

COLLECTION III
WINTER READING 2021

X-R-A-Y
Collection III
Winter Reading 2021
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ARE YOU MY MOTHER?

by Allie Zenwirth

A

I used to get these pangs of want, filled with unnamable desires. You would find me jumping. You would find me erratic. *I want to make something. I want to dance with somebody... I want to feel the heat with somebody... yeah... With somebody who loves me. A xory. I want... I want... I want... I don't know... I want...* If you were that stranger at the bar you would ask me, “How do you have so much energy?” and I would say, “I don’t know,” and then jeté away.

Now I’m drained, all my juice is gone. Instead of yelling at people to, “Wake up!” I’m alone in a desert of darkness, amputated, stuck on scalding asphalt, bleeding as I push myself forward by my stumps one inch at a time into a never-ending nightmare. Nobody’s home inside me. My voice is deeper and flatter, allowing my new apartment-mate to clock me as trans:

New Apartment Mate: Can I ask you a question?

Allie Zenwirth: Sure

New Apartment mate: Your voice is very thick

Allie Zenwirth:

New Apartment Mate: (winks, gives thumbs up)

I am in a manhole of wanting to die. The lid standing between me and the street weighs 249 lbs (as manhole covers are wont).

My therapist points out that my suicidality is reasonable.* That makes me feel better.

*he phrases it differently.

B

In the beginning of 2020, Corona Time, New York was the epicenter. I stayed with my Russian professor in Yonkers for a month, and during one particular dinner, as I talked everyone's heads off about the Community, I got a text.

Father: How are you feeling?

I announced: "Guess who just texted me?" I consumed everyone. "That's a weird text, right? The first time in months: 'How are you feeling?' How should I respond?"

From my father's perspective, a concern regarding my health was

reasonable. About half of the Chasidic community was infected by the virus. He was. My mom was. His brothers were. My mom's siblings were.

I had a follow up call with my father who said he'll call me back, but he never did. However, the virus gave my mom an excuse to talk with me again. We hadn't spoken in a year.

C

For a while, her disembodied voice was a grounding presence. She was someone to talk to when I moved back to my room in Jersey City. A windowless basement room in which I couldn't stand upright, without A/C, and infested with both cockroaches and ants. Housing-wise, things improved when I paid the extra \$150 and moved up to the second floor. I was still unemployed, alone, without many friends.

D

Throughout my years at Sarah Lawrence College, I would be on the verge of homelessness during the winter breaks when the campus closed, relying on the kindness of strangers. During the break my senior year, January of 2019, I called my mother, asking her if she wanted to get together. Just like the year before, she asked if she could think about it and call me back. After three days, she decided she would be down to meet, but just like the year before, it

would need to be in secret. We discussed our options and my mom determined it would be as if we were to have an affair. We would book a hotel room.

The following Wednesday morning, after eating two egg and cheese English Muffins I had gotten from Dunkin' the night before, I looked out the window of a room in Hotel Le Blu and watched as a woman approached the hotel. She had gained weight. As usual she was wearing body-covering dark-colored clothing and false hair.

My mother entered the hotel and came up the elevator. I found her in the hallway, looking lost. I hugged her as if she were a pillow. Going into the room she put down her bags of Greek yogurt for herself and homemade cookies for me and we sat down on chairs facing each other. She got straight down to what she wanted to tell me.

Mom: I love you.

Me: I love you too.

Mom: I like talking with you on the phone.

Me: I like talking with you too.

Mom: I know you are well intentioned, but you writing a memoir has been incredibly hurtful to me. I know you think you're doing it for the right reasons, but I don't think it's ok that you expect me

to keep talking with you.

Me: Is it because I am writing about you? I could use a pseudonym.

Mom: Being written about is part of it. You know I'm a private person.

Me: (nods unsure)

Mom: But...

The real problem? I would be writing negatively about the Community.

E

Talking with my mother in the bowels of my basement room was not all bliss. We would argue in almost hour-long bursts. Strangers would look at me strangely as I broke the silence of the night, making laps around my neighborhood, raising my voice in vehemence. She argued that I wasn't Paul Revere rousing the colonials, that my memoir was not whistleblowing, that I was sharing with the world a warped version of the Chasidic Community, one driven by hatred and personal grievance.

I argued that the Chasidic Community was a place where human rights were being violated.

In August of 2020, when my mother recruited an aunt and an uncle to help refute my claims, when three people telling me that my experience in the Community was my own fault* became too much, I told my mother so. I told her we could continue to speak but I will not be gaslighted. She stopped calling me.

*My mother will laugh. How predictable: another conversation that I warp and misconstrue. What else is new?

F

So now here I am in September of 2020, isolated, with a deadness all too familiar. My feelings blend with those of my still-in-Community-self, the mirage of pain I left behind in 2016, when I escaped. An experience I hoped would never return.

G

In 2011, when I was thirteen, I would sit beside Halberstam, a rabbi who was also a therapist, in the uncomfortable chair besides his desk, waiting. The darkness that had surrounded me since the age of five had turned into a throbbing pain. I was waiting for Halberstam to tell me why. To prescribe me some Advil.

Like a pediatrician walking into a room saying, “Hi, how are you doing?” who would hear a few symptoms then confidently declare,

“So here is what I’m going to do,” Halberstam found the problem: it was my parents. They had been putting “interjections” in my brain, programming me to believe that I deserved to be miserable. He implied that I was abused. I had never liked my parents, but I never realized their terribleness. “Oh boy, poor me.”

Halberstam’s abuse theory was not based on anything I said. I found out later that my mother had been seeing him as a patient as well. He must have based it on what my mother told him during her therapy. Something real. Unwilling and unable to tell me the truth, he turned it into something vague, which turned into “my parents are abusing me.” He didn’t bother to check in and see if that was my lived experience. He didn’t bother to check in and see if that was what made me unable to see anything but bleakness.

H

In 2014, after my second hospitalization in a psych ward, at sixteen, my mother and I became friends. Prison inmates. My mother shared that she never wanted me to be born. I was grateful she told me as it meant I wasn’t making things up. For a while, that was all that was mentioned of it. Then, in 2020, during the few months we resumed talking, my mother added that she didn’t want to get married either. She described her increasing dread as the wedding date had drawn nearer.

I

In 2020, when we would be on the phone, I argued that the Community was to blame for her marriage and my birth. The Community made her get married to someone she didn't know at 18, and made her pump out one kid after the other. But in her mind the fault was her own. She could have decided not to get married and be ostracized. She chose to get married because deep down she wanted to. "We all need connection." She could have gone on birth control even though she wasn't allowed to without permission from a judge. She chose to have kids to prove to the world that you can have kids and not love them.

J

Sister Cathleen (*Margaret Qualley*) is a novice in training at a nunnery in Novitiate (2017). She is intimacy repressed to the extent that she can't bear hearing the object of her desire, Sister Emmanuelle (*Rebecca Dyan*), read the bible. One night, Sister Emmanuelle wakes up to a knock on her door. She opens it a crack.

Sister Emmanuelle: (whispers) You can't be here

Sister Cathleen: (inaudible pleading)

Sister Emmanuelle: Okay

They both sit down on the bed nervous. LONG pause.

Sister Cathleen: Do you remember... Do you remember when you asked what I was starving for? I just want to be comforted... please will you just comfort me... please... please will you just... please will you just... please I just want to be comforted... please will you just comfort me... Please... Please... Please... Please will you just comfort me... Please will you just comfort me...

Unable to shut up until she is held, kissed, smothered, and eaten.

I feel that.

JO VARNISH INTERVIEWS ALLIE ZENWIRTH

JV: Your piece, “Are You My Mother?”, explores some very difficult subject matters. Is writing a cathartic process for you, or is it something you are compelled to do, no matter how challenging?

AZ: T Kira Madden wrote “[Against Catharsis: Writing is Not Therapy](#).” It’s a persuasive essay. It made me wonder if I’m doing something wrong.

As of now, most of my writing is about the Chasidic Community. The lack of available information about Chasidim turns my reality into evidence. I need to hold on to my memories. Tightly, like an unpinned grenade. To paralyze myself as if I’m standing above a land mine. But once it’s written down on the screen I can relax. I find myself, thankfully—in most instances—able to forget. I am unable to recall in vividness; my past feels like a story told second hand.

But, on the flip side, when nonfiction of mine gets published, I find myself dejected. The hope that my evidence getting out there will change things is quashed. I’m still living at 340 Redacted Ave and the landlord still hasn’t fixed the heat.

JV: How do you decide what goes in a piece? Is it pure instinct or

do you plan ahead of time?

AZ: It's instinctual when it comes to shorter works. But with the memoir that I'm currently working on, I'm finding myself needing to rely on others for feedback. I am unable to assume the perspective of the outsider, to know the relevant.

JV: Your writing has a fresh, experimental feel. Tell us about your inclusion of the dialogue from Novitiate.

AZ: That scene crystalized the fact that I was lying to myself. I know exactly what I want. I want to be kissed, held, smothered, and eaten. Also, it was a sneaky way of mentioning Margaret Qualley. She is "hot." I want her to fuck me. Now that I've answered your question can I complain?

You mention that my writing feels experimental. I wish it wasn't. Experimental usually goes hand in hand with being less accessible. I don't like that. I prefer the days when my psychiatrist compared me to Michael Lewis. Oh well.

Thank you X-R-A-Y and Jo! It's always a pleasure to talk about myself.

X-R-A-Y

LOST

KETCHUP



BLACK AND WHITE CAT. 7 YRS OLD. WHITE SOCKS. WHITE SPOT ON HEAD (SEE PIC). LAST SEEN YESTERDAY (SEPT 27TH) IN THE GLENWOOD AREA.

REWARD FOR INFORMATION.

CALL US ON [HTTPS://XRAYLITMAG.COM/KETCHUP-BY-REBECCA-GRANSDEN/FICTION/](https://xraylitmag.com/ketchup-by-rebecca-gransden/fiction/) EVEN IF IT'S BAD NEWS.

PLEASE RETURN KETCHUP IF YOU HAVE HIM, NO QUESTIONS ASKED. KETCHUP IS REALLY MISSED.

KETCHUP by Rebecca Gransden

Ketchup went missing. I made some posters and taped them around the neighbourhood.

Lost

Ketchup

Black and white cat. 7 yrs old. White socks. White spot on head (see pic). Last seen yesterday (Sept 27th) in the Glenwood area.

*Reward for information. Call us on ***** even if it's bad news. Please return Ketchup if you have him, no questions asked. Ketchup is really missed.*

Every telegraph pole, lamppost, or empty surface around the nearest blocks had a poster attached. If Ketchup didn't return, I planned to extend the search area to streets farther away.

After a sleepless night I got out of bed to find Regina already up, eyes red. I hadn't seen her eyes like that since her dad punched her brother at our reception. She looked at me, headphones on, guitars blistering, some track I couldn't make out. I grabbed a handful

of dry cereal and then my bike and rode, coming back every few hours to break her heart with no sign of Ketchup. She worked from home and wanted to be there in case he came back, but she greeted me each time with the same red eyes that said Ketchup hadn't returned.

On the third day of Ketchup's absence I had to go in to work. Sticky air met me as I left the bar, having spent my time cleaning. There had been no real rain for weeks, and the baked concrete of the day turned stale in the evenings. I collected my bike from the locked courtyard behind the bar and took off in the direction of home.

Hunger pangs irritated me, but despite the discomfort I swerved around a corner, deciding to take the long way back with the intention of checking that the posters with Ketchup's details were still in place.

A telegraph pole resided at the end of the approaching avenue. The streetlight farther along had lit up earlier than the others and it created a strange light when mixed with the lemony dusk. I clutched at my bike's brakes and they squeaked with dry dust. The dark wood of the telegraph pole really made the white poster attached to it stand out. I glanced at the poster, ready to ride away. Something wrong with the picture. I bumped the bike's front wheel up onto the pavement and walked the bike closer to the pole.

There, where Ketchup's picture should've been, another image had been placed—black and white, a printed reproduction of an old photograph, glued into position to cover Ketchup. A figure stood

mid-picture, dressed as a cat, the costume sagging around the body, tail ragged and floppy, the head rounded and cushioned, large eyes, ears slightly flattened, a checkered bowtie around the neck. Hard to tell what colour the costume would have been, but something about the shade of grey made me guess at light brown. The figure in the cat suit stood on a suburban street, a street indistinguishable from any around the neighbourhood. Waving a raised paw, the cat person posed in front of a garden that appeared to be from another era, as did the small 1950s house.

I reached out my hand, slowly, pointing, and then placed my finger on the poster, tentatively running my fingertip along the outside edge of the image. Whoever had put the new photograph there had been careful when attaching it, the glue or paste firmly adhering its edges to the poster underneath and at the same time using just enough of the substance to not soak through or spill out onto the surrounding poster.

I ripped the poster down. It came off mostly intact and I put it in my backpack. Wondering if I should tell Regina about it or not, I shuffled my bike back onto the road and continued along the avenue.

Distracted by my thoughts I almost sailed past the next location of a poster, this time a lamppost. This lamppost hadn't lit up yet, like the malfunctioning one I'd left behind. Before I got close to it I could tell that Ketchup's picture had been tampered with again, the same image placed over it, a black and white shot of a figure in a cat costume, holding still for an unknown photographer.

I travelled the neighbourhood, ripping down every poster, Ketchup's picture smothered by this new image. When I got home my backpack was bulging. I walked into the kitchen, part of me hoping Regina was out somewhere, as I knew I had to tell her, but didn't know what the hell I was supposed to say. Regina looked up at me from her place at the kitchen table, partially torn posters scattered over the tabletop. What posters I'd failed to locate she'd apparently already dealt with.

Regina spent some hours the next day reprinting Ketchup's poster. I called in sick and re-postered the neighbourhood. It didn't even occur to me to be concerned that we hadn't received a single call about Ketchup.

Exhausted, I closed the back door on the dark midnight behind me and staggered into the spare room we'd made into a den. Curling up on our small sofa, bile shifted my guts, steadily rising until I couldn't stand it. I got up and went to get my bike.

Outside, night insects flitted between gardens. A hush came down driveways. I rode around the streets, protectively gazing over the posters I'd taped up in daylight hours, all as I'd left them.

My head pounded. I'd been awake too long. A sudden swell of uninvited emotion hit my chest as the light from a lamppost struck Ketchup's picture from a peculiar angle, causing the image to halo in my vision. I shook my head, halted my bike in the middle of the street. No good being out here. Go home.

I took off, rounding a corner, aiming for the shortest route back.

About halfway down the street a figure stood next to a lamppost, arms up and reaching for a poster. I clutched at my brakes, screeching the bike's tires, and stopped. The figure rotated its head in my direction, a head adorned with a cat's face. Dressed in full costume, the figure clutched at a bundle of papers under its arm and turned to run.

For a moment I froze, but as the figure rushed towards a section of street in shadow, where it would be possible to slip out of sight, I felt myself press the bike peddles into action and before I realized what I was doing I was chasing it.

The person was fast, wearing trainers, not cat costume feet. It reached the darker stretch of road and upped its speed, rushing ahead under high black trees, branches overhanging from unkempt gardens.

I felt a bump, then something wedged beneath me awkwardly and sent my back wheel skidding out from under me. The ground hit me quick, my shoulder taking the worst of the fall.

I lifted my head to see the figure turn, the person having heard the accident. The cat costume was identical to the one pictured in the photograph, but sorrier, worn, the lightish brown colour I'd imagined, the same checkered bowtie skew-whiff around its neck. The figure raised a paw, mimicking the pose in the image, and scrambled to flee and was gone.

Lost

I recovered myself and hobbled back home, a bruised shoulder and sprained ankle the result of the night's efforts.

The following evening I sat with Regina, both of us trying to watch TV but taking very little of the streaming film in. Around eleven pm, when tiredness had enabled us both to doze on the sofa, our heads roused at the sound of a car coming to a loud stop on the road outside. We paused as a few moments of quietness passed, then listened to indistinct noises echoing from out front. A car door slammed and almost immediately the car sped away.

Regina looked at me, then stood up, moving to the den's window and peeking out from behind the closed curtain.

A harsh sound resonated from the kitchen behind us, a noise we'd heard so many times previously. The cat flap.

A dark blob rushed past the den door. It came back along the hallway, slower this time, a cat shape, weaving around, as though regaining its bearings. Ketchup walked into the den, a lopsided checkered bowtie attached to his neck.

AARON BURCH INTERVIEWS REBECCA GRANSDEN

AB: I'm curious about the beginnings of this piece. In part because I'm always curious about beginnings—both the actual written beginning, but also the impetus for the writer—and in part because I was especially struck with two central images (the initial poster for Ketchup, and then the second image of the figure dressed as a cat). This is fiction and I don't really care / it doesn't really matter what is "true" or borrowed from real life or whatever, but I also kind of couldn't help but imagine myself as the writer and how, for me, this probably would have started with seeing some weird telegraph pole poster like this. And I was curious if you could talk about the initial spark of an idea for the story—an image, a sentence, an idea...?

RG: I'd had in my mind the vague idea of doing something featuring a lost pet poster for a while, prompted by an article about comical parody posters having mysteriously appeared around a certain area, somewhere in the States, if I remember correctly. I still don't know if the culprit has been discovered. While the article is light-hearted, there is an undeniable air of menace linked to the situation—predominantly surrounding the anonymity and motivation of the person behind the posters. I'm sure also at the back of my mind—although I'm only suspecting this in

retrospect—was the book *Lost: Lost and Found Pet Posters from Around the World* compiled by Ian Phillips. The book is incredibly melancholy, containing many posters that can be categorized as outsider art. Although not at the forefront of the piece, the awful feeling of losing a beloved animal is an element in the background. Of the many animals I’ve had live with me over the years, only one has ever gone missing. It’s an upsetting and disquieting experience which lingers, so I was considering that also, although it ended up being a peripheral theme.

AB: This is one of those kind of dumb, small questions, but... that the cat’s name is Ketchup (and then, further, that that name is borrowed for the title of the story) is interesting. There’s something about it that prepares me for a slightly different story than a more “traditional” cat name. Where’d that come from? Do you think it affected your writing of the story at all, the way it affected (even while not quite knowing how) my reading?

RG: I’m going to condemn myself as a thief here and confess it was a straight up steal. I can’t recall precisely where but I came across a mention online of a forthcoming work by another author, to be titled Ketchup. The word popped out at me and Ketchup was born. It was pretty immediate. It struck me as being in line with my aim to inject an uncanny distance into the story, with it being an unusual name for a cat, while at the same time being a word that is believable as being selected by someone as a cat name. Phonetically, it’s a substantial word as well, something abrasive about it. Looking back on the piece I think it might also add some

character to the cat himself, and suggest a background within that household, for example that there could be a reason, maybe an incident, that inspired that name. It's another element to confirm the sense of unease and perhaps uncomfortable humor of some of the surrounding imagery.

AB: One of my favorite things in fiction is the appearance of some kind of mysterious, largely unexplained character. Can you talk a little about how much interaction you did or didn't want with the person in the costume, if there was anything important to convey or leave out or think about when thinking about that figure?

RG: I thought seriously about this. It's central to whether the piece works or not, in my eyes. My main aim was to introduce an outside figure that is ambiguous enough to represent the unknowable, but at the same time suggest a possible connection with the main characters. For me, it was important that the level of interaction remain at a distance, always suggestive, never direct. I find my pieces of this type always gravitate towards Freud's observations about the uncanny, and part of that is the idea that something is made unnerving by the familiar being placed out of its usual context. The trope of sinister suburbia is a well used one, but I was hoping this character was a bubbling up of the essence of that, a little self aware, but no less intriguing for it.

AB: Is there one small thing in the story that would make you especially happy if a reader noticed or took special note of, and/or

is there a question that you'd get especially excited to answer if a reader asked it?

RG: I'm pretty much of the mind that all writing is dead to me once I've categorized it as finished with, so I'm content for any and all details to be picked up on, in line with my intent or not. Accordingly, I'm open to all questions, as long as they are rhetorical ones.

AB: Can you rave about Bob Schofield's art for a minute? :)

RG: Hell yeah! Bob's graphic accompaniments to the pieces X-R-A-Y publishes are things of beauty. When considering how to approach constructing a pet poster to go with the story, the only option was to use Bob's graphic of the mysterious cat-costumed character, as the image captures its essence perfectly. So I'm very grateful Bob agreed to let me superimpose the image onto my (rather basic) background.

CARHENGES

by Aaron Burch



SPIRAL JETTY

by Aaron Burch



REST STOPS AND PARKING LOTS

by Aaron Burch

After Kristine Langley Mahler

Because I didn't want to pay for a hotel.¹ Because I could afford to pay for a hotel, but it seemed like a waste.² Because, as much as I enjoy sleeping in and then being lazy and watching TV in bed³, I wanted to get up and moving and on the road as soon as possible.⁴ Because I'd paid for and slept in a hotel the night before, and I'd do so again the night after, and I thought a night in my car would both save me a little money and make me appreciate the nights when I did get a hotel.⁵ Because, despite a near inability to make decisions regarding large amounts of money, I had just bought a

1 Because I'd grown up with parents who always thought about money, always worried about it, fretted over and considered and reconsidered every financial decision, and that worry and fretting and considering and reconsidering is hard to shake.

2 Because I didn't have a plan and so I just drove until I was tired, and sometimes that meant until it was pretty late, and I wanted to get up and back on the road in the morning, and so if it were *just* for a bed for a few hours, the cost-benefit ratio seemed off.

3 Because I didn't have a TV at home, and so laying in bed and watching TV, even bad TV, maybe even *especially* bad TV, was a kind of treat specific to staying in hotels, even bad hotels, maybe even *especially* bad hotels.

4 Because there's something exciting and energizing and life-affirming about waking up at sunrise; there's something hard-to-describe about squinting into the light of the morning sun coming through a windshield and locking into your eyes.

5 Because sometimes, even when you can afford something, there is a specific kind of pride in finding an alternate option, in doing something another way, in moments of money saved.

new car.⁶ Because I had in every other car I'd ever owned, and so now I wanted to in this one, too.⁷ Because I had in my 20s and my 30s and I wanted to prove to myself I still could.⁸ Because I'd left the passenger seat empty as well as the seat behind it so I could fold it down as far as it would go.⁹ Because it made for a good story.¹⁰

6 Because I had just gotten a raise and because, although I didn't yet explicitly know I was about to get divorced, I knew it implicitly enough, and because I knew I was about to drive across the country and because the savings in gas alone wouldn't do that much to offset the cost of a car but it was at least something, and because I wanted to treat myself.

7 Because it felt like a kind of christening, a rite of passage, even if I wasn't sure if for my car or me.

8 Because there can be something a little reassuring or comforting about these kinds of repeating or echoing or rhyming life moments, and because there is a kind of pride in doing something as you get older that may seem reserved, or at least better suited, for the young.

9 Because I hadn't exactly planned to but I'd known I might.

10 Because sometimes it feels good to do something that you know is going to prompt someone to ask you why you would do that. Because sometimes it feels good to do something just because.

PHOTOGRAPHS

by Aaron Burch





CORY BENNET INTERVIEWS AARON BURCH

CB: I am interested in what came first, the story or the form? I feel like certain stories have to be told a certain way and I'm wondering if that's where you're coming from.

AB: I don't remember the *actual* chicken or the egg "first," but, pretty quickly, they were working in tandem, back and forth, a kinda of conversation with itself. For whatever reason, I found myself writing a bunch of form-centric stuff last year. A long, single sentence essay, an essay where every sentence was a question, a couple of list stories, this. And in each case, I guess the story came first and then the form was borne out of me leaning into and exaggerating something. So, like, I wrote two or three questions in a row and then it became, "can I keep this going?" Or I handwrote a short essay and just let myself write long rambly, run-on sentences and then, when editing, that became, "rather than cleaning this up, what if it was *all* a long, rambly, run-on sentence?" I was thinking about telling someone why I slept in my car and I had a couple, then three, then four "Because" answers so then, again, it became, "what if it's *all* that?"

CB: Do you like footnotes in books/short stories? What are some

memorable ones for you? I like how the notes aren't metacommentary but more like in conversation with the sentence.

AB: I do. Especially when they're used playfully. Maybe only then? DFW and *Pale Fire* are probably the two big obvious ones? There was this story in *Hobart* 6 that's always stuck with me. It's written/presented as an essay written for a freshman composition class, with footnotes from his cousin kind of trying to figure out and tell the story of his cousin's disappearance. I barely remember the story at all (I had to go dig out the issue to remember even what I just wrote there) but that form has always stuck with me. I also included footnotes in *Stephen King's The Body*, usually in moments where I'd found little additional trivia that I wanted to share but didn't fit or I wanted to make a little reference to or joke about my life. Mostly I like "techniques" or whatever we wanna call them when they let you be playful.

CB: Sleeping in your car is a very specific type of sleep and every sentence, even the footnotes, start with Because. Which suggests movement to me, who or what started the because?

AB: It was really intended to be a series of answers to "Why would you sleep in your car?" At one point, that was the title... which is a shitty title, but it was helpful for me in writing, to keep me on track.

REBECCA GRANSDEN INTERVIEWS AARON BURCH

RG: What made this particular approach to form attractive for your piece “Rest Stops and Parking Lots”? Did you have any specific goals in mind at the outset?

AB: As I remember it, I was thinking about my road trip back and forth across the country and specifically thinking about how I told someone about it—the road trip itself, how I spent the whole summer in Tacoma with friends and family, all the “roadtrippy” things I stopped and saw (Carhenge, Spiral Jetty, Wall Drug, the Badlands, the *Field of Dreams* baseball field)—and when I said I slept in my car a couple of times, they asked “Why would you do that?” I was thinking about my answers and how they were both big and small, both specific and abstract. One of my reasons was “just because” and one of my reasons was to save money and one of my reasons, to be honest, was for the story itself. And all of these answers felt true and kind of equal to each other. So then I started thinking about this essay as just like a collection of answers to that same question. And then, as I was writing, I had little additional notes or ideas or sentences that I wanted to include, but they weren’t specifically answers to “Why would you do that?” and those ultimately became the footnotes, which at first felt weird when there was just one or two, so then it became something of a

constraint to try to add a note to each sentence/answer.

RG: Reading on a laptop, the piece takes on a further dimension as the whole of the text isn't visible as presented by the hosting website, X-R-A-Y in this instance. This requires the reader to either make adjustments or use scrolling when digesting this piece. With different devices potentially changing the way a piece is experienced, was the medium of publication a consideration when bringing the piece together?

I didn't think about devices or medium, no, although I have published a couple of pieces on Hobart that have used a similar form ([“People Who Seem Envable”](#) by Kristine Langley Mahler and [“Ten Rules for Cooks on the Verge of Collapse”](#) by Meg Pillow) and I had both in mind (the Mahler piece especially) once I “found” the footnotes form. And there's something about the scrolling up and down back and forth that I like. I've used footnotes in a couple of pieces and I never really think about DFW as an influence, I think I use them a little differently, but I do like the actual physical act of reading DFW and having to flip back and forth. Same for Nabakov's *Pale Fire*. There's something about the physical, tactile, active act of it that I like. I'm not sure how it actually affects the reading of the piece, but I like it.

AB: And then, speaking of presentation, I sent it to X-R-A-Y in part because they had published [“American Lake,”](#) a short essay where each sentence was a question, and I kind of liked the idea

of this short essay being something of the inverse of that, and definitely hoped they would accept it and become my home for this specific genre of my constraint driven short essays.

RG: Thinking back to how the footnotes influenced my experience, there's a repetitive quality to the action that put me in mind of certain aspects of travelling—the necessity of repeating rituals, the monotony of the pragmatic requirements of getting from one place to another, the extra attention to detail that's necessary when navigating a journey, planned or not. It's a very effective technique in conveying the physical experience of travelling, without explicitly describing it within the piece. The choice of title for the piece, "Rest Stops and Parking Lots" is also suggestive of this repetitive aspect of travelling, with these kind of places designed to be visited by people on their way to somewhere else, each fitting a basic template, one location as significant, or insignificant, as the next. Was this an aspect you were aware of on the journey? Anecdotally, I've heard—particularly from touring bands—that when travelling America the uniformity of culture is what strikes them, that the same logos greet them wherever they stop. This is true for anywhere, of course, but seems particularly amplified in the American experience. This has me wondering how someone on the inside of that culture registers it, if at all. For any road trip like this there is a tension between the freshness of new experience and the perhaps repetitive nature of the places passed through. Although this isn't the main focus of your piece, I did get an underlying implication of that, wholly by what you did structurally.

AB: I'm not sure I have a lot to add here, other than just that this is really smart and interesting.

I don't think I have thought about it in this way before, but I think one of the reasons I so like these Americana road trip-y kinds of places mentioned above (Carhenge, Spiral Jetty, *Field of Dreams* baseball field) is because they are so unique to place. It can be easy to get caught up in the same-y-ness of gas stations and McDonald's and the like when driving, but you have to go to middle of nowhere Nebraska to see Carhenge. All three of those, too, are out of the way, so it takes a little effort, and then feels like something of an achievement.

RG: As a further introduction to the piece, you mention on Twitter that "last summer I bought a new car and drove across the country and along the way sometimes I slept in cheap motels right off the freeway & one time I splurged and stayed in a fancy hotel downtown & other times I slept in the car." The piece is very interior. I wondered if at any point there was a pull to include a broader reflection of your experience and of the places you moved through on this journey.

AB: Not really. For a couple of reasons, I think. One was just... it didn't really fit into the form. One of the things I like about form and constraints is that they give you these challenges, *How much can I tell the reader, while trying to stick to this idea where every sentence is just an answer to someone asking why I would sleep in my*

car?

And then, too... I'm working on a longer essay (well, "working on"... I haven't worked on it in months and it's just sitting there, half-done, at most) about that summer. I drove across the country; I stopped in Utah and met my youngest biological half-sister (I'm adopted; this was the first time I'd met someone I was related to by blood); I spent the summer living with one of my best childhood friends, hanging out with friends and family; I found out I was getting divorced (!); and I drove back. There's a lot there—family and friendship and the people both in our lives and not. "Rest Stops and Parking Lots" felt like a little side quest or detour, to overextend the roadtrip metaphor, where I wanted to keep most of that broader reflection for that longer essay and really try and keep this as specifically focused just on sleeping in my car as possible.

RG: Traditionally, travel is associated with reflection or an opportunity for a change in perspective. Does this apply in this case, and if so, how did this translate to the piece, if at all?

AB: I guess this is one of the reasons why I like both reading and writing about travel? This also reminds me that I've been working on another essay that has a similar thesis of something along the lines of "because I wanted to be the kind of person who did [thing x]," which feels almost like a cheating, nonreflective answer along the lines of "just because," but I think this awareness that I slept in my car *in part* because I wanted to be able to tell this story about

having slept in my car is... hopefully a little interesting?

RG: Road journeys contain a lot of empty time. Is there any particular music, listening, or reading material you associate with this drive? Did silence or noise influence your experience?

AB: So! I almost mentioned this above, but... at some point on that road trip, probably only a couple of hours in, I decided that I wasn't going to stream any music or listen to any MP3s. I listened to a few podcasts, but mostly I listened to CDs. I had packed two of my old CD booklets, knowing that there's something about listening to CDs on a roadtrip that I especially love, which definitely encouraged the already reflective, nostalgic nature of travel.

I DEFINITELY NEVER LOVED YOU **by Cory Bennet**

It's that time of year when California burns. It will peak in the Fall when the shadows begin to grow longer. There was a lightning storm across the Bay Area last night and fires today and ash falling from the gray sky. My knee is torn up from skating but I'm restless tonight so I cruise the neighborhood inhaling the poison air.

Once the fire had torn through my parents' neighborhood, we tried to return but the cops had all the roads closed. My stepdad knew a way through an orchard. We came upon the house and it still stood. The land was black and smoldering in places. There were two deer trapped between our fence and the fire line. Twisted limbs, charred skin, organs exposed. My stepdad and I dug two graves and buried them together in silence at dusk.

*

I had Bobby cut the sleeves off my Ceremony long sleeve in his apartment on a day I couldn't stop crying. We bought snacks from the dollar store and watched Nightmare on Elm Street 3. Passing me the joint he asked what was the matter. I said, "Everything."

*

I've been reading about Catholic saints and the desert fathers. The Shobogenzo is on my nightstand, and I understand none of it. I've read it twice. I pray, I speak to my dead friends, I sit cross-legged on the hardwood floor, I think of my father swaying from his noose like a metronome.

*

It's the violence, my mother told me once, that my blood has collectively faced. It's the drugs. It's the gutshot my great-grandfather took and his daughter's lethal abortion in an alley off Market Street. It's the fact that it becomes a list. Categorical. I did not believe how violent lives, violent deaths, could be transmitted through cells. Mom told me I had a weak imagination and placed her cigarette on the edge of the table to watch the ash collect and fall.

*

My father once said I kept him alive and I wonder what changed that. He told me once he would never go back to prison. Six years ago he was looking down the barrel of a 25 year bid. He kept his word.

*

I go entire days without laughing, without cracking a smile, without moving my mouth at all. Not even to eat. Only rubbing my tongue in the space where a tooth got kicked out.

*

I can see the stadium lights of my high school from the backyard. My ex-girlfriend's parents live up the street.

Last night I was taking out the trash and the orange cat who hangs out in my wheel well was laying in the driveway. He was dead, it was obvious in how not alive he looked. I didn't know if he belonged to any of the neighbors so I knocked on doors but no one answered. I grabbed an old shirt from my closet and draped it over his body, muttering something I remembered from Catechism: *...and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety.*

*

After I read the Gucci Mane book I texted Juice: *Guwop prolific as fuck*. He said *What? The Young Thug song? And I said Nah man, Gucci Mane, East Atlanta Santa*. Juice believes the real Gucci is dead, and the sober and healthy Gucci is a replacement, a replicant. I ate an Adderall and took a sip of my diet coke, tonguing the hole in my mouth where that tooth used to be.

*

I had to get out of bed. It was my dead friend's birthday and some of us agreed to have dinner, but I didn't want to go. One year ago I had

my hands around his neck, trying to keep him from hemorrhaging when he got stabbed in the throat. I lost. His frantic eyes searched but couldn't focus. I told him it was okay and that we'd look after his family. He died and I left before the ambulance arrived.

I got dressed and ate some more Adderall and pocketed a Klonopin and nicotine patches. I thought of shards of glass in the blades of grass. I thought of cumming on lusty lady death.

*

I'm just so bored of everything. Nothing surprises me anymore, even when it does. I clip my toenails and gather them to place inside an empty diet coke can. I ejaculate indiscriminately on my socks. I sit slouched in NA meetings and feel grateful for absolutely nothing.

*

I was watching my mom's house for a few days during the week in the middle of August. I took the days off work so I could hang out with the pets and get stoned. She lives out in the country on about five acres of pasture at the bottom of a valley, with my stepdad who is there for her and always comes home at night.

There was a thud at the window and Mila barked and ran to the door. I got off the couch to see what it was. Outside the window, a tiny bird lay on the ground, its tiny beak opening and closing. I knew it was going to die but felt panicked like I had to do something.

I couldn't just wait it out. I scooped the bird into my hands and submerged it in my dog's bucket of water. I can't say if dying the other way would have been better. The corpse floated to the top.

AARON BURCH INTERVIEWS CORY BENNET

AB: I asked Rebecca a version of this, too, so I'm a bit of a broken record, but I'm curious if you can talk about the impetus for this piece a little bit? With hers, there's a central image or two, and I was curious if that was as important in the genesis of her writing as it was in my reading. With yours, it's in these segmented chunks, and this is maybe a boring question, but is at least a place to start. I'm curious what was "first"...

CB: The chunks were much bigger, originally, and there was a story in there about a failed relationship and a dead friend, but the first thing I put down was about the dead cat in the driveway. I emailed the story to Mila Jaroniec and she sent it down the path that ultimately had me fragmenting the entire thing.

AB: ...and also, I guess, did you write them in the order they appear or not? Which is to kind of ask, in a newly separated from the above question, about how you constructed/organized this one?

CB: I wrote it all centered around finding the cat dead and drowning the bird. Those were what I wanted to work with. All the other things I just pulled from what was going on in my life or

had recently happened. I had no organization in mind, and Mila structured it for me and organized it, essentially. I owe a lot to her and Crow for editing that piece.

AB: Tell me a story about Mila and/or Crow. You can make one up.

CB: This isn't a story so much as what I think but Mila is a genius and could write and/or do anything and it would be great and the fact that she fucks with me still surprises me. Her humor and intelligence continue to impress me in delightful ways. This is all very mushy and shit but I don't give a fuck. I am obsessed with her. Crow sent me a skateboard poem once and I really liked it. I think he put it on Neutral Spaces. Oh shit, skate anthology!

AB: What do you think it is that's so interesting about writing about deer?

CB: In general or in my story? I think deer are incredibly stupid animals so there's not much interesting about them. I included them in the story because it was a surreal experience. The most interesting thing about them is that they were dead.

AB: "I've been reading about Catholic saints and the desert fathers."
... "After I read the Gucci Mane book." Tell me one good story

or anecdote or whatever, something you remember about either a Catholic saint and/or Gucci.

CB: Gucci has this philosophy that like if the major labels don't fuck with you, drop a mixtape or two in the street, and I really like that attitude. One of my favorite saints is Saint Guinefort who is a folk saint and also a dog. He died in 13th century France and basically his owner thought Guinefort had eaten or devoured his infant son, when in fact he had protected the son from a snake and saved his life. They dropped the dog down a well and covered/filled it with stones. And they made a shrine cause the dude knew he fucked up.

CONTRIBUTORS

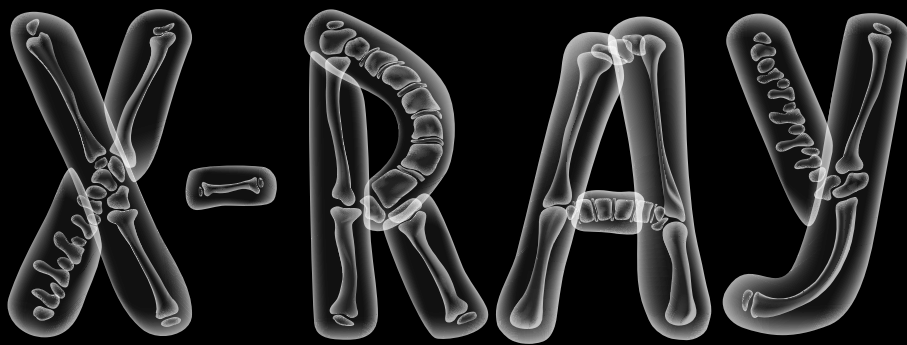
Cory Bennet is 32 and lives in northern california. his work has appeared in entropy mag, witch craft magazine, dostoyevsky wannabe, and shabby doll house. Cory is currently enrolled in the mfa program at sierra nevada university. He is on twitter @melancory666.

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Allie Zenwirth asks, if you have the means, please consider donating to Footstepsorg.org, an organization making escaping the Chasidic community a survivable possibility. Oh, and if you're an agent reading this: Allie is working on a memoir – wink. Find her on Twitter @AllieZenwirth.



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