The Hythe Review

Younis, J. 2026. Hope and other follies: On Shulamith Firestone's *Airless Spaces*. *The Hythe Review*, 1(1): pp. 1–7. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/thr.29438

Open Library of Humanities

# Hope and other follies: On Shulamith Firestone's *Airless Spaces*

**Jumanah Younis,** jumanah.younis@gmail.com

Jumanah Younis reviews *Airless Spaces* (Silver Press, 2025) by Shulamith Firestone.

*The Hythe Review* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Open Library of Humanities. © 2026 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.
OPEN ACCESS

Lately I don't recognise my hands. The skin is raw and cracked between the fingers, the flesh swollen and sore to touch. I google the symptoms. Is it pollen? A man in the park pointed out the pink and white blossoms to me, 'it's so beautiful, it gets my heart', he said, and we both stood there for a minute with tears in our eyes. Or could it be stress, the build-up of bodily tension as I refresh my banking app, or the low background buzz, 'you'll feel it at the gas pump' pitched up to a screech when I scroll socials and a photograph of a mutilated child appears without warning.

When reflecting on *Airless Spaces*, the short story collection by second-wave feminist Shulamith Firestone, I think about what happens when grief and hopelessness become chronic. When consensus reality means going on with life as normal in the face of the US and Israel bombing Iranian schoolgirls in their schools and displaced Palestinian families in their tents, not to mention the destruction of the natural habitats that hold their history. In the afterword to the book, Susan Faludi cites clinical psychologist Louis Sass, who writes that 'the schizophrenic is "acutely aware of the inauthenticities and compromises of normal social existence'" (163).

For Firestone, though 'it's unclear when the first symptoms of schizophrenia surfaced [...] the decisive episode in its onset was a family crisis' (164), namely the sudden death of her estranged brother, Daniel. The murkiness of the circumstances surrounding the death was made worse by her family's refusal to acknowledge the features that suggested suicide since this would have ruled out the possibility of Orthodox Jewish rites at the funeral. 'Theories about his death [...] contributed to my own growing madness — which led to my hospitalization, medication, and a shattering nervous breakdown', Firestone writes in the piece 'Danny' (138).

In defiance of their father, Danny went to study classics and philosophy at Washington University in St Louis. Firestone followed him. He barely acknowledged her while they were studying, leading to a period of estrangement that continued up to his death. Upon leaving St Louis, Firestone moved to Chicago to study figurative painting, rooming with her sister Laya (150). When interviewed for a documentary about her during this time, Shulamith Firestone scoffed that she had yet to achieve anything significant. 'I want to be a master of time', she said (172). It seems that from an early age 'Shulie' sensed the terrifying scope of life's possibilities.

After her initial tumultuous encounters with the left and nascent feminist organising in Chicago, she left for New York in 1967, and by 1968 she was running women-only consciousness raising groups (according to friends of hers she was also escaping a violent partner). As Susan Faludi argues, Firestone's feminist activism could be seen as her 'trying to imagine a "home" where "all relationships would be based on love

alone"', an antidote to the patriarchal rules and obligations of organised religion from which she escaped (162). 'I think we're onto something new & good', she wrote to her sister Laya in 1968, '[...] if we don't get fucked up, we'll take a decidedly different direction' (153).

After gaining notoriety for publishing *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone was accused by other activists of hoarding attention and being hierarchical and domineering. Shortly after, she would be thrown out of the groups she had founded, a rejection which fellow activist Dell'Olio likened to rejection by her family (164). In 1987, Firestone's sister came to New York in response to her landlord's plea 'that the situation had become "dire"' (166). She found Firestone emaciated, begging in the street, convinced that her food had been poisoned. In the years that followed, Firestone would be hospitalised repeatedly, and it is principally experiences from this portion of her life that inform the stories in *Airless Spaces*.

When I read *Airless Spaces* I didn't know that Firestone had a visual art practice, though there are signs of it in her craft and impressionism, her eye for detail. The collection is itself a series of intimate portraits; Lourdes Cintron, a support worker who worked with Firestone for seven years, tells us that Firestone had personal relationships with many people living on the margins of society who appear as characters in the collection (143). Any sensationalism that we might associate with depictions of altered states is markedly absent.

Firestone renders her subjects human and relatable, their dilemmas described through the lens of common existential themes: hope and disappointment; the risks of relationship. The stories feel mostly unresolved, refusing easy explication. 'What she DIDN'T want was for her succinct writing to be obfuscated with academic commentary', her sister Laya writes in a contribution to this new edition (171). The sparseness of the prose itself seems to warn that there is nothing to be recuperated here.

Life at the margins, like anywhere else, has its own internal logic. In the first group of stories, 'Hospital', protagonists balance their own desires with what the institution demands from them in order to progress towards release. '"The only way to get out fast is to have people on the outside rooting for you"', advises the narrator in 'The Turkish Filmmaker' (18). Participation in patient activities is key – Firestone reserves her highest contempt for describing these – although we see that some patients, like Debra Daugherty, find their 'own instinctive way out of the place' (13).

Firestone explores the small, often frustrated efforts of patients to control what aspects of the day they can. Bettina steals the thermostat wheel 'so there was an icebox chill to the air all night [...] "If I can't sleep, at least I can chill out," she giggled to

herself' (22). But soon there are complaints and she has to return it. The temperature increases, and 'Bettina was miserable again in her bed' (23). Holly arrives in the hospital 'wanting to sleep all day and night to escape her imprisonment' (9). She trains herself not to sleep during the day so that she won't be awake during lights out, only to end up 'an insomniac on the waiting list for the Sleep Disorder wing of the psychiatric hospital' (10).

If the regime in hospital breaks patients' spirits by taking away their agency, welfare policies in the world outside have the same effect. In the story 'Prevoc', the protagonist Brian receives notice of a rent increase which he can't afford to pay on his disability allowance. He tries to get vocational training through the hospital, but is told he has to register with the day program first before he can be admitted to the pre-vocational training, 'pre-voc'. 'By the time his lease ran out – freeze! – Brian was waiting for the Asia Society to call him back on a volunteer afternoon a week' (74).

Firestone was a truth-teller. 'She wanted her deadpan vignettes to be a window into a world most people would rather ignore', her sister writes (171). A preoccupation with the body's betrayals abounds in the book. The story 'Incontinence', from the section entitled 'Losers', begins: 'Mrs Rafferty's worst fear was that she would end up having to wear diapers'. In the brief account, we hear Mrs Rafferty's anxious internal narrative about controlling her bladder. While she succeeds in that regard, in the end 'she found herself shitting in her pants while walking on the street' (76). Shit and shame – a universal human experience.[1]

Firestone shows the body as a site of distress, but also of resistance. Even in the most abject situations the desire for bodily autonomy persists. A woman fights the orderlies in the hospital not to have to shower because she believes the water is poisoned (she loses in the end and they stick her with a tranquilizer for resisting, but we understand that the fight is an honourable one). On the ward, a clean white tracksuit is a precious commodity for Ana, 'who felt like a bride wearing it'. Her careful use of the suit even gets her 'on a speed track out of the hospital'. However, on the other side of the hospital walls, 'she looked like an escapee from a loony bin rather than a high-fashion model' (32).

*Airless Spaces* is all about the cost of relating, the risk inherent in hoping for connection, love and recognition from others. The piece 'Afterfits' begins: 'I woke up one spring morning filled with light and peace and memories of Mark, a Russian fisherman's son from rural Maine whom I had not seen in over ten years. It was such a beautiful day, I thought, wouldn't it be great to plan a trip to see Mark again?' (48).

---

[1] Thanks to Hel Spandler and Elizabeth Cotton for giving language to this in our conversations.

The protagonist prepares to write to him again, even walking to the store to buy a new letter-writing pad. The genius of Firestone's writing resides in these small details, the moments of hope dangled before the denouement.

When the protagonist gets home the Rolodex where she kept the address is nowhere to be found. 'I searched my memory carefully until I recalled that fit of madness in which I had thrown out not just my pills but my papers and even my Rolodex files and address books in an effort to make a clean start. I realized now that I might never see my friend Mark Petroff again, and whether he fared well or ill, was married or not, was still painting out there in Maine I would never know' (48).

The stories in *Airless Spaces* are neither here nor there; they occupy a liminal space where 'we can see "what is" as it really is, with all its contradiction, impermanence, freedom and terror'.[2] In the Madness Movement today, psychiatric survivors and anti-carceral practitioners propose a paradigm in which madness is not pathologised: '[W]hat if living on the edge meant exploring the possibilities of existence as a whole? A new exploration of expansion, beauty and growth in our thinking and way of being!'[3] Or as the mission statement of the Centre for Mad Culture UK puts it, 'madness as a valuable aspect of human culture and intersectional identity, bringing gifts of knowledge and insight to the greater society'.[4]

This is not a new proposition. In 1940s France, the active therapeutic model of Saint-Alban hospital, under the leadership of Lucien Bonnafé, turned the institution 'into a refuge for members of the Resistance and Communist intellectuals and artists' (Fanon was also a psychiatry intern there).[5] The idea of active therapy included, in part, the 'valorisation of the patients' subjectivity and expression, thereby questioning the traditional definition of art'.[6] For François Tosquelles, a Catalan psychiatrist based at the hospital during this time, madness 'was potentially revealing of fundamental aspects of the "drama" of human existence. "There is no struggle against the illness, but rather a struggle by the ill person to affirm their human condition."'[7]

Firestone's intellectual project consisted of observing human life and the structural conditions that prevent us from affirming our humanity. Whether describing the oppression of children or the inequities imposed on the mad, her work was always

---

[2] Lain Burgos-Lovece, Nesli Erten-Gun, 'Edges & Cracks', *Unpsychology* 10, 2024, p.67.

[3] Weston Robbins, 'Edge Exploration', *Unpsychology* 10, 2024, p.187.

[4] https://centreformadculture.uk/home/about.

[5] Lucie Kim-Chi Mercier, 'Saint-Alban's contested legacy: Fanon, Tosquelles and the politics of psychiatry in post-war France', *Radical Philosophy* 220, Winter 2026, 31–52, p.38.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

firmly rooted in an analysis of power. Just as some might have mistaken her utopianism in *The Dialectic of Sex* for 'rhetorical bombast' (183), so others have assumed that *Airless Spaces* reflects a point of failure in Firestone's life, where 'the author [...] is no longer an agent, or by this point even a subject, of feminist history' (187). In reality, *Airless Spaces* represented an important achievement for Firestone. It was made possible with the support of a group of younger feminists and long-standing comrades who provided the 'edges' of a container within which she was safe enough to explore and write.

The creativity made possible with the resource of community around her was, like many of her stories, a bittersweet interlude – evidence of how effective non-carceral approaches to healthcare can be. 'I may be redeemed once again', Firestone wrote to Margaret Fraser in 1995 (168). As the group dissipated over time, Firestore relapsed and was hospitalized repeatedly. She was found dead aged sixty-seven, alone, on the floor of her apartment.

## Biography

**Jumanah Younis** is a freelance writer and therapist working in private practice.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.