

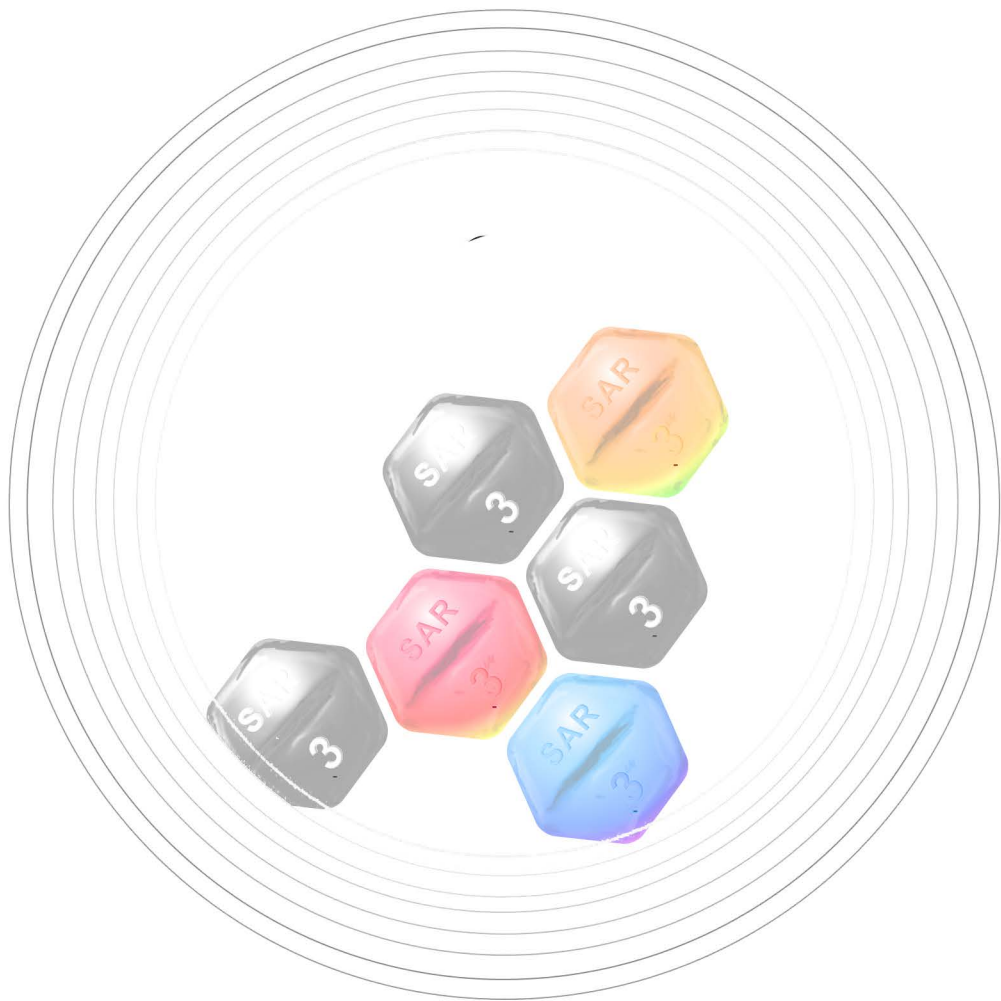
SELECTED AMAZON REVIEWS

VOLUME 3

KEVIN KILLIAN

selected and introduced by

DIA FELIX



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#93

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ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES

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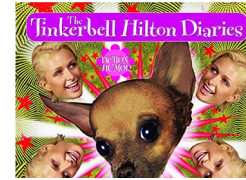
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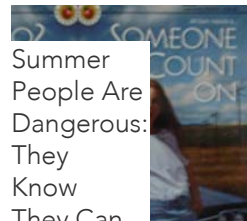


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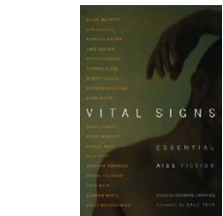
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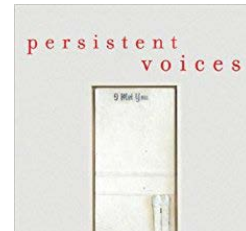
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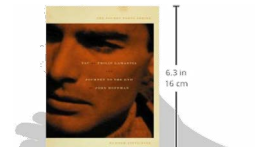
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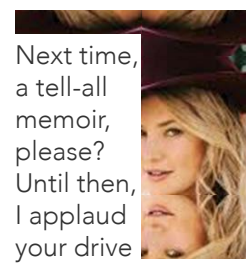
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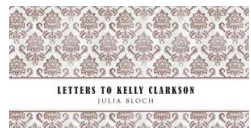
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Introduction

Take it from me, these reviews are really something.

When I was a little g/irl growing up at the foot of the Golden Gate Bridge, (in a small house that we referred to as “the little toe” for its diminutive position in the formation of mostly xtra-butth former military buildings of the Presidio), I would read Kevin Killian’s Amazon reviews to cure my frequent fevers. Putting a towel along the bottom of my bedroom door to trick mother and older sister into thinking that my room was dark, I would read until butterflies of exhaustion flocked at the edges of my vision, and, finally soothed, I could sleep against the soundtrack of the crashing silver waves. What was under those waves?

Mornings were no easier. It wasn’t only a hard time for me and for my family, it was a hard and strange time in general, wasn’t it? If you don’t remember it I don’t really even want to tell you. As I recall it was nearly always cold and damp, and if you didn’t hear from someone for a few weeks, you could assume the worst. There were the occasional darts of joy, of course, bright spots in the darkness. Like the pop-up visits from Dad-Dad, with rollicking, boozy games of Stinky Boot. These transported us for a short time through sheer physical exhaustion, we tumbled slapstick-style into heaps of laughter.

I remember one particular time almost dying of laughter with older sister's full weight on my chest. As she looked down at me smugly I thought, well, if this is how it all ends, I guess it's not such a bad way to go. . . but other than these brief diversions it kind of sucked. Young friends, I hope you never know a single hour like this time.

Even as Dad-Dad's visits grew slim and eventually vaporized into memory, even as the streets were increasingly empty, even as darkness came over me like a soft, dirty bedsheet . . . there was something which I can only describe as a sort of enduring chord in my heart, a sympathetic vibration which bestowed on me an embodied knowledge—that my people were out there somewhere, buzzing too, with me. That there was a kinder world, a world of mercy. That there was something to discover. As I grew, it grew louder. I believed I would find it someday.

Every day on my way to my temp job in Unreal Estate I walked past a broken freeway, with metal sinew hanging down like torn-open arteries, an earthquake casualty. There was talk of memorializing it, which enraged me. Why would a physical fact be honored, but not all the souls that were disappearing everywhere, constantly, with no more fanfare than specks of dust into a Hoover? And of course, the question which underlined each day, each hour, each breath, like a pulsing cursor—why was I still here, able to have thoughts like, should I spend an extra dollar to get guacamole on my burrito, or save it towards a new bike light?

It's odd, what gave me comfort. The stamps in the library books which declared with certainty San Francisco Public

Library once brought me to the brink of tears. The fact of it. The new crops of young people with their tribal tattoos and open faces enquiring as to the vegan-ness of this or that. Oh but back to the library—it was in one of those very stamped books I learned of a saying from a faraway culture: after a story, the storyteller says, and then three apples fell from heaven. One for the storyteller, one for the listener, and one for the person who makes the story come true.

I don't know if there are other worlds where old friends will meet again. I don't know if my sister, who perfected her eyeliner and smoking (and smoky eyeliner) techniques just in time to leave this earth, will ever tickle me or sit on me again. Her eyes were like the pattern of a tabby cat. They were so crazy the way they contained every color. Except blue. Just recently in a dream, she'd moved up to Sonoma County and opened a childcare center called Rad Beginnings. I don't know if she's gone or if she's here with me in the room right now. I know there is a nanny who works on my block who has green hair, a leopard fur jacket, and is very kind to her tiny charge. I know that the world seems to start again every day.



Well it's 2017 now. In my role as editor, I've selected 40ish from the 2554 (and counting!) reviews that undefeatable Hall of Fame reviewer Kevin Killian has produced. The story goes that Killian began writing these as a low-stakes exercise, a way to return to writing in small, self-contained bits after significant health troubles broke his writing pattern. In them, I feel a fresh lightheartedness engendered by proximity to the literal end. They are wise and have the perfume of the afterlife.

I grabbed hot banana-yellow stars. I favored reviews of household items. Nimble, playful, and imaginative, the reviewed objects are touchstones for exercises of narrative imagination which provide prompts toward better living—here's how to have a better home and more wildly imagined life, here are mantle top case studies of liberation, radical love, self-actualization. There is medicine in duct tape, knock-off Finnish vases, Christmas decor. Everyday things can be “the answer to deep grief.” You can make a home anywhere, friends at any crosswalk or pharmacy line, pop stars are just as holy as saints, and the minutiae of the everyday can be prismatic, animated with good wishes and ghosts. Family history can be revised. First person accounts and human interest are ever the most enchanting portals for literature, veracity is minor. (Did you really faint?) Some reviews are self-contained stories and worlds, making a world that you can enter. A world you recognize. A world you desire. A world to hope for. That thing you always want from art.

It's been said that Killian has “no bottom line.”¹ It does seem that these pieces in particular are free and unconcerned. When you discover them, you might have a feeling of peeking at something mysterious, a private chamber of the imagination or personal demo tapes. Not in the sense of something underformed but in the sense of something purely gestural, yet still about people. Amazon customers rarely mark the reviews as being “helpful.” Some complain of a lack of seriousness, some are confused. There is some petty amusement to be had in reading instances of minor outrage.

¹ Said by Bob Gluck as recounted on page 72 of *Academonia* by Dodie Bellamy.

In misusing this for-profit platform, Kevin Killian joyfully lacerates the supposed doom of the present. The question is not whether to use branded platforms anymore but HOW. Not will we be cash cows but HOW. This gesture, or 2563 gestures, makes a happy vision of the future/present even as the consensual world devolves toward decreasing possibilities for living weirdly. A sexy new morality shines like a sportscar. This work can excite your sense of freedom and make you want to consume more literature. A *côte d'Azur* on every table.

Sometimes I get weird with taking pictures, I said to Kevin after our lunch. Vanity wise.

The waiter took the photo.

I used to be weird about it until I realized it's just going to get worse. So you might as well preserve the present, he said.

Squeezing the biscuit,
Dia Felix
New York/San Francisco 2017

With my bells and velvet

Review of *Jingle Bell Stick* on December 7, 2006

As an American boy growing up in a rundown chateau along the Côte d'Azur, which is in France, I could wake up and smell the Alps in one nostril and the salty Mediterranean in the other. As Christmas approached we would jostle each other at breakfast (steaming mugs of chocolate, large, leafy flaky bricolettes, and heaping bowls of Casino Boules Miel) in our rush to get out into the yard to the bayberry hedge abutting our property, where we would crouch like explorers waiting for a sign. Hush, we would whisper to each other in choked excitement. The Christmas Owl is approaching. Sooner or later we would spot the Christmas Owl—a fluffy, feathery white mass tottering along on the far side of the hedge. We would greet its arrival by spouting the mating calls of owls, the call children love, “Who? Who?” The French girl who took care of us would be giggling in the corner, sprawled on a hayrick, face half buried in a volume of Françoise Sagan. “Silly children,” she would reproach us, in French. “Bring a torch, Jeannette, Isabella.” Eventually we were to learn that the mass of white feathers was not an owl at all, but rather one of St. Paul de Vence’s most distinguished citizens, the painter Marc Chagall.

Chagall had been spending every Christmas in St. Paul de Vence for decades, known everywhere for his renderings of Jewish folklore and cows flying through the air and rapturous

lovers jumping over rainbows. The local church, or, as we called it, our *eglise*, was decorated with stained glass executed in Chagall's workshop. To local children he represented the eternal spirit of youth, and we liked to go to his seaside villa, with our jingle sticks, and sing him carols in English, a language with which he had little working knowledge. My parents were mum about the propriety of bothering our illustrious neighbor with our cracked and unmusical voices, but they worried about the possible implications of serenading such a famous Jewish man, with songs and bell ringing explosions commemorating the birth of Christ. It seemed unkindly to say the least. In our ignorance we just clutched our jingle sticks tighter and shook them without mercy. Have you ever really looked at your jingle stick? At Amazon you can order as many as you like, strapping them if desired to your arms and legs. They will ring out the Christmas season as loud as you want it to be, in whatever nation you find yourself, grown-up or no. And the velvet makes for a festive, warm touch. Its red is like the lustrous ruby red Russian-bred Chagall employed in *I and the Village* and other famous paintings. Oh well, it has been many a year since our elderly neighbor passed on to the great chamber in the sky, but I still think of him every time frost hits the air and my jingle sticks fall out of the top drawer of my treasured *directoire*, he who said so famously, his triangular mop of hair a cleaver of white owl feathers atop a jaunty head, "All colors are the friends of their neighbors and the lovers of their opposites."

The answer to deep grief

Review of Mackenzies Smelling Salts 17 ml
(Health and Beauty) on December 31, 2013

My Irish grandfather used to keep a bottle of MacKenzie's Smelling Salts next to his desk. He was the principal at Bushwick High School (in Brooklyn, NY) in the 1930s and 1940s, before it became a dangerous place to live in, and way before Bushwick regained its current state of desirable area for new gentrification. And he kept one at home as well, in case of a sudden shock. At school, he would press the saturated cotton under the nostrils of poor girls who realized they were pregnant in health class, before he expelled them. Or, when the policy of corporal punishment had allowed him rather too much paddling of the sophomore boys, he would apply smelling salts to their faces till they recovered from passing out.

For me, 2013's a new era, and the salts themselves seem way more organic than they used to when first I sampled them in the '70s. I was a typical teen raiding my grandparents' medicine cabinet, trying a little of this, a little of that, you know . . . I took a whiff of the MacKenzie's and I was like, whoa! It was the feeling when your face has been "stuffed up," and reality has blurred your vision, your passages clogged, the doors of perception jammed shut. And one infusion of this magic ointment opens all of them up within a fraction of an instant, you can't even get a syllable out, you're just yourself again, your very best self.

Nowadays, with my ongoing heart problems, I use them only when I'm in a deep grief or have had a shock. I was so sad when Paul Walker died. And then again one day I came staggering down the stairs, having been passed over for inclusion in the 2014 Whitney Biennial by a troika of careless curators, I simply collapsed out of grief, and it took my wife a minute or two to locate the MacKenzies, but passing it under my nose, as though she were my grandfather ministering to the pregnant girls of yore, or the sore-bottomed "tough guys": and suddenly I snorted and came awake, shot to my feet, still grieving for my disappointment but at least able to function and go back to making my art, feeding the cats, etcetera, being a man. In time of deep mourning thank goodness for small miracles!

When in Doubt, Go with the Swag

Review of **Good Tidings 30-Inch Teardrop Christmas Swag with Apples, Holly, and German Ivy (Kitchen)** on December 31, 2009

I wanted to get the kids some swag for the holidays and thank goodness didn't look for the reviews that accompany Good Tidings! I might have gotten so discouraged it would have been a terrible Christmas for all of us in our group, kids and adults alike. Goodness knows 2009 has been a terrible year what with economic foreclosure, broken promises, worry about jobs and careers: I feel sorry for the children is what. My kids have a thing for swag, always have, maybe comes from a special place in their hearts and a time when, as itinerant festive merrymakers, we would take them from town to town at Christmastime to sing carols in front of happy and well-off family townhouses in the nicer parts of town. Sometimes the snow would be falling and the kids, who had seen snow only on TV, would watch like angels in wonderment as the white cold flakes covered the holly and the ivy.

Now here it comes back again in swag form. For those of you who have missed out on the joy of swag, it is an agricultural product made from living firs and other decorations. I have seen them threaded with miniature gold horns and harps, but here, it is just mother nature speaking, holly, ivy, and a few apples for good measure.

The kids have always enjoyed a nice apple. Many a Christmas morning they would rub the sleep from their eyes and then plunge a greedy little hand into the very bottom of the Christmas stocking hung from the dinette with care, to find the prettiest apple available in stores. Now all this goodness available in season no matter what part of the country you're from (we're in San Francisco). It's shaped like a teardrop and may indeed bring a tear to your eye if you have any heart at all, and remember, Christmas is for the children. When in doubt, go with the swag.

Clever isn't the word for it!

Review of **Clever 5198 Ferrara Latin Brief (Men's Clothing)** on December 31, 2009

Top scientists collaborated on the design for this product in two teams, meeting daily for three weeks. One team worked on the crotch and pouch fabric, producing a cotton spandex blend that was more or less like some other sort of underwear you might buy, but for the huge tent-like monolith in the front of the underwear molded to show off your package. The other team took responsibility for the remainder of the underwear, the sheer, nylon, and spandex blend that will remind you of an old-time nurse's white stockings. Thin slips of a hardier material are sewn in (or perhaps pressed in with nuclear tape) to form the natural ends of the leg openings. And the waistband tells you, "Clever": in appealing black letters. Should you manage to get someone to give you these for Christmas, thank them kindly and then make your own way to the dressing room, for it will take you a good 15 minutes for your eyes to stop popping out of your head.

Once again, scientific underwear design brings us a future in which you seem to be wearing two things at once, neither of them very flattering, but together they create a wily, synchronic lilt that, as you rub your thighs together, will ensure a cottony susurrant audible from the building next door. Sort of a white noise, very much a Lou Reed metal machine music.

To get them off your hips, you really have only to wear them until you're tired of them. In public and semi-public places, whether it be a beach in Malaysia or the penthouse roof of a hot Madrid nightclub, they will be your tickets to success, if not happiness. Somewhere, a lone Lycra molecule will be smiling.

Do You Want to Build a Lesbian Masterpiece?

Review of *Frozen* (DVD) on September 29, 2015

Disney's *Frozen* has some magical sequences and tuneful numbers, but mostly people respond to it because of its story of sisters who can't live with each other, can't live without each other. The simple plot must hold a deeply felt Marion Woodman appeal to a variety of audiences—the largest of which, apparently, is girls under 10, millions of whom have made home videos of themselves singing "Let It Go" and released them on YouTube in cute outfits and with (sometimes) bewilderingly sophisticated, perhaps parent-supplied backgrounds and props.

Idina Menzel can be imperious in real life, but in *Frozen* she seems deeply sorry for having offended anyone and for having turned all of Irindell into a winter hell without a single flower. And also for hurting her sister Anna (once again!) with her magical power of coldness. The ingenious screenwriters have simplified the plot of Hans Christian Andersen's "Snow Queen" story of the Danish Romantic period, so that now instead of an evil snow queen menacing a brother and sister (Kay the brother and Gerda the sister), the siblings are both female—perhaps they took their cue from the way Kay never sounded like a boy's name anyhow...instead of three characters, they reduced them to two by making the evil queen and the devoted sister the same person!

Kristen Bell employs a beautiful strong voice as Anna, and she is so funny your sides will hurt at some of her byplay with Kristoff and Olaf, yet halfway through she becomes increasingly out of her game, for a reason I can't disclose—

[SPOILERS AHEAD]

Okay, because Elsa has shot a chip of ice into her heart, the way the Snow Queen did to Kay in the old Andersen story—

[SPOILERS CONCLUDED]

As she grows weaker and weaker, she has to undergo some dramatic suffering rather beyond Bell's own Veronica Mars comic charm. Well, even tragedy queens like Angelina Jolie might not have been able to handle the depths of the part, so I would give Kristen Bell a good "B" for doing her best.... If Billie Whitelaw was still alive she could have given Anna that precipitous Camille-like decline and tragic illness inherent in the part. And having Jonathan Groff as Kristoff doesn't help the situation much. Luckily here the little Snowman and the big Reindeer come in and steal the show with their heroics. That snowman, Olaf, is the most original cartoon character in eons, and his big oblivious number about "Summer" is more surreal than anything Man Ray ever made in or out of Hollywood. Suffice it to say, me and my wife were like two seven-year-old girls watching this film and for the first time in forever we burst out into applause and clapped until our palms grew raw and chapped. I wouldn't say that the cold never bothered me anyway, but I felt pretty heroic after watching *Frozen* and look forward to at least 14 other sequels—fingers crossed!

Used Again and Again

Review of Novelty Dummy Full Size with Hands (Toys & Games) on November 22, 2013

Like most of the other reviewers, I first bought this dummy in 2011 as a prop for a haunted house me and my mates were operating in Oakland, just across the Bay Bridge from San Francisco. We were running a nonprofit artist run space that hosts poetry readings and meetings of likeminded people into poetry and the verbal arts. For years, ever since the shutdown of government support for poetry, Halloween has been a big money making time for us, but in 2011 as I recall we were especially wary of other competition, breathing down our necks, because a good spooky house is something every artist wants to have at his disposal this time of year. With increased competition everybody has got to boast more gore, more carnage, more fake blood and most of all, more corpses, and realistic looking ones particularly, otherwise a jaded audience gets weary and bored easy, just as if we were presenting two Language poets, say, while the other guy down the street could boast Mary Oliver and Billy Collins. Thus in 2011, we were totally up against it, and we wound up going wholesale and buying dummies, where once we could count on our friends acting crazy in homemade costumes—Jack the Ripper, the Human Blockhead, the spider with 10 legs, the Hypnotic Eye, Jayne Mansfield without her head, Tarzan, and many more.

Alas those once unemployed poets had landed good tech jobs at Twitter and Google and were no longer amused by nor available for the long hours and unpaid lifestyle of a spooky house volunteer for poetry. Amazon came to the rescue so I bought one of these guys as a treat. We planned to employ “Dummy Full Size with Hands” as a mummy, sort of a Frankenstein mummy with a meat knife sticking out of his chest, a mummy that would greet the terrified pilgrim who opened the door to the back room with a maniacal recorded cackle easily downloadable from numerous sources on Spotify or iTunes. And it worked.

It worked so well that our competitors from other poetry groups protested that we were stealing all of their thunder. They didn't realize we were trying to raise the money to start off 2012 with a bang and we needed the extra dough to be able to afford Christian Bök and Dottie Lasky to come together onstage for our Valentine Ball. The only question was what to do with our dummy till the next year, 2012 Halloween? None of our members had an extra bedroom for the fellow so, even though he was fairly heavy and nearly my own height, I wound up taking him home back to my place where he remains today. My cats love him, they sit in his lap all day and shroud his crotch with hair (I should say, it's not really anatomically a crotch). He went back to work just this past Halloween in a new costume—Manson! And when I'm feeling lonely and my wife has gone out of town on business or pleasure, I hate sleeping alone, so I shoo the cats away and drag my guy into the bed with me to spoon with. You know, he's stuffed, and his spine comes with extra holes into which you can feed more stuffing, be it grain, acorns, or styrofoam, and I like to move my fingers

up and down his spine looking for the holes and sealing them up if necessary. His hands are fully operable and will wrap themselves around any elongated object.

Duct Tape Special

Review of Polyken 223 Multi-Purpose Duct Tape (Misc.) on April 20, 2010

I was impressed by the manufacturer's claim that "This product's actual size is 72mm x 55m. This tape is typically cut to width from log rolls so most sizes ship on a plain white core." I've used enough duct tape in the past to know that, although many manufacturers claim they're cutting to width from log rolls, it's not always the case. Duct tape's a funny thing, isn't it? No matter what you're using it for. I like Polyken as a brand and I always like products cut from logs . . . When I was in shop class in high school they used to call me the Log Lady, and one time it was my birthday they brought me an ice cream cake shaped like a log! So I ordered several rolls of the dark green 223, as you see here, and when it came I went a little crazy with the back of my refrigerator . . .

And also I had the common problem of having three cats (of my wife's) who run around the kitchen sometimes knocking down the upright broom and dust mop much to my annoyance. Problem licked with Polyken! I just applied a few inches of that thick, log-derived polymer on either side of the broom handle, basically taping it to the wall. Mop too. One caveat, but this is something all duct tape users know: if you are actually taping yourself, or another human being, watch out, that tape stings when you peel it off, so save the bare skin by inserting strips of

linen or cotton underneath, and save yourself some swearing down the line.

It has a nice aroma just sitting in my shop cellar. I keep thinking it wouldn't be inappropriate in my top dresser drawer, if I ever run out of potpourri—again, a nice mixture of clean, sweet, unearthed log, and maybe something a little chemical like air freshener.

Think Pink

Review of **Officemate Breast Cancer Awareness Push Pins, 200 per Tub, Pink (08906) (Office Product)**
on August 26, 2011

If you are worried that having these pink push pins on your desk at home or at the office will somehow brand you as a softie, well, worry no more, just enjoy. First off, this is a product with true quality. I have bought six packs of these pins and have never experienced so much as a jab or a defect. It is almost as good as it gets! Then, the color pink is not as feminine as you might suppose. Indeed, as you can see from the illustration, no two push pins have the same exact tint of pink. And their colors change depending on the light. Spill out the jar of Office Mate Push Pins across your blotter in the morning sunlight. You'll see a soothing, almost angelic pink on their tips, as friendly as a dog's tongue licking your face. At noon, under the white-hot sun, spill them again, the pink nearly disappears, almost burnt off by the summer heat. You'll think you're looking at little white dots of loose-leaf clipped from a pad of white paper, instead of the backs of sharp pins. Seeing them pushed into corkboards you wonder, how'd that pink get so pallid, like an old formal your former wife wore to her high school prom and for some unaccountable reason kept hung and wrapped on the back of her closet door for years. Miss Havisham anybody?

Then at evening, when the breezes pour in through the veranda, and it's time for a nice planter's punch, knock over your container of push pins once again and see the difference! The pink has turned red, lobster red, as though engorged by blood and the pins seem sharper than ever. Take your thumbs and plunge these pin-heads through paper and cork, feel the satisfying crunch going in, the press and release. Tell me this ain't the way push pins should be—like small, personalized power tools of the mind.

Conceptual Calories

Review of *Wear Your Life Well: Use What You Have to Get What You Want* (Hardcover) on August 21, 2009

Marilu Henner's book was one given to me by someone concerned about my total health and beauty—not just the surface, what one sees from outside, but the inner light that glows from within. My friend pointed out that, although Henner, a former actress and TV star, had written many successful volumes about total health and beauty, the new one hadn't done well in the bookstores and was already remaindered. I can see that there certainly weren't anywhere near the number of reviews for this book that Henner's previous books mustered, even on Amazon. Check it out, maybe people are tired of her message. Well, they shouldn't be! She has a lot to offer the restless seeker.

One of her main tenets is similar to advice my uncle Bill used to give me, when he said that if you smile often, you'll feel yourself growing unconsciously happier because the muscles make you happy. Uncle Bill, who exerted a strange influence over me, was a Marilu Henner type of person, though a bit larger and younger. Henner advises those of us who are not healthy to think about auditioning for the role of a healthy person. How would you walk if you were healthy? What would your hair look like? How would you prepare for this role? And if you can do it for even a day, you can "act" your way into

fitness. But, you will say, I'm not an actor. Nonsense, scoffs Henner, we all of us act every day.

Think of your health as a business, she says. She has written all of her books while acting in other projects, for the energy that fuels the one fuels the other too, through an odd cross pollination of good ideas. My Uncle Bill was like that too, he thought nothing of installing knotty pine walls into a basement while dictating his response to Plato's *Symposium* into one of those old fashioned reel to reel recorders. And always dressed impeccably, like Marilu Henner—none of those vinyl workout outfits for her, because they promote dehydration.

Just Perfect Now

Review of *A Book of Prophecies* (Paperback)

on July 11, 2007

I think even those of us who love John Wieners's poetry have been taken aback, in fact bowled over by the greatness of his hitherto unknown *Book of Prophecies*, written in the 1969–1970 period right after *Nerves* and preceding *Behind the State Capitol or Cincinnati Pike*, but whatever, we're all happy now. Halfway through the book you can trace the mark, so obvious it feels like an actual physical thing, perhaps a torso in marble missing an arm or two, where Wieners must have decided that the lyric style of *Nerves*, *Asylum Poems*, etcetera, just wasn't going to cut it for him anymore and it was time to move onto the "derangements" of his later style, the accent on language's materiality, the "cut up" effects, the slide into a slippery first person multiplicity. It's fascinating just from a biographical point of view, and in effect what you get is a whole mini-anthology of two very different strains in Wieners's writing, and this *Book of Prophecies* provides wonderful example of both styles.

The other night there was a launch for this book at New College here in San Francisco, and as reader after reader took the stage to read from this book, we were struck by how many of these poems, which we had never heard before, had the force and the "click" of what amounts to instant classics.

They were new to us, and yet we felt we had known them forever. As it happens, a few poems will be already familiar to you from this book, as Wieners published them separately or in magazines and they wound up in the old Black Sparrow *Selected Poems*, only now in their full context they make sense, and accrue a patina or luster of richness which they lacked before, appealing as they were in their abandoned state.

The book itself is physically beautiful, and the young Boston-based poet Michael Carr has done a fantastic service by providing this transcription of a "lost" Wieners notebook—replete with some scans of the actual holograph—with a fine sensitivity to Wieners's variegated methods of punctuation, spelling, line break, revision, and so forth. (At the end of 1991 the notebook itself was bought by Kent State Special Collections in Ohio, where Carr "discovered" it.) The poet Jim Dunn, who was close to Wieners in the final years of J. W.'s life, has written an introduction that might be a model for this sort of thing, a memoir and an appreciation in one, in which he doesn't seek to shield the reader from the immense difficulties of reading Wieners, nor does he romanticize Wieners's psychological and physical ruin.

"I died no one/ as I once felt I had/ to be someone." He is the poet of heartbreak, and the shadow figure enslaved by the more vigorous and together figures in his life, like Olson or Creeley, feeling himself hardly human in his pale remnants of a life. Both shamed and inspired, as well, by the superhuman, glamorous Hollywood actresses and female artists he had glimpsed on screen, or met in "real life," from Jean Seberg and Barbara Stanwyck to Nico and Nell Rice, Grace Hartigan and Phyllis Webb. *A Book of Prophecies* begins, eerily enough,

with the single poem, "2007," a Blakean, ecstatic prediction of a moment tragically removed from our own, his vision of Aquarius in "full flowers" and "music string and forms of verse controlled symbolism." The poems don't always work, and a couple of them dangle sadly into a ludic space, but the best of them are among the greatest poems Wieners ever wrote, and that's saying something. At the launch I read "Sexual Despair," nearly made myself cry out loud with repressed longing and hardcore sex tension. "I need you, my little son/ / to be beside me in bed/ jerking your meat and/ smoking hash-hish/ /What will the future bring/ this fear ling-/ ers every day." Well, as you can see, all I am saying is, this is a signal event for poetry and a rare opportunity to re-assess the work of an authentic lyric genius.

Hypnosis then, and now

Review of *Memoirs of a Hypnotist: 100 Days* (Paperback) on June 8, 2016

If ever you wanted to know how the artists invited to big European shows, like Documenta, survive the months-long and often arduous toil of basically singing for their supper, I can think of no better guide than Marcus Lutyens's lovely little book, *Memoirs of a Hypnotist: 100 Days*.

The artist was approached by a Lithuanian curator, Raimundas Malasauskas, in Los Angeles, and asked if it were possible for him to hypnotize someone—literally. Malasauskas had already made an agreement with a San Francisco gallerist who had given him carte blanche to stage a show at her new gallery on whatever topic he wanted. He was interested in hypnosis, no doubt because of his early experience behind the Iron Curtain in the days of the Soviet state. However, he didn't have a hypnotist so the beloved arts activist Ronni Kimm reached into her Rolodex and found him one, young Marcos Lutyens, then living in LA with his wife Yi-Ping and a young son, Jasper Tian-Huu. His memoir reveals him as the perfect artist for the show, and once the Silverman Gallery show was held, it became clear that curator and artist had it in them to expand a modest pop-up exhibition into first, a touring show, and then finally an attraction at the most famous art fair of them all, Documenta (13) in Kassel.

Kassel is a town in Germany and there, we gather, Lutyens devised a mirror cabin for his installation. (To “mirror” the mirror theme, the book’s introduction is laid out in a footnote scheme in which we see the numbers on the right hand page, say 23, but on the left hand we see the number “23” reversed as if seen in some sort of dim, reflective mirror.) There was an unease built into the show, and happily Lutyens has pages and pages on anecdotes of what it was like, hypnotizing visitors into vague “narratives” devised by participating artists for an experience that would leave them feeling interpersonal but singular. Celebrated artists came too, and like all good sports sat in and let themselves “go under,” like the American performance legend Joan Jonas. We watch as Lutyens watches Ron Athey undergo genitalia stapling surgery without pain, due to his ease with hypnosis, while in another sequence a friend grants him access into a private hospital in which operations are performed on actual patients to be witnessed by spectators in their underwear, like some fantastic futuristic Eakins painting nobody knew he painted.

I didn’t go to Documenta but I was there, hypnotized, at the American gallery in which the Hypnotic Show debuted. I append my contemporary notes from 2008. I relished my time spent with both Lutyens and Malasauskas. I think they implanted suggestions in my brain like the shadowy brainmelters in Heinlein’s *The Puppet Masters*, or Condon’s *The Manchurian Candidate*, so that every time I think of either of them my cares melt away and I drift between smiles and sighs and erections.

My 2008 notes begin here: At the door of the Silverman Gallery you had to sign two releases before being allowed entry. “Basically this one says you waive liability in case you get

possessed by a demon while within these walls,” explains the gallery girl, “and this one’s stating you won’t sue if the dream machine gives you an epileptic seizure.” Possessed? Dream machine? We were positively fibrillating by the time we took seats in the dimly lit gallery space on Sutter Street. Job Piston and I sat warily, cameras in our laps, ready to snap any sign of ectoplasm or wrathful spirits, but apparently this was just part of curator Raimundas Malasauskas’s Barnum-like showmanship, and when he promised a “séance of hypnosis,” he was using “séance” as a metaphor, as one might say, “a whole bunch of hypnosis,” or, a “quiet evening of hypnosis.” I don’t know how they say it in Lithuanian, but the philosophy of the studio heads of Hollywood’s golden age was, get those asses into the seats by any means necessary. Malasauskas might well be the William Castle of modern curatorial projects.

[I might have the prophetic streak, for here I was, calling on the name of the U.S. schlock horror master William *Castle*, not knowing that the project was going to wind up in Kassel Germany, the Castle homonym! Nevertheless let me go on:]

I never felt that I was actually going to be possessed by an incubus, but artist slash hypnotist Marcos Lutyens certainly had us all going pit a pat as he entered and prowled through the space, dividing the audience into two groups, those who were volunteering, and those like myself afraid to participate, who wanted merely to watch. Malasauskas had commissioned hypnosis scripts from a group of international artists, and Lutyens had worked four of them into a running spiel. The ring of chairs was soon deep in a trance, the sitters nodding and blinking like rabbits, while he spoke on in a velvety, Michael Ondaatje baritone redolent of summer, with a poignant tang of autumn

surprising some of his labial consonants. Like I say, he worked the space, reaching out here and there to clasp shut a pair of hands a-trembling on a knee, to touch a supplicant's forehead with his thumb, all the while counting us down, five, four, three, two, one. At one we were in the deepest possible trance state, and then he'd have us count down yet again, from ten to one, deeper still. One girl wound up so out of it her hair touched the ground in front of her, I've never seen anything like it, not even back in college when we took massive doses of animal tranquilizers to get over the outrage of having Nixon as president.

Meanwhile Lutyens was droning on in that intimate, simpatico way, walking us into Joachin Koester's script about a park, a sidewalk, a civic building called the "Department of Abandoned Futures," after which we crossed the threshold and descended a stairway, entered a hall, found a box filled with—with what? We each were invited to imagine what lay within. Deric Carner's script was more ominous, I thought, a dark, cloudy horizon along which an unimaginable object began to evince itself—in a color we could not name, as it was not a color we had ever seen before—and the name of the large object came to us little by little as its Lovecraftian shape began to struggle in shadows and gleams across the sky. I called my object "Zephyr." I don't know why. You'll gather that my status as a spectator did not prevent me from joining into the general trance; Marcos Lutyens's voice is so seductive that, were you in that room that night, you too would be dreaming these dark visions. He leaned on some catchphrases that, perhaps, judged objectively, he used too often ("went back to the well one too many times," as my dad used to say), but I never got tired of hearing him say, "And you're drifting and dreaming—drifting and dreaming." Indeed I'm now engaged

to Marcos Lutyens and cheerfully I am bearing his children without anesthesia. I'll just be drifting and dreaming in a bower of erotic bliss somewhere, bent to the floor, my hair soapy, and washing his high-instepped feet.

Before I knew it we were waking up, one, two, three, four, five. Kylie Minogue had that song on her LP, *Body Language*, which I should have listened to before exposing myself to Hypnotic Show.

Count backwards 5, 4, 3, 2, 1
Before you get too heated and
turned on (and turned on)
You should've learned your les-
son all in times before
You've been bruised, you've been broken
And there's my mind saying think before you go
Through that door that takes
me to nowhere (yes boy)
I stopped you all romantic crazy in your head
You think I listen, no I don't care

The truth is, I do care, and when Raimundas Malasauskas proposed hypnotism as an avenue of total interaction, a room full of mirrors in which objects create themselves from the swept floorboards of the Silverman Gallery—the birthplace of the golem—I went there. You know how Susan Sontag coined that expression, "Don't go there." Well, I went there, ignoring Sontag, thrusting myself in a post-Sontag space of risk, interpellation, and impending childbirth, drifting and dreaming, drifting and dreaming, in the Alterjunga of the Australian aboriginal people—the dreamtime.

Deep Inside the Mind of a Courageous Federal Prosecutor

Review of *After Etan: The Missing Child Case that Held America Captive* (Kindle Edition)

on October 4, 2009

It is a beautifully written book and one sure to draw controversy. The kidnapping of little Etan Patz convulsed New Yorkers and gradually led to the society of supervised play-dates and restricted freedom for children that we live in today. Milk cartons started featuring the faces of missing children, at least when kids still drank milk. As author Lisa R. Cohen points out, however, the faces of the missing children on the milk bottles represent almost always children snatched by one or the other parents in custody disputes, or children who turn out indeed to have run away from home. She reports that perhaps a thousand children at any one time have gone missing, and tragically often it was the parents who did it. New York police fixated on Julie and Stan Patz, particularly Stan, the photographer who often took pictures of little Etan shirtless. These innocent photos set the investigation back several years.

Author Cohen goes for broke describing two men and the unequal cat and mouse game developing between them. The main suspect was a mess, a Charlie Manson lookalike as dirty as a mud pie, and scary looking enough so you'd think children would run from him, but au contraire, boys ate out of

his hand. One scary anecdote shows him in a NYC apartment building, figuring out that kids lived below him, and he lowered on strings one GI Joe doll and one Barbie doll outside the window of the children's bedroom. Naturally the curious kids would look up and then they would see their perverted neighbor beckoning them to come upstairs. The other man in the story is federal prosecutor Stuart GraBois, whom Cohen paints as an improbable combination of John Brown, Joan of Arc, and Mother Teresa. He's too good to be true, and she loses a little ground telling us, instead of showing us, why she thinks he's so fantastic.

The story is satisfying and compelling, and at last, those of us who lived in NYC during the time of Etan's disappearance can get some closure about what happened (as well as a welcome update on the current lives of those effected by this terrible crime—Etan's brave mother and father, and a sister and brother now all grown). Back then we were all of us only kids who didn't understand why it couldn't happen to them tomorrow.

Cut Just Right

Review of 260 Brass Sheet, Unpolished (Mill) Finish, H02 Temper, Standard Tolerancem, Inch, ASTM B36 (Misc.) on April 24, 2008

This review is from: 260 Brass Sheet, Unpolished (Mill) Finish, H02 Temper, Standard Tolerance, Inch, ASTM B36 (Misc.)

My kids were asking why our apartment doesn't have its own brass sign outside like all the other apartments. We live in San Francisco's trendy South of Market district, where brass signs have become de rigueur in recent years. Signs with butterflies embossed on them that say "The Nabokovs." Signs with monocles engraved that read "Peter and Harriet." The lot. Yes, I know what it's like to be a kid and to be ashamed of one's parents for not providing one's family with something it seems all the other kids have. And so, when I noticed that they were crying themselves to sleep over this issue, and that in the morning their pillowcases were wet with tears, I resolved to do something about it, so I ordered a few ultra slim 260 H02 sheets of brass from Amazon and decided to make myself a sign for "The Killians."

These brass sheets, less than .02 inches thick, are flexible enough for you, or your child, to wrap around a pole, massage into desired thickness, test for bugs, in any dimension you like. My kids wanted to paper the lintel with brass, and I let 'em.

Might be hot on summer afternoons, but they'll learn. In the meantime you can hammer out the font characters you want, plus some amusing design (we had tulips) cut to 36" x 12" so you will have a nice plaque right next to your doorbell. Or should you discover someone famous once lived in your building, and your HOA approves, you could whip up a sign to commemorate the achievement right away. Like we discovered that Samuel Delany and Marilyn Hacker once lived in our building and staged a production of Genet's *The Maids* on the three-flight stairwell, so that spectators stood on the street and craned their necks up to see the fun. Blam! Another brass sign. At this price you'll be buying brass like there's no tomorrow.

Summer People Are Dangerous: They Know They Can Survive

Review of *Someone to Count On* (Paperback)

on June 28, 2016

I came back from Cape Cod yesterday after having attended the annual meeting of the Lenora Mattingly Weber Society. One thing I realized for the first time is that people who loved L.M. Weber might also be enjoying the novels of the late Rosamond du Jardin (1902-1963).

One event was a book swap; you could bring a YA book and take one away. I cheated a little and brought one of my own books, suitably wrapped, and came away with a novel I had never heard of before, *Someone to Count On*, by Rosamond du Jardin. This is one of du Jardin's "standalone" books and does not fit neatly into her four or five celebrated series—the "Pam and Penny" books, the "Marcy Stories," the "Tobey Heydon" book etcetera. Someone at the conference speculated that our own idol, the late YA novelist Lenora Mattingly Weber (1895-1971), who enjoyed a much, much longer career, might have envied or disliked her rival, for in one of her later books she devised a treacherous drama teacher who encourages Katie Rose Belford to try out for the leading part in the play, knowing all the time she was not going to give it to her, just to be mean (under the guise of "testing her"). And Weber dubbed this loathsome character "Mrs. Du Jardin"!

I walked into "Someone to Count On" (1960) with tiny expectations and was pleasantly surprised to find it an interesting story of a young woman's growth, though I never lost my discomfort discovering that the heroine's name is Twink. Yes, "Twink." It was the age of cute names for protagonists and teens in general, like Mimsy Farmer I guess, or Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Twink (Deborah Elliott) is beginning a summer vacation before she begins her junior year in high school, a suburban school somewhere near Chicago. Her dad's a teacher and her mom, although a former high fashion model like Suzy Parker, now prefers just being a mom.

Indeed the mother's anti-feminism is a bit much even for the days preceding Betty Friedan. I figure Rosamond du Jardin, who wrote something like 20 novels the last 14 years of her life, could have been a breadwinner, but not in her own opinion. Twink's parents, admirable in every other way, both believe that "the place of a woman with children was at home taking care of them." The mother, Cam, responds humorously with a bizarre metaphor I still can't figure out. "Mothers who take jobs when it isn't financially necessary always puzzle me. It's like taking the trouble to mix up a lovely cake and put it in the oven, then going off and leaving it to bake and get out by itself when it's done." That's a truly graphic and unpleasant way of describing the mysteries of childbirth, isn't it?

Anyway Twink, though never truly torn, has broken the code of teen society by dumping her steady, for girls only keep steadies in order to always have a date on the all-important Saturday night and Sunday day social times. The other girls in her group act like she's Hedda Gabler slamming the door on dates, but the truth is, Twink doesn't have to worry about

going dateless to school dances, bowling sessions, pool parties or car races—she’s too pretty and self-possessed. She intends to spend this summer reading recommended books like *Wuthering Heights*, and to learn how to play the guitar like Carol Kaye, and how to do antiques and gardening like her ever-busy mom Cam, and to play bridge and tennis and plan parties with friends. Well, I’ve read a lot of these books and honey, cute guys are going to be distracting you all summer.

One of them is local hunk Gary Rogers, who works in the town drugstore with his dad. The drugstore, we learn, is the center of the entire town, though Mr. Rogers decries the new practice of asking the druggist to sell everything at his store, from cosmetics to clothes to home furnishings. Gary is drop dead handsome, but everyone likes him, even the unpopular kids at school, because he’s so nice.

Then there’s the spoiled, rich bad boy Jared Bradley, who moves into the mansion next door and sits around all day brooding in his red Jag—a cool sports car he is never actually seen driving. When the enigma of his past unravels, I am sure I wasn’t the first to guess the Jaguar had something to do with it. Jared is so rich they call him “Jay” instead, like Jay Gatsby, and although Du Jardin never makes me believe that Twink would care for Gary’s dreams of going to medical school and helping poor people like the unpopular kids, she is good at making Jay sound like the sort of wounded James Dean type any Twink might develop a yen for. She is great at scene making and describing nature and the sort of innocent, yet sexy fun that straight teens seem to enjoy.

On the cover Twink appears, flanked by blond Gary and dark-haired Jay, both boys in white pullover turtlenecks like back-up dancers, while she moves seductively toward the reader in a puffed-up bouffant and a white sheath gown with spaghetti straps, a cross between Jackie Kennedy and Audrey Hepburn. I would think that would have been a lot of pressure for a girl to read this book by. Wonder if many readers peeled off the cover and cherished the plain buckram binding underneath.

Never Ever

Review of *Vital Signs: Essential AIDS Fiction* (Paperback) on December 4, 2008

Richard Canning's anthology of AIDS fiction includes many of the best-remembered stories from the 1980s and 1990s, when AIDS was essentially a death sentence and those who came down with it were shunned and essentially quarantined. Edmund White's canonical novella *An Oracle* stages its age-old drama on the Greek islands where Ray, a youngish New Yorker, mourns the death of his older friend George, and learns how to step outside George's shadow while simultaneously fielding questions of colonial privilege as he makes his way around Marco, a delicious native gigolo. Ray's not a complicated person by any means, and White relates his story without an ounce of condescension or amusement. Andrew Holleran's "Friends at Evening" announced itself as the harbinger of a new kind of writing, a faceless and multivalent Babel of voices all talking about the same drastic subject, the panic of AIDS-related illness against the glittering social world of New York in the early 1980s.

At the same time as these established writers were adapting traditional styles to new, apocalyptic realities, a bumper crop of younger writers were jumping in with new experiments. Matias Viegner's tale "Twilight of the Gods" caught the attention of many with its New Wave fabulation of Rock

Hudson, Michel Foucault, and Roy Cohn all being treated for AIDS at the same time in a Paris Hospital, in a Ragtime-style imaginarium of history, desire, and glamor. Carole Maso's novel *The Art Lover* included a strong AIDS subplot, in which the heroine visits a childhood friend, Stephen, in a forbidding NYC hospital, back in the early days when the signs on the ward windows read "Enter at Your Own Risk." Stay out at your own risk, responds our angry narrator, and you want to cheer.

David Wojnarowicz and Robert Gluck take up New Narrative positions on either end of the spectrum, but they share common techniques, especially the blurring of fiction/nonfiction and the abdication of the traditional bourgeois narrative posture in favor of a more essayistic, even agitprop voice, the 30s voice of social activism and what was once known as "special pleading." I wonder why Canning didn't think of something like "Nobody Ever Just Disappears," by Sam D'Allesandro, another innovative re-mix of the procedural and diaristic. But considering he lives in England he does give us an awful lot of American fiction—in fact, is there a single non-US story in the bunch? I must have missed why, since Canning in his introduction (and Dale Peck in his foreword) is at pains to foreground AIDS's status as an international disease with innumerable cultural manifestations. *Vital Signs* is an immensely satisfying collection, and when one has put it down one wonders how it was that so many fiction writers lived right through the era in question (roughly 1986-1994) without apparently ever thinking once about AIDS, like P. G. Wodehouse never writing a word about the Nazis while their prisoner in Berlin. I'll never figure that out, never ever.

Those Endearing Young Charms

Review of **Monkey Smiling Italian Charm Bracelet Link (Jewelry)** on August 8, 2008

When I got my first charm bracelet I was already a grown man. Yes, as a boy I had owned one or two charms—lucky amulets to protect me from the evil spirits known to haunt my childhood home in Smithtown (Long Island)—but I was too bashful to wear them on a bracelet, fearing taunts from bullies, fearing being considered a “sissy.” So I kept my charms under my pillow, and when others found them I pretended I was hoarding them to give to an unspecified “girlfriend.” Let’s see, I had an angel, a piano, and a—what do you call those things graduates wear on their heads? Graduation caps? I also had a pewter rabbit, so cute, with onyxes for eyes and whiskers made out of actual rabbit whiskers. I acquired them by stealth, trading them for marbles, took the SAT exams for others, and one, I’m ashamed to say, I removed from the bracelet of a girl I knew who had passed away tragically of what her mother called “the mastoid.”

Boyish daydreams die hard, but by the time I was 30 I had utterly forgotten that I had wanted a charm bracelet my entire life. Isn’t that funny how things work? Then a close friend and mentor showed me her Italian charm bracelet and all of a sudden, I was hooked again. There’s a new, Italian way of doing these things, sharp and chic as a tattoo on Asia

Argento’s pelvis. These new Italian charm bracelets click right into each other, link by link, with the visionary synthesis of Ettore Sottsass (who pioneered these bracelets in the 1960s). See this cute charm of a smiling monkey? It protects me from the swirling influences of those jealous of my accomplishments as a literary author, as well as being the one I go to for a quick injection of cheer. Just as many who own GPS devices in their automobiles wind up naming the spirited female voice calculating their route for them, so I have named my little monkey.

“Sam,” in case you’re curious. The bracelet I wear on my right wrist has 20 links, most of them animals, but also licensed Disney characters such as Mickey Mouse, Winnie the Pooh, Snow White, and more. Other licensed charms include Red Hat Society, Elvis, Beatles, Barbie, Coca-Cola, Madeline, Garfield, Hello Kitty, Betty Boop, Peanuts, Archie Comics, and sports. And *The Phantom of the Opera*.

Stylish and Retro

Review of Genie Headpiece and Veil

(from "Costume Express") on December 7, 2007

Ever have one of those days? I'm sure you too have felt like I did last month, when for a week or so it seemed nothing was going right. I was feeling a little headachy and feverish, people at work were looking at me weird, one of my students seemed to be staring at me with a look of hate across the seminar table . . . little things . . . we got two new cats and they weren't "blending" with our old two cats Ted and Sylvia . . . like I say, little things, but add them up together and you start looking longingly at cute costumes in an enchanting *Princess Diaries* shade of blue with a large, outstanding blue rhinestone placed cunningly in the very middle of the sash, so that it looks like you have a third eye! I'm talking of course about Costume Express and their incredibly cunning "Genie Headpiece with Veil."

I like blue, always have, so this baby was a no brainer. You don't have to be a little girl to want to acquire, by any means necessary, something of the genie's power. He (or she I suppose) lives in a brass lamp but it couldn't be any more squalid or overcrowded than our third-floor walkup in a dingy alley in San Francisco; and yet he slash she has at [its] fingertips all of the powers of the Justice League of America rolled together, able to grant wishes, magically transport people like Hiro Nakamura from place to place, and to turn

straw into gold. Yes, let me at that headpiece, and when I got it home and managed with a little help from Velcro to jam it down over my brow, arranging the flimsy blue veil over my back hair, shoulders and upper back, I felt kingly, like Faisal in David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*, my sunburnt face turned west toward the setting sun where, soon, night would fall and in the desert darkness one might spy stars like jewels flung up and pinned to the Arab night, as I stood out on my landing on Minna Street and watched, 40 feet below, a homeless lady cry out for 75 cents.

After continued use I did notice that the gorgeous rhinestone has a way of somehow imprinting itself on one's forehead if you forget to take off the genie headpiece and veil before turning in. I spent a restless night plagued with dreams and in the morning, I had what looked like a scary bruise above my nose but I could tell, it was mere rhinestone dent. As Joni Mitchell used to sing, "Amelia . . . it was just a false alarm."

Blueness of Crows

Review of *Tau & Journey to the End* (City Lights Pocket Poets Series) (Paperback) on April 30, 2010

Invited to read at the "6" Gallery reading of October 1955, surrealist Philip Lamantia declined to read any of his own poems, and instead read, from an onionskin manuscript, pages of an unpublished collection that his late friend, John Hoffman, had left behind. Editor Garrett Caples, who knew Lamantia in his final years, and who shepherded his papers into the archives of the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley, posits that the decision to read Hoffman might have been the lucky byproduct of another decision Lamantia made—to reject the poetry of "Tau," his then recent project, in the face of a volcanic conversion (or re-conversion) to Catholicism. This has the effect, for me at least, of showing Lamantia's human side, one prone to snap judgments and error just like anyone else.

Of course it was an accident, or nearly so, that made the "6" Gallery reading a famous event in poetry history, thus pinning, like a fixative, John Hoffman's name into position, and yet it has been a curious immortality, hasn't it, since no one has actually seen any of the poems in question until now? This City Lights "Pocket Poets" Edition reunites the young men who bonded together in the late 1940s in North Beach with such passion and vigor, by printing all of Hoffman's extant poems, with the manuscript that Lamantia was working on

in the mid-1950s, poems he recanted but, tellingly, never actually destroyed. "Tau" turns out to be one of Lamantia's most interesting achievements. From the moment it begins it plunges us into the mind of one who saw the way Tanguy painted, in a poetry of edges, splinters, riven landscapes still crackling with dead energies. I read these poems while the TV showed us the footage of Eyjafjallajökull, the volcano in Iceland, and I clutched the book harder. Half horror, half sublimity, the features of "Tau" take a long time to emerge from the smoke cloud. "His color is green green,/ to distend him from the earth," writes Lamantia in "The Owl." "He does not fly./ You meet him while walking." I wonder if Lamantia knew Hawthorne and Melville well—it feels like it to me.

As for John Hoffman, he isn't as dazzling and his metrics aren't as menacing, but he has a great sadness to him, the sadness of youth (he died at age 23, far away from home, in Mexico under disputed circumstances). "Do, re, mi, fa—how lugubrious!" is the refrain of one piece. The enormous pleasure of seeing this work arrive after so many years in shadowland, for now, makes it hard for me to feel very glum, but I can always go back once the initial high has subsided, right?

Kind of Blue

Review of *Iittala Aalto 3-3/4-Inch Glass Vase, 2006 Anniversary Petrol Blue (Kitchen)* on May 3, 2007

What a bargain! If you had an original Alvar Aalto vase, you'd be a millionaire, but this one is reasonably priced from Finland, and now that price is slashed to rock bottom.

What you could do with this wonderful tribute to eccentric Finn design, as you ponder how the world's greatest visionaries always need to have a vase nearby. Trace with your fingers the many unusual surfaces of this vase and you will see, though it seems small, that the multifold shape of the glass actually means that it uses much more glass per cubic foot than even a very large US made vase, with our straight modernist up and down lines. Now what would cause an architect designer like Aalto to go so wiggly? Some have laid the credit to the glacier-based farmland of his native country. For example, stand up, stand on a chair, and look down at this vase from a bird's eye view, you will see that from above it resembles roughly an air view of the shape of Finland.

Others have ascribed Aalto's quirkiness to the ups and downs of his emotional and spiritual life while here on earth. As his soul bubbled over, so did his glass blowing; compare to our contemporary Dale Chihuly, who has acknowledged this classic vase design in many recent commissions. To design in glass

properly, you have to be very, very controlled, with an iron rod instead of a spine, and a mouth intuitively ripe for blowing, and yet you must be a romantic too. Anyone with a "petrol blue" vase at home will find Aalto's signature on the bottom (in replica on Amazon of course) and those who know a thing or two about graphology will know the man, from the way his hand trembled over the double A that began his name and which plunged him to the front of twentieth century designers if you ranked them in alphabetical order. The conflict, you see, was always there, like a birthmark on his shoulder.

On the Straight and Narrow

Review of HAT Straightening Boar Hair Brush (Teal)
(Health and Beauty) on June 30, 2006

Ever have one of those days when your alarm clock rings and you bound out of bed and even before you get to a mirror you know your hair is out of control? Some call it "Bedhead" but on me, it's like the enchanted broccoli forest. For years I've been looking for a cheap, elegant solution to the problem of overnight curl, and now thanks to the good people at HAT I think I've found it. Their straightening brush is one of the most well designed products in my medicine cabinet, and the satisfying click you hear when you lock your hair into place with it reminds you of the high-hat Charlie Watts used to set "Honky Tonk Women" roaring into the ether.

The color? Well, who doesn't like a bit of teal, and it's bright enough so you can find it, even when you're as hungover as I used to get. You know, when your ears are still ringing and the floor is still swaying and the last thing you want is something heavy, like a comb, passing over one's scalp. The HAT brush acts quickly, you grab a handful of hair, secure it in the provided ridge, click the brush closed and then scrape away, and voila, within seconds even the most recalcitrant hank of hair (or cowlick) is tamed utterly. If you have naturally curly hair this would be even more useful. Alright, I don't like to think that boars were killed to make this brush, but I keep thinking,

maybe they just followed some boar trails in the Ardennes Forest and picked up the loose hair like pine needles.

Look me up sometime, I'll be the guy with the perfectly groomed head of hair thanks to the HAT straightening boar hair brush in teal.

Tinkerbell Released

Review of *The Tinkerbell Hilton Diaries: My Life Tailing Paris Hilton* (Paperback) on October 24, 2004

This book is pretty cute, all things put together, and D. Resin whoever he may be has a cunning way of seeing events from a Chihuahua's point of view. I enjoyed the different chapters about filming *The Simple Life* and the discovery that Paris had made a sex tape, and how her handlers were going to spin that for maximum publicity density. Resin understands as few others do that people like Paris not because she's socially aware, but because she treats life like a game and she always seems like a good sport.

Tinkerbell complains about the Pomeranians who live with her in the LA house. She explains how you have to be extra patient with Pomeranians because they're so dumb. And she deplores the way people associate Chihuahuas with Pomeranians. "Unfortunately, because they're small, yappy, and ubiquitous, they're the ones most people picture when they hear the term 'toy dog.' Real fond of barking at nothing and getting freaked out by their own tails. Not exactly Lassie. In fact, if they had done that show with a Pomeranian dog, it would have been much simpler: Timmy would fall down the well, Lassie would furiously lick itself for 40 minutes, and then Lassie would turn around and psychotically challenge a small rock to a fight, a rock which it would ultimately become

intimidated by." Needless to say, Paris isn't likely to use the word "ubiquitous" in a sentence any time soon, nor has she probably heard of Lassie. She's great, and as Tinkerbell points out, she has a "slack, blank, almost Zed sort of ease that's like wallpaper to read" but is sublimely easy to get along with. I hope that instead of being ashamed to be seen reading this book, as most people doubtless would be, more people pick it up and give it a good read. Virginia Woolf wrote *Flush* on much the same grounds—she wanted to paint a picture of a famous person (in her case Elizabeth Barrett Browning) from the point of view of her kidnapped dog. If it worked for Woolf, why can't it work for Resin? I say it does!

Cars and Girls and the Future

Review of “Jeepster” (Remastered Version)
(MP3 Music) on June 10, 2016

Now that I get unlimited streaming of this song with my Prime membership, it has been playing again and again to weird effect. I found myself living, after my fourth playing, in two eras at once. Back when I was 18 or 19 I thought Marc Bolan the beginning and end of everything. Must have driven my family and friends crazy with blasting out *Electric Warrior* all over the place and for the infrequent visits of T. Rex to Long Island, where I lived in my parents’ basement one long hot summer.

He was an enormously appealing little guy; David Bowie called him “The Prettiest Star,” though that wasn’t really true, he wasn’t all that handsome, but he had a wonderful smile and seemed to take to the switch from folk acoustic occult trance music to basic rock and roll with great aplomb, as though to say, if Dylan could do it, so can I. And for three or four LPs in a row he released the catchiest material: not every song was memorable but many of them got under your skin so that one wondered, this is so primal, why hasn’t it been written before by somebody else? “Jeepster” was among this group. Bolan’s lyrics could sometimes veer on the Orientalist, to fetishize colonial cultures, and that makes them fishy viewed today, but he also had the knack, shared with Bowie, of seeming to predict the future and to be able to peer into technological

and philosophic developments that hadn’t yet occurred. The concept, corny as it was, of the “electric warrior” might be emblematic of Bolan’s interest in what we would today call cyborg culture—that a pretty, sweet girl could turn him into a “jeepster,” spoke to a world in which boy + machine could merge and, once combined, become something even cuter than either apart.

“Just like a car, you’re pleasing to behold. I’ll call you Jaguar, if I may be so bold.” The sentiments were so dumb and yet so outlandish they allowed him to get away with murder. The famous punchline of “Jeepster,” in which he calls out, “I’m gonna suck you,” went without editorial challenge from upstairs at my folks’ house in Smithtown—maybe mom and dad couldn’t understand his British accent.

Oh, and the other thing is in how many ways he anticipated Prince! Watching Prince live was like watching T. Rex live, I wonder if the relation between the two little guys will become clearer as time passes on. So that was the second phase of my life that comes back to me as I listen to “Jeepster,” the early 1980s when I first saw Prince and heard “Little Red Corvette.”

The Place Where Your Horses Run Free

Review of *1999* (Audio CD) on September 23, 2008

For some reason when I woke this morning I had this tune in my head and couldn't rest till I traipsed down to the basement and found the old LP. What a difference from today when you can play all 10 tracks on the CD without switching or changing the record, but back then I never heard the songs on side 2—and never played the second disc on the double-LP, not ever, didn't see any point to changing up from the first two tracks. Why did artists make such long LPs, why not just collect a few perfect tracks? And thus it wasn't until today that I wound up hearing "International Lover" and "Free" and the other songs (some of them not so great) on the "second disc" of the double LP—well, that dates me, but I expect at this time in Prince's career most of his fans are those who, like me, remember the 1980s as if they were yesterday and a time when 1999 seemed a zillion light years away, and when Wendy and Lisa puzzled us with their odd, superior androgyny like a pair of aloof Claude Cahuns, always nodding to the same beat, thrusting out their chins in unison, 10 tons of hairspray making them look sort of feminine.

That's not to say that today's Prince fans love what used to be sides one and two, three and four with equal fervor, how could they? They won't even remember the exquisitely perverse

take on "Little Red Corvette" that Sandra Bernhard gave in her concert film *Without You I'm Nothing*, her unsuccessful attempt to divert '80s energy into '90s irony.

Vanity's on this CD too, which I did not realize in the 1980s, but that's because I never heard "Free," in which her vocals ring out loud and clear. That's not such a good thing.

Dreaming of Selena

Review of *Selenidad: Selena, Latinos, and the Performance of Memory* (Paperback)
on November 27, 2009

Like the other reviewer, I came to Paredez and her book *Selenidad* not through the gateway of Latino studies, but rather as a fan, and that's where the book repays a lot of care and attention, since it is written, perhaps not so much with Selena in mind, nor even her body, but for the fans, and even against the fans to some extent. At any rate the fan is paramount in Paredez's extended account of Selena's fame that increased after death, and perhaps this approach makes special sense in the case of our beloved Selena, for it was one of us who killed her.

Paredez doesn't mince words, and that's part of the special appeal of her book. Sure, it's laden down with academic jargon (the "performance of memory" bit in the subtitle will forever date this book as belonging to a particular period of discourse when everything was performing this or that). Paredez shows how the fan is always more alert than the official historian, and how we must move beyond the official story to the world of fandom in order to come up with anything real about the subject of scrutiny. She gives us a detailed history of Selena's final concert, showing how Selena was herself "performing" at that time a supposed opening of Latino culture into the

wide world of English, every bit as though she wasn't herself a fluent English speaker, in the name of the market that awaits the crossover artist.

She goes further and debates whether or not the actual slayer of poor Selena was involved with her in some extra-management way, and how this played out in the legend that developed around her. That sort of yes/no/maybe shell game must have enraged Selena's family, but for Paredez and for other cultural scholars, the fan (and tabloid) speculation allowed for what she calls "scenes of the subjunctive," the what-if games we all play whenever a tragic event occurs, and adds a vivid drama of same-sex rebellion against heterosexual normativity no matter what the "real" story was between Selena and Chris or between Selena and Yolanda.

Holiday Seasonal Salad

Review of Read German Potato Salad Can, 15-Ounce (Pack of 12) (Grocery) on November 29, 2012

Now that the holidays are here my wife and I attend many parties at church functions and social media events in San Francisco. Oddly enough the one food you see at both types of affairs is the so-called German potato salad. Recently we were at a party celebrating the arrival of young Twitter folks to our block. It's nice to see young people digging in to the foods we had long ago as children in another time pre-digital culture, when basically you went to the deli and asked for one of two different kinds of potato salad, or some wise old neighbors made it themselves, adding crumbling bacon and diced pickle chips to their golden hoard of spuds.

I asked the corporate hostess who had made the delicious potato salad we were wolfing down and she replied, "Alice Waters of Chez Panisse." It was worthy of Chef Waters, but as it turned out, later that evening the hostess sought me out and said she had been misinformed, and the Chez Panisse potato salad had been reserved for the Twitter VIPs, while we late comers made do with fancy Read German Potato Salad. Nice of her to let us know, she was all apologetic and so forth, but Twitter had nothing to be ashamed of. In the backroom of the kitchen, we found empty cans of Read stacked high in the dumpster, easily seen even by fading eyes due to the

distinctive red, yellow, and black packaging, like the flag of Germany, so simple it is like the red, white, and blue of the USA. The caterers had spiked up the Read canned salad with some extra potatoes, bacon, parsley, and some sagacious slices of fresh strawberry as a splash of garni.

I compliment the Read people for making a product that not only baby boomers, and the foreign-born, can enjoy, but something that new grads and new Twitter hires take to with the reckless abandon and élan of their generation. My wife who knows about such things whispered that, in addition, it is probably cheaper than ordering from Berkeley's Chez Panisse where California cuisine was born, so if you had to pay off a student loan, it was probably going to be Read for you, at least till your startup took off in a big way and all of a sudden the Rolling Stones were playing your company's Christmas party.

Bony Memories

Review of **Stud Earrings Sterling Silver - Fish Bone (Jewelry)** on July 23, 2010

Not the highest-ranked jewelry on Amazon, Old Glory Sterling Silver Fish Bone Earrings are a delightful gift for a special anniversary, or to wear on your own. I first saw them at a popular seafood place nearby at the Wharf in San Francisco, but the price was artificially hiked to attract tourists, and I knew I could do better using my Amazon Prime account.

My wife liked getting these earrings, as they constantly recall for her a transition from not eating fish at all, to once in a while, on the advice of her doctor, trying a salmon or trout, perhaps once a month, for protein reasons if nothing else. At first, the bones made her feel grisly but then she realized, it's all nature. And as it turns out, it is not silver-plate covering actual fish bones, but each earring is 100 percent solid sterling silver without a trace of the original bone, now lost to history and the artist's imagination. Our three cats totally ignore them, which they would not do if even one cell's worth of fish remained in their makeup. We can leave them out on the dinner table or even in the cat's dish, and they will remain untouched, still gleaming with the traditional heartiness of fine silver.

You will always be getting smiles from neighbors and strangers when you leave your apartment wearing earrings from Old

Glory. This is my fourth pair and it won't be the last. They are unisex, though perhaps they look better on someone with a smaller lobe than mine. I wish Old Glory would consider making a longer pair, with five or six pairs of lateral bones, instead of the present, skimpy four. But such are the dreams of an impossible princess.

Uncanny

Review of *Persistent Voices: Poetry by Writers Lost to AIDS* (Paperback) on June 6, 2010

It's natural I suppose that AIDS has disappeared from public consciousness, and that the present generation of young people are living in an artificial white light concerning the recent past. The era was too painful for us, too painful for anyone to have to think about. In the twentieth century this phenomenon happened again and again, a trauma followed by a period immediately afterward of complete and benign dissociation, and then a third period where the original trauma can return to the brain, modulated by the twin effects of time and sobriety. *Persistent Voices*, the new anthology of poetry edited by Philip Clark and David Groff, thus comes along at a time that is not likely to make it a bestseller, and yet, it is the sort of book that is worth reading for that reason alone.

We all knew that having AIDS did not automatically make you a good writer, and yet I found something of value in just about every poem here. Messrs. Clark and Groff did a fair amount of cherrypicking here and there to find perhaps the two or three only good poems written by a few bad poets, but that's what editing is all about, and why not look at these guys in the best light honor can provide? An air of respect and yet a fine discrimination soars through the pages of this book like birds through the windows of a lighted mead-house.

Then there were the writers who, no matter how sick they got, notoriously denied having AIDS: how to represent their contributions? Everywhere, you see, there were traps and pitfalls for our editors, and yet by and large *Persistent Voices* is just the book we all hoped it would be. Out of the writers in this book, I knew two quite well (the New Narrative boys, Sam D'Allesandro and Steve Abbott), eight or nine others well enough to cry when they left us, and some I knew not at all. (Anyone my age will have the weird experience of reading through the book and murmuring, "Hmmm, didn't know he was gay," "Hmmm, didn't know he was dead.")

In *Chroma*, UK writer and editor Richard Canning published a characteristically thoughtful review of *Persistent Voices*, though he controversially asked two pressing questions: "Why select poets simply according to their medical condition, unless that condition became the governing subject around which the poems are based? And—churlish as it may be—if you do use this criterion, why then bend the rules, to accommodate poets who, suffering from ill health, committed suicide?" At this point I depart from Canning's line, though it served him well for his own, outstanding, AIDS-themed anthology of the best short stories written about AIDS a few years back (*Vital Signs*, 2008). In fact I can't even figure out what his reasoning is. Why all this talk of "rules" in the face of the most devastating epidemic in our time? Why go all neoformalist on us at this juncture? It is the very unruliness of *Persistent Voices* that best reflects the tragedy it memorializes. I don't want a book of poems about AIDS written by the poets Canning finds sorely absent from this collection, "great poets who either escaped HIV infection themselves, or have not died of AIDS: Thom Gunn, perhaps, most famously (*The Man with the Night*

Sweats collection), but also Olga Broumas, Rafael Campo, Mark Doty, Marilyn Hacker, Rachel Hadas, Richard Howard, Richard McCann, J D McClatchy, David Trinidad and Gregory Woods." That's your book, but this is not that and I'm glad.

A World Transformed

Review of *The Meaning of Matthew: My Son's Murder in Laramie, and a World Transformed* (Hardcover) on September 18, 2009

He was very small, looked like he was 13 or 14, and when 18-year-old Aaron Kreifels saw his body propped up against a fence, his mountain bike skidded across the road for it looked like a scarecrow, a "Halloween guy," Kreifels remembered. A tiny body, but soaked in blood, most of it under his head. By this time Matthew Shepard had been hung on that fence for nearly 18 hours, his lungs gradually pooling with blood. How any mother could cope with the Laramie police findings I don't know, but it was up to Judy Shepard to take it all in without fainting, and she has written a book to try to find the meaning of Matthew—the meaning of his death, but also the meaning of his life, how did this all come to happen.

It is a disturbing and chilling account, but it's human. We come to wonder about the killers and their girlfriends and their families, and how drugs and poverty have chipped away at their moral sense. One of the killers robbed a Kentucky Fried Chicken of \$2,500 (and "some desserts," adds Mrs. Shepard) and hid away in Florida to avoid the heat, then sneaked back when he thought it would be OK. Judy Shepard isn't what you'd call a natural writer, but she has given us something of a different order, the thoughts and feelings of a person

devastated, and on top of it a person strong enough to pick up the pieces and do something that will mean something.

There's always a through-line of something resembling guilt giving her narrative an edge of real feeling and conflicting pressures. The book opens up that way, herself living with her husband in the Middle East—so far away from Laramie that it takes her days to get back to her son's bedside. There was the puzzling and horrifying earlier incident when Matt was assaulted by several men in North Africa—again she asks herself, where was she? Matt was complicated, too, and like a bird he couldn't be contained by parental worry. He had to do what he wanted to do, and he had to go where he wanted to go. In that one way, he was just like his mother.

Feels So Good

Review of Advil Tablets, Ibuprofen, 200 mg, 300 Tablets (Health & Household) on March 19, 2009

Ordinarily I agree with James Koenig's reviews 1000 percent. Not for nothing is he one of Amazon's top 100 reviewers. And yet, when he tells us we might as well just get the generic version of ibuprofen, as well as brand name Advil, I demur sharply.

Other reviewers recommend Advil for its ease of use, but I'm here to tell you the main reason to buy it is that it is tasty and sweet, rather like a cherry. If common sense and doctors' warnings didn't preclude it, I would be popping Advils all day just to get that delicious taste in my mouth, like a kid in a candy store.

First week of January I had an industrial accident at my office when a large box of heavy paper stock tumbled down onto my foot from a great height. Rushed to the hospital, I found myself weak and faint, and when the doctor told me that I should be having an Advil every four hours for the next three months, to reduce swelling and to heal the fracture, I perked up considerable. Now in front of me, as I type, is a king size dispenser of Advil, used to be an oversized Pez dispenser in black and gold, wearing Tim Lincecum's uniform, which some friends had bought me

on a trip to the SF Giants stadium here. Now it dispenses Advil and I find myself looking at the clock wishing it was four hours later already. I'm hooked I guess, and a little piece of me wishes I could return to the days of youth when I needed nothing, no poppy or mandragora as Shakespeare says, but in the meantime I do enjoy a nice Advil every four hours, and as a side benefit, its healing atoms have sped the recovery of my swollen foot inside its sturdy surgical boot.

A breath of 60s air

Review of Pilot Hi-Tec-C Maica Gel Ballpoint Pen,
12 Color Set, Fine (LHM180C4-12C) (Office Product)
on June 8, 2015

As an American boy growing up in France, I got used to the French way of doing things very quickly—so quickly that my Dad worried that French ways were taking away some essential kernel of “American-ness” from me. It wasn’t overnight, of course, for French ways are so different than those my parents had taught us on Long Island—but after a while I began to think of every French product as better than the ones I had left behind in Smithtown. The game of Risk, for example, I preferred infinitely to the bourgeois American Monopoly with its sordid focus on Capital. The Risk we played at home, of course, was itself a bastardized version of Albert Lamorisse’s French original. Luckily we could play both versions often on one bureau, sweeping our pieces madly in the French style and being more sedate and mannered when we went back to the American board. Anyhow Dad was glad that there was at least one American staple I found superior to its French avatar, and that was the simple ballpoint pen. Though many of my classmates à l’école had, of course, beautiful pens that were almost family heirlooms, and many carried the Montblanc pen like it was a badge of cultural superiority, I was always so glad when cousins and merchants back home airmailed me *et ma soeur* the latest round of Pilot pens—the beautiful Pilots with

their jaunty caps and their slim, yet strong, plastic encasements. “Encasements”—is that how you would say it in the US?

They had to be strong, for I was a rough and tumble athletic teen, always ready for a gang fight or a rigorous game of football, and the pens in my back pocket sometimes broke—if they were Montblanc pens—and a sharp collision with turf, or another garçon’s foot, might leave mon cul a hideous mess of blue or black ink. I ordered the 12 pack of Pilot Hi-Tec-C Maica pens recently through Amazon Prime, and as soon as I unwrapped the brown paper of the box, my years in De Gaulle’s France came back to me like the madeleine that made Marcel swoon back to an earlier, simpler time, in Proust’s seven-volume novel *Remembrance of Things Past*. Of course with today’s sleek Japanese influence the pens themselves are rather different, and kind of clunky, wouldn’t you say, their encasements encumbered with useless protrusions—though the glittering jewel cameo laid into each pen top is charming, like a diamond almost in its brightness. Like other owners, I too am perplexed about the color range Pilot is giving us in the Hi-Tec-C 12 pack. They give us something like three or four oranges—from gold to apricot to a pale root beer—why so many I wonder? It’s not like many people of any age or gender do much writing in orange shades do they? Oh, maybe they do in Japan. I brought out some old French stationery that I kept, a stone blue, and when I tried writing a note to *ma soeur* with the “Apricot Orange” pen I couldn’t even see any marks on it! Looked like invisible ink. Similarly there is a scarlet and two pinks, and I can’t tell them apart.

The caps are constantly being mixed up, but maybe that’s just me. Each 12-pack should be issued with a separate, extra

assortment of tops, just in case they slip onto the carpet while writing. My wife said, “Why not use the orange and black pens you complain about every day and every *nuit*, and make a pen and ink drawing of the San Francisco Giants stadium”—our uniforms, you see, are orange and black. I think I will. She is always the one with the best ideas and she knows her colors well, having had them “done” herself by a certified New Age color consultant. Boasting all those orange shades—the Pilot 12 pack is what we in the New Age would call an “Autumn” set. “They write beautifully,” my wife says, “and I love them.” She keeps stealing them to grade student papers with. We are bringing this pen set to our four-year annual color palette review, and seeing if it makes the grade with our Franco American style. However I will never lose my memories, not so long as these pens stay on my desk like beautiful reminders of the land of my birth.

Next time, a tell-all memoir, please? Until then, I applaud your drive to “tell true”

Review of *Pretty Happy: Healthy Ways to Love Your Body* (Hardcover) on July 18, 2016

By the time the postman brought me my copy of Kate Hudson’s new self-help book I had completely forgotten I had ordered it; nor could I remember that it was about diet and exercise and how they pale next to yoga for toning your body and learning to love plain food. I thought it was a memoir, a tell-all, a book that would lift a corner of the curtain, the curtain that has kept her life a complete mystery for all these years. But as the jacket copy explains, “in *Pretty Happy*, Kate doesn’t tell all—she tells true.” Zap! A takedown of impudent curiosity.

The lookalike daughter of a beloved comedienne, Kate Hudson was resigned to follow in the footsteps of, say, Lucie Arnaz—to be half a celebrity, the watered down byproduct of a famous mother and father. But happily unlike Lucie Arnaz, Kate was blessed by having a father who, though a performer of some kind, definitely was not a star. At Thanksgiving seven of her biggest fans got together to practice yoga moves recommended by Kate, and none of us could remember the actual name of Hudson Senior. One of us was pretty sure he

was part of a fake rock group like The Monkees and they were called the Hudson Brothers and that, in a moment of weakness, Goldie Hawn had married one and then gave birth to her twins, Kate and Oliver, who recently starred in *Nashville* as a satanic talent agent to country stars, partially redeemed by a love affair with reality TV contestant Layla Grant. Kate herself has put aside all ugly thoughts and recommends what she calls “open monitoring.” Which is, while wide awake, attaining a peaceful stoned-like buzz of paying attention to the butterflies in the air and the fawns at your feet—“aware but nonreactive.”

In this way she flexes her acting muscles enough to convincingly play an impatient, rude, musical has-been on the cancelled series *Glee*. We also remember her as the *ingénue* nurse or whatever she was who confronts Gena Rowlands in the spooky Bayou-set thriller *Skeleton Key*, in the wake of Katrina. Cutting down on sugar, the “villain like no other,” helps to reground the aging body and allows it to find its own center, and prevents disease such as heart, and Crohn’s. Don’t do cleanses to lose weight! For that you can practice modern dance. Do them to detox! Kate and Oliver Hudson have walked through a dark, young person’s Hollywood littered with human zombies like Zayn Malik and they’re still “pretty happy” and look fantastic. One time Kate got dumped. “Yup. Out of the blue. The guy I’d been dating told me it was over.” Heartbroken, she moped until Goldie Hawn told her to go on a cleanse, arguing that our cells hold emotions too, emotions you can’t shake with a good Eastern Ayurvedic cleanse.

In another chapter, the Dalai Lama says that happiness is not a Duchampian “ready-made,” but rather, it is the product of one’s own actions. Are your needs being met? Do you

know the name of your own *dosha*? Are you viewing too many photos of beautiful women? We should respect our shapes and sizes and embrace ourselves as we are. Eat more vegetables, protein and fat, do away with no-fat diet plans. No matter how many flops you make with Matthew McConaughey (many viewers actually believe the two are a real life item, but no), our bodies are one “large chemistry experiment.” A mother, a fitness addict, as well as one of the US’s great movie personalities, Kate Hudson has grown through spiritual growth and overcome the hardships of life without a real father and a mother who’s sexier and funnier than her, and Kurt Russell always in the house. She’s a “bit of a hybrid—and that’s fine.”

Enhorabuena Mayhew!

Review of *Apocryphal Lorca: Translation, Parody, Kitsch* (Hardcover) on December 26, 2009

I bought this book to help me in ongoing research into Lorca’s influence on US poets of the Cold War generation. It has repaid my investment many times over. Thank you, Professor Mayhew, for your invaluable guide through the myriad pathways of Lorca’s influence.

Mayhew, alert as a caterpillar, knows where, when, and who was borrowing from Lorca’s style during a dark and dangerous period of US history, plus he has a sense of humor about how awful some of this borrowing turned out to be. If translation is a two-way street, then there have been many head on collisions in the name of love. But in general, we get a measured sense of how all of a sudden many of the New Americans were talking about “*duende*” without really knowing what it is. I understand that I myself, for example, will also never know what it is, as that knowledge is vouchsafed only to one in every two million US citizens. It is the one thing that most people will never be able to understand. Even in Spain they don’t really get it either. I have been working with a Spanish scholar, David Menendez Alvarez, who has steered me towards the instances in which Jack Spicer translated directly from Lorca’s poetry, and Menendez Alvarez advised me, “Why not skip the whole *duende* thing?” But Mayhew

shows us how, for one reason or another, and for reasons not entirely divorced from the ongoing crisis of masculinity of the 1950s, the concept of *duende* became extremely important to this group of poets—mostly men, though Mayhew points out that Denise Levertov, Diane Wakoski, and Hilda Morley wrote with at least a glancing awareness of Lorca.

His list is a long one, but perhaps the most intriguing chapter of Mayhew's is the coda, in which he acknowledges that Lorca's influence on US poetics appears to be drawing to a close. Where once everyone from Langston Hughes to Creeley to Frank O'Hara used him as their personal MFA program, today very few poets of note bother with the man. Is this a testament to the never to be underestimated shallowness of our gene pool? Or is there a way in which, once more generally understood, a cult figure's mojo ceases to shine or vibrate? I have also thought that it might be a result of narrowcasting: now that there are actual experts on Lorca in the United States, people who actually know what *duende* is, the rest of us are just left feeling pretty inadequate. Until that moment, Mayhew has written a book that will stand the test of time, an authoritative survey on a controversial and protean subject, one infinitely twisty like a snake on the Andalusian plain.

Perfect Fit

Review of Highland 1039500 Black Rainproof Car Top Carrier and Duffel Bag - Pack of 2 (Misc.) on March 30, 2007

We joke that our rolling duffel bags would be a good place to put Grandma in if, like in that classic Flannery O'Connor tale, Grandma were to die during one of our family trips. No one would ever suspect a thing and, as appropriate, the color Highland makes the thing in it a funereal black. We have transported no corpses (yet!) but we are pleased to report that in general, all of our children's toys and masks made it without a scratch when we left San Francisco and headed for the world's kids' mask championships in Memphis. Our load was considerably lightened on the road home, for we sold most of the masks and the toys, but to compensate we stopped at a "big-box" store for masks and let the kids buy whatever they wanted.

Bumpy back roads and sudden downpours aside, our masks and toys had just as comfortable a trip as we did, the adults and children gathered in our roving SUV. We experienced a few problems reported by reviewer #2, including the flaking of the rubber interior surface, which must have been factory poured, for it began to flake as soon as we crossed the Pecos River and one of the kids wanted to bring out his Hopi Warrior mask and our little angel her "Christine in Phantom of the

Opera" half-mask. A little touch of rain made some of the feathers stick together but nothing a trip under the portable hair dryer wouldn't cure instantly. However, our stay was short and I wonder what would have happened if we had introduced any sort of mold culture into the twin duffle bags. After four days on the road, stopping at common Embassy Suites and bed and breakfasts from here to Tennessee, would the mold have spread, or would the tightened flakes of black rubber, so like stretchy masks themselves, have killed the culture with its simple, yet effective, airtight security? We each of us were very sober during the journey, reflecting on what life would have been like if one of our kittens was missing and she might have wound up in the duffel bag, only we counted them several times before pulling out of the driveway and everyone was accounted for in my chief purser (that is, my wife's) list.

Can't say enough about the friendly service, nor about the admiring stares of envy from some of the other "Okies" who made the trip to Memphis by piling everything on their rooftops—without bags—just letting it all sit out in the sun, which faded some of the delicate filigree on their kids' costly mask possessions. One little boy could have been the twin of Opie (Ron Howard), burst into crying bag when he done seen his mask blanched to a creepy white bone color where it had once been the color Crayola used to call "flesh." Needless to say, that boy won no prizes and his family hung their heads in mutual shame for him.

Eden Eden Eden

Review of *Jeannie Out of the Bottle* (Hardcover)
on December 7, 2006

Barbara Eden is fundamentally likeable, and her memoir is harmless popcorn fun, but I will say that not very many super interesting things happened to her. Well, she had a terrible time in the '70s and '80s with a teenage son hooked on drugs, and that part of the book is gripping, but ultimately too painful to fit in with the picture on the cover. You have to wonder if the boy might have gravitated towards drugs at least partially because life at home must have been pretty surreal.

She grew up in the loveliest of all US cities, San Francisco, in a family that tilted towards show business, and she can remember every theatrical jump or slight that made her teen years so dramatic. She was living in the shadow of vaudeville, where every entertainer had to sing, dance, look pretty, and look sexually obliging. LA was where the action was, so she danced in the chorus line of Ciro's, dodging male attention and getting nervous that her golden chance was passing her by. Sammy Davis, Jr., asked her out, as did Elvis, but a mean rival locked her in the ladies' room and made her miss her big number, "Take Back Your Mink." By the time she signed a contract with Fox, she had been a show biz vet for decades and she was still 22. It was the age of the blonde bombshells and Fox had them all. Huffman wouldn't do for a last name

then (she credits Felicity Huffman, a distant relation, for ignoring agents' orders of today and keeping her own real name), and a producer said, "You seem kinda innocent, so let's call you Eden, like the garden."

With her marriage to TV hunk Michael Ansara, Barbara's dating days came to an end, but every lech in Hollywood made a pass at her, from Tony Randall to Burl Ives to Bob Hope. One man in later years who made a play might have gotten someplace—the one and only Tom Jones: if she had been single, she admits, she would have gone there in a minute. Alas it was not to be. Instead she divorced Ansara and married a crazy, no-good Chicago promoter called Chuck Speed Addict, a grandiose guy who wound up hitting poor Barbara and encouraging his stepson Matthew to do most of the drugs that wound up killing him. All through this period the tormented, bibulous Larry Hagman was driving Barbara nuts with his megalomania and the hatred he harbored for his mother, once the famous Peter Pan, Mary Martin, and now he was faced with co-starring with a sort of Tinker Bell of a Jeannie, and he just seems to have gone a little mad. It can't have been easy to have been Barbara Eden, but every now and then she'd get a "Harper Valley PTA" or a movie of the week, so the roar of the greasepaint seems to have kept her going pretty strong right up to this minute. She discovered Goldie Hawn and Ellen Barkin and more power to her! And also Katharine Hepburn was just nasty to her. So, I guess things did happen to Barbara Eden, but not five stars' worth maybe.

Going Daffy

Review of Sabuda Daffodils Pop Up Note Cards (Kitchen) on March 27, 2013

I got a box of Sabudas for Christmas and spent my first days of the new year trying to decide which among my friends (nearly 2,500 on Facebook, many of whom I actually know in real life) deserved these cute little suckers.

It was agonizing for a while, then I realized there was another way out—order another box, or maybe a small case. Six come in a box, and I had at least three dozen friends who are softies for daffodils. Tragedy! Amazon was stone cold out of 'em and didn't know when they would get more. My rep said to try MOMA instead, but have you ever tried ordering something from MOMA when you live thousands of miles away? Their customer service is fine, that's not the problem, but they send you the daffodil boxes in clouds of organic styrofoam . . . Literally enough to coat the whole floor of my San Francisco apartment in flat white, a white that rustles in your ear when you try to pick up a few pieces off the carpet, the white that chokes up the Tyson vacuum when you try to suck it up tube-wise. It became a challenge to find the boxes of cards amid the inundation of white flyaway foamcore pieces, and this was a challenge my three cats were happy to meet. Whomp! There goes one into the box, panicking when he can't find his way out. Whomp! There goes the littlest one, the one who likes to

play with new toys. To her, foamcore's like catnip. Eventually we overturned the dumpster size box upside down to release two cats, 9,000 pieces of foam, and the daffodil cards that made it all worthwhile. Friends, if you're wondering how I got those cards that greeted you on the first day of spring, it was MOMA and my cats. Another "pop-up" gift from your friend Kevin.

Looks Faded, but It Was This Way Brand New

Review of *The Toaster Oven Cookbook (Nitty Gritty Cookbooks)* (Paperback) on September 21, 2015

It took me only a few minutes to plug in my new toaster oven and perhaps 20 to read the revised edition of David DiResta and Joanne Foran's *The Toaster Oven Cookbook*. Ever have half an hour in your life where you had nothing to do but do the thing you always wanted to do? I was getting ready for the monthly meeting of my Bicoastal Mask group, and thought to myself, "I'll just make something out of *The Toaster Oven Cookbook*" the way I had always wanted to do.

For too long this book has lain on my Formica counter, handy to my cooking station, but somehow the time never seemed right. Now, with the meeting coming on, I flipped open the cookbook and tried to find some of the recipes I had salivated over during previous reads. There was one with shrimp and broccoli that sounded right. (Why is it, I ask parenthetically, that I find the word "broccoli" so hard to spell? Early childhood aversion to green, wiry, tough vegetables?) I grabbed the book and looked at it guiltily, it had lain in the sun so long that the cover looked all faded, even the hot orange cylinders of the toast filaments seemed dim, like candy corn. But now as I compare it to the illustration on the book cover, I can see, it hadn't faded, it was just printed with a sort of sepia finish. The

very first recipe was what I wanted (and indeed it is the one on the book cover), shrimp and broccoli pizza. The authors advise the readers to get little pizza pans, and even tile ramekins on which to place your pizza slices, but not me. I was willing to risk the inevitable disappearance of some of the crumbs, dropping off into the hot hell of the lower levels of my toaster oven, i.e., the drip tray—what my wife calls the crumb tray. Some of your food is going to be lost, that's a given. That's toaster oven cooking, you might even say, that's the heartbreak of toaster oven cooking.

But there are many rewards. The smiles on the face of your friends in the Bicoastal Mask group when you bring out tray after tray of toaster oven pizza, with that shrimp and broc combo spiced with oregano and store bought pizza sauce! The curious, envious questions your guests will be peppering you with. The sheer joy of the heavy, viscous scent of the pizza, bringing back memories to all of days spent eating heartier fare at Domino's or Little Caesars. Each page in the cookbook contains one recipe, and by the time you've finished one, you want to try the next one, which is just perfect for one or two person meals. It's intense, this craving to go on, turning the pages, dialing up the fun.

A valentine to Bataillean abandon and excess

Review of *Letters to Kelly Clarkson* (Paperback) on December 30, 2012

Letters to Kelly Clarkson will last even after people forget who Kelly Clarkson is—as an erotic monument, as a valentine to Bataillean abandon and excess, and as a document in investigative poetics that winds up linking what we want from our stars, with the giant battle that looms before us. “The battle isn't outside,” Bloch warns us, or is it a form of reassurance? I hear many of the statements in the book with two sets of ears, one tuned to sensual pleasure, the delight in coming up close and personal to a writer who can turn nouns to hors d'oeuvres and verbs to artisan cocktails; the other set of ears is tuned in to the dangers modern technology imposes on its users—the speed with which the strongest love could wither in the face of Armageddon.

People will read this book thinking, “Wow, Julia Bloch is really crazy about Kelly C.” and I hope the actual Kelly thinks so too. But there's another way in which Kelly's being criticized throughout, as though winning that darn contest and then touring the country in hideous stadiums as part of an Idol tour wasn't good enough, somehow. There's a panoply of questions the phenomenon of Kelly Clarkson raises: about Kelly's own debated sexuality, her assurance and her class,

the contradictions of her acting like a woman wounded in love and her admission that she's never loved anyone. Questions of sincerity and authenticity, the sort Lionel Trilling loved to raise. Most stars have something phony about them, otherwise we couldn't care for them as much as we do, but Julia Bloch goes up and down the intellectual and emotional gamut of trying to work out the value in "femininity's dystopic embrace as if it were a big clammy hand from the deep."

It may seem like froufrou to those of you who never loved a star, but actually the deepest parts of ourselves, and the ugliest parts of our social spaces, is what is invested in such poetry. Bloch is an amazing young writer who could do just about anything, but she decided to write a cockeyed masterpiece instead.

Glory, Glory, Hallelujah

Review of **CostumeCraze Novelty Lincoln Costume for Kids (Costumes & Accessories)**
on January 17, 2008

With Lincoln's birthday right around the corner, the market is literally flooded with children's Lincoln costumes, so we took our time about ordering the best. Our little ones had each had bad experiences in the past with inferior costumes (some of the shoddy, garish trash they try to shuck off as quality materials will shock the living daylights out of you), and so our main concern was finding a fabric with enough denier, one might say, to take them through their vigorous school-mandated Lincoln-related tasks like splitting logs, pulling a tug of war rope across a pool of mud, and walking in the snow towards one room schoolhouse replica, also provided through the internet.

And so it came about that our first child, a boy, tested the sturdy polyester pants of this Abraham Lincoln costume, and lo! It was pronounced "keen" by him. We're mad about the boy and we like him even better in his new, black bushy beard, for there is nothing cuter than the sight of a young man of late infancy decked out in stovepipe hat of rusty black, and crazy beard of Civil War days. I am buying the adult version of this very costume, I hope it comes with similar bolo tie, the

sort Lincoln is known to have worn in all those artistic Mathew Brady photos of battlefields bloody and sere.

Together, man and boy, we will walk barefoot to school on Lincoln's birthday, celebrated this year on February 18, preceded by others in our family band, one playing the flute, another a little drummer boy in rags, one with a patch on his eye to denote wounds of honor. Mine eyes have seen the glory in the coming of CostumeCraze's well-made and long lasting child's costumes for year round play, not just Halloween, also featuring Princess Jasmine, Darth Vader, Child Batman, Green Goblin, even Child Marilyn in her pink evening gown singing "Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend" in Howard Hawks's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.

Back to Bedrock

Review of *Paleopoetics: The Evolution of the Pre-literate Imagination* (Hardcover) on May 14, 2013

A kind friend, aware of my interest in the intense research conducted by the Hanna-Barbera studio when preparing the "Bible" for their long-running early '60s hit *The Flintstones*, suggested that Christopher Collins's new book might include some Flintstones tidbits. Well, not exactly, but what I uncovered opening its pages was reward enough for my curiosity. I find his imaginative and sympathetic recreation of prehistoric man and his movement from sight to thought to speech almost as convincing as the time based, seven season run of the Hanna-Barbera classic from 1960 through 1966 (and on to present TV culture). There's no "Ann-Margrock" in Collins's scholarly book, but that is about the only thing he's missing. All the other tropes are there, including a detailed account of Merlin Donald's four stages of development.

No one would ever say that *The Flintstones* is meant to be a documentary. In fact, it is really more or less a satire of American life in the contemporary Cold War atmosphere in which it was made. Similarly, Collins's cavemen are very much a product of today's prisms of thought, particularly in the way that for him (he is professor emeritus of English at NYU, not really a scientist or archeologist per se) ontogeny is never better than in its stringent recapitulation of phylogeny. If

I understand it, primitive man in the days before speech still possessed a sort of poetic. A man or woman in the jungle veldt might look at a tree and see it sharply and vividly, but if he or she saw that tree again a few minutes later, they had no way to realize it was the same tree as the one they had just seen. The disconnect was even sharper when the tree flowered, or became covered with snow, etcetera, its visual impact altered in any way. It was only when man started walking towards the tree, that he learned it was one object from moment to moment, and an element of narrative entered the paleopoetic.

Man is the only animal to be able to use speech to conjure up the absent (though Collins shows us that bees have been observed dancing around objects that used to exist in a particular location, like a mulberry bush chopped down since the bees were last there—perhaps not even those exact bees, but their ancestors!), and in *The Flintstones* bees were put to use for all sorts of anticipations of modern day projects—such as the electric razor, which Hanna-Barbera configured as a clamshell filled with buzzing bees that would bite off parts of a man's beard. Fred and Barney often had what we would call five o'clock shadow since the ur-electric bee razor had flaws. Collins asks us repeatedly to keep in mind the question Noam Chomsky asked to challenge behaviorist theories of child development that theorized language grasp as a pattern of call and response, "arguing that the amount of time used by parents to teach this behavior could not account for the complex grammatical learning that the child achieves by three years of age."

Flintstones fans will be familiar with Collins's argument through the osmosis of comparing Pebbles Flintstone's speech

acceleration over seven years, with that of her counterpart/love interest Bamm-Bamm, the towheaded son of Barney and Betty Rubble. Bamm-Bamm is cute but he's sort of monosyllabic if that. (It is implied that there's an innate difference in development between the natural-born like Pebbles, and the adopted such as Bamm-Bamm.) In the adventures of the two youngsters, which gradually came to dominate the series (my colleague Derek McCormack points to the existence of a contemporary tie-in volume called *Pebbles and Bamm-Bamm and the Wicked Witch*, which unexpectedly parallels Collins's citation of Donald's third step of language development as the "Mythic"), the glib and cute yakety-yak of Pebbles is frequently contrasted to little Bamm-Bamm as the miniature "stone face" boy nothing like either of his putative parents Barney and Betty.

As Cole Porter wrote (in "Find Me a Primitive Man"), "I don't mean a kid that belongs to a club,/ But the kid that has a club that belongs to him./ I could be the personal slave/ Of someone just out of a cave." Collins is a wonderful writer who keeps surprising us at every turn with the twists of language development, including changes in physiology that allowed words beyond the grunts of Bamm-Bamm. If imagination was the mammal's most effective tool, it is equally true, he argues, that instantly a social problem arose once what he calls the "mental photography" of the imagination took root. "The first scrap of object information ever communicated was likely to have been a lie." (Lies, like poetry, might have been devised to create an alternate universe than the one unfolding in front of the witness's eye.)

Fantasia in Pink and Gray

Review of Brillo® Hotel Size Soap Pad PUR W240000
by Purex (Kitchen) on March 10, 2008

I opted for the hotel size, even though I live in an efficiency apartment and even though someone else washes the dishes, because I have found through regular use that the ordinary (so called "biscuit") size just isn't enough, not when you want that extra sparkle of cleaning for your odds and ends.

We argued for several hours why Andy Warhol was so inspired by the Brillo Pad that he offered to make a new box out of plywood and silk-screens, a box that, as Arthur C. Danto has argued, marked the moment when art reached a pitch of self-consciousness from which it will never recover. For after all, Warhol created not only Brillo boxes, but boxes of Heinz ketchup, Del Monte peaches, etcetera, etcetera, but when we think of his boxes, we think of the Brillo one, that seems to have achieved pole position in the popular mind. Why? Some say it is the familiar red white and blue logo of Brillo; others say the inanity of Brillo's name led to its hook in pop culture; my own idea is that the pinkish soap, oozing through the gray metallic fibrous mass, replicates some horrid Freudian primal scene we don't really wish to remember but we have no choice but to recall, and we prefer to do it through Brillo's displacement.

Anyhow hotel size is the way to go, especially if you are fond of squeezing them with gusto. Really, really, making that pink film rise to the surface of the gray ganglia.

A Mixed Bag

Review of Tribest Handheld Blender for Almond Milk, Soup, Puree (Kitchen) on August 19, 2006

I wouldn't touch this thing, but my wife uses it all the time to grind flax seeds and to make smoothies. And she's loved it. Especially having a grinder that can be easily washed. When she travels she even takes it to hotels with her and makes almond milk with it. She's had it 14 months and the four-pronged blade assembly broke. Given the price of the unit, she feels it should have lasted longer than this. When she wrote to Tribest to complain, she was told that she was welcome to buy another blade unit. Bed and Bath sells a cheaper similar product.

Would I buy this again? Probably, but this time around I'd set myself a mental clock that would start ticking down the minute I unwrapped the unwieldy Amazon packaging. And I'd know it had only X amount of blending in it. Thank the Lord it's modular and I can buy her the pieces she needs even though they're more than 25 dollars a pop (if you count shipping), and in the end this may be your idea of a bargain though it is definitely not mine. However, this way you can have almond milk in your hotel room without paying those hefty room service fees, even if you should be lucky enough to check into a hotel that has "almond milk" on its menu.

It could be quieter, too. Sometimes I'm trying to sleep after a long hard day at work at my regular job and after composing choice Amazon reviews only to wake to the unearthly roar like the opening of the pit of Hell. It's just her trying to blend frozen blueberries with her ubiquitous almond milk. Who knows what the neighbors are thinking.

An Orgy of Unthinkable Fire

Review of *Jane: A Murder* (Soft Skull ShortLit)
(Paperback) on July 3, 2006

Jane's diaries are extraordinary; oh, maybe they're not but Maggie Nelson frames them in an extraordinarily telling manner, abstracting their most beautiful or witty parts so that often she comes across as a teenage Marquise du Deffand. Considering that Nelson had only two journals to work with, written many years apart, she mines them wonderfully, and part of the heartbreak is realizing how much Jane has grown in the gap of missing years between 1960 and 1966. Sometimes the older Jane strikes a note of spiritual exhaustion, like Françoise Sagan last year at Marienbad: "Cigarettes—one after the other; why?" And the 1966 Jane sometimes seems a little bit like the questioning heroine of the "Go Ask Alice" diaries, a far cry from her innocent days of youth, in which it was bliss to be alive.

And yet what Nelson does with this material is in the end a fit memorial for a woman we feel we might almost know, except an evil spirit came down on Michigan and began stamping out its most beautiful citizens. Nelson has attained a niche in both true crime and poetry; has any other writer really been in this crazy space before? The life that she had, born in the wake of this terrible murder, has been a haunted one; for better or for worse poetry got ahold of her. *Jane: A Murder* is nearly a novel,

for it has a strong subplot that culminates in the early death, revealed in "The Burn," of her father, described almost as an apple, strawberry, or rose. "I remember thinking he looked really, really red," a classmate tells Maggie. "Like he was about to burst."

The trope of bursting is everywhere in these plain and wonderfully turned poems. Ripeness is all, a surreal ripeness like the bright beating bead at the end of the thermometer. A friend recommended this book for its therapeutic value, as though Nelson had healed herself, or her family, through writing it all out, but I don't think that it's about rescue per se, it's more about noticing how vivid it all is, life, death, going away, coming back, the pulsating world.

Priceless Heirloom

Review of 14K Ruby & Diamond “Dynasty” Necklace (Jewelry) on January 4, 2007

As an American boy growing up in France, I became mesmerized by an enchanting painting of an ancestor that hung never very far from the hearth. The painting, smudged by smoke and damaged by Vichy occupation of the chateau, showed a very thin and angular woman, her face like something reflected in the bowl of a spoon, festooned in bright stones that gleamed out still bright after the passage of many decades. “Who is this woman,” I used to wonder out loud, until one evening, as my grandmother passed through the room looking for our vanished cat, Gateau, I noticed that she wore the same diamond and ruby necklace as the ancestor in the old damaged painting. I persuaded my grandmother to sit down and forget about her eternal hunt for a cat who had died long before I was born, when she was still a young woman not even married to my grandpapa yet, and to tell me about the necklace she wore. She took my little hands in hers and, in a low, breathy whisper, told me how she had stumbled across these precious stones in a valise once. Amazon’s 14K Ruby and Diamond “Dynasty” necklace looks like a lot like my family jewels; the resemblance is shocking enough to have made me drop my cocoa while leafing through the jewel pages this morning in an attempt to bring back, madeleine-style, the vanished days of yesteryear.

These diamonds are perhaps a bit more brilliantly cut than the ones my grandmother used to sport, but as she mentioned, her diamonds predated modern mining methods so they seemed rough, scratchy, almost fungal in their savage brightness. You wouldn’t want to wear them next to your skin, an aversion she averted by (normally) wearing a sort of wool ascot as a liner between her necklace and her body. The clarity here is superb, like drinking water from the nearby fountain at Lourdes when Our Lady wriggled her shepherdess’s staff into the rocky ground on which Bernadette fed her sheep. I used to ask my grandmother what would happen to her diamonds and rubies when she died, and she said she would never die.

The rubies, in the Burmese style, have that distinctive pigeon’s blood shine that befits a country ironically wracked by civil war. Rubies and diamonds, “blood and water,” my dad used to say—he had one of those great Irish voices, like a poet. I think I’ll order one of these necklaces one of these days, for if nothing else, like all the other “Dynasty” jewelry I have ordered, worn, and stored away in a vault, it will be fit for a king. If only I had a JPEG of my grandmother wearing this piece, darting after Gateau, half-consumed with anxiety and yet, *noblesse oblige* always paramount in her fragile, gregarious mind, yet stopping for a minute to console a lonely and abandoned grandson who grew up without proper supervision in a country far from Long Island. I think I’ve come to a point in my life where I deserve the priceless luxury of a “Dynasty” heirloom.

Author Bio



Kevin Killian, one of the original New Narrative writers, has written three novels (*Shy*, *Arctic Summer*, and *Spreadeagle*), a book of memoirs, and three books of stories. He has written four books of poetry, most recently *Tony Greene Era*. With Peter Gizzi he has edited *My Vocabulary Did This To Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer*. With Lew Ellingham, he has written the acclaimed biography of Spicer, *Poet Be Like God*. He teaches writing to MFA students at California College of the Arts in San Francisco.



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