

Bethlehem writer Joyce Hinnefeld

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🍷 Latest in a series of posts on the Arts in Bethlehem 🍷

“A Better Law of Gravity”

“A Better Law of Gravity,” collected in *The Beauty of Their Youth* (2020), began as a kind of playful experiment: I wanted to try to imagine the life of Frankie, the 12-year-old girl at the center of Carson McCullers’ 1946 novel *The Member of the Wedding*, as a disaffected 18-year-old. I changed a few other things along the way; Frankie is now called FJ, and the story has been moved to a later time—probably the 1970s or early 1980s. Though it began playfully, the story turned more serious as I wrote it, eventually pulling in themes of gender identity, social isolation, and sexual violence that are all there (though some are more immediately apparent than others) in the original novel.

Joyce Hinnefeld

Joyce reads “A Better Law of Gravity” here on [The Other Stories](#) podcast, where she is interviewed by Ilana Masad.

Excerpt from “A Better Law of Gravity” :

Gradually [FJ] realized that Janice had begun to cry.

“What is it, Janice?” she asked her then. “Are you okay?” And she patted the hand that held her own.

But Janice yanked her hand free then and slapped the air where FJ’s hand had been, “No, I’m not all right, I’m loose as a goose,



I'm a firecracker ready to go off, a loose cannon aimed at the outer zones of the universe. If I can just get there, if I can just fly a little farther out, I'll be off their screens for good. You'll see, kiddo, I'll fly right off the map and then they'll never get me back."

"Who?" FJ asked, even though she knew Janice had to mean Jarvis. And for FJ there was her father, Aunt Pet. Everyone who seemed to like her best when she was quiet and out of the way. And hadn't she once talked about a similar feeling with Berenice and John Henry, seated around the kitchen table with the playing cards spread out in front of them? Everybody feels caught, she had said that day (and she winced, remembering Berenice's reply—"I'm caught worse than you is"). But to her it seemed more like everyone—and most of all she herself—was coming loose.

"All of them, the psychiatrists, your brother, my parents, the whole bloody shebang," Janice said as she grabbed her open handbag off the floor. For another cigarette FJ assumed, but instead she pulled out a bottle of pills.

"It's these, squirt. Watch out for these things." She shook the brown bottle, rattling it in FJ's face. "They'll pin you down with these." She threw the bottle in FJ's lap.

"It's this they're after," Janice went on, pointing at her right temple. "It's the top that's spinning up here, spinning so hot and fast they can't get a hold on it, but not because they aren't trying, oh no. I'm spinning right out of their grip but they're desperate to get to that hot spot at the middle. The tropical zone. The psycho-tropics."

Janice giggled then, pleased with her pun, and FJ laughed, too. "The psycho-tropics," FJ repeated. "That's clever." She put the bottle of pills in her shorts pocket and said, "I hate to tell you this, Janice, but I have to pee."

This was true, she did in fact have to pee, but besides that, FJ was getting very nervous. The more Janice talked about her spinning top of a mind the faster she drove. Yes, FJ did remember feeling loose, too, when she was a kid. But right now the fact remained that at the line about the psycho-tropics, FJ looked over to see the speedometer needle coursing well beyond the speed limit, to sixty, seventy, eighty, and beyond. And at that point she looked closely at Janice and admitted to herself that yes, in fact, she felt afraid of being as loose as that.

But by this time Janice was mumbling to herself—more about not stopping, about what might happen if she did—and it was clear she'd forgotten FJ was even in the car.

“Not this time!” she hissed as ashes from the cigarette at the corner of her mouth drifted onto her skin-tight T-shirt and the bare, downy skin of her arm.

“Not. This. Time.” By now her voice was barely above a whisper, but she pounded the steering wheel furiously with each word.

And even though Janice had taken her foot off the accelerator now and the speedometer needle was on its way back down, FJ knew that all she could do was close her eyes and brace herself, grit her teeth and hope for the best, because like it or not, Janice was flying somewhere else right then and it didn't matter whose car it was or who was in it. So that when they rolled off the highway and finally smacked into a tree, the only thing that surprised FJ was the silence afterwards.

Joyce Hinnefeld is the author of two short story collections, Tell Me Everything (1998) and The Beauty of Their Youth (2020), and the novels In Hovering Flight (2008) and Stranger Here Below (2010). Tell Me Everything received the 1997 Bread Loaf Writers' Conference Bakeless Prize in Fiction, Stranger Here Below was a finalist for the 2006 Bellwether Prize in Fiction, and In Hovering Flight was the Booksense/Indie Next #1 Book for September 2008. Hinnefeld has been

*a fellow at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts (in both Virginia and Le Moulin à Nef, France) and received a Christopher Isherwood Foundation Fellowship in 2010. She is Professor of English and the former Cohen Chair in English and Literature at Moravian College, where she founded and directs the Moravian College Writers' Conference. The Beauty of Their Youth, in which "A Better Law of Gravity" appears, is available from **Wolfson Press**.*

Learn more about Joyce at www.joycehinnefeld.com or <https://www.facebook.com/jhinnefeld>.