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[Love & Heartbreak](#)

## Weeping at the Lake Palace

I tried to compete with my rivals by spending money.

By [Akhil Sharma](#)

July 1, 2024



*Illustration by Jillian Tamaki*

In college, when people looked at me I felt scalded. I was fat and wore large eyeglasses, but there was something else going on, some deep sense that I wasn't enough and that people could see this. For some reason, I believed that if I could be involved with a beautiful woman I would stop being me.

In my junior year, I did a semester abroad, volunteering for a nonprofit organization in Udaipur, India. Udaipur may be the most beautiful city in a country full of beautiful cities. Situated in the desert state of Rajasthan, a landscape with mountaintop fortresses and villages unconnected by roads, Udaipur contains several man-

made lakes. When you arrive in the city and suddenly discover one of these, it can seem like a hallucination.

Elizabeth was working at the same nonprofit, and was also doing research for her Ph.D. I started translating for her when she interviewed villagers. Sitting beside her and producing the Hindi equivalent for “green fertilizer” or “microclimate,” I felt the force of her intelligence. I used to watch her bike to and from work, her blond ponytail bouncing behind her. She had blue eyes and was often laughing.

One night, we went out to dinner. Then we walked back to the room she rented, in a mansion with a walled garden. In her room, with the door closed, speaking softly, I had the feeling that we were hiding. Touching her was, unfortunately, an out-of-body experience.

Afterward, I walked home along Fateh Sagar Lake. It was late and the road was empty of traffic. Udaipur has a problem with feral dogs. A pack of them soon began pacing alongside me, growling. I became frightened. I tried, though, to hold on to the dreamlike feeling of what had just happened. I was aware of the shimmering lake and how, in the distance, the mountains of the Aravalli Range appeared stacked, one behind the other.

At work the next day, Elizabeth told me that she didn’t want a romantic relationship. I wasn’t surprised. I knew, of course, that I couldn’t be with someone so pretty.

Elizabeth worked on one floor and I on another. The only way that I would ever walk past the office where she sat was if I used a staircase that I had no reason to use. I began using it so that I could look through the open door at Elizabeth sitting at her desk, her lips pursed as she marked up papers.

I asked her out again. We went to a restaurant that was much nicer than the all-you-can-eat place I usually frequented. After dinner, we went back to her room. Later, there was the frightening walk along the lake with the packs of wild dogs.

We were soon going out once or twice a week. Periodically, Elizabeth would say that she felt uncomfortable dating someone she worked with, or that she didn't want to date someone so young—I was nineteen and she was thirty-two. Her hesitation was perturbing enough, but the fact that I almost always paid for dinner made things worse. My parents had given me spending money of about a hundred dollars a month. At the end of dinner, putting rupee bills on the table, I felt my chest tighten.

Elizabeth talked a lot about other men she had dated. She also made regular trips to Delhi, and she would tell me about men there who were interested in her. One man said that if he weren't already married he would marry her. Another called her in the middle of the night just to hear her voice. I didn't ask why she gave these men her number or why they felt comfortable making such declarations. I had a low enough opinion of myself to begin with, and often, hearing about her interest in these men, I'd feel myself sinking, vanishing. And this was in 1991, when, to make international phone calls in India, one had to go to the post office or book the call with an operator. In Udaipur, cut off from my life in America, I felt insubstantial, as though I lacked the solidity even to push open a door.

Udaipur has one of the greatest hotels in the world, a five-star palace built in the middle of a lake—the hotel appears to float in it. Elizabeth and I started going there for dinner. The dishes cost ten times what they cost in a more conventional setting; the prices seemed to have no connection with reality. We'd order and sometimes not finish the food.

One night at the Lake Palace when I'd had a good deal to drink, I went to the lobby and booked us a room. I was able to pay for it because my parents had given me a credit card for emergencies. Later, when Elizabeth was asleep in the room, I felt horror at what I had spent—several hundred dollars. I went into the bathroom and wept.

The next week, we returned to the hotel.

Two weeks later, we went back again.

Being in Udaipur made me feel unreal, being told by Elizabeth of her interest in other men made me feel unimportant, and spending money that my family didn't have made me feel drunk. The more I spent, the more I was willing to spend, although spending it triggered enormous panic.

When Elizabeth wondered how I was able to spend like this, I told her that my father was rich. In reality, he was an insurance examiner. He did not wear a tie to work, but kept one at the office in case he was invited to a meeting. And he preferred going to meetings where food would be served.

I spent seven months in India and saw Elizabeth for perhaps four of those. I began counting the days until I could return to America. Finally, the day of my departure arrived. Even sitting in my seat on the plane, I had a strange fear that I might be dragged off it and made to take Elizabeth to dinner.

I was the one who got the mail the day the credit-card bill arrived. It was seventeen hundred dollars. My father shouted at me first, then my mother. I remained silent so as not to prolong the screaming.

From America, I spoke with Elizabeth a few times. We exchanged occasional letters in which I hinted at successes that were coming

my way. Soon enough, we stopped writing. ♦

*Akhil Sharma* is the author of “*Family Life*” and the story collection “*A Life of Adventure and Delight*.” A revised version of his début novel, “*An Obedient Father*,” was published in 2022.

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[Love & Heartbreak](#)

## Bound Together

I felt that I was being tied to the women in my family, those who had come before and those yet to come.

By [Edwidge Danticat](#)

July 1, 2024



*Illustration by Jillian Tamaki*

Nineteen years ago, when my daughter Mira was born, my mother, a seamstress, gave me a scarf-length piece of white linen that she'd cut from the fabric she was using to make herself a dress. Calling it a *bando*—typically a headband in Haitian Creole (*bandeau* in French)—she wrapped it around my belly to help me regain my posture and reshape my waist. Like many postpartum rituals, including forty days of rest and special leaf baths and teas, this custom was as old as time, she told me. There were trendier belly bands and wraps available online, but I opted for hers because, as

she helped me bind and unbind it, I felt that I was being tied to the women in my family, those who had come before and those yet to come. We even joked about my one day having to convince my own daughter that this was something all new mothers had to do.

“There will probably be faster ways to do this in the future,” she’d say.

“There already is one,” I’d say. “It’s called plastic surgery.”

This March, when my brother-in-law died, at fifty-six, I saw his eighty-nine-year-old mother include belly binding as part of her mourning practice. Between the showers that she had to force herself to take, she wrapped a head scarf around her abdomen, which, in her old age, was permanently protruding. Sometimes she needed help tightening it, and, at her request, I would fasten the scarf over the spot where she believed her uterus to be. Other times, we fastened it around her pelvis, closer to the birth canal. For the first time in decades, she said, she was feeling *tranche*, visceral labor pains, as though her son were being born again. Because she could not fully express her grief in a New York City apartment, at least not in the traditional ways—by wailing or allowing her body to completely contort in the manner we call *kriz* (convulsions)—she groaned through her body’s memory of pre-labor, crowning, and the final release of birth. She even moaned in her sleep, grunts like the ones I remember emitting during my daughters’ births. After a few weeks, she moved the scarf to her head, using it to cradle her face and occasionally as a mourning veil.

What we wear in both joy and grief can amplify our emotions, serving as an extension of our feelings. Mourning attire is much more than fabric; it is a way of expressing ourselves to those around us and perhaps even to the dead. Funerals, where love and heartbreak are simultaneously on display, are a kind of runway on which we honor our missing loved ones. At a couple of funerals I

recently attended in the Haitian diaspora, mourners wore the deceased's favorite colors, even though those colors were far from the traditional sombre hues. At some homegoing services, people wear memorial T-shirts emblazoned with photographs of the dead that note the span of years between the loved one's sunrise and sunset.

Recently, a fifteen-year-old girl whom my younger daughter, Leila, knew briefly in middle school died in a tragic accident. It was the first time that someone my daughter knew who was her age had died. After hearing the news, Leila slept in a keepsake sweatshirt that the young woman had given to her guests at a party. After my mother died, I wore many of the black blouses she had worn to mourn *her* mother, which made me feel as though both of them were with me. Focussing on something touchable, lasting yet still fragile, like clothes, while mourning has allowed me to imagine grief as potentially sheddable one day. This is, of course, not entirely true, but I have found it momentarily comforting, which is perhaps the most one can hope for during the early and most uncertain stages of mourning. I did not, however, wear any of the many flowered skirts that my mother had made, sometimes in as little as five minutes, using pillowcases, elastic, hemming tape, and a pair of scissors. My distaste for those skirts was a running joke between us: I do have my limits.

In "A Grief Observed," a meditation on bereavement, the writer C. S. Lewis described his wife's death from cancer as a kind of shroud over his world. "Her absence is like the sky, spread over everything," he writes. Then, correcting himself, he adds, "But no, that is not quite accurate. There is one place where her absence comes locally home to me, and it is a place I can't avoid. I mean my own body." This is perhaps why our bodies require so much cradling in grief. Just as many people call out for their mothers in moments of sorrow and distress, in Haitian Creole we might be urged to brace ourselves for a catastrophic disaster—whether a

hurricane or an imminent invasion—with this solemn piece of advice: *Manman pitit mare vant nou*. Mothers, bind your bellies. ♦

*Edwidge Danticat*, who has contributed to the magazine since 1999, is the author of the essay collection “*We’re Alone*.”

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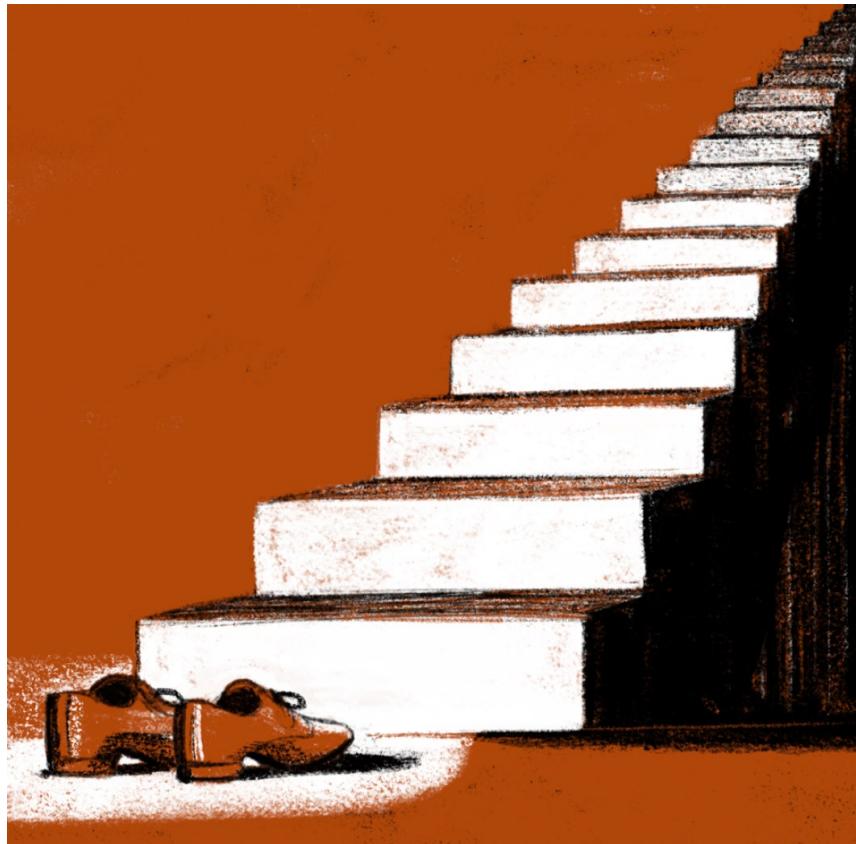
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## Up the Stairs

Granddad had apparently taken the bus quite a distance and walked very far that day, to reach a certain apartment building.

By [Shuang Xuetao](#)

July 1, 2024



*Illustration by Jillian Tamaki*

In fourth grade, I spent a summer living with my grandparents. Granddad would often recline in bed, his right leg cocked, and regale me with stories like an aging son of the manor. When he was about thirteen, he fled famine in Shandong and came to Liaoning Province. He was big for his age, which made his hunger all the more ferocious. “Whenever I tried to stand up straight,” he said, “I felt like someone was wringing my gut.” A shop owner noticed his physique and asked him to lift a hundred-pound bag of rice. “I managed to get it over my head. My heart felt ready to jump out of

my mouth.” The man hired him as a lackey at his grain store. Not only could Granddad finally eat his fill; he also quickly learned how to use an abacus, handle sales, keep accounts, and even take care of the shop owner’s children. “The only downside was that there were so many of them. There wasn’t space for me. After closing each night, I took the doors down and threw some bedding over them.” When the People’s Liberation Army reached Shenyang, the shop was commandeered and turned into a people’s granary. The owner was now just another lackey, and Granddad was put in charge of him. “He was dead within a few years. I gave his wife two months of my wages. I never saw the family again.”

As Granddad told me this story, my eyes landed on a photo he kept on the sideboard. He’d been very handsome when he was young, with an aquiline nose that made his features particularly dashing.

Soon, Granddad was promoted to Grain Center Chief of Shenyang’s Tiexi district. Around this time, my grandma started selling fabric at the Tiexi Department Store. “She was an unforgettable sight, like a dancer,” Granddad said. (As he told me this story, Grandma was making us zhajiang noodles.) “No matter how much material you wanted, she’d cut it perfectly, not an inch more or less.” As model workers, the couple were taken on a tour of Hangzhou and Suzhou. The year after that, they got married, and over the next dozen years they had my uncle, my mother, and my aunt. Granddad became the chairman of the Tiexi Grain Bureau labor union, in charge of workers’ benefits and cultural activities. Everyone respected him, and he had no enemies.

Granddad spent his first year of retirement gardening. The following year, at the age of sixty-one, he had a heart attack. There were no warning signs. He didn’t drink, and rarely smoked. My mother found him stuck full of tubes at the hospital. The doctor said that his arteries were clogged, and he needed surgery; he had a one-in-ten chance of surviving. Despite being a staunch atheist, my mother knelt in the hospital corridor and prayed to the heavens:

“Please give me just a little more time with my father. Even ten years would be enough. By then his grandchildren will be in school, old enough to remember what he looks like. I’ll be a better daughter.” Granddad took a turn for the better that night, and he was conscious again by morning. The operation was a success. He emerged from the hospital looking more or less the same as when he entered it. The doctor said that he’d have to quit smoking, and to take extra care doing two things: using a squat toilet and going up the stairs.

The afternoon I finished my final exams in junior high, in the summer of 1999, my mother knocked on my door and came into my bedroom. She asked how my exams had gone. Terrible, I said, because I hated school, I hated exams, and I thought I’d probably gone off topic in my essay. My mother was very calm. She hadn’t come to pick a fight, she said. “Your Granddad died last week. I didn’t want to distract you from your exams. He had another heart attack.” It had been exactly ten years since his first one. “My heart is breaking.”

Granddad had apparently taken the bus quite a distance and walked very far that day, to reach a certain apartment building. My mother said no one in our family knew of this place, nor had we ever heard Granddad mention it. On the eighth floor of this building lived a woman who was also in her seventies. The elevator was broken. Step by step, Granddad climbed up seven flights of stairs and knocked on her door. According to the investigation that followed, the woman was shocked. She said it had been decades since she and Granddad had seen each other, but she knew who he was right away. He smiled, and looked like he was about to speak, but before he could get the first word out he crashed to her living-room floor, and a few seconds later stopped breathing. The woman was the only witness.

The investigation lasted more than a month. We learned from the report that she’d been a cashier at the grain store more than forty

years earlier. Not one person in my family wanted to know anything more about her. Around the time that I enrolled in high school, my mother told me that the investigation had ended. As I suspected, the woman had been telling the truth. Granddad climbed up the stairs, and then he died. That's all there was to it. ♦

*(Translated, from the Chinese, by Jeremy Tiang.)*

*Shuang Xuetao* has published six volumes of fiction. “*Rouge Street*,” a collection of novellas, was released in English in 2022.

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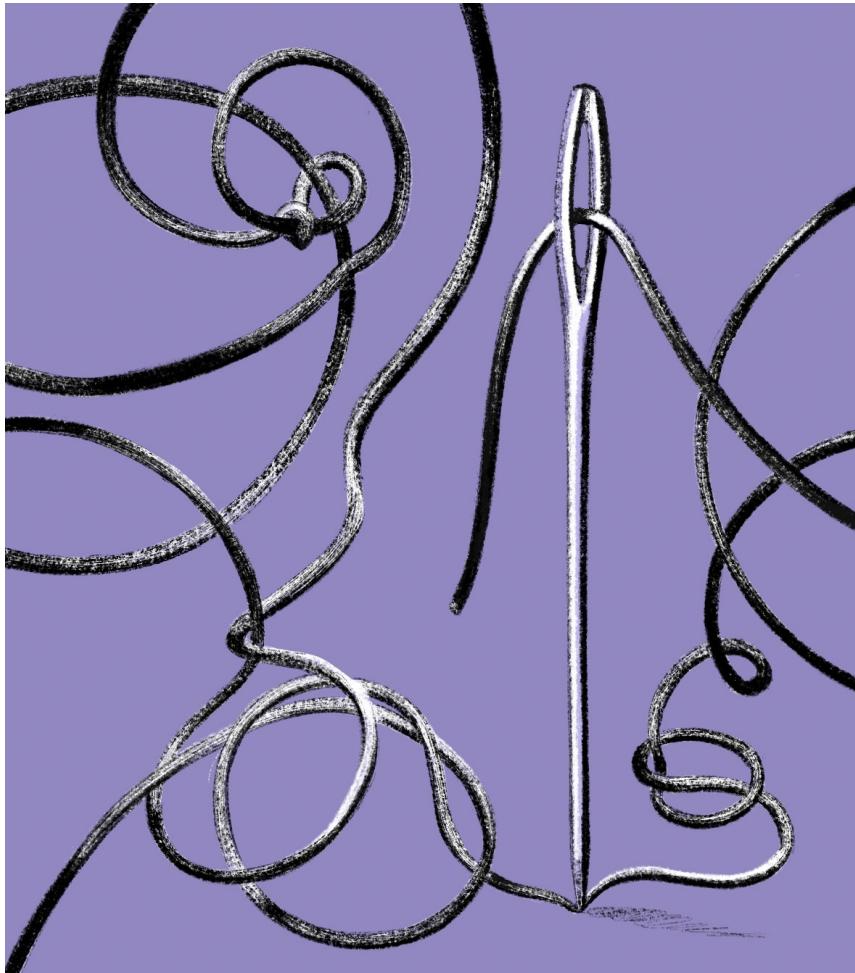
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## Lost Stories

I promised myself that I would not write memoir again; it was too strenuous, too costly, too harmful, no matter how cathartic it might be.

By [Donald Antrim](#)

July 1, 2024



*Illustration by Jillian Tamaki*

For a long time, when I was younger and she was alive, I told stories about my mother. The stories were funny, meant to be funny, made funny in the telling. I might say to you, “Jesus, I just got off the phone with my mother.”

“How is she?” you might say.

“She wore one of her outfits to the symphony, and now she’s distraught because no one talked to her,” I would answer.

“Outfits?” you’d ask.

“She’s a seamstress and a tailor,” I’d explain. “She calls the things she makes creations.”

From there I might describe, say, a gold jacket with floppy lapels and giant clown buttons. That would lead me to grievance and psychoanalysis: “She’s infuriating. She isolates herself from people, and her loneliness grows, and she wears these garments around town, and people shy away, and she doesn’t understand, and she’s traumatized. She does it again and again.”

I’d be traumatized myself. But I might get a laugh as I went on to describe her terrible haircuts, or the way she ate, or her big, round glasses, like a bug’s eyes—or, wait, it gets worse.

She’d been a horrible drunk, but had nonetheless got sober, a testament to her strength and the Twelve Steps. I’d been a part of all that—flying from here to there, Florida, New York, North Carolina, getting her on and off the ward in Miami, cooking for her in her trashed duplex when she hadn’t eaten for a week or two, picking up cat shit, wishing her well as she went out the door for another A.A. meeting, another start.

Was I, in telling these stories, somehow protecting myself from her? Or was this my way of healing wounds, or even of keeping her at a distance?

I told stories of her drinking. I told about our fights. I would riff on her creepy New Age friends in the mountains outside Asheville, North Carolina, on her belief in her own afterlife, on the kimono that she’d sewn—and sewn well—and then draped with ribbons

and hanging things, stuffed birds and little cats and various personal totems.

Then, in 2000, she died, and soon after that I began to tell those stories in the pages of this magazine.

At first, it was awful. The anxiety kept coming. I had a hard time writing, because I saw myself as a betrayer. I worked at memory, and made it a point to be accurate in my reporting. Under revision, the stories that I'd told for so long—on first dates, or long car rides, or while sitting at home, talking on the phone—seemed to expand, to grow in detail, to become more interconnected and complex and ambiguous in relation to the judgments I'd heaped on her in the form of laughter. Memoir is a responsibility, a set of responsibilities, not only to the people represented in the writing but to the characters those people become in a narrative. My mother, as a character, became a more serious figure as time went on; I recognized that she'd had a work ethic, that she'd been desperately lonely, and sad.

I told the stories less and less, and I promised myself that I would not write memoir again; it was too strenuous, too costly, too harmful, no matter how cathartic it might be. I had breakdowns and hospitalizations, which I attributed in part to the act of writing memoir, and which led, counterintuitively, to more memoir, a short work on suicide, itself a set of stories that I'd already told. This time, I wrote not about my mother's failings but about my own.

These days, I refer to my mother in conversation, but I never tell the stories that I used to tell, before I began writing them down. I certainly never talk about my mother's haircuts, or her manner of eating, or her crazy kimono. Nor do I quietly speak to her, as I did in the year after her death. I don't push her away. She just doesn't come around. All those old stories, those little conversations, were lost to me at the moment that I published them. I've learned by now that the act of publishing is its own kind of ending, and, with

each publication, my mother has seemed to recede further, to, as it were, drift off into some distant past. I am getting older.

It's not that I don't miss her. I miss her more every day. ♦

*Donald Antrim is the author of “One Friday in April: A Story of Suicide and Survival.”*

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[Love & Heartbreak](#)

## Diorama of Love

Love is wherever love is felt, and with love being a complete statement, well, that's enough.

By [Addie Citchens](#)

July 1, 2024



*Illustration by Jillian Tamaki*

I don't know shit about love. It's the eighties and no one is doing it right, especially not my parents, or anyone else's that I know. The women in church are pressed flat by love's duties, its labor; the men, outwardly stern and inwardly duplicitous, eye anything that jiggles under a skirt. These relationships end in heartbreak, in death or divorce. This is the one-sided love my grandmother taught my mother, the love her mother taught her. It is the type of love women trade their youth and their goals to sustain. When you ask these

women about love, their mouths speak of fulfillment, but their eyes say: this is a raw deal.

I don't know shit about love. I am a twenty-year-old undergrad, infinitely more familiar with books than with the bodies of others. He is a big, brown, smiling country boy with a gap in his teeth. And although my mama warns me that the gap means that he is a liar before the living God, I trust him completely. Because, though I am certainly aware by then that people cheat on each other, I am not aware that someone who can make every cell in your body buzz in concert can also arouse that same energy in another. And another. This is when I skip love and go straight to heartbreak.

I don't know shit about love. While my friends are starting families, I am moving from state to state, collecting experiences and trying to find myself. Romantic relationships are like TV shows that I watch until an episode turns me off, making me never want to think about them again. I develop a habit of sampling folk, rather than boxing them up, even when I meet a pretty, big-legged Texan lady with a sweet smile, a huge laugh, and hugs that make me feel hugged all day. I think I am learning to love, but in fact I am learning to break a heart.

I don't know shit about love. Neither does he, but he has a beautiful face and a sad story. In his yard, there is an orange tree, bowed by ripening fruit. I'm excited for the tang of fruit, for the happily ever after. When we move in together, we make a home out of things given to us by his grandmother and my mother, who meet only via phone, where they bond over a shared devotion to Jesus and their hopes for our future. There is delight when I become pregnant. If I know nothing about love, surely growing a baby will teach me. But I miscarry right after Christmas, and we break up on Valentine's Day.

I don't know shit about love. But I am learning, both from what I devour and from what I spit out. I reconnect with someone from

college. After the formalities, we share a splendid evening, and, as we cruise around later looking for something to eat, they say that they love me. Although at that exact moment I feel the same thing, I say, “You don’t love me. You love what we did.” They go on to haltingly explain that love is wherever love is felt, and with love being a complete statement, well, that’s enough. The idea seems revolutionary. A diorama of love, hold the heartbreak.

I don’t know shit about love, but I find a little in the night I spend with an exquisite Honduran, who shows me that the name Addie can sound like a supplication, and that making love should feel that way, too. I find some in the evening with a firefighter I have crushed on for years, an encounter that makes me realize my imperfections are perfect landing spots for kisses. A delightful bit of love on the day a colleague and I skip work and prove that love should break beds, not hearts.

I am in love, and this love is defined not by its duration but by its intent. There is love wherever there is a shared goal to create it. Other things I learn: love should be planned and spontaneous. It is not possession. It is always temporary. I’ve also come to know that love is all around me. It’s in the person whose arm I grip on a turbulent flight. Or in the stranger who asks to borrow a pen before we end up sharing life stories. Or in anyone who sees me just at the moment when I need to be seen. All that is love, too. ♦

*Addie Citchens has contributed to The Paris Review and The Oxford American, among other publications.*

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## Goings On

- **A Little Bit of Everything at Lincoln Center’s “Summer for the City”**

Also: Nancy Pelosi vs. A.O.C. in “N/A,” the observant folk of Cassandra Jenkins, Catherine Breillat’s “Last Summer,” and more.

- **Lyle Ashton Harris’s Scrapbooks of the Self**

By Vince Aletti | The artist’s knotty, intimate archive is on display at the Queens Museum.

[Goings On](#)

## A Little Bit of Everything at Lincoln Center’s “Summer for the City”

*Also: Nancy Pelosi vs. A.O.C. in “N/A,” the observant folk of Cassandra Jenkins, Catherine Breillat’s “Last Summer,” and more.*

*June 28, 2024*

### **Marina Harss**

*Harss has written about dance for Goings On since 2004.*

*You’re reading the Goings On newsletter, a guide to what we’re watching, listening to, and doing this week. **Sign up to receive it in your in-box.***

**You can’t miss it.** As you approach Lincoln Center, a large metal frame fills the plaza, around which rise three of the center’s stately theatres, homes to ballet, opera, and symphonic music. Above the familiar fountain hangs a ten-foot disco ball. This is the Dance Floor, the centerpiece of Lincoln Center’s **“Summer for the City”** festival, now in its third year.

The initiative, which fills the gap left by the much lamented Lincoln Center Festival and Mostly Mozart Festival, is of the little-bit-of-everything variety. As Shanta Thake, the center’s chief artistic officer, said recently, “we believe that more is better.” Accordingly, [the busy schedule](#) includes almost nightly dance parties on the plaza, along with film screenings, poetry readings, civically minded discussions, augmented-reality experiences, musical performances, and more, spread across the complex’s open and indoor spaces. The vast majority of events are free; select indoor performances are pay-what-you-wish.

In place of the weeks-long Mostly Mozart Festival, the newly named **Festival Orchestra**, led by the incoming music director Jonathon Heyward, offers seven programs (July 20-Aug. 10), at David Geffen Hall. These contain everything from works by Haydn and Mendelssohn—and some Mozart!—to “City of Floating Sounds,” a tech-driven, interactive symphony by Huang Ruo.



*Performers in “Avimukta,” Ashwini Ramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy (left to right).*

*Photograph by Steven Pisano*

And there is dance—and not just the participatory kind that goes on under the disco ball. As part of “India Week” (July 10-14), the Minneapolis-based bharata-natyam company **Ragamala Dance** presents the spare, elegant “Avimukta: Where the Seeker Meets the Sacred,” composed of stylized movements related to rituals of death and mourning (Damrosch Park, July 10). The following two evenings, the British dancer and choreographer **Aakash Odedra**, a kathak virtuoso, performs a collaboration with the Chinese contemporary dancer **Hu Shenyuan**, the duet “Samsara” (Rose Theatre, July 11-12). Imagine a fluid, constantly evolving conversation between contrasting movement languages.

Later, **Urban Bush Women**, based in Brooklyn, presents a site-specific dance-theatre work inspired by African American histories (Hearst Plaza, July 28 and Aug. 4). And the **BAAND Together Dance Festival**, now mercifully moved to the air-conditioned

space of the David H. Koch Theatre, returns (July 30-Aug. 3). Five major New York companies—Ballet Hispánico, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, American Ballet Theatre, New York City Ballet, and Dance Theatre of Harlem—take turns in programs featuring works by William Forsythe, George Balanchine, Hans van Manen, Brady Farrar, and Annabelle Lopez Ochoa. That's something to look forward to.

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## About Town

### Folk

When the singer-songwriter **Cassandra Jenkins** was young, her father bought a bus so that their family band could tour little folk festivals across the country. After design school, Jenkins ran the gamut of small-time groups, from surf rock, synth pop, and emo to playing at a honky-tonk bar. In 2019, she was set to join David Berman's Purple Mountains project on tour when he took his own life, and her breathtaking breakthrough album, "An Overview on Phenomenal Nature," is possessed by that loss and by the epiphanies produced in tragedy's wake, channelling its revelations into hushed, observant folk songs. Reinvigorated by the LP's success, Jenkins seems to fully unclench on her new album, "My Light, My Destroyer," its wider-ranging sonic palette nodding subtly to a roving musical journey.—*Sheldon Pearce (Public Records; July 11.)*

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### Classical

Nothing welcomes you to Tanglewood quite like Beethoven. The first-ever concert of the Massachusetts festival, in August of 1937, was an all-Beethoven program; this summer, the **Boston Symphony Orchestra** kicks off the season in the same fashion. The opening concert includes the spirited Violin Concerto in D Major, performed by the Grammy winner Gil Shaham, and the epochal “Eroica” Symphony, originally dedicated to Napoleon, before Beethoven came to his senses.—*Jane Bua (Tanglewood, Lenox, Mass.; July 5.)*

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## Theatre



*Photograph by Daniel Rader*

From the contrast between Nancy Pelosi’s bubble-gum-pink suit and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s black slacks to the slash in its title, “**N/A**” emphasizes the divide between the first female Speaker of the House (played by Holland Taylor) and the youngest U.S. congresswoman ever elected (a diamond-sharp Ana Villafañe). The playwright, Mario Correa, ably exploits their differences in age, background, and political tactics for zingers, but he confines the pair to repartee for almost the whole show, which spans the four years between A.O.C.’s 2018 Democratic-primary upset and Pelosi’s announcement, after the 2022 midterms, that she would not seek a leadership role in the next Congress. Despite excellent performances and a sleek production (directed by the Tony-winning

Diane Paulus), viewers may wish for, as with Congress itself, less talk and more action.—*Dan Stahl* (*Mitzi E. Newhouse; through Aug. 4.*)

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## Dance

**The Royal Ballet**, from England, and Jacob's Pillow, in the Berkshires, two august institutions with roots dating to the nineteen-thirties, have never fully intersected until now. To mark the occasion, the Royal is spreading its festival début across both of the Pillow's stages, indoor and outdoor. The programming, alas, isn't quite as exciting. The company brings Pam Tanowitz's new "Secret Things," not yet seen on these shores, and also a world première by Wayne McGregor, but otherwise it presents samplers heavy on staple solos and pas de deux, clipped from classics for galas and touring. Still, this is the Royal, and the dancers will shine.—*Brian Seibert* (*Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, Becket, Mass.; July 3-7.*)

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## Art



"Tourism: Las Vegas/First View," 1984.

*Art work by Laurie Simmons / Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery*

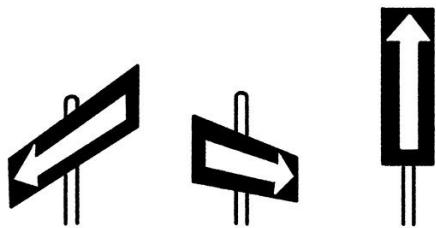
The beautiful, cool, intellectual, and visual atmosphere that fills the air at the outstanding show “**Tabula Rasa**” is due to the curator Steven Henry’s deep knowledge and understanding of conceptual art as it relates to photography, and to language. The exhibition takes its title from the late artist Sarah Charlesworth, and her early exploration of the historical value of fact-based images. It’s a wonderful opportunity to see the work of some members of the Pictures Generation—artists who, in the nineteen-seventies, questioned not only art’s “expressiveness” but its very function—and those who came after. Of special note are Joseph Kosuth’s fascinating studies of how text itself is an image, James Welling’s masterly and lyrical dissection of the print, Mike Kelley’s concept of home, Glenn Ligon’s examination of photographic production, and Laurie Simmons’s model who lives in a “Taxi Driver”-inspired world.—*Hilton Als (Paula Cooper; through July 26.)*

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## Movies

With her new film, “**Last Summer**,” the French director Catherine Breillat—whose career, launched in 1976, has been centered on the dangers and pleasures of forbidden desire—displays the destructive furies at the heart of family life. Anne (Léa Drucker), a lawyer and a mother of two young girls who is married to a businessman, has an affair with her seventeen-year-old stepson, Théo (Samuel Kircher). It’s more than a transgression—it’s a crime, and the maneuvers by which Anne fights to save both her marriage and her reputation have a mortal ferocity that the callow yet intrepid Théo, with his own demands and schemes, matches step for step. The movie’s clashes of irresponsible, irreconcilable passions reach a fearsome pitch—yet the terrifying silences of ironclad secrets shriek loudest of all.—*Richard Brody (In theatrical release.)*

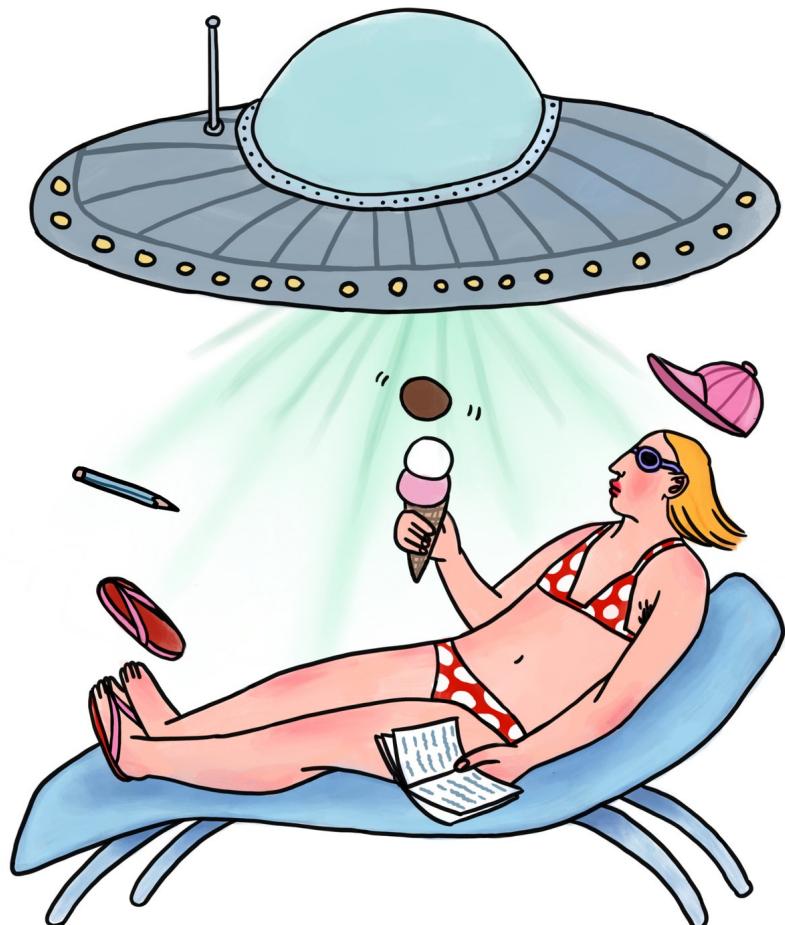
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## Pick Three

*The critic Jennifer Wilson on vacation-gone-wrong novels.*

Summer makes me sweat. There is too much pressure to enjoy it. But I realized that the season and all its expectations—softball games, pool parties, trips—grated on me only when I found myself recommending “beach reads” about vacations doomed to disappoint.



*Illustration by Maisie Cowell*

**1. “The Diver’s Clothes Lie Empty”** (2015), by Vendela Vida, begins mid-flight. On a plane to Casablanca, an American is flooded with hot memories of summers past—kissing a boy who smelled of sunscreen on a hammock, an interlude in Dubrovnik. Once in Morocco, though, her wallet and passport are stolen. To anyone hoping that travel will turn them into a new person, this novel warns: Be careful what you wish for.

**2.** In Katie Kitamura’s “**A Separation**” (2017), a woman travels, off-season, to Greece to find her estranged husband, like the Odyssey in reverse. These days, men no longer had “a sea to roam,” she thinks. “It was only on the shores of infidelity that they achieved a little privacy, a little inner life”—assuming, that is, he’s still alive.

**3.** In Marie NDiaye’s “**That Time of Year**” (2020), a Parisian family lingers in a French resort town after summer is over. It’s just a couple extra days, they think. No harm done, until the morning when the husband finds that his wife and child are missing. All of us have overstayed our welcome at some point, in a place, in a relationship. This novel is at once a social critique about the leisure class and a devastating meditation on why it’s so hard to leave the places (and people) that help us forget who we were before we came to their shores.

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### P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- Tracking a joke from “Golden Girls” to “Glee”
  - Chip nation
  - A sheep’s sneezes
- 

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## Lyle Ashton Harris's Scrapbooks of the Self

The artist's knotty, intimate archive is on display at the Queens Museum.

By [Vince Aletti](#)

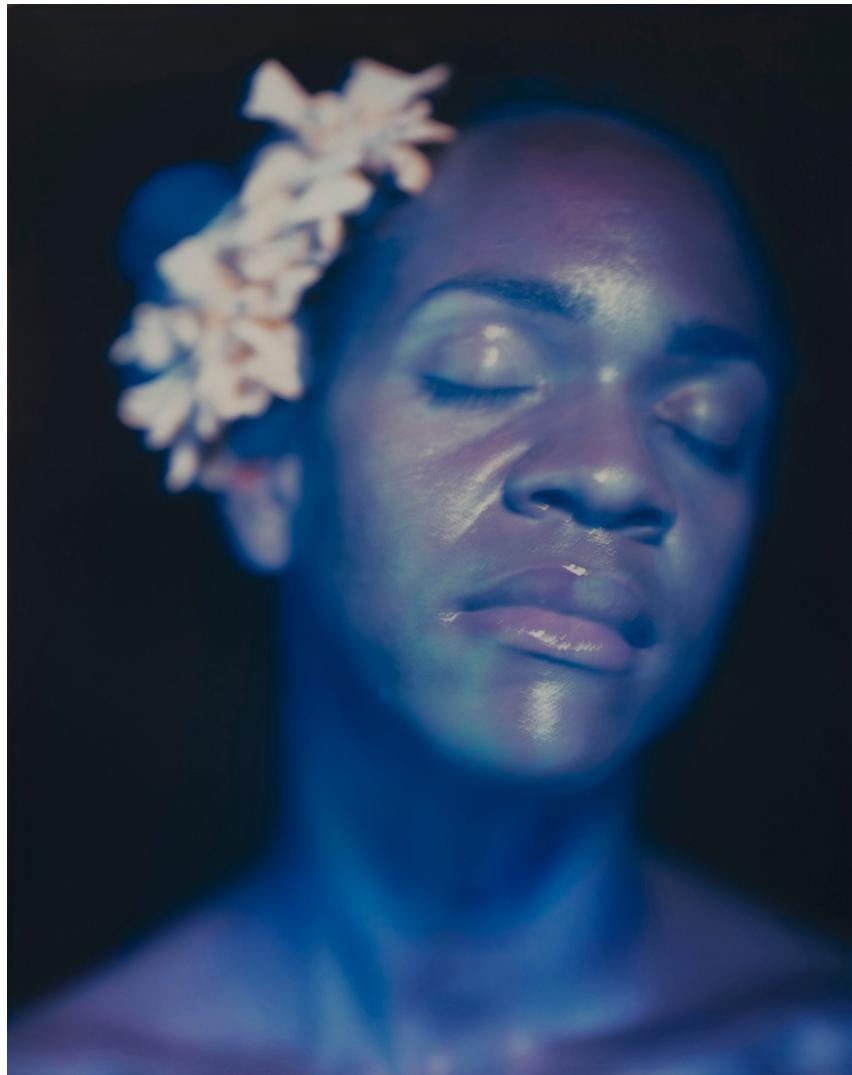
June 8, 2024



*“Zamble at Land’s End #2,” 2018.  
Photographs by Lyle Ashton Harris*

The title of Lyle Ashton Harris's current exhibition at the Queens Museum, “Our First and Last Love,” is an abbreviated version of a fortune-cookie message: our first and last love is . . . self-love. The

original strip of paper is on display in the show, pasted into a notebook and presented in a vitrine. Harris, a fifty-nine-year-old Black and queer artist, rejects the notion that his work is narcissistic; “self-love,” he says in the show’s catalogue, “sustained me through acts of resistance” in places where same-sex relationships were still against the law. Yet viewers won’t be surprised to find that Harris is the (not always recognizable) subject of much of the photography, assemblage, video, and installation pieces that are being showcased. From the beginning, he’s used his body like a mannequin—a figure to be manipulated, dressed up, and stripped naked. Slipping easily between genders, and landing at some thrilling place where identity is at its most fluid, Harris is one of the wittiest and busiest heirs to an outlaw avant-garde that includes Lucas Samaras, Pierre Molinier, and Claude Cahun.



“Billie Dreaming in Blue,” 2021.

Harris, who has taught in the U.S. and abroad for much of his postgrad life, can talk like an academic (“There was a desire to find that subject position . . . as well as the desire to lay claim to a space of greater visibility and agency,” he says in a collection of his work from 2017). Yet he makes art from a much knottier and more intimate place. The new show is a survey skewed toward a recent series of photo-based collages called “Shadow Works” but featuring pieces in a similar vein from throughout his career (the earliest works on display are dated 1987). Each of the “Shadow Works” features a pair of scrapbook-like compilations framed by mats of richly patterned Ghanaian fabric. Often, the collages are seen as if through a red gel that gives everything a lurid aspect, like the bulletin board in a sex club—or in Hell. Placed here and there on the fabric are cowrie shells, shards of pottery, or small bundles of Harris’s clipped dreadlocks, giving the pieces the feel of votive offerings, at once sacred and profane. Images repeat from piece to piece, like the refrain in a song, haunting but free-floating and difficult to interpret. The “Shadow Works” are mood pieces, dreams—sometimes nightmares—but not tracts.



“Untitled (Red Shadow),” 2017.

The exhibition's catalogue includes an appendix of a hundred and nine separate elements of the “Shadow Works” collages, each annotated, some by Harris himself, who remembers when and where he made or acquired a particular image. Some of the notes read like diary entries describing brief encounters, romantic hookups, and first connections with new friends. In between these more personal notations, Harris includes news clippings and magazine covers about [Abu Ghraib](#), the Pulse night-club massacre, a police shooting caught on camera, a Ta-Nehisi Coates portrait commission, a Jack Pierson show announcement, and a postcard of Warhol’s Liz. Detailing the contents of the “Shadow Works” collages doesn’t really demystify them, but it does allow us access to a certain slice of Harris’s brain—and to the obsessiveness involved in inventorying it all.



*“Succession,” 2020.  
Photograph by Lyle Ashton Harris*



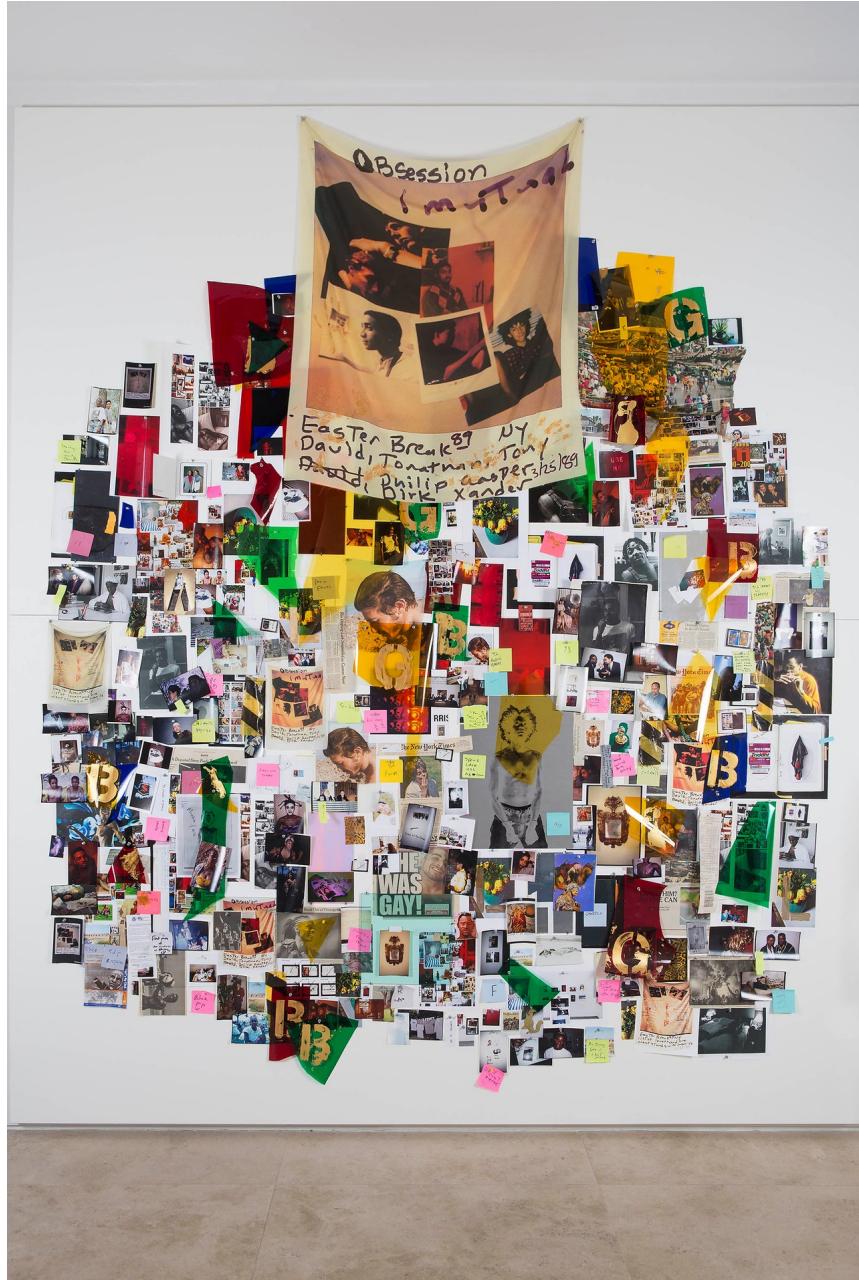
*“Migration Times,” 2020.*

Even more of this collected material (most identified as “artist’s ephemera”) is laid out in several vitrines and on bulletin boards dotting the show. (For fellow-obsessives, there are also catalogue appendixes with details for two of the largest boards.) Outside the more concentrated wall works, all this printed matter may not be especially enlightening, but it gives Harris’s show a Pop aura that

he grounds in an utterly idiosyncratic Black aesthetic, as funky as it is sophisticated. Having spent his childhood partly in Tanzania, and seven additional years in Ghana, Harris possesses a sensitivity to and an understanding of African art and culture in all its variety that complicates and enriches his work immensely. It's not a matter of "authenticity"; it's about depth, flair, and a sense of cultural continuity.

Much of the raw material in the Queens show is included in Harris's 2017 book, "[Today I Shall Judge Nothing That Occurs](#)," a compendium of what Harris calls the Ektachrome Archive, a trove of memorabilia that formed the basis of his multimedia installation in the 2017 Whitney Biennial. (I contributed a brief essay to the volume.) At the end of that book, there's a lively conversation between Harris and his brother Thomas Allen Harris, in the course of which Lyle says, "All of my work privileges subjectivity, as opposed to thinking that one's personal experience, one's subjectivity, can be left in the margins." Subjectivity isn't left in the margins at the Queens Museum, but it's rarely as center stage as it is in a 2016 two-channel video piece excerpted from the Biennial and labelled "Untitled (For Tommy)," after Harris's onetime partner and longtime collaborator, Tommy Gear. One monitor shows a view of Harris sprawled on a daybed and talking on the phone. The other monitor, smaller and just below, looks into a bathroom with a shower stall behind a pink curtain; the shower is running and Roberta Flack's "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" is playing on repeat. At one point, Harris emerges naked from the shower, towels off, and walks offscreen, but in the time I watched the footage he never stopped chatting. The video is seventy-seven minutes long. Subjectivity prompts subjectivity. After what felt like eavesdropping on a lovelorn lament, I walked away but couldn't avoid the insinuating intimacy of Harris's voice —the only sound in the galleries besides Roberta Flack's. For other viewers, this might prove as fascinating as a daytime soap opera. I wanted to turn it off.

I took refuge in the exhibition's last room, where another video, a 2008 installation piece, "Untitled (Cape Coast)," made in Ghana, was projected on large, loose panels of silk organza that emphasized the work's breezy sensuality. The images on display pick up on that mood. Over an establishing shot of surf surging up a wide, busy beach, Harris layers swaying palm fronds, rustling trees, and handsome young men skating, lounging, and running toward us. A sequence shot from a car puts us in the position of a tourist, but there's something at once casual and alert here that makes it feel far from a hit-and-run. "Cape Coast" is a pleasure cruise and a love letter—a sweet way to close a show as tender and touching as it is raspingly raw.



“Obsessão II,” 2017.

Vince Aletti is a photography critic and the author of “*Issues: A History of Photography in Fashion Magazines*.”

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# The Talk of the Town

- **Finally, a Leap Forward on Immigration Policy**

By Jonathan Blitzer | President Biden has offered help to undocumented spouses of U.S. citizens, in the most consequential act of immigration relief in more than a decade.

- **Alan Braufman's Loft-Jazz Séance**

By Nick Paumgarten | The composer and saxophonist tours what remains of the clubs and run-down apartments (now delis and clothing stores) of the downtown scene of the seventies.

- **Steve McQueen Is an Art Doer**

By Victoria Uren | In town for a Dia Beacon installation, the visual artist and “12 Years a Slave” director commuted five hours each day and expounded on the virtues of doing stuff instead of thinking about doing stuff.

- **How to Survive Lions and Bears and Racism in Nature**

By Mark Yarm | Rae Wynn-Grant, the host of “Wild Kingdom” and author of “Wild Life,” recounts the times she nearly died.

- **High-Roller Presidential Donor Perks**

By Brendan Loper | Give now to get your name on the wing of a fighter jet!

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## Finally, a Leap Forward on Immigration Policy

President Biden has offered help to undocumented spouses of U.S. citizens, in the most consequential act of immigration relief in more than a decade.

By [Jonathan Blitzer](#)

June 30, 2024



The American immigration system has been called many unsavory things, most of them deserved. It was last reformed thirty-four years ago. What has emerged in the decades since is a welter of backlogs, visa shortages, piecemeal enforcement measures, and every manner of bureaucratic complexity. Ordinary people, trying to work and take care of their families, are often forced into surreal scenarios. Take the 1.1 million people in this country who are married to U.S. citizens but are undocumented themselves. You might assume that it would be relatively straightforward for them to get on firm legal footing. In fact, the process is quite complicated. Anyone who first entered the United States illegally must travel to another country for a visa interview at a U.S. Embassy or consulate. But if she has lived in the United States for more than a year without papers, as some eleven million people have, a law in place since the nineteen-nineties bars her from reëntering the country for up to a decade. That could mean, in effect, getting stranded outside the U.S., despite having a partner, possibly children, and a livelihood here. She can get a waiver permitting her to remain in the U.S. if she can prove that her prolonged absence would cause “extreme hardship” for certain members of her family. But, because of processing delays, getting the waiver can now take three and a half years.

A couple of weeks ago, at the White House, President Joe Biden announced the most consequential act of immigration relief in more than a decade. He gave roughly half a million undocumented spouses of citizens a path to permanent legal status, on the condition that they have lived here since at least 2014 and pass a criminal-background check. “I refuse to believe that to secure our border we have to walk away from being American,” Biden said. “The Statue of Liberty is not some relic of American history.”

The measure, known as parole in place, is part of a broader executive power dating from the early nineteen-fifties, which every

President since then has exercised to grant special protection to particular categories of people. Biden has made liberal use of his parole authority, allowing more than a million people to enter the country in the past three years, about a quarter of whom have been displaced Ukrainians and Afghans. Republicans have attacked Biden for using this power too broadly, and there's no question that the Administration has been creative. Last year, to reduce unauthorized crossings at the southern border, the Department of Homeland Security developed a parole program that has admitted more than four hundred thousand Venezuelans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Cubans who had financial sponsors in the United States. Conservative state attorneys general filed a lawsuit to block the program, but in March it was dismissed in a federal district court. There will almost certainly be legal challenges to Biden's latest policy, too.

Some Administration officials who knew about the parole-in-place policy were unsure that the President would go through with it until they received an invitation to the announcement. He has spent much of the past year charting a resolutely centrist course as views on immigration have hardened among Democrats and Republicans alike. Two weeks earlier, Biden had issued an executive proclamation curtailing asylum at the southern border. This followed the failure of a Senate bill to restrict asylum, which Republicans abandoned under pressure from Donald Trump. Biden called the lawmakers "most pathetic" and "petty." To reinforce his point—that he was pragmatic, his opponents cynical—the President made his asylum proclamation harsher than the Senate bill.

The problem for Biden was that his efforts still weren't registering with the electorate. Polls show that voters consider immigration to be one of the most serious problems facing the country, and they now trust Republicans more than Democrats to handle the situation. They appear to have forgotten the chaos and the anguish

of the Trump era, from the separation of families at the border to a travel ban denying entry to anyone from seven Muslim-majority countries.

Earlier this year, the polling firm Equis turned to a question that has been increasingly troubling Democrats: Why are so many Latinos, once a fairly dependable bloc of Democratic support, reporting that they prefer Trump and the Republicans to Biden and the Democrats on immigration policy? In one subset of results, Latinos in battleground states said that they were more concerned about Democrats’ “broken promises” than they were about Republicans’ “extreme measures.” Those findings reinforce the fact that the President, in trying to prove his enforcement bona fides at the border, hasn’t managed to communicate policy successes in other areas: he has increased legal immigration, restored a refugee program that was decimated by Trump, and reduced unnecessary immigration arrests in the interior of the country.

In addition, immigrants’-rights advocates have spent much of Biden’s Presidency trying to persuade him to take actions known as affirmative relief—policies that he can adopt, without congressional approval, to provide direct aid to vulnerable populations. The model is Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or *DACA*, which President Barack Obama introduced in 2012, to shield from deportation some eight hundred thousand immigrants who had come to this country as young children. The program, which allowed them to work, study, and support their families, was an overwhelming success and has remained highly popular across the political spectrum. Trump tried to cancel it anyway, in 2017, and subsequent lawsuits brought by Republicans led a federal judge in the Southern District of Texas to block new applications.

Those who have been trying to make the case for Biden to do more went looking for a new policy, like *DACA*, that could have a significant impact and win broad political support. Another finding from the Equis poll was so striking, in this regard, that the pollsters

and several advocates shared it at meetings this spring with Biden's top advisers: some seventy per cent of voters supported an action that gave relief to undocumented spouses. The President cited this figure when he announced the plan and repeated a phrase that had the virtue of not only polling well but making sound moral sense: Democrats, he said, were "keeping families together."

The new policy is a rare bit of unqualified good news. But it is also a reminder of the paradox of U.S. immigration policy: each act of relief underlines everything that hasn't been done, both to make the system as a whole more equitable and to allow millions of people living in legal limbo a chance to settle their status once and for all. ♦



*Jonathan Blitzer* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. His first book, “*Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here*,” was published in January, 2024.

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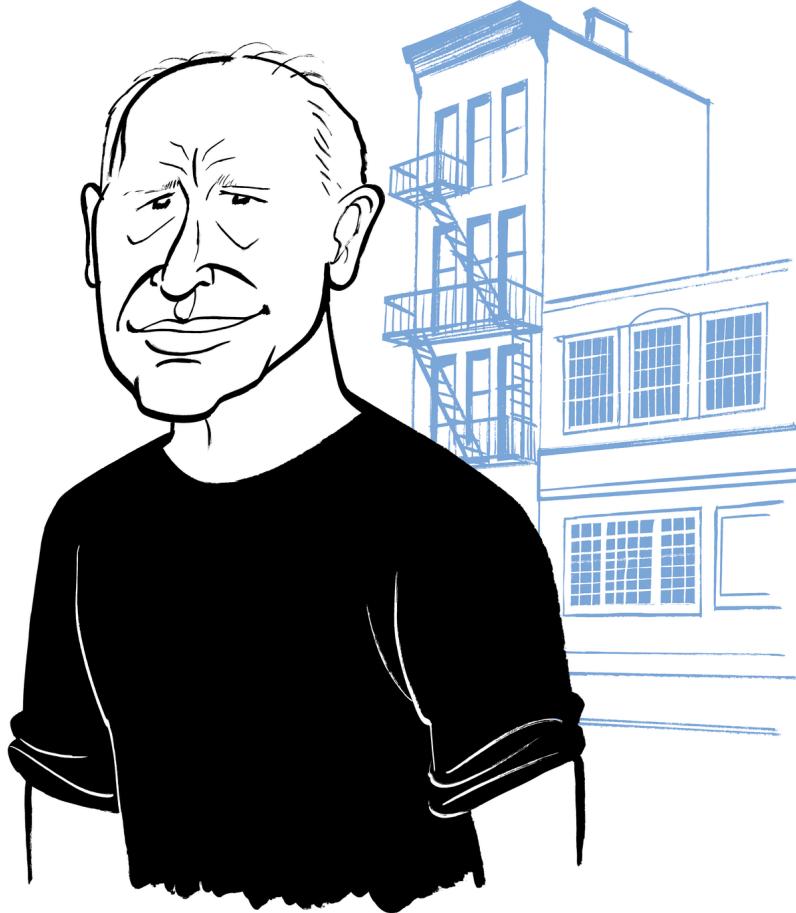
[Sentimental Journey](#)

## Alan Braufman's Loft-Jazz Séance

The composer and saxophonist tours what remains of the clubs and run-down apartments (now delis and clothing stores) of the downtown scene of the seventies.

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)

July 1, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

On a recent afternoon, Alan Braufman, the jazz composer and saxophonist, stopped outside what used to be his home, at 501 Canal Street, by the entrance to the Holland Tunnel. In 1973, when he was twenty-two, he and four other musicians moved into a

derelict building that was there at the time, to eat, sleep, practice, and perform; this was the loft in their iteration of loft jazz, a term for the style and the era of avant-garde music germinating in the then ghostly districts of downtown. “The two sax players lived on the second floor,” he said. “The pianist on three. Bassist on four. Drummer on five.”

The building didn’t have heat, or much of anything, although there was a pay phone in the entryway which, if you touched two wires together, spat out all the change. “You could call Europe for free,” Braufman said. The whole building cost them five hundred and fifty dollars a month, roughly equivalent to one night at the Arlo hotel, which now occupies the lot.

Braufman, at seventy-three, has an ex-marathoner’s skinny legs and a horn-blower’s bellowsy torso. He wore slim-cut jeans and a green pullover with the sleeves rolled up. He was accompanied by his nephew Nabil Ayers, a writer and a musician, who runs a couple of independent record labels, one of which, Valley of Search, he founded to issue, and reissue, his uncle’s work. “Valley of Search” was the name of Braufman’s first album, recorded at 501 Canal, in 1974. “Infinite Love Infinite Tears” was the name of the latest one, released in May and produced by Nabil.

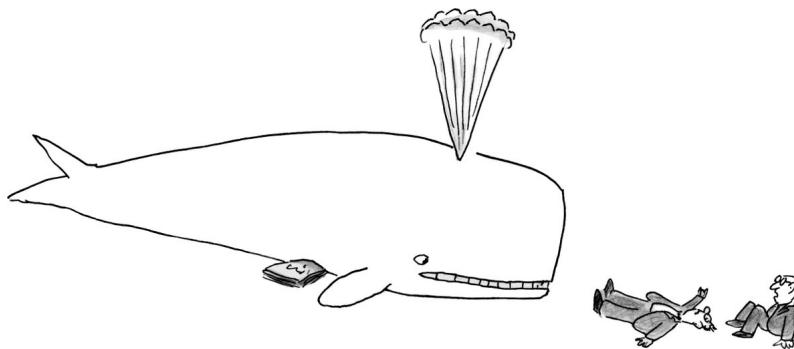
The night before, they’d been in Park Slope at the home of Nabil’s mother, Braufman’s older sister, to celebrate her birthday. The Braufmans grew up in Wantagh, on Long Island. When Braufman was in high school, he often stayed at his sister’s place in the West Village. He got a summer job as an usher at the Bleecker Street Cinema, which had a reciprocal deal with the Village Gate. Sometimes he’d practice his horn in the theatre after it had closed, then head to the club to catch the last set. Miles, Mingus, Roland Kirk, Roy Haynes.

Here’s how Nabil came to be: after high school and before Canal Street, Braufman attended the Berklee College of Music, in Boston,

and took a job at the Jazz Workshop and Paul's Mall, where he got to know the vibraphonist Roy Ayers. Later, Braufman and his sister, who was a ballet dancer, ran into Ayers at the Village Gate, and she decided that she wanted to have a baby with him and told him so. He said he was cool with that, as long as she'd be cool rearing the child without him. Deal. In his 2022 memoir, "My Life in the Sunshine," Nabil writes, "My mother insists that it was that brief—that easy." He also quotes his uncle: "'It was New York City in the early seventies.' "

Braufman, who later had two kids, treated his sister's son almost as his own. You could say that the nephew, in championing the uncle and urging him to record, has been returning the kindness.

Braufman had gone twenty-five years between albums. "I realize I got a lot of music left in me," he said.



S.GROSS

"Maybe we shouldn't have made 'Moby-Dick' into a pop-up book."  
Cartoon by Sam Gross

From Canal Street, Braufman set out on a loft-jazz tour of downtown. Nabil peeled off. At 77 Greene Street, Braufman summoned the memory of Ali's Alley, the home/club owned by Rashied Ali, Coltrane's drummer, which closed at the end of the seventies. (It's now an Ami Paris clothing shop.) "I was extremely shy," he said. "I'd come and listen. Sit in the corner."

Braufman kept going, past 2 Bond Street, the former site of the Ladies' Fort, a loft space set up by Joe Lee Wilson, and then 24

Bond, the former home of Studio Rivbea and the sax player Sam Rivers. (Robert De Niro's mother had owned the building; Robert Mapplethorpe used to have a place upstairs.)

He motored through the East Village to East Third Street and the site of Slugs' Saloon, which he described as "the most vital jazz club of the sixties." He'd been a regular there, too, as a teen. Sun Ra on Mondays, and then a headliner for six nights: McCoy Tyner, Pharoah Sanders. "My last time there, it was Tony Williams's band with John McLaughlin," he said. Slugs closed abruptly, in 1972, after the trumpeter Lee Morgan was shot and killed on the bandstand by his wife. Now it's a deli.

In 1992, Braufman moved to Salt Lake City. His wife didn't like New York. "It was like going to the minors—I had some developing to do," he said. "I'd move back here, but I can't afford it." He still gigs and teaches in Utah. "The kids there aren't so great at counting. They can't come in on the upbeat. My theory is it's baseball. With baseball, you get good at math. In New York, everyone played. In Utah, it's soccer, and every game is 1–0."

Fifty-plus years ago, David Lee, Jr.—the drummer for Roy Ayers—and a bunch of New Orleans players had a loft space in Chinatown, on Chatham Square, but Braufman, who used to go there to jam, couldn't find the building; the address had vanished. "Those sessions led to my first recording," he said. "And then Philip Glass asked me to be in his band. But I went back to Boston, to go to school. Probably a silly decision. If I could do it again, I'd always choose playing music instead of going to school." ♦

*An earlier version of this article misattributed a quote from Braufman.*



*Nick Paumgarten*, a staff writer, has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 2000.

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[Art Work](#)

## Steve McQueen Is an Art Doer

In town for a Dia Beacon installation, the visual artist and “12 Years a Slave” director commuted five hours each day and expounded on the virtues of doing stuff instead of thinking about doing stuff.

By [Victoria Uren](#)

July 1, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

The artist and filmmaker Steve McQueen sat down in the lobby of a hotel in Chelsea one recent Saturday evening. He was wearing a

double-breasted cotton jacket, indigo jeans, and unscuffed leather shoes. As usual, he was in heavy-rimmed spectacles with rounded edges, like Yves Saint Laurent's. It was McQueen's last evening in New York, and he was taking a breather between engagements. Soon, he would be on his way to dinner with friends. Earlier, he'd been upstate, at Dia Beacon, attending a benefit for the museum, which houses large-scale works by artists including Louise Bourgeois, Richard Serra, Donald Judd, and, currently, McQueen himself. The gathering had left him irritated. The vibe? "People texting in a movie theatre," he said. "Anything that can support the arts, for sure, I'm up for. But I wasn't really happy being there. When people are talking loudly in these art works, it's kind of, like, what's the point? But the food was fantastic."

McQueen, who was born in London to parents from Grenada and Trinidad, rose to prominence as a visual artist in the nineteen-nineties, but he is better known as the director of narrative films, such as "Shame" and the Oscar-winning "12 Years a Slave." He had been in New York for a week to prepare his Dia Beacon installation, "Bass," which consists of sixty light boxes set into the ceiling of the museum's basement, with a soundtrack of improvised jazz. The color of the light boxes changes slowly—almost imperceptibly.

The artist had been making the commute from the city to the museum each day, five hours of driving in all. "This trip has been work—W-O-R-K, in capitals," he said. On Monday, his "day off," he took meetings at the Dia in Chelsea, where he will have a follow-up show in September. That exhibit will include "Sunshine State," a video piece that combines footage of the surface of the sun with McQueen relating a violent encounter that his father, Philbert, experienced as a migrant fruit picker in Florida in the nineteen-fifties. The work, which has been shown across Europe, has appeared in the U.S. only once before. "It was shown in L.A.,"

he said. He dropped his voice to a stage whisper: “Does that count?”

McQueen speaks bluntly. If posed a question he doesn’t like, he scrunches his nose and frowns, and says, “No, not talking about that.” After New York, he would be stopping in London for a memorial service for his former agent Jenne Casarotto, and then returning to Amsterdam, where he lives, to finish “Blitz,” his upcoming film about wartime London, starring Saoirse Ronan. All the travel gives him time to catch up on movies. “I like romantic comedies,” he said. “‘The Apartment,’ or ‘The Proposal’—all things that make me laugh are fantastic. And ‘The Devil Wears Prada.’” Would he ever make his own romantic comedy? “No,” he said. “Maybe. No.”

McQueen’s career is expansive. He has made films about a hunger strike, sex addiction, and a female-led heist. He won the Turner Prize, given annually to a British visual artist, in 1999. His recent projects have included “Small Axe,” a film series about the Windrush generation, and “Occupied City,” a documentary he directed which is based on a book by his wife, Bianca Stigter, about Amsterdam under the Nazis. “I just do stuff. I don’t ‘transition,’ ” he said. “You can think about it all fucking day. Thinking gets you to the edge of the diving board. *Then* you have to fucking do it.”

In 1993, McQueen lived in New York for about three months. He was studying film at N.Y.U. It did not go well. “It was a rigid way of doing things,” he said. “And I didn’t fit in.” He lived with an aunt and uncle in Brooklyn and commuted. “Because my family didn’t have a lot of money, my parents and my uncle put money together to pay for my tuition.” One day, he told his mother he wanted to go home. “I was on the phone with my mum, lying on my bed, and having the sensation of tears coming out of your eyes and falling into your ears.” He traced a line above his cheekbone. “I will always remember that.”

A hotel concierge stopped by to deliver a copy of the *Times*. The concierge, an aspiring screenwriter named Shannon Owens, later mentioned that he used to watch McQueen's Oscar acceptance speech "all the time." Owens is working on a script about a failed writer inspired by the artists who used to live in the Chelsea Hotel. "My dream is to win an Oscar," he said. "When I see him, I see that's possible."

McQueen thanked him. "That was nice," he said. After a while, he launched into a lesson. "You know what, mate?" he said. "Let me tell you something. Go out with two guns blazing." ♦

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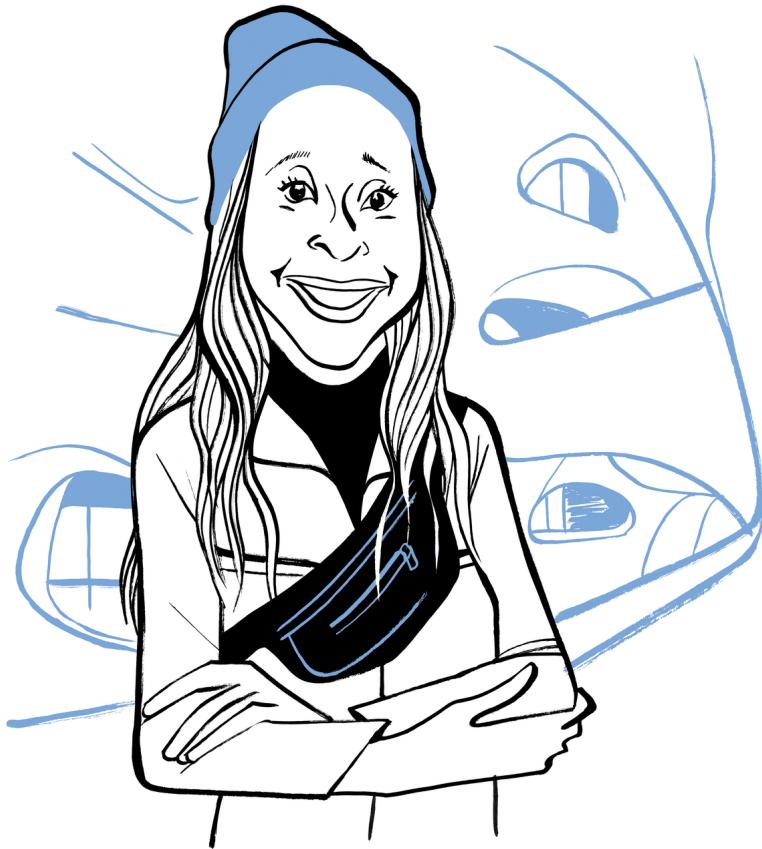
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## How to Survive Lions and Bears and Racism in Nature

Rae Wynn-Grant, the host of “Wild Kingdom” and author of “Wild Life,” recounts the times she nearly died.

By [Mark Yarm](#)

July 1, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

The large-carnivore ecologist Rae Wynn-Grant has had her share of nerve-racking experiences in the field. There was the time, on a college study-abroad program in southern Kenya, that she saw the silhouette of a lioness nosing around her tent. During the resulting long, sleepless night, Wynn-Grant (a nonreligious sort) prayed to God to spare her life. Several years later, in the Lake Tahoe Basin,

she was chased by a black bear and managed to hightail her way to a waiting all-terrain vehicle. An intern sped them to safety.

The other day, Wynn-Grant, who is thirty-eight and lives in Santa Barbara, was experiencing a more relatable case of nerves. She was visiting an old and, in her description, “toxic” workplace: the American Museum of Natural History, where she’d been a postdoctoral fellow (studying the movements of black bears in Nevada) for three years before she quit, in 2018. “I’m trying to tell myself it’s a normal anxiety,” she said as she walked down a second-floor hallway. She wore a rust-colored knit cap and a khaki jumpsuit, and she took a seat on a marble bench in a quiet corner. “I love this museum, I hate this museum,” she said. “I definitely experienced a lot of racism here.” In 2017, Wynn-Grant spoke to several news organizations about diversity issues at the institution. (At the time, she said, she and the astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson were the only full-time Black scientists there.) “I got in *soooo* much trouble,” she said. “They viewed the truth about the lack of diversity as slander.”

During the same period, Wynn-Grant, who possessed a lifelong dream of becoming a nature-show host, met with an executive at a major cable channel. “He said to me, ‘You’re obviously the real deal,’ ” she recalled. “‘But, Rae, you’ll never have a nature show. You’re not a white guy with a beard. Because that’s what America wants to see.’ And that’s how the meeting ended.” Nevertheless, six years later, Wynn-Grant landed a gig hosting NBC’s “Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom Protecting the Wild,” alongside the wildlife expert Peter Gros (a white guy with a mustache). The conservation-minded series recently began shooting Season 2.

The museum visit was Wynn-Grant’s first since she wrote a memoir, “*Wild Life: Finding My Purpose in an Untamed World*,” which covers her nearly two decades as an ecologist with a need to prove her daring. Early on, she writes, “I didn’t see people who looked like me—whether a Black person, a woman, or a Black

woman—represented as being stewards of the environment, being confident in and down and dirty with nature.”

En route to the museum’s Richard Gilder Center for Science, Education, and Innovation, a two-hundred-and-thirty-thousand-square-foot wing that opened last year, Wynn-Grant addressed the recent closure of two halls exhibiting Native American artifacts. (This was in compliance with federal regulations requiring that tribes approve the display of their cultural objects.) “It honestly suggests to me that this museum has changed a lot and has moved in the right direction,” she said.

Wynn-Grant gravitated to a display of live leaf-cutter ants, which reminded her of the time she took her then two-year-old daughter on a jaguar-tracking study in Panama. “She really fell in love with leaf-cutter ants,” Wynn-Grant said. “It’s this vibrant memory that I have.” In hindsight, she added, bringing her toddler “was an irresponsible choice”—accompanying them on the expedition was a married man with whom Wynn-Grant had been carrying on a yearlong affair. The relationship led to the dissolution of her marriage. (She subsequently settled down with the filmmaker Dave Seligman, a onetime museum colleague; they now have a blended family with four daughters.)

She headed for an old-school section of the museum: the Akeley Hall of African Mammals. Wynn-Grant, who spent many of her early years living in California, recounted what was likely her first visit to the museum, when she was about four years old. After a couple of long bus rides from her maternal grandparents’ place, in New Jersey, she and her family arrived at the ticket line. “I had to pee so bad,” she said. “I was running, running, running. And I peed my pants, like, right outside the public bathroom. We had to leave.”

She stopped to examine a diorama of a pride of lions. “My craziest adventures are behind me,” she said. “I’m doing ‘Wild Kingdom,’ where we kayak with great white sharks and all kinds of stuff. But I

don't feel like I need to prove how independent I am or how badass or how rugged I am anymore. I'm happy to travel with groups and, like, stay at a hotel."

Being pursued by a bear once was enough. "I always carry bear spray, but on that day I did not," she said. "I could have died." How would she categorize her near-death experience? "Horrible!" she said. "Zero out of ten. Do not recommend." ♦

*Mark Yarm is the author of "[Everybody Loves Our Town: An Oral History of Grunge](#)."*

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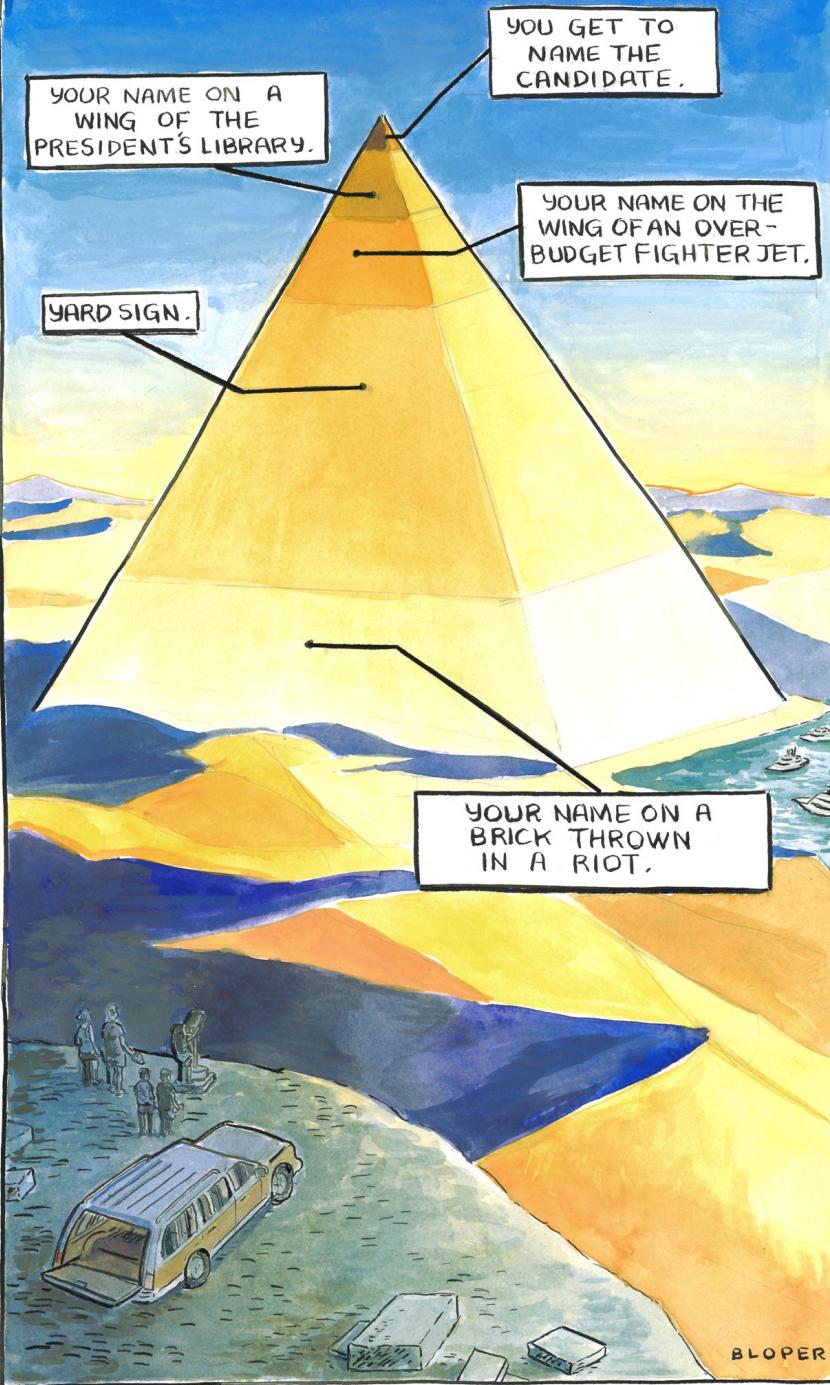
# High-Roller Presidential Donor Perks

*Give now to get your name on the wing of a fighter jet!*

By [Brendan Loper](#)

*July 1, 2024*

# PRESIDENTIAL DONOR TIERS



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# Reporting & Essays

- **Fitzcarraldo Editions Makes Challenging Literature Chic**

By Rebecca Mead | In ten years, the London publishing house has amassed devoted readers—and four writers with Nobel Prizes.

- **The Last Rave**

By Emily Witt | “If to dust we return / And we do / Why spend a minute / Choosing wallpaper.”

[Annals of Publishing](#)

## Fitzcarraldo Editions Makes Challenging Literature Chic

In ten years, the London publishing house has amassed devoted readers—and four writers with Nobel Prizes.

By [Rebecca Mead](#)

July 1, 2024



*Jacques Testard, the founder of the imprint, says that his mission is to publish work “perceived to be too difficult for the mainstream.”*

*Illustration by Alex Merto*

For nearly a year after Jennifer Croft, a translator, sent a submission to Jacques Testard, a publisher in London, in the

summer of 2015, the manuscript languished unread. Testard had launched Fitzcarraldo Editions the previous year, with the goal of creating a distinctive list of literary fiction and essays, many in translation. He was only thirty, and fiercely ambitious, but his publishing house was barely more than a one-man operation, and he fell behind on his reading. It wasn't until after the Brexit referendum of June, 2016, when U.K. citizens voted narrowly to leave the European Union, that Testard reviewed the text that Croft had sent him: a two-hundred-page extract from "Flights," an expansive novel first published in Polish, in 2007, by Olga Tokarczuk.

Testard, a French citizen who had moved with his family to the U.K. in childhood, hadn't been eligible to vote in the referendum. But, like many people in his social circle, he'd assumed that Britain would choose to remain part of Europe. Testard was shocked by the result, and horrified by its effective legitimization of hostile attitudes toward European-born residents of the U.K. Testard didn't feel personally vulnerable: he is effortlessly bilingual, and speaks English with the accent of London's educated, affluent, cosmopolitan class. But less privileged immigrants were made to feel insecure: "Go Home" graffiti appeared on British streets, and mothers observed speaking to their children in a foreign language were chided. Immigrants from Poland—who, after that country had joined the E.U., in 2004, had become the U.K.'s largest foreign-born cohort—were derided in the right-wing press as "Polish plumbers," job-stealers from Warsaw or Lodz who'd thrived by maintaining the homes of hapless Londoners.

Various British novelists, including John Lanchester and Rachel Cusk, had combatted this stereotype by including sensitive portrayals of Polish builders in books about life in the U.K. Testard, for his part, decided to add to the diversity of Polish voices in Britain by making Tokarczuk's work available in translation. Tokarczuk, who was born in 1962, and whose first novel, "The

Journey of the Book-People,” was published in her native country in 1993, had become one of Poland’s most heralded intellectuals, with a catalogue of genre-defying novels that draw on history and myth. Although Tokarczuk’s work had been translated into French, German, and several other European languages, none of her novels were in print in English in the U.K.

“Flights,” the book that Croft had partially translated, was an ideal choice for introducing Tokarczuk’s wide-ranging œuvre to the English-speaking world. Composed of fragments, the book contains different strands and stories that cross time and space. A mother and son disappear while vacationing on a Croatian island; the bereaved daughter of a formerly enslaved African seeks the return of his preserved body, which the Emperor of Austria has placed in a cabinet of curiosities. These narratives are interspersed with often whimsical essayistic excursions into the experience of modern travellers, who might fly from Irkutsk to Moscow in a continuous dawn, or buckle into an airplane seat alongside depleted members of a bachelor party, the cabin pungent with their “stench of sweat mixed with the remnants of arousal.” One comic passage in “Flights” pityingly notes the helpless vulnerability of the monoglot English speaker, for whom “all instructions, all the lyrics of the stupidest possible songs, all the menus, all the excruciating pamphlets—even the buttons in the lift!—are in their private language.” Testard loved Tokarczuk’s cosmopolitan storytelling, which offered a riposte to the narrow perspective of Britons who had voted for the closing of borders.

Testard struck a deal to publish “Flights” in 2017, and also commissioned Croft to translate Tokarczuk’s most recently completed work, “The Books of Jacob,” a historical novel about Jacob Frank, a Kabbalah scholar who led a messianic sect in the borderlands between Poland and Ukraine in the eighteenth century. In 2018, “Flights” won the International Booker Prize, Britain’s most important recognition for literature in translation, with the

prize's chair, Lisa Appignanesi, heralding Tokarczuk as "a writer of wonderful wit, imagination, and literary panache." Thanks to the Booker win, the author already had an eager readership in English when Fitzcarraldo Editions released that fall a noirish thriller by Tokarczuk, "Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead," translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones. That book has become Fitzcarraldo's best-selling title, with more than a hundred and fifty thousand copies purchased. In 2019, Tokarczuk won the Nobel Prize, an event that primed English-language readers for the formidable "Books of Jacob," which extends to nearly a thousand pages and appeared in English in 2021. To date, Fitzcarraldo has sold more than three hundred thousand copies of books by Tokarczuk. Four more translations from the author are in the pipeline.

I first encountered Fitzcarraldo Editions in the summer of 2017, while browsing in the London Review Bookshop, near the British Museum. I came across a slim paperback volume with a plain cover in International Klein Blue. In white lettering was a single-word title, "Pond," and the name of the author, Claire-Louise Bennett, along with the name of the publisher and its insignia (a bell inscribed in a circle). The aesthetic was alluringly reminiscent of the wares in a Parisian bookstore, down to the folding French flaps on the cover. I settled in a sunny spot in St. James's Park and nearly finished the book in one sitting, feeling that I had made a discovery. Behind the reticent cover unfolded an interlocked series of funny, peculiar short stories conveying the inner life of a reclusive young woman living in the Irish countryside. The subjects the narrator dilated on ranged from literature and "the essential brutality of love" to the inadvisability of postponing breakfast so late that her porridge strikes her as "a gloomy repast from the underworld." The book was plotless and meandering, but the over-all effect was one of delightful originality.

Having been first picked up by the Stinging Fly, a small press in Ireland, where Bennett, who comes from the southwest of England, has lived for the past two decades, “Pond” had been submitted unsuccessfully to several British publishers. “I remember getting various feedback about it, such as it needed more work—it needed a story, it needed more characters, all this kind of thing, which was not at all what it was about,” Bennett told me recently. Testard, however, refrained from suggesting that Bennett turn an odd, beguiling book into something more immediately accessible, and published it, in 2015, as it was. “Pond” was rapturously reviewed, and was short-listed for the International Dylan Thomas Prize, for young authors. The book is now in its thirteenth printing. “Jacques doesn’t just chase after stuff that might be trending, or that he thinks might really catch fire,” Bennett explained. “He’s directed by what he’s really into.”

What Testard is really into is chronicled by Fitzcarraldo’s catalogue, which, as the house prepares to celebrate its tenth anniversary, includes more than a hundred books, by seventy-eight authors. About half the titles are in translation, and Testard’s list is divided more or less evenly between works of fiction, which share the same blue cover as “Pond,” and nonfiction books, for which the color scheme is inverted: blue lettering on white covers. The striking visual presentation is the work of Ray O’Meara, an Irish graphic designer, who also designed an original serif typeface for the books and keeps a close watch over their stylistic consistency, with much thought given to how the density of the ink, contrasting with the white space of the margins, grants a bracing severity to each page. The uniformity of appearance means that a first-time fiction writer such as Bennett becomes, visually, a peer of a Nobel Prize winner.

Impressively, four of the writers who have been named Nobel laureates in the past decade are on Fitzcarraldo’s roster. In addition to Tokarczuk, the house publishes the work of Svetlana Alexievich,

of Belarus (2015); Annie Ernaux, of France (2022); and Jon Fosse, of Norway (2023). The house’s range, in terms of subject matter and style, extends from “Animalia,” an unrelenting saga of rural poverty and violence by the French novelist Jean-Baptiste Del Amo, to “Suppose a Sentence,” the scholar Brian Dillon’s musings on individual sentences from works by such writers as George Eliot and Roland Barthes.

Although Fitzcarraldo now turns a profit, Testard cannot match mainstream commercial publishers financially, and for the most part he can afford to pay advances only in the low four digits. For some writers, being offered a bigger advance elsewhere after a Fitzcarraldo-instigated success is an opportunity that would be reckless to turn down. Bennett was wooed by the publisher Cape for her follow-up, the 2021 novel “Checkout 19.” Bennett said, “It wasn’t a decision I made lightly at all. There were a few tears involved.” Testard told me, “We couldn’t compete on the money, and she needed money, and that’s fine.” To writers who stick with Fitzcarraldo, Testard offers the opportunity of being impeccably published, and being seen in esteemed editorial company. Tynan Kogane, a senior editor at New Directions, in New York, said of Testard, “He’s gotten this very strange reputation as a Nobel whisperer.” Testard is also known for being committed to nurturing a writer through an entire career. He told me, “If you come to me with your first book, and I believe in you as an author, and I believe in the writing, and it doesn’t work and it sells five hundred copies, we will still do the next one, and the next one, because it takes time.”

In fact, only one of Fitzcarraldo’s titles has sold fewer than a thousand copies, and many have sold far more. For literary writers, the prospect of such old-school loyalty from a publisher allows for a freedom of imagination that might be impossible elsewhere. Dan Fox, an art critic whose second book with Fitzcarraldo, “Limbo,” is about experiencing a creative block, told me, “It’s a bit of a mess of

a book—I don't think it really works. I have often thought that I'd quite like to do a 'Limbo 2,' and 'Limbo 3,' that's the same book, gradually reworked or retooled, so that it would never be a *resolved* book. I mentioned that to Jacques at one point, and to his credit he seemed to think, Oh, yeah, that would be quite a nice idea." ("I would gladly publish a 'Limbo 2' or 'Limbo 3,' if that's what Dan wanted to do," Testard told me.)



"You just had to develop passive-aggressive expressionism, didn't you?"  
Cartoon by Colin Tom

Testard's bilingualism gives him an advantage in a publishing industry in which the ability to read languages other than English is surprisingly uncommon. Not only does he read many French authors before they are translated into English; as a French reader, he is also introduced early to authors in various other languages, because French publishers tend to be far quicker than British or American ones to issue translations. Testard read Svetlana Alexievich in French before seeking to acquire "Second-hand Time," an oral history of post-Soviet Russia, in 2014, during his first visit to the Frankfurt Book Fair, an annual gathering where international rights are sold.

"I was walking around with one blue book and one white book," he recalled of the fair. That year, the Frankfurt conference coincided

with the announcement of the winner of the Nobel Prize, and Alexievich was considered one of the front-runners to win. He recalled, “I was basically told, ‘You’ve got no chance.’ ” When Patrick Modiano was named the winner, the heat went out of the competition for “Second-hand Time”; within a week, Testard had acquired the rights to Alexievich’s book, for what was for him the huge sum of thirty-five hundred pounds. The next year, she won the Nobel, and the English-language translation that Testard had commissioned, from Bela Shayevich, was sold to a U.S. publisher for a quarter of a million dollars.

When introducing an established author in translation to an Anglophone reading public, Testard has savvy instincts about how to position his product. After he bought the rights to publish the works of Annie Ernaux—the French writer whose œuvre, in one slim volume after another, has consisted of a ceaseless reworking of the experiences of her own life—he began not with her most recent book at the time, “A Girl’s Story,” which appeared in France in 2016; instead, he chose “The Years,” from 2008, in which Ernaux took the framework of her life to tell an impersonal autobiography of French womanhood from 1941 to the present. Edmund White wrote a galvanizing review of “The Years” in the *New York Times*, calling it “a ‘Remembrance of Things Past’ for our age of media domination and consumerism.”

When Testard promotes his books, he is as aggressive as a soft-spoken, cerebral man can be. Several times he has submitted books from his Essays series for the International Booker, a prize intended for works of fiction, under the rationale that—despite Fitzcarraldo’s own binary division between white and blue—only a small-minded judge would fail to understand how, say, the nonfiction works of Ernaux should be in the running alongside self-declared works of fiction. (Sometimes he succeeds: “The Years,” translated by Alison L. Strayer, was short-listed for the International Booker in 2019.) In another Booker bid, Testard

sought to submit Jon Fosse’s complete “Septology” in a single edition, in 2022, despite its having been submitted in installments in previous years, with “Septology VI-VII” short-listed. “They said no, which is *fine*—I guess,” Testard said. “I know I’m not the only person who checks in about the rules.”

Peter Straus, a prominent literary agent in London, said of Testard, “He never stops thinking about how he can sell books,” adding, “You need that strength of belief, but also that stubbornness. And the other thing you need, which he’s got, is an unquenchable belief that he is an excellent publisher.” Barbara Epler, the publisher and editorial director of New Directions, the storied American house, founded in 1936, that has issued seminal translations of Jorge Luis Borges, Roberto Bolaño, and others, told me, “Jacques reminds me of James Laughlin, the founder of New Directions—they want to make publishing houses homes for writers to a degree that I don’t think is typical.”

Fitzcarraldo’s services extend beyond the editorial. In May, Sheila Heti, the Canadian author, travelled to London to promote “Alphabetical Diaries,” her poignant compilation of sentences drawn from her journals and arranged from A to Z—a project that Testard had been discussing with her for a decade. She asked him to accompany her to a clothing store, where she sought his tasteful counsel about which of three tweed jackets she should buy. He gave a lilac one the nod. “I sensed that it was the answer she wanted,” he told me, mildly. “It also looked the best.”

Testard and his editorial staff—he now has seven colleagues—like to talk about Fitzcarraldo authors and books as forming constellations, with one title leading a curious reader to another, with which it shares a kinship, and then to yet another. Someone who, like me, starts with “Pond” might be attracted next to the work of the German writer Esther Kinsky, whose richly observational novel “River” features an unnamed narrator who lives alongside the River Lea, in London’s outlying wetlands.

Reading Kinsky might, in turn, lead to the Russian poet Maria Stepanova, whose essay “In Memory of Memory” concerns the survival of several generations of her family in the twentieth-century Soviet Union. Enjoyment of Stepanova’s work might encourage a reader to try another modern text about the Soviet experiment, such as Alexievich’s “Second-hand Time.” The constellation concept helps to guide Fitzcarraldo’s staff when they consider which authors might fit next in their roster. But they do nothing as crude as clutter the books’ back covers with “if you loved this, try this” urgings. The refined, distinctive covers are recommendation enough.

It’s no coincidence that many Fitzcarraldo books share a preoccupation with history and memory: Testard was considering undertaking a Ph.D. in history at Oxford University before he went into publishing. Many titles are also distinguished by a degree of self-conscious literary difficulty. The first fiction title that Testard published, in 2014, was “Zone,” by Mathias Énard, a five-hundred-and-twenty-one-page novel written in a single swoon of a sentence. The narrator, who is making a five-hundred-and-twenty-one-kilometre train journey from Milan to Rome, reflects on his own history and that of modern Europe. The book was hailed as a propulsive, profound masterpiece in some quarters, including the book pages of the *New York Times*, and as quite possibly intellectually fraudulent in others. (“Stuffing a book with deep, dark things and invocations of Homer does not necessarily make it deep and dark and Homeric,” a skeptical Nicholas Lezard wrote in the *Guardian*.) Publishing “Zone” as his first outing, Testard told me, was “a mission statement of sorts—here was a small press that was going to be publishing ambitious writing that was perceived to be too difficult for the mainstream.”

Fitzcarraldo’s first nonfiction offering, also in 2014, was the British philosopher Simon Critchley’s “Memory Theatre,” an unreliable narration in which the author, while sorting through a box of papers

that had belonged to a late colleague, reflects on his own journey to an elevated life of the mind, and on the baser indignities of the life of the body. (“Sleep would softly descend . . . only to be interrupted by that vague alien-like pressure in the lower abdomen. Do I need to piss or don’t I?”) The manuscript, Critchley told me, “was this weird little book which I wasn’t at all confident about, to say the least.” He agreed to publish it with Testard, with the expectation that the result would resemble “a small fanzine or something.”

Being linked with Fitzcarraldo’s origin story, he told me, now looks like a far cleverer decision than he can properly lay claim to. When I asked Critchley how he’d characterize a Fitzcarraldo title, he offered, “They are books of high literary and intellectual worth that no one else is going to publish. Cool and weird, and probably quite good.”

Testard chose the name for his company while browsing his own bookshelf. His eye fell on a book, by the French writer Emmanuel Carrère, in which Carrère discusses an interview that he conducted in the early eighties with Werner Herzog, the filmmaker. Herzog’s 1982 epic, “Fitzcarraldo,” about an opera aficionado and would-be rubber baron who attempts to transport a steamship from one tributary of the Amazon to another by lugging it over a steep pinnacle in the Peruvian jungle, has become a byword for an exorbitant, doomed adventure. Testard told me that his choice was “a not very subtle metaphor about the stupidity of setting up a publishing house.” When Herzog’s recent memoir, “Every Man for Himself and God Against All,” was being offered to publishers, Testard wrote to Herzog’s German publisher with, he told me, “a publishing maneuver which I may have invented because it’s so stupid—a lowball preëmpt.” He went on, “I put in this impassioned pitch, with the biggest sum I could offer at that point, and ended the letter saying, ‘If Werner Herzog has a sense of humor, he will say yes to this.’ And then, obviously, he went somewhere else, for quite a lot of money.” Testard quickly added, “I *don’t* think Werner Herzog does not have a sense of humor. I think he definitely does.”

(Herzog told me, in an e-mail, “I do not mind at all there was never any contact between me and Jacques Testard about him taking the name ‘Fitzcarraldo’ for his publishing house. He is welcome, since he seems to publish very fine books.”)

An alternative possible name had been Pale Fire Editions. But Nabokov’s title ended up being adopted by Testard’s wife, Rowena Morgan-Cox, for her own company, which designs stylish lamps made from recycled paper. The couple’s handsome apartment, in South East London, has a number of the lamps, and two more decorate Fitzcarraldo’s light-filled, open-plan office, in a renovated carburetor factory on the same side of the Thames. Crittall steel-framed windows maintain an industrial atmosphere, and there’s a craft-coffee shop on the ground floor.

Every week at Fitzcarraldo starts with a staff meeting, and one morning in May I joined the team at a round conference table on which were scattered a handful of blue and white books, with more titles arranged on shelves and bookcases. The Fitzcarraldo color combination is such a powerful trademark that, after I had been exposed to it for a while, even ordinary objects in the same hues—a blue bowl for washing dishes; a denim-dress-and-white-T-shirt outfit worn by one of the editors—started to seem like deliberate acts of branding.

First on the agenda were books that were currently in the works. These included “Dysphoria Mundi,” by Paul B. Preciado, a Spanish philosopher and curator whose earlier books include “Can the Monster Speak?,” an essay about the pathologization of transgender people by the psychoanalytic profession. Testard, who brushes his brown hair forward over his temples, like a Romantic poet, reads Spanish in addition to French and English. “I’m slowly working my way through our version, and Paul has accepted most of the edits, which I wasn’t expecting,” he remarked.

The group then discussed Lucy Mercer, a poet, who would soon be publicly named the winner of this year's Fitzcarraldo Essay Prize, an award, bestowed annually since 2016, for a proposal for a nonfiction work in progress by an unpublished writer. The recipient receives three thousand pounds; a residency of up to three months at the Mahler and LeWitt Studios, in Spoleto, Italy; and a contract to be published by Fitzcarraldo. Mercer won the award for an essay, tentatively titled "Afterlife," about mortality and wax. (In the loose Fitzcarraldo mode, the essay touches on everything from candlelight vigils to Madame Tussauds.)

The talk around the table then turned to Clemens Meyer, the German novelist, whose début novel, "While We Were Dreaming," about a group of youths going off the rails in the former East Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall, was first published in 2007 in his native country. A Fitzcarraldo translation of "Dreaming," by Katy Derbyshire, was long-listed for the International Booker, as was "Bricks and Mortar," a novel about the rise of a soccer hooligan turned pimp. "I've got Clemens's new novel—it's longer than 'The Books of Jacob,'" Testard announced, matter-of-factly. "I need to put together an offer and work out how we are going to fund the translation. It's going to be a '26 or '27 book—it's going to take a year to translate." The cost of translating a Fitzcarraldo book can be considerably higher than the advance given to an author. Meyer, Testard later told me, would be receiving an advance in the low four figures for the new book, a nonlinear historical novel about film, war, and masculinity called "The Projectionist"; Derbyshire would be paid about thirty-seven thousand dollars to render it in English. Fitzcarraldo often applies for funding from cultural institutions within the writers' native countries to help defray the translation costs. Rachael Allen, a poetry editor whom Fitzcarraldo hired last year, spoke of attending an event this spring, in Manchester, about poetry in translation, where she'd discussed potential acquisitions for a new poetry

series, which is scheduled to launch next year. (Ray O'Meara has been working on a closely guarded design scheme.)

Tokarczuk's next book, I learned, will be a reworking of Thomas Mann's "The Magic Mountain," titled "The Empusium: A Health Resort Horror Story." Because Tokarczuk has become so eminent, a translation was commissioned immediately after the manuscript's completion, in Polish. Testard told me, with pride, "Every book is different and can be read on multiple levels—she always messes with the form or complicates it. She is never not surprising." The Fitzcarraldo team is excited about the commercial potential of "Empusium"—twenty-five thousand copies are being printed—and the sales team at Faber & Faber, with which Fitzcarraldo works on distribution, was determined to attract readers beyond the hard-core Fitzcarraldo customer. Testard turned to O'Meara and said, "I can't remember if we told you this, but we are going to need to print the subtitle on the cover." O'Meara let out a low groan.

A doorbell rang. "That will be Jon Fosse's bookplates!" Testard said. To mark the company's tenth anniversary, this September, O'Meara has designed the Fitzcarraldo First Decade Collection, a limited-edition series of ten of the house's most significant titles—including "Pond," "Flights," "The Years," and "Septology"—which will be case-bound in linen cloth, with marbled endpapers and signed, numbered bookplates. Testard had sent each author a box of bookplates along with a black pen; Fosse, who lives in Oslo and has a collection of more than two hundred fountain pens, let it be known that he would be using his own writing implement for the task. After the delivery person dropped off the package, Joely Day, an editor, opened it up to reveal stacks of rectangular bookplates signed by Fosse in a spidery hand, in varying densities of ink. Fosse is not the only author who has deviated from the house aesthetic: "When Annie did 'Getting Lost,' they started out black, and then blue, and then pink," Clare Bogen, Fitzcarraldo's publicity director, told her colleagues. Each of the books selected to mark the

anniversary would be printed in a limited edition of a thousand; owning all ten will set a collector back more than six hundred dollars. For Fitzcarraldo aficionados of lesser means, the online store offers a tote bag, in blue canvas, bearing the company's name, and, in white, a tote bearing the title of a volume by Dan Fox: "Pretentiousness: Why It Matters."

Testard moved to the U.K. when he was five, after his father, a management consultant, was transferred from Paris to London. In contrast with many other expat families, his parents sent him to British schools rather than to French-language ones, and he soon became fluent in both the language and the social codes of his English peers. After Brexit, Testard finally applied for British citizenship, for which he was recently approved, having passed the Life in the U.K. test, a series of questions about British customs, institutions, and values. "I didn't study, out of cockiness, and then actually it was more difficult than I thought," he admitted. "You get asked questions about the different layers of courts in Scotland, for example." Not having a full command of the different layers of courts in Scotland could probably be considered a defining characteristic of English citizens of the U.K., but Testard's confidence lay elsewhere. "I have that first-generation thing of being more British than the British," he told me.

When he was thirteen, his family returned to Paris; he was enrolled in a local school, where he floundered academically. "We spoke French at home, but I'd never studied in French—I'd never learned French grammar, or done math in French," he explained. His younger brother, Pierre, was in a better position to adapt; he stayed in Paris and is now a published novelist in French. (Pierre has since moved to Berlin.) After a year in Paris, Testard became a boarder at London's Westminster School, one of the best private schools in the U.K. Weekends were spent with family friends or the families of friends; by the end of high school, Testard was a familiar, charismatic figure among a roving group of lightly parented teen-

agers in London. He went to Trinity College Dublin as an undergraduate, where he found a group of friends among whom there was a social cachet to being a serious reader. “In that kind of naïve, slightly pretentious, studenty way, we would all push ourselves to be into books together,” he said. “Nabokov, Joyce, Dostoyevsky.”

After graduating, Testard began his graduate studies in history, at Oxford, but his ambitions for an academic life soon waned. “There was one specific seminar that I was made to attend as part of the course requirements where someone presented their research on the memorial bells and fountains of Oxfordshire, 1847 to 1852,” he said. “I was specifically interested in collective memory, and seeing this guy present his research I realized it was going to be very, very, very narrow for a really long time.” Testard found an internship at Autrement, an independent publisher in Paris, where he typed up e-mails dictated by the company’s founder, who declined to use computers, and did some editing of translations from English to French. “I got this firsthand view of what a publisher does,” he said. After four months, he moved to New York for a further stint of interning, first at Farrar, Straus & Giroux, and then at *The Paris Review*, while living in a shared apartment in Williamsburg. “I learned about the slush pile”—where manuscripts that are submitted without agents end up before being read—“and I learned how to say no to things. I also learned about what it takes to bring something to press—the different passes, checking, proofreading,” he said. “I was really into it, and I wanted to work in this world.”



DESPISE ALL WARNINGS, PANDORA OPENED THE COMMENTS SECTION

*Cartoon by Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby*

Upon returning to London, and inspired by the example of *The Paris Review*, and other small literary magazines in New York, including *n+1* and *Bomb*, Testard and a friend from Trinity, Ben Eastham, launched, in 2011, their own literary periodical, called *The White Review*. “Jacques idolized publishers, reading their biographies, which is quite a niche thing for a twentysomething to do,” Eastham told me. They enlisted O’Meara as the journal’s designer, and crowdfunded the magazine’s starting budget of about fourteen thousand dollars. *The White Review* was handsomely produced, with a cover that could be detached, unfolded, and mounted as an art work. The name was a tribute to *La Revue Blanche*, a nineteenth-century publication edited by the art critic and anarchist Félix Fénéon. “There was a political dimension,” Testard explained. “The coalition government had just come in”—an alliance of Conservative and Liberal Democrat Members of Parliament had instigated broad cuts to social services—and “student fees had tripled.” In the world of publishing, e-books and online shopping seemed to be threatening the existence of print. “We wanted to create something that was a book-as-object, and in our small and modest way might say, ‘Books can be really nice, and reading this can be a nice experience.’ ”

If Testard and Eastham didn't follow Fénéon's revolutionary example all the way—in 1894, he was charged with conspiracy—they did adopt his name, with its outlaw glamour, for an annual award bestowed by the magazine, which became well known not just for its content but for its parties. “Free drinks go a long way to getting crowds out, whether in a greenhouse in Wapping, a car park in Peckham, a bookshop in Berlin, a gallery in Bristol, or an artist’s studio in Hackney Wick,” Testard and Eastham wrote in an introduction to a 2017 anthology of *White Review* pieces. (In a blithe aside that might not have survived the scrutiny of a post-#MeToo edit, they added, “In all of these instances, only once has a member of the audience purposefully set his girlfriend’s hair on fire. No lasting damage was done.”)

While working at *The White Review*, Testard had a day job as an editor at Notting Hill Editions, an independent publishing company, where he brought out the first volume of the British novelist Deborah Levy’s so-called living autobiography, “Things I Don’t Want to Know.” He also commissioned the American novelist Joshua Cohen to write an essay called “Attention!: A (Short) History.” Testard was laid off, amid downsizing, at the end of 2013. He made a list of publishers with whom he felt his taste would mesh: it was vanishingly short, and none were hiring anyway. The offer of a loan from a family member enabled him to set out on his own. “I knew I wanted to edit books,” he said.

Cohen recalled to me, “Jacques had talked to me about his plans to found a publishing house. It’s sort of like men who talk to you about buying bars—you sort of listen to them and say, ‘Sure, sounds like a great idea.’ But he’s the one person of our generation I can think of who truly managed to build something that will last.” The manuscript of Cohen’s most recent novel was rejected by his previous U.S. publisher, Random House, and by two dozen others. The book eventually found a home at Fitzcarraldo (and, in the U.S.,

at New York Review Books). Cohen’s novel, “The Netanyahus,” won the 2022 Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

Fitzcarraldo’s annual summer party was held on the solstice, at Bold Tendencies, an arts organization in South London with a pop-up bar atop a converted parking garage. Testard introduced a series of readings to a capacity crowd of three hundred mostly young, and mostly attentive, guests, who sat on folding chairs arranged around a makeshift stage. Marianne Brooker, the winner of the 2022 Essay Prize, read from “Intervals,” a wrenching memoir about her mother’s death from multiple sclerosis, pausing occasionally when a train rattled by on the nearby Overground line. Zarina Muhammad, an art critic, read a lively essay about taking men on dates to Gujarati sports bars, extracted from “London Feeds Itself,” a volume co-published by Fitzcarraldo and Open City.

Antonia Lloyd-Jones, the translator, asked the crowd, “Who here likes Polish cuisine? At the end, I am going to ask if you still like Polish cuisine.” She then launched into a lurid passage from Tokarczuk’s “Empusium” about the preparation of *czernina*, a traditional soup made with duck blood. (The description was also part of an excerpt of the novel which was published in this magazine.) Toby Jones, the character actor, read a section from Jon Fosse’s latest book, “A Shining,” about a man stuck on a dead-end trail in a snowy forest; Jones turned Fosse’s bleak narrative into uproarious comedy. Between readings, Testard, who was dressed in a yellow-and-orange three-quarter-length coat by the designer Alex Mullins—a garment Testard wears only once a year, at the summer party—hopped up to the microphone to remind guests that signed books and tote bags could be purchased after the readings, and that, if anyone hadn’t yet read Tokarczuk’s “Drive Your Plow,” an audiobook, read by Lloyd-Jones, was available. Afterward, the audience rushed the cash bar and watched the sun set over the skyline while Testard stood for a moment with his brother and his father, who were visiting.

“He’s a cultural hybrid,” Testard’s father said proudly, before remarking on the ungenerous serving size of the evening’s refreshments: “*Un petit verre pour cinq pounds!*”

“Welcome to London,” Testard said.

The youthful crowd reminded me of a striking study, released by the Booker Prize Foundation, about who reads literature in translation. Although most fiction in the U.K. is bought by readers older than sixty, works in translation skew much younger: almost half of fiction in translation is bought by readers under thirty-five, with only eight per cent being bought by those of retirement age. Readers of translated fiction are more educated, and far likelier than most other consumers of books to say that they prefer “a challenging read.” Not coincidentally, in the 2016 Brexit referendum, voters younger than thirty-four were overwhelmingly in favor of remaining within the E.U. It’s not fanciful to suggest that, for young, educated, and relatively affluent readers, the blue and white covers of Fitzcarraldo Editions have become a kind of flag of international allegiance, no less than the blue-and-yellow banners of the E.U. were during the referendum period.

Fitzcarraldo is determined to extend its purview beyond the mainly European literature that characterized its earliest offerings. It has published the Palestinian writer Adania Shibli’s novel “Minor Detail,” about the effects of the Nakba, in a translation from the Arabic by Elisabeth Jaquette. In 2023, Testard published “Owlsh,” a novel by the Hong Kong author Dorothy Tse, translated from the Chinese, which was acquired by Tamara Sampey-Jawad, Fitzcarraldo’s associate publisher, who has worked at the house since 2016. Testard said of Tse’s book, “It’s a very dark fairy tale—surreal, uncanny, but also funny and moving at times—as if Angela Carter were doing postcolonial political allegory.”

Last year, he and his colleagues set off in another new direction: the launch of Fitzcarraldo Classics, a series of formerly out-of-print

books that mirror and illuminate the Fitzcarraldo list. “We can’t just publish more and more contemporary books, because a point will come where maybe they’d start to compete against each other, which is not desirable,” Testard told me. “And a Classics series seemed interesting from an intellectual point of view.” He went on, “To me, Fitzcarraldo is publishing as an intellectual project.” So far, the Classics series includes the essay “A Very Easy Death,” by Simone de Beauvoir—an influence on Annie Ernaux—and “The Possessed,” a pastiche of the gothic horror genre by the Polish modernist Witold Gombrowicz, made newly relevant by the success of Tokarczuk.

The Classics list, Testard explained, would “go back in time through the affinities and influences of authors we already publish, and trace literary heritages in some way, or imagine an alternative history of twentieth-century literature.” It’s a big ambition, and also a way to stay small. “I feel very strongly about independent publishing, and Fitzcarraldo remaining an independent publisher,” Testard said. “I’m not interested in growth for the sake of growth, and I don’t ever want to have to publish a book for commercial reasons.” Testard allowed that he may not have another Nobel Prize winner in the immediate offing: “We don’t have anyone else who’s quite *old* enough, to put it bluntly.” He can wait, though. He told me, “I want to do this forever.” ♦



*Rebecca Mead*, a staff writer since 1997, most recently published “*Home/Land*.”

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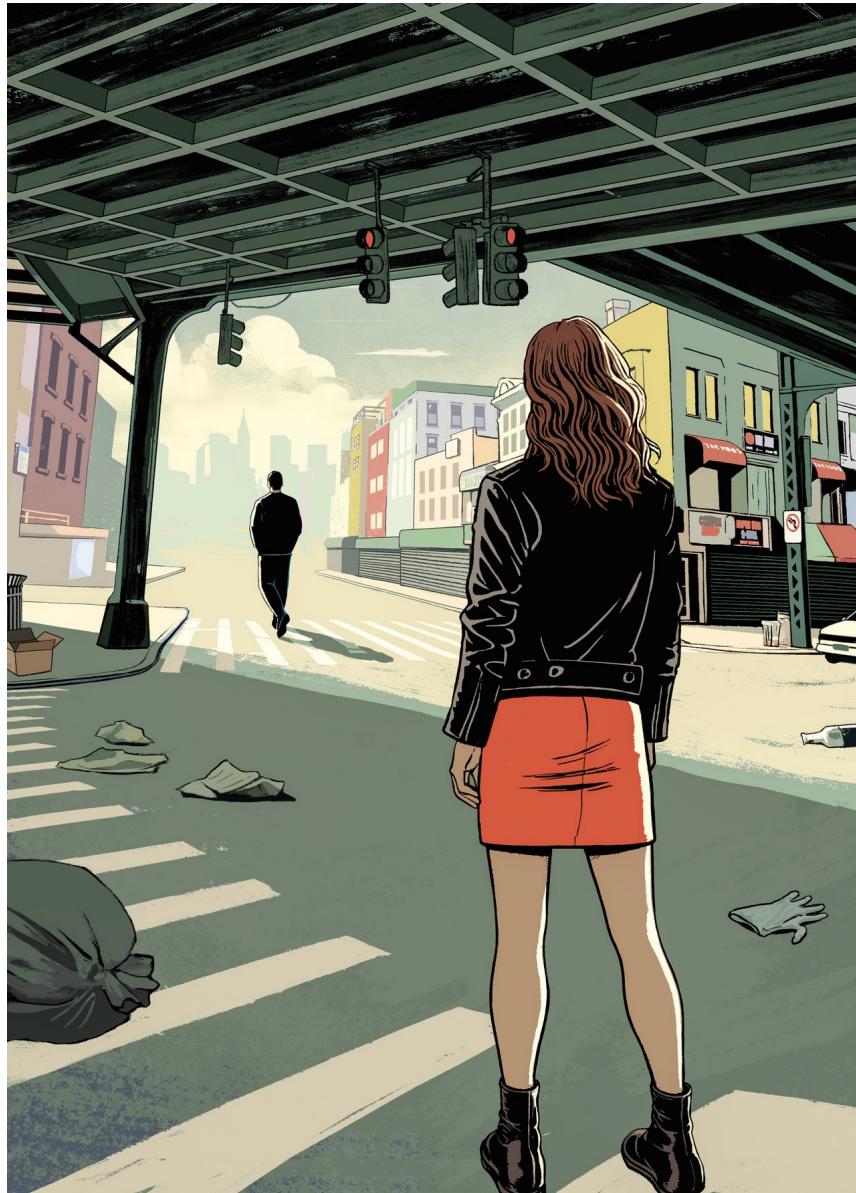
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## The Last Rave

In the summer of 2020, I felt as if I'd entered the wrong portal, out of the world I knew and into its bizarro twin.

By [Emily Witt](#)

July 1, 2024



*Illustration by Angelica Alzona*

On March 6, 2020, Andrew and I went to a rave. If it weren't for what happened later, I don't think it would have stood out in my

memory. A couple of days before, I had met a friend at the movie theatre at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, to see “Portrait of a Lady on Fire.” It was the first time I saw someone trying to open a door with his elbows. My friend and I ordered separate popcorns as a hygienic precaution. I remember someone behind us coughing, and being aware of it.

On Friday night, before the party, I put a single drop of LSD into a glass of water. I drank half, and Andrew drank the other half. For the next couple of hours, while he made beats in his studio, I lay in bed with my eyes closed, listening to one of the final mixes made by Andrew Weatherall, a British d.j. who had got his start in the nineteen-eighties club scene and had recently died. The tracks had titles like “Jagged Mountain Melts at Dawn” and “The Descending Moonshine Dervishes.”

I sat up in bed, and, as the waves of acid broke over me, I wrote down some thoughts. I was a magazine writer, but I was thinking of going to Brazil to write a book about the Amazon rain forest. The problem with trying to write a book about the Amazon rain forest was that it was a place that was much better left alone, like Everest, or the moon. I looked over at the cat, who was sitting on an ottoman, her eyes two glowing lamps of annoyance. It was time to go out.

I went and got Andrew (not his real name). He walked around his studio, picking things up and putting them down again. In the end, he brought his sunglasses, keys, wallet, phone, and vape pen, and some ketamine. It was almost 2 A.M. To gather our thoughts, we did two lines of cocaine, then walked down Myrtle Avenue, where drag queens teetered on platform shoes in front of Happyfun Hideaway, to Bossa Nova Civic Club, the neighborhood electronic-music venue where we were regulars. Karen at the door waved us in. The bar was full, the dance floor frenzied. We ordered shots of tequila, danced, and stood around gossiping with friends. At 3:30 A.M., we went outside and caught a car to the rave.

The party was called Club Night Club. I had never been before. It was newer, maybe a year old, and took place sporadically. This time it was being held in the basement of a warehouse on Wyckoff Avenue that was rumored to be the future site of a fancy bowling alley. Illegal parties were becoming rarer, but I was also less interested in going to new places. I never went to Mood Ring, because the crowd was so young that I looked like a chaperon at a school dance. I didn't like Elsewhere; Basement was fine. When I went out, it was mostly to Bossa or Unter or Nowadays, or, once a year, to Fourth World and Sustain-Release. These were the clubs and parties where people seemed to care about the music, and where I knew I would see friends.

From the outside, the building looked deserted. The only indication of what was going on inside was the bass vibrating up from the storm drains. We had been instructed by e-mail to enter through an adjacent parking lot, where a bouncer stood guard. Inside the lobby, a line of people with smeared eye makeup and dilated pupils snaked out of the bathrooms, laughing and flirting next to a wall of fake plants. Some ticket-takers at a folding table stamped our wrists, then gestured toward a foggy stairway that emptied out onto a basement dance floor. The room was big and dark, with narrow columns and gray-painted floors. The d.j., who was from Bristol, went by Bruce. The bass reverberated through my body. I thought of the sound of the metal door on my roof when it would squeak on its hinges and then violently slam shut; of a drill on the Second Avenue subway line tunnelling into bedrock; of a skyscraper groaning and toppling in a disaster movie.

After spending a few minutes on the dance floor, Andrew and I found a large, windowless room with soft pink lighting. There was a makeshift bar, in front of which our friends laughed and sipped beers. The public-health authorities had not yet started telling people to wear masks, although, in keeping with the latest guidelines about hand washing, there were all kinds of pineapple-

and waterfall-scented antibacterial soaps in the bathroom. I smoked weed to turn up the acid and, back on the dance floor, tried to lose myself in movement and sound, but something was off. I couldn't quell an omnipresent anxiety. At around seven in the morning, Andrew and I walked home, trash blowing through the empty streets of Bushwick.

I liked the day after a party as much as the party itself. We would stagger up the four flights of stairs to our apartment, open the door, and confront the cat, who would be upset about having been left alone. After we fed her and cooed over her, we would take off our disgusting clothes, shower, and fall into bed. We would spend the day sleeping, having sex, watching television, drinking Gatorade, competing for the cat's attention, and ordering Chinese food. All three of us—me, Andrew, and the cat—loved a day of being extremely lazy in bed. It was one of the valued principles of our little family.

The events of the next week happened quickly. On Sunday, a friend offered to make burgers at our place, and a dozen people came over for an impromptu dinner party. On Wednesday, I spent an afternoon reading Google docs that were being circulated about the new virus from Italy and China; they somehow had more detailed information about what doctors were seeing in hospitals there than the news did. That weekend in New York, the bars were still open, though at half capacity. By Monday, every venue in the city had gone dark.

In the weeks that followed, when I went out for walks, I saw disposable latex gloves in the gutters. Sirens took the place of ordinary city noise. I would read accounts of people applauding for medical workers each night at seven. Bushwick at seven o'clock was silent, which I perceived not as a lack of gratitude but as the only correct response to what we were experiencing.

I had been aware that the past few years of going to clubs and raves might be a phase of my life, and that one day, even if I didn't start a

family, it would end. I was approaching forty. Like a lot of people in New York, I daydreamed about a less enervating life in a less expensive city. I knew that my most transcendent drug experiences were probably behind me. I still had a year, maybe two, to try to have a child. People dropped out of the scene all the time. Someone would be there reliably for years, and then all of a sudden you never saw them again. At other times, I had thought that the scene would die out of its own accord, as most things did in New York, usually for reasons having to do with rent. Now, with thousands of New Yorkers getting sick and dying of *COVID-19*, the scene disappeared overnight.

I didn't mind the first few weeks of staying home. I liked being with Andrew every day. We had been together for three and a half years, and had moved into our rented loft apartment in Bushwick in 2017, seven months after our first date. He was from California; I was from Minnesota. He had a wealthier family background, and I was five years older than him, but our connection had been immediate. I was not necessarily interested in marriage, but I thought of him as my life partner. He worked in tech and had a laid-back California affect, and we could talk about literature and art. His friends had become my friends; our families had met and got along. With him I found what had been so elusive in my years in New York: a stable partnership within a larger social scene.

Many of our friends lived within a few blocks of us in Bushwick, and for three years our apartment had been a place to casually stop by for a drink or to play music before parties. We had fights that could get vicious, often about his daily cannabis habit and the frequency with which I had to travel for work, but we usually made up quickly afterward. In the past year, we had started discussing having a baby.

My sense that the only safe enclave you can build in the world is with the people you love was heightened by the pandemic. But, sometime in May, Andrew started having difficulty doing things.

He would sit on the couch on his laptop for eighteen hours a day. It wasn't clear what he was working on, or if he was working on anything at all. He did not leave the house, even for short walks, which I suggested might make him feel a little better. The reason for his reluctance was not a fear of getting sick but a general disengagement. He let his laundry pile up, and would go for days between showers. He lost interest in sex, and dropped the pretense of waiting until the afternoon to start smoking pot.

And so I watered the plants, did the dishes, took out the trash, kept the litter box clean, and invented little excursions, like biking to the fish store in Greenpoint, or to the French bakery near Myrtle-Wyckoff to get us bread. I oscillated between sympathy and frustration. Since he was usually stoned during our arguments, I would say almost anything to try to get a reaction out of him. But our fights would usually end the same way: I would calm down, he would pledge to do more around the house, and our routines would resume. I had grown up in a family that argued regularly, and so had he.

On a warm spring day, we met up with some friends at Maria Hernandez Park, our first time making plans with other people in two months. I could see that Andrew was wary of jumping back into ordinary social interaction, but after taking a long time to get ready he made it outside, and we spent the evening sitting on the sidewalk and eating tacos. It was the most normal we had felt in weeks. At the end of the night, biking home, we were both elated. I didn't understand what was going on with him, but being depressed seemed like a normal response to the current state of the world. I thought it would pass.

One afternoon, I asked him to take out the trash, and he locked himself in his studio. I was so tired of his refusal to help that I kicked a hole in the door. He came out, blowing weed smoke in my face. He made me feel like it was my fault that he wasn't producing music. He didn't have enough room in his studio to work, he told

me, and he was going to set everything up in the living room instead. “Fine,” I said. He began piling his synthesizers and mixers on the dining table. As he stalked around, he knocked over a bottle of gin from a bookshelf and it shattered, leaving a puddle that seeped across the floor.

The music equipment sat there unused for the next ten days, until he sullenly put it all back in his studio. I wrote a long letter to myself, trying to figure out if it was time to leave. But then I would think, Am I really going to end things with the person I love the most over some dirty dishes?

The day after the murder of George Floyd, I called my editor asking if I should go to the protests that had started in Minneapolis. The answer was to wait and see. In the end, one of the magazine’s combat reporters, who had been following right-wing militias in Michigan, drove to Minneapolis. Andrew pointed out, as he had before, the depravity of journalistic practice—in this instance, the way white journalists make their names by piggybacking on acts of racial injustice. I didn’t have the energy to argue with him. And what was my claim to the story, anyway? I had grown up in Minneapolis, but I had not lived there for twenty years.

Every time I tried to articulate what the politics of the place were, I could only come up with decades-old memories—of being one of just a few kids on the school bus on the day of the Million Man March, the rally for the civil rights of Black men convened by the Nation of Islam in 1995, because many of my classmates stayed home in solidarity; of the eighth-grade teacher who had us read Howard Zinn; of the community-run radio station KMOJ, “your power station.” My parents were Clinton Democrats and boomers from the East Coast for whom the *New York Times* was the mouthpiece of reason. Meanwhile, my peers and I read Fanon, Baldwin, and Angela Davis; our soundtrack was A Tribe Called Quest, Black Star, Dead Prez, De La Soul. Now, in Brooklyn, I sat on the couch and watched a reporting collective called Unicorn

Riot stream a live broadcast of angry protesters as they filled the halls of the Third Precinct of the Minneapolis Police Department, a mile from my old high school, and torched it. Outside the station, hundreds of people were gathered in the night, yelling, “I can’t breathe.” “This is an organic uprising from the belly of the beast of America,” a Unicorn Riot reporter said. “This has been bubbling, bubbling, bubbling, for four hundred years.”

In the days that followed, I saw commentators propose all kinds of theories about what had fuelled the city’s rage. Their impulse to explain was understandable, but it bothered me. The uprising had come from a city with a long tradition of radical activism. People on the coasts always had trouble computing that the people in the middle could live radical lives.

The protests in New York began on Thursday. A large demonstration was planned for Friday outside the Barclays Center, in Brooklyn, and I was asked to cover it. I expected the usual—a blocked intersection, a few arrests—but by the time I arrived the N.Y.P.D. had pepper-sprayed and beaten and arrested more than two hundred people, who were now being loaded onto M.T.A. buses to be taken to booking, their clothes torn and their eyes red. I went home and wrote down what I had witnessed.

The next morning, I followed a protest that started in Harlem, and I ended the day at a protest in Flatbush. The morning after, Andrew and I had what seemed like an ordinary spat about dishes that had piled up, except that it ended with him telling me that my clothes were ugly. A day later, the mayor announced that the city would be placed under an 11 p.m. curfew. The day after that, the curfew was moved up to 8 p.m.

In the past three years, I had covered rallies concerning gun control, Brett Kavanaugh’s confirmation to the Supreme Court, and climate change. But nothing had seemed as urgent and uncompromising as this outpouring, in the number of people and

the depth of their feeling. There was a sense, heightened by the estrangement and mass unemployment of the pandemic, that there was nothing to lose—a willingness to remind the police that they did not rule the cities they claimed to serve. I trailed marchers down a traffic-free Madison Avenue, past the empty store windows of Bottega Veneta and Celine. I watched as protesters in Times Square, many of them teen-agers from the Bronx and Harlem, paused, knelt, and, in the flickering lights of a hundred billboards, read out a long list of names of Black men, women, and children who had died at the hands of the police in recent years. On a billboard above them, an animated wand of CoverGirl mascara endlessly separated eyelashes. Someone threw a water bottle at it. “Don’t throw anything!” another protester shouted.



*“Yes, are you guys getting MRI patients at the water park?”*  
Cartoon by Paul Noth

At the end of that week, there was one more demonstration that I wanted to attend, in the Bronx. It wasn't for an assignment. I hadn't yet shown up at a protest as a civilian. I asked Andrew to come with me. He didn't want to, but I persuaded him. “We'll go home before curfew,” I promised. “I just want to see.” I relive this

moment. I think I will forever. You can ruin your own life in an instant by not paying attention.

We drove to the Bronx in my car, a Toyota Corolla that I'd borrowed from my dad. The protest called itself "FTP" (as in "Fuck the police," but also, according to the organizers, "Feed the people," "Free the prisoners," and "Fight the power"). It was leaving from the Hub, a shopping district in Mott Haven. As Andrew and I walked toward the meeting place, we saw throngs of riot police on bicycles. Their presence seemed heavy for what was a relatively small group of people, compared with the thousands who had been gathering in the streets all week. We arrived at a plaza in front of some shops. Cops monitored the scene from the rooftops above. Andrew and I stood near each other. My press pass was in my bag. I took it out and put it on. As the rally started and the speeches began, I turned on my audio recorder and opened a notebook. Andrew watched me as I began taking notes. I sensed that, by choosing to be an observer rather than a participant, I was failing a moral test.

We walked down the street behind someone carrying a banner that said "*Ante Up! Punch that cop!!*" But the march was calm. One of the organizers, a neighborhood advocacy group called Take Back the Bronx, had given guidance online. "Goofy irresponsible adventurism in our hoods will be met with these collective hands," a post had read. Another organizer, Decolonize This Place, had a following of academics and young professionals and had previously held protests at museums. The police, who had been following us at a distance, began to circle closer. There was a call for "white allies" to come to the front. Before I even realized what was going on, Andrew moved up, and I lost sight of him. Shortly before eight o'clock, the police surrounded the marchers on a cross street and would not let anyone out. Then they began pepper-spraying, beating, and arresting everyone. (Later, a class-action lawsuit was brought against the city, which agreed to pay at least

\$21,500 to each of the people penned in and arrested at the protest that night.) I was pressed against a fence; all around me, people were getting pepper-sprayed, pushed against one another. A teenage girl was hyperventilating; a pregnant woman was screaming; medics were handcuffed and arrested. I took out my phone and started recording video, my hands shaking. As I posted the video on Twitter, a police officer grabbed my arm. I reflexively showed him my press pass. “I’m press!” I yelled.

“I can’t hear you with that mask on,” the cop said, shoving me. “You’re not supposed to be here.” But I was let go without arrest, disgorged on the sidewalk, where a handful of other reporters had also been deposited, all of us stunned by the violence. I kept looking for Andrew, but he was gone.

Later, Andrew, with his long arms, managed to reach his cuffed hands into his back pocket to text me from his phone. He had been arrested, he said. They were in some kind of transport van. They had just passed signs for LaGuardia Airport. “*LaGuardia?*” a lawyer on a protest helpline said when I told her.

It was almost eleven when I got a call saying that most of the arrested protesters had been taken to Queens Central Booking, near Flushing Meadows. I drove there. The air was damp and chilly, the streets dark. The people getting released emerged bloodied, their clothes torn. After it became clear that Andrew would not be released that night, I went home to try to get some sleep.

The next day, I drove back to Queens. As I rounded the corner in the car, I saw Andrew striding purposefully out of the jail. I double-parked, got out, and hugged him. He did not react. He was smoking a cigarette and speaking with a lawyer, who was there to collect evidence of possible civil-rights violations. Andrew’s black T-shirt was crusted with blood. I pulled the car into a parking spot. When he finished talking with the lawyer, he got in on the passenger side and slammed the door.

I asked if we should offer anybody a ride.

“We’re going home,” he said, staring straight ahead.

I understood then that he was angry with me. He had a broken finger, a scratched eye, and a bloody nose, and had been forced to sit in police custody with pepper spray burning his face for sixteen hours. It was my fault: I had made him go, and I was unscathed.

When we got home, Andrew stripped, got into the bathtub, and asked for his bong. I brought it to him and sat next to the tub as he recounted what had happened. He told me that, because he had been in the front, he was one of the first people arrested. More than three hundred people were detained, and they waited in line for hours to be processed. He was put in a cell full of men. Nobody had slept.

After his bath, I took photographs of his injuries: abrasions on his elbows; his red eye; his swollen finger. Then he crawled into bed. He plugged in his phone and began looking through videos of the scene to try to identify the cop who had hurt him. He was too amped up to sleep. I ordered us Mexican food, and we lay together in bed and ate it. Finally, he fell asleep.

Over the next few days, Andrew became hyperfocussed on learning about the cops at the protests, who had used their bikes as a shield. He sent me a 2017 *Guardian* article about this police strategy, which had originated at the Battle of Seattle, the major protests against the World Trade Organization in 1999. He wanted to order protective body armor on Amazon. His speech was accelerated. I texted a friend that his fixation on the bicycle cops reminded me of film portrayals of Vietnam vets who talked about helicopters all the time. The stagnation of the previous month had been replaced by a new energy, a righteous political anger that I could not seem to meet or respond to.

A few days later, on a Tuesday, Andrew borrowed my car to go to the beach at Fort Tilden with a group of friends. It was a perfect, sunny June day. I had to cover a City Council hearing where protesters would be testifying about police brutality. We decided that I would take the train to meet him later. We had a brief argument before he left. I don't remember what it was about, but afterward we looked at each other in fear. We didn't know what was going on with us.

The hearing, which was held virtually and which I watched from home, lasted for hours. I had trouble concentrating. I kept thinking about Andrew at the beach with his friends and about how he reserved all his anger for me. I sent him a snide text message about having borrowed my car. I wrote that I was feeling left out. He said that by the time I got there they would be leaving. I told him that I would be upset if he stayed out late.

"I am currently sitting away from all my friends just to talk to you because you are having a little fit," he wrote. "Why does it make you upset if I have fun and feel good about myself?"

He kept texting as he drove back. "I had some time at a stop light to say fuck you."

Once the hearing ended, I made dinner and opened a bottle of wine, hoping that when Andrew got back I could apologize. When he came in, he slammed the door. "It's over," he said. "Are you going to move out, or am I?" I could see by the expression on his face that this fight was different. He grabbed a handful of the rice on my plate and dropped it into my glass of wine. I began to tear up.

"I'm going to harass you for an hour the way you harassed me today," he said. "I'm not going to leave you alone."

By this time, he was yelling. He began repeating the phrase "I don't hurt people on purpose," the implication being that I did.

I booked an Airbnb in Manhattan for the night. As I drove into the city, messages from Andrew kept arriving on my phone. I wrote to him that I knew the fight had been my fault. He told me that I had fucked up something special, that he guessed I had fallen out of love. He told me that he didn't feel safe being in the same space with me. He claimed that I had hit him before. I sarcastically encouraged him to call the cops.

"You would say that," he wrote.

"I'm being facetious."

"Yeah but you would think that would be a potential solution to a conflict as a Karen," he wrote. I asked why he was trying to fight with me if the relationship was over.

"Because if I don't act like an asshole you won't go away and leave me be."

In Manhattan, the owner of the Airbnb never showed up. It was late, so I asked Andrew if I could come back. "No," he wrote. I said that I couldn't find a place to stay. He said he doubted that I had looked especially hard. "Not only are you an asshole, but you're lazy," he wrote. I replied that I no longer cared what he thought of me, that he could keep insulting me. "Okay, I will," he wrote. "Thanks for the consent. Now you can't claim harassment."

He told me that he was calling a locksmith to change the locks. ("Amazing the service you get in New York—'be there in 15 minutes,' " he texted.) He told me that I could retrieve my things from the street the next day. He told me that he felt liberated. When I asked why he was acting this way, he insisted that I deserved it. He let me know that he'd had sex with someone while I was at a writing residency a few months earlier.

When I got back to Brooklyn, my keys still worked. I walked into my office, where I was planning to sleep. There was a dark stain on the couch. He had peed on it. I stared at the spot in disbelief while Andrew hurled insults that I no longer remember. I started calling friends.

“I’m having a problem, and I need someone on the phone with me,” I told the first friend who picked up.

“She’s exaggerating,” Andrew yelled.

My friend was calm. She told me that I needed to leave.

As I drove to her apartment, the texts and e-mails kept coming. “Like most liberals, the thing you were most upset by is property damage,” he wrote, with a crying-laughing emoji, referring to the couch. “Pretend to be about the cause only because it might net you a book deal.”

I stayed at my friend’s that night, then found a sublet in Manhattan. In the ensuing days, I waited to hear from Andrew. He did not write. Eventually, I wrote to him because I needed clothes. As we texted back and forth, I realized that what I was experiencing as a life-altering crisis was for him a vague annoyance. He didn’t ask where I was, or how I was doing—he did not care. His rage had been scary, but this utter indifference in the aftermath, which was not in the least feigned, produced in me a new kind of pain. I waited for any acknowledgment that I mattered, or any sign of remorse, but his attitude was imperious and cold. I again said that I was sorry and hoped for an apology in return.

“I am sorry for abusing you,” he finally wrote. “I came home furious with the intention of terrorizing you. I have never acted like that before in my life.” Then he added, “But you also played a part in it.”

He told me he was upset that I was telling people he was an abuser. I told him that I had done everything I could *not* to let my friends know he was kicking me out of the house, and that in any case I had not used the word “abuse.” Most of my friends and family were simply concerned. Because it wasn’t normal, what was happening. It wasn’t normal at all.

The possibility that Andrew was suffering a mental break as a reaction to having been arrested, or that he might be having a manic episode, occurred to me. I had seen it before in other people, and I knew what it looked like, but I doubted myself—he insisted that he had simply come to his senses and that his sudden shift in behavior was caused by me and our relationship. I went back home on a Saturday to get some things. In my absence, he had moved everything I owned into one room. But he had also left flowers and written a letter.

“I have been so angry I haven’t been able to process my feelings and understand what I’ve done,” the letter said. “I don’t want to break our family apart. I love our life. I love you. I will never love anyone the way I love you. I don’t know if we can fix this but we need to try.”

It was the last glimpse I had of the person who loved me. A few weeks later, I came home and the letter, which had been on my desk, was gone.

The next two months proceeded like a nightmare from which I couldn’t wake up. In the beginning, I stayed away from our home, but we continued to communicate. He told me that he had shaved his head, rearranged all the furniture, and built a climbing ramp for the cat. He told me that he had gone to a protest where crowds amassed in the streets on their bicycles instead of on foot, and that he’d had sex with a former co-worker afterward. Manhattan felt like exile.

One night, I missed Andrew and being home in Brooklyn so much that I just went back. I called to let him know. He was at an outdoor dance party, and agreed to come home only after I demanded it. I still was having trouble computing that I no longer mattered to him at all. He had talked about how good he was feeling, but when I walked into the house it was clear that he was in denial. The apartment was wrecked. Dirty dishes filled the sink. The ramp that he had built for the cat was a small piece of packing material stuck to the wall. Instead of taking out the trash, he had piled it all in one room. “What does it matter if the trash is inside or outside?” he asked me. “I’m redecorating. It doesn’t happen all at once.”

I spent the night anyway, relieved to be home again. He slept in the living room, on the couch. When I woke up in the morning, he sat there, weeping with emotion, and announced that he was going to give away his trust fund, write an article about it, and inspire a generation of wealthy millennials to do the same.

I decided to go stay with my parents, in New Hampshire. After ten days, I wrote to him that it seemed like he wanted a different life, and that I was ready to let go. “I’m not sure if I want to break up or not,” he responded.

Unable to accept that his cruelty toward me was real, I went back to live in our apartment. Why did it take me so long to understand? He told me that while I was gone he had again slept with the former co-worker. He told me he was thinking that he would rather be with someone younger, that he wasn’t ready for kids after all. He started texting me fantasies about people he wanted to pick up at bars. “I’m in the bossa stall where u fucked me,” he wrote, sending me a picture of himself in the bathroom. A lot of things had fallen apart between us. Sex was not one of them. My campaign of not getting angry ended when he told me that the sex was better with the other woman. I picked up one of his synthesizers and threw it on the floor. He charged me two hundred dollars for it on Venmo. Later, he tried to walk back what he had said. “I was just

trying to hurt you,” he said. “It wasn’t true.” I had no idea what was true anymore.

In August, Andrew’s speech began to accelerate again. His epiphanies came more frequently—he would talk about how Spotify exploited musicians, and about how his interpretations of house music, as a white man, had been acts of cultural appropriation. He got a job at a nonprofit with a social-justice mission and announced he had decided that once he started working, in the fall, he would be sober. “Why not be sober now?” I asked, hopeful. I had not done a single drug since the last rave we’d gone to in Bushwick. Any desire to alter my consciousness had vanished—reality had become so weird that it was as if I’d entered the wrong portal, out of the world I knew and into its bizarro twin.

The last night we slept together in a bed, I woke up in the middle of the night, agitated with longing. I knew that it was important that Andrew rest, that I shouldn’t wake him. I lay next to him, almost weeping with desire, until I fell asleep. In the morning, when we had sex for the last time, my longing was gone.

# IMAGINE



Cartoon by Roz Chast

That day, he was filled with energy. He went to play golf, then he went back out to play basketball. At night, I met him at Bossa. He ordered pizzas for the entire bar and spoke at a rapid clip, his pupils dilated. As we walked home, my brother called me. Andrew was on his bike, and he rode in circles around me, impatient. Once we were home, I went into another room to keep talking. When I got off the call, Andrew seemed anxious to show me something. He wheeled out his bicycle. He had attached all his golf clubs to it with zip ties. I looked at it, bewildered.

“I just rode it around the block,” he said. He was sweaty, breathless, and bleeding from one ankle. “It’s a prototype,” he explained. “Instead of using golf carts, people will be able to use their bicycles. There are all these people like me who feel guilty about playing golf, and this will make golf ecologically sustainable. It will change everything.”

I nodded, panic growing inside me. “I can’t take this any longer,” I said.

Andrew’s excitement turned to fury. He would show me, he said. He was going to patent his invention and manufacture it on a large scale. “Joe thought it was an amazing idea,” he said. Joe was the old man who cleaned the bar downstairs.

“I’m going to bed,” I said. “Please, let’s go to bed—we can talk about it in the morning.” I lay down. In his rearrangement of the apartment, he had moved the bed into the room closest to the train, which ran right by the building and made sleep impossible. He came in and stood in the doorway, then walked out again. At some point, he took off all his clothes, I guess to take a shower, and every five minutes he would open the door and stand there, naked, ranting about the bicycle golf cart.

I woke up in the morning around six, and he was gone. Hours later, he walked in, glowering, and accused me of having locked him out of the house the night before. I told him I hadn’t.

“You’re gaslighting me,” he responded. I didn’t know what to do. I was worried that he was going to hurt himself. I e-mailed his therapist. This made him even more furious. “You’re a Karen,” he said to me. “You’re a cop.”

That night, he went out for a drink with the woman he’d been sleeping with. I stood in the doorway, pleading with him not to go. He shoved me and I stumbled and fell, weeping. “That was your fault,” he said as he went out the door. “You were blocking my way.” (Andrew denies shoving me.) The door slammed, and I heard his footsteps retreat down the four flights of stairs. I lay on the floor, sobbing. I thought of women who seemed never to lose composure. I pictured Beyoncé, then Simone de Beauvoir. How was this happening to me?

It was hard to remember later why leaving was so difficult. I did not want to make Andrew mad. The idea that what he said or thought no longer had any relevance to me defied my comprehension. I felt isolated, unsure whom to turn to. I could not ask my parents to come to New York City, where more than twenty thousand people had already died of *COVID*, many of them their age. My brother was in California. Most of my friends were out of town, and, besides, I was ashamed to tell them that I'd gone back to him. But, also, I knew what I was giving up by leaving, which wasn't only about Andrew. It was about some fantasy of family which had become a delusion months ago, but which I could still pretend was possible. A middle-aged solitude I had always been scared of was coming, and it terrified me. I was wrong about a lot of things at that time, but I was right to be scared about that.

When I told my friends what was going on, they reminded me that the only thing I now had control over was limiting my exposure to him, and that it was imperative to get out. Andrew agreed to let me stay in the apartment on my own until the end of the month, but I knew that I had to leave sooner. And so, in the course of three days, I packed up my things, rented a storage unit, and booked movers. I patched the hole I had made in the door and hired a professional cleaner. Everything had to be right. My friends told me to record a video, in case I was accused of leaving the apartment in bad shape. In the video, I narrate my walk through the rooms. I start to cry toward the end. I place my keys on the dining-room table. I find the cat and say goodbye. I put on my shoes, and the door shuts behind me.

I wrote Andrew that I had moved out.

“For good?” he asked.

“Yes,” I wrote.

“Would’ve been nice to know that was your plan earlier,” he responded. “But whatever.” He said that he would remain on my health insurance through September, then figure something out. He sent me the money for the premium over Venmo, with a cigarette emoji.

I stopped responding to messages from him, and attempted to focus on work. Less than a week later, a teen-ager named Kyle Rittenhouse, armed with an AR-15-style rifle, shot and killed two people at an anti-police demonstration in Kenosha, Wisconsin, and I went there to document the aftermath. As I tried to report, I was getting e-mails from Andrew headed “K2.” K2 is a cheap psychoactive chemical that is sprayed on plant matter, which is then smoked. It was sold under the counter at a deli near our apartment to street users; empty foil bags of it littered the sidewalks, and a bad batch had once caused more than thirty people to be hospitalized in a single day. Andrew wrote that he had “hung out with homeless people on our roof and smoked K2 with them and learned the entire history of the drug here.” He said that he was going to write a book about “the simultaneous rise of ketamine and K2 and the differential treatment by the police and white people.” He posted an analogy on social media: “Cocaine: crack: ketamine: K2.”

From Wisconsin, I called a New York City mental-health helpline. A kind person answered. She asked my first name. I told her about Andrew and the e-mails about K2. I told her that I was worried. She said that the city could send someone to check on him. No, I said. No, it’s impossible. She gave me a list of outpatient clinics, and I let myself fantasize that he would call me and ask for help. I wrote down “Community Healthcare Crown Heights” and “Kingsboro Psychiatric Williamsburg Clinic” and their phone numbers. I thanked her and hung up without giving any identifying information. Then I reprimanded myself. It was over. He didn’t want my help.

On Labor Day, back in New York, I went to the beach. I posted a photo of the shore on social media and wrote, “Summer of heartbreak and violence, glad it’s over.” My phone lit up the next morning. It was Andrew accusing me of libel, even though I had not mentioned him by name. He sent me a link to a tweet he had just posted: “tfw your journalist ex asks you to attend a protest because she feels ‘unsafe’ and then, when the police start beating you, she flees to the protection of the cops, flashes her press badge, and then writes a series of tweets in order to go viral and promote her own brand.” I looked at the people who had liked the post, some of whom I’d thought of as friends.

A couple of weeks later, I learned that he had been hospitalized in a psych ward. I wasn’t told if he’d received a diagnosis of any kind. I didn’t hear from him again. (He told *The New Yorker* that he was diagnosed as having bipolar disorder, and that much of his behavior at the time was symptomatic of a manic episode.)

I no longer wrote about protests. Andrew’s accusations that I was a fraud rang in my ears. He had spoken with a borrowed vocabulary, using words such as “abuse,” “toxic,” “weaponize.” It was as if I had algorithmically generated a terrifying millennial edgelord from my own personal data points. I was left to convince myself of the integrity of my politics, which I was incapable of doing, because of course I was culpable.

A friend needed someone to drive a camper van back to Los Angeles from New York, and I offered to do it. New York was still largely shut down, and the weather was getting colder. There was no social world to replace the one I had lost, just a shuttered city and the relentless replay of the summer in my mind. I had no plan, just a need to get out of town. I stayed in state campgrounds on Lake Erie and Lake Michigan. In Utah, I found a backcountry campsite and spent three days walking through slot canyons and climbing rocks to look at the folds of the land, its patterns of sedimentation and uplift.

At an R.V. park outside Zion National Park, where I had stopped for a night, I began looking at Andrew's social media again. He had removed his all-caps rants; in fact, he had deleted almost everything. It had been two months since I moved out. His friends had told me that he had a new social circle, new roommates, a new girlfriend. As a mutual friend put it to me, "It was as if he had gone to Bed Bath & Beyond and bought a whole new life." I watched Instagram videos of him singing the Oompa Loompa song on a karaoke system that he had installed in our living room, a group of young people dancing to his music in our apartment. He had "black trans lives matter+++reparations" in an online bio, and was still attentively taking note of instances of cultural appropriation and social injustice, but the fire had died down. He was communicating in a normal register.

I thought that he might be ready to have a conversation about what had happened, and I texted him. I wrote that I was struggling and would like to talk. It turned out nothing had changed.

"I cannot ever be near you again," he wrote. He had set a boundary. I had to respect it. He had erased me from my own life. I was literally wandering alone in the desert while he was still living in Bushwick, in our home, happy. "I feel a lot better," he said.

When I reached California, I decided to stay for a while. This was why California existed, after all. I was surprised how much comfort I found in solitude. Now that the whole thing had ended, I wondered what I had been doing all those years.

I never looked him up again. He receded into the world like someone lost in a crowd. He would know people different from the ones we had known, and do different things. If I didn't look for him, he would no longer exist, so I stopped looking, and my life took on its own character once again. The rest of it now stretched before me. ♦

*This is drawn from “[Health and Safety: A Breakdown.](#)”*



*Emily Witt is a staff writer at The New Yorker and the author of “[Future Sex](#),” “[Nollywood: The Making of a Film Empire](#),” and the memoir “[Health and Safety](#).”*

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# Fiction

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By E. L. Doctorow | An indispensable part of the ceremony, of course, was the Civil War veteran, and at the time I'm telling about we still had one—a Confederate, naturally.

- **[“Kaho”](#)**

By Haruki Murakami | He may have been patiently waiting, for the longest time, for me to show up in front of him, she thought. Like an enormous spider waiting for its prey in the dark.

- **[“Opening Theory”](#)**

By Sally Rooney | Looking over at her, he starts to smile again—revising, she thinks, the presumption of failure.

- **[“The Hadal Zone”](#)**

By Annie Proulx | Arwen's last thought before sleep is that he is in a twisting cyclonic fall down through the ocean trench to become a compressed speck of matter. It feels good.

Fiction

# The Drummer Boy on Independence Day

By [E. L. Doctorow](#)

July 1, 2024



*Illustration by Leigh Guldig*

*This story was written in the mid-nineteen-fifties, after E. L. Doctorow, then in his twenties, had completed his military service in Germany. It was found by the biographer Bruce Weber with Doctorow's papers at the Fales Library and Special Collections, at New York University.*

In our town, as in most, we celebrated the Fourth of July with a parade around the square and a few speeches from the steps of City Hall. An indispensable part of the ceremony, of course, was the Civil War veteran, and at the time I'm telling about we still had one —a Confederate, naturally, an old man of bone and leather named John Sewetti. John had been a drummer boy with T. J. Jackson and was thought to have seen most of what happened in the Shenandoah Valley. But he never spoke about his experiences, and he must have been a hundred and two years old before he finally agreed to lead an Independence Day parade.

The year he accepted the invitation, the Parade Committee, which had offered it to him by custom, nearly swallowed its collective cigar. John usually turned callers from his door, and, by his own custom, he had refused for decades to have anything to do with the holiday. The fact is, he wasn't an easy subject for town pride: in the first place, when, on each birthday, he was asked to what he attributed his long life, he always said his genes; in the second, he was known to hate children; and, in the third, he was so old that his wrinkles had smoothed out again and he had the face of a beautiful, toothless girl.

[Read an interview with E. L. Doctorow's biographer for the story behind the story.](#)

Or maybe it was his clouded, angry eyes or his small head, tucked in the shadow of a humped shoulder, that made him inaccessible. The only person to whom he ever talked willingly was his daughter, a seventy-year-old maiden, who cared for him in a peeling wooden house near the center of town. In the early mornings, she used to sit him on the brown front porch, hung with a broken trellis and edged with weeds and wildflowers, so he could watch the sun the first half of the day; at noon, after his nap, she'd walk him around to the back and sit him down there. He'd wait for the sun to come over the roof, and then follow it down past the railroad yard and the ball-bearing factory until, finally, it

disappeared. No one could tell the clock by him; no one could quote an epigram of his; no one could ever remember his being a friend of their daddy—or even their granddaddy.

I don't know whether you'd remember the Civil War veterans in your own parades. They usually rode in an open car, didn't they, gazing blankly from behind their hats and medals, like monkeys dressed up to look cute? I guess the old man knew the impression he wanted to make: he agreed to the parade only on the condition that he could walk, and only if he didn't have to wear his uniform. There was some objection, of course—Lindsay Grayson, the head of our American Legion, swore he doubted that the old man was a veteran after all, since what veteran wouldn't wear his uniform? There was even talk of importing someone from the other end of Caldwell County—a man was said to live there who had really fought, not just drummed, and who had a letter of commendation signed by Longstreet. But the talk died soon—we are a people sunk in propriety, however we struggle—and when the Fourth came around it was John Sewetti who led the parade. I'll never forget the sight.

John was almost too old to stand up, let alone march. And his maiden daughter had to hold his elbow while he stepped slowly up the middle of the street, followed by the mayor, the Firemen's Band, the Daughters of the Confederacy, and the rest. Nobody could march at that pace, and pretty soon the band couldn't keep its beat while it shuffled so, so it stopped playing then, and before long the whole parade squashed together and became an embarrassed, overdressed clump of people herding along behind this old man, like disciples following a Greek philosopher. Lindsay Grayson was fit to be tied.

But old John *had* the parade, and the whole town, for that matter; he wouldn't give it up even when he finally reached the City Hall steps. He didn't climb the whitewashed speakers' platform but stood off to the side and turned around, facing the embarrassed

confusion in back of him. By then, things were so out of their arrangement that everyone just stopped; and with him looking, half-blind but stalwart, straight ahead of him, there was nothing for anyone to do but scuff a bit and grow quiet. The tuba player slipped his big bell off his shoulder and the honor guard leaned on their flagstaffs. In the back of the crowd, there were still some boys and girls laughing and skittish, but John began to talk, that way old people talk, without dreaming that anybody might not be prepared to listen.

I have often told the story of what happened that day, and each time, in the telling, I see John Sewetti standing in the middle of that trapped, crumpled parade of people, as if he should have been wearing a sheet and sandals, the way those walking saints of India do, or holding a staff and carrying two stone tablets under his arm. He didn't belong in our town that hot morning—or, rather, he didn't seem to belong there. It was almost a noon sun above us, and there was just a shiver of a breeze—not enough to stir the big flags on the empty speakers' platform, just enough to flap the little Confederate flags attached to the fenders of cars parked around the square. Every store was closed but for the Walgreen's next to Mayor Cole's Buick agency, and, across the green, spectators were stooping under the wooden cordons and scurrying over to mingle with the marchers. John piped out his words on the breaths he took between phrases. I doubt if more than the first few in the crowd could hear John, or understand him, toothless as he was, but the whole town listened.

“At Manassas,” he said, “we waited reserve for six hours . . . and then we got called up to the line . . . and, marching up, we passed the field surgery. I drummed by a hill of arms and legs . . . cut off and piled higher than I was.”



*"I'm just lying here quietly in the dark trying to minimize my carbon footprint."*  
Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

Next to John, his daughter stood shyly, holding his elbow. She looked more like his mother than his daughter, slack-bosomed in a black dress and smiling apologetically at no one in particular—as if she had heard these words a thousand times in the dim damp must of their house and felt foolish about his bringing them out into the sun.

“Close on that,” he went on, “Zekial Shuford to the left of me spin and fall with a ball in his neck. . . . He bled at the mouth . . . and I tried to close the hole with my hand or to pluck at the ball . . . but he died first. Right then I went down to a creek . . . and took my sticks and broke them and threw them in the creek . . . and I stepped in my drum and threw *it* in . . . and then I washed my hands of the blood. And then I walked on home. . . . Now, Jeb Stuart was a fool. . . . He believed we were in glory. Now, Mr. Lee . . . he didn’t make that mistake Jeb Stuart made, you all make. . . . He knew a man had to fight sometimes . . . but he knew it weren’t nothing to drum about.”

John smacked his lips a few times and looked as if he had more to say. But he lurched forward suddenly and his smiling, squinting daughter took a firmer hold on his arm and they moved into the

crowd. Everyone fell back, and only when he passed them did people look at one another and begin to speak; and he was already at the sparse edge of the crowd before Lindsay Grayson, who was Parade Chairman, and the mayor conferred quickly and tried to save the day for tradition. A minute later, a police car pulled out from across the square and drove around alongside John. Ed Rainey, the police chief, tipped his hat and offered to drive the old man to his house; John shook his head but his daughter nodded, thinking probably her father looked flushed and overtired. So Ed and one of his patrolmen picked John up and put him in the car, and helped the daughter in. The doors closed and a moment later John Sewetti was gone from the square.

After that, Lindsay Grayson and the mayor and the high-school principal and Mrs. Cox, the head of the local United Daughters, got up on the speakers' platform and the band fell in and the ceremonies got going. Things weren't right, though: the microphone was troublesome and kicked back a hum; the sun was hot; and after the band played the anthem and "Dixie" a lot of cars pulled out of the square and kids wandered off down the streets. The counter boy at the Walgreen's had to stop watching things, because people were already coming into the store for a cherry smash.

The afternoons of most holidays are depressing, and that July Fourth afternoon was as disquieting as any. The square was hot and littered and empty, and people stayed in their houses after the mealtime, napping or fanning themselves. Everyone in town must have heard one version or another of John Sewetti's speech by lunchtime, but if there was any consensus of opinion it was slow forming. Only after six o'clock, when the sun's edge had worn off and Joe Holler was able to open up his tavern by special county dispensation, were the town's regulars able to get together gracefully and ask one another what their opinion should be.

By eight o'clock, the square was coming to life again; men taking their families out for a ride on the highway stopped in front of Joe's, left their engines idling and their doors open, and went in for a quick beer to hear what was being said. By nine o'clock, a majority opinion had crystallized, and, by midnight, when Fred Warren, the freight dispatcher, went on shift down at the depot, he carried the opinion with him for the ear of any trainman who would pass through. Considering old John's silence and solitude for so many decades, considering that he'd never given anyone much chance to make of him a parade doll, I suppose there was a certain appeal to the idea that his speech in the morning had been a confession of an eighty-year-old desertion.

Of course, not everybody got as self-righteous about it as Lindsay Grayson; beefy and red with beer, Lindsay harangued well into July 5th about how it was a long-standing mystery cleared up—why the old man never talked of the War Between the States or wore his grays. He even cornered me at my office late in the evening and told me to do an editorial on "The Shame of Our Town"—I got away from him only when Mrs. Grayson marched in and took him home. But if not everybody was as militant as Lindsay they still pretty well agreed with him: Reverend Harper, the Methodist preacher, spoke in church the next Sunday about charity and forgiveness and why we shouldn't always judge a boy by a man's standards.

I did what I could for what I thought was right; I printed John Sewetti's speech just as I took it down when he made it. And, in the same issue, I ran an editorial on what I believed it signified. But if one man agreed with me he never let me know. I suppose I have yet to learn how to make my points in this county where I was born.

John himself never read a newspaper. And if he was aware at all of how he shifted a few sands under us that day, he never let on. Every morning through the summer, he came out on that small shade porch of his, and every noon, after his nap, he went around in

back. Then, in October, he died, and that was the end of our drummer boy. A great-grandson of his came up from Charlotte and handled the details and then took John's old daughter back with him to Charlotte. (There was nobody at the cemetery but the three of us, though I doubt that the old man would have cared.) The following July Fourth, the Parade Committee came up with that veteran from Caldwell County and they rode him, uniformed, in an open car with the mayor and Lindsay Grayson. I covered the parade, of course—I always like to report on Independence Day in our town. ♦

*E. L. Doctorow* was an author and a *New Yorker* contributor. His novels include “*The March*.”

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Fiction

# Kaho

By [Haruki Murakami](#)

July 1, 2024



*Photograph by Tobias Nicolai for The New Yorker*

“I’ve dated all kinds of women in my life,” the man said, “but I have to say I’ve never seen one as ugly as you.”

This came after they’d had dessert, while they were waiting for coffee to be served.

It took a moment for his words to sink in. Three, maybe four seconds. The statement came out of nowhere, and Kaho couldn't immediately read his intentions. As the man was pronouncing these blunt, alarming words, he was smiling the whole time. A gentle, mostly friendly type of smile. There wasn't even a hint of humor in what he said. He wasn't making a joke; he was completely serious.

The only way that Kaho could think of reacting was to take the napkin from her lap, toss it onto the table, grab her purse from the chair beside her, stand up, and, without a word, leave the restaurant. That would, most likely, be the best way to deal with the situation.

[Read an interview with the author for the story behind the story.](#)

But somehow Kaho couldn't. One reason for this—one that occurred to her only later on—was that she was genuinely startled; a second reason was curiosity. She was angry—of course she was. How could she not be? But, more than that, she wanted to know what in the world this man was trying to tell her. Was she *really* that ugly? And was there something *beyond* this remark?

“Saying you’re the ugliest may be a bit of an overstatement,” the man added after a pause. “But you are the plainest woman I’ve seen, no doubt about it.”

Kaho pursed her lips and silently studied the man’s face, her eyes fixed on him.

Why did this man feel the need to say something like that? On a blind date (which this sort of was), if you don’t like the other person that much, then you can just not get in touch afterward. Simple enough. Why insult her to her face?

The man was probably ten years or so older than Kaho, handsome, his clothes spotless and impeccable. He wasn’t exactly Kaho’s

type, though he looked like he came from a good family. He had a photogenic face—that might be a more accurate way of putting it. Add a couple of inches to his height and he could have been an actor. The restaurant he chose, too, was cozy and stylish, the dishes tasty and refined. He wasn’t what you’d call talkative, but was decent enough at keeping a conversation moving—and there had been no awkward silences. (Oddly, though, when she looked back on it later, she couldn’t remember what they’d talked about.) During dinner, she’d found herself warming to him. She had to admit it. And then, out of nowhere—this. What was happening here?

“You might find this strange,” he said in a calm voice, after two espressos had been brought to their table. It was as if he could read Kaho’s mind. He dropped a small sugar cube into his espresso and quietly stirred it. “Why did I have dinner to the very end with someone I find ugly—or maybe I should say, whose face I don’t like? After we’d drunk the first glass of wine, I should have been able to just cut the evening short. It’s a complete waste of time, isn’t it, to take an hour and a half and eat a three-course dinner? And why, at the very tail end of the evening, do I have to say something like that?”

Kaho remained silent, staring at the face of the man across the table. Her hands clutched the napkin in her lap tightly.

“I think it’s because I couldn’t stifle my curiosity,” the man said. “Probably I wanted to know what a really homely woman like you was thinking, how being so homely actually affects your life.”

And was your curiosity satisfied? Kaho wondered. Of course, she didn’t ask it out loud.

“And was my curiosity satisfied?” the man asked, after taking a sip of coffee. There was no mistake here: he could read her thoughts. Like an anteater licking an anthill clean with its long, thin tongue.

The man shook his head a fraction and returned his cup to the saucer. And answered his own question. “No, it wasn’t.”

He raised his hand, called the waiter over, and paid the bill. He turned to Kaho, bowed slightly, and went straight out of the restaurant. He didn’t even look back.

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Truth be told, since she was little Kaho had never been that interested in her looks. The face she saw in the mirror didn’t strike her as either beautiful or especially ugly. It didn’t disappoint her or make her happy. Her lack of interest in her face stemmed from the fact that she didn’t feel that her looks were affecting her life in any way. Or perhaps it was better to say that she’d never had an opportunity to know if they were. She was an only child, and her parents had always showered her with an affection that was likely unconnected to how pretty she might or might not be.

Through adolescence, Kaho remained indifferent to her looks. Most of her girlfriends brooded over their appearance and tried every makeup trick in the book to improve it, but she couldn’t understand this urge. She spent very little time in front of the mirror. Her only goal was to keep her body and her face appropriately clean and neat. And that was never a particularly difficult task.

She attended a coed public high school and had a few boyfriends. If the boys in her class had voted for their favorite female classmate, she would never have won—she wasn’t that type. Still, for some reason, in every class she was in, there were always one or two boys who were interested in her and showed it. Kaho had no clue what it was about her that interested them.

Even after she graduated from high school and started attending an art school in Tokyo, she seldom lacked for boyfriends. So there was no need for her to worry about whether she was attractive or not. In

that sense, you could say she was lucky. She always found it quite odd that friends who were far better-looking than she was agonized over their looks, in some cases undergoing expensive plastic surgery. Kaho could never fathom this.

And so when, a little after her twenty-sixth birthday, this man she'd never met before bluntly told her she was ugly, Kaho was deeply confused. Instead of feeling shock at his words, she was, quite simply, unsettled and bewildered.

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It was her editor, a woman named Machida, who'd introduced her to the man. Machida worked at a small publishing company in Kanda, mainly putting out books for children. She was four years older than Kaho, had two children herself, and edited the children's books that Kaho created. Kaho's picture books didn't sell all that well, but between those and her freelance work doing illustrations for magazines she made enough to get by. At the time of the date, Kaho had just broken up with a man her own age whom she'd gone out with for a little over two years, and was feeling unusually down. The breakup had left a bad taste. And, partly because of this, her work wasn't going well. Aware of the situation, Machida set up the blind date for her. It might be just the change of pace you need, she told her.

Three days after Kaho met the man, Machida called her.

"So how was the date?" she wasted no time in asking.

Kaho gave a vague "Hmm," skirting a direct answer, and then asked a question of her own. "What kind of person is he, anyway?"

Machida said, "Honestly, I don't know that much about him. Sort of a friend-of-a-friend kind of thing. I think he's near forty, single, and works in investments of some kind. He's from a good

background, and good at his job. No criminal record, as far as I know. I met him once and we talked for a few minutes, and I thought he was handsome and seemed pleasant enough. He's a little on the short side, I'll admit. But then Tom Cruise isn't that tall, either. Not that I've ever seen Tom Cruise in person."

"But why would a man so handsome, pleasant, and good at his job have to go to the trouble of going on a blind date?" Kaho asked.  
"Wouldn't he have plenty of women he could go out with?"

Machida said, "I suppose so. He's very sharp, efficient at his job, but I happened to hear that his personality is a little quirky. I decided not to mention that, since I didn't want to prejudice you before you met him."

"A little quirky," Kaho said, repeating the words. She shook her head. Could you really call that *a little quirky*?

"Did you exchange phone numbers?" Machida asked.

Kaho paused a moment before replying. Exchange phone numbers?  
"No, we didn't," she said finally.

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Three days after this, Machida called her again.

"I'm calling about the handsome Mr. Sahara. Can you talk?" she said. Sahara was the name of the man with whom she had the blind date. Pronounced the same way as the desert. Kaho put down her drawing pen and shifted the receiver from her left hand to her right.  
"Sure. Go ahead."

"Last night, he called me," Machida said. "He said he'd like to see you again, and wondered if you two could talk. He sounded pretty serious."

Kaho couldn't help but gasp, and was silent for a while. *He wants to see me again so the two of us can talk?* Kaho couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"Kaho-chan," Machida said, sounding concerned. "Are you listening?"

"Yes, I'm listening," Kaho said.

"He seemed to like you. So what should I tell him?"

Common sense dictated that she say no. He had, after all, said such horrible things right to her face. Why would she ever need to see that kind of person again? But she couldn't reach a decision at this point. Several doubts converged in her brain, all jumbled together.

"Can I think about it?" she asked Machida. "Let me call you back."

•

Kaho ended up seeing Sahara one more time, that Saturday afternoon. They arranged to meet during the day, for a short time, with no meal or alcohol involved, at a place where they could talk quietly, though there could be other people nearby—these were Kaho's conditions, which Machida conveyed to him.

"Odd conditions for a second date," Machida commented. "You're being extremely cautious."

"I suppose," Kaho said.

"You haven't hidden a wrench in your purse or anything, right?" Machida said, and laughed happily.

That might not be such a bad idea, Kaho thought.

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The last time they'd met, Sahara had looked as if he were on his way home from work, in a nice dark suit and tie, but this time he had on a casual weekend outfit—a thick brown leather jacket, slim jeans, and well-worn-in work boots. Sunglasses stuck in his breast pocket. Quite a stylish look.

Kaho arrived a little later than the set time, and when she got to the hotel lobby Sahara was already there, texting someone. When he spotted Kaho, a faint smile rose to his lips and he closed the leather flap on his cell-phone cover. There was a motorcycle helmet on the seat beside him.

"I ride an 1800cc BMW," Sahara said. "Of all the BMWs, this one has the highest displacement and the engine makes the nicest, boldest sound."

Kaho didn't say anything. I couldn't care less what you ride—a BMW motorcycle, a tricycle, or an oxcart—she silently muttered to herself.

"I bet you're not at all interested in motorcycles, but I thought I'd mention it anyway, just F.Y.I.," Sahara added.

This guy knows how to read my feelings, Kaho thought again.

A waitress came over and she ordered coffee. Sahara ordered chamomile tea.

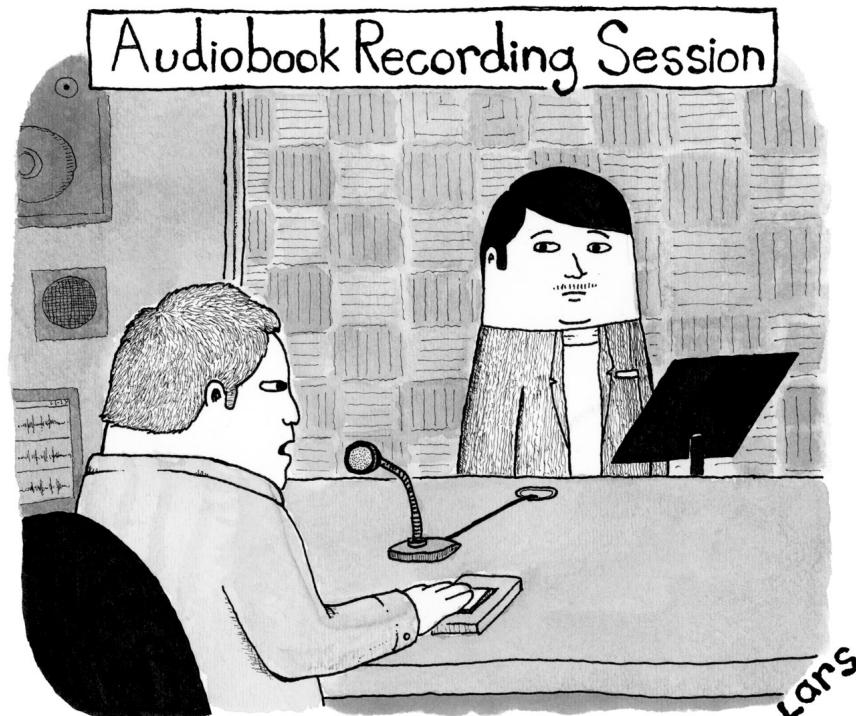
"By the way, have you ever been to Australia?" Sahara asked.

Kaho shook her head. She'd never been to Australia.

"Do you like spiders?" Sahara asked, forming a fan in the air with both hands. "Arachnids? The kind with eight legs?"

Kaho didn't reply. She hated spiders more than anything, but wasn't about to reveal that.

Sahara said, "When I went to Australia, I saw a spider the size of a baseball mitt. Just looking at it gave me the creeps. Made me shudder. But the locals actually welcome them into their homes. You know why?"



*"Instead of careful interpretation of the prose, maybe try pronouncing even the most basic words like an insane person?"*

*Cartoon by Lars Kenseth*

Kaho remained silent.

"Because they're nocturnal and they eat cockroaches. They're what you'd call useful, beneficial bugs. Still, imagine having spiders that eat cockroaches. I'm always amazed by how clever and magnificent the structure of the food chain is."

The coffee and the herbal tea came, and for a while the two of them sat before their drinks without speaking.

"I imagine you find it kind of odd," Sahara said after a few minutes, his tone formal. "That I wanted to see you again like this."

Again Kaho didn't respond. She didn't dare to.

"And I must say I'm truly surprised that you would agree to see me again," Sahara said. "I feel thankful, but I was astonished that you'd agree to it after that rude thing I said. No—what I said went beyond rude. It was an unforgivable insult that tramples on a woman's dignity. When I say that to women, most of them never agree to see me again. Which is only to be expected, really."

*Most of them*—Kaho repeated his words in her mind. That shocked her.

"Most of them?" she said, speaking for the first time. "You mean that you've said the same thing to all the women you meet? You're saying . . ."

"Exactly," Sahara readily admitted. "I tell all the women I meet exactly what I said to you: 'I've never seen anyone as ugly as you.' Usually when we're enjoying dinner and dessert has just been served. With this kind of thing, timing is everything."

"But why?" Kaho asked, her voice dry. "Why do you have to do something like that? I don't get it. You hurt people for no reason? You spend time and money just to insult them?"

Sahara tilted his head a little and said, "Why—that's the real question. It's too complicated to explain. Instead, why don't we talk about the *effects* such a statement has. What always surprises me is the reaction of the women I say that to. You might think that, having those awful words said right to their face, most people would fly into a rage, or else laugh it off. And there are people like that. But not that many, really. The majority of women are . . . simply hurt. Deeply, and for a long time. In some cases, they blurt out something weird. Something hard to comprehend."

Silence reigned for a while. After a time, Kaho broke it. “And you’re saying you enjoy seeing those reactions?”

“No, I don’t enjoy it. I just find it strange. How when women who are obviously beautiful, or at least well above average, are told to their face that they’re ugly how amazingly flustered or hurt they get.”

The coffee she hadn’t touched, steam rising from it, was steadily growing cold.

“I think you’re sick,” Kaho said firmly.

Sahara nodded. “I guess so. You’re probably right. I might be sick. Not to excuse myself or anything, but in a sick person’s eyes it’s the world that’s even sicker. Right? Listen—nowadays people severely attack lookism. Most people loudly denounce beauty contests. Say the words ‘ugly woman’ in public and you’ll get beaten up. But check out TV. And magazines. They’re full of ads for cosmetics, plastic surgery, and spa treatments. No matter how you look at it, it’s a ridiculous, meaningless double standard. A farce, really.”

“But that doesn’t justify hurting other people for no reason, does it?” Kaho countered.

“Yes, you’re right,” Sahara said. “I am sick. That’s an undeniable fact. But, depending on how you look at it, being sick can also be enjoyable. Sick people have their own special place that only sick people can enjoy. Like a Disneyland for the disturbed. And, fortunately for me, I have the time and money to enjoy that place.”

Without a word, Kaho stood up. Time to put an end to this. She couldn’t talk to this man anymore.

“Hold on a sec,” Sahara said to Kaho as she stood there. “Could you give me just a bit more of your time? It won’t take long. Five minutes is enough. I’d like you to stay and hear me out.”

Kaho hesitated for a few seconds, then took her seat again. She didn’t want to, but there was something in the man’s voice she found hard to resist.

“What I wanted to say to you was that the reaction you had was different from anyone else’s,” Sahara said. “When you were assaulted by those awful words, you didn’t panic, didn’t respond in anger, didn’t laugh it off, and didn’t look so hurt by it. Without letting any of these trite emotions take over, you just gazed at me. As if you were studying some bacteria under a microscope. You’re the only one who’s ever reacted that way. I was impressed. And I thought, Why doesn’t this woman feel hurt? If there is something that would deeply wound her, well, then, what is it?”

“So you’re doing this,” Kaho said, “setting up these elaborate meetings, over and over, just to see women’s reactions? That’s it?”

The man inclined his head. “There haven’t been all that many. Just when the opportunity presents itself. I never use a dating app or anything. Things that are too simple are boring. People I know introduce me, and I meet only women whose backgrounds I know about. Old-fashioned, *omiai*-type arranged meetings are the best. The old-school approach. I find that exciting.”

“And then you insult the woman?” Kaho said.

Sahara didn’t respond. He merely gave a smile that soon subsided. He held his hands out in front of his chest, studying them for a while. As if checking whether there had been any changes in the lines in his palms.

“I was wondering if you’d go riding with me on my motorcycle,” he said, looking up. “I brought along an extra helmet for you. The weather’s good today, and we can enjoy tooling around. I just passed five thousand kilometres on the odometer, and the horizontally opposed engine BMW’s so proud of is tuned to perfection.”

An undeniable rage boiled up inside Kaho. It had been some time since she’d felt this angry. Or perhaps it was the first time ever. *We can enjoy tooling around?* What the hell was he thinking?

“I’ll pass,” Kaho said, keeping her emotions under wraps, her voice as calm as she could manage. “Do you know the No. 1 thing I want to do right now?”

Sahara shook his head. “What would that be?”

“To put some distance between me and you, even a little distance. And scrub off this filth that’s on me.”

“I see,” Sahara said. “Indeed. Well. I guess I’ll have to unfortunately give up on tooling around this time. But what do you think? You think wanting to get some distance from me will work out?”

“What does that mean?”

Somewhere a baby cried. The man glanced in that direction, then looked right at Kaho.

“Before long, I think you’ll understand,” he said. “Once I’m interested in people, I don’t let them go that easily. And you might find this surprising, but, in terms of distance, we’re not that far apart, you and I. See, people can’t escape the structure of the chain. No matter how much they don’t want to see it, even if they want to have nothing to do with it. Swallowing something and being

swallowed are two sides of the same coin. Front and back, credit and debit. That's the way the world is. We will probably, I think, meet again somewhere."

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I should never have seen this man again, Kaho thought. She was sure of this as she strode quickly toward the exit. When Machida called me that time, I should have made that clear. "No, thanks," I should have said. "I never want to see that person again."

It was curiosity. Curiosity that led me here. I think I wanted to find out what in the world this man was aiming at, what he wanted. I think I wanted to know that. But that was a mistake. He used curiosity as bait to skillfully lure me in, just as a spider would. A chill ran up her spine. I want to go somewhere warm, she thought. The desire couldn't be stronger. A southern island, with a white beach. Lie down there, close my eyes, shut off my mind, and let the sunlight wash over me.

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Several weeks went by. Kaho, of course, wanted to drive any thoughts of that man, Sahara, from her mind as soon as she could. Shove this pointless episode, one that had nothing to do with her life, somewhere she'd never see it again. And yet, as she worked at her desk at night, the man's face suddenly, unexpectedly, rose up in her mind. Smiling faintly, gazing, for no particular reason, at his long, delicate fingers.

She started spending more time in front of the mirror, much more than she ever had. She'd stand in front of the bathroom mirror, carefully checking every detail of her face, as if reconfirming who she was. And it occurred to her that she wasn't much interested in any of it. This was definitely her face, yet she could find nothing that dictated that it had to be *her* face. She even started to envy her

friends who'd had plastic surgery. They knew—or at least believed they knew—which part of their face, surgically altered, would make them more beautiful, more satisfied with their looks.

My own life may be taking a clever revenge on me: she couldn't help thinking this. When the right time comes, my life may simply take away what I owe. Credit and debit. Kaho understood that, if she'd never met that guy, Sahara, she never would have thought this way. He may have been patiently waiting, for the longest time, for me to show up in front of him, she thought. Like an enormous spider waiting for its prey in the dark.

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Occasionally, a large motorcycle would speed by on the street outside her apartment late at night, when everyone was asleep. Whenever she heard the low, dry throbbing, the drumbeat of the engine, her body trembled ever so slightly. Her breathing grew ragged, and cold sweat oozed from her armpits.

"I brought along an extra helmet for you," the man had said.

She pictured herself riding on the back of that BMW motorcycle. And she imagined where that powerful machine would take her. What kind of place would it take me to?

"In terms of distance, we're not that far apart, you and I," the man had said.

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Six months after that strange blind date, Kaho wrote a new children's book. One night, she was dreaming she was at the bottom of a deep sea, and when she woke up she felt as if she were suddenly being tossed to the surface, floating up from the sea

bottom. She went right to her desk and wrote the story. It didn't take long to finish.

The story was about a girl who goes in search of her face. At a certain point, the girl had lost her face; someone had stolen it while she was asleep. So she had to do something to get it back.

But she couldn't remember at all what her face had looked like. She didn't even know if it was a beautiful face or an ugly one, round or thin. She asked her parents, her siblings, but for some reason no one could recall what sort of face it was. Or else no one was willing to tell her.

So the girl decided to set out alone on a face-seeking journey. For the time being, she found a face that would fit her, and pasted it on where her own face should be. Without a face of some kind, people she met along the way would find her strange.

The girl walked all over the world. Climbed high mountains, crossed deep rivers, walked across vast deserts, managed to make her way through savage jungles. She was sure that if she came across her face she'd recognize it right away. Since this is a very important part of my existence, she told herself. As she travelled, she met many people, and had all kinds of odd experiences. She was nearly trampled by a herd of elephants, was attacked by a huge black spider, was almost kicked by wild horses.

A long time passed as she walked everywhere, examining countless faces as she went, yet she never found her own face. What she saw were always the faces of others. She didn't know what to do. And before she knew it she was no longer a girl but an adult woman. Would she never be able to find her own face again? She fell into despair.

As she was sitting at the tip of a cape in a northern land, crying in utter hopelessness, a tall young man in a fur coat appeared and sat

down beside her. His long hair gently waved in the wind from the sea. The young man gazed into her face and, smiling broadly, said this: “I’ve never seen a woman with such a lovely face as yours.”

By then, the face she’d pasted on had become her true face. All sorts of experiences, all kinds of emotions and thoughts, had joined together to create her face. This was her face, and her face alone. She and the young man were married, and lived happily in this northern land.

For some reason—and Kaho herself wasn’t at all sure why—this book seemed to spark something in the hearts of children, especially girls in their early teens. These young readers excitedly followed the girl’s adventures and trials as she set off into the wide world in search of her face. And when, in the end, the girl found her face and discovered inner peace, readers breathed a sigh of relief. The writing was simple, Kaho’s illustrations symbolic, monochrome line drawings.

And that tale—the work of writing and illustrating it—brought a kind of emotional healing to Kaho as well. I can live in this world as me, just as I am, she realized. There’s nothing to fear. The dream she’d seen at the bottom of the sea had taught her that. The anxiety she’d felt in the middle of the night grew fainter. Though she couldn’t say it was gone completely.

The book sold steadily, through word of mouth, and got a good review in a newspaper. Machida was thrilled.

“I’m thinking this children’s book may become a long-term best-seller. I just get that feeling,” Machida said. “It’s a completely different style from your other books, which surprised me at first. But I wonder, where did you get the idea for it?”

After thinking about it for a moment, Kaho replied. “In a very dark, deep place,” she said. ♦

*(Translated, from the Japanese, by Philip Gabriel.)*

*Haruki Murakami* has published more than a dozen novels, including “[1Q84](#)” and “[Norwegian Wood](#).” His latest, “The City and Its Uncertain Walls,” is due out in English in November.

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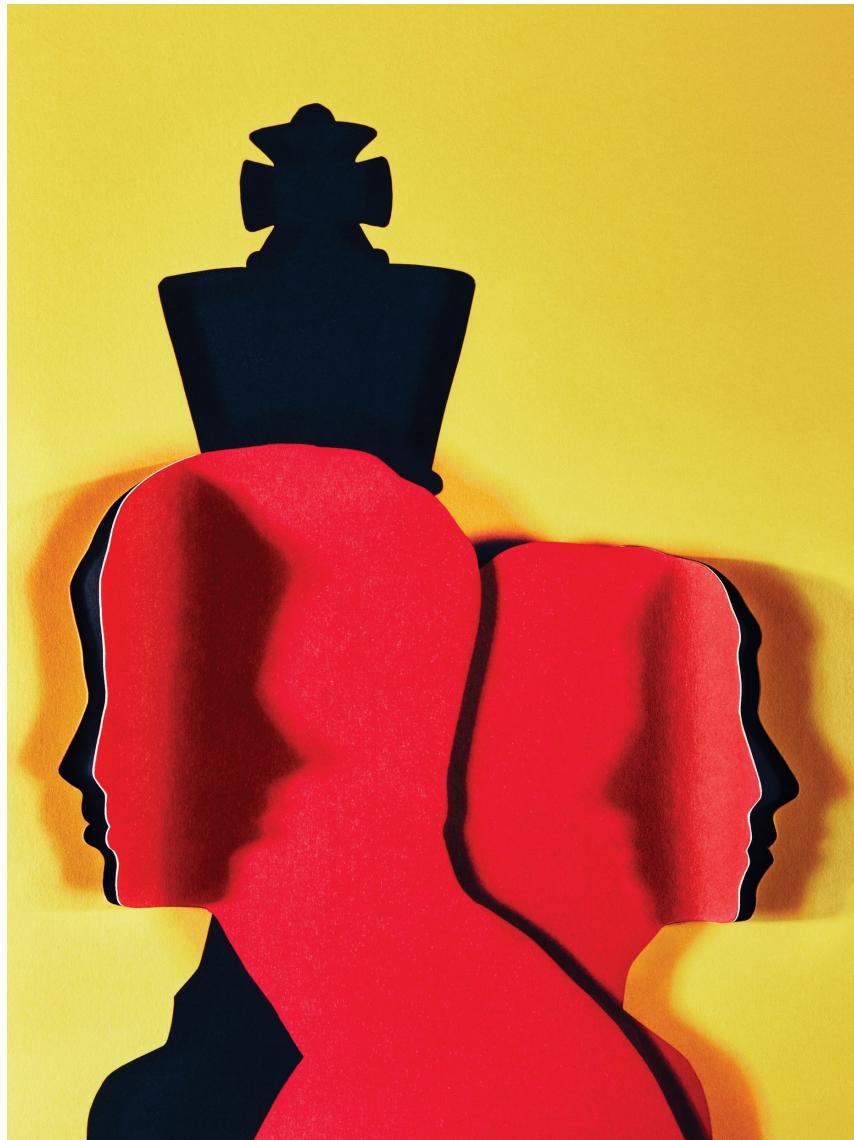
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# Opening Theory

By [Sally Rooney](#)

July 1, 2024



*Photograph by Alma Haser for The New Yorker*

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*Audio:* Sally Rooney reads.

Ivan is standing on his own in the corner while the men from the chess club move the chairs and tables around. The men are saying things to one another like: Back a bit there, Tom. Mind yourself

now. Alone, Ivan is standing, wanting to sit down but uncertain which of the chairs need to be rearranged still and which are in their correct places already. This uncertainty arises because the way in which the men are moving the furniture corresponds to no specific method Ivan has been able to discern. A familiar arrangement is slowly beginning to emerge—a central U shape composed of ten tables, with ten chairs along the outer rim of the shape, and a general seating area around the outside—but the process by which the men are reaching this arrangement seems haphazard. Standing on his own in the corner, Ivan thinks with no especially intense focus about the most efficient method of arranging, say, a random distribution of a given number of tables and chairs into the aforementioned shape. It's something he has thought about before, while standing in other corners, watching other people move similar furniture around similar indoor spaces: the different approaches you could use, if you happened to be writing a computer program to maximize process efficiency. The accuracy of these particular men would be, Ivan thinks, pretty low, like actually very low.

While he's thinking, a door opens—not the main town-hall door but a smaller fire-exit door at the side—and a woman enters. She's carrying a set of keys. The other men hardly seem to notice her entrance: they just glance over in her direction and then away again. No one says anything to her. It's probably one of those situations other people find instantly comprehensible, and everyone other than Ivan has already worked out at a glance exactly who this woman is and why she's here. She happens to be very attractive, he notices, which makes her presence in the room all the more mysterious. After a moment, Ivan sees that the other men, although they have not directly acknowledged the woman, seem to be behaving differently, lifting the tables with heftier motions of their arms and shoulders, as if the tables have become heavier since she walked in. Showing off in front of her, he realizes, and he even seems to see her smiling to herself, maybe because she has come to

the same conclusion or maybe because they're all pretending to ignore her. Now, perhaps noticing Ivan watching, she looks back at him, a friendly kind of relieved look, and with her keys in her hand she approaches the corner where he's standing.

Hello there, she says. My name is Margaret. I'm a member of staff here. I'm sorry to ask, but do you know whether the little man has arrived yet? This chess prodigy. I think we're supposed to keep an eye on him.

### **Podcast: The Writer's Voice**

*[Listen to Sally Rooney read “Opening Theory.”](#)*

He looks down at her. She has said all this in a smiling, funny, almost apologetic tone, as if sharing a joke with him. She looks somewhat older than he is, he thinks, not a lot older—in her thirties, he would guess. Ah, he says. You mean Ivan Koubek?

That's right, she says. Is he here?

Yes. I am him.

She gives an embarrassed flutter of laughter at this, lifting her hand to her chest, jangling her set of keys. Oh, my God, she says. I'm so sorry. Crossed wires, obviously. I thought . . . I don't know why. I thought you were about twelve.

Well, I was once, he says.

She laughs again at that, sincerely it seems, and the feeling of making her laugh is so nice that he also starts to smile, even though he knows she'll see his braces that way. Ah, that explains it, she says. No, I am sorry, how silly of me. Did you have an O.K. time getting here?

He goes on looking at her a moment, and then, as if belatedly hearing her question, he replies quickly: Oh, right, it was O.K. I got

the bus.

Still gently smiling, she says: And I was told you might need a lift back to your accommodation after the event, is that right?

He pauses again. Her eyes are friendly and encouraging. Definitely it would be creepy of him to read too much into her friendly looks, since she's literally at work right now, being paid to stand here talking to him. Although, he remembers, he is also kind of at work, being paid to stand here talking to her, even if it's not really the same. Yeah, he says. I don't know where it is exactly, the accommodation. But I guess I could get a taxi.

She's putting her keys into the pocket of her skirt. No, no, she says. We'll look after you, don't worry.

The club captain comes over finally and introduces himself. His name is Ollie; he's the one who collected Ivan from the bus station earlier. The woman says again that her name is Margaret, and then Ollie lifts his hand in Ivan's direction, saying: And this is our guest, Ivan Koubek. She exchanges a glance with Ivan, just a very quick glance of amusement shared between the two of them, and then she answers: Yes, I know. Ollie begins talking to her about the event, what time it will begin and end and which of the studio rooms they'll be using tomorrow morning for the workshop. In silence, Ivan watches them talking together. She works here, the woman named Margaret, here at the arts center: that explains her sort of artistic appearance. She's wearing a white blouse, and a voluminous patterned skirt in different colors, and neat flat shoes of the kind ballerinas wear. He begins to experience, while she stands there in front of him, an involuntary mental image of kissing her on the mouth: not even really an image, but an idea of an image, a realization that it will be possible to visualize this at some later point, what it would be like to kiss her, a promise of enjoyment simply to picture himself doing that, which is harmless enough, only a private thought. And yet he also feels at the same time an

abrupt desire to draw her attention back to him in real life, which he suspects he could do just by addressing her, just by saying something or asking a question aloud, it doesn't even matter what.

Do you play chess? he asks.

They both look up at him. Too late now, he realizes he's being weird. He can see it, it's perceptible in her face and even in Ollie's. How weird, to ask her for no reason whether she plays chess, and it wasn't even related to what they were talking about. Cheerfully, however, she answers: No, I'm afraid not. I don't have a brain for that kind of thing. I suppose I know what the pieces do, and that's about it.

With grim regret at having spoken, Ivan nods his head.

Gesturing to the hall behind them, Ollie says: We don't have much to boast about in the gender-equality department, unfortunately.



*"It doesn't matter what happens to me, just get my presentation to the 9 A.M. meeting at 562 West Ninth Street, conference room C!"*

Cartoon by Tim Hamilton

Oh, I wouldn't worry, she says. We had a knitting group in the other week, they were just as bad. Anyway, I won't keep you. If you need anything, I'll be upstairs in the office.

Ollie thanks her. Ivan says nothing.

Glancing up at him, she adds: And good luck with your match later. I might come and watch if I get a minute.

He looks at her a moment longer before saying: Right. Thank you.

She goes back out the side door then, closing it behind her.

Nice woman, Ollie remarks. Ivan says: Yeah.

They go on standing by the wall together, watching the other men set up the chairs and tables. What does it mean when people say that kind of thing, like “nice woman”? Is it a coded way of saying the person is attractive? Ivan wonders if Ollie also experienced a certain captivated feeling when this woman Margaret looked into his eyes. Why did it take him so long to come and speak to her then? But maybe, like Ivan, he gets shy around the opposite sex. Ollie is small and portly, and wears glasses, and might be fifty years of age. Also, he wears a wedding ring: married. It’s difficult to imagine him experiencing feelings of captivation while talking to a beautiful woman. But a person’s outward appearance does not define the boundaries of their internal feelings, Ivan knows.

Whether the woman named Margaret was wearing a ring, he didn’t notice. The fact of her being so good-looking was impossible not to notice: she’s probably sick of hearing about it from men.

[Read an interview with the author for the story behind the story.](#)

Ivan has come to understand that it must be awkward to receive unwanted sexual comments and invitations, and there was that one occasion even in his own case, which was also a man, which probably just goes to show. He would personally go to great lengths to avoid ever encountering that guy again, not that he even did anything bad, but purely from the awkwardness. Then imagine being an attractive woman and it’s not just one man you have to

avoid but almost all of them. At the same time, how to reach a mutually agreeable situation without one person making an advance on the other which may turn out to be unwanted? It's like the problem with the chairs and tables. In a haphazard and inefficient way, without any fixed method, solutions can be reached, and, evidently, are reached all the time, considering that someone like Ollie is married. People get to know each other, things happen, that's life. The question for Ivan is how to become one of those people, how to live that kind of life.

Now, says Ollie beside him. What can we do for you before things get started? Would you like a cup of coffee? They have a nice little coffee shop out the front here.

Ivan nods his head slowly. The chairs and tables are all set up, ten tables evenly spaced, ten chairs. One of the men is even starting to lay out the chessboards. Sure, says Ivan. A coffee would be good, thank you. Just espresso, if they have it.

I'll pop out for you, says Ollie.

Ivan watches Ollie leave the hall, through the main doors, toward the lobby. Soon, he will return with Ivan's coffee, and then the event will begin, and Ivan will play ten chess games at the same time. He finds in his experience it's better not to dwell on these matters in advance. To contemplate the approach of the event gives him an intense physical sensation or, rather, a coördinated array of physical sensations: in his chest, his hands, his stomach, a hot feeling, tightness, nausea, shading even into light-headedness, a sense that he can't see properly, that something is wrong with his eyes, and then he starts feeling like he's going to be sick. On certain occasions, he actually has been sick, after contemplating too deeply the inexorable approach of a scheduled event. At the same time, he's not at all nervous about the chess. That aspect will be easy and, he knows, ultimately pleasant. Nothing will, or even really can, go wrong. The physical anxiety that accompanies chess

events—exhibition games, tournaments—does not bear any meaningful relationship to the events themselves, except a chronological one: it arrives beforehand and goes away afterward. His mind knows this, but his body does not.

For this and other reasons, Ivan considers the body a fundamentally primitive object, a vestige of evolutionary processes superseded by the development of the brain. Just compare the two: the human mind weightless, abstract, capable of supreme rationality; the human body heavy, depressingly specific, making no sense at all. It just does things: no one knows why. It begins for some reason to attack itself or to proliferate cells where they don't belong. No explanation. Does the mind do that? No. Well, in the case of mental illness, he thinks, O.K., sure, it can do similar things, but that's different. Is it different? Anyway. Ivan's own mind is far from perfect, often incapable of completing the relatively straightforward tasks with which it is presented, but at least the mind responds to reasoning. Sentience, he thinks. The body is an insentient object, animated by a sentience it does not share, like an insentient car is animated by a sentient driver. More or less everyone can accept the death of both body and mind past a certain point, like past the age of ninety, say, or at least it's acceptable in theory if you don't think about it too much. But to accept that because the body dies, at any point in time, the mind must also die, just literally whenever?

Ivan's brother, Peter, who is thirty-two and has a graduate degree in philosophy, says this school of thought on the relations between body and mind has been refuted. To Ivan, this is like when people say the king's gambit has been refuted. People are always using that word, "refuted," just because they read it on some forum somewhere, "King's Gambit Destroyed in One Move" or whatever, and the move will literally be 3 . . . d6. Thank you, Bobby Fischer! Not that Peter is someone who says things simply because he saw them on forums. He's an adult man who has a social life and might

not even know what forums are. But mutatis mutandis. He probably just heard in a lecture once that the mind and the body are not considered to be separate anymore, and he was like, Got it. Peter is the kind of person who goes along the surface of life very smoothly. He talks on the phone a lot and eats in restaurants and says that schools of philosophy have been refuted. In any case, Ivan has to admit that Peter organized pretty much everything around their father's funeral and that Ivan himself did nothing; he can admit that freely. Probably he should have shown more gratitude on that front.

As for the whole thing about Peter giving the eulogy and Ivan not, that was a mutual decision. Obviously, Ivan regrets that now, he's been over that already, the regret, again and again, but it's his own fault, not Peter's, not even shared but exclusively his own. He didn't think about it enough beforehand, clearly. But what's the point in dwelling? It's not as if there's going to be a second funeral for his father at which Ivan can make up for his mistake by saying all the things that later came into his mind to say.

The human mind, for all the credit he was just giving it a minute ago, is often repetitive, often trapped in a familiar cycle of unproductive thoughts, which in Ivan's case are usually regretful in nature. Minor regrets, like asking that woman Margaret whether she played chess—horrible—and major regrets like declining or, rather, failing to say anything at his own father's funeral. Major regrets like devoting his life to competitive chess only to watch his rating drop steadily for several years to the point where, etc. He's been over all that before, the irretrievability of the past, what's done being done, and in any case now is not the time. Instead, he's going to eat the small chocolate bar he brought in his suitcase and drink a cup of coffee. It's good to visualize these actions in advance, how he'll unwrap the chocolate bar, what the coffee will taste like, whether it will be served with a saucer or just in a cup by itself. These are the right kinds of things for him to think about at

this moment: precise things, tangible, replete with sensory detail. And then the games will begin.

By the time Margaret finishes dinner, it's dark outside the window of the bistro, the glass blue like wet ink. Garrett behind the till asks her what they have on tonight, and she says the chess club are in. Cheerfully he answers: Each to their own. Every week or two, the same routine: another performance and, afterward, another stranger sitting in the passenger seat of Margaret's car, chattering away about something, and then gone again. Comedians, Shakespearean actors, motivational speakers. And now chess players. Funny. She liked him actually, the young man with the braces on his teeth. Her mistake about him being a little boy, that was embarrassing, but he made a joke of it, which she liked. Slightly awkward, of course: those high-I.Q. people usually are. Although, she thinks, leaving the restaurant, buttoning her raincoat, he was still a lot more polite than the others, especially that officious man Oliver Lyons, who was basically quite rude. In the chess player, she thinks, you have an example of a friendly, likable person, perhaps lacking in some of the finer social nuances, whereas Ollie Lyons is a man who simply relishes the modicum of authority that he believes attaches itself to his captaincy of the local chess club.

It's raining outside, water spilling from the gutters overhead, and Margaret fixes her scarf over her hair. Funny, the feeling she had, talking to the two of them, as if she and the chess prodigy were in one camp together and Ollie in the other. Why: a sense of being outside the group, perhaps. Retrieving her keys from the bottom of her handbag now, she continues toward the office, nodding hello to that nice man from the bakery. She finds with her fingers the external key and lets herself into the building, gently pulling the door closed behind her. Rain drums on the roof, drips quietly from her raincoat onto the tiles, while she makes her way along a low, cool corridor and, unlocking a side door, enters the hall.

Inside, all the lights are turned up bright, and thirty or forty spectators are seated in a tense, whispering silence. The players are seated on the outer side of the U-shaped arrangement of tables. And on the inside the chess player, Ivan Koubek, is standing alone, leaning over a particular table, with one arm folded across his chest, using the other hand to rub his jaw. He looks very tall and pallid, looming there above the chessboard, while his opponent, an older man with a ruddy face, is sitting comfortably in the chair opposite. Ivan moves one of the pieces—Margaret, standing in the doorway, can't see which—and then he walks to the next table. Touching the pieces, his hands look precise and intelligent, like the hands of a surgeon or a pianist. When he's gone, his opponent starts scribbling something down on a sheet of paper. The spectators are sitting on plastic chairs, watching, some taking photographs or videos with their phones.

The next one of Ivan's opponents is a small child, a girl who can't be more than eleven years old. She has golden hair tied up in a purple scrunchie. When Ivan reaches her table, his back to the door where Margaret is standing, the girl moves a piece, and he responds immediately, without taking time even to think. Margaret waits for him to move on to the next table before she slips inside, clicking the door shut behind her. Some people look up at the sound, but Ivan does not. He continues along the same path, sometimes standing wordlessly for ten seconds, twenty seconds, cradling his jaw, and then moving a piece and carrying on to the next table. Without taking her eyes from him, she sits down on one of the nearby chairs, drawing her bag and coat onto her lap.

Surveying the tables, Margaret gathers that two of the games are over already. The players are sitting back sheepishly, and the board in front of each is set up with a white king standing in the center. Ivan's king, she thinks, since he's playing with the white pieces, and it even looks like him, tall and thin, which is funny. Do chess players think of themselves that way, as the king piece? But, from

what Margaret remembers of chess, the king is weak and cowardly and spends most of the game hiding in the corner. At the next table, Ivan stretches his arm up over his head and places the flat of his hand between his shoulders, rubbing the base of his neck with his fingertips. Under his arms are two darkened circles of sweat. The room is not especially warm, though it is very bright, so probably he's sweating from the sheer force of concentration.

At the back of the room, someone says something that Margaret can't hear, and there follows a murmur of laughter. Ollie, who is seated at one of the tables, and whose game is still proceeding, turns to glare in the direction of the laughter, which drops away into silence. Standing at the little girl's table again, Ivan moves his queen and in a toneless voice says: Checkmate. The girl turns to look at two adults sitting behind her, a man and a woman, who must be her parents. Margaret can see them smiling at the girl and putting their thumbs up, mouthing: Well done! The girl turns back to the board and writes something down on her sheet of paper, and then she passes it over the table and hands Ivan her pen. He leans down to scribble something at the bottom of the sheet, and then straightening up he offers her his hand. With a broad, beaming smile full of milk teeth, she accepts, and they shake.

In silence, the games continue. Another player seems to give in, shaking Ivan's hand, and then another: men from the chess club who were here arranging chairs earlier. Finally, the only one left is Ollie. He has put on a jacket and tie, Margaret notices—he wasn't wearing a tie earlier today, but now he is, a red one with a light stripe. Ivan Koubek hasn't changed clothes; he's wearing the same light-green button-down shirt and dark trousers. His sneakers are dirty, and Margaret can see that the sole is coming away from the body of the left shoe. Ollie looks up at Ivan now and gives a little nod, and Ivan nods back. Ollie writes something down on his sheet of paper, and so does Ivan, and they shake hands.

The other players start to applaud, and then everyone is applauding. Margaret lets go of the handbag in her lap to clap along. She gathers from the general energy of the ovation that Ivan has defeated Ollie and won all ten games. Ivan nods his head to acknowledge the applause, which is growing louder rather than fading, and someone at the back of the room gives a long, loud whistle. Ivan stands there inclining his head, smiling politely without showing his teeth, bathed in the cheers of the spectators. Ollie gets to his feet from behind his table, and slowly the applause subsides. He thanks everyone for coming, and thanks Ivan and congratulates him on a “clean sweep,” and after a little more clapping and thanking of various people the event comes to an end. People start to get out of their seats, talking to one another, gathering their things, and one of the chess-club men props open the main door to let the audience file out.

Margaret sees that Ivan has gone back to speak to the little girl with the scrunchie. He has his back to Margaret, but she can hear him talking. You played a really good game, he’s saying. Do you know where you made a mistake? The girl shakes her head. Let me show you, he says, and that way you won’t do it again. To her parents, he says: You don’t mind, do you? It’s going to take, like, one minute. She played a good game otherwise. He’s setting the board up while he’s speaking. Around them, the spectators are leaving, checking their phones, zipping up jackets. Margaret is standing by her chair, thumbing the strap of her handbag absent-mindedly, her long raincoat hanging loose, unbuttoned. You remember this position? Ivan says. The girl nods her head, staring down at the board in front of her. After a few seconds, he asks: Do you see now why it was a bad idea to move that rook? She looks up at him solemnly and nods her head again. That’s all right, you’re learning, he says. You played really nicely. Maybe we’ll have a rematch in a couple of years. Her parents are smiling, her father with his hand on the girl’s shoulder. It’s so kind of you to take the time, the mother says. I’m sure you’re exhausted. Ivan straightens up from the table. I’m all

right, he says. The father is looking behind Ivan now, at Margaret, and Ivan follows his gaze and sees her standing there. She smiles, and he looks back at her without speaking. She can see that his forehead is still damp.

Congratulations, she says.

Oh, he replies. Well, whatever. Thank you.

He wipes his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt—noticing that she noticed, maybe. The room around them is emptying out, the girl and her parents saying goodbye and leaving. Inattentively, Ivan says to them: O.K., bye.

I believe I have the honor of giving you a lift home, Margaret says.

Ivan looks her in the eyes, a very direct look, even, she thinks, intense, with that feeling, again, of their belonging wordlessly somehow to the same camp. Right, he says. I think the others are going for a drink now. But I can skip that, I don't mind.

Would you like a drink? she says. You deserve one after what you've been through. I'm astonished you're still on your feet.

He smiles at her, showing his braces again, the new white ceramic braces that young people have now. Yeah, there's a lot of walking around, he says. That's what people say: Forget about the chess, practice the walking. Were you— He breaks off here, with a look that is shyly proud. Were you watching, or? he asks.

Margaret feels suddenly very kindly toward him, a rush of kindly feeling, to see him look so proud of himself. Oh, I was spellbound, she says. Not that I had any idea what was going on. What do you think, would you like to go out and celebrate?

He's still looking at her. Sure, he says. I'll get my things.

She goes to join the group at the door. Ollie tells her they're going for a drink in the Cobweb, and she says she'll come along. She knows one of the men vaguely from town, the retired chemist Tom O'Donnell, and another man says his name is Stephen, and another Hugh. When Ivan joins them, they all leave the hall together. The men are talking about chess, using vocabulary of which Margaret has only the vaguest comprehension—gambits, sacrifices—and in the long corridor their voices echo off the walls and ceiling.

Though the conversation seems to be directed toward Ivan, he isn't speaking, only walking quietly with his small black suitcase. The case has wheels, but he isn't wheeling it, just carrying it by the handle. Before they go out onto the street, Margaret turns the lights off and then gets up onto a little step stool to set the alarm while the others wait, while Ivan waits behind her. He's watching her, she thinks, but how does she know without looking? And she doesn't look, she just knows, as if his eyes are sending out little needles in her direction and she can feel the needles pricking painlessly on her skin.

She feels for him, surrounded by these blustering middle-aged people, men who admire him and at the same time fear and perhaps resent him, men who want to impress him but also to intimidate or slight him. And yet she seems to feel that Ivan is well aware of the dynamic between himself and the other men, and that this awareness has something to do with his watching Margaret while she sets the alarm. But how to know, how to interpret the watching, when he doesn't say anything to her or even seem to want to?

Outside, the rain has softened into mist and the street lights are on. The chemist, Tom O'Donnell, is putting up his umbrella.



*"I knew I'd find you in here scheming."*

Cartoon by Frank Cotham

Tell us, the man named Stephen says, where is that name Koubek from?

Slovakia, says Ivan.

You don't sound Slovakian, Stephen replies.

No, yeah, Ivan says. I'm from Kildare. My dad was Slovak, but he moved here in the eighties. And my mother is Irish. O'Donoghue.

They are walking across the car park, passing Margaret's car, and she unlocks it so that Ivan can leave his suitcase in the boot. The other men go on talking. Her hair is getting wet, and she takes her scarf off and knots it over her head while Ivan closes the boot down quietly and says: Thank you. She feels for an instant a strange urge to turn to the other men, saying something like: I said I would drop him back to his accommodation. This would be, she thinks, a bizarre remark. No one is wondering why Ivan is so quietly and obediently placing his suitcase into the boot of her car. To offer an explanation would suggest that something is in need of explaining, raising the spectre of other, alternative explanations, which have as yet occurred to no one. A terrible thing to say. She says nothing. They all keep walking together, through a little paved alleyway to the Cobweb Bar, and Ollie holds open the door for Margaret to enter first.

Inside, the bar is warm and quiet. Along the walls are padded benches with tables in front of them, and old advertisements, dimly lit. Margaret unties her scarf from her hair, letting her eyes half close, inhaling the warm, familiar atmosphere. It's Friday, she thinks, the working week is over, it's not so bad to sit in a bar with all these men for just a little while, to be for a while the only woman in the warm enclosed room. Let me get you a drink, Ollie says. Margaret says she'll have lemonade. And Ivan? Ollie asks. I presume you're of legal age by now, are you? Ivan gives an embarrassed laugh at that and answers: Yeah, I'm twenty-two. Ollie asks what he would like to drink in that case, and Ivan says a glass of Italian beer. Slipping her coat off her shoulders, Margaret finds a space to sit on one of the soft leatherette benches, with a low table between herself and Ivan. One of the other men asks her if she watched the games, and she says: Oh, yes, what a performance. Ollie goes up to order at the bar, and the others get up to help him or to insist on paying for their own drinks, leaving Margaret and Ivan alone in the corner. The fact that they have been left alone together is present to her with a kind of insistent, intrusive feeling, and wanting to make light conversation she says aloud: So, were you ever in trouble?

For a moment, he says nothing. You mean, like, in the chess just now? he asks.

Yes, I'm sorry. That's what I meant.

Self-consciously, he smiles, and he's rubbing at his shoulder with his fingertips again. Right, obviously, he says. No, I wasn't in trouble really. I mean, I do draw games sometimes, if it's a lot more people or the players are better. But with these local club players I wouldn't worry about it. He swallows now, glancing back at the bar, and then says in a friendly voice: Ah, but you won't tell them I said that, maybe.

She smiles also, at the backward glance, his friendly tone, almost conspiratorial. No, don't worry, she says. But don't you ever lose games?

In an exhibition? Not too often, because I'll only play people below a certain rating, which would be a lot lower than mine. I lose competitive games, though. All the time. I'm, like, not actually that good at chess.

She starts laughing then, and he smiles along with her, which she finds sweet: his unfeigned pleasure at being funny. That's hard to believe, she says.

He glances down at his hands. His fingernails are bitten, she notices. Well, I mean relatively, he says. Still examining his hands, frowning, he adds: We don't have to talk about chess, by the way. I know you don't play.

No, but it's always interesting to hear people talk about things they're passionate about.

He looks up at her again. Is it? he says.

Uncertainly, smiling, she replies: Don't you think it is?

I don't know, he says. Being honest, I've never thought about that. But I will think about it, now that you've said it. I suppose it depends what you mean—"passionate." I find some people can be very boring when they talk, but maybe it's because, actually, they're not passionate enough. He gives another smile now. I don't know if I even am that passionate about chess, he adds, but I suppose everyone probably thinks I am.

What do you think you're passionate about? she asks.

At this, he blushes. She can see him, even in the dim light, blushing, and he says something that sounds like: Hmm. Alarmed,

she says with forced cheerfulness, too loudly: Never mind, you needn't tell me. Then she regrets saying that, too. The other men are coming back from the bar, finally. Ollie leans over to hand Margaret a cold, damp glass, saying: A lemonade for the lady. They're taking seats around the table, drinking, talking, but Ivan is not talking, only looking at the side of her face while she avoids his eye. Maybe he's watching her because he doesn't know what else to do, she thinks, because he feels awkward or ill at ease. Maybe he wants to catch her eye because he has something particular he wants to say, and by avoiding his gaze she's only prolonging the interval during which he feels it necessary to keep looking. Or maybe—the idea intrudes forcefully into her thoughts—maybe he's looking at her for sexual reasons.

It is not possible for Margaret to exclude such thoughts completely from her life, however much she might in certain circumstances like to. Ideas intrude which are shameful, sad, even obscene and immoral. Most of the time, she can go through life interacting pleasantly with the people around her, pleasantly and superficially, never thinking or wanting to think about the profound and so carefully concealed sexual personalities of others. But it is not possible all the time to be so unconscious of other people, the disguised aspects of their lives. This young man with the braces on his teeth, who spends his weekends visiting arts centers to play chess in front of spectators, carrying a cheap black suitcase around and leaving it in the corners of rooms, this young man also has sexual thoughts and feelings, almost certainly, almost everyone does, especially at the age of twenty-two. He's still looking at her even now. Why did she say the word "passionate" to him when they were talking? And why did he repeat it so many times, three or even four times? Is the word "passionate" or is it not basically an obscene item of vocabulary? No, it isn't. But is it like a small bandage placed over an item of vocabulary that is in fact obscene? Maybe yes. A word with blood running through it, a red word. In casual conversation, it's better to use words that are gray or beige.

Where did it come from, then, this word “passionate”? She knows where. From that so firmly suppressed feeling, present all along, that when he looks at her, when he speaks to her, he is addressing not only the superficial but also the deep, concealed parts of her personality—without meaning to, without knowing how not to.

Beside them, the other men are talking about a famous chess player from the nineteenth century. You know he was Irish, Ollie says. His father was an Irishman. Murphy. The others disagree about that. Ivan sits drinking from his glass and looking at Margaret; she can feel again the pressure of his eyes on the side of her face, while she goes on pretending to listen, pretending to smile. Finally, she turns and meets his gaze. They look at each other without speaking. Belonging, it could not be clearer, to the same camp, separate from the rest. And he puts his glass down on the table. Clearing his throat, he says to the others: Listen, thank you. I’ll see you in the morning. They all want to congratulate him again and slap him on the back, and Margaret needs a minute anyway to put her raincoat back on, and to find her scarf hanging over the back of a chair.

Out of the bar together and into the dark street, they walk with the rain falling around them. For a while, not speaking, not even looking at each other, they walk side by side, and this is simple and correct. Margaret asks Ivan where he’s staying, and he takes out his phone to show her the address, down in the holiday village by the lake. In the car park, she unlocks her car and they get inside together, closing the doors, and all her acts and gestures are just the necessary things that follow after getting into a car: putting the key in the ignition, and turning the lights on, securing her seat belt. These actions more or less perform themselves, ritually, and she has no decisions to make, nothing at all to do, except to feel and observe herself checking the rearview mirror, reversing out of her parking space. Ivan sits with his hands in his lap, saying nothing. Outside, the car park is glowing with the skeletal orange light of the street lamps, the paved surfaces dappled and glistening. She

turns on her wipers and they click and scrape rhythmically over the windscreen.

It happens all the time that she drives someone home like this or drops them at the station, and they sit in the car together this way, chatting about something. It's just work. And if Ivan doesn't want to chat, if he wants to sit there looking at his hands and then looking at her and back at his hands again, that's O.K.—he's only twenty-two, and very gifted at one particular kind of board game, and after all there's no formal etiquette for the situation. Finding yourself in the car of an older woman after a presumably strenuous public event, being driven to your accommodation with your little black suitcase: no one ever teaches you how to behave under such circumstances. If he wants to sit in silence, looking at his bitten fingernails, that's all right, no problem. She, too, of course, is sitting in silence and has nothing to say. They come off the main road and down onto the small lane leading to the holiday cottages, the gravel crunching noisily under the tires of Margaret's car. She has done nothing wrong, has done nothing at all, in fact, beyond what is required for the purpose of driving Ivan from the bar to the holiday village. If she made a little error in the conversation earlier, if she used one little dubious word or phrase, asking him what he was passionate about, that was excusable, even in a sense deniable, because subjective. She pulls up outside one of the houses, a white bungalow with peeling paint and darkened windows.

This is you, I think, she says.

It's the first time either of them has spoken since they got in the car, and inside the sealed environment her voice has a compressed sound. Ivan looks out the window at the bungalow.

Thank you, he says.

She tells him it's no problem. He nods his head, and once more he looks at her. Would you like to come inside? he asks.

Doubtfully, he goes on looking at her, as if to say he's sorry to ask, and he waits for her to answer. There's something so vulnerable in his look, in his tone of voice. Is there anything she can say to explain? About her job, and how much older she is, and her life situation. But her explanations will only sound like lies. Nobody when they're rejected believes it's really for extraneous reasons. And it almost never is for extraneous reasons, because mutual attraction—which even makes sense from the evolutionary perspective—is simply the strongest reason to do anything, overriding all the contrary principles and making them fall away into nothing. She lets her eyes drop down for just a fraction of a second to his hands, which are resting in his lap: fine-looking, sensitive hands, she noticed that earlier, when he was playing chess.

O.K., she says.

The house is damp and chilly, and all the rooms are dark. Ivan is carrying his suitcase, and Margaret finds a light switch in the hall. Overhead, a bare bulb comes on, with no lampshade, and in the corner by the door the wallpaper is mildewed. In a friendly, conversational tone of voice, she says: Not what I'd call luxurious. It's the chess club that booked this for you, by the way, not us. He smiles at that, showing his braces again. I've seen worse, he says. Sometimes I just have to sleep on someone's floor. She hangs up her coat and scarf, and he puts down his suitcase. They go along the hall together, into a living room with a kitchenette. He turns the light on this time. There's a red cloth sofa, and a small dining table, and a sliding glass door leading into the back garden. Margaret goes to look in the kitchen, and Ivan follows after her. On a shelf above the microwave is a box of tea and a tin of instant coffee, and someone has even put milk and butter in the fridge.

I wonder if Ollie came in and stocked the kitchen personally, she says. I think he might have a crush on you.

Ivan laughs at that, looking gratified. I could tell he was happy with how his game went, he says. Which is kind of sad, because he actually made a lot of mistakes.

You're not a professional, are you? she asks. I mean, you don't play chess full time.

He says no, but he does get paid for exhibition games, and for coaching. Then he clears his throat and afterward says nothing. She remembers when she was nervous around men, as a young person —though, of course, it's different for women. Impossible to imagine a girl of twenty-two behaving as Ivan has behaved tonight, as he is behaving even now. Not that he seems more powerful or domineering than a girl, not that at all: rather, that he seems to have taken on exclusive responsibility for what appears to him a very difficult task—the task, unless she is mistaken, of seducing an older woman he has just met—and to feel frustrated with himself for not knowing how to accomplish this task, frustrated and guilty. These feelings would not arise in a young woman. Different feelings, equally unpleasant, but different. At the same time, isn't Margaret herself playing her part in these feelings, in this drama? Is it not, after all, a drama with two principal actors? She is not offering, she notices, to accept any shared responsibility for the accomplishment of the task Ivan has set himself. She has indicated, by entering the holiday cottage, that she may well be available to be seduced; but she is not helping him along toward success in that respect. To help, however, would obviously be injurious to her dignity, far more than the present situation is to his. She asks him if he's in college, and he says he just finished a degree in theoretical physics. Another silence falls. The house is cold; her back is cold against the fridge door.

Sorry I'm being so awkward, he says.

I don't think you are, really.

Well, I'm definitely a lot more awkward than you are, he replies. You know, when you're talking, everything you say sounds so normal and, like, smooth. I can never get words to come out that smoothly. You're the type of person who can just go up to someone and start a conversation. It's very— He breaks off here, and then shyly he goes on: I was just going to say, it's very attractive, but maybe I shouldn't say that.



Cartoon by Sofia Warren

She turns her eyes away, oddly flustered now after all. Ah, she says. Well, I don't know.

He's looking at his hands again, examining the little pink stubs of his fingernails. I'm sorry, he says. Just because you're being nice to me, it obviously doesn't mean . . . you know. It went through my head, or whatever, but it's probably stupid. Like, yeah, Ivan, I'm sure she thought it was really cool and sexy when you beat all those elderly guys at chess.

She feels a strange, light, amused sensation at his words, as though, concluding that the negotiations have fallen through, he wants only

to show how nicely he can take defeat. Well, not only elderly guys, she says. You also beat a ten-year-old girl.

He gives a little laugh. Yeah, she wasn't too bad for a ten-year-old, he says. Although she made one serious blunder. I actually had to go back and talk to her afterward. It was three or four intelligent moves and then a horrible mistake.

I guess you only make good moves, she says.

I don't make horrible mistakes, he answers.

I do.

Looking over at her, he starts to smile again—revising, she thinks, the presumption of failure. Under the dim ceiling light, she can see the wire of his braces wet and gleaming. O.K., he says. Interesting. That's very interesting to me.

Are you sure you're twenty-two? she asks.

Yeah, I'm sure. Do you want to check my I.D.?

Would you mind?

He puts one of his hands into his pocket and takes out a wallet to show her an age card. She notices the hand trembling a little.

The photograph is not too nice, he says. Or I don't know, maybe that's just what I look like.

She removes the thin plastic card from the wallet and studies it under the light. Born in 1999, she says. Jesus. I started college in 2004.

Really? You're what age, then? Thirty-five.

Thirty-six, she says. She's still looking down at the card, at the small black-and-white image of Ivan's face, grave and sombre. You know, I actually did think it was impressive when you won all those chess games earlier, she says. I thought you were glamorous.

He gives a sweet, foolish smile. Ah, wow, he says. That's nice of you to say. I definitely don't feel glamorous. But that's cool of you to be so nice.

She hands the card back, and he puts it in his wallet. Do your parents play chess? she asks.

Well, no, not really, he says. My mother, not at all. And my dad did play a little bit, but actually, uh . . . he just passed away. Very recently, like three or four weeks ago. Four weeks, I guess it is.

Oh, God, she says. Ivan, I'm so sorry to hear that.

Yeah. He had cancer for a long time. So it wasn't unexpected.

She's looking at him, but he's looking at the floor. She says: My dad . . . not that it's the same, I'm sorry. But my dad died a couple of years ago. I can imagine how you must be feeling.

He looks back at her now, dark quiet eyes, and she feels him very close. It is kind of hard, he says. And, like, weird or whatever. I don't know if you felt that.

Of course.

My parents were split up as well, he says. And I lived with my dad mostly. Not to give you my whole life story, I'm sorry.

Don't be sorry. Do you have siblings?

An older brother. Who's a lot older, like ten years. But we're not close or anything. Before she can reply, Ivan clears his throat and

adds: He actually . . . Just that you were asking if the other people in my family play chess. My brother does, but he's not very good.

Tentatively now, she smiles. Ah, she says. Compared to you, I suppose not.

Right. Although, if you want to know something sad, I already hit my peak like four years ago. I was playing really well for a while, I mean, really well. But I'm not able to play like that anymore. I don't know why. It makes me depressed when I think about it. You have all these dreams that you're going to keep getting better and better. And then in reality you just start getting worse, and you don't even understand why. Is this boring to hear about?

Margaret says: No, it isn't. He's looking down at his hands again.

I don't know, he says. The one thing I said to myself in the car was, If she comes inside with you, don't start talking to her about chess. It takes up too much of my life already, to be quite honest. Like, to say the absolute truth, I spend too much time on it, because I'm not even that good. Although it makes me really sad to admit that. You know, a lot of people told me I was letting it take up too much time, and I just thought they didn't understand. But now I think, Maybe I've really wasted a lot of my life. Like when other people were out having fun, getting girlfriends or whatever, I was at home basically reading. You have to read a lot of opening theory—that's the beginning of a game, the first moves. Which have all been played before, so you just have to learn them. It's not even that interesting, but it has to be done. So you have all these openings that come from books, and you have all these endgame strategies, which can be honestly kind of formulaic. And you're learning all this for what? Just to get to an O.K. position in the middle game and try to play some decent chess. Which most of the time I can't even do anyway. Sometimes I think, if I could go back to age fifteen, I would give up. I was already pretty good then, I haven't gotten much better. And I could have used that time to get more of a social

life. I don't lie in bed every night just thinking about chess, you know. I won't go into detail on what I do think about, but I can tell you, it's usually not related to chess at all.

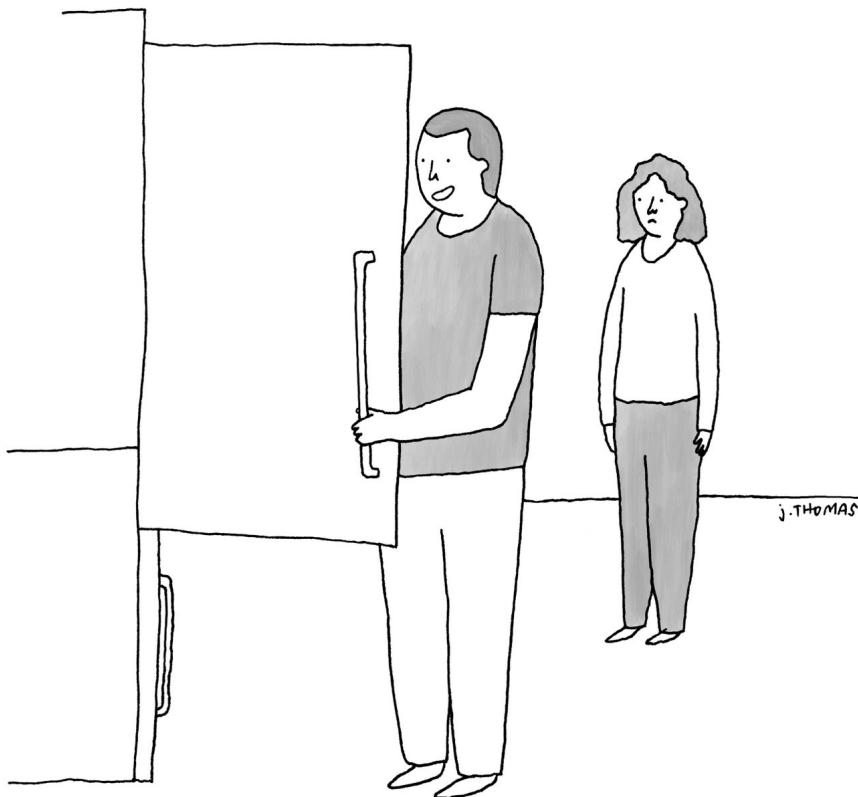
She's smiling, listening, nodding her head, and yet his words give her a strange feeling, a feeling in the pit of her stomach.

But don't you think you enjoyed it? she says. All the time you spent practicing, don't you think it made you happy sometimes?

With a pained expression, picking at his thumbnail, he answers: Yeah, there is that side of it. I did win a lot of games. And I played at big tournaments, I beat some good players. I have played some very nice chess. One or two games, I would say, better than nice. That's the other side. You're right. And if I gave up when I was fifteen, and I tried to be more social and talk to girls more, it might not have worked anyway. You know, I don't think I would have become this really popular guy just from not playing chess. You can drive yourself crazy thinking about different things you could have done in the past. But sometimes I think, actually, I didn't have that much power over my life anyway. I mean, I couldn't give myself a new personality out of nothing. And things just kind of happened to me.

She is silent after he finishes speaking, and her eyes are turned toward the floor, bare yellow linoleum.

Are you really bored now? he asks.



*"I can make dinner if you tell me what's for dinner."*  
Cartoon by Julia Thomas

After a moment she replies: Not at all. It's true, you can drive yourself crazy thinking about different things you could have done in the past. I drive myself crazy in that way, too.

He's looking at her, she knows. Yeah? he says. Why?

When I was your age . . . That's not right, a little older than you. In my twenties, I met someone. And later we got married. Legally, we still are, because it's all so complicated. But we don't live together anymore. It's like you said, you can drive yourself crazy thinking about these things. The other lives you could have had. And the life you did have, after it's over—where did it go? I mean, what are you supposed to do with it? Anyway. It's lucky you're thinking about all this now, when you're only twenty-two. When I was that age, my life hadn't even started happening to me yet. I hardly remember anything from before then, honestly, that's the truth. You know, everyone in their twenties has these problems you're talking about —feeling left out and thinking people don't like you. Those aren't serious problems at your age, even if they feel that way. Maybe

you're on a different wavelength from some of the girls you've met in college. But I can tell you, you're very attractive. You really are. Women are going to fall in love with you, believe me. That's when the problems start.

She looks up at him now, and he's looking back at her, an intense silent look. She tries to laugh, and her laughter has a helpless sound. Margaret, he says, can I kiss you? She doesn't know what to do, whether to laugh again or start crying. O.K., she says. He comes over to where she's standing against the fridge and kisses her on the mouth. She feels his tongue move between her lips. Drawing away slightly, he murmurs: Sorry about my braces, I hate them so much. She tells him not to apologize. Then he kisses her again. It is, of course, a desperately embarrassing situation—a situation that seems to render her entire life meaningless. Her professional life, eight years of marriage, whatever she believes about her personal values, everything. And yet, accepting the premise, allowing life to mean nothing for a moment, doesn't it simply *feel good* to be in the arms of this person? Feeling that he wants her, that all evening he has been looking at her and desiring her, isn't it pleasurable? To embody the kind of woman he believed he couldn't have—to incorporate that woman into herself and allow him to have her. Pressed against her, his body is thin and tensed and shivering. And what if life is just a collection of essentially unrelated experiences? Why does one thing have to follow meaningfully from another?

In the morning, Margaret wakes alone in the holiday cottage to the sound of her alarm: Saturday, 8:30 a.m. After finding the phone and fumbling to switch the noise off, she lies back down in solitude, empty of thought, hearing a faint humming noise elsewhere, like a fridge or a dishwasher. The ceiling is finished in stippled plaster, the peaks and dimples casting small irregular shadows in the light from the window. Weak watery morning light. The minutes pass. She sits up and finds her clothes on the floor, damp, crumpled, and

turns yesterday's underwear inside out to put it back on again. With something like detached curiosity, with a pale inward blankness, she thinks about Ivan, who has gone now, who has left her in bed alone—she remembers him the night before, very deep inside her, saying: Ah, fuck. Well, that's what boys his age like to do at weekends. Why not with her? She's not bad-looking, so they say, not old yet, no longer really married, and she failed to put up the resistance he seemed to expect. Her lack of resistance, so unusual, fascinated and stirred him. Also, he was grieving over his father, she thinks, and in grief people do uncharacteristic things, behave irresponsibly, get drunk and sleep around. Not that he had been drunk last night. He'd had, if she recalls correctly, a single glass of beer. Will he tell his friends about her? she wonders.

The chess prodigy, Ivan Koubek. Almost nothing about him was really explained. Quietly he seemed to observe other people, and to perceive a great deal, and when he spoke, his words conveyed a sort of loneliness she found touching. He was very nice to her in bed, she remembers: so nice that it's difficult for her, even now, to regret completely the whole ludicrous episode. She has never in her life spent the night with a stranger before. But then Ivan did not, at the time, seem to her like a stranger: he seemed, all too consciously, to belong to her own camp. Yes, that again—and what does it even mean? Now, in any case, her life will return, unexplained, to whatever it was before. But no, she thinks, because its shapelessness has been exposed to her, the old values and meanings floating off, unattached, and how can she go about reattaching them? And to what? In another room, the whirring noise comes suddenly to a halt, and she can hear something like a curtain hissing along a rail. Oh, she thinks. Oh, Christ, he's been in the shower. Frantically she gets to her feet, finishes dressing, and with darting hands makes the bed, hearing his footsteps now along the hall.

When Ivan enters the room, his hair is wet, and he's wearing a clean gray sweatshirt. Ah, he says. You're awake. I was wondering if I should wake you. He coughs and continues: Anyway, this is awkward, but they only gave me one bath towel, and it's wet now. I hope that's not really annoying. I'm sorry I didn't ask first, but you were sleeping, like I said.

She stands at the bottom of the bed with her arms folded. Her face feels tired and swollen, her eyes swollen, hot. It's no problem, she replies. I'll shower when I get home.

Right, he says. Right, that's what I thought. Sorry.

By his ear, he has a small thin cut, where she supposes he has cut himself shaving. Do you need a lift to your workshop? she asks. I don't mind driving you.

Oh. That actually would be cool, if it's all right.

She's toying with a button on her cardigan. Sure, she says. And look, if you don't mind, I would be grateful if you didn't tell people at the event today. About last night. I'm sorry to ask, but I think it would be difficult for me at work if everyone knew.

He gives a strange little laugh. No, obviously, he says. I mean, I get you, but that's not the kind of thing I would tell people at a chess workshop anyway. The conversation doesn't really go there. For like, a lot of different reasons.

Without looking up, she nods her head and says: Are you going— She breaks off, smiling, wiping her nose with her fingers. I was going to ask if you were going home today, she says. But I don't even know where you live.

Oh, I live in Dublin, he says. And yeah, I'm going back today. On the bus.

Her eyes are hot, her face is hot, she's nodding, pretending for some reason to button up her cardigan.

I probably have to go soon, he says. To be on time for the thing.

Sure. I'm ready.

Right, I just want to say something to you first.

She looks up at him, and he's looking back at her—a very direct and intense look, like yesterday evening, when the games were finished and everyone else was leaving, the same look. Can I give you my number? he says. Like, in case you ever think about me. I could just put the number into your phone, and then it would be there, you wouldn't even have to look at it again if you didn't want to. What do you think?

With her fingers, she dabs at her eyes. Let me think about it, she says.

Outside, a wet chilly morning, the branches of trees dripping overhead. They get in the car together and drive back the same way they came the night before, and again they're not speaking, again the windscreen wipers scrape back and forth. Once she has parked outside the building, she says: You can give me your number. But I don't know if I'll get in touch or not. O.K.? And, if you don't hear from me, it won't be because I haven't thought about you. I will think about you. I just have to figure out what's best. He says he understands, and he keys the number into her phone. The time on the dashboard is 8:56 a.m. He gets out of the car, and she watches him walk up to the main entrance of the building, carrying his black suitcase. One of the wheels on the case is hanging askew, broken—she can see that now. That's probably why he carries it, instead of using the wheels.

At the entrance, he turns back and looks at her over his shoulder. Then he's gone, the door swinging shut behind him. The door of her own workplace, with its flat rectangular handle, with one glass panel broken at the bottom and patched with brown tape. She has been contained before, contained and directed, by the trappings of ordinary life. Now she no longer feels contained or directed by these forces; no longer directed by anything at all. Life has slipped free of its netting. She can do very strange things now; she can find herself a very strange person. Young men can invite her into holiday cottages for sexual reasons. It means nothing. That isn't true: it means something, but the meaning is unfamiliar. ♦

*This is drawn from “[Intermezzo](#).”*

*Sally Rooney is the author of “[Conversations with Friends](#),” “[Normal People](#),” and “[Beautiful World, Where Are You](#).” Her fourth novel, “[Intermezzo](#),” will be published in September, 2024.*

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# The Hadal Zone

By [Annie Proulx](#)

June 30, 2024



*Illustration by Jacqueline Tam*

Listen to this story

*Audio:* Annie Proulx reads.

Arwen Rasmont waits hours at Keflavík International for his flight; they call it as he leaves the men's room. He walks past the mirrored wall and is assaulted, as usual, by his dead father's handsome

image: high-arched nose, yellow hair. A difference in the contact glance—the father’s a hard squinting challenge, the son’s sidelong and measuring.

A week earlier the luxury-real-estate-rental mogul Rodrig Cushion had sent Arwen to Reykjavík to examine and make a judgment on a rare nineteenth-century whaling captain’s house perched above a fjord with a view of dripping icebergs. Now, as he stands in the boarding line, he checks the snapshots on his phone. The most recent shows the interior entryway of that house; an umbrella jar holds several walking sticks and two ancient Inuit harpoons with whale-bone barbs; on the wall above them hangs a gleaming nineteenth-century harpoon gun. It is, Arwen thinks, whaling history in a nutshell. Such details, he knows, are priceless to Cushion. He looks at the steel gleam of the harpoons, cruel instruments. The owner is a taciturn old woman who didn’t like the sound of Cushion’s deal and pushed the door open, inviting Arwen out but not before he took that quick shot of the harpoons.

When Acme-Air’s loudspeakers rattle out the information that boarding for his flight is under way, it is 3:20 *a.m.* and the Icelandic sun is coming up. He calls Carolla, who takes eight rings to answer.

### **Podcast: The Writer’s Voice**

*[Listen to Annie Proulx read “The Hadal Zone.”](#)*

“So, where are you? Do you know what time it is? Are you in Boston? Will you be home soon?”

“No, I’m still in Reykjavík. We’re just boarding. Sorry, babe, I forgot the time difference. I thought I was headed home, but I have to go to New York first. Via Chicago.”

“What, Iceland to Chicago to New York?”

“Cushion’s plan. He popped it on me out of the blue. He’s in Chicago this week. Look, I’ll call from there or New York. I don’t know what he wants.”

“Well—don’t call at midnight. And as long as he pays for the travel he can do that, right? You get to go to marvellous places—golden sands of Araby and all that.”

“Carolla, there’s a serious heat wave, some new virus, an earthquake, and gunfire in Araby right now, so I’m hoping he don’t get ideas about luxury tents and camels. I’ll be back Friday night and there’s a beaut cod on ice on its way to you from the fish market in Reykjavík.”

“For Saturday?”

“Right. I ate at a restaurant in the fish market, tried to get their recipe for the baked cod, no go, but my God, it was—look, I’ll call you from New York. When I know what he wants, O.K.? Take care of that cod. Love you, love you, I do love you.”

Only Arwen, in that large shouting family of boys, inherits the father’s face. All his brothers have enviable potato heads. As a child, he is the one chosen for the front row of school photographs or given a cookie and posed on the laps of relatives. Teachers treat him kindly and he imagines the world is a smooth place without difficulties until a summer family visit with his mother’s people in Kansas. Two cousins, lump-jawed bigger guys with pimples, hit and push him back and forth until his nose bleeds. He cries and runs to tell his mother, but he is intercepted by his father, who pulls him into the bathroom and hands him a sopping washcloth, tells him that it could have been worse than a bloody nose and a few bruises. “Hey,” he says, “the plug-uglies hate you at the same time they . . .” and he gives Arwen a fatherly smack on the shoulder. Arwen never knows what he means.

[Read an interview with the author for the story behind the story.](#)

The father, Joe Rasmont, is a roofing contractor, whose pride is his Ulster Scots-Irish ancestry and his love of a scrimmage. The mother is a practitioner of invisibility and has secret habits. The father and Arwen's brothers are loud; they like sports contests and marching bands, and on weekends do not get up until high noon. Arwen dodges arguments, likes silence and subtleties, sleeps lightly. The father laughs with Schadenfreude when he hears that a boy from Iowa has been to the ocean and had his right leg severed by a shark. He says, "The kid was dumb. Punch a shark in the snoot it hauls ass," but Arwen has recurrent thoughts of the boy's terror. By his teens Arwen knows that his good looks are evidence not of his personal uniqueness but of his father's genetic domination. Even when Joe Rasmont dies after a fall from a roof where he was faking a clog dance for the plaudits of three preteen girls on their way home from school, Arwen's knowledge that he is not uniquely himself folds him inward.

At the state university Arwen signs up for the jumbled mix of architecture, history, and arts courses popular with the student misfits. In his last year he meets Carolla Windon—strong-willed and so sure of herself that with her he feels guided, a feeling he mistakes for love. She seems a different kind of person, a fizzing bit of electricity that has broken free from the main lightning bolt.

Carolla finds that Arwen's good looks enhance her own plain-Jane self, so she makes a decision not to correct his grammar. After graduation she hustles him into the jeweller's shop to buy her engagement ring. She organizes their wedding and arranges the honeymoon—a trip to Japan where they overdo garden tours and he develops an allergy to shoyu—and finds them a little saltbox house half an hour from Boston. He revels in the love-light that shimmers from her and envelops him as she excitedly describes her plan for owning a rescued-and-restored-furniture shop or a booth at the county fair where she will sell home-made pickles that

somehow are never made. She is not a beauty: sandy hair, elliptical brown eyes, and a thin mouth perfectly sized to take in whole apricots. She is also bony and stiffly put together, wide hipped, her arms and legs apparently hammered into place. But her rapid reactions sweep him along. He is secretly thrilled by her liveliness and her sudden huge enthusiasms that disappear and reappear like sunlight on a day of moving clouds. She puts his wardrobe in order, manages their joint taxes, and works out soy-free menus that keep him in good health. She is exceptionally loving and a serious cook.

“Carolla, you treat me like the prize pig you’re going to show at the farm fair—”

“I think you love every minute of being the prize piggy, don’t you?”

He does love it.

Early in their marriage he expects babies but it doesn’t happen. Carolla does not seem to miss being a mother and Arwen can find no way to introduce the subject without sounding like a domineering male.

In those same early days Arwen tries several jobs before finding Back Bay Garden Supply, in Boston. Since childhood he has waited for a defining moment, an event or a flash of comprehension that will shift him into self-recognition, the kind that happens in books when a character nails it—“from that moment Bertie Fuse knew what his life was going to be”—but Arwen’s shock of understanding never arrives. The closest he has ever come to an epiphany was discovering, as a six-year-old, that flakes of mica in the driveway gravel could be split into glassy layers with his thumbnail. Life just goes on, but he never looks at a driveway again without checking for micaceous gleam.



“ . . . and this is where I store my tennis ball.”

Cartoon by Lonnie Millsap

Albert Bebby, a large man in his sixties who still has great physical strength and flexibility, owns Back Bay Garden Supply. He also owns some acreage with a two-room shack on it forty miles north, past Gristle Falls, past the years-long paving work on a twisted mountain road, past the renovation of the old woollen mill below the falls. Bebby is a climate-change denier who sometimes wears his *MAGA* hat and argues that every grim bit of warming, hundred-year storm, or sea-level rise is an anomaly. There have always been storms and hot days. Yet Arwen likes him, and he likes Arwen, and assigns him every interesting job, from greenhouse work to scouting antique shops for giant urns, encourages him to take night classes in garden design—training he might have given his son, Daniel, had turtles not interfered. Daniel is afflicted with a sense of moral outrage over the misdeeds of humans which are bringing about the climate shift, an outrage that merges with his impulse to save small animals, especially turtles, from highway traffic. Daniel used to spend weeks at the shack up north. Arwen does not know

him except through hearsay, because a year before Arwen met his father, Daniel quit the shack and moved to the West Coast to become a road ecologist.

Bebby mutters to Arwen that he is glad to be free from Daniel's nightly dinner-table sermons about humans' destruction of the natural world. Daniel, gone but not forgotten, sends frequent e-mail bulletins to his father offering proofs of climate change, exposing the machinations of villainous corporations and of governments that are planning to dredge and rape the seafloor, describing the coming floods that will drown the cities around the Great Lakes and create Lake Gargantua. Daniel puts all his business out there—he cares, and he wants his father to care. Bebby dismisses the messages: "Daniel don't get it that there is always ups and downs. He thinks this 'climate' stuff is something special. We've had problems with weather and the seasons since the beginning. It's in the Bible, all the plagues and floods. Just like now with *Covid* and Vermont underwater last year. And this business about carbon credits—there's a crooks' game for you." But he continues to read Daniel's warnings and prophecies aloud, and Arwen listens. After one of Daniel's messages exhorting his father not to eat fish species that are struggling to survive—cod from the North Atlantic are on that list—Arwen feels a twinge of guilt, feels the earth beneath him stir uneasily like a sleeper seeking a more comfortable position, but the stirring is also possibly a global response to the devilish human fleas that plague its surface. He, Arwen, is just such a flea. He knows that.

Arwen and Carolla wink at couples who concoct a weekly date night to keep their marriage lively. Instead, they take a full day in the kitchen, usually Saturday, when they cook and eat together, trying difficult recipes such as duck roasted in a watermelon, chicharrones served in a greasy paper bag, a *kavkaski shashlik*. It is awkward in their poky little kitchen in East Ashbane, crowded with culinary accoutrements. They give each other presents of kitchen

gadgets: smokers, hullers, scalders. Carolla lets him know that it is not every husband who can slice sea scallops into thin disks, steam them in a spoonful of white wine, and convert the juices into an unctuous sauce, and that she loves him for it. They drink back-page cocktails unknown to most bartenders and increasingly precious wines from European vineyards fainting with heat. They make a little world of toasting, roasting, boiling, grilling, and swilling which is inhabited only by the two of them. Once, a delivery man with a box of frozen crab legs looked around the kitchen and remarked, “You get a burglar in here, he sees all them knives, you got a killer instead of a thief.” And he laughed at his own wit.

After some happy years, their life together changes. Carolla’s mother dies, leaving her daughter money and a historic house called White Chimneys. And Rodrig Cushion appears out of nowhere.

White Chimneys is a large, extremely plain ten-room building, its defiant lack of exterior ornamentation a moneyed sneer at more ostentatious dwellings. White Chimneys dominates the landscape, exudes power. On the day of the funeral for Carolla’s mother, the thought flashes into Arwen’s mind that he is looking at an early example of brutalist architecture. The house is twenty-eight miles from the coast, set in acres of fourth-growth, boulder-strewn woodland that has seized the fields where sheep once ate grass down to the dirt. The woodland is neglected, a tangle of downed and broken trees, and in the clearings and along the old pathways grow invasive oriental bittersweet, buckthorn, Morrow’s honeysuckle, poison ivy, nettles, and Canada thistle in such exuberance that the place can never be rid of them. Foreign phragmites encircle and choke off a small pond.

After the cursory funeral—there are no other mourners—they walk through the house. Carolla leads the way with a bottle of lavender-essence germicide, spraying as she advances. She had visited the house only twice while her mother was alive.

“Yes, and now it’s mine so everything is new to me,” she says as she talks into her phone, making a list of the furniture and fittings, the heavy damask drapes and two Chinese knotted silk rugs. Arwen lags behind, trying to quench his growing distaste for the house. It seems to him that every wall and staircase exudes an unpleasant past—incurable illnesses, schemes and plots, intentions, hot-breath lies and betrayals. When Carolla drags chairs back and shoves tables so that the legs chatter across the uneven boards he hears centuries-old bullying laughter. They go upstairs and the groaning treads evoke women weeping in closets—people cornered by circumstances beyond modern recognition. He knows that it is a terrible house but he keeps his mouth shut. Carolla does not care about the truths of history or geology; her ideas of how the world and time and people come together are set in her mind like Roman concrete. So he says nothing, for there is no point in arguing with Roman concrete.

“I just love it. I will have to get an antiques expert in here to help me catalogue everything,” Carolla says. “I know Mother was really upset that a Searles family portrait was stolen by a house guest. Or a burglar. Or the guy who brings wood for the fireplaces. About twenty years ago. I don’t know if they ever got it back. I think it’s still on the *IFAR* list. An ancestor on a black horse.”

On that first walk-through of White Chimneys Arwen turns away from a cherry tallboy and, as if he had stubbed a toe, he is suddenly filled with utter despair and dread. The feeling lasts only a millisecond and does not return; he believes it to have been the remnant of an old memory, so old he can not pull its long-ago reality into his present consciousness. He supposes that the brief but terrible spasm of misery is something he had experienced in wordless infancy. Children, especially crying babies, have been invisible to him for decades but now he knows unmistakably that they are not complaining of wet diapers or hunger, that even without words they roar to show they are in the grip of black

existential despair. That he and Carolla do not have children was once a secret sorrow to him; he is relieved now that he need not comfort a squalling disconsolate infant and falsely say, “There, there, it’s all right,” while knowing that nothing is or ever can be all right. Yes, it is better that they have not brought a child onto the despoiled earth.

White Chimneys is not a property that has been handed down through generations of Carolla’s family. Her family hands down nothing but the urge to move physically east and socially upward. The house was built in 1772 by Jonas Cutts, the wealthy owner of thousands of acres between two New England rivers who sold them off little by little, to maintain the Cutts family’s bizarre illusion of living on an English country estate. Sometime in the mid-nineteenth century the property came into the possession of a distant cousin, Henry Mintroy Searles, a Portsmouth shipping magnate and goods importer. In Portsmouth in the late twentieth century, at an exhibition of early-American dough troughs, Carolla’s mother found and rapidly married Nathan, the remnant Searles, who perished in the first wave of *Covid*. She metamorphosed overnight into a member of an “old Colonial family” with presumed American Revolution connections and became an impassioned spokeswoman for the house she described as a pivotal headquarters in the nation’s early history.

Upstairs they come to the library, a room whose walls are tiers of glass-fronted cabinets, the shelves freighted with books all the colors of old age: burned caramel, leached gray, dirty blue, streakily faded red, the green of nettles. A small fireplace in a sequestered alcove with two crewel-worked-upholstery wing chairs facing each other lets him know without evidence that here the earlier occupants made their grasping decisions.

As they walk through White Chimneys Carolla ticks off the possibilities.

“It’s better than I remember it. I can sell it. Or rent it out. It’s stuffed with antiques and portraits. It’s a historic house. Well, now that you’re here you know. The house is famous as a meeting place for the patriots. When Mother got it, after Nathan Searles passed, she had an open house the first weekend of September every year and tourists paid to walk around. There is a letter in the historical society’s collection showing that George Washington stayed in the north bedroom when he met John Adams. Or Sam Adams. Or Thomas Jefferson—one of them. Mother’s copy hangs in the entry hallway—I don’t know why it isn’t there now. We’ll look for it. Mother always intended to rent out the house for the ‘historical experience.’ But she never did it. Pretty sure I can rent it out.”

“And where will we live?” Arwen asks, the pinched saltbox in East Ashbane a two-hour drive from White Chimneys.

“Easy-peasy. We’ll fix up the carriage house with the money we get from selling the East Ashbane place. We will make a really great kitchen.”

He has to admit that it is sensible. The carriage house is a handsome and sturdy building. He likes its inaccessibility out in the broken black trees. They make an upstairs bedroom and living room in the carriage house and turn the entire stone-floored downstairs into a huge kitchen with two refrigerators, a professional chopping block, ceiling-to-floor pantry, three prep tables, two dishwashers, and a big squashy sofa for relaxing while waiting for something to come out of the oven. There is an alcove with an antique chestnut plank table and only two chairs, for they never invite guests to their feasts.

Carolla quits her job to work on the interior of White Chimneys.

“She left enough money and there is a lot of work to do on this place. We have to redo all the bathrooms. Also, the gardens and grounds are in terrible shape,” she says and looks at him.

“I can take care of that,” he says. He is glad then for his job with Albert Bebby and the classes in garden design. He even tells Bebby, “Al, it looks like a big job.” To Carolla he says that a restored and redesigned back garden at White Chimneys will be his contribution to the renovation if she gives him a budget.

“We’ll do it together,” she says. “Just let me know what your ideas are. And how much it will cost.”

He makes a plan with Bebby to work three days a week in Boston.

“I can sleep in the warehouse,” he says. But Bebby insists that Arwen use Daniel’s room—Daniel is immured in Oregon and has declared himself free of the East Coast. He is engaged to a veterinarian who specializes in reptiles and he writes a letter to Bebby describing his happiness near the Pacific, which he says is a superior ocean, far more interesting than the Atlantic. Bebby replies with some malice that the Atlantic is growing larger while the Pacific is shrinking.

With Bebby’s advice Arwen plans a wrought-iron archway. He discovers some antique bed edgings in a machinery warehouse, and although he wants to use native plants in the gardens Bebby begs him to choose the exotic and curious, as the original owners did. Yes, Arwen thinks, and that is why the place is choked with European weeds. Yet Albert Bebby knows the right stonemason to repair the tumbled rock wall; he gives Arwen the name of a poison-ivy-removal lady, and puts him on the trail of two old teak benches that once graced the gardens of the Maxfield Parrish house. They will be at their best placed along a gravelled path with good views of the water feature, a life-size spouting crocodile, a rescue from an estate sale. The crocodile looks uncomfortable as does all spouting statuary. The creature lies on its belly, snout raised like a howling wolf.

Arwen begins the physical work himself—it will get him back in shape. A patch of stinging nettles at the base of a mound surmounted by a huge red-oak stump takes a day's work in heavy gloves, stout boots, and a hazmat suit. He pulls up the nettles, the feathery towers of sorrel, ragweed, and ironweed. At night he fills sheets of paper with sketches of a fern grotto, a tiny wildflower meadow, a topiary shrub in the shape of a galloping centaur, perhaps a curved stone wall sheltering a beautifully shaped little tree he has yet to find. The red-oak stump is enormous. Bebby says that red oaks have the deepest roots of any tree in New England's forests and it will be costly to get the stump out—better to work it into the greater design. It can perhaps be a pedestal for an interesting sculpture—something like David Nash's charred shapes, or even something local.

During the first autumn that Carolla owns the house she continues her mother's hour-long leaf-peeper tours. The customers, all tourists, pay a hundred dollars each for the pleasure of seeing the cherry tallboy whose drawers gleam with decorative brass-inlay borders, the great fireplace so large a man can stand upright in it, the cast-iron cauldron big enough to boil a small walrus, and the rare beehive oven.

Rodrig Cushion is one of the visitors, and this is his first meeting with Carolla. He is a big man. Six-three with massive shoulders and bursting arms, which Arwen thinks are not muscle but good old American fat. In a jacket his shoulders look a yard wide but atop the swollen neck balances a narrow pointy face with slightly popped green-tomato eyes that seem to say, "What! Don't you believe me? It's all true!" Arwen thinks Cushion's head looks like one of Richard Avedon's road-trip portraits—one of the drifters. Cushion inhales deeply as his eyes sweep over the Queen Anne breakfast table with its sensuous, curved legs, the corner cupboard stacked with chinoiserie, the firedogs. He says, "Oh, my God. Oh, my God." He sizes up Arwen and nods, but openly declares his

love of the house to Carolla, and at the end of the tour he takes her hand and says very softly that he wants to “partner up” with her. He gives her his card, explains his international rental business. “I take a very unique approach to the glamour of history,” he says. “If you join me in my business—Heritage House Holidays—I will open the way to a select clientele that longs for deep historical experiences.” He stares into her golden eyes with his drifter glare and says in a superior voice, as though conferring a prize, “We will both be part of the ecosystem of heritage homes.” He promises to free Carolla from the burden of bookkeeping, insurance, upkeep, cleaning, advertising, and vetting guests. But she will have to install invisible air-conditioning because of the increasingly fierce summer heat. Once the air-conditioning is in, he says, he can get them twelve-thousand-dollar-a-week rentals in summer and autumn—Heritage House will take only a third of the rent. It is Carolla’s property and she has the final word, and that word is “yes.”

Rodrig Cushion seems to feel that Arwen comes with the deal as a subsidiary Heritage House Holidays employee. He calls on Arwen to examine other properties, discuss the annual listings brochure, and listen to his views on the international historic-house-rental business. There is more to it than Arwen imagines—special celebrations for local heroes and patriots of old like Pilsudski, Savanarola, Guy Fawkes, Betsy Ross, and especially Robert E. Lee, whose statues are being pulled down everywhere by left-wing philistines and scoffers. Small details are not neglected and Cushion and Carolla will tour White Chimneys together with the renters on the final day of their stay, “just to make sure,” as Cushion says, “that nothing got broken or cracked.” But Arwen understands it is to see that nothing has been stolen—not a fork, not a brick, not a portrait on the wall, not a linen pillow slip, not a pinch of ashes from the fireplace—for the framed letter proving Washington’s stay is never found. Theft is the only possible explanation.

Arwen does all that Cushion asks without pay beyond travel expenses, which go to Carolla, who makes his reservations and doles out his travel allowance. Arwen believes that the arrangement is some undeclared part of Carolla's "partnering up" with Cushion, although he sees no salary, dividend, or share.

For the first months of the partnership Carolla spends hours in consultation with air-conditioning experts. Rodrig Cushion recommends Kool Haus Air Wizards. The outlook is not good. The old house is a sieve of air leaks—to make it tight means replacing every window and door. There is no insulation, no ductwork. And mini-splits cannot be used because they will ruin the authenticity of the old house. But the situation is not hopeless. Air-conditioning can be done though at an astronomical price. Carolla balks and after a conference with Rodrig Cushion they decide that temporarily the house will do without air-conditioning and will be rented only in times of moderate temperatures. Cushion sighs heavily, says, "You know what? This is really a modular situation, so let's just take a deep breath and see how it goes. But you will have to do it someday. If you want the real money."

Arwen works on White Chimney's gardens on weekends, when he's not travelling on Cushion's business. He hires Maddy Vane, a local landscape guy with a Kubota, to level some uneven ground where he envisions the fern grotto. The blade scrapes away the topsoil and then squeals as it rakes across a flat stone.

"Look at that!" Maddy says, pointing at soil-caked letters engraved on the stone. "Got yourself a gravestone. Could be somebody historic. Man, that's insane!"

"I guess I'll clean it up," Arwen says. "You don't have to hang around." But Maddy is interested in the stone and takes a stance near it that tells Arwen he is not going to leave. Arwen gets the hose and two stiff brushes, and handing one to Maddy he says, "We

might as well see what it is. Looks like some inscription. Maybe an Emily Dickinson poem for garden thoughts.”

“More likely a burial verse. Gotta be somebody’s grave. Right here in your back yard. You’ll have to call the police.” Arwen says nothing but begins to scrub at the stone. Word pieces emerge: “Stra,” “Froz,” “esires.”

“Not Emily Dickinson, I don’t think,” he says. By late afternoon the chiselled words lie revealed in six puzzling lines:

What strange Congealed Heart have I when I  
Under such Beauty shining like the Sun  
Able to make Frozen Affection fly,  
And Icikles of Frostbitt Love to run.  
Yea, and Desires lockt in an heart of Steel  
Or Adamant, breake prison, nothing feel.

He turns to Maddy and opens his mouth as if to ask the question. Maddy shakes his head. “Not like any grave verse I ever seen. Kind of a downer. Not sure what it means but I wouldn’t want that on *my* stone. Better get in touch with Will Honor. He’s the old president of the historical society and he knows everything worth knowing about this town from way back. Used to be a history professor at some university. They got a new president now—Mrs. Ella Miller Faller—but she still has to ask old Will about some things. She’s not up on the fine points. Give me a call if you want to get back to levelling that area. Call me nosy but I’d like to hear what Will Honor has to say.”

It is weeks before he remembers to call William Honor and ask him about the verse chiselled into the stone. The warm autumn days lean against one another like books on a shelf. Bright leaves cascade and still the days and nights are mild. Biting flies continue to hatch as though it were June and their insect lives stretch before them in an endless glory of sunlight. Arwen knows that the

autumnal storms of crashing branches and splintered trees will come soon and cool the heated earth. There may even be early snow that will rapidly vaporize but make the point that the seemingly endless summer has been a lure, that the bitter stone-splintering cold of ancient days has returned to turn the leafy bowers into ice chambers, to freeze the marrow in deer bones and leave them poised to leap but immovable on their slender dead-cold legs.

If Rodrig Cushion looks like a nineteen-seventies interstate drifter, William Honor looks like an elderly African American artist, tall and spare, barefoot, clad in a pair of rolled-up duck trousers and a paint-blotted singlet as he opens his door. He holds a soft rounded-bristle paintbrush in his left hand.

“Mr. Honor?”

“Yes. And you are Arwen Rasmont.”

“I am. Thanks for seeing me.”



*Cartoon by Daniel Kanhai*

“Come in. Should I resemble a Sunday painter it is because I *am* a Sunday painter. Head out to the back porch while I clean this brush and then we can talk. I’ll join you in a few minutes.”

The screened back porch is stacked with junk, furnished with old wicker chairs, a table of planks laid on cinder blocks, a weathered green sideboard missing its shelves. The view is of a yellow garden where goldfinches stitch the air above, over and through a quarter acre of black-eyed Susans. The little birds are not still for an instant, diving and swirling, yellow on yellow in a patch of transparent yellow light.

William Honor returns with a pitcher of what he says is lemonade. There is no doubt about the lemon as the drink is unsugared and impossibly sour. Arwen takes one swallow, grimaces, and puts

down the glass. He tells William Honor about Carolla, White Chimneys, the garden he hopes to make, the uncovered slab with the mysterious verse. “Here is the verse,” he says, handing Honor the typed-out lines. “Could it be Emily Dickinson . . . ?”

William Honor joins the first and last lines aloud in a sombre, pinched voice: “What strange congealed heart have I when I . . . nothing feel.” Then he says, “No, not Dickinson. I think by quite a different person. You say White Chimneys was built in 1772?”

“Yes. Or maybe earlier. By Jonas Cutts. And then it passed on to Henry Searles and eventually to my wife.”

“Indeed. Searles from Portsmouth. Important fellow. But 1772 is too late for the poet I have in mind. Is your wife a Searles descendant?”

“No. Her mother married the last of the Searleses. They claimed it was an important meeting place for George Washington during the American Revolution.”

“That would have been quite an event for General Washington—the horseback ride from Virginia to New England—not something he would do often. And, of course, there is the name—White Chimneys. Perhaps you and Mrs. Rasmont are not aware that during the time of the Revolution having white-painted chimneys was a secret way of declaring to others in the know that ‘here live true loyalists to King George’?”

“No! We certainly had no idea—but that would mean Washington probably never—”

“Quite right. Probably never. Benedict Arnold, perhaps, or Major André, but not Washington. There is an old Federal in Kennebunkport called Tory Chimneys—and of course they, too, are painted white. It would be helpful if you can find out anything

about the religious tastes of the Cutts and the Searleses. The verse on the stone is interesting. I need to do a little digging but I think I know who wrote it. A strange and rather tortured early preacher-poet working through his private beliefs long before Cutts built his manse. It might be one of his Meditations. What is not clear is why it would have been chiselled onto a stone in the garden of a 1772 Royalist's house. In fact, it is doubtful that the stone could have been chiselled before 1937 except by someone with a very private knowledge of Colonial church history. I'll look into it. May I suggest that we meet again in two weeks, on Friday?"

"Of course," Arwen says, his imagination steaming up.

The pallid Icelandic morning light makes him feel worn out—waiting for hours in airports kills him. He wants it to be Saturday, wants to be home in the carriage-house kitchen with Carolla, sharpening the knives, listening to Norteño music.

After a year of what Rodrig Cushion and Carolla call "partnership" it is still an unspoken, unwritten, and undiscussed arrangement that Cushion pays for travel and hotel rooms. Arwen takes care of food, car fares, phone calls. Rather than argue with Cushion he goes along. Slow and careful moves will work in his favor without hassle, without confrontation. Without shouting. But he notices certain things. Cushion, despite his many global offices, seems inept at anything except convincing women to let him handle their properties. He has a string of European "countesses" who let him rent out their mouldering heaps, which are more reminiscent of Piranesi ruins than of Downton Abbey. He can be persuasive and gently insinuating but Arwen knows he will drive toothpicks under your fingernails to get his way.

Acme-Air's plane is old and it stinks. He thinks the odor is like what you smell on opening a box of crackers languishing in a forgotten cupboard. Arwen has a window seat—he always has a window seat. Even flying over the ocean he finds pleasure in

looking down, watching colors change from the pastel of coastal shallows, where he searches for the dark commas of whales, to the blue-black wrinkles of deep water. As the plane angles away he sees Reykjavík like a printed map and thinks he can just glimpse the sun-gilded geologic folds of the Hallgrímskirkja steeple. Then Reykjavík is gone. He is so intent on the dwindling view that he doesn't hear the woman in the seat in front of him asking something. She has twisted around in order to speak through the window-side gap between the seats and the wall of the plane.

"Your window blind! . . . Pull it down . . . light . . . ruin my movie!"

He squints back at her through the aperture and sees her black-eyebrowed glare and on a corner of her little screen shuddering images of Hollywood gangsters. He knows about "air rage," when disturbed passengers flip into violent tantrums; although he wants to watch the ocean he pulls down his shade. Air rage and road rage, waiting-in-line rage. He leans back and shuts his eyes, thinking about the countless rage attacks that are now part of daily life. His old college roommate Timo lost his job at the observatory in Puerto Rico when the big radio telescope, weak from age and neglect, fell apart. It took a year for Timo to find a job teaching at a small college in Nebraska. There his sixteen-year-old son Alondro was shot dead in what the papers called "a road-rage incident."

Arwen brought nothing to read on the plane and sits bored and clenched in his seat until he, too, turns on his screen, to watch the symbol of their tiny plane moving over the ocean, over the unrecognizable names of shipwrecks and seamounts—Reykjanes Ridge, Charlie-Gibbs Fracture Zone, Orphan Knoll. What are these places, he wonders—they are not islands—and he remembers a trip a year earlier on a North Atlantic flight when he saw constellations of clouds, the icy edge of Greenland, thousands of scattered bergy bits and open water giving way to a scribbled edge of ice that was no longer a continuous sheet but broken everywhere by glittering

meltwater, and then, in a brilliant burst of sunlight like a death ray from space, he saw great thrusting mountains of purest snow. That day he pressed his face against the window until the landscape below went foggy and the mountains dissolved in smears. He sits now in the musty Acme-Air seat remembering that flight, burning to see what lies below, and edges his window shade up a few inches. Immediately the black-eyebrowed woman in the seat in front of him shouts, “*Put down your window shade!*”

Hours later in Chicago he waits at the baggage carrousel. As always, the wait is long. He glances at the other passengers standing beside the moving belt like herons poised for the opportune fish. The woman with the black eyebrows is ten feet away and looking at him. He moves to the far side of the carrousel and wills his bag to appear. But Black Eyebrows follows him to his new position and plants herself in front of him.

“I want to explain to you. About me watching the movie. You see—it was my son. He was a actor. His first movie—‘Deadly Garbage.’ I always watch it when I can. He died in a night-club shooting out in California last year and I guess I am not over it.”

He feels himself reddening, feels the burn of dislike shift a little but most of it is still there. He turns away from her to look at the approaching bags. And with relief sees his old brown bag with the broken handle lumbering along. Carolla has been after him to replace it for years but about this he is stubborn. He seizes it now and as he turns he says to the woman, “I hope you get over it.”

“You people!” she calls after him. “You are one of those woke people who think they know everything.”

In Chicago he is told that Cushion is in New York at an emergency meeting—Arwen is to follow at once. In New York the car booked to meet him isn’t there and when he calls the car service a voice tells him that the driver has gone to Grand Central instead of to

J.F.K. “Of course,” Arwen says, “hard to tell them apart.” The harried voice seems to blame him for the mistake and tells him to take a cab.

There is another long line and a forty-minute wait. The cabdriver—a scrawny older man—drives rapidly and erratically, cutting off other vehicles, muttering imprecations in an unfamiliar language under his breath, swerving in and out of lanes, blowing his horn to force laggard drivers to let him by. Several times Arwen, who sways with each lurch, asks him to slow down but the man speeds on. When they pull up at the hotel Arwen speaks slowly to the driver and hands him the exact fare.

“No-tip-because-you-dangerous-driver.”

The man looks at him; his inflamed dark eyes fill with tears. As the doorman opens the cab door and Arwen puts one foot on the sidewalk the driver suddenly accelerates and pulls out into traffic, pitching Arwen and his bag into the doorman’s arms.

“Crazy driver,” Arwen says. The doorman wears an elaborate uniform like a doorman in an old-fashioned Viennese film—part of the hotel’s conceit. The cuffs are frayed.

He says “Yeah. Everybody’s like that now—y’know?”

In the elevator Arwen’s thoughts are not of the taxi-driver or Black Eyebrows but of the North Atlantic seamounts. In the room he opens his laptop, begins looking for the names of the mounts, and blunders into an undersea gazetteer. Such is the power of the names and descriptions that he feels himself sliding below the water, past mounts and spiky cockscombs of rock. Over the centuries drowning people must have seen the vertiginous undersea mountains with their fading sight as they glided into the dense blackness. He reads that some chains of seamounts are higher than the Rockies, higher than the Himalayas, one undersea mountain

higher than Everest, heaved up by invisible plate tectonics, covered and surrounded by the seven seas, millennia after millennia in zones of darkness and pressure. He dimly remembers the Mariana Trench in the Pacific from a high-school science class. He doubts that kids today learn about the Mariana Trench, the deepest darkness on Earth. But he does not remember much about it himself, except that the ancient Greeks believed in a bottomless abyss. He reads more descriptions of the ocean layers and, inspired by the idea of layers, he calls room service and requests blinis with raspberry syrup but he has to settle for a B.L.T., extra mayo on the side.

As he eats he reads on until he imagines himself sinking down through the named under-ocean zones and layers: the epipelagic sunlight zone with its wind-mixing waves and seasons, then a slow descent through the mesopelagic twilight zone, where seasons, depths, and fainting measures of sunlight juggle up and down. He tumbles ever downward, through the bathypelagic zone of rich darkness and constant cold, luminescent animals stitching through unending density. Even deeper is the abyssopelagic zone, where the temperature hovers just above freezing, the darkness pitch-black under the crushing pressure of miles of water, which he can hardly grasp. But Arwen's imagination curls into a knot when he comes to the screamingly deepest and coldest waters of the hadal zone, with the vast brain-flattening pressure of eight tons per square inch. Even in that intense place there is life: snailfish and grenadiers with tapering tails. He wonders how the benthic grenadiers can swim blithely in such deadly pressures. He thinks of last year's headlines about a submersible implosion in a zone far less terrible than the hadopelagic. Then he reads that the lungless grenadiers can manage very well, that they have evolved in the deeps and are as comfortable there as humans are under the weight of their oxygenated atmosphere. Arwen's last thought before sleep is that he is in a twisting cyclonic fall down through the trench to become a compressed speck of matter. It feels good.

There is no point in trying to guess why he was summoned to a non-meeting with Rodrig Cushion in Chicago, the HQ of Heritage House Holidays, and then bounced to New York where Cushion makes a delighted fuss over Arwen's photograph of the umbrella stand and the harpoons. "It's very exceptional," he says. While Arwen stands waiting, Cushion gets the old-woman harpoon owner on the phone and after six or seven minutes of cajoling and promises—"It's perfect for discerning renters"—he closes the deal, says the papers will be delivered to her by courier within days. He winks at Arwen as if to say, "That's how I do it."

It is the same way that Cushion has got a hold on Carolla and wormed himself deep into their lives. Arwen finds it easier to go along with the man's endless brainstorms. Once in a while he submerges the unpleasant thought that Cushion is like Carolla in temperament and ambition. He believes Cushion has roped in Carolla in order to get access to White Chimneys, a house that Cushion says, using his favorite phrase, is "perfect for discerning renters." "Discerning" means ultra-rich. It isn't clear to him why Carolla has been so happy to go into business with Rodrig Cushion. The real-estate mogul boomerangs among his offices in New York, Chicago, Buenos Aires, Lisbon, Wellington, and London. Despite Cushion's efforts to pull off a smart-casual look with his Cuban-collar shirts and unstructured mohair blazers, Arwen still sees a dangerous and wily hitchhiker, and knows that whoever makes a bargain with him makes a bargain they will regret.

Before he gets home and goes to his Friday appointment with William Honor a viper twines around Arwen. He suspects something is wrong at the time of the aborted Chicago meeting with Cushion. He has a feeling that Carolla knows what Cushion is up to, a feeling that her sympathies and love have diverted to Cushion, who sends Arwen on useless errands in order to weasel his way into Carolla's affection. Arwen thinks that while he was in Iceland and then Chicago Cushion was at White Chimneys. He

becomes wary and watches and listens. He is afraid, but when he calls Albert Bebby and tries to talk to him about his suspicions he gets Bebby's stock answer: that those are just the normal ups and downs of marriage, that it is just like the weather, just like the roasting-hot summers and snowless winters, just like the rising sea level and other climate-scare bugaboos that will infallibly straighten out "in time"—a time unspecified.

On Thursday, the day before Arwen is due to meet again with William Honor, as he prepares to wrap some potato peelings in newspaper for the compost heap he finds himself reading the page. It is the local paper, which specializes in long and florid obituaries about kindly oldsters who gave their lives and energies to the towns they lived in, and there it is, a quarter-page black-bordered essay, "William Hasty Honor, Well-Loved Local Historian Passes." There is a photograph of the African American Sunday painter. Arwen goes cold. He will never find out who wrote the chiselled verse or why it was at White Chimneys.

A few weeks later Cushion sends him on another trip, this time to Vancouver, where an old yacht has been hauled up on land, rejuvenated, and refitted as an eighteenth-century nautical-themed dwelling. The charming space is so small that only a thin couple or a single person can stay in it without cramping, but he guesses that Cushion will add it to his stable. Even by the shore it is furnace hot. There are no cooling sea breezes, and the air-conditioning in the plane on the flight back is no match for two hundred sweating bodies. The view out the window is of swaths of wildfire smoke and flickering red outbursts.

It is late when he reaches White Chimneys. There is a full moon and its light lies on the old house like boiled icing; the two white chimneys show like plastic-wrapped boxes. It is still hot and humid. In the carriage house Carolla is asleep. He leaves her undisturbed and settles down on the kitchen sofa. Too hot to sleep he watches the moonlight crawl across the wall until he somehow

dozes, awakens, dozes. He is up before Carolla, before the heat of the day can sink its fangs in; he makes coffee and takes it outside to look over his half-finished garden and plan the next work area. He will sit on the teak bench and make a few notes, so he brings his notebook. As he rounds the corner of the house he sees that the half-finished garden is gone; utterly gone. A large bulldozer sits near the woods. Where once the new path wound, where once the fern garden was just beginning to feel at home, where once the water-feature crocodile howled, all is raw earth. And in the distance near the woods there is a heap of soil and rocks, wrought iron, and one of the Maxfield Parish benches upside down and splintered, a section of the crocodile's jaw like a giant comb thrusting up. He walks over to the pile and picks up a piece of broken stone that says "nothi." He rushes back into the carriage house and up the stairs and wakes Carolla.

"What have you done to my garden?" He—who is almost never angry—is afire, bursting with flame.

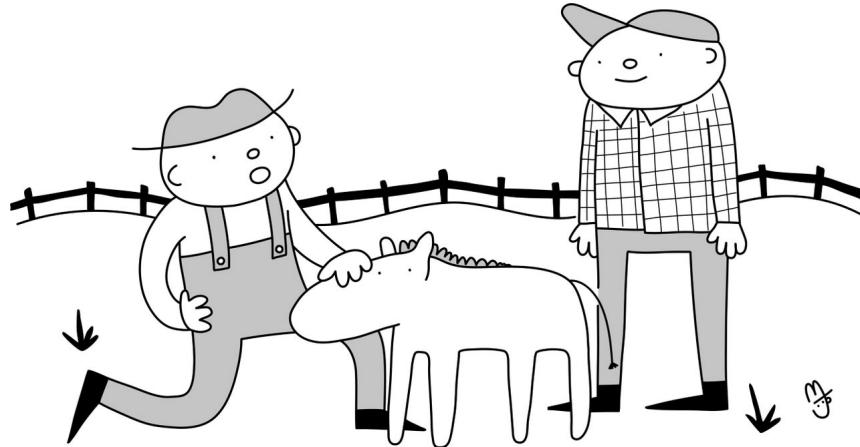
"Calm down," she says. "You'll have a stroke. And it is not *your* garden. Rodrig and I decided that a lawn would be better—more historical. That's what they had in the old days—a really big lawn. With sheep. As soon as the grass comes up I will get two sheep."

They quarrel loudly and dangerously for an hour, the worst argument they have ever had, Carolla aggressive with the rage of the guilty, Arwen trembling with the fury of betrayal. He wants to wound her and he has two arrows: "I always wanted kids," he shouts. And then, waspishly, "And the white chimneys were a secret sign that meant that loyalists to King George lived there. Not Colonial revolutionaries!"

"Well, aren't you the fountain of information," she sneers. She ignores the remark about wanting kids and hones in on the white chimneys. "I knew that. But that is not what people want. They want to believe in good-looking brave patriots fighting for

democracy and freedom. Nobody wants to see a house because English loyalists lived in it.” She tells him off. In the end she tells him to get out.

“I intend to be with Rodrig. We understand things the same way. And we never argue or fight. You can clear out right now. I have had enough. This is legally my property and I have the right to have a big lawn if I so choose. And I do so choose.” Her face is scarlet; he is shaking. He looks around. Once again it is a hot day, every day will be another hot day. He is furious at Carolla and Cushion, especially Cushion—an incendiary deep red anger. If Cushion were to suddenly appear, he would tear his head off. But this doesn’t happen.



*“Buck, go run home and call the university. Tell ‘em we finally bred an easy-to-draw horse.”*  
Cartoon by Michael J. Johnson

He has not unpacked his suitcase and now he throws it in the too warm car. He knows he should react in the traditional way so often seen on television—pound on the steering wheel and shout, “*Fuck! Fuck!*” He hits the steering wheel hard three times. His hands hurt. He says “fuck” in a low voice and turns on the ignition, drives east to a cliff-top path overlooking the ocean. Even there the sun is brutal and hot. There is no sea breeze, just the stench of rotting seaweed. There is a sun-faded plastic bench. He sits on it until it’s almost dark, watching the glitter of the sea, the curling foam that hides the immensely deep and lightless future. His skin feels hot and sore. It comes to him that the hadal zone is more extensive than

any oceanographer imagines. Then he drives to Bebby's place and the old man lets him in. They don't say anything to each other. One look at Arwen and Bebby can see he is somehow wounded.

Arwen is still awake the next morning in Daniel's room after a sleepless night. He can hear Bebby downstairs, talking on the phone, coughing and choking. He dresses carefully, his maroon arms and face painfully tender and goes downstairs to talk to Bebby, to get help figuring out what to do. Bebby is sitting at the table, fiery-eyed and crying. His phone lies to one side. He looks at Arwen, tries to speak and cannot. Nor can Arwen speak. It takes a long time before either can say anything clearly, before either knows for sure what is wrong with the other. Bebby speaks first but with limping slowness for if the words are spoken rapidly they will blur, they will be facile. Bebby drags out the news that Daniel and the veterinarian have been killed by a driverless robotic taxi while crossing a street in California. Daniel is dead and the veterinarian is dead. Arwen is shocked but cannot help thinking it is an ironic death for a man who spent years helping turtles cross the road. He does not say this. He tries to tell Bebby about his sundering from Carolla, but it seems unimportant in comparison with the old man's loss. He can't go back upstairs to Daniel's room because now Bebby is in there, hauling out Daniel's school sports uniforms and notebooks, weeping, talking to Daniel's old shirts. Arwen drives back to the bench overlooking the ocean but the sun is too painful and he finds a shaded park and dozes in the car. At dusk he returns to Bebby's place.

"Can I sleep in the warehouse?" he asks and Bebby nods yes, says he is leaving the next day for Daniel's funeral in California. Days pass and Bebby returns saying nothing about Daniel and Arwen says almost nothing about Carolla. They follow the old daily work routine though Bebby often goes into the house to be alone with his feelings. He talks softly and often on the phone with someone, not letting Arwen hear.

The months go by, the season shifts with ravaging winds and Old Testament storms and downpours. Before dawn they can feel the oncoming heat. One day when they are setting out the frames and display tables for Bebby's big spring plant sale, five wild geese fly over in a pitiful semblance of a migratory formation. "Look at that," Bebby says. "Once we saw hundreds of them—thousands, miles of them—all over the sky." On Friday he says he is going up north to his property to see if the old shack is still standing, to see if he can use the land for extra nursery stock.

When Bebby comes back from the shack he is lively and purposeful, says, "That whole area up around Gristle Falls is changing. There's a lot going on—they are making the old woollen mill into apartments. They got a Whisperin' Smith Steakhouse, a fancy motel. The Turnpike Lodge. Daniel's old shack is still on the property but it is not what it used to be. Knock me down with a feather. You better come up with me next time and take a look. You won't believe it. At first *I* didn't believe it."

He disappears into his cluttered "office" complaining about the stacks of paper that rise like flooding water, muttering about hiring a part-time secretary. He says he wants to spend more time "up north." He somehow has a lot of money. Arwen thinks it might be from Daniel's life insurance and is surprised when Bebby buys a lime-green electric luxury car. Arwen thinks life is returning to the old boy. He wishes for a similar rejuvenation. He says yes, he will come to the shack with him. He looks forward to a change of scene even if it is only a shack in the woods. He is even looking forward to the steak house.

The next Saturday as Bebby steers his green car through street traffic and onto 93 North he stuns Arwen by saying that Daniel's shack is now a hospital and rest home for injured turtles, something Daniel started years ago. There is a fancy laboratory in a cinder-block structure put up by volunteer reptile fanciers.

“By God,” he says, “they got more than a hundred turtle patients there right now. They got Daniel’s picture on the wall. They got about six people work there. I never knew nothin’ about it. Him and me never talked too much. They got some old-lady turtle-lover who’s given them enough money to run the clinic for fifty years. It’s called the Daniel Bebby Turtle Refuge. Anyway, I decided to get involved, whatever, legally turn over the property to them. Then it will be the Daniel *and* Albert Bebby Turtle Refuge. It’s not that good a place for nursery stock anyhow, and I got some ideas for exercise rooms for the turtles that are gettin’ healthy again but still don’t got good muscle tone. You know, rocky climbs and sandpits —build them up.”

Arwen thinks that during all the weeks of adjusting to Daniel’s death Bebby has been talking with the turtle people. Making plans. But when Bebby makes the old familiar turn onto 95 South, Arwen understands that they are going not to the turtle hospice but to White Chimneys. He doesn’t say a word.

They drive into the web of narrow roads that make it always possible to get anywhere by eleven different routes. There is no public transport in darkest New England—only cars and more cars. For travellers the illusion that they are entering the wooded past of ancient forest is spoiled by the sudden appearance around a twisted bend of a Whisperin’ Smith Steakhouse backed up against the trees or a pizza joint beside a pathetic two-hundred-year-old house clad in age-stained chestnut siding. Arwen can almost feel the suction of charring beef fat and pineapple pizzas pulling drivers in. The railroads of an earlier century are now hiking or bicycle trails, their stations are antique shops, map stores, or coffee kiosks.

Up the long hill and around a bend that almost touches itself White Chimneys comes into view, as harsh and obdurate as ever. Bebby pulls up in front of the carriage house. He says, “I guess I’ll wait here a while and catch up on my phone messages. Take your time. Then we will go to the turtles.”

Arwen opens the door into the great kitchen. The sunlight streams in like languid honey, drenches Carolla, who stands in it, her wiry hair ablaze, not surprised to see him. He inhales the rich aroma of Maui Mokka. They look at each other. Carolla gestures at a box filled with pale torpedoes and says, “Fresh Belgian endives.”

“They are beautiful,” he says truthfully. “The best. What will you do with them?” He thinks, you—and the hitchhiker.

“There are a thousand ways. Help me decide. Please, will you stay?”

“What about—*him*?” He doesn’t have to say the name.

“Forget *him*. *He* cannot boil an egg without burning it. *He* is a crap person with an air-conditioning obsession. He says White Chimneys is no good unless it gets the air-conditioning. And do you know who owns that big air-conditioning company he recommended—Kool Haus Air Wizards? He admitted it. That’s the business he started out with before he thought of Heritage Homes.”

“My God,” Arwen says, thinking that “Air-Conditioning Huckster” fits Rodrig Cushion’s personality like a banana skin fits a banana. He opens his arms to Carolla, but she does not rush to him. She wants to talk.

She races on, detailing Cushion’s evil ways. “Anyway—he is gone, gone, gone. And I am fired and you are fired and White Chimneys is no longer a Heritage Homes property. In fact, there is no more Heritage Homes—he has a new setup. Dark Adventures, which is tourism in places where bad things have happened—true crime, serial-killer childhood homes, assassination sites, K.K.K. hanging trees, plane crashes, Auschwitz, Chernobyl. He says White Chimneys can be on this list as a spy headquarters. I say no. In fact, I intend to sell it.”

She looks at him in their old wordless communication that says what words cannot. It is as if they have never been apart. Almost.

My little grenadier, he thinks, stepping closer to her sunlit presence. She rushes at him as though angry, but he is familiar with this angular approach; she has always hurled herself into intimacy. Holding her, he knows that even in the most profound ocean depths there is life, knows he is loved again—at least for the moment. But he is afraid and the wound of the destroyed garden still aches. He has to say something.

“I can’t stay right now. I promised Bebby I’d go with him up to Daniel’s old shack. I got to go with Bebby. But I will come back. I will.”

She gives him a look and says nothing. They hear Bebby out on the mica-flecked driveway toot his horn and Arwen turns toward the door.

Carolla says, “I’ll walk out with you. You know, we’ve been talking on the phone for weeks, me and Mr. Bebby, working out how to get you here. And now I will finally meet him.”

“You got it,” he says joyfully, puts his arm around her shoulders and they walk out together.

Two years later Arwen works for a local organic-fruit-preserves company. He rarely travels. On Saturday mornings he sits drinking inferior coffee near the kitchen window in his little apartment in the renovated Gristle Falls woollen mill. Often enough he sees a lime-green vehicle like a gleaming lozenge waiting to turn at the light. The sunlight fires up the driver’s wiry dishevelled hair—Mrs. Albert Bebby on her way to the turtle sanctuary. He thinks, Well, we all have places to go. Since his time at White Chimneys he has understood his grievous mistakes, his foolishly hopeful belief in the idea of love. He sees his misjudgments clearly. Carolla, a creature

of the sunlit shallows, will never know the deeps; it is he who is the grenadier, the one who can tough it out, the habitué of a Stygian darkness that compresses even time and memory.

But, hey, he does miss the good coffee. ♦

*Annie Proulx* is the author of “*Fen, Bog & Swamp: A Short History of Peatland Destruction and Its Role in the Climate Crisis.*”

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## Ivan Cornejo's Mexican American Heartache

“Regional Mexican” music is booming, but one young singer is in no mood to celebrate.

By [Kelefa Sanneh](#)

July 1, 2024



*Cornejo sings exclusively in Spanish, but in other ways his music is distinctively hybrid.  
Photograph by Lenne Chai for The New Yorker*

Four years ago, when Ivan Cornejo was a junior in high school, he had a meeting with his family to announce that he was dropping out. His parents were alarmed, of course, but his older sister, Pamela, had a more sympathetic reaction, because she also happened to be his manager, and she knew that he wasn't bluffing when he said that he had to focus on his career. By the time of his announcement, Cornejo was becoming a star on Instagram, where he posted videos of himself singing and strumming his guitar. But, unlike many Instagram kids, he hardly seemed like a kid at all. His specialty was plaintive love songs, delivered in a voice that suggested he was already starting to suspect that romance might be more trouble than it was worth. Not long after he quit school, he released "Está Dañada," the lament of a boy hoping to make an impression on a hopeless girl. "*Está dañada del amor / No siente ningún dolor*," he sang—"She's damaged by love / She doesn't feel any pain"—emphasizing the sentiment by enveloping himself in reverb and bending his notes downward, as if he were literally melting with heartache.

"Está Dañada" was a hit—and a demonstration of the rising importance of two overlapping musical domains. One was the frictionless world of streaming, where there are scarcely any limits to how widely a song can spread. The other was the world of Latin music, which was once treated by the American recording industry as a peripheral enterprise but increasingly occupies a place near its center. In the late twenty-tens, a visionary from Puerto Rico known as Bad Bunny began reeling off a string of danceable hits, transforming the locally grown genre of reggaetón and achieving the kind of Anglophone cultural dominance that had generally been denied to Spanish-language performers. (Last fall, Bad Bunny hosted an episode of "Saturday Night Live"; Spotify currently lists him as the twenty-first most listened-to musician in the world.) A song like "Está Dañada," an acoustic recording with traditional Mexican guitars, might not seem closely related to Bad Bunny, but in fact it was a sly tribute to the growing success and

interconnectedness of Latin music. In Cornejo's lyrics, a girl dances to reggaetón, singing along. “*Todas las noches, cantando la canción*,” Cornejo rasps, and, while “*la canción*” means “the song,” here it also refers to “*LA CANCIÓN*,” a hit collaboration between Bad Bunny and J Balvin, from Colombia, which Cornejo quotes in the next line. Three years after its release, “*Está Dañada*” has been streamed more than a quarter of a billion times on Spotify.

Cornejo recently turned twenty, and he is still managed by his sister, who is also his roommate: they live together in North Hollywood, and on the weekends they often visit their parents in Riverside, about an hour east of Los Angeles. Cornejo was born in California but spent his early years in Michoacán, Mexico, his parents’ home state—they wanted to make sure that he understood their native country. He returned to the United States at age six, which was around the time he persuaded his father, a truck driver, to buy him a guitar at a flea market. He picked up bits and pieces of music that he heard at home: the Beatles songs his mother loved, the Mexican ballads his father preferred, and a wistful instrumental composition by the Argentinean guitarist Gustavo Santaolalla, which teen-agers everywhere know as the musical theme of the video game *The Last of Us*.

When Cornejo started writing his own songs, he was influenced by a new generation of Mexican and Mexican American acts, like T3R Elemento and Eslabon Armado, who were popularizing a slangy, emo-inflected version of the Mexican style known as *sierreño*—the lyrics were in Spanish, but the subgenre was sometimes known, in English, as “sad *sierreño*.” Cornejo’s first mini-album, from 2021, was titled “Alma Vacía” (“Empty Soul”); the cover depicted him holding his bloody heart in his left hand, with a hole in his white sweatshirt where it used to be.

“I always say this genre’s like emo soul music, emo folk,” he told me one afternoon. He is small and soft-spoken, and tends to wear black: slacks and blazers onstage, hooded sweatshirts offstage. Last

year, Cornejo signed with Interscope Records, and on this day he was perfecting tracks for his major-label début, “*Mirada*” (“*Gaze*”), which he plans to release this month. He had never been to a concert before he began playing his own; his crowd is young, and predominantly Mexican American, although this demographic may be starting to change. At a recent meet and greet, after a sold-out concert in Bakersfield, California (venue capacity: three thousand), a man who did not speak Spanish told Cornejo that, despite the language barrier, Cornejo’s music had changed his life. Cornejo knows that most of his fans expect Spanish lyrics, which is what he has given them—mainly. In “Noche de Relajo,” the first song he ever recorded, he accentuated the initial chorus by saying, to his engineer, “Fuck these hos—am I right, Randy?” (This ad-lib was omitted from a rerecorded version.) And earlier this year he released a Spanish-language song with an English title, “Baby Please,” that seems like a tease. “It’s just hinting that maybe, in the future, I might release an English track—when I’m ready,” he said.

In other ways, Cornejo’s work is already distinctively hybrid. His dark, echoey sound was partly inspired by one of his favorite bands, Cigarettes After Sex, a hazy indie act that he listens to on the road to wind down after concerts. One of the band’s best-known songs is “K.,” about a lost love, and so Cornejo was moved to write “J.,” in which the lovelorn protagonist makes a memorable wish: “*Quiero que te trate con respeto ese pendejo.*” (More or less: “I hope that asshole treats you with respect.”) Another of his new songs, “Donde Estás,” starts relatively traditionally, with waltzing acoustic guitar, and then makes way for an unexpectedly languorous electric-guitar solo that evokes another of Cornejo’s favorite bands, Arctic Monkeys. “We try our best to keep in mind our fans that are just used to very regional things,” he said, and in this context “regional” is shorthand for “regional Mexican,” a catchall term for many of the country’s native genres, including *sierreño*.

On his new album, Cornejo wants to expand his fans' expectations. He has recorded a version of "Quiero Dormir Cansado," by the Mexican singer Emmanuel, turning a big, dramatic love song from 1980 into an achy late-night lament. When he played it for his parents, he was pleased and amused that they didn't initially recognize it. Another new song is buoyed, halfway through, by a call-and-response chorus—an idea that, Cornejo admits, he may have got from the 2012 hit "Another Love," by the English singer Tom Odell, although it also channels the Rolling Stones. The song had begun, he explained, as something more indie rock, but he retrofitted it with conventional Mexican instruments: acoustic guitar; *tololoche*, which is close to an upright bass; trombone. He intentionally kept the original time signature. "Usually, a regional Mexican song is 3/4, and then this song is 4/4," he said. "So it's a unique sound, in a song with regional elements." The equivocal identity of his music complements the stubbornness of his lyrics, which tend to describe a guy who is hopelessly and unapologetically hung up. "It's about promising myself that I was going to change—promising myself that I wasn't going to talk about her anymore," he said, laughing, about another song he was working on. "And then breaking that promise."

Nir Seroussi, an Israel-born executive who fell in love with Spanish-language music, spent most of the twenty-tens with Sony Music Latin, which, like many Latin labels, is based in Miami. He now runs the Miami office of Interscope Capitol Labels Group, which is pointedly not called Interscope Latin. "I have an allergic reaction to the word 'Latin,'" he told me. "Because it's what segregated us. Saying 'Latin' kind of felt like, 'There's a ceiling.' " The label's Spanish-language performers include Karol G, a chameleonic pop star from Colombia. "Karol G did a stadium tour in the U.S.—she sold more tickets than a lot of big general-market artists," he told me. "I like defending the underdog, until they're not. And we're not the underdog anymore."

It was Seroussi who signed Cornejo to Interscope, impressed by both his following and his perfectionism—Cornejo can spend weeks tinkering with a vocal melody before he feels that it's right. By the time the deal was announced, last August, the explosion of interest in Spanish-language music had spread to regional Mexican songs, which were once considered peripheral even within Latin music. That has lately changed because of streetwise young stars like Natanael Cano, from Sonora, and Peso Pluma, from Jalisco, who is one of the biggest Mexican singers on the planet, and whose kingpin swagger inspires a combination of ardor and disapproval that recalls the gangsta-rap controversies of the nineteen-nineties. At a recent frenetic performance in New York, at the Governors Ball festival, Pluma put some news headlines on the screen, including one from a Spanish-language version of the *New York Times*, which read "*PESO PLUMA Y EL DEBATE SOBRE LA NARCOCULTURA.*" Cornejo's shows are markedly more subdued: at Sueños, a Spanish-language festival in Chicago, he descended from the stage to walk next to the crowd, handing out red roses. But the two artists admire each other, and they sing a song together on Pluma's new album, "*ÉXODO*"; the song—called "*Reloj*," or "clock"—is about ex-lovers who ran out of time.

Like the broader term "Latin music," the narrower term "regional Mexican music" is not universally beloved. Carín León, a singer from Sonora who is more roots-minded than Cornejo, has been photographed wearing a T-shirt that makes clear his ambitions: "*F\*CK REGIONAL: Este Movimiento Es Global.*" Naturally, no singer likes to be told that his music is only for certain people, or that his career can only get so big. (León is scheduled to play Madison Square Garden in October.) And yet "regional Mexican" is a useful term, because it points to a real phenomenon: a huge and loosely defined community of musicians and listeners, one that is capacious enough to accommodate an inspired outlier like Cornejo. "If you map out 'regional Mexican,' he would be on the outer rim," Seroussi told me—and he meant it as high praise. ♦



*Kelefa Sanneh* has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 2008. He is the author of “[Major Labels: A History of Popular Music in Seven Genres](#).”

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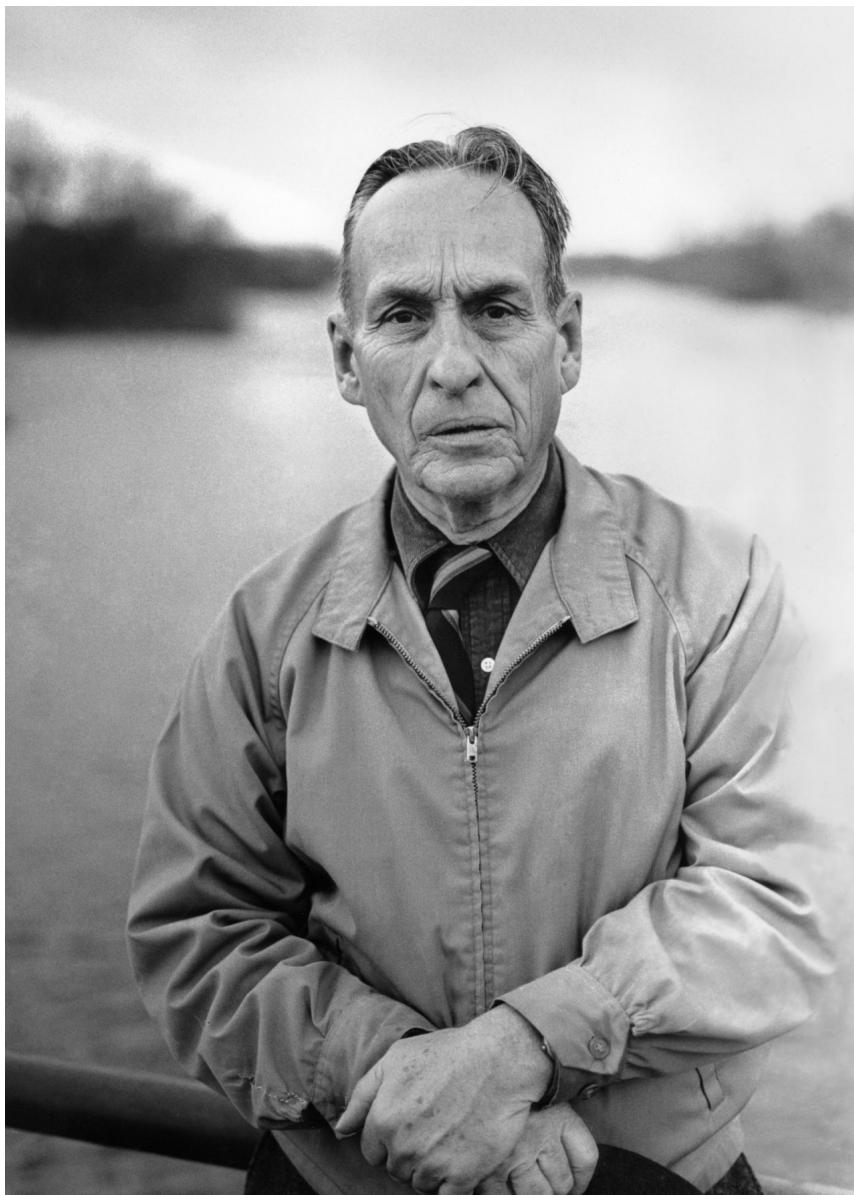
[A Critic at Large](#)

# Norman Maclean Didn't Publish Much. What He Did Contains Everything

You could read his literary output in a single day, yet it includes almost all there is to know about what the English language can do.

By [Kathryn Schulz](#)

July 1, 2024



*The author's work was shaped by the Western canon and his Montana upbringing. His great gift was for capturing our relationship to the elemental things: fire and water, mountains and rivers, death and love.*

*Photograph by Joel Snyder*

When I am stuck on something I'm trying to write and have exhausted all the other options—ignoring the problem, staring blankly at the problem, moving the problem around to see if it's less annoying in some other location, eating all the chocolate in the house—I eventually do what I should have done in the first place and go read some writer who is much better at this business than I am. The candidates are legion. But, from the whole long, idiosyncratic list of authors I regularly turn to for intellectual and aesthetic resuscitation, one of the most consistently useful is Norman Maclean.

If you know Maclean, it is likely because of his first work, “[A River Runs Through It and Other Stories](#),” a triptych of tales—about, among other things, families, fly-fishing, love, death, and a time when virtually all hard work in this country was still done by hand—that was published to enormous acclaim and considerable astonishment when the author was seventy-three years old. For many years before that collection appeared, in 1976, Maclean had tried to write a book about the Battle of Little Bighorn. For all the years afterward, until his death, at eighty-seven, he worked on a book about a different tragedy on a hillside—a wildfire in Montana that killed twelve smoke jumpers and a forest ranger—which was published, posthumously, as “[Young Men and Fire](#).”

That comes to two and a half books. Add to them a handful of lectures, essays, and sketches, most written or resurrected in the flurry of sudden, late-in-life fame, and you have Maclean’s entire literary output. You could read it all in a single day, yet it contains almost everything there is to know about what the English language can do. Are you trying to deploy a fact in a non-boring way? Consider this, on the geology of the Blackfoot River Valley: “The boulders on the flat were shaped by the last ice age only eighteen or twenty thousand years ago, but the red and green precambrian rocks beside the blue water were almost from the basement of the world and time.” Are you trying to find a new way

to describe an old familiar thing? Consider this, on afternoon thunderstorms in the mountains: “By three-thirty or four, the lightning would be flexing itself on the distant ridges like a fancy prizefighter, skipping sideways, ducking, showing off but not hitting anything.” Are you trying to find a beginning for a story? Consider this, the opening line of “Young Men and Fire”: “In 1949 the Smokejumpers were not far from their origins as parachute jumpers turned stunt performers dropping from the wings of planes at county fairs just for the hell of it plus a few dollars, less hospital expenses.” That is a fly fisherman’s prose, spinning in glittering circles overhead before landing exactly where it must, for a story that is running headlong toward mortal danger.

## What We’re Reading

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Examples like this abound, but you can’t capture Maclean’s brilliance just by quoting him. Much of what he did best was architectural, and the strength of his writing often comes from the soundness of his structures, large and small. A beguiling setup leads to a punch line, or to a gut punch; the oomph of a sentence derives from how perfectly it caps or how swiftly it topples the ones that came before. My copies of his books are filled with underlinings that sometimes run for pages on end before terminating in an exclamation point.

Maybe you are nodding along vigorously as you read this, or maybe you have never heard of Maclean. His status has always been ambiguous—too celebrated to count as a cult favorite, too marginal to be a favorite over all—and his cultural standing peaked

in the nineteen-nineties, after [Robert Redford](#) made the title story of “A River Runs Through It” into an Academy Award-winning movie starring [Brad Pitt](#). But every once in a while someone who shares my smittenness emerges with another glimpse of the man: a personal reflection, a scholarly consideration, a new volume of collected works, even though there is never really any new work to be collected.

The latest addition to this narrow bookshelf is [Rebecca McCarthy’s “Norman Maclean: A Life of Letters and Rivers”](#) (Washington). Maclean was a friend of McCarthy’s family and a mentor to her when she was an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, where he taught for decades. That connection is sometimes illuminating but more often distracting; McCarthy’s book dwells too much on their interactions and on his academic career, at the expense of momentum and chronology. Still, as the first full-length biography of Maclean, it is long overdue, and not only because his fiction cleaves so closely to his life that the two are best considered side by side. Like every brilliant author, Maclean simultaneously seems inexplicable and demands explication—some attempt to answer the questions raised by his prose. One of those questions is practical, a matter of craft: How does he do this? But another is ontological: What kind of man could make this work?

Norman Maclean was born in Clarinda, Iowa, two days before Christmas of 1902. His father, a Scotch Canadian from Nova Scotia, was a passionate angler and a Presbyterian minister. His mother, a schoolteacher before she married, was vivacious where her husband was reserved and affectionate where he tended toward dour.

When Norman was six—by which time he had a younger brother, Paul—the family moved to Missoula, Montana. The state was barely older than the boy, and Missoula was still just a logging town, hewed out of a vast wilderness and home in the off-hours to single men and the services that spring up wherever they

congregate. Saloons were plentiful; prostitution and gambling were practiced profligately. Bears sometimes wandered into the streets from the nearby mountains and drunken men sometimes did the reverse, freezing to death in the foothills when they overshot the edge of town. The entertainment options ran to rodeos and fights of every kind: dog on dog, badger on bulldog, man on man. Being underage did not exempt anyone from this combative culture, and neither did being the preacher's son. "Some guys would try to beat the hell out of my brother and me, just to see what we would do," Maclean said. Such guys assumed that Paul and Norman were obliged to exercise restraint because of their father. But the Reverend had no objection to brawls, so long as the boys won. Back home in Nova Scotia, his father and uncles had been known as "the fighting Macleans."

In most respects, however, the town's lawlessness stopped at the Macleans' front door. Together with his family, Norman prayed on his knees after breakfast and dinner and went to church on Wednesday evenings and four times on Sundays. His father, in deference to his calling, didn't swear—a genuine sacrifice, Maclean felt, for someone who, as a Scotsman, was "coded for profanity." Virtue came more naturally to Maclean's mother, a teetotaller and a member of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. Even after Norman grew up and developed his own strong opinions about alcohol—gin-and-tonic post-tennis, wine with dinner, bourbon afterward—he never drank in front of his mother.

This moral contrast between home and town was one of two stark oppositions that shaped Maclean's early years. The other pertained to his formal education. For years, his main teacher was his father, who was inspired by how successfully a fellow-Scotsman had homeschooled his own firstborn son: a boy named [John Stuart Mill](#). After breakfast, the Reverend Maclean would read aloud from [Wordsworth](#) or [Milton](#) or the Bible; then came three hours of instruction, during which Norman was made to write an essay

while his father worked on his sermons. After forty-five minutes, Norman was summoned to see the Reverend, who spent fifteen minutes criticizing the essay before sending the boy away with a mandate to make it shorter. Those same events occurred the next hour and the one after that—except that, at the end of the final hour, the essay was thrown in the trash.

The method was unconventional, the instructor was unforgiving, and the pupil sometimes spent nearly as much time crying as writing. “I cannot tell you,” Maclean later wrote, “how much of life 15 minutes can be when you are six, seven, eight, nine, or ten years old and alone with a red-headed Presbyterian minister and cannot answer one of his questions.” The saving grace of these mornings was that, when the time was up, Norman was free to grab a rifle or a fishing rod and head outdoors. About the only thing the two halves of his day had in common was the expectation that the boy would rely on his own resources and answer for his own behavior, which in the wilderness mostly just meant staying alive.

This era of Maclean’s life lasted until he was ten and a half, at which point a truant officer found him out hunting in the middle of the day and put an end to the experiment. Maclean went off to the Missoula public schools and then to Dartmouth, which he chose because he thought it would be easier to slip away to the woods there than it would be at Harvard. But he quickly grew to despise the affluent prep-school kids around him, whose only virtue, he felt, was how often and how expensively they lost to him at poker. He later spoke of only one close college friend, “the craziest guy I ever met,” an irreverent, word-mad classmate named Theodor Geisel: the future Dr. Seuss.

He also spoke of just one outstanding course—with Robert Frost. As a professor, Frost did not suffer fools, chiefly because he did not trouble himself to discover any; he began speaking when class started, took no questions, and walked out the moment he was done. For at least one student, raised on even sterner stuff, the

method worked. It's impossible not to hear something of Frost in Maclean, who became to Montana what the poet was to New England: a plainspoken chronicler of its customs, with a musing, conversational tone that masked an ironclad control over prosody. Maclean learned meter from his mother, who tapped his hand on the kitchen table while reading poetry aloud until he could tell anapests from iambs. That mastery is the invisible force tightening all the bolts on Maclean's prose. "My ordinary style," he once said, "is better than ordinary speech, but not so much you would notice it."

Aside from these two wildly different literary eminences, Maclean cared little for Dartmouth and escaped it as often as he could to go back to the Montana woods. By then, he had been not just playing but working in those woods for many years, beginning at fourteen, when he took a job in the logging industry. Soon, he switched to the United States Forest Service, which he liked so much that he returned for summers during college and again after graduation, building trails and fighting fires and helping to pack horse-and-mule trains with enough supplies to sustain those activities. It took him a decade to give up on the idea of a career with the U.S.F.S., and all his life he wondered what kind of life that would have been. "I wanted to be a head packer," he wrote, at the age of eighty-four, "and still do."

It was while Maclean was back in Montana after college that he met Jessie Burns, a young woman from the two-street town of Wolf Creek. Maclean was captivated by her self-assurance and high spirits, and in 1929, after he had begun working as a graduate assistant at the University of Chicago, she joined him there. Two years later, they got married. But, while Norman was turning into an upstanding adult, the same could not be said of his younger brother. Even in early childhood, Paul had driven his parents to distraction; smart, charming, and sublimely indifferent to authority, he was, as McCarthy writes, "fond of flipping cards in the back

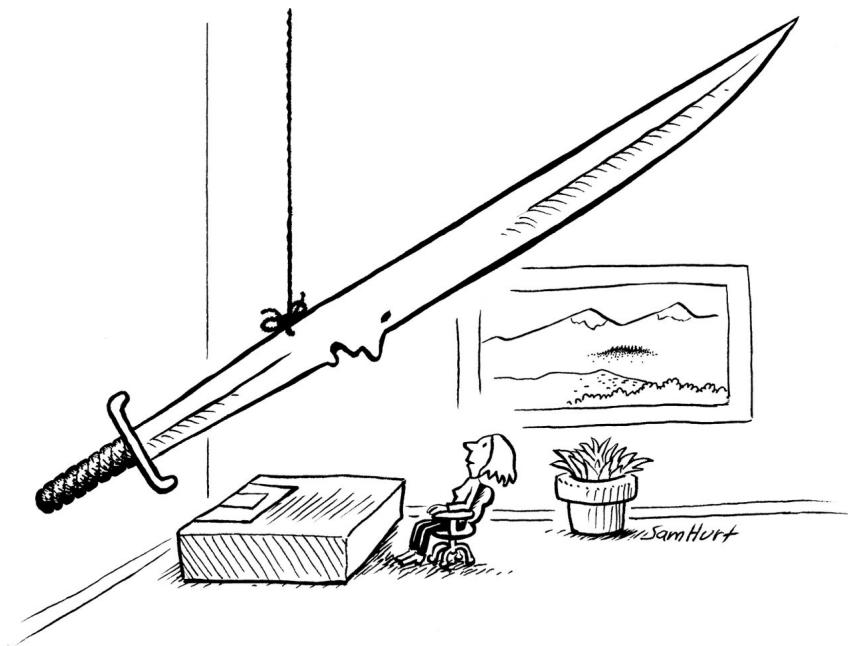
pew while his father preached.” As an adult, he was handsome, secretive, and pugnacious, with a drinking problem, a gambling problem, and an ever-increasing debt in a not at all friendly local poker game. By 1937, McCarthy writes, the Reverend Maclean felt that Paul was “headed straight to hell if he stayed in Montana.” At their father’s urging, Norman persuaded his younger brother to join him in Chicago.

Scarcely more than a year later, on May 1, 1938, Paul took the woman he was dating to a White Sox game, followed by an evening on the town. Afterward, Paul escorted her home, then headed out alone into the night. He was found at sunrise, in an alley on the city’s South Side, with his head bashed in. He died later that day.

Maclean accompanied his brother’s body on the long train ride back to Montana. He was awash in grief and guilt; not only had he encouraged his baby brother to move to Chicago—he had failed all his life to find a way to help him. He was also tormented by not knowing what had happened: whether Paul had been murdered for old gambling debts or new ones, or for some other reason that would never be known, or for no reason at all, a victim of random violence. No one was ever charged, let alone convicted, in the killing. Maclean and his mother learned to live with the uncertainty and the grief. But the Reverend, McCarthy suggests, died of it, felled by a stroke three years after his son was murdered.

It took four decades for the death of Paul Maclean to reveal itself as the catalyzing event of one of the more remarkable careers in American letters. In its immediate aftermath, Norman simply returned to Chicago and earned his Ph.D. He and Jessie had two children in quick succession—a daughter, Jean, and a son, John—and Maclean became a fixture at the university. He stayed through the Second World War (when he taught marksmanship and orienteering alongside English literature), through the upheaval of the nineteen-sixties, through five decades and four university

presidents and countless trends in college education. Throughout it all, he himself had an unchanging understanding of his job: “A great teacher is a tough guy who cares very deeply about something that is hard to understand.”



*“You’ll be working directly under me.”*

*Cartoon by Sam Hurt*

The “tough guy” part came naturally to Maclean. Like his father before him, he was a formidable and unsparing critic, and anyone who fell short of his high standards—a student who turned in subpar work, a colleague whose career foundered, a friend whose marriage fell apart—could expect to face his undisguised disgust. “Sometimes the split was irreparable and he cast them out of the tribe forever,” McCarthy writes. “The Calvinist in him hated failure.” As a result, many people who knew Maclean feared him. Yet he was also widely beloved—especially by his female students, whose intellects he took seriously—and those who got his praise knew they had earned it.

But, if Maclean poured energy into teaching, he withheld it from scholarship: in his entire career, he published just two academic articles. “He ended the ‘publish or perish’ debate for himself with a rhetorical question,” his son wrote in a memoir. “‘Does the world

need another article on lyric poetry?’ ” Deciding that it did not—and recognizing some very different need in himself—Maclean left campus every summer for a cabin on Seeley Lake, an hour northeast of Missoula. It was his Innisfree: “The only place in the world,” he once wrote to his wife, “where my troubled soul feels at peace.”

For a long, hard spell in Maclean’s later years, the troubles grew greater and the peace more elusive. Jessie, a lifelong smoker, was diagnosed at the age of forty-five with emphysema, which would eventually be compounded by esophageal cancer. Two years later, Maclean’s mother died. By the early nineteen-sixties, Maclean was suffering from his own health problems, which routinely landed him in the hospital. That’s where he was when, in 1968, friends came to his room to tell him that, elsewhere on the premises, Jessie had succumbed to cancer. After that, Maclean’s emotional health collapsed as well. Then one day, during a third stint in a psychiatric ward, he turned to his son-in-law, who was visiting, and said, “I’m sick of this shit.” He went home, returned to teaching, and began dating. In 1973, he retired from the university amid a shower of accolades. Then he settled down to finally do the work he had been training to do, knowingly or otherwise, since the age of six.

“A River Runs Through It” contains three stories: the title novella plus two shorter tales, “USFS 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and a Hole in the Sky” and “Logging and Pimping and ‘Your Pal, Jim.’ ” When Maclean finished a draft, he shared it with Allen Fitchen, an editor at the University of Chicago Press, who immediately recognized it as “a work of genius.” Fitchen wanted to publish it, but the mission of the press did not include fiction, and so, playing the role of an obliging colleague, he helped steer it to an editor at Knopf. That man reacted as Fitchen had hoped, dismissing the manuscript as “not a saleable book.” (Maclean, an epic holder of grudges, relished the occasion when, years later, Knopf came knocking. If it were the only publishing house left on the planet and

he were the only author, he informed the unfortunate emissary, that would “be the end of the world of books.”)

While Maclean fumed, Fitchen persuaded his colleagues at Chicago to publish the book. The initial print run was five thousand copies. To date, it has sold well over a million in English alone. “The usual channels of publicity and criticism had virtually nothing to do with it,” Wallace Stegner, a great admirer of the book, wrote. “Neither did literary fashion, for that, along with the orthodoxies of contemporary short story form, is simply ignored in these stories.” Maclean wrote entirely according to his own instincts, which, like so much of his life, had been shaped by the unlikely merger of two sources: the Western canon and that other Western tradition, in which men sat around campfires or on barstools swapping tall tales. Maclean spoke with equal admiration of Wordsworth and Rabelais and a master storyteller he once encountered in the woods, “the only one I ever heard who could tell a whole story with only two grammatical subjects”: “them sons-of-bitches” and “the rest of us bastards.” When the time came for him to commit his own fiction to print, he said, “I went back to my memory of Montana for my energy and to my years of teaching literature for the power lines to conduct it.”

Again and again, I myself return to his stories for energy. One reason is that they are very funny: in keeping with the tall-tale tradition, which favors brevity, action, and humor, Maclean was an excellent comic writer. “USFS 1919” contains a rare and perfect instance of what I can only call textual physical comedy—an entire fight scene viewed low down and prone, from the sawdust beneath a saloon table where the narrator has been knocked flat, leaving him to distinguish between the battling parties solely by their footwear. It also contains a different kind of battle, this one over the name of a tributary of the Clearwater River known to locals as Wet Ass Creek. The narrator takes delight in helping persuade a team of federal surveyors to submit the rightful name to the map-drafting

office, but in the end the joke is on him. When the map is published, the name is rendered as a single word with a final “e”: “Wě-tä’-sē Creek, just as if its headwaters were on Beacon Hill.”

Yet, for all the humor in these tales, sorrow courses underneath them. Maclean is mourning, in part, a whole lost way of being. His setting is the Rocky Mountain West in the early twentieth century, a time and place when manual labor predominated (not by accident is the main character in each story a master of some physical task: logging, packing, fishing) and most people lived cheek by jowl with nature. He clearly loves that world, and yet—this is another reason I admire him—his writing is elegiac without ever being nostalgic. He understands, as Frost did, the human toll of living in constant proximity to axes and saws, livestock and wildlife, fires and floods, and he refuses to let the passage of time soften the experience. You will encounter, in his book, a shepherd who has worn his underwear for so long that his hair has grown through the fabric, such that when it must finally be removed swaths of his skin come off, too; you will encounter injured ranchers riding into two-bit towns in search of help, “holding their intestines in their hands.” “It was a world that was infinitely beautiful and very tough,” Maclean told Studs Terkel after the book came out, “and it’s hard at times to tell the toughness from the beauty.”

Still, the most evident object of mourning in “A River Runs Through It” is not the world at large but Paul, whose death, lightly fictionalized, solemnizes the title story. That story, in turn, anchors the collection, partly because of its gravitas and partly because of its beauty. It is one of American literature’s truly great accounts of family breakdown, and one of its most unusual: the Gospel of Luke by way of Izaak Walton and Paul Bunyan.

The entire novella is structured, subtly, as a series of fishing lessons, though they are far more than that, as its famous opening sentence establishes: “In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing.” The fictional Reverend Maclean,

like the real one, is a dedicated fly fisher, and he wants to pass the art on to his sons. Paul is a quick study—he soon becomes a better angler than his father, maybe a better angler than anyone—but the early days are rough going. The boys, being boys, just want to go out and start trying to catch fish, “omitting entirely anything difficult or technical in the way of preparation.” But the Reverend believes that people who don’t know how to fish should not be allowed to catch anything, “so my brother and I learned to cast Presbyterian-style, on a metronome.”

That lesson, on casting on a four-count beat, is the first one in the book, and it doubles as an introduction to the dynamics of the Maclean family. The instruction carries on from there: how to read the water, how to choose a fly, how to set a hook. It’s easy to miss the orderly way all this unfolds. It’s also easy to be indifferent to fishing and still adore the book, because in the meantime we are treated to the sometimes farcical tale of what happens when the upright Norman and the wayward but honorable Paul must take an insufferable brother-in-law fishing. We get a look, too, at the one-woman sex trade of a tiny Montana town and at the vicious anti-Native attitude prevalent throughout the state, which Paul and Norman both despise and Paul provokes by dating a Native woman. Neither that girlfriend nor the prostitute is what you would call a strong female role model, but they are both strong female characters, specific and plausible and tragic. (Maclean had no patience for the habit of confusing virtuousness with accuracy of depiction. His Custer manuscript contains a scathing line about how Sioux and Cheyenne women at the time of Little Bighorn “should not be sentimentalized into sweet Victorian types in extra good physical condition.”)

Around the edges of all this, a lot of fish get away and a lot of fish get caught, but only when we are almost at the end of the story do we actually witness someone land one. That is the final lesson, delivered via a master class by Paul, who is catching the last of his

limit after his father and brother have given up for the day. We watch him through their eyes, sitting on the riverbank partly jealous but mostly delighted as Paul reels in a monster fish, swims across the swift water carrying his rod and his catch, then comes charging jubilantly up the bank toward them: “He dripped all over us, like a young duck dog that in its joy forgets to shake itself before getting close.”

One page later, he is dead. In the book, the murder happens in Montana, a reflection of Maclean’s Aristotelian commitment to unity of place but perhaps also a way of exorcising guilt over inviting his brother to Chicago, of telling himself that Paul would have met the same fate anywhere. The question lurking beneath that change in setting—whether the younger Maclean was doomed from the beginning—is central to why the book works. What makes it heartbreakingly moving is not just that Paul dies. It’s not even just that everyone loves him and no one knows how to help him. It’s that no one knows whether he can be helped: if he is desperate for assistance or determined to rebuff it; if it was always impossible or if the right act at the right moment might have saved him. At one point, Paul tells a story about driving mesmerized through the dark as a hare bounds along in the beam of his headlights. Then he crashes the car—allegedly because the hare turned and he did not, but more likely because the man, unlike the hare, had been drinking. Norman mulls it over, then concludes, “Since it was no great thing either way, I finally decided to forget it, and, as you see, I didn’t.”

Of course he didn’t—for what is “A River Runs Through It” about but the impossibility of knowing, when you are chasing after some beautiful wild creature, whether you are frightening it or lighting its way or simply bearing witness while it does what it would be doing even if you were not there to see it. That is why, despite all its technical and topographical specificity, the book had such universal appeal. Maclean knew he had caught tragedy in his high beams,

because readers wrote to tell him so again and again: “I have a brother just like that, and I can’t find anything to do that will help him.” Such readers loved Paul because they loved someone like Paul—a prodigal son or daughter or sister or brother, recognizable and precious to countless generations of siblings and parents whose hearts could never be free of worry and grief.

The “unsaleable book” not only sold; it almost won the Pulitzer Prize. It was the first choice of the 1977 fiction jury, but the Pulitzer board, murmuring that the nominees were “not as distinguished as we would have liked,” declined to award a prize that year. The resulting brouhaha was likely as good for sales as the prize would have been; over the years, similar snubs had been doled out to [Ernest Hemingway](#), [Eudora Welty](#), [Saul Bellow](#), and Thomas Pynchon. Nonetheless, Maclean, who was not modest about his talents, was understandably displeased.

He was not, however, daunted. Although he was by then seventy-four years old, Maclean felt that as a writer he was just beginning. His interests were wide, but his grand theme was the problem of Paul: of young men whose violent deaths raised unanswerable questions. That had been the impulse behind his Little Bighorn project—enhanced, no doubt, by the fact that General Custer had fought side by side with a brother in that battle, and that the brother’s body had been hideously mutilated after death, while the General’s remained nearly pristine. When that book thwarted him, he turned to the 1949 wildfire at Mann Gulch, a place he had first visited when parts of the hillside were still smoldering. The resulting work of nonfiction is nearly as beautiful as “A River Runs Through It,” and similarly concerned with the question of inevitability—with whether all those barely-more-than-boys were doomed to burn to death in the canyon. Once again, Maclean knew the question was unanswerable. “There’s a lot of tragedy in the universe that has missing parts and comes to no conclusion,” he wrote, “including probably the tragedy that awaits you and me.”

Maclean's own tragedy came for him quietly, on the morning of August 2, 1990, as he sat down to breakfast in his Chicago apartment. He loved that city dearly; still, it was no place for him to spend eternity. His ashes were scattered in the Swan Range, the mountains overlooking Seeley Lake.

Those ashes had long since turned into Montana by the time I first read Norman Maclean. I started with "Young Men and Fire," and then moved on to "A River Runs Through It," and then moved on to wishing Maclean had lived long enough to get around to earth and air. His great gift was for capturing our relationship to the elemental things: fire and water, mountains and rivers, death and love. I fell for his work right away, partly because I, too, am drawn to the beauty of wild places, but chiefly because he reminds me that language is also an elemental thing, that our connection to it is primal, and that the number of things that can be done with it is infinite. "A River Runs Through It" ends with a theological debate between the Reverend and the narrator about the place of rivers in the creation of the universe. The narrator regards them as fundamental, present even when all was void and God's face moved upon the waters. But it is the Reverend who prevails: in the beginning was the word. ♦



*Kathryn Schulz*, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing. Her latest book is "[Lost & Found](#)."

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## The Seditious Writers Who Unravel Their Own Stories

“Consent,” by Jill Ciment, and “Change,” by Édouard Louis, revisit the past with an eye for distortion and error.

By [Parul Sehgal](#)

July 1, 2024



*“Consent” is an account of Jill Ciment’s almost half-century marriage to the painter Arnold Mesches, told largely through a rereading of her 1996 memoir, “Half a Life.”*

*Photo illustration by Tyler Comrie; Source photograph from Jill Ciment*

On time, as anticipated, they have returned, tunnelling into view, leaving their sooty signature. Pale in the sudden light, they fan and flutter their wings. It’s time to sing. *Me*, they sing. *Me, again.*

Cicada season has come and gone; it is another class of organism I refer to, in the throes of a parallel drama of ceremonial unwrapping

and full-throated song of the self. As if compelled by biological imperatives of their own, these writers—serial memoirists, they’re sometimes called—burst forth with regularly timed tales of tribulation, of molting, of transformation. And each time they tell us they have it figured out. This time, they’ve got the real story for us, the real handle on themselves, on what it’s all about. It’s about living with the ambiguity. Accepting the light and the dark. It’s about (the serial memoirist will say, without a whisper of irony) other people.

To be fair, memoirs have exhibited a tendency to multiply ever since Augustine recalled pocketing those pears. His “Confessions,” which began appearing around 397 C.E., were spread out over thirteen books, each conceived as a distinct unit. In his wake, heavy hitters have included Diana Athill, Shirley MacLaine, Maya Angelou, and Augusten Burroughs, each of whom has produced a proper shelf of memoirs. At work, and advancing: Leslie Jamison, Mary Karr, Lauren Slater.

## **What We're Reading**

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From time to time, what necessitates a new installment is a dramatic development in the author’s life. After writing a memoir about her parents, Dani Shapiro learned that the man who raised her was not her biological father. Back to the desk and out with another draft, “Inheritance” (2019). (It’s about living with the ambiguity.) More often, however, these accounts are dispatches from ordinary life, and frequently about middle age: reports of the birth of a child, worry for the child, divorce and love again, this

secret, those ghosts, my parent is sick, my friend is sick, I am sick, I have an armful of regret, I have these memories of my father's voice, what to do with the too much and too little of it all. A stack of such memoirs might be distilled down to the title of Athill's 2015 volume: "Alive, Alive Oh!"

They can give off a particular scent, these serial memoirs—embarrassment mingling with self-regard. The self is merely source material, the memoirist protests, pink-cheeked; the life merely what is at hand for the staging of larger questions of memory, ethics—Cézanne painting his apples and rewriting the laws of perspective, etc. There will be little of the playfulness and blunt candor of, say, HBO's "Jerrod Carmichael Reality Show," in which Carmichael, a comedian, arranges for a camera crew to follow him, documenting his infidelities, therapy sessions, breakdowns. When a friend protests that Carmichael seems less interested in the truth than in being "masturbatorially public," he does not deny it. More often, to sell copies or to justify the necessity of another installment, the writer doubles down on the importance of the new story—she's finally surfaced the defining trauma, finally seized the defining insight.

But a small, seditious group of serial memoirists complicate the endeavor. Here, one book follows another not as its sequel but as its unmaking. These writers unravel their own stories, enumerate the costs and consequences of the act of narration, with an avid, unsparing eye for distortion and error. In 2000, Emily Fox Gordon published a memoir of her decades of psychiatric care, beginning when she was a teen-ager, called "Mockingbird Years." Part of a wave of therapy memoirs, including "Prozac Nation" and "Girl, Interrupted," the book was well received. Ten years later, Gordon renounced it, in "Book of Days." The first book, she said, was a lie—of a particular kind, a lie forced by the form itself. "Everything that I say happened in my memoir happened, and happened more or less when I said it did: no fact checker could catch me out," she

said. “I wrote from an impossibly posthumous point of view, as if I knew the final truth of my life—as if I were confident that nothing that happened in the future might yet revise it.”

Gordon felt that she could not separate her sense of self from what she had written; she felt ensnared in her own words, stunned into silence: “For two years after *Mockingbird Years* was published, I struggled to disentangle the triumphant narrative self of my memoir from my necessarily nontriumphant real self. I lost touch with my real past, and consequently lost access to the future; I was unable to live and consequently unable to write.”

They are restless creatures, these books, so often stained with shame. Two new ones join the pack: Jill Ciment’s “Consent” and Édouard Louis’s “Change.” (Louis’s accounts of his life have been published as autobiographical fiction, and he insists that everything he writes is true.) I suspect that the ranks of such books will only grow, with the current mood of rapid reconsideration, of reckonings of individuals and institutions, as we ask how present knowledge inflects the past, and vice versa: What do I call what happened to me? What did I know then, and what am I to do now? What story am I to carry forward?

Beneath the tablecloth, a faint silhouette of a horse’s legs, mid-stride. Behind a copse of trees, children at play. “Pentimento,” from the Italian *pentirsi*—to repent, change one’s mind—is the term for the ghostly emergence of something painted over, obscured, an error perhaps. With time, the paint fades. Behind the steady calm on a portrait sitter’s face, another expression reveals itself.

Jill Ciment’s new book, “Consent,” is an account of her marriage to the painter Arnold Mesches, told largely through a rereading of her 1996 memoir, “Half a Life.” She traces evidence of pentimento in those pages, looking for what her narration occluded and what the years have made visible, what she is finally able to confront. “What do I call him?” Ciment begins. “My husband? Arnold? I would if

the story were about how we met and married, shared meals for forty-five years, raised a puppy, endured illnesses. But if the story is about an older man preying on a teenager, should I call him ‘the artist’ or, better still, ‘the art teacher,’ with all that the word *teacher* implies?”

Ciment was sixteen years old when they met. She was driving home from school when she noticed a painting hanging in a gallery window. She stopped the car and got out for a better look. “Under a sheen of varnish, a pile of toys—rag dolls, fire trucks, tin soldiers—appeared to be made out of motion and life,” she writes in “Half a Life.” “When I cupped my eye to the window glass to find the source of the painting’s intensity, the toys imploded into sheer pigment.” Whatever that power was, Ciment wanted it. The woman in the gallery mentioned that the painter was her husband. And he gave lessons.

In “Half a Life,” Ciment portrayed herself as a scrappy, sensitive girl trying to escape her hurricane of a home, dominated by a father prone to cruelty and inexplicable compulsive behaviors. Arnold, the art teacher, appears late in the story, an older man, forty-seven years old, whom Ciment, as she tells it, is determined to seduce, never mind his wife and two children.

Ciment and Mesches were married for almost half a century. Ciment turned from art to fiction, writing novels that were often about women married to much older men; Arnold continued to paint. He died in 2016. Ciment has no one to protect now, she writes in “Consent.” She has been stirred by the energy of #MeToo. She dissects her previous memoir, holding it up, part by part, to the light. She pursued lessons with Arnold, and she pursued him. But, at sixteen, was she capable of consent? Was his praise of her talent a form of grooming?

Ciment had considered herself the “sexual aggressor”—was it a false narrative of empowerment? And what of their ensuing years

together? “Was my marriage—the half century of intimacy, the shifting power, the artistic collaborations, the sex, the shared meals, the friends, the travels, the illnesses, the money worries, the houses, the dogs—fruit from the poisonous tree?” she asks in “Consent.”



*“Hurry! If he gets inside that claw machine, we’ll never get him out!”*  
Cartoon by Jon Adams

Ciment scatters questions like confetti, letting them lie where they land. What can language do for her? Words want to fix things in place, and what she seeks to understand feels as if it’s in motion—in the culture, in her own mind. She does not think she was wounded; her marriage was long, happy—but what could she be concealing from herself? She pans for clues in the silences, the omissions in “Half a Life.” In that book, recalling how Mesches left his family and moved in with her, she wrote that they found a rental, a “hillside bungalow,” situated between her college and his studio. “Late at night,” she recalled dreamily, “the ceaseless whoosh of tires sounded like a wave that never reaches shore.”

In reality, as she clarifies in “Consent,” they were house-sitting and were relegated to a five-year-old’s “princess pink” room, complete with a canopied bed draped in purple sequinned gauze. Arnold couldn’t get an erection on the Barbie sheets. “We bought neutral sheets. It didn’t help,” Ciment writes. “The irony of our landing in

a pedophile's daydream was not lost on me. I found it funny, but it troubled him." She left out those details in her first memoir, just as she did the stories of the pair's early assignations, the sneaking into and out of squalid motels. Too many shades of Humbert Humbert and Lolita.

She is disturbed, too, by the absence of descriptions of Arnold's body. She notes that she did not include her early impression of his "middle-aged neck"—"I found it repulsive." Later, she wonders if she really felt overpowering desire for Arnold, as she professed; if so, "where are the loving descriptions of his body, the object of my mad desire?"

Where are those descriptions? Well, on page 120 of my copy of "Half a Life," for example. "He wasn't wearing his usual undershirt and I could see a faint dusting of gray hair around the base of his throat," she wrote. "He looked 'lived' and I wanted him all the more because of it." Or in a passage about watching him sleep, his eyes "rolling to zones where I yearned to follow. When I caressed him—I couldn't stop caressing him—my touch became as proprietary as it was tender." Or in a scene in which she hungrily smells his skin. One doesn't present these examples to contest Ciment's point, to call her redescription of these events into question, but to demonstrate the difficulty of her task; as she moves from memoir to memoir, and from one trope (scrappy heroine escapes hardscrabble childhood with wits alone) to another (possible #MeToo story of exploitation), much is revealed and obscured. A different genre, a different set of questions, renders different details inconvenient, irreconcilable.

And so the omissions in "Consent" become revealing—what did she leave out as she revised, and why? To read "Half a Life" is to encounter a simpler, more saintly version of Arnold—not purely because he was being protected but because of the larger story the book includes (one that "Consent" largely avoids), of a family life that was frightening and full of neglect. Her father's cruelty and

unpredictability were so total, so destabilizing, that, as a teen-ager, Cement once tried to kill him. She strangled him with a leather cord until she was pulled off by her brother. Cement’s mother would sneak into her daughter’s bed at night to unfurl long confessions about her husband’s poor hygiene, her loneliness, her longing for touch. Her daughter was bent on escape. Fleeing to New York for a time and living in a squat were preferable; posing for nude photographs for revolting men was preferable.

In the new memoir, we wait for Cement to consider what “consent” might mean, to this teen-ager on the run, who would identify a middle-aged man as a safe harbor, who did not stop to acknowledge what felt distressing in this relationship because she had known little else. But Cement demurs. “Consent” is trained squarely on her and Arnold, on a story of changing sexual mores. To widen the aperture, to consider what she was running from as well as toward—in effect, to read the books together—would blur the outlines of the story she is telling, one about consent and harm. It would risk indicting others, too, who took advantage or who watched and did nothing. Her mother, for example. “Consent” does not complete or cancel out “Half a Life”; in tracing the evidence of pentimento, it leaves its own traces that tamper and reveal. No one story supplants another, no brushstroke blots out the past.

The serial memoirist haunts her own books. But not all ghosts are like Cement; not all linger in the hope of clarity, of restitution. Some unravel the story to keep it going—ghosts unsure about their next destination.

Édouard Louis was born in 1992 in the village of Hallencourt, in northern France, into bitter poverty and family dysfunction. At twenty-one, he published an autobiographical novel, “The End of Eddy” (2014), in which he dramatized the violence of his village, the racism, the routine humiliations he endured growing up gay. The title referred to him changing his name, as if to bury the boy he once was.

“The End of Eddy” was an international sensation and a local scandal. Louis reported that his brother travelled to Paris and was looking for him with a baseball bat. His mother went on television to challenge his account. He could no longer return to his village. In a 2017 interview with the *Financial Times*, he sounded indifferent. He had a new family now, writer friends, famous ones at that. “Anyway,” he said, “I don’t write for *maman* and *papa*. I won’t let the conservative ideology of the family stand in the way. What is this, the 18th century?”

Four books followed in rapid succession: “History of Violence” (2016), “Who Killed My Father” (2018), “A Woman’s Battles and Transformations” (2021), and, most recently, “Change,” which was published in 2021 and appeared earlier this year in an English translation by John Lambert. Louis now devoted himself not only to writing for *maman* and *papa* but to avenging them. He went from attack to identification; from criticizing his family—their values, their ways—to enveloping them in a silky and surprising pronoun: “us.” “Should I not repeat myself until they listen to us?” he asks in “Who Killed My Father.” “To *make* them listen to us?”

His father is the monster in “Eddy,” introduced on its second page, his mouth ringed with blood—he had been drinking the still warm blood from a freshly butchered pig. In subsequent books, Louis notes, with admiration, his father’s evolution. He wants to give his mother solace: “I would like for this book—this story of her—to be, in some way, the home in which she might take refuge,” he writes in “A Woman’s Battles and Transformations.”

One begins to suspect that Louis returns so frequently to the scenes of his childhood, to the stories of his parents, not to soften his previous critiques but for the sheer sake of return and the relief it offers. New angles seem like pretext; his pen feels surest on the old terrain, requires it—no matter how extensively and expensively he has transformed himself. In “Change,” he asks, “Need I tell you again how it all started?” We barrel backward again, back to

Hallencourt, always to Hallencourt, to the story of how Eddy Bellegueule became Édouard Louis. “At just over twenty I’d changed my first and last names in court, transformed my face, redesigned my hairline, undergone several operations, reinvented the way I moved, walked and talked, and got rid of the northern accent of my childhood.” He recounts finding fame, moving to Barcelona, trying to “give up everything and move to India”—the doleful itinerary of the years when he thought wealth and success would make him happy. He dwells on how wrong he was.

“In your life there are a few places, or maybe only the one place, where something happened, and then there are all the other places,” Alice Munro wrote. For Louis, there is such a place, the place where it happened. I’d argue that it is not Hallencourt but that first book, that first set of memories and impressions he captured in “The End of Eddy,” which he rehashes again and again, those scenes which he does not develop or complicate (like Ciment) but continues to haunt. “I’d like to go back,” he writes in “Change,” sounding bewildered. “To the time of smells. To the times when I came home after school to the strong odor of fuel oil in the living room . . . (I’m not nostalgic for poverty, but for smells and images).” His new life seems to give him little creatively; it dulls him. So he stalks his past—waiting, it seems, for the transformation, that intensity of sensation, to happen again. He wants the blank page back.

Who wouldn’t? A memoir is not merely the record of a transformation but the device for one, and the blank page symbolizes its great hope and wager. Is it the lure of renewal that drives the serial memoirist? The writer’s “I” can be a persona, but it can also be a chrysalis, a placeholder for the self in making, the self to come. Lift your hands from the keys, to reconsider, revise, be reborn. Watch the cursor blink back, patient and cautioning: I, I, I. ♦



*Parul Sehgal* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*.

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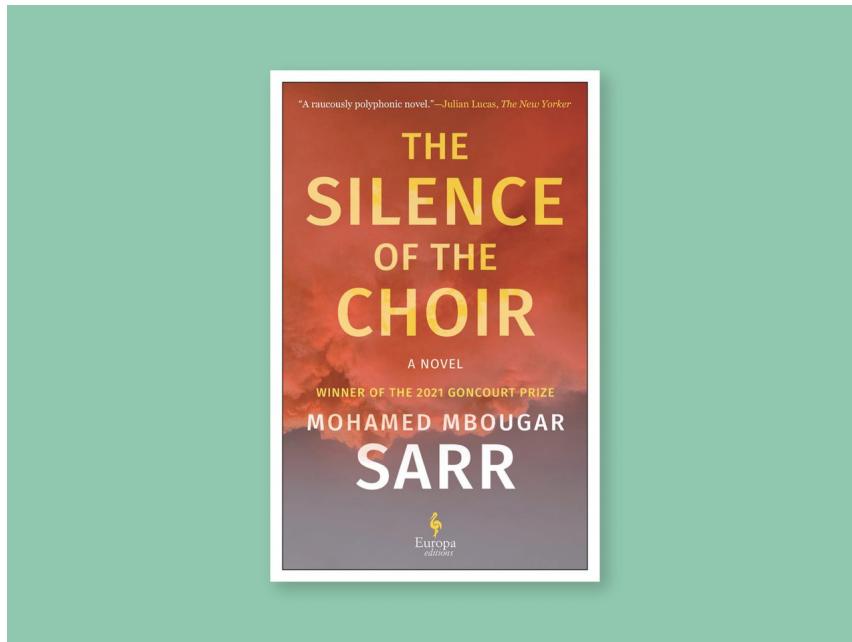
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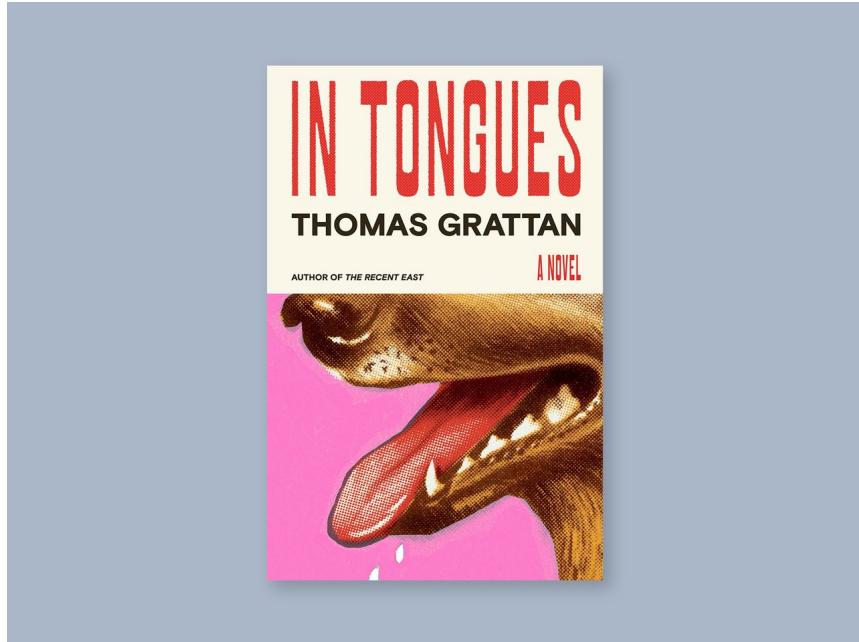
## Briefly Noted

“*The Silence of the Choir*,” “*In Tongues*,” “*Woman of Interest*,” and “*The Museum of Other People*.”

July 1, 2024



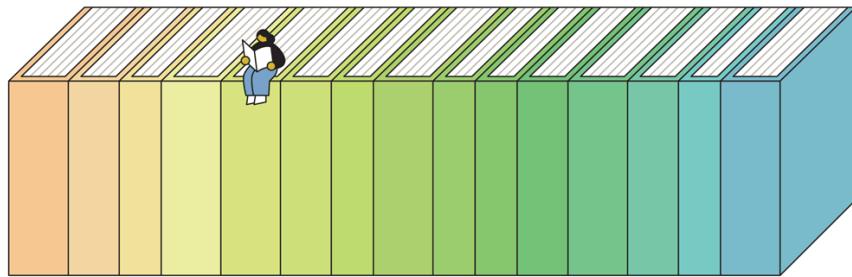
**The Silence of the Choir**, by Mohamed Mbougar Sarr (*Europa*). In this ambitious, Goncourt Prize-winning novel, seventy-two African asylum seekers arrive in a fictional town in rural Sicily after a harrowing journey, only to find themselves at the center of an ideological battle that splinters the community. Sarr moves adroitly between the viewpoints of a wide cast of characters—refugees, politicians, advocacy workers, xenophobic vigilantes, a priest, an eminent poet—while probing the complexities of Europe’s debate over asylum. Ultimately, the novel suggests that it is not only members of the far right, “obsessed with their phobia,” who deserve excoriation but also those more sympathetic to migrants’ plights who nonetheless “reduce a refugee to a walking tragedy.”



**In Tongues**, by Thomas Grattan (MCD x FSG). The protagonist of this moody novel is a young man attempting to make a fresh start in New York City at the outset of the twenty-first century, seeking—through dead-end jobs, anonymous sexual encounters, and a gradual infiltration of the art-world élite—a new way to be seen. Amid his adventures, he wonders whether self-scrutiny is anything more than self-obsession, and if answering questions like that one is really a path to maturity. Grattan casts early adulthood as a period of inertia, in which a person is trapped between the urge to be present and the desire to move on—a time of life whose outward expressions are, above all, absurd.

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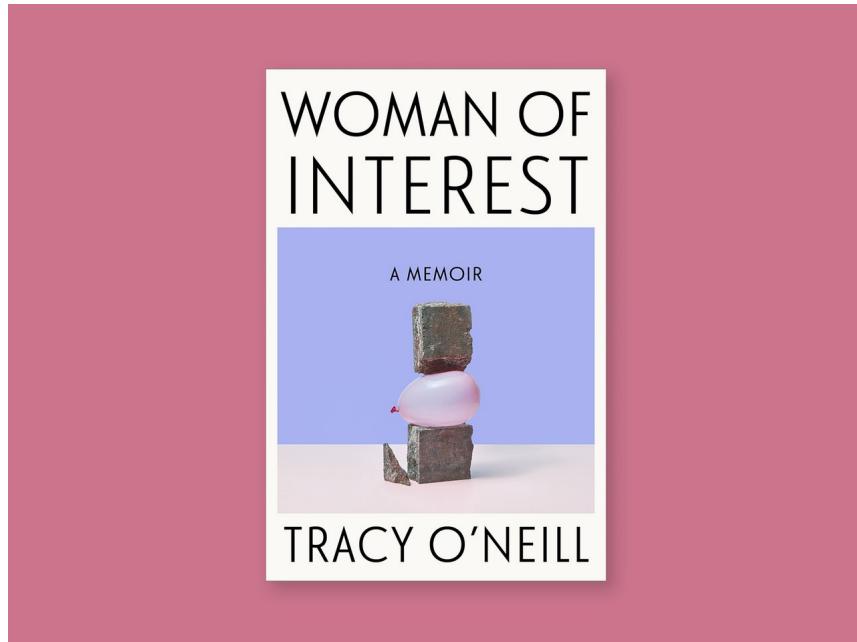
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*Illustration by Rose Wong*

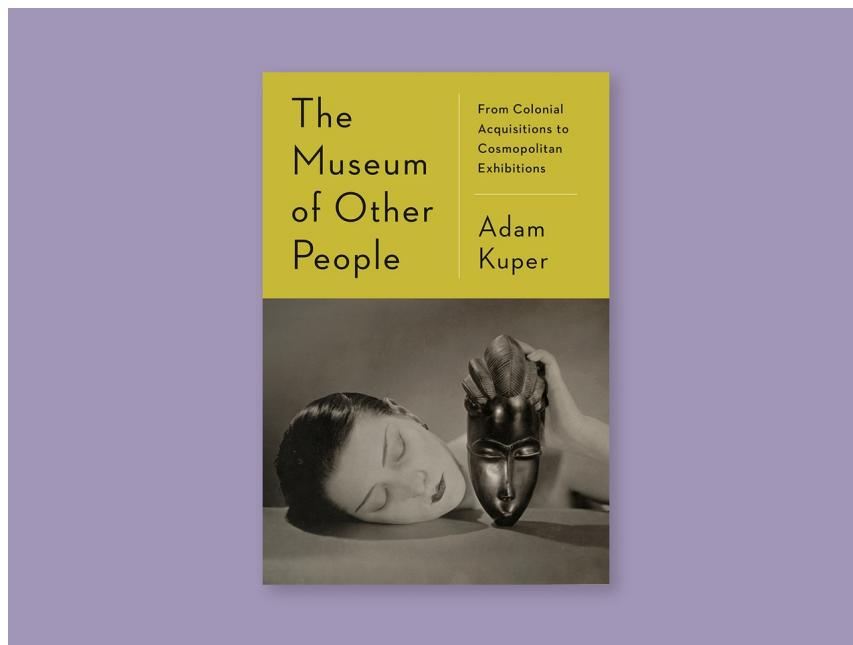
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**Woman of Interest**, by Tracy O'Neill (HarperOne). At thirty-three, O'Neill, a writer and a professor who grew up in the Northeast, embarked on a quest to locate the South Korean woman who gave birth to her. In this dark, deeply funny memoir, O'Neill relates the story of that quest. Although her tale contains familiar elements (DNA searches, a trip to the motherland), she handles them uniquely. Framing her narrative as a detective story, she writes in a comedic voice that's at once old-fashioned and contemporary—Dashiell Hammett meets “Fleabag.” Discursive detours give the book an intentionally shaggy feel: “Unruly story forms imply how a writer believes the shape of life goes,” she

notes. It's a keen observation, elegantly illustrated by the life of the woman at the center of her investigation.



**The Museum of Other People**, by Adam Kuper (Pantheon). Non-Western and Indigenous artifacts—antiquities, ceremonial objects, human remains, and the like—are sites of contention in this anthropologist’s history of museums. Covering more than two centuries, Kuper considers the troubling entwinement of his field with colonial thievery and racist propaganda, while tackling a wide range of other subjects, from Franz Boas to World’s Fairs, modernist art to the National Museum of the American Indian. Beginning as a scholarly historical survey, Kuper’s analysis gradually morphs into a polemic that questions contemporary restitution and repatriation efforts, and is based on a fear that anthropologists are no longer deferred to as experts.

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[Books](#)

## Taffy Brodesser-Akner's Scabrous Satire of the Super-Rich

In “Long Island Compromise,” wealth is a curse. Or is that just what we’d like to think?

By [Jennifer Wilson](#)

July 1, 2024



*Any story about the American suburbs has to wrestle with the high price we pay for physical safety.*  
*Illustration by Lucas Burtin*

The rich are always crying poverty when it comes time to pay a ransom: “Net worth and liquidity are not the same thing!” Across

cinema, the moneyed and their auxiliaries question the kidnappers' math. In the film "Fargo," the wealthy father of Jean Lundgaard grumbles, "A million dollars is a lot of damn money." In the action thriller "Rush Hour," the men who kidnapped the daughter of a Chinese diplomat call to demand fifty million dollars, to which the L.A.P.D. detective James Carter (Chris Tucker) exclaims, "Fifty million dollars?! Who you think you kidnapped, Chelsea Clinton?" The real-life haggling can get just as protracted. In 1973, the oil tycoon J. Paul Getty did not agree to pay his grandson's kidnappers until several months after the initial ransom letter, when a bloody ear turned up. Even then, Getty paid only the maximum he could claim as a tax write-off.

Not so with the Fletchers, the "extraordinarily, absurdly, kidnappably rich" family at the heart of "Long Island Compromise" (Random House), by Taffy Brodesser-Akner. When Carl Fletcher is abducted outside his estate, in 1980, his family quickly coughs up the cash; Carl's wife, Ruth, withdraws two hundred and fifty thousand dollars from the bank like she's getting a coffee to go. (She is married to the heir to a Styrofoam fortune, after all.) She delivers a briefcase with the money to a baggage carrousel at J.F.K. Airport, and, within minutes, Carl is dropped outside a Mobil bathroom, drenched in piss, vomit, and relief.

Before Carl's kidnapping, the only thing that residents of the fictional hamlet of Middle Rock, Long Island, had to fear was radiation from their microwave ovens. But the Fletchers hand over the ransom so readily that it is as if they've been expecting calamity to strike. In fact, they have been through something like this before. Carl's father, Zelig Fletcher, fled to New York from Poland in 1942, with nothing to his name but a formula for polystyrene and the knowledge that, for Jews like him, money and family could disappear with no warning. He traumatized—or prepared—his children with a catchall phrase to describe every misfortune, from busted machinery to the Holocaust: "There's a

dybbuk in the works.” In Jewish folklore, a dybbuk is an evil spirit “that either warded off or provoked unexplainable happenstance like an infestation of ants in a sugar bowl or Cossacks murdering your siblings in front of you.” Zelig pursued fortune as a protective amulet. The family needed enough money to repair the havoc a dybbuk could wreak. So what if the Styrofoam factory that he built polluted Long Island Sound? As he learned in his harrowing exit from Europe, you do what you have to do to survive.

## What We’re Reading

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Brodesser-Akner is a keen observer of class aspiration as a survival method. In Middle Rock, the first American suburb that’s fifty per cent Jewish, ostentatious wealth is a disguise, a nervous attempt by the town’s residents to camouflage their minority status against the backdrop of the American Dream. “They fixed their noses into pointy things and dyed their hair blond and founded pool clubs and boat clubs so that the transformation was complete and no one would be able to pick them out from the general population and send them into slavery or off to concentration camps again. Their very own Canaan,” Brodesser-Akner writes.

What has all that wealth cost them? In “Long Island Compromise,” Brodesser-Akner tries to do the math. Ruth, who does not come from money, looks at her family and can only see what it has subtracted from their lives. Carl’s abduction, which turns out to be a bit of class warfare, has given him P.T.S.D. Her children grow up to underachieve as only people whose bills are covered by someone else can afford to. Any story about the American suburbs has to

wrestle with the high price we pay for physical safety and the spiritual danger that comfort invites into our lives in the process. Brodesser-Akner asks whether wealth itself is a poltergeist, troubling the waters of the Fletchers' swimming pool and marble bathtub. Or do the rest of us need to believe that money takes a toll on the rich so that we don't go crazy and kidnap one of them?

Writing about money is Brodesser-Akner's bread and butter. At the New York *Times Magazine*, she covered the life styles of the rich and famous as a writer of celebrity profiles. Her début novel, "Fleishman Is in Trouble," was, perhaps not coincidentally, about the crazy-making effects of being around absurdly wealthy people (and also the absurdities of wealthy people). That book, like "Long Island Compromise," begins with a missing parent. One morning, the high-powered talent agent and high-strung Manhattan mom Rachel Fleishman kidnaps herself to attend the Kripalu wellness retreat while she processes years of Middle Rock-esque striving. Most of the novel is told from the perspective of Toby, her soon-to-be ex-husband, who complains that his wife spread herself too thin in her efforts to keep up with the Leffers, a Fletcher-like family who hired German tutors for their children to prep for Christmas vacations in Deutschland. To Toby, they "sounded like soldiers in the Third fucking Reich," but it was music to Rachel's ears—until she drowned out the siren call of aspiration with the sound of her own tension-releasing primal screams at Kripalu.

"Fleishman Is in Trouble" was turned into a Hulu miniseries, with Brodesser-Akner serving as its head writer and showrunner. In her latest novel, she draws on her time in Tinseltown. Extended portions of "Long Island Compromise" take place in Hollywood, where the middle Fletcher child, Beamer, is a floundering screenwriter. Years after making a comedy about a rich Mexican teen-ager who gets kidnapped but then falls in love with his captor's daughter, he keeps pitching studios variations of the same B movie: "'Gone by Dinnertime,' a romantic comedy about a man

who, years after graduation, kidnaps his high school crush without realizing it”; “‘Physical Education,’ a fast-moving romp about four teenagers who try to kidnap their math teacher but accidentally end up with their gym teacher”; and so on. At one point, he pretends to be his more successful former writing partner, Charlie, hoping to get a return call from Mandy Patinkin.

Charlie, too, is from Middle Rock, but his family was middle class. A TV show he wrote and produced, “Family Business,” “about a family in Queens whose adult children were engaged in a constant fight for taking over the family factory,” becomes a cultural sensation, both a critical darling of the chattering class and a political touchpoint, responsible even “for some renewed labor organizing in the younger generations and at least one piece of legislation regarding inheritance taxes.”

The Fletchers suspect that the show is about them. Readers of “Long Island Compromise” will suspect that “Family Business” is about the HBO hit “Succession.” Like Logan Roy—the self-made patriarch at the center of that series—the elder Fletchers are forced to watch as their children squander the fruits of their labor.

Beamer’s older brother, Nathan, is an anxious land-use lawyer who, when he first heard of the profession, became “drunk on the promise of a life of low-risk nonconfrontational tedium.” Their sister, Jenny, a socialist who studies economics at Yale, is a prodigy, good at all she tries, except for destroying her family’s wealth and the system that enables it to exist. She wants her father’s factory workers to unionize, and hopes that class struggle as a movement will replace class struggle as psychodrama in Middle Rock. Her plan is to “fight against the whole diaphanous premise that they”—the Fletchers—“based their greed and clannishness upon: that whatever they had to do for money was justified because once, a long, long time ago, Jews trusting the world and playing by the rules didn’t go so well.” But Jenny struggles to graduate from theory to praxis, and squats in her

parents' Manhattan brownstone, where she plays a video game about having a job and attending H.R. meetings.

Every quarter, the Fletcher siblings each receive nearly one million dollars from the factory's earnings. Their mother feels like "the bottom could fall out anytime," but the Fletcher children associate hitting bottom with being sent to an upscale rehab facility. Beamer blows his money on maintaining a Hollywood life style (couples therapy, black-market weight-loss drugs, his wife's dermatologist-cum-psychologist). Nathan becomes addicted to buying insurance (including kidnapping insurance). Jenny gives so much of her money away that the I.R.S. nearly puts her in a negative tax bracket.

The novel names this state of affairs the Long Island Compromise: people born poor will struggle but be resourceful, whereas those born rich will turn into basket cases but never have to wonder how they'll pay the therapist. But a plot twist threatens that equilibrium. In a complicated set of financial transactions that the Fletcher children barely comprehend (the family business has never been any of their business), their factory is being sold out from under them.

Could this calamity force House Fletcher to downsize? The opening line of the novel reads, "Do you want to hear a story with a terrible ending?" It's our first clue that the Fletcher kids might very well survive the threat that comes their way from private equity, the dybbuk of our era. Compromises, it turns out, are for the rest of us, because the only thing more indestructible than Styrofoam is inherited wealth. ♦

*An earlier version of this article misstated Lundgaard's association with a scene in "Fargo."*



*Jennifer Wilson* is a contributing writer at *The New Yorker*.

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## “Cats: The Jellicle Ball” Lands on Its Feet

The directors Zhailon Levingston and Bill Rauch cross Andrew Lloyd Webber’s juggernaut musical with queer ballroom culture to electrifying effect.

By [Helen Shaw](#)

June 27, 2024



*Restless spotlights catch Qween Jean's gorgeously glamazon costumes like jewels in the dark.  
Illustration by Ohni Lisle*

When I was little, five or six, I was taken to Andrew Lloyd Webber’s long-running juggernaut musical “Cats.” My parents knew that I was already a big fan of cats (the species), and they had

strategically hyped Lloyd Webber's source material, T. S. Eliot's "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats." What they didn't know was that I was extremely nearsighted—I had never thought to mention it, but I couldn't see anything more than three inches from my face. I remember my blurry toddler life before "Cats" (and glasses) as a mist, out of which books and snacks gently materialized. But in the night-black New London Theatre, during a bit of "fun," fourth-wall-breaking crowd work, a spandex-clad dancer in leg warmers with a glowing cat-eye light on her head pounced onto my lap. Was theatre supposed to be this terrifying? I immediately started sobbing.

Some forty years later, screaming and, indeed, discreet sobbing are actually the *appropriate* reactions to the ecstatic, quasi-immersive production of "Cats: The Jellicle Ball," at *PAC NYC*. The directors Zhailon Levingston and Bill Rauch have reenvisioned Lloyd Webber's cheese-tastic musical as an event on the queer, largely Black and Latinx ballroom circuit, the once underground drag milieu introduced to the mainstream in works such as the 1990 documentary "Paris Is Burning" and the TV show "Pose." This type of ballroom features voguing dance battles and catwalk strut-offs, and so the directors have deliberately orchestrated a raucous crowd response. When André De Shields, a Broadway icon, appears as the kinglike Old Deuteronomy, in a purple suit (designed by Qween Jean) and a white-and-purple ombré lion's mane, the audience's din of approval becomes his royal fanfare. And the longer the contestants sashay the more the room urges them to greatness. "Deliver! *Deliver!*" one theatregoer next to me shouted.

Given "Cats'" dominance—it ran on Broadway for eighteen years—it's difficult to remember that, in 1981, Lloyd Webber's synthesizer-forward musical interpretation of Eliot's whimsical poems seemed like a sure loser. Eliot's verses have no connecting narrative, so Lloyd Webber and his director, Trevor Nunn, corralled

them into a junk-yard revue in which various cats jockey for a prize from Old Deuteronomy, who will select one to ascend to “the Heaviside Layer.” If you overlook the nine-lives-are-a-burden, death-wish aspect—which the musical strongly encourages you to do—“Cats” originally played as a cross between a children’s song cycle and a dance fantasia consisting of eroticized aerobics, which were very much a thing in the eighties. (Schlock the show may have been, but I wasn’t the only one who fell for it.)

To accommodate this new ballroom incarnation, *PAC NYC*’s huge, flexible space has been arranged around a runway, designed by Rachel Hauck, with cabaret tables on three sides. Adam Honoré lights the cavernous environment with rich fuchsias and restless spotlights, which keep catching Jean’s gorgeously glamazon costumes like jewels in the dark. The choreographers Arturo Lyons and Omari Wiles send the ensemble down that catwalk in a militarily precise flying wedge, then let each performer spin off into extraordinary solos, in which they perform dips and smash splits, often ending up lying down in voguing’s signature attitude: one leg up, head thrown back. (It’s a charming coincidence that cats spend a lot of time with one paw in the air.)

Levingston and Rauch’s melding of “Cats” and the queer ballroom scene is so effortless that it seems to have required only the slightest alterations. The synthesizer groove has been juiced up with some new club beats by Trevor Holder, the directors have added a plotlet about the naughty thief Macavity (Antwayn Hopper) getting rumbled by the cops, and the entire number “Growltiger’s Last Stand,” in which the titular tom hates “cats of foreign name and race,” has been tastefully deleted. The true difference, though, lies in the piece’s shift from commercialized kitsch to camp sincerity. The performers here—among them the magnificent dancer Robert (Silk) Mason as Mistoffelees, with Cher hair swinging long, and the ultra-charismatic Hopper as Macavity, who can control the room just by dropping his hat—appear to be

dancing for the love of it, and for one another. As the show goes on, a more mysterious literary synchrony emerges: how wonderful that Eliot, in 1939, placed such an emphasis on the power of names known only to those who understand you, and on a thriving community's reverence for its elders.

In ball culture, competitors are organized by houses, and the show pays homage to these structures of found family, often by casting performers from the scene itself. At one point in “Jellicle Ball,” we see a slide sequence of famous housemothers going back fifty years, including Crystal LaBeija, the Black trans legend who co-founded the Royal House of LaBeija, in 1972, and Grizabella, “founder of the House of Glamour.” In “Jellicle Ball,” Grizabella, a.k.a. the Glamour Cat, is played by “Tempress” Chasity Moore; she will win over Old Deuteronomy with her plaintive song “Memory,” the bathetic, earwormy ballad that steamrolls every effort to resist it. At first, Moore prowls melodramatically at the edges of the action, seeming awkward and at sea. But her climactic rendition of the song stops the show. “I can dream of the old days, life was beautiful then,” she sings, center stage at last. She sends her voice low, shaking us somewhere down under our feet, as if a subway were passing. I felt as though it were my first time at “Cats” all over again. Something had been blurry, and then there it was, all of a sudden—shockingly real and close.

A day after I saw “Jellicle Ball,” I went to one of the last performances of “Can I Be Frank?,” a bitingly funny tribute to a very different queer forebear, created by the comedian and activist Morgan Bassichis at the recently refurbished Club at La Mama. In that same venue, during the grittier days of the late nineteen-eighties, the artist and musician Frank Maya began doing talk pieces called rants, which launched him into a brief but important standup career. (He was one of the few out comedians in the nineties to make it onto network television.) Maya’s manic style involved long, discursive, sometimes personal speeches about, for

example, a parent who wants to “cure” his gay child—“Dad! You know the only cure for being gay is fame!”—and men who don’t maintain their oomph. He also did a lot of material about death.

Bassichis first heard about Maya while attending an artists’ residency—it’s “when you go to have sex with people somewhere else,” they explain, helpfully—and fell into an obsession with the comic, who died from *AIDS* complications in 1995. Maya had a “selfishness that was political,” Bassichis relays, interrupting their re-creations of Maya’s routines to confess to their own paradoxical feelings of anxiety and grandeur. Sam Pinkleton, the director of Cole Escola’s hit show “Oh, Mary!,” also worked on “Frank,” and Bassichis makes comic hay out of having a “big Broadway guy” involved. “We’ll fly this in,” Bassichis says confidently, shoving a ratty set of stairs across the floor. Bassichis tries various things to honor Maya, or perhaps, in some odd way, to get his posthumous attention, including a bit in which they receive a letter, supposedly from their dead idol.

Maya didn’t live long enough to become a queer elder; for so many reasons, there are now too few. Yet Bassichis clearly yearns to know what Maya might have thought of their work. It reminded me of André De Shields, seventy-eight years old and glorious, sitting on his throne at the judging table, watching the “Jellicle Ball” ensemble perform. There’s a tether between De Shields and the younger dancers, taut as a wire, and life force runs through it. No wonder so much of ballroom culture is founded on competition: parents who truly see a queer child are sometimes hard to come by, but a judge—and an audience—will watch intently, every time. ♦



*Helen Shaw joined The New Yorker as a staff writer in 2022. She won the 2017-18 George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism.*

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[On Television](#)

## “The Boys” Gets Too Close for Comfort

The Amazon Prime series started as a fantastical, darkly funny sendup of the superhero genre. Now it’s set in a political landscape that looks distressingly like our own.

By [Inkoo Kang](#)

June 26, 2024



*“The Boys” traces Homelander’s degeneration from celebrity to demagogue.*  
*Illustration by Joe Gough*

Marvel could only dream of a monoculture like the one found in “The Boys,” Prime Video’s pitch-black superhero parody, now in its fourth season. Stern-jawed or ready with a smile, “supes” can be

seen on the streets of New York City, stopping criminals, but also on multiplex screens, spearheading a cinematic universe; in churches, spinning their powers as divine gifts; on cereal boxes, modelling athleticism; and on bedroom posters, inspiring millions of innocents across America. Vought International, a corporation that's part Disney, part Fox News, part Big Pharma, first created superheroes as weapons, then turned them into celebrities. The members of the Seven, its élite, Justice League-esque squad, have proved both extremely lucrative and—between sexual-harassment scandals, struggles with addiction, and the odd manslaughter case—rather difficult to manage. The company's stock price, and the supes' fragile egos, depends on the adoration of the crowd—but, as any show-biz tragedy can tell you, fame is a poor substitute for love.

“The Boys” began as a middle finger to [the M.C.U.](#), but it evolved into an electrifying political satire in its [second season](#), which aired just ahead of the 2020 election. It’s then that Homelander (Antony Starr), the leader of the Seven, meets his ideal woman: a white supremacist named Stormfront (Aya Cash), who informs him that the era of courting the masses is over. “You don’t need fifty million people to love you,” she says. “You need five million people fucking pissed.” It was a brutally perfect encapsulation of the fracturing of the country and those poised to exploit it; the rest of the series has charted Homelander’s id-fuelled pivot from a mainstream star to a rage-stoking demagogue. The parallels with [Donald Trump](#) have never been subtle, and at the end of the third season Homelander gets his own “stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody” moment: when a protester hurls a soda can in his direction, the supe reflexively retaliates by blowing away the top half of the man’s head with his laser vision. Homelander braces for the consequences—and is met with cheers from his red-capped fans.

The showrunner Eric Kripke has professed an interest in “how social media and entertainment are used to sell fascism,” and the new season opens with Homelander on trial for the protester’s death, pushing out messaging not unlike that of his Presidential analogue. (A fund-raising ad urges viewers to support their hero as he “faces his toughest opponent yet: our corrupt legal system.”) Homelander assesses prospective additions to the Seven with an eye toward their political cachet; an adviser says, approvingly, of a fiercely anti-migrant supe from Texas, “He bumps us with suburban women and white men over fifty!” Instead, Homelander opts to recruit a right-wing conspiracy theorist named Firecracker (Valorie Curry) and the nihilistic Sister Sage (Susan Heyward), who has to constantly remind people that she isn’t just the smartest *woman* in the world but the smartest *person*. Firecracker, who hosts a podcast called “The Truthbomb,” is an emotionally canny phony who knows exactly how to nurse her followers’ aggrievements. Sage, a Black woman who doesn’t bother to sand down the edges of her intellect, is acutely aware that Homelander’s allies tend not to have long life expectancies. That she chooses to partner up with him anyway lends her story arc a simmering sense of doom.

Sage’s plan is to use existing societal fault lines to instigate a civil war, allowing Homelander to swoop in and play the great unifier. Since the [real-life riot](#) at the Capitol, artists have conjectured what such mass-scale strife might look like: the Alex Garland film “[Civil War](#)” was most interested in the aesthetics of the conflict, whereas the final season of the #Resistance lark “[The Good Fight](#)” confronted the practical realities of stochastic violence. Though “The Boys” is the most fantastical of these projects, with characters who run at the speed of sound and punch through the torsos of their enemies—aided by a fake-intestines budget that probably rivals the G.D.P. of a small country—its commentary is arguably the most grounded. Even as Kripke delights in the gruesome and the absurd, he advances a question that too few actual political actors seem to

have asked themselves: How many norms and institutions are they willing to destroy in order to “win”?

“The Boys” ’s fluency with current events, once its great strength, has proved a double-edged sword. The series is stuffed with ripped-from-the-headlines subplots, and new characters seem half-formed, lost in an increasingly sprawling ensemble; the titular crew, a ragtag group determined to bring down the Seven, comes to feel like an afterthought. More than any particular narrative thread, power is the show’s true object of fascination. Homelander is a case study in its corrosive effect. Blond and blue-eyed, with a modified American flag for a cape, the nominal hero is blood-chilling yet pitiable, a golden boy undone by his compulsion to exercise the upper hand in every relationship. Just as the online right’s maliciousness is inextricable from a contempt for the marginalized and a fear of vulnerability, Homelander’s insistence on his superiority has made him dangerously lonely. And his self-made echo chamber comes with other complications: he needs more strategic support than he can get from the short-term allies and terrified yes-men who are left.

In this season, the supe is reunited with Ryan (Cameron Crovetti), the son who’s been kept from him for years—one blessed, and cursed, with supernatural abilities of his own. For Homelander, fatherhood poses fresh, even poignant, challenges. Having been raised as a lab rat and remade into a photogenic mascot, he defaults to being a stage dad, pushing Ryan into the spotlight with scripted heroics and instilling a disdain for the humans who actually fall for them. In contrast with the members of the Seven, who’ve chosen a life in the public eye, Ryan—a sheltered, insecure preteen—is uninterested in how fame and fortune can transform his life. Yet Homelander, who’s loath to leave him with a “shithole country,” doesn’t know how else to demonstrate his love. His capacity to corrupt takes on life-or-death stakes. As another character puts it, “If Ryan becomes like Homelander, that’s the end of the world.”

For a certain subset of viewers, such dire warnings have come as a surprise. “Some people who watch it think Homelander is the hero,” Kripke told the *Hollywood Reporter*. “If that’s the message you’re getting from it, I just throw up my hands.” The most recent episodes’ perceived turn toward “wokeness”—namely, the mask-off treatment of Homelander and the introduction of a gay romance—has sparked backlash among such fans. But, perhaps because of the tightrope Kripke has long been able to walk, “The Boys” has been a bona-fide hit for Prime Video, with a final season still to come, two spinoffs (including the teen-oriented “Gen V”), and more in development. As disturbing as the show is meant to be, it used to offer a perverse kind of comfort: our society may suck, but at least it’s not *this* irrevocably fucked up. That silver lining evaporates in the fourth season, as constant references to members of our own D.C. milieu—Pete Buttigieg, Ron DeSantis, Mitt Romney—suggest that it’s not only the characters who live in a hopeless world but us, too. The dystopian developments and comic-book-level gore once felt reassuringly far from home; now, with another election looming, it all reads as distinctly American carnage. ♦



*Inkoo Kang* is a television critic at *The New Yorker*.

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[The Current Cinema](#)

## Kevin Costner's "Horizon" Goes West but Gets Nowhere

*The actor-director's three-hour Western, the first installment of a planned tetralogy, rushes through its many stories and straight past American history.*

By [Richard Brody](#)

June 28, 2024



*Kevin Costner directs and stars in the first part of a projected tetralogy.*  
*Illustration by Matt Williams*

Westerns are an inherently political genre, for the obvious reason that they depict (or distort or interrogate) American history. But they are also political in that they show the birth of the polis itself—the institutions of modern urban society, with their laborers, clerks, merchants, teachers, sheriffs, entertainers. Where philosophers from Plato to Rousseau sought to imagine the development of civil society from first principles, the makers of Westerns—John Ford, Howard Hawks, Raoul Walsh—showed it being created from the ground up, by hands-on labor.

Unlike the blank pages awaiting philosophers' fancies, the American West was already inhabited, and the Indigenous peoples

living there had well-developed social orders, so Westerns are, unavoidably, tales of conquest and subjection. Westerns, which emerged around the dawn of the twentieth century—while the westward expansion that they depicted was still going on—have often served to whitewash a bloody past and ease the mainstream conscience. If the genre has a particular bent toward mythology, it's because this episode of American history admits of no honest telling without shame and dishonor. The Western, at its worst, is a series of convenient lies, but the genre also encompasses works that look frankly at prejudice and at crimes against humanity. In John Ford's "The Searchers" (1956), an Indian-hating warrior goes into self-imposed exile; Robert Aldrich's "Apache" (1954) dramatizes the heroic struggle for freedom of Geronimo's subchief, Massai.

Kevin Costner's directorial career is dominated by Westerns, starting with the film that launched it, "Dances with Wolves" (1990), which was nominated for twelve Oscars and won seven, including Best Picture and Best Director. It's a mildly revisionist story, with Costner playing a U.S. Army officer who befriends a Sioux tribe and lives among them, actions which make him a traitor in the eyes of the U.S. government. Costner also directed the hearty but conventional 2003 Western "Open Range," in which he co-stars with Robert Duvall. So Costner is hardly a naïf when it comes to Westerns; he understands the heritage, the context, the risks. But you wouldn't know it from watching "Horizon: An American Saga —Chapter 1," his heavy-handed, big-footed return to the genre.

From the start, Costner turns his back on the Western's historical and foundational functions. Horizon is an outpost in what is now Arizona, and the movie opens in 1859, with three white surveyors staking out the land. But, before anything is built, they're killed, apparently by Indigenous people nearby (though there's enough elision in the filming to make one suspect a red herring). Then the movie skips ahead, to 1863, with Horizon now thriving, filled with tents, small houses, and even a dance hall. This temporal leap is an

act of great historical chutzpah: it waves away the first years of the Civil War and betrays indifference to the labor by which bare land becomes a town.

Chutzpah is almost an operating principle for this movie, beginning with the production itself. Three hours long, the film is only the first of a projected tetralogy. (The second installment is scheduled for release in August; filming on the third started in May.) It is a passion project of Costner's, who has partly bankrolled it, putting up thirty-eight million dollars of his own money. (The budget for the first two films is reportedly a hundred million.) Costner conceived of the story nearly forty years ago, as a movie centered on two characters (including the one he plays in this first installment). Now that the narrative has swollen to more than eleven hours, there has been talk of eventually cutting it into a TV series, but he is adamant that "Horizon: An American Saga" is a single movie and belongs on the big screen.

It would be a mistake to write a movie off just because of a director's grandiosity. Making any big-budget picture involves some degree of hubris, and movie history abounds with projects that have been derided for extravagance or megalomaniacal self-indulgence and ended up being great films, such as Michael Cimino's "Heaven's Gate" or Elaine May's "Ishtar," or huge hits, such as George Lucas's "Star Wars" and James Cameron's "Titanic." But the case of "Horizon" is different. For one thing, its commercial fortunes depend on a blithe confidence that Costner's name is enough to induce viewers to shell out at the box office four times—and, initially, for a story that is avowedly unfinished. What's more, the inflated production of "Horizon" shows in its aesthetic. The dramatic format seems borrowed from television, with multiple threads jumpily interweaved, to ward off impatience. With so many balls in the air at once, the movie lacks the kind of patient observation that this story demands. (Costner's two prior Westerns are far more gracefully paced.)

It's impossible to know, at the end of this first installment, how or whether its story lines will eventually intersect. Horizon's inhabitants seem to have been lured from the East by handbills touting Edenic splendors. They have been distributed by a man named Pickering, who is selling shares in the town. (He isn't in this installment, though a closing montage suggests that he'll feature in the next, played by Giovanni Ribisi; my money is on Pickering to be the story's arch-villain.) The major inciting event in this film comes in 1863, when Apache fighters attack the resettled Horizon, burning most of the town and killing most of its inhabitants. The action alarms the local tribe's chief (Gregory Cruz), who recognizes that it will likely provoke white retaliation and bring ruin to his people. He sends his son Pionsenay (Owen Crow Shoe), who led the attack, away, along with a small group of fighters and their families. Survivors of the slaughter include a woman named Frances Kittredge (Sienna Miller) and her young daughter, Lizzie (Georgia MacPhail), who are brought to safety at a U.S. Army post. Frances attracts a lieutenant (Sam Worthington), who is increasingly uneasy about his mission.

The plot line in which Costner appears takes place far from Horizon. He plays a taciturn prospector named Hayes Ellison, who confronts a hotheaded young man intent on revenge after his father was shot by a sex worker; soon, Hayes is helping a different sex worker, Marigold (Abbey Lee), flee across rugged country, together with an abandoned baby. Elsewhere, settlers in a wagon train heading West, to Horizon, realize that they've been noticed by Native scouts; as supplies dwindle, the settlers circle the wagons in anticipation of an attack.

Any of these stories would make for a worthy two hours of moviegoing, and, as Costner switches from one strand to another, he sustains suspense even when interest flags. What's more, he and Jon Baird, who co-wrote the script, carefully plant loose ends, in the form of side characters whose desires, ideas, or resentments are

suggestive of dramas to come. There is a farsighted colonel (Danny Huston) whose firm authority is shot through with a tragic sense of foreknowledge; there is Pionsenay's brother Taklishim (Tatanka Means), a conflicted member of the war party. Several children, such as an Apache boy who speaks English and a white boy whose lust for vengeance is balanced by unexpected principle, point to future revelations and showdowns.

But not one of these characters comes off as anything other than plot-generating machinery, a set of dramatic springs and gears. What humanity they have is provided by the actors, but the tight plotting and narrow function of the characters offer the performers little scope for creative freedom. This failure of characterization is also a failure of ideas and of politics, because none of these people seem tethered to the wider world. The Civil War is largely absent from people's thoughts. Nobody has much to say about the conflict or the principles at stake, as if Costner were afraid of offending someone, anyone, Southern or Northern, Black or white. In the town of Horizon, too, Costner gives little sense of how politics play out. Drawing dramatic energy from anarchic violence, he barely hints at any incipient framework of legal authority.

It is worth noting that the greatest directors of Westerns were not specialists. Though Ford made dozens of them, he also made dozens of other great movies—about the First World War, rural Ireland, the South Seas, mid-thirties China—that are no less politically incisive. Aldrich, in the mid-fifties, dispelled the noxious myths of whatever subject he turned to: the freelance cool of private eyes, Second World War triumphalism, the dignity of Hollywood itself. And the foremost contemporary director of Westerns, Clint Eastwood, has proved equally politically audacious across crime dramas, thrillers, war films, supernatural mysteries, and movie-world tales. For these filmmakers, political sensibility is inextricable from artistic outlook. A worthwhile Western, like any other film, is the expression of a point of view, and, in “Horizon:

An American Saga—Chapter 1,” Costner doesn’t yet display one. Here, he’s a storyteller but nothing more, and therefore much less. ♦



*Richard Brody began writing for The New Yorker in 1999. He writes about movies in his blog, [The Front Row](#). He is the author of “[Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard](#).”*

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# Poems

- **“Wallpaper Poem”**

By Phillis Levin | “If to dust we return / And we do / Why spend a minute / Choosing wallpaper.”

- **“Bull’s-Eye”**

By Arthur Sze | “Along the Pojoaque, cottonwoods form a swerving river of gold.”

[Poems](#)

# Wallpaper Poem

By [Phillis Levin](#)

July 1, 2024

*Read by the author.*

If to dust we return  
And we do  
Why spend a minute  
Choosing wallpaper  
Patterns exquisite or dull

Will be dust as well  
You may say  
It will say as well to you  
When you ponder

Fruit upon branches  
Delaying the end  
Trellises and semblances  
Meeting meant-to-be  
Seams and angles

Repeating what it is worth  
To forget another hour  
Lose oneself in a labyrinth  
Devoid of a minotaur

What door never opened  
Opens once and for all  
If only you find

A flaw hidden in the design  
Disclosing a moment

Time's timeless print  
Gone now Here tomorrow  
Deer at the edge of a wood  
Turning still

*This is drawn from “An Anthology of Rain.”*

*Phillis Levin* is the author of poetry collections including “[May Day](#),” “[Mr. Memory & Other Poems](#),” and “*An Anthology of Rain*,” forthcoming in spring 2025.

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[Poems](#)

## Bull's-Eye

By [Arthur Sze](#)

July 1, 2024

*Read by the author.*

Along the Pojoaque, cottonwoods form a swerving river of gold—  
a plumber’s daughter returned your call to say her father died—  
that moment slipped like water between your fingers—  
like light yellowing during an annular eclipse before it whitens into  
daylight—  
you tremble at the surge of yellow-gold light at your fingertips—  
the stretch of desire in your body like stringing a bow—  
you love how she gathers herself then gazes point-blank into your  
eyes—  
a Himalayan crane’s-bill opens violet flower after flower before the  
oncoming frost—  
at Troy, you ignored the ruins and marvelled at how silt from two  
rivers had distanced the sea—  
they brag at building the largest sandcastle on a beach—  
you grieve at the thought of deep-sea mining—

we pick a few blood-red strawberries among the desiccating leaves

---

as sunlight heats a wall, you see how red petunias in a pot survive a freeze—

water rises in a stone fountain and spills over the rim—

you drink the candlelight before shimmering into flame—

you take off, like a shaggy coat, what the world thinks and warm yourself at an outdoor fire—

nocking an arrow, you thrill at the anticipation that spreads to your fingertips—

you fly straight into the bull's-eye of the day—

*Arthur Sze received a 2024 Science + Literature Award, from the National Book Foundation, for “The Glass Constellation: New and Collected Poems.”*

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# Puzzles & Games

- **[The Crossword: Monday, July 1, 2024](#)**

By Chandi Deitmer | Today's theme: Uncharted territories.

**Crossword**

# The Crossword: Monday, July 1, 2024

*Today's theme: Uncharted territories.*

By [Chandi Deitmer](#)

July 1, 2024

[Chandi Deitmer](#), of Cambridge, Massachusetts, is a puzzle editor for Elevate Labs.

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