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THE

FEB. 15 & 22, 2021

# NEW YORKER





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# THE NEW YORKER

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**DRAWINGS** John McNamee, Kaamran Hafeez and Al Batt, Avi Steinberg, Frank Cotham, David Sipress, Roz Chast, Harry Bliss, P. C. Vey, Lars Kenseth, Sophia Wiedeman, Bruce Eric Kaplan, Victoria Roberts, Karen Sneider **SPOTS** Greg Clarke



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## CONTRIBUTORS

**Atul Gawande** (*"Don't Tell Me What to Do,"* p. 36), a surgeon and a public-health researcher, was a member of the Biden-Harris Transition COVID-19 Advisory Board. His books include "Being Mortal" and "The Checklist Manifesto."

**Rivka Galchen** (*"Better Than a Balloon,"* p. 24) will publish her fifth book, the novel "Everyone Knows Your Mother Is a Witch," in June.

**Sergio García Sánchez** (*Cover*), a cartoonist and an illustrator, has co-authored, with Nadja Spiegelman, the graphic novel "Lost in NYC."

**Jhumpa Lahiri** (*Fiction*, p. 62) won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction for "Interpreter of Maladies." Her new novel, "Whereabouts," will be out in April.

**Maurice Manning** (*Poem*, p. 42) published his seventh poetry collection, "Railsplitter," in 2019.

**Carolyn Kormann** (*Portfolio*, p. 48), a staff writer, has contributed to the magazine since 2012.

**Ariel Levy** (*"The Believer,"* p. 30) has been a staff writer since 2008. Her latest book is the memoir "The Rules Do Not Apply."

**Brendan George Ko** (*Portfolio*, p. 48) is a visual storyteller working in photography, video, installation, text, and sound.

**Stephanie Burt** (*Books*, p. 70), a professor of English at Harvard, has written several books of literary criticism and poetry, including "After Callimachus," with Mark Payne.

**Natan Last** (*Puzzles & Games Dept.*) is a writer and researcher in refugee and immigration advocacy, a poet, and the author of "Word."

**Sarah Holland-Batt** (*Poem*, p. 67) is a poet based in Brisbane. Her book of essays on contemporary Australian poetry is forthcoming later this year.

**Emily Flake** (*Sketchpad*, p. 23), a *New Yorker* cartoonist, is the author of "Mama Tried" and, most recently, "That Was Awkward."

## THIS WEEK IN THE MAGAZINE



### PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

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# THE MAIL

## IN SEARCH OF ALIEN LIFE

In a review of current debates about whether extraterrestrials have visited Earth, Elizabeth Kolbert discusses the Fermi paradox, which asks, in reference to aliens, “Where are they?” (Books, January 25th). Some useful context is the Rare Earth hypothesis, which argues that advanced life is an extremely unlikely outcome of Darwinian evolution; after all, life required nearly four billion years—almost one-third of the age of our universe—to develop on Earth. There is growing consensus that intelligent life here may well have depended on improbable contingencies such as the Chicxulub asteroid impact, sixty-six million years ago, which obliterated the dinosaurs. Fermi’s question, seen in the light of the Rare Earth hypothesis, could yield the answer “They are not there.”

*Pedro Lilienfeld*  
*Lexington, Mass.*

Speculation that advanced extraterrestrials might exist somewhere raises a more interesting question: What if they’re already here? The U.S. Navy recently confirmed the authenticity of videos showing bizarre, Tic Tac-shaped aircraft darting through American airspace. It took centuries for the Catholic Church to allow Galileo’s observations about the solar system to supplant medieval cosmology. Today’s strictures on the inconceivable are loosening much more quickly: the 2021 Intelligence Authorization Act calls for the Pentagon’s Unidentified Aerial Phenomena Task Force to deliver an unclassified report by late June. In the 2020 documentary “The Phenomenon,” which I wrote, Christopher Mellon, a former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, said, “These things are real, they’re here, this is happening now.” Perhaps a new Copernican revolution is closer than we think.

*Marc Barasch*  
*Berkeley, Calif.*

In considering the likelihood that the interstellar object ‘Oumuamua came

from an alien civilization, Kolbert consults the pseudoarcheologist Erich von Däniken, whose work subscribes to a kind of temporalism. Von Däniken asks his readers to believe that ancient peoples lacked the brains and the ambition to conceive of and build their monuments, from the pyramids to Easter Island’s moai, without extraterrestrial guidance. Christians and Muslims may have constructed enormous cathedrals and mosques to signal to God, but, according to von Däniken, the (much earlier) inhabitants of what is now Peru drew the Nazca Lines to signal to aliens; abstract thought was beyond them. The suggestion is that our non-European forebears, in particular, were subservient to alien visitors. A reference to von Däniken may be apt in the context of theories about aliens, but his work enjoys no respectability among scientists today.

*Jim Kelly*  
*Rio Rancho, N.M.*

## THE QUIET ABOLITIONIST

Dorothy Wickenden’s account of three important women in pre-Civil War America fills major gaps in my knowledge about Frances Seward’s impact as an abolitionist and a women’s-rights pioneer (“Civil Wars,” January 25th). Nearly ten years ago, I visited the Seward House Museum, in Auburn, New York, which at the time understated Frances’s significance, portraying her as a sickly woman who was uninterested in entertaining at her husband’s parties—a mere sidebar to Seward’s illustrious life. Wickenden’s description of Frances’s connections with influential women such as Harriet Tubman and Lucretia Mott reveals her bravery in combatting slavery and standing up for equal rights.

*Monica Lamont*  
*Baldwinsville, N.Y.*

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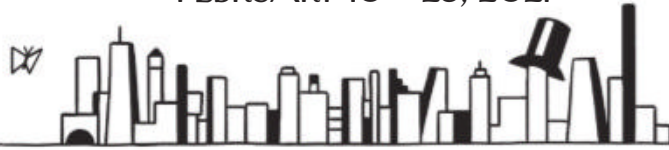
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*In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, many New York City venues are closed.  
Here's a selection of culture to be found around town, as well as online and streaming.*

FEBRUARY 10 – 23, 2021



# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



The outspoken British rapper **slowthai** returns with “TYRON” (released on Feb. 12), a striking new album that makes the personal political. Split into two opposing halves, his follow-up to his 2019 debut, “Nothing Great About Britain,” tries to measure the extent of his fury and depression. The ferocity, virility, and animus of the first seven songs are offset by the vulnerability and understatedness of the last seven—punk thrash versus alternative subtlety—and in this ongoing balancing act slowthai finds his equilibrium.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY MATT GRUBB





In “Land of Dreams,” an expansive and transporting exhibition at the Gladstone gallery, the Iranian artist **Shirin Neshat**, who lives in New York, ventures into new territory: the American West. The diverse people and starkly majestic landscape of New Mexico are the subjects of an installation of some hundred black-and-white portraits (a detail is pictured above) and a melancholic, surreal two-part film. The elegant photographs—whose backgrounds include accounts of the sitters’ dreams, handwritten by Neshat in Farsi—loosely establish the film’s narrative thread. Its main character, Simin, is an Iranian art student (played by the actress Sheila Vand, in a role that suggests Neshat’s alter ego) who has undertaken a dream-recording documentary project, with a twist. She is also a spy, one of a network of archivists who work in a vast mountain bunker. Simin is a psychic interloper, too: she appears inside the dreams that she records. Neshat uses this eerie story and the similarity of the American and Iranian desert terrain to draw unlikely connections between disparate people, imagining a tenuous bridge across geographical, political, and metaphysical divides.—*Johanna Fateman*

## ART

## Patrick Angus

Can an artist be important without being much good? That’s just one of the questions haunting a show by this realist painter, at the Bortolami gallery, which chronicles aspects of urban gay life in the late twentieth century. Born in Hollywood, in 1953, Angus perished from AIDS, in New York City, at the age of thirty-eight, and one mourns the artist he might have become. The drawings on view owe a great deal to David Hockney’s loving early portraits of his friends and lovers, with one essential difference: Angus doesn’t offer any particular insight into the inner lives of the men he depicts. His large paintings are more imaginative. Stillness is a hallmark of such canvases as “Hanky Panky,” from 1990,

inspired by the scene at the now defunct Gaiety Burlesque, a pornographic emporium with male dancers, in Times Square. A complementary exhibition titled “Lucky for Men,” curated by David Rimanelli and situated in the gallery’s intimate second-floor space, features works by the fascinating sculptor Kayode Ojo, the painter Bornha Sammak, and the photographer Chivas Clem. There’s great restraint and delicacy in Rimanelli’s installation—the volume may be on low, but the poetry and music resonate.—*Hilton Als* ([bortolamigallery.com](http://bortolamigallery.com))

## “Engineer, Agitator, Constructor”

Your first impression of this vast and exciting show, at MOMA, of Soviet and European graphic design, made between 1918 and 1939, may combine déjà vu and surprise. You likely know the look, loosely termed Constructivist: off-kilter geometries, strident typography,

grabby colors, and collaged photography, all in thrall to advanced technology and socialist exhortation. But you won’t have seen about two-thirds of the three hundred pieces here. (They’re recent acquisitions.) The scope is encyclopedic, surveying a time when individuals sacrificed their artistic independence to ideological programs of mass appeal. As the exhibition unfolds, artists—penitent, shrinking from the perils of originality, dominate in Russia. Careerist designers teem in the West, with such fecund exceptions as László Moholy-Nagy and Kurt Schwitters. Some work will surely be enjoyed for its formal ingenuity and rhetorical punch. The architectonic and typographical razzmatazz of the Austrian-born American Herbert Bayer affords upbeat pleasures; a strikingly sensitive Dada collage by the German Hannah Höch feels almost overqualified for its company. But art unaffected by personality is sterile. That needn’t constitute a failure. It may be a clear-eyed choice made on principle. What needs saying conditions how it’s said, which means accepting the chance that, should conditions change, the work may prove to be ephemeral.—*Peter Schjeldahl* ([mom.org](http://mom.org))

## “Native Feminisms”

The trio of wonder women in “Sisters of War,” a wall-filling vinyl mural by Jolene Nenibah Yazzie, on view in this dynamic group show at Apexart, have a superpower: they shatter taboos. Yazzie, whose tribal affiliations are Diné, Comanche, and White Mountain Apache, has outfitted the trio in hats historically worn only by male Diné warriors. Her own experience competing in the traditional men’s category at powwows—the liberation she feels, the bullying she encounters—is the subject of another piece here, the Ojibwe filmmaker Marcella Ernest’s dreamlike documentary collage “Because of Who I Am.” The film alternates on a monitor with two hypnotic animations by the Anishinaabe-Métis digital visionary Elizabeth LaPensée, who treats ancestral imagery of the natural world with an eco-poetic futurism. Nearby, an exquisite miniature fringed-leather tipi by Sheldon Raymore, an artist from the Cheyenne River Sioux Nation, memorializes “two-spirit” people of fluid gender. If the show, which was curated by Elizabeth S. Hawley with an eye for beauty and a heart for politics, has a rallying cry, it’s supplied by a lively poster from the Diné artist Demian DinéYazhi’ and R.I.S.E. (Radical Indigenous Survivance & Empowerment): “Decolonize Feminism.”—*Andrea K. Scott* ([apexart.org](http://apexart.org))

## Gordon Parks

This revered American artist, who died in 2006, at the age of ninety-three, was a clear-eyed witness to history and an intimate chronicler of everyday life, who produced some of the most indelible images of his time. In 1942, Parks was the only Black photographer working for the Farm Security Administration, and he later became the first Black photojournalist on staff at *Life* magazine. “Half and the Whole,” an exhibition in two parts, at the Jack Shainman gallery, focusses on the work that Parks made from the early forties until 1970. On West Twentieth Street, lush color pictures of life in the Jim Crow-era South, taken in 1956, document children at play; in “Outside Looking In, Mobile, Alabama,” a group of young girls in bright summer dresses peer at a fairground





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The twenty-year-old British singer-songwriter Arlo Parks makes music fixated on youthful ennui. Her cross-pollination of indie pop and soul is potent yet melancholy and anxious. Some have pegged her as a kind of Gen Z whisperer, but the power of her music is in its heightened state of awareness, one that, at its best, verges on empathy. On her debut album, **“Collapsed in Sunbeams,”** she lives up to her promise as a good listener turned great storyteller. Parks is most insightful when operating as a friend or a bystander—on “Caroline,” she observes a breakup and gets so wrapped up in its throes that she assumes the boyfriend’s perspective. But Parks’s songs become even more gripping when she is forced to come to terms with her own feelings in this outsider capacity, as on “Eugene,” in which she, a third wheel, becomes the last point of a love triangle.—*Sheldon Pearce*

through a chain-link fence. The exhibition on West Twenty-fourth Street is devoted to scenes of the civil-rights movement, including stirring portraits of Malcolm X at a rally in Chicago and of Martin Luther King, Jr., in Washington, D.C. Parks brilliantly captured ebullient crowds and newspapers held aloft in outrage—the headlines reporting police killings of Black men are as resonant now as they were then.—*Johanna Fateman (jackshainman.com)*

## MUSIC

### Guy Blakeslee: “Postcards from the Edge”

**ROCK** As Entrance, Guy Blakeslee has cut recordings of acoustic blues and uncorked rock that feels plugged into a bolt of lightning. His allegiance isn’t to genre but to the pursuit of artistic liberation through psychedelia, his wavering muse guided by a fervid warble forever hinting at madness, and by a

wayward guitar that he plays, with a touch of poetry, upside down. On “Postcards from the Edge,” the lush new album issued under his own name, Blakeslee is more restrained but no less adventurous. Produced at the Preservation Hall Jazz Band’s recording space, the LP features a mosaic of studio sounds, with backing choruses, synthesizers, and mysterious scraps of noise meshing behind him. The album culminates not in a torrent of guitars but in musique-concrète recordings captured around New Orleans, and in a ghostly piano that duets with the patter of a rainstorm—a storied rhythm section with a difficult drummer’s temperament.—*Jay Ruttenberg*

### Boston Symphony Orchestra

**CLASSICAL** The Boston Symphony Orchestra’s music director, Andris Nelsons, conducts the ensemble for the first time since January, 2020, in three new installments of “BSO NOW,” the orchestra’s magazine-style streaming series. Embracing the season-long theme “Music in Changing Times,” Nelsons leads three programs that position revolutionary symphonies

by Beethoven alongside contemporary works that grapple with his imposing stature and restless innovation. The first episode includes Hannah Kendall’s “Disillusioned Dreamer,” the second Iman Habibi’s “Jeder Baum spricht,” and the last Carlos Simon’s “Fate Now Conquers.”—*Steve Smith (Feb. 11, Feb. 18, and Feb. 25 at noon; bso.org.)*

### CNCO: “Déjà Vu”

**LATIN POP** Commercial popularity has softened reggaetón into forms nearly unrecognizable from its pioneering Caribbean roots. One indicator of the genre’s mainstream pop-ification might be CNCO, the boy band that won the Univision singing competition “La Banda.” The guys have found massive success in ultra-energetic fusions and light dembow riffs, but their latest album, “Déjà Vu,” is an unabashed celebration of their pop forebears. They boldly take on classics such as Sin Bandera’s “Entra en Mi Vida” and Aventura’s “Un Beso,” then nimbly slide into English-language balladry, tapping into the drama of Enrique Iglesias’s “Hero.” Some selections aren’t ripe for reinvention—tinkering with DLG’s “La Quiero a Morir” feels sacrilegious—yet that’s unlikely to derail the record’s ultimate goal of pleasing screaming fans.—*Julyssa Lopez*

### Dayna Stephens Quartet

**JAZZ** The adroit saxophonist Dayna Stephens had a most productive 2020, releasing the studio recording “Liberty,” in a lean trio setting, and “Right Now! Live at the Village Vanguard,” a more expansive and lengthy quartet project. On both albums, he launches a robust and, at his most persuasive, considered attack via the tenor sax (as well as a few auxiliary horns, like the baritone, which makes an impressive mark on “The Lost and Found,” on “Liberty”). Stephens returns to the Vanguard for this live stream, featuring, as he did on the earlier recording, a reactive quartet.—*Steve Futterman (Feb. 12-13; villagevanguard.com.)*

### Madlib: “Sound Ancestors”

**ELECTRONIC** Most of the releases credited solely to the Los Angeles hip-hop producer Madlib—and not to one of a dozen other aliases—have concentrated on specific areas, such as jazz or rock or Indian music. But “Sound Ancestors,” made with help from the London-born electronic artist Four Tet, who is listed as the album’s editor and arranger, displays Madlib’s itchy groove sense in mature, full flower, draped with billowing arrangements—splashy soul-sample drops here, a quiet flamenco groove there, a skeletal, sun-kissed samba for an authoritative finale.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

### “Save the Boys”

**CLASSICAL** Long before the countertenor John Holiday was a finalist on NBC’s “The Voice,” as a member of John Legend’s team, he was a conservatory student at Juilliard who brought improvisatory fervor to the title role of Handel’s “Radamisto,” in 2013. Holiday’s melismatic facility, high notes, and flamboyant attire are tailor-made for a televised talent show, but at his core he is a communicator with vocal charisma to burn. His versatility and imagination make him a match for Tyshawn Sorey, a composer of wide-ranging



stylistic influences, who asks that his performers depart from the written notation of his scores. Sorey's new commission for Opera Philadelphia, "Save the Boys," is an interpretation of an urgent, gripping poem by the abolitionist and Black-women's-rights activist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Holiday performs it with the pianist Grant Loehnig for the company's streaming channel.—*Oussama Zahr* (*Available from Feb. 12 at operaphila.tv.*)

## DANCE

### "La Boixeuse Amoureuse"

It began as a music video: Marie-Agnès Gillot, a former star of the Paris Opera Ballet, acting out the idea of love as a boxing match in the lyrics of the French singer-songwriter Arthur H. This hour-long expansion of that video, choreographed by Gillot and available online Feb. 16-28, courtesy of the French Institute Alliance Française, is essentially a low-key Arthur H concert. As he plays in a style somewhere between Serge Gainsbourg and Randy Newman, Gillot and three hunky athletes slowly warm up. The guys spar. She writhes glamorously and recites. After taking some punches herself, she rises to embrace the man who knocked her down.—*Brian Seibert* (*fiaf.org*)

### Dance Theatre of Harlem

The company's digital programming series continues, at DTH on Demand, on Feb. 13, with "John Henry," a take on the man-versus-machine legend made by the company's own legendary founder, Arthur Mitchell, in 1988. On Feb. 20, the selection is "New Bach." Created by the troupe's undersung resident choreographer, Robert Garland, in 2001, it's one of his first, happy experiments in mixing Balanchinian classicism with Harlem vernacular. Each selection is available until the second Sunday following its debut.—*B.S.* (*dancetheatreofharlem.org/dthondemand*)

### Nrityagram Dance Ensemble

In "Ahuti" ("Offering"), Nrityagram continues a creative partnership with the Sri Lankan troupe Chitrasena, juxtaposing the exquisite curves of Odissi with the more upright and folksy manner of Kandyan. Unlike the companies' previous collaboration, "Samhara," this one includes men, whose leaps exude virility. It's the women, though, who successfully mimic peacocks. The production, filmed in Bangalore in 2019, streams for free (advance registration is required), on Feb. 17, via the Arts Center at N.Y.U. Abu Dhabi.—*B.S.* (*nyuad-artscenter.org*)

### Richard Alston Dance Company

Some people have good timing. The British modern-dance choreographer Richard Alston is one of them. When his company of twenty-five years lost its funding, in 2019, he announced that he would pull the plug after a final tour ending in March of last year. That tour included a show at Peak Performances, at Montclair State University's Alexander Kasser Theatre, which was captured on film and will be broadcast on Valentine's Day, at 8, on allarts.org, where it will remain indefinitely. The pro-

gram includes "Shine On," a quietly hopeful valedictory piece by Alston, set to songs by Benjamin Britten. Like all the other works on the program, it is performed in the full-bodied, musical style—a mixture of balletic flow and Cunningham-esque daring—for which the company is known.—*Marina Harss*

### Ronald K. Brown / Evidence

It's been a very long year since this invaluable, soul-preserving company last danced on the stage of the Joyce Theatre. It returns on Feb. 18, this time for a live-streamed performance (available on demand until March 4). The program is retrospective, sampling from more than twenty years of repertory, and, for safety reasons, it's composed mostly of solo pieces and solo excerpts. But the show closes—as last year's did—with Brown's most recent ensemble work, a 2019 collaboration with Meshell Ndegeocello. It's called "Mercy," and that's what it searches for. Undulating on a low-rumbling groove, it's unaggressive yet insistent, openhanded but not acquiescent.—*B.S.* (*joyce.org/joycestream*)

### San Francisco Ballet

The second program in the company's digital season, Feb. 11-March 3, combines two older works with a new one, by Myles Thatcher, a soloist in the ensemble who is also a budding choreographer. The Thatcher work, made during the pandemic, was conceived for the camera, and filmed all over San Francisco by the experienced dance filmmaker Ezra Hurwitz. (The music is Steve Reich's "Variations for Vibes, Pianos, and Strings.") The other two works are "Let's Begin at the End," a rambling piece created by Dwight Rhoden for the company's 2018 Unbound Festival, and Mark Morris's cheerful "Sandpaper Ballet," from 1999, set to light classical tunes by the Boston Pops regular Leroy Anderson.—*M.H.* (*sfballet.org*)

## STREAMING THEATRE



### Thunderbird American Dancers

Now in its forty-sixth year, the annual Pow Wow and Dance Concert is a gathering for Native peoples and an education for everyone. Dancers in regalia, of many tribes and many ages, present dances, stories, and music, all elucidated by the beloved octogenarian m.c. Louis Mofsie. This time, it's virtual, live-streamed from the Theatre for the New City on Feb. 20 (with a recording available through March 7).—*B.S.* (*theaterforthenewcity.net*)

### "Titon et l'Aurore"

This Baroque opera by Jean-Joseph Cassanéa de Mondonville, a pastoral allegory about a love affair between a shepherd and a goddess, is ideal material for the renowned puppeteer Basil Twist, who makes his international debut as an all-in-one director and designer with this Opera Comique production. William Christie, Les Arts Florissants, and a fine cast handle the music while Twist provides the homespun fantasy: the three Graces on strings, wings of billowing silk, a dress of hanging vines, and a whole flock of life-size sheep that make like the cow over the moon. The production streams on medici.tv for free through April 19.—*B.S.*

## MOVIES

### Grigris

Moving from the night-club scene and the gangland underworld of N'Djamena, Chad's capital, to the country's tradition-bound rural villages, this drama, directed by Mahamat-Saleh Haroun, distills a vast swath of history and experience in the travails of one striving man. Souleymane Dème, a nonprofessional actor, plays a character with his own name, nicknamed Grigris, an immigrant from Burkina Faso. Despite a crippled

It's abundantly clear by now that technology doesn't smooth away human foibles but refracts and often magnifies them. In "**Smittown**," the playwright Drew Larimore probes the cracks of our digital lives in four chatty, unsettling monologues revolving around the same tragedy in a small college town. The play, directed by Stephen Kitsakos and presented by the Studios of Key West, was written before the pandemic and has been revamped as online theatre, featuring a quartet of appealing actors: Michael Urie, as a professor who has just been dumped; Ann Harada, as a woman who sends pick-me-up texts for hire; Colby Lewis, as a local artist with a questionable ethical code; and Constance Shulman, as a grieving mom. The show is available to stream Feb. 13-27, at tskw.org.—*Michael Schulman*



leg and a spinal deformity, he's a renowned disco-style dancer and earns a living through tips and odd jobs. But, when his stepfather's hospital bills threaten to bankrupt the family, Grigris signs on with gasoline smugglers, whom he's later tempted to double-cross. Along the way, he meets Mimi (Anaïs Monory), a half-French, half-Chadian prostitute who struggles to change her life and whose heart of gold defies cliché. Haroun catches the rising cosmopolitanism of the capital city and the corruption that reinforces inequality; his deft, active, contrast-riddled, and subtly unbalanced images conjure a muffled cry of despair in a bottomless spiral of violence. In French and Arabic.—*Richard Brody* (*Streaming on the Criterion Channel.*)

## Judas and the Black Messiah

This vigorous and mournful historical drama tells the story of the killing of Fred Hampton, the chairman of the Illinois Black Panther Party, in 1969, by the Chicago police, in a raid planned by the F.B.I. and aided by the infiltrator William O'Neal. The details are fascinating: the charismatic and visionary Hampton (Daniel Kaluuya) forges a revolutionary coalition with Chicago's

leading Black gang as well as with a Puerto Rican group and, surprisingly, with a white-supremacist one, too. O'Neal (LaKeith Stanfield) is recruited as an informant following his arrest for stealing a car and impersonating an F.B.I. agent; his feigned allegiance to the Panthers proves extraordinarily convincing. Hampton's relationship with another Party member, Deborah Johnson (Dominique Fishback), who becomes pregnant with his child, provides one emotional through line; O'Neal's dealings with an F.B.I. agent (Jesse Plemons) who is managing him furnish the other. The director, Shaka King, who co-wrote the script with Will Berson, keeps the tension high, but the film is mainly a collection of sketch-like scenes; the protagonists are given traits in lieu of depth, and the results are informative but unenlightening.—*R.B.* (*In theatrical release and streaming on HBO Max starting Feb. 12.*)

## Rabbit Hole

The director is John Cameron Mitchell, who made "Shortbus" and "Hedwig and the Angry Inch." Nothing in the flamboyance of those films, or in their dedicated will to shock, hints at the restraint of this movie, from 2010, in which vol-

atile emotions are more liable to leak through the cracks than to explode. Nicole Kidman and Aaron Eckhart play Becca and Howie, whose life together seems tense, orderly, and ominously quiet. Only gradually do we work out what, or who, is missing: their young son, who was killed by a car some months before. The film, adapted by David Lindsay-Abaire from his own play, could have been merely gruelling, but Mitchell keeps nudging scenes away from the obvious, toward the risky brink of comedy—look at Howie and another grieving parent (Sandra Oh) getting stoned and giggling their way through group therapy. Kidman is warmed by the presence of Dianne Wiest, who plays Becca's fraying mother. With performances like these, the result is not so much an issue movie as a study of human quiddity and stubbornness under siege.—*Anthony Lane* (*Reviewed in our issue of 1/3/11.*) (*Streaming on Amazon, Tubi, and other services.*)

## Saint Maud

The conceptual strength and uneasy mood of this horror film are betrayed by its failures of observation. Morfydd Clark plays a nurse named Katie who, after a hospital mishap, changes her name to Maud and takes a job as a live-in nurse for a terminally ill woman named Amanda (Jennifer Ehle), a famous dancer. Maud's Christian faith, with its halcyon visions of the afterlife, provide Amanda with solace, but it's a jealous faith: when Maud tries and fails to pry Amanda away from her other relationships, Maud's devotion turns obsessive, wrathful, and vengeful. The writer and director, Rose Glass, has a macabre sense of impending menace, but she doesn't let the action unfold—she imposes situations on Maud for the sake of provoking shocks, and the resulting images play like pages torn from a storyboard. The growing gap between Maud's experience and her religious delusions is thinly dramatized; the movie builds to a fine frenzy that's hollowed out by incuriosity.—*R.B.* (*Streaming on Epix starting Feb. 12 and in theatrical release.*)

## St. Louis Blues

This oversimplified bio-pic of the composer W. C. Handy, released in 1958, is energized by one of the greatest casts ever assembled. Nat King Cole stars as Handy; Ruby Dee plays Elizabeth, his fiancée and then his wife; and Eartha Kitt plays Gogo, a cabaret singer who recognizes his talent. The supporting actors include Pearl Bailey, Juano Hernandez, and Cab Calloway; musical scenes feature Mahalia Jackson and Ella Fitzgerald. The workmanlike director, Allen Reisner, seems to recognize his good fortune, relying on plain and simple extended takes that highlight the cast's finely expressive artistry. Though the script absurdly minimizes racism in turn-of-the-century Memphis (where it's largely set), it also foregrounds the Black community—Gogo is the mastermind of Handy's rise to fame, which is won at a Black-owned night club. The drama is centered on the conflict between the church music on which Handy was raised and the secular music that he writes and performs; the melodramatic tale is rendered vital and immediate by the actors' frank intimacy and hushed urgency.—*R.B.* (*Streaming on the Criterion Channel.*)

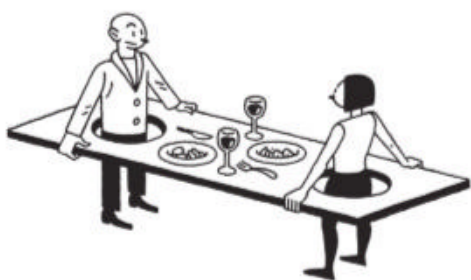
## WHAT TO STREAM



The 1936 French census, with its enumeration of residents of a large Parisian apartment building, provides the framework for Ruth Zylberman's 2017 documentary, "**The Children of 209 Saint-Maur Street.**" She meticulously traces the lives and connections of the hundred or so Jewish people (mainly immigrants from Germany and Eastern Europe) who lived there then, and the dangers that they faced during the Second World War, under the German occupation. (It begins streaming on OVID.tv on Feb. 19.) Visiting the building, at times in the company of former residents, Zylberman combines far-reaching detective work and a virtually forensic attention to detail—complete with maps, wall charts, and miniature models—in re-creating what is, in effect, a crime scene. Elderly survivors of persecution evoke the terrors posed by police raids and the trauma of family separations; tales of heroism and villainy emerge in discussions with non-Jewish neighbors. The film's reconstitution of the past merges with present-tense activism: long-lost family members and friends are reunited, and the building's very walls and floorboards resound with the history that haunts it.—*Richard Brody*

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## TABLES FOR TWO

### CookUnity

On a recent Monday, I received a large tote filled with a dozen cardboard containers, each sealed with plastic and sheathed in a paper sleeve: my first order from CookUnity, a subscription-based delivery service. Once a week, customers select, from up to three hundred options, between four and sixteen single-serving, fully cooked, ready-to-heat (or ready-to-eat) meals designed to keep in the refrigerator for as long as a week.

I associated the meal-subscription model, of which there are many examples, with restrictive diets, from meatless to keto (for years, I've been pummelled with Instagram ads for a "plant-based" iteration called Sakara Life, endorsed by Gwyneth Paltrow's Goop); the point was to make calorie counting or ingredient exclusion as painless as possible. I've never toyed with a diet, and I revel in meal planning, shopping, and cooking. Still, I could see the allure. The marketing for these services often evokes the near-universal fantasy of having a personal chef.

CookUnity indeed caters to the dietary fads of the moment, with paleo, vegan, and gluten-free options, and conspicuous as-

surances that its meat is humanely raised and its stance on G.M.O.s is "no." What inspired me to try it is what set it apart. The company, a three-year-old startup that recently raised \$15.5 million and delivers to twenty-seven states (from Maine to Arkansas), identifies as a "collective of independent chefs," including some prominent New York restaurateurs. In a recent interview with *Forbes*, the C.E.O. and founder, Mateo Marietti, explained that part of his (prescient) idea was to create opportunities for chefs "beyond the confines of a restaurant kitchen and lifestyle—enabling them to scale and grow."

And so I filled my cart with meals that adhere to my current culinary regimen: supporting New York chefs as they navigate the pandemic. Among my selections were slow-cooked salmon with quinoa, butternut squash, and coriander vinaigrette, by Dan Kluger, of Loring Place; braised lamb sabzi with cumin-seed rice, from Einat Admony (Taïm, Balaboosta); Pierre Thiam's Casamance kale salad, featuring fonio, mango, and tomato, also on his menu at Teranga; and wild-mushroom bibimbap, by Mökbar's Esther Choi. All the chefs oversee the cooking personally, in CookUnity's commissary or in their own kitchens, and some have been able to hire back furloughed staff.

No one could accuse CookUnity of offering romance. Government regulations require meals to be stamped with calorie counts. The system can't account for impulse: at the end of the week, I found myself staring down a meal that I'd chosen when I was feeling virtuous—

the Alta Calidad chef Akhtar Nawab's Indian spiced cauliflower with coconut yogurt and RightRice, a high-protein imposter made with powdered lentils and chickpeas. It was just about the last thing I felt like eating.

And yet, if being stuck at home for nearly a year has made most people tired of having to coordinate meals, let alone prepare them, and desperate for variety, CookUnity solves for both. For five days, I subsisted on diverse dishes that ranged from truly satisfying at best to genuinely interesting at worst, requiring little more effort than turning on my toaster oven, and almost no thought.

The problem with many diets, as Barry Estabrook points out in his excellent new book, "Just Eat," is that they "play down or completely ignore the important, sensual role" of food. Maybe not, if a talented chef is involved? Nawab's cauliflower and RightRice—vegan, low-fat, and low-cal—was surprisingly persuasive, the cauliflower complexly seasoned, the Franken-rice convincingly textured. Besides, it was only one meal of a dozen. Admony's comforting lamb sabzi—the tender meat redolent of mint, dill, and Persian lime, the rice gone slightly crispy in the oven—felt well worth its nine hundred and thirty calories. Marc Forgione's Ode to the Chicken Under a Brick, featuring a leg nestled with quartered Yukon Gold potatoes and a bundle of broccoli rabe, a take on a popular entrée at his eponymous Tribeca restaurant, came topped with a cube of butter. (*Subscriptions start at \$53.96 for four meals.*)

—Hannah Goldfield



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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT SENATE RULES

As President, Donald Trump often seemed surprised to discover what was and was not constitutional. His lawyers now seem intent on perpetuating that confusion at his impeachment trial. Last week, one of them, David Schoen, said in an interview with Fox News that “fair-minded people” don’t support using impeachment to “bar someone from running for office again”—even though that is one of the two punishments for conviction that the Constitution specifies. Schoen also issued a challenge: if there is an attempt to call witnesses in the trial, “you also should be able to call, then, many of the senators as witnesses, because of the awful bias and prejudgment they’ve shown.”

It wasn’t clear which senators Schoen had in mind—Mitt Romney, the Utah Republican, who, in the midst of the assault on the Capitol, on January 6th, said that Trump had caused “this insurrection”? The Senate’s rules allow its members to be impeachment witnesses (and to have a say in what witnesses to call), and any number of them might offer vivid descriptions of the violence, which Trump is accused of inciting. But such accounts can hardly be what Schoen is after. As he said on Fox, he didn’t think that, at the trial, the House managers should show videos documenting how Trump’s followers, after the President told them at a rally earlier that day to go to the Capitol and “fight like hell,” did just that. “Why does the coun-

try need that now?” Schoen asked. His goal, it seemed, was to put the senators on trial instead.

The House managers weren’t deterred. Three days after Schoen’s interview, Representative Jamie Raskin, of Maryland, the lead manager, sent a letter to Trump inviting him to testify. Why not? A hostile witness can be helpful. (His lawyers called the letter a “public relations stunt.”) Trump would find a trial, where he is subject to cross-examination, to be a very different experience than Twitter. His no doubt outrageous claims would make the stakes plain, perhaps even to Republicans. As Raskin noted, Trump and his defenders continue to dispute even the basic facts of the events surrounding the attack on the Capitol. In a fourteen-page pretrial brief that Schoen and his co-counsel, Bruce Castor, filed last week, they deny

that Trump’s imprecations to the crowd were anything but a general statement about election security, or that he asked the Georgia secretary of state to “find” enough votes to give him the state—although that exchange, an apparent election-law violation, is on tape. Trump, as depicted in the brief, is a peace-loving, free-speech martyr.

Trump brought in Schoen and Castor just a week before the trial’s opening, after parting ways with his previous team. The new lawyers have said that their defense wouldn’t focus on Trump’s lies about the election being stolen from him, but those falsehoods are given respectful treatment in their brief. Schoen has spoken of representing “reputed mobster figures,” and had been in discussions with Jeffrey Epstein, the sexual abuser, before he killed himself in jail. (Schoen says he was murdered.) Castor, a former district attorney in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, declined to prosecute Bill Cosby for sexual assault, and later sued one of Cosby’s victims for defamation. (The case was dismissed.) Perhaps the attorneys’ experiences have prepared them to juggle improbable excuses for Trump’s behavior.

In their brief, they write that, since Trump is no longer President, the impeachment trial is “a legal nullity.” In fact, there is strong support for post-Presidential proceedings in constitutional history and in precedent; otherwise, there would be no real penalty for a late-in-the-term coup attempt. (What’s more, Trump was President on the day he was impeached; only the





trial is occurring in his post-Presidency.) The Constitution also gives the Senate great latitude in running a trial. But the nullity argument, as flimsy as it is, has come to be seen as a safe harbor by Republicans who want to forget that January 6th ever happened. Senator Rand Paul earlier sought a dismissal of the case on that ground, and, in a procedural vote, only five Republicans joined Democrats to kill his motion. At least seventeen Republican votes are needed to convict Trump. Those numbers show how crucial it is that the House managers present a forceful case: Trump's party is not ready to walk away from him.

One of the topsy-turvy arguments that Trump's defenders, including Senator Lindsey Graham, are making is that the evidence that some people in the mob arrived in Washington already intent on engaging in violence exonerates the President. How, they ask, could he possibly have incited them, if they'd already decided to try to lynch

Nancy Pelosi and others? One answer lies in the House managers' seventy-seven-page pretrial brief, which charges Trump with "a course of conduct aimed at subverting and obstructing the election results" in the weeks leading up to the rally.

The managers cite a December 19th tweet from Trump calling on his supporters to come to Washington—"be there, will be wild"—and his telling a crowd in Georgia on January 4th that it was imperative to "fight" to hold the White House. He made it clear that the task at hand was to intimidate Vice-President Mike Pence, whom Trump had directed, both publicly and, reportedly, in meetings behind closed doors, to throw out electoral votes, in violation of the Constitution. (Even after the mob had breached the Capitol, and began searching for the Vice-President, Trump tweeted, "Mike Pence didn't have the courage to do what should have been done.") Pence would be a good witness. So would aides who reportedly pleaded

with Trump to take quick action to protect the Capitol, and found him uninterested. The managers, in their brief, call his failure to act a "dereliction of duty." In many instances, Trump was invoking the power he had as President. It is not the case then that, as Castor argued last week, we are going through an impeachment trial "just because somebody gave a speech and people got excited."

It is true that senators will be judged by what they do and say at the trial. The House managers wrote that Trump was "singularly responsible" for unleashing a violent attack on a joint session of Congress, with the aim of disrupting the transfer of power. The senators, under the Constitution, now have a singular responsibility to render a verdict on Trump's actions and, by extension, on whether an attempt to overturn an election can be brushed aside. Senators saw how close the country came to catastrophe because of Trump. And they should know what their job is now.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

## THE MAYORAL RACE LOVE CENTER



On an icy Saturday afternoon, on Myrtle Avenue in Bushwick, a homeless man missing an eye walked up to the campaign office of the mayoral candidate Paperboy Love Prince. He grabbed a bejewelled lilac blazer that was hanging on a hook near the open front door. Afrobeats blared from a boom box, and the man danced a little in the street before abandoning the stolen blazer on the hood of a Prius and taking off. "At least he has good taste," Briana Calderón Navarro, a longtime volunteer, said afterward. "I was, like, you know what? I'm just gonna let him have his moment." She added, "I think it was done with love."

The candidate arrived, and a passing cyclist shouted, "Hey, Paperboy, I voted for you, man!"

Prince, who lost a bid against Representative Nydia Velázquez for New York's Seventh Congressional District last year, shouted back, "One love!"

The nonbinary rapper (preferred pronouns: God/Goddess, Paperboy Prince, they/them), Instagram personality (followers: 37.7 thousand), and former Andrew Yang hype man (lyrics: "Doing it for Yang/and I put that on gang/Thousand Dollars/Yang Gang!") is one of more than thirty Democrats competing in the primary, in June. The winner is expected to sweep the general election, in November, so candidates are scrambling to stand out in the crowded field.

Most are running on a progressive platform, but Prince's campaign goes further: cancel rent, abolish the police, legalize psychedelics, and establish "love centers" across the five boroughs. The informal campaign headquarters—the PaperboyPrince.com Love Gallery—is a prototype. Community members can drop by to get a hug, warm up, buy vintage clothing, or grab items from a community refrigerator stocked with milk, turkey sandwiches, and vegetables (that day: carrots, beets, and rutabagas). "I started with six bags of groceries, in my car, in March," Prince, who is twenty-eight, said. "Fast-forward to now, they're pulling up with a tractor-trailer full of food." About twice a week, an eighteen-

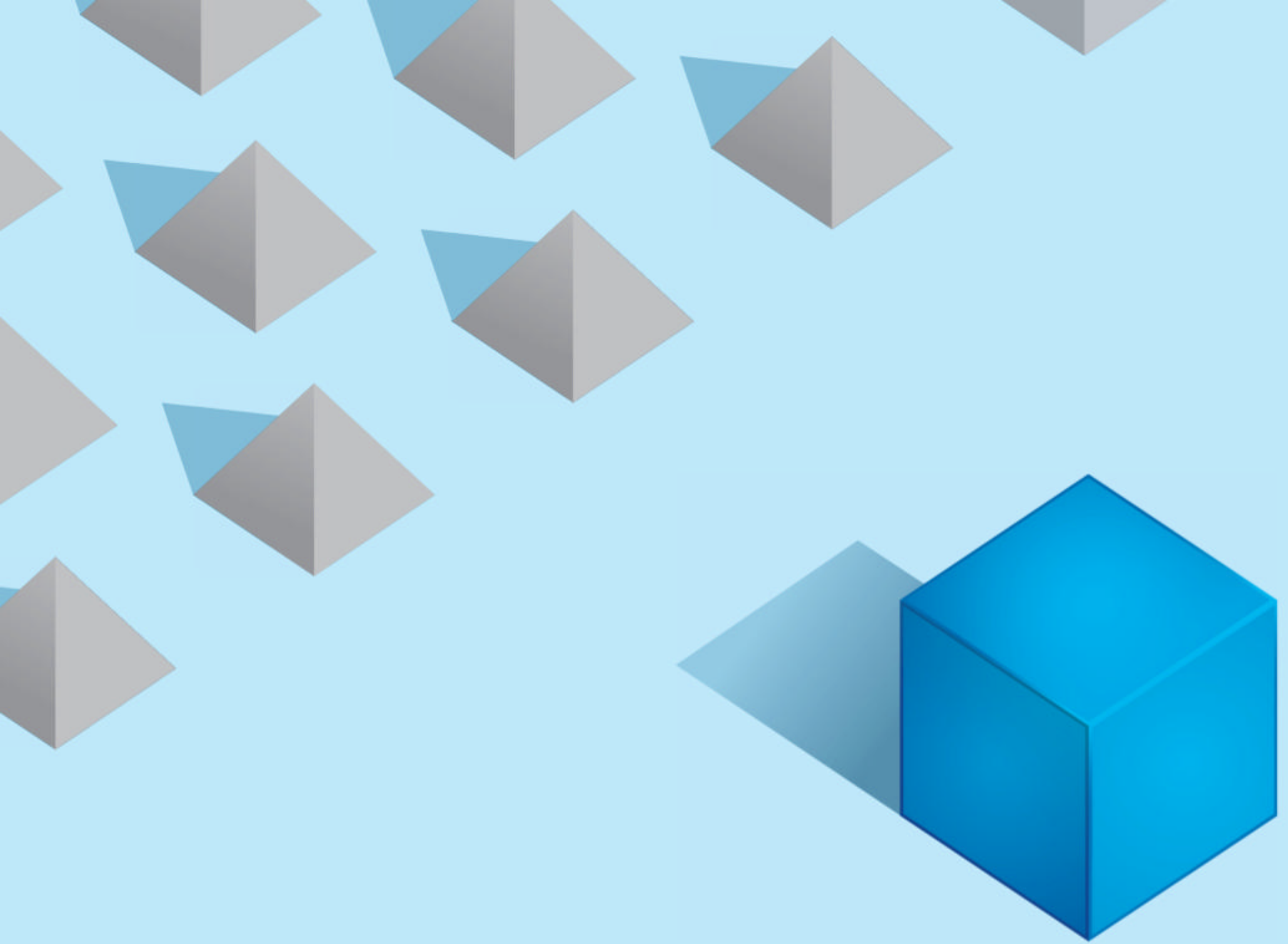
wheeler from the United States Department of Agriculture's Farmers to Families program arrives loaded with boxes of produce for volunteers to hand out. A middle-aged woman who introduced herself as Mrs. Vicky had filled her handbag with beets. "They're good for your blood," she said.

Last month, while other candidates pitched plans—Yang proposed a casino on Governors Island, and Eric Adams,



*Paperboy Love Prince*





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## ONE PATIENT'S STORY OF USING A CONVENIENT SHORT-COURSE ORAL TREATMENT FOR PATIENTS WITH RELAPSING FORMS OF MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS



"I'm enjoying my life, easing back into work and college," Sagal said, as the twenty-four-year-old urban-engineering student described her routine. For a long time, life was significantly more challenging for Sagal, who was diagnosed with relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis, or RRMS, when she was in high school. Her primary-care physician attributed her fatigue and migraines to hormones or developmental issues, and teachers implied that she was lazy. "I blamed myself," Sagal said. "To compensate, I signed up for an early-morning gym class, ate healthily, and pushed myself to do well in school."

Despite her efforts, Sagal's symptoms began to escalate: tingling and numbness in her arms and legs, loss of sense of taste, and increased fatigue. One day during her senior year, Sagal was struck by intense dizziness and vomiting. "My dad took me to the emergency room, where the doctor did not take me seriously," she said. Her father, also a doctor, insisted that she be admitted for testing. A spinal tap revealed that Sagal had MS. "I cried—I thought my life was over," she recalled. "But I also felt a little relieved, thinking, 'I'm not crazy!'" Sagal's neurologist, Dr. Bhupendra O. Khatri, a founder and medical director for the Center for Neurological Disorders, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which treats 3,500 MS patients per year, prescribed a daily pill. She became well enough to attend college on a limited basis and to work part-time.

But then, after five years, Sagal's fatigue and headaches returned and she had to put her college studies and work on pause. A new MRI confirmed some progression of the disease. Dr. Khatri told her about MAVENCLAD® (cladribine) tablets, which had recently come on the market. "I had been following the development of MAVENCLAD for years," Dr. Khatri said. "I felt that Sagal was an excellent candidate for this short-course oral therapy."

He made sure that Sagal and her family were aware of potential side effects. He explained that there is a cancer risk associated with the medication, so she needed to follow screening guidelines prior to treatment. Dr. Khatri also noted that there's a risk of birth defects for pregnant women, and that men and women of childbearing age should use effective birth control during treatment and for at least six months after the last dose of each treatment course. The most common side effects for MAVENCLAD include upper respiratory infection, headache, and low white blood cell counts.

Dr. Khatri was reassured by the fact that "the pharmaceutical company, EMD Serono, Inc., had performed analysis by collecting safety data from two thousand patients over 15 years." During a ninety-six-week clinical trial for MAVENCLAD, inclusive of 433 patients on MAVENCLAD and 437 on placebo, patients who took the medication experienced a 58%

reduction in relapse rates per year, compared to those who took a placebo (MAVENCLAD 0.14 vs placebo 0.33). In people with MS, white blood cells called T and B cells, or lymphocytes, do not communicate properly and become overactive, leading them to attack the central nervous system and cause damage and inflammation. "MAVENCLAD is believed to work by reducing the number of T and B cells in the body, so there are fewer of them to attack the nerves," Dr. Khatri said. Once treatment is finished for the year, the immune system will begin to produce new T and B cells. It may take several months or more for the recovery of T and B cells, but some patients may not go back to pre-treatment levels.

MAVENCLAD is the only short-course oral therapy that requires a maximum of ten treatment days a year over two years. "For me, the best part is the dosing schedule," Sagal said. Patients take one to two tablets for up to five days per month for two consecutive months during the first year, and then repeat that course at the beginning of the second year. "Since I'm not taking MAVENCLAD for ten months out of the year, I don't have to take it everywhere with me," she added.

Your healthcare provider will continue to monitor your health during the two yearly treatment courses, as well as between treatment courses and for at least another two years, during which you do not need to take MAVENCLAD. Your healthcare provider may delay or completely stop treatment with MAVENCLAD if you have severe side effects. It is not known if it is safe and effective for people to restart MAVENCLAD after the full four-year period.

Sagal completed her second course of treatment in August of 2020. Today, she and Dr. Khatri are pleased with how she's doing. "Over all the years I've known Sagal, she seems more like herself now," Dr. Khatri said. Sagal has returned to college, though classes are virtual due to the coronavirus, and works part-time. "MS is not holding me back," she said. Reflecting on her experience, she said, "I would offer this advice to people who are newly diagnosed with MS: There are people who care. Stay hopeful!"



US-MAV-00525

MAVENCLAD is a prescription medicine used to treat relapsing forms of multiple sclerosis (MS), to include relapsing-remitting disease and active secondary progressive disease, in adults. Because of its safety profile, MAVENCLAD is generally used in people who have tried another MS medicine that they could not tolerate or that has not worked well enough. MAVENCLAD is not recommended for use in people with clinically isolated syndrome (CIS).

**MAVENCLAD may cause serious side effects.**

**Treatment with MAVENCLAD may increase your risk of developing cancer. You should follow healthcare provider instructions about screening for cancer. Because of the risk of fetal harm, do not take MAVENCLAD if you are pregnant or of childbearing potential and not using effective birth control.**



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<sup>†</sup>Depending on your weight.

Please see Important Information, including **serious side effects**, on the following pages.



## IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT MAVENCLAD® (cladribine) tablets, for oral use

Read this information carefully before using MAVENCLAD and each time you get a refill, as there may be new information. This information does not take the place of talking with your healthcare provider (HCP).

### What is the most important information I should know about MAVENCLAD?

#### MAVENCLAD can cause serious side effects, including:

- **Risk of cancer (malignancies).** Treatment with MAVENCLAD may increase your risk of developing cancer. Talk to your healthcare provider about your risk of developing cancer if you receive MAVENCLAD. You should follow your healthcare provider instructions about screening for cancer.
- **MAVENCLAD may cause birth defects if used during pregnancy. Females must not be pregnant when they start treatment with MAVENCLAD or become pregnant during MAVENCLAD dosing and within 6 months after the last dose of each yearly treatment course. Stop your treatment with MAVENCLAD and call your healthcare provider right away if you become pregnant during treatment with MAVENCLAD.**
  - For females who are able to become pregnant:
    - Your healthcare provider should order a pregnancy test for you before you begin your first and second yearly treatment course of MAVENCLAD to make sure that you are not pregnant. Your healthcare provider will decide when to do the test.
    - Use effective birth control (contraception) on the days on which you take MAVENCLAD and for at least 6 months after the last dose of each yearly treatment course.
      - Talk to your healthcare provider if you use oral contraceptives (the “pill”).
      - You should use a second method of birth control on the days on which you take MAVENCLAD and for at least 4 weeks after your last dose of each yearly treatment course.
  - For males with female partners who are able to become pregnant:
    - Use effective birth control (contraception) during the days on which you take MAVENCLAD and for at least 6 months after the last dose of each yearly treatment course.

### What is MAVENCLAD?

MAVENCLAD is a prescription medicine used to treat relapsing forms of multiple sclerosis (MS), to include relapsing remitting disease and active secondary progressive disease, in adults. Because of its safety profile, MAVENCLAD is generally used in people who have tried another MS medicine that they could not tolerate or that has not worked well enough.

MAVENCLAD is not recommended for use in people with clinically isolated syndrome (CIS).

It is not known if MAVENCLAD is safe and effective in children under 18 years of age.

#### **Do not** take MAVENCLAD if you:

- have cancer (malignancy).
- are pregnant, plan to become pregnant, or are a woman of childbearing age or a man able to father a child and you are not using birth control. See **“What is the most important information I should know about MAVENCLAD?”**
- are human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) positive.
- have active infections, including tuberculosis (TB), hepatitis B or C.
- are allergic to cladribine.
- are breastfeeding. See **“Before you take MAVENCLAD, tell your healthcare provider about all of your medical conditions, including if you:”**

#### **Before you take MAVENCLAD, tell your healthcare provider about all of your medical conditions, including if you:**

- think you have an infection.
- have heart failure.
- have liver or kidney problems.
- have taken, take, or plan to take medicines that affect your immune system or your blood cells, or other treatments for MS. Certain medicines can increase your risk of getting an infection.
- have had a recent vaccination or are scheduled to receive any vaccinations. You should not receive live or live-attenuated vaccines within the 4 to 6 weeks preceding your treatment with MAVENCLAD. You should not receive these types of vaccines during your treatment with MAVENCLAD and until your healthcare provider tells you that your immune system is no longer weakened.
- have or have had cancer.
- are breastfeeding or plan to breastfeed. It is not known if MAVENCLAD passes into your breast milk. Do not breastfeed on the days on which you take MAVENCLAD, and for 10 days after the last dose. See **“Do not** take MAVENCLAD if you:”

#### **Tell your healthcare provider about all the medicines you take**, including prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements.

#### **How should I take MAVENCLAD?**

- Limit contact with your skin. Avoid touching your nose, eyes and other parts of the body. If you get MAVENCLAD on your skin or on any surface, wash it right away with water.
- Take MAVENCLAD at least 3 hours apart from other medicines taken by mouth during the 4- to 5-day MAVENCLAD treatment week.



- o If you miss a dose, take it as soon as you remember on the same day. If the whole day passes before you remember, take your missed dose the next day. **Do not take 2 doses at the same time.** Instead, you will extend the number of days in that treatment week.

Your healthcare provider will continue to monitor your health during the 2 yearly treatment courses, and for at least another 2 years during which you do not need to take MAVENCLAD. It is not known if MAVENCLAD is safe and effective in people who restart MAVENCLAD treatment more than 2 years after completing 2 yearly treatment courses.

### **What are the possible side effects of MAVENCLAD?**

#### **MAVENCLAD can cause serious side effects, including:**

- o See **"What is the most important information I should know about MAVENCLAD?"**
- o **low blood cell counts.** Low blood cell counts have happened and can increase your risk of infections during your treatment with MAVENCLAD. Your healthcare provider will do blood tests before you start treatment with MAVENCLAD, during your treatment with MAVENCLAD, and afterward, as needed.
- o **serious infections such as:**
  - **TB, hepatitis B or C, and shingles (herpes zoster).** Fatal cases of TB and hepatitis have happened with cladribine during clinical studies. Tell your healthcare provider right away if you get any symptoms of the following infection related problems or if any of the symptoms get worse, including:
    - fever
    - aching painful muscles
    - headache
    - feeling of being generally unwell
    - loss of appetite
    - burning, tingling, numbness or itchiness of the skin in the affected area
    - skin blotches, blistered rash and severe pain
  - **progressive multifocal leukoencephalopathy (PML).** PML is a rare brain infection that usually leads to death or severe disability. Although PML has not been seen in MS patients taking MAVENCLAD, it may happen in people with weakened immune systems. Symptoms of PML get worse over days to weeks. Call your healthcare provider right away if you have any new or worsening neurologic signs or symptoms of PML, that have lasted several days, including:
    - weakness on 1 side of your body
    - loss of coordination in your arms and legs

- decreased strength
- problems with balance
- changes in your vision
- changes in your thinking or memory
- confusion
- changes in your personality

- o **liver problems.** MAVENCLAD may cause liver problems. Your healthcare provider should do blood tests to check your liver before you start taking MAVENCLAD. Call your healthcare provider right away if you have any of the following symptoms of liver problems:

- nausea
- vomiting
- stomach pain
- tiredness
- loss of appetite
- your skin or the whites of your eyes turn yellow
- dark urine

- o **allergic reactions (hypersensitivities).** MAVENCLAD can cause serious allergic reactions. Stop your treatment with MAVENCLAD and go to the closest emergency room for medical help right away if you have any signs or symptoms of allergic reactions. Symptoms of an allergic reaction may include: skin rash, swelling or itching of the face, lips, tongue or throat, or trouble breathing.

- o **heart failure.** MAVENCLAD may cause heart failure, which means your heart may not pump as well as it should. Call your healthcare provider or go to the closest emergency room for medical help right away if you have any signs or symptoms such as shortness of breath, a fast or irregular heart beat, or unusual swelling in your body. Your healthcare provider may delay or completely stop treatment with MAVENCLAD if you have severe side effects.

#### **The most common side effects of MAVENCLAD include:**

- o upper respiratory infection
- o headache
- o low white blood cell counts

These are not all the possible side effects of MAVENCLAD. Call your doctor for medical advice about side effects. You may report side effects to FDA at 1-800-FDA-1088.

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the Brooklyn borough president, promised to hire the city's first female police commissioner—Prince had their campaign slogan (“It’s our time!”) tattooed on their right arm; shared their cell-phone number (dial PAPER-9-2327) at a press conference; challenged the other candidates to a pie-in-the-face contest; and met with their thirteen-year-old campaign manager, a seventh grader who goes to school on the Upper West Side. “Anytime that somebody is interested in what we’re doing, and wants to be a part of the team, I take it very seriously,” said Prince, who had on white overalls and a lime-green Adidas x Ivy Park jacket (“Beyoncé gave it to me”), Jeremy Scott teddy-bear sneakers, a plush animatronic Chihuahua purse (“It’s fire”), and a coonskin cap. “My thing is about believing in the youth,” Prince said. “It’s about supporting those who people might overlook.”

Theo Demel, the teen campaign manager, sat in a floral armchair petting a dog that had meandered over. “I think homework’s unconstitutional,” he said. This was Demel’s first time in Bushwick; he wore three cloth face masks and kept squirting hand sani-

tizer onto his palms. “A lot of people are going to laugh at me, and say I’m just a kid, but I honestly think that you work your ass off in middle school, and then you go to high school and do it again.” He shook his head; the dog licked his hand. “You’re supposed to look back at your childhood and be able to be a child! I think it should go to the Supreme Court, honestly.”

It was late afternoon, and a few volunteers had gathered for the first in-person campaign meeting. Someone asked how much money had been raised.

“I don’t know,” Demel said, blushing. Asked how much they were trying to raise, Demel looked at his feet. “I don’t know,” he said. “Paperboy, what’s the answer to that?”

“Well, I think a good goal is two million,” Prince said.

“Shit, yeah, that’d be good!”

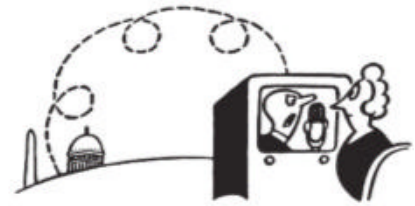
“C’mon, we gotta watch our language!” the candidate chided.

The meeting adjourned. Demel hailed an Uber back to his parents’ apartment, in Manhattan, and Prince changed into their “love armor”: a magenta-and-gold robe that evoked Big Bird in a graduation gown, acces-

sorized with a cloth crown and Roll-erblades. They were headed to busk in front of the Popeyes near the Myrtle Avenue-Broadway subway station. “My job is to remind people that the city is still alive,” Prince said. “I’m like a synonym of a Friday night.”

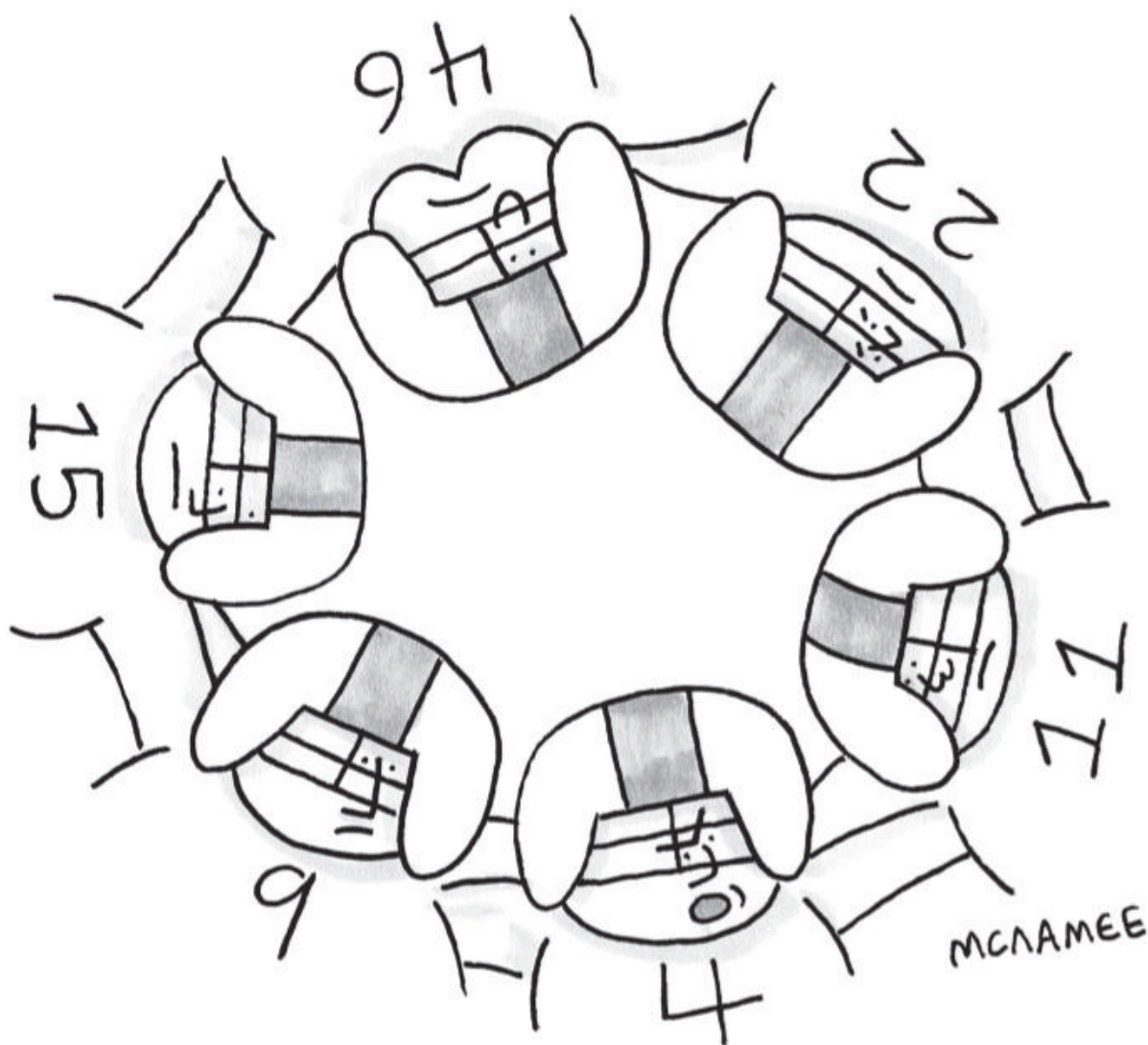
—Adam Iscoe

## FREE SPEECH DEPT. PRIVATE-ISH



Law professors love hypotheticals, the more specific the better. Legal niceties are often arcane (read: boring); enlivening the arcana with fictional scenarios can help students grasp the material (read: stay awake). If a tree falls in the forest and squashes the last living red panda, who’s liable? Under Article II of the Constitution, would Meghan Markle be eligible to run for President? “A good hypothetical is one that’s theoretically plausible but almost certainly would never happen,” RonNell Andersen Jones, a law professor at the University of Utah, said recently. For a decade and a half, Jones, a former clerk for Sandra Day O’Connor, has taught a seminar on the First Amendment, focussing on dilemmas that have been either created or exacerbated by new forms of media. Most years, she has prompted class discussions with one or both of the following hypotheticals: “Imagine that a major social network bans a powerful political speaker, such as a sitting President” and, to illustrate the thin line between free speech and incitement of violence, “Let’s say a crowd gathers outside the White House or the Capitol, riled up and maybe armed, and someone gets up in front of the crowd and shouts, ‘Let’s go in and hang ’em right now!’” She continued, “Among the many challenges of living through this era, one of the surreal challenges of being a legal educator is that you have to keep rewriting your lectures. Every time I turn on the news, almost, I have to go back to my notes and delete ‘Imagine, if you will. . . .’”

The other day, Jones convened the inaugural meeting of this semester’s



*“Why do you only call a huddle when you want something?”*





— ★ ★ ★ —

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First Amendment seminar, over Zoom. “Hey, Darian, good to see you,” she said to one student (male, cardigan, trendy haircut). “Hi, other Darian,” she said to another student (female, glasses, ordinary haircut). A student named Joel Andersen popped up. “Did your wife get her vaccine yet, Joel?” Jones asked.

“The first round,” Andersen said.

“Awesome,” Jones said. (A law-school class in Utah, it turns out, is just like a law-school class anywhere, except that everyone is nicer.)

After the small talk, Jones began. “Let me take a second here to acknowledge the enormity of the moment,” she said. “If things feel to you right now like they are not normal, it is because this is categorically, absolutely, unquestionably not a normal time. We are on the twenty-second day of a year that feels like it has been a decade long, and one in which there has not been a single day that has gone by where I haven’t been asked, as a constitutional-law scholar, to comment to the press or to the public on something wholly new and unexpected and alarming.” The students stayed politely muted. For the moment, the source of so much of the enormity—the man who had begun the week as the most powerful person in the world and had ended it by slinking into swampy Floridian ignominy—remained He Who Shall Not Be Named.

Jones asked the students, “What makes this an exciting moment to be thinking about speech and press issues, and what makes it a daunting one?”

Within seconds, He was Named. “With Trump being banned from Twitter, is that an attack on his freedom of speech?” another student, Kaleb Evans, asked. “In one way, it is a private-ish platform. But, in another way, is it really private, since almost anyone can make an account? It is free to make an account, and there’s no real restrictions, I think.”

“There are actually pages and pages of restrictions, but none of us read them,” Jones said, defanging the correction with a laugh.

Andersen raised the example of WeChat, a Chinese app that has more than a billion users, at least nineteen million of them in the United States. Last year, as part of his strategy of anti-

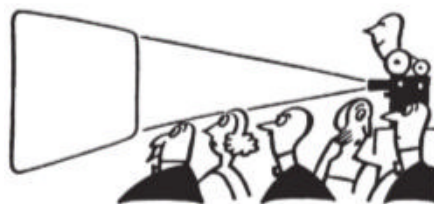
diplomacy against the Chinese government, President Trump signed an executive order restricting Americans’ ability to use the app. Andersen wondered whether such an order was consistent with the First Amendment, especially since it wasn’t clear whether apps like WeChat are standard commercial enterprises, journalistic outlets, or both.

Jones nodded. “We have built our doctrine on a set of assumptions,” she said. “Then the assumptions start to shift, and the doctrine lags in catching up with them. That has always been true, but it’s staggeringly true at this heightened moment of constitutional chaos.”

In most of the students’ Zoom squares, the afternoon light was fading. A minute before the class period ended, Jones wrapped up the discussion—“We have a really exciting time ahead of us this semester, and we will absolutely not lack for content”—and the squares disappeared. “You only go to law school once,” Jones said. “You only live with your feet in the time period that they’re planted in. It’s hard to convey that there was such a thing as normalcy or stability prior to this. And maybe it doesn’t matter.”

—Andrew Marantz

## SHOWRUNNER TWO VIRUSES



Weeks before his latest drama, “It’s a Sin,” was set to air, the British showrunner Russell T. Davies lay awake in bed, convinced that he’d made a terrible mistake. The series, which follows a group of friends in the early years of the AIDS crisis, had wrapped in January, 2020, just as COVID-19 arrived in England. “We were editing the show while all the P.P.E. started to be introduced, and all the distancing,” he recalled, over Zoom, the other day. He began to fear that his timing was awful: “I quietly thought the series would die.” Last month, it premiered in the U.K., to excellent response: friends and fans got in touch; H.I.V. charities credited the show with a spike in both testing and donations. Davies



Russell T. Davies

found himself booked on ITV’s flagship news program.

Davies, who is fifty-seven, was in Swansea, having decamped from Manchester to be closer to family. (He’s in a bubble with “the better sister, and the better niece,” he joked.) He wore a blue shirt and black glasses, his hair slightly askew. “Blasted,” he said, from a walk in the wind. “But I’m alive!”

Behind him were posters he’d drawn for productions at a Cardiff theatre where he had worked before landing a job at BBC Wales, in 1985. It was a formative, risky period in more ways than one: the following year, he appeared in an educational film about H.I.V./AIDS. He moved to Manchester, discovered the city’s vibrant gay scene, and sneaked L.G.B.T. story lines into soaps. But by the time he developed “Queer as Folk,” his first series about gay life, AIDS “was beginning to *not* be a death sentence. And I was absolutely determined that we would stop being defined by an illness.” He stands by his decision to keep the epidemic out of the show’s plot, which angered activists at the time. “It liberated those characters,” he said. “H.I.V. and AIDS had been the constant story of all gay men popping up in fiction—in cop shows, in dramas, in soap operas—they would inevitably drag the disease with them.”

“It’s a Sin,” which will be released on HBO Max this month, recalls the uncertainties of the era, but also the unprecedented freedoms, with triumphant



one-night stands and a hookup montage that captures the joy of coming out and coming into one's own. "It's a really horrible virus. It's a nasty little fucker," he said. "I think we've spent a lot of time remembering the deathbeds; it's time to remember the lives." He added, "And, my God, we've all had some great nights, frankly—even this withered old husk sitting here."

"Queer as Folk," with its similarly blunt but celebratory ethos, became a cult classic. After running the 2006 revival of "Doctor Who" (and earning an O.B.E. for "services to drama"), Davies leveraged his influence to pitch "Cucumber," a spikier series that he'd been quietly developing for years, about a middle-aged gay man in present-day Manchester. He considers the triptych of "It's a Sin," "Queer as Folk," and "Cucumber," which premiered in 2015, to be his life's work. "I'm not saying it's finished—I'll gladly still be around to write about gay men in their seventies," he said with a laugh, then paused to consider the idea more seriously. "That will fascinate me. Already, I hear stories about old men having to go back into the closet when they go into care homes. Suddenly, they're entering a straight world again." Davies may pitch the care-home idea one day, but he has no intention of living it. "Not me!" he said. "I'll be sitting there playing 'Hello, Dolly!' if I have to."

For now, he plans to focus on mentoring screenwriters who've reached out during lockdown, responding to notes from bereaved viewers, and enjoying some calm—the first he's had since his husband, Andrew Smith, died of a brain tumor in 2018. Davies had spent eight years as Smith's caretaker, and he wrote much of "It's a Sin" while the loss was still fresh. The death of one of the characters, who exhibits signs of dementia following his diagnosis of AIDS, "is almost stage for stage Andrew's death," he said. The parallels, although not conscious at the time, were cathartic. "I'm immensely sad he's not here at the moment, because he would find the success of this hilarious," Davies continued. "He would be loving it. Me being on 'News at Ten'—he'd be very happy for me, but he would be taking the piss like you wouldn't believe."

—Alex Barasch

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A NOTE TO TED CRUZ







## PERSONAL HISTORY

# BETTER THAN A BALLOON

*Life in an unloved neighborhood.*

BY RIVKA GALCHEN

For ten years, I have lived in a neighborhood defined by the Port Authority Bus Station to the north, Penn Station to the south, the Lincoln Tunnel to the west, and, to the east, a thirty-one-foot stainless-steel sculpture of a needle threaded through a fourteen-foot button. Though there are many, many people here, the neighborhood is not a people place. It is better suited to the picking up and dropping off of large pallets. Within this homey quadrilateral are a methadone clinic, a parole office, liquor shops with cashiers behind thick plastic screens, a fancy Japanese clothing store, plenty of pawnshops, the Times Building, drumming studios, seven sub-

way lines, and at least four places to get your sewing machine repaired. A young runaway, emerging from one of the many transit hubs, might find herself—after maybe buying a coffee-cart doughnut and being shouted at for hesitating at a crosswalk, and being nearly hit by a bus—sheepishly deciding to give it one more go back home. There is, though, a lot of office space here. To walk north on Eighth Avenue in order to get to the subway entrance on Fortieth Street is to know what it is to be a migrating lemming.

This is where I have raised my daughter, from birth to her current age of seven. I moved here for pragmatic reasons. I do wonder at times what it means that

when my daughter sees someone passed out on the sidewalk, or walking erratically and maybe threatening people with a 7-Eleven Big Gulp cup, she neither panics nor thinks to ask if that person needs help—she just holds my hand a smidge tighter and keeps walking. There aren't a lot of young children in this neighborhood. She seems at ease with her exceptional state, and will one day be confused, I suspect, to live somewhere with many people her same-ish size.

I realize that it sounds like I'm bragging about my neighborhood. I am never sure where my bragging and my complaining meet up for coffee to agree about their views on the world. Arguably, these blocks resemble the nineteen-seventies New York romanticized in film and on TV. But do we really want ourselves or anyone we love to live in "Taxi Driver"? Until recently, there were dusty and tattered pennant banners announcing the "Grand Opening" of the Big Apple Meat Market on Ninth Avenue, a market that had been open for at least twenty years. I used to see very good-looking, well-dressed people getting professional photos taken there. Also sometimes at an abandoned lot nearby. The photographers have had to location-scout again, however, as the market was torn down not long ago and replaced with a tall and as yet unoccupied glass building. The community complained about the loss of the Big Apple market, where you could buy a gallon of mayonnaise and cheap hot food, so a new, affordable home has been found for the store, a couple of blocks south, though there are no banners or "Grand Opening" sign. I am what I am: I have grown into an adult who likes pumpernickel bread and red cabbage, but there were years when my partner's young sons longed for Eggo waffles and bacon and Campbell's chicken soup, and Big Apple was there for us.

I was born, somewhat randomly, in Toronto, and between the first and twelfth grades I lived in Norman, Oklahoma, and after that I moved East. I have lived in New York since 1998. I've long held the belief that being a fan or a cheerleader of New York is ethically and aesthetically dubious. Like the Yankees and, for that matter, the Mets, New York needs no more fans. This place is dense with wealth, with cultural capital, with anecdote; it is the setting for too

*Like the Yankees, New York needs no more fans, except in certain quarters.*



many movies, books, and television shows. To be a vocal fan of New York is like hanging out with the popular kids. Norman, Oklahoma, where so many people I love and admire live—now there's a place that could use a fan club. Loving New York, which I do, has often made me feel morally compromised, even alien to myself. Moving to the neighborhood, for pragmatic reasons, solved that emotional tangle for me. Almost no one likes this neighborhood or wants to live here. It would be O.K. to cheer for it, if I could learn how to.

At first, we kept our windows open for fresh air, but soon we noticed a pervasive black soot. It turned up on our dishware, our shelving. It was unimpressed with Palmolive and a scratch-free sponge. Was this substance, which was likely lining our alveoli, the kind of character-producing grit for which people move to the city? I have almost never chosen the neighborhood I lived in—it was always determined by external factors, often institutional housing. So I'm accustomed to a time of getting to know a neighborhood, of trying to convince oneself of its unelected virtues.

I went on walks, amid the soot. Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe, an obese detective who never leaves his apartment and raises orchids, lives on Thirty-fifth Street, according to a plaque there. Bob's Park is nearby. Bob, I learned, had a pet boa constrictor, wore Scottish kilts and an Indian headdress, and was an adopted member of the Blackfoot tribe. He did a lot of good work for tenants' rights in his building. In 1992, he was found stabbed to death in his apartment; the crime was never solved. One afternoon, I see Baryshnikov at a bagel place. This neighborhood is full of dancers, I notice. The Trisha Brown Dance Company has an office here. There are also many strip clubs. Now and again, I'll see a velvet rope I have no interest in being invited to cross. I keep thinking that at any moment I'll find the durably gentle side of this neighborhood. Instead, I find a stable where livery horses are kept, on levels, like parked cars. The DHL building is kind of cheery, as parts of it are painted yellow.

Our favorite twenty-four-hour deli, on the corner of Thirty-seventh Street and Ninth Avenue, is owned by a Ye-

meni immigrant who has been running it for nearly forty years. It has never been closed for even a day. Not through 9/11, not through the blackouts, not through Hurricane Sandy, not through the pandemic. The owner tells me he slept on a cot in the basement during the first six years of the business. Our neighborhood is home for many homeless people, and I've seen him give food and drinks to people who don't pay and I've also seen him ask people who are causing a problem to leave. He's at the register less often these days; instead, we see his children and grandchildren. When I'm tired or overwhelmed, my partner orders me a special treat: an egg-white-and-bacon breakfast sandwich on a toasted English muffin. It arrives home wrapped in thin foil, and tastes like someone taking care of you.

Our apartment overlooks the entrance to the Lincoln Tunnel, which I estimate to be the source of at least two-thirds of the soot. The traffic is particularly heavy one night. My daughter looks out the window, noticing the long line of red brake lights that distinguishes the outgoing traffic from the long line of white headlights that characterizes the incoming. It's a beautiful view, she says. A memory comes to me, of a friend telling me how her grandmother, when she visited from New Delhi, used to describe a night scene like this as "a necklace of rubies and a necklace of diamonds."

The Two Bros pizza at the corner of Eighth Avenue and Thirty-eighth Street sells a fresh, hot slice of cheese pizza for a dollar. There are other Two Bros in the city—there are other Two Bros in the neighborhood—but this one is the best. It is nearly always busy, and it has a fast-moving and efficient line. I fell in love with Two Bros when I was pregnant. I would sometimes step out to have a slice there an hour or two after dinner. You could eat the slice at a table in the back and feel companioned and alone at once. The lighting is like that of a surgical theatre. The Mexican pop music is a reliable endorphin generator. And though the ingredients that go into a dollar slice of pizza do not come from a family farm in the Hudson Valley, these slices are supreme. The clientele, those evenings, was a mix of transgender prostitutes, thin young men, and

quiet immigrant families, often with suitcases, headed I have no idea where.

After my daughter was born, I would still get a slice now and again, and, as soon as she was old enough, a slice was a special treat, better than a balloon. By the time she was two or so, she liked holding the dollar and paying for her slice herself. When she was three, she could proudly hold the paper plate with the hot slice on it, and now she can even take that hesitant first bite, where you gauge how hot the slice is and how much of a triangle you can bite off.

Because there are so few babies or children in this neighborhood, when you travel with a baby or a child you and the child are treated like a majestic presence, almost like tigers. My daughter is celebrated at the grocery store, at the pizza place, at the deli, and even on the street. In this neighborhood, crowded with mentally unwell people, and with drug dealers and panhandlers, and with tired office workers and sex workers and fruit vendors and psychics and police officers—all these people, nearly to a one, say something tender to a child, whether you want them to or not. I remember once journeying to the idyllic family neighborhood of Carroll Gardens, in Brooklyn, where there were more babies and children than pigeons, and no one seemed interested in my baby at all, and I felt like a pigeon.

I have lived in other New York neighborhoods. For a time, I lived near the Mount Sinai Hospital Complex, on Ninety-eighth Street, right near where the Metro-North northbound train changes its path from underground to aboveground. All conversation would pause when a train went by, as in a running gag in a sitcom. Later, I lived in Morningside Heights, near Columbia University, a neighborhood that some find boring, and none find cool, but, as the city changes and changes and changes, Morningside Heights has a permanent population of thousands of eighteen- to twenty-two-year-olds. They reside, forever young, alongside a mysteriously eternal elderly community. Time does not pass in Morningside Heights. In my seven years there, I never changed age. The Cathedral of St. John the Divine will always be partially under renovation. The Hungarian Pastry Shop, now owned



by a Greek family, will always be crowded and will never have Internet service or music; the outdoor seating is in use even now. I lived briefly in two Brooklyn neighborhoods: Fort Greene and Brooklyn Heights. Both were so pleasant as to make me feel uncomfortable. Maybe because I grew up the daughter of Israeli immigrants in Oklahoma, a neighborhood feels “right” to me only when it suits me in no particular way—when it seems unlikely that I’ll run into another household like my own. If I wear the clothing that might earn me compliments in Fort Greene or Brooklyn Heights, here, near the Lincoln Tunnel, those same clothes make me look as if I’m demented.

When my yearning for a sense of softness and sanity in the neighborhood really soars, I go to Esposito’s butcher shop on Thirty-eighth Street. A handful of businesses have been in this neighborhood for decades, and the butcher shop has been here since 1932. When I go in there, the staff ask me about my kids. They ask everyone about their kids, or their dogs, or their parents, or whatever there is to ask about. In the ten years I’ve lived here, the owner has been there every operating day, six days a week, working alongside his staff. One of the butchers is strikingly handsome. He always smiles and says it’s nice to see me. He says that to everyone and gives everyone that smile. Still, it retains its power. It took me years to realize that the floor on the butchers’ side of the glass display case is elevated by about six inches; the butchers look like gods on that side.

Esposito’s has a take-a-number ticket dispenser. The slips of paper come out like interlocking Escher frog tiles. Of course, my daughter loves to pull those numbered papers. When your number gets called, it’s heraldic. With that take-a-number ticket in hand, I get something I very rarely get—a felt connection to my childhood. I pulled this same kind of numbered ticket at the Skaggs Alpha Beta, in Norman. I would wait, with my mother, to be called on. My mom would ask for Muenster cheese “very thinly sliced, please.” Sometimes the deli-counter worker had trouble with my mom’s accent. You could measure the deli person’s character by how

thin he sliced the Muenster. That was my mother’s thinking, and I guess it’s mine, too. To this day, a thick slice of Muenster signals an uncaring soul. These Thirty-eighth Street butcher guys would slice the Muenster very thin, I’m sure of it, even if I no longer like Muenster, and recently for the first time heard it called the children’s cheese.

It was my daughter’s reaching toddler age that began to alter my relationship to this neighborhood. For the first years, my heart had been open to it. I had been proud of its lack of charm, as if this were a consequence of its integrity. I had gone so far as to mildly dislike the perfectly clean and inoffensive “short-term luxury-rental” building that went up on this otherwise rough block—the Emerald Green. The complex planted ginkgo trees all along the block’s sidewalk. The trees were thin and pathetic and nearly leafless at first. In winter, the building’s staff lit up the trunks of the trees by wrapping them with white Christmas lights. In summer, they planted tulips in the enclosures in front of the entrance. As it grew cold, they planted some sort of hearty kale. We don’t need this! I remember thinking. This is even less charming than the lack of charm! Now I worship that building. My daughter and I both wait with anticipation for the November day when they wrap the ginkgo trees in those white lights. In fall, the ginkgo leaves tumble down as elegant yellow fans. The Emerald Green



employee who hoses down the sidewalks every single morning, always pausing as we approach—he has my heart.

A recent pandemic afternoon, in socially distanced line yet again with my daughter for two dollars’ worth of Two Bros pizza, the normal sonic atmosphere of honking and Mexican pop music is augmented by more shouting than usual. I can’t make out what’s going on. Two fashionably dressed Japanese

teen-agers start singing Frank Sinatra’s “New York, New York.” There’s a fight going on. We cross the street. One of the shouting protagonists tells us that he’s glad we crossed the street, that there’s a guy with a wrench over there and he’s crazy. It’s unclear who provoked whom, and in the end the only violence involves thrown soda bottles—though, another recent night, someone was stabbed to death on this corner.

It’s not the violence in the neighborhood that makes me, at times, really hate living here. If anything, it’s clearer than ever how safe my family and I are, relatively, except from maybe being hit by a car or dying of lung disease. But the neighborhood used to feel to me like a rough part of a softer place, and nowadays the roughness feels more general, and this makes it harder to cheer for a neighborhood that is so loud and dirty and uninterested in or unfit for human life. It feels fit for delivery trucks and construction dust and as a postcard of man’s inhumanity to man. Years ago, under the Port Authority crossway, there was some sort of shelter—or at least meal, phone, and shower service—provided, and there is no such thing there anymore, only lots of people with substance-abuse and mental-health problems wandering around with a memory of this being a place where one could find help. There’s also a ubiquitous day-and-night smell of pot. Some people love that smell. I don’t. I complain about it to my partner one day, on the sidewalk. My daughter says, What smell? Of skunk, her dad says. What does skunk smell like? she asks. Do you mean that smell that is like burnt mushrooms with lots of spices? I don’t like spicy food, she concludes.

Twelve years ago—before my time!—the fifth floor of our building was often lit up with red lights. The street at night was crowded with limousines and S.U.V.s. This was the side effect of an improvised and lucrative business run by a man known as Big Daddy Lou. He and his wife made nearly a million dollars in ten months running a sex club favored by bankers and lawyers. For building-code purposes, certain small rooms were designated for recording books on tape. Big Daddy Lou paid at least two hundred and sixty thousand dollars in a no-jail-time plea deal that barred him from strip



clubs and similar businesses. He could recently be seen on Twitter, posting about voter suppression in Georgia. A custodian on the second floor said that he hadn't known about the club, but that he had "seen many pretty girls coming through, and no one caused a problem." Judging by the movies and TV shows I see advertised on posters, this is precisely the kind of caper that millions of Americans dream of being near. I am living the dream, or almost.

Oh, I know your neighborhood, a man I was interviewing for a journalism piece once said. He was a scientist who was working on robotics that could land, and then rove, on the moon. He said he had worked in a space not far from Penn Station. He loved it, he said. He said that the company used a fine red Mars simulant dust, and that the dust had caused troubles, as it sifted down onto the silk-tie-manufacturing business that was one floor below. The problem had been resolved, and the two businesses had mutually admired each other's work.

For my daughter, this neighborhood is dense with magic and love. This is her childhood. I will give you an example, one that involves the Lot-Less store that we pass on the way to the subway. In this memory, she is three years old, and we are headed to her preschool. My daughter is supposed to bring in her blankie from home, to be used for nap time for the rest of the year. My daughter has always been very interested in fulfilling these sorts of expectations.

On the sidewalk that day, I realize that I've forgotten the blankie. I suggest that we go into this Lot-Less store, that maybe we'll find something. "I want a Minnie Mouse blanket," my daughter says, in probably the most clearly enunciated sentence of her life up to that moment. She used to watch "Mickey Mouse Clubhouse" every time she stayed with my mother, and her love for Minnie Mouse mirrored the depth of love between a grandmother and a granddaughter. I try to say that we may not find a Minnie Mouse blanket, but that we shouldn't cry or panic or worry, etc. As it turns out, there is only one blanket on sale in the Lot-Less. It is a Minnie Mouse blanket.

I know the neighborhood so well—I know the old Hartford *Courant* building,

the countless vape shops, the Hamed Fabric, with its clearance sale, the Money Change/Weed World/NY Gift & Luggage, and Daytona Trimming, with its boas—on account of the carrying, and then the strolling, and then the very slow walking, and then the normal-paced walking of these same streets year and again with this child of mine. When she was a baby, the only way to reliably get her to fall asleep was to push her round and round these blocks in her stroller. Amid the honking, shouting, and backfiring, and the music coming from the Wakamba bar, her eyes would close, then stay closed.

She began walking. I was made aware that every tree enclosure and every concrete border was an irresistible balance-beam challenge. To get from our door to the corner took twenty minutes. Each challenge needed to be met, step by careful step, whether coming home or leaving. Some of the enclosures were flat brick. Some were curved metal. What a playground. She knew she could run up to the barrier near the parking garage but then had to wait to pass by it. In any month on any day, she might ask when the ginkgo leaves would turn yellow, when the Christmas lights would go up, when the illuminated snowflake would be hung over the intersection of Ninth Avenue and Thirty-eighth Street. When we neared the corner butcher shop, she would sing a little made-up tune about the butcher, Bobby Esposito (though he goes by, and we always call him, Robert). The tune has a nineteen-forties cadence that I think she picked up from her Irish grandfather.

One afternoon, when we were on a tree-lined, picturesque block of Brooklyn Heights, near where I had once lived, with clean sidewalks and elegant buildings and gaslit lamps and no smell of garbage, my daughter turned to me very seriously and said, "This place is spooooo-ky."

"It is?"

"It would be terrible—terrible!—to live here."

I do my best to adopt her view of our not beautiful neighborhood. After all, what is the Staples store but the enchanted red place that had a sequin notebook in the window for sale? Here is the 7-Eleven, with its bounty of stuffed animals and key chains, where on her

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birthday she got to pick out, after long deliberation, an owl Beanie Baby. The fruit man, whom I find slightly “off” but who is cheerful and always gives her an extra banana whenever we buy anything—where has he been since March? The hat-and-glove sidewalk vender called her Madam President when he gave her that double-bobbled hat which was pretty but itchy. Near that large sculpture of a needle going through a button, there appeared, in a plant enclosure, a metal sculpture of the head of a woman. It looked odd, unlabelled, just that head. I told my daughter that I thought it was someone named Emma Goldman, maybe, but the next time we passed by the sculpture was mysteriously gone.

One day, I have my own experience of magic in the neighborhood. A rack of plastic-wrapped dresses is being wheeled across the street. Its bars are wrapped in tape labelled “Hjelm, Hjelm, Hjelm.” That is very near to the name of the family who lived across the street from me as a child, who were a second family to me. There are so many stories there, but that is not where my mind goes. I realize in that moment that I have been walking, all these years, on the same streets I walked as a seven-year-old girl. These fabric shops, these button emporiums, these sewing-machine-repair shops, even the sparsely populated Ben’s Kosher Delicatessen, which is so large and hard for me to believe in: is it possible that this was exactly where I was once or twice or three times before? With my aunt ordering cheesecake for dessert and taking only a bite and leaving me with the burden of trying to eat the rest out of politeness?

My aunt, who lives in Sydney, Australia, used to come to New York—to these same streets—to buy fabric for her line of clothing for young women. She used to give me leopard-print jeans and crop tops and clingy polyester dresses that no other kid in Oklahoma had. When my aunt went to New York, sometimes my mother and I would fly out to see her.

We are in the back rooms of the third and fourth floors of these buildings. These are my earliest memories of seeing the suits and hats of Orthodox Jewish men. We are being shown bolts of fabric. We are told that they are very

special prints, and that not everyone gets to see these. My aunt has introduced my mother as her “assistant,” and my mother holds a notebook and pen—not something that I have ever seen her do. Usually she holds large stacks of computer code printed on that old dot-matrix computer paper with those side strips you can tear off. My aunt tells the men that she has seen better prices, and that the fabric pills, or tears, or something. We leave, maybe we return, I don’t remember. Later, there is matzo-ball soup with matzo balls of unfathomable scale and fluffiness. These trips are also marked by the marvel of my aunt, her four-inch red fingernails and her resemblance to Tina Turner. It makes the most sense to meet her in New York, or sometimes Los Angeles, since why would she fly all the way out to the Will Rogers World Airport, in Oklahoma City?

I’ve lived my adult life so far away from my childhood, away from whatever madeleines might return it to me, and yet here I am, in some sense having never left this neighborhood. Time has and hasn’t wrought its transformational power. Now it’s my aunt’s children who shop for fabric. They don’t come to these streets; they go to Guangzhou. There are still fabric stores here, but there’s something nostalgic and aspirational about calling the area the garment district. If you look up, there are magnificent Art Deco buildings, one after the other, but in the windows you see dusty stacks, sometimes mannequins, and very little that looks as if it had been moved in years. These are a thousand Miss Havisham stage sets, though before the pandemic there was some trend of expensive, often “organic,” “Made in NYC” brands settling in the area. Here and there, one would see a beautiful person. Café Grumpy, of trendy Greenpoint, had opened a branch here. And Pacific Trimming had recently remodelled, so that if you walked by on Thirty-ninth Street, between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, even the least crafty among us might be filled with a desire for rickrack, for zippers in thirty-six colors, for shank buttons. Shortly before the pandemic made itself credible to New Yorkers, in early March, a fancy food court was opening across the way from Pacific Trimming, the kind of place where one could pay as much for a cup of coffee as you might

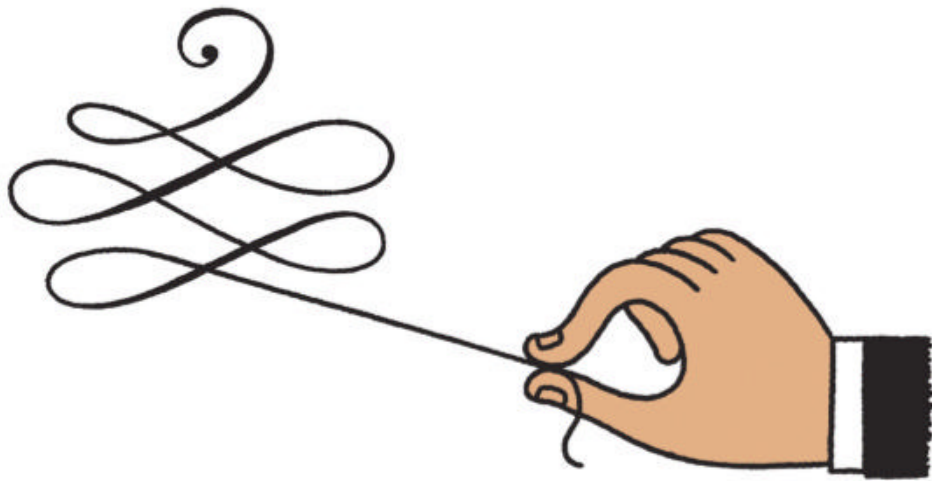
ever dream of, where three soft tacos could be sixteen dollars. I wonder what will happen to that food court.

So much has closed, and now there are no crowds to navigate up Eighth Avenue in the morning. The pandemic has revealed that, apart from all my grouching, this neighborhood was working very well. It lacked sweetness, sure, and hygiene, but it had office space, and it had office workers, and it had breakfast carts and restaurants, and it even had—I saw this three times—unremarkable-looking pedestrians who, seeing someone slumped over in a crosswalk, in the line of traffic, would pick that person up and help him onto the sidewalk. There may be little or no sunny side to the prostitution in this neighborhood, but there’s something cheering about walking by the Holiday Inn park benches at 7:30 A.M., and seeing the tall, long-limbed sex workers in leggings and false eyelashes, sitting together over a coffee, chatting, laughing, adjusting their bras, their hair.

I know it would be wrong to get romantic about it, just as I know that the people on the sidewalk near Fortieth Street who shout at me that they love my hair and where do I get it done are just hawking their salon on the second floor, but what can I say? It sometimes feels as if these chaotic crowds were here because we were all inside the velvet rope to the one club that would interest me, the one where we all belong.

I used to wonder about people who were born in New York and who still lived here. Did it not annoy them that any block they walked down, any business they passed, was liable to bring up a ghoulish or irritating memory? Even good memories can be exhausting. Maybe especially good memories. For this reason, I pitied the New York natives. And envied them, naturally. Lately, I find myself awake in the middle of the night in a panic, wondering, Why am I here? Where are all the people I have known? My mother lives only two miles away, but I still sometimes think, Where is my mom? Where is my black-sheep stuffed animal? Now my child is a native New Yorker. The pandemic will be over one day. She will again make her way up a very crowded Eighth Avenue. New businesses will open. Maybe, years from now, she will wonder what happened to these irreplaceable days. ♦





# KILL YOUR DARLINGS

BY LARRY DOYLE

Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it—whole-heartedly—and delete it before sending your manuscript to press. *Murder your darlings.*  
—Arthur Quiller-Couch,  
“On the Art of Writing” (1916).

Exceptionally fine writing I deleted from “Enigmatic Machinery—A Time-slipper Mystery,” before sending out the manuscript this morning:

Her eyes were all the colors of the rainbow.

“Two bits says you can’t hit that spittoon from over here, little girl.”

We were in love, if that’s what you want to call it.

She was beautiful, like some kind of model. A fashion model, probably.

“Whiskey, straight up,” he snarled. “With a Diet Coke,” he added. “And a glass of ice,” he again snarled.

She was beautiful, like some kind of model. And now here she was on the cover of *Vogue*.

“This town tain’t big enough for both casinos.”

I started thinking, if Lincoln (Honest Abe to his friends) had been six inches taller, it would have been a shoulder wound. Was that the solution?

Her nose was perky, like a precious jewel, and every bit as shiny.

“If you’re lookin’ to stir up trouble don’t come to this here town, please.”

But not just any cover of *Vogue*. *The issue was dated April 14, 1865!*

We were like two peas in a pod, with two other peas on either side.

That was the year I fell in love. It was the year I grew a beard. Totally unrelated.

Her name was Charlemagne, but she called herself Charlie. Both stupid names for a girl.

“We don’t cotton to terrorists ’round here.”

Her ears were like *orecchiette*, literally “little ears” in Italian. Only they were regular size.

Her name was Loralie, but I called her Sis. She thought it was creepy.

The celebrated actor’s .41-calibre bullet bounced harmlessly off the Great Emancipator’s stovepipe hat, only that day reinforced with 22-gauge stovepipe.

She was like a fast car, only not as expensive.

“Old Man Jenkins up the road is pay-

ing fifty dollars a head, and it don’t matter which kind.”

“You can’t say that!” I admonished her.

“I just did,” she retorted.

“O.K., fine,” I rejoined. “*Shouldn’t.*”

“Oh,” she replied. “Got it. Thanks.”

If she was a dog she would have been an Afghan hound. But she was not a dog. She was a human female, and the Afghan part was mostly the haircut.

“Captain!” the first mate shouted. “There’s an enormous kraken, the mythical sea monster said to appear off the coast of Norway, only we are five nautical miles, or 5.75 land miles, off Long Beach Island on the Jersey shore, attacking the starboard bow!”

“Remind me,” the captain barked. “Is that right or left?”

She was like one of those frogs that glowed in the dark.

As the supersized kraken ripped into his loins with its powerful fabled beak, the captain sighed angrily as he looked down at his always pristine white uniform, now drenched in blood that would never come out.

Her name was Cathy and she called herself that. Just Cathy.

Her breasts were clusters of grapes, like in the Bible.

I offered to put her through clown school.

Her hair was black as night and her skin was white as snow. She had been dead approximately six hours.

“After all this adventure, I wondered, doctor,” I asked the professor, who preferred the doctoral honorific though he was only a Ph.D. “Why did you call it the Enigmatic Machine, anyway?”

“Because Time Machine was taken, *dummkopf!*” he spat back in a thick German brogue, clenching his tweed pipe gruffly between his uneven teeth.

She had an ass for days.

“Who wants a snack?” ♦





## PROFILES

# THE BELIEVER

*Glennon Doyle's best-selling gospel of honesty.*

BY ARIEL LEVY

On the morning before the Presidential election, the author and activist Glennon Doyle was drinking coffee in bed, exhausted. For the past forty days, she had led her 1.5 million Instagram followers in taking an action each day to disempower Trump: phone banking, exploring the details of absentee ballots, contributing to progressive candidacies, discussing civics with Elizabeth Warren (who told Doyle, “You, in a time of complete insanity, are a voice for reminding us all we have a center, we have a heart”). But that’s not why she was tired. She hadn’t stopped cleaning in days. “I did the house, then I did the garage, and then yesterday we moved

on to the storage unit,” she said. Doyle’s wife, the soccer legend Abby Wambach, who was stretched out next to her, added, “It sucks in the moment. But now I don’t have to think about that storage unit ever again. And we’re saving four hundred and thirty-three dollars and ninety-nine cents a month.” Doyle nodded and said, “Anxiety has fringe benefits.” The frenzy of organizational activity had been a distraction from pre-election dread. “This is one of those just-keep-going moments,” she continued. “Like: We’re not going to feel any of the feelings. Let’s just keep our little hearts *frozen*.”

From Doyle, this is apostasy. She has

a sticky note on her bathroom mirror that reads “Feel It All.” In her most recent memoir, “Untamed,” she writes, “Every great spiritual teacher tells us the same story about humanity and pain: Don’t avoid it. You need it to evolve, to become.” During a Goop video chat in the early days of quarantine, Doyle advised Gwyneth Paltrow, “*All feelings are for feeling.*”

Doyle, who is forty-four, has always espoused experiencing vividly all that is beautiful and brutal in the world. “Life is *brutiful*,” she wrote in her first book, “Carry On, Warrior,” in 2013. At the time, she was married to a man, and “Christian mommy blogger”—her least favorite sobriquet—was a pretty accurate description of her job. Her blog, Momastery, offered readers a look at her life as a progressive Christian raising three children which was intimate, unguarded, self-revealing. “I found my thing: openness,” she wrote. “I decided that’s what God wanted me to do. . . . I was going to make people feel better about their insides by showing them mine.”

God—at least, the version she had in mind back then—is not much of a presence in “Untamed,” but radical honesty is still focal. The book begins with the story of a trip to the zoo, during which Doyle and her family encounter a tamed cheetah named Tabitha. She imagines what the animal would tell her, if it could talk: “‘I feel restless and frustrated. I have this hunch that everything was supposed to be more beautiful than this.’ . . . She’d sigh and say, ‘I should be grateful. I have a good enough life here. It’s crazy to long for what doesn’t even exist.’ I’d say: Tabitha. You are not crazy. You are a goddam cheetah.”

Each of Doyle’s books has reached the top of the best-seller lists. “Untamed” has sold more than two million copies. After reading it, the singer Adele posted, “It’s as if I just flew into my body for the very first time.” Oprah Winfrey called Doyle one of the “awakened leaders who are using their voices and talent to elevate humanity.” The Biden campaign sought Doyle’s help reaching suburban women: “Glennon is their knight in shining armor,” a campaign staffer said. Doyle’s books aren’t memoirs of extraordinary experience—she is not a Kenyan-American who goes on to become President, or the daugh-

*Doyle began writing because she was “dying for a place to tell the truth,” she says.*



ter of a flamboyant con artist, or a survivor of a wrenching immigration. But Doyle, who sometimes refers to herself as a “clinically depressed motivational speaker,” has a knack for distilling wisdom from seemingly incompatible sources—radical feminism, evangelical Christianity, twelve-step programs, Pema Chödrön—into an easy-drinking blend. Everything will be better, she suggests, if you just tell the truth about yourself.

Between Doyle’s first book and her third, her truth has changed considerably. “Carry On, Warrior” honors women committed to slogging through the muck of domesticity. “Untamed” argues that if women would just gnaw their way out of the cages of societal expectation they’d be goddam cheetahs. “My world view is, *of course* you should be changing, but it’s become clear to me that that’s not everybody’s world view,” she told me. “Some of the criticism I’ve read about ‘Untamed’ is: Does the fact that she’s so different in this book mean that her other books were lies?” Not many writers have more than one memoir in them, but Doyle has had more than one life. “To write a new book,” she told me, “I always feel like I have to become a new person.”

Years ago, at one of Doyle’s readings, a reporter approached her father and said, “You must be so proud of your daughter.” Doyle’s father, a middle-school principal and football coach, replied, “Honestly, we’re just happy she’s not in jail.” Before she was a lesbian or a Christian or an author or an influencer, Doyle had a different incarnation, one that is crucial to her canon: the fuckup.

Growing up in Burke, Virginia, a suburb of Washington, D.C., Doyle was admired for her looks. “*She is such a beautiful child*, strangers say to my mother daily,” Doyle wrote in “Love Warrior,” her second memoir. “I have to learn what to do because beauty is a responsibility.” At ten years old, she started binging and purging: “Each night I bring two cups to bed with me—one filled with food and one to fill with vomit. I leave the cups underneath my bed, and their stench is a constant reminder to all of us that I’m not better.” Doyle was raised in a Catholic family that valued service and humility; a poster in her father’s office said “DON’T GET TOO PROUD, THE SIZE OF YOUR FU-

NERAL WILL LIKELY DEPEND ON THE WEATHER.” She describes herself as loved and unhurt but still desperately out of place on planet Earth.

After nearly a decade of battling bulimia, she entered a psychiatric hospital during her senior year of high school. “For the first time in my life, I found myself in a world that made sense to me,” Doyle said at a TED talk in 2013. “In the mental hospital, there was no pretending: the jig was up.” But the suffering was not. While attending James Madison University, Doyle found camaraderie in her sickness. “There are so many openly bulimic women in my sorority that there is an announcement one afternoon,” she writes. “‘When you throw up, please flush the toilets. It looks bad when people come to the house and there’s puke everywhere.’”

She began drinking ferociously, at frat parties where there were signs on the wall that said “NO FAT CHICKS”: “There I can drink myself into a stupor and be carried to bed to have sex that I will not remember.” When she was not attending these festivals of misogyny and dissipation, she was preparing for them. “The process begins at around four o’clock when I’m steady enough to get out of bed and begin drinking again,” she writes. “Then I dry off and gather my tools—hair dryer, straightener, makeup, stilettos, tube top, short skirts, more beer—and begin the hard work of transforming myself from a sick mess into my shiny, beautiful, bulletproof rep.” (She means this in the sense of “sales rep.”)

After Doyle graduated, she became a third-grade teacher. She loved her students, but every day after class she drove to the store for “two huge bottles of wine.” One weekend, at a bar crawl in Washington, D.C., Doyle was reintroduced to Craig Melton, a high-school classmate. He was, she recalled, “a star soccer player with all the wholesomeness and goldenness that soccer coaches require or create.” (Doyle has a thing about soccer players.) He was also handsome enough to work as a model. They became drinking buddies and lovers, and, four months later, Doyle had an abortion. “After that night, I don’t stop drinking often enough to maintain a life,” she writes. She missed work; she abandoned her car while on a

bender; she was arrested—“only *five times*.”

On Mother’s Day, 2002, she discovered that she was pregnant again, but this time she had a revelation. “I am a drunk. I am a bulimic. I cannot love a child, because all I do is hurt the people I love. I cannot teach someone else how to live because I am only half alive. There is no one on earth, including me, who’d consider me worthy of motherhood. And yet. As I stare at the little blue cross, it is impossible for me to deny that someone decided I was worthy,” she writes. “I decide to believe in a God who believes in a girl like me.”

This marked the emergence of Doyle’s second literary iteration: the believer. She believed in matrimony, and she believed in motherhood; she and Melton got married and had a son, Chase. Two more children followed quickly, both of them girls (“until they tell me otherwise,” as Doyle puts it these days). She believed in a loving, forgiving, Mary-centered version of Christianity, and in her twelve-step program, both of which emphasized surrender. Perhaps above all else she believed in integrity. “I wanted to be perfect—because I had spent my whole life pissing people off and disappointing people and making people very, very sad,” she told me.

She sought redemption through conventional channels: “I’ll start going to church and I’ll marry this guy and I will quit my job and stay home and figure out how to make baskets out of papers.” But with three small children it was difficult to get to twelve-step meetings, and so she lost her sole outlet for expression. It is this avatar of Doyle’s—the housebound warrior, carrying on—who started regularly e-mailing friends her impassioned, essayistic impressions of life. “I was just dying for a place to tell the truth,” she said. “I would send them the e-mails, and then I would check up: ‘Did you have any time to think about the things that I was talking about?’ But they were at *work*.”

Eventually, one of her friends responded with a link to a tutorial on how to start a blog. Doyle began getting up at four-thirty, to write before her children were out of bed. She told stories from her darkest days, or made extended metaphors out of the mundane experiences of motherhood. One of the first posts to go viral was “Don’t Carpe Diem,”



about the impossibility of savoring every second of her children's lives. "I'd be at Target, or wherever, and one of my kids would be breaking down, and some older woman would come over and say, 'Every precious minute goes so fast!'" Doyle recalled. "And I'd never had a moment feel longer." Threaded through her writing were slogans and terms that she coined (and often capitalized) to soothe and inspire her readers—a technique borrowed from her football-coach father which was later reinforced by church and by A.A. (Doyle has retained this habit: in "Untamed," she refers to the process of finding profound truths by intuition as "the Knowing.") Momastery drew an overwhelming response from (predominantly white, Christian, female) readers, who saw their secret selves reflected in Doyle's work.

"Carry On, Warrior," built around her most popular blog posts, was a celebration of persistence in marriage, of the grace to be found in domestic routine. Just as the galleys were going to press, Doyle learned that her husband had been having one-night stands for more than a decade. "While I've been home changing diapers, doing dishes, and feeding our children, he's been sleeping with other women," she wrote later. "While I've been apologizing for my inability to connect during sex, he's been connecting with strangers."

If this revelation undermined Doyle's first book, it provided the foundation of her second. "Love Warrior" is the story of how Doyle reconfigured her marital crisis as an opportunity for transformation. "The invitation in this pain is the possibility of discovering who I really am," she wrote. "Death and resurrection—maybe that's just the way of life and love."

Oprah Winfrey selected "Love Warrior" for her book club, and Doyle's publisher braced for a marriage-redemption blockbuster. Once again, though, the release of a book coincided with a life-altering experience: at a publishing event, she met Wambach, a two-time Olympic gold medallist and a World Cup champion, who was promoting her own memoir. "Suddenly, a woman is standing where nothingness used to be. She takes up the entire doorway, the entire room, the entire universe," Doyle wrote. "I stare at her and take inventory of my entire life. My whole being says: *There*

*She Is.*" And then they were stuck, feeling all the feelings, from opposite coasts, in two separate marriages.

"It was absolutely brutal," Doyle said, "one afternoon when she and Wambach were sitting in the bright living room of their house, in Naples, Florida. There were palm trees out by the pool; inside, the furniture was modern and mostly white, and on the wall were paintings by an artist from Wambach's native Rochester—caricatures of Bob Dylan and Philip Seymour Hoffman, two famous shape-shifters. "I thought, This is my one shot at happiness," Doyle continued. "And I will never be able to take it."

Their first e-mails were about recovery; Wambach was one month sober, after a D.U.I. that made headlines. "My face was on the ESPN ticker for a whole week," Wambach said, ruefully. "That public shaming just knocked it right out of me." She was living in Portland, Oregon, and was in the process of separating from her wife, Sarah Huffman, a former teammate on the WNY Flash. The two were celebrated for exchanging a passionate kiss in the stands following Wambach's win at the Women's World Cup in 2015—a moment of public pride, just a week after a Supreme Court ruling effectively legalized marriage equality. Doyle had never kissed a woman before.

At first, Wambach said, "I was protecting myself, on a soul level. Because they never leave the family, straight women. They never leave the man—you know, like, for *me*." But Doyle's background turned out to be an advantage. "When Glennon started to talk Jesus and Christianity to my mother," Wambach continued, "Mom was kind of taken aback that, Oh, this person knows more about this subject than I have basically been using as the reason why my daughter should not be with women."

Doyle does not like to label her sexuality. On Instagram this fall, she posted a photo of a new haircut and wrote, "I like it short and unruly and wild and not so straight—just like me." In her living room, she asked, "Who's the boss of what's a lesbian? And what's bisexual? I do not feel like I was hiding something for my whole life. I really understand why the 'born this way' narrative is important to so many people, but to me it smacks of guilt and shame. It's, like, 'Oh,

I would be straight if I could, but I can't.' Can you imagine if we had that in the civil-rights movement? If Black people were, like, 'I would be white if I could?'"

Doyle wears a gold pendant of Mary on her neck, and she played with it with her manicured fingers as she spoke. "I have been in and out of Christian circles for so long that I know all of that culture, that language," she said. "It's all semantics. Abby talks about leadership with a team, and to me it means the exact same thing as what I talk about in terms of faith. When I say that I'm obsessed about Jesus, what I love so much is the idea of showing up for the world in a way that is sacrificial." Wambach was that kind of leader, Doyle said, much more than she was: "I am not my favorite kind of person."

In Doyle's defense, Wambach suggested that, in effect, the political is personal: "Because of her size, because of her gender, because of her pretty face, in order to get her way she *has* to go into an alternative mode! Otherwise, she will be walked over and talked over and never get things done."

"Listen, it's not like I'm walking around shooting people," Doyle said. "I'm a good and kind person. I don't know if I'm *nice*. Would you say I'm nice?"

"I think you are in your heart," Wambach replied, which made them both laugh. "I have to remember that you have clinical anxiety, right? And it's not fair for me to be, like, 'Why don't you respond nicer?' So it forces me to be emotionally intelligent!"

"See?" Doyle said. "She's my favorite kind of person."

Doyle and Wambach are the embodiment of what straight women have in mind when they say that it would be so much easier to be in love with another woman. They exist in what Doyle calls a "forever conversation—the way I always dreamed it could be." At this point, their relationship provides as much fodder for Doyle's work as motherhood and spirituality do. Whenever they find themselves on the verge of a certain kind of interaction, one of them whips out a phone to record it. "You know when you're, like, 'Oh, here we go again?' Each of us knows when it's coming, and this is part of our online story." They have been approached about doing a television series. "Probably once a week for the last four years, some network has



written to us begging for us to do a reality show, and never, ever, in a million gazillion years would we,” Doyle said. “We do a slice of that, but all on our own terms.” Reality television relies on people acting out. Wambach and Doyle are done with all that. They prefer Instagram, where people go to see something that they can aspire to.

Initially, Doyle was told that admitting she’d fallen in love with Wambach—just as she was about to go on tour promoting “Love Warrior”—would be career suicide. “There is fear and panic,” she posted on Momastery. “And the advice from many is: Wait, G. Just wait till after the book has launched to reveal this. This is a MARRIAGE book—you can’t break up before it even comes out!” But, she explained to her readers, “I was not called to be successful. I was called to be faithful. I was called to be faithful to truth and vulnerability and to YOU.”

Every weekday morning at nine, Doyle has a Zoom meeting with her team back in Virginia: Dynna Cabana, who is in charge of events and operations; Allison Schott, who handles graphic design; and Doyle’s sister, Amanda, whom she describes as “the boss of me.” (“Glennon thinks in colors,” Amanda, a lawyer, said. “I think in spreadsheets.”) One morning, the four women were discussing Doyle’s recent appearance on Hillary Clinton’s podcast, which they intended to promote on her social-media platforms. “She said, I really need you to call me Hillary, and I was, like, I really need you to have a different request of me,” Doyle said. “I can’t even call my eighth-grade civics teacher Tina.”

“But she’s doing that for likability, right?” Amanda asked.

“No! We had a really beautiful conversation, and she was really vulnerable and precious, and it was, like, a moment.”

Doyle was concerned about how her followers might respond to Clinton’s podcast. “I was up at 2 A.M. thinking about this,” she said. “When we post it, I want this to be a completely safe space for her. Like, if one person says one freaking thing . . .”

“That will one hundred per cent happen,” Amanda said, nodding vigorously. “Less so on Instagram, but on Facebook you might want to consider just turning off the comments.”

This would be a big step in the Doyle-sphere; she considers the back-and-forth with her readers sacrosanct. “I’m always amazed by my friends who are writers online who say, ‘Why are you reading comments?’” she told me. “It’s, like, That is half the thing!” For Doyle—who has written, “I love people, but not *in person*”—the Internet provides an ideal medium. Online, the exchanges are immediate, and building fellowship can seem effortless. (Publishing, by contrast, feels to her like “idea generation in molasses.”) She communicates with her readers almost daily, in tones as intimate as if she were talking to dear friends. She often begins videos by saying, “Hello, loves.” A habitual sign-off is “I love us,” or, if she’s responding to something bad, “We will get through this together, like we always have.”

“I just feel so indebted to them,” Doyle told me. “It feels like a very good use of my life and time to keep guiding my little community, because they actually can make change.” She and Amanda started the nonprofit Together Rising in 2012, and since then have raised more than twenty-eight million dollars for causes that have gripped Doyle’s followers: Syrian refugees, children separated from their parents at the border, incarcerated Black mothers who can’t afford to post bail, a single mom who needs breast-cancer treatment. A mantra of the organization is “Transform your heartache into action.” In their living room, Wambach suggested that this idea had a persistent place in their lives. “You see something

wrong, you *feel* it,” she told Doyle. “Like, you’re in bed for two days when kids are getting locked up in cages—and I’m, like, Where’s my wife? And then one day I wake up, and you’re out of bed, you’ve got an *easel*, and you’re ready to take down the whole system.”

In addiction recovery, the Serenity Prayer encourages people to change what they can and accept what they can’t; Doyle has reevaluated where that line is. If you abide by her catchphrase and “feel everything,” you may well find yourself moved by the suffering of others. Another of her catchphrases might inspire you to work against it: “We can do hard things.” Doyle came across the maxim when she taught third grade, noticing it on a sign in another teacher’s classroom. Since she started using it in her writing, it has resonated broadly. After Biden won the Presidency, his campaign manager tweeted, “We can do hard things . . . and you just did!” Addressing Congress after the siege of the Capitol, Chuck Schumer said, “In America, we do hard things.” A flurry of comments erupted online. An Instagram follower of Doyle’s commented, “Schumer is Untamed!” Another wrote, “I might have started crying,” to which Doyle responded, “me too :)” There were a great many cheetah emojis. As the conversation continued, Doyle offered a comforting wish: “Just an idea for us: maybe we all go to bed a little early . . . to extra prepare us for whatever comes tomorrow? I love us. We can do hard things.”

Doyle’s good friend Elizabeth Gilbert—who also rose to fame with a



*“Now that we can talk, we have to have meetings.”*



memoir about self-actualization, and who addresses her followers as “dear ones” online—explained the connection. “I don’t want to pathologize, but we might have some teensy boundary issues, and some history of not being able to tell where I end and the other person begins,” she said. Gilbert defended the relationships as real, though: “People will say, ‘I feel like I *know* you,’ and what I tend to say to them is, ‘Well, you do—that’s not an insane thing for you to think. I’ve quite literally told you everything.’” She added, “If you’ve come this far with me in my—I hate the word—*journey*, and you’ve stuck with me, then I kind of know *you*, too.”

Doyle has, of course, become another kind of believer now: the social-justice warrior. “Untamed” consists of sixty-five chapters, each with a staccato title—“Racists,” “Girl Gods,” “Sandcastles,” “Blow Jobs”—and each told swiftly enough to be shared on Facebook. “I think one of the reasons ‘Untamed’ did so well is because the chapters are short, and people could handle it with their traumatized COVID brains,” Doyle told me. Her stories function as parables, offering reassurance and implicit advice for a good life: defy the patriarchy, stand against white supremacy, honor your intuition. If, like A.A. slogans or catechism, Doyle’s shibboleths are simplistic, they are also a kind of lifeline for many. “Something you always hear in twelve-step rooms is that religion is for people who are afraid of going to Hell, and spirituality is for people who have

already been there,” Gilbert said. “Most of the people who follow both of us have been to Hell—or are in it.”

Adrienne Elrod, who was the Biden campaign’s director of surrogate strategy and operations, reached out to Doyle after taking an informal poll of women she knew, asking whose endorsement would influence them most. “It was mind-blowing,” Elrod said. “Didn’t matter if you were a friend I went to high school with in Arkansas who never got a degree, or my sorority sister who’s a suburban mom living outside of Dallas. Glennon Doyle—they hang on her every word.” Many weren’t even Democrats, Elrod said; they just trusted Doyle. “Most of them are politically agnostic—maybe they even have Fox News on every evening. They are in their forties, the kids are about to go to college, a lot of them are stay-at-home moms or are working in jobs they don’t love. And they feel like, We need someone to tell us what the meaning of life is and give us reassurance that we’re more than just moms.”

Though Doyle sees herself as a leader, she bristles at the term “guru,” which the media often apply to her. “I earn trust from these people hearing about their everyday needs, and I am endlessly fascinated by that—how to deal with our emotions and relationships, that’s my jam,” she said. “A guru is someone who’s getting people to follow them. I’m trying to get people to feel more activated in their own lives.”

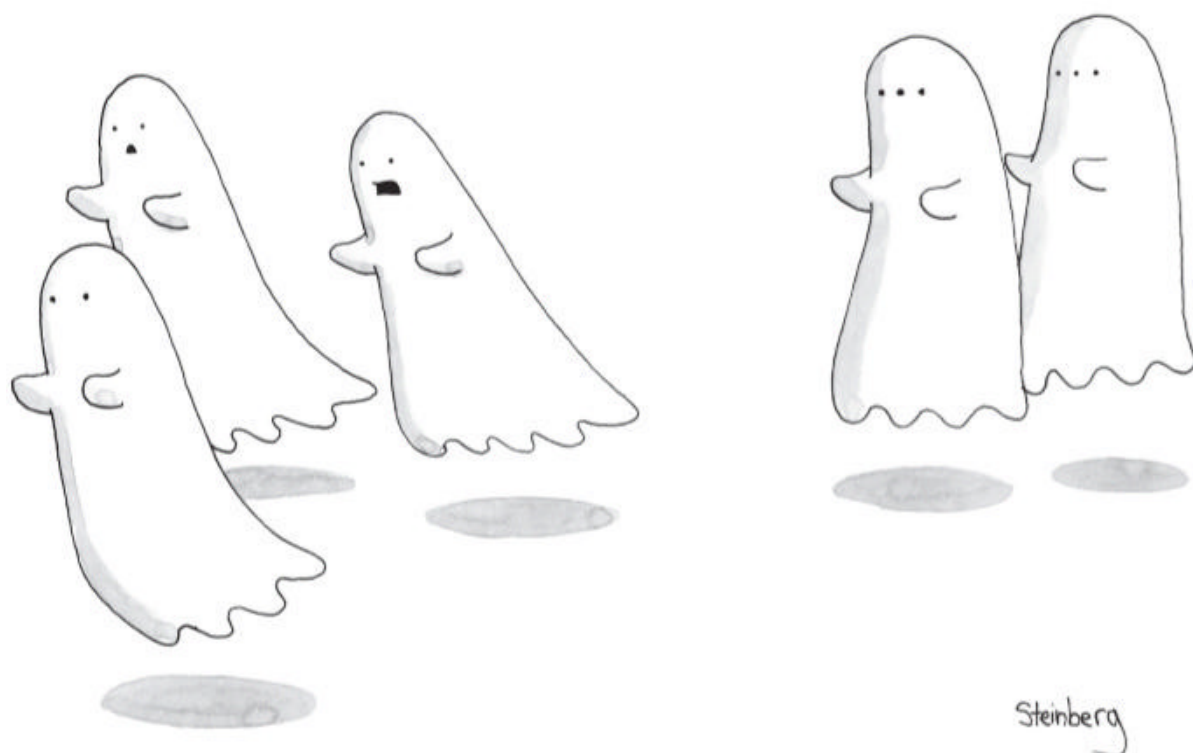
After “Carry On, Warrior,” Doyle contemplated a career as a minister, and was

accepted to Chicago Theological Seminary. “But I was talking to my eighth-grade civics teacher, Mrs. Yalen, this ridiculously fiery Jewish woman, who taught me everything about being involved with democracy,” she said. “And she was, like, You already have a church—it just doesn’t have walls.”

Doyle isn’t even sure she identifies as a Christian anymore. “Sometimes I look back on the Christian-ese I used to use, and I can’t even recognize it,” she said. “But there’s a lot about the actual, Biblical character Jesus that I’m obsessed with.” She added, “If I were going to write a story now about what love would do if it walked around on Earth, I would make it a baby from the most oppressed, most marginalized group. I would make Jesus, like, a transgender Black woman.”

For every reader who has been put off by Doyle’s evolution, there are many more who have been entranced by it; her online following has doubled since the publication of “Untamed.” “When she fell in love with Abby, it’s not like her audience defected,” the author and activist Luvvie Ajayi Jones said. She and Doyle became friends about four years ago. “She still had this really big evangelical audience then—she represented the woman who believed in God in a way that was palatable to them. But then she started speaking truth to power, and they’re, like, ‘Oh, shoot! I came here for one thing, but I’m going to stay for this other thing.’” After the murder of George Floyd, Ajayi Jones and Doyle collaborated with the Netflix executive Bozoma Saint John on an Instagram campaign called #ShareTheMicNow, in which white celebrities handed their social-media accounts over to Black women.

Doyle thinks that her community is there to be decent together, in the same place, at the same time. “It’s like what people like about church,” she said. During quarantine, people have turned online for connection, a sense of belonging. Doyle has been getting those things out of a computer for years. At a time in her life when she felt lonely and isolated, the people who commented on her blog posts gave her solace. She contemplated this phenomenon in “Love Warrior,” and concluded that she and her ex-husband had something in common—they were not so different, the blogger and the adul-



*“Aliens!”*



terer: "Through strangers on a screen, I've found the intimacy I yearned for. We both have."

Running errands one afternoon, Wambach ordered a strawberry milkshake. Doyle did not. Back home, Doyle put the milkshake in the fridge for Wambach, who returned to find it reduced by a third. "I saw you grab it, and I knew what was going to happen," Wambach told Doyle. "It just settled," Doyle replied unconvincingly, pacing their kitchen. Wambach asked, "Do you think that there will ever be a time when you can just order your own?" Doyle shook her head, then tried another tack: "That milkshake was freaking thirteen dollars! Who orders a thirteen-dollar milkshake?" Wambach—who was filming the interaction on her phone—was outraged. "I do," she said. "Guess what? I get to do whatever I want. And you get to do whatever you want." Doyle, giggling, made one last attempt: "That just seems so individualistic and mean." Ultimately, she apologized. The women proffered their undying love. Wambach posted the video on Instagram, where it was enjoyed by four hundred and eighty-four thousand people.

Doyle said that they shared the video as a kind of teachable moment. Like Gloria Steinem, another feminist whose beauty made her message of liberation from the patriarchy's aesthetic more appealing to women who still wanted to embody it, Doyle has struggled persistently with eating. "In my weird times, a lot of my thoughts are about, What should I eat? What shouldn't I? Is that too much? How much am I working out?" she said. "Everything in me intellectually knows what a freaking opportunity cost it is—the things that I could do with that energy, in that brain space! It's, like, the one program I can't get out of my floppy disk."

Until recently, Doyle dutifully dyed and straightened her long, blond hair and cultivated the plastic glamour of a Disney princess. Pointing at her chin-length, naturally curly hair, she said, "Even this is a big deal for me." She has given up Botox and sometimes goes on camera without makeup. "When someone says to me, 'You're pretty,' the only thing that means to me is 'Our culture has a list of things that deems people attractive, and you are really good at kicking your own ass to match those standards. Congratulations,'" she said.

"It's the same way people will say, 'There's no way *you* can have an eating disorder, look how thin you are.' Like, why do you think I'm so thin? Because I have a raging eating disorder, you freaking asshole!" She shook her head. "I would not at all be surprised if I'm this ninety-year-old badass woman who's done a lot of good things and is still, like, I'll just have a quarter of a cookie."

Doyle has always thought of herself as a feminist, but she's not sure it's a club that wants her for a member. "I think feminism has a hard time being inclusive of a lot of things that I am," she said. "My femme presentation. My high-pitched voice." Doyle fired an agent who insisted that she speak lower and slower in interviews. "She kept saying, 'No one's going to take you seriously.'" Doyle recorded the audio version of "Untamed," and it became one of the year's most downloaded audiobooks.

"It's not just hard-core feminists who I feel are begrudgingly allowing me a seat at the table," she continued. "Same thing with L.G.B.T.Q. activists—I'm not gay enough for the gay community." Doyle has got blowback for refusing to reframe her story as a life spent in the closet. "Also, you know who else won't let me at any tables? Christians!" The writer Jen Pollock Michel argued in *Christianity Today* that Doyle "sermonizes that God's love is so boundless that her choices need no bounds." Real Christianity, Michel wrote, does not entail "abandoning the discomfort of God's revealed truth for self-soothing versions that placate the conscience and tickle our fancy."

Doyle, despite her huge following, often feels displaced. "I'm not used to belonging," she told me. Even her neighborhood in Florida seems inhospitable these days. Her house, which abuts a canal leading to the Gulf of Mexico, is one of just a few there without a Trump sign. "We look out at our back yard, and there's boat after boat with Trump flags," Doyle said. "It's not *conservative*. It's like we live inside a rally."

"We can have good surface conversations at soccer," Wambach said, coming into their kitchen one evening. "We love their kids, and they love ours. But I think that, by necessity, it's forced us to just

kind of keep to ourselves." They were getting ready for an early dinner before soccer practice. Both daughters, Amma and Tish, play. "But nobody loves soccer more than Craig," Doyle said. "Including this one," she added, pointing to Wambach.

"He's a *lover*," Wambach agreed. "I was just good at it."

Wambach, Doyle, and Craig Melton are good friends who "parent like a braid," Doyle likes to say. The three of them, and their children, recently decided to move to Los Angeles. The move is partly to do with work. Wambach and Doyle are investors in the Angel City Football Club, a newly established team in the National Women's Soccer League, and Doyle is collaborating on a script for a television series based on "Untamed," which is being developed by J. J. Abrams's

production company. Perhaps most of all, they are tired of being so isolated. Asked what she wouldn't miss about Naples, Tish, who is fourteen, said immediately, "The Republicans."

Doyle, who was wearing peach pants and a white tank top, led the family in a rendition of "The Lord Is Good to Me," and then distributed burgers, veggie for Chase and regular for everyone else. She asked, "What is the single thing that is not a person that you *will* miss about Naples?"

"Do they have smoothies in California?" Amma asked her.

Doyle told her they definitely did: "I don't even think they have solid food."

In Los Angeles, Doyle may finally find that she belongs. Her friend Chelsea Handler, the comedian, told me, "All my friends in Hollywood read 'Love Warrior.' And 'Untamed'—this time, *everyone* knew about her." In June, Wambach and Doyle were looking at houses in the L.A. suburbs, and, for the first time, Doyle encountered "Untamed" "in the wild," as she put it. "We were waiting for the realtor on this tiny, precious tree-covered street," she recalled. "And this woman walks out of her house and says, 'Are you Glennon? I'm literally sitting on my front porch finishing 'Untamed' right now, and I looked up and you're standing in the middle of my street.'" Doyle grinned. "I said, 'Yes, I come to everybody's house. I'm just here in case you want to talk about anything.'" ♦





# DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO

*As North Dakota's hardest-hit county battled the pandemic, a mask mandate became another battleground.*

BY ATUL GAWANDE

Every day seems to bring another test of whether our democracy can succeed in managing the problems of a country as big, varied, and individualistic as ours. In Minot, a city of forty-eight thousand people in Ward County, North Dakota, the twice-monthly city-council meeting was into its fourth hour when an alderwoman named Carrie Evans put forward an unexpected motion: she wanted Minot to adopt a mandatory-mask policy. It was Monday, October 19th, two weeks before the Presidential election. In the wood-panelled council chambers of city hall, Evans and the five other alderpersons who, with the mayor, make up the council, sat on a dais, in padded chairs, behind brass nameplates and stemmed microphones. Mayor Shaun Sipma, a baritone-voiced former anchor for the local CBS television station, presided in the middle, while a scattering of people in attendance, including the police chief, followed the proceedings with shifting degrees of attention. The council had worked through nineteen items—including a viaduct improvement and a new Internet contract for the fire department that would save Minot \$220.80 per year. Then, under an agenda item labelled “Miscellaneous,” the Mayor had called upon Lisa Clute, the executive director of the First District Health Unit, to give a local update on the coronavirus pandemic.

The story was grim. North Dakota had more new cases and deaths per capita than any other state. Half of its hospitals were facing critical staff shortages. Ward County had the highest rate of new cases of any county there, with a record five hundred and twenty active positive cases, and almost forty per cent of them had been diagnosed in the past two weeks. The volume of positive coronavirus tests had overwhelmed her contact-tracing team. Surging numbers of pandemic victims forced Minot's Trin-

ity Hospital to expand its COVID-19 wing.

When the Mayor opened the floor to discussion, Evans—fifty years old, cardigan-clad, red hair tucked behind each ear—pushed herself upright in her seat and cleared her throat. “This is where we’re headed anyway,” she said. “I would like to put a motion forward.”

That afternoon, the mayor of Fargo, two hundred and sixty miles away, had used his emergency powers to issue a citywide mask mandate. It was a cautious order—there would be no penalty for violating it—but this was the first one in North Dakota, where there was widespread opposition to state mask requirements and other public-health restrictions. Evans spoke clearly and carefully: “I would like to make a motion to ask the Mayor to create a mayoral mask mandate modelled after Fargo’s.”

She looked over at the Mayor for his reaction, ducking as if he might throw something at her. Sipma was speechless. He stared at her for a long moment. “That is a motion,” he said.

“I will second that,” Alderman Stephan Podrygula, a shaggy-white-haired psychologist, called out.

Normally, the Mayor has a good handle on the votes for a proposal. But not this one. Trying to buy time, he called on the chief of police. “Can you give me an overview right now?” he prompted. The “compliance issue,” he said, was “really at the heart of a lot of concern for a mandate without any kind of teeth.”

Chief John Klug, his shaved head gleaming, walked up to a microphone. “I know there’s a lot of people that are on both sides of this issue,” he began. Still, his police officers and dispatchers had started falling ill, and he required masking and distancing from members of the force. Soon, he said, “it became more normal, and more compliance was there.” A citywide mandate, he said, would send the right message.

Although Podrygula had seconded

the proposal, he had concerns. “This is something that gets people riled up,” he said, turning to Evans. “And we have enough friction, we have enough polarization and enough conflict in our society.”

Alderman Paul Pitner—at thirty-one, the youngest council member, and the owner of Pitner Rain Gutters—wore a mask himself but had doubts about telling anyone else what to do. This was, to his mind, “a slippery slope.”

“I don’t know what the silver bullet is on this one,” Mayor Sipma said.

“There is no silver bullet,” Evans declared, making a visible effort to remain composed as she looked around the dais. “If there was, we would have been over this pandemic in this country, in this world, a long time ago. This is leadership. This is moral leadership.” She was gesticulating now. “It is embarrassing, as an elected official, to be sitting and not doing anything about this.” She pulled up Fargo’s mandate on her computer and read from it. It allowed for various exceptions—religious, medical, even athletic—but ordered people in the city to wear a face covering in settings where they would be “exposed to non-household members, and where social distancing of six feet or more cannot be assured.” Evans concluded, “I simply propose swapping in ‘Minot’ every time it says ‘Fargo,’ and I think it is a great, short, succinct, but impactful, mandate.”

Alderman Tom Ross disagreed. “Obviously, since I’m the only one up on the dais without a face mask, I’m going to speak to the other side,” he said.

Ross is fifty-six, square-faced with square reading glasses, a neatly trimmed white beard, and a maroon golf shirt. He works at a farm-equipment dealership. “We’re living in fear—we’re instilling that fear—fear for a virus that has a cumulative survival rate of over ninety-nine per cent,” he declared. He had recently spoken to a friend from high





*In the city of Minot, the response to the public-health crisis revealed a stark divide over how to get life back to normal.*



school, now a pathologist, who operates a laboratory that handles coronavirus tests in Amarillo, Texas. “I said, ‘Give me your best medical advice when it comes to masks,’” Ross recounted. “He said, ‘Tom, the only place you need to wear a mask is more than likely in an airplane, or if a place is extremely crowded.’”

He had another point. “What’s the goal of this? I hear it time and time again—to slow the spread, to slow the spread. So we want to extend this until *when*? If we’re going to slow the spread, we’re going to slow it, we’re going to affect businesses, we’re going to affect revenue, we’re going to affect so much.”

His voice was rising. “We don’t need to slow the spread. We need to have health organizations throw spaghetti noodles at the wall for a cure and a treatment until one sticks.” He returned to his friend in Amarillo: “This man, who’s a physician, *a doctor*, told me, ‘Tom, if you get COVID, God forbid, take two hundred and twenty milligrams of zinc and drink a gallon of diet tonic water for two days. That’ll clear it up.’ . . . I’ve got to believe my classmate. He wouldn’t steer me wrong.”

He turned to Lisa Clute. “Lisa, to have you tell me that I have to believe in your science because it works? Why don’t you believe in the science of all the other studies that say masks don’t work? I’m a believer. I’m a firm believer in personal responsibility. If you’re sick, stay home. If you don’t feel safe, stay home. It’s all on yourselves. Putting together a mandate without a consequence? What a waste of time.”

Clute started to try responding to each point. But ultimately she just said, “Our intent has never been to create fear. Our intent is to provide you the facts.”

I wanted to learn about Minot because it was exceptional: it was in the worst-performing county in the worst-performing state in the worst-performing country in the world. But I also wanted to learn about it because it didn’t seem unusual at all: the city was divided over what to do about the pandemic, and even what to think about it. I wanted to understand what made it so difficult

for people to come together and address a deadly crisis.

Minot was founded in 1886 on a broad floodplain fifty miles from the Canadian border, along the northernmost section of the transcontinental railroad. The Souris River snakes east to west through the center of town, creating a valley with low hills on either side. The city reminds me of my Ohio home town, with its small historic center of brick buildings filled with restaurants, jewellers, and opticians, but most of the town and its day-to-day life takes place along a few long roads. Gas stations, churches, fast-food places, and offices are separated by parking lots, although the neighborhoods are scattered with pine, oak, and linden trees. Beyond the



lanes of highway and communication towers, you can see miles of horizon in every direction.

Much of that land is farms. Agriculture is a big part of the local economy. An Air Force base, just to the north, is another major source of local income. Then, there’s the nearby Parshall Oil Field, discovered in 2006, which boosted Minot’s population by a third, and made North Dakota the nation’s second-largest oil producer after Texas. The city started 2020 with an unemployment rate below three per cent, a median income of sixty-four thousand dollars, and income inequality in the bottom quintile of the nation. Minot is overwhelmingly conservative, sending only Republicans to the state legislature and to Congress. In this, it’s similar to the rest of North Dakota. But because North Dakota, unlike many red states, took advantage of Obama’s Affordable Care Act to expand Medicaid, it has one of the lowest rates of uninsured people in the Midwest. One in three of Ward County’s adult residents is obese, three in five have high blood pressure, and one in six smokes—about average for the country.

Lisa Clute, who is sixty-one, has spent almost a quarter of a century in charge of the First District Health Unit, which is based in Minot and serves seven counties—ninety thousand people altogether. With her husband, Barry, she lives on

the two-hundred-acre farm outside town where she grew up. For many years, Clute was a schoolteacher, which led her to take a job in children’s services with the state. “From there, I was recruited into this position in public health, and I have loved it ever since,” she told me on a video call.

Like most public-health officers who lead city and county departments, she is not a clinician, but she oversees a team of sixty clinical officers and other personnel. When I asked Clute to tell me about some of the issues her department had to contend with before the pandemic struck, she mentioned binge drinking, alcoholism, lead poisoning, and above-average rates of sexually transmitted diseases such as chlamydia. Minot had the worst recent outbreak of hepatitis C in the country, and getting that under control had taken years. The opioid crisis had led Clute and Dr. Casimiar Nwaigwe (pronounced “Wigwey”), the chief of infectious disease at Trinity Hospital and the health unit’s medical director, to lobby the police and local leaders to let them set up a needle exchange for addicted people, which opened in February of 2019. Clute coordinates preventable-disease tracking, contact tracing, and treatment programs. When a train derailment, in 2002, ruptured five tanker cars and released a huge cloud of poisonous ammonia gas—well, that had been her problem, too.

In short, Clute’s job is to help secure the health of the community by plugging the holes in the health-care system—and to do it with a minuscule budget. In 2019, per-person spending for medical care in the United States was almost twelve thousand dollars; it was just fifty-six dollars for public-health departments.

On March 11th, at 7:30 P.M., Clute got a call from her health unit’s epidemiologist: Minot had North Dakota’s first COVID-19 patient. A man in his sixties who had travelled out of state had developed symptoms and tested positive. Two hours later, Governor Douglas Burgum put out the news. That night, the N.B.A. announced that it was suspending its season, after a Utah Jazz player tested positive. It was becoming evident that everyone’s life was about to change.

Clute, Nwaigwe, and Sipma held a



press conference the following day. To avoid panic in a crisis, Clute had learned over many years, the key was to make sure people knew the facts, good and bad. An investigation revealed that the patient had immediately isolated upon arrival. But it was clear that there would be more cases. She and Nwaigwe explained about distancing and hygiene, about the symptoms of COVID-19, about what to do if you developed any.

The next day, President Trump, who had been downplaying the threat for weeks, changed course and declared a national state of emergency. On March 16th, he announced guidelines for Americans to follow for fifteen days in order to slow the spread of the virus: stopping nonessential travel and shopping; avoiding bars, restaurants, and social gatherings of more than ten people; working from home when possible. Within two weeks, Clute's health department reported that the virus was spreading within the community. Working with businesses, medical professionals, and local officials, she encountered little resistance to the recommended restrictions. "We were all together then," she said.

Tom Ross had turned in the three hundred signatures required to run for city council just a few days before the pandemic hit North Dakota. He had never been involved in politics before. He'd grown up in Minot, the fourth of six children. His mother worked at the local hospital for four decades as a registered nurse and, later, as an operating-room supervisor. His father was a heavy-equipment operator for a local construction company. "The skyline of Minot, you really can't swing a cat in this town and not hit a building my dad didn't help build," he told me. "I'm kind of proud of that."

He had attended college at Minot State and broadcasting school in Minneapolis, returned to Minot, and got a job as a camera operator at the local NBC TV station. During the next fifteen years, he worked his way up to station manager. Then came out-of-town ownership and cutbacks. For the past four years, he has worked in customer relations at an area dealership for large-scale farm machinery, trading in his polo shirts and khakis for a John Deere baseball

cap and Wranglers. He travels the state to check on farmers' equipment needs. Since starting, he's logged three hundred and eighty thousand miles on his 2014 Ford F-150.

I asked him what he did with all that time in the truck. "I'm almost embarrassed to admit this, but, most of the time, nothing," he said. "You're kind of deep in thought."

"About what?"

"I'm still coming off my dad's death"—his father died of Alzheimer's in 2019—"so you're deep into thinking about that," he told me. "You're deep in thought about the next farm you're pulling into—what kind of issues are you going to discuss with this guy? You're also deep in thought about campaigning."

Ross had been a volunteer and a booster for much of his life, working on various local boards (and even serving as president of the Minot Curling Club, though golf and fishing were more his thing now). And he had spent a lot of time watching the city council as a reporter. "When my dad died, it hit me then that life is short," he told me. After he learned that three seats had opened up in the council, he decided to run.

Council elections are nonpartisan, and Ross was glad of that. He hated politics. On his road trips, he used to listen to talk radio eight hours a day, and he'd

watch the morning cable shows before heading out, too. He'd voted for Barack Obama twice, and he'd end up voting for Donald Trump twice; he'd switched from MSNBC to Fox, but either way, he said, "I just found myself going to work angry." In the past couple of years, he'd got fed up with the situation. "I went on Facebook and I said, 'This is it. I'm not going to change your mind. You're not going to change my mind. I'm going to use Facebook for things that make me happy.'" And he kept to his resolution. "I really put a concerted effort into not listening. I stopped. It's really helped my attitude."

At the end of the day, he would often drop by the Lucky Strike Lounge for a Michelob Ultra with friends who had a regular table there. The bar has a bowling alley and a golf simulator through a door on one side, along with such casino games as Pig Wheel, which is similar to roulette but features pigs you can bet on, with names like Bob, Roxy, and Sue. The owner, Greg DeMakis, was always there, at a table with a group next to Ross's, ready to greet him with a wave. Before launching his campaign, Ross asked DeMakis what he thought of the idea.

"I thought he was crazy, to be honest," DeMakis told me. "I went, 'Well, hopefully you got the guts to take it,



*"How does it make you feel when I'm on the verge of tipping over?"*



because you're going to get some guff." But DeMakis signed Ross's petition. "He'll get up there and say what needs to be said, and our council needs that right now."

The first time Carrie Evans met Tom Ross was at the Lucky Strike. She lives a few blocks away and would go there with a cousin who loved to play bar bingo. She had decided to jump into the race in March, too. But, unlike Ross, she actually liked politics. She thought it was the best way to address injustices and move communities forward.

Evans graduated from high school in Minot and got a degree in sociology from Minot State, but then she left North Dakota. "Like many young progressive people of my generation, you could hear our wheels squeal out of the state," she said. She earned a law degree and spent most of her career involved in L.G.B.T.Q. advocacy in the Baltimore-Washington area. In 2012, Evans helped lead the campaign that made Maryland one of the first states to legalize same-sex marriage through popular vote. By then, she'd already married her longtime partner in Canada. In 2017, after eighteen years together, they divorced.

"My family was still here, and I said, 'Hey, I'm just going to go back to Minot and lick my wounds,'" she recalled. Back home, Evans developed increasingly frightening symptoms—numbness along the left side of her face, vision problems, difficulty walking. Eventually, she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Medication to suppress her immune system brought the disease under control. She hadn't intended to return permanently, but now she has a house, a dog, a cat, and a circle of family and friends, along with steady work consulting for human-rights organizations across the country.

"It was a different city than the one I had left," she said. "There were more progressive folks. And I said, 'You know what, I think I might stay.'" During the Democratic primaries, she supported Elizabeth Warren. After Warren withdrew from the race, Evans spent a few days grieving the loss, and then decided to run for office herself. She collected the first hundred of the required three hundred signatures at a drag show, then another five hundred from people waiting in line to vote

in the Democratic primary. "I like to exceed expectations," she said.

The next night, her phone blew up with text messages about the first COVID-19 case in the county. She was alarmed but didn't know what it really meant for her. A few nights later, she went to a Noël Coward play at the community theatre. It was the last event of its kind that she attended in 2020.

Sheltering in place wasn't a major adjustment for her. She already worked from home. As for her campaign, she switched from going door to door to making phone calls. Tom Ross, though, was still racking up the miles; because farming was an essential business, he continued visiting his clients to deal with their machinery needs. But there were other changes. He and his friends hosted Zoom happy hours, where they played Pictionary or the like; for a while, it was a tolerable substitute for the Lucky Strike, which had shut its doors for six weeks. "The novelty of it was kind of nice," Ross said. "Though that wore off fast."

In early April, Trump announced that the C.D.C. was recommending that people wear face masks in public, but emphasized that the guidelines were voluntary. "I don't think I'll be doing it," Trump said. In Minot, Lisa Clute fielded a brigade of mask-makers, including her mother, using material donated from a local craft store. Thousands were distributed. "My mom—I can't imagine how many of those masks she made," Clute said.

In May, as restrictions relaxed, Ross and other city-council candidates re-



sumed door-to-door campaigning, but Evans did not. She recalled, "People started ridiculing those of us wearing masks, or saying, 'Why are you still isolating? That's so stupid.'" Still, when it was announced that the state fair, held annually in Minot, was going to be cancelled, the public mood was one of disappointment, not fury. "Even I was think-

ing, We have a very small number of cases," Evans told me. "Are we being too dramatic here?"

North Dakota recorded about a thousand cases that April—nothing like the hundreds of thousands of cases on the coasts—and on May 1st began its "Smart Restart" plan. "Probably about every two weeks we would move into the next phase," Clute explained. "We knew all along that the Governor's goal was, by June, he was going to be fully open." The pace was quick, but North Dakota had developed one of the most comprehensive testing-and-tracing programs in the country. Tests skyrocketed, and businesses reopened, but cases remained low. In Ward County, nearly six thousand people—almost fifteen per cent of the adult population—were tested for the coronavirus in June, and just twenty-three were positive.

The city-council election that month, at which Ross and Evans won their seats, was conducted entirely by mail, and voters didn't mind. They figured that things would soon be back on track. "People began testing the waters," Evans said. "Eventually, they were filling the bars up, filling the restaurants back up—testing the limits, and then exploding through them." By July, indoor dining had resumed; mask-wearing was minimal. "I have friends from Baltimore and D.C. who'd say, 'Hey, I think we're going to come to North Dakota for a while to get out of this,'" she recalled. "I don't know what you guys are doing, but you're doing something.' I'd tell them, 'No, we're not. We are *not*.'"

Ross described that summer as "life as normal," and saw this as well earned. "Summers are critically important to us here," he told me. "We've only got twelve weekends of summer, so we take advantage of those twelve weekends."

He wore a mask only when it was required: at the doctor's office or in stores with strict policies. By August, big chain stores—such as Walmart, Target, and Dollar General—had instituted mask requirements, social distancing, and capacity limits. In fact, these businesses did more than any national institution to get people used to behaving in a way that reduced spread, providing reassurance for many customers and employees. But for others—like Ross and his circle—the measures seemed overblown.



People couldn't be expected to restrict their interactions forever. They needed to return to working, and living, and getting the economy going again.

Greg DeMakis, the Lucky Strike owner, was seventy-one years old and wore a mask when he was out and about. At the request of a nurse who worked behind the bar for extra income, he had the staff wear masks, too, and posted signs encouraging others to do so. But he did not require customers to wear them when bowling or gaming, and he didn't limit capacity. Business was down at least forty per cent, anyway. Younger customers returned, but, DeMakis said, "there's a lot of customers of mine that I haven't seen since the pandemic started."

Ross saw the same thing, and he had a diagnosis. "There was fear out in the country," he said. Farmers increasingly preferred to just have him drop off parts or materials at their door. He honored their concerns; he just didn't share them.

Ward County's case numbers that summer rose quickly: in July, there were more than a hundred, and in August more than three hundred. In September, test positivity spiked from less than one per cent to more than six per cent. The influx of students had quickly turned Minot State University into a superspreader site: within two weeks, more than ten per cent of the coronavirus tests that students received were coming back positive. Lisa Clute's team worked with campus administrators to enforce universal mask requirements, a ban on indoor gatherings, and an aggressive testing-and-contact-tracing protocol. "It was amazing how fast we could pull those numbers down," she said.

But there were too many outbreaks to control. Entire groups of people became infected at crowded bars and restaurants or at weddings where there were hundreds of attendees. By September, North Dakota had the fastest rate of COVID-19 spread in the country. Meanwhile, contact tracers found that as many as thirty per cent of residents who tested positive or had been exposed weren't isolating or quarantining themselves. Nwaigwe, fifty-four years old and soft-spoken, told me about talking to people who, despite living with a household member who had COVID-19, refused test-



*"The captain tempers justice with mercy."*

ing or quarantine: "They felt that they needed to go to work, and they felt that the risk was low. One of them was in construction, for example. He said, 'I haven't had symptoms. It's been more than seven days. I have bills to pay.'"

Clute warned the Governor's Office, and she tried to warn Minot. "We can test, test, test," she told the city council on September 21st. "But, if people don't quarantine and isolate, we aren't mitigating spread. I get it. We're all sick of COVID, and no one wants to stay home fourteen days. But it's important."

North Dakota, departing from C.D.C. recommendations, asked only exposed household members to quarantine, not close contacts. At the end of September, when the state health officer tried to bring the state's policies in line with C.D.C. guidance, there was such an outcry that Governor Burgum promptly rescinded the order. The next day, the state health officer became the third one to resign in four months. (His predecessor had quit in August, after the Governor refused to raise the state's risk level from

green to yellow, which would have imposed a size limit on gatherings.)

Clute and Nwaigwe were frustrated; they didn't have the tools they needed—and the ones they did have were looking increasingly ineffective. As the medical director of the First District Health Unit, Nwaigwe noted, "I could write an order requiring that somebody be quarantined, if I felt it was a public-health need. I shied away from that. I didn't want things to be confrontational."

At the October 5th city-council meeting, Clute again tried to talk about how serious the situation was. In Ward County, there had been seven hundred and five new cases in the past fourteen days—an astonishing eighteen hundred new cases per hundred thousand people, among the highest rates of spread in the world. And the weather hadn't even turned cold yet.

In an even, unemotional tone, she said, "We will follow the Governor's guidelines. . . . We have not restricted or endorsed any large group gatherings." Still, she told the council, personal and



collective choices could make a difference. “The Governor has made it clear that it is up to local jurisdictions to determine what policies should be enforced,” Clute said. “There’s a whole host of things that you can do.” She mentioned some of them—reducing seating capacity in bars and restaurants, restricting large group gatherings. “It really boils down to what the communities want to do.” There weren’t many people in the room, and they didn’t respond audibly. But an incendiary dialogue was taking place in the anonymous chat that accompanied the live feed of the meeting on YouTube:

“This bish can put her MUZZLE back on.”

“Only 277 TOTAL have died since the beginning in a state of 667K people.”

“Sorry but grandma’s die and babies are born so goes the cycle of life.”

“277 is NOT A PANDEMIC.”

“#SCAMDEMIC.”

Four days later, Trinity Hospital held a press conference, urging people to wear masks and engage in social distancing. On the Minot Whiners and Complainers Facebook page—which has fourteen thousand members, one for every three residents—the commentary mixed ridicule (“Gotta keep pushing that fear”) and nihilism (“It’ll never get stopped”) with public-health concerns (“What has to happen to change your mind? Refrigerated trucks? Your child passing?”).

Beth Renae was among the concerned. “My perfectly healthy active-duty husband with no underlying conditions is in one of those hospital beds unable to breathe on his own while I’m at home in quarantine with our small kids for at least another couple of weeks,” she wrote on the page. “This is absolutely real.” Although she and her husband wore masks outside the home, she still got infected and transmitted the virus to him. “I can’t give my two year old a bath without feeling so breathless I’m going to pass out.” One user replied, “Thanks for confirming [masks] don’t work.”

Roscoe Streyle, a forty-one-year-old local banker who had spent two terms in the state legislature and lost a run for city council, was an outspoken skeptic. In his Twitter feed, masks were “BS,” “Fauci is an idiot,” experts were “clowns” and “frauds.” Clute, he told

## TURNER

One morning when the weather was strange  
and haunted following a rain—  
I believe a fog had settled like  
a thought over the field and the sun  
that peered through it troubled the thought—  
I remember saying to myself,  
for no one was around, it’s like  
we’re living in a Turner painting,  
a haunted cave of melody  
so indistinct, almost unseen.  
As if a painting could convey  
its time and also imagine a time  
after, but keep the original time  
to let it heavily hang in the present.  
The point is, something in the world  
is timeless, beyond the measure of time,  
yet we perceive the timeless in time,  
aware of its weight and of its passing  
lightly like a song through a voice.  
It isn’t always beautiful,  
the voice, the time, the foggy scene.  
I said the fog had settled like  
a thought over the field, but the thought  
was mine. I wasn’t sure if the scene  
was beautiful. Something was ghostly,

me, was a “not so smart lady” who led a team of “unelected bureaucrats.” In an October Facebook post, he wrote, “The worse run health district in the State of North Dakota is First District Health in Minot, an embarrassment and a laughing stock.”

In Clute’s twenty-four years in public health, she had experienced nothing like this response. “Pretty much everything that we ever talked about when I went through training on how to manage pandemics and bioterrorism has played out in this,” she said. “With the exception that nobody ever talked about what to do if we weren’t able to convince the public that this was serious.”

Since March, she had routinely worked twelve hours or more a day, with hardly a day off. Once, when we spoke, she was dealing both with another mass outbreak and with problems at an area-wide testing site, while providing updates to hospital leaders, funeral-home directors, the city’s emergency-operations team, and ordinary people looking for help or information. Salted through it all were calls and e-mails that brought

her up short. “You’re a fearmonger,” she was told. “This disease is no worse than a flu.” Some were vicious. “I would get calls at home—people just yelling into the phone.” She tried talking through the issues with the less belligerent, but it proved impossibly time-consuming. She added, “I started locking my doors when I was home by myself.”

The obituaries helped convince Carrie Evans that she had to try to get the city council to do something. One of the tasks she has taken on is updating the database of regional Democrats. “So that means updating deaths,” she explained. “I do it in the mornings when I read the paper. It’d normally be two, maybe three people—boom, boom, done. But I have not seen the obituaries be less than two pages since September. And it was not just ninety-five-year-olds. Every day, I was just, ‘Oh, my God.’”

When she arrived at the October 19th city-council meeting, she still didn’t have a clear plan. Then, while Clute was speaking to the group, Evans got a text with news about Fargo’s mask mandate. She



the spirit of something not alive  
 was there. But maybe it was alive,  
 a spirit passing through the night  
 now lingering over the field.  
 The sun, as cold as a cat-eye marble,  
 was out of place in the scene, but there.  
 We love the sweeter passages  
 of time, but never get it right.  
 The sense of time floating in time,  
 the effort to capture time in time,  
 in verse, in the ancient rhythm of verse,  
 not in my voice, but a timeless voice  
 haunted by a timeless voice  
 before it—rhythmic, keeping time  
 to the world of trees and fields and fog  
 resounding, as if a fog resounds—  
 that is the effort of my art.  
 Such as it is. It's a plain thing,  
 as plain as a field in early spring  
 with two or three blurry symbols,  
 composed almost completely of silence,  
 because it's there, the oldest art,  
 and that's what Turner painted, silence.

—*Maurice Manning*

told me, “I texted the city attorney, saying, ‘Hey, Kelly, do you have a copy of that?’” She knew that proposing the same for Minot was a gamble; the council was wary of anything that might provoke a backlash.

Evans herself wasn't afraid of confrontation, though. At a council meeting a month earlier, she had listened to local people lining up at the microphone to berate Mayor Sipma for having flown a rainbow flag at city hall for twenty-four hours in support of a gay-pride festival. It had been, he explained, “a call for kindness,” much like the Juneteenth flag that had been flown earlier in the summer and the P.O.W./M.I.A. flag that would be flown in a few weeks. One outraged man described being “embarrassed” and “ashamed” by the display; others complained that the rainbow flag “identifies Satan,” or “is taking my freedom away.”

When one man singled out Evans for her negative “body language,” she'd finally had enough. “If you're not aware,” she said, “I am proudly the first openly elected lesbian in North Dakota. So that

is why I am not paying any heed to your crap.” Her gaze was intent. “This city is big enough for all of us,” she went on. “Me having a flag flying doesn't take away anything from your rights and freedoms. But you know what it does for me? It shows me I live in a city that appreciates and embraces me and the people of my community, and that I can live here and feel safe.”

A video clip of her defense went viral. She did not expect to change anyone's mind that day. But she wanted it to be known that there was a different Minot that was not being heard in that room. Two days later, she wrote in a Facebook post, “What happened at the City Council meeting, while painful and difficult, was a necessary rupture in our community. From this rupture, I have full confidence that our community, our Minot, will become stronger and better.”

A month later, Evans wondered whether the time had come for another necessary rupture. “By that point, I felt like North Dakotans had been given every opportunity to show personal responsibility and get our numbers down

and had failed to do so,” she told me. “Unfortunately, that's when government sometimes has to step in.”

Mayor Sipma is the kind of small-government Republican who respects local expertise and institutions, not the firebrand kind who'd rather burn them all down. He was ready to back Evans's proposal. “For the folks out there that are talking about abuse or overreach of powers, look at where we're at,” he said, referring to the surge of COVID-19. Besides, he pointed out, “we do actually tell a lot of businesses how they're going to operate, whether it be liquor licenses, fire codes, safety codes, or other things.”

The debate went on for more than an hour, and the YouTube chat was erupting:

“DONT YOU DARE USE THAT UNCONSTITUTIONAL EMERGENCY ORDER.”

“WE HAVE NEVER GONE TO SUCH TYRANICAL MEASURES.”

“Your asking for mass protests you fools.”

At 9:30 P.M., Mayor Sipma finally called the roll. The vote was five in favor, two against. A penalty-free mask mandate was adopted.

Clute later sent the Mayor a text: “I didn't see that coming tonight.” He replied, “Neither did I, but it's a good thing.”

The council moved on to the next item of business—a report from Alderman Podrygula on a meeting of the commission on aging. He noted that they were having difficulty achieving a quorum. A member had died at the age of fifty-one.

Tom Ross had a decision to make on his way in to work the next day. He wasn't interested in public defiance. But he didn't see the need to set an example, either. “I had a mask in my pocket, and I was just going to see what the attitude was like,” he told me. “I remember walking into the dealership thinking everybody's going to wear a mask. But not one person had a mask on.” The new normal was the old normal. “I just never put it on,” he said.

He went to bed that night feeling wiped out and achy, and woke up in the morning with a sore throat and sinus pressure. He scheduled a coronavirus test and called the head of his company's H.R. department, who instructed him



to quarantine at home. He soon realized that he couldn't taste his coffee and had lost his sense of smell. His test results came back after three days. He was positive. "I voted against the mask mandate and came to find out that, at that meeting, according to the state health department, I was contagious," he said.

Ross figured that he had contracted COVID-19 the weekend before the council meeting, while taking his camper to a storage facility. "I knew the owner had COVID. I thought he might have somebody else there to put my camper in storage, but he was there," he said. They spent nearly an hour together. Tom wasn't wearing a mask; the owner had one on, though Tom couldn't recall whether he'd been wearing it properly—to cover his nose as well as his mouth. (Studies show that multilayer cloth masks block between fifty and seventy per cent of droplets that carry the virus, but fit matters, and they don't guarantee protection.)

For ten days, Tom lived in his basement. But he'd already been contagious for days. His entire family—his girlfriend and his two sons, ages eighteen and twenty-one—got infected.

Ross followed the advice of his pathologist friend in Texas: he took zinc and drank a gallon of diet tonic water for two days. He also found a telemedicine clinic in New Mexico that prescribed him hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin, despite medical guidelines rejecting their use; after some two hundred trials, there was little evidence of benefit.

He was fatigued, but most of all he was frightened. He had a pulse oximeter that hooked up to his phone and monitored his pulse and his blood-oxygen level. On his first day of isolation, his oxygen level read ninety-five per cent; by the second day, it was eighty-five per cent. "So I'm running into the bathroom every five minutes, looking at my lips to see if they're blue," he told me. "There's so much anxiety. . . . You're always going, 'O.K., this is day five. Maybe tomorrow I'll get over the hump, and I'll feel better. Maybe the next day, maybe the next day.'"

This was not just the flu. A friend of Ross's who was about his age had been the first person in Minot to die from COVID-19. Ross feared dying right

there in his basement, or not getting well enough to return to work, which seemed just as bad. It wasn't a baseless fear: a study of COVID-19 survivors in Michigan found that forty per cent of people who'd been sick enough to require hospitalization weren't working sixty days later, either because they'd lost their jobs or because they were still too sick to do them.

"That absolutely scares the hell out of me, because I'm a guy who should be working toward the end of his career," Ross said. "All of a sudden, at this age, what do you do? All of a sudden, I failed, I failed, I failed. That could be too much for me."

Almost twenty-five hundred people in Ward County tested positive in October, quadruple the number reported the previous month. Deaths quadrupled, too. As funeral homes began running out of space, Clute found herself tracking down a refrigerated truck. One day, she got a call from her mother. "She's the most healthy eighty-one you can imagine," Clute said. "She lives in a condo. And she had lost three friends the night before to COVID."

Carrie Evans told me, "It's really scary, because it's literally everywhere. You feel like it's this *steam*. You go to the grocery store and you know there are positive people there. You're just scared." She was perfectly aware that, as she said, "people's behavior doesn't change because the government tells them they need to do something." But she was determined to keep up the pressure. The week after the vote, she was scheduled to attend a county planning commission meeting, and she e-mailed members of the group with a personal appeal for mask-wearing. She was taking immune-suppressing medicine for her multiple sclerosis, she explained, and so "even in non-pandemic times my immune system struggles to combat attacks." At the meeting, most members were not wearing masks. "I was devastated," Evans said.

Minot was quickly becoming the unmasked face of the coronavirus explosion in North Dakota, a state that the White House coronavirus adviser Deborah Birx described as having the worst mask use she'd seen in the country. Clute decided that it was time for her and Nwaigwe to hold a press conference

about the viral surge in Minot. "It was interesting," she said, in her mild, North Dakota-nice way. "We were going to go out to tell it like it was, and we got quite a bit of flack for contemplating doing that." Just acknowledging the extent of the problem was seen as a political act. But Clute forged ahead. "I felt very strongly," she said.

The press conference was held on Election Day, in the city-council chambers, where two weeks earlier Evans's mask-mandate proposal had been passed. One medical leader after another described the stark realities. "We North Dakotans are in crisis," Dr. Jeffrey Sather, the chief of staff at Trinity Hospital, said. "Last night at our hospital, we had no more room to admit patients. We had patients stacking up in our E.R. The normal process is we call around to the larger hospitals that have the same capabilities and ask them to accept our patients. We found no other hospitals could take care of our patients." The entire state had just twelve open I.C.U. beds left.

"North Dakota is currently a hot spot, and we are a hot spot within North Dakota," Clute said.

Nwaigwe warned people against claims that herd immunity was just around the corner. "Please, please, if anybody's telling you that, they are lying to you," he said. "That is fantasy, and that is foolish."

Ross, for his part, was gradually getting better; he felt his breath relaxing, and after his ten days in the basement he reemerged. Although he still felt wiped out, he returned to work. "For me, the mental aspect of it had been the worst part," he said.

He admitted that he had become somewhat more convinced of the value of masks. "I've got one in just about every coat pocket, every hoodie sweatshirt," he said, although he seldom actually wore one. "It's just uncomfortable for me."

Finally, ten days after winning a second term on Election Day, Governor Burgum followed the lead of cities like Fargo and Minot and imposed a statewide mask mandate—with a ticketing penalty of up to a thousand dollars for those who did not comply—as well as restrictions on bars, restaurants, and indoor gatherings. North Dakotans began



listening. Surveys found that almost eighty per cent of the population thought the mandates, such as a requirement to wear masks, were needed, and mask use reached eighty-nine per cent. Cell-phone mobility data showed reductions in travel outside the home and the workplace. The county's and the state's daily case counts peaked and, during the next two months, fell eighty per cent. Deep declines in hospitalizations and deaths soon followed. Lisa Clute told me that she knew the tide had turned when she was able to cancel her daily meeting with funeral-home directors in order to assess their capacity to accept bodies.

There were voluble holdouts, of course. On Twitter, Roscoe Streyle insisted, "Masks have never worked. All BS." He presented a chart showing that daily case counts in South Dakota, which had no mask mandate, were dropping right along with North Dakota's. He wasn't wrong about the numbers. But mask use in South Dakota had also risen—to eighty-two per cent. There is overwhelming evidence that masks are effective, and critical for achieving control of the coronavirus without lockdowns.

What determines whether people go along with mask mandates? Political rhetoric plays a role, but local conditions do, too. At some point, the damage becomes too severe to dismiss. For North Dakota, that point was reached only after ten thousand people became sick, hundreds died, and jobs dried up. Which isn't to say that North Dakota's problems have been solved: hospitalizations and deaths have slowed, but they have not stopped.

As the case rates began to fall, I called Streyle. He grew up an hour's drive away, in Leeds (population five hundred and fifty-eight), went away for school—including a year in Boston, "One of my favorite cities on the planet"—and then returned to work at a regional bank branch in his home town. He was now the senior vice-president of a bigger branch in Minot. During the fall, his whole family had been hit by the coronavirus. "I've had it," he said. "My wife's had it. My fifteen-year-old's had it. My other two came back negative, actually, just yesterday." He went on, "Is it brutal? Yeah, it is, for certain age groups. But for my age group? I had no smell, no taste, and my nose burned. And I

stayed in my basement for ten days. That's literally the only impact."

Streyle is a numbers guy. He was on the state budget committee as a legislator, and has managed the data network at his bank. Based on his read of the numbers, he remained steadfast that the response to the coronavirus has been disproportionate. People with COVID-19 occupied fewer than four hundred of the state's two thousand beds, he pointed out. How was that a crisis?

The way he saw it, flu deaths were plummeting as coronavirus deaths rose, so everything basically evened out. "Total deaths statewide are down from where they were in that age group year over year," he claimed. "I just think it's been done wrong. We should've quarantined the people that are vulnerable and let the rest of the world move on."

I wanted to argue the data with him. I could have explained how a fifteen-per-cent rise in patients can overwhelm a hospital's staff and resources. I could have explained that, as Minot discovered, it's impossible to protect the frail elderly if the virus is running rampant through the population that provides care for them. I could have pointed out that the C.D.C.'s tracking data have shown that deaths in the United States

have increased for every age cohort over twenty-five, resulting in a fifteen-per-cent increase in total deaths from 2019; daily deaths for the coronavirus now exceed heart-disease and cancer deaths, making it our No. 1 killer; and American life expectancy for 2020 appears to have dropped as much as three full years, which is the worst setback since 1918.

And I did start to lay out some of the arguments. But the effort seemed beside the point. It wasn't just that he was unlikely to be persuaded (if he didn't believe the local experts, why would he believe me?); it was also that the data debate didn't get at the heart of the divide. Even if I managed to convince him that the public-health disaster was bigger than he had made it out to be, the public-health response to it was still going to trouble him more.

"The cure can't be worse than the disease, and at this point I think it is," Streyle said. "I don't mean to diminish anybody who has lost people. I really don't." He'd seen friends struggle. But, he continued, "to me the impact on mental health, the impact on the kids, the suicide rates, the drug use, the alcohol use—all of that stuff is not going in the right direction. It just isn't."

He had a point. In the course of the

## VALENTINES for COFFEE



I wish I could give  
you a hug—  
You're my very  
favorite drug.  
*Let's never part.*

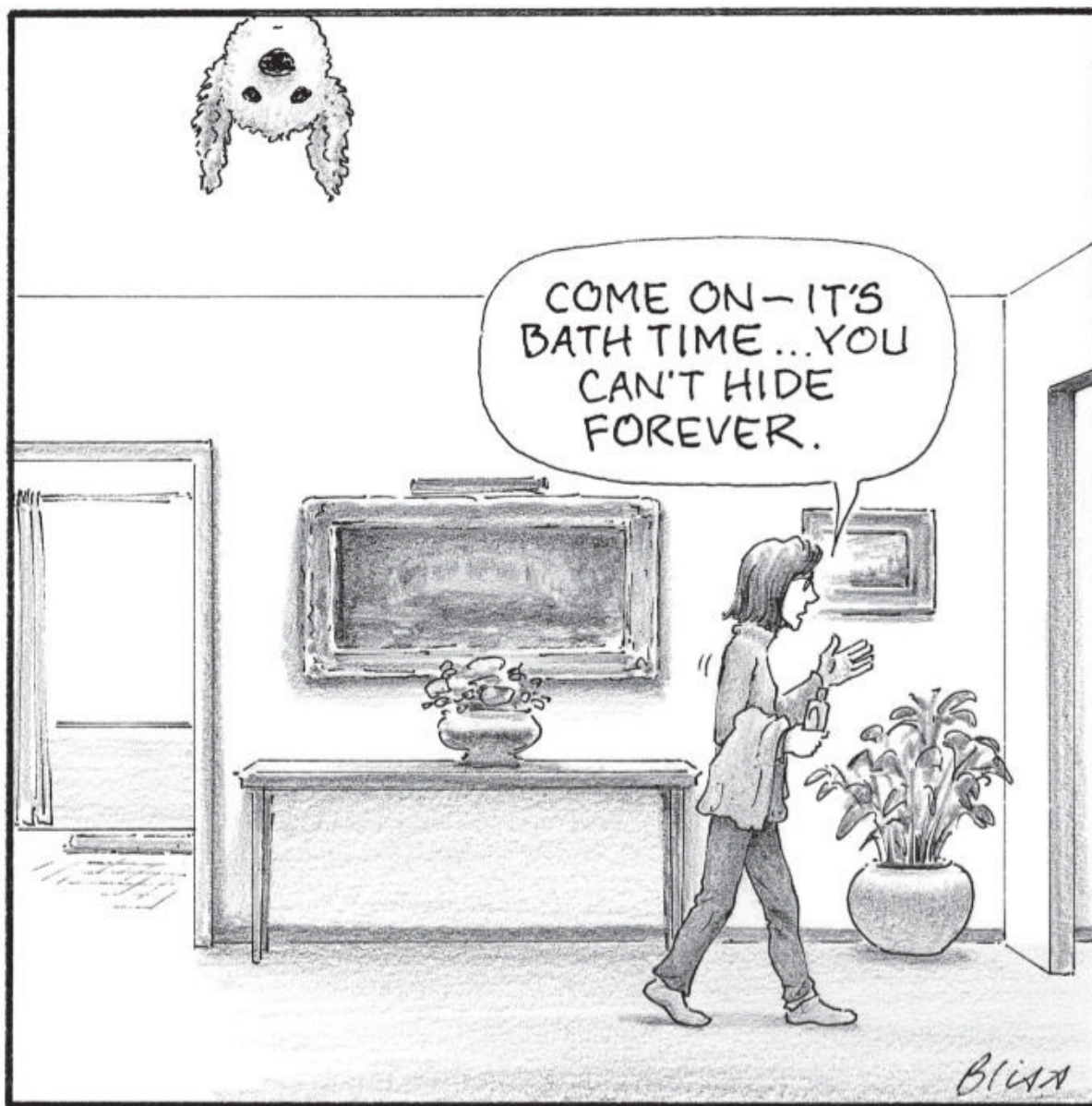


Hot or iced,  
perked or drip,  
I was yours from  
the very first sip.  
*It was meant  
to be.*



Without you my life  
would be a disaster.  
With you, my heart  
beats a little bit faster.  
*Be mine.*  
R. C.





pandemic, opioid and alcohol problems have only worsened. (The effect on suicide rates is still unknown.) Domestic abuse has increased. A generation of children have lost a year of essential schooling and social experiences. And compounding this is the economic damage related to people's desire to protect themselves from the virus. The vast majority of the jobs lost during the pandemic involve face-to-face contact with the public. Even without restrictions, the airline, hospitality, entertainment, child-care, and health-care industries have lost an immense amount of business. Streyle has watched this loss of livelihood alongside the loss of life. "I had a friend in the restaurant business just lay off seventy people the other day," he told me.

This was ultimately the reason that he didn't trust what Clute or Nwaigwe or the Trinity Hospital leaders had to say. "They're only concerned about the health side of it," he said. "They don't know what's going on."

Tom Ross was friends with Streyle,

but he was open to doubts about things that Streyle asserted with certainty—that experts are frauds or clowns, that masks don't work, that we could easily cordon off high-risk groups like the elderly from the rest of society, or, for that matter, that the Presidential election had been stolen. ("I think there was enough evidence in there that should have had more of an investigation," Ross says.) But he agrees with Streyle that what public-health officials are asking people to give up is more than what people stand to gain. They were being told that lives were saved, but they were being asked to live in fear. Fear kept people from seeing friends, going to school, shopping, travelling—from living normally. Masks, for Ross, both represented and communicated that fear.

"I don't want people to think the people who are pro-freedom don't think death is tragic," Ross told me. "I mean, this community is small enough where you know just about everybody who's died. . . . But, at the same time, we've got

a lot of mom-and-pops in Minot, North Dakota, a lot of mom-and-pop shops. That's their life. If they're not able to pay their bills? That mental-health issue, that anxiety, that feeling of failure—I just think that's going unanswered."

The discussion had begun to sound like an economic debate about relative trade-offs. But then we got to talking about our mothers, who had received their first COVID-19 vaccination, and about the freedom we hoped they would soon enjoy again—to see family, to get out of confinement, even if they still had to wear masks.

"Freedom," it's such a simple word," he said, and then he began to tear up. "I'm sorry about that," he added, wiping his eyes.

"It's O.K.," I said.

"This thing has taken its tentacles and really went through every single aspect of life," he went on. "I know for a fact, the first thing my mom will do when she gets that freedom, she'll go to church. That means so much to her. I think there's just so much anguish. I hesitate using the word 'destroyed,' but it's just destroyed so much."

The night before, Ross had attended a high-school basketball game in which his son was playing. Only two tickets for family members were allowed, and few people were in the stands. Masks were mandatory except when eating or drinking.

"To be perfectly honest with you, I bought a box of popcorn and a bottle of water and I slowly ate my popcorn one kernel at a time for pretty much the first half and kept my mask off," he said. Partly, he did it because he was confident that he wasn't infectious. (The C.D.C. considers people likely immune to reinfection for three months after a positive test.) But he also did it because the mask muffled his cheers, and he wanted his son to hear him.

"My son's a senior. This is his last lap, and, since he's my youngest, it's the last lap for me. But his last games are empty gyms. He's playing for twenty-five, thirty people. There's no big crowds. There's no cheering." It wasn't fair, he thought. "That age group is so healthy, and the death rates are minuscule, from what I understand." But they were the ones paying the price, and the public-health people didn't seem to care. So



Ross was going to keep nibbling his popcorn and cheering for his son as loudly as he could.

In medicine, when patients face a difficult decision whether to seek aggressive treatment, they are often asked what they are and are not willing to sacrifice. When patients cannot speak for themselves, someone else has to answer for them. This task can tear families apart; there is, for instance, the well-recognized seagull syndrome—in which the family member who lives farthest away from the patient flies into town and craps all over the plan. Designating a decision-maker helps insure that choices will be guided by the patient's priorities, not anyone else's.

When an entire community must decide how to tackle a serious problem—must choose what it is and is not willing to sacrifice—matters get more complicated. In business, the decision-maker is generally clear, and, if you don't like the decision, too bad. The boss can insist on obedience. But that's not how democracy works. We designate decision-makers, but the community has to live with dissent. This is why businesspeople so often make terrible government leaders. They've never had to manage civic conflict and endure unending battles over priorities and limits.

Conflict is also why so many people say they hate politics. We want consensus—badly enough that we convince ourselves that it can be created if we only try hard enough. “Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the ability to cope with it,” Mahatma Gandhi said, getting closer to the truth. (Even Ronald Reagan repeated the sentiment.) Among the questions we now face is that of how our frayed democracy can cope with the conflict required to navigate the global pandemic.

As a country, we still face a long, pot-holed road. We will soon exceed half a million deaths from COVID-19. It's not inconceivable that we will reach three-quarters of a million or even a million deaths this year; the magnitude of certain dangers is difficult to predict. The world's uncontrolled circulation of the virus has already bred mutant strains that are markedly more infectious than existing ones. Some have developed the ability to at least partially evade current vac-

cines, and further mutations may develop that more fully evade the vaccines, requiring updated formulations. Or—as has been our repeated pattern when public-health measures have succeeded in slowing the spread of the virus—we could simply take our foot off the brakes too soon.

On Friday, January 15th, Governor Burgum announced that he was letting North Dakota's mask mandate expire; capacity limits on bars, restaurants, and event venues would no longer be required, merely recommended. He cited the decline in the number of active COVID-19 cases in the past three months, from 10,224 to 1,675. He asked residents “to continue to exercise personal responsibility,” just as he had through much of the fall. After the announcement, Tom Ross told me that, at the upcoming city-council meeting, he would propose rescinding Minot's mayoral mask order. That weekend, however, the Mayor announced that he planned to keep it in force, and would call for a vote to affirm his decision.

At 5:30 P.M., on January 19th, Mayor Shaun Sipma called the meeting to order. Outside, the sky was clear, and the above-freezing evening was almost balmy for a Minot winter. A dozen people sat in the audience in distanced chairs, only three of them not wearing a mask. On the dais, the councillors all wore masks, even Tom Ross. After the Pledge of Allegiance and an update from



Lisa Clute on COVID-19 vaccinations—the efforts of units like hers had given North Dakota one of the highest vaccination rates in the country—the agenda turned to the mask order.

We were “on the brink,” Sipma said. There was no reason, he argued, to start edging closer to it again.

Carrie Evans pointed out that Minot Air Force Base was banning airmen from Minot businesses because counts were not yet low enough to allow them

to circulate in the community without jeopardizing the base.

Ross, in a button-down shirt and a navy sweater, sat with a bottle of hand sanitizer next to his bottle of water. When he spoke, he didn't argue against the efficacy of the masks; he argued against what extending the mandate represented. He spoke about autonomy, and about the importance of protecting Main Street.

“Let's put it in the hands of the people,” he implored. “Let's respect the small businesses that have their own mask mandate.” If we lived in fear, he said, we could stay at home and stick to online shopping, but at what cost to the community? “Businesses are riding on the edge of a knife right now,” he said. As he began to describe all the ways in which we'd allowed the virus to disrupt our lives, he choked up.

“Man, we just gotta get things back to normal,” he added softly. That was one hope everyone could share.

The Minot city council voted five to two, as before, in favor of the mask mandate, but it survived for only another week. In the state capitol, legislators prepared bills that would strip municipalities of the ability to adopt mask mandates when the state hadn't done so, and the Governor had declared the state to be in the low-risk category. Mayor Sipma announced that the city's mandate would be lifted.

At the council's February 1st meeting, Sipma said that he would have “preferred to see this mask mandate continue,” at least until the vaccinations were further along, but he was mindful of what was happening in the state legislature—and worried about losing the power to act if things worsened again.

The question arose whether to preserve a mask mandate for city buildings and city employees. Evans didn't see why city workers should get protections that were being denied to many retail workers. But Pitner thought it set a good example without getting in anyone's way, and the others agreed with him.

“Let's take care of our house,” he argued. “And not worry about anybody else's.”

That approach made sense to Ross, although he was rueful when we spoke afterward. “The debate never comes to conclusion,” he said. “It just never does.” ♦



A photograph of monarch butterflies on tree branches. The butterflies are orange with black veins and white spots on their wings. They are perched on thin, dark branches. The background is a deep blue with a bokeh effect, suggesting a forest setting. The text is overlaid on the lower right portion of the image.

PORTFOLIO

# THE BUTTERFLY FOREST

*Environmental destruction and violence threaten  
one of the world's most extraordinary insect migrations.*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRENDAN GEORGE KO







Every November, around the Day of the Dead, millions of monarch butterflies descend on a forest of oyamel firs in the mountains of central Mexico. The butterflies have never seen the forest before, but they know—perhaps through an inner compass—that this is where they belong. They leave Canada and the northeastern United States in late summer and fly for two months, as far as three thousand miles south and west across the continent. The migration is accomplished in a single generation that lives eight months, whereas the return journey north will occur over some four generations, each living four to five weeks. This is the most evolutionarily advanced migration of any known butterfly, perhaps of any known insect. But climate change and habitat loss, both in the forest (photographed here in February last year) and in the U.S., are fast eroding the monarchs' numbers.

The Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve, a partnership between the Mexican government and the World Wildlife Fund, is a hundred-and-thirty-nine-thousand-acre area, straddling the border between the states of Mexico and Michoacán, sixty miles northwest of Mexico City. The monarchs hibernate here for four months, at an altitude of around ten thousand feet. The land belongs to dozens of groups, including indigenous communities and communal-land villages called *ejidos*. Before the reserve was founded, locals relied on logging and mining for income. Now they also get revenue from roughly a hundred and twenty thousand tourists who visit the reserve each year.

Michoacán is a battleground for drug cartels, whose activities extend to land theft and the lucrative timber trade. In January of last year, Homero

Gómez González, a former logger who had become the supervisor at El Rosario, the most visited butterfly colony in the reserve, disappeared. Two weeks later, he was found drowned, with blunt-force injuries to the head, at the bottom of an irrigation pond. Then a tour guide who worked for him was found dead. Authorities reported that the deaths were under investigation, but the sense of danger now makes challenging work much harder.

The W.W.F. monitors the reserve's forest cover each year, and since 2005 thirty-seven thousand acres have been replanted. Nonetheless, the migration of the monarchs is under threat. Last winter, the area they covered in the reserve decreased by fifty-three per cent, probably because the previous spring in Texas, the first main stop on the journey north, was unusually chilly. (Texas is where they start laying eggs, and the cold hampered this, in part because it limited the growth of milkweed, the only plant on which they lay their eggs.) The microclimate of the forest is changing, too. Violent storms, high temperatures, and dry conditions have disrupted the equilibrium on which the monarchs depend. Weak, parched trees succumb to bark beetles and other pests. A forest geneticist, Cuauhtémoc Sáenz-Romero, has experimented with planting oyamel firs farther up the mountains. It seems that the trees can survive a decrease in temperature of two degrees Celsius, the equivalent of being planted four hundred metres higher. The monarchs, however, are already near the top of the mountains, so Sáenz-Romero is looking to plant oyamel firs on higher peaks, outside the reserve. These would be far from where the monarchs have ever been. Even if the planting is successful, will the butterflies find them?

—Carolyn Kormann

*Previous spread: Monarchs on an oyamel-fir branch at the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve.*

*Right: Young fir trees are watered at Las Novias del Sol, a community-run tree-nursery coöperative.*









*The wings of a dead monarch. While in Mexico, the butterflies look for water but do not feed, relying on fat stores that they*





*have accumulated in the course of migration. Although resistant to cold temperatures, they can freeze if their wings get wet.*





*Above: Nuns from a convent in Sahuayo, Michoacán, visit the butterfly reserve.  
Right: A cluster of monarchs in the morning, before the day's flying begins.*









*A guided horseback tour at the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve. Some hundred and twenty thousand tourists visit the*





*reserve each year, diversifying the income of local communities, which previously relied on logging and mining.*









*Above: A statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the town square of Angangueo, Michoacán.  
Left: When spring comes, monarchs reach sexual maturity and begin the northerly migration.*





*The first flight of the day at El Rosario. Monarchs take to the air as the sun rises and begins to warm them up. Once the sun*





*sets, the butterflies cluster in the oyamel-fir trees until the next morning.*



FICTION

# CASTING SHADOWS

*Jhumpa Lahiri*

MAGNUM



Now and then on the streets of my neighborhood I bump into a man I might have been involved with, maybe shared a life with. He always looks happy to see me. He lives with a friend of mine, and they have two children. Our relationship never goes beyond a longish chat on the sidewalk, a quick coffee together, perhaps a brief stroll in the same direction. He talks excitedly about his projects, he gesticulates, and at times as we're walking our synchronized bodies, already quite close, discreetly overlap.

Once he accompanied me into a lingerie shop, because I had to choose a pair of tights to wear under a new skirt. I'd just bought the skirt and I needed the tights for that evening. Our fingers grazed the textures splayed out on the counter as we sorted through the various colors. The binder of samples was like a book full of flimsy transparent pages. He was totally calm among the bras, the nightgowns, as if he were in a hardware store and not surrounded by intimate apparel. I was torn between the green and the purple. He was the one who convinced me to choose the purple, and the saleslady, putting the tights into a bag, said: Your husband's got a great eye.

Pleasant encounters like this break up our daily meanderings. We have a chaste, fleeting bond. As a result it can't advance, it can't take the upper hand. He's a good man, he loves my friend and their children.

I'm content with a firm embrace even though I don't share my life with anyone. Two kisses on the cheeks, a short walk along a stretch of road. Without saying a word to each other we know that, if we chose to, we could venture into something reckless.

This morning he's distracted. He doesn't recognize me until I'm right in front of him. He's crossing a bridge at one end and I'm arriving from the other. We stop in the middle and look at the wall that flanks the river, and the shadows of pedestrians cast on its surface. They look like skittish ghosts advancing in a row, obedient souls passing from one realm to another. The bridge is flat and yet it's as if the figures—vaporous shapes against the solid wall—were walking uphill, always climbing. They're like inmates proceeding, silently, toward a dreadful end.

"It would be great, one day, to film this procession," he says. "You can't always see it, it depends on the position of the sun. But I'm amazed every time, there's something hypnotizing about it. Even when I'm in a hurry, I stop to watch."

"So do I."

He pulls out his cell phone. "Should we try?"

"How does it look?" I ask.

"No good. This contraption can't capture them."

We continue to watch the mute spectacle, the dark bodies that advance, never stopping.

"Where are you headed?"

"Work."

"Me, too."

"Should we have a coffee?"

"I don't have time today."

"O.K., ciao, see you soon."

We say goodbye, separate. Then we, too, become two shadows projected onto the wall: a routine spectacle, impossible to capture.

In spring I suffer. The season doesn't invigorate me, I find it depleting. The new light disorients, the fulminating nature overwhelms, and the air, dense with pollen, bothers my eyes. To calm my allergies I take a pill in the morning that makes me sleepy. It knocks me out, I can't focus, and by lunchtime I'm tired enough to go to bed. I sweat all day and at night I'm freezing. No shoe seems right for this temperamental time of year.

Every blow in my life took place in spring. Each lasting sting. That's why I'm afflicted by the green of the trees, the first peaches in the market, the light flowing skirts that the women in my neighborhood start to wear. These remind me only of loss, of betrayal, of disappointment. I dislike waking up and feeling pushed inevitably forward. But today, Saturday, I don't have to leave the house. I can wake up and not have to get up. There's nothing better.

Inevitably I bump into my ex, the only significant one, with whom I was involved for five years. It's hard to believe, when I see him and say hello, that I ever loved him. He still lives in my neighborhood, alone. He's a small but handsome man, with thin-rimmed

eyeglasses and tapered hands that lend him an intellectual air. But he's never amounted to much, he remains puerile and full of complaints, in spite of his middle-aged man's body.

Here he is today in the bookstore. He stops in often, he fancies himself a writer. He was always writing something in a notebook, though I have no idea what. I doubt he's ever managed to publish anything.

"Have you read this?" he asks me, pointing to a book that just got a prize.

"I don't know it."

"You should." He looks at me and adds, "You're looking well."

"You think?"

"I'm a mess, I hardly slept last night."

"Why not?"

"The kids in the bar below my apartment are too rowdy, it's an ongoing problem. I need to find a new place."

"Where?"

"Away from this godforsaken city. I've been thinking of buying a little house by the sea, or maybe in the mountains, far from everything and everyone."

"Are you serious?"

He'll never do it. He's not the type, he's too fearful. When we were together, all I did was listen to him. I would try to solve his problems, even the tiny ones. Every time his back went out, every existential crisis. But by now I can look at him without absorbing a drop of that tiresome anxiety, that ongoing lament.

He was terrible at planning or remembering things. Distracted, the opposite of me. He never checked to see what was in the fridge, he'd buy the same stuff twice, we were always tossing food that had gone bad. He was almost always late, there was always some hitch, we were always rushing into the theatre halfway through the movie. In the beginning it irritated me, but I got used to it. I adored him, I forgave him.

When we'd go on vacation together he would inevitably forget something essential: shoes for walking, a cream to protect his skin, the notebook for jotting things down. He'd forget to pack the heavy sweater, or the lightweight shirt. He was prone to getting fevers. I've seen several small cities alone while he recovered in a hotel room, while he slept wanly in the bed, coated with sweat under the covers. I made him broth



when we got home, I prepared the hot-water bottle, I ran to the pharmacy. I didn't mind playing nurse. Both his parents had died when he was young. You're all I've got in this world, he'd say.

I was happy to cook at his place. I'd spend the whole morning doing the shopping, I'd crisscross the city for the meals I prepared for him. I remember absurd expeditions from one neighborhood to another searching for a particular cheese, for the shiniest eggplants. I'd arrive at his door, I'd set the table, he'd take his place and say: What would I do without your soup, without your roast chicken? Convinced that I was the center of his universe, I took it for granted that, sooner or later, he'd ask me to marry him.

Then one day in April someone rang my buzzer. I thought it was him. Instead it was another woman who knew my boyfriend just as well as I did, who saw him on the days I didn't. I'd shared the same man with this woman for nearly five years. She lived in another neighborhood, and she'd come to know about me thanks to a book I'd lent him, the same book that he in turn, idiotically, had lent to her. Unbelievable. Inside that book there was a piece of paper, the receipt from a doctor's visit, with my name and address. At which point all the little things that puzzled her about their relationship made sense. She realized that she was only one of his lovers, and that we were an unwitting threesome.

"Did you tell him that you found that receipt? That you were coming to see me?" I asked her once I was able to speak. She was a short woman with bangs, caring eyes, a glow to her skin. She spoke calmly. She had a soothing voice.

"I didn't tell him anything, I didn't see the point. I just wanted to meet you."

"Would you like a coffee?"

We sat down and started to chat. Pulling out our agendas, we reviewed, point by point, details of our parallel relationships: vacations and other memorable moments, herniated disks, bouts of the flu. It was a long and harrowing conversation. A meticulous exchange of information, of disparate dates that solved a mystery, that dispelled a nightmare I'd been unconsciously living. We realized that we were two survivors, and in the end we felt like partners in a

crime. Each revelation was devastating. Everything she said. And yet, even as my life shattered in pieces, I felt as if I were finally coming up for air. The sun started to set and we were hungry, and when there was nothing left to say we went out to share a meal.

I spot them on the street, in the middle of a crowd of pedestrians waiting for the light to change: the couple who live around the corner, my friend and the kind man I cross paths with now and again on the bridge. I quicken my pace to catch up to them, I think of saying hello, but then I realize that they're having an argument. It's a wide avenue, there's confusion right and left. You can hardly hear a thing, but they manage to make themselves heard. They talk at the same time, their sentences overlapping so that it's impossible to know what they're fighting about. Then I hear her voice: "Don't touch me, you disgust me."

I start to follow them. I don't go into the store where I was heading, it's not urgent. We cross the broad street together. He's handsome, lanky. She's got long hair, a bit tousled, and wears a flame-colored, egg-shaped coat.

They pay no attention to passersby, they're not ashamed of fighting in public. It's as if they were in the middle of nowhere, on a deserted beach, or inside a home. They're having a bad, bitter fight.



It rises above the mayhem that surrounds them; they act as if they were the only people who inhabit the entire city.

She's furious, and in the beginning he tries to appease her. But then he, too, loses his temper, and he's as irritated and spiteful as she is. It feels unseemly, a quarrel so intimate in front of everyone. Their biting words pierce the air as if physically puncturing it, seeping into the blue of the sky, blackening it. And it upsets me to notice that his face has turned mean.

At the intersection she says, "See those two?"

She points to an elderly couple. They hold hands and walk with measured steps, in silence.

"I wanted us to get where they've gotten."

My friends aren't so young anymore, either, even though they're now behaving like children. After crossing the busy avenue, we turn onto a quieter street. I'm still walking a few paces behind them. And as I do I begin to understand what they're arguing about.

They'd gone to their daughter's school to listen to a concert, and then they'd stopped to have a coffee. After that she wanted to take a taxi home, whereas he wanted to walk. He'd offered to call her a taxi and then return on foot. And this suggestion had offended her to the point where she'd exploded.

Now she's saying that he'd never have suggested such a thing when they were first dating, when he was deeply in love with her.

"It's a bad sign," she says.

He replies dryly, "You're out of your mind, you don't know what you're saying."

"You're always going your own way these days. I don't see how we can resolve this."

After making this statement, she starts to cry. But he keeps walking slightly ahead of her. At the next intersection he stops and she catches up to him.

"Why were you so opposed to walking and enjoying this sunny day?"

"I'm wearing a new pair of shoes that I haven't broken in yet."

"Well, you could have told me that."

"You could have asked."

At that point I stop following them, having already heard too much.

In August my neighborhood thins out: it wastes away like an old woman who was once a stunning beauty before shutting down completely. Some people spend the month here on purpose; they hole up gladly, turning anti-social. Others cower at the thought of those shapeless days and weeks, the severe closure. Their moods dip, they flee. I'm not a great fan of this month, but I don't hate it, either.

At first I enjoy the peace and quiet. I greet the neighbors who are still



around, who walk out in their flip-flops as if they were in some sleepy seaside town. In the few stores that remain open, at the coffee bar, people talk about their plans, upcoming vacations. They say: I love parking wherever I want, these days there's so little traffic you can cross the avenue with your eyes closed. It's startling to see the piazza nearly abandoned. Then at a certain point everything grows static, choked by silence and inertia, and the very lack of activity feels, paradoxically, depleting.

For the past few days the bars have been shut tight; I can't even have a coffee outside my home. I go out in the late morning anyway, to buy food: only two of the farm stands are open, there's not much. The food looks flaccid. It's overpriced and already half-cooked by the sun. The proprietors stand like statues under their white tents: mute, listless characters in a *mise en scène*. They're not the people I like to buy from. The ones I'm loyal to, who give me a discount, are away. These two are wily, they're cheating the tourists who come here for a week or two, who rent the apartments of people who normally live on the piazza and are spending these weeks on their boats, or in the mountains, or abroad. The tourists visit the city in spite of the torrid heat, the gloomy atmosphere.

It's impossible to spend money other than at the market. All the store owners are on vacation, they've pulled down their grates not for a death in the family but for merriment, and they've left exuberant handwritten signs with exclamation points on their doors wishing everyone a good vacation and saying when they'll open up again. But this year there's something unusual going on: one of my neighbors—he's a guy in his thirties, a bit unkempt—has decided to get rid of certain things in his house. He lives in an atypical building, it looks as though it was originally a storefront. It has a grate instead of windows or a front door.

He sits for half the day in a pair of shorts—I bet he also sleeps in them—on a stool in the middle of an alleyway closed to traffic. It's a road to park on, or to turn down simply in order to back out again. Next to the stool, he's set up two or three folding tables, and on them he's displayed a series of objects that



*"Perhaps 'balcony billiards' isn't for you."*

are both useful and utterly useless: vases, silverware, science textbooks, chipped hand-painted porcelain bowls, lacklustre teacups, toys, various knickknacks. Women's shoes, pretty but battered. Evening bags lined with silk that's faded and slightly soiled. There's an ugly multi-colored fur on a hanger, looking out of place, totally out of season.

He's arranged some books in a lopsided hutch that belongs in a kitchen. Costume jewelry sits on one of the tables, on top of a piece of velvet. Plates and bowls are carefully stacked on the same table. I ask myself: How many meals are behind those beaten-up forks and knives? How many bouquets of fresh flowers filled those vases before withering? Every day the merchandise changes slightly as he combs through more layers of stuff. "Cheap Deals," he's written on a piece of paper. When I ask how much something costs, he almost always tells me the same price.

In the afternoon, before lunch, he moves all his objects inside, pulls down the grate, and goes somewhere, probably to the beach. The following morning, he's there again. As I pass by his house I catch a glimpse of the dark, dusty, jumbled source of his little venture.

I say hi to him every day, I pause to

look at this and that. I worry that it would seem impolite not to. At the same time, even though he's the one putting everything on display, I feel hesitant, somehow invasive. I worry about touching his things, I feel strange coveting them, wanting to purchase them.

A painting on canvas, not too big, catches my eye. It's a portrait of a girl with short, side-parted hair. The portrait is unfinished. There are no shoulders, no bust, instead there's just the dirty surface of the canvas. The girl seems anxious, she gives me a side-long glance.

My neighbor—is he the hale and hearty son of the pallid young girl?—is friendly, but he doesn't pester me. He's rather indifferent to my curiosity. In any case, since all the stores are closed, I decide to give him some business. One day I buy a couple of drinking glasses. Then, for the same price, I buy a magazine that was sold thirty-three years ago at a newsstand, that was read, perhaps, on a train. I buy a necklace. Then I buy the portrait. The more I buy, the more new things turn up on the tables. In the stark summer desert, this oasis of objects, this ongoing flow of goods, reminds me that everything vanishes, and also reminds me



of the banal, stubborn residue of life.

Even though I don't need any of this stuff, I keep buying things from him. And back at my house, in the mornings, I taste the day's first coffee from one of those chipped cups. I read the magazine on my balcony and learn all about the actors and gossip and goings on of another generation. I hang up the portrait and look at that young, timid face. What would have made her happy? Did she grow up to wear that flashy fur coat? Was it hers? Did she like feeling elegant, being admired as she rushed about doing errands in winter under a chilly blue sky?

One day the young man invites me in, he owes me some change. As soon as I set foot in the room I'm uneasy. The life lived in that house overwhelms me. It's all been hoarded, neglected, ransacked.

Finally I ask, "Who owned these things?"

"My family. And me. I put together all those puzzles. I graduated from high school because I read those books. My mother cooked meals for decades in those pots and pans. My dad played with those cards. He never tossed anything out. When she died he didn't want to get rid of her things. But this year he died, too, so it's up to me, otherwise my girlfriend won't spend the night here."

And so for very little money my house transforms, and my spartan life perks up a bit. It builds in flavor like a slow-simmering broth, even though the yellowed paper of the magazines makes my eyes water and there are termites in the portrait. It doesn't bother me, these new acquisitions entertain me, they keep me company. My orphaned neighbor, on the other hand, grows tired of the tedious sale, and maybe also of his only regular client. So one day he shoves it all into a big garbage bin and speeds off to the beach on his motorcycle, with his girlfriend's arms clasped around him for dear life.

There's no food in my refrigerator, so I head to the supermarket, where I bump into my married friend, for whom I represent . . . what, exactly? A road not taken, a hypothetical affair? I carry a basket with a few things inside, the routine purchases of a woman on her own, while he pushes a cart overflowing with

all kinds of food: cereal boxes, bags of biscuits and cookies and melba toast, jams, butter, whole milk, skim milk, soy milk. He tells me what each member of the family likes to eat, the ongoing battle to sit down to breakfast together, something that, to his regret, rarely happens. He likes to have ample stores in the pantry: boxes of rice and pasta, cans of chickpeas and tomatoes, containers of coffee and sugar, bottles of oil, bottles of still and sparkling water.

"In case disaster strikes," he says, kidding.

"Why would there be a disaster?"

With or without the food, I doubt a disaster will ever take place in that home. I never stock up, I shop from day to day. My refrigerator is never full, neither is my pantry.

We pay at the register, separately. It takes him fifteen minutes to put all that food into shopping bags. I follow him down to the parking lot below the supermarket. We escape the banal music, the neon lights, the odor of food, the excessive air-conditioning.

"Can I give you a ride?"

"I don't have much to carry, I can walk."

"It's supposed to rain, let's head back together."

He opens the trunk. All the shopping bags are made of a sickly transparent green and they merge into one big mass. We decide to put my two bags on one of the car seats. It's a little disgusting, covered with crumbs, and around it I see the detritus left by his children, imprisoned for long journeys in that car: all manner of toys, dismembered action figures, battered books.

He pulls a chocolate bar out of one of his bags.

"We need to eat this right away," he says.

I know the reason. My friend, his wife, is worried about his blood sugar, his intake of saturated fats. He gives me a little piece.

"No one knows about this parking lot. See how empty it is? I like to keep it a secret, I never tell anyone that I know about it."

He drops me off at my door. I take my bags, thank him, and say goodbye, kissing him on the cheeks like always.

"Sure you don't need anything else?"

Want a few of our bags? Half of it's just stuff for the pantry."

"If disaster strikes, I'd suggest you abandon the house."

"You're probably right about that."

In any case, I don't need anything else. The tenderness he sets aside for me is enough.

Never married, but, like all women, I've had my share of married men. Today I think of one I met here, in this bar on the other side of the river where I now happen to be, on my own. That day I'd had a coffee and I was about to head out. He'd followed me, he'd stopped me on the sidewalk. He'd run like a lunatic behind me.

It was the first time a man had pursued me so vehemently. I'm attractive enough, but not the kind of beauty to make heads turn. And yet he'd said, panting for breath, "Sorry to bother you, but I'd like to get to know you."

That was the gist of it. He was about fifty years old and I was in my twenties. He'd looked at me, fixing me with pale, restless eyes, not saying anything else. His gaze was kind, also insistent. My impulse was to brush him off and yet I was flattered, he didn't strike me as the type who does nothing but chase after women.

"Just a coffee," he'd added.

"I just had one, I've got some things to do."

"Later on, then, around five? I'll wait for you here."

That afternoon I met up with a girlfriend. I told her what had happened.

"What was he like? Were you into him?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe."

"Good-looking? Well dressed?"

"I'd say so."

"Well, then?"

At five-twenty I went back to the bar. He was seated at a small table, waiting, as if he were expecting someone at the airport, waiting and doing nothing else. I'll never forget the warmth in his eyes when he saw me walk in. He was unhappily, permanently married. We had a fling. He lived in another city, and he would come down from time to time, for the day, for work. What else is there to say?

A few faltering memories. Some trips outside the city at lunchtime, in his car.



## THE GIFT

In the garden, my father sits in his wheelchair  
garlanded by summer hibiscus  
like a saint in a seventeenth-century cartouche.  
A flowering wreath buzzes around his head—  
passionate red. He holds the gift of death  
in his lap: small, oblong, wrapped in black.  
He has been waiting seventeen years to open it  
and is impatient. When I ask how he is  
my father cries. His crying comes as a visitation,  
the body squeezing tears from his ducts tenderly  
as a nurse measuring drops of calamine  
from an amber bottle, as a teen at the car wash  
wringing a chamois of suds. It is a kind of miracle  
to see my father weeping this freely, weeping  
for what is owed him. *How are you?* I ask again  
because his answer depends on an instant's microclimate,  
his moods bloom and retreat like an anemone  
as the cold currents whirl around him—  
crying one minute, sedate the next.  
But today my father is disconsolate.  
*I'm having a bad day*, he says, and tries again.  
*I'm having a bad year. I'm having a bad decade.*  
I hate myself for noticing his poetry—the triplet  
that should not be beautiful to my ear  
but is. Day, year, decade—scale of awful economy.  
I want to give him his present but it is not mine  
to give. We sit as if mother and son on Christmas Eve  
waiting for midnight to tick over, anticipating  
the moment we can open his present together—  
first my father holding it up to his ear and shaking it,  
then me helping him peel back the paper,  
the weight of his death knocking,  
and once the box is unwrapped it will be mine,  
I will carry the gift of his death endlessly,  
every day I will know it opening in me.

—Sarah Holland-Batt

He liked to drive, take a random exit  
and find a tiny place in the countryside  
to have a good meal. A series of empty  
*trattorie* come to mind. One time it was  
just the two of us, the waiter, the *pa-  
drone*, the cook who remained behind  
the scenes. We'd lingered all afternoon,  
talking. I don't remember what we ate,  
just the abundance and variety of the  
food that surrounded us, as if it were a  
lavish wedding.

They'd let him smoke at the table. I  
had no idea where he lived with his wife,  
I never asked which city he returned to.  
He never came to my place. I waited  
for his phone call and showed up for

every date. It was an incendiary time, a  
momentary surge that has nothing to  
do with me anymore.

This evening as I read in bed I hear  
the roar of cars that speed down  
the road below my apartment. And the  
fact of their passing makes me aware of  
my own stillness. I can only fall asleep  
when I hear them. And when I wake  
up in the middle of the night, always  
at the same time, it's the absolute si-  
lence that interrupts my sleep. That's  
the hour when there's not a single car  
on the road, when no one needs to get  
anywhere. My sleep grows lighter and

lighter and then it abandons me en-  
tirely. I wait until someone, anyone,  
drives by. The thoughts that come to  
roost in my head in those moments are  
always the gloomiest, also the most pre-  
cise. That silence, combined with the  
black sky, takes hold of me until the  
first light returns and dispels those  
thoughts, until I hear the presence of  
lives passing along the road below me.

Today one of my lovers keeps call-  
ing. He presses a key by mistake  
and reaches me without realizing it. I  
see his number on my cell phone, I say  
hello, and he's already talking, enthusi-  
astically, only not to me. I hear him while  
he's having lunch, while he's asking the  
waiter what the specials are, while he's  
walking down the street, while he's at  
the office. His roaming voice ends up in  
my ear, distant but familiar, present, ab-  
sent. He's laughing as he's talking. While  
I'm privy to all this, he has no clue.

I'm at home today, I don't have plans.  
I'm constantly cold, it's that patch of  
autumn before my building turns the  
heat on, so I've put on a heavy sweater  
and I keep boiling water for tea. Even  
in bed, in spite of the down comforter,  
the sheets radiate no warmth whatso-  
ever. They feel like a punishing slab  
under my bare feet.

Every time the phone rings I pick  
up, thinking maybe this time he really  
is trying to call me. But he's not calling  
me, he doesn't hear me saying hello, he's  
still not aware of our ongoing, inadver-  
tent contact.

Who is he talking to? Where is he?  
I have no idea. He's at work, at a bar,  
on the platform of the metro, I suppose.  
It's just that every time I get one of his  
calls I feel betrayed. Our communica-  
tion, of which he's ignorant, nettles me.  
It makes me feel particularly alone.

Finally, in the late afternoon, he calls:  
it's really him. I pick up and hear the  
passion in his voice.

"Hi, darling, how are you?"

"Ciao, how was your day?"

"A drag. I was at work all day, I even  
skipped lunch, it was one thing after  
another. How about you?"

"My day was also a bit of a drag."

"So what about dinner tonight?"

"Tonight I think I'll pass."

"Why?"

"I've had a headache for hours," I



tell him, then hang up and go out, ravenous, to eat dinner on my own. There's no bite to the air; it was colder inside than out.

At the end of the year, when all the schoolchildren in the city are on vacation, I accept an invitation to accompany my friends and their children—their son and daughter—on a visit to a castle. He drives. He's my friend from the bridge, the one quarrelling on the street, the one from the supermarket. His wife should have been with us, but she's come down with a bad cold and has decided, at the last minute, to stay home. So I stand in for her today.

On our way back to the city we stop to stretch our legs in a sleepy little town. He parks in front of a precipice. We get out of the car and walk up the narrow road, seeking glimpses of sunlight. A woman sweeps the piazza—two criss-crossed flags and a small fountain—with a broom. She goes about it as if that public space were her own living room.

We continue walking. The children run on ahead. We linger under a grand house that looms over the countryside. At the base of a statue, we read the name of the noble family that once owned it. It's a stone façade, but the colors are a mix of pale pink, yellow, and orange—warm shades that form the background for the slanting shad-

ows cast by lampposts. The town, practically abandoned this afternoon, starts to drown in a piercing light.

We're doubled over by a sharp wind and our eyes are filled with tears. We see the church at the top of the hill, and an ancient olive tree decorated with shiny red balls, in place of a Christmas tree. The higher we climb the more we feel the wind and the cold. We're enveloped by the wide-open space, enclosed by all that emptiness.

We pause at one of the side streets, curious to see where it leads. It's actually a dead end, a sort of courtyard composed of four buildings, or maybe it's just one building with three or four separate entrances. It's a sheltered space, so dark that it's an effort to adjust our eyes. But bit by bit we make out a staircase with a railing that leads to a brick archway, and a few doors, closed and battered. The winter sunset seeps in through some cracks. It's incredible, it feels as if we're standing in a grotto, with light that darts through it like fish.

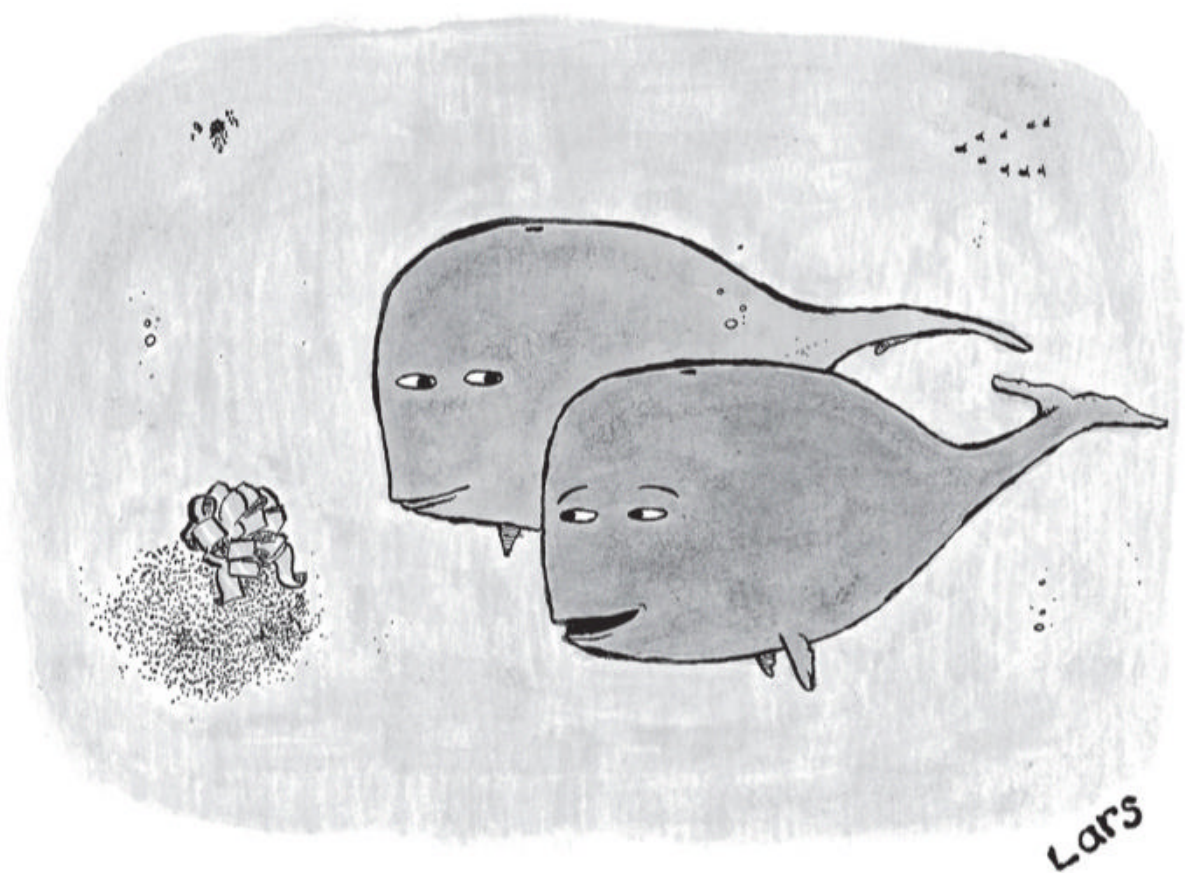
As soon as I step into that secluded niche I dream of inhabiting it, of withdrawing there, away from everything. He's standing beside me, we admire it together, and before heading out he turns to look at me. "Stunning," he says. The word burns inside me, but I can't tell if he's talking about me or the place we're in. He's enigmatic that way.

His daughter wants a hot chocolate, so we walk back to the town hoping to find a bar that's open. The woman with the broom says, "Ask down that way," and we proceed to a barbershop, which to our surprise has numerous clients inside. "At the top of that road, in about three hundred metres," a man tells us, reclining in his chair, his face covered with soap.

We walk to the top of the road, but, alas, the bar is closed. The large awning set up outside, which needs to be taken down for the season, whips wildly in the wind.

We go back to the car parked at the precipice. And as he turns on the engine and puts it into reverse I feel a panic starting to rise, not trusting that low cement barrier between us and the abyss. I don't trust that the car will move backward, all I feel is its steep downward slope, pointing toward danger. But we go up, the car whines as it pulls out in reverse gear and we move, against the force of gravity, away from the little town with its spotlessly clean piazza, and the hushed grotto that had enchanted me, and the man who will have dinner tonight, freshly shaved. No hot chocolate, just the depleting artificial heat inside the car. We go home without talking, though the little girl hums strange songs to herself all the while.

It's that spring in my step I've always lacked, an absence of ability which held me back and was an obstacle when I was a young girl, at school. For half an hour they let us play outside. Most of the students were euphoric during that short block of time, but I couldn't stand it. I hated their sharp cries, the spontaneous exaltation. In any case, the game I'd play with my friends back then was to leap from one tree stump to another, as if they were little round islands, a wooden archipelago arranged in a clearing. The stumps were low, they must have come up to our hips, no higher than that, but climbing on top of them made me sick to my stomach, and once I stood up my legs would tremble. Crossing those gaps cautiously and clumsily to get from one to the other took enormous effort, one that humiliated me as the other girls moved back and forth without a thought, relishing every second of the activity as



*"A swarm of krill! How did you know?"*



if they were birds hopping from branch to branch. How I envied their brazen strides. It now occurs to me that I was as tenacious as I was timid. I never protested, I did what they did, that is, I clambered up, I hesitated, and then I strode across, afraid each time that the empty space between the stumps would swallow me up, terrified each time that I would fall, even though I never did.

Ever since that trip together with my friend and his children I've been feeling off-kilter. I've wondered what it would be like to take things further, and I think, too often, about the way he laughs, the way his voice reverts to the high pitch of a little boy's, and the hairs on his wrists and scattered on the backs of his hands, and the humorous messages he still sends me now and then. I wait but he doesn't get in touch, it's been a while since I've seen him in the neighborhood, but then one day the phone rings, and his name on the screen already smacks of impudence. My friend is usually at work at this hour, their children are at school. What will he suggest this time? A bite to eat at the bar on the corner?

Instead when I hear his voice I realize something's happened. He explains it all quickly: my friend's father has had a stroke and the outlook is grim. They got the call early in the morning and they left the dog and the house without tending to either. The barista on the corner has the keys.

I head over right away, the dog needs to go out. It's the first time I've been at their place alone. Until now all I've known is the table set for a dinner, the bathroom used by guests, the kitchen crowded with pots and pans. This morning it's all under control in spite of the call before dawn, the hasty departure. The plates in the dishwasher are clean, and the coffeepot on the stove is the only thing to wash. Someone spilled a bit of sugar on the countertop.

I look into the bedrooms. The bright one, uncluttered, with white linen curtains, that he shares with my friend, and the one right next to it, less spacious, crowded with toys and a bunk bed. But even there it's all relatively tidy. The hallway is lined with photos of the two of them and of the children, photos of the four of them, moments

of parenting they treasure, with their children at the seaside, or abroad, or in their laps. I pull down a few window shades and turn off the lever for the gas. I spread a blanket over the bed. I tie the garbage bag. All this is the private morphology of a family, of two people who fall in love and have children: an enterprise as mundane as it is utterly specific. And all at once I see how they form an ingenious organism, an impenetrable collective.

I find the leash that hangs by the door and take the dog out. I walk him to the villa behind my house, carrying a few plastic bags in my pocket. We walk past the dirty fountains, beneath the sclerotic palms, past the pockmarked statues flecked with lichen and moss.

He's a good dog, it doesn't take long for him to trust me. He doesn't bark, he leads me along the grounds of the villa, and I like the tinkling of the tags on his collar. He stops to drink water from a fountain, in front of a she-lion who crushes a skull with her paw, and another, recumbent, eating an apple.

Three times a day, for the next three days, until they've buried my friend's father, until they come back, the dog and I make the same rounds. I grow fond of the animal, of his ears, always alert, and of his careful gait, his determined muzzle. Our walks together thrust me forward, and though he pulls me, I'm the one holding the leash. Every step puts distance between me and my infatuation until it's no longer dangerous, until our romance, which never took hold to begin with, loses its hold over me.

I clean my house from top to bottom. Every neglected nook and cranny, each windowsill, all the floors, the lampshades. I remove the stains that the detergents leave under the sink and the line of dark dust that creeps on top of the molding, dragging my finger along it, wrapped in a cloth. I clean the inside of the washing machine and the inside of my garbage can. I sweep away the detritus that gathers by the threshold of the balcony. After that I get rid of the lime that encrusts the faucets, submerging the washers in a glass of

white vinegar. I want to remove every trace of myself.

I move the furniture around, inspecting within, behind, beneath. This type of filth spreads everywhere, there's no end to it. It works its way into every surface. I go to the hardware store and buy a few things to spruce up the kitchen. Hooks for my pot holders, a receptacle in which my sponges can rest and drain. I toss out the chewed-up

wooden spoons and buy new ones, arranging them in a vase like flowers. And as I'm sifting through all my belongings I come across an old ceramic plate in a closet. Something that had broken, long ago. It's in two pieces now, each still intact, the smaller one in the shape of a triangle, like a slice cut from a cake. I'm

about to toss them out when I change my mind. I'm inspired to join them back up. And I think it would be worth the trouble. It's a hand-painted piece, I'd bought it on vacation in the mountains once. I can't remember when.

I go back to the hardware store and ask for a glue that's good for ceramics. They give me a product that has superpowers, they say, that can make anything stick to anything else. Back at home, seated at my desk, I open the tube, follow the directions, and attach the slice to the rest of the cake. It sets instantly so that I can barely see the crack. It looks like a single folded hair. But when I close the tube I press it by mistake and a sizable clump of glue spurts out, covering my fingers, drying immediately, leaving a stubborn film on my skin. I wash my hands but that just makes matters worse. The water doesn't rinse away the glue, and by now my fingers are sticking to one another as firmly as the slice to the rest of the cake. I look up and see myself in the mirror, weary, stiff hands coated with glue whose ghostly traces resemble the dust I've been working hard to get rid of all day, and after a long time, or maybe for the first time, I burst out laughing. ♦

*(Translated, from the Italian, by the author.)*

NEWYORKER.COM

Jhumpa Lahiri on missing Rome.





# THE CRITICS



BOOKS

## FLAME ON

*We all live in Stan Lee's universe. How much of it did he create?*

BY STEPHANIE BURT

In the early nineteen-forties, decades before he was Stan the Man, the impresario of the Marvel Universe, Stanley Martin Lieber fetched coffee, took notes, and sat on desks playing the piccolo—or perhaps the ocarina—in the offices of his uncle's comic-book company. There, before and after his Army service, and into the decade that followed, Stanley became one of many typists and scribblers providing copy for word balloons and prose for the books' filler pages. He was as efficient as his older colleagues at churning out scripts, and already distinguished himself in one way: he put his pen name, Stan Lee, on all his work. He said that he was saving his birth name for a more respectable project, like a novel. Still, if he was going to make comics, he wanted credit.

That desire served him well. It also raised big questions about—to use two of Lee's favorite nouns—power and responsibility, since Lee never created a comic alone. Novelists have editors and publishers. Live-action films require directors and actors. And company-owned superhero comics are plotted, drawn, scripted, and lettered by different people, with creative teams that change over time. To give a full account of Stan Lee, as Abraham Riesman sets out to do in a new biography, “True Believer” (Crown), is to contend not just with his presence in popular culture (the smiling oldster in sunglasses, with a cameo in each Marvel film) but with the fluid nature of artistic collaboration, and so with endless debates over which parts of the comics are his.

Why should we care? One answer is money—lots of it. Nine of the thirty top-grossing films in history use Marvel

characters. Though Lee gave up his stake in the intellectual property years before the Marvel Cinematic Universe began, money kept flowing his way. Another reason is honesty: audiences believe that Lee created those characters, and his life-long habit of taking credit has stoked fans' and journalists' wish to get at the truth.

And then there's the cultural dominance that superheroes, especially Marvel ones, have attained. Figures that Lee co-created, or said he created, revived a genre that had been on its last legs, helping to launch them from drugstore spinner racks to the screen. Americans who can't identify Achilles or Botswana know Wakanda as a high-tech nation in Africa, Loki as a Norse god who's up to no good, and Peter Parker as the original Spider-Man. Even as they dominate popular culture, superheroes—the flawed kind, the weird kind, the kind Marvel pioneered—can stand for exclusion, for queerness, for disability, for all manner of real or perceived oppression, marshaling enough power to blast their enemies into the sun. For decades, the title page of every Marvel superhero comic said “Stan Lee Presents”—no wonder we want to know who he really was.

Named for one of Lee's catchphrases, “True Believer” isn't the first serious biography of Lee, though it is the first completed since his death, in 2018. It cannot settle every question about what, exactly, Lee did. What it does best is unfurl a *Künstlerroman*, a story about the growth of an art form and an artist who was also a director and a leading man, unable to admit that the show could go on without him.

Stanley Martin Lieber was born in 1922, the first child of Romanian Jewish immigrants in Manhattan; his father was a garment cutter and his mother was a department-store saleswoman. His younger brother, Larry, arrived nine years later. As unassuming as Stan was self-promoting, Larry worked with—or, really, worked for—Stan in comics, off and on, for most of the century. At DeWitt Clinton High School, in the Bronx (a few years ahead of James Baldwin), Stanley showed verbal skill and a performer's ambition. When he noticed a classmate with a knack for extempore speaking, he was inspired. “I decided that I wanted to be able to speak that way, to be able to hold the attention of an audience,” he recalled years later.

Had he grown up elsewhere, Lee might have fled to Hollywood. Instead, as a teen-ager, he took an entry-level job at Timely, his uncle Martin Goodman's firm, where Jack Kirby, Joe Simon, Bill Everett, and Carl Burgos were assembling stories about a cantankerous Prince of Atlantis named Namor; his android nemesis, the original Human Torch; and a blond, Nazi-punching guy called Captain America. Lee started out “erasing the pencils off the inked artwork,” as Simon recalled, but soon he was writing, too, not least because postal regulations made comics cheaper to mail if they contained prose, any prose. The 1941 story “Captain America Foils the Traitor's Revenge” was the first to bear the name Stan Lee. Simon, who assigned the story, later remarked, “I made his life.”

The Timely business model emphasized quantity over quality, trend chasing over trend creating, and Lee quickly

ABOVE: TAMARA SHOPSIN





*Like Cyclops fighting Magneto, or the Thing taking on Galactus, Lee needed a team: he couldn't do much by himself.*



proved that he could serve the model. He displayed a spectacular ability to meet deadlines, scripting comics for Timely artists—Kirby among them—to draw. Goodman soon named him editor of the comics operation. The Second World War might have derailed him, except that when Lee enlisted he was assigned to the so-called playwriting division at Fort Monmouth, in New Jersey, where he wrote training films for soldiers and kept writing comics for Timely. After the war, he returned to the company, and to self-promotion. In 1947, he self-published a short, hype-filled book called “Secrets Behind the Comics.” That year, he met the English model Joan Boocock, who divorced her husband to marry Stan. The pair—by all accounts happy and well matched—settled cozily in Long Island suburbia, where they had a daughter, Joan Celia, known as J.C. Local newspaper accounts of their swank pool parties do not mention Stan’s comics at all.

Comic books like the ones Goodman published didn’t amount to much in nineteen-fifties America. Some newspaper comic strips, such as Walt Kelly’s “Pogo,” enjoyed highbrow followings, but staple-bound serials were for children, or those clinging to childhood. (In Phyllis McGinley’s perfect 1952 poem, “Portrait of Girl with Comic Book,” the comic book becomes a talisman of that painful age, thirteen.) When more ambitious but sometimes violent stories entered the market, a moral panic—spurred, in part, by the psychiatrist Fredric Wertham’s jeremiad “Seduction of the Innocent”—prompted congressional hearings, and the comic-book industry turned to self-policing. At Timely, Lee cranked out scripts for the genres allowed under the 1954 Comics Code: romances and Westerns and, especially, science fiction. Lee did not, in those years, write superheroes: much reduced from their wartime prime, they earned little money for anyone except DC Comics, the home of Superman. By the end of the decade, DC had found success in rebooting old heroes, like the Flash, and combining them into new teams, like the Justice League of America.

Lee became the editor-in-chief of a company—now called Atlas—that was going nowhere fast. In a humiliating deal in 1957, DC, the company’s rival, had be-

come its de-facto distributor, and Goodman and Lee were confined to eight newsstand titles a month. Flooding the zone would no longer work. Instead, they cut expenses and experimented with new stories that might hook readers. The answer turned out to be superheroes with, as Lee liked to say later, “feet of clay”: squabbling families, like the Fantastic Four (1961); teens animated by angst, regret, and rotten luck, like Spider-Man (1962); delightfully pretentious renovations of ancient myth, like the mighty Thor (1962). Before long, Lee and Goodman branded the comics line with a new name: Marvel.

In what became known as the Marvel Method—not because Lee invented it (he did not) but because he preferred it—he and an artist would start out by chatting, perhaps making notes. The artist would draw the story and flesh out the plot, and Lee would add captions and dialogue. The method suited artists like the energetic veteran Kirby, known for his dynamic action and far-out costumes, and the moody Steve Ditko, who cooked up sullen characters and mysterious semi-Expressionist backgrounds. Kirby originated the Fantastic Four, the Hulk, Thor, and the X-Men. Ditko drew Spider-Man and Dr. Strange. Other early pencillers were asked to imitate Kirby’s style, while Kirby himself worked at a Stakhanovite pace: almost twelve hundred pages in one year. (As Kirby’s biographer put it, Kirby was “very, very good at creating comic book art and very, very bad at getting paid for it.”)

Lee’s dialogue revealed his need for attention, which some of his superheroes shared. In one sequence, Captain America, after a long absence, is discovered by a teary police officer: “All these years—all of us—your fans—all your admirers—we thought you were dead! But you’ve come back—just when the world has need of such a man—just like fate planned it this way! Forgive me, Cap, will ya? I—I seem to have something in my eye!” Tearjerkers, love triangles, and money troubles sustained one Marvel plot after another, in between all the clobberings. In *Fantastic Four* No. 45 (“Among Us Hide . . . the Inhumans!”), Sue Storm pulls a blanket tenderly over an unconscious humanoid whose huge gray head resembles a dinosaur’s. “Despite his great strength,” Sue tells her husband, “he seems to need kindness and

protection!” Ben Grimm, a pilot turned by cosmic radiation into the Thing, sees the tableau and frowns: “That’s the way Alicia”—his girlfriend—“must feel about me, too! It can’t be love! It’s just pity! The pity of beauty . . . for a beast!” The monstrous visages were Kirby’s doing.

The comics became hits—with kids, and then with older teens and college students, too. They had no highbrow baggage, no Great Tradition that a counterculture would feel any need to repudiate. They tried, if awkwardly, to reflect generational conflict, giving power to young people (like Spider-Man and the X-Men) and “ugly” outsiders (like Ben Grimm). They were cheap and easy to share, but without the square everywhere-ness of TV and radio: you could flaunt your devotion to comic books, or conceal it. And they didn’t take long to read.

Comics of the Silver Age—as collectors call this era—could never be described as realistic, but they did take place in a world more like ours than the universe of older cape comics. Ben Grimm hated his rocklike body. Bruce Banner feared the Hulk’s rage. Spider-Man could not have come to such vivid life without the iconic buildings of New York to climb. The original X-Men, advertised as “the most unusual teenagers of all time,” may not have been fashion forward, but they did bring youth culture to their punch-ups. Before they’re attacked by the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants in issue No. 6, they hang “at a Greenwich Village coffee shop,” where the unsophisticated Iceman says to the intellectual Beast, “How about that jazz combo, Hank? It’s so far out that they’ll be fired if anyone can understand the melody!”

To live in the world of the X-Men, moreover, was to live in the larger Marvel Universe: footnotes in *Uncanny X-Men* No. 6, “Sub-Mariner Joins the Evil Mutants!,” directed readers to *Fantastic Four* No. 27 and *Avengers* No. 3. Lee and Kirby and their co-workers devised what Riesman calls “a massive latticework of stories,” in which any character could meet any other; fans could project themselves into it, too.

In 1965, the *Village Voice* published a rapturous piece about Marvel. “College students interpret Marvel Comics. . . . Beatniks read them,” Sally Kempton wrote. “I myself was deeply in love with



a Marvel hero-villain for two whole weeks. The fact is that Marvel Comics are the first comic books in history in which a post-adolescent escapist can get personally involved.” As more coverage followed Kempton’s swoon, Lee became the face of the company. No one could stop him: he had some say over who got credit and who got paid. Most creators in the industry—including Kirby and Ditko—were freelancers, doing what the law calls “work for hire.” It’s clear that Kirby drew the pictures and Lee wrote the words. What they later disputed, in decades of interviews and litigation, was who came up with characters and plot. Cognoscenti give Kirby more kudos than casual fans do, and more than they give Lee, especially after a vitriolic custody fight, in the nineteen-eighties, between Marvel and Kirby over his original art. As the sixties wore on, Riesman summarizes, “Stan went out of his way to praise Kirby,” but not to raise his rates. Kirby later concocted, for his DC series *Mister Miracle*, a harshly satirical picture of Lee as the ever-smiling, sleazy entrepreneur Funky Flashman, prone to grandiloquent pronouncements (“I *know* my words drive people into a *frenzy* of adoration!”).

There is no single word for the role that Lee played in building Marvel’s “massive latticework,” nor is there, even now, consensus about how he played it. Chris Claremont started working at Marvel as a teen-ager, in the late sixties, then wrote *Uncanny X-Men* continuously from 1975 to 1991. He recalls a figure “good as an editor, equally good as a manager, equally good as inspiration.” Artists and writers whom Lee would have regarded as his juniors generally paint him in the sixties as bombastic but kind, reliable, fun to work with.

Auteur models of artistic creation—Emily Dickinson alone at her desk—have little room for such an encourager and organizer. Perhaps above all, Lee was a grand self-mythologizer. As Riesman writes, one of his canniest bursts of creativity was inventing “a character to play named Stan Lee.” His ability to impress strangers, and to believe his own tall tales, suggests comparisons to Ronald Reagan. He claimed to have won public debates with Fredric Wertham back when Lee was too obscure to have merited Wertham’s attention; Riesman concludes that they never happened.

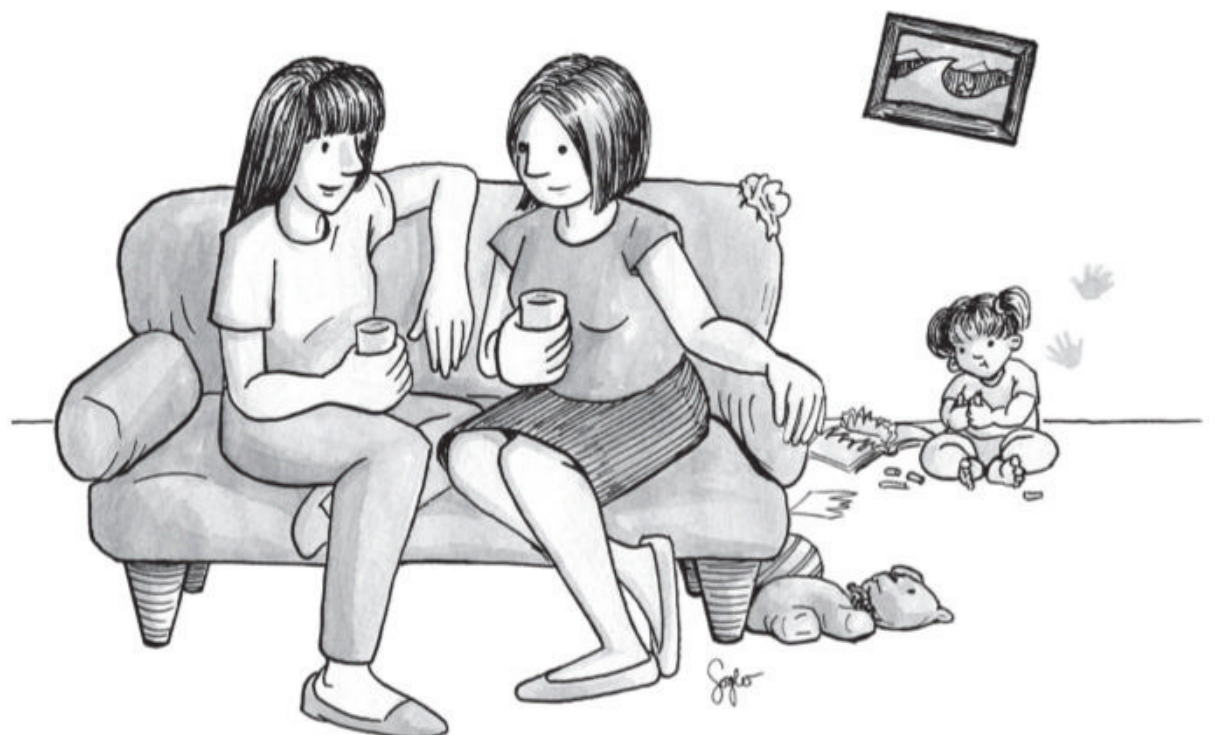
More generous observers might compare Lee to an orchestra conductor, coaxing talent from others. Toward the end of the so-called Silver Age, Lee was less writer than coördinator and door-opener, allowing an artist like Jim Steranko, whose panels recalled psychedelic rock posters and Op art, to conquer the once boxy visual medium. Like Cyclops fighting Magneto, or the Thing taking on Galactus, Lee needed a team: he couldn’t do much by himself.

The team, of course, wasn’t the same without him. In 1972, Lee left the day-to-day supervision of Marvel Comics, facilitating his own promotion to “president and publisher.” As Sean Howe showed in “Marvel Comics: The Untold Story” (2012), the company in the early seventies was delightful, idiosyncratic, creatively fertile, but internally disorganized and economically shaky, running through five editors-in-chief in the five years after Lee left. Only lucky breaks from licensed properties (the rock band Kiss, and “Star Wars”) kept Marvel afloat until another editor-in-chief, the widely despised Jim Shooter, stabilized the ship.

The industry that Lee had left behind was always changing. In the eighties and nineties, comic books were moving from drugstores to specialty shops, a shift that encouraged creators to write for what the comics critic Douglas Wolk calls “super-readers,” devoted fans who knew the decades-long backstories. Fans like that could impede change, seeking

out only what they already knew they loved; as collectors, they could also generate boom-and-bust cycles, like the one that almost crushed Marvel again, in the mid-nineties. On the other hand, creators working in these later years could count on long-term emotional investment in changing characters, rounding out figures in what once seemed the flattest of media. These characters, such as Ben Grimm and Sue Storm, lasted beyond the generation of artists who produced them and readers who consumed them: they had room and time to grow.

Few will read Riesman’s biography principally for its account of Lee’s last decades, but no responsible narrative could skim over them. After 1972, Lee spent the rest of his life as the ebullient face of a medium to which he had nearly stopped contributing. He tried repeatedly to succeed in Hollywood, with Marvel properties or with his own new ideas. Producers took meetings—who wouldn’t meet Stan Lee?—but few live-action films, and no hits, got made. The TV show “The Incredible Hulk,” with Lou Ferrigno, ran from 1977 to 1982, and there were several bursts of Saturday-morning cartoons (lucrative, though unsatisfying to Lee), but that was as good as it got. In 1998, at seventy-five, Lee gave up his remaining rights in Marvel properties in exchange for a high-six-figure retainer and a cut of film and TV profits. But he might have felt that he missed out. In 2000, “X-Men” became



*“I can never tell if I’m allowing independent play or just ignoring her.”*



the first global hit film from a Marvel franchise (though the X-characters had been licensed to Fox to raise cash in Marvel's lean years). The Marvel Cinematic Universe took off with "Iron Man" (2008), spawning a succession of blockbusters. Lee's own later pitches were less Peter Parker and more cut-rate Hugh Hefner: a superheroine called the Femizon, and one named Stripperella; "A One Hour Erotic Action Series" for TV.

The twenty-first-century Lee could have simply retired. Instead, he seems to have wanted to stay relevant, even though he no longer had the team or the skills. Stan and Joan Lee grew close to a serial con man named Peter Paul, who orchestrated an Internet-boom-era fraud around a new venture, Stan Lee Media, fronted by Lee. It launched a few clunky Web series—one starred the Backstreet Boys—and then effectively morphed into a multimillion-dollar self-dealing and check-kiting scheme before folding. In 2001, Interpol arrested Paul in Brazil. And then Lee did it again, or let it be done to him. As Riesman recounts, the successor to Stan Lee Media, POW! Entertainment, was "a largely criminal enterprise," promising Lee-based works that never appeared. Stan the Man was never charged with a crime.

To justify his get-rich-quick efforts, Lee cited Joan's luxurious tastes and J.C.'s needs. Riesman describes a volatile relationship between father and daughter, with ugly fights recurring in Lee's final years. A knot of new caretakers and hangers-on formed around him, including the collectibles entrepreneur Keya Morgan. After Lee died, at ninety-five, the disputes continued: over the estate, which J.C. inherited; over alleged elder abuse by Morgan (he pleaded not guilty); and, less credibly, over alleged sexual abuse by Lee. No one comes off well, and J.C. and Morgan worst of all. "He knew that people depended on him for a living," one late-life associate said of Lee. "He was a generous, trusting man." Even in his last months, he could be the center of attention, a well-meaning spider in his unlucky web.

If Lee's life deteriorated into fraud and feud, his legacy has come to seem only more enduring. The cast of characters that Lee and a clique of almost entirely white guys created has

gained cultural and commercial superpower, animating stories and authors and fans in ways that they could never have foreseen.

In Lee's X-Men, Jean Grey was The Girl, the fairer sex, the weakest link (many of the women in Lee's books were, alas, The Girl); but in Chris Claremont's X-books she became the cosmic center of the Dark Phoenix saga, burning down a patriarchal world. Kirby and Lee introduced Black Panther in *Fantastic Four*, in 1966, but he could not come close to the T'Challa of Chadwick Boseman's screen portrayal until others (especially Ta-Nehisi Coates and Brian Stelfreeze, beginning in 2016) wrote and drew him. Peter Parker's teen angst laid the groundwork for the internal divisions of such later young heroes as Kamala Khan, the current Ms. Marvel, defender of Jersey City, committed both to her Muslim faith and to the role models that older heroes provide (she writes fan fiction about the Avengers). Notably, neither the Black Panther nor the Ms. Marvel character was reinvented by white men. The writer G. Willow Wilson, the artist Adrian Alphona, and the editor Sana Amanat modelled Kamala partly on Amanat's immigrant childhood.

These figures, too, live in the lattice-work that Lee and Kirby and the rest began, seesawing between personal dramas and cosmic dilemmas. Something big and scary is always on the horizon in a well-made Marvel comic, new or old. If the power fantasies, the high stakes, and the uncertainty about what comes next brand superhero plots as quintessentially adolescent, perhaps—with our tenuous futures, our need for new forms of community, our day-to-day fears about climate and justice and medicine—we are all adolescent now.

Today, new comic books featuring Marvel (and DC) superheroes make up a niche market. It's unlikely that any staple-bound comic will ever approach the eight million-plus copies that an X-Men relaunch sold in 1991. But as modern superheroes—not just at Marvel, but in part thanks to Marvel—have become more complicated, and sometimes more profound, the culture around them has, too. Newsletters and fan clubs of the Silver Age have grown into spe-

cialized venues for critics, from Gary Groth's *The Comics Journal* to sites like WWAC and ComicsXF (for which I write). Academic attention has followed. The pioneering monograph about superhero comics, Richard Reynolds's "Superheroes: A Modern Mythology," appeared in 1992. Now there are several each year.

The popular podcast "Jay & Miles X-Plain the X-Men," whose existence testifies to the scope of the fandom that Lee helped inspire, calls X-Men "comics' greatest superhero soap opera." That soap-operatic aura—not one hero's journey but the arc of a whole universe—might be credited to Lee and Kirby or, better yet, to their entire sixties stable of writers, pencillers, inkers, and colorists, and to their fans, who wrote in to letter columns, praising or denouncing the latest plot twists. It's an effect that the Marvel Universe, more than any other modern intellectual property, embodies. Like Troy or Rome, every new Marvel story exists on layers of foundations laid by various hands. Incredibly, Douglas Wolk has chosen to excavate them all: this year, Penguin Press will publish his book about reading every Marvel comic issued between 1961 and 2017, a kind of peak for the highbrow attention that Marvel comics can now attract—not just cultural commentary but appreciative archeology.

Today's X-Men, chronicled in ongoing comics, are citizens of a sentient island nation, Krakoa, with its own ecosystem, its own foreign policy, its own space colony, diplomats, and privateers. Mutants move there for safety and community, find long-lost friends and same-sex lovers, and resurrect the dead. It's a far cry from the original X-men roster, five white-bread teens at a Westchester County school. And it's a lot more like Marvel fandom—a found family, an imagined community, no longer all white, and frequently disabled, devoted to unlikely stories about people who may look odd, or lack social graces, but who can read minds, or teleport, or fly. That mutant nation could never have been created—or even anticipated—by the fast-talking, smug, sometimes generous, and surprisingly conventional Lee. But it could never have happened without him. ♦





BOOKS

## DREAM LOVER

*Tove Ditlevsen turns estrangement into art.*

BY HILTON ALS

Don't think yourself odd if, after reading the Danish writer Tove Ditlevsen's romantic, spiritually macabre, and ultimately devastating collection of memoirs, "The Copenhagen Trilogy" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), you spend hours, if not days, in a reverie of alienation. It's because the author, who died by her own hand in 1976, when she was fifty-eight, makes profound and exciting art out of estrangement. Like a number of dispassionate, poetic modernists—the writers Jean Rhys and Octavia Butler, say, or the visual artists Alice Neel and Diane Arbus—Ditlevsen was marked, wounded, by her own sharp intelligence. Her world—the world she describes in "Childhood," "Youth," and "Dependency," the three short books that make up the tril-

ogy—was cash poor, emotionally mean, and misogynist. The sun must have shone sometimes in Denmark before and during the Second World War, but the atmosphere in "The Copenhagen Trilogy" is damp, dark, and flowerless. It's not so surprising, then, that the first work Ditlevsen published, as a teen-ager, was a poem titled "To My Dead Child":

I never heard your little voice.  
Your pale lips never smiled at me.  
And the kick of your tiny feet  
Is something I will never see. . . .  
See how I kiss your icy hand,  
happy to be with you yet awhile,  
silently I kiss you, weeping not,—  
though the tears are burning in my throat.

In this attempt to imagine a mother's repressed grief at the stillbirth of a

child, Ditlevsen, who went on to publish more than twenty volumes of verse, fiction, children's literature, and memoir, was beginning to explore the territory she masters in the trilogy's terse, cinematic chapters: the drama and the particularity of disappointment.

You can't be disappointed without first having hoped. As a little girl, Ditlevsen yearned for a complete union with her mother. "Childhood" (which was published in Danish in 1967 and is translated here by Tiina Nunnally) opens with the five-year-old Tove living with her parents, Alfrida and Ditlev, and her older brother, Edvin, in a small apartment in Vesterbro, the red-light district of Copenhagen. Times are hard. But they've always been hard. Tove's parents met while both were employed at a bakery before the First World War. Ditlev, who was ten years Alfrida's senior, had been sent to work as a shepherd when he was six. Social advancement was connected to economic advancement, and you couldn't achieve either without an education. But higher education—or high school—was not an option if you were penniless, like Ditlev. A bookish socialist who wanted to be a writer—a dream that "never really left him," according to his daughter—he was eventually hired as an apprentice reporter at a newspaper, but, "for unknown reasons," he gave up the job. In any case, Ditlev's love of words can't compete with Alfrida's constant arias of disillusionment. Alfrida is unhappy with the life she has made with her husband, but what can she do? She's a woman. And poor. Her life is limited. Still, she makes an opera out of her dissatisfaction, and Tove is her rapt audience. Being an audience is one way to be loved. Being silent is another. Ditlevsen writes:

In the morning there was hope. It sat like a fleeting gleam of light in my mother's smooth black hair that I never dared touch; it lay on my tongue with the sugar and the lukewarm oatmeal I was slowly eating while I looked at my mother's slender, folded hands that lay motionless on the newspaper. . . . Behind her on the flowered wallpaper, the tatters pasted together by my father with brown tape, hung a picture of a woman staring out the window. On the floor behind her was a cradle with a little child. Below the picture it said, "Woman awaiting her husband home from the sea." Sometimes my mother would suddenly catch sight of me and follow my glance up to the picture I found so tender and sad. But my



mother burst out laughing and it sounded like dozens of paper bags filled with air exploding all at once. . . . [I]f I hadn't looked at the picture, she wouldn't have noticed me. Then she would have stayed sitting there with calmly folded hands and harsh, beautiful eyes fixed on the no-man's-land between us. And my heart could have still whispered "Mother" for a long time and known that in a mysterious way she heard it. . . . Then something like love would have filled the whole world.

No mother is ordinary to her child. She is always as beautiful, confusing, and monumental as the world. It's only when the child grows up that the parent becomes ordinary—which is to say, human. Part of the work of becoming an adult is figuring out how to reconcile your vision of your parents with who they actually are. Ditlevsen's early obsession with writing may not have given her insight into that process, but she did learn how to use language to describe the rejecting force of Alfrida's various gripes and dismissals. By the age of seven or so, Ditlevsen knew that writing was her vocation, and that, as such, it would separate her, "unwillingly, from those I should be closest to"; the gravitational pull of creativity would tear her away from her family, as it does to so many writers, even as she tore her family apart, the better to see it and tell its story.

One evening, after Ditlevsen quarrels with her brother—she is not yet a teen-ager—Edvin discovers the album where she keeps her poetry. Reading her verse aloud, he laughs and mocks her words. The humiliation is great, but Ditlevsen's shame turns to pity when

Edvin breaks down and starts to cry; he hates the life as a tradesman that has been mapped out for him, and his parents are not sympathetic to his plight. Perhaps what Edvin is crying over, too, is his sister's ability to find a haven in her imagination, one that may open a wide window onto a larger world.

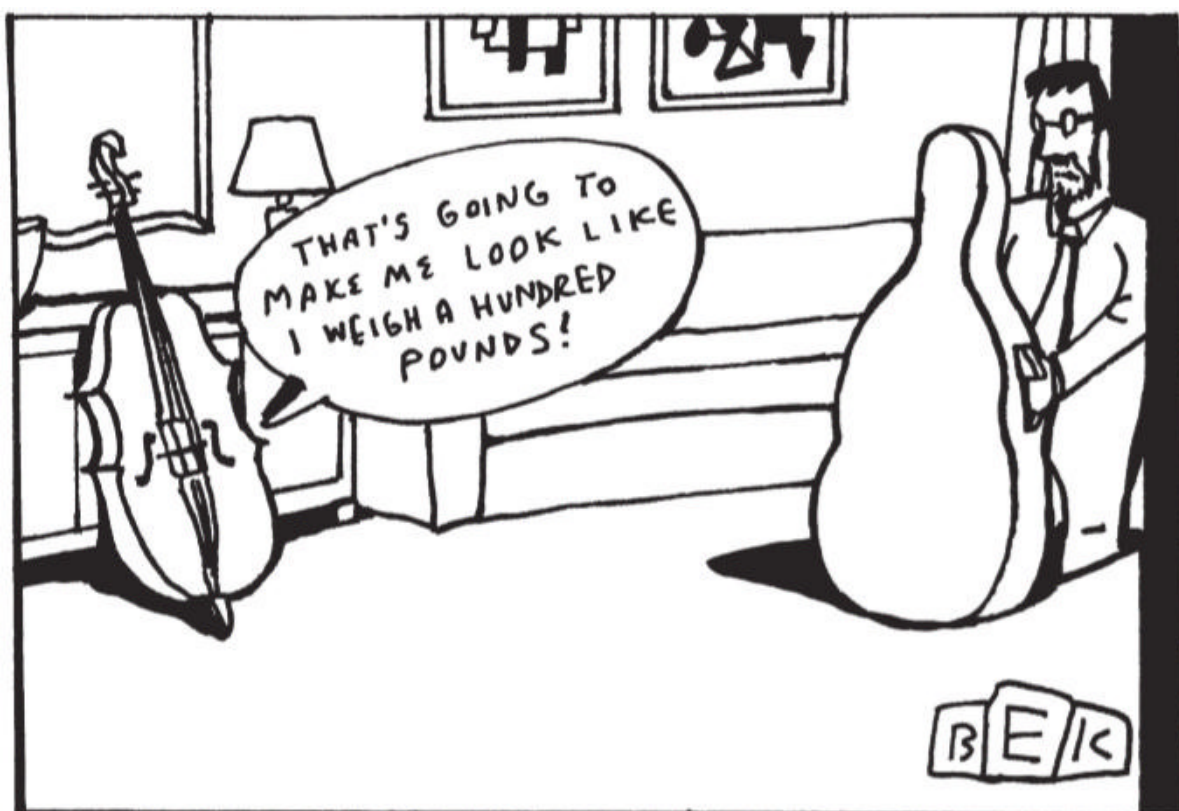
One's heart sinks at the close of "Childhood," which sets the tone for what's to come. Ditlevsen is fourteen and has had to quit school to help support her family. Alfrida doesn't commiserate; rather, she's excited by the prospect of Tove abandoning her literary ambitions in order to earn a wage—Alfrida wants to buy a radio. (And, of course, if Tove's hopes are crushed, she will be more like her mother, who can think only of herself.) But Tove is made of more resilient stuff than Alfrida, and her writing remains at the forefront of her mind, as she works, during the next few years—covered in "Youth" (which was also first published in 1967 and is translated by Nunnally)—as a rich family's maid, a cleaner in a boarding house, a clerk in a lithographer's office, a stock clerk in a nursing-supply company, a secretary in the State Grain Office, and an assistant in a lawyer's office.

Dreaming of words and how to put them together sustains Ditlevsen. Her admiration of other girls is also a sustaining force. Her outgoing friend Ruth introduces her to an old man named Mr. Krogh. He's a bibliophile who enjoys

hanging out with young girls. Eventually, Ditlevsen shows him her poems, and although he doesn't like them much, he has to admit that she's a writer. (In this world of emotional deprivation, kindness is usually qualified, if it's offered at all.) One day, she goes to visit the old man and finds that his building has been demolished. "The world doesn't count me as anything and every time I get hold of a corner of it, it slips out of my hands again," she muses. "The world is constantly changing—it's only my childhood's world that endures."

But that world of childhood, colder than the real world, is about to come to a close. Over and over, Ditlevsen makes small but decisive steps toward building a life for herself as an artist. When she is about fifteen, she answers an ad in a local paper: a director is looking to stage a comedy and needs actors. Ditlevsen is eager to become an actress; after all, she likes to perform, and, when she practices her role, she greatly amuses Alfrida. At the theatre group's first gathering, she meets a beautiful young woman called Nina, and before long they're spending evenings out together. This is love in action. "I remember Mr. Krogh's remark that people always want to use each other for something, and I'm glad that Nina has some use for me," she says. One evening, at a dance hall with Nina, Ditlevsen encounters a tall, distinguished-looking boy named Albert. As they talk, she learns that he, too, writes poetry and has published some verses in a journal called *Wild Wheat*, which is edited by a man named Viggo F. Møller. Ditlevsen wastes no time in asking for Møller's address and sending him some poems. He writes back to say that he's rejecting two of the poems but will take a third—"To My Dead Child."

"Youth" is set in politically significant times—Hitler has come to power in Germany, and some Danes would love to bring his brand of fascism home—but the outside world doesn't carry much weight in Ditlevsen's consciousness. Nor does it in ours, because by now her investigation of her own voice has overwhelmed the exterior world—hers and ours. Part of the fascination of "Youth" is its tone; Ditlevsen's offhanded speech and beautifully rendered sentences, her passivity and her will, make one feel in the presence of an alert sleep-





walker—a dreamer who wants to be claimed, told what to do, possessed, or, more precisely, mothered.

Soon to be a published poet, Ditlevsen is working at the State Grain Office. She passes the time watching people walk their dogs. She writes:

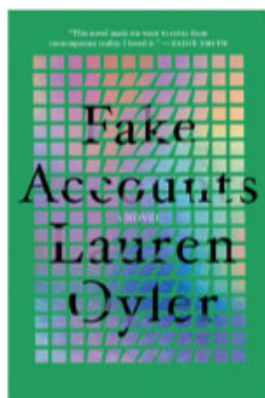
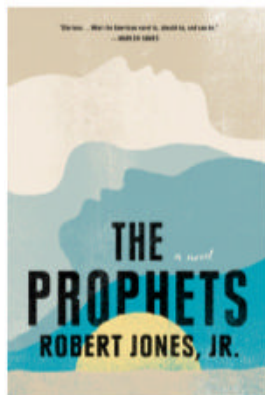
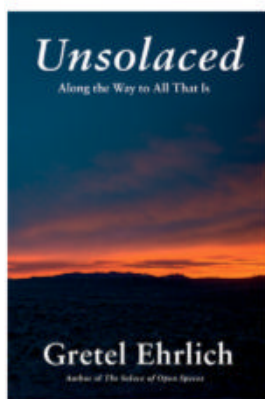
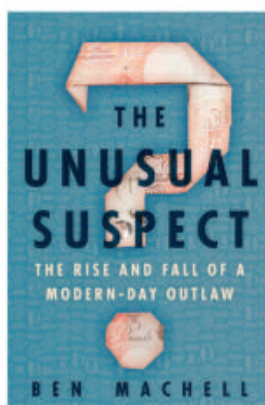
Some of the dogs have a short leash that's jerked impatiently every time they stop. Others have a long leash and their masters wait patiently whenever an exciting smell detains the dog. That's the kind of master I want. That's the kind of life I could thrive in. There are also the masterless dogs that run around confused between people's legs, apparently without enjoying their freedom. I'm like that kind of masterless dog—scruffy, confused, and alone.

Will Møller make a difference?

He does. Some seven or eight years older than Alfrida, considerate, and socially connected, he is more accessible than Mr. Krogh. Ditlevsen begins to spend time with Møller, whose sitting room is dominated by the color green—green curtains, green walls, green drinking glasses. It's a place where ideas can grow, and maybe love. But the outside world is not so verdant. England has declared war on Germany. Ditlevsen recognizes the momentousness of this, but is preoccupied with anxiety about her writing, and about whether the destructive times will stand between her and publication. A wonderfully destabilizing writer, she admits to something that a more timid memoirist would never cop to: monstrous self-interest. By baring her bathos along with her genius, she makes us reflect on our own egotism. How many of us have thought only of ourselves at a time of great calamity for others?

In 1939, Møller helps publish a volume of Ditlevsen's poems, titled "Girl-Soul." After a courtship that feels more like an adoption, she marries him and moves in with him. Set in his ways, he needs his own space and sleeps in a different room. Which is fine with Ditlevsen: when she wakes up, she can get to work without interference.

As I read the third volume of "The Copenhagen Trilogy," "Dependency" (which was published in Danish in 1971 and is translated by Michael Favala Goldman), I marvelled, again and again, at Ditlevsen's authority—and at her shoulder-shrugging. Her "after all, it's just life" mode reminded me of a conversation I



## BRIEFLY NOTED

**The Unusual Suspect**, by Ben Machell (Ballantine). This cross between heist tale and biography examines the career of Stephen Jackley, a British student who blamed the financial system for the world's suffering, and, in 2007, decided to become a modern-day Robin Hood. The plan was to rob banks in order to fund schemes for eradicating poverty and reversing ecological harm, but the execution bordered on farce. Jackley was arrested within nine months, having attempted ten robberies, five of which failed—once, he accidentally ransacked a children's charity—and he wasted his loot on frivolities or gave it away to the homeless. Nonetheless, Machell treats his subject, a sensitive loner with undiagnosed Asperger's syndrome, with tender fascination, disapproving of Jackley's strategy but not of his world view.

**Unsolaced**, by Gretel Ehrlich (Pantheon). Perpetual motion fuels this episodic memoir about loss and getting lost. At the age of twenty-nine, after the death of her boyfriend, Ehrlich sets off for a "cowboying life" in Wyoming. She finds herself well suited to it, but, after nearly being killed by lightning, she heads abroad, travelling through Greenland by dogsled and spending tense nights camping in the grasslands of Zimbabwe. After years of living and working outdoors, she empathizes with those for whom climate change is an acute trauma: nomadic sea-ice hunters with no ice, shepherds tending cattle in drought-stricken lands. Her immersion in timeless, strenuous modes of life yields a message of profound fulfillment.

**The Prophets**, by Robert Jones, Jr. (Putnam). Set on an antebellum plantation known to the enslaved there as Empty, this debut novel offers a panoramic vision of love and cruelty. At the story's center is the passionate attachment between two young men, Isaiah and Samuel, who try to make a life together under conditions of brutality and abuse. The fragile balance of their open secret is disturbed when the artistically minded son of the plantation's owner returns home from the North and wishes to paint both men, beginning an entanglement that leads to bloodshed and tragedy. Numerous perspective shifts give an unsparing portrayal of a barbaric system.

**Fake Accounts**, by Lauren Oyler (Catapult). "We don't want to die, but we also don't want to do anything challenging, such as what living requires," the millennial narrator of this novel proclaims. Although the story toggles between Berlin and Brooklyn, the main setting is the Internet, where the narrator's boyfriend is active as a conspiracy theorist. The writing is witty and self-aware, as it skewers the pervasive inauthenticity of online life—Twitter, dating sites—and its effects on the offline world. For the narrator, the real world feels secondary to the virtual one, and the knowledge she finds online seems close to moral truth. "I didn't actually believe the knowledge I acquired online was useless," she says. "It would one day become vitally important, provide the clue to some threatening mystery of my social or professional life."



used to have with Berlin-based friends about the “Berlin affect”—a sort of pervasive cool disinterest—and I wondered if Copenhagen also cultivates an atmosphere in which the complexities of existence are viewed from a rueful distance. Throughout the trilogy, Ditlevsen tells stories about being broken—and breaking others—with the utmost control. Although she can express a kind of self-governing feminism, especially when it comes to her work, a profound passivity often sets in. She wants to be saved, but who will do the saving?

When Ditlevsen is around twenty, she takes up with a man named Piet, who, like Møller, is privileged. (All the partners she describes in “Dependency” are upper-class and educated.) Piet persuades her to leave Møller, but it isn’t long before he dumps her for another woman. Oh, well. And then there is Ebbe, who makes Ditlevsen feel loved for the first time. They marry and have a child, Helle. But, after the girl is born, Ditlevsen loses interest in sleeping with him. The important thing is her writing. (Helle quickly learns to tell her dolls that Mama is working whenever Ditlevsen is at the typewriter.) At least through her work she can place a “veil between myself and reality.”

Ditlevsen is constantly performing a dance of the seven veils. Despite her bluntness on the page, no one in her life can know her. Her childhood taught her not to share her feelings; she cannot express her dissatisfaction or her fears to Ebbe. To do so would be to reveal vulnerability or need, and thus risk the kind of rejection she got from Alfrida. Ditlevsen hasn’t been with Ebbe for very long before she meets Carl at a party. A scientist with a medical degree, he admires her beauty; what Ditlevsen notices that first night is his teeth—“so crooked it looks like they are in two rows.” Riveted by this oddity, she sleeps with Carl, then finds out that she’s pregnant. She doesn’t know whose baby it is, Carl’s or Ebbe’s. “I can help you with that,” Carl says over sandwiches. He gives her an abortion after administering a shot of Demerol. Peace in a bottle—and with a man in control of it.

Separated from Ebbe, Ditlevsen manages to finish a book of short stories, but she no longer has any desire to write. All she wants, really, is another shot. One

day, Carl asks her when her divorce will be finalized:

Anytime, I said, figuring that once I was married to him it would be even easier to get him to give me shots. Wouldn’t you like to have another baby? he asked. . . . Sure, I said immediately, because a child would bind Carl to me even more, and I wanted him with me for the rest of my life.

Every dog has its day. And, like a dog, Ditlevsen will do whatever it takes to get what her rapidly developing habit requires. Drugs are like sex for her and Carl; when she’s high, she’s blissed-out, satisfied—and it’s then that Carl takes her, roughly. When she retreats from him emotionally—in order to attend a literary dinner that includes Evelyn Waugh, whose “sharp pen” she admires—Carl shows up, uninvited, to pull her away. Complicit with his need for power, and her need for his power, she leaves with him. What would Alfrida’s caustic rejection mean to her now? Nothing can hurt Tove, not even the neglect she inflicts on Helle. (The couple hire a nanny, ostensibly so that Ditlevsen can work, but mostly so that Helle, and their new baby, Michael, won’t interfere with their rituals. Carl and Tove also, incredibly, take in a baby that Carl fathered with another woman, to keep her from being put up for adoption.)

Nunnally and Goldman have done an excellent job with Ditlevsen’s strong rhythms and the dramatic sweep of her story. But it’s a sweep in miniature—a catastrophe in a box. Unlike Karl Ove Knausgaard and many other recent memoirists, Ditlevsen doesn’t have a larger philosophy about pain or death; she is drawn to the flatness of facts and the way they mix with dreams. She builds a literature of disaster, brick by brick, entombing within it all the people who couldn’t love her and whom she couldn’t love. Her individualism, which is also a form of skepticism, reminds me of the dissolute, romantic voice that shapes Robert Musil’s epic “The Man Without Qualities,” and of Diane Arbus, who saw the fascination in everything, even in what others might label wrong. In her first book of photographs, Arbus described a nudist colony populated by latter-day Adams and Eves:

After a while you begin to wonder. I mean there’ll be an empty pop bottle or a rusty bobby pin underfoot, the lake bottom oozes mud in

a particularly nasty way, the outhouse smells, the woods look mangy. It gets to seem as if way back in the Garden of Eden after the Fall, Adam and Eve had begged the Lord to forgive them and He, in his boundless exasperation had said, “All right, then. Stay. Stay in the Garden. Get civilized. Procreate. Muck it up.” And they did.

For some, mucking things up can be an assertion of will; negative attention is better than none. Reality—or one’s understanding of it—can be as dependent on pain as it is on hope, and Ditlevsen is addicted to both.

“Dependency” strikes me as an inspired title for this volume, which is called “Gift” in Danish—a word that can mean “marriage” or “poison.” Ditlevsen has a dependency not only on Demerol but on the question of what it means to be a wife while also a lovesick daughter and an artist. In a way, being a junkie is her most selfless role; one of the reasons you get high is to forget who you are and concentrate on how you feel as the world melts away.

Eventually, she is admitted to a hospital to get clean. Her doctor urges her never to see Carl again, and she returns home to children who are strangers to her and immediately meets a new, caring lover named Victor. Reading this, I thought of the cruel, glittering, and beautiful world of “Veronika Voss” (1982), one of the last films directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, also a drug addict with an interest in power and degradation. In it, a former star, addicted to morphine, becomes a slave to a doctor who withholds the drug at will. Imagine what Fassbinder would have made of such lines as the following, which close “Dependency”:

There were five doctors in the town, and Victor visited every one of them right away and forbade them to have anything to do with me. So it was impossible for me to get the drug, and slowly I adapted to accept life as it was. . . . I started writing again, and whenever reality got under my skin, I bought a bottle of red wine and shared it with Victor. I was rescued from my years of addiction, but ever since, the shadow of the old longing still returns faintly if I have to have a blood test, or if I pass a pharmacy window. It will never disappear completely for as long as I live.

*Adapting to accept life as it is.* How many of us have managed to do that without giving up the dreams that helped define us in the first place? ♦





BOOKS

## EASTWARD HO!

*In "My Year Abroad," Chang-rae Lee again shifts course.*

BY ALEXANDRA SCHWARTZ

When Chang-rae Lee was young, he was drawn to old souls. He published his first novel, "Native Speaker" (1995), at twenty-nine, and though its protagonist is roughly the same age, he is so freighted with world-weariness that he seems twice that. Lee's next two novels, "A Gesture Life" (1999) and "Aloft" (2004), were both narrated by retirees, men looking fitfully backward. Now Lee is fifty-five, and his sixth novel, "My Year Abroad" (Riverhead), brims with youth. Its narrator, Tiller Bardmon, is a twenty-year-old college dropout just back from an adventure overseas, whose outrageous particulars he recounts in wide-eyed detail in the course of the novel's nearly five hundred pages. Where did he go? To

Asia, the place that many of Lee's previous characters left for the United States. Much is made of Tiller's heritage—he is "twelve and one-half percent Asian," one-eighth—and the novel delights in the prospect that the Old World should now beckon to this representative of America's "growing minority of basic almost white boys" with the same promise of reinvention that the new one offered to Tiller's forebears, once upon a time.

At the start of the book, Tiller is living in a scruffy town that he calls Stagno, as in "stagnant," with his lover, Val, an enigmatic older woman (she is in her thirties), and Val's eight-year-old son, Victor Jr. They met, romantically enough, in the food court of the Hong Kong Inter-

national Airport as Tiller was slouching home from his mysterious foreign exploits. Val is a presumed widow; she is also in witness protection, having alerted the Feds to the extralegal business activities that led to her husband's disappearance. The couple are thus required to keep a low profile, though their blinkered domesticity more than suits Tiller, who describes it, as he describes everything, in ecstatic pogo-stick prose, all spring and bounce: "My stated obligations to Val are to treat Victor Jr. better than the sometimes unruly pupster he is, and to be, as she says, her reliably *uberant* fuck buddy (*ex-* and *prot-*), and finally to pick up around this cramped exurban house so it doesn't get too skanky." Money presents no obstacle, since Tiller's lone souvenir from his travels is a fabulous A.T.M. card that always draws cash.

Stagno is the home base that the novel periodically returns to while, bit by bit, the curtain is pulled back to reveal the events of Tiller's past. He grew up an only child in Dunbar, a prosperous New Jersey university town with too many ice-cream parlors which seems very much like Princeton, where Lee lived and taught for years. Tiller's mother was troubled, and abandoned the family when he was young, a primal wound that the novel vulturishly circles and picks at. His checked-out dad, Clark, shows abstracted, if sincere, love for his son, who, for all he knows, is back at college after spending a standard semester abroad carousing in some picturesque Western European city. Such, in fact, was Tiller's plan. But, while caddying at a local golf club the summer before his departure, he met Pong Lou, a Chinese chemist at a large pharmaceutical company, who was impressed enough by Tiller's brio at an impromptu post-round drinking session to slip our hero a business card and suggest that he give him a call.

Pong is dazzling. He drives a Bentley. He lives with his hot Japanese wife in a house that he designed himself. He has a bizarre Dracula-like hairdo and speaks English "like he'd stuffed bread clods in his mouth," which only makes his American success story more impressive. Pong has worked his way up from an undocumented dishwasher at a Chinese restaurant to an entrepreneur with a Midas touch. He owns a number of food shops in Dunbar with punny names—a

*Lee is writing like a man released from a cage, revelling in newfound freedoms.*



frozen-yogurt joint called WTF Yo!, a fancy hot-dog place called You Dirty Dog—with menus featuring recipes that he has lab-tailored to scientific delectability. When it emerges that Tiller has a remarkably keen sense of taste, Pong suggests that he come along for a meeting with his business partner, a yoga mag-nate based near Shenzhen, to discuss his next big thing: a version of the Indonesian health tonic jamu, to be mass-mar-keted as Elixirent. Thus the first leg of the novel's mad dash culminates with Tiller stretched out next to Pong in a business-class berth, on his way to China.

What is all this narrative mania about? Lee made his name as a realist, one who thrived on restraint. “Native Speaker” and “A Gesture Life” are triumphs in this regard, masterly works of pressurized control. Their protagonists—Henry Park, a Korean-American private investigator, and Doc Hata, a Japanese immigrant and veteran of the Second World War—are outsiders who move through white society, men well versed in concealment, dissembling, suppression. Hot feeling, in these books, builds up beneath a thick cover of ice, and when it bursts through it scalds.

Then Lee got restless. He began to swing his elbows in “Aloft,” whose narrator, Jerry Battle, is a kind of tonal uncle to Tiller, a confident white guy in a mid-life crisis who plasters over spiritual wounds with cocky bluster. Next, Lee summited the pinnacle of a certain kind of bold, cinematic realism with “The Surrendered” (2010), an epic that leaps from Korea in the fifties to Manhattan in the eighties, Manchuria in the thirties, and so on. But, in showcasing the enviable facility of his expanded technique, Lee also revealed some of its facileness. In “A Gesture Life,” it takes us close to a hundred and fifty pages to begin to glimpse the brutality that Doc Hata has been an accomplice to, and I cannot forget the mute image of an empty hut, at a Japanese military camp in Burma, outfitted with narrow, coffin-shaped planks where the “comfort women” who have been brought in to service Hata’s brigade will lie. “The Surrendered,” by contrast, opens

with a truck exploding, a mob of refugees ransacking a farmhouse, limbless children expiring in pools of blood. These horrors are all too believable, and that is part of the problem. We have seen them in any number of war movies; they are familiar to the point of cliché.

Maybe Lee sensed that realism had taken him as far as it could, for he abandoned it altogether in his fifth novel, “On Such a Full Sea” (2014), a dystopian adventure story set in an America that has been settled by immigrants fleeing an ecologically blighted China. With flat, chilled descriptions of fish farming, supply chains, and hospital administration, all from the point of view of an eerie, robotic “we,” the novel was designed to give you the willies, and it did. No wonder that now, in “My Year Abroad,” Lee writes like a

man released from a cage. His prose unfurls like a scarf pulled from a magician’s mouth, one bright, brash clause after another. Here, for instance, is Tiller, listening to a jamu artisan of indeterminate origin: “I was enjoying the trip and jaunt of his speech, how it rolled along like a shined-up jalopy, the bumpers and doors and hubcaps looking like they might fall off any second, the engine about to go kaboom, but the whole funny contraption of it staying put and clattering forth and conveying us down the road.” That is pretty much what “My Year Abroad” sounds like, too. Lee is revelling in his return to freedom. He is having fun.

And, at first, so are we. Tiller’s voice, buoyant and sure of itself, whoops with joy, a precious commodity these days, and not just in fiction. We do not always want to hear how sad and bad the world is, how poisoned the future, how feeble our nature, and Lee knows it: “My Year Abroad” is one big song-and-dance number, an optimist’s treat.

The trouble is that Lee will not modulate his antic music. The novel starts loud and only gets louder, its language soon cracking under the strain of supporting so much insistent vitality. The goofy jargon that’s meant to telegraph Tiller’s youth comes to seem old, outdated. Nor is he the only character who sounds suspiciously like a Ninja Turtle. “That was rocking, brother!” a lesbian

biker says; after a good meal, a sated hipster “from one of the Portlands” gives thanks for the “righteous grubbage.” It’s not hard to indulge Lee in some of this awkward, enthusiastic grasping, the “BTW”s and other bits of texting-speak that jangle around in his sentences, the not quite convincing reference to Katy Perry. It’s the literary equivalent of a dad who chaperones his kid to a punk show and winds up happily thrashing in the mosh pit. More grating is his tic of enlisting nouns as adjectives and verbs to inject his sentences with a steroidal boost: Tiller, whose emotional range runs the gamut from amazement to awe, dwells on the thought of “some chick’s lulu-lemoned crack” and tells us that “a spike of guilt kebabbed my heart.” Stylistic flourishes like these don’t express character so much as they flatten it, cartoonishly.

The novel’s flash-bang tone is matched by its plot, which seems inspired by the same principle as the New York Lottery. Could Victor Jr., a comedic little terror, suddenly mature into a peewee culinary genius, turning Stagno into a destination for foodie pilgrims? Could Tiller—and here comes a spoiler of sorts, though the novel’s conveyor-belt structure, one zany episode following another, cancels any notion of suspense—wind up in the vast mansion of a Chinese entrepreneur employed both as an abused kitchen servant and as the personal gigolo of the man’s stolid daughter? Hey, it could happen, or so Lee insists. Eager to titillate, this long novel constantly one-ups itself, busily insisting that we not grow bored. The action is blandly luxurious—surfing! scuba diving! karaoke with escorts!—the sex weird and wacky. An old lady lifts her skirts and orders a man to tongue her in the presence of an appreciative group that includes her own son; a kindly prostitute marks Tiller’s forehead with her menstrual blood. About a penile probe, administered in a kind of dreamy date-rape sequence, the less said the better.

The more I read of “My Year Abroad,” the more I came to feel that I was trapped in a novelistic Netflix, one stuffed episode blurring into the next. Lee teaches college students. Maybe, having seen them peeking at their phones under the seminar table, he decided to prove that the page could hold their attention, too. Yes, writers perfected the art of addictive se-





rial storytelling long before TV did—thank you, Mr. Dickens—but that is precisely what is at issue. Television has already taken what it needs from the novel, as photography took what it needed from painting. What it cannot usurp is the unsettled private domain, the interior—the very space that Lee has explored, in the past, with such sympathetic, acute intelligence, and that he now seems willing to chuck for the sake of making the pages turn faster. Alas, they don't.

But back to teaching. It's the great theme of the novel—Lee has dedicated the book to his own teachers—best expressed through Tiller's adoring relationship with Pong. Pong is “a human tonic to dissolve our habits of inattention and complacency,” capable of anything, adored by everyone he meets. Tiller reveres him with the special love of a surrogate son:

If I had simply bumped into him on a Dunbar street, I couldn't have imagined him being all the other ways he was. I would have assumed he was like any other latecomer Asian immigrant, focused and industrious and leaving nothing to chance. A worker-bee bench chemist at a mega-pharma, but only that. Eyes on the prize, even if it wasn't clear what the prize really was. . . . I couldn't have placed him at the center of so many orbiting bodies, how each of us was drawn and held by the force of his peerless competence, the diverse skills and discerning aptitudes and effortless generosity that made him seem like he was the wealthiest person in the world.

Lee has said that he modelled Pong on a real person he admires, and that warmth shines through. At a time of grotesque American jingoism and anti-Chinese sabre-rattling, here is a Chinese-American hero, an immigrant who is living the American Dream and helping to create the modern Asian one, too. By his example, Pong teaches Tiller to look past the superficial, which proves a useful lesson in Asia, where Tiller, despite his Asian eighth, is categorically dismissed as a *bule*, a *farang*—white, foreign. National role reversal is a motif in this novel, just as it is a motif in our world, with China waxing and the United States on the wane. One of Lee's better jokes involves Pruitt, a wealthy white boy who travelled to Asia to teach English and ended up an indentured servant like Tiller, pounding curry alongside him with his bare feet. Their taskmaster, meanwhile, is an illiterate polyglot who has become committed to Marxist theory

after watching videos on the Internet.

Yet Pong remains curiously impermeable, more symbol than character. His greatness is explained, like that of contemporary, psychologized superheroes, as the neat result of childhood trauma: his artist parents were persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. There is also something pat about the pride that he inspires in Tiller, whose own Korean heritage is referred to only briefly, and something weirdly generic about the China he introduces Tiller to, which amounts to a world of comfortable interiors—restaurants, mansions, malls. Their bond thus proves to be a weaker revision of the one, in “Native Speaker,” between Henry Park, the investigator, and John Kwang, the Korean-American politician whom he is assigned to spy on. Kwang, too, is an astonishing immigrant full of energy and industry, and Henry, in spite of the wariness inherent in his profession, is seduced. Henry's father was a Korean grocer, a repressed man in a white apron who plagued his American-born son as a totem of their difference. Kwang, ferociously proud of his people and confident in himself, insists that America accommodate itself to him, and even Henry, cynical as he is, comes to believe that Kwang will succeed; he needs him to. When he doesn't, it is devastating, a real shock. Pong, too, is ultimately revealed to be something less than the ideal he first appeared, but when the truth is at last revealed it barely signifies. As in a fairy tale, poof!, he vanishes, and since he was never made fully real, there is not much of him to miss.

There is another, stranger father-son bond in the novel: that between Tiller and Victor Jr. Though only twelve years separate them, Tiller, barely more than a kid himself, loves the boy like a son. Victor Jr. is the book's best creation, a comical mix of grubby, insatiable child and wise old man. (When he is done preparing his miraculous meals, he puffs on a bubble-gum cigarette.) The Stagno plotline, which may well be the remnant of some other project, so little does it relate to Tiller's exploits abroad, actually proves by far the stronger of the novel's two strains. Tiller's heart is in his home, the one he has made for himself. Family, after all, is not just a bond forged in blood. It is an invented thing—a fiction that, if believed in, becomes true. ♦

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A CRITIC AT LARGE

## THE ICON-MAKER

*The director Andrei Tarkovsky fashioned a new way of looking at the world.*

BY ALEX ROSS

It is 1423, in Russia, and the Black Death has laid waste to a village where a master bell-founder and his family reside. When emissaries representing the Grand Prince of Moscow arrive to commission a new bell, they find that only the founder's son—a gaunt, sullen teenager named Boriska—has survived. As the prince's men turn to leave, Boriska says, “My father knew the secret of copper for bell-casting. When he was dying, he passed it on to me.” Reluctantly, the men take Boriska along with them: if they return empty-handed, they will face the prince's wrath.

The work begins outside the walls of a monastery in Suzdal, northeast of Moscow. Boriska picks a spot for the casting and digs furiously with his hands, pulling up a root from a nearby tree. Rainstorms create an elemental landscape of earth, water, fog, and mud. When Boriska finds the right clay for the bell's mold, he writhes ecstatically in the mire. Aware of what might happen if the project fails, Boriska chews his nails, mutters prayers, and sleeps in the casting pit. At times,

though, he exudes a demonic fury. A diffident boy becomes an aesthetic tyrant, rejecting inferior materials and demanding more from the prince's coffers. When the furnace fires are set, he grins with savage joy, and bends over the molten metal as though to listen.

The bell is cast, and an army of townspeople gather to raise it on a scaffold, for a test. The monastery grounds become an industrial camp of ropes, cranks, and pulleys. Boriska directs the operation by raising his fists and then bringing them abruptly down, like a conductor. By the time the prince comes to witness the test, however, the boy is cowering under the scaffold, his confidence gone. The prince sneers to an Italian ambassador, “Look at what kind of people we have overseeing things here.” A worker begins swinging a massive clapper back and forth, in an ever-widening arc. It croaks on its joint, and a grueling minute passes as the ambassador chats with his translator: “I wouldn't venture to call that thing a bell.” “Have you heard that the Grand Prince beheaded

his brother?” Boriska sinks to the ground. When a tone finally booms out, a monkish man is looking on in wonder—the icon painter Andrei Rublev. Boriska remains slumped while the crowd surges exultantly forward. We look down from an increasing remove, as if through the eyes of an angel soaring backward.

From a high angle, with bells pealing all over, the scene resembles a pageant of Russian glory. Yet Boriska is distraught. When Rublev tries to comfort him, the boy shrieks, “My father, old serpent—he never passed on the secret.” Rublev replies, “And you see how everything turned out—all right, it's all right. So we will go together: you will cast bells, and I will paint icons.” Suddenly, a black-and-white screen is filled with color, as we see icons that the real-life Rublev painted in the early fifteenth century. Their damaged surfaces, seen in extreme closeup, resemble modernist canvases that were painted five centuries later, when other terrors stalked the land.

Some art works impress us so deeply on first encounter that they become events in our lives. So it was for me with Andrei Tarkovsky's epic film “Andrei Rublev,” which ends with the story of Boriska and the bell. I first saw it in 1987, twenty-one years after it was made and a year after the director's untimely death, at the age of fifty-four. I was no older than the actor Nikolai Burlyayev had been when he played Boriska, and I identified with this unhinged adolescent who conjures a masterpiece from mud. I had the sensation that I was seeing the raw matter of history filtered through an artistic imagination. The bell sequence unfolds like a gritty documentary about some heroic Soviet-era project, like the building of a dam. At the same time, the camera roams with a subjective eye, zeroing in on anguished faces and zooming back out to revel in the Romantic sublime. Ingmar Bergman might have had that capaciousness in mind when he wrote, in his memoirs, “When film is not a document, it is dream. That is why Tarkovsky is the greatest of them all.”

In college, I devoured Tarkovsky's other films in quick succession, convinced that I had come into the possession of a cultural secret. But I was hardly alone in my conversion experience: the cult of Tarkovsky had grown to considerable size by the end of the eighties,

ALAMY



and has not stopped growing since. When he left the Soviet Union, in 1984, he became, unwillingly, a symbol of dissent; when he was diagnosed with terminal cancer, in 1985, he acquired a martyr's aura, working from his sickbed to finish his final picture, "The Sacrifice." The posthumous publication of his diaries amplified his suffering-genius image. Prophetic powers were ascribed to him: the post-apocalyptic landscapes of his 1979 film, "Stalker," spookily presaged the Chernobyl disaster, and in 1986 the Swedish Prime Minister, Olof Palme, was assassinated on the Stockholm street where a crazed crowd stampedes in "The Sacrifice."

Among directors, Tarkovsky has become a godlike figure, his signature motifs imitated to the point of becoming clichés. He is the chief exemplar of what is sometimes called slow cinema, in which the camera lingers in long takes on austere landscapes and scenes of minimal activity. (The average shot length in Tarkovsky's final three films is a minute or more; in a modern action movie, it's usually a few seconds.) In the journal *Sight & Sound*, Nick James wrote, "If there are grasslands swirling, white mist veiling a house in a dark green valley, cleansing torrential rains, a burning barn or house, or tracking shots across objects submerged in water, a Tarkovsky name-drop is never far away." Terrence Malick, Claire Denis, Shirin Neshat, Béla Tarr, Alejandro González Iñárritu, Christopher Nolan, and Lars von Trier, to name a few, display Tarkovskyan traits. Admirers have proliferated in other realms as well. Elena Ferrante reveres him, and Patti Smith has a song called "Tarkovsky," which includes the line "Black moon shines on a lake, white as a hand in the dark."

The long pandemic months seemed a good time to burrow back into Tarkovsky's world. Life was moving at a neo-medieval pace, and the aesthetic of slowness was all the more welcome in an age of frantic digital scissoring. I watched the films again—including Janus Films' luminous new restoration of "Mirror" (1975), streaming via Film at Lincoln Center—and plowed through a dense analytical literature, which includes two recent additions: Sergey Toymentsev's essay anthology "The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky" (Edinburgh; part

of the "ReFocus" series) and Tobias Pontara's "Andrei Tarkovsky's Sounding Cinema" (Routledge). I emerged with my admiration undiminished but my idolatry somewhat tempered. Tarkovsky had a reactionary streak, and in the era of Vladimir Putin his drift toward nationalist mysticism can take on an ominous tinge. I was crestfallen to learn that Nikolai Burlyayev, the erstwhile Boriska, has become a cultural-religious apparatchik, spewing homophobia.

When I returned to "Rublev," I found that the film had somehow anticipated its maker's ambiguous legacy. Neither of its two principal artist figures, the antic bell-founder and the monkish painter, can elude the cold eyes of earthly authority. Rublev remains a reserved enigma; Anatoly Solonitsyn, Tarkovsky's favorite actor, plays him with sad, watchful stillness. Tarkovsky himself was much more of the Boriska type; Burlyayev modelled the character's fidgety mannerisms on the director's. The bell sequence is, finally, a parable of the creative process: great art rests on some murky mixture of luck, lies, and witchcraft.

No self-made phenomenon, Tarkovsky arose from an extraordinarily fertile cultural environment that the Soviet system never succeeded in bringing under total control. He was born in 1932, into the Moscow intelligentsia. His father was the poet Arseny Tarkovsky, who wrote in a ruggedly lyrical style, in the mold of Anna Akhmatova. Four years after Andrei was born, Arseny had an affair and abandoned the family. Andrei's mother, Maria Tarkovskaya, also a poet, went to work as a proofreader at a Moscow publishing house. She pushed Andrei toward the arts, paying for music and art lessons with her meagre resources.

Stalinism shadowed Tarkovsky's childhood, and the clammy atmosphere of the era is palpable in "Mirror," his most autobiographical statement. In one sequence, a character based on Maria Tarkovskaya convinces herself that she missed a catastrophic typographical error. We don't find out what it is, although, as Vida T. Johnson and Graham Petrie reveal in their comprehensive 1994 book, "The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky: A Visual Fugue," Soviet audiences were primed to think of a story about Stalin's name being misprinted as *Sralin*

("shitter"). By the time the proofreader discovers that her fears are unfounded, she is a quivering wreck.

Tarkovskaya's attempts to encourage artistic inclinations in her son met with a spell of rebellion. After the young Andrei fell into the ranks of the *stilyagi*—nattily dressed, jazz-loving hipsters—she dispatched him to Siberia, to take part in a geological expedition, which he later described as the happiest experience of his life. His yen for beautifully barren landscapes may have stemmed from this period. Tarkovsky returned with the idea of becoming a filmmaker, and, in 1954, a year after Stalin's death, he enrolled at the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography, now known as the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (V.G.I.K.).

In the later fifties, the Khrushchev thaw gave rise to a cinematic renaissance. Tarkovsky was a part of a formidable V.G.I.K. cohort that included the directors Andrei Konchalovsky, Larisa Shepitko, Elem Klimov, Kira Muratova, Vasily Shukshin, Otar Iosseliani, and Giorgi Shengelaia. In school, Tarkovsky also met his first wife, the actor Irma Raush. (He later married Larisa Kizilova, an assistant on "Rublev.") This group took encouragement from breakthrough films like Mikhail Kalatozov's 1957 drama about the Second World War, "The Cranes Are Flying," which makes mesmerizing use of a handheld camera, blurry editing, and jumbled compositions. As Zdenko Mandušić points out in the "ReFocus" anthology, filmmakers were applying documentary techniques in an effort to distance themselves from the ponderous pomp of the Stalinist era.

At the same time, the new generation absorbed postwar European and Japanese cinema. Tarkovsky revered Bresson, Antonioni, Buñuel, Kurosawa, Mizoguchi, and, especially, Bergman, whose deliberate pacing and stark compositions affected his work from the start. He also paid heed to the radical legacy of early Soviet film, even as he professed to reject Eisenstein's influence. A classic Soviet practice was to avoid scene-setting establishing shots, instead plunging viewers into the action and forcing them to piece together what was going on. The bell episode in "Rublev" begins with Boriska resting against a house, gazing at melting snow. We hear the prince's



men and see the tails of their horses, but are given a vista of the surrounding steppe only when they leave for Suzdal.

Tarkovsky, despite his avant-garde leanings, ultimately gravitated toward nineteenth-century Romanticism and its fin-de-siècle mystical offshoots. His diaries channel Goethe ("The more inaccessible a work is to reason, the greater it is") and Schopenhauer ("We are all dreaming the same dream"). He displays a misogyny that is retrograde even by nineteenth-century standards; a woman's real purpose, he writes, is "submission, humiliation in the name of love." He pictures himself as a messianic artist beset by "lies, cant, and death," in quest of a "hieroglyphic of absolute truth." The aim of art, he declares, is to "prepare a person for death."

You would expect him to have been a terror on set, and Tarkovsky had his tyrannical moments. In Michał Leszczyński's 1988 documentary, "Directed by Andrei Tarkovsky," which chronicles the making of "The Sacrifice," assistants can be seen walking into a meadow muttering, "Everything yellow must go." For the most part, though, Tarkovsky's crews became swept up in his quixotic passions. The director's son Andrei recalled how Sven Nykvist, Bergman's longtime cinematographer, who shot "The Sacrifice," described the prevailing mood: "We were giving totally for Bergman because we were afraid of him, and we gave everything to Tarkovsky because we loved him."

You could take fifty stills from any Tarkovsky film, mount them on gallery walls, and make a stunning exhibition. The drenching richness of his visual imagination is evident in the first few minutes of "Ivan's Childhood," his début feature, released in 1962. Burlayev plays a boy named Ivan, who has lost his family during the Second World War and is exacting revenge by scouting behind enemy lines. The opening sequence appears to be a flashback or a dream. The initial shot is a slow pan up the trunk of a tree—a reverential gesture that is replicated at the end of "The Sacrifice." Idyllic imagery of nature, with the camera taking flight through treetops, leads to a closeup of the beatific face of the boy's mother. The sound of gunfire cuts the sequence

short, and Ivan awakens in a dark, menacing space, which turns out to be the interior of a windmill. These juxtapositions of dream memory and historical nightmare recur throughout the film, with the demarcations between the two states steadily disintegrating.

"Ivan's Childhood" won a Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival and received praise from Jean-Paul Sartre. It also made a profound impression at home, its freewheeling technique helping to embolden Tarkovsky's colleagues. The Armenian director Sergei Parajanov unleashed an anarchic visual feast in "Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors" (1965), which centers on life in a traditional mountain village in western Ukraine. Larisa Shepitko, perhaps Tarkovsky's most gifted contemporary, created her own hallucinatory realism in "The Ascent" (1977), set during the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union; Susan Sontag once called it the most affecting war film ever made.

To be sure, Tarkovsky's breakthrough relied on his V.G.I.K.-trained crew, particularly the cinematographer Vadim Yusov, who might be considered the co-creator of the Tarkovsky style. A famous scene in "Ivan" shows the boy and two soldiers making their way at night through a flooded forest in a boat, with flares exploding high above them. The cinematographer Roger Deakins has named one lingering shot—in which a stand of bare trees is silhouetted against a gray expanse of land, water, and sky—his favorite in movie history. Yusov had scouted the location and mapped out the scene before the director arrived for the shoot. Still, Tarkovsky's collaborators were working in his spirit. Yusov recalled, "Tarkovsky frequently could not understand the limitations, and this ignorance made him bold."

For Tarkovsky, the question was always whether he could find a narrative structure to match his pictorial visions or whether he should discard narrative altogether. "Rublev," which he co-wrote with Andrei Konchalovsky, is his monumental exercise in the epic mode. It unfolds in discrete episodes, not all of which focus on Rublev. We witness a primitive experiment in balloon flight; the cavortings of a doomed jester; the sage musings of an elder icon painter, Theophanes the Greek; an orgy among pagans; the savage court of the Grand

Prince, who punishes a group of stonemasons by having their eyes gouged out; an attempted coup by the prince's brother, resulting in the sacking of a cathedral in the city of Vladimir; Rublev's retreat into a vow of silence; and the casting of the bell. These chapters add up to a formidable architecture: grim pillars of historical reality support the extravagance of the whole.

The film is a portrait of an artist in which we almost never see the artist at work. Tarkovsky thus avoids the trap of the standard artist bio-pic, in which celebrity actors thrash around pretending to be Michelangelo or Frida Kahlo. Rather, we are shown the storehouse of experiences that shaped him. Rublev's proxy is the camera, which glides through immense, chaotic scenes like an invisible observer, becoming distracted by irrationally beautiful details. A black horse rolls on its back; geese flutter above the mayhem of battle; a cat prowls among bodies in the plundered cathedral. The viewer's awareness that Tarkovsky has planted those details does not detract from their world-building effect. One moment has always mesmerized me. During the sacking of Vladimir, the camera comes to rest on the dazed face of the prince's brother. A tasselled censor swings behind him: three times, it floats into sight from the left side of the frame and then floats out of sight again. Without explanation, it fails to appear a fourth time. Whenever I watch this brief shot, I have the same involuntary reaction: the cessation of movement causes an interior shudder.

Soviet bureaucrats, having accused "Rublev" of both obscurantism and excessive naturalism, delayed its Russian release until 1971, five years after its completion, although a print was shown at Cannes in 1969. Tarkovsky made various cuts but stuck to his original plan. (A superb Criterion Collection release contains the initial version, "The Passion According to Andrei," which runs three hours and twenty-six minutes, and the final cut, which is twenty-three minutes shorter.) Johnson and Petrie, in their "Visual Fugue" book, argue that Tarkovsky suffered less under the Soviet system than many of his contemporaries. His main weapons were his fearless self-assurance and his unrelenting stubbornness. He was too much of



an individualist to fit the profile of the dissenter, and opposition to his work was rooted more in incomprehension than in anything else.

While Tarkovsky was pondering his next project, he saw Stanley Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey," which he both disliked and envied. He set about making "Solaris" (1972), his own attempt at transcendental science fiction. The source was the eponymous novel by the Polish sci-fi writer Stanisław Lem, in which a sentient ocean planet invades the consciousness of human visitors and drives them mad. Unlike Kubrick, Tarkovsky showed little interest in the mechanics of space travel, dwelling instead on the haunted memories and unresolved conflicts of his protagonist. (Steven Soderbergh's 2002 remake, also titled "Solaris," is more faithful to Lem's text.) Hallmarks of the later Tarkovsky come to the fore, for better or for worse: majestic long takes, rambling philosophical dialogues, extended scrutiny of classic art works, bouts of Bach on the soundtrack. The lead actor, Donatas Banionis, is all too palpably trying to figure out what kind of movie he is in.

Tarkovsky was probably right when he named "Solaris" his weakest film, but it is transfixing all the same. As Julia Shpinitskaya points out in "ReFocus," Tarkovsky almost emulates Kubrick in a nearly five-minute-long sequence that consists largely of highways and tunnels as seen from a moving car. A thick overlay of electronic sound, fashioned by the composer Eduard Artemyev, helps transform the footage into a voyage no less mind-bending than the one at the climax of "2001." By the end of "Solaris," Banionis seems to have returned to a country house on Earth, but increasingly lofty vantage points reveal that he is on an island in the seething Solaris ocean. Bach's chorale prelude "Ich ruf zu dir" gives way to a cataract of noise.

"My aim is to place cinema among the other art forms," Tarkovsky wrote in his diaries. "To put it on a par with music, poetry, prose, etc." He fulfilled that ambition spectacularly in "Mirror," which came after "Solaris." A deeply personal work that re-creates scenes from Tarkovsky's childhood in fanatical detail, "Mirror" is at the same time a tour-de-force assemblage of

stream-of-consciousness memories, dreamscapes, paranormal occurrences, poetry recitations, and grainy newsreel footage. Watching it is like attending a séance of the twentieth-century Russian soul. The first time I saw "Mirror," I experienced it as a gorgeous, sensuous bewilderment. It was equally rewarding to watch the restored film in conjunction with Johnson and Petrie's fastidious analysis. "Mirror," like "Ulysses" or "The Waste Land," is the kind of work for which you welcome a guide.

The cinematographer for "Mirror" was Georgy Rerberg, who had a knack for making drab interiors and dusky landscapes shimmer with unseen forces. From the start, irrational events ensue: a barn bursts into flame, a jug crashes to the floor, ghostly presences materialize, people levitate. Heightening the uncanny atmosphere, the actor Margarita Terekhova plays two distinct characters: one based on Maria Tarkovskaya, Tarkovsky's mother, and the other based on Irma Raush, his first wife. Tarkovskaya is also cast as herself, in scenes set in the present day. At the end, Tarkovsky creates chronological pandemonium by having his mother share the frame with a representation of her much younger self. The situation is ripe for psychoanalysis, which the filmmaker and historian Evgeny Tsymbal, once Tarkovsky's assistant, supplies in "ReFocus." One has the sense that Tarkovsky held his mother partially responsible for his father's departure, and that this feeling perhaps became a source of his warped attitudes toward women. But the film transcends the director's misogyny on the strength of Terekhova's expressively harried performance. She holds fast against the tide of male neurosis rising around her.

"Stalker," Tarkovsky's final Russian film, has become his most celebrated work, almost a pop-culture phenomenon. It has inspired a brilliant free-associative study by Geoff Dyer—"Zona," from 2012—as well as a series of first-person-shooter video games. In Tallinn, Estonia, where much of the film was shot, you can take a Tarkovsky-themed bike tour. The cult of "Stalker" is surprising, because, at first encounter, it is the most

cryptic of Tarkovsky's hieroglyphs. Based on Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's sci-fi novel "Roadside Picnic," it contrasts an ashen outer world with an eerily verdant place known as the Zone, which appears to have been visited by aliens. Inside the Zone is the Room, where all wishes are said to come true. Although military guards shoot at anyone who tries to enter the Zone, guides known as "stalkers" lead illegal tours. The film follows three men named Stalker, Professor, and Writer, who are played with laconic grit by Alexander Kaidanovsky, Nikolai Grinko, and the hypnotic, hooded-eyed Solonitsyn. Their inching progress across booby-trapped, supernatural terrain unfolds like a slow-motion, hyper-abstract thriller—a zombie apocalypse without zombies.

Nothing in Tarkovsky's work has elicited more awestruck comment than the sequence in which the travellers pass into the Zone. Claire Denis, in conversation with the director Rian Johnson, said of this moment, "I remember I thought I was going to faint. My heart stopped beating for a second." The first part of the movie, which shows Stalker leaving home and meeting his clients, is shot in desiccated sepia tones. The trio makes it past the guards and travels toward the Zone on railroad tracks, riding a motorized flatcar. A numbing series of shots of irregular length—forty seconds, ninety-six seconds, seven seconds, seventeen seconds, sixty-two seconds—fixate on the sides and backs of the men's heads, giving only vague glimpses of the surrounding terrain. The clanking of wheels is at first percussively harsh and then fades into an electronic blur. In an abrupt cut, color replaces sepia, and we find ourselves in a landscape of dark-green vegetation, skewed telephone poles, and abandoned vehicles—a leap into a post-human paradise. The flatcar glides to a halt as the men gaze, rapt. It is, Tarkovsky scholars point out, a bleak homage to "The Wizard of Oz." As with the censer shot in "Rublev," the sudden absence of motion generates a kind of internal vertigo, accentuated by an onrush of silence.

Pontara, in his absorbing study of Tarkovsky's use of music and sound,





shows how much of the spell of “Stalker” depends on its extraordinary audio track. Artemyev, who specialized in electronic composition before collaborating with Tarkovsky, devises a seething soundscape in which otherworldly ditties alternate with upwellings of noise. Tarkovsky throws in some classical selections, but they are alienated from their usual ennobling role. When, in the scenes set in Stalker’s home, trains rumble past, railway sounds intermingle with faintly audible strains of “La Marseillaise,” Wagner’s “Tannhäuser” overture, and Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. Landmarks of Western music are reduced to technological detritus. Pontara suggests plausibly that Tarkovsky is exposing the catastrophic failure of industrial and cultural progress alike.

The final scenes bring tremors of hope. Although the travellers return from their journey without having dared to enter the Room, alterations in the film stock imply that they have smuggled out some essence of the Zone: a touch of color seeps into the sepia wasteland. In a shiver-inducing epilogue, we learn that Stalker’s disabled young daughter, Monkey, has developed occult gifts. Just before the aural train wreck of Beethoven’s Ninth, she telekinetically pushes a glass off a table. Pontara points out the ideological problem underlying this concluding wonder: in place of failed Romantic aesthetics, Tarkovsky substitutes his own heroic gesture of transcendence. “Stalker” ends up reaffirming, in Pontara’s words, “the false promise that we can escape from and step outside of history and civilization.”

By the time “Stalker” was released, in 1979, Tarkovsky had become the most internationally celebrated of Soviet filmmakers, but he still faced bureaucratic interference at home. Constraints on his artistic freedom angered him; so did the persecution of Parajanov, a favorite colleague, on anti-gay grounds. (Johnson and Petrie say that Tarkovsky himself was not exclusively straight.) He took up residence in Italy in 1982 and announced his exile two years later. Anticipating this decision, the regime had refused to allow his son Andrei to leave the country. Within two years, perestroika had changed the Soviet cultural atmosphere, but it came too late for Tarkovsky. In 1986, as

he was dying of cancer, Mikhail Gorbachev intervened to allow the younger Andrei to go see his father. The French writer and filmmaker Chris Marker was on hand to witness the reunion; heart-breaking footage of a frail Tarkovsky embracing his son appears in Marker’s 1999 documentary, “One Day in the Life of Andrei Arsenevich.”

Tarkovsky completed two feature films during his years abroad: “Nostalgia,” made in Italy in 1982 and 1983, and “The Sacrifice,” shot in Sweden in 1985. He enjoyed more creative freedom, but financing was a challenge, and he had lost the network of collaborators who enabled his middle-period masterpieces. Some critics hail these final works as a supreme revolt against cinematic convention; others detect symptoms of mannerism and decline. Both films bewitched me when I first saw them, but I’m now inclined to agree with Dyer, who comments that, after “Stalker,” Tarkovsky fell into self-imitation: “The guru became his own most devoted disciple.”

The long takes grow liturgical in manner. At the end of “Nostalgia,” the protagonist, a Russian travelling in Italy, spends nine minutes attempting to carry a lit candle across the length of an empty mineral pool, believing that he will thus avert the end of the world. He then falls dead, and there follows an awesome vision of a Russian dacha nestled within a medieval Italian abbey. “The Sacrifice” stages a similar ritual of world redemption: a Swedish intellectual becomes convinced that if he sleeps with a local witch he will undo an apparent nuclear war. His bargain also involves the burning of his island home—a six-minute take that consummates Tarkovsky’s motif of immolation.

These images are as grandly dumbfounding as any that have been put on film, yet the surrounding narratives are thin. The Swedish actor Erland Josephson, a mainstay of Bergman’s troupe, appears in both “Nostalgia” and “The Sacrifice,” and invests his divine-madman roles with emotional conviction. But other actors struggle—especially the women. Domiziana Giordano, in “Nostalgia,” and Susan Fleetwood, in “The Sacrifice,” are obliged to enact prolonged scenes of female hysteria. A dark aspect of Tarkovsky’s critique of industrial modernity manifests itself: the reversion to

a pre-modern order brings with it a reinforcement of male dominance. In the Zone of “Stalker,” women disappear entirely, leaving only three men and a dog.

Such regressive tendencies have left Tarkovsky open to appropriation by the pseudo-religious illiberal ideology that has asserted itself in Putin’s Russia. The director has attained a canonical position in his homeland; there is a statue of him outside V.G.I.K. and a monument in Suzdal. As Sergey Toymentsev notes, latter-day Russian critics have linked Tarkovsky to Eastern Orthodox theology. Toymentsev counters that, although Tarkovsky was fascinated by religious iconography, he described himself as an agnostic. “The one thing that might save us is a new heresy that could topple all the ideological institutions of our wretched, barbaric world,” he once declared. Nor did he espouse conventional nationalist views. In his diaries, he wrote, “Pushkin is superior to the rest because he did not give Russia an absolute meaning.”

In the end, Tarkovsky evades whatever ideologies lay claim to him, and his symbols resist successive waves of interpretation. In his 1985 book, “Sculpting in Time,” he quotes the Symbolist poet Vyacheslav Ivanov: “A symbol is only a true symbol when it is inexhaustible and unlimited in its meaning, when it utters in its arcane (hieratic and magical) language of hint and intimation something that cannot be set forth, that does not correspond to words.” Tarkovsky’s motifs—dripping water, burning houses, spirit-laden animals, levitating bodies, self-propelling objects, scoured landscapes shining from within—add up to a pantheistic visual rite. What matters is not the identity of the sacred object but the transfiguring intensity of the gaze fixed upon it.

For me, as for many others, Tarkovsky bestowed a new way of looking at the world. When I sift through thousands of photographs I’ve taken over the years, I recognize how often I’ve searched out a Tarkovsky vista in whatever place I was passing through. Paths meandering in grass, tilted telephone poles, a man-made relic half devoured by nature, sunlight slanting wanly from the horizon: for more than half my life, I have been trying to convert scraps of land around me into versions of the Zone. ♦





## THE ART WORLD

# HOME GOODS

*On loving the Frick.*

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

“Welcome to my house,” I’ve said more than once while introducing people to the Frick Collection, my favorite museum. I’ve had to acknowledge an awkward domestic layout, extending to nine stops on the No. 6 train from the East Village. But I’ve meant it in a way that I share with a lot of art lovers, or even just art likers. The Frick stirs proprietary feelings as, say, the Metropolitan Museum of Art doesn’t. Big museums array works by a historical logic that is cold to the eye until thawed by your attention. Everything at the Frick is toasty at first glance. That’s an effect of the place’s having been a home, the mansion of the coke mogul Henry

Clay Frick, and of the somewhat fictive sense of the collection’s memorializing one person’s passions: pre-loved, call it. Some works and even whole rooms have been added since Frick died, in 1919. The house opened as a museum in 1935. Now we nervously await the collection’s temporary move to the Breuer building, on Madison Avenue—formerly the Whitney Museum and currently leased by the Met—during an expansion and renovation of the main digs: the museum has promised to return the mansion and its contents to their long-cherished states. We’ll see.

At the Frick, you feel more than welcomed—you feel invited, like a family

friend. You needn’t be comfortable with the relationship. Frick was a ruthless capitalist, with mines in Pennsylvania and leading roles in the steel industry and railroads. During the Homestead strike, in 1892, he dispatched armed Pinkerton mercenaries. Several workers and a few Pinkertons were killed (accounts of the number of casualties differ). That year, a would-be assassin, the anarchist Emma Goldman’s boyfriend, Alexander Berkman, attacked Frick in his Pittsburgh office, shooting him twice and stabbing him repeatedly. Frick, forty-two years old at the time, soon recovered. (Berkman was imprisoned for fourteen years.) An insatiable collector, Frick was one of several Gilded Age magnates who vacuumed great art from Europe when it was financially pinched. A depression in British agricultural income in the last decades of the nineteenth century made country estates target-rich environments for swashbuckling dealers like the Briton Joseph Duveen, who, at one point or another, had his hands on much that ended up in Frick’s house. Almost all the amassments were bequeathed by Frick to the public.

Admission was still free when, as a tyro critic ignorant of the Old Masters, I discovered and was transformed by the collection in the late nineteen-sixties. Over the years, I fell in love with specific works one by one—each identified on the walls by little more than the artist’s name, so that I learned from my response to the art before knowing much about it. Likewise self-educated are many of the sixty-two culturati—from fields including literature, music, dance, and film—who contribute short personal essays on favorite works in the collection to a slim illustrated anthology, “The Sleeve Should Be Illegal: & Other Reflections on Art at the Frick.” (The title quotes the novelist Jonathan Lethem’s stunned wonderment at an expanse of black-shadowed red velvet in a 1527 portrait of Sir Thomas More by Hans Holbein.) It is published by the museum and DelMonico Books with a foreword by Adam Gopnik, one of several authors in the anthology who regularly appear in this magazine. Some of the most appealing contributions are from thunderstruck amateurs. This

*In Ingres’s “Comtesse d’Haussonville” (1845), style conquers all, even common sense.*



is a charm of the book. Though now a grizzled professional, I still identify with them in spirit.

My Frick isn't yours, though yours interests me. The place is a Rorschach for personal meanings, unguided by curatorial programs. (I've pitied ambitious curators there, contending with a collection that is both heterogeneous and, as installed, perfect. What needs doing, beyond keeping the lights on?) There's no overriding historical or institutional narrative to come away with. Most museums have works in storage that can reasonably alternate with those on view, at opportune moments. The Frick boasts no such depth. It is top-heavy with a medley of the simply superb—fantastic icing on not much cake. Its context is itself, occasioning a rat-a-tat of sensations that accumulate but don't add up. They are episodic, guaranteeing a Babel of individual moods and tastes among viewers on any given day. A visit there is a biographical event: who are you this time? Your alertness to some things and indifference to others will tell you. I'm reminded by nearly every page in the book of my own past and ongoing engagement with the collection, not always agreeing with the contributors but stirred by them to recall bits of the discontinuous stories of how the Frick has affected me.

Keeping in mind that an unprejudiced eye should apply as much to one's hundredth encounter with a compelling art work as it does to one's first, I'll try not to be possessive. I can't endorse, but I enjoy, the writer Jerome Charyn's association of Rembrandt's "The Polish Rider" (circa 1655)—a mounted, heavily armed young man, probably at the dawn of a day of battle—with memories of his own boyhood wildness in the South Bronx. He deems the rider "defiant in his orange pants" and "beyond any sense of authority or ownership." I see the picture differently, perceiving the pathos of a youth who is about to change from somebody's son or brother or sweetheart into an annealed killer. His eyes are already hard. His mouth, still boyishly soft, will have a harsher set by the day's end.

Another matter is the best painting in the museum, if not the world: Rembrandt's fathomlessly self-aware "Self-Portrait" of 1658, made when he was fifty-

two and sorely beset by personal and professional woes. He knows that he's the leading painter in Amsterdam, but he seems to wonder if that's worth anything. It does nothing for his tiredness. A shadow falls across his eyes. I'm loath to argue with the five contributors who single the work out. It becomes part of each viewer's life: a talisman. I have my ideas on how the artist achieved it. One feature is the odd placement of the throne-like chair in which he sits. The chair's arms end snuggled up against the picture plane, leaving no forward space for his knees to occupy; only shapeless paint smears mark that zone. We as much as view the artist from his lap—an intimation of physical intimacy that intensifies the work's psychological amplitude. The late Diana Rigg recalls thinking, when she first saw the picture, "That is how I want to act!" Roz Chast recounts an existential encounter. She writes, "I felt as if he were saying to me: Once I was alive, like you. Sometimes I suffered. Sometimes things seemed funny, or maybe absurd, especially myself. I was a man. I was an artist. I was a great artist. My name was Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn. I painted this painting. I lived. I died. Yet here I am. There you are. We are looking at each other."

My other chief touchstone in the collection is Diego Velázquez's "King Philip IV of Spain" (1644), which initiated me into the higher sorceries of the Baroque. The painter George Condo puts the marvellousness well: "There's a majestic presence here; yet it's all just paint"—true of any painting, perhaps, but minus the majesty. Space becomes porous behind, around, and in front of the subject: a revolving-door effect, spinning pictorial depth out into the real world. Passages of visible brushwork snap into verisimilitude at a calculated distance: about thirteen feet, as measured by me with baby steps. What seem, up close, to be slight variants of the same grayed white become, from the proper remove, satin, silver, linen, and lace. Is Philip an inbred Habsburg geek? Never mind. A contrast between his tight grip, with one hand, on a silver mace of military command and his dandling of a hat with the other hand poses your choice of treatment from him. The portrait is a treatise on royalty.

Unlike Velázquez, Rembrandt plumbed the mysteries of individual hu-

manity, observant but dismissive of social status. I've had moments of feeling that painting has been all downhill since that contemporaneity of a Spanish Catholic courtier and a Dutch Protestant entrepreneur. But elsewhere in the galleries wonders ensue—or predate, as with Duccio di Buoninsegna's pre-Renaissance, gold-backed "Temptation of Christ on the Mountain" (1308-11), in which Jesus fends off the blandishments of a monstrous, winged Satan on a rocky prominence above miniaturized kingdoms. Humbly barefoot and calm, the Saviour rejects with a gesture the Evil One's offer of world-ruling power. The choreographer Mark Morris both astutely analyzes the picture and has fun with it: "After those forty terrifying days alone, who wouldn't be tempted to do something desperate and stupid by such a randy and charcoal-black Satan? It happens all the time."

My first Frick crush, some fifty-plus years ago, was Ingres's "Comtesse d'Haussonville" (1845), the lady in blue satin who raises a finger to a pulse point on her throat as if her beauty were a self-charging battery. Since then, I've recognized the work's shameless solecisms, mainly an arm that, when you focus on it, appears to emerge from two or three ribs down the subject's right side, and the longueur of outsized blue eyes that, far from being windows of the soul, suggest top-of-the-line Tiffany accoutrements. There's a chair at the lower left that only a stick figure could fit into. With Ingres, style conquered all, starting with common sense. The Dominican-born artist Firelei Báez nails the signature qualities: "glossy, soft, and cold." The theatre artist Robert Wilson contributes a handwritten Gertrude Steinian rhapsody: "WHAT IT IS IS ALWAYS IS CLASSICAL." Concerning prosperous women, the great cartoonist Chris Ware, having noted that there "are few uncooler-sounding words than 'eighteenth-century marble portraiture,'" pleases me by selecting Jean-Antoine Houdon's complexly personable "Madame His" (1775). From her features and expression, you can tell the very tenor of her thoughts. Houdon is one of those artists whose work you may walk past for years until a day that feels fated when you stop.

Masterpieces command a drawing



room that is very much as Frick left it. There are two portraits by Titian, two by Holbein, and a religious vision, Giovanni Bellini's "St. Francis in the Desert." (There's also a potent El Greco.) Holbein's "Sir Thomas More" is a miracle of elegance and empathy, coming to a point in the sitter's prodigiously intelligent gaze. Holbein must have loved him. With apologies to Hilary Mantel, the novelistic defender of the subject of the room's second Holbein portrait, Thomas Cromwell (1532-33), he looks like a thug to me, sullen in profile. But the singer-songwriter and author Rosanne Cash casts a vote for the picture's richness of color and cuts Cromwell some compassionate slack for his future consignment by Henry VIII to a headsman's axe—"on the mountaintop of power until Henry destroys him," she writes. In a theatrical coup of installation, Cromwell and More, enemies who were doomed to the same end, face each other from either side of a grand fireplace, bracketing a colorful, deadly history.

About Titian, what can be said after you say that he is the finest pure painter ever? Susanna Kaysen, the author of "Girl, Interrupted," surmises that the subject of "Portrait of a Man in a Red Cap" (circa 1510) "looks to the left, into the past." Reading that, I see it. The other Titian portrait is of the artist's best friend and tireless promoter, Pietro Aretino—poet, connoisseur, power broker, feared satirist, author of popular devotional literature and pornography, intimate of rulers including the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, and altogether one of the most interesting men of the sixteenth century. (I'm acquainted with Aretino from a bounteous 2012 biography, "Titian: His Life," by Sheila Hale.) Turning to the Bellini (circa 1476-1478), we behold St. Francis standing outside his cave in a rustic landscape with meadowed sheep nearby and mountains and noble buildings in the distance. He looks skyward and holds out his open hands in a conventional posture of receiving the stigmata. But there's no other hint of anything supernatural. The married artists John Currin and Rachel Feinstein report years of concentrating, by turns, on the radiant scene's intricate topographical and botanical details. My favorite element, which mirrors my mystification at the

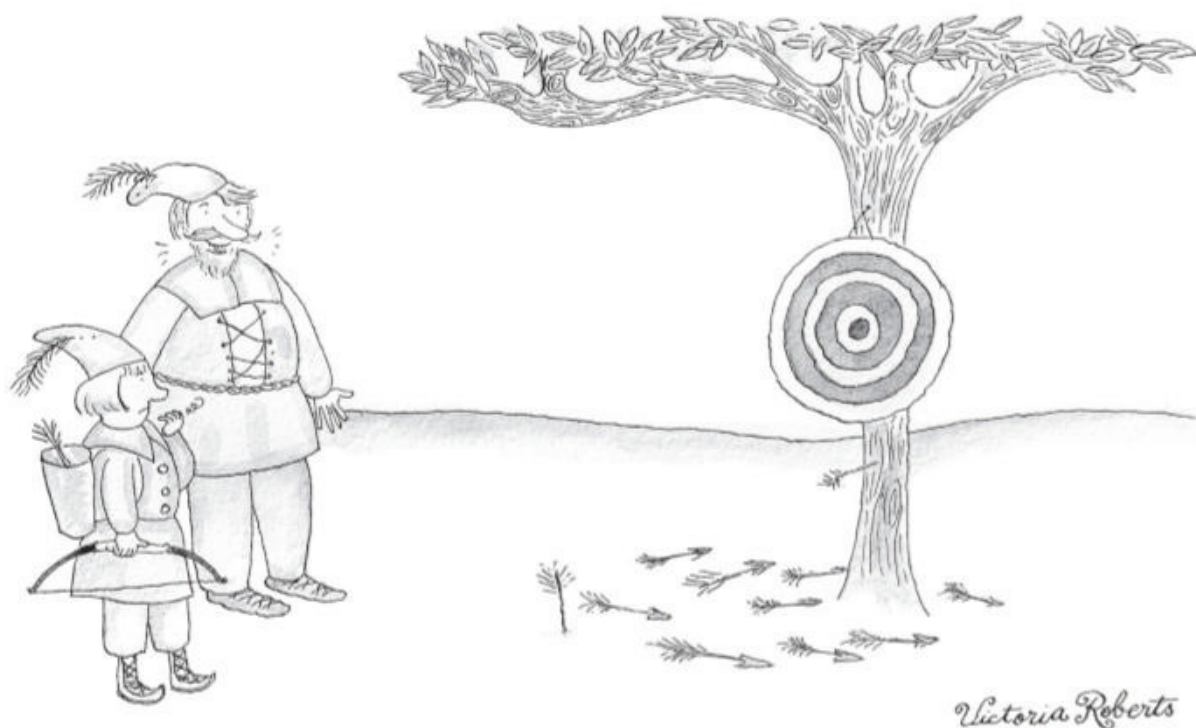
matter-of-factness of the image, is an adorably witless donkey.

I don't regard the Frick's three Vermeers as first-rate—for the premium grade, visit the Met—maybe because I'm not beguiled by their possible narrative content. Parts of the pictures aren't fully integrated and resolved, bespeaking a haste that compromises the artist's usual—and, for him, indispensable—perfectionism. I am persuaded by the critic and author Vivian Gornick's speculative interpretation of "Mistress and Maid" (1666-67), in which a seated lady evinces alarm at the approach of her servant holding a letter. Gornick decides that both women suspect that it announces the discovery of an affair the lady is having. I only wish the whole picture were up to the éclat of the lady's spellbinding yellow dressing gown. Maddeningly, the Frick once passed up a chance to own Vermeer's supreme "The Art of Painting," which is now owned by Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum. What a baffling artist! He was at his most transcendent with his most quotidian subjects. Vermeer could split the difference between fact and fiction with a tronie—the imagined portrait of a type of person—like the "Girl with a Pearl Earring," at the Mauritshuis, in the Hague. But when he fell to storytelling, the results tend to weirdness. In the Frick's "Officer and Laughing Girl" (circa 1657), a young woman grins with some ratio of ingratiating and fear at a cavalier-ish man, who is seen from the back. The ambiguous

drama makes the pictured room, with its open window and map on the wall, feel like an arbitrary stage set.

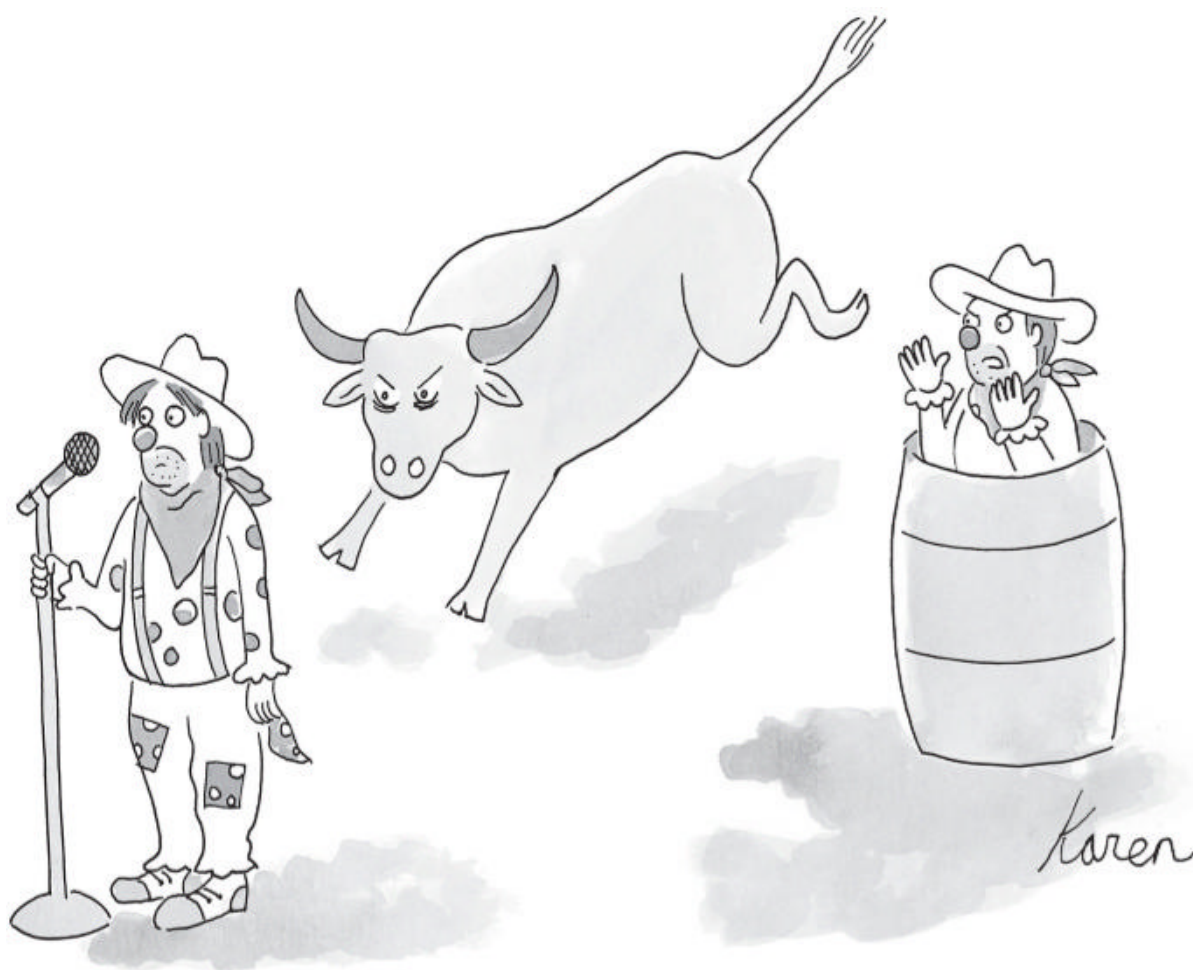
In another space, we confront Agnolo Bronzino's peak-Mannerist portrait "Lodovico Capponi" (circa 1550-55), of a handsome, arrogant, somehow discontented youth, clad in a gorgeous outfit that features a startlingly projecting codpiece. (That fashion wasn't Bronzino's invention, though he surely didn't mind it. He was notorious for erotic wordplay in his poetry.) The German-born architect Annabelle Selldorf shares her years-long fascination with the painting's "simultaneous quality of utter impenetrability paired with a provocative invitation to enter, to speculate, and to lose oneself in the ambiguity of the portrait." I've been ambivalent about the work, at times deeming it intolerably arch, but Selldorf persuades me to give it another chance, as does the American man of letters Daniel Mendelsohn, who eruditely speculates about the sitter's downcast air. Madly romantic, Capponi famously pined for a reciprocally smitten girl whose stepfather forbade her to see him. I'm not used to detecting emotion in works by the icily stylizing Bronzino. But now I look again, and there it is. Score points for the book, opening my eyes and mind.

Less surprising to me, but gratifying, are accounts by the British artist and writer Edmund de Waal and the American choreographer and dance impresario Bill T. Jones, both of whom zero in on the seemingly humble, but sneakily



*"Don't worry, son, you'll just have to learn to steal from the poor and give to the rich."*





*"Clem, y'durn fool, this ain't no time for a monologue!"*

powerful, small painting "Still Life with Plums" (circa 1730), by Jean-Siméon Chardin. I have urged friends to contemplate it for several minutes. It's less about how a jug, a glass of water, and some fruit appear—the description is perfunctory and the palette drab—than how they are what they are: instances of matter as densely actual as matter can be. The longer you gaze, the more sensitized you'll be to quiddities of painting in relation to the real—and in relation to yourself as a viewer. Jones calls the painting "a peculiar mirror through which to 'watch oneself watching.'" Ordinary things in the world interested Chardin. That doesn't sound rare, but, oh, it is. No other still-life painter until the twentieth century's Giorgio Morandi is so profound.

James McNeill Whistler's full-length "Harmony in Pink and Grey: Portrait of Lady Meux" (1881-82) and "Arrangement in Black and Gold: Comte Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac" (1891-92) usually hang, with two others, in the Frick's beautiful wood-panelled Oval Room, constituting a decorative scheme that is platonically perfect. I'm always annoyed when some temporary show displaces them. Adam Gopnik writes of the "X-ray of emotion" in Whistler's por-

traiture. "Anxiety, doubt, self-reflection, sexual ambiguity: we feel it all," Gopnik says of the rendering of the Count. The artist Ida Applebroog admires Lady Meux, a banjo-playing barmaid who married a brewing heir and repeatedly scandalized London high society. Both paintings are about glamour as an ethic and almost a morality, defiantly accepting the attendant psychological strains. Whistler communes with his subjects' audacities of dress as well as attitude—the Count in svelte black and Lady Meux in a dress that looks corseted from the outside. Taste, as taste, had never risen to equivalent eloquence.

My own taste skates past the Frick's abundance of genteel English portraiture—an Anglophilic craze on the part of Gilded Age American collectors who, lacking distinguished ancestry, as much as bought some. Regarding portraits by Gainsborough that line the Frick's dining room, I'm not insensible to the "delicacy, poise, restraint, and a certain kind of cool" that puts the English musician Bryan Ferry in mind of "a Miles Davis trumpet solo." It's just that I find the manner smugly self-congratulatory. But Alexandra Horowitz, a scientist who heads the Horowitz Dog Cognition Lab,

arouses my interest in a Gainsborough park scene by identifying three pooches that frisk amid perambulating ladies: a setter mix, a terrier, and a Pomeranian—"the eighteenth-century version, with longer legs and nose, less of a stuffed toy than a vulpine variant of 'dog.'"

We look at paintings, which are specific objects in specific places, as individuals, alone. We may then turn, with excitement or anxiety, to others in the hope of having our responses confirmed. Those conversations are the test of any art's cultural vitality—commonplace regarding books and movies but rarer, and a mite self-consciously special, in cases of visual art, where undertones of rarity and brute expensiveness intrude. "The Sleeve Should Be Illegal" models for us the starts of such invigorating talk. What's nice about the book is the variety of personality, extending to eccentricity, of the voices heard and awaiting rejoinders. A contributor occasionally veers into sentimentality, which is easily understandable. The museum's sacredness to many, including me, can cloy a little. The book could do with more jokes like Mark Morris's. What is at issue, after all, is only art, a holiday of the spirit on the crowded calendar of life lived. Nor is all the art worthy of reverence. Mixed and even negative opinions can serve as control rods for the fission of overly pious engrossment.

I am not a fan of Joseph Mallord William Turner, though I savor Simon Schama's nostalgic affection for the British showoff's relatively muted "Mortlake Terrace: Early Summer Morning" (1826), which, as the critic points out, deploys a watercolor-like use of oils to convey sights along a bank of the Thames. He writes, "The limpid light washing the scene is the light of my memories, the happy ones anyway." I'm distracted by the calculatedness of the work's technique, which counts on an emotional appeal that doesn't strike me as earned. For his big sea and harbor scenes—there are two harbors at the Frick—Turner applied splashes of paint that we are expected to interpret as an accurate capturing of light and atmosphere. (Contrary to some opinion, these paintings don't anticipate Impressionism, which coheres in the eye; Turner's visual fictions require complicities of the imagination.) Then he drew



in paint on top of them, with an occasional effect like that of bathroom-tile decals. I much prefer John Constable. If I were to choose only one painting at the Frick to write about, it might well be “The White Horse” (1819), which gets everything right about a rural setting—meadow, stream, sky, clouds, woods, path, farm buildings—at a time of day that is signalled by the homeward transfer, by raft, of a workhorse. Constable conducts me into a specific part of his world and tactfully leaves me alone there. I like that.

I suppose that I know the paintings at the Frick better than any others (including some that are superior) by the respective artists. The collection anchors my art love as pocket editions of the Constitution can seem to serve certain politicians—except I’m honest. By the way, would I be a collector if I could afford it? You bet. The very few purchases that my wife and I have made instruct me that writing a check is intrinsically more sincere than writing a review, because the expense hurts. I would pass on a big Goya, “The Forge” (1815–20), in which a blacksmith is about to strike an anvil. It excites the American painter, sculptor, author, and photographer Tom Bianchi as “an intensely modern painting, based as it is on a specific, near-photographic moment.” The picture seems to me more akin to the artist’s anecdotal etchings—unnecessarily large for its content of a discrete muscular action—than to Goya’s more complexly inspired oils.

But Goya! The Israeli-born American artist, author, and designer Maira Kalman attributes the haunting—or is it haunted?—mood of his “Portrait of a Lady (María Martínez de Puga?)” (1824) to its slightly elfin subject’s “neutral gaze,” scalloped hair, and black dress against a taupe background. “Pensive? Uncomfortable? Indifferent?” Kalman can’t decide. Nor can I. This example of Goya’s unsettling gifts is a minor painting. But sometimes you may be in the mood for inconspicuous works. Thus the photographic artist Duane Michals comes to rest on an uncharacteristic painting by Jean-Antoine Watteau, “The Portal of Valenciennes” (circa 1710–11), of soldiers lounging outside a city or fortress wall. The master of ceremonious Eros is, for once, hanging out with random guys. This testifies to the eighteenth-century France that Watteau actually lived in

while he conjured visions of aristocratic dalliance. A bonus of such oddities is that you can usually have them to yourself on days when the museum is crowded with fellow-viewers.

Crowds can’t vitiate the almost violent charm of the Frick’s Fragonard Room, which incorporates a suite of paintings, “The Progress of Love,” that was commissioned in 1771 by Madame du Barry for a new pavilion outside Paris (she later decided against the paintings, deeming them out of fashion). After the Revolution, the suite, with additions, ended up in the home of a cousin of the artist, in Grasse. The British dealers Agnew’s acquired it for J. P. Morgan. Following Morgan’s death, in 1913, Joseph Duveen sold it to Frick on behalf of the banker’s estate. Duveen arranged for the room’s installation, enhanced with gems of furniture, ceramics, and small sculpture. (However you may judge the sly dealer, he merits lasting honor for this tour de force.) In Frick’s day, women would gather in the room after dinner while the men consumed cigars in a basement space that is still equipped with a billiard table and bowling alleys.

As a mot juste for “The Progress of Love,” I nominate “silly.” Great art essentializes qualities of human experience, of which silliness is a capital instance. The big paintings theatricalize stages of adolescent amour—resisted seduction, furtive intimacy, triumphant union, and



subsequent nostalgia—among young people at court who were given nothing to do in life except to dress up and to play at love. At a heroic scale under sumptuously soaring trees, the tableaux both amuse and overwhelm. “It’s like being blown away by a French love bomb,” the musician Donald Fagen, a co-founder of the band Steely Dan, writes, adding a confessional rue for the common course of romance in real life: “the feverish rush of desire, the euphoric first months when

lovers are compelled to idealize each other, followed by the inevitable crash when the levels of serotonin, oxytocin, and dopamine in the brain start to plunge.”

Fragonard didn’t neglect love’s downside. A final addition to the suite—looking unfinished but really made in a late, simplified style—finds a young woman drooping alone, with one limp hand resting suggestively in her lap. A stone Cupid above her on a pillar regards her indignantly and points a finger horizontally, as if saying, “Girl, stop moping and get out there.” Fragonard’s rococo gaga-ness is deceptive. He had a subtle, at times almost subliminal narrative imagination. His tones vary from shouts to whispers. No other major period style ended as abruptly as this one, extinguished by the Revolution.

“The Progress of Love” brings to an extravagant climax the luxuriousness that is implicit, at the Frick, in the ownership of so much extraordinary art. Its showiness departs from the collection’s generally sober temperament. Frick had conservative compunctions. He acquired no nudes, for example. He seems to have dreamed less of glory than of dignity, laundering the machinations of his avarice. There was nothing racy beyond the dandyism of Whistler. Frick collected more works of Whistler’s than of any other artist, likely because the painter squared his originality with soothingly patrician airs. Frick was reluctant to endorse his era’s cascade of Parisian avant-gardes. (An occasionally displayed Monet or Renoir feels positively reckless in context.) He epitomized sensibilities of the time that said “Not so fast!” to modernity in a way that can only be modern in itself, called forth by the pressure of worldly change: reactionary, certainly, with a touch of hysteria in championing prestigious, almost exclusively dead white men. The collection’s bias makes it, as a whole, an illustrative historical artifact that happens to be breathtaking in many of its parts. The works may be old, but our experience of them is strictly up to date. More than one contributor to “The Sleeve Should Be Illegal” invokes a sensation of walking on air after a visit to the Frick, a payoff of renewed faith in the powers of art and a forgivable pride in our own perhaps untrained and underused capacities to comprehend the aesthetic and spiritual stakes of a timeless game. ♦





ON TELEVISION

## TASTELESS

*"The Real Housewives of Salt Lake City," on Bravo.*

BY DOREEN ST. FÉLIX

The most promising character at the start of "The Real Housewives of Salt Lake City," which debuted in November, is not one of the "housewives" but one of their children: Meredith Marks's son, Brooks, who, in oversized sunglasses and a puffer coat, presents himself as a ready-made meme. Meredith, a jewelry designer, tells us that her son has taken a break from his studies at New York University to support her as she navigates a tough spot in her marriage. The twenty-one-year-old Brooks, an aspiring fashion designer of limited skill, seems to be a student of the "Housewives" phenomenon; he is fluent in the show's tropes, acting as Meredith's confidant and stylist. Here is a thoroughly modern, weirdly affecting image: the savvy,

gay son protecting his sad, subdued mother, with whom he shares a pink pout and a hunger for insta-celebrity.

But how quickly the presumptive fan favorite fell from grace! In the third episode, Meredith invites Jen Shah over for margaritas. A Muslim Polynesian living in a white Mormon stronghold, Shah is doubly outcast, and so she fights hard for the spotlight. Her vibe is confrontational and campy; Brooks finds her uncouth. While sitting on the couch, Shah gets excited and girlishly kicks her heels in the air. We see Brooks seethe in a corner, and, in a cut to a confessional, he exaggerates the scene, saying, "I'm feeling really uncomfortable. Her vagina's in my face." After the episode aired, fans voiced their displeasure with him on social media,

branding the incident "Vagina-gate." Ultimately, it was Shah who barrelled her way to the spot of protagonist.

Am I applying too much analytical pressure to the situation? Well, yes. This is how to enjoy reality television these days. Brooks's mistake, or, rather, his miscalibration of the etiquette of the genre, fascinated me. It wasn't the fakeness of the budding feud that rankled viewers; "Housewives" is, constitutionally, a soap opera, and it is fuelled by petty offense, manufactured from the slightest of slights. The issue was the *artlessness* of the fakery. Brooks's jab, a callback to the witty white-male cruelty that thrived in the aughts, now directed at a woman of color by a member of Gen Z, felt like an anachronism. He was reaching, and, in that crucial moment, he flopped.

Being tasteless requires good taste. Reality-television fans have high standards for artifice, which needs to seem both believable and intricately produced, bloody and plastic. This was the initial appeal of the "Housewives" franchise, which will swan to its fifteenth anniversary in March. When the inaugural series, "The Real Housewives of Orange County," premiered, in 2006, audiences were titillated by this monster picture of female arrogance, wounded glamour, and social betrayal, and, moreover, by the participants' evident awareness of the bit. In the years that followed, the franchise expanded to encompass nine more cities, and to spawn several spinoffs. "Housewives" has become an institution of network reality television; it is still beloved—though that love is mainly expressed, by devotees, through biting critique—but its trusted formula, with rare exceptions, lulls. The drink will be thrown, the gossip will be launched, the husband will be divorced. The "artsy" label, in the current reality-TV landscape, is more likely to be lavished on the quiescent experiment of "Terrace House"; the avant-garde, queer-friendly portraits of "Dating Around"; or the social-commentary humiliation of "90-Day Fiancé." "Housewives" is now comfort TV, which is a compliment and a dig.

I needed the mess of "Salt Lake City," a frolic that frequently nails a difficult art: incorporating cultural politics into the sketchy morality of a guilty pleasure. It is the rare début that benefits from



being judged primarily by its early episodes, which are jammed with bitchery, excess, and surprise. The show kinks expectation by notionally revolving around the characters' relationships to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In all the "Housewives" series, the culture of the geographical place is integral to the study of the cast; religion is as essential to "S.L.C." as respectability politics is to "Potomac," which follows a group of Black women in colorism-obsessed Maryland society. Every housewife introduces herself, in the opening credits, with a summary of her personal brand. "Just like my pioneer ancestors, I'm trying to blaze a new trail," Heather Gay says, in "S.L.C.," without sarcasm. Was the gaucheness of her tagline a harbinger of classic "Housewives" cluelessness? The cast is mostly white, but, in "S.L.C.," the whiteness is an ethnicity, rather than a catchall for wealth and status, as it is in "Beverly Hills" and "New York City."

"Housewife," in the world of the show, invokes not an occupation but a life style; the women are often socialite business owners. Gay is the proprietor of a med spa in the area. "Perfection is attainable," she says, cheekily linking the tenets of Mormonism to her career. Gay was formerly married to a man whom she describes as "Mormon royalty." (The women use the term "Mormon," even though the Church is trying to phase it out.) Post-divorce, she says, she has been ostracized by the "community." Luckily, she loves "rap music," "Black men," and "homosexuals." Endearingly, she finds her whiteness genuinely oppressive. Naturally, she's taken by Shah. At her spa, Gay tends adoringly to the petite rabble-rouser, who requires champagne with her armpit Botox. Shah, too, is an ex-Mormon. She is married to "Coach Shah," a Black football coach, with whom she has two sons. In an introductory confessional, she describes, with no-nonsense gravitas, leaving the Mormon religion when she learned of its history of racism, and converting to Islam. We also meet Lisa Barlow, the owner of a tequila company, who dresses in Sundance-chic attire and looks confusingly like Meredith, and Whitney Rose, Gay's third cousin, who has been exiled from the religion for her pursuit of forbidden love. Then there's the wild-eyed Mary Cosby, a Black woman and a hoarder of cou-

ture, who is the "mother" of a Pentecostal church. Cosby, with her strange restraint, explains that she inherited the role from her grandmother, which involved marrying her own step-grandfather—the pastor of the church—with whom she now has a son.

"S.L.C." is the most racially diverse series in "Housewives" history. (The franchise has been criticized for segregating across racial lines—the series tend to have all-white casts, with the exception of "Atlanta" and "Potomac," which are all Black—but I'm of the mind that cynical diversity efforts will harm the clique chemistry.) In "S.L.C.," the white castmates play supporting roles to the antagonistic dyad of Cosby and Shah. The details of their fight are too stupid to parse, but they involve Cosby's claim that Shah "smelled like hospital," and Shah's observation that Cosby "fucked her grandfather!" The two squabble at Cosby's Met Gala-themed luncheon, and Cosby, befitting the legacy of her surname, deems Shah a "hoodlum" and a "hood rat." Shah leaves the event and, in a confessional, accuses Cosby of being a racist.

Viewers are torn on Shah, who clings to the camera. Her hunger eclipses her hauteur. I appreciate the vulgarity of her performance. The show delights in the playing of Cosby's conservatism against Shah's confrontational, in-vogue politics, of Black against brown, which is to say that it captures a real, intra-racial social tension. Shah's politics are righteous, but she is also aware of how they might garner her clout. Call this culturally sensitive trash.

"Salt Lake City" is aggressive and scrappy. (You need to have been thoroughly exposed to the arts of feminine clownery to appreciate the scene in which Cosby prays the demon of addiction out of her castmate's father.) Soon, though, the season begins to lag. Shah exhausts her options, resorting to too-petty outbursts. In the end, it is Gay and Rose, the cousins with hearts of gold, who emerge as the fan favorites. They commit to the joke of lampooning their own goofy whiteness. At one point, Shah throws a hip-hop-themed birthday party for her husband. He instigates a dance battle, and the girls join in, awkwardly krumping and twerking, gladly playing the minstrel. They look like they're having fun. ♦

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THE CURRENT CINEMA

## SMALL PLEASURES

*“French Exit” and “The World to Come.”*

BY ANTHONY LANE

For anyone who venerates both Michelle Pfeiffer and cats, it’s been a long pause. In 1992, in “Batman Returns,” Pfeiffer played Selina Kyle, who was so lonely and so forgetful that she left messages on her own answering machine, and whose only companion was a black cat. Later, after a near-fatal fall, Selina was chewed and licked back to life by a feline mob, and transmogrified into Catwoman, whose idea of fun was to use a whip as a jump rope. The way she pronounced the word “meow”—casual, insolent, and almost bored—before blowing up a building has echoed long in the memory of all who heard it. Pfeiffer succeeded in suggesting (as the Marvel franchise has increasingly neglected to do) that a comic-book persona, far from being pasted at random onto an existing character, should answer to something latent in that character’s instincts and looks. Her cattishness was waiting to be whelped.

Now, all these years later, we have “French Exit,” in which Pfeiffer plays a tellingly torpid widow, Frances Price, who wears a lot of fur. She has a son,

Malcolm (Lucas Hedges), with whom and for whom she exists; nothing else appears to interest her. “She’s upset in the general sense,” Malcolm says. Frances has a black cat, Small Frank, so named because, in her solemn opinion, he enshrines the spirit of Franklin (Tracy Letts), her late—and, to be honest, unlamented—husband. The plot demands that Frances and Malcolm quit their home in New York and travel, by ship, to France, where a friend has lent them an apartment in Paris. But how is Frances to smuggle the cat through customs? By drugging him and laying him softly atop a pile of cash in her handbag, as if he were a scarf.

There is an odd surrealism to that image, at once indolent and pragmatic, and it’s one of the recurring virtues of “French Exit,” which is adapted by Patrick deWitt from his own novel and directed by Azazel Jacobs. Look at Frances, for instance, summoning an apathetic waiter in a restaurant, not by calling out “Check, please” but by spraying perfume all over the small vase of flowers in front of her and setting it on fire. A

century ago, in Paris, such a gesture might have been hailed as art. In one of the movie’s last—and loveliest—images, she moseys down an empty street by night, with Small Frank following behind and, to her right, a red umbrella painted on a wall.

There *are* other figures in this film, apart from the Prices, but they stray in and out of the action as if by accident. In New York, Malcolm has a girlfriend, Susan (Imogen Poots), to the disdain of his mother. “Oh, to be youngish and in loveish,” she remarks. At sea, having left Susan behind, Malcolm befriends Madeleine (Danielle Macdonald), a fortune-teller who—correctly—predicts the imminent demise of a passenger. Again, Frances is ready with her assessment, declaring, “Malcolm fucked a witch on the boat over.” Susan and Madeleine both show up in Paris. We also get Mme. Reynard (Valerie Mahaffey), a genteel exile with the saddest smile imaginable, plus Julius (Isaach De Bankolé), a private investigator, hired when Small Frank goes AWOL. At one point, everyone sleeps in the apartment, though viewers girding themselves for a bedroom farce of the old school, brimful of fizzy libidos, will be frustrated. Even the private eye wears pajamas. People are just too tired for love.

The movie starts and ends with scenes from Malcolm’s past—specifically, from a day when he was twelve or so (nicely played by Eddie Holland). Frances came to fetch him from boarding school, in a silver Rolls-Royce, and swept him off: shades of Humbert Humbert, arriving at summer camp and gathering Lolita into his clutches. Now and then, in “French Exit,” we catch a faint blush of perversity in the closeness of Frances and Malcolm. “Aren’t you her gigolo?” Madeleine asks him, when they first meet. “God, no, that’s my mother,” he hastens to reply. In narrative terms, the nearest equivalent would be Bernardo Bertolucci’s “La Luna” (1979), in which another American mother, freshly widowed, took her glum son to Europe. In mood, however, the two tales could not lie further apart, for Bertolucci’s manner was operatically Oedipal, unabashed by incest, and borne along by a full-throated performance from Jill Clayburgh in the leading role, whereas Jacobs’s film could be marked *andante*

*In Azazel Jacobs’s film, Michelle Pfeiffer plays a widow who travels to Paris.*



*moderato*. Deeds are done on the quiet, halfheartedly, or not at all.

Hedges, as Malcolm, is resigned to this listless air. Gazing across rooms, marooned in his thoughts, he's one of those actors who seem quite comfortable with having little to say. That's why we watch him so intently. Whether or not the atmosphere suits Pfeiffer, too, is open to debate. She certainly gives a master class in the weary and the withering; languor has always been her forte. But it's best combined with a comic snap, or with sudden surges of yearning—as in “The Fabulous Baker Boys” (1989), a great American film that won't grow old, for the simple reason that it was never young. There she played a singer who stumbled in late to an audition, breaking a heel and chewing gum; unleashed a song that knocked you slowly sideways; then popped the gum back in her mouth and said, “So?”

There was more going on in that single sequence than in the whole of “French Exit,” which steers Pfeiffer into the zone of lassitude and keeps her there, granting her more time and space to deliver (and to decorate) her lines than are required. Frances, told that she is insolvent, replies, “My plan was to die before the money ran out, but I kept and keep not dying, and”—eyes shut, a shrug of the shoulders, a shake of the head—“here I am.” To be fair, maybe she's right to harp on the drama of that moment, because the link between money and mortality is of consuming interest. Some wealthy folk accrue and hoard as if to fortify themselves against what's coming (a fruitless task), but Frances, with her remaining funds compressed into tidy blocks of cash, disburses them as if

she could fritter herself away. Generosity is not the issue. As she leaves a hundred euros on a café table for a coffee, or offers a wad of banknotes to homeless men in the park, you begin to realize what this unhappy woman really wants, and what this loafing, wistful movie can scarcely admit. She wants to die.

The season for redheads is in full swing. Michelle Pfeiffer's tresses, in “French Exit,” are a study in autumnal russet-gold, and Vanessa Kirby, playing a woman named Tallie, in “The World to Come,” sports a magnificent mane of flame. Just to complete the effect, her complexion, we are told, “has an underflush of rose and violet.” Mona Fastvold's film begins in 1856, and I kept expecting to see the entire Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood racing after Tallie, waving their brushes and begging her to pose.

Tallie is one of two heroines. The other is Abigail (Katherine Waterston), and she is our guide to the story. “With little pride, and less hope, we begin the new year,” she says at the start, in voice-over; we also observe her writing in her journal. Might this patient exercise in show-and-tell not be too much of a good thing? That's how the movie struck me at first blush, and some of Abigail's outpourings sound like the losing entries in a school poetry competition—“My heart is like a leaf borne over a rock by rapidly moving water.” And yet, in retrospect, the purpose of her narration becomes clear: here is a godly soul, striving to bring order to experiences that are, she fears, so wild and so harsh that they will not be tamed.

We are in upstate New York, in tough country, where you can all but perish in

a snowstorm. Abigail and her husband, the brooding Dyer (Casey Affleck), have already lost a young daughter to diphtheria, and any affection between them has died in the wake of grief. “My reluctance seems to have become his shame,” she says. Their habits are spartan; for her birthday, he gives her a box of raisins, a needle case, and a tin of sardines. The stage is therefore set for the arrival of Tallie, a new neighbor, who, despite being married to Finney (Christopher Abbott)—another killjoy—brings passion, color, and highly strokable knitwear. *Her* birthday present to Abigail is an atlas, hinting at far horizons, plus a pot of applesauce and an egg. Luxury!

The women, having become boon companions, proceed toward maximum boon. There's a shot of Abigail, stretched out in rapture after a visit from Tallie, lying back on a table with her arms flung wide; it's an extraordinary sight, so much so that Fastvold didn't need to boost it with a warbling soprano on the soundtrack. But ecstasy, like other thrills, is a rare commodity in this time and place, and the principal legacy of “The World to Come”—unusually, for a costume picture—is a sense of bridled anger, at all that will never be said and done. “Tallie kept strict custody of her eyes,” Abigail reports, after the couples have dined together. Happiness is best confined to dreams and flashbacks, for the bulk of life is hard labor. When Dyer has a fever, his wife administers “an enema of molasses, warm water, and lard. Also a drop of turpentine next to his nose.” Ah, the romance of the past. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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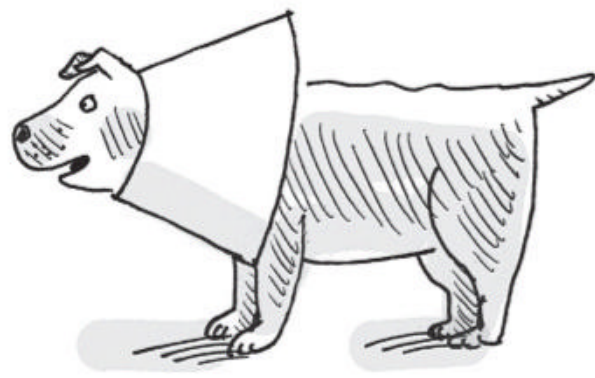
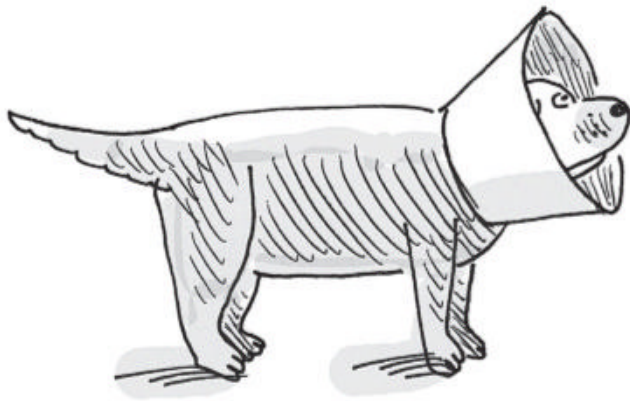




## CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

*Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Mick Stevens, must be received by Sunday, February 21st. The finalists in the February 1st contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 8th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).*

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



*mickstevens*

“

”

### THE FINALISTS



*“That’s a rare medium. Well done.”*  
Benjamin Branfman, New York City

*“I could’ve made that!”*  
Cory Weinfeld, New York City

*“Fine, but no flash photography.”*  
Lawrence Wood, Chicago, Ill.

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*“You were right—putting him  
on commission changed his attitude.”*  
J. F. Martin, Naples, Fla.





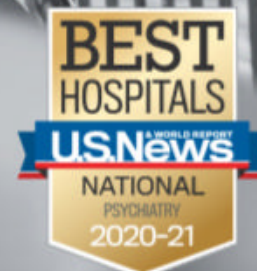
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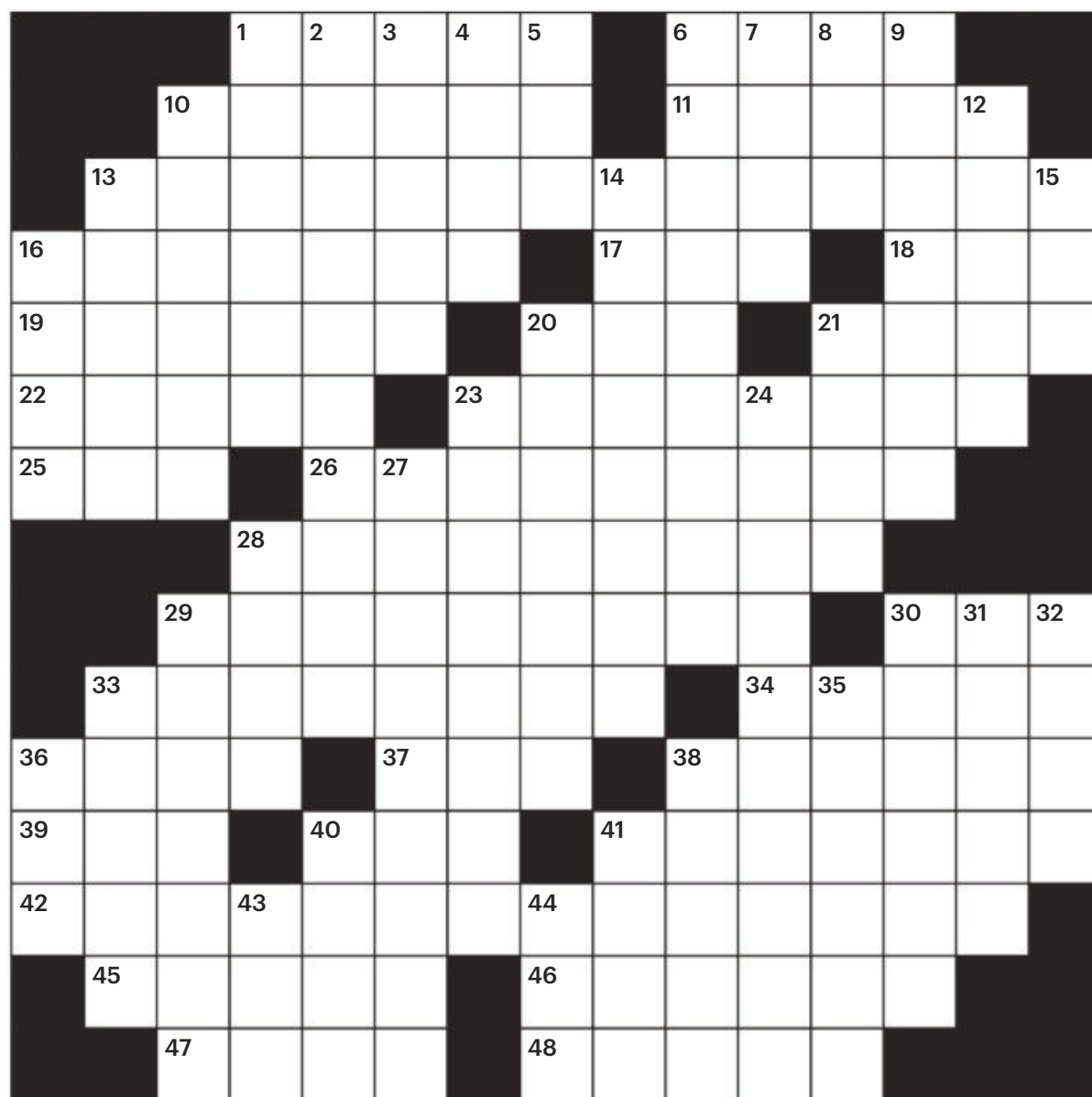
# THE CROSSWORD

*A moderately challenging puzzle.*

BY NATAN LAST

## ACROSS

- 1 "Good thinking!"
- 6 Word with truck or fight
- 10 Awkward knee-jerk response to a waiter saying "Enjoy your meal!"
- 11 "Never stop improving" sloganeer
- 13 Key figure in the Stonewall uprising, whose middle initial stood for "Pay it no mind"
- 16 Vacuum-cleaner sine qua non
- 17 "\_\_\_ Boys" (final book in the "Little Women" series)
- 18 Hoppyright Infringement or Hop Drop 'n Roll, e.g.
- 19 Spinoza's magnum opus
- 20 Scoundrel
- 21 Weights, to a weight lifter
- 22 Portions (out)
- 23 Sinéad O'Connor or Samuel Beckett
- 25 Fake \_\_\_
- 26 Sixteenth-century political treatise with a chapter called "How Flatterers Should Be Avoided"
- 28 Popular Doritos flavor
- 29 Many a gig worker
- 30 Deg. earned by Ina Garten and Lisa Leslie
- 33 Containers for one doing découpage
- 34 1975 Tony-winning Peter Shaffer play whose 2007 revival starred Daniel Radcliffe
- 36 Hammer or sickle
- 37 What the *Washington Post* rates with a number of Pinocchios
- 38 Philosopher whose 1980 funeral procession was attended by tens of thousands of Parisians
- 39 Four-wheel-drive transport, for short
- 40 Raging
- 41 Sephora purchase
- 42 Folding tables at a breakfast buffet?
- 45 Eliminate



- 46 "Eichmann in Jerusalem" writer
- 47 Places with stones and mud
- 48 Scout's goal

## DOWN

- 1 Troop movement
- 2 Guitar Center, for one
- 3 Cohort of Porthos and Aramis
- 4 Reddish brown
- 5 Designation on Grindr, perhaps
- 6 High-water mark, literally
- 7 Responses to fireworks
- 8 Part of B.Y.O.B.
- 9 1954 film starring Jean Simmons as the title character (and Marlon Brando as Napoleon Bonaparte)
- 10 Splashy venues for some bar mitzvahs
- 12 Deep sleep
- 13 Turned off, as one's Zoom mike
- 14 Co-creator of "Lost" and "Felicity"
- 15 "I'll Be Your Mirror" photographer Goldin
- 16 Freight hauler
- 20 Certain red ore
- 21 Rainfall unit
- 23 Targets of upright rows
- 24 Upping

- 27 Dorm-room conveniences
- 28 Membrane covering a newborn's head
- 29 Certain shorebirds
- 30 Mystique, e.g.
- 31 Third Second Family
- 32 Unmoored
- 33 "No idea"
- 35 Scannable square
- 36 "Eternally nameless" religious principle
- 38 Fuller than full
- 40 Plain sight?
- 41 Rooney of "Carol"
- 43 Word with dance or band
- 44 Acid dose, perhaps

## NOTE TO POTENTIAL SOLVERS

*From now on, you'll find a New Yorker crossword at the back of each issue of the magazine. Difficulty levels—lightly challenging, moderately challenging, and challenging—will vary from week to week; the solution to each puzzle will be printed in the following issue. Visit [newyorker.com/crossword](http://newyorker.com/crossword) for more puzzles.*





# Mitchell Johnson

Catalog by request:  
[mitchell.catalog@gmail.com](mailto:mitchell.catalog@gmail.com)

Follow on instagram:  
[@mitchell\\_johnson\\_artist](https://www.instagram.com/mitchell_johnson_artist)



Mitchell Johnson of Menlo Park, California—an American Academy in Rome Visiting Artist (2015) and a Josef and Anni Albers Foundation Artist in Residence (2007)—is the subject of the monograph, *Color as Content*, and the documentary film, *The Artist of Silicon Valley*. Johnson's color- and shape-driven paintings are known for their very personal approach to color and have been exhibited in Milan, New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Johnson divides his time between his favorite painting locations in Europe, New England, New York City, Asia, and California. His paintings are in the collections of 28 museums and over 600 private collections. The most recent museum acquisitions were by Museo Morandi in Bologna, Museum of Modern Art in Rome, Tucson Museum of Art, and Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento. Johnson moved to the Bay Area in 1990 after finishing his MFA at Parsons in New York. Follow [@mitchell\\_johnson\\_artist](https://www.instagram.com/mitchell_johnson_artist) on instagram to stay informed about exhibits, color talks, color workshops and new publications.