A Shimmering, Serrated Monster: Bonus Features

Introduction

By

Michael Pietsch

Dear Rick,

A friend from Crown's subsidiary rights department who shared my taste in writers saw an excerpt in Harpers Magazine's wonderful "Readings" section and tore it out for me. He'd written in the margin: "Word!" The excerpt began "I was an infinitely hot and dense dot" and spiraled in a superheated takeover of familiar narrative structures with hyperspecific scientific, historical and sexual content. It flashed in seconds through bodies of knowledge-all kinds of technical and political knowledge that you take in as you pass through the world but don't retain. This writer retained everything and repurposed it in ways that set lights flashing in every quadrant of my brain. He made facts dance. It was both serious and dead funny. I loved it beyond reason.

I got in touch with him, through Harpers probably. Did I write him a letter? Did they give me his phone number? I wish I could remember. I think I wrote Mark a letter. Soon we were talking. And there was a complication. The novel this excerpt was taken from was under contract already with a small press. But Mark was sure we could find a way to work around that and sent me a manuscript. It was all as wild, exuberant, playful and serious as that first taste. It was the most original piece of writing I'd ever held in my hands, entirely

new and entirely itself, narrative and performance at once. I was determined to persuade my bosses that we should publish it.

My credibility as an editor at this point was not huge. I was a kid and I'd never had a hit. But I had the great fortune of working for an imprint, Harmony Books, whose roots were outside the mainstream. Its original success, *Be Here Now* by Baba Ram Dass, was the millions-selling hippie intro to Eastern philosophical and mystical thought. The imprint's founder, Bruce Harris, still walked the halls, no longer barefoot in overalls but still setting a standard of adventurousness even as Harmony's parent, Crown Publishing, was being absorbed into the corporate world of Random House (which had acquired Crown a few months earlier).

My boss, Harmony's editor in chief Peter Guzzardi, liked what he read. His boss, Betty Prashker, was an experienced publisher and oversaw all of Crown. She asked, pragmatically, do you think he would agree to use periods? (The original used double spaces between sentences, accelerating the breathless rush of story and imagery.) I conceded that it was worth retyping some of it with periods to see whether it interfered with the reading experience. She was right—a lot of readers might pick up and scan a text with no periods and think it was too weird or too much work. And the text read wonderfully with normal punctuation. The genius was in the words, not the spacing between them. So I asked Mark if he was open to punctuating the text if we were to offer him a contract to publish the book.

He said yes.

Yours,
Michael
20 June 2018

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The Imp of the Perverse: Cartoons, Lucky Charms and Poetry

"Fate is the ultimate pre-existing condition."

RK: Well, Sherman has set the Wayback Machine to Jersey City, 1962. My dude, what do we detect upon arrival in terms of the formative and foundational?

ML: Cereal boxes were my first "books"… A form of phantasmagorical merchandizing that completely fascinated me – the intersection or interface between poetry/fantasy and politics (and thus between the unconscious and ideology), a conjunction (long before I ever had a sense of or an aspiration to be a "writer") of magical language and everyday life (i.e., social interactions and performances, products, consumption – politics, that is). After all, these boxes explicitly linked – in the child's mind, the reader's mind – sugar consumption to the Imp of the Perverse (e.g., the Lucky Charms leprechaun).

Speaking of sugar rush, this may also have been my first inkling of literature as psychoactive pharmaceutical, as "club drug" (a form of writing the mind can dance to).

RK: As the planet's preeminent Mark Leyner scholar, I probably should take this opportunity to ask for the historical record whether you've a memory of your very first literary triumph.

ML: Billboards…viewed on long car trips. Superimposed upon the comforting, muffled white-noise of my parents' conversations up in the front seat were the texts of passing billboards, which strobed in my eyes like individual frames from a movie.

I put on plays (half-sketched out, half-written) for puppets in my bedroom in Jersey City. These were not puppet plays, as such, but plays intended for an audience of puppets (I still write primarily for an audience of stuffed animals!).

The first official text of any kind that I actually sat down and wrote was a play to be performed by me (I was probably six or seven) and a teenage babysitter at a big extended-family shore house we shared with grandparents and aunts and uncles in Deal, New Jersey.

It was Romeo and Juliet as a western. It took place in a saloon and out on the main street (I played Romeo, the teenage babysitter was my Juliet). Gun play culminating in kisses.

I wrote the play, created advertisements, made refreshments to be served at intermission, etc. It was called "Tombstone Romeo." It was performed twice (for rapt audiences of relatives) – the premiere at night in the living room of the house and once outside in the back yard.

RK: A number (0) of academics who've devoted careers to the study of your work have noted the seminal influence of Popeye, Russian Constructionists and The Patty Duke Show. As unlikely as it seems, might they actually be onto something?

ML: Animated cartoons were hugely, decisively influential. The Fleischer Brothers, Chuck Jones, Tex Avery…Popeye and Bugs Bunny were my absolute favorites. I was thrilled by the anarchic freedom, the polytropic, this-can-go-anywhere-at-any-given-moment aesthetic at play. I loved the transgressive ethos of Looney Tunes. What also, crucially, appealed to me was the frequent self-reflexiveness and the obnazhenie priema, as the Russian Constructionists called it, the "laying bare of the device."

I loved and studied the opening sequences of old TV shows. Those introductory sequences that began every episode compressed back-story, presented themes and motifs—the show's raison d'etre, etc., etc., all in a 30-second montage and sung narrative. This was something of an a-ha moment and perhaps (along with the 3-minute rock and roll song) the origin of my infinitely hot and dense dot approach, my "all killer, no filler" aesthetic. (I'm thinking here of the opening sequences of, for instance,The Beverly Hillbillies, Gilligan's Island, Green Acres, etc.)

And, of course, we see the low culture / high culture conjunction (always a ubiquitous feature in my work) in the introductory sequence of The Patty Duke Show: "Cathy adores a minuet, The Ballet Russes, and crepe suzette; **P**atty loves to rock and roll, a hot dog makes her lose control, etc."

RK: It follows then that, when we refer to the decline of western culture since the 90s, we should attribute way more causality to Patty than Cathy. Well, what are you gonna do? Poetry had a gigantic impact on your germinating aesthetic. Who do you love?

ML: Animated cartoons and poetry were my foundational influences as a boy and I continue to think of myself and operate more as an animator – an assembler of panels and frames – and as a poet than as a "prose" writer.

I was actually introduced to the English Romantic poets as a young teenager when Mick Jagger, at a memorial concert for Brian Jones in Hyde Park, read "Adonais," the poem by Shelley: "Peace, peace! he is not dead, he does not sleep/He has awakened from the dream of life…"

I thereupon soon discovered the Beats (Kerouac, Corso, Ginsberg, etc.) and, through them, poets like Baudelaire and the incomparable Arthur Rimbaud, then on to the great Dadaists and Surrealists (Tristan Tzara, Andre Breton, Antonin Artuad), then Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens and the New York School, especially John Ashbery.

RK: The sections in *Gone With the Mind* describing the class you took at Brandeis with Mark Strand are among my all-time favorites. What are your earliest memories of books that were *not* cereal boxes?

ML: My original feelings about literature were vaguely religious feelings. My grandfather had floor-to-ceiling book shelves in his living room in Jersey City and I'd just stare up at them in absolute awe, at this tower of books. Also seeing those beautiful lines of Hebrew in prayer books at the synagogue when I was little, these letters and words I couldn't understand but which filled me with such a sense of the marvelous – I think this induced in me an abiding sense of the materiality of words that somehow communicated to me in ways beyond discursive meaning.

But here also was the beginning of that hot-rod engine operating via the torsion of reverence and iconoclasm – of loving literature and wanting to destroy it.

RK: All killer!

ML: No filler!

12 January 2020

2

I Weaponized My Childhood

RK: *I Smell Esther Williams.* One of the truly fantastic titles of all time. Total love at first sight for me. So what was on your mind as this was percolating, did you have any idea what you wanted to do, to accomplish with this?

ML: It was the first big, strenuous attempt I made to weaponize my childhood. Almost all of my influences were extra-literary, you know? I wasn't one of those writers who could point to this person and that person and say that was a really formational thing to have read. That wasn't the case with me. It was the case with me that reading poetry had an enormous impact because of how it works, how it's so concentrated and multidirectional.

The first poets I read weren't all that exotic. I really loved the Romantics, Keats and Shelley, and kind of hunted around for things. I remember getting a book of French surrealistic poetry out of the library in high school. I was kind of on my own with all that. It was very eclectic. But, aside from just realizing the possibilities of poetic language, the influences were from how I experienced the world as a child.

One of the things that always fascinated me was the idea of miscellany. When I think back to experiences I had that remain vivid to me,

they all have to do somehow with miscellany and specifically with venues that fused miscellany into a kind of compressed space. So, if I say something like that, it sounds like my work, right? Kind of wild miscellany fused into the compressed space of a sentence. But as antecedent, the origin of that, I can point to all kinds of experiences and I'll give you a few:

Shopping. Walking with my mom when I was very little along sort of commercial streets in Jersey City. Meaning that you experience one kind of store after another after another so, in the course of twenty five steps, you'll have passed a men's tailor shop, a barber shop and a candy store, you know? I really loved that.

My parents would say "Oh, do you want to come with me to one place or another" and at certain ages you don't have a choice much. I would accompany or sometimes be dragged by my mom or my dad to a place they were going. You know, like, "We're going to the hardware store-yay! Or to Lord & Taylor's with my mom."

I came to really love going to department stores with my mom for that reason. There's really nothing like a department store for being a physical manifestation of what I was saying: fusing miscellany into a compressed space. A department store is like an amusement park of that for a little child. Everywhere you look is something from a different dimension and realm of the culture and the world. It was enormously influential on me.

Or going to a hardware store with my father and having explained all the different tools and what they're used for again revealing a kind of enormous multiplicity of life forms or tool forms, aspects of living through the tools that are used to build and repair things.

Some of these places are from a different era and don't even exist anymore, like a 5 & 10 store. Even more than a department store we have there a self-contained place that's such an explosion of miscellany. Like Woolworth's or something like that…

RK: Kresge's!

ML: And then the one that I would say I love most (I spent lots of time at these, particularly in summers)-drug stores or pharmacies. And again, this only exists in vapor trails from history now. Pharmacies and drug stores had little counters where you'd have milkshakes or burgers or different things. A drug store of this kind is the pluperfect example of what I'm talking about. That really was foundational to a kind of aesthetic-just wandering around a drug store and looking at all kinds of beauty products, regular pharmaceutical products, those huge magazine racks that had a crazy mix of Playboy, Good Housekeeping, The National Enquirer, bodybuilding magazines, hotrod magazines and everything in between. Fangoria! Do you remember Fangoria? A lot of these had very gruesome things in them.

And the racks of comic books, another huge thing. You had everything from Little Lotta and Richie Rich-a whole world, a particularly bizarre world unto itself of Harvey Comics. Then Sgt. Rock and Archie comics, all the Marvel and DC stuff. And then those revolving racks of paperbacks and then all the other products you'd find-houseware things, really everything under the sun including stools at an enormous counter where you could smell the burgers cooking at one side of the drug store.

I think it's really not hard to see sort of my general sensibility, if you can say such a thing, to really situate its origin in places like that, you know? That really more than anything I read. When I started

writing, I just loved the idea of "How do I transpose that feeling of there being something unexpected with every glance? How do I get that into a piece of writing?"

And I think the sort of venues I'm talking about even more than anything I saw on TV. You'd have to take everything I saw on TV in aggregate to approach the impact of drug store miscellany. I was very indiscriminate in TV watching. I really enjoyed just watching what other people wanted to watch because then I'd see things I never would if I just followed my own tastes. I mean I had a good sense even when I was really little that your own tastes sometimes can be very limiting and sometimes it's good to really surrender it and just go along with other people. I'd say, "Just put something on. I don't care!"

Allied with this and, again, formative: like many kids, my parents at some point got me a set of encyclopedias. It seems to me just a thing that was done then. That every boy and girl just got a set. There were World Book and Encyclopedia Brittanica. I *loved* mine. Every morning I would get up earlier, as kids do than their parents by hours, and would just pick a letter and start going through it. That certainly is kind of creating a text for yourself that is in a way somewhat akin to what I do. For instance, reading within thirty seconds about Sharks and Shostakovich!

RK: Pretty much exactly the way you read now, just absorbing everything around you…

ML: Exactly. The organizational grid makes perfect sense but it's completely arbitrary in terms of thematic continuity. So you can see as I'm saying this to you now that really stayed with me, the enormous pleasure of encountering things in that way, right? When I think about it in a serious way, these are the foundations of my way

of doing things, which I first tried to put as a very young adult in *I Smell Esther Williams*. The first attempt to weaponize my childhood, to deploy these things I'm talking about in writing.

RK: Do you recall which parts of the book came first?

ML: That book is comprised of material that was written when I was in Boulder as a graduate student. There's material from then, '77-'79, and then material I was writing when I moved to Washington DC after that and material I wrote when I moved back to my parents' place for a little while, then material that I wrote when I first moved to Hoboken. There's some really early stuff there from graduate school.

I can probably tell you which part I began writing in Boulder. I have such a clear picture of me doing this: You know I've always had an appreciation of the visual arts. My mom had painted a little bit and I think, through my parents, I learned a lot as a kid. I was exposed very much to painters, aware of what was happening in the so-called New York Scene. And then, when I was at Brandeis, I took a particularly great art course from a particularly great professor who concentrated on people like, you know, de Kooning, Pollack-mostly the Abstract Expressionists- but also Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg.

Those were the painters my parents loved at the time and it became very much part of my methodology to spread things out on the wall, on the floor, as a painter might and step back and look. I remember the first time I began doing this was in my apartment in Boulder where I would put out pages, pages of notes on the floor. A page could have as little as a sentence or maybe a few lines or a paragraph. Just putting them out and kind of walking over them and just looking and moving something here and then something over here and thinking to myself, "Oh I wonder what it would be like to read

this and then read *that."* And then, "Wait, what if first, between this and that, was *this?* That's pretty cool, that's wild. That creates a whole little eruption of new meaning.

Again, when I think back on it, it's sort of like those films you see of Jackson Pollack hovering, walking around on those canvases and smoking, cigarette ash falling into them. It has remained useful for me to see things at a kind of physical remove.

There was always a somewhat scientific approach to it. Like *what would happen?* I've always had that little mad scientist thing. *What would it be like if we put a few drops of this in?* I was never thinking-and to a really large degree still don't-about *expressing* something else. It was always about *what am I making here? What happens when you put this next to this? What would the experience of reading that be like?* It was always about trying to engineer a reader's experience. Like designing a drug or something-*what will it feel like? Can we add this to it? Well this will keep a person up a little more while they're having this other experience. Oh this is interesting: they'll have a psychedelic experience but they'll also be extremely constipated, let's put that in!*

That was the beginning of Let's Spread Things Out and Walk Around it and Look at It the Way a Painter Would. In Boulder when I was writing the earliest parts of *I Smell Esther Williams*. I had a photograph I really loved of Mark Rothko just sitting. There was a painting in progress and he's sitting like ten feet from it smoking a cigarette and looking at it. That was always one of my favorite photographs as a representation of what it is that I'm doing. Because it made me realize that a lot of what people call writing, for me, is just trying to figure out what it is that you've done. *What is that? What sort of creature is this?*

I want my stuff to feel like you're taking a walk in the park or the woods and you come upon some alien creature. You don't know quite what it wants from you or you from it. Do I want to have sex with it? Does it want to have sex with me? Eat me? Give me some wisdom? None of that? And also what is it? Is it a living thing? Is it a machine? Some combination? Am I going crazy? Having no idea. That's what engenders my pulling the rug out from under itself technique. It's to make sure the reader never is quite sure of what it is.

I really started thinking about this even earlier at Brandeis. That's when I started thinking could there be a kind of prose that operates more like poetry? Because I was finding poetry in all the things I loved such as pop music. And animation, cartoons were something I really loved too when I was young. Specifically I would say my favorites were Popeye, I loved very much all the Max Fleischer and Chuck Jones stuff.

And again you can see a lot of the things I've done in those. As they say, fourth wall-breaking, the way Bugs Bunny takes his sunglasses off and looks directly at you and says, "It's a living but it's a little humiliating!" But with poetry I think what impressed me so much was the sheer efficiency of language, the distilled, miniaturized effect of active language. I think I realized early on that, technologically, language can do more per square inch than anything out there and I still think that. What you can do with three or four words is sort of kaleidoscopic, prismatic, protean. What can happen in language was just so thrilling to me as a teenager on. I looked at the world as a demonstration of that principle and saw it everywhere in the things that affected me or just experiences like riding on a bus and seeing fifteen disparate things happen as you look through the window.

So *I Smell Esther Williams* was the first time I, with some little bit of confidence, weaponized my childhood, tried to make all of this into

something. I had a feeling my junior year at Brandeis that I was really onto something, that there was really something here.

I'm reading Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, which is really wonderful, and there's a line that reminds me of my feeling, my first inkling when I thought *Aha, no one's doing this. And this is pretty great!* I don't mean that the quality of work was great. I just mean this was sort of a marvelous thing to be experimenting with. There's a great line in the book. I wanted to give it to you. Victor says, "I became myself, capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter."

I just love that line.

3

Making My Armamentarium

RK: I love a lot of the stuff in *Esther* but there's no question your next book represented a kind of quantum leap. Any thoughts on what supercharged your work in the late 80s?

ML: I've never reread these things! I finish them and I never read them again. My immersion in these things, as you know, it's so total that thinking back to the experience of it… the years it takes to do these things, it seems to me like some sort of sojourn somewhere. I just reminisce with a kind of wonder about how did that happen? Also there's the sadness of having to expel myself from it as we were talking about this summer with *Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit.*

So when you ask me what accounts for the leap forward from *I Smell Esther Williams* to *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*, it's very hard for me to say. That's more something that you would have to muse upon a little bit. I can tell you how I was feeling about myself as a writer and my work and to some degree what I was doing, though even that gets a little
hazy in the specifics. But I think one of the things-and again I'm saying this out of complete ignorance because I don't know the books that well-in *My Cousin* there are certain things that remain conspicuous to me. I don't even know why that is.

I remember very well the piece about the car bomb (the suggestiveness of one stray hair in an otherwise perfect coiffure) because I composed it on the way to a job while I was driving. Every line. I mean that piece in the book is a verbatim recapitulation of what I kept repeating to myself in the car driving to this job I had as a copywriter. That piece had a bit of a life of its own, it was something people seem to enjoy very much. MTV did an animated version of it on something called Liquid Television. And I did that a lot. There are many things in *My Cousin* that I wrote in the car driving to various jobs and repeating to myself over and over and over again. There was one job in particular. While I was writing the pieces in *My Cousin*, I was working for an agency that did medical advertising. I was responsible for the copy for all the ads this agency did. That was tricky because I had an office and I'd have to be just aggressively antisocial and walk in, not say hello to anyone and get into that office and shut the door and type furiously because if anyone intercepted me, it would be gone. I don't know what people thought initially, you know, what is this person doing in there? It's not like I was running into the bathroom. That would be explicable. Eventually I told people but it must have seemed odd at the time.

There's material I wrote in graduate school that ended up in *I Smell Esther Williams*. I occupied what felt to me as a kind of lofty status in graduate school. There were some writers that I had admired who were a part of this program at the University of Colorado in Boulder and they not only encouraged me in a very ardent, beautiful way but were, I think, admiring of the work and curious with a very complementary sort of wonderment about where this stuff came from. I had a writing teacher at Brandeis as an undergraduate, a guy named Alan Lelchuk, who was at the time very well known for a certain book he had written and he was very impressed in a way with what I was doing. He said something to me that I just never forgot. He said, “You’ll never be able to keep this up.”

When I was in graduate school, I felt like-I mean it's terrible for me to say these things-but I felt like a bit of a star of the fiction writers in the program. People enjoyed my stuff very much. The writers teaching in this program, as I said, were very encouraging and admiring and it was just a wonderful, wonderful feeling. The two years I spent there were just sort of heavenly. I was young-I think I was the youngest person in the program-and I had wonderful friends and wonderful girlfriends. Boulder was very beautiful and different from any place I'd ever been to. It was a fabulous time. It was prelapsarian, "before the fall." It was sort of a paradise, Edenic, you know? Before you realize how incredibly complicated and difficult life can be. It was just all kind of perfect.

All the people in the program were very interested in each other's work. We'd meet and sit around in hallways or in bars, where ever we were, and talk about each other's work like it meant a great deal. It was important. It reminded me of what I'd read about the Abstract Expressionists being in a bar, being at the Cedar Tavern in lower Manhattan, having arguments and fistfights about each other's work. It all seemed to mean so much to everyone. We were just so endlessly, indefatigably, intensely interested in everything about each other's work. "Why did you start your piece with this?" "Why this, why that, you know?" "Why is it not punctuated?"

There was a guy I was very friendly with at the time who did a piece and he screwed, impaled it with like a bolt. The piece was called "Bolt" and it had a bolt through the middle of it. Some people were doing really interesting things and there were a lot of very genuine, good, convivial people. It was a very nice time.

When that ended, I moved from Boulder to Washington DC to live with my girlfriend from college, Rachel Horowitz. Rachel had come to Boulder for like six months in the middle of my first year but then she ended up getting a job in Washington DC and left so I was in

Boulder on my own. Which certainly increased the scope of my, I guess, social activity we'll call it. And when I moved to Washington DC, I realized well, it's never going to be like that again. The good times are over.

I had a series of jobs. I was a cashier at a pharmacy. I was a cashier at a bookstore. I did something called "document analysis." I worked for a company where you had to read a certain quota of documents and code the content. These were for huge litigations where there was so much evidence and documentation that it had to be computerized.

I immediately felt devoid of any sort of compadres, people interested in what I was doing, any sort of audience and saw no way of pushing this further. I just didn't know. OK, I did that. How does one then become a writer in society? I didn't know. It just felt finished in a way.

Though, obviously, I kept at it very, very persistently. In the places where I lived I always found a space to do my work. It was never abandoned but the possibility of publishing and having work that people in the world would read seemed increasingly remote. But what I'm getting at is the more remote I feel, the more I feel self-exiled or exiled by exigencies, be they financial or practical, whatever, the more remote my exile from the world of "official literature," the more interesting, the more reckless the work becomes in the most positive sense, in the most wonderful way.

I think that accounts to some degree for the difference between *I Smell Esther Williams* and *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*. At some point, you just feel like there's nothing to lose. And that becomes a whole methodology.

I think the two books I feel are the most kind of intransigent and the most joyously reckless are *My Cousin* and *Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit*. I would say those two are the pillars of unholy recklessness for me. In a way, they both correlate with me feeling deepest in the forest and farthest from the Citadel, to use that construct we always talk about.

RK: Hey, what about *Nutsack*?

ML: Well, yeah, I would put that in there too, definitely. And that was a particularly hard time. I had great trepidation about getting into that book. It had been a while since I had done anything like that. Somewhere in the middle of it I got a cancer diagnosis and that book became such an oasis, such a refuge from worrying about other shit. So yes, you're right. That has to be included too, very much. I would say those are the three. To me, by a certain standard, those are the most interesting, the most vibrant examples of what I do.

The other difference-if we look at *Esther* as being in a certain class and *My Cousin* as being in another class-and this is very simplistic though I think there may be truth to it, I think I was inventing and learning to use a sort of armamentarium, you know? All the tools and little gadgets-my stuff. I feel like I was making these funny tools and they were sort of laid out in front of me, a huge array of these things on the floor and I'd play with them and see "Oh, this does this!"

To use my great, favored mad scientist analogy, I was building and stocking the laboratory not necessarily knowing what any of the stuff did. So it would be like, "Ah, if you put this thing on the roof, it serves as a sort of conduit and lightning will come through it and I can bring that into the lab and it can animate dead matter. Aha!" Or "Oh this is a limbic, a sort of vessel in which we can turn lead into

something else. If not gold, something else. Coke Zero or *something* good."

And "Oh, this spins things at a great rate so it separates things like a centrifuge." It's a very heuristic, very methodical trial and error. I hate the word "experimentation" when it comes to writing because it usually has a pejorative meaning. I mean I think any book that anyone writes is an experiment. You write it and show it to someone and you see whether the experiment was a success or not or what it does. I think *I Smell Esther Williams* was almost like an attempt to write a dishwasher service manual or like one of those exploded diagrams of all the pieces in something. There's probably fun, interesting stuff in there. Again, I have no idea at this point but I think that by the time I was doing the next book, *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*, I was putting these things to some purpose.

And the purpose was a very deliberate one, to try to make something ecstatic and sublime. To leave the reader enraptured and with a sense of wonderment. All these words may sound ridiculously pompous but what the fuck? I put this armamentarium I'd been accumulating and devising and playing with to use in an effort to create something that would give the reader this feeling of ecstasy and confound expectations, something difficult to find a precedent for almost to the extent of finding something incomprehensible. You know, in the way you'd find a UFO incomprehensible if you went to look for your car in a mall parking lot and suddenly there was this thing there instead. Encountering such a thing would be a sacred and ecstatic experience. I don't know whether I completely succeeded in that but it remains my mission statement.

Long ago when sleep away camp was a thing, parents had this big checklist of things their kids were supposed to bring. Two pairs of chinos, blah, blah, blah. *I Smell Esther Williams* feels kind of like a list of all the parts of something, almost a sort of glossary. But by the

next book, I knew what I was after really in a complete way and it hasn't changed.

When things feel least auspicious for me and I'm driven into a corner, that corner ends up becoming a kind of mansion for me in terms of doing the best kind of work. The most spectacularly unique kind of work is done in the worst possible circumstances.

If we look at the making of *My Cousin*, that was a time when I was driving five days a week to jobs, when I told people, "I don't think this writing thing might happen. I think I might want to become a biologist or something." But, oddly enough, it never dimmed my enthusiasm for pursuing what I was doing. Writing and writing and making notes and looking at how things looked juxtaposed with one another. In fact, it just enflamed that for some reason. But I wasn't on a path to becoming any sort of literary figure. Very far from it.

So one book came out of this feeling of being in a ridiculous way the Prince of Boulder, just feeling wonderful and taken care of and admired and the next from feeling completely bereft of any of that kind of support, to then feeling you're now a young, young man needing to make a living. You're doing these things and maybe that's what you're going to end up doing-being a copywriter in advertising or a biologist. *My Cousin* came out of a whole set of circumstances that pushed me further and further into my hermitage in the woods which, as I said, ends up being my great mansion.

There was a person who really championed my work. He was a professor of literature at San Diego State. His name is Larry McCaffery. He's retired. He was an afficiando very much of *I Smell Esther Williams* and he edited The Mississippi Review, a prestigious literary journal. They did an issue about cyberpunk and in this issue were all the luminaries, like Bruce Sterling and William Gibson, both really

good guys and writers I admire. Larry somehow or other got the chance to edit this issue and he asked me for a piece. I gave him a piece that ended up in *My Cousin*. I think it was I Was an Infinitely Hot and Dense Dot. I don't know whether that's the name of it or a line in it…

RK: Both. It's the opening chapter of *My Cousin.*

ML: I'm showing my terrible ignorance about my own stuff. And that became an enormously crucial moment. Because then Harpers found that and published it in their Readings section. I'll never forget the night I found out about it. I was at a bar I really liked back then, the Broome Street Bar in lower Manhattan, and my wife at the time, Arleen, was meeting me there. I was drinking with some friends and she showed up and said, "You won't believe what happened. We got this call and Harpers wants to publish this piece!"

I just had this feeling when that happened that I was sort of entering a new portal, a portal to something else, you know? It's probably unwarranted. It's being in a great magazine in a very cool section that a lot of people enjoy. But I just thought this means a lot. This is a portal into a different realm of exposure for my work. I felt that standing there at the bar.

RK: I'm sure you remember that moment vividly.

ML: I remember exactly where I was standing, the position I was standing in. I remember turning toward the door because I'd noticed that Arleen had entered the bar. I remember her coming up to me and having the feeling that this was the opening up of a new kind of vista for me.

RK: And not insignificantly, it was a portal to Pietsch.

ML: Yeah, Michael saw the piece in Harpers. So there's a real direct genealogy from Larry McCaffery to Michael Pietsch.
RK: And to Harmony Books, a groundbreaking campus bestseller and literary stardom. Just like that, you were a made man!

4

"I Came from the Fictional Womb As I Am"*
(Mark Says Muse So I Muse)

I may be America's preeminent Mark Leyner scholar but I am hardly the first to ponder the staggering transmogrification his writing underwent during the period between *I Smell Esther Williams* **and** *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist.* **In his 1996 interview collection** *Some Other Frequency***, for example, the eminent literary critic and editor Larry McCaffery took a shot:**

"Leyner labored for nearly five years painstakingly accumulating the materials that would comprise *My Cousin,* **and the results of his meticulous work habits are immediately apparent. Although his new pieces continue the basic method found in** *Esther Williams,* **in** *My Cousin* **Leyner had refined his prose, raised the intensity level and rhetorical precision of his writing, thus coming very close to his avowed writerly goal…of making 'every line be the center of the whole piece.'**

McCaffery's insights are predominantly on the money, of course, though I'm not sure I concur that *My Cousin* **continues the basic method found in Mark's first book. For its time—the early 80s—** *Esther* **certainly was a radical creation. At the same**

time, its tone is considerably more wistful and dreamy than that of *My Cousin* and its humor more reliant on non sequitur.

*"Plot and character are constantly eliminating possibilities"**

At the point when *I Smell Esther Williams* was written, Mark had yet to fully jettison the conventions of mimetic narrative. Plot, character and the trappings of traditional fiction were excised in the generation of his breakout second book, however, and replaced with the armamentarium of techniques and devices he'd concocted in his literary laboratory. The result was a new mutant strain of prose totally without precedent.

"I want my readers to go on to the next sentence because they have this sense that it literally might contain anything*"**

My Cousin **represented an across-the-board aesthetic escalation. His writing had become more boldly imaginative, deliciously unpredictable, infinitely funnier than anything he'd ever done and remarkably assured. As he's noted, *My Cousin* was written during a time when Mark's prospects for a career as an artist appeared to diminish by the day, when his life in fact was becoming incrementally more conventional due to the need to hold down jobs and the dearth of creative camaraderie. His sense of having little to lose ironically freed him to innovate with a recklessness and fearlessness which would make his reputation.**

Has any other writer achieved such complete metamorphosis between books? Has any proved more Hulk-like in supersizing

creative muscle? Can you name even one who may be said to have conceived of a completely new literary species?

"Here's what I respect most about Mr. Leyner: He's the undisputed master of a style of writing he invented, whose rules no one else can really understand."
-Sam Sacks in The Wall Street Journal
January 22, 2021

Further insight into Mark's process (a process he did in fact invent) may prove helpful in appreciating the almost alchemical transformation of his writing during this period. "My works evolve through a constant process of accumulating information or language," he explained to McCaffery. "I'm always writing things down that I come across on the radio or television, so materials are accumulating every day…I'm a fanatic about having external things going on around me…When I'm working I always have the television going…And I'll have a few magazines spread out in front of me, and the newspaper, and whatever I'm reading, the *Iliad* or a Jules Verne novel or a book about poisonous insects…Being jacked-in to all these sources of mental stimulation makes me feel very comfortable."

"There is a certain point I arrive at when I have been gathering materials (and I am always gathering materials, this is just part of my life) where I decide to enter a new stage. It's almost like I'm now entering the text, this information, bodily-I dive into it and begin to metabolize the stuff. I dance in it, play around in it…And then certain things start happening, I start to see certain relationships and rhetorical possibilities."

In a related story: André Malraux asserted that "Genius is not perfected, it is deepened. It does not so much interpret the world as *fertilize itself* with it." That's certainly true in Mark's case. In fact, it may suggest a key to understanding how he ultimately tapped into the really good shit.

Of course, it's also possible that he was relaxing on a cabin cruiser one day (in black and white) and passed through an ominous radioactive fog like Grant Williams (Scott) did in The Incredible Shrinking Man (1957). Only, instead of diminishing, Mark's gift expanded to super-colossal proportions. It could happen.

You've read a bit of *I Smell Esther Williams.* **Here come excerpts from** *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist.* **Maybe you'll come away with your own solution to one of modern literature's great enigmas-how in a million years (much less five) Mark was able to make his way from one to the other.**

*** Maximum, Flat-out Drug Overkill: An Interview with Mark Leyner, Some Other Frequency by Larry McCaffery, 1996**

5

Calm Before the Sturm

RK: So, you've written one of the wildest books ever and it's been embraced beyond your wildest dreams. You're probably not going to have become a biologist after all. What does that triumphant moment feel like?

ML: This was really kind of a halcyon period for me. It was just the right amount of attention. I felt like I had become this thing I'd wanted to be for as long as I could remember. I was doing it and there was this book. That's all I had wanted. I had wanted the opportunity to be walking past a bookstore someday and look and see a book of mine. And this had happened so I was happy.

And there wasn't yet the kind of enormous feeling of being borne upon something that wasn't completely in my control as was going to happen with *Et Tu, Babe*. That incurred all sorts of new obligations. This was a time when I had a very gratified, insouciant feeling about everything. I was just really very happy in that period.

And I loved the work! I can say that unabashedly. We were just talking about the Smiths and I felt the way a person in a band would feel when they say *we just loved what we were doing at that time.* **That's how I felt. I had a great certainty about the ways I was composing and producing this work. I felt like I had a really great aplomb, a great confidence about it. I knew what I was after, you know? What I wanted this to feel like from line to line. There was a sureness about it that also felt great. I think with** *Esther Williams* **I was still training myself in a way, inventing a way and here I had it. It was a great joy for me applying it, executing it.**

I just thought that this was going to be so much fun for people too. I was often asked whether I was surprised by the attention it was getting, the great response people had to it. If we're talking about *My Cousin,* **I wasn't surprised that people were reacting to it in that way because it was designed to produce that reaction. I thought people are going to have so much fun with this and be astonished by it in a certain way. So, when they were, it wasn't like** *oh my God, I never thought in my wildest dreams that such a thing could happen, you know?* **It was all kind of just right, like in Goldilocks and The Three Bears- what was that refrain? One was too hot, one was too cold but this one was just right. This was just right. It was a modest success in the scheme of things and a wonderful feeling of fulfillment about being this now.**

There was a wonderful, perfect, never-to-be-repeated group of people who were devoted to this book getting as much attention as possible-as much as they could with book from an unknown person writing like this. Just the most enthusiastic bunch of people who adored the work and were wonderful people and really good at what they did.

There was Michael. This was when Michael was an editor at Harmony. And there were people in sales and marketing and promotion. There was someone named Keith Fox, an incredible person named Hilary Bass and these are people who became even more instrumental in all the things that happened with *Et Tu, Babe.* **There was someone named Chip Gibson. It was just a great group. It felt like a little band, a little cell of people who were determined to get the word out about this stuff. Michael was phenomenal and brilliant in who he sent it to. We ended up getting a blurb from David Byrne and all kinds of people. Michael was just so energetic and ebulliently behind this book.**

And I've told you the story about Michael calling me and asking *would you be willing to punctuate some of this?*

RK: Yeah, he wrote about that in his Introduction too. So at what point did you realize *My Cousin* **was a hit?**

ML: I didn't have that feeling in the way I would with *Et Tu, Babe,* **like** *My God, what's happening?* **This was a much more comfortable, manageable feeling of just enormous pleasure and gratitude at what was happening. But there were a couple of moments that are very memorable in being especially gratifying and pleasurable for me.**

Larry McCaffery and I were at the White Horse Tavern on Hudson Street in Manhattan in the West Village. It's famous in literary lore as the place where Dylan Thomas drank himself to death. And it's a really fun place, you know? It was a Saturday night and on Saturday night you could get parts of the Sunday Times. So Larry and I go out to get cigarettes and there's the New York Times with a picture of me and an article about my being the cult author or this cult author and *My Cousin* **being the**

big cult novel on college campuses or whatever. And there was this funny-looking picture of me.

Larry and I were just sort of incredulous because Larry, as you know, had been a longstanding proponent of this work. And there we were together in New York City looking at the New York Times and there *I* was. We were in the midst of celebrating and now we had this to add to the celebration. That remains an unforgettable moment, an enormous kind of happiness to be able to share that with Larry, of all people. Because he was instrumental in all this happening. He put me in the Mississippi Review's Cyberpunk issue. Editors at Harpers Readings saw that and put me in Harpers, which is what Michael Pietsch saw! So had it not been for Larry, who knows?

RK: A career as a cult biologist perhaps.

ML: I probably would've become the motocross champion I always wanted to be second to that. And, obviously, the whole notion of this cult thing became one of the seeds that grew into *Et Tu, Babe.* When I thought about it, the idea of having a cult was something that was obviously appealing to me.

There was a party for *My Cousin* that Michael organized at a bar. It was so much fun. He got up on a table and talked to everyone there about what a joy it was for him to have turned this material into a book that's being talked about so much. It was just such an extraordinary night to be able to celebrate with Michael and everyone I mentioned earlier what they had accomplished with this book. I had that feeling that it can't get any better than this.

At that party, my agent at the time, Martha Mallard (who also represented Bruce Sterling and William Gibson), made a deal with Michael for the next book. She consummated the deal at that party.

I had written a "proposal" which is actually the beginning of *Et Tu, Babe* **where I say "I dress…"**

RK: "like an off-duty cop!"

ML: Yeah, that whole thing, this little description of what the new book was going to be like. The night of that party when Michael's up on that table it was just such a revel, such a rambunctious, enormously convivial celebration of things. I'm feeling things can't get much better and Martha says "Okay, we made a deal!"

Those are the two events that come to mind as being emblematic of how I felt about what had happened with *My Cousin.* **It got a lot of attention. A lot of people I admired were reading it. I loved the cover by a friend of mine named Kaz, who became very well known maker of cartoons and cartoon imagery and worked for Nickelodeon for a while. I loved that cover. You know the origins of all that-kind of R. Crumb, the Joplin Cheap Thrills album. It was a wonderful, wonderful time for me.**

RK: At that point were you still holding down a job?

ML: This is where it becomes hard for me to remember. It gets very confusing. I was saying this to Gaby last night, complaining about this because I wanted to be as helpful as possible with you. And I was saying it's hard to keep the different timelines

together. Who were you married to? Did you have a job, if so, where? You know, book by book.

I was working at an ad agency when Michael Pietsch called to say he wanted to make a book out of the work I had having read the Harpers. So I know that. At some point soon after I started working at that job less-a couple days a week-and ultimately I stopped. I might then have taught a little bit. I think I waited waited tables. No, that was long before. Let's just forget that. I can't remember. I do know it gets easier with *Et Tu, Babe* **because I was able to earn a living with magazine work.**

Those times with Larry and Michael are the times …what was the name of that VH1 show about the bands-that famous series?

RK: Behind the Music?

ML: Yeah, if I was writing the Behind the Music episode about this, the two scenes I would include as emblematic of that time would be the Michael Pietsch party scene and the one with Larry McCaffery at the White Horse.

6

”Mark, You Must Know What This Is Like,” said Keith Richards

RK: So, the publication of *Et Tu, Babe,* **it’s fair to say, proved considerably more life-changing.**

ML: If you did a Paleolithic cave painting depicting the height of its success, there’d be two images on the wall: One would be that New York Times Magazine cover and the other would be Letterman. In fact, they were actually sort of superimposed upon one another because, when I was a guest on Late Night with David Letterman for the first time, he had the cover with him and held it up during my segment. There’s probably no single image or moment that more perfectly expresses the phenomenon. I mean, David Letterman holding that up with me sitting next to him. Quite extraordinary.

But it was also the beginning of a kind of crisis. Unbeknownst to me at the time but a crisis that would last until, I’d say, *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack* **(2012). I remember Binky calling me and saying, “We’ve got the cover!” of the Times Magazine in great agentspeak. I remember her saying that so clearly. It just seemed impossible. Soon after, Binky had a party at her apartment and, if I’m not mistaken, Mary Karr was there. I think Richard Ford might have been there, the writer, you know?**

RK: I actually do know Richard Ford. But that's another story.

ML: So, a bunch of people and there in Binky and Ken Auletta's fabulous apartment on the East Side up on the mantel was a mock up of the cover. This was a day or two before the Magazine was even out and there I was flexing on the Hudson!

I made good utilitarian use of that cover and I'll give you two examples. This shows how ridiculous this culture is but, even more, how ridiculous I can be. One night, probably a couple of weeks later, I'd been out with Jay McInerny, whom I have always found to be an enormously generous, decent, very nice person. A real old world gentleman. In fact, it was Jay who originally called and suggested that I take Binky on as an agent having read and admired *My Cousin.*

We had been out carousing, going from bar to bar and I was on my way home in a car of some sort-either a cab or car service or something. We had just gotten out of the Lincoln Tunnel and the driver did something illegal. I don't recall whether he sideswiped another car or switched lanes when he shouldn't have but he got pulled over. Of course, I happened to have that New York Times Magazine in my bag and I got out of the car and went up to the cop, who'd gone back into his police car, and did some equivalent of "Do you know who I am?" while showing him that cover. I should cringe as I recall this to you. But I don't.

And an even worse example took place on the book tour for *Et Tu, Babe.* **I'd done some event at a Boston bookstore and then gone out with people. At some point, there were people back in my hotel room. It was really late, like 3 in the morning or something and we were doing drugs and drinking. This was after a long, long night and I had to be at Brown, I think, the next day.**

Anyway, I wanted more champagne and they wouldn't send more up to the room.

So I went down to the front desk brandishing this New York Times Magazine cover and did it again: "Do you know who I am? I want more champagne!"

RK: How'd it work that time?

ML: It worked! They said okay, no problem. My Keith Moon days I guess you could say.

RK: Hey, you're 1 for 2 anyway.

ML: And then, of course, the Letterman thing. The first time I was on that show, I was on with Angelica Huston and Joni Mitchell. The rigors of an appearance were such that it's hard to remember what the sensation of being on actually was. It was a very structured thing and there was a lot you had to do. You've gone over a series of anecdotes you're going to tell, for example. But it's still a bit terrifying. As you're on the precipice, about to leap off, you were sort of held offstage by this guy who became very well known on the show. I forget his name…

RK: Biff?

ML: Yes, exactly. He'd have his headphones on and he was very gentle. He'd have his hands around your shoulder knowing that you were probably a little apprehensive but he'd hold you so you didn't go out too soon, so you didn't just run out waving your arms.

And then doing the thing, as I've said to you, was remarkably easy at least for me. Once you're there, it's really remarkably easy. I decided *just talk to him.* **And he was really, really skilled at what he did. You could be out there and say nothing or just respond monosyllabically…**

RK: I believe Joaquin Phoenix tried that.

ML: Yeah and he could still turn it into something. That whole experience-it was just such an extraordinary thing. Especially-and this gets into the crisis part of it all-especially given the work that I do. That somehow this dream team of people at my publisher had to some degree engineered such a thing.

But it's also about a certain cohort of people at the time in publishing and television-segment producers, maybe Letterman himself, different people at a certain level of media who were who were very excited by what I was doing. But the thing is it didn't represent any sort of actual popularity. That's what resulted in a kind of crisis. It was all such an aberration.

RK: When you say it didn't represent any sort of popularity, are you talking about book sales?

ML: I'm talking about readership, yeah. It did result in a certain *recognizability* **but even that was somewhat short-lived. The day after you're on something, Letterman or Conan or whatever, people will recognize you on the street but even that is very evanescent, you know?**

Because all of this was happening, I made a gross miscalculation about the level of my popularity or the accessibility of my work and what it signified for how my life was going to go from

then on. Because, I thought *Okay, basically I'm on Easy Street now. It's just going to be so very simple for me.* **That obviously wasn't the case and was never going to be the case.**

The other great irony of all this is that *Et Tu, Babe* **did to some real degree come true. When I wrote that, it was just a kind of exercise in hyperbole and inversion that presented a character who was everything I'm not. But then that changed and I felt almost as though I drank my own Kool-Aid, you know? It was the beginning of a crisis. It became a kind of fairy tale only I was the moral. I was the butt of the joke. Like some wizard who took his own potion or something-the potion being** *Et Tu, Babe*-**and I drank it and it happened to me in a way.**

RK: This was when you started turning out all kinds of lucrative magazine work and hanging out with celebrities?

ML: Yes, in fact I'll tell you about another event that's so emblematic of this. On the Monday after the New York Times Magazine came out, I was accompanying Martha Stewart to some big fancy event in the New York Armory for Gianni Versace. She was going to be a little late so I arrived first and I'm on a line of all these people and there's a lot of paparazzi. Everyone who attended was famous.

So there I am. There's just an explosion of flashbulbs and I thought to myself *Well, it's happened. I was on the cover of the Times Magazine yesterday and look at this. It's just amazing!* **I'm turning, I'm preening, I'm acknowledging my radiant fame. Then for some reason I turn around and behind me is Claudia Schiffer, the German model…**

RK: Sure, Guess Jeans!

ML: Nobody was taking my picture. They were taking *her* picture. That's so emblematic of this naive miscalculation. I had indoctrinated myself. Instead of Mao's *Little Red Book*, though, there was *Et Tu, Babe.* I had become the most fanatical believer in it somehow so there I was thinking I was being devoured by paparazzi!

RK: At the same time, there were in real life signs of that radiant fame, right?

ML: Well, that's the thing, there was enough reality to this to sustain itself for quite a while. And in the ensuing period magazines were actually really ravenous for my work. I had this wonderful person at ICM who handled my magazine stuff. He's now a very successful agent and really spectacularly great person named Sloan Harris. My memory of it is that we just sort of had our pick of the big magazines, the run of the table. It was a time of maximal notoriety for me. If there were a Q Factor for writers, that's when mine was the highest. We had a marvelous run.

This was a period of time when I was writing Shouts & Murmurs back pages in The New Yorker and back pages for Time. I eventually had a column in Esquire-whatever we wanted! And that resulted ultimately in *Tooth Imprints On a Corn Dog,* which, for the most part, is a collection of pieces.

RK: "With his pumped-up prose and steroidal satire . . .," Newsweek wrote of that one, "You could call him the Quentin Tarantino of cult fiction," There's that word "cult" again. Anyway, fame-wise, that's pretty sweet, getting a whole new book out of stuff you already wrote.

ML: The opportunities that availed themselves to me resulting from this fame endured for a while. In pragmatic terms, the magazine work was the most meaningful manifestation of it. Basically, I had a lot of work coming my way. Now I've always had ambivalent feelings about that book, feelings I haven't had about any other. That's because the magazines were sort of *clients.* **I was doing work** *for them* **at the direction of editors.**

I was so confident then about there being a market for me in the magazine world that, at a certain point, I would just come up with pieces on my own and send them to Sloan and he would say, "You know, this would be great for The New Republic or whatever. Again, it was very heady stuff and very good for me practically. Very good money. But that book has always felt somewhat Prêt-à-Porter to me. Not my own couture, you know?

I'm not sure whose decision it was to do a book like this. At this point, Michael Pietsch had moved to Little, Brown and I was still at Harmony, at Crown. I might have had a multiple book contract at that point. So this guy, Peter Guzzardi, who'd actually been Michael's boss at Harmony, became my editor. So I'm not sure whose idea it was to do a collection.

It's not a terrible idea but it is resting on one's laurels a bit. And, of course, it's easier because you're not writing anything new. I did decide early on that I didn't want the book to be limited to just that so I wrote that long piece, the play Young Bergdorf Goodman Brown. I don't look at my old stuff ever. If I do, it's usually a mistake because I think *how did I do that?*

I think I told you that right before I started working on *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack* **when I hadn't done a book in a long time**

(fifteen years!) I made the mistake of looking at some old things and said *I just can't do that.*

RK: You were daunted by you…

ML: It was so ridiculous considering that then I did *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack!* **You know it's just me cornering myself. It's the wounded animal strategy. Except I have to wound myself. I have to attack myself.**

If at some point you want to ask me anything about Young Bergdorf Goodman Brown, you would have to read it then ask me about it. I mean I know it took place in Bergdorf Goodman's. I love Hawthorne and I love that particular story, Young Goodman Brown. It's a great true crime story about a husband who discovers his wife is basically a Satanist.

There's probably a show now called I'm Sleeping with a Satanist. If not, there should be. But, otherwise, I'm not sure. I think the piece involves the discovery of some sort of conspiracy…

RK: Yeah, you've got Israeli intelligence secretly meeting with extraterrestrials in the store's basement!

ML: Well that one obviously contains a few of my favorite things, as Julie Andrews would say. But, getting back to the magazines, at some point Michael Solomon asked me if I'd be up for writing a column for Esquire.

RK: That was Wild Kingdom, right? Very cool.

ML: Yeah, that was a remarkable thing for me because it was Esquire. I mean we're not talking about a magazine like, say,

Between C and D, a neo-expressionist fiction magazine I had work in. That was a very interesting Lower East Side thing that was put out on that old computer paper that had those perforations on each side, those unseparated accordion pages. Esquire's obviously not that.

It's a very mainstream magazine but also a venerable magazine in terms of canonical American fiction. Fitzgerald published in Esquire. Ring Lardner published in Esquire, you know? So it was really a kind of breathtaking thing for me to be invited to do this. I mean it was amazing to me.

Not that it was a fait accompli in the beginning. I didn't have to audition exactly but I had to write one. There was a new editor at the magazine. We had to do something so Michael Solomon could show his boss that this guy can do this thing that'll be good for Esquire. So I had to do one before they could make an offer. I wrote a column about Gaby running and knocking into a chair, you know, hurting herself and crying and me taking the chair out into the yard and basically giving it a beatdown. Killing it for hurting Gaby. The new editor loved it.

They had a great illustrator who did almost all of my columns there. He had a very distinctive style and he did an illustration of me like a mob guy dealing with someone who owed money because it hurt Gaby. The big dude, the new guy loved it and we made a deal for me to write a column every month. It was great, a really good amount of money.

RK: Isn't it amazing how magazines were so big money in those days?

ML: It's beyond amazing. Because that's over, completely over. I worked with an editor before this at Esquire named Terry McDonell. Terry and I had a lunch where we had like four or five martinis each. Which just shows you how long ago that was because that would not happen now.

He asked me if I would do a piece which would be me staying at the Chateau Marmont and just writing whatever I wanted there, for which I'd be paid some enormous amount of money by Esquire. I mean that's what things were like then. These were very different times.

But, getting back to Michael Solomon, we just happened to be made for each other. He's a very smart, enormously charming, amiable guy. We shared a huge love for Marcel Duchamp. It really was an editor-writer marriage made in heaven.

He'd come up with a bunch of ideas if there was something in the news or just in the air and every month we would do our thing. It was really a delight and I only stopped when a new regime came along. A new editor came in and did a kind of housecleaning and got rid of all the editors who had been there. Which included a lot of famous people. They were all gone. I stayed on with Esquire for a few more issues and then stopped.

I remember when I'd just started doing the column. I was at some restaurant and the guy who had done the old column before me was there. He used the pen name Stanley Bing. I remember him sitting across the table and I was just kind of railing at him about what a has been he was and how I was taking over. Just hurling mock insults back and forth drunkenly. It was a really fun time. We got to be very friendly.

One of Esquire's advertisers was Tommy Hilfiger and I ended up giving a reading once, under the auspices of Esquire, in the Tommy Hilfiger section of like a Bloomingdale's or something in the middle of the day. There were people there shopping. I remember them going through jackets and piles of pants then turning to see who this guy was talking over the loudspeaker. This in some way was the inspiration for *Gone With the Mind!*

RK: I love it. That makes perfect sense. You went from a department store filled with baffled shoppers to a reading at an empty mall all those years later. I guess the experience really stayed with you.

ML: I also wrote long pieces in a style that was digressive, tangental, circling and whirling *for Travel & Leisure!* **Long, long, long pieces. Such a thing would never be found in** *Travel & Leisure* **anymore. Or in any magazine. None would devote that much space to something like that written that way.**

Writing for Time magazine was a pretty heady experience as well. I think David Shipley was the guy I worked with there. I'm not sure what it said about the state of the culture at that point for a publication like Time to be asking me to write for them. Sort of like my friendship with Martha Stewart, it just seemed the oddest pairing in the world.

Of all the magazines I worked with, Time probably required the most self-imposed restraint, the greatest feeling of self-censorship, you know? There were things that simply wouldn't fly. I felt very much, again, like an architect who has a client. It was startling to go to a newsstand, open a copy to the back page and there I am!

That was the kind of thing my dad really appreciated. My dad never really liked the work in any sort of deep way. He never completely got it, never really figured out a way to enjoy it or allowed himself to enjoy it. And I don't say this with any bitterness. I was OK with that. He was by no means a philistine. He had sophisticated tastes in certain things but just couldn't bring it to things he read. That I would be in a magazine his law firm would have in the waiting room made him enormously happy though. And I'm sure that made me happy in a certain way too.

RK: You were a regular in the pages of the New Yorker too, right?

ML: Yeah and the thing I remember most about writing Shouts & Murmurs for the New Yorker is the way they always used to come upon me sort of suddenly. "You want to do something?" they'd say. "Yeah, OK." "We need it by Thursday." And it would be Tuesday night or something, you know?

The pieces were limited to, I think, 700 words and every time my editor, Chris Knutsen and I would be working on one, it would be like fifteen words off and we'd be scouring the piece for anything we could cut without doing damage. Anything. Making "did not" "didn't"-anything we could do.

Writing for the New Yorker was, again, very heady and, certainly, very different from Esquire. Esquire had a kind of masculine, sort of Hemingway-esque tinge to it, right? Where the New Yorker, on the spectrum, was more what-effete? I mean, the history of that magazine, its éclat. It was equally venerable if not more so.

They all represented a strange conjunction of my work-which was very much outside any sort of mainstream-and the *most* mainstream American periodicals possible! So I think *Tooth Imprints On a Corn Dog* does represent a kind of remarkable confluence in the culture at the time. Still it's the only book about which I have some ambivalence simply because those are not purely my pieces.

On the other hand, each of them is a collaboration with a specific person and that's not a terrible thing, you know? In that sense, it certainly more resembles the work I did later in Hollywood, which is always a collaboration among a number of people for the most part. So I should go easier on the book.

RK: There are some great things in there. When you read it, you do get the sense that the core joke in *Et Tu, Babe* took hold a bit in real life and you morphed into a kind of rock star.

ML: And that was reinforced sometimes. When I met Keith Richards, he said to me, "Mark, you must know what this is like," making the absurd comparison between being Keith Richards and being me. Which really was just him being such a sweet hearted person. Or making terrific fun of me because I had the airs of someone who thought he was famous for a second. But I don't think so. He's just a very nice, generous person. And it *was* a big interview for the cover of Spin, which was a big magazine at the time.

So, as I say, if there"s anything you want to ask me about the new piece in the book, the play I wrote for it and which hadn't originally appeared in a magazine, you'll have to take a look at it. Because, beyond what I've said, I don't have a vivid memory of it.

RK: It's so funny that you did that. It's like a band putting out a greatest hits collection but feeling like they have to throw in one or two new tunes.

ML: It's exactly like that! I'm sure that's where I got it from. Like "Oh and two new bonus tracks. For the fans!"

7

"You Must Always Kill the Father

Every act from the most august to the most banal must be patricidal if you hope to live freely and unencumbered…"

- My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist

ML: Let's talk about what you wanted to talk to me about relative to *The Tetherballs of Bougainville…*

RK: …

ML: If you're waiting for me to have things to say about it…

RK: That would be nice.

ML: It's a sort of amnesia I have. I don't really remember what I was thinking the way I do with some other things. I was probably very gleeful about having a book to be working on after being so involved with the magazines. To turn fully to a new book probably made me feel great. But, if you want more, you'll have to ask me specific things.

I was trying to think about the content of the book and I think the father thematics are something I've dealt with for a long time and continue to, you know?

RK: The whole "kill the father" thing's in many if not most of your books.

ML: Patricide! Maybe it's in *My Cousin* **or** *Et Tu, Babe*-**I don't remember-that I say "You always have to kill the father."**

RK: I believe you say it in both!

ML: It is obviously a thing I've thought about. The war between fathers and sons is among the oldest wars. You and I have known each other now through some crucial things…

I had for the most part a very close, loving relationship with my father and he was a wonderful father when I was a little boy. We had some problems with each other as all fathers and sons do. One of my particular ones, and again we've talked about this: My father was very proud of my celebrity but completely indifferent and uncomprehending about the work itself.

That wasn't a huge problem. I didn't care that much. Until I sort of did. At some point I did. Because it prevented him from being happy about certain aspects of what would happen. I remember

telling him…(We don't know how much of all this we want in the book but it's good to have. We can decide. It's up to you really.)

The Sugar Frosted Nutsack **was a Michael book. Michael was still a hands on editor and the head of Little, Brown at that point. Soon after that book, I think, he became the big Hachette person. So I dealt with him on that book and** *Gone With the Mind* **was the first book I worked on with Judy (Clain, Little, Brown's Vice President and Editor-in-Chief).**

I sent it (*Gone With the Mind*) to Judy on a Friday and she called me on Monday morning exulting about it and telling me she wouldn't change a word and how much she loved it. She's always been very wonderful in that way and responsive. So I was very happy that Monday and happened to be having dinner with my father at this place across the street that was kind of my headquarters. I had a certain table that I always sat at with my back to the door. When I got there, I said, "Oh, the greatest thing happened today. Judy, my editor, really loved this new book!" And his response was, "Well, maybe this time they'll actually raise a finger and do some promotion" or something really sour like that. Talk about a buzzkill.

It just ruined everything. I got furious at him and I was furious for the rest of the night. And, with me, drinking a lot and being furious at my father were a bad combination. Because I just get more and more angry. And my anger will suck in the other main problem I had with him, which was his being a kind of negligent, nonexistent grandfather to Gabs.

RK: Oh, I never knew about that. Bummer.

ML: Yeah, so of course at some point this sort of maelstrom of fury will suck that in too and this was one of those nights. My father's inability to enjoy my work at times made it impossible for him to rejoice with me about certain aspects of or responses to my work. He loved the publicity. He'd ask me if new reviews had come in and I'd send him things. He was very proud of that, loved showing his friends notices and things like that. He just never really understood how to enjoy the work itself.

RK: Was it a generational thing do you think or a matter of literary taste or something else?

ML: I think my father, as a reader of my work, is probably no different from your average American. Look, when we're talking about *The Tetherballs of Bougainville,* **we're talking about all of this in a sense. A Freudian analyst looking at the story would say this is a kind of wish fulfillment, right? Your father being executed.**

When I was a little boy, my father and mother-though in very different ways-were aficionados of all the things that enlightened, well-educated hip young people were supposed to like. It was a funny time. Well, you grew up in this time too. It was very different from our culture now. It was a time when certain kinds of artists, musicians and writers were not unknown to the general public. Lenny Bruce could be on the cover of Time. People knew who Warhol was. People might even have known who Allen Ginsberg was or Jack Kerouac. There wasn't such a balkanized culture at the time.

RK: My father was anything but enlightened, well-educated or hip but he adored *Trout Fishing in America.*

ML: Even if their apprehension of people was negative, you know even if their notion of Jackson Pollock was "Oh, that's the artist who does what my five-year-old kid could do having a tantrum with paint," they still knew the name and still had some idea what their work was. Today if you were to ask someone who Gerhard Richter is or something like that…

RK: That's not going to happen.

ML: Similarly with my dad. He also played the clarinet and the saxophone and there was a certain kind of jazz music he liked and was knowledgable about. It probably didn't include more adventurous, atonal stuff like wilder Coltrane but it would have included people like Stan Getz. I guess what I'm trying to say is he liked jazz. He taught me a lot about it. He also claimed to like certain kinds of painting such as abstract expressionism, which was the thing then.

So it's hard to separate out what was an authentic response of his to art and what simply a response to cultural cachet. You know, *this is what sophisticated people like***. I mean walking past a painting in a museum is one thing. Reading 200 or 300 pages of something is another. When it came to things that require more complicity or immersion on the part of the audience, like reading, that's where he sort of couldn't go ever in his life. He was honest. He was one of these people who say "I want to be entertained by a movie and feel good when I come out of it" and don't realize that's a fairly philistine thing to be saying.**

He was a Philip Roth fanatic. Obviously, he was, again, an average American upper middle class attorney person who wanted a story with recognizable characters, the sorts of things a lot of people feel comfortable with when they're reading something.

And that was that. He didn't read poetry. He just didn't know how to enjoy that sort of thing.

He would ask me, "Can you explain to me why people like what you do?" He'd say these funny things. And I'd say, "Not really." I'd get a great review somewhere and he'd say, "Can you help me understand why someone would write that about what you do?"

RK: Was he sincere about all this?

ML: Yes, he was sincere. He wasn't saying that to insult me at the time, I don't think. I think at later stages in his life, depending on the audience (if we were out with people for instance), he liked poking fun at me in a different way. In the way I think older fathers can be because it's a way of asserting your own ascendence.

Well, your dad died when you were relatively young. But you know there comes a point when you can't squabble with your older, ailing dad anymore. They're too old to battle with. It would be unseemly. And this gives the other person enormous leeway to say whatever shit they want to say!

These are uniquely personal things between my dad and me, of course, but this whole business is everywhere in ancient literature. It's the basis of the Oedipal structure of families. The whole *Tetherballs* thing is certainly not my original take on fathers and sons. It's right there, you know?

And I may be misremembering my own book but basically being in the audience for your father's execution, during which

time you're flirting flamboyantly with the warden who's overseeing the process is my version of a Greek classic! So that's sort of what I have to say about that aspect of the book. Which is more than I thought I would.

RK: You know, my sense is we could devote the whole intro to the *Tetherballs* section to reflections on your relationship with your recently deceased father and not even say that terribly much about the book. The excerpts will be there and can speak for themselves. Actually, I think that would be really nice.

ML: This father stuff has been very much on my mind because of his death and my intimate involvement with it. I don't mean that to sound like I murdered him. In case I'm being bugged. I watch too many true crime shows.

RK: The passage in your latest book (*Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit*) where Gaby asks you what your father looked like when he died and you describe the experience is incredibly beautiful and moving. It's clear there was a lot of love there.

ML: Yes, yes. Remember the way the Wolf Man returns to human form in death at the end of the film? In his dying, in those moments, my dad became the father I had when I was a little boy. Suddenly he was right there. That was a remarkable thing to experience. And all those other things we've been talking about just vanished, just dissipated in that transubstantiation of that person into the father you so adored and idealized. To use a religious term, I was *blessed* to have a glimpse of him that way one more time.

You should use all the stuff I'm saying now. Which obviously you will. Because I've never thought about all these things in relation to *Tetherballs.* **I just did that book without reflecting on the origins of the material, without thinking about it the way I am now, so this is really good. I've never thought about that book in this way. Amazingly because it so clearly is about all these things.**

RK: I'm curious as to whether you have any insight into your father's whole absentee grandparent deal.

ML: I would ask him and he would say, "I don't know why I've done this." At a certain time he said, "When Gaby's a little older and I can talk to her about things…" and I thought that was ridiculous. That's not how this works. You don't not go near your infant granddaughter because you can't talk to her yet.

If it had just been that, maybe it could have been chalked up to being a cultural, generational thing. There are certain types of men that just don't know how to be with babies. You know, it's a sort of type you see in TV shows and movies. You say, "Do you want to hold the baby?" and the guy will retreat, recoil. "No, I'll drop him" or something.

But then this threshold of wanting an interlocutor of a granddaughter, a conversation partner, kept getting pushed. Like "Alright, the person's seven. You can talk to her." "Well, yeah, but about what? I want to wait until we can really talk about things."

Like what things do you want to talk about-Nixon's Attorney General, John Mitchell being imprisoned? I began to see that

wasn't real. That was a threshold that was going to get forever pushed. Then, you know, it becomes kind of too late. The thirteen or fourteen-year-old human being is going to realize that this person doesn't feel that comfortable with me and isn't that engaged in my life.

When I was young, I would spend a lot of time with my grandparents. I'd sleep over. And here's the funny thing, the irony of this is this was chiefly with my father's parents, who had a little apartment in Jersey City. I loved being there. My grandmother would make me blintzes, which I loved. My grandfather was sort of a dandy. They didn't have a lot of money but he was a dandy. He would always be resplendently dressed, he smoked cigars, he walked with a walking stick. He just looked like this guy out of some noir film. And we had the same tastes in entertainment. He loved The Honeymooners. He loved wrestling. We watched wrestling a lot. You know, in the days of Bruno Sammartino and Gorilla Monsoon. I just loved being there.

Had I not done this, I might have thought well, grandfathers just don't do this. But I had a different model. And you know this: a lot of people probably wouldn't care about any of this but I'm just an extremist, a fanatic when it comes to Gaby. So this was no good.

So, to answer your question, my father always seemed perplexed by his own behavior. Baffled by it. I'd ask, "Why did you do that?" and he would say, "I don't know." He had that response to a bunch of important things. Such as leaving my mother. I would say, "What happened? You can tell me. I don't care at this point. People are free to get married and divorced." And he'd say, "I don't know." I don't know whether this is true of relatives of yours from another generation but the extent to which he could be self-reflective was extremely limited.

I'll tell you another story. This might be too much for a book about my work but it's good for my own psychotherapy. I was down in Florida once visiting my father and I could see he was a little hurt that I had done this book (*Gone With the Mind***) with and about my mother.**

He said, "Don't you want to do one with me?" And I said, "OK, maybe we can do a similar thing about your life and your feelings about when mom was pregnant with me. We were out at a restaurant in Southern Florida and I asked him, "What do you remember about those times? Tell me some things and we'll start from there." And he said, "I don't really remember anything about it."

RK: Seriously?

ML: Yeah. And I said, "Well, do you remember being very happy?" and he responded,"I don't really remember being very happy. I just don't remember anything about it." He said, "I remember your mother being very sick once and getting this doctor to come over and give her a shot so she wouldn't be so nauseous." So I said, "That's it?" and he said "Yeah, that's it. I worked." So I said, "Well, I don't think this is going to happen."

Something else happened in the course of that dinner. One of the things I used to love doing with my father was going to hit golf balls at a driving range. One of the things I loved most about it was this one particular place we used to go that had a soda machine and you could get a Yoo-hoo. I remember how cold the Yoo-hoo was. I just loved it. I looked forward to the whole business.

So this time I'm in Florida, like within the last five or six years, and we were going to go to a driving range because my father had taken up golf again late in life. One morning I took his car, drove to one of these stores they have down there-a Winn-Dixie?-got some Yoo-hoo and hid it in his golf bag so that, when we were done with hitting the golf balls, we could have a Yoo-hoo. So we do that and, at dinner that night I said, "That was really great, wasn't it-hitting golf balls then having the Yoo-hoo?" And my father said, "I don't know that I'd say it was so great."

I got back to his apartment-this is the same dinner where he said he didn't remember anything about my mother being pregnant with me-and I called Gaby and said, "I'm so angry with my father . I just had this interaction with him. It made me feel so awful and it seemed sort of deliberate. I don't know how someone could say these things that were so deflating without meaning to.

Before I went on this trip, both Gaby and Mercedes had said to me, "Just don't get mad at your dad. Try to enjoy yourself. So Gaby was saying things like, "Yeah, that's fucked up, just let it go." Long way around the bend, as they say, no, my father never had an explanation for why he was such a nonexistent grandfather, such a negligent grandfather. He just didn't know.

But he knew I was angry with him about it and I told him very explicitly that it hurt our relationship. I said, "This is not a thing I'm going to get over. I don't care about any of these other things. Stuff with my mom-that happens to people. I know you don't love my stuff-join the club. A lot of people don't. I don't need you as a fan." And there were probably half a dozen other minor beefs but I said, "This thing with Gabs is an irredeemable sin and I'm not going to get over it. This hasn't been good for us."

RK: And what would he say to that?

ML: Now that you're asking me, he might have said, "I'll try. I understand what you're saying." He might have said, "I don't want to talk about a particular thing anymore" if I was really angry. I could be scary to him if I got angry enough. I remember him leaving one time and going across the street. He just couldn't deal with it.

RK: What was his relationship with Mercedes like?

ML: He loved Mercedes very much. They got along really well, liked talking to each other. All that was fine. If there could have been some sort of parallel thing with Gabs, that all would have been good. And, again, this was never something I would brood about in any sort of disabling way. But it did sully and sour to some degree my relationship with my father in the latter part of his life.

At a certain point I put it aside and wouldn't talk to him about it anymore. I felt he just wasn't strong enough to talk about things he knew I felt angry about or disappointed in him about. So I stopped.

RK: The day you and I first met, at the bar in that hotel, you got a call from your father and had a conversation about a procedure he was going to have. I remember getting the impression that you were a particularly caring and devoted son.

ML: I loved him. I didn't like *that* at all. When he was strong and feisty enough, I would let him know that. And as I engaged in

Tetherballs, **there was always this idea that to some degree a father and son are embattled. I think fathers and sons are.**

The interesting thing is that I never thought about these things in terms of that book. And it's so blindingly obvious! That's sort of what that book is "about." Which, of course, is always an unstable term relative to my stuff.

RK: Well then, I'm pleased we got it all sorted out.

ML: Yes, I'm glad we had this little talk.

8

RK:

(Things Take a Turn for the Möbius)

RK: As Mark mentioned, my dad died when I was relatively young, a senior in high school. As he wisely notes, there comes a point when a son can't squabble with his older, ailing dad anymore because it isn't seemly. It's equally true that there comes a point when a son can't squabble with his relatively young, ailing dad anymore. Particularly if he's in his early 40s and has a terminal illness which robbed him of the ability to speak. That would *really* be unseemly.

I said in the Forward that I hail from Maine. But cut-rate Maine. Underbelly Maine. An armpit the tourism bureau doesn't want you to even suspect exists-Lewiston. A mill town where the mills had closed and bars had opened in their place. An absolutely crazy number per capita. There was a time, if memory serves, when it got incredibly close to the point where everyone there operated their own.

Speaking of memory, my earliest is of whacking my father in the sack. It wasn't the way it sounds. I was three or four. He walked into the room and I just reached out. It was more a mat-

ter of height than anything, you know, Oedipal (though I confess to appreciating the cut of my mother's jib as a boy, to finding her très Elizabeth Taylory). I just happened to be balls tall. At the time, I thought his yelping and crumpling was meant to be a funny little performance for my benefit so I laughed and laughed appreciatively. To this day I recall it as vividly as an old black & white TV show.

Of course, I felt quite badly later. Then considerably worse when we learned he had ALS and little more than a year to live. Things were never 100% cool between us. I suppose I'll never know for sure why. It may have been that attack of the testes. It could just as easily have been my teenage philandering, enthusiasm for pharmaceuticals or the line in the sand I one day drew with respect to getting a Beatle haircut. He seemed to have a determinedly anti-fun agenda. But by the time he knew time was running short, he surprised me. We flew to Bermuda for a week, just the two of us.

The disease at that point was getting better and better at convincing his muscles not to listen to his brain. It was like he had a subatomic agitator in his nervous system penning micro manifestos to turn his body against him. Everything was in revolt. Walking wasn't easy. Talking was next to impossible. The last stop before human speech deteriorates into gibberish is less suggestive of a baby's babbling than of a recording of things you said one afternoon when you were still healthy played back at half-speed, dragging, garbled, groany.

For some reason, I was able to hear words in those strange sounds when others no longer could. I conveyed his messages to the boarding pass people at the airport. I ordered for us at restaurants. We had our best conversations ever. He asked me things in an effort to see over my shoulder into the future. Did I

think Patty, my girlfriend at the time, and I would get married someday? Did I have any idea what I'd like to do with my life? Did I want children? What movies, music and books did I care about right then? It seemed like we'd talked about everything. Until he asked whether I'd be willing to get drugs for him if he asked. Were his condition to become unbearable and survival wasn't a possibility, would I ferry him over in as-pleasant-as-possible a dream?

You know you're living La Vida Lewiston when you're seventeen, 1,000 miles from home and can assure your father without hesitation you can get him anything he wants. He was a small town newspaper man. The story of his life turned out to be the story of his impending demise. He wrote a piece about what it's like to live with a terminal illness and the AP picked it up. It was printed around the world. Beatle-grade bags of mail were lugged into our home. People famous in my father's world wrote or phoned-the sportscaster Curt Gowdy. The optimistic author Norman Vincent Peale. The editor of Paris Match. A sobbing Jack Lemmon read the column in a video produced for the Jerry Lewis Telethon (We caught up years later when he was doing a play on Broadway). The windfall financed our excursion to Bermuda.

The last thing I ever said to him was "goodbye" (as I headed off to school the morning no one knew he'd be in the hospital by noon). A couple days later, the last thing he wrote was a note to us reading "keep cool." Imagine your body walking off the job, air all around you but no longer having the ability to breathe it in, wishing you could close your eyes and even that being beyond you. Then somehow summoning the heart to scrawl that jaunty adieu. "Keep cool." It may not be *Et Tu, Babe* **but it's pretty great.**

Anyway, talking to Mark about his dad got me thinking about mine. I think he's right about fathers and sons and their eternal state of war. I'm glad we called a truce before it was too late.

9

OK, Mark, So What Do We Do Now?

RK: After *Tetherballs,* **you stopped writing books for fifteen years. What happened?**

ML: We have a moment crystallized in that incident I mentioned where I address a cardboard cut out, a point of purchase display featuring a life-size image of me with those sunglasses halfway down my nose (the author photo from *Et Tu, Babe***). This moment came when I looked at it and said out loud, "OK, Mark, so what do we do now?"**

Gaby was a little girl. Mercedes was a relatively new mom. I felt like I had to re-think my money-making options. Which, of course, meant I had realized that the trajectory of all this had peaked. The interest in me on the part of Harmony and Crown wasn't what it had been, understandably. As enthusiastic as they were, these books were never huge sellers. And it just hit me how ineffectual most book marketing and publicizing was. I had been extraordinarily lucky to have had that dream team

that worked on *My Cousin* **and** *Et Tu, Babe.* **That was like the Chicago Bulls with Michael Jordan!**

So, looking at that cardboard cut out version of me-my doppelgänger-I was saying so what do we turn to here in a purely practical, economic sense. Also, I think I felt I was on the verge of simply recapitulating myself in some way or another like a car company putting out a new model. I remember thinking I don't want to just put out another book every two years unless there's something wonderful to do. So I was actually asking myself "OK, so what do we do now that will be wonderful in a surprising way?" and I didn't quite know the answer.

There was another thing. I had this desire to sort of disappear in a performative sense, to leave that arena as an aesthetic act in some way. What do we do now? We leave town. We disappear, go to the dark side: Hollywood!

The idea of doing this other thing and really dirtying my hands-it almost felt like a kind of *criminality* **to me. Like I'm going to stop doing this and become a hustler! I would never seriously compare myself to Arthur Rimbaud, whom I revere beyond measure, but he stopped writing poetry when he was nineteen or twenty and became, among other things, a gun runner in Africa so why not?**

I think I might have asked Binky to help me get representation in L.A. or to get me some work screenwriting or script doctoring. Anyway around this time Jefery Levy got in touch with me to say he wanted to make a movie out of *Et Tu, Babe.* **He'd written and directed a film called S.F.W. with Stephen Dorff and Reese Witherspoon and he held a private screening of it for me**

in Manhattan. And I said "OK, cool" because I got a good feeling about him.

We became really good friends. I spent a lot of time at his high modernist house in the Hollywood Hills. Mercedes and Gaby were there at various times too. And Jefery wrote this script which-I don't say this in a critical or judgmental way-was really just a recapitulation of the book in screenplay format. It always felt to me like he'd retyped the book using Final Draft or some program!

I don't really remember what happened with that script. He might have shown it to some people and tried to get some money for it. But what happened was, soon after that, we got a bunch of deals and I began to have steady work in Hollywood. We had a deal with Fox to write a show. We had a development deal with two guys who both eventually went on to become network heads. Jefery kind of knew everybody.

I'd had these ideas rolling around in my head about a punk surgeon, a surgeon who has an agent and performs his operations in a theater. You know, the operating theaters from centuries ago. I combined these into this thing that became Iggy Vile, M.D. Jefery and I talked about this idea and he loved it so we decided we would pitch it to MTV. MTV loved it and we made a deal.

Dealing with MTV at the time was always a frustration. They didn't have as much money as the networks then. At the time, they weren't union. They didn't deal with SAG or the Writers Guild. But it was still MTV, which had its cachet, especially years back.

I wrote the script and Jefery was going to direct it. I kind of feel like it was the first script I'd written. I had read a bunch of sit-com scripts in advance to learn the cadence of the form. It's formulaic but it can be fun to play with that. And they're condensed, which suits my infinitely hot and dense approach.

It was a fun script to write. And that was the most fun part of the experience because it very quickly became somewhat difficult and ultimately awful. MTV loved the script and a pilot was shot in L.A. and at one point Gaby and Mercedes came out to stay with me for a week or so. It was all kind of heady stuff. Someone from MTV went to pick Gaby and Mercedes up at LAX, which at the time felt to me like *whoa!*

Jefery and I had a lot of fun together shooting the pilot and hanging out. It was a great time. But this particular executive we dealt with and his bosses all hated it. Someone said it was the most disgusting, grotesque thing they'd ever seen.

RK: Someone at MTV?

ML: Yeah, which is comical in all sorts of ways. There was a wonderfully grotesque scene where Iggy Vile does a liposuction at a club or a restaurant. This woman comes up to him and says, "Oh, you're Iggy Vile, M.D., I adore you. I'm such a fan!" and I think she asks him to do a liposuction because she's feeling fat.

So Iggy Vile, who's sitting there with a friend, takes an ice cube from his drink, sort of pulls her pants down a little, numbs her ass with the ice cube and then jabs a straw into it and sucks the fat out of her then spits it all into this pitcher on the table. Maybe that was the scene they were referring to.

RK: Ya think?

ML: At some point, this executive asked me to do a re-edit of it, to sit down with an editor and make all these changes. This was when things were getting bad and I was feeling very alone in this process. I don't know exactly what happened to Jefery at this point. I think he might have been resistant to working on it anymore. I think I still wanted it to happen.

Anyway, the troubles with MTV around this time sort of put the kibosh on my friendship with Jefery. I saw him once years later and might've been in touch a bit but it effectively ended our friendship. There wasn't some blow up or anything. I just felt I'd had to deal with all the silliness with MTV alone and felt Jefery wasn't sufficiently being a comrade, you know? And that was kind of my introduction to the business.

The next big thing was getting a job for a re-write of this movie Ron Howard was going to direct at Imagine. It was called B Major. That's how I met Kim Roth, who's my favorite person in Hollywood, just a really lovely person. She was at Imagine at that time I had lots of meetings with her over the years. We had a lot of good times together. We both smoked the same ridiculous cigarette-True Menthols. We'd often meet for martinis and smoke True Menthols. Working together was fun.

I had some nice meetings with Ron Howard about that movie too. It was eventually not made, as most things are eventually not made. And all that took a long time. The whole process played out over several years. And I was flown back and forth to do research for it in Scranton, Pennsylvania, which is where it

took place, but also spending a lot of time in L.A. at very nice hotels on Imagine's dime. That was kind of my first real Hollywood script work.

RK: And what was the film about?

ML: It was about a broken down, alcoholic bar pianist in Scranton who decides he's going to make it big by breaking the Guinness World Record for continuous piano playing. That's how he's finally going to put himself on the map. He also believes it would be a wonderful, unifying, celebratory thing for the whole town so there's a Frank Capra sort of tinge to all this. B Major, obviously, is both a musical term and an exhortation to *be something.*

RK: Why did it ultimately not get made?

ML: For the same reason most projects don't. I really had no idea what I was doing when I got that job. When I pitched it, it was a phone meeting with Ron Howard, Kim and some other people from Imagine. I was sort of naive and consequently fearless. My pitch was that I really don't have any ideas or strong feelings about the characters or the plot but I do have a sense of the *shape* **of it. I think it should be a movie in which there's this central theme stated and then improvisation and then a return to the theme. But it should be like a jazz song in some ways, like a jazz performance of a standard. That's pretty much what I said.**

Now I kind of knew at the time that this was not what people did but that's what I said. And I think there were a bunch of big time guys and women going for this. There's a roster of people, like go-to people to do re-writes. Really famous people, you

know? Like Joan Didion's husband was a big screenwriter and script doctor-John Gregory Dunne? And then, of course, Ron Howard has people he uses all the time. It just seemed very unlikely I'd get the job.

And I got it-I got the job! It kind of amazed everybody. I got it based on that pitch. Which is like pitching that the film should be like a Doublemint Gum commercial and they say, "Yeah, OK, we like it!" There was even an announcement for it in Variety with all that great industry lingo and insider jargon. I was just amazed by it all and that was really my immersion into the life.

I remember saying to someone at the beginning of this process, "Are you sure anyone will want to see a movie about a guy who just won't stop playing the piano?" And ultimately there was a version of the script that Kim loved very much. Ron was always very busy with things. I'd meet with him and he was, it seemed, a very unassuming, dignified, good person.

But these projects deflate at some point. You can feel the change in the energy. Sometimes it's because an executive leaves and his or her projects are suddenly dead. At some point I was staying at a place in Malibu and I had a meeting at Imagine. Kim said to me, "Ron can't really see a movie about a guy who just won't stop playing the piano." And I felt like saying, "Yeah, I know but we…"

RK: It just hit him?

ML: Yeah, exactly. So that was the end of that project. I just stayed in this dingy hotel, bought a lot of beer and Mexican food and watched baseball all day long for three days and then came home. In retrospect, eating burritos and drinking beer for three

days and never emerging was the perfect way to end one of these things.

RK: A palette cleanser!

ML: Oh, I have to tell you about The Man Show, how that happened. All the times I was on Letterman, my segment producer was Daniel Kellison. The segment producer is a crucial person on late night talk shows, the person who kind of sculpts your segment. Daniel would call me and say, "Well, tell me some stories" and, out of a bunch of anecdotes, he'd pick three or four that he felt could be linked in some way. So that's how I got to know Daniel Kellison. He was really great at what he did and we got to be friends and saw each other now and then.

At some point, he left Letterman and later called to ask, "Would you like to work on the pilot for this thing called The Man Show?" The two stars were Jimmy Kimmel and Adam Carolla. Now here's the interesting thing about all of this:

I said, "Yeah, sure" and a little deal was made for me to be out there for a week working on it. But the critical factor here is I got there and realized that the expectation was that I would sit in a room with a bunch of other writers. And I just said no.

Maybe I feigned incredulity because I probably knew things were done that way but I just said, "What? I can't even listen to music with words while I do what I do. I can't even listen to music *without* words. It's too distracting." So I told Daniel, "Here's how I'm going to do it. Tell me what you need and I'll do it in my hotel room. Then I'll bring it in." That was one of those moments when I realized that the severe insularity with which I thrive is just not the way it's done on a lot of jobs out there.

I have written a couple things with my friend Jeremy Pikser, War, Inc. being one of them. And I've written some things with Johnny Cusack and that's been OK. I mean it's not the way I prefer to do things, obviously, but John is capable of really admirable leaps of imagination. And Jeremy in a very different way is extraordinarily, wickedly funny and a consummate craftsperson. He really understands the mechanics of a screenplay.

But collaboration is generally just not something that suits me in the end because what I do involves so much…well, first of all, the accumulation of material is done in such a specific way that seemingly has nothing to do with what I'm actually doing. And then what is done with that material involves so much exacerbating, taking things that I'm unhappy with and making them *worse* **as a solution. It involves so much sabotage and booby-trapping and defilement and desecrating of things that, a day before, I thought were wonderful. Remember those things that came in Bazooka Bubble Gum, the little plastic things with a portrait or a scene on them? You'd turn them a bit and the image would change to something else. It's sort of like that. And these are things you just can't do with another person. It's impossible.**

One of the things that make it impossible is that, when you collaborate with someone, you have to respect the other person and take them seriously. You also have a desire to sort of please them. And those things are antithetical to all the modalities I've just described.

One way I got around that a bit with John when we worked together was that neither of us could or would ever say no to the other person. It was complete acceptance. If the other person

says, "Oh, the astronaut should be a python," you have to say yes to him.

All these things just really have to be done in isolation. If you want to get the strangest of the strange, you have to be really painfully isolated in that process where you're doing things out of desperation and you're completely reckless. And that just can't be achieved with another person.

RK: Much less a roomful.

ML: I didn't particularly like The Man Show but I liked the people. I liked Jimmy Kimmel. He's a very nice guy. Adam Carolla seemed like a good guy. Really it just wasn't my thing.

RK: So it's safe to say the whole women bouncing on trampolines in slow motion thing wasn't your brainchild?

ML: I can confidently go on record as saying it was not.

RK: What was Wiretap?

ML: Wiretap was a unique thing, something I did at Audible with a couple people. It was really more akin to a kind of radio show. It was fun. I performed in it too. A lot of it was improvised within this conceit I had set up. Just another one of the extra literary things I did during that period.

Wonderland was also very much a part of that whole experience of working within that industry with its remunerations and its many problems for me, which I didn't really understand until later.

RK: And this was your introduction to Peter Berg?

ML: Yeah, a really interesting guy who, to his enormous credit, went way out on a limb to include me in this. It was an ABC/Disney TV project produced by Imagine. So it was a big, big deal.

I did two or three scripts. Peter and I did one together. After the first, one of the executives from Imagine, Tony Krantz, told Peter to fire me. And Peter said no. Peter was a really staunch supporter of the work I did on that show.

We produced a season's worth and, at the end of the process (I think it was cancelled after three episodes aired), Tony called and sort of apologized and said, "I was so wrong" after viewing the episodes. I thought that was very noble of him.

RK: It's odd to think of you writing for a network medical series. What do you remember that being like?

ML: One of the things I enjoyed about it was the fact that it took place in a hospital. I think Peter saw that I had a very idiosyncratic interest in science and that I was conversant in it in a way that would be useful or interesting for the show. It was a medical show so there were multiple story lines, a kind of A story and B, C, D story, kind of interwoven the way these shows work. And also interwoven, of course, is what's happening to the doctors in their personal lives, that whole thing.

I think the first one involved some rare neurological syndrome involving a lesion in the brain that produced very disinhibited behavior-eating things you shouldn't eat, being sexual in ways you shouldn't. I found an organic cause for my ideal person!

The woman who has this condition is sitting with her husband in the office of one of the doctors and the doctor has this plastic model of a brain. So the woman begins running her tongue over it and her husband says, "Honey, stop licking the doctor's brain!" That's a line Peter loved. Some of that felt like being a prankster in a position to infiltrate network television.

RK: Yeah, there's a definite through line from Iggy Vile, MD to this project.

ML: I very quickly established myself as the rogue element on the show. But Peter loved the stuff and was very enthusiastic about the two of us working together on the next season. This, of course, was before the whole thing was quashed.

Financially that was kind of a wonderful thing for me. And Peter was a memorable person. But, again, the actual situation wasn't something I loved. There was a production office in downtown Manhattan, a really nice, groovy place to work but, you know, it's just not my thing to be with a lot of people like that.

The other writers, producers and directors all decorated their offices. No one knew what the longevity of the project would be. At least a year to produce the season. The pilot had been green lit and they wanted a season of episodes and that's what was made. So people decorated their offices the way people do, with art they like, pictures of their family, their wives or husbands or children-all of that. And I had an office but I just refused to put anything in it. It was completely bare. Nothing on the desk. Nothing on the walls. Nothing.

I came in as infrequently as possible too. I liked all the people. They were wonderful people. It's just incompatible with the

way I not only work but, well, live to a certain extent. But it was a really unforgettable thing.

And it was through Wonderland that I met Billy Goldberg! One day I came home and there was a message from Peter saying, "I met this great guy and you should go talk to him, Billy Goldberg. He's a doctor in the E.R. and he's just a fabulous, really smart person and funny." So Billy and I became really great friends like almost immediately.

RK: Did he mean talk to him to get ideas for the show?

ML: Exactly. Billy became a consultant on the show and Peter just thought everyone working on it would benefit from meeting Billy and talking to him. And, at some point after the show was finished, Billy had this idea. The origin of those books-*Why Do Men Have Nipples?* **and the sequels-was completely Billy.**

He told me,"Every time I'm at Thanksgiving or Hanukkah or Christmas, whatever, people are always coming up to me, lifting their shirts and asking,'Do you know what this is?'" So he had the idea for the book and asked me whether I would be interested in helping him with it and I said, "Of course."

Every now and then I'm just intuitively certain about something. Like the time you proposed *this very book* **and I just said, "Sure, yeah!" You probably thought doesn't he give anything any considered thought?**

RK: I wouldn't have thought that at all. I know you know.

ML: I can honestly say I didn't think *Why Do Men Have Nipples?* **would even be published. Binky, to her credit, was immediately**

interested in it when we presented it to her. The agent who did the down and dirty work on it sent it to, I think, like twenty publishers and nineteen passed on it. And it became this enormous bestseller, number one Amazon book in the world or something! Insane! And I was so happy about it. *Ka-Ching*, **as they say. Good for the family. I was so happy for Billy.**

But the point is the book never would have happened without Wonderland. Oh, another funny story from when I worked on that: Johnny Cusack called me one day while I was working on that show. I was out doing something and, when I got back to the office, the guy who worked as the receptionist/go-fer/weed dealer for the show said, "Someone who says he's John Cusack called you but it's obviously just someone busting your balls." That got around and no one believed it. I suppose I should have taken umbrage at that. No one could figure out why this movie star would be calling me.

RK: It's Thanksgiving with Martha Stewart all over again!

ML: I think even Peter was skeptical. It made me aware of the gradations of celebrity. Peter at the time was already very well known. He had starred on Chicago Hope and had directed a couple of movies by then. He had a very piratical, buccaneer-like swaggering kind of personality. But John Cusack was on a whole other level. It just *had* **to be an imposter.**

Similarly, when John Kennedy Jr called me to write for George magazine, I didn't believe it was him. I thought it was a friend named Oscar and said, "Alright Oscar, enough. You don't even sound like him!" I said this to the actual John Kennedy Jr. It was an eventful period of time.

RK: And there were two more books in the *Nipples* franchise?

ML: Yes, there were two more and Binky, being a depressingly accurate prognosticator of all things, said, "Each book will do half as well as the previous one." She always makes these amazingly accurate oracular statements about everything. And she's invariably right. And, of course, each book became less fun to do. By the third one, we were just like, "Please, let there not be a fourth one!"

RK: After all those years you must have missed writing books on some level. You know, the kind you'd written up to the Interregnum.

ML: All this taken together cumulatively resulted in a slow motion car chase of a crisis for me, which was the slide from *my* work to magazine work to Hollywood stuff.

That resulted in a period of my life when I was very unhappy. At certain points I had a lot of money from some TV things I did and working on some movies but it really altered me. And I didn't realize until years later that I was unhappy because I wasn't writing, I wasn't involved in my books anymore. I had kind of wandered away. I was uncertain about who and what I was and became not such a good person. Though I was so unhappy I didn't realize it at the time.

In a way I always thought of these people, of this industry, as potential scores for me. Potential victims. It was mercenary in a way. I wanted money from them sort of like drug trafficking by insurgent groups. I wanted that money in order to do my books and I was conscienceless to a sociopathic degree about it. That

whole period of time we've talked about is just me being predatory about this. It took on a life of its own and I realized in time that it was becoming intolerable for me to do that anymore.

There came a point when I was in Culver City helping with the sound editing on War, Inc. (2008) and I was staying at the Culver Hotel, the place where the munchkins resided during the filming of The Wizard of Oz. I was seriously thinking about leaving and coming back to the East Coast then one day I stepped into the street on the way to the hotel parking lot and was hit by a car.

It was so weird. You're hit so unbelievable hard and suddenly catapulted into the air. The woman driving the car stopped, got out, gave me the once-over while I sat, dazed, on the asphalt, then tossed me a business card and drove away. As if to say, "If you ever want *more* of this, here's how to reach me!"

And the whole episode just got weirder and weirder. Eventually, a police officer arrived. She asked me to describe the car that hit me. Then she asked me to describe the driver. She asked what race she was so I said something along the lines of "She was Hispanic." I wanted to give her the most common characterization possible because I really couldn't think at the moment. And Hispanic could mean black, white, anything. And then, when she got to the driver's weight, I said, "I don't know, around 130 to 140; she was kind of chubby." And she got really pissed at me! I'm on the ground. She's looking down at a person who just got hit by a car and she says, "I weigh 135-are you calling *me* fat?"

When I was finally able to get up and walk back into the hotel, the guy at the desk asked me whether I had been practicing

skateboard tricks. "I saw you flying through the air so I figured you were working on your flips, dude." It was time to go.

One of my knees was torn up pretty bad. Back in Hoboken, I would lay in bed all day for weeks recovering, rereading Thomas Hardy and Moby Dick and, eventually, slowly, starting to formulate a book. And I was just so acutely aware of the complex pleasures of reading something wonderful like that. I think it just completed in me this turn away from the Hollywood work back to what I had been doing initially. The savagery with which I returned, which I think is palpable in *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack,* **was a direct result of what I had been doing and what I had not been doing all those years.**

And from feeling desperate. I hadn't done it in a dozen or so years. I looked at the books I had done and thought *I don't know how I did that.* **I was kind of incredulous. It wasn't anything to do with thinking they're great. It was just honestly not knowing how I did it. They sort of amazed me. So I started feeling a little panicked about it. Which, as we've talked about, is always a good thing for me. When I think back on it now, it's so interesting. The first line, I think, is "There was never nothing."**

RK: You are correct, sir.

ML: That line helped me a lot in conceiving how I would attempt to do this book. It's a statement of the kind of primal relatedness of everything to everything else that's always been a powerful engine in what I do. There are no two things that can't be correlated. There never were and never will be.

I remember that line being very catalytic for me without my even realizing how. I still don't really. It's a very enigmatic line

in a sort of perfect way. I remember sending it to Michael Pietsch and telling him, "I've got the first line and it says everything." And, because he's a very courtly person, he sent back a note saying, "I'm so happy you're excited" I suspect thinking "I don't know what he's talking about or what he wants me to say about that line but I'm happy he's happy."

I was intent on writing something that was intransigently impractical in any commercial sense because I had been having to do that for so long, tending to all the imperatives that are in play in the entertainment business. Here I was just savagely committed to aggressively abandoning all of that.

As I was getting started on this, I got diagnosed with cancer. With prostate cancer. The effect of that was to make me feel further isolated, more alone. Like a sick animal who has to go off by himself into the woods. Which again, in terms of trying to produce this work, suited me perfectly.

The paradoxical thing about feeling completely isolated and maybe even threatened by death is that feeling despairingly on your own is the one thing we all actually have in common oddly.

RK: Isn't that true, yeah!

ML: You can't name another thing we all invariably share. At various points in our lives we all feel this way. I can't think of another thing that we all share. Not all of us fall in love. You can enumerate all of the experiences that supposedly bind us but the one thing that really does is feeling by ourselves.

So there was a lot of upheaval in a certain way during that time because I didn't know what to do about the cancer. It was not

clear cut. It can be treated any number of ways. Not treated at all. There are all kinds of controversies. It just wasn't clear. You have all these numbers you're constantly looking at from various tests, PSA levels, biopsies and different things that are interpreted differently depending on who you are. Doctors have different ideas about how to treat it depending largely on what their specialties are. Radiologists want to radiate. Surgeons want to remove it. There are people who tell you, "Just wait. You'll never die of this. It's a slow-growing kind of thing."

And here I was attempting to do this thing again and I already had this agitation and trepidation about it. But it ended up being helpful though in a different way. Yes, the trepidation made me feel desperate. Finally you have to say *I don't know how I did those other books so I'm just going to do this, just going to write these insanely ill-advised sentences because I don't know what I'm doing.*

It gave me the feeling of having never done this before in a way, which was so great. It made me feel like I was lucky enough to make that first album again, you know? The album where music snobs will say,"That's the band's best. I didn't like anything they did after that." I got to feel that a second time.

The experience of working on *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack* **also was a great solace to me. That was an oasis I could enter, a refuge from all the uncertainty I had about the cancer and what to do about it. So I was driven in a centripetal way by a number of factors that were somewhat contradictory. Desperation drove me toward the mode of working I had. Also seeking refuge from this illness drove me toward it. Working on that book was a very distinct experience.**

I think that this is the first book in which I excavated my own familial culture for artifacts to use. I think I've done that more and more and shamelessly, happily in my last three books than in any of my other work. My other books were very staunchly committed to imaginative excursions. In the last three books, I've developed a sort of autoanthropology or autoarcheology.

The motifs you use in riffing within your own family-you know, there's a whole culture there. Beginning with *The Sugar Frosted Netsuke,* **the last three books are very much ethnographic studies of the culture of my family. The words we use, the secret phrases, nicknames for things, ideas and musings. So it's really a kind of self-scrutiny, of excavating things that, before, I stayed away from. I think I was trying to do everything** *but* **that in the first set of books.**

Et Tu, Babe, **for example, is sort of about everything I was not. Very actively, deliberately. Whereas this set of books is more about the culture of myself and the culture of my family and the culture formed by the way one instrumentalizes memories. Your own childhood becomes a kind of ancestry for you.**

And it's had the odd effect of making these books funnier. I stopped worrying about certain things, like whether something felt completely unique and ultra-sophisticated. Things like that ceased to be part of any criteria. In a way I think that some of the comedy in the last three books has become broader and more accessible. In this paradoxical way I think the last three books have become much more personal. They mine a much more personal load of material and yet, paradoxically, I think they're more…

RK: Relatable?

ML: Yeah, yeah, relatable to other people. Which, again, gets to this funny paradox of you as a singularity, that feeling of complete insularity being relatable oddly. It was an amazing thing to see how much people enjoyed *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack* **and how enthusiastically I was welcomed back in response to a book that did everything possible to alienate the reader!**

RK: It's notable that *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack* **hasn't an iota of melancholy or angst to it given the situation you were dealing with at the time it was written.**

ML: When I was working on it, I didn't feel anything related to what you might think in terms of a person casting about for a way to treat some potentially serious illness. None of that! I sort of couldn't do wrong. I realized that I had come upon a way of doing these things. Not that I didn't reach terrible impasses in writing the book.

As I've told you, the whole invention of XOXO came about because I just couldn't stand the thought of doing some things I'd anticipated doing and I just wanted to euthanize the book. And XOXO became the character who could do that, an impish kind of villain…

RK: You could do a director's cut of the book laying out all the things you originally had in mind before you concocted that character to spare you going through with it all.

ML: I could. I never would. It would so reveal, I think, my occasional fathomless stupidity. And I'm too vain.

RK: So you see this book as the first in a completely distinct second set.

ML: My willingness and joy about interpreting the culture of my family, the culture of my past, the culture of my childhood and using these things in a relatively unmediated way is, I think, significant and marks a big difference in the work. All that and the really aggressive, really savage eccentricity of these three books. It all somehow, as you say, became appealingly relatable to readers in a way my books hadn't been before. You know, before the interregnum, before that whole hiatus. I think people are feeling these later ones-*feeling* being the key word-in a very different way.

RK: It represents the second quantum leap in your career, as I see it. The leap you made from *Esther Williams* to *My Cousin* was truly astounding but almost pales next to the total reinvention and turbocharging of your aesthetic in these three most recent works.

ML: The vectors are pointed in different ways. The earlier books were centrifugal and these newer ones are centripetal. Or maybe I've gotten them backwards. We'll figure that out. Better yet, let's forget that!

I have accepted the world of my own insularity, my predilection of just being shy and preferring basically the company of just two other people.

RK: That's the thing this book introduces and announces. The heart of *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack* is really Ike and his family!

ML: It is. It's exactly about that. All three of these books have been about that. They're about my creation of a tiny world. Ike was very much a representation of what I would then enact in the next two books. The assumption being that this might interest another person, the study and revelation of this world as if we were the last three people to speak some Amazonian language, that sort of thing.

You're exactly right. It was introduced and depicted in a representational way for the first time in *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack.* **Ike, his wife and his daughter. They're the beginning.**

10

EKPHRASIS:
MAXIMAL AVENUES OF ATTACK

ML: Guess what I did yesterday. I "unpacked" the empirical origin of *Gone With the Mind.* **I've never used the word "unpack" until just now. It seems to have gotten very popular.**

When I was writing a column for Esquire, I would occasionally participate in promotional events they had for advertisers. One of the things I did was give a reading in a Bloomingdales in the Tommy Hilfiger section because Tommy Hilfiger was a big advertiser. I don't know whose idea this was but there I was in the middle of the afternoon and my memory of it is that no one could have cared less. They were shopping, rummaging through stacks of of folded garments looking for their size. I don't remember anyone turning toward me except with a kind of bemusement, if not annoyance that the music was off and here's this person talking.

RK: Wait, do you mean you had a microphone and a podium in the men's department of Bloomingdale's?

ML: Yes, I had a podium and a microphone. And people seemed completely oblivious. None of it was unpleasant. No one yelled at me or threw underwear at me. By the way, I was and remain a great fan of Tommy Hilfiger boxer briefs!

So there's the kernel of what, many years later, would become *Gone With the Mind-* **the whole idea of what would it be like to give a reading no one came to. Sort of "If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?," you know? Which seems like a silly pseudo-philosophical question but actually isn't. It's sort of a great question about all kinds of fascinating things. Like the dangers and failures of anthropo-centrism. And correlationism. And whether we can have access to things without recourse to knowledge, an epistemic grasp. Can things exist beyond human thought and are there ways to have access to things beyond knowledge? All of this became central to the methodology of** *Gone With the Mind,* **to how I ini-tially conceived of the whole thing.**

I think there's usually a kind of conversation going on between my books. A repudiation or contestation often, a struggle against the last one. *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack* **was very aggres-sively** *not* **about Mark Leyner in any way because I kind of wanted to mark off a new terrain in that way from the books that had gone before. So here I'm turning back the other way again, spinning around again.**

We went from a hyper-imaginative mythology in *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack* **to an autobiographical mythology in** *Gone With the Mind.* **And I think of an autobiography as an anthology of sto-ries. The stories we tell ourselves, the stories we tell others about ourselves. It's obviously not simply a matter of enumer-ating the facts. When you tell someone about your life, there's fact and fiction. There's confabulation where we fill in parts of**

our past we can't remember with stuff we make up, like planting artifacts in an excavation site.

Originally I wanted to try to create an autobiography based entirely on those parts of my life to which I had absolutely no access. At the beginning of the process, I had intended to make the book exclusively out of these kinds of things, examples of which would be: My life in utero. And who would know about that but my mother? So that's the first section of the book. I wanted a good part of the autobiography to be about my life in utero.

RK: I'd call the first 41 pages a pretty good part.

ML: Another example would be my own unconscious. And that's where that diagnostic test, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, comes in ("I was just delighted with the idea that psychodiagnostic algorithms would generate a posthumanist psychiatric profile of me for the autobiography."). I filled out all those questions. By definition, the unconscious is something else we can't have conscious knowledge of.

I wanted to make an autobiography out of parts of my own life I can't know anything about. Again, it's sort of my Pucky, perverse inclination to do things wrongly. The opposite of the way one would do them and to constantly exacerbate them with the wrongness of it. The future, of course, is also something I can't know anything about so there's Janet the Psychic!

Something which links this book very much to the preceding one but is done in a more literalized, theatrical way is that the book is actually a description of the book and *not* the book. In

the way *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack* **wasn't the epic but an ongoing description of the epic and never the epic itself. There's this thing called ekphrasis, a description of a work of art. That's very much what** *Gone With the Mind* **is.**

It never gets to the book. There's never a reading from the book. There's my mother's fabulous introduction then I give a kind of discursive, tangental, ramifying sort of preface to what I will read until there's no time left to read from the book. I've squandered it all.

I've realized that writing descriptions of a book or a text instead of actually writing the book or text gives me maximal avenues of attack. So I'm doing that here. But here it's very literalized and clear to the reader what's happening. I've always been drawn to Russian Constructivism and it has a very central principle, which is the idea of transparency. The means of production, the way something's made, the way its parts relate to each other, its purposes, etc, are all immediately transparent to a person either looking at a piece of art or using a product, whatever. There's a great word for it: *prozrachnost.* **And this is a principle I tried to follow more in this book than any I had ever done as a kind of anti-mystification strategy.**

This is so different from my other books, even *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack.* **In the simplest way, the reader knows where we are and what's going on at every moment. There's this person in a car with his mother on the way to a mall, there they are in the food court in the mall, there's a reading and no one's there except for these two workers on a break, the mother's giving an introduction then the son comes and talks about what he's going to read. Visually, there you are. All very clear, almost as if you're in an audience and there's the proscenium, then the**

stage and it's all happening right before your eyes. The transparency of all that was very key to me, very important.

The other thing I had never done-or thought I had never done-is including another voice, the voice of my mother. I was thinking the other day that I had never done that before but then realized it's actually all I do. All my books are made out of a myriad of voices rather than my one and only, you know, this idea of *my soul* expressing itself on paper in some way. That's never been the way I've felt about what I'm doing. I've always felt this was made out of language coming from many sources.

I was interested as well in the possibility of inverting the notion of a guide. You know how, in the sixties, one of the standard ways of taking LSD was with a guide, someone who had done it before?

RK: Well, my peer group didn't get that memo apparently but sure, I've seen it happen that way in movies since then.

ML: Yeah, you know, to see you through what can be a grueling experience for the novice, right? So there you have a real guide to help you through this imaginary, chimerical land. In *Gone With the Mind,* that's inverted. You have an imaginary guide to a so-called real world.

RK: The Intern!

ML: Yes, the Imaginary Intern! Now you have this trip into the so-called real, the autobiographical. Which is a very contingent kind of reality, as we've said before. But you have a trip into the autobiographical real with a completely fantastical guide. And,

again, in furtherance of this idea of total transparency, that person is never *not* called the Imaginary Intern.

It was an enormously satisfying and surprising lesson of this book to find that it doesn't matter whether I keep calling the Imaginary Intern the Imaginary Intern. People told me it was

still extremely moving to them when he left suddenly. They thought that was so sad.

RK: It was!

ML: And I couldn't have done more to say this is not a real person yet people said it was so sad, it really made me feel for you when the Imaginary Intern left. Like *I felt you, bro.*

RK: It's true. I was heartbroken.

ML: Figures of life are suggested by the smallest things. And then they become kind of indestructible and that was an important thing to me, to have a fabricated guide to the so-called autobiographical real.

This is a book I signed on to do with an absolute fervor and commitment to excavating the culture of my own insularity. It's a fascinating thing to do. You would think it involves an acuity of recollection, of remembrance, where in a funny way it really involves a need to forget everything. Or to forget what you think you're trying to remember and, by displacement, finding other things.

There's a kind of artful forgetting you use when you do this excavation and that's what *Gone With the Mind* **is. It's hopefully a kind of artful forgetting of a life, a kind of forgetting that involves an almost heedless drive into the future.**

RK: "A kind of artful forgetting of a life." A little elaboration?

ML: You can approach your past, your memory of your past, as a sort of frozen archive or ossified canonical archive of events.

Everyone does this. If you ask someone to think back, they'll think back on a certain repertory of events. Almost like a fossil record.

We use these events to calibrate our past. Certain events represent my adolescence, my early twenties, etc. They're like signposts. But it becomes completely static and what I mean by "forgetting" is undoing or contesting that, fighting against that way of experiencing the "past." If there's a canonical past, what I meant by forgetting is, you know, firing a cannon at that canon.

It's a way of working with a past that's still active and has an ongoingness to it. That's sort of happening now. So what I mean by forgetting is simply a very active engagement with the past.

I really like the idea of engaging in a present tense sort of way with ancestors or times past. That's one of the reasons I love that little piece where Janet the Psychic tells me my grandparents are doing a play-by-play of my life and have decided I'm not having enough happy-go-lucky sex. What I mean by forgetting is really just a way of engaging with the past that's more active than treating it as a frozen archive.

It's very much like Mr. Peabody and Sherman. It's going…

RK: Going way back!

ML: Yeah, it's like the Wayback Machine. Interactions are possible. Mr. Peabody and Sherman would interact with people from the past and even change the outcome of past events. It's very much like that.

Whenever I think about these things and I think honestly about how I'm experiencing some of what I do myself, it's so frequently an image from a cartoon. And then I remember anew how crucial watching certain cartoons when I was little is to what I do now at 68.

Again, I'm talking about Chuck Jones, Tex Avery, the Fleischer brothers, who did Popeye-all those kinds of people. Because, when I think about the material and its effect on the reader, I think of those mutating swarms of insects in cartoons that can become anything. A swarm of insects will suddenly take the shape of a beautiful princess. Then a battleship. Or a guillotine. Maybe a cannoli. That's what I feel like I'm working with, one of those mutating swarms. All made out of the same matter. It's my form of monism, everything being made of the same thing or the same processes.

Which means, of course, that these new books, whose "subject matter" is so different from that of the work which came before-books that use the micro culture of my own family-are ultimately made from the same mutating swarms the work was always made from. The elation I felt when I started, the ultimate latitude in what one could do sentence to sentence-obviously, that's all still in play now with this new stuff. And it's all made out of the same swarm.

Another thing I thought about when I decided not to approach the past as an ossified record is the idea of ventriloquists. We hear a kind of narration of our own lives in what might sound like our own voices (This is probably a slightly psychoanalytical take on all this). If you're sitting with this and meditating upon it, you realize it's not quite *your* voice because there is no *your* voice.

You begin to realize-or I do-let me stick to me and not imply that everyone else is as tormented as I am. I begin to feel in a sense like I'm oscillating back and forth between the dummy and the ventriloquist. You think, "I'm speaking" then you look up and think, "No, the ventriloquist is speaking sort of through me." The thing I'm seeing as I keep working with this material is that the thermodynamics of it, the kinetics and motion of it is like this continuous pulling back of one scene to reveal another, pulling back to reveal there's yet another ventriloquist!

RK: Oh my.

ML: So one may think naively, "Oh, this is being told in my voice" but then pull back to reveal the ventriloquist. And then is the ventriloquist speaking about your past? You pull back again and see the ventriloquist has his hand up the dummy's back. It's the dummy speaking. And you just keep pulling back and pulling back so there's this infinite *mise en abyme,* **an infinite number of pull backs and that continuous pull back-which feels to me as if it has a whirring sound-is one of the things that I'm trying to impart to these retrospective books. The whir of pulling back and pulling back infinitely. Perhaps your memories are being related by someone other than you at every juncture so it's sort of an endless series of nesting ventriloquists. You know, like Russian dolls.**

One of the things I love so much about these books being not the thing itself but a commentary on the thing itself, a similar sort of pull back and reveal, is the way it puts one's own memory in quotes, if you know what I mean.

RK: Dude, I haven't known what you meant since we stopped talking about cartoons.

ML: But isn't that the point of what I do? I think you've hit upon it. Yes, it's the psychotropic essence of me, you're exactly right.

At the end of *Gone With the Mind***, my mother and I are together in a sort of space capsule, in that stall in the Ladies Room. I mean I do come out at the end and do that Jackie Gleason turn but it's to talk about the future. That maybe this is the last book and I'm going west again.**

And I'm forgetting everything. That's all gone, all done. I'm moving off almost into the blackness of space. Friends have said they were really upset when they read the end of that book because it seemed very elegiac. No, not "elegiac." What's the word? You know, kind of a goodbye. But obviously it wasn't. That was just my way of currying sympathy!

RK: Manipulating!

ML: Yes, of course. Why am I not thinking of that word? I'll think of it. It has the sense of a goodbye. I'll e-mail it to you because I can't stand it!

RK: I know that drives you absolutely crazy.

ML: Oh and one thing I forgot to say is that I had very specific rules in this book. For example, if something was not "true" (again, that's a very unstable, contingent term as we've said), if something was not autobiographically accurate, I had to say that. I had to say *it was a dream* **or** *I was thinking.* **There's never a moment in that book where I try to pass something imaginative off as the actual items from the resume, the actual facts. It's al-**

ways qualified as dreaming, day-dreaming-anything speculative or conjectural would very clearly be labeled as such. That was all part of the transparency.

I clearly wanted to distinguish some of the things I was doing from past books and I think the quality of presenting material that feels authentically archival and that's filled with a kind of wistfulness was something I had never really done before in that way.

RK: How would you say the touching material relating to your grandparents and the way they lived fits into the *Gone With the Mind* **plan?**

ML: The material feel of talking about grandparents and another time in this book set in a suburban mall, it's sort of like mixing film and video. There's just a certain impact that one has that the other doesn't vis-à-vis each other. So it was something I was really interested in playing with for the first time.

These are stories that the reader will feel are-and, again, this is a troublesome word-that are true. That I'm relating pieces of my own actual history. That these were flesh and blood people, people I loved and who loved me.

So there's all kinds of stuff sort of thrumming under the surface. Which makes it completely distinctive and different from the kind of frantic, antic play in some of the earlier work. You're encountering something very distinct from that. And yet, sentence to sentence, image to image, phrase to phrase, it's still operating with some of that leaping but it's a very different sort of thing.

And this is from a lost world that I am very attached to. The Jersey City of my childhood is my Eden, against which I measure every experience in life. If there's a beautiful late afternoon, it's beautiful to me because it resembles a late afternoon in 1961 in Jersey City. That's the original index of all my feelings about everything. That time, that place, these people. It's a world that's completely lost except that it so thoroughly, decisively operates on me every moment of my life.

Again, it's the idea of excavating this site within the culture of my insularity. My little, little world. This is a very tiny world I'm now working with. It's tiny in one sense but then opens out into a kind of infinity. An infinity that feels like a kind of forgetfulness. It's a portal to what seems like
a tiny lost world. So the grandparents symbolize all of that to me.

"Valedictory-" *That's* **the word!**

11

RK:

RK: Revisiting *Gone With the Mind* **and its comic food court reading, I've found myself looking back at the ways literature has played a semi-mystical role in my life and sent me on the trajectory that would lead to a deep, highly unlikely friendship with Mark, to founding my own annual festival of readings in Vermont and to the creation of the book you hold in your hands. Half my DNA , off the bat, is the output of a professional writer. I've always been fascinated by literature and people capable of producing it. In the seventh grade, for example, I was introduced to Poe. Well, his work. I imitated it shamelessly.**

Not that all my encounters with writers have been inspirational. Nope. I signed up for a class with the well-known poet James Lewisohn when I was at the the University of Maine in the 70s. For Maine, he was hot stuff. I remember him in the halls with his hair disheveled and his jeans yellowing. *So that's what a poet looks like,* **I remarked to myself.**

Imagine my dismay when The Portland Press Herald front-paged the story of him shooting his wife dead. Everything about the incident was horrible and tragic, it goes without saying. Nonetheless, I'll never forget my crushing disappointment in the alibi he came up with. "I was cleaning my gun (at 2 AM after

a night of heavy drinking at a local tavern) and it just went off." And he taught Creative Writing!

Later fate kicked in and I found myself running into the beings responsible for books and other works of art I loved. Way more often than I'm pretty sure is mathematically probable. One time I took a trip to New York City in my early twenties and within 48 hours encountered Andy Warhol, Taylor Meade and Woody Allen. In those days you still *wanted* to encounter Woody Allen.

Not long after, I took a few classes at Harvard and in short order bumped into J.P. Donleavy (whose Irish estate I'd popped by a few years earlier unannounced-but that's another story), Tom Wolfe, Kurt Vonnegut, Seamus Heaney, Robert Bly and John Updike. Bly and I stayed in touch until his death; he wrote a poem about Galway Kinnell for me to read at my festival. I took a course taught by C. Michael Curtis, editor of The Atlantic. Somehow we became friends and he managed to appear unfazed whenever I'd drop by his office at the magazine to shoot the literary shit.

Here's an example of what I mean by semi-mystical: A friend gave me a copy of John Berryman's 77 Dream Songs thinking they might be my cup of tea. Delicious. I imitated *his* style shamelessly in The Nana Poems. He'd jumped off that Minneapolis bridge in the winter of 1972 when I was in Bermuda with my father so I wasn't destined to meet him but, within days of arriving in Cambridge, I'd met Robert S. Fitzgerald, the eminent scholar, professor, poet and translator who'd been one of Berryman's closest friends and godfather to his daughter.

He generously read a manilla envelope of my shameless poesy and recommended me for Special Student status at Harvard,

suggesting I be the first to do a critical analysis of Eleven Addresses to the Lord. I called Berryman's widow, Kate, from my Beacon Hill apartment one evening to convey warm wishes from Fitzgerald and ask questions I'd prepared but she freaked. I've never been able to figure out why. He and I talked on the phone regularly. After his retirement, Fitzgerald indulged me by corresponding from Connecticut until shortly before his death in 1985. In his last letter, which I keep by my desk to this day, he alluded to being "too tired" to write anything more. It was no "keep cool" but *jesus.* **(Just before Fitzgerald died, he received an L.H.D. from Bates College. And only Bates College. In Lewiston, Maine. Come on.)**

One day I awoke in Burlington after dreaming about starting a literary festival. So I did. It's not that hard. You can do it yourself at home in your pajamas. Anyway, I do. You've got the whole year to get things together for one weekend. If that's too tight a turnaround for you, it might be time to taper off a substance or five. Thank the lord it hasn't come to that yet.

Obviously, the rate at which I ran into prize-winning writers spiked exponentially. The first year, 2005, I suddenly knew Russell Banks (a movie guy too), Grace Paley, Galway and many more of whom you no doubt know. Since then it's just been ridiculous-everybody from Joyce Carol Oates to Alistair MacLeod has come through my little town. Robert Bly headlined the second year. Rita Dove, Ann Beattie, Edward Hirsch, Charles Simic, Mary Jo Bang, Yusef Komunyakaa, David Lehman, Rick Moody, Ron Powers (who does a phenomenal Charles Kuralt), Alison Bechdel (who once told me I'm a genius but is, let's remember, a humorist), Chris Ware, Tracy K. Smith, Amy Hempel, Vijay Seshadri (who tells a great dirty joke), Maria Howe, Sharon

Olds, dear, departed Tony Hoagland, dear, departed Philip Levine, Maxine Kumin, C. D. Wright, Galway, Grace and David Budbill. Here's a funny one:

Dear, departed Warren Zevon has always been one of my favorite artists and was, of course, among the most literate of rockers. As karma or whatever would have it, his wife, Crystal Zevon, made her way to Vermont as well and, after he died, wrote his biography, *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead.* **Of course, she read from it at my festival the year it came out and, of course, we've been friends ever since. But that's not the story.**

I want to tell you about the time Paul Muldoon, recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, kicked off the weekend in 2015. We have a gala donor reception on Friday night right before the opening ceremonies. I'm there schmoozing (the only time I schmooze or do anything remotely gala all year) with a few patrons, my friend Major Jackson and the president of the University of Vermont when in strides the Irish bard and New Yorker poetry editor. We wound up in a corner talking about Warren and what it had been like to work with him. Muldoon cowrote two songs on the 2002 album My Ride's Here, including that fabulous title track.

The dude doesn't say a word. When the time for his opening night reading arrives, he just takes the stage and does his stuff, jokes a bit between poems, the audience loves him. Eventually, he announces the next poem will be the night's last. I can't figure out what he's doing. Rifling through the pockets of his jacket and pants like he's about to smoke but can't find his lighter. Then out comes his cell phone. He taps it several times to bring up lyrics which clearly aren't part of his regular repertoire and grins at me as he reads,

“I was staying at the Marriott
With Jesus and John Wayne
I was waiting for a chariot
They were waiting for a train
The sky was full of carrion
‘I'll take the mazuma’
Said Jesus to Marion
‘That's the 3:10 to Yuma
My ride's here…’

The Houston sky was changeless
We galloped through bluebonnets
I was wrestling with an angel
You were working on a sonnet
You said, ‘I believe the seraphim
Will gather up my pinto
And carry us away, Jim
Across the San Jacinto

My ride's here…’

Shelley and Keats were out in the street
And even Lord Byron was leaving for Greece
While back at the Hilton, last but not least
Milton was holding his sides
Saying, ‘You bravos had better be ready to fight
Or we'll never get out of East Texas tonight
The trail is long and the river is wide
And my ride's here’

I was staying at the Westin
I was playing to a draw
When in walked Charlton Heston
With the Tablets of the Law

He said, 'It's still the Greatest Story'
I said, 'Man I'd like to stay
But I'm bound for glory
I'm on my way
My ride's here…'

Jesus.

Of course, that's not really the story either. The real story begins with my DM-ing Mark out of the blue two years later. As I've mentioned, he responded with shocking speed, offered his phone number and we got to know one another over the course of a year or so through a series of always amusing calls and e-mails. At some point, I had the impertinence to propose my doing a book about him. "That's just a completely marvelous idea," he responded. "As I have said to you, I am exceedingly secretive about certain things. My family-we joke with each other all the time about this-is a little cult. A mini-mafia of hermetic mystics, we are pure folie à famille. We never tell anyone the truth about what we're actually doing, where we actually are, what we're actually thinking, etc. So, it should be loads of fun for you!"

And it has been. The most I've ever had (and during a pandemic!). For a guy who's always cared about books and writing, what could possibly be more magical? The writer I consider the best in the world has become my very close friend. Because of him, I have a legendary powerhouse of an agent at CAA. Because of him, I get to work with the man who's edited everything from *My Cousin* **to** *Infinite Jest.* **Because of him, I get to see my name on a brick of a book published by Little, Brown. If that's not a semi-mystical turn of events, I don't know what is.**

Speaking of comic readings: Mark drove up with Mercedes to take part in my festival in the fall of 2018 and gave an unforgettable, incredibly funny presentation of material from *My Cousin, Et Tu, Babe, The Sugar Frosted Nutsack* **and his latest novel. Obviously, sitting in the audience and listening to him give a reading about the reading given in** *Gone With the Mind,* **was nothing short of an out-of-body experience for me.**

Believe it or not, though, that wasn't the highpoint of his visit. The following evening he and Mercedes joined me, my wife, Nancy, and my then 25-year-old daughter, Ashley, for dinner at one of our favorite restaurants (My son, Lane, is an environmental attorney and lives near DC with his young family).

It didn't exactly go as planned. Ash is on the autism spectrum. She's the sweetest, loveliest, bravest girl in the world. But there's a reason it's called a disorder.

Everything in my life having to do with words-which, as I've mentioned, has been nearly everything-turned out to be the perfect preparation for serving as her translator the same way I'd served as my father's when language left him. I seem to have an uncanny ability to decipher exotic or nondiscursive language, which may account for my capacity to understand my dad, commune with my daughter and delight in Mark's writing. On this particular evening, however, the only words she needed were answers in a frantic, marathon session of Hangman.

She was in a highly agitated state and the only thing that calmed her even marginally in that moment was burning through page after page of the legal pads on which I scribbled new games for her as quickly as I could. She was in the grip of one of her compulsions. These tend to shift like seasons and last about as long. It was the Autumn of Hangman. As quickly as the blanks of one

game would be filled in, she'd demand 'Hangman!' with the urgency of a diner in need of a Heimlich. Needless to say, all the bicameral multitasking, dividing my attention between Ash on my left and the Leyners across the booth, made Algonquin Round Table-level repartee something of a challenge. This wasn't the way I'd imagined our get-together going.

My assumption by the time desert arrived was that the barely-controlled chaos had likely left our guests jarred, unsettled, freaked, possibly even marginally frightened. But I was only just getting to know this remarkably caring couple and would soon learn that Mark and Mercedes are two of the least judgmental, most empathic people one could hope to meet. They weren't taken aback. But they *were* taken. Here's Mark on meeting Ash:

"When I watched Ashley from across the table at that restaurant in Burlington, it was just the most astonishing, inspiring thing for me… the way she so militantly relegates the entire world to oblivion, EXCEPT for that one thing she's doing, that ONE SPLENDID THING, to which she devotes herself with this fanatical, head-bopping, vital, hyper-focus. Watching Ashley that night, genuinely awestruck, I thought to myself: That's me! (Or perhaps an idealized, heroic incarnation or avatar of myself.) That's me in the ecstatic throes of my sentences! That's me, fanatically, euphorically devoted to concocting a kind of writing the brain can dance to. Ashley's dance and my dance."

"I am he as you are he as you are me," as John Lennon noted. Notwithstanding the absence of a feminine personal pronoun, "we are all together." We truly are to this day. Connected on more levels than I ever could have imagined.

Equally eerie: the way he and I keep discovering new parallels in our lives. The music we adore, the writers we've read, the movies we're both drawn to-even the kind of whiskey we drink.

But most of all, our devotion to our daughters. We're virtually the same age as are they. We're besotted. It's as though Mark and I have lived mirror images of the same life in so many ways. I suspect reading him that first time back in the early 90s activated a sort of homing signal and that's what made me contact him when contacting him made no explainable sense. Of course, it all makes sense now. Semi-mystical.

12

Selected Screenplay

The Range of His Madness

RK: I've read a number of the screenplays you've written but I've never read anything remotely as weirdly beautiful and fun as *Full Metal Artaud.* **As I said after my first perusal, "This is the craziest poem you've ever written!" Would you care to explain yourself?**

ML: Well, I'm somewhat of an Artaud proselytizer. I love reading his work, which is mostly essays, letters and poetry but mostly essays and letters. There are a couple of writers whom I read and just say, "How did *that* **happen?" What they did is so extraordinary! Rimbaud is like that. And Virginia Woolf. I'll read a line, put it down and think, "There's no precedent for that. I don't know where that came from."**

It's not as though he was part of a movement or school and took a kind of writing to its next stage. Someone like Artaud is just an extraordinary, completely unprecedented and thrilling thing so I've always talked him up to people. You know who wrote a wonderful piece about him? Rick Moody, in The Believer.

RK: "Analects of the Influence of Artaud," his 2009 essay? Yes, it's undeniably deep. Moody was a headliner at my literary festival the following year (i.e.: I've met everybody!).

ML: I've talked about Artaud a lot to John Cusack. I've always thought that John-and this is a somewhat superficial thing , but *not*-that in terms of physical appearance, John could play Artaud when he was a handsome young silent film actor. And the older Artaud, with his ravaged appearance after harrowing experiences in mental hospitals and getting shock treatment, that John can look that way too depending on what time of day it is.

RK: Love & Mercy…The Paperboy-the guy can definitely do ravaged.

ML: I remember sitting with John at a restaurant in Lower Manhattan and telling him, "I think you could do this." And John said "Write it-that sounds incredible!" And, at the time, I didn't really have any idea what this would be like. Maybe I was just thinking in conventional terms of doing a biographical thing. You know, an hour and a half feature.

RK: Talk about a change of plans.

ML: Well yeah, it started feeling like a term paper and I don't want to do that. I almost immediately realized I don't want to do that. I may have realized it on the way home from dinner with John!

He and I have been dear friends for a long time and we've done a bunch of things together. A couple of them have been made, most prominently War, Inc., the 2008 movie with Marisa Tomei and Ben Kingsley.

RK: Did you know (co-writer) Jeremy Pikser before making that film?

ML: Actually John was toying with the idea of a sequel to Grosse Pointe Blank and, in its inception, that's what War, Inc. was in John's mind. John was a fan of the 1998 movie Bulworth, which Jeremy wrote with Warren Beatty. So John, Jeremy and I met in New York once to talk about Jeremy taking a crack at a rewrite of the *Et Tu, Babe* script. We all really got along and I've become very close friends with Jeremy.

Then this whole War, Inc. thing happened and Jeremy, John and I became really serious about working on that. Everyone contributed to that, Jeremy especially. But I had some really specific ideas very quickly, like there being a kind of Rockettes line of amputees who had been blown up by an American company and then fitted with prosthetic legs by the same company, as a way of expressing with great economy this idea of creating catastrophes in order to monetize them.

The other thing I was thinking about at the time was-and this is my own personal thing-I really don't love actors playing characters (I'm saying this and John is such a good friend!). Many great filmmakers have used non-actors instead. Robert Bresson did that. In very different ways, of course, Warhol did that…

RK: Fellini, I believe, as well.

ML: Yeah, Fellini did it. I think a lot of Italian neorealists did it. Roberto Rossellini did it-a filmmaker I really love, especially those first movies.

RK: Rome, Open City (1945), co-written by Fellini, Desire (1946) and Paisan (1946), also co-scripted by Fellini?

ML: Exactly. So John Cusack does not drink alcohol and I wanted to give him some sort of vice that would be congruent with him. So I came up with this idea, which runs throughout the movie, that he's addicted to hot sauce. And it escalates. Hot sauces are rated on a scale that measures Scoville Units. So by the end of War, Inc. he's downing sauces on the maximum end of the heat spectrum.

RK: Holy Hot Ones, Batman!

ML: I've also script doctored a bunch of things that John's been in. And just in practical terms aside from the real authentic depth of our friendship, John's been wonderful for me because script doctoring is a great sort of mercenary thing that I can do. It's like you get to town, kill the person and leave. It's a couple of weeks or whatever and a nice chunk of money and then I go back to my books.

I script doctored this movie Must Love Dogs that John was in. I also worked on a movie John did where he plays Edgar Allen Poe called The Raven. A bunch of things, all uncredited. This is all sort of on the down low…

RK: Top secret. Until now.

ML: It's sort of secret but not really. It's a really good way to supplement an income, or even make an entire income for a year. It doesn't take that much for me. I'm not an enormous consumer of luxury items.

RK: (*Clears throat*) I couldn't help but notice that sleek black Mercedes in your driveway…

ML: There are two things I've not minded spending money on: A nice car. I mean I'm a boy from Jersey City. That was a thing. Both my grandfathers had Cadillacs. It's just some macho thing. You want your wife driving around in a nice car even if you don't have enough money for lunch. And Mercedes-obviously-should have one. She drives a lot and I just really wanted her to be in a nice safe car. The other thing I'll spend money on is scents, fragrances. That's the one fashion thing I'm kind of interested in.

RK: Designer scents is certainly a theme that runs through your body of work. I'm not sure a lot of authors can say that.

ML: Right? Anyway, John and I wrote a script inspired by *Et Tu, Babe*. We wrote a script called Pipe Dream. We have a bunch of things we've sat down and written together and then not made. We'll spend a period of time together either at John's place in Malibu or Chicago or John will come to New York where I am and we'll work on these things. Neither of us really has the stomach to deal in a sustained way with the people you have to deal with to get financing. So we have some really terrific things that are unmade. As all writers do. Most of what you write for the movie business, 95% of it, will never be made. Unless you're one of these guys like Ron Howard.

I've got to tell you I really love the title *Full Metal Artaud.* I didn't know quite what that was when I came up with it. But it's pretty characteristically me. I just love it!

RK: Big time. I was delighted to see a reference to it in the About the Author section at the end of *Last Orgy* **(spiffy author photo by Mercedes by the way).**

ML: I would never put that into one of those little bios if I didn't think that title belongs among the titles of my books. I've always thought of titles as lines of poetry that can stand on their own. If you read a list of my titles, you're reading a sort of Dadaist poem.

And I said to John, "Let's really make this one." The idea of being something that could be made became a central theme of it. You know, DIY. Or a term I like more…

RK: Homemade!

ML: Right, I've used that word in reference to books that use the culture of my family. I wanted this to be able to be homemade. Which is why I started getting the idea of these strange alien children making things in this classroom setting, like arts and crafts sorts of things, and that the movie could actually be made out of their drawings or collages. I was even thinking of doing something where John and I could actually make the stuff and just film it and there'd be a voiceover. We could really do it in like a couple of afternoons. I mean it would take longer to make the things and to write the script but it wouldn't necessitate any kind of crew or anything. It would really be homemade and have this arts and crafts feeling to it.

And that's how I began exploring these ideas about Warhol's Factory. I love reading about Warhol and the Factory and just admire that scene so much. It's really so inspiring to me.

RK: Spoiler alert: The movie also involves The Munsters!

ML: The history that John and I have had together in writing things and getting financing for things-that all came into play when I thought about the homemade quality I wanted for this. It began to influence the actual content of it.

John had this brilliant, distinctly Cusack idea, a fabulous leaping kind of idea. He said, "Artaud should rise out of the ocean like Godzilla!" That's just a wonderful idea. When he said that, I thought, "I really love that guy." And, as soon as he said that, I thought-and there's absolutely *no* connective tissue-I want to close with the end credits to The Munsters. John and I both love that song and wanted to use it somehow. I thought, you know, the movie should end with the end credits to something else and how perfect to end it with that!

Also it ties in this idea of the monstrous character of Artaud. I mean he liked to talk about himself in that way and of the monstrous being a category of beauty. It was kind of a surrealist idea but I think he took it even further than the surrealists. And that becomes a very big part of *Full Metal Artaud.*

RK: I love it when you say in the screenplay that the most perfect version of *Full Metal Artaud* would be just showing him rising out of the ocean and then cutting right to the end credits of The Munsters.

ML: My thought was to just do it that way and to make something that has a very distinctive length. So this isn't quite a short and it's not a feature. I think the length of something becomes a very important part of the materialist nature of a

movie. There are elements of a movie that are felt by the audience which have nothing to do with processing content, length being one. It has to do with how the viewer's being buffeted by the movie. You sit through a five or six hour thing that some auteur has made and you're feeling that. There's a kind of grueling endurance aspect to it.

Or something ending very abruptly can be felt in an almost tactile way. The viewer can be assaulted by the abruptness of an ending, just left going, "What the fuck, what just happened?" I'm interested in all of those material effects of a movie and I thought, "Yeah, we can do something with that here." And I said to John, I think the perfect version of this movie would be Artaud rising out of the ocean immediately followed by the end credits to The Munsters, that this should be the movie. But in the end I did a slightly more embellished version.

There's a whole Artaud thing called the Theatre of Cruelty that's about a kind of ritualistic theater. It had a sort of violence to it. Not necessarily literal violence but violent juxtapositions of things and whatnot. Again, this was akin to surrealism and Artaud was part of the movement but got excommunicated at various times by André Breton, who was, you know, the Great Excommunicator, sort of the Pope of surrealism. Though he ended up writing very beautiful things about Artaud after he died. Beautiful, beautiful things about him and the impact of his art.

RK: As we sit here in your Vermont Airbnb, I'm googling the piece Breton wrote for La Tour de feu in which he declared, "To defend Artaud is not to clear him of any 'aberration of the mind' but rather to acknowledge the range of his madness and the creative power which lies in it, and the fact that the cry of Artaud arises from the 'caves of being?'"

ML: Beautiful, right?

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE ASSEMBLY OF FULL METAL ARTUAD

To: John Cusack (writer, activist, actor)

From: Mark Leyner (poet, moral equivalent of Ratso Rizzo)

The absolute best version of Full Metal Artaud – the most elegant and beautiful version – would be Artaud rising out of the sea like Godzilla, immediately followed by the end credits for The Munsters.

EXT. THE OCEAN

The sea is glowing neon blue and sparkling with bioluminescence.

SHOGUN ASSASSIN CHILD NARRATOR (V.O.)
On May 25, 1946, Antonin Artaud was released from the Rodez lunatic asylum, where he received fifty-one electroconvulsive shock treatments.

Ominously, the waters begin to darken, roiling turbulently, and suddenly -
ARTAUD RISES FROM THE SEA LIKE GODZILLA.

Title fills screen to pre-lap sound of screaming children:

FULL METAL ARTAUD

CUT TO:

INT. CLASSROOM, THE WARHOL SILVER FACTORY SCHOOL - DAY

Seated in orderly rows here at the prestigious Warhol Silver Factory School are the screaming "children" -

- **although now that we see them, we can't be sure exactly what they are. Strange creatures to be sure - deformed, mutant, ethereal, perhaps otherworldly. Of indeterminate age. Just what are these waxy larval beings, these glaucous homunculi with their bags of chips and juice boxes? (Let's just call them "mutant kids" or "mutant aliens" for simplicity's sake.)**

Three seconds of screaming, then three seconds of stasis and impassivity. Three seconds of absolute terror. Three seconds of perfect calm, perfect serenity. Back and forth and back and forth. It's almost as if they're receiving electroconvulsive shock treatments themselves. But there's no visible apparatus. They remain calmly in their seats, their "hands" (flanged appendages of some sort) clasped on their desks.

And these moments of intense excitation seem devoid of the pain we'd associate with electroconvulsive shock. The fright we see on their faces, the convulsive spasms of their little bodies, seem borne of rapturous delight, akin to the giddy terror of kids on an amusement park ride or moviegoers watching a horror film. They seem to love it. They want more.

At the front of the classroom, orchestrating the oscillating emotions of these mutant aliens - perhaps working some unseen transformer - is a fervent-eyed, raven-haired woman in her late-forties -

FREEZE-FRAME CLOSE-UP OF TEACHER

Text superimposed over her face:

Valentine de Saint-Point, poet, playwright, dancer, choreographer, author of the Manifesto of the Futurist Woman and the Futurist Manifesto of Lust.

Valentine is constantly writing and erasing quotes and citations and equations on her blackboard, a palimpsest relentlessly transforming itself in white clouds of chalk dust:

Et qui - And who
aujourd'hui - today
dira - will say
quoi? - what?

Erased. And then another quote from Artaud:

I hate and despise as a coward every being who does not recognize that life is only given to him so that he can remake and reconstitute his body and his entire organism.

One would be forgiven for thinking that everything we see from here on in is being generated by the mutant aliens in the Warhol Silver Factory School. But it's true. It is in this factory that the paranoid, scatological realities of Full Metal Artaud are literally manufactured.

MUTANT ALIEN
Someone or something has taken over the ship, Captain.

They're literally "space cadets" in their turquoise tunics.

Through the "viewscreen located on the bridge" - i.e., the window - we see an animated version of Bruegel's painting Landscape with the Fall of Icarus - that is, we see Icarus actually falling into the sea.

BUT NOW - once this mutant alien raises his strange appendage and says to his teacher, Valentine de Saint-Point, "Someone or something has taken over the ship, Captain," we now see on the Viewscreen black, star-spangled intergalactic space... an enormous jade and crystal edifice floats out there, the mansion of some deity.

And then we see a succession of things:

- **A slide-show of upside-down sumo porn.**

- **A TED Talk by an obviously deceased nun who teaches crows to read.**

- **Maybe just a dirty white screen with the words "you suck" scrawled or scratched into the lower-righthand corner.**
- **Maybe just this - a dirty white screen with the words "you suck" scrawled or scratched into the lower-righthand corner - and then the end credits from The Munsters.**

You know that wonderful story about Stan Brakhage and Andy Warhol? Jonas Mekas told Brakhage he must see this particular work of Andy Warhol's (perhaps Empire or Sleep or Blow Job).

So Brakhage watched about 16 hours of Andy's stuff, and he came out, and he said, "This is trash! This is ridiculous, this is ludicrous, it's nothing. I mean, it's absolutely nothing, it's bull-shit." And then Mekas said, "Did you watch it at 24 frames a sec-ond?" And he said, "Yeah." He said, "Stan, I want you to go back and watch it at 16 frames." Which, of course, makes it longer. "Because if you've only seen it at 24, you haven't really seen it." Being the hardcore guy that he was, Brakhage went back, and he sat there for, you know, 20 hours, came out, he said: "He's a genius." True story.

Maybe... "You suck." For 20 hours. Who cares, right? It's easy to just shrug nihilistically at this point. We're doomed anyway, right? Right, John? Right, bro? We've doomed ourselves.

And then Valentine de Saint-Point writes that on the black-board. She writes:

We're doomed anyway,
right?
Right, John?
Right, bro?

How is that even possible? Can she read our minds? Yes. (This is science fiction after all, right?) Valentine would say: "I'm in here and you're out there. But an extraordinarily thin, porous, translucent membrane separates us. You read my mind, I'll read yours."

The mutant aliens - with all their inimitable verve and convic-tion - return to work.

We see all their DIY-crafts - their drawings and cut-outs and coloring books, their little dioramas and mime-shows and animation, their crayons, markers, glitter, collages, clippings, etc., all their wildly miscellaneous bricolage. We see their Bolex 16mm camera on a tripod, their canisters of film, their hand-cranked movieola. It is as if a group of strange children were inventing cinema from scratch.

Although their ferocity has been sublimated into a kind of playful creativity, they retain traces of their origins in the violent and unpredictable nature of a darker dimension.

The vibe here combines the heroic zeal of the Stakhanovites, (those super-workers in wartime Soviet tank factories), the high-spirited industry of Santa's workshop, and, of course, the unceasing, meth-fueled creative activity at Warhol's studio/HQ on East 47th Street, in Midtown Manhattan.

Like cephalopods capable of changing color to match their surroundings, to camouflage themselves when threatened by predators, the mutant kids, when they feel threatened, instinctively turn into mini-Artauds - gaunt, ravaged, their hair lank and greasy, cigarettes dangling from the corners of their toothless mouths.

Their speech is a barely audible gibberish, an indistinct, incoherent murmur, something like Simlish punctuated with dolphin clicks.

We notice that the mutant kids don't care if the objects they're viewing or working on - photos, collages, drawings, writings, equations, etc.- are upside-down or right-side-up. They glean everything they need with a quick scan of the visual information either way, with equal accuracy.

Also, they don't write the way that humans write. Whereas we would write the word "cat" by inscribing the letters sequentially from left to right, "c" "a" "t" - the mutant aliens inscribe the letters one on top of the other. First the "c" then the "a" superimposed on the "c" and then the "t" superimposed on the "a." Whole sentences, whole paragraphs and pages of text are written that way, each new letter superimposed upon the last.

They are fanatical admirers of their teacher - a fanaticism sublimated, one might say, into an indefatigable industriousness. And whereas human pupils might experience some degree of trepidation and disquiet, for these mutant aliens, Valentine's magisterial brilliance provides great comfort.

They are both advanced and puerile. The umwelt of this alien intelligence centers around the anal zone, which Freud considered to be one of great symbolic confusion. (The infant does not much distinguish between feces, penises, babies, gifts, and so on.) Sex and caca. In this sense too, mini- Artauds.

Now we see a group of mutant aliens working avidly at a crafts table, cutting out photographs of What's My Line from old magazines and books... pasting them to rectangles of cardboard... gluing popsicle sticks to the backs so they can raise the photos in the air...

TIGHT on raised photograph of a blindfolded ARLENE FRANCIS -

ARLENE FRANCIS (V.O.)
Are you a famous chef?

TIGHT on photo of Artaud from The Theater and its Double -

ANTONIN ARTAUD (V.O.)
Non, Madame.

TIGHT on raised photograph of a blindfolded BENNETT CERF -

BENNETT CERF (V.O.)
I discern a French accent. Are you Jacques Cousteau?

TIGHT on photo of Artaud -

ANTONIN ARTAUD (V.O.)
Non, Monsieur.

Etc., etc., etc., etc., etc.

And from Artaud: "Non, Non, Non, Non, Non."

This should call to mind André Breton's remark about Artaud's "total refusal... which he formulated more aptly and more heatedly than anyone."

CUT TO:

INT. BEDROOM, CONDO IN BOCA RATON, FLA - SEVERAL HOURS LATER

Valentine de Saint-Point, in headphones, sleeveless black shirt and cut-offs, turning knobs, cuing disks, and dancing at a DJ console set up on a credenza at the opposite side of the room.

We hear nothing. All the music she's mixing is being fed directly into her earphones, but we watch her dance for a while in her sweaty trance…

Let's not marginalize or underestimate the centrality of the music she generates.
Later when we hear Chopin's Nocturne op. 9, No.2 at the CVS, or the bursts of Debussy, Balinese gamelan and Gudon (a hardcore band from Hiroshima) when she administers the Toilet Bowl Rorschach Tests, or, of course, the movie's climactic theme song, let's give credit where credit is due: to DJ Valentine de Saint-Point.

INT. LIVING ROOM, CONDO IN BOCA RATON, FLA

Tristan Tzara and F.T. Marinetti (respectively - as per the chyrons across the screen - the founders of Dada and Italian Futurism) and Antonin Artaud are playing mahjong. Old palsied men at this point - Tzara and Marinetti are each about 135 years old. But old men who, like cephalopods changing their colors to match their surroundings when threatened, can change into demons.

The sunlight streaming through the windows is blinding.

Everything looks like it's made out of polystyrene foam core covered with foil and shiny paper, like the Starship Enterprise, but with the candy-colored palette of a K-pop video.

The actors playing Artaud, Valerie de Saint-Point, Tzara, and Marinetti should approach their scenes as if they are dramatic reenactment segments on a "true crime" show.

Thanks to decades of heroin and cocaine addiction, his electrophilism and compulsive consumption of metal filings, and his irremediable isolation, Artaud has begun to resemble the monstrous protagonist of Tetsuo, the Iron Man.

Also, Artaud is clairvoyant and already knows that after his performance at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier at the age of 52, he'll die alone at the foot of the bed in the same motel room where John Wayne Gacy and Jayne Mansfield had decapitated each other in a suicide pact following the revelation that they'd been passing top-secret military secrets to the Red Chinese.

Listening to the Shogun Assassin Child Narrator, we should get the distinct feeling that he's making this all up as he goes along -

SHOGUN ASSASSIN CHILD NARRATOR (V.O.)

In the early morning of May 26, 1946, Artaud is met at Austerlitz station in Paris by notorious East End gangsters the Kray twins, Son of Sam, and Montecore, the deranged white tiger responsible for the career-ending mauling of beloved Las Vegas entertainer Roy Horn.

CUT TO:

INT. WARHOL SILVER FACTORY SCHOOL

OTS of mutant alien working with crayons on a coloring-book page depicting Montecore mauling Roy.

Remember, these strange, larval, compound-eyed, servo-appendaged, Adderall-snorting freaks will be happy to customize something for you "on-demand" - a paper mâché diorama of Tzara, Marinetti and Artaud playing mahjong in the living room of their condo, for instance. They basically live at the Warhol Silver Factory School. They never sleep. They're all about the

DIY, the bricolage, the cinéma brut, etc., etc. They're not above sprinkling their thickly impastoed poop with glitter and calling it "art" (what Jean Dubuffet's detractors would have dismissed as "cacaism").

CUT BACK TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM, CONDO IN BOCA RATON, FLA

Tzara, Marinetti, Artaud… mahjong… swallowing pills from little paper medicine cups… more mahjong.

From this one moment, we get a sense of the Boca condo as a kind of private sanitarium (with in-house DJ, 24-hour high-stakes mahjong, a robust electrophilic S&M face-sitting scene, etc., etc.).

Valentine de Saint-Point (big headphones still affixed to her ears) darts in and out of the room, gathering up the paper cups, grabbing a book from a shelf, plucking a cigarette out of some-one's pack, etc. We notice that she calls Artaud "Tony."

While the Shogun Assassin Child Narrator explains how Artaud ended up here, stay on the game, which is grim and tense, à la John Woo.

SHOGUN ASSASSIN CHILD NARRATOR (V.O.)
Artaud is taken to Dr. Delmas's clinic in Ivry-sur-Seine, where he's given a room in a new pavilion. Although he's in France in 1946, he insists on being transferred to a condo in Boca Raton in the year 2020, where he'll be able to play mahjong and take drugs for the rest of his life. When his caretakers demur, Artaud threatens to bludgeon them. (Seeking remnants of the ancient Celts in Ireland, he'd procured an ornately decorated "magic"

walking stick he said once belonged to St. Patrick, Jesus Christ, and Lucifer.) Not only do they acquiesce, but - so besotted are they by Artaud's genius - they put straitjackets on themselves and allow Artaud to beat them to death with the stick.

CUT TO:
INT. WARHOL SILVER FACTORY SCHOOL

The giggling mutants enact the foregoing scene using velcro restraints and a Nerf bat.

Whether this is a playful recreation of something that has already happened or the conjuring of a future event, that is to say, the ritualistic technology by which the mutant aliens (at the behest, perhaps, of Valentine de Saint-Point) actually cause an event to happen, we don't know. Full Metal Artaud is a science-fiction film, after all.

CUT BACK TO:
INT. LIVING ROOM, CONDO IN BOCA RATON, FLA

Mahjong playing.

SHOGUN ASSASSIN CHILD NARRATOR (V.O.)

In the evening of his first day in Boca, Artaud walks the streets for hours on end with Valentine de Saint-Point. She takes him to see André the Giant. According to Valentine, Artaud recites a "very beautiful poem of dereliction and fury for André the Giant who wept."

CUT TO:
INT. WARHOL SILVER FACTORY SCHOOL

Valentine de Saint-Point in front of blackboard covered with equations and diagrams:

VALENTINE DE SAINT-POINT

In the same sense that we can ask what a particle is from a physicist's point of view (and we can answer that a particle is a quantum excitation of a field), we can ask how the simulations of reality generated here at the Warhol Silver Factory School – particularly in the coloring books and the crude animations and abstract films - can be instantiated in the actual, empirical universe of the condo in Boca Raton. In other words, how does this here become that there?

CUT TO:
INT. DINER, BOCA RATON

Artaud is seated in a booth across from Valentine de Saint-Point. Using a file, he's grating metal onto his pasta.

SHOGUN ASSASSIN CHILD NARRATOR (V.O.)

The Café de Flore in Saint Germain-des-Pres was to become one of the principal creative sites of this final period of Artaud's life.

Montage of elderly Jewish couples in various stages of dementia at the diner.

CUT TO:
EXT. STREET

A shirtless black kid on a BMX bike performs a series of flamboyant tricks - stalls, grinds, bunny-hopping down stairs, etc - then…

SHIRTLESS BMX KID
(speaking directly to camera)

The Warhol Silver Factory School in Boca Raton and the Lycée Français School for Mutant Aliens in New York are probably the two most prestigious private schools in the country. Valentine de Saint-Point would say: "All my pupils are the crème de la crème. Give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life." Artaud took a slightly different approach. Now, Artaud adored Valentine. This was a woman who literally put electric eels on his perineum - just to be absolutely clear about their relationship and about Tony Artaud's devotion to her.
But Artaud said: "There is nothing I abominate and shit out so much as this idea of representation that is intended to socialize and at the same time paralyze monsters." That bears repeating: "There is nothing I abominate and shit out so much as this idea of representation." (Notice we keep returning to this idea of "caca" and "cacaism.") Artaud goes on to say: "I abject all signs. I create only machines of instant utility." An uncanny anticipation of Warhol's credo, his cri de guerre: "I want to be a machine." Could two human beings have been more different? And yet both shared this notion of a Theater of Cruelty. What else could you call Warhol's cruel hierarchical scene that took one last tortuous inward turn when the writer Valerie Solonas fired a .32 caliber bullet into his belly?

CUT TO:
INT. SCHOOL AUDITORIUM

On stage, the mutant children from the classroom are apparelled in turquoise choir robes. They sing, their pure, celestial voices consecrating the space and this moment -

CHILDREN

(singing, adagio and in liturgical harmonies)

Once upon a time there was an engineer,
Choo-Choo Charlie was his name we hear.
He had an engine and it sure was fun,
He used Good & Plenty candy,
to make his train run.
Charlie says, 'Love my Good & Plenty!'
Charlie says, 'Really rings the bell!'
Charlie says, 'Love my Good & Plenty!'
Don't know any other candy,
that I love so well!'

Footage or still photo of someone laughing uproariously in a movie theater, tears streaming down his face. (Perhaps from that scene in Preston Sturges' Sullivan's Travels in which shackled convicts watch Disney cartoons at a church.)

CUT TO:
INT. CVS PHARMACY

Seated on the floor of an aisle, a clerk is using a price gun to affix stickers to boxes of laxative gummies…

He pauses and addresses the camera:

CVS CLERK
The amount and intensity of work Artaud was to accomplish in the twenty-two months he still had to live proved to be enormous.
Certainly aware that he was pressed for time, he worked constantly, night and day, in all situations and surroundings - on

metro trains, automobiles, in cafes, while eating, while taking drugs. Only the drug comas of the last year of his life began to punch holes into his ferocious rhythm of work. He compacted the various layers of his work together, so that drawings entered his texts and texts entered his drawings. The last part of Artaud's life had no respite. It was relentlessly incendiary and furious. Artaud intended to produce new images of the human body, and did so. He wrote through extreme illness, ridicule and addiction, until he felt that he had said all that it was crucial for him to say. Towards the end of 1946, he produced two long and intricate poems, "Here Lies" and "The Indian Culture," during the course of one burst of writing on 25 November. Artaud created a vision of a virulent poetry composed of blood, mucous, cruelty and insurrection. Mud, sexuality, rot, and torture.

For these poems, Artaud developed a language which used many violent, excremental and sexual elements; he also soldered words together, and visually emphasized the parts of his poems where he worked with his invented language of incantation.

Drawings of nails, skulls and dancing bodies, and "mysterious operating machines." Into which he carefully burns holes with lit cigarettes. Adding imprecatory, hallucinatory words. Scarring and gouging the paper.

One of the doctors at Rodez recalled Artaud doing a self- portrait "in a rage, breaking one crayon after another." Artaud aims to reach the body directly, to establish an existence for the body in which all influence, all nature and all culture are torn away, so that the body is by itself, honed to bone and nerve. Artaud's depictions of the human body are machinistic, dismembered, surrounded by flying nails. They are drawn spotted with markings made so heavily they threaten to pierce the squared paper of the notebooks; daggers in many forms recur

as a motif, recalling Artaud's travels in Mexico and his fascination with the rituals of the Tarahumara Indians, whom he lived with there.

Full Metal Artaud should, at times, simulate an experimental film from the sixties (e.g., Jack Smith, Ron Rice, etc.) – fake scratches, emulsion bubbles on the surface, blank film leader, flickering and flaring momentarily into whiteness, where one of its reels would have been spliced to the next.

INT. ARTAUD'S BEDROOM, CONDO IN BOCA RATON

SHOGUN ASSASSIN CHILD NARRATOR (V.O.)
Artaud's psychiatrist had installed a huge block of wood in Artaud's room. Artaud struck it with hammers, pokers, and knives, finally reducing it to splinters as he tested the rhythm for the poems he was working on - the poems he would recite at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier.

We see Artaud doing this, but it's not "a huge block of wood" he's striking with hammers and knives as he works out the incantatory rhythms of his poetry. It's one of those big vertical cones of sliced meat you find at a shawarma stand.

Spitting out violent text after text from his toothless mouth, he speaks of how malicious beings come to attack him every night and drink his sperm; how he hates sexuality and all the organs of the body - especially the tongue and the heart, which would have to be excised before a true body of shattered bone and nerve could be created.

Or is it wood after all? Perhaps a shellacked wooden sculpture of a shawarma meat-cone made by the kids at the Warhol Silver

Factory School. The skewer spit running through the meat does look suspiciously like the kind of blue dowel you'd get at a crafts store.

EXCERPTS FROM ARTAUD'S WORK FLASH ACROSS THE SCREEN TOO QUICKLY TO BE READ. A BLUR.

INT. WARHOL SILVER FACTORY SCHOOL

A mutant alien is working with his crayons on a coloring-book depiction of Ed Gein accompanying Artaud to a Lakers game.
`
Gein is wearing a psychedelic, purple-splotched jumpsuit. The obvious inference here is that the jumpsuit is made out of the flayed purpuric skin of his grandmother.
Valentine's pupils all have huge crushes on her and are always vying for her attention, trying to provoke her, to get a rise out of her somehow.

But she's far too dignified, far too circumspect in her demeanor, to respond with anything beyond an indulgent smile.

CUT TO:
INT. LIVING ROOM, CONDO IN BOCA RATON, FLA

Valentine de Saint-Point shaves her armpits.

She steeps the shaved hair in boiled water, and she pours the strained liquid into three small beautiful ceramic cups.

Then, she serves it to Artaud, Tzara and Marinetti in a solemnly ritualistic, highly refined TEA CEREMONY.

CUT TO:

INT. WARHOL SILVER FACTORY SCHOOL

Written on the blackboard:

“There is in the immediate teeming of the mind a multiform and dazzling insinuation of animals.”
- Antonin Artaud

Erased. Written:

Truffles are another example - pungent fruiting bodies of certain types of fungi that live below the ground and whose lives depend on the amazing smells they produce. For a truffle to spread its spores, it must make itself attractive to animals. The animal - pig, dog, shrew, squirrel, or whoever - digs up and eats the truffles and then deposits the fungal spores in their feces.

Erased. Written:

Art Brut is precisely that which falls outside of any "transformation set" or "matrix of intelligibility.” The essence of the work of art brut lies in its illegibility, its incommunicability, and its indecipherability.

CUT TO:
EXT. A HEATH, AS IN WUTHERING HEIGHTS (THIS COULD ALSO BE A FIELD IN AN EMPTY STADIUM)

Artaud is lying supine across the heath (or stadium field).

Valerie de Saint-Point gives him an injection of cardizol, a seizure-provoking drug generally administered as a prelude to electroshock.

She removes her underpants.

She then grasps a jumper cable in each of her hands. The cables are attached to the engine of a monster truck.

With the enclasped jumper cables raised above her head, Valentine sits on Artaud's face.

When the driver of the truck guns the engine, the current courses through the cables, through Valentine's body and, via her electroconvulsive pussy, into Artaud.

The effect is incontrovertible. He is becoming more MONSTROUS, more FULLY METAL.

CUT TO:
INT. AN EMPTY WAREHOUSE

A Ventriloquist is seated on a stool with a Dummy on his lap.

As the Dummy speaks, the Ventriloquist ostentatiously eats a pastrami sandwich.

VENTRILOQUIST'S DUMMY
Artaud's physical suffering never stopped him working. He continued to write texts, draw, dance, and hammer at his wooden block in his condo, working to drive his pain away.
He sought out doctors who might prescribe laudanum for him, contacting friends in Florida to ask them to send him drugs. Finding it difficult to obtain laudanum regularly under black-market conditions, Artaud began to take enormous doses of chloral hydrate, which he swallowed in the form of a syrup. Chloral hydrate is an addictive, hypnotic drug, used in medical practice to kill pain and put patients to sleep rapidly. Artaud

found it hard to regulate his dose, and often fell into comas. When he went out unaccompanied by friends to watch over him, he often collapsed in the street.
Jackie Gleason was one of those friends devoted to obtaining laudanum and chloral hydrate for Artaud. (Gleason knew Artaud through Tzara and Marinetti whom he'd met at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich at a performance by Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings called Das Hochzeitsreisende, which would eventually serve as the basis for The Honeymooners.)
Gleason, a dedicated UFO buff, had been invited by his golf buddy, Richard Nixon, to see proof of extraterrestrials. Nixon had arranged for Gleason to be escorted through Homestead Air Force Base in Florida to view four embalmed aliens, "with small bald heads and disproportionately large ears.")
On Tuesday March 25, Nixon and Gleason swing by the condo in Boca Raton, pick up Artaud and bring him to Homestead. They leave him alone with one of the aliens, and when he doesn't come out for quite a long time, they become alarmed.

CUT TO:
INT. HOMESTEAD POLICE DEPARTMENT

DETECTIVE
We received a 911 call from Jackie Gleason at approximately 9:45 that night. Mr. Gleason expressed concern that an alien had assaulted Mr. Artaud. At first the dispatcher thought it was a prank because she could hear Nixon laughing in the background.

CUT TO:
INT. MEN'S ROOM, HOMESTEAD AIR FORCE BASE

Artaud prepares himself for his tryst with the embalmed alien.

As in a scene from Michael Mann's Thief, we're treated to a display of urgent DIY technical mastery as Artaud attaches a long, rubbery, uncooked hot dog to each finger - separating the linked frankfurters with a box-cutter, tearing the black electrical tape with his teeth, etc.

(Perhaps we also flash to this scene as depicted in a Warhol Silver Factory School coloring book.)

CUT TO:
INT. ISOLATION UNIT, HOMESTEAD AIR FORCE BASE

EMBALMED ALIEN (O.S.)
Come. I have a herring on the fire.

Artaud, with his ten long hot-dog fingers, enters the chamber.

He lies next to the Embalmed Alien.

They're seated inside the innermost secret chamber of Homestead Air Force Base, and yet - given their rapport, their obvious chemistry - it could be a decrepit apartment, a couch, overflowing ashtrays, etc.

Here, the Embalmed Alien evinces the breezy sprezzatura of Edie Sedgwick in Warhol's great film, Beauty #2.

EMBALMED ALIEN (CONT'D)
I think when you have short hair like this... when you have a... (air quotes) "boyish bob" like this... it makes the earrings all the more necessary.

ARTAUD
I completely agree.

It playfully flicks at its earrings.

EMBALMED ALIEN

Do you think they're pretty?

ARTAUD

Very much.

Samsara and Nirvana are perceived as one single reality. This is the quintessence of non-duality.

And the Embalmed Alien fills Artaud's anus with radioactive fungus. It uses its spined aedeagus to infuse thousands of fungal spores into his anus.

These fungal spores, of course, would germinate and develop into the "mutant aliens" or "mutant kids" who attend the Warhol Silver Factory School.

An act of procreative anal sex? It's not something we can clearly discern. We're guessing here.

Artaud remains largely impassive, a slight sneer the only acknowledgement of the sacred transmission, that moment of "the convulsive communication of what is ordinarily stifled."

Later… a sumptuous putrescence…

EMBALMED ALIEN

What a world we're enduring right now. And to have you in my life as such a precious friend, to have this enduring, indestructible relationship... well, it's quite what one desperately needs in these times, is it not?
Is the delirium you mention the "good kind"? Please let me know if there's anything I can do to be of some solace, even if it's just... murmuring about my balls.

ARTAUD
Your balls will remain sparkly for billions of years.

The Embalmed Alien gazes at him intently -

EMBALMED ALIEN
There's a piece of metal stuck in your brain. What genius inserted it?
CUT TO:
INT. WARHOL SILVER FACTORY SCHOOL

The mutant children are making beautiful, brightly colored, traditional origami boogers.

One of them flicks an origami booger at the viewscreen hitting Kate Winslet in the head and knocking her off the Titanic and into the sea.

We see flicked origami boogers hit Tony Montana in Scarface, we see them hit Ryan Gosling in The Notebook, Patrick Swayze in Ghost, Ethan Hawke in Before Sunset, Gene Kelly in Singin' in the Rain, etc., etc.

When someone's hit with an origami booger, he or she emits a loud arcade video-game grunt or groan and falls down.

CUT TO:
Footage or still photo of someone laughing uproariously in a movie theater, tears streaming down his face.

CUT TO:
INT. TRAILER

A hair & make-up artist is shaving "Artaud."

She's consulting various photographs of Artaud: playing Jean-Paul Marat in Abel Gance's Napoleon, as the monk Massieu in Carl Dreyer's The Passion of Joan of Arc; sitting on a bench on the grounds of the asylum in Rodez (May 24, 1946) wearing an oversized woolen suit, alongside Dr. Gaston Ferdiere and the head nurse Adrienne Regis; in his room in the clinic at Ivry-sur-Seine, etc.
She pauses for a moment... and then takes another photograph - a personal photograph - from one of the pockets in her smock...

TIGHT ON PHOTO - it's a carpenter ant lethally infected with the pathogenic fungus, Ophiocordyceps lloydii. Two fungal fruiting bodies sprout from the inert body of the insect.

Nothing needs to be said here. We realize that she's lost some-one extremely dear to her and that, no, she hasn't been able to just "move on with her life" as so many of her well- intentioned friends have urged her to do. One might be forgiven (after all, one could read virtually anything into her expressionless face) for thinking that she was looking at a photograph of some ear-nest paramour who'd been gassed at Ypres...

One thinks of Marinetti's collage-poem "In the Evening, Lying on Her Bed, She Reread the Letter from Her Artilleryman at the Front."

We watch her impassively process a subconscious chain- reaction of apercus as she accommodates herself somehow to the inescapable Hobbesian (perhaps de Sadean) reality of it all - that life is cruelty, that parasitic treachery is standard operating procedure from worlds microbial to the stellar, that every day is witness to these little, trivial, innumerable Grand Guignol horrors, everywhere, everywhere.

It's hard not to think to yourself, well, it's all just "work product" from the Warhol Silver Factory School anyway.

(And one almost has the feeling that the end credits from The Munsters could be appended right here to great effect.)

CUT TO:
INT. WARHOL SILVER FACTORY SCHOOL
Over various shots of mutant aliens cutting out pictures from magazines, drawing, working on their coloring books, on their laptops -

- **Namio Harukawa's fetishistic illustrations with Valentine's head cut & pasted.**

- **An homage to Jacques-Louis David's painting The Death of Marat made with yarn and glued macaroni.**

- **An elaborate display of artwork celebrating cloacal birth, and Artaud's paternity in particular.**

SHOGUN ASSASSIN CHILD NARRATOR (V.O.)
Intellectually, these kids far far surpass human children their age. They are the sequel. The Next Generation. These are the true offspring conceived when Nixon and Jackie Gleason

brought Artaud to see the Embalmed Alien at the Homestead Air Force Base and it impregnated Artaud, who was so high from smoking a cigar that Gleason had dipped in PCP that he was never quite sure if he'd hallucinated the whole event or if it had actually happened.
Certainly the creature left thousands of spores in Artaud's anal cavity, spores that were spread when Artaud shit in the woods outside the planetarium.
We know that these excreted spores developed into the mutant children in the classroom. Whether or not residual or impacted spores contributed to the advanced colorectal cancer with which Artaud was diagnosed in January 1948 is not certain.

CUT TO:
INT. CVS PHARMACY

As the Clerk sits in the aisle, putting price stickers on containers of hemorrhoid ointment -
We hear Claude Debussy's Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun.

CUT TO:
INT. WARHOL SILVER FACTORY SCHOOL

Written on blackboard:

"What a lark! What a plunge!" - Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway

Erased. Written -

"... good and evil fused together gush from your royal gangrenous bosom in impetuous surges as torrent does from rock - through the secret spell of a blind force." - the Comte de Lautreamont

CUT TO:
INT. EMPTY WAREHOUSE

The Dummy is seated on the knee of the Ventriloquist, who is getting dental work done as the Dummy speaks -

VENTRILOQUIST'S DUMMY

It was Jean Dubuffet's idea that Artaud and Valentine de Saint-Point appear on Shark Tank and try to raise money to help cover the cost of the private clinic in Ivry-sur- Seine, i.e., the condo in Boca Raton. For the occasion, the mutant kids fashion an IKEA box-mask using white laminated particle board.

Intercut with actual footage and/or montage of still photos (as we did with What's My Line?) of Shark Tank.

INT. SHARK TANK
The doors open and Artaud (his head encased in the white IKEA box) is led by Valentine de Saint-Point down the hallway toward the panel of "sharks" in an agonizingly slow Noh procession.

Finally they stop -

VALENTINE DE SAINT-POINT

Sharks, today I am offering you the opportunity to invest $250,000 for a 15% equity stake in Antonin Artaud.

A Mutant Alien hands out books (e.g., Susan Sontag's Selected Writings anthology, The Theater and Its Double, Derrida's essay on the drawings, Artaud, A Critical Reader, etc.) to the seated Sharks.

VALENTINE DE SAINT-POINT (CONT'D)
What you are about to see is the personification of Thyestes when he realizes he's devoured his own children:

Using an Allen wrench, Valentine removes the front section of the Noh IKEA mask, and -

Artaud SCREAMS, letting out the most inhuman sound that has ever come from a man's throat.

Despite slight interest from Mark Cuban, no funds are raised.

CUT TO:
INT. BATHROOM, GRACELAND

A fat, drugged-out Elvis/Nixon chimera in a gold lame suit - a single hybrid ogre - sits on the toilet.

CUT TO:
INT. BEDROOM, GRACELAND - CONTINUOUS

Artaud is on the bed - sitting amidst a welter of Domino's pizza boxes, writing a song for Elvis Nixon... scrawling on a large drawing pad... He's humming to himself, trying to get the lyrics just right...

He gets up off the bed, walks over to the closed bathroom door, and knocks on it with his magic walking stick -

ARTAUD
You're constipated, right?

Later -

They get high together and commiserate with each other about their respective intestinal problems.

Later -

SHOT of Elvis Nixon at the window watching Artaud drive off on his Vespa.

CUT TO:
INT. LIVING ROOM, CONDO IN BOCA RATON, FLA

Tristan Tzara roller-skates into condo living room to take his medication.

MARINETTI
What are you, in fucking Boogie Nights or something?

Later…
While Artaud is out walking his octopus or directing traffic with his tuning fork…

Valentine de Saint-Point administers THE TOILET BOWL RORSCHACH TESTS (more art brut, i.e., "cacaism" via the Warhol Silver Factory School).

Tzara and Marinetti are each shown a schematic drawing of a toilet bowl with an inkblot floating in it and asked to identify what he sees. (Each inkblot is, for all intents and purposes, identical.)

As each considers the inkblot, we hear -

three seconds of Debussy, three seconds of gamelan, three seconds of Gudon (a hardcore band from Hiroshima).

F.T. MARINETTI
Lee Harvey Oswald grabbing his stomach after he's shot by Jack Ruby

TRISTAN TZARA
Juan Marichal hitting Jonny Roseboro with a bat

F.T. MARINETTI
A rat in NYC dragging a large slice of pizza down the steps of a subway
station

TRISTAN TZARA
Red Army soldiers hoisting the hammer-and-sickle flag over the Reichstag in Berlin in 1945.

Etc, etc., etc.

CUT TO:
Video of Keith Richards talking about his relationship with John Lennon, about how sometimes Lennon wanted to take a break from being a Beatle by being a Rolling Stone for a night or two.

EXT. STREET

Following a series of tricks -

SHIRTLESS BMX KID
I thought Artaud would appreciate The Human Centipede, but he didn't seem to really respond to it one way or the other. He LOVED that old movie Stella Dallas with Barbara Stanwyck

though. He'd watch that and he'd cry and cry. Boo-hoo cry, tears streaming down his cheeks.
(shrugs)
He was out of his mind.
(laughs)
In fact, Artaud was so crazy that a lot of the time he thought he was on the phone with Little Lotta!

CUT TO:

Split Screen: Artaud on the phone / Little Lotta on the phone.

OR

Alien Mutants at the Warhol Silver Factory School create a split-screen image by pasting a photo of Artaud talking on the phone next to a cartoon image of Little Lotta talking on the phone.

CUT TO:
INT. CRYPTOCURRENCY MINE

Various shots of Artaud electrocuting himself in a cryptocurrency mine in an old aluminum smelting plant, and becoming more monstrous.

CUT TO:

A Troll Doll with pink hair and a plastic triceratops in a shoebox painted to resemble a bullring in Spain.

CUT TO:

An extremely graphic and disturbing image of a SpaghettiOs Deviled Egg.

FRAN DRESCHER AS SAINT TERESA OF AVILA (V.O.)
I saw in the angel's hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it.

CUT TO:

Footage or still photo of someone laughing uproariously in a movie theater, tears streaming down his face.

CUT TO:
INT. WARHOL SILVER FACTORY SCHOOL

Written on the blackboard:
"What the wizard finds so thrilling is to transform: beauties into beasts, beasts into beauties. This is a highly instructive procedure." - Jean Dubuffet

CUT TO:
INT. KARAOKE BAR

Artaud (in one of his most grotesque and wrathful incarnations) and Valentine do a karaoke version of Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers recording of "Islands in the Stream."

CUT TO:
INT. F.T. MARINETTI'S BEDROOM, CONDO, BOCA RATON

Tzara and Marinetti are in their pajamas, lying next to each other together in bed. They're waxen, their breathing shallow, their eyes open and fixed.

Seated on a chair next to the bed, Valentine is reading them a bedtime story:

VALENTINE DE SAINT-POINT
(from Frankenstein)

"I was created apparently united by no link to any other being in existence. I, like the arch fiend, bore a hell within me; and, finding myself unsympathized with, wished to tear up the trees, spread havoc and destruction around me, and then to have sat down and enjoyed the ruin.
From that moment I DECLARED EVERLASTING WAR AGAINST THE SPECIES."

CUT TO:
EXT. STREET

In a brazen game of one-upmanship with the poet Gerard de Nerval (namely his notorious promenade through the gardens of the Palais-Royal with his pet lobster), Artaud and deranged Philadelphia crime boss Little Nicky Scarfo each walks a kaleidoscopic, polychromatic octopus on a retractable leash. As they walk on their tentacles, the octopuses assume the coloration and patterns of anything near them.

CUT TO:

Footage of Gary Coleman and Todd Bridges from Diff'rent Strokes over which we hear:

HILARY CLINTON (V.O.)

They are not just gangs of kids anymore. They are often the kinds of kids that are called superpredators. No conscience. No empathy. We can talk about why they ended up that way, but first we have to bring them to heel.

CUT TO:

Footage of US drone attack on marriage procession in Yemen intercut with Barack Obama crying about the massacre of children at the Sandy Hook Elementary School.

CUT TO:
INT. WARHOL SILVER FACTORY SCHOOL

Incomprehensible montage of fragments of scenes from a puppet show the mutant aliens are putting on entitled "The 7-Piece Chicken Lord." The puppet show itself constitutes a kind of hallucinatory home-movie, a puppet show within a puppet show, a Making-of "The 7-Piece Chicken Lord."

This should reinforce the movie's subplot - its B-story - that Full Metal Artaud is an "experimental" film shot in 16mm at the Warhol Silver Factory School.

(It is "steampunk" in the sense that its auteurs, the intellectually advanced mutant aliens, are using the anachronistic technology of 1960s underground filmmakers.)

CUT TO:
EXT. STREET

Artaud is directing traffic with a tuning fork, electrodes protruding from his skull.

He puts the vibrating tuning fork down on a manhole cover causing the Planet Earth to crack.

One might ask here:

Has Ragnarok begun? Have all fettered monsters broken loose? Will everything be sucked into that cavity in the bed which swallowed up the corpses of my father and his father and his father's father?

CUT TO:
INT. WARHOL SILVER FACTORY SCHOOL

Written on blackboard:

"We intend to sing to the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness. Courage, boldness, and rebelliousness will be the essential elements of our poetry. Up to now literature has exalted contemplative stillness, ecstasy, and sleep. We intend to exalt movement and aggression, feverish insomnia, the racer's stride, the mortal leap..." - F.T. Marinetti

Erased. Written -

"From now on, we want to shit in different colors so as to adorn the zoo of art with all the flags of all the consulates." - Tristan Tzara

Erased. Written -

"My mind, exhausted by discursive reason, wants to be caught up in the wheels of a new, an absolute gravitation." - Antonin Artaud

CUT TO:
INT. CVS PHARMACY

The clerk is stocking shelves. Stops to address camera -

CLERK

After the failure to raise money on Shark Tank, a decision was made to organize an event - the "Tete-a- tete with Antonin Artaud" at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier.

Taking place on January 13, 1947, this would become the notorious, lacerating and numinous performance toward which Artaud's life had been inexorably leading since his release from the Rodez asylum. He would read - or attempt to read - four texts: "Le Retour d'Artaud, Le Momo," "Alienation Et Magie Noire," "La Culture Indienne," and "Ci-Git."

The night was both disaster and apotheosis. Drawing partly from those hoping to be entertained by a "famous lunatic," but also from Paris's artistic community (including Paulhan, Gide, Camus, and Breton), the Vieux-Colombier was at its 300-person capacity.

The heat in the cramped theater caused people to faint. Artaud was in a highly charged, strained state. His delivery was shredded with silences, and his hands fluttered nervously around his face and gripped it. The poems were almost inaudible, sobbed and stammered out into the room.

His words poured out chaotically, in a hoarse whisper, his speech punctuated by stuttering, sobs, and agonizingly long pauses.

At one point near the end, Artaud dropped all his papers, and he fell to the ground in anguish, trying to gather them up so he might continue.

Gide rose to his feet, climbed up onto the stage to embrace Artaud, and guided him to the wings.

Some lamented the exploitation of a pathetically sick artist, deploring "the atrocious bad taste in the exhibition of such misery."
But others were awestruck.
One spectator described Artaud's appearance as "so terrifying" and his performance as "so stupefying, so devoid of a relationship with simple words and acts, that we were left in a complete trance, unable to speak."
As Andre Gide later recalled, the audience leaving the theater that night "remained silent. What could they say? They had just seen an unhappy man, fearfully shaken by a god."
Michel Foucault has said that here, that night, Artaud evoked "that space of physical suffering and terror which surrounds or rather coincides with the void."
Gide concluded that it was Artaud's finest hour: "Never before had he seemed so admirable to me."

At this point, a CVS MANAGER approaches the clerk to reprimand him (berate would be more accurate) about talking so much to the interviewer about Artaud instead of doing his job, i.e., for dereliction of his responsibilities for which he'd be more than happy to fire him if he didn't get back to work immediately.

The clerk takes exception to the manager's belligerent, hectoring attitude and the abusive, disrespectful language he's using.

He gets up and pushes him away. The manager pushes him back, much harder. And the clerk falls backwards, striking his head on the edge of a shelf. He rubs his head, sees the blood on his fingers, leaps up and lunges at the manager.

Very quickly this escalates into is an unbelievably intense, brutal, and extended fight. Obviously there's an extraordinary

amount of animosity that's been festering between these two that's now exploded into the open.

The intimacy, the down-and-dirtiness, the nasty banality of the violence is especially harrowing to watch as they roll on the floor up and down the aisle, struggling, flailing, gouging, twisting, pummeling at each other…

The tactility of clothes, muscles, skin. The implacable hostility of insects in combat.

These are two enraged but completely unskilled agonists who are trying furiously to hurt each other. In its prolonged, close-range, strenuous exertions, it has the feel of that kitchen fight scene in Torn Curtain.

We experience a lost-in-its-throes-ness here.

THIS IS BY FAR THE LONGEST SCENE IN THE MOVIE. We should feel its disproportionate, unwarranted duration. Not only is it too long relative to what we've seen thus far, it's tonally incongruous, like a scene from a different movie. Or a scene that's ruptured and expelled itself from the movie.

At some point, in mid-combat, with no resolution or cessation of hostilities in sight, we have no choice but to finally

CUT TO:
INT. WEDDING HALL

A bunch of boorish, intoxicated frat-boy guests are making salacious, puerile toasts.

This goes on for awhile.

Then it's ARTAUD'S turn.

He stands up, looks around, uncertain why he's here, in search of a familiar face... finally -

ARTAUD
I would like to read a poem called
"The Return of Artaud, Le Mômo -

DRUNK MALE GUESTS
Mômo! Mômo! Mômo! Mômo! Mômo! Mômo Mômo!

ARTAUD

The anchored mind
screwed into me
by the psycho-lubricious
thrust
of heaven
is the one that thinks
every temptation,
every desire,
every inhibition.
o dedi
o dada orzoura
o dou zoura
a dada skizi

TIGHT on Artaud's tortured, ravaged face, the cigarette dangling from the toothless mouth, as he realizes that he's been tricked (or "bewitched," as he preferred to say) - that this is the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier!

Bewitched by whom, though? By the same individual whom, he wrote, returned every morning to accomplish the "revolting, criminal, murderous, sinister task" which was to render him an "eternally bewitched man." The compass needle of Artaud's delusional paranoia would surely have pointed to Valentine de Saint-Point and the mutant aliens she'd so conscientiously cultivated or perhaps to Little Lotta or even Saint Teresa.

CUT TO:
INT. THÉÂTRE DU VIEUX-COLOMBIER

ARTAUD

o kaya
o kaya pontoura
o ponoura
a pena
poni

Menendi anenbi
Embenda
Tarch inemptle
O marchti rombi
Tarch paiolt
A tinemptle

Orch pendui
O patendi
Ko ti aunch
A ti aunch
Aungbli

Once we cut away from this initial shot of Artaud, we never return to him in this scene.

All we will see from here on in (to the sound of Artaud's glossolalia and/or to complete silence) is:

FOOTAGE OF THE CRAZED HYPER-AGGRESSIVE SLAM-DANCING OF HARDCORE PUNK FANS IN A MOSH PIT.

(For reference, see Gulch's performance at the "This is Hardcore Fest" at the Franklin Music Hall in Philadelphia, PA on July 28, 2019 or Gulch live at the 1720 Warehouse in LA on Jan. 18, 2020.)

This should go on and on too. More temporal distension here. These sweaty ricocheting bodies (as if in a human particle accelerator) in the void of absolute silence or unintelligible incantations.

This is - because we don't flinch - how we depict the hallowed "Tete-a-Tete par Antonin Artaud."

CUT TO:
EXT. MOTEL

Artaud - his monstrous form glistening in the drizzling rain and in the LED cobra-head streetlights - staggers across the motel parking lot, toting a cake box by its crisscrossed bakery string.

He enters a room.

CUT TO:
INT. MOTEL ROOM

Artaud sits on the floor at the foot of the bed, and then opens the box -

TIGHT on cake toppers: a clown and a buxom woman with long platinum hair.

Artaud removes an envelope from the box, opens it and reads the card:

I salute Antonin Artaud, for his passionate, heroic negation of everything that causes us to be dead while alive.
xoxo, André Breton

Artaud tosses the card aside and begins devouring the cake which has been laced with a Novichok nerve agent.

He freezes in that cataleptic posture for eternity, with - a la Hijikata's butoh version - a shoe (like a fish) in his mouth.

Right before he dies, he laughs at the notion of Gacy and Mansfield as spies who'd funneled information to the Red Chinese and then decapitated themselves in this very room.

He knows, at that moment, that the alien mutants from the Warhol Silver Factory School (the demonic spawn from his own cancerous rectum, the "creme de la creme") have been putting voices in his head all along.

And he knows that Andre Breton - the capo di tutti capi of Surrealism - had issued the fatwa, had put out the hit on him. Breton might have called it euthanasia, he might have claimed that he was just speeding Artaud to his next karmic incarnation, but it was a hit all the same.
Breton knew fully well that when it came to the absurd, the irrational, the permanent rebellion, Artaud considered the Surrealists merely tourists on vacation.

Whereas Artaud spent World War II receiving electroconvulsive shock treatments at a lunatic asylum in southern France that was perpetually on the verge of being overrun by Nazis, Breton spent it in New York City, partying at Studio 54 with Claude Levi-Straus, so Artaud's very existence constituted an unacceptable reproach, an affront, to Breton's inclination for expediency and self-preservation. Artaud had to die. It was a papal bull issued by Breton himself, who poisoned the batter and baked the cake with his own hands.

SHOGUN ASSASSIN CHILD NARRATOR (V.O.)

Here sits Antonin Artaud. This revenant. Risen from fifty-one electroconvulsive shock treatments, from fifty-one crucifixions, risen from the black sea like Godzilla. Now this metal effigy of himself, this seated sarcophagus, this paralyzed android enthroned at the center of a candy-colored mandala... forever more. Forever and ever and ever and ever.

But dead?

If he were actually dead, wouldn't the authorities have covered his face with a freshly prepared omelette?

CUT TO:

THE MUNSTERS END CREDITS

The Munsters Theme Song and...

Production Executive
IRVING PALEY

Developed by

NORM LIEBMANN and
ED HASS

From a Format by
AL BURNS And
CHRIS HAYWARD

Music
JACK MARSHALL

Director of Photography
ENZO A. MARTINELLI

Art Director..... HENRY LARCH

Film Editor..... BUD S. ISSACS

Unit Manager..... JAMES HOGAN

Assistant Director... DOLPH M. ZIMMER

Set Decorators..... JOHN McCARTHY and AUDREY BLASDEL

Costume Supervisor... VINCENT DEE

Makeup..... BUD WESTMORE

Etc., etc.

13

Homemade:
The Pure Joy of Reckless Invention

It's 3 September 2021 (Can you believe how long it took to do this book?), the second day since Hurricane Ida devastated the Northeast, turning the New York City subway system into the world's least inviting water ride. Mark is recovering from a painful medical procedure (which sounds suspiciously like the "natural childbirth" version of a transesophageal echocardiogram only he never asked his doctor to "hold the Oxy") as well as night terrors from the PTSD he got texting Gaby as she made her way from a Bronx video-shoot home to Brooklyn during the worst of the unprecedented deluge. He sounds like he's been gargling razor blades as we connect over the phone to begin our preface to the excerpts from his latest novel, the equally unprecedented **Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit,** *in which he costars with his cherished daughter…*

ML: I feel a little distracted. There's a lot on my mind so I don't necessarily want to have an *official official official* **Session about a book that's so precious to me. But I did jot some things down-to the best of my remembrance, the things I was initially contemplating, the imperatives I was playing with, at the very beginning:**

The first thing is that this was going to be the second in a series my friend Kip (Williams, director of one of my favorite Jeff Bridges films, 2004's The Door in the Floor!-RK) had sort of suggested to me. There was a Mom Book (*Gone With the Mind***) and this was going to be the Daughter Book. In my head, prospectively, there would be a Mercedes Book but this was the Gaby Book and it would be distinctly precious to me because it involves my daughter and our relationship is different from any other.**

Another thing I thought about at the beginning was that, because this was Gaby, I didn't have the kind of latitude nor the desire to play with Gaby the way I did with my mother. I sort of tricked my mother. I didn't tell her anything about how the recording of anything she said was going to be used. I went over and got her to talk for many, many hours about her pregnancy with me, the sociocultural context of that pregnancy, what being a 19-year-old pregnant woman was like in Jersey City in the mid-1950s and she delivered this beautifully eloquent, very comprehensive account.

But it would never have worked if I'd said, "I'm going to paste this in as your crazy introduction of me in a reading at a mall." It would have ruined it. It would have made her self-conscious. She'd have tried to do something she thought was appropriate or funny. It just wouldn't have worked.

That's not something I would ever do with Gaby. I also didn't want to put Gaby on the spot and ask her to talk about anything that would be revealing or embarrassing or about her friends or boyfriends or anything like that. I knew she wouldn't feel

comfortable with that. So I had to figure out a way to collaborate with Gaby that would be OK with her because I would never do anything that wouldn't be, you know?

I had a kind of two-step solution to that. First, I thought *OK, I'm just going to do a book that's basically* **for her** *instead of with her and about her.* **But then ultimately I realized that's kind of weaseling out of it. It's taking the easy way out. And, again, these things happen on a slow continuum. It's not like they're great epiphanies. Though occasionally they are.**

Gradually I realized that it would be possible to do a book about the culture of Gaby and me, the culture we've developed together. The way we are with each other, the way we spend time with each other, the way we talk to each other and feel about each other. The culture of us.

And that brought in a whole slew of immediate imperatives. The first was to do a kind of anthropological portrait of Gaby and me as a unique, self-contained culture of two. Basically a tribe of two. And that's where this idea came in for an ethnography, which is the anthropological term for a study of a particular group of people. To do an ethnographic portrait of the two of us. And that, obviously, is mirrored and embedded in the whole idea of the ethnographic study of the Chalazian Mafia Faction in the book. But it's actually an ethnographic study of Gaby and me. Or simultaneously. Or in the end. Or blah, blah, blah.

To a great degree, I've always thought that my work is *about* **reading. That one of the things that happens to someone experiencing my work, hopefully, is a kind of euphoric recognition of what reading is or can really feel like. We've talked about this a**

lot. I'm very much concerned with what that experience is like. For me, writing is about choreographing the reader's experience as opposed to expressing something within me. It's about triggering things in the reader. I think about it in that way probably more than many writers do.

So I wanted to address that in a more direct way in this book and one of the things I'm most proud of is deciding that the most direct way of confronting the phenomenon of reading, the most perfect way to do that would be to have someone reading an eye chart. Which I would rank among my great achievements! I just think it's so perfect and yet it's so funny. It's perfect in that it's so ridiculous!

I was really happy with the idea and I had two confirmational experiences I'll tell you about: I had like a page and a half, kind of just dialogue between the Optometrist and the Patient. It's sort of what you see in the first couple of pages in the book except that it was coy. It didn't situate the scene the way I ultimately did in the book. It forced the reader to infer from the dialogue where it took place.

I brought it one night to a dinner with Michael Pietsch. And I'll only do that when I'm really excited about something, you know, share it with someone. With you, it's different. I'll share things much more readily to show you what's happening that day. So we're at the restaurant and Michael's reading it right there while we're having drinks. He said, "This is so great. This is something only you could do." But at some point while reading, he asked, "I'm not sure, is this set at an optometrist's office?" And I said, "Yeah, yeah. Maybe I should be more clear about it." But he said, "No, it *becomes* clear and it's great blah, blah, blah." But when I thought about it, I said to myself *You're*

being coy. Why be coy about it? Just say where it is and what's happening.

That was the first confirmation I had about this material being as surprising a take on all this as I thought it was and as funny and as perfect. Then I showed something to Jeremy (Pikser, writer of one of my favorite Warren Beatty films, 1998's Bulworth!-RK) over drinks at a bar and Jeremy just said, "That's what you're doing in a book about reading? That's just outrageously good. That's so funny!" So these confirmed what I knew. I mean I had a feeling. To have someone sitting there reading from something on the wall under the guidance of this person-I mean maybe I'll never have another idea as satisfying to me as that again. It's great!

RK: And the really genius thing about it is it allowed you to…

ML: I'm going to say what you were just going to say. There are an infinite number of transmutations of the text I can play with because of that which all make perfect, logical sense in that context. Including the most obvious one: misreadings! And, in one way, it will all be typically kaleidoscopic text but, in another way, something everyone has experienced: "Is it better like this or like that, you know?"

RK: "Oh no, I wasn't even close!"

ML: And the first is, "Gosh, I was way off on that one!" It's one of these things that suits my purposes so beautifully, which is a thing I've been doing in *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack, Gone With the Mind* **and this book. A kind of logically necessitated mayhem. So there's that, the whole area of reading.**

Then there's the whole area of alcohol. I don't think I'd ever written about my-it's a funny word they use-my "relationship" with alcohol and I wanted to in this book because I also think it's part of Gaby's and my relationship. We have a wonderful time at bars, first of all, just sitting and talking and having drinks. It makes me think of something my dearly departed father once said to me.

I was sort of grieving the loss of Gaby when she was about eleven or twelve. There wasn't any kind of alienation. It was just Gaby getting older and having friends but I kind of felt like I wasn't this deified Number One quite anymore. Friends become very important for adolescents. So I was really kind of mourning this perceived loss, which is so silly in retrospect but it's how I felt. And I wrote a whole screenplay about that, this thing called Hurricane Jerry.

Anyway, I was once talking to my father about all this and he told me, "You will have a relationship with Gaby that you can't even imagine right now when she gets a little older and it's going to be an incredible thing." And that happened. Over the years I've met Gaby at various places and we hang out for hours and talk and talk. Obviously, that's a kind of foundational interaction in *Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit.* **It's what we're doing in the second part of the book in Kermunkachunk in that bar.**

Another thing I was thinking about in the beginning was sort of alcohol abuse to some degree. Drinking too much is something Gaby has seen me do throughout a certain part of her life. I don't do that really anymore but she's seen that. So I wanted there to be some of that, which is the source of all those lines where Gaby says, "Dad, you're so drunk you're reading the wrong screen!" and all that kind of stuff.

RK: Not to mention all the crap you get from the Professor.

ML: Yes, that whole portrait-right! Isn't there a line where he says I hydroplaned on a slick of my own vomit? Yes, all of that. All of that was another imperative I wanted in this book. Again, I'm enumerating these things but I had no idea at the time how they were all going to work in one book.

Also I was very hot around this time on the idea of some conjunction of crime and mysticism, which is in a way the origin of the Divine Hermits, right? The Divine Hermits serve in an advisory capacity, if not a leadership capacity, to the Chalazian Mafia Faction.

RK: As they levitate ithyphallically…

ML: So these were the primary architectural elements I wanted. I wasn't quite sure how that could be but these were the things that were most prominently, most conspicuously floating around in my head. And it wasn't until I started working on it that the topology of the book made itself apparent to me. There's a really interesting thing that happens in the book, which is a kind of inversion or perversion or mangling of the usual narrative chronology.

This is demonstrated in the fact that the Father is furious at the Professor for what he wrote in the Introduction. Now that's logically impossible given the organization of a book because, obviously, the Introduction had to be written *after* the book was and, not to give anything away to anyone who hasn't read the book, but it becomes a very big deal, my anger at the Professor. I think I say to Gaby in one conversation something like, "Never mind his portrayal of me. He slathered you in seductive praise."

And I think at that point Gaby says,"Yeah, you know I think you're right. It was a little creepy."

These are all conversations that are sort of impossible except for the fact that I saw the organization of the book in almost spatial terms, by which I mean just the physical dimensions of the book. So the Introduction comes first and any characters that are in a part of the book that comes after the Introduction are, of course, aware of it. It's as if the Introduction was the anteroom and they had to walk through it to get to where they are in the book, to get to the Bar Pulpo.

All of these things and the opportunities they afforded me in making the sort of shapes I like-the non-orientable surfaces where there's no inside or outside and the sort of inside-outness of the chronology of the book-realizing all those possibilities happened along the way. But the other things I had in my head before. The anthropological take on the culture of Gaby and me, the world of reading, alcohol and the crime/mysticism hybrid were things I'd been thinking about.

I tend to want to put everything I'm thinking about into something when I'm writing it. You know, why not? It's a very maximalist attitude. It's like what we've discussed about some of the artists who've had a big impact when I was younger. Rauschenberg, for example. Artists who'd find, you know, all kinds of things-a bed, a tire, a stuffed goat and make something out of those things. Putting them *all* in because, if you don't put them all in, you're making a judgement about what belongs and what doesn't. And you're only able to make that judgement if you have a pre-existing model for what you think something should be. And that's not going to be exciting. So one way of sabotaging one's reversion to something comfortably pre-existing is to force yourself to use it all!

RK: When we were talking the other day, you referred to this book as "homemade." Can you expand on that?

ML: What I meant is that I've always to some degree segregated my experiences, the experiences I considered conducive to and useful as source material. There were imaginative experiences that were artistic or literary and then those that were more quotidian or familial. Distinguishing between the two and really dealing those cards out into two different hats also sort of distinguished what I thought made me interesting as a writer as opposed to what made me perhaps good company.

I'm calling the "homemade" the more quotidian and familial sorts of things, the things that might make people say, "You're fun to be with." And I don't think there's another one of my books that comes close to integrating those two to the degree this one does. *Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit* **may even be preponderantly homemade. I just finally completely relaxed into the** *homemadeness* **to the point where there are many things in the book that are riffs and private exchanges and ongoing refrains that I have with Gaby and Mercedes-just things that I would say in the course of living in my home in my family that I would write down so that my life with Gaby and Mercedes became a proper ongoing laboratory for the work whereas, before, I had what felt like a secret underground lab and that's where I did all** *that* **work. Like in the old horror movies. Then I would come up out of that lab, take off my lab coat and inhabit a different role. In this book, there's no difference.**

So that's what I mean by the homemadeness. And I think you can feel that in this book. I think that makes the experience of reading this book different from reading anything that came

before. This is a book where I have dropped and rejected a kind of literary criteria completely and I don't think I've quite done that before.

The other thing is that in this book there's a capitulation to a kind of unmatched freedom in moves I make, just a pure recklessness. It feels that way to me, that at any given moment, I'm willing to do *anything.* That includes my receptivity to the randomness of the input I'm getting in the process of writing it. Which I think is reflected in the book by the whole idea of the shuffling of tiles at the Floating Casino-a kind of extemporaneousness, a spirit of improvisation.

The imperative is to try to have the reader experience as exuberantly as I do the making of the book. I think what I'm trying to get at is almost something like virtual reality where the reader can strap on a helmet and feel the making of the book along with me, get in the driver's seat with me. I think you feel that way most acutely with certain instances when you can feel a kind of sudden leap or abrupt detour. When it's both a surprise and you kind of see how that could happen, that's when the reader is in the driver's seat with me.

I'll give you a couple of examples: On page 103 the Patient is reading this off the Snellen Chart and she says, "Chalazian mystics call the heart a wedding chapel, 'the hall of mirrors where the Mafia warlord marries the Divine Hermit.' The consummation of this marriage (between these two aspects of one's own chimerical self) is called the 'last orgy.' And this last orgy (sometimes called 'the lady' or 'She's a lady' or 'Oh, whoa, whoa, she's a lady/ Talkin' about that little lady') is said to occur simultaneously with death. Or it is said to cause death."

That sequence is the sort of thing where I think you can feel me writing it, you know? You can feel it veering toward quoting that Tom Jones song. It's just so ridiculous in the spirit of this book. There are so many questions raised that all just lead to its ridiculousness. Like *who* calls it "She's a lady?"

RK: This book is wall to wall with that kind of thing. I've never read anything like it.

ML: It's really just the pure joy of reckless invention that the reader is hopefully experiencing almost in the real time of its creation. Actually, I'm giving you really great quotes right now.

RK: I'm recording them *and* writing them down they're so great!

ML: I don't know that I could express that more precisely. That's really what I hope I've done in this book. And here's another, a simple one from page 105:

"His slurred gibberish is an extraordinary mantra because he reconciles those oppositions within himself which are never reconciled on a human level, and because…well, just because."

RK: I remember laughing out loud when I first read that. What on earth possessed you?

ML: It's one of those things where you can feel the weight of hermeneutical language is just becoming annoying even to me. It's like *whatever. What the fuck. We're moving on*. It's one of these times when you almost feel that coming in a way. Or, after the fact, you feel like you're doing this with me.

It kind of reminds me of the time David Foster Wallace told me I should never call anything *Gone With the Mind* **because, he said, people will think you're just trying to do things that are crazy. I asked him, "So what? I am!"**

It's very extreme. Recklessly extreme and very deliberately so. Suddenly there'll be a page filled with something and you wonder *why is* **that** *highlighted in bold letters?* **What's the thing at Costco?**

RK:

I WANT YOU TO WALK
AROUND COSTCO
WITH MY ENUCLEATED
EYEBALLS
IN YOUR BRA.

ML: Yeah, so why does that get its own page? The book is always doing that but I think in ways where you have a good feeling, I hope, of assent. Like yeah, it *should* **have its own page. I do the same thing with Ferret's Pringle. That gets its own page.**

RK:

Ferret's Pringle?
Could such a magical-sounding place
even exist in this fallen world of ours?

ML: And I did it for the most ingenuous reasons. I just loved it and just love that as the name of a town so why not isolate it in the middle of a page? Again, I hope the reaction will be this

wonderful feeling. That the reader says, "Well, yeah, it *should* have its own page!"

RK: I love it when the Professor lists the famous names you've supposedly been dropping and suddenly there's this full page of bold type. And some of them are figures I know you really do know:

Sunny von Bülow
Mary Jo Buttafuoco
Famke Janssen
Oksana Baiul
Fin Total
Lorena Bobbitt
Martha Stewart
Jeffrey Dahmer
Bobby Flay
Chef Boyar…

ML: I've always talked about my solidarity with the reader but I've never really put it into practice as deeply and comprehensively as I do with this book. In certain interviews all through my career, I've talked about caring about the reader and the reader's experience. That it's a kind of dance. But I think I've never enacted it with such openheartedness as in this book. The embrace with the reader is so ardent. To the degree that I've succeeded at this, that's why I love this book so much. I mean, of course, I love it in a special way because of Gabs but I really love the aspects of it we've just talked about.

I was thinking recently about the scale of my audience. Like what feels OK to me and we can save this for the very end because it bears on the title (at any rate, *The Mark Leyner Reade***r portion of the title) and I think it would be a nice final discussion. Because I think, at various times, the size of my audience has fluctuated. The times when I was on TV, for example, that probably gave me a larger audience than I may have now, I don't know. Though I think that the audience I have now may be a better audience, a more devoted audience than I had in the past.**

I have a feeling about myself that I'm OK with a very small audience. And there's a model for it. Also, what's funny about this, obviously, is the title of this book. I've always loved it because it implies that you, Rick, are the only reader left. *You're* **The Mark Leyner Reader. There's Mark Leyner and then there's a reader. It's just us two. I love that.**

RK: I'm beyond honored, natch. Plus super grateful that Little, Brown continues to put your books out strictly for my benefit.

ML: In all seriousness, I really think the model when it comes to scale of audience for me was the workshop classes I took in graduate school. Because I was writing then for a very specific group of people. That was the first time I had such an attentive audience of-what was it-ten or fifteen people. But I took that very seriously.

Sometimes I wrote things specifically for or about the people in those workshops. Some of these are in that very first book, *I Smell Esther Williams.* **There are two or three pieces for someone named Ginger, one of the women in the class. It gave me a really interesting sense of an audience being people with whom you**

have a real interaction. It wasn't just a removed, abstract group of people out there. These were people I saw every week.

There was something about that I loved. I loved knowing exactly who was reading because I was working with their expectations, with things I knew about them, with experiences we had in common, etc. and loved that so much. That's a very different sense of it than thinking of readers as an almost theoretical construct, a sort of faceless audience.

I think I've never relinquished that feeling and the scope of that is very small, almost necessarily. So this is something that I've never worried about because I'm easily satisfied by this model. In all parts of my life I'm a kind of genius at making virtues out of necessities. I don't know, this may be an example of that.

I feel a kind of operational closeness with readers. There are other ways of thinking about these things, I suppose, but I think that's the one that's probably most unique to me and my kind of psycho-aesthetic take on what I've been doing all these years. I think that what I just said about the audience is probably the most real for me and the most personal.

RK: And it sort of lines up with your preoccupation with cults!

ML: One of the passages I love most in *Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit* **is that exchange where I say to Gaby, "As long as my people like me or respect me-I don't remember the exact quote-and Gaby says, "Who are your people?" and I say, "You and Mom."**

RK: "My people love me…"

ML: Yeah, you're right, that's it! That's exactly what we're talking

about. I mean, if I can consider “my people” Mercedes and Gaby, the audience I care about is going to be fairly similar in scale. You know, we’ve succeeded in linking this perfectly to *Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit* after all. Very good. We’re getting to be very marvelous at this, I think!

14

Moral Messages About Mortality and Love

RK: Hey, remember back in Chapter 4 when I said: "*My Cousin* **represented an across-the-board aesthetic escalation. His writing had become more boldly imaginative, deliciously unpredictable, infinitely funnier than anything he'd ever done and remarkably assured. As he's noted,** *My Cousin* **was written during a time when Mark's prospects for a career as an artist appeared to diminish by the day, when his life in fact was becoming incrementally more conventional due to the need to hold down jobs and the dearth of creative camaraderie. His sense of having little to lose ironically freed him to innovate with a recklessness and fearlessness which would make his reputation?"**

Oops!...he did it again. As unfathomable as was the creative leap from *I Smell Esther Williams* **to** *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist***, it's a hop, a high step over a puddle relative to the breathtaking breakthrough represented by** *Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit.* **No one else has written a book like it. No one else** *could* **write a book like it. Much less thirtysomething years into their career and having mysteriously never received a single piece of mail**

from the MacArthur Foundation. If there were an evolutionary chart of literature, the Pyramid Texts and Epic of Gilgamesh would be at one end and Mark's latest all alone at the other. Seriously.

Not to get all scholarly about it but, say Andy Warhol recreated his iconic 1975 portraits of Mick Jagger and the new version of the screenprints was somehow animated-you know, could not only track admirers with his subject's gaze, shift position and speak, but insouciantly snarl tunes the Stones wouldn't even write or record *for another thirty years* **(this was a series of ten so the singer could have comprised his own supergroup). Such a feat still wouldn't equal the imaginative artistic advance of this book. It's just that next-level!**

In addition to being colossally laugh-packed, it's inventive in ways literary theory doesn't even have a vocabulary to dryly address yet (though I should add that, if Jacques Derrida butt-dialed him from the next world, my guess is Mark would courteously accept the call but quickly steer the conversation toward the subject of his current streaming True Crime fave). Take *Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit***'s "stage directions," for example: First of all, who writes a "novel" in screenplay form with stage directions? Secondly, whose stage directions not only fill the reader in on technical elements like setting and scene-by-scene action but then go on without warning to develop their own identity, consciousness and emotional life, essentially morphing into one of the book's primary characters?**

As in-*"These stage directions are written by God — that is to say, by the one who ever pulls out the rug from under the rug-puller-outer. ("God" in the sense of an omnipotent, superintelligent machine AI.)*

They are dedicated to those restive Chalazian Mafia Faction street soldiers who hurl enucleated eyeballs at the windows of the Bar Pulpo like a disgruntled audience throwing rotten tomatoes at a stage.

They represent an ideology of implacable antipathy toward everything and everyone. (They are further dedicated to the bats and insectoid robots who will inherit the earth.)

When posted on Instagram, they typically get something on the order of (10/82) or one hundred thousand quadrillion vigintillion " likes…"

FATHER

We're doing gravy shots all night, bruh.

(he slips him a hundred-dollar bill)

Just keep 'em coming.

"Gravy" is, of course, the fiery, high-proof vermifuge that's considered the national drink of Chalazia.

The WAITER exits.

Conscientious ethnographers, the FATHER and GABY are both frantically scribbling notes in crayon on their place mats.

In marked contrast to the explosive, id-driven chaos out on the piazza, there's nothing remotely spontaneous about any of this. It's all a very predetermined, choreographed, almost liturgical sequence of events.

So, let's not confuse or somehow conflate these abstract figurations, these refined, highly aestheticized pantomimes, with the very real stomach-churning violence that's taking place outside.

Nor should we forget the cool, detached, sublimated shuffling of the lettered tiles by Divine Hermits levitated slightly above their seats in the Floating Casino on Lake Little Lake, that primordial, cosmogenic activity from which arises all phenomena, that shuffling whose consequences are emitted into our collective imagination and externally as empirical reality.

From this infra-language come both those poignant folktales that stream across the spoken-word karaoke screens at the Bar Pulpo on Father/Daughter Nite and the murders and grotesque mutilations that take place out on the piazza.

But what does it say about us as a society that amidst these nightmarish massacres, these orgies of violence, in which deranged young CMF street soldiers (these ex-musical-theater kids) slaughter and mutilate one another, people flock to the Bar Pulpo (formerly King Kong Couscous), on that very piazza, each and every Thursday night to recite and reenact folktales about dying fathers and their heartbroken daughters, those wrenching melodramas (streaming on screens), those "scabrous weepies," as the screenwriter Jeremy Pikser (War, Inc.; Bulworth; The Lemon Sisters) has christened them?

It is, to quote the brochure," like enjoying a night out with friends at Applebee's as the Kishinev pogrom rages outside."

"But what does it say about us as a society?" **Who's even asking that question and who exactly is "***us***?" Isn't this taking place in Kermunkachunk? All of this is unfolding in a multiplication of dimensions without the slightest regard to laws of traditional narrative. It's just pure, heedless recklessly sublime invention. And, just when it seems Mark has kicked open the last possible locked door of perception, he introduces the concept of "***the brochure,"*** a voice within the inscrutable voice issuing all these**

stage directions which, of course, have been "*written by God."* **It's simply a semiotic marvel. And, most importantly, loads of fun overflowing with wistfulness, warmth and wisdom.**

15

RK:

I found the whole idea of those Hermits divine. "Those outside agitators who never go outside…" Maybe I connected with them in part because I spent so much time a long time ago among divine hermits of a different kind.

Did I mention I was a monk? Sure. When you're a teenager, you experiment. I believe it's fair to say I did religion recreationally. Nothing could hold a candle to a week or three at The Society of St John the Evangelist by the Charles River on Memorial Ave in Cambridge. Google it. That lovely old monastery's there to this day.

What did a cherub-faced 17-year-old (see photo) get up to behind those high walls with fifty to sixty men who'd literally sworn off women? Oh, the usual: Brother George was the only black monk I ever met. He was in his early 30s and adored jazz. We'd listen to Duke Ellington and Count Basie records for hours on the elaborate stereo system he'd set up in the edifice's catacombs. When you're seventeen and crazy for Poe, there aren't a lot of things cooler than catacombs.

We all lived in spartan little rooms called 'cells.' Wooden desk, chair, bunk and a window. The bathroom and showers were shared though, truly, I can't recall ever running into anybody in there. We all helped out with meals and took them together in the refectory at a long table close to the cooking area. The food and the talk were great.

But the best thing was they'd let me noodle around on the great organ they used in private and public masses multiple times each day. I've always enjoyed the peculiar delusion that I'm capable of coaxing something melodious out of any instrument

and, between matins, prime, terce, sext, nones, vespers, and compline, I'd coax billowy, angelic chords and notes which soared up the high chapel walls and swirled around the ceiling sort of gloriously it seemed to me. I admit to slipping in the occasional Louie Louie. No one seemed to mind.

MY SHOCKING MONK STORY:

As I did, priests from all parts of the country would stay at the monastery for brief bits of time. Some, I imagine, because they wanted to recharge their spiritual battery. Others because they wanted to save the cost of a room at the Ritz. Little godly stopovers on life's awfully odd journey. Why not?

One afternoon I suddenly had a next door neighbor, a convivial chap from a parish in the midwest. Since I was seventeen at the time, I recall him as sixty-something but you know how that works. He may well have been in his forties Fit, chinos, crew neck sweater, thinning light hair, a pleasant, friendly voice. He asked me whether I liked movies. Duh. Then he asked whether I might like to look over the Globe's listings in his room. What could go wrong?

He sat on one end of his small bed, motioned for me to take an edge on the other, withdrew the day's paper from his opened suitcase and placed it between us unfolded to the movie section. What I found myself inspecting instead were the contents of his Samsonite. Immaculately packed were quarts of vodka, bourbon and rum. Perpendicular to the bottles were neat rows of colored bikini briefs folded into identically-sized squares.

More than anything, though, it was the Day-Glo Hanes rainbow they made that got my attention. I was from Lewiston. I wouldn't have imagined pink, purple, orange and mint tinted

men's undies existed any more than centaurs. All those neon squares. They looked like the pattern you might see if you looked down from a plane over a country demarcated by Liberace.

We decided on The Summer of '42. I was about to accompany an older man I'd just met-one who'd sworn off women-to a movie about young boys obsessing over sex. If this were a Lifetime movie, would we not precisely here pause for a commercial break? A few words-for mature audiences only-from our sponsor. Adult content. Have you ever seen The Summer of '42? Porky's with literary pretensions. Courtesy of IMDb:

'STORYLINE

During his summer vacation on Nantucket Island in 1942, a youth eagerly awaiting his first sexual encounter finds himself developing an innocent love for a young woman awaiting news on her soldier husband's fate in WWII.

Silent as a painting, the movie shows us day-dreamer Hermie and his friends Oscy and Benjie spending the summer of '42 on an US island with their parents - rather unaffected by WWII. While Oscy's main worries are the when and how of getting laid, Hermie honestly falls in love with the older Dorothy, who's married to an army pilot. When her husband returns to the front, Hermie shyly approaches her.'

Unlike Oscy, my main worry was that I wouldn't get to hear of word of dialogue. My best new beatific bud was a chatterbox. His arm draped across the back of my seat, he leaned in and whispered a stream of questions, not one of which related in the remotest way to the film.

Did my friends and I talk about sex? What kinds of things did we discuss? Did I find it an interesting subject? Yada yada. I only learned the full pathos of Hermie and Dorothy's ordeal years later when I bought a Betamax (Sony's idea of a VCR for about 10 minutes in the 80s. The rest of the planet had a completely different idea. Google it. The memory's still too painful for me).

My friend, on the other hand, in the end was a perfect gentleman. True, the palaver was pervy but, hey, he paid for the tickets and popcorn. A little saucy language didn't overly alarm me. When the credits rolled and his deposition came to a close, he took things in stride. We rode the subway, strolled by the river and made our middle of the night way back to our funny rooms. Where we said a pleasant goodnight and (I assume) slept.

Funny, I've always enjoyed the peculiar delusion that nothing vicious or violent will befall me (way to jinx it, dude). When I later lived in Boston, my coworkers at the Phoenix (another story) and I would infiltrate the Combat Zone and spend the night drinking and ogling writhing employees of The Naked Eye. Something that, for guys who looked like us, wasn't necessarily the healthiest choice. Friend after friend regaled me with tales of getting mugged but I'd stroll back to Beacon Hill through the Commons alone at 3 AM never giving a thought to peril.

SO HERE'S THE SHOCKING PART:

Which is that, amazingly, the story doesn't have a shocking part. Not the kind you might expect, certainly. As I knew it wouldn't, per the aforementioned delusion. The closest thing would be what the monastery's abbot, Father Alfred L. Pedersen, said to me the morning I left after telling him about movie night. Bear

in mind this fellow was not just a monk but the number one monk, a tiny, shriveled man. A mini-monk in slimming black vestments. "Sex," he confided leaning in, a twinkle in his eye I swear, "makes the world go round, Rick." At the time, I thought this a slightly shocking thing for an elderly man of the cloth to say to a cherub-faced 17-year-old. But I guess he knew what he was talking about. Though I've ever since pondered how.

One additional thought about my semi-mystical connection to Mark and his work: In *Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit* **manifest reality is said to be produced through the levitated mystics' endless shuffling of lettered tiles at the Floating Casino on Lake Little Lake, a process referred to as "the permutation of the letters" ("that primordial, cosmogenic activity from which arises all phenomena, that shuffling whose consequences are emitted into our collective imagination and externally as empirical reality"). Isn't that marvelous?**

Well, I haven't levitated lately and can't remember the last time I shuffled anything more cosmogenic than a deck of cards. But I'll go so far as to suggest that the letters in my initial tweet to Mark back in 2017 comprised nothing less than a permutation resulting in the manifest reality of the tome you now hold. If that's not semi-mystical, I don't know what is.

Remember, the ultimate pre-existing condition is fate. You don't necessarily think of the gods as particularly interested-much less *invested***-in the literary marketplace or publishing industry justice. But look at all they've ordained here. That a part-time monk from Lewiston, Maine with zero academic credentials would wind up with a copy of** *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist,* **hook up decades later with the author, his creative eidolon, whose biography he out-of-the-blue proposes (here the whole thing normally, of course, would go crazily off the rails-**

you know, celebrities stalked by overly enthusiastic fans a la Misery or The King of Comedy!) to which suggestion Mark, however, is unexpectedly moved by inexplicable instinct to agree, leading to an unlikely bond between the two sixtysomethings (and ultimately their families) which in time yields the notion of a completely new and different strain of collaboration, a mutant and Möbius document which not only collects and comments on Mark's life's work but digs deep into his life and psyche as well while allowing space at specific points for my own voice and life to seep into the narrative and join his because, in the end, this is the story of a ludicrously improbable confluence, a story which not only finds its way to the desk of Michael Pietsch (CEO of Hachette Book Group and editor of *Infinite Jest* **as well as works by everyone from Malcolm Gladwell to Chuck Berry) but is green lighted for publication by no less venerable a press than Little, Brown.**

Now I know why *I* **wanted to bring this book into the world. I wanted to shake things up in the canon, to instigate a reassessment of Mark's oeuvre and to see him accorded his proper place as the master innovator of our age, maybe even awarded an overdue Pulitzer or two. The real question is what's in it for the gods? Why would they go to such unprecedented lengths to facilitate a correction of this kind, however deserved it might be? I can't say. I'm merely their mortal marionette.**

Maybe "the gods too are fond of a joke," as Aristotle posited. "Wit is educated insolence" and, of course, Mark's work is incomparably, inimitably witty. Perhaps they were flattered by his portrayal of them in *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack.* **We'll probably never know with certainty why they conspired to carry out this cultural coup d'é·tat. For me it is joy enough just to know that they did.**

Afterwords

MITCH THERIEAU

Literary Miniaturist

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Mark Leyner. *Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit*. Little, Brown, 2021.

MARK LEYNER'S FICTIONS OF THE 1990S were collections of aggressive, hallucinatory fragments. Shorn for the most part of plot and character, they derived their energy from the smoldering tautness and sheer comedy of their prose:

I was an infinitely hot and dense dot. So begins the autobiography of a feral child who was raised by huge and lurid puppets. An autobiography written wearing wrist weights.

Another character speaks of a personal motif "tattooed on [his] heart," but a cliché like this would not go unreckoned with. "I have it tattooed on my heart," that voice continued:

And I don't mean on the skin of my chest over my heart. I mean tattooed on the organ itself. It's illegal in the States—I had to go to Mexico. It's called visceral tattooing. They have to open you up. They use an ink that contains a radioactive isotope so that the tattoo shows up on X-rays and CAT scans.

From such heterogeneity—metaphysics and junk science, incantations and punch lines—the critics of this era constructed two versions of Leyner. Each was based on an extreme pole of Leyner's style. One pole was cyberpunk. A certain techno-noir swagger animates what just might be Leyner's most famous scene, from his breakout My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist, in which a "muscleman" blitzed on a polydrug mix that includes "growth hormone extracted from the glands of human corpses . . . anabolic steroids, tissue regeneration compounds," and Sinutab tries to pick up a date in a dive bar, only to find out that she is his "monozygotic replicant"; they share 100 percent of their DNA. In the scene's protracted climax, the protagonist tries to solve the problem by pulling out a "miniature shotgun that blasts gene fragments into the cells of living organisms," but winds up using it on himself. His consciousness unravels, as does the narrative, ending in enlightenment: "And the sunlight, rent into an incoherence of blazing vectors, illuminates me: a shimmering, serrated monster!"

The other pole was heckling—specifically, lobbing quips at the TV. Critics likened Leyner to MTV, with its speedy references and expectation that you knew a definite canon of TV moments since JFK's assassination and the moon landing, but Leyner's style, in this mode, was much more like the quintessentially '90s cable TV institution Mystery Science Theater 3000. In that show, the reference was a gesture of mastery, as if the puppeteer-critic could defeat the stupidity of the culture once and for all by committing its tropes to memory, then spitting them out in the wrong order. "Imagine Chaim Potok collaborating with Amy Tan and Iceberg Slim," Leyner exhorts. "Imagine Fiddler on the Roof starring Bruce Lee. Imagine Miss Saigon with book by Martin Buber and music by Booger Storm, a garage 'cai luong' band from suburban Da Nang."

IT WAS THIS TV-LIKE recombination of references that especially upset and threatened the young David Foster Wallace. The salvation of literature from TV was a dominant motif in the journalistic coverage Leyner started getting after My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist became, as Wallace put it jealously in 1990, a "campus smash." From a fawning New York Times profile: "One line on Leyner is that he is the writer who can persuade the MTV generation to read again, because he speaks their language and thinks in a disjunctive way that derives from television." From a review in the Boston Globe: Leyner's writing was "faster than MTV and a hundred times better for you."

But it depended on whom you asked whether this newness that Leyner was coming to represent heralded salvation—literature and criticism alike redeemed—or the end times. Wallace went so far as to call him "a kind of antichrist." (A few years later, Wallace reportedly apologized to Leyner for this remark as they smoked preshow cigarettes waiting for their cue to go on Charlie Rose with Jonathan Franzen to discuss the future of American fiction.) The Wallace line on Leyner comes out most clearly in his essay "E Unibus Pluram," which starts as a meditation on the corrosive effects of television and irony on contemporary fiction and ends as an extended screed against My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist. The gist of the attack is that Leyner writes "image fiction," fiction that not only appropriates the jerky fragmentariness of television but also—more damningly for Wallace—strikes the self-mocking, anti–mass media, and especially anti-TV pose that so much early '90s television itself struck. If the optimistic side of the MTV reading of Leyner was the conviction that the zany force of his prose would seduce legions of ex-readers back to literature, the pessimistic side was that this force was fundamentally acidic, a kind of universal doomsaying that also contributes to the sense, in Wallace's words, of "the culture as a cancer patient with a terminal diagnosis."

Academics too saw something deadly serious in Leyner's writing. But where Wallace saw a threat to literary culture, English departments saw a guarantee for its—for their own—survival. Both the literary history and creative writing sides of English departments tied Leyner to the rising stock of cyberpunk. His "I Was an Infinitely Hot and Dense Dot" was printed at the head of a 1988 Mississippi Review special issue on cyberpunk fiction that also featured stories from Samuel Delany, William Gibson, and Bruce Sterling. The same story came in for extended analysis in the UCLA professor N. Katherine Hayles's influential 1999 book How We Became Posthuman. There, Hayles pulled off the incredible feat of surgically extracting the fun from Leyner's writing: "Much of the wit," she explains of "I Was an Infinitely Hot and Dense Dot," "comes from the juxtaposition of folk wisdom and seduction clichés with high-tech language and ideas." To Hayles, "I Was" gave proof of the pressure that digital information technologies had put on the function of the narrator. "The narrator"—Leyner's narrator, but also by extension all narrators everywhere—is now "not a storyteller and not a professional authority. . . . Rather, the narrator is a keyboarder, a hacker, a manipulator of codes." For Hayles, Leyner held the key to understanding a profound shift in expressive culture writ large, a sort of becoming-cyberpunk of the act of storytelling itself. One can feel the sense of relief in these arguments. Finally, a problem of the present that only a literary critic could crack.

WHETHER SAVIOR OR ANTICHRIST, Leyner is miscast in any messianic role. Even zeitgeist-capturing "satirist" feels short of the mark. Of Leyner's published works—five novels, three collections of short pieces, and three coauthored pop-medicine books (one of which, Why Do Men Have Nipples? Hundreds of Questions You'd Only Ask a Doctor After Your Third Martini, was a number one New York Times best seller)—only the 1992 novel Et Tu, Babe really qualifies as a satire. A gloriously unhinged send-up of the culture of literary celeb-

rity into which Leyner found himself catapulted following the publication of My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist, its main character is the wildly successful writer Mark Leyner. He lives in a mansion, eats raw turtle eggs for breakfast, surrounds himself with "flunkies and yes-men," and employs a phalanx of cybernetically enhanced nonagenarian bodyguards to kidnap and torture writers he identifies as rivals. It is an acid caricature of a consuming, fully merchandised sort of fame.

Yet even that book is charged with an antic intensity that wrenches it out of the realm of celebrity-culture satire into much stranger territory. Halfway through its more or less day-in-the-life narrative, the novel collapses into a series of what its narrator calls "miniature" works, which range from an erotic poem about Martha Stewart to a one-act play entitled Varicose Moon. This collapse, which is explained within the narrative as a response to the fictional Leyner's persecution by shadowy government forces, represents a paranoiac inward turn. Not to make something too portentous of a book that features the phrase coarse-cut marmalade enema binge, but the point stands: while Wallace's version of Leyner is a silhouetted heckler watching TV, even the Leyner of Et Tu, Babe, the novel of his that most resembles what Wallace called "lapidary stand-up comedy," ends up facing away from the world at large and training his powers on creating a miniature world of his own.

Two paths: on one, self-loathing neurosis; on the other, no feeling whatsoever. In such a literary field, one might wonder, where is the place for fun?

The central figure for this hermetic, miniature-world-creating power in Leyner's writing is drugs. In the novels that followed Et Tu, Babe, characters are constantly getting high on something Leyner calls "gravy." At different points, gravy is described as "a psychedelic beverage pharmacologically analogous to ayahuasca," a "fiery, high-

proof vermifuge," and even "a form of hallucinogenic borscht." The further Leyner's writing drifted from techno-noir and ascended above heckling, the more the gravy flowed. In the David Foster Wallace universe, the most significant thing about drugs is that they provide an ersatz fullness that dissipates into addiction. But this is not at all how drugs work in the Leyner universe. To Leyner, drugs are mechanisms for condensing maximum intensity into a contained zone. Gravy, notably, is a psychedelic, not a stimulant. In 1997's The Tetherballs of Bougainville, where gravy makes its first appearance, the protagonist, a budding 13-year-old screenwriter named Mark Leyner, goes on an extended trip. He encounters a cosmic entity, experiences a lengthy series of epiphanies, and has a disturbing sexual liaison—all of which, we are later told, takes less than thirty seconds.

If irony is an effort to hold oneself at a remove, it's hard to imagine anything less ironic than a gravy trip. Surely gravy is a solvent for irony, not a catalyst for it. And with its tightly coiled, mind-annihilating power, what could be a better allegory for the ambition of Leyner's fiction on the whole? In the spirit of what he has called "unhinged generosity" toward the reader, Leyner wants to keep the gravy flowing. Gravy, with its time-dilating effects and ability to vacuum-seal pure, exuberant fun into an impossibly small space, is just what Leyner's fiction is made of. None of his books pass the three-hundred-page mark, and some are shorter still.

AFTER THE TETHERBALLS OF BOUGAINVILLE, Leyner took an extended hiatus from fiction writing. He cowrote the aforementioned Why Do Men Have Nipples? along with two sequels, developed TV scenarios (including one made into a short-lived MTV show called Iggy Vile M.D. about a punk rock surgeon who performs operations on a TV cooking-show set), worked on a radio drama (in 2002, right before the dawn of the podcast),

and did some Hollywood screenwriting (most notably on War, Inc., starring John Cusack).

While Leyner applied his talents elsewhere, literary history ground on. As Zadie Smith's now-canonical argument goes, the standard-issue anglophone "lyrical realist" novel developed a severe case of neurosis in the years after September 11 and the endless war. As if it knew all too well that its neat model of the psyche could not hold, the lyrical realist novel started to filigree itself with an increasingly ornate tissue of preemptive self-critique, a simultaneous apology and excuse for its stultifying conventionality, its embarrassing fetish for authenticity. Smith saw an antidote to this neurotic realism in the "brutal excision of psychology" at work in Tom McCarthy's Remainder. No interiority; just neutral, surface-level sensations. (Recent novels by writers like Ottessa Moshfegh and Alexandra Kleeman clearly carry on a part of this affect-flattening project.) Two paths: on one, self-loathing neurosis; on the other, no feeling whatsoever. In such a literary field, one might wonder, where is the place for fun?

One obvious candidate is genre fiction. Aliens, zombies, and apocalypse allow fiction to flex its capacity to dazzle, an opportunity that literary fiction of the past two decades has availed itself of more and more. But it is also part of the specifically new-millennium story about the realist novel's self-loathing. Mark McGurl is right: genre figures in so much contemporary literary fiction as a technology of enchantment, a series of periodic blasts of CGI intensity injected into narratives that are otherwise more or less lyrical-realist. In a way, this turn to genre is an alternate-universe version of the future Leyner seemed to represent for fiction in the '90s. Appropriating foreign zones of mass-media flash, reconfiguring fiction according to their rhythms—redeeming fiction, in other words, by breaking it. And yet the goal of the Leyner project was always to shatter fiction

into something fun. In contrast, a core sample of the very best recent genrefied literary fiction—Colson Whitehead's Zone One, Ling Ma's Severance, Jennifer Egan's The Keep, to pick three more or less at random—returns much of value, but not fun. (If it were fun, maybe it would threaten to be mistaken for actual genre fiction.) Zone One and Severance are efforts to wed the flat-affect, anti-psychological sensibility of something like Remainder with the pyrotechnics of zombie apocalypse. The result is arguably much more interesting than the genrefied realism of, say, Jonathan Lethem, but it is a far cry from Leyner's self-obliterating exuberance.

When Leyner returned to novel writing in 2012 with the exquisitely titled The Sugar Frosted Nutsack, he found himself in a changed field. He also found himself relieved of the literary world's hopes that he would be the one to rescue fiction from the threat of obsolescence—these hopes had been transferred to the aesthetics of comics and horror movies. And the last person to care about this slackening would be Mark Leyner. Leyner has been explicit over the years about how his writing process requires him to tune out the literary market, even as his work in the '90s lampooned said market with a consuming energy only matched by Percival Everett. (In a surreal segment of The Tetherballs of Bougainville, in a review of a nonexistent film embedded within a script for another film, the 13-year-old Mark Leyner claims to have written all the most celebrated books of the '90s, by everyone from Franzen and Wallace to A. M. Homes and Bret Easton Ellis, under a series of pseudonyms derived anagrammatically from the names of Bougainvillean tether-ball players, in collaboration with a signing bonobo named Polo who turns out to be Leyner's father in disguise.)

One of the most significant developments in Leyner's work from the 1990s to the 2010s has been a pronounced shift in his engagement with the politics of literary culture. The Sugar Frosted Nutsack, as well as 2016's Gone with the Mind and his brand-new novel, Last

Orgy of the Divine Hermit, are still books about "literary culture," though in different keys. Nutsack is a book-length exegesis of a fictional epic about a group of gods who have installed themselves on the top floor of the Burj Khalifa and are currently obsessed with an unemployed butcher from Jersey City named Ike Karton. We get fragments of the plot of the epic, but most of the book is devoted to its reception. Academic disputes about its meaning boil over into gang wars; the epic expands over the generations through endless oral repetitions by groups of "vagrant, drug-addled bards." Some of the most memorable scenes include an interview with a "real husband" and "real wife" recording their responses after a live recitation of the epic—always a widely, indeed religiously, attended affair—as well as select exchanges from the epic's dedicated customer helpline and online comment section. (All of this, we are told, gets folded into the epic itself.) Gone with the Mind imagines Leyner giving a reading at a mall food court to an audience of his mother and two Panda Express workers who are on break and definitely not there for the reading. As in Nutsack, the central prose, the text he is supposed to be reading from, is missing. His mother introduces him, he gives a long contextualizing preamble, there is a Q and A that is not really a Q and A, and then the book is over.

This effect is intensified, infected with even more of what Leyner calls "dadaist malware," in Last Orgy, which includes the introduction and epilogue to (but, "due to the fallen state of the world," not the text of) an ethnographic study of the Chalazian Mafia Faction, the gang that controls the city streets in fictional Kermunkachunk. In the epilogue—which appears in the form of a script, as so much of Leyner's writing does—the coauthors, a father and daughter, are doing gravy shots at a bar in Kermunkachunk, where it is "Father/Daughter Nite." At the bar, all the father-daughter pairs, both authentic and cosplaying, do "spoken-word karaoke," reading off their conversations and bits of apocryphal folktales from a series of

screens. This whole text, the dialogue and everything, somehow issues from an optometrist's eye chart. It is as if the text each of these books is supposed to be "about" is placed in brackets, dialed out of our focus, so we can attend to what really matters: the weird rituals and paraphernalia of literary culture; the ways they fracture and mutate across media and over time.

What distinguishes Leyner's recent writing from his '90s work is that he has stopped meditating on the absurdities of our literary culture and devoted his efforts to inventing miniature literary cultures of his own. Some might say that he has traded a heckling impulse for a microcosmic one. But Leyner's principal form has always been the microcosm—the cosmos-compressing power of gravy; the infinitely hot and dense dot—and his recent work finally lays his microcosmic ambitions bare. And for good reason: the literary culture and megafame lampooned in Et Tu, Babe today are more of a mirage than ever. Amid such instability, isn't it much more viable to "just try and do [one's] own DIY version" of one's fiction and its reception, "to 3D-print all the sets," audience and all, "and have mechanomorphic vermin play all the characters," as Leyner's avatar describes in Last Orgy? To write the fictional equivalent of what Leyner calls "singing all the parts," the act of trying to re-create all the layered overdubs of a pop song with a single voice? Why else would Leyner's books be so fixated on the singing girls in the terrarium from Mothra, on toy soldiers and puppets, on mechanomorphic vermin acting out the scenes from his imagination? Each Leyner book choreographs its own miniature universe.

To say miniaturist is not to say solipsist. Leyner's miniaturism does not entail a total turn inward—say, a pull-back shot, via a fiberoptic endoscope, up one's own ass, to adapt another of his images. It is better read as a strategy for bracketing the novel's viability as a form, which haunts so much contemporary fiction, so that the writing can get back to the serious business of delighting the immediate

reader. It is an effort to defeat questions of literary sociology and audience preemptively by staging them in fiction in the most phantasmagoric way. It is also quite simply, as Hannah Arendt says of the mystical doctrines of the early Christian philosophers, an effort to create something "strong enough to replace the world"—in this case, the literary world. A new miniature world to replace the one eroding around us.

It's this Leyner, Leyner as forger of bonds strong enough to replace the world, who makes a point of praising the bootleg recordings of the Beatles' Shea Stadium performance, where the noise from the crowd infamously drowns out the music. "I've always loved that din especially," he has said, "that vast, unrelenting din of screaming girls that almost completely overwhelms the sad, beautiful voices of John and Paul. That's great. That whole thing for me is the real music." The real delight, the real exuberance, is in the way the enthusiastic noise overtakes the music. It is maybe the ultimate credit to Leyner that he has managed to write fiction that condenses this, this way the world aggressively metabolizes art and precipitates wonderful new compound objects; part epic and part exegesis, part folktale and part gravy bender, part song and part scream. A fiction, anyway, that screams all the parts.

This Dionysian Novelist Who Once Wrote a TV Pilot about a Surgeon Who Sucks the Fat Out of a Woman via a Straw Stuck In Her Ass:

A Literature as Tenacious and Articulate as a Poem

By Nicole Rudick

I once wrote to Mark Leyner confessing my profound appreciation—my love, really—for the show *Xena: Warrior Princess*—for its Brechtian aesthetics, the intentional legibility of its stagecraft illusion, to say nothing of its enduring story of female power and friendship. Though I certainly felt no shame, revealing my feelings felt risky. How well did I really know this Dionysian novelist who once wrote a TV pilot about a surgeon who sucks the fat out of a woman via a straw stuck in her ass?

Leyner responded with a screenshot. Of course, I should have known better: in 1997, anticipating *Xena*'s third season, Leyner had written his own tribute to the show, for *Esquire*. Across from a full-page photograph of Lucy Lawless in Bettie Page dom guise, Leyner summarized *Xena*'s appeal, in typical Leyner all-or-nothing style: "She's the first mass-murdering, bisexual, homeless woman to capture the hearts of America's families."

Even better, Leyner's article shared a page with Bill Maher's appraising take on Laura Ingraham ("She's just so right"). I wouldn't be surprised if Leyner had orchestrated the whole thing.

Mark Leyner is in a category of one, with a style so inimitable it can't be counterfeited, plagiarized, or replicated. Where are the others who can write so discursively about (and with such fondness for) The Bachelor, male urologic concerns, Brecht's Verfremdungseffekt, balloon angioplasty, giant cockroaches, Philippe Descola's anthropological ontology, children's puppet theater, and New Jersey? And not just write about these things, and so many others, but alchemize them, through his own secret recipe, into a literature as tenacious and articulate as a poem, as imaginative and formally inventive as the Cabaret Voltaire, as anarchic as an Emma Goldman pamphlet, and as funny as anything you're likely to read, ever. His dialectic is exquisite.

After reading Leyner's 2016 novel, *Gone with the Mind*, **I couldn't go near a mall food court without thinking of him, which is rather apt. His writing is a kind of free-range plaza offering a disparate cuisine, a global bazaar of ideas. There are no barriers between the reader and the characters (of which "Mark Leyner" is one). If I were to call him the food-court writer of American letters, I would mean it in the Artaudian sense—a spectacle of depravity and mysticism, wildness and rigor, voyeurism and participation. I read him with awe.**

Leyner once emailed me a photograph of a toy called "Joseph Stalin extraterrestrial," which was a plastic E.T. body topped with Stalin's head. (A blanket, à la the movie's flying-bicycle scene, was cleverly used to conceal the juncture.) He sent the image with no explanation, but I understood why he'd shared it.

It represented an epic clash of worlds: popular culture and demagoguery, a perfect incarnation of the carnivalesque. Talk about a gestalt. Plus, the thing is just completely absurd. The packaging bore the the phrase "nuevos heroes." And that's what Leyner is—a nuevo hero, literarily speaking, for all of us.

Nicole Rudick is the author of What Is Now Known Was Once Only Imagined: An (Auto)biography of Niki de Saint Phalle (Siglio) and the editor of a new edition of Gary Panter's Jimbo: Adventures in Paradise (New York Review Comics). Her criticism appears regularly in the New York Review of Books.

Our Story

By Gaby Leyner

My dad and I began discussing his desire to write a book that somehow involved our relationship once he finished *Gone with the Mind*. **I can remember evenings (I'm sure over drinks, at a bar) where we would roughly go over his initial ideas about how he was planning to structure this book. Truthfully, there was no way I could have possibly anticipated what this novel was ultimately going to become. Somehow the very fabric of this book, it's materiality, is made up of me and my dad—all of these anecdotes, jokes, and nicknames we've produced became central to this story—our story. Our cherished improvisations became a boundless gift that is** *Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit.*

There really are few things I love more than hanging out with my dad. Whether we're conversing at a bar, watching Fassbinder movies, listening to Hall & Oates, or watching mukbang videos on YouTube. Constantly pausing and rewinding what we're watching, while we endlessly go off on tangents, analyzing, recontextualizing, laughing until we're wheezing.

Reading *Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit* **was a profoundly sublime experience for me, that involved tears pouring down my face and uproarious laughter. I was utterly in awe. To have a book that my dad and I call ours is an incredibly sacred thing to me.**

It's still a little strange that I have to share it with other readers! This deeply moving, hilarious, and exhilarating piece of literature my dad created for the two of us is now immortalized.

Gaby Leyner is an actress, producer and filmmaker known for Cell (2016) and Mouchette on East 4th (2019), which she wrote and directed.

Not So Fast, Pal

By Susan Daitch

At some point during maybe the second Reagan administration, I was meeting Mark and other friends in Hoboken for the Fourth of July. We, my then husband and I, were on a backed Path train going under the Hudson River when it stopped abruptly. Every seat was filled, people were standing in the aisles, you couldn't see more than about six inches in front of you, so if you were sitting, your sightlines only extended as far as a hip-level view of pants, flies and back pockets, mostly. There were zero announcements, and the train wasn't going anywhere. Just when I couldn't feel more claustrophobic, a group of platinum blonde high school-age girls started singing patriotic songs. I was dying. I thought this is where life ends, crushed by gallons of Hudson River water because the tunnel is going to give, and the last damn thing I'm going to be hearing is, I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy. I told Mark about this incident many years later, in the era just before Covid hit, and he said he wanted to use that story. I hope he does. It's classic Leyner-the confluence of state-tinged popular culture, a situation of no exit and sheer, if manufactured, terror.

One of my absolute pleasures in teaching has been to tell students who think they've invented the densepack paragraph, artfully positioning contradictory references to a Pokémon card, say, so that it rubs elbows with neuroblastomas, I get to

announce, not so fast, pal, you have to read this, and I send them an e-mail that looks like a ladder of links, starting with *I Smell Esther Williams*, **including essays, interviews, stories. Look at** *Gone With the Mind.* **When is a food court not a food court and why can't a food court be just as symbolic as Tintern Abbey or Walden Pond? This is where our collective and individual memories reside, this is where you talk to loved ones, this where you will feel a sense of loss when it's closing time.**

Even if you don't have a memory of a grandfather calling on a kitchen wall phone to bark at your parents to watch Golda Meir on Meet the Press, godammit, everyone recognizes the Gods of *The Sugar Frosted Nutsack*. **They are telling you that we have met the enemy and they is us. The books toss you a McGuffin, lead you to a Cyclone, you get on the roller coaster only to find the ride isn't all laughs, it's really serious, wildly and singularly inventive, beyond any possible category. There are discursive off ramps, interruptions, asides, monologues, spectacular violence that is really a comment on how we consume spectacle. The action is full throttle, the God of Head Trauma, who is also the god of all kinds of brain degeneration, has many alias, but when you read about XOXO, you also have to stop and think, yeah, our consciousness are often inhabited by uninvited guests.**

I recently found a postcard Mark sent me of Torvill and Dean back when people still sent funny ironic postcards instead of just clicking on a TikTok. They look pained, whether it's a theatrically performative pain, or they're thinking, okay, the triple lutz is coming up in the next two seconds. This could be the Nutsack et al in a nutshell: virtuosity, unforgettable performance, and gold-medal brilliance backed by thunderous applause.

Susan Daitch is the author of six novels and a collection of short stories. Her short fiction and essays have appeared in Guernica, Tablet, Tin House, The New England Review, Bomb, Conjunctions, The Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Fiction, and elsewhere. Her work was the subject of a Review of Contemporary Fiction, along with that of David Foster Wallace, and William Vollman. Her recent novel, Siege of Comedians was listed as one of the best books of 2021 in The Wall Street Journal.

An Admirably Weird Career

By Sam Sacks

If posthumous accolades are hard to predict, obscurity obeys a fairly simple formula in which time is the main factor. For Mark Leyner, the height of popularity came in the early 1990s, with the absurdist, hypercerebral novel "*My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*" and "*Et Tu, Babe*," a Rabelaisian pseudo-autobiography in which Mr. Leyner depicts himself as the most famous and debonair writer in Christendom. Years passed, Mr. Leyner dropped off the scene, and when he returned it was with books like "*Gone With the Mind*," from 2016, which portrays the author giving a reading at a shopping-mall food court that no one attends except his mother and two fast-food workers on their break.

Mr. Leyner sends up his own obsolescence again in "*Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit*" (Little, Brown, 277 pages, $27), the weirdest and surely the most unsellable novel in an admirably weird career. At the heart of the nonsense are a father and daughter bonding in a bar in the Eastern European nation of Chalazia. Outside the bar, the Chalazian mafia is conducting its ritualized

slaughter of random passersby—the sound of gouged eyeballs pelting the windows produces a steady drumroll—but inside the feeble old writer (whose last book, "*Gone With the Mind,*" was a flop) and his loyal, beautiful daughter discuss happier times and peer toward the father's imminent demise.

All the trademarks of a typical Leyner bizarrerie are on display, from the high-flown language and po-mo hijinks to the endless pop culture references and comic non sequiturs. A hilarious discussion about the surfeit of homophones in the Chalazian tongue—one phrase means both "I can't go for that (no can do)" and "Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty that seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress"—is followed by the father's recital of a dramatic speech from "Grey's Anatomy." There is a degree of pointless virtuosity here that no other writer can, or should ever want, to match. Here's what I respect most about Mr. Leyner: He's the undisputed master of a style of writing he invented, whose rules no one else can really understand.

Sam Sacks writes the Fiction Chronicle for the Wall Street Journal and is an editor at Open Letters Review (formerly Open Letters Monthly). Reprinted with permission of the author.

Writing So Truly Unique Critics Haven't Known How to Talk About It (Director’s Cut)

An Email Conversation with Larry McCaffery

Fri, Nov 6, 2020, 6:43 PM

Dear Larry,

It was great to connect today. Sincere thanks for your time.

I look forward to working with you in whatever way works for you.

Also, happy to say I now have a hardback of Some Other Frequency hurtling toward me.

Can't wait to see the interview.

Cheers,

Rick

Thu, Nov 19, 2020, 3:05 PM

Yo, Rick,

Sorry I've been so delayed in getting back to you—it's taken me some time to fully recover from the election (actually, given Trump's current I CONCEDE NOTHING! reaction to his loss, I'm STILL not fully recovered).

But I'm delighted to hear that SOME OTHER FREQUENCY has probably already arrived. Let me know what you think of the interview, and I'll be interested to hear more about your plans for a Leyner volume.

My sense, then and now, is that Mark's work has always been so truly unique that critics haven't known how to talk about it; but certainly he deserves more serious attention. At any rate, I'm interested in hearing more about your plans

Cordially,

Larry

Nov 22, 2020, 10:51 AM

Hi Larry,

I know what you mean about the election. That initial euphoria was short lived. I can't believe Biden's fundraising to finance the transition.

Yes, the interview is fantastic. I've reread it several times and keep finding the most wonderful, illuminating lines!

It's such an out-of-body experience for me in 2020 to see Mark answering many of the same questions I've asked way back in 1996 in his conversations with you. It's a really invaluable record of his thoughts and impressions at a super pivotal point in his life. I hope it will be possible to include some or all of the interview in our book.

As I understand it, you're responsible for pulling the pin from the grenade of his career. You published that piece in the MR, Harpers picked it up & the next thing Mark knew, he was offered a deal by Harmony Books. Who knows whether he ever would have happened without you.

It would be very nice, if you're at all inclined, to have a comment or reminiscence from you about this connection, your friendship and what you saw in his writing that prompted you to include him in that issue.

As well as any insights you may have as to Dave Wallace's love/hate thing for Mark and his work. That's always been something of a mystery to me.

Anyway, I'm very much enjoying your book. And Mark was extremely glad to get your greetings.

Hope you have a great Thanksgiving.

Cheers,
Rick

Thu, Jan 28, 2021, 10:09 AM

https://bombmagazine.org/articles/mark-leyner-interviewed/

Hi Larry,

I hope you're well. And thought you might get a kick out of this.

Mark's latest was released on the 19th and has gotten nothing but great reviews.

It's been a blast to ride along through its creation to its reception. A really next level work.

More soon. All the best,

Rick

Jan 28, 2021, 6:04 PM

yo, rick,

thanks for the tip! i've already arranged to have amazon send me mark's new book--can't wait! at last: there really IS light up ahead.

meanwhile, have you had a chance to read stephen wright's latest novel, PROCESSED CHEESE? i kept being reminded of mark while I was reading it (this doesn't happen very often! i mean, even the TITLE sounds leyner-esque).

warmest regards from the desert of the real,

Larry

Attachments

Tue, Apr 13, 2021, 2:28 PM

Hi, Rick,

I know I'm prejudiced, but I absolutely loved LAST ORGY OF THE DIVINE HERMIT ! Not only did it keep me laughing throughout, but I actually wound up also being very moved by Mark's sweet treatment (it IS sweet) of the father-daughter motif. I just sent a copy to my son, Mark—his daughter Ella, who is my beloved granddaughter Ella, is a senior in high school, and so Mark is understandably concerned about how their relationship will change once Ella takes off for college, so I thought LAST ORGY would be the perfect novel to offset his worries.

It's so great to see Mark continuing to write with such ... poetic and utterly timely outrageousness and passion (as you know, it's hard to describe Mark's work).

aren't we lucky to have him around?

best,

Larry

p.s. speaking of my granddaughter ella, i'll attach a couple photos from a road trip we took with her last week when we were visiting her and her parents.

Apr 14, 2021, 1:50 PM

Hi Larry,

Thanks so much for the wonderful message and beautiful photos. What a great story about sending your son Mark's book. Maybe it will become the standard text for father/daughter separation a la What to Expect When You're Expecting for childbirth!

Yes, I agree. We're lucky to have him still around and still innovating. It was such a privilege to watch that novel come together. You know, the way you did in the case of My Cousin and Et Tu, Babe.

Speaking of which, you're mentioned a number of times in the book we're working on. I quote from your interview with Mark in Frequency and he alludes to several memorable moments involving you (the Cyberpunk issue, the night at the White Horse when you guys came across the piece on Mark in the NY Times, etc).

Any chance you might be willing to contribute a few memories or observations if I sent you text for comment? It would be an honor to have your voice in there.

All the best,
Rick

Attachments

Sat, May 29, 2021, 10:38 AM

Hi Larry,

I hope you're well. And thought you might get a kick out of this astonishing review by Bruce Sterling. In a science magazine of all things.

Really beautiful.

Cheers,
Rick

May 31, 2021, 1:09 PM

Dear Rick,

I am resting up nicely after a "small stroke", my "rest" being made more cheerful by the bruce sterling review. i'm expecting my rest to start really getting going after my doctor gets around to operating (the actual operation is supposed to be routine, i'll be back in touch shorty when all this is taken care of), in the meantime, we have bruce sterling's review ...

bruce has been a leyner fan ever since i chose mark leyner's piece ("i was an infinitely dense and dot ...") for the specific mississippi review cyber punk double issue (the one that preceded STORMING THE REALITY STUDIO), and i think he comes close to what make's mark fiction so distinctive here.

hooray.

i'll be back in touch shortly with good news about my operation,

larry

May 31, 2021, 2:13 PM

Jesus,

Very sorry to learn of this and look forward to hearing back when it's all behind you.

Very best wishes,
Rick

Sun, Jun 27, 2021, 2:09 PM

Hi Larry,

How are things going? Well I hope.

I'd love to hear when you have a moment.

All the best,

Rick

Sun, Oct 17, 2021, 2:11 PM

Hi Larry,

I hope all's well. And am just circling back to see how you're doing post-procedure.

Would love to hear from you.

All the best,

Rick

Lawrence F. McCaffery Jr. (born May 13, 1946) is an American literary critic, editor and retired professor of English and comparative literature at San Diego State University. His work and teaching focuses on postmodern literature, contemporary fiction and Bruce Springsteen. He—not Mark, Charlie Rose or Harmony PR minions—is responsible for the following much-quoted words, which appeared as a blurb on the back cover of *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist* in 1990:

"Establishes Mark Leyner as the most intense, and, in a certain sense, the most significant young prose writer in America."

A Mutual Fan Club

By Porochista Khakpour

Mark Leyner has not just been one of my favorite writers for well over two decades now, I can also call him a friend as of a few years ago. One of the great joys of being a published author is occasionally being able to make contact with your literary heroes and perhaps by virtue of being seen as one of their own tribe, they sometimes respond and before you know it, you're exchanging everything from madcap jokes to K-pop videos in each other's DMs.

As I relayed in my intro to our conversation in BOMB on the occasion of his last book, the story of how I got to Leyner in the first place is perhaps a disappointingly straightforward one. In 1999, my college fiction professor seemed a bit frustrated by my hijinks in class and on the page—I was an "absurdist," I had decided—and so her last resort was turning me onto a writer who was even more "over the top" than I could ever be. The writer was Mark Leyner, and the book was *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist.* **As I wrote in the intro, it left quite an impression on me—I found myself howling in the library, annoying my roommate by staying up all night reading, quoting it constantly at inappropriate moments to other student writers who had no idea who he was. Then, a decade later, in the earlier years of Twitter, I was tweeting about something on the outsider margins of "literary"—I believe the conversation hovered around the now ancient-sounding movement called "alt lit"—and I got to tweeting about Leyner. To my surprise, the man himself was on Twitter, though not so active. But he engaged me and some other**

fans, in a kind, amused elder way and we became mutual "followers," which felt like a fever dream.

Enter years of us messaging from casual check-ins ("Isn't it amazing how—due to age, health, economic exigencies, work, one's spiritual posture, etc, etc, the question "how are you?" becomes the strangest, most complex question in the world?" he wrote me in 2021) to congratulating each other on various successes, to notes of concern about illnesses ("I actually had an oozing scalp cyst myself. Someday we should compare notes!" 2016) to messages about our shared interest in K-pop. He eventually read my work and called us a "mutual fan club," which I boasted about to my old fiction professor, who was somehow not surprised we had finally connected. When this recent book, *Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit,* **came out, I was sent an advanced copy, and it arrived at the bleakest point of the pandemic when the only thing I needed was a good laugh. The story takes place in one night, between an anthropologist father, who is researching mystic mobsters, and his daughter, at a karaoke bar in Kermunkachunk. As I flipped through its pages, my roommate reported hearing me wheeze with laughter from our kitchen, which then turned into me knocking on her door at all hours to let her hear another wild passage. At the same time, another friend and I on Twitter began creating fancams (in the great K-pop tradition) for Leyner, and I saw the word of his work spread again—including to a new generation of Leyner-ites—through various pipelines of what we lovingly used to call "Weird Twitter."**

It's been an absolute joy to call Mark Leyner a favorite author of mine and a dear friend now. We still have our one goal of meeting in person one day—the pandemic prevented us from several ambitious plans—but I have no doubt it will happen one

day and it will be weirder and more delightful than either of us could have written in a story!

Porochista Khakpour's debut novel Sons and Other Flammable Objects (Grove, 2007) was a New York Times Editor's Choice, one of the Chicago Tribune's Fall's Best, and the 2007 California Book Award winner in the "First Fiction" category. Her second novel The Last Illusion (Bloomsbury, 2014) was a 2014 "Best Book of the Year" according to NPR, Kirkus, Buzzfeed, Popmatters, Electric Literature, and many more. Her third book Sick: A Memoir (Harper Perennial, 2018) was a Best Book of 2018 according to Time Magazine, Real Simple, Entropy, Mental Floss, Bitch Media, Autostraddle, The Paris Review, LitHub, and more. Her collection Brown Album: Essays on Exile & Identity (Vintage, May 2020), has been praised in The New York Times, O: Oprah Magazine, TIME, goop, USA Today, and many more. Her latest book, Tehrangeles: A Novel, from Pantheon is out now and garnering great notices. Among her many fellowships is a National Endowment for the Arts award. Her other writing has appeared in many sections of The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, Conde Nast Traveler, Elle, Slate, BOMB, and many others. She is a contributing editor at Evergreen Review and lives in NYC.

“Even those who consider all this total bullshit have to concede that it's upscale, artisanal bullshit of the highest order.”

— Mark Leyner