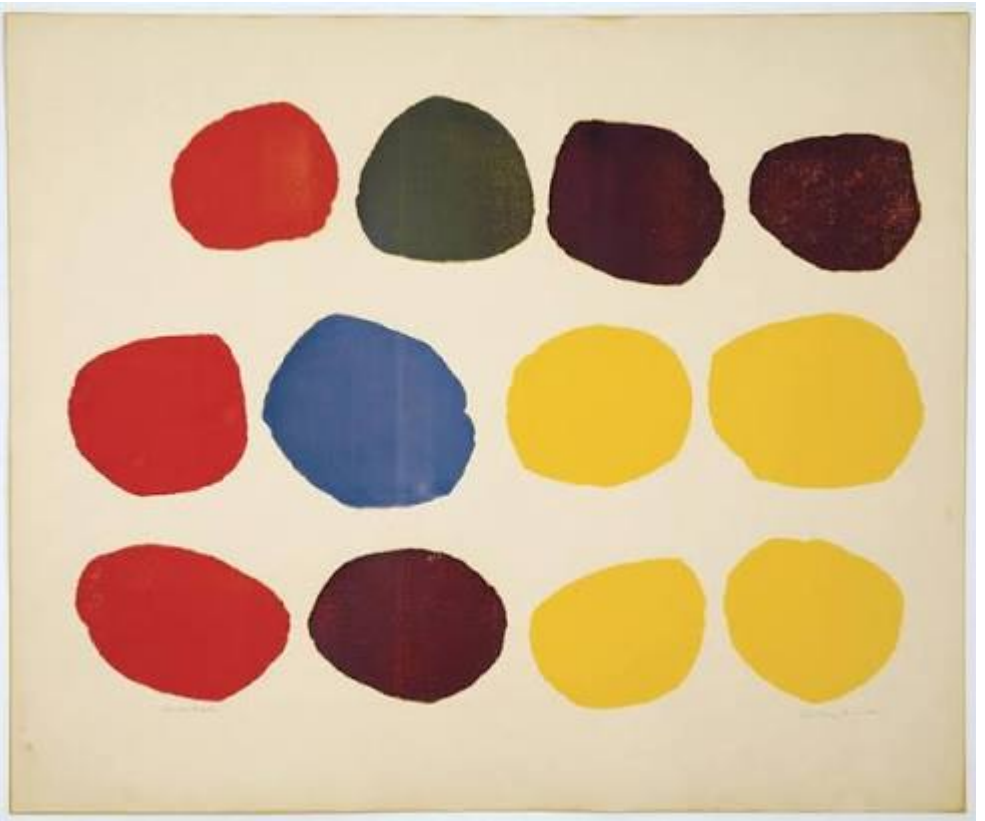
Wonder Bread

by Chris Okum



The Hijacking of the Achille Lauro is a television movie that aired on NBC during February of 1989 and concerns a cruise ship that four Palestinian militants forcibly took over as it sailed off the coast of Egypt in the Mediterranean Sea. One person died during the incident—a 69-year-old Jewish-American man in a wheelchair, Leon Klinghoffer, who was murdered by the hijackers and thrown overboard. In the movie, Klinghoffer is played by the gentile-American Karl Malden, which poses an immediate problem for the

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movie, as Malden (who is in top form here, bellowing his lines to the back row of an invisible Federal Theatre Project audience, chewing on his lines as if they were written by Clifford Odets at his most lachrymose, and throwing his nose around at the other actors as a way to warn them that they better not make the mistake of thinking that the camera is trained on anyone but him) engenders no sympathy as either the character or the human being playing the character and leads the viewer to root for the terrorists to act swiftly and with extreme prejudice, which they do, eventually, but not soon enough. Hollywood gave Malden tons of work because his very presence could be used to make whatever actor was standing next to him look ten times more attractive, whether it be Marlon Brando or Michael Douglas or Sean Connery (Connery next to Malden looks like Richard Gere in *American Gigolo*). What was most pernicious about the career of Malden, besides the fact that it was believed by the people in casting that his freakishly bulbous nose could act as a synecdoche for Jewish, is that he is a show business person's idea of what a working-class person looks and sounds like, i.e., grotesque and loud and bellicose and lacking all the nuance and subtlety of a father farting directly onto the peanut butter and jelly sandwich he is preparing for his child, which is something that actually happened to the author when the author was a child, and which is something the author hadn't thought about for decades, not until this very moment, making the author want to explain something about his father, which is that his father was a working-class individual from Cleveland, Ohio, who was the opposite of Karl Malden or anyone else in the mugs' gallery of character actors and leading men whom Hollywood used to stand in for America's lumpen proletariat, in that his father was graceful, quiet, genteel, and, to everyone who saw the man with their own two eyes, absolutely beautiful in a way most devastating, a unique quality for a member of the male species. The author has no idea why his father decided to break wind mere inches from two pieces of Wonder Bread holding a hearty schmear of boysenberry jam and Laura Scudder's Nutty Peanut Butter, but this is exactly what his father did, which makes

the author think he must have, as a child, said or done something so offensive to his father that his father repaid him in kind, even though he can't, for the life of him, think of what it may have been, although, now that he is thinking about it, maybe the aggressiveness of the act has something to do with the author being the proprietor of all the working-class traits Hollywood believes it should be highlighting, as the author is, if anyone ever has been, a lot closer to Karl Malden in physical appearance and demeanor than his father is. In *The Hijacking of the Achille Lauro*, the death of Leon Klinghoffer occurs off-screen, depriving the author of any catharsis. The body, however, is shown being thrown off the ship and into the sea, which did help, if only a little. The reviews for the television movie were mostly negative, which was to be expected for a rushed, low-budget production that looks like it was shot on the Queen Mary during off hours. Another television dramatization of the hijacking aired in 1990, starring Eva Marie Saint and Burt Lancaster, who, to the author, has the perpetual look of a man who knows how beautiful he is and who feels bad about it, not out of guilt, but out of pity for whoever is looking at him (and by the end of Lancaster's career, that was the entire world). This, the author theorizes, is how all movie stars feel when they look past themselves, sad that they have to feel what they feel not for themselves but for all who could have been them but for the grace of God, a grace which is handed out to a few, the ones who burn like gold from the inside (many of whom lived well before the camera arrived) and whose existence forced the invention to invent itself, with the help, of course, of all the human beings the camera did not want to look at, not then, not now, not ever, a problem that appears, to the author at least, at the heart of whatever malaise is coating the roof of humanity right now, a problem that can't be fixed, because the camera wants what it wants, and what it wants is not you, and by you, I mean the author**,** and by the author, I mean me, though the author and I aren't necessarily one and the same. Another problem for another time. We overlap, but only for a moment, like the moon crossing in front of the sun**,** like a father looking at his child and seeing in that child a

glimpse of himself, a brief flash that never returns but is there, if only to solidify the fact of paternity, with the rest of both their lives mere confirmation that a glimmer of recognition from one mind to another is all one gets before the big drift, parent and child pulling away from each other like two galaxies as they race toward the end of time. Karl Malden, as Leon Klinghoffer, describes having a stroke as being hit on the head with God's hammer.

