

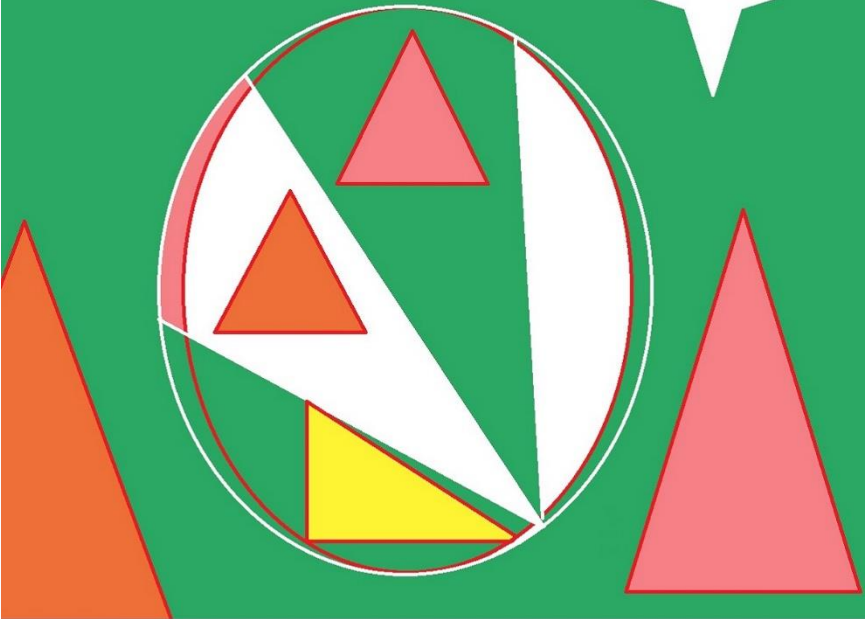
O
B



ORION'S
BELT

JUNE 2022

EDITED BY JOSHUA FAGAN



Caring for a Picky Eater
During the Apocalypse

Richie Narvaez

Demystifying the Science Behind
Boys in My Country Evaporating
into Mist at Every Shutter Click.

Abdulkareem Abdulkareem

The Necessity of
Strangeness

Joshua Fagan

Orion's Belt

June 2022

Copyright © 2022 Orion's Belt
All rights reserved.

Cover art: Joshua Fagan
Cover and interior design: Joshua Fagan

Contents

Demystifying the Science Behind Boys in My Country	
Evaporating into Mist at Every Shutter Click.	3
The Necessity of Strangeness	5
Caring for a Picky Eater During the Apocalypse	10
Notes on Contributors	14

Demystifying the Science Behind Boys in My Country Evaporating into Mist at Every Shutter Click.

by Abdulkareem Abdulkareem

there is no mystery here, every language
spoken by the gun is a disaster.

the verbs motioning their molecules
are too aggressive, pulling sultrily from

the wormhole of their kinetics,
the communion of fire to fold boys

out of blue into a chalice of mist.
every shutter click could sound like a gunshot.

vinegar & salt sprinkled on their
mothers' plants of prayers.

the equilibrium of disappearance too
is an unbalanced thing, like a pendulum.

the damp patch of the boys' wetness is from
God's tears, & the cloud, a smoke

from God's cigar. the wind scythes
my hearing, & everything sounds

like the agony birthed by too
much blood. on disappearance,

boys in my country are meant
to hoard an inferno like Abraham,

still & unmoved & not burnt.
to expel the salt in their wounds,

& their gritted teeth without
 motioning a syllable from their mouths

too loud. but grief is a damned thing—
 it shapeshifts fragments of the boys

who conceal their anguish too much—
 it turns into something intangible.

to compel a boy subdued by anguish
 into erupting his toothless mouth with a hearty

smile that sticks—is like vowelizing
 a mannequin to a dance floor. But of course,

happiness can be an emissary
 to anyone's empire if an edict dawns

it into your living. But some type
 of fire eats the cauldron & its content.

The Necessity of Strangeness

by Joshua Fagan

The absence of strangeness is sorely felt in American media. That your average Marvel blockbuster is predictable is a given. What is worse is that it never feels genuinely strange. There might be moments of weirdness, but these are largely ornamental and have little bearing on the outcome of the film. The same is true of narratives from *Stranger Things* to Sally Rooney's *Normal People* to even the fantastic new *Top Gun* movie. Strangeness does not equal quality, nor is it identical to being subversive or surprising. Works can be daring, thoughtful, and well-written without being strange. Still, the persistent absence of strangeness nonetheless coats the media landscape with a desiccating feeling of sameness. Whether the work is good or bad, whether it takes place on an alien planet or in suburban New England, the underlying assumptions are that it should employ clear chains of reasoning and an airtight cause-and-effect structure. There's the assumption that the setting, even if it involves magic incantations and channeling spirits, should adhere to identifiable empirical laws and formulas.

Critics call narratives "illogical" as a condemnation, as though stories have an obligation to adhere to logical principles. This hostility toward the illogical and irrational relates quite directly to our perceptions of the world in which we live. Aristotle explicitly advanced the idea of narrative as mimesis: art should copy life. We consciously accept the validity of this hypothesis even if we've never read Aristotle because the alternative, that art is completely separate from life, would make art a largely absurd venture. The belief that art should be lucid and rational comes from a belief that life is, on a basic level, lucid and rational too.

Few would assert that the murky, the enigmatic, and the senseless are a part of existence. Cartesian rationalism asserts, however, that

these elements can be understood logically as part of a larger pattern of existence. What appears meaningless fits into larger, coherent narratives about existence. These narratives can be devotionally optimistic, such as the common “everything happens for a reason,” or cynically pessimistic, such as the oft-quoted “the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.” While different in tone, these statements are similar in that they are general, abstract statements that claim to reveal truth applicable to specific experiences. Reasoning is crucial; it allows us to understand existence as more than a series of disconnected events. Stories too need reasoning. A story without any reasoning at all would be malformed mush. What differentiates artful narrative-making from bland anecdotes is the use of specific structures, techniques, and principles.

Well-reasoned stories are, thus, not antithetical to strangeness. What is antithetical to strangeness is a dogmatic, mechanistic rigidity that asserts that logic and reason can provide a complete, crystalline view of how the world functions and how people will act. Both Cartesian reasoning and empirical, scientific observations can tell us a lot about the world, but their power is limited. The world is ultimately not made of logical precepts, nor is it only made of numbers and statistics. Emotions, values, and experiences cannot be erased from our view of life without that view becoming so reductive as to be useless. Yet these are parts of existence that cannot be made clear and unambiguous, particularly considering how they are constantly in flux. A true view of art as mimesis would embrace the mysterious, the strange, and the unsettling.

Certainly, characters should not make strange decisions in order to allow a miraculous heroic escape or to solve narrative problems that couldn't be solved if a character acted “normally.” Contrived writing is cheap—not because a character acts illogically, but because that character acts in a way that is not organic to the person they are. Determining who a person is, however, proves difficult. The psyche

is vast and capacious, refusing to give way to clear rational categories and classifications.

Scottie's obsession in *Vertigo* is not rational, and neither is Betty's in *Mulholland Drive*. Tony Soprano acutely recognizes the problems with his world, yet he cannot force himself to be better. These characters don't lack the capacity to reason, but reason can't help them become the people they want to be. The short-sighted viewer might condemn these characters for not being reasonable enough, but such an objection derives from the viewer looking at a given situation the characters face as an abstract, isolated incident. Asking why Scottie doesn't notice the negative consequences of his actions is equivalent to asking a drowning victim on a tempest-tossed sea why they have difficulty grabbing a life preserver. Saying these characters act irrationally is technically true, but one could more accurately say they've reached a position where reason, abstract and colorless, is of little help to them in achieving the clarity they seek.

Pure reason seeks to separate itself from individual ideals, sensations, and experiences, but even if such a feat were possible, it would be practically useless considering how real situations are never separate from these factors, but rather hopelessly knotted in a confluence of dozens of different desires stemming from thousands of different experiences. The concept of an isolated, self-contained situation wherein reason alone has the capacity to provide perfect, piercing clarity is as much of a comforting fantasy as any *Harry Potter* book. Imagining the trolley problem without considering that one of the people on the tracks might be a friend of yours, and that your boss might have given you an ultimatum not to pull the lever, and you might be feeling distressed from a particular news story you saw yesterday, presents an image antithetical to reality.

An astute study of the social conditions characters encounter can help us better understand their actions, but reason and empiricism cannot explain these actions. A different person under the same circumstances might react an entirely different way; their inner lives

remain strange. At the end of *Psycho*, a psychologist monologues about why Norman Bates made the choices he did, yet this hardly makes his actions not-strange because it fails to explain why even a mentally damaged character with a distorted psyche necessarily must make those choices. The experience remains disquieting and disorienting, immune to rationalist explanations.

That these characters make decisions that we find inexplicable, even bizarre, is not a problem with the writing, but by the widespread valorization of logic not as a useful tool, but as a method for attaining absolute understanding. These characters consistently make strange choices that logic can penetrate but not fully explain. Unlike in the average blockbuster, the likes of *Better Call Saul* and *Mulholland Drive* comprehend that our lives don't operate on clear chains of causes and effects. We can't be fully rational beings, not because we're stained with passions and desires, but because reason is insufficient to help us explain our interactions with the chaotic, fluctuating world in which we live. Our perspectives, yearnings, and experiences can be informed by reason, but they aren't bound or determined by it. Strangeness remains.

John Dewey in *Art as Experience* discusses how, when the viewpoints of art clash with those of conventional morality, the blame is inevitably placed on art. In reality, he claims, the blame should be placed on our ideas of morality, whose flaws art allows us to overcome. The same is true of the relationship between art and the mundane and explicable. Russian critic Viktor Shklovsky discusses the "defamiliarization" that characterizes the best writing, which describes actions in such a way that there is a stripping away of convention and rationalizing, allowing the action itself to be seen and understood. The demand of logic that has swallowed popular culture is a demand to reduce actions, decisions, and experiences to the explicable and the clear.

This process results in art that can be satisfying but rarely daring, reaffirming the idea that the world is a place that can be fully

comprehended by those who are smart and savvy enough. The wild, uneasy side of our experiences, the side that can be contextualized but never reduced to logical precepts and reactions to material conditions, is thus erased. Strangeness is necessary because it provides a relief from this mechanistic thinking. The disorienting and uncanny are inevitably components of existence. Ignoring them doesn't make them go away.

Caring for a Picky Eater During the Apocalypse

by Richie Narvaez

1. Know Your Picky Eater's Food Favorites and Keep Them in Mind When Planning Meals.

On your first date, only eight months ago, Sara told you she spent a summer as a vegetarian, by which she meant she would eat dessert three times a day. Twinkies, she'd said, were her number one go-to fave, dinner for most of that July.

So when you present her with the last box of Twinkies you had to elbow someone for at the rapidly emptying supermarket, try not to be upset when your picky eater says, "No, thank you. They changed the flavor. They're too dry and too sweet now."

This would be understandably frustrating. You might find yourself fuming in the government-mandated darkness afterward. In that case, eat an extra Twinkie—because apparently, no one else is going to.

2. Introduce New Foods Slowly but Consistently.

Try not to become grateful that your honeymoon to Paris was cancelled because of the end of the world. You had planned an itinerary of gourmet establishments, not knowing then how picky your picky eater was, and now you can just imagine her saying she could find absolutely nothing to eat on the menu and then asking the waiters, "Is it possible to get a BLT?"

So put new foods next to foods your picky eater already likes. For example, take those soda crackers she seems so fond of and place them all around the Honey BBQ Tuna Creation you found left behind in that looted bodega. There was a lot of it left behind, actually. You might feel like you're trying to trick your picky eater, but she really needs to eat something besides those soda crackers. She

offers some to you, but you refuse, glad that she's eating something, anything.

3. Avoid Showing Disgust or Disinterest When Trying New Foods Yourself.

Got squirrel? Unlike humans, they seem to be thriving. So why not squirrel?

Warning: They are slick and fast. Like the one that took you three hours to catch, almost killing you in the process, when you fell from a tree. Sure, the meat is stringy and greasy and once belonged to a rodent, albeit an adorable one. But you are starving. Both of your faces are looking hollow.

When she moves the charred squirrel morsels around the plate without bringing a single piece to her mouth, she crosses her arms and says, again, "I've been so craving a hamburger and French fries and a vanilla shake," try not to take it personally.

And try not to be regretful about having finally committed to someone. When you make a decision about your life, especially one that affects others, you have to live with it whether you like it or not. Plus, squirrel is delish. Don't let her portion go to waste.

4. Forage for Foods Together.

When your picky eater has taken on a grayish pallor and has fallen into listlessness, remember she might appreciate more foods if she is part of the process of salvaging food, sneaking past the armed gangs, and sometimes breaking into the homes of people who look like they will not put up a fight. Sara might be getting weaker, too, living only on that can of crackers, about which she says, "I can't decide if they need more salt or less salt."

You two climb down the fire escape and kick through the Henriquezes'. An old couple, probably in their eighties. You haven't seen them for days, so you hope they are dead and hate yourself for hoping. Don't tell your picky eater this. Instead, be happy that you're doing things as a couple.

5. Deal with Unwanted Food Calmly.

Let your picky eater monologue about the best pizza she ever ate. Remember to block the door as you pass the decaying bodies in the bedroom, so she doesn't notice. You don't want to upset her appetite!

In the kitchen, very little is left. You hold up each item for your picky eater, and she rattles off her favorite dismissive phrases. "Not a fan," "Repeats on me," "Do they have the organic kind?"

You might feel like breaking down then, telling her, "Dammit. Sara, c'mon, you can't be like this anymore. We haven't found anything to eat for days."

She says, "Okay, I'll try it." But alas, she'll only have the smallest bite. The smallest, and then fall back to sleep.

6. Plan Meals Together.

Having a hand in the measuring, pouring, or preparing of the meal will increase the chances that your picky eater will want to try at least a nibble. And then—

It dawns on you that Sara has planned this from the beginning. Not to eat, not to survive.

So that your ribs wouldn't show (as much), so your hair wouldn't fall out (as much). So that you would be the one to survive (a little longer).

She is sleeping a rare sound sleep, so you wait to confront her to have your first big fight. You practice everything you are going to say.

But she never wakes.

In the morning, you have your final breakfast together, nibbling from the almost full tin of crackers. (They need more salt, you discover.) These carbs will give you strength—at least enough to get moving, far away from the increasingly large gangs of marauders and into the less irradiated woods upstate.

Enjoy them for now.

Under a churning charcoal sky, sit together on the fire escape with your picky eater one last time, as if you two had made it to Paris, as if you were on a balcony overlooking the Seine.

Notes on Contributors

Abdulkareem Abdulkareem, Frontier III, is a Nigerian writer and Linguist. He is a fellow of the SprinNG Writing Fellowship, 2022. His works appear/forthcoming on *POETRY*, *West Trade Review*, *Off Topic Publishing*, *Aster Lit*, *Poetry Column-NND*, *The Shore Poetry*, *Afro Literary Magazine*, *Brittle Paper*, *Rulerless Magazine*, *Better Than Starbucks*, *Feral Poetry*, *Claw and Blossom* & elsewhere. He won the University of Ilorin SU Writers Competition (Poetry Category) 2022 & the SprinNG Writing Fellowship Poetry Contest. He is also on the shortlist for the top entries of the Nigerian Students Poetry Prize, 2021 & Brigitte Poirson Poetry Contest, 2022. He reads poetry for *Frontier Poetry* & *Agbowó Magazine*. He tweets @panini500bc Instagram @panini_500bc

Joshua Fagan is a writer and critic currently residing in New York City. His creative work has previously been published in venues including *Daily Science Fiction*, *The Fantastic Other*, and *Star*Line*. As an academic, his work focuses on the intersection of literature, myth, and technology in the aftermath of Darwin, and his critical work has been published in *The Robert Frost Review*. He is the founder and editor-in-chief of the literary speculative-fiction publication *Orion's Belt*. His YouTube channel has received over 1.6 million views.

Richie Narvaez is author of the award-winning collection *Roachkiller and Other Stories* and the thriller *Hipster Death Rattle*. His slipstream short story "Room for Rent," from the anthology *Latinx Rising*, was read by LeVar Burton on the *LeVar Burton Reads* podcast. His most recent novel is the historical YA mystery *Holly Hernandez and the Death of Disco*, and his latest book is the anthology *Noir Yorican*. He lives in the Bronx.