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There's a scene in the middle of season two of *Louie* when Louis C.K. is walking through a flea market with Pamela (played by the wonderful Pamela Adlon), his off-again/off-again love interest, a woman who, by that time, has spent a significant portion of the show's 18 episodes telling our hero how unattracted she is to him. Louie has its share of squirm-worthy moments, but nothing quite equals this one when C.K., undeterred by Pamela's pleas for him to stop, bulls his way through a halting monologue about how much he loves her. I found myself actually saying out loud (to nobody, I was alone), "Just stop Louie! Stop! Let it go!" But what at first appears to be a train-wreck of an emotional meltdown becomes one of the most honest, undiluted expressions of vulnerability I've ever seen on a screen. When it was over, I found myself thinking, "I don't understand. Why can't other TV shows *just do that*?" It wasn't until much later that the answer came to me.

To paraphrase HBO, *Louie* isn't TV. It's literature.

This is not an argument meant to rationalize my enjoyment of a TV show. Cultural highbrows have been denigrating television for years -- often with good reason -- as an inferior medium, one that lends itself to easily recognizable emotions and tidily resolved storylines. Much of that perception has changed, largely because of what HBO started and others (including HBO) have continued. The notion of "quality television" has come a long way since *The Golden Girls* and *L.A. Law* represented the best the boob tube could offer. I now have friends who rarely to go to the movies. "TV is better," they say.

And still, as much as I love *Mad Men*, for as complexly drawn as Don Draper is, I never forget I'm watching TV. On *Mad Men*, I am aware that one of the main reasons the characters exist is to keep me looking toward next week, or, as was the case with the show's ludicrous hiatus between seasons four and five, next year. There are no comedy parallels either. For all the comic bravado of Larry David who, like Louie, plays a fictional version of himself, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* feels like a contrived vehicle for David's peculiarities. A hilarious, spit-out-your-cornflakes vehicle (I laugh far harder and more often at *Curb* than I do at *Louie*), but a vehicle nonetheless. I'm coming back next week because I simply must see what Larry will do next.

You get the feeling C.K. doesn't care if I come back, as long as I'm totally invested in whatever he's showing me at that moment. Sometimes the moment is the torturously beautiful declaration of love to Pamela, an almost embarrassing, nakedness of feeling reminiscent of a Shakespearean sonnet, or *La Vita Nuova*. C.K.'s language - sample line: "I don't have enough time in any day to think about you enough" -- is far more shocking, and moving, than the ultimately inevitable development in the story arc of Louie and Pamela's inequitable relationship.

Then there are episodes of *Louie* that feel far closer to an avant-garde short story than a weekly television show, rife with absurdist detours that send the viewer spiraling down an almost Kafka-esque tunnel of disorientation. And not just because C.K. purposely eschews (with very few exceptions) carryover plots. In "Dad," the eighth show of the current season, we see Louie thrashing through his angst over an impending visit to his estranged father. He throws up at a poker game, sprouts a rash on his neck, imagines a scolding GPS asking

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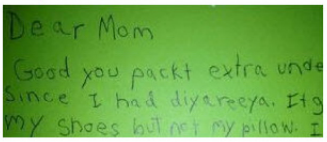

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him, "Why are you being such a little pussy about this?" And then, just as the audience is about to get its payoff, just as Louie walks up the steps onto the porch of his father's home, rings the doorbell, and a shadowy, distorted figure emerges on the other side of the tinted glass... he bolts. What follows is a manic, hard-to-fathom fleeing, a chase scene without a physical pursuer. He runs full-speed around the corner, finds (steals?) a three-wheel motorcycle which he drives through downtown Boston, comes to the waterfront where he finds (steals?) a speedboat that he races into the middle of Boston Harbor. Once there, he cuts the engine and, as the boat bobs limply, he sits, laughs, raises his arms in a gesture of triumph, and lets out a long, loud "Whoooo!"

I mean, what is this?

I am so accustomed to television's conventions that even as a fan of the show, and, understanding C.K.'s weekly desire to fuck with his audience's expectations, my first thought was: "Oh, come on Louie. Now you've gone too far." But Louie -- and *Louie* -- is always several steps ahead of me. During subsequent viewings of the scene, I saw that the payoff, though not what I expected or even thought I wanted, is there all along. It comes in the look on Louie's face just as the credits begin to roll, the immediate aftermath of his exultation. He got away, but he always has to go back. The anxiety dissipates, turns ecstatic during flight (particularly when the flight possibly involves one or more felonies). But it will always return in another form. Maybe it won't be puke or rash. But it will be something else, perhaps even more mortifying. What's worse, he's now all the way out in the middle of the harbor.

C.K. seems to be everyone's current "Funniest Person in America," an unofficial title usually bestowed by unspoken consensus (think Chris Rock in the early 2000s). But the designation now seems a limiting one for him. It's not that a stand-up comedian can't be a philosopher; the best usually are. But C.K.'s gravitas is no longer derived solely from jokes. It's common knowledge by now that C.K. does everything himself -- writes, acts, directs, edits -- on *Louie*. FX, happy for the prestige the show receives despite viewership numbers that pale next to the network's newest hit, *Anger Management*, has no say in anything he does. But he's not just using that freedom to make a "good" show, or even a funny one. He's creating a virtually new version of the form, in which plot is on an equal playing field with, and is often subservient to, language, character, ideas, randomness and whimsy. That sounds an awful lot like this:

> I am simply writing about people. I have taken man in one of his amazing victories and have tried to put it down on paper. If it takes plot to do that, then I will -- will borrow a plot from somebody. There ain't but two or three plots, you know. If -- if it takes a mood, then I will hunt around to... where somebody has portrayed that mood, and I will borrow from him... I'm writing about people. Man involved in the human dilemma, facing the problems bigger than he, whether he licks them or whether they lick him.

In other words, whatever it takes.

That was William Faulkner, speaking in 1958 as the writer-in-residence at University of Virginia. None of this means plot isn't an important component of literature (or *Louie*). But it is only one component, and shouldn't automatically be predominant. Such a de-emphasis has rarely, if ever, existed on a television show, even among the new crop of prestige programs littered throughout the cable landscape. Good literature is not always about turning to the next page; often it's about lingering on the one you're reading.

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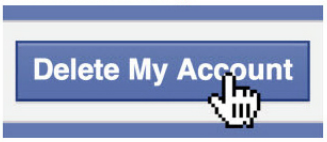

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And that's *Louie*'s greatest trick. At times, it can be a wildly entertaining, sitcom-esque joyride. But its heart is something heavier. It is a television show in which seeing what happens next is almost always trumped by the ever-shifting vagaries of the moment.

Oh, *Louie*. TV hardly deserves you.

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