

april '08

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The Movies Issue, ed. Jurgen Fauth & Marcy Dermansky



# GODZILLA

BRANDON SCOTT GORRELL

Godzilla woke at 8:37 AM and knew, because of the time, that there would be no new emotionally significant emails. Godzilla knew, by now, not to be disappointed by no new emotionally significant emails at 8:37 AM. "The real time for concern," Godzilla thought, "is around 11 AM." By then, Godzilla knew, his east coast friends would have been awake for some time, his west coast friends would most likely be awake, and the jobs at which he applied would have checked their email accounts and responded to suitable applicants. Godzilla sighed, turned on his back, looked at the ceiling, and worried about running out of money. Godzilla did some mental calculations with figures he had seen from checking his bank account online the other day and decided that if he didn't find a job within a week he was fucked. Godzilla let out a soft roar, which sounded more like a depressed and exasperated Chewbacca.

Four hours later, Godzilla was sitting on a riverbank in the small forest that Ravenna Park surrounded, crying softly and making quiet whimpering sounds. Godzilla knew that he should be looking for jobs, but felt paralyzed by the anxiety of not having

any. He had gotten so used to his days on the riverbank in the forest that doing anything else made him feel either extremely uncomfortable or like he wanted to destroy Seattle and all the people he had given resumes to that hadn't called him back. Godzilla felt a terrible despair. He considered ripping the Space Needle from the ground, holding its base while spinning around repeatedly and using his momentum to hurl it far into the Puget Sound. Godzilla felt excited while considering this sequence of events, so he stood up and began walking towards the Space Needle. But as he approached the top of a hill and the Space Needle came into view, Godzilla was overcome with a feeling of apathy. He fell on his side and obliterated some pine trees. He lay there and stared at the horizontal tree trunks, moving only to blink, and a tear came from his eye.

Godzilla felt such a sense of apathy that he lay in this position for two weeks, not even moving to defecate, hardly any thoughts passing through his brain at all. Toward the end of the second week, Godzilla felt a slight excitement about the fact that he would have, possibly, fifty new emails to check when he decided to go home again. Only when Godzilla began to feel extreme urges to check his emails that were as strong as any intense physical pain he had ever felt did he stand up, bathe in the nearby river, and walk home.

Brandon Scott Gorrell blogs [here](#). He is the author of an e-book, *ALIENATED AFRAID OF FURNITURE IN BEDROOM* (Lamination Colony, February 2008). He has completed a poetry book. He lives in Seattle.

# DANCE PARTY, USA

COLIN BASSETT

They were on the couch. They were looking at the TV.  
The TV was playing a movie. It was a "mumblecore" movie.  
They watched a lot of "mumblecore" movies.  
They watched MUTUAL APPRECIATION.  
They watched LOL.  
They watched HANNAH TAKES THE STAIRS.  
They were both 23. They felt like "23" was the "mumblecore" age.

They said, "This is how we talk. They're just regular people."  
But they liked it best when the people in the movies didn't say anything. They wanted those moments to go on and on for a long time. They wanted to always be able to watch one of those moments.

"I feel very mumblecore," they said. But they weren't sure if they did.

They watched SCENES FROM A MARRIAGE and talked about "pre-mumblecore" directors.

They said things like "John Cassavetes" and "Woody Allen" and "Lars von Trier."

When they said "Woody Allen" they also said things like "Not SLEEPER Woody Allen, but MANHATTAN Woody Allen."

"MANHATTAN," they said.

They watched THE PUFFY CHAIR.

They watched QUIET CITY.

They said, "SOUTH BY SOUTHWEST."

They looked at calendars.

They said, "AUSTIN, TEXAS."

They looked at maps.

They didn't go anywhere.

They were on the bed. They were looking at a different TV. It was very late. They knew they should be asleep. They thought about how late it was. They thought about how they should be sleeping.

They thought about not saying anything simply because it had been so long since they had said anything.

"FUNNY HA HA," they thought.

"KISSING ON THE MOUTH," they thought.

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# TALKING WITH FRANÇOISE SAGAN

EMMA GARMAN

When Françoise Sagan jumped into my head and started talking, I didn't picture the actual woman—especially not the way she looked before she died, all craggy and sunken from a life of smoking, snorting and drinking. Nope, in my mind's eye she was Jean Seberg in the film version of *Bonjour Tristesse*: an achingly gorgeous golden-skinned blonde gamine in a fifties-style swimming costume. Even her voice was Jean's, that deep and creamy posh American accent that nowadays you can only hear in old movies (I haven't been to America, but I watch a LOT of television, and none of them speak like that anymore). Then again, if Françoise had been speaking in her real voice, and in French, I'd hardly be able to understand her, like at all; my French is getting much better, as it goes, and I'm def going to do French at uni next year—but it's not *that* good. Not so good to understand the nicotine-stained, whisky-soaked (no disrespect to Françoise, just making a safe assumption) communiqué of a ghost.

I mean, I'm guessing that's what I'm dealing with, right? I haven't told anyone else about this (and you'd be doing me a solid if you kept it on the DL) mainly because they— my Mum, my

brother, my (only) friends Lila and Samar—have all got plenty drama of their own (not that it ever stops them getting up in my business when the mood takes them, naturally). But plus, it's on account of the fact that I happen to know *exactly* what registers highest on the lunatic scale, and that would be announcing you're hearing voices (I'm seventeen, I'm not *deficient*). The last thing I need right now is to be labeled a schizo. This actually happened for real to a boy in my year—he reckoned he was receiving instructions from an underground militia plotting to overthrow the government through his Wii. Which is actually kind of awesome. Except now he's so zombiefied from the crazy meds, he can't even have a proper conversation with anyone, let alone accept assignments from wacky soldiers tapping into a gaming console. Who, if they knew what an irresponsible slut this kid was, wouldn't have chosen to communicate him with anyways. But yeah, I think secrecy's a wise move here.

I was alone in my room—per ush—smoking a cigarette, painting my toenails Chanel Jasmin, and watching Bertolucci's *The Dreamers*. (What I wish: that when I move to Paris—which I'm totally doing when I'm twenty-one—I could go in a time machine to the sixties too. That would be majorly off the chain. Btw, I know time machines don't exist yet, just in case I'm exacerbating your understandable concerns vis a vis my sanity.) I'd just got to the bit where Michael Pitt unwittingly devirginizes Eva Green, when I heard my name.

“Emily!” the voice said, urgent but sort of excited. “Can you hear me?” I paused the DVD and took a deep drag of my cigarette. “I can hear you,” I said in a quiet way, my voice

sounding extra-nasally London compared to hers, not to mention a touch fruck out. “Who are you?”

I heard a tinkly laugh, like a handful of broken glass being chucked across the room. “Why, Emily, this is Françoise, Françoise Sagan. I hope you don’t mind, but it gets terribly dull down here, and you seem like such a funny girl.” (I get that a lot, viz. peculiar rather than amusing. I’m not bothered.) “So I decided to come and talk you. You know, you remind me so much of myself at your age.”

I decided to take that as the compliment she hopefully meant it to be. “But at my age”—still talking quietly, like someone, I don’t know who, might be listening and alerting the little men in white coats with syringes full of antipsychotics in their capacious pockets—“you wrote a bestselling novel. And everyone worshipped you, and you cruised around in an Aston Martin and hung out with Truman Capote and Sartre, whereas me, I can’t even get my alleged boyfriend to return my texts.” (That’s the truth. He—his name’s Cain, yup, as in Adam and Eve’s son, and he’s an incredible space cadet, which he gets away with thanks to him resembling, in the right light, Alain Delon in *Plein Soleil*—doesn’t understand the veerrrry basic etiquette that dictates all text messages should be reciprocated within 20 minutes, max. I bet you—any money—that Mireille Darc did not have to contend with that kind of nonsense from Alain.)

“Oh, darling, you wouldn’t want to be like me. I died penniless! The authorities took all my money. After everything I’d done for that country! I invented the sixties. Well, me and James Dean.”



“So true, Ms. Sagan,” I offered politely. “But can I ask you something?”

“Why, of course. What would it please you to know?”

For the first time in my life I understood the mighty responsibility a TV presenter has interviewing a Hollywood star. I was completely dying to ask some major league personal questions for example regarding her being, you know, heteroflexible but a) I didn’t want to piss her off so she disappeared; b) nor make her think I was wicked gauche; and c) I didn’t know whether or not to expose the fact that I already knew practically everything, owing to her being one of the dopest people who ever lived. Embark upon it gently, I thought, that’s the wise strategy. (As Samar always says: the ability to strategize is the savior of any dicey situation. And he should know.)

“So were you really a big time dealer?” OK, maybe that wasn’t so gentle. However: I’d read all about her going to court for drug possession and for supplying to the “Jet Set” and about how huge a stash the five-o found in her flat, so it happened to be the non-sexwise subject of discussion that sprang to my dazed little mind.

That laugh again. “Big time? How adorable, but I don’t think I can make such a grand claim. My friends and I helped each other out, you know how it is, I’m sure.”

I wasn’t about to tell her that illegal substances were totally not how I roll. I preferred smoking cigarettes and drinking red wine while watching old Leslie Caron films and pretending my life was like in *Gigi*. (Lila smokes weed—like a fiend, if I’m being honest here—but the only time I tried it my eyes became hideously bloodshot, my mouth and tongue dried up, and my synaptic

connections started, I'm not joking, *disconnecting*. It was way scary, if you want the absolute truth. And that was the result of, and I'm quoting Lila, Grade A Genetically Modified Hydroponic Shit, whatever that is. Then again, this is the girl who tried to tell me that you won't get pregnant if the boy has an extra-hot shower before you do it. I'd better check in with her about that, come to think of it.)

"Anyway, my dear, if you really want to be a writer like me, there's no time like the present! Just remember, write something shockingly amoral, a story the public would never expect to come from the pen of a seventeen year old girl. Then possibly, if you're very lucky, you'll become as rich, as famous and as wildly successful as I did. Oh, and remember: smoke all the time, have short hair, and wear leopard skin!"

"OK, not to dis your sartorial choices, but wearing the fur of endangered species is kind of, um, frowned upon nowadays. I'm not judging or anything, I know it was different back in the day."

"Well, it worked for poor little Edie Sedgwick...which reminds me of a heavenly night Bob Dylan and I spent at the Gettys' place in Marrakesh; I'll have to tell you all about it sometime. Remind me to do that, won't you my dear?"

"You betcha. But Edie popped her clogs in a tragic and premature fashion. Not the brilliantist of role models. And hang on a sec, I thought you said I shouldn't want to be like you either?"

Silence. Oops, had I offended her? "Françoise? Can I call you that?"

But she'd fluttered back to her afterlife, apparently.

Mindful of her (prolly v. dubious) wisdom, I lit a fresh cigarette—a Sobranie Black Russian, which is what Jeanne Moreau smokes—pressed play on the DVD, and carried on with my now slightly less envious watching of Eva and Michael and Louis’s lush Parisian triangle d’amour.

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# NEARLY HERE

JOHN MINICHILLO

[Nearly Here]

Met a good enough woman through the municipal arts project and I'm on the brink of making it with her. A design of mine was runner-up in a contest and I was invited to the installation, one of twenty-six Fiberglass saxophones placed around the city on twenty-six Saturdays, the most ostentatious thing ever in plain old Maulderburg, now vying for the nickname Saxophone City. Bellephonic Instruments is housed in a two-story machine shop downtown. Their woodwinds are B-rated and for kids. They make ten times more flutes than saxophones. In another part of town is a Fiberglass molding shop. *They* devised and lobbied for this contest. My saxophone had triangle-shaped keys and the horn blew blackbirds. I scanned in flat shapes, pasted them with Photoshop, and made composite color prints at Kinko's. My guiding principle was an abstract woman. The pieces made up a woman, though I probably should have written that on the plan, because you only see her looking straight on.

My good enough woman is a welder, nothing sexy about her. When I met her she was dressed in welder's gray: mask, gloves,

steel-toed rubber boots, iron apron. Under her helmet was a curly black mane pinned into a bun, a swath of gray hair also pulled back and tucked in. Her name's Dawn. She has welded fifteen saxophone installations and mine is her favorite. The concrete was poured days ahead so it was clean, new, and dry. She attached the sculpture to the rebar prongs set in the cement.

I seized the moment and asked if she took off her rings to weld. It was my way of asking if she was married. She shrugged her shoulders, put the gloves on, and went to work. Later she said she thought I'd said 'wings,' and it was a compliment. But I never would have said that. So I lucked out again, because runner-up was nothing to scoff at, and they presented me a check.

My saxophone was stage left of the juvenile justice courthouse, part of the renovated downtown and among the recognizable buildings. My artistic vision—my idea of a saxophone—was at the heart of the city. Maulderburg put on a contest and I responded. I gave back. The photographer snapped a shot of me, Dawn, and my Fiberglass saxophone: in the photo we're smiling and I'm between Dawn and my sax, an arm around both. In that particular photo I can tell the sax is a woman, though probably no one else can.

I followed Dawn in the paper afterwards and got to know her. Her last name is DeWalt. One guy accused first the city, then the paper, of hiring a model, but I could have told him. I had put my arm around her and she was genuine. She worked. At installations she remembered me, my sculpture still her favorite. I put my arm around her again, only this time there was no photographer waving us together.

Truthfully, one or two of the other saxophones were better than mine. One had them twisting and untwisting like loose braids. I didn't know Fiberglass could do that. Then I noticed the best artists never came to the unveilings. It got me thinking. Maybe some of them were inside jobs, people from the molding shop sneaking in their own designs. Dawn posed with her blowtorch and I held up the sculpture for the photo—an unwieldy yellow thing more banana than sax. I'm cropped out of the shot but I'm there. I'm holding it up.

[Drive-In]

Dawn has eight children. I had guessed maybe one or two. Was likely at our age. She invited me to her church, and her church became where I eventually saw her. That is to say I succeeded in casually running into her. Streams of people went into and out of the stone building, not the kinds of people I like. I spotted her with the eight kids. Two were pulling her by the hands and she hardly kept them together as they crossed the street to her brick-colored minivan. I called her name and she turned. She loaded the kids into the van and locked it so we could talk. She had eight girls, of various ethnicities, a beige-and-brown bouquet, one with her face pressed against the windshield.

I said I wasn't the church type, said I was more interested in her than God, but I would come try it out. The faces in the van stared back at me, her girls each about two years apart. And the youngest looked to be two, a kid who stood in her car seat and pointed at me, as if I was being called out to provide the next DeWalt sibling. Yes, she welded for a living, but I'd seen Dawn's

softer side. She liked girl movies, she liked veggie pizza, she liked Will and Grace. These were the things we had talked about at the installations. They draped each sax with the black velvet curtain minutes before unveiling, the effect worn shabby, the same thing every Saturday, for the cameras mostly and also no-shows for the artists.

Dawn said church was the only time she could get the girls together and quiet. I liked them shut up in the van like that, so I proposed going to a drive-in together. They could stay like they were and maybe she would come join me in my car. You probably imagined me driving some sweet car. I always wanted a Corvette. One of the old Sting-Ray's, the curvy ones, painted with gold specks and with a T-bar roof. Now *those* looked like a woman. I drive an Oldsmobile but mostly walk around town or ride my mountain bike.

Dawn knew a drive-in she liked, The Star-Glo Amphitheater, though it wasn't an amphitheater, everyone knew that, the parking spaces in regular square rows, the lot flat, yellow lines spray-painted on limestone gravel. The Sunday night feature was The Passion all summer long. Some rich Christian was paying for it, the tickets free. So we set a date. We drove our separate cars and met in the lot. I brought wine and snacks and whatever, and we parked side-by-side. It was up to her to sit with the kids or to sit with me, depending on her mood.

She wanted me to see The Passion because I was new to the faith. I suppose I should have felt insulted but I wasn't. That's me, her guinea pig. I thought I'd try to kiss her during this Passion movie.

As soon as we were parked the kids wanted popcorn. Eight is an easy number to multiply by, especially when you add two, then it becomes ten. Around the concession grounds families sat at picnic tables, kids putt-putted, kids were swinging on swings, everyone facing the screen. Dawn got out of the car and ran behind her older girls who went right for the Daytona racing video game in the arcade. I brought over the four youngest, most easily done by carrying two and trying to corral the remaining two with my feet. Dawn handed out quarters and the girls commandeered the four linked sit-down racing consoles. They got the green light and were pedal-to-the-metal. When they hit the first turn there were identical screams. After coaxing, I managed to get the four-year-old to slap the fire button repeatedly while I played a sit-down table version of Asteroids, and I balanced the two-year old on my thigh. Dawn caught kids three and four wandering off and she lured them over to a Barbie pinball machine.

She came over to me and it was like we were alone. We stood at the exit of the arcade, at the threshold of an open garage door where we could see the movie and also watch the girls. She put her arm around me. I was holding her youngest and the second youngest sat in the gravel in front of us, picking up a piece and examining it, then putting the small stone back in its exact place.

“Having fun?” she said.

“More fun than Jesus.”

“Hard times then,” she said.

“These guys are Spartans, right?”

“Romans.”



“Spartans are a *kind* of Roman,” I said in my own defense. It had been my school mascot. I knew about Spartans. “Remind me again why there’s no English?”

“Artistic choice.”

“Romans sure did kill some people.”

“We all did,” she said. Then after a pause she added, “...do.”

I supposed she was talking about the war. Which I liked to forget. I didn’t have a steady job, wasn’t exactly contributing to society. I was afraid of a draft. They needed bodies.

“You probably get lots of dates,” I said, but it was the wrong thing to say. What I meant was that I liked her. She was outgoing and had a cute face.

“No one wants eight kids,” she said. “I need a helper.”

I don’t want eight kids either. I hadn’t thought about them. Was easy enough to make them go away. I wanted wine, but I left it in the car and that’s not the kind of place this was. I’d wanted to see the rich Christian, but knew as soon as I rolled through the gate no rich person was making any appearance. Christian or not, he had better places to be.

“There’s guys that would,” I said and I put my arm around her. I didn’t feel I was promising anything. Because I might not have been talking about myself.

[Ark of the Convent]

I told Dawn I wanted to attend sermons. What I really wanted was to hear about this thing God gave the Jews that kicked ass in war, The Lost Ark from the Indiana Jones movie. The ultimate weapon but no one seemed to want to speechify on that. Probably

if Jesus had had that, things would have really wound up different. But I had a feeling that months would go by before anybody would bring up the Ark of the Convent. There's a Web site says it might still be out there. Buried in some pyramid in Egypt. If I had the ultimate weapon I'd make money. I'd keep the thing cocked so no one could swipe it and people would pay me to view it. I could charge *anything*. Or I'd get paid through the defense budget, a line item—one superfat U.S. Government check every year like Christmas.

I asked Dawn about Jesus' magical powers and she got a gleam in her eye. We can't talk during the sermon so she whispered with her lips pressed to my ear.

And so there's this moment in our story where maybe Dawn is the girl of my dreams and we will make it together. Or maybe nothing like this has ever happened and never will. If I say we make it, who believes me? But if I say we don't, none of the rest of this makes sense. How can I describe her? How can I describe moving on top of her and staring deep into dark eyes? Or if I say she closes her eyes when we make it is that more believable? What I do is wait for her to hire two babysitters. She says hiring one is just plain cruel. And we're alone in her van for the first time.

[Dawn]

I would soon see Dawn's van as my own and it wasn't long before I was at the wheel. There was a still-air smell that was always around her girls, it lingered in the van and in their house, most especially in the bedrooms: talcum, lilacs, and something

else—the DeWalt smell. I was around them so much I didn't notice but I occasionally got a whiff of her that took me back to when her scent was intoxicating, to when I was calling the kids by the wrong names and no one got mad. I used to joke about Dancer and Prancer and Dasher, but I never got far before I couldn't remember reindeer names either. I joked about Dawn's house with the ninety fingers and the ninety toes and this they would join me in, this usually raised the mood. But I never knew when to quit, so I would say something about Eight is Enough. None of the kids had seen that show, and Dawn just hated it. There was a spot on the old shag carpet where I liked to lie in front of the TV. There were dolphins swimming across the TV screen, the camera underwater. Leonard Nimoy spoke a voiceover about mermaids, dolphin birthing, dolphin nursing, dolphin mating, dolphin bites.

Dawn said, "They're so beautiful."

I sometimes tipped my head back and watched the screen upside down. It was like being a kid again. We watched nature shows and the youngest girls climbed over me or they found toys to put on me. And Dawn knew so much about nature. If God wanted to start over he would do well to enlist her. She could weld a scrap iron forest with her blowtorch. I got up off the floor and sat next to her on the couch, because her "beautiful" remark was inviting. Leonard Nimoy read a line about the day when humans and dolphins would interact via synthesized dolphin calls. "The beginning of a new age," he said, pausing for emphasis before signing off, "and that day is nearly here."

Dawn squeezed my hand as if it were the beginning of our new day too.

I looked deep into dark eyes.

[Something]

But there's something I left out. Because it's embarrassing and it made me angry. I had been sitting with Dawn on the couch and things were going as planned, until I felt her tummy and she was beginning to show. This wouldn't have been bad if the kid was mine. But I counted back the months and there had been someone else, someone before me—when she must have hired two babysitters.

Dawn was giving me all the right signals, her older girls staying up with us past nine. She wanted me to snuggle with her under the blanket, where there was no telling what we might do. But when I felt her I was pissed. She hadn't told me she was pregnant. I felt she owed me a big apology. If she thought I was signing up for nine kids, she had some talking to do.

“Look how they smile,” Dawn said. She meant the dolphins.

“I heard they were gay,” I said, the best way I knew to convey my anger.

“Don't be mean,” Dawn said.

“They do gay things,” I said.

That perked up the ears of the younger girls. I even think they got it.

“If dolphins are so gay, where do dolphins come from?” Dawn said.

“Not all gay,” I said. “And not all the time.”

“Spock never mentioned it,” she said.

“This is a show for kids,” I said.

“Kids know,” she said.

“*Your* kids know,” I said.

“Dolphins aren’t gay.”

“It’s what I heard.”

“I heard *you* were gay,” she said, and the girls laughed. It was the kind of thing kids said to each other, so she was being playful, but Dawn was also serious. We’d been snuggling on the couch and she wanted to know why I hadn’t made my move. All this time putting my arm around her.

I had one of two choices. I could begin the slow process with hands and hot breath, the girls sent to bed, and then no holding back. Or I might mope on the carpet. Which was what I felt like. I wasn’t happy after she’d said what she’d said. I was man enough.

“I heard you were a powder puff,” one of her girls added. She sounded sleepy but she’d said it effortlessly, like recalling a true memory.

“I heard you like it in your dookie hole,” the youngest from that group of girls said, and I had to count off in my head: two, four, six, eight, ten. This girl was ten years old and she knew what she was saying.

“Dawn, can your kids be less rude?” I told her from my place on the floor, but she didn’t say a word.

Everyone in the room suppressed giggles except me, and the ten year-old added, “I heard you were the girl.”

[Engaged]

Though actually quite small, a white diamond has a way of expanding inside itself. I debated over how much to save for the

ceremony and the honeymoon, but decided not to compromise on cut or carat. Dawn's diamond drew the eye with an array of light, an infinity of line and angle, the illusion of pure bright space inside the clear gem.

I put it on my own finger, just as far as the first joint, so it wouldn't get stuck, to see what it felt like. And I couldn't stop staring. Time passed without me. I kept the ring a few days longer, not ready to give it up. But when I pulled it from my pocket and opened the petite velvet-covered black box, the look of surprised joy on Dawn's face was better than winning any contest. She would have said yes, just to be able to put it on. But she hugged and kissed me and I hung around until she was wearing nothing but the diamond. We both stole glances at it, when our eyes weren't locked, and I felt like I'd done the right thing, the good thing. I was man enough. No one was going to be calling me the girl. We didn't need two babysitters to be together and here was proof.

[Where He Makes It]

There are alcoholic drinks with caffeine in them now and everyone smokes that really good weed. I drink iced tea laced with ginseng and I chew orange baby aspirin for my heart. I was nothing before Dawn. She gets on my nerves but she completes me. We know number nine is not mine—though *that* we never talk about. He's a cocky specimen. His sisters are goo-goo for him and he knows. Eleven is not an easy number to multiply by and you can forget division. But any more kids from here on out are mine because we sealed the deal.

That night was the first of six we spent alone in a log cabin in the woods. It had a hot tub and we soaked and watched the stars. There were fearless raccoons and we splashed water to make them shoo. I often return to those nights in my head because it's when we were most close. Afterwards, she stopped trying to talk about Jesus with me and all of a sudden money was important. I don't hit her kids but man am I ever going to. Not to make it sound all bad. We've had our moments. And I have a lot to offer a woman like Dawn. We're legally bound now. What's mine is hers is mine, etc.

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# FRED ASTAIRE REFUSES

KATHERINE A. GLEASON

Mother, you say this Astaire man is not your son and that what I have done by changing my name has stripped you of your pride, deprived you of the joy of motherhood. You say I am denying you, denying my heritage and that your grandchildren won't know who they really are. But I will not, cannot go back to being Frederick Austerlitz. You know it has taken me my whole life to create this illusion, this Fred Astaire, a star at the top of the stairs, feet flying over the white marble upon which they tap.

After thirty-four years of polishing and perfecting, I made my film debut and arrived—the saint of sophistication, Ginger's partner, Fred Astaire. That image erased the reality of sweat, blisters, worn down shoes, strained ankles. That image taught me illusion, music, and light are movement, vibration—all the same dance. How could you want me to return to the gravity of Omaha, Nebraska, to the world of a hooper with unpaid bills and a perpetual cough?

What can I say to convince you Fred Astaire is the better son? Frederick Austerlitz is preoccupied, worrying about money, bad breath, ingrown toenails, and dyspepsia. Last Christmas, in your



suite at The Plaza, you were the toast of New York, remember? We decorated the tree with Fabergé eggs, and Harry Winston sent you a necklace, tiara, and pin. You wore white ermine, with the diamonds, and a gown from Chanel. Waiters served canapés and refilled glasses. Our guests ate and danced and sang by the piano, and you moved through them like an angel, serene and agile. They raised their champagne flutes and drank to your health, to the health and longevity of Mrs. Astaire.

Oh, Mother, if only you could see how much you are her, not Mrs. Austerlitz, but Fred Astaire's mother, built of light and music and dance, a shining constellation in the Milky Way.

Katherine A. Gleason's stories have appeared in *Best American Erotica 1996* (Simon & Schuster), *The First Word Bulletin*, *Windy City Times*, *Cream City Review*, and online in *La Petite Zine* and *Ducts.org*. In early 2007, her story "Sweet Treat" won first place in the *River Styx* Schlafly Beer Microfiction Contest.

# ROCKFALL

LORI ROMERO

My friend, Annie, is a rock hound. Not the my-dad-bought-me-a-rock-kit-when-I-was-eight kind of person, but a genuine hard piece of the earth fanatic. Her den looks like a mining expedition took over that part of the house. Annie's unwavering enthusiasm finally persuaded me to abandon my usual Saturday slothful ways and join her on a hike through the juniper-piñon canyon of Rio de las Trampas. After a fifteen minute clamber, passing what I hoped was not bear or mountain lion droppings, we came upon an unexpected sight. A Noel Langley landscape. We found ourselves at the bottom of a boulder-lined bowl created by retreating glaciers. Thousands of rocks were stock-still, frozen in mid-tumble down the hill. The sight made me feel small and vulnerable. I was hesitant to move lest I remind gravity of its job. Annie picked up a piece of stone and rubbed it in her hand. It sparkled like an Oz slipper. The shadow of something large flew overhead as Annie and I collected samples of milky quartz, granite, gneiss, shale and pyrite. We picnicked near the curious formations, and let the sweet air and sun work its magic on our tired brains. Yellow yarrow lined the way to a spiraling waterfall roaring down the ravine. When it was time to head back home, I

didn't want to go. On the steps of my apartment, I pulled out the stone Annie had pressed into my hand as a keepsake of our adventure. It was broken off from what it once was and heavy with the weight of wear, much like Dorothy on her return to Kansas.

Lori Romero's chapbook, *Wall to Wall*, was published by Finishing Line Press. Her short story, "Strange Saints," was a semifinalist in the Sherwood Anderson Fiction Award. Her poetry and short stories have been published in more than eighty journals and anthologies. She was just nominated for her second Pushcart Prize.

# REQUIEM FOR AN ALMOST LADY

MEGHAN AUSTIN

We are mountaineers, and after the summit, I fall and break my leg, and you try to save me but are really annoyed by my broken leg and secretly hope you can just cut the cord and walk back to base camp. You slide me down the mountain much too fast, and I scream, but I understand you have to do that, and then I fall off the side of a cliff and you cut the cord, and I somehow fall into a deep ice cave where I lie for several days, having revolutionary hallucinations and drinking my own urine. We tell our stories in a documentary about our famous climb. In our documentary we are both British men and have great senses of humor and still get along, after you left me for dead.

In this one, I am Vincent Gallo the vampire and you are a vampire. I made you that way. I am on honeymoon with my possibly retarded wife, masturbating vigorously into sinks and bedspreads. Young boys break into the house where your lover keeps you boarded up while he rides his motorcycle. You eat one of the boy's tongues and pretty much his whole face, and I rape a French maid with my mouth. Later, I have to kill you and burn down the house. It's all in Paris, so it's a beautiful love story, and

at the end, I give my wife a puppy and forget I ever met you. I don't kill the puppy.

We are scientists in Antarctica and I am Wilford Brimley and you might be Kurt Russell, and I go out to make you a quesadilla and I don't notice until much later that I (Wilford Brimley) have already died because I have a hard time recognizing myself (Wilford) before my Quaker oatmeal days. You have icicles in your beard and are threatening everyone with a blowtorch and testing their blood with a hot piece of metal, and before it's over, we go make out in the cabin bathroom, and I want to stop and say: I have always known there was something dangerous about you.

You are an opera singer, and I am a strange French boy who steals your dress and wears it as a scarf while I ride around town on my Vespa. We have a bizarre platonic relationship where I take long baths while you play piano. People are trying to kill me, in an uninteresting subplot related to outdated technology, and you don't seem to notice or care. I want to hold your hand, but your mood has shifted in the past few days, and I look at you, and you're someone I barely know, a child.

Meghan Austin wrote half of the novel *love block* (3-Day Books/Arsenal Pulp Press). Her short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Stranger*, *failbetter* and *dicey brown magazine*.

# VERBATIM

MYFANWY COLLINS

The night before I arrived, a hurricane battered the city—knocking down trees, tearing off roofs, displacing puppies. I wouldn't have known about the storm but for the oak tree thrown down—ass up—in the side yard.

Mrs. B, an orange cat in her arms, came out to greet me as I unloaded my things. I'd left home before sunrise, easing through the worn streets, noting every burning light above every kitchen sink, every shadow in every doorway, every tree branch sagging low.

“Big storm,” Mrs. B said. “You're lucky you missed it, Jeannie.”

Back home I left a garden with tomatoes rotting on the vine, a box of my father's clothes in the basement, and my mother in her housecoat waving to me from the gravel driveway.

But here, in this new town, I missed the storm.

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The inhabitants of the boarding house shared a kitchen, bathrooms, and common areas, but my room was mine alone. I put

a quilt made up of hexagonal pieces on my bed. It had been sewn by my mother's mother back when she was a girl before the Great Depression. The heavy quilt felt like half a dozen tigers were lying on top of me at night, panting, waiting for me to move so they could dig in. I enjoyed pulling the quilt up over my head when I was in bed. I would pretend that I was hiding in a tent, waiting for someone to find me and rescue me before I was smothered by the weight of a stranger with a pillow in his fists, or before I was mauled by big cats.

It was a Victorian rehab, the house, owned by Mrs. B's only son—a would-be real estate developer. Bums and drunks and druggies had lived there once—smeared their shit on the walls, pissed in the corners. But now it was redone, back, almost, to its original glory. Of course, it was in the worst part of town—smack in the middle of South Main. No one would buy it once it was refurbished; hence, the boarding house. I shared the downstairs bathroom with the handyman, one of the old inhabitants now rehabilitated along with the building we lived in.

At night, I sat on the porch with the handyman and watched the hookers walk by. Until one of them was found floating in the murky pond across the street from campus on the Wednesday of my first week in town. And then everything changed.

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Jared was my sixth appointment on my first day at the university's Voice and Sound Center. He could quote, verbatim, the entire screenplay from "Vision Quest" and he preferred to fuck me with the lights off. "You look better that way," he said.

What drew me to him was his alleged speech impediment—a stutter that no one ever heard. In fact, his stutter was so imperceptible that it was barely a stutter at all. I didn't hear it when he quoted freely from "Vision Quest," thus I was able to meet his eye, clap him on the back.

But why "Vision Quest"? It was certainly an obscure choice of film to memorize. Why not "Casablanca"? Even "Caddyshack" would have been understandable.

I had only seen "Vision Quest" the once and then only for the Madonna cameo when she sang "Crazy for You" in the club scene. Regardless, the plot stuck with me. The main character is a young man—a high school wrestler with a dream of not only beating the odds, but of winning the girl—an enigmatic older woman, new to town, with a sketchy past in tow.

It was, then, much like a young stutterer winning over his speech therapist and fucking her beneath the psychedelic posters in his filthy off-campus apartment.

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Grasshoppers clung to the screens those early days of September. Up close, I could see the hairiness of their legs, their searchless eyes. Mrs. B said they were trying to tell us something. Perhaps another storm was coming. Perhaps something about the dead woman floating in the pond.

The dead woman. I pulled the quilt up at night and saw her as she would have been in the end: pale limbs outstretched, bloated face nearly unrecognizable, shoes gone, fingernails in tatters.



I felt I should know her name if nothing else, but until I knew her name, I would know her as Carla—same as the love interest in “Vision Quest.” The dead woman’s hair was Carla-like. Black like the crow—scrappy, fierce. The downtrodden crow with its naked, naked heart.

A hawk lived in the tall white pine trees back home. He tormented the crows, seeking their young. Each summer afternoon, I watched him circling in the blue. Then he was gone, diving. Before long the crows would pick up their wheedling, frantic cries, which tugged at the hearts of the local mothers who otherwise loathed the crows for their early morning chorus.

“I wish that hawk would leave their babies alone!” the mothers (including my own) said.

Soon two or sometimes three crows would chase the hawk away from their nests. Whether he had a baby crow in his talons was open to debate. If the crows took up cawing and carrying on when they made it back to their nests, we figured they were down a head or two. We cursed the hawk, then, circling, squealing victorious in the sky.

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On the Thursday of my first week, my mother called to ask why hadn’t I telephoned to let her know I’d made it all right? “I left a message,” I said. But she hadn’t spoken to me directly. She was certain there was a problem.

I told her there's no problem and she said, "I should have had another baby after you, Jeannie. That other baby would never up and leave me."

"What would you have named her?"

"How would I know?"

"What about Carla?"

\*

Jared brought me a candy apple he bought at the street fair put on by a sorority in order to raise money for childhood obesity awareness. "Apple for the teacher," he said, with no audible stutter. The thing he handed me was a slick red, an impossible red, a poisonous red.

"Where did it come from?"

"I bought it from one of the booths," he said.

This was not like the church bazaar back home, where you knew whose bake goods to avoid. Here I pictured a squalid kitchen—rodents, bugs, droppings. Hair, mucus. There might even be a razor blade embedded inside. It might even be laced with drugs—perhaps something to bring on visions.

I ate the apple and Jared watched as I did. Watched as my teeth cracked through the candy shell and as I licked the bloody stickiness off my lips and fingers.

"See, Jeannie?" he said. "It was good, right?"

"Delicious," I said.

\*

It was dark that Tuesday night when Carla died, was murdered. The moon had blown out to sea with the storm, never to return or so it felt on that black, black night. No more harvest moon, no more wolf moon. No more moon, no more.

Carla waited in the doorway of the copy shop, somewhere to lean and she liked the cool glass of the door against her back while she waited for a car to drive by, slow down.

She was tired; she was over it. She had a sick mother with a colostomy bag. Her dog needed a rabies shot. She had forgotten to buy toilet paper. Everything. Her roof leaked. A broken lock. A flat tire. All of it was piling up.

But she didn't know she was going to die, otherwise she might have enjoyed her last moments of life—might have listened more carefully to the breeze which frisked the leaves of the trees lining the street, planted in the name of beautification.

The pimp watched her from a distance, watched as car after car passed by without Carla so much as making an attempt to secure any business. He was pissed at her lack of ambition. He expected more from Carla. She was one of his top earners. He didn't know her thoughts were elsewhere. He got out of his car and was about to make his way over to her when she made her move. When she got into the other car. The one.

And that's where it ends for me. My vision depleted, sooted over with grief.

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Jared cancelled his appointments and stopped coming to the center for help. When I questioned him about it over the phone, he told me that he was healed.

“You saved me,” he said.

“I never even heard you stutter,” I said. “Not once.”

“See?” he said. “Cured.”

A week before my father died, our yard was overrun by grackles. They pecked at late summer’s fallen acorns and downed twigs. They scratched at the dry soil looking for sustenance; the long summer days had been arid, dusty. It was a drought, the newscasters said. I stood at the window over the kitchen sink and counted the grackles. I got to fifty before I lost count and had to start over again.

Soon mother was out in the yard, swinging her broom, yelling at the grackles, “Be gone!”

They flew, en masse, into the popples and white cedars that lined our back fence and waited there for her to leave. But she would not go.

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I took to spending all of my free nights on the porch, watching. Of special interest was the sugar maple in the lot of the derelict house across the street. My father had taught me how to tap the maples back home for their sap, which we would bring to the sugar shack to turn into syrup. We would put the hot syrup on the snow and wait for it to harden so we could eat it, sugar on snow.

This city maple had bottom branches which were full of glossy leaves yet, just barely turning with the coming autumn, but up top its gray branches were scaly and barren. The tree was dying, for this is how they die—from the top down. The most important part of a tree is the roots. That is their heart and what connects them to the community of all living things. The only way to save the tree would be to chop it down and then from the stump new saplings would grow. But I had no axe.

Often the handyman would join me. He enjoyed smoking cigarillos and telling me stories of how things used to be in the house during its heyday of debauchery—the wild nights, lighting fires in the middle of the floor when the chimneys became too choked with soot. There were stories of dirty needles and broken bottles and women caught unaware—but then the lure of his television became too great and he would slink indoors with the others.

Once he was gone and once Mrs. B's light was out for the night, I would take my wig from its paper bag and put it on. The wig hair was black and long. I was on my way to Carla.

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I needed practice before I gave myself over completely, before I offered myself up as the sacrificial crow. I went to the barber up the street and asked him to cut my hair. I needed it sleek so that it would fit better beneath the wig. The barber had fought in Viet Nam, was used to buzz cuts and folded newspapers. “You sure, girlie?”

Sure. Sure.

He gave me a perfect bob. “I love it,” I said, shaking my head back and forth as he used a tiny broom to sweep the stray hairs from my shoulders. “May I use your bathroom?” I met his eyes in the mirror as I asked. He shrugged yes. “Where is it?”

“Back there,” he said, hooking his thumb behind him. “Past the curtain.”

The curtain was gingham, red and white. A tablecloth that someone had sewn into this other purpose. The bathroom was tidy, white. There was no can of air freshener; instead a book of matches on the back of the toilet served the purpose. He was a man, but he was not dirty. This comforted me.

As I washed my hands, I took in my new look. The cut was blunt, but not without style. The barber had done his best. I smiled. Nodded to myself.

I peeked out from behind the curtain: the shop was empty but for the barber. “Can you come here?”

“What?” he said.

“I need help,” I said. He looked wary but came behind the curtain. I faced him, pulled him towards me by hooking a finger into the waistband of his trousers. “I owe you,” I said. “For the cut.” Then I kissed him. He fought me but I fought back and ended up giving him a blow job in his tidy bathroom.

He cried afterwards. Said I had been pushy. Said he had buried his wife just a few weeks before and we had disgraced her.

I thought of the grackles as they mercilessly stormed the lawn in search of grubs. As they pecked away at the tomatoes, which my father had planted with fierce hopes of some delicious soup come September.

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After many nights of surveillance, I saw the man I took to be Carla's pimp. Beneath the streetlights his skin was as pale as uncooked turnip. He continually scratched the inside of his left ear. He was unmistakable and would have been easy to pick out of a line up. "Hey," I called to him from up on the porch. "Wait up."

He kept walking—thinking I was not talking to him or possibly not hearing me. He might have a defect of hearing that required testing. I could talk to him about that, offer some suggestions for treatment. I pulled my wig down tight and took the stairs two at a time. I ran to catch him, wheezing with the smoke from my last cigarette, the thick August air.

"You," I said, grabbing the pimp by the arm. His skin was softer than expected, damp and soft as the lamb's ear growing in my garden back home.

"Get off me, motherfucker!" he said, turning, affecting a wrestling stance. He resembled Jared around the lips, the eyes. They might have been brothers.

"I'm off!" I said, hands in the air, stepping back.

"Shouldn't sneak up. Get yourself hurt." The pimp turned to go.

"I'm seeking employment," I said,

"Do you see Help Wanted anywhere on me?" He faced me and stuck an index finger in his chest.

"I want to be one of your girls," I said. "I need protection." I held out my hand. "I'm Carla." I watched for any sign of hesitation or recognition of the name.

"Why are you messing with me?" he said and turned to go.

“I know what you did,” I said, but he didn’t hear me, finger already digging into left ear.

I waited in that doorway, my back against the same cool glass—her glass, her coolness. The pimp was not visible, but I knew he was there, watching me, just as he had watched Carla before me.

I was careful to keep a cigarette lit so that the one I awaited would see the burning ember, would know of my existence. The one I awaited would be older, but not too old. He would still be strong enough to overpower me if he needed to, if that was what he desired.

Traffic tapered off to one or two cars an hour, until after 2:30 when all went still. My wig was itchy and I was weary, so I left my spot, walked back toward the house when a car pulled up. “You like to party?” the man asked. I nodded. I had never gotten into a car with a stranger before and felt a thrill at the slip of his car’s leather seats beneath my pale thighs as I pulled the door shut and sealed myself within the vehicle.

He drove out to where the abandoned factories stood sentinel. We parked near a building within which shoes were once made—shoes which traveled to New York, to Philadelphia, to Boston. Shoes for the feet of a young, bright country. Shoes for short life spans and limited incomes. Shoes for a simpler time.

“I’m Carla,” I said.

He took my left hand in his own, small hand. He tugged me closer to him on the bench seat of his Chrysler Supreme. “All right,” he said and opened the car door, exited, and pulled me out behind him.



He wore green Dickie work pants and a gray short sleeve shirt. His brown hair had been recently cut. He wore glasses. Biofocals. Boots, not shoes. White socks. I gathered all of the details of this man, Carla's killer. He was thin. He parted his hair on the side. He had a limp—slight, like a stutter.

He brought me to a door which led into the shoe factory. Carla was with me then, urging me to break free. *Run*, she said.

With that, I withdrew my hand from his and kicked off my shoes as I did. I ran, my bare toes gripping the rutted pavement, running as I had when I was a child and all that chased me was time. The killer pursued, the thud of his boots a heartbeat behind me until they trailed off to silence.

Then I was alone, a shoeless savior of the modern world. I stopped beneath a streetlight in a quiet neighborhood and took in the scene. There were no cars, the only sound the stuttering love cries of the tree frogs. Above, there was not even the hint of a moon, just sky, murky, pond-like, with Carla, white and glowing, hanging like a shaved fingernail looking down upon me with gratitude, with love.

Myfanwy Collins's work is published or forthcoming in: *The Kenyon Review*, *Cream City Review*, *AGNI*, *Swivel*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Saranac Review*, *Quick Fiction*, *The Jabberwock Review*, *Caketrain*, and other venues.