GOOD ACTORS
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... it’s only in the movies that it’s easy.
John Cassavetes

It’s just language.
Jeanne Liotta
Curtain opens to reveal a theater meadow.
Good Actors

I want to make a movie before I turn 45

About two characters exchanging money.

I give them directions. I say to them, Earnestly.

As if holding grilled cheeses,

They push the money into each other’s hands.

I call out, Reluctantly. They look down

And say, Goddamnit, this is the last time, Ray.

And weave it between their fingers.

They are good actors. So I say,

Hopefully. They blink and gaze into their hands

Like into a new baby. Angrily, I say. They gnaw

The money to confetti. I tell them,

As if in mourning. And the money fevers

Down their wrists. And now, Like a bank.
They fist and throw it like garbage.

*And a forest? Now a forest?* Like seed

They sow it. *You’re doing very well,* I say.

They drop it at my feet.

*Exuberantly,* I say. They remove their clothing.

*Lovingly,* I say. They move toward me.

They are such good actors.

They turn off the camera.
If you tell me which *Twilight Zone* episode you remember best, I can tell you what your problem is.


Your problem is: You cannot reconcile your desire to believe in something greater than yourself with your doubt that something greater than you exists.
Thank You

Thank you, Moms Mabley.

Thank you, Moms Mabley and Phyllis Diller.

Thank you, Moms Mabley, who ran away at 14 to join a vaudeville troupe, and Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers.

Thank you, Moms Mabley and Phyllis Diller, who started doing stand-up at 37, and Joan Rivers and Carol Burnett.

Thank you, Moms Mabley, who came out at 27 in 1921, and Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers, who kept a note from Lenny Bruce that said, *They're wrong, you're right*, in her bra for years, and Carol Burnett.

Thank you, Moms Mabley, who came out at 27 in 1921, and Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers, who bombed every night for two years, and Carol Burnett, who said, *There's laughter in everything*.

Thank you, Moms Mabley and Phyllis Diller, who started doing stand-up at 37, and Joan Rivers and Carol Burnett, who said, *There's laughter in everything*, and Bea Arthur.

Thank you, Moms Mabley and Phyllis Diller, who started doing stand-up at 37, and Joan Rivers, who claims she was the first female host of the *Tonight Show*, but so does Florence Henderson, Phyllis Newman, and Della Reese, and who really cares anyway, and Carol Burnett and Bea Arthur, whose TV character, Maude, chose to get an abortion at age 47 in 1972.

Thank you, Moms Mabley, who gave birth to six people, and Phyllis Diller, who gave birth to five people, and Joan Rivers, who gave birth to one person, and Carol Burnett, who gave birth to three people, and Bea Arthur, who mothered two people.

Thank you.
If you tell me which *Twilight Zone* episode you remember best, I can tell you what your problem is.

"Eye of the Beholder" *(I already believe my problem is with conformity).*

Your problem is: You doubt your knowledge.
In Alice Notley’s *Waltzing Matilda* the narrator reads a friend’s poems, contends with the ambivalences of marriage, tends to sick children, gets hammered, makes an ass of herself, worries about making an ass of herself, reads the news, frets about money. Good god, am I describing my life or a book of poems? This book was published in 1981. I was published in 1976.

Lately when I sit down to write it’s a firework. (This essay will be an admirable example! Also, I do not write of Quiznos in it.) A thousand threads spiraling out of a teeny, tiny, imperceptible, barely pulsing center a.k.a. my brain. I don’t know if the diversity of these threads makes sense, sense is likely too haughty of a goal anyway. But they seem to affect each other. Take the way I recently injected Fred Sandback into a fantasy [us making love next to Untitled. 1967.] with my new lover. Or the way accidentally no-showing my therapist on Monday is directly connected to my inability to get my daughter’s and my new telescope aligned. So far, we have seen the impenetrable fabric of night, really up close, and a neighbor’s garage, really up close.

A few days ago, on a November day, Alice Notley tweeted [yes for real] that she is having a birthday. Today, on this November day, I randomly opened *Grave of Light: New and Selected Poems, 1970–2005* and read the poem, “The Trouble With You Girls.” It begins:

In the chair covered with shawls  
I’m wearing my favorite red shirt  
Maybe it’s November near my birthday, sun  
On my shoulder and coffee too in what cup chipped;

“...coffee too in what cup chipped.” Just damn. This phrase is a song. Later:

Day’s lovely before I’m  
Too many thoughts, I’ve become content this year;
Content? Or content? How wonderful to be both.

And running in the background of her thoughts, Ted is talking at or to her. She admits she isn’t listening. She answers the question, what’s a person for?

I think it’s
Partly to be with a plant.

Two nights ago, I watched 3 Faces by Jafar Panahi at the Denver Film Festival. It was very good. My friend Andrew told me Panahi once had to sneak a film out of Iran in a birthday cake because the government banned him from making films, but he made one anyway. 3 Faces is about a dozen things. One of those things seems to be the human need to create despite horrible consequences, or, if I were a film critic, “the enduring power of self-expression.”

Notley writes in her poem: I don’t know what I’m for.

Ted, in her poem, talks so much about objects. He mentions chairs and things to drink and sunshine and coffee and money and asses and cigarettes and Pepsi and the newspaper and doughnuts and ... philosophy. It is funny to place philosophy into his litany of things, but it becomes an object. He says in the poem “You have no philosophy” which sounds to me like half, Dude, you’re out of toilet paper, and half, Yakkity yakkity yak.

In an exquisite example of bibliomancy (bibliomancy is always exquisite, maybe?), “The Trouble With You Girls” is also about “the enduring power of self-expression.” Go figure. Ted’s standing in for what the power must endure; in this poem it is money, patriarchy, lofty ideals about the artist, the outside world of news and current events, the body’s needs.

A couple of weeks ago, my friend Julia asked me to speak to her students about a few poems I wrote. Sometimes I don’t know who I am until I say
it out loud. This time, a student asked me if I believe in the angels and muses that some poets and artists say speak through them. I told them I have never had such an angel, but I believe in other people’s angels. I also said, almost as if in warning, that the existence of these angels doesn’t let us off the hook. That there is a lot of work we must do to prepare ourselves for the arrival of angels. Gotta fill yourself up with stuff angels like.

Then I said, and this scared the hell out of me: *I’ve been preparing for these angels my whole life.*

If this is true, then getting a DUI a million years ago and breaking my sister’s horse cookie out of jealousy another million years ago and crying in front of my boss last month and divorcing and mooning the Grand Canyon and staying on the phone for hours with a sick friend and cleaning my mother’s house on my hands and knees and sneaking into *Lethal Weapon II* and watching my child do the Floss and being a librarian and forgetting to buy deodorant last night was all in preparation for the arrival of angels. It seems impossible but, it was, it is. It’s a terrifying relief, frankly. I don’t have to write “prepare for angels” on my to-do list. In fact! (And this is wonderful!) I’ll rename my to do list: Prep for Angels.

Sometimes, I’m a lot more Ted than I think.
If you tell me which *Twilight Zone* episode you remember best, I can tell you what your problem is.

*The old lady is tormented by US Astronauts* (sorry, spoilers).

Your problem is: The impossibility of aligning one’s morals with one’s needs and desires causes you suffering.
Great Things from the Department of Transportation

My mother desires to track my location on her phone.

My mother announces that she’s “latex intolerant.”

My mother is horrified that the children’s cartoon character Caillou is bald.

My mother to the server at a terrible restaurant: *I don’t want a box—I want a flamethrower.*

One’s mother might be the most famous person one knows.

My mother says, *There is no Denny’s, only Zuul.*

My mother on penises and traffic cones: *On occasion they’re both orange, aren’t they?*

The young lungs of my mother fill with fine particulate matter on the streets of Clairton, PA.

My mother on the X-rated hypnotist: *He was only concerned with having the hypnotized persons act sexually stupid.*

One night in the 1970s, in the Mojave Desert, my mother ceases to feel apart from the world.

My mother pays my sister and me $40 each to not have birthday parties.

My mother’s soulmate is not my father but her dog, Six.
The only thing I don’t like about John Wick is that he never washes his hair.

My mother’s father, a bipolar beer distributor, laughs at least once that I know of because it echoes through me for 40 years.

On the whole my mother likes Miranda July’s novel, The First Bad Man, but could have done without the sex parts.

I listen to my mother tell my child a story as if I were my own daughter.

My mother tells me there were some skanks on America’s Next Top Model.

My mother asks, Didn’t someone famous say, “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger?”

My mother prays for her children every night.

My mother prays for children every night.

I bet you never thought you’d marry, have a baby, and get divorced before you’re 40, she tells me.

My mother expects great things from the Department of Transportation.