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By [James Wood](#)

Content

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Now *here's* how to open a novel:

“Quite like old times,” the room says. “Yes? No?”

There are two beds, a big one for madame and a smaller one on the opposite side for monsieur. The wash-basin is shut off by a curtain. It is a large room, the smell of cheap hotels faint, almost imperceptible. The street outside is narrow, cobble-stoned, going sharply uphill and ending in a flight of steps. What they call an impasse.

I have been here for five days. I have decided on a place to eat in at midday, a place to eat in at night, a place to have my drink in after dinner. I have arranged my little life.

Who wouldn't want to keep reading? The spiked enigma of the details is unsettling and enticing. Which old times? Why “madame” and “monsieur”? Why does madame get a bigger bed? The writing has a strictness—modern, minimalist—that feels at odds with its theatrical expressionism: a world in which rooms, gloomily alive, talk back to you, and where an impasse seems more than just topographical. There's the fraught psychological intensity. The narrator, as yet ungendered, seems almost obsessive about fixing a routine, in order that this “little life” won't burst into anarchy; fixing a drink —better still, having it fixed for you—is evidently central to this containment.

It's the opening of “[Good Morning, Midnight](#),” the fourth novel by the Dominica-born British writer Jean Rhys (1890-1979), the subject of Miranda Seymour's enthralling new biography, “[I Used to Live Here Once](#)” (Norton). Rhys's novel, published in 1939, when she was forty-eight, rounded out a burst of genius and industry that had produced the novels “[Quartet](#)” (1928), “[After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie](#)” (1931), and “[Voyage in the Dark](#)” (1934). These four books, similar in brevity, elegant attack, and bitter metaphysics, relate to one another like polished stones hewed from a single quarry. The

narrator of “Good Morning, Midnight” is Sasha Jansen, but she could just as easily be Marya Zelli, the protagonist of “Quartet,” or Julia Martin (from “After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie”) or Anna Morgan (the narrator of “Voyage in the Dark”). The books overlap enough to disclose a composite type: an outsider, a youngish Englishwoman of ambiguous ethnicity (“But you are English—or aren’t you?” Marya is asked), curiously unidentifiable by the traditional English markers of accent and education (“She was born in the West Indies or somewhere,” a character says of Anna). Barely afloat in London or Paris, recently separated from a husband or otherwise single, the Rhys heroine is seductive, vulnerable, touchy, acute, reduced. Notably, she has no money. Moving between grim hotel rooms and the men who pay for their interest in her, she knows that, as one of these men says, women are much cheaper than the clothes they wear, since you “can get a very nice girl for five pounds.” The Rhys heroine constantly negotiates trauma and calculation. Sasha Jansen had a baby who died; a botched abortion brings Anna Morgan close to death. Despair is temporarily banished by alcohol and sleeping pills. A characteristic line, from “Quartet”: “Then the vermouth warmed her throat and chest and she felt less physically miserable.”

Rhys’s heroines are imprisoned by poverty, yet this brutal economy also releases them into a cynical liberty. They walk the city streets as fearlessly, if not quite as safely, as the flâneurs of Flaubert and Baudelaire. Why shouldn’t they pop into a cinema, or have a drink alone? There is a dark joy in Rhys’s details, in the reportorial news that her fictions bring. We learn from “Quartet,” for instance, that men ogle women like Marya Zelli in different ways, according to their nationality: “The Latins were gay and insolent, the Northerns lustful, shamefaced and condescending, the Easterns shy, curious and contemptuous.” In “Good Morning, Midnight,” we hear about a lodging in London where only one bedsheet is changed at a time, “so that the bed was never quite clean and never quite dirty.”

Virginia Woolf dreamed, in [“A Room of One’s Own,”](#) of a new kind of female writing, in which one might read about, say, Chloe and Olivia, working together in a lab, and maybe eventually encounter the radical, Bechdelian sentence “Chloe liked Olivia.” “A Room of One’s Own” was published in 1929, the same year as the American publication of “Quartet,” though as far as I know Woolf never read Jean Rhys. But I like to think that, had she done so, she might have been arrested by the new reality of, say,

this: “Julia took a seat at her usual table, propped her newspaper up in front of her and read it while she ate.” Or—a bitterer recognition—by Anna Morgan, eighteen years old, reflecting on her first sexual experience, with a man nearly twenty years her senior: “I thought that it had been just like the girls said, except that I hadn’t known it would hurt so much.”

It’s natural to consider Virginia Woolf and Jean Rhys literary allies of a sort, near-contemporaries doing pioneering work at the same time, both adept at constructing productive lives in the shadow of trauma. But, though Woolf was always a prominent figure, Rhys disappeared so thoroughly from literary existence that in 1949, when an actress, Selma Vaz Dias, tried to contact her about the possibility of developing a dramatic adaptation of “Good Morning, Midnight,” she had to resort to a personal ad appealing for information about the novelist’s whereabouts. “Very *tactless* of me to be alive,” Rhys later commented.

Vaz Dias eventually succeeded in creating a BBC radio play of the novel; she also befriended Rhys and encouraged her to start writing again. It was to Vaz Dias that Rhys first spoke of the project that was to resurrect her reputation: a reframing of “Jane Eyre” from the point of view of Mr. Rochester’s mad Creole wife. It would draw on Rhys’s childhood in Dominica to imagine the woman’s early life in Jamaica, her arranged marriage to the abusive Mr. Rochester, and the events that led to her confinement in his attic. Rhys worked on the book in her sixties and seventies, in precarious health and devotedly coaxed by two editors, Diana Athill and Francis Wyndham. Eventually published in 1966 as “[Wide Sargasso Sea](#),” her fifth and final novel became a key text in feminist and post-colonial literature.

In truth, Woolf and Rhys might as well have come from different planets. No one would have been in any doubt, hearing the crystal ring of Woolf’s accent, about where she was niched, socially; Rhys was much harder to place, and spoke with what Seymour calls “a seemingly ineradicable island lilt.” Woolf was born just around the corner from Kensington Palace and, despite her best Bloomsbury efforts, could never forget it; Rhys was born on a small Caribbean island, and seems to have spent her life trying to recall a place that never quite felt like hers.

Dominica, once a colonial possession of France, was ceded to the British at the start of the nineteenth century. Rhys, who was born Ella Gwendoline Rees Williams, the fourth of five children, came from the equivalent of white aristocracy. Her father was a Welsh physician who had arrived in 1881; on her mother's side, Rhys's great-grandfather, a Scot named James Lockhart, had twice been governor of Dominica, enriched by his ownership of sugar mills and slaves. Lockhart had had two enslaved mistresses, and the young Rhys was "discouraged from making friends with any of the darker-skinned Lockhart cousins," Seymour writes. Rhys herself was a white Creole, a term that merely denotes someone of European descent born on the island. But, despite her family's inherited privilege, its status was ambiguous and uncertain. The ancestral money was mostly gone, and by the time of Rhys's childhood fewer than a hundred Dominicans were white, out of a population of nearly twenty-nine thousand.

To a sensitive child, the confusion of privilege and irrelevance, of innocence and historic misdeed, must have been atrocious, surely compounded by the violence of her upbringing. In an unfinished memoir, "Smile Please," published just after her death, in 1979, Rhys says that she appreciated the many ways her father supported and protected her. But the household was mostly run by Rhys's cruel mother, Minna, and by a sadistic nursemaid, Meta. Minna whipped her daughter on the slightest pretext, or none at all, favored the girl's two elder brothers, and did not encourage her reading. Meta played demeaning practical jokes on her young charge. She was not allowed to slap the child, but, Rhys wrote, "got her own back by taking me by the shoulders and shaking me violently."

Seymour powerfully evokes the world from which Rhys never really escaped, one of prejudice, abuse, and abuse's shamefaced offspring, complicity. In the late thirties, while writing "Good Morning, Midnight," Rhys filled the pages of an exercise book with memories of childhood traumas: not only her mother's brutality but also abuse at the hands of a shadowy older man known in the text as Mr. Howard. She was fourteen when she encountered Mr. Howard; he and his wife were family friends. The abuse was physical (he groped her breasts) and psychological (he spoke of making her his sexual slave). She later emphasized the "mental seduction" of these events, and, with fatalistic irony, her own ashamed preparedness, the uncanny familiarity of the scene: "Pain humiliation submission that is for

me. It fitted in with all I knew of life with all I'd ever felt. It fitted like a hook fits an eye."

The scholar Patricia Moran, in her book "[Virginia Woolf, Jean Rhys, and the Aesthetics of Trauma](#)," has written subtly about how this "seduction" seems to have functioned as a "form of *recognition*" for Rhys, a "confirmation of her own sense of self." Certainly Rhys's writing is relentlessly drawn to scenes of recognition and recoil, to enmeshed relations of identity and power. "Like a hook fits an eye"—the very borderlessness of her Dominican world, the erotic proximity of Black and white, paradoxically reinforces the electric distinction of borders.

In her work, Rhys desires Blackness and flinches from it. In "Smile Please," she discloses a childish longing to become Black, how she would run to the mirror in the morning to see if the miraculous transformation had occurred. Yet she describes the loathed Meta, vengefully, as "very black," and recalls retaliating during the nursemaid's violent shakings by yelling, "Black Devil, Black Devil, Black Devil!"

It is the same between the sexes. In Rhys's fiction, men and women attract and repel each other like switched magnets, and learn no lessons from this doomed push-pull. The tough-minded Laurie tells Anna, in "Voyage in the Dark," "If you give people a handle they'll always take it." Rhys heroines know this truth full well but still end up providing people, usually men, with an easy handle.

In 1907, on the cusp of turning seventeen, Rhys left Dominica for England, where she was sent to a distinguished girls' school in Cambridge. She had merely exchanged one insular world for another, bigger, one, and would belong in neither. She found England cold, gray, benighted; her classmates mocked her Caribbean accent and called her West Indies. She did well academically, but her ambitions were theatrical, and soon, supported by her father, she enrolled at Sir Herbert Tree's acting school in Bloomsbury, the institution now known as *RADA*. But when her father, struggling with the fees, inquired about his daughter's prospects and was told by the school's principal that she would never be a serious actress (the "ineradicable" Caribbean accent apparently again the culprit and stain), he withdrew his support. A more timid daughter would have gone home. Rhys, now

eighteen, marched round to a London theatrical agency and emerged with a job as a chorus girl in the summer tour of a two-act musical called “Our Miss Gibbs.”

So began her hazing at the hands of the demimonde. She had a new name (Ella Gray) and a new identity, but the chorus girl was an inevitably vulnerable figure—young, attractive, poorly paid. A lucky few, Seymour tells us, were plucked by roaming aristocrats (one became the Countess of Dudley), but the fate for most of them must have been closer to Rhys’s own experience, the one she more or less gave to her protagonist Anna Morgan: to be picked up—and eventually let down, of course—by a wealthy older man who was essentially paying for a mistress. Rhys’s first lover was the forty-year-old son of the governor of the Bank of England. He set her up in nice lodgings, gave her a large dress allowance, took her to expensive dinners, and, when she became pregnant, paid for an abortion. In her memoir, Rhys treats this last event with cutting equanimity: “After what was then called an illegal operation, I stayed in a flat in Langham Street. I didn’t suffer from remorse or guilt.”

Money—getting it, losing it, never having enough of it—runs through Rhys’s life like a watermark through a pound note. She married three times, but her husbands were relatively impoverished, or else criminal, or both; the first and the third served time in prison for financial misdeeds. To read her fiction and her biography is to realize that the marriage market for women was hardly less desperate in Rhys’s time than it was in Jane Austen’s. A woman with no money could become a chorus girl or a governess. (Rhys tried her hand at the latter, too.) But how could she become a writer, if what was needed was the room of one’s own and five hundred pounds a year prescribed by Virginia Woolf? The heroines of Rhys’s first four novels all live about five pounds away from the gutter. Badly in need of money, they keep offering “handles” to men who greedily take hold of them. One of these patrons, the repellent Mr. Horsfield, in “After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie,” assumes, rightly enough, that Julia Martin comes from “the vast crowd that bears on its back the label, ‘No money’ from the cradle to the grave,” and then concludes that “this one had rebelled.” But Julia isn’t really rebelling—she wants money from Mr. Horsfield and is merely giving him a hard time over it. Rhys’s heroines rebel only insofar as they insist on seeing and describing, without illusions, the walls of their prison; in this

important sense, Rhys's works are significant acts of protest. Though her women don't break out of the sexual-patronage economy, the novels do. To be allowed to read of the way in which Mr. Horsfield takes Julia back to his hotel room and, in a gesture of queasy erotic largesse, slips her two banknotes—"He put them into her hand and shut her fingers on them gently"—adds importantly to the stock of available reality. As does the next, killing sentence: "When he had done this he felt powerful and dominant." One of the most poignant scenes in Rhys's fiction occurs in "*Voyage in the Dark*," when Anna's friend Maudie, a fellow chorus girl, tells her about the man she wants to marry, an electrical engineer from the suburbs whom she fears she will lose:

"Isn't it awful losing a chance like that because you haven't got a little money? . . . But I'm so damned shabby and, you know, when you're shabby you can't do anything, you don't believe in yourself. And he notices clothes—he notices things like that. Fred, his name is. He said to me the other day, 'If there's anything I notice about a girl it's her legs and her shoes.' Well, my legs are all right, but look at my shoes. . . . Isn't it rotten when a thing like that falls through just because you haven't got a little cash? Oh God, I wish it could happen. I want it so to happen."

Rhys's most important patron was the novelist and editor Ford Madox Ford, the model for the sexually and emotionally appetitive Hugh Heidler, in "*Quartet*." The two became acquainted in 1924, in Paris, at a low moment—there would be plenty more—in Rhys's life. She and her first husband, Jean Lenglet, a Dutch journalist and a sometime spy, had been wandering around Europe and had had to flee Budapest after an embezzlement went awry. Within a few years, Lenglet was in a French prison, on further charges of embezzlement. Rhys and Ford each wanted something from the other. He admired her short story "*Viennese*," and wanted to publish it in the influential literary journal he edited; she stood to gain everything from his literary support. Ford helped to publish her first book, a collection of stories titled "*The Left Bank*" (1927), and expanded her knowledge of French and Russian literature. Under his encouragement, she first became the writer Jean Rhys. She also seems to have fallen in love. Large, florid, and fifty—Heidler is cruelly described as "puffing" his way about Paris—Ford was an unlikely paramour. If "*Quartet*" is a reliable guide, as Seymour assumes, the

two writers had an emotionally violent affair, which Ford's partner, the artist Stella Bowen, tolerated or perhaps even encouraged—until she didn't. In the novel, Hugh and his wife, Lois, treat Marya Zelli with acquisitive and manipulative arrogance; Marya, like the other Rhys heroines, "rebels," refusing to go quietly when Heidler has had enough of her, declining to abide by the rules of what Heidler calls "playing the game"—which stipulate that it's better not to articulate the rules of the game. Seymour's lively account of this tortured love affair offers our first clear glimpse of Rhys's heavy drinking, and of how it inflamed her behavior: "Sometimes, when Rhys drank too much and felt that the couple were playing a cruel game of their own with her emotions, she lost control and screamed or even spat." She was just warming up.

In 1990, Jean Rhys became the subject of a huge and ardently [engaged biography](#) by Carole Angier. Seymour is respectful of Angier's achievement, but discreetly takes a different approach. Angier deals with Rhys possessively and pedagogically, as if psychoanalyzing a brilliant and difficult family relation. Rhys is called Jean throughout, and Angier concludes that "Jean" probably suffered from a borderline personality disorder that blocked her from developing "a complete, autonomous self." The novels are read intelligently but romantically, as episodes in self-analysis; "Wide Sargasso Sea" is judged Rhys's masterpiece, because it allowed her to achieve "complete artistic control over her demon of self-pity."

Seymour prefers to trust the tale, not the teller. Angier was inclined to examine every motivation; Seymour is content, at times, to leave her subject magnificently unexplained, excused by the absolution of narrative. A sentence such as "the seventy-five-year-old author struggled to pull herself together with a new regime of early nights and a pre-dawn start, fuelled by strong tea and a nourishing pack of cigarettes" suggests a biographer equipped with reserves of ironic generosity and a tone well aligned with Rhys's disinclination to examine herself.

Above all, Seymour breaks with Angier by stressing the ways in which Rhys's heroines are not mere alter egos; if Rhys did not quite develop an autonomous self, she certainly developed autonomous works of art. In "Quartet," Hugh and Lois Heidler are far more brutal and calculating than

Ford and Bowen were; Rhys “hated the sense of being indebted,” but makes Julia Martin in “After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie” a “habitual parasite.” In all her novels, Seymour remarks, Rhys excises from the lives of her heroines the writing that was central to her own, rendering them less cultured and more helpless than she was herself. This brings into sharper focus the harsh dynamics of their survival and allows the reader to see around their illusions.

Such novelistic comprehension is best achieved, I think, in “Voyage in the Dark,” my favorite of her books. Of all Rhys’s novels, it’s the one most open to the voices of others. How brilliantly she captures the Cockney rhythms of Maudie (the one who so wants to marry the electrical engineer), or the aspiring manicurist Ethel, or the high-class tart Laurie, who delivers this great absurdist take on the meaning of life: “Search me what the whole thing’s about. When you start thinking about things the answer’s a lemon. A lemon, that’s what the answer is. . . . Never mind, you’re a good little cow; you’ll be all right.” Rhys lends to Anna, her first-person narrator, many of her own defining wounds and travails—Anna is an impoverished and attractive chorus girl, born “somewhere” in the West Indies. The other girls call her the Hottentot, and she finds England cold and gray, the streets greasy. She’s always shivering. Indeed, you can make a case that “Voyage in the Dark” is Rhys’s great post-colonial novel, rather than the stagier “Wide Sargasso Sea,” with its gothicky dramatic monologues. Anna is a kind of ghost to her English life; her memory is always sliding back to the colors and the warmth of the Caribbean. Rhys’s use of stream of consciousness is as delicately realized as Woolf’s: “I thought about home and standing by the window on Sunday morning, dressing to go to church, and putting on a woollen vest which had shrunk in the wash and was too small, because wool next the skin is healthy.” The big island of Britain seems a shrunken place alongside the vibrancy of the small, remembered Caribbean island; Anna recalls arriving in England and seeing the countryside from a train window, the land divided into squares “like pocket-handkerchiefs.” Anna’s racist stepmother chides her for the way she was always hanging around with a Black girl named Francine: “When you were jabbering away together in the pantry I never could tell which of you was speaking.” The novel offers its own resistance to this prejudice by insisting on a kind of miscegenation of memory—Anna can’t tell present and past apart.

But, once again, Rhys separates herself from her character by denying Anna the advantage of culture and literary ambition. In an early scene, Anna is reading Zola's novel "Nana," and is finding it a slog: "The print was very small, and the endless procession of words gave me a curious feeling—sad, excited and frightened." Her friend Maudie assumes it's a "dirty" novel, and then denounces all books—they're "just somebody stuffing you up." Rhys's novel is full of such sparkling and original colloquial phrases, strange imaginative conclusions that put me in mind of the speech-heavy novels of her contemporary Henry Green. "We got to Holloway and it was winter and the dark streets round the theatre made me think of murders"; "There was no sun, but there was a glare on everything like a brass band playing"; "She had another whisky and went on about being clever and putting money away, and her voice joined in with the smell of the room." Again and again, Rhys finds a literary way to vocalize an unliterary apprehension, to find words for wordlessness.

"Poverty is the cause of many compromises," Rhys writes in "Quartet," and her own extraordinary life was incised with them. Seymour's biography is more eventful than any of Rhys's novels. Rhys discovered that her first husband was a bigamist. Her alcoholic explosions blew up friendships and landed her in the hospital wing of Holloway Prison. In 1940, she was charged with being drunk and disorderly on a road in rural Norfolk; someone poured a bucket of cold water over her to calm her down. In the late forties, in southeast London, where she was living with her third husband, she surrendered to a growing paranoia and got into a prolonged war with her upstairs neighbors. Once, when the police were called, Rhys hit and bit an officer, and capacious accused him of being both a "dirty Jew" and a member of the Gestapo.

She spent the last nineteen years of her life in the small Devon village of Cheriton Fitzpaine, in a bleak bungalow that had been condemned as "unfit for habitation," and bought for her by an elder brother. This parochial and diabolically English place might as well have been devised by her post-colonial torturers. From there she sent characteristically gloomy-funny letters to her small circle of correspondents: "My neighbours detest me because they think I'm putting on airs." Seymour has tracked down a middle-aged resident who remembers, as a kid, peering through Rhys's window and seeing the author—regarded as a witch by local boys—drinking

straight from the bottle while watching television. In a surreal episode, Rhys seems to have attacked the local postmistress; “When angered,” Seymour writes, “the ageing Rhys could still spit, bite or scratch a perceived opponent.”

Rhys’s longtime friend Peggy Kirkaldy said that the author was always imagining insults in chance encounters: “A vulnerable complex organism, she was made to be hurt”—a poignant formulation, with its implication that both hurter and hurtee might almost pleasurable conspire. But if Rhys was made to be hurt, she was also made to survive. One is struck by how easily she attracted friends and admirers, and by the hardened loyalty of those closest to her—those, precisely, who saw her at her worst.

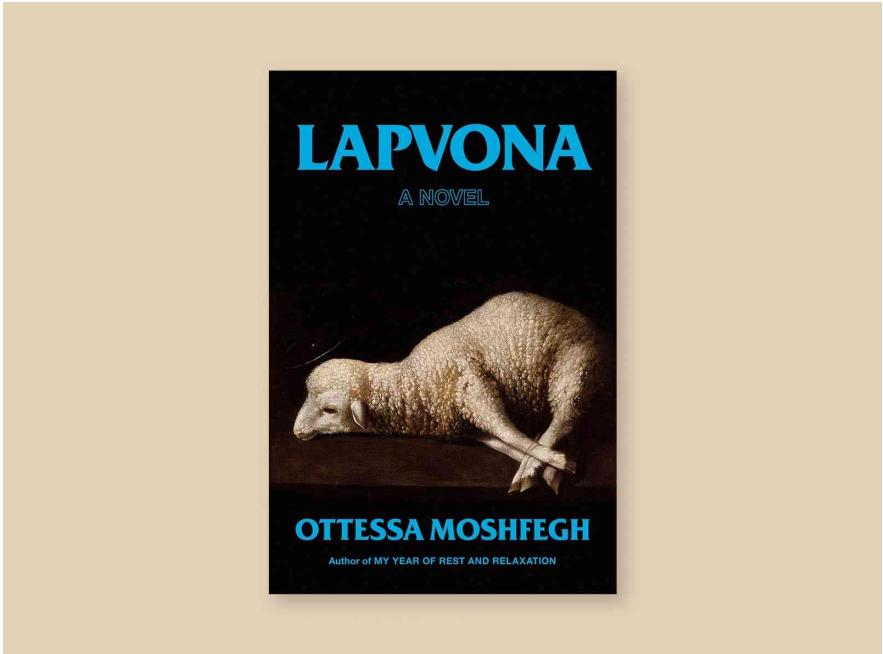
True to form, Rhys grumbled that the celebrity “Wide Sargasso Sea” brought her was burdensome and overwhelming, but Seymour’s biography is a testament to how triumphantly, against odds inflicted and self-inflicted, she succeeded in arranging her “little life” into a writing life whose dimensions we are still happily measuring. She lacked hope, but never courage. ♦

By Parul Sehgal

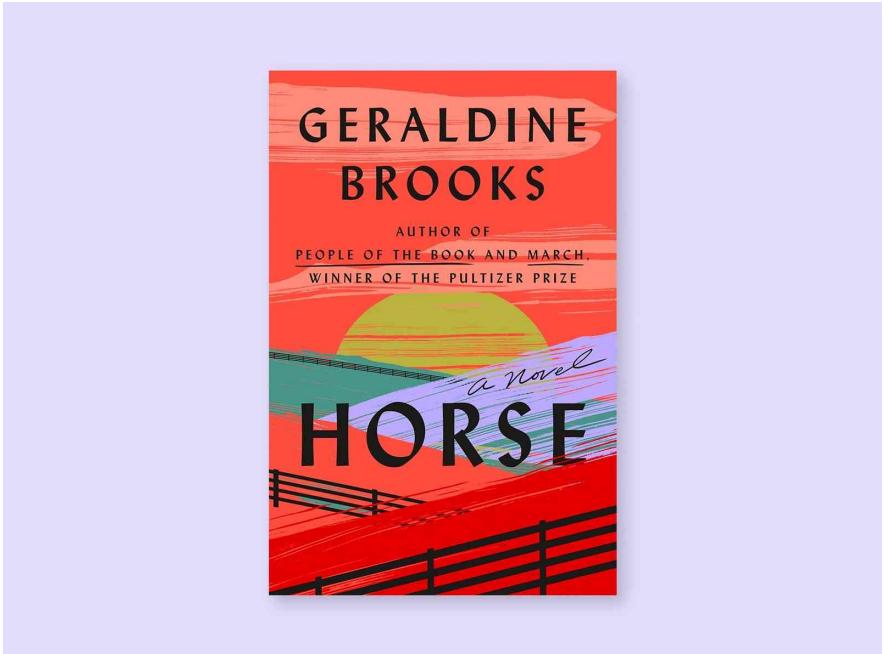
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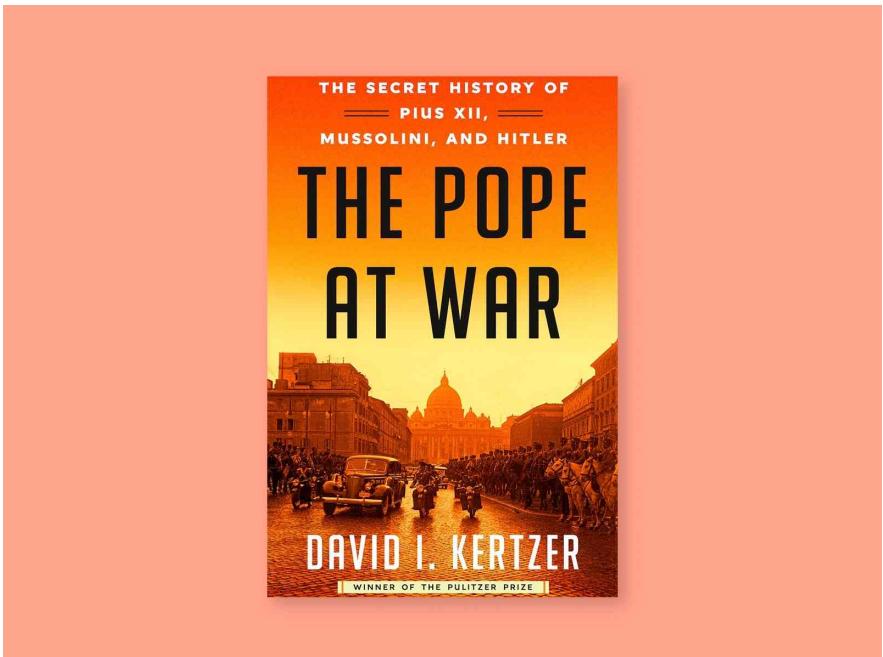
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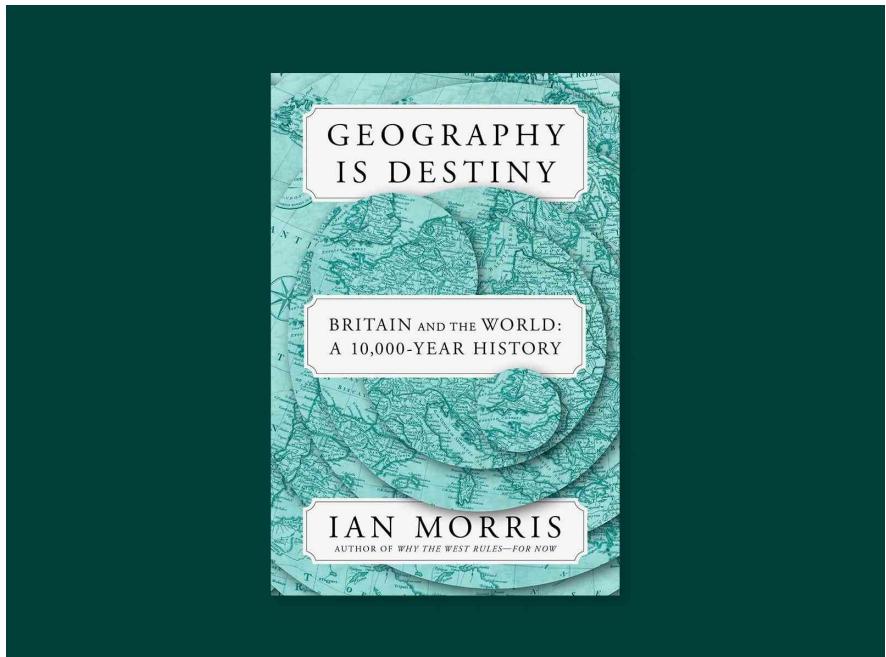
[Lapvona](#), by Ottessa Moshfegh (Penguin Press). In this novel of medieval grotesquerie, Lapvona is a realm where cruelty reigns. Marek, a disfigured boy, and his father, Jude, a shepherd, live a life of squalor until an accident results in Marek's being adopted by Lapvona's slovenly lord, Villiam. While Marek grows fat on the castle's delicacies, Jude and the other villagers go hungry during a drought. Alternating between scenes of idle decadence and of desperate struggle for survival, the novel abounds with violence, cannibalism, and magic, while human compassion flickers only occasionally. Moshfegh's brutal vision can make for grim reading, but it has a coherence that is rare in contemporary fiction.



[**Horse**](#), by *Geraldine Brooks* (*Viking*). One of America's first champion thoroughbreds, Lexington (1850-75), stands at the center of this deft novel, which moves between the present day and the Civil War era in a polyphonic examination of the fraught racial aspects of horse racing in U.S. history. Theo, a Nigerian American art historian, finds a portrait of a horse in his neighbor's trash, and meets Jess, an Australian scientist who is involved in analyzing the recently discovered skeleton of a powerful stallion. Back in Lexington's lifetime, we meet his young groom, Jarret, living in slavery and torn between his desire for freedom and his devotion to the animal. These narratives and others gradually fit together to create a picture of the artistic, athletic, and scientific passions that horses can inspire in humans.



The Pope at War, by David I. Kertzer (Random House). Afraid of jeopardizing the Vatican's precarious neutrality during the Second World War, Pius XII was so reluctant to upset Mussolini and Hitler that he refused to publicly condemn the slaughter of Europe's Jews. Yet he has retained many defenders, and his legacy has been much debated, in part because his papers were sealed until 2020. Drawing on these newly available documents, this history offers both a masterly character study of a flawed, tormented leader and a cautionary tale about the perils of both-sides-ism. Although the Pope managed to protect the papacy during a tumultuous period, Kertzer definitively concludes that "as a moral leader, Pius XII must be judged a failure."



[Geography Is Destiny](#), by Ian Morris (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*). Ten thousand years of British history are condensed in a book that seeks to explain what led to Brexit. A pattern emerges in which Continental innovations (in agriculture, technology, religion, and governance) have invariably pushed northwestward, with the Isles repeatedly facing encroachment and population replacement. The pattern was disrupted in the imperial age, but this, Morris contends, was a blip, whereas the anxieties that produced Brexit—immigration, identity, ownership—represent the norm. Looking to the future, Morris predicts that, as the globe continues to shrink, “Beijing, not Brussels,” will become the focus of Britain’s encroachment angst.

By

By Kristen Roupenian

By

By

Content

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The “Torso of Adèle” is among the smallest and most sensual of Auguste Rodin’s partial figures. She has neither head nor legs; her body reclines with its elbows raised and one arm flung across her neck, her back arching into the air. The eye seeks the point that balances her movement. Skimming her breasts, her ribs, her navel, it comes to rest on her iliac crest, the bone that wings its way across the hip. “From there, from Ilion, from her crest, Odysseus departed on his return to Ithaca after the war,” thinks the narrator of “[The Iliac Crest](#)” (2002), the second novel by the Mexican-born writer Cristina Rivera Garza. To his wandering mind, “Iliac” summons Ilion, Homer’s Troy—a city destroyed because one selfish man desired one beautiful woman. In Rivera Garza’s fiction, quests for desirable bodies do not destroy cities. They destroy the identities—man, woman—worshipped by rulers.

No one clings to his manhood more ardently than the narrator of “The Iliac Crest,” a physician at a state-run sanatorium. He lives alone in a forbidding house, on a wild spit of land somewhere near the ocean, on the border of two nations. One storm-thrashed night, a woman arrives at his door, trembling and disconcertingly lovely. “What really captured my attention was her right hip bone, which, because of the way she was leaning against the doorframe and the weight of the water over her skirt’s faded flowers, could be glimpsed just below the unfinished hem of her T-shirt and just above the elastic of her waistband,” he observes. His clinical gaze is clouded by the allure of his visitor’s body. The learned language of anatomy eludes him: “It took me a long time to remember the specific name for that bone, but, without a doubt, the search began at that moment. I wanted her.”

This woman, whom he takes as the object of his quest, tells him that her name is Amparo Dávila. The name is the first obstacle he must confront. It is the name of an actual Mexican writer of fantastical short stories in the nineteen-seventies. Characters—sadistic house guests, elusive demons—and passages from Dávila’s fiction creep into “The Iliac Crest” as the Amparo Dávila of the novel usurps the narrator’s home, laying more obstacles in his

path. She invites his ailing ex-lover to live with them, and the women begin to whisper conspiratorially in a private language. “*Glu-glu*,” they repeat, like rainfall. Engulfed by their dialect, the narrator starts to lose his grasp on his masculinity, the source of his power. “I know your secret. You are a woman,” Amparo Dávila tells him. Unsure of his identity, unable to differentiate between reality and fiction (or insanity), he—and we—start to lose the thread of the plot.

Desperate, the narrator embarks on a journey, crossing the border to track down the real Amparo Dávila. He finds an old woman who bears her name and claims to have disappeared into her writing. Addressing him with feminine parts of speech, she tells him he has been not only a woman but also a tree. “My half-buried, half-liberated body,” he thinks, seeing flashes from his vegetal past. “My own ruins.” The journey ends with no consummation of his desire, no reclaiming of his home. Instead, he must surrender to his undone, unsexed, antiheroic nature; he must plunge into “an infernal abyss” of desire that shatters his preconceptions about the body, identity, and language. “I felt as if I were inside a parenthesis in a sentence written in an unknown language,” the narrator thinks.

The mystery and obscurity that envelop Rivera Garza’s fiction caress both gender and genre, words with a shared etymology. In “The Iliac Crest,” gothic shades into noir, noir into fable, with fable climaxing in the metafiction cherished by Nabokov, Calvino, and Borges. Trapped in the undertow of this procession, it is easy to forget what prompted the narrator’s quest in the first place: the name of the hip bone. It appears only on the novel’s final page, when such cruel, inexplicable things have passed between him and his various Amparo Dávillas that the word “iliac” clarifies nothing. It hangs before us, flush with the deferred promise of some ruinous or transcendent revelation. “I smiled upon remembering, too, that the pelvis is the most definitive area to determine the sex of an individual,” the narrator thinks, with irony. Nothing is definitive anymore, least of all the relationship between anatomy and gender.

This unsettling of boundaries conjures up various terms to describe Rivera Garza’s body of work as a writer and as a professor of Hispanic Studies at the University of Houston: feminist, queer, trans, posthuman, and—the term stressed by the MacArthur Foundation, which awarded her its “genius” grant

in 2020—transnational. At times, the will to place her fiction seems to betray the very evasions on which it depends. But these terms help to excavate the political imagination of her sensuous border crossings, and the national history behind her aesthetic of disappearance. “Only a disappeared person could have materialized on the coast as she had,” the narrator thinks of Amparo Dávila, wondering if she has been a victim of the government, organized crime, or a medical institution like the one where he works. “Disappearance is contagious,” he thinks. “With scientific and technological advances, we now know that to become a disappeared person, previous contact with another such person is necessary.”

The disappearance of women here holds a cracked mirror up to the disappearance of women in the world beyond the novel. In Mexico, women do not fade into texts with mysterious grace. They are snatched from the streets and thrown into unmarked cars. Their bodies—raped, tortured, decapitated—are found days or months later, or never found at all. The rate of femicide has doubled in the past five years; ten women and girls are killed every day on average, and Mexico is the second most dangerous country for transgender people. The increase has been spurred by the rise in cartel violence since President Felipe Calderón launched his war on drugs, in 2006. “But we know other, more truthful names: the war against the Mexican people, the war against women,” Rivera Garza writes in her essay collection “[Grieving: Dispatches from a Wounded Country](#).” The word “femicide” never surfaces in Sarah Booker’s exquisite translation of “The Iliac Crest.” But it is the missing word that hurls the reader down to earth.

The primary tension in Rivera Garza’s fiction—between the unruly intensities of sexual desire and the political disciplining of the body—is at its most concentrated in the latest translation of her work, “[New and Selected Stories](#)” (Dorothy). The book assembles pieces from three collections first published in Spanish—“La Guerra No Importa” (1991), “Ningún Reloj Cuenta Esto” (2002), and “La Frontera Más Distante” (2008)—variously translated by Booker, Francisca González Arias, Lisa Dillman, and Alex Ross. And it adds a new collection of flash fiction, “Diminitus,” parts of which Rivera Garza translated herself, while founding the first Spanish-language creative-writing doctoral program in the United States.

In Rivera Garza's refusal to elevate one language above the other, we glimpse her family's bilingual history. In her essay "Writing in Migration," she traces it to the turn of the past century, when the regime of Porfirio Díaz pursued a program of economic growth at the expense of the country's peasantry and its Indigenous peoples. All four of her grandparents were exiled from their lands. Her father's parents fled to ranches and mines on the Texas-Coahuila border; her mother's parents, to the burgeoning cities of southern Texas, where they picked cotton, worked construction, and learned English, until one day, some thirty years after their arrival, they were deported to Mexico, casualties of Herbert Hoover's Depression-era crackdown on immigration. Exiles again, they found themselves in the port city of Matamoros, whose northern limits follow the Rio Grande. On the other side of the river lies Brownsville, Texas.

Rivera Garza was born in Matamoros in 1964. She knew nothing of her family's American past—only the fears and anxieties of her home town, the base of the Gulf Cartel, one of the oldest criminal syndicates in the country. Her childhood coincided with its expansion into the U.S. and across Latin America. Her adolescence saw the successful introduction of cocaine trafficking to the cartel's operations, aided by the political ties of the narcos, "the fierce businessmen" of globalization. By the time she enrolled at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, the state, like many others in the eighties, had ratcheted up its economic liberalization, seizing lands, privatizing social services, and watching as violence, especially violence against women, exploded. "For a *unam* graduate with a degree in sociology, the prospects for life in a country clearly turning toward neoliberalism were few," she recalled.

In 1990, she arrived at the University of Houston to start a doctorate. Her dissertation examined the criminalization of prostitutes and insane people during the Díaz era and the "mad narratives" produced by doctors and inmates at La Castañeda General Insane Asylum. Inmates were often poor mestizo women, whose allegedly aberrant sexual desires informed much of the state's discourse on mental illness. In the asylum's archives, Rivera Garza found traces of their voices, raised in opposition and sometimes in supplication, when they confessed their sexual suffering and pleasure. "Asylum inmates pressed doctors, often successfully, to listen to their stories closely," she wrote. "Suspicion and seduction must have played equal roles

as their multiple encounters unfolded.” Reading the case files of inmates, she discovered acts of expressive freedom smuggled in through the diagnostic protocols of psychiatry and its production of knowledge designed to control women.

Mad narratives are central to Rivera Garza’s earliest fiction. Her first collection of stories introduces a recurrent narrator named Xian, “a slacker and occasional thief and queer liar,” who slinks through the world with an attractive insouciance. In the opening story, “Unknowing,” we find her in a bar, asking a gorgeous woman for a light and listening to her tell “the same old love story,” about an affair that has ended in agony and ruin. “I’ve always been skeptical of those sickly emotions that plague women,” Xian thinks. But the woman prides herself on her sickliness. “Love is this, Xian, contriving lies and deeply believing in them,” she insists, and Xian, overcome by beauty, fear, and the fog of drink, cannot determine whether the woman is truthful or deluded. When they end up in bed, Xian’s desire to know—to diagnose and to dismiss the woman as insane—is short-circuited by the desire to touch.

Knowing and touching: these are the axes on which Rivera Garza’s fiction turns, with a certain predictable steadiness. Yet her single-mindedness is offset by the lure of her fractured forms, her gnomic sentences, and her fairy-tale settings. In her second collection, men seeking women from their pasts trip from one metaphysical plane to another—from dream world to waking life, from the harsh present to the glow of memory. The stories in her third collection are crafted as elliptical variations on detective fiction, edging her readers toward, as she puts it, “a suspension of belief, a sudden break with the rules of the real.” Detectives, journalists, and anthropologists journey in bewilderment from a city to its outskirts. Arriving in the desert, or the mountains, or the taiga, they discover that men are women, women are trees, and trees are part beast, part shadow, creeping across the forest floor, indifferent to human intrusions.

What do her characters come to know? At first, nothing other than their frustrated desire to know. Then the pleasure of abandoning their quest and submitting to the ecstasy of not knowing, of pure physical sensation. In “Autoethnography with the Other,” the narrator, an anthropologist, observes a man lying on her lawn. “I called him the Stranger because even though he

did recognizable things, his actions seemed alien,” she explains. The story she tells of their relationship is cut into numbered slices of text, part field report, part Wittgenstein’s “Tractatus.” Some sections chronicle the history of anthropology, a discipline that has grown wary of its complicity with Western exploitation. Others trace the anthropologist’s growing intimacy with the Stranger—an intimacy that breaks the rules her training has instilled about how knowledge of others should be produced. “I had forgotten what pleasure was,” she thinks. “What happens when the fingers of an other’s hands—I don’t know what these fingers are feeling—rest, with their own temperature, their own exile, their own nerve endings, on your skin. Inside.”



Cartoon by Drew Dernavich

The irrepressible energy of sexual desire grafts flesh onto the bones of Rivera Garza’s characters. Indeed, they are not so much people as exposed nerve endings, preternaturally responsive to the presence of others. In most other ways, they remain willfully undifferentiated. Search the “Selected Stories” for a character with a proper name and you will find only a handful. When they are not simply anonymous, they are given names like the Stranger, the Elderly Man, the Woman Who Disappeared Behind a Whirlwind. The substitution of a descriptive epithet for a proper name is Rivera Garza’s signature technique for creating character. It is a baptismal act that reveals the lie behind all description. There is nothing natural or essential about the words—“man,” “woman”—that categorize people.

The conceptual cunning of Rivera Garza's stories cannot account for the passion that warms them. This passion is distinct from the melodrama of the Mexican *boom femenino* of the eighties and nineties, the golden age of such best-selling historical novels as Laura Esquivel's "[Like Water for Chocolate](#)" and Ángeles Mastretta's "[Tear This Heart Out.](#)" According to the critic Ignacio Sánchez Prado, Rivera Garza writes in reaction to sentimental fiction that assumes literature can redeem the past by narrating it from a woman's point of view. In her essay "Under the Narco Sky," Rivera Garza recalls how she and her friends, in their twenties, amid disappearances and kidnappings, drafted a "long, furious manifesto" against the love they read about in these novels. Yet the sight of two lovers, holding hands and murmuring, makes her think twice:

What is strange, I thought at that moment, is not that rage and death, corruption and cruelty, multiply and grow under the narco sky, but that these two lovers exist, here, recently showered, lavishing on each other with the always unprecedented, always unrepeatable, always transparent gestures of something that, if I were a little braver, I would not hesitate to call, fair and square, love.

Here, as in her fiction, the nimbus of love, a word she dares not speak, creates a little pocket of freedom around her characters. Their touch shelters them from the idea that the knowledge of anthropologists, doctors, or governments can control why we want whom we want. It spurs the mind beyond what seems most real, because it is most painful—death, cruelty—to find pleasure in imagining the relations between bodies. "I imagined her eating blackberries—her lips full and her fingertips stained crimson," the narrator of "The Iliac Crest" thinks of Amparo Dávila. "I imagined her words, her silences, her way of pursing her lips, her smiles, her laughter."

How to write about sexual experience in a way that is at once desiring and loving—unprecedented, unrepeatable, and always transparent? A clue may be found in the blackberries the narrator imagines the woman eating, which are, I like to think, a wink at the late critic and novelist John Berger, whom Rivera Garza admires. In his novel "[G](#)," Berger writes with breathtaking lucidity of the gap between experiencing sex, with its "quality of firstness," and writing about it:

Take the example of a seasonal fruit: blackberries. The advantage of this example is that one's first experience each year of eating blackberries has in it an element of artificial firstness which may prompt one's memory of the original, first occasion. The first time, a handful of blackberries represented all blackberries. Later, a handful of blackberries is a handful of ripe/unripe/over-ripe/sweet/acid, etc., etc., blackberries. Discrimination develops with experience.

For Berger, as for Rivera Garza, simply naming body parts is the wrong move. Trafficking in the language of the physician or the pornographer makes it impossible to simulate either the firstness of experience or the discrimination that makes the second, third, and subsequent experiences seem palpable and unique. "Words like cunt, quim, motte, trou, bilderbuch, vagina, prick, cock, rod, pego, spatz, penis, bique—and so on, for all the other parts and places of sexual pleasure—remain intractably foreign in all languages, when applied directly to sexual action," Berger writes. To approach the quality of firstness, the writer must be precise, but grammatically indirect, veiling nouns in adjectives and adverbs of taste—ripe, sweet, acid—touch, sight, smell, and sound that bear no essential relation to the parts of the body they graze. This is not for modesty's sake but to heighten the singular intensity of what Rivera Garza calls "the desire of bodies, and the desire to narrate bodies."

Take the story "Simple Pleasure. Pure Pleasure." It opens with a woman, called the Detective, who discovers a man's headless body on the side of the highway and, by a pool of blood near it, a jade ring. Later, she encounters a woman wearing an identical ring. The Woman with the Jade Ring asks the Detective to investigate, intimating that the dead man was an old lover who betrayed the cartels. As the Detective retraces the man's steps, Rivera Garza deploys familiar scenes from film noir—an interrogation brimming with erotic tension, an order from a superior to stop the investigation—but punctuates the slick narrative with a surreal refrain. It first occurs when the Detective returns to the city from the crime scene: "There is a city within a head." Then again as the investigation unfolds with cinematic stylishness: "There is a movie within a head." And again after the Detective boards a plane in pursuit of the narcos: "There is an airplane flying within a head."

Like the head severed from the body, these sentences are detached from the body of the story, prompting the question: Whose head are we in—the Detective’s or the dead man’s? There is, in the head, also a dream or hallucination of sex with the Woman with the Jade Ring:

There were the interwoven bodies again. The slowness with which the tip of the index finger glides over the skin of the belly, the embowed branches covering the pubis, the lips’ edge. The subsequent spasm. There was the hand that decisively grabs the long, feminine hair. A bridle. The moans of pain. The moans of pleasure. Pure pleasure. Simple pleasure.

“There is pleasure—pure pleasure, simple pleasure—within a head,” the final mutation of the refrain reads, and the hallucination unfolds with slow concentration, revealing sounds and movements in little gasps of metaphor: “embowed branches,” “bridle.” Yet the “head” refrain makes it impossible to forget that the head within which the dream is relived is missing; that it has been severed; and that the spasms and moans projected within it cannot be free of the corpse. Pleasure, like love, is never pure or simple when it gains its force from the threat of annihilation.

In her most recent essay collection, “*Autobiografía del Algodón*,” not yet translated into English, Rivera Garza invokes Berger explicitly to propose a rationale for writing fiction. “If, as John Berger reminded us, what distinguishes us here on earth is not our laughter, nor our ability to shape our own reality, nor our intellect, but rather our capacity to live with the dead,” she writes, “perhaps what brings us here, to these lonely places, to these strange shores, is a basic need to recognize ourselves as part of a species.” Acknowledging the universally disordering pleasure of sex is a rejoinder to the painfully specific withdrawal of public care. When Rivera Garza’s characters moan, they cry out on behalf of their flesh, against a state that refuses to protect this flesh because it belongs to a woman.

Rivera Garza calls the contemporary Mexican state “the Visceraless State.” It is not difficult to imagine it as the real home of the Detective and the Woman with the Jade Ring. “The neoliberal state has established visceraless relationships with its citizens,” she writes. “Relationships without hearts or bones or innards. Disemboweled relationships.” It is the state that is

responsible for the mutilated bodies that lie by the roadside, even if its smiling politicians and bland technocrats do not wield the blades themselves. And the responsibility of the writer? Confronted with these bodies, she must express, “in the most basic and also the most disjointed language possible, This hurts me.”

“This hurts me” is not a claim that demands verification or action from others. It asks only to be heard. Which is not to say that writing makes nothing happen. In 2021, Rivera Garza published a book about the murder, in 1990, of her younger sister Liliana by an ex-boyfriend, whom the police never managed to capture. It opens with Rivera Garza’s return to Mexico City to retrieve her sister’s case file from the state. It is summertime. There is something obscene about the beauty of the city—its boutiques, gazebos, poplars—and something frightening in Rivera Garza’s ability to narrate this beauty in light of her terrible quest. “It is capable of welcoming anyone, this city,” she thinks, words one can imagine slipping from the lips of the Detective. As she draws closer to the file, she imagines her sister cumbia dancing, standing under trees, raising her arms, and smiling. When she finally finds the file and opens it, voices rise from its pages—the voices of Liliana, her parents, her friends, and the friends of her murderer. They are testimonies not to Liliana’s death but to her life. “She was in charge of creating an archive of herself,” Rivera Garza explained in an interview. “I listen lovingly and create a context where her voice is heard.”

One of the photographs that Rivera Garza found in the file was of the killer, his unremarkably handsome face etched in black-and-white. She included it in the book. Several months ago, the [Times reported](#) that, after the book had been published in Mexico, Rivera Garza received a tip concerning the possible whereabouts of the killer. He had been living in California for thirty years, under an assumed name. Then she was sent a link with information about the man’s funeral. He had died in 2020. If there is no poetic justice, there is a terrible poetic aptness. Apparently, the person she had sought—the resolution she had imagined—had baited and eluded her, in life as in fiction. ♦

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Content

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During the final months of the Second World War, the publisher Alfred A. Knopf commissioned a reader's report, consisting of a form on blue paper with a few queries, regarding a translated novel it was considering by an Icelander named Halldór Laxness. Section B of the form instructed the reader, "If you recommend us to publish the book give your chief reason in a single sentence." The reader replied, "Those who read this book will never forget it."

The novel, "Independent People," tells the story of an Icelandic farmer who renames himself Bjartur of Summerhouses, after the wretched farm that he has managed to buy for himself following eighteen years of servitude. No obstacle of God or man will separate him from his independence, even if he pulverizes himself and his family in the process. Against this grim backdrop, the reader observed, "Certain passages are of such beauty, so filled with an understanding of human dignity and pathos, so richly imaginative, that I want them permanently available for myself, my family, and my friends." Yet the report projected meagre sales. The style, the characters, and the atmosphere were surely too unfamiliar to the American reader. Knopf published the novel anyway.

In its first year, "Independent People" sold more than four hundred thousand copies in the United States. Nine years later, Laxness won the Nobel Prize in Literature for "his vivid epic power which has renewed the great narrative art of Iceland." Yet, even after the Nobel, the novel no one would forget was not reissued in the U.S. Of Laxness's sixty other books, many of them fiercely admired around the world, nearly all remained unavailable in the United States for the rest of the twentieth century.

How to explain this long eclipse? Some scholars argue that Laxness was, however informally, blacklisted. An outspoken socialist and a defender of Iceland's independence (achieved in 1944, when, after centuries under the Danish monarchy, it declared itself a republic), Laxness condemned the country's joining *NATO*, in 1949. A documentary film that examined his

U.S. reputation, “Anti-American Wins Nobel Prize,” was produced in 2011, taking its title from a contemporaneous American newspaper headline. The scholar Chay Lemoine has demonstrated that J. Edgar Hoover authorized an investigation into Laxness’s royalties from Knopf, on the suspicion that he was using them to underwrite Icelandic Communists.

Others suggest more prosaic explanations. The overwhelming majority of the sales of “Independent People” resulted from its selection by the Book-of-the-Month Club, not a prairie fire of spontaneous enthusiasm in bookstores.

All this turned around in 1995, when the writer Brad Leithauser published an essay on “Independent People” in *The New York Review of Books* that began a renaissance of Laxness’s work in English that is still ongoing. “There are good books and there are great books,” Leithauser began, “and there may be a book that is something still more: it is the book of your life.”

Two years later, Vintage International published a new edition of “Independent People” that’s now in its thirty-sixth printing. A new hardcover edition came out in 2020. In the years since 1998, when Laxness died, in an Icelandic nursing home, at the age of ninety-five, Vintage has published his novels “World Light,” “Paradise Reclaimed,” “Iceland’s Bell,” “Under the Glacier,” and “The Fish Can Sing” in matching volumes, each with its own bright color, like the painted iron roofs of Icelandic coastal villages. More recently, Archipelago has published Philip Roughton’s translations of the novels “The Great Weaver from Kashmir” and “Wayward Heroes.” When Leithauser wrote his essay, nearly all of Laxness’s work was either unpublished in America or had been out of print for decades. But as of last month, when Archipelago published Roughton’s new translation of “Salka Valka”—a gripping wonder, and Laxness’s most sustained piece of narrative drama—all the major novels became available to English readers for the first time.

His father was raised on the parish: if you were the child of destitute parents, the local authorities placed you with a better-off family, who put you to work on their farm. Like a lot of things in nineteenth-century Iceland, where glass was just beginning to displace the afterbirth of cows as the material for windowpanes, such arrangements had remained mostly unchanged since the Middle Ages.

By his twenties, the pauper boy had become a “vacant man,” a day laborer free to work for a wage. His industriousness on a road-building crew got him promoted to foreman. He met a young woman employed as a farmhand whose father had died when she was ten. Of her mother’s six children, only this girl had survived to adulthood.

The vacant man and the woman married and settled in Reykjavík. In 1902, she gave birth to a boy on whom a cat leaped in his crib to scratch at his face. For its offense, the cat was hanged. When the boy, called Dóri, was three, the family moved on horseback about ten miles east, to a farm called Laxnes. The boy contracted polio but recovered, though it left him with a permanent stammer. When his father came in from work, he sat in the twilight by the window and played the violin.

The boy had a different passion: he wrote incessantly. For ten hours a day. He showed no interest in farm labor and, for reasons no one can explain, his parents let him stay inside at his desk.

One day at Laxnes, a man knocked on the door, looking for directions to a nearby waterfall. No one answered. He continued knocking until a twelve-year-old boy came to the door. “Unfortunately, no one is at home,” the boy said, to the man’s surprise. After all, the boy himself was home. Everyone was out making hay. The man asked why the boy himself was not working with the others. “Me?” the boy asked, perplexed. “I’m writing!”

The boy’s name was Halldór Guðjónsson. At thirteen, he finished writing a six-hundred-page novel. He put it aside. At seventeen, he finished another novel and found someone to print it. The day before reviewing the proofs, he returned home from Reykjavík, where he was studying, for a Communion service at the local church and met up there with his father. When they parted, his father extended his hand. “Bless you now, dear Dóri,” he said. Within two weeks, his father had died of pneumonia.

A month later, the boy boarded a steamship heading to Copenhagen. When he arrived, he had business cards printed. He taped one to his door. It read “*HALLDÓR FROM LAXNES, POET.*”

Only one major biography of the writer who would call himself Halldór Laxness exists in English: “The Islander,” by Halldór Guðmundsson, which was published in 2008 in the United Kingdom but never in the U.S. Abridged from the Icelandic original though it is, the biography still provides a lively soup-to-nuts account, including the dizzying sequence of travels Laxness began after he left home.

In Denmark, he covered his expenses with stories he wrote for newspapers and with remittances from his mother, who earned the money by knitting. He went to Sweden to read Strindberg, passed himself off as a baron in Germany and Austria, and sailed to New York, where he was refused entry for lack of papers. He fathered an illegitimate child in Denmark, although he didn’t know it until he had already gone to Luxembourg, where he converted to Catholicism, entered a Benedictine monastery, and stopped just short of taking Holy Orders. He lived briefly in France, England, Norway, Rome, Sicily, Canada. By the time he was twenty-five, he had already published four books. He knew Danish, English, and German, and was teaching himself Russian, French, and Latin. His private writing from that time reveals two modes: narcissistic grandeur and annihilating self-doubt. In a letter, he declared, “*I shall* become a great writer in the eyes of the world or die!” In his diary, he wrote, “With the exception of being prideful and having empty dreams of being a superman, I am nothing.”

Determined to break into the movies, he went to Hollywood, where he wrote a screenplay called “Salka Valka,” or “A Woman in Pants,” with Greta Garbo in mind for the title role. The movie had good prospects of being produced by M-G-M, until Laxness fell out with the studio over its idea to set the film not in Iceland but in Kentucky.

The crash of the American economy in 1929 convinced Laxness of the truth of socialism. He gave up on Hollywood and returned to Iceland. Something seemed to have matured in him. Having travelled and studied the languages of the great powers, he began writing with expansiveness and confidence, in the language of his tiny nation, the epic, multivolume, tragicomic novels of struggling Icelanders that would make his name.

Chief among the works of this period was “Independent People,” set amid shocking poverty that engenders in the characters a steeliness verging on

cruelty. When by some miracle the lonely old cow at Summerhouses gives birth to a calf, Bjartur's family falls in love with it and seems to know hope for the first time, until the morning Bjartur matter-of-factly slaughters it and wakes up the children with an order to clean its tripe off the paving as he heads to town to sell its carcass.

Laxness's severe depictions of rural life did not flatter Iceland's modernizing self-image. When the novel first came out, one of the most prominent politicians in the country accused Laxness of "raising old and lost banners of oppression" and "working against his own people." For his unorthodox spelling and use of neologisms, others accused Laxness of being a "language abuser." This was no trifling matter in a country whose case for independence from Denmark rested in part on its mostly unaltered use of the ancient language of the Vikings.

By 1954, he had married twice, fathered four children, built his family a house on his father's old land at Laxnes, and become famous abroad. The next year, when he won the Nobel, he was still just fifty-three. A remarkably various body of work was still to come. Both his ideological commitments and the genres in which he worked continued to evolve. By the nineteen-sixties, he had renounced Stalinism and identified more closely with Taoism. He turned to playwriting, then to memoirs. To any writer prone to blocks, he makes a daunting example. Throughout his life, he wrote with the tirelessness of a swimming shark.

If many readers come to Laxness for the scenery of an exotic land, they often stay for the characters, more specifically for the quality of his attention to them—close enough to sympathize with their inmost longings yet somehow far away enough to chuckle. Everybody does foolish things, and everybody has a soul. One of his most often quoted lines comes after a despairing girl in "Independent People" gives way to sobs, and her little brother, in comforting her, sees for the first time into the labyrinth of another soul: "The source of the greatest song is sympathy."

But when a reader who knows Laxness only from "Independent People" encounters his contemporaneous political writing, in which mere human beings seem to count for nothing compared with the success of the socialist

project, the cognitive dissonance is enough to crash the operating system of the brain.

Countless Western intellectuals shared his ardor for the Soviet Union, but few of them had witnessed the purges firsthand, as he did. Laxness attended the infamous Moscow show trials of 1938, where all but three of the twenty-one defendants, including Nikolai Bukharin, were found guilty and sentenced to death.

Within a day of the verdicts, Laxness was invited to dinner at the apartment of his friend Vera Hertzsch, a devout Communist. Around midnight, a knock came at her door. While Laxness watched, Hertzsch's baby daughter was taken from her with a promise that she would be sent to an orphanage. Hertzsch herself was taken to the Gulag. The daughter vanished from public records and is presumed to have died shortly afterward. Hertzsch died in a Kazakh labor camp in 1943.

Yet, in the face of what he'd seen, Laxness still went home to Iceland and finished writing "The Russian Adventure," a travelogue of Stalinist propaganda that included his wonder-struck account of the trials. So in awe is he of the political struggle the trials represent that, he wrote, "issues such as the legal or moral 'guilt' of the conspirators or the punishment that awaited each of them personally becomes a minor issue, of no interest for further debate." Is this a man ironically sneering at a murderous spectacle or applauding one? Or did he stand by the sentiments he had written in a letter some years before: "What are the masses but clay in the hands of superior minds? They are nothing but raw material, at the most the tools to initiate events of world importance."

His politics impeded his career and led to errors in his reputation that persist today. Ernest Hemingway won the Nobel Prize the year before Laxness did. The *Times* wrote of the two favorites, "The fact that Mr. Laxness had received the Stalin Prize for Literature might have swung the vote for Mr. Hemingway." The claim that Laxness had won the Stalin Prize gained currency. The *Times* repeated it in his obituary, in 1998. Susan Sontag included it in her introduction to the Vintage edition of his late novel "Under the Glacier."

Laxness won no such prize. He didn't win the Stalin Peace Prize, either, as others have erroneously claimed. No available Russian source, including *Pravda*, which seemed to report his every move at that time, links him with any of these laurels. Guðmundsson insists that the awards are a fiction and points to a medal that Laxness accepted in Vienna from a Communist-affiliated peace council as a possible source of the rumor.

Nowhere in Laxness's novels is the conflict between the shining ideal of socialism and the dignity of individual people on plainer display than in "Salka Valka," written after the movie of the same name fell through. Roiling with "unruly vitality," young Salka arrives with her mother one night in a coastal village. Salka has a "deep, almost masculine voice." Tall and strong, she's determined to buy herself a pair of trousers soon "and stop being a girl." When the schoolmaster asks her who the minister is who rules over them all in Iceland, she replies, "No one's going to rule over me!"

To readers whose attachment to Offred, in "The Handmaid's Tale," has led you to get "*NOLITE TE BASTARDES CARBORUNDORUM*" tattooed on your arms, "Salka Valka" is for you. It never even occurs to Salka that the bastards might grind her down.

Everyone fails this girl, especially her mother, Sigurlína, who neglects to protect her from the predations of a vainglorious drunk, Steinþór Steinsson, whom Sigurlína is desperate to marry. After Sigurlína has become pregnant by him, Steinþór tries to assault Salka and is discovered. He escapes the village, only to return a few years later. Sigurlína wants him back and plans a big wedding, but Steinþór is there only to get at Salka, now fourteen. After Salka fights him off another time, he leaves her mother for good. In despair, Sigurlína drowns herself, and Salka is alone.

The only other English version of "Salka Valka," which came out in 1936, had to be prepared in a ricochet off the Danish translation. Laxness didn't like it. "Fifty per cent of my style has disappeared," he complained. Nevertheless, "Salka Valka" was a hit in the U.K., where the *Evening Standard* wrote that it was "replete from cover to cover with the beauty of perfection"; however, no edition of it has been available in the U.S. since the Great Depression.

Roughton has made his version from the Icelandic. Even in moments of high drama, he moves along with calm assurance, tossing off Laxness's inventive and always spot-on descriptions as though they were commonplace, as when, on a cliff, the puffins "squatted with the dignity of church officials in front of their burrows." He captures Laxness's singular dour-droll tone with uncanny grace. After her mother has died, Salka walks alone under the mountains and sticks a peppermint in her mouth to comfort herself in "this gray, unfantastic, meaningless Easter weather."

"*Salka Valka*" was published in Iceland in two volumes, in 1931 and 1932. When the second part came out, it bore the subtitle "A Political Romance." A young local intellectual, Arnaldur, has gone away to school in the south and come home to incite a Communist revolution in the tiny village. Salka, her self-sufficiency notwithstanding, goes weak for this man who promises to lead a dictatorship of the proletariat. Here the reader braces for agitprop.

Evidently, so did the Nazis, who, after Laxness signed a contract to publish "*Salka Valka*" in German, found it "sinister" and banned it. The Soviets, too, at first refused to publish it, on the ground that Arnaldur was a coward to the cause. After the war, the novel's would-be publishers in Communist East Germany asked Laxness to change the ending for the sake of ideological conformity. He refused, saying that the editors in Moscow had told him, "'Our people have never seen Communists such as Arnald.' I replied: 'Of course they have, but you hang them.'" (The novel eventually came out in German, Russian, and at least twenty other languages.)

A heavy ideological hand does hover over the second part of the book. But, if the problem with ideology in a novel is its tendency to drag the characters down the routes it prescribes, Laxness allows his heroine better than a fighting chance to choose her own way. The revolutionary arguments that galvanize her village are as violent as the snow that inundates the ramshackle houses; Salka takes these ideas seriously, but, despite what may feel like Laxness's own wish that she get with the program, she never quite acts as any ideology demands. She rises to own a share in a fishing boat, and her interests compete with those of the workers on shore. The stakes now are more than her own gain. She has to support a bunch of malnourished children she's taken in. The Communist standard-bearer Arnaldur would have let the children die, and says so. "It's nothing but bourgeois

sentimentality and hypocrisy to help individuals,” he pronounces. Salka accuses him of being nothing but a doctrine, “and a false doctrine at that. When did you ever harbor human feelings for a single soul?”

It’s impossible to separate any Laxness novel from the legacy of the Icelandic sagas, the great savage stories written in prose on calfskin during the early twelve-hundreds, before many modern languages had any literature at all. We know the authors of almost none of the sagas. Among the devices that distinguish them is a point of view that seems to come from the shared knowledge of humanity as applied to particular farmers on particular fjords. Laxness is an heir to the form and its tropes, which he can deploy for laughs or for pity. Of Salka and Sigurlína’s first arrival in the village, he writes, “The snow blew straight into their faces, as it always does with such people.” Of the moment Salka discovers that her mother has spent all of Salka’s money, he writes, “Few sights are as peculiar as that of a little girl in a ragged man’s jacket, with a string around her waist, crying on a set of steps in a little village by the sea as dusk is beginning to fall.” Who’s saying this? None of the characters. But it isn’t Laxness himself, either. Reading him reminds you that the narrator of any novel is as much an invention as the characters are. But a funny kind of invention. Far from being a part of the writer’s mind, it partakes of a genius, when things are going right, that the writer himself doesn’t possess.

Once that invented narrator starts to speak on the page, whatever point a writer may have hoped to dramatize can feel hopelessly sophomoric. Laxness seems to have made this same discovery multiple times. His opinions were less interesting, and paradoxically less true, than the fictitious products of his imagination.

Laxness once wrote in a letter that he felt “like a man who is rowing for his life on a little boat out on the open sea.” If that image conveys the novelist’s fundamental loneliness as well as her strange belief that, seated in a quiet room while the hot radiator ticks and the snow falls outside, she is engaged in a matter of life and death, it also conveys the feeling you get from reading Laxness: that, despite his mischievous show of ease, he is giving his book everything he has in the hope that it will exceed him. ♦

By Rachel Kushner

By Ling Ma

By David Wright Faladé

Comment

- [The Supreme Court's Conservatives Have Asserted Their Power](#)

By [Jeannie Suk Gersen](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

The lasting depredations of the Trump Presidency were brought into sharp focus by last week's testimony before the House Select Committee investigating the events of [January 6th](#), which left an indelible portrait of Donald Trump as a food-throwing despot willing to encourage an armed mob to march to the Capitol. And, in addition to an attempted coup, we have him to thank for 2022's becoming the turning point of the Supreme Court's conservative revolution.

In a single week in late June, the conservative Justices asserted their recently consolidated power by expanding gun rights, demolishing the right to abortion, blowing a hole in the wall between church and state, and curtailing the ability to combat climate change. The Court is not behaving as an institution invested in social stability, let alone in the importance of its own role in safeguarding that stability. But what if its big and fast moves, eviscerating some constitutional rights and inflating others, are bound for collision? As people harmed by one aspect of its agenda look to other aspects of it to protect them, the Court may not be altogether pleased with where that process leads.

Shortly before the Court, in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, [overruled Roe v. Wade](#), a synagogue filed suit in a Florida

court, challenging, under the Florida constitution, the state's new law criminalizing pre-viability abortions. Among the plaintiff's claims is that the abortion ban violates the right of Jews "to freedom of religion in the most intimate decisions of their lives." The suit states that Jewish law stipulates that life begins at birth, not before, and "requires the mother to abort the pregnancy" if there is a risk to her "health or emotional well being." Thus, the plaintiff argues, the abortion ban infringes on Jewish free exercise of religion.

Many post-Dobbs lawsuits can also now be expected to assert that abortion bans violate state constitutions, which may be more protective of individual rights than the federal Constitution is. Marriage equality, for example, was protected in Massachusetts by a state constitutional ruling twelve years before the Supreme Court declared a federal constitutional right to same-sex marriage. Republican-dominated state courts, no less than G.O.P.-led state legislatures, though, may well stymie such efforts to preserve abortion access. Last month, the Iowa Supreme Court simply overruled its own 2019 decision affirming a state constitutional right to abortion, leaving Iowa free to ban the procedure.

But the Jewish group's claim is a bellwether, because the Supreme Court has lately been exceedingly accommodating of people's religious views. This term, two cases resulted in historic expansions of the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment. The Court held that Maine, which provides tuition funds for students who reside in districts lacking public secondary schools to attend secular schools elsewhere, must also provide funds for such students who choose to attend religious schools. The Court also held, in the case of a football coach at a public high school in Washington State, who knelt and prayed on the field after games, that the school district could not stop him, even if it wanted only to avoid the appearance of endorsing religion. The upshot, [Justice Sonia Sotomayor](#) wrote, in a dissenting opinion, is that the Court "elevates one individual's interest in personal religious exercise . . . over society's interest in protecting the separation between church and state." And, in a free-speech case this term, the Court held that Boston must allow a group to fly a Christian flag on the flagpole outside city hall if it allows other groups to hoist non-religious flags, such as the pride flag.

The Supreme Court's expansion of religious liberty is long-running, but it has rapidly accelerated in the two years since the Court gained a conservative supermajority. At the start of the pandemic, in 2020, the Court repeatedly rejected claims of churches that objected to states' stay-at-home orders. But, after Justice Amy Coney Barrett was confirmed, in the fall of 2020, a majority—the same five conservative Justices who eventually voted to overrule *Roe v. Wade*—held in favor of Catholic and Orthodox Jewish organizations that objected to a state's stricter capacity limit for houses of worship than for essential businesses. Similarly, the courts have historically and routinely rejected religious free-exercise challenges to compulsory vaccinations, such as for admittance to schools. But, since last year, a number of courts have required religious exemptions to *COVID*-vaccine mandates. According to a recent *Yale Law Journal* [study](#) conducted by Zalman Rothschild, a fellow at the Stanford Constitutional Law Center, “while every federal court in the country faced with the issue has rejected vaccine-mandate challenges brought under free-speech or substantive-due-process theories, free exercise challenges have succeeded in securing wins for vaccine objectors.” He has since noted that “free exercise has exploded out of proportion.” Indeed, that expansion threatens to allow people to claim a religious free-exercise right to discriminate against L.G.B.T.Q. individuals. But it may also arm those who seek religious exemptions from abortion bans with powerful arguments that courts will have to grapple with. And some groups that make such arguments may be beyond the embrace of the general public—much less that of Republican-dominated courts.

The Satanic Temple, for example, headquartered in Salem, Massachusetts, claims seven hundred thousand registered members in congregations around the world. Courts and the I.R.S. have recognized the organization as a religion (which doesn't actually worship Satan as a deity but, instead, views him as a symbol of dissent against tyrannical authority). In keeping with one of its core tenets—that “one's body is inviolable, subject to one's own will alone”—TST has filed several lawsuits pressing a free-exercise claim that objects to abortion bans. Its position is that a state's imposition of a waiting period or counselling prior to an abortion is as much a violation of religious freedom as it would be prior to a baptism or a Communion.

We are accustomed to hearing religious objections to abortion. Religious objections to abortion bans also reflect the fact that, for many people,

questions of when human life begins and whether to have a child are centrally informed by their religious beliefs. It is possible that these free-exercise claims won't succeed, because avoidance of hypocrisy is not a value that we expect from this Supreme Court, any more than we expect it from the man responsible for its composition. The Select Committee and the Department of Justice may yet force Trump to answer for some of his actions, but, notwithstanding the historic swearing-in of Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson last week, we are stuck with his Court, and the damage it will do, for the next generation. ♦

By Margaret Talbot

By Jane Mayer

By Jill Lepore

By Jia Tolentino

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Friday, July 1, 2022](#)

By [Janie Smulyan](#)

Fiction

- “[Call Me Ishmael,” an Early Story by Shirley Jackson](#)
- “[Arrivals](#)
- “[A King Alone](#)
- “[Peking Duck](#)”

By [Shirley Jackson](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

“Yes,” she said. “It’s incredible.”

It was quite stupid of people, she thought, to make everything, even conversation, so interrelated and dependent that she could not say merely that *it* was incredible but must be referring to something preceding or obvious; nothing exists, she thought, unless it depends upon something previous; people are incapable of realizing anything that does not bear upon that interrelation. In this case, it was the number of warm days that was incredible (warm days being a factor in *anyone’s* understanding), instead of anything more important, and there seem to be so few important things, she thought desperately, besides the weather.

“I like it, though,” said her mother.

There. Her mother liked it. In the pattern which existed around and in and was a part of her mother, there was a place for liking the weather.

[An interview with Laurence Jackson Hyman.](#)

“Look,” said her mother. “She’s there again.”

Thus, something outside the pattern was only a subject for comment, never as real as the weather, never as permanent. Only a subject for “Look. She’s there again.”

“I thought she had moved.”

“And a good thing, too,” said her mother. “No better than she should be. Decent people expected to live with a woman who . . . with a woman like that. More than a person should be expected to put up with. I suggested to the landlord that he put her out.”

Again, it was not the concreteness of the act of forcing a woman out of a house that was important; it was the fact of mentioning it to the landlord.

“What a queer interpretation you put on things, Mother.”

“Queer?” said her mother. “Queer to refuse to live in the same house with that woman? And now she comes and stands on the corner. On the corner!”

The corner was important, more important than the woman; the woman derived her actuality from the place where she lived, her landlord, the people she lived with, the corner she stood on; there was no woman, there was a corner, and a corner was no place for a woman to stand, any more than a decent house was any place for her to live.

“She seems to be drunk. . . .”

“There,” said her mother, “don’t blame the poor creature; you don’t really know, and, anyway, she’s to be forgiven.”

The woman, then, existed to be forgiven, not blamed; not understood, forgiven.

“She’s probably tired,” said her mother. “But I can’t understand why she comes back here; the landlord says she lives so far away now.” She paused. “And not in the *nicest* part of town,” she added reflectively.

“I believe I’ll speak to her.”

“We should,” said her mother, making the decision, by the use of the “should,” one of nothing; thus, the woman lost the momentary personality and became again the object of a verb.

“My good woman,” said her mother (and again the woman regained personality for a moment, by the confusion resulting from the use of “good”), “aren’t you lost?”

The woman, gathering reality from the people in the house, from the corner, from being the object of a verb and the subject of an adjective, raised her eyes and looked levelly.

“Yes, thank you,” she said flatly. “Very well lost, thank you.”

And there was the confusion of a non-related thought scattering for a moment all of the pattern; her mother stared, the corner vanished; and then the pattern was re-established.

“I’m sure I don’t know what to make of it,” said her mother. “I’m sure I don’t understand it at all.” ♦

By Charles Bethea

By Stephania Taladriz

By Ariel Levy

By [Bryan Washington](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Audio: Bryan Washington reads.

You've caught the morning's first flight and your car is late, but Aiden told you it'd be there and five minutes later it is. He's filming in Georgia, because apparently everyone's filming in Georgia, which means he's sleeping on set, which means you won't catch him during daylight hours—but he still puts you up in a hotel on Piedmont for the weekend.

It's like Montrose, he texted, but gayer.

[Bryan Washington on why he loves Houston.](#)

You're surprised he even remembers the neighborhood. And you start to ask if he isn't worried about having his name on the reservation, given the fag of it all. Then you remember that he probably made an assistant do that shit for him.

•

Your driver's a tall Black dude. He helps with your bags. When he says, You don't need that face mask here, you thank him but you keep your shit on. In the Mercedes, this gentleman asks where you're coming from, and then blinks twice before telling you that Houston is his favorite city in the world.

The barbecue!

The strip clubs!

The most delicious women in North America!

He pauses for your opinion on the third matter.

You say the weather's chillier here than you thought it would be.

And your driver's eyes flash in the rearview mirror before he takes the hint, speeding through the rest of the trip in silence.

•

In the spring, Aiden shot a film in New Haven. And then a series in Philly. And then a documentary in Brooklyn. And then this other feature in Austin. That week, he put you up in a house just east of downtown, where the block's foot traffic and stray cats and revving engines kept you up past midnight.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Bryan Washington read “Arrivals.”](#)

But you liked waking up at sunrise. You stumbled through the heat, past chicken coops rounding out tiny over-renovated bungalows, and bought churros from a vegan taquería that you thought Aiden might like. (*I can't eat meat for this role*, he'd texted.) You'd envisioned walking along the train tracks hand in hand, or pointing out wares in the coffee shops lining East Cesar Chavez, but what actually happened was that he cancelled on you twice.

Something came up.

And then again.

Eventually, the muggy afternoon the day before your flight home, Aiden found time to meet. You were stoned from some pot that you'd bought off Grindr, and you hadn't really showered, but he fucked you in front of the window anyway, gripping your hips while you braced against the sofa.

The next morning, he called a car to take you to the airport. Your driver was a whiteboy who couldn't have been much older than twenty. He had sleepy eyes, and as he pulled his Chevy out of the neighborhood he idled at the stoplight for too long—which was when you realized that he'd fallen asleep.

•

Sometimes Aiden calls a limo to take you home from I.A.H. That's when you know it's been a good week on set. Other weeks, you wait for one of the roster of drivers willing to work at dawn—usually, the same Vietnamese person ends up picking you up in a Honda, wearing a snapback and playing J-pop the entire drive home.

Coming home from Boston a few weeks later, your driver's a Brazilian woman. Her smile feels like a warm blanket. She plays Jorge Ben Jor as you glide down I-610, and the guitars make Houston feel a little more present. When you ask how her night's been going, she says that it's busier than usual: people are travelling again. Maybe she'll hop on a plane, too. She's got two kids in Boston she hasn't seen in two years. When you ask how old they are, your driver laughs and says, Basically grown!

Eventually, the two of you pull back onto the feeder road. At a stoplight, you idle under a billboard, and what towers above you is a portrait of Aiden's face.

You do your best not to stare.

Your driver gives the sign a once-over.

You wonder if she knows, but she only shakes her head, smiling at you in the back seat and taking a right into the neighborhood.

•

In the nine years that you've been entangled with Aiden, many things have changed.

You got chubby and Aiden got fucking *ripped*.

You stayed the same height and Aiden sprang, like, four inches taller.

You wrote one book that twelve people bought and Aiden found roles in nearly twenty-five major productions: first as a small-town coke dealer, and then as a big-city cop, and then as a boutique sneaker salesman, and then as a bail bondsman, and then as another cop, and then as a pastor, and then as a barber, and then as a pimp, and then as a con man, and then as a slave, and

then as a slave master, and then as a slave catcher, and then as a sleazy pharmacy tech before he voiced an animatronic penguin in a movie that broke box-office records globally. (One night, after you'd gone down on him and he'd finished on your face, you asked him why he couldn't just play someone like himself; the volume of his laughter insured that you'd never ask him a question about his profession again.)

Eventually, Aiden got rich and shipped out to L.A., because that made sense for his job.

You kept your gig teaching E.S.L. in Houston, because California is fucking expensive, although your buddy Shun swears you'd be happier with him in the Bay.

Aiden spent his weekends at galas, smiling into everyone's iPhones. You spent your Saturdays on the patio at Ripcord, sipping beer after beer as white bears in leather chaps looked on with boredom.

•

A few weeks later, the Cadillac picking you up from Miami International is driven by an old dude who's Cuban, which you know because he tells you twelve times.

His mustache is incredible. His car smells like fresh bread. A trumpety tune gurgles from the speakers, and he asks what brought you to Florida, noting the sun and the sand and the gorgeous, gorgeous mujeres—unless, of course, you have a girlfriend, but also, perhaps, even if you do, because isn't she waiting back home in dusty Wherever the Fuck while you're Here, in the Present, Right Now?

When you reply, I'm just visiting a buddy, your driver stays silent for six stoplights.

Then he says, Miami loves the gays, too. A big guy like you? I'm sure you'll find a nice papito here.

And these men are at the front of your mind—tall or short or pale or dark or stocky or skinny or hairy or smooth—because it's been weeks since you've

seen Aiden, and for once you haven't fucked anyone else in the interim. But when you reach the hotel, less than two miles from where he's filming, Aiden texts that he won't catch you this weekend after all.

Something came up, he writes.

But the hotel's yours for the weekend.

And also, the car will pick you up all the same, and did you get last month's deposit?

This is one of many times you've thought to ask how long he expects you to put up with this. But before you text Aiden back, eventually, inevitably, you've made it up to your room and are wrapped in the bathrobe. It's maybe another five minutes before you've updated your profiles on the apps (changing your bio to: Visiting ☺!), but everyone's so beautiful that you just beat one off on the chaise.

•

The next week, in Manhattan, you and Aiden actually spend a morning in bed: ordering avocado toast from room service, sipping twelve-dollar coffee, watching HGTV as you suck each other off—cosplaying like the couple you're sure you could maybe become.

But then Aiden gets a text from his public-girlfriend-at-the-moment. She's a Brit who co-starred in his most recent film, with bright-red hair and no accent to speak of. The truth is that you enjoy her work more than his—Shun calls this your queer responsibility—but of course you'd never say that. And, as a sort of punishment, Aiden is dressed and out the door instantly; he apologizes for the inconvenience, and an Asian dude sits in a Hyundai downstairs waiting to drive you back to J.F.K.

Aiden swears things will get easier. Soon! He'll take some time off. You'll spend a few weeks in Copenhagen, in a rented town house among the whites. Or you'll laze on the beach in Puerto Vallarta. Or tour museums in Berlin, because what's the point of the money he's making if you two can't spend it together?

And this is what you're thinking of as your driver sits on the horn. He's whistling along to Schubert. The symphony leaps from his speakers. But the traffic is debilitating, and you're well on your way to missing your flight—until, suddenly, he veers off road, plunging through a series of side streets, and a Korean woman's voice gives the directions block by block, lilting from avenue to avenue until you've finally made it to Departures.

When you offer your driver a janky gamsahamnida, he breaks into the biggest grin. He wishes you safe travels. And a happy life! Which you realize Aiden's never done.

•

When you land in Houston, gagging from the humidity, a Black woman at baggage claim is holding a sign with your name on it. Walking outside to her Audi, she asks where you're from. When you say Here, she says Mm.

She tells you that her family's been in Texas for generations. Her people lived in Prairie View. Her father's father taught at the university. His father did, too. Her mother was a cellist who played for the Houston Symphony, and when your driver asks if you'd like to hear a bootleg of her performing Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, you shrug under your mask and say, Why not.

So this is what plays as the Audi drifts down I-69, across Kirby and then Weslayan, until you've finally reached Bellaire, past the pho bars and payday sharks and pupuserías and smoke shops. When your driver stops in front of your place, parking beside your neighbor's jasmine bushes, she tells you to take care. You promise that you'll try.

This city's changed so much, she says, but some parts feel the same.

•

When you text Shun about Aiden's promises, he doesn't respond for hours. You try to understand. After Shun made it to California, at the outset of the pandemic, he quit his remote accounting gig, dyed his hair blond, weaved his way into a throuple with two graying ceramicists, and found a job selling pot.

You wake up the next morning to a message from Shun: *Men say a lot of shit!!!!*

•

Living apart means that you and Aiden are open. Obviously.

Mostly, this means that you fuck whoever in your orbit is up for it. You tend to attract the same kind of person—fleshy, jokey guys—and you've never wanted for dick, but no one ever believes you when you say this.

Lately, Aiden's been associated with A-list girlfriend after A-list girlfriend. Before Ms. Brit, there was the blond spy, and the brunette scammer, and the red-haired nanny, and the black-haired zombie slayer who got slammed for tax evasion.

Also: a few years back, you came up poz after spending the night at an orgy in Midtown.

You thought Aiden would drop you from his life, but he didn't.

He didn't say anything absurd. He knew that U=U.

That was actually when he started flying you out to his various gigs.

And you've kept each other around.

Or he's kept you around.

And then there's the other thing: every few weeks, Aiden transfers a few grand your way. Shun says that he's basically paying for your life. Which you deny. But you take the money, putting it all in an account you can't bring yourself to touch. Every time your bank calls about scheduling a consultation for this healthy balance, you let it go to voice mail.

•

A month later, in Chicago, a Pakistani cub picks you up from the airport. He's got a rainbow flag in his car. When he asks where you're headed, you

give him the address. Aiden doesn't do gay bars—too risky, too many phones—which means you'll have to check this one out on your own. But, after a few minutes of silence, your driver asks where you're from, and grins at the answer, because he grew up in Sugar Land.

The car feels ten degrees warmer. Your driver asks about Montrose. His grandmother owned a home on Fairview a few decades back, but then the neighborhood changed, with the investors and the cafés and the condos. And the white people. After years and years of pressure, it just made sense to sell. Now she owns a four-bedroom home in Katy, for a fraction of the price, and your driver's the only grandchild who hasn't actually visited.

Is JR's still there? he asks, and you confirm that it is.

God, your driver says, I lost my virginity in that bathroom.

Which makes you cackle—because, you say, you did, too! You let some whiteboy rail you in an open stall, with his hands on your shoulders as you clung to his jacket. And you've never actually told anyone. For the rest of the drive, the two of you grin at each other through the mirror, delighting in this secret shared so many miles from home.

•

Back in Atlanta (because Aiden's dirtbag-pharmacist sitcom was renewed for a third season), you're picked up from the airport by a white lady. She insists on driving maskless. She simply lowers a window, rolling it up after you hit the highway. But she seems nice enough. You attempt to make small talk.

Your driver tells you that she owns a catering business with her son. They bake cookies and cakes for terminally ill toddlers across Georgia. *COVID* hurt their situation, but things have gradually picked up, and you say you're happy to hear that they're finding a way. Your driver smiles into the back seat, thanking you for the well wishes.

Then, idling at a stoplight, entirely out of nowhere, she says, The truth is that Atlanta is a *dangerous* city.

Clearly you aren't from around here, she says. I can tell. So you must not know.

The locals are different, she says. Uneducated.

And, she adds, after the so-called *protests*, you can't even send your kids to school. The history isn't being taught. I picked up a teen the other day, and he didn't even know it was nineuhleven! Nineuhleven! It's disgusting! A perversion of the system!

You realize that if you wrote this in a book it would seem farcical (but it would also probably sell more copies than your usual bullshit). So you raise your hand in the rearview mirror, asking your driver to pull over. Never mind that it's five blocks from the hotel. You'll just walk through the neighborhood. When your driver refuses—because the app won't allow it, and also it's hardly *safe*—you inform her that you'll piss on the cushion if she doesn't pull over, and she pumps her brakes so hard that your head bounces against the passenger seat.

But you grab all your shit. You shut your ears as your driver yells through the window. And you've walked a few blocks before you realize that it's snowing.

•

Aiden pops by on your first night in Atlanta, which is strange and notable because it usually takes him a minute. But you fuck on the sofa, and then on the bed, and then in the bathroom, and after he finishes a fourth time he asks if you'd like to take a walk.

Which is shocking! But it shouldn't be. This is something you and Aiden did all the time back in Houston. Partly because you loved bumbling through your old neighborhood off Navigation, before you were priced out. Partly because that was all the two of you could afford to do. But, on this evening, you lean against each other's shoulders, holding hands as Aiden leads you into a café. You've just sat down with sandwiches and coffees when Aiden clears his throat, beaming, and tells you that he's been cast, in a limited series, as the President of the United States.

You say, Oh.

Then you add, What?

But this is, Aiden tells you, huge news! It will change his life. And yours. For the better, if that wasn't obvious! If his team does this right, it could mean awards season. Accolades. An inclusion rider. This role will open the door to other, huger roles.

It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, Aiden says, cheesing as he licks foam from the rim of his cup.

Which is when, for reasons still unknown, you smile and say, So they made the President a queer?

Aiden takes a long sip of his coffee. Then he clears his throat. You immediately start to apologize, but Aiden cuts you off.

It really is a funny joke, he says. Ha-ha!

But also, he says, accepting the role means more work.

Which means even less time together.

That's enough for you to lose your cool. You squeeze your thighs under the table.

Then why the fuck are we even still trying? you say. Why the fuck are you here if you can't even be here?

We're doing the best we can, Aiden says.

If this is your best, then it fucking sucks.

But here you are. It's not like you'll ever do any better.

Aiden delivers this like he's telling you the weather. Then he turns to his phone.

You think of all the things you could say. Each of them tastes raw on your tongue.

When you look up, you realize that the blue-haired barista's been staring your way, but he blinks like something's in his eye when you catch him.

•

A few nights later, you're back in Houston, vaping beside idling taxis when Shun texts, *Are you saying you believe him? You really think you can't do any better?*

And the truth is that you aren't sure. You and Aiden have too much history. You both came up in ultra-Baptist homes. You both got slapped around by your fathers. Aiden can finish your sentences, you know precisely when he needs hand lotion, and your individual laughs have become one laugh, along with all the other ridiculous things that synch when people are in love.

Shun writes, *Is he as serious about you as you are about him?*

Must be, you write. *He wouldn't be sending for me otherwise?*

Bubbles appear on your phone. They disappear just as quickly. Someone finally accepts your ride request—it's the same Vietnamese person who's picked you up before, their name's Tony, they're in a different snapback—and they nod as you clatter into the back seat of their Honda. You glance at their profile picture, and then the back of their head, and right when you open your mouth to start a conversation Shun finally texts you back.

He writes, *Can the dick really be worth it?*

You type back, begrudgingly, *But can't it?*

Because this is a crucial component of the conversation: Aiden has indubitably got better at fucking. There is no other way to say it. And you were fine with your sex life to begin with—hardly even needed penetration, truly—but with each passing session Aiden gains a new wind, more speed, and increased flexibility, leaving you sweaty and breathless well after you've finally come.

For all the ways you miss his body's softness, this fills a different kind of void in you. You've fucked enough guys to know how rare that is. And you also know that, on the opposite end, a part of your appeal is you're open to things that Aiden's girlfriends aren't—any position, any location, any kink that he can wrap his head around.

The two of you complement each other in this way. It's a union you're reluctant to relinquish.

But Shun refuses to engage with this argument; he sends you a photo of his dog instead. He adopted the pit bull at your suggestion, a few weeks after he left Houston.

Now the pup's all grown up. You send back thirty-two hearts as a reply.

•

When you make it to LAX a few weeks later, Aiden and the British actress have publicly split.

On Instagram, they've cited irreconcilable differences. You make a face as Aiden wipes tears from his cheeks in a video he's posted.

Maybe it's for the best, you text him, a few hours later.

Maybe you don't have to be a fucking asshole, he replies, immediately.

You type one message, and then a second. You end up deleting both of them. Four white drivers cancel on you, and finally a fifth person, a Mexican woman, accepts your digital plea.

She says she'll have to make a few calls, and will that be all right? You tell her it's cool with you. Despite a lifetime in Houston, your Spanish is pretty shitty. But you understand enough to know that your driver is talking to an anxious suitor, then chatting up a second man, whose tone sounds slightly more desperate, followed by a third boyfriend with a husky voice that's eventually reduced to sobs, before she switches to English on a fourth call, with her younger brother.

A little bit of the kid's laughter flits through the speakers. Your driver's tone of voice changes. She asks how he's doing, and if he's finished his homework, and if he's eaten, chiding him when he complains that a person can only do one thing at a time.

•

In Houston, a few weeks later, you're picked up by Tony again. This time, there's no snapback. They're wearing a Lakers jersey, and their hair sits on the back of their neck. Neither of you says much of anything, but they play Hikaru Utada on the Honda's speakers, which gets you thinking about how Aiden used to play them in his shitty car, driving up and down Westheimer until you finally ran out of gas, and it's not long before you're wheezing in the back seat.

Tony is adequately alarmed. They pull off the feeder road. You open the car door, pace on the concrete, inhale the city's infinite smog. Tony asks if you're all right, and you tell them that you're fine. When you ask them to keep driving, they say, I don't want you having a fucking panic attack on the road.

This strikes you as reasonable. You take a moment to observe your driver again: you thought they were cute from their photo, and your suspicion is confirmed. Once you've finally slowed your breathing, the two of you blink at each other. Tony swears under their breath before they turn the ignition.

Which is when, entirely beside yourself, you ask if they know a good place to eat.

Tony cocks their head.

Then they say, You're my last ride of the night. I'd need you to change your destination.

So that's a yes?

Change it first. I'll give you an address. Then we'll see.

The noodle spot they take you to is only a block from your place. You've never seen it before, but it looks generations old. The walls are a pastel pink. Your shoes squeak on the tile. Tony orders for you in Vietnamese, and you're starting to think that this whole thing was a Bad Fucking Idea when a bowl of bún riêu is placed in the center of your table, along with a fork just for you. Tony smiles as they set it aside, passing you a pair of wooden chopsticks.

So, they say, do you just go around asking out rideshare drivers?

I've never done this before, you say.

Could've fooled me, Tony says.

Neither of you says anything else. An episode of "Paris by Night" blinks on the television above the table. You're thinking that this meal might be shared entirely in silence, and how that wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing, when Tony asks how long you've lived in Houston.

Too long, you say. I'll probably die here.

That isn't funny, they say.

I wasn't joking.

Good. I hate comedians.

Tony's been in Texas for only a year. The state feels a little impenetrable, they say, and a little fascist, and pretty fucking transphobic.

But you're still here, you say.

Duh, Tony says. The food's too good.

When they ask what you do for a living, you tell them you wrote a book.

So you're a writer?

No. Just the one book.

And Tony surprises you by laughing. They fold their hands over the table, grinning.

But what about you? you ask.

What about me?

What else do you do? Besides drive?

Who says I need anything else, Tony says. I set my own hours. I don't need to buy a suit. I honestly probably make more money than you, and I definitely make more than at my old gig.

Which was? you ask.

Standup comedy, Tony says, and smiles. I wrote jokes for a living.

And you got tired of laughing?

No. But I got tired of making white people laugh.

The waitress pops by your table again, refilling your water. Once she's moved on, you consider Tony again.

My boyfriend's an actor, you say, and the word actually makes you shiver because Aiden's never called you that out loud.

Would I know them, Tony says.

I think so, you say.

Tony only blinks back at you.

So, they say, is that what you were crying about, and you debate bringing up the minor catastrophes of your life, but instead you smile and say, Yeah.

Been there, your driver adds. But a person who makes you cry might not be the person for you.

I don't think he means to.

That doesn't make it better. Fuck that guy.

The two of you lean over your noodles. Steam fogs the air between you. You start to smile, and you wonder why, but you decide just to let the moment play out.

•

And of course it's not long before Aiden texts you from New York. It's been days since you've heard from him, since his outburst over text.

But he's sorry for being a dickhead. He wants you around again. He's paid for a room in Manhattan tomorrow night. You text back that the turnaround doesn't work for you, and it's another few hours before Aiden replies.

It's a nine-text screed that basically ends with how obviously *he* can't visit *you*.

And also: If you *cared*, you'd *find* the time.

Reading it makes you want to throw your phone out the fucking window. But you don't because it'd be too fucking expensive to buy another one, and the E.S.L. center's been cutting your hours.

•

When you text Shun about your maybe-date, he wonders if you got Tony's number. You did.

Shun texts, *So did you call them?*

You text, *No*.

When Shun asks why not, you tell him you don't need any more problems.

There are bigger problems than your shitty movie star paramour who won't claim you, Shun texts. Actual issues in this world.

We're in like three different proxy wars, Shun texts. The country's a fucking gun range. The planet's on fire. I want to get to work without getting shoved under the fucking BART by a fucking Proud Boy. I want my mom not to get punched in the head on the street by some fucking racist asshole.

Wait, you text. You never talk about these things?

You never ask, Shun texts.

And you don't know how to respond to this.

Because it's true.

So, for a few hours, you don't say anything at all.

Then you send six texts to apologize. You ask Shun how his mother's doing.

He responds immediately: *Ma's fine. She just discovered OnlyFans.*

•

Despite everything, you take the flight to New York.

Your driver is an Iranian dude. He has the flag in his car, along with some pictures drawn by his daughter. His hands are grizzled, but his features are baby soft, and he plays light, tinny jazz as the two of you move through traffic. It reminds you of a bathhouse you once visited, where the fucking was broken up by muted guitars. Your driver asks if the music's too loud, and you tell him that it's absolutely perfect.

When Aiden meets you in the hotel lobby, he looks the most at ease you've seen him in years. You've been following the blogs—they've been about nothing but the breakup—yet Aiden doesn't wear any of that on his smile, and once you've locked the door he fucks you face down in front of the mini-fridge.

Afterward, the two of you lie on the carpet. You place Aiden's palm in between your hands. He traces circles around your belly.

Then you do a funny thing: you ask if you can fuck him.

Over the course of your relationship, it's just been assumed that you'd bottom. From the very first time you fucked each other, this was a thing that never changed. Aiden grabs his wrist, bashful all of a sudden.

I don't know, he says. That seems like a lot.

What, you say. What? You've literally only ever been inside of me?

I know, Aiden says. But, you know, I don't know how that would work. I think we're better the way things are.

The two of you remain on the carpet until Aiden stands to get dressed. But you only roll onto your side, and then onto your knees, so that your forehead's pressed against the windowpane. The glass stretches from floor to ceiling. You stare down at all the people below you, stepping in and out of bodegas, texting at intersections, coming and going from the contours of their lives.

•

But there's a memory that comes to mind: the evening you told Aiden you were poz. He was back in Houston for a two-week stretch. The two of you smoked on the patio of George, back when Aiden could still do that. A gaggle of gays leaned on the bench beside you, holding their sides from laughter, and you breathed in their gasps and the smoke and the humidity and you told Aiden what you'd wanted to tell him.

At first, he didn't say anything. He took another pull of his cigarette.

Then he grasped your hand, folding his fingers into yours.

I don't care, he said. I'm just glad you're O.K.

That's all I care about, Aiden said, and then he smiled, glowing under the midnight lights.

•

Hours later, you're snoring when your cell starts buzzing. You fell asleep in your boxers on top of the comforter, so you roll across the mattress to silence it.

But it's actually Aiden. Who tells you that he's calling from across the city.

He's back together with the British actress. They figured something out. He wasn't sure whether to tell you, but now he's thinking that he needs to.

O.K., you say.

And also, Aiden says, she knows.

Fuck, you say. Fuck.

You're thinking that maybe it's because of something you overlooked. Maybe you left your meds or a jockstrap or poppers at his place—but Aiden says, No. None of that.

She knew.

She's *known*.

She simply decided to ignore it.

But now she's given him a choice.

If I stay with her, Aiden says, she'll keep it to herself. She won't tell anyone.

The two of you pause on the line. Down the hallway, you can hear drunken laughter.

You mean she won't blow up your life, you say.

Yeah, Aiden says, exactly.

But I can tell her I won't do it, Aiden says. I can tell her I don't care. I just need to know that you want me to. That you think we can stick it out.

The laughter down the hallway dims. It's replaced by a tinny ringing.

You want me to decide for you, you say.

What I want, Aiden says, is whatever you want. If you want me to stay, then I will.

And then, as he breathes into the phone, Aiden says three words that you've never heard from him before.

You think about how you were always the heavier breather. Aiden was always silent. Sometimes, at night, you'd wake up and shake him just to make sure he was still alive. It always took a minute to settle him back down.

•

An hour later, you get a car to the airport. Your driver's a Chinese guy who turns his music down while you call the airline to change the ticket, then turns it back up when you start to cry, humming along to the Cantopop. Eventually, he reaches for tissues, handing them to you wordlessly. He says something in Cantonese, which you don't speak. But then he repeats it, rubbing a hand along his cheek.

•

Shun picks you up from the Oakland airport.

His dog's in the passenger seat. The car smells like pot, which makes your toes as warm as your cheeks. When Shun tells you to move his pup to the back seat, you put her in your lap instead.

She's fine, you say.

Really?

Really.

Don't blame me if we crash into a divider, Shun says.

And then, I'm sorry that happened to you. But what are you going to do with the money?

I'll donate it, you say.

Really, Shun says.

No, you say. Or at least not all of it. I'll figure something out.

Shun pulls off the highway, and you loop around a neighborhood, and, in the way that your life is a joke, you run into flyers of Aiden's face as the President of the United States.

The suit fits well on his shoulders. He looks happy. But, convincing as his smile may be, you recognize it as his fake one. The real one has more cheek. More of a crick in his neck. You hope, eventually, he'll have the chance to actually show it. But the thought leaves your head when Shun's dog slobbers in your lap, which has Shun yelling and you laughing for the first time in months.

•

You fly back to Houston two weeks later. Sulking away from baggage claim, you call your own car. The guy who picks you up is an older man from Peru, and when he asks how your night is going you tell him it's been fine.

He says that so many people have sat where you're sitting. He used to drive luxury taxis. The pandemic killed his business. Killed it. But he took pictures of the stars—everyone you can imagine, your driver says—and he sent them to his son in Peru. These people, your driver says, made him finally see his father.

There are so many things that can happen in this life, your driver says. A human being must deal with so many things! What terrible luck. But, still, what a pleasure.

You smile at him through the rearview mirror. You've mostly just been texting Tony. Then your driver tells you to look up, because you're passing the city's skyline, glowing in the purple of the sunset behind you.

It's enough to make your driver smile. He slaps the steering wheel. He says, We're in the greatest city in the world! We can go anywhere from here! ♦

By David Sedaris

By Nick Paumgarten

By Stephanía Taladrí

By [Rachel Kushner](#)

Content

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Audio: Rachel Kushner reads.

He was on a low road next to the French Broad, which divided the town in half. He thought about how with small cities, like this one, that were split in two by a river, you added the word “West” or the word “East” to the half that was less desirable, the half that was not the commercial center.

He had been on this road before, twenty years earlier. The damp and teeming feel was familiar and unchanged. There was almost no development here, just tall trees and railroad tracks. His windows were down and the river felt close, as if its green water were breathing on his skin.

He arrived at the railroad crossing—he remembered this crossing—as the gates were descending. He waited. The sound of a train horn blasted into the car. As the train appeared and rumbled past—industrial, Norfolk Southern, tankers of chemicals connected one to the next like hot-dog links—a man hobbled up to the driver’s-side window.

[Rachel Kushner on sharing a car with a stranger.](#)

Where had he come from? Who knew. People seemed to pop up on a roadside from out of nowhere.

The man’s mouth moved as though his lips were dancers.

George heard nothing at all. The train was moving past, tanker by tanker, and the sound of it drowned out every other.

The man kept talking.

His chin was stubbled in gray, his gut sloping forward like a stretched water balloon. He was on crutches, missing the bottom half of one leg. He held the crutches and also a full bottle of beer, as if this were no challenge.

The man and George were possibly the same age. People aged differently. George was sixty but felt undeterred in his habits and pursuits. He had both his legs, for starters.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

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George pointed to his ears and shook his head to indicate that he couldn't hear the man's words, and the man nodded and stopped moving his lips.

The two of them, George in his car, the man resting his armpits on the supports of his crutches, watched the train slide past like they were watching a movie.

When the caboose appeared, orangey-red—some things, not that many, do not change—the man spoke again.

"Can you take me to the other side of the river? Just up to River Bar—it's close."

George said that was fine. He had always picked people up. It was like they knew. They understood that they could just walk up to his car window at a stoplight. Crutch up to the window.

The man was impressively nimble getting in the car with the crutches and the missing half leg and his beer bottle, as though he'd been managing this way for some time.

The gates went up. As they set off, the man raised his bottle in a toast, the turbulence of the uneven train tracks sloshing beer onto the car seat. George did not care, had never cared about anything material and certainly not this Ford Crown Victoria, which looked like an undercover cop car.

"Did you know most people are dehydrated?" the man said. "Ninety per cent of Americans, is what I read. All these thirsty people. Not me." He drained the beer bottle.

George did not ask the man what had happened to his leg. He sensed that he would hear about it without prompting.

A very long train was stopped on the tracks one afternoon, the man told George. He was walking. He had always walked to River Bar before the accident. He waited and waited for the train to move so he could cross. There was no engineer, no one in sight, and happy hour at River Bar was almost over—you get a shot and a beer for three dollars, he said. He had six bucks, and he could get a little credit from Smitty, the bartender who was working that night.

He figured he'd step over the linkage between train cars, do it quickly. Why stand there getting eaten alive by tiger mosquitoes when he could be inside, under a fan, drinking with his buddies? He'd got one of his legs up over the linkage when the train lurched forward and started rolling. It picked up speed, with him trapped under it.

He detailed to George what had happened next. There was a tourniquet fashioned from a shirt. A nephew of Smitty's who worked in the emergency room. A sum he was awarded, eventually, thanks to a lawyer from Charlotte. An ex-wife who bled him of the money as if he had a hollow leg. And look, he said, I don't have any leg.

He had told this story—the bar, the train, the shirt, the lawyer, the ex-wife, the hollow leg—probably eight hundred times.

River Bar was a shack painted sky blue, with a dark, open doorway. It looked like the kind of outbuilding where you'd expect to find old gas cans and a lawnmower. There were voices audible from inside. People relaxing and drinking in this tiny shed. The man thanked George for the ride and got out of the car and started crutching. At the entrance, he shouted, "Honey, I'm home!"

Honey, I'm home. It was like in that movie with Jack Nicholson, pretending he's a cheerful nineteen-fifties-style husband when really he's a monster and a murderer. But maybe that *was* a nineteen-fifties husband, George considered. That movie, "The Shining," only pretended to be horror. It was really the horror of your typical family. Men yelling and blaming, and women on their eggshells, padding around.

He'd heard this line just a week earlier; it was as if there were a regional conspiracy of men yelling, "Honey, I'm home!" It had happened at a liquor store near the bass lake in north Florida where George had gone to fish. He was buying bait. At the counter was a display of Fireball, on military discount. The clerks were from India, and they were behind bulletproof glass, because the place had been held up repeatedly. This was on the Georgia border, near a huge state mental hospital. Some character walked in and grabbed a bottle of Fireball and yelled, "Honey, I'm home!" The two clerks did not look up at him.

Honey, I'm home, but what's the use.

Honey, I'm home, but I can't stay long.

George had been in a dry spell, lyrics-wise. He turned that one over, hoping something might come from it, as he meandered north.

A giant insect flew into the car and got trapped in an air vent on his dashboard. He pulled over to direct the insect out, but mangled it by accident while trying to remove it from the vent with the edge of his insurance card. It left a mess suited for one of those cleanup companies, the ones that come in after a flood or a suicide or a chemical spill. Not that he'd ever called one.

Cleanup Man. That was a concept for a song.

The guy who sidles in with a woman as she's exiting a long and brutal marriage. As she's ending a short and volatile affair. Whatever it was—something complicated—the Cleanup Man came after. He's not the one. I ain't the one. That was a Lynyrd Skynyrd song. The Cleanup Man is the guy she cries to; he's an innocent. He's not to blame. George took a few notes in his little black leather-bound notebook, which he kept on the seat of the car for when he had a sudden idea.

He turned up a leafy incline, where he expected to see a diner on the right, a place he'd gone to with his daughter, Jenny, twenty years ago, when he was in this town to visit her. He could go there again. Jenny did not live here anymore, but she'd loved that diner. And when he got to Nashville, where he was going in order to see her, he could tell her that he'd gone back there.

The diner was on a rise above the river, as he'd remembered. But it was almost completely covered in kudzu, which looked to be pulling down the nearby electric lines. The place was wrecked and abandoned.

Its name had been Greek Diner. At least that was what Jenny had called it.

"That can't be the name," George had said. She'd pointed to the sign.

"It's like 'Chinese buffet,'" he'd said. "Or 'Thai food.' It's not called that. That's just what it offers." But the place had lost the sign indicating what its name was long ago, and people called it Greek Diner.

The woman who ran Greek Diner had decorated the place with her own folk art—postcards and calendar pages collaged with bird appliqués, Disney characters, and Bible verses, and coated with a hard shiny lacquer.

The woman had had a mysterious accent—Greek, maybe. She wore stage-ready makeup and a big brown wig with height, structure, and large-bore curls, as if she were Loretta Lynn. She seemed lacquered like her folk art, existing in a different reality from the one that Jenny and George occupied, and not just because she was shit-faced drunk, slurring and stumbling between the vinyl booths at Greek Diner. There was a genuine mystery to her.

"Isn't she gorgeous," Jenny had said.

George and Jenny, they liked the same kinds of things. Jenny had meant, isn't she wild, and he had agreed that she was.

Back then, Jenny had been living in an unfurnished little house next to a creek in West Asheville. There were people along that creek who were off the grid, using generators and rain cisterns. They weren't hippies. They were country people, suspicious of the government. Several times that week, while George was staying with Jenny, he had woken up to the sound of arguments. People threatening to blow each other's heads off.

He remembered Jenny's neighbor, a character named Junior Brown, who had no idea he shared a name with a musician in Austin, where George lived now, and for whom George had written a couple of songs.

Junior Brown painted cars for a living, and the fumes had ravaged him. He talked a lot about Mr. Smith and Miss Wesson, the two accomplices that others might have to meet if they didn't stay in line. Junior Brown liked Jenny, and said that if anyone messed with her they'd have to talk to Mr. Smith and Miss Wesson.

People with guns could be pretty corny about them. George himself did not own guns. He'd had a shotgun when he lived in the Hill Country outside Austin, for shooting rabbits that got into his vegetable patch, but that was it. No handguns. Nothing for so-called security. He thought of a possible song lyric: "No gun in my pocket, I'm just happy to see you." Or "I'm just happy to see you." Suggesting the other part, not stating it.

Jenny had been employed then as a waiter at a place downtown by the courthouse in Asheville. Jenny said "waiter," not "waitress"; she was a tomboy. She wore engineer boots, Carhartt work pants, and wifebeaters, had slicked-back, chin-length hair—basically the same clothes and hair as George. She had no car. She walked into town to earn her pay. She was a songwriter like George, but not yet successful. She was a kid then, twenty-one or twenty-two years old. She'd eventually bought a car, an orange Maverick that constantly broke down. Her joke to George was "catfish at a caviar price." Because the used-car lot on Patton Avenue where she'd bought her Maverick had the reverse on its rippling banner: "caviar at a catfish price." Jenny had learned to work on the car. She was like George in that way. In so many ways. She acquired tools and figured things out.

George had come to visit only that one time. That week, they'd walked up the hill bordering the creek to the gas station for coffee each morning; they'd dabbled in variability by trying different flavored creamers. They'd brought home a carton of milk and a package of Oreos for breakfast. Dipped the cookies in the milk. Health food was for other people. Jenny had inherited his trim physique and his good looks, his bad-food habits almost as an ethic: a way to keep things simple, by knowing how to enjoy what was readily available at any gas-station convenience mart in America.

The neighbor Junior Brown had told George that Jenny had a lot of good-looking friends. "I mean fine young ladies. Ouch. Hurts me to look at them. They come and go. It's busy over there." George understood that Junior

Brown was suggesting that Jenny had girlfriends. That she impressed him as a peer, as an honorary man. Which she was to George as well, except that she was also his daughter, and she didn't share her private life with him. He never asked her about it. They talked about their work, about music.

The house in West Asheville that Jenny was renting had an old lawn jockey out front that Jenny could have sold to the antique mall downtown for good money. Instead, she'd wanted to "take it out of circulation"—her expression, as if it were money—because it was a racist curio and she didn't think people should be collecting them. George had helped her knock it from its anchored perch in a block of cement.

They had carried the lawn jockey to George's car by the head and the feet, like it was a corpse. It was solid concrete and weighed about a hundred and fifty pounds. Part of its face had flaked away. It stayed in the trunk of George's car, putting an extra load on his rear shocks and springs, until he found someone who wanted it, a blues musician in Mississippi.

The last time he'd visited Jenny in Nashville—the only time—he'd been coming from the west and had stopped in Memphis to see Graceland. Moving through the rooms, he'd listened to an audio guide, in which Priscilla Presley spoke of Elvis as her beloved dead husband, even though they'd divorced long before he died. The mansion grounds featured a "meditation garden," where Elvis and his parents were buried. Beyond the meditation garden was a horse corral. While trying to experience the meditative effects of the fountain, George was distracted by the corral: one of the horses had an enormous erection. "Elvis loved horses, as everyone knows," Priscilla was saying, "and there is still one horse remaining at Graceland that he purchased and brought here and lovingly rode: Ebony's Double, a Tennessee walking horse that—"

It was the horse with the erection.

As he left Memphis, it was raining heavily. The roadways were flooded with water and debris. Wind was uprooting huge trees. It was too dangerous to keep going. He'd pulled off in a tiny town near the Kentucky border, one bar, one motel. The motel had been full.

He went to the bar. He met a woman there who had a tough sexiness and made a good drinking partner. He told her the motel was full, and she said he could sleep at her place, an apartment down the street above a furniture store. He was due at Jenny's, but it was raining, and he was following the script of chance, as he often did.

He and the woman had not even kissed—he didn't know if they were going to, he never made assumptions about women, and this sometimes got him in trouble—when she asked him to burn her with her cigarette, which she held out to him.

He told her there'd been a misunderstanding.

He slept in his car that night, the wind angrily rocking it on its springs.

Later, he regretted having been abrupt with the woman; she had tried to backpedal the request. He'd left anyway.

I ain't the one.

That was five years ago. That same night, in that little bar, he'd danced with a much older woman. She was seventy, she told him, to provoke his shock and his compliments. From the neck down, in the very tight pants and high heels she had on, she had the body of a twenty-year-old.

George remembered the song they danced to. It was "Love (Between a Boy and Girl) Can Be So Wonderful," by the Temprees. The Temprees' lead singer had a falsetto that was like velvety crushed ice. The voice was so beautiful that tears had run down George's face as he danced with this old woman in her tight pants and high heels.



"And, when the DNA test results arrived, the woman realized her so-called 'little terrier mix' had been part German shepherd all along."
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

He didn't know who had written the song. But the song wasn't the thing. It was how the Temprees sang it. A good songwriter, and George had certainly thought about the craft of it, was like a good screenwriter. You had to leave enough room for the real genius to come in and do the work: the singer of the song, the director of the film. You were just setting up furniture. Setting up pins. Creating possibility. That's all. The magic of song lyrics had to do with their simplicity. There had to be space for the singer. And space for the two people on a dance floor in a one-bar town.

Jenny was now more successful as a songwriter than George was. That was fine with him. He was proud of her. For himself, he never wanted anything out of reach. He never forced things. He went where doors opened, where he was invited, and that was it.

Except that he had not been invited to visit her in Nashville, had not let her know that he was coming. She had stopped returning George's calls after that last visit, five years ago. She did not answer his letters, or his e-mails. He tried not to take this personally. She was living in the present. Doing whatever she was doing. He was like that, too.

He figured he'd just show up and everything would be fine. It might not be fine, but he hoped it would be. She could take him to whatever was the

equivalent of Greek Diner in her world these days (and he could report that Greek Diner was nothing but a memory, a collapsed building with a wig of kudzu fitted over it). He could get to work helping her with some project, refinishing furniture or replacing ball joints. Putting lawn jockeys in trunks. That was how they visited. That was how they were.

Heading north from Asheville on secondary roads, George spotted someone on the side of the road up ahead, a guy with his backpack on the ground next to him.

Someone hiking the Appalachian Trail, George assumed. They always needed a lift into town to buy provisions.

George pulled over.

The kid scrambled up eagerly and hitched his backpack over one shoulder, thanking George profusely.

That was probably part of why he gave people rides. How grateful they were in a world where almost no one would stop to help a stranger. Today, he also wanted to replace his memory of the old guy who had sacrificed his leg to happy hour, and what was more wholesome than a backpacker?

The backpacker was in his twenties, with a scraggly beard and tattoos on his legs, his skin browned from exposure, not leisure. He told George that he was from Alabama and had been in the military. Now he worked part of the year restoring power after hurricanes and major storms, to save up for hiking season.

“I’m the guy up there in the bucket. A lot of people can’t do the heights. Doesn’t bother me.”

He’d already completed the Pacific Crest Trail and the Continental Divide. When he finished the Appalachian Trail, he’d be a Triple Crown.

George asked him how his hike was going.

The kid acted as though this question were mysteriously insightful, but there was no more obvious question to ask.

“It’s just such a trip you’d ask me that,” he said. “Because at the moment I’m facing some serious challenges with my feet. My heels are splitting open. I have to get some kind of medicine up here at a pharmacy.”

He told George that sometimes he hated hiking. That he never looked around him and felt the wonder of nature, because there wasn’t time for that at the pace he needed to keep in order to hit his daily mileage goals. He was often completing a summit at 8 *a.m.* that regular hikers would structure their whole day around. And after that summit he might have two or even three more ahead of him before dark. And sometimes he kept hiking after dark, until he could see almost nothing. He slept in his clothes, on the side of the trail.

George asked if he ever hiked with other people.

“Nobody out there can keep up with me,” he said. “I’m solo.”

George wished him the best of luck, hoped his feet healed.

He dropped the kid at a grocery store in the nearest town, then went to a diner down the street. There were three solitary young men spread out along the counter eating their lunch. They each looked identical to George’s passenger—tanned, with scraggly beards, tattoos arrayed on their legs at random angles like luggage stickers, their dusty backpacks behind them, against a wall.

On his way out of that town, George passed a fenced-in lot that was filled with old restaurant signs, one leaning against the next, like soldiers sleeping standing up. He slowed, curious. They were all from the same franchise—Shoney’s. There were scores of them. Where the lights would have been screwed into each sign in a series of holes, like a pegboard, were rust-caked circles.

The magic of a thing you’d normally see only from a distance disappears when you see it up close. But a new magic takes its place.

He’d travelled through Illinois with Jenny one winter, and the snow had been piled up so high that when they stopped to get gas at a Union 76 the

trademark orange ball was low and huge above a berm that a plow had made. It had looked like some foreign moon barely floating above the snowbank. Jenny was seven or eight then. He was taking her for a short visit to see his parents. They had scrambled onto the snowbank, and he had held her up to touch the big orange ball.

She probably would claim not to remember that now. Her story of her childhood didn't highlight such moments.

He'd once given a ride to a photographer—he later figured out that the guy was famous—who took pictures of stuff like the old restaurant signs. The forlorn and forgotten. The casually striking.

George had picked that guy up in eastern Arkansas. It wasn't clear why he was hitchhiking. He wore beautiful clothes and orated like a gentleman with fine manners and proper schooling. He had shown George a brochure of a museum show—his own, he said—featuring a photograph of a woman in a coat with a fur collar. She was in profile and it was hard to see her face, but George understood that she was beautiful. Beautiful and long-suffering.

“The point is not *her*,” the photographer said, as if reading George's mind. “The point is these stations of depth in the signs behind her, one, two, three: from Esso to Old Crow to Bourbon Supreme. Get it? And then the car, a detail, a part of something whole and unseen.”

In the foreground was a blue wedge of a trunk lid. George knew from the elongated chromed tail-light, the way the housing of the light was part of the tail fin, that the car was a Cadillac, probably an Eldorado. There was no need to point this out. He and this man, his passenger, were of the same generation. They were men from a world furnished with the same stuff—cars and attitudes and Old Crow. Long-suffering women.

The woman in the image was the man's wife, George assumed. Just from how the picture was composed and the way he'd said “*her*.” *The point is not her.*

George had been married three times. He and his first wife, Jenny's mom, had planned to inhabit the world together, a small world shaped by small-

town ideas. He was nineteen and goosed up on youth, and he thought that marriage was like having a girlfriend but without having to sneak around, without having to fuck quickly in the back seat of cars or in cornfields. (They'd grown up together in southern Illinois, outside Carbondale.)

Sure, it was stupid. But that was how he'd seen things at the time. They had moved to Chicago and got an apartment, and he'd taught rudimentary math and reading to women in a Job Corps program. The women were there by court mandate. They painted their fingernails in class. They went into an uproar when he said that California was a state like any other and not a foreign country. The women were unwilling to learn. Most of them had what their social workers would label "innumeracy." They ran circles around George, getting him to sign various forms for their court appearances and their parole officers. He quit before too long, but the truth was he took a lot from those women, in terms of how they talked. What they talked about. They bent language like glassmakers, folding and molding it to custom uses. That was when he started taking notes, writing song lyrics, with the encouragement of Jenny's mother, who believed in him.

He wrote a bunch of songs and sold two. He went to Nashville to meet with music publishers. He got a little work, but, more important, he got an idea of what kind of person he wanted to be. George was staying in a bare-bones weekly-rate place. He went to clubs every night, caught glimpses of songwriting legends like Ray Price and Harlan Howard. It was 1974 and the director Robert Altman was in town, making the movie "Nashville." George and some younger musicians and songwriters more or less lived off the food they stole from the craft tables of Altman's film set. Jenny was six months old. He did not return home to her and her mother.

He saw Jenny sporadically, took her on a trip here or there, when she was old enough that she didn't need much minding. As a teen-ager, she stopped talking to him. She didn't give a reason. After her mother died, of cancer, she was more open to his company. Her mother had been "Mom." He was "George." If he had to describe the relationship, he would say it was more like two friends.

That photographer he'd picked up in eastern Arkansas had asked him to pull over every now and then, which was how George absorbed that the man had

a taste for the Atlantis-like quality of certain roadside scenes, of what had been and was no longer. A closed gas station. A boarded-up snack bar. A cinder-block building with faded script: “Watermelons, red meat, yellow meat.”

“You don’t see the yellow-meat watermelons much anymore,” the photographer said. “And no one calls it meat.”

He told George that he built stereo equipment as a hobby. The photography was not a hobby, he said. George said he wrote songs as his not-hobby. They talked about music a bit, and the man started describing technical aspects of tube amplifiers, which George could not follow. When the man saw that George was lost, he backed up, changed register.

“I met this guy who did everything single,” he told George. “I mean, he had one speaker connected to his stereo. He only listened to mono records. Rode a B.S.A. Gold Star, single cylinder. Lived alone. Everything was ‘one’!”

“You might say I’m like that also,” George said. “I mean the ‘one’ part.”

“You know what Pascal said.”

“I don’t,” George replied. He never had any hangups about his education, never felt that knowledge would make him look better or that he should pretend to have more of it than he did.

“A king alone, without distractions, is a man of misery.”

“So it’s fine to be alone,” George said, summarizing what he took from this aphorism. “So long as you have your distractions.”

The man said that sounded about right.

When he’d arrived at Jenny’s place in Nashville, five years earlier, after the awkward confrontation at the woman’s apartment and sleeping in his car, he’d been a day late. He explained that he’d been delayed because of the storm. He himself never cared if people were late, even several days late. He worked with musicians. They lived on their own time. He figured Jenny was the same. He told her about the old woman in her tight pants at the bar,

because it was a funny story. And about the young woman who'd kicked him out when he said he didn't want to burn her with a cigarette, because it was a strange story. (She hadn't kicked him out so bluntly—it was more like she'd ruined the hospitality—but he was simplifying for Jenny.)

He thought Jenny would enjoy his reports from the road. But Jenny said she didn't want to hear about it. "I don't need this," she said. "It's bullshit. I try to let you into my life. Which is something you haven't earned. And I'm sitting here waiting for you all night while you're apparently at some dive bar dancing with strangers."

"I've done a lot worse things with strangers than *dance*," George said, and smiled, hoping he could get her to lighten up. He and Jenny, they were cut from the same cloth. The two of them were ramblers and chroniclers. People who tried to condense things—complicated and painful things—into verse and chorus. Something like that. But Jenny did not laugh.

Instead, she went to the kitchen and took a hammer from a drawer. She walked outside and swung it into George's windshield, which fractured where she'd hit it, in a large radiating web on the passenger side. She certainly knew how to use a hammer.

"That won't even hurt you," she said. "Because you don't give a shit. About anything."

He knew to stay quiet. She went back in. He followed. They sat down and she started talking. She told him that for years she'd wondered when he would decide to get to know her, but that moment had never arrived. She started talking about her childhood. Her mother had worked full time as a secretary at a wholesale farm-equipment supplier to support them. This was in Carbondale, where her mother had returned after Chicago, when Jenny was still a baby. At sixteen, Jenny got a weekend job with the local utility. She rode in a van with a crew. She was the only girl. She was already a tomboy by that point. One afternoon, the crew decided to make her into a proper girl, to show her that she was one.

When she started going into the specifics of what had happened, George discovered that he could not listen. Could not hear it. He stood up. Of course

leaving wasn't the right thing to do. But he had to.

"See? See?" she screamed after him. "I knew it. You have your stories, and I have mine. I don't want to hear your stories, just like you don't want to hear mine."

He left her apartment and drove that stupid car with its partially fractured windshield all the way to Austin. That was their last interaction. Back at home, he could have taped the windshield, to be cheap, and to preserve the damage as a kind of stubborn penance, but he eventually had it replaced.

George meandered from western North Carolina into Tennessee. He picked up no more strangers after the amputee and the young hiker. He ate barbecue alone.

He thought about calling Jenny to let her know that he was coming. But if he did she might say, Don't come.

He arrived in Nashville at 10 P.M. He knocked on the door of Jenny's house. He heard a baby crying. He felt confused. Was this the right place? He was sure that it was. His memories of this street, the dead grass and the little walkway leading to a brick triplex, Jenny's the only door that faced the front, and of what had happened between him and Jenny were vivid, although he had tried to forget them.

A woman answered, holding a newborn. A man stood behind her. They showed no reaction when he said Jenny's name.

"We've been here three years," they said, "and we don't know your friend."

George said, "It's my daughter," and they looked at him and he felt their judgment.

He went to a bar where people were drunk and rowdy and he remained separate and alien. He slept at a motel and the next morning drove around Nashville with a sense of vertigo. As if his daughter were lost out there. But she was not lost. She was a forty-year-old woman and she was living her life. She could be anywhere.

He went to a few studios in Music Row where people might know his daughter. No one had heard from her. Some of these people knew him, at least vaguely, knew his work as a songwriter. George began to get the feeling that Jenny had instructed them not to tell him anything.

He left Nashville. He drove along the border with Kentucky, travelling west. It was the same route he'd taken when he'd stopped in that one-bar town to shelter from the storm, but in the opposite direction. He went back to that town. Retracing his steps was a habit of his, a way to navigate his life.

This time, there was vacancy in the only motel. He paid for a room. It was late afternoon. He walked down the street to the bar and ordered a beer. As he ordered, he wanted to ask the bartender about the young woman he'd met there. He remembered her name—Merle—because it was unusual. But he hesitated, thinking the bartender might know about Merle's tastes. She'd probably asked every guy in the bar to burn her with cigarettes. But then he went ahead.

“Does Merle still come in here?”

“You don't know?” the bartender asked, as he opened George's beer bottle.

“No.”

The bartender said that Merle was dead. She'd had an argument with a boyfriend and he'd shot her. That man was in prison now.

There were others at the bar. The older woman with the young body, she was among them. She was seventy-five now. She walked up to George and asked him to dance, but he was still absorbing the news about Merle.

He wasn't in the mood to dance, he told her. She looked at him with pity.

“Do you remember me?” George asked her, suddenly feeling that this mattered.

“Why would I remember you?” the old woman said with disdain.

“Because I danced with you last time. I was in this bar five years ago.”

“Five years ago! Honey, I’m here almost every night. Five years ago! I can’t even tell you who I danced with *yesterday*.” She laughed, pleased with herself, and motored off to dance alone, her drink in her hand, swivelling her knees back and forth to the rhythm of the song that had just come on. She was wearing white pedal pushers and had the tanned legs of a college tennis champion.

The bartender came out from behind the bar and boogied with the old woman. He danced until his regulars started yelling at him to get back behind the bar.

George left.

It would be dark in a couple of hours. If he started now, he could make it to Memphis. He had already paid for the room in the little motel, but it was sixty dollars and it didn’t matter. He needed to keep moving.

He drove in a southwesterly direction. The dogwoods were in extravagant bloom. Great clotted white-branched specimens that glowed in the dusk, all along the Cumberland River.

He was in countryside that seemed to have more cemeteries than it did towns. More people dead than living. But wasn’t it like that everywhere, more dead than living? He pictured the face of the waitress from Greek Diner, her thick makeup. In his mental image of her, her eyes were closed as if she were lying in a casket.

As dusk transitioned to dark, the temperature dropped thirty degrees.

He put on AM radio to get a weather report. It turned out that he was driving into a freak storm.

Rain speckled his windshield. It surged, falling like a curtain over the road. He thought of the kid on his hike. He’d be under a rain poncho, pushing past wet branches and stepping in mud, going and going.

The rain lightened, and then turned to gravelly pellets of ice. It began to patter his windshield like the taps of someone trying to get his attention.

It was hailing, and as he slowed a little he spotted a person on the side of the road. Walking, in pants and a T-shirt, no jacket, with towering beech trees behind him. It was dark and thirty-one degrees on a remote highway, hail popping from the ground. As George passed, the man sent up an arm, waving at him to stop.

George didn't want to step on the brakes. The road was freezing and he knew he could slide. Instead, he let off the gas and slowed. By the time he came to a stop, he was several hundred yards up the road. The guy ran toward his car, soaking wet.

He was youngish, tall, and very thin. He was shivering as he approached the car, a baseball cap pulled down over his ears. George lowered the passenger-side window. "I'm going west," he offered, thinking he'd be noncommittal.

"That's good," the man said in a frail voice, his body trembling with cold.

It wasn't until they were back on the road, slush collecting in long sloppy piles along the wiper blades, that George sneaked a look at his passenger. He appeared undernourished in his baggy clothes and baseball cap, hunched in the seat. His upper arms were the same diameter as his wrists. He stared straight ahead, perfectly still, as if he needed to concentrate on the road in order to keep George's car moving along it.

"I'll turn the heat up," George said.

The man didn't respond.

George wasn't the type to push for conversation. Although he would have liked a little talk. To get his mind off Jenny, and the way the couple with the baby had looked at him as they absorbed that he didn't know where his daughter was.

A semitruck went past, noisy and slow, in the opposite direction, its headlights scouring the car's interior. In the harsh, bleached light, the passenger reached up and snatched off his baseball cap. A tumble of dark hair flopped over the man's thin shoulders and down his back. He shook his hair out—it went all the way to his waist—and turned toward George.

George realized that this person in his car was not a man. It was a woman. She grinned at George in a way he could not interpret, and he felt suddenly afraid.

The hail finally let up. He made mention of this to his hitchhiker. Now that he understood she was a woman alone in an area that was only dark woods, he wanted her to talk. To confirm that she was O.K.

“This is crazy weather for May,” he said.

She didn’t respond.

“I’m going to Memphis,” he said. “I can let you out there. That all right?”

She nodded enthusiastically, like a mime accentuating emotion to compensate for her muteness.

“You kind of appeared out of nowhere,” he said.

Her mouth quaked into that same smile from before, almost maniacal.

“Nowhere,” she said, as if impressed by the word, and she started to laugh, an eruption of giggles.

George stared ahead. He reminded himself how frail she looked. There was nothing to be afraid of, he told himself.

“Have you eaten?” he asked. “We could stop and get something.”

“I can’t remember,” she said. “No, I had a hamburger. But I don’t know when that was. It could have been a week ago.” She giggled in a machinelike way that had no joy in it.

He said they could stop if they found something up ahead.

He hadn’t eaten, either. And it would be a break from having to be alone with her in his car.

Thirty minutes later, there was a restaurant on the side of the road. A country place with a few customers, brightly lit. George pulled over.

Seated across from her, he could see that she had smears of dirt or soot on her face, which she partly hid behind her long, straight brown hair. She had deep scratches on her arms. He did not like the way the scratches looked, and he let himself wish he could get rid of her.

He asked where she'd come from, and she said, "I've been in a few places. Some different places."

He tried to press her.

"I was walking," she said. "Then you pulled over."

"Where are you trying to go?" he asked.

"You can take me to Memphis," she said. "That's where you said you're going."

"But where will you go from there?"

"That depends," she said.

"Where's home for you?" George didn't like that this was becoming an interrogation, he the interrogator.

She looked at the table, folding her bony hands one over the other, her fingernails lined with dirt.

"I'm in between places right now," she said. "I'm going to see some friends of mine. People who know me."

The waitress came. George ordered spaghetti and meatballs and a beer. He needed the beer.

The woman glanced at the menu with a worried look. She seemed unable to parse it.

“Spaghetti and beer,” she said.

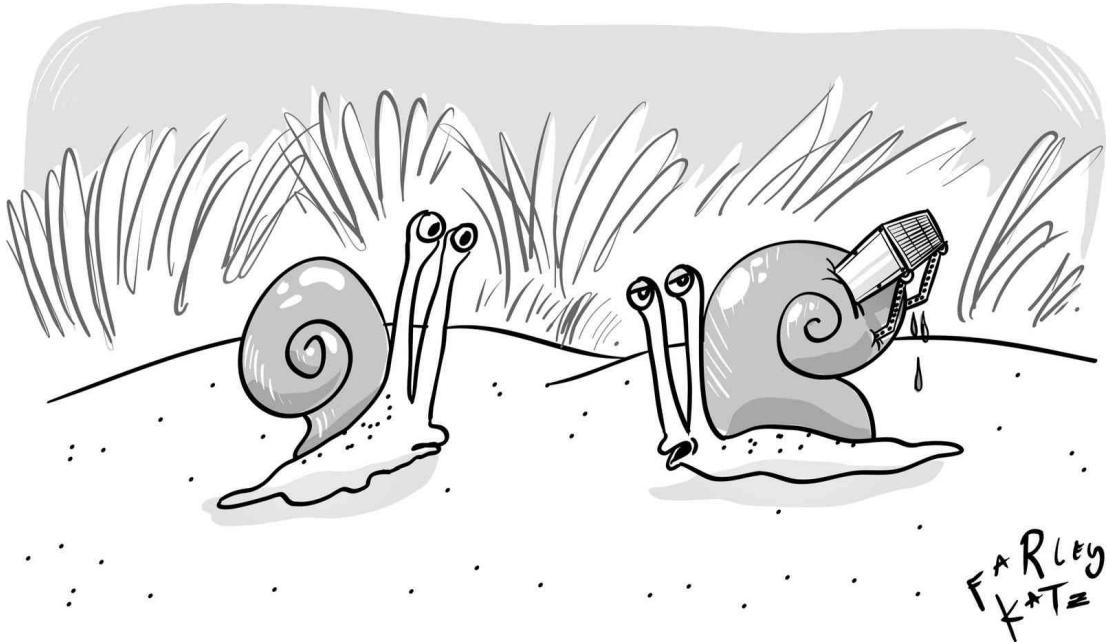
“You want the same as him, hon?”

She nodded adamantly in her mime style.

She ate like an animal. George tried not to stare. She picked up each meatball like it was an apple, and took quick bites, then set it back on the plate. She picked it up again and bared her teeth and bit at it as if she were punishing it. Death by a thousand bites.

She sipped at the beer, made a face of displeasure, and then she dumped salt into it from a shaker on the table, which agitated the beer, sent it foaming up in its glass. She picked up the foaming beer and guzzled, leaving a white mustache above her mouth. She stared at George, with beer and spaghetti sauce on her face.

They were back in the car. It had stopped sleeting. After two hours of driving, they arrived in Memphis. It was late, almost midnight.



“I can’t believe I went so long without A.C.”
Cartoon by Farley Katz

“Where should I let you off?” he asked.

“Anywhere is fine,” she replied.

He took the business loop off the freeway and pulled up to an intersection to let her out.

“I’ll drop you here,” he said.

She got out. He said goodbye and wished her luck.

“Thanks,” she said, and walked off, her gait stiff and hurried, a half run. It was how she’d moved when he’d pulled over for her, when he’d thought she was a man.

He was planning to stay in a motel he knew, the Admiral Benbow, which was on the main drag, but it was apparently no longer. Closed down, its sign dark. There was a series of large chain hotels all in a row farther on. He chose one. Got a room, closed the curtains, locked the door.

The next morning, he woke to the sound of vacuuming in the room next to his. It was late. He had slept a long time. He made coffee in the little carafe in his room and let himself rouse slowly, flipping channels on the television.

Walking toward his car, he saw that the woman was there, waiting for him. A wave of panic went through him. He tried to calm it.

She must have searched every hotel lot on this boulevard.

She stood. “I’m ready,” she said.

He was caught off guard. He didn’t have a lie prepared.

“I’m going to visit some friends,” he said.

“O.K.,” she said. But she continued to stand there, next to his car, looking down, her skeleton arms folded over her chest.

He felt something in him give.

“They live in Arkansas,” he said.

This gave him some out, he felt. He was going all the way to Austin, but he could get rid of her sometime today in Arkansas, wherever he claimed he was going.

They set off. Again, she said almost nothing. The woman impulsively pressed Play on his car stereo. "Born to Be Wild" came on. It was his cassette of Steppenwolf. The woman reached and turned up the volume. They rode with "Born to Be Wild" blaring into the car. It was like at Graceland, with that horse: God, playing a joke. Born to be wild. He had a woman in his car he could not shake. He didn't know if she was mentally unstable or shell-shocked or had some other problem.

Over the course of the day, he tried a few more times to have normal interactions with her. When they stopped to get gas, she went into the women's room around the back of the gas station, and he contemplated starting the car and taking off before she returned. He could not bring himself to do it. She appeared from behind the gas station.

"I thought you were going to leave," she said.

That was the thing about crazy people. Everything goes out of whack except their ability to read other people's minds.

They crossed Arkansas, and George couldn't drum up the nerve to tell her that this was it. The fictitious friends came and went. They were in Texas now, headed toward Dallas.

"This is where I'm going," he said. "I can drop you off, O.K.?"

She nodded her mime's nod. As if, Yes. Dallas. Sure.

"Do you have money?" he asked her.

"I don't need money," she said. "I mean, I had some. I'll have some again. I find it when I need it."

He reached into his wallet and pulled out forty dollars, which was what he had.

“Here, take this.”

She looked at it on the seat.

“Please take it,” he said.

She picked up the bills.

They were now on one of those hideous eight-lane boulevards with car dealerships and chain restaurants. He pulled over near a gas station and a McDonald’s.

“Good luck with everything,” he said.

“O.K.,” she said. She thrust her hand out for him to shake. He paused, because he hadn’t expected it, and she retracted her hand and got out.

She walked away, with the same stiff brisk gait, the baseball cap, her hair down, in her baggy T-shirt and loose pants. She turned toward the McDonald’s and went rushing through its entrance as if it were the gateway of a predetermined journey she was on.

He saw that the forty dollars he had tried to give her was on the passenger-side floor.

He picked up the bills and got out. Went into the McDonald’s, thinking he’d give her the money.

He didn’t see her inside. He walked up to the counter.

“Did you see a woman with long hair come in here just now, tall and thin, with a baseball cap?” he asked the cashier.

“I think I saw who you mean,” the cashier said. “She left.”

“But I didn’t see her come out.”

“She went out the other door,” the cashier said. “Customers aren’t supposed to use that. It’s an emergency exit.”

He walked back outside and circled the McDonald's on foot. He didn't see the woman. He watched cars blow past on this ugly boulevard. A man in an overcoat carefully picked trash from the garbage can outside the McDonald's. Why were these hobo types always in overcoats? S.U.V.s idled at the drive-through window. A man in a parked car lowered his window and offered his leftovers to the man sorting trash. The man rushed over, coattails flapping, to receive the offering. "God bless!" he said.

Night was coming on. The boulevard didn't have sidewalks. It wasn't for people on foot. George realized that he could not guess what age the woman was. Maybe thirty. Maybe older.

He asked the man in the overcoat if he'd seen a woman with long hair wandering around.

"She got out of your car," the man said.

"That's right," George said.

"I think she went that way." He pointed up the boulevard.

"Are you sure?" George asked, aware that he might sound desperate.

At a huge intersection, up where the man had pointed, was an AutoZone. George went in and asked about the woman, if anyone had seen her. The other businesses here were closed for the night. The clerk said he hadn't seen anyone who fit that description.

It was dark now, the high sodium lamps on the boulevard glowing orange, blotting out the sky, and making the nimbus from their artificial light feel like a world, but a mean and impersonal one. A truck missing its muffler went tearing past. George walked back to his car.

Maybe she'll be there, he thought. Like at the motel in Memphis. Waiting, like a dog. Some cats are like that, too. He'd once had a cat, a petite black thing that looked like a kitten though it was grown, that would follow him all around, even two blocks down to his coffee shop in Austin, wait outside as he ordered, and saunter home at some distance, but never too much distance, then flop down on his stoop.

The woman was not at his car.

He went into the McDonald's a second time.

"Did she come back in here?" he asked the cashier.

"Who?"

"The woman I was asking about earlier. With the long hair."

"Oh. No. I don't think so."

He was suddenly envious of that cashier, who wasn't looking for someone. Who was just doing her job, without having to manage a feeling of loss or doubt.

He got into his car and turned onto the boulevard, driving slowly, keeping his eyes on the parking lots of the businesses he passed. He went about a mile, then turned around to check the other side of the boulevard.

He was circling the lot of a Dollar General when he thought he saw her. He pulled over, feeling a rush of adrenaline. But the figure who looked like her, tall and thin, was a woman with two children. They got into their car and drove off.

People were parking in order to shop at Dollar General. Getting out of their cars and walking toward the entrance. Others were leaving Dollar General, putting grocery bags in hatchbacks and driving away. He caught snippets of conversations. People doing normal things, being family members, making purchases. He was feeling the same envy he'd had for the cashier at McDonald's. These people didn't know what he was dealing with.

He tried to think of where to look next. He pulled out of the lot.

He drove in the right lane with his blinker on, going slow, in case he spotted her. People honked at him. He didn't care. Go around me, he thought at them. He continued on, driving five miles an hour, alert to every person on foot, ready to stop. ♦

By Michael Schulman

By Vinson Cunningham

By [Ling Ma](#)

1.

In my first years in the U.S., my parents take me to the library to encourage my learning of English. With my mother's guidance, I check out ten, fifteen books every weekend. Though I gravitate toward picture books, my mother pushes me to start reading more advanced chapter books. "Just the words themselves should be enough," she says. "If you can't think up the image on your own, then that's a failure of imagination."

This is how I come across "Iron & Silk," recommended by a librarian as an adult book that's easy to read. It's a memoir by Mark Salzman, a wushu enthusiast who was among the first wave of Americans accepted into China in the early nineteen-eighties. He travelled to Changsha and taught English at the Hunan Medical College.

Salzman recounts how, during one lesson, he asked the students to read aloud their essays on the topic of "My Happiest Moment." The class consisted of middle-aged teachers brushing up on English. The last to read was Teacher Zhu, who wrote about attending a banquet dinner in Beijing years before. "First we ate cold dishes," he read, "such as marinated pig stomach and sea slugs. Then we had steamed fish, then at last the duck arrived! The skin was brown and crisp and shiny, in my mouth it was like clouds disappearing." He recounted other courses of the Peking-duck dinner: the duck skin in pancakes with sauce and scallions, the meat with vegetables, the duck-bone soup and fruits.

[Ling Ma on writers and their parents](#)

At the end of his reading, Teacher Zhu set down his essay and confessed to Salzman that he had never experienced this. It's someone else's memory, he said. "My wife went to Beijing and had this duck. But she often tells me about it again and again, and I think, even though I was not there, it is my happiest moment."

I've never had Peking duck, but it was once a near-iconographic image. In a past life in Fuzhou, it represented some reality other than the one of daily

congee and pickled turnips, cabbage and boiled-rib soup. On TV in the evenings, I saw it in soap operas set among the wealthy, in commercials filmed in Hong Kong. After I moved to the U.S., however, I forgot about it. Flipping through picture books, sometimes I conflate Peking duck with similar-looking things: a turkey in a story about the origins of Thanksgiving, the roast chicken that's part of a hallucinatory dinner that appears to the little match girl, foods she's fantasized about but never tasted.

2.

It's winter when I move to the U.S., where my parents have been living for the past few years. In the airport after we deplane, a woman lunges at me with so much excitement that I draw back toward my grandfather, my escort on the trip. The sliding doors close between us just as I recognize her, faintly, as my mother. I'm seven, and have not had a mother for two years. But I have had a grandma, whose hands, ruddy fingers inlaid with gold and jade rings, patted me reassuringly before I fell asleep at night. Next to her warm, snoring body, I drowsed on a bed overlaid with bamboo mats that kept us cool in the subtropical heat. When it got even hotter, my grandma hung bedsheets all across the concrete balcony to block out the sun.

It's December, possibly, off the top of my memory, when I arrive. There are sensations that exist for me only in English, many associated with winter, that I experience for the first time when I move to Utah. There is the sensation of walking underneath pine trees, of wearing a too big puffy coat, of destroying the clean surface of snow after first snowfall, of buying discounted items in a white-tiled Osco Drug redolent of harsh detergents, the scent of which I will always associate with being poor; overcompensatory cleanliness. The sensation of my mother dragging a wet towel across my face to wipe off dried congee, and the sensation of wet skin drying in the stiff, cold air outside. We live in a one-bedroom apartment that is very tidy, but sometimes ants come in through the bathroom. I sleep in the living room, where, at night, I still hear my grandma's phantom snores.

In someone else's home, a two-story mansion nestled in the mountains outside Salt Lake, a VHS cassette of "Bambi" plays on the TV while actual

deer come through the back yard, pulling at the garden foliage with their teeth, and we are separated from them only by a sliding glass door.

My mother points outside. *Deer. Tree. Teeth. Eats.*

I repeat the words, then put them in sentence order: *Deer eats tree with teeth.*

The English lessons take place inside the mansion, where my mother is employed as a nanny to a toddler named Brandon. The home, which has a lobby-like foyer and an elevator, is imposing enough that not even Mormon missionaries bother us. Either that, or it's too isolated from anywhere else to be worth the trek. When I first arrive in the U.S., my mother takes me with her to work every day, my father driving us half an hour outside the city before swinging back to campus to resume his grad studies. At the mansion, our days are geared around my learning English. We watch "Sesame Street," though it's too babyish for me even then, so I can learn the alphabet. I keep a daily journal and write three to five sentences in English every day.

When her charge is napping, my mother goes through E.S.L. workbooks with me at the kitchen table, books she's found at school-supply stores. One question set asks you to come up with the first letters of similar-sounding words. *Mouse, house, blouse. Pill and hill. Bell and knell. Pail and . . .* She gives me hints. "The letter you feel in your nose," she says, and I understand that she is talking about "n." *Nail. Pail and nail.*

When a salesman comes to the door, he has a hard time understanding my mother. She tells him to come back later, when the owners are home, and he takes this as an invitation to come inside, to demonstrate his cleaning sprays. Peering over the railing, I think maybe he's willfully misunderstanding her, hoping it will result in a sale. My mother, noticing that I am spying, tells me to go into the other room.

I'm not sure how my mother teaches me English, when her facility with the language is hesitant and halting. Unlike my father, she didn't learn English in China, and even after living in the States for years she is not fluent or even proficient. Cashiers at grocery stores stare at her blankly, the Mormon missionaries who show up at our apartment give up trying to convert us, and

the sellers at yard sales shake their heads and over-enunciate, saying loudly, “I can’t understand you.” Despite this, her imperfect, broken English serves as a scaffolding for my own.

The winter that I touch snow for the first time, I also taste ice cream. In the kitchen, we review the fridge and pantry foods in English. My mother names every item, foods I’ve never heard of: Minute Maid orange-juice concentrate, Yoplait strawberry-banana yogurt, Farley’s Dinosaurs Fruit Snacks, Lay’s potato chips, Surfer Cooler Capri Sun, Lunchables. I repeat each word after her. They hover in a vacuum, with no Chinese correlation. And we’re not allowed to eat anything, so I can’t associate word with taste.

There is, however, *bing ji ling*, which up until this point I have seen only on TV. My mother sneaks me some from a rectangular paper carton. Breyers French Vanilla. It’s denser and sweeter than I expected, eggy in flavor, fuzzy with freezer burn. To my surprise, I don’t like it at all and feel nauseated by its smell. But I have to like it, because I saw ice cream on TV back home, where all my friends and I fantasized about how wonderful it must taste.

Ice cream is my favorite food. I write these words in the journal my mother gives me to record my first days in the U.S. English is just a play language to me, the words tethered to their meanings by the loosest, most tenuous connections. So it’s easy to lie. I tell the truth in Chinese, I make up stories in English. I don’t take it that seriously. When I’m finally enrolled in first grade, I tell classmates that I live in a house with an elevator, with deer in the back yard. It is the language in which I have nothing to lose, even if they don’t believe a thing I say.

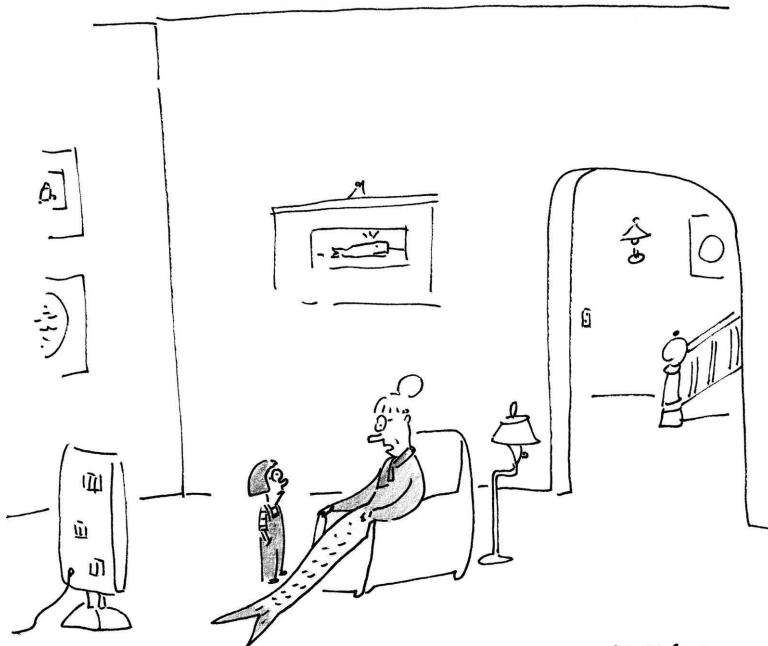
3.

During one semester of my M.F.A. program, we begin every workshop with a discussion of a piece from “The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis.” That week’s piece is called “Happiest Moment.” The workshop, which takes place every Thursday evening, is held in a building typically reserved for the hotel-management program. The instructor reads aloud the entirety of the story:

If you ask her what is a favorite story she has written, she will hesitate for a long time and then say it may be this story that she read in a book once: an English-language teacher in China asked his Chinese student to say what was the happiest moment in his life. The student hesitated for a long time. At last he smiled with embarrassment and said that his wife had once gone to Beijing and eaten duck there, and she often told him about it, and he would have to say the happiest moment of his life was her trip, and the eating of the duck.

The instructor looks at the class, eight students scattered around a conference table in a fluorescently lit seminar room. “So, what do we think?”

We talk about the way the story frames and reframes an anecdote. Thom, whom everyone calls “the plot Nazi,” likens this device to a game of telephone, where the story is transmitted from person to person. “The wife tells her husband the story about eating Peking duck, the husband shares the story with the teacher, laying claim to it as his own happiness, the teacher writes a book incorporating this story. And then, in this piece, the writer describes what she read in a book, which is recounted by the narrator. It’s being reframed once again.”



“Grandma used to sit on a rock all day luring sailors to their deaths, but now I like just watching TV.”
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

We talk about the reframing and what we think the writer is trying to achieve. I tell them about “Iron & Silk,” which contains the same anecdote. “The Lydia Davis story doesn’t give credit to the Salzman memoir, but I can’t imagine that it *isn’t* a reference to that book.”

Matthew, the only other Asian student in our program, has read the book, too. He says, “This idea of framing and reframing the same anecdote raises a question: Can the writer, who’s retelling another’s story, really assume authorship? And, going along those lines, can Mark Salzman assume authorship for his student’s story?”

We kick this ball around for a bit—discussing the difference between appropriating someone’s story and making it new through retelling—without drawing much of a conclusion. At some point, Allie, the star student, declares, “By writing the story, the writer naturally lays claim to it.” To which Matthew responds, “But we know that’s just an excuse. Authorial license never justifies appropriation.”

In the ensuing silence, the instructor smiles. “Well, these are all great points,” she says smoothly. “Since we’re running out of time, we need to get started with workshop.” She turns to me. “Let’s begin with your story.”

4.

My workshop story follows a Chinese immigrant nanny through the span of a Friday, when she brings her young daughter to the mansion where she is employed. The piece is written from the nanny’s perspective, as she moves through a seemingly ordinary workday, which is interrupted by the arrival of a door-to-door salesman, who persistently tries to sell her cleaning products. The day culminates in her losing her job. Her daughter observes the proceedings.

“Well,” the instructor says brightly. “This is a very interesting story. Let’s open up discussion. Any thoughts?”

Thom always speaks first. “The way English is rendered in this piece, it’s kind of artificial. I mean, the first-person narration reads too smoothly and is too well articulated for a protagonist who’s not fluent in English.”

Others in workshop echo some of Thom's sentiments about the inherent awkwardness of rendering the experiences of such a character in English, but there's no consensus on how to solve this issue. Someone suggests that it could be written in Chinglish instead, but another student counters that this would play into stereotypes. "Using Chinglish would exaggerate the character's inarticulateness, and flatten her into an immigrant trope."

From the far end of the conference table, Matthew clears his throat. Somehow, I've been waiting for his response. "Whether the story is written in English or Chinglish," he says deliberately, "it's just a tired Asian American subject, these stories about immigrant hardships and, like, intergenerational woes."

I can't look at Matthew. His thesis is a Western novel that, in his words, interrogates white masculinity. The few times we've spoken outside class, he's talked mostly about his summers in Taiwan, which he spends playing basketball with his cousins. He continues, "It also doesn't help that this is a stereotypical representation of a female Chinese immigrant."

There is an uncomfortable silence. The instructor clears her throat. She says, "For those of us who may not be familiar, can you expand on this stereotype, Matthew?"

I look at him.

"Yeah," he says. "Like, when the salesman invites himself inside, she just goes along with it. She's very passive. It fits into representations of these meek, submissive women we see all the time. It's unrealistic." He doubles down. "It's a kind of Asian *minstrelsy*."

When no one wants to speak, Thom does. "Is this story autobiographical?"

"The writer isn't allowed to answer during workshop," Allie points out.

There is another lull in the room.

"Well, I found the story so interesting," the instructor interjects, forced cheer in her voice. "It shows how differences in cultural assimilation, in English fluency, can alienate this immigrant mother and daughter from each other."

Her voice rises. “And then there are these *startling* moments of tenderness . . .”

5.

My mother drinks only water in restaurants; any other drink order is an unnecessary expenditure. Because she is my mother, I do the same and order water, even though she’s long ago given up on lecturing me about frugality. A few weeks before my book release, I take her out to a fancy Chinese restaurant, a half-empty banquet hall with roast ducks hanging in the front window. The restaurant is famed for its Peking duck, which is ranked the second best in the world, according to a travel magazine.

When the waiter comes, I order for us in English, the usual dishes. “So, we’ll get B16, C7, and F22. To start, we’d like A5 and A11.”

My mother sets her menu down, looks at me. “Is that how you order? Like a computer.”

“O.K., sounds good.” The waiter, a Chinese teen-ager in Air Force 1s, also answers in English. “I’ll get those appetizers out first.”

Before the dishes arrive, I give her an advance copy of my book, a story collection with a vaguely Chinese cover image of persimmons in a Ming-dynasty bowl. “It comes out next month.”

“So this is the final copy? I’ll show your father when I get home.” She studies it skeptically, as if it were a lottery ticket that will never yield, frowning at the marketing copy on the jacket flap. “Haven’t these stories been published already?”

“Some have. They’re just all collected in one book.”

“People can just read them for free somewhere else?”

“Have you read any of them already?”

“I looked at the story about the nanny you sent me.” She slides the book into her purse. “So, where do you get your ideas?” She asks this in a lightly mocking tone, pretending to be an interviewer.

“For the nanny story? Well, it’s obviously based on your job in Salt Lake.”

Though we start off speaking English, all conversations with my mother eventually move toward Mandarin, the language in which she is the most agile, firing off insults and embedding her observations with acid subtext. Though I am no longer fluent in Mandarin, I try to accommodate. Her English is awkward and mangled, and it’s not easy to move through the world shielded from the unkindness of others by only their thin veneer of liberal respectability.

The teen-age waiter returns with the appetizers and the main dishes together, setting down mock-chicken bean curd, lotus root, garlic pea shoots, mapo tofu, and salt-and-pepper smelt sprinkled with tiny diced jalapeños. It all comes out so quickly that I wonder about the quality. Topping off our water, he asks, “Is there anything else I can get you?”

Not bothering to switch back to English, my mother asks for a little side dish of chili bamboo.

“I’m sorry, what?” he says.

“A2,” I tell him, and he rushes away. My mother helps herself delicately to a bite of pea shoots, then the smelt. “Do you think the food is good here?” I ask her.

“I like simple food,” she says, neither confirming nor denying. Maybe it was ridiculous to come to a restaurant famed for its Peking duck and just order regular dishes. Neither of us likes duck though, with its fatty skin. She pretends to correct herself. “No, no, that’s wrong. What I *should* say is: I love it, honey! This is the best.”

“But you would never say that.”

She smiles her Cheshire-cat grin. “But I don’t want to be like the usual Chinese mother, someone who is never satisfied, yells at her children, and

keeps saying *ai-yah* all the time.”

Now I understand. “Do you think it’s you in these stories?”

“There are so many mothers in your stories, what am I supposed to think?” My mother is suddenly indignant. “But they’re all so miserable. Does there have to be so much suffering?”

I look down at my plate, a mound of rice covered with gushy mapo. “Well, they’re not all about you. I wasn’t trying to capture your experience.”

“You weren’t trying to capture my experience,” she repeats, as if to herself. “Then why did you write them?”

I’m surprised by this question. “Well, the nanny story was more based on you, compared with the others. It was about what happened to us when you worked as a nanny. I wanted to show how terrible—”

“But how would you even know what happened? It happened to *me*, not to us. You were too young to understand. And you weren’t in the room. I made sure of that.”

“I was in the hall, listening. And you told me when I was older. The details were very disturbing.”

My mother is smiling incongruously. “But, see, you’re not tough. You need to be tough. He was just a silly man. You made him seem almost dangerous.”

“He was dangerous, very unpredictable. He was nice one moment, then scary the next. The things he said to you, they were very hurtful.”

She sighs a little. “Look, we’re not like Americans. We don’t need to talk about everything that gives us a negative feeling. I wouldn’t move forward if I just kept thinking about it. But I do move forward. I set a good example for you. And you had a great childhood.”

I take a sip of water. We’ve been over this before. There’s no point in setting the record straight for the millionth time about my childhood, the school

bullying. The worst part was how my mother used to encourage me to lie to her, to pretend how great things were. She would phrase her questions like “You’re popular at school, right?” or “You have a lot of friends, right?,” priming me to answer the way she wanted. She couldn’t not have known that I was lying, but she wanted to bathe in the lies. She needed to believe that I was thriving in the U.S., that my happiness came at the cost of hers, rather than acknowledge the fact that we were both miserable in this country together.

Instead of arguing this time, I simply say, “My therapist says that it is always better to acknowledge reality.”

She flinches at my mention of therapy, which, predictably, closes the conversation. As we pick at our food in silence, the TV in the background plays a compilation reel of food-show segments featuring the restaurant. In one clip, the host tells the audience that Peking duck goes as far back as the fourteenth century. He looks at the viewer, breaking the fourth wall. “So remember, when you take a bite of that mouthwatering barbecue, you’re eating a piece of history.”

The waiter comes back. “How is everything?”

“Great. I think we’re actually going to get the rest of this boxed up,” I tell him.

My mother turns to him. In Mandarin, she gives elaborate instructions on how she wants the leftovers wrapped so that I can take them home.

He waits for her to finish, then smiles in embarrassment. “I’m sorry, I don’t speak Chinese.”

6.

I am making lunch for the children when the doorbell rings. Because the house is in a remote area outside Salt Lake, it’s unusual that we receive guests. Sometimes I ignore the doorbell, the same way I ignore phone calls to the house. Let people go to the answering machine or leave a note. They’re not here to talk to me.

But today I feel restless. I take the elevator down to the large foyer, where I open the door.



"Based on the feedback from advisers whom I haven't beheaded, all of my ideas are great."
Cartoon by Tom Toro

"Good afternoon!" It's a man carrying a clipboard and a caddy of cleaning products. "I just have one question. How clean would you say your home is?" He holds up the cleaning spray, and informs me that I can take it today for a one-week trial, and if I like it there's an installment plan for the entire set. . . . His enthusiasm makes him speak very quickly and I can't catch everything. "Just try it for a week! And then I can come back in seven days to see what you think."

In his jeans and plaid shirt, he doesn't look like a salesman. His long, dirty-blond hair and goatee aren't well groomed, either. He's looking at me, then past me, at the gleaming, tiled foyer, which amplifies our voices, the elevator leading up to the second floor, the upstairs railing. He's taking everything in.

"No, thank you. I'm not the owner." I smile politely. He hesitates. "So are you the cleaning lady?"

"I work here. I don't clean." I don't feel the need to specify that I'm the nanny, looking after two children, my daughter and a boy named Brandon.

“You come back later. The owners come home. Maybe they buy.”

“Oh, O.K.” After a pause, he resumes. “This product works for everyone, though. It can go on all surfaces. Let me show you.” He walks past me, into the foyer, and begins cleaning the wooden bench next to the elevator.

I worked for a cleaning company when I first came to the States. During the training, the manager told us trainees to crouch down when we were wiping floors with a rag. And then he looked at us, all these women cleaning on their hands and knees. Why would we not use mops and brooms? I’m not a dog, so I quit.

The man in front of me kneels to polish the legs of the bench, and soon he is on all fours. It’s strange that he doesn’t at least feel shame in this position, a position he voluntarily assumes. Maybe he wants me to feel sorry for him. “Very nice. It’s very good,” I tell him. “Maybe we buy later.”

He looks up. “They don’t sell this in stores, Ma’am!” When the elevator comes—did he press the button?—and opens its doors, he walks inside, spraying down the metal handrail, the two-button panel. Unsure of what to do, I step inside with him. There is dirt under his nails, and his clothes carry the smell of gasoline, making me think of farming equipment. The elevator feels very small with two people. He asks, “What are you up to today?”

“It’s very busy day. I make lunch now.”

“Well, I could use some lunch, too.” He smiles at me. When the doors open, he steps out, marvelling at the rest of the home, its view of the valley and the mountains below. It’s good that my daughter is not within sight, is in another room. And Brandon, whom the man does not notice, is still sleeping on the sofa.

I follow him, a bit helplessly.

“I haven’t eaten all day.” He seats himself at the kitchen table, sliding my coupons off so they fall to the floor. It’s when he looks at me, a kind of leer on his face, that I finally realize the situation has become unusual. “So, what kind of Chinese food can you cook me?”

“I don’t cook Chinese food,” I say, somewhat formally.

“Come on, play along.” It is his first sign of impatience. “What about moo shu?”

“Mushrooms?” I know what he means.

“No, moo shu. It’s a dish. It’s listed on all those menus.”

“Oh. I don’t know.” I shake my head.

He is annoyed. “Come on, now. I’m not asking for the real thing. I’m asking for you to play along.”

“I don’t eat moo shu where I am from in China,” I say calmly, and that seems to placate him. Of the two of us, only I can be the expert on this. Before he gets too angry, however, I tell him, “I can make egg and tomato.”

He hesitates. “Is that like egg foo young?”

“No, egg and tomatoes. I stir-fry with rice wine and sugar.” It is my favorite quick dinner.

“That doesn’t sound too good.” After a pause, he says, “What about Peking duck?”

“I don’t have duck. But how about kung-fu chicken?” I am just making up names.

He hesitates. “O.K.,” he finally says.

“This is *real* Chinese cooking,” I warn him. As for what kung-fu chicken is, I don’t know. I wanted to say wushu chicken.

In the fridge, there is a leftover roast chicken. I shred the white meat with my hands, afraid of using a knife and revealing where all the sharp objects might be. I make a soy-oil-sugar marinade, then stir-fry the chicken with some green onions, which I also tear apart into jagged pieces. The result is

maybe a terrible stir-fry version of three-cup chicken. What matters is that it passes as Chinese to his taste.

There is a wall phone in the kitchen. I calculate the risk of calling 911, but decide against it. It's too obvious. He'll see me. According to the clock, it is two-forty-five in the afternoon. The parents, who own a Mormon jewelry company, usually get home early on Fridays, around three. All I need to do is distract him for the fifteen or twenty minutes until they return.

"This is good," he says, after taking the first few bites, and I feel sorry for him, that he can't tell that what I've cooked is actually a mess, sprinkled heavily with five-spice from a dusty bottle, using old soy-sauce packets I found in a drawer of takeout menus. I wouldn't serve it to anyone I cared about. And he thinks it's good. I almost wish I had made it better.

Then he puts his arm around my waist, and I stiffen. "This is all I want, you know?"

"You want some tea?" I move beyond his reach.

"I want beer. You got any beer?" Feeling bolder, he gets up and begins to root through the fridge himself. My daughter peeks into the doorway of the kitchen, a little confused. Irritably, I gesture for her to hide herself, and she does.

"I get it for you!" I half scold him, which he seems to like. "Finish the food."

He sits back down. "Yes, Ma'am." We are playing house, I realize, the same way my daughter plays it with the Taiwanese boy next door. She brushes the doorway with an imaginary broom and scolds him for tracking dirt into the house. He pretends to watch TV and acts grouchy.

When I place a cold can before the man, he tells me to pour it into a tall glass. As I do this, he tells me earnestly, "I can take you away from here." He points out the window, to an indeterminate spot in the distance. "I live in a cabin, out there in the woods."

Where he's pointing, all I see is a row of snowcapped mountains. I often sit here alone, while the kids are watching TV, and look out the triangular window, built to align with the roof. It is my favorite part of the house, with a view of the sunset in the late afternoons. I can estimate the time of day by the way the light looks. Sometimes I think the landscape of Utah is the most beautiful I have ever seen. This view may be the only thing that anchors me to this job, to this new life my husband insists on pursuing.

The man says, in a voice low and wistful, "Do you want to come with me?"

"I will think about it," I say, as if deciding whether to buy his cleaning sprays. I feel more afraid than I sound. "I'm very busy. People rely on me." It's all so logical. I stop short of filling in the details. That my husband is a Ph.D. student in math, in his second year. That he is paid a small stipend. Until he graduates, I work to help support the family. I went through a string of jobs before landing at this one, the most leisurely one, the one that feels like passing time more than all the others. I am almost thirty-five years old.

"Oh. That's a pity." He looks down at his beer. His voice changes. "But I'm going to be honest. When people see you, they can tell you don't belong here." He rushes into his next sentence. "Now, I'm not trying to offend you, and you know how you're different, the way you look and talk. You're obviously not from here."

"Hmm." I pretend to consider this.

He taps on the window, indicating his home in the distance. "But where I live, it's far away from anyone. And I'm completely self-sufficient, you'll see. I have a water pump, I have my own electricity. There's no one around to judge me." He turns to me. "So, do you think you'll reconsider?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, why the hell not?" His agitation is a little splash of hot oil.

"Do you know what I used to do in China?" I say, looking out the window. Not at anything in particular, the trees and the mountains and the road

winding through them, carrying, in the distance, the mother's car, painted a shiny beige shade that I think of as champagne. She will be home soon.

Maybe it's because of the sight of that car, knowing that someone is coming, that I tell this man more than I would normally, more than I've ever told my employers. How, in another life, I worked at an accounting firm, where I managed the accounts of the mayor and other prominent local officials. There weren't as many high-rise buildings in the city then, but our office was in one of them, and we worked on an upper level. I made more money than my husband, whom I was only dating at the time. For two years, he wrote me long letters, revealing a passion I barely glimpsed from him in person. During reeducation, he, along with both my sisters, was sent out into the countryside to work. Hard labor, manual labor. I saw their hands when they returned. But not me. I stayed in the city because of my job, which was deemed crucial to the Party. I stayed in the city and looked after my parents. Sometimes it felt as if I were the only young adult who lived there. I liked that time very much, when everything else—marriage, children—was something that had been planned but nothing I had to think about in the day-to-day. I liked knowing that my life was following a track without having to accept responsibility for it.

MISSING BOOKS OF THE BIBLE



Cartoon by Roz Chast

When I'm done, I turn away from the window. Who knows how much he even understood of what I've said? I can't communicate the complicated things in this language.

"So, are you a Communist?" he asks, looking at me curiously.

I know there's no answer except no. "No."

"Good, because we don't like Communists in this country. You know what we do with them?" I can't tell if he's joking. I've always thought those old American movies about the Cold War were just movies. He stands up, his face a scowl. "Do you know what we do with Communists?"

I don't say anything. It is the first time I feel afraid. I look past him, and I see my daughter standing in the doorway again. I am filled, suddenly, irrevocably, with anger. "Get out of here," I tell her in Chinese. "Go, go into the other room." When she doesn't move, I raise my voice to a scream. "Get out!" I yell, and she rushes away.

The sound of the garage door opening fills the room.

When my daughter first came to the States, she would insist that I tell her a bedtime story every night before sleep. This was a tradition her grandma established when she lived in China without me. So I tried to make up stories, simple fables with a moral lesson. Except when I got to the end, my mind would go blank. What's the lesson here supposed to be? I would always lose track, thinking she'd be asleep long before the story finished. But she would wait for the conclusion, and if it didn't satisfy her she would ask a lot of questions. She wanted the story to make sense, at a time when my own life didn't make any sense. Shortly after, I began taking her to the library. I would read her picture books instead, and that solved my problem with thinking up endings.

The ending of what happened that day is that, as soon as the salesman hears the garage door opening, he panics. Cursing me, he stands up quickly, the fork and knife dashing off the table. Watching him rush out the door and then downstairs, I think, This is so easy. This problem of this stupid stranger is so easily solved despite all the fear I felt.

Then the wife comes through the garage door. She looks at the messy kitchen, the cutlery that scattered across the floor as he bolted up to leave. I explain everything, relieved. Then she asks me a lot of questions. Questions like: Did you invite him inside? Did he misunderstand, maybe, your English? Why didn't you ask him to leave? Did you offer him food? When he forced you to cook food for him, why didn't you just say no? Why is there beer open in the kitchen? Did he also force you to give him a beer? What made you afraid of him? Did he have a weapon on him? How did the food get all over the place?

I'm answering her as well as I can, but in the middle of my answers she interrupts with another question. And so my English falters, becomes distracted and nervous. When she can't fully understand my responses, she looks over at my daughter, who is only too eager to translate.

My husband, who has arrived to pick us up, watches intently from the kitchen doorway.

The mother says, more to herself, "I have to figure out what to do."

"What about calling the police?" my husband suggests.

"Well, it's tricky, given the arrangement we have worked out . . ." She trails off.

"We're legal U.S. residents," he says, thinking that he's clarifying.

But I know what she's referring to. Even though we have our green cards, I'm not their legal employee, and they pay me under the table. "Let me talk it over with Dave when he gets home," she finally says. "He should be getting back any minute." She glances at the clock, then at me. Indicating the mess in the kitchen, she asks, "Well, can you clean this up now? Then you can go."

"No." It's a reflex, how quickly I say this.

"What do you mean?" She's looking at me. Does she really think I'm going to drop everything to clean her kitchen? While my husband and daughter look on?

“She wants you to clean up, Mom,” my daughter says in Chinese. She thinks I can’t understand.

I look at my husband. I want him to intervene, to defend me. He opens his mouth, then closes it, unsure. He is an agreeable person, but his problem is that he wants to please everyone. That’s how you survive here, he told me. But just because he wants to live in this country doesn’t mean I have to eat shit.

She purses her lips. “But that’s your job.”

“No. I take care of Brandon.” All the times that I’ve wiped down the countertops, the stove, the inside of the microwave at their request—I have tried to be a good employee, going above and beyond, but cleaning is not actually part of my job. They pay me less than what a trained nanny would cost, what a maid would cost.

She doesn’t say anything for a moment. “Someone has to clean up. And I didn’t make this mess,” she says.

I don’t say anything.

“I’ll do it,” my daughter announces, grabbing the paper towels. I yank her arm back, and she yells in pain.

“Maybe you can talk about it on Monday,” my husband proposes.

“Bye, Brandon,” I tell the boy as he squeezes his warm body against mine. I give him a little hug. I am not coming back on Monday, I decide. Maybe that will turn out to be a lie, but it’s a lie I need in this moment. Without looking at anyone, I go out the front door and sit in the passenger seat of the car, waiting.

It is several minutes before my husband and my daughter come to the driveway. “You shouldn’t have done that,” he says, grimacing as he gets into the driver’s seat and starts the engine. We drive downhill. My daughter chimes in from the back seat, “Brandon’s mom is very nice, Mom. She just wants to know what happened.”

In the rearview mirror, I study my daughter. When I first learned that I was having a daughter, everyone in the family was so disappointed. In China, a boy is always better, if you're going to have one child. But me, I was secretly happy. A boy, at best, can adore his mother, but a girl can understand her. When the doctor told me it was a girl, I thought, Now I will be understood. That was my happiest moment. The idea of a daughter.

"Don't talk to me about things you don't understand," I tell her now.

She blinks, doesn't say anything. She makes herself very quiet, as she should, and gazes out the window. Good, I think. Don't look at me.

As if by instinct, she looks up. Our eyes meet in the mirror. Then she looks away. ♦

This is drawn from "[Bliss Montage: Stories.](#)"

By Dorothy Wickenden

By Jessica Winter

By Ariel Levy

Hoopla Dept.

- [Selling Lies with Jon Hamm](#)

By [Sarah Larson](#)



John Mankiewicz and Jon Hamm Illustration by João Fazenda

On a recent Thursday, Chantal Smith, a creative director, met the actor Jon Hamm and the writer-producer John Mankiewicz outside Studio 525, in Chelsea, to give them a preview of the party space for the première of their new docudrama, “The Big Lie,” débuting the following night at the Tribeca Festival. Hamm wore aviator sunglasses, a brown denim jacket, and cuffed jeans; Mankiewicz wore a suit with no tie. They both looked intrigued. Smith gestured toward the entrance, which would be red-carpeted and ringed with lights. “It looks glamorous from the outside, but you’ll quickly discover that everything is not as it seems,” she said. “The Big Lie,” in which Hamm plays an F.B.I. agent, is set in [McCarthy-era](#) Hollywood, among blacklisted writers and directors struggling to shoot a workers'-rights-themed movie while being treated as political subversives. Hamm’s character, via suave duplicity, is trying to stop them.

“The Big Lie” is a podcast, on Audible. “All these forms are breaking down and realigning,” Hamm said. (The Tribeca Festival, formerly just for film, now encompasses many genres, including virtual reality.) Smith guided them down a hall, amid noisy set construction, describing the space’s coming features: vintage anti-Commie propaganda, audio of *HUAC* testimony, fedoras dangling overhead, theatrical fog. Hamm suddenly

spotted a friend and greeted him with a hug that seemed poised for liftoff. “That’s our director, Aaron Lipstadt,” Mankiewicz said.

Next: an F.B.I. office, with mid-century typewriters and a trenchcoat, and which, like a Sterling Cooper office, was also a bar. News clippings and photographs of film-industry leftists were arrayed like a murder board, connected by tangles of string; Hamm peered at a diagram titled “How to Detect a Lie.” The podcast’s first episode, played in the next room, would be augmented by projections of stars evoking Griffith Observatory; a shadow play; and onscreen images that stopped short of making a movie out of a podcast. After a preview, Hamm praised the shadow actors. “Looks very cool, you guys,” he said.

In a greenroom, Hamm reclined on a couch. “I’m runnin’ on fumes,” he said. “Five countries in four days, doing the ‘Top Gun’ stuff.” Hamm, Tom Cruise’s foil in [“Top Gun: Maverick”](#), had recently attended première events on an aircraft carrier (Cruise arrived by helicopter); at the London Ritz (featuring British royals); at Cannes; and so on. Podcasts, he said, had a certain appeal: “You don’t have to buy three hundred cars and populate Hollywood Boulevard. It’s all in your mind, right?”

“The Big Lie” is set amid the making of the 1954 movie “Salt of the Earth,” a neorealist drama about a 1950 zinc miners’ strike in New Mexico, written by Michael Wilson, directed by Herbert J. Biberman, and produced by Paul Jarrico, all of whom were blacklisted by the film industry for refusing to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. “Salt” was considered especially dangerous for its pro-labor bent. In 1997, Jarrico, who was eighty-two at the time, approached Mankiewicz with an idea for a screenplay: the “Salt” story, from the perspective of an F.B.I. agent. It sold as a movie, and, soon after, Jarrico was honored at an industry dinner at the Academy, in Beverly Hills. “It was the fiftieth anniversary of the blacklist. He was the guy who got everyone’s credits restored,” Mankiewicz said. “They reënacted Paul’s *HUAC* testimony, which was fantastic. Driving back to Ojai, he got into a one-car accident and was killed.” Jarrico’s wife, Lia, asked Mankiewicz to write the script.

Mankiewicz, grandson of Herman (“Citizen Kane”) and son of screenwriter Don, is a longtime television writer and producer; he met Hamm on “The

Division,” a Lifetime cop drama, in the early two-thousands. “I was the token guy,” Hamm said. By the time Mankiewicz approached Hamm about “The Big Lie,” Hamm was starring on “[Mad Men](#).” He liked the script. “But I was, like, ‘Well, it’s a guy in a hat who smokes cigarettes and drinks—that’s kind of my day job.’” Audio, and the current era, put it in a different light: “the power of the big lie,” and the pandemic, and the climate of the big quit. Hamm jabbed his thumb eastward. “We take it for granted now. But go to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory monument and know what working conditions were like before unions, right?”

Calling the podcast “The Big Lie” had received a bit of pushback post-January 6th: “There’s the other Big Lie in the news,” Mankiewicz said.

Circa “Mad Men,” Hamm watched the BBC documentary “The Century of the Self,” which illuminated some salient concepts about Freud, propaganda, politics, and P.R.: “It talks about hitting those pleasure centers, feeding that ego, giving people what they want: create the itch and sell you the balm. It’s Don Draper, basically. This idea of the big lie is a tale as old as time. And it’s a remarkably effective way to get populations to do what you want.”

“And you can attach the big lie to stories and songs,” Mankiewicz said.

“Woody Guthrie on one side, Toby Keith on the other.”

“That side has no good music,” Mankiewicz said.

“Don’t say that at a Nascar rally,” Hamm said. ♦

By Michael Schulman

By Michael Schulman

By Nick Paumgarten

By Isaac Chotiner

Masterpieces

- [DALL-E, Make Me Another Picasso, Please](#)

By [Laura Lane](#)



Since humans invented art, sometime in the Paleolithic era, they've produced lots of pictures—"The Starry Night," some memes, that photo of Donald Trump staring at the eclipse. What does it all add up to? A few years ago, a company called [OpenAI](#) fed a good deal of those images, along with text descriptions, into the neural network of an artificial intelligence named *DALL-E*. *DALL-E* was being trained to create original art of its own, in any style, depicting in uncanny detail almost anything desired, based on written prompts. But a mastery of the entire universe of human imagery makes for difficult choices. How do you decide what *DALL-E* should create? After careful deliberation, one of the first images that OpenAI prompted was a doughnut made of porcupine quills.



"a real hippopotamus sitting on a sofa smoking a cigarette, 70mm Nikon," as prompted by Roz Chast. Art work by DALL-E / Courtesy OpenAI

"There was this belief that creativity is this deeply special, only-human thing," Sam Altman, OpenAI's C.E.O., explained the other day. Maybe not so true anymore, he said. Altman, who wore a gray sweater and had tousled brown hair, was videoconferencing from the company's headquarters, in San Francisco. *DALL-E* is still in a testing phase. So far, OpenAI has granted access to a select group of people—researchers, artists, developers—who have used it to produce a wide array of images: photorealistic animals, bizarre mashups, punny collages. Asked by a user to generate "a plate of various alien fruits from another planet, photograph," *DALL-E* returned something kind of like rambutans. "[The rest of mona lisa](#)" is, according to *DALL-E*, mostly just one big cliff. Altman described *DALL-E* as "an extension of your own creativity."



"octopus riding the subway," as prompted by Roz Chast. Art work by DALL-E / Courtesy OpenAI



"octopus doctor performing brain surgery, 65mm lens Kodachrome," as prompted by Roz Chast. Art work by DALL-E / Courtesy OpenAI

For the more than a million people on *DALL-E*'s wait list, the only way to extend their creativity is to slide into the A.I.'s Instagram D.M.s with a request. The company launched the account, [@openaidalle](#), in April. "I was worried that maybe it would take more of an explanation to get people engaged," Natalie Summers, who runs the account for OpenAI, said, from a conference room near Altman. "And it did not." [@openaidalle](#) now has almost two hundred thousand followers. It's Summers's job to read through

the messages and choose the best of the best. “If I did every single thing that people asked, we would have a lot of raccoons and sloths,” she said. Hits have included “cheeseburger lamp,” “emotional baggage” (suitcases with sad faces), and “attractive dinosaur in a tuxedo, looking at himself in a mirror and seeing his reflection, digital art,” which *DALL-E* endowed with human-proportioned arms to aid in its hotness. Reviews have been of the mind-blown variety. “I’m gonna lose me job,” one commenter, whose profile said they were a graphic designer, posted, below an image of polymer-clay dragons eating pizza on a boat.

To sift through the latest requests, Summers, who wore dangling earrings and a jean jacket, videoconferenced with *DALL-E*’s product manager, Joanne Jang, and with a member of the technical staff, Aditya Ramesh. Ramesh was responsible for *DALL-E*’s name; it came to him in the shower. “Some people got it immediately,” he said. “Other people I had to explain that it’s a portmanteau.”



“a very sad parakeet in a ball gown in the style of John Singer Sargent,” as prompted by Roz Chast. Art work by DALL-E / Courtesy OpenAI



"cartoon t-rex 'african grey parrot' monster, photograph 70mm," as prompted by Roz Chast. Art work by DALL-E / Courtesy OpenAI

There are rules for requesters. Images of public figures are off limits, as is anything remotely offensive, including nudity and violence. Political campaigning is forbidden. "We are worried about [deepfakes](#)," Summers said. Recently, a researcher named Boris Dayma developed a low-fi copycat, called *DALL-E* Mini, which went viral. Users were permitted to submit prompts like "Ice T in a glass of iced tea" and "Babies fist fighting," though the output is sometimes eerie: Ice-T's face appears to be melting; the babies look like zombies. At OpenAI's request, *DALL-E* Mini was renamed Craiyon. ("There has been a lot of confusion," an OpenAI spokesperson said.)

Summers began scrolling. "Here's one that I found this morning: 'a cat with a bed of tulips growing out of its back,' " she said. She clicked a button, and the system came up with ten images. All featured tulips, but only one had tulips growing out of a cat's back—though not enough to qualify as "a bed." Ramesh gave the prompt a try, and the machine spat out a white cat with two dozen or so tulips sprouting out of its fur. "I love how chubby the cat is," Jang said. Summers sent the photo to the user, who responded with three smile emojis.

They turned to "an astronaut eating in a diner that is floating in space." Jang spotted a problem with *DALL-E*'s work: too much gravity.

“Oh, that’s true,” Ramesh said. “I’ll see if I can get floating food.” A few wording tweaks yielded an astronaut with a piece of toast, staring out a diner window at the stars. “It’s like he’s contemplating his life’s decisions,” Ramesh said. They went with a less melancholy option.

Next up: a fish fishing. “How about this one?” Ramesh said, pulling up an illustration of a green fish wearing a fisherman’s hat, with a smaller fish dangling from a rod.

“That one’s good because he looks alarmed to be in this meta situation,” Summers said.

The meeting was wrapping up, but they decided to take on a few more requests. One user had asked for, simply, “The Big Bang.” Jang took a deep breath. “There’s a lot of artistic license for that one,” she said. ♦

By Ellis Rosen

By Richard Brody

By Elisabeth McNair

By Rebecca Mead

Night Life

- Arturo O’Farrill’s “Fandango at the Wall”

Since 2008, the Fandango Fronterizo Festival has brought musicians from both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border together to play *son jarocho*, regional folk music from Veracruz, Mexico. In 2018, the jazz maestro Arturo O’Farrill met with the festival’s founder, Jorge Francisco Castillo, to arrange a special jam session that was captured in the HBO documentary “**Fandango at the Wall.**” O’Farrill and his eighteen-piece Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra reunite with musicians from Veracruz for a free concert on the lawn of Brooklyn Bridge Park’s Pier I, on July 9.

By Alex Ross

By Millie von Platen

By

By Susan Orlean

Personal History

- [The Truth About My Father](#)

By [David Wright Falade](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

The kingdom of Dahomey, at its peak, dominated the sliver of West Africa known as the Slave Coast. From around 1724 until the eighteen-sixties, when the last slave ships heading for the Americas set out from these shores, the kings of Dahomey used terror and brutality to supply human chattel to the triangular trade. During months-long campaigns, their army, which featured a corps of women warriors who served as shock troops, overran towns and villages, horrifically murdering some people as a tactic to get others to submit. Anyone not Dahomean was either a vassal, a victim, or a captive to be sold to European trading companies, which had established barracoons by the sea.

Though Dahomey was smaller than New Jersey, with a population of three hundred and fifty thousand by some estimates, three-quarters that of Staten Island's today, it is believed that about fifteen per cent of all the slaves sent to the Americas departed from this stretch of coast—nearly two million women, men, and children. Those sold off resisted the spiritual death that could accompany enslavement, striving to retain some tie to their past. Aspects of African American culture emerged from West African traditions—music and dance, culinary practices and religious beliefs, notably vodun, what we call voodoo in the United States.

Until I was sixteen, I believed that, on my father's side, I was descended from the enslaved people who had crossed the Atlantic in chains, perhaps forced onto ships in Dahomean waters.

My mother was a white woman. Right up to her death, six years ago, at the age of eighty-five, she sustained an improbable sort of idealism—a wholehearted aspiration for equality, regardless of race, gender, or class, which was underpinned by a near-providential belief in basic human goodness, despite her own experiences. The eldest of three children of French Jewish parents, in her youth she had survived the Nazi occupation of Paris. She immigrated to the U.S. in the fifties as the G.I. bride of an African American soldier, and, in the years before *Loving v. Virginia*, gave birth to

two biracial kids, my older sister, Myriam, and me. Her first husband, Jack Wright, was a drinker, unreliable in the way that drinkers can be, and she divorced him in 1967, when I was two, raising Myriam and me on her own, working menial jobs to pay the bills.

Mom was tough, much larger than her five-foot-one-inch frame. Still, she felt that I needed a Black male presence in my life. She met my stepdad, Ed Wheeler, who had escaped Jim Crow South Carolina by joining the Army, which deployed him to Vietnam. He was decorated for his service, and, when he returned, we followed him to Yuma, Arizona, then to Lawton, Oklahoma, then, on his retirement from the military, in 1976, to Amarillo, Texas, where he'd taken a job working security at Texas State Technical Institute. We were now a family of five—my younger sister, Chantal, was two years old when we moved to the Panhandle.

In choosing a difficult path for herself, Mom necessarily set us, her children, on one, too. “Biracial” is the term of use today. When I was growing up, we were referred to as “mulatto” or, when the speaker was being considerate, as “mixed race” or “mixed.” To white society, though, either expression meant Black, full stop. Mixed-race people went largely unseen, made nonexistent by the one-drop rule.

Myriam and I were two of four Black students in our middle school in Amarillo. I was the only Black male. She and I sat in the cafeteria one day as a boy described to the rapt kids at our table the thrill of watching the movie exploits of “that great big nigger Mandingo.” Not long afterward, the same boy and a group of others set upon me on the playground—they held me down and ripped open my shirt and gave me a “red belly” until I cried, and even after.

A schoolyard prank or an age-old ritual about my proper place? I understood their message to be the latter, even if the school dismissed it as the former.

I'd seen “[Roots](#).” The five of us watched together on the couch, Chantal on my mother's lap. Alongside the triumph of seeing Chicken George lead his family onto land in Tennessee that they themselves owned, indignation simmered within me, a rising fury at the sweep and scope of the horrors that we African Americans had borne since our very beginnings here. Lurking

just beyond was something more, something troubling, a feeling that was not new but that “Roots” had made discernible. Even at that young age, I recognized it to be the tinges of shame—shame at being part of a people who, no matter how brave, how noble, or how cunning, seemed to always end up debased.

Identity is rooted in place as well as in parentage. In the Texas Panhandle, the red-brown fissures of the Caprock Escarpment abruptly become the grassy Great Plains, the stark beauty a study in contrasts. Like the geology of my new home, I was formed in a space where differences converged.

A few months after my schoolyard hazing, we moved fifty miles northeast, to Borger, population fifteen thousand, where my stepdad joined the Hutchinson County Sheriff’s Department, its first Black deputy. Borger was less than four per cent African American, and most other Blacks lived across town, in the Flats. But my [stepdad](#) had moved us into Keeler Heights, a white neighborhood. Ours was one of the only mixed-race families in town, and for certain the most public one, given my stepdad’s new position. Mixed-race couples could still meet with looks of disdain and sometimes with nasty remarks from white Borgans, young and old. Despite this, to me Borger was a relief. People honked and waved when they passed by even though we didn’t know them. I joined the football team and made friends, Black, white, and brown, and soon I found my way.

America, historically, has understood the mulatto to be a tragic figure, the product of two different worlds, belonging to neither. For me, the opposite was true. I learned to code-switch and became a sort of insider-outsider in both. I was as readily at home in my advanced-biology class, where I was the only Black person, as I was in the football locker room with the brothers. When with white friends, I never pretended to be white. But I blended in. I was liked, as was my stepdad, who had become popular around town.

Borger was the epitome of the late-seventies Bible Belt—socially conservative, Christian symbolism everywhere, proselytizing. From time to time, I went to the church across the alley behind our house, Keeler Baptist, with my friend (white, necessarily) from down the street. Our football coach taught Sunday school. One morning when I’d stayed in bed, I heard my name being hollered from outside, at a distance. Coach Henderson had

raised the second-story window of his classroom and was summoning me. I dressed and ran over.

I didn't consider myself committed to church so much as curious. Yet one Sunday I found myself responding to the call of the pastor, Reverend Scott, ambling down the aisle toward him, and receiving Jesus as my personal Lord and Saviour. Coach Henderson looked particularly proud, more than he ever did watching me on the football field. I lingered with the other kids afterward, talking and laughing, sipping on the grape juice used for Communion from tiny Dixie cups. I took the long way home, around on the street rather than through the alley, and felt . . . something. Fulfillment, maybe. A sense of accomplishment. Whatever it was, I imagined it to be an outgrowth of my spiritual redemption.

Turning the corner, our house coming into view, I saw my mom standing in the yard, puffed up, arms crossed over her chest. How long she'd been there I could not know, but the tongue lashing began before I was even within hearing distance.

Didn't I know that I was Jewish? she asked. Did that not matter to me?

Before I could answer, she followed with a question that, I would learn from Myriam, she had also asked the Reverend Scott when he'd stopped by to congratulate my family on my having accepted Christ. To me, she said, "Do you think those crackers will still love you when you want to date one of their daughters?"

Growing up, Judaism meant everything and nothing in my family. Mom always wore a Star of David pendant on a necklace, and the fact that we were Jewish was never a question in my mind. But we didn't acknowledge, much less observe, Jewish holidays or celebrations. I wouldn't have recognized the names—Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur—had someone spoken them aloud.

No one did. We lived in a part of the U.S. where Jews were even less common than Blacks.



"Whatever you do, don't turn the page before he's finished reading it."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

I was introduced to the Holocaust in school, in a unit in world-history class. I knew that, as a child, Mom had lived something of the horrors being described to us, and I asked her about it one evening. She answered—not evasively, but not fully, either. She'd been young, she told me. All that remained in her from that time were bits and pieces, more feeling than detail. Though she had been nine when the Nazis occupied Paris and thirteen when they were finally expelled, she seemed unwilling to attempt to form a coherent picture of her experiences.

For all that learning about the Holocaust had moved me, I didn't feel any more—or any less, for that matter—Jewish as a result. Jewishness, while certainly a part of who I knew myself to be, was less immediate, less intimate, more abstract than being Black. It held no stakes. No one in my Texas town, after all, understood me to be a Jew. Seeing Afro'd, football-player me as Jewish was like trying to make sense of a pangolin or a duck-billed platypus without the benefit of a picture. Who could imagine such a thing?

In this world of complicated identities, where navigating my way through potentially hostile environments was becoming second nature, sometimes the animus came from close to home. Though in the eyes of society at large I did not exist as a biracial person, only as Black, Black friends sometimes

referred to Myriam and me as “mixeded.” In so doing, they weren’t saying we were not Black. They were, however, making a distinction, one that seemed to confer a certain privilege. The distinction could also lead to conflict, should Myriam or I, however inadvertently, seem to act as though our light skin made us better. I understood that I was an insider-outsider among Blacks, too, despite claiming Blackness as my identity.

The line between keeping on to keep on keeping on and being an Uncle Tom was exceedingly thin. I learned this, too, through the example of my stepdad. I had to join him one Friday at a happy hour at the furniture-and-appliance store of his best friend, Stonie Ferguson. We were the only Black people present, and I, largely invisible in a chair off to the side, was the sole minor. Several local businessmen drank whiskey-and-Cokes or whiskey-and-sodas and told tall tales and laughed. One told a “nigger joke,” never pausing, not seeming to notice that among them was a so-called nigger—two including me, on the periphery. I watched as my stepdad laughed along with the rest of the guests.

In Amarillo, when the boy had boomed, “That great big nigger Mandingo” in the lunchroom, I’d sat there silently, recognizing the danger of speaking up. So I understood the tough spot that my stepdad was in. Few African Americans owned businesses in Borger or were city leaders. He’d worked hard and was striving to make a mark in town. But where my diminutive mom would have roared in outrage on the spot and later offered me a lesson about standing up for oneself, he never even discussed the incident. It was hard to keep from resenting him.

Not that Jack Wright was a better model—of Blackness or of maleness or just of dependability. Mom always described him as a man who, if you asked, would give you the shirt off his back; for his family in Kansas City, he was an anchor, someone to turn to. But he’d rarely sent child support for Myriam and me, and had disappeared from our lives altogether when she was nine, and I seven. When Myriam turned fourteen, she reconnected with him, and we began visiting Kansas City for a few weeks during the summer. She and I would ride with him in his yellow cab, sitting beside him on the long bench seat. We’d pick up dinner from Arthur Treacher’s Fish and Chips or Shakey’s Pizza and bring it back to his one-bedroom apartment.

Sometimes our cousin Brenda and her boyfriend Al would take us to the movies or bowling.

The trips were difficult for both of us, but, where Myriam was charming and funny, I was brooding, a bit of a mama's boy. I wanted to impress Jack Wright—as an athlete or a brainiac, or as something—but never much felt like I did.

The spring I turned sixteen, my mother and stepdad were fighting constantly and were heading toward divorce. Early in their marriage, she had confided in him a secret that she had otherwise shared only with her mother, her sister, and her two dearest childhood friends in France. Now he threatened to inform me, wanting to discredit her in my eyes. So Mom beat him to the punch. She told me about a man named Max Faladé—my “real father,” she called him, in a sheepish way that was unlike her. He was an architect, she said, and had spent his career working for the [United Nations](#) in Africa. She told me that he was from Benin, although it had been called Dahomey when she first met him.

After the initial jolt of surprise, I laughed—a deep belly laugh. I hadn’t been looking for another father. If anything, my two were too many. And here was a new one, out there somewhere in the homeland of Kunta Kinte.

I didn’t feel shame on learning that I was of the lesser so-called Third World or that I was a bastard. In fact, the joy Mom expressed while telling me about Max, her eagerness at the possibility of he and I connecting, made connecting seem important. I didn’t know French, so I wrote him in English, a warm letter, introducing myself. His reply arrived a month or so later. It was gracious, if formal, though not especially informative. He finished with: “You need to know that there is nothing for you.”

This seemed particularly insulting, as I’d asked nothing of him. I was merely saying “Hello” and “I know now.” Yet he made it clear that I was an inconvenience to him, maybe even a source of embarrassment. His response also seemed to insinuate something demeaning about my mother, and this disturbed me even more. He hadn’t expressed anything untoward, had hardly mentioned her, actually. But his rejection of me read as a slight of her.

Part of my agitation stemmed from the fact that she so obviously still loved him. She hadn't seen him since he'd visited the hospital after my birth, and the family resemblance confirmed what my mom had claimed—that I was indeed his child. He'd offered to assume responsibility for me, as Mom told it, if she left Jack Wright. Max refused to take care of Myriam, though, which he must have known my mom would never accept. Even so, despite this obvious pettiness and manipulation, she still referred to him, all these years later, as her one true love, confiding that she had overcome an early ambivalence about Ed Wheeler because he had Max's deep, resonant voice.

It was plain from his letter that Mom's abiding love was not reciprocated. This made me pity her—the fierce, fiery woman of my childhood, reduced now, diminished. I needed to understand the particulars of this apparently abasing history, the history that had led from France to Africa to the Texas Panhandle, that had led to me.

At the heart of that story are the intertwined stories of each of my parents, idealistic insider-outsiders as foolhardy as they were brave, who pushed against convention when the convention didn't seem able to accommodate the lives to which they aspired. Ambivalence characterized my mom's youth, the result of upheaval and the consequent loss of mooring. Born in 1931 to an affluent, assimilated Jewish family in Paris, she was indulged during her childhood. Then came the war. Her great-uncle Georges, a Mayer patriarch who was like a grandfather to her and who owned an antique shop on the swank Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, killed himself after Hitler's Blitzkrieg overran Poland, recognizing that France would be next. His wife, Lucie, who doted on my mother, her namesake, died at the transit camp in Drancy, awaiting deportation to the East. But my mom's father used connections to wangle falsified documents, and the immediate family escaped the worst of it. They hid in plain sight. My mom was enrolled at Le Bon Sauveur, a Catholic school outside Paris, and at thirteen she took her Communion. I remember seeing a picture of her on that day, dressed in white gloves, a white veil, and a long white gown.

Impulsive and sometimes reckless, she rebelled. She refused to forgive collaborationist France, and neither could she reconcile the seemingly random forces that had permitted her family to survive when so many others had not. During the Occupation, they had avoided donning the mandatory

Jewish star, but after the Liberation she wore a Star of David pendant insistently on the outside of her blouses, a “fuck you” (*Allez vous faire foutre!*) to anyone who might dare to question her or her choices. The symbol did not signal a pull toward Judaism or the Jewish community, however. She joined the Communist Party instead and embraced anti-colonialism, frequenting Présence Africaine, a new bookstore and publishing house in the Quartier Latin. Her friends were negritude writers and artists, colonial subjects who were militating to be free of the French yoke. She saw a connection between her past suffering and their current struggles.

During this period, she met Max. Born in Dahomey in 1927, the only boy in a family of girls, he was sent to France in 1933 by his parents, with the imperative that he succeed and, in so doing, perhaps demonstrate to the colonizing society that colonized Africans were every bit the equal of whites. Two older sisters were also dispatched to France, one twelve, the other eight. The siblings resided at first with a maternal uncle who had served in the colonial administration and retired in France. His wife treated them like household servants, and, at the outbreak of war, the eldest, fearing for her safety, returned to Africa against her father’s will. The other, Solange, was taken in by nuns. Max made it through the Nazi Occupation in an orphanage near Dijon, the rare Black child there, doing farm work and being trained in carpentry.

Still, filial duty above all. After the war, without having had the opportunity to finish lycée, he prepared for and then passed the competitive entrance exam for the architecture track at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, in Paris—the prestigious grande école where [Degas](#), [Monet](#), and [Renoir](#) had studied, as had a long line of renowned builders, including Louis Sullivan, known as the “father of skyscrapers.” Max and Solange, who had been accepted to medical school in Paris, also got involved in the burgeoning anti-colonial movement.

Until then, they had been two of a small but growing population of sub-Saharan Africans in France. Max had formed friendships with whites, among whom he had lived for nearly his entire life. With my mom, he found something more. Theirs was a world that had been turned upside down by war and that, consequently, seemed possible for remaking. They might even undertake the journey together—if they could only get out of their own way.

They failed to. After a dispute—the trifling stuff of youthful romance—Max cheated on her with her best friend, to which Mom responded in kind, sleeping with his, a student from Senegal. In April, 1957, she married Bayless (Jack) Wright, a G.I. from Kansas City, Kansas, after knowing him for only six weeks.

Impulsive. Sometimes reckless.

For Jack, who was stationed in postwar France, success was measured by the easy money he could make from the abundant American goods to which he had access, and by the trophy he'd boasted he would bring back to the U.S.: a white woman with long hair that he'd said he would use to mop his mama's floors. Marrying my mom represented a fanciful, though serious—and, back in the U.S., potentially *deadly* serious—desire, suddenly realized. But, where he had imagined a token and a prize, she turned out to be a photo-negative reflection of Jack himself. She was white but a minority, from affluence but oppressed, a survivor of legalized terror and outraged because of it.

After the agonizing end with Max—breaking with him also meant distancing herself from other African friends and suffering a frustrated idealism—Mom must have found Jack exciting. They wanted for nothing during a time of want. He bought her things at the post exchange on the base—clothes, canned goods for her family, cigarettes by the carton. They danced at music clubs and dined at Gabby and Haynes's restaurant, in Montmartre, the first soul-food joint in the city, owned by a buddy of Jack's. This new life didn't offer Communism's promise of a more just world; it wasn't the hard-luck grind of war-blighted France, either, even though they still lived in the country.

By the next year, Jack had been rotated back to the U.S. After a stint in Colorado Springs, Mom found herself in Kansas City, with Jack's family. Life in America was hard. The Wrights were poor, and Kansas City was segregated. She was often the sole white person present. Only the children—her young nieces and nephews—seemed to accept her. Or maybe they were the only ones with the time to pay her much mind. Jack's mother, in particular, seemed to disapprove of her. Mom wrote her own mother regularly, long letters describing the courses in typing and stenography that

she was taking, her jobs using these new skills, the nieces and nephews and their strict upbringing. Years passed, but the U.S. never felt like a home.

In 1962, Jack was stationed in France once again. The return was a relief for both of them. Jack felt freer in France, especially given his white wife. And the time away had given Mom perspective. She appreciated being near family and friends, despite her misgivings about the French. My older sister was born that year. But Jack was, in today's parlance, a player. My mom knew it, and, after five years of marriage, she reconnected with Max. She would claim that they slept together only once and justify it by saying that she believed in "an eye for an eye." If Jack was running around, then so would she. This never quite rang true. No, she had always loved Max, and only Max.

As for Max, he had finished at Beaux-Arts—the first Francophone West African to do so, I was told—but he had also been recalled to the Army and sent to Algeria, where he'd commanded a squad of armed jeeps like those in "The Rat Patrol," the sixties TV show that I grew up watching. The only African in his team, he was commended for his actions in battle. On his return, suffering from post-traumatic stress and disillusioned by his involvement in an anti-colonial war, Paris, the closest thing to a home he'd ever known, must have been a comfort all the same, familiar and safe. Then, unexpectedly, here was my mother, also recently returned. I want to imagine it in this way—that, on finding her again, he experienced a profound emotion, something not so dissimilar from what she felt.

Max kept the fact of my birth a secret from his father. Maybe because of shame. Possibly because of fear. Or just because to admit to having conceived a child with my white French mother risked betraying the legacy of his forebears, and he may have thought that his father, a man of stature in Dahomey, would not approve.

His father, it turned out, was a son of Béhanzin, the last of the kings of an independent Dahomey. With the "Scramble for Africa" under way in the final decades of the nineteenth century, Béhanzin fiercely fought off the French imperialist push for two years. He had multiple wives, some of whom were thought to be pregnant when he was finally defeated and ordered into exile in Martinique, in 1894, for fear that his presence would

continue to incite resistance. One of them was Tata Sokamey. Béhanzin wanted his future child with her to remain in their homeland, despite the risk that this posed from the French authorities and also from Dahomean rivals who might see the baby as a potential threat. Sokamey's sister was married off to the king of neighboring Allada; her brother-in-law entrusted her safety and that of her unborn child to his loyal subject Francégnikan Faladé in exchange for lands in the district of Zinvié.

Where Béhanzin was of the Fon ethnic group, the Faladés were Nago, and some of them resented the boy Sokamey gave birth to, a scion of the kings who had enslaved so many Nagos and sold them to European and American traders. So, when the boy, Maximien, was school-age, Francégnikan sent him to the Catholic mission at Porto-Novo, about seventy-five kilometres away—several days' walk—to be educated by the French priests there. Maximien's experiences growing up under the influence of the Church—the point of the spear in the French “civilizing” mission—shaped him as much as his precarious relationship with the Faladés had. From the Chicago World's Fair to Paris's Exposition Universelle, in popular culture and in anthropological studies, Dahomey was depicted as the archetype of African savagery and barbarism during his youth, the incontrovertible evidence of inherent Black inferiority. His birthright as a son of Béhanzin was a source of ignominy the world over, even as Béhanzin's resistance against the French was becoming a source of pride in Dahomey—indeed, across French West Africa.

Until his death, in 1989, at the official age of ninety-six, Maximien, conflicted about his heritage, refused his father's name. But he never denied the widely known fact that he was Béhanzin's son. When, as a father himself, he contemplated his children's education, he sent them to France with the charge of upholding the family name—either one, Faladé or Béhanzin, or maybe both.

News of my birth might expose Max's straying from this duty, and, what's more, with one of the colonizers.

After finishing high school, in 1982, I went as far north of the Panhandle as I could and still remain in the United States, to Carleton College, in Northfield, Minnesota. My relationship with Max had begun and ended with

our exchange of letters, as far as I was concerned. In the meantime, I'd grown closer with Jack Wright. He seemed to take a certain pride in me, the captain of my college football team, on my way to earning a bachelor's degree—just the fifth Wright to do so. In my junior year, though, Mom told me that she had stayed in contact with Max and that he wanted me to come to Addis Ababa, where his employer, the U.N. Economic Commission for Africa, was situated, so that he could get to know me. The trip was planned for summer break.

My mother had orchestrated the encounter of her dreams, but Max, I would discover, had been only a reluctant participant. Ethiopia was suffering from widespread famine and a series of insurrections against the repressive Mengistu government, yet when my plane landed after a long overnight flight Max was not at the airport to pick me up. I had never been in a developing country before. There were heavily armed soldiers all over at the antiquated airport, and what appeared to be general chaos—large families with lots of luggage, jockeying for position at the front of the thronging queue to passport control and customs, which consisted of long tables where soldiers rifled through suitcases. I changed some dollars to birrs and took a taxi to the Africa Hall, a gated compound that housed the U.N. commission. Max's secretary told me that he was in a meeting, but that I could wait for him in an anteroom, where I stretched out and eventually fell asleep.

I awoke to him standing above me, wearing a gray suit and a warm smile. I wasn't sure why his smile surprised me, but it did. He admitted that he had confused the date of my arrival.

At his home later, I met his wife, Claire, who was nearly thirty years his junior, and their two-year-old son, Olayimika, and recently born daughter, Adéwolé. Their marriage represented the coming together of two prominent Beninese families. To outsiders, Max had not produced a male heir until Ola's birth. When we encountered colleagues or acquaintances, he would introduce me as "Monsieur David Wright, from the United States." Once, a woman who was obviously a close friend looked skeptically from Max to me and back again, then pressed him: "*Mais alors!* Don't try to tell me that this boy is not your son?"

Max, smirking faintly, demurred. "*Si tu veux,*" he said.

If you wish.

When I left, after three weeks, I was certain, as he likewise appeared to be, that we would never see each other again.

Jack Wright never knew about the trip. I concealed it under the guise of summer travel in Europe with friends. A diabetic, he'd got sick after too many years of too much drink, his body just shutting down. Doctors removed a gangrenous toe later in the summer, the first in a series of amputations that would leave him without his legs and under full-time care at the age of fifty-six.



"I wish I'd been invited to all these parties before I discovered the joys of staying in."
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

As is so often the case, the truth eventually outed. I was living in England in 1987, a year out of college, playing semi-professional American football for the Heathrow Jets, when I got a call from my mom back in the U.S. “Your grandfather is on his deathbed and wants to meet you before he goes,” she said, excitedly.

Her father had died nearly a decade earlier; the fathers of Jack Wright and Ed Wheeler, before I was born. “Who?” I asked.

“Your grandfather!” she insisted.

The implication was clear.

Maximien Faladé was in his mid-nineties and very ill when he asked that we meet. It remains uncertain how or when he found out about me. Maximien had spent his entire life attempting to reconcile the stigma of lineage with his own hopes and ambitions in a perplexing, modernizing world—another insider-outsider, culturally mixeded, as it were. He had sent his son away for a similar sort of multivalent education, among the colonizers. My existence must have made a certain kind of sense.

For me, the desire to get to know Max had come and gone. I had never even considered being embraced by his family. I agreed to go all the same.

Though bent and frail, Maximien welcomed me warmly. I stayed with him in his colonial-era house in Porto-Novo, Benin's capital, which had electricity but no running water, rather than with my father, who had retired from the U.N. and was now living in Cotonou, the country's economic hub and population center, forty kilometres away. We spent our days in Maximien's parlor, him slumped in an armchair wearing apricot-colored pajamas, body weary but mind alive. He wanted to know about my aspirations, about my growing up in Texas, about my mom. I asked for his story, and also about his family history.

In “Roots,” a white slave raider, with his African lackeys, captures Kunta Kinte. In reading about Dahomey, though, I had learned that it was indigenous armies, like those of Maximien’s father and of his forefathers, who had rounded up and sold the majority of the Africans who would be enslaved. Peering at me, unabashed, Maximien raised an arm and turned his wrist. “Because the fingers of the hand are not of equal length,” he said, as though to explain that this was just how it was, the order of things.

Maximien, still devoutly Catholic, arranged for a home audience with his priest, a Beninese man in a white cassock, introducing me as his grandson. In the days that followed, he insisted that, despite his fragility, he, Max, and I make the two-hour trek to Zinvié, so that he could present me to the family, both living and gone. Ancestor worship is central to West African spiritual beliefs. The dead are not dead; they have merely passed to the other side. Their spirits must be honored.

The drive was a stop-and-start crawl across redundant stretches of developing-nation cityscape, with two-, three-, and four-story buildings everywhere, in various states of construction or disrepair. Chinese-made motorbike taxis puttered past or slipped behind our road-weary Peugeot. Maximien sat beside the driver, Max and I in the back. Just beyond Cotonou, we quit the two-lane blacktop and started into the forest, each of us jostling right then left as the car wended around and through ruts in the red-dirt road. Max appeared visibly worried about how his father was suffering the rough ride.

Faladés of all ages turned out to greet us as our car pulled into a compound of terra-cotta houses beside the Zinvié village square, bright smiles accompanying the repeated “Èkabo!” “Èkabo!”—which Maximien told me meant “Welcome.” We sat on the porch of a particularly old house with four or five elders, an ever-increasing crowd of people gathering around. Maximien spoke in Yoruba to the elders facing us, then translated for me. This is my son, he said of Max, which the others clearly already knew. And this, he continued, indicating me, is his eldest son, the product of a Black person and a white one. The onlookers gawked and smiled.

Maximien went on from there, translating much less frequently. One of the elders, a woman, tittered and pointed at me, speaking in this language I did not understand—teasing me, it seemed, though not in an unfriendly manner. Max silently observed the goings on, studiously not looking my way.

The village blacksmith arrived, another elderly man. Though he was the son of an enslaved person, like his father before him, he was held in high esteem. Because of their trade, transforming metals with fire, it was believed that blacksmiths knew secrets, and so, like priests in the Church, they served as intermediaries to the unknown. He led us to a dark room just off the porch, wherein resided the vodun altar.

Largely misrepresented and misunderstood in the U.S., vodun, which partly originated in Dahomey, is as much a way of life as a religion, a way of understanding and of moving through the world. It is the spirit that inhabits everything, and so everything is potentially divine and nearly anything can become a fetish, or a talisman: tobacco, herbs, sculpted wood, a live animal or its remains.

The altar in the Faladé house consisted of a number of items that I could barely make out in the dark of the room, spread on the floor against the far wall—an animal pelt, some small bones, what looked to be feathers. A person should cross the threshold only without shoes, I was told in French by a young man behind me, who appeared to be more or less my age. The woman who had teased me entered the room, as did the blacksmith and another elder, and the three conferred, their voices nearly inaudible.

No one explained to me what was happening. Maximien watched solemnly from the doorway, Max rigidly beside him, dutiful. I stood respectfully, wanting to honor these people and their traditions, however inscrutable they were to me.

The trip to Zinvié signalled my grandfather's embrace of me as a Faladé. He christened me Omon Wolé, which, in Yoruba, means "the child has returned home." With the Béhanzins, some of whom I subsequently met, he named me Éro Ònan—"travelling companion." He explained that this is what I had been for his son. He had shipped Max off with the charge to succeed, and Max had returned from his long journey with a companion.

With his father's acknowledgment of me, Max eventually publicly acknowledged me, too, and over time he and I developed a relationship, a close one, despite the odds against it. I left London for Paris, where I joined an American football team, still carrying that piece of the Panhandle with me. On her father's instruction, Max's sister Solange—a regal, imposing presence, credited as the first African woman psychoanalyst—received me as family. She had been a protégée of the pioneering pediatrician Robert Debré and of Jacques Lacan, and with her help I enrolled in the graduate program in sociology at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. Max spent a few months each year in Paris, sometimes with Claire and their children, sometimes without. He, Solange, and I dined regularly, and he began including me in his activities—errands, mostly, but eventually also rendezvous with family and friends. Almost without my noticing it, he began introducing me as his son.

This had been Mom's most ardent desire—for me not just to know about the Faladé family but to be part of it, and thereby to realize her own tie to Max. I was a grown man now, past wanting or needing a father. Yet I also

understood that to accept myself as a Faladé was to honor my mother. This mattered to me.

I am the triangular trade embodied. My lineage connects Europe to Africa to America. Believing myself to be descended from slaves, I'd grown up espousing Black pride, even as that feeling was tinged by hints of shame. Now, knowing that I am a descendant of the Dahomey kings, a gratuitous, almost irrational culpability is intertwined with the strange honor I uncomfortably feel at being the progeny of one of the lasting dynasties of Africa. These gnarled feelings mirror something of what my mother must have felt after the war—the wound of having been victimized, as a Jew, while also fearing herself complicit in the victimization of others, as a survivor, as French. These were the contradictions which had fuelled her lifelong restlessness and which also informed her improbable sense of hope.

Mom died in 2016; Max, three years later. Jack Wright had passed in 1987; Ed Wheeler, a decade after him. In the days leading up to Max's funeral, a Dahomean cousin reminded me, "Death is only a curtain. The dead are on the other side, watching." Much as an adherent of vodun would, I think of my mother and my many fathers in this way, each of them divine, their spirits inhabiting everything. ♦

By Dorothy Wickenden

By Jessica Winter

By Nathan Heller

By Andrew Solomon

Poems

- “[The Dead](#)”
- “[A Theory of Human Origin](#)”

By [Nancy Morejón](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Audio: Read by the translator.

The dead are what's absent,
forgotten, inert.
A bell rings out
its loneliness swaying amid the roses.
The dead come out at night
or they come out in the afternoon
to feed from gourds,
from lecterns,
from other people's throats,
from guitar pegs,
from the key and the calabash,
from scissors blunted by use,
on the concrete of plazas,
on savage smells,
on nectar,
on bone.
In the drop of water
appears the face of the dead.
In the fragment of the sea that the passerby glimpses
lies hidden the universe of the dead.
The dead hang from the hours.
They slake the thirst of a poet friend.
The dead endure.
The dead sing.

(Translated, from the Spanish, by Pamela Carmell.)

By Isaac Chotiner

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

By Jeannie Suk Gersen

By

By [Marianne Boruch](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Audio: Read by the author.

Though she knew no English,
or only little, I could put my small hand into
her leather glove to read

the rabbit in snow, fur so cool and sweet
even winter faded.

That was my favorite thing.

In summer, I could pick out her kitchen
from the street, through the air, open window,
cabbage and more cabbage,

a lovely green though it paled
as the boiling did something.
Many times I saw her carry one

newly picked, hard and round
as a head you'd reach for
to save the whole body from drowning.

On the boat over, she came alone as a child
is the story, years before they called
the war *great* then morphed it merely *first*,

a second one arriving in mud and rain
like a trumpet unmutes, so
they had to rewrite the world, count it up

all over again. *Ma, these are*
American children, I heard my father tell her.
Behind that house every

ancient why and who, a garden multiple
as it was mindful. Not how the Brits
mean *garden*, not just a back yard. And never

willful beauty. Her huge *No, no waste dirt
on flowers!* I'm pretty sure she said
in a precise almost English.

Behind that, winter's tooth.

By Ling Ma

By Cressida Leyshon

By Salvatore Scibona

By Dhruv Khullar

Profiles

- [Emmanuel Carrère Writes His Way Through a Breakdown](#)

By [Ian Parker](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Emmanuel Carrère, who writes with the clear-eyed judgment of someone who has trained himself, against instinct, to take an interest in other people, was eating lunch one day last fall in a restaurant in north-central Paris. Charline Bourgeois-Tacquet, a film director and Carrère's partner, had joined him; they live nearby, in an apartment as spare and as sunny as one in a yogurt commercial. The restaurant, her choice, was more modish and vegetarian than he might have chosen. Carrère's manner was measured, almost courtly; his smile resembles a wince. After lunch, he would walk a mile and a half south, to the Palais de Justice, to spend the afternoon at the trial of men accused of involvement in the [2015 Paris terrorist attacks](#) that killed a hundred and thirty people, ninety of them at a rock concert in the Bataclan theatre.

He'd been attending the trial since its start, weeks earlier, and his fame had initially caused a stir on the press benches. Carrère, who is sixty-four and has cropped hair and a lean, lined face that gives the false impression of a life spent outdoors, was once a novelist. Today, he is France's best-known writer of literary nonfiction, or what one Paris critic has called "sublimated journalism." Since the turn of the millennium, Carrère has published a series of best-sellers that set engrossing character studies—of a Frenchman who murdered his family; an optimistic young woman in a small Russian city; Luke the Evangelist—alongside what he knows about himself, including tendencies toward melancholy, vanity, and undependability. His writing's appeal derives equally from its candor and its narrative brio. Carrère has written, "I know nothing other than my own ego." His chosen form could be described as comparative self-portraiture: he looks out at the world, then looks in, then out again, and assembles it all into an artful collage. In his hands, the narcissistic lament "What about *me*?" becomes a potent observational tool. Carrère, in his portrait of Luke, cites the Rogier van der Weyden painting "[St. Luke Drawing the Virgin](#)." Van der Weyden is thought to have used his own face as Luke's. "I'm doing the same thing in another way," Carrère writes.

His books often enact the experience of someone being brought out of himself—diverted from disappointment or dickishness—by the unearthing of a story worth telling and by the desire to be admired for telling it. (He has written that he is “obsessed with being a great writer.”) Carrère is drawn to material in which people become cut off from the rest of us by extreme circumstances—in particular, by violence. His narrative voice is confiding, comradely. He’ll write a passage that has a fiction writer’s fluidity and sense of drama, then reintroduce himself to the reader with a conversational aside: “You get the idea”; “Maybe I’m on thin ice here, but . . .” Hervé Clerc, Carrère’s closest male friend, who has been scrutinized by him in print more than once, told me, “It’s a kind of paradox. He’s very self-involved, but also *very* able to see the subtle character of others. He can see in me things which I don’t see myself.”

“[Lives Other Than My Own](#)” (2009), one of the books on which Carrère’s reputation is founded, starts with a beach vacation that he took in Sri Lanka in 2004. Carrère begins, “The night before the wave, I remember that Hélène and I talked about separating.” He is referring to Hélène Devynck, then a television journalist, who later became Carrère’s second wife, and with whom he has a daughter. When a catastrophic tsunami interrupts their trip, Carrère is momentarily energized—“our flagging vacation had received an extraordinary jolt”—then sulkily conscious that, compared with Devynck, he’s useless. As she files news reports and looks for ways to be helpful, he feels like “a cautious and caustic diplomat, perfectly suited to cocktails and garden parties at the embassy but who, when the Khmer Rouge surround the place, fails to measure up, dithers.”

But these early pages also contain intense sketches of tourists in the first shock of grief for a lost family member. If Carrère is dithering, he’s also paying attention to suffering—recording the happiness that existed in these lives just a day or two earlier, and capturing how the plot twist of disaster has made people look and sound. He meets a British woman who has lost her girlfriend. “I imagined the two of them getting on in years, living in a lovingly tended house in an English town, taking part in its social life, going on a yearly trip to some distant country, putting together their photo albums,” he writes. “All that shattered. The survivor’s return; the empty house. Each woman’s mug with her name on it.”

When Carrère and Devynck return to France, they make several visits to the home of Devynck's sister Juliette, a judge, who is dying of cancer, more than a decade after being disabled by the disease in adolescence. And Carrère expands on what to him is the mystery of people wanting to help others. The book has some of the shape of a memoir—it's a year or two in Carrère's life; there are scenes of family, writing, sex—but it also has an overarching subject: the claim made on us by people who have no reason to be in our memoirs. And that subject, appropriately, distorts this memoir's form. At the book's narrative and moral center is a colleague of Juliette's, Étienne Rigal, who, like her, developed cancer early in life. These two judges did groundbreaking work, in relative obscurity, to protect low-income debtors brought to court by predatory lenders. Carrère describes that achievement in technical detail, after first immersing us in Rigal's experience of illness and, at twenty-two, of having his leg amputated. ("When he holds out his boxers with both hands and bends over, he will first make as if to put his left foot through the left opening, knowing perfectly well, seeing perfectly clearly, that he no longer has a left foot.") After the book was published, someone who met Rigal for the first time broke off from their conversation, distracted by memories of Carrère's portrait, saying, "It's like talking to Madame Bovary."

François Samuelson, Carrère's agent, told me that another client of his, the novelist [Michel Houellebecq](#), once described himself and Carrère as the best living writers in France (leaving little doubt about who ranked first). When recently asked about this, Houellebecq said that he didn't recall making the claim, but that it was certainly a defensible one. Houellebecq has written that Carrère "knows when the behavior of his characters is estimable, admirable, odious, morally neutral. He can have doubts about everything, but not about that." He has also recalled his reaction to the line about the English mugs: "I burst into tears, and had to put the book down, unable for a few minutes to continue reading."

When I met Carrère and Bourgeois-Tacquet for lunch, the terrorism trial was in its second month—and was expected to last well into 2022. Carrère's sustained attendance would surely yield a book, but its form wasn't yet evident to him. Meanwhile, he was writing a weekly column for *L'Obs*, a magazine that referred to him again and again as "the great writer Emmanuel

Carrère.” (He ultimately decided to publish an expanded rendering of the columns, which will be issued later this year.)

In the trial’s first weeks, most of the witnesses had been survivors, or family members of victims. Day after day, they had described the same scenes of blood, disfigurement, and terror. A column that Carrère had just begun writing described this repetition as having “the beauty of a shared story and the cruelty of a casting.”

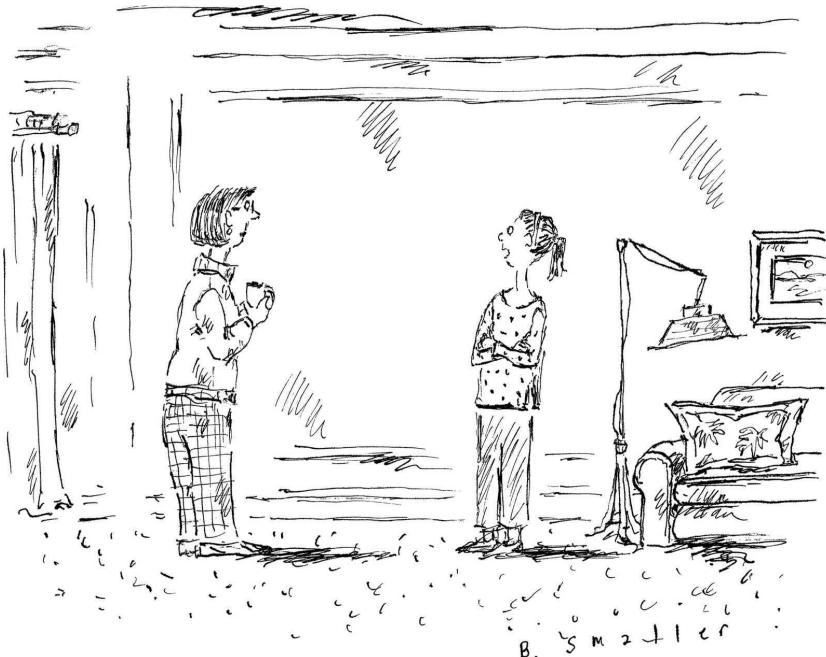
Bourgeois-Tacquet met Carrère four years ago, as he was coming out of a period of mental—and marital—collapse that is recounted in “[Yoga](#),” his latest book, which Farrar, Straus & Giroux will publish in August. When “Yoga” appeared in France, in 2020, it generated weeks of commentary, not least because Devynck, now Carrère’s ex-wife, revealed that he’d recently signed a contract promising not to write about her without her permission.

Bourgeois-Tacquet had discouraged Carrère from taking on the story of the trial—the subject was too distressing. “I almost quit him,” she told me at lunch, speaking lightly, but only half joking. “I thought it wasn’t a good idea for him.”

“Our life didn’t become a nightmare,” Carrère said.

“Not yet,” she replied. “After one year of listening, writing, you could be overwhelmed by the material.”

“You can’t prepare yourself for a possible catastrophe,” he said. Carrère, who has also written and directed movies, mentioned a response that a cinematographer he has worked with gives to any question about a film shoot’s future: “We’ll see when we get there.”



"Nature, nurture—either way, it's still all your fault."
Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

"Life gives you a lot of catastrophes," Bourgeois-Tacquet told Carrère. "You're not obliged to *chase* them." She is thirty-six. Her first feature, "Anaïs in Love," released in the U.S. in April, is a breezy Parisian comedy: summer dresses, adultery, talk of [Marguerite Duras](#).

She began telling me how her understanding of Carrère's character had changed since they'd met. (Carrère's posture of self-disclosure, in print, gives permission to others.) He laughed and announced, "I'm going to the bathroom."

"He's a little bit autistic," Bourgeois-Tacquet said. (I later heard Carrère apply the same word to himself, though neither he nor Bourgeois-Tacquet intended to suggest an actual diagnosis.) "It took me time to discover this. For several months, I didn't understand. So I was, like, crashing against a wall." She went on, "It's an effort for him to get interested in others. Empathy, it's not really developed. And, in a love relationship, it's sometimes hard."

After Carrère returned to his seat, she added, "He recently told me the most important thing in his life was his books, not human beings."

He gave her a look.

“That’s true!” she said.

A nod, acceptance: “That’s true.”

Carrère’s “[The Adversary](#),” published in 2000, starts:

On the Saturday morning of January 9, 1993, while Jean-Claude Romand was killing his wife and children, I was with mine in a parent-teacher meeting at the school attended by Gabriel, our eldest son. He was five years old, the same age as Antoine Romand. Then we went to have lunch with my parents, as Jean-Claude Romand did with his, whom he killed after their meal.

In 1993, Carrère was in his mid-thirties, recently married to his first wife, Anne Devauchelle, and the father of two boys. When I asked Emmelene Landon, a painter and a writer who has been Carrère’s friend since the eighties, to recall him as a younger man, she did a teasing mime of someone pushing back a romantic lock of hair from his forehead. His intelligence was remarkable, she said, but so was his incapacity for embarrassment. He never disguised the moment when he lost interest in a conversation, and didn’t think to ask before turning off the music when visiting someone’s apartment.

He grew up in a comfortable, academic Paris home. He was an “odd little boy,” he told me, who wasn’t quite at ease among his peers. Emmanuel’s mother, Hélène Carrère d’Encausse, who has aristocratic Russian roots, is the author of “[The Great Challenge: Nationalities and the Bolshevik State, 1917-1930](#)” and other histories of Russia and the Soviet Union; she was once a conservative member of the European Parliament. Her husband, born Louis Carrère, is a retired executive. Both are in their nineties. Louis and Hélène’s adoption of “d’Encausse”—from Dencausse, Louis’s mother’s name—indicates an interest in perceived poshness. (One of Emmanuel’s two sisters has followed this lead.) Carrère has not written at length about his parents. “I’m supposed to be a very take-no-prisoners writer, but maybe I don’t dare,” he told me. Yet he has observed that he and his mother share an appetite for glory—a need to “occupy as much room as I can in other people’s minds.” For the past twenty years, she has been the Perpetual Secretary of the Académie Française, the French language’s Supreme Court. The position, one of immense prestige and pomp, comes with a sword and

with what her son calls a “*huge apartment*,” in the seventeenth-century Institut de France. She and Louis follow a conversational convention unlikely to survive their generation: they address each other as *vous*, not the familiar *tu*.

In France, “literature means ‘novel,’ ” Carrère told me, during one of the several times we met in Paris last fall. A writer with literary ambitions who does something different “is a bit *specialized*, a bit strange.” He noted that his mother shares this view: “Autobiographical books are absolutely not her cup of tea. It’s contrary to her philosophy of life.” (She has admiringly compared Houellebecq to [Victor Hugo](#).) After Emmanuel graduated from Sciences Po—the college attended by his mother, and by more than a dozen French Presidents and Prime Ministers—he had a career in film criticism. And shortly before the Romand killings, to help pull himself out of a period of gloomy unproductiveness—which was also a religious phase, with Bible reading and daily attendance at Mass—he wrote a short, somewhat slapdash book about [Philip K. Dick](#), the science-fiction writer. He also wrote a few magazine accounts of trials involving violent crimes: infanticide, attempted matricide.

But at the time of the Romand murders Carrère was known primarily for writing novels—of an admired, if sometimes convoluted, stories-about-stories kind. He had published four, the third of which, “[The Mustache](#)” (1986), had the plainest surface and reached the widest audience. Carrère has described it as “the first one that was readable.” A man shaves off his mustache, then finds himself in a world unwilling to accept that he ever had one. (“You know very well that you never had a mustache. Stop it, please.”) The novel covers a period of about twelve days; it took Carrère about twelve days to write. Like much of the science fiction that Carrère adored as a teenager, it scrupulously follows the logic of a simple rupture-in-reality premise. [John Updike](#), writing in this magazine, called it “glossy and inexorable, like a machine with one lost gear tooth,” and interpreted it as a study of detachment: “We are solipsists who in uneasy conjunction with other solipsists construct a society and a shared world.”

Carrère has said that, on learning of Romand’s crimes, he knew immediately that he would write a book about him—with Truman Capote’s “[In Cold Blood](#)” as his inevitable model. Romand had lived in a French town on the

Swiss border. His neighbors, his wife, and his children all understood him to be a doctor with a grand research job at the World Health Organization, in Geneva. In fact, Romand had left medical school without passing his exams, and he had no job. For years, he spent his days just driving around, or reading in his car at highway rest stops. He paid for this existence partly with money he'd taken from family members, having promised to invest it in exotic funds. Like the man in "The Mustache"—and, one could say, a social but awkward young writer—Romand gave the impression of living among other people, even as he lived in solitude alongside them. As his life unravelled, he began telling people that he had cancer. Carrère has written, "Everyone concurs that he was a nice guy, eager to please, afraid of hurting people's feelings: so afraid that he preferred to kill his whole family rather than hurt their feelings."

According to Carrère's later accounts, he reread Capote. He wrote to Romand, who was in jail, saying, "What you have done is not in my eyes the deed of a common criminal, or that of a madman, either, but the action of someone pushed to the limit by overwhelming forces." He enclosed his recent Dick biography. After he sent off this package, it struck him that the book's title—"I Am Alive and You Are Dead"—might land weirdly in Romand's cell.

Romand didn't reply. Carrère then tried, unsuccessfully, to render the story as fiction. He went on to write an arresting short novel, "[Class Trip](#)" (1995), in which a violent crime is seen through the eyes of a miserably self-conscious boy on a school-sponsored ski trip.

Two years after Carrère wrote to Romand, he received a response that included praise for "Class Trip." Romand's trial would soon begin. Carrère attended the proceedings—which ended in Romand being sentenced to a minimum of twenty-two years in prison—and accepted some guidance from him about further research. He worked on a first draft. Carrère described this as "a pile of beginnings." For example, one version introduced the crime from the perspective of a neighbor, who was a doctor: "On Monday January 11th, 1993, just after four in the morning, the phone rang in the home, near Ferney-Voltaire, of Dr. Marc Vital-Durand. Such calls, at night, are routine for a doctor. He picked up with a sigh, but without anxiety. Françoise, his wife, pulled the covers over her head, to block the light from a lamp that he

turned on. She heard him make brief, neutral comments that didn't indicate whether or not the call was serious. 'Yes . . . Really? . . . Shit!' (He said that often; it didn't really mean anything). 'O.K., I'm on my way.' ”

The manuscript was growing, but Carrère was anxious about it—some passages “didn’t sound right.” At one point, he told Romand that he was setting the work aside. Only after that, as he was writing himself a memo, did he discover a way to tell the story. (“The best way to get something done is to renounce it,” he told me.) Carrère would largely junk the idea of a smoothly omniscient, Capote-like voice. He’d not only accept the fact of his subjectivity; he’d measure it, report on it. He worked with uncharacteristic slowness; he broke from the project, now and then, to write screenplays. Emmelene Landon recently recalled how weighed down he was by Romand’s crimes, and by papers that Romand had entrusted to him. “He’d move from place to place with those files,” she said. But eventually Carrère had a striking new draft, which contained long autobiographical digressions; a critique of the obsequious tone of his letters to Romand; and a hint of the idea that some part of Romand’s problem was that his sex life didn’t measure up to Carrère’s.

When I spoke with Carrère one day, in a quiet café where he reads *Le Monde* on his phone each morning, he told me about a celebrated film director he’d once met at a festival. He admired the man’s work but was amused by the gravity with which he expressed himself in everyday conversations. Carrère recalled, laughing, “He says things like”—slow, serious voice—“ ‘Women are *often late*.’ And he said this one thing about a film. He said, ‘It’s not bad, it’s *wrong*.’ ” Carrère remains struck by this. “I think it’s an extraordinary sentence,” he said. It helped him understand his dissatisfaction with “In Cold Blood,” a book that “pretends to objectivity” and declines to acknowledge that its author was impatient to see the accused hanged. “It’s not bad—it’s more than excellent,” he said. “But there is something *wrong* in the idea of the book.”

“The Adversary” was a global success. Since its publication, Carrère has continued to tack between fact and fiction; he directed a deft adaptation of “The Mustache,” and he helped create “Les Revenants,” an award-winning TV show that imagines a town in which a dozen dead residents reappear alive. But he has not written another novel.

Last fall, visitors to the terrorism trial at the Palais de Justice had to pass through half a dozen security checks. To avoid everyone needing to do this more than once, proceedings didn't start until after lunch.

I went with Carrère one afternoon. We sat on benches that had come to be used both by reporters and by the two thousand or so *parties civiles*—the interested parties directly affected by the killings (survivors, the bereaved), all of whom could testify in court. They wore color-coded lanyards: green indicated a readiness to grant media interviews; red meant the opposite. Carrère had observed that some people wore both. The courtroom was a long, handsome box of pale wood that—for reasons of security and necessary scale—had been built for the event within a colonnaded hall.

Hélène Fresnel, a journalist Carrère knew, had been a *partie civile* at the 2020 trial of men connected to the January, 2015, attack on the offices of [*Charlie Hebdo*](#). Her partner, Bernard Maris, an economist and a journalist, was one of twelve people murdered that day. In “Yoga,” Carrère describes how, on a visit that Fresnel made to the morgue where Maris’s body was sent, she heard a mourning family speaking in Arabic in the room next door. Someone told her that these were relatives of Chérif and Saïd Kouachi, the brothers who had perpetrated the attack and who were shot dead by police after two days on the run. When Fresnel described her courtroom experience to Carrère, he scolded himself for not having thought to attend. She reminded him that the Bataclan trial had yet to begin. He spent last summer reading about Islamist terrorism. In the fall, he was reading [*Hannah Arendt*](#).

Carrère, in jeans and a rain jacket, sat on the edge of the bench, looking around the room like someone worried about missing his train. He was carrying a hardback red notebook that I didn't see him use that day. The trial wasn't being broadcast, and no transcript was being published, but Carrère could always refer to accounts from the daily papers. And he was confident that the kind of small detail that might not make it into *Le Monde* tends to stick. “If it's useful to remember that the carpet was green, you would remember,” he had told me. “And if you're mistaken and say it was blue? Well, I'll confess I'm wrong!” (Carrère has sometimes emphasized that what he writes is “all true,” but this refers to an avoidance of fictional embellishment rather than to a regime of rigorous fact checking. John Lambert, who has translated Carrère's last four books into English, and

admires him deeply, told me that Carrère is as likely to trust his memory of a literary quotation, or a movie plot, as he is to look it up. With Carrère’s permission, Lambert makes fixes.)

At the far end of the room were five judges. On the floor sat a court artist, with paintbrushes and a jar of water in front of him. Fourteen defendants were to the left, and eleven of them sat behind glass in a line that ended, farthest from us, with a man named Salah Abdeslam. On November 13, 2015, three groups of three jihadists attacked sites across Paris, including the Bataclan; seven of them died that night, and two others died during a subsequent police raid. It’s not disputed that Abdeslam began that evening as the tenth member of this cohort—he had been wearing an explosive belt. And, at the start of the trial, he declared his allegiance to *ISIS*. But he later told the court that he hadn’t killed anyone, and had removed the belt—it was found on a suburban sidewalk—after a change of heart and not, as others have proposed, because the device had malfunctioned. The charges against Abdeslam included murder. The three defendants not behind glass were accused of much lesser crimes and were not being held in custody; they came to court each day by public transit. (In late June, all the defendants were found guilty.)

One day a few weeks before we met, Carrère had varied his routine at the Palais de Justice: he had gone to a smaller courtroom, in the basement. As he later wrote in [his *L'Obs* column](#), he had watched a prisoner—an “old gentleman” in a “sky-blue suit, matching scarf and pocket square, smoothed white hair, thin moustache”—greeting the public as he took his place in court. The man was Ilich Ramírez Sánchez, or Carlos the Jackal, and he was mounting an end-of-the-line challenge to the life sentence he’d been given for a 1974 grenade attack on a Paris department store. His public that day, Carrère observed, included someone holding an anti-Semitic pamphlet; another attendee had the latest book by [Éric Zemmour](#), the far-right 2022 Presidential candidate. Carrère found himself laughing quietly at the absurdity of Sánchez and his fan club.



"This is probably where we'll part."
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

In 1974, at a time when a bourgeois Paris teen-ager might well have been drawn to revolutionary politics, Carrère was having extended discussions with record-store clerks about the comparative strengths of recordings of Bach oratorios. Today, he can approach a terrorism trial without having to account for any past support for political violence. Indeed, he has a kind of political innocence, or at least an instinct to abstain. “He’s not interested in politics,” Bourgeois-Tacquet told me. “I’m not, either.” It was a relief, she said, never to argue about such matters. In 2007, Carrère voted for the first time, to please Devynck. He has said that he distrusts his responses to broad sociological and political questions; he feels himself taking on the views of the last person he spoke to. (And he is awed by Houellebecq’s state-of-the-world assurance.) “I prefer not to talk about things, problems, issues where I don’t have a firsthand knowledge,” Carrère told me. “Which excludes a lot of things.” He added, “I prefer to rely on my experience, even if it’s *very small*. I don’t think that I know the truth, but I know at least the difficulties I have to know the truth.”

He was once friends with Renaud Camus, who, until the late nineties, was known as a novelist and a poet. Camus is now reviled as the far-right ideologue who fashioned the “great replacement” conspiracy theory, which proposes that hidden forces are collaborating to insure that nonwhite

populations become a majority in countries like France. Carrère's response to Camus, at a time of rising popularity of far-right political figures in France, has been personal disappointment shaded with residual personal sympathy. In 2009, he put a Camus novel—along with others by [W. G. Sebald](#) and [Edith Wharton](#)—on a list of his twenty favorite books. In 2016, he described Camus as principled, if unquestionably wrong: “These delirious convictions remain those of a man of integrity, not a scoundrel.”

Carrère's book about the terrorism trial, then, would likely not be as autobiographical as some of his other books—he told me that he had little about his own history to incorporate, and added that his current life lacked the context of crisis that has prompted his most personal work. But it would still be a book about *his* trial, and the trial of the people in pain around him. In an introductory column for *L'Obs*, last summer, Carrère wrote that he expected the event to teach him something about justice, and something about religion. “When it comes to God, where does madness begin?” he wrote. But his primary impulse, he said, was to experience *being in the room*. He wrote, “I think that between the day we enter this box and the day, still far off, still without a date, when we'll leave it, something in us, participants and even observers, will have changed.”

Carrère's creative missteps tend to have occurred in projects in which he did things differently, and allowed someone other than himself to claim a narrator's role. In 2011, he published a biography of the swaggering (and fascistic) Russian writer and political activist Eduard Limonov. It was built largely out of Limonov's own mythmaking accounts of his life. The book isn't celebratory, but neither is it skeptical in any sustained way; Carrère plays a wingman's role. More recently, he directed “Between Two Worlds,” a fictionalized adaptation of a book by Florence Aubenas, who disguised her journalistic identity to report on the unskilled-labor market in Caen, France. Carrère's movie, which was released in France earlier this year, is about a bourgeois reporter negotiating the social and ethical complications of that kind of disguise—of not telling people that you're planning to write about them while you clean toilets alongside them. A book about poverty became a movie about friendship and betrayal. It seems likely that if Carrère had written a book about Caen it would have found a way to be about all three.

Carrère told me that, a few days earlier, he'd heard an expression of hate in the courtroom for the first time. Patrick Jardin, a retired businessman whose daughter was killed in the Bataclan, expressed his regret that France no longer has the death penalty, and his disgust for people whose loathing for the perpetrators didn't match his own. (Later, Jardin unsuccessfully ran for office in the 2022 legislative elections, as a candidate for the Reconquest Party, founded by Zemmour.) Jardin, in his testimony, mentioned a book that had been published two years earlier, in a spirit of liberal optimism; it took the form of conversations between Georges Salines, the father of Lola Salines, a Bataclan victim, and Azdyne Amimour, the father of Samy Amimour, who, after killing many in the concert hall, was blown up, on the theatre's stage, by the explosives he was wearing. Jardin told the court that Georges Salines made him sick.

Carrère had chatted with Salines during breaks in the proceedings. He had heard him, and others, talk about their lack of rage. "That's very civilized, and very beautiful—I admire these feelings," Carrère had told me. "But there was at least one guy who said the unpleasant thing that people must feel. I felt that, at least once, it was necessary—I needed to hear that." Carrère is a serious reporter, but his posture toward any story is that of a *partie civile*.

On the day of our visit, the court was hearing from experts in caring for disaster victims. Carrère seemed restless. He whispered to me that a man who was speaking seemed to be "auditioning for the role of most boring witness." But after Marie-Claude Desjeux, the head of a victim-support organization, began testifying Carrère heard something that interested him. The presiding judge asked Desjeux if she thought it was useful for the court to show images of the attacks. The *Charlie Hebdo* trial had incorporated security-camera video. The new trial had used such material sparingly, as part of an institutional effort to make the event "as humanly delicate and careful as possible," as Carrère put it.

Desjeux told the court, "Victims are capable of hearing everything," adding that it can be helpful to understand what actually happened. For others, "there's the possibility of leaving the room." A young man to our right, a *partie civile* wearing a Ramones T-shirt, was taking notes. Carrère, whispering, asked him something about the history of this issue. When that

query turned into a conversation, Carrère was untroubled by people in front of us who turned, frowning, to object.

We left and headed toward Carrère's apartment. He talked about a number of "false victims" of November, 2015—including Alexandra Damien, a woman who claimed to have been at a bar that was attacked. She had shown reporters a scar that, she said, came from that night. (It was the result of a kite-surfing accident.) He recalled that the president of a group for victims of the attacks in which Damien became involved had told him, "She was completely lost. We liked her. We were the first friends of her life." She had escaped social solitude by inserting herself into this community. For Damien, Carrère said, "it was an identity to be a victim."

Carrère met Hervé Clerc, his close friend, in the late eighties, through a mutual godmother; their relationship was cemented on long hikes in Switzerland. They still take hiking trips at least once a year: they often walk in silence, out of sight of each other.

Clerc, a writer and a former editor at Agence France-Presse, has published books on Buddhism and other religious topics. He told me that when he's on a hike he experiences nature as "an expression of eternity." He suggested, with fond concern, that, although Carrère may well be happier on these walks than he is anywhere else, it's not really the right kind of happiness: it's a mere break from worldly agitation about work and reputation.

Clerc added that he has often encouraged Carrère to spend more time thinking about death. As he put it, paraphrasing a Buddhist source, Carrère does not pay enough attention to "the avalanche that will cover you in a very short time."

The hikes are now more slowly paced. The two sons Carrère had with his first wife are adults; he's been a grandfather since 2016. His daughter with Devynck, born a year and a half after the tsunami, is sixteen.

Carrère and Bourgeois-Tacquet's apartment, which they moved into a year ago, is on the top floor of a building in a narrow nineteenth-century shopping arcade. The apartment has views of rooftops but of no human activity. In the kitchen, a small tree grows through a hole in the center of the

table. When we spoke there one day, Carrère mentioned that his younger son, a journalist, has decided to own only one pair of pants. (He has other assets, including an apartment.) Carrère isn't in denial about his own ability to acquire, and enjoy, bourgeois comforts. Once, when writing beside an infinity pool on a luxurious trip with his extended family to Phuket, Thailand—where Houellebecq's novel "[Platform](#)" stages scenes of sex tourism—he registered that he was taking the most un-Houellebecquian vacation in the most Houellebecquian spot. But he admires his son's instincts and shares them, up to a point: whenever he has moved, he has got rid of most of his stuff, including books. One object that has survived is a painting by Emmelene Landon, which he bought thirty years ago—an abstracted landscape of ochre and gray-green. It's near him when he writes. When Bourgeois-Tacquet met Carrère, in 2018, he was recently separated from Devynck, and was living on a busy street above a South Asian specialty grocery, in an apartment that, in her view, was "very dark and ugly." (Carrère disagrees.) It seemed to contain little besides a few dozen books about yoga and Landon's painting.

In "Yoga," Carrère recalls a period in his life that ends around the time Bourgeois-Tacquet first saw that home. He begins in January, 2015, about three years earlier. There is an element of terror in Carrère's fascination with the ways that people can become marooned—buried alive, paralyzed, imprisoned, struck mute—but also a martyred acceptance of his own version of entrapment. Once, trying to understand his neutral response to a session inside a flotation tank, he wrote, "Mostly I'm in my inner world, of which I am tired and where I feel trapped. I dream of breaking out of my prison but can't manage to do it. Why not? Because the idea frightens me and—harder to admit—I actually love my prison." At the start of "Yoga," he has signed up for a ten-day silent-meditation retreat in rural France: no talking, no writing, no phones. He had planned, he writes, to publish an "upbeat, subtle little book" about his longtime interest in yoga and meditation.

When I spoke with Bourgeois-Tacquet and François Samuelson, Carrère's agent, they both scoffed at the idea that Carrère would ever have written such a book—and Carrère himself told me that the plan was probably an illusion. (Samuelson, an old friend of Carrère's, is entertainingly intemperate: he told me that he had not liked "Yoga" as a title, and that he certainly hated yoga.) But the book's first pages do have an unusual

lightness, as Carrère faces the quandary of making judgments about people to whom he can't speak. He's also wistful, as he sits looking out over the damp landscape, about his inability to have a fully contemplative moment. "I don't have direct access to experience, I always have to put it into words," he writes. "I'm not saying that's bad. It's my reason for being, it's why I'm here, and I'm not complaining, I'm terrifically lucky to have what's known as a vocation. But all the same, how good it would be, how restful it would be, what a huge step forward it would be, if I could make fewer sentences and see a little more."

Midway through the retreat, Carrère is summoned to an administrative office, where there's no ban on talking. He's told that "serious things have happened in our country." He learns that *Charlie Hebdo* has been attacked, and that he has been asked to give a eulogy at the funeral of Bernard Maris, the economist. He writes, "I have to be honest, and I'm sure I'll be understood: I felt a huge relief to learn that it was Bernard who'd died in a terrorist attack and not someone closer, not one of my children."

He leaves the retreat and speaks at the funeral. And then—we're nearly halfway into the book—something happens. He experiences a crisis of an unspecified kind. He refers, obliquely, to a happy life that is now coming to an end: "They say it's only when you're no longer happy that you realize you once were. For me that's not true: for ten whole years I knew I was happy." He also mentions having started an affair, at some imprecise earlier time, with someone he calls "the Gemini woman." (The name refers to a little terra-cotta statue that she gave him.)

Devoted readers of Carrère will know a little more than is being said here. The four books he published in the years between "The Adversary" and the silent retreat contain ample information—names and dates—about his intellectual, emotional, and sexual life. The first, "[My Life as a Russian Novel](#)" (2007), described visits he'd made to a small city five hundred miles east of Moscow; disobeying his mother, he also told some family history. In the final years of the German Occupation of France, his Georgian-born grandfather, who was married to the daughter of a Russian aristocrat, collaborated with the Germans, as an interpreter. He disappeared in 1944, and is presumed to have been executed by Resistance forces; his body was never found. In this period, Carrère writes, "there was one truth everyone

agreed on: Resistance fighters were heroes, collaborators were scum. In my grandmother's home, however, another truth reigned: Resistance members had abducted and probably killed the head of the family, who had been a collaborator and who they knew for a fact was not scum. He was moody and often angry, but he was an honorable man, upright and generous. Those thoughts could not be voiced outside the home. The family had to remain silent, and ashamed." By making all this public, Carrère opened a rift with his mother. "For more than two years, there were very, very cold relations," he told me. In time, they reconciled, he said, "but 'reconciled' means never talking about it."

The same book describes the arc of a romance with a woman, referred to only as Sophie, who sometimes faults Carrère for what she registers as his privileged, careless ways. In Carrère's assessment, she is not fully at home in his intellectual milieu; he recalls that, when she makes a note to herself to look up the great American novelist whose name she's heard at dinner, she writes, "Read Solbello." In the summer of 2002, he plans what he supposes is a gift to her. He has been asked to contribute a short story about travel to *Le Monde*; weeks in advance, he has arranged for his story to be published on the Saturday in July when he knows that Sophie will get on a train to join him at the oceanside village where his parents have a summer house. He writes a pornographic tale, "L'Usage du *Monde*." The title, borrowed from a classic Swiss travel book, here means both "The Way of the World" and "Making Use of *Le Monde*." The story is addressed to Sophie, and places her on that train, reading his story. *On the train, you will do this, and you will do that.* Carrère told me that he was perhaps encouraged in this project by the example of Nicholson Baker's two sex-filled novels of the mid-nineties, "[Vox](#)" and "[The Fermata](#)."
(Carrère's usual sexual subject matter is happy sex, in fantasy or in reality. Such passages can read like a reply, on behalf of all French charmers, to Houellebecq's depictions of contemporary sexual ugliness. Bourgeois-Tacquet, speaking at lunch, said that sex gave Carrère a sense of being "close, close, close" to another person—"and that doesn't happen very often in his life.")

In "Russian Novel," Carrère writes, "Only a man immune to superstition could plan his pleasure in such detail without fear of defying the gods." Just before his story's publication, Sophie tells him that she probably won't be able to come that weekend. On the day the story appears, he searches a train

bound for the coast but doesn't find her. He does, however, find two reporters from *Le Monde*, looking for her.

Sophie never took the train, because she was arranging an abortion, after getting pregnant by another man. *Le Monde*'s ombudsman later questioned the paper's decision to publish Carrère's story.

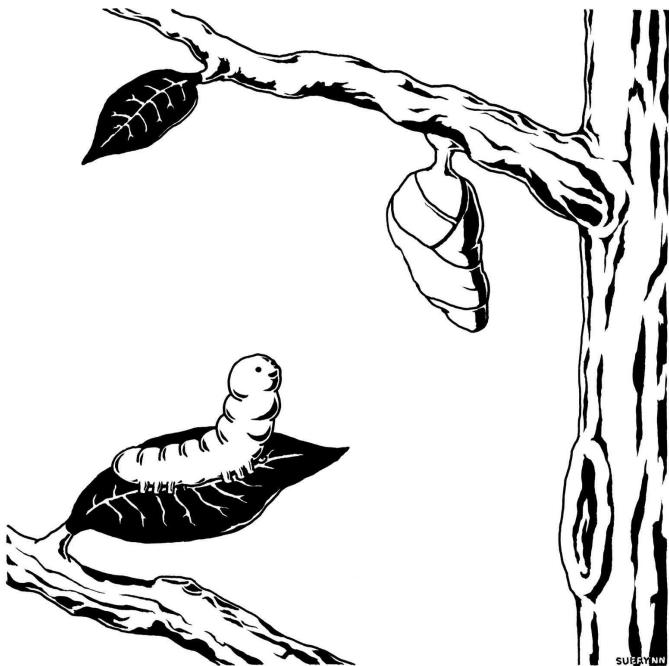
In various ways, then, "L'Usage du *Monde*" was not a success. Carrère, reliving the episode five years later in "Russian Novel," acknowledges feeling some embarrassment in front of the reporters—"the shame of a shy adolescent who invented girlfriends and then realized that no one believed him"—but he isn't ready to disown the short story, and he notes that many readers praised it. His mother, in whose house he's staying that weekend, says nothing. Carrère writes, "What she thinks of it is clear, but she'd rather be torn to pieces by wild horses than even mention it."

Not long after this, Carrère and Sophie broke up. But first they flew to Corsica to vacation with Emmelene Landon and Paul Otchakovsky-Laurens, her husband and Carrère's beloved friend and publisher. (Otchakovsky-Laurens died in 2018.) Landon recently described Carrère and his girlfriend moving through the airport in sunglasses, smoking, like movie stars of an earlier age. They didn't help much with housework. There was little discussion of "L'Usage du *Monde*." Landon, laughing, said of the story, "I think that you have to do whatever you feel like—even if it's the weirdest thing."

Near the end of "Russian Novel," Carrère refers, with relief, to having met Devynck, his future wife, in 2003, just before his forty-sixth birthday. In "Lives Other Than My Own," the book he published next, she is a constant, stabilizing figure. He recalls, for example, a conversation that they had just before the death of Juliette, Devynck's sister:

Only a few months ago, if I'd learned I had cancer and would soon die, if I'd asked myself the same question as Juliette—has my life been a success?—I could not have given the same answer. I'd have said no, I hadn't made a success of my life. I'd have said I'd succeeded in some things, had two handsome sons who were alive and well, and had written three or four books that gave form to what I was. . . . But I had

not learned how to love—or hadn’t been able to, which is the same thing. No one had been able to rest in complete confidence in my love and I would not rest, at the end, in anyone else’s. That’s what I’d have said at the news of my impending death, before the wave hit. And then, after the wave, I chose you, we chose each other, and now nothing’s the same. You’re here, close to me, and if I had to die tomorrow I could say like Juliette that my life has been a success.



"I know you're really busy right now, but when you have a chance I'd love to pick your brain about how you got to where you are today."
Cartoon by Suerynn Lee

Devynck is present, too, in “[Limonov](#)” and then in “[The Kingdom](#)” (2014), a beguiling account of the early decades of the Christian church and of Carrère’s religious impulses in adulthood, written partly in the form of notes for a historical novel that he’s been wise enough to leave unwritten. Carrère’s identification with St. Luke is explicit: “Luke really didn’t have a head for abstract ideas. He was interested in quarrels between real people with real names, people he knew.” As before, “The Kingdom” includes descriptions of Carrère’s family life: he refers to his daughter’s school, in Paris, and to a house that he and Devynck have bought on the Greek island of Patmos.

At the start of “Yoga,” Carrère briefly acknowledges that at the time of the silent retreat he was married. But he says no more, and he doesn’t name Devynck. We now know that they separated not long after he returned home,

and eventually divorced. “Yoga” describes only the effect of the rupture—the wash from a boat that’s out of frame. He’s suddenly living alone, and “as lonely as a rat.” He doesn’t bathe. “I don’t stop trembling, objects fall from my hands. If I put jars of yogurt in the fridge, they slip and crash onto the kitchen floor.” And after a lifetime of psychological inquiry, including long periods of psychotherapy, he is surprised to receive a new diagnosis: bipolar II disorder. (As he notes, symptoms may include behavior that’s “seductive, flirtatious, very sexual, outwardly very much alive.”) When I asked Carrère if this had helped him understand earlier aspects of life—like, say, “L’Usage du *Monde*”—he smiled: “Yes. Performative pornography, involving my girlfriend, without telling her? And being sure that you are *doing something wonderful?*”

Carrère’s mental distress grows so severe that he enters Sainte-Anne, a psychiatric hospital in Paris, where doctors note suicidal ideations, among other disturbances. He is then given electroshock treatment and prescribed lithium—and the medication comes to help him, in a way that he finds confusing. As he put it to me, “It’s completely contrary to my philosophical attitude, which is that to improve oneself you have to *work* on it.” He is discharged from Sainte-Anne.

“Yoga” then takes a number of turns. Carrère describes volunteering with young migrants in a camp on the Greek island of Leros; he writes of the death of Paul Otchakovsky-Laurens. He then ends—as he has in previous books—on a moment of qualified good cheer. He has met an unnamed woman, whom it’s now possible to identify as Bourgeois-Tacquet: “Considering all the things that can be chalked up against me, I find life generous to give me another chance.”

Carrère wrote the bulk of “Yoga” in the second half of 2019, while he and Devynck were still negotiating their divorce. As we now know—but we don’t learn from “Yoga”—Devynck proposed that Carrère sign an agreement to leave her out of future books, except with her permission. This could be thought of as extending beyond the marriage one aspect of the marriage: Carrère had previously shown Devynck his drafts, and would not have published something over her objections.

A few years ago, when Carrère released a collection of his shorter nonfiction pieces, he included nine columns on matters of sex and love written, in 2003 and 2004, for an Italian magazine. In one, he described a dinner at which he introduced “Hélène,” then his new girlfriend, to an ex. He quotes Hélène saying afterward, “I like the fact that she likes you so much, and I think she’s sexy.” But, she went on, he seemed to be signalling to her his bona fides as an ex; he seemed impatient to get past the period of tempest and passion, and to “settle into a peaceful, loving friendship.” Hélène continued, “That’s not how it’s going to be with me. When it’s over, it’ll be over. When we no longer love each other, we’re not going to be friends.”

When Samuelson, the agent, saw Devynck’s proposed clause, he firmly advised Carrère not to sign. As he said to me, the facts of Carrère’s life “are the ingredients of his writing.”

Carrère signed. “I was wrong to do it,” he told me. But “I wanted to divorce, and my ex-wife told me that I had to sign it.”

They were divorced in March, 2020. Almost immediately, Carrère showed Devynck a draft of “Yoga.” That fall, she published [an article](#), on the Web site of the French edition of *Vanity Fair*, to correct media “rumors and inaccuracies.” The article was critical of Carrère. She said that she’d had no idea he was writing about her even as he was making an agreement not to write about her. She quoted from a note that her ex-husband had sent along with the manuscript. “That I write autobiographical books should not be a surprise to you,” he wrote, adding that “Yoga” would be “incomprehensible if I said nothing about its context.” Devynck observed, “The context, in this case, was me.”

Devynck, who declined to give me an interview, had previously accepted that Carrère’s books would describe her life, often in intimate detail. But, as she recounted in her article, she now wanted to keep “unwelcome revelations about my personal life” out of print—and she certainly didn’t want to be included in what she described as a scene of sexual fantasy. The draft hadn’t made Devynck a central character, but she was in there. Using a yellow highlighter, she marked every reference to herself in the manuscript—all were to be deleted. Later that year, on Instagram, she posted a screenshot of a few sentences by Serge Doubrovsky, the French writer,

describing how his autobiographical novels had made use of the women in his life: “I fed on their flesh. . . . I am a devouring, greedy monster, an eternal suckling infant.” (Devynck has written a book, to be published in September, that will be, in part, about this recent history.)

In the matter of the breakup, “I think *we* were responsible—both,” Carrère told me. The split should have been disclosed in “Yoga,” he said, “even very lightly, very simply, without any accusation.” (In Carrère’s opinion, Devynck’s public remarks have given him license to say a little more about the relationship’s end than he did in the book.) Carrère had imagined that they would negotiate over “Yoga.” “I thought she would say, ‘This I would like you to remove, this I would like you to change,’ ” he told me. “I would have agreed to everything.” He added, “I thought there would be a normal talk, not this incredible thing to say—‘*I must not exist* in your book.’ ”

Carrère and his publisher protested. Carrère recalled telling Devynck that he wanted to acknowledge her generosity of spirit: she’d held his hand at Sainte-Anne even as their relationship was dissolving. Close to tears, he told me, “I want never to forget that we were really happy, that she was a wonderful woman, that I loved her because she was lovable. And that I even showed the best of what I can be.”

In the first weeks of the pandemic, in the apartment over the grocery store, Carrère attempted a rewrite that was highly fictionalized, prefaced by an “Any resemblance to . . .” clause of deniability. Ten pages in, he stopped. His book, he decided, would have to exist with some holes. As he noted in “The Kingdom,” his usual instinct as a writer had been to seek narrative orderliness—to “always connect one sentence with the next, always look for a smooth transition.” Now he tried to take some encouragement from the novelist Georges Perec’s formal experiments with narrative gaps and omissions. “I never experienced such an uncomfortable situation,” Carrère told me. “Honestly, it’s a flaw of the book. Well—this flaw, it’s part of its identity.” He mimed a limp.

He cheated, or at least tested Devynck’s readiness to sue, by quoting a few hundred words about his marriage from “Lives Other Than My Own”—the “my life has been a success” paragraph. He also added a new chapter headed “The place where you don’t lie.” He wrote, “Each book imposes its own

rules, rules we don't set in advance, but rather discover with use. I can't say of this book what I've proudly said of several others: 'It's all true.' While writing it, I have to distort a little, transpose a little, erase a little. Especially erase, because while I can say whatever I want about myself, including less flattering truths, I can't do the same with others."

Carrère's admirers, at home, have sometimes described his work as "autofiction"—a tag, coined by Serge Doubrovsky in the seventies, that has a firmer footing in France than in the United States, and describes work that could reasonably be thought of as memoir but for one reason or another is published as fiction, and has permission to toy with the truth. When that word is applied to Carrère, who has written that his "first rule is not to lie," it sounds a little perverse. But it's meant respectfully: in a publishing and bookselling culture that rarely refers to "nonfiction"—rather, there's literature, and then everything else, in subject categories—"autofiction" helps to ratify a work's literary intent, and keeps it at the front of the bookstore. Laurent Demanze, an academic who has made a specialty of Carrère's work, explained, in a recent e-mail, that in France "many writers have a second profession: the profession of journalist is one of them."

Carrère is largely unimpressed by critical hand-wringing about the ineffable uncertainties at the border of fiction and nonfiction. He has proposed that the line between the categories is "perfectly clear." When he says that he's trying hard to tell the truth, he means it. It's relevant to him that he uses real names. (Sophie is Sophie.) He described it to me as a "point of honor" that in France he has never categorized his nonfiction books as novels. ("Limonov" was published as a novel in the U.K.)

But "Yoga" does exist at a blurry border. Carrère left things out and made things up. He cut the marital breakup that tipped him into madness. (When I put it to him in those terms, he replied, "I can't say more, but that's right.") One of his sisters agreed to stand in for Devynck as the figure in "Yoga" who makes an appointment for him at Sainte-Anne.

And there are fictional aspects of "Yoga" that aren't explained by the Devynck lacuna. The book vividly describes one of Carrère's fellow-volunteers in Leros—an American woman who's a little lost and pitiable,

like the fake victim of the 2015 attacks. Carrère then notes that she's "a partly fictional character."

Soon after, he brings the story of his affair with the "Gemini woman" to a close. According to "Yoga," the affair had begun in a Swiss hotel, without a word being said, after a yoga vacation that both had attended; it had continued on later occasions—but still without the participants fully introducing themselves—in a hotel somewhere in provincial France. We then read that, three years after they last met, he's in an airport terminal in the Azores, failing to enjoy a [Cormac McCarthy](#) novel. He looks up and sees the Gemini woman, and has no doubt that she's seen him. "What would happen if I got up, walked over to her, and took her by the hand?" he writes. "Would we walk out of the terminal together, the way we once walked out of the Gare de Genève-Cornavin, head over to one of the Sheraton or Sofitel hotels you can find at any airport, ask for a room at the front desk, go up together in one of the lifts, without a word, lock ourselves in that room of ours, and go under the radar for a few hours? I don't know. What I'm certain of, though, is that the scenario that's running through my head is also running through hers, and that she knows full well that it's also running through mine. And the knowledge that I have unlimited access to her thoughts and fantasies, and she to mine, makes the situation extraordinarily erotic."

This reads like fiction, and a little like "*L'Usage du Monde.*" I asked Carrère, as politely as possible, if this perhaps hadn't happened.

He was sitting at one end of a deep, pale sofa in his living room. He said, "Uhh," and pulled the corners of his mouth down in a grimace. Then, laughing: "I confess there is a small bit of fiction. This is a bit arranged." (The French edition at one point notes that the Gemini woman is part fictional, although without drawing attention to the airport scene. Carrère cut this warning in the English translation.)

Had he seen someone in the airport who looked like his former lover, and taken things from there? Yes, he said.

Devynck, in her article, protested that "Yoga" had misled readers, not least in the scenes set in Leros. In her view, Carrère implied that he had

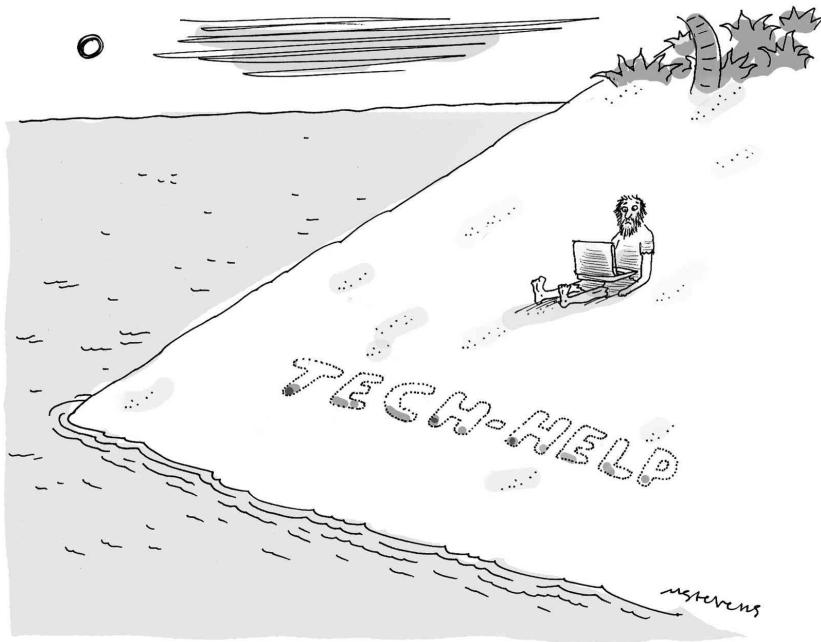
volunteered there for weeks, whereas he'd actually been there only a few days, some of them with her. She also noted that his Leros experience had occurred *before* he was hospitalized; "Yoga" implies that it was afterward. Carrère had allowed the Greek-island interlude to become, she said, part of his story of an "exit from depression, a return to life." Such shaping (which was present even in the first version of the book she saw) was an ethical breach, she proposed: Carrère had lied.

This perhaps goes too far. "Yoga" is imprecise about chronology. Besides, it has its "distort a little" warning. "Yoga" is not *wrong*, nor is it bad. But it's not quite Carrère's best, and readers may feel let down by his new embrace of half-truths. Carrère resembles someone who, upon being invited to loosen his tie, takes off all his clothes. One of the appeals of Carrère's writing—especially in his ruminations about St. Luke and St. Paul in "The Kingdom"—is how he frames passages of speculation or fantasy in a way that leaves readers feeling secure in their understanding of what is *not* speculation. This narrative control extends to his management of time. Indeed, as he writes in "Lives Other Than My Own," referring to the nonlinear conversational style of Étienne Rigal, the judge, "I, on the other hand, care intensely about chronology. I find ellipsis acceptable only as a rhetorical device, duly rationed and controlled by me, otherwise I can't stand it. Perhaps because there are snags in the fabric of my life (which I try to repair by keeping the weave as tight as possible), I need to establish markers—such as 'the previous Tuesday,' 'the next night,' 'three weeks earlier.' " In a recent e-mail, Arnaud Vivant, a leading French critic, described his reaction to "Yoga"'s fiction-making. "I saw myself detaching from the story," he wrote. "Suddenly, Carrère no longer appeared to me as a super journalist-writer, but as a half-novelist playing a journalist."

I asked Carrère why he didn't tell the truth in the airport scene. He thought for a moment, said, "Because . . .," then paused again. "I thought it would have spoiled it a little." What he liked about the story of the Gemini woman was that, this final scene aside, he had been describing something real that sounded fictional: an extended sexual relationship that remained essentially anonymous, with communication of one kind and not the other.

He wanted "homogeneity," he said. That is: to avoid disrupting a narrative of real events that had a novelistic, or filmic, texture, he had added fiction. This

is the kind of thing that happens all the time in works of autofiction.



Cartoon by Mick Stevens

Carrère went on, “Because of all this thing with Hélène, it had a very strange status, *all* of it. So it’s a bit confusing. Not just for the reader but for me, too.”

The jury of the prestigious Prix Goncourt has a clear preference for fiction, and Devynck’s article accused Carrère of trying to boost his chance of winning the prize by including fictional elements. Carrère denies this, and he described to me how he had resisted a suggestion from his publisher to call “Yoga” a novel: “They said, ‘It’s not a big effort, and it would make things *very different.*’ ” In September, 2020, “Yoga” did make it onto the Prix Goncourt’s initial longlist. After Devynck’s article appeared, later that month, the book was not on the final shortlist.

Bourgeois-Tacquet, speaking at home one morning when Carrère was out, observed that he had never experienced heartache or profound grief. Now that his extremes of mood have been smoothed out by medication, he’s left with an equanimity about everyday things, which she described as an almost prelapsarian state. “I have something very important to tell you,” she said. “And I keep saying it to my friends, and to his friends. Emmanuel is the happiest person I know. I’m not joking! I have never met anyone who is like

this. He's always happy. I don't mean *heureux*—I mean *content*. He's O.K. Everywhere is fine. I'm *never* happy. Everything is a problem for me. For him, everything is O.K. He doesn't care. It's raining, it's O.K. It's sunny, it's O.K. He's sick, he's happy to be sick. I'm sick and I want to kill everyone."

He was aware of a deficit in natural empathy, she added, "so he compensates—in everyday life, he's very attentive, more than other men I've been with." It was lovely to live with him. But, after a moment's hesitation, she went on to describe the gift that Carrère had given her on her thirty-fifth birthday, and the arguments that had followed. This was before they moved in together.

His birthday present, he had explained in a letter, was an idea for a movie that she could write and direct. The letter had sketched out a film treatment. "I had never asked him to give me an idea," she said. "I don't need an idea. And that's *not a present*. He really thought it was generous." She added that his proposed screenplay—about a sexual relationship conducted remotely—was an elaboration on one she'd already mentioned to him, months earlier.

A few hours after visiting with Bourgeois-Tacquet, I met Carrère at Le Napoléon, a café within view of his old apartment above the grocery. His former home with Devynck—with whom he is still on poor terms—is around the corner.

We sat at a table on a busy sidewalk. Carrère, who hadn't had a drink in a few years, ordered an orange juice, and described how, not long after the events related in "Yoga," he had "the most simple, the most obvious, and the most promising idea for a book I *ever* had—I thought that it was impossible not to make a great book with such an idea." He laughed. The idea was to talk to people around him.

He would start conversations with those living and working within about a thousand feet of where we were sitting: "I know nothing about them. And I am not that interested. And I think it's bad not to be interested. I think, even, it's wrong." He mentioned a waiter, then working at Le Napoléon, with whom he sometimes briefly chatted about books: "I see him every day. I like him, I think he likes me. But I know nothing of him." Carrère's feeling at the time, he said, was that "you don't have to choose either to make a good

piece of art or to improve the quality of your relationships with other people. The idea was to work on both.” His provisional title was “Proximité.” When Carrère wrote a memo about the project, for himself and for Samuelson, he recalled [the diner scene](#) in “Groundhog Day” in which Bill Murray astonishes Andie MacDowell by giving her intimate biographies of those around them. (“This is Bill. . . . He likes the town, he paints toy soldiers, and he’s gay.”) That was the dream of “Proximité,” he wrote: to generate that astonishment. He added, “But, yes, of course I’ll talk about myself.”

He interviewed a hundred people: the waiter; barbers serving West African-born customers; the owners of a fancy bakery with customers like Carrère; homeless people. He wrote hundreds of thousands of words.

He put it all aside to finish “Yoga.” Later, in 2020, he “opened the file and reread the whole thing,” he said. “It was *bad*. Really bad. Really uninteresting. I closed the file.” He might open it again in a couple of years.

Carrère gave me a little tour of the neighborhood. The stores were closing for the day, and the bars were starting to fill. In Passage Brady, an arcade that’s a little like the one where he now lives, Indian restaurants were waiting for customers. As we walked past one of them, a young waiter made eye contact with Carrère, and the two men said hello. But there was a misalignment: although they’d spoken, occasionally, at a different restaurant, the waiter clearly didn’t remember him, and was greeting him only as a customer. There was a moment of awkwardness, from which the men smilingly extracted themselves.

As we walked on, Carrère said that, for the sake of the article I was writing, it would have been nice if I’d heard people yelling out, at every corner, “Hey, Emmanuel!” He went on, “There are people who know everybody. I would like to be that person, and I’m not.”

Early this year, the Russian theatre and film director Kirill Serebrennikov—who spent some two years under house arrest on charges of embezzlement that are widely thought to have been trumped up, for political reasons—began filming an English-language adaptation of Carrère’s study of Eduard Limonov, who died in 2020. Carrère had agreed to take a small acting role in the movie, which would star Ben Whishaw. And, because Carrère’s personal

calendar seems to synchronize with catastrophic world events, his brief trip to Moscow was scheduled to start on February 24th. François Samuelson would join him.

In a video interview published on February 23rd, Hélène Carrère d'Encausse was asked if Russia would invade Ukraine. She has met [Vladimir Putin](#) a number of times, and the French political establishment has long paid attention to her views, which have largely shown support for, or acceptance of, Putin's policy decisions, including the annexation of Crimea. No, she told her interviewer: Putin was "not an idiot." Early the next morning, Putin invaded Ukraine. Emmanuel Carrère was at home, waiting for a taxi to the airport, when Samuelson called to say, "I think we can't go." Carrère said that he was probably right.

But then he felt bad; he'd let the film down. The next day, he flew to Moscow alone. He shot his scene. By now, Ukrainian forces were fighting to retain control of Kharkiv, where Limonov had spent much of his youth. When Carrère's return flight was cancelled, the film company found him a flight to Dubai. He headed to the airport in a taxi, then asked the driver to turn around. When Bourgeois-Tacquet asked him why he'd decided to stay, he answered, "I'm a journalist." Her reply was not facetious: "O.K., I didn't know." He later mentioned to her that, after the years of abstaining, he'd had a few drinks.

When I called Carrère in Moscow, he'd been there ten days. The Limonov film, he said, was being moved to Bulgaria. He had learned how to use Telegram, the encrypted-communication app. He had spent the week largely with middle-class people of his generation. They were either preparing to leave or imagining a new life under conditions that were bound to fascinate Carrère—they would be cut off from the rest of the world. When we spoke, he was writing a piece about Moscow for *L'Obs*; when it was done, he'd fly home, via Istanbul.

[The article](#), published a few days later, began with a sketch of a woman whom he called Irina. "The only thing that reassures me is that our country is very big," she told Carrère. "There are places to hide. Magadan, Baikal, Altai. . . . I do boating, you know, my friends and I have a small boat, which is moored fifty kilometres from Moscow. My dream was a long trip to

Africa, by rivers and by sea. We had prepared everything, I was going to take a year off, leave next summer. Maybe, instead, I'll go with my daughter to the Arctic Ocean. Maybe we'll live by the Arctic Ocean. Maybe we'll learn to live differently. Maybe it will be good." ♦

By Lauren Collins

By Parul Sehgal

By Michael Schulman

By Masha Gessen

Road Trips

- [Mine Field](#)
- [Wide World of Disney](#)
- [In the Beforetime](#)
- [Night Driving](#)

By [Joy Williams](#)

I drive from Tucson, Arizona, to Centennial, Wyoming, and back twice a year, with my two German shepherds, in a 2004 Toyota Tundra (two hundred and ninety-four thousand miles and counting). I used to drive on 10 East, taking the shortcut to Hatch, New Mexico, before hooking up to 25 and heading north to Denver. This was nice, because it allowed me to stop at the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge—a treasure—and, a bit farther on, to get those killer chili-cheese fries at the Owl Café. But, before that, I'd have to pass the town of Truth or Consequences, never as much fun as you'd think, and the ghastly Elephant Butte Reservoir. Past Albuquerque, there are the pleasantries of Santa Fe and Taos, but then it's a grind to Denver and beyond, before the intersection with 80 West and that patch of Wyoming where enormous trucks are always blowing over in the wind. The drive is just a bit more than a thousand miles.

Lately, I've been taking another route (only about nine hundred and fifty miles), up 77 through Globe and the twisty, magnificent Salt River Canyon and the White Mountain Apache lands to funky Holbrook, a city that still primarily sells rocks, then on through Navajo and Hopi lands into Utah and strutting Moab (which has truly jumped the shark) toward Colorado Springs and the shrinking Colorado River, through the lovely Yampa Valley, past sprawling Steamboat and through the forbidding Rabbit Ears Pass and into Wyoming, the Meadowlark State.

Globe, Arizona, is an old mining town in a breathtaking landscape scarred by that brutal industry, which literally scours out the hearts of mountains, leaving behind toxic craters, lifeless terraced hills of slag, and poisonous ponds of chemical-laced tailings. A mine is a horrible thing to behold—a brazen monument to environmental ruin. An enormous one presses against 177, a side route out of the town of Winkelman, named for somebody. Globe has a couple of inactive ones, still dutifully poisoning their host, the Earth, but, a half-hour drive southwest, outside the town of Superior, Resolution Copper, a subsidiary of two mining colossi, Rio Tinto and B.H.P., has dug a seven-thousand-foot shaft in preparation for the deepest mine in Arizona and one of the largest in the world. This in the Tonto National Forest, a portion of which has been off limits to mining for more than six decades because of its cultural and environmental importance, an area of abundant wildlife, old

oaks, and streams sacred to the Apache—Chi’chil Biłdagoteel—known in Anglo as Oak Flat. Rio Tinto has lusted after Oak Flat for years, but it took a stealth act of congressional chicanery for Resolution to get it. In 2014, Senators John McCain and Jeff Flake slipped a “midnight rider” (a ploy that has proved quite effective in depriving Native Americans of their lands and rights) into a must-pass defense bill. This permitted a land swap whereby Resolution would give up five thousand acres it owned in small parcels here and there in Arizona for two thousand four hundred acres around Oak Flat.

We are in a moment when a scenic drive, a little road trip through a purportedly protected landscape, is still theoretically possible. But we are also realizing our powerlessness to preserve or protect anything—children, the Earth, our instinct to harbor and honor the holy. The iconic saguaros of the Sonoran Desert around Tucson scarcely bloomed this year—thought to be a reaction to stress and persistent drought. Much of the deep wilderness around Globe was scorched in the Telegraph Fire of 2021, which was most likely caused by military jets shooting flares in mock dogfights. Oak Flat is on the National Register of Historic Places, but copper mining would destroy it, along with an additional sixteen thousand acres of wildlands that would become the dump site of a billion and a half tons of toxic waste. Despite years of resistance and litigation by tribes and environmental groups—still ongoing—in 2013 Resolution’s shaft pierced an underground river and now must continually be “dewatered,” at the rate of five hundred gallons a minute, with predictably devastating effects on the aquifer of one of the country’s driest states. The mine will not be operational for years, but already the hoist towers loom over Oak Flat, a heraldic image of woe.

Road trips should be fun, of course, but landscapes can be quite emotional. As you travel through our threatened land, you might want to respect, praise, lament, resist, think.

If you’re weary (and who can blame you, with all that’s going on) and just want a suggestion for where to stay on this particular route, try the dear and simple Recapture Lodge, in Bluff, Utah. If you make it to Laramie, Wyoming, the vegetarian restaurant Sweet Melissa and its attendant bar, Front Street Tavern, should not be missed. ♦

By Nick Paumgarten

By Vinson Cunningham

By Patricia Marx

By [Akhil Sharma](#)

When I was in college, all I really wanted was to be a white guy. I didn't want to be a sophisticated or important white guy. I thought the whole point of being white was to be able to slip into the background. Also, my tastes naturally drift toward the mass market. I once announced to a friend that what I was most looking forward to was the next Paula Abdul album and the next James Bond movie.

My best friend in college, Peter Shiao, was a lot like me, except kinder and less weird. Peter was of Taiwanese origin and for a while he wrote his name as "Peter Shaw." He told me he'd first realized that he wasn't white when he was looking in the mirror, at age eleven or twelve, and suddenly noticed his eyes. Both of us were the much loved sons of nervous parents. Among the ways our parents kept us in line was by not giving us money. And the way we dealt with them was by lying.

During spring break of our sophomore year, in 1990, Peter and I decided to drive from New Jersey to Disney World. We did this not out of some ironic feeling for Disney and what Disney represents but because we wanted to ride Space Mountain.

We left on a Friday evening and took rolls of quarters. The quarters were because we would have to phone our parents and pretend that we were still in New Jersey.

We went in my gray Honda Civic, and the journey was immediately wonderful. This was the first time that either Peter or I had struck out into America. Many years later, I read "On the Road" and realized that our drive had triggered the same ecstatic response in me as the one that Kerouac describes. I loved the enormous highways, how they lifted us and then gently set us down. To me, authentic America was fast-food restaurants in rest stops and eighteen-wheelers asking, How am I driving? All around us seemed to be life: life in a traffic jam near Baltimore and a sudden fog in Virginia, life in the accent of a woman in Georgia and the click-click of palm fronds rubbing against one another in Florida, life that seemed more real than our own, because it was occurring in spaces that in my mind belonged to white people. One of the anxieties of feeling peripheral is the sense that

what one loves will probably be taken away. On our drive, Peter told me he was certain that when he got married his wife would cheat on him.

We finally arrived at Disney World. The sky was a perfect blue that made everything beneath it—Cinderella's castle, Big Thunder Mountain Railroad—picturesque.

My experience has been that even public places in America are segregated. Nonwhites tend to cluster in certain sections of the beach. Many restaurants are frequented primarily by people of one race. But the lines at Disney World were like no public spaces that I had ever been in before, in that there were white and Black and Asian and Hispanic people standing next to one another. Most of Peter's and my time was spent in these lines. Every ride seemed to require a long wait, and there was nothing to do except talk to those beside us. Day after day, we stood and talked. My tendency with white people back then was to make up stories. Lying was a way of showing disrespect, a disrespect that came out of my fear of whites. I told one man I spoke with that Peter and I had driven down in a white Lotus. Another I told that we were the sons of ambassadors. These lies made Peter uncomfortable. He asked me to stop telling them. I did, and then he and I began having ordinary conversations with our line-mates. Some of these led to confidences. A woman had recently got divorced and was recovering from this by treating herself to a trip to Disney World. A man told me about visiting his grandfather in a nursing home and petting his dog. His grandfather, who had dementia, shouted, "Don't hit my dog," and rose to punch him. The man thought, Well, I guess I've got to let him hit me.

I didn't know what to do with these intimacies, but they affected me. I remember reading in Malcolm X's autobiography about his trip to Mecca and how it made him realize that whites had feelings, just like Blacks. I had the same experience in the lines at Disney World. White people were human, too.

Each night, when we left Disney World, Peter and I would drive to a rest area to sleep in our car. There were other people there, too—not just couples but entire families, some asleep with their car doors open. Peter and I would keep our windows down, and sometimes, at two or three in the morning,

we'd hear people murmuring to each other. Their voices felt all of a piece with the sky and the soft air and the clicking palm trees. ♦

By Ali Fitzgerald

By Jack Balderrama Morley

By John Cassidy

By Katy Waldman

By [Yiyun Li](#)

Two trips, two poets, two permanent farewells: this is one way of framing a particular week in my life. It was September, 2017, which, seen from 2022, could nearly be called the good old days. Yet so rarely do we look at the present, innocent of fresh disaster, as a rosy beforetime: we live in the aftertime of events, some more catastrophic than others.

I was in London for William Trevor's memorial and had planned to go to Hull to see a Philip Larkin exhibition. "Will you be taking the train or driving?" a friend asked over tea and cake. I said I always take the train when one is available. Five days later, I was planning to visit the Emily Dickinson Museum, in Amherst, Massachusetts. The distance between London and Hull is the same as the distance between Princeton, where I live, and Amherst: a little more than two hundred miles, but for the Amherst trip my only reasonable option was to drive. We talked about the two poets, complex figures who had chosen not to become parents. We talked about British and American politics, post Brexit referendum, post 2016 election. It was one of those conversations: predictable, inevitable, only marginally memorable.

The Larkin exhibition was in the university library at Hull, where he'd served as a librarian. It displayed hundreds of personal items: his collection of ties; letters to his mother, neatly stacked in a glass case, their contents protected from voyeuristic eyes; a minute Hitler figurine, which had belonged to Larkin's father; the hard covers and spines of Larkin's diaries, among them one decorated with collages of scantily dressed women cut out of magazines (the insides of those diaries, which he had entrusted to Monica Jones, his longtime companion, had been shredded shortly after his death).

The Emily Dickinson Museum, which is made up of two houses, including the one Dickinson lived in, would offer a more intimate milieu: wallpapers, curtains, mirrors, teacups, books. All these I have not laid eyes on, and perhaps never will. Shortly after I arrived at my hotel in Amherst, in the early afternoon, a text message prompted me to return to the reception desk. I checked out and rushed to my car. I might have driven past Dickinson's house that day, but I wouldn't have noticed.

A road trip by car has some advantages: flexibility (a train won't change its schedule for personal emergencies); alternative routes to bypass traffic (which my G.P.S. directed me to do on that day); a secluded space, where one can despair and hope, free from the world's gaze. A train, on the other hand, makes a public stage for private woes. I had booked a seat in the quiet carriage for my trip to Hull. When the train left King's Cross, the only other travellers were a pair of parents and their teen-age children, a boy and a girl. They sat down at a table across the aisle from me, took out a pack of cards, and began a jubilant game.

"Excuse me," I said, pointing to a sign. "This is a quiet car."

"A quiet carriage?" the father said. "That won't do!"

Won't do for what—I marvelled—or for whom? "You can go to another car if you want to play."

"We booked these seats," he said.

"You booked a quiet carriage."

He turned to his wife. "Did I tell you to book a quiet carriage?"

She searched in her purse for their tickets, looked at them, and said nothing. The boy put down a card, and they resumed the game, the mother playing silently, the children speaking in stage whispers, the father at his normal volume. I turned toward the window and watched the reflection of the family with a detached interest, which is to say, I despised the man, pitied the woman, and tried to read the children's feelings.

At the next station, a man with a backpack boarded. What followed was a routine drama. The man admonished the family. They played on in hushed tones; even the father lowered his voice. Then the father's phone rang, and he began an uninhibited conversation. The man yelled at the father. The mother studied her cards, held in both hands, arranged evenly. Had they been travelling by car, she wouldn't have booked the wrong carriage. Her husband might still have found fault with her, but she would have suffered

away from a stranger's scrutiny. Even so, they would have been the same family: a car or a train is only the context.

Later that week, I would be driving through an autumn sunset, calling my son's number, reaching the voice mail every time. I could sense in my bones that the worst had happened, yet a road trip allowed time and space for disbelief. Disbelief is a kind of hope.

I arrived home after nightfall. Two police detectives and a uniformed officer met me. When I think about that week, I often think about the family on the train to Hull, carved into my memory the way passersby are accidentally caught in a snapshot. We were fellow-travellers in the beforetime: what difference did it make that they were noisy in a quiet carriage? ♦

By Andrew Solomon

By Masha Gessen

By David Sedaris

By Anna Holmes

By [Uwem Akpan](#)

The moon made I-15 look special as it cut through a ghostly desert and distant hills. It was in the small hours of a morning in early 2011. I was returning to Las Vegas in my silver Saab S.U.V., having taken a break from my writing to go for a drive. I was a fellow at the Black Mountain Institute, at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. As someone who loves to drive at night, I was quietly enjoying the hum of the engine against the steady purr of tires on the tarmac, and relishing the contrast with Michigan, where I'd been living, as well as with my home state of Akwa Ibom, in southern Nigeria. I was so thrilled that I considered cruising past my exit.

Suddenly, my rearview mirror sparkled with the flashers of a police car. Thinking that it must be chasing an emergency ahead, I moved over and slowed down. Yet the car pulled up behind me in some California or Nevada city whose name I no longer remember. Afraid, I rolled down my window, switched on the interior light, and sat like a stone. The wind was warm and dry, as if I were being sprayed with fine sand.

The cop, a white man, appeared on the passenger side and knocked on the window. It startled me, because I didn't expect him there. Worse, his eerie reflection made it seem as though he had two heads. I scrambled to lower the window and greeted him. When I said, "Officer, any problem?" he asked where I was going, his eyes searching my car. "Returning to Vegas," I replied.

I was confused by his silence. Should I ask again why he'd stopped me? Or was it a mistake to have asked? My mouth became so dry that I kept sucking my cheeks as though to plumb them for saliva. I knew that he disliked my stupid facial movement, because his own face formed a scowl. "Officer, don't you want to see my license and registration?" I asked. I handed them to him, then he disappeared. I studied the desert skies.

After he returned my papers, I made to leave.

"But your registration says Michigan. Is it your car?"

"I live in Michigan. It's *my* Saab, as my registration says."

“Did you ship it into Vegas?”

“I drove.”

“And how long a drive is that?”

“Thirty hours.”

“Alone?”

“Yes.”

“Quite a drive, huh.”

“Well, I slept in Omaha and Denver. My best memory was the sudden twisty descent into Glenwood Canyon on I-70. The scenery, the adrenaline, my car snapped out of cruise control. Look, I love to *see* this beautiful country. On my way back to Michigan, I plan to go north to revisit picturesque Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, before hitting Fargo, North Dakota—”

“But what are *you* doing in Vegas?” he said, cutting into my attempt to let him know that long road trips were normal for me. I said I was a fellow at U.N.L.V. He excused himself, then yawned and stretched. When he adjusted his belt, all I could see was his handgun. I wished I were in any one of the cars passing us.

“Could you come to the back of the car for a sec?” he said when I asked again what the problem was. My heart raced and my fingers shook, though I held on to the wheel. Fear glued me to my seat.

What if this strange officer who has refused to say why he stopped me shoots me? What if he says I jumped out and pursued him to the back to attack him? *Ee-wi ben akpaniko isok irung ajid?* Who will tell the truth to my family and friends? With all the *ibak-ibak* stories of American police and Blacks, everyone was already upset by my love of night driving. Stephen King’s “Desperation,” a novel about a possessed Nevada deputy abducting people, crossed my mind. Is it a crime to drive a used Saab? Why ask about my cross-country craze yet stop me from sharing? I was unsettled by his

unusual behavior. Was he tired, having a bad shift, or just trying to provoke me?

He asked how long I'd been in Nevada. Since August, I said. When he told me that it was an offense not to change my license, I explained that my fellowship was for only nine months. "O.K., please, just come to the back of the car," he said. "I want to show you something."

I braced and told myself, if he pulled his gun, I was going to fight for my life. My spirit was set. I watched him carefully as he walked ahead of me. He was about my build. He stopped and faced my license plate. I stood close enough to smell his sweat. He pointed at the frame around the plate and complained that it was blocking the registration decal. "I mean, not the whole thing," he corrected himself. "Just a bit of it."

I thanked him and promised to remove the frame completely. "Officer, ha, what kind of eyes do you have to spot this tiny decal this night?" We ground out fake chuckles and went our separate ways. ♦

By Rachel Kushner

By Lauren Groff

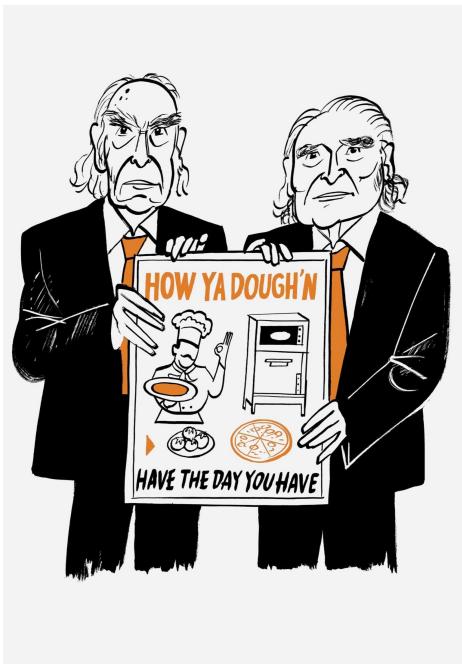
By Akhil Sharma

By Jay Martel

Signage Dept.

- [The Wes Andersons of Sign-Making](#)

By [Henry Alford](#)



Carlos Cevallos and Miguel Cevallos Illustration by João Fazenda

Carlos Cevallos, eighty-four, and his brother Miguel, eighty-one, make whimsical, hand-drawn signs and posters for a living. The other day, they were sitting in a booth at a coffee shop in Lenox Hill. The brothers, who live together nearby, were dressed, as they are every day, in baggy suits and neckties. They both used a knife and a fork to eat a corn muffin.

Seated across from them was their friend and helper, Aviram Cohen, forty-one, who asked, “You want me to show you the jobs for next week?” The brothers gravely nodded. Then, using a mixture of English and Spanish—the brothers are Ecuadorian but were raised in Colombia, and speak limited English—Cohen outlined six signs that were to be made, including one for a gastropub in New Jersey called Salt.

“Irish,” Carlos said when he saw a sketch of plant life that Cohen had drawn according to instructions the customer had given when placing the order via the brothers’ Instagram account.

“*Flores*,” Miguel added.

Carlos muttered “shamrog” a few times before landing triumphantly on “shamrock.”



"O.K., Belinda, America wants to know . . . How Will You Settle!"
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

If you've ever walked under the elevated 7 train in Queens and encountered the swirl of *pupuserías* and loan sharks and taco trucks known as the [Roosevelt Avenue](#) corridor, you've likely seen examples of the Cevallos brothers' *cartelismo*, the South American term for hand-lettered posters and signage. Maybe it was a sign in the window of the restaurant El Toro Bravo heralding an expectations-heavy holiday ("FELIZ DÍA DE LAS MADRES"), or perhaps a pushcart emblazoned with the words "ELOTES LOCOS" ("crazy corn"). Since the fall of 2018, when Cohen started an Instagram account to post photographs of the Cevalloses' work, commissioning posters from the brothers has become, according to the food Web site Eater, "a rite of passage" for hip establishments in Brooklyn and Manhattan (e.g., Van Leeuwen Ice Cream and Café Habana). At the retro luncheonette Baz Bagel, in Little Italy, diners are greeted by a poster of a fireman hosing down a flaming bagel ("BAZ BAGELS / GET 'EM WHILE THEY'RE HOT?"). At Greenwich Letterpress, a stationery store on Christopher Street, a Cevallos poster proclaiming the store "A SISTER OWNED COMPANY" hangs above a trio of antique-looking cat masks, creating an impromptu shrine; at the dank man cave that is the Academy Record Annex, in Greenpoint, a framed Cevallos poster ("ACADEMY RECORD ANNEXES / GOOD TO YOUR EARHOLE") overlaps a photograph of an underpants-clad Prince. Recent commissions have come in from Russia, Wales, and South Korea, and have

included posters honoring pets, birthdays, and charities, as well as advertisements for sourdough home delivery, Arthur Ashe Stadium, and a law student’s “devil dog lawyering.” Also, a poster bearing a marriage proposal, and one quoting the “[Midnight Cowboy](#)” line “ ’Eyyyy, I’m walkin’ here!”

Making art is the only job the brothers have ever had. As kids in Bogotá, they supported themselves by drawing caricatures of tourists in hotels. Carlos moved to New York in 1974, to join his sign-making older brother Victor, who died in 2012; Miguel came in 2002. Carlos and Miguel, both bachelors, work side by side in their apartment, using Sharpies and poster paints; Miguel does the layouts and the lettering, and Carlos does the coloring. Each order takes about three weeks to fulfill.

Cohen befriended the brothers in 2017, when his wife needed a sign for her new yoga studio in Jackson Heights. He’d noticed the colorful posters in his neighborhood and assumed that they were the work of a teen-age girl. The Cevalloses were nocturnal at the time, and when Cohen tracked them down they proposed meeting at 9:30 P.M. Cohen works building and mounting exhibitions at museums around the city, but he considers his unpaid gig with the brothers—taking orders, translating, posting their work on Instagram ([@cevallos_bros](#))—to be less an act of curation than an effort to help a vulnerable population. The brothers, whose Roosevelt Avenue clientele shrivelled during the pandemic, have no family in the States; they call Cohen an “*amigo verdadero*.”

Back at the coffee shop, Carlos and Miguel finished their muffin. A middle-aged woman seated near them, seeing the two solemn-looking men in their suits—the Cevalloses have been featured on the Web site Accidentally Wes Anderson—asked if they were Italian. No, no, they haltingly explained—*ecuatorianos*. Ah, the woman said. She introduced herself by name. Miguel, looking down at the floor to avoid eye contact, pointed tentatively at his brother and said, “Carlos.” Then he pointed at himself and said, “Michelangelo.” ♦

By Daniel Alarcón

By E. Tammy Kim

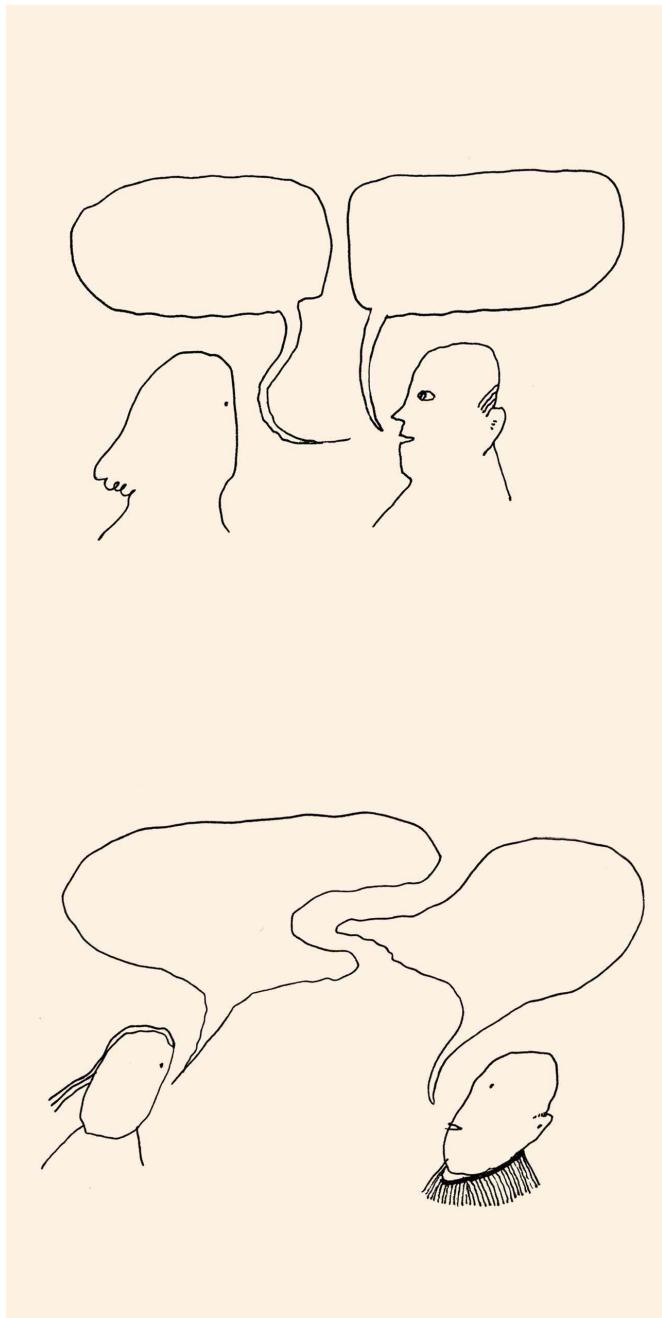
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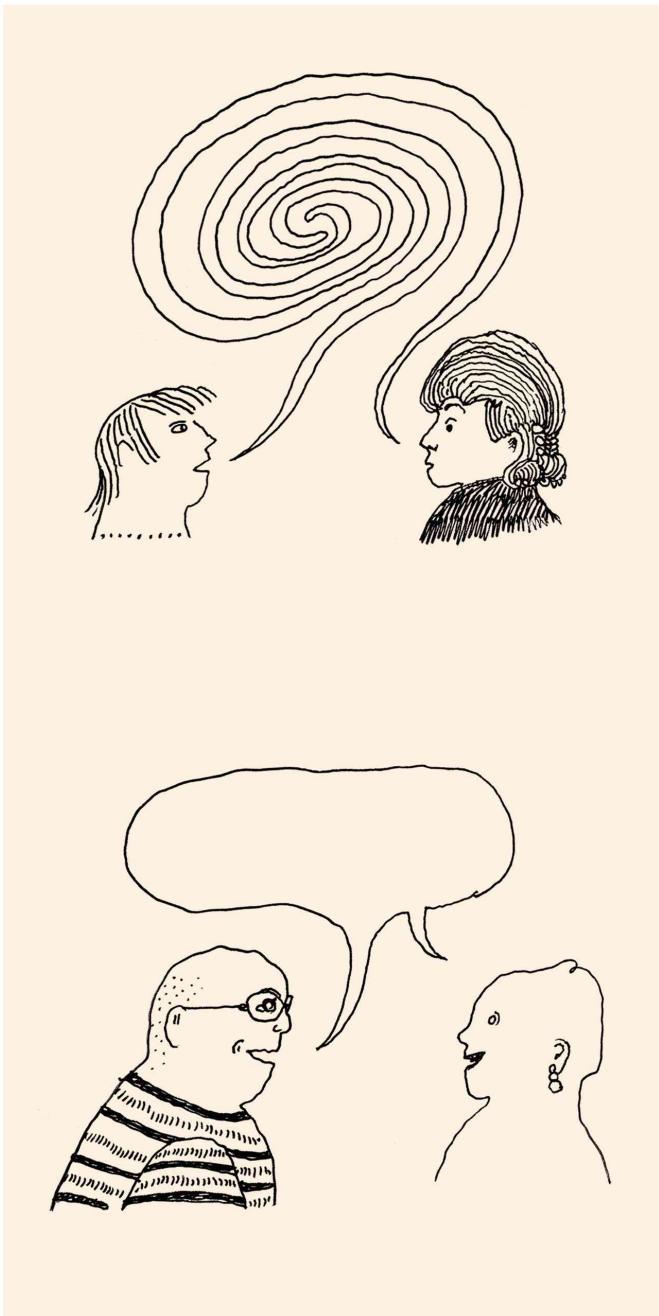
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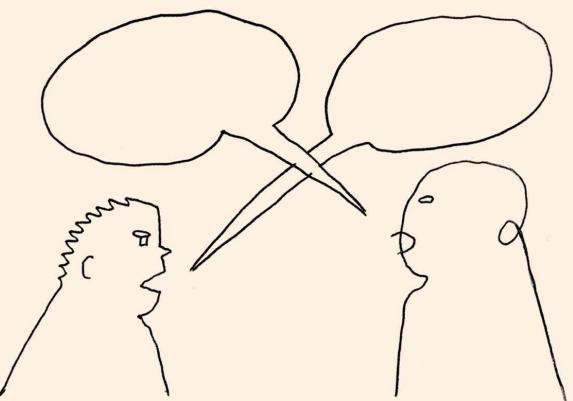
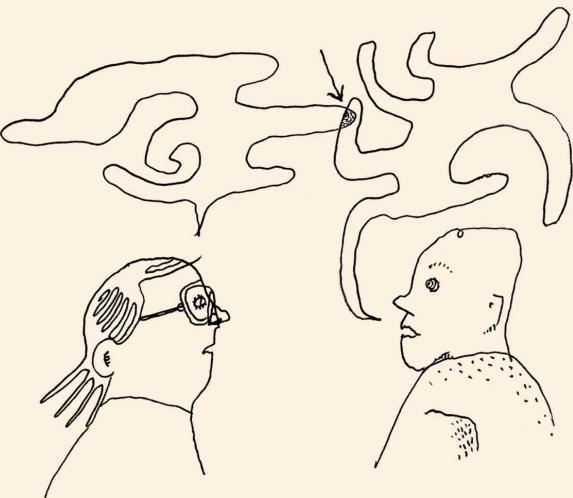
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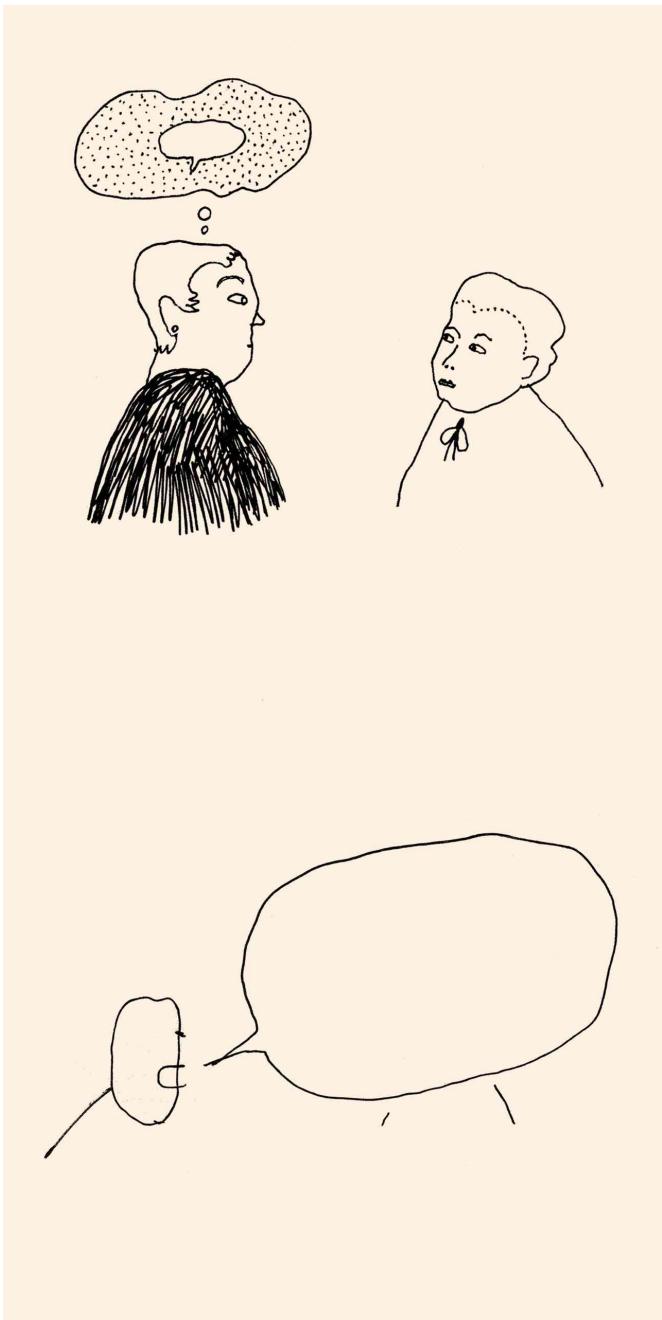
- [Rebellion of the Speech Bubble!](#)

By [Liana Finck](#)









By Dan Abromowitz

By Rachel Syme

By Caitlin Reid

By Emma Green

Tables for Two

- [Evelia's Tamales, from Pushcart to Brick and Mortar](#)

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

Is there a culinary innovation more practical than the *tamal*? Tamales, believed to have originated in Mesoamerica as early as 8000 B.C., were considered sacred by pre-Hispanic civilizations and were offered to the gods but were also used as portable fuel for long journeys, hunting excursions, and armies in battle. To make tamales, corn kernels are steeped in water and calcium hydroxide (lye)—a process called nixtamalization—then rinsed, drained, and milled to be turned into masa, a nutritious and filling paste seasoned with salt and lard or oil. A big spoonful of masa—plus some combination of meat, vegetable, cheese, and salsa—gets tightly wrapped in dried corn husk, then steamed until firm. Earlier this year, archeologists posited that not even the steeping liquid was wasted by the Mayans. In a pair of ancient stone toilets, they discovered microscopic by-products of nixtamalization; the leftover lye water, it seems, was used to flush.



Tamales are steamed in enormous stockpots that are sealed with plastic wrap.

At Evelia's Tamales Restaurant, in North Corona, Queens, the facilities are luxurious, but the origin story is one of pure practicality. In 2000, Evelia Coyotzi left Tlaxcala, Mexico, and her two-year-old son, to find a job in New York. In September, 2001, she was working at a McDonald's near the World Trade Center. When it closed after 9/11, she began to make tamales at home, in Queens, to sell from a shopping cart on the corner of Junction Boulevard and Roosevelt Avenue. (Later, she upgraded to a proper

pushcart.) In the shadow of the elevated subway tracks, she arrived every day at 4:30 A.M. to catch the early-morning rush of commuters eager for a *guajolota*, also known as a *torta de tamal*—two tamales, husked and stuffed into a crusty roll, a further improvement on efficient portability—and a cup of warm *atole*, a drinkable porridge made from sweetened masa.

For twenty years, Coyotzi made a living this way, through inclement weather and frequent hassling from the N.Y.P.D., having been refused one of the city's inexplicably meagre number of street-vender permits, earning countless loyal customers and catching the attention of Anthony Bourdain. In January, 2020, she took out a lease on a storefront half a mile from her cart's usual spot. This past March, she finally opened it.



Coyotzi's cart is still parked every day beneath the elevated subway tracks.

An undercurrent of pragmatism runs through the bright, clean counter-service restaurant, which opens only slightly later than the cart, at 5 A.M. (It closes at 10 P.M.) But there's also a sense that Coyotzi is finally getting to relax a little, and have some fun. Hanging on a wall of faux greenery is a neon sign that reads "live / love / eat tamales." On the Web site, managed by her now twenty-four-year-old son, John, there is merch for sale; a cheerful printout taped to the deli case the other day announced "*TENEMOS ICE COFFEE.*"

A selection of tortas includes the Viagra, featuring breaded chicken, chorizo, and sliced hot dog, and the Supreme, whose cross-section reveals Flamin' Hot Cheetos encased by Oaxacan string cheese. An *atole* called Galleta is made with crushed animal crackers. Masa is pressed into tortillas for tacos, scattered with crumbles of sweet-and-salty neon-pink chorizo, minced white onion, and cilantro; for *huevos divorciados*, topped with gently fried eggs and thick red and green salsas; and for sale in packs of three, to accompany carnitas and barbacoa by the pound.



Expanded menu offerings in the restaurant include carnitas and barbacoa both by the pound.

Still, tamales are the main draw, both the traditional, in corn husks, and the Oaxaqueño, featuring heftier portions of masa, which take on a blockier shape when wrapped, Oaxaca style, in slick banana leaves, tied with twine. I'm especially partial to the traditional tamale laced with a chili-based sweet-and-smoky mole that plays perfectly off the pure, nutty flavor of the corn and hides tender shreds of chicken. Through the doorway into the kitchen, enormous stockpots of tamales are visible on the stove, steam forcing their plastic-wrap lids to go convex, bulging into domes, antiquity adapted. (*Tamales \$1.50-\$3; other dishes \$3-12.*) ♦

By Bryan Washington

By Rachel Kushner

By Ling Ma

By David Wright Faladé

The Art World

- A Frequently Misunderstood American Master

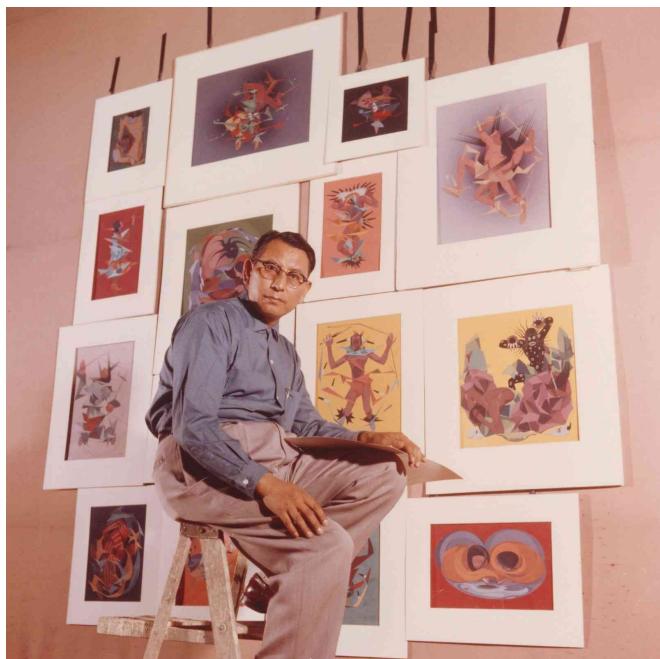
By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

In town with some summer hours to spare? Visit “Dakota Modern: The Art of Oscar Howe,” the overdue retrospective of a remarkable Yanktonai Dakota painter, who died in 1983, at the age of sixty-eight. The show graces the always entralling New York branch of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian, housed in the Alexander Hamilton U.S. Custom House—a prodigy of Beaux-Arts architecture by Cass Gilbert, from 1907—hard by Battery Park. It’s admission-free. Too few attend. (Some days, you may have the place and its spectacular collection of Native American art and artifacts almost to yourself, except for the occasional school group.) Howe is a frequently misunderstood American master. He bridged ethnic authenticity and internationalist derring-do, though condescension from establishment institutions and proprietary tribute from some sectarian advocates have hindered his recognition as a straight-up canonical modernist. Really, go see.

In Howe’s “Sacro-Wi-Dance (Sun Dance),” from 1965, sacrificially self-wounded male celebrants are seen from an improbable viewing point, below and looking up, as they tumble from a foreshortened, serpentine rendering of the rite’s lofty, horizontally striped central pole. The vertiginous composition incorporates tropes of [Surrealism](#) and [Abstract Expressionism](#), which, having become second nature to Howe, hardly vitiate the intensity of this particular religious rapture. A palette of russet, yellow, and black has precedents in the Lakota and Dakota crafts of hide painting and beadwork. But racial identity wasn’t so much asserted as baked into Howe’s pragmatic appropriation, and advancement, of sophisticated aesthetics. In “Bear Dancer” (1962), illustrative details—a bear’s head, a wielded spear—lurk unobtrusively amid cubistically distributed abstract forms. Yet more peekaboo are bits of figures in the plangent gallimaufry of “Dance of the Heyoka” (1954). Such paintings embody no rationale except their own.

Howe owed the flowering of his genius to silver-lined childhood bad luck. Born in 1915, with the tribal name Mazuha Hokshina, on an impoverished reservation in South Dakota, he was shipped off, seven years later, to one of the United States’ federally run boarding schools. At the time, these schools harshly endeavored to suppress Native youths’ ancestral ways. He spoke no English when he arrived. Beset by eye and skin diseases and, in 1924,

traumatized by news of the death, from an illness, of his mother, he contemplated suicide. The school let him leave to convalesce. He spent roughly a year back on his home reservation with a sage grandmother, Shell Face, whose exciting stories imbued him with a profound knowledge of tribal history and myth. Such matters were alien to his father, who scorned his artistic aspirations. (Manual labor was then the all but obligatory horizon of ambition for most reservation-raised boys.) Howe subsequently returned to the school, which, in the interim, had undergone humane reforms. After graduating, in 1933, he enrolled in a trailblazing art program at the Santa Fe Indian School, in New Mexico.



Oscar Howe, photographed on March 30, 1958, at South Dakota State University, with a selection of his paintings. Photograph courtesy National Museum of the American Indian / Oscar Howe Family

Howe quickly became a leading light in what was dubbed the Studio Style, which originated at the school, elegantly arraying linear tribal motifs in negative space with sparing touches of color. One example in the show, "Blue Antelope" (circa 1934-38), delicately represents the eponymous animal beneath a floating, austere geometric arch. By the early fifties, after the Studio movement had begun to devolve into gift-shop fare, Howe was onto something rangier, informed by an avid appreciation of Western modern art, if at first only by way of reproduction, while being sustained, in South Dakota, by teaching jobs and, eventually, by commissioned work on public murals.

Howe served in Europe as an Army artillery soldier during the Second World War, almost never speaking of the experience except sardonically. (His unflagging goal, he remarked, was to avoid earning a Purple Heart.) Returning to the U.S. in 1945, he was joined two years later by his fiancée, a German woman named Heidi Hampel, whom he had met and courted during the war. She was to be an astute and redoubtable partner for the rest of his life. The couple reunited in New York and, travelling west by train, married during a stopover in Chicago, to elude a law against miscegenation in South Dakota, where they settled. Howe resumed teaching and achieved B.A. and M.F.A. degrees at universities there and in Oklahoma. Their daughter, Inge Dawn, who was born in 1948, still administers her father's legacy.

“Dakota Modern,” crisply curated by Kathleen Ash-Milby, consists almost exclusively of works in tempera, watercolor, gouache, or casein on paper. The execution is phlegmatically deliberate. Photographs of Howe, always neatly dressed and placidly industrious, usually seated at a table, consort oddly with the power-packed compositions and aggressive hues of his pictures. The upshot is a channelling of sheer, visionary imagination, as if the artist were taking dictation from an unseen demiurge. Do some of the effects seem cartoonish, with figuration that anticipated popular styles of graphic fiction which took hold in the nineteen-seventies? Perhaps. Still, generic characters in melodramatic poses strategically depersonalize subjects to the benefit of thematic punch and decorative finesse. The results exalt audacity and breathe beauty. Howe seldom repeated himself. Each work can feel one-off, fulfilling a special mission to a fare-thee-well. If any quality is consistent, it’s suddenness.

Howe’s topics are rarely historical or patently political, with the main, sensational exception of the gouache “Wounded Knee Massacre” (1959-60), which, at twenty-two inches high and twenty-eight inches wide, is smallish but feels monumental. It depicts a firing line of soldiers along the edge of a ditch, who are riddling defenseless Lakota men below while, in the distance, bluecoats decimate other groups with weaponry that includes a sinister rapid-fire Hotchkiss gun. (One rifleman, neglecting to shoot, gazes askance with an enigmatically goofy grin. He haunts me.) Howe said that his intention here was strictly reportorial, born of an urge to acknowledge the atrocity that, in 1890, effectively ended Native military resistance to white conquest.



"*Fleeing a Massacre*," from 1969. Art work courtesy National Museum of the American Indian / Oscar Howe Family

One other picture in the show, "Fleeing a Massacre" (1969), may also allude to that event, if not to some other in the United States' annals of exterminatory violence. A panicked young woman is seen on a galloping but bloodied and overstrained horse, the image framed in lyrical arabesques. Collective tragedy is a given, not an issue, for Howe, who strove neither to outrage nor to comfort anyone.

His was a lonely course, incurring resistance even from compatriots who routinely hailed him. As late as 1958, he was denied consideration for a prize in an annual show of Native artists because the new painting that he submitted, "Umini Wacipi (War and Peace Dance)," was declared "not Indian," despite its indubitable subject matter. (It is reproduced in the fine catalogue of "Dakota Modern," but its present whereabouts are uncertain.) He responded with the sole publicized polemic of his career, a letter to an organizer of the show which mocked the tourist-bait "pretty, stylized pictures" favored by the officially sanctioned authorities. "Are we to be held back forever with one phase of Indian painting, that is the most common way?" he wrote. "We are to be herded like a bunch of sheep, with no right for individualism, dictated as the Indian has always been, put on reservations and treated like a child . . ."

Another setback to Howe's autonomy, though it increased his fame, occurred in 1960. He travelled to California with "Wounded Knee Massacre," at the urging of the actor [Vincent Price](#), who had collected work by him, for a show of Native art in Hollywood. The exhibition took place, but the personal invitation proved to be a ruse, to trick the artist into appearing on the television show "This Is Your Life," which made a shtick of surprising featured guests with sentimental exposures of their life stories. Having thus been ostracized on the one hand and then exoticized on the other, Howe stood alone.

Howe took as little interest in political contestation as he did in commercial pastiche. But he had to be conscious of the drama that he enacted through his forthright embrace of his Dakota heritage without either parochial constriction or outward rancor, however justifiable that rancor might have been. He proposed, and exemplified, a tough but open-ended imperative for Native American artists of all stylistic stripes—looking back with fealty and sideways with candor while forging ahead—in a statement that he published in 1959: "This is our art . . . and here is where we are making our last stand. . . . The least we can do is to fight this last battle, that Indian Culture may live forever." ♦

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