

MIRIAM FELTON-DANSKY

FROM A WEATHER REPORT

High Winds, Insomnia, and the Theater of Sylvan Oswald

I.

High Winds did not begin as a text for theater. It began, in 2015, as a response to its author's insomnia. Sylvan Oswald was a playwright who had recently transplanted himself from New York to Los Angeles, a place where theaters were geographically scattered and many of the theater artists he encountered devoted most of their attention to film and television. This was a disorienting landscape, especially following the energetic experimental theater scene Oswald had been part of in New York, filled with graduates of Mac Wellman's and Paula Vogel's MFA programs and clustered around intelligent, writer-centered theaters like Soho Rep. LA had different rhythms and different assumptions about art, and the light was too bright and the air too hot. Oswald couldn't sleep. When he started writing the piece that would become *High Winds*, it was aphoristic and abstract, meant to entertain and soothe the insomniac's frenzied mind. "I thought it was going to be a bunch of disconnected sentences that could almost be read in any order, that just had a kind of talismanic quality," he told me.¹

A talisman: something you might grip tightly in case of crisis, which in this instance was the total disappearance of sleep. Insomnia is a confounding ailment. Its causes are many, its cures uncertain, and it is isolating and counterproductive, denying sufferers the rest they need to participate in the working world. Insomnia has a long history of being understood as a pathology that emerged with the modern city and alongside modern forms of productivity, widening inequality, and capitalism. "Sleep deprivation is both a symptom of modernity, as well as one of its primary causes," writes Roger Schmidt in an essay about the links between caffeine, literature, and sleep in the eighteenth century.² During the Enlightenment, Schmidt explains, Londoners began sleeping less and instead seeking nighttime ghosts and fantasies in the pages of long novels or in the wilds of after-midnight urban streets. For the title character in *High*

Winds—who, like Oswald, endures insomnia—sleeplessness emerges out of overlapping personal and social impasses. These include, for instance, how a transmasculine person might come to terms with the legacies of masculinity, or how someone long separated from all biological family might stage, and survive, a reunion. Insomnia balloons into an exhausted, jangling emergency of its own, and *High Winds* responds by venturing into the wilds of an after-midnight America, into the depths of stalactite-crusted caverns, and into a near collision with his unresolved past.

I first read text from *High Winds* in the summer of 2016, when Oswald had been living in Los Angeles for about two years and shared with me what he called at the time an art-book project. (I first saw it onstage in September 2017, when Oswald performed it at Abrons Arts Center, directed by Ellie Heyman and accompanied by Jerome Ellis's live music.) To be more precise, according to the independent bookstore Printed Matter, one might call the original version of *High Winds* not an art book but an artist's book, clarifying that *High Winds* was not a volume about art but was itself the art.³ This distinction matters because, as a playwright, Oswald has a long history of engagement with the printed page as a means of disseminating artistic work, particularly when the mechanisms for getting that work onstage are too conventional to accept it or too sclerotic to actually function. In 2003, while studying for an MFA at Brown, he had cofounded the periodical *Play a Journal of Plays* with classmate Jordan Harrison. Each issue was aesthetically specific, containing new plays by a wide array of the experimental playwrights in Oswald's generation and that of his mentors. Mac Wellman introduced the first issue, and over the course of the journal's four volumes, contributors included writers like David Greenspan and Ariana Reines, and ensembles like Nature Theater of Oklahoma and the Rude Mechs. Each issue was a different size and style, and the formatting of any given play was a collaboration between the writer's vision and editors' ideas about how it could look on the page. This refusal of any consistent house style was, in part, a protest against the homogenizing effects of Samuel French and other commercial play publishers.

It was also a protest against the institutional structures that organized new play production in New York's large nonprofits and in American regional theaters when Oswald was entering the professional theater world. "Our [graduate school] mentor Paula Vogel was preaching a gospel of 'impossibility,'" Oswald recalled in his 2016 essay "Cut Piece," written for the launch of the new independent play publisher 3 Hole Press. "This ethos fit in perfectly with the downtown theater I was introduced to in college. Yes we would write impossible plays! Plays that no one could produce! Meanwhile, we playwrights were also getting schooled on how to enter the business of theater circa 2003."⁴ This involved writing plays in an institutionally approved format, printing and mailing them to major American theaters—those that accepted unsolicited submissions—and then waiting for the possibility of, at best, a developmental reading. It was also in 2003 that the group 13P inaugurated its celebrated playwright-driven producing model,

Sylvan Oswald's
Pony, About Face
Theatre, Chicago,
2011. Photo:
Michael Brosilow



and only four years later that Richard Nelson, in a speech at the annual meeting of ART/ NY, infamously railed against a culture of “help” clogging the gears of new play production and infantilizing the playwright.

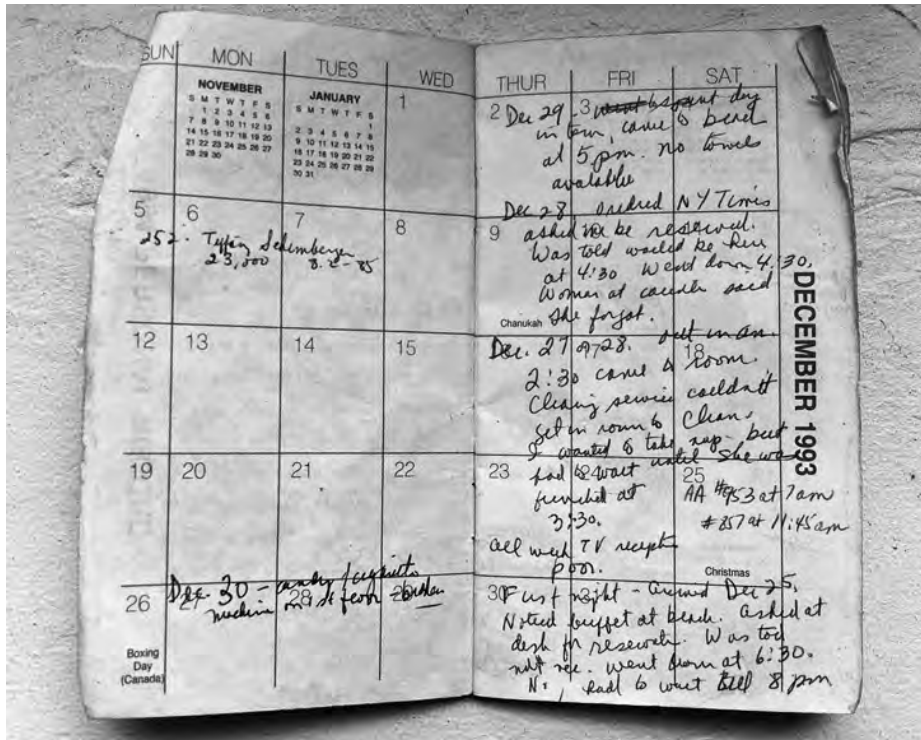
Oswald’s plays were too formally unruly for the mainstream institutional theater of the early 2000s, but they also did not look quite like those of his downtown-theater peers. His plays were fascinated by language and by permutations of emotion and experience within single characters and small groups. They were often investigations of genre (romance, mystery, tragedy), and they were metatheatrical, but not in the deconstructive or mashup modes many of the postdramatic artists of that decade were exploring. His early work was inspired by Greek tragedy and Gertrude Stein and the Wooster Group. A touchstone of his undergraduate education was Suzan-Lori Parks’s *The America Play and Other Works*, featuring Parks’s stunning dramas of the early 1990s, notably *The America Play* and *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*. In those waning years of theatrical postmodernism—the late 1990s, the early 2000s—these plays were the magnetic north around which many young theater makers oriented our artistic compasses. Parks showed us how landscapes and histories, rather than conventional domestic psychologies, could be driving forces for theater. Her essay “Elements of Style” pried open possibilities for understanding theatrical time and space and demonstrated how theater could address historical atrocities and historiographical erasures.

While an undergraduate, Oswald had begun theatricalizing what he called the “psychogeography” of his native city, Philadelphia. *Goat Songs* (2000), first staged in a Barnard College classroom, and *Desmond or Abraham and Frances* (2001), first staged at the New York Fringe Festival, were tragedies or were inspired by tragic form: the first took its name from the genre’s translation in ancient Greek, while in the second, the cast takes the elemental form of a family trio whose city-state is being destroyed. Many of these early plays included gender-nonconforming characters, at first male roles to be played by female actors, later sometimes characters who were explicitly butch and still later, as in *High Winds*, explicitly trans. These characters were never confined to truisms about gender fluidity or personal evolution and were often depicted grappling with their reluctance or refusal to confine themselves in those ways. In writing trans stories, Oswald frequently attends less to the process of “transition” (a commonplace about trans experience that he, among many trans writers and artists, has long sought to destabilize and expand) and more to questions of how to inhabit masculinity and grapple with its sometimes violent legacy once one has begun to claim it. *Pony*, which premiered in 2011 at Chicago’s About Face Theatre, stages a generational divide between an older butch lesbian and a younger trans man, with its title character, Pony, caught somewhere in between. But this does not mean that *Pony* is a story about linear evolution, or that the play presents the vocabulary of transition and the repertoire of medical

care as a belated solution for the older butch lesbian's struggles. In case the spectator did mistake *Pony* for a parable about progress, they would have to grapple with the play's simultaneous identity as a dramatic response to Georg Büchner's unfinished 1837 drama *Woyzeck*: a paradigmatic literary depiction of male-on-female violence, a subject which Oswald's play also confronts.

A Kind of Weather (2015) relates the story of Kid, a young trans man commissioned to write his transition memoir but resisting the expectations such a project would bring. The play is explicitly not "about" Kid's transition, and as it unfolds, one realizes that it is in fact not primarily about Kid, focusing attention instead on his straight, cis, middle-aged father, Grey. This play, perhaps the work of Oswald's that flirts most explicitly with confessionalism and transition stories, thus also decenters an audience's expectation about how such narratives would unfold and what kind of significance they might accrue. Psychology, in Oswald's work, operates as a separable element of dramatic form alongside many others—language, music, landscape—all of which are useful for allowing characters to expand and contract in unpredictable ways.

For Oswald, dramatic form has always coexisted with creative ways of resisting the theater: not leaving it, but holding formal conversations in his work that aim to expand what the art form can be. Sometimes, talking back to the conventional theater



The found object that inspired Oswald's *A Kind of Weather*, 2015. Courtesy of Sylvan Oswald

was the author's response to his own encounters as a queer and trans writer with institutional glass ceilings in the nonprofit theater world. And sometimes it was threaded through the artistic impetus driving the work itself. He wrote *Weather* with the goal of "forgetting everything he knew about playwriting." When puppeteer and director Dan Hurlin asked him to write the text of Hurlin's *Disfarmer* (St. Ann's Warehouse, 2009)—a wild large-scale puppet piece about the 1940s-era work of outsider artist Mike Disfarmer—he also requested that Oswald "not write a play"; instead, Oswald's performance text served as "a layer of the design."⁵ And in the years surrounding his move to Los Angeles to teach playwriting at UCLA, he made several projects that were informed by the structures and legacies of theater but weren't theater themselves. *Outtakes*, a web series about transition (initially streamed on YouTube, then picked up by the platform Open TV), was self-referential in a deeply metatheatrical way and featured several of Oswald's longtime theater collaborators in its cast. "Cut Piece," an essay commissioned for the launch of 3 Hole Press in 2016, argued for the significance of plays as artistic works on the page, independent of their lives in performance. When Oswald began writing *High Winds*, he decided the project would have "nothing to do with theater": in fact, that was one of the first things he knew.

2.

High Winds is alone because he's awake when everyone is sleeping, but also because he's really alone: there are no friends in this story, just a passive-aggressive neighbor, and he has only one living family member, the one he decides to seek after untold years of estrangement. We learn of *High Winds*'s half-brother Bantam sometime after our narrator realizes his insomnia has reached crisis pitch, and sometime before the clock blinks 5 a.m. This desire for sibling reunion and personal recognition drives (literally) the plot of *High Winds*, which takes the form of a road trip: part station drama, part hallucination, and part quest, pushed and pulled by clues that leap out of old phone books and drift in on postcards of dubious provenance. Bantam, we learn, gave *High Winds* his name "from a weather report." But Bantam, once *High Winds* locates him on a one-lane dirt driveway, refuses to recognize his only living relation. "I don't know anyone by that name," he says. Terse stage directions, lacking articles or pronouns, register *High Winds*'s response to this blunt denial. "Shot in the chest," he says. The conclusion to a western showdown if ever there was one: heartbreak, abstracted into a figure of speech.

This (anti)climactic confrontation, Oswald pointed out to me, is what propels *High Winds* into its "phantasmagoria" section (*phantasmagoria*: from the Greek, an "assemblage of phantasms"). This passage in *High Winds*'s journey consists of memory, nightmare, and fantasy combined. Childhood battles between the brothers and against

imagined villains evoke all the sci-fi glitter of a 1980s childhood spent with the TV: warp speed, light sabers, epic combat in deep space. At its climax, we learn that though Bantam is the one who drove away in his Celica all those years ago, it is also Bantam who feels left behind. “Forget it,” he tells his younger brother at a climactic point in their childhood hero fantasy. “Leave me here. Everything you know is from cartoons.” Not, in Bantam’s mind, a useful genre when preparing for existential battle, nor one in which the brothers’ future could be found. Much of Oswald’s work consists of inquiry into what genre a given character inhabits, and what genre it is that would let them grow.

Phantasmagoria isn’t only the descriptor for a section of *High Winds*; it’s also the genre designation Oswald applies to *High Winds* as a whole, calling the piece a “western phantasmagoria.” This is a theatrical form with a charged cultural past, dating back to multimedia performances staged in Paris shortly after the French Revolution: “lantern shows” that used projectors and scrims to create supernatural effects and unsettle thrill-seeking spectators. Inventor Etienne-Gaspard Robertson’s spectacles deliberately played on the French public’s memory of revolutionary bloodshed. “The recent Terror,” writes Marina Warner in a recent book about the subject, “furnished him with the inspiration for some deadly special effects: the severed head of Danton, adapted from his death mask, was projected on to smoke, and then gradually faded away, changing into a skull as it did so. The show was even closed down by the police for a spell because the fear spread that Robertson could bring Louis XVI back to life.”⁶ *High Winds*, like the original phantasmagoria, is a multimedia conjuring. Its glowing screens and musical score extend the protagonist’s hallucinogenic imagination and reflect his moods and imaginings. Like the original phantasmagoria, *High Winds* is fascinated by how a conversation among media can shake our sense of time, space, and reality. In adapting Fleischmann’s designs into stage projections, one of Kate Freer’s adjustments was to add an overlay evoking crumpled paper, in order, she said, to give the video “the sense that we were living in a book.”

Though technologically innovative in their moment, the original phantasmagoria were part of a family of entertainments (also including panorama shows) that were sidelined or rendered obsolete with the advent of film. Oswald’s interest in media as communication, meanwhile, is explicitly grounded in a curiosity about outdated forms. *High Winds* receives a mysterious postcard that he decides is from Bantam. He pursues Bantam to, maybe, the last functional phone booth in the world, and dials a number obtained from the yellow pages of a paper phone book. Oswald is hardly a technological determinist, but he suggests here that changing the format of communication might change not only how we talk to one another but also what long-lost phantoms we might be able to access anew.

Nineteenth-century audiences watched flickering screen images and scrolling panoramas to inspire ghostly thrills and touristic awe (many American panorama shows



Dan Hurlin's
Disfarmer, text by
Sylvan Oswald, St.
Ann's Warehouse,
New York, 2009.
Photo:
Richard Termine

depicted striking western landscapes, both encouraging and substituting for actual travel). *High Winds*, by contrast, is unsettled by this history of western exploration as entertainment, displaying anxiety about accelerating smoothly through seemingly empty landscapes. In the artist's-book version of *High Winds*, Oswald invokes the history of western settler colonialism explicitly: "High Winds disavows all of those white men. / Their panorama fantasy," he writes. In performance, Ellis's reverberating soundscape registers his unease. Oswald asks his spectator to consider the historical ghosts lingering behind absences both formal and personal: more or less every character besides *High Winds's* protagonist is either spectral or primarily absent, while the central destinations for both the child and adult *High Winds* are caves, a kind of geological absence. There's the mysterious chamber presided over by the brothers' childhood villain, the Cow Lady, and Carlsbad Caverns, a "gaping maw." Carlsbad, with its deceptive timelessness ("Each day is the same underground. / Fifty-six degrees"), preserves the legacy of rapacious American tourism in its fantastical cafeteria, an establishment that serves junk food (itself a sort of black hole of nourishment) to long-vanished tourists. At White Sands, the ancient dunes vibrate with distant sounds of missile practice.

In her 1994 masterwork *The America Play*, Parks had traced a line from American tourist entertainment to legacies of American enslavement, racial violence, and historical erasure, setting the play in a theme park known as the “Great Hole of History.” *High Winds*, likewise, views imaginative excavation as an act that becomes possible in the theater.

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“High Winds tucks his cock into his pants and it’s a western,” he announces. “Now everybody try.” Oswald’s main character tells his story mostly in the third person, a choice that, among other things, pries open a space between the fictional High Winds and his creator. Much of Oswald’s work includes elements of autobiography, though none is directly or solely autobiographical. An equally significant function the third-person storytelling serves is to foreground High Winds’s pronouns, requiring him to apply the male pronoun to himself immediately and regularly as the piece unfolds. Though Oswald does not provide a conventional list of characters in the performance text’s front matter, he does specify that the cast must include at least one transmasculine actor: a self-confident requirement that emerged from decades of writing and casting performers in his gender-nonconforming and transmasculine roles.

In the early 2000s, theater troupes like Split Britches and Five Lesbian Brothers offered paradigms for butch performance, and Peggy Shaw and Dominique Dibbell were two of Oswald’s early theatrical heroes. But there were few models for transmasculinity on the American theater stage, and when Oswald wrote butch characters, he had to educate directors and artistic directors about their contexts and histories. He got used to being told that his butch and gender-nonconforming characters might be threatening or confusing or nearly impossible to cast, and he learned to explicitly expand these characters’ gender identifiers from dramatis personae pages into dialogue and stage directions, so that they couldn’t be ignored.

In this way Oswald’s work anticipated by a decade or more the larger emergence of consciousness about trans art and experience in mainstream American theater. (This is more accurately described as a reemergence: trans artists and artistic work had been flourishing for decades, particularly in the watershed 1960s, but the cultural conservatism of the 1970s and 1980s had so thoroughly obscured these histories that, for many, the public acknowledgments of the 2010s felt new.)⁷ The mainstream American theater has participated in new efforts toward trans inclusion and acknowledgment, but frequently without empowering trans artists to lead. Think of Jordan Harrison’s *Log Cabin*, produced in 2018 at Playwrights’ Horizons, or *Southern Comfort*, a musical by Dan Collins and Julianne Wick Davis, produced at the Public Theater in 2016. Both plays told trans stories, but neither was originally produced with trans artists in the lead. Now Oswald reads young trans artists’ applications to Trans Lab, a development

program launched by M. J. Kaufman, Kit Yan, and Cece Suazo in 2018 and hosted by WP Theater (formerly the Women's Project). He has also cited initiatives like the Brick Theater's annual Trans Theatre festival as crucial to achieving baseline representation for trans theater artists.⁸

But Oswald's plays have always been less about representation and more about critical engagements with the forms representation takes. His plays afford their trans characters the emotional complexity of having other preoccupations besides "transition," and the formal complexity of inhabiting a world that is metatheatrical and as interested in landscape and language as it is in psychology. Trans characters are not the only ones who struggle, and transition is rarely the main thing they are struggling to do. Characters' particularities emerge in sentence structure (*High Winds* speaks telegraphically, avoiding both definite and indefinite articles), in fragmented memories coexisting with the theatrical present, and in the colorful geometries of landscape. For *High Winds's* visual aesthetic (initially designed for the artist's book, then adapted to theatrical projection), Oswald and Fleischmann looked to the brightly colored, politically radical silkscreens of Sister Corita Kent. They immersed themselves in western landscapes and in the color spectrum of the Los Angeles sky. Most pages of the book employ the controlled color shifts of a digitally rendered gradient, often dimming into grayscale or blackout. Designer Kate Freer orchestrated these images into scrolling, shifting projections, their shapes and patterns much larger than the humans onstage. The projections are evocative of sliding through the natural world, but also redolent of the digital vortex that helped produce them. The crosshatches and ellipses and glowing bands imply computer code as much as geology, reminding the viewer that although they may occasionally resemble suns and windows and hills, they have no necessary referent in the exterior world, or at least no obligation to one.

In other words, *High Winds*, both on the page and in performance, participates in an ethos of abstraction, something Oswald explicitly points out in the introductory notes for the performance text. Pure abstraction is a notoriously hard artistic goal to achieve, perhaps because no matter the medium, human spectators hold tightly to a desire to see our figurative form represented. The quest for abstraction, as David Getsy notes in *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender*, was a contentious element of sculpture's twentieth-century evolution, leading to a fractious debate over whether sculpture could survive its unhappy marriage to the history of the statue. Though Getsy's book is not about performance, his insights about the relationship between gender and abstraction are deeply illuminating for *High Winds*. As he explains, the challenges to human figuration presented by abstract sculptors like David Smith and John Chamberlain emerged alongside radical shifts in consciousness about gender as a culturally constructed aspect of human identity. In the work of these sculptors, "the human form could no longer be taken for granted or treated as universal. Gender became an open question, and it was mapped variably and successively onto abstrac-

THE THEATER OF SYLVAN OSWALD



Sylvan Oswald's
Outtakes, web series,
2013–15, OpenTV.
Video stills. Courtesy
of Sylvan Oswald

tion. In these same years, genders and bodies came into question more widely, and nonascribed genders became visible as potentialities and actualities.”⁹ Abstraction challenges viewers’ capacity to normalize the human form in everything we see, and therefore it also challenges our capacity to normalize gender.

4.

In the initial staging, Oswald performed the text of *High Winds* himself alongside composer Jerome Ellis, as a duet for actor and musician. An early jolt of curiosity about turning *High Winds* into performance had come when Oswald saw Ellis present a work-in-progress showing of his theater piece *Ink: A Piece for Museums* with artistic partner James Harrison Monaco (under the moniker James & Jerome) at Berkeley Rep’s Ground Floor. It wasn’t that Oswald had never thought of performing *High Winds*, or

Sylvan Oswald’s
Pony, 2011. Photo:
Michael Brosilow



that he hadn't considered its potential musical score. It was that Ellis's music convinced him that the soundscape should be electronic, that shifting static and reverberating rhythms and loops could be the form that illuminated High Winds's unsettling western dreamscape. "The text is metabolizing America in its sleep," Oswald told me, "so a musical equivalent began to seem essential."¹⁰

The electronic music, the color gradients, the mod swooshes and shimmering grayscale: these all draw attention to *High Winds's* internal landscape, its devotion to abstract hallucination and the liberation of shapes from anything they may represent. But Oswald pointed out to me that *High Winds's* shape-shifting visual elements also reflect the unique light and landscape one might find in Los Angeles, whose climate and architecture have long been understood as theatrical, metamorphic, and maddeningly disorienting. It is a place where anything might or might not be real. In one of Oswald's research folders for *High Winds*, I read a *Los Angeles Review of Books* essay about the function of the city's palm trees, most of which were transplanted from other habitats with the goal of turning LA into a tourist's tropical fantasy, minus the humidity found in places closer to the Equator. "This conjoining of the phrase 'semi-tropic' with the image of palms had a profound effect on the region," wrote Victoria Dailey, "causing Angelenos to think of their city as an ersatz tropical substitute, a veritable stage set, not quite the tropics but an improved simulacrum."¹¹ Los Angeles was a place that stood in for a shifting series of other places—like Hollywood, of course, but also like the theater, or like a phantasmagoric lantern show.

Central to Oswald's research was a reckoning with LA's famously strange light. Fleischmann, born and raised in LA, had given him a copy of Lawrence Wechsler's 1998 *New Yorker* essay "L.A. Glows," which probes artists' and writers' subjective experiences of Los Angeles light. In the essay, which inspired *High Winds's* epilogue, Wechsler quotes his interview subjects describing LA light as both still and soupy, both very transparent and very white. Perfect for astronomical science, confusing for everyday perception. The light, Wechsler notes, flattens distances and space and has therefore been described as "nonhierarchical." It reflects off the air, bouncing whiteness back to the human eye in disorienting ways.¹² No wonder High Winds is "awake at wrong hours"; no wonder jasmine season comes and goes between the beginning of the performance and, an hour later, the end.

Disorientation is, of course, a central cause of sleeplessness, and as Eluned Summers-Bremner notes in *Insomnia: A Cultural History*, the experience of the horizontally expanding modern city has a kind of conceptual analogue in the experience of modern insomnia. Both destabilize the boundaries we rely on to tell us how to conduct our everyday lives. Summers-Bremner writes, "When a town or village grows too large, it becomes a city, but cities grow endlessly without change of definition; they are instances of 'circumscribed infinity.' The paradox of this built-in illimitability is the

cause of contests over the meanings of urban time and space, . . . but it also makes a good working definition of insomnia.”¹³ Although Summers-Bremner’s book mostly describes nineteenth-century Europe, this is an apt way of thinking more broadly about the simultaneous expansiveness and constriction insomnia creates, and about how a change of urban landscape (say, the move from New York to LA) might contribute to it. “Insomnia’s doubling of a crucial absence—the absence of unconsciousness, of sleep—indicates where society loses its purchase on the individual, because it doubles the place where the individual loses purchase on his- or herself,” she writes. “As such, insomnia often highlights areas where societies are already making complex—and, often, contested—uses of absence they cannot fully control.”¹⁴

For High Winds, who lives in the contested space of a violent American West and in the inherited violence of masculinity, insomnia leads to spaces that are far from flat, nonhierarchical, or transparent. “Doesn’t bode well for bathroom,” notes High Winds in a crowded gas station. “Was that a butch nod?” he wonders, looking skittishly at the cashier in a New Mexico country store. Every moment of *High Winds*, right up to and past the dirt road where Bantam plays aggressive chicken with his only living relative, is a contested space because it is a space in which High Winds might or might not be seen and recognized by another human being. That’s probably why Oswald devotes the last lines of the piece to demolishing the privilege implicit in an “unhierarchical” idea about light: “Easy for *who* to say,” says High Winds.¹⁵ There will always be hierarchies, even if reflective particles of air make them difficult to see.

After making something that had “nothing to do with theater,” Oswald began, in 2017, to work on *High Winds* as a piece of live performance, one that would circulate in interdisciplinary performance spaces and festivals rather than large nonprofit theaters. With director Ellie Heyman, Oswald decided to step out of the central role, and the pair hired Luke Zimmerman, whose role evolved into the dream version of High Winds, narrating most of the piece. The fall 2018 iteration of *High Winds*, produced for video recording, begins and ends with Oswald onstage. He launches into the prologue alone at the standing microphone, in front of a projection of crumpled paper, the folds and wrinkles so large that a regular-size human might lose himself in them. Zimmerman materializes upstage, then joins Oswald for dialogue of sorts, the kind of dialogue where one speaks to oneself at the height of emergency. “But when it gets real bad?” asks Zimmerman. “It’s real bad,” Oswald replies. They both stare into the middle distance. Then Oswald leaves.

Later, much later, after Zimmerman’s High Winds has rolled down Fairfax and apologized to the neighbor whose truck he borrowed without permission, Oswald returns. Ellis orchestrates some static and a bit of beeping—a truck backing up, perhaps. Car engines rev up or rev down. Then, for the first time in an hour, the stage is silent. “If you ask High Winds,” Oswald says, “The sun just sets / And takes all the

information with it.” The two performers face each other, standing in profile against an enormous, muted yellow ring (the setting sun, perhaps; or just a muted yellow ring). They look and look: a scene of recognition if ever there was one, and, in *High Winds*, the first and only time that one human being looks another one in the eye.

NOTES

1. Sylvan Oswald, interview with author, March 2018.
2. Roger Schmidt, “Caffeine and the Coming of the Enlightenment,” *Raritan* 23, no. 1 (Summer 2003): 129–49.
3. Printed Matter, “What Is an Artists’ Book?,” www.printedmatter.org/about/artist-book (accessed April 14, 2020).
4. Sylvan Oswald, “Cut Piece” (2016), *3 Hole Press*, www.3holepress.org/cutpiece (accessed April 14, 2020).
5. See the *Disfarmer* section at Oswald, “Earlier Projects,” www.sylvanoswald.xyz/earlier-projects (accessed April 14, 2020).
6. Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 147.
7. David Getsy, *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 31.
8. Sylvan Oswald, “Towards a Trans Theater” (unpublished draft manuscript, August 2019). I am grateful to Oswald for sharing this draft with me.
9. Getsy, *Abstract Bodies*, xvii.
10. Sylvan Oswald, email to author, August 22, 2019.
11. Victoria Dailey, “Piety and Perversity: The Palms of Los Angeles,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 14, 2014.
12. Lawrence Wechsler, “L.A. Glows,” *New Yorker*, February 15, 1998, 94.
13. Eluned Summer-Bremner, *Insomnia: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 251.
14. *Ibid.*, 15–16.
15. This emphasis is not in the text, but I hear it in the performance and find it clarifies the meaning of the line.