

*In this issue, we present a hybrid craft-essay/review feature celebrating the art of extraordinary writing. The feature was inspired by Holly Goddard Jones's "Unreasonably Good Stories: Breaking the Competence Ceiling," which we've excerpted here.*

HOLLY GODDARD JONES

## from Unreasonably Good Stories: Breaking through the Competence Ceiling

*Friday Black.* Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah. Mariner Books, 2018. 208 pp. \$16.99 (paper).

I teach in an MFA program, and it's a very old and good one, so we get a respectable number of applications each year, and my Januarys and Februarys are generally spent scrolling through these application writing samples on Submittable. Reading in bulk this way is never ideal, but there's no getting around it. If you have weathered your own slogs through the slush, you'll know what I mean when I say that I try to come to the earnest efforts by these hopeful, often new writers with an attitude of generosity, but I'm hindered by my many human failings. I have a class to prepare for or a meeting to attend. I want to work on my own writing. I'm bored. I'm guilty. I'm annoyed. I'm looking for reasons to give the manuscript a thumbs-down and move on, culling the pile, even as I read just one more page, and another, out of fear that my initial impulses were wrong.

I've been rating these applications for over a decade, but I still don't fully trust myself with them. I've noticed that the manuscripts that cause me the most anguish are not the obviously unskilled ones, which can be incredibly entertaining in their way, but the ones that occupy the intersection of competency and dullness. These are the stories that are well written—I can't put my finger easily on anything that's wrong with them—but I find myself reading the same paragraphs over and over because my mind keeps wandering.

In "On Defamiliarization," Charles Baxter describes the process of reading a student's "reasonably good workshop story" and having a similar reaction. The story, Baxter writes, "had begun to read itself too early, and before very

long it was always and only about one thing, with the result that all the details fit in perfectly. All the arrows pointed in the same direction. When all the details fit in perfectly, something is probably wrong with the story. It is too meaningful too fast.”

Baxter goes on to add that the story’s writer “has decided what her story is about too early and has concentrated too fixedly on that one truth. Well, what’s wrong with the truth, and under what conditions does the truth grow undramatic, that is, without tension or instability?” If you’ve read “On Defamiliarization,” you’ll know that Baxter’s thesis on mediocrity is that it comes of the writer relying too much on familiar truths, and that stories only work if the writer forgets what they think they know for sure, “pull[ing] something contradictory and concealed out of its hiding place.”

For Baxter, the truth seems to be about plausibility—if a situation, a character, or a detail strikes the reader as recognizable. In this way, a story can be both truthful and undramatic. We know, for instance, that there’s truth to stories about the stresses of new motherhood, the pain of infidelity, the wonder and angst of coming of age, and so on—but if you’re not delivering the news on those topics, as one of my former professors would say, you may as well not bother. Across his larger essay, Baxter also seems to suggest that what we think of as truth in fiction may be only capitulation to social norms and craft conventions, which is why his student’s workshop story is only “reasonably good” and not great.

What, then, makes a story truthful *and* dramatic? How, I’ve wondered, working with graduate students, can I offer some practical guidance to help them pull that “contradictory and concealed” thing Baxter talks about from its hiding place? The conclusion I’ve reached is that the stories that invoke in me recognition, surprise, and delight do so through an interaction between the following three elements, and you need them all if you want your story to rise above dull competence—if you want it, to pervert Charles Baxter’s original statement, to be “unreasonably good.” Before I begin this list, let’s assume the qualities of “reasonable” goodness are already in place: the story is well structured; the characters have some complexity; there is an attempt at subtext; the language is pleasing. With those as a given, here’s what I would argue are also crucial:

**Authorial ethos.** I don’t want to wade into the topic of authenticity without noting that one of the things in the mix is the identity of the author

and the issue of whether that person has the experience and authority to tell certain stories. I don't have new insights to offer on the subject, beyond saying that I occupy a space, as a reader, where I can both appreciate the nuanced, empathetic way thrice-divorced, adulterizing Andre Dubus wrote his women characters and understand the widespread outcry at the publication of *American Dirt*. The maxim "Write what you know" is a dismayingly limited imperative, but at minimum, ask yourself this question: If I'm writing what I don't know, what's my agenda? And is there any feasible way I can acquire the knowledge and experiences necessary to make my voice on this subject necessary?

**Cellular-level knowledge.** In answer to that last question, what I'm talking about here is a writer's level of such deep, generous understanding of their characters and those characters' worlds that this understanding permeates every image, sensory detail, and word choice. This knowledge obviously comes from organically acquired experiences, but writers can strive to attain it too, through research and sought experience—what journalists would call reporting. I'll add that this knowledge is also the product of training yourself to be a keen and empathetic observer, which leads me to the next and final point.

**Emotional intelligence or (gulp!) moral authority.** I was lucky enough at an early season in my writing career to attend several bookstore events with Edward P. Jones, and a question he kept getting asked was what kind of research he'd done to write *The Known World*, his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about a black slaveowner. And Edward's response each time was that he spent nearly a decade researching the Antebellum South, but it wasn't until he put these books to the side and stopped worrying about things like the historical accuracy of the drapes that he was able to tell Henry Townsend's story. The lesson I took from this wasn't "Research is unnecessary." Rather, it was that research can tell you what the drapes looked like in the early nineteenth century but not whether the character in your story would notice those drapes or, if so, the language he would use for the noticing. It can be helpful to have the historically accurate drapes at the ready, on the cellular level of your knowledge base, if you find you need them, but putting them into the story simply because you've learned they existed is letting the tail wag the dog. If pressed to offer what I believe is the baseline minimum skill necessary for literary talent, I'd say that it's

an ability to offer the right detail through the right perspective—and this is a talent lodged in the heart. Luckily, though, the heart is a muscle. You don't need me to tell you that writers aren't all good people, and in fact, I've known some writers who were awful people. But the writers who were good on the page, even if they were awful in real life, managed to excavate something decent and generous within themselves and commit it to the page. And this decent thing, if you ask me, is as simple as living in the world in a way that allows you to recognize points of connection: opportunities for drawing a line between yourself and the reader you hope to encounter. This decent and generous impulse is what allows a writer to understand why summer sunlight filtering through pale yellow curtains might make a woman's sinuses ache with unshed tears. If the drapes she's looking at are historically accurate, great. But they need to be necessary, first, and then correct.

A published story I admire, one that encapsulates these three elements I've discussed—authorial ethos, cellular-level knowledge, and emotional intelligence/moral authority—is “The Finkelstein 5,” part of Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's collection, *Friday Black*. It takes place in a slightly different version of our own world, where outrage over the not-guilty judgment in a white-on-Black mass murder has resulted in a campaign of deliberately staged retaliative acts of violence against random white people. You can tell from this description that Adjei-Brenyah has committed boldly and ambitiously to making concrete one of white America's deepest fears: what would happen if oppressed people demanded not just equal treatment but a complete balancing of the scales. This is the sort of concept that could easily never attain liftoff beyond delighting in its own highly contrived cleverness if Adjei-Brenyah weren't also possessed of the emotional intelligence and moral authority to find the perfect lens for this material. He tells the story through the eyes of a character whose grief and trauma drive him to the edge of an act that is somehow both unthinkable and understandable, and the story turns on the question of whether Emmanuel will embrace his rage or suppress it. Reading the story the first time, I felt a mounting unease at the narrative trap of these two options, and somehow Adjei-Brenyah pulls off an ending that validates Emmanuel's desire for justice without robbing him of his humanity. Adjei-Brenyah is clear on his story's objects of critique but never simplistic. Each time I reread this story, I finish it with questions—not about what happened but about what is in my own heart.

The paragraphs I share now are both from early in the story:

That morning, like every morning, the first decision he made regarded his Blackness. His skin was a deep, constant brown. In public, when people could actually see him, it was impossible to get his Blackness down to anywhere near a 1.5. If he wore a tie, wing-tipped shoes, smiled constantly, used his indoor voice, and kept his hands strapped and calm at his sides, he could get his Blackness as low as 4.0.

The next paragraph is a couple pages later, when Emmanuel is getting ready to go to the mall to buy something to wear to a job interview:

In a vague move of solidarity, Emmanuel climbed into the loose-fitting cargoes he'd worn on a camping trip. Then he stepped into his patent-leather Space Jams with the laces still clean and taut as they weaved up all across the black tongue. Next, he pulled out a long-ago abandoned black hoodie and dove into its tunnel. As a final act of solidarity, Emmanuel put on a gray snapback cap, a hat similar to the ones two of the Finkelstein Five had been wearing the day they were murdered—a fact George Wilson Dunn's defense had stressed throughout the proceedings.

Emmanuel stepped outside into the world, his Blackness at a solid 7.6. He felt like Evel Knievel at the top of a ramp.

I think it's immediately clear here how Adjei-Brenyah's ethos as a young Black American male gives him access to a cellular-level of knowledge that writers lacking his ethos—no matter how talented, no matter how well-meaning—probably couldn't access. But it's the third element, the element of emotional intelligence and moral authority, that imbues these passages with the power not just to evoke a particular experience but to make a connection between that experience and a reader who may not ever have experienced anything like it. I've never come close to feeling like the clothes I choose to put on in the morning are an Evel Knievel-level of life-threatening audacity, but Adjei-Brenyah convinces me this is the case for this particular man. He does it by carefully mounting specific details across the story's first pages and calibrating the reader's sense of what this character's Blackness scale means in practical, psychological, and thematic terms. As a middle-class, middle-aged white woman, I've registered the general impression offered through popular media of what a threatening Black male looks like, and I of course recognize the symbolic import assigned to hoodies, but Adjei-Brenyah also gives me the cargo

shorts from a camping trip, the patent-leather Space Jams with their perfect laces, and the snapback hat that draws a line between Emmanuel's "vague move of solidarity" and the tragedy he is trying, in his way, to express solidarity with. This list of items with their little backstories shows me that the outfit Emmanuel is donning is both costume and uniform, comprised of some bits that are sincerely him and some that are, paradoxically, meant only to elicit a reaction. The choice of a close third-person point of view lets us eavesdrop on Emmanuel's rationalizations without having those rationalizations be clouded by a first-person narrative agenda. The overall impact of these moves is a satisfying and deeply affecting harmoniousness, and that's as close as I'm going to be able to come to defining what fictional truth ought to look like.

Getting from good to great is easier for some than others. It comes innately to a few writers, whom we try not to hate, and for the rest of us, it's a skill developed through lots of reading—reading so often and so broadly that the moves of these genius writers imprint upon us—and lots of practice. When you're revisiting a draft of a story that strikes you as promising but not quite lifting off, try starting with the moments—and you're going to know exactly what moments I'm talking about here—that have never, ever felt right to you in the writing or rereading process. Those moments where you threw something on the page, hoping a better idea would later strike you, and instead the stand-in barnacled to the draft's hull, ugly and unyielding. Notice it again. Pry it loose. Consider what false note it may have been sounding. Is a detail out of sync with the point of view? Is there something unnatural about the staging? Are you being fancy when you should be getting out of the story's way? Are you throwing in a "suddenly" moment to eject your character from a plot dead end? The good thing about working at this granular level is that it feels manageable and discreet but often ends up having necessary story-wide implications. And maybe that's the bigger lesson here, if I'm capable of offering one on such a huge, abstract, and often frustrating subject as the competence ceiling: it can feel to us like breakthroughs are the consequence of magic, or of finally cracking the lock on our hidden reserve of God-given talent. It can feel like we get better as writers only when we figure out some necessary capital-*T* truth. But in fact, these breakthroughs usually happen when we're doing the humblest work.

Editors' note: To read the unabridged essay, visit the page for this issue on our website: [cincinnatiareview.com/issue/20-1/](http://cincinnatiareview.com/issue/20-1/)

SHANNON FANDLER

## Pilgrim amid Spectres: A Craft Review of *The Collected Schizophrenias*

*The Collected Schizophrenias*. Esmé Weijun Wang. Graywolf, 2019. 224 pp. \$16.00 (paper).

In her 1905 essay “The Decay of the Essay,” Virginia Woolf grumbles about writing that begins “with a capital I.” At first glance, her complaint is reminiscent of those who rail against the personal essay as an exercise in naval-gazing. But Woolf’s criticism is aimed at the “I” that gazes outward, not the introspective one. She decries the “I” that shares uninformed opinions about art, music, and literature, and urges anyone with an essayistic impulse to instead write about their life, “that single book to which they alone have the key.”

Of course, Woolf acknowledges that writing honestly about oneself is uncommonly hard: “Confronted with the terrible spectre of themselves, the bravest are inclined to run away or shade their eyes.” I know the feeling—I have a progressive disability that I spent much of my life trying to ignore, and to write honestly about myself, I needed to confront “spectres” ranging from long-lived shame to the fear of making a mistake in a community with competing disability discourses. Instead, for my MFA thesis, I plowed ahead with a writing project about pilgrimages that only ever circled the reasons I, a lapsed Catholic and devoutly unspiritual person, had walked seventy miles of the Camino de Santiago and also traveled from Philadelphia to New Mexico solely to visit El Santuario de Chimayó, a New Mexican pilgrimage site cherished for its holy dirt. Because of my own reluctance, I’ve wondered what options are available to the nonfiction writer still trying to find their way to and through their subject.

Esmé Weijun Wang’s essay collection, *The Collected Schizophrenias* (Graywolf, 2019), showed me an approach to writing about disability that deftly handled everything I was afraid of—including finding the courage to write despite not having all the answers. Wang has late-stage Lyme disease and schizoaffect-

tive disorder, a mental illness that combines symptoms of schizophrenia with mania or depression. Wang writes that while “other human catastrophes can bear the weight of human narrative[,] . . . schizophrenia’s built-in chaos resists sense.” Her ability to make “sense” of her experiences is tied to her capacity for insight, which she fears losing to her illness. Some essays in the collection deploy the shaky hindsight of remission: the right combination of medications seems to have put the most serious of her delusions behind her. But others cleave closer to the subject—Wang writes portions of the essay “Perdition Days” while experiencing Cotard’s delusion, a type of psychosis in which the patient believes they are dead. At first, the delusion brings elation; Wang assumes she has been given a do-over in the afterlife. Her joy is quickly replaced by the belief that “I was doomed to wander forever in a world that was not mine, in a body that was not mine; I was doomed to be surrounded by creatures and so-called people who mimicked the lovely world that I’d once known.”

Wang confronts the “spectre” of herself also in parsing how her feelings about her mental illness both do and do not reflect mainstream and activist discourses. Twice exceptional, Wang shares a psychological diagnosis with just 0.3 percent of the American population, and she’s also intellectually gifted, having attended Yale and Stanford and worked as a researcher at a prestigious lab. Appearing “high-functioning” is an attempt to guarantee that she can keep moving freely in the world—Wang has experienced involuntary hospitalization and dreads a recurrence. This choice is also about survival of the ego: a first-generation American, she’s a high achiever who has long derived her self-worth from her ability to not just keep it together but surpass others’ performance.

In the essay “High-Functioning,” Wang pokes fun at the steps she takes to distance herself from stereotypes about schizophrenia, including dressing in designer clothes, flashing her wedding ring, eating “potato skins in Irish bars,” and conveying at every opportunity that she has attended Yale. She admits that she is reluctant to identify with those who share her diagnosis: “I’m uncomfortable because I don’t want to be lumped in with the screaming man on the bus, or the woman who claims that she’s the reincarnation of God. I’m uncomfortably uncomfortable because I know that these are my people in ways that those who have never experienced psychosis can’t understand, and to shun them is to shun a large part of myself.” By articulating her “uncomfortably uncomfortable” feelings, Wang avoids a common pitfall of personal writing: trading ambivalence and acknowledgment of complicity for a more politically empowering stance. When she’s surviving her day-to-day



life, Wang's biggest risk lies in the slippage of her high-functioning mask. But the page presents different risks—reinforcing negative stereotypes, adding her voice to an already damning chorus. The “spectres” of ourselves aren't ours alone; they reflect all that haunts the world we live in. Wang worries about lending credence to neurotypical bias by treating schizophrenia as a terrible affliction but asserts, “I also believe in the suffering of people diagnosed with the schizophrenias.” She weighs the idea that schizophrenia confers creative or spiritual gifts but ultimately concludes, “If creativity is more important than being able to maintain a sense of reality, I could make a plausible argument for remaining psychotic, but the price of doing so is one that neither I nor my loved ones are likely to choose to pay.”

In identifying why I found *The Collected Schizophrenias* so “unreasonably good” when I read it a few years ago, my initial thought was that it's precisely Wang's reasonableness—her self-awareness, her commitment to examining her subject from all angles—that makes her work exceptional. But on one hand, demonstrating reason is a fairly low bar for essays, even in these rhetorically troubling times. On the other hand, the concept of reasonableness has long been used to silence those speaking out against injustice—after all, the American eugenics movement of the twentieth century used science and “reason” to promote state-sponsored horrors such as the forced sterilization of disabled people.

Perhaps it's out of that last concern that some nonfiction writers feel guilty for reining in their emotions on the page. When you're writing about what's nightmarish, self-aware gestures can seem too conciliatory. But does the impulse to be unreasonable undermine the strengths of the essay?

Phillip Lopate writes in *To Show and to Tell* (Free Press, 2013), his primer on literary nonfiction, that essayists are sometimes tempted to “heat up the form, make it more irrational.” Lopate urges readers not to “disdain the classic mandate of the nonfiction writer to make sense of the world, to tell about it in lucid, rational terms.” He praises autobiographical accounts by Daniel Paul Schreber, a German judge who had schizophrenia, and Louis Althusser, a French Marxist philosopher who strangled his wife and was committed to a psychiatric hospital; in these accounts, Lopate observes, the authors seemed “compelled to hold tightly to whatever shards of sanity still existed, by trying to relate the horrible experience of losing their minds.” While it's preposterous to think that sanity can be retained through sheer willpower, Lopate implies that it can be achieved as part of the editorial process. And maybe he's right, to

a point—technologies continually reframe human limits. Being able to revisit and revise could help writers work around and interpret periods of illness. (Assuming there are such interludes—as Wang puts it, “When the self has been swallowed by illness, isn’t it cruel to insist on a self that is not illness?”)

A somewhat opposing pitfall is what Leslie Jamison describes in her essay “Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain” as the “post-wounded” affect. Jamison finds that writers—especially women—exploring their psychic or physical pain often worry about seeming self-pitying or short on perspective: “What I’ll call ‘post-wounded’ isn’t a shift in deep feeling (we understand these women still hurt) but a shift away from wounded affect: These women are aware that ‘woundedness’ is overdone and overrated. They are wary of melodrama, so they stay numb or clever instead.”

Instead of asking women to rationalize or contain their pain, Jamison wants “our hearts to be open.” Writing rationally about a painful subject while keeping an open heart is a challenge Wang conquers through her maximalist, questioning approach. She ranges from deploying clinical detachment to making acerbic, self-aware jokes to zooming in on the details of her suffering. She’s unflinchingly critical of what people with mental illness have to go through as they seek the lives they want, yet she acknowledges that the solutions aren’t always clear and can sometimes cause more harm. She believes in “science and authority” but writes toward the point where knowledge reaches its limits.

In “Chimayó,” Wang describes her pilgrimages to Saint Roch Chapel, a shrine in New Orleans where pilgrims leave their prosthetic limbs as offerings, and to Chimayó, where I never bothered to collect any holy dirt even though I’d traveled so far to it. Pilgrimages have a fascinating relationship with disability—pilgrims have long journeyed to spiritual sites in hope of a cure, which had figured into my interest in a nonliteral way. But historically, people also made pilgrimages when old age, illness, or disability meant they could no longer perform heavy labor and finally had time to take a long trip. Even if undertaken in pain or in the face of impending death, a pilgrimage would have been a once-in-a-lifetime vacation on which the wine flowed and touristic delights rivaled spiritual ones. It would have been a chance to meet others who understood if not the full complexity of one another’s motivations, at least the impulse to take—like Wang’s “I” in *The Collected Schizophrenias*—a risky, hopeful, awful, playful journey to a mysterious destination.

As a pilgrim and a writer, I have not always felt ready to face the spectres in front of me. But Wang’s account of her experience at Saint Roch offers the

perfect metaphor for writing into a sense of uncertainty and incompleteness: “To the chapel I had taken a beloved stone striated by white lines. According to what I’d read, I was supposed to leave something only once I’d been healed—but my intuition told me to leave something then, and so I knelt and tossed the stone through the bars.”

RACHAEL UWADA CLIFFORD

## On Place and *The Unpassing*

*The Unpassing*. Chia-Chia Lin. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019. 288 pp. \$26.00 (cloth).

The June after I turned fifteen, my family moved to New Mexico. We drove twenty hours away from a small Georgia town in quiet decline where we had lived for eleven years. I remember the early days of that Georgia house, old and full of holes and hiding places, so well. How anxiously the animals—rats, mostly—tried to get in, and did get in, from the yard and the woods. How we'd boil water for baths, the pipes faulty. And how my brother and I, exploring the house's nooks and crannies, would find the small toys of the children who had lived there before us. How strange those children seemed in their absence. Soon my father patched and sealed and stuffed everything up. Eventually, after an electrical fire, the house got a complete-gut renovation and almost became a different house altogether. Leaving was difficult. Driving through Alabama and Mississippi felt familiar enough, but I remember a certain shift in the air somewhere between Oklahoma and Texas. By the time we reached New Mexico, it could have been another earth. The land and sky widened. The air thinned. That night the moon was low and full. It skimmed along the horizon, at the bottom of the mountains, as we drove; I didn't know moons could do that.

All this to say, I am perhaps unusually predisposed to liking novels involving US states with strange landscapes; houses where the delineation between *inside* and *outside* is not always so clear; children who are ghost or gone, or both; and optimistic immigrant fathers who like a good DIY project (or three). Chia-Chia Lin's first novel, *The Unpassing*, offers all of this and more still. Set in the 1980s, on the mostly wild edges of Anchorage, Alaska, it tells the story of a grieving Taiwanese immigrant family from the perspective of a now-adult son, Gavin, reflecting on his childhood. Grief, migration, and the myth of America are of course well-worn literary themes, and what sets this novel apart from others like it is the stark, startling sense of place Lin evokes on every page.

With her portrait of a setting equal parts brutal and beautiful, she elegantly convinces us that this novel could not have taken place anywhere but Alaska.

In her 1956 essay “Place in Fiction,” Eudora Welty writes, “The truth is, fiction depends for its life on place. Location is the crossroads of circumstance, the proving ground of ‘What happened? Who’s here? Who’s coming?’—and that is the heart’s field.” For both Welty and me, place in fiction offers all manner of questions in which the heart is especially invested. This is why, I think, for a novel to be unreasonably good, it must do all it can to resplendently establish place. I believe the best novels make the reader *feel*, and place is the most immediate path to feeling. When I conjure the sensations of my childhood home—the singing screech of the ancient tea kettle, the mothball smell of my father’s closet, the thwack of beetles hitting our windows on summer nights—I am flooded with feeling: safety and solitude, levity and lonesomeness. In *The Unpassing*, Lin illuminates how the constitutive elements of place—sight, sound, taste, touch, smell—can transcend themselves to produce the rich realm of feeling.

Passage after passage exquisitely embodies a sense of place at once external and internal to the characters. At one point, forced to leave their home, Gavin and his family venture to the Kenai Peninsula, where a classmate’s family vacations and where the summers—unlike in Gavin’s hometown—are actually hot. On the drive there, Gavin wonders at the transition of climates: “We had driven south along the inlet before, but only up to the ghost forests. The coastline there had sunk during the Good Friday earthquake, and the spruce forests had guzzled salt water and died. Decades later, the silvery skeletons of those trees still stood, petrified by salt and leaning drunkenly, some nearly horizontal. It might be there, in the bewitched space where trees defied time and gravity, that the world shifted.” This is place in its barest concrete sense—the sunken coast, the salt, the spruces. But this is also place in the sense of the narrator’s internal landscape—place that constitutes the narrator’s very being and helps him articulate his feelings and questions. Here Gavin is not only talking about the transition between cold weather and hot weather. He is also drawing our attention to—while attempting to make sense of—the other kinds of transitions that happen in the novel: the transitions between life and death, between familiar and strange. This fluidity of feedback between internal and external states is part of how place becomes character in *The Unpassing*.

Lin’s skillful rendering of place as character also emerges in the way that certain settings in the novel quite literally take on lives of their own. In the best

novels, place is more film sequence than landscape painting, ever changing and churning—at times physically, at times metaphysically. Lin captures this dynamism most evocatively through her depiction of the forest surrounding the family’s home, a familiar forest that can become unfamiliar at will. Stumbling through the dark woods in search of his younger brother, Gavin notes: “The trees took up more space at night; their shadows added to their volume.” Far from static backdrop, here the natural world is unpredictable, heightening fears or offering healing and liberation, depending on time of day, on season, on whim. In a different scene, playing after school with a classmate who is brave enough to walk in the woods alone, Gavin—self-conscious about his own fear—works to rationalize it: “It seemed to me the woods wanted something of us. And the farther you went into the woods, the bigger that thing was, and the more intensely it was wanted.” Lin’s hand is especially deft here; she might have simply written that Gavin felt afraid or anxious in the deep woods. But she opts for a more expansive inversion: rather than directly describing Gavin’s interiority in the woods, she instead attends to Gavin’s imagination of the interiority *of* the woods. Implicit in this imagination, of course, is Gavin’s own interiority, but the way the reader arrives at it is through place—through the surprise of place as a being that can *also* want, and through a much fuller and more immediate sensorial experience than we’d have had absent Lin’s inversion.

The dynamism of Lin’s place-making does two other important things for the novel. First, within the context of a narrative where interiority is so bound up with exteriority, and where the main characters are working-class immigrants of color, a rendering of place that lacked dimension or complexity or contradiction would in turn deprive the characters of those same qualities. Vitally here, and in large part a result of Lin’s mastery of place, the characters feel fully and wonderfully realized. Second, Lin’s dynamic place-making allows for necessary moments of rupture in the book. Never does Lin bear too heavily down on the severity of the landscape or of the characters’ impoverished conditions in it; there are bursts of surprise, of wonder, of ease. The family truck careens into a late-blooming patch of daylilies; the mother climbs out, collects the buds, and makes soup. At the first sight of spring sun the children play ecstatically in a clearing. The forest opens into a friend’s sun-filled backyard, “a lovely shock, a rich apricot pool where the late afternoon light gathered and stewed.” For the color palette of *The Unpassing*, Lin relies primarily upon

blacks and blues, grays and greens, but moments like these indeed serve as “lovely shocks.”

Lin is as interested in the built world as she is in the natural world—and especially, it seems, in the frequently murky division between the two. If there were an award for most compelling literary houses, the house in *The Unpassing* would be a solid contender. Surrounded by a half-wilderness, it remains the lone home in an unfinished subdivision: “When the others move in,’ my father used to say, followed by his own vague wishes: the road might be paved, the mailbox might be relocated, the wind might not blow so hard on us. At some point the future ossified, our ghost neighbors vacated, and he talked in should-haves.” And the house itself does not simply *have* character; it too is a character, living and breathing—figuratively and literally: “Mushrooms sprouted in our bathroom with the seasons, tracking time. They grew from the seam between the floor and wall, and the caps were perfect and unblemished, curving over their stems like modest skirts.” The image—if one can call this simply an image—is both horrifying and fascinating. The house is perpetually damp. The characters bring rain and snow in—and other materials from nature find their way past the door too. Frustrated by skittering sounds at night, the father breaks open the sealed attic, and out tumbles a heap of spruce cones and squirrel skeletons. Before this discovery, the eldest daughter, Pei-Pei, had insisted there were children in the attic—“paler, thinner versions of us who played in constant darkness.” While there are several deaths in this novel, and while the characters are haunted—and, at times, haunt—this is not a ghost story.

But Pei-Pei’s invention of the ghost children illustrates something the novel does so wondrously throughout, with its place-making: It engages all of our senses—including our sixth. Some unnamed thing hovers just over every scene of *The Unpassing*, something we get wind of only through the attentiveness Lin pays to the air itself—again, literally and figuratively. This scene, where the mother is simmering beef bones for broth, perhaps best illustrates the latter sense: “‘The soft marrow. We’ll cook them until they crumble, until they release their animal souls.’ When she went on like this, talking to someone we didn’t know, the air felt thinner in the room.” These unsettling moments work particularly well because they are always anchored to some sensorily rich, concrete detail—the marrow bones, in this case. Lin’s use of the sixth sense becomes, for me, such a lucently evocative way of drawing attention to the characters’ past and possible lives in Taiwan. These lost selves in fact seem to

haunt the characters more than any of the actual lost loved ones in the novel. Which is part of what gives *The Unpassing* its miraculous pulse: It's not about the dead at all. It's about the living. At one point, the family becomes homeless following an eviction, and they return to their abandoned house and begin to haunt it—or to create a life again, depending on how you look at it.

After finishing *The Unpassing*, I found myself wondering at how little the narrator actually speaks—but how well I felt I knew him. Perhaps this is the highest testament to what makes this novel, and its sense of place, unreasonably good. By way of Lin's graceful collapsing of the lines between the built and natural, internal and external worlds, the novel's expansive, expressive landscape never feels as though it is at odds with taciturn, too-small-for-his-age Gavin; instead they feel like each other's natural counterparts, extensions of each other, ways into making sense of the other. Like Gavin, I was a quiet, observant child. Like Gavin, I carry certain houses and certain woods everywhere. And what I love most about Lin's engagement with place, the space and attention she allocates to it, is how it becomes a kind of tending—to wild places, quiet children, and all the things that happen when they meet.



EMILIA PHILLIPS

## “Then My Eyes Got Hungry”: On Diane Seuss’s “Memory Fed Me until It Didn’t”

*Still Life with Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl*. Diane Seuss. Graywolf, 2018. \$16.00 (paper).

In a netted hammock in my partner’s backyard, between two greening oaks whose crowns almost but never touched, I reopened Diane Seuss’s *Still Life with Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl* to a random page. In those early days of the COVID-19 lockdown, I wanted poems like I wanted slices of cake—cut with the intensity with which Judith beheads Holofernes in Artemisia Gentileschi’s early seventeenth-century painting. That’s the intensity I always expect of Seuss.

The poem to which I opened begins its first divulgence in the title only to continue it in its first line, a maneuver I believe Matthea Harvey, in a lecture I heard way back in 2012, called an “on-ramp.” I’ve always felt delightfully bewildered by such a beginning to a poem, as if I’d expected something on “GO!” but got it on “3!” Seuss writes:

MEMORY FED ME UNTIL IT DIDN’T

Then the erotic charge turned off like a light switch.  
I think the last fire got peed on in that hotel outside Lansing.  
Peed on and sizzled and then a welcome and lasting silence.

The title alone doesn’t define what memory entails for this speaker here. Rather, we require the first line’s correlative elucidation to understand that it’s memory of erotics that “fed” (i.e., sustained) the speaker. What did it feed though? A fire, and then an electrical charge—with which the act of feeding or being fed doesn’t seem quite compatible—and, lastly, something noisy, loud, or, in my partner’s first language of Spanish, *ruidoso*.<sup>1</sup> To be able to successfully mix

1. This Spanish adjective has always struck me as more bombastic than its English translations, more evocative of *ruin* (at least to my ear, whose taproot is English). Of course, *ruin* and *ruido* (the

metaphors, the way that Seuss has done here and does with extraordinary panache across her oeuvre, requires the mixology skills of a bartender in a basement bar marketed as a “speakeasy” by its hipster owners. Perfect proportions, the right tools, and the requisite charm, with just a hint of impropriety.

The poem’s next four stanzas shift the poem’s direction:

Then my eyes got hungry.  
They looked at bowls and barn owls and paper clips,  
panoramic lavender fields and a single purple spear,  
  
and it was good but not good enough.  
My eyes were hungry for paint, like I used to imagine  
a horse could taste the green in its mouth  
  
before its lips found the grass.  
Then I woke to the words “still life,” not as the after-image  
of a dream but as the body wakes and knows it needs  
  
mince pie before the mind has come to claim it.  
I craved paint like the pregnant body craves pomegranates  
or hasenpfeffer or that sauerbraten made with gingersnaps.

The speaker’s “erotic . . . fire” that was peed on (figuratively, yes, but one can’t say for certain there wasn’t a literal component in that hotel outside Lansing, Michigan) is replaced by a hunger—not exactly a literal one, not in the way I crave the numbing sensation, almost like very fast and tiny tremors, of the Szechuan peppercorn. Instead, Seuss’s hunger for paint is more figurative, even if it is described by literal hungers: the horse’s hunger for the grass, the sleeper’s craving for mince pie, or the pregnant body’s desire for pomegranates, hasenpfeffer, and sauerbraten.

What’s most interesting about the poem up to this point is how it’s leveraging its line breaks to create tension. The first four lines end in periods—this is end-stopping at its most pure. Perhaps these lines suggest a kind of end of that “erotic charge.” As the speaker begins to look at objects in the world (e.g.,

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noun form of *ruído*/a) are false cognates: “ruin” comes into English from Middle French’s *ruine*, which was formed from the Latin *ruina*, a nominalization of the verb *ruere* (“to fall”). However, as the Real Academia Española Spanish dictionary notes, *ruído* comes from the Latin *rugītus*, which can mean either “the roaring of lions” or a “rumbling of the bowels,” according to Olivetti Media Communication’s online Latin dictionary. But I digress, which is, I suppose, what footnotes are for.

“bowls and barn owls”), the lines remain end-stopped but less confidently so, with commas that conclude clauses but not the sentences to which they belong. Once desire—or, rather, hunger—is reignited, however, the lines begin to break midsentence, against the grammar, as in the following three lines:

My eyes were hungry for paint, like I used to imagine  
a horse could taste the green in its mouth  
before its lips found the grass.

If one understands line breaks as functioning not only to illustrate the relationships between lines but also to reveal a distinct signification of the language within the line from the language within the sentence, one can have a field day with Seuss’s breaks here. Imagine for a moment that there was a period at the end of the first line in the passage above: “My eyes were hungry for paint, like I used to imagine.” The speaker once imagined the eyes being hungry for paint, and now that past act of imagination has become true. “A horse could taste the green in its mouth” suggests that the animal can taste the color green—as if colors themselves can be tasted!—not just in a metonymic figuration of the grass. The stanza break also serves a mimetic function of implying a “before” and “after.”

Associatively, Seuss connects all this talk of a hunger for paint to the art the speaker eventually devours by introducing “the myth of van Gogh” eating paint. “I ate van Gogh,” she writes, “the still lifes of old boots and thick-tongued / irises.” She goes on to list all the artists at which she looked—Dürer, Chardin, Baugin, and more—in a swift, leaping catalog that reminds this reader of perusing a market, all of its stalls, unable to decide what to buy. Seuss ends the poem with Pieter Aertsen’s *Butcher’s Stall with the Flight into Egypt* (1551), which is held by the North Carolina Museum of Art, about an hour and fifteen minutes up the road from that hammock in my partner’s backyard. Ironic that the poem’s final still life (which comes from the Dutch word *stilleven*) includes the “flight”—something entirely active, not “still” at all—of the Christian Holy Family.

Seuss describes the dead<sup>2</sup> objects in the foreground:

2. “Still life” in Italian is *natura morta* (literally, “dead nature”), which, unlike the English and Dutch words for this art genre, place emphasis on death instead of life. Two subgenres of still lifes—*vanitas* (Latin for “vanity”) and *memento mori* (“remember you die”) have intersecting but not perfectly overlapping subjects and symbolic meanings. *Memento moris* tend to feature images of skulls or skeletons, reminding the viewer that they one day will die, whereas *vanitas* paintings, despite likewise featuring skulls often, tend to suggest that beauty and wealth are ephemeral. This seems more encapsulated in *natura morta* than “still life.”

loaded with gaudy carnage,  
a vat of lard, a pig's head hung by the snout, cascades  
of sausages, strangled hens, and yawning sides of beef.

The huge gory head of a cow is front and center,  
directly below the cool blues of the miniature Virgin Mary  
handing out alms to the poor. The cow's cold nose  
is so close it makes my eyes water.

I could obsess over the phrase “gaudy carnage” for the length of this entire essay! *Gaudy*, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means “brilliantly fine or colourful, highly ornate, showy. Now chiefly in disparaging sense: Excessively or glaringly showy, tastelessly fine or colourful.” It defines *carnage* as “the slaughter of a great number, esp. of men; butchery, massacre.” The idea of carnage being brilliant in color feels literal, but the idea of them being “[e]xcessively or glaringly showy” or even “tastelessly . . . colourful” excites me because it's a minor moment of editorialization on behalf of the speaker. The words arrive from the Anglo-Norman and French, respectively, suggesting that, in their juxtaposition, they have a kind of complementary filigree. Secondly, for American speakers, the *au* in *gaudy* either makes a /ɔ/ sound, what is described as a “lax mid back rounded vowel” by a University of Pennsylvania site on phonetic symbols, not unlike the vowel in *dog* for many speakers, or an /ɑ/ sound, a “low back unrounded vowel” as in *spa*. The first *a* in *carnage* produces an /ɑ/ sound, thereby making the two words assonant or slant assonant, depending on pronunciation. Secondly, the words are both two syllables, with the stress falling on the first syllable, making their discrete pairing trochaic. Sense, subtext, sound, and meter emerge to create an eccentric image that has a lot of what sommeliers might call heavy-bodiedness in the mouth.

Beyond that phrase, there is so much to ogle, diction wise, in this passage: those “cascades / of sausages,” the “yawning sides of beef.” These are not mere ekphrastic descriptions but images of the kind that Ellen Bryant Voigt writes about in *The Flexible Lyric*: “Image can supply not only what the writer-as-camera uncovers in the empirical world, or what the writer-as-ecstatic isolates and articulates from the whirl of the individual psyche, but the moment when both are fused in objects seen, heard, smelled, and rendered with human response still clinging to them.” That is, image attaches observation to the observer, their “individual psyche,” so that it becomes a kind of effigy of their

internal lives, subjective thought, and extemporaneous emotion, which is the very gesture of Seuss's poem's final sentence:

Its watery eye  
gazes back at me and I fall in love. I fall in love again.

Let's turn back to that word *erotic* with which the poem began. The word, you may know, comes from the Greek *eros*, which Sappho, as Anne Carson reminds us in *Eros the Bittersweet*, described as *glukupikron*, a compound word meaning, literally, "sweetbitter." Carson goes on to write: "Many a lover's experience would validate such a chronology, especially in poetry, where most love ends badly. But it is unlikely that this is what Sappho means. Her poem begins with a dramatic localization of the erotic situation in time (*dēute*) and fixes the erotic action in the present indicative tense (*donei*). She is not recording the history of a love affair but the instant of desire. . . . A simultaneity of pleasure and pain is at issue. The pleasant aspect is named first, we may presume, because it is less surprising." From where does that bittersweetness creep upon the speaker of Seuss's poem? The art itself? Somewhere else? Can we read *eros* into the word *love*, repeated twice in this final line? It is often translated as such, and the poem's concluding word *again* suggests as much, as if it is the reconnection of the "erotic charge" in the first stanza. It is desire and horror, in one—perhaps like sex.

As I finished reading "Memory Fed Me until It Didn't," there in that hammock, in the midst of a quarantine, I, too, wanted to see *specifically* everything. Perhaps I was in the midst of falling in love with the world as well, exactly because it was what I desired, now that I was limited to a small acreage of it, and because I could not have it, because it pained me, because I knew now that it was being ruined, because it was a living *vanitas* of itself, painted in the gaudy carnage of spring.

## The Paradise of Danez Smith’s “summer, somewhere”

*Don't Call Us Dead.* Danez Smith. Graywolf, 2017. 96 pp. \$16.00 (paper)

In year three of the COVID pandemic, I’m still craving refuge, and poems remain one of my go-to sites of sanctuary. Frost once called poetry a “momentary stay against confusion”—so whether it’s “sheltering-in-place” or just wanting to escape the noise of my mortal worry, I’ve found great relief in taking up temporary tenancy in a poem that offers an evanescent, shimmering vision of a someplace else.

I’m not alone in this. Part of being human, it seems, is to seek a vision of a Somewhere. The Place of No Wind, the Spirit World, Elysian Fields, Field of the Host, the Walled Enclosure, the Lofty Waters, the Bosom of Abraham, the Garden (al-Jannah), the Eternal Reward, the Light of Your Face—across cultures and time, people have named the place where we go when we pass from this life into whatever’s after: the infinite, the oneness, the arms of God—whatever one’s choice of metaphor. I love how earthy these place names are. We cannot imagine Heaven or Afterlife or God without metaphors—for example, like the image of using rungs of a ladder to ascend (or descend, depending on your topology of what’s next).

This poetry that seeks paradise is also evocative of John Paul Lederach’s notion of the moral imagination: “the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist.” It’s occasionally a poetry of the future tense, but a future tense merging into the now. I think of Yeats’s “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”—“I will arise and go now . . .”—how he offers us a vision of what he is about to build on that island, an imminent future tense of the peace just across the water. The best poems of paradise, like Danez Smith’s wrenchingly gorgeous “summer,

somewhere,” are able, at once, to acknowledge the suffering that is stitched into existence but also somehow to bracket it, decenter it, let it be. The suffering that fuels the longing for the infinite, the poems of paradise assure us, will not have the final word. Such poems shine a light in the cold dark of our hurt and dread. In fact, as “summer, somewhere” developed from a tight slam piece with four basic movements to a rangy multisectioned poetic sequence of twenty pages, it retained its core dream-vision of and hope for a world without police murder of Black people.

I first encountered an early version of Danez Smith’s “summer, somewhere”—a recent poem that continues to haunt me, with each rereading—on a Button Poetry video called “Alternate Heaven for Black Boys” in 2016, a film that’s been watched well over seventy-five thousand times. (I have contributed at least one hundred of those viewings.) Smith’s performance is nothing short of electrifying. Their voice begins peacefully, slowly, then rises, insistent, desperate, ferocious, then falls again, then rises in crescendo—the map of its tonal movement something like a great pop song, its peaks and valleys growing deeper and taller as we move through its landscape. This isn’t a poem, it’s a prophecy, an exorcism of white supremacy and its ravages.

In that first version, in what become the first three couplets in print (fyi: this essay’s quotes are from the version published in Smith’s 2017 book), Smith initiates the vision slowly, calmly:

somewhere, a sun. below, boys brown  
as rye play the dozens & ball, jump

in the air & stay there. boys become new  
moons, gum-dark on all sides, beg bruise

-blue water to fly, at least tide, at least  
spit back a father or two. I won’t get started.

Smith’s summer place is full of brown boys whose skin is the color of “rye,” an orange-brown grain grown in their native Minnesota, a nod to the pastoral. But these boys aren’t the shepherds of yore: they roast each other, they’re ballers who “jump // in the air & stay there,” the enjambment itself holding those boys up. (I think of Gwendolyn Brooks’s centering of those pool players in “We Real Cool” through enjambment.) Smith’s muscular, sensuous, fleshy language—with its alliterations, internal and slant rhymes, and assonance—

celebrates the selves of those boys. But the mention of the lost fathers turns the tone (both on the page, and in their reading) to that of suffering:

history is what it is. it knows what it did.  
bad dog. bad blood. bad day to be a boy  
  
color of a July well spent. but here, not earth  
not heaven, we can't recall our white shirts  
  
turned ruby gowns. here, there's no language  
for *officer* or *law*, no color to call *white*.  
  
if snow fell, it'd fall black. please, don't call  
us dead, call us alive someplace better.  
  
we say our own names when we pray.  
we go out for sweets & come back.

Just as quickly as history irrupts into this scene, Smith talks the boys back, pushes them outside of the “here.” We know, even in the poem, what’s happened *there*, where the boys have been shot, where the words *officer*, *law*, and *white* not only exist but rule cruelly. Even blood on a shirt is seen as a “ruby gown.” It goes without saying that Trayvon, Michael, Tamir, and countless others hover close by. (In the final printed version of the poem, Smith name-checks a number of the murdered young men throughout.)

But in this alternate heaven, their murderers don’t have the final say. Instead, the boys are their own gods—the line “we say our own names when we pray” reminds me of Paul D’s beautiful words at the end of *Beloved* (Knopf, 1987): “You your best thing, Sethe.”

In the second movement of the slam version, Smith’s alternate heaven, this someplace, dilates into an everywhere, a paradise “where everything / is sanctuary & nothing is a gun”:

do you know what it's like to live  
on land who loves you back?  
  
no need for geography  
now, we safe everywhere.  
  
point to whatever you please  
& call it church, home, or sweet love.



paradise is a world where everything  
is a sanctuary & nothing is a gun.

here, if it grows it knows its place  
in history. yesterday, a poplar

told me of old forest  
heavy with fruits i'd call uncle

bursting red pulp & set afire  
harvest of dark wind chimes.

after I fell from its limb  
it bandaged me in sap.

In the space of the astonishing utterance, the “here” of the poem’s reading and speaking, a paradise comes into being. Where Black boys are safe. Where trees have fruit that is *not* strange (perhaps a nod to the devastating song “Strange Fruit” and the legacy of lynching). For the span of the poem, Smith has created a visionary site where Black people are in a place “that loves . . . back.”

In the third movement of the poem, Smith’s speaker reflects on their memories of the life before the Somewhere, drawing out a mythic vision redolent of the old myths of river crossings (from Styx to the Ohio River), the Spirituals and their rivers, and the drowning of Emmett Till:

there, i drowned, back before, once.  
there, i knew how to swim, but couldn’t.

there, men stood by shore & watched me blue.  
there, i was a dead fish, the river’s prince.

there, i had a face & then didn’t.  
there, my mother cried over me, open casket

but i wasn’t there. i was here, by my own  
water, singing a song i learned somewhere

south of somewhere worse.  
now, everywhere i am is

the center of everything. i must  
be the lord of something.

what was i before? a boy? a son?  
a warning? a myth? i whistled

now i'm the god of whistling.  
i built my Olympia downstream.

What begins as a description of murder by drowning turns into an apotheosis in which the speaker is no longer a passive victim but “the center of everything . . . the lord of something . . . the god of whistling.”

In the concluding lines of “Alternate Heaven,” Smith admonishes their listener/reader to “go home:”

you are not welcome here. trust  
the trip will kill you. go home.

we earned this paradise  
by a death we didn't deserve.

i'm sure there are other heres.  
a somewhere for every kind

of somebody, a heaven of brown  
girls braiding on golden stoops

but here—

how could i ever explain to you—

someone prayed we'd rest in peace  
& here we are

in peace        whole        all summer

Smith's final move is to eject us from paradise, those of us who haven't died as a result of anti-Black or racist violence. As audience, we're caught in the discomfiting realization that the only ticket to this heaven requires our murder. Smith's expulsion is not exclusivism but an insistence on the reality of the suffering of Black people. Yet even in that move, the poem promises that there are “other heres . . . for every kind / of somebody.” “summer, somewhere” is a poem incredibly canny about audience—centering Black boys yet at the same time opening up a window to create spaces for others who face their own threats. The poem's final sense of peace, buoyed by the belief that somebody

has prayed for the “us” of the poem, these black boys, resonates beyond the poem’s end, amplified by the white spaces between words in the final line—as if the words were clouds floating across the sky.

In subsequent versions, Smith drops the initial title, “Alternate Heaven for Black Boys,” and changes it to “summer, somewhere”—published on the page first in *Poetry* in 2016, and then as the first poem in the collection *Don’t Call Us Dead* (Graywolf, 2017), the title of which comes from the poem itself. Smith’s new title strips away the blinking-neon certainty of the original version and invites the reader into participating in the vision of this Somewhere. Smith is our Beatrice, walking us through their own Paradiso. For the version in *Poetry*, Smith added five new sections, like this one:

if you press your ear to the dirt  
you can hear it hum, not like it’s filled

with beetles & other low gods  
but like a tongue rot with gospel

& other glories. listen to the dirt  
crescendo a kid back.

come. celebrate. this  
is everyday. everyday

holy. everyday high  
holiday. everyday new

year. every year, days get longer.  
time clogged with boys. the boys

O the boys. they still come  
in droves. the old world

keeps choking them. our new one  
can’t stop spitting them out.

In this and the other additional sections, Smith echoes Lucille Clifton’s “won’t you celebrate with me” at least twice, writing elsewhere of “starshine”—yet the joy is freighted down with “the old world” that “keeps choking them.”

Smith would complete the poem with an additional eleven sections for *Don’t Call Us Dead*, including italicized sections on facing pages aligned to the

book's center that give voice to a grieving person left behind (at times figured as a mother, at others as a lover) as well as to the Black boys in the Somewhere. These sections seem to press together, divided, irrevocably, by the book's spine. The mother/lover voices, in particular, haunt like unhealed wounds:

*when i want to kiss you  
i kiss the ground.*

*i shout down sirens.  
they bring no safety.*

*my king turned my ache  
my one turned into my nothing.*

It's as if Smith wanted to spend more time inside that Somewhere, building that world beyond its initial length. We know—even in the joyous immersion in the otherworld of a beautiful poem—that it will end, that we must return to the world where so many of us are not safe. Like the great poems of paradise, from Dante to Yeats, “summer, somewhere” does not sell its reader a fantasy of heaven but instead shares a prophetic vision that names society's ills and offers the dream of something better. That shimmering vision is what remains with us—clutched close to us, like we would hold a child as we cross a dangerous street—as we head toward a Somewhere.

JAY FRANKLIN

## Breaking the Fourth Wall and Intimacy in *Fleabag*

*Fleabag*. Phoebe Waller-Bridge, creator. First aired in the US on 16 September 2016 and 17 May 2019. Amazon Prime Video.

Every serious relationship I've been in has forced me to confront myself. In my teens I learned about the need for boundaries. In my twenties the lesson was: just because I feel strongly about someone does not make them the partner for me. In my thirties, the lesson has been to embrace my vulnerability. Our culture is obsessed with love, yet there is rarely an honest depiction of the experience in our entertainment. The emphasis is often placed on the excitement of falling in love while glossing over a truth: each significant romantic relationship will challenge us to grow as an individual, as a partner, or both.

While meet-cutes and drama make for emotionally compelling television, what craft decisions can screenwriters and directors make if we want to dramatize the psychological nuances of love and offer the public more substantial examinations of its power? One way to do so is by taking a well-worn genre convention and recontextualizing it in a way that reveals character. I can't think of a more elegant example than Phoebe Waller-Bridge's use of the fourth wall in her series *Fleabag*.

Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* has been acclaimed for countless reasons: its dark humor, ruthless editing, and unforgettable performances from Waller-Bridge and Sian Clifford, who plays Fleabag's sister, Claire. What I love most about the series, and its second season in particular, is that it is wonderfully instructive for those of us writing about and—if I'm being honest—personally navigating the more painful and difficult aspects of romantic love, especially confronting oneself through intimacy.

In the first season of *Fleabag*, Waller-Bridge literalizes a complex coping

mechanism through the complication of the fourth wall. From the first scene, Fleabag addresses the audience as if we were her best friend. As the show progresses, we learn that Boo—her actual best friend—took her own life after Fleabag had an affair with Boo’s boyfriend, and it becomes clear that Fleabag started directly addressing “us,” the audience, to cope with the pain of being a contributing factor in her friend’s death. There have been great characters in movie and television history who have broken the fourth wall (shout out to Zack Morris, Ferris Bueller, and Rue from *Euphoria*), and doing so inherently disarms the viewer because we are exposed to the character’s point of view in a way no one else in the story gets to experience. Combined with Fleabag’s wry sense of humor, this exposure ingratiates us to her and her bad behavior. But what makes Waller-Bridge’s use of it exceptional, so “unreasonably good,” is the intentional connection between the conceit and the character’s development: the fourth-wall break stems from the traumatic loss of her friend. Boo’s death establishes the audience as an emotional crutch, the only access Fleabag has to emotional intimacy.

To complicate the audience’s role for Fleabag, Waller-Bridge introduces an alternative source for intimacy in the second season, a love affair between Fleabag and her godmother’s “cool, swearsy” Irish priest (played by the sparkly eyed Andrew Scott). In talking about his vocation in the first episode, Hot Priest (the only name he is given) explains to Fleabag’s family over dinner that “I came quite late to it actually. But it’s been a good life to me. I’ve really found peace in it.” And his search for peace is quickly justified: At the same dinner, he mentions that his parents were alcoholics—a bit of trivia he uses to relate to Fleabag’s brother-in-law, Martin—and that his brother is a pedophile. (“I’m aware of the irony,” he says, to break the tension).

Throughout the season, it’s also clear that his attraction to Fleabag disrupts his hard-won peace. “Peace be with you,” she repeats at the beginning of the second episode, smiling and greeting other parishioners, but her presence at Mass has the opposite impact on him. When he spots her from the lectern, he grins boyishly, looks down at the floor, thoroughly embarrassed, and struggles to find his words. After the service, he spills the tea he offers her then immediately suggests they drink gin. Midway through the season, Fleabag finds him in the vestry bumping early aughts hip-hop after hours, trying to reach a bottle of whiskey while an almost-empty bottle sits on the table. He is loose and, to Fleabag’s delight, letting sexual comments fly, for example, “Don’t call me ‘Father’ like it doesn’t turn you on just to say it.” He pours them both a glass and raises

it in a toast. “Here’s to peace,” he says, “and those that get in the way of it.” He lets Fleabag get in the way of his vow of celibacy that night.

A break in the fourth wall is not especially radical—some may even call it a gimmick—but Waller-Bridge uses these well-worn, “gimmicky” conventions to pull the audience into ideas and depictions of love that are much more profound, even instructional. To position love as a kind of inquisition, a form of facing oneself, the first line of the second season is a question: while Fleabag stands before an elegant mirror, cleaning her bloodied nose and chin as inoffensive jazz music plays over the speaker, a voice from behind the bathroom door asks, “Can I do anything?” Chronologically, the moment takes place near the end of the episode, but it’s been edited to be the audience’s introduction to the couple—the voice, we will learn, belongs to the Hot Priest. In place of the meet-cute is a raw image of Fleabag’s pain, answered by a simple expression of curiosity and empathy, at once caring and a bit intrusive. Fleabag assures the voice she’s all right, hands a paper towel to another bloody-nosed woman sitting on the floor, then breaks the fourth wall to wryly inform the audience: “This is a love story.”

When we go back in time—though only about an hour—to meet the Priest for the first time, we’re thrown into a painfully awkward and increasingly chaotic family dinner. The two are seated next to each other, but she’s confused by his presence. “No idea who this guy is,” she tells the audience, roping us back in with irreverent wit and the warmth of being in her confidence. Her family mostly ignores her, and as she turns to the camera to complain, the Priest severs her bond with us:

Fleabag: No one’s asked me a question in forty-five min—

Priest: So what do you do?

In that instant, the entire focus of the scene turns to Fleabag, a cinematic shift dramatized by the show’s ruthlessly precise editing. The table goes quiet, and four quick cuts show everyone turning to Fleabag: first the Priest, then her father and godmother, then her sister and brother-in-law; and then, finally, we hold on a shot of the Priest and Fleabag looking into each other’s eyes. The moment breathes, and the look they share is given room to imprint on us, the audience, who have just been ejected from Fleabag’s confidence. It’s an excellent moment because it highlights her pain—how she feels disregarded and undervalued in her family—now attended to by the Priest’s curiosity, which temporarily forces the entire family to concentrate on her.

Here, Waller-Bridge reveals she is playing the long game with a convention, drawing the audience's attention away from the external drama and actively dramatizing the qualities of the partnership that speak to its depth: Hot Priest is so attentive to Fleabag that it threatens the show's most prominent stunt, positioning love as an uncomfortable face-off with one's personality and coping mechanisms. As Fleabag and the Priest bond, she begins looking at the camera with an adorable, uncharacteristic shyness. As he asks more personal questions, her coy looks turn panicked and pleading, as if she expects us to break through the fourth wall in return and save her. By the fourth episode, in a stunning performance of avoidance, Fleabag oscillates between confiding in him and confiding in the audience. Having just revealed that she no longer runs the guinea-pig-themed cafe with her friend, she can't bring herself to tell him that it's because Boo committed suicide, let alone the role Fleabag played in Boo's misery. Instead, she laughs nervously, glancing at the camera for help. The priest notices.

The Priest: That thing that you're doing. It's like you disappear.

Fleabag: What?

The Priest: What are you not telling me?

Fleabag: Nothing!

The Priest: Tell me what's going on underneath there!

Fleabag: Nothing!

Fleabag: [*to the camera*] Nothing!

When she addresses the audience to insist that there's "nothing" she's keeping from him, knowing full well that we know exactly what she's hiding, the Priest turns to the camera and screams right into the lens. It's a playful scream, the kind one might use when playing hide-and-seek with a small child, but it's a chilling moment. The Priest has fully inserted himself between Fleabag and her audience. They are playing a kind of cat and mouse—or hide-and-seek—a game they continue later in the episode, inside the confessional. The wall between Fleabag and the Priest creates enough of a hiding space for Fleabag to open up and tell him her deepest fears, a dynamic that simultaneously (and controversially) heightens the sexual tension between them.

The couple consummates their love, but they don't get a happily-ever-after. He chooses to stay in the priesthood, recommitting himself to God instead of making a new commitment to her. In a remarkable act of vulnerability, Fleabag accepts his decision and still tells him, for the first time, that she loves him.



“It’ll pass,” he says at first, but admits he loves her too before walking away from the bus station. Able to shoulder this heartbreak on her own, she endures the scene without breaking the fourth wall, and the relationship she’s built with us over two seasons comes to an end. Her bus is canceled; she begins the long walk home in the dark. As the camera begins to follow her, she looks over her shoulder and shakes her head “no.” In the distance, she waves goodbye. The conclusion of our relationship with Fleabag is given as much narrative weight as the conclusion of theirs, prioritizing not a happily-ever-after but Fleabag’s growth as a result of opening herself up to love, even if it ends in her rejection.

Relationships help us see ourselves clearly. They put our ways of communicating, our habits, and belief systems, to the test. When depicting a romantic love onscreen, it matters less if the couple stays together or breaks apart. What matters is how we push genre conventions like breaking the fourth wall to honestly depict our characters’ shortcomings in that relationship. As in *Fleabag*, these shortcomings can give them the opportunity to make necessary changes. It’s one of the hardest truths of love, but it still gives me hope.