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**MATTRESS**

**by**

**Mitchell James O'Hearn, B.A.**

**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
The University of Texas at Austin  
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of the Requirements  
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## **Dedication**

This is dedicated to the most important person in my life, my mother, Sally Hammond. Although she is no longer with us in the physical sense, she lives on in all that I do. This is how I choose to honor her, through the pursuit of happiness and my passion for making work that she would be proud of, if not at least, intrigued by. She believed in being yourself and staying open to the possibilities in life, and I strive to live by these philosophies. I will take this moment to thank her for all that I have. While mum is everything, my father Ted O'Hearn, and other mother Sue Ripley, are also responsible for giving me the many gifts in life that I am forever grateful for, such as humor, humility, compassion and the ability to love with gusto. Their respective partners, my friends and the rest of my family are also a part of this network of support and I am nothing without each and every one of them.

## **Acknowledgements**

The biggest mention here must be given to my professor, mentor and friend, PJ Raval, for the countless hours he has spent with me during the making of this film. His diligence, insight and passion for story, can only be matched by his talent as a director. It was an honor to work with him on my thesis and can safely say that the work is stronger for it.

In all of this madness, another bright shining light has been there for me time and time again. Thoa Nguyen, my partner and co-collaborator, was always there to guide me back home when lost in the sea of making the film. Despite the intensity of living together and working together, she helped me shape the film and bolster my belief when times were at their rockiest. I will forever be thankful for her love and support.

The other two members of my thesis committee, Don Howard and Teresa Hubbard, are some of the finest creators around and I am in constant admiration of the work they do both as educators and artists. Don was always available to hear me out and help me make the film on my terms. Teresa helped me see my ideas from a new perspective, find the lightness in the script and be my home away from home, my Aussie friend. Without their guidance, I would not have gotten through.

The entire RTF community is a wonderful place to grow and develop as a filmmaker. With the faculty's passion for cinema and the continual commitment to education, I am walking away from the program ready to begin my life with what I have learnt here. This of course includes my beautiful cohort, for their no-nonsense approach to collaboration and criticism, many of whom I hope to continue to make work with and alongside for years to come.

## **Abstract**

### **MATTRESS**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Supervisor: PJ Raval

This report chronicles some of the incredible and not-so-incredible moments that happened while creating my thesis film, *Mattress*. The report does not conform to a rigid outline of the process, or a linear movement of time, rather it acts as a pastiche of the some of the moments that transpired throughout my journey. I have learnt a lot about myself during this journey, and these experiences do not always relate to filmmaking. I would like to use this report as an opportunity to express some of these truths, and share a few thoughts on what it requires to take a bunch of people into the desert for ten days.

## Table of Contents

List of Figures .....	viii
The Start of the Story .....	1
Getting Out of One's Head (And Out of the State of Texas) .....	5
Don't Stand in the Way of Yourself .....	13
A Clear Choice.....	17
Getting It Done .....	22
Conclusion.....	26
Appendix A: Shooting Script .....	28
Appendix B: Storyboards .....	44
References .....	51

## List of Figures

Figure 1: The White Sands National Monument, NM.....	10
Figure 2: The Salt Flats of Dell City, TX .....	11
Figure 3: <i>Silence</i> by Mitchell O'Hearn .....	20



## **The Start of the Story**

I suppose it all begins with a mattress. Yes, that's right, a mattress. There is something about a mattress that produces a funny reaction in me. A mattress is a private object that we spend a lot of time with, but rarely discuss in public. Sure, we might say that our mattress is too hard, or soft, or just right, but that's it. It's amazing, we spend roughly a third of our lives on a mattress – dreaming, drooling, sweating, whispering our wildest fears, joys and aspirations into its lining – but never spend time considering this. I remember being a young boy, around ten years old, lying awake in my bed at night. It was a moderately comfortable twin, or single bed, as we say back in Australia. There I was, on my back, looking up at the skylight window carved into the tin roof of my old Darlinghurst home, my brain racing. What kept me up as a young boy was the thought of death. What did it mean? Where do you go when you die? What happens to our awareness in this moment?

I remember trying to imagine total darkness, without sound. This attempt to recreate nothingness, casting my own consciousness as the lead amongst such emptiness. It terrified me. What scared me even more than that, was the fact that my mother, Sally Hammond, would one day die, and thus enter this space, away from me. That would be it. I would not be able to speak to her, hug her or receive the overwhelming love and support she had given me all of my life. This concept rattled me straight to the core. I would obsessively play these scenarios out in my head, a night-time ritual, and stay up late into the evening with these thoughts. That's normal, right? Anyway, the point is that a huge part of this daily habit was shared with my twin mattress. And yet, I could not tell you where it ended up, or when we parted ways. This was my first encounter with a mattress.

The next milestone on my journey with mattresses, is the twin I occupied for my time at an all-boys boarding school in the rural part of New South Wales, Australia. I was studying there for four years from the seventh grade to tenth. After

having no siblings to then suddenly having twelve of them, all crammed into a dormitory, it was a wild ride, one which I will never forget. The name of the game was pranking, and we would do everything from short-sheeting beds to hoisting people (or being hoisted) up and into the laundry shoot. There were an endless number of ways to mess with people, or to be messed with. In no time at all, everyone became aware that I was a heavy sleeper, i.e. a weakness to exploit. And so the year twelve students that were overseeing our day-to-day lives, soon invented a prank so good, that it was repeated over and over again.

The seniors would wait until I was in a deep slumber, and then each take a corner of my mattress, lifting it off the old frame and making me into a kind of human taco. Fairly carefully, they would take me down the stairs of the boarding house, through the old glass doors and out into whatever part of the school they deemed worthy of my resting form. There they would leave me until I would inevitably wake several hours later. The dread of the unfamiliar sights and sounds filling me. I once woke up in a shower block, the diving platform of our school pool, the main quadrangle of the campus, and most memorably, the school's central sporting oval. One misty autumn morning, I rolled over and told my friend, Chris Bailey, to shut his window because it was cold. When I opened my eyes, all I could see was a thick mist in every direction. Then, as I had always done, I began the solitary act of dragging the mattress back to my dorm. They did not do this to me because I was a bad person, but because I was an easy target. That's how it went. I would have done the same thing if I were in their shoes. These moments became the folklore of my life, following me from place to place, growing in its mysticism.

Then one weekend, years later. I found myself trying to write a short screenplay for Stuart Kelban's Intro to Screenwriting class. As I usually do when starting creative work, I sifted through the years of my life, and on that particular day, the story of the travelling mattress was left in the sieve. I wrote a treatment for a short script about a young girl who keeps waking up in odd places around her

neighborhood – the shock of the discovery driving her to new heights of anxiety, until she is close to breaking point. On the final night, we would see her family carrying out her mattress, loading it into the family station wagon and taking it to a field far away. This is the same family who had been dismissive of the young girl's concerned tales of the wandering mattress. When the girl arose to such a drastic location, this far off field, she went into a tailspin. At this moment, the family would jump out from behind a bush and say, "Happy Birthday!"

Naturally, my cohort found the story to be a hard one to swallow. It *was* only a rough draft. They told me to revisit it and find the core of what I was trying to say. Maybe I wasn't trying to say anything. That's film school for you. I spent the next week looking at the elements in the story, and remembering how my mattress was always there in that scenario, and what I found was something quite different. The mattress went from being a mere porta of surreal comedy to become an object of burden. There was now a teen girl and an even younger boy. These new characters inhabited a world much like purgatory. They were dead, forced to carry around burdens from their previous lives. I liked the idea that there was not a simple, happy ending at the close of life, but more of a measured experience. In some ways, perhaps I was thinking about the place my mother might be, and if she still missed me and how that would work, how she would carry that. At this point, I should mention that my mother died of cancer in-between the days of the travelling mattress and my time at the University of Texas.

In this story, the young girl drags her mattress through a space that looks like our world, yet nobody notices her. The girl's mattress stands in as her guilt for leaving her mother behind, with the grief of her death. The mattress is her literal deathbed. Unable to let it go, she wanders, looking for way to return home. The story really gets going when she crosses paths with a boy who has his own cross to bear, a box of matches that represents his guilt for burning down the family home – the accident that caused his death. Together they roam until a rift between them

drives him to burn her mattress. The girl is forced to finally let go of the physical burden, but not the emotional one. I was drawn to the complicated idea that just because a burden may be lost, there is always the residue of pain that sticks to us. This is the best we can do. The whole new take on the mattress was celebrated by the class, and quickly became a story I had to tell. In my mind, this script, or a version of it, would become my pre-thesis film in the program.

However, a funny thing happened along the way. From the time I wrote the script to the time I was ready to begin work on my pre-thesis, something my father, Ted O'Hearn, had said to me, begun to nibble at my consciousness. This personal truth of his meant a re-examining of my entire childhood, which seemed necessary at the time. I had also been wanting to archive my immediate family's photographic and super 8mm materials. And so, my interest in telling the mattress story was put on the backburner. The final nail in the story's coffin was at our end of year review, when we met with the entire faculty to show our film and discuss our plan for the year to come. I couldn't decide which way to go, the mattress story or the personal documentary, but it was clear what the faculty thought. The mattress idea was unanimously shot down. Perhaps they could sense the timing was right for me to delve into my family history – an important part of my healing after the death of my mother. It could have also been that the mattress story was too abstract for them – never evolving from anything more than the simple six-page script crafted in Stuart's class. Either way, that meeting signified the end of *Mattress* for what I thought would be forever.

## **Getting Out of One's Head (And Out of the State of Texas)**

Many of us in the program have made films before. We are all drawn to this medium for a certain reason, whether it is because we grew up with films, escaping through fantasy worlds, or because we have spoken this language since our early time in front of the television. There is a unique quality to moving pictures that draws us in. The possibility of making someone feel something means that there needs to be a belief that you have something to say, something to show. It took me a long time to realize that I wanted to tell stories with pictures, and as with most things in my life, it happened through a series of serendipitous events, pushing me closer and closer to donning the director's hat and making a movie. Admittedly, not all of these events were positive, and often they left me feeling confused. Though, one end would undoubtedly be the new beginning I hadn't even known I was looking for, and then I was one step closer to that first film (or movie if we are being precise; it was shot on mini DV tape, so can't technically be called a film).

When I got to my final year in an undergraduate theatre and media program at Charles Sturt University in Bathurst, New South Wales, I made my first movie. The story was about a woman trying to get in touch with her sexuality, culminating in a feverous encounter with her vagina (a person in a vagina suit) and an eventual acceptance of her sexual self. Needless to say, the movie was heavily influenced by my three years in a theatre-focused program, much akin to the spectacle of a Fellini film. Except that Fellini's great muse *was* the circus and that he understood the symphony of life with Italian gusto. Making the film also provided me with my first experience of bringing a story into being and nurturing it through to its ultimate completion. Though, some films will never feel complete. There were many nights sitting at the dining table of my small 1940's cottage on the hill, with my co-director/co-conspirator, Miriam Pickard. We banged our heads against the wall and

fought hard to write something we were both proud of. Originally, we wanted to tell a magical realist tale, but we soon found ourselves heading in a much more warped direction.

The reason I bring this memory forth from the bowels of my past, is that making the movie was hard for the usual reasons – getting that many people together with actors, locations and props. Yet, it was completely liberating. We did not know the rules, aside from the 180° rule, and this meant that we could move the camera around however we wanted, put a woman in a vagina suit, use still images to make a scene, create wild and expressive, free-flowing sequences with uncanny cuts, and dream up whatever we wanted the movie to be. I would like to think that hasn't changed, but in some ways it has. This freedom is why I wanted to talk about the very early filmmaking experience. Coming into my final year of the graduate program was very difficult because there was a silent pressure to make something that represented the time spent learning the craft, both in and out of school. I know that for many in my cohort, myself included, the very notion of a thesis film got into our heads and caused paralysis.

Instincts are your biggest ally in the filmmaking process. Since filmmaking is simply the act of making a great number of choices, one must learn to trust their gut and follow their heart. Being in any film school where success is often measured by the quality of the festival your film plays in, there is no way to keep these thoughts out of the process, and ultimately, they start to make some of the choices for you. This is one of the hardest lessons I had to learn. I imagine this is the way it is when you get out into the larger world when making something commercial. The people putting up the money will be wanting the story to be this and that, and you have to stick to your guns, your instincts, alas, be sucked into their way of making the film. Now, these are extremes, but in some small way, the pressure to make something worthy of a thesis is a very real one, and was something that I had to overcome. Especially with such an abstract story like *Mattress*, full of symbolism and mystery.

I have always loved a quote by the great director, Sidney Lumet. In his book, *Making Movies*, he equates starting work to pulling the wool over your own eyes:

I guess I'm talking about *self*-deception. In any creative effort, I think that's absolutely necessary. Creative work is very hard, and some sort of self-deception is necessary simply in order to begin. To start, you have to believe that it's going to turn out well. And so often it doesn't. I've talked to novelists, conductors, painters about this. Unfailingly, they all admitted that self-deception was important to them. Perhaps a better word is "belief." But I tend to be more cynical about it, so I use "self-deception." (Lumet, 145)

Lumet has at least two things right in his sentiment. Firstly, creative work is hard. It's tricky because there are no rules, no structure, as there is in something like engineering, or flying a plane. Secondly, since this act becomes such a risky undertaking, one must tell themselves that everything is going to be great, and you tell yourself this so often that it becomes your own truth. It grows in such an organic way that you then start to convince others of this belief to enable them to want to work with you. This is even more so when making work in a film school environment where there is no money, or very little money, to pay people. The cast and crew have to see your passion, your belief, or find something in the story, otherwise why would they want to give their time and energy. You can begin to see the amount of energy that it takes to launch a project like this. Or in Lumet's case, how much self-deception. This is a big lie to live with.

When I began to think about my thesis project, and how unconventional the story of the mattress was, it scared me. I had also made a few films about the death of my mother, and my grief, and wondered whether I had explored the theme enough, whether my soul was ready for some new discovery. I searched around for

other ideas, trying not to merely think about what would grab the attention of festivals, even though this still plagued me. Every time I moved towards a new concept for a film, the inner-pessimist would sow seeds of doubt about the caliber of the story, or how it would be received by the filmmaking community. I know as you are reading this, you might think, “What is this person talking about? It’s merely a screening of work amongst peers.” You have clearly not had to publicly screen work before, or been to an end of semester screening of the thesis films – I even find myself walking into the room with very high expectations. Being on the other end of that is difficult. Thinking about the end result can take away from the process of making the work – might make you quit before you begin. These types of negative thoughts were running rampant in my brain during the summer of 2015. I knew I had to begin, and as many times as I tried to head in new directions, I kept coming back to the mattress.

At around this time, right in the dog days of summer, August 2015, some Australian friends visited me here in Austin, TX. We had made plans a few months earlier to do a road trip out to West Texas, via Marfa, the Carlsbad Caverns, onto New Mexico, the White Sands National Monument, and finally, part ways at a little slice of paradise in the Mimbres Valley, NM. From a couple of previous trips out to this region, I knew that if I were to tell the story of these two people wandering through some kind of purgatory, this was the landscape it had to be in. The story of the mattress deserved the unending, arid lands of West Texas, the kind of space where the magic of Wim Wender’s film, *Paris, Texas*, lives. The biggest problem was that I did not know the area at all. Even after several trips out there – reading forums, visiting the many ghost towns, hiking through remote parts of the Big Bend National Park, making scratches on maps, it was still a mystery. It was another world, one that I knew little about.

A few great things happened on that trip. As I have mentioned earlier, there seems to be a certain amount of fortuity in my life, which has always helped me see



the way forward (even if I could not see it until the exact right moment). During that trip, I went from having a hunch that the mattress story would come to fruition, to believing (self-deceiving myself) that it would definitely happen. This is the order in which it all took place: I experienced the White Sands for the first time in my life, I met two people in Marfa, Ginger Griffice, a photographer from the area who makes handmade soap, and a tour guide by the name of Logan Lewis, who grew up in Alpine, TX, and finally, I took a series of photographs that helped me familiarize myself with the visual language of the area. It is important to talk about these events in a little more detail, simply because these are the moments that led to the project actually happening. At the close of discussing these three elements, I will speak about a higher power in filmmaking that I have come to know simply as the “Film Gods.”

Arriving at the White Sands National Monument cannot prepare you for the full effect of being inside the monument. We had gotten to Alamogordo, NM, the night before, when the cloak of darkness fell over everything, and thus, had no idea what to expect. As you approach the monument, you see the sands as a strip of white on the horizon. The strip seems like an anomaly, a trick of the eye. Driving in, the dunes grow around you, but it is so gradual that you don't realize how deep you are into them until all you can see is white in every direction (Figure 1). I felt like I was on another planet, a planet that had a different delineation of time and space. When there is that much white around you, all perspective is lost. This quality is unique. I remember the surge of thoughts running through my brain – I had not been this inspired for a long time. I did not say it at first for fear of jinxing it, but I knew that I had to shoot there. Of course the reasons why it had to be there grew over time, though the instinct was there from the first experience of this natural wonder.



Figure 1: The White Sands National Monument, NM.

The other essential thing that happened was to meet two people that gave the project such great direction. Both stories of how I met these people are full of fluke and I love them all the more for that. The first one took place at an amazing eatery in Marfa called Comida Futura (now permanently closed). I was in line with my girlfriend, Thoa Nguyen, when I made a joke about the name of a dish on the menu. This prompted Rachel Griffice, the photographer, to turn around and get in on the joke. We ended up sitting with her and her friends, and by the end of the meal, she had given me a bunch of locations that could work for the film, one being this mysterious salt flat just out of El Paso on the Texas side (Figure 2). Then at the end of the trip, I was stopped again in Marfa, TX, at a small Taqueria where very little English is spoken. I was having trouble reading the Spanish menu, when I saw a guy in the back eating something delicious. Boldly, I asked him what it was, green chili enchiladas, and before I knew it, Logan Lewis and I were talking about locations for

the film. It turned out that he was a guide and had helped many filmmakers find locations previously.



Figure 2: The Salt Flats of Dell City, TX.

On that trip back from West Texas I took the long road home and visited many of the spots mentioned above – National Parks, ghost towns and places of interest. I was searching for the remote places. Since it was the peak of summer with temps in the high hundred, I was often alone in these spots, not seeing cars for hours. This unplanned isolation put me in the shoes of the characters, wandering without direction, searching for these places that I wasn't entirely sure existed, or how they would look if I ever found them. It was humbling. I felt incredibly small, dwarfed by giant rock faces and big flowing rivers. Yuccas seemed alien, deserts infinite and my search, only just beginning. There were many images taken on my old Nikon FM2 35mm camera on this trip (Figure 1 and 2), and these photos made it

possible for me to lay out the path I travelled visually and try to imagine the journey these characters would go on. I could place the printed images on my floor, standing above and see it all. It was the perspective I needed.

These series of events bolstered my belief (self-deception) that making the film was possible. Throughout the process I would get cold feet, thinking “This is too difficult, too big,” but I could always return to these moments of serendipity, the people that helped me to get a handle on the unknown. These incidents were how I knew I was on the right track. I believe that in life there is a healthy amount of putting yourself out there, but then also taking stock of the signs that present themselves along the way. The trick is to be open enough to see these moments for what they are and to let them guide you. They often happen for me when making a film, like when making my film *Poop* in the first year of the program. When looking for locations, the door I just so happened to knock on housed someone who was not only happy for me to shoot on their front lawn, but someone who would also called their neighbor across the road to enabled us to use their house for the weekend as a place to stage the gear and cast/crew each day. Sure, I had to search Google Street View for hours, finding potential houses, go and knock on each of those doors with a handout about the film *and* face a lot of rejection, but then it all finally clicked and I knew I was making the right film at the right time.

These are the “Film Gods” at play. When they visit you in this way, they become a beacon to follow when the film might seem unattainable. These times when the universe provides are the reason *Mattress*, and all my films, to some degree, get made. Had I not ventured out to West Texas and New Mexico on that expedition, this film would have never seen the light of day.

## **Don't Stand in the Way of Yourself**

In the Fall semester of 2015, I was the Teaching Assistant for a class called Audio Documentary. It was taught by a very capable human being, albeit a frenetic one just the same. That lecturer was Michelle Garcia. A former UT undergrad, Michelle made a life for herself producing radio documentaries and stories for broadcasters all around the country. Our first day of class was funny in that Michelle decided to play an original Biggie Smalls song and then a remixed version to illustrate the idea that the same material in different hands can mean something entirely different. This is the state of the mediated world – it is what you depict it as. Thus, we began our time with Michelle.

In that same first class, she had each of us go around and talk about a song that we identified with, a song that we simply couldn't escape no matter how hard we tried. The selections were all so unique. There was a punk song, a few R&B melodies, and of course some folk classics. One by one, everyone discussed their attachment to the music, which usually consisted of a story about what that person was going through when they first heard the song. It was incredible to comprehend the variety in such a small number of people (the eleven of us).

The semester progressed and Michelle set the students on task with a project to produce a profile of someone they had not met before, a stranger. The notion was that it would be a healthy challenge to go out into the community and engage someone. This process being an exact replication of the real world, where journalists like Michelle, must enter the fray and find a story buried somewhere in the unknown. There were struggles. Students fought the workload. Some thought they didn't have a story, couldn't see the story, their own stubbornness getting in the way. Still, Michelle pushed them. She guided them to see what they couldn't, or didn't want to, see. Some had epiphanies and discovered parts of their personal

history that they hadn't understood until this moment. Others finally caved and told the story that their subject had given them, and not what they thought it should be. The rest resisted until the bitter end, nothing gained.

At some point in this process it became clear that Michelle's plan was to take them on that journey that all creatives must embark on. The one where they set out to tell a story they believe will work, only to uncover an entirely new story that lives deep under the surface of the material. The real work is often about letting the buried truth, the one you couldn't predict, speak to you. Then you react with your sensibilities to make strong work. I am happy that some realized the journey for what it was. This lesson is one that will live on in them and enrich their practice for years to come. It only gets sharper over time.

However, this was actually not the most eye-opening thing to come out of the experience. At the close of the project, Michelle played back the songs the students had shared those four weeks ago, and then she played each student's piece. And there it was, the proof that some had taken the journey. More than half of songs correlated so divinely to the pieces that same student made, that the class (myself included) shook their heads in disbelief. It was uncanny. One student had chosen Billie Holiday's *Strange Fruit*, a song that bleeds for the suffering and oppression of African Americans lynched in the South. The song perfectly accented the student's own tale of abuse and a lifetime hiding his sexuality. Another student chose *Needle and the Damage Done* by Neil Young. This same student ended up connecting with a man whose music career stemmed from a need to escape his dad's heroin habit through the guitar. As we listened to the maudlin ramble of the jangling steel strings, the poignancy of this pairing beamed right into each of us. The point was made.

As much as we let the story come from the material and as much as we fight ourselves, our needs and agendas, hidden and transparent, will find a way into our art. No matter how external it may seem by the end of the process. Let's call this our voice. This realization, as much a reminder as ever, left me with a sense of confusion

(wonder) about *Mattress*. See that's the thing about this process, you cannot predict the outcome before it begins. The sheer finality of a thesis had played many games with my head so far, had me second-guessing myself and left me with the paralysis previously discussed. I had to force myself to sit with my ideas, read possible leads, ask myself the tough questions and not let up.

This dance is one that always seems to haunt me. I run from my story until there is no choice left but to tell it.

What was I running from this time? Which repressed memory, which color of loss, lust, shame, fear, or anger, would spring forth this time? The biggest clue I had was the song I chose at the beginning of that class, a song that I always come back to. The song is *Eid Ma Clack Shaw* by Bill Callahan. Its lyrics and poetry cuts right through me every time I listen to it. The effect is arresting. Of course, the raw quality of Callahan's expression is what also sharpens the blade. The song resonates deeply with my experiences of loss and grief. The way it uses the imagery of the wilderness and the uncanny to depict grief is powerful. When Callahan says that "Love is the king of the beasts, And when it gets hungry it must kill to eat," I am in total awe. With my mother's death I have learnt that love can consume you like the most ferocious of animals. This is what I had to build from. This feeling.

I started to do some research into the song, wanting to find out more about Callahan's intentions. I came across an AV Club interview he gave<sup>1</sup>. Surprisingly, my interest wasn't peaked by something he said about the song. I was much more interested in what Callahan had to say about a couple of albums he hopes to make some day. "They're intimidating because they're working in ways I have never worked before, and I'm not even sure what those ways are – I just have a feeling," said Callahan. This was exactly what I was going through. Originally, I thought that the project would be about taking people into the desert and crafting a narrative from exploration and character building. I usually work with a tightly scripted, shot

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.avclub.com/article/bill-callahan-26516>

listed story, as my biggest concern is having answers for my crew or actors. This project seemed like it would be different in that I would not plan as much, and try to be more reactionary to whatever the landscape or situations were presenting myself, the actors and the crew.

There was a lot in this idea of a woman carrying a mattress that scared me. I knew that people would read it so many ways, and some may find it humorous to see the abstract image of a woman dragging something so obscure behind her. Yet, in my heart I knew that there was power in the mattress – the burden of such a physically overwhelming object felt right. I couldn't explain it. Like Callahan, I knew that there was magic in the idea, the central image if you will, but I couldn't fully describe it. I simply had a feeling.



## A Clear Choice

In my second year of the program, I did a photography class in the art school, and learned about a man in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century who was obsessed with placing his frozen urine under a microscope – it drove him to build better microscopes to see further than humans had ever seen before; going beyond the surface of perception and into a whole other world. His name was Robert Hooke, and he intricately drew what he saw through his lens. The drawings astonished the world. They inspired awe, disbelief, questions, and drove the human race to understand its reality in a way never before possible. The notion that to see is to believe must have originated from this moment in time, altering history by the undeniable power of the image.

I knew there was power in the symbolism of the mattress, but also knew that people might have trouble deciphering what it meant. From the time I had first written the script to the point when I decided to make the film, around Fall 2015, a classmate, Shelby Hadden, pointed out that a young woman was carrying around her mattress in protest of an alleged on-campus sexual assault<sup>2</sup>. The story got national attention and at this point I realized that the symbol of the mattress was going to be perceived as a very clear thing, and one thing alone, sexual assault. Even though, my original intention was far from this, I knew I would be wrestling with this image. It definitely put a dampen on my desire to tell the story, since I wanted to use the mattress as a different symbol.

One day, when I was helping my roommate move out, we were cleaning up some of his books from the shelf. I stumbled upon a book that delves into symbols and where they originate from. I remember flipping straight to the word “mattress,” nothing. It said see “bed.” What I found certainly changed a lot for me and my motivation to tell the story. It turned out that there were ideas I had overlooked

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mattress\\_Performance\\_\(Carry\\_That\\_Weight\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mattress_Performance_(Carry_That_Weight))

about the symbol of the bed, and it supported the history of me and mattresses, and how these all fit together. Here is what it said about beds:

Symbol of the regenerative effects of sleep and love, the bed is also a place of death. Birth, marriage, and death make the bed a focus of particular care and even veneration, since it is a center devoted to the mysteries of life, of life in its basic and not in its higher states of development. (Chevalier, 63)

These few words had enough power to get my mind running. Remembering that the symbol of the bed could encompass so much, such as birth *and* death, and “the mysteries of life,” felt like the push I needed. I was wanting to use the mattress in a similar way – making it into a device to explore grief and the death of my mother. Around this time, I had to get a treatment ready to hand into the school to apply for funding for the film. The culmination of this discovery, my summer trip to all of the potential locations and a few new thoughts about my own final moments with my mother, helped the story to become focused. The mattress shifted from being about the guilt of a former life to being about my own grief and having to say goodbye to my mother, carrying that pain around with me for many years after, even still today.

After writing what felt like the most long-winded treatment, I had an important meeting with my thesis chair, PJ Raval. He basically said that I had a feature’s worth of material in the treatment, which had a lot to do with having seen all those amazing locations and taken all the images – I had tried to include everything into the journey the characters take. PJ proposed a simple idea. What if the story took place in a single location? After all, it was a short. There was only one place it could be, the White Sands. No location rivalled the immediate feelings of awe this place evoked. When I revisited the story with this in mind, it took a much better shape. *Mattress* still had the fundamental elements: a woman carries the mattress

through a barren land, she is discovered by a young boy, only to have him destroy the mattress.

There were a few other changes that came from this stage of writing and development. Since I had started to put this story in the context of my own experience with mum, I looked back on the final moments I spent with her and an earlier piece I wrote called *Silence* kept coming back to me (Figure 3). In the story, I go through the profound moment of being given space with mum on her final night alive. When I was with her, I thanked her for everything she had given to me and gave her permission to die if she wanted to. Within a few moments her breathing slowed right down until she took that final breath. On one hand being able to share this with her has helped me in my grieving, but it is still something that amazes me in the way that it transpired. It was like nothing I have ever experienced, or will ever experience again. The memory stays with me always.

I needed to find a repercussion to the boy burning that mattress. In one version the woman ran away in disgust, in another she became violent with the boy, but it was in the final take on it that the heart of story really grew. Upon discovering the burning mattress, the woman would throw herself on the flames, transporting her back to the final moments with her mother, the memory that had tied her to the bed in the first place. Making this connection enriched the film exponentially. It's funny because it is exactly the process I talked about earlier in terms letting the deeper story come to you. It had been buried, and was now surfacing. The more everything crystalized, the more I was able to see the desert for what it was, the barren landscape that the world becomes directly after a massive loss. The sands were a perfect way to depict this change – I went from knowing the world as this secure place, to being alienated from it by the destruction of the central pillar that held it all in place. I could see the film.

*Silence* by Mitchel O'Hearn

The hum of the inflatable hospital bed underpins the whole scene. It was brought here because we promised mum that she could pass at home. Now, we all sit around it. Mum, transfixed by the morphine, passive to the moment. We form a natural amphitheatre of loved ones and blood relatives, ex partners, extended family members and a big-hearted nurse who is here to oversee the faultless death of my mother.

In no particular order we each tell stories that make us laugh from our guts and then weep even harder, still laughing through the tears. The contrast between the joy and the pain are too much for comprehension. With every story our loss becomes more present. My breath feels effortlessly elongated, as if someone else is breathing for me. In fact, I am not in my head. Instead, I drift above the whole scene.

Nan looks across the bed to me. Her hand is firmly clasped around mums, the wrinkled skin encasing the pale yellow hue of mum's hand. She looks inside to where I am drifting, seeing something beyond me. With matriarchal authority she announces that I should have some time alone with mum.

In the wake of everyone's departure, the entire room swoops down, bringing me back into my head. I compose myself with a deep wavering breath. Without the distraction of the room, I take mum in. In one look I see a lifetime. My heart is embedded in her heart and there is not much time, for both of us. The hum rumbles on underneath everything.

Now at the side of the bed, I gently pull back the strands of hair from her face, feeling the softness of her skin, I carefully place them behind her ear. For a moment I forget who the parent is. Awkwardly, I recline next to her on the bed, so that our arms are connected. As my head falls into her shoulder, the inside of me bottoms out. I am empty.

There is only one thing I can think of. I thank her for everything she has given me, for being the most incredible mother a son could ever want. I promise that I am going to live a rich and full life, and never forget her and what she has taught me. As if listening the whole time, and finally being released by my words, her breath slows right down to a trickle. I panic.

Mum draws in a large breath from the back of her mouth and holds it longer than I can bear. The hum of the hospital bed intensifies. In the end, she exhales until there is nothing left inside her lungs. She does not take another breath. My heart stops. I am completely paralysed. It is as if her last breath has sucked all the sound out of the room. I cannot hear a thing. Not a hum, not a pin, nothing. I am frozen in this moment, trapped here by the silence.

Figure 3: *Silence* by Mitchell O'Hearn

The final image that came to me in the writing process said a lot about my journey of healing. This is the one element in the story that differentiated it from my other movies about grief. Whereas before, the death or disappearance of one of the characters felt open-ended, I wanted to find a resolution for the mother's soul when she exhales that final breath. My exploration of West Texas and its unique landscapes, helped me to find the final moment of the film and inspired a change in myself, an acceptance on some lower level. As the mother exhales her last breath, I decided that the breath would return to the landscape, thus completing the cycle of life and some closure for the character of the young woman. It may seem small, but it was a big step for me and my grief.

## Getting It Done

Once you have a concrete idea of what a film means to you, then the making of it seems entirely possible. Being able to go out and find a cast and crew knowing what it is you want from them, makes for a much easier task. It's as if they can sense your passion and drive straight off the bat. From the time I sought out the help of my producers to the time we drove back from New Mexico, I felt like I had the support of a great number of people. There was a profound belief in the work. Also, the White Sands is a site of great beauty and people felt that to go on such an adventure was to be a part of that.

Casting was smooth, as my producer, Malina Panovich, helped me put it all together – Malina does this as a job, so had everything set up to receive submissions and handled that side of things. I knew from the outset that I wanted to work with an actress by the name of Ariana Guerra because I had seen her in a number of smaller productions and had been drawn to a certain electricity in her performance. I knew she would surprise me. Luckily, she jumped at the chance to audition. There were some other actresses that came close, but from the moment Ariana came in, took her shoes off and moved that mattress around the studio. I could sense that she was the one.

Finding a boy was a greater challenge. Originally, I had wanted a kid who was more of a non-actor, someone with a past. We saw more kids who were trained actors, most of them too polished. When Carson Haverda came into the room, I could see that he was different. Immediately, he challenged Malina in a scene and threw emotional obstacles in her way. Carson tried some interesting tactics to get his way in certain improvisations and I could tell that he was able to hold his own. I made the casting process as abstract as you could get, playing wind noises in the room, giving rolling direction, and letting the scene evolve to wherever the energy took my direction. Many of the actors said they hadn't experienced a casting session

like it before. If anything, it felt a lot like my theatre days.

After two rounds of callbacks, I found that Carson and Ariana were a good fit – both full of energy and a willingness to make it complicated for one another. The next phase was rehearsals, which I had already made some definite decisions about. Since the script was abstract in nature, I wanted to get them both linked into each other's energies before we begun work on the actual beats of the story. For the first four rehearsals, I did not bring a script into rehearsal. Instead we played games, drew pictures, shared stories from our pasts about grief and loss, big and small, and I connected them to the essence of the script. By the time we were ready for the story, they felt the transformation had occurred, like I was a mad scientist who knew exactly what he was doing, but really, I just wanted their connection to be strong. And it was. Many walls had been broken down.

On set, they both took such good care of each other, and there is no denying that their on-screen energy is there. It was a good thing that I didn't get the non-actor in the end because when we got out to New Mexico and had to trudge into 110°F heat every day, Carson was the biggest trooper I had ever worked with. He got out there, gave me multiple takes, all the while suffering from massive glare and heat. I remember joking about how important it was for the crew and cast to be really living the reality of the characters, amongst the heat and the landscape. Well, I got what I wished for, tenfold. In the end it was almost too much. There were times where I had to push very hard to keep us going, my stamina outweighing everyone else's due to my investment in the project – all the time I had spent with it.

On the first day of being at the sands, one of our crew members did not cover themselves like I had asked them to. Of course, an hour or so later, I got a call on the walkie saying that the person had felt unwell and that we were calling an ambulance for them to get fluids. These were the conditions we were working in every day, and they made it nearly impossible to direct. If it wasn't that I found it hard to remember every scene adjustment post-take due to the staggering heat, it would be just simply

looking around at the crew and seeing how beat they were. I would literally have to cheer them on to rouse them up sometimes, but then other times I would be down, and someone else would bring me and everyone else up. And this is how it went.

Despite this intense way of shooting, I knew that these extremes were going to help the actors get to a real place with what they were going through. Often I could tell how much they were feeling it, and I had to find a way to help them channel it back into the performance. And they did. There were moments on set when I would look at the frame and think to myself how I had never seen an image like that before, and this drove me on. We certainly ended up living the reality like I had proposed all those moons ago. The weather also brought us closer together. It was as if the sun was our common enemy, and we had to become one to fight against it and win. And this is how it went. The subtle battles with me for wanting more, and the bigger battles with the environment for wanting everything.

When we got back from the shoot, we were all so relieved to be home. Ten days was a long time away. As much as it took out of me, I learnt what it is like to do a location shoot – what it takes in terms of money and in terms of energy. One of the most important things to have was a good caterer because food becomes the main focus when people are tired and touched by the day. There were definitely times when I wished I had had more crew, but since we had to keep the budget down, this was not possible. Though, we got it done and the intimate size of the crew meant that we had become a family throughout the experience, for better or worse.

Another oversight, was that I only had about six weeks to edit the film after a week's rest post-shoot. If it wasn't for the diligence of PJ Raval and Don Howard, I don't know how I would have gotten there. PJ and I had two extremely thorough sessions where we unpacked every small cut and read said cut quite deeply. We talked a lot about managing perspectives and how to let what was apparent in the material, be even stronger by a process of subtraction. Highlighting a moment with one shot as opposed to a sequence. Don and I focused more on the overall structure



of the cut. He had me select eight key moments that I could not live without. He said to drag these up on another video track in Avid, but instead, I decided to put them on a whole new timeline. Doing this, I was able to see how to move between these points and where I had doubled up in similar actions, a common mistake of young storytellers. These are short films after all. This combination of approaches got me there in the end, and a final screening to a few trusted peers who had never even read a draft of the script, cemented the final changes to the cut.

We colored and mixed in a couple of weeks, and there was nothing as satisfying as finally seeing beyond that flat s-log footage I had been staring at for weeks. This was by far the tightest I have had to cut a film before, but I loved how it pushed me to make quicker decisions and let go of elements faster than I otherwise would have been able to. Of course, there were a ton of moments where I wanted more time to keep working and exploring, however, I got the cut to good place. This is much like the writing of this report. Having the timeline be so condensed meant that the writing had to be to the point as time marched on. Still, many of the eye-opening lessons learnt live within these words, and act as a portal to one of the most challenging artistic endeavors I have ever undertaken.

## Conclusion

I will never look back at my time with this project and wonder, “What if?” I did it. I went out into the wilderness with a handful of talented people, working with an abstract script about grief in the desert and we got some incredibly beautiful footage. There are a million things I could have done differently, mainly in regards to time management and having a few extra crew members, but what we accomplished will forever surprise me. The fact that the process also helped to see a new development in my grief, and that I got to share that with many creative people who I also have friendships with, is a very special thing. We will always have fond memories from our time out there in the middle of nowhere, sand in every crevice.

A thesis project needs to push you further than you have gone before, and I had to face so many aspects that scared me. Knowing now that I can handle a set with that many people for that many days, keeping stamina and focus, makes me feel like I can do almost anything. I am not naïve though. When I think on the time out West, there is a lot of pain that I remember too. My lips were cracked, my feet blistered, my eyes stinging and my muscles sapped. The story kept me going; the adrenalin cursing through me. Even when those sand storms rolled in every day at 5pm, I kept my chin up and tried to embrace the raw power of nature. I only hope that the other members of the cast and crew got something out of those challenges too. Perhaps I will get to ask them one day soon, when all the madness has died down.

I make films about grief. I have made films about loss. I hope that this will be my last one for a while, but as fatigued as I am by the theme, I always seem to get something positive out of the films on the journey of my healing. One day, I will look back at these films and most likely, be able to trace my steps as a human being. That’s how personal these films are. I don’t really know how to make any other type of film, and that’s okay. I can tell that there is a hunger in me to do something

different with the next film, and that never would have been there if it wasn't for each of these projects, like *Mattress*, that have helped to clear my emotional cache. They have also enabled me to represent this pain in dreamlike ways. Film school has given me the opportunity to dig deep into the past and the very real things in my life. I am grateful for that and always will be.

Each one of these films has pushed me to connect with others and share some of the more difficult events of my history with them. Where else do you get a chance to do that? They have not been straight dramatic representations of these moments either, usually twisting and turning in narrative form, and that is something unique about them. Playing with the world in that way is part of my style, my voice. My voice has definitely gotten stronger the more I have been fortunate enough to be able to use it. I am excited to see how distinct it can get.

## Appendix A: Shooting Script

MATTRESS

By Mitchell O'Hearn

10th Draft

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1 MONTAGE - ALL THE FORGOTTEN MATTRESSES 1

A) EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - PREDAWN - An empty street filled with early morning fog. A dumpster is overflowing with trash. Leaning against it is a heavily stained full-sized mattress.

B) EXT. SMALL WOODED AREA - MORNING - It's raining. Scattered, dog-torn piles of trash line a patch between spindly shrubs. Buried under the debris is an old mattress. It's in the process of decomposing.

C) EXT. TRASH HEAP BESIDE BARN - DAY - Midday light hits this weathered spot. Set in front of discarded hoards are half an old recliner and the partial remains of a twin mattress.

D) EXT. SIDE OF THE HIGHWAY - DAY - Heat waves are rising off of an old stretch of road. No traffic. Laid out on the dirt is a burnt-out mattress with beer cans piled on top.

E) EXT. SIDE OF A WHITE DUNE - AFTERNOON - The sand has all but swallowed up a mattress. As the wind blows, the sand grains fall over the crosshatch pattern, covering the last little window to its existence.

2 EXT. SEA OF WHITE DUNES - DAY 2

Endless dunes stretch out to the horizon. A YOUNG WOMAN (early 20's) appears, battling up a distant dune. She is tiny against the dunes. Behind her, she drags a twin mattress.

Stumbling forward against harsh winds, she stops and uses the mattress as a wind break. With her last ounce of energy, she tumbles down the side of a dune and disappears from sight.

3 EXT. THREE LARGE DUNES - AFTERNOON 3

The shadows of the dunes rush from one side to the other.

3.1 EXT. A PATCH OF YUCCAS - AFTERNOON 3.1

A yucca's shadow darts across the sand.

4 EXT. BASE OF THE DUNE - AFTERNOON 4

The woman is laid out flat, one hand grasped around the mattress. A grimy piece of cloth is wrapped around her head. Her clothes are worn and sweat stained. She does not move.

A BOY (13 y/o) comes over the same dune the woman fell down. His shirt and shorts are filthy and his tennis shoes are falling apart. The only thing he has with him is a gallon jug, half-filled with dirty water.

He spots the woman below. He considers her and his water. The boy secures the water jug in the sand and tracks down the dune towards her.

As he approaches the woman for a closer look, the boy shouts as a warning. Nothing. He reaches the woman and nudges her with his foot. Still nothing. He makes a booming noise right above her, but she remains motionless.

The boy kneels down beside her and is grossed out by the smell. He removes her head wrap to reveal her burnt face and deeply cracked lips. He inspects her. While prodding her, he gets an idea. The boy pulls out the end of a glass bottle from his pocket and positions it to catch the sun.

A white spot forms on the woman's cheek. The spot begins to smoke rapidly and the woman snaps awake. She grabs her face in agony.

WOMAN  
Mother fucker.

The boy scurries back.

WOMAN (CONT'D)  
What was that?

The woman holds her tender cheek.

BOY  
I thought you were dead.

WOMAN  
Dead?

BOY  
I didn't think you'd feel it.

WOMAN  
What's wrong with you?

The boy averts her gaze.

The woman stands, no time for the boy. She hikes the mattress over her frame and heads off.

BOY  
Where are you going?  
(beat)  
I know how to get out of here.

She carries on, dragging the mattress through the sand.

Not knowing what else to do, the boy runs over and grabs the other end of the mattress. The woman spins around, yanking the mattress off him.

WOMAN  
Don't.

BOY  
But I can help you.

WOMAN  
Don't touch me, don't follow me,  
don't even look at me.

She pushes him hard onto the sand. The boy is shocked. He stays put while the woman walks away.

5 MONTAGE - CAT AND MOUSE IN THE DESERT 5

A) EXT. DUNE HILL - LATE AFTERNOON - The woman is dwarfed by the dune she is traversing up, the mattress in tow. When she is far enough ahead, the boy appears, carefully following.

B) EXT. SIDE OF DUNE CREST - LATE AFTERNOON - The boy peers over the crest. The coast is clear, so he scrambles up and over it.

C) RIDGE OF DUNE - LATE AFTERNOON - The woman trudges along in the late-afternoon sun. She can barely put one foot in front of the other. Determination is all that keeps her on her feet, but that is tested when a gust blows sideways.

6 EXT. BACK FROM THE RIDGE OF DUNE - LATE AFTERNOON 6

The boy is watching the woman from off in the distance.

Her steps get loose. She sways with each one. Suddenly, she collapses to the ground, the mattress pinning her down. The boy takes off to help.

7 EXT. RIDGE OF DUNE - LATE AFTERNOON/SUNSET 7

The woman's dry mouth is pressed against the white sand. With each breath she draws sand in and pushes it out.

4.

Her eyes can hardly focus. Her cheeks are red and cracked.  
The boy's jug is shoved in front of her face.

She looks to see the boy kneeling beside her, but has no  
choice. Grabbing it from him, she gulps it down. When she has  
had her fill she lets go and it spills out. The boy scrambles  
to save the water.

The woman crumbles in an exhausted heap and pulls the  
mattress over herself.

The boy looks around, helpless.

8 EXT. RIDGE OF DUNE - DUSK 8

The delicate, blue light of the evening gives the dunes an  
ethereal quality. The boy sits by the woman, watching her  
laid out under the mattress.

The woman stirs. She gets up, dusts herself off and heads out  
into the blue abyss.

BOY

Where are you going?

The boy follows her.

BOY (CONT'D)

Hey. I'm talking to you.

The woman stops. She reluctantly considers the boy.

BOY (CONT'D)

What's out that way?

Endless dunes.

WOMAN

Home.

They both survey the vast expanse.

She starts off again. He joins her.

9 EXT. LONG ARCHING DUNE - NIGHT (DAWN OR DUSK CHEAT) 9

The woman and boy walk in the dead of night. It's cool so the  
boy has more energy to walk and talk. He wants to ask her  
something, but is unsure.

BOY

Do you think it hurts when you die?



The woman doesn't respond.

BOY (CONT'D)  
It's gotta hurt. Like shooting  
yourself in the face. Your brains  
spray out. You would feel that.

He mimics the actions, with sound effects, of brains being splattered all over the place.

BOY (CONT'D)  
Or jumping off a building. Just  
falling. You watch the street get  
closer and closer.  
(beat)  
What if you didn't die when you hit  
the ground?

The woman simply looks straight ahead.

BOY (CONT'D)  
Or drowning. Or electrocution.

WOMAN  
Or what about starving to death in  
the desert and the birds come and  
pick out your eyes. You scream, but  
no one can hear you.

The boy is quiet. The woman stops and looks out.

Across the horizon, four small figures carry a mattress high above their heads while someone lays on top.

WOMAN (CONT'D)  
Do you see that?

The figures walk a bit farther and place the mattress down. They walk away from it.

BOY  
What is it?

The woman heads off towards the spot. The boy inevitably follows.

10 EXT. LONE TALL DUNE - DAWN/SUNRISE

10

When they get to where they saw the mattress being dropped, the sun is coming up. Drag marks in the sand trail off into the distance.

The woman looks ahead and can just make out a tiny figure dragging the mattress. The figure goes over a dune and disappears from sight.

They follow.

11 EXT. HIGH DUNE/LOW DUNE - MIDDAY 11

The sun is overhead. The pair are still tracking the figure. The boy stands on a tall dune, trying to see into the distance.

WOMAN  
You see anything?

BOY  
Nope.

They continue on.

12 EXT. CREST OF A DUNE WITH A VIEW - AFTERNOON 12

The woman stops. The drag marks have run out. All that's left are a thousand sand ripples imprinted onto the dune.

BOY  
Where did they go?

The woman sits down, exhausted. She looks out.

WOMAN  
What I wouldn't give to hear the  
sound of a watch. Or to hear  
someone talk about the weather.

The boy studies her.

BOY  
I can make a sun dial.

WOMAN  
Oh, yeah.

BOY  
Yeah. It's easy. I learned in  
school.

Hopping around, the boy removes his shoe. He digs a hole in the sand and buries the shoe to make the dial. The shadow is cast.

WOMAN  
So what's the time?

Pretending to be scientific about it, the boy makes calculations. He looks around, searching.

BOY  
It's-- You have to know where north is.

He tries to figure out the way they've come, but everything looks the same. The woman loses it.

WOMAN  
Perfect.

She falls back on her mattress, bundles it around her and rolls down the back of the dune. The boy thinks it is a game. He grabs his shoe and copies her.

When he gets to the bottom, he runs around like a goal's been scored. The woman watches on.

BOY  
Perfect, perfect, perfect.

He goes up to the mattress and jumps up and down on it, screaming. The woman's instincts kick in. She grabs him by the ankles and pulls his legs out from underneath him.

As she rips him off the mattress, the boy lets out a massive yelp. When she looks down, the woman sees a wire sticking out of the mattress and a deep cut in the boy's leg.

She reaches out to help, but he pushes the woman aside and limps off, howling.

The woman picks up the mattress, looks towards where the boy went and then in the opposite direction. She takes a few steps in that direction, but stops, looking back.

She sees his water jug.

13 EXT. FLAT LAND SURROUNDED BY DUNES - AFTERNOON 13

Blood runs from the boy's open wound.

He is resting in a flat of rust-coloured sand and weak-looking plants. The sun is in full force, bleaching everything.

The boy teases more blood out. He gathers some on his finger, and studies it closely. He licks it.

The woman makes her way to the boy.

WOMAN  
You all right?

BOY  
Leave me alone.

WOMAN  
I didn't mean to.

The woman places his water jug on the ground. The boy collects it.

BOY  
Whatever.

The woman bends down to take a closer look. The boy moves back.

BOY (CONT'D)  
Don't touch me.

WOMAN  
Okay. It needs to be wrapped though.

BOY  
Not by you.

WOMAN  
Don't you know I have healing powers?

BOY  
Yeah right.

WOMAN  
It's true. I once brought a cockroach back to life.

The boy thinks this is ridiculous.

BOY  
Cockroaches don't die. They survive nuclear bombs. Everyone knows that.

WOMAN  
True. Let me take a look.  
(beat)  
Please.

The boy slowly slides his leg out. The cut is deep. The woman looks at the mattress. Very delicately, she tears a strip of the fabric away.

BOY  
Why don't you get rid of that  
stupid thing?

The woman considers the mattress. She turns back and wraps it around the boy's leg, making a tight knot.

WOMAN  
There you go. Good as new.

BOY  
Mom says that.

WOMAN  
Smart woman.

BOY  
Yeah. She's probably freaking out  
right now.

The woman nods.

14 EXT. FLAT STRETCH OF A DUNE - MIDDAY 14

They are up and travelling in the midday heat. It's powerful and the wind is blowing them this way and that. They walk and walk. The boy falls down a couple of times and the woman picks him up, but they keep going.

He watches her struggle to help him and carry the mattress. It makes no sense to him. She battles on.

15 EXT. DUNE LEADING TO SALT FLAT - LATE AFTERNOON 15

The woman and boy come over a dune dotted with yuccas. The boy limps. The woman stops dead, but it takes the boy a few steps to realise.

WOMAN  
Look. There are no dunes out there.

Beyond them are salt flats that extend to the horizon.

The boy tries to be hopeful. He inspects his water bottle, there's not much left. He takes a sip and offers it to the woman. She refuses.

10.

16 EXT. EDGE OF THE SALT FLAT - SUNSET 16

The woman and boy walk on a flat, white surface, framed to one side by a small hill. The mountains in the background are engulfed by the red hue of the sun's last hoorah.

There's an old truck tire laying on the ground. The boy stands it upright, gets in and tries to push himself. He falls miserably.

The woman helps him out. She rolls him along the ground and he spins round and round. The tire runs out of steam and falls over. When he gets up he is very wobbly.

BOY

You get in.

WOMAN

Nah. I don't have time for that.

She starts walking away. The boy is disappointed. He follows her. She suddenly runs back towards it and hops in. The boy thinks this is amazing. They right the tire and he pushes her along. After a while of spinning, the woman gets out and is dizzy. When she steadies herself, she sees that she has just left the mattress and walks back to it.

BOY

Push me again.

The woman doesn't acknowledge him.

The boy watches her from afar, examining the mattress and brushing it clean. He kicks at the dirt, frustrated.

17 EXT. SALT FLAT - NIGHT 17

There is a deep night all around them except for a small fire. They sit, watching the flames. The boy pokes at a burning stick.

BOY

Is anyone out there looking for you?

WOMAN

No.

BOY

Your mom or dad?

WOMAN

Nup.

BOY  
How come?

WOMAN  
They just aren't.

BOY  
What are they like?

WOMAN  
My mom and dad?

BOY  
Yeah.

WOMAN  
Like parents.

BOY  
And?  
(beat)  
Please.

The woman looks deep into the flames.

WOMAN  
My mom was always busy, yet she had  
time for everyone.

She checks to see if the boy has had enough. He hasn't.

WOMAN (CONT'D)  
I remember her scent, patchouli  
oil. Know what that smells like?

The boy shakes his head.

WOMAN (CONT'D)  
Like musty flowers. Kind of sweet.

BOY  
She sounds nice.

WOMAN  
She was.

The crackle of the fire fills the still night air.

BOY  
My mom's pretty forgetful. She  
never remembers to get me after  
school. I usually walk home by  
myself.

The woman doesn't respond.

BOY (CONT'D)  
She'd be looking for me though.

The woman considers him deeply.

WOMAN  
You know, we're in the middle of  
nowhere.

BOY  
What do you mean?

WOMAN  
Forget it.

BOY  
What do you mean?

WOMAN  
It's a big place.

BOY  
My mom's out there.

WOMAN  
I know she loved you, but she's not  
coming.

The boy gets up.

BOY  
What would you know? You drag that  
stupid thing around thinking you'll  
find your home.

The boy storms off.

WOMAN  
Hey.

18

EXT. MIDDLE OF THE SALT FLAT - PREDAWN/DAWN

18

Early morning blue light illuminates the white salt flat. The boy stands over the sleeping woman. She is not on the mattress, though her hand is firmly clamped to it.

The boy carefully pries her grip away, finger by finger, and drags the mattress off into the flat. He comes back to get a stick from the fire, an ember at its end.



Now standing over the mattress, the boy considers what he is about to do. He tosses the stick onto the bed and fans it with both hands. It catches and goes up in flames. A bright red smoke pours out, cutting through the predawn light.

Smoke drifts to where the woman sleeps. She begins to cough, which wakes her up. It takes a moment to see that the mattress is on fire, the boy standing in front of it. She bolts off towards him.

The woman tries to get past the boy, but he blocks her. She shoves him down. She tries to put the fire out by kicking and scraping dirt at it. Reaching down, the woman attempts to flip the mattress over, but she gets burned.

Seeing this, the boy rushes over and puts his arms around the woman's waist. With everything he's got, he pulls her farther and farther away from the burning mattress.

By now, the smoke has risen high into the air, forming a massive column in the middle of the wide, open salt flat. The smoke is so thick that the mattress cannot be seen.

At about twenty feet away, the woman's writhing overwhelms the boy and she frees herself. She runs straight towards the column of smoke, and throws herself on the mattress, vanishing from sight.

The boy is in shock.

19 EXT. THICK CLOUD OF SMOKE - DAWN

19

A smoke screen. All the woman can hear is her breathing and coughing. Occasional clouds blows by, giving a hint of an arm or an eye.

The woman crawls on her knees. She searches around the flat for the burning mattress. Her hand knocks into something and she reels back. It's nothing. She cautiously pushes her hand into the smoke again and moves towards it.

At the end of her reach is the corner of a crisp, white bed. The woman traces her hand along its edge, revealing white hospital sheets. In the middle of the bed, the woman finds an older woman's hand. The woman lifts the hand, careful to feel its warmth and smoothness. She holds it against her face.

WOMAN

Mom? Mom?

As the woman fans the smoke away, the body of an OLDER WOMAN (50's) comes into view. They are on the same flat as before, but the boy and the burning mattress are nowhere to be seen.

14.

The older woman is on a pristine bed. She's unconscious and her skin is jaundiced. The woman realises where she is.

She leans in and tucks the older woman's hair behind her ear. She kisses her cheek and looks to her for any sign of stirring. Nothing.

She gets on the mattress with her, laying her head next to the older woman's. From this new vantage, the young woman observes her breathing, steady, mechanical. She moves to softly talk in her ear.

WOMAN (CONT'D)

Thank you for a beautiful life. I love you so much. I know you are tired. It's okay to go.

She kisses her temple.

The older woman's breathing starts to slow down, becoming laboured.

The young woman is alarmed by the change.

The old woman's breath is now extremely slow. Her lips are cracked and dry. The silence in-between each breath is deafening. Finally, a long breath is drawn in, and then an extremely long exhale out as the last of the air leaves her lungs. This sound melds with the sound of the wind, becoming one.

20 EXT. SIDE OF A DUNE - SUNRISE 20

The morning sun mixes with the blue shadows cast by the dune. The wind whips at the crest of the dune and sprays sand forward into the air. The sound of the wind is constant.

21 EXT. PUDDLE IN THE DESERT - SUNRISE 21

The flat surface of a puddle is chopped into waves by the wind. When the breeze has passed through, the water settles.

22 EXT. MIDDLE OF THE SALT FLAT - SUNRISE 22

Warm light falls across the salt flat. The wind blows, picking up loose ashes and carrying them to the spot where the mattress was burning.

It's now a black patch, with nothing but a few warped wires. The woman lays in the middle of the charred earth, as she was laying next to the old woman.

She rolls over onto her back.

The boy has been watching from afar. He cautiously approaches.

BOY  
I shouldn't have done that.

The woman looks upside down at him. She pats the ground next to her.

BOY (CONT'D)  
What?

She pats the ground again.

BOY (CONT'D)  
What?

She points up. Wisps of clouds streak across the sky, all painted in brilliant morning colours.

The boy comes closer and looks up, trying to see what she sees.

The sun falls on her face, radiating a golden colour. She breathes in deeply.

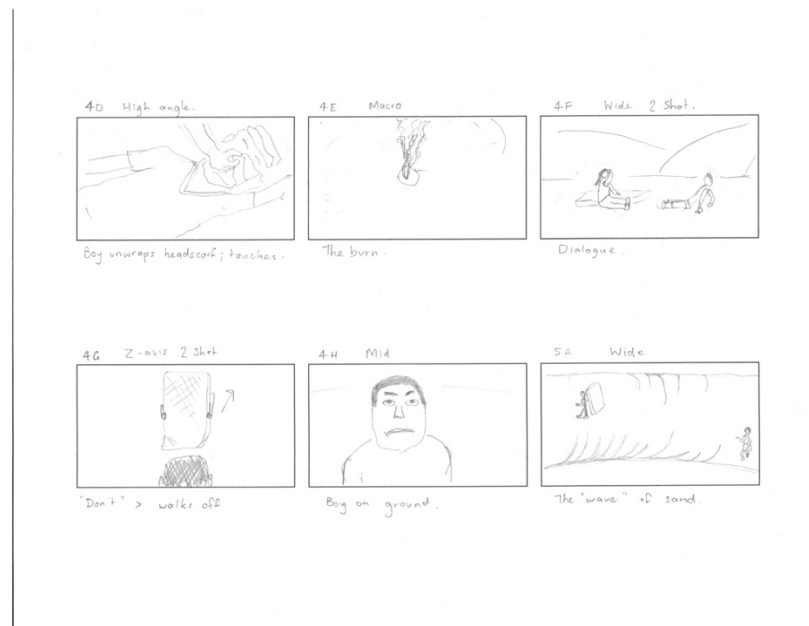
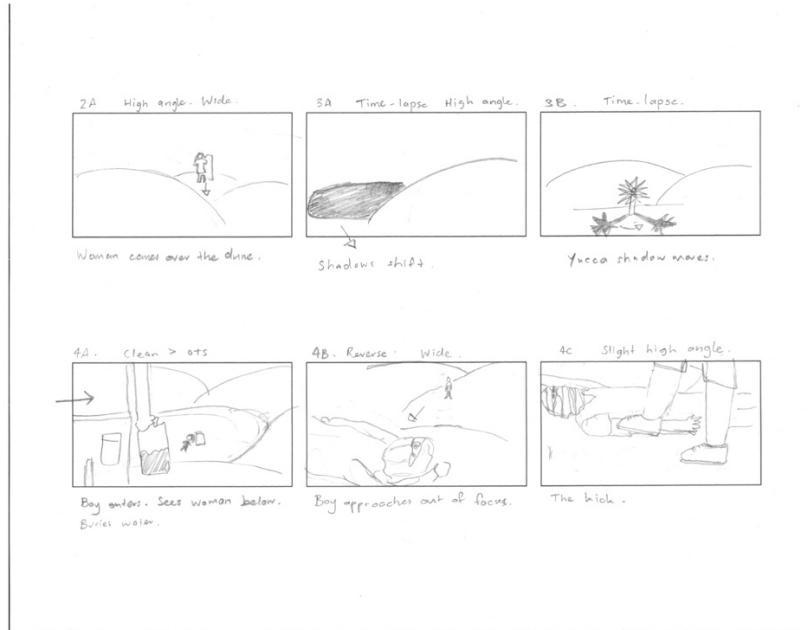
WOMAN  
Here.

She again pats the ground next to her. The boy is wary of her offer.

WOMAN (CONT'D)  
Come on.

The boy lays down next to the woman and they both look up. They just lay there. The woman is calm. She closes her eyes and feels the golden rays of the sun.

## Appendix B: Storyboards





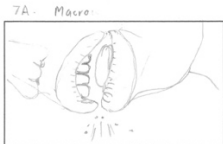
Boy peeps over crest.



Woman stumbling forward.



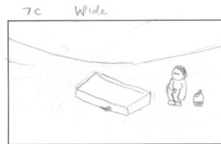
Woman tiffs, boy runs to help.



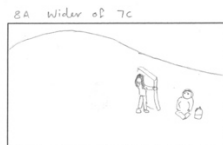
Woman breathing - moves sand.



Jug is shoved in front of woman's face.



Hopeless Boy.



Woman stirs..



"What's out that way?"



Endless dunes.



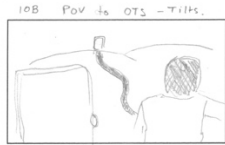
Ways to die..



The figures.



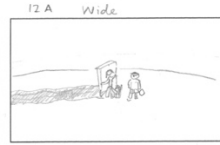
Discerning the tracks.



They see the figure in the distance.



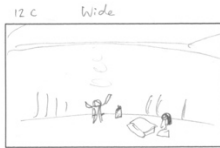
High / Low dune.



Tracks run out. They stop.



Woman and boy roll down. Pieces of them.



Boy reaches the bottom.



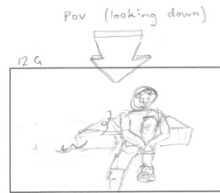
Boy's celebration. Jumps on Mattress.



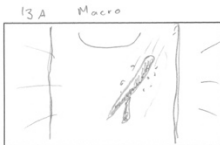
Woman's reaction.



Pulls boy off mattress.



Follow boy?



Boy's cut.



Nurses wounds. Woman walks into shot (carrying jug).



Dialogue.



Woman picks boy up off the ground.



Boy watches woman struggle.



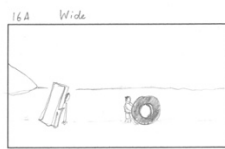
Boy reacts to woman.



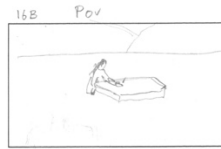
'We're getting sunbathers'



Salt flats.



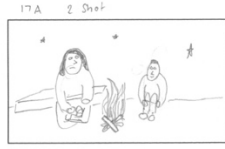
The fire scene



Woman returns to mattress



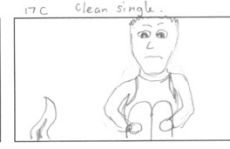
Boy kicks at the ground.



Fire scene.



Woman



Boy

WITNESS SCENE, SCENE 18A-18C

18 B Wide High Angle

The boy watches the woman. He drags the mattress away and comes back for a burning stick.

18C CU x TILTS DOWN

Boy watches ember, contemplates.

TILT DOWN

Cont'd.

Smoke starts. Flicker of flames across the boy's face.

18D Medium Tilts up

Woman sleeps as smoke drifts in. Coughs. Wakes up.

18E POV Wide

Boy stands in front of burning/smoking mattress.

Next Page

WITNESS SCENE, SCENE 18D-18F

Cont'd.

Woman runs into shot (runs into her own POV) and shoves the boy out of the way.

18F M CU

Woman shoves boy out of the way.

TILT DOWN

Woman tries to flip the mattress over, but it's too hot.

Boy comes in and pulls her back.

18G Wide Profile

Boy pulls woman back from what is now a column of smoke.

Woman breaks free and runs into smoke.

19A M CU Inserts

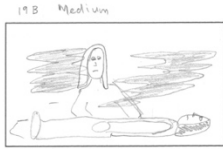
Woman searches for the mattress. Feels the ground.

Woman discovers edge of bed, then mother.





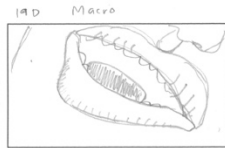
Boy contemplates.



Woman draws smoke.



Woman lying beside mother.



Mother's breath.



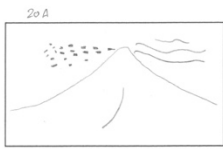
Whispering permission.



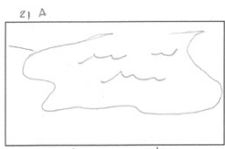
Brushing hair.



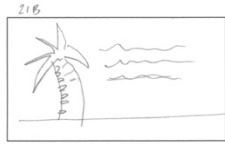
Mother draws last breath.



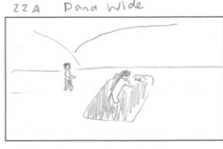
Wind on dune.



Wind on puddle.



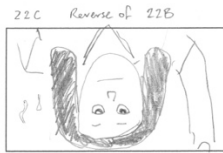
Wind on yucca.



Ashes > Woman lying in char.



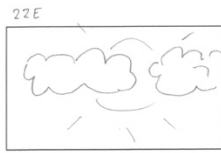
Boy approaches.



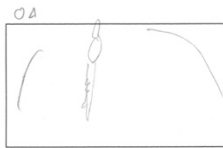
Woman talks to boy



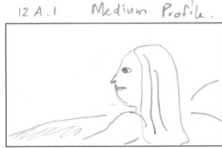
Woman and boy look up.



Glorious sunrise.



Dances man.



↑ Behind the axis.



↓

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