



## SUSAN JANE GILMAN with Susan Marque

by Susan Marque

It was a wonderful morning treat talking with Susan Jane Gilman about her most recent memoir *Undress Me in the Temple of Heaven*. She, a native New Yorker who is living in Geneva, Switzerland, and I, a recent transplant to New York from L.A., met on Skype to connect about travel, writing, and life.

**Susan Marque (Rail):** Susan, I love your writing. I could relate to so much of the book and I feel like I know you and went on this journey with you.

**Susan Jane Gilman:** Thank you. That was something I was not expecting. If you write about something people become very vulnerable to you and I wasn't aware of the enormous responsibility. I bared a lot of myself. I never tried to make myself look good. I think because of what I have to say, other people can relate to it. I get emails every day and I wonder how they know all of this about me and then I think, schmuck, you wrote a book.

**Rail:** Where did you grow up?

**Gilman:** I grew up on the Upper West Side. It's changed a lot. Back then it was mostly Hispanic, and empty lots and junkies. We were Jewish but I went to Presbyterian school.

**Rail:** It says on your website that you are afraid of clowns and puppets. Was there a clown or puppet incident, or were you just born afraid?

**Gilman:** There is something grotesque about them and that is what makes me afraid. And that they are forcing funny.

**Rail:** What is your next project?

**Gilman:** A novel. I feel done with reality for a while and am going to retreat into fantasy. That's all I can say for now.

**Rail:** How did you get your first book published?

**Gilman:** I expected I would sell my first novel by 21 and become wildly successful, or that I would write a book, my father would buy three copies, and I'd die penniless. I did write a book of short stories and my agent took it around. The editors liked my writing and said, "Where is her novel? Short stories are not really selling right now, we want to see her novel."

My great American novel just wasn't working at that time. It was coming out like wet cardboard. I had a feminist humor column where I was giving out practical advice and I was living with a guy at the time, and realized that I didn't want to marry him. Someone had just sent me a copy of *The Rules* and I'm sure you've heard of it. A book about your hymen for a diamond. I thought someone should write a book about friendship and beauty, and it became a Cinderella story. An editor loved it and wanted me to give it to her. She gave it to five other women who also all loved it. I went to the meeting and walked out with a book deal. It took me 17 years.

*Kiss My Tiara: How to Rule the World as a Smart Mouth Goddess* is now in its eighth printing and is an Amazon best seller. Things took off from there.

You still have to sit down and write. The hustle and the struggle of writing, that is what it all comes down to and that doesn't get any easier.

**Rail:** How did your mentors elevate your writing?

**Gilman:** Oh! Well, Frank McCourt was my high school English teacher. You might have heard of him, he wrote a little book called *Angela's Ashes*. I always knew I was going to be a writer. I submitted work to him in creative writing class and he would say, "Oh Miss Gilman: you have a gift." I sent in one of my poems to a paper and I got published at 16. He would submit my work without telling me to poetry contests. He would say, "When you get to college, don't let them silence you. Keep writing." I got addicted to pleasing my teacher. He had faith in me.

I did my M.F.A. at the University of Michigan. They were really teaching me the nuts and bolts of craft. There was one professor, Rosalind Brown, who gave me really brutally honest criticism. It broke down my pretenses and got me writing in ways I had not before. If you do it well it looks effortless and looks like you were hit by a lightning bolt. I really learned the craft of writing there.

**Rail:** You mentioned at the end of *Undress Me in the Temple of Heaven* how China changed in the 20 years between visits. How has travel changed for you?

**Gilman:** HUGE. Two things have changed—one is technology and the other is me. With technology, I can now be in the desert and call my dad on my cell phone. I've been in China booking hotels for the next day on the Internet. I just came back from South America where I can Google the hotel and do the 360-degree virtual tour, and know what the place will look like. Unless I was in North Korea,

parts of Africa, certain altitudes, or Siberia, there is no place you can go where you don't have access to contact people instantly. A friend texts me with a boyfriend crisis in 2005 and I can call her directly. In '86 I would have had to wait, hand in my passport, and fill out papers. There is now this level of information, connectivity, and familiarity that just wasn't there.

It has taken some of the mystery out of travel.

I have changed the way I travel. I used to think it was great to get a room for \$2 a night in Bangkok. I don't find the glamour in sharing a toilet with backpackers anymore. I want to get a good night's sleep. I worry if I think the room is going to be noisy. I've become a big pampered wus. Travel is unnerving.

**Rail:** How is that? What makes it unnerving?

**Gilman:** Because I am a writer and I have a perpetual imagination. I'm the *what if* girl. What if we get stranded? What if the plane crashes in the jungle? What if there is a fire? I can imagine just about anything; no situation is too preposterous.

**Rail:** How did this book become your third?

**Gilman:** I put off writing the book because it isn't a story I'm particularly proud of. We behaved badly and bad things happened to us. I thought I would turn it into a novel. Then there was this trend happening with books about divorce and running away to these other countries for personal self-help. There was this idea that the world is there for our own personal entertainment or make over. I wanted to tell how travel isn't about us Americans conquering another country, but surrendering. There has been a trend towards a kind of travel porn. There is the travel channel and books depicting finding one's self and no one was writing what it means, what it is, to be a stranger in a strange land.

I thought, I am from New York. The whole world is there, how different can it be? I thought it was important to tell a story where she (the heroine) goes and has her ego handed to her.

**Rail:** What would be your top tips for travelers today?

**Gilman:** Do your homework. We've had people come to visit us here in Geneva and they haven't even looked at a map. They don't know where they are or what is around them. Look at a map. Read a little about the culture and the history to have an idea of the place.

Learn two words: Please and thank you.

Travel more intelligently than I did when I went to China the first time.

Don't go with expectations. Let go of the stereotypes. We expect every country to be like America. Be open. In '86 we were going to show how hardcore we were going to be. Throw that out the window and let the experience carry you. It is a very difficult thing to do. It is sort of a let go and not let go. It gets easier. You accumulate enough experience that you start to know that you know how to handle things.

**Rail:** Did the "Claire" experience change the way you created friendships or did it change your experience of others or did you just chalk it up to one of those odd things that happens in life?

**Gilman:** It changed the way I felt I could handle anything. It absolutely did not change how I saw people or created friends. I really thought that what happened to her was my fault. I was difficult to travel with or I was spending too much time flirting. We had just come from an Ivy League school environment where everything is skewed. I had no baseline of reality to compare it to. Nothing stable. No bottom. How do you know the person beside you?

**Rail:** I seem to always go back to food. What is your favorite food?

**Gilman:** Breyers mint chip. Ice cream is like sex; even when it's bad, it's pretty good. Here in Geneva we have the Susan Jane Gilman: Institute for Advanced Gelato Studies. We do comparative gelato studies and are starting the journal of advanced gelato studies. All are welcome.

**Rail:** Any last words?

**Gilman:** Stay literate, buy books.

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Susan Jane Gilman is the author of three nonfiction books: *Undress Me in the Temple of Heaven*, *Hypocrite in a Pouffy White Dress*, and *Kiss My Tiara*.

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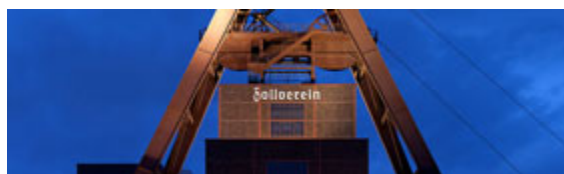
## **CONTRIBUTOR**

### **Susan Marque**

*SUSAN MARQUE is an M.F.A. student at the New School. She is working on a memoir.*

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## **RECOMMENDED ARTICLES**



# WHEN ATTITUDE BECOMES A FOUNDATION

*“Making the Impossible Possible” in North Rhine-  
Westphalia and—for a Few Days in  
July—New York City*

by Thyrza Nichols Goodeve

**JUL-AUG 2015 | ART**

*Nowhere is the myopic New York-centrism that Saul Steinberg so famously captured in his March 29, 1976 cover of the New Yorker as ubiquitous as it is in the art world. Although international travel is a given for most art professionals, in 2015 the art-infested boroughs of New York City, branching out from Soho to Chelsea, to Williamsburg, Long Island City, and Bushwick, with museums expanding in ways both depressing (MoMA) and exhilarating (the Whitney), it is hard not to continue to call New York the center of the art world.*



# CARL BOUTARD *Life is Elsewhere*

by Jonathan Goodman

**APR 2016 | ARTSEEN**

*Swedish-born, Berlin-based sculptor Carl Boutard is currently living in New York City on a residency at the International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP). His exhibition, *Life is Elsewhere*, installed in the long, somewhat narrow space of TURN Gallery, consists of eight sculptures made from paper and cardboard, rather than the bronze and wood he usually works with for both indoor sculpture and outdoor projects.*



# BECKY HOWLAND: *Weeds of New York*

by Chloe Rossetti

**MAR 2016 | ARTSEEN**

*MOIETY gallery, an inviting first-floor space in a long-time artist-owned building opposite McCarren Park, dwarfed by the McCarren Hotel—that almighty glass gentrifier—and a neighborhood bar, is seemingly the perfect space to host a meditation on gentrification, weeds, the secret life of parks, defiance, and survival. Howland, a former member and one-time president of Colab (Collaborative Projects, Inc.), has lived in New York for several*

*decades, seemingly spending them defying or thinking around the onslaught of real estate development.*

# *Towards a Foothold in New York*

*by Elizabeth C. Baker*

**NOV 2016 | CRITICS PAGE**

*Absolutely nothing: that's how much I knew about the art world when I left graduate school (Ph.D. unfinished) in the early 1960s and moved from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to New York.*

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