

HELD BY WATER

A VISUAL TREATMENT | JENNY KLEIMAN



ABOUT

When a waterborne illness shuts down New York City, a recently traumatized woman absconds to a closed hotel in the idyllic Catskills to work with a renowned healer. But when she discovers she's pregnant, she must fight the hotel staff for her sanity, life, and child as increasingly dark cult-mentality takes over.





rosemary's baby

GENRE REFERENCES

susperia



blood on satan's claw



holy mountain



the wicker man



CLASSICS OF FOLK HORROR

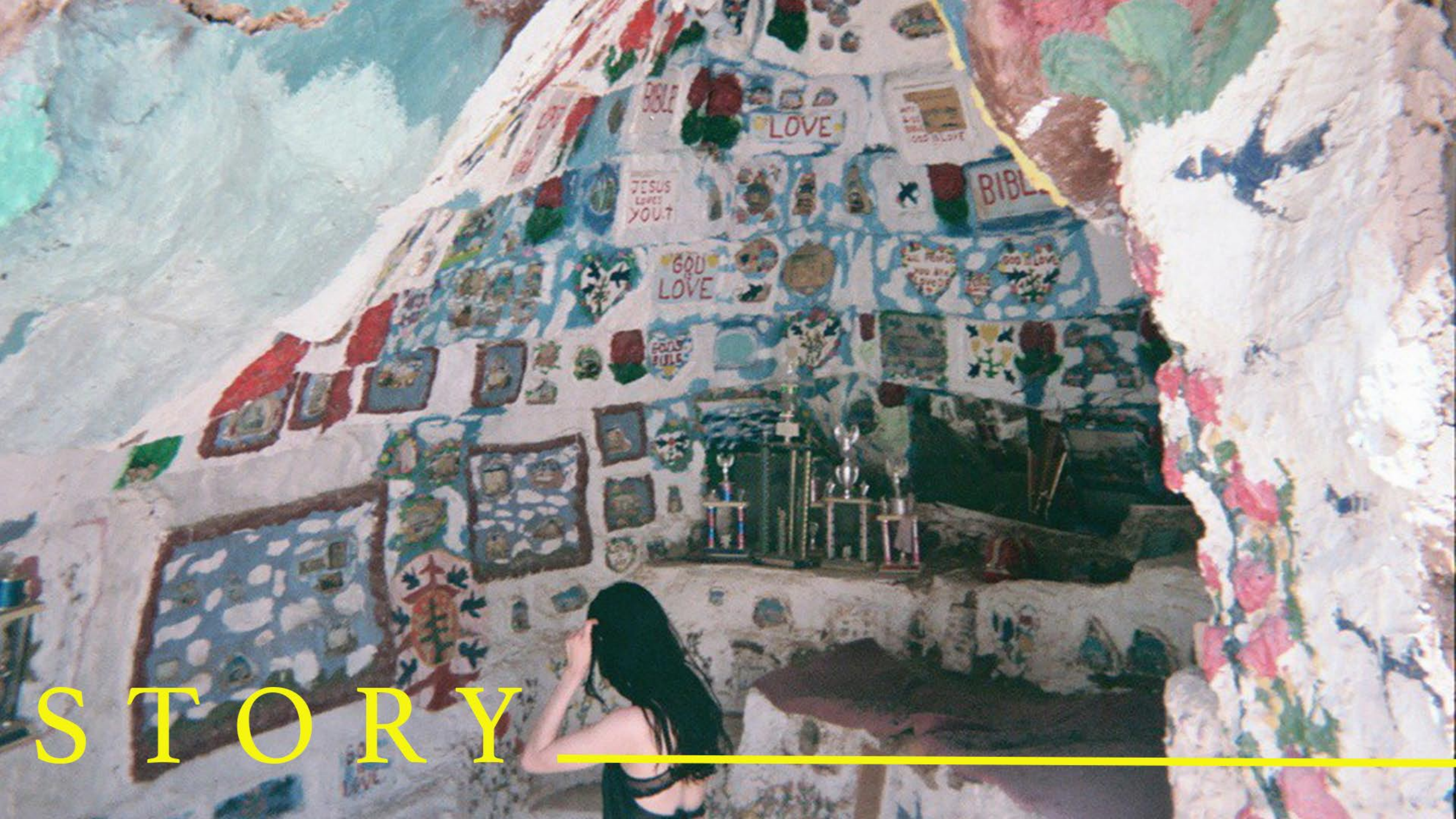


midsommar

GENRE REFERENCES

the witch





STORY

“I somehow moved to heaven while the rest of the world is being ravaged by disease.”

It's been nine months since Lilith was r*ped in a Brooklyn bar's dingy bathroom, but memory gaps have Lilith frozen in her trauma. Detached, she's floundering with no friends or family- unless you count her border collie, Samson, or her mansplaining boss at NYC's Department of Water. With the trial approaching, Lilith's lawyer recommends a therapist to help unlock the night's events, but Lilith would rather seek healing on her own terms. Yoga, clean-eating, and meditation reunites Lilith with Zara, an old friend and current apprentice to a renowned healer at an old hotel in the Catskills.

So when a waterborne illness brutalizes NYC- the culprit of citywide miscarriages, paralysis, and sudden death, it's the perfect time to take Zara up on her offer to visit.

Lilith absconds to the sprawling Mount Ida Hotel, surrounded by three waterfalls and said to have a spiritual quality (like Sedona without tourists). She's welcomed as the “protector” of the water by the nine members, each more charming and attractive than the next- and then there's Wade. A Scorpio for those who “get” astrology, Wade and Lilith have that magnetic connection only seen in movies. Further, Darlene, the esteemed healer, is as talented as Zara promised; in Lilith's first session with Darlene, she remembers a moment from her attack. But the energy work comes at a cost...

As Lilith unlocks her trauma, she physically loses time- waking up hours or sometimes days after flowing through her subconscious.

~~ACT ONE~~






Lilith works to explore the physical manifestation of healing as Wade and Lilith incorporate BDSM into their sex life. Being submissive allows Lilith to reacquaint her mind and body post-attack, but Wade and Lilith's chemistry skirts the boundary of healthy and Hedonistic: Lilith totals her car with Wade's hands down her pants. However, sexual fluidity and freedom is the atmosphere at Mount Ida, and chemistry bubbles between Lilith and Matthew, the handyman. Meanwhile, Wade flirts with Sophia to Lilith's discomfort as Sophia is the sole person at the hotel not fond of Lilith.

When Zara's boyfriend is called away from camp- his mother paralyzed by the virus- Darlene unites the family in a group meditation. Lilith achieves full memory of her attack (though ignoring a greater trauma to be unlocked) finally feeling success- and like part of the family. And so despite her misgivings, she engages with the group in an orgy.

ACT TWO







HELD BY WATER

~~ACT TWO~~ (CON'T)

Confused and self-shaming, Lilith struggles with her promiscuity- and discovers she's pregnant. Yet, the family's joy overshadows Lilith's misgivings about the baby, whom they claim is the first to be "created" in unison. It's only then that Zara lets slip that the family "chose" Lilith together to carry the child- their reunion not random in the least. Lilith realizes... she's ingratiated in a dangerous cult.

Constantly under watch by the members, Lilith drinks a tainted water sample in an abortion attempt, but both baby and she survive. During an escape attempt, Lilith is apprehended by Wade, and a squabble between the lovers results in Wade falling to his death. Hysterical, Lilith's water breaks. Despite giving birth to healthy Baby Eve in the woods, Lilith loses too much blood, rendering her unconscious.







~~ACT THREE~~



Comatose, Lilith explores her childhood and generational trauma, working to heal her first ideation of trauma response. She wakes up to discover Mount Ida is now a full-blown cult with hundreds of followers called Children of the Falls. Fifteen years have passed, and Lilith is now considered a religious figure aptly named Surrogate Pure as her womb was used to produce an entire generation of youth. Her resurrection is hailed as prophecy as her teenage daughter, Eve, is on the verge of her “baptismal birthday” and will take Lilith’s place as a baby machine.

Lilith uses the tainted water samples to poison the communal holy water, but when the goblet reaches Eve, Lilith sacrifices herself for her daughter. Darlene and the entirety of the cult succumb to a bleak death- and Lilith is drowned before Eve can save her. Eve was raised on Darlene’s word that the Children of the Falls are the last remnants of humanity and now as the sole survivor, she must leave Mount Ida to find out if that promise holds true.





WHY NOW?



Held by Water is by definition a Cult Thriller, but in many ways an outlier. Why? Because it is a film for women, by women. Classically scary, highly dramatic, and packed with commercial appeal, the cult genre has traditionally been stocked with tales of lost, young women swept up by a manipulative men and their devout families. Though it pains me to admit (because I'm a huge fan of the work I'm critiquing), it's no small coincidence the films anchored by that stereotype- almost the genre in entirety- are written and directed by men . This fact brought me to write *Held by Water* because... **What do men know about women's trauma?**

Unlike the archetype, I've watched smart, successful, motivated, talented people get drawn and locked into these manipulative groups. This is a harder pill to swallow, a far more shocking and scary proposition, because it means someone like you or me could easily fall prey. Trauma specific to women and people of color acts as a perfect storm for cult indoctrination; it makes every opportunity look like a liferaft. The act of healing, in turn, means navigating healing opportunities to decipher which are real, reliable, or bouyant.

In the days of Instagram therapists and Youtube gurus, it's time to deconstruct what health and wellness looks like. And as we exit the pandemic, a time wrought with unprecedented national and worldwide trauma, finding proper channels of healing couldn't be more relevant.

This film is meant to serve as a map on how to pull your head out from under the metaphorical water.





CHARACTERS

LILITH REZNIK (32, biracial). Tousled hair peeks out from her hard hat and tattoos of Judaic symbols from beneath her neon Water Department vest: balanced earthiness and New York coolness; the masculine and feminine.

On a good day, Lilith is strongwilled, independent, intelligent, and has that certain “je nais ce quoi...” But she hasn’t been feeling that way lately. The assault brought Lilith’s life to a halt, robbed her of what made her feel shiny, diluted her judgement, which of course is how she ends up at the Mount Ida Hotel in the clutches of the cult. But Lilith is a born survivor...

When Lilith was six, she lost her mother to a stroke- but only after she was comotase for a grueling two year stint in the hospital. Without much family, Lilith (called Lily at the time) was raised thereafter in a foster home in Queens. A beautiful singing voice, Lily was considered special amongst the children making her a target long before her arrival at the hotel.



LILITH

DARLENE



(45, caucasian) Type-A in a hippie skirt, master herbalist and poised matriarch.

Darlene claims she's harnessed the water to help cure those who seek healing- and on the surface, this is seemingly true. And that power, of course, is what leads Darlene to claim herself as the cult's "Wellspring" and become a false idol.

Like many leaders of actual cults, there's an unexplainable magic to Darlene. In spite of her many manipulations, snake oils, and illusions which can be explained away, Darlene can be described as having an aura of light around her; a magnetic pull- despite the fact her methods and means of healing are questionable.

(36, caucasian) Quiet on the surface with an intense undertow, Wade's scraggily beard gives an authentic farm boy look- as opposed to the Brooklyn hipsters playing pretend; but his presence is enigmatic- a Scorpio for those who "get" astrology.

Wade is manipulative in a different way than Darlene, but a villain nevertheless. Despite his calm, cool, and seemingly caring exterior, Wade sees Lilith as his property. He leaves her guessing, keeps her in the dark on need-to-know information: like his complicated past with Sophia.

Wade looks like a liferaft to Lilith when she's drowning, but she will come to find Wade is a mirage. She sees what she wants to see in him.

WADE



CHARACTERS (CON'T)

(31, caucasian, green thumb)

Zara's that best friend you haven't seen in the ten years since college, and you can't remember for the life of you why you stopped speaking. Lilith will soon find that despite Zara's initial familiarity a lot has changed in that time.




(26, caucasian, modelesque, sporty blonde)

Sophia is the type of girl who sits on your boyfriend's lap because it's "not a big deal." She takes a dislike to Lilith because of her complicated relationship with Wade, but Sophia becomes Lilith's ally in the unexpected finale.

(15, Biracial, a wholesome, innocent disposition)

Lilith's daughter is now a teenager and on the brink of her baptismal birthday. Raised entirely under Darlene's rules, Lilith and Eve must quickly find common ground in order for Lilith to save Eve from her "prophecized" destiny.



A photograph of a stream flowing over mossy rocks in a forest with autumn foliage. The stream is the central focus, cascading over several large, moss-covered rocks. The surrounding forest is dense with trees, some of which have yellow and orange leaves, suggesting an autumn setting. The lighting is soft and natural, creating a serene atmosphere.

When you see water in a stream
You say: oh, this is stream.
When you see water in the river
You say: oh, this is water of the river;
When you see ocean
Water
You say: this is the ocean's water!
But actually water is always
Only itself
And does not belong
To any of these containers
Though it creates them.
And so it is with you.

- ALICE WALKER

THEMES

MYTHOLOGY

1 / LILITH

According to Jewish rabbinical legend, Lilith was the first woman before Eve. She willingly left the Garden of Eden because she wouldn't subject to Adam, submit to his dominance, and insisted on equality. Her story was dropped from the Bible, but her home, hope, and Eden were passed to another woman... Eve.

Lilith reappears in some of the oldest Hebrew-language texts as a demon who steals Adam and Eve's first baby- which dies bereft of its mother, giving Lilith the reputation of being a "child-murderess." Her name is also the root of the word, "lullaby."

2 / RIP VAN WINKLE

Who fell asleep in the woods to escape his nagging wife- and woke up 20 years later to find he missed the American Revolution. The legend is said to take place in the Catskills- where our story is anchored.





GENDER ROLES & INTERSECTIONALITY



Lilith is a biracial character because I wanted to thematically explore the ingratiated racism and prejudice in a post-2020 America with the cult as a cautionary tale.

Lilith's Judaic background is in line with my own identity, but was more so included as an allegory to the Torah story and allegorical character of "Lilith." She is most literally of "The Chosen People," which parallels with the cult's fascination, selection, and obsession with her: othering disguised as special interest.

Black women are very specifically pigeonholed within family roles and society at large- demonized, sexualized, overworked, exoticised, and underappreciated. The cult's treatment of Lilith as an emotional and physical laborer is a familiar narrative for Black

women over many iterations of American history.

Both minority groups have suffered (and continue to suffer) extreme and specific prejudice. However, weighing in misogyny and gender inequality, the cards are intrisically stacked against Lilith. During the pandemic many women were pushed back into more traditional gender roles in the home, and I think it's important to discuss what the next chapter of feminism and equality looks like. In my opinion with death, there is rebirth, change, and opportunity to grow. Despite the film's dark finale, Lilith saves Eve from her own fate granting Eve the freedom she was never allowed.

I am extremely dedicated to bringing on a producer of color and hope to continue development with a diverse and collaborative team in place.

If a tire tread cuts deep into the mud, pulling your bike wheel onto the unbroken path feels unusual, difficult- even treacherous. This is why trauma is patterned, cyclical, keeps us stuck in wash, rinse, repeat. It's why unsolved childhood trauma still runs many adult lives- we're repeating the pattern.

Generational trauma works the same but on a much larger basis. War, violence, slavery, genocide insight trauma in massive waves radiating through generations because the survivalist mentality becomes patterned. The cyclical nature of trauma is often discussed in Black and Jewish communities- still healing from the ingratiated effects of slavery and the Holocaust. No matter how many years have passed the timeline is irrelevant because the current generation is still dealing with the plights of their parents, grandparents past. This is in and of itself akin to "time travel:" we are constantly looking back to give the current struggles context. Trauma brings time into a fluid, undefined realm.

Lilith travels backwards and forwards through time via Darlene's "spells," each time entering her subconscious to explore this theme. Lilith cannot heal her current manifestation of physical trauma without exploring the depths and diving into the beginning of her cycle- her foster care origins story, mother's rape, and lineage's history of genocide, slavery, and struggle of the Jews and Black Americans. When Lilith saves Eve, it is akin to Lilith deciding the generational trauma dies with her. Eve is the fresh slate, but the audience is challenged by the ambiguous ending to imagine what a new, healed world looks like.

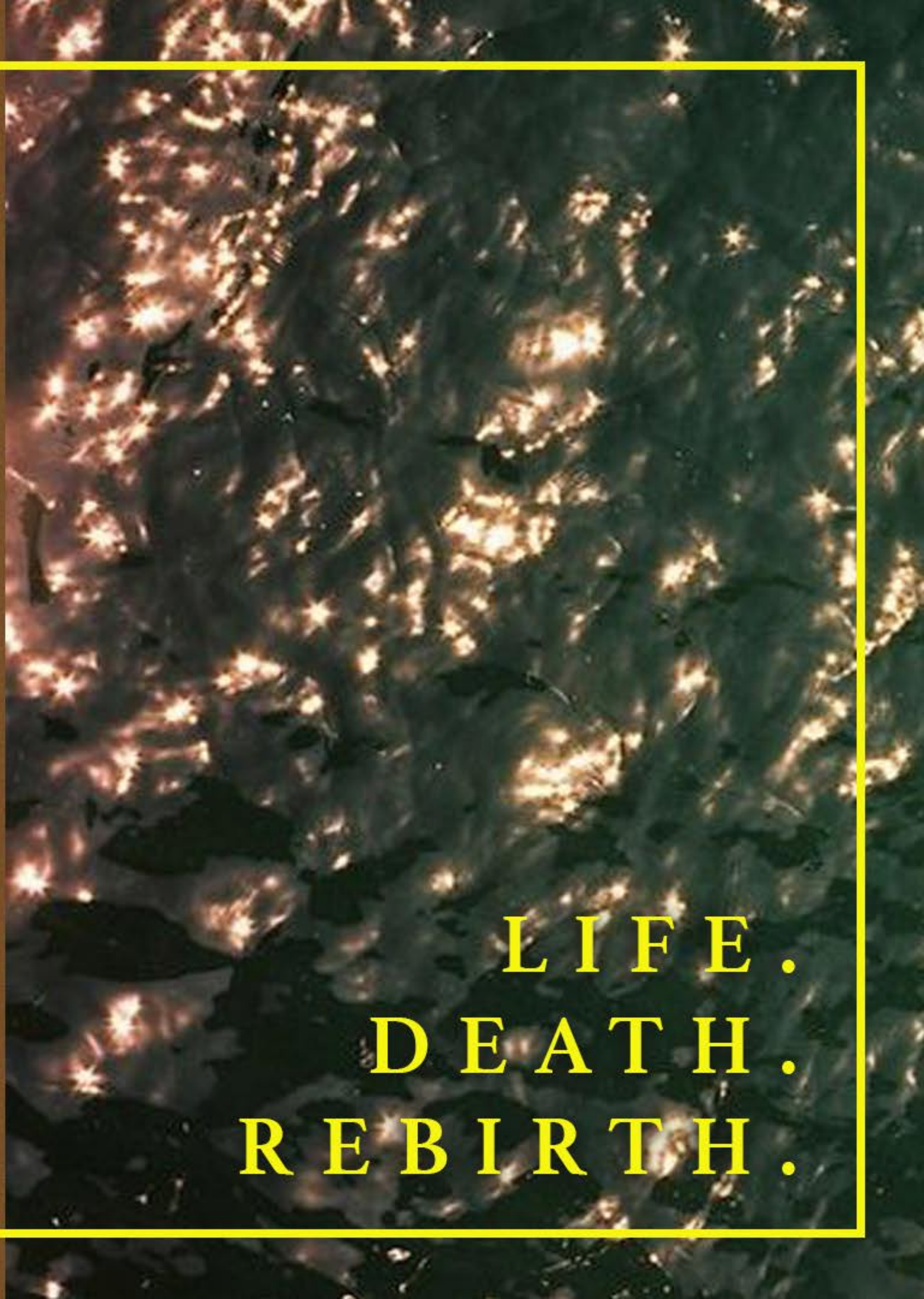
TIME TRAVEL
& GENERATIONAL TRAUMA

WATER

The concept of water as a catalyst of life; it is the fuel of organic survival, and it renews and revives the damaged and dirty. Baptism and the use of water as a instrument of cleaning: physically and spirtually, conicide with this viewpoint. A change, a rebirth, a renewal of spirit.

However, water also has a dangerous energy: the ability to drown life in its excesses faster than it can create it, swallowing up into its depths what cannot stay afloat and wiping away all traces of what lays in its path on occasions of complete anihilation.

Water holds us in the womb, holds us afloat on its surface, holds us under. It's mysterious, paradoxical, and yet somehow predictable. But for Lilith, its everchanging meaning keeps her caught in its tide.



LIFE.
DEATH.
REBIRTH.



DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Last March, I was invited by my new partner to ride out the beginnings of lockdown in the Catskills at the hotel they managed. I went up assuming I'd be there for two weeks- and ended up living at the closed hotel for four months. Eleven of us survived the early pandemic in a bubble, and just like Act 2A, the beginning was magical. The rest of the world was in mourning while I was cooking family dinner 3-4 times a week, getting drunk by the bonfire, and living with my partner for the first time. But a la the Rashomon effect, each of us was facing our own demons and living our own versions of the same story.

Over the ensuing months, group politics and power dynamics strained to a breaking point, and gave way to: my breakup, my realization I was trauma-bonded to my partner and the other members, the expanse of the wilderness juxtaposed with the feeling of being trapped at the hotel, and all under the complete delusion around the amorphous sense of time; it's no coincidence the Catskills were the hysical home to Rip Van Winkle.

Writing *Held by Water* was like therapy. It forced me to push my darkness into the light, understand and embrace it, and then distance myself enough to turn the

pieces into my protagonist, Lilith. I'm no longer her , and she's no longer me- but it took a lot of work to get there and force perspective.

Held by Water is a thriller at heart with high drama and commercial appeal. It's deep in theme, rich in texture, and aptly suited to appeal to both high concept and scholarly audience members. The tone is current, edgy, and meaty for a 2020's audience. What I'm saying is... It's got blood and tears and weird all over, and I think you're going to love it. Thanks for reading *Held by Water*, and I look forward to making this movie with your support.

Jenny Kleiman





JENNY KLEIMAN

... is a screenwriter, director, producer, and screenwriting teacher. She was recently chosen by Austin Film Festival as one of the 25 Screenwriters to Watch in 2021.

Jenny's work “finds the fun and funny in trauma,” and is united in thematic explorations of changing families, sex, and the taboo. Her most recent short, *Sofa Queen*, received numerous selections and awards including 2020 AFF, HollyShorts, and the Jury Award for Best Short at Film Invasion LA.

She is also a script doctor and teaches the Working the Wound Screenwriting Workshop focused on helping writers of all identities and skill level develop complex women, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ protagonists.

Jenny was raised in both Charleston, SC and NYC; currently residing in the latter with her border collie-mix. As an 7th-generation Southern Jew, her family's recipe for matzo ball soup with a beef & tomato broth is famous throughout the South. She finds great pride and bragging rights in her ability to throw mediocre pottery and parallel park really well. However, she cannot reach high shelves or play any instruments.

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