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Covid-19's Virus of Xenophobia: Holocaust Survivor Trudie Strobel Reminds Us of Its Cost

Charity Hume · Wednesday, April 22nd, 2020

As I write this Sunday afternoon in April of 2020, the Corona virus continues to threaten global citizens without discrimination, killing the wealthy, the poor, the famous and the unknown. Despite the universal danger, a resurgence of nationalism has made some populations far more vulnerable to the deadly virus. Fernand de Varennes, the UN Special reporter on minority issues, stated recently: "Covid19 is not just a health issue; it can also be a virus that exacerbates xenophobia, hate and exclusion." A recent UN News article reported that marginalized groups, including Asians, Roma, and Hispanics have been targeted with violence; those detained or incarcerated have been denied access to medical care, and some world leaders have fanned the flames of xenophobia, seeking to cast blame on ethnic minorities in order to prolong and expand their own political power. As politicians target minorities with hate speech, the survivors of the Holocaust have important testimony for our own era. At a time when multiple news outlets have reported that the history of the Holocaust is fading from public memory, a new book from Prospect Park books is a timely and important reminder of the dangers of hate speech.

Stitched & Sewn: The Life Saving Art of Holocaust Survivor Trudie Strobel, by Jody Savin, humanizes the consequences of xenophobia, by following the trajectory of its impact on a single child over the course of her life. Trudie Strobel's memories of the atrocities she endured are conveyed through the powerful medium of her embroidered murals. The story of Strobel's survival and her eventual evolution into a recognized artist of Judaic embroidery gives readers hope in a time of despair. Recognizing the importance of Strobel's artistic testimony, author Jody Savin located tapestries that Strobel had given away or sold, and interviewed Strobel. By framing the retrospective sequence of each tapestry within the historic and personal context of Strobel's life story, Savin has preserved historic, important testimony of one of Los Angeles last surviving witnesses of the Holocaust. This important work, published by Prospect Park Books, allows readers to follow Strobel's path to survival in a profound and visual journey.

The book begins in 1937, on the collective farm in Russia where Strobel's parents, Vassiliy and Masha Labuhn, awaited Trudie's birth. Vasilliy had been warned that his stature in the community would not protect him from arrest. When his Jewish co-workers and neighbors began to disappear, arrested in the middle of the night and taken away, Vassiliy spent an extravagant sum on a doll for

his unborn daughter, a gift to remember how much her father loved her. Vassiliy's premonition proved correct. Weeks before Trudie was born, he was arrested by the Soviet police, taken from Trudie and Masha, never to be seen again.


Trudie, age three, 1941, with Papa Doll, taken by a traveling photographer

Four years later, Masha too was arrested and deported with Trudie, now four years old. In the chapter, "The Walk," Savin conveys the horror of the 394 miles of the forced march from Russia through Poland. When prisoners were ordered to wear the Magen David, the yellow star of David, Masha helped sew them onto prisoner's coats. Seeing Masha's skill with the needle, a Nazi guard ordered Masha to repair his coat, a job that proved fateful in the coming days.

They walked through towns decimated by murder: Uman, where 10,000 Jews were killed in a year, where 1000 Jewish children had been massacred only two months before their arrival. One of their companions tried to save a precious Samovar, a symbol of the life she hoped to preserve. But she was beaten to death in front of Masha and Trudie by the same guard who had demanded the repair of the coat. In Lwow, thousands had been killed and tens of thousands sent to the Janowska death camp. It was here that young Trudie, waiting for orders, was approached by an SS guard.

Seeing the "Papa doll" in Trudie's arms, he snatched it away. "Give that to me."


"Russia, 1942" by Trudie Strobel. Photo by Ann Elliot Cutting

Knowing of Trudie's distress, Masha quietly but sternly warned her daughter, "Shah. Quiet! Don't cry!" Masha knew how dire the consequences were.

The four-year-old Trudie buried her pain in silence, too terrified to cry. But the memory of this moment, when a four-year-old understood that she might be killed if she cried out, did not disappear. Instead, the indelible loss of the doll, symbolizing her connection to her father, haunted her dreams. For years, she had nightmares about dolls, as the event became a pivotal symbol of the loss of her freedom and the father the Stalinists had killed.

When the caravan arrived at the Lodz ghetto, they reached a place where 43,500 Jews would die of starvation and disease, and from which 77,000 would be sent to Chelmno, a death camp, between 1941 and 1944. But Masha's sewing saved them. The Nazi guard had bragged about his coat; word of Masha's skill had been passed. Guards located a sewing machine and put her to work.

The next transport put Masha and Trudie into a cattle car, crammed with other prisoners, reeking with vomit and the stench of human waste, with barely enough air to breathe. When the rest of the prisoner caravan left Lwow on a train to their own exterminations, Masha and Trudie were ordered into a separate train that was almost empty, destined for a Labor Camp. This satellite camp was an SS farm. Though prisoners were not immediately gassed there, many were worked to death.


"Final Destination," by Trudie Strobel. Photo by Ann Elliot Cutting

Masha and Trudie sewed to survive. When the camp was liberated in 1945, Trudie was seven years old.

Though American immigration policies prevented Trudie and her mother from coming to the United States for another six years, they finally arrived in 1951. In Chicago, Trudie met and later married another Holocaust survivor, Hans Strobel; together they raised two sons. But when Strobel reached her fifties, the trauma of her wartime experiences caused a paralyzing mid-life depression. After a therapist suggested that she try to recreate the doll she had lost as a way to heal, needle and thread again saved her from despair. Recreating her doll led to a project called *Eleven Centuries of Degradation,* which is currently in the permanent collection of the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust. Strobel dressed 11 dolls in the historic costumes different countries used to stigmatize Jewish women throughout the centuries. Strobel's dolls continue to educate thousands of visitors to the Museum. Continuing her path to recovery, Strobel began to work on embroidered murals, and slowly, stitch by stitch, began to free the childhood sorrow she had buried within her.

Strobel's tapestries remind us to feel the deep wounds of the past. Each tableau in *Stitched and Sewn* provides crucial and vibrant testimony of the dangers of xenophobia. Strobel's compelling testimony demonstrate art's power to heal, and by showing how one artist overcame the virus of hate she endured, the book offers a message of hope. At this historic moment of global crisis, Strobel's art and life story call us to remember the danger of losing our humanity in a time of crisis.

A recent ABC news headline reads:" FBI warns of potential surge of Hate Crimes against Asian Americans." Crucially, the FBI mention warns of the violence fueled by political rhetoric: "Many Americans, including President Donald Trump and other political leaders and media commentators, have adopted the practice of calling the ailment the "China virus," or some other variant that makes reference to China or Wuhan, rather than "Coronavirus" or "COVID-19," the terms used by federal health officials and in the FBI analysis. The rhetoric, critics say, has fueled ill will and has led some people to act out against Asian Americans." The FBI report refers to several examples, including the March 14 attack on a family trying to shop for supplies at a Walmart in Midland, Texas: "Three Asian American family members, including a 2-year-old and 6-year-old, were stabbed … The suspect indicated that he stabbed the family because he thought the family was Chinese, and infecting people with the Corona virus."

As our world responds to the moral tests of the coronavirus ahead, Strobel's testimony of her experiences during the holocaust has never been more relevant.

Trudie Strobel, 2019. Photo by Ann Elliot Cutting

A child survivor of the Holocaust, Trudie Strobel settled in California, raising a family and never discussing the horrors she witnessed. After her children grew up, the trauma of her youth caught up with her, triggering a paralyzing depression. A therapist suggested that Trudie attempt to draw the memories that haunted her, and she did–but with needle and thread instead of a pencil. Resurrecting the Yemenite stitches of her ancestors, and using the skills taught by her mother, whose master seamstress talent saved their lives in the camps, Trudie began by stitching vast tableaus of her dark and personal memories of the Holocaust. What began as therapy exploded into works of breathtaking art, from narrative tapestries of Jewish history rendered in exacting detail to portraits of remarkable likeness. Many of her works are now in public and private collections.

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Nightmares within Nightmares—Playwright Ellen McLaughlin adapts The Oresteia

Charity Hume · Wednesday, May 22nd, 2019

The Oresteia, adapted by Ellen McLaughlin, begins with Clytemnestra's nightmare, a dream of washing the walls of her house until she realizes the pail she is using is filled with blood. This scene introduces the internally discovered landscape of McLaughlin's imaginative adaptation of the original Aeschylus trilogy. In her modern version of this ancient work, Ellen McLaughlin finds psychological avenues for us to experience the horror in the dark family drama of the house of Atreus. McLaughin's focus on the interior motivations of her characters gives them a modern dimension that encourages us to examine the bewildering divisions within our own families, and the meaning of the violence of our own contemporary Trojan Wars.

Michael Kahn, the artistic director of the Shakespeare Theater Company in Washington D.C., commissioned McLaughlin's adaptation of *The Oresteia*, as the culminating project of his directing career, requesting that she distill the original trilogy into a version that could be performed in a single evening. The play explores deep questions of moral accountability, both for the perpetrators, and for us as witnesses, as it relentlessly unfolds the sequence of murders that each member of the house of Atreus feels they owe the gods: Agamemnon commits infanticide by killing his daughter, Iphigenia; Clytemnestra and her lover commit regicide when they kill him for this crime; and finally, Orestes commits matricide when he avenges his father's death.

The interior motivations in McLaughlin's version of *The Oresteia* speak powerfully to our age. Clytemnestra's recollection of her nightmare in the opening scene begins her journey further back into the realm of memory. In a flashback, Iphigenia is still alive, and when she wakes in a fright, Clytemnestra is there to comfort her. From the play's earliest scene, Iphigenia and Clytemnestra are given a beautiful and tragic bonding, imbued with a violent foreboding that underlies and motivates the rest of the play. The child relates a prophetic nightmare, when she sees two eagles devour a pregnant hare in the sky. In this dark omen of the slaughtered child, we are in a nightmare within a nightmare.

Simone Warren as Iphigenia and Kelley Curran as Clytemnestra in *The Oresteia*. Photo by Scott Suchman

To create this powerful moment, McLaughlin borrows texts from earlier versions of the story, outside the original trilogy. The insertion of this scene gives the audience a way to understand the cold logic of a mother's vengeance for her murdered child. In this ingenious way, McLaughlin nests the backstory of the Aeschylus plays inside a profoundly archetypal place in our minds. Scenes are called up out of the recesses of memory, from internal places, showing dark motives. It is impossible not to sympathize with a mother's, primordial urges to punish her child's murderer at any cost to herself. Clytemnestra's deep attachment to her daughter allows us to find the motive for the murder of Agamemnon, who sacrificed her to the gods.

In a recent interview with McLaughlin, I asked about whether there was any equivalent in the modern world of Agamemnon's blood sacrifice of his daughter, in order for the gods to give his ships wind on the way to war. McLaughlin's response drew a direct connection to the various international conflicts that consume the lives of generations of young people, in historic cycles of repetition:

> *I think we have always sacrificed our children in different ways. It's what human societies tend to do, much to our shame. We sacrifice boys differently than we sacrifice girls, but we are very quick to sacrifice our children, one way or the other. I think Iphigenia is asked to sacrifice herself in the classical story, and there have been Iphigenias ever since. The girl is asked to sacrifice herself for the greater good, and for her father's cause. She is asked to give up her life for his idea.*

In this stark reality, I see more clearly the harsh cost of those who appease the gods of war in my own era, and feel the threat of the particular suffering that war inflicts on women. The cleansing ritual of Clytemnestra's bucket of blood can be read in the mythological language of many other kinds of sacrifice, the goat on the stone, the bull of white skin, the child of Abraham, Abel's lamb. But it is only after hearing McLaughlin's parallel that I see the concept of our own daily toll of conflicts, the victims, as types of blood sacrifice to the gods of war. In this play, there is no hiding from the repetition and facts of the consequence of violence, and its ongoing legacy.

McLaughlin asks*:*

> *Once we have seen ourselves through a criminal like Orestes, once we have seen that happen in front of us, what is our responsibility? What do we owe him? What do we owe ourselves? What do we do?*
>
> *And when we do things right, how do we do things right? The thing that kept on coming up was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, without which we would not have anything like a functioning country in South Africa. It would be just be embroiled in civil war. The fundamental principles of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission are that they do not promise absolution; they do not promise forgiveness. Nothing like that. What they promise is that all the truths that are present can be spoken, and will be spoken. The truth of the people who were persecuted. The truths of the people to whom violence was done, and the truth of people who do that violence, and everyone in between. All of those truths will be spoken because everybody will be there to listen. They can promise only that they will allow them to speak, and that they will listen.*
>
> *And it turns out that those are the truths that underlie theater.*

As McLaughlin describes the moral accounting inside Aeschylus, and inside the imaginative and personal journey in this version of the play, we gain understanding of the dramatic ways our internal drama rules our actions, when we become prisoners of our own desire. Somehow, in the facts of staring down our own human violence, in its most intimate quarters, an experience of listening to what happened becomes in itself, a redemptive act, one that the theater offers. Not

forgiveness. Not absolution. But a place to speak, to hear, to listen.

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Ellen McLaughlin is an award-winning playwright and actor.?Her plays include *Tongue of a Bird* (The Public Theater, The Mark Taper Forum, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, the Almeida Theater, London), *A Narrow Bed,* (New York Theater Workshop, Actors' Theater of Louisville), *Iphigenia and Other Daughters* (Classic Stage Co., NYC) *Trojan Women* (The Flea, NYC), *Infinity's House* (Actors' Theater of Louisville), *Helen,* (The Public Theater) *The Persians,* (National Actors' Theater, NYC, Shakespeare Theater, DC), *Oedipus* (The Guthrie), *Ajax in Iraq* (ART Institute, MA, Flux Theater, NY), *Septimus and Clarissa* (Ripe Time, NY) *Pericles* (Orlando Shakespeare Festival), and *Penelope* (Playmaker's Rep, N.C.) Her work has been performed in New York, Off-Broadway and regionally as well as overseas. Among her honors are the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, the Lila Wallace—Reader's Digest Writer's Award and the Helen Merrill Award for Playwriting.?As an actor, she is most well known for having originated the part of the Angel in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America,* appearing in all workshops and productions of the play through its original run on Broadway, '93-94.

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Women Speak of War Wounds: Survivors of Rape and Genocide at Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust

Charity Hume · Wednesday, May 15th, 2019

"Women at the Frontline of Violence World Wide," an exhibition at Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust, documents the oral testimonies of nineteen women survivors of mass violence in four regions of the world: "*Jewish female survivors of the Holocaust by Bullets in Eastern Europe; Roma female survivors of the Porajmos, the genocide against the Roma during World War II; indigenous women from Guatemala, victims of the internal armed conflict in the 1980s; and Yazidi female survivors, victims of ISIS in Iraq today.*" The Museum and Yahad-In-Unum, in collaborating to present the stories of these survivors, hope to make the wartime atrocities women experience more commonly known. Their mission of education takes powerful form in the direct testimonies from women who have suffered the wounds of war.

The exhibition itself is stark, a room of portraits of women survivors. The impact of the exhibit comes about by using one of the four headphones to listen to the oral testimony behind each woman's portrait. One enters the room with a superficial impression of the women's faces, and leaves with a profoundly altered understanding of their war wounds, their stories of trauma, and the sexual violence they endured. Even from this small group of testimonials, 19 out of more than 6000 witness testimonies gathered by Yahad-In-Unum, patterns of the violence against women emerge from the past 70 years of war. Marco Gonzalez, Executive Director of Yahad In-Unam, has summarized the ways in which women have been frequently targeted: "*From our investigations into the victims of genocide and mass violence, Yahad has seen that women have suffered in a distinct way: as victims of sexual violence, forced abortion, sterilization or sexual slaves,*"

“Violence against women during mass killings and genocide is an issue in its own right that needs to be further studied by scholars and better known by the public at large.”

Leanna, Roma Survivor, Cazanesti Romania: *“The Russians came to the camp to pick up young girls in order to abuse them. My stepmother wanted to protect me but she was beaten to death with batons. They took me away and raped me.”*

In multiple conflicts, systematic rape continues to do untold damage to women of different ages, religion, economic caste and ethnicity. Rape is a common consequence of invasions, and in these regions it had a tactical purpose: to disrupt the reproductive capacity of an entire population. In these cases, rape is not an isolated or individual crime of passion. It is perpetrated deliberately by entire armies and groups of soldiers in order to interrupt, dismantle, and prevent a population’s reproductive future. Rape in this context is not only a war crime, it is an instrument that furthers the conquering army’s goal: genocide.

Maria, 69 years old, indigenous survivor, Batzul Guatemala: *“We had almost nothing to eat while hiding in the mountains. I lost my two children, my three year old toddler and my baby because I didn’t have breast milk.*

Jordanna Gessler, Educational director at Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust, discussed these patterns of genocide, saying: *“Human beings across the globe have a lot of commonality, both in what the victims experience, and what the perpetrators are doing. When people come to the museum and ask, why do we study the Holocaust seventy years later? Here is the answer: this is not going to stop until we come together and really have thoughtful conversations about how about how we can recognize human nature, and how we can support one another as human beings.”*

As an example of the ongoing crimes that continue to be perpetrated against women in conflict zones, Gessler described the interconnected pattern of murder, violence and rape currently being reported from present day Iraq: *“There have been many accounts in the last few years of ISIS militants take women as sex slaves. We have read reports of entire communities of men being murdered and women being taken and women being raped over and over and over again. Many of the interviews that Yahad did were in refugee camps. Women who are no longer able to be in their homes. Since August, 2014, thousands of Yazidi have been persecuted by ISIS. Men are shot. Women and young girls are sold and raped. And of course the young boys are forcibly converted to Islam and forced to become soldiers in ISIS, oftentimes brainwashed, often made dependent on drugs.”*

Nasrin, 21 years old, Yazidi survivor, Kadya camp, Kurdistan: *“An ISIS chief came and chose 35 girls. I was among them. We were taken to a two story building and locked in a room. The first night that he brought me, he undressed me and raped me. Then he made 4 of his guards come back to the room and they raped me one after another.”*

Women in patriarchal cultures, including our own, are made to feel that they are responsible for the sexual crimes they suffer even when that act is the result of an external invasion. As a result, women victims of sexual violence have been silent, reluctant to expose themselves to the harsh consequences of having been attacked. They do not speak of what they have suffered. The crimes against them go unreported, unwitnessed, unpunished. And the crimes continue.

Beth Kean, the executive director of Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust, is a granddaughter of two Holocaust survivors, Arnold and Rose Rakoszynski. and the exhibit is housed in a room at the museum that is dedicated to their memory. Kean's family story speaks to the culture of silence so many victims of sexual violence observe, decades after the traumatic attacks they suffer.

"My grandmother was in a women's camp called Ravensbruck…One of the things she never discussed was the forced prostitution and the rape. We didn't learn about this until she was at her end of life, and things started coming out. She died in 2005, but when this museum opened, I was able to meet survivors who had also been imprisoned at Ravensbruck. When I told this survivor that my grandmother was liberated from Ravensbruck by Russians, she looked at me, and said, "I'm so sorry."

I asked, "What are you talking about?"

She said, "I'm pretty sure your grandmother was raped. I don't know any woman who was liberated by the Russians who was not raped."

"It made sense to me. So this is an important personal story for me, and having this exhibit is important for me, because my grandmother felt ashamed. She was embarrassed to talk about it.

"This isn't a topic that is easy for women to talk about. That is why this exhibit is important — because hearing their voices, gets the word out. We need to prevent this from happening again and again and again."

About Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust

Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust, the first survivor-founded Holocaust museum in the United States, is a primary source institution that commemorates those who perished, honors those who survived, and houses the precious artifacts that miraculously weathered the Holocaust. Since 1961 the museum has provided free Holocaust education to students and visitors from across Los Angeles, the United States and the world, fulfilling the mission of the founding Holocaust survivors to commemorate, educate and inspire. The museum is open seven days a week, and admission is always free. lamoth.org

About Yahad-In Unum

Yahad-In Unum combines the Hebrew word Yahad, which means "together," with the Latin phrase In Unum, which means "in one." Founded in 2004 by Father Patrick Desbois, the organization is dedicated to documenting the evidence of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe and to work on the prevention of future genocides. Yahad-In Unum's ongoing research on World War II crimes against Jews and Roma/Gypsy people in Eastern Europe has uncovered the location of more than 2,500 killing sites and documented more than 6,000 witness testimonies to these crimes. Yahad-In Unum is not affiliated with any political party and does not advocate any economic or military action. Its mission is to discover the facts of genocidal practices wherever they are and provide a voice of protest on behalf of all victims of genocide and mass violence. yahadinunum.org

Photo credits: Victoria Bahr/ Yahad-in Unam

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Internal Apocalypse: Catatonia by Israeli Artist Zvika Lachman

Charity Hume · Thursday, April 18th, 2019

When the artist bears witness to an atrocity, the viewer is called to experience the traumatic, side by side with the artist. Zvika Lachman's *Catatonia* transports us to such a moment of co-equal witness. My own access to this monumental work occurred in his studio in Tel Aviv. I met Lachman when I studied at NYU in the 1980's. When I planned my visit to Tel Aviv in March of 2019, I made arrangements to visit Lachman's studio, hoping to interview him about his work. It was there on a rainy Sunday, I encountered the immense power of *Catatonia* (*Homage to Géricault).*

Catatonia, (Homage to Géricault), by Zvika Lachman

Lachman explained that the original seed for *Catatonia* had been a drawing he completed in 2003; he had returned to this subject by creating a series of paintings in recent years. In some of his works, Lachman enters into a dialogue with the Old Masters by re-interpreting their compositions through the lens of his present-day/contemporary perspective. *Catatonia* illuminates our own era in Lachman's re-envisioning of Géricault's 1819 masterpiece, *The Raft of the Medusa.*

Géricault's painting documented a maritime atrocity that had occurred in 1816. The Medusa, a French frigate, sank off the coast of Mauritania when Viscount Hugues Duroy de Chaumareys, the ship's aristocratic, but woefully inexperienced captain, struck a reef in notoriously dangerous waters. As the Medusa began to sink, the captain ordered the ship's carpenter to build a raft for 150 of the settlers and sailors on board; the captain, the officers, and the wealthy passengers took the only lifeboats. The moment the raft began to knock into the lifeboats, the captain ordered a connecting rope between the two vessels to be cut, and the raft drifted out to sea. The lifeboats made it to safety, but did not send for help. Two weeks later, when another French ship, the *Argus*, accidentally encountered the raft, only fifteen were still alive, and five died within days. An embarrassment to the French monarchy, attempts were made to cover up the incident, but two survivors wrote about what had occurred as the raft drifted: starvation, dehydration, murder, and finally, cannibalism. Their story became a scandal in France, and inspired Géricault's most famous work.

Géricault's painting of this event used a monumental, heroic style, magnifying the impact of the scene, confronting its viewers with the horrors of human depravity. Its subject shocked the French Academy. Géricault was initially deprived of artistic recognition in France, and almost destroyed the masterpiece. But it later became a celebrated symbol of French Romantic and revolutionary political ideals, recognized as a powerful social critique of the class divisions that had played out as the ship began to sink. *The Raft of the Medusa* now hangs in The Louvre.

The Raft of the Medusa, 1818-19, oil on canvas, by Théodore Géricault.

Lachman was intrigued by Géricault's re-creation of the disaster and by the force of its second-hand witnessing. In his decision to create a monumental painting that alluded to Géricault, Lachman's *Catatonia* creates an implied referendum on the catastrophes of our own era. During the ten days I visited Tel Aviv, as a member of the online community, I witnessed unfathomable acts of cruelty and horror: a year after 17 high school students were gunned down in Parkland, two surviving students and a parent took their own lives; in New Zealand, fifty Muslims were slaughtered in a Mosque as they gathered to pray; sirens sounded across Tel Aviv, when two missiles struck, breaking a four-year cease fire, followed the next day with hundreds of retaliatory missiles fired into Gaza, in an escalation that threatens ongoing terror through the region. The vortex of Cyclone Idai killed hundreds in Mozambique, leaving two million people without homes; a cholera epidemic now threatens the survivors. From this hell of self-destruction and darkness, Lachman's painting asks how to make sense of the mangled present.

The multi-dimensional and contradictory movements in *Catatonia* entrap its figures in a *Huis Clos*. There is no escape, and the figures are at the mercy of polarizing and conflicting forces, raising questions about human capacity to alter the violence of the world. In an essay on Lachman's poet drawings, the Israeli poet and critic, Sva Salhoov, described Lachman's fragmentation of perspectives as *a dynamic occurring in a multi-directional entropy, a wild, unraveling complex of contradictory and identical gestures that ceaselessly attract and move in all directions.* These multiple perspectives involve us in a moral complexity that asks us to examine our own means of survival, as a battlefield of conflicts assail the figures in this closed, internal space.

During our conversation, Lachman explored the dialectic between the internal and external worlds reflected in *Catatonia*. He said:

> *What you see in The Raft of the Medusa is the external world. There is a catastrophe, but in Géricault there is some kind of place you can escape to. The way that I was working on it, it became a kind of closed world. In the earlier work, the apocalypse occurred to me as the collapse of the temple, or Samson's "Let me die with the Philistines." A moment of destruction. The entire composition led to an expectation, a resort to an enlightenment from above. The later paintings were shaped by the tension between the catastrophe that is closed, and the intimate interactions among the figures. See, the father and the son in the bottom left. The only help one can find is not outside, but from something inside yourself.*

In Lachman's painting, the point of view comes from within a closed chaos, as if we are one of the condemned souls struggling upward from Dante's lowest layer of hell. From this *Inferno*, a tangle of human limbs forms a desperate ladder, but it leads toward a blocking figure, whose ambiguous shadow could be either a savior or judge. Despite the upward movement to escape, an immense column points downward, a phallic force directed toward the parting legs of a reclining nude. A rape. Savage forces have gained power. In *Catatonia*, Lachman seems to draw us straight into/or: inside the violence. We become actors in the scene, or perhaps jurors, listening to evidence about a crime against humanity. In legal venues, there is an intended outcome, a judgement by which the criminals are held responsible and the innocent are redeemed. But what if the atrocity to which the artist bears witness can't be named in a court of law? What if the perpetrators include those who witness but remain silent to the injustices that lie in plain view?

Lachman's *Catatonia* asks its audience hard questions. What are you capable of? Would starvation, homelessness, flood or fire unmask the violence of your own nature? Are you fated to fulfill the violence of inherited wars in perpetuity? Peering into the screens of witness from a removed aristocracy of global privilege, is your response to the desperate as cold and remote as those who sailed away to save their own skins in that distant boat?

Catatonia cries out to its viewers to find in themselves, a human response to the chaotic and desperate scenes before us. In this act of witness, Lachman demands a kind of moral accounting. Before the apocalyptic present, before the dramatic tragedies of violence and depravity we witness daily, the work becomes a mirror, casting us inward as we confront the question of our own humanity.

Zvika Lachman's sculptures are in permanent collections of Israeli Museums and private collectors, and he is the subject of the documentary, *One Eye Wide Open: Following Zvika Lachman at Work*. In addition to solo exhibitions in Israel, Lachman's works have been exhibited in group shows around the world, including galleries at Yale University, the Studio School, Parsons, Denver Museum and Boston University. His works represent Human Encounters, the Gaze, the Head, Portraits and Self-Portraits. His present projects are: Genealogy of the Head (sculpture) and Homage to the Jewish German writer, Paul Celan. You can follow his drawing & painting diary in the Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/zvikalachman/

Posted in Visual Art | One Comment »

Shahidul Alam: Case Study in Free Speech

Charity Hume · Wednesday, August 22nd, 2018

With Trump's attack on free speech growing to a nationwide media protest from over three hundred newspapers after his assertion that the press is the "enemy of the people," America stands at a crossroads in its historic First Amendment protections as a democracy. This month, Shahidul Alam, an award winning photojournalist was criminalized, jailed and tortured in Dhaka, Bangladesh for expressing his views in an interview with Al Jazeera. Alam's arrest bears witness to the kind of world Trump thinks he is owed, and Alam's oppression is a warning to us all of the dangers of allowing the first amendment rights of free speech to slide into the trash bin of Trump's version of America.

Shahidul Alam is internationally known as a photographer and activist, whose work has garnered the highest awards for over three decades of documenting human stories in Bangladesh, covering cataclysmic floods, violent protests, the extrajudicial murders of fellow citizens, and the plight of factory and garment workers. Alam's photography has powerfully brought attention to historic events in Bangladesh, and through artistic representations of human suffering, has given voice to those in Bangladesh who lack the means to advocate for social reforms and action.

Woman cooking on a rooftop, Photo: Shahidul Alam

Internationally recognized, Alam's work has been exhibited in the *Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the Tate Modern in London, and the Museum of Contemporary Arts in Tehran.* Alam's photography has powerfully brought attention to historic events in Bangladesh, and through artistic representations of human suffering show his intent to use artistic forums to advocate for social reforms and action. On August 5, 2018, in an interview with *Al Jazeera,* Alam advocated for more tolerant, peaceful methods for dealing with unarmed students protesting the government's inaction on ensuring greater road safety. The issues of road safety in Bangladesh have reached a critical point, with an average of 20 deaths a day, amounting to more than 25,000 deaths in the past three years. Sparked by the death of two teenagers killed by a bus in July, Bengali students took to the streets to urgently bring attention to the ongoing carnage citizens have endured with accidents caused by a lack of regulation and safety measures. Although the students were interviewed and repeatedly stated their aim was a peaceful demonstration to bring attention to a common cause, they were violently attacked by hired men wielding machetes, sticks, and rubber bullets. In addition to the violence against students, New York Times reporter, James Estrin reports that many photojournalists covering the protests, including Mr. Alam, have been attacked "by the police and armed gangs linked to the ruling Awami League party." This escalation transformed the protests into a political clash.

Speaking on the students' behalf, Alam drew attention to apparent complicity in the protestors' mistreatment, as government police looked on while hired "goons," armed with machetes and sticks beat the students who were hoping to assemble in a nonviolent protest for road safety. Alam stated to *Al Jazeera* that the attacks on students seemed to be part of a pattern of other abuses by the government: "The looting of banks, the gagging of the media… the extra-judicial killings, the disappearances, the need to give protection money at all levels, bribery at all levels, corruption in education," he said. "It is a never-ending list." In retaliation for this critique, armed police showed up at Alam's home and arrested him, holding him without access to a lawyer. In his appearance on the 6th, he was limping badly, and alleged he had been beaten and tortured. He is now in jail custody and is being held until September 11 to await further sentencing, for violating a law that criminalizes on-line criticism of the government. The potential sentencing for the offense could be as high as 14 years.

Alam's international reputation as an esteemed photojournalist and his stature as part of the country's cultural elite may have brought about the harshness of the government's reaction, in that his criticism of governmental violence has a maturity and weight that is hard to dismiss. *New York Times* reporter James Estrin writes in his *New York Times* article:

> *Mr. Alam has had many encounters with Bangladeshi authorities throughout his career. His 2013 exhibit about extrajudicial disappearances of government opponents was shut down by the police minutes before the show was to open. Undeterred, Mr. Alam and his associates put on an impromptu exhibit in the streets outside the gallery. In 2009, an exhibition of photographs of Tibet at the Drik Gallery provoked the Chinese government to pressure the Bangladeshi government and riot police to shut down the show. And 18 years ago, when the Drik Gallery was the meeting place for government opponents, Mr. Alam was pulled out of a rickshaw by a group of men who stole his computer and camera and stabbed him eight times.*

Alam’s courage and advocacy for freedom of expression has been repeatedly tested, and it is time for the world to declare that the nonviolent expression of beliefs to safeguard human rights in Bangladesh must be defended by the global community.

This past week, over three hundred American newspapers condemned Trump’s characterization of the press as an “enemy of the people.” As the count of journalists who are jailed, imprisoned, tortured and murdered has grown in the past few years, spreading to the Western countries we once believed had safeguarded freedom of speech, it is urgent that those of us in countries where our freedoms are on the line speak with one voice to defend the courage and example of Shahidul Alam, and thereby bear witness to the principles of freedom we hope to see take root and flourish in the world.

In the morgue. Part of “Crossfire,” a photo story on extrajudicial killings by the Rapid Action Battalion in Bangladesh. Nov. 20, 2009. Credit Shahidul Alam

Amnesty International urges supporters to write directly to government officials before September 18, calling on them to immediately and unconditionally release Alam, and to ensure that journalists and other citizens be allowed to exercise their human right to freedom of expression.

To make this effort as easy as possible, the following link is from a post by Alam’s nephew, an easy template to fill in and sign. Your letters will make an impact if they come from all over the world. Please take the time to send one (or more) out today.

Letter Template to release Shahidul Alam

The offices to contact include:

Minister of Home Affairs
Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal
Email: minister@mha.gov.bd
Salutation: Honourable Home Minister

The Bangladesh High Commission and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Address: Segunbagicha, Dhaka 1000, Bangladesh
Email: ict1@mofa.gov.bd
Salutation: Hon. Minister Mr. Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali, MP

Copies of emails to those officials should also be sent to diplomatic representatives accredited in the sender’s country.

In the US:
The Embassy of Bangladesh in Washington, DC
Ambassador Mohammad Ziauddin
Phone: 202-244-0183 (PABX)
Fax: 202-244-2771
202-244-7830
Contact form: http://www.bdembassyusa.org/?page=contact
Salutation: Dear Ambassador

In Canada:
High Commission for Bangladesh in Ottawa, Canada
Ambassador Mizanur Rahman
Phone: +1-613-236-1088
Email: mission.ottawa@mofa.gov.bd
bangla@rogers.com
Salutation: Your Excellency

Related Articles:
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Art Net: Why Everyone Should Be Paying Close Attention to the Case of Jailed Bangladeshi Photograph Shahidul Alam

New York Review of Books: Bangladesh's Authoritarian Turn

New York Times: Shahidul Alam: A Singular Voice in Photography for Dignity and Human Rights

Top image: © Christopher Michel. Shahidul Alam at the CatchLight Summit in San Francisco, November 2017

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InHouse Theatre's Dinner with Friends

Charity Hume · Thursday, October 20th, 2016

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The breathtaking catharsis of a well executed play occurs when all its elements, its structure, its cast, its set, its internal music of emotional truth, correspond to give the audience an experience of singular insight, one that will give them the sense that they too have been altered and changed by the night's events. InHouse Theatre's skilled rendition of Donald Margulies's Pulitzer winning masterpiece, *Dinner With Friends,* takes us on emotional journey that questions our relationships and our assumptions about the people we most intimately know. The InHouse cast, a powerful ensemble of premier actors, delivers an entertaining but thought provoking interpretation of the play in its confident production of this modern classic.
In keeping with the philosophy of InHouse, audiences are invited to on-site locations that immerse the audience in the world of the play. Typically, InHouse stages its work in site-specific locations that dissolve the fourth wall as the plays are set in bars, studios, houses, and bedrooms, rather than on a curtained stage. (How passé!) For *Dinner With Friends*, InHouse artfully staged the work at the historic Moncado Mansion in the West Adams neighborhood, and the architectural layout of

the house added a layer of meaning to the drama. Drew Rausch's sensitive direction makes skillful use of the space, as we begin the play on the lower floors, and gradually ascend as its ideas become more complex, and ultimately, higher in nature. The audience's path through the house opens to new spaces as insight deepens, and the emotional progress of the characters results in a collective expansion of the "mansion of the mind." But the intriguing choice of venue succeeds so powerfully because of superbly realistic and nuanced performances by Caroline Morahan, (Karen), Dylan Ramsey, (Gabe), Renee Threatte, (Beth) and Tim Redmond, (Tom). They immerse us in their domestic world in an exquisitely challenging, intimate portrayal of the world's worst weekend in a couple's life.

Those who have lived through the hard conversations that lead to divorce will recognize the archetypal, familiar and tragic truths behind Marguilies's dialogue. In witnessing the sensitive portrayal of Caroline Morahan's Karen and Dylan Ramsey's Gabe as they process their best friends' divorce, one feels the separations cut to the core, as their chemistry conveyed a subtle mockery of our own superficial preoccupation with our life style/Facebook competitions with the realities of what it means to be faithful and married when the adventure of love begins to fade. In their opening scenes, I was reminded of the night my own "Ex" and I went to our best friends' house and let them know we were going to divorce. That day remains with me as one of the saddest moments of the marriage, the day we were still together, but the hours were running out. That final excursion of walking over to tell a happily married couple that we were splitting up was one of the very last things we did together. In *Dinner with Friends,* Tim Redmond, Tom, brilliantly shows the uneven competition he feels when he is late to this confession, as he challenges Beth's motives in "spilling" the beans while he is not present. Contesting her motives, he confronts Beth with the real consequence that she has the upper hand in the fallout. The classic questions to the aftermath of their divorce pertain: who will be friends with whom? Who will "get" Karen and Gabe? We are immediately involved in a duel over their lasting loyalties, splitting hairs, siding with first one, then the other.

In a Pinter type flashback in an ensuing scene, we glimpse the couples ten years earlier, the weekend Beth and Tom first met, "set up" by the newly married Karen and Gabe. As the scene fills us in on the complicated dynamics of their shared past, this time we have 20/20 hindsight, and we are on alert for the signs of the end we now know the future will hold. In their first date, we find the seeds of the conflict rooted in their past. Tim Redmond's Tom exudes a sadly familiar narcissism, in an abusive interrogation that the wounded Beth finds masochistically appealing. Both seem imprisoned by their own insecurities, and we recognize in their fears our own need to have a place or identity in life, a title, a meaning, along with the tendency to take out our frustrations on those closest to us. The binding together of these two lost souls in a single union begins to seem random and meaningless, as we see their unhappiness with one another point toward the fact that their separation is for the best. Renee Threatte and Tim Redmond lend authenticity and power as the foil couple to their own chosen idols of the "normal" and successful bourgeois paradigm of happily married Karen and Gabe. They capture an intimate but violent dynamic that reveals an abusive eroticism between them. We gradually realize that no matter how attracted they may have been, or may still be to one another, they bring out the worst in each other. You want them to split.

As the play hastens towards its climax, the audience is properly in the dark. What is the play ultimately about? Is this play a sordid understanding that our marriages are either dishonest or narcissistically competitive? Are the powerful attractions of early love just unrealistic delusions that intimacy and loyalty can have a permanent place in a modern marriage? We examine these questions with the characters, as each scene delves deeper into the truth of the relationships beneath the veneer of social interactions, dinners, risotto tips and wine pairings, trips to Europe and

endless soccer games. The characters seek to identify the crucial wrong turn earlier in the relationship that could hold a key to the present, as if it could be rewritten, as if the unraveling of their worlds can be changed. But these attempts seem futile, when we learn that as Beth and Tom will begin over again with new partners, their earlier bonds with their "best friends" shift out from under them, revealing the truth of their competition and alienation, until the loyalties between friends, in addition to the marriages, seem to be running on empty.

The most moving moment of the play comes as Karen and Gabe prepare for bed, faucets running in the bathroom as they brush teeth and then confide the day's events once they settle under the covers. Gabe tries to answer Beth's question as to what happens to the adventure, the early romantic love, and he tries to piece it together for her, knowing that as he answers her with honesty, he and she are admitting that they are older now, and so much of that first blush of attraction has in fact faded from their lives. He answers: "You know: having kids . . . having to pay the mortgage . . . making the deadline . . . *marinating the snapper*." In this beautifully acted *pas de deux*, Dylan Ramsey and Caroline Morahan lead us to an intimate resolution that anyone who has experienced a committed love will find joyous and erotic in its earned intimacy. For all its harsh realities, their powerful grasp of this marriage moment, when two people hold one another hard in the face of the threats to emotional security we have all experienced, creates an affirming scene, and as such, makes *Dinner With Friends*, what I would call, a real romance.

Tim Redmond, Dylan Ramsey, Renee Threatte, and Caroline Morahan in Dinner With Friends, Photo by Joshua Fike

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Charity Hume · Thursday, October 20th, 2016

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Tim Redmond, Dylan Ramsey, Renee Threatte, and Caroline Morahan in Dinner With Friends, Photo by Joshua Fike

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InHouse Theatre Presents Private Eyes

Charity Hume · Wednesday, May 18th, 2016

Under the brilliant direction of Rob Welsh, a talented ensemble of sterling performances from the actors of InHouse Theatre imbue *Private Eyes* by Steven Dietz with the gorgeous tonalities of infidelity in its most erotic and human moments. Setting this company apart from traditional staging approaches, InHouse offers audiences 3D realism in an immersive experience of "clandestine observation," as the plays are shown "on site" in "houses, lobbies, bars & restaurants, and backyards," and even bedrooms.

The sense of conspiracy and mystery begins with the first "secret of the night" – When purchasing tickets, the audience is merely given an address, and does not previously know what type of building or interior they will visit for the play. Director Rob Welsh explained why InHouse deliberately keeps the audience in the dark: "The less information the audience has for a venue, the easier it is to transform that space for them. It becomes a party that they're invited to and it elevates the experience, if they simply have an address and don't know what to expect. "

Welsh expressed some of the reasoning for choosing the venue for *Private Eyes*: "You enter a nondescript brick building near La Brea and Wilshire, and immediately find an ascending staircase

as your only option. As you get to the second floor it opens into a lobby. There are couches, chairs, benches; places for actors to wait. There are rooms down the hall with camera and lighting equipment and computers and TV monitors. I'm an actor, myself, and I've been in dozens of these rooms all over town. This is where actors go to audition. We must transform the space for ourselves with our imagination when we perform audition scenes so it is only fitting that we have literally transformed the space around us."

We follow the plot line while filing down corridors of casting photographs, and find a room where we can listen in on the next shoot. In secretive whispers, actors cue the audience to tiptoe, to listen in, to give the actors privacy, to settle down in a back part of a restaurant so that the characters can be heard, or overheard.

In his "Author's Notes," Dietz confesses that *Private Eyes* began with a lie, and the lovers' deceptions are echoed by the conscious ironies that Dietz employs, as he "deceives" the audience in a sequence of scenes. After we have accepted that the very first scene presents two lovers who have never met, we subsequently learn that these characters, Matthew and Lisa, are in fact married and have known one another for years. In this first shift, it's clear that this is a play where the audience can't predict alliances, which makes the whole evening into a delightful whodunit, as we begin to unwind the layers of acting in the nested narrative that only begins to explain itself when we are again caught unawares. The rhythm of not knowing, or surprises begins a kind of labyrinth of premises, echoed by the physical path of different scenes down corridors, and back rooms, that mimic the "memory palace" implied by the construct of each character's daydreams, memories, and fantasies. In another room, we will re-consider the whole relationship, in a completely different light.

Herein lies the genius of Inhouse's philosophy. Just as Dietz's play keeps the audience in the dark for the first scene, the subsequent revelation that we are "only watching actors," nestles into the fact that we are *still* only watching actors, when each underlying truth is revealed. Complicit in constructing the imagined world that theater asks of any audience, this play calls into question its own pretending, as each subsequent scene refers to a new observer's reality, which cancels out the previous truth that we as audience conspired to pretend to believe. So we can't believe anyone, or anything, much like the lovers who are trying to figure out the strands of loyalty and deception in their own series of duplicitous dialogues

Caroline Morahan and Drew Rausch, Photos by Daud Sani

In the role of Lisa, Caroline Morahan beautifully and convincingly gives a feminine center to the vortex of sexual duplicity and energy that encircles the plots interweaving her lover, her husband, her husband's psychotherapist, and finally, her lover's jealous wife. Drew Rausch brilliantly conveys Matthew's associative thought process, almost succeeding in cancelling out his lower fantasies of jealousy, considering a more mature and forgiving response, as each idea wins or fails with varying degrees of success. In a further layering of self-consciousness, we are introduced to Frank, Matthew's psychotherapist, (Tim Redmond) who elicits a series of Matthew's fantasies in the interrogations of a typical therapy session: "Now Matthew, is that what *really* happened?" Mimicking the associative process, Redmond and Rausch's staccato duets win us to Matthew's madness as our sympathies find many aspects of ourselves in this quest to understand Matthew's accelerating ambivalence. As Adrian, Mark Sullivan plays the "other man" with subtle and powerful chemistry that lends an exquisite realism to the pain and pleasure of Lisa's temptation to give in to her attraction. But Adrian must submit to his own series of paradoxes, as he helplessly admits, that though he may have been the object of Lisa's love, "I'm jealous of a man whose wife is unfaithful to him." Further complexity arrives in the form of Cory, (Lara Maria Silva), Adrian's

wife. Silva's darkly comic "Private Eye" simultaneously conveys both the violence of jealousy and a tongue-in-cheek noir performance that builds key momentum for the climax of the play.
Why is this play such a delight? As each subsequent allegiance gives the characters added dimension, the audience discovers the weightless quality of thought, epiphany, and random associations, as we are caught in scenes that are later revealed to be fantasies, revisions, and Freudian "wish-fulfillment." InHouse's intelligent and fast paced production of *Private Eyes* satisfies its audience with a quick witted, psychologically realistic, mental romp through a series of private lives that mock and mend us in a hilarious blend of honest examination and dark humor. The play's epiphanies are rich, and varied.

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InHouse Theater presents The Weir

Charity Hume · Wednesday, November 4th, 2015

Last week, I lucked into a site specific showing of Conor McPherson's Olivier Award winning play, *The Weir*, and took my seat at a table in Hutchinson Cocktails and Grill, an Irish bar in West Hollywood, and waited for the play to unfold around me. Yes. I said, "Bar." InHouse Theater Company uses site specific locations to create an immersive theater experience for the audience: *Our goal at InHouse is to create site-specific productions that confront our audiences with the realism of film in an immersive live theatre setting. We perform in houses, lobbies, bars & restaurants, backyards – all in an effort to give patrons a theatrical experience of such immediacy and electricity that entertainment becomes clandestine observation.*

Co-directed with confident expertise by Elizabeth Schmidt and Mark Sullivan, the muted realism of the actors' ensemble showed profound humanity and exquisite timing. The quality of clandestine observation heightens because the audience is seated inside the "set." The absence of the "fourth wall" created a 3D reality that gives the play much more intimacy, and I was soon transported by the seamless and convincing Irish dialects, the unforced realism of the acting, and the language of the play to a rural village in Northern Ireland. The actors take the set further, and we soon sense we're deep in the country, listening to tales of fairy roads, the ghost stories of the village, a place steeped in folklore. As the actors immerse us in their world, we become witnesses to the soul baring evening ahead.

The play begins with Jack, played by Tim Redmond, stumbling in out of the cold and attempting to draw from a broken tap, but forced into the bottles… not the stout he was looking for. As members of the audience nurse their own stout purchased on the way in, Jack's banter with Brendan (Bryce McBratnie), reveals Jack's essential solitude. He's a hard-working man who owns a garage in the town, and counts his change, even as we know he bets his wages on the horses to a fault. As each of five characters wanders into the pub, the ancient ritual of story telling begins. We're in Ireland; it's cold outside; there's the question of the broken tap, and then there's village gossip. But why is this night different from all the others?

We learn that Valerie, played by Caroline Morahan, a single woman, has just rented a long empty

house. Curious about what a single woman would want with a life in the boonies when she'd been in Dublin most of her life, Valerie's arrival soon awakens old rivalries. Jack and Brendan are soon joined by Jim, (Rob Welsh) who philosophizes on the mysteries of betting as the news of the day trickles in. The men complain about another mate, Finbar, (Drew Rausch) who will soon be joining them. Rausch gets us to feel the sting of Finbar's easy road; he has the nerve to chide his old friends with his success by extolling his own merits, missing the point that an inheritance gave him a crucial head start that others have missed. On top of the financial competition he represents, Finbar rankles Jack because he has the bad taste to be the one bringing in the only single woman seen in town in years, though he's a married man.

Tim Redmond as Jack and Bryce McBratnie as Brendan in The Weir. Photo Daud Sani

Jack's a talker, and begins with complaints that show he's been humiliated by life, as he and Finbar exchange barbs that salt the wounds of small failures to grasp opportunities that could have been. In Jack, we can see our own inability to seize the moment, and feel haunted by false starts, and inevitable mistakes that could have turned our destiny in a different direction, had we known then, what we know now. Redmond's take on Jack takes us by surprise, as his understated portrayal of a wounded ego gradually reveals a man we grow to respect and like, as we share a pint and find who he is under the layers of his years stuck in the same old place. Tim Redmond's virtuoso performance as "Jack," shows a subtle paradox of character that results in the audience admiring something in Jack we recognize in ourselves. He's failed to make it big, and failed to take a chance on a long lost love who married away from him. By his own account, he mistreated her and never deserved her. So he's here and he's alone.

But as Valerie unveils the reason for her flight from Dublin, it is Jack who gives her, and the audience, the refuge of his identity, from his pissed off banter and complaining, to his openness to a good joke, to the time he'll take listening to a yarn that grows deeper and closer to the nerve of the true sorrow in another's soul. Secrets can only surface when there's a good listener. Valerie is a new audience for the regulars at the pub, and as each man welcomes her with a bit of local gossip, the village tales of ghosts and supernatural mysteries provide the evening's entertainment as the drinks go round. Gradually, the play leads each character to reveal the stories of the ghosts that live inside them. Caroline Morahan's performance gives validity to a supernatural tale of grief that will haunt her forever. Valerie's transition from the new woman in town, to someone who has earned a place among the regulars, occurs as Morahan portrays her character's mysterious experiences with direct, and believable poetry.

While the play tells us of loss, in its many forms, the redemption hidden in this play is that on occasion, there is someone there we can trust with our secrets and sorrows. In an unexpected turn where Valerie shares her own "ghost" from the past, something springs to life in Jack, and in all of us. There's consolation for our suffering when we can take the time to talk it out over a pint. Each of us has a ghost, a story of a missing person. There's no one of us could not have taken a turn in the round. *The Weir* speaks of a spiritual hunger to acknowledge and live with our ghosts. Despite logic, our missing loved ones still live and breathe inside us. In travelling through time to stories of loss and grief, the characters show us a way to unburden our souls of the invisible weight of grief we've carried within. The paradox is that like the characters in *The Weir*, by the end of the night, by acknowledging our sorrows, we head out into the night with a deeper trust in our fellow

travelers, and a lighter heart.

Posted in Theatre | No Comments »

Writing Prompt: Haunted House

Charity Hume · Wednesday, October 29th, 2014

A special Halloween edition writing prompt from Charity Hume. BOO!

Whether it's the Bates Motel, or the stairs down to the cellar where you once saw a snake, some houses remain with us as spooky, mysterious, or "haunted." In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Jem and Scout run by Boo Radley's house rather than be caught there after dark, and they touch it only for a "dare."

I can still remember finding a ruined hunter's cabin in the middle of the New England woods on a hike when I was a child, and seeing that a rusted rain barrel had bullet holes where it had been used for target practice. A house after a fire, an abandoned barn, an overgrown and forgotten cemetery, a dusty apartment filled with magazines from decades ago, places like this speak to us of forgotten stories and whisper haunted messages from the past.

In this exercise, use your memory to think of real places you have visited that stirred your fear or curiosity about the people who once lived there. You can splice together the memories of different spaces, or commit to one, describing elements that most intrigued you.

Take a walk through the rooms and describe the feeling you have as you let your mind travel back. Your memory may surprise you with its powers to retain specific details. Try to stay physical as you write and use all your senses. Rather than write: "It was scary," describe the moment when you first spied that rusty meat hook dangling from the barn wall.

The Old Fairbanks House, by Childe Hassam, (1884), courtesy of Wikipaintings

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Writing Prompt: The Hiding Place

Charity Hume · Tuesday, July 22nd, 2014

This week's writing prompt to get your creativity flowing: The Hiding Place.

I was a member of a large family, and throughout my childhood I found various "hiding places"

where I could escape the busy clamor of siblings and parents. I sought out places where I could lose myself in books, reading for hours in trees, in a loft in our barn, anywhere beyond the reach of voices calling me to supper. In our family, hiding became a sport in itself. We played a game called “Hide and *Ghost* Seek,” when we looked for one another with flashlights in the dark, or “Sardines,” when a group of us gradually packed into one tight hiding place till the last player discovered us. As we all grew up, there were more important secrets, and other kinds of hiding places. And those moments of refuge, though harder to find, still call my name.

Think of your own hiding places. More symbolically, think about a time you needed to hide something important: a parental illness that couldn’t be shared with a younger sibling; a *rendez-vous* with forbidden friends who had not met with parental approval. What were you hiding and how did you avoid detection? Brainstorm and make a list of all of the different memories.

Then, write a story that draws on a moment where you needed to hide. Your inspiration could be a light-hearted secret, or describe a memory of when you needed to escape forces too large for you to deal with at the time. Let the reader understand the fear of discovery, the motives, the duration and tension of hiding a secret. When you work from specific memories of your own life, you will find seeds for interesting and powerful stories.

Hide and Seek, by William Merritt Chase, (1888), courtesy of Wikipaintings

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Writing Prompt: The Betrayal

Charity Hume · Wednesday, July 16th, 2014

This week’s writing prompt is that juicy word – Betrayal.

What are the most significant motivators for human beings?

There are primal moments in our lives which touch on the deeper feelings inside us, and draw us into action. Moments of betrayal between husband and wife, friends or siblings, form the heart of drama. These betrayals can have small consequences, or they can be cataclysmic.

In the great Belgian film, *La Promesse*, a teenager witnesses his father hide a terrible secret. The arc of the film hinges on whether the son will have the strength to betray his father and uphold his loyalty to what is truly right. An exquisite tension builds through the story, as the viewer wonders which side of the son’s character will win. Here, a son’s loyalty has a darker price than the betrayal itself.

When have you been betrayed? When has someone truly let you down? When have you done the same? Write a few pages in order to explore these questions. Don’t worry if intense feelings rush back as you write. Just let them flow onto the page in their raw and honest state. Later, you can edit, disguise, and fictionalize if the “true” version inspires you to use its rare, powerful material. When you have some “footage,” construct a story, fictional or autobiographical, around a betrayal

you know all too well.

“Parau Api,” (1892), by Paul Gaugin, courtesy of Wikipaintings

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Writing Prompt: Fevers

Charity Hume · Wednesday, June 25th, 2014

In this week’s writing prompt, “Fevers,” Charity Hume encourages the writer to explore something we’d rather avoid in life.

Novelists have sometimes used sickness as inspiration: Camus in *The Plague*, Thomas Mann in *Magic Mountain*, Geraldine Brooks in *The Year of Wonders*.

Write about illness, either by researching one you have read about in an article in the media, or even better, one you have witnessed first hand, as a patient or by caring for a loved one. Illness can create a separate world that divides the healthy from the stricken. Give your full attention to the progress of the disease, its effect on the character, the circumstances and changes that result when illness interrupts the patterns of daily life. This can be a light hearted exercise, or one that is a portal into a whole world.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee subtly organizes the arc of the novel as Scout tries to remember details about the summer her brother Jem broke his arm. The point here is not to hyper-focus on illness, but to see where the “symptom” or the illness can take you.

The Sick Girl, (1882) by Michael Ancher, courtesy of Wikimedia

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Writing Prompt: Snakes, Spiders, and Bats

Charity Hume · Wednesday, June 11th, 2014

A new writing prompt from Charity Hume

In *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Harrison Ford gets a laugh when, after riding through Amazonian rapids, stealing a grave idol, fighting off warriors and flying through the air like Tarzan, he then confesses that he’s mortally afraid of snakes. We may not all be Indiana, but many can identify with his squeamish fear.

In this exercise, list the creatures or settings that especially scare you. My list includes both situations and objects: heights, snakes, dentist appointments… (I could go on!) When you look down that list, one of the entries will have a particular charge of energy. Circle that one and commit to writing about that phobia for today.

Once you've chosen it, stick with it and don't waffle.

Write for a page about this fear, and associate to every time you can remember any physical encounter with this object: the day you stepped on a jellyfish, the time your mother insisted you eat okra. As you write, don't worry if there are several different memories crowding in your mind. Let them lead you to different experiences and fully explore them all as you give yourself permission to remember them in detail. Use every sense you can as you communicate the details. Once you're done, you will have interesting footage. From here, you can consider a story or poem that uses your imagery and feelings. Try to be specific and realistic, as you tell the story of the cockroach you saw your first night in the Brooklyn apartment, the possum on the road, the barn spider that first week in Canada. You can also create a fictional character who shares your phobia. Let your character explain the fear to another character, or write a character's "interior monologue." Use your "footage" freely and give this fictional character a human weakness.

Flor Imperiale, Coral Snake, and Spider, Brazil, by Marianne North, (1873), Courtesy of Wikipaintings

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Take This Creative Writing Road Trip

Charity Hume · Wednesday, June 4th, 2014

From *The Canterbury Tales*, to Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, the transformations that happen when we hit the road and leave our daily routines behind can open a whole new dimension of experience. In the course of a journey, we meet new characters, experience obstacles and solve the challenges that unfold in the course of our journey. Road trips are not always easy. Flannery O'Connor blends the concept of horror and social realism, along with a dash of ironic humor, in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," when she tells the story of a family road trip gone horribly wrong.

This summer, take a notebook on your own creative writing road trip with you and take notes. Eavesdrop on the back seat squabbles and the decisions about what to order in the truckstops. Tell the story of a road trip in all its realistic detail. Include the bickering in the car, the argument over how to drive safely, or try to capture the reflective connected silence between a parent and a child that unexpectedly bonds them after a year of fighting. Use your own memories of journeys, and tell the back stories that begin to weave their way into the narrative as you recall some of the adventures. Before you begin, think of the transformations you experienced while you were on the road, and find the material that you think will give you the most dramatic material. That drama can be subtle, an internal "letting go" of a relationship that is over, or it can be more dramatic, Thelma and Louise on the lam. Enjoy the journey, and see where the road leads you with the characters who accompany you on the way.

The Road to a Particular Interest, (1890) by Ferdinand Hodler, courtesy of Wikipaintings

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