman as the reporter, someone struggling to make sense of the horrible banality, the damning numbers of war.

Stylistically, I felt that the interrupted monologue form was the strongest to tell this story.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Rosemary Frisino Toohey has had nearly 300 productions of her plays around the world. She's produced on 4 continents and in 40 US states. In London she won top honors as Audience

Favorite in the British Theatre Challenge and in New York she won the Next Generation Playwriting Contest. She tied as Gold Medal Winner in the Italian American Theatre of Chicago's First Playwright Competition, and she's won the Baltimore Playwrights Festival three times. Nine of her comedies are published and three of her dramas have been honored with Artist grants from the Maryland State Arts Council. She is currently penning the book, music and lyrics of her second musical. Frisino Toohey is a member of The Dramatists Guild of America and SAG/AFTRA. There's more at www.frisinotoohey.com

Intuitive LEAP

By Barbara Y oshida

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes... Barbara Yoshida's INTUITIVE LEAP is a play that leaps across boundaries from theatre to performance art and blurs the edges of both. It's wildly risky and marvelously weird with the middle-aged WOMAN-AS-HARE in a bunny mask confronting a masculine yet socially awkward MANNY. And did I mention that WOMAN-AS-HARE is buckass naked? THE ENTIRE TIME? That's commitment! Here we are looking at masks as the very tools of social distancing, but the mask in this play takes us back to our shamanic roots and allows for the transformation of the symbolic into a living and breathing effigy in the form of WOMAN-AS-HARE. Behind the mask lies a feminine/Jungian/Dickensian rabbit hole of insights about our relationships and our humanity. Evidently, MANNY has summoned WOMAN-AS-HARE from the bowels of his psyche to teach him some of life's most difficult lessons. WOMAN-AS-HARE doesn't have to do it alone, however. There's a disembodied PRIEST and some vocal cows ready to jump into the mix. Add some shadow puppets and get ready for this play to delight, disturb, and knock your socks off.*

(Fade to black. MANNY sings.)

MANNY

My love has no fingers,

my love has no toes,

but she has plenty of holes,

so it goes, so it goes.

Five stars.

INTUITIVE LEAP

by Barbara Yoshida

The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.

– Albert Einstein

CHARACTERS*

MANNY A rugged looking man. His clothes are mismatched. He wears a leather vest with fringe, cowboy boots, and a bolo tie.

WOMAN-AS-HARE Naked, except for a hare mask; middle aged and full-figured.

PRIEST (voiceover) The voice of an older man.

Roles are identity-flexible.

Playwright can supply the audio recordings of cows.

INTUITIVE LEAP

Dim light reveals a bed, stage left, and a trunk, stage right. A hobby horse leans against the bed and a lasso lies on the bed. WOMAN-AS-HARE sits on the trunk. MANNY bursts into the room, visibly upset. He blindly rushes forward, between WOMAN-AS-HARE and the bed, and stops downstage.

MANNY

(Yelling.) Jesus H. Christ! No matter what I say, she knows better! She treats me like a child! I'm just some stupid schmuck who didn't go to a good enough school. If I'm not smart enough, why did she marry me?

(MANNY grabs his hair, then stretches his arms out wide.)

I can't take this anymore!

WOMAN-AS-HARE

You talkin' to me?

(MANNY whirls to the right and sees WOMAN-AS-HARE for the first time.)

MANNY

(Startled.) Huh?! *(Jumping back.)* What the fuck! Who are you?

WOMAN-AS-HARE

I'm whoever you want me to be.

(MANNY *moves aggressively toward* WOMAN-AS-HARE.)

MANNY

(*Angrily.*) What is this?! You the first of three nightly visitors?

WOMAN-AS-HARE

Nah. Don't need to get my wings, either. But relax, I'm on your side.

MANNY

(*Laughing giddily.*) You related to the Playboy Bunny?

(WOMAN-AS-HARE *shakes her head.*)

(*Leering at her.*) Too bad. (*Chuckling.*) That could make things a lot more interesting.

(MANNY *picks up the lasso.*)

(*Excitedly.*) I could tie you up! That might be fun!

WOMAN-AS-HARE

In your dreams.

MANNY

(Scowling.) I don't know. I'm not dreaming, but. . . . *(Angrily.)* Look, I can't talk to you! That would be crazy.

(The sound of cows is heard in the distance. MANNY picks up the hobby horse and rides around the room. He twirls the lasso and whinnies as the sound of cows diminishes. He continues to ride, without the lasso.)

Why are you here?

WOMAN-AS-HARE

You called me. You activated that deep area of your psyche—your Jungian unconscious. Why are you riding that thing around?

MANNY

This is my Jungian symbol for you. *(Laughing hysterically.)* Get it? A nightmare!

WOMAN-AS-HARE

How's your sex life?

MANNY

Huh?

WOMAN-AS-HARE

You're having problems with your wife, Sheela.

MANNY

She doesn't understand me. And that's not all. My supervisor doesn't understand me, either.

She fired me yesterday.

WOMAN-AS-HARE

And you just had a big fight with Sheela.

MANNY

(Snorting derisively.) As if you care. Yeah, we really got into it. She found out about the other woman I'm seeing. So this is where I live now.

(MANNY flops on the bed, gets up again, and paces.)

Wish I could sleep! I'm so tired! *(Shouting.)* What am I supposed to do? I don't know where to turn! It's all her fault!

WOMAN-AS-HARE

That's what they all say.

(MANNY grabs the pillow and punches it a few times.)

But you're the one who started seeing someone else.

MANNY

(Shouting.) But I haven't had sex with her! Besides, Sheela drove me to it! And the other one— she started it! It wasn't me! Now there's no way I can stop seeing her! I'm so confused.

WOMAN-AS-HARE

Sexual attraction is a powerful thing.

(MANNY slows down on the horse.)

MANNY

Tell me about it! Can you have sex with other animal spirits, or whatever you are?

WOMAN-AS-HARE

Not your concern. *(Pause.)* Have you ever seen a UFO?

(MANNY stops riding, lays the hobby horse down, and faces WOMAN-AS-HARE, his legs spread and hands on hips.)

MANNY

(Defensive, sensing a trap.) I wouldn't tell you if I had.

WOMAN-AS-HARE

Because there's no scientific proof? What about parallel realities?

MANNY

Quantum physics says they exist, so it must be true.

WOMAN-AS-HARE

Then why can't I be from another dimension? A parallel universe?

MANNY

(Smirking.) Yeah, right. More like indigestion—a bit of underdone potato.

WOMAN-AS-HARE

Not everything can be proved by science or rational thinking. Don't you trust your own senses?

(WOMAN-AS-HARE leaps off the trunk. MANNY steps toward her, jabbing his forefinger at her.)

MANNY

(Threatening.) You know what? Scientific proof is exactly what I do need. To judge what's real and what isn't.

(WOMAN-AS-HARE moves toward MANNY. With each step toward him, he backs up.)

WOMAN-AS-HARE

Hah! Even Einstein had to take a break from months of intense work and let his imagination wander, so images could pop into his head and then he said, "Eureka!". His imagination triggered his theory of relativity.

(MANNY and WOMAN-AS-HARE stop, facing off against each other. MANNY thrusts his face to within a few inches of hers.)

MANNY

That has nothing to do with me. I suppose next you're gonna talk about "female intuition." Spare me! That's just the way women do something because it "feels" right to them. If I did that right now, I'd punch you. Lucky for you, my rational mind tells me to cool it.

(WOMAN-AS-HARE sits back on the trunk.)

WOMAN-AS-HARE

(Slapping the trunk loudly with the palm of her hand.) Hah!

(MANNY turns his back and walks away. His face is twisted in anger.)

You say “female” intuition in a disparaging way, as if men are superior because they’re more rational.

MANNY

(Glaring at WOMAN-AS-HARE.) That’s just the point! We are superior! We use our intelligence instead of our emotions. Why do I need intuition? I get along fine without it.

WOMAN-AS-HARE

Really? With Sheela? Doesn’t seem like you’re communicating very well. For starters, if you used your intuition, you might have a clue about how to talk to her.

MANNY

We can’t have a normal conversation because she always puts me down. I told her Darwin said humans are more evolved than any animal. And Ms. Know-It-All said I was an idiot!

WOMAN-AS-HARE

She’s right about Darwin. A species is more evolved if it’s better adapted to its environment. As time goes on, humans are less adapted to their environment because their environment is more and more polluted.

MANNY

We're more intelligent than animals, right?

WOMAN-AS-HARE

You have bigger brains, but that doesn't mean you're more intelligent. You don't know enough about animals to be sure! Are your communication skills better than a dolphin's?

(MANNY gets on the hobby horse again. He rides around, ignoring WOMAN-AS-HARE. The sound of cows returns.)

MANNY

I think you're hare-brained!

(WOMAN-AS-HARE leaps off the trunk in front of MANNY, stopping his ride.)

WOMAN-AS-HARE

Is that supposed to insult me? In many cultures, the hare is the animal that leaps up suddenly, so she symbolizes a quick mind and creative thought.

(WOMAN-AS-HARE sits on the bed. MANNY starts riding again.)

MANNY

Big deal. I don't care! Leave me alone!

WOMAN-AS-HARE

But you told Sheela, "What does it matter if some species goes extinct?"

MANNY

(MANNY *stops in front of* WOMAN-AS-HARE.) Okay, we need animals for food. And there's horseback riding (*he whinnies*), dog racing, . . . and cockfights! Yeah, cockfights! Now we're talkin'!

(MANNY *starts riding again.*)

WOMAN-AS-HARE

Animals have always taught us things, since our earliest days on the planet. And now so many of them are going extinct, we'll never know what we could have learned, what we've lost.

(*The sound of cows recedes. MANNY stops riding and faces* WOMAN-AS-HARE.)

MANNY

By the way, why are you naked?

WOMAN-AS-HARE

(*Mock bewilderment.*) Just noticed? (*Tauntingly.*) Does it turn you on?

MANNY

I don't think you're supposed to be naked. (*Lasciviously.*) Maybe I should jump your bones, then I'd know you're real.

WOMAN-AS-HARE

Ooooh, you're a randy one! So it's not just Sheela, it's any woman!

(*WOMAN-AS-HARE poses seductively on the bed and beckons to him.*)

(*Amused, tauntingly.*) Come on, big guy, let's see what you've got!

(*MANNY drops the hobby horse and approaches WOMAN-AS-HARE. He faces her, his arms folded.*)

MANNY

(*Angrily.*) No, not any woman—and certainly not you! It's the other woman—my piece on the side! She's a succubus! I can't work or think about anything but her. And Sheela knows I'm seeing her. It's ugly. But I can't stop!

(*WOMAN-AS-HARE kneels on the bed and faces MANNY.*)

WOMAN-AS-HARE

What the fuck's the matter with you? (*She slaps him.*) Stop whining. Just choose! Either work things out with Sheela or call it quits with her! What a pussy! You can't even trust your own

senses. Am I real? You're the smart one, so prove it! But you're too scared to make a move one way or the other. You disgust me.

MANNY

That's your advice? *(He leers at her.)* I gotta admit, I kinda liked being slapped, but how does that help?

(Cross-fade into a pool of light center-stage. MANNY steps into it and kneels, hands folded in front of him. He looks up and speaks, as if confessing to a priest. Low light reveals WOMAN-AS-HARE, stage left.)

MANNY

You know I'm married, right? But I'm seeing someone else and I just can't help myself. I know it's wrong, Father. But I don't feel guilty! I should, but I don't.

(The voice of a PRIEST comes from above, and WOMAN-AS-HARE lip-syncs as if it's coming from her.)

PRIEST *(voiceover)*

Don't worry, son. I'll have a talk with your parents and they'll sort it out.

MANNY

What?! You can't talk to them! This is supposed to be confidential!

PRIEST (*voiceover*)

You came to me for help, didn't you? I know what's best. Anything else you want to tell me?

MANNY

I've been visited by a goddess of mischief, an apparition. She's part woman, part animal. And she's naked. What's it mean?

PRIEST (*voiceover*)

It means you need to get away from here. You could just fly away. Do you fly in your dreams? Maybe go up on the roof and see if you can fly.

MANNY

I made my wife cry. But I wasn't even moved. I feel like I'm not even human. Maybe I'm already dead and don't know it. I'm gonna kill someone—really! I'm gonna do it, I just know it!

PRIEST (*voiceover*)

Are you on drugs?

MANNY

No! I just think I'm losing my mind.

PRIEST (*voiceover*)

Instead of killing someone, maybe you should commit suicide.

MANNY

Are you really a priest?

WOMAN-AS-HARE

(Continuing the priest's dialogue.) Depends on who you ask.

MANNY

(Looking up.) Wait a minute! You sound like that animal woman!

WOMAN-AS-HARE

(Wicked laughter.) Ha, ha, ha, ha!

(Fade to black.)

(Light comes up on MANNY waltzing around the room, embracing a blow-up sex doll. WOMAN-AS-HARE stands in front of the trunk, watching. MANNY sings.)

MANNY

My love has no fingers,

my love has no toes,

but she has plenty of holes,
so it goes, so it goes.

(MANNY casts the doll aside and goes to WOMAN-AS-HARE.)

WOMAN-AS-HARE

(*Bugs Bunny voice.*) Eeeeeeh, what's up, Doc? (*Chuckling, taunting him.*) How'd it go with the priest?

(MANNY reaches with both hands as if to put them around her neck.)

MANNY

Aaaargh! I'm gonna kill you, bitch!

(WOMAN-AS-HARE easily slips out of his reach and moves away.)

WOMAN-AS-HARE

(*She snorts incredulously.*) You dumb-ass! If you could believe your own senses, you'd know you can't kill me! (*Pause.*) Poor you. So misunderstood.

(WOMAN-AS-HARE sits on the trunk.)

MANNY

(Shouting.) Don't make fun of me! *(Arms outstretched.)* I'm really on the edge here!

(MANNY puts a pillow on the floor in front of the trunk and sits, facing WOMAN-AS-HARE.)

WOMAN-AS-HARE

I bet Sheela likes to go to museums and look at paintings. Do you like to do that with her?

MANNY

Always makes me feel stupid. She doesn't respect me! Just because I can't understand art. I don't need it! Poetry or theater or any of that.

WOMAN-AS-HARE

What about music? Music makes you feel a certain way, doesn't it? You could share that with her. It's the same when you're looking at a painting. Pick one you like, then just give it some time. There's nothing to understand. Just feel it—give your thoughts and emotions free rein—listen to your intuition! You know, many of our imaginings and feelings can't be explained, even to ourselves. We know they're real, but we can't prove it. So we create art—painting, music, dance.

MANNY

At least you have to agree that humans create art and animals don't. Isn't that evidence of our superiority?

WOMAN-AS-HARE

I don't think so. There was a gorilla, named Koko, who enjoyed painting. Does that surprise you?

MANNY

Creative because she put paint on something?

WOMAN-AS-HARE

Can you say it's not creative?

(MANNY gets up and stands, facing WOMAN-AS-HARE. They make hand shadow puppets of hares. Fingers and hands are illuminated so the audience can see them. Each hare image is different. Silhouettes are projected against the back wall, enlarged significantly. The hares' ears twitch and the legs move as if they're talking.)



Koko was also taught to sign. Her vocabulary was the same level as a three-year-old human child.

MANNY

Oh my God, that's incredible!

WOMAN-AS-HARE

And she understood two thousand words of spoken English. She even understood abstract concepts like "good" and "fake." Koko adopted a kitten and created a name for him. She loved the other beings she became attached to, and grieved when they left or died. She could be mischievous, too. Once, when she didn't like someone, she called the woman a toilet!

(The silhouettes vanish. Slowly, MANNY turns his head toward WOMAN-AS-HARE.)

When she was asked where gorillas go when they die, Koko signed, "Comfortable hole bye."

(WOMAN-AS-HARE waves "bye-bye." MANNY buries his face in his hands, clearly distraught. Sound of crying cows is heard again, louder than before.)

MANNY

(Lifting his head.) Oh, sweet Jesus. *(His face is distorted, anguished.)* Why are the cows crying? I thought they only went "Moo."

WOMAN-AS-HARE

Come on, man! What do you feel?

MANNY

They've lost something. They're grieving. They're in pain!

(Sound of crying cows changes to the sound of a single cow.)

(Distraught.) She's away from the herd, alone, and she's searching for something. She's missing something. Aaaargh! I can't stand it! It's heart-breaking!

(MANNY drops to his knees as the sound of the cow dies away.)

(To WOMAN-AS-HARE.) I want to call Sheela. God, I'm so tired.

(MANNY lies on the floor in a fetal position, pillow behind his head. Lights dim. WOMAN-AS-HARE goes to MANNY and covers his face with the pillow, pressing down on it with both hands.)

(Blackout.)

END

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *During a 1999 artist residency at Ucross in Wyoming, I was invited to watch some calves being branded; the male calves were also being castrated. It was the first time these mothers had ever been separated from their calves. I was deeply affected by the agonizing cries of the mothers, and I was shocked—I hadn't known that cows could make that sound—that they made any sounds other than "Moo." I rushed back to get my recording equipment. I felt this "language" would affect anyone who heard it. So, when I began writing about the value of intuition in a society dominated by rational thinking, I remembered the sound of those crying cows and knew it had to be a driving force in the play—the trigger for Manny's transformation. My background is visual art, so I also wanted to engage people with visual stimuli, like the hand shadow puppets, another "language." And the woman wearing a hare mask is an important visual manifestation of the non-rational. In this play, the rational is viewed through the lens of absurdity (see Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, Albee's *The Zoo Story*, and Guare's *The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year*). Is it really a priest? —or is it the hare woman? How absurd that Manny would put himself in her hands!*

AUTHOR'S BIO: **Barbara Yoshida** is a multi-disciplinary artist whose work has been exhibited throughout NYC, the U.S., and internationally. Her short play, *Language Games*, can be seen in *Fleas on the Dog*, Issue 6, Part 2 (plays & screenplays), and was presented in NYC's Rogue Theater Festival in December, 2020. Also during December, a trailer of the film, *Language Games*, was shown prior to an artist talk in *AD ABSURDUM: The Politics and Poetics of Absurdity* by the Philadelphia Avant-Garde Studies Consortium (PASC). After taking Peculiar Works Project production and publicity photos for over a decade and editing too many grant applications, she began working as a dramaturg on projects such as *Planet X* (Black Mountain College), *2 Jane Jacobs* (Cherry Lane Theater) and *Son of Cock-Strong* (La MaMa). Other than English, she speaks French, Japanese, and Spanish (some more than others). She has served on the Board of PWP since its inception in 1993. You can visit Barbara at www.barbarayoshida.com Her latest monograph (below) is now available.

MOON VIEWING

Megaliths by Moonlight

Photographs by Barbara Yoshida

Essay by Lucy R. Lippard

Foreword by Linda Connor

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Representing ten years of travel and research, *Moon Viewing: Megaliths by Moonlight* surveys megalithic stones from Sweden to West Africa and east to Armenia. Night photography emphasizes the relationship to stars and planets.

Acting Class for

♻️↕️△↔️▽◀️➡️△▽ Pornstars

By C L Byrd

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes... Lexi and DJ are aspiring pornstars, but before they get more than their feet wet they have to concentrate on the craft of acting – or do they? This is porn, after all (even DJ points out, that it isn't "Fences" with Denzel). Gosh, I didn't know how much I'd love this play, but Acting Class for Pornstars has to be one of my faves. So what if nobody gives a sh-t about acting references except actors? I think everybody will be interested in the porn/intimacy aspect regardless. CL Byrd's wonderful script is reminiscent of Annie Baker (Circle Mirror Transformation), but the porn angle and the humor make it uniquely its own. The play is hysterical, but not slapstick. It's thoughtful, not cerebral. And it addresses issues of artistic expression and sexuality that are surprising not just for a short play, but for any play, really. No worries about keeping up with porno-acting class jargon; this is about as hard as it gets (pun intended):*

TEACHER.

We call this packing in acting terms. You have to do a lot of *packing*. You have to know everything about your characters so that they seem like real people to you. If he doesn't like butt stuff, that's fine, but why doesn't he like butt stuff?

This is a feel-good show, and I'm not talking about a money shot. Not exactly family fare, but I'm sure you got that from the title.

Five Stars

(Spacing and format are playwright's own.)

Acting Class for Pornstars

Cast of Characters

	LEXI	<i>Younger female.</i>
	DJ.	<i>Younger male.</i>
TEACHER.	<i>Older, any gender.</i>	

A studio.

Scene:

Time:

Present.

*A (/) indicates where the next speech begins.

ACT I

Scene One

“Talking and Listening”

AT RISE: (LEXI and DJ are sitting, watching a television screen that can't be seen by the audience. Sounds of moaning. The TEACHER stops the video.)

TEACHER.

Thoughts?

LEXI.

I thought it was a really good scene.

DJ.

Same.

TEACHER.

Specifics people.

LEXI.

Specifics?

TEACHER.

It's not enough to say that something was good; you have to have reasons why you thought it was good.

LEXI.

Reasons? Like, you mean...

TEACHER.

Anything.

LEXI.

Um...

TEACHER.

Characterization. Use of subtext. Conflict. Did they make any specific choices? Did they commit to their characters? Does this make sense? Why was the scene good? What did they do as *actors* that made the scene work?

LEXI.

I felt like they were really connecting with each other.

DJ.

Same.

TEACHER.

Any other thoughts, DJ?

DJ.

Not really...

TEACHER.

There must be something...

DJ.

It was a good scene.

TEACHER.

But why was it a good scene?

DJ.

It was HOT.

LEXI.

They were talking and listening to each other. They were both really present in the room, if you know what I mean.

DJ.

Yeah, what she said.

TEACHER.

Okay, so they were both really present. What else?

LEXI.

There was a lot of give and take...

DJ.

Yeah...

TEACHER.

Is there any room for improvements?

LEXI.

I felt like she was pushing a bit...

DJ.

He was pushing too.

LEXI.

Yeah.

DJ.

It was HOT.

LEXI.

Like when she was screaming...

TEACHER.

Okay...

LEXI.

It didn't feel justified.

TEACHER.

What else?

LEXI.

Also, I will say that she committed at first, but towards the end, right when she took the load on her face, you could tell that she dropped out of character a bit. I think it was just because it landed in her eye...

DJ.
Yeah, that was one of my favorite parts.
TEACHER.
Anything else?
DJ.
Do we have to let them...you know...
TEACHER.
What?
DJ.
You know...
TEACHER.
What?
DJ.
Lick our buttoholes...
TEACHER.
I don't know, DJ. What would your character do?
DJ.
I don't know.
TEACHER.
Who's your character?
DJ.
The pizza guy...
TEACHER.
Right.
DJ.
So no?
TEACHER.
What's his backstory? Does he have some type of sexual repression that would prevent him from engaging in such an act?

I think he just wants to fuck...

TEACHER.

See, this is where specifics will help you flesh out your characters.

DJ.

Should we be taking notes?

LEXI.

I have...

TEACHER.

We call this packing in acting terms. You have to do a lot of *packing*. You have to know everything about your characters so that they seem like real people to you. If he doesn't like butt stuff, that's fine, but why doesn't he like butt stuff?

DJ.

Well, uh, I guess...

TEACHER.

You have to know the answers to these questions, or it won't be clear to the audience.

DJ.

So I don't have to let her lick my buttole?

LEXI.

I don't know about that either.

TEACHER.

Don't worry about that stuff, guys.

DJ/LEXI.

Okay...

TEACHER.

These are professionals. They have spent years perfecting their craft.

DJ.

So no butt stuff?

TEACHER.

Not for today.

DJ/LEXI.

Good.

TEACHER.

Is there anything else before we move on?

DJ.

I have a side question...

TEACHER.

Yes?

DJ.

We don't have to do step-brother, step-sister stuff, do we?

TEACHER.

No, that's another course.

DJ/LEXI.

Good.

TEACHER.

Anything else?

DJ/LEXI.

No.

TEACHER.

Okay, so moving on. Now, Lexi brought up pushing, and as we learned yesterday, pushing is where we are showing the audience emotion.

LEXI.

Emotion...

DJ.

Pushing?

TEACHER.

We are broadcasting how we feel to the audience, and this comes across as forced. So the answer to this is the Stanislavski method, which says that "all characters must have something they are doing...an action, a motivation of some kind."

DJ.

Like fucking?

TEACHER.

Yes, that is part of it, but it's more than that.

LEXI.

So like when the girl was putting on lipgloss at the beginning?

TEACHER.

Exactly!

LEXI.

That was an action...

TEACHER.

Right! And what might be her motivation for doing that?

LEXI.

I don't know...

TEACHER.

There are no wrong answers.

LEXI.

She, um...

DJ.

She wanted to look pretty for the pizza guy.

LEXI.

Yeah, she wanted to look pretty.

TEACHER.

But what's the subtext?

LEXI.

Subtext?

DJ.

She wanted to have those dick sucking lips...

TEACHER.

DJ...

DJ.

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What?

TEACHER.

Can you take this seriously please?

DJ.

But I thought...

TEACHER.

Is this a joke to you?

DJ.

No...

TEACHER.

Go ahead, Lexi.

LEXI.

You were saying something about subtext...

TEACHER.

Right.

LEXI.

We talked about that last class, so that's what's going on underneath the surface. I think that's what subtext is...

TEACHER.

Yes, you're absolutely right.

LEXI.

Maybe she's insecure?

TEACHER.

Go on.

LEXI.

And her parents never loved her...

TEACHER.

Keep going.

LEXI.

Her mother always told her she was ugly.

DJ.

Really?

LEXI.

Her older sister was prettier than her, so she developed an eating disorder in her teenage years. A vicious cycle of vomiting and self-harm destroyed her psyche. She was a broken vessel. So she turned to drugs. She turned to alcohol. She turned to sex. Anything that would make the pain go away. Finally, she got the help she needed, and she turned her life around, but still...she didn't feel good enough. She didn't feel like she was worthy. She felt ugly. So her lipstick was her comfort. Her lipstick made her feel beautiful again...

DJ.

Or maybe, and this is just a shot in the dark...

TEACHER.

What DJ?

DJ.

Maybe she just wants some good dick and a slice of pepperoni pizza!

TEACHER.

Is that what you want, DJ?

DJ.

I just don't think it's that complicated...

TEACHER.

Human beings are complicated creatures.

DJ.

I'm talking about the scene...

TEACHER.

No scene is simple.

DJ.

But we're not...

TEACHER.

What?

DJ.

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This isn't "Fences" with Denzel; it's porn!

TEACHER.

So what?

DJ.

You talk about all this stuff that goes on beneath the surface, but the audience doesn't care about that. They just want to see people screw.

TEACHER.

How do you know what they care about?

LEXI.

Yeah...

DJ.

Because I am the audience!

TEACHER.

You are?

DJ.

Young men!

LEXI.

Women watch porn too.

DJ.

Not as much...

TEACHER.

What are you running from, DJ?

DJ.

I'm just trying to get a paycheck, man.

TEACHER.

Why don't you like butt-stuff?

DJ.

It's gross!

TEACHER.

Do you know where the male G-spot is?

DJ.

Yes, I do, and that's fine, when I'm drunk, whatever...but right now, I'm just trying to get my dick wet.

TEACHER.

You have no other motivations?

DJ.

No, I really don't. I thought this was a place I could come and be free, and be open about the fact that I'm a man, and I just want to fuck and have a good time, and that doesn't make me some misogynistic animal, or pig, it makes me a human being. I'm not sorry, that's just the way it is, and every time I've ever tried to open up with a girl, she rejects me because I'm too skinny, or my dick isn't long enough, or it hurts when I stick it in, so I can't win, and I haven't had sex in a WHOLE FUCKING YEAR, and I feel like a castaway on some pussy-less island, but yet, I'm surrounded by girls, everywhere I look, and this bullshit Tinder dating culture, where they keep your matches from you on purpose, because they want you to spend money, and even when you do match up, it's awkward, and there's no connection, and the dating scene is so fucked up, and I can't take it anymore!

TEACHER.

I am sorry that you are going through all of that.

DJ.

I don't even think sex will make me happy...

LEXI.

It won't.

DJ.

I know.

TEACHER.

But you're not the character, DJ.

DJ.

I'm not...

TEACHER.

Bad actors think they have to use their own trauma in their acting; really, they're just making it about themselves. If you can't leave your issues at the door, then this might not be the place for you. You have to use your imagination.

DJ.

You're right.

TEACHER.

So do you think you can do the work, or not?

DJ.

I think so...

LEXI.

I'm ready whenever...

TEACHER.

Slow your roll...

LEXI/DJ.

Sorry.

TEACHER.

Let's do a Mesiner repetition exercise first, and then we'll try your first scene. We have to make sure you're present...

DJ.

Okay, um...

TEACHER.

Turn and face each other.

They do.

DJ.

So...

(Pause.)

Hey.

LEXI.

Hey.

DJ.

How are you?

LEXI.

I'm good.

TEACHER.

No pushing...

LEXI.

Sorry.

DJ.

You're really pretty.

LEXI.

Thanks.

TEACHER.

That was real.

LEXI.

You're pretty cute yourself.

DJ.

Thanks.

TEACHER.

That was real.

DJ.

I'm really nervous...

LEXI.

So am I...

DJ.

Okay good.

LEXI.

Yeah...

DJ.

I've never done anything like this...

LEXI.

Me neither...

DJ.

That makes me feel better.

TEACHER.

Repeat.

LEXI.

What?

TEACHER.

Repeat: "that makes him feel better."

LEXI.

That makes you feel better.

DJ.

I feel better.

LEXI.

You feel better.

DJ.

Now I'm feeling nervous again...

LEXI.

Yeah...

TEACHER.

Repeat.

LEXI.

You feel nervous again...

DJ.

I feel nervous again.

LEXI.

I don't know what to say...

DJ.

Yeah...

TEACHER.

Repeat.

DJ.

You don't know what to say.

LEXI.

I don't know what to say.

TEACHER.

Don't push.

DJ.

So, um...how many people have you slept with?

LEXI.

Around ten.

DJ.

Nice.

LEXI.

What about you?

DJ.

About the same.

LEXI.

Nice.

DJ.

Yeah...

LEXI.

What's the best sex you ever had?

DJ.

Well um...

TEACHER.

Don't think.

DJ.

With a girl named Samantha. We had sex in the bathroom at a party. It was so good, but we didn't really know each other.

LEXI.

That sounds nice.

DJ.

It was.

TEACHER.

Repeat.

LEXI.

It was nice.

DJ.

It was...

LEXI.

It was.

DJ.

What about you?

LEXI.

The best sex I ever had was with this girl from college. It was my first time with a girl; I didn't know that someone could make love to me like that.

DJ.

What was good about it?

LEXI.

She was soft...

DJ.

Yeah...

LEXI.

Every guy pulls my hair...

You don't like it rough?

DJ.

Not really...

LEXI.

Not really?

DJ.

Not really.

LEXI.

So you prefer girls over guys?

DJ.

It just depends.

LEXI.

It depends.

DJ.

It feels like...when I'm with guys, they're just trying to prove themselves to me. Like this one guy, he'd always ask me if I came yet, and if I didn't, he would get sad, but if I did, he would feel like it was this big accomplishment. I guess what I'm saying is...every guy that I've had sex with...they make it about themselves, and not about me. And that might sound selfish, but girls, they make love to me. They talk and listen to me. Guys just want to "pound the shit out of my pussy."

LEXI.

I'm ashamed to say that I've been that guy.

DJ.

You have?

LEXI.

Yeah.

DJ.

Oh...

LEXI.

Repeat: "I've been that guy."

TEACHER.

DJ.

153

I've, uh...been that guy.

LEXI.

You've been that guy.

DJ.

I've been that guy.

LEXI.

It's okay though...

DJ.

It's one of those messed up parts of being a man, I think.

LEXI.

What is?

DJ.

Evolution fucked us up, you know? All we care about is survival, and spreading our genes, and making sure that we're perceived as attractive, and tough, and manly, and we put on this show, lifting heavy things, and then as soon as we cum...we're done with all of it. Like I'm so jealous of girls, because apparently, your orgasms are amazing.

LEXI.

They are pretty amazing.

DJ.

And circumcision actually decreases pleasure.

LEXI.

Yeah...

TEACHER.

Repeat.

LEXI.

It decreases pleasure.

DJ.

It does.

LEXI.

And you didn't have a choice with that...

DJ.

Right.

TEACHER.

Repeat.

DJ.

I didn't have a choice...

LEXI.

You didn't have a choice...

DJ.

Yeah.

LEXI.

So do you feel repressed?

DJ.

I would be lying if I said no...

LEXI.

That's another thing that you guys face; toxic masculinity.

DJ.

How so?

LEXI.

It's much more acceptable for a girl to admit she likes girls, than I guy to admit he's attracted to guys. Girls don't give each other hell for that, but guys torture each other for having "gay thoughts." I wonder how many guys would admit they were bisexual, or gay, if they didn't have to fear the judgement of their friends.

DJ.

That's true.

LEXI.

I feel bad for men sometimes.

DJ.

Well, girls have it way worse than we do...

LEXI.

You think so?

DJ.

I've never walked to my car with my keys in my fist...

LEXI.

That's true.

DJ.

Yeah...

LEXI.

I would say everyone deals with things...

TEACHER.

Repeat.

DJ.

Everyone deals with things.

LEXI.

Everyone deals with things.

DJ.

Everyone deals with things...

LEXI.

Everyone deals with things...

DJ.

How do you feel now?

LEXI.

Good.

DJ.

That's good.

LEXI.

What about you?

DJ.

Good.

LEXI.

That's good.

TEACHER.

That was really nice, people.

(Pause.)

So then, are you ready for your first scene?

DJ/LEXI.

Yes.

TEACHER.

(exiting.)

Okay, so I'm going to leave, give you both some time to strip down, prepare...and then when I come back, we'll get started.

A pause. They both take off their clothes and look at each other.

DJ.

Wow...

LEXI.

What?

DJ.

I've never been with someone like you...

LEXI.

What do you mean?

DJ.

You're really hot...

LEXI.

Oh.

(Pause.)

Thanks.

DJ.

Sorry, not trying to make it about your looks or whatever...

LEXI.

You're okay.

DJ.

Yeah...

LEXI.

You have really nice muscles.

DJ.

Thanks.

LEXI.

I like your tattoos.

DJ.

Oh yeah...

LEXI.

How many do you have?

DJ.

I think nine...

LEXI.

What's that one on your arm?

DJ.

It's for my Dad.

LEXI.

It's pretty.

DJ.

Thanks.

LEXI.

I only have one tattoo...

DJ.

That one?

LEXI.

Yeah.

DJ.

What does it say?

LEXI.

Beautiful...

A pause. They approach one another. They kiss. A bit awkward, but intimate. They laugh, do weird little awkward things. They kiss again. Blackout.

END OF PLAY.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *When I started writing, I was exploring the comedic aspects of two rookie porn actors (and a teacher) taking themselves too seriously. It reminded me of acting class, where sometimes (if not all the time) we took ourselves too seriously. As I continued, the play started to change from being just a joke. The themes include: effects of the porn industry on individuals; sexuality; and gender roles. The characters make observations on hookup culture, dating apps, toxic masculinity, sexual repression, and the awkwardness that exists between strangers performing intimate acts with one another. My influences include Samuel Beckett, Annie Baker, Lynn Nottage, and Stephen Adly Guirgis. Most of my plays are comedic. I avoid realism and political activism. I want my plays to be entertaining and engaging.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: My name is CL Byrd and I'm from High Point, North Carolina. I've been involved in theater since I was in high school. After high school, I spent time acting with community, semi-professional, and professional theater companies such as High Point Community Theater, Shared Radiance Theater, City Arts Drama Center in Greensboro, The Community Theater of Greensboro, and the North Carolina Shakespeare Festival. During this time, I also pursued my Associate in Arts degree at Guilford Technical Community College. As of today, my plays have been performed in the United States, Australia, Costa Rica, Israel, and South Africa.

Two (2) (2) BoyS on the Beach

By **M**atthew Weaver

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

Matthew Weaver's Two Boys on the Beach gives us an innocent scene of two boys, Jack and Lucky, feigning swordplay and then swerves dangerously onto the precipice of adulthood. The play stands out as a vehicle that will transport you to the age of 12 or 13 when something happened that made you realize the ground was shifting underneath you – that maybe you didn't realize until much later, when you smelled salty water or suntan lotion – or you found yourself reading this intense little play - and it all came flooding back. What's remarkable about this play isn't just how universally it captures a liminal experience, but that it dares to do so with young actors. You could probably get away with older teens in these roles, but even so, it's going to make you squirm a little and even give you tingles. Don't worry, it's just a play, and there are intimacy coaches and all that. Still, I am tripping on how live theatre can push the limits of make believe into reality more than any other art form and how in a gobnobbingly good play like this one, the actors could be as impacted by the journey of their characters as if they had lived it themselves, right? It's a whole meta- physical thing and it's primal, and it's fascinating (and I swear I'm not high), and - let's get back to the play. We were there. Next to the ocean. Playing pirates. We were going to walk the plank. And there was a hot babysitter...

JACK: You scoundre!! You ruffian! You bastard!

LUCKY: You scalawag! You rapsallion! You ... bastard!

Both grin at each other. "Bastard" feels forbidden, taboo and very grown up.

(Spacing and format is playwright's own.)

Two Boys on the Beach

By

Matthew Weaver

The stage should suggest an empty beach.

We continually hear the roar of the ocean, gulls, waves crashing.

Two boys, JACK and LUCKY, both 12-13, stand on the beach.

They hold long pieces of driftwood that they found and have naturally turned into swords. Perhaps they are brothers, best friends, cousins. It's not entirely clear. But they've known each other all their lives.

Their driftwood swords clash.

JACK: En garde!

LUCKY: Take that!

They play-fight. They're boys, not yet concerned about growing up.

JACK is the better fighter, more handsome. He's probably taken fencing or swordfighting for some reason.

JACK: Have at you!

LUCKY can play-fight with swords, but has no real experience. He's just playing.

LUCKY: Argh!

They fight some more.

JACK: You scoundrel! You ruffian! You bastard!

LUCKY: You scalawag! You rascalion! You ... bastard!

Both grin at each other. "Bastard" feels forbidden, taboo and very grown up.

JACK: Now ...

JACK spins and comes up behind LUCKY, sword at his throat.

JACK: Now I've got you!

LUCKY: You villain! You wicked, murdering villain!

JACK: Now ... Stab me.

LUCKY: What?

JACK: Stab me.

LUCKY immediately turns and mock-plunges his sword into JACK's chest.

JACK: Ah! Now who is the murdering villain? Now who is wicked? You were my ... best friend!

He dies.

LUCKY laughs and claps.

JACK does not stir.

LUCKY is not worried at all.

He didn't stab JACK that hard.

OK, maybe he's just a little bit worried.

LUCKY: Jack?

JACK laughs, joyful at being alive and here.

LUCKY: Now murder me.

WRIGLEY (O.S.): No one's murdering anyone.

Enter WRIGLEY, 18-19. Every boy's first crush. She wears a baggy T-shirt and baggy shorts. She's in charge. She carries a towel and sandwiches.

LUCKY: You're supposed to be watching us.

WRIGLEY: I was watching you. He spun around and got the drop on you and then you stabbed him through the heart. Come have sandwiches.

She hands them both sandwiches.

WRIGLEY: No peanuts, right?

JACK: Right.

The boys eat while WRIGLEY sets down her towel, then takes measure of the sun.

WRIGLEY: Perfect. You boys need sunscreen.

LUCKY: Awww.

WRIGLEY: Here.

She whips out a tube. She squirts it into their hands, watches as they administer the lotion, makes suggestions for places to be sure they get.

WRIGLEY: Here.

She helps get their faces, spots they can't see.

WRIGLEY: How's it gonna look if you show up all red? Your moms won't let me watch you again.

LUCKY: Good sandwich.

WRIGLEY: Cold ham on wheat with stone-ground mustard. Shocker. You're probably starving. You boys have been down here a while.

JACK: He murdered me and now I'm going to murder him.

WRIGLEY: Sounds like the best possible day. Can I watch?

LUCKY: Sure!

JACK: Sure.

WRIGLEY: OK, then ...

She removes her shirt and pants to reveal a SWIM SUIT, perfect for tanning. She does this without shame or fuss. Matter-of-fact.

The boys are boys - twinges of excitement and uncomfortable all in the same breath.

WRIGLEY lies on her towel.

WRIGLEY: Can one of you get my back?

JACK: I will.

WRIGLEY turns, looks at them both carefully.

WRIGLEY: Lucky.

JACK: Awww.

LUCKY nervously approaches.

LUCKY: Where.

WRIGLEY: The back. My shoulders. Don't worry about my legs. Just where I can't reach. We're shooting for golden brown, not lobster red.

LUCKY applies sunscreen nervously.

JACK: I like lobster.

WRIGLEY: Because it is delicious.

LUCKY: I've never had it.

WRIGLEY: A travesty. We must rectify post-haste. Unless you're allergic? Can you have crab? Shrimp?

LUCKY: We have shrimp a lot.

WRIGLEY: Probably not allergic, then. I'll check to be sure. Done?

LUCKY: I think so.

WRIGLEY: Did he do a good job, Jack?

JACK gives a quick once-over. Just checking the lotion.

JACK: I think so.

WRIGLEY: Excellent! Commence murderment! I release you. Stay close. Don't go in the water for half an hour.

LUCKY: Is that really a thing?

WRIGLEY: Ten out of ten medical experts agree. Remember the rule ...

JACK AND LUCKY: If we find dead things, leave them alone.

WRIGLEY: Good.

She lies out on the towel, on her stomach.

JACK and LUCKY look to one another, shrug.

JACK: You! You're the- the - bastard that murdered my identical twin brother!

WRIGLEY does not respond to the swear, they both relax.

LUCKY: It wasn't me! I swear! It was my identical twin brother!

JACK: What are the odds?

LUCKY: Not very good. It was me.

JACK: I knew it! Now you shall pay! In blood!

WRIGLEY does not look at them.

WRIGLEY: No blood.

JACK: In guts!

WRIGLEY: No guts.

JACK: In ... gummi worms?

WRIGLEY: Proceed.

LUCKY: En garde!

They resume their swordfighting. Parries and thrusts and clashing of blades. JACK shows LUCKY little improvements in his form, which LUCKY graciously adopts.

As they fight, WRIGLEY turns and watches them.

JACK: Ready?

LUCKY: Yes.

JACK: This is for you, brother!

He mock-stabs LUCKY.

LUCKY: You ... you .. Son of a seabiscuit.

The line catches both JACK and WRIGLEY, surprises them, charms them. Like they didn't know LUCKY was capable of it.

LUCKY: I was your brother, too!

He gasps and dies.

JACK: Noooo!

WRIGLEY: Lucky.

LUCKY: What?

WRIGLEY: Please run our garbage back to the beach house.

LUCKY: But I'm dead.

WRIGLEY: Lucky ...

LUCKY: I didn't swear.

WRIGLEY: I know. When you get back, you'll be able to go in the water.

LUCKY: OK!

Exit LUCKY.

They watch him go, then JACK plops down on the towel next to WRIGLEY.

WRIGLEY: You two looked like you were having fun.

She turns over, to sun her front.

WRIGLEY: Where did you learn to fight?

JACK: I was in a play last summer. Romeo and Juliet in Kindergarten.

WRIGLEY: Sounds off-off-Broadway.

JACK: Very. We had a swordfight.

WRIGLEY: You were Romeo.

JACK: Better! Mercutio. A chicken pox on both your houses!

WRIGLEY: Well, you looked ...

She trails off.

Just the roar of the beach.

JACK and WRIGLEY are comfortable in the moment. She basks in the feel of the sun.

She looks up and down the beach.

WRIGLEY: Jack.

JACK: What.

WRIGLEY: Can I ask you a question?

JACK: Sure.

WRIGLEY: ...

JACK: ...

WRIGLEY: Kissed a girl yet, Jack?

JACK: ... No.

WRIGLEY: Well, don't worry about it. It'll happen.

She rolls back over onto her stomach.

Without looking at him:

WRIGLEY: Would you like to?

She turns and looks at him.

Jack slowly, shyly, nods.

WRIGLEY: Hurry up, then. Before - before Lucky gets back.

Quickly, JACK bends down and brushes his lips against hers. Very fast. A step above a peck.

WRIGLEY: That was nice, Jack.

JACK: ...

Sound of the ocean.

WRIGLEY: Some people use their tongues.

Maybe JACK has heard of this. Maybe he's wondered how that works.

WRIGLEY: Jack ...

She reaches up, pulls his face down into hers.

They kiss.

The kiss continues. Both have their eyes shut.

LUCKY comes running back, about to jump out and make a loud entrance, but he stops and sees.

He might even grin for a moment, thinking they're teasing him.

But then he stops and really sees what he sees.

They don't notice him.

His heart breaks.

They don't notice anything.

LUCKY pauses, then slowly backs away, wanders off.

A moment, then he returns.

This time, he makes a lot of noise, trying to keep his voice as normal as possible.

LUCKY: Pirates off the north shore, captain!

JACK and WRIGLEY pull apart. Resume some semblance of normalcy.

JACK: Avast! They're after our gold!

LUCKY: We'll have to fight them all! Can we go into the water?

WRIGLEY: I said you could, didn't I?

LUCKY: Will you come with us?

WRIGLEY: I'll watch.

LUCKY: But ... There will be pirates.

JACK: Pirates.

WRIGLEY: OK. But you've got to promise me. Every last one of them walks the plank.

JACK: Deal.

WRIGLEY: Lucky?

Long pause.

LUCKY: Deal.

WRIGLEY: OK, then.

She leaps to her feet, ready to race.

WRIGLEY: Last one in the water carries all the stuff back. On three. Ready?

JACK and LUCKY prepare to race.

WRIGLEY takes off.

WRIGLEY: Onetwothree!

LUCKY: Hey!

JACK: No fair!

All race offstage, down to the water.

End of Play

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

In his New Play Exchange recommendation for the alternate version of TWO BOYS ON THE BEACH - entitled THREE BOYS ON THE BEACH, using an all-male cast - friend and fellow playwright Scott Sickles (PLAYING ON THE PERIPHERY: MONOLOGUES AND SCENES FOR AND ABOUT QUEER KIDS; THE SECOND WORLD TRILOGY; TARTARUS) writes "As the boys' parents, I'd be furious. But in this iteration ... I kind of wish I had been one of these boys and

am resigned that I'm the other." Which I think strikes at the heart of what I'm going for with Jack, Wrigley and Lucky. TWO BOYS ON THE BEACH is a coming of age story. It's about loss of innocence, in more ways than one. It's about how appealing that loss can be sometimes, and what you do next when you're the one who isn't chosen.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Matthew Weaver is a Spokane, WA playwright. His plays have been produced in 25 states, Canada, Ireland, Japan and England. Full-length plays include BED RIDE, GLUTTONY AND LUST ARE FRIENDS, ACES ARE FEVERISH, TIMMY'S BIG KISS, JESUS AT 10, THE BLUSHING GROOM, AWKWARD ROBOT'S INSTRUCTION MANUAL FOR DATING OTHER AWKWARD ROBOTS and SHAMROCK SHAKE JONES IN THE CASE OF THE BONUS FLOUR BABY. Shorter plays include A NEW PLAY BY MATTHEW WEAVER, ANOTHER PLAY BY MATTHEW WEAVER, 19 EXCELLENT REASONS TO DATE MATTHEW WEAVER and HELP! I'M TRAPPED IN A MONOLOGUE WRITTEN BY MATTHEW WEAVER!

<https://newplayexchange.org/users/9069/matthew-weaver>

You (U) *Lovely, Insatiable* ThinG

By Jen Diamond

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes... Much like its 13-year old stars (played by full-fledged adults), this play goes a lot deeper than might first meet the eye. You Lovely, Insatiable Thing by Jen Diamond is a strange and wonderful coming of age drama along the lines of a Blair Witch with Girl Scouts and a whiff of Clare Barron's Dance Nation. There's also like, a Bigfoot or something:*

EMILY

What was it?

KATIE

I don't know.
It looked a little like a person
when you saw it from afar, but not really.
Something was a little – off.

THE CREATURE is made of myth and metaphor, but its presence is palpable and real. In defining THE CREATURE without specific borders, the edges between the monster and humanity become blurred as well as the boundaries between the imagination and reality. And it becomes terrifying.

There is also a chilling casualness in the girls' banter as they talk about the missing members of their Girl Scout troop and their own chances of survival. But soon the cracks in their bravado start to reveal moments of authenticity and even heartbreak as they try to figure out the best course of action, whether to face uncertain doom – or run away from it. The play doesn't answer its hardest questions; rather it confronts the post-feminist adolescent angst within us all and asks to make the hard choices:

EMILY

We're girl scouts. Girl scouts thrive and survive in these kids of conditions.

(Spacing and format are playwright's own.)

Cast of Characters

KATIE

13 years old (played by an adult), female, at school she was quiet and a little wise beyond her years.

EMILY

13 years old (played by an adult), female, at school she was popular and outgoing. Think she's older than she is.

THE CREATURE

Like a human, but not quite. Any gender. Ancient.

Place

Deep in the woods.

Note

Katie and Emily should both be played by adult actors. Resist the urge to make the girls cartoonish.

It's nighttime. Dark – the moon is the only light. A long moment. The CREATURE walks across the stage. It walks like a human. It doesn't stop or do anything. Just walks.

It pauses for one moment in the middle of the stage. Stillness. Then moves along.

Later:

A campfire comes to life. KATIE sits at the fire. She is injured and in pain. Emily looks for firewood.

Did you hear that? KATIE

What? EMILY

Maybe we should get moving. KATIE

We need to rest. EMILY

I really think I heard something. Should we go check it out? KATIE

No. EMILY

I honestly don't know what I'd do if it turned out to be like a – KATIE

Could you move your foot? EMILY

*Emily puts a log of wood on the fire. She sits.
Beat.*

What if it's like watching us? KATIE

The moon is super bright. We would see if it was in the bushes. EMILY

What if it's really like good at camouflage? KATIE

Well, then there's nothing we can do, huh? EMILY

Katie thinks about this. Fire crackles.

Hey, Emily? KATIE

Yeah? EMILY

Do you like – feel traumatized? KATIE

Traumatized? EMILY

Yeah. KATIE

I don't know what 'traumatized' feels like. EMILY

Sure, but like – I like feel different you know? Right now. Versus before. KATIE

Me too. EMILY

Yeah? KATIE

I feel a little taller. EMILY

You know that's not what I mean. KATIE

My mom told me that like you're always growing. Every day. Until you get your period and then you like stop... Do you have your period already? EMILY

That's really personal. KATIE

Beat.

Yes. KATIE (con't)

Justin from my French class – Justin M. who is like older because he keeps re-doing seventh grade – anyway, he told me periods attract predators. EMILY

Why would you say that? KATIE

EMILY

I don't know – it's just like interesting. Jeez.

Fire crackles. Katie stands up.

KATIE

Um, could we like address the elephant in the room?

Katie stands.

EMILY

Okay. Go ahead.

They face off. A challenge.

KATIE

Okay. Um. I know that like, at school, we don't like hang out or whatever? And you don't talk to me because you're all popular and like kiss boys and I do like student government and sit by myself at lunch. But we have to like be a team out here. We have to survive.

EMILY

Did you really just like slut shame me right now?

KATIE

It doesn't matter! None of it matters, Emily.

Beat.

We are the only two left. Everyone else is gone. Probably dead.
Doesn't that like, make you want to cry?

EMILY

We're girl scouts. Girl scouts thrive and survive in these kids of conditions.

KATIE

Yeah, well, the rest of our troupe sure didn't.

EMILY

The rest of our troupe was a bunch of babies.

KATIE

They're gone now! Okay? Who cares if Melissa cried that one time in gym or that like Zoe super religious or anything else! We're being picked off one by one and that totally sucks.

EMILY

The others were lame and that thing knew it. So it stole them and didn't get us. Whatever.

KATIE

That doesn't make sense.

EMILY

Well, I don't know! I don't know why it didn't kill us. We aren't the fastest or the thinnest or the prettiest in Troupe 44. So, I don't know – okay?

KATIE

Okay.

EMILY

You're right. We are probably going to die out here. I have no idea where we are. And *it* probably does.

KATIE

I wonder how long it will take for our families to come looking for our bodies?

EMILY

I don't know. We're way off the beaten path.

KATIE

Yeah.

EMILY

What do you think they'll say at our funerals?

KATIE

Probably, like, they were so young and they were angels and why were they taken from us so soon.

EMILY

Probably. They always say stuff like that when little girls die.

KATIE

We're not little girls.

EMILY

Yes, we are. In the scheme of things? We like totally are.

KATIE

I was not an angel. I did some bad stuff in my life.

EMILY

I've never actually kissed a boy. Just so you like know.

KATIE

Oh.

Beat.

EMILY

What's it like to get your period?

That's personal!

KATIE

We're going to die here together.

EMILY

Beat.

It's sort of sticky.

KATIE

Oh. That makes sense.

EMILY

Do you want to tell a campfire story?

KATIE

Okay... I don't know any good ones.

EMILY

Fire crackles.

Me neither...

KATIE

Fire crackles.

Um, when we were at the river – and it took Hannah –

Hannah M. or Hannah C.?

EMILY

Hannah C. Hannah M. was taken near that ditch.

KATIE

Yeah.

EMILY

But, um, like when it came for Hannah C., I – I heard it speak.

KATIE

Really?

EMILY

Yeah. Like, when it lined us up, I was standing right next to her. Like *right* next to her – the way it shoved us together, I could hear her breathing. And remember how it came up really close, like, and leaned into her?

KATIE

EMILY

I thought it was smelling her.

KATIE

Yeah, no, it was saying something to her. Whispering.

EMILY

What did it say?

KATIE

I'm not totally sure – but it sounded like, “Later will be better.”

EMILY

What does that mean?

KATIE

I don't know. Maybe it was something else.

EMILY

Later will be better.

KATIE

Emily – what do you think it even is?

EMILY

I don't know. I guess some kind of animal – or mutated human. What do you think?

KATIE

My uncle used to tell me a story
about this ancient creature
that like
lived just on the outskirts of a town.
Just outside – like you could sometimes
catch a glimpse of it as you drove
by the woods on the edge of town,
or like if you woke in the middle of the night
and squinted out your bedroom window,
you might see it for just a second.

It was always nearby,
always just a little bit behind you.
Until it was your time.

It's very patient.

EMILY

What was it?

KATIE

I don't know.
It looked a little like a person
when you saw it from afar, but not really.
Something was a little – off.

But if *it* saw *you*, if it looked right at you,
it would
transform.
Into, like, the most beautiful thing
you had ever seen or
could like imagine.

EMILY

Oh.

KATIE

And it would talk to you –
like it knew you –
and knew like,
what you were afraid of
and what upset you

KATIE (con't)

and what worried you about the future.

And it would
tell you
what it knew
you needed to hear –
quietly, and with love –
so you would listen.

Because you couldn't help yourself.

EMILY

That doesn't sound so bad.

KATIE

Yes, but that's how it would draw you in.
You would end up seeking *it* out.
And when you found it,
you would lose track of where you were
or who you are.
And once that happened,
it would destroy you.

EMILY

Destroy you?

KATIE

Yes.

It would consume you –
you would become a part of it.
Disappear and join with all the others
it had ever taken before –
for generations and generations –
and together,
you would meld together
to become
this larger, stronger,
but insatiable thing
that knew all the secrets
of life and of strangers
and of happiness
and the intricacy of loneliness.
You would all become it
and it would become all of you.
And on it would go.

KATIE (con't)

Until everything and everyone had been
eaten up.

EMILY

I don't believe in monsters.

KATIE

But what if they believe in you?

Rustling. The girls jump to their feet.

Okay, I definitely heard something that time.

EMILY

Me too.

Emily looks at Katie. Emily walks offstage.

KATIE

Emily – !

*Katie looks towards where Emily exited. She looks around herself. She
grabs a stick and brandishes it.*

Emily reenters.

Did you see something?

Nothing – not really.

EMILY

What do you mean “not really”?

KATIE

I did see tracks.

EMILY

Like a bear?

KATIE

No. Not like a bear’s.

EMILY

The girls stare at each other.

I wish my mom was here. I am not big enough to handle any of this.

KATIE

I know. Me neither... Katie – I’m sorry I wasn’t nicer to you. I’m sorry I lied about kissing boys and for that one time I made fun of you in the bathroom at winter formal. I’m mean because because I’m just really freaked out all the time of, like, being a person.

EMILY

That’s okay. I get it.

KATIE

Yeah?

EMILY

Yeah.

KATIE

Okay, we need to keep moving.

EMILY

What does it matter? It keeps finding us. I wonder which one of us it will take next? I hope it’s me. I don’t want to stay out here by myself.

KATIE

You’ll be okay.

EMILY

They collect their bags. They prepare to leave.

I never even got my period. I never went to college or kissed a boy. I never read Shakespeare or saw an R rated movie. I never watched porn. I never grocery shopped by myself. I never got a job, or got fired, or said things like “just getting through hump day!” I never got to feel what it’s like to fly on a plane for the first time.

KATIE

It isn’t fair.

EMILY

I don’t want the story to stop here.

KATIE

I know.

EMILY

I want to know it ends happily.

KATIE

We have to leave.

EMILY

Okay.

*They take a deep breath. They are brave. They exit.
The fire is still crackling.
It crackles for a while – and then:*

*The thing from before enters, slowly. It stands onstage. It looks at us.
It knows us.*

*It looks off where Emily and Katie exited.
It points towards their direction.*

*It looks at the fire.
It takes a deep breath.
It blows the fire out.*

Blackout.

End of play.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *I love ghosts and ghost stories, even though I am scared extremely easily. I never went to a real sleepaway camp, so I’ve long fantasized about what it would be like to gather around a campfire with a group of girls I am simultaneously in love with and full of preteen rage and jealousy towards – all while having the shit scared out of us by a story about an old lady who appears in a haunted mansion.*

Did you ever notice how most ghost stories feel dated? Like they belong in the 1980s (landlines play a big role in scary stories) or a modern character only encounters a ghost because they wandered into a dilapidated carnival or ancient house. I think that we are due for a new crop of campfire stories – ones that involve problems and situations that are scary because they could happen today and because the fear they evoke is connected to something deeply human that transcends time. I want to write those kinds of stories – and I want to read them!

*To me, one of the most emotionally vulnerable, terrifying states I've ever experienced was being a preteen girl. Girlhood is very scary. People are staring at you for the first time, your body is changing and you're not really supposed to talk about it, and everyone becomes weirdly mean all at once (including you). It's like being possessed, but you also have a compulsion to look hot while doing it. *You Lovely, Insatiable Thing* is an attempt to transform the fear I felt as a pubescent girl into a story that could be told around the campfire by future girls as they roast marshmallows and wonder when they're going to kiss with tongue for the first time. I hope you enjoy it.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: JEN DIAMOND is a playwright, comedian, and performer based in Brooklyn. Her plays include a new, American myth (*HERE WE ARE* – Johns Hopkins University Theatre, Kennedy Center/Page-to-Stage, Interrobang Theatre); a dystopian romance about the ways the internet ruins our brains (*PORN: A LOVE STORY* – Cohesion Theatre, Inkubator New Works Development Laboratory); and a murder mystery about fuck boys (*THE ALIBI PLAY* – Baltimore Theatre Project, Maryland State Arts Council Creativity Grant recipient). Jen was a 2016/2017 Cohesion Theatre Company Playwrights Fellow and a Wright-Right-Now playwright at Baltimore Center Stage. Her short play, *THIS IS HOW GHOSTS SPEAK*, was a 2019 finalist for the City Theatre National Award for Short Playwriting and her screenplay, *PARALLAX*, was a second-place winner of the Stephen Dixon Award. Her work has been presented at the Woolly Mammoth Theatre, the Kennedy Center, Baltimore Center Stage, and other stages across the East Coast. Jen makes up one-half of the indie comedy duo *OLGA*, with whom performed in a bunch of cool places up-and-down the East Coast. Jen's writing has been published in *McSweeney's Internet Tendencies*, *J.Magazine*, the Boston Theater Marathon's Collection of Ten-minute Plays, and *Matchbook*. www.jen-diamond.com

SHAVE 000

By Joseph Vitale

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

Joseph Vitale's SHAVE swiftly moves the blade into high stakes territory and how. This is a gem for actors with conflicting objectives and an urgency that'll add to the knot in your neck. Directors will love the retro feel and the nuanced build. And you writers are going to appreciate a short play that's crafted with surgical skill (unless you're the jealous type and you really need to get a handle on that). Here we are social distancing (or just being anti-social), but this one gets right in our faces and nails us with all the intimacy of personal grooming with a stranger. It might make you think twice before you ask for that old-fashioned shave or bikini wax. Here's to a close shave and a close call (and watch out for those jealous types).

BART

Tsk, tsk.

ALMERS

What?

BART

More telltale signs. Feel that?

ALMERS

Yes, as a matter of fact.

BART

An unfinished area right above the sternal notch. See, unless you're shaved by a professional, you're not really shaved. Come on, let me give you one. It'll be the best shave of your life. You won't forget it, I promise.

(Spacing and format is playwright's own.)

Time: The present.

Setting: A small barber shop in an out-of-the-way side street in the financial district of New York

Synopsis

In tiny, out-of-the-way barber shop on a side street in New York's financial district, a barber prepares to give a Wall Street banker a shave. The two men could not be more different – one is a “Master of the Universe,” well-quaffed, smartly attired man in his bespoke suit and Italian shoes. The other is a nervous, paranoid little barber, down on his luck and with a sneaking suspicion that his young, sexy wife may be cheating on him. Are the barber's fears unfounded? Or are there things we don't know about his client and his wife? One thing is sure, by the end of the play, one of them will get more than a close shave.

(In the darkness, the sounds of Figaro's aria, “Largo al factotum,” from The Barber of Seville. As lights come up, music fades. ALMERS is sitting in the chair. He wears an expensive tie and shirt with cufflinks. He has taken off his suit jacket, which hangs behind him on a coat tree, and loosened his collar. As the lights come up, BART unfurls the barber's cape with a flourish. He places the cape around ALMERS's shoulders, then fastens it snugly behind him. In addition to the chair and coat tree, there is a small work table containing a basin, and the various accoutrements of the barber – scissors, combs, hair dryer, lotions, after shaves, powders, etc.)

BART

So, what'll it be today?

ALMERS

(Reacting to the cape around his neck) A little tight, don't you think?

BART

(Adjusting it) Oh, sorry.

ALMERS
Just a trim. I'm in a hurry

BART
I see. How about a shave?

ALMERS
No thanks.

BART
Really?

ALMERS
Yes.

BART
You need one. *(Running a finger around ALMERS's face.)*

ALMERS
Don't think so. I shaved this morning.

BART
Oh, you see, that's where most men are wrong. They think they've given themselves a good shave but they haven't done it properly. You use an electric razor don't you?

ALMERS
Yes.

BART
Rotary. Aluminum housing. Five-year-old blades.

ALMERS
How do you know that?

BART
I can tell.

ALMERS
You can?

BART
Oh, yes. You have all the telltale signs.

ALMERS
I do?

BART
Of course.

ALMERS
And what are the telltale signs?

BART
Well, for one thing, stubble residue. Here, on the philtrum.

ALMERS
The what?

BART
The philtrum, the flat part of your upper lip right below the nose.

ALMERS
The philtrum?

BART
That's right. Do you know some people believe the philtrum is a mark left by an angel?

ALMERS
Really?

BART
Yeah, they believe the angel touches a newborn baby right there and the baby forgets everything he knew as a soul. It's only a myth, though, so I wouldn't worry about it.

ALMERS
I won't.

BART
Know how I learned that? From one of my customers. It's amazing the things you learn from people sitting in that chair.

(BART runs a finger along the ALMERS's throat, just above the collar.)

BART
Tsk, tsk.

ALMERS
What?

BART
More telltale signs. Feel that?

ALMERS
Yes, as a matter of fact.

BART

An unfinished area right above the sternal notch. See, unless you're shaved by a professional, you're not really shaved. Come on, let me give you one. It'll be the best shave of your life. You won't forget it, I promise.

ALMERS

I don't have a lot of time.

BART

Of course, busy man like you. I'll be quick.

(BART goes to his table and shows ALMERS his straight razor.)

BART

Fastest blade in the West. You'll be finished before you know what hit you.

ALMERS

Well, OK.

(BART begins preparing his lather in a shaving cup.)

BART

Yeah, a man like you should always look his best. Good looking guy, beautiful suit. Beautiful shoes. What kind of shoes are they anyway?

ALMERS

Testoni's.

BART

Testoni's. Italian, right?

ALMERS

Yes.

BART

Beautiful. I can almost see my face in them.

(Lather prepared, BART begins to strop the razor.)

BART

Hey, you look familiar. Haven't I seen you somewhere before?

ALMERS

I doubt it.

BART

That's funny. I swear I've seen you before.

ALMERS

I don't think so.

BART

So, what's your name?

ALMERS

Almers.

BART

What?

ALMERS

Almers.

BART

Oh. Is that your first name?

ALMERS

No.

BART

Of course not. I mean, how could it be? How could that be somebody's first name?
Almers. I mean, who would give somebody a name like that? My name's Bart, by the way. First name. Actually it's Bartolo, but who wants to pronounce that?

ALMERS

Bartolo?

BART

Yeah. Hey, don't look at me. It was my father's idea. He named me after that character in the *Barber of Seville*. He liked opera.

ALMERS

Isn't that Figaro?

BART

You're right. Hey, you know your opera Mr. Almerson. No, Figaro's the hero. My father didn't name me after the hero, though. He named me after the villain. See, that says a lot about my father doesn't it? I mean, what kind of man would name his son after the villain, right?

ALMERS

I wouldn't know.

BART

Of course you wouldn't. Do you like opera Mr. Almerson?

ALMERS

Not really.

BART

I guess you wouldn't. Probably too busy for that kind of thing, right?

ALMERS

That's right.

BART

It's funny about names. You give a kid his destiny by the name you give him, right? I mean, depending on the name you give him, he's either gonna be one of the guys or have the crap beat out of him in the schoolyard.

ALMERS

I suppose so.

BART

You give him a name he's going to mumble under his breath when he's introduced to somebody or say right out loud, right? But parents don't think about things like that, do they? They never really think about the kid. They only think about themselves and the names *they* like, right?

ALMERS

If you say so.

BART

Anyway, some things you can't control. You gotta make the best of a bad situation, right? That's what my wife always says. *You gotta make the best.* Hey, she works where you do, Mr. Almers.

ALMERS

Where I do?

BART

Well, maybe not for your company. Where do you work?

ALMERS

Kimmelblatt Gardner

BART

No. That's not the one. But that's down on Wall Street, right?

ALMERS

Right.

BART

No. It's another company. It's only initials though. DDB and B...BBD and D. Something like that. Anyway, it's got a lot of D's and B's in it. Does that ring a bell?

ALMERS

No.

BART

All those names sound the same, don't they? I mean, they all do the same thing. Those firms. Stocks, bonds, stuff like that. She's a secretary.

ALMERS

Who?

BART

My wife. That's what she does. A secretary. She's not a stock broker. No, *she* wouldn't be a stock broker! She just sits around looking pretty all day, know what I mean? She's been there for a while. She makes good money, too. Better than me. I mean, who doesn't? A barber doesn't

BART (Cont.)

make much, you know? But sometimes I think she only got the job just because of the way she looks.

ALMERS

The way she looks?

BART

Yeah. She's good looking, you know what I mean?

ALMERS

Not really.

BART

Of course, you wouldn't. I mean, how would you know what she looks like, right? Yeah, she's a pretty good looking girl. Nice figure, know what I mean? She's...well, she's the kind of girl a man would notice right away. She's...how would you say? Built. You know what I mean? She's got a great body and she looks pretty sexy when she's all dressed up for work. You know, the nice dress, a little tight here and there. The neckline's a little too low sometimes. Yeah, we fight about that. High heels. And she's got this great little walk. Especially in the high heels. You know, she kind of swings her hips when she walks. Know what I mean?

ALMERS

How would I know? I've never seen your wife.

BART

Of course. How could you know? You've never seen her. *(Pause)* But, then again, maybe you have.

ALMERS

What does that mean?

BART

Well, I was just thinking. Maybe you've seen her down there on "the Street." That's what they call it, right? Where all you guys work. All those investment firms. All the stocks and bonds. "The Street," right?

ALMERS

Yes.

BART

Yeah, I wonder if you might have seen her.

ALMERS

I doubt that.

BART

Like in the afternoon, when you're running out to lunch with a client at one of those fancy restaurants. Maybe you've seen her at lunch time in that tight dress and the stiletto heels. Cute little brunette?

ALMERS

There are thousands of people on the street at lunch time.

BART

Of course, of course. But you wouldn't forget *her*, believe me. You'd notice. *(Pause)* Or maybe you've seen her when you go out for a smoke in the afternoon.

ALMERS

I don't smoke.

BART

Of course, you don't. A man like you wouldn't smoke. You're too healthy. You look like you work out a lot. Do you work out?

ALMERS

Yes.

BART

You probably belong to some private athletic club somewhere? Oh, what's the name of that....The New York Athletic Club, right? That's the name. You probably belong to the New York Athletic Club.

ALMERS

As a matter of fact, I do.

BART

Of course. I could tell. You look, great, Mr. Almers. You have a great...physique, is that

what it's called? A great physique and Testoni shoes. You're the kind of guy who's probably never had a problem with women.

ALMERS
Problem?

BART
Not a *problem*. I don't mean a "problem". I mean, picking up women? Getting women?

ALMERS
I'm married.

BART
Are you? Now that's funny. There's no ring on your finger. Most married guys wear wedding rings, right? See, I have one.

ALMERS
I must have forgotten it this morning.

BART
Of course. (*Laughs*) "I must have forgotten it this morning." That's a good one! Hey, it's easy to forget a ring, right? Busy man like you. All those stocks and bonds to trade. All those clients giving you a hard time. And all those other things you must have on your mind.

ALMERS
That's right. Can we change the subject? Do you like sports?

BART
No. (*Pause*) It's funny. I used to know this guy. We used to go out for drinks once and a while after work. And do you know what he used to do? He'd take his ring off whenever we went into a bar. He was married but he used to take his wedding ring off and put it into his pocket in case he met a girl at the bar. You know what I mean? He was a good looking guy like you and he never had trouble picking up girls in a bar.

ALMERS
He was married?

BART
Yeah, but that never made any difference, you know. That wedding ring would be safely in his pocket and as far as the girls knew, he was single. So, he'd just pick up a girl and she'd always have an apartment in the city so they could slip away for a couple of hours.

ALMERS
Really?

BART
Yeah. Of course, it would have been easier if he had his own little place in the city. Know what I mean? A *pied-à-terre*, is that what it's called?

ALMERS
I'm not sure.

BART
Yeah. *Pied-a-terre*. Know where I learned that word? From someone sitting in that chair. Yeah, just his own little place that nobody knew about. So if he met a girl, he could just...

ALMERS
Slip away?

BART
Right.

ALMERS
Didn't his wife suspect?

BART
Who?

ALMERS
Your friend. In the bar.

BART

I don't know. I guess not. He worked in the city and sometimes he had to work "late." You know what I mean? I guess his wife believed him. She must have been the trusting type. She must have just thought, hey, my husband has to work late again, the poor bastard. He's working late at the office just to put food on the table.

ALMERS
I see.

BART
Yeah, once they trust you, you can get away with anything. See, trust is the key. Here's my friend's wife waiting for him at home, worried about him working late and all. And here he is with his wedding ring in his pocket laying a lot of linoleum in his *pied-a-terre*, you know what I mean? Anyway, my wife, Susanna...

(ALMERS twitches in his seat.)

BART

Hey, Mr. Almers, you shouldn't do that. I cut you a little bit.

(BART dabs his face with the tip of his towel then places the tip against the cut, holding it there.)

BART

You have to stay nice and still when you're being shaved. This razor can do a lot of damage. It's as sharp as a ...razor! That's funny, huh? They say everything is as sharp as a razor, right? "This knife is as sharp as a razor...the pleats in his pants were as sharp as a razor...he's smart; he's as sharp as a razor." But this really *is* a razor. And these razors today are really sharp. They're not like the old razors. High-carbon steel. Very strong. I can perform surgery with this. I could probably cut out somebody's heart and he wouldn't even feel it.

ALMERS

How much longer is this going to be?

BART

Oh, not long. Anyway, we were talking about my wife, Susanna. Remember?

ALMERS

Yes.

BART

She's got to work late once in a while too. Yeah, they really keep her busy down there on the Street. A lot of times she'll call and say, "Won't be home for dinner tonight. Got to work late again. Don't wait up." Yeah, you guys really work her hard.

ALMERS

No I don't.

BART

What? No. Of course *you* don't. Why would *you*? You don't even know her.

ALMERS

That's right.

BART

Of course. (*Pause*) Although, like I said, you could have met her. Especially if she didn't use her real name?

ALMERS

Why wouldn't she use her real name?

BART

I don't know. You'd have to ask her.

ALMERS

How could I, I don't even...

BART

You know, it wouldn't surprise me if you had run in to her. I know she likes to have a drink now and then after work with her friends. There's nothing wrong with that. Going out after work for a drink? There's nothing wrong with that, is there?

ALMERS

Of course not.

BART

Yeah, there's nothing wrong with going out with your friends to one of those nice bars where all the brokers and the bankers hang out. Not a joint, you know? Not a place where I would go. Not one of those places. But a place where you can sip wine and talk to Wall Street guys in nice suits. So, maybe you went out for a drink with your friends one night and you noticed a bunch of good looking girls down at the other end of the bar. And maybe one of the girls caught your eye. The one in the tight dress and the stiletto heels.

ALMERS

No, I don't think so. Look, I really need to...

(ALMERS tries to get up but feels the razor against his throat.)

BART

Careful, Mr. Almers. Remember what I told you about sudden movements. I mean, your carotid artery is right here. My god, if that got cut the blood would probably hit that wall over there. That's a good 10 feet. See, people think it's the jugular vein that sprays but it's really the carotid. There's more pressure in there. Yeah, you'd bleed out in less than a minute if that got severed. I mean, you could try running somewhere but you wouldn't make it to the end of the block.

(ALMERS tries to get up again. BART grabs his hair and holds his head back, razor to his throat.)

BART

Don't move. This is the most important part of the shave. Like I said, maybe one of the girls catches your eye and later, her friends leave but she stays at the bar. That's a sign, right? She's sending you a signal. And then your friends get ready to leave but you tell them you're staying for one last drink. And then, it's just you and her.

ALMERS

Please.

BART

Almost done. So you decide, what the hell? You're a good looking guy in a beautiful suit

and a big pair of Testoni's. Who wouldn't want a man like you? You could offer a girl a lot, right? A lot more than she's got. And maybe, just maybe, if you're lucky, you and she could just...slip away.

ALMERS

I didn't do anything. I swear. It wasn't me.

BART

You didn't do anything? *(Suddenly becomes lost in thought)* Of course you didn't. I mean, what could you have done?

(BART loosens his grip on ALMERS but still keeps the blade of the razor at his throat.)

BART

It wasn't you? *(Scrutinizing ALMERS)*. No, it couldn't have been. Not you. You see, when it comes to taking that final step, some men can do it and some men can't. Some men just can't do what their supposed to do. Don't you just hate that, Mr. Almers? Not being able to do what you're supposed to do.

(BART steps away from the chair and looks out into space,
deep in reverie.)

BART

Where does that come from anyway? Not being able to do what you want to do. Does that just get beaten into you over time, or is it something you're born with, like your name? Anyway, some things you can't control. You gotta make the best of a bad situation, right, Mr. Almers?

(ALMERS bolts from the chair and runs out the door with the barber's cape still around his neck.)

BART

Mr. Almers!

(BART grabs ALMERS's jacket from the coat tree and runs after him. He exits the shop a few feet and is seen looking up the street.)

BART

Hey, Mr. Almers, you forgot your...

(BART shrugs, returns to the shop. He walks toward the coat tree but instead of hanging ALMERS' jacket back up he flings it across the room into a corner. He then begins tidying up. He sweeps the floor and begins cleaning his utensils. A MAN enters)

MAN
Hey, are you open?

BART
Yes.

MAN
Can I get a haircut quick?

BART
Of course, of course. Come right this way.

(MAN begins to take his suit jacket off. BART helps him off with the jacket, which he carefully hangs on the coat tree. BART then ceremoniously ushers man into the chair.)

BART
Right over here, sir.

(BART unfurls barber's cape with a flourish, places it around the MAN, and fastens the cape behind his neck.)

BART
So, what'll it be?

MAN
Just a little off the top I think.

BART
Really?

(BART runs a finger across the man's cheek and chin.)

BART
Hey, how about a shave?

MAN
No. Don't have the time.

BART
It would be on me. My pleasure.

MAN
You mean it?

BART

Sure.

MAN

Well, in that case, why not? But it's got to be fast. I don't have a lot of time.

BART

I figured that. Busy man like you.

(BART raises the leather strop from the side of the chair and begins stropping his razor.)

Hey, you look familiar. Haven't I seen you somewhere before?

(As BART continues to sharpen the blade, lights fade to black. End of play.)

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *In one sense, "Shave" can be seen as a classic struggle between a have and a have-not. A Wall Street "master of the universe" against a down-on-his luck barber. But in this case the power alignment is ultimately reversed, with delicious consequences. The barber winds up getting the upper hand and in that hand is a sharpened razor. At the same time, I wanted to blend in the subtext of "The Marriage of Figaro," perhaps the greatest of all tales involving a barber. As in "Shave," Figaro gets the better of a powerful man. I love plays that seem to be about one thing, but point larger themes. My playwrighting heroes are Pinter, Mamet, Stoppard, Shaffer and James Goldman, whose *The Lion in Winter* I would have given my eye teeth and several molars to have written.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Joseph Vitale, a finalist for the 2020 Woodward-Newman drama prize and a semi-finalist for the 2012 Eugene O'Neill Theater/National Playwrights Conference, is the author of a number of plays, including *Dragons in the Crease*, which was performed at New York's Hudson Guild Theater in 2019. *Murrow*, a one-man show about the life of Edward R. Murrow (called "a dramatic masterpiece" by the *Huffington Post*), was performed Off-Off Broadway in May 2016 at The Phoenix Theatre Ensemble. *Back Channel* premiered at The Theater Project in New Jersey in 2018. *The Fourth State of Matter* was performed in 2011 at the Theater for the New City in New York and was later nominated for the National Playwrights Conference. His one-acts have been produced at the Hudson Guild, Barrow Group and Manhattan Repertory theaters in New York and at theaters around the country. His one-act, *The Monster Under the Bed*, was voted "Best Play" at both the 2018 St. Paul (IN) Theater Festival and the 2019 One-Act Jamboree at the Rhino Theater, Pompton Lakes, NJ. He is a graduate of Rutgers, Columbia and the New School for Social Research and studied playwriting at the HB Studio in New York. He is a member of the Dramatists Guild of America and the Theater Project Playwrights Workshop. Visit: www.josephvitale.net

THE . . . STANDARD . . . PURIFICATION

By Katie...Doyle

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

In The Standard Purification, Katie Doyle has written an unusual performance piece that is at once as abstracted and realistic as its setting:

Somewhere in America.

The piece unfolds without dialogue as a series of actions in real time with the two characters in the play, MAN and WOMAN, interacting not with each other, but with the American flag as a third character. The flag provides the counterpoint for this experimental play symbolizing a country conflicted in its definition of patriotism. At only three pages, the play is a veritable theatrical Zip file that opens up into an expansive pantomime. It's a vignette with startling simplicity, but that doesn't diminish the size or scope of the presentation.

[Note: The flag used in this play should be as big as can possibly be accommodated by the pole and stage in which this plays.]

The Standard Purification offers no explanations or conclusions. Rather, it allows us to explore a cultural divide silently, even subconsciously, within the embodiment of the characters, their breaths, and their gestures. For those who have tuned into the American election cycle from the world stage, this piece is timely indeed. And for anyone who hasn't (you lucky devil!), it might be worth lifting your rock to take a peek. (Spacing and format is author's own.)

THE STANDARD PURIFICATION

by

Katie Doyle

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THE STANDARD PURIFICATION

Cast of Characters

Man : Caucasian. Well dressed. Content. An all-around American gentleman. Under his jacket, he carries a concealed weapon, which we see.

Woman: An immigrant African or Latin woman. Possibly Native American. She is comfortably and neatly well-dressed for work in a factory or housekeeping, wearing an apron. She works with precision, compassion. Above all, she does her job very well.

Note: Man and Woman, however cast older/younger, should be of about the same age.

SETTING: Somewhere in America. Any clear blue-sky day. A flag staff, with halyard/hoist rope.

[*Note: The flag used in this play should be as big as can possibly be accommodated by the pole and stage in which this plays.*]

SOUND: A light breeze blows throughout the work.

AT THE TOP: For a few seconds, we hear, almost feel, the breeze blowing and a bird chirping.

(LIGHTS RISE.)

(BEAT.)

MAN

(MAN enters the stage casually holding, with both hands, a carefully correctly folded American flag. He stops for a moment and feels the breeze, then looks the flag staff over. Satisfied, putting the flag under his arm, he walks to the pole. When he reaches the staff, he takes the halyard/rope and opens up the carabineer to hold the top of the flag, attaching the entire flag by its grommets as he moves along the band. He raises the flag, full staff, ties it off, steps back AND looks up at it. Without

thinking, he wipes his hands against each other, as satisfied, he gives a slight smile and turns exiting the stage.)

(BEAT.)

(Breeze blows.)

WOMAN

(WOMAN enters the stage focused on doing her work. She has a large laundry 'drying tree', which she plants on the stage. WOMAN exits stage and quickly returns with 2 weights to support the bottom of the drying rack.

She exits again and this time returns with a wash basin filled with water which she plants near the drying tree.

WOMAN carefully, and thoroughly, wipes her hands off on her apron. She says a short mantra (or prayer) to herself which we don't really hear.

WOMAN then crosses to the flag pole. She unties the halyard and lowers the flag, gathering it in a bundle in her arms. She does this carefully, so that the flag does not touch the ground. WOMAN is respectful with the flag. With the bundle secured in one arm, she reties the halyard, almost as a sacred thing - gathers the bundle securely in both arms.

WOMAN crosses to the washbasin and proceeds the process of washing the flag.

She washes thoroughly, adeptly. She has done this many times before.

She washes it, and washes it, and washes it, until it is utterly and completely clean. . . to her satisfaction.

When the flag is washed, she rings the flag out. Wringing and wringing... Once this is completed, she again bundles the flag in her arms and crosses to the drying tree. Here she lays the flag out to dry, draping it as best she can on the large tree, laying it out as far open as possible. Steeping underneath it, getting dripped on.

When she is finished with this, she steps back, wiping her hands again. Then she reaches out and puts one hand on the flag for a moment, just talking it all in.

WOMAN slowly pulls her hand off the flag, and crosses to her wash basin which she picks up and then moves towards her exit.

Before she exits, she stops. It has been a long day already. We see her roll her shoulders and let out an almost inaudible sign. Woman carries on and exits the stage, as...

(LIGHTS FADE TO BLACK.)

#

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

This play was originally written in early 2018 as a response to mounting national stories regarding the continued emotional and sexual abuse of women. Especially women of color. When I discovered poetry and playwriting during my early high school years, writing became a necessary part of my life. Now, as a woman-of-an-age, I find there is still much for me to write about and to learn. In this winter season, with the COVID pandemic, though my body is pulled down towards the hard earth, I try to stand upright amongst the trees, eyes on the blue sky. Take in a deep breath. Listen. There are so many stories that must be shared.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Katie grew up a DoD kid, whose career-military dad, and mom, were born in the Midwest. She calls Michigan home because home is where your parents keep all your childhood artwork and writing in little boxes. All over the house. As a grown-up, some working moments Katie truly enjoyed include: several years as assistant to the director of Playwrights Horizons Theatre School in NYC; Properties Designer with the Peterborough Players in New Hampshire; Associate Director of BoarsHead Theatre and Stormfield Theatre in Michigan, where she also worked as Stage Manager and an AEA actor. She worked for over a decade as a planning organizer and coordinator for the Renegade Theater Festival in Lansing, Michigan, and a playwright with *Renegade N.O.W.*, the new original works portion of this Festival. After her move to Oregon in June 2018 to care for an extended family member with ALS, Katie was honored to be involved with 'The Art of Aging' in Portland's 2019 Fertile Ground Festival - which featured a portion of her writing - as well as performing original spoken word stories at the Clinton Theater and in the community. She currently reads original work with Prop Thtr's WRITERS ALOUD (Chicago) and listens to others who do the same. Katie continues to write, challenging herself to come up with some answers to daily questions that flummox her.

H E A V Y H E A R T 000

By Hannah C. Langley, Angela Parrish and Makena Metz

WHY I LIKE IT: Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...

Fabulous! Unusual! Sexy and delicious! Heavy Heart, is a seamless screenplay that follows the curvaceous Ida B. Delight, from the limelight of the Burlesque stage into a perilous crisis of identity. In the character of Ida, we have a tragic beauty who draws us into her world from the nightclub to offstage and back again. At the heart of the story is Ida's relationship with Callie, determined to keep Ida from self-destructing, but Ida's relationship to food and her body are driving forces, propelled by original songs that get into our heads, even without the score. The writing team on this mini musical extravaganza, Angela Parrish, Makena Metz, and Hannah C. Langley, are all rockstars in their own right, but put them together and they're unstoppable.

And now for a sample of a song from our lovely Ida (bet you can't stop at just one):

IDA (CONT'D)

I'M SWEET, I'M SOFT
I'M FRESH OUT OF THE OVEN
I'M HERE, I'M HOT
I'M READY FOR YOUR LOVIN'
WANT SOME NOOKIE WITH YOUR COOKIE? LET ME
TREAT YOU RIGHT
I'LL BE YOUR EVENING DELIGHT
ALRIGHT

(Spacing and format is authors' own.)

H E A V Y H E A R T

Music and Lyrics by Angela Parrish and
Makena Metz

Book by Hannah C. Langley

INT. BACKSTAGE - BURLESQUE CLUB - EVENING

(1. MAGIC SHOW.)

The sound of a HEART BEATING loudly over APPLAUSE.

CLOSE ON: IDA'S FACE

IDA (late 20's, curvy) stands on the edge of the stage, hand over her heart.

APPLAUSE.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)

... Ladies and Gentlemen. It's almost the witching hour and you know what that means - Megan Trick is here to make your weekday troubles disappear!

INT. ONSTAGE - BURLESQUE CLUB - EVENING

MEGAN TRICK (20's, thin), in a sexy magician's outfit, poses in the spotlight.

MEGAN

WELCOME, WELCOME TO THE MAGIC SHOW I'LL TURN SOME TRICKS, YOU'LL GET YOUR FIX COME ON LET'S GO

GET READY FOR SURPRISE YOU WON'T BELIEVE YOUR EYES
WELCOME TO THE MAGIC SHOW

Megan reaches into her hat and pulls a strand of MULTI-COLORED CONDOMS out of it, tossing them into the audience.

MEGAN (CONT'D) WELCOME, WELCOME TO THE MAGIC SHOW

I'LL MISDIRECT ATTENTION NOW FROM HIGH TO LOW
THEY CALL ME MEGAN TRICK, I MAKE MAGIC WITH A STICK
WELCOME TO THE MAGIC SHOW

Megan pulls out a DECK OF CARDS.

MEGAN (V.O.)

Hey you. There in front ... I've got a loaded *deck* just for you.

Megan suggestively sprays the crowd with cards.

INT. BACKSTAGE - BURLESQUE CLUB - EVENING

(TRANSITION.)

IDA

CALM, CALM, PEACEFUL, CALM, CALM, CALM PEACEFUL
THINK OF CALLIE AND BE CALM, CALM CALM, CALM, PEACEFUL,
CALM, CALM, CALM PEACEFUL THINK OF CALLIE AT THE SEASHORE,
SEASHORE

Ida takes a deep breath.

IDA (CONT'D)

You're on the beach with Callie. You're Ida B.
Delight and you are fine.

INT. ONSTAGE - BURLESQUE CLUB - EVENING

MEGAN WELCOME TO THE MAGIC SHOW
RING MY BELL, I'LL CAST A SPELL TO MAKE YOU GROW
I'LL WHISPER IN YOUR EAR, THEN I'LL DISAPPEAR
WELCOME TO THE MAGIC SHOW

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

Give it up one more time for Miss Megan
Trick, everybody!

APPLAUSE.

Megan Trick bows and quickly scampers off-stage, passing...

INT. BACKSTAGE - BURLESQUE CLUB - EVENING

... Ida, psyching herself up just beyond the curtain.

IDA

(to herself) You are on the beach.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)
And now the moment you've all been waiting for
...

IDA
(to herself) With Callie.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)
The captivating. The incomparable ...

Ida turns to check her reflection in the mirror, revealing her skin-tight evening gown and a feather boa.

IDA
You are ...

ANNOUNCER (O.S.) Miss ... Ida IDA (CONT'D)
... B ... Miss ... Ida ... B ... *

Delight. Delight.

IDA (CONT'D)
And you are *fine*.

Ida's heart beat QUIETS as she straightens her back...

(2. EVENING DELIGHT.)

...puffs out her ample chest and struts into the BRIGHT LIGHTS onstage.

INT. ONSTAGE - BURLESQUE CLUB - NIGHT

The unseen crowd goes wild. Ida SMILES broadly, nerves gone.

IDA (CONT'D)
Hello, Los Angeles! Are you ready for this?

An affirmative ROAR from the crowd. But Ida simply shakes her head, waving her boa, dismissing them.

IDA (CONT'D)
I don't think you're ready.

Ida starts to exit the stage. The CROWD erupts in protest and Ida smiles, before re-entering the stage.

IDA (CONT'D)
Now that's more like it! Hit it, Simon.

(Musical Transition.)

IDA (CONT'D) I'M SWEET, I'M SOFT
 I'M FRESH OUT OF THE OVEN I'M HERE, I'M
 HOT
 I'M READY FOR YOUR LOVIN'
 WANT SOME NOOKIE WITH YOUR COOKIE? LET ME TREAT YOU RIGHT
 I'LL BE YOUR EVENING DELIGHT ALRIGHT

Ida sees Callie (20's, naturally slim) in the audience. Her smile grows.

IDA (CONT'D)
 Now, I know what you're thinking ... Miss Ida B., is all this goodness gluten-free? And to that I say, that's the only thing free about me, baby!

Ida strips off a glove ... or two.

IDA (CONT'D) I'M SWEET, I'M SOUR
 I'M READY FOR A LICKIN' I'M ROUND,
 I'M REAL
 AND YOU CAN PUT THE STICK IN
 WANT SOME PUCKER WITH YOUR SUCKER? LET ME TREAT YOU RIGHT
 I'LL BE YOUR EVENING DELIGHT ALRIGHT

Ida pulls off her skirt and finds a legal pad between her thighs. She reads off of it.

IDA (CONT'D)
 A quick public service announcement before the next verse, "the Club and Miss Ida B. are not responsible for any cavities that may result from ... (tossing the legal pad and another item of clothing aside.) ... all. This. SWEETNESS!

LOUD CHEERS from Callie as ...

IDA (CONT'D)
 ARE YOU READY TO SAVOR A FLAVOR I PROMISE WILL BLOW YOUR MIND?
 (MORE)

IDA (CONT'D)
 COME IN FOR THE NIGHT AND I'LL SHOW YOU A SNACK
 I EARNED MY DIPLOMAS IN SUGAR CANE COMAS, AND SOON YOU'LL
 FIND
 I'M THE ONLY SNACK THAT EATS YOU BACK

Ida throws off more layers.

IDA (CONT'D) I'LL LET YOU WHIP THE FROSTING
 I'LL LET YOU LICK THE BEATER BE BOLD, BE BAD
 COME BE A DIET CHEATER I'M SO GOOD IT
 HURTS GET YOUR JUST DESSERTS LET ME
 TREAT YOU RIGHT
 I'LL BE YOUR EVENING DELIGHT COME TAKE A
 BITE
 I'LL BE YOUR EVENING DELIGHT TASTE ME
 TONIGHT
 I'LL BE YOUR EVENING DELIGHT ALRIGHT

CLOSE ON: IDA'S FACE

MORE APPLAUSE.

(MUSIC HEART SKIPPING CUE.)

CLOSE ON: CALLIE'S FACE

As she cheers ...

CLOSE ON: IDA'S FACE

Ida's HEART starts to POUND, hard and FAST again.

The STRAIN on Ida's perfectly made-up face is only seen by Callie.

As the POUNDING of Ida's heart drowns out her APPLAUSE, Callie's smile transforms into a mask of concern.

The spotlight goes out on Ida and the stage as the POUNDING continues over ...

INT. IDA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT - LATER

IDA'S HAND clutches her now-robed chest. She sits in front of her VANITY TABLE MIRROR, where several PHOTOS of Callie and Ida (in full make up) on the beach - holding hands, sharing a kiss - sit. Ida takes a deep BREATH.

IDA
(to herself) Calm. Seashore.

IN THE MIRROR, we see Callie watching Ida struggle before slipping into her pajamas.

The POUNDING subsides. Ida opens her eyes and resumes removing her makeup. Ida GRIMACES at the skin underneath.

CALLIE
They were begging for an encore tonight.

IDA
... It was a good crowd.

CALLIE
It wasn't just the crowd. YOU were good. Great!

IDA
Thanks but there's always room for improvement.

Callie SIGHS, changing tactics.

CALLIE
Well, I'm starving. How 'bout you?

Ida continues her work as Callie makes her way past ...

... the closet, overflowing with BURLESQUE COSTUMES, the sewing table, and the dress form with a half-finished, sparkl-y outfit pinned to it toward ...

THE TINY KITCHEN AREA.

CALLIE (CONT'D)
Babe? You still with me?

IDA
Huh?

CALLIE
We're talking dinner.

Ida looks at her bare face in the mirror. She pats her clean cheeks.

(3. Take Care of You)

CALLIE (CONT'D)
(opening a cabinet) Looks like it's either-

IDA
I'm not really that hungry/right now-

Ida moves toward her sewing table.

CALLIE
/Right now! You're gonna eat. With me.

NO MORE EXCUSES
NO NEED TO GET DEFENSIVE WE'RE COOKING
DINNER
I'LL MAKE THESE FROZEN PEAS

HERE DRINK THIS WATER
(filling a GLASS OF WATER) RIGHT NOW IN FRONT
OF ME
WE'RE COOKING DINNER
DON'T GIVE ME THE BRUSH, PLEASE. LET ME TAKE
CARE OF YOU

Callie sets the water in front of Ida at the sewing table. Ida moves it to the counter, away from her sequins.

IDA
Callie, please. I need to get this dress ready for Viva Las Vegas.

I'M GONNA TAKE IT
I HAVE A CHANCE TO WIN IT MY ACT IS
SOLID
I DESERVE TO TAKE THAT STAGE

CALLIE
Of course you do. But that doesn't mean you can't rest tonight.

CALLIE (CONT'D) YOU'RE HOT AND TIRED
THE PERFORMANCE IS OVER NOW WE'RE COOKING
DINNER

IDA
I can rest when I'm dead.

CALLIE
Ida. Don't even joke - LET'S GET ON THE
SAME PAGE LET ME TAKE CARE OF YOU

Callie slides the glass of water back into Ida's hands.

CALLIE (CONT'D)
Please.

IDA

Fine, *Mom*.

Callie kisses Ida passionately. Ida is left breathless but in the good way.

CALLIE

Cut the kinky Oedipal shit and do what you're told.

Ida takes a long drink, longer than anticipated. She grabs Callie's hand.

IDA

You take good care of me.

CALLIE

I'm trying.

IDA

Thank you. For coming. I love seeing you out there.

CALLIE

I never wanna miss a show.

Callie avoids Ida's gaze as she pulls away to start making dinner.

IDA

(re: dinner)

... So how can I help?

CALLIE

WELL IF YOU COULD TAKE A LOOK AT ALL THE STUFF ON THE TABLE

Ida notices the BROCHURES and SEVERAL SPREADSHEETS on the small dinette table. She approaches the pile of papers.

CALLIE (CONT'D)

SEE I PUT IT THERE FOR YOU, TAKE A LOOK IF YOU'RE ABLE

Ida picks up a BUDGET.

CALLIE (CONT'D)

I'VE BEEN WORKING ON A CHART, WELL A SHEET, NO A BUDGET AND I KNOW YOU'LL SAY NO BUT BEFORE YOU START TO JUDGE IT

THINK OF ALL THE DREAMS THAT COULD BE THINK OF
 ALL THE THINGS YOU COULD START IF YOU COULD
 AFFORD TO TAKE THE TIME
 THE TIME TO FIX YOUR HEART

Ida's heart BEATS as she glances over some PAMPHLETS about
 CALIFORNIA COVERED.

IDA
 Wh-What do you mean?

CALLIE
 I figured out how to make it work.

IDA
 Make what work?

CALLIE
 The surgery.

IDA
 There's no way I can afford-

CALLIE
 But we can.
 LET ME TAKE CARE LET ME TAKE
 CARE
 LET ME TAKE CARE OF YOU

IDA
 You're between commercial bookings right now and you
 still need to get your car fixed.

CALLIE
 The bus isn't so bad. I can read and -

IDA
 No. I hate worrying about you waiting at all those
 stops alone at night.

CALLIE
 And I hate worrying about you having a heart attack on
 stage!

Another loud BEAT of IDA's heart. She clenches a fist.

IDA
 You don't have to worry about that. I'm fine - Fit as a
 flabby fiddle, in fact.

CALLIE
 Stop it.

IDA

It's a joke.

CALLIE

Get better material.

IDA

Alliteration's always good material. Try not to smile when I say, "Callie kills kittens."

(4. Weigh Yourself Down)

CALLIE

Ida-

IDA

Horrible content, I know. But it sounds /funny-

CALLIE

STOP MAKING LIGHT OF THIS SITUATION LIKE YOUR WORDS
DON'T MAKE A DIFFERENCE LIKE YOUR THOUGHTS DON'T GIVE
YOU CHILLS YOU'RE ALWAYS DODGING THIS CONFRONTATION
IT'S THE REASON THAT YOU'RE HURT

IDA

NO, IT WAS STUPID DIET PILLS

CALLIE

IF YOU DON'T FIND A WAY TO CHANGE YOU'LL JUST WEIGH
YOURSELF DOWN

IDA

I'm done changing, Callie.

CALLIE

YOU DRAG YOUR COSTUMES TO ALL THE DANCE SHOWS. YOU'RE
SINKING DOWN IN SEQUINS AND YOUR BODY'S IN DISTRESS.
And for what? A couple hundred bucks every few
months?

IDA

The money doesn't matter.

CALLIE

Yes it does! When it's your life on the line. We could
sell some of these dresses. Make a little room -

IDA
 I CAN'T GET RID OF THEM I NEED MY DANCE CLOTHES
 MY COSTUMES ARE A PART OF ME WHY DANCE
 WITHOUT A DRESS

CALLIE
 They're not worth dying over.

IDA
 Nobody's dying. I'm not dieting. (gesturing to
 her body)
 Clearly.

CALLIE
 You're doing it again!
 IF YOU DON'T FIND A WAY TO CHANGE YOU'LL JUST
 WEIGH YOURSELF DOWN WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO TAKE
 CARE OF YOURSELF

Callie touches Ida's face.

CALLIE (CONT'D)
 YOU NEED TO PUT YOUR HEART BEFORE YOUR HEAD
 I LIE AWAKE AT NIGHT AFRAID TO LOSE YOU AFRAID YOU'LL
 NEVER CHANGE AND END UP DEAD

The LIGHTS SHIFT becoming THEATRICAL. Ida pulls away from
 Callie, grabbing a RED SPARKLE-Y SHAWL.

CLOSE ON: SHAWL

DISSOLVE TO:

SPOTLIGHTS ILLUMINATING HER, Ida, in a FIERY red costume, now
 stands on the COUNTER or the TABLE, her new stage. As she
 sings, Ida uses all available surfaces to circle Callie.

IDA
 YOU STUFF MY FACE WITH YOUR SAD OPINION SHOVE YOUR
 FEELINGS DOWN MY THROAT WHEN I DON'T SHARE YOUR POINT
 OF VIEW YOU'RE NOT MY BOSS YOU DON'T HAVE DOMINION
 I CAN'T AFFORD THE SURGERY
 IT'S SOMETHING I WON'T DO. I DON'T NEED TO CHANGE
 HERE IN THE LIMELIGHT. DANCING LIFTS ME UP AND YOU -

Ida lets herself fall – Black Swan style – back onto the BED, before finishing the verse on her back.

CLOSE ON: IDA'S FACE

IDA (CONT'D) YOU'RE WEIGHING ME DOWN

The spotlights go out. Ida is in her robe again. The apartment is no longer a stage.

CALLIE

You're seriously choosing a bedazzled thong over your fucking life?

Ida sits up, indicating the overflowing closet.

IDA

This is my life. Burlesque – It's the only time I've ever felt like myself ... Like I can like myself.

CALLIE

... What about me? What about when you're with me?

IDA

You wouldn't be with me if it wasn't for all this.

(5. See Me.)

CALLIE

Ida. I loved you the minute I saw you.

IDA

... What about Pors Vous?

Ida stands as the LIGHTS in the apartment change again as the kitchen of the apartment transforms into Por Vous.

DINETTE TABLE

IN SPOTLIGHT, Callie sits at the dinette table, drinking and laughing with IMAGINED FRIENDS as Ida approaches with a BOTTLE OF WINE and an APRON. Both women act out what Ida sings.

IDA (CONT'D)
 YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS WENT DRINKING WEDNESDAY
 NIGHTS
 I WAS THE GIRL POURING DRINKS BEHIND THE BAR
 TOLD MYSELF IT WAS JUST THOSE DIM, OLD LIGHTS
 'CAUSE YOU NEVER ONCE LEFT A TIP IN MY JAR

AND I FELT SO SMALL THE MINUTE YOU
 SAW ME
 YOU DIDN'T SEE ME AT ALL

Callie snaps back to real life and tries to confront Ida.

CALLIE
 What? No. That isn't -

IDA
 STILL I WOULD SMILE, POUR YOU WINE, AND BRING YOU
 BEER

MEGAN TRICK enters, face in shadow, as she sits across from
 Callie at the table. Callie looks at her, drawn back into the
 memory.

IDA (CONT'D)
 STILL I FELL HARD AS THE TIME TICKED ON BY
 YOU DATED AROUND, I REALIZED YOU WERE QUEER
 YOU LOOKED AWAY WHEN I TRIED TO CATCH YOUR EYE

Ida pours Callie wine as she leans into Megan's shadow to give
 her a KISS. The spotlight goes out.

Ida turns away and Callie and Megan disappear from view.

IDA (CONT'D) AND I FELT SO SMALL
 'CAUSE THE MINUTE YOU SAW ME YOU DIDN'T
 SEE ME AT ALL

Ida turns back to see Callie of the present sitting on the
 bed, listening to her with tears in her eyes.

IDA (CONT'D)
 WHEN YOU CAME TO MY SHOW, YOU OPENED YOUR EYES
 I DIDN'T NEED TO ACT OR PUT ON A DISGUISE YOU SAW ME,
 YOU SAW ME

I THOUGHT THAT YOU HAD LEFT, BUT LITTLE DID I KNOW
 YOU WAITED BY THE DOOR, SAID "I LOVED YOUR SHOW"
 YOU SAW ME, YOU SAW ME

Callie rises and slowly approaches Ida as she continues to sing.

IDA (CONT'D)
 I THOUGHT THAT YOU HAD LEFT, BUT LITTLE DID I KNOW YOU
 WAITED BY THE DOOR, SAID

...

Callie's arms wrap around Ida.

CALLIE & IDA "I LOVED YOUR SHOW"

IDA

YOU SAW ME, YOU SAW ME

The two pull apart, just enough for their eyes to meet.

IDA (CONT'D) NOW I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND

CALLIE I SEE YOU NOW

CALLIE (CONT'D)

IDA

THERE'S NOTHING THAT I
 WOULDN'T GIVE TO WIN THIS
 SHOW
 FIGHTING LIKE THIS IS NOT
 WHAT I HAD PLANNED

I KNOW YOU NOW

IDA

I'M BUYING MY SEAT AND I'VE MADE MY CHOICE TO GO

THE MINUTE THEY SEE ME THE MINUTE
 THEY SEE ME-

CALLIE

You're gonna die, Ida. If you don't, /let me help you

...

IDA

If I can't compete in Vegas, I might as well be dead.

Callie pulls away from Ida.

CALLIE

Then I might as well leave.

Callie waits for Ida to say something, to stop her. She doesn't.

Callie walks out.

The door SLAMS shut and Ida is left alone. Ida glances at her half-finished dress and then at the pictures of her and Callie at the beach smiling at her, mocking her from the night stand.

INT. ONSTAGE — BURLESQUE CLUB — NIGHT

(Evening Delight Reprise.)

Ida, in her new costume, saunters on stage. She poses, flawless.

IDA

ARE YOU READY TO SAVOR A FLAVOR I PROMISE WILL BLOW YOUR MIND?

COME IN FOR THE NIGHT AND I'LL SHOW YOU A SNACK

I EARNED MY DIPLOMAS IN SUGAR CANE COMAS, AND SOON YOU'LL FIND

I'M THE ONLY SNACK THAT EATS YOU BACK

The crowd goes WILD!

But Ida's heart starts to RACE, beating LOUD. She falters, closing her eyes.

IDA (V.O.) CALM. THINK OF ...

Ida looks out into the audience. Her eyes find the empty seat in the crowd where Callie sat during Ida's last act.

IDA (V.O.)

Callie ...

The BEAT OF HER HEART grows LOUDER!

IDA
 I'LL LET YOU WHIP THE FROSTING I'LL LET
 YOU LICK THE BEATER BE BOLD, BE BAD
 COME BE A DIET CHEATER

Ida sweats, but forces herself to straighten her back and continue the act.

IDA (CONT'D) I'M SO GOOD IT HURTS
 GET YOUR JUST DESSERTS LET ME
 TREAT YOU RIGHT
 I'LL BE YOUR EVENING DELIGHT COME
 TAKE A BITE
 I'LL BE YOUR EVENING DELIGHT TASTE ME
 TONIGHT
 I'LL BE YOUR EVENING DELIGHT
 (Breathless, almost a whisper.)
 ALRIGHT ...

The CROWD ROARS for "MORE" as Ida struggles to hold it together for ONE, TWO more LOUD BEATS.

She looks at Callie's empty chair one last time before ...

CLOSE ON: IDA'S PALE FACE

Her eyes roll back into her head as she falls backward – Black Swan Style – then ...

BLACKOUT.

The SOUND OF THE SEA fades up through the darkness.

END.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

HEAVY HEART is a 15-minute musical screenplay, inspired by my interest in burlesque and its more-inclusive beauty standards. Like many, I have struggled to maintain a healthy relationship to food and my body my entire life. I thought this piece was a great space to explore how one's personal struggles with self-love and acceptance not only affect one's physical health, but also the health of one's relationships. I'm so grateful that Makena and Angela were attracted to this story and wrote the beautiful lyrics and music for the piece. – Hannah C. Langley

AUTHORS' BIO's:

Hannah C. Langley (book) is an emerging playwright, screen and television writer from

Valencia, California and a proud member of EST/LA's New West Writers Group. Known for tackling political topics on a personal scale, Hannah's work was chosen and featured three times by the Fountain Theatre's Rapid Development Competition—winning with her play, *Monsters Are Made*. Her play, *Losing My Religion (in 140 Characters or Less)* received a workshop production at USC, staged readings at Cypress College and the Pasadena Playhouse, and was recorded as a podcast by *At the Table: A Play Reading Series*, featuring Tony nominee Isabel Keating. The play has since earned semifinalist status in both The Road and Sanguine Theatre NYC's summer play festivals. Her screenwriting credits include Lifetime's *Psycho Nurse* (formerly known as *Munchausen by Internet*).

Makena Metz (music and lyrics) is an LA native who writes fantasy, sci-fi, and magical realism for the page, screen, and stage. She studied theatre at Columbia College Chicago and is a proud member of DGA & ASCAP. In 2020, Makena wrote her debut novel *Deeper Than Bone* and won NaNoWriMo for her second novel *A Whisper of Magic*. She was excited for her short play *Death Bites* to be presented in The Lincoln Center's Virtual ADA30 Celebration and she was also selected for the Institute for American Musical Theatre's inaugural IAMT CREATORS Certificate Program in Musical Theatre Writing. Additionally, her pilot *Theo's Grand Adventure* (Semifinals) and her feature script *Alba and The Underworld* (Quarterfinals) were selected as part of the 2020 ScreenCraft Animation Competition. Makena is a graduate of New Musicals Inc. CORE Curriculum for Musical Theatre Writing. Follow her on twitter or instagram @MakenaMetz and find her work on NPX!

Angela Parrish (music and lyrics) is a Los Angeles-based songwriter, composer, record producer, and multi-instrumentalist. She is known for her vocal work on projects such as Florence + the Machine, Jimmy Kimmel Live!, and the film *La La Land*. Most recently, Angela co-wrote original songs for the 2020 film *Chance* starring Matthew Modine, one of which was nominated for a Hollywood Music in Media Award. She is the vocal producer for the BBC/Disney series "Chuggington" and is working on several upcoming projects due for release in 2021.

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IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm8456280>

Now You See ‘Em see ‘em see ‘em

By **Greg Jenkins** Jenkins Jenkins Jenkins

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

Greg Jenkins’ delightful and haunting, Now You See ‘Em, is a ten-minute postmodern adventure infused with undertones of Shakespeare and Beckett. Not exactly a comedy nor a drama, this is a problem play, in which the main character is split between two actors, who together are trying to solve an existential conundrum. Henry One and Henry Two are both versions of the same, “brooding middle-aged man” with a familiarly “frowsy” wife, Emma, providing a counterpoint to their confusion. The two Henrys, dressed alike in jeans and untucked shirts, are nearly identical in temperament, sometimes even finishing each other’s sentences, but Henry One is more of the rabble-rouser, questioning things and stirring them up while Henry Two is more inclined to look for a reasonable explanation. The play is well suited for an intimate space, with a list of names on a white board at the center of the mystery at hand, but the writing is so sharp that the intent would carry in a large house, or (dare I say) as a virtual presentation. Let’s talk about that for a second. This is not a Zoom play. But some theatrical pieces take on additional nuance when reading and imagining them in the midst of an extended period of social distancing. This is one of them. The following exchange will give you an idea, then go ahead and read it yourself. Five Stars. (Format and spacing is playwright’s own.)

HENRY ONE

Well, I have the perception...

HENRY TWO

I get the distinct impression

HENRY ONE

That people around me are, I dunno...

HENRY TWO

Disappearing.

EMMA

Disappearing?

HENRY ONE

And I don’t like it.

Now You See 'Em

As the lights rise, we see two middle-aged men standing at a whiteboard. Nearby is a writing desk littered with books and papers. The two men, whom we'll call HENRY ONE and HENRY TWO (for they represent different aspects of the same man) look alike and are dressed identically; each wears an untucked denim shirt, blue jeans and white sneakers. Each is holding a magic marker. On the board is a long list of printed names, both male and female, with "GRANDMA" at the top, "MOOCH" in the middle and "ROBBIE" near the bottom. The guys are preoccupied with the names on the board and are talking thoughtfully to each other as if trying to puzzle something out.

HENRY ONE

And this is the point I'm trying to make, OK? Over time, they add up.

HENRY TWO

Over the years.

HENRY ONE

Yes. They add up.

HENRY TWO

The names do.

HENRY ONE

The names, right. Look at 'em.

(Gestures)

They not only add, they multiply.

HENRY TWO

The names do. The people don't.

HENRY ONE

The people disappear.

HENRY TWO

The people *subtract*.

HENRY ONE

That's it. The people, they just go away.

HENRY TWO

What about . . . Let's see. What about Sarah? She on the board?

HENRY ONE

Who?

HENRY TWO

Sarah. Rabinowitz.

HENRY ONE

Ah! Sarah.

HENRY TWO

From high school. Dark hair, dark eyes.

HENRY ONE

Had a tush with a slope you could *ski* on.

HENRY TWO

Quite an image. Eleventh grade, she took your virginity.

HENRY ONE

Yeah, she could have it. I didn't want it anyway.

HENRY TWO

So where is she today?

HENRY ONE

No idea.

HENRY TWO

There you go, man. Put 'er on the board.

HENRY ONE goes to the board, uncaps his magic marker and prints the first four letters of "SARAH."

HENRY ONE

Is that Sarah with an "h" or no "h"?

HENRY TWO

Whatsa difference? She's outta here regardless.

HENRY ONE

(Appends an "H" to the name and reflects for a moment)

But there's a *pattern* here, don't you think?

HENRY TWO

No question.

HENRY ONE
And I don't like it.

HENRY TWO
I don't like it either. But not much we're gonna do about it, right?

HENRY--both versions of him--frowns in contemplation as his wife EMMA ventures in. A touch frowsy, she's dressed along the same casual lines as he is. Her skepticism would seem to be often practiced and well earned.

EMMA
I *thought* I heard something in here. What's up?

HENRY ONE
Nothing. Just talking to myself.
(Gestures at his counterpart)

EMMA
So I see.

HENRY TWO
Actually, I was just talking to *myself*.
(Offers the same gesture)

EMMA
Whatever. So what's with the board?

HENRY ONE
(Shrugs)
Trying to figure something out.

EMMA
Like what?
(Pause)
Henry?

HENRY ONE
Well, I have the perception . . .

HENRY TWO
I get the distinct *impression*--

HENRY ONE
That people around me are, I dunno . . .

HENRY TWO
Disappearing.

EMMA
Disappearing?

HENRY ONE
And I don't like it.

EMMA
What do you mean, disappearing?

HENRY ONE
You know. One minute they're here . . .

HENRY TWO
Next minute they're gone.

EMMA
People are disappearing before your eyes?

HENRY ONE
It's a little more subtle than that. But once they're gone--

HENRY TWO
They're sure as hell gone.

EMMA
Really.

HENRY ONE
(Nods)
Take my grandmother up here.
(Taps the board)
She was the first.

HENRY TWO
She disappeared when I was just a kid.

EMMA
She got old and died, Henry.

HENRY ONE
Certainly did.

HENRY TWO
That's what I'm *saying*.

HENRY ONE
(Nostalgic)
Sometimes I'd go to her house and spend the night. And she'd give me things.

HENRY TWO

She'd give me toys . . .

HENRY ONE

One time she gave me a colored Slinky.

HENRY TWO

But mainly she gave me attention.

HENRY ONE

Attention that I couldn't always get from other sources. Beautiful, sweet lady.

HENRY TWO

I mean, she had her quirks, as we all do.

HENRY ONE

Favorite all-time entertainer was Sammy Davis, Jr.--which I didn't really understand, but I went with it.

HENRY TWO does a quick and not too impressive tap dance.

HENRY ONE

I had some great times with her . . .

HENRY TWO

And then she was gone.

EMMA

She got old and died, Henry.

HENRY ONE

I know, Emma.

HENRY TWO

Now--another example. There's my buddy Mooch up there.

(Points at the board)

Remember Mooch?

EMMA

(Sardonic)

How could I forget him?

HENRY ONE

Met him in the eighth grade. He'd bring contact explosive to school and put it on the teacher's chair.

HENRY TWO

She'd sit down, and *bang!*

Both HENRYs guffaw.

EMMA

Henry, last I checked, Mooch is still living.

HENRY ONE

We got older, we'd go out drinking together.

HENRY TWO

Chasing women, raising hell.

HENRY ONE

He'd always have a shot and a beer, a shot and a beer.

HENRY TWO

It was one helluva formula.

HENRY ONE

The man could put 'em away.

HENRY TWO

Then all the alcohol finally put *him* away.

EMMA

Henry, Mooch is still around, remember?

HENRY ONE

As I remember, Emma, Mooch is in a nursing home.

HENRY TWO

Can't even wiggle a finger.

HENRY ONE

Just sprawls there in bed the way he used to after a night on the town.

EMMA

(Sincerely)

It's a wonder he held up as long as he did.

HENRY ONE

I miss him, you know?

HENRY TWO

We had some wonderful, stupid times together.

EMMA

You can go to the nursing home and visit him whenever you like.

HENRY ONE

Well, yes and no. I can't *communicate* with him anymore.

HENRY TWO

I can't *relate* to him.

HENRY ONE

For all intents and purposes, he's gone from my life.

HENRY TWO

He's outta here.

EMMA

Henry--

HENRY ONE

One more example. Our own son.

HENRY TWO

Robbie.

(Gestures at the board)

EMMA

Oh, come on, Henry. Robbie is perfectly fine. He lives right down the street. You just spoke to him this morning.

HENRY ONE

Not the young version.

EMMA

(Baffled)

The young version . . .

HENRY ONE

That guy down the street is a grown man. He pays taxes.

HENRY TWO

He smokes cigarettes. Menthol, but still.

HENRY ONE

I'm talking about Robbie when he was five, six, seven years old.

HENRY TWO

Remember him?

HENRY ONE

(Chuckles)

He'd go out in the backyard and dig holes. *Deep* holes.

HENRY TWO

Like he was part gopher.

HENRY ONE

Didn't even have a shovel. I dunno how he did it.

HENRY TWO

Used to cut his own hair, too. He'd grab some scissors and butcher himself.

HENRY ONE

Looked like he'd been attacked by locusts.

EMMA

Henry--

HENRY ONE

One time I found him in the backyard at the bottom of a giant hole, chopping his hair.

HENRY TWO

Unbelievable.

HENRY ONE

I miss that little guy, you know?

HENRY TWO

He was full of mischief, but I enjoyed every minute I spent with him.

EMMA

Henry, Robbie grew up.

(Pause)

Most people do that, or haven't you noticed?

HENRY ONE

I miss that little kid.

HENRY TWO

He went and disappeared on me.

EMMA

(Shakes her head)

This is silly. You're talking about *life*--about the way things *are*.

HENRY ONE

I know what I'm talking about.

EMMA

Sometimes I wonder.

(Pause)

People grow up, they move on, they get sick, they die. That's how it is.

HENRY ONE
Doesn't mean I have to like it.

EMMA
Nobody said you did. But that's how the game is played.
(Turns to go)

HENRY TWO
Some game!

HENRY ONE
Say, where you going?

EMMA
(Wry)
Think maybe I'll visit Robbie, see if I can get him to start digging holes and cutting his own hair again.

HENRY ONE
When you coming back?

EMMA
I dunno.

HENRY TWO
You *are* coming back? . . .

EMMA
What do *you* think?
(Exits)

The two HENRYs stare after her, the first in exasperation, the second wistfully.

HENRY ONE
Not much philosophy about that woman.

HENRY TWO
No, not much.

HENRY ONE
Wonder if I should put her name on the board . . .

HENRY TWO
She'll be back.

HENRY ONE
Sure?

HENRY TWO

I *guess* she'll be back.

(Pause)

Guess I'll be back, too.

HENRY ONE

(Startled)

Where the hell are *you* going?

HENRY TWO

With her.

HENRY ONE

Why?

HENRY TWO

For one thing, I'm married to her.

HENRY ONE

Well, so am I. But I'm staying here.

HENRY TWO

(Starts to leave)

Do what you have to.

HENRY ONE

Man, you can't leave!

HENRY TWO

Why not?

HENRY ONE

We belong together. Don't we?

HENRY TWO

Do we?

HENRY ONE

I'm no good without you.

HENRY TWO

(Mildly)

You're not much good *with* me.

(Exits)

Rattled, HENRY ONE stands still for a moment.

HENRY ONE

Yes sir, I'm seeing a pattern here.

(Approaches the board and uncaps his magic marker)

A very definite pattern.

(Prepares to write something, then stops himself. Abruptly disgusted, he recaps the magic marker and flings it down)

I've been seeing this pattern for a *while*.

(Goes to the desk and clears it roughly, knocking items to the floor)

And I don't like it.

(Sits on the desk, facing the audience)

I don't like it a bit!

He turns and lies face-up on the desk, his head to stage right. Folding his hands on his midsection, he assumes the look of one in a casket.

Gradually the lights dim and then black out.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *Like a lot of us, I've recently noticed that I'm not quite as young as I used to be. I've noticed, too, that some of the people who were once part of my life are no longer around. In most cases, I miss them. These thoughts and feelings are what sparked the play.*

*Writers who've influenced me, here and elsewhere, are too numerous to list. I might mention that I appreciate David Mamet for his dark humor and his catchy dialog. And the device of having different versions of the same character on stage simultaneously may've come from Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women*.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Greg Jenkins is the author of four books, including the critical study *Stanley Kubrick and the Art of Adaptation* and the novel *A Face in the Sky*. He's published roughly 60 short stories, which have appeared in journals ranging from *Weirdbook* and *Cafe Irreal* to *Prairie Schooner* and *Mensa Bulletin*. He has also had eight plays produced.

B.B.B.B. (B.B.B.B.) (b.b.b.b) (B. B. B. B.)...

By Barbara Blatner

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes... Written as “a short Zoom or stage play”, Barbara Blatner’s B.B.B.B packs it in, touching on the foibles of relationships, parenting, conscious living, gender-bending, climate change, and more! Not to mention that there’s this COVID thing going on... Fortunately, an end to the collective nightmare is in sight (please!) and we have Barbara Blatner’s sharp play to help us get back on track. B.B.B.B. offers a radical approach to becoming better parents (and better people) that involves acquiring new brains created by a child genius who dreams of sustainability and eating kale. Here’s to the future generation (even if you just had them to add to the carbon footprint)! I love this play on so many levels. I love that the parental banter is so accurately precious, but noxious at the same time. I love that the possibility of gender neutral casting allows the play to both lean into and against stereotype. I love that these nit-picky nose-picking characters who are turned on by aerosol pollutants are so grievously relatable. Laughter is surely the key to building back better in this au courant Ozzie and Harriet (or Ozzie and Ozzie as the case may be) playlet. Format and spacing is playwright’s own.*

Here’s an excerpt:

ALEX

Dearest, you *really* wanna do ideological battle with your child over burger?

BOBBY

You fight with her about your SUV.

ALEX

I *love* that fat car. She won’t admit she loves sleeping in the back of it.

BOBBY

I love looking down at little people in little cars below. I love it helplessly.

ALEX

So what if it pigs out on gas.

BOBBY

Thank god you stood firm and told her *no* to heating this house with solar panels.

B.B.B.B.

A short Zoom or stage
play

by Barbara Blatner

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Characters

BOBBY – parent, any gender, partnered with ALEX

ALEX – parent, any gender, partnered with BOBBY

GEORGE – BOBBY and ALEX’s daughter, 7 years old, can be played by an actor of any age

BOBBY, in the bedroom, obsesses about what to wear to her/his/their anniversary lunch happening very soon at BOBBY's mother's house. Clothes are strewn all over the room, bed and floor, and s/he/they will pull more and more clothes out of the closet to try. In the room is a window through which ALEX will later climb.

ALEX, in the bathroom, in a Zoom closeup, is dressed for the party in a nice winter shirt and pants, trims his/her/their ear hairs with a nose hair implement at the mirror.

GEORGE is in her room, behind closed doors. Her room has two doors - a main door accessible to BOBBY in the bedroom, a door accessible to ALEX in the bathroom)

BOBBY

Knock again.

ALEX

Why don't you.

BOBBY

I'm getting dressed. What are you doing?

ALEX

Trimming ----- ear hairs.

BOBBY

Is that important right now, my love?

ALEX

"Sir, your nose is....hmm....it is...very big."

BOBBY

What?!

ALEX

Cyrano de Bergerac. "It's a rock, it's a peak, it's a cape... No, not a cape, it's a peninsula!" And yet, "A large nose is the mark of a witty, courteous, affable, generous and liberal man."

BOBBY

Yes you're all those things, darling. But you'll be wearing a mask, no one will notice the glories of your nose.

ALEX

I'm not wearing a mask to this party. I'm done with masks.

BOBBY

I'm so sick of masks. I won't wear one either.

ALEX

She didn't peep when I banged on *this* door. Can you lure her out to get her - whitish - vegan lunch together to take to your mother's?

BOBBY

I say: You want a burger, don't molest plants into burger shape and call it burger. Eat a burger, made of *c-o-w*.

ALEX

Dearest, you *really* wanna do ideological battle with your child over burger?

BOBBY

You fight with her about your SUV.

ALEX

I love that fat car. She won't admit she loves sleeping in the back of it.

BOBBY

I love looking down at little people in little cars below. *I* love it helplessly.

ALEX

So what if it pigs out on gas.

BOBBY

Thank god you stood firm and told her *no* to heating this house with solar panels.

ALEX

This climate crisis thing is *so* down the road, Bobby. We'll never get fires like out West.

(Pulls a nose hair too hard, holds up nose hair implement)

Ow!! This damn thing!

(ALEX knocks on GEORGE's bathroom door, shouts to GEORGE:)

ALEX continued

We're leaving for Granma Noni's in- *(looking mistakenly at nose hair implement, as if it's a cell phone, then picking up and looking at phone)* – eight minutes! You don't want to make us late for our own anniversary lunch, do you?

BOBBY

Tell her her grandmother will be agitated if we're late! And she'll-

ALEX

(Quick Beat. GEORGE is talking, we can't understand HER)

No, Noni doesn't recycle and has plastic everything in her house, she's *old*, honey. You *know* she'll be agitated if we're late and sit by her window and scream at birds! What?!

(Quick beat. GEORGE is talking)

We *know* you hate grandma screaming at innocent birds, so we can't be late! Open up!

(ALEX jiggles door knob. We hear music in GEORGE's room, and maybe she drops something. ALEX opens door suddenly- it wasn't locked.

Revelation of GEORGE's space: A kid's room piled high with strange contraptions she's building. A blast from HER room of a Beethoven symphony, before we see HER hand shut the door in ALEX's face, then hear

her lock it. ALEX returns to mirror, tweezes nose hairs with nose hair implement)

ALEX continued

Let George do her thing five more minutes.

(Considering nose hair implement)

Is this a torture instrument?

(We hear GEORGE singing along loudly with the Beethoven)

BOBBY *(Shouting to GEORGE, continuing with clothes, etc.)*

What *are* you doing in there, offspring?!

(We hear GEORGE humming more loudly)

ALEX

O to have off-springed – off-sprung? a genius kid who builds all sorts of contraptions.

BOBBY

Did I tell you I'm getting a license plate that says "my child is a genius," for the SUV?

ALEX

Put her IQ on it, it's flashier.

BOBBY

What did Smile-a-lot say her IQ was?

ALEX

Smile-a-lot...?

BOBBY

Her science and tech teacher.

ALEX

Why do you call him Smile-a-lot? He never smiled at *me*.

BOBBY

He *smote* me with smiles, pre-COVID, of course.

ALEX

Does he have the hots for you?

(Pulls a nose hair too hard, throws nose hair implement on floor)

Damn!

BOBBY

I dunno. Maybe.

ALEX

Wait. Do you - return his hots?

BOBBY

I like that he said George was a genius. Who eats tempeh dogs and makes us use ugly environmental light bulbs and-

ALEX

You're not answering me: do you return his hots?!

(ALEX removes hair from nose hair implement. BOBBY goes to, knocks on GEORGE's door)

BOBBY

Time to get your kale wrap, kale chips and kale soda together pronto!! We are leaving for the party at Noni's, you hear me? George, do you hear me?!

(Beat. We hear movement in GEORGE's room. To ALEX:)

She's getting up.

(We hear this door locking)

ALEX

Bobby, will you answer me?!

BOBBY

She locked *this* door! Has she *ever* locked herself in her room before?! We *are* gonna be late for Noni's!

ALEX

Bobby—

BOBBY

Done with your ears?

ALEX

I'm weeding my nose now, but this damn thing- ! Bobby!

BOBBY

Alex, go outside, go to her window and see what's going on.

ALEX

Why can't you answer?!

BOBBY

I'm getting dressed!

ALEX

You've been getting dressed for two weeks! Do you have-?!

BOBBY

(Breaking frame, holding up outfit, asking "audience":)

I gotta make a decision! How 'bout - this one? Is this good? Yeah? Okay, I'm goin' with it!

(BOBBY finally gets dressed. ALEX dresses in heavy winter coat, hat, gloves, etc.)

ALEX

Do-you-have-the-hots-for-Smile-a-lot?!

BOBBY

Geez Louise, what do *you* think?

ALEX

You – don't...? You're sure. You're sure?!

BOBBY

The guy's rabid about aerosol pollution! Please *please* go outside, look in her window?!

ALEX

(Relieved)

Getting on my jacket and hat and scarf and gloves and socks and boots and-

BOBBY

Why does everything seem slowed down like in a dream where I can't get anywhere?

(ALEX EXITS to the frigid winter outside. We hear winds raging and whistling when HE opens the door)

ALEX

Into the New Jersey Arctic!

(ALEX EXITS, plunging into the snow and cold)

BOBBY

(Finishing dressing, picks up cell phone, calls mother)

Mom, we're gonna be a little late. No everything's fine, it's just that George is – *(Beat)* Yes she wants to be called George, you should *know* that by - what?! You're telling sparrows to “go to hell”?! Calm down, will you? We'll be there – in twenty minutes. Did you just call a cardinal a “bastard”?! Mom, I'm gonna take away those bird feeders I got you. *(Beat)* No, they don't understand what you're saying, but-- yes it upsets George, you gotta *not* be doing it when we get there. Get away from that window and check the bundt! *(Beat)* The *bundt*, the cake with the hole! No, don't worry about the hole, worry about not burning the bundt! We'll be there soon, just – get away from that window!

(Hangs up)

(ALEX ENTERS through the bedroom window, breathing hard, breathing steam from the cold, shivering and panting. BOBBY watches him)

BOBBY

What the hell, Alex?

ALEX

(Panting, entering through the window)

I locked myself out! She's making contraptions. I trudged through knee-deep snow to her window and spied on her. She looked up. I tell you, Bobby, when people *gaze* in your direction, in this case, when I gazed in *her* direction, *at* her, she felt it and looked up. She *felt* it, Bobby.

BOBBY

Omigod, is that important now?! We gotta get moving!

ALEX

She got up with a frowny face and closed the blinds on me! She pushed me away, I feel hurt!

(ALEX throws off coat onto floor, takes off and throws down gloves, hat, etc., will strip down to briefs/underwear)

BOBBY

Don't take anything off, we're about to gotta go!

ALEX

She closed the shade on me, Bobby, it was upsetting! This coat is boiling!

coat (BOBBY frantically gathers stuff to take to party, will get and put on winter and clothing, etc.)

BOBBY

What do we do about her, Alex?!

ALEX

Leave her here?

BOBBY

She's seven!

ALEX

We ditch the party? What'll we miss? Your mother screaming her mouth dry at crows?!

BOBBY

It's *our* party, for *our*- O god, what are you doing in your underwear?! This is one of those awful slowed-down dreams!

ALEX

My party shirt's all sweaty! I can't stand it!

(ALEX looks for a new shirt to wear, will eventually put one on and start dressing again.

BOBBY goes to GEORGE's door:)

BOBBY

Get out here and get your food immediately, or your dad will come in through the window and pull you out and take you to the party where you'll eat Noni's un-organic pot roast with plastic silverware and-! What?!

(Quick Beat)

Better her yelling at blue jays than at you, right?! George! You want us to love *all* creatures, every last creature on this earth! Your parents who want to celebrate their 10th anniversary are also creatures, so open this door immediately!

ALEX

You're a swamp creature, Bobby! Ha ha, right? Kinda disorganized, kinda – crawly? I'm – a tundra creature. Clean and cold.

BOBBY

What? Are you insulting me, Alex?

ALEX

What? Nooooo, I'm just - wondering outloud if – what kind of swamp creature you are. Definitely from the deep dark slimy depths and-

BOBBY

You're insulting me!

ALEX

I am not! I adore you!

BOBBY

You insult me like at an angle, Alex, like you did when we met ten years ago, then deny you're doing it! Christ, time *is* going backwards here!

ALEX

You're over the top, like *you* were ten years ago!

BOBBY

You're *still* insulting me and denying you're-!

ALEX

(Agitated, looking for shirt)

I'm looking for a clean shirt!

BOBBY

Happy anniversary, jerk!

ALEX

Happy anniversary, jerk, too! 'Too' or 'two'? Jerk number two or jerk in addition?!

(Doubles over in laughter)

BOBBY

Screw you! Just-

(Door opens, GEORGE emerges, holding two items she has built)

GEORGE

(Very excited)

Look look look Mommy daddy! *(or daddy daddy! etc.)* I made something *awesome* for you two for your anniversary! I got the idea from Mr Smile-a-lot's class, and and and and from TV! Mommy daddy *(or daddy daddy! etc.)*, your brains don't work right, your brains are old and worn out and you know they keep saying on TV, um, "Build Back Better" right?! for when nobody's sick anymore?! But I did it when everyone still has to stay inside, I worked all night in my room! I call these *(showing what's she's built)*, um um: BBBB. No! B.B.B.B., with periods between each B! It stands for Build - Back - Better - Brains! I built you – tada! new brains! Granma Noni's brain's too old to be fixed but *yours* can be! Put them in, do it before we go, you'll be able to deal with Granma better and and and

protect the birds and make everything better! Mommy daddy (or *daddy daddy!* etc.), here are your new brains!

(ALEX, BOBBY express.....something on their faces.....before...

LIGHTS OUT)

END OF PLAY

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

I wrote B.B.B.B. in response to a prompt - "build back better" - given by the theater I work with, New Circle Company in Manhattan. What could we build back better than our own brains, I wondered sardonically. And so I created a couple cavalier about environmental issues who are taken to task by their seven-year-old daughter George, a genius girl who builds them new brains for their anniversary present so that they can think better about the world they live in. I wrote the play for Zoom, using as well as I could the limitations and perks of the small screen. Alex, tweezing nose hairs, we see up close; Bobby, trying on one outfit after another for her anniversary lunch, suddenly asks the viewer how they like a particular outfit. The absurdity of the play borrows something from Ionesco and other absurdist guys, and I tried to quicken the dialogue and charge it with ridiculousness, to counter the weight of the topic.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

BARBARA BLATNER is a playwright, poet and composer. Her Zoom play SHE CAME IN THE DOOR was produced by New Circle Theatre Company, Scribe Stages, and Hong Kong's Aurora Theatre. LIGHT was featured in the New Play Development Workshop at the 2020 Theatre in Higher Education Conference. TWO SISTERS, published in *Synkroniciti*, will be produced online by Spark Creative Works and featured at the Inge Play Festival 2021. Three monologues from full-length scripts will be published by Applause Books. YEARS OF SKY was produced by Scripts Up! at the 59E59 Theatres and was read at the Great Plains Theatre Conference. A monologue from YEARS OF SKY was published in *Best Men's Monologues of 2019*. NO STAR SHINES SHARPER, was produced for radio by New Voices/Public Media Foundation, published by Baker's Plays, aired repeatedly on Christmas eve on NPR stations, and acquired by New York's Museum of TV and Radio. GUERNICA 2003 appeared in the American Globe Theatre's 15-minute Play Festival, GRASSY

KNOLL in New York's Turnip Theatre Short Play Festival, the First Annual Boston Theatre

Marathon and was published in Baker's Plays anthology of plays selected from that event. SHADOW PLAY received a workshop production in the Cleveland Public Theatre's 1993 New

Plays Festival. Barbara's adaptation of Tadeusz Borowski's THIS WAY FOR THE GAS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN was commissioned by New Voices and staged at the Boston Public Library. THE CHOICE, a video about childbearing, was shown in the International Women's Video Festival. Early versions of CLEARING and WHITE ASHES were Finalists in

the O'Neill Playwrights Contest, POSTURES was staged by the Capital Repertory Company,

and THE FAIR was produced by the Albany Playwrights' Workshop which she co-founded. New York Quarterly Books published Barbara's two poetry collections, THE STILL POSITION

(2010) and LIVING WITH YOU (2012). Poetry, fiction and reviews have appeared in *Beloved*

on this Earth (anthology), *Heliotrope*, *House Organ*, *Poetry Northwest*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Lift*, *Apalachee Quarterly*, *13th Moon*, and others.

Ms. Blatner is a Senior Lecturer in Writing at Yeshiva University. She has been a fellow at many

residencies, including Tyrone Guthrie Center, Blue Mountain Center, Banff Colony, Ragdale,

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GILT

By Michael Hardstark

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

Let's say you just traded in your Jewish girlfriend (aka "The Whore from Gehenna") for a hot Aryan shiksa who knows how to cook sauerkraut and sausage in your desire to avoid marrying your mother. Have I got the play for you! Even if you're not into sauerkraut, we're all feeling guilty about something, we're all high maintenance, and we all have a Jewish mother, so I insist that you read this play regardless as a cautionary tale. Michael Hardstark's GILT is a sophisticated and stylish short that may piss you off, but it's time to dust off your sense of humor and relish a play that plays on power dynamics and stereotypes with unusual flair. There are Freudian allusions. There's the Jewish guilt zeitgeist. There's even a parakeet named Helga. The witty dialogue is terrific and the ending promises to get under your skin and stay there forever - like herpes. This modern Sisyphian tale is sure to trigger tender feelings for the loveable schmuck within all of us, whether or not it helps you escape your mother or your destiny.

A GILTy sample:

ALLEN

You see, the thing is...they don't mind being in the kitchen. Cooking isn't seen as a lowering of status to them...

DAVID

You sayin' that's why Jewish girls don't like to cook?

ALLEN

Not ALL Jewish girls, just the ones from Long Island – and California...

(Spacing and format are playwright's own. Eds.)

GILT

A brief play

by Michael Hardstark

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By michael hardstark

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#917 838 3849

Cast of Characters:

Allen.....a young man 25- 30 years old.

David.....a young man 25 – 30 years old.

Nancy.....a young woman 25 –30 years old

SETTING: the living room/kitchenette of a small one-bedroom apartment on the upper westside of Manhattan. Late afternoon.

AT RISE: two young men are seated, having a conversation. They are smoking cigars. From time to time, from the bedroom, we hear the chirping of a parakeet.

ALLEN

...she cooks things I never tasted before...

DAVID

Yeah? Like what?

ALLEN

You ever have knockwurst cooked in beer?

DAVID

That's GERMAN stuff, Allen...

ALLEN

So what?

DAVID

How was it?

ALLEN

I liked it! She made me the whole works...sauerkraut, mustard...

DAVID

Ummm...

ALLEN

You see, the thing is...they don't mind being in the kitchen. Cooking isn't seen as a lowering of status to them...

DAVID

You sayin' that's why Jewish girls don't like to cook?

ALLEN

Not ALL Jewish girls, just the ones from Long Island – and California...

DAVID

That's just about the lot of them...

ALLEN

Well, you still got the mid-west...

(slight pause)

I met a Jewish girl from Chicago didn't mind cooking – wasn't very GOOD at it, but she didn't mind it.

DAVID

Probably first generation.

ALLEN

She was second.

DAVID

Figures.

ALLEN

Are you ready for this? She sews...

DAVID

No kidding?

ALLEN

I'll show you the sewing machine, it's in the bedroom...

DAVID

That's okay.

ALLEN

I'm serious...I come home one night; I was out drinkin' with some of the guys from work...my shirt was torn...figured I'd have to buy me a new shirt, right?

DAVID

Well, yeah, if you only have one shirt...

ALLEN

I fall into bed, go to sleep, wake up the next morning – she's working away on the sewing machine...she fixes the shirt – like new!

DAVID

Christ – you lucky bastard!

ALLEN

Oh, Davey...it's something else, man, it's something else.

Pause

DAVID

What about...ahhh...you know...

ALLEN

Dave, you have no idea – none.

DAVID

Really?

ALLEN

No inhibitions...

DAVID

Oh brother...

ALLEN

...like she never heard of the word GUILT...like she grew up on Bora Bora or something -
BEFORE the missionaries came. I'm telling you, Dave, I have a hard time keepin'
up with her...

DAVID

What about the bird?

ALLEN

Helga?

DAVID

That her name?

ALLEN

You put a sheet over the cage, shuts her up in a second.

DAVID

Huh...

ALLEN

...and there's another word she never heard of...

DAVID

What's that?

(ALLEN silently mouths the word 'No'.)

Oh, brother...

ALLEN

Any time, day or night. Eight in the morning? Sure. A late afternoon delight? Why not?

(he indicates his cigar)

How do you like these? Aren't they great?

DAVID

Excellent...

ALLEN

I got 'em at a little place over on 23rd street...you want some, let me know...'cause you can't get them just walkin' in from the street – you gotta know somebody...

DAVID

I'll let you know...

ALLEN

And another thing...it's always gotta be the same damn place with them, like there was a magic circle around it and you can't do it out of the circle...

DAVID

Who? With the Jewish girls?

ALLEN

...they get nervous you have another idea...maybe the bathroom...standing up or something...the ROOF – whatever...

DAVID

Yeah, you're right.

ALLEN

With Nancy – no problem...on the living room floor? Let's do it! Against the stove? Why not? In a chair, a bathtub, on a sofa...it don't matter...

DAVID

You ever do it in a bed?

ALLEN

Once in awhile...and another thing – she requires very little maintenance...you know what a typical Saturday night is for us?

DAVID

What?

ALLEN

A movie, if there's something good playing in the neighborhood, then Vinnie's for a pizza, hop over to PG's for a few beers – that's it.

DAVID

A movie...let's see...pizza's what...?

ALLEN

About 12 bucks over there (and it's good)...

DAVID

...coupla beers – so you've spent – what? Forty, fifty bucks?

ALLEN

Around there...and she's happy, she's content...shit, man – she's grateful...

DAVID

With Elaine I'm always figuring out what to do for Saturday night. Last week it was bowling...we doubled with her friends Shelly and Howie – I can't stand them...

ALLEN

Gentile woman aren't into that comparing game Jewish broads get into...they weren't raised the same way, I guess...

DAVID

...guy's a CPA with arms like play dough, toochis on him as big as a beach ball – he beats me.

ALLEN

...maybe it's genetic...all those generations of families plowin' the fields together, getting the harvest done...standing by their men – that sorta stuff, you know?

DAVID

...fuckin' bowling – it ain't a sport, it's...ahhh...

ALLEN

Fuckin' RECREATION...

DAVID

Right.

Pause.

ALLEN

I don't know, Dave...I just feel – GOOD, ya know?

DAVID

Hmm...

ALLEN

I feel like this is my HOUSE...I'm King-of-the-Castle here...

Pause.

DAVID

You tell your mom?

ALLEN

Yeah, I called there...they know. I gave 'em the new number...

DAVID

It's her number though, right?

ALLEN

Yeah, it's her number...we're not gonna change the number, you kidding?

DAVID

Well, I don't know, maybe you want your name on it put in the phone book, just in case...

ALLEN

Naw, I been callin' people, giving the the number...it's fine...she picked up those cards from the Post Office had me fill them out – change of address...

DAVID

Oh, yeah...

ALLEN

That's what I mean...I didn't even think of it...someone like Linda or - what'sherface - Joan, it wouldn't 've OCCURRERED to them...

DAVID

JOAN...

ALLEN

My mail would've piled up the old place – they send it back, I could be involved inna
SUIT (god forbid) or maybe a pre-approved credit card, whatever...

DAVID

You ever hear from her?

ALLEN

Who?

DAVID

Joan...you still in touch?

ALLEN

Are you kidding?

DAVID

No, huh?

ALLEN

FUCK HER! That ball-busting, manipulating, bitch-of-a-whore's-litter – CUNT!!! My
worst nightmare – I run into her!

DAVID

She's an acquired taste.

ALLEN

I can't believe I went with her.

DAVID

Two years...

ALLEN

...the Gulag years...

DAVID

You learn from your mistakes, is all...

ALLEN

The Whore From Gehenna...

(Pause.)

Why'd you even mention her name?

DAVID

YOU did.

ALLEN

That was in PASSING! YOU did it deliberately!

DAVID

Take it easy.

Sound of a key in the front door lock. The door opens. NANCY enters carrying packages

ALLEN

Hi, honey...

She stops. Takes in the cigar smoke, the cigars...

NANCY

What -

ALLEN

You remember David...

NANCY

Yes, hi.

DAVID

Hi.

Pause.

NANCY

Allen -

ALLEN

What?

NANCY

You know better...

ALLEN

I...

NANCY

Not in the apartment. In the hallway, the lobby, the roof – those were the rules.

ALLEN

We didn't expect you back so soon.

NANCY

Rehearsal ended early...

(she goes to the door, props it open with a chair or small table.)

Let's keep the door open for awhile, shall we? Allen, open the window, would you?

ALLEN gets up. Starts opening the window. NANCY goes to the kitchenette, starts putting out the groceries.

DAVID

Oh – we're not supposed to...?

NANCY

It's not your fault, David. You didn't know the rules. Allen's the one who's guilty...

DAVID

Where should I put - ?

NANCY takes a dish, pours some water into it.

NANCY

Here -

(she indicates Allen's cigar.)

His is on the table.

DAVID

Sure.

DAVID drops both cigars into the dish. NANCY dumps them into a wastepaper basket.

NANCY

Thanks. Allen – open the bedroom window as well...poor Helga...

(to ALLEN.)

You didn't hear her complaining?

ALLEN

Sorry...

NANCY

(To DAVID.)

I'm fixing supper. We're having cold cuts and potato salad. You're welcome to stay,
there's going to be plenty left over.

DAVID

Thanks, but Elaine made reservations at Trovatore's.

NANCY

(To ALLEN.)

You've told me about Elaine...we'll have to double date sometime...

ALLEN

Sure.

DAVID

Sure...well, I better get going...

DAVID stands in the doorway.

NANCY

Nice seeing you again.

DAVID

You, too.

(To ALLEN.)

Talk to ya,

ALLEN

Yeah.

DAVID exits.

NANCY

Sweetheart, why don't you set the table. I'm going to change...and I bought some lovely chardonnay for us...we'll have it with our supper...

She exits into the bedroom.

ALLEN

Okay.

NANCY

(From off-stage.)

Hello, my sweetums...my Helga...howse my sweet Helga? Did smoke get in your eyes, hmmm?

She puts on a CD; Mozart's Der Holle Rache Kocht In Meinem Herzen from The Magic Flute. ALLEN has been setting the table. He stands still, staring at the open front door.

SLOW FADE

THE PLAYWEIGHT SPEAKS:

Inciting incident for the piece (inspiration)?

I gave myself a writing exercise : write something as if I were another playwright. In this case - David Mamet. I used a semi-autobiographical incident & spun it into GILT.

Themes?

The role 'status' plays in relationships. As well as the interplay between the 'social' persona & the 'interior' emotional self.

Influences, likes, etc.?

Jean Anouilh , Paddy Chayefsky, Jean Francaix, Sid Caesar/Your Show of Shows.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Michael Hardstark's plays have had productions and readings throughout the USA, including; the Chelsea Theatre Lab, NYC, the Neapolitans Theatre, Chicago, the Prescott Arts Center, Prescott, AZ, the Jewish Repertory Theatre/92nd st. Y, NYC, and the Greenway Court Theatre in Los Angeles, featuring Alfred Moliina and Harold Gould.

His play, The Last Laugh, is published by Samuel French, Inc.
He is a member of the American Renaissance Theatre Company and the Dramatists Guild.

OxyContin Follies(S)

By Steve Gold

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes... The year may be 1998 in Steve Gold's scathing seriocomedy, but what better way to celebrate the shit show of 2020's pandemic than a spirited theatrical jaunt into the introduction of yet another source of death and devastation in our society? That's right, folks; it's the opioid crisis, with Oxycontin as the backdrop as well as the title role. There is no song or dance in Oxycontin Follies, rather it offers a time capsule glimpse into just a few of the forces that released the scourge of these drugs into the general population. We've got Ginger, a hopeful and hungry drug rep from Purdue Pharma where she's been groomed for "humanitarian service" with incentives, retreats, and motivational seminars. Then there's Dr. Bill Van Zandt, a young physician who admittedly has limited experience with pharmacology, but wants to do right by his patients. It's a lethal combination. To top it off, there's fantastic dialogue without a wasted word that leaves us feeling sucker punched even when we know where this thing is heading because, well, here we are. This timely short play is a societal call to wake up and smell the Narcan. It's totally doable on any platform from Zoom to Room - and it needs to be done.*

Ginger

Believe me, you don't have to worry about addiction. It's so safe, like taking M&Ms.

(Spacing and format are playwright's own.)

Oxycontin Follies

Cast of Characters

Ginger.....Pharmaceutical Saleswoman

Bill Van Zandt.....Physician

Time: 1998

Place: West Virginia

Scene: A darkened stage. A woman in her early twenties is stage right, well-dressed and very enthusiastic. Her name is Ginger; she is carrying a small knapsack. Stage left is a man dressed in business attire and wearing a white lab coat: Dr. Bill Van Zandt, about thirty, low-key and amiable. It is the year 1998. The place is West Virginia.

Ginger

(GOES TO HIM)

Hi! My name is Ginger.

Bill

Hello, Ginger.

Ginger

(SHAKES HIS HAND)

Isn't it a *beautiful* day?

Bill

Yes, indeed.

Ginger

I prefer warm weather myself—I'm from Florida. Newly arrived here.

Bill

Welcome to West Virginia. My secretary tells me you're from Purdue Pharma.

Ginger

Yes, I am.

Bill

How long have you been with them?

Ginger

I started three weeks ago.

Bill

How do you like it?

Ginger

Oh, it's *fabulous*!

Bill

Really.

Ginger

The possibilities are endless.

Bill

You get a commission?

Ginger

Oh, yes. And a regular salary and a bonus. Isn't that terrific?

Bill

Yes, it is.

Ginger

Purdue is a top-notch place in which to work. They have motivational seminars for us.

Bill

Do they?

Ginger

Yup.

Bill

Well, you seem to be motivated.

Ginger

And they have retreats.

Bill

Retreats?

Ginger

And they pay for it too. Isn't that *fabulous*?

Bill

Sounds good to me.

Ginger

They have all these wonderful products.

(A BIT SHEEPISH)

...And that's what I've come to talk to you about.

Bill

(TO STAGE CENTER; MILDLY AMUSED)

Is that so?

Ginger

You don't mind?

Bill

Not at all.

Ginger

I mean, I'm kind of new at this.

Bill

That's okay.

Ginger

I graduated college only a few months ago. And I've got a lot of students loans to pay off.

Bill

(WRYLY)

Tell me about it.

Ginger

This is my very first job.

Bill

Very first?

Ginger

Isn't that *fabulous*?

Bill

Fabulous.

Ginger

So if I say something wrong, it's because of my inexperience.

Bill

Don't worry about.

Ginger

Okay, great. Now, I came to tell you about a wonderful opportunity.

Bill

What's that?

Ginger

Well, I'll tell you. My company, Purdue Pharma, makes a product that will change the way we think about pain management.

Bill

That would certainly be a good thing—

Ginger

And profitable.

Bill

That too.

Ginger

And why not? Do we have to apologize for making a buck?

Bill

Of course not.

Ginger

I mean, I've got my student loans to pay off. But anyway, Purdue Pharma has this medication that does wonders where pain management is concerned.

Bill

What's the name of this medication?

(PAUSE)

Ginger

(MELODRAMATIC)

Oxycontin!

Bill

Oxycontin.

Ginger

That's right.

Bill

I vaguely remember oxycontin from my pharmacology class.

Ginger

That's *fabulous!*

Bill

Isn't it given only to cancer patients to lessen their pain?

Ginger

That was the original function, yes. But Purdue Pharma and I believe that oxycontin can be used for other types of chronic pain.

Bill

What other types? Did they alter the formula?

Ginger

I'm not sure. I'm really terrible when it comes to chemistry. But I can get back to you on that.

Bill

Great.

Ginger

But the point is, you don't have to have cancer to see the marvelous benefits of oxycontin.

Bill

No?

Ginger

No. If someone comes into your office with, say, severe back pain, oxycontin will help them immediately.

Bill

Perhaps.

Ginger

No perhaps about it.

Bill

Have you got any literature I can read?

Ginger

Absolutely!

(REMOVES SOME PARAPHERNALIA FROM HER KNAPSACK, GOES TO HIM AND HANDS IT TO HIM; HE LOOKS IT OVER)

Bill

Hmmm. Interesting.

Ginger

It's more than that: It's *fabulous!*

Bill

Maybe.

Ginger

You'll be even more impressed when you read it. I know I was.

Bill

I can see that.

Ginger

Like I said I don't know the first thing about chemistry, but I have a feeling this is very impressive, you know?

Bill

I'm a family doctor, not a pharmacologist.

Ginger

But you do appreciate the fact that pain has been undertreated for far too long.

Bill

(TO HER)

Has it?

Ginger

Of course it has. Survey after survey has shown that.

Bill

If you say so—

Ginger

We have to think of patients as health consumers. We have to give them what they want. I don't see anything wrong with that.

Bill

(PUTS THE PARAPHERNALIA IN HIS SIDE POCKET)

Well, every patient is different—did they tell you that during your training?

Ginger

No, and I'm sure that's true. But I'm not trying to tell you how to practice medicine.

Bill

I realize that—

Ginger

The point is, we now have a chance to alleviate the misery of countless people. This is humanitarian stuff we're talking about.

Bill

Humanitarian?

Ginger

Absolutely! ...And if we can make a few bucks on the side that's okay, too. Right?

Bill

I guess so.

Ginger

Here's a sample supply.

(REMOVES A BOTTLE OF PILLS FROM HER KNAPSACK, HANDS IT TO HIM)

Bill

What's the dosage?

Ginger

80 milligrams.

Bill

Sounds a bit high.

Ginger

They didn't pick that number out of a hat, you know.

Bill

I'm sure they didn't.

Ginger

They did tons of clinical work and this is the amount they came up with. Take one of these tablets and you can run the Boston Marathon.

Bill

My patients have lower expectations.

Ginger

Oh, by the way do you have children?

Bill

Yes.

Ginger

If, God forbid, one of them suffers a serious accident requires pain medication, you won't find anything better than oxycontin. And, you know, this may sound crazy, but I almost wish I have such an accident so that I have the opportunity to take oxycontin.

Bill

You have a lot of faith in it.

Ginger

I sure do!

Bill

What's the rate of addiction?

Ginger

How's that?

Bill

The rate of addiction.

Ginger

(CAREFREE)

Oh, that. Less than one percent.

Bill

That's all?

Ginger

That's what the material says.

Bill

I'll look it over.

Ginger

Believe me, you don't have to worry about addiction. It's like taking M&Ms.

Bill

M&Ms?

Ginger

You know what M&Ms are?

Bill

Yes.

Ginger

What could be more safe than that?

Bill

You tell me.

Ginger

Nothing. And nothing is safer than oxycontin. Purdue Pharma guarantees it.

Bill

I would hope so—

Ginger

Look, I would never, *never* sell anything that could have the slightest chance of harming anyone. And your patients will kiss the ground you walk on.

Bill

That's not why I got into medicine.

Ginger

But isn't a nice feeling to be worshipped?

Bill

No.

Ginger

Well, *I* wouldn't mind being worshipped.

Bill

Good for you—

Ginger

So you'll consider prescribing oxycontin?

Bill

I don't know yet.

Ginger

Just keep an open mind. That's all I ask.

Bill

I will.

Ginger

(DELICATELY)

In the meantime...can I order you...a sample supply?

(LONG PAUSE)

Bill

...Go ahead.

GINGER

(BEAMING)

...*Fabulous!*

End

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *I got the idea for the play from a book called "Dopesick," by Beth Macy; as well as a 60 Minutes piece on the same subject.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: I'm a New York City-based playwright and the author of the full-length plays *Smash the State*, *Women and Guns*, and *Star of David*, *Men of Bondage*. Several of my one-act plays have been staged at local festivals. My influences include Bernard Shaw, Eugene O'Neill and Preston Sturges. His story **Mussolini Monologue** appeared in Issue 7 (fiction).

Hands Off, We **BITE**

By Faith de Savigne

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRlich COLSON writes... As an opener to her play, playwright Faith de Savigné asks, “What does it mean to be an animal lover?” If you think you know the answer, you may be in for a surprise. Hands Off. We Bite is about our relationships with animals and what tips the scales between appreciation and domination, but it doesn’t stop with our four-legged friends or smiling porpoises. In this play, humans are included in the mix and how we treat other animals has everything to do with how we relate to each other as well as to our environment. Although the play goes right for the jugular of socio-political themes, it does so deftly and playfully, popping off the page in the context of a Zoom happy hour and a series of act-outs of animal tourism. The physical aspect of the play is impossibly entertaining but also serves an important purpose, allowing us to go to some incredibly dark places and come back out again.*

NATASHA

(She demonstrates as if she is a manatee by floating gently in space) The manatees are such shy gentle creatures. They're hard to find but our guide knew where to go.

STEVE

And off we went swimming with them.

STEVE THEN GRABS HER AS SHE TRIES TO MOVE AWAY BUT HE PULLS HER CLOSER AND ALMOST CHOKES HER LIKE HE'S SWIMMING ON HER BACK. HE HOLDS HER BY HER NECK AND IS ALMOST DRAGGING HER DOWN AS SHE TRIES TO IGNORE WHAT HE'S DOING.

NATASHA

They just eat plants, so they don't bite.

Watch out for this play – it’s got teeth. (Spacing and format is playwright’s own.)

HANDS OFF, WE BITE

By

Faith de Savigné

Characters:

STEVE

NATASHA

Setting: *STEVE AND NATASHA ARE ON A ZOOM CATCH-UP WITH FRIENDS. THEY ARE STANDING TOGETHER IN THEIR KITCHEN WITH DRINKS IN THEIR HANDS. HAPPY HOUR STARTED MUCH EARLIER.*

STEVE: *(To their friends)* Hey guys, I know you said you're animal lovers. But we prove it. Right, Natasha?

NATASHA: Well, I wouldn't say-

STEVE: We do it and go there! Like have you heard about some of our trip? We did this cool thing in Florida. As part of a kid's pool party, you can rent baby alligators to swim with!

NATASHA: *(Gestures with her hand to her nose)* They have their snouts taped shut, of course.

STEVE: Oh yeah, or else they'd take your skin off. Here, like this.

STEVE TAKES HOLD OF NATASHA AS SHE HOLDS HER LIPS SHUT. WITH BOTH HANDS ON HER MOUTH, SHE TRIES TO MOVE AWAY FROM STEVE TOSSING HER AROUND AS IF SHE IS IN THE POOL. SHE STRUGGLES TRYING TO GET AWAY FROM STEVE WHO IS HOLDING HER TOO HARD AND SHE LOOKS LIKE SHE IS DROWNING AND HAVING TROUBLE AS SHE SPEAKS.

NATASHA: *(Breathing heavily)* It's amazing swimming with them. I don't know how they feel about the chlorine, but they just swam for their lives. The pool was full of screaming kids, barking dogs going after them and we just-

STEVE: Wanted to have the experience of touching them.

NATASHA: *(She flicks Steve off of her and faces friends)* I know, you look how I felt. It was scary. I thought I was going to drown. Those poor little gators. Oh, tell them about the Everglades.

STEVE: Yeah, we drove down and got a guide who takes you to swim with the manatees.

NATASHA: They're protected so it's all hush, hush.

STEVE: But it's like a huge maze of mangroves and waterways, so the cops can't find you.

NATASHA: *(She demonstrates as if she is a manatee by floating gently in space)* The manatees are such shy, gentle creatures. They're hard to find but our guide knew where to go.

STEVE: And off we went swimming with them.

STEVE THEN GRABS NATASHA AS SHE TRIES TO MOVE AWAY BUT HE PULLS HER CLOSER AND ALMOST CHOKES HER LIKE HE'S SWIMMING ON HER BACK. HE HOLDS HER BY HER NECK AND IS ALMOST DRAGGING HER DOWN AS SHE TRIES TO IGNORE WHAT HE'S DOING.

NATASHA: They just eat plants, so they don't bite.

STEVE: Yeah, like a really big inflatable sausage. The one I held on to had a big propeller gash on its back.

NATASHA: Well, you know, the power boats just run right over them.

STEVE: Oh, and I posed with one holding out its flipper like we're dancing. *(They pose for a selfie)* Cool.

NATASHA: *(To friends)* Um, yeah, I know what you're thinking.

STEVE: What? *(Turns to NATASHA)* What?

NATASHA: We kept that selfie to ourselves. We're not like those trophy hunters.

STEVE: How can you compare us?

NATASHA: You can see their point. We're using the animals to make us look good.

STEVE: But we're not killing them to do that.

NATASHA: *(To friends)* You think we're killing them with kindness?

STEVE: That's ridiculous. We just want to be with them. My favorite were the dolphins.

NATASHA: *(To friends)* It's amazing the stuff you can do with them.

STEVE: I just wanted to swim but they set you up to do this freaky thing where you can excite them, and they try to hump you like a dog. It was kinky.

STEVE THEN GETS OVERLY EXCITED WITH NATASHA. SHE PULLS AWAY BUT HE DOES WHAT THE DOLPHIN DID, A DRY HUMPH.

NATASHA: He just kept going at you.

STEVE: Yeah, endurance man. Wish I could last like that, eh?

NATASHA: *(Disappointingly agreeing)* Yeah, It was a lot of effort for him, right Steve?

STEVE: He got his rocks off, for sure.

NATASHA: Talking about rocks, did we tell you about seeing turtles laying their eggs?

STEVE: We were up all night, but it was worth it.

STEVE GESTURES TO NATASHA TO ACT LIKE A HEAVILY PREGNANT TURTLE. SHE HOLDS ONTO HER BELLY AND MOVES HER ARMS LIKE FLIPPERS AS SHE THEN FLOPS UPON THE COUNTER TOP WHILE STEVE OPENS HER LEGS AND SHINES AN IMAGINGERY FLASH LIGHT BETWEEN THEM.

NATASHA: Well we all had these lights on our heads as well and when they hauled themselves on to the shore, we ran around them.

STEVE: Then they started to lay the eggs after they dug a hole.

NATASHA: That took a while. They were heavy and ready to burst.

STEVE: We were all excited, trying to touch the eggs as they came out.

NATASHA: Yeah, squishy. I wouldn't want to give birth that way. The crowds and noise-

STEVE: Anyways, the guides did the eggs up later and place them in a more protected area.

NATASHA: Being endangered and all.

NATASHA COMES DOWN FROM THE COUNTER TOP.

STEVE: Nothing beats the call of the wild. That primal instinct-

NATASHA: It was very commercial. Like that one where you can touch the sting rays.

STEVE: I wanted to go out in the open sea but Natasha said-

NATASHA: No. I told him. 'Steve, don't do a Steve.'

STEVE: Yeah, well I hope our next trip could be Thailand.

NATASHA: Um, I was talking to them (*points*) about that. I don't think we should go.

STEVE: Why? (*Facing friends*) What did you say?

NATASHA: Now Steve. Hold on. They make a lot of sense.

STEVE: What? How?

NATASHA: It's not just them. I've been looking into this. It's really awful. That tiger place? They're drugged, bred like a puppy mill, then sold to be kept in cages by the rich.

STEVE: What? That can't be right. They said they do it for conservation.

NATASHA: And the elephants?

STEVE: C'mon, that's cultural.

SHE JUMPS ON STEVE'S BACK AND STARTS TO PULL HIS EARS AND DIG IN HER HEELS. THEN SHE SLAPS HIM.

NATASHA: Move! Oh yeah, that's what elephants do in the wild. Have people ride their back. *(She gets off)* To do that you have to break the animal's spirit.

STEVE: What's going on? Just because they're *(points to friends)* here?

NATASHA: No, hey, show them your missing fingertip. That was from an otter he tried to feed through a hole.

STEVE: *(Holds up his finger tip)* Well I just went to touch it in that zoo and man, those teeth are sharp. Nipped the tip off.

NATASHA: Steve got mad and banged the whole exhibit. They were petrified.

STEVE: I just wanted to touch him. Then I wanted to wring its neck.

NATASHA: I'm always yelling, "Steve, don't do a Steve." You know, Irwin, the guy that got speared by a sting ray?

STEVE: Would you just stop?

NATASHA: You don't see Attenborough getting bit.

STEVE: He doesn't have half the fun. Wrestling, jumping, clutching them. That's how you get close to nature. The one that caught me by surprise was that goose. I didn't know they could be so vicious. Worse than a pit bull.

NATASHA: He was just defending his flock.

STEVE: Why are you defending them? Look what he did to my leg. Clear through my pants.

NATASHA: Maybe they don't want to be groped. No one does.

STEVE: They just don't understand someone trying to help them. Stupid animals.

NATASHA: No, you're not the one getting it. A wild animal shouldn't have to obey you.

STEVE: I'm bigger and I paid for it.

NATASHA: They don't want to be manhandled by you and neither do I.

STEVE: You don't mean that. *(Comes towards her)*

NATASHA: Yeah, I do. Enough. You're too needy. Can't you understand? They can live their lives without you. Without performing, begging or licking your fragile ego!

STEVE: What? No. Hey! *(Tries to come towards her again)*

NATASHA: Don't touch me! Or I'll bite! *(Shows teeth then growls as she leaves)*

STEVE: *(To friends)* See the trouble you caused! *(Runs after her)*

THE END

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *This play is an exploration of people's blind spots. I have heard many people claim they are animal lovers but their actions can be as suspect as those of the Tiger King.*

The character Natasha starts to realise the reality of her animal interactions as she bears the brunt of Steve acting out their adventures on her.

She feels what the animals have gone through.

I was inspired to write this using true examples of what people do in order to have hands-on contact. Animal tourism is a cruel big business.

It's something I have become aware of in my travels and try not to contribute to.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Faith de Savigné has had her plays produced in the U.S.A, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Recent zoom productions: The Religionistas- BelievAbility, N.Y and Are We Doing Christmas? Open Door Playhouse, L.A.*

Beardy McBeardeRsen o o o

By Jeremy Kehoe

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

*That's right, it's time to check your privilege and check out **BEARDY MCBEARDERSEN**, a play by Jeremy Kehoe with smart comedic writing that is painfully spot on. Be prepared to navigate a tsunami of pop culture as MARY, a restaurant hostess on the outer stratosphere of Gen Y (and middle-aged at 35!) serves as our beleaguered tour guide to this entitled set, which includes PRIVILEGE, a wannabe influencer, and a bunch of dudes with goatees and ironic flannels.*

PRIVILEGE

Have you seen anyone who looks like that?

MARY

You just described every single man in here. Literally. Look around. This place looks like the cast of Spielberg's A.I. swallowed Attack of the Clones and shit out the Hipster Matrix.

The play is hilarious yet horrifying as it hits closer and closer to home. Okay, so we can't ALL be obnoxious bearded hipsters and privileged vloggers, can we? Not if we dare to identify with MARY and embrace our inner conformist. Looks like it's time to wear beige.

MARY (*releases a long moan*)

If anybody needs me I'll be weeping silently for our collective future in the corner. Thanks for making nihilism great again.

(Spacing and format are playwright's own.)

BEARDY MCBEARDERSEN

By Jeremy Kehoe

(LIGHTS UP on MARY, mid-30s, standing behind a RESTAURANT HOSTESS STAND. PRIVILEGE, mid 20s, ENTERS in mid conversation with her PHONE.)

PRIVILEGE

So, yeah, hi everyone! Li'l Nervy-Wervy here! Surprise! Not. Can you blame me if I was, though? What human wouldn't be? I mean, like, this guy could be completely the one for me. Soul mate! Imagine? Me with my own Netflix account, raising chickens and homeschooling my two-point-two, non-gender, free-range kids on YouTube? Who is this, like, adult who invaded me all of a sudden? Freaky deeky extra squeaky, right? God! I'm turning into my mom. Sick. What is happening? Ew. Gross. TMI. Gag!

(PRIVILEGE purses her lips, and flashes an exaggerated smile.)

Oh, my god. Check it out, everyone! Conformist at twelve o'clock.

(PRIVILEGE points the phone at MARY for a few seconds then turns the PHONE back on herself.)

How do I look? Look at all those hearts! This is going to be amazing! I love you all!

(PRIVILEGE walks up to MARY, her face down in her phone, typing and chuckling.)

MARY

Good morning. Welcome to –

(PRIVILEGE puts her hand up stopping MARY, her face still down.)

PRIVILEGE

Hut, tut, shut. I'm live right now!

(PRIVILEGE finally stops looking at her phone then raises it, and points it at MARY. When she sees MARY through the PHONE, she puts the PHONE down.)

I just totally made you famous. You're welcome. I'm a vlogger. I have three-thousand followers, but they're niche-market followers, so that's, like, three million in people-who-matter followers. And just a suggestion, but you may want to rethink that outfit if you want to trend.

(PRIVELEGE phone dings, and she raises the PHONE back to her eye level.)

MARY

How can I help –

PRIVILEGE

So, hi, how are you, I'm Privilege. Pleasure, pleasure, pleasure! Love, love, love!

MARY

You're here to –

PRIVILEGE

Meet someone. How do I look?

MARY

You look –

PRIVILEGE (*into her PHONE*)

I'm not asking you – so rude – I'm asking my followers. Ooh! Hearts! Hearts! Hearts!
(*PRIVILEGE puts her PHONE down and addresses MARY*)

So, I'm looking for someone. He's an Instagram influencer. He sells sock on Etsy.

MARY

He sells socks?

PRIVILEGE

Not socks. Sock.

(*beat*)

You know – hello? – as in *single* socks. Nobody wears matching socks anymore.

MARY

They don't? I thought the whole point of having socks was having two of them.

PRIVILEGE

Um, gee, let's see, I don't know: maybe because this is the twenty-first century, maybe? I'm, like, literally losing-my-mind going insane right now. Am I being Kutcher-ed right now?

MARY

I have no idea what that means.

PRIVILEGE

Of course, you don't. Is he here?

MARY

What's his name?

PRIVILEGE

His name? I have no idea. His handle's: SoyBoyBathroomBendingNeverTrending.

MARY

That's quite a mouthful.

PRIVILEGE

Oh, I'm sorry. I must've missed the Hashtag Memo. Is there, like, a character limit on handles now all of a sudden? Wait.

(*PRIVILEGE turns away, looks into her phone, primps herself, and starts talking*)

So, I just legitimately met a total, like, actual triceratops or whatever who thinks that – get this – socks should match and that there should be, like, a law putting character limits on Instagram handles. Crazy! What’s next? Plastic straws, y’all? Stay tuned, y’all!

(turns back to MARY)

PRIVILEGE (CONT’D)

So, is he here?

MARY

There’s no Soy Boy, uh – Toilet –

PRIVILEGE

Bathroom Bending Never Trending.

MARY

Right. There isn’t one of those on our reservation list.

PRIVILEGE

This is Hashtag No Filter, isn’t it? Don’t tell me my Uber –

MARY

This is Hashtag No Filter. You’re in the right place. There’s just no one with that name –

PRIVILEGE

Handle.

MARY

Sorry – *handle* – on our reservation list.

PRIVILEGE

That’s not possible. We’re supposed to meet here. Here: look. He D-M’ed me.

(PRIVILEGE shows MARY her phone.)

What does that say?

MARY *(reading)*

How about Hashtag No Filter?

PRIVILEGE

That’s me.

MARY *(reading)*

Say 10:30? Avoid the brunchers? Just threw up in my mouth a little. L-O-L.

PRIVILEGE

And what did he type back?

MARY

The letter “K”.

PRIVILEGE

That's a date!

MARY

It's a letter.

(PRIVILEGE pulls the phone away.)

I don't know what to tell you. Perhaps you could –

PRIVILEGE

Oh, my god, that food looks uh-mazing.

(PRIVILEGE takes a few quick steps DOWNSTAGE and begins snapping photos into the AUDIENCE with her PHONE.)

MARY

Miss, please don't bother the –

(PRIVILEGE stops her with her hand.)

PRIVILEGE

Can't hear you. Slipping into a triple-X food-porn coma. Soooo, dee-lish!

(MARY guides PRIVILEGE, who keeps typing and looking into her PHONE, back UPSTAGE.)

Hearts, hearts, so many hearts! Hi!

MARY

Perhaps if you told me what your friend looks like I can –

PRIVILEGE *(looks up)*

Hmm? Oh. According to his NextDoor profile pic, he's a bearded, beanie-wearing guy with a man bun he's had for, like, five years before anybody ever thought M.B's would be, like, an everywhere-on-everyone thing. But he's not going to cut his just because it's trending over-trending all of a sudden, right? I mean, why should he be the victim? How's that fair? And he's wearing a flannel.

MARY

A flannel?!

PRIVILEGE

Ironically.

MARY

Of course.

PRIVILEGE

Because –

MARY

Of the irony. Got it.

PRIVILEGE

Oh, and he's starting an arm-sleeve tattoo of random images lacking any theme, context, cultural relevance or personal meaning. But now he's thinking about having them removed because, like, everybody has tattoos now? So, you know, where's the counter-culture in that?

I don't have any tattoos. I don't do tattoos, but I'm pierced, like everywhere. Here. Look.

MARY

Please. No.

(PRIVILEGE shows MARY her phone.)

PRIVILEGE

Don't go all Rated-G A-A-R-P on me.

MARY

That's a lot of holes. Does your mother know you're a human voodoo doll?

PRIVILEGE

Are you kidding? She's my number-one Instagram Super Fan. Mom always said, "Privilege, if you think you deserve it, I'll give it to you." I did, and she gave.

MARY

And look at you now.

PRIVILEGE

I know!

(beat)

So?

MARY

So?

PRIVILEGE

Have you seen anyone who looks like that?

MARY

You just described every single man in here. Literally. Look around. This place looks like the cast of Spielberg's A.I. swallowed Attack of the Clones and shit out the Hipster Matrix.

PRIVILEGE

Wow. Somebody's old and bitter.

MARY

More like middle-aged and mindful.

PRIVILEGE

OK, I didn't understand two-thirds of what you just said, but the third I did get totally made no sense.

MARY

Because your eyes are up your ass.

PRIVILEGE

Uh, well, for the record I was literally conceived in the theater during The Matrix, so let's just say I think I know just a little more about it than you do, OK?

(A bearded, beanie-wearing MAN with a man bun wearing a flannel ENTERS.)

Oh, my god! There he is! Hi, hello, hey!

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

'Sup?

(He gives PRIVILEGE a BRO HANDSHAKE and inadvertently pulls her phone from her hand. He stops, realizes it, then hands the phone back to PRIVILEGE.)

Sorry, Bro-Hug reflex.

PRIVILEGE

Oh, that's OK! I don't mind! You're SoyBoyBathroomBendingNeverTrending, right?

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

Nah. I'm Hashtag ConformityNonConformity.

PRIVILEGE

Are you sure?

(PRIVILEGE shows him her phone)

You look just like him.

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

Well, that's not me. I'm not him.

(beat)

Wait. At least I don't think that's me. I don't think I'm him. Am I?

MARY *(releases a long moan)*

If anybody needs me I'll be weeping silently for our collective future in the corner. Thanks for making nihilism great again.

(PRIVILEGE AND HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY look at each other, confused, then turn to their phones and begin typing, searching for the definition of nihilism.)

PRIVILEGE

Oh, yeah?! Well, thanks for . . .

PRIVILEGE (CONT'D)

(PRIVILEGE and HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY begin reading.)
nothing!

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

Yeah, thanks for. . .nothing!

MARY

Exactly!

PRIVILEGE

Go! Bye! See ya! Have fun on Facebook, Mom Jeans!

MARY

Have fun in hell, Sponge-Bob Smug Rats!

(MARY STARTS TO EXIT.)

PRIVILEGE *(yells after her)*

Thanks for the budget deficit!

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

And climate change!

(MARY stops, turns.)

MARY

You know, there are some days you meet people who make you say, “Fuck it, let’s accelerate global warming.” Thanks for being them. I’m going to go make you a couple of Coal Smoothies. You’ll love it. Everybody will. Trust me.

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY *(to PRIVILEGE)*

Sounds terrible. Greatest generation, my ass, right?

PRIVILEGE

So right.

MARY *(yells behind her)*

The Greatest Generation fought in World War Two! Read a book written before you were born! Read a book! Hearts, hearts, hearts!

(MARY EXITS, mumbling/moaning “Hearts, hearts, hearts”.)

PRIVILEGE

Books.

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

Right? I’m Hashtag ConformityNonConformity.

PRIVILEGE

You so totally are. I’m Privilege.

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

I can tell.

PRIVILEGE

And, like, can I just say: Hello?! My god – your sideburns! Max adorbs!

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

Yeah, I know. Cool, right? Everybody had them, and I was, like, “Nah”, and then nobody had them so I was, like, “Hey! Window!” and decided I was going to be the one to bring them back again. Sweet, right?

PRIVILEGE

Not as sweet as that jacket. It isn’t leather, is it?

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

Vintage. Cow died way before I knew anything about it. But I couldn’t let it go to waste, right? Sustainer’s gotta sustain.

(PRIVILEGE squeezes her eyes tight.)

PRIVILEGE

I’m terrifying myself to ask, but. . .are you A-OK with A-O-C?

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

I L-U-V A-O-C. If I could be anyone but me, it’d be she.

PRIVILEGE

Her.

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

Huh?

PRIVILEGE

Nevermind. All I know is f she gets Pelosi-ed again this year, I’m going to cyber protest so *hard*.

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

I’ll never vote again.

PRIVILEGE

Ever!

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

Ever!

(The TWO began typing feverishly on their phones, then pause to snap off a series of selfies. They stop and take pictures of each other, then slowly close in on each other, still taking pictures, until they are chest to chest. They intertwine phone arms, taking pictures and begin a slow, erotic social-media dance, twirling and snapping pictures until it crescendos in a climactic, orgasmic dip.)

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

That was –

PRIVILEGE

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

Amazing.

Amazing.

(They pull out MATCHING VAPE PENS, inhale, and sigh in content.)

PRIVILEGE

Look at the love!

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

So much love.

(PRIVILEGE takes a VIDEO SELFIE)

PRIVILEGE

Somebody's in love!

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

So, just so you know – I've recently entered a completely evolved mind space – kinda like a multi-dimensional portal, like – *beyond this banality* – you know? And as totally-up-front member of the progressive male species, I feel obligated to inform you that I've recently developed a severe allergy to adult-onset monogamous relationships. It's just like my body super-dope, one-hundred-percent tapping my mind on the shoulder – hey! Tap-tap! – I'm totally not signed up for any of this at this moment in time, you know? — that my conscious-unconsciousness needs to, like, chill Han Solo for, like, fourteen parsecs in the here and now — in order for me to optimize my past, present, and future potential. Hope that's not a problem.

PRIVILEGE

Problem? Yeah! No! Me too. I mean, I'm totally evolved – more like still evolving, you know? Marriage and true love are so Friendster, right? I can't imagine.

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

Cool.

PRIVILEGE

Cool.

(The TWO start scrolling through their PHONES.)

But could you imagine how amazing this wedding dress would look?

(beat)

On my Pinterest board!

(HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY backs away)

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

Pinterest! Oh. Yeah. Pinterest. I love Pinterest. Pinterest is awesome.

(beat)

Why don't you, uh, text me a link or something?

PRIVILEGE

A text?!

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

I don't really read my texts, though.

PRIVILEGE

Oh, no, I know. Me neither. Nobody does.

(PRIVILEGE and HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY smile, then PRIVILEGE looks past him.)

Oh, my god! Is that, like, your brother?

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

I . . .don't know.

PRIVILEGE

He's kinda hot. Hotter, maybe?

(PRIVILEGE puts her PHONE up to her eye level)

What do you think?

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

I'm not really –

(PRIVILEGE walks DOWNSTAGE past him, aiming her PHONE at THE AUDIENCE.)

PRIVILEGE

Not you.

(to audience)

You!

HASHTAG CONFORMITYNONCONFORMITY

Wait. I don't even have a brother.

LIGHTS OUT

END PLAY

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *“Beardy McBeardersen” was birthed from an M.I.T. study on hipsters which concluded that hipsters who strive for non-conformity end up “conforming in their non-conformity” — trying to be different they all end up looking the same. The M.I.T. study featured a generic photo of a bearded man in a flannel shirt and a beanie — a stereotypical hipster. The researchers were then sued by a man who accused them of using his picture without his permission. It turns out the photo wasn't of him — it was just a different bearded, beanie-wearing guy who happened to look like him.*

This compelled me to create a story that could comically capture this unique generational moment where culture has fused with technology to reshape our timeless, human desire to define our identity — our collective yearning for individuality, distinction, meaning, and rebellion — onto which has now been added a layer of obsessive need for immediate

affirmation — which has yielded the ironic result of landing us staring into cell-phone screens in a collective, homogenous cyber space.

As for literary influences, four writers have had the greatest impact on my writing for different reasons: Kurt Vonnegut, for bearing witness to the horror of war and creating humanity and humor and hope from its ashes; George Orwell, for his prescient commitment to speak truth to power and his “lack of purple prose”; J.D. Salinger, for his ability to capture and convey a cultural and generational malaise; and Charles Bukowski, who was a master of finding beauty and creating poetry from an underbelly of society who had been cast aside and forgotten.

AUTHOR’S BIO: JEREMY KEHOE Jeremy hears voices that call him to create characters and place them on a quest. These characters stress him and possess him until their protests soften from howls to murmurs at the words “End Play”. Audiences have heard Jeremy’s voices at such shows as “Well, Well, Well” (Open Fist Theater Company/LA); “Beardy McBeardersen” (FINALIST: Long Island City One Act Flay Festival); “Shamamonica” (Son of Semele/LA); “Movin’ On Up” (New York Int’l Fringe Festival, Hollywood Fringe Festival); “A Few Good PB&Js”(New Jersey Repertory Company); “God Help Us”(Monster Box Theater/Mich); “Let’s Dance for a Little While” (Emerging Artists Theatre/NYC); “Existential Magic Eight Ball” (Sky Pilot Theatre Company/LA); “Urban Wash” (Emerging Artists); “Pitch Me”(Emerging Artists) “AMMO”(Hollywood Fringe Festival); “Car Play: She & Him” (Lounge Theatre/LA); and “Killing Russell Crowe”(Group Repertory Theatre/LA). He is a member of the Dramatists Guild and a former newspaper editor and reporter, where he earned awards from the NAACP and the New England Press Association. As a freelance writer he has published articles in newspapers including the Houston Chronicle, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Philadelphia Inquirer, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and Sacramento News & Review. Jeremy also strangled himself with a necktie as a PR executive for 10 years until the oxygen nearly drained from his brain.

You CAN Try IT

By George F reek

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRlich COLSON writes...*

YOU CAN TRY IT, by George Freek is a slamming good old-fashioned comedy in two acts. It's a nod to a time when plays were full of twists and capers à la Noël Coward and just what we need right now as an antidote to our collective cabin fever. What we've got here is the family matriarch haunted by the spectre of her dead husband to the point of distraction not only for her, but for everyone else in the MANION household as well. Surely someone can convince CHRISTINE that she didn't kill her husband with laxatives. And surely something can be done to get CHRISTINE to stop obsessing about this departed toxic male and start living her life. Can anyone say séance? Get ready to get your Freek on in this marvelously madcap alternative to your coffee and Zoloft– and keep an eye out for this outrageously talented playwright. Yes, you can try it (free sample below):

LORRAINE

Now mother, will you please listen to me. I'm sure that pleasure deprivation is not recognized by the American Medical Association as a certifiable cause of death! If it were, I don't think anybody would be left alive! So will you please be reasonable and eat your food!

CHRISTINE

(She looks at her food, perhaps a sausage) I keep thinking of your father.

(Spacing and format is playwright's own.)

YOU CAN TRY IT

(A Comedy in Two Scenes) by

GEORGE FREEK 515 DOUGLAS ST.
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YOU CAN TRYTHE CHARACTERS

CHRISTINE MANION, Judge's Ezra Manion's widow, 40s

LORRAINE MANION, The Judge's Daughter, 20s DELMORE

MANION, The Judge's son, 20s

CAPTAIN OLE OLSEN, A Captain in the Merchant Marines, 40s

PETER WOOD, In love with Lorraine, a chemist, 20s

DAISY WOOD, Peter's sister, in love with Delmore, 20s

THE PLACE

The Manion home

THE TIME

Recently

YOU CAN TRYScene 1

(The MANION livingroom, with breakfast nook to one side. Lights up, CHRISTINE and LORRAINE are sitting at the nook table. Dominating the livingroom is an extremely large, full-length portrait of a stern, forbidding man in a judge's robe)

LORRAINE

(Concerned) Mother, won't you please eat your food?

CHRISTINE

I'm sorry, Lorrie, I don't feel like eating.

LORRAINE

But you have to eat!

CHRISTINE

Why do I have to eat?

LORRAINE

(Sighs) That's a rather stupid question. For heaven's sake, I fixed your favorite for you.

CHRISTINE

I know, dear, and I appreciate it. But it was also your father's favorite food.

LORRAINE

Well, what of it?

CHRISTINE

If I eat it, I'll feel like I'm depriving him.

LORRAINE

Mother... he's dead.

CHRISTINE

I know that, Lorrie. And you know that...

LORRAINE

Well then...

CHRISTINE

But I get the feeling *he* doesn't know it. (She looks fearfully at the portrait).

LORRAINE

Mother! Will you please try to think rationally!

CHRISTINE

I'll try... but I also get the feeling that he thinks I'm responsible for his death.

LORRAINE

He's beyond thinking anything now.

CHRISTINE

But I... deprived him, Lorrie. He must have told me that a thousand times. He said he suffered from pleasure deprivation!

LORRAINE

Pleasure deprivation! Well, what about *you*. You certainly never got any pleasure from *him*. Didn't you deserve any pleasure?

CHRISTINE

But he said that would be sacrilegious.

LORRAINE

What does that mean?

CHRISTINE

I think it has something to do with the fact that Man was created first and Woman was created second, so Man is in the dominant position. Heavens, he used to read that passage from the Bible to me every night before we went to bed.

LORRAINE

Now mother, will you please listen to me. I'm sure that pleasure deprivation is not recognized by the American Medical Association as a certifiable cause of death! If it were, I don't think anybody would be left alive! So will you please be reasonable and eat your food!

CHRISTINE

(She looks at her food, perhaps a sausage) I keep thinking of your father.

LORRAINE

Oh, mother, please! You know you like it.

CHRISTINE

I'm sorry. I just can't.

LORRAINE
(Cajolingly) Oh, come on, just taste it.

CHRISTINE
Ugh!

LORRAINE
(Teasing) Oh, go on! Try it.

CHRISTINE
No!

LORRAINE
(Getting angry) Good grief! Just take a bite!

CHRISTINE
I can't.

LORRAINE
(Puts a piece of meat on her fork) Eat it!

CHRISTINE
Take it away! Get it away!

LORRAINE
(Starts to shove it in CHRISTINE's mouth) Eat it, you silly woman!

CHRISTINE
Ach! I'm... choking! (She has apparently swallowed the food, but is coughing and spitting).

LORRAINE
For heaven's sake! That wasn't so horrible, was it?

CHRISTINE
I'm... choking! (She gags, coughs and splutters).

LORRAINE
Oh, I'm sorry, mother... But you're so *frustrating*!

CHRISTINE
That's what your father used to say!

(Then there is a knock. LORRAINE is about to answer it, when PETER enters.)

PETER

Hello, Lorrie, Hi, Mrs. Manion...

CHRISTINE

(Chokes out) Good evening... Peter. (PETER stares at her).

LORRAINE

(Quickly) Hello, Peter. Peter, tell me, have you—

PETER

Yes, I have those pills you wanted me to analyze right here. (He holds up a bottle of tablets) And you were right, Lorrie. They're simply a strong laxative.

LORRIE

There! You see, Mother! Are you satisfied now?

CHRISTINE

But Peter, could they be... dangerous?

PETER

(A mischevious look) Well... I suppose if you took a whole lot of them, Mrs. Manion, they'd create some, um... powerful problems. (He chuckles).

CHRISTINE

I knew it! I did it! Now he'll never forgive me! (She exits, in despair).

LORRAINE

Why did you have to say that?

PETER

(He shrugs) What did I say?

LORRAINE

Oh, it doesn't matter, anyway!

PETER

(Pause. PETER prepares himself for a 'speech') Now look here, Lorrie... I came over here this evening with something important to say to you—

LORRAINE

Oh Good Grief, Peter! I'm warning you! I'm in no mood to listen to another one of your ultimatums!

PETER

(Immediately crestfallen) You're not?

LORRAINE

No, I'm not!

PETER

But—

LORRAINE

So if that's what you had in mind—

PETER

Now hold on, Lorraine Manion! Just a darn minute! You could at least hear me out! It's been quite a while since I gave you my last ultimatum, but I promise you that this will be the *final* one! I think I've been pretty patient, Lorrie, but everyone has his limit, and I've finally reached mine! So what I am saying is that we set a date for our wedding tonight, or else we just call it off! And I think that's very fair!

LORRAINE

(Pause) Yes, so do I, Peter.

PETER

(Pop-eyed with disbelief) Do you!

LORRAINE

Yes, I do, Peter.

PETER

Well... all right then... Why don't we—

LORRAINE

And that's why we have to call it off.

PETER

Yes, that's exactly what—We *what!* But... I thought you loved me, Lorrie?

LORRAINE

It's not you, Peter. It's someone else...

PETER

You mean there's someone else!

LORRAINE

Oh, Peter, don't be a baboon! You've seen my mother! She is obsessed with the fact that somehow she's responsible for my father's death! Well, I can't marry you until she's gotten over that crazy idea, and I can't promise you when that will be. It's not fair to string you along this way, holding out false hopes—

PETER

Now wait a minute, Lorrie...

LORRAINE

No! It isn't!

PETER

But I think I should decide—

LORRAINE

No, you won't! And so I think you should just get out of here right now!

PETER

(Pause) Lorrie, I take back that final ultimatum.

LORRAINE

You can't do that! You have every right to give me that ultimatum!

PETER

Nonsense!

LORRAINE

The situation isn't fair to *you*, Peter!

PETER

Who says it isn't?

LORRAINE

I do!

PETER

But for Pete's sake! It would be pretty selfish and insensitive of me to leave you high and dry at a time like this! What kind of a person do you think I am!

LORRAINE

Oh, I don't know...

PETER

You don't!

LORRAINE

Well... I do think you're very kind, Peter.

PETER

(Embarrassed) Oh. Well...

LORRAINE

But you also must be a complete idiot!

PETER

Thanks!

LORRAINE

I mean to put up with all of this!

PETER

Now listen, Lorrie... I've been considering your mother problem...

LORRAINE

Peter, I don't have a mother problem. I have a problem mother!

PETER

Be that as it may, I can see no reason why if intelligent people put their heads together, they can't come up with a solution to this mess!

LORRAINE

I know two heads are better than one, but if one of the heads is, say, *Delmore's*—

PETER

Now what's wrong with your brother?

LORRAINE

(Shakes her head) I think he's as haunted by father as my mother is!

PETER

Huh! You know I always thought Delmore was a mother's boy.

LORRAINE

Oh, he is! That's the point! He's *exactly* like her!

(Then, DELMORE enters. He does look a lot like CHRISTINE. He is also a bit dazed)

DELMORE

Do I resemble that remark?

LORRAINE

Delmore! Where have you been?

DELMORE

I've been talking to mother.

LORRAINE

Good. Then you must realize that we have a problem.

DELMORE

Oh boy, do we!

LORRAINE

I mean you've seen how bizarrely mother has reacted to father's death.

DELMORE

(He looks at the portrait, shivers slightly) Well, he does have that effect, doesn't he?

LORRAINE

Yes, I know... but after all he *is* dead.

DELMORE

(He smiles eerily) You'd like to think so, wouldn't you?

LORRAINE

And so it is up to us to convince mother that she is mistaken.

DELMORE

Boy, I'm with you there!

LORRAINE

Thank heavens!

DELMORE

Um... mistaken about *what*?

LORRAINE

Listen, I know it sounds strange, Delmore... but I think mother actually believes that father is haunting her!

DELMORE

(He stares at LORRAINE) And you *don't*! Let me tell you when I look at that portrait I get the chills up my spine... And my blood runs cold! (He shivers, has a haunted look)

PETER

(Pause) That's not good.

LORRAINE

Peter! Now listen, Delmore... are you a man or a wimp!

DELMORE

(He shivers again) What do *you* think!

LORRAINE

But... I know you disliked father.

DELMORE

Oh Lordy yes! The things he did to me I wouldn't do to my worst enemy! (He gets a gleam in his eye) Well, yes, maybe to my *worst* enemy! So I guess that gives you an idea of what we're talking about! I mean there was that cute puppy he brought home, and then gave it to the neighbor's kid! The kid who had beat me up! And those camping trips when he left me alone in the woods without food! Oh, I know, I know! He said he wanted to make a man of me... but at *six*! I ask you! And then the ladies of the evening...

LORRAINE

(Shocked) He didn't!

DELMORE

No, he didn't! That's something else I hold against him. I tell you he still gives me the willies!

LORRAINE

All right... but Delmore, you have to get over it! He is dead!

DELMORE

But that's just my problem. Don't you see?

LORRAINE

(Pause) No, I don't. (To PETER) Do you!

PETER

(Shrugs) Delmore often has me stumped.

DELMORE

The point is I never had a chance to tell him how I felt about him. Whenever I tried, I got weak-kneed and backed down. And then he goes and *dies* on me! And so I feel that wherever he is, he's laughing at me knowing I never had the courage to face up to him... Knowing that I was a *coward*! (He turns and buries his face in his hands, but peeks out to see what effect he's having).

PETER

(Shakes his head) Not nice...

LORRAINE

Oh good grief!

(Suddenly, a knock, and then DAISY enters. She is small but feisty, a little 'manly')

DAISY

Hello, everyone. Oh boy, now what gives with Delmore!

LORRAINE

Maybe you can help us, Daisy. We're having some trouble with him.

DAISY

Oh, maaan! Not that father hang-up again!

LORRAINE

We can't get him to see reason.

DAISY

(She raises her fist humorously) You know there are times when I'd like to get him to see stars!

DELMORE

(To DAISY) And there are times when you remind me of father! What does *that* say?

DAISY

Oh, I'm sorry, babe! It's just that some times you get me soooo upset!

LORRAINE

We know what you mean!

DAISY

But then I say... (She shrugs)... if you can't beat 'em, join 'em!

LORRAINE

Daisy!

PETER

(Rather admiringly) You can say what you will! My sister is certainly practical!

DAISY

(To DELMORE, but with a wink at LORRAINE and PETER) Now come here, babe, and give me a big hug!

DELMORE

That's more like it! (He does so)

PETER

(Aside to LORRAINE) But if I know her she's got something up her sleeve.

DAISY

Oh... will you look at the time! (She takes out an extra large pocket watch) How do you like my watch, babe?

DELMORE

Your watch? (He looks at it, however, as she begins to swing it back and forth) It is very nice, isn't it? In fact... it's quite... soothing...

DAISY

It is, isn't it? Now... just keep looking at it. (As she swings the watch back and forth, DELMORE continues to stare at it, becoming mesmerized) Are you beginning to feel... relaxed?

DELMORE

Yes...I... am...

DAISY

Very relaxed...

DELMORE

(Head moving back and forth with the watch, speaking slowly) If I was any more... relaxed... I'd be... dead...

DAISY

Good. And now you are feeling very calm and very serene... aren't you?

DELMORE

(Like an automaton) Yes, I am feeling very calm... and very serene...

DAISY

And you feel like you want to take me to dinner, don't you?

DELMORE

Yes, I feel like I want to... take you to dinner...

DAISY

At a very expensive restaurant...

DELMORE

At a very expensive restaurant...

DAISY

(She stops swinging the watch) Okay. Delmore... Delmore! (She gives him a good slap on the side of the face. He shakes his head).

DELMORE

(Shaking his head) What happened?

DAISY

Nothing much... How do you feel, babe?

DELMORE

I don't know. I feel... strange.

DAISY

(To herself) Uh-oh! I wonder if it worked?

DELMORE

I mean I thought I was *upset*, but suddenly I feel very calm and serene! (Shakes his head again) And I feel like I want to take you to dinner... at a very expensive restaurant.

DAISY

Well then, come on, what are we waiting for? (She takes his arm and they start off)

PETER

Just a minute, Daisy! Where did you learn to do that?

DAISY

There's nothing to it. It's a little trick I picked up in my psych class. We'll be seeing you.

DELMORE

(In high spirits) Yes, we'll be seeing you! (They exit).

LORRAINE

That was amazing!

PETER

(Light bulb over his head, if possible) Yes, it was! And Lorrie, that gives me an idea!

(Before PETER can elaborate, there is another knock on the door, and CAPTAIN OLE OLSEN enters. He's VERY fat, wears an oldstyle naval outfit, and an eye patch)

CAPTAIN OLSEN

Hello der, Miss Lorrie, I vant to speak vith yore mudder, if dats awright vith you.

LORRAINE

Oh, it's all right with me, Captain Olsen, but I'm not sure about mother.

CAPTAIN OLSEN

(Alarmed) Py Yiminy! Is she feelin' poorly?

LORRAINE

Yes, she is. (She looks at him) Captain, I don't quite know how to say this...

CAPTAIN OLSEN

Vell now, maybe I just got it figgered out myself...

LORRAINE

Maybe you do at that. Tell me Captain. Did you know my father?

CAPTAIN OLSEN

Oh yah! And I know your mudder before your fadder efen!

LORRAINE

Did you!

PETER

(Quietly to LORRAINE, rather confused) Did he... *what?*

CAPTAIN OLSEN

Oh yah, now I ain't one to be disrespectin' the departed, put Py Yiminy, yore fadder vas a real shtinker! God Forgif me! But he vas rich and respected and yore mudder vas just a poor voman! Must I say more?

PETER

(Aside to LORRAINE) What *did* he say?

LORRAINE

Perhaps you'd better say more, Captain.

CAPTAIN OLSEN

You t'ink so! Vell den, Py Yingo, I'll belay my cards on da table! Miss Lorrie, I vas always in luf vith yore mudder! And I always figger dat she and me ve vould be married! But I had no right to ask her ven I was just a poor sailor, so I vork myself up to Captain, but Yumpin'Yehosaphat, py dat time yore mudder had married yore fadder. So it vas pack to the sea vit me, until I hear dat yore fadder has suddenly drop dead!

LORRAINE

And you've been in love with my mudd—I mean with my mother all these years!

CAPTAIN OLSEN

Yah! Of course I vent trew a coup! a vives in da meantime. Der's no point in peing a pig fool!

LORRAINE

I understand. I... think. Captain, what I'm trying to say is that mother has been acting very strangely since father died.

CAPTAIN

Yah! Py Yiminy I seen dat! But den I figger it's pen many long year since I last seen yore poor mudder! And den losin' yore fadder like dis...

LORRAINE

No, it's not that. In fact, just between you and me, Captain, I don't think mother ever really loved father...

CAPTAIN OLSEN

No! Vell vat about dat!

LORRAINE

That's right. Mother is upset... about something else.

CAPTAIN

Vell vat can I do! I'll do anyt'ing for yore mudder, Py Yolly!

LORRAINE

Well, the truth is mother feels that father is still exerting an influence over her... even from the *grave*!

CAPTAIN OLSEN

Frum da Grafe! Now hold on! Yore making my hair stant on ent, yung laty!

LORRAINE

But then you see our problem?

CAPTAIN OLSEN

Yah! I see dat somepody's off der nut!

LORRAINE

But it's only temporary, I assure you! Can you help us!

CAPTAIN OLSEN

I'm sorry, Miss Lorrie, but I don't mix vit spooks! Us seafarin' men are a superstitoos punch o' lubbers! I'm sorry. (He backs quickly out of the room, tripping as he does).

LORRAINE

But Captain...

PETER

Oh, forget him, Lorrie. Besides, I can't understand a word he says. Listen to me. I have a plan! Now do you think you can get everyone together here tomorrow night around nine?

LORRAINE

(She stares at him) I suppose so... but why so mysterious?

PETER

Now listen, here's what we're going to do... (As he whispers in her ear...

BLACKOUT

YOU CAN TRY ITScene 2

(The same room. LORRAINE is speaking to CHRISTINE, who appears skeptical)

LORRAINE

But mother, we're doing this for Delmore's sake!

CHRISTINE

All right, but *what* are we doing for his sake?

LORRAINE

I've told you. We're holding a mock séance.

CHRISTINE

Yes, you've told me that. But you haven't told me how that is supposed to help Delmore.

LORRAINE

(She sighs) Look, mother, haven't you noticed how adversely father's death has effected Delmore?

CHRISTINE

Well...I have noticed something a bit strange... I thought it was lumbago...

LORRAINE

Well, it's not! So anyway, Daisy's idea was if we had a mock séance, and we could pretend to conjure up father, and then if father were to apologize to Delmore for all the terrible things he did to him, maybe Delmore could be rid of him.

CHRISTINE

But how does she propose to do *that*!

LORRAINE

Oh, I don't know... something with smoke and mirrors I suppose.

CHRISTINE

(Suddenly anxious) It sounds like exorcism to me!

LORRAINE

It's harmless, I'm sure, mother. (Pause, nervously) I'm leaving the details to Daisy.

CHRISTINE

(She shivers slightly) I don't know about this, Lorrie. It sounds decidedly unhealthy!

LORRAINE

But mother! Don't you want to help Delmore?

CHRISTINE

Well... if I really thought this might help him...

LORRAINE

Don't you want to help him get over this guilt he feels about father?

CHRISTINE

(Perhaps also thinking of herself) Well... yes, I do.

LORRAINE

So then...

CHRISTINE

Oh, all right, but how does Delmore feel about it? I mean won't he see through this flimsy ploy?

LORRAINE

We have to trust Daisy to pull it off. After all, she is his fiancée.

CHRISTINE

(Not entirely convinced) I'll tell you. *I'm* not entirely convinced.

(And then DAISY enters. She wears a multi-colored robe and other psychic attire)

DAISY

Here I am.

CHRISTINE

(Looks at her) You certainly are!

DAISY

What! Am I late?

LORRAINE

Well no. Peter had to work, and I'm afraid we don't know *where* Delmore is.

DAISY

Uh-oh!

CHRISTINE

Frankly, I'm beginning to feel very nervous about this whole thing!

DAISY

Well, Mrs. Manion if you want to forget about it that's okay with me...

LORRAINE

(Aside to DAISY, kicking her) Daisy!

DAISY

But I know *Delmore* is really counting on your support!

CHRISTINE

He is? (She sighs) Oh well... what harm can it do?

LORRAINE

Now that's the spirit.

CHRISTINE

(Alarmed, she looks at the portrait) Don't say that!

LORRAINE

Oh, good grief...

(And then DELMORE suddenly enters. He is quite anxious, is biting his nails)

DELMORE

Here I am, but I don't mind telling you I'm quite anxious about this.

LORRAINE

(Smiling awkwardly) Yes! That's exactly what we were just telling mother.

DELMORE

Then you're really going through with it?

CHRISTINE

What do you mean? But I thought...

LORRAINE

(Quickly) That's right, Delmore! Just like you wanted us to!

DELMORE

But... I can feel something in the air...

DAISY

You can feel it too! Oh, that's a very good sign! (She kicks him) And can you feel that?

DELMORE

Ouch!

CHRISTINE

(To LORRAINE) Lorrie, what is going on? You told me Delmore was really looking forward to this.

DAISY

(To DELMORE) Oh hey, I've got something in my eye, babe! Come over in the light and have a look, okay? (She pulls him to one side).

CHRISTINE

Lorrie, I want to know what's going on!

LORRAINE

Well... Daisy seems to have something in her eye. (She looks over at DAISY and DELMORE. DAISY has taken out her watch and is swinging it back and forth).

CHRISTINE

But I don't think Delmore is very pleased.

LORRAINE

Sure he is.

CHRISTINE

No. I don't think so.

LORRAINE

But he will be, I promise.

CHRISTINE

No, I've had enough! I'm going to bed!

LORRAINE

Mother, you can't do that! Think of Delmore!

CHRISTINE

But I don't think Delmore is really looking forward to this at all!

(Then DAISY and DELMORE return. Delmore is now speaking automaton-like)

DELMORE

You know I'm really looking forward to this.

CHRISTINE

You are!

LORRAINE

There, you see! I told you so!

DELMORE

I'm very excited about it.

CHRISTINE

(Aside to LORRAINE) There is something *very* odd about your brother.

LORRAINE

You've just noticed that?

CHRISTINE

Now that is not nice, young lady!

DAISY

Well look, I think we can begin. When Peter gets here he can always catch up.

CHRISTINE

(To herself) Catch *up*?

DAISY

Everyone, will you please come to the table? Delmore, sit here by me, babe. (He does so) Lorrie, will you sit there? And Christine, will you sit right here, please? (They all sit) Now... We must all join hands. (They do so. CHRISTINE reluctantly).

DAISY

Now then... let us begin. (Suddenly, the lights darken).

CHRISTINE

What's that!

LORRAINE

Shush! It's only for effect.

CHRISTINE

(Whispering) But who did it!

DAISY

(Eyes suddenly rolling, speaking in a deep voice) Ashtoreth, Astarte, Ishtar... I beckon you. Come forth! Come *forth!* In the name of Asphodel and Filomel, come forth! Amo, amas, amat... veni, vidi, vici... In Hoc signo vincit... Come forth, I say! *Come forth!*

CHRISTINE

(Whispering) Oh, really...

DAISY

(High-pitched voice) What do you wish? To whom do you wish to speak?

LORRAINE

(After a startled pause) To... Ezra Manion...

CHRISTINE

What...

DAISY

(Same Voice) Ezra Manion... I can do that! Ezra! Ezra, come forth...

CHRISTINE

(Whispering, but clearly frightened now) Lorrie, this is going too far—

PETER

(Off, EZRA's voice) Who called me from my peace? What do you want? Who's there!

LORRAINE

(A Pause, finally nudging CHRISTINE) Mother! Say something! Go on...

CHRISTINE

(Frightened, whisper to LORRAINE) No! I... can't...

LORRAINE

Father, it's me, Lorraine! You treated mother terribly, didn't you? You must apologize!

CHRISTINE

(Suddenly blurts out) Ezra! I didn't blab, I promise!

PETER

(Voice of EZRA) Oh, but Christine, I *did* mistreat you! And now by the light of eternity I see how wrong of me it was...

(Some smoke; then, PETER, steps from behind the portrait, in a robe and fake beard)

CHRISTINE

Ezra!

PETER

Forgive me, Christine! I was really mean to you! Can you ever forgive me!

CHRISTINE

Oh...

DELMORE

(Suddenly emboldened, starts towards PETER) Hey, how about *me*! Remember all those rotten things you made *me* do! Don't I get some of this apology, too? Do you remember all those times when you—

CAPTAIN OLSEN

(Now comes bursting in the door) Christy, I'm here fore you! I vas chicken... (He looks at the scene before him) Yumpin Yehosaphat! Vat is dis! Esra! Iss dat you! I see I'm yust in time to gif you piece of my mind, you tirty pum! (He advances warily towards PETER, who quickly retreats).

CHRISTINE

(Suddenly lets out a scream, which has been trying to force itself out of her for a minute and a half) Ahhhhh! (And then she faints).

LORRAINE

(The lights now go completely dark) Mother! Mother?

CAPTAIN OLSEN

Christy! Christy! Ver in da heck are yuh! Christy!

(There is a minute of total darkness and silence. Then the lights come up with PETER at the light switch. He finds himself temporarily alone. Then LORRAINE comes in)

PETER

Lorrie! Where's your mother?

LORRAINE

(Dejected) Captain Olsen carried her to her room.

PETER

And... what about Daisy and Delmore?

LORRAINE

I don't know... I guess they got lost in the chaos.

PETER

Boy! What a fiasco!

LORRAINE

(Sarcastic) You think?

PETER

You don't have to say it, Lorrie! I know everything was my fault! It was my brainstorm!

LORRAINE

Well... it didn't exactly work out as planned, did it?

PETER

If only I'd stayed behind the portrait!

LORRAINE

I don't think that really mattered, Peter.

PETER

I honestly thought that Captain Olsen was going to murder me!

LORRAINE

(After a pause) Peter look here. (Pause) We *are* going to be married next month!

PETER

I know you're right, Lorrie, I was a big... (He looks at her, shocked) What! We *are*?

LORRAINE

(Resolute) Yes, we are! My mother is an adult! I've tried to help her! Heaven knows I have, but enough is enough! She has to deal with this... *fantasy* of hers by herself!

PETER

(Pause) But... you realize I probably pushed her over the edge tonight?

LORRAINE

Oh, gosh! Peter, how in the world did you ever think up such a *hare-brained* scheme!

PETER

Now wait a minute! I mean... you went along with it!

LORRAINE

That's because I was desperate! You should have realized that!

PETER

Now that's not fair! I think—

(Then suddenly DELMORE and DAISY re-enter. They both look rather pleased)

DELMORE

Well did I do okay? I mean wasn't I... *fantastic*! Did I stand up to him or not!

LORRAINE

Well... yes... you did. (She looks at PETER. He shrugs).

DAISY

I always knew he had it in him. You just needed a little help. Didn't you, babe?

DELMORE

And will you look at what Daisy gave me for an engagement present! (He reveals her watch).

LORRAINE

Delmore... did you say 'engagement present'?

DAISY

(A broad smile) That's right... next month...

DELMORE

No, next *week*... (He suddenly swings the watch back and forth in front of her)... isn't that right... dear?

DAISY

Stop that! I said next *month*!

DELMORE

(Shakes his head, about the watch) I can't seem to get the hang of this thing.

DAISY

(To PETER and LORRAINE) So... now it's your turn.

PETER

(He looks at LORRAINE, who looks depressed).

(Before she can speak, CHRISTINE enters with CAPTAIN OLSEN, arm-in-arm)

CAPTAIN OLSEN

(Smiling) Yore mudder iss fine now, Miss Lorrie.

LORRAINE

She *is*!

CHRISTINE

And I feel so *relieved*!

LORRAINE

You do!

CHRISTINE

Yes! I feel like a tremendous *weight* has suddenly been lifted from me! (Then they all look at CAPTAIN OLSEN, somewhat shocked).

CAPTAIN OLSEN

Yumpin' Yiminy, vhy iss everypody lookin' at me! (Then everyone laughs, and...)

THE PLAY IS OVER

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *I've had many influences ranging from Shakespeare to Ibsen, Strindberg, O'Neill and Pinter. But mostly as material for parody. I look for the pretentious or the emotionally exaggerated, then carry it one step farther. The result is always parody! Humor is therapeutic. That's a cliché, but expressions become clichés because they're true, I guess.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: George Freek has spent playwrighting residencies at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre; Southern Methodist University; Southern Illinois University; and Eastern Illinois University. His plays have been published by Playscripts, Inc.; Lazy Bee Scripts; Blue Moon Plays; and Off The Wall Scripts.

Behind the Shed (Shed shed shed...)

By Giselle Muise

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

This play is so real you might wonder if it's a play at all, or if it's one of your own memories. Behind the Shed by Giselle Muise is a micro drama with a stunning arc in less than seven pages and layered characters that speak so naturally, you can almost hear the rise and fall of their breaths. Muise's writing is superb – the flow of language goes by like a piece of music with punctuation guiding the score. We are drawn into the scene, not as voyeurs, but as if we were part of it. Matt and Danielle are college students home for the holidays. They've known each other since childhood. Now they're in Matt's childhood bedroom, sharing a bed for the night. I don't want to give anything away, so I'll stop right there and let you wonder...

DANIELLE

...what if you didn't have to wonder?

MATT

Danielle.

DANIELLE

But what if you didn't?

(Spacing and format is playwright's own.)

Behind the Shed

by

Giselle Muise

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Cast of Characters

DANIELLE (F), 20s, a student home from college for the holidays, in a relationship

MATT (M), 20s, Danielle's longtime family friend, also home from college for the holidays, single

Setting

Matt's bedroom in his family home, Virginia Beach, VA

Time

The Present

(MATT's bedroom in his family home, after everyone else has gone to sleep. It's been tidied. DANIELLE lays next to him, both staring up at the ceiling, whispering)

DANIELLE

Hey, thanks again for letting me stay here.

MATT (playfully)

Duh.

DANIELLE

It's so strange, I feel like we haven't breathed the same air in so long.

MATT

You're telling me.

DANIELLE

So, catch me up. What's new? How's school?

MATT

School's school. I started helping out with the wrestling program—

DANIELLE

That's amazing!

MATT

Ha, thanks! Yeah, it's a welcome relief from everything else.

DANIELLE

Classes are no good?

MATT

I'm not really passionate about engineering?

DANIELLE

Who is?

(They laugh softly together)

MATT

I've actually been thinking about leaving.

DANIELLE

What would you do?

MATT

Go into the Navy, probably.

DANIELLE

(props up on her elbow to look at him)

No way.

MATT

I mean, that's what my dad did. And I've been thinking about it for a long time, even before school...I don't know.

DANIELLE

If that's what you want to do, do it. Why waste time doing anything else?

MATT

Yeah...what about you?

DANIELLE

Ugh, god, where do I start? (sincerely) School's school here, too. But, like, in a good way? I don't know, I always liked it—

MATT

And were very good at it—

DANIELLE

Thank you. I'm just surprised that people still don't give a shit. Like, you're paying to be there...I don't know, maybe when I get into more classes in my major...

MATT

What's your major again?

DANIELLE

Public Relations.

MATT (earnestly)

I'm sorry—what is that again?

DANIELLE

That's the thing, I *don't know*.

(They laugh again, a bit louder this time)

MATT

You could do something else.

DANIELLE

What else is there?

MATT

Theatre.

DANIELLE

...ugh, I don't know.

MATT

You know, someone very wise once told me, "If that's what you want to do, why waste time doing anything else?"

DANIELLE

She sounds very wise.

MATT

I never said she was a she.

(They laugh even louder. MATT shushes them, still laughing)

MATT

Shhh, everyone's asleep!

DANIELLE

(playfully whisper-yelling into the darkness)

Hey! If you're awake, clap twice!

(Silence. DANIELLE looks at MATT like, "See?" More laughter before they both begin to calm down)

DANIELLE

I'm never going to be allowed over here again.

(Beat)

MATT

Do you remember when you lived in the Swanton house, and you had that huge backyard with a shed?

DANIELLE

The one you kissed me on the cheek behind?

MATT (caught)

That's the one.

DANIELLE

And then we both ran into the house and sat on the couch, so nervous?

MATT

We were *so* nervous!

DANIELLE

And then you left. Like, in a huge hurry!

MATT

I was so nervous!

DANIELLE

Why?!

MATT

You're joking, right?

DANIELLE
(knowing what she's doing)

No...

MATT

Well...I was nervous because I really liked you!

DANIELLE

You did not.

MATT

Danielle.

DANIELLE

OK, fine. But if you liked me, why did you leave?

MATT

I—I didn't know what to do. We were, what, 8 or 9? (jokingly) I probably got a boner and ran home.

DANIELLE

Ha ha, very funny.

MATT

I don't know! I had never kissed a girl before that.

DANIELLE

Really?

MATT

Really.

DANIELLE

Not even on the cheek?

MATT

None of the many cheeks.

DANIELLE (amused)

Ew.

MATT

What?!

DANIELLE

Nothing.

MATT

Good.

(Silence)

MATT

And ever since that day, I've wondered what it'd be like to really kiss you.

(Beat)

DANIELLE

Oh.

MATT

Yeah...I'm sorry if that comes off—

DANIELLE

No.

MATT (nervously)

No what?

DANIELLE

No, don't be sorry.

MATT

Oh.

(Silence, then DANIELLE turns to face MATT)

DANIELLE

(Soberly, not pressing)

So, you're still wondering that?

MATT

Yeah. I'm still wondering that.

DANIELLE

...what if you didn't have to wonder?

MATT

Danielle.

DANIELLE

But what if you didn't?

(MATT turns to face DANIELLE)

DANIELLE

Why waste time?

(MATT kisses DANIELLE, deeply, passionately, holding her face in his hands. It continues until they are both certain they no longer have to wonder. DANIELLE pushes away suddenly)

DANIELLE

I can't do this.

MATT

Oh no, no—

DANIELLE

I'm so sorry—

MATT

No, I'm sorry—

DANIELLE

It's just, I live with him—

MATT

I know—

DANIELLE

Please forgive me—

MATT

Forgiven.

(They both sit up in silence for a moment,
DANIELLE's head in her hands. MATT is still)

DANIELLE

Should I go?

MATT

You don't have to go. I won't do anything.

DANIELLE

OK.

(DANIELLE and MATT lay back down, facing away from one
another, not breathing. They stare off either side of the bed in
stark silence)

CURTAIN

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

Behind the Shed is wholly based on the longest friendship I've ever had, with a golden-hearted athlete and now-Navy-guy I met in elementary school. This night really happened, and we didn't speak for several years after. I recently started wondering, did I really make the unselfish choice I thought I did?

In writing, I discovered the answer was 'no.'

I also had him read this piece, though he didn't remember it the same way. His happy ending—or, happier ending—was my shame. His love, my need to be loved.

I am forever inspired by honesty in story, stage and music—and am built by the courage of Glennon Doyle, Jodi Picoult, Annie Baker and Sara Bareilles.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Giselle Muise is a NYC-based actor, singer/songwriter, playwright and educator. Notable credits include: Jobsite Theater's *The Threepenny Opera* (Polly Peachum), TampaRep's *Stupid Fucking Bird* (Nina), and FringeNYC's *Full: The Musical* (Emily). Other credits include *Sweet Charity* (Nickie), *9 Parts of Desire* (Loyal) and *Shruti Gupta Can Totally Deal* (Shruti) at American Stage's 21st Century Voices: New Play Festival. Most recently, as a result of live theatre's brief hiatus, Giselle founded Theatre Unmasked—a virtual group that explores important contemporary stories and facilitates conversation around unique and marginalized voices in the theatre. Her passion lies in finding deep connection and self-actualization through theatre and music, as well as the written word.

YOU'RE going to *LOVE* this ONE (1)

By Paul Bowman

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes:*

Paul Bowman's YOU'RE GOING TO LOVE THIS ONE, is an entertaining take on a "screenplay" that exploits cinematic tropes to the point of absurdity. This fictional movie keeps topping itself and fits in pretty much everything you can think of in a Hollywood ballbuster including wistful ghosts (with great complexions!), a UFO and everything in between. You'll also get STAR and COSTAR pulling out their acting chops in exchanges such as this:

What do you grow? asks STAR. Farmer looks nervous, finally says
doughnuts, we grow doughnuts. STAR instantly knows better.

Or this:

STAR says, What about me? COSTAR looks at his wrists and gently pulls
his hands apart. Apparently they forgot to knot his rope.

And how about this one?

Helicopter tilts. COSTAR asks "Do you know how to fly this
thing?" STAR shakes his head no.

There's a fight scene, a love scene, a politically correct reference to hillbillies, a not-so-politically correct reference to a sexy lesbian, and of course, schmaltzy music. All that and a screenwriter/narrator who lets us in on the process of movie magic:

CUT TO: Judge sitting on the bench. He brings the gavel down and says
TEN YEARS. (For what crime? I haven't worked that out yet.)

*I dare somebody try and shoot this. You never know, maybe it's already in production.
(Spacing and format is playwright's own.)*

YOU'RE GOING TO LOVE THIS ONE

A ROMANTIC-HORROR-COMEDY-DRAMA

OPENING CREDITS

HANDSOME MALE STAR late forties, a few wrinkles on the face, but still ruggedly handsome

STUNNING FEMALE COSTAR barely twenty-five, this hottie is HANDSOME MALE STAR'S romantic love interest. Her role was not integral to the plot initially, but it has been beefed up.

SUPPORTING ACRESS late thirties. She used to be a STUNNING FEMALE COSTAR. Unfortunately her looks have faded some. She has done the classics and Broadway and won some awards, but lately she's been doing dinner theater, television commercials, and the local weather on station WXWX in Billings, Montana.

THE HOOK

The front parlor of an abandoned, decayed mansion. Moonlight comes through the tall windows. In the parlor an old grand piano, its keys yellow with age. In the center of the room a couple shuffle-waltz. Although they are dead they are not corpses or ghosts. Their gray skin is smooth, unwrinkled. Their faded, formal clothing once spoke of glamour. Their shoes scrape the wooden floor. Their eyes are large with sorrow. They gaze at each other with desperation only they can know and understand from a lifetime of loving each other and privately lusting after others.

Exterior shot of the mansion. In the moonlight a young boy and girl, both five, stand on the walk that leads to the massive front door. The children hold hands. Their faces grieve. Why? They slowly walk toward the massive door as the full moon slips

behind a cloud. Four small hands push the giant door open. It CREAKS.

We are inside. The infirmed couple stop, turn, and look at the children who are, can you guess?, themselves many years ago. They look on their previous selves with a wisdom we can never possess.

On top of a bookcase a crow watches everyone and everything. (A symbol of supernatural intelligence, in case you missed it.) It flies down and lands on the keyboard of the piano. The black bird carefully walks across the keys (can we train a crow to do this?). The result: a gentle, sad melody sure to tug at your heart. SLOW FADE OUT.

ACT ONE

MALE STAR is a drug counselor and his client, wait for it, is the FEMALE COSTAR. She is haggard and uncooperative. They despise each other. A shouting match erupts. SUPPORTING ACTRESS, MALE STAR'S boss, enters the office and threatens to fire MALE STAR for being belligerent (which is the way a real man is supposed to be, you realize). MALE STAR states the facts as he sees them. They take this discussion into the hallway. Meanwhile COSTAR opens the window and attempts to escape. MALE STAR enters and grabs her from behind. COSTAR turns and smashes his nose. When he bends over to stop the bleeding, COSTAR runs out the door, but SUPPORTING ACTRESS is in the hallway. They fight. SUPPORTING ACTRESS accidentally rips off the blouse of the COSTAR which exposes her magnificent (use a close-up) rack. MALE STAR gets a good look at it. We should all be so lucky.

CUT TO: Judge sitting on the bench. He brings the gavel down and says TEN YEARS. (For what crime? I haven't worked that out yet.)

CUT TO: COSTAR is in a prison cell with a sexy lesbian. Actually the entire

cell block is filled with hot, young women, some with their prison shirts off (A SLOW PAN). One prisoner bends over in a semi-seductive pose to polish her toenails.

COSTAR reads a law book.

Visitor area. STAR and COSTAR. STAR informs COSTAR that he knows she is innocent of the crime for the terrorist bombing that occurred in Paris but there is no possibility of proving that to the criminal justice system unless they both are on the outside and find the evidence themselves. COSTAR agrees. He discusses escape plans. She says with a sad and forlorn expression that escape is impossible.

COSTAR'S CELL at night. She looks real, real sad. (Lonely also.) She misses the human interaction with STAR (not to mention that it's been a hell of a long time since she's had any physical intimacy). One of the prison bitches, I mean actresses, sings a wistful song (EMOTIONAL HIGHLIGHT). The women prisoners listen. They too have problems. BACKGROUND MUSIC. Strings play the melody of the song. Very sweet and sad, but not too syrupy. (BIGGER EMOTIONAL HIGHLIGHT.) FADE TO BLACK.

We hear a ticking clock. Is it a bomb? Ticking clock sound slowly changes into the whir of helicopter blades.

BRIGHT DAYLIGHT. PRISON EXERCISE YARD. A helicopter descends from the sky and lands in the yard. COSTAR runs to copter and hops in. INTERIOR OF HELICOPTER. It is piloted by MALE STAR. They give each other meaningful looks. SOUND of gunfire from the guard towers. MALE STAR and COSTAR kiss (OPEN DISPLAY OF AFFECTION). Helicopter rises into sky. Gunfire increases. SOUND of helicopter motor misfiring, an ominous hiccupping. More meaningful looks between STAR and COSTAR. Helicopter tilts. COSTAR asks "Do you know how to fly this thing?" STAR shakes his head no. LONG SHOT: helicopter tilts, spins, and falls from

the sky. LONGER SHOT: helicopter falls like a rock over a large lake. BLACKOUT. There is a tremendous splash, then COSTAR says: I can't swim! STAR says: Me neither! COSTAR: I hate you!

ACT TWO

CUT TO: NIGHT. STAR and COSTAR are running on a dirt path in the woods. STAR and COSTAR hide behind a tree. They listen to two sets of footsteps stomping through the underbrush. Two people breathe heavily (not STAR and COSTAR). A puppy comes up to them, basically asking for friendship. They listen for their pursuers (there are two of them) and ignore the dog. The dog begins to bark. A flashlight beam probes the darkness. Two voices in the dark argue: This way! No, over here. The dog barks louder. STAR grabs dog and squeezes its throat to silence it. SOUND of pursuing footsteps get closer, as does the flashlight beams (now two of them). STAR looks down at the puppy he's choking. The dog is about to die. STAR tears up a little and then decides to let the animal live (PUT MUSIC WITH THIS). STAR stands with dog in his arms, preparing to sacrifice himself. He gestures with a nod of his head to COSTAR that she should stay hidden (THUS DISPLAYING HIS NOBLE INTENTIONS). STAR walks forward to give himself up. COSTAR also stands and walks beside STAR (THUS DISPLAYING HER INTEGRITY AND HER LOVE FOR THE STAR). They slowly march forward. It is certain that now both are going to prison forever. The two pursuers step forward out of the midnight gloom. COSTAR'S arms are raised in a sign of surrender. It is a father and his teenage son, both very rural people (not hillbilly! I refuse to use that term.) They see the dog in STAR'S arms and exclaim with

happiness. “Fifi! Fifi! You’re ok! Thank you for saving our Fifi!” COSTAR quickly lowers her arms. Son takes Fifi out of STAR’S arms and kisses the dog. Father again thanks STAR and COSTAR and invite them to his farmhouse for coffee and doughnuts.

ACT THREE

Farmhouse exterior night. Kitchen interior. Everyone sits around the table, drinking coffee and eating doughnuts. COSTAR inserts a long john pastry into her mouth, very slowly and seductively. Farmer’s boy watches her, entranced, and, distracted, pours his cup of coffee all over the front of his shirt. He feels no pain. The discussion between Farmer and STAR is the local drought that is ruining the crop. What do you grow? asks STAR. Farmer looks nervous, finally says doughnuts, we grow doughnuts. STAR instantly knows better. He knows doughnuts grow in factories and tells the farmer so. Farmer scoots his chair back. Immediate fist fight! Exciting! Farmer’s son stands and in a selfless move to protect his dad throws himself across COSTAR’S body. STAR and Farmer fight for five minutes. Chairs break, a pie safe falls, doors to the cabinets splinter, the kitchen faucet spouts a torrent of water, but the two men are unable to hurt each other. Finally, Fifi, brave dog, jumps up about six feet and viciously clamps her jaws on STAR’S neck. BLACKOUT.

Barn interior. STAR is on the dirt floor. His hands are tied behind his back. COSTAR is nearby. She is bound the same way. She passionately informs him on the magnitude of his stupidity. Arguing about doughnuts! And now she has to use the bathroom. Her period has started. (Wait. Better cut that part out.) STAR backs up to COSTAR. His fingers skillfully unties the knotted rope binding her wrists. She starts to walk away. STAR says, What about me? COSTAR looks at his wrists and gently pulls

his hands apart. Apparently they forgot to knot his rope. COSTAR goes left to explore. STAR goes right to explore. COSTAR wanders into a horse stall and SHRIEKS! CAMERA reveals a line of ten, huge rats, their eyes glistening in the dark, and their tails twitching with hunger. COSTAR runs after STAR and falls into his protective arms. He comforts her like I wish I could. They go forward and exit through the rear of the barn where they see in the strong moonlight, bales and bales of cocaine, marijuana, and cotton. There is also an old car. STAR gasps in wonder. He runs to the car, rubs an appreciative hand on the hood, and exclaims “Wow! A 67 Mustang! Do you know how valuable this is?”

A super large flying saucer hovers in the sky above the field. It is a special effects image. A symbol, a metaphor of all that is strange and mysterious. Simultaneously at the same time three loud, fast jeeps with large, bright lights race over the field toward them. The couple is in trouble and they know it. STAR takes COSTAR’S hand. They run into the barn. STAR goes to wall in the barn where the tools are kept and grabs a pitchfork. He runs to a stall, opens the door, stops, wrinkles his nose, closes the door. He goes to an adjacent stall, opens the door, stops, wrinkles his nose, closes the door. The UFO makes a mysterious humming sound. Real ominous. The jeeps park nearby. We hear deep, masculine voices. An army of five guys approaches the open rear of the barn. All carry rifles. A Leader steps forward. He has a nice beard and moustache. A charismatic villain. Leader says: You touched my car. For that you must die! COSTAR speaks up. But what about all the drugs? The cocaine, the weed?

Oh, that? replies the Leader. That is for charity purposes. International Red Cross, Sierra Club, Toys for Tots, Save the Whales. They get to spend it for their worthwhile causes. And we get to deduct it off our taxes. Everyone benefits. But, my

car, my baby, MAN! YOU DON'T DO THAT! The Leader's eyes tear up. THAT'S MY THING, MAN! MY LIFE! DO YOU NOT UNDERSTAND?

STAR knows he does not have much time, just seconds. He throws the pitchfork. It sails through the air----and the four sharp tines land on and puncture Leader's left shoe! Leader howls in great pain and fires his rifle up into the air. His men attempt to fire their rifles, but the safeties are on. STAR runs to first stall, opens the door, and a horde of chickens run out, scatter everywhere, and run toward the lawless gang. There must be two hundred chickens running this way and that, all clucking like crazy. STAR quickly opens the second stall door and another horde escapes. Fifty, sixty (whatever the budget allows) grunting, squealing sows and boars, some of them really huge, running this way and that between the chickens. The larger pigs charge at the lawless gang. Only two of the gang have managed to release their safeties. They fire at the melee of animals and miss everything except dirt. The other two panic, drop their rifles, and flee. The Leader painfully removes the pitchfork from his foot. STAR runs at him, does a cartwheel or two, grabs the rifle, pitches it backwards to COSTAR, and snatches the keys to a jeep which were hanging from Leader's belt. The Leader hops about in pain. A chicken flies up and hits his head. COSTAR, rifle in hand, joins STAR. They run to a jeep. Pigs squeal; chickens cluck.

CUT TO MANSION shown in opening shot. DAYLIGHT. The mansion is new. Jeep drives up. STAR and COSTAR hop out and run to the massive front door. STAR pushes it open. SUPPORTING ACTRESS is seated at the piano. She smokes a corncob pipe. She plays slow arpeggios on the piano. C minor. The lid of the piano is down. STAR approaches and lifts up the lid. Tape to the underside of the lid are rows and rows of sticks of dynamite. And a burning fuse. COSTAR gasps. SUPPORTING ACTRESS turns her sorrowful head to COSTAR, removes the smoking pipe from her

mouth and confesses: Yes, it is true. I sold Monsieur Frenchman the bomb materials. I did. For the money. I did it for the money. I wanted to buy a Harley.

Meanwhile STAR grabs the burning fuse and extinguishes it in his bare fist. He bravely shows no pain. SUPPORTING ACTRESS rises and throws herself on STAR. She kisses him. She is actually a better kisser than COSTAR.

“Because I loved you entirely, recklessly, privately, uselessly! Now, I must confess my crime, resign, serve my time, pay the fine, toe the line. Be kind. The tragedy is all mine.” (Cut this. Too much like Shakespeare.)

COSTAR, sensing her imminent freedom, smiles gratefully. Tears up too.

SUPPORTING ACTRESS exits. Camera follows her. She is in a side yard. She looks up at the night sky. Floating between the dark, moonlit clouds is the same UFO saucer. SUPPORTING ACTRESS’S face morphs and melts. Turns rubbery. And ugly. We see that she is actually an alien! From outer space! A shaft of light shoots downward from the UFO. She mysteriously grows a third arm and begins to float upward like the evil angel she is. Heavenly but eerie music.

Back inside the mansion the butler, a tall, elegant man, enters from the hall.

“Dinner is served. Caviar, oysters, persimmons, quail eggs, leftover pizza.”

STAR grins. “Thanks for the invite, tall man. I’m starving.”

MUSIC SWELLS. FADE OUT. THE END.

It has everything, don’t you think? I don’t mean to brag, but definitely Oscar material.

My agent will call you.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

Why did I write YOU'RE GOING TO LOVE THIS ONE? The number of screenwriters probably exceeds infinity. I wrote a few myself before giving up. I have noticed from reading the log lines of contest-winning screenplays is that they tend to be formulaic. The screenwriters have dutifully read all of the screenplay textbooks. So they follow the template: hook, act one, act two, etc. And they mix genres. Horror is mashed with romantic comedy. A war drama with s-f. Anything to get a producer's attention. So, I had a little fun doing the same thing. Also, I refuse to write a typical mfa (Master of Fine Arts) story. Not every story has to be sad, tortuous, soul-wrenching experience that ends with a lyrical epiphany. I'll do that next month.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Paul Bowman has been a security guard, bartender, lumber salesman, nursing home maintenance man, etc. He also writes plays & fictions. His one-acts have been staged in ten states and in Australia (Judges Award). Another production is forthcoming in Canada. Eighteen of his stories, flash to full-length, have been published in evocatively-titled literary journals: Burnt Pine, Muse, The Listening Eye, Esthetic Apostle, Southern Fried Karma, Green Hills Literary Lantern, and so on. He has also written novels and screenplays. The publishing industry and Hollywood both ignore his brilliant efforts. It is truly baffling.

Two (2) SLeePING *Babes*

By Samantha Oty

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes:*

Samantha Oty's Two Sleeping Babes is a terrific and taut play that challenges us to examine our preconceptions about women and motherhood. Flash fiction theatre set in the 60's with a noir tone and a lens of misogyny, the play shows us the hypocrisy of a system that judges women more harshly than men and punishes them accordingly. Annie, a cocktail waitress accused of killing her children, is in no position to make her case in court, much less in the media. Even the way Annie grieves is under scrutiny:

ANNIE

Ha. You newies always bring that up. The fact that I don't cry. But why do I owe anyone my tears?

*Whether or not the reporter (Johnny) interviewing her believes her spin on the story, the question is will it sell papers? This piece is a throwback to a different time that ricochets squarely in our own. It's no wonder the adage "You've come a long way, baby," came from a cigarette company. We've got a long ways to go.
(Spacing and font size are playwright's own.)*

Two Sleeping Babes

A Short Play

By Samantha Oty

Cast O' Characters

Annie St. Claire

A young divorcee accused of killing her two daughters.

Jonathan Speck

A newspaper reporter who's written hit pieces against Annie.

Setting

A newspaper office in the 1960s.

It's late and JOHNNY is the only one working into the wee hours of the morning. A woman, dressed for a cocktail party storms onto the stage. She stops at the front door to primp her hair and adjust her bosom. She opens the door.

ANNIE

I'm looking for Johnathan Speck.

JOHNNY

Without looking up from his typewriter.

That's me.

Looks up

Mrs. St. Claire?

ANNIE pulls a gun out of her purse and points it at him, determined.

ANNIE

That's right, you son of a bitch.

She tries to pull the trigger but the gun is empty. JOHNNY lets out a sigh of relief.

ANNIE

Dammit! He told me this was loaded.

JOHNNY reaches into his desk and pulls out a bottle of scotch and two glasses.

JOHNNY

Who? Tony Romano? Or was it your other boyfriend? Pull up a chair, and we can have a drink.

ANNIE

You have a lot of nerve talking about me like that. I should sue you for slander.

JOHNNY

It's only slander if it's not true. And I gotta say, trying to shoot me the night before your trial--

Takes a drink and grimaces.

It's not a good look. Come on, one drink. You have a big day tomorrow.

ANNIE grabs a chair from another desk as he pours her a drink. She pulls a pack of cigarettes and a lighter from her purse.

ANNIE

Well, it can't make me look any worse. Thanks for all that by the way.

JOHNNY

I'm only reporting the facts.

ANNIE

You're reporting what you **think** are the facts.

JOHNNY

Your two daughters are found strangled in a park 100-yards away from your apartment. You show no signs of grief and spend your evenings at cocktail parties--

ANNIE

I'm a cocktail waitress. Where else am I supposed to serve cocktails?

JOHNNY

Neighbors say you bring home a new guy every night.

ANNIE

Well, that's just bullshit. We usually go back to his place.

JOHNNY

Then you come to the reporter's office with the intent of murder. Really, not a good look.

ANNIE

My husband--ex-husband--has been going out to bars every night. Why not report on that?

JOHNNY

He's a grieving father self-medicating.

ANNIE

Why does he get to use that excuse? I'm a grieving mother.

JOHNNY

You want the truth?

ANNIE

At this point, I don't think you're capable of telling it.

JOHNNY

The mother of two dead children going out to parties every night is going to sell a lot more newspapers than the dad drinking a few beers every night.

ANNIE

So, you're ruining my life to sell a few newspapers? TV must really be hurting business.

JOHNNY

Do I really need to run through it all again?

ANNIE

No. I get it. Ever since the divorce people look at me differently, and every week it seems like there's a new rumor floating around. Did Mrs. Lovitt tell you I locked my girls up in their bedroom, so I could entertain my gentlemen callers?

JOHNNY

She mentioned it.

ANNIE

Well, thank you for not printing it. Imagine how **that** would make me look.

JOHNNY

At least you don't entertain in front of them.

ANNIE

I'll drink to that.

ANNIE takes a sip of her drink.

Maryanne has--had--a sleepwalking problem. That's why I locked their door.

JOHNNY

Sure, makes sense.

ANNIE

And I **do** cry, you know? After I get home from work and I have to see their bedroom. Empty. I used to come home to a tired babysitter, and two little girls refusing to go to bed.

JOHNNY

So you only grieve in privacy? Tell me, if you were in our shoes, how would that sound?

ANNIE

I can't say because I'm not in your shoes. Just like you're not in mine.

JOHNNY

Good thing too. They don't look very comfortable.

ANNIE

Ha. You newies always bring that up. The fact that I don't cry. But why do I owe anyone my tears?

JOHNNY

It's just a little odd--

ANNIE

I have to keep going with my life. It doesn't matter that my girls are gone. Rent is still due on the first.

JOHNNY

And the men?

ANNIE

I get hungry. They pay for dinner.

JOHNNY

Look, it was nice chatting with you but--

ANNIE

Listen. Just because I go on dates doesn't mean I killed my daughters. Did anyone tell you our neighborhood had a peeping tom a few weeks before they were killed? Probably not.

JOHNNY

You're getting a fair trial--

ANNIE

Fair? You think there's anything fair that a "jury of me peers" equates to twelve married men? Is it fair that you've all had it out for me since before they found my girls? How is any of this fair?!

JOHNNY

I'm sorry.

ANNIE

That's the thing. You're not. This doesn't affect you does it? Not as long as you get your paycheck.

JOHNNY

I'm just reporting what I see.

ANNIE

Sure, but you've never spoken to me. No ever talks to me, yet they all seem to know 'the seductive divorcee with two dead kids'.

JOHNNY

Have you considered that's why people don't like you? Yes, you don't owe anyone your grief, but you could at least act like you care.

ANNIE

I care. I've always cared about my daughters more than anyone in the world. My ex-husband has been going out to bars and meeting with hookers--even before the divorce--yet I'm the criminal for trying to keep a roof over my head.

Beat.

ANNIE

Is that the reason I'm on trial? Because I don't live the way **they** think I should?

JOHNNY

Well... It certainly doesn't help.

ANNIE

It's bullshit. We get conned into thinking if we're good girls everything is going to be perfect. They don't tell you how hard it gets. How unfair the real world is. I did my best.

She stands and begins walking toward the exit.

JOHNNY

Did you kill your daughters, Mrs. St. Clair?

She turns and lets out a defeated laugh.

ANNIE

I guess we'll find out.

She exits.

BLACK OUT

END OF PLAY

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *So, like every basic white girl, I'm very much into true crime. And I'm a huge supporter of The Innocence Project and other organizations trying to help the wrongfully convicted. I also had it in my mind that I would write one new ten-minute play a month through 2020. Well, I wrote the second (and last) play in that series after watching a short documentary on Alice Crimmins, who in the 1960s was accused of killing her children and was later convicted.*

What I found interesting about the case is the same thing I find interesting about a lot of high-profile cases: the way the media affects the outcome.

Let's use Scott Peterson as an example. That is arguably one of the most famous missing person/murder cases of the century. It was almost impossible to watch the news without it coming up, and it later went on to inspire Gone Girl. With that much media coverage painting Peterson as suspicious, how could he possibly get a fair trial? That's not to say he's innocent. I just think it would be damn near impossible to find a jury of his peers who didn't already whether or not he killed his wife.

And a similar situation happened to Alice. Regardless of her actual innocence, she was a divorcee in the 1960s known to go on dates with a lot of men. She was also hot, so she had that going against her. In the end, it really felt like Crimmins was on trial for not being the idyllic

mother the culture at the time wanted her to be...especially since there was no real evidence tying her to the murder of her children.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Samantha Oty* graduated from Radford University with a degree in English, technical editing and writing. She received her master's degree in publishing from The George Washington University in 2017. She is totally not two ten-year-olds in a trench coat. Her first play, *Demolition Lovers*, was written in her sophomore year of high school and won the 2010 New Voices playwriting contest. Sadly, due to a conflicting trip to Europe, it would be another two years before she would see it performed. She has been writing plays ever since. Her work has appeared in *Junto Magazine* and in [5th Wall Production](#)'s Rough Draft Reading series. When not writing plays, she's talking about horror movies with fellow writer and friend, Stormy Skies, on [Real Horrorshow](#) or writing new travel content for [Postcard Press](#). Samantha lives in Virginia with her boyfriend and guinea pig.

Publication Credits

Demolition Lovers - Performance, Christiansburg Highschool, 2012

Please Don't Go - Ten Minute Play Workshops (Podcast), 2013

Long Abandoned - Junto Magazine, 2016

Like a Porcelain Doll - Workshop, 5th Wall Productions, May 2016

New Year's Eve at the Stop-n-Go - [Workshop](#), Pharmacy Theatre, June 2020

Let's Hope You Feel Better - [Workshop](#), Pharmacy Theatre, December 2020

Long Abandoned - Barely Seen, 2020

End of the World at the Quality Mart - Independent Movie, Post-Production

*Based on *New Year's Eve at the Stop-n-Go*

New Year's Eve at the Stop-n-Go - Production, Pharmacy Theatre, December 2021

We Met on the Instagram

By Sarah Congress

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes: I adore the simplicity of this Zoom-ready micro play by Sarah Congress. Besides two (ballsy) actors and an Internet connection, the only requirement for We Met On the Instagram is a context for the time in which it takes place:*

December 2020 a.k.a. COVID Times.

And yet it offers a biting commentary on the perils of trying to transcend social distancing via social media (also I get a kick out of the title). The play is full of fun and makes clever use of theatrical conventions, breaking the 4th wall (or coming through the screen as it were) with Jeremy's inner thoughts directed to the audience as Claudia dares him to plunge into yet another level of interaction:

Claudia: Hey want to get off of Instagram?

Jeremy: *(Looking around the empty stage)* And go where?

Claudia: To a Facetime call?

Jeremy: Uh. Sure. Okay. Cool. We can FaceTime.

Then with the speed of broadband, Jeremy and Claudia shed layers of clothing and identity, until the reckoning that this date might be too virtual for reality. (Spacing and format is playwright's own.)

We Met On the Instagram
By Sarah Congress

Characters:

Please note that the below parts can be played by an actor of any ethnicity/race.

Jeremy: 35. A super chatty tech start-up guy living in the Upper West Side.

Claudia: 35. A surprisingly sultry human resources manager living in New Jersey.

Set Requirements:

N/A

Time:

December 2020 a.k.a. COVID-19 Times.

Lights up.

Jeremy sits on a stool at one side of the stage.
He turns to face the audience.

Jeremy: Statistically speaking, during a pandemic, the chances of meeting a strong, sexy, gorgeous woman in person these days are well, slim. I mean I don't have to tell you all that. That's why you're here with me tonight. Instead of at home. Pouring a glass of wine for this strong, sexy, gorgeous woman.

Jeremy takes out a bottle of hand sanitizer.

Jeremy: Yeah.

He sanitizes his hands.

Jeremy: So you can imagine my pleasant surprise when last Tuesday upon leaving the zoom meeting I was in with the investors for the app I'm developing—which I just want to plug real quick. The app is called: JuicyFruit. JuicyFruit is an app that lets you scan any fruit in your house using your phone camera and then it tells you how long a life the fruit has before it goes bad. So like if you have this banana and it's kind of brown but not entirely brown yet, you can use my app JuicyFruit to scan the banana and then you'll find out: oh I have two days to eat this banana. Or oh! This banana is already bad. (*He stares at the audience*) I'm still figuring out the algorithm for how we can use JuicyFruit on vegetables...but anyway—I'm leaving this meeting and I open up Instagram and there right there in my DMs is a message from @claudialovesbigcucumbers which said—

*Lights up on the other side of the stage where **Claudia** sits on a stool.
She looks at the audience and pulls out a bottle of vodka from her purse.*

Claudia: Hey big boy. I like your feed.

Jeremy: So I'm just like WOW. I gotta stalk @claudialovesbigcucumber's Instagram profile.

Claudia: There are pictures of me in my tiny black bikini in Mexico City with my girl Ruth. Hey Ruth girl how's it hanging? 2019 was sure fun. Wasn't it? Then it all went to shit.

Claudia takes a swig of vodka.

Claudia: There are also pictures of me with my old boyfriend Derek—

Jeremy: Oh God who is @Derekbuidsbikes—

Claudia: At Soul Cycle and having picnics with all of his annoying body-builder friends.

Jeremy: Derek has the most masculine Instagram page I've ever scrolled through in my entire life.

Claudia: But I also write poetry on my Instagram.

Jeremy: Wow she's a writer too? Jackpot.

Claudia: I write poetry which I then tattoo on my body.

Jeremy: Is that her belly button?

Jeremy holds up the phone sideways over his head.

Claudia: "Ice cubes are cold but the cold makes me hot."

Jeremy wipes his brow.

Jeremy: Okay. How do I respond to Claudia?

He stares at the audience.

Jeremy: You're right. Be direct. Play it cool.

*Jeremy types: perhaps it could be projected across a screen—
"Thanks ;)"*

Claudia: You must work out a lot.

Jeremy: Nope.

Claudia: Really?

Jeremy: Yeah.

Claudia: Then how did your arms get so big and strong?

Jeremy: I type a lot? On a keyboard? Maybe the ergonomics of my work station and spine position cause for—

Claudia: I'm Claudia.

Jeremy: Jeremy.

Claudia: Hey want to get off of Instagram?

Jeremy: (*Looking around the empty stage*) And go where?

Claudia: To a Facetime call?

Jeremy: Uh. Sure. Okay. Cool. We can FaceTime.

Jeremy stares at the audience.

Jeremy: Hey it's not like you can get COVID-19 from a phone.

Silence.

Jeremy: (*Frightened*) Right? Dr. Fauci never said that. Right?

Claudia fixes her hair and has another swig of vodka.

*She dials **Jeremy** on FaceTime.*

***Jeremy** hesitates for a moment, then answers.*

Jeremy: Hey Claudia.

Claudia: Oh my God. Jeremy! You made it.

Jeremy: To FaceTime. Yeah. I made the dangerous voyage.

Claudia: I loved your Instagram feed.

Jeremy: I loved yours too. You're a poet?

Claudia: Only at night.

Jeremy: Wow.

Claudia: During the day I work as a human resources manager for a pharmaceuticals company in Northern New Jersey.

Jeremy: Also wow. I would never have guessed that you worked in human resource—

Claudia: I like your arms.

Jeremy: You said. Thanks. I uh like your—

Claudia: I just want to be honest.

Jeremy: Of course. Honesty is always the best policy.

Claudia: I never do this.

Jeremy: Do *what* exactly?

Claudia: Pick up guys I've met on the Instagram and then FaceTime with them.

Jeremy: Oh. Good. Me either. With woman, I mean.

He laughs.

She laughs.

Claudia: Usually I just start sexting with them.

Jeremy: Sexting? You mean writing sexual things with strangers over texts?

Claudia: Uhuh, But you you seemed special. I wanted to see your face and those arms. In person sort of...

Jeremy: Thanks?

Claudia takes a swig of vodka.

Claudia: Cheers.

Jeremy: Wow vodka straight out of the bottle huh? It's not even three p.m.

Claudia: So big boy: how you want to do this?

Jeremy: Do what?

Claudia: Should I get naked?

Jeremy: I mean my God yes. Please get naked.

Claudia: Okay I'll get naked.

Claudia takes off her top.

Claudia: You going to get naked too?

Jeremy: Sorry but where is this going?

Claudia: We're going to both get naked.

Jeremy: Yeah but...why? We're virtual. What's the point?

Claudia: Cause it's turning each other on and it's a pandemic and there's nothing else to do except drink vodka.

Jeremy: But like I want to do this with you.

Claudia: You *are* doing it with me.

Jeremy: No...this is just weird simulation porn.

Claudia: Oh.

Jeremy: I want to touch your hair and kiss your lips and cuddle with you afterwards. It's not everyday that I get to talk to a gorgeous, strong, sexy woman. You know?

Claudia: No I don't know.

Claudia puts her shirt back on.

Claudia: Thanks a lot for wasting my time.

She has another sip of vodka.

Claudia: Next time don't be such a FUCKING TEASE ON INSTAGRAM.

Lights out on Claudia.

Jeremy looks at the audience.

Jeremy: Statistically speaking, the odds are just not in my favor. However: the odds do still exist. Therefore there is still a chance for me to meet my gorgeous, strong, sexy woman one day. Just maybe not over Instagram. And maybe not during COVID-19.

*Lights out.
End of play.*

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *I have made it my mission during the COVID-19 pandemic to write a ten minute "COVID" comedy a week. This play actually features a BELOVED recurring character, Jeremy (the 35 year-old super chatty, and somewhat lonely, tech start-up guy) who originated in my play The Covid-19 Do-Over Marriage. Hope this piece brightens up your day!*

AUTHOR'S BIO: My name is Sarah Congress and I write scripts for theatre, television, and the books for musical theatre. My writing has been presented in NYC and in LA. Most recently my play Atlantic Pharmaceuticals was selected as a Finalist for the Think Theater Project "Think Fast" one act play festival (February 2021) and my comedy It's Not Haunted Real Estate won "Best Effects" at the Theatre of Fifth Avenue Virtual Play Festival (November 2020). I am currently working with The Theatre of Bombay on an Instagram Live production of my comedy *The Covid-19 Do-Over Marriage* and teaching "Writing Comedy for the Television Sitcom" with The Knowledge Project.

LAST FIRST (first first first...)

By **MARTIN** Keady

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

Martin Keady's LAST FIRST is a heartfelt short play with an intimate style and an expansive scope. The play, based on a true story, takes place on a small boat, chartered by Captain Neil, an "undertaker of the seas," who provides a safe space for the illegal dumping of cremated ashes over the side. With water splashing off the deck of the boat along with the character's Irish and English accents, the play comes off the page creating an evocative experience as a mother and daughter say their final goodbyes. LAST FIRST raises issues about survivor's guilt and how each member of a family confronts grief in their own way. As audience, we are included in the process of paying respects to a loved one and healing from the trauma of an untimely death. The play aptly deals with a gamut of emotions from sadness to frustration and even humor as the two women find it as difficult to open the box of ashes as it is to let go of them.

MARY:

It's what he wanted, Mum, and we have to respect that.

LORETTA (nodding):

I know. And I do...however hard it is. *(She looks as if she might cry, but somehow stops herself.)* Right...shall we get on with it?

MARY:

I think we should. We've only got the boat for an hour.

(Spacing and format is playwright's own.)

LAST FIRST

A Short Play
by Martin Keady

Based on a True Story

Copyright 2020

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For my mother and sister.

LORETTA (60), her daughter, MARY (30), and NEIL, the skipper (also 30) are on a small boat. NEIL stands at the stern, holding the tiller, while LORETTA and MARY sit in front of him. LORETTA is holding a small wooden box.

NEIL (looking to one side):

Hold on!

A wave hits the boat. NEIL just keeps his footing, while LORETTA and MARY hang on to the sides: MARY with two hands; LORETTA with one, as she holds the box with the other. The wave passes and NEIL looks off to the other side.

NEIL:

Bloody pleasure boats!

When LORETTA speaks, she does so with a strong Irish (southern Irish) accent: both NEIL and MARY have English accents.

LORETTA:

I suppose this must be the *opposite* of a pleasure boat.

NEIL:

What?

LORETTA:

Well, it's more like a *death* boat, isn't it?

MARY:

MUM!

NEIL (smiling):

As I explained when you called me, Mrs Kelly, I provide a boat for individuals or families who want a boat all to themselves for special, *personal* reasons. (Pause.) Anyway, I'll leave you to it. I'm going in the cabin - (He points

ahead, off-stage.) I'll wait there for as long as you want, or need. Just call out, or knock on the door, when you're ready.

LORETTA:

Thank you, dear.

MARY:

Yes, thank you.

He nods, smiles and walks forward towards the cabin (exiting).

LORETTA:

He seems nice.

MARY:

I suppose he has to be.

LORETTA:

What d'you mean?

MARY:

Well, otherwise he couldn't do this job. I mean, did you ever meet an *undertaker* with bad manners?

LORETTA (looking upset):

I wish we were dealing with an undertaker now, rather than - (*She looks around her, at the sea and sky, then at MARY.*) Well, *this*.

MARY:

It's what he wanted, Mum, and we have to respect that.

LORETTA (nodding):

I know. And I do...however hard it is. *(She looks as if she might cry, but somehow stops herself.)* Right...shall we get on with it?

MARY:

I think we should. We've only got the boat for an hour.

LORETTA:

I don't mind paying for another hour. We can take longer, if you need longer.

MARY *(shaking her head)*:

No, Mum. I don't. And neither do you. So let's do it, please.

LORETTA:

Alright, then.

LORETTA lifts up the box in both hands and she and MARY stare at it.

LORETTA:

I can't remember how they said to open it.

MARY:

They said the top should just slide off.

LORETTA:

Right.

She puts one hand on top of the box, ready to slide the top off.

MARY:

Not here! You've got to move nearer to the side of the boat, so he goes overboard. We don't want him *blowing* about the boat, do we?

LORETTA:

No. Right. OK.

She moves further over and then tries to slide open the top of the box.

LORETTA:

It won't open.

MARY:

What?

LORETTA:

It won't open - it's stuck!

MARY:

No, it's not. Let me have a go. (*She takes the box and also tries to slide the top off.*) You're right. It won't.

LORETTA:

See? I told you!

MARY:

So what do we do *now*?

LORETTA:

We could just throw the whole box in.

MARY (obviously horrified):

No way! There's enough *crap* in the sea already: I'm not adding to it. Besides, you're supposed to *scatter* ashes, not just *dump* them. (*She looks ahead.*) Maybe Neil can help.

LORETTA:

What? No! Don't bother him.

MARY:

Mum, this is his *job*! He probably deals with this kind of thing *all* the time. (*Then, calling out -*) NEIL!

Instantaneously, as if he were waiting to be summoned, NEIL returns.

NEIL:

Can I help?

MARY:

I hope so. The top of the box is stuck. We can't open it.

NEIL (smiling):

You'd be *amazed* how often that happens! I think they must use *super-glue* or something. Here, let me try. (*He takes the box from MARY and tries to slide the top off - in vain.*) You're right - it's stuck. Fortunately, that's precisely why I always bring my *trusty tool-kit*!

He hands the box back to MARY, goes to the tiller and takes out his tool-kit, which is stowed beside it. He takes out a screwdriver, comes back over to MARY and retakes the box from her. Then, holding the box with one hand, he holds the screwdriver in the other and stares down at the top of the box.

NEIL:

Oh!

LORETTA:

What? Is something wrong?

NEIL (nodding):

I'm afraid there is. I've never seen this before, but somehow they seem to have *sealed* the top shut.

LORETTA:

What?!

MARY:

You're joking!

NEIL (shaking his head):

I'm afraid not. There are no screws in the top that I can unscrew. It's stuck fast.

LORETTA:

What about the bottom?

NEIL:

The bottom?

LORETTA:

Yes. Are there any screws there?

NEIL (looking under the box):

Yes, there are.

LORETTA:

Well, just undo them. They'll do.

NEIL:

Are you sure?

LORETTA:

Why not? He came into this world arse-first; he might as well leave it the same way. (*MARY and NEIL both stare at her in disbelief.*) Well, he did. He was born upside down - the wrong way round - so he might as well stay that way at the end.

NEIL:

OK...if you're quite sure.

LORETTA (nodding):

I'm *absolutely* sure, thank you.

NEIL turns the box upside down and begins unscrewing the bottom.

NEIL:

I thought for a moment there you said, "Last First", as in, "The first shall be last and the last shall be first..." (*THE TWO WOMEN both stare at him.*) In this job, you hear a *lot* of Bible readings. They get stuck in your head.

LORETTA:

Oh. Right. Got you.

He unscrews the last screw and hands the box back to LORETTA.

NEIL:

Now, you'll have to be *very* careful. As I said before, don't take off the top - sorry, the *bottom* - until you've lifted the whole box over the side of the boat, so that the ashes go in the water, as planned. OK?

LORETTA (nodding):

OK.

MARY:

Thank you.

NEIL:

It's no problem. Now I'll just go back and wait in the cabin. And again - if you need me for *anything*, just give me a call.

LORETTA:

Thanks, dear. You're a life-saver!

MARY and NEIL look surprised by this remark, but LORETTA turns away to lift the box back over the side of the boat. NEIL smiles at MARY, she smiles back and he exits. Once he is gone, MARY slides over to sit beside LORETTA.

MARY:

Are you ready, Mum?

LORETTA (nodding):

As ready as I'll ever be.

She removes the bottom of the box and tips the box over so that the ashes inside fall into the water.

They stare at the water for a moment, then LORETTA stands up.

LORETTA:

I'm going with him!

MARY:

WHAT?!

LORETTA puts one leg over the side of the boat but MARY pulls her back in.

MARY:

What are you doing? You can't swim!

LORETTA:

That's the *point*! I want to go with him. I was there at his beginning, so I should be there at his end.

MARY:

You are, Mum! We both are! That's why we're here.

LORETTA:

No, I mean *really* with him. (*Pause.*) I can't go on without him.

MARY:

Yes, you can.

LORETTA:

I can't! Not knowing how he went.

MARY:

That was *his* decision, Mum. Remember?

LORETTA:

Of course I remember! I'll never forget!

She bursts into tears and MARY puts her arms around her.

LORETTA:

How could he do it? He might as well have killed me too when he took his own life.

MARY:

I know, Mum. I know how hard this is for you. It's bad enough losing a *sibling*, but a *child*... Well, I just can't imagine. But as I've said to you a *million* times before, it's *not* your fault.

LORETTA:

It is. It *must* be!

MARY (shaking her head):

No, it's not. How could it be? We're *twins*; you raised us *exactly* the same way; and John chose to take his own life, while I - well, even after all this, I want to *live* mine. (*Pause.*) Who knows? Maybe *I'm* to blame.

LORETTA:

What?!

MARY:

Well, I was always the "happy-go-lucky" one, wasn't I? I was always the one who could *survive* things. John couldn't.

LORETTA:

That's not your fault.

MARY:

Once, I wondered whether I'd stolen his serotonin.

LORETTA:

Stolen what?

MARY:

Serotonin. It's the chemical that makes you *happy* and I used to wonder if somehow, in the womb, I'd taken his, so I had double the amount I should have had and he had none.

LORETTA (staring at her):

Now who's talking shite?

MARY (laughing):

I know. It must run in the family.

They both laugh.

MARY:

Mum, it's time to let him go.

LORETTA:

I know.

Gently, carefully, she puts the box back down on the deck.

LORETTA:

What do we do now?

MARY:

We just sit here, for as long as we want - well, until our time's up.

LORETTA:

OK. Then will you do one thing for me?

MARY:

Of course. What is it?

LORETTA:

Will you sing it?

MARY:

What? *Here?*

LORETTA:

Well, you never got to sing it in *church*, did you?

MARY:

He didn't want any music at the funeral: he didn't even really want a funeral.

LORETTA:

But he never said anything about music on the *boat*, did he?

MARY (sighing):

No, I suppose not.

LORETTA:

Good. Then sing it for me now, please. Sing it for *him*.

MARY:

Alright, then.

She takes a deep breath, then sings.

MARY:

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now am found
T'was blind but now I see.
T'was grace that taught my heart to fear
And grace, my fears relieved,
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.
Through many dangers, toils and snares
We have already come.

T'was grace that brought us safe thus far
And grace will lead us home."

She finishes singing and looks at LORETTA, who takes her hand.

They continue to hold hands as the lights come down.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

LAST FIRST was inspired by a real-life event. I actually undertook such a boat journey with my mother, my sister and my brother-in-law after the death – by suicide – of my beloved younger brother, John, and just as in the play the box containing my brother's ashes (after his cremation) would only open from the bottom, not the top. I did not realise that this event could be the basis for a play until I told the story to a dear friend, Paul Scott, who immediately said, "Write THAT!" It was a turning-point in my writing, as I realised that I could write about my own personal experiences but without actually including myself: I wrote myself out of the play, as it were, so that I could concentrate on what really mattered to me, which was an examination of the relationship between the two women (one old, Irish and extremely Catholic; the other younger, English and sceptical at best about the merits of Catholicism or any other religion) and how they could both survive such a tragedy. I remain indebted to Paul for simply saying, "Write THAT!" And I also remain indebted to my most important literary and other creative influences and inspirations, who, in descending order, are: William Shakespeare; David Simon; Woody Allen; Oscar Wilde; and Jane

Austen. I have tried (and obviously not always succeeded) to learn not just from the greats, but the greatest.

AUTHOR BIO:

Martin Keady is an award-winning dramatist, journalist, poet and lyricist. As a dramatist, his major credits include: **Man of Colour**, a biopic of Walter Tull, one of Britain's first black professional footballers who subsequently became a hero of WWI, which won the inaugural BIFFA (Bristol Independent Film Festival Award) for Screenwriting 2018; **All The Dreams: The Gil Scott-Heron Story**, a play for the award-winning Nouveau Riché theatre company (Nouveau Riché @infonyrch); **Moon The Loon**, a play about Keith Moon, the legendary Who drummer, which premiered at The Edinburgh Festival; **The Final**, a short film about the famous ending of the 1979 FA Cup Final, which was broadcast on Channel Four; and an award-winning play for children, **Three Tragedies**, about some of Shakespeare's minor characters, which is published online at: dramanotebook.com/plays-for-kids/three-tragedies.

As a journalist, he writes extensively for a number of print and online publications, including on screenwriting and television writing for *The Script Lab* thescriptlab.com/author/mkeady, on tennis for *Last Word On Tennis* lastwordontennis.com/author/martin-keady and on the Olympics and politics for *C4News.com*.

As a poet, he has written **Shards**, a collection of short poems, extracts from which have been broadcast on BBC Radio Four and published in the inaugural "Poets Issue" of KollideZine magazine. And as a lyricist, he co-wrote a WWI lament, **Dreaming of England**, with the composer Barnaby Robson - [Dreaming of England on Spotify](#).

Martin has Masters Degrees in English Literature from Cambridge University, in Shakespeare Studies from The Shakespeare Institute in Stratford on Avon, and in Playwriting from The Central School of Speech and Drama in London. Having lived in Los Angeles and in Ireland, he now lives in London with his wife and three children.

NON-FICTION

Our Various States of BeAuTy

By Watsuki HarrinGTON

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A classroom assignment that turns out to be something more. We like the way the author wittily contrasts geographical states with the psychological and emotional states of 52 women in a fictional beauty pageant. At the same time, the Misses are depersonalized by an innovative format that simply lists the wryly observed and fascinating trivia in their cameos like so much dependent property—the point being, within beauty lies its opposite. The voice is appropriately impartial, cleverly ironic and a little bit foxy. We were intrigued as soon as we started reading but when we learned how the author enlisted tek to design the structure of this hybrid, we liked it even more. We don't know how her prof graded this assignment, but in our classroom we give it...*

Five stars.

(Spacing and format is author's own.)

Our Various States of Beauty

1. Miss Wyoming thinks that since she had to look up the word *pustule* that makes her one of the attractive ones, which is bizarre, because she's had to look up other things like "statute of limitations for drug trafficking," and "how to get a free abortion in a state that doesn't take your insurance."

2. Miss Michigan wants to open a bakery with a gym in the back so she has a steady stream of clients. She's unsure about the name but thinks "It's a Bakery and a Gym" is a pretty good contender.
3. Miss Oklahoma knows that even though a woman wants to look sexy, it doesn't mean she wants to have sex.
4. Miss Nevada has a subscription to *Interview* magazine, which helps to curate her own style. She thinks ironic dressing is better than being cute.
5. Miss Alaska has a hard time separating beauty from sex.
6. Miss Virginia was told to always wear heels to auditions because they're looking for something taller than her.
7. Miss Missouri remembers reading a quote that goes something like, "The prettiest thing you can wear is a smile." Now she smiles at everyone believing she's being pretty. As a result, men come up to her, *advance*, ask her if she comes here often, or where have they met; things that make no sense. She's confused. She's just being pretty; she doesn't want the attention.
8. Miss Ohio dreams of having a daughter that calls her mama and feeds her Goldfish in the back-yard.
9. Miss Hawaii has had three abortions and may be pregnant again, though the judges don't know this and neither does she.

10. Miss Louisiana thinks her mother's hands are so beautiful. Wrinkly and moist like chicken thighs fresh out of the package. Those hands show the life she's lived in service and love to others. They aren't crinkly and old. She'd be honored to have those hands. (And she will.)
11. Miss Arkansas will get a mommy make-over once she's given birth to her three kids: the heir, the spare, and her little princess.
12. Miss Wisconsin wishes she could be smart enough so that she didn't have to be beautiful.
13. Miss Arizona will go to Rome with her family next year and in the airport she will see a banner with Sophia Loren and a quote that says, "Everything you see I owe to spaghetti." When she returns to the States, she will continue to eat pasta with reckless abandon. She will gain thirty pounds instantly and no one will ever believe for the rest of her life that she was in a beauty pageant.
14. Miss New Jersey has a hard time separating beauty from power.
15. Miss Connecticut will marry an attorney, and will try to be beautiful for him, but not so beautiful that the other husbands notice her more than they notice their own wives.
16. Miss New Hampshire is good with names, which makes it easy to care for others. She calls her friends regularly, calls, not texts. And because she has a penchant for elegant stationary, she sends hand-written letters often to her family in other states.
17. Miss Iowa hasn't eaten carbs since she was twelve. Once, a few years back, she accidentally ate a stray crouton at lunch in the school cafeteria. She let the salty crunchy goodness mush gluten heaven into her veins, sending her nerves exploding to the moon.
18. Miss Washington loves going to the mall, not to shop, but to be seen.

19. Miss Illinois wants her nail polish sometimes to look like the color of blood, but sometimes she wants her nail polish to look like the color of her vulva.
20. Miss California was brought roses by a suitor once, to which she frowned. He asked her *what's wrong, don't you like roses?* She said *I like orchids more, you know, all that waste, you don't throw away orchids because they'll bloom again.* The next time they saw each other, he brought her orchids.
21. Miss Puerto Rico has a boyfriend who buys her rings so that he doesn't have to buy her The Ring.
22. Miss Montana attracts people with a magnetism no-one quite knows how to describe.
23. Miss Colorado is having an affair with a woman online. She is remiss to tell her family that she's gay because they've spent so much time grooming her to get to this place and qualify for this pageant, which is her best hope of getting a scholarship big enough to attend the university her parents have picked out for her. They are her biggest fans and tell her she's beautiful every day.
24. Miss Alabama loved carbs and sugar as a child, so her mom made her love running too.
25. Miss Oregon wishes she could be talented enough so that she didn't have to be beautiful.
26. Miss Massachusetts is curious and loyal and always makes you feel seen.
27. Miss Minnesota admires her aunt who studied glaciology when she was a kid. All that ice, like a gigantic mirror shining the sun's light into her aunt's eyes every day. As a result, her aunt has the worst crows feet you'd ever seen. But what those wrinkles say is that she did something significant with her life.

28. Miss Kansas has a hard time separating beauty from stress.
29. Miss Tennessee will be told she should follow her heart. So she follows her heart into the bedrooms of Steve, Joaquin, Kelsey, and Barbara. She will swear her heart is in Chadwick's car one night and in Raz's office bathroom for months. Later, her heart ends up with Enzo during a girls' trip to Italy. Finally, she will follow her heart down the aisle to Sammy. But somehow her heart will also speak a special language with a man named Juan Alberto, who incidentally doesn't speak English so well.
30. Miss Vermont wishes she could be cool enough so that she didn't have to be beautiful.
31. Miss South Carolina knows her boyfriend is sleeping with an under-aged girl, which makes her afraid she may catch an STD, but the boyfriend, who she now shares with a teenager, was the first man to encourage her thinking, her whimsical thinking, and even though he's cheating on her, she wants to stay because it's too hard to find someone who loves you for your mind before your body.
32. Miss Mississippi wants to be a high school teacher, but she will need to get a breast reduction first - *this will be intimated by her peers* - because at this rate she's better suited for adult movies and the prepubescent boys in her class won't take her seriously or look her in the eye.
33. Miss Utah understands that her life is easier than her two sisters, who by conventional standards, aren't as lovely as she; a realization that will haunt her forever. The guilt she feels because she was given the good genes will eat away at her until she commits suicide at 39 with a bottle of pills prescribed to her for depression and anxiety.

34. Miss Georgia, for her talent portion, won't get a prize because her talents are too varied; she wrote an original song that she choreographed a dance routine to, a retro jazzy number with tap shoes and a sequined leotard, but she won't win because the judges want someone who they can shoe box in, someone they understand: a singer, a dancer; not someone with too much talent, too much going on.
35. Miss Guam hasn't eaten anything for four days, just water and sugar free Lipton Iced tea. She believes it's totally worth it. After the pageant, she plans on ordering three cheese pizzas all for herself.
36. Miss Kentucky wishes she could be rich enough so that she didn't have to be beautiful.
37. Miss New Mexico has a grandmother, Nana Gloria, who tells her not to separate beauty from goodness.
38. Miss Indiana sleeps on her back because her mother told her, in order to keep her symmetrical face, she shouldn't sleep on her side or, god forbid, her stomach.
39. Miss Delaware will become a Waldorf teacher who leaves bouquets of flowers in her classroom long after their peak because Waldorf teachers believe that witnessing the life cycle of flowers prepares one's psyche for appreciating every stage of life; the aging buds will still look beautiful long after the flowers have withered and hung low, in dullish muted tones, devoid of vibrance, and putrid smelling like a mix of old beef and steaming maple syrup. She will love her flowers in all their phases of grace.
40. Miss Idaho believes that her greatest strength is the ability to lift others up.

41. Miss Maine will raise two daughters; one will be on the spectrum. She will revel in her time with them so much that when she thinks she could die tomorrow from the joy inside of her; a part of her does die, just a little.
42. Miss Florida worked at a Jamba Juice all throughout high school so when she turned eighteen she bought herself breast implants. This is her prized achievement.
43. Miss Rhode Island is being courted by a Mormon boy who brings her gifts from The Hallmark store, mostly stuffed teddy bears with velvet bows around their head and golden charms around their necks. The presents are an extension of his love since he has a hard time separating gifts and care.
44. Miss Maryland was told her Bat Mitzvah was when she would become a woman, which she translated as losing her virginity and since she didn't have anyone lining up to be with her, she asked a friend, not a good friend but not a bad one either, if he'd do the deed. He said yes, but got her pregnant. She was sent to boarding school that year while she had the baby and got counseling. Now she's fine, but she hasn't felt like having sex since. Now she only wants to win.
45. Miss New York has a hard time separating beauty from age.
46. Miss North Carolina is not afraid to laugh at herself.
47. Miss Nebraska works as a television model. When she turns forty-three her metabolism will plummet, and she will gain eighteen pounds within a year and then twelve more the next year. At forty-five, she will be fired from her modeling job because the camera doesn't lie.
48. Miss North Dakota has a warm smile and infectious laugh.

49. Miss Pennsylvania wants a tattoo that says, “Courage is not the strength to go on; it’s going on when you don’t have the strength.” She may put it in a ring around her thigh.
50. Miss West Virginia has a mom who counts the number of almonds she eats before she eats them one by one.
51. Miss Texas loves watching re-runs of *What Not to Wear* because she’s never felt “put-together” enough.
52. Miss South Dakota has a hard time separating beauty from happiness.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I wrote Our Various States of Beauty in one of my classes at Rosemont College last semester. Just a little back story, lockdown had just happened in Pennsylvania and I signed up for this class on a whim just to keep my mind focused on something other than the terrifying state of our new world with covid19. The class was called “Pushing Beyond Genre Boundaries” and was taught by poet, Christine Salvatore. Her first assignment was about Beauty. I began, as I always do, writing long-hand in my journal. These thoughts were extremely varied, but no less honest in their representation of what beauty can mean. I saw them tinged with narcissism, bitterness, superficiality, passion, and irony to name a few. A straight essay with a through-line would be impossible, so I decided I’d list them in random order, just like the way they plopped out of my head. I used the free online Random Number Generator to feed me an order. I cross-referenced them with our 52 states. The draft I handed in to my professor was originally entitled, Beauty Pageant, which was the only change I made before submitting it to FOTD.*

AUTHOR’S BIO: Watsuki is a biracial woman who was raised in Hawaii by hippie parents. She found her calling in the theatrical arts at a young age performing in schools within the Hawaiian chain. During her twenties she became, among other things, an efficient lettuce farmer, a diligent acrobat, an exceptional cheese monger, and a ruthless art consultant. She is a nontraditional student who, apparently, returns every decade to the hallowed halls of academia as she believes education is the best investment. Her essay, Farming the Social Ladder, is forthcoming in Abstract Magazine. She lives in the Philadelphia area with her family, one ancient feisty guppy, and the cutest dog in the world. She is currently a MFA in Creative Writing student at Rosemont College.

Keep *Going*, You Crazy BITCH

By Lynn *Magill*

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A harrowing, hair-raising re-tell of an incident within a dysfunctional marriage that could easily past for fiction (horror, dirty realism, grit lit) if it wasn't so appallingly true. The style is hyper-focused and down to details, like you are watching a deep web reality show through a zoom lens. Apart from the skill in recounting this event, we admire the author's pluck for, well, just having the low hangers to tell it. We're also glad she survived this pos. Strong, up front and in your face. (Spacing and format is author's own.)*

Five stars.

QUALITY QUOTABLES *(for the love of language)...*

I found myself being held over the edge of the balcony, a wad of his blue flannel shirt clutched in each fist so tightly that my fingernails ripped holes in the weave, determined to take him with me if he chose to drop me to the pebbly asphalt below because he wanted more Jack and Coke.

If it's not a rule that you can call someone by their first name after making sure they don't get shot, it sure as shit oughta be.

Keep Going, You Crazy Bitch

You always pay for your education, in one way or another. – Uncle George

Squinting into the Fall dusk, I eased my red 1975 Roadrunner into the AM/PM parking lot and slowly braked into the furthest spot that I could find from the main road. I turned the radio off, as if he could hear me from all the way across the busy 4-lane arterial street. The purple and orange glare of the AM/PM sign advertising gas for .91 cents a gallon – 3 cents more for unleaded – reflected in my rearview mirror, making me blink. I tried to partially obscure both the car and myself from view as much as possible; which was optimistic at best considering I was a 21-year-old woman driving a vehicle painted nearly identical to the Starsky and Hutch mobile thinking that half of a shrub was going to somehow make either of us inconspicuous. As Joe Pesci's girlfriend said in *My Cousin Vinny*: *yeah, you blend*.

Everything was in vulnerable hyperfocus; I felt like a rabbit in an open field. Reaching back to refasten my banana clip, I realized that I was holding my breath and sucked in a deep pull of cool air through my nose, exhaling slowly.

The hedge lining the sidewalk on the other side of the street was made up of what we called “apartment trees”, or arborvitae. I couldn't see much through their old growth, but above their tops was an unobstructed view of the 2nd floor of the Northern Lights Apartments, buildings A and D, that were perpendicular to the street. Painted a faded denim blue with industrial grey trim likely in the same year my car was made, each upper unit featured a deck stained in faux redwood, weathered and streaked with yellowish-green mildew that grows on everything that doesn't move in the Pacific Northwest.

The top corner unit in Building D used to be mine, and still was.....on paper. Up until four weeks ago when my husband (but only technically, just like the apartment) decided that my refusal to accompany him to the bar at 10:00pm after my 14-hour workday was unacceptable. If truth be told he just wanted the company of my debit card. I found myself being held over the edge of the balcony, a wad of his blue flannel shirt clutched each in each fist so tightly that my fingernails ripped holes in the weave, determined to take him with me if he chose to drop me to the pebbly asphalt below because he wanted more Jack and Coke. Strands of my long hair were caught in my fists, tenuously connecting my head to my lifeline. The ends stuck out from between the webs of my fingers and caught on my watchband. I will NOT end up in a splattered heap in parking spot 328D. The last thing I see on this earth is not going to be a wild-eyed drunk with Bon Jovi hair grimacing above me as his blackened, greasy hands let go and the neighbor has to clean my brains off of his Honda Gold Wing and for what? Because I don't feel like partying that we can't afford after a double shift?

Behind the arborvitae was something else that was still mine: my jacked-up baby blue GMC truck that I was still making payments on, and I was here to take it back. Last time he'd shot at me – and missed – from that same balcony as I sat in the driver's seat frantically turning the key. He'd removed the distributor cap. This time, I came prepared: *AAA, where the fuck are you?*

The grill of a white commercial-sized truck emerged over the hill. It pulled up to the stoplight on the opposite side of the intersection, revealing a large winch on the back and the words *Day & Nite Towing* on the side.

Action.

Fumbling for my keys – I’d left my purse at home; too risky to both leave unattended or carry with me – I scrambled out of the Roadrunner, closing the door quietly and then turning around to push it all the way shut with my butt until the latch clicked. The light hadn’t changed yet- if the tow truck arrived and there was nobody with the vehicle, they would leave AND I would get billed for the erroneous trip, neither of which I could afford.

No time to go to the corner and wait for the crosswalk light – those were valuable extra steps and seconds that I didn’t have. I’d have to jaywalk across traffic and dodge cars like *Frogger*. The stakes were comparable, too. The last time I’d attempted to get my truck, a month ago, my best friend had driven me to the complex parking lot and waited with her Monte Carlo idling while I unlocked it and got it started so that she could follow me home. I sat on the grease stained bench seatcover inside the cab and turned the key: *click*. Nothing.

I pumped the gas. Tried turning the key in the ignition again.

Nothing. Christ on a snowmobile.

Breathing more shallowly now, I eased myself out of the high cab and down to the asphalt, my eyes on the apartment for signs of life. Angela rolled down the window of the Monte Carlo, parked on the other side of the truck.

“Won’t start?” she whispered.

“No.” I whispered back.

Angela looked up at the balcony. “Shit.”

“Yeah.”

“You want to go?”

I shook my head no. “Not yet. I’m going to see if he took the battery out. Maybe we can get one at Schuck’s.”

She looked at me like I’d lost my mind. “Hurry UP.”

Gingerly, I reached under the hood of my truck and felt for the latch. I squeezed it slowly so that maybe it wouldn’t make as loud of a metallic *pop* when it opened.

A short, hollow thunk, like a small kettle drum: *unlatched*. I pushed the heavy hood up above my head, wincing at the creaky hinges. Standing on my tiptoes to peer into the engine, I saw the battery was still there. *Strange*. I knew it was running and being driven, as it was frequently absent from the parking lot – and more often than not spotted at either the Riviera lounge (an ill-contained euphemism for *dive bar*) or the apartment of one of their cocktail waitresses.

Angela’s car was quietly idling, its fan belt a barely discernable squeak. Still on tiptoes, I steadied myself by placing my hands on the grill, my eyes frantically scanning the engine for anything obviously amiss. And there it was: *the distributor cap*. Actually, there it wasn’t. *Gone. Motherfucker.*

The shot startled me out of my amateur mechanic ambitions. Loud and echoing, it reverberated against the concrete and was buffered by the apartment trees. I’d been so engrossed in trying to see what was wrong with the truck that I’d forgotten to keep an eye on the apartment.

John stood against the deck railing, his silhouette illuminated by the light from inside. Backlit through the sliding glass door that he'd left open, the hanging lamp in the dining room washed the entire balcony in yellowish fluorescent glare. His hair was flat on one side, as if he'd been lying down on it or napping. His thin frame – not a tall man, maybe 5'7 – was wearing a faded black *Lynyrd Skynyrd* t-shirt and the only pants he ever wore in his entire life: blue Levi 501's. He squinted, and as he grimaced I could see the black outline around his right front tooth; the one where the veneer thing that he didn't take care of kept sliding down. He brought his right hand up over the railing to get a grip on his old black powder pistol with both hands again.

Leaving the hood open, I scrambled behind the side of the truck the farthest away from John, ducking underneath the passenger side window in the space between it and Angela's car. Half-squatting, I began to shake.

He won't shoot through the truck. It's not a clear shot. It's his only transpo, and he might hit the gas tank. Someone is going to hear this and call the cops. I hope they call the cops. He won't hit the truck. Is he still up there? I'm not looking.

Angela cracked her window and hissed: "Get in the car!"

Crawling under it seemed like a good option, but I took my chances and half-hunched half-squat walked around the front end of the Monte Carlo; trying to be a moving target and harder to hit. Angela had already leaned over and opened her passenger side door from inside so that it was slightly ajar.

She had the Monte Carlo in reverse before my butt had connected with the seat and my door had weakly clicked closed: forget about seat belts. *We are getting the fuck out of here.* Backing up so that the rear of the Monte Carlo was just a few feet past the back of the truck, she threw it into drive with a jerky lurch and stepped on the gas.

Slouched in the driver's seat, she had her head pulled down like a turtle, frosted blonde hair barely above the steering wheel, so that she could just see over the dash. I was nearly curled up into a ball in the passenger's seat, watching for cars in the complex parking lot that might pull out of an aisle unaware and t-bone us. I'm not sure what I thought watching for them would do in the grand scheme of things, but I sure wasn't looking back to see if John was after us on foot. At least we'd be long gone by the time he was able to get downstairs and get the distributor cap back on the truck if he was thinking about chasing us.

Halfway to Angela's mom's house, we pulled off onto a Mountlake Terrace side street of older 1950's cinderblock bungalows and pulled into an empty spot in front of one of the houses. Inching up a little straighter, Angela checked her rearview mirror and side mirrors in the dusky light. I realized that I'd been holding my breath this entire time. My hands were cold and cramped; unclenching them, I rubbed them on the legs of my jeans. It started to dawn on us both that we couldn't go back to either of our houses: that's the first place he'd come looking for us. Or rather, me – Angela was just collateral damage.

This time around Angela had balked at going through that mess again. Who could blame her, really? If I was willing to get shot over some old truck, I was on my own.

Being overwhelmingly in debt will make you make some pretty sketchy choices as a young adult, and I was so far in hock on that redneck vehicle that my still-immature brain just wasn't having any part of letting someone else drive off with it while I still owed more money than I ever had in my life to that point. Even if it meant getting my dumb ass killed.

The stoplight was still red. Bonus: no traffic. Easily loping across the street, eyes on my old apartment, I made it to the sidewalk on the other side. It was more difficult to see the apartment through the line of trees when I was up close, so I walked slowly, looking over my shoulder to see where the tow truck was now. I heard car engines getting closer behind me: the light had changed, so the tow truck should be here any second.

I heard the distinct rumble of its diesel engine as it closed in behind me, and I stopped for a moment to make sure it was turning into the parking lot in case it wasn't *my* tow truck. It was. As the back bumper disappeared around the corner, I veered sharply off the sidewalk and pushed in between two apartment trees, emerging on the other side into the parking lot just as the driver pulled up behind my truck. My white Keds were dirty from the new landscaping bark. I stepped from the bark to the asphalt and positioned myself strategically behind the passenger side door frame; the same place I'd ducked under last time. This time I stood. I needed to look calm, confident and *normal*. *Nothing unusual to see here*.

The tow truck driver slammed his door shut. I winced and glanced up at the apartment. *Dark. Empty. So far, so good*. He wasn't anything to write home about: wearing a blue uniform shirt that said *Mike* and a matching blue cap with the company logo on it, he was straight out of tow

truck driver central casting. These were the days before internet, so he carried a yellow booklet of carbon forms in one hand, and a pen in the other.

He had close cropped brown hair, and equally brown eyes; with a faint five o'clock shadow and fainter lines on his neck above his collar that curled up slightly at the tips. His black steel-toed work boots were firm on the pavement. "Are you Lynn?"

"Yes."

"You are wanting this towed to.....Edmonds, the paperwork says? What seems to be the problem?"

"It won't start. I've cranked it and nothing. Looks like the distributor cap is missing."

"The distributor cap is missing?" He looked at me like I was speaking Martian, and repeated it back as if he were learning a phrase in a new language.

"Yes sir." I was getting impatient now. Staying in one place in this parking lot for too long was hazardous to my health.

"Okay, well!" He said brightly, "I'll just hook up my jumper cables and we'll get it checked out here real quick and see what we've got." Mike beamed at me helpfully.

I appreciated the awesome customer service, but frowned slightly, making a little crease in between my eyebrows. "It's not going to start without a distributor cap. I've tried."

Mike was not impressed with my self-professed mechanical abilities in the slightest. Mild irritation crept into his voice, while he tried to remain polite. “Ma’am. We are required to try and start the vehicle before we tow it to ensure it won’t start. It’s AAA policy.”

I looked up at the apartment. And then back at Mike. “I see. Well, O.K. You do that, and I’ll go wait over there across the street at the AM/PM.” I pointed to the convenience store through the trees for emphasis.

This guy is looking at me like I am batshit crazy. He’s not entirely wrong.

But Mike, bless him, simply said “You’re going to what?”, standing with the yellow tablet froze in mid-air.

I shifted my weight from one newly bark-stained Ked to another. Clasp my hands in front of me, I took a deep breath, and blurted: “This is my truck. I have the title on me. I can prove it. My ex-husband lives in that apartment up there. He took off the distributor cap so that I can’t take it back. Last time I tried he shot at me. And I don’t want to get shot. So anyway……I’m going to go across the street and wait there, okay?” I pointed to the AM/PM again; as if he didn’t understand what *across the street* meant the first time I’d said it.

I looked at the apartment again for emphasis. Then back at Mike, as if to say *can you believe this shit?*

At this point, any rational person would have noped out hard and said “Lady, you really need to call 911 and/or your divorce attorney. This is 100% not my gig. I am not fucking Repo Man. Peace out.” But what did St. Mike, Patron Saint of Tow Truck Drivers and Young Women Who

Pick Shitty Husbands do? His eyes went wide, and he snapped into a military grade alertness. His tone was slightly singsong, as if he was merely a garcon bringing me more lemon for my Evian. “Oh. WELL. Why didn’t you SAY so? Let me just get this hooked up and we’ll be on our way! Go get your car and I’ll follow you.”

I didn’t think that I had heard him correctly. I was holding my breath again, immobile.

“Go.” Mike motioned towards the AM/PM with a jerk of his head.

I went. Back through the bark, my hair catching in the apartment trees, I heard the winch groan as he lowered it to hook up to the GMC. *No cars. Fuck yes.* I ran, reaching into my pocket to grab my keys mid-stride; at the ready for when I got to the Roadrunner.

Mike was waiting alongside the curb on the arterial street, the GMC tilted on the hook behind the *Day & Nite Towing* truck. His neck craned out the window, watching for me in the windows of the cars that passed. I rolled my window down and threw my left arm up in the air, raising it high to signal that it was me. His baseball cap bobbed as he nodded in acknowledgement and threw his own left arm out of his window, motioning frantically as if he were herding me forward: *go, go, go, go, hurry up, hurry up, hurry up, whatever you do don’t stop, keep going you crazy bitch.*

The stoplight Gods were in our favor: we hit every green one along the main roads. After we’d made it a couple of miles with no signs of my husband, pursuit, or gunshots, I finally let myself breathe in. Hitting a red light on 156th and Fryhaus Way, I rolled my window down and put my left arm up again in a wave/salute; checking on Mike in my rear view mirror. *You okay back there?*

Mike had his elbow hanging out of his window, and he raised just his forearm and spread the fingers on his left hand in response. He grinned every so slightly. *Yeah. Aight back here. So far so good. Keep going you crazy bitch.*

Mom met us in the middle of the street front of the house in a pair of yellow terry cloth shorts, slippers, and a t-shirt stretched around her round stomach. Bud Light in one hand, and a lit Kool in the other; she was probably on her 2nd pack of both. “Can he back it into the back yard? We can shut it in the gate and lock it, and it’ll be more hidden and harder to get to there.”

Mike could. Expertly. He lingered in the neighbor’s alleyway behind our house, writing on the yellow notepad.

“Go lock the gate, Lynn.” Mom handed me a padlock and gestured towards the fence. I slipped the chrome lock through the latch and heard the tow truck door open.

“Ma’am? I need you to sign this for AAA.” Mike held out the yellow form and pen to me. He’s formal all of a sudden, like we totally just haven’t been through a life-or-death situation together. If it’s not a rule that you can call someone by their first name after making sure they don’t get shot, it sure as shit oughta be. As if he didn’t just have an entire Cliff’s Notes version of every bad decision I’ve ever made in my life up to that point (there would be more...aren’t there always?) play out right in front of him.

I didn’t even read it. Sometimes, I wish I had a copy of it. I have no idea what it said, or what I signed. I was alive. “I cannot tell you how much I appreciate this. Really. I mean....”

Mom stuck her hand in through the neck of her t-shirt and pulled out a wad of bills from her bra. She counted off four of them – twenties – and handed them to Mike. “Thank you for getting dumbfuck her truck back.”

Mike looked at Mom, and then me. Nodded. “Thank you.”

And with another expert backing-up of the tow truck, he was gone.

The truck: The distributor cap was a fairly easy fix. It ran for a couple more years until it developed a terminal rod knock and I still owed more on it than it was worth. My father drove me back to the used car lot that I originally bought it from – at 28% interest – and we returned it to them in exchange for them forgiving the rest of the loan with no penalty.

John: skipped the state with yet another cocktail waitress, along with one of our checkbooks and a string of bills. It took me another year to divorce that motherfucker *in absentia*, and another five after that to pay off his string of debt that was still considered community property. Sitting in my bathrobe at the Marriott in St. John, USVI, I stopped with my coffee cup in midair as I read from my balcony on the beach: *Wyoming Man involved in fatal motorcycle accident.*

Possible driver impairment is being investigated. 25 years to the month from when this story took place; 4 months after he had cleared his final warrant.

Keep going, you crazy bitch.

Thanks again, Mike. I owe you.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *“Keep Going, You Crazy Bitch” is the 100% true story of the events that transpired after I had finally decided to leave my first husband at the age of 21 after realizing that I valued saving my life – literally - more than other people’s opinions. The reason I tell these stories is a social and psychological commentary on how our upbringing shapes our ‘dysfunction radar’ – and also that it can be recalibrated. There is a relationship between small kindnesses and decisions in the moment that can change our trajectories. Most importantly, I write about trauma because while I have been fortunate enough to have had closure for decades, others have not (yet!) and knowing that they are not alone, unique, or hopeless is critical. It is my own way of offering them a seat at the table with those of us who have pushed through and now have the life – and security – they deserve. As the cliché goes: you can’t choose the cards you were dealt, but you can choose how you play them. My writing is particularly inspired by Hillbilly Elegy by J.D. Vance as our backgrounds are extremely similar, and continually by Mike Perry, author of Population 485. If Bill Bryson and Christopher Moore had a love child, that’d be pretty much perfect to me, although I expect their spouses might have an opinion on that. I also really wanted to send a thank you out into the universe to Mike, wherever he may be, for saving my bacon all those years ago. I’ve tried not to waste the opportunity.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Lynn Magill lives in Western Washington with deep Iowa roots that influence many aspects of her work. She writes poetry and nonfiction and is also a painter and visual artist. She is scheduled to graduate from Central Washington University in Winter 2021 with a master’s degree in Professional and Creative Writing. She has two nonfiction pieces scheduled for publication in Spring of 2021 in an anthology via McFarland & Sons, and is currently published in *Route 7 Review*, *The Good Life Review*, and *Thin Air Magazine*. Lynn loves to travel and spend time with her husband on their Texas ranch herding goats and finding any excuse to avoid being within range of cell phone reception.

"There are two kinds of people in this world: the takers and the givers. The takers sometimes eat better, but the givers always sleep better." - Danny Thomas

S H I M S H A M

By Janet **Ehrlich** Colson

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor DENNIS HINRICHSEN writes...A former tap teacher, a brother's suicide, AIDS, a hotel room—what a compelling opening moment in this non-story that deftly weaves many story lines that radiate from the same basic idea of what do we owe those we love in times of crisis. What holds it all together is the found form of the title—a tap dance routine—the moving forward, moving back, feet apart, feet together—that perfectly captures the movement of Colson's mind here and lends a gravity to each one of the layered crises. The feeling of being forgotten as a child by a parent, for example. Or being a parent herself being late picking up a child. To the worry (unstated) that links the opening moment of assisted suicide with the potential need to put down her dog. What a fine non-story that captures the complicated nature of our lives—our commitment to each other that fails at times but nevertheless is focused on helping each other live, even if that means helping each other as we die.*

Five stars.

Shim Sham

My tap teacher helped her brother commit suicide in a hotel room. This was back in the 80's when AIDS was a new thing. Her brother wanted to commit suicide before he was too sick to say goodbye. She told me other stories, too, because my mom was always late picking me up. Mostly, I remember my tap teacher telling me about her brother. I picture her brother looking just like her, but with shorter hair.

When I was fifteen or sixteen, my mom forgot to pick me up from the bus station after I came back from Milwaukee. When I got home, all the lights were off and the car was gone. I imagined what it would be like if my parents never came back, but they had just gone up north for the weekend. My friends asked me to spend the night so I didn't have to be alone, but I was okay. I liked having the house to myself.

Our dog got sick and we don't know why. Was it something she ingested? A toxin? Something in the backyard? A skunk? A tick? My son Forrest was up late that night so I asked him to come with me to the vet. I needed his help getting Scarlett into the car (she weighs more than 80 pounds).

My mom used to leave me in the toy section of the supermarket and then she'd vanish. She'd head straight for the produce, leaving me to look at the same toys that were there every week: jacks, marbles, the fake Barbies, the handcuffs. I could always use another pair of handcuffs.

There was an infectious disease specialist from the university who came to my high school to give a presentation about AIDS. The gymnasium was packed. Outside there were vans with television equipment and cameras from the local news. I was taking a video production class so I got to stand in front and videotape the presentation.

I ask Forrest if he's sure he wants to come with me to the vet. He says he'll come but he doesn't want to drive. He's almost 16; the same age I was when my tap teacher told me about her brother. The conversation in the car is mostly one-sided. I talk about tap dancing, AIDS, and euthanasia. Forrest asks if I can change the subject.

My mom and I both lose track of time. Or maybe it's that we lie about it. This has been going on for quite a while.

The other day I pull up at Forrest's school to pick him up. "I'm only six minutes late!" I announce as he gets in the car, even though we both know it's seven. Why would I lie about one minute? "It's fine," he says. I ask him if he wants to drive home. He doesn't.

I can't find my mother. I look up and down the aisles. I look in the produce section. I go to the canned soup aisle. The bakery. The meat counter. A couple of times I think I've spotted her, but it's always someone else. Eventually, I go to the service desk and have her paged over the PA system.

We were supposed to be on the road the day before yesterday, but we're just taking off now. We're stuck in traffic on the 23 South near Ann Arbor. I leave a message for the vet with the answering service. I forgot to tell them about the tick. They'll get back to me on Monday.

I love my cat as much as my children.

They say when you're in the middle of something you can't get any perspective. (I am always in the middle of something)

My tap teacher taught us to drum with our feet. Rhythm tap. Time steps. The Shim Sham. Tap as language. Tap as blues. Old School.

The vet asks me lots of questions about Scarlett. She asks about her appetite. Urination. Bowel movements. We tell her that we knew something was wrong when we were getting ready for our trip and she wouldn't come out of her crate. (Ordinarily she doesn't go in her crate at all. We just keep it there because there are receipts piled on top). There were other things, too, that worried us about Scarlett. She lay down during a game of badminton. She stopped playing with the puppy.

I used to dream about getting lost in the supermarket. Now I dream about hills, stairs, grass. Sidewalks. I dream about flooring. Linoleum. Carpet.

We got a puppy because we thought Scarlett was depressed. I realize how dumb this sounds as I'm saying it. The vet sends me a report with test results, blood cell counts, and observations. Some of my stories about Scarlett are in the report. They don't sound that dumb.

They call me back from the vet on Monday. They are recommending a bone marrow biopsy. She'll need to be there for several days after the surgery.

I dreamed I was about to fall from a wire but I remembered to point my toe.

I am exhausted.

The medication has made Scarlett a different dog. She's always thirsty. She's irritable. She'll bite my fingers when I give her treats if I don't watch out. She used to leave kibble in the bowl. Now she licks it clean and comes back for more. She's getting into the garbage, stealing from the counters. Digging in drawers. We locked her out of the kitchen. She ate my underwear.

Sometimes a dream will come back to me if I can remember what the grass looked like.

Sometimes I do a tap dance inside my head. (Bum-pa-bum, bum-pa-bum, bum-pa-bum-*pa-bum*-pa-bum...)

I'm highly allergic to cats.

We blamed my parents' dog for pulling a roast off the stove when we were up north, but I think it was Scarlett.

Eventually, Scarlett will go off the prednisone and stay on another immune suppressant. Three quarters of a pill two times a day. We have to wear gloves to give it to her. We drew a skull and crossbones on the bottle.

My tap teacher told me that the medication to kill her brother was in a paper bag.

Forrest and I were talking about the kinds of stories in which the protagonist is looking for something and finds something else along the way.

(When I was sixteen, I thought about how much I weighed more than I thought about stories.)

My cat weighs 16 pounds.

Forrest says all stories are like that, but I'm not sure. I think some stories end when you get back to where you started. Others end because you never get back there at all.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I started this piece on the road, pre-COVID. I've been on the road a lot lately, and felt the rhythms of the Shim Sham rumbling their way back into my head (along with the bone-rattling sounds of my car). An earlier version of the piece was slated to be published last spring in a magazine that went dark during the pandemic. I've since revised, renamed, and wondered what it was - fiction, non-fiction, or something else. I landed on creative non-fiction, which I think covers it.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Janet Ehrlich Colson (she/her/they) is a playwright and actor living in Detroit, Michigan where she recently relocated with her family. Along with being displaced during the pandemic, she wrote several plays including ZA-92, a Covid zombie play, Coming Out Inside, about coming out during a quarantine, and The Dreamwalker, based on the true story of a somnambulist. Her full-length play EA (Eaters Anonymous), an audacious tale of recovery from addiction, was presented virtually by Riverwalk Theatre in Lansing. Their hybrid poem Socially Distanced appears in The Social Gap Experiment anthology. Janet is drama editor of the deliciously defiant literary zine, Fleas on the Dog (www.fleasonthedog.com) which published her play, Coming Down, and a mini collection of poems in Issue 6. www.janetehrichcolson.com

EDITOR'S BIO: Dennis Hinrichsen, author of *This Is Where I Live I Have Nowhere Else To Go*, winner of the 2020 Grid Poetry Prize.

The <<<<Quarantine>>>> Checklist

By R. F. **G**onzalez

WHY WE LIKE IT: *The Covid themed subs we got for this issue ranged from the very good to the gawd awful This is an example of the very good.*

The Quarantine Checklist

by R.F. Gonzalez

1. You can't hang your heart at home forever.

Home may not be exactly where your heart is after all this. Hearts wake up early and complain because traffic sucks, or because the kids refuse to get ready, or because the toaster broke, or because the coffee tastes like dirt. The other day my heart cracked an egg into an iron pan and the yolk burst. They do it so much better at restaurants. That's where my heart is - sitting at a table in a vinyl booth while waiting for some mean

service from a disgruntled waitress who I'll still tip because maybe she needs it more. My heart is not at home, though. It sleeps at home, reflects at home, is safe at home, loves my people at home - but it doesn't hang there.

2. Don't go crazy.

This is going to be the coldest summer ever. Not that it's going to be cold, but that this whole isolation, lockdown, distancing thing has made everything frosty. Everything. If cold had complexion, it would be pallid. It would look sickly. Don't go crazy. Cold is death and tastes like ice cubes and feels like a metal chair on your back in the morning. Everything feels cold lately. You can hear the clink, clink, clinking of cold everywhere.

3. Have kids, they said.

It'll be worth it. If you don't have kids, then you may be lonely. And if you do have kids, then they may be lonely because they miss their friends more than anything. You. You might not miss anything if you're an isolationist anyway. This quarantine is just a season like any other. Maintaining six feet between people is more relief than anything because you crave the space. If you're socially inclined, then those six feet may as well be

six hundred. But the kids, keep them close - like, within a foot or so.

4. Have a drink.

Sip it from across the street with your neighbor. It can be any drink because they won't know what's in your cup anyway. They're too far to tell. Share a green tea and mischievously pour sugar into it. Toast a coffee from afar and make it Irish, if you want. Share an ice-cold water and let them think it's water and not some other intoxicating drink on the rocks that you made at home.

5. Don't horde.

My kid wanted some cheap noodle soup the other day. Couldn't get it for her because for some reason the fear of impending doom had been projected from toilet tissue to paper towels to soup - like some bizarre consumerist eco-chain that's gone ablaze. Sorry, darling, but there was no soup at the store. But why? she said. Because people are scared and when they're scared they horde tissue and soup. I wish they'd make up their minds, she sighed. It was gasoline last time.

6. Yay! Working from Home.

Even with super focusing powers, working from home is still chaotic. I'm trying to write this story for the zine but my kid

wants pretzels. I get him pretzels. Wrong kind so he screams at me for failing as a father. Two minutes of writing and all I've written is *Two minutes of writing*. I've got to grade my classes but the essays are worse than getting the wrong pretzels. I manage to squeeze in two hours of solid work in ten hours.

7. Coffee is life.

Seriously, my coffee drinking has turned into a frenzy. Instead of four cups a day I drink eight, yet I'm sleeping more and waking up less rested. There must be a science behind this which I'll have to check out sometime, which means never. They shut down all the coffee houses too, which means my office is closed. I took the two-dollar a day cheap rent for granted. Now, the real rent is due and the landlord is showing up like a 1970's pimp caricature to make sure we have it. I wish we could pay him with coffee. Coffee currency - that would solve everything.

8. Take a drive.

Take a drive for no other reason than to be alone. Tell your wife and kids that you've got important errands to run - the most important of which is to get a sandwich and eat it in the most serene place in quarantine history - a widely paved parking lot. Watch the cars zip by and wonder what parking lots

they are driving to since they can't possibly be driving to the one you're in (since they just zipped by, of course). Maybe they'll check back later to see if you've relinquished the lot. Sit there longer just so they can have a story to grumpily tell themselves later. *Can you believe that jerk? Sitting in my lot, smugly eating a sandwich on my errands break. I hope he chokes.* And for a moment you choke on a piece of salami. Karma is still a *B* even in pandemics.

9. Don't cough.

Cough quietly or else everyone will think you're infected. I was walking the grocery aisles a week ago and I coughed and looked around to see if anyone had heard it through my mask. Nobody. I coughed again and it was a phlegmy cough, one of those wet hacks that could be allergies, a dust particle, a cold, too many cigarettes, or the vile virus itself. So, I attempted to cough quieter than I've ever done before. I couldn't manage the tiny heaves so I abandoned my cart and hurried out to my car where I gripped my steering wheel and yelled obscenities about the absurdity of closing playgrounds. It was liberating for a moment before the rigidity of this new life suddenly hit me and robbed me of breath anyway. The irony made me want coffee.

10. Art.

Take up an art - any art. Writing is probably the easiest art to do because everyone has been using words since they were children, and in writing you use words to paint pictures (because you're not talented enough to actually produce anything significant on canvas). The only drawback is that once you've written something it has the tendency to stick to your character, taint your life, and estrange people who read themselves into the words you've committed to paper (or internet pages nowadays). Put it like this. People don't admire an abstract painting and say, Yeah, that blue one, that's me. I'm that blob. Writing is a lonely, solitary art, so maybe it isn't the best one to take up during the quarantine since this disease is already the champion of keeping us distant and estranged. Writing is also pandemic and it's unlikely we will ever find a cure for it. The virus is like writing - it's never going away. Maybe.

11. Infection Perfection.

We could go away instead and leave the virus to fester on its own and without bodies to infect. Or even better: we could reverse roles and infect the virus. You've got a case of human, the virus-doc would say. Oh, sweet virus-gawd, no. What will happen to me? At which the virus-doc would say, you may

experience a temperature of 98.6, patches or stretches of skin growing, hair sprouting, oxygen saturation of at least 94, tirades about a wife and kids which you don't have because you're a virus, and extremely violent episodes where you will horde red blood cells or virus-toilet tissue and virus-soup. Or petrol (Why the hell not?) But what will I tell my virus-daughter? Oh, no, the infection has begun, the virus-doc would say. We should quarantine you.

The End

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Hog a parking lot and watch other cars envy you. Share a drink from far away. Don't horde, because everyone already has and so there's nothing left. We live in a state of infection perfection. *The Quarantine Checklist* consists of mini-vignettes about coping with the pandemic. Simple acts like shopping, drinking coffee, and relaxing have all been redefined as risky behavior. Accepting that the virus is here to stay means that these behaviors will also remain with us even after the social measures have vanished.

AUTHOR'S BIO: I have a short story published with The Piker Press literary magazine, titled *Meaty Machismo* (2019), as well as a short story published with The Acentos Review, titled *Flip-Flop* (2020). Also, I have a non-fiction book published with McFarland & Company, Inc., titled *Chinese Gong Fu: Toward a Body-Centered Understanding* (2019), and a fiction book titled *Love is a Cheerleader Running* (2019) published with Wings ePress, Inc. I also hold a PhD and am a writing instructor in Dallas. R.F. Gonzalez was born in Nicaragua. After living in Europe and Central America, he moved to the United States where he works as a writing instructor, investor, and writer.

Up and Down the Tube (Re: Howard Zinn & Michael Gove)

By Pavle Ranovic

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Moxy kool.*

(Spacing and format is author's own.)

Up & Down the Tube (Re: Howard Zinn & Michael Gove)

Howard Zinn

Isn't he wonderful. Heard him before. Loved the mentions of Mark Twain & Helen Keller. Who in the heck knew that stuff? Carefully tailored fame.

From memory an autodidact, not uni grad.

You notice the size of the nib on Trumpet's signature quill? See the pour of lustrous black from the Fordham grad who cheated his way into Penn.

Remember Prof Blainey only a decade & half back during Howard's time, Bush's sheriff, banging on relentlessly about the advance of civilisation, impossibility of holding back against lesser cultures, refusing the black armband version of history. Still not dead the old bastard, god forgive me. (The voice of Bab at my back.)

My Pentel *ENERGel 07* flows like a dream. Brought 20-25 refills with me out here, as well as half dozen pens; near the end of the supply after such an extended stay. Disdain inferior product. It took the Japs some good while to refine the technology for their nibs. Not to be taken for granted. You drop or even knock them, goodbye the cascading outpour from the heart.

His skin treatment in the shot here, as well as the autocue either side he swivels to read from like a halting schoolboy. You can imagine years ago how long he practised that tag, curls, hooks and flourishes to die for. No statesman in history has anything to compare, Theodore Roosevelt poss coming closest.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_L7U0R0oSM

Michael Gove

Knew the name but never laid eyes on the man previously, nor heard that voice and those rhythms. You feel humanity has been cruelly trapped and overpowered by malign forces of darkness causing such numbers to be herded into the language of this fellow's marauding ancestors. Stuck there we are like insect specimens in aspic. Three minutes of the twelve was as much as could be borne. You begin to think of the possibility of the revenge of the natural order currently working away on that island through this pandemic, the late interventions by BoJo all too little. Did you hear his recent freedom-loving guff contrasting Brits / Germans & others?!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VV42soUXW_g

NB. Replies to mail from George

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Not being so much a Net surfer myself, I rely on friends fwd-ing material for widening the aperture, something that has been important in the last few years trying to take measure of the pol scene, especially over a number of different locales. The quick of email sometimes has spinoffs for other writings too. Some of my friends are mining v. useful material.*

Being a literary writer means serious, hard-nosed. Many years schnoz to the grindstone/Sisyphean wheel in my case. Influences are really too too many to mention. On the blog I posted a list a few years ago:

The headkickers: Beckett, Joyce (not F.W.), Pynchon, Dickinson, Celine, Genet, Flaubert, Nietzsche, Vidal, Sontag, Bernhard, Dostojevsky, Chekhov, Camus, Kafka, Canetti, Jelinek, Wordsworth, Banville (nay to the nay-sayers), Larkin, P. P. Njegos, Kawabata, Oe, Whitman, Rilke, Garcia Marquez, Walser, Hamsun, Anais Nin, Brodkey, Chomsky.... Shakespeare! Blake, Milton, Sam Johnson....

Recent discoveries: Victor Serge, Debord, Virilio, Alexievich, Pessoa. Then Tariq Ali, Chris Hedges, Zizek, Pankaj Mishra.

The I Ching (David Hinton transl.), Bhagavad Gita, Tao Te Ching, Analects.

Australian: Bail, Garner (Children's Bach), Drewe (Our Sunshine), Lawson, Stead (Man Who Loved Children)

Must hasten to add Cornel West, only exposure thus far in my case performing on the Tube, but a number of hours watched/listened. The man is a glory; marvellous riffs.

*Took a number of years to get to *The Wretched of the Earth* – Franz Fanon, only finally eventuating because of the Islamic community where I was living and a particularly persistent bibliophile friend.*

The Tamil Perumal Murugan is worth added mention, one of the rare authors providing scintillating insight into “native,” village life. Urban greenies/foodies/enviro activists should get acquainted with such natural, important allies. Programmatic discourse can only take one so far.

AUTHOR’S BIO: Australian by birth and Montenegrin origin, Pavle Radonic’s eight years living and writing in S-E Asia has provided unexpected stimulus. Previous work has appeared in a range of literary journals and magazines, most recently Panoply, Modern Literature, The Blue Nib & New World Writing.

The **Five-OH** (*OH Oh oh oh oh*)

By Jan **Bartelli**

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Turning 50, like turning 21, is a rite of passage in North American culture, except that 50 is the down side of 21. No matter how many facials, sit ups or colour rinses we all know deep down the Big Five Oh is going to win out every time over our precariously constructed fantasies of who we are (or think we are). Every one handles this existential crisis differently and we liked Bartelli's drolly self-deprecating, quietly humorous and ultimately truthful approach-- I cannot reinvent myself – I can change, I can grow, but I cannot reinvent the wheel that is my 50-year-old soul-- to midlife stocktaking. If there's an upside to this woeful reminder of our mortality, it's probably reminding yourself turning 60 is ten years away!*

The Five-Oh

I know what you're be thinking: "Wow! You don't look 50!! Really???" That's what you're thinking.

And if that's not what you're thinking ... well, fuck you.

50 prompts inventory.

And I see that the years of expensive skin care, the regular exercise, the good genes – they do not fool the 50-year-old me.

Do not fool my belly, with its strange new indentation below the belly button, flanked by two small pouches of fat.

Do not fool my waist, which has sprouted an unfashionable fleshy “peplum” that folds over my uncomfortable jeans.

Do not fool my hair, ever thinner and responsive if at all only to special salon gloss and expensive volumizing shampoos.

Do not fool my skin, encroached by spider veins that weave around my thighs and the back of my knees.

Do not fool my legs, that grow slower thicker, edging toward that shapeless stolid look that sends hemlines plummeting.

Do not fool my bones...

At 40, newly divorced, I went to law school. Suddenly single and surrounded by hundreds of 20-somethings, I wanted to be 20-something, too, with 20-something lovers and a 20-something’s toned body - or as close as a lucky and disciplined 40-something could get.

A classmate – a nice guy, but slutty – refused to believe I was 40 and said, “If you’re 40, then I’m a virgin.”

A law school friend got married recently. I ate sparingly in the week before her wedding, bought a pretty dress and had my hair cut and my nails manicured. The nice-but-slutty guy eyed me up and down, shook his head and said: “You are a real piece of ass.”

It made the 50-year-old me happy. I danced with abandon and drank lots of champagne. My dancing grew delirious and soon, I was a laughing, dancing dervish... then, was a strange

pop in my knee.

I limped gingerly back to my seat.

Do not fool my bones.

At 50, even my dreams have changed. There are no more effortless runs, arabesque leaps, or soaring flights through the clouds under my own power (I was partial to the breaststroke). I loved those dreams – the air rushing toward my body and the pleasure of pushing through it. My dreams these days are dull, heady affairs – full of talking, thinking, feeling. And I no longer fly – though on a good night, I can still hover a bit above the ground.

I see breach-able distance between the old and me. I will grow simultaneously both rough and fragile – the skin coarsened, the hair thinner. It will become harder and harder to believe that I was ever one of those creatures with buttery skin gliding over strong bone, and hair that needed to be tamed and gathered.

There are still times – increasingly rare – when I feel my young, supple self. Then there is a moment or two of glee – followed quickly by anxious worry. Am I deluded? Pathetic? Is this how the self-deception begins: believing that I can still strut my stuff even as I apply lipstick clownlike around thin lips and paint two red circles on my cheeks?

I fear that as grace and dignity grow ever more important, I will only manage ridiculous exaggeration.

This is all very distressing. But it is not the worst.

This is the worst: from now on, it's about what remains. At 49, life was the helm; now it's the stern.

I saw possibilities; I see eulogies.

Major purchases may last my lifetime.

I can no longer make life-long friends, only long-term ones.

I might share my life with someone, but we will not build our lives together.

If I attain a major success, it will be viewed as the surprising achievement of the late bloomer.

I cannot reinvent myself – I can change, I can grow, but I cannot reinvent the wheel that is my 50-year-old soul.

Single and without children, I feel edged toward the outline. At the center, are the “meaningful” events in other people’s lives – the engagements, weddings, baby showers, bar mitzvahs and college graduations. I celebrate these meaningful events; at work, especially, I keep celebrating, expensively marking the celebrations in my colleagues’ lives.

“I will be 50,” I told our office manager, shortly before my birthday. “And you people better buy me a big, fucking present.”

They did.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I turned 50 seething with indignation and self-pity, and the embarrassing realization that – despite professional and personal successes – I had relied heavily on my youth and appearance for purchase in the world. Of course, the signs that I was no longer a sexy, young thing did not suddenly appear on my 50th birthday, but they were suddenly very visible to me.*

Faced with that vision, I floundered. Where to safely hang my identity hat? I was neither parent nor significant other, as I was constantly reminded by the familial celebrations around me. My colleagues were (mostly) lovely people – but it is hard when you realize that the “+1” is you.

Years later, I still easily recall my panic. But it has been a very long time since I placed such power in youth and beauty. Granted, a few (hard-boiled) eggs still roll around in that basket.

But just a few.

AUTHOR’S BIO: Jan Bartelli lives in a tiny town in upstate New York and for many years lived in a very big city in downstate New York. She is a former journalist and, maybe, retired attorney (depends who’s asking). Her CNF has been published in *82 Review, Sad Girls Club, The Dewdrop (“Isolation Shorts”), and elsewhere.

UrBaN cowBoY

By James **H**anna

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A world weary officer burdened with PTSD looks back on his time with the San Francisco Probation Dept and his experiences with the damned and the damaged. Through his recollections we are afforded a glimpse inside a reality show where the mystique of being a cop is demythologized and the sometimes covert tricks of the trade are laid out like a hand of cards. It's a long way from Hollywood and TV heroes like Clint Eastwood and Karl Malden. This is a low key narrative that slowly gathers strength and Hanna's handling of character and dialogue is what you'd expect from a seasoned writer. Both the prose and the voice are Wednesday afternoon rather than Saturday night but then that's as it should be when it's Wednesday afternoon. Quote:*

To my credit, I never took stress leave although my nerves grew increasingly raw. Far better a gaucho's aura than the shame of a doctor's note.

Senior Editor CHARLES writes...*The first paragraph of this CNF is a textbook example of how to open effectively. No fooling around. Draw your pistol, point the barrel and fire.*

(Spacing and format is author's own.)

Urban Cowboy

by

James Hanna

I am hypervigilant. I have an exaggerated flinch response. Whenever I lock a door, I go back and check it three times. These are the emotional limps I acquired while I was a San Francisco probation officer, a job that let me boast that I was an urban cowboy. So consoling was this image that my PTSD seemed secondary; even today I would venture to say that my glory was cheaply bought. How proud I was of my duty belt, my handcuffs, my two-way radio. How proud I was of the Glock 40 that I usually kept in my locker at work. I even affected a lazy drawl and walked with a gunfighter's swagger, and at times I kept a cheroot clamped between my teeth.

When Mary, my wife, said I looked like Clint Eastwood, I was quick to correct her. "You could say he looks like *me*," I replied. "I'm a real peace officer. Clint Eastwood is shooting blanks."

"Well, maybe you shouldn't be so cocky about putting people in jail."

"Nabbing bad guys goes with the job," I drawled. "I can't get hung up on it. I don't try and understand them—I just tie and throw and brand them."

"Hmm," she said. "That's kind of profound," then recognition dawned on her face. "Hey, that's the theme song from *Rawhide*," she scoffed. "That TV show in the sixties where Clint Eastwood got his start."

"Yeah," I said, "but it's my song now. I *deserve* it more than Clint Eastwood."

Sometimes people would ask me how many arrests I had made. Whenever this happened, I feigned nonchalance and said, "Maybe two or three hundred." I spoke without inflection, as though reciting a grocery list, and I did not bother to mention just how the arrests took place. When it came to the ticklish business of putting people in jail, The San Francisco

Probation Department was averse to taking risks. We never made our busts on the streets where bystanders might intervene; instead, we lured our clients to the probation department and arrested them in teams. No rough and tumble for us, no roping and throwing for us. Why risk a bruise or a fractured skull when a timely lie would suffice? So whenever I received a complaint that one of my clients was misbehaving, I conjured up a pretense to bring him to my office. Usually, I would ask him to report for a piss test or to sign some paperwork, but when it came to pathological stalkers I had a more convincing line. Most of them had rescue fantasies where their victims were concerned, and I shamelessly exploited their delusions to get them hooked and booked. For instance, a stalker once told me that his victim was being abused by her father, so I called the stalker on his cell phone when I learned he was lurking outside her home.

“Jimmy Wong,” I said when he answered my call. “I need you in my office at once.”

“What’s happenin’, Mister Hanna?”

“Your girlfriend’s in trouble—we have reason to believe that her father’s still molesting her. I need you to tell me everything you know about him. I want to lock that pervert up.”

In less than fifteen minutes, Jimmy Wong knocked on my office door, and I was waiting for him with a pair of detectives from the San Francisco Police Department.

“Not again,” Jimmy said as we hooked him up.

“Thanks for reporting,” I said, and I gave him a pat on his shoulder as we perp-walked him to jail.

Yes, I was more conman than cowboy, more bluffer than buckaroo. And I compulsively kept the odds in my favor when I cuffed a client up. My odds grew ridiculously high one day

when I was taking a sex offender to jail—a client who attempted to bolt after I collared him for possessing child porn. I was accompanied by two burly detectives from San Francisco Sex Crimes Unit, and the client broke away from all three of us as we entered the jail sally port. The moment he was loose, a dozen deputy jailers, responding to an alert signal, poured through the electronic jail door and wrestled him to the ground. When I thought of Clint Eastwood single-handedly gunning down three or four bad guys, I had to admit that fifteen to one were hardly sporting odds.

On one rare occasion, I left the building to bust a client who lived in Oakland—a former head nurse on probation for stalking a woman she barely knew. She had been spotted outside of her victim’s home cutting the telephone wires, and she had failed to report when I called her on her cell phone and tried to trick her into coming to my office. Since this woman seemed dangerously nuts, I teamed up with an Oakland task force—a gang of deputy sheriffs assigned to an apprehension squad. They were a cavalier, good-natured lot with a gallows sense of humor. “Oh shit, that’s my sister,” one of them said when I showed them my client’s mug shot.

Had I made a deal with the Devil by so overplaying my hand—by summoning an entire posse to bust one mentally ill woman? If so, I received the Devil’s wages when we broke into her rented room. My client was not there so I could not hook her up, and a search for weapons produced only a penknife and several enormous dildos. When I told Mary about this adventure, she offered a joke of her own. “A pack of armed and dangerous vibrators!” she laughed. “Did you tell them to drop their batteries?” Fortunately, the woman was picked up that evening by a cop from San Francisco’s Mission Station. He had spotted her casing the victim’s home and arrested her without incident.

Many of my arrests were attributable to another's reputation—a brawny deputy sheriff whom most of us called Pac Man. He was a huge Filipino dude who worked on San Francisco's Fugitive Recovery Enforcement Team—an outfit known as FRET because it made the bad guys sweat. Pac Man had a couple of martial arts black belts; he had been shot or stabbed seven times, but he relentlessly combed the city to nab criminals on the run. Whenever I first met with a client, I always mentioned Pac Man. "If you get in trouble," I said, "surrender to me right away. If I have to put a bench warrant on you, you'll have to deal with Pac Man. Believe me when I tell you that you don't want to mess with Pac Man." This spiel was remarkably effective in getting clients to turn themselves in. Probationers spooked by the thought of an ogre would buzz my office phone. When they mentioned a drug charge they may have caught or a complaint they might have suffered, I said, "Make it easy on yourself or you know who's gonna getcha." These clients would quickly come see me and put their hands behind their backs. On their way to jail, some even thanked me for saving them from Pac Man.

So why, with all my precautions, did I suffer PTSD? Perhaps it was due to the threats I drew from clients who could not take a joke. On one occasion, a batterer spat at me while we were standing in open court, and he swore he would make me pay for using a fib to lock him up. Fortunately, this fellow was a resident alien from Ireland, and The Department of Homeland Security deported him back to the Emerald Isle. On another occasion, a stalker I nabbed was released after only two weeks, and he tracked me on the internet as soon as he got out of jail. The client was on probation for harassing a famous movie actress, and I had busted him after he sent her an email promising to cut out her tongue. Although she was subpoenaed, the actress did not come to court and testify, so the judge released the ingrate to continue his

rampaging ways. *U R not God*, he emailed me, *U R gonna dispear*. At least, his misspelled threats gave me a small consolation. I could claim to have the same stalker as a glamorous movie star.

To my credit, I never took stress leave although my nerves grew increasingly raw. Far better a gaucho's aura than the shame of a doctor's note. So my swagger grew bolder, my drawl became thicker, and I feigned a range rider's squint. And I chewed upon my cheroots until they were worn to nubs. "Ayup," I said to Mary before catching the Caltrain to work, "gonna lasso me some doggies and throw 'em in the pen."

"Is that what you call them—*doggies*?" she said. "Those poor souls you put in jail."

When I said that's what cowboys call cattle, she suggested I turn in my spurs.

One day, my office partner and I were taking a drug offender to jail—a shrimpy little fellow who had tested positive for cocaine. As we herded him through the jail parking lot, Pac Man pulled up in his van. After giving us a friendly wave, he opened the door to his van, and a half-dozen bad guys stepped out of it and accompanied him to the jail. They were linked together with chains, and they walked like a string of horses. He had caught them single-handedly, all in a morning's work.

My bravado left me as quickly as water circling a drain. How could I keep my swagger after seeing a muster like this? Here was your true urban cowboy; here was your lord of the range; here was the windburned vaquero I had so brashly pretended to be.

Pac Man looked at me and my lone, little doggie, and then he laughed generously. "Mister Hanna," he said, "are you trying to put me out of work?"

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *On several occasions, friends told me that I look like Clint Eastwood. This compliment sprang from the years I once spent with the San Francisco Probation Department, where I was an officer assigned to a domestic violence and stalking unit. Having made over two hundred arrests, I was quick to point out that it might have been said that Clint Eastwood looks like me. After all, I was nailing bad guys for real while Clint was just pretending to shoot other actors. Given the nature of my arrests, I was probably taking things too far. My modus was to trick the bad guys into reporting to my office then hooking them up with the help of two or three other officers. Thinking back on these busts, I have to concede there was nothing sexy about them.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: James Hanna is a former fiction editor and a retired probation officer. He has had over seventy story publications and three Pushcart nominations. Many of his stories deal with the criminal element. James' books, three of which have won awards, are available on Amazon. You can visit him there at:

https://www.amazon.com/James-Hanna/e/B00WNH356Y?ref_=dbs_p_ebk_r00_abau_000000

His story **How I Done Good in School** was published in Issue 7 (fiction).

He was an Exclamation point

By Greg **Bowers**

WHY WE LIKE IT: *In an email exchange we suggested (just to be cute) that Greg finish the title with an ! He politely declined our suggestion and wrote...*

I thought of ending the title with an exclamation point, but decided against it because it seemed like too much. And after all, I thought, it's a description - not an exclamation.

Bang on. (Serves us right for being cute.) This is good writing. The dialogue and characters are nailed down and we love the whole 'cardboard thing'. As Canucks we can relate to border guard hassles on both sides of the line. Sometimes it's just better to stay home (!) Spacing and format is author's own.

He was an exclamation point

He had an Irish-sounding last name and he wore it like an old sweater. It was part of his identity.

He drank only Guinness. The dark Irish beer was still kind of an unusual choice in the 70s and I think he knew it because, when we went to bars, he'd announce his order in a booming voice, so loud that other drinkers in the room would shoot him the side-eye.

For those of us who knew him, the loud-talking wasn't that big of a deal. He often talked louder than he should've – misreading the moment and making himself the center of attention when most folks just wanted to disappear into the shadows.

He also used profanity frequently. I think he was attracted to the startling aspect of it: How the word “fuck” with its hard-consonant sound didn't carry any real contextual meaning but could be used as an exclamation point for whatever was being said.

It was surprising, and remarkably useful, punctuation. A dog barks. Fuck. A door slams. Fuck. Look at me. Fuck.

He was an exclamation point.

I liked him.

I was more of a question mark. We all have periods in life where we're trying to figure out what we want to be or, maybe more to the point, what we already are. I was deep into one of those periods. I decided it was like going through racks of clothes, trying things on until you find something that's just your size, something that feels right.

That's the story I told myself anyway.

My profanity-spitting friend appeared to have his act down cold and I often found myself feeling strangely jealous. I wanted to be somebody who didn't care what other people thought. Somebody who didn't pay attention to the rules. Somebody who colored outside the lines. Somebody who did what he damn-well pleased.

But of course, I was too timid for that. When I used profanity, it always sounded like I was forcing it. Ketchup on a hot dog, oblivious and clunky.

My friend had a book signed by William Butler Yeats, the great Irish poet. It was signed and numbered by Yeats. Go back and underline that. It was signed by William Butler Yeats.

How cool is that? I was a graduate student in Bellingham, Washington studying English and creative writing and, at the time, I couldn't think of anything that could be cooler than a book of poems signed by Yeats.

There was a bar in town where people claimed that the poet Theodore Roethke had written and signed an obscene inscription on the bathroom wall. It was a good story and it fit comfortably into the easy narrative of a poet being a sort of hard-drinking, hard-living free soul.

But I went into that bathroom lots of times. And, although you can't let yourself get caught studying bathroom walls too closely, I never personally found proof that the Roethke story was true.

So, as far as I was concerned, the Yeats book sat solidly in first place. Every time I was in his apartment, I asked to see it. And every time, he would smile, pull it off the shelf and hand it to me like it was nothing.

Of course, it was something.

But this isn't a story about a signed Yeats book.

This is a story about cardboard.

Vancouver, British Columbia was about 55 miles north of Bellingham. You could make it in an hour and change, although depending on the mood of the border guards, it could take much longer.

It was close enough that college students could slip up there on a free day to drink Canadian beer and smoke Cuban cigars. Cuban cigars were available in Canada, even though they were banned in the United States. We didn't know anything about cigars, but that somehow

made them more exciting and attractive. Then, when the fun was over, you could get easily get back to Bellingham later that night.

The only delay was the border and usually that wasn't much of a problem. Most days, the bored-looking guards would smile and wave you through – especially the Canadian guards who seemed totally disinterested in hassling college guys looking to spend some money and have some fun.

“Where you guys headed?”

To Vancouver.

“You going to have a good time?”

That's our plan.

“Well, be careful,” the guard said, waving us through.

The American guards, on the return trip, were not as friendly. They didn't wave you through to the United States easily. Actually, it seemed like they were getting paid by the question.

“Where are you guys headed?”

Back to Bellingham.

“Do you live there?”

We're students.

“So, what took you to Vancouver?”

We spent the afternoon looking at animals in the zoo, then we visited sick kids in the hospital, sir.

OK, maybe that last part would've been too obvious, but you had to step carefully with these guys. Otherwise, they'd tell you to pull over and get out while they searched your vehicle

in the bright fluorescent lights of America. Best-case scenario, you wouldn't be getting back to Bellingham anytime soon.

Pro tips? You needed to have your ID ready. You didn't need a passport, but you needed something. A driver's license would do and maybe a college ID card.

And you couldn't be obviously drunk, at least the driver couldn't be obviously drunk and it was best if nobody in the vehicle was. You also had to ditch the Cuban cigars before you got to the border. It was better if there were no souvenirs from your day trip that might pique their interest and require, if they were in a sour mood, more investigation.

Still, even with all that noise, going to Vancouver for the day was fun and usually worth it. I mean, how many college kids get to actually leave the country for the day?

So, when my friend asked if I wanted to go with him to Vancouver, it was an easy decision. And when he picked me up in his old pickup truck, I swear that I didn't even notice the cardboard.

This is the truth. We were headed to Vancouver to spend the day, tell some jokes and waste some time. And, raise my right hand, I promise that the fact that his pickup's bed was covered, about a foot deep, in broken-down cardboard boxes didn't even register with me.

In my defense, the cardboard actually seemed like it belonged. His truck was big and ugly. Dirty white paint. Rust spots the size of dinner plates. Doors that groaned when you opened them. The radio didn't work. The windows were smeared.

It was not a good-looking truck, but I didn't mind. We were in a good mood. The Canadian border guards were in a good mood too.

We even told them our plan – to have a couple of beers and then head back to Bellingham. Maybe our honesty paid off, or maybe we were just lucky. They waved us through with minimal curiosity and even tossed some good wishes after us.

The day in Vancouver passed uneventfully. Later that night, heading back to Bellingham, we were still in a good mood. But we weren't as lucky this time. The American guard who stepped out to meet us took a long, hard look at the truck. And he had some questions.

“Where'd you guys get the cardboard?”

I looked out the back window at the cardboard, then across the seat at my friend. I didn't have an answer. Did he have an answer? Where'd we get the cardboard?

“We brought it with us,” my friend said.

“What are you planning to do with it?” the guard asked.

“We're taking it back with us.”

“You can't bring that cardboard into the United States.”

Now thinking back, this is the pivot point of the story. This is the exact moment when things started spinning out of control for us.

“Sure, we can,” my friend said. “It's American cardboard.”

What?

American cardboard? We had ourselves a problem. And his poorly-played joke wasn't helping. It *was* a joke, right? I mean, American cardboard?

The guard leaned down and looked at us through the driver's window. Neither of us said anything. I tried real hard not to move. Actually, I tried real hard not to breathe.

“You're going to have to go back,” the guard said, pointing to a turn-around area. “You can't bring that cardboard through here.”

“What do you want us to do with it?”

“I don’t think that’s my problem,” the guard said and pointed again to the turnaround. I could feel trouble.

“Let’s just get out of here,” I whispered.

“That guy’s a fucking asshole,” my friend said in a loud-enough voice that I looked back to see if the guard had caught his exclamation point. An angry three-point turn sent us back into Canada.

We got off the highway and drove through the black British Columbia night, looking for a place where we could dump our cardboard. To put it another way, we had no idea what we were looking for. I looked at the gas gauge.

His first idea was to dump it in a ditch by the side of the road somewhere. I winced. That sounded too much like a lame “Alice’s Restaurant” spin-off to me. A bad idea.

I was able to talk him out of littering and still keep an eye on the rearview mirror, in case the border guards were following us and our illicit cardboard. The night was dark and, happily, clear.

We finally found a place that made more sense, an unguarded garbage bin. He yanked the parking brake hard and, with the engine still running, we both jumped out. The cardboard wasn’t heavy, but there was a lot of it. It took us maybe five minutes to dump it. It seemed like hours.

We headed back to the border. Of course, the guard recognized our truck.

“So, where’s the cardboard, gentlemen?”

For some reason, and you’ll recall that this was one of his special gifts, my friend decided that this was a good moment to be a smart ass.

“We got rid of it,” he said. “You said it was our problem and we solved our problem.”

The guard was not amused. “Get out of the truck.”

We both got out and stood beside the truck while he searched. The cardboard was gone. We had no more secrets.

Check that. There was one more secret. The guard searched the truck carefully, even got down on one knee and used a flashlight to check underneath. Then he looked under the driver’s seat and came out holding a 10-inch knife.

What?

He held the knife between his index finger and thumb – like he was trying not to disturb any fingerprints that detectives might want to look at later. From where I was, the knife looked old, maybe even a little rusty.

“What’s this?”

I had the same question. What is that?

My friend, continuing to display his remarkable talent for misreading situations, took a dramatic pause.

“It’s a knife,” he said.

What? Of course, it was a knife. Why do you have a knife?

“Why do you have a knife?” the guard asked.

“For cooking,” my friend said. “I’m a cook.”

You’re a cook? Was he a cook? I didn’t know he was a cook. And what kinds of things could you be cooking that would require a 10-inch knife? And why would you keep a rusty 10-inch cooking knife under the seat of your pickup truck?

What?

The guard took us inside and pointed to a metal chair where he wanted me to sit. He took my friend into another room.

Every now and then I could hear voices coming from the other room, but I couldn't make out any of the words. How much trouble we were in? Was I in trouble? Did they see me as some sort of cardboard accomplice? Was my friend controlling his temper? Was he making more smart-ass jokes?

Question marks.

It was early in the morning and the bright light from inside the building pushed hard against the stark darkness outside - like an Edward Hopper painting. There were few cars headed to the United States at this hour. When one of them did pull up, another guard met them and waved them quickly through.

The light reflecting off their windows and side panels made the cars seem shiny and beautiful. The people in the cars seemed beautiful too. Some of them stared at me, wide-eyed, through their spotless windows.

"What do you think he did?" I imagined a beautiful wife asking her handsome husband.

"Drugs," the handsome husband probably answered, then sighed. "That'd be my guess."

"Actually, it was cardboard," I wanted to yell at them.

But that didn't seem to be a good idea and it would've probably bought us even more trouble. So, I sat there, trying my best to project silent innocence. Do you know how hard that is?

When they finally accelerated, pushing their beautiful cars forward into the American night, I felt sad.

Later, the guard finally let us go and we drove back toward the university.

But the air had been sucked out of the day. My friend was steamed. He said he'd been searched. On top of that, the guard confiscated his "cooking" knife and put it in a plastic bag like it was a sandwich that he was saving for later.

It was nearly dawn when we got back to campus. He stopped his truck out in front of my building, turned off the engine, and we sat there for a few minutes – a quiet coda.

The university was dark and still -- except for the sun, which was rising in slow motion over the shadow mountains and punctuating everything that caught and reflected its new golden light.

I told my friend that I was going to go inside and try to get some sleep.

He said that he was going to go the fuck home.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Here's what happens: Most life experiences push past fast, like dark trucks on the highway at night. Whoosh. What was that?

Later, at least with some of them, you go back and spend more thought. Why is it still sitting in your brain all these years later? What does it mean? How, even if it's in a small way, were things different than they were before?

"He was an exclamation point" came from that kind of exercise.

Beyond that, it's just fun to write, to tell the story. Like Dave Kindred, a writer I admire, said: "It's fun to write a sentence that you didn't know you were going to write."

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Greg Bowers taught journalism at the University of Missouri in Columbia, MO and was a reporter/editor in Pennsylvania. His work has appeared in Arts and Letters, Saw Palm, Southeast Review, Missouri Life and Between Coasts. He now lives near York, PA.

SEPTEMBER 2001/*Between Friends* Part (2) Two

By John Alexander & Laurence Wilson

WHY WE LIKE IT: *911 introduced a new 'Age of Anxiety' and changed the comfort zone of the USA (and by extension the globe) forever. What follows is an absorbing account of the events seen through the correspondence of two friends. Because their communication is through email you might call it something like 'virtual belles-lettres'—an updated spawn of the Romantic epistolary. The letters between the two close friends, one in NYC and one in Toronto, begins on the day of destruction and last until Nov. 29. Numerous exchanges detail the events immediately following the attacks and there are human stories that touch us deeply—a man who fell 70 stories only to break both legs—most others were not so lucky. A penetrating CNF account of both the physical and emotional havoc suffered by New Yorkers and empathized by a world shaken to its boots. The style leans towards the dramatic and 'Between Friends' could just as easily be read as a theatrical script—there is starkness to the whole thing that is not far from the bare stage. This is a serial submission. Part One was published in Issue5 and is available in the archives. (Spacing and format is authors' own.)*

December 6, 2001- Thursday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Hi Laurence:

Hope that all is good.

I heard there was a minimum of 900 cars under the WTC and something like 8,000 gallons of Freon for the air-conditioning.

They are “strongly encouraging” people to simply take the cars as a total loss and not try to rehab them.

John

December 10, 2001- Monday- Toronto- 8:42 PM-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

John, hello!...hope all's well...sorry I haven't connected for a while...

...here's a thought you can pass along!

A Canadian Joke

They have pledged 2 of their biggest battle ships, 20,600 ground troops, and 6 fighter jets.

After the exchange rate, the Americans ended up with 220 Mounties, 1 canoe, and a bunch of flying squirrels.

...regards, John

December 25, 2001- Tuesday- Queens- Very Early Morning-

John Alexander wrote:

Hey, Laurence!
Merry Christmas!
John

December 25, 2001- Tuesday- Toronto- 10:48 AM-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

Hello, John!...thanks so much fro your email today and for your Merry Christmas!...Happy Holidays to you and yours too!

...how profound the change in our lives has been as a result of the 11th?...many families today won't be able to think of Christmas the way they had before the loss of loved ones...I hope everyone takes time today to reflect on those lost and who aren't here to share in the magic of this day...

...John, on a less somber note...my son Phillip gave me a book, "How to Be Canadian"...it's a roarr!...subjects include: how to find Canada on a map; how to talk like a Canadian; how to

waste time like a Canadian; how to drink like a Canadian; how the Canadian Government works and more!:)

...John, may the upcoming palindromic year bring you health and happiness...and may you forever remember the good times when Sam Cooke, Wilson Pickett, Otis Redding, Muddy Waters, B. B. King, Bo Diddley and others of their ilk ruled!...regards, Laurence

December 31, 2001- Monday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Hi Laurence!
Happy New Year!
Wishing everyone there the best,
John

January 1, 2002- Tuesday- Toronto-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

Hello everyone!... hope you are all having a grrreat
Holiday Season!

... thought you'd be interested in the comments of a
good ol' boy from
Serbia... regards, Laurence

A great Orthodox Christian saint of the 20th
Century, Bishop Nikolai

Velimirovic of Serbia, who survived the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau, writes: "Do not be vengeful; do not return evil for evil. The evil of your neighbour is sufficient. If you return him evil for evil, you double the amount of evil in the world; but if you do not return him evil, he may yet burn out his evil through repentance and you will then have lessened the evil in the world by your patience and forgiveness."

January 17, 2002- Thursday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence!

This is bordering on crazy shit; almost as crazy as the rumors that Osama is hiding out in Utah! Better yet, there was a cartoon in the paper that said that the BEST place for Osama to hide out would be at airport, check-in security."

John

P.S.:

Hey, when you get the disposable cash, you need to come down here; my goal while in NYC is that when I finally leave- assuming it is alive (by the way, there are somewhere around 9 fire trucks that drive up and down city streets looking for dirty bombs- yes, radioactivity- to defuse. They drive around with sensors looking to see- and I understand that it is easily detectable- if

they can find the dirty bombs), anyway, my goal before I leave is to have seen ALL of NYC;
kind of like, been there, done that;

Laurence, this place is EXTREMELY strange; went to new parts, today- almost surreal;

John

February 26, 2002- Tuesday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence!

(This is all written in the spirit of 'correct me if I'm wrong,' but...)

It seems that pig-farming in Canada has made the news around here; what was it, some "fucking" pig farmer in B.C. has killed at least 30 women- if not another 50!- and buried them in the pig shit on his "phuckin'" pig farm?!

Great news among the stories from Kabul, Kashmir, the U.N. and Ground Zero!

You know what Laurence, there is probably some psychiatric literature that links being a fucking pig farmer- and you have to ask what the fuck does that mean, "pig farmer," anyway?!? I mean, what kind of husbandry is there in just dumping enough fucking slop to turn these animals into obese fucking pigs? So there has to be literature out there linking pig farming- and it's potential

for psychological scaring- and being a pig fucking serial killer! I wonder if the women were all obese? Kinda like Deliverance-North!?

If they were obese, before he killed them, maybe the pigs, "Had there way?"

Anyway, do you people want that kind of die-eased mentality in your area?

Laurence, this is really sick shit coming out of Canada. Hey, forget about "foul" play! This is "pig play in the pig pen!" Picture Peter Mansbridge-

"...And tonight on the National, is Canada in danger of becoming awash in a sea of pig shit? Has the government purposely encouraged pig farming in B.C. with the secret knowledge that the country slopes from west to east and that Eastern Canada will get the runoff? That story after Wayne Gretzky's latest tirade- "Why does the hockey world treat us like pig shit? Welcome to the National"

more later,

John

March 31, 2002- Sunday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Hey, Young Man!

Happy Easter to all!

John

April 1, 2002- Monday- Toronto-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

John, hello!...thanks so much for your Easter greeting!...

All's well here...we missed you in February at our gathering!...
You would have loved it...

Hope you're well?...regards, Laurence

May 6, 2002- Monday- Toronto- 5:50 PM-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

John, hello!...long time no hear?...hope all is well...thought you'd enjoy the below story...regards, Laurence

April 26, 2002- "Salute to a Brave and Modest Nation"- Kevin Myers- **The Sunday Telegraph-**

As our country honours the last of its four dead soldiers, we reprint a remarkable tribute to Canada's record of quiet valour in wartime that appeared in the Telegraph, one of Britain's largest circulation newspapers.

---LONDON--- Until the deaths last week of four Canadian soldiers accidentally killed by a U.S. warplane in Afghanistan, probably no one outside their home country had been aware that Canadian troops were deployed in the region. And as always, Canada will now bury its dead just as the rest of the world as always will forget its sacrifice, just as it always forgets nearly everything Canada ever does. It seems that Canada's historic mission is to come to the selfless aid both of its friends and of complete strangers, and then, once the crisis is over, to be well and truly ignored. Canada is the perpetual wallflower that stands on the edge of the hall, waiting for someone to come and ask her for a dance. A fire breaks out, she risks life and limb to rescue her fellow dance-goers, and suffers serious injuries. But when the hall is repaired and the dancing resumes, there is Canada, the wallflower still, while those she once helped glamorously cavort across the floor, blithely neglecting her yet again.

That is the price Canada pays for sharing the North American continent with the United States, and for being a selfless friend of Britain in two global conflicts. For much of the 20th century, Canada was torn in two different directions: It seemed to be part of the old world, yet had an address in the new one, and that divided identity ensured that it never fully got the gratitude it deserved. Yet its purely voluntary contribution to the cause of freedom in two world wars was perhaps the greatest of any democracy.

Almost 10% of Canada's entire population of seven million people served in the armed forces during the First World War, and nearly 60,000 died. The great Allied victories of 1918 were spearheaded by Canadian troops, perhaps the most capable soldiers in the entire British order of battle. Canada was repaid for its enormous sacrifice by downright neglect, its unique contribution to victory being absorbed into the popular memory as somehow or other the work of the "British." The Second World War provided a re-run.

The Canadian navy began the war with a half dozen vessels, and ended up policing nearly half the Atlantic against U-boat attack. More than 120 Canadian warships participated in the Normandy landings, during which 15,000 Canadian soldiers went ashore on D-Day alone. Canada finished the war with the third-largest navy and the fourth-largest air force in the world. The world thanked Canada with the same sublime indifference as it had the previous time. Canadian participation in the war was acknowledged in film only if it was necessary to give an American actor a part in a campaign in which the United States had clearly not participated - -a touching scrupulousness which, of course, Hollywood has since abandoned, as it has any notion of a separate Canadian identity. So it is a general rule that actors and filmmakers arriving in Hollywood keep their nationality - unless, that is, they are Canadian. Thus Mary Pickford, Walter Huston, Donald Sutherland, Michael J. Fox, William Shatner, Norman Jewison, David Cronenberg and Dan Aykroyd have in the popular perception become American, and Christopher Plummer, British. It is as if, in the very act of becoming famous, a Canadian ceases to be Canadian, unless she is Margaret Atwood, who is as unshakably Canadian as a moose, or Celine Dion, for whom Canada has proved quite unable to find any takers. Moreover, Canada is every bit as querulously alert to the achievements of its sons and daughters as the rest of the world is completely unaware of them. The Canadians proudly say of themselves - and are unheard by anyone else - that 1% of the world's population has provided 10% of the world's peacekeeping forces.

Canadian soldiers in the past half century have been the greatest peacekeepers on Earth - in 39 missions on UN mandates, and six on non-UN peacekeeping duties, from Vietnam to East Timor, from Sinai to Bosnia. Yet the only foreign engagement that has entered the popular non-Canadian imagination was the sorry affair in Somalia, in which out-of-control paratroopers

murdered two Somali infiltrators. Their regiment was then disbanded in disgrace – a uniquely Canadian act of self- abasement for which, naturally, the Canadians received no international credit. So who today in the United States knows about the stoic and selfless friendship its northern neighbour has given it in Afghanistan? Rather like Ctrano de Bergerac, Canada repeatedly does honourable things for honourable motives, but instead of being thanked for it, it remains something of a figure of fun. It is the Canadian way, for which Canadians should be proud, yet such honour comes at a high cost.

This week, four more grieving families knew that cost all too tragically well.

May 7, 2002- Tuesday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Dear Laurence:

I hope that all is going well. Yes, long time. Everything here is moving along- sort of rushing down the gorge at the same time.

Yes, thanks for the article; I really do understand what the writer is trying to say; I will respond at greater length in a day or two, but it does seem to echo of something from the U.S. past; and maybe what he is voicing is part of the "Maturation of Nations" that all countries go through; quickly, for now; it really wasn't that long ago when the U.S. was- and to some degree still is going through the same set of feelings (as a nation); it wasn't that long ago that- I believe his name was- Gordon Sinclair, a Torontonian, did the radio piece called, I think, "The Americans," which voiced the same U.S.- we are not appreciated kind of sentiment, but from "North of the Border;"

if there is any plausibility to the "Maturation of Nations" concept, then, we have to look at the British who do their role in the world and don't ever seem to look for thanks; we- the U.S.- still looks for it, though after 9/11- far less; 9/11, I think, propelled us further on the maturational curve; maybe similar to the WWII bombing of London; I'm not sure that the British give a fuck

any more- or really have for a long time; it seems that the suicide bombings have done the same to the Israelis; the U.S., again, seems to have gotten there- though, I don't think all the way there, yet, when you see talk about the invasion of Iraq- along with the timetable on the front of the New York Times you start getting the feeling that people in government(s) are not really thinking about who gives a fuck or not;

and, yes, somebody in Saudi Arabia did "rattle" the threat of using oil as a weapon, cutting off the oil, but, hell, Laurence, don't forget, at least in Saudi Arabia we don't have to worry about invading the fucking place to make sure the oil keeps flowing- what is it? the U.S.- and I have no doubts the Brits are there too with us- already has 15,000 troops on the ground in Saudi Arabia...

Am I suppose to think- let alone imagine- there is not a contingency plan in place to "secure" Saudi Arabia- please mon cheri...

more later,

John

May 22, 2002- Wednesday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Hey Laurence!

I hope that all is well for you and the family.

Just wanted to drop you a line from what I am now calling "The Zone."

To begin, you know life in NYC is stressful enough without the possibility of impending death.

As regards that, I just looked out the window and saw two Apache attack helicopters fly by.

They were probably within 60 yards of the building.

Also, a couple of lines from Maureen Dowd's column in today's NYTimes;

"I have no faith in the ability of the U.S. government to keep out terrorists. But I have absolute faith in the ability of New York co-op boards to keep out terrorists.

The FBI has warned apartment managers in NY that the evil-doers might try to get a place, furnish it with explosives and blow up the building.

But first the Qaeda rats would have to find an empty affordable apartment. Then they'd have to get past the withering front line of real estate agents. Finally, they'd have to penetrate the maximum security defenses of Manhattan co-op boards.

There's screening and then there's "screening."

The enemy can dupe the INS to get student visas, but wait until the East Side co-op president starts grilling them about where they went to school, what eating clubs they were in, which dancing class they attended, and whether they would bother the neighbors with any impolite crashes or unesthetic bangs. If Henry van der Luyden of the Ardsthorne had interrogated Mohamed Atta, that creep would have been screaming for mercy. "Beyond the co-ops boards, however, we're on our apocalyptic own..."

"...INS employees continue to show up for work, exponentially ratcheting up the risks to the American public..."

talk to you later,

John

May 25, 2002- Saturday- Toronto- 3:14 PM-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

John, hello!...thanks for your mail of the 22nd from "the Zone"...it's hard for me to fathom the difficulty of not living peacefully and contentedly like you are these days...

...it's no wonder the extra terrestrials have looked at our planet and decided not to communicate with us in response to our many attempts to hook up!

...when are you getting out of there?...regards, Laurence

May 25, 2002- Saturday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Hi Laurence:

Strange that you should ask.

I don't know if you've heard, but the Statue of Liberty has face-recognition screening.

I do miss the "old neighborhood" corridor.

The impending doom thing is- honestly getting very old; maybe if I weren't as aware of the possibilities, maybe it could be easier- but it's not;

you see, being in Queens- on Long Island- kinda limits you; (by the way, I will never live on a fucking island, again!), there are a fucking tons of people here; Queens alone has 2.25 million people; there are not a lot of fucking ways out of here; Throgs Neck Bridge; Whitestone Bridge; Triboro Bridge; Queensboro Bridge- and then you get into the Brooklyn based bridges of which there are probably 4-5 as well as another 2 million people; and, most of the Brooklyn based bridges take you in Manhattan, the other the Verrazano- takes you onto another fucking island; we're planning to get an inflatable boat, and a battery driven pump;

head to Pa. on a road trip, maybe a weapon; the critical goal would be to get back on the mainland;

however, on the other side, there is a certain degree of security being on an island; it might be tough to get a car bomb into Manhattan;

Laurence, I'm almost finished here; we've re-tooled the game plan so that as soon- literally- as the critical variables are in place- we are out of here- no matter what;
I won't deny it; there is a degree of living on the edge going on around here; but, it's not like an amusement park where you can go home at the end of the day; here, the amusement continues, even as you sleep- or try to;
John

July 11, 2002- Thursday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Laurence!
Are you still alive?
John

July 11, 2002- Thursday- Toronto- 7:54 PM-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

John, hello!...thanks for connecting on the 10th...I'm still alive but living the good life!...yeah, right...

...so, I'm between the intensity of juggling balls and the comatose-type times at the beach I'm fine tuning my schizoid behaviour!

...it's summer and the livin' is easy...trying to get a book-a-week in from the likes of James Patterson, Stuart Woods, Jeffery Deaver, et al...

...do you have a trip to Kahnahda on the horizon?...

...connect when you can...it's always grrreat to hear from you...
regards, Laurence

September 10, 2002- Tuesday- Queens-

John Alexander wrote:

Hey Laurence!

I hope that all is good for you!

Yes, once again, last night, I heard the fighter planes. We will see what tomorrow brings.

Talk to you soon.

John

September 11, 2002- Wednesday- Toronto- 8:32 AM-

Laurence Wilson wrote:

John, hello!...thanks for you email yesterday on this the eve of when, a year ago, we began to trade mail on the single most calamitous event of our time!

...whew!...I can hardly believe a year has passed since we first began that exchange...it was such a tragic, angst-evoking time...it was grrreat to have you on the other end of the pipeline while I floated my feelings, thoughts and impressions through space to you...ventilating is the first step toward healing...and for sure the ability to send and receive the thoughts of that time were helpful and enabling...my understandings and ability to maintain some semblance of perspective was greatly aided by your fresh, new news and insights from the front!
...regards, Laurence

P.S....John, are there still places in N.Y. where people have posted pictures of their missing loved ones?

END

AUTHORS' NOTE:

(1) *"What inspired your submission?" At the moment- on the afternoon of 9-11-01, I just decided to send an email to my friend. The fact that it took off and endured wasn't planned at all. Just like the deer, it just happened. Actually, it wasn't until it got to the 10th anniversary did it "come to me" to re-process the emails. The most important thing was that I never deleted them. Just had to go back.*

(2) *"What issues, themes, did you want to explore?" Nothing planned. Just relay to my friend in T.O. the scope, depth and gravity not only of day-today life but, also, of all that I set out to experience."*

(3) *Stylistic and literary influences?" Hard to say. It varies based on the genre. It's even harder to say when you're talking about a genre- in 2001- the email, where I- we- were "talking" but without uttering a discernible sound.*

I don't know.

That's about it.

Again, it wasn't planned. It just happened, just like the deer.

Best,

John

P.S.: Here's an anecdote from my T.O. partying days- A bunch of us are partying along Front Street. I say, "You know, it's late, I've got to get going back."

They say, "Why? It's only 1 AM"

To which I respond.

"No, it's 1 AM here in T.O. In Bflo, it's 3:30 AM because that's what time its going to be when I get there."

AUTHORS' BIO:

John Alexander has "wandered" portions of North America for a good portion of his life. Thus, when asked once- "Where did you grow up"- his answer was that different aspects of him "grew up" in the different places that he has lived.

These places include- Chicago, Concord and Knoxville, Tennessee, Erieau, Ontario, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, New York, Athens and Milledgeville, Georgia, Rocky Mount, North Carolina, and in Queens.

Recently. after spending years in New York City, John Alexander has temporarily relocated to the hamlet of Getzville, New York. He lives- and writes- there in the company of his two favorite pets, "Bunny" and "Roma."

Most recently, John Alexander has appeared in Clockwise Cat (5), Ygdrasil (Cd), Syndic Literary Journal, The Bitchin' Kitsch, Danse Macabre du Jour (2), Straightjackets Magazine, and Hackwriters: The International Writers Magazine (U.K.). He also co-authored the online novel, entitled, "A Vow of Silence." It can be found at-

www.avowofsilence.net

Laurence Wilson is an enigmatic and passionately private person who has proudly called Ontario home since birth. He wants only to be recognized as part of a history making dialogue/document during an equally history making event.

Addicted

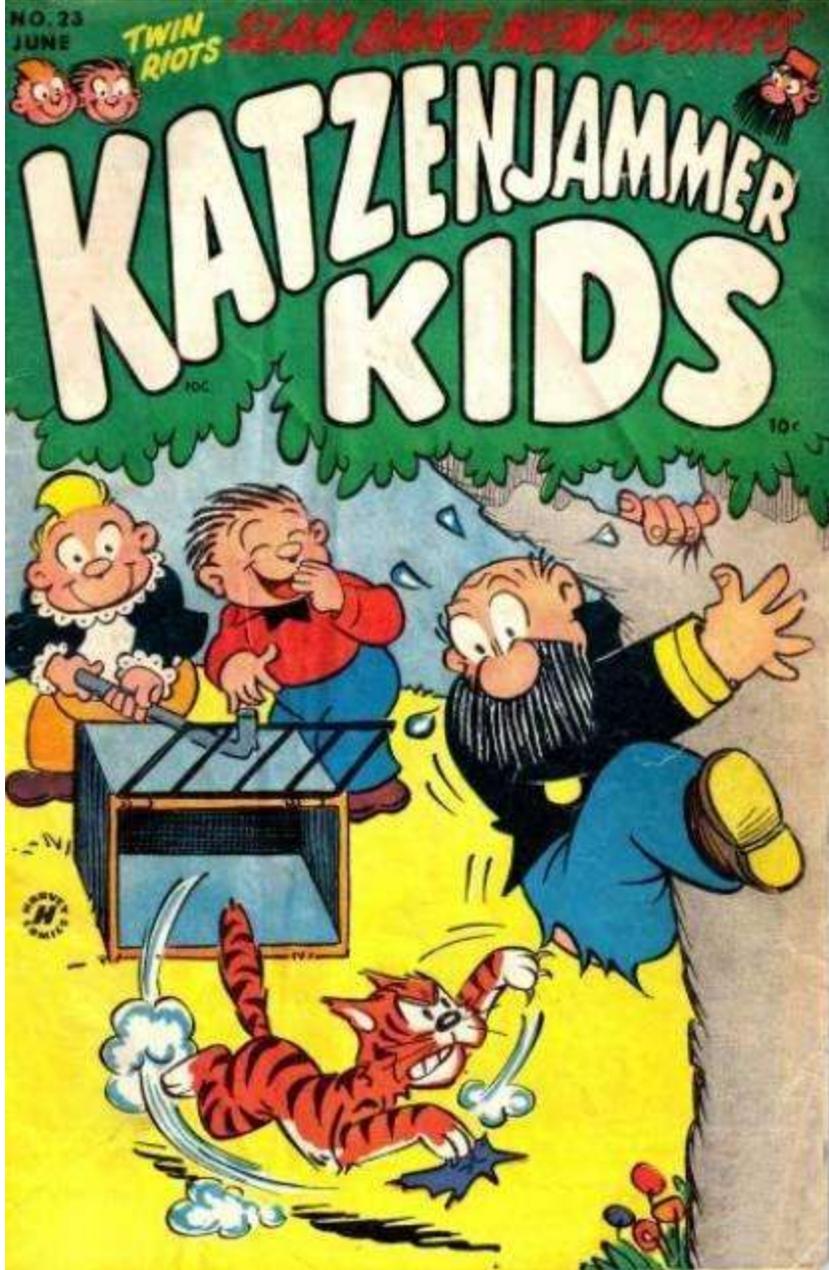
By Ken W. Simpson

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We have to admit to liking this hybrid as much for the pictures as the clear-headed prose. The title says it all. In this case the cultural opiate is the American addiction to violence and the author escorts us on a brief guided tour that runs from Hollywood to Desert Storm. With the images, it's like a 2 minute news brief with a content warning. (Spacing and format is author's own.)*

Addicted

What the day
discloses
the night forgets

I can remember being surprised at the brutality of the Katzenjammer Kids comic strip - but it did epitomize an American love for the bizarre.







The Katzenjammers Club (1997 - 2009) by Frederick Dinkel
 The drawing by Dinkel is a caricature of the author, known for his satirical and humorous style. The cartoon panel shows two men in a field, one shouting 'HAW! HAW!' and the other singing 'SAILING SAILING' with a musical note above him.

Kaggy Moolgaa (1999 - 1912) by Frederick Dinkel
 The cartoon depicts a man in a blue coat and hat, holding a large wooden club, walking towards a smaller man in a green jacket and red hat. The man in the blue coat is shouting 'HAW! HAW!' and the man in the green jacket is shouting 'SAILING SAILING' with a musical note above him.





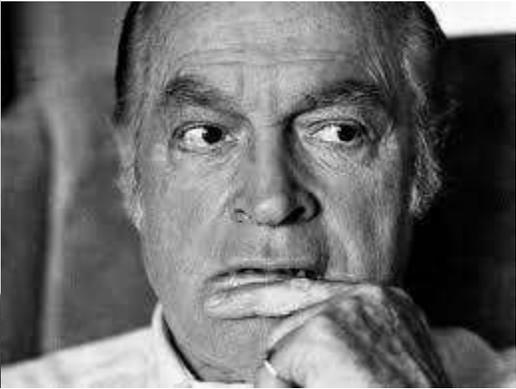
Comedy routines back then varied from the slapstick of Charlie Chaplin - to the cleverly ironic and droll of Jack Benny and Phil Silvers.



Chaplin was invariably about to be beaten up by some huge lout. Jack Benny was one of the great stand-up comedians who set himself up to be laughed at - with perfect timing.



Strange to say - two wonderful current American political satirists - Jimmy Dore and Lee Camp - in the great tradition of Bill Hicks - have been frozen out of the US media. You can go to YouTube and Wikipedia and get a list of great American comedians - but you won't find a sign of Dore or Camp.

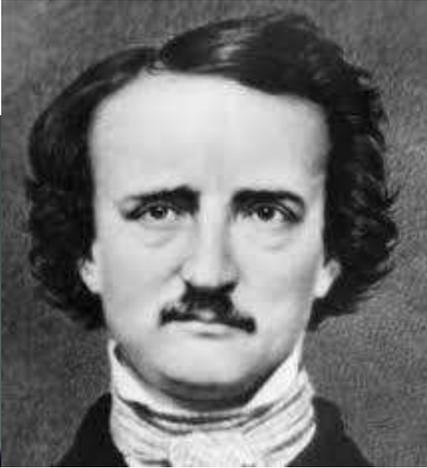




Americans enjoyed the give and take slapstick of Laurel and Hardy and Abbott and Costello - and the ultra violent slapstick of The Three Stooges. Bing Crosby was the straight man to Bob Hope's buffoonery.



In real life Hope was not a buffoon. He was a handler of MKUltra victims - a sort of glorified pimp - but was undoubtedly a fine stand-up comic in the tradition of Jack Benny. Crosby's rival - Frank Sinatra - pimped girls for JFK and other politicians - and like Hope - was a notorious womaniser - shades of Bill Cosby.





Comedy does have elements of tragedy - and should be taken seriously because of these links - to which Americans seem to feed off - like a drug. Movies were designed to satisfy that craving - an escape from the mundane into a fantasy world.

Americans love to fear monsters - whether they be grizzly bears, bigfoot or King Kong. The movie had the desired element of suspense and horror - as King Kong carried the pretty heroine to the top of the Empire State. Poor Kong had to die - even though he was a nice monster- and the girl who represented purity had to be rescued unharmed.. Later, the Frankenstein monster did the same with a little extra horror. Heroines never died in American movies. Only the imitation villains died.

The vampire craze was a huge success because of Americans addiction to horror - apart from their addiction to sex. Edgar Allen Poe and Ambrose Bierce wrote repetitive variations on horrific themes - vampires for Poe and ghosts for Bierce. Bram Stoker wrote Dracula and Bella Lugosi starred in Nosferatu. Stephen King wrote probably the best contemporary horror novel - The Shining - which was adapted into a wonderful movie directed by Stanley Kubrick. The movie - The Exorcist - was based on the religious belief - particularly among Catholics - that people can be possessed by evil spirits - which need to be exorcised by intrepid priests wielding crucifixes. Evil - like monsters - has to be vanquished in the movies.

The Amityville Horror movie was based on reality. A murderous rampage did take place. Hollywood added the evil spirits.

Hollywood adapted comic strip characters such as Superman, Batman and Spiderman - to the screen - using actors with not a lot of acting ability in repetitive action movies with lots of

violence. They were American heroes - almost as real as John Wayne - big and imposing - who laconically beat the bad guys to pulp without raising a sweat.

Tastes became even more macabre with movies featuring living corpses.- the living dead - who continued to lurch around after being riddled with bullets. It took more than brute force to destroy the undead - in numerous astoundingly popular episodes. Zombies continue to be boxoffice.superstars to this day.

Apart from the fake - Americans with a taste for violence enjoyed watching the fights. They also enjoyed the fantasy of wrestling. Big, beefy guys, with bizarre names - wearing garish costumes, pretended to hurt each other - good guys to cheer and bad guys to jeer - like what Superman does to the bad guys in the movies - and just as real to the fans.- so that fantasy and reality got mixed together - to produce entertainment.

The love of violence was also catered for in the octagon - where martial artists attempted to destroy each other - and sometimes did. Brutality was extremely popular - and its exponents gained iconic status.

Americans were barely aware of the horrors of war. Their TV's didn't bother them with the truth. Those who knew and who were involved in Desert Storm - or the Invasion of Iraq - were not permitted to share their experiences - so had to suffer from PTSD - and worse - in silence.



Americans may have thought John Wayne's Green Berets had won the war in Vietnam.- so probably didn't believe the truth.



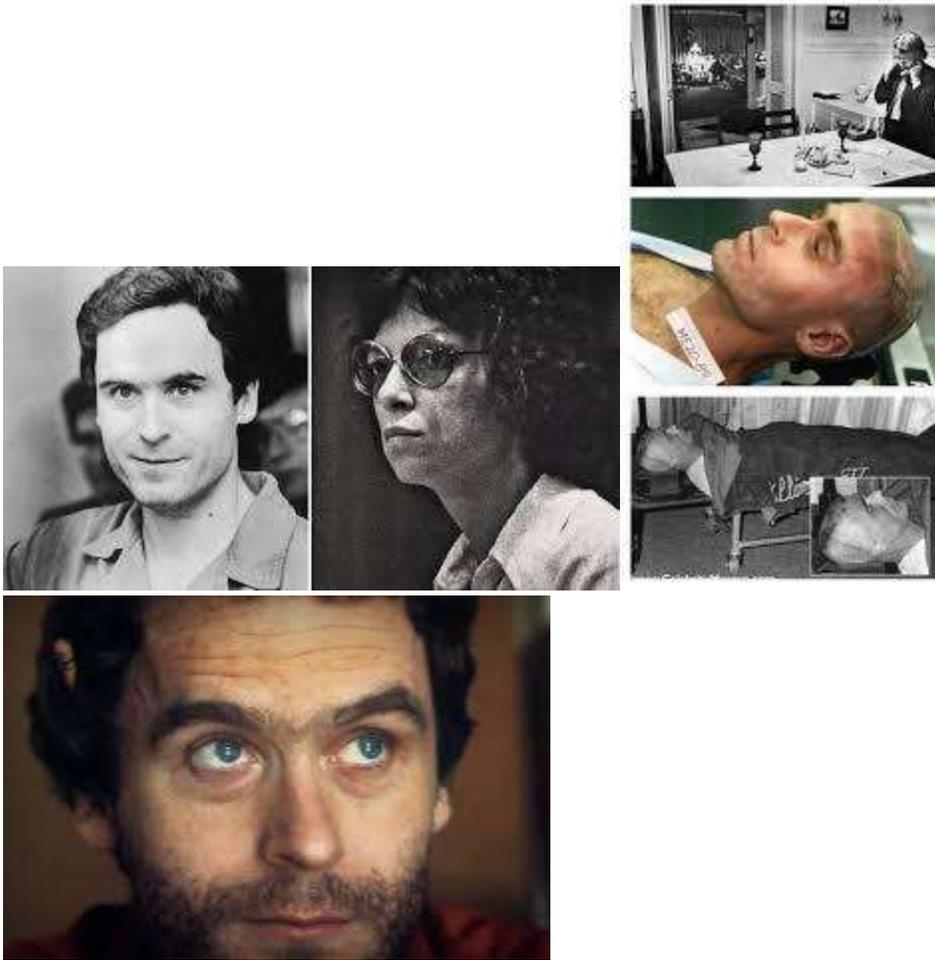
They had little idea that Madeleine Albright - when Secretary of State - had authorised the use of sanctions that caused the death by starvation of half a million Iraqi civilians. Real horror. Hillary Clinton, when Secretary of State, had authorised the use of Sarin gas so that President Assad could be blamed.

Katherine Hepburn may not have approved. .

Crime was real too - as an epidemic - and mental disorders were as commonplace as lies, disinformation and propaganda.

Reality was being replaced with fantasy and sanity with insanity. .

Ted Bundy was just one of numerous American bred psychopaths and murderers.in the land of the free.



America has more prisons and prisoners per capita than any other nation. Many inmates are illiterate gang members from ghettos - where life is a battle for survival. Drug addiction is an escape from reality into a halfworld of fantasy. Americans have become slaves to the artificial world created for them - deliberately - by their government - in collaboration with the media and Hollywood - and where the give and take of honest debate is verboten.

***AUTHOR'S NOTE:** My activism began with opposition to the Vietnam war - although I still accepted America as the leader of the free world. I had no idea the media was collaborating with the governments of the American alliance to tell lies - disinformation - and propaganda. I thought poor Gaddafi was a terrorist. I thought Syria was a civil war - and Assad was a despot. I thought Barack Obama was God's gift to America - if not the world - but I learned a peace group from America had visited Damascus. They discovered that it wasn't a civil war - that Assad was not a tyrant. My mind began to unravel - because I was seeing the truth for the first time since Vietnam.*

I began writing poetry in my seventies - about socio/political themes - which developed into an attack against American totalitarianism and imperialism. It was almost impossible to get a lot of

my poetry published - and getting banned by the social media was a disadvantage - because I used to post my poetry on Twitter and Facebook.

AUTHOR'S BIO: An Australian poet and essayist - educated at Scotch College (Melbourne) and Swinburne Art School - taught art - began writing short stories - switched to writing free verse poetry and essays - with a poetry collection - Patterns of Perception - published by Augur Press (UK) in January 2015. 43 Allamanaa Blvd - Lysterfield - Victoria - Australia - 3156.

THE CIBOLO CREEK 'Rent Boy' RANCH

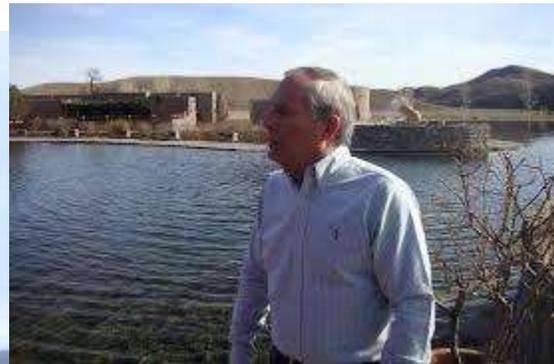
By Ken W. Simpson

WHY WE LIKE IT: *An op-ed style micro expose' with pics of the conspirators and crime scene. (Opinions expressed here are author's own. Eds.)*



THE CIBOLO CREEK 'Rent Boy' RANCH

Ever steeper cliffs to climb
and deeper depths to dive.



They pretend to be hunters - but their game is pedophilia - the rape of boys.

A Texan - John Poindexter - opened the 30,000 acre VIP ranch in 1990. He was a Vietnam vet - who served as a captain. He was obviously very bright - and became a successful businessman



He has the ugliest face I have ever seen. Perhaps that's the reason he opened a ranch for like-minded pedophiles - because girls rejected him.

He pretended it was something entirely different - as a cover - and maintained the ranch was a hunting lodge in the Chinati mountains.



The all male Order of Saint Hubertus - has links to Bohemian Grove. Guests fly in by plane for rooms costing \$500 a night - and included: Mick Jagger- Bruce Willis - Tommy Lee Jones - Randy Quaid - and Charlie Sheen.

According to David Shurter - who was trafficked as a child - he was made to participate in a pedophile hunt - amidst the redwood forest of Bohemian Grove - where he was drugged and raped by Billy Graham. He claimed Justice Scalia was one of the big three - worst pedophiles who abused him.



Scalia - a Luciferian - had his throat slit by rent boy - who objected to being raped at the Cibolo Creek ranch.

That this damned ranch is allowed to be flaunted as a place of prostitution - where boys are exploited - rented - and sexually abused by high rolling pedophile creeps - is appalling. Anybody with eyes can see through its cover as a hunting lodge - for The Order of Saint Hubertus - where pedophiles are legally allowed to sexually abuse boys. 265 words

AUTHOR'S NOTE: See 'Addicted' in the TOC

AUTHOR'S BIO: Ditto