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*Directory*



OTIS BOOKS

MFA WRITING PROGRAM

*Otis College of Art and Design*

LOS ANGELES  2020

*For the living and the dead*

# Contents

<i>Directory</i>	9
<i>Listing</i>	10
<i>Gestalt</i>	12
<i>Lecture</i>	14
<i>Rope Trick</i>	15
<i>Cul-de-Sac</i>	17
<i>Initiation</i>	18
<i>Ceremony</i>	19
<i>Recoil</i>	20
<i>Dinner</i>	21
<i>Date Night</i>	23
<i>Belief</i>	25
<i>Tongues</i>	27
<i>Reunion</i>	29
<i>Elegy</i>	30
<i>Procedure</i>	31
<i>Timber</i>	32
<i>Visitation</i>	33
<i>Pitstop</i>	34
<i>Apocrypha</i>	36
<i>Folktale</i>	39
<i>Father's Day</i>	41
<i>The Temple</i>	43
<i>Chattel</i>	45
<i>Masterpiece</i>	46
<i>Finale</i>	48
<i>Proposal</i>	49
<i>River</i>	51
<i>Homecoming</i>	52
<i>Routine</i>	54

<i>Zia</i>	56
<i>Showtime</i>	57
<i>Slideshow</i>	58
<i>Race</i>	59
<i>Layover</i>	60
<i>Terminal</i>	62
<i>This</i>	63
<i>Memes</i>	64
<i>Chorus</i>	66
<i>Counterpoint</i>	68
<i>Disconnected</i>	71

## *Directory*

Back when we loved our mother, we recorded her telephone calls. Most nights she took the handset into the bath and talked to her string of men. We sat downstairs next to the speaker, Dictaphone in hand, copying the sounds of her voice. She spoke of stripping off her leather skirt, her silk blouse and rainbow fishnets. She laughed about not wearing any underwear. She joked about the bubbles in the bath, the placement of her loofah. The men spluttered, asked her to keep going, provide more details. They always wanted to know more. Our mother acted coy. She said she had long tanned legs, freshly shaven—the men would not believe how smooth her skin felt. When pushed, she described her breasts, the pinkness of her nipples. Then she would splash about, top off the bath with steaming water. Her skin pruned; her makeup ran; her hairpiece slopped into the soapy water behind her neck. We heard breaths deepen, become intertwined, smoky. A last guttural moan and the call would be over. Water channeled down the pipes, out of the house, to the sewer. Our mother would emerge towel-clad, wanting us to fetch her a strong drink, but we'd escape to the basement, the cot behind the tool rack, and split up: one hidden beneath the sheets, the other on top. We had committed the conversations to memory and liked to replay them as man and woman, swapping roles every night. When the handset returned to the cradle, we crept up the stairs and sneaked into the living room to watch our mother dialing another man.

## *Listing*

Our parents obliterated us.

Back then we had names. But they are gone now.

Our former selves no longer exist.

We are American and un-American.

We are fragments of our personal archives.

Silently adrift in our insular world.

The architecture of language surrounds us.

But we wish to run away.

And explore the cities and towns of this nation.

And consume and regurgitate.

We want to discover who we were and will be.

We read Marx and Freud and slog through Aristotle and Plotinus.

We adore Walter Benjamin. Or, at least, one of his ideas.

We laugh at our PTSD diagnosis.

We have lived through κ-holes and sad comedowns from Molly.

We are fuckups and weirdos.

And we lie constantly.

But then the people who know us will not be surprised.

We are two, sometimes three.

We fetishize telephones and compilations of their numbers.

We desire men and women on the other end of the line.

We become these men and women, boys and girls; we occupy nebulous pronouns in between.

We inhabit every point on the spectrum.

We confess rarely.

But today is different.

## *Gestalt*

Our misdeeds—let's start with those. We made our old man piss his pants. He limped away, sopped the urine with a kitchen rag and kept his hand over his crotch. He swore at us, said we were no good since our mother left. We laughed. We didn't care. We filched his bottom-shelf vodka and terrorized the neighborhood, rode our dirt bikes up and down the road, burning rubber outside of Mrs. Macomber's house. She watched us from her bedroom window. Her flash of silvery hair a clear sign we had her spooked. We stole her underwear from the drying line, strung it to the back of our bikes, saw if it worked as a parachute. The panties flew away, ripped, busted, left in the street for everyone to see. She came out, threatened to tell our old man. Go ahead, we said. He cares less than we do. Mrs. Macomber raised her fist, her knotted fingers thin and brittle. She wanted to punch us, knock us out, teach us a lesson. We rode up her pristine lawn, stepped off our bikes, stood in front of her. We jutted out our chins. Take your best shot, we said. She fell to her knees. She cried about her flowerbed. We had destroyed her African daisies and her purple-blue phlox with our tires. She clutched the stems of her plants and tried to replant them; we hopped on our bikes, left her crying in the dirt. She died a few weeks later. Our old man said she tripped in her garden, broke her hip, developed septicemia. DNR.

We're really here to talk about our virtues. Ten years ago, we slunk out of our old man's house. We sped our dirt bikes out of town, down 84. Rumor had it our mother was

shacked up with a man in Fishkill. We rolled along Main Street, eyeing any woman around forty. Any woman who seemed she'd had twin boys and abandoned them. A saggy belly, lopsided breasts, shellacked blonde hair—this is what we looked for. We propped our bikes against the picture window of a laundromat and searched inside, then moved on to the clothing stores, the churches, the solitary teahouse. We questioned women, asked if they knew who we were. The women feigned ignorance. We slapped our chests and pointed to the color of our eyes. We match, we said. You match too. The women glanced around, crossed the street, dialed cellphones. We ignored their fright and carried on with our quest. Inside a florist's, we stole a bouquet of hydrangea and white roses from the wedding display. We lugged the flowers all through a clapboard neighborhood. At the end of one cul-de-sac, a man stood talking to a woman. She was our mother, she had to be, and he resembled Mrs. Macomber's son. He had the same silver hair, the squashed nose. One of us tackled the man, sent him to the ground, and the other pressed the bouquet on our mother. She smiled at us. That was enough. We ran back to our bikes. We rode south then west a little, finally hitting the City. So perhaps we don't have virtues. But surely we have something.

## Lecture

Our father tells us the French word for peephole is *judas*. He bears down on us, angles his pinky toward his eye. The betrayer is the size of my pupil, he says. Sometimes smaller. We don't reply. We let him drone on about the Bible, about respecting your father, staying out of his business. We don't know what any of this has to do with the French language. *Quelle?* we say. Our father's cheeks redden, his chest swells. He turns around, and we follow him into the hallway. He rummages through the closet and brings out a roll of black tape. He snaps off a piece and sticks it over the front door's peephole. See? he says. Now come here. We step forward and he tears off several more pieces of tape. He presses the tape over our eyes. We hear him walk down the hall and enter his bedroom. His muffled voice seems to be directed to someone else now. Maybe he guesses about understanding our spy game; the mission our mother gave us to identify his lover. We peel off the tape. Our eyelids burn but the pain is worth it. We slip inside the hall closet and keep the door ajar. Two loud voices echo through the house. Then they go quiet. Through our watery eyes, we see a strange man open the front door and run toward his car.