




BIRTHMARK

a creative nonfiction project by LA

BIRTH
MARK



“In the end, one writes stories to learn,
to further one’s growth as a human being. That is all.”
– Richard Krevolin





You can't sleep.

You keep scanning your mind for an answer. You're asking why, how, what? You ask: how can she just start hating me like this? You say in your head, "Why now? Why me?" Then, it's followed by a painful squeeze your chest. When you breathe in, your ribs stab inwards like swords through the heart.

It's time to give up, you can't do this on your own. You start calling out to God. You ask, "Why me?" Then, it's at once surprising and inevitable; he answers. "It's because of your birthmark." You suddenly know it's true.

This pronouncement triggers a flood of tears and howling; a memory comes back from a long time ago. You let all the pain and grief out in muffled wails. It's four o'clock in the morning after all; you don't want to wake up the kids.

Yesterday's meme: "Sometimes the worst place to be is inside your own head." What more can you really do except to be aware about what's at work? What is subtly influencing your choices? You've been interested in the behind-the-scenes back-of-your-head shut-the-front-door open-your-third-eye back-to-square-one open-the-window-to-your-soul kinda thing for a long while now.

"This is the only moment you have to change the world," says Caleb Behn. You are sure as your blood that your best talent is for making movies. And you've seen it happen, films can change the world for the better. Start the change with yourself, you want to document some process and share it. Caleb says, "Now that you've seen the film, you are accountable to yourself." We are in the midst of a shift; you can feel it and recognize it happening with others. It's an emotional shift; a shift towards healing.



Morning is a list you avoid doing. Morning is making the bed. Morning is a stretch. A gaping mouth, the morning yawns. Brushing your knee against its teeth, you are swallowed. Morning is the stark white of the blank document. Morning is the blinking cursor. The cursor is a metronome in time to your heartbeat.

You keep thinking you just want to have a chance to tell your story. You want be understood. You think telling your story might help you figure it out for yourself and, in turn, help others as they hear it. Telling your story gives you identity. But you want to tell your story in a different way. You want to film something that may be impossible to film. You want to film your enlightenment like it's some kind of grade school recital. You say you want to show an account of your struggle but it's to reach an invisible goal. So, you've hired a videographer and your eighteen-year-old daughter, as the production assistant, for the day.





Remember the F you got from the Alternative Cinema course? You failed the class because you could not hand in your last essay assignment. Your professor had shown you Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* and it changed your life. Until then, you had not realized films could be made that way. You got obsessed and you kept watching the film repeatedly. You booked time to watch it at the library. You figured out how to dub the entire soundtrack on a cassette tape and you listened to it in your car on long drives. You wanted an extension on your essay but you didn't bother to call the school. The research kept leading you further and farther away. You filled pages and pages of notebooks with your small handwriting. You changed.

What began as an essay turned into an alter-ego. You called yourself Agent Sunless. You moved to New York City. Years later, you will drop the moniker in trade for naming your daughter Sunny. With your personal Sun, you are no longer sunless. Now that she's grown up, this F in Alternative Cinema is really starting to bother you.

You wake up in the middle of the night; dreams about spaces that fit into each other. Dreams of geometry, impossible shapes just out of reach in the waking. The pattern is passed down from generation to generation by way of parents to children. It seems so simple.

Outside, you seem calm, cool, and collected. You're a clutter inside. Close the closet door. Don't let anybody see. You're making progress. Bit by eentsy tiny bit.

Hazy memory. If you could go back and organize everything, you could probably trace it all like a detective or a thorough investigative documentary filmmaker. This is your personal archeology site and you're Indiana Jonesing.

Dig dig dig with a shovel and a hoe, dig dig dig, the whole day through. Hi ho. Hi ho. It's off to work you go.





Your memory needs a back-up. You type out the words in real-time. You record your thoughts for the future to read; a self-contained slice of your life. What story do you want to tell? The break-up started you on a journey to find happiness. You tried different kinds of therapy, you listened to hours of self-help audio books, you started talking to people.

There is power in knowing you're not alone. Not talking furthers the isolation. Open up; join the circle. We are keeping secrets from people who are keeping the same secrets from us.

New realizations lead to a kind of psychic shock of awakening. Your insides are broiling. Chemicals are shifting. DNA switches switching.

You have many ideas for films and books and documentaries but you settled on Birthmark. Something happened a long time ago and it has stuck with you.

Your mother says you were a just a newborn baby when she held you in her arms sitting on the couch to watch the live footage of the moon landing being broadcast on the small black and white TV. One small step.

You can do this. Just ignore the voice in your head telling you what you're supposed to do or not do. You've done this before. Write your questions and your lists. Cut phrases from your journal entries into fortune cookie fortune-sized morsels and scatter them on the table. Remember, this is your writing ritual for discovering voice-overs.

And your so-called bad luck. You need to do some research. Maybe look into other myths from other cultures, historical references, make sure you got all the bases covered. Information on the internet keeps changing. How can you make anything definitive? The story is really about you. That's how you feel inside but you don't know if you're ready to tell your story.





At the press conference, they announce your name as a pitch competition finalist. You eye the other finalists and silently assess your chances. You are dismayed about seeing R. You doubt that you'd win against him. R is hip and cool and younger than you. Pull out now and maybe you can save face.

Next, you're being interviewed on camera. "What is your film about?" Birthmark myths and superstitions, you say. "What was the inspiration for your pitch?" The inspiration was when you realized that your birthmark actually didn't mean bad luck. Filipino superstition says it's bad luck because it's on the butt.

The interviewer giggles.

Flash-forward to the competition. You've just delivered your pitch. And the first question from the judges throws you off a little bit: "So it's a comedy?"



When you were a kid, you played with your toys and pretended you were making movies and you were also inside the movies. You didn't just play "house," with your friends, you played drama or horror. You didn't just play war, you played "war movie."

You can't believe this is actually happening right now. You've been too concerned about organizing the photo shoot that you forgot about being nervous in front of the camera. The photographer is busy with someone else right now but once they get a break, you're up.

In one version of the movie pitch, the action started here. You always knew it would happen somehow; you had a strong pre-sentiment the year before. You already saw yourself in front of the lights at the moment of truth. Now you're living it. And soon, it will be time to drop your pants.

A close-up photograph of a person's hand, showing the palm and fingers. The skin is light-colored, and there is a prominent, dark brown birthmark on the palm. The hand is positioned as if holding something, with the fingers slightly curled. The background is a plain, light color.

This book will find you.

If a spoon falls on the floor, that means someone is going to pay you an unexpected visit. Don't put your wallet on the table; you will lose all your money. If you cough unexpectedly, someone's thinking of you. You still default to these mundane superstitions. You've been forcing yourself to put your wallet on the table. It's a lot more difficult than you thought. You've been trained very well.

It's all in your head. You find the on/off switch and you are now looking forward to life. It took you this long. The skill can be taught. This is what the voice in your head sounds like. It's not about the birthmark.

“It’s not only about the marks we are born with but the marks we imagine for ourselves.”

Inspired by a flashback about his birthmark, filmmaker Lester Alfonso is convinced that making a film will help confront a distant trauma rooted in cultural superstition. A follow-up to his award-winning film *Twelve* (2009), *BIRTHMARK* is a wry, sensitive, and candidly confessional exercise in creative anthropology. Soliciting fellow mark-bearers to add their testimonies to his own, Lester documents his journey to find peace and forgiveness, and to quiet the voice in his head.

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