

CONVERSATIONS WITH ORSON
COLLEEN O'CONNOR

Orson



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#86

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Introduction

— David Lazar

“Desire is an acquisition,” Colleen O’Connor writes in her unsettling series, *Conversations with Orson*. And much of desire is dark and escapable, the original noir of *noir*. The narrator is and isn’t O’Connor. Just as Orson is and isn’t Welles. Orson/O’Connor. *O*, the plasticity of persona. There is a perverse desire to be both known and unknown in these pieces, fragments of essay, prose poems, bad dreams. How to wrap around a signifier that big, that messy, spilling out so many shadows! Colleen O’Connor pierces her Orson Welles with pity and recognition. We imagine them on Corsica thanks to a time machine, her vivid imagination, and a kind of bad cinematic hangover. The hair of the dog is the deconstruction of the male gaze. The result is a series entirely original, hard to place, and in that way, Wellesian.

War of the Worlds

Grover's Mill, New Jersey, 1938

Smoke holds the house in its black coil. Orson may be the last living man on earth—his blackened hands find my face, trace the lines of my nose and chin. *This intense heat projects in a parallel beam*, he says. *It's a wave—a parabolic mirror*. His want for me is complicated.

We hide in this half-burnt, empty house; we're tattered, derelict. I find moldy bread in the kitchen, an orange not too spoiled to swallow. Orson records the movements of stars across my thighs and explains: *We generate intense heat in waves of conductivity. We spray the air with a jet of steam, an orange flash of light*. He smears ash on my hips and stomach. *The heat projects against any object it chooses*. Orson feels hot. His eyes pierce me.

Outside the kitchen window the yard sprawls in black crumbles, scorched. Inside, a radio blasts static. Orson props me on the countertop. *There's still you and me, two of us left. I'm ready to fling myself flat on the earth*. I wrap him in my legs. His heat projects; we steam.

Desire is an acquisition. At least, I assumed I'd acquire it, assumed I would eventually want for things in the ways I saw on television, in movies. I have tried to locate desire within myself for years, as if it's merely misplaced—what should throb in my chest lodged in my left wrist instead, what's supposed to tingle and ache blocked in a clogged artery. I temporarily find it—it shows its face for minutes or hours or even months at a time, only to vanish.

I have felt, of course, the heat of desire. Raw heat. Red and sharp. Sometimes I think I'll fuck everyone in a room. Sometimes I want everyone and everything and it presses against my insides like a tumor, pierces me like flashes of light cutting across a dark room, razor-edged and hot. This desire is harder for me to focus, harder to control and manipulate because it passes through me in bursts. It's slippery. It's difficult for me to grab a hold of, adjust, or even, when necessary, stop.

Orson's heat is like this. Orson is stinging and slick—he hooks me with his baby face, his devious eyes. His characters are so often devious and he (Orson the man, the off-reel character) was so often devious (in drink, in lies, in showing up months late to film sets, in making people wait). He blurs the line between characters, between role and man, between heat and scald. He's messy. He makes me wish I were messy—makes me want to learn to be devious, to make messes.

I place myself behind the scenes with Orson. I imagine him performing *The War of the Worlds*: a tiny radio studio, a glass window, a pop screen. I hear the power in his voice—his breath against the microphone, spitting out each word. His eyes are closed. His hands push a pair of thick black headphones firmly against his head. They leave imprints in his cheeks and bits of black plastic padding flake off onto his face. It's messy. Spit and saliva coat the metal microphone mesh and there's a vein bulging from his temple. His forehead sweats and he basks in the commotion. His arrogance is dizzying.

What did he do once it was over? I imagine he took off his headphones. He walked to the window and opened it. He didn't even bother to wipe the sweat away when he walked toward the door, opened it, and continued out and down the stairs.

So often I find myself struggling to feel desire at all, aching to feel its pull. This isn't to say that I don't ever feel that initial surge of desire. It does swell up at first—I desire so strongly, and then it stops. Halts. Put me in a quiet room with an object of my desire and chances are I'll clam up—that the want will drain from me like some sort of erotic bloodletting. I close off; I shut down; the thought of any kind of contact, of touching at all makes my stomach turn and my skin tighten. My limbs constrict. Desire's hazy fog dissipates and I'm left feeling crystal clear and hollow and nauseated and frustrated and it all woozes around inside me and I just can't do it; I'm sorry but I just can't; I did want to; I did but I can't; it isn't you; I just can't do this; I feel ill but I'm not ill, I'm just too warm and could you please open a window and I'm so sorry—it isn't you; I swear it isn't you; of course I want to but I just can't.

Maybe I desire Orson because I'll never be in the same room with him. I'll never have to tell him no.

The Third Man

Vienna, 1949

My fingers trace the seam of Orson's pants, hook their buttons.

The world doesn't make heroes outside of our stories, he says.

Vienna's streets are black. We hide in their shadowed corners. *I still*

believe in God, he says, I believe in God and mercy and all of that.

It must be midnight. Orson presses me, opens my jacket, curves my spine against the dusky brick wall. *Don't be so gloomy.* His lips thicken, puff.

Nobody thinks in terms of human beings. Orson puts his hand on my ribs, plucks them like a zither. *You and I aren't heroes.* He smirks, inky. *But victims? Don't be so melodramatic.* His breath is on my neck. *Be reasonable.* He pulls me to his chest. A woman opens her window, streams light across the square. *What do you want me to do?*

My obsession with Orson Welles started with *The Third Man*, even though he doesn't appear until halfway through the film. He enters at night, sneakily, veiled in a shadowy city square, hiding still in a doorway. His shoes appear first: dark and laced and gleaming. His pants are gray and cuffed and a cat grooms itself at his feet. Suddenly, the cat squeaks and a woman opens her window above, spilling light into the dark doorway, exposing him. Orson's face lights up against the black backdrop of his hat and suit jacket. He raises his eyebrows and flips his glance toward the light exposing him. It's as if he's annoyed by this light getting in the way. He smirks, parts his thick lips, and disappears again once the window shuts and cuts the light.

I am obsessed with Orson because I am obsessed with his shadows—the way he hides—the way he leers through the darkness and the camera and the screen. Orson is sneaky and subtle and he hides in corners and he lied in interviews and it is difficult to get a sense of what his life was like as he consistently shifted and changed the details of his stories. Orson hides in city squares. Orson hides in his characters. He hides in noir, hides in inky film. I imagine his hands are ink-stained. I imagine there are black and grey smudges on the pads of his fingers, the folds of his palms.

Orson hides not in darkness, but in shadow, which is different in its thinness. It's permeable. Shadow weighs less than darkness. It's porous and lithe. I am drawn to Orson because I want to hide in his shadows, and yet I fear it's only the shadow I want—the seclusion of Orson's murky corner on that city square in Vienna, the dusk of his jacket, the blackened cuff of his pants.

A torturous desire, to want shadow: I reach for it, but the light just steals it away. Depressed desire. Longing. Something about longing implies melancholy—wanting to touch something I'll never touch, wanting to feel something that doesn't even exist. Orson at the end of his life: bloated, drunk, recording commercials for champagne and canned peas. I want to touch that Orson—to soothe him and tell him that it's okay, I'll still touch him (I still want him) and he'll say the same things to me. Longing implies *despite*. I desire Orson *despite*.

Desire begins with looking, so often hot and piercing and flashy. But desire belongs in shadow, with light shifting to reveal only a little at a time: the blurred memory of a body, a hand pressing against a scrap of thigh, lifting the corner of a shirt to reveal a warm bit of skin. Don't show me the whole thing, not all at once. I want to desire in pieces, with an obscured view, forever peering over an edge or through darkness to get a better look.

It's easy to lose sight of the darkness, of the haze and fog that come with wanting, of the way bodies are lost and conflated in desire's shadows—arms cast shadows over legs, legs cast shadows over arms, hands cast shadows, and hair, and the soft pads of fingers, and skin casts shadows over skin and desire pulls and pushes and the light dims and dims and dims.

Citizen Kane

Xanadu, Florida, 1941

Dawn's shadows give way to the Gulf Coast murk. Orson splays in his bed, silhouetted against his window. *I'm sorry*, he breathes, *You don't have to fight anymore*. He is aged, leering. *And anyway, there are always endings*. His hands find my face. His voice is hot in my ear. *You end with your last word*.

I taste the salt on his pillow as he drags a glass ball across my bare back. *You can't fight impersonally*. His thick hands cup my neck, tug my hair. *The personal is all there is*, he says, *Find your own terms*. I move to him, pressing, stagnant and choked. *Those are the only terms anybody knows*.

Orson drops his glass ball, pulls me tight, sloppy, closer than before. The ball rolls to the corner. *I'll tell you what to do*.

Sometimes I think I could fuck my way back into myself. It isn't as if I desire the actual fucking—I just want to let myself crash fully into another person. To bruise my way into existence. It's as if I'm trying to fuck my way out of desire, to rid myself of it, and trying to fuck my way into what I desire instead. Trying to become the thing I want. To become anything at all.

Orson had many lovers during his lifetime, famous women, gorgeous women, women who most often left him. Rita Hayworth. Dolores del Rio. I wonder if, before they left, these women tragically fucked Orson—if they wrapped him up in their arms or their legs and touched him sadly, the way lovers touch each other when they know the relationship is over, the way we try to force ourselves to connect physically when there is nothing left, when the love is gone, when we know each other's bodies so well and that knowing has somehow left a hollow space where desire should be, and then there's just the sadness of that knowing, the sadness of repulsion, of the absence of spark, the sadness that comes from letting things end, letting them fizzle and sputter and eventually die.

I am struck by an iconic scene toward the end of *Citizen Kane*. Orson is Kane and Kane is devastated because his second wife left him. He is in her bedroom, a weakened old man. His hair is white, his skin is wrinkled and he walks with a bit of a limp. When she leaves, he watches her disappear down the long hallway, and then proceeds to tear her bedroom to bits. He knocks over tables and lamps, rips shelves from the walls and throws vases, boxes, keepsakes. Once the room is completely destroyed, he turns around and sees the entire house staff staring at him. His face is hollowed and sagging, but he looks calm. Proud even, but emptied.

I want Orson in that mess. Orson is Kane, but Orson is Orson, and I desire each part of him—his role, his self, his acting, the fact that he is split into Welles and Kane and director and man. He is Kane left broken-hearted; he is Orson left broken-hearted; he is Orson Welles left shattered when the film failed and was heckled at the Academy Awards. Kane's sadness is his sadness, is my sadness.

There is, of course, the violence in desire—the way it threatens to slam two bodies together without any regard for bruises, the way it pulls until it rips us apart from ourselves. I'm terrified of the violence, not because of the ripping, but because of how badly I want to be torn. To feel anything at all.

Orson lived violently, in that he overate and overdrank and oversexed and his films were always over budget and the excess, the constant overages wreaked violent havoc on his body. Orson violently took up space—it wasn't enough for him to simply exist: he expanded, swelled, took up room. I'm attracted to that space, that ability to exist so widely. My physical presence so often feels diminished. Orson basked in his weight, in his physical presence. He gloated. I desire that growing, that puff, that taking up room.

In parts of *The Third Man*, Orson had a body double. It's hard to imagine someone doubling for Orson, pretending to have his body. I imagine the charges running through the body double's arms as they stretched or his fingers if he paused to scratch his face. As if we can switch our bodies. As if we can pretend there's someone else inside.

I want to be Orson's body double. I want his body to surround my body, to encase me. I want to desire Orson from within him, from that fleshy darkness. I want to watch my own movement through Orson's eyes, I want my hands to touch Orson with Orson's hands. I want to desire Orson, for Orson to desire me and himself at the same time and we'd touch each other and ourselves at the same time with the same fingers and we'd say the same things to one another in exactly the same voice.

Touch of Evil

Mexico/U.S. Border, 1958

Orson has a gun but won't use it.

Do you know the best way to kill? he asks. *The best way is smart.* I slip my fingers under his jacket. *It's clean, silent.*

We are under a bridge. My back faces the water. *A rope leaves no fingerprints,* he says. *Water is deep.* Orson grabs my hands, spins me around, digs his chin into my shoulder. *Every last silence sinks.* I sway against him. *Every weight settles.* In the distance, lights graze the border. A car honks at a gate.

He spins me—my face meets his chest, swelling, sweating. We lurch to the ground. *Ignore that thing they wear,* he says, *That halo. That glowing piece of string.* *An innocent man,* he says, *doesn't eat his heart. Doesn't pine.* My hands find his belt. *He sinks, guilty, to his knees. Then to his hands.* In the distance, sirens.

If I had a gun it would shoot blanks. Or it should shoot blanks. Or it could shoot blanks, but maybe no one would ever even know it shot blanks because what does a blank even feel like anyway? I imagine a puff of air against the skin. A quick, pressured prick and sting.

I guess I'm trying to say I feel empty, but I've said it before. I am devoid of this something I'm supposed to have, this desire, and wanting this man to fill me up—this shadow of a man, Orson, this ghost, this embodiment of access and lack, of having and not having, of touching from great distances, of feeling hands on me without actually having hands on me, of my own safety, of having exactly what I want while never actually having to have it at all.

A gun is too easy of a metaphor anyway. Desire fires on all cylinders, is locked and loaded. Though in this metaphor I suppose I'm the gun. An empty gun, but a gun nonetheless. Maybe I'm looking to hurt. Maybe I want to happen, not be happened to.

Orson lied and it seemed as though he had fun lying and sometimes I lie too. Desire practically demands it, as does a lack of desire. I've faked my way into desire, faked the desire itself. It maybe wasn't you I wanted, for example, but there you were—my desire proxy. And then I became an actor, my desire the great lie. All desire's a stage. I'm skilled at maneuvering it well, bending my limbs and arching my back into the most believable shapes, folding into what desire demands: an arched back, a quivering lip, the slight bend in a neck that beckons for more. Or at least it seems to beckon. I suppose one can never really know for sure.

In *F for Fake*, his only documentary, Orson says, *What we professional liars hope to serve is truth. I'm afraid the pompous word for that is art.*

Maybe, but the word is also *desire*. After all, how many lies have I told? How many lies have been told to me in an effort to coerce me into feeling desire? *You're beautiful*, they've said. Or, *You look like you have nice tits*. Or, *There's no one else here I want but you*. Or even, quite simply, *I do*.

Would I lie to Orson? I wouldn't have to. His lies are enough for the both of us, which is maybe all I want anyhow—to be rid of the need to lie all together. To be rid of the need for desire. To make it a given, an assumption, something that never needs to be acknowledged or said—something only to be acted upon.

Maybe I'm wrong about it all and desire isn't the lie. Maybe it isn't even desire that drives the lie. I suppose that maybe the pompous word for that, I'm afraid, is *love*.

F for Fake

Ibiza, Spain, 1975

Orson holds a coin in the palm of his hand, holds everything. *This isn't magic*, he says, *Never think this is magic. Everything you hear right now is true and solid fact.*

We are in a beach house, in dim light, in fog. It's the booze, isn't it? It's the salty heat, the wet breeze. I can't think straight, can't set anything straight. I won't.

Open your mouth wide, Orson says. He puts his hands under my chin, turns my face to profile, looks hungrily at my teeth and tongue. *You're suffering from August*. I am pulled toward his heat. A crooked painting hangs limp on the wall, the canvas slacked: a smeared gun, an oil-slicked rendering of something that's sure to hurt.

I'm going to tell you a story. He brings me into the living room, sits me at a long dining table. The hot wind doesn't stop, never stops. *Everything must fall. It all wears away. A fact of life: we're going to die.*

He's eating now, peeling oranges and sipping wine. He puts his hand in my hair, slicks my bangs back with the sweat on my forehead. There's a twitch in his eye, a tear in the canvas on the wall.

Almost any story is almost certainly some kind of lie. He stands up. He turns his back to me. He begins to walk toward the water.

Acknowledgments & Notes

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A portion of the language from *The War of the Worlds*, *The Third Man*, *Touch of Evil*, *F for Fake*, and *Citizen Kane* has been adapted and repurposed from its respective screenplay/transcript (written by Orson Welles, or in the case of *The Third Man*, by Graham Greene).

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Author Bio

Colleen O'Connor received her MFA in Nonfiction from Columbia College Chicago. She is the author of the chapbook *The Pretty Thing to Do* (Dancing Girl Press, 2016) and her work has appeared in journals like *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Glittermob*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, and *PANK*. She lives in Chicago, where she is the Managing Editor of the feminist poetry press Switchback Books.



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