

The background of the cover is a dark, textured surface, possibly black or dark grey. It is covered with numerous thin, white, curved lines that sweep across the frame from the top left towards the bottom right. These lines are parallel to each other and create a strong sense of movement and depth. The lines vary in thickness and are spaced out, giving the overall effect of a stylized, abstract landscape or perhaps a close-up of a curved architectural element.

The Paragon Journal  
A Journal of Creative Arts



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## PARAGON PRESS

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# First Visit by Mark Belair

The summer  
after my mother died  
my wife and I spent time in Maine,  
where we saw extended family and visited,  
for the first time since her internment, my mother's grave.

The day  
was calm and cool—  
the cemetery close to the ocean—  
and I was surprised to find, as I drew the car  
near the plot, that my feelings were fairly collected.

We stood  
before the stone on which our family name  
is engraved and it came to me that  
I must have come, over the months, to make peace  
with her sudden death, because I did not well up with tears.

Then we put  
fresh flowers in the vases  
and walked behind the stone  
to ensure that all was trim and I saw  
my mother's full name and dates—and my father's  
name, date of birth, and a dash that led to the unknown.

That's when  
I fell to one knee  
as if knifed and wept.

On our way home,  
we visited my dad  
in upstate New York and I saw him  
strangely, saw him as I now see my other  
beloved and see myself and see the spreading t  
rees and the squirrels darting between dipping branches  
and the soaring and nesting birds: as the living (living!) dead.

# Both Our Boys Away by Mark Belair

## *At Camp*

Slow moves the summer day.  
Slow the garden work.

Then quick-grilled fish  
and glasses of Bordeaux.

At night we read,  
make love, sleep—

black velvet  
rippling with dreams—

until, through the open  
bedroom window,

birdsong

and a cool morning breeze.

## *At College*

Two empty infant swings  
wind down

as if two infants  
got lifted

out about  
the same time—

though  
no infants are here.

Then the swings go still.  
Then rise and fall,

ever so slightly, in a cold,  
clear breeze



# gene's garden by Mark Belair

he'd take ice water / ginger ale / or chicken broth / and left his bed to use the bathroom / but as for the rest of his former life / of rising and dressing / reading newspapers / cooking meals / enjoying wine / and meeting friends / his hand waved it away with disgust

only weeks before / he attended a dinner held in remembrance of a deceased neighbor / and only days before / he took baths and ate actual meals

but no more

it had been coming on / this final giving up / since the death of edgar / the love of his life

ever burdened / exhausted / stressed / and too proud to accept help / gene was edgar's caretaker and a candidate / all we neighbors felt / for a few good years after edgar / trailing years of difficult decline / died at 94

but gene / at 86 / was too spent to care for himself / or perhaps gene's very self / fine-tapered to a flame of loving devotion / was something / with edgar / he'd lost

gene had been an artist who decorated tiffany's christmas windows for money / edgar an amiable businessman who invested his profits in art and culture / their domestic arrangement / their 55 years of living together / was a consummately arranged closet they only reluctantly / with the times / learned to open up

back in the prime of their elderly years / gene and edgar would invite our family upstairs every epiphany for tea and cakes and little presents / perhaps a tree ornament or paper figure gene would hand-make before our two enchanted boys

kind and civilized / gene and edgar embodied to us / as we indulged from pats of butter molded into a fleur de lis / all that was getting crushed by the hard ironies of post-modern life / and we were grateful our young / pre-ironic boys could experience / first hand / such slow / gentle / old-world consideration

since gene had no family left / we brought him two meals a day that he cordially thanked us for / then left untouched / neither sick nor impaired in any way / according to the doctor who came in / gene was simply refusing all care / as if he'd come to the calm conclusion that edgar / alone in the beyond / needed him / so was on his way

in the foyer of his apartment stood a life-sized bronze bust of gene as a beautiful young man / you could see why edgar fell in love with him / passing it one night while leaving with gene's undisturbed tray / my wife gave the bust a sweet / gentle / loving sweep under the chin then dreamed / that night / of gene living on a floor of our building higher than he does / and with french doors that opened to a radiant garden / everything lush / civilized / cared-for / and centered / by the bust of an angel



# Homeless Lady in the Streets by Nam Nguyen

To herself, she is nothing more than a high school drop-out who has no skills, not any, neither work nor social.

Therefore, to society, she is nothing more than a poor old lady in tattered clothing, reeking of a stench that is like the sewers below where she sleeps every night.

To her parents that gave her up for adoption, however, she was once a green-eyed little princess that had perfect, soft and delicate skin that glowed like the heavens above.

To her shabby Tibetan Terrier as well, she is a loving provider and motherly leader that somehow always finds a way to fill his tummy with goodies.

To me, a poet writing about this homeless person, she is like an unread, unpublished poem, a leaf that has just fallen from its branch, being blown gradually farther and farther away from her roots.

# Icarus by Neil Mullin

“I’m guessing there’s more than a few churchgoers out there today, the way y’all are bedoozled up in sport jackets and perty blouses. Now here’s a question the pastor might not have asked you last Sunday...”

He, RC Clerick, *had* this Nashville crowd, as he often did at the Southpaw Bar & Grill, but as he paused a beat, walking slowly across the platform, he saw he didn’t have her, that singer who often performed before him. She slumped on a barstool, her long, brunette spiral curls tented over a shot glass.

He stopped stage left. “Now here’s that question, people: Have ya ever noticed that folks come the way they laugh?”

Laughter simmered up and rose to a boil as he riffed and pattered through the rest of the routine, citing orgasms subtle as a shy tee-hee giggle and bust-the-bed, hit-the-ceiling climaxes of people who laugh with screams and hoots.

And in the midst of it all, he noticed he had her too, lifting her head, locking eyes with him, holding a toothy smile that said, “You’re one funny idiot.”

Stepping off the stage, the applause faded to white as he made a beeline for her. “I see where you’re going, buddy,” she said, putting a firm grip on his shoulder. “You’re blending that city and country, a pinch of Borat and a teaspoon of Hee Haw.” She’d been watching him for a few weeks, she said, and she complimented the way he peppered stand-up with news of the day, careful not to rub the red-staters the wrong way but trying not to pander. “RC,” she went on, “you got *something*, because at every show, eventually those belly laughs rumble out.”

They, just shy of 30, had been performing over a month at the Southpaw, one of the few clubs that mixed comedy and music. “Shannon Perkins belts it out,” a reviewer wrote, “with dragons’ lungs. Her band is tight, and her riffs on electric fiddle rock the house.” RC’s routines started showing up on YouTube and Twitter, drawing thousands of hits and rave comments.

As time went on, they knocked back shots between their sets and grew increasingly fond of each other. RC noticed she put herself down, calling herself “top-heavy” and describing her legs as “more stumps than stems.” One night he told her she was as beautiful as her voice. “Now, I ain’t no prize,” he went on, exaggerating his country syntax and twang while lifting his T-shirt to expose a lightly furred belly drooping over a rodeo belt buckle. “I am, however, hung...like a grasshopper.” She laughed into a kiss, and the crowd at the nearby tables howled at the public display of affection, interrupting a mandolin rendition of “Foggy Mountain Breakdown.” Discreetly, she slipped a hand between his thighs and whispered, “Yup, nothing to see down here... Y’all move on now.”

It didn’t hurt Shannon’s view of RC that he’d come from country royalty. His father and grandfather had played backup and session guitar for the greats, from Hank Williams to Patsy Cline and Johnny Cash. This history, she came to see, was a pressure on him, a reason for him to avoid the music industry and try to make it at something else.

She’d been raised, she explained, by a single mother, Betty Perkins, who took in laundry but also was in high demand to sing soprano at weddings, funerals, and other church services in the Tennessee countryside.

As the months went on, he’d join Shannon’s band onstage for a song or two, fingerpicking on an old guitar with a steel resonator. The bar’s owner loved having the pair, who drew packed rooms even midweek.

Shannon had RC over for Thanksgiving dinner at her rented place—“a shack pretending to be a cottage,” she said—on the outskirts of town. The point was celebration: Shannon had been signed up for a record deal, and after one of his death bits went hot on YouTube, RC had been hired to headline a few well-paying gigs at hotels out of state.

RC met Shannon's mother, Betty, and after dining on turducken and helping with clean-up, he taught Shannon's 11-year-old daughter, "Steenno," Justine, how to play chords on a Martin acoustic left behind by the girl's father, Benton. In the cramped living room, he had her strum a C major and then an A minor while he fingered the chords.

"That's a sad sound, RC."

"Well, minor is," he said.

"Why?" she asked, bringing her face closer to the frets as if they held the answer. "I mean, it's just another bunch of notes."

"How'd you get so smart?" He strummed a D minor and then an E minor. "I don't think anybody knows the answer."

She put her hand gently on his hand. "Benton didn't play those notes," she said, referring to her father, smiling while betraying sadness in her dark eyes. And RC remembered a sister he once had, precocious, like this little girl. At age 9, Katie had played "Just a Closer Walk With Thee" for the whole congregation, moving the preacher to hallelujahs, arms in the air. They lost her to leukemia the following year.

"Where's your daddy now?" RC asked while Betty and Shannon sipped beers at the kitchen table.

"Driving a truck in Memphis," she said.

"Do you see him much?"

"Mama told him don't come 'round," she said, "but we text and talk every now and then." As he drove home that night, RC wondered if Shannon had it hard raising a mixed-race daughter in the Tennessee countryside. A bony Black girl with jutting ears and rhinestone studs, she seemed sweet and smart. But wounded. Maybe from Benton moving out. Or taking shit at school. Even in the age of Trump, Nashville had remained a blue dot in a red sea. Yet the old ways and flags and so-called pride, RC knew, ran deep outside the city. And he'd been raised that old way, he told Shannon, in "the deep whiteness" of country music.

By Christmas, he started sleeping over from time to time, though he kept his place in the city. Betty stayed on, sleeping on a foldout couch, to help with Steeno. Shannon spent increasing hours in the recording studio, and RC began traveling, writing, and practicing in front of motel mirrors, hoping he could match his girlfriend's success and make his father proud.

When they had time to talk about their career paths, Shannon spoke, as she often did, in spiritual terms. "If you manifest success," she said, "you get it." Though she wore a small hand-me-down crucifix, she preferred tarot cards to the New Testament, and he welcomed her centered, serene ways, odd as he found them. As he put it, he'd heard enough hellfire preaching to last him a lifetime.

When he or she was out of town, the pair spoke by phone most mornings. He sent selfies to Steeno, of him kissing a frog he found in the motel parking lot, or eating a sundae with blue whipped cream. Steeno sent him videos of her picking out pop songs on the guitar. "You got your mama's music ears," he answered, with plenty of heart emojis. He pictured himself stepping into her life, more as brother than father. Maybe he'd get Steeno a guitar that fit her size.

He missed Steeno and made it back to his almost-family when he could. He missed Shannon too, but guarded his heart, sensing she wasn't quite finished with Benton.

When he could, he'd drive Steeno to school, and at bedtime he read her *Stuart Little*, a book he used to read to his Katie. Steeno had a fine memory and loved the phrase "north is nice," said by a lineman to *Stuart Little* as he drove a miniature car in search of his love, Margalot the bird. When RC called the house and Steeno answered, she'd say, "North is nice."

"Well, yes it is, Margalot."

He'd take her out for cheeseburgers at the local place. One night, he thought a couple at the counter looked at them funny, maybe wondering why RC, a white man with a shaved head and a full sleeve of tats, took a Black girl out to lunch. RC knew his father wouldn't take well to Steeno, much



less a marriage that would make the girl into a granddaughter. Best not, though, to bother Shannon with such worries. And why allow thoughts of marriage?

Telephone sex between RC and Shannon, while on the road, became a theme in his stand-up, though he didn't name his mate. "Now I got Pornhub paying my phone bills," he'd tell the audience, "as long as AT&T lets them listen."

"Hey, be careful," Shannon said on one call. "I caught her watching your X-rated stuff on YouTube."

"You know," he said, "I fly at the edge, sweetie. Why don't you put her on those parental controls?" he added.

"That's above my pay grade," she said.

A casino near the Mississippi coast flew him first-class from a gig in Idaho. The stage manager loaned him a sport jacket and a collared shirt, saying, "This is Johnny Carson and Jay Leno sort of folks. Lots of golfers. Not that they don't love a good laugh, RC. Don't worry. By the time you get onstage, the martinis will have loosened them up."

The audience was the biggest he'd ever had—hundreds—and the energy in the room, the repeated bursts of laughter gave him, he would later tell Shannon, a rush "like being strapped to the front of an Amtrak."

He thought of a news piece he'd seen a week before and had scribbled about without anything gelling. He went for it, improvising, not sure where he'd go.

"Looking at y'all," he said, strutting across the stage and extending his arms to the crowd, "I'm betting you're big on building that wall."

"Build the wall, build the wall," the audience began to chant. Fists pumped. Red caps waved. Morphing into, "U.S.A., U.S.A., U.S.A."

"Well, what if I told you that your dear Mr. President won't never, ever build it big enough?"

Playful boos flowed. The manager, in the wings, grimaced a bit and tilted his head, seeming to signal, "Be careful, son."

"All right," RC went on, "calm down now. Easy does it," he said, waving them quiet like a teacher before an unruly class.

"Have y'all read in the newspapers about that British guy lying there on his back lawn, catching a few rays? Probably lifting a cup of tea like they do over there with their little Limey pinkies out like this," he said, miming the motion. Laughter.

He turned his back to the audience and let quiet descend. "And suddenly," he said, pivoting, "*whack, bam, boom*, a body frozen hard as rock comes cracking through his walnut tree and hits the bluestone three feet from him so hard it shatters. The vibration knocks that teacup clean out of his hand.

"Now you might say that the guy sunning himself is what?"

"Fucked!" a man bellowed from the audience, and while the crowd roared again, RC applauded the man—"See, you can say what I'm not allowed to in this particular classy venue. That Brit was both the luckiest and the unluckiest bastard in the world, right? He was almost pancaked—but he wasn't.

"Not that it doesn't shake him up. Let's say he was sitting there diddling himself and *boof!* He might think God was sending him a message that shuts his johnson down for years. Or let's say he just stole some cash at the pub where he works. Again, he's gotta figure the Lord might be talking here. The poor guy might just have to call the bobbies and have himself arrested to avoid further body bombs from heaven.

"But forget him. What about the guy who fell from the sky? He's gotta be the dumbest stow-away in the history of the world, right? One fine morning he crawls into the wheel well of a jumbo jet somewhere in Africa and settles in while the temperature drops to 60 below and the air is so freaking thin, he can't breathe. Then, when the landing gear comes down and the 500-miles-per-hour wind comes whooshing in, the idiot, frozen into a rock, falls from the sky. No stowing away on

a posh cruise ship for this moron... Dumbest damned illegal in the whole damned world.”

He basked in their laughter now. The audience was whooping, clapping, cheering.

“So,” RC said, “if y’all don’t mind, I’ll swing back to the part where you guys were booing me. Like I said, the president’s wall won’t do it. Now these people are dropping from the clouds. So everyone together: ‘Build that dome. Build that dome.’”

The audience rose to its feet, joining the chant, clapping along with it. The manager looked ecstatic in the wings, raising his hands in high applause. RC took his bows, knowing he’d begun to fly higher than his father ever did. They were clapping for him, not some rockabilly star he was backing up.

The casino bit trended on Twitter and went viral on YouTube. As soon as he finished it, he had to rush to a series of performances in Texas, the Florida Panhandle, up to Indianapolis, and then to Cheyenne.

He didn’t hear from Shannon for a few days, but he was traveling, and he knew she was buried in a recording studio. Finally, late at night in a Wyoming hotel, he got her on the phone.

“Did I wake you?” he said. “I swear I’m losing track of where I am and when I am.”

“That’s not a problem,” she said, but seemed for a moment at a loss for words.

“Then what?”

“Honey, I’m a little worried about this falling man thing.”

“It’s shooting me to the stars, babe. What’s to worry?”

“Benton texted the video to Steeno—”

“Okay. That’s a little fucking odd. I mean, it’s a pretty adult performance, but...”

“—and told her it’s racist.”

“Oh, c’mon now. Remember Moe, the old Jewish bartender at the club? He told one just like it. What’s the difference, he would ask, between a *schlimazel* and a *schlemiel*?”

“What?” She exhaled, sounding impatient, weary.

“The *schlimazel* is the one who falls down the stairs. And the *schlemiel*...”

“All right, what?”

“...is the one he lands on.”

Shannon stifled a laugh.

“Funny, right?”

“Sorta, but what’s the...”

“So, the guy falling out of the plane is the—”

“I get it, I get it.”

“And the Brit with the tea—”

“I...”

“It’s nothing but humor, baby. Dark maybe. Old as Moe. But no evil vibes behind it, babe.”

“Well, you should see the comments online. They love your act for all the wrong fucking reasons.”

“And I get blamed for dumbasses sitting around in their jockstraps surfing the Web?”

“Well, then Benton sent her some article about a mother in Somalia who had been searching for the boy who fell into London. They were slowly dying in a refugee camp, and her son took off and...”

“Why’s he even allowed to talk to her?”

“He’s her father, RC.”

“Some father, whipping this shit up.”

“She was crying, honey, is all I’m trying to say.”

“I’ll talk to her.”

“Okay,” Shannon said and clicked off. No “I love you.” She didn’t pick up when he called back.



He Ubered from the airport after two weeks on the road. He carried guitar books for Steeno and quartz crystals for Shannon's meditation. They didn't know he was coming and, to surprise them, he had himself dropped off a block from the cottage.

He walked, squinting at morning light that pierced the clouds. He raised his denim collar against a chill.

As he put his key in the door, the handle turned, and Steeno stuck her head out.

"Hey, little girl," he started. "North is nice."

"You can't come in now, RC," she whispered.

"Where's Mom?"

"In town, working."

"Betty?"

"Moved out last week."

"So who's watching you?"

"Benton." The man suddenly stood at the door, a hand on Steeno's shoulder. Skinny like his daughter, but with hollow cheeks. Wearing an undershirt. A cigarette dangled from his lips.

RC put his bags down on the porch and extended his hand. "Pleased to..."

"Steeny," Benton interrupted, wincing from his smoke. "Why don't you go ahead and ask RC those good questions you came up with." He stubbed the cigarette out on an ashtray by the door. The man, RC assessed, was half his weight and sleepy. He was a problem easily handled, if it came to that.

"Okay, Benton." She paused. *Or froze?* RC wondered.

"There's no need," RC said. "I'll come back another..."

"There is a need, sir. Ask the questions, Steeny. The ones you came up with."

Benton let his hand slip from Justine's shoulder. She seemed, RC thought, to be acting on her own at that point, and she stepped out the door and faced him.

"Why," she said, "did you bother telling all those white people in the audience that the boy who fell from the sky was some sort of African?"

"I don't know exactly. You know I didn't mean anything by it."

"If the dead boy was white, would you still have told that joke?"

"That's hard to say. I..."

Justine now took each of RC's hands and looked him in the eyes. "RC," she said, "am I some kind of African?"

A sting rose up his neck. He lifted her hands to kiss them, but stopped himself and let go. "I..." he began but couldn't go on, and they stood there, silently. He picked up his bags. "Well..." He forced a smile for her and a nod to Benton and went down the porch stairs, feeling their gaze as he went along the slate path to the sidewalk.

He walked a few blocks, not knowing what to do or where to go, passing doublewide trailers and bare magnolias. Sorry wouldn't erase the hurt in her face. Not ever, he thought. He called Shannon as he walked, but she didn't answer. First, he left no message. Finally, a few blocks from the house and growing cold, he said, "Shannon. Maybe you could've told me more about Benton and Steeno. Or you and Benton. Maybe, busy as you are, you didn't have to fall off the face of the earth, babe. Just possibly you could have been there."

He taxied to his place in the city, unpacked his bag, and drank a couple of beers for breakfast. All day he checked his phone for Shannon's call, but none came.

That night, sitting on a stool at his kitchenette counter, he worked on his next gig, in a few days at Columbus, Georgia. "You know, folks," he scribbled, "some things, when they're broke, you don't get to fix 'em." He rewrote, "ya cain't fix 'em," giving the crowd a stronger dash of country. "Like when your mom walks in and catches you fucking something you really shouldn't be fucking. [long pause] Phoebe, the rooster from next door. That leg of lamb Mom was marinating for Easter Sunday. Or Grandma. At that point, your work there is done, ain't it? You don't even try to

apologize, do you? You just jump right through the bedroom window, send the glass and wood chips a-flyin', and pray to God you land on your feet. Then you run fast as you can and don't bother telephoning for maybe ten, twenty years."

He awoke in moonlight, on his couch, thinking Steeno and Katie, Katie and Steeno. *North is nice*, in a soft girl voice.

On his way to the bathroom, he found the routine. He tore it to confetti and pissed on it as it eddied down.

# How to Fold a Fitted Sheet by Hannah Yoest

*"I am a maniacal perfectionist." - Martha Stewart to Oprah Winfrey, August 2000*

Martha is flanked by two inferior officers of domestic incompetence. There is a live audience or laugh track lending the tutorial a sense of camaraderie against the tyranny of an unruly linen closet. "What a wretched thing!" Martha says in a parenthesis of benevolent laughter as she picks up the mound of a sheet brought by the woman to her right.

Martha shakes out the cloth and takes a corner in each hand. Stretching to her wingspan she looks like the Redeemer over Rio de Janeiro. "You have to tuck the corners into each other." She brings her hands to meet and slips the seam held by her left under the one held by her right. This motion repeats

as she pulls and tucks the remaining two doubled corners again until all four corners are nested together and held by one hand. Beholding the remaining single square, Martha and her disciples praise themselves. You turn to address your own freshly laundered adversary.

You wonder what Martha would make of the blood still stubbornly stained into the center. Barely faded dark dotted reminders of menstrual hiccups. You pull the fabrics corners, causing the seams to face the ceiling, like a woman on her back.

The problem is the edge of the fabric is neither sharp, nor straight. Even when ironed—the hemline is still gathered and curved, a stretchable border yielding like the turn of a race track. You only notice the rounded resemblance once the material is folded in—the scrunched difficulty reduced and made a mere bent line surrounded by familiar corners.

You run a finger around the fold and crash into the elastic.

# Free Birdie by DeLaney Hardy Ray

## Characters

BENJAMIN BRATTER  
MRS. KRAKOWSKI

BIRDIE MAY  
LINDY  
OSCAR

Thirty-something, tightly wound  
BENJAMIN's pocket-sized neighbor in her mid-sixties.  
An eccentric stranger  
Friend of BIRDIE  
Another friend of BIRDIE

## Setting

A fastidiously maintained and decorated apartment in New York City.

## TIME

About one week during the 1960's.

## ACT I SCENE 1

(The apartment of BENJAMIN BRATTER. The apartment is annoyingly neat. There is a place for everything and everything in its place. There's a coffee table CS, a couch with a quilt placed on the back, and perfectly fluffed pillows along the seat. Diagonally from the couch is a little armchair with another perfectly placed blanket across the back. Next to it is a side table with a phone. At the back of the room is a wet bar, a record player, and a cabinet full of knock-knacks and records. Above the record player is a mirror. SL is a door which leads to BENJAMIN's kitchen. BENJAMIN, a handsome man in his early thirties, enters from the kitchen. He is wearing tan dress pants, a white, button-up shirt, and a brown tie. His clothes are still. He fluffs each pillow, straightens the quilt on the back of the couch, then checks his reflection. SFX: Telephone rings.)

BENJAMIN

Hello... Mr. Abner, hello... Yes, yes, I am just getting ready and... Uh huh... I won't be late, sir. I don't have to be there until... Yes, and it's only... Okay... Yes, sir... No, sir, I am not using sass... No, sir... Yes, sir... Okay. Yes, I'll see you in a few minutes. Goodbye.

(BENJAMIN exits to the kitchen SL. He returns with a bottle of antacids and eats them by the handful. He goes back and fluffs the pillows, straightens the quilt on the back of the couch, and checks his reflection again. SFX: Knock on the door. BENJAMIN opens the door SR and finds MRS. KRAKOWSKI. She is wearing a long, pink, fluffy robe, fluffy slippers, and curlers in her hair.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Ben, it's doing it. It's making that noise again.

BENJAMIN

I've told you, your radiator is supposed to make that noise. It's fine.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

This time, it's different. I swear.

BENJAMIN

I wish I could help, I really do, but I'm going to be late for work.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Oh, and if you're late one more time, Mr. Abner will fire you....

BENJAMIN

What?

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

What....

BENJAMIN

What have I said about listening in on my party line?

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Don't listen on your party line.

BENJAMIN

Don't listen on my party line.

BENJAMIN

It's my one rule.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Speaking of which, I wish you would stop being so damn polite to that man.

BENJAMIN

He's my boss.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

He's a jerk.

BENJAMIN

You want me to be a jerk to my boss?

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

No, but I'd like you to stick up for yourself. You're a bit of a pushover.

BENJAMIN

I am not!

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Go get me some coffee.

BENJAMIN

Okay.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Ben!

BENJAMIN

I am not a pushover.

BENJAMIN (Continued)  
(Aside.)

You're just bossy.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

I heard that.

(BENJAMIN pops a couple more antacids into his mouth, straightens his tie, and fixes his hair in the mirror. MRS. KRAKOWSKI watches.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI (Continued)

Ben.

BENJAMIN  
(Still fixing his hair in the mirror.)

Yes.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Ben.

BENJAMIN

Uh-huh.



MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Ben!

BENJAMIN

What?

(MRS. KRAKOWSKI walks over to BENJAMIN and places her hands on his shoulders.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Relax, it's just a job.

BENJAMIN

I know.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

And you're just a man.

BENJAMIN

I know.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

And you're such a nice man.

(MRS. KRAKOWSKI plants a motherly kiss on BENJAMIN'S cheek, leaving a bright, red lip stain.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI (Continued)

Oopsy.

(MRS. KRAKOWSKI licks her thumb and tries to rub it off.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI (Continued)

Oh, nuts. Here, let's try this.

(MRS. KRAKOWSKI takes a hankie out of her pocket, licks it, and uses it to wipe the kiss off of BENJAMIN'S cheek.)

BENJAMIN

Why are you wearing lipstick?

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

There we go. All right, off I go!

(MRS. KRAKOWSKI makes her way to the door SR, but stops abruptly and turns around.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI (Continued)

You know, my friend, Mildred, has a granddaughter about your age. She's just darling; she's got a Bette Davis face on an Orson Welles body... you don't have a problem with close talkers, do you?

BENJAMIN

Not interested.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

You always say that.

BENJAMIN

Well.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Okay, okay, fine.

BENJAMIN

Goodbye, Agnes.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Okay, okay. Goodbye, dear!

(Exits. SFX: Telephone rings. BENJAMIN stares at the phone, pinches the bridge of his nose, looks back at the phone, and pops another antacid before answering.)

BENJAMIN

Hello? Mr. Abner, I'm on my way! My landlord, she's a little paranoid and likes to... I know that's not an excuse... I'm sorry. I am. I'm on my way now. Bye.

(BENJAMIN straightens the living room one last time, checks his reflection. He rushes out the door SR. SFX: Telephone rings. Lights fade.)

SCENE 2

(Lights come up on BENJAMIN'S apartment. It is later that evening. BENJAMIN returns after work. He comes back and fluffs the pillows again, straightens the quilt on the back of the couch. He goes over to the bar and makes himself a drink. He sits down. SFX: Knock on the door.)

BENJAMIN

Come in, Agnes, it's open.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI  
(Enters.)

Ben, how was your day?

BENJAMIN  
(BENJAMIN holds up his glass of whiskey.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI  
That bad, huh?

BENJAMIN  
(BENJAMIN nods.)

Can I get you a cup of tea?

MRS. KRAKOWSKI  
I'd hate to impose, so just one cup.

BENJAMIN  
(BENJAMIN begins to get up.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI  
Don't be silly, allow me.

(MRS. KRAKOWSKI exits to the kitchen SL.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI (Continued)  
I came here to tell you that a young lady was here earlier looking for you.

BENJAMIN  
Wow. There hasn't been one of those here for a long time. No offense.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI  
(Entering.)

None taken. In fact, I said the same thing.

BENJAMIN  
Well, it was probably a mistake.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI  
I don't think so. She said, "Excuse me, miss. Do you know when Benjamin Bratter will be home?"

BENJAMIN  
There could be a million Benjamin Bratters in this city.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

A million who live in this apartment? I don't think so. She was a lovely girl. Very Jane Fonda.

(BENJAMIN perks up a little.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI (Continued)

Oh, now I have his attention.

(BENJAMIN smiles.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI (Continued)

Anyway, I asked if I could take a message, but she said she would stop by another time.

BENJAMIN

Well, whomever she was, I'm not interested. Probably trying to sell me something.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI  
(Aside.)

Hey, if you can't get it... buy it.

BENJAMIN

What?

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Nothing.

(There's a brief moment of silence. BENJAMIN sips on his drink. MRS. KRAKOWSKI sips on her drink. Finally, she slams her teacup down on the coffee table, leans forward, and places a hand on BENJAMIN'S knee.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI (Continued)

Ben.

BENJAMIN

(Distracted by MRS. KRAKOWSKI'S hand on his knee.)

What?

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Look at me. Now, listen to me very carefully.

BENJAMIN MRS. KRAKOWSKI  
You. Are. Boring.

BENJAMIN

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

You. Are. Boring.

BENJAMIN

Hey!

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Well, it's the truth. I love you like my own son, and you know that, but my goodness, your life makes me sad. Honestly, it's time you got out and moved on...

(BENJAMIN holds up his hands.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI (Continued)

All I'm saying is, how do you ever expect to go out and meet anyone if you spend every waking moment either here or at work?

BENJAMIN

I don't want to meet anyone.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Now, I don't mean in a strictly romantic sense. I mean getting out and making some friends.

BENJAMIN

I have friends.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Oh really? I don't think I have seen anyone come or go from this apartment in six years.

BENJAMIN

They come when you're not watching.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

I'm always watching.

BENJAMIN

If your life is so exciting, what are you doing spending your time with me.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

If you must know, I've just come from my weekly bingo tournament, and in a half an hour, my friend, Mildred, is coming over, and we're going to eat exotic food and not talk about our grandchildren

BENJAMIN

Well, I'll be. I stand corrected.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Speaking of which, I better get going.

(They both get up. BENJAMIN walks her to the door.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI (Continued)

Think about what I said.

BENJAMIN

I will.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Good.

(Almost out the door, MRS. KRAKOWSKI turns.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI (Continued)

You know, my friend, Mildred, has another granddaughter about your age, and...

BENJAMIN

Good night!

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Okay, okay. Good night. Love you, kid.

BENJAMIN

Love you, too.

(MRS. KRAKOWSKI exits. BENJAMIN checks his watch, goes and pours himself another drink, goes back to the couch, and sits down. SFX: Telephone rings. BENJAMIN lets out a deep breath, then gets up and answers the phone.)

BENJAMIN

Mr. Abner... Lucky guess. Yes, I got that report done, and it is sitting on your desk. You will see it first thing tomorrow morning. I checked it twice, just like you always tell me to. I plan on being at work at the same time tomorrow. I... I wasn't late this morning. I was there at eight o'clock. Oh, I see. You watched me clock in at eight o'clock. I apologize, I could have sworn my watch said... Okay, no, I promise I won't be late tomorrow. Yes, sir. Goodbye.

(BENJAMIN drinks the last of his glass, places his hand on his stomach, makes his way to the kitchen, and comes back with the antacids. SFX: Knock on the door.)

BENJAMIN

(Walks towards the door.)

Agnes, I thought you were headed with your friend, Mildred, to have exotic food and...



(Opens the door. BIRDIE stands on the other side of the door. She's wearing high-top green pants, a pink turtleneck that's tucked in, a colorful scarf, and a small purse. Her hair is high on the top of her head. She has a pink suitcase. Mascara is streaming down her face.)

BENJAMIN

Whoa, hello...

BIRDIE

May I come in?

BENJAMIN

Uhhhh....

BIRDIE  
(Crying hysterically.)

Oh, thank you. I'm Birdie.

(BIRDIE lets herself right in. She throws her scarf down on the floor, leaves her shoes on, and throws herself, and her purse, right down on the couch. BENJAMIN notices as she tracks mud and other city particles in on her shoes.)

BENJAMIN

Uhhhhh....

BIRDIE

I just couldn't live there anymore. My landlord is a real son-of-a-bitch. Pardon my French. But, that's not French. I believe it's a very American saying. Oh, I don't know.

(BIRDIE pops a cigarette in her mouth and waits for BENJAMIN to light it. Picking up the cue, he runs to the kitchen and returns with a pack of matches and simulates lighting her cigarette.)

BIRDIE (Continued)

Thank you. Anyway, I just couldn't stay anymore. I'd had enough. I said to him, I said, "If you hand me that eviction notice, I'm leaving." And he did.

(Takes a drag.)

BIRDIE (Continued)

So, I did.

(BENJAMIN picks up the ashtray and pathetically holds it under BIRDIE'S cigarette to catch every single piece of ash.)

BENJAMIN

Excuse me, I don't mean to be rude, but... who are you?

BIRDIE

I told you, my name is Birdie.

(BIRDIE has stopped crying. She stamps her cigarette out in the ashtray, pulls a compact out of her purse, wipes mascara away from her eyes, and pushes her hair around.)

BENJAMIN

Okay...

BIRDIE

Think of me as a Holly GoLightly.

BIRDIE (Continued)  
(Snapping her compact shut.)

Capote, not Hepburn.

(BIRDIE puts her compact back in her purse, then begins to dig around mindlessly.)

BENJAMIN

Do I know you?

BIRDIE

Ha! Typical. Of course, you know me. Well, sorta. I guess. Well, no, not really. I've been coming to your bank for almost a year.

BENJAMIN

Am I your banker?

BIRDIE

Of course not. Don't be ridiculous. Do I look like someone with an account? No, I'm friends with a gal there...

(Snaps her fingers, looking for the words.)

BIRDIE (Continued)

Libby, Liddy...

BENJAMIN

Leslie?

BIRDIE

(Smacks BENJAMIN in the chest.)

That's it. Anyway, you and I've exchanged pleasantries. How do you not remember?

BENJAMIN

I'm so sorry. I just -

BIRDIE

Anyway, I had nowhere else to turn, and you've always been so nice, I thought I'd come and stay with you for a while.

(BIRDIE gets up and makes her way to the kitchen. BENJAMIN fluffs the pillows she was just sitting on, tries to straighten the quilt on the back of the couch. BIRDIE returns, sits back down, and plops her feet on the coffee table.)

BIRDIE (Continued)

So, what do ya say? Can I stay here or what?

BIRDIE (Continued)

(Before BENJAMIN can answer.)

Oooh, peanuts!

(BIRDIE takes the bowl of peanuts off of the coffee table, she opens the shells, then throws them on the floor.)

BENJAMIN

I mean... I don't know...

BIRDIE

Come on, it will be fun!

BENJAMIN

Will it?

(BENJAMIN watches in horror as BIRDIE throws the peanut shells on the ground.)

BENJAMIN (Continued)

I mean, I don't know you. You could be here to rob me.

BIRDIE

Rest assured...

(Looks around.)  
BIRDIE (Continued)

I'm not. Drink? I am parched!

BENJAMIN  
(BENJAMIN points SL to the kitchen.)

In there.

(BIRDIE gets up, taking the peanuts with her, and makes  
her way to the kitchen.  
BENJAMIN re-fluffs the pillows she was just  
sitting on and re-straightens the quilt.)

BIRDIE  
(From the kitchen.)

Benny! Do we have any wine glasses?

BENJAMIN  
(To himself.)

We?

BENJAMIN (Continued)  
(To her.)

Top cupboard.

BIRDIE

Found them!

(BIRDIE returns with the bottle of wine and  
two empty glasses.)

BENJAMIN  
Wait a second. You were here looking for me earlier today.

BIRDIE

Yes! That was me.

(Handing the glasses to BENJAMIN, BIRDIE takes  
a large drink from the wine bottle.)

BENJAMIN

Why?

BIRDIE  
(Snapping her fingers.)

Keep up, man. I was evicted, and I'd like to stay with you.

(BIRDIE is swinging the wine bottle around  
in one hand, holding the bowl of peanuts  
in the other. Wine and peanuts are spilling  
everywhere.)

BENJAMIN  
(Grabbing the bottle.)

All right! I think you ought to be leaving.

(Pushing BIRDIE towards the door.)

BIRDIE  
You said I could stay.

BENJAMIN  
I said no such thing. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go to bed.

BIRDIE  
It's eight-thirty.

BENJAMIN  
Good night!

BIRDIE  
But -

(BENJAMIN slams the door in her face.)

BENJAMIN  
That was rude. That felt rude.

(BENJAMIN opens the door, but BIRDIE has  
already left. He notices she has dropped her  
business card in the hallway.)

BENJAMIN (Continued)  
Birdie May, established 1962... Huh...

(Black out.)

SCENE 3

(Lights come up on BENJAMIN'S apartment the next morning. The mess made by BIRDIE has been cleaned up. SFX: Telephone rings.)

BENJAMIN

Mr. Abner! Yes, I remembered what we talked about yesterday. I'll be there, I promise. Okay, goodb -- Mr. Abner?

(BENJAMIN hangs up. SFX: Knock on the door.)

BENJAMIN

Agnes, I really can't do this today.

(Opens the door.)

BIRDIE

Hello!

BENJAMIN

Oh, no.

BIRDIE

I know you said I can't stay, but I was here last night, and you didn't even notice.

BENJAMIN

What?

BIRDIE

Yeah, I slept right outside your door.

(BENJAMIN checks his watch.)

BENJAMIN

I don't have time for this, not today!

BIRDIE

Maybe we should discuss this over a glass of wine.

BENJAMIN

It's seven-fifty a.m.

BIRDIE

Oh, fine, get my grape juice.

(BENJAMIN goes to the kitchen.)



BIRDIE (Continued)

But, put it in a wine glass. And make it wine!

(BIRDIE lets herself in and beelines right for the couch. BENJAMIN comes back out with a glass of wine. He hands it to her. She gulps it down.)

BIRDIE

Another?

(BENJAMIN goes to the kitchen and returns with another glass of wine.)

BIRDIE (Continued)

Oh, no, thank you, dear, it's far too early for that.

(BENJAMIN looks back at his watch.)

BENJAMIN

Okay, you've had your wine. Time to go.

BIRDIE

You go. I'll stay.

(BENJAMIN pinches his nose and begins to nervously stamp his foot.)

BENJAMIN

I'm beginning to lose my patience.

BIRDIE

And a little bit of hair in the back...

BENJAMIN

What?

(BENJAMIN rushes to the mirror and checks his hair.)

BIRDIE

My goodness, man, lighten up!

(BIRDIE has picked up the peanuts and is tossing them in the air and catching them in her mouth, with mixed success.)

BIRDIE (Continued)

Shouldn't you be at work?

BENJAMIN

Yes. Yes, I should. And today, it's particularly important that I'm there on time!

BIRDIE

So, why aren't you?

(BENJAMIN makes a low growl, rubs his eyes,  
then checks his watch.)

BENJAMIN

There is time. I still have time. You know what? Fine, stay. Stay here; don't steal anything. Or do. At this point, I don't really care. I'll be right back.

(BENJAMIN rushes for the door.)

BIRDIE

(Getting up.)

Oh, thank you!

(BIRDIE goes to give BENJAMIN a hug, but  
instead knocks the wine glass off of the  
table, spilling wine all over the floor.)

BENJAMIN

Look what you've done!

BIRDIE

I'm so sorry. I'll clean it up.

(BIRDIE starts to rub the stain with the  
bottom of her shirt.)

BENJAMIN

No, no, no, that will never work. You need club soda and to pat, not rub and... what am I saying? I don't have time for this....

(BENJAMIN looks at the stain, then at his watch.)

BENJAMIN (Continued)

Great. Great! I'm late.

BIRDIE

No.

(Staring at her watch.)

BIRDIE (Continued)

It's seven fifty-nine. You're not late.

(Stares at her watch a moment longer.)

BIRDIE (Continued)

Eight o'clock. Now you're late.

BENJAMIN

Wonderful!

BIRDIE

Well, since you're already late, you might as well clean this up.

(SFX: Telephone rings. BENJAMIN and BIRDIE look at the phone, then at each other, then back to the phone. It continues to ring.)

BIRDIE (Continued)

You going to answer that?

(BENJAMIN looks at BIRDIE. Phone stops ringing.)

BENJAMIN

Thank God.

(SFX: Telephone rings again. BENJAMIN rushes over to the phone.)

BENJAMIN (Continued)

Hello? Yes, I know... I'm really sorry. I was on my way, and then I got distracted. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Okay. I understand. I... Ummm... Well... Oh, okay... Thank you?

BIRDIE

Well?

BENJAMIN

I'm not fired.

BIRDIE

You sound disappointed.

BENJAMIN

Ummm, no, I'm not. I'm... huh.

BIRDIE

Yes?

BENJAMIN

Well, I better be going. I need to go get Mr. Abner's dry cleaning.

BIRDIE

Are you kidding?

(BENJAMIN pulls the antacids out of his pocket and dumps the entire container into his mouth.)

BENJAMIN

Be back soon!

(BENJAMIN exits.)

BIRDIE

Now to get to work.

(Lights fade to black.)

SCENE 4

(Lights up on BENJAMIN'S apartment, a few hours later. BIRDIE has transformed the home. There are beads hanging in the doorway to the kitchen, an orange shag rug has been placed under the coffee table, the stiff pillows have been replaced with brightly colored velvet pillows. The little dish of peanuts has been replaced with a large vase with multi-colored flowers in it. BENJAMIN enters.)

BENJAMIN

Whoa.

BIRDIE

Welcome home!

BENJAMIN

What have you done with the place?

BIRDIE

Do you like it?

BENJAMIN

It's different.

BIRDIE

You don't like.

BENJAMIN

No, it's not that. It's just very...

BIRDIE

I'm sorry, Ben. If you don't like it, just say so.

BENJAMIN

I like it! I do.

BIRDIE

(Fixing BENJAMIN a drink.)

Good.

(Hands him drink.)

BIRDIE (Continued)

How was work?

BENJAMIN

Ummmm. It was fine.

(BENJAMIN sits on the couch. BIRDIE sits next to him.)

BIRDIE

Just fine?

BENJAMIN

No, it wasn't just fine. It was... just okay.

BIRDIE

Tell me, Ben, when you were a little boy, did you dream of growing up and working at a just-okay job?

(BIRDIE stands up, walks behind him, and starts to rub his shoulders. BENJAMIN initially sinks into the touch, but suddenly shrugs BIRDIE'S hands off his shoulders and stands up.)

BENJAMIN

You did all of this today?

BIRDIE

Well, I wanted it to be ready for our party.

BENJAMIN

Party?

BIRDIE

Yes, I thought it would be fun to host a party. Sort of like a housewarming.

BENJAMIN

Oh.

BIRDIE

Do you like that idea?

BENJAMIN

(A pause.)

That sounds great.

BIRDIE

I'm glad, because people will be arriving any moment!

(SFX: Knock on the door.)

BIRDIE (Continued)

Right on time.

(BIRDIE answers the door. OSCAR and LINDY enter.)

BIRDIE (Continued)

Benjamin, this is Lindy and -

OSCAR

I'm OSCAR!

(OSCAR strolls into the room in a very dramatic fashion.)

OSCAR (Continued)

(To BIRDIE.)

Friend.

OSCAR (Continued)

(To LINDY.)

Confidant.

OSCAR (Continued)

(Turning to Benjamin)

And lover.



OSCAR (Continued)  
(Holding out his hand to BENJAMIN.)

Hello.

LINDY

And I'm Lindy.

OSCAR  
(Turning to LINDY.)

Why do you do that?

LINDY

What?

OSCAR  
I had a whole thing going, and then you just ruin it with your -

BIRDIE

Oscar, Lindy, I'd like you to meet Ben.

OSCAR

A pleasure.

LINDY

Nice to meet you. Have you two known each other long?

BIRDIE

Yes, hours!

BENJAMIN

Can I grab anyone anything to drink?

BIRDIE

Wine.

LINDY

Wine.

OSCAR

Whiskey sour! Here, Benjamin, I'll give you a hand.

(BENJAMIN and OSCAR exit to the kitchen.)

LINDY

So, who is he?

BIRDIE

I'm not quite sure yet. But, I'll tell you this, it couldn't have been better timing. I was evicted yesterday.

LINDY

That happens when you don't pay rent.

BIRDIE

I was paying.

LINDY

In money?

BIRDIE

(BIRDIE turns away.)

Anyway, Ben's a nice guy and has offered to let me stay here.

LINDY

I'm sure very willingly, with little convincing.

BIRDIE

Of course.

(BENJAMIN and OSCAR return.)

OSCAR

A toast! To roommates?

LINDY

To landlords!

BIRDIE

To fresh starts!

BENJAMIN

To strangers.

BIRDIE

I like them all. Cheers!

OSCAR

Birdie, dear, show me around your new digs.

BIRDIE

Don't mind if I do.

(OSCAR and BIRDIE exit through the kitchen.)

BENJAMIN

(BENJAMIN and LINDY stand awkwardly for a while.)

I think we need music.

LINDY

Good idea.

BENJAMIN

(BENJAMIN goes to the record player and puts on a record.)

Better?

LINDY

Much.

(They sit on the couch. Another awkward  
pause. LINDY eyes BENJAMIN'S tie.)

LINDY (Continued)

Oh, I can't stand it any longer!

(LINDY reaches over and loosens BENJAMIN'S  
tie.)

LINDY (Continued)

There, that's much better.

BENJAMIN

Oh, ha, I can breathe again.

LINDY

Sorry, it just looked so uncomfortable.

BENJAMIN

I guess it is, a little.

LINDY

You don't have to let her stay here, you know. You could say no.

BENJAMIN

I know.

LINDY

So, why let her stay?

BENJAMIN

I don't know.

LINDY

You're kind of a sad man, aren't you?

BENJAMIN

Excuse me?

LINDY

I didn't mean to be rude, but you just have a sadness about you.

BENJAMIN

(BENJAMIN stands up.)

This apartment is not that big. What could Oscar and Birdie possibly be doing?

LINDY

Rummaging through your drawers.

BENJAMIN

Probably my bathroom cabinet.

LINDY

Yeah, probably. I'm sorry if I upset you with what I said.

BENJAMIN

It's fine. You're not wrong.

(BENJAMIN sits next to LINDY on the couch and takes a sip of his drink.)

BENJAMIN (Continued)

So, what do you do?

(BIRDIE and OSCAR return.)

BIRDIE

She works at the jewelry counter in Macy's. That's her day job.

BENJAMIN

What's your night job?

LINDY

Well -

BIRDIE

Lindy is a phenomenal writer.

LINDY

Birdie!

BENJAMIN

Are you really?

LINDY

I don't know if I'd say phenomenal, but yes, I'm a writer. Nothing too fancy.

BIRDIE

She's being modest. Her short stories have been published in several magazines.

BENJAMIN

I'm a writer, too. Or, I used to be.

LINDY BIRDIE  
Really? Really?

BENJAMIN

Yes. That's why I moved to New York.

LINDY

Used to be a writer? You're not anymore?

BENJAMIN

I haven't written in years.

LINDY

Why?

BENJAMIN

I'm a sad man.

OSCAR

Are you kidding? They make the best writers!

BIRDIE

You should keep writing.

BENJAMIN

No, I couldn't.

BIRDIE

Why?

BENJAMIN

I have a day job.

BIRDIE

That you hate. Besides, Lindy has a job, and she still writes. You know what I think you should do? I think you should quit your job.

BENJAMIN

What?

OSCAR

Oooh, yes, I agree. What is your job?

BIRDIE

He's a banker.

BENJAMIN

I am not going to quit my job!

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

(Through the door.)

I think you should.

BENJAMIN

Mrs. Krakowski, what are you doing? Come in here.

(MRS. KRAKOWSKI enters.)

BENJAMIN (Continued)

Why were you listening at the door?

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

I'm always listening at the door. Anyway, Ben, I think it's a fantastic idea. You hate your job. Your job hates you. You should quit.

BENJAMIN

(BENJAMIN looks from face to face.)

All right, yes, I'm going to do it.

(Walks over to phone.)

BENJAMIN (Continued)

I'm going to quit.

(Picks up phone and dials.)

BENJAMIN (Continued)

Uhhh, yes, Mr. Abner? This is Benjamin... Benjamin Bratter.

(Lowers his voice.)



BENJAMIN (Continued)

I've worked for you for six years.... I picked up your dry cleaning this morning. Yes, that Benjamin Bratter. Anyway, I've called to tell you... I quit!

(BENJAMIN slams the phone down.)

BENJAMIN (Continued)

I did it! I did it... Oh, what have I done? I quit. I've... I've been... I can't... What have I...

(Faints on the couch.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Ben!

(MRS. KRAKOWSKI slaps BENJAMIN'S cheeks, sticks her fingers in BIRDIE's wine glass, then flicks the wine on BENJAMIN'S face. He wakes.)

BIRDIE

(Hands BENJAMIN her glass of wine.)

Here you go.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

It was the right thing to do, Ben. I've been telling him for years to quit. That job did not appreciate you.

BENJAMIN

I have no job. How am I going to pay for anything? I'll lose my home. I'll be homeless. I'll be one of those people you see on the street with a shopping cart, and a brown paper bag full of booze. I'll -

(MRS. KRAKOWSKI slaps BENJAMIN.)

OSCAR

You read my mind.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Ben, listen to me. This is a good thing. This will give you a chance to continue writing while looking for a day job you care about. And that cares about you.

BENJAMIN

You're right. Besides, I have some money saved up that will get me by for a little while.

BIRDIE

That's the spirit!

BENJAMIN

This is a good thing.... Yes, this is a good thing.

(Lights down.)

SCENE 5

(Lights come back up. BENJAMIN is lying on the couch, two days later. His hair is sticking up, his tie is hanging loosely around his neck, noose-like. BIRDIE is talking on the phone.)

BIRDIE

Lindy, this is not a good thing. He has not moved from the couch in almost two days. His hair is a mess. He's a mess. Plus, I lost an earring in the couch, and I believe he's sitting on it... Oh, would you, darling? That would be wonderful. Thank you.

(Hangs up.)

BENJAMIN

Who was that?

BIRDIE

Lindy. She's going to come over for a bit.

BENJAMIN

Huh.

BIRDIE

Say, Ben, what you say we go for a walk. It's a gorgeous day.

BENJAMIN

Oh, no, thanks. I'm not a fan of Doris Day.

(SFX: Knock on the door. MRS. KRAKOWSKI enters without waiting.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Any signs of movement?

BIRDIE

Not much.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

(Checking BENJAMIN'S pulse, shaking around his limp hand.)

Benny, hunny, I think maybe youv'e gone to a bad place.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI (Continued)

(To BIRDIE.)

Telling him to quit may have been a bad idea.

BIRDIE

No! We can't back down now.

(SFX: Another knock on the door. LINDY enters without waiting.)

LINDY

I'm here.

BENJAMIN

Lindy? What are you doing here?

LINDY

Birdie needed reinforcements.

BENJAMIN

If I'd known you were coming, I would've -

LINDY

Tidied up? I know.

(LINDY sits next to BENJAMIN on the couch.)

LINDY (Continued)

Okay, come on, Hemingway, don't you think you're being just a little dramatic?

BENJAMIN

I'm not being dramatic. And I'm definitely not Hemingway.

LINDY

That's true. This is nothing compared to what he did when he quit his job. Now, you're looking at this all wrong. You've been given -- nay, you took -- a second chance. You could be spending all day writing or out shopping for new jobs. And would you lose this damn tie already?

(LINDY takes BENJAMIN'S tie off and throws it behind the couch.)

BENJAMIN

You're right.

(BENJAMIN stands and looks around at BIRDIE, MRS. KRAKOWSKI, and LINDY.)

BENJAMIN (Continued)

Can I get anyone some coffee?

LINDY

I'd love a cup.

(BENJAMIN exits to the kitchen SL.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Thank you, Lindy. I've seen him like that only one other time, and it took months for him to snap out of it.

(MRS. KRAKOWSKI notices the gaze LINDY is giving towards BENJAMIN in the kitchen.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI (Continued)

Hey, Birdie, I have something for you over at my place. Do you want to come over real quick and grab it?

BIRDIE

Sure!

(BIRDIE and MRS. KRAKOWSKI exit. BENJAMIN returns with a tray, 4 coffee cups, and a pot of coffee.)

BENJAMIN

Where did they go?

LINDY

Over to Mrs. Krakowski's. She said she has something for Birdie.

BENJAMIN

Well, more for us.

LINDY

Thank you.

(Sips coffee.)

BENJAMIN

I feel so embarrassed.

LINDY

Please, don't. Change is scary, and it really wasn't fair for us all to talk you into quitting your job. I do believe it will work out in the end.

BENJAMIN

How can you be so sure?

LINDY

Because it always does.

(Sips coffee. LINDY gets up and looks at all the tchotchkes above the record player.)

LINDY (Continued)

Where did you get all of these?

BENJAMIN

Gifts.

LINDY

(LINDY begins to push around some of the items to get a better look. She finds a picture of a young woman.)

Who is this?

BENJAMIN

That's Julia.

LINDY

She's beautiful. Sister?

BENJAMIN

Wife.

BIRDIE

(BIRDIE enters, wearing a fluffy bathrobe.)

That Agnes is a kick. She sees me naked from the street one time and has to go out and get me a bathrobe. Everything okay?

BENJAMIN

You know, I think I could use some sugar. Anyone else?

(BENJAMIN exits.)

LINDY

Birdie, can I talk to you for a moment?

BIRDIE

Of course, darling, what is it?

LINDY

This thing with Ben... I don't know if it's a good idea.

BIRDIE

Lindy, come on, we're making progress.

LINDY

No, you don't understand.

BIRDIE

Understand what?

LINDY

Well, he's -

(SFX: Knock on the door.)

OSCAR

Lovebirds, let me in! I've brought libations.

(BIRDIE opens the door. OSCAR enters,  
dressed in 1920's party gear.)

OSCAR (Continued)

Well, ring-a-ding, swing-a-ding, look who decided to let me in! I've come from a Great Gatsby party.

LINDY

And what brought you here?

OSCAR

(Pulling out hipflask.)

Well, would you believe it? This Truman Capote lookin' mother fella would not keep his hands off of me. I'm not convinced that it wasn't, in fact, Truman himself. Anyway, I finally had just about as much as I could stand, and I said, "Good God, man, please, I am married. Then, he gets all huffy and says, "I thought you were hip." I said, "I am, baby.."

(Takes a swig from the flask.)

"...but I'm not blind." And, for whatever reason, he took offense to that and got me kicked out. Anyway, now I'm here.

BENJAMIN

(BENJAMIN returns to the living room.)

Oh. Hi, Oscar. Coffee?

OSCAR

Dear, no, darling, it's bad for your buzz.

(OSCAR takes another swig from his flask.)

OSCAR (Continued)

Oh, lawdy, we need some music.

BIRDIE

I noticed some records in the cupboard over there.

OSCAR

(OSCAR gets up and begins searching through the records, listing each name off as he reads them.)

Dean, Frank, Sammy. Gang's all here!

OSCAR (Continued)

(Pulls out and brandishes a Cole Porter record.)

Ooooh! Cole Porter...

OSCAR (Continued)

(Aside.)

Interesting.

BENJAMIN

(Agitated.)

Please, put that back.

BIRDIE

I love Cole Porter.

BENJAMIN

(In a snappy tone.)

I'm just not in the mood for him right now.

BENJAMIN (Continued)

(Grabs the record from OSCAR.)

Thank you.

BIRDIE

Well, that was kind of rude.



Birdie!

LINDY

It was!

BIRDIE

Rude? Oh, excuse me. I'm sorry, was that rude? Maybe I should be more polite and just barge into your home, and throw parties, and smoke cigarettes? Would that be the more polite thing to do?

BENJAMIN

I'm sorry we upset you. It's just a record.

BIRDIE

That's what everything is to you, right? It's just a job. He's just my landlord. It's just a record. Maybe you should just get out!

BENJAMIN

BIRDIE

(Silence.)

Is that really what you want?

BENJAMIN

(Looks at BIRDIE, then at OSCAR and LINDY.)

Yes.

BIRDIE

Fine.

(MRS. KRAKOWSKI enters.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Where are you going?

BIRDIE

It's over.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

What?

BIRDIE

He's kicking me out. Don't worry, you'll get your money back.

BENJAMIN

What?

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

What?

OSCAR

(OSCAR, just about to drink from his flask.)

What?

BENJAMIN

Agnes, what does she mean “you’ll get your money back”?

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Well... Ummm... You see... I... Hmmmmmm.

OSCAR

She’s a companion!

LINDY

Oscar! No, she’s not a companion, she’s -

BENJAMIN

Why don’t you two let Birdie explain?

BIRDIE

Fine. People hire me to help their loved ones. Yes, Mrs. Krakowski hired me to fix you.

(BIRDIE exits to the kitchen to gather her bag.)

BENJAMIN

Fix me?!

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Ben, it’s been six years.

BENJAMIN

I don’t want fixing. For once in your life, why don’t you just mind your own business? You know what, I think you should all leave. I need to be alone.

LINDY

All of us?

BENJAMIN

All of you.

(BIRDIE enters from the kitchen, crosses the living room, and leaves the apartment. OSCAR begins to leave, as well.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Oh, no. Oh, no. I've really done it this time.

(MRS. KRAKOWSKI sits on the couch.)

OSCAR

(Peeking his head through the doorway.)

You coming?

LINDY

I'll be along in a minute.

(OSCAR exits. LINDY sits next to MRS. KRAKOWSKI and puts her arm around her.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

My friend, Mildred, told me about her granddaughter and how she has created a business of finding broken people and making them come to life again. I thought I was helping. He may never forgive me.

LINDY

You didn't mean for things to happen like this.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

You don't understand. Ben is fragile. He wasn't ready. I knew he wasn't ready.

LINDY

Mrs. Krakowski, can you tell me about Ben's wife?

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

There's something you need to understand. The Ben we know today is completely different from the Ben I met seven years ago. Seven years ago, two young writers moved into this apartment: Ben and Julia. They were both free spirited, full of life, didn't care one bit about crumpled pillows.

LINDY

What happened?

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Well, Julia... had a problem. One day, Ben came home to find Julia cold on the couch with a needle in her arm. Her favorite Cole Porter record was playing in the background. After that, Ben was a completely different man.

LINDY

Poor Ben.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

I thought by hiring Birdie, Ben would see that there is still life to be lived. He wasn't ready. I should've known he wasn't ready.

LINDY

You really care about him.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Like my own son.

(Looks at LINDY.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI (Continued)

And you?

LINDY

Yeah.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

I suppose we had better respect his wishes and leave.

LINDY

You're right. Goodnight, Mrs. Krakowski.

(LINDY exits.)

BENJAMIN

(BENJAMIN enters.)

What are you still doing here?

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Ben.

BENJAMIN

I asked you to leave.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

(Stands.)

Ben.

BENJAMIN

I want to be alone.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Ben...

(They look at each other. BENJAMIN crumples into her arms and begins to cry.)

BENJAMIN

It still hurts so bad.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

It will for a while. And then that pain will turn into a memory.

BENJAMIN

How do you know that?

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

(Smiling.)

I know everything.

BENJAMIN

(BENJAMIN pulls away.)

I really do want to be alone right now.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Of course. I love you, kid.

(BENJAMIN nods. MRS. KRAKOWSKI squeezes his hand and exits. He sees the empty room. He moves over to the couch and begins to fluff the pillow, then decides not to. He moves over to the cabinet and finds Julia's picture. He sets it on the coffee table. He exits to the bedroom, then returns with his typewriter. He sets the typewriter on the coffee table next to Julia's picture and begins to type. Lights fade to black.)

## SCENE 6

(Lights up. A few months have passed, and the living room has a much more lived-in feel. There's a wine glass on the coffee table from the night before, an ashtray with a few cigarette butts, and a typewriter. Julia's picture is now front and center of the record cabinet. The quilt that usually lives on the back of the couch is now casually flung over the arm; however, the pillows are still perfectly fluffed. SFX: Knock on the door.)

BENJAMIN

(From kitchen.)

It's open.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

(MRS. KRAKOWSKI enters. She stops at the picture of Julia.)

There she is.

BENJAMIN

(BENJAMIN enters with a cup of coffee.)

Morning!

(BENJAMIN sits down at his typewriter and begins to type. MRS. KRAKOWSKI sits.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Good morning! At it again, I see! Good for you.

BENJAMIN

I was up until three this morning.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

I haven't seen this side of you in a long time. I've missed it.

BENJAMIN

I did, too.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Julia would like to see you like this.

BENJAMIN

You know, I always thought that if I didn't talk about Julia, it meant her death didn't happen. As if she were just off on a long trip.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

I think we fear bringing up our loved ones because it will be too painful. However, talking about them shouldn't remind us that they're gone, but instead remind us that they lived.

BENJAMIN

(BENJAMIN stops typing and looks at MRS. KRAKOWSKI. She reaches over and grabs his hand. They stay like this for a moment.)

There's coffee. Would you like a cup?

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

I'd love one.

(BENJAMIN starts to stand up.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI(Continued)

Oh, no. Let me get it.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI (Continued)

(From the kitchen.)

So, it's been a month. Has she stopped by?

(BENJAMIN continues to type. MRS. KRAKOWSKI enters.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

And I take it she hasn't called either.

(BENJAMIN keeps typing.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Well, maybe you should call her.

BENJAMIN

If she wanted to talk to me, she would have.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Maybe she's scared. After all, you were awfully angry last time she saw you.

BENJAMIN

I had the right to be.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Yes, I know. We've been over this. It's just very clear you miss her.

(MRS. KRAKOWSKI finishes her coffee.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI (Continued)

Well, I better be going. Mildred and I are going to go try on fancy clothes and not talk about our grandchildren.

(MRS. KRAKOWSKI goes over and plants a kiss  
on BENJAMIN'S forehead.)

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

I love you, kid.

BENJAMIN

I love you, too.

MRS. KRAKOWSKI

Goodbye.

(She exits. BENJAMIN continues to type. He takes a sip of his coffee, realizes it's empty, goes to the kitchen for a refill, returns, and goes right back to typing. SFX: Knock on the door.)

BENJAMIN

Mrs. Krakowski, I thought you and Mildred were going to try on fancy clothes and not talk about your grandchildren.

(SFX: Knock continues. BENJAMIN answers the door. LINDY is on the other side.)

BENJAMIN (Continued)

Lindy.

LINDY

May I come in?

BENJAMIN

Yes, please.

(BENJAMIN looks around. He doesn't try to tidy up.)

LINDY

I like what you've done with the place.

(LINDY walks over to BENJAMIN'S typewriter.)

LINDY (Continued)

You're writing again!

BENJAMIN

Yes, a little.

LINDY

What are you writing?

BENJAMIN

A novel.

LINDY

About?



BENJAMIN

What are you doing here?

LINDY

Birdie thought maybe she had left some things here, and she asked if I would come and grab them.

BENJAMIN

(Disappointed.)

Oh. Can I get you a cup of coffee?

LINDY

Yes, please.

BENJAMIN

(Goes to kitchen. From kitchen.)

I'm sorry to disappoint you, but there's nothing of Birdie's here. I checked.

(Returns with a cup of coffee.)

LINDY

Okay, well, I'm sure she'll find what she's missing.

(Silence as LINDY and BENJAMIN sip their coffee.)

BENJAMIN

I've been meaning to call -

LINDY

I wanted to call, but -

BENJAMIN

You go ahead.

LINDY

Oh, sorry, you go.

(Silence.)

BENJAMIN

What were you going to say?

LINDY

I wanted to call, but I didn't know if you'd want to hear from me.

BENJAMIN

I wanted to call you, too, but I felt so foolish after that night.

(LINDY goes to take a drink of her coffee  
and notices it's empty.)

BENJAMIN (Continued)

Oh, let me get you more.

(BENJAMIN grabs LINDY'S cup and races to the kitchen.)

BENJAMIN (Continued)

(From kitchen.)

Damn.

LINDY

What?

BENJAMIN

(BENJAMIN returns.)

I'm out of coffee.

LINDY

Oh.

BENJAMIN

Don't leave. I'll get some from Mrs. Krakowski's apartment.

LINDY

Ben.

BENJAMIN

Yes?

LINDY

(LINDY stands and takes a step towards BENJAMIN.)

I don't like coffee.

BENJAMIN

Oh...

LINDY

The truth is... I missed you.

BENJAMIN

(BENJAMIN rushes over and grabs LINDY'S hands.)

I missed you, too. I really did want to call, but, well... I had no idea how to reach you.

(LINDY laughs.)

BENJAMIN (Continued)

I need to ask the people who come into my life more questions! I'd really like to get to know you better.

LINDY

I'd like that.

(LINDY turns towards the typewriter.)

LINDY (Continued)

What are you writing?

BENJAMIN

(BENJAMIN takes LINDY'S hand and they walk over to the couch.)

Well, it's sort of an autobiography.

LINDY

Really?

BENJAMIN

Yes, I could really use another writer's input.

LINDY

Mine?

BENJAMIN

Yes!

LINDY

I'd be honored.

(The two sit on the couch together. Shy at first, then LINDY drapes her legs over BENJAMIN'S lap. He continues to hold her hand as he tells her about his novel. Dialogue fades to stage whisper as the lights fade to black.)

# Planet Earth: A Digital Dimension of the Universe by Sarah A. Odishoo

“If what we call reality is a multi-dimensional space-time interface, it would likewise be expected to be calculated only on demand. The virtual reality viewer would then be no more aware of this than a virtual game player is, as everywhere they looked the world would exist. Our reality could indeed be only calculated when we ‘measure’ it. However, there is a twist, as if our world is a virtual reality, we are viewing it from within not without. In a computer game, the player exists outside the screen interface. However, in the case of our world, we are viewing it from within. This makes this world a recursive interface, that both sends to and receives from itself. If so, it is like no other interface that we know.”

*The Physical World as a Virtual Reality*  
Brian Whitworth

i

For over one million years, the history of homo sapien sapiens has left markings all over the earth that reveal a larger presence at work in the human mind. That mind infers, precognates, and metaphorizes knowledge that is beyond the physical three-dimensional world in which we are located.

From cave paintings to language to tools to agriculture to civilizations with agreed-upon rules, the creatures evolved across territories without direct communication in many instances. But no matter where on earth these creatures traveled, they all expressed one idea: the existence of higher powers—gods.

Every tribe, every clan, every culture in history has named its gods as aliens. I don’t mean from another country on this planet, nor do I mean from this galaxy. I mean from another plane of existence. If we live in a three-dimensional universe, the gods of the history of this planet come from the fourth dimension or the 35th dimension, ones we haven’t discovered...yet.

Except the ones in our belief systems...all our belief systems. So far as I know, no culture has taken the possibility that gods (fourth-dimensional beings) have been communicating, possibly creating, and observing this “virtual reality earth and solar system” until this century.

What if the “gods” are living simultaneously to us not in a physical dimension of the universe but in a digitalized metaphysical dimension of another universe, one that overlaps into all the dimensions possible?

ii

On January 18, 2014, Saturday, at 3:58 a.m., I was dreaming...  
Suddenly...a Flash (the kind that appears on a computer screen)...ERROR...  
ERROR

A WHIRRING IN MY THROAT LIKE A MECHANICAL DISCHARGE OF A MOTOR...

And behind the square black print of the ERROR message were men in black at computers for as far as I could see horizontally whose expressions looked like hackers who were caught!

And I was wide awake, like a television set whose program had been disrupted. I was fully awake to this reality—what I will call LIFE on earth as I have lived it, and I knew—I KNEW—that my life’s perceived reality was a projection, like the TV screen’s, and the ERROR message was a different reality that had control, some or perhaps all control of my conscious and unconscious

existence.

I did not think, nor did I feel fear. I did feel deceived—as if I had been living all this time in a world manufactured and created for me/us and that observed me/us to study and watch us the way we watch soap operas or UFOs—tracking our beliefs, motivations, changes, etc.

The other thought as powerful was that they were nurturers of the evolutionary changes a creature in this environment had to transform—evolve—to actually know/remember its own birth vision for itself and awaken literally to see behind the screen and know seeing behind the screen indicated an ERROR in the Machinery of the Mind or an awakening to its Source.

iii

I not only did not feel fear, I felt a presence. It was more than a presence, it was a kind of voice; no, no, more like a thought, but not my thought...an over-thought...I guess...

The “ERROR” message is triggered when and if you are ready to accept this inherent reality of the human condition, the message of the over-thought communicated:

“You are a Spirit from the ALL (read as LOVE) who agreed to be encased in an earth-based form (earth, water, air, wind), and your body, like an astronaut’s suit, is meant to protect you from the earth’s forces and to allow you to use your mind and heart to transform correspondingly the earth and your own Soul’s capacities (Love, Laughter, Language, Learning) consciously.

“You are here in this temporary body with a transcendent soul—Your soul can see with eyes of never-ending Love and Laughter and Learning. Language is your vehicle and is part of the growth factor. The Growth Factor is based on an incompleteness scale—one you chose before you were born—whose basis is your everlasting exploration of WHAT IS. The physical world is only one of the worlds you have needed to explore, to occupy, and to help you grow. It’s the Other—the corresponding universes—that are demanding discovery. You can, if you believe in your own consciousness, reconcile your expectations with meaning that will illuminate your cosmological images—your reason for why you were born at this time and in this place, in your body, and what it is that you have yet to do to awaken other people’s hearts as you awaken to your own.

“The population and the entire environment—Earth, its inhabitants, and all the majesty of the cosmos that surrounds this breeding place—are holographic digital images projected into your eyes, mind, and spirit to make a virtual reality of this breeding place.

“We are not human beings. We are beings of Light...kind of like Star Trek’s ‘Beam me up, Scotty.’ We have been beamed into a physical reality from a transcendent reality—a cosmic process from which the ordinances of life and growth proceed.

“We—as holographic images—are tracked like cell phones to find who has proceeded to the next level of knowing the transcendent purpose which they have volunteered to complete before their physical beam fades—

“ERROR may be the signal that the spirit and the self have joined, and as in birth, the hymen is broken—They are being born into a new form...sometimes too early—”

iv

As soon as I awoke, I knew there were observers beyond my previous cognition of the contained reality of the earth and the solar system I had assumed was the all in all. When I awoke the voice had said was another possibility to the Real.

That just as Socrates had instructed 2,500 years ago, we see shadows of the real—distortions of the Real. We are “images” of the forces to the extent that we are born to think, to question, to doubt, and to reconstruct the “real” by living authentically with those four qualities that start with the letter “L” and in that order: Love, Laughter, Language, and Learning.

But to get to that Real Space, we need to find and LIVE the L words by awakening them in all we do and say. Then maybe, just maybe, we may reach beyond the virtual reality we were physically

born into to the Real we are meant to be.

OTHEEYESOFGODWATCHUSOUTOFEACHONEOFUS

—ken patchen, poet

# Author Biographies

Mark Belair's poems have appeared in numerous journals, including Alabama Literary Review, Atlanta Review, The Cincinnati Review, Harvard Review, Michigan Quarterly Review, Poetry East and The South Carolina Review. He is the author of seven collections of poems, most recently the companion volumes *Taking Our Time* and *Running Late* (Kelsay Books, 2019) He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize multiple times, as well as for a Best of the Net Award. Please visit [www.markbelair.com](http://www.markbelair.com)

Neil Mullin has fiction that has appeared or is forthcoming in Hawaii Pacific Review, Faultline, Fifth Wednesday, Limestone Journal, Blue Lake Review, Green Hills Literary Lantern, Midway Journal, Linden Avenue Literary Journal, Sanskrit Literary-Arts Magazine, Sliver Of Stone, Storyscape Journal, Superstition Review, Umbrella Factory, Willow Review, and Zone 3. His short story "Anniversary" was a finalist in the 2018 Glimmer Train annual fiction open. My story "Milkweed" was a finalist in Middlesex University London's international fiction contest. Also, his short story "Miracle of the Cow" won an annual fiction award from Willow Review. He has also published nonfiction, including an Op-Ed piece in the New York Times. A native of the Bronx, he drove a taxi and spent years as a sheet metal worker before he became an attorney specializing in civil rights and employment law. He has successfully argued cases in front of many juries and before appellate courts, including the United States Supreme Court. Recently, he represented Gretchen Carlson in her lawsuit against Roger Ailes of Fox News.

Hannah Yoest is a writer and editor for a magazine in Washington D.C. Her poetry is seen and forthcoming in several literary magazines (Atlanta Review, Barely South, Aperion Review, and others). She is a graduate of the University of Virginia where she studied fine art. She studied poetry at the Iowa Writers Workshop summer course and has attended the VQR writers' conference. She is also an artist in residence at the ceramics studio KUZEH Pottery. You can find her on instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/avecruth/> and twitter: <https://twitter.com/ruthyoest>.

DeLaney Hardy Ray is a 27-year-old actress and playwright living in Billings, MT. While pursuing a degree in Theatre Performance, she has worked professionally as a director, actor, and teaching assistant for the Seattle Children's Theatre, Virginia City Opera House, and Yellowstone Repertory Theatre.

Sarah Odishoo (English) is a poet and writer. Her essay "Germane German: A Lesson in Dispelling" was nominated for the 2015 Pushcart Prize by Under The Sun. "Euclid's Bride" was nominated for the Best of the Net Anthology, and "Eat Me: Instructions from the Unseen" was awarded the Best Nonfiction Essay of 2012 by Zone 3.