

GRACE AND GRAVITY

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NEWS

"PLEASANT PEOPLE" BY PAMELA WOOLFORD

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Photo by Bridget Turner

Pamela Woolford is an interdisciplinary artist and keynote speaker, intertwining her work as a writer, filmmaker, performer, and immersive-media director to create new forms of narrative work about Black women and girls and others whose joy, imagination, and inner life are under-explored in American media and popular art. She is the recipient of six Maryland State Arts Council Awards, five film-festival awards internationally, a Changemaker Challenge Award from United Way of Central Maryland and Horizon Foundation, an aSHE Fund Micro-Grant, and a Baker Artist Award in interdisciplinary arts. Her latest film, *Interrupted: Prologue to a Mem-noir*, had a limited online release with a premiere event attended by 1.5 thousand people.

She is the author of more than 100 memoir, fiction, profile, human-interest, and think pieces published in *The Baltimore Sun*, *Poets & Writers Magazine*, NAACP's *Crisis Magazine*, Harvard University's *Transition*, and other publications. Her writings have been selected for anthologies, translated into

German, and widely cited. She has been awarded a Storyknife Writers Residency, a NES Artist Residency, and an Official Citation from the Maryland House of Delegates and has been a Bisson Lecturer in the Humanities at Marymount University. As well, she has received numerous other literary honors, including a Pushcart Prize nomination for the story republished here, "Pleasant People."

Her upcoming virtual-reality show *Up/Rooted: Pamela Woolford's Cabin Windows* premieres in 2022 at a four-month solo show of her work at Joan Hisaoka Healing Arts Gallery in Washington, DC. To find out more about Woolford and her art, visit pamelawoolford.com.

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Woolford is a member of Sundance Co//ab, Brown Girls Doc Mafia, CRAFT Institute, Women of Color Unite, The Gotham, and Women Writers of Color.

Alejandro Irizarry is a TV and film screenwriter from Caguas, Puerto Rico. He recently made his directing debut with his capstone short film, *God Knows*, made with American University's District Cinema Society. He's currently reworking the pilot script for his crime drama *Double Vision*, about corruption in the Drug Enforcement Administration the first draft of which made it to the quarter finals of the Austin Film Festival Screenplay Contest. He's also researching a nonfiction book investigating real life corruption in DEA.

INTRODUCTION TO "PLEASANT PEOPLE"

BY ALEJANDRO IRIZARRY

In interdisciplinary artist Pamela Woolford's work, memory frequently takes center stage. In her story "Pleasant People," memory is tucked away and even reveals misunderstandings between characters. But memory is what we have. As Woolford alludes to in conversation and speeches, reality escapes humanity's grasp because our memories are always there, tinting the present. In "Pleasant People," Woolford explores memory.

Woolford's been a presence in the DMV literary scene for decades. After living in Manhattan for two years, Woolford returned to her home of Columbia, Maryland in the early '90s and started *Jambalaya Magazine* alongside Paula Richardson, Carolyn Greer, and Kristen Radden. *Jambalaya Magazine* and the subsequent Maryland Jambalaya-Fest spotlighted the diversity of people of African descent, especially in the Howard County community, where Columbia, Maryland is located. Outside of her own art, Woolford has helped raise millions of dollars for cultural and community enrichment programs through her work in development, PR, and marketing for museums, as well as work in arts and nonprofit administration. She promotes Black voices through her work in the most complete sense of the word.

Since *Jambalaya's* shuttering in 1997, Woolford has truly earned her multidisciplinary artist title. She's written for the *Baltimore Sun* as a correspondent, and her work has been widely cited in academic texts. She has performed as a dancer both solo and in group, practicing several forms, done voice acting, written essays, modeled for photography, done screenwriting, made films, choreographed, written poetry, written and directed an upcoming multi-genre virtual reality experience, written an upcoming memoir, and of course authored short fiction. All contribute to rounding out her expansive portfolio of work.

Hearing Woolford talk it's clear she's an artist who thinks a lot about memory. For each one of her projects, she's acutely aware of the building blocks in her life that's molded her work. Spoiler alert: in case you want to read "Pleasant People" before being told elements purposely not revealed upfront in the story, I am going to discuss those things now.

In "Pleasant People," Woolford uses memory to expose the delta between different interpretations of reality through two contrasting first-person narrators: Arianna, who is Black, has witnessed the death of her family's white house cleaner, Mrs. Wilson, who speaks after her death, reflecting on what she thought of her time alive. Together these characters showcase how memory works for us and how it fails us.

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Woolford twists the stereotypical racial depiction of this sort of situation, a house cleaner working in a well-to-do family's home. Here the family is Black while the house cleaner is white. The simple reversal of that employment dynamic alone pushes back against the limits placed on Black characters by historically white writing and publishing spaces.

Woolford stays close to the characters to truly inhabit their minds so that everything could be put in the full context of the characters in "Pleasant People."

Both of the lead characters are equally real. Neither Arianna nor Mrs. Wilson could tap into the other's mind to read each other's intentions, so the best they could do is filter everything around them through their memories, the foundation that forms how they read the world. Their respective races and the resulting life experiences brought about by their races are key to this filtering, even if Mrs. Wilson never outright acknowledges it as Arianna does.

Pamela Woolford
Pleasant People

PAMELA WOOLFORD is a recipient of a Maryland State Arts Council award for screenwriting and has published nonfiction and poetry. “Pleasant People” is her first published work of fiction. A former correspondent for the *Baltimore Sun*, she has written numerous articles for the newspaper and has been published in *Transition: An International Review*, *Poets and Writers Magazine*, and the *Crisis* magazine among other publications. She lives in Columbia, Maryland.

I’m back there again. I’m in the house. It’s warm. Pleasant, the way I like it. I’ve just had that satisfying meal, and I’m content because it’s spring and I’m on break and I’m home.

And then the scream, the shrill. I run to her. I remember the running. I just remember the running, which is odd because I couldn’t have run more than a few paces before I reached the door. And that’s where the memory stops.

But I’m not sure I see the point in pushing it. All of them seem to say the same thing—the counselors or therapists or whatever—that I should try. But I think there’s a reason I don’t remember what happened, and I’m not sure I want to know the reason.

Even the police wished I could remember when they asked me about it that day. They *kept* asking, which doesn’t make sense to me; they seemed to know what had happened; they were the ones telling me. And I don’t doubt anything that they said. I mean, it’s not that I think they’re trustworthy. It’s just that it makes sense. It’s what I *would* do, so I guess I did.

They say I saw her lying there, or struggling, I guess, if she was still alive. That could be why I don’t remember: that would be a morbid sight. But the doctor seemed to think she would have been dead before I got there, even if I ran quickly. He said it was almost instantaneous, which I’m glad of, of course. He said, “gone just like that.”

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“She would have been gone just like that,” he said.

I remember thinking, “What a funny way to put it: ‘gone.’” I felt removed from it all because I barely knew her.

And when I think about it now, the way I felt just before everything changed, before the scream, and I was feeling so... What’s the word? It was like a calm drifting feeling. I was so carefree it was like I was floating.

Earlier, after lying in the sun on the deck, I had taken my mom’s Prius down the road to get takeout from the cafe at the Lakeside Inn. I had just had the last morsel of yam noodles with braised vegetables in brown almondine sauce. It makes me feel guilty. I suppose I was happier than her in life. Nobody’s happy cleaning homes, I imagine. No, I guess that’s a stupid thing to say. I suppose there are people who would be happy to have a job cleaning a nice house. There are much worse things. That was a stupid thing to say. She was unhappy, it appeared to me, but I have no reason to believe it had anything to do with cleaning homes. I just mean, if something is not quite right with you or your life, I guess it would make it all the more difficult to clean up after other perfectly capable grown-ups. I mean, I think about her. I think about what I knew of her, what little I knew, since all of this happened. She seemed pleasant enough, but she didn’t seem happy. I had seen her once a week for almost a year before I left for college, and I never thought about that solemn way about her until after all of this, after she’s dead.

It seems weird to say somebody you knew is dead, I mean, even if I just knew her a little. I wish this hadn’t happened because it leaves me nervous. It’s hard enough to worry about school and getting my internship and now I just feel all sick about the fact that this happened, even though there’s nothing I can do about it. It’s just that I’ve never heard anything like that shrill before. I can’t believe she died at my house.

You know, she never said much. Once, she wished me happy birthday, and I thought that was sweet. She had seen the birthday cards on the counter. She said, “How old are you now?”

“Nineteen?” I said it like a question because it took me by surprise that she was asking. I didn’t know why she was asking, because she never talked to me except to ask what time my parents would be home if she were to be paid that day and they were out.

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I wanted to ask how old *she* was, but I thought that wouldn't be polite. She seemed older, in her forties or something, but she seemed all alone, so maybe she wasn't quite that old. I don't know. I mean, she didn't seem like she had children or a husband or anything. Now, don't think this is racist, but I think I couldn't tell how old she was because she was white. I think sometimes—and I think it's just because they have different skin and they age differently—they seem older. She was quite pretty though. If she were happier, she would have been pretty, but you couldn't really tell because she was so blah all the time. But I guess, maybe, she was happier around other people. Maybe she just wasn't happy at work.

One time she told me she didn't like Champagne. "I don't like it," she said and pointed to the bottle. I imagine she was a little jealous. Who doesn't like Champagne? I looked over at her for a second when she said that because she so rarely spoke. After, I just went back to what I was doing. She was a little weird, I think.

Still, it's hard to see someone lying there dead at your parents' while you're on break. It was a lousy vacation. And I felt so good just before. I wish she hadn't died like that, that shelf falling on her. She was a nice lady. She seemed nice.

ARIANNA WASN'T TALKATIVE, so I never bothered her much because she seemed a little shy around me. I'm not one to pull people out of their shell. I leave people alone. I could see she worked hard at school though. Such a smart girl. She had many friends, too, which was nice for her and her parents. It's always good to know that your children are well liked. It means they'll do well in life. My mother used to say that. "Looks like you know so many of the other students at school," she'd say when I was in junior high, just after she and I moved in with Aunt Matilda in Centerton. "That's a good sign." I was friends with Brenda, who lived next door and introduced me to everybody. We soon grew apart, but Brenda married a man who owned several hardware stores, and we were friends in junior high.

I could see Arianna could do well in life. The Andersons were pleasant people, and I liked working there once a week. The pay made a difference. My mother's medicines had become so expensive, so it helped. Everything was so tight after Bill and I divorced. I had to get my own apartment and pay full, not just part anymore, and soon Momma moved in with me. Even if I could've had children, I imagine

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it was best that I never did. I ended up working so much, though working for the Andersons still left me with one day off a week from the magazine and newspaper shop. Assistant-managing the news store was good retail work; being downtown in the lobby of the Cardwell Building, we were closed on weekends, so I could do the second job on Saturdays. I like being busy. I'm like my mother in that way. She used to work double shifts when she could when I was coming up.

I wonder what Momma will do now? I suppose she's in a nursing home somewhere now that I'm gone. That was always an option I didn't want, but I do hope she's there now. I can't see her caring for herself all alone—though she did well to be in her nineties—and my older brother wasn't really in a position to help. He was old himself. Momma had us well apart, which, it seems, was good for her since I was only yet in my fifties when she really needed me these last years. I was still young enough to help her to stay independent awhile longer.

Arianna used to look at me in a quizzical way sometimes. She was still figuring out life. She wasn't very mature, but she was a nice young woman, pleasant. She didn't appear to get in any trouble, and she was well spoken. Her parents could be proud of her. They were decent people. The man was a man of God, a minister and a community leader of some sort. I noticed people in that community, you know, their community, looked up to him. And the wife was a medical doctor of some sort. I never asked what kind.

I did wonder why they only had one child. That house was so beautiful—I was shocked the first day I worked there—but it was so grand for just the three of them. They weren't tidy people, but they were clean. Such a proud family. And the parents spoke so well, too, not just the daughter. They were very intelligent. Hard-working people. I was surprised: the man played golf, and the daughter apparently did well in tennis. I believe she played in high school. As they say, I don't take anything from them. It's nice to see those people doing so well.

I KEEP RELIVING IT. HER cry was so brief and piercing. Like a fox. It's sad. She must've seen the shelf coming at her. I guess the edge of the marble hit her head. I'm glad I don't remember seeing her lying there.

There must not have been a portable phone in the upstairs den where it happened because I called from my bedroom. I don't even remember what I said to the people on the emergency line, but I remember standing there.

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That's where the memory picks up again, me standing there, on the phone, but I can't remember saying anything.

That last counselor, the one from school, said I'm still in shock, but I don't think I am. I just don't remember.

Arianna was a funny child. She spent so much time on her hair. And it always looked so earthy and curly when she was done, not like she'd spent time on it at all. It was a pretty head of hair though. I liked the way she wore it like that. Perhaps she was self-conscious—always fussing with herself, prettying herself—but she should be proud of her attractive dark skin and her look. She shouldn't be ashamed. I think she was a nice-looking girl. I tried to show her that it's OK not to be glamorous and it's OK not to like things like Champagne. I think she was trying to fit in. I understand there weren't many blacks at her high school. But it's good she went to college. I thought she might. She seemed like such a smart girl.

I USED TO WONDER ABOUT her sometimes. I guess that's why I think about her so much now. And what happened, of course, keeps me thinking. I don't think I need counseling help, frankly, which I know is something someone who needs help would say. But what are they helping me with?

I'm just tired.

The thing about reaching the door, running to that door and then I'm there, is that I turn the knob in slow motion when I remember. I'm not sure if I turned it slowly in real life—like I knew something really bad just happened and I was scared to know—or if I just turn it that way when I remember—like I'm scared to remember more than that—but I can see my hand on the knob. My hand is dark against the bright gold that my coral palms are cupping, and I turn, but I never get to the metallic click of when the door opens. I never get the door open.

ARIANNA MUST HAVE BEEN FRIGHTENED when it happened. I believe—and I know this sounds unusual—but I believe I knew what was going to happen in some sense, just before my skull was hit. I do believe I knew I was going to die, but I knew in some immediate sense: I didn't think of the big picture of my momma and those that would miss me, rather I thought of the fact that Arianna was right there down the

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hall, and I thought, "I'm glad I shut the door" (the vacuum cleaner, I didn't want to disturb her if she were studying), as if that door would block her from seeing it all just after.

I thought to cry out. It must've been less than a second before I was gone when I saw what was to come, could see it happening. And there was no time to save myself, not enough time to lift my arms to break the impact of the shelf or cover my head, not enough time to think, leastwise move, but I do suppose—I know it now—that we have knowledge quicker, sometimes, than we have thoughts, and I knew what was going to happen, could see it in some sense, and this knowing was so quick that there was no time for it to push my wishes beyond the most immediate: that Arianna should not see. So I cried out, to warn her.

The cry was to tell her, "This is bad. Don't come in. Just don't come in and see this before you're ready.

"Don't come in."

SHE USED TO LOOK AT me in a way sometimes that I didn't know what she was thinking, but it made me wonder. I didn't always like being home when she was cleaning because, I guess, she probably figured I should be doing that work. If she were black I probably wouldn't have been so paranoid, but white people seem like they're judgmental, I mean older white people. She seemed like she tried to act in a good mood though—even though she didn't talk—smiling approvingly at me sometimes. She always tried to be pleasant. I mean, I don't care if some white person thinks I'm lazy, but I don't want them cleaning my house and thinking it. And I don't want them looking at me condescendingly—not that she did. I'm just saying, I don't know what she was thinking. I liked her though. I never wished her anything bad. I might have wanted her not to be there when I was on break, but she was nice and I really, really wish this horrible thing hadn't happened. I really wish it would not have happened. I wish I never opened that door. I don't remember opening the door, but I know I did because when the police came in my room and looked at me holding that phone, and then I thought, "They were just yelling from downstairs. That must've been who was yelling, 'Hello? Hello?' just now, but I couldn't answer." They could probably see me, or part of me, from the foyer and rushed up the stairs because I could hear them yelling, "Hello?

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Did you call 911?” as they came up. They walked in the room, and I was still holding the phone, and then one of them saw the open den door and looked in and said, “My God.”

I FEEL DRAINED, EVEN NOW. Knowing I'm dead wears at me. I think of Momma and my brother Henry and his ex-wife and children, who barely speak to him anymore; and Bill, I even think of Bill; and my friend Janet Marie. Who will go to Sunday all-you-can-eat at the Chinese with Janet Marie? And who will give Charles, that friendly security guard in the Cardwell Building, a nice tip at Christmas, which he always appreciates?

Who will visit Momma? Will Henry? He barely visited when I was alive.

And Arianna, that young girl at the house I cleaned. I wish I had spoken to Arianna more than I did.

I've left unfinished business. And yet, I guess we all go when it's time.

Maybe there's a reason you know a moment before you die. That last thought links you to something on this Earth. It's quick so you don't think of what your answer to the question "What's important to you?" is. You think of what you're doing in that moment and your immediate surroundings, no matter if you know how you're truly connected to that—the moment and the surroundings—or not. You're connected. There's a link, and it stays with you.

I hope I did well in life. I believe I did.

THERE'S A REASON THAT I DON'T REMEMBER. Something told me that it was so bad in there. It's like I wiped the memory of what I was to see from my mind before I turned the knob, before the click. It's like that scream of hers triggered something in me, and I didn't want to open that door, but I knew I had to, so I told myself to just do it and don't think about it.

Oh, I forgot I had felt that way. It was a weird feeling. I don't even know if I'd call it a feeling; I felt so blank.

I remember I felt that way, and I held the cool knob in my hand, and I turned, the metal clicking as I pushed the door open. She was lying there, just as still as anything, as still as that moment is now in my mind, the blood spreading from that God-awful gash, the shelf crushing her face. I do remember now. She *was* dead. I went and picked up the phone in my room and dialed.

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“Nine one one—what is your emergency?” the man said. “What is your emergency?”

I spoke to him. I told him to send the police, that Mrs. Wilson was surely dead. I knew that this woman in our house—in my home so much and I barely knew her—was dead.

Wow. I’m glad I remember now that I saw her lying there. It was morbid, but it makes me think about how she was; it’s like she wasn’t that dead body lying there at all. I *knew* she was dead. I can’t explain, but it was like there was no warmth to her and no fight to her if you know what I’m saying, I mean, she wasn’t there. It wasn’t her. It was like that body wasn’t her. It wasn’t Mrs. Wilson anymore, but just her shell lying there.

And I could feel an emptiness in the room.

It makes me think about the way Mrs. Wilson was. She had a nice way about her. I think it would have been nice to talk to her more. I guess there was some link between her and me, something like that. I just want to remember that she was there and never did anything but look at me nice. I guess that’s saying something. But I bet there was a lot more to her than that. I imagine there was.

To learn more about Pamela Woolford's work, visit
her [website](#).

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