Body Blows
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While part of me can still admire the blithe chutzpah it takes to title a performance “Stretch Marks” at the callow age of thirty, from my current perspective it seems a little over-determined, a tiny bit drama-queeny around the edges! But the truth is that by the time I turned thirty, I did feel profoundly stretched. Stretched by the horrifying loss from AIDS of hundreds of people I had known. Stretched by the piling-up despair brought on by almost a decade of Reagan/Bush horrors. Stretched by a chaotic inner landscape that brought me a major dose of fear of flying.

In response to all this I feel lucky that I was also being stretched in a much more positive way by other surrounding forces. Stretched by an emerging culture of diversity in America in reaction to the racism of the Reagan administration. Stretched by my paralyzing air-travel phobia to sit myself down next to some human beings on a train in the middle of the night in Texas. Stretched to direct-action political activism by the carnage of the AIDS crisis. Stretched to imagine that one of art’s chief functions is to foster change. As I say in the bratty, high-octane art/politics

Stretch Marks
manifesto section of *Stretch Marks* where I re-stage a performance I did at a political demonstration for an AIDS ward in front of County General Hospital in Los Angeles:

BECAUSE . . . maybe any function of art that does not basically work in some kind of direction toward healing the sick . . . fostering communication . . . easing suffering . . . feeding bodies . . . or saving the planet just ought to get back to an apolitical, conceptual 1980 where it would be much more comfortable!!!

*Stretch Marks* is where I begin to find a political praxis, a way of telling my stories—in theaters, on the streets, in the pulpit, and in a jail—that created a bunch of highly engaged conversations with the world. The chaos continues of friends dying of AIDS, planes crashing, heroes being assassinated, hometowns having earthquakes, right-wing cabals becoming ascendant—but a way of responding as an artist and a citizen has started to make itself clear to me. I can’t overestimate how transformed I was by two huge events in my life: my direct activism around AIDS with ACT UP and the explosion of new discourses that the multicultural revolution engendered. Suddenly as an artist I was getting to participate extensively in situations that shattered conventional theatrical performance—including creating guerrilla performance pieces for mass protest and civil disobedience actions with ACT UP—which rewired my connections between art and society.

At Macondo Espacio Cultural, a Salvadoran cultural center in Los Angeles, I collaborated with performers Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Rubén Martinez, Elia Arce, and others to create a work exploring bicultural dialogue and conflict.

I began teaching gay men’s performance art workshops where we created exactly the rituals and performances that our tribe needed. These workshops provided a place for queer men to physically explore in full-color real time their most intimate narratives, memories, dreams, and possibilities with one another. Not
only did these workshops allow me to understand in a grassroots way just what it means to be a community-based artist, they also were the springboard for hundreds of new artistic voices and several gay men’s performance collectives that kept working together for years.

My regular collaborations with Reverend Malcolm Boyd in our controversial “performance art sermons” as part of the mass at St. Augustine by-the-Sea Episcopal Church in Santa Monica did more than stir the waters between the church and contemporary performance. We also got the biggest houses other than at Easter and Christmas Eve masses!

The ricochet of all these forces came together in 1989 when Linda Frye Burnham and I opened a new arts center, Highways Performance Space in Santa Monica, dedicated to providing a venue for diverse creative voices exploring the vortex of art, community, and social change. *Stretch Marks* would premiere at Highways three months after the space opened. Highways would be our clubhouse, our social club, our playpen, our Maoist self-critique slow-roasting barbecue, and a stage for thousands of performances and other interventions.

The cultural surf was definitely up! All of these experiences went right into the creation of *Stretch Marks*. A piece I performed at an ACT UP demo ended up in the performance. The whole structure of the performance is built around a mysterious and evocative train journey that is a metaphoric glue for the themes. A bittersweet tale of “cultural stretch” in the show comes directly from a life narrative about learning German from a Mexican lesbian named Fräulein Rodriguez that I dredged up for that wild night at Macondo. The whole show is suffused with the spiritual, dare I say shamanic, voice that my gay men’s workshops and my collaborations as a parish performance artist were giving me. Finally *Stretch Marks* is haunted, penetrated even, by the overwhelming loss that filled that time whether from AIDS or exploded jet planes crashing at Lockerbie, Scotland. The performance is overflowing
with a desire to find my place in history, to know where I come from culturally, and to feel an exchange with other human beings, an exchange as elusive yet tangible as the audience’s flickering flashlights that illuminate the end of *Stretch Marks*.

All of these energies pushed, pulled, and stretched me toward a new kind of cultural practice, a new way of claiming voice and agency in the world, a new way of understanding the roles I can play (pun intended!) as an artist, a gay man, and a citizen.

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*(Tim enters in the dark carrying a birthday cake with thirty lit candles and a vintage Ken doll stuck in the middle of the frosting. With his beach bag over his shoulder, Tim drops a small trail of sand from his hand at the downstage edge of the performing area. The adagietto from Mahler’s Fifth screeches off the record player and is replaced by a loud train.)*

I am here. I am here on the beach. I’m here by the ocean. I’m waiting for a train to come here on the beach, here on Venice Beach. I’m on Speedo Lido. That’s the homo one. I’ll take any train that comes along. I swear I’m not picky. I’ll take the *Desert Wind*, the *Trans-Siberian*, the *Southwest Chief*, the *Orient Express*, or the *Sunset Limited*.

I want these trains to come pounding down the sand or out from the horizon or down the boardwalk. This will be the express service from Avalon (and I don’t mean Catalina). I mean Avalon, where King Arthur went and from where someday he will return. . . .

I am waiting here, watching the planes take off from Los Angeles International Airport, here by the salty edge of the ocean in Venice. But it’s not just any ocean . . .
(Tim shakes his head till spit flys from his mouth—just to prove a point—and to get some of his salty saliva on the audience.)

. . . it’s the Pacific Ocean.

People are blabbing a great deal about the Pacific Ocean—the Pacific Rim, the islands, the twenty-first century. The Pacific Ocean is not just a big blue spot on the globe or a buzzword for a trendoid cultural reference . . .

(Tim moves toward the audience and speaks to individuals.)

. . . the Pacific Ocean is where my life has taken place. The most intense moments: where I learned to swim, where I kissed my first boy on a church outing, where my family was happiest together, where I took acid on the winter solstice and lay for hours in the seaweed at low tide. It is the ocean where my father is buried, a few miles out that way. It’s where I will be buried too, I suppose, unless there is a nuclear war or I get lined up against a wall and shot and bulldozed into a mass grave. Or we get the big oceany-earthquake experience, which is picturesquely called liquefaction. Now, liquefaction is not a new and satisfying milk shake at 7-Eleven. Liquefaction is what the experts think will happen to all the low-lying silty areas like Venice Beach if (or when) a big earthquake happens. Basically the dirt will turn to liquid, kind of like quicksand, and drop a few hundred feet, and the ocean will pour right down my street, Venice Boulevard, and head straight for my driveway covering up me, my garden, my boyfriend, and my dog.

But in the meantime, I walk and swim almost every day along Santa Monica Bay. Here at my beach in Venice.

(Tim goes upstage and pins California towel and other beach stuff he pulls from his bag to the up left wall.)
I love the beach. Everyone comes here and takes off a lot of their clothes and their preconceptions and their jobs and lays down and offers their bodies to the ocean. They create a little world around their towels: the chair, the book, the bag full of refreshing beverages. Then they sit next to lots of other almost naked mammals here on the beach.

*(Tim strikes beach tableau comical pose.)*

At my beach, here on the cusp of Speedo Lido, everyone has their way of getting into the ocean.

Some people dip one toe in. Some people walk briskly in then see it’s cold and walk briskly out. Some people (certain hirsute fellows, generally) run mad-dog style into the surf, leaving foam in their wake. A delicious photo opportunity, that.

There are all kinds of people: older polar bear types, Salvadoran families, folks from Watts, German tourists, gay boys (of which I am a variety) with their triple-D pecs and swimsuits tucked into the crack of their ass so they can tan their butts.

Everybody laid out offering their bodies in nice rows to the ocean. It’s a lot like the supermarket . . . or a train ride . . . or death . . .

*(Tim does gesture sequence . . . towel shake . . . sand brush . . . head shake.)*

I guess. Everyone stripped, completely the same and completely different.

There are strong handsome men and women in red bathing suits here, lifeguards they are called. They’re ready to intervene if the stakes get too high, the breathing too fast, the flesh too tired. Then they jump in and save you. It’s an excellent arrangement. Everyone watches them. From the leggy run through the shallows . . . to the shouldery swim . . . to the meeting amid the rip-tide . . . to the return. The savee always a little sheepish but still grateful. And then the order returns. Heads go back under hats.
People return to their towels . . . a little ripple . . . a tiny gamble . . . nothing to write home about . . . no gory details at 11:00. Because there are lifeguards here.

*(Tim does gestures and crosses downstage close to audience.)*

But I have found myself from time to time at a place where there are no lifeguards, a place called Zero Beach. This is a place where Rod Serling puts on his baggies and anything might happen. For a while I thought for sure that Zero Beach was in Far Rockaway at the Beach 67th/Gaston Ave stop on the A Train. There is nothing there but burnt-out buildings, a frayed boardwalk, torn-up hard-core sex magazines blowing in the wind over broken glass. I was sure this was Zero Beach. And so it was once. I was there on my twenty-first birthday and a young black girl drowned there on the rocks. That was her Zero Beach.

And now everywhere has become Zero Beach. Here in Venice, the ground zero of my life . . . bull’s-eye . . . corn hole. I am here with Gustave von Aschenbach from *Death in Venice* and Maria von Trapp from *The Sound of Music*. I am their love child. Together we sit watching the airplanes take off from LAX, watching the cute boys jog, watching Zero Beach.

I wear my father’s dog tag from World War II. The dog tag he carried across the Pacific when he was seventeen. I have it around my neck now. There is a cute German boy on my right and a cute Japanese boy on my left. Then there’s me with my father’s dog tag, the only trophy I have of the twentieth century, right here in the middle. My feet in the wet sand . . . my head under a wave . . . the water which reaches to the Americas . . . and to Asia . . . and to the Star-Kist tuna cannery in Terminal Island, too . . . Terminal Island . . . next to Zero Beach.

I am waiting for a train. I check the schedule. It’s due any minute now or maybe in fifty years. I watch the planes taking off from LAX. I wonder which one of them will explode.

I wait some more.
(Tim makes his hand into an airplane as the lights go dark. The sound of jackhammers fades up. He stomps and flies cross stage. Tim straps on the huge airplane costume and takes his position for take-off. The sad bit from Beethoven’s Seventh haunts the runway.)

Once upon a time . . .
I was a Prince of Flight . . .
A Captain of Soaring . . .
Intimate of Updrafts . . .
Master of Gravity . . .
Lord of Cloud . . . Wind . . . and the very Ozone Layer itself!!!

Since childhood I had rushed headlong in my pursuit of flight—I experimented with umbrellas, flammable lighter-than-air gases, cut-out plywood wings on my arms off windy promontories—whatever it would take to shake the earth from my impatient and ambitious feet. As a kid I savored dirigibles, studied gliders, stroked the smooth fuselage of prop planes. I never met a Cessna I didn’t like!

I threw myself out of airplanes. Pulled the rip cord in ecstasy. Hang-glided from high New England beachy cliffs. I was always happy in the air in my window seat in front of the wing on the Boeing 727, my breath fogging the glass that reflected my face . . .

But now, something has happened. Flight has left me. The skies aren’t so friendly anymore. I don’t care if they do it best—I’m not ready for Delta anymore, and the sight of a passenger plane sets me shivering.

I who once floated happily thousands of feet above the earth dangling beneath parachutes!

I who once swooped through the air cradled under a human-size kite am now terrified to fly to Columbus, Ohio, or over the Columbia River, and certainly not down to Colombia!

Not on your life!!! Not on a bet!!!
And definitely not on an airplane!!!

And now when I have to fly, and often I must, I follow my special ritual. I take out a lot of travel insurance. I have my friend Dona, who’s a witch, light magical, blue, travel-candles. I prepare a special calming cocktail—Stolichnaya and codeine with a Xanax chaser—that I guzzle pre-flight. I put my affairs in order, tidy up my desk. I don special travel underwear, bleached their whitest white, purified garments for the flight to 37,000 feet. I get a seat near an exit in the back. Or is it better to be near the front? Oh shit I can’t remember. I fly only on very large, seemingly dependable airplanes, preferably 747’s with their names painted on the side. Names like Pride of Denver or Spirit of Flight. I prefer airlines from obsessive and technologically anal countries, like Japan Airlines or Lufthansa, but United might do in a pinch . . . in a pinch . . . in a pinch.

Somebody pinch me I must be dreaming!!! This big fat airplane full of unsavory Americans in polyester jumpsuits can’t possibly take off and then safely arrive at Newark airport. It must be a joke! But here we are jockeying for position on the runway. There is no doubt in my mind that this plane will explode a few moments after we become airborne and then will smash into an overpass on the San Diego Freeway decapitating a mother of eight in a Volvo. . . .

We’re next for takeoff. Why does everyone seem so cheerful? Don’t they know we’re about to share a horrific and collective death? This will be a mass of pissing shitting puking fear-filled protoplasm to be fried over-easy into huevos-gross-out-rancheros!!!!

The engines begin to race. We are rolling faster and faster down the runway. I am thrown back into my seat. I grip the seat handles. This is it I guess. I say prayers to every world religion I can think of. I make shameless promises that if I get out of this I will be more appreciative of things. I will love and honor them!!!

I love my boyfriend. I love my 1974 Gremlin. I love the letters of Thomas Mann. I love blow jobs. I love cups of coffee. And now I’m going to have to leave all of that!!!
Give up all the pleasures and pride of the zillion thrills and chills that flesh is heir to.

*(Beethoven music collides with Peter Pan “I’m Flying” and reaches ear-splitting volume.)*

Father, I have flown too high. The sun has melted the wax on my wings.
Father, I’m falling into the sea.
I’m falling!

FAAAAAAAAAAAATHEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE-RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR!!!!!

*(The anvil chorus from Il Trovatore begins as fear of flying litany peaks. Tim hangs up cut-out travel images on the clothesline—a locomotive, the Titanic, a bomb, a jet plane—and gets out of airplane costume. Tim approaches the cake doing a slashing knife dance as “Climb Every Mountain” from The Sound of Music very slowly plays. Tim blows out candles.)*

I have always been obsessed by travel disaster.
The *Titanic* slipping beneath the icy waves as an ultimate and convenient symbol for an end of an era, the limits of technology. . . .
The *Hindenburg* exploding in the sky over New Jersey, consuming itself in thirty-seven seconds. The swastikas on its tail the last thing to burn as they peeled and crackled off like the wrapper on a Three Musketeers candy bar.

I would stare at these pictures like they were sex and more . . . alpha and omega . . . *Götterdämmerung* and morning in America.

It seemed like these travel disasters meant that somebody was demanding a sacrifice to appease the old gods. It was time for the technological big boys on the block to pay up for their misdeeds. These sinking, crashing, and exploding things were the tasty Technicolor metaphor for a world about to eat its own tail.
I would look at these pictures in my big travel-disaster picture book when I was ten or eleven. Watch movies on TV about ships sinking and nights to remember. Cry when George C. Scott fails to defuse the bomb that blows up the zeppelin. I would press my ten- or eleven-year-old hard-on into the heavy-pile, emerald-green shag carpet as I flipped the pages of my big travel disaster book and then I would go out and play. I was happy, so happy, that that would never happen to meeeeeeeeee!!!!!

*(Tim drops face in birthday cake. What a mess.)*

But now, metaphor becomes reality.
Morning becomes electrical wing-flap failure.
And misery is the 1:15 flight to San Jose.
Which is why I take the train.

*(Tim picks up suitcase, does wild train dance, goes into audience and pulls a basin of water out from under a seat. Tim gives it to an audience member and has them help him wash the cake off his face.)*

I took the train for eight thousand miles this fall. From Union Station, LA, to New Orleans on the *Sunset Limited*. New Orleans to Atlanta on the *Crescent*. Atlanta to NYC also on the *Crescent*. NYC to Toronto on the *Maple Leaf*. Toronto to Chicago on the *Lakeshore Limited*. From Chicago back home to LA on the *Southwest Chief*!

The train is a funny place. It’s a place where you might actually sit next to and talk to people who aren’t at all like yourself. It’s an odd bunch that take the train: old people, the Amish, people afraid to fly, European tourists, poor people on their ninety-nine-dollar unlimited tickets, and me. There is a weird intimacy that exists—especially on a long trip. It takes fifty-one hours from LA to New Orleans. There’s no stewardess to tell you where to sit. There’s no in-flight movie that makes you slip down the plastic and shut out the light. This is no quickie, alienated postmodern
hip hop from point LA to point NYC. Nope. You have to look at things. You have to watch the time and endless miles go by. You have to actually see Kansas . . . become Colorado become New Mexico become Arizona become the Mojave Desert become here.

And when you walk into a crowded dining car and sit down at a table with a bunch of strangers the question you most often hear is, “Where ya headin’?” Seems like a simple question, but what that question really means and how it is sometimes heard is, “What is the meaning of life and why are you on this train?”

When that question is asked you better be ready to ante up. Otherwise get your cherry pie to go and get out of the game. This is the main reason I like taking the train. There is a disarming candor about it. No appearances to keep up. No telephones to answer. No errands to run. There’s a rock and a rumble and a sway that I like. It’s like being asleep in the back of the station wagon late at night when your parents drive you home from your horrible aunt and uncle in West Covina.

The rock. The rumble. The sway.

I went with my boyfriend Doug to Union Station to leave on my six-week eight-thousand-mile trip. We got there and checked my baggage . . .

(Tim flings his suitcase through the air.)

. . . and waited in that big Spanish deco hall. This was going to be the longest we had ever been apart. Doug and I had said goodbye in many places—airports, the subway, bus terminals, through the open window of an automobile, even once parting in anger in the cold gray drizzle of the Parc Royal in Brussels—but this was different. Bigger, but smaller, too. More like a campfire than a microwave, more permanent somehow, like once the slow growl of a locomotive gets moving it might be very hard and take a long time to get back.

I had entered a whole other layer of experience there at Union Station in downtown LA, a whole other world where
wood and steel connects you in a line with where you are going to go.

I got on the train and put my stuff in my sleeping compartment. The little bed was all laid out, a small bottle of bad wine waiting for me on the stiff starched pillowcase. There was a place for all my things—a shelf for my book, Thomas Wolfe’s *Of Time and the River*, a nook for my glasses, a hiding spot for my porn magazines between the mattress and armrest.

I came back down onto the platform and Doug and I hugged and kissed as the diesel horn blew and shook us to our tennis shoes. The nice woman conductor told us it was time to go. I climbed back on the train and she shut the door. The train rocked forward imperceptibly and then back. And then forward. I pressed my face to the glass as Doug walked along with the train as it slowly began to leave Union Station. This was so intimate and close to the bone. The two of us there—one on a train beginning to move and the other still on the platform. Which one of us was moving and which was standing still? As the train moved quicker so did Doug until he was walking as fast as he could alongside. Then he was running faster and faster until he couldn’t keep up anymore. Finally he was just a little waving curly-headed speck there at the end of Platform 6, Union Station, L.A. The train picked up speed and went over the river and I couldn’t see him anymore.

I am on the train moving through my life and the history of the world. . . .

I LOOKED LEFT and I saw my long-dead grandparents’ house there on the train tracks by Mission Road in Alhambra and the very same tracks where as a kid I put pennies and nickels to be squashed under the Union Pacific. . . .

I LOOKED RIGHT and I see the deer of the fields of Marienborn as my train heads through East Germany on my way to Berlin. I am twenty-seven. Those deer are playing around in the grass there in the no-man’s-land between the war and what was next to come. . . .
I LOOK UP and I’m standing between the cars on the IRT subway in New York. I am heading downtown on my way home from a friend’s AIDS memorial and I scream up at the damp roof of the subway tunnel!

I LOOK DOWN and I see a scarred and sooty ten-pence coin there on the tracks as my train comes into Victoria Station as I arrive in London for the first time.

I am on a red trolley heading toward Tijuana!

I am on the sealed train that brought Lenin to Saint Petersburg!

I am on the funeral train taking Lincoln’s body home to Springfield!

I am on the Twentieth-Century Limited bringing the Dodgers to LA!

I am on the train that brought Phyllis Diller to Hollywood! The Jews to Auschwitz! The tourists to Tomorrowland!

THE TROLLEY TO TIJUANA!!!!!!

We are pulling into a station. What does the sign say? BERLIN-BAHNHOFZOO! I have left Union Station and traveled all the way across the country underneath the Atlantic Ocean through Europe and now here we are in Berlin!!! There’s a large crowd of people here to greet me. They carry big signs that say WELCOME! The Adorable Jewish Boyfriend Douglas is there wearing a prayer shawl and is getting ready to sing his favorite Oktoberfest song. Didn’t I just leave him at Union Station? I better get ready. What should I wear when getting off in Berlin in 1931?

(Tim opens suitcase. Puts on sailor hat. Nope, throws it back in. Then puts on lederhosen instead.)

I just happen to have my lederhosen here. What luck! As I slip into them I hear a cumbia by Sonora Dynamita play over the station loudspeakers. It’s a cumbia about AIDS. An announcement over a loudspeaker says this train is leaving for Guadalajara!!!
I better hurry. I’m struggling to get into these fucking lederhosen—just one more antler button. Slap on my Alpine hat and I grab my suitcase. I rush out of my compartment down the hall out onto the platform . . . and there’s no one there.

The train is gone. I’m standing in my lederhosen at the abandoned train station in Whittier, California. The wind is blowing. All I can hear is some yodeling in the distance and the rock and clang of a disappearing freight train. Welcome to Whittier.

*(Tim has scrambled into his lederhosen and alpine hat, done his fake German Schubladen slapping dance and stands poised at the edge of cultural stretch.)*

I grew up here in Whittier, California. On Whittier Boulevard at Pounds Avenue. To get to Whittier you go from downtown LA over the Sixth Street bridge through the barrio underneath the arch that says “Welcome to Whittier Boulevard,” Champs Elysées of East LA. Through Montebello. Past Pico Rivera. Over the San Gabriel River to Whittier!

I learned German here from a Chicana lesbian named Fräulein Rodriguez. I am not sure what twist of fate brought me here to study German with Fräulein Rodriguez, but I know that it happened. I think somehow I got mixed up when I changed trains in Mexicali to get on the connecting service through Sri Lanka for Hamburg and that I ended up here on the abandoned train station in Whittier wearing my lederhosen. It is very strange. I am ready to learn from Fräulein Rodriguez the irregular forms of the verb “to be.”

Ich bin. Ich war. Ich werde sein!

It is 1972 in Whittier. Which at that time, when I was about to learn the irregular forms of the verb “to be” from Fräulein Rodriguez, had not yet been destroyed by an earthquake. Which at that time had a big sign which said WELCOME TO WHITTIER—HOMETOWN OF PRESIDENT RICHARD NIXON. Which at that time was sometimes called WHITE-ier.
Ich bin. Ich war. Ich werde sein!

I grew up hearing a weird Spanish in our house. No, we didn’t have Spanish-speaking maids or anything. This was hard-core, middle-class, middle-brow, San Gabriel Valley peasant routine, okay? Both my parents sold things. My mom on the floor at May Company department store and my dad as a traveling salesman. He was really into speaking Spanish. When he came back from World War II he taught himself from a book called *El español al día*.

I grew up hearing and saying things like . . .

“Pass the mantequilla.”

“Can I have some more leche, por favor?”

“Honey, please get me a cerveza!”

I was called Timoteo, which is a name I don’t think anyone in Latin America even has! At the end of every perfect California day, my mom would tuck me in and say, “Hasta la mañana, Timoteo.”

Which was the only Spanish I ever learned until this year.

I grew up on Whittier Boulevard. Not far from my house, just over the San Gabriel River, was the mansion of Pio Pico, the last (so far anyway) Mexican governor of California. This always confused me as a little kid. What was the house of the last (so far anyway) Mexican governor of California doing at the corner of Whittier and Pioneer Boulevards just across the street from Vons supermarket? Where did Pio Pico go? Did he still live there? What’s going on? Did he go back to Mexico in 1847? Did they kill him? Imprison him? They named a boulevard for him. What ever happened to Pio Pico?

To learn the answer to this and other questions, in 1972, the same year I began learning the irregular forms of the verb “to be” from Fräulein Rodriguez, I also took a summer school course called California Heritage.

*(Tim runs to beach towel and points to mission locations.)*

We learned more than anyone should ever have to know about the state of California. We learned about the horrors of the
conquistadores. The bravery of Sir Francis Drake and the *Golden Hind* sailing into San Francisco Bay. The wet foot of Cabrillo as he claimed California for Spain at Point Loma in San Diego. We would go on endless field trips to all the missions. I would write and perform little plays about Father Junipero Serra. These plays had titles like “In Which Father Serra Whips Father Jose!” or “In Which Father Serra Brutally and Unremittingly Scourges the Recalcitrant Indigenous People.” We visited some battlefield near San Diego where our teacher whose name was (I am not kidding) Mr. West, said, “Okay kids, everybody off the bus to see where U.S. imperialism stole California from Mexico!!!”

We smoked dope in the tannery of Mission La Purissima de Santa Inez in Lompoc. I stole a hunk of adobe as a souvenir from Mission San Gabriel by my grandma’s house. I pined away for the adorable Roger Blaney in the cool mystery of the chapel at Mission San Juan Capistrano, which is widely known as the “Queen of the Missions.”

The next year my sister Betsy married Jorge Olmedo and our whole family life changed. Suddenly Jorge and his huge Cuban extended family became the center of our world in Whittier. Christmas dinner became black beans and yucca, not ham and cranberry sauce. Under the influence of Cuban warmth, my family started getting huggy with everybody. Jorge’s mom and dad were pretty old and didn’t speak much English, so this was my dad’s big chance. Out came *El español al día* and my dad was speaking Spanish. My sister was speaking Spanish. My brother Greg, fresh from a year in Lima with his Peruvian girlfriend Jezebel, was speaking really good Spanish. It was at this point that I began my study of German with Fräulein Rodriguez.

I don’t know why I picked German. It didn’t really make sense. It had no relation to reality. It just meant that I couldn’t talk to Jorge’s parents on Sundays. It was like I was refusing to be where I actually was: in Whittier, California, with an enormous Cuban extended family in the late twentieth century! Clearly I
should have been taking Spanish in second period with Señorita Rodriguez and not German in fifth with Fräulein Rodriguez! My study of German made sense, in that I am German. German/English. German/Scotch. German/Flemish. German/Alsatian! German/Scotch! Scotch and Water. The water underneath my feet, reaching to the Americas and Asia and to the Star-Kist tuna cannery in Long Beach, too. . . .

(Hypnotized by this steamy, simmering melting pot, Tim slaps himself to snap out of it.)

Let’s just say, I got very into my German study.

I would read Schiller in the original as I ate my Cap’n Crunch every morning. I forced my family to begin observing Oktoberfest as religiously as we did Christmas. I made them dress up in traditional lederhosen and dirndl to go to Alpine Village, the German cultural theme and amusement park right off the San Diego Freeway in Torrance. I subscribed to and religiously read the Los Angeles German-language newspaper, the *California Staats-Zeitung*. At a certain point I got a little too into it with a group of friends after seeing *A Clockwork Orange* at the Egyptian Theater on Hollywood Boulevard when we gathered around a piano in our proto-punk attire and sang “Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles.”

It was hard for us white kids to know who we actually were as we dog-paddled desperately through the blankness of a suburban childhood. You just tried to grab onto something, lasso a kind of identity life preserver, and hope you didn’t drown. This is probably why I studied German.

Fräulein Rodriguez was a very good, but widely feared teacher. She was also the advisor for the MECHA group at my high school, the Chicano kids’ cultural and political club. I could have been taking Spanish with her too, but I didn’t. That’s too bad, because though she was a very good German teacher, I bet she was ace at Spanish. Fräulein Rodriguez mostly hung out with
another lesbian teacher at our high school, Miss Schneider, a very
strict biology instructor. Miss Schneider looked just like Ernest
Borgnine in *McHale’s Navy*. Fräulein Rodriguez and Miss Schnei-
der would walk down the hallways together lost in conversation.
Some high school kids, being the complete creeps that they usu-
ally are, made fun of them a lot behind their backs. “Look out!
Here comes the faculty lesbian and gay parade!” Once or twice I
even shouted this out too, which was quite a joke since I was just
about to bloom into the biggest fag at my high school.

Fräulein Rodriguez and I had a complicated relationship. She
was a real authoritarian and would drill us ruthlessly in our con-
jugations, declensions, and adjective endings. Fräulein Rodriguez
and I would fight a lot in class about stuff, argue about issues of
*Realpolitik*. We had to get along though. I was, after all, the best
German student at school. In fact, eventually in my senior year I
was the only German student at my high school doing inde-
pendent study. This is when I really began to learn the irregular
forms of the verb “to be.”

*Ich bin. Ich war. Ich werde sein!*

In 1975, at the beginning of my senior year, I finally com-
pletely figured out that I liked boys. I began to manifest my newly
discovered sexual identity in the behaviors of my era. Black nail
polish, black lipstick, black eyeliner. This neo-goth look is still very
popular across our troubled land. Occasionally I would add a spe-
cial fashion accent, a black velour floor-length cape, but only on
pep rally days. I showed everyone the class ring my boyfriend from
a rival high school had given me. I also began making up the most
outlandish fantasy narratives of all the sex I imagined I was hav-
ing on the mean streets of Hollywood. My best girlfriend Kim
Bertola was so impressed with my stories she became my personal
homosexuality PR agent. Kim wrote on every available surface at
my high school—desk tops, lockers—*TIM GIVES GOOD HEAD.*
She was such a good friend she even went to the stencil T-shirt
shop at the mall and made me a T-shirt with that message! I would
wear this shirt to my high school every other Wednesday, and if anyone so much as looked at me sideways I would freeze them with my homo death glare!

Fräulein Rodriguez noticed these things. But she said nothing. For my independent study course with Fräulein Rodriguez, I was translating Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* from German to English. This was not easy. Often Fräulein Rodriguez and I would sit together late after school. The two of us leaning over the page, an Anglo-Germano homo and a Latina lesbian untangling the pleasures of the subjunctive case *auf Deutsch*.

I shared my progress on a tricky part of my translation with Fräulein Rodriguez one afternoon. I had gotten to the point in *Death in Venice* where Gustave von Aschenbach, this uptight-closet-case-writer-from-Munich, has gone to Venice on a package vacation. He quickly falls in love with the beautiful Polish jailbait boy named Tadzio with bad big seventies hair. Gustave follows Tadzio around, making the boy’s mother very nervous. Finally he gets lost following them in the back alleys of Venice and he collapses into a heap on the plague-strewn piazza and whispers a confession to his deepest place of psychic self. “I love you, Tadzio!”

When I got to that point in my translation, I sort of flipped out. I didn’t cry hysterically or anything. I am, after all, a WASP. But my lower lip did quiver noticeably. Who did I think I was? Gustave von Aschenbach or a teenage queer boy with bad makeup? The truth was I didn’t give good head. I’d never given anyone head! I wasn’t even exactly sure what *head* even was!

Fräulein Rodriguez looked at me quietly and shut her copy of *Death in Venice*. She said, pointing at my Halloween midnight black nail polish, “Das ist nicht nötig. That isn’t necessary. *Sei stolz!* Be proud of yourself. *Alles stimmt.* It’s okay.” Fräulein Rodriguez placed her hand on my shoulder but she said nothing, for she was a Chicana lesbian of few words. Then she quickly picked up the book and we went back to our translation. At that exact moment the entire Lowell High School varsity water polo team loudly
walked past the open classroom door after their practice. I could smell the chlorine on their skin rising from their bodies, chlorine from the pool full of men I was about to dive into. I was getting ready to move on. I was going to get out of high school soon. I looked forward to the moment at graduation when the entire Lowell High School chorus would sing some maudlin and inspiring song from a Rodgers and Hammerstein musical as I clutched my diploma. I would get older, a tiny bit wiser, maybe even reach the ripe old age of thirty! Who knows? Eventually I might even learn how to give good head! Then I would think of Fräulein Rodriguez and how she always hoped I would someday study Spanish too but I never did until this year. I have my father’s book, \textit{El español al día, “y finalmente estudio español.”} I think of Fräulein Rodriguez and thank her for teaching me the most important thing, the irregular forms of the verb “to be.” I am. I was. I will be.

\textit{Danke schön, Fräulein Rodriguez.}

(Tim puts on his alpine hat and as the lights fade he stamps out the years from eighteen to thirty. With each pound of his feet the lights flash in the audience’s eyes.)

Since then, I have been stretched, and pulled, and mashed, and squished . . . by this unkind century.

EXHIBIT A! Gray hair!
EXHIBIT B! Scar from carved out blood tumor!
EXHIBIT C! Skin graft from here to here. Cut off end of finger on the day the Pope was shot!
EXHIBIT D! Faint, but visible, stretch marks back here in the butt zone. Testament to the ceaseless bend and sway of life.
EXHIBIT E! Parts of my heart torn out by the early loss of friends, lovers, and family.
I am used merchandise.
A 1958 model.
There is a mountain out by where the trains come over Cajon Pass coming into LA. In beautiful Colton, near San Bernardino.
I’ve been watching this mountain a long time, for my whole life. They’ve been slowly tearing this mountain down. . . .

Rock by rock.
Scoop by scoop.
Foot by foot.

It must be made out of something useful, something valuable. Like bauxite . . . or Oil of Olay.

It used to be a very high mountain. And now it’s only half of what it was.

And it’s probably been turned into Ziploc bags, jet engines, and railroad tracks. . . .

(Pounding pile driver sounds fill the space.)

CHOP. GRATE. GRIND. STIR. PUREE. WHIP. MIX. BLEND. LIQUEFY. FRAPPE.

Let’s face it, any way you slice or dice it, we are all used merchandise. Like me. Like that mountain. I turned thirty this year.

(The Broadway recording of “Climb Every Mountain” comes on. Every show needs a musical number! Tim speaks the text along with that fabulous nun singing the lyrics.)

CLIMB EVERY MOUNTAIN I had a birthday party last year.
It was my birthday party.
My twenty-ninth birthday.

SEARCH HIGH AND LOW I had eaten too much sushi.
Drunk too many sloe gin fizzes.

FOLLOW EVERY BYWAY I became sick to my stomach.
Soon I would throw up . . .

EVERY PATH YOU KNOW And I knew I would be seeing those twelve California rolls and that bowl of creamed corn once again.
Climb every mountain So I decided to rush home. 
So that I could puke in private.

Ford every stream When I got home. 
I turned on the TV and waited.

Follow every rainbow There was a movie on KTLA channel 5. 
There were all these nuns looking holy and humming.

Till you find your dream Wait a minute! 
I know these nuns. 
I know this movie! 
This musical! It’s one of my favorite things!

A dream that will need It’s at the point in the movie where the one young nun has given up on life . . .

All the love you can give She has quit, returned to the convent, and then the head honcho nun tells her she has to go back into the world and fight for her dreams!

Every day of your life And suddenly I’m at my graduation from high school When the Lowell High School chorus sang this song. It turned my stomach then too!!

For as long as you live It told me that I was supposed to move upward and on to forge things in the smithy of my soul to strive and not to yield!!!
CLIMB EVERY MOUNTAIN  As the nun’s singing was about to peak
I knew it was time!
I was going to have those nuns help me climb my way to the bathroom!!

FORD EVERY STREAM  I got up from my sickbed and took a step.
I covered my mouth.
I didn’t want to toss up in my typewriter!

FOLLOW EVERY RAINBOW  I saw a harsh glow at the end of the hall, a glow on the toilet bowl.
Just one more step! One more step!

(A gleaming white toilet seat flies in from the heavens. A toilet ex machina!)

TILL YOU FIND YOUR DREAM  I made it! I fall to my knees.
My chin on the rim.
My face reflected in those still toilet bowl waters.
The smell of Sani-Flush wafting over my entire body!

A DREAM THAT WILL NEED  I embraced that cool indifferent toilet bowl
and I said a little prayer.
“Oh please God, no sharp chunks or burning acids!”

ALL THE LOVE YOU CAN GIVE  I saw the world with different eyes.
That toilet scum line my only horizon.
EVERY DAY OF YOU LIFE
I wanted to tell that singing nun
that things aren’t always that great.
Students are being massacred!
People are dying of AIDS!!!

FOR AS LONG AS YOU LIVE
It’s not just a day-hike from birthday
to birthday.
And this was a lesson I was going to
learn on a gut level.
For now it was BARF-O-RAMA
time!

CLIMB EVERY MOUNTAIN
It just came up.
It was like turning on a switch of a
garbage disposal—
up it came!

(Tim barfs.)

FORD EVERY STREAM
I just wanna stick around!
Acting-Up as much as I can.
It’s my party and I’ll puke
if I want to.

(Barf.)

FOLLOW EVERY RAINBOW
I wanna live to puke again!
I WANNA LIVE TO PUKE
AGAIN!!!

(Barf.)

TILL YOU FIND YOUR DREAM
THAT’S (barf) WHAT (barf)
LIFE’S (barf) ABOUT!!!!

(The toilet flies back up to the ceiling and Tim begins doing
deep knee bends, counting from his age projecting into the sev-
enties. Then Tim makes a big stomp coming out of the birth-
day count. The lights flash.)

We’re here.
We’re here by the ocean.
We’re here in Colton, California, where the freight train
derails and wipes out a whole suburban neighborhood.
We’re here in Colton a week later when the gas line ruptured
by the derailed freight train explodes and wipes out a whole other
suburban neighborhood.
We’re here in Beijing, in Tiananmen Square with the student
doing the pas de deux with the tank.
1 and 2 and 1 and 2 . . .
We’re here in the stadium at Santiago de Chile where my
friend Roberto’s brother is about to get his dick cut off during
his torture-murder by the fascist General Pinochet.
We’re here now in the wrong row on Flight 232. Oops!
We’re here with poor Alyosha Karamazov, of course, being
offered unfair ironies about tortures by Turks.
We’re here on the beach with Gustave von Aschenbach and
Maria von Trapp who are about to have a love child and I am that
child . . . ready to go out into the world.
We’re here in front of County General Hospital in East LA.

(Tim sets the scene in front of the hospital. Places his
props—a bag of sand and a knife—then sets the wooden
box that will be the stage.)

County General is the biggest hospital in the world. Right
here is a big mean iron fence. Over here are banners and signs.
Symbols of protest. Manifestation. Over here—from this part of
the audience over to here—there are tents. A community is liv-
ing here on the pavement. From this person in the audience over
to here are TV cameras. Reporters. Journalists. And up here are
votive candles, hundreds and hundreds of votive candles. Okay,
let’s recap: Protest signs. Community. Media. Votive candles. The four basic food groups. This is the ACT UP–LA week-long vigil in front of County Hospital in January 1989. For a week we’ve been living here on the pavement to force the fucking County of LA to provide an AIDS ward here at the biggest hospital in the world. This is the closing rally. I have been asked, since I’ve been here most of the week, to make a performance for the closing rally. They have provided a performance space, which is very important to me. They have also provided a stage for me, which is somewhat less important. I have my props. Which are of utmost importance to me. People are doing speeches. Singing songs. It’s my turn. I come out of the audience. Approach the stage and begin.

*(Tim steps up on his soap box, stomps, and sings the following like in a mass.)*

FOR THE AIDS COALITION TO UNLEASH POWER (ACT UP–LA) WEEK-LONG VIGIL IN FRONT OF COUNTY GENERAL HOSPITAL. WE’RE HERE TO DEMAND PROPER CARE, PROGRAMS, AND AN AIDS WARD HERE AT THE BIGGEST HOSPITAL IN THE WORLD!

There is a big building behind me—a very big building—and on this building these words are written: “Erected by the citizens of the County of Los Angeles to provide hospital care for the acutely ill and suffering to whom the doctors of the attending staff give their services without charge in order that no citizen of the County shall be deprived of health or life for lack of such care and services.”

There is a big building behind me. I looked up at these words this morning after waking up on the cold cement and going to the bathroom by the perpetually blood-stained walls of the public toilet. Why do those words sound so old and crinkly? Like they just slithered off some asshole’s Victrola? Have the county board
of supervisors, or the mayor, or the governor, or our brand-new, fucking President Bush ever read those words?? Which were chiseled in during the administration of Herbert Hoover, THAT TACKY QUEEN!!

OOPS, sorry Herb. I got you mixed up with your girlfriend, J. Edgar.

And lots of us have been gathered here this week to try to make those words become true.

*(Tim stabs knife into a bag of sand he holds in one hand. It begins to pour out.)*

As I sat on the beach on Inauguration Day, the day before this vigil began, I sat in Venice near the homo zone, a.k.a. Speedo Lido, and three things happened: I saw the jet airplanes taking off from LAX and I thought of my recent and brutal fear of flying and about Elizabeth Marek who died in the bombing of Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. She was from here, in Venice Beach, and was a spectacular lesbian and performer and peace activist who got blown up at 33,000 feet. No conclusions there, just a little context.

I watched the planes taking off over the Pacific Ocean and on the beach arrived a midwestern tourist family, shooting lots of pictures to be sent back to Hays, Kansas, with the caption “HERE WE ARE ON THE BEACH IN JANUARY!” This group included a mother type who shouts to the others very loud, “I DON’T CARE WHAT ANY OF YOU WANT. I HAVE NO INTEREST IN GOING TO MEXICO!”

And then I heard an announcement over the loudspeaker on the lifeguard’s truck which says, “ATTENTION!!! ALL LIFE-GUARDS! BEGIN CHECKING ALL PERSONS LAYING IN THE SUN TO SEE IF ANY OF THEM ARE A DEAD BODY!!!”
This is the world I am living in this day in front of County General Hospital.

There is a building. There is a big building. There is a big building on the hill behind me. Something has been happening here in front of this building. People have passed seven days and seven nights in front of this building together. Soup has been made. Stories have been told. Performances have been done. TV cameras have been pointed. Wet sloppy noisy sex has been had by those two persevering dudes in that pup tent over there, wobbling and shaking, and I say unto you now that if Boy Scouts had been like this I might have made it past Tenderfoot. Gestures have been made, sleeping on the pavement in the cold and the rain. Most intense of all we’ve seen what each other looks like before coffee in the morning and yet still we are here. Because demands have been made, demands to this city, county, state, and country to help our people live.

Now, what has actually happened here? Has all this stuff made County General Hospital rise from its foundations and fly away trailing its rotten plumbing, sadneses, and a thousand IV tubes doing a slow anti-viral drip as it disappears over the barrio? No. That has not happened. But maybe it will make some other things happen. . . .

LIKE MAYBE . . . when the county gets its shit together . . . people who are dealing with AIDS stuff right now and don’t have health insurance will have a place to go where they won’t have to sit in a public hallway on a hard bench getting their chemo and throw up from the side-effects in view of all . . .

LIKE MAYBE . . . it will begin to seem to more of us . . . that it is at least as important to get people who need it proper health care ASAP as it is to shop for a new leather jacket or to make yet another performance piece which obliquely deconstructs print advertising . . . and believe me I’ve made my share of those . . .
LIKE MAYBE . . . a new kind of community is being born . . .
LIKE MAYBE . . . sleeping outside here in East LA has stretched a few of us to think in a real way what it is like for the eighty thousand people who will sleep in cardboard boxes in this City of Angels tonight—some of whom have gathered here with us, walked the four miles from Skid Row, shared some food, and found a safer place to sleep through the night . . .
LIKE MAYBE . . . this is a whole new cultural time arriving . . . of people gathered around a bunch of votive candles trying to tell each other a coupla stories waiting for the morning to come . . .
LIKE MAYBE . . . we fags and lesbos can become a model for how Americans can stop forgetting and holding in and avoiding and feeding off of a lot of suffering in this world and off the world herself as she strains to deal with my 1974 Gremlin’s carbon dioxide . . .
LIKE MAYBE . . . next time we won’t be electing the country club trustee Georgie Bush President of the United States and believe me there is waltzing in Washington right now . . .
LIKE MAYBE . . . it is time for lines to be drawn . . . some absolutes to be acknowledged . . . some choices to be made . . .
BECAUSE . . . BECAUSE . . . BECAUSE . . .
BECAUSE . . . silence actually does equal death . . .
BECAUSE . . . action actually does equal life . . . these are not metaphors or gym wear . . .
BECAUSE . . . there may not be all that much time left . . .
BECAUSE . . . my strongest art- and life-filled moment last year was a civil disobedience action in front of the federal building in LA. And with each outline of a friend dead from AIDS drawn on the pavement . . . pure spectacle was happening . . . drums were beating . . . hearts were pounding . . . hands and bodies covered and gritty with chalk . . . trying to make the big pic-
ture . . . which more and more seems to be the one that matters most to me . . .

BECAUSE . . . maybe any function of art that does not basically work in some kind of direction toward healing the sick . . . fostering communication . . . easing suffering . . . feeding bodies . . . or saving the planet just ought to get back to an apolitical, conceptual 1980 where it would be much more comfortable . . .

BECAUSE . . . maybe it’s time for a lot of art to be quite useful . . .

BECAUSE . . . maybe it’s not enough for us to be sad and pissed off for our boyfriends or our friends who are boys who have been lost to us . . . there are lotsa different kinds of people there in that building behind me . . .

BECAUSE . . . last month I walked around the border near Tijuana with my friend Guillermo who told me that on that square mile more people die each year than on any other place in North America. Run over by cars crossing the border. Asphyxiated in the trunks of automobiles or shot by crazed north San Diego County white supremacist lunatics. I know this is just one injustice out of a zillion, but it cannot be foreign to us. This cannot be ignored. It’s in our pockets. It’s in our beds. It is next door to Sea World amusement park. Shamu the dancing killer whale is watching us to see if we can hook up . . . we homos . . . people of color . . . the undocumented . . . feminist ecologists . . . crazed global performance artists . . .

AND ALL YOU STRAIGHT WHITE GUYS TOO!!!

BOTH OF YOU!!!!

BECAUSE . . . there is a place smoldering inside US that wants to learn this lesson WE Americans need to learn about pain and suffering and loss . . .

BECAUSE . . . each of us—writing, agitating, painting, kissing, performing, designing, activating, fellating, detailing, coiffing, public-relating, primping, obsessing, committing, masturbating—
might make a society not quite so stuck on itself and able to speak so fucking glibly about kindness and gentleness!!!!

BECAUSE . . . there’s no question . . . that more lesbian peace activists from Venice will be blown out of the sky over Lockerbie or Burbank . . .

BECAUSE . . . there’s no question . . . each of us is going to have to go to someplace like Mexico . . .

BECAUSE . . . there’s no question each of us is going to walk along the beach and find a body or two there in the sand.

*(Tim jumps off his soapbox.)*

Then it was over. I gathered my stuff. Because you always want to leave your campsite cleaner than you found it. And I went back to the rally. And became part of the group.

*(We hear planes crashing and bombs dropping. A rope drops from above—rope ex machina—Tim climbs, huffing and puffing, up to the rafters and perches there.)*

We’re up here now. We’re all up here high up in the sky. We’re all having sex with the twentieth century. I am having sex with the twentieth century in a sleeping compartment on an express train in the middle of the night in Texas. It is an affair that does not stop. I try to be faithful to my boyfriend, but when a new crisis or a cute peace activist comes along I have to go out and be with them. Tongue kiss. Wrestle. Caress. Battle. I remember so many things! And some of them even happened! I have licked Mao Tse-tung’s balls—sweet-n-sour. I have held hands with the cute southern boy from Atlanta at the Civil War Memorial. I have spanked Oscar Wilde. I kissed that working class fellow by the RAF memorial on the embankment of the Thames. I embraced Mayakovski before his final Russian roulette. I fucked my beautiful Italian boy on the Lower East Side high up on the roof when we were both intensely young. I have been porked by Richard M. Nixon in the
middle of Whittier Boulevard. YECCH! I held my dying World War I poets machine gunned there on Flanders Field and my friends and lovers dead from AIDS. Held them like this . . . and like this . . . and like this . . . and like this . . .

*Tim does strong gestures of holding and lovemaking.*

It all comes back. The way my father’s body felt lying sweaty in a hammock in the South Pacific in 1944. My mother’s breasts full of milk for my brothers and sister and then for me. The men and a coupla women that I have laid with and loved—on the beach, in the bed, in the trenches, or on some long march. It all happens at once with that fast forward whooosh when I come. WHHEEEE!!!!!

It all happens at once and we will all keep having sex with the twentieth century. It’s an affair that my body might not outlive. It keeps coming . . . faster and faster and faster . . . all at once . . . and on and on . . . and on and on . . .

*Tape collage peaks as Tim climbs down the big rope back to the stage.*

and on and on . . . and on and on . . . and on and on . . .

TAPE OUT!!! LIGHTS OUT!!!!

*The plug is pulled on the sound system. It growls to a halt. The lights go out in the space. Tim hands out flashlights to three or four people in the audience to light him for the end of the piece.*

I’ve got one last thing to tell you. It won’t take me long. We’re here in the dark. We’re back on the train. It is very dark. A light flickers far away. I sat at a table in the dining car for supper as the *Sunset Limited* pounded across Texas on its way to New Orleans. At my table was a heavyset older couple and a middle-aged black woman. The train had pulled out of El Paso a couple
of hours before and was now rolling into the endless all night of Texas.

I asked the big question, “Where ya headin’?” And so it begins. The couple was from way up in the north part of Wisconsin. The black lady was from Lake Charles, Louisiana. And I’m from right here, LA, born just over those hills. So I have a place too. Just like they do. And now here we are on the Sunset Limited heading for New Orleans.

The man from Wisconsin sold life insurance. I asked him what he thought of air travel. He said he didn’t think much of it. His wife had raised their umpteen kids in a house they had built in the woods. About twenty-five miles from a tiny town near the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The black lady was a grade school teacher at a suburban school outside of Lake Charles. She used to live right next door to the school where she taught but then desegregation came along and now she drives ten miles to a fancy white neighborhood. And the stories start coming.

The couple from Wisconsin are retired but they’re now volunteer ambulance drivers. There’s only a coupla hundred people in their part of the county so they’re on call to drive people the forty-two miles to the nearest town that has a hospital. They start telling me and the lady from Lake Charles about their life in the ambulance. And suddenly there in the Amtrak dining car it all spills out. They’re telling me the most intimate details of their life in the ambulance—delivering babies, deaths of their neighbors from heart attacks, accidents, a suicide—the usual grunt and groan routine. The woman from the Wisconsin couple tells us how once they got a call for a baby who had stopped breathing. They raced over there and gathered the crazed mother and non-breathing baby and started doing their stuff. The man’s wife giving the kiss of life on the kid while he tried to calm the mother down as they drove a million miles an hour over frozen roads. Over and over again he said, “It’ll be all right.” He said. “It’ll be all right.”
And the man took over the story at this point. He told us he was driving like a lunatic when suddenly he heard the baby cry weakly, then a good healthy howl, then another, and then the baby kept crying. He told us at the table that when he heard that baby cry, full of life once again, he sat up straight as he drove toward the hospital and held that steering wheel full of happiness. The tears were running down his cheeks cause he and his wife had saved that baby there on the icy highways of Wisconsin.

We were all quiet for a bit after this story. I poked at my bad pot roast and stringy string beans.

Now, the African American lady from Lake Charles hadn’t talked too much so far, but she was clearly moved by the couple’s story, by the sheer heat of it, and I could see she had something she wanted to tell.

She dabbed at her mouth with a napkin and said, “Oh, I know. I know how these young ones can touch you.” Before she had moved to her new school, back when she still taught at the city school in Lake Charles, she had had a boy in her sixth grade class. He wasn’t the best student but he was a good boy and she liked him and helped him and he would come by her house do some chores and they would talk.

But then as June came around and it was the last day of school, she knew he would be going off to junior high. That last day he came by to say good-bye to her. They talked like they usually did. When it was time for him to leave, the boy hugged the lady from Lake Charles. He had never hugged her before and he wouldn’t let go. She said his little hands were clasped real tight around the back of her neck, like he was holding on for life itself. The lady told us he was shaking so hard as they hugged.

She calmed him down and told him, “It’ll be all right. It’ll be all right. You can come and visit me whenever you want. Sure you can, honey. You come by anytime.” And then she dried his face and sent him home. And off he went.
The next week, while she was hanging up her laundry in the backyard, she heard from a neighbor lady that that little boy had drowned in the lake just a few days after their farewell. And she leaned forward over the Amtrak linoleum and looked at us around the table in the almost empty dining car in the pitch dark of Texas. She told us—she actually said these words staring us each in the eye—“I think of that little scared boy all of the time. I can still feel his cold hands holding on to the back of my neck right here. I still feel them. I feel them right now.”

Well, a waiter came and broke the spell at the table. It was time for dessert. And I thought about what I had heard from these people as the train clackety-clacked on and on. And I think of it now too. The man from Wisconsin crying with joy for the life of the baby that is saved. The lady from Lake Charles haunted by the loss of that little kid drowned in the lake.

And as for me, I feel like I’m dancing around somewhere between those two touches. Bouncing back and forth between that life grip on the steering wheel and that cold touch at the back of the neck.

(Tim stands and comes close to the audience, the light of their flashlights washing over him.)

Now, I didn’t tell a story of my own in that dining car, but if I had I might have told this. It’s a story about a train. Which is as it should be. Around the back of Griffith Park in LA there is a place called Travel Town. This is a park where a lot of old locomotives and engines and Pullmans are kept. It’s a graveyard for trains. They’re frozen onto bits of track that don’t go anywhere. I’ve been going to Travel Town a lot since I was five or six. I’ve always loved trains. There is something very sad about this place, Travel Town. There’s something completely hopeless because these trains can’t go anywhere. It’s like they’re all dressed
up, embalmed and painted and dead, but not buried. It’s a sad place.

I was there at Travel Town a few months ago. I was thinking as I walked around that too many people I know are dead lately. Or locked into seemingly impossible battles with a fucked-up world. And I began to feel like maybe I could get one of these trains moving. That somehow with some help from somewhere, I could do it. I picked a steam engine I liked and pulled myself up into the cab. There was a kid up there. He was about six or seven. He looked a lot like me at that age. He was me. There in my Union Pacific train uniform that I wore constantly as a child.

I looked at myself. We nodded to each other but there was work to do. We put our four hands on the throttle and braced ourselves and slowly pulled it back through the rust and layers of paint. I felt the train creak a tiny bit, and then take a breath. The engine moved forward, straining like a fat man trying to get out of bed, rocking out of its cement shoes on those useless rails. I looked back to the train cars attached to the engine and saw lots of people on board. People I know and care about and people from history too. Some of them are alive and some of them aren’t, but now we’re all on this train.

Up on top of the Pullman, I saw Jesus. He was polishing something.

Down by the track I saw Karl Marx, he was oiling the gears.

And on the passenger car were Gustave and Maria, Fräulein Rodriguez and Vladimir, Doug and the Lady from the Lake.

The wheels are screaming. The steam is hissing. We’re moving forward. Faster. Off the track. Crashing through the chain-link fence out onto the Golden State Freeway. Faster and faster. The whistle blows. The conductor waves.

Everybody is on the train.

We’re heading for the beach.
Everyone is going to the sea, at last to the ocean.
Everyone is on the train.
Every One is on the train.
All aboard.

(Fade to black.)