“Is there no way out of the mind?”

-Sylvia Plath
Some people with an overly literal mind might question: “Genna, why lipsticks for the fall cover? What does makeup have to do with fiction and poetry?” Well, more than you might think, as it were. But before we get to that, let me break it down for you simply: the lips of writers are often sealed, reserved for opening only when bringing the glass or bottle to them. And nothing cinches a closed mouth like a daub of lipstick.

With this in mind, is it any wonder that so many writers are nutcases, bursting at the seams with tales to tell and emotional baggage to unload? They possess many shades, alternating tones of personality and temperament at any given point in time, or throughout the day. Thus, yes, the lipsticks are an homage to the multi-faceted psyche of the artist. Plus, it can’t be ignored that those who write are often trying to re-create a better world (or maybe “livelier world” is the more fitting term), much in the same way makeup tries to re-create a better face.

Shay Siegel’s “Carlin, David” kicks off the issue with an appropriate amount of the macabre, in keeping with the dark-hearted sentiments brought on by the fall season. Taking the subject of self-mutilation to a level far beyond Richie Tenenbaum, Siegel delves deeply into the mindset of what propels David to cut himself with the combined veracity, delicacy and frankness that fictionalized accounts of this subject matter tend to be missing.

For anyone living in a major metropolitan city right now, with its forceful subjugation of affordability and therefore artist communities (especially New York and San Francisco), Joel Streicker’s “I’m Really Going To Miss This” will resonate with particular profoundness thanks to the main character, Roger, making peace with the fact that the city he once knew no longer really exists (though he will always be charmed by it when those rare instances of what made it great occasionally shine through), and that he must leave it in order to carry on with basic survival, i.e. shelter that won’t dip into one’s entire paycheck.

Following Streicker’s “I’m Really Going To Miss This” is Jo Mortimer’s whimsy-filled “Sparks,” detailing the unlikely grieving process of Sophia, a baker who works in a small English town and grapples with its denizens placing blame on her recently deceased father (and, by association, her) for causing the faultiness of a generator at the nearby fairground.

Next is Daniel Ryan Adler’s seventh chapter from Sebastian’s Babylon, rife with coffee shop brawls and dragon slaying reimaginings. Hurt feelings and misappropriated emotions are, naturally, par for the course as Sebastian gradually accepts that Lexi is repulsed by and uninterested in him.

The nuanced buildup to the final scene in Evelyn Sharenov’s “The Hood” is punctuated by a mixture of ennui, nostalgia and resignation as two childhood friends, one of whom is dying of AIDS, get to know each other again after being separated for a lengthy period. Filled with ruminations on loss and the facile slippage of that commodity, time, Sharenov weaves a valuable lesson throughout the narrative: a person can always start over again, no matter how impossible it seems.

Rounding out the fiction section is John M. Keller’s “The Death of James Franklin,” an almost magical realist tale that explores not only the obsessive reactions of “commons” when famous people die, but also the question everyone secretly wants to answer: at what age would you want to die? (“After eighty, I guess. Then you know you’ve lived a long life, where you had time enough to fit everything in.”).

Our poetry section commences with John Gosslee’s “Knocking on the Night Sky,” a lament, of sorts, on lustig after another chance to get it all right. “It,” being, of course, life. A.G. Price’s “Unstable Ground” is yet another piece in the fall issue that seems to place its emphasis on the difficulty of starting anew. Maybe the season was simply designed to suffuse people with a more than slight tinge of hopelessness. Spring and summer are for “pep.”

Joseph Harms’ “Mortmain” harkens back to a bygone era of poetry, one of more staidness and poise, and will most assuredly have you reaching for the dictionary (if people still reach for dictionaries). After, the evocative prose of Jackie Sherbow pervades her grudging ode to the brain, “Narcissus, tulipa, cerebral cortex.”

Perhaps the most stylistically unconventional poem in this segment of The Opiate is Chris Campanioni’s “We Hope You Enjoy the Selection,” blending elements of exaggerated fiction within the framework of poetry. And, after all, who hasn’t felt the strange out of body experience of traveling only to be hounded by the airline demanding you to rate your experience, as though experience is that effortlessly classified?
To conclude the poetry segment is Kailey Tedesco. In “I Hear Evil Enter Through The Nothing of Me,” Tedesco brings the constant struggle of humanity to the forefront: that of grappling with an innate duality, and feeling compelled to settle upon merely one aspect of the self (you see, that’s why lipstick shades are key—you never have to choose just one).

Last is “The More Things Change, The More They Stay The Same: Douglas Coupland’s Generation X,” a criticism of this forgotten gem of the early nineties comparing the similarities between Gen Xers and millennials. The only reason I came into contact with it was thanks to my cousin’s Polish girlfriend. I really need to give the book back to her, but then, she’s there and I’m here.

Yours very sincerely,

Genna Rivieccio
"D avid, can you hear me, sweetie?"
A woman shook my arm with the lightness of white cotton.

It was difficult to open my eyes, more difficult than something to simple should be. Sticky and crusty gunk was attached to my eyelashes and my body. A fog spread itself thick across my mind. A dimple barely visible. Her eyes were on the back of street lamps washed over her honey, just lay down."

I squeezed my throbbing wrist with my other hand, trying to stop the searing. I tried hard to avoid the stares of theaggered stuffed animals scattered around her room as my naked body, scarred arms and all, lay on top of hers. The green glow of street lamps washed over her and made her look like a creature from another world.

When we were finished, we lay side by side, not touching, though I could feel her warmth inking toward me. I thought about what I would pick up from Pat Flannigan's on the way home for dinner. My stomach grumbled a bit thinking about their cheeseburgers. A cold draft slithered beneath the sheets. I clenched my teeth, ready to reach for my clothes.

She propped herself up on one elbow and looked at me with those huge green eyes, like emeralds in her face. She weakly smiled, her dimples barely visible. 

"I guess I should get going," I said.

"Sure," she replied.

I picked up my pants from the floor.

"What are you doing the rest of the night?" she asked.

"Um, just gonna get dinner," I said, plainly.

"From where?" she sat up, wrapping a pink blanket around her shoulders. I buttoned my pants and scanned the room for my shirt.

"I don't know," I said.

Her eyes were on the back of my head as I dressed.

"David, you can talk to me." Her voice was small, but maple sweet.

I said, plainly.

"I don't know," I said.

She propped herself up on

the floor.

I picked up my pants from

the floor.

"Sure," she replied.

I said.

"I guess I should get going," I...
I hung up. I stood in the middle of the kitchen, clutching at the counter, trying to breathe. I punched the marble countertop into the soft, white flesh of my arm. I was working late,” he said in a matter of fact, rehearsed tone. “That’s bullshit and you know it, David.”

“I’m going to take a shower, then I’m going to bed,” he said, plainly.

“You’re a piece of shit, David!” She was slurrying this time. She had started crying, too.

“We both know you won’t remember this in the morning, anyway. Good night, Carol.”

I heard his footsteps walking across the wooden floorboards. I heard the shower spring to life, spurring out a thick stream of water. In the kitchen, I heard my mother smash something glass in the sink. I heard her cry harder. I wanted to go to her, but I didn’t.

“Who brought me here?” I asked Leanne. She was sitting next to me, silently, after administering the world’s smallest dose of pain medication. It was apparently all I was allowed, but it made no difference. Pain was all there ever was.

“Where have you been?” My mom asked him, as he walked through the door at one a.m.

I was upstairs in my room, not sleeping as usual. I turned my iPod off at the sound of her raised voice. I had heard her down there pouring drink after drink. Bottles clinking against glass.

“Jesus, Carol, you scared me.”

“Where have you been?” She was louder this time. I wasn’t sure she still cared.

I shut my eyes tighter, as tight as I could. “No.”

“What?” I asked. I stared at her for longer than I usually did. Her face was flushed and uncertain. She took a step toward me, but kept her distance.

“I have to tell you something.” She fixed her eyes on the floor. “Jessie,” I exclaimed. I didn’t want to do this. I didn’t want her tracing her fingers over my arms, as her eyes watered. I didn’t want her pressing her powdery lips to my mutilated skin, like she could heal me. I didn’t want her to care. “Maybe I should just go.” I stood up.

She started to cry. “You really don’t care about me at all, do you?” Tears streamed down her face. I smiled wider and kissed me on the cheek. I didn’t like the feeling of superiority. He snorted and turned away. “Fine, just go,” she said after a minute; it was like she didn’t mean it.

“Comfortable”. I didn’t mean to dismiss her. She was nice and she shouldn’t have been. But, I hadn’t been comfortable in a long time. Not ever.

I ordered a blueberry muffin and two iced coffees at the Lunar Café a few blocks from her house. I sat and ate the muffin, slowly and absently, before driving there.

She opened the ivy-covered door in a different variation of the same dress she always wore. She flashed her dimpled smile, only this time; it was like she didn’t mean it.

“Here you go.” I handed her one of the coffees.

She smiled wider and kissed me on the cheek. I didn’t like the feeling of comfort.

“I’m going to take a shower, but I know it, David.”

“Stop!” She pushed away from me and stood in the center of the room. “You aren’t going to ask me why I did it or anything!” I asked, realizing that I wished she would. She had been treating me like I was normal and we bumped into each other at a restaurant or something.

“David, you will meet with a hospital psychologist in the morning. I’m just here to make sure you are in good health and comfortable.”

I sighed and laughed an un-funny laugh, as I repeated the word “comfortable”. I didn’t mean to disregard her. She was nice and she shouldn’t have been. But, I hadn’t been comfortable in a long time. Not ever.

I regulated the water heater to run cold, to not waste the world’s last remaining source of comfort. I slid into the bed, clamping my hand against my face. I closed my eyes and breathed in through my nose. I dropped my head and put my hand to my face.

“Then, I woke up, and I was still alone.”

“I’m just here to make sure you are in good health and comfortable.”

I reached my hand out, about to put it on her shoulder, but then I pulled it back and dropped it at my side. I picked up my shirt off the ground and my coffee off the nightstand, and then I left.

“It’s almost midnight. You should get some rest,” Leanne said, once I finished my orange juice.

“I’m not tired,” I said, not knowing if it was true or not.

“I can talk to you for a little bit if you’d like.”

“You aren’t going to ask me why I did it or anything!” I asked, realizing that I wished she would. She had been treating me like I was normal and we bumped into each other at a restaurant or something.

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“Mom?” I repeated again. She sat up abruptly, a short escape from tears. “Oh, grrr, David, you scared me.” “Sorry.” She touched a hand to her forehead and squinted. “Where’s your dad?” “Dunno.” “Did he come home last night?” I wanted to scream at her. To tell her she deserved this. Did she really not remember? “Dunno,” I said again, hoping she was just covering it up and that she actually did remember. “Hrm, I’ll just call him in a bit,” she said, lying back down. She was asleep again almost instantly.

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“Where’s my mom?” I asked Leanne, who was crouched at the foot of the stairs.

“We were only able to get in touch with your dad a little while ago. No one answered the house phone all night.” She gave me the same sympathetic look she had been giving me since I’d been awake. “Oh.” He was probably with that woman from the phone. Either her or one of the others. He probably took a detour here to yell at me, and then go right back to his fancy apartment. “Um.” She took a tissue from the box on the table. “Are you sure you’re going to care?” she asked, sniffling.

“I guess I won’t know until I try,” she said, lying back down. She started at the unicorn, disgusted.

“Come in,” she said. Her sniffling and crying slowed down.

I walked inside and sat on the couch in the living room. I had never lingered in any room other than her bedroom before. She sat across from me in a different chair. Usually she put herself as close to me as possible, but not now.

“Um.” She took a tissue from a box on the table. “Are you sure you’re going to care?” she asked.

“I guess I won’t know until you tell me.” She sniffled and huddled in her windpipe, and then she said it. “I’m moving next week. For good.”

“I started at her for a few silent moments, and then I nodded.

“You haven’t packed,” I said.

“That’s it?” Her lip quivered. “I really do have to go.”

She began to sob.

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“I stood in her driveway, holding my iced coffee, letting the cold moisture from the cup percolate into my hand. I looked up at the wall of windows that her bedroom sat behind. I couldn’t get it out of my mind. I turned back around, and knuckled on the ivy-covered door. She didn’t answer. I stood there for another minute, about to leave when she finally appeared at the door. She stared at me with red, tear-stained eyes. Drips of black mascara collected underneath her lashes.

“Forget something?” she asked, sniffling.

“What did you want me to tell you?” She scanned her small body. She had changed out of her dress and into sweatpants and a tank top with a unicorn on it. I stared at the unicorn, disgusted.

“Hi,” she said. Her sniffling and crying slowed down.

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“Hi,” she said. Her sniffling and crying slowed down.

“I didn’t ask to know you,” I said as I closed the door to her house. Her crying seemed even louder from outside as I walked to my car. I didn’t know why I said it. Nothing was going to change that she was leaving.

I slammed the steering wheel hard as I drove home. I wanted to crash right into a wide tree trunk. I wanted it to end. I may as well have been dead already.

I pulled into my driveway and opened the car door before I came to a full stop. I kicked the gravel, sending it into the air and graying pebbles all around me. I went inside the dark house. I felt like my own ghost.

I walked to the kitchen and took one of my Mom’s many gin bottles out of the cabinet. I chugged a quarter of it, spitting and gagging as I did. I took the rest upstairs.

She walked to the counter at the far end of the room. She collected two different types of gauze, miniature scissors, rubbing alcohol, and ointment.

She picked up my arm and unwound my soiled bandages, slowly and carefully. The fabric snagged in the black spider leg stitches poking out of shredded skin on my wrists. I looked away as her cold fingers tights grazed my gashes, and she gently peeled the gauze away from my greasy, disinfected wrists.

“Just so you know, this will heal fine,” she said, as her pale fingers tenderly worked to re-cover the sewed up wounds.

“Thanks,” I said. But she couldn’t believe that. It wasn’t true.

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The first time I met her was a Saturday morning. I went to get coffee at the Lunar Café. A small girl with spiral, blond hair stood in front of me in line. She turned around and looked at me with huge, green eyes, flashing a dimpled smile.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hey,” I said, with no smile. She lingered until I got my coffee and muffin. When I sat at a table, she sat in the chair across from me without asking.

“I’m Jesse,” she said, smiling so wide that her eyes wrinkled.

“David,” I replied, still not smiling.

She glanced at my arm. My short sleeves didn’t cover the scars.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

Her rose lips turned down, her sparkling forest eyes were watery. No one asked me that in years.

I took a sip of my coffee and stared hard at her eyes, wanting to get lost in them. I managed a weak smile. I never smiled. And, for just a little while, nothing was wrong.
I’m Really Going to Miss This

Joel Streicher

Roger stopped to look at the penises. This was not something he regularly did; he wasn’t sure he’d ever actually stopped and looked at them. Only he knew they were there—prominently displayed in the windows of EverHard and Boy Toy on Castro Street, on his usual route to the metro. They were large and white people flesh-colored, with thick red or purplish heads. Some came with accessories—accessories to the accessory, flesh-colored, with thick red or purplish heads. Some came with accessories—accessories to the accessory, flesh-colored, with thick red or purplish heads. Some

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than five months later they finally found something

Roger realized his nostalgia was tinged with regret. Or maybe nostalgia always leaned heavily on regret. I should have done more with my time here, he thought. All the stuff he had never done because he thought it was uncool (but not uncool enough to be cool) or never got around to doing: he had never had the best hookups in town (as a sign above a diner on Market and Guerrero proclaimed), or attended services at the Church of John Coltrane, or gone to the Chinese New Year’s Day parade. He always thought there would be time to do whatever he wanted, that eventually he’d get around to doing all that was worth doing in the city, the things to do as endless, in his mind, as the time he had left to do them in.

It felt like he’d been holding back for so long, saving up money and time for that mythical day when the kids were out of college and he and Janet had more time. As it turned out, they’d been priced out of San Francisco anyway, and their oldest was just a high school freshman.

The undertow of nostalgia for what hadn’t yet disappeared from his life was disorienting, as if his space/time coordinates had undergone some kind of sci-fi slippage, but he found it impossible to resist. The pensy

two years in the city would soon come to an end when he and Janet loaded up the U-Haul and the kids and drove across the Bay Bridge in what he couldn’t help but think of as the wrong direction.

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Six months ago he and Janet had bowed to the inevitable and begun looking for a more affordable apartment, which meant venturing outside San Francisco’s overheated housing market. More than five months later they finally found something suitable in what the landlord called a “transitioning” neighborhood across the bay in Richmond. Only in this last week before the move did leaving San Francisco seem real, and one symptom of this reality was that he had begun taking note of all the things he took for granted about the city. He knew he’d still come back—

the Latin American Resource Center, where he worked, had a year left on its lease and so couldn’t be priced out until then—but it wasn’t the same as living here.

He’d be a commuter, rushing into the office bleary-eyed in the morning and fleeing home in the evening to his husbandly and fatherly responsibilities. His twenty years in the city would soon come to an end when he and Janet had more time. At first it turned out, they’d been priced out of San Francisco anyway, and their oldest was just a high school freshman.

He continued down Castro to the metro. He was past counting all the friends who had moved to the East Bay or returned to where they came from in the past few years. He couldn’t even remember now all the stores and bars that were gone. The look and feel of the city had changed: the new five-story glass and steel condos rising over their smaller neighbors; the cool, sleek, empty spaces that were the new signature retail style, with their small, carefully curated displays—when did “curate” slip into his vocabulary? he wondered—as if wanting to distance the commercial experience from the crass directness of the desires (I will give you money for that object) motivating it; gaggles of young white people crowding the bars and cafes and bidding up housing prices beyond what even many well-paid professionals could afford.

As Roger made his way up the slight hill to the metro station he saw a crowd gathered across the street at the streetcar turnaround. He wasn’t in a hurry—Janet was at the ceramics studio, the kids were at friends’ houses, and he was at loose ends. He crossed the street and stood in a rapidly growing ring of people gazng at a dozen white men—mostly older, mostly flabby, mostly tan—naked except for combat boots and the occasional pair of sandals, chanting in its counterpoint “Nakedness is a right!” and “Buck naked and proud of it!”

“Nothing to be proud of here,” a short young white guy next to Roger snickered to his friend, a very slim and very black man with a goatee, who rolled his eyes and replied, “White raisins in the sun—positively unsightly.” They locked arms and walked off.

“There is simply no rational basis for prohibiting public nudity!” shouted a big man with tightly curled chest hair wearing nothing but a cowboy hat and boots. “But what about the children?” someone in the crowd yelled back.

“To kids, a dick is a dick is a dick,” one of the other men responded. “Really, adults make a bigger deal of it than kids.”

“Yeah, kids see it as something natural,” Cowboy chimed in. Roger smiled. He grudgingly admired the naked guys’ exhibitionist streak and goofy cock-certainty that they had a God-given right to swing their members publicly, but he had seen their preteen son avert his eyes on this street enough times to be skeptical of the persuasiveness of the triply tautologous dick-a-dick-a-dick argument. If it was true, as Freud might have said, that sometimes a dick is just a dick, it was also true that sometimes showing your dick is just being a dick.

An amusing sidebar, Roger mused, punning in his head and turning back toward the metro station. Bigger dicks to fry today, he said to himself out loud, just to hear himself say something transgressive—first making sure no one was near enough to hear—as he walked down the steps to the metro entrance.

Ah, the delights of a nearly empty metro car, he thought: a seat from which to observe a couple of giggling, douching Asian teenage girls in skinny black jeans, outsized glasses, and that black baseball cape; the usual frantic pinched-face guys getting off at Civic Center to buy their drugs or take their meds or make it back to their SROs before they fall completely to pieces; an aging hipster in black leather asleep with a huge parrot on his shoulder; a couple with toddler
duffers, all sporting Flers gear.

Of course, Roger thought, Super Bowl City! He was vaguely aware that the mayor, with the concurrency of his lackeys on the board of supervisors, had allowed the NFL’s corporate partners to erect a ten-acre temporary Super Bowl City on the prime real estate at the foot of Market Street and the Embarcadero. According to its backers, Super Bowl City was an act of civic-corporate
collaboration in celebration of the Super Bowl’s fiftieth anniversary, showcasing before a national and international audience the desirability of San Francisco as a place to visit and do business. As if the city weren’t, it was in a corporate, not-cool way—but Super Bowl City—it sounded tacky. He hadn’t intended to visit the south, in Santa Clara.

He hadn’t intended to visit Super Bowl City—it sounded tacky in a corporate, not-cool way—but he couldn’t figure out what else to do with his Saturday afternoon. Besides, what if it turned out to be really great or really gruesome in some unforeseen way?

He de-trained at Embarcadero towers and walked the stairs to street level. He’d thought the nearly empty metror train meant sparse attendance at the plaza underneath the Embarcadero towers. A vision of the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the opening of the Golden Gate Bridge came to mind. On that evening in the mid-1980s the competent authorities, in their wisdom, had closed the bridge to car traffic and opened it up exclusively to pedestrians, without imagining that people would pour across the bridge from both north and south and meet in griddlock in the center. He’d spent a tense couple of hours pressed tightly against his fellow celebrants, his feet ever so often lifting off the ground as more people packed into the crowd. A couple of bicycles were flung over the bridge, whether voluntarily or not, he couldn’t tell, but the room their sudden absence freed up was gone before they hit the water below. No thanks, he said to himself, and stepped out of the line.

He overheard a woman with a tearful toddler ask a cop, a catch of desperation in her voice, whether any other entrances were nearby. Try Washington Street, the cop said, pointing. Line’s probably not as long. Walking’s probably better than waiting in line with the little fella, he added, and winked at the boy. Roger followed Desperate Mom, who’d waiting in line with the little fella, he couldn’t tell, but the room their sudden absence freed up was gone before they hit the water below. No thanks, he said to himself, and stepped out of the line.

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At last he passed through the metal detector and was inside Super Bowl City. Roger was ready to hunt some snark, but as he walked around the venue all he felt was disappointment. Yes, it was self-important as the NFL and its Super Bowl, and weirdly self-referential—everything was slapped with a Super Bowl 50 logo yet it wasn’t clear exactly what Super Bowl City’s focus was. But Super Bowl City wasn’t spectacularly over the top, as he’d expected. You could pretend to throw passes to a receiver streaking down the field on a huge flat screen, the ball’s imaginary trajectory tracked by a computer’s bionic eye and meeting (or not) the wide receiver’s outstretched hands. A row of bikes on stationary stands were connected to a tower of black metal frames fringed with LCDs; whoever pedaled fastest the longest was rewarded by the lights in his part of the tower reaching the top before his rivals. The elaborate tourism booth of the city of San Jose ("The Heart of Silicon Valley") invited people to explore who knows what in that godforsaken suburban sprawl of a mislabeled city. Long lines for New England clam chowder—really! Roger thought, clam chowder—"and Bud Light. On a small stage a pretty young Newscaster in an electric blue dress interviewed Panthers fans for the TV news back in Carolina (Roger wasn’t sure if it was North or South, but the team owners had cunningly eluded the question, no doubt doubling their market reach). On another stage a long line of men and boys waited to get their photos taken with a group of cheerleaders in heavy makeup and small spandex costumes. People milled around taking selfies, cruising Super Bowl City’s attractions, gazing up at the tall buildings looming over the street.

It’s all about the brand, he thought, even as he noticed that he hadn’t seen a single vendor of NFL clothing or memorabilia. Still, Super Bowl City’s temporary residents certainly weren’t stinting on flying team colors; they must have brought their gear from home or bought new garb somewhere other than Super Bowl City. He wasn’t sure exactly what the NFL was selling, and what people were buying. Yet he found himself mistaking a bit at the idea of all those people coming to San Francisco because they’d heard it was so great. Maybe they’d just go on the cable cars and visit Fisherman’s Wharf and see as little of the city as so many tourists do. But he also knew that many people were renting out rooms and entire apartments on Airbnb—Rog er was aware that at every mention of Airbnb, whether aloud or in his head, he automatically felt object to state, aloud or in his head, that he hated Airbnb for taking so many housing units off the long-term rental market in order to cater to tourists or short-term corporate hires, thereby contributing to the housing shortage and driving up prices further—and he thought that they couldn’t help but see parts of the city that they otherwise might not have experienced. He thought that people coming to San Francisco from red states, or red parts of blue states, would be enchanted by the city and reconsider their retrograde ideologies and embrace progressive politics and turn their guts into ploughshares or cool sculptures and drop their opposition to Obama and their obsession with Obamacare and… He was certain that only a person with a seriously messed up head could think a visit to San Francisco would have such a beneficent impact on visitors. It occurred to him that what was missing from Super Bowl City was a booth where you could suffer a simulated concussion. It could project your post-concussion life trajectory, through the stages of disorientation, mood changes, memory loss, and shaking limbs, and even give you a prognosis of life expectancy.

Super Bowl City was bland and corporate. In a word, boring. It’s as if in order to scrub its image the NFL had decided to excise anything even remotely smelling of the bloodlust that inspires such devotion among football fans. He exited half an hour after entering. It was hard to see what cordoning off Super Bowl City from the city accomplished other than keeping out the homeless or determining anyone not willing to wait ten minutes in line to get in.

He wandered aimlessly up Market Street, away from the crowds heading toward Super Bowl City. He had nothing pressing to attend to at home, or anywhere else. It had been a long, long time since he had simply walked without a destination.

A light post plastered with red, black, and green posters caught his eye. Back in the day, he thought, the light posts and telephone poles sputtered posters like mushrooms after a rain, advertising bands, political rallies, poetry readings, rooms to share, self-help classes—guerrilla marketing for an archipelago of small-time, sometimes dubious, enthusiasms, vocations, hustles or just plain weird obsessions (“Manifesto for the Eradication of Ice Plants”). At some point the Department of Public Works had implemented a zero tolerance policy, ripping down posters and fining violators. He was surprised that these posters, as scandalously colorful as a flock of macaws, had survived DPW’s zeallessness.

Sporting the logo of the San Francisco Public Library, the poster was a low-quality color copy in several fonts with blurry photos. “Black History Month Film Series” was printed at the top. He glanced at his watch. The first film (Dar Hi) had already started, but he calculated that he could easily make the second film (Njaga, Queen of Angola), even if he walked.

*****

Roger hustled into the small basement auditorium; the lights were dimmed completely off. He quickly scanned the room. Plenty of seats to choose from: there were only a few people, all of them sitting alone, scattered throughout the auditorium. The screen was filled with the face of a close-shaven black man in a short-brimmed turquoise lady’s hat and dark pants, sitting on a porch railing. A solitary hiss rose from the right front of the auditorium. Roger hustled into the small booth. There was no response.

Roger glanced at the film series flyer that he had grabbed on the way down to the auditorium. Dar Hi was a one-man movie depicting the murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi in 1954 and the subsequent trial that failed to bring his tormentors to justice. The screen began speaking again. Maybe the projectionist had managed to forward the video; maybe the scene had shifted. The same man from the previous scene was now dressed in a white button-down shirt and dark pants, sitting on a porch swing and talking like a Southern white man.

“We don’t take kindly to outsiders coming down here telling us what’s right and what’s not,” he said. “Especially if they’re niggers,” and he leaned over and spat over the porch railing. A solitary hiss rose from the right front of the auditorium. The screen froze again, the wad of saliva barely out of the actor’s mouth. More shifting, some coughing, and another patron stood up and left.

“What your name?” the Chinese woman asked in a loud voice.

Roger turned and was about to ask why she wanted to know his name, but he realized she was addressing the projectionist. “Why don’t you fix this problem? I’m going to write a letter to the mayor.”

Roger felt an urge to chuckle; he stifled it.

“I’m going to tell about how this movie ruined, your fault.” The screen went dark. Another audience member left.

“Now only four audiences left!” the woman shouted. The woman looked neat and well-dressed, with short hair and wire-rim glasses. Roger estimated that she was ten years older than him. Maybe she was someone’s slightly eccentric aunt who thought nothing of speaking truth to power, loudly and in public, denouncing the exodus of the city’s African Americans, a community whittled down by gentrification to nothing. Maybe she was bat-shit crazy, the grocery bag on the seat next to her stuffed with flyers ranting against the Chinese government or a 500-page instruction manual for a board game of her own devising. “The mayor know about this he be mad! He fire you!”

The screen remained frozen. The projectionist must be one cool customer, Roger thought. Or he didn’t give a damn about the four “audiences” still in the auditorium. Looking around the auditorium, Roger saw a skinny white woman sitting in the front row on the right, the source of the coughing, her face creased as if from worry, her hair a matted mess of impromptu dreadlocks topped by a small black beanie. An older black man sat in the last seat in the last row on the left. Judging by the angle of his head, chin resting on his...
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ing.

According to the notes on the flyer, the movie told the story of Njinga, a 17th century African princess who, after her father’s death and the feckless rule of her brother who succeeded him, ascends the throne and militarily defeats and diplomat-
ically outwits would-be Portuguese conquerors in what is now Angola. Despite its violence and the sexiness of its actors, the film moved at what Roger generously thought of as a leisurely pace, and he found himself unable to keep his eyes open the entire time. It struck him as part feminist costume drama—although the costumes on the Angolan side were kind of skimpy—part anti-colonial celebration, part blaxploitation flick. He was aware of missing large chunks of the action, or inaction, but the storyline was clear: Njinga confounded the Portuguese and the skeptics among her own people. There was a subplot about an adviser who was in love with her. Roger couldn’t tell ex-
actly why the adviser didn’t become Njinga’s royal consort or whatever its Angolan equivalent was. As the film ended, Njinga, sitting on her throne after thwarting the nefarious Portuguese plans for conquest, spies the adviser, previously exiled from her court for some reason Roger missed, filter into the crowd as the queen shares with her people the news of the Portuguese capitulation to her de-
mands. Queen and adviser exchange a rueful, nostalgic glance, as they both, now much older (suggested by their salt and pepper hair—their bod-
ies were as firm as in the film’s first scenes, of course), seem to appreciate how much they had given up in part-
ing ways earlier.

The credits played. The lights went up. Roger looked around. He was alone in the auditorium. His head felt like it was filled with sand—any movement produced a slight change of pressure in his skull and a gritty sensation in his mouth. He hazily recalled that Angola didn’t become independent from Portugal until the 1970s.

It was dark as Roger walked past a chorus of drug-whisperers (whatchoo lookin for I got it; weed, weed; I got the ice, I got the fire) and descended the steps to the metro, headed home. As he walked down the tunnel toward the Muni turnstiles, he heard fiddle music bounce off the sickly white tiles. Ahead he saw a slim young redheaded woman sawing away on a violin, singing in a strikingly clear voice. He slowed down to listen. He passed the woman without making eye contact, and then stopped. The song’s re-
frain spoke of “fatal attachments” so strong that the loverstruck singer was powerless to follow her own will.

He turned back. The woman offered a small, equivocal smile. All her youth and beauty, Roger thought, poured out in song for the benefit of those in this particular place, in this particular time, who have ears to hear. He fished his wallet from his pocket, took out a twenty dollar bill, and deposited the money in the open fiddle case at her feet. It was a tip he could ill afford but, he reasoned, it was a vote of confidence in the city’s future. He stepped back, put his hands in his pockets, and rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet in time to the music, smiling and watching her as she sang and played. I’m really going to miss this kind of shit when I move, he thought.

chest, which slowly rose and fell, he appeared to be asleep. Not a bad idea, Roger thought. He laced the fingers of his right hand through those of his left, and tilted his head back, resting it in his right hand through those of his left, and then stopped. The song’s re-
frain spoke of “fatal attachments” so strong that the loverstruck singer was powerless to follow her own will.

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Sophia, wearing rubber Wellingtons and dragging a car-tyre, stomps under moonlight to the family bakery. Her red dress sparks.

Grief—nice, normal grief would be better than this. The village is in darkness again and it is Sophia’s fault.

Standing under his dark porch, Marco Moretti takes another fierce pull on his cigarette.

“We’ve had enough of your carry-on.”

“Fine” Sophia says, staring down at the melting tyre. “Make your own bread.”

Marco says he’s had enough of her lip, turns away in disgust and disappears into his black house. Sophia is alone. There is quiet now, save for the sizzle-fizz coming from her dress. Carlo gazes over from behind his welding mask; Sophia feels clear, calm pace running through her. At the bakery, she drags out the dough, launches it at the counter and stabs deep eyes with furious fingers. She punches and scratches the floury face before slinging it hopelessly across the shop.

Sparks
Jo Mortimer

Sophia stops; the tyre smokes ominously.

“I know,” she says.

Marco jabs a finger at a hunched shadow on the steps of the merry-go-round.

“We’ve all been talking and... see Carlo over there? He’s fixing this mess and soon, the generator will be ready. Be as angry as you like!”

“Fine” Sophia says, staring down at the melting tyre. “Make your own bread.”

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Ever since her father’s ridiculous death (is there anyone else anywhere who has been run down and killed by a Dodgem?) Sophia has made the bread this way. She hates baking more than anything but in this tiny village, there is no other way for her to make money. So, through the night, she punches and kicks two hundred perfect loaves and as dawn breaks, Sophia leaves exhausted, her forehead against the hot oven.

There is no other way for her to make money, but she continues to stare, listening intently to the silence. Carlo is a patient man but asks her to hurry up and say something.

“Leave this fair alone.”

“It’s my job,” replies Carlo.

“We all have to make a living.”

Sophia squints through the dull iron.

Sophia has noticed Carlo’s smooth lips; he is no longer speaking but she continues to stare, listening intently to the silence. Carlo is a patient man but asks her to hurry up and say something.

Carlo takes her hand and they clumsily walk, as he gathers up the bulbs, to the merry-go-round where he has left his tools.

“Hold this,” Carlo says, handing Sophia a torch. He sorts through pieces of metal before choosing one, pressing the iron to it and lowering his mask. Sophia touches his head with the torch—its beam scans the indigo sky.

“Do you feel whirry?” she asks Carlo.

“I feel I ought to get this work finished,” Carlo says.

Sophia jumps to the top step of the merry-go-round, hides her face with her hands and grins. Sophia dances; it is an awkward, euphoric affair. She spins and flings herself into the air, but is frozen by the distant sound of a slamming door.

“Mother!” Sophia whispers.

Carlo slides into the shadow. Sophia exhales slowly and steps down to the ground where she waits, quite still. Her mother walks towards her; the lights of the fair blink out with Sophia’s growing fury. They face each other in near-darkness, Sophia’s mother twisting a loose hem-thread around her index finger. The thread snaps.

“Sophia, get back to the bakery!”

“Sparks—Jo Mortimer

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Sparks—Jo Mortimer

25.
Lexi waited in her favorite cafe as she sipped idly at her iced latte, the caffeine making her heart pound, or maybe she was nervous to see Dominic after so many weeks. Even if he didn't have a big dick, he made good money as an art director at Ogilvy. She was still out of his league—had good money as an art director at Ogilvy. She was still out of his league—he didn't, based on the disappointment in his face when she said she'd be away for two weeks. She supposed she shouldn't be too mad at him for keeping her waiting since she always prided herself on being fashionably late, but now it was mostly his nose was crooked and he was uncontrollable when drunk, given as he was to addiction, which did turn her on at first, especially when she found out it was heroin, but now it was mostly when he moved to the counter and the barista was asking him to chew with his mouth closed. Well, she was just having fun. Sebastian was a waffler, though his buying tickets to Venice before she'd said yes had been unexpected and although she didn't see a future with him either, she could, as he said, “enjoy the finer things together.”

That did not mean that she was at all glad to notice him out of the corner of her eye. Sebastian knew where she lived and it wasn’t that hard for him to guess where she might spend a Sunday afternoon. So that when he did see her, he didn’t know what to do, especially since she was there with another man—Sebastian’s friend. He was shocked that she could see the artist he had met at the garden party, a former heroin addict of all people. His stomach dropped out, he was sweating and his hands were shaking. He wanted to turn around and leave but somehow he moved to the counter and the barista was asking him what he wanted and out of habit he ordered a coffee, immediately regretting it, and automatically reached into his back pocket, handed her his money, dropped the change into the tip jar, took the coffee and passed her table. Spilling a coffee trail on his way, he fixed his gaze on the back wall silently telling himself to stay calm as tears of joy, nervousness, anger and fear filled his eyes.

To Lexi, it was clear that Sebastian had come here hoping to see her and this destroyed everything she’d favored about him mere moments before. She was not planning to see Sebastian for at least another week and as he sat in the back of the cafe, it was clear that he was far worse than Dominic. Lexi’s eyes welled with tears. “We met at Alana’s garden party,” Dom grumbled. “Sebastian is Jasper’s friend.”

“We met that day too,” Sebastian’s eyes met Lexi’s. “Her face reddened. She stared at his phone.”

Dominic looked from Sebastian to Lexi, then back again. “What’s going on here? You guys old friends?”

Lexi tried to appear as unconcerned as possible, fumbling with her phone for a distraction. “Nothing. He asked me out past her and recognized Sebastian. He called his name and waved him over so that everyone in the cafe stared. She blushed and lowered her head. She had no idea they knew each other. She wanted to go to the bathroom but it would be too obvious that something was wrong. Dom stood. She kept her eyes on him and did her best to ignore Sebastian.”

“Hey man,” Dom said.

Sebastian blanched as he accepted Dom’s man-hug. Dom held him by the shoulders. “I yelled because I hate when you see someone and they see you and pretend not to. It’s awkward until one of you says ‘hey, you don’t, which shows you were never friends to begin with. Anyway, this is Lexi.” He pivoted to her as he set a hand on their table. “We met at Alana’s garden party.”

“Can you shut up?” she blurted.

Dom watched as though nothing had happened, those nearby were following the scene. “Came back from where?”

“Nothing. He asked me out when he first saw me and that’s it. We never had anything. I don’t know why you called him over here. He’s a freak.”

Dominic stiffened. “Chill out, Sebastian. A big boy, right Sebastian? You can be into her as much as you want.” He put an arm around her shoulder and pulled her to him. “She’s with me.”

“Doesn’t she care about you?” said Sebastian. For a moment neither Dom nor Lexi knew what was going to happen. All the power in their triangle rested with Sebastian.
Dominic stood back and searched Sebastian's face as he smiled, his hands tightened into fists, their faces moving closer together.

"If I want to know about our relationship, I'll ask her, Bro." And with his index finger Dominic pushed Sebastian so that he took two steps back. Those seated behind them edged their seats backwards, still watching to see what would happen.

"Ask her, then," smirked Sebastian. "Watch her lie.

As Dominic paused Lexi prayed he would not do it. She tried to tell him mentally that she would tell the truth if he did ask and she suspected he knew this. The two men stared at each other and after what seemed like an eternity, but was only two or three seconds, Dom said, "She cares about me more than she'll ever care about you. Tell him Lexi."

She kept her eyes low, staring into her coffee cup. She wanted to scream with frustration. What Sebastian told her on the Rockaway platform about hating the ones we're with flashed into her mind. Did she care about Dominic? She hated both of them, and not in any transcendent care about Dominic? She hated both of them, and not in any transcendent care about you. Tell him Lexi.

Dominic paused Lexi's statement by knocking cups of coffee onto the counter, putting him in a headlock and pulling him outside. Lexi stood amidst the pandemonium, mortified. She left her sunflowers, pulled on her purse and avoided eye contact with Sebastian, who was lying against an overturned table, a brown stain on his white t-shirt. She ignored Dominic as she power-walked outside and up the block, trying to dissociate herself from what had happened. He stood in front of the cafe, calling her name, but she didn't stop until his hands were on her shoulders as he spun her around.

"Did you really only meet him once before?"

"Let me go!" He dropped his hands. "I told you what happened. And thanks a lot because now I can never go to my favorite cafe again. You're out of control, as usual."

"I don't want to be told that I'm wasting my time with someone I care about."

"I don't care what you want. The world is not dedicated to you. I'm seeing someone else too, so don't feel bad. She didn't respond. Another text, I'm so sorry, I really loved you. I should have known you would do this.

In a moment of consciousness, Dom slurred, "Who's texting you?"

"My mom." She rolled away and deleted the messages. She could not sleep. A snore caught in Dom's throat and she shook him, wondering if it might have been better to end it while he was begging her forgiveness.

She was entitled to whatever they wanted. The world is not dedicated to you. Tell him Lexi.

She didn't respond.

"Not so fast." She shrugged it off and walked ahead.

"Let's go to Whiskey Train. My treat."

By the time they left, their rift had healed. She did not think about Sebastian, preferring to put the cafe scene out of her mind. But by one o'clock that morning, she was tired of Dominic, who followed her stumbling to her apartment, and couldn't give her what she wanted when they arrived. She lay in bed, Sebastian texted her, I'm seeing someone else too, so don't feel bad. She didn't respond. Another text, I'm so sorry, I really loved you. I should have known you would do this.

“Please.”

Sebastian had been asking for it. This would be the end of two relationships. Dom's pleading eyes, his long black hair… Her icy wall was melting. "Get up."

He put an arm around her shoulder.

"Not so fast." She shrugged it off and walked ahead.

"Let's go to Whiskey Train. My treat."

He's a freak.’"
him to dive away. The heat of embers burned around him and he feared his own death as he ran under the dragon's long yellow fangs and rancid breath, but not fast enough; it swiped at his chest, and though he dodged its rapier-like claw, the pincer-tip pierced his skin and cut him in the rib-bone over his heart. Sebastian fell to a knee and with what he imagined was his last breath, prayed to his guardian angel. Her voice replied, “Stay true to yourself and remember I will always be here watching over you.”

As if he had discovered a hidden reserve of strength, Sebastian rose and fell with all his weight upon the giant lizard's side, smiting it so that his blade pierced its thick plates of flesh and entered its breast to the hilt. In the monster's death-cry, more flames erupted from its mouth and it released a scream strong enough to shake both heaven and earth.

Terrified, Sebastian rushed to remove his sword from the dragon's heart, the monster disappeared, and he searched for his lady throughout the cave, but she was gone along with the carcass. Yet traces of its blood remained, and Sebastian removed a tin cup from his satchel and scooped the spilled, viscous liquid from the cave floor. The poison in it was enough to kill a small horse; he would have to wait to drink it until he regained strength.

Staggering, he left the den and entered the wilderness, every step causing him pain. That he had emerged alive was no consolation; his lady had disappeared. He shook from the toxins coursing through his body from the beast's claw and hobbled to the nearest stream, where he sought refuge under a laured tree, too tired to remove his armor and under its weight, lay there unconscious through the night.

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I can make a case that I'm in the exact middle of my life, with as much ahead as has gone before. I have a small but respectable law practice. It has become more lucrative as the economy sinks into the Pacific Ocean and people sue each other not out of acrimony or greed but to survive.

I live alone. My wife's departure was not my first taste of loss. I've always felt as if something were missing, as if everything always turned out to be less than I expected—marriage, kids, life. When I was a kid I was obsessed with the plate-twirler on The Ed Sullivan Show, the man who ran across the stage giving a twist to this pole or that plate, in an effort to keep them all spinning; I watched and waited for a single plate to fall and shatter but I can't recall that it ever happened.

My parents were mesmerized by animal acts and ventriloquists, but I waited impatiently for the man with the plates. Some of my plates have crashed but others are still twirling.

It's a hot sunny afternoon. I step outside into a wall of heat and putter in my yard a bit. The air is tight against my skin. The winter rains have ended; the hot Santa Ana winds, usually reserved for autumn, blow the desert to the sea and fool the lawns into thinking it is an early summer. As winter leaves, it clears the way for spring. That first hot day, when cats scratch at their screen doors to get out, when pale legs emerge in shorts, when winter's ballast appears curbside for garage sales and recycling, lawnmowers growl to life and barbecue grills spear the sky with flames after a brief shower of lighter fluid. The stubble of newly planted lawns appears as a five o'clock shadow of green; it convinces feet to shed shoes and welcomes bare toes.

I assess the year's casualties: the neighbors disfigured by divorce, maimed by illness, the defections, infidelities, deaths. Those who remain standing, even if not quite upright, are survivors.

My next-door neighbor's lawn is overgrown and brown. I offer to mow it myself, but he turns me down. He is reeling from the blows of grief. Last autumn his son shot himself, perhaps in anticipation of his father's reaction to the announcement he was gay. Now their dog sits and watches me do yard work. He shyly wanders over and sets a tennis ball at my feet, hoping for a game of catch. I spend the remainder of the afternoon playing ball with the dog while the kids...
come home from school and screen doors slam and dinners cook and dates are made and broken. There's yelling up and down the block. Laughter travels the tree-lined blocks like a streetcar and the hood is transformed into a town with the eternal hope of a happy ending.

The phone's ringing somewhere deep inside my house and I debate whether to answer it. I've dismissed the answering machine. It won't stop ringing unless I pick up. At first I don't recognize the voice.

"I've always felt as if something were missing, as if everything turned out to be less than I expected—marriage, kids, life."

Then: "How've you been? Where've you been?" It's Stuart, my oldest friend in the world.

It's been about six years since we've spoken. He was banished from jail. Leslie believed he was a troublemaker. I don't think so.

"It's difficult seeing Stuart like this. Wait, more than difficult. It breaks my heart. He's thin; his skin is ash gray and he has a cough. He denies he's in pain, but I don't believe him. I hold him for a moment in the door during the intensity of the storm. Then: "How've you been?"

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timeless way. I barbecue on Easter Sunday. Steaks, potatoes and corn on the cob. The briquettes are ready. A drop of fat catches fire and billows of rising smoke make my eyes tear: Eric is stretched out on a chaise near me; he’s reading *The Opiate*, Fall Vol. 7.

“This is a great book, dad. Have you read it?” I say I haven’t. “Well, you should.” He reads thick novels. He’s dating a senior who will visit in August. She’s majoring in literature, an influence on his current tastes in reading. I figure I’ll discuss a sensible major with him some other time.

I watch Eric through the smoke. His long tan limbs are comfortable at rest, all potential energy. Last year he was amorphous, comfortable at rest, all potential...
I'm calling Leslie an awful lot these days. She's taken her own place and doesn't seem to mind. She needs to be needed and now I need her. She arranges for a hospice nurse to come to the house to bathe Stuart and help with the medications. A hospital bed with side rails comes with the deal so Stuart won't fall on the floor. Eric's bedroom is a miniature hospital room now.

I watch the hospice nurse bathe Stuart, gently holding each limb, carefully soaping and rinsing his skin, shampooing his hair, changing the water in the blue hospital basin after each task, drying him with soft cloths. She inspects and changes the sterile dressing around the IV line in his chest and disposes of her equipment in a red bag. These seem like acts of tenderness for her, more than just her job. She increases his morphine dose.

Stuart's parents and ex-wife don't visit. My mother and Leslie come a couple of times a week.

In the evening I sit at Stuart's bedside and read to him from the newspaper. I doubt he understands but I'm told he knows I'm there. At least he's not alone,ercially he slips into a coma. Sometimes he seems to acknowledge me; there's a smile on his face, like a baby with gas. When he stops breathing, I'm in the room with him, my feet up on his bed, my eyes closed. I wait a while before making any calls, hoping he might start breathing again.

******

This is not weather for dying. The insects continue their music well into autumn. The air is benign and warm; the nights lengthen but the day sky remains high and blue. It seems unfair that anyone should die in such perfect weather. This is what I think during those first weeks after Stuart is gone. The clouds arrive finally, but are rainless. I throw out the broken television sets and blast Springsteen and Cocker instead.

One warm night I go down to the shore to one of the local hangouts for a beer and some TexMex, something spicy to revive my sense of taste. I figure maybe I'll meet someone. But I'm closed in by the heat and the crowd of people. I can't get out of there fast enough and walk down to the beach.

The vagrant who accosted Stuart is stretched out on the warm cement strand. I put a twenty dollar bill on his chest. The guy grunts at me. Stuart would have been disgusted. I don't care if it's a grand gesture. It just seems like the right thing to do.

I walk out onto the beach, remove my shoes, dig my toes into the sand; it's cool and damp. I'm alone out here, but I don't feel particularly lonely. I sit and watch a full moon rise. When the hot autumn sun comes up next morning, it's treated to the sight of me, curled on my side, fully clothed, asleep on the sand, surrounded by shattered plates.

This morning I learned that James Franklin was dead. It accosted me from all sides, as if it were a part of the air and water or one of the universe's natural physical or mystic laws. I heard it when I wandered over to the bookstore from an acquaintance, who began, dispiritedly, "I guess you've heard..." as if it was not the man's death but the fact that there was no one around to whom to break the news that was the disconcerting fact.

"Dead young. Or would you consider that young? 63..." "What's a good age to die?" I said. "After eighty, I guess. Then you know you've lived a long life, where you had time enough to fit everything in."

I made my way to the supermarket, where everyone was talking about it, where the headlines at the checkout counter seemed egregiously outdated, yesterday's news in large block letters sitting like the previous evening's leftovers inside the refrigerator. "A big fish," someone said, not about one of her groceries. "It's crazy," someone else said. "Would you believe, last month I saw him live..."

"He was an inspiration to me, and so many others..."

Indeed something exciting was in the air. And death was a trump card like no other, a once-in-a-lifetime magic trick of which only a true artist was capable. An impostor would wish to sit in the bushes and watch as crowds formed, from among the masses. The vrai artist—(something truly artistically sublime can only be captured by use of the French)—is consumed by the objet d'art, absent for the audience's reaction, already on to the next act. Dead in a certain sense only. The news was catching on, now multiplying, and the new fashion in which it spread pro-
I met him more than several years ago, when we were both much younger. It was an odd thing, how he stood in front of me and introduced himself. Is that how James Franklin did, to feel normal? Or was it like so many of the things we do all that are literally one thing and in reality something else, pauses and tics and introductory words, an opening quotation mark to frame the words to come? The first few moments are adjustments of scale; a puppet has sprung to life, and he has said, “Hello, I’m James Franklin” in mimicry of a person who has to say those words, for whom his name has not always appeared in captions, the way something inanimate introduces itself, though a sticker or a label, never by proclaiming itself as “...let me. Nice to meet you. And you are?” “Arugula in these parts. Rocket elsewhere. You can learn something about history through the subdivision of my name...” In centuries, he was 170. In American measurements, this is 5’6”—his eyes, piercing blue, part of the reason why he had become James Franklin.

“My name is Veronika. We’ll see whether or not my last name is important later”—I might have said. Instead, before I could respond, he went on. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you. As soon as I got the call from Tim, I was looking down over the names, and remembered I’d seen you before in a daring performance of Six Characters.”

“If we’re to kiss,” I said, perhaps because he had used the word “daring” in association with me, “I think perhaps we should have a drink first.”

“A drunken kiss before the kiss, then,” he said.

“I’m married,” I said. “My husband has made it clear that the only kisses I’m allowed from men or women other than he must be in front of a crowd.”

“Of course,” he said. In the photos of him when he was alive that we see of him now that he is dead, it’s easy to note the look on his face is the one that was on it at this moment; it’s a gentle look, of a teacher, a father, of a certain type of kindly man.

“In the first twelve hours of his death, no cause is given. Redundant facts in quotation marks reveal that he was found “unconscious and not breathing inside his residence.” In a certain sense, this is a cause of death. But what led to his unconsciousness and lack of breathing inside his residence? There was certainly something that came before.

The evening prior he had been seen with his third wife and his two children at dinner. Observers noticed he had “laughed,” which had certainly been a sign of vitality. Another passerby, at ten p.m., had seen him walk through the door to the restaurant, at which he was a regular, where he had gained some traction as a person who, under normal circumstances, has to introduce himself, while ordering a meal can be about ordering a meal and not about the person ordering the meal, where the emphasis of things is placed on appropriate, functional details. As he passed through the door a “smile was on his face” (according to a waiter), appropriate, functional details. As he passed through the door a “smile was on his face” (according to a waiter), something which, along with the laugh, contrasted with the growing suspicion that his death had not been of “natural” causes. He wasn’t seen again, not by members of the general public.

“As the ‘survivors,’” he continued to be seen. In the car, by his third wife and two children, to who discussed with him the dinner and the service, one of whom asked him about his ponderousness as he looked outside the window of the automobile, casting a glance out at the particolored goblets of the lamplight, lamplight as it appears to a man who has forgotten his eyeglasses, who has left them at home because his prescription has always been just slightly weaker than one that would induce a man to go look for his eyeglasses at all costs. There is no trace of a smile. There is no laugh. It is as if, even in the ordinariness of the restaurant which he frequents with his family Monday evening, it too is a stage, not simply because no environment will ever be conducive to the ordinary when he is in the room, but also because he himself no longer knows what it is to be anyone other than the himself that is James Franklin.

He blows his nose. His wife asks him if he is catching a cold. He says that it is just allergies. Again, he laughs. “Fucking allergies,” he says.

“We were sitting in a bar, quite drunk. His blue eyes were glassier than in the moment I met him. He said something like this, “Veronika, have you ever been to a fortuneteller?” I said that I hadn’t, because I didn’t want to know the future.

“I have,” she said. “She told me I will die a terrible death, when I am 63. Can you believe it? I had to pay her afterwards, for reading my fortune. She showed me what I had signed—fucking Hollywood—in small letters that, even if the fortune she reads is bleak, you still have to pay, I mean, how can fortunetellers be responsible for whether what’s to come will be good or bad?”

“That is all she told you?”

“She told me my best successes were behind me.” He started laughing, laughter that showed he was more than alive, and which turned to tears in his blue, grey eyes. I couldn’t stop laughing. “My name is V eronika. We’ll...,” according to a waiter, “I think perhaps we should have a drink first.”

“V eronika, have you ever been to a fortuneteller?”

“I said that I hadn’t, because I didn’t want to know the future. “I have,” she said. “She told me I will die a terrible death, when I am 63. Can you believe it? I had to pay her afterwards, for reading my fortune. She showed me what I had signed—fucking Hollywood—in small letters that, even if the fortune she reads is bleak, you still have to pay, I mean, how can fortunetellers be responsible for whether what’s to come will be good or bad?”

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The next day, the news remained the same. He was dead. It was hard to believe. The cause of death was rumored to have been a suicide, but the authorities had not yet confirmed this. The question was, instead, at what age should we remember him? (death revets us to the individual years). Was he himself during his most iconic roles?—but which were his most iconic roles?—the earlier ones that established him, or the ones in which he had matured from a comic actor into a dramatic one? Death is a drama, not a comedy, so perhaps the latter?...

Was he himself with the beard that he wore for that part on stage, where he won the Best Actor award? (...no, but he was principally a screen man...)

But certainly not the photo of him in a dress. In a suit, or dressed as he did in one of his roles, or when he went out in civilian wear: on the beach or whilst shopping maybe? Or do we just take the average of his years and divide 63 in half, and see him then (...but he looks so distinguished in a beard?...)? There’s an opportunity here, isn’t there? An opportunity we haven’t had for quite a while, to place him elsewhere in time, to place the earlier ones that established him, or the ones in which he had matured from a comic actor into a dramatic one? Death is a drama, not a comedy, so perhaps the latter?...
of shapes, our voices giving voice to suppressed alien thoughts we may feel but have not ourselves authored, that have sprung from somewhere else but that we own in this instant, lend a voice to, occupy as one does a setting he does not own but finds familiar, like the supermarket aisles or the breathless, unconscious floor of our “residence” (after our deaths, everything we owned turns out to have been rented, or borrowed). I realize that he is right, that the kiss he has planted on my face is an authentic one.

It is this kiss that I think of when I hear simultaneously from six directions that James Franklin is dead. It is what I think of when I fall asleep that first night after his death, my husband snoring next to me in the bed—my husband who saw me kiss him on stage, for whom this kiss was sanctioned, stolen under his very eyes.

By noon the next day, it is official—a word itself that signifies a kind of death, too: the end of the spontaneous and the casual, the end of the anonymous or only partially understood—in which there lies some kind of hope? Yes, James Franklin killed himself. This preceded his death. He died by asphyxiation. At just past noon, a personal assistant knocked on his door and, receiving no response and, because he knew the man and his troubles, he—concerned, his heart racing with fear and adrenaline—opened the door to find the man hanging from a door frame.

But the man he found dead wasn’t James Franklin.
Knocking on the Night Sky

John Gosslee

I’m leaving the islands,
the jugular of the universe pumps
through the rising sun.

The highline interstate above the water perks out of green,
the wind pushes my hand back in the car.

* 

The gulls circle the landfill,
nothing gets out of the lips
sealed around the water bottle.

I’m propped up on corn chips
and caffeine folded in the infinite night.

* 

The weight of my feet in the floorboard,
the metal around the windows
unfold in the dark
and I long for another rotation of the wheel
to get it right.

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Unstable Ground

A.G. Price

I am like the ground here
Unstable
Eroded and unable
To hold myself intact
Crumbling
Dissolving

Time and weather
Have conspired with neglect
To betray both property line
And foundation
No longer able to support any structure
Shifting and ever sliding
Downward
Unabated
To the very bottom

No
Not yet
The property owner in me
Rises up
I can plant things
Things I can hold on to
Good things for myself
Like flowers and shrubbery
Trees
Not trees
Perhaps lay some eco-friendly matting
Made of straw or coconut fibers

Yes
I will terrace and put in baffles
I will mulch and landscape
Turfgrass will be my new regimen
I still have time
Time to repair the damage
Time to abate the slide
Downward
But not today
My storm clouds have returned
Looming blackish-grey
All earth moving resolve
Swallowed up whole
Like a ramshackle poolside cabana
Collapsing into a Florida sinkhole
After a heavy rain

Who landscapes in the rain anyway
Let us now resolutely turn our backs on the once-born.  

William James

Atoll about a sun selenian, 
aesptic; skunk and petrichor; the elms’ 
temperity redacting clouds; in fen 
the pumpkins jellied blenched and squirreled: derealed 
as won! limicoline unease longedfor 
wherefrom a joke might still be told or heard 
though halved of course) when at a thought (why not 
exalt and praise this awe so alien 
and cold that makes of us a nil?  Orgone…  
Orgone… a bevy strident, myriad 
(unseen, unheard till then) exods from elms 
noosing cloud and sun (the maledict 
a glimps behind patina where the kennings 
can’t be found), a school, a dream: salstill I stood.
Narcissus, tulipa, cerebral cortex

Jackie Sherbow

The flower of my brain is a tulip, too closed or too open. The flower of my brain is an egg-yolk daffodil: too loud, too organic, too ugly, too silly, too like something else. The dusty acorn of your brain is unknown to me. It needs more vitamin D. It is tired. It makes you cough and snore. It loves me no matter what. The cloudy quartz of my brain is from both of our sometime territories. The glass eye of your brain sees me, but not clearly. It knows what brains are actually made of and do. Blood and nerves. It knows which side controls which big hand. The skinned knee of my brain almost sees it all, almost has the magic word, almost has that starburst tulip, almost has that ochre daffodil—almost gives them both to you.

We Hope You Enjoy the Selection

Chris Campanioni

Munich is all green fields & beige brown mounds of earth. A slab of ash-gray sky. Homes of slanted red squares, black tops. Rolling hills like the image on the cassette sleeve of The Sound of Music. At least from the view of the Airbus 340. Redlining, inclining, uncertain where to place myself & how. Ten emergency exits on board, & if I paid more attention, I’d be able to describe their whereabouts.

Red from France & Austria, Johnny Walker Blue, two champagnes I only take photos with to begin & end the flight. A hot towel over my face if I occasionally open my eyes.

Business Class is so good you actually don’t want the flight to end.

It’s like life.

With two minutes to land, I finally learn how to properly use my mechanical-massage seat, seven buttons which control seven parts of the average human body. I watch the 3-D image of the plane’s nose on the monitor of the person diagonal to me, imagining my position of sight as being outside myself, simultaneously inside the jet of which I’m watching from afar. A bird’s eye view; as a bird. The effect is, like all things post-Internet, so real it seems fake. Unless it’s the other way around. Flattened, compressed, reflecting itself as half of mirrors; & over the mountains, mountains. So many vantage points from which to view experience, yet I hardly ever experience anything but inert alertness; a desire to think through things as if I’m still standing still & still I’m always moving. All of us & everywhere.

“They are also lands of ethnic diversity: the traditions & innovations of conquerors & Native Americans, & of settlers and city dwellers, have shaped American cuisine into a taste sensation. … The forested Northeast is arguably the most European part of the USA. The Italian, Spanish, & British roots of immigrants are still noticeably today alongside Greek, Syrian, & Chinese influences.”

I’m reading “The Best of the Northeast” section in the Lufthansa Business Class pamphlet that was provided by an air stewardess. I enjoy reading about where I live from the perspective of someone outside of the place, because it makes me feel even more of an outsider than I already am; defamiliarize the familiar & all of us eventually realize we are strangers, to each other & ourselves.

“Vast landscapes, mountains & forests. The Pacific, Atlantic, & the Great Lakes. Journey through the USA or Canada & admire what nature & the vastness of these countries have in store.”

A friend asks me what I’ve been daydreaming about. If I knew what, I wouldn’t be daydreaming. I tell her, three quarters of the time I’m halfway here.

I underestimate but she gets the point, because we’re not even looking at each other as we talk.
Sometimes all we want to do is look & sometimes we can’t bear to look. I don’t know what dictates this desire, or the lack of it. I only know that I want to look you in the eyes as our fingers move forward.

During the flight I am mostly silent. Instead, I shake my head. Continually mistaken for German. I’ve never gotten German before; my mom is from Poland; she left Warsaw when she was six. But I’ve never been there. I’ve never been anywhere, except the page you are right now reading.

Look, the sun is almost coming up. I expect it to be beautiful.

In the shuttle to get to Gate G at Munich Airport, I listen to the robotic voice of a German woman serenade me as an actual German woman yawns in my face. If I hit pause, right here, & capture the moment in my camera eye, it would look like she was eating me. My face in her mouth as it opens to bear down, bite, swallow. Leave yourself as you take in the other. So I take a picture & register her mouth to memory.

We huddle close, in silence, for a moment longer until we stop. The robotic voice says something new in German. I swoon. She stretches. Everyone sort of exhales, or unlocks their phones. Then we start again.

Tomorrow I’ll receive an e-mail from Lufthansa, asking me if I could spare my time. Say yes & no.

Rate my experience.

---

I Hear Evil Enter Through the Nothing of Me

Kailey Tedesco

I.

I am siamese (because I choose to be) & always pregnant – It’s true
I ate the rabbit’s inards & I ate the caul.

I wish I were siamese with the statue of Mary – I crawl inside her voided eye & see
myself curled in cement
at the corner of the garden & I am
so full.

II.

I am always two
or three things – I was born inside
another woman
& she said I felt like a ouija board

or a bi-level house with
a murder inside.

There were not one
but two Eves & the serpent. I think
I’m still inside the serpent – I was born
into a sack of divination &
there are so many windows
to shut.
III.

When I'm here, I talk in reverse.

Sleep in the guff makes me wake up beautiful & I bring you to bed –

You are inside me with everything tugging you further – the jungle of my innards wants to maul you & bring you to the heaven of me.

I am afraid in heaven I will not cry.
The saying goes: “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” And yet, in these times of constant flux, advancement and increased (quote unquote) ease, the generation of now, we’ll call them millennials in spite of how derogatory the moniker has become, have a tendency to believe their apathy is a truly unique phenomenon. They don’t believe in the aforementioned platitude, instead insistent on the notion that everything has changed to a point where the only appropriate response is all-out detachment. This coping mechanism, of sorts, prevents messy emotional involvements—not that much emotional involvement of any kind is able to flourish in a world dictated by apps and screens that practically mandate social ineptitude. Or so the generation of today would like to tell themselves. But in Douglas Coupland’s debut 1991 novel, *Generation X*, the issues and self-imposed disengagements of the current epoch remain an equally as soul-deadening force to be reckoned with.

Focused on the enmeshed lives of three off-the-grid living platonic friends, Claire, Dag and Andy (the primary narrator), Coupland highlights the persistent problem of today in showcasing how severely these antiheroes are suffering from, essentially, “the mid-twenties breakdown,” defined as: “a period of mental collapse occurring in one’s twenties, often caused by an inability to function outside of school or structured environments coupled with a realization of one’s essential aloneness in the world.” A mere three years after *Generation X*’s release, the Helen Childress-penned *Reality Bites* would cinematically solidify the symptoms and subsequent effects of the mid-twenties breakdown, an epidemic that has befallen all those without the fortune of being born a baby boomer—a group of people with the luck of existing in a period of ironclad economic prosperity. This charmed generation is one that Coupland addresses with a term both reverent and derisive, known as “boomer envy: envy of material wealth and long-range material security accrued by older members of the baby boom generation by virtue of fortunate births.”

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common ground with his parents, opting instead to stay in the remote desert recesses of California to wait out the holiday season. Claire, too, has non-family related Xmas celebrations in mind, pursuing a semi-boyfriend named Tobias (a real Patrick Bateman type in good looks, good “breeding” and good profession) in New York after an interaction with her in the desert proves to be more than he bargained for. As a “yuppie wannabe” type of fellow, his brief desire to dabble with a girl like Claire stems from believing she might be able to save him from the curse of being “interesting” solely for his handsomeness. That she might be imbued with the power to lend him some of her substance. But after realizing he is much more a member of the pay for your experiences of happiness sect, he recoils. This concept of “purchased experiences don’t count” is explained by Claire’s only female friend, Evissa, who chidingly remarks to Tobias, “Fake yuppie experiences that you had to spend money on, like white water rafting or elephant rides in Thailand don’t count. I want to hear some small moment from your life that really counts.”

As the most capitalistic society, even in a post-Eisenhower, post-Reagan, post-Bush I/II world, it’s a challenge for most twenty-something Americans to feel they’re enjoying themselves without spending an unnecessary sum of money. During both the nineties and today, the “best” way for young, unfocused, generally confused about life people to feel “fulfilled” is to shell out the money for a vision quest-oriented trip. Ignoring the cost part, twenty-somethings truly believe they’ll find meaning in the “spiritual” experience of travel, all the while ignoring that they’re paying out the nose to do it (even hostels don’t come cheap).

And so, as Claire attempts to win back the affection of Tobias over Christmas, Andy grudgingly makes his way back home, where many of his siblings have come and gone to recuperate from life in the realm of adulthood. In this regard, the parallels between Gen Xers and millennials continue to abound. The millennial predilection toward moving back in with one’s parents is a trend that existed among Gen Xers as well—though, admittedly, it appears millennials are far more comfortable doing so, and generally less self-deprecating about the whole affair of arrested development.

Still, most who are forced to spend protracted periods with their parents after the age of eighteen (and, frequently, even before then), will have the same revelation as Andy: “Already, after ten minutes, any spiritual or psychological progress I may have made in the absence of my family has vanished or been invalidated.”

With Andy being reduced to this child-like state on contact with his parents as a result of how they see him, Coupland can’t help but refer to a tongue-in-cheek vocabulary term in this segment of the novel, “pull-the-plug, slice the pie: a fantasy in which handing over the world to us like so clean, so free of mace them. I want to tell them that I envy their upbringings that were always the same?”

Indeed, most adhere to a strong belief in “safety netism,” an anomaly in somewhat direct conflict with the notion of “poverty lurks.” Unlike the latter fear, “safety netism” espouses the belief “that there will always be a financial and emotional safety net to buffer life’s hurts. Usually parents.”

And yet, this dependence on the ones who made you what you are—insane—in opposition to the contempt that is subliminally felt toward them. The combination of resentment and reliance leads Andy to seethe, “Give parents the tiniest of confidences and they’ll use them as crowbars to jimmy your open and rearrange your life with no perspective. Sometimes I’d just like to mace them. I want to tell them that I envy their upbringings that were so clean, so free of futurelessness. And I want to throttle them for blithely handing over the world to us like so much ski-marked underwear.”

Millenials, likewise, have this innate sense of blame-shifting, pinning the cause of their stagnation in life on their forebears as opposed to acknowledging any of their more self-made problems (e.g. a lack of will to suffer the fools of cubic existence in order to make money, as the baby boomers did).

So what is it that really separates the Gen Xers from the millennials? They’re both looked upon as lazy ne’er do wells trapped in a perpetual state of immaturity. Well, maybe the former group was in possession of a touch more compassion and humanity (the internet really has lent an element of extreme desensitization to the post-1995 world).

At the very end of Generation X, Coupland gives his readers a breakdown of all the statistical ways in which things have changed for the worse since the X generation came of age (for example, “percentage of income required for a down payment on a first home” in 1967 was 22 and, by 1987, had jumped to 32). But if things are always getting worse, aren’t they technically always the same?