the soho press book of 80s short fiction

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Introduction

Between Courage and Despair: A literary antidote to the 1980s

We cringe when we think about them. Shoulder pads and acid wash. K cars and the Portland Building. *Rambo*, hair metal, and the travesty of the Moscow and Los Angeles Olympics. And, oh yeah, the Cold War and the Gipper, who personified the time over which he governed more completely than any president since Eisenhower, if not FDR.

Let's start there: Ronald Reagan, a '50s throwback as unrepentantly unoriginal as Elvis's cover of Big Mama Thornton's "Hound Dog" (hell, he even ripped off Elvis's haircut), a John Wayne manqué who conceived of international politics as if it

were a script for one of the Duke's wartime propaganda films (never mind that Wayne was playing a bastardized version of his own cowboy hero), a modern-day Nero lusting after an office for which he was manifestly unqualified, and succeeding to it only because of the cryptocratic machinations of a shadow government of oligarchs and con artists. In other words, the personification of the military-industrial coup d'état Eisenhower had warned us about twenty years earlier, Warholian in execution, Orwellian in effect.

We'd had bad presidents before. Stupid presidents even. Pierce, Johnson, Harding spring to mind. Reagan was something new. His tenure completed the theatricalization of American politics, concentrating unprecedented power in a telegenic figurehead whose policies, like his speeches, were crafted by handlers who not only put the words in his mouth but the ideas in his head: *The American Presidency*, a mockumentary by Lee Atwater, produced by Michael Deaver, starring Ronald *Bedtime for Bonzo* Reagan. To call Reagan an actor-turned-politician is to give his acting career credence it doesn't merit. Even so, he brought a method sincerity to politics he could never muster for his films, and this seemed all it took to create the myth of the Great Communicator, *paterfamilias* meets *pater patriae*, smiling genially as he sold the American public one bottle of snake oil after another. His less flattering sobriquet, the Teflon president, was more apt, yet neither it nor the pyramid scheme of scandals it referenced did any real damage to his reputation. Not Debategate, not Iran-Contra, not the open door between the administration and lobbyists or the surrender of the EPA and HUD to the very corporations from which they were supposed to protect citizens or the spree of financial and media deregulation that led to the $160 billion S&L crisis and the transfer

of authority from elected officials to the broadcasters who now set the political agenda, nor even the refusal to mention the word "AIDS" during the entirety of his first term. Not even the *ex post facto* revelation of Alzheimer's tarnished his legacy. His was leadership through lifestyle, after all, not cerebration. He didn't have ideas, he had ideals, and of all the ways his presidency betrayed the American experiment, not least the uncountable trillions spent on video game technologies (SDI, the Peacekeeper missile, the Stealth bomber) and the era of preemptive wars they require, the most damaging may ultimately prove to be the anti-intellectual populism he ushered in as the dominant mode of civil discourse. To all those who say the US could never elect a Donald Trump, I say: we already did. His name was Ronald Wilson Reagan.

It may be that history—whatever "history" is anymore—remembers the '80s as the last analog moment when human beings were what we had always been, before we're fully digitized into whatever hive creature information technology is in the process of creating. Hence our amused nostalgia over the music and the fashion and their air-brushed, hair-sprayed accoutrements. Yet it seems clear, too, that the normalization of postmodernity was well underway by the time Nancy Reagan talked one of the First Family's backers into dropping $200K on a new set of White House china. Millennials tend to associate postmodernism with a sophisticated if neurotic (and sometimes tedious) interplay between the object that is the case and all its previous and possible iterations, but for much of the second half of the twentieth century the postmodern condition was a source of crippling anxiety for artist and working stiff alike. The past seemed to have exhausted the possibilities

of identity, the future destined for Armageddon, while the present, well . . . the present was jacked, economically and politically, intellectually and aesthetically.

If the angst reached its zenith in the 1970s (Watergate, the fall of Saigon, gas lines, the hostage crisis), its nadir came in the '80s. Enervated by the tremors of punk and disillusioned by the failures of the Congressional class of '74 and the impotence of the Carter presidency, America sighed a collective "What the fuck" and decided to ring out the end of empire/end of days with the indulgence of third-century Romans. Ronnie's simulacrum of a presidency was only the most obvious manifestation of our retreat, but if you looked around you could see the signs everywhere. Tell someone you liked the '80s (even someone who lived through them, someone who should know better) and they'll immediately assume you're talking about *Thriller* or *Top Gun* or *Bonfire of the Vanities*. *Like a Virgin*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *The Color Purple*, *Pyromania*, *The Terminator*; one of those robust novels of the not-so-distant past by Doctorow or McMurtry or Morrison or Stone or Kennedy or Updike or Roth or . . . Or Paula Abdul's choreography, or Julian Schnabel's paintings, or Donald Trump's personal style, or Gianni Versace, or Denise and Robert Venturi, or nouvelle cuisine, or the Harmonic Convergence, or a poster of a pair of battered pointe shoes . . . It's a motley collection, admittedly, linked by nothing more than temporal proximity and an unironic commitment to various forms of regressive cultural assumptions. Its failings were as evident then as they are now (as, for that matter, are its strengths), but as with the rampant sexism and racism of America's great cultural bloom in the '30s, '40s, and '50s, they're also irrelevant, at least in regard to their status as cultural totems rather than aesthetic objects. Twenty-five,

thirty years on, a nostalgia inherent in the work itself has reified into sepia shellac, rendered all the more jaundiced by the smug paternalism with which people who consider themselves technologically or psychologically sophisticated regard the artifacts of more primitive—"innocent"—eras.

Still, if the aesthetic ideology of a decade can be reduced to a slogan, that slogan would have to be Gordon Gekko's infamous "Greed is good." The line itself is forgetable. What makes it emblematic is the fact that audiences were supposed to find it, like, *evil*, when the truth is it represented their values more accurately than Charlie Sheen's puling coming to consciousness ever could. Like the best Hollywood directors, Oliver Stone understands that cinema trades in visual symbols rather than narrative, but like the worst (which is to say, like most of them) he's never managed to replace story with other ways of making meaning, with the result that *Wall Street* ends up selling the excesses it purports to denounce far more persuasively than the straight-and-narrow path it pretends to endorse. Which, who knows, was maybe the intention. Stone isn't a complete idiot, after all. On some level, he had to know his audience didn't want a dingy semidetached house in Queens any more than he wanted to make an honest but less commercially appealing movie. They wanted the blockbuster lifestyle: the Upper East Side penthouse, the Armani suit, the promise beneath Darryl Hannah's Marilyn Monroe minidress. Tiger blood *avant le lettre*. But more than they wanted any given material marker, they wanted not to have to do anything to earn it. They wanted the "money for nothing" the Dire Straits song waved under their noses, in a four-and-a-half-minute narrative that contains more dramatic irony than *Wall Street*'s leaden two-plus hours. Not that irony counted for anything: like every future stockbroker's understanding of Gekko's

greed line, like George Will's blinkered endorsement of "Born in the USA" and a nascent generation of stalkers and victims slow dancing to "Every Breath You Take," it didn't matter that you weren't in on the joke. That the joke was at your expense. It mattered only that you got what you wanted and that *no one made you feel guilty about it*.

The greedy American was nothing new. Nor was the innocent American. These Americans were as greedy as their forebears but they couldn't claim previous generations' näiveté about the sources of American prosperity. But rather than repudiate their materialism, they took denial to a new level: they wanted not to be accountable for it. For their boorishness, for their avarice, for their emphatic failure to empathize. They wanted to be wrong and to be rewarded for it. This is practically the definition of decadence, but it's a decadence Huysmans or Proust would hardly recognize, let alone the emperor from some last-gasp interval of Chinese or Ottoman profligacy. Unfettered capitalism had reduced debauchery to brands rather than objects, transformed nihilism to celebrity rather than self-indulgence or mortification. Everything—cars, art, faces—was reduced to burnished surfaces that couldn't help but reflect what they were meant to conceal: the replacement of an inner life by mass production and the dollar value placed on same. People effaced themselves not by scourging the flesh or denying their connection to nature but by pretending to be the masks they wore. If the effect tended toward neurasthenia, its origins lay in a more banal complacency. Call it greed, call it fear, call it the apotheosis of kitsch: the '80s oozed intellectual and aesthetic flatulence, but even that was circumscribed and dull, less *Gargantua and Pantagruel* than that kid in *9 ½ Weeks* who could fart the theme to *Jaws*—but only the first note.

But for all that, the '80s get a bad rap. When the dominant ethos is so patently meretricious, so devoid of originality, morality, or any other claim to a thinking person's attention (let alone admiration), it becomes irrelevant, if not simply invisible to those who haven't decided to trade on their privilege or otherwise cash in. Think Weimar between the wars, Adorno, Brecht, Gropius et al., flourishing even as fascism seized the German psyche; or the samizdat of Brodsky and Bulgakov and Solzhenitsyn mapping the constraints of a Russian reality that stood in stark contrast to the hegemonic claims of Soviet orthodoxy.

What I mean is, the 1980s I just described wasn't my 1980s. My 1980s didn't simply reject Ronald Reagan, it ignored him: ignored everything that made him possible and everything he made possible. My 1980s was peopled by outsiders: by nerds, eggheads, Goths, drug addicts, and dropouts; by bitches and lezzies, faggots and trannies, and people who had only just started (at least in music and movies and books) to call themselves niggers. ("I, Debbie, nigger faggot cunt crippled by my sawed-off dick": Laurie Weeks's declaration of allegiance to the disenfranchised and reviled is rooted in Lennon/Ono's "Woman Is the Nigger of the World" and Patti Smith's "Rock N Roll Nigger," but occupies a swiftly changing cultural landscape somewhere between Bret Easton Ellis's "I hate hanging out with niggers anyway" and Essex Hemphill's "Are you funny, nigga?") My 1980s turned on this kind of appropriation and reappropriation. It was fired by the zeal of the hippies and flower children and Civil Rights marchers, but without the earlier generations' sense that momentum was on their side. The outlook was pessimistic, fractured, contradictory. We railed and rallied against a corrupt, homogenous mainstream in a language as expedient as

political jargon always is (c.f., "mainstream," a buzzword whose only consistent meaning was that it discredited anything to which it was applied), but we never really thought things would change, or about what we would do if they did. The only thing we knew for sure was that the show was being put on by assholes and imbeciles and we had no desire to join them, which is why protest was only occasionally labeled as such, and more often manifested as refusal.

But in the shadows and the margins, in dingy bars and night clubs, in indie bookstores and record shops and seedy apartments in the East Village and Harlem and the Haight and Compton, an alternative culture began to sprout. Indeed, the '80s was the period when "alternative" became an aesthetic descriptor, "indie" too. Both terms were as nebulous as the "mainstream" to which they stood in opposition, but no less persuasive for that. If the mainstream was characterized by sameness—whiteness, maleness, the concession to a mercenary standard of universality—then the alternative was marked by difference, not just to the mainstream but, crucially, to itself. Mainstream was a gravitational singularity, obliterating distinction (even if only notionally) by shrinking everything to the market's yardstick, whereas indie was dispersed across the orbital bodies just outside the event horizon (and occasionally getting sucked in). There were similarities in the outliers' songs and stories and movies, certainly, but nothing you'd call a program, let alone a school. This isn't to say that the work was ignorant of history, of ideas. In fact it was often steeped in "theory" (yet another buzzword), but support for one or another formal mode was tempered by the knowledge that the aesthetic shifts and rifts in literature, art, music, etc., had always privileged the making of meaning over identity, which is the polite

way of saying that the various "experimental" modes to which previous generations of avant-gardists and enfants terribles had declared allegiance were no more innocent of racism, misogyny, or homophobia than the culturally normative realism to which they had organized in opposition. For the first time a substantial number of artists—and their audience—were willing to say that moral concerns trumped formal ones. The new work drew from a welter of sources and styles—realist and postmodern, figurative and conceptual, punk and rap and New Wave—and paired them with an equally diverse array of points of view. I originally wrote "married" rather than "paired," but the liaisons were as suspicious of monogamy as they were of every other aspect of heteronormative patriarchy. Artists weren't endorsing one method, one identity, over another, but simply trying to make them tell. In particular, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction collapsed. A piece of writing might run in a magazine as an essay and later show up in a book of short stories, or a short story might later find its place as a chapter in a memoir. Or the genre tags were simply left off, and it was up to the reader to decide if a piece was "real" or "made up." The labels didn't matter. What mattered was revealing the world and its beleaguered citizens rather than torturing them with edifying or otherwise aspirational myths that no one could (or should) hope to live up to.

Not that the disjunctions were always amicable. As with the rivalry between East Coast and West Coast hip-hop (okay, not *exactly* like the East Coast/West Coast split—there weren't any guns), the literary world made much of the antagonisms between writers, between crews, even though the distinctions had more to do with marketing labels than the way a given writer conceived of his or her work. The New Narrativists

supposedly hated the minimalists for being too mannered, the dirty realists (who might or might not have been the minimalists) hated the post-punks for their sloppiness, and everybody hated the Brat Pack because they were making all the money. Yet the New Narrativists were no more unified than the groups to which they were purportedly in opposition, even less so the dirty realists and the minimalists and the Brat Pack, whose most common shared trait was probably a revulsion for the belittling or otherwise misleading tags by which they were sold.

Still, some similarities were visible, which time has only served to highlight. The return of/reinvention of parataxis (in lieu of what Robert Glück called the "La Brea Tar Pits of lyricism") the shift in narrative focus from institutions (marriage, corporations, the military) to individuals, above all the insistence on constricting consciousness to its physical container: to the body, whose movements and sensations didn't exactly circumscribe the self, but nevertheless made it possible, and meaningless in any other context. This is a literature of the flesh: of its shifting loci of pleasure and pain, as Foucault, uncoupling sexuality from Freudian pathologies, labeled them; of its frailties; of its futile but inevitable gestures toward transcendence. Lynne Tillman: "This is a Herculean task never before recorded. An adventure with my body. In forever." Raymond Carver: "The body is still unidentified, unclaimed, apparently unmissed." Jim Lewis: "The human body is the best picture of the human soul." The language echoes metaphysics but the context is always (comically, banally, painfully) concrete: a woman attempting to remove a diaphragm; a news account of a body found in a river; a man who's shot himself in the foot. Depending on how you interpret it—and this is the work's genius, the closest it comes to universality—its obsession

with the body is either a capitulation to the Cartesian construct of the head in the tank or an absolute rejection of it. Which is to say: the new writers suffered from the same postmodern anxieties about the epistemological relationship between the self and the world as had the post-war generation, but they didn't allow that to derail an engagement with the information delivered by the senses, only to temper any conclusions at which they might (seem to) arrive. John Keene: "Thus his musings, when written down, gradually melded, gathered shape, solidified like a well-mixed mâché, and thus, upon rereading them he realized what he had accomplished was the construction of an actual voice. The final dances of youth, dim incandescence. Willow weep for me. And so, patient reader, these remarks should be duly noted as a series of mere life-notes aspiring to the condition of annotations."

Notes maybe, but notes to, for, *from* life—real life, life-as-it-is-lived, and not the beginning-middle-end stuff that fiction had always insisted on, as if life were a sculpture on its plinth rather than a gas drifting through, merging with, the void. This was a literature that engaged with time more honestly than any that had come before. Most writing concerns itself with the relationship of the present to the past and the future. This was a literature of moments. Of successive moments, because the forward flow of time is inexorable, but not necessarily linked moments: if one action followed another, the first action wasn't always depicted as causal—even if, say, the second action was death from AIDS and the first was unprotected sex with an HIV-positive person. Hence what Dennis Cooper referred to as a "widespread disbelief in a future and a refusal to learn from the past," which observation served as a kind of psycho-social barometer for most of my early career. Yet this anomie was

balanced by what Robert Glück described as a need to "convey urgent social meanings while opening or subverting the possibilities of meaning itself." The most urgent of these "meanings" undoubtedly concerned the AIDS crisis, which was to the Blank Generation what World War I was to the Lost Generation. AIDS disproportionately affected people who fell into one or another disenfranchised minority, which was widely perceived as the reason behind the Reagan administration's criminally sluggish response to the epidemic. But it was more than that. AIDS was a medical crisis, and a political one, but it was also existential, because if anything united the diverse members of the counterculture, it was sex. From the litany of lovers in Lynne Tillman's "Weird Fucks" or Susan Minot's "Lust" to the gritty pornography of Gary Indiana's "Sodomy," the neonatal voyeurism of Suzanne Gardinier's "How Soft, How Sweet," or the inculcation of shame in Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl," copulation was almost always a liminal experience, the lens through which the artifice of identity could be seen most clearly. "He used sex as a means of communicating," Sam D'Allesandro writes in "Giovanni's Apartment": "I need sex as a way to get into heaven." Or Sarah Schulman in *After Delores*: "She saw something special in me. She trusted me. And I was transformed suddenly from a soup-stained waitress to an old professor." Perhaps the only feeling more pervasive than alienation from the revanchist ethos of Reagan's '80s was the refusal to succumb to it, to validate it or accept its judgments. Writers found strength in the very traits that had been used to vilify them and, fertilized by desire and fear and determination, a new literature flourished in the tiny spaces between courage and despair.

The '90s ruined everything, of course. The boom went on so long it produced a generation that believes it can have whatever

it wants. Liberal or conservative, aesthete or infidel: identity and ideology don't have to inconvenience anyone anymore. You can vote against gay marriage and pay your gay hairdresser $500 to cut your hair like Ellen Page's. You can espouse environmentalism but still drive an SUV and jet off to India or the Caribbean for vacation. You don't have to choose between Björk and Beyoncé, between the Hamptons or the Hudson Valley: you can have it all. Even now, when the go-go '90s are a distant memory, the prevailing ethos seems to be "Get what you can" (or maybe "Get it while you can") and this is just as true in literature as it is in the rest of life. The fractured antirealisms of the 1980s were supplanted by a recidivist postmodernism even as an ever-assimilationist realism tied its fortunes to politically expedient notions of identity, a lose/lose development that reduced the aggressive insecurities of '80s alt-lit to easy ironies or even easier pieties. What I mean is, the stories in this anthology aren't just a corrective to the excesses of the Reagan-Bush era. They're an admonition to ours as well.

It should be said, though, that the goal of this anthology isn't to define a canon or a school, only to dismantle one—or two, or three, or a dozen. The parameters of what remains are as idiosyncratic as its writers; as its readers. It starts, by one measure, with Baldwin and Becket and Burroughs, and ends with Bolaño, Didion, Ferrante, Knausgard, Sebald. By another measure it starts with the first line of Brad Gooch's "Spring": "It's not dark yet, but it's getting there," and ends with the last line of David Wojnarowicz's "Spiral": "I am disappearing but not fast enough." It starts with Dorothy Allison's "I tell the stories and it comes out funny," and ends with Amy Hempel's "She wants my life." It starts with Gil Cuadros's "Thoughts of the world seem woven of thread, thinly disguised, a veil," and ends with

Rebecca Brown's "Above the crowded street, the hospital, you fly." "Her body feels like someone else's," writes Suzanne Gardinier: "As she lies there with her head on my father's chest she admits for several seconds that it feels like a prison, in which she must serve out the term of her life."

"In that extended instant after sex," Christopher Bram observes, "before you remember you are not alone, I felt pleased with myself and the life I lived."

"Out in the snowy East of Long Island," Kevin Killian answers, "I bent over Frank O'Hara's grave and traced his words with my tongue, the words carved into his stone there: 'Grace to be born and to live as variously as possible.'"

"But then the war came," Gary Indiana writes, "which ended a good deal one might have looked forward to."

"Looking back on it," Mary Gaitskill sums everything up, "I don't know why that time was such a contented one, but it was."

A note on chronology: Decades only rarely oblige the calendar by confining themselves to their numerical delineation (perhaps reflected in our perverse insistence that they start in the tenth year of their predecessor, and end in their ninth). The stories in this anthology were all either written or published between 1980 and 1992, which is to say, the Reagan-Bush years, which seem to me to form a cohesive period in American culture, markedly different from the 1970s (which didn't really start until the fall of Saigon and Nixon's resignation) and the Clinton '90s, when the genuine prosperity of the boom years succeeded in commodifying aesthetics in a way that Reaganomics never could. I apologize if my title misled anyone, but what can I say? *The Soho Press Book of Short Fiction from 1980–1992* is no one's idea of sexy.