

ME, MYSELF AND NARRATIVE ART

I grew up in a pale blue cinder block house, next to a row of melaleuca trees, on a street that flooded up to the doorway every time it rained. Every morning my dad sneezed for fifteen minutes, until all the air in the yard had been blown away, which had settled overnight from the Australian pollens.

The horticulture of Henry Nehrling brought exotics to the subtropical climate of Naples, Florida, a pleasure to anyone but my father, whose nostrils rivaled those of a mythological dragon. Outside the house there were insects whose carbon ethos survived clear from the Mesozoic epoch; ground-aerial Doppler from commuter airplanes that made the neighborhood sound like a war zone; and nuisance flooding that anticipated climate adaptation imperatives. It was like the house existed across three colliding tempests.

From the outside, if you squinted you couldn't tell the house was even there because the roof and the trim and all exterior walls matched the sky on mostly cloudy days. It's like my family was invisible, and I was the only one who knew about it. And from the time I first saw the unscrolled blueprint of our house, it always felt like we lived inside a drawing – *an unfinished drawing*.

"There's no reason a developer would intentionally leave out the drainage pipes," I thought. Somebody had made a mistake. After all we lived in a neighborhood that got built by the same man who

dredged the Gordon Pass, and put up all the homes where the Kelloggs once wintered. Because of that, I was always one cereal box away from a cartoon version of reality, where somehow the absence of story we lived in was going to suddenly come to life.

And it did. One day from the Yucatan, I called my dad, and he had just bought the shoe store after his boss retired, and that same store I worked at in high school would now become the place where the rest of my story would happen. In a corner of the stock room, the two-inch avatar from the AC duct, who I met at age three after a bloody ER visit, would show up as I worked out a business plan. He was a fully developed cartoon, even before I had verbal language, and I was just learning to see him again.

Then one day my dad came into the stockroom and said, "You remember that girl from fifth grade who came from Peru? Well, I see her mom all the time and she said, 'If you ever see your son again, tell him my daughter wants to take him out to dinner.'"

Was I the subject of a wish? I honestly didn't remember the girl at all. But apparently she thought I was a friendly kid. And I said yes to dinner, out of curiosity. On our date, anticipation yielded to wonder as she remembered things about me only a friend would recall. *Where was I during all these great memories?* When I told her I was going to be a cartoonist, she believed me and offered me her computer. After work, from dusk to dawn, she would lend me her laptop so I could draw all night. *And that's how I*

crashed into my first storyworld: “‘Captain’s log,’ narrating, ‘After the television crash, and all the flying colors, a qwerty snowball fell from the sky.’ His flight jacket on a crushed wingspan, the tail fin up a tree, bearing ‘02, Reality Pilot...’”

Inherited dyslexia, synesthesia, eyes that project television – it all made sense now. Who wakes up one morning, having never drawn on a computer, staring at the “Master Avatars of Children’s Entertainment”? *The Startoons*, cartoons from the stars, were for all practical purposes rescued from the electromagnetic spectrum – a story born from vectors and ellipses, because of a friend.

But as quickly as their world arrived, the childhood harbor that I had rescued a cartoon dream from was collapsing. Divorce, the division of private property, strange couches, a Saab dashboard that became my desktop. Homeless kids, the next British cultural invasion, this time with reality TV instead of radio. I was in the midst of a maelstrom of forces that were shaping me as an artist.

Marooned by a color, and a pod of dolphins, I wrote the beginnings of *Blue Christmas*, where I had redesigned Santa Claus because he was overweight and needed to move to Miami for health reasons. Then there was Mrs. Emerson, who had three months to live. That was the first time I was really a hero in a story, as we fought to get her a new prognosis. And she lived three years beyond, by the grace of a new mental image.

I became a writer there, in the back cottage at the tail end of a through line that connected me to 19th century Transcendentalism. The person who had the mannerism of my grandmother and devastating life of my mother, was also in paternal lineage to one of the most important, quintessentially American philosophers, Ralph Waldo Emerson. I was living Walden, in the Neotropics, in the middle of extreme weather, in the corridor of hurricanes between 2004–2006.

After that I moved to Georgia where I wrote my first programming block. Then by chance Kansas City, where I learned my mother had gone to school as a girl. Was there was some thread across lifetimes that pulled me into the center of an evolution I had been missing due to illness in the family? It seemed the subconscious of my missing identity had infused space-time itself.

I was drawing, writing and finding stories now. And the creative force that I had met as a boy, masked by tragedy, was now a part of me, replacing absence and loss with a new dream. The gift I had been given as a boy by my mother's spirit of play and love of learning, had been returned by two strangers, a foreign girl who could only speak Spanish, and a forsaken woman who had lost all hope.

Sometimes we don't know our own stories. And we need something we can't apprehend. That is what the narrative arts is for, and what I hope to contribute as a writer-director.