

MY STORY: ME, MYSELF AND NARRATIVE ART

I grew up in a pale blue cinderblock 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.

At the age of eight I lost my parenting. My mom got sick. And my dad had to find a second, and then a third job. Soon enough it was just me and a bunch of popsicle sticks, which I used to build cities and make floor plans and elevations. By order of play I might have become an architect, had someone measured my interest.

From the outside, if you squinted you couldn't tell the house was even there because the roof and the trim and all exteriors 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 just around me like a song, but in the form of a picture that bent around the corners of my mind. And I was sensing him, what he might look like when he wasn't moving, and what he wanted with me, as I learned to run a small business. 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."

I honestly didn't remember the girl at all. But apparently she thought I was a friendly kid. And I said yes to dinner and she was hands down the coolest person I had ever met. *"It's like she's a cartoon,"* everything about her was animated. Maybe she thought I was a cartoon too? Was this the plan of my life? *"Poof!"* My car would turn into pixels and everything would be hunky dory; me and the girl, in full cartoon, driving around on some perfect movie set. And it was all true, *until the night she left me her laptop.*

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 — in the manner of a Russian miniature, born in between heart beats!

Using ellipses instead of vectors, I figured out how to draw a 3D character with only two dimensions. Technically I was catching motion with ellipsoid riggings, recording a mere figment into an obscura of collapsed 2D volumes. And I captured a kind of motion I called "elastics," as I took impressions of the inside television world: *"After the television crash, and all the flying colors..."*

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. But I cried every time I worked on that story, because one time when my mom was bedridden I wanted to stay home with her, but my father made us go out to dinner anyway. It was like the Christmas tree grew knives as I was walking out the door. I was just too little to fight against my father, without the armor of my own story.

It's who I was. The person who always stayed next to my mother. Then there was Mrs. Emerson, who had three months to live. And it was me and her and Hurricane Charley, the way I remember it. And though I was a different person, at a different time, it was the same moment – but this time I wasn't too little to stay with her and make a difference. We found out that we had been neighbors two doors down, from where I lived when I was in third grade, but we had never met. And now in a completely different part of town, we were neighbors again: "*Me, Mrs. Robinson, you, Tarzan!*"

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 I lost Mrs. Emerson, and all I had was the paper under a pen to hold my own thoughts, I moved to Georgia and became neighbors with a photograph my mother had kept on her wall of her brother, meeting Jimmy Carter at the White House, during his tenure as the district leader of the 68th New York Assembly. He was my role model and his life was commemorated with a street renamed for his work across civil rights, public housing, and education in East Harlem, NYC.

After writing my first crossmedia programming block, I was never so fortunate as to get robbed, one hot Augusta day, because it was in that instant that I packed my car and headed to Kansas City. And

it was sort of the punctuation mark on a decade long sentence, that could only make sense if you know providence – or Craigslist.

My dad explained to me that my mother had gone to boarding school in Chillicothe, just one town over from the Disney farm, in Marceline. I walked around my new neighborhood, across the street from the Kansas City Art Institute, rich with a story my father had never told me. Then right there on the sidewalk, in front of the building I moved into was a sign that read, “This is where Walt Disney took drawing classes as a boy.” The last thing I was cast in, *because of my mom*, was a local cable TV show for kids. With her, it occurred to me, I had been a musical theatre kid, who studied piano and voice.

Was there some thread across lifetimes that pulled me into the center of motion where the subconscious of my missing identity had infused space-time itself? I was drawing, writing and finding stories now. But something happened after that; I was morphing again. Another part of me was being born. The inventor.

I was now developing new writing and digital cinema technologies, on my way to LA. “I’m not a filmmaker,” I thought, “I’m a medium.” So I made study of computer science, generally starting with the hyperlink. And from that I was growing a callosum between Silicon Valley and Hollywood. And that became my period at Art Center, which is a kind of temporary autonomous zone where you exist as an artist. There I observed an oral culture that replaced the urgency of literacy with mimesis; an absent pedagogy subverted by poeisis.

Stories are vital tools. They are the models for how lives take shape and interact with the world, often times replacing real life experience itself. I’m a director-hyphenate and future startup founder who believes that media technology can fortify commodity entertainment with social objectives. More so, narrative art, converged with data-driven practices, can impact media culture toward top line initiatives. Just as cable and broadband changed TV and the internet, digital allows the movies a new set of possibilities for synching industry and user value. With the right investment into platform-level technologies, the upper limit of cinema, unconstrained by box office or ancillary, can define enriched engagement models that provide the movie goer new kinds of pre- and post-theatrical experiences.