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# THE NEW YORKER



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## A Critic at Large

- [Gayl Jones's Novels of Oppression](#)

In the author's work, colonization and racial hatred turn mother against child, Black against white, man against woman.

By [Hilton Als](#)

## Content

In 1975, the professor and poet Michael S. Harper conducted a lengthy interview with Gayl Jones, a twenty-six-year-old writer from Lexington, Kentucky. Jones was a former graduate student of his in the literary-arts program at Brown University, and the occasion was the publication of her first book, "Corregidora," a short, baroque novel about love and history in Truman-era Kentucky. The novel had been edited by Toni Morrison, who was then working as a senior editor at Random House. (It was Harper who had first sent Jones's work to Morrison.) But Jones had attracted notice before she was accepted at Brown, in 1971; she'd had a modest upbringing, and the critic Elizabeth Hardwick, a fellow-Lexingtonian and a friend of a teacher who took a special interest in Jones, had helped her secure a scholarship at Connecticut College, where she majored in English. While there, Jones apparently jettisoned an early desire to write like Henry James and began to write like herself. In the interview with Harper, she explained that her writing had grown out of listening, that the stories she'd heard adults tell one another at home and the tales that her mother, Lucille, had written and then read aloud to Jones and her brother had had a profound effect on her. (Jones's grandmother Amanda Wilson wrote plays to be performed at church, and her father, Franklin, worked as a cook.) As a result, Jones told Harper, she was most engaged by writers "whose 'voice' I can trust and who I feel can 'hear.' " She went on:

A lot of European and Euro-American writers . . . have lost the ability to hear. Now Joyce could hear and Chaucer could hear. A lot of Southern American writers can hear. . . . "Finnegans Wake" is an oral book. You can't sight-read [it] with any kind of truth. . . . Of course, black writers—it goes without saying why we've always had to hear. And Native American writers, and Latin American writers. It's all tied in with linguistic relationships, and with the whole socio-psychological-political-historical manifestations of these linguistic relationships. . . . If you don't have to hear, if your humanity isn't somehow involved in hearing, you don't.

In “Corregidora,” people listen and respond to what they’ve heard, but the responses are, at times, delayed reactions to some other injury, a wound of memory, a deforming history, which sets off another reaction—a fight, or some other kind of physical abuse—that has nothing to do with the interlocutor’s original intention. Usually, the person wanting to be heard is a woman. Like all of Jones’s subsequent novels—her fifth, “Palmares,” which came out in September, is the first she’s published in more than twenty years—“Corregidora” is told in the first person and relies on long stretches of spare dialogue to keep the action going. Ursula, the narrator, is a twentysomething blues singer in Kentucky; when the book opens, in 1947, she’s married to a brutish man named Mutt, who doesn’t like the way other men look at her when she performs. So he knocks her down some stairs. She lands in such a way that the “doctors in the hospital said my womb would have to come out.” There will be no “generations” from her.

Ursula’s mother and her maternal grandmother were sired by Corregidora, a white Portuguese slaveowner who preys on Black women and who pimped out Ursula’s Great Gram. Ursula’s father was a Black man named Martin, who loved her mother and beat her, and is there much of a difference between the two in this novel, where love begets violence at nearly every turn? In an extraordinary scene near the middle of the book, Ursula returns to Bracktown, where she grew up, because, she says, “I couldn’t be satisfied until I had seen Mama, talked to her, until I had discovered her private memory.” Which is what? The story of the women who came before Ursula and who made her, a story that is inseparable from Corregidora’s blood, Corregidora’s savagery. At the close of the visit, Ursula’s mother shares a memory that involves her own mother, who had absorbed some of Corregidora’s distaste for Black men. One day, when Ursula’s parents were living with Ursula’s grandmother, her grandmother made sure that Martin—whom she called a “Black bastard”—would see her powdering her breasts and become aroused. She wanted to show her daughter that all men were alike.

Corregidora—a symbol of colonization and racial hatred—turns mother against child, Black against white, man against woman. Yet this antipathy is so normalized that Ursula’s parents choose not to leave that hate-filled house: Martin even asks, when Ursula’s grandmother and great-grandmother are out, to “take” Ursula’s mother in their bed; he wants to do it where those who spite him sleep. Ursula’s mother and Ursula herself narrate their lives as if the stories

they're telling had happened to other women, a clear mark of sexual and racial damage: in order to survive it, you have to put it over *there*, while making it seem like just another part of the everyday.

As in Richard Wright's work, the cruelty of Jones's novels is sometimes flaked with sentimentality. At the end of "Corregidora," Ursula takes up with Mutt again, even though she resents him. They go back to his hotel room to have sex: Mutt wants Ursula, the singer with the open throat, to blow him. As she does, she tries to understand what drove Corregidora's abuse of her forebears:

It had to be sexual, I was thinking. . . . "What is it a woman can do to a man that make him hate her so bad he wont to kill her one minute and keep thinking about her and can't get her out of his mind the next?" In a split second I knew what it was. . . . A moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken skin but not sexlessness, a moment just before sexlessness . . . a moment that stops before it breaks the skin: "I could kill you." . . .

[Mutt] came and I swallowed. He leaned back, pulling me up by the shoulders.

"I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you," he said.

"Then you don't want me."

"I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you."

"Then you don't want me."

"I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you."

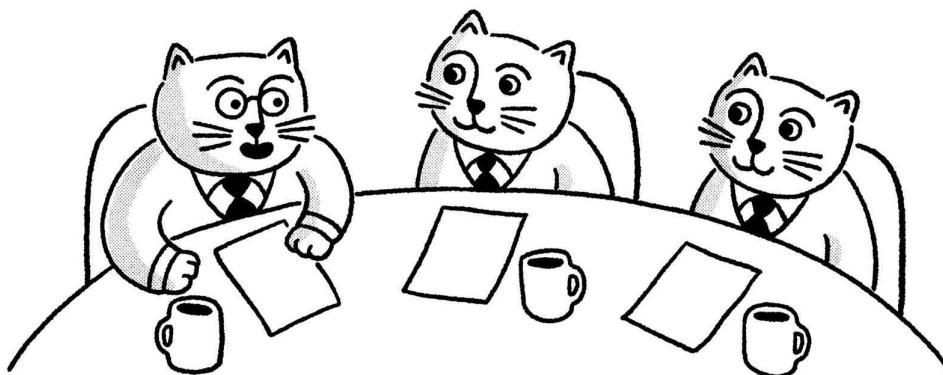
"Then you don't want me."

He shook me till I fell against him crying. "I don't want a kind of man that'll hurt me neither," I said.

He held me tight.

Growing up, I very much admired one of my four older sisters, the one closest to me in age. She was an activist who wrote poetry and sometimes made music, and she had a great ability to synthesize all manner of abstract thought and make a narrative out of it. In the nineteen-seventies, I spent many hours with her at protests around New York, where some of the talk was about racial uplift and the natural dignity and power of the Black man. Sometimes I tried to read the books she brought home—books by Sonia Sanchez, by Margaret Walker—in the hope that, if I read enough, I’d be able to meet the challenge of her beautiful mind. One writer I saw on her shelf was Gayl Jones. I must have read “Corregidora” first. And, although I couldn’t identify with any of Jones’s characters, I recognized, or thought I recognized, that the blood she spilled in the book was a metaphor about brutality, and, more precisely, about the ways in which women could be shoved to the margins of their own lives. I had seen some version of that process in real life, and had seen, too, how that marginalization could either strengthen women’s bonds or alienate them from one another.

### HOW AMAZON WAS INVENTED



"Any ideas on how to get more cardboard boxes into our homes?"  
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

From the beginning, Jones’s writing stirred conflicting feelings in me, between what I believed was artistically true in her books—the flat affect of her distinctly American prose—and what I saw as a blind spot, which is to say, the absence of joy, of the kind of prolonged pleasure that can be

transformative and can enrich a story, let alone a life. For a time, I wondered if slave narratives—those first-person stories of familial separation, punishment, and horror, by Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Keckley, and far too many others—were an influence that Jones wasn’t directly aware of. But, though Jones’s books have the dehumanization of those narratives, they lack the rhetorical fire and uplift. When I read “Corregidora” and Jones’s second novel, “Eva’s Man” (1976), now, I see them less as books than as *specimens*, evidence of a youthful inability to understand that to be oppressed you must first have had the things that oppression took from you: innocence, a sense of freedom, a sweet belief in Santa Claus. Jones plunks her women down in hopeless, filthy muck from the start, and the characters don’t question it because everyone’s in the shit. Jones, it seems, doesn’t grasp that even the most miserable life or work of art can have its dose of tenderness and dreams.

When we meet Eva, of “Eva’s Man,” she’s forty-three and sharing a cell in a psychiatric prison with a predatory bootlegger with bad teeth named Elvira. Eva says of her fellow-inmate, “They let her go out more than they do me because they say she’s got more control than I have. It ain’t nothing I’ve done since I’ve been in here. It’s what I did before I came.” What Eva did before she came was kill her lover, Davis. We flash back to the day she met him, at a bar in upstate New York. When Eva first sees Davis, he reminds her of her ex-husband, but then he is “just himself.” That self calls Eva the “coldest-ass bitch.” Pages later, she’s with Davis in his hotel room. She has menstrual cramps. Davis throws her a tin of aspirin. He doesn’t like the smell of blood. And one wonders if Eva likes her own smell, her own body. Does she value it at all? When Davis asks if he should wear a condom, she declines. How long will Eva be plagued with her lady problems, Davis wants to know. She stays in his little room for a number of days, and, even though he leaves the door unlocked, she can’t escape his apparent need for domination. (“He wouldn’t let me comb my hair. I don’t know why, but he kept me in that room and wouldn’t let me comb my hair.”) Sexually enslaved and psychologically abused, Eva experiences with Davis a sort of extension of everything she’s ever experienced with men: capture, hurt, extreme violence. At the end of the novel, Elvira performs oral sex on Eva, but there’s no possibility of love there: Elvira and Eva are two women in a cage at a prison that America has built to house the madness it generates in women of color.

In a 1976 interview with *Esquire*, Toni Morrison talked about publishing these two novels within a year of each other. “I knew perfectly well that the similarities between the first two [books] might be unfortunate,” she said. “Someone might say, ‘Gee, all her books are about women tearing up men.’ But I wanted that element of carnal, raw, economic, sinister sensuality. I took the risk. And it worked.” “Corregidora” and “Eva’s Man” went on to be published in paperback, and “Corregidora” was bought for the movies. (A film has yet to be made, but, given the current fashion for narratives centered on Black degradation, now might be the moment.) But what was it that worked? What Morrison saw in Jones’s writing, beyond the raw sensuality, was a willingness to address race and the legacy of slavery in a personal way. Whereas Black writers at the time had “all sorts of philosophical attitudes about ‘the predicament’ ” of race, Morrison told an interviewer, Jones looked at “the weight of history working itself out in the life of one, two, three people: I mean a large idea, brought down small, and at home, which gives it a universality and a particularity which makes it extraordinary.” Henry Louis Gates, Jr., writing about Jones in the *Times* in 1999, remembered how “the excitement that this new voice generated in the mid-70’s, especially the sense it generated that no subject for a black writer was now taboo, inspired a new generation of black women writers to testify about being black and female in a wide variety of forms.”

Morrison likely also saw Jones’s novels as examples of what Black women could do when writing about sex, specifically, and about the atomization of intimacy between men and women, generally. But there were many writers, including Morrison herself, and others whom she edited—Toni Cade Bambara and Lucille Clifton—who knew that, for the pain and the loss and the disconnect to matter, there first had to be a desire to connect. Jones’s women don’t connect; they fuck. “Eva’s Man” strikes me as the more interesting of the two novels, in part because it aims to describe insanity, shifts in consciousness, and how women of color can be destroyed when they don’t fit the standards of white beauty. After Eva poisons Davis and then castrates him with her teeth, she goes to a gas-station rest room to refresh herself and comb her hair: “I’m Medusa, I was thinking. Men look at me and get hard-ons. I turn their dicks to stone. I laughed. I’m a lion woman. No, it’s the men lions that have all that hair.” In her troubled and troubling internal monologue, one hears echoes of Pecola Breedlove, the fractured

Black girl in Morrison's "The Bluest Eye" (1970), who longs for blue eyes —another symbol of acceptable female beauty.

"'Eva's Man' may be one of the most unpleasant novels of the season. It is also one of the most accomplished," the critic John Leonard wrote in the *Times* when the novel came out. But not everyone was impressed by it. The poet June Jordan, also writing in the *Times*, in 1976, said:

This is the blues that lost control. This is the rhythmic, monotone lamentation of one woman, Eva Medina, who is nobody I have ever known. You gather from the name that she, this woman, embodies bad news for men. (Cf. the Garden of Eden and also the stone consequences, so to speak, of Medusa.) You further surmise that this alleged Double Trouble, this demented black woman invented by a black woman writer, is supposed to renew or revise some pretty traditional ideas about the female. . . . In addition, there is the very real, upsetting accomplishment of Gayl Jones in this, her second novel: sinister misinformation about women—about women, in general, about black women in particular, and especially about young black girls forced to deal with the sexual, molesting violations of their minds and bodies by their fathers, their mothers' boyfriends, their cousins and uncles. . . . What does it mean when a young black woman sits down to compose a universe of black people limited to animal dynamics? . . . Is Eva Medina the new Bigger Thomas minus the enemy white world?

Part of the problem with Jones's novels is their lack of spiritual value: most of her characters have little faith, even in themselves. Has America done this to them? Is Jones's dead despair the result of a kind of internalized racism that says Black people are thieving misogynists who suck pork and cabbage out of their teeth after a murder because that's how they do? One could argue that the core of Jones's writing is existentialist, that her novels are a Black American version of Albert Camus's "The Stranger," but that would be wrong: Camus was sick about humanity and the ways in which power can alienate one from oneself. Jones's writing in these early books is closer to the vision of degradation in movies such as Craig Brewer's "Hustle & Flow" (2005) and "Black Snake Moan" (2006) and Lee Daniels's "Precious" (2009) and "The United States vs. Billie Holiday" (2021), or to the "surreal" Black world of Deana Lawson's photographs. In these works, Black people

are greasy artifacts from the old colored museum, a place where racist views are celebrated and Blackness is always a curse.

Jones's 1977 short-story collection, "White Rat," was the last book she worked on with Morrison. By the time it was published, Jones was teaching at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and keeping company with a man named Bob Higgins, who had come back to Ann Arbor in 1975—he'd graduated from the university there—after a run-in with the Staten Island police. Publishers had rejected Higgins's treatise on Hegel, and he had become so incensed that the cops were called; there was a standoff, the police teargassed his apartment, and Higgins jumped from the sixth floor to get away. The *Times* reported that Higgins had been abandoned by his mother, who eventually died, homeless and mentally ill, of alcoholism. He had grown up with relatives and in a series of foster homes. After returning to Ann Arbor, Higgins told the story of his Staten Island escape, as a way of proclaiming his "godliness." His relationship with Jones quickly intensified, and soon he stepped in as her agent, a move that alienated Morrison so much that she stopped working with Jones. Then, with Higgins facing charges for assault, after attending a gay-rights parade where he declared that *aids* was divine retribution, Jones resigned from the university, and the couple fled to Europe.

Jones and Higgins stayed overseas for five years, living mostly in Paris. They returned to Lexington in 1988, and moved in with Jones's mother, whose health was starting to fail: Lucille, the storyteller, had throat cancer. According to the *Times*, Jones's devotion to Higgins was "seemingly total":

At 6:30 or 7 every morning he walked to the White Castle to bring back coffee and breakfast, and two or three times a day he went to the grocery store. The few occasions she was seen outside, she walked, silent, several yards behind him. Even in warm weather she wore long-sleeved shifts and bulky sweaters and wrapped her head and face in scarves, like a Muslim woman. The children on the block called her "the scarf lady."

While Lucille was being treated, and after she died, in 1997, Higgins, using the name Bob Jones, issued numerous statements and letters claiming, among other things, that she had been kidnapped by the hospital that cared

for her and that she was the victim of nefarious white forces in the medical community, and threatening the president of the University of Kentucky. Still, Jones continued to write and had started working with Helene Atwan at Beacon Press, which had, in the eighties, published the paperback editions of her first two novels. In early 1998, Beacon published “The Healing,” Jones’s third novel. To commemorate the occasion, the author conducted an interview via e-mail with *Newsweek*, in which Higgins’s cover was inadvertently blown. The police realized that Bob Jones was, in fact, the Bob Higgins who was wanted for assault in Michigan.

When officers arrived at the Jones home with a fifteen-year-old warrant, Higgins shut the door on them and ran to the back of the house, where he grabbed two knives and pointed them at his throat. If they attempted to enter, he said, he’d kill himself. A *swat* team surrounded the house a few hours later, and Jones called 911. The *Times* published part of the call transcript, and it’s excruciating to read. It’s like being back in Eva’s mind. Jones tells the operator that the police want to kill her husband like they killed her mother. She mentions the “full-page article” about her that had appeared in *Newsweek*. She says that she and Higgins have turned on the gas in the house. Were they trying to kill themselves, or blow up the whole neighborhood? After evacuating the nearby houses, officers entered the home and Higgins stabbed a knife into his throat. He died at the hospital. Jones was handcuffed and taken to a state psychiatric hospital, where she was held for more than two weeks, until she was no longer considered a danger to herself.

I was already working at this magazine when the Jones story broke, and there was much discussion in the office that day about what could be written about it, and whether we could reach Jones or Harper, her former adviser, who, despite Higgins’s efforts, was still in touch with her. But Jones was not talking to anyone. In my heart, I knew that no article would be written with Jones’s help: if she spoke to the press, it would not only be a betrayal of Higgins and his Black masculinity; it would negate her role in the creation of that masculinity.

Michele Wallace, in her seminal 1978 text, “Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman,” argues that the ideology that informed the Black nationalism of the sixties wasn’t so much revolutionary as it was

reactionary: for Black men to be men—and to enact the myth of the “bad nigger,” say—somebody had to crack the eggs, or get cracked in the head. I had seen some version of this my entire life. I had sat at rallies in Harlem while one of my sisters, charged with babysitting me, listened to a confused and confusing talk about nation time, a separate economic system, and how a “sista” was there to lift up her man. But what if that man was violent? Or crazy? There were many broken men who concealed their brokenness under a cloak of Blackness. Higgins believed in the power of his machismo because it was all he had. What could any woman do for him but serve the madness that his motherless loneliness had created? I wonder if Jones felt that she needed not just to live out one of her early stories but also to apologize for it—apologize for creating a Mutt who’d throw Ursa down the stairs, or a Davis who didn’t like the smell of a menstruating woman.

Jones’s relationship with Higgins seems to have been in part a performance of gender minstrelsy, with her walking a few yards behind him and covering her face. She was not allowed, as Wallace might say, her own subjectivity. Still, she took that subjectivity back, and what she has done with it is both sad and triumphant. Sad because “The Healing,” “Mosquito” (the novel that followed “The Healing,” in 1999), and “Palmares” are not good books; triumphant because, in writing them, she was still fighting to hold onto her own vision. Subjugation takes your options away but, in some cases, releases your mind: with so few choices to be made, you can allow yourself to imagine.

The narrator of “The Healing,” Harlan Jane Eagleton, a faith healer, grew up in a world of women: her mother and her grandmother own a beauty salon in Louisville, and for a while Harlan, too, worked as a beautician. We first meet her on a bus as she eats sardines, slurps mustard sauce, and ruminates on the beauty of the passing landscape. Harlan is a healer, not a preacher, and she makes that distinction early on—this is, after all, what Flannery O’Connor called the “Christ-haunted” South, where faith is synonymous with Jesus. In a sense, Harlan is her own Jesus, and the Scripture she reads has to do with the junk of the modern world. McDonald’s, Sally Jessy Raphael, Taco Bell: these are as much a part of America as the tepees in Wigwam Village, where people stay when they want to feel like they’re Native American.



"You are getting annoyed, ver-r-ry annoyed . . ."  
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

To enhance her cred, Harlan has her old friend Nicholas come down from Alaska to describe to her followers his experience of witnessing her first healing—even though he’s implied that he’d like to retire from performing that particular truth. Nicholas, Harlan says, looks like the colored fellow in the Village People, “like them men that dances for them women in the nightclubs, you know, usually they costumes theyselves to resemble the masculine stereotypes of men.” She adds, “I thought about hiring me another ‘witness’ but that would be duplicitous and Nicholas the true one witnessed the first true healing.” These lines are fairly typical of the book as a whole, which veers associatively from one thought to the next, not so much to indicate the movement of Harlan’s mind as to encompass all that Jones wants to talk about: gender roles, faith, America.

What does Harlan heal? Sometimes pain or an ailing mind—and sometimes her presence alone is a comfort. (She comes from a line of Spiritualists, including her grandmother, who is convinced that she was a turtle in another life.) Eventually, Harlan meets a singer named Joan, and, as with other female relationships in Jones’s books, the connection is fraught. Joan is a richer character than, for instance, Elvira, in “Eva’s Man,” but she is still subject to Jones’s tendency to define women in degrading language. Here’s how Harlan introduces her:

And now Ladies and Gentlemen, our star, the fabulous Joan Savage, or as she prefers to be called, Savage Joan the Darling Bitch! Ain't that a contradiction in terms? A Savage Darling? A Darling Bitch? I like a good bitch, even a darling bitch, who allows you to call her a bitch, though, 'cause some bitches even the nicest darling bitches, when you calls 'em bitches, even the bitches that they are, even the bitches that they know they are, even wonderful bitches, like this wonderful bitch.

Joan hires Harlan to do her makeup and then to be her manager. She wants stardom but never achieves it, despite Harlan's hard work. They fight on the road. They talk about "everything" in long passages of dialogue. Joan wonders if she is just another stereotype, "playing the Nigger Entertainer. . . . Maybe I'm the Archetypal Nigger Entertainer and not the Stereotypical Nigger Entertainer." "The Healing" has political intrigue, failed marriages, and many other diversions and anecdotes, but no amount of verbiage—and there's a great deal of it in the book—can make these thin characters whole. Jones's real subject is fracture, and it is as hard for her to create a complete female character as it is for her to feel love for her broken ones.

The marvellous thing about the new novel, "Palmares," is that Jones here allows women to get close without trying to destroy one another. Those feelings, however, still emerge under the dreadful cloud of oppression. Set in seventeenth-century Brazil, the novel revolves around Almeyda, a Black slave girl, who lives on a plantation with her watchful mother and her caustic grandmother. Almeyda recounts her life in flashback, and Jones forgoes her usual mixup of past and present. Instead, she interrupts the narrative to insert other narratives, all of which are told in a flat voice that feels less like seventeenth-century Portuguese than like Kentucky by way of Sugarloaf. Dropping in the occasional Portuguese word doesn't help. Still, Almeyda has a story to tell, one that she has learned through quiet observation. "Look at Almeydita, how she's watching with her ojos grandes," someone says early on. What Almeyda sees with those big eyes is colonialism at work. She is taught to read by a Franciscan priest named Father Tollinare, who is having an affair with Mexia, a half-Black, half-Indian woman, whom Almeyda is drawn to for her silences, just as she's drawn to the words—the language—that Tollinare teaches her.

One day, a white artist named Dr. Johann shows up at the plantation; he wants to paint a portrait of Almeyda, and as he does so he touches her hair and her face, while her mother stands silently nearby. In the end, it's not Almeyda whom Johann wants but her mother, who disappears with Johann for a "sitting," and then returns, still silent. Silent, silence, silenced: the women of color in "Palmares" have so little that they can share with their casual or brutal assaulters—to talk back is to court death. But Almeyda has the language of her mind, which is filled with fascinating observations, like this one:

After Dr. Johann arrived, my mother was brought to work in the household, in the casa grande. I was many times there working along with her and so got to see many visitors. Since there were no inns in our part of the country—and indeed in most of Brazil there were no inns—those with letters of introduction and visiting dignitaries were allowed to stay at the casa grande; those without letters of introduction, if they were not thieves or ruffians were allowed to camp on the outskirts of the plantation or in the fields surrounding the senzala.

As I read this, I thought of the Argentine director Lucrecia Martel's 2017 masterwork, "Zama." Set in a remote colonial outpost during the eighteenth century, the movie is creepy with Old World ways that make little sense in this dry, dusty New World. Martel focusses on a small cast of characters, knowing that the intimacy—the heart—of the film comes from the way it burrows into them as they trade insults, don ill-fitting wigs, and get sick. "Palmares," however, avoids that kind of immersion by piling on more and more people, more and more plot.

One day, another man arrives at the plantation, looking for the blood of a Black virgin, which he believes will cure him of a venereal disease—another revealing detail of the surrealism of colonial and colonized life. After Almeyda's mother makes a drink that protects her daughter from the man, she is sold off. Eventually, Almeyda reaches Palmares, a settlement for escaped slaves, where she marries a man named Anninho. The couple are separated after Portuguese soldiers attack Palmares and destroy it. Almeyda then embarks on a journey with Luiza, a mystic, who guides her through the vast, treacherous terrain of Brazil as she searches for Anninho and for freedom. The connection between Luiza and Almeyda feels forced at times

—Jones’s attempts at magical realism in “Palmares” are more dispiriting than they are transporting—and one’s patience wears thin with the introduction of yet another significant character, especially one who embodies the virtues of silent womanhood and maintains a knowing, almost supernatural distance. Editing is a delicate process, and part of the job entails listening for what the author cannot hear. Reading “Palmares,” I thought of Toni Morrison, the editor who helped Jones become an author. Morrison often read with a pencil in hand; in the margins of this book, she might have jotted, “I hear you, but it’s missing something. How about a bit more *life*?” ♦

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# American Chronicles

- [When Black History Is Unearthed, Who Gets to Speak for the Dead?](#)

[October 4, 2021 Issue](#)

# When Black History Is Unearthed, Who Gets to Speak for the Dead?

Efforts to rescue African American burial grounds and remains have exposed deep conflicts over inheritance and representation.

By [Jill Lepore](#)

September 27, 2021



## Content

Herein lie buried many things.

—*W. E. B. Du Bois, 1903.*

When Deidre Barnes was a kid in North Carolina, horsing around in the back seat of the car with her little brother, her grandfather drove by the woods in a white neighborhood in Durham. “You got cousins up in there,” he called back from the driver’s seat, nodding at a stand of loblolly pines in a tangle of kudzu. Barnes and her brother exchanged wide-eyed glances:

they had cousins who were wild people? Only later, looking hard, did they spy a headstone: “Oh, it’s a *cemetery*.” A few years ago, Barnes read in the newspaper that the place was called Geer. “My grandmother’s maiden name is Geer,” she told me. “And so I asked her, ‘Do we have people buried there?’ ”

I met Barnes at the cemetery on a warm, cicada night, with Debra Gonzalez-Garcia, the president of the Friends of Geer Cemetery. “When I was growing up, I could name five African Americans in history,” Gonzalez-Garcia said. “Five. Nobody else did anything.” At least fifteen hundred people who did all sorts of things are buried in Geer Cemetery, including Deidre Barnes’s great-grandfather, a grandson of Jesse Geer, a plantation owner who sold two acres of land to three Black freedmen in 1877. Gonzalez-Garcia and her team have been painstakingly reconstructing the cemetery’s population from its two hundred surviving headstones and from burial cards recorded by the W.P.A. in the nineteen-thirties.

The movement to save Black cemeteries has been growing for decades, led by Black women like Barnes and Gonzalez-Garcia, who have families to care for and work full-time jobs but volunteer countless hours and formidable organizing skills looking after the dead and upending American history. They transcribe death certificates; they collect oral histories. They bring in community organizations—Keep Durham Beautiful helps out at Geer—and hand out rakes and shears and loppers to Scouts and college students, tackling poison ivy that’s strangling trees. They hold tours, warning everyone to wear long pants, because of the snakes. They work with churches. They work with businesses: Durham Marble Works repairs broken headstones. Eagle Scouts installed Carolina gravel along what might once have been a carriage road. An archeological survey will be done soon, to make sure that, when you walk that road, you’re not stepping on sunken graves.

“The people who started White Rock Baptist Church and St. Joseph’s A.M.E.,” Barnes told me, “they’re buried here.” She and Gonzalez-Garcia seemed to know each epitaph, telling story after story about African American families who thrived in the early years after Reconstruction—getting college degrees, starting businesses—only to lose most of their gains to segregation and swindles. “Olivia Tilley Wills,” Gonzalez-Garcia said,

pointing to a stone, amid the overgrowth. “She was married twice. There was a big court case about her estate. She had investments.”

Underneath America lies an apartheid of the departed. Violence done to the living is usually done to their dead, who are dug up, mowed down, and built on. In the Jim Crow South, Black people paid taxes that went to building and erecting Confederate monuments. They buried their own dead with the help of mutual-aid societies, fraternal organizations, and insurance policies. Cemeteries work on something like a pyramid scheme: payments for new plots cover the cost of maintaining old ones. “Perpetual care” is, everywhere, notional, but that notion relies on an accumulation of capital that decades of disenfranchisement and discrimination have made impossible in many Black communities, even as racial terror also drove millions of people from the South during the Great Migration, leaving their ancestors behind. It’s amazing that Geer survived. Durham’s other Black cemeteries were run right over. “Hickstown’s part of the freeway,” Gonzalez-Garcia told me, counting them off. “Violet Park is a church parking lot.”



*“Maybe it’s more than just the waves you’re running from.”*  
Cartoon by Christopher Weyant

What would it mean for the future of the United States to mark and honor these places? In 2019, the four-hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the first captive Africans in Virginia, members of Congress from North Carolina

and Virginia, inspired by volunteer organizations like the Friends of Geer, introduced the African-American Burial Grounds Network Act. Last year, an amended version passed unanimously in the Senate. It doesn't come with any money, but if it's enacted it will authorize the National Park Service to coordinate efforts to identify, preserve, and interpret places like Geer, Hickstown, and Violet Park. Federal legislation might also provide some legal clarity. A few years ago, a Geer neighbor took down a giant tree; as it fell, it crushed a row of headstones. They're pinned there still. There's little the Friends can do about that: they don't own the land. "Legally, this place is considered abandoned," Gonzalez-Garcia explained. "The city hasn't traced anyone who's inherited the title." The Friends of Geer can't find a titleholder, either, and not for lack of trying. Their work is guided by the principle that descendants ("people with bodies in the ground") should decide what to do with the cemetery. They've so far found about fifty. They're still looking.

Meanwhile, that same principle—that descendants decide—lies at the center of a widening controversy about human remains in the collections of universities and anatomical and anthropological museums. It has led to a proposal for another piece of federal legislation modelled on the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, *NAGPRA*, but for African American graves—an *AAGPRA*. This spring, in an essay published in *Nature*, three young Black archeologists called for, among other things, a halt to the unethical study of all human remains in the United States until those of people descended from Africans can be identified, and descendants found and consulted. Another group of Black archeologists argued that, on the contrary, suspending research would only further widen the gap between what scientists know about people of African and European ancestry, leading to worse public-health outcomes for African Americans, who are already adversely affected by a history of medical mistreatment and poor representation in everything from clinical trials to the human-genome project. Antiracist orthodoxy has it that everything's either antiracist or racist: there is no other position. This anguished disagreement reveals the limits of that premise.

It isn't merely an academic dispute. The proposed burial-grounds network and graves-protection acts are parts of a larger public deliberation, less the always elusive "national conversation" than a quieter collective act of

conscientious mourning, expressed, too, in new monuments and museum exhibits. History gets written down in books but, like archeology, it can seep up from the earth itself, from a loamy underground of sacred, ancient things: gravestones tucked under elms and tangled by vines; iron-nailed coffins trapped beneath pavement and parking lots and highway overpasses. How and whether the debates over human remains get resolved holds consequences not only for how Americans understand the country's past but also for how they picture its future. The dispute itself, along the razor's edge between archeology and history, is beset by a horrible irony. Enslavement and segregation denied people property and ancestry. But much here appears to turn on inheritance and title: Who owns these graveyards? Who owns these bones? Who owns, and what is owed?

•

Bury me not in a land of slaves.

—*Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, 1858.*

When I went to Geer Cemetery, dusty with Carolina gravel, I was about midway through a road trip from New Hampshire to Florida. I'd plotted a route that would take me through battlefields in today's history-and-archeology wars. I started out in Portsmouth, a brick city founded in 1652 along the Piscataqua River and the site of the northernmost African burial-ground memorial in the United States, and I ended in the Tampa Bay area, on the Gulf Coast, incorporated in 1866, where a half-dozen paved-over Black cemeteries holding thousands of graves have been found in the past two years alone, including under a parking lot at the Rays' baseball stadium, Tropicana Field.

In an interview Toni Morrison gave in 1989, she explained why she'd written "Beloved," a novel whose title is an epitaph. "There is no place that you and I can go to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves," she said. No marker or plaque, no museum or statue. "There's not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit, or you can visit, in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence or better still on the banks of the Mississippi." Three decades after "Beloved," people everywhere are tending to markers.

Portsmouth's Negro Burying Ground first appeared on a map in 1705 and disappeared only after 1902, but it had already been built over by the eighteen-teens. Primus Fowle, an enslaved artisan who operated the press that printed the *New Hampshire Gazette*, was buried there in 1791. The *Gazette* printed an epitaph: "Now he's dead, we sure may say / Of him, as of all men, / That while in silent graves they lay / They'll not be plag'd agen." In October, 2003, construction crews working on a sewer line under Chestnut Street discovered eight coffins, which turned out to be a fraction of those buried there. In deciding what to do next, Portsmouth took as its model the New York African Burial Ground Project, an effort that began in 1992, after the remains of hundreds of people—at a site that held some twenty thousand—were found in lower Manhattan during excavations for a federal office building. Because these weren't Native American graves, no law explicitly applied to burial grounds which would prevent the government from continuing to excavate and build. Protests persuaded Congress to authorize funds for a memorial. Michael Blakey, a bioarcheologist then at Howard University, led the study of the remains and artifacts; he also pioneered a protocol for collaborating with the Black community, rather than leaving decisions to white property owners, government officials, and archeologists. Under *NAGPRA*, indigenous artifacts and remains were returned to Native nations designated as their "culturally affiliated group." Blakey created an analogous group-rights category: what he called the "descendant community."

Descendants can be hard to find, for reasons that have everything to do with the atrocities of slavery, which stole people from their homes, separated children and parents, barred marriage, and assigned to people no family name except that of the people who claimed to own them. You can find Primus Fowle at Findagrave.com, but you can't find his family tree at Ancestry.com. Given the difficulty of identifying literal descendants, the New York African Burial Ground Project used a proxy—the local community of African Americans. Portsmouth's population is more than ninety per cent white. The city council appointed a committee, led by a local Black educator, that, in the absence of a descendant community, held public meetings and selected a memorial designed around the theme of honoring those who have been forgotten. Sometimes the people in charge of a site do nothing more than consult with a descendant community after the fact. In an article published last year, Blakey denounced some white archeologists

working in this field for “appropriating” human remains and “avoiding acknowledgment and redress of White racism, blinded to their own deep subjectivity and deaf to critiques of those who are not of their own White likeness and presumed neutral voice.” (Blakey declined to speak with me.)

In 2003, just as Portsmouth’s site was discovered, the New York remains were carried from Blakey’s lab at Howard back to New York and reburied in a series of ceremonies called the Rites of Ancestral Return. The site is now a national monument. Here, too, Portsmouth followed New York’s example: in 2015, the remains found in 2003 were placed in eight coffins and reburied in a vault beneath that block of Chestnut, now permanently closed to through traffic, at the unveiling of a memorial featuring eight golden silhouettes that appear to rise up from the ground. A trail of red bricks is inscribed with the words from a petition that African-born Portsmouth men submitted to the New Hampshire legislature in 1779, seeking emancipation and pleading “that the name of ‘slave’ may no longer be heard in the land gloriously contending for the sweets of freedom.”



Cartoon by Roz Chast

More unknown sites are sure to turn up, especially if the African-American Burial Grounds Network Act passes. Still, not all African burial grounds in the North have disappeared. Last March, Keith Stokes, whose first African ancestor arrived in Philadelphia and moved to Newport, Rhode Island, in

1795, buried his mother beside seven generations of his family in an area now called God's Little Acre. (In 2019, the Newport site was awarded a fifty-thousand-dollar grant from the African American Cultural Action Fund, which is part of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.) What survives in God's Little Acre is a measure of what's been lost elsewhere. Its every headstone, including those carved by an enslaved eighteenth-century artisan named Pompe Stevens and dozens with engraved portraits—faces with strikingly African features—contains a record not found in any archive. As Stokes told me, “It’s a repository of African American heritage and history.”

Vincent Brown, a colleague of mine who teaches in Harvard’s departments of history and African and African American studies, has ancestors who were enslaved in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake. He coined the expression “mortuary politics,” to describe the uses to which mid-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century diasporic Africans put the dead. Lately, there’s a partisan politics to mortuary politics. “I’d for sure rather have voting rights than Juneteenth,” Brown told me. “But who knows where that goes, because anytime someone is celebrating the dead it’s not really about the past—it’s about how we imagine the future.” A century ago, when white supremacists destroyed Black cemeteries and erected Confederate monuments, they weren’t so much honoring the Lost Cause as advancing *their* cause: segregation forever. A risk, in this fraught moment, is of getting strangled by their dead hands. White Tea Partiers dressed up like George Washington; Black Lives Matter activists demanded the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee. The Trump Administration answered the *New York Times’* 1619 Project with its 1776 Commission. And then what? “There’s a strange overlap between people who don’t want to think about the history of slavery and people who fixate on the politics of race only in terms of slavery,” Brown said. Both assume that “the conflicts of the past are necessarily the conflicts of the present and the future, as if somehow the descendants of the slaveholders and of the slaves are supposed to be aligned with their ancestors forever.”

In Albany, a graveyard not on any map was found in 2005, on the onetime plantation of a cousin of Philip Schuyler, Alexander Hamilton’s father-in-law. It held the bodies of African-descended people, mainly children and babies, all buried before 1790. Cordell Reaves, who is African American,

was working for the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation when he learned about the Albany remains. Those bones went to the New York State Museum for analysis. “What people ate, where people were from, where their ancestors hailed from, understanding the effect of the brutal physical labor they were forced to endure,” he told me. “That story is etched into their actual bones.” For a long time, Reaves tried without success to get people interested in a reburial. In 2015, it finally came together: a Catholic cemetery donated plots; woodworkers built coffins, and artists and schoolchildren decorated them. The dead lay in state in the front hall of Schuyler Mansion before the multi-faith burial, in one of the best attended and most moving public-history events the state has ever hosted. Reaves wept. “It was like lightning struck,” he told me. All that night and the next day, people read poems, and sang, and danced. “Something about this captured people,” Reaves said, tearing up again. “I’m not sure what it was. But I keep coming back to the word ‘reconciliation.’ ”

He’s got a slightly different notion of what a descendant community might be. “I looked out at the sea of people that were there,” he said. “This country is rooted in the story of enslaved people. This is everyone’s history.” You can be a cynic about all of this, Reaves admitted. It’s one thing to pray for the dead; it’s another to look after the living. But Reaves isn’t cynical. “It’s a door,” he said. “You open it, some of them will walk through.” The question is what lies on the other side.

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God has no children whose rights may be safely trampled on.

—*Frederick Douglass, 1854.*

Samuel Morton, a Philadelphia doctor, began collecting skulls in 1830. Determined to study the craniums of the world’s five newly classified “races,” he directed faraway correspondents to dig up graves and ship him heads, eventually amassing nearly nine hundred, including, closer to home, those of fourteen Black Philadelphians. Morton is buried in Philadelphia’s Laurel Hill Cemetery, under an obelisk inscribed, “Wherever Truth Is Loved or Science Honored, His Name Will Be Revered.” In 1854, three years after Morton’s death, Frederick Douglass called his work “scientific moonshine,”

but it took more than a century for scientists to disavow the notion of biological race. And yet calls for the return of those remains rest on a notion of race, too.

Christopher Woods, a Sumerologist from the University of Chicago, is the first Black director of the Penn Museum, in Philadelphia. In April, not yet two weeks after he began his appointment, the museum issued a statement apologizing “for the unethical possession of human remains in the Morton Collection” and pledging to return them “to their ancestral communities.” Penn is not alone. In January, the president of Harvard issued a similar apology and charged a committee to inventory the human remains found in its museums, with priority given to those of “individuals of African descent who were or were likely to have been alive during the period of American enslavement.” As Evelyn Hammonds, a historian of science who chairs the Harvard committee, told me, “No one institution can solve all these questions alone.”

But Penn has other problems. Days after Woods’s first apology, the museum issued another one, this time for holding on to the remains of a Black child killed by police in 1985 during a raid against the Black-liberation organization *MOVE*. (The police bombed the *MOVE* house, and eleven people, including five children, were burned to death.) The museum returned those remains to the families this summer. As for the rest of the remains, including the Morton collection, “We want to do the right thing,” Woods told me. “We want to be able to repatriate individuals when descendant communities want that to be done.”

During the years when Morton was collecting skulls, much of Philadelphia’s African American community was burying its dead in a cemetery on Queen Street that’s now a playground called Weccacoe, for a Lenni Lenape word that means “peaceful place.” The day I stopped there, the playground was a tumble of sippy cups and strollers, water buckets and tubes of sunscreen, and toddlers playing pirates. Underneath lie thousands of graves.



"I'm just here to complain about the length of this line."  
Cartoon by Kaamran Hafeez and Al Batt

Pennsylvania passed a gradual abolition law in 1780, and by the seventeenth-nineties Philadelphia had a thriving free Black community, much of it centered on what is now the Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1810, the Bethel church trustees and the A.M.E.’s founder, Richard Allen, bought a city block on Queen Street. Until 1864, the congregation used the land as a burial ground and then, in 1889, strapped for cash, sold it to cover the cost of a new church. The burial ground became a park, and then a playground. Nearly half the city’s population is Black, but the city’s monuments and museums mostly commemorate Benjamin Franklin, the Declaration of Independence, the American Revolution, and the drafting of the Constitution. Avenging the Ancestors, a coalition formed in 2002 to advocate for a slavery memorial in the city, has taken a broad view of the notion of a descendant community, describing its members as “today’s free Black sons and daughters” of “yesterday’s enslaved Black fathers and mothers.”

In 2010, Terry Buckalew, an independent researcher and aging antiwar activist, read in the newspaper that the city was about to renovate Weccacoe. “They were going to dig it up,” he told me. “They were going to put in new trees, new light poles, and a sprinkler. And I said, ‘Oh, no. The bodies are still there!’ ” Three years later, the city conducted a ground-penetrating-radar

survey and concluded that the site, the Bethel Burying Ground, contained at least five thousand bodies. Buckalew, who is white, has spent his retirement researching the lives of those thousands of Black Philadelphians. I asked him why. “Reparations,” he said. “I firmly believe in reparations.”

Reparations rest on arguments about inheritance and descent. But, if genealogy has a new politics, it has always been urgent. After Emancipation, people put ads in newspapers, desperately looking for their children, husbands, wives, and parents. “*INFORMATION WANTED* of my mother, Lucy Smith, of Hopkinsville, Ky., formerly the slave of Dr. Smith. She was sold to a Mr. Jenks of Louisiana,” Ephraim Allen of Philadelphia posted in the *Christian Recorder* in 1868. Today, reparative genealogical projects in search of descendants put out calls on social media and ask people to fill out Google Forms. One of the most successful, the Georgetown Memory Project, has been looking for direct descendants of two hundred and seventy-two enslaved people sold by the Jesuit Society that ran Georgetown in 1838, mostly to pay off debts. So far, the project, in conjunction with independent researchers and American Ancestors (the nation’s oldest genealogical research organization, which established pedigrees for Mayflower descendants), has located more than eight thousand descendants. In 2019, after a student-driven referendum, the university announced a plan to provide four hundred thousand dollars a year in reparations, in the form of “community-based projects to benefit Descendant communities.”

Reparations hasn’t been the dominant note sounded in Philadelphia over Bethel, perhaps in part because it was the A.M.E. Church that sold the burial ground. Still, there’s been plenty of controversy, along with the usual and more than usual delays of a complicated city-planning process. But last year the Bethel Burying Ground Historic Site Memorial Committee selected a proposal by the award-winning artist Karyn Olivier, for a memorial titled “Her Luxuriant Soil.”

Olivier, who teaches sculpture at Temple University, was born in Trinidad and Tobago in 1968. “My ancestors were slaves, but not here,” she told me. Olivier likes to work with soil: “It holds history and holds loss and holds pain.” But she took her title from a speech made by Richard Allen in 1817, before a meeting of three thousand free men of African heritage, who’d gathered to debate a proposal, mostly favored by Southern slaveowners, for

resettling free Black men and women in West Africa. “Whereas our ancestors (not of choice) were the first cultivators of the wilds of America,” Allen said, “we their descendants feel ourselves entitled to participate in the blessings of her luxuriant soil.”

Olivier’s elegiac design incorporates features discovered during excavation of the site, including the inscription found on the only headstone that was unearthed: “Amelia Brown, 1819, Aged 26 years. Whosoever live and believeth in me, though we be dead, yet, shall we live.” A wrought-iron cemetery gate reading “Bethel Burying Ground” will mark the entrance to the park—half of which will still be a playground—where paving stones engraved with epitaphs will have something of the quality of Germany’s *Stolpersteine*, or stumbling stones, marked with the names of those who were killed in the Holocaust. You won’t trip over Olivier’s installation; instead, inscribed into water-activated concrete, the words will appear, and disappear, with rain, snow, and a sprinkler system. The plan is to break ground in March. But it won’t be very broken: the graves lie only inches deep.

Olivier’s work stands at the vanguard of a mournful aesthetic, closely associated with a Philadelphia-based non-profit called the Monument Lab, which, with a four-million-dollar grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, is reimagining the nation’s public memory. In September, the Monument Lab released the results of a National Monument Audit as a prelude to opening ten field offices across the country—places in need of new monuments “to transform the way our country’s history is told in public spaces.” The stops along my route began to appear to me to be gathered together by thread. The artist Sonya Clark, who teaches at Amherst College, has worked with the Monument Lab, and she also once collaborated with a carver named Nicholas Benson, who owns the stone-carving shop in Newport where Pompe Stevens etched headstones: Benson carved the word “slave,” in Italian, in Roman capitals in marble, then sent her the dust. Clark likes to work with dust the way Olivier likes to work with soil. “To gather dust is to gather up all that is around us that is sloughed off,” she told me. In 2019, Clark covered a floor with dust she’d collected from Philadelphia sites like Independence Hall and Declaration House, and—dressed as a charwoman named Ella Watson, photographed by Gordon Parks in 1942—got down on one knee with a bucket of soapy water and scrubbed the floor

with a Confederate-flag hand towel, to reveal the words “We hold these truths . . .”

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Let the people see what they did to my boy.

—*Mamie Till-Mobley, 1955.*

Washington, D.C., is a monument to the dead. But the “national” dead rest on top of the Black dead: Arlington National Cemetery started out as a Black burial ground, the former plantation of the Confederate general Robert E. Lee, seized by the Union during the Civil War. After Appomattox, James Parks, once enslaved, dug the graves of the white Union dead; the United States Colored Troops were buried in a separate section. In 1898, President William McKinley opened Arlington to the Confederate dead, declaring, “In the spirit of fraternity, we should share with you in the care of the graves of Confederate soldiers.” In 1914, Woodrow Wilson dedicated a thirty-two-foot monument to the Confederacy, on Jefferson Davis’s birthday. Having admitted secessionists, Arlington remained racially segregated until Harry S. Truman integrated the military, in 1948. A bill introduced in 2020, the Removing Confederate Names and Symbols from Our Military Act, would, if passed, call for taking down the Confederate monument. But, like a lot of gestures made in 2020, nothing has yet come of it.



"And here's one I made up called 'Mama's Last Nerve.' "

Cartoon by Emily Flake

Washington's newest monument is written on the ground across from the White House, where yellow painted letters spell *BLACK LIVES MATTER*. If a commitment to naming and marking the Black dead undergirds reparation efforts, it also informs the design of new monuments and museum exhibits. They cleave to the same dark themes—dust and soil, ancestors and descendants, death and resurrection—because the spectre and the spectacle of Black death lie at the heart not only of anti-Black violence but also of Black freedom struggles. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, opened in Montgomery, Alabama, in 2018, suspends from its ceiling hundreds of steel coffins, memorials to victims of lynching. The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, which opened in 2016, displays Emmett Till's glass-topped casket. In September, the Smithsonian National Museum of American History installed a single artifact in a vast hall at the entrance of the museum, a historical marker that, until recently, stood along the banks of the Tallahatchie River, where Till's body was found. It's a sign, evocative of an old headstone, that not long ago had been shot by vandals three hundred and seventeen times. Dimpled with BBs, pocked with shotgun blasts, riddled with the bullets of semi-automatic weapons, the sign now stands as a monument not to the past but to our violent national present. "It is an object of such pain," Anthea Hartig, the museum's director, said to me. "How do you memorialize when

you're still in the middle?" The historian Tsione Wolde-Michael, who co-curated the Till exhibit, is also the director of a new Center for Restorative History. "There are very few historical moments that create openings like the one we have right now," Wolde-Michael told me. "You have publics around the globe that are pushing not just museums but universities, and governments, all sorts of major institutions, to not just issue solidarity statements, but to create altogether new structures."

Lonnie Bunch III, the first Black secretary of the Smithsonian, has charged the National Museum of Natural History, down the block from the American-history museum, with assessing its human remains and sorting out individuals of African descent. Sabrina Sholts, a museum curator of biological anthropology, is leading that effort, from an office where a plastic skeleton, propped up in a corner, gathers dust. The audit is beset by a paradox: the people who collected these remains did so in order to invent "race" as a biological category, one that does not exist, but one that has to be used, somehow, to identify what remains can be considered those of African heritage. "Our discipline, biological anthropology, helped reify race," Sholts told me. "And now we need to explain to the public that race does not describe biological variation."

Here's one way of thinking about this impasse. Democratic political struggle rests on the idea that ancestry is not destiny. But American history has betrayed that idea through centuries of state-imposed inequality, discrimination, and disenfranchisement. There is therefore no path to equality without measures aimed at repair: restorative history, reparations, the return of remains. But these measures sometimes advance the anti-democratic idea that ancestry is destiny. Politicians are trapped in this maze; you can hear them in there, screaming. Can archeologists and genealogists, curators and artists, and, not least, everyday people who volunteer in cemeteries find a way out?

Among the remains Sholts's committee will consider are thirty-three skeletons found in Maryland in 1979, during the expansion of a state road through what turned out to have been a slave cemetery at Catoctin Furnace, an ironworks. (Catoctin isn't far from Gettysburg, along a route taken by Civil War battleground tourists, where the highway signs read "Hallowed Ground.") "It's an accident of history that we have these bones," Elizabeth

Comer, the head of the Museum of the Ironworker, told me, but the museum is able to tell its visitors about those lives because of what has been learned from the remains by Sholts's curatorial colleague Doug Owsley. Owsley's study, along with sequencing done by the Harvard geneticist David Reich, is the kind of research that people calling for *AAGPRA* want halted, until a descendant community can be found and consulted. (Owsley says that the local African American community supports the research.) As for what to do with the Catoctin remains now, Comer, too, believes that it's up to the descendants, except that, after years of steadfast searching, she has yet to find any.

Why add only historical African Americans to a protected category? If collecting human remains without consent is wrong, which was *NAGPRA*'s argument, why not include everyone? Sholts's answer is that no one is more powerless to give consent than a person held as property, so the work has to begin there. She sees this change of approach as generational, and she's a part of the new generation.

Among the leaders of that generational change are Ayana Omilade Flewellen, from U.C. Riverside, and Justin Dunnivant, of U.C.L.A., co-founders of the Society of Black Archaeologists. They're trying to build the kind of restorative justice-based structures in archeology that Tsione Wolde-Michael wants to build in history. In an essay that appeared this past April in *American Antiquity*, Dunnivant, Wolde-Michael, and others warned, "The future of archaeology is antiracist, *or it is nothing*." The next month, *Nature* published an essay, by Dunnivant and others, calling for the creation of an *AAGPRA*, while acknowledging that "centuries of displacement and sparse genealogical records for African Americans can mean that it is difficult to link a set of human remains to specific Black descendants." The sensible solution, they argue, is to define "descendants both in genealogical terms and more inclusively, to welcome input from African Americans whose ancestors had a shared historical experience." According to guidelines established in 2018 by the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, that shared historical experience is enslavement. For Dunnivant, it's also being Black in America. "We need to do this research on behalf of the communities we are studying," Dunnivant told me. The Society of Black Archaeologists is calling for a national audit of all human remains.

But the universal keeps straining against the particular. The people whose remains were most likely to be taken without their consent are also the people whose lives are the least well documented in paper archives, the people about whom forensic and genetic analysis has the most to tell. That's why Henry Louis Gates, Jr., disagrees with aspects of the *AAGPRA* approach. Gates, who serves on the Harvard human-remains committee, has been studying the diaspora through historical records, genealogy, and DNA for decades. In 2006, he started a PBS series called "African American Lives" that spurred interest in genealogy in the African American community. Gates grew up in West Virginia, where he visited the "colored" cemetery. "My grandfather and my grandmother were buried there," he told me. He hasn't had a strong emotional response to the African-burial-ground ceremonies he's seen, with kente cloth and African drumming. "I'm deeply moved by the recovery of remains," Gates says, "but I worry that sometimes an excess of kitsch substitutes for substantial reflection about the meaning and import of the burial sites." Although he believes in a notion of descent that encompasses shared historical experience, he thinks that decisions "shouldn't be made exclusively by local Black families who happened to live there" but through a process of collective deliberation involving genealogical descendants, representatives of the local Black community, scientists, and other researchers. For Gates, DNA research has the potential to repair some of the damage done by slavery: it can restore links that were severed when families were separated and genealogical evidence was destroyed. Otherwise, it's a Catch-22: not sequencing the DNA makes it harder to find the descendants to ask for their permission to sequence the DNA. "This is magical stuff," Gates said. "It's the only way to connect the dead to the living. It's the only way these dead can speak. Some people think they should be buried and sealed. I believe in respecting the dead. I also respect the living."

Fatimah Jackson, a professor of biology at Howard University, has been weighing the implications of *AAGPrA* for scientific research. (Jackson, like Blakey, is a former director of Howard's W. Montague Cobb Research Laboratory, which houses the largest collection of African American skeletal remains in the world—a collection that Cobb assembled to refute the work of people like Samuel Morton.) Suspending research, she argues, will affect public health, widening historical inequities and leaving the African

American community even less well represented in databases that are essential to practices expected to be central to the future of medicine.



*Cartoon by Will McPhail*

What should be done when one kind of restorative racial justice conflicts with another? Jackson is unpersuaded by the contention that all people whose ancestors were enslaved ought to be called upon to decide what to do with their remains. “Scientists know more about Neanderthals than modern humans recently out of Africa,” she said. And she’s skeptical of Dunnivant and his co-authors “speaking for forty million people, or even for four people.” She thinks their rhetoric of representation is misbegotten. “What sampling method is that?” she asks. “Does he speak for Black America? Or do I speak for Black America? It’s ludicrous.” She also believes that, on balance, African Americans (who lately, like the rest of the country, have tended to cremate their dead) would want the research to proceed and that, meanwhile, if the scientific community needs to make an ethical assessment about future research, it should engage in a deliberative process, perhaps involving a series of conferences with Black lawyers, doctors, clergy, ethicists, and scientists.

That deliberative body sounds something like the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, called for by Congress in 1974 in the aftermath of revelations about the

experiments done on Black men at Tuskegee. The commission—eleven scientists, ethicists, lawyers, and activists who deliberated for nearly four years—produced the landmark “Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research,” better known as the Belmont Report. It might be time for a new commission, on the Protection of Human Subjects, Postmortem. Still, it’s easy to imagine that venture falling apart before it even starts, over the vexing question of who can speak for the dead.

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Why do you not propose a cemetery for the illustrious Negro dead?

—*Zora Neale Hurston to W. E. B. Du Bois, 1945.*

Near Richmond, the former capital of the Confederacy, Brian Palmer met me at East End and Evergreen Cemeteries with his little black dog, Teacake, named, he said, “for the one good male character in Hurston’s ‘Their Eyes Were Watching God.’” Palmer, an award-winning journalist, helped found Friends of East End, in 2017. “I’m a descendant,” he told me, hitching Teacake’s leash to a carabiner dangling from a belt loop and waving to me across a locked gate. The cemeteries, both founded in the eighteen-nineties by African American citizens, are open only to descendants and, for now, only with advance notice. Between 2019 and 2020, the Enrichmond Foundation, a nonprofit that had no experience with cemeteries or with historical preservation, acquired both of them, an area that stretches across seventy-six acres. “The state secretly anointed this white-led organization and said, We’ll do what we want, and then we’ll worry about the descendants,” Palmer said. “In my humble, grumpy-ass view.”

Enrichmond plans to develop a tourist site (Palmer calls it a “recreation plantation”), including a visitor center with an estimated price tag of \$1.9 million, bike trails, and hundreds of feet of electrical, sewer, and water lines—all plans that could disturb unmarked graves. Last winter, members of Richmond’s Black community formed a descendants council: they consider the site hallowed ground, and they have asked the governor to suspend the development’s funding. But Enrichmond has enlisted its own group of descendants, including John Mitchell, a descendant of Richmond’s celebrated Black newspaper editor John Mitchell, Jr., who is buried in

Evergreen. Mitchell is also “Enrichmond’s Family Ambassador,” and the man you’ve got to notify before you enter the cemetery. While Palmer and I were walking around with Teacake in tow, Mitchell pulled up in a pickup truck. He waved hello but eyed us warily. “Brian has valid concerns about descendant representation,” Mitchell later said. “But twisting the words and actions of those descendants that chose to get inside this system is not productive.”

The term “descendant community” comes from Michael Blakey’s work on the New York African Burial Ground, but it also has roots in sites of conscience, where the terms are “families of the missing” or “communities of mourners”—labels that apply equally well to U.S. sites of mass atrocity, like Tulsa, where archeologists have been uncovering a grave believed to hold the bodies of hundreds of African Americans who were killed in the 1921 massacre. The human-rights scholar Adam Rosenblatt, the author of “Digging for the Disappeared,” is struck by the relationship between descendant communities and communities of mourners. “These are the people who matter the most,” he told me. “But what it often too quickly translates into is the assumption that somehow those people are always going to agree with each other.” Which, as a visit to East End and Evergreen makes clear, isn’t necessarily what happens. Palmer, pointing out that the condition of these cemeteries is a consequence of disenfranchisement, argues for a democratic solution. “There are people who still have deeds to their plots, people in the ground,” Palmer said. “Let’s gather around a table. Let’s vote. Isn’t that what democracy is for?”

After Richmond, I travelled through the heart of the Confederacy, from cemetery to cemetery. The Oberlin Cemetery, in Raleigh, was one of the smallest, with about six hundred bodies interred beneath magnolias and oaks. Cheryl Williams’s family is buried there, and she’s the cemetery’s steward, but she doesn’t expect ever to lie in any grave. “My family recently, we’ve been going with cremation,” she told me. The Friends of Oberlin Village gives amazing tours. Williams said, “We’re at a time when people are ready to hear these stories and accept them as true history.”

But in Charleston I wasn’t so sure. The neighborhood around Bethel United Methodist Church, on Calhoun Street, sits atop graveyards, including Bethel’s own, containing the remains of congregants, white and Black. The

church grounds are covered in dug-up old headstones, lying in beds of pine needles and on patches of shaggy grass, some rescued by the church, others left by neighbors who came across them in their back yards. (“Sacred to the Memory of Laurence Carnes,” one 1805 stone reads. “Disturb not his bones while they are mouldering in their Mother Earth.”) Behind the church is a house on a lot that city archeologists believe to be the not very restful resting place of more than fifteen hundred people. In the nineteen-forties or fifties, the owner began using headstones as paving stones, for a garden path. I found the new owner by a dumpster in the driveway. Earlier in the summer, when he filed for a construction permit, the city issued a stop-work order but then decided that it lacked the authority to halt the planned renovations. I asked him about the burials in his back yard. “It’s all over,” he said, exasperated. “It was sold in 1915.” He threw up his hands. “There is no story.”

Everything happening in the rest of the country is happening faster, and hotter, in Florida. “It’s just insane right now. It’s crazy here,” the anthropologist Cheryl Rodriguez said when we spoke about the state’s Republican governor, Ron DeSantis. Rodriguez is the former director of the Institute on Black Life at the University of South Florida, in Tampa. In June, within a matter of days, DeSantis denounced the teaching of critical race theory, forbade the use of the 1619 Project in the state’s classrooms, issued a requirement that state colleges and universities survey their students to reveal whether they have been indoctrinated into an antiracist agenda, and signed a law convening the Task Force on Abandoned African-American Cemeteries. I asked Rodriguez how the task force could possibly produce a report that doesn’t document the very kind of discrimination that the Governor’s other directives ban people from even talking about. She laughed, and said, “Welcome to Florida!”

In 2018, a *Tampa Bay Times* reporter named Paul Guzzo got a tip from an amateur genealogist named Ray Reed: he found death records for an African American cemetery called Zion, but he couldn’t find its location. At first, chasing leads and digging through the archives, Guzzo thought there might be just a few bodies, but then he realized, “Oh, shit, this is a big cemetery.” Guzzo fell down a rabbit hole, and so did a lot of other people. He learned that part of Robles Village, now a predominantly Black public-housing community, had been built on top of Zion. People would call to tell him

about another cemetery they knew had been paved over, Guzzo would investigate, the *Tampa Bay Times* would run another story. A local TV news station, WTSP, started a history series called “Erased.” All this breaking news galvanized activists, including Corey Givens, Jr., whose great-great-grandfather, a mason who helped build the St. Petersburg seawall, is buried somewhere under an overpass for I-175, outside Tropicana Field. The Tampa Bay Rays are scheduled to redevelop the site in 2027. “All I’m saying is it should be Black descendants telling the mayor what we want to do to honor our Black ancestors, not him telling us,” Givens told me. “I want to bring some peace and justice to my family.”

The Task Force on Abandoned and Neglected African-American Cemeteries, introduced by the state congresswoman Fentrice Driskell, passed Florida’s legislature with unanimous support, and was signed into law this summer by DeSantis, even as he was doing things like banning the 1619 Project. Paul Ortiz, a historian at the University of Florida, and the president of the United Faculty of Florida, says, “They’re going to make sure you don’t mention 1619—I mean, don’t mention the *date*?” Ortiz is the author of a history of racial violence in Florida. Between 1882 and 1930, no state in the country had a higher rate of lynching than Florida; a state senator urged the nullification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments; and one governor, Napoleon Bonaparte Broward II, effectively proposed the deportation of all Black people. During the election of 1920, the Ku Klux Klan burned prospective voters alive in their homes, and Dade County Democrats published an announcement in the *Miami Herald*: “*WHITE VOTERS, REMEMBER! WHITE SUPREMACY IS BEING ASSAULTED IN OUR MIDST.*” In the face of this violence, Blacks fled the state. In 1860, the Black and white populations of Florida were roughly the same size; by 1930, whites outnumbered Blacks by more than two to one. Then came cars, and asphalt. The decades-long process of transforming Florida from the Jim Crow South into a Sun Belt Disney World involved not only destroying Black communities but also dismantling Black cemeteries, all but erasing the state’s Black history. In 1945, Zora Neale Hurston wrote to W. E. B. Du Bois proposing that the N.A.A.C.P. buy a hundred acres of land in Florida, build a cemetery, and rebury the remains of the “illustrious Negro dead.” Du Bois wrote back, “I have not the enthusiasm for Florida that you have.”



*Debra Gonzalez-Garcia, the president of the Friends of Geer Cemetery, leads a group of volunteers who tend to neglected grave sites. "Legally, this place is considered abandoned," she said.*

If a way ahead is possible in this moment, if all sorts of people can be brought together through a door to sit down around a table and come up with something like a Belmont Report, Antoinette T. Jackson is the person to make it happen. Jackson, an anthropologist at the University of South Florida, is dazzling and unstoppable. In 2020, with funding from a university antiracism initiative, she started the African American Burial Grounds and Remembering Project. The project has brought a team of anthropologists, historians, activists, artists, poets, and storytellers to burial sites in both Tampa and St. Petersburg. (Cheryl Rodriguez is a principal investigator on Jackson's team.) They research genealogies, conduct oral histories, meet with community members and organizations, make art, tell stories, and perform poetry. A burial-grounds network? Jackson isn't waiting for federal legislation; she's doing this now. This spring, she founded the Black Cemetery Network, a research coalition that tweets using the hashtag #BlackGravesMatter.

Jackson, who was born in New Orleans, was an executive at A.T. & T. in Illinois when, on vacation in South Carolina, she heard stories she'd never heard before, and decided to become an anthropologist. "I went to a rice plantation outside Charleston with my dad, and we were on a boat," Jackson told me. "And something just hit me, and I knew, this is what you gotta do.

Tell these stories.” She took a leave of absence from her job, and went to graduate school. She wrote a pioneering book called “Speaking for the Enslaved,” about the efforts of African Americans to preserve their own heritage at antebellum plantation sites. “Descendant knowledge needs to be on the same plane with archeological and historical knowledge,” she told me. “The same thing applies to the cemetery project.” As a cultural anthropologist, she doesn’t have the same attitude toward descendants as Justin Dunnivant’s society of archeologists: she’s not only looking for descendants with a legal claim; she’s interested in the meanings people make out of places. “One way to think about it is you network out, six degrees of separation,” she said. “There are the people who have people in the ground. There are the people who live on top. There are the people who own the land.” Her work rests on all kinds of other work, including researching, unearthing, and reburying, but she has a particular gift for bringing people together around learning, the act of openhearted and honest inquiry.

Jackson and I got into her blue Volvo and drove across a city of pavement and palm trees. Zion, Tampa’s first cemetery for African Americans, opened in 1901, at the center of a Black community on North Florida Avenue. It closed in 1920. In 1951, the Housing Authority of Tampa bought the land and then built Robles Park Village, a residential community for middle-class whites, a Sun Belt Levittown, one and a half acres of which is on top of more than eight hundred graves. Later, the housing authority opened Robles to Black residents, who now account for more than ninety per cent of the population there. Three months after Guzzo’s story about Zion ran in the *Tampa Bay Times*, the housing authority conducted an environmental assessment. When it announced the results at a community meeting in Robles and the residents learned that they were living on the dead, people wept and screamed. Some left the room.

There is no plan to move the bodies, only a plan to move the living. Finding Zion led the housing authority to relocate all the tenants and accelerate a planned redevelopment that will expand low-income housing. The housing authority has convened the Zion Cemetery Preservation and Maintenance Society to decide what to do with the cemetery; there has been talk of a memorial and a genealogical-research center. Todd Guy, the Robles Village property manager, met Jackson and me in the parking lot and took us into his office to show us a new master plan for a mixed-income community, a

lavishly illustrated, glossy, oversized book that looks as though it cost the moon. “It is with great care and respect that we must now honor those buried within Zion and tell their story,” it says. The Zion committee has two vacant slots, reserved for descendants. So far, committee members say, they have yet to confirm any.

Yvette Lewis, the head of the Hillsborough county branch of the N.A.A.C.P., wants more than a memorial at Zion. “These people have been walked on all their lives, and now they want to rest and people still want to walk on them,” she told me. She wants reparations: scholarships for African American families affected by the Robles Village discovery. Fentrice Driskell, the state representative, wants the whole community involved. “In a place like Zion, if we can’t find descendants it’s got to be a community conversation,” she said. “Also, what about all the Black families who have lived in Robles over the years? What about sending these kids to college? Starting grants for Black entrepreneurs?” But, here again, the particular strains against the universal: free college tuition and business grants are great ideas as remedies for economic injustice. Why stop at providing them to people whose families lived at Robles?

Jackson, Lewis, and Driskell all serve on that state task force. Its report is due at the beginning of 2022, around the time that reports and audits from committees at Penn, Harvard, and the Smithsonian are to be finalized. “We don’t want to be a road to nowhere,” Driskell told me. “We want the work to continue even after the task force sunsets.” Jackson isn’t worried. DeSantis? “The Governor has *sanctioned* the importance of African American cemeteries,” she told me, and smiled. “We can go wherever we want with that.”

Todd Guy drove Jackson and me around the Robles housing project in a golf cart. We rumbled across crumbling pavement and past tipped-over trash cans and fading grass to a six-foot-tall chain-link fence that marks the perimeter of Zion. A Mylar banner, zip-tied to the fence, lists the names of the people known to be buried there, a makeshift memorial.

Beyond a swinging gate marked “Restricted Area” lies a peach stucco ghost town. The families living on top of the cemetery have been moved out. The housing authority will relocate the remainder, about four hundred families,

in the next year or two. “The housing authority ran this place into the ground,” Jackson whispered to me. She fears the worst. “They’ll move these people to someplace worse, make this place nice, and move other people in.” Spanish moss drooped from an oak tree. The trees are protected, Guy explained. “Even to prune the oaks, we have to have permission from the city,” he said. “We have to build around them.”

Jackson looked around. A lone washing machine stood in a patch of grass. A white plastic bag fluttered on the ground. She appreciates the work that human-rights activists do at sites of conscience, but she doesn’t think it fits a place like this. “They define justice as if you build a memorial and you’re done,” she said. “‘You’ve got justice. You have closure.’ That’s not justice. I don’t want anything to get closed. I want an opening.”

In Zion, a black screen door, unlatched, flapped in the wind. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the estimated cost of Enrichmond’s planned tourist site.

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# Books

- [The Church of Jonathan Franzen](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)
- [Anthony Doerr's Optimism Engine](#)
- [We're Shaped by Our Sexual Desires. Can We Shape Them?](#)

In “Crossroads,” bad decisions and bad faith weigh down the characters—and propel the novel to startling heights.

By [Kathryn Schulz](#)

## Content

A rabbi, a preacher, and a drug dealer walk into a Christmas party. This is not the setup to a joke; it is the setup to a pivotal scene in “[Crossroads](#),” Jonathan Franzen’s new novel. The drug dealer is Perry, the fifteen-year-old son of Russ Hildebrandt, the associate pastor of the First Reformed Church of New Prospect, Illinois. That makes him a P.K., or preacher’s kid, a famously fraught identity that some people navigate by striving to be good enough to live up to the accompanying expectations, and others by becoming conspicuously, defiantly bad. When we first meet Perry, he is stranded between the two options: brilliant but troubled, he has lately resolved to quit doing drugs, be nicer to his sister, and generally become a better person, but he is finding the whole idea of goodness difficult to comprehend.

At the party—an annual interfaith affair for the religious leaders of New Prospect—he convinces himself, through a brief bargaining session with his better angels, that drinking is not technically a contravention of his resolution, then covertly helps himself to a generous amount of gløgg, the potent Scandinavian drink on offer. While the booze works its way into his system, he strikes up a conversation with a rabbi and a pastor about a question that is much on his mind: whether an action can be considered good if the actor knows that by taking it he will gain either pleasure or advantage. Is a godly man truly good if “he enjoys the feeling of being righteous, or he wants eternal life”? Is Perry himself good if he can’t stop his busy mind from tallying up the ancillary benefits of doing the right thing? The rabbi and the pastor are pleasantly surprised that a teen-ager is interested in such morally substantive matters, but the hostess, familiar with Perry and therefore suspicious of him, tries to steer him away from the clergy. Perry, blood alcohol surging, promptly explodes; as the party falls silent, his mother steps into the room. “This is what I’m talking about,” he exclaims. “No matter what I do, it’s always me who’s in the wrong.” Drunk, desperate, ashamed, he bursts into tears, and into the only apologia available to him: “I’m doing the best I can!”

Perry is not the only character in “Crossroads” who is struggling to understand the nature of virtue. The Hildebrandt family occupies a milieu—churchgoing, suburban, Midwestern—in which worth is measured according to “the all-important niceness spectrum,” niceness being that quality Perry fears: a simulacrum of goodness that may or may not have its substance. Within this milieu, Russ is known for being upstanding, and his wife, Marion, for being “Very Nice,” but both of them, together with three of their four children, are doing some notably Not Nice things.

This distinction between real and ersatz virtue is the central preoccupation of “Crossroads”—so much so that Franzen, who historically wears his thematic concerns on his dust sleeve (“[Freedom](#),” “[Purity](#),” “[The Corrections](#)”), might have titled this new novel “Goodness,” if the word didn’t double as an awkward exclamation. It is true that “Crossroads” is also concerned, like every Franzen novel, with the makeup and the breakdown of American families. And it is concerned, too, with the issues implied by the title he gave it: those moments in the lives of individuals and in the history of a nation when stark choices with permanent consequences must be made. But, deliberately and otherwise, the book returns again and again to the same question: What does it mean—for a person and, in a different sense, for a novel—to be good?

“Crossroads” is structured chronologically, around the liturgical calendar, and opens in the season of Advent. But Russ Hildebrandt is not waiting to celebrate the birth of his Saviour. He is waiting for an opportunity to convert his adulterous feelings for Frances Cottrell, a pretty young widow in his congregation, into an actual affair.

Raised Mennonite and still devoted to God and at least nominally to family, Russ is not a serial philanderer; Marion was his first love and remains the only woman he has ever slept with. But, twenty-five years and four children later, time—which, for the families in a Franzen novel, is almost always a corrosive rather than an adhesive force—has worn their marriage away to a dull cycle of aversion and routine, and his eye has lately wandered. Marion knows this, but she also knows what Russ does not: that lurking behind their relationship is a lie she told at its very beginning, and lurking behind that lie is the conviction that she is a fundamentally bad person, one who deserves forgiveness from neither her husband nor her God.

The Hildebrandts, in other words, are a nuclear family chiefly in the fissile sense, rendered unstable and explosive by reactive elements at the core. Only the youngest, Judson, seems (at first) unscathed by this ambient volatility; at nine years old, he is still possessed of a kind of Rousseauian purity. Not so the eldest child, Clem, lately deflowered and on his way back from college to inform his parents that he has dropped out, given up his deferment, and notified the local draft board that he is ready to ship out to Vietnam. His sister, Becky, the social queen of her high school, is newly in love, newly interested in Jesus, and on the verge of thwarting every expectation that anyone ever had for her future. As for Perry, the second youngest: Clem ignores him, Judson worships him, Marion believes that he is a genius while worrying that he has inherited her family's troubled genes, and Russ, who fears Perry's intellect, generally tries to avoid him. That leaves Becky with—in her opinion—the only clear-eyed view of her younger brother: as an expert manipulator, too slick by half, with a surfeit of brains and a deficit of soul. But Perry himself shares her view, though he is unsure whether he is responsible for his faults or has been condemned by fate to being an “evil, selfish worm.” Either way, he believes that he is intrinsically bad, as Marion believes that she is—in contrast to Russ and Becky, who remain convinced of their own fundamental goodness, no matter what they actually do.

Thus do the Hildebrandts enter the Christmas season of 1971. The events of that season and those which follow are told by Franzen, a master of free indirect discourse, via a series of baton handoffs among the five older members of the family. What we learn from Russ sets the stage for the intramarital and intergenerational breakdown to come: three years earlier, he suffered a grand “humiliation” in which he was ousted—in his telling, owing to excess piety and insufficient hipness—from the youth group at First Reformed. That group is called Crossroads—a name with just the right degree of clever-hokey Christian plausibility. It is now led by Russ’s nemesis, the adored youth pastor, Rick Ambrose, under whose guidance it has become vaguely cultlike: low on recognizable Christianity, high on the repeated baring of adolescent souls. Its members speak “from the heart,” offer one another “strokes” for affirmation, sing along to the strumming of acoustic guitars, and gather around a single candle flame to share their feelings.

Much of this world will be familiar to readers of “[The Discomfort Zone](#),” a 2006 collection of essays (some of which appeared in this magazine), in which Franzen describes his youthful participation in a similar organization. And indeed the depiction of Crossroads has the uncomfortable accuracy, simultaneously comic and cringeworthy, of a particularly unfortunate childhood photograph. But one can as easily mine one’s past for clay as for gold, and at first glance the goings on at a Christian youth group in the nineteen-seventies seem less like the stuff of serious literary fiction than like the premise of the newest movie from Christopher Guest.

As it turns out, though, Crossroads is classic Franzen fodder: a slice of suburban life ripe not for satire but for the far deadlier scrutiny that comes from taking it seriously. He shows us the group as it is experienced by his characters, each of whom grants it outsized importance. For Clem, Crossroads matters because he was present for Russ’s humiliation and promptly lost all respect for him. For Becky, it matters partly because joining a Christian youth group is a morally unimpeachable way of rejecting her father, and partly because she was encouraged to join by the young man with whom she has fallen in love: Tanner Evans, an aspiring musician whose band is a Crossroads mainstay. For the addiction-prone Perry, who grasps that, in the economy of the group, “public display of emotion purchased overwhelming approval,” it matters because he craves that approval like a drug.

Ultimately, this oozy adolescent experience is no less important to the two grownup Hildebrandts. For Russ, Crossroads matters because, having semi-reconciled with Ambrose, he has invited himself along on the group’s annual service trip to a Navajo reservation in Arizona, where he hopes to seduce Frances, one of the trip’s parent chaperones. For Marion, it matters because, while Russ is away, she plans to visit an old flame in Los Angeles and commit a little adultery of her own.

That service trip, which takes place during spring break, advances the time line of “Crossroads” from Advent to Eastertide, and propels the Hildebrandts from mere dysfunction to outright disaster. Yet despite that catastrophe, and earlier ones in the history of Marion Hildebrandt, “Crossroads” does not offer a theodicy—an explanation of why a benevolent and all-powerful God would permit the existence of suffering. Franzen is not

interested, here, in why bad things happen to good people. He is interested in why people perceive themselves as good or bad, often despite ample evidence to the contrary, and why people who are at least intermittently trying to be good do terrible things.

These questions are among the fundamental concerns of moral philosophy, but they are also some of the oldest preoccupations of fiction, which was once far more overtly concerned with goodness than it is today. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels are full of naïve young protagonists striking off on journeys of ethical maturation, and omniscient narrators opining on virtue and meting out reward or punishment to characters based on their moral worth. Novels were judged in part on their promotion of rectitude —“Madame Bovary” caused a scandal because Flaubert failed to explicitly condemn the adultery he depicted—and authors, accordingly, used their work as vehicles for advancing ethical ideals. Consider Dickens, making the case again and again for selflessness over greed, or Austen, parsing the distinctions between dignity and vanity, discernment and snobbery, amiability and ingratiation—those everyday virtues, at times almost indistinguishable from manners, that make sharing one’s life with others either pleasant or insufferable.

Eventually, this tradition waned, partly because of the rise of modernism, with its greater interest in consciousness than in conscience, and partly because of increasing skepticism toward conventional notions of goodness. But Franzen is an admirer and an inheritor of this earlier mode of the novel, and he nods to it in his new one. “Crossroads” is the first volume in a trilogy called “A Key to All Mythologies,” a title he borrowed from George Eliot’s [Middlemarch](#), perhaps the most deft and persuasive work to emerge from the long history of fiction as an instrument of moral instruction. The original “Key to All Mythologies” was an omnibus treatise on world religions, destined to remain unfinished, that was the life’s work of the dreary old clergyman Edward Casaubon, who marries the book’s moral and actual heroine: the much younger Dorothea Brooke, who realizes too late that his mind is no match for his ambition.

Given that the phrase “Key to All Mythologies” is now inseparably associated with misguided and unrealized ambition, it’s unclear, in Volume I, why Franzen has decided to use it. Presumably he is not just winking at his

Casaubon-like status in certain corners of literary culture: cranky, condescending, out of touch, always at work on that other impossible achievement, the Great American Novel. Nor are there any obvious literary progeny of “*Middlemarch*” here, though Marion, like Dorothea, is markedly smarter, more socially astute, and more theologically sophisticated than her husband, and has faithfully rewritten his sermons throughout their marriage.

What seems most likely is that the reference is meant to draw our attention to the fatal limitations of totalizing theories of religion or anthropology—of any attempt to unify the wildly varied ways that people justify their actions, measure their own worth, and make sense of existence. In the course of Franzen’s novel, we watch the Hildebrandts pursue such different means of doing all this that they collectively reflect the fracturing of any kind of shared understanding of virtue in modern life. Marion tries psychotherapy; Clem rejects introspection in favor of action; Russ turns to volunteer work; Becky experiments with romantic love and love of God; and Perry tries logical deduction, will power, and cocaine.

None of these efforts are particularly successful—but then, with the exception of the cocaine, none of them are wholly unsuccessful, either. Franzen is not Dickens, which I mean here as a compliment; he does not do moral pageantry, doling out impossible quantities of virtue to some characters while withholding it entirely from others. Instead, in “*Crossroads*,” the desire to be good is broadly shared but alarmingly ephemeral, dissolving with equal ease in the face of forces as potent as addiction (for Perry), as insidious as self-pity (for Russ), and as trivial as a traffic jam (for Marion). Yet it is also strangely persistent, readily rekindled by an encounter with another person, an experience of the ineffable, or the banked heat of some mysterious inner fire. This combination of fragility and tenacity renders the old-fashioned question of virtue interesting again, by rendering it suspenseful. Like real people, the characters in the book go to therapy every week and attend worship services every weekend because their will to be good is in constant need of renewal, which is to say that it is in constant jeopardy.

If this were the only question about goodness animating “*Crossroads*”—basically, “Will it prevail?”—the novel would be old-fashioned indeed, and also almost certainly not by Jonathan Franzen. What makes the book

distinctly part of his canon, with its ambient atmosphere of self-absorption, self-loathing, and disaffection, is not the question of whether virtue can triumph but the meta-question that Perry asks: Does real goodness even exist, or is it always compromised by the dividends it pays to the do-gooder?



*"I can't wait for it to be 5 P.M. so I can go from looking at work stuff on the Internet to looking at non-work stuff on the Internet."*  
Cartoon by Matilda Borgström

To ethicists, that is a question about whether right thinking matters more than right action—that is, whether we should judge people’s goodness based on what they are doing or on why they are doing it. Most of them agree that motives matter: in a perfect world, we would all do the right thing simply because it is the right thing to do. But we don’t, and Franzen repeatedly exploits the gap between what we do and why we do it—which, in fiction, is the gap between plot and character. Many of the book’s crises are set into motion by allegedly high-minded decisions: Becky shares an unexpected financial windfall with her siblings; Clem gives up his deferment to keep someone from a less privileged background from taking his place in Vietnam; Russ, in his youth, leaves a cushy administrative job to help out on a Navajo reservation. Yet we know that Becky is not so much generous as invested in feeling superior; that Clem wants to spite his father, a former conscientious objector who opposes the current war; and that Russ’s volunteer work has long been more helpful to him than to its intended beneficiaries.

Do these motives matter to the rest of the story? You can imagine. In the end, the ostensibly good acts in “Crossroads” are only slightly less disastrous than the overtly bad ones, and virtue seems less like a living possibility than like a trap or a phantasm. There is no Dorothea here, no steadfast moral center to rouse our admiration. Instead, the most generous take on human nature to be found within “Crossroads,” and the final summation of all its characters, might be that desperate claim Perry makes at the Christmas party, rendered strikingly pitiable by how sincere it is, and how little it avails: “I’m doing the best I can!”

It would be a mistake to conclude, from all this talk of virtue, that “Crossroads” is a solemn book. It is, on the contrary, a breezily written family drama with plenty of plot and a touch of melodrama; on the map of literary culture, it shares a border with the beach read. As befits a novel of middle-class suburban life, its crises are insular: a kid isn’t living up to his potential, a woman is unhappy about her weight, a teen-ager has a crush on someone else’s boyfriend. Even the Vietnam backdrop bows to this insistent banality: by 1972, the war is beginning to wind down, and the draft board isn’t interested in Clem, who ends up going to Louisiana and working at a Kentucky Fried Chicken.

These everyday stakes are not a problem; most of life is banal unless it is happening to you. But some part of Franzen—the part that believes in social novels and novels of ideas, and, no doubt, also the grimacing pessimist of his nonfiction, who feels so much despair for the state of the world—is forever turning outward, toward the grand sweep of history and the prevailing customs and troubles of our era. Sometimes his attempts to square those two scales are successful. Without manipulation or overreach, he nicely instantiates in the characters of “Crossroads” a series of larger phenomena: the generational fraying of the nineteen-sixties and seventies; the emergence of women’s liberation, slightly too late for Marion’s cohort of mid-century mothers and wives; the way mainstream Protestantism lost traction with young people precisely by its eagerness to retain them (Rick Ambrose, defending the absence of anything identifiably Christian in his youth group, weakly observes that, “obviously, the hope is that everyone will find their way to an authentic faith”); and, especially, the particular kinds of trouble that befall suburban Wasps whose lives have everything but meaning.

Moreover, in a first for Franzen, whose characters of color have historically been few and dreadful, the extreme discomfort of scenes set on Chicago's South Side reads less like authorial limitation than like literary realism. Russ, in his volunteer work there, displays the awkward mix of self-consciousness, self-congratulation, and obliviousness emblematic of white liberals struggling to reconcile their awareness of racial inequality with their sense of themselves as the good guys. And, to the bit part of a Black preacher, Franzen grants an interiority not interested in sharing itself with Russ, and an external reality, in the form of pastoral obligations, that the white volunteers are just as likely to complicate as to improve—another, more fraught iteration of the question of whether our intentions or our actions matter more when we try to do the right thing.

Sometimes, though, Franzen's outward impulse leads him away from his own strengths. At heart, the human scale to which he is most acutely attuned is the familial—taken together, his novels amount to one long elaboration on the theme of Every Unhappy Family Is Unhappy in Its Own Way—and the forces he channels best are centripetal: he is at his finest when writing about the Midwest, the middle class, midlife crises, middlingness in general. The farther he ventures from all that, the shakier his plots become, the less organically they arise from his characters. Thus the otherwise effective spring-break trip is marred by a secondary tragedy on the Navajo reservation involving strip mining, which seems imported less from Arizona than from "Freedom," where it didn't work, either. Similarly, toward the end of "Crossroads," Clem vanishes to rural Peru, for no reason except that Franzen routinely sends one character per book on an ill-advised adventure in a developing nation, in service to some woes-of-globalism subplot. In such moments, the characters seem subservient to a set of ideas, which is the problem with Clem more generally: his fall from diligent student to aimless drifter is less a plausible personal trajectory than a convenient embodiment of the generational archetype of the dropout. Even Judson feels more like a real person, despite having almost no role in the book beyond quietly absorbing his family's trauma.

That lacuna is effective, in that it makes the reader look forward to hearing from the youngest Hildebrandt in the rest of the trilogy. Elsewhere, though, the spectre of those future novels does not serve the current one as well. In general, Franzen is good at endings; a surprising feature of his writing, given

how consumed it is with dysfunction and disaffection, is how regularly it finds its way toward tenderness in the final pages. But the pacing is off at the end of “Crossroads.” Although most of the book lingers on just a handful of days during Christmastime of 1971 and Holy Week of 1972, its final stretch feels rushed. A couple of years pass with no more than a summary of the momentous events that filled them, and the conclusion is really just a cliffhanger; the novel does not so much end as trade on our knowledge that the story itself is far from over.

Yet here is the thing about “Crossroads”: when I got to that unsatisfying ending, I found myself irritated less by its shortcomings than by the fact that I couldn’t read those other volumes right away. The experience brought to mind E. M. Forster’s maxim about the novel: “*Qua* story, it can only have one merit: that of making the audience want to know what happens next.”

By that metric, “Crossroads” plainly succeeds—yet that metric does not distinguish Jonathan Franzen from James Patterson. Still, the two are plainly distinct, which raises the question of what, other than suspense, makes Franzen’s new novel so compelling. That’s tricky to answer, because what’s true of ethics is also true of aesthetics: certain forms of goodness are strangely elusive. And Franzen, more than most contemporary writers of his calibre, operates in this covert mode almost exclusively. In the years since the publication of “The Corrections,” his prose has grown looser and laxer; never a showy author, he now sometimes scarcely seems like a good one. He has become so assertively styleless that he appears to have deemed linguistic pleasure not only inferior to but anathema to all other literary aims. Whole chapters—almost whole books—go by without a beautiful line or an arresting image. Yet I still remember the description, from “The Corrections,” of thunderstorms piling up across the Midwest—“like big spiders in a little jar”—and I miss the writer who conjured that vision. Unlike Perry, in other words, Franzen does not always seem to be doing the best he can. That impression is enhanced by the unmistakable fact that, from time to time, he towers above his own work. I don’t just mean that “The Corrections” was the best of his novels; I mean that at some point *within* each novel he demonstrates the full, showstopping range of what he is capable of doing.

These bursts of excellence take two forms, the first having to do with his characters. Not all of them are convincing, although I've never agreed with the claim that Franzen is bad at writing women. (Yes, all the female characters in "Freedom" are weak, but so are all the men.) But when he does succeed with characters he succeeds dramatically, lighting up their inner lives, in the manner of police stations and emergency rooms, with accurate, unflattering fluorescence. Think of Enid, the matriarch of "The Corrections," who presides over her difficult husband's decline into dementia while desperately yearning for one more family Christmas with her adult children gathered together in their childhood home. She is needy, maddening, familiar, sharp, utterly consistent, in urgent relationship with the constraints of her gender, her marriage, and her era, and, all told, one of the truly great creations of twenty-first-century literature.

In "Crossroads," the standout characters are Becky, Perry, and Marion. We watch Becky's moral formation almost in real time—under the triple influences of newfound piety, a narcissistic aunt, and her family's sudden implosion—and the result is flatly terrifying. By the end of the book, she appears to have turned to ice, complete with an inner Zamboni to keep her maximally smooth; nothing can mar her perfect self-righteousness, and it is to Franzen's great credit that she made my skin crawl to a degree usually achievable only by someone from whom you have repeatedly walked away fuming. Perry, meanwhile, is terrifying in a different way: we are scared not of him but for him. A teen-age drug addict with a troubled mind, a grave lack of adult oversight, and ruinous instincts, he is headed for disaster from the beginning, yet I can think of no other character in the Franzen universe who receives such tender treatment.

Together with Marion, Perry also illuminates the second of Franzen's erratic but astonishing gifts, which is for the creation of the perfect set piece. There is at least one of these in almost all the novels—a moment when some inner gear shifts dramatically upward and we are delivered into a stretch of literature transcendent in its wonderfulness. In "The Corrections," that moment comes when Chip, in childhood, is left alone at the dining-room table until he finishes his dinner. All around him, the other members of the family retreat to their various corners of the house, his mother willfully and his father accidentally forgetting about him, while time simultaneously slows to a crawl, reduced to Chip's microscopic contemplation of the pattern

on a placemat and the ancient boogers stuck to the underside of the table, and stretches forward indefinitely into the future—because, as Franzen understands, once you have sat alone at age seven in front of a plate of cold liver and mashed rutabaga for long enough, some part of you will be sitting there for the rest of your life.

That scene is representative of what makes these set pieces work: it combines maximum insight into a character's psychology with maximum narrative reach, both spatial and temporal—a different kind of successful squaring of scales. In "Crossroads," the analogous scene with Marion lasts for sixty pages and is set in a therapist's office, a convenient place for both elongating time and accessing interiority. In the course of it, we learn what her therapist, interestingly, does not: as a very young woman, she had an affair with a married man that resulted in a psychotic break, a pregnancy, and an abortion, which she could afford only through a bargain so Faustian that she sincerely describes its purveyor as Satan.

It is difficult to know which is more gripping: this backstory or Marion's take on it, which is shaped by the potency of her belief in guilt and sin. Her insistence that she is responsible for some of the terrible things that have happened to her dismays her therapist, who suggests, predictably, that she should forgive herself and feel angry at the perpetrators instead. But Marion, who does not regard anger as benign, is refreshingly unpersuaded: "I know you think it's sick to blame myself, but spiritually I think it's healthier." Gradually, we learn that the litany of things for which she blames herself tracks backward along a dark red line from Perry's fragile mind all the way to her father's long-ago suicide. And all the while Becky is heading to a Crossroads concert to publicly declare her love to Tanner Evans, Perry is taking Judson to that ill-fated Christmas party, and Russ, who should be at the party as well, is getting into a fender bender in the increasingly heavy snow with his would-be mistress beside him in the car.

Three hundred more pages and thirty years elapse before Marion's crisis is echoed by another, and we watch as Perry, now in the grips of a full-blown addiction, descends into catastrophe in the Arizona desert. Franzen's narrative dexterity is never more evident in the book than in the widening chasm between Perry's inner experience and what we see happening to him there, and the resulting story line is the opposite of Clem's: meticulously

constructed, emotionally convincing, simultaneously suspenseful and inevitable. But it is also successful for a subtler reason. A breakdown in the past, a breakdown in the present; two parents each abandoning a child in order to pursue an affair; a climactic week unfolding with exact, unforced choreography across multiple time zones and six family members: it turns out that “Crossroads,” which reads so speedily it can seem almost slapdash, is carefully wrought, its neatly balanced architecture another clandestine source of its power.

“Crossroads” is an imperfect novel that is nonetheless a great one, its inner operations lofting it high above its flaws. Only the rest of the trilogy can tell us whether the same will hold for any of its characters. Throughout the book, Franzen fixes his gaze on bad decisions, bad faith, the incremental setting in motion of disaster. Ultimately, though, he seems more invested in what happens after all those calamitous choices are made—in their practical consequences but also in who offers forgiveness and who withholds it when the will to be good has failed. The deepest form of suspense at work in his novel is driven not by its plot but by a kind of moral uncertainty. At its conclusion, almost every character is at his or her worst; the question it leaves us with is whether any of them can ever be better. ♦

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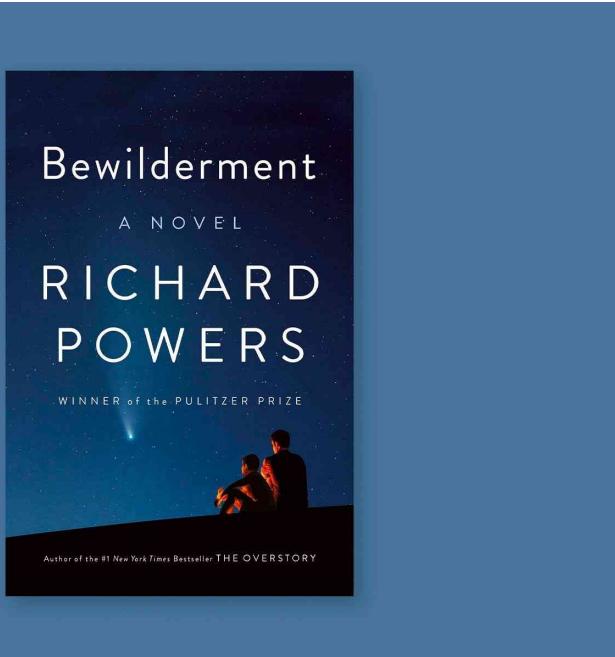
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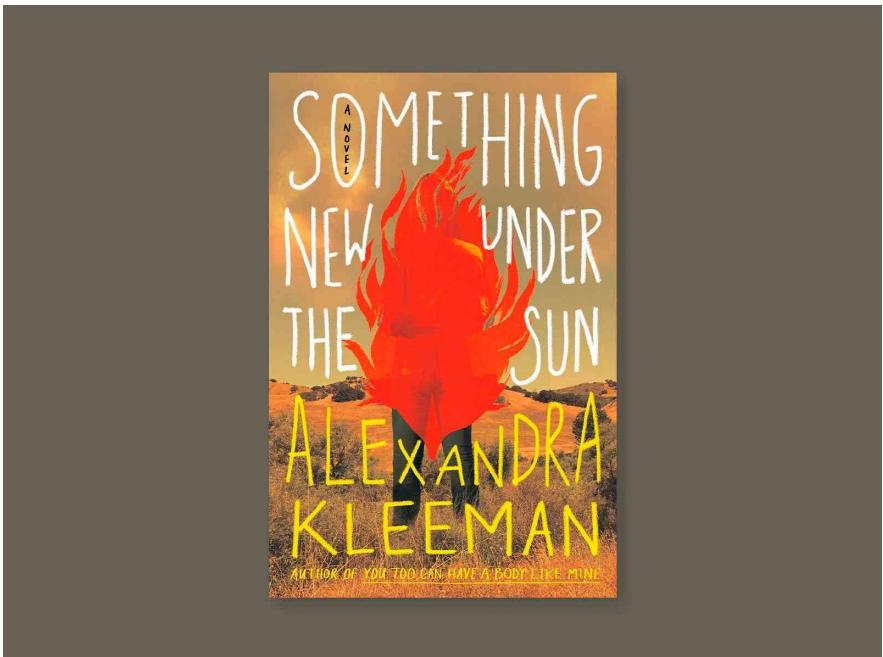
## Briefly Noted

“Bewilderment,” “Something New Under the Sun,” “Against White Feminism,” and “Burning Man.”

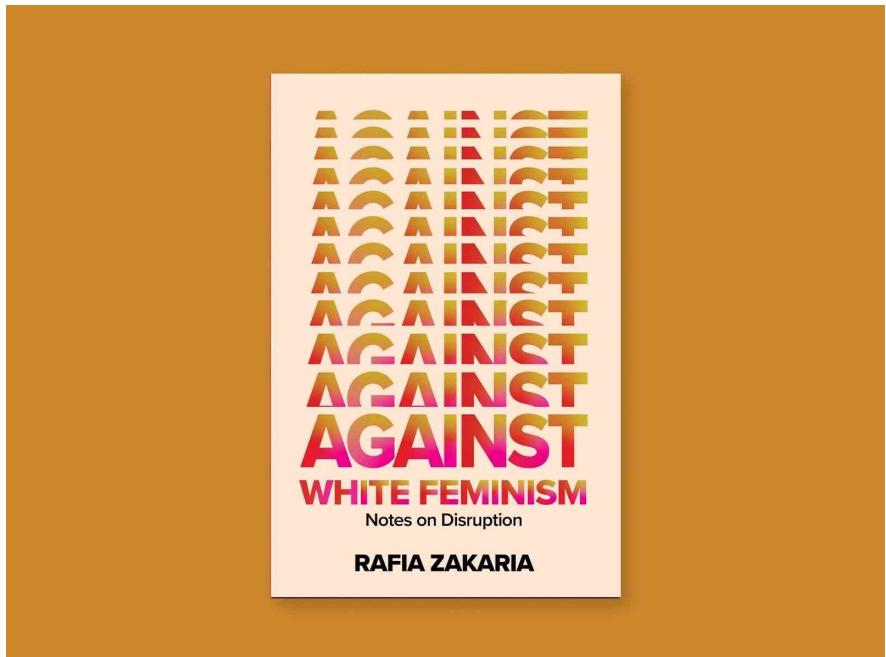
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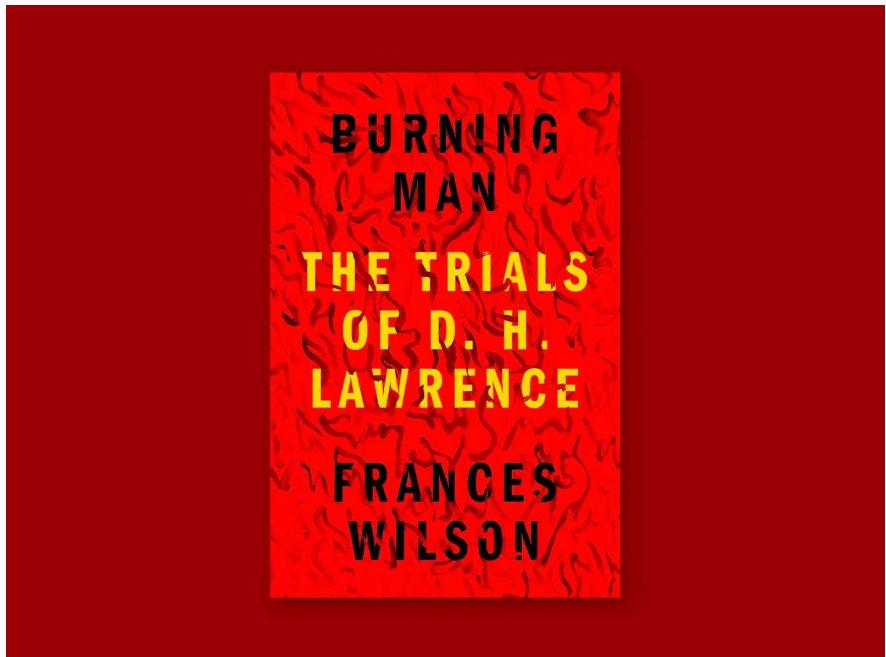
**Bewilderment**, by *Richard Powers* (Norton). In this follow-up to Powers's Pulitzer-winning eco-saga “The Overstory,” a recently widowed astrobiologist engaged in assessing the potential for life on other planets must attend to the needs of his nine-year-old son, Robin, who has a spectrum disorder. Since the boy’s mother died, his symptoms have intensified and his empathy for animals sometimes leads to angry outbursts. He undergoes an experimental neurofeedback therapy that can imprint other people’s emotions—including his mother’s—onto him. Before long, the treatment transforms Robin into an almost oracular figure, a social-media activist devoted to protecting the earth against mankind. Powers provides a moving depiction of filial love, as father and son confront a world of “invisible suffering on unimaginable scales.”



**Something New Under the Sun**, by Alexandra Kleeman (Hogarth). In this novel, set in the near future against a backdrop of California wildfires and drought, an East Coast novelist travels to Los Angeles in order to be on set for the film adaptation of his book. Thanks to the film's female lead, he gets drawn into investigating a synthetic water substitute, *WAT-R*, that has become ubiquitous. Meanwhile, back East, his wife and daughter join a cultlike gathering in the woods, where they mourn extinct species and plants. Charting a path through the genres of mystery, Hollywood novel, and dystopian fiction, Kleeman ably balances entertainment with an ambient sense of disaster.



[\*\*Against White Feminism\*\*](#), by *Rafia Zakaria* (Norton). Combining personal anecdotes with historical analysis, these essays examine such linked phenomena as the “white savior industrial complex,” “securo-feminism,” and the commodification of sexual liberation. Zakaria calls for a feminism that is not only centered on the experiences of women of color but also, more broadly, seeks to counter “whiteness”—a term that, for her, denotes not merely a phenotypic trait but, more, a nexus of behaviors, systems, and ideologies stemming from “the legacy of empire and slavery.” Her argument spans centuries and continents to demonstrate the ways in which mainstream feminism’s focus on white, Western perspectives has perpetuated, rather than challenged, oppression and exploitation across the globe.



[Burning Man](#), by *Frances Wilson* (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*). This biography of D. H. Lawrence dwells on the years between the publication of “The Rainbow,” in 1915, and his diagnosis of advanced tuberculosis, in 1925, during which Lawrence lived in a perpetual state of motion, wandering from Bloomsbury to Sri Lanka and Taos. Wilson portrays a man defined by contradictions: a coal miner’s son and a snob; an intellectual who despised the intellect; a novelist driven to write about sex while also fearing it. Wilson has an infectious enthusiasm for the byways of her subject, lavishing attention on such figures as the arts patron Mabel Dodge Luhan and championing a foreword that Lawrence wrote for a friend’s memoir —“an unclassifiable document virtually unknown”—as the epitome of his genius.

In “Cloud Cuckoo Land,” the world may be falling apart but everything and everyone must come together.

By [James Wood](#)

A curious coincidence, of the kind favored by certain novelists, occurred in 2014 and 2015, when both the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction were awarded in consecutive years to Donna Tartt, for “[The Goldfinch](#),” and Anthony Doerr, for “[All the Light We Cannot See](#).” These novels, enormous best-sellers, are essentially children’s tales for grownups, and feature teen-age protagonists. In both books, the teen-ager possesses a rare object that has been removed from a great museum; the subsequent adventures of the object are inextricable from the adventures of the protagonist. In “[The Goldfinch](#),” the object is an exquisite seventeenth-century painting, which thirteen-year-old Theo Decker has stolen from the Metropolitan Museum. In “All the Light We Cannot See,” Marie-Laure LeBlanc, sixteen years old and blind, ends up as the surviving guardian of a hundred-and-thirty-three-carat diamond known as the Sea of Flames, which once sat in a vault in the Museum of National History in Paris. As the Nazis closed in on the city, Marie-Laure and her father, who worked at the museum, fled with the gem to Saint-Malo.

The two novels end with loudly redemptive messages. On the final page of Tartt’s book, Theo informs us, “Whatever teaches us to talk to ourselves is important: whatever teaches us to sing ourselves out of despair. But the painting has also taught me that we can speak to each other across time.” Toward the end of Doerr’s novel, a character reflects that to behold young Marie-Laure, who has survived the Second World War, albeit orphaned, “is to believe once more that goodness, more than anything else, is what lasts.” Years later, in 2014, a now elderly Marie-Laure sits in the Jardin des Plantes, and feels that the air is “a library and the record of every life lived.” At each moment, she laments, someone who once remembered the war is dying. But there is hope: “We rise again in the grass. In the flowers. In songs.”

For both writers, I think, the real treasure to be safeguarded is not a particular painting or jewel but story itself: Tartt’s novel shares its very title with the painting in question, and more important to Marie-Laure than the gem are Jules Verne’s adventure stories, which she carries with her throughout the novel; in a stirringly implausible episode, a German soldier is

kept alive by listening to her radio broadcast of “Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea.” In both books, “goodness” is really just the presumed great good of story. We “sing” across the generations, and this song is first of all the novel we hold in our hands, and more generally storytelling itself. This is what lasts, or so these writers hope: history as an enormous optimistic library.

What was implicit in “All the Light We Cannot See” is blaringly overt in Doerr’s new novel, “[Cloud Cuckoo Land](#)” (Scribner). Scattered across six hundred and twenty or so pages are five stories, set in very different places and periods. In the nearish future, Konstance, a teen-age girl (here’s our hero-guardian, once again), is flying in a spaceship with eighty-five other people, toward a planet that may sustain human life, after its collapse on earth. (Reaching its destination will take almost six hundred years.) In mid-fifteenth-century Constantinople, Anna, a Greek Christian, awaits the assault that has long been threatened by Muslim forces. A few hundred miles away, Omeir, a gentle country boy, finds himself caught up in the Sultan’s army and its march toward Constantinople, and he eventually encounters Anna. In contemporary Lakeport, Idaho, a sweet-natured octogenarian named Zeno Ninis is minding a group of schoolchildren, who are rehearsing a play in the local library, while, outside the building, a troubled ecoterrorist named Seymour sits in his car, a bomb in his lap, about to make his great explosive statement.

These characters are explicitly connected by a fable (or fragments of a fable) that Doerr has invented, and that he attributes to an actual Greek writer, Antonius Diogenes, thought to have flourished in the second century C.E. Titled “Cloud Cuckoo Land,” the Doerr-Diogenes fabrication tells the tale of Aethon, a shepherd who tries to travel to “a utopian city in the sky,” a place in the clouds “where all needs are met and no one suffers.” After assorted escapades of a classical nature—the hero is turned into a donkey and a crow—Aethon returns to earth, grateful for “the green beauty of the broken world,” or, as Doerr capitalizes for the slow-witted, “*WHAT YOU ALREADY HAVE IS BETTER THAN WHAT YOU SO DESPERATELY SEEK.*”

Each of the novel’s five principal characters finds his or her way to this invented Greek text. Anna stumbles across a frail, goatskin codex of the tale in a ruined library in Constantinople. Omeir and Anna eventually fall in love

and have children, and together they guard and tend the magical manuscript. Zeno spends his later years translating the Greek fable—indeed, it's his dramatic version of “Cloud Cuckoo Land” that the schoolchildren are rehearsing in the Idaho library. Konstance’s father, one of a small number of people on the spaceship old enough to remember life on earth (most have been born on board), used to tell embellished adaptations of the Greek story to his daughter at bedtime. Near the end of Doerr’s novel, Diogenes’ fragments reach even Seymour, now in the Idaho State Correctional Institution, where he is doing time for the deadly incident at the library: Seymour gets interested in Zeno’s translation, and asks one of his victims, the town’s former librarian, to send it to him. As he reads, the potent text emits its healing gas. “By age seventeen he’d convinced himself that every human he saw was a parasite, captive to the dictates of consumption,” we’re told. “But as he reconstructs Zeno’s translation, he realizes that the truth is infinitely more complicated, that we are all beautiful even as we are all part of the problem, and that to be a part of the problem is to be human.”

What on earth—or even on Cloud Cuckoo Land—is this? It’s less a novel than a big therapeutic contraption, moving with sincere deliberation toward millions of eager readers. The author might reply, with some justice, that a fable is a therapeutic contraption, and so is plenty of Dickens. Doerr’s new novel, though, is more of a contraption, and more earnestly therapeutic, than any adult fiction I can recall reading. The obsessive connectivity resembles a kind of novelistic online search, each new link unfolding inescapably from its predecessor, as our author keeps pressing Return. The title shared by the Greek text and the novel comes, an epigraph reminds us, from Aristophanes’ comedy “The Birds.” Yet these characters are also bound to one another by larger ropes of classical allusion and cross-reference. Anna and Zeno both excitedly discover the *Odyssey* before they encounter the Diogenes text; Seymour, who appears to be somewhat autistic, develops a relationship with an owl, which he nicknames Trustyfriend (a borrowing from “The Birds”); when Konstance’s father was back on earth, he used to live in Australia, on a farm he called Scheria (a mythical island in the *Odyssey*); the spaceship is named the Argos (the name of Odysseus’ dog, and also suggestive of Jason’s ship, the Argo).

These characters are, necessarily, held together not only by “Cloud Cuckoo Land” the fable but by “Cloud Cuckoo Land” the novel. Having laid out his

flagrantly disparate cast, Doerr must insist on that cast's almost freakish genealogical coherence. This formal insistence becomes the novel's *raison d'être*. We have no idea how these people or periods relate to one another, or how they rationally could. But storytelling, redefined as esoteric manipulation, will reveal the code; the novelist is the magus, the secret historian. Although the book is largely set in a recognizable actual world, largely obeys the laws of physics, and features human beings, storytelling, stripped of organic necessity, aerates itself into fantasy.

Novels that, like "Cloud Cuckoo Land," follow the "[Cloud Atlas](#)" suite form provide an opportunity for authorial bravado. (David Mitchell has much to answer for.) Doerr's new book and its predecessor open with narrative propositions. The reader is, in effect, presented with a vast map, pegged with tiny characters who begin very far apart. Slowly, these dots will get bigger and move toward one another. In "All the Light We Cannot See," for instance, we open in Saint-Malo, with sixteen-year-old Marie-Laure. Two other characters—a tenderhearted German radio engineer and a Nazi gem hunter—are converging on Marie-Laure, and it will take the course of the book for them to do so.

Doerr likes to start in medias res, and then to go back to the origins of his stories and work forward again (or forward and backward and forward again, in alternation). He dangles that first picture, the confusing snapshot from the thick of things, as the prize awaiting the properly plot-hungry, plot-patient reader. So that novel begins in 1944, and promptly takes us back to Marie-Laure at the age of six, in Paris, in order to demonstrate how she and her father ended up in Saint-Malo with a diamond bigger than the Ritz. At the opening of "Cloud Cuckoo Land," we're presented with the incomprehensible tableau of fourteen-year-old Konstance hurtling through space in the Argos. She has recently discovered the connection between her father and Antonius Diogenes' tale of Aethon. But the scene quickly gives way to the snatched preludes of two other stories: Zeno at the Idaho library with the children, Seymour in a parked car with his bomb. These stories, too, quickly reverse—we see Zeno at seven, in 1941, and Seymour at three, in 2005—in order to go forward once again more slowly. When we next encounter Konstance, a hundred or so pages after her first appearance, she is four years old. In this way, the reader is always playing Doerr's game of catch-up, eager to reach a finale that has already functioned as prelude.

As a stylist, Doerr has several warring modes. One of them comes from what could be called the Richard Powers school of emergency realism. Omeir isn't merely afraid; "tendrils of panic clutch his windpipe." Anna isn't merely very thirsty; "thirst twists through her." When Seymour thinks, "questions chase one another around the carousel of his mind." But Doerr's habitual register is less obtrusive. He often writes very well, and is excellent at the pop-up scenic evocations required by big novels that move around a lot. Although the arcs of his stories may tend toward a kind of sentimental pedagogy, his sentences, in the main, scrupulously avoid it. He knows how to animate a picture; he knows which details to choose. Here is Zeno as a young infantryman, fighting in the Korean War. The supply truck he's riding in has been ambushed by enemy soldiers:

A middle-aged Chinese soldier with small beige teeth drags him out of the passenger's door and into the snow. In another breath there are twenty men around him. . . . Some carry Russian burp guns; some have rifles that look four decades old; some wear only rice bags for shoes. Most are tearing open C rations they've taken out of the back of the Dodge. One holds a can printed *PINEAPPLE UPSIDE-DOWN CAKE* while another tries to saw it open with a bayonet; another stuffs his mouth with crackers; a fourth bites into a head of cabbage as though it were a giant apple.



"I couldn't find parking in the city, so I moved home, got back with my high-school girlfriend, had a baby, and got a great deal on a new car."

Zeno is captured, and put in a P.O.W. camp. Doerr deftly provides the equivalent of a cinematic establishing shot: “In winter stalagmites of frozen urine reach up and out of the latrines. The river freezes, the Chinese heat fewer bunkhouses, and the Americans and Brits are merged.” We’re up and running.

Yet his prose is regularly on the verge of formula, and too often capitulates to baser needs. “All the Light We Cannot See” recycles a goodly amount of Nazi tropes: impeccably dressed officers brush invisible specks of dust from their uniforms, or pull off their leather gloves one finger at a time. A boy is “thin as a blade of grass, skin as pale as cream.” In both novels, when Doerr wants to gesture at immensity, he . . . gestures. The telltale formulation involves the word “thousand.” From his previous novel: “At the lowest tides, the barnacled ribs of a thousand shipwrecks stick out above the sea.” And: “A thousand frozen stars preside over the quad.” And: “A thousand eyes peer out.” And: “A shell screams over the house. He thinks: I only want to sit here with her for a thousand hours.” He’s at it again in the new book. Anna “practices her letter on the thousand blank pages of her mind.” Zeno, as a little boy, is afraid: “Only now does fear fill his body, a thousand snakes slithering beneath his skin.” Konstance, too, is on edge: “From the shadows crawl a thousand demons.”

It’s a minor tic, appealing even in its unconsciousness. But this double movement, simultaneously toward the enlargement of intensity and the routine of formula, tells us something about the strange terrain of Doerr’s novels, which leave so little for the mean, for the middle. Proficient prose supports an extravagance of storytelling; excellent craftsmanship holds together a flashing edifice; tight plotting underwrites earnestly immense themes. Every so often, a more subtle observer emerges amid these gapped extremities, a writer interested merely in honoring the world about him, a stylist capable of something as beautiful as “the quick, drastic strikes of a bow dashing across the strings of a violin,” or this taut description of an Idaho winter: “Icicles fang the eaves.”

“Cloud Cuckoo Land” has little time for such mimetic modesties and accidental beauties. Far more even than its predecessor, it is fraught with preaching. This novel of performative storytelling that is also a novel

about storytelling is dedicated to “the librarians then, now, and in the years to come.” Two anxieties, reinforcing each other, are at play: the end of the book, and nothing less than the end of the world. Which is to say, the book is under threat both by the erosion of cultural memory and by the climate crisis. Doerr’s invention of the fable of Aethon is also Doerr’s fable about the precariousness of the book: a fragment that barely made it into the modern world, surviving only by the tenuous links between successive generations of readers. Books, a teacher tells Anna, are precious repositories “for the memories of people who have lived before. . . . But books, like people, die.” Elsewhere, another scribe reminds Anna that time “wipes the old books from the world,” and, likening Constantinople to an ark full of books, neatly twins this novel’s emphases: “The ark has hit the rocks, child. And the tide is washing in.”

The terminality of the message perhaps explains the frantic didacticism of all the theming. Libraries are everywhere here, from Constantinople to Idaho. In one of the book’s most tender episodes, Zeno meets an English soldier in Korea named Rex Browning, and surreptitiously falls in love with him. Rex is a classicist, who tells Zeno that he might be named for Zenodotus, “the first librarian at the library at Alexandria.” Later in the novel, back in England, Rex writes a book titled “Compendium of Lost Books.” The spaceship Argos offers an elegiac, troubling vision of life without actual libraries; its brain is a Siri-like oracle known as Sibyl, a vast digital library of everything we ever knew: “the collective wisdom of our species. Every map ever drawn, every census ever taken, every book ever published, every football match, every symphony, every edition of every newspaper, the genomic maps of over one million species—everything we can imagine and everything we might ever need.”

Gradually, you come to understand that the desperate cross-referencing and thematic reinforcing borrow not so much from the model of the Internet as from the model of the library. Just as this novel full of stories is also about storytelling, so this novel about the importance of libraries mimics a library; it is stuffed with texts and allusions and connections, an ideal compendium of “the collective wisdom of our species.”

It’s here, perhaps, that “Cloud Cuckoo Land” becomes an affecting document. As a novelist, Doerr is utterly unembarrassed by statement. For

him, storytelling is entertainment and sermon; the novel is really a fable. Late Tolstoy might have approved. And since we are living in critical times, the lessons are made very legible: the book is at risk; the world is at risk; we should not seek out distant utopias but instead cultivate our burnt gardens. Above all—or, rather, underneath all—everything is connected. Seymour, vibrantly, morbidly alive to our self-destruction, realizes this:

Seymour studies the quantities of methane locked in melting Siberian permafrost. Reading about declining owl populations led him to deforestation which led to soil erosion which led to ocean pollution which led to coral bleaching, everything warming, melting, and dying faster than scientists predicted, every system on the planet connected by countless invisible threads to every other: cricket players in Delhi vomiting from Chinese air pollution, Indonesian peat fires pushing billions of tons of carbon into the atmosphere over California, million-acre bushfires in Australia turning what's left of New Zealand's glaciers pink.

If this sounds like it could almost have been written by [Don DeLillo](#), there's a reason. The apprehension that everything is connected is essentially a paranoid insight (and a useful one for the novelist, who can pose as esoteric decoder). What's poignant here is the way one kind of connectivity helplessly collapses into another. Seymour's Internet search, today's version of a library search, is an exercise in scholarly connection, of the kind this novel also enjoys—everyone and everything is related by cross-reference and classical allusion and thematic inheritance. But "Cloud Cuckoo Land" embodies and imposes a darker connective energy, too. Climate change, after all, enforces an entirely justifiable paranoia: we are indeed part of a shared system, in which melting in one place arrives by flood in a second place and fire in yet another. One form of connectivity might be almost utopian; the other has become powerfully dystopian. History's enormous optimistic library becomes reality's enormous pessimistic prison. Each vision, as in Seymour's alarmed search, fuels another in this book.

Artistically, this sincere moral and political urgency does the novel few favors, as the book veers between its relentless thematic coherence and wild fantasias of storytelling. But that urgency may also account for the novel's brute didactic power; it is hard to read, without a shudder, the sections about

the desperate and deluded Argonauts, committed to voyaging for centuries through space-time because life on earth has failed. A pity, then, and a telling one, that Doerr finally resolves nearly every story optimistically and soothingly. And Konstance's hurtling spaceship? Oh, it turns out to be the biggest therapeutic contraption of all. ♦

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What we want may be more socially conditioned than we realize.

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

## Content

Do you know the story of Myrrha and Cinyras? It appears in Book X of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, alongside more celebrated tales, like that of Orpheus and Eurydice; in fact, Orpheus himself sings of it. Myrrha, he tells us, was the princess of Cyprus, the daughter of King Cinyras, whom she dearly loved—but not as a daughter should. Tormented by forbidden lust, she tried to hang herself, but was discovered in time by her nurse. The nurse then arranged for Myrrha to go to Cinyras during a festival when married women (including Myrrha's mother, the queen) stayed away from their husbands' beds. Disguised by the dark, Myrrha spent many blissful nights with her father, until Cinyras at last thought to fetch a light to see the face of his young lover. On learning the truth, he seized his sword, to kill her. She fled and wandered the earth until the gods put an end to her misery by turning her into a tree. That is how we got myrrh.

Two thousand years later, this tale is as strange and harrowing as ever. (The poet [Frank Bidart](#) drew on it in his 1997 book, "[Desire](#)," and his telling practically burns the page.) Why is Orpheus singing of such things? He has just lost Eurydice by turning back and taking a forbidden look at her as she followed him up from Hades. Maybe, having ruined his life by succumbing to his own desire, he is taking bitter comfort in the fact that someone else has done the same.

What makes Orpheus' account of Myrrha even stranger is that it immediately follows the story of Pygmalion, a sculptor who falls in love with a statue of his own making. (Cinyras is their grandson.) That is a happy tale, ending with an impossible wish fulfilled. But it, too, contains the bitter seed of female duplicity. Pygmalion's statue is, in Charles Martin's translation, "better than any living woman could boast of"—essentially, it is an ivory sex doll—and he's moved to create it by his disgust at women's wanton ways:

Pygmalion observed how these women lived lives of sordid indecency, and, dismayed by the numerous defects

of character Nature had given the feminine spirit,  
stayed as a bachelor, having no female companion.

Pygmalion's attitude sounds like one that we now associate with incels: involuntary celibates. The most notorious example is Elliot Rodger, the twenty-two-year-old who went on a murderous spree in Isla Vista, California, in May, 2014, to avenge himself on a world of women who, as he claimed in a hundred-thousand-word autobiographical manifesto, acted like rapacious sluts with other men and yet punished him by denying him sex. Thwarted male desire, we know, is a dangerous thing—and so, Myrrha's story tells us, is female desire fulfilled. Myrrha is cursed from the moment that she recognizes what it is she wants, and she knows it.

This is an ancient belief: that our most ardent desires dwell fully formed within us, only waiting to emerge. It's at the center of contemporary sexual politics, too; few things have been more critical to the acceptance of gay rights in the United States than the notion that queer people are "born this way." Change our desire? It seems easier to be changed into a tree.

Has the time come to reconsider? Amia Srinivasan, a professor of philosophy at Oxford and an occasional [contributor](#) to this magazine, thinks so. Her new collection of essays, "[The Right to Sex](#)" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), takes on a number of topics that are relevant, as its subtitle says, to "feminism in the twenty-first century," such as porn, consent, and the prospect of sex between students and their teachers. But at its heart is the title essay, in which Srinivasan asks us to imagine what might be possible if we chose to see our own erotic desires as flexible rather than fixed. The [essay](#) caused a stir in 2018, when it was first published, in the *London Review of Books*, in part because its provocative original title, "Does Anyone Have the Right to Sex?," suggested to certain readers that Srinivasan was prepared to argue that some people did. In fact, she was arguing the opposite; it is "axiomatic," she writes, "that no one is under an obligation to have sex with anyone else," and "axiomatic" is a word that philosophers do not just throw around. Still, reading the essay now, you can see why people—conservative commentators, like the columnist Ross Douthat, but also a number of feminists—were freaked out.

Srinivasan begins her discussion with Elliot Rodger. He and other self-declared male incels want to rape and kill women, and, what's more, they blame us for inspiring them to rape and kill. As many feminists have pointed out, the incel phenomenon is a particularly concentrated form of the misogynistic poison that is aerosolized throughout the general cultural air. Such men feel that they have a right to sex, but so have many men—and, until very recently, the law was often on their side. (Nobody was convicted of marital rape in the United States before 1979.)

So, though what Rodger did was aberrant, “his sense of sexual entitlement was a case study in patriarchal ideology,” Srinivasan writes. This is the consensus position. Then she asks us to look closely at what Rodger’s particular sense of sexual entitlement entailed. Rodger’s mother was Malaysian Chinese, his father white English; in his manifesto, he wrote of his fury at finding himself sexually rejected while “an inferior, ugly black boy” he knew was “able to get a white girl.” Clearly, Rodger’s desire for, and hatred of, women was amplified by a rigid, repellent racial hierarchy. But, Srinivasan wonders, is the incel’s system so different from the one that most so-called normal people in our society use when they go about looking for sex? Rodger, who was erotically obsessed with “the spoiled, stuck-up, blonde slut,” was not wrong to recognize that such a person was not likely to return his interest. He might have been looking at women reductively, categorically, but weren’t women doing the same, when they looked at him and saw (as Srinivasan puts it) a “short, clumsy, effeminate, interracial boy”?

Our sexual marketplace is explicitly and brutally judgmental, especially now that dating and hookup apps make it easier than ever to “shop” for partners according to a set of predetermined preferences—as if shopping for groceries by category online—and such “preferences,” Srinivasan thinks, tend to involve race. Certain bodies confer status to those granted access to them. “Consider the supreme fuckability of ‘hot blonde sluts’ and East Asian women,” Srinivasan writes, summoning the values of the marketplace in flesh, “the comparative unfuckability of black women and Asian men, the fetishization and fear of black male sexuality, the sexual disgust expressed towards disabled, trans and fat bodies.” So our desire is not some neutral, private thing. It is mimetic of other people’s, as the scholar René Girard

postulated, more than half a century ago. It colludes with society to stratify and imprison us.

Feminism should help point the way out of this predicament, but feminism, Srinivasan believes, bears some blame for getting us into it in the first place. Female desire isn't seen as an appropriate subject for feminist critique. Sex positivity rules the day: whatever a woman claims she wants is, by definition, a good thing, an expression of female agency, so long as it takes place within the bounds of consent. "Sex is no longer morally problematic or unproblematic," Srinivasan writes. "It is instead merely wanted or unwanted."

That wasn't always the case. Many second-wave feminists of the nineteen-sixties and seventies were concerned with analyzing sex and desire. Enough of Freud and his ridiculous theories, they said. Desire, in Catharine MacKinnon's words, is not some "innate primary natural pre-political unconditioned drive divided along the biological gender line." Who and what and how we want is political, conditioned by patriarchy, which is to say, by oppression. What is more, many feminists—"anti-sex feminists," as they came to be known—believed that the fact of desire itself constituted oppression, at least when it was directed toward men. One obvious solution was to cut men out of the picture. Lesbianism was framed as a political identity, available to all women regardless of sexual preference, though, true to their moniker, some anti-sex feminists decided to go further. Srinivasan writes of a group called Cell 16, based in Boston, which "practiced sex separatism, celibacy and karate" and opened meetings with a reading of Valerie Solanas's "[SCUM Manifesto](#)."

On the other side were "pro-woman" feminists like Ellen Willis, who pointed out that asking women to reshape and restrict their desires according to their politics might not exactly be liberatory. The anti-sex feminists, they said, wanted to apply "personal solutionism" to a problem that was, at root, structural. Men had a lot of work to do, but women didn't need to forswear their company while they got their act together: the bedroom *was* the battlefield. Eventually, Willis helped stake out a new position. Feminism, she demanded, needed to stop engaging in "authoritarian moralism" when it came to sex, and to start considering women as empowered sexual agents who got to decide what they did and didn't like in bed without being told

that they were colluding in their own oppression. Women had an absolute right to follow their own desires, within the limits of consent. This was sex positivity, and it anticipated the advent of feminism's third wave, the one that we are largely still surfing.

Unsurprisingly, sex positivity has had more staying power than celibacy or political lesbianism. Sex is a useful thing to have on your side, but, Srinivasan believes, it comes at a cost. "The important thing now, it is broadly thought, is to take women at their word," she writes. "If a woman says she enjoys working in porn, or being paid to have sex with men, or engaging in rape fantasies, or wearing stilettos—and even that she doesn't just enjoy these things but finds them emancipatory, part of her feminist praxis—then we are required, many feminists think, to trust her." She herself doesn't seem to think so—her tone here is laced with skepticism, even sarcasm—but she stops short of saying that directly. One reason may be that she sees this kind of because-I-say-so feminism as the by-product of an indisputably good thing that happened to the movement, which is that it got more diverse, and consequently more tolerant. A lot of the fights during the second wave took place among middle-class white women; as feminism broadened its racial and cultural tent, Srinivasan writes, "thinking about the ways patriarchal oppression is inflected by race and class has made feminists reluctant to make universal prescriptions, including universal sexual policies."

Mainly, she seems to want all of us to think harder about whom and what we like—to "dwell in the ambivalent place where we acknowledge that no one is obliged to desire anyone else, that no one has a right to be desired, but also that who is desired and who isn't is a political question, a question often answered by more general patterns of domination and exclusion." Srinivasan is clear about the need to do something about our desires but not about what, exactly, we should do. She sees promise in body positivity and other "radical self-love movements," whose iconic phrases—"Black is beautiful" and "big is beautiful"—are "not just slogans of empowerment, but proposals for a reevaluation of our values." Such a reevaluation may be harder to accomplish when you are trying to love people other than yourself. There is already a term for categorical attraction to "the other": fetishization. There's a term, too, for preference based on guilt rather than on desire: pity. The first is anathema to love, the second to sex, and both are anathema to dignity.

Srinivasan's essential counsel—to embrace ambivalence—might seem unlikely to cause offense. But it did. The disgruntled responses to the publication of "Does Anyone Have the Right to Sex?" are the subject of a subsequent essay in Srinivasan's book, "Coda: The Politics of Desire." Reading these two pieces together is like chasing a glass of rosé with a shot of fire. In "The Right to Sex," Srinivasan is temperate and scholarly, treading lightly as she builds her argument. In "Coda," she is writing with the clarity of anger. She numbers each paragraph—there are eighty-eight in all—like Martin Luther's theses, as if to make sure that we miss none of what she has to say. And there is another major tonal shift. She embraces the first person, telling us what she only hinted at in "The Right to Sex": that these questions, for her, are personal.



Cartoon by Michael Shaw

Srinivasan takes her critics seriously, citing the tweets and the columns of the opposition. They include trans feminists who worry that Srinivasan's political critique of desire could impinge on the desires of marginalized people; anti-trans lesbians who "want to resist any possible analogy between the white person who as a matter of policy doesn't sleep with black people, and the cis lesbian who as a matter of policy doesn't sleep with trans women"; conservatives who see in Srinivasan's arguments the upending of the old sexual order of female submission to male dominance. (Of course, if

the old sexual order had been upended, Srinivasan would not need to write a book addressing the problem of male domination.)

Srinivasan responds by marshalling evidence that the premise of “preference” is used to cover for an astonishing array of injustices and abuses. This requires her to go spelunking through sexist Reddit threads, racist reality-TV shows, and other icky places. But what is most painful is often what is closest to home. She quotes the writer Audrea Lim, who—in an [Op-Ed](#) about the tendency, among alt-right men, to date and marry Asian women—described her own experience as a “14-year-old Asian girl in an overwhelmingly white school” who sought favor by “distancing myself from the other Asian kids” and knew she had succeeded when a friend told her that she was “cool,” and therefore white. “I also have friends who joke that I am ‘basically white.’ ” Srinivasan writes. “Maybe it isn’t a joke.” She goes on:

I know many East and South Asian women, living in western countries, who don’t want to marry the sort of men our mothers, our grandmothers, and our aunts married. Sometimes when we say that Asian men remind us of our cousins, we are saying: we know too much about how these boys and men are raised. One question is: aren’t Asian women within their rights to make such choices? Another question is: why think that white boys and men are raised any better? *Is sophistication to be found only in Caucasia?*

Srinivasan is talking about the unsettling experience of being categorized by others, and looking hard at the way that she might be tempted to adopt these categories. For each of her points, as this passage makes clear, she can find a counterpoint. This must be what it means to “dwell in ambivalence.” Clearly, it’s not a comfortable place to be.

But why should it be comfortable? Confronting one’s own desires is risky, and its history, as a practice, is hardly one of success. Conversion therapy, too, is about trying to change what people want, and by all accounts the experience is not only hell; it is also ineffective. Yet conversion therapy serves a politics of repression. Srinivasan is after liberation. The process of self-interrogation may be painful, but it is part of the quest, she maintains, for greater joy.

In [Pedro Almodóvar](#)'s film "Law of Desire" (1987), Antonio Banderas plays Antonio, a smoldering young layabout with a screw loose, who becomes obsessed with Pablo Quintero (Eusebio Poncela), a gay film director. Antonio hangs around the club where he knows Pablo likes to go, waiting to bump into him. "I don't normally sleep with guys," he tells Pablo, when at last they meet. But what he normally does or doesn't do is irrelevant. He has been ambushed by desire, and is determined, as Pablo soon learns, to satisfy it.

Desire changes, and not usually by the mechanism of conscious choice. We meet someone; we want them. Then we meet someone else. Srinivasan recognizes this. Actually, it's what she thinks we should hope for. "Desire can take us by surprise, leading us somewhere we hadn't imagined we would ever go, or toward someone we never thought we would lust after, or love," she writes, at the end of her "Right to Sex" essay. Maybe we shouldn't worry too much about how to shift what we want but instead, like Antonio, recognize that we may be wrong about what we *think* we want, and embrace the possibility of wanting something different.

That is the message of the theorist Katherine Angel's recent book, "[Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again](#)" (Verso). Erotic desire, Angel argues, does not sit within us, fully formed, waiting to be mined like ore. It takes shape through a process of exploration, and, ideally, collaboration. (They don't call it "intercourse" for nothing.) But Angel thinks that this kind of happy discovery is compromised for many women. One clear reason is the threat of male violence. A less obvious culprit is the safeguard that contemporary feminism has formulated to defuse that threat: affirmative consent.

Where Srinivasan's issue with consent is that it is too permissive a standard to determine what constitutes "good" sex, Angel's is that it is far too restrictive. For one thing, affirmative consent depends on "the conceit of absolute clarity": before a woman can agree that she does or doesn't want to do something, or to have something done to her, she must know just what it is she likes and wants. What if she is uncertain, or doesn't yet know? Too bad. Angel worries, too, that the focus on consent treats any sexual encounter between a man and a woman as a possible crime scene, which it is up to the woman to police. (Her focus is on the dynamics of

heterosexuality.) The man is assumed to be a threat; the woman's role is to assure him that he is not. This doesn't exactly make for an equal exchange of pleasure, and it doesn't seem like a particularly effective way of preventing sexual violence, either.

Angel writes witheringly of "confidence feminists," who object to female hesitance and uncertainty. Why didn't you just say what you want? Why didn't you just leave? That's what these feminists ask when a woman admits that she was disturbed or confused in the aftermath of an ambiguous sexual encounter. Confidence feminists treat any sign of vulnerability on the part of a woman as an admission of weakness—and vulnerability is exactly the aspect of desire that Angel finds most precious: "A sexual ethics that is worth its name has to allow for obscurity, for opacity and for not-knowing."

"Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again" is most exciting at the start and at the end, where Angel is boldest in her own ideas. In the middle chapters, she walks us through a lot of other people's, mainly in the interest of throwing cold water on studies that purport to prove some objective truth about women and desire. If you are tempted to put your faith in tools like the vaginal plethysmograph ("a small, acrylic probe the size of a tampon," in Angel's useful description), which measures blood flow to the vagina in an attempt to objectively determine what it is that women want, Angel will disabuse you of the urge. It is a relief when she moves from science to film and literature—that is, to fiction, where the most complex human truths are told. On the recommendation of her enthusiasm, I read Susanna Moore's novel "[In the Cut](#)," and it nearly melted my face off. As Angel's interest in that violent, sexy book suggests, she is drawn to the link between eros and danger. Vulnerability entails risk, Angel reminds us, and sex is never free from the dynamics of power. That is what makes it scary, and also, sometimes, wonderful.

Angel is not proposing that we do away with consent. She wants us to treat desire less like an assertion and more like a "conversation, mutual exploration, curiosity, uncertainty—all things, as it happens, that are stigmatized within traditional masculinity." The modern woman has been told, ad nauseam, to embrace her masculine side: to be declarative, decisive, and confident, to admit no confusion or hesitancy, to "lean in" not only in the boardroom but also in bed. Now, Angel says, it is time for men to act

more like women by embracing their own “porousness” and sensitivity. (After all, Angel points out, fondly, what is more vulnerable than the male body, which makes its desires so openly known?) It’s good to see Angel pay attention to heterosexual men, to “welcome them to vulnerability.” They may be the group of people most in need of hearing what she has to say.

One challenge that Srinivasan and Angel confront, as theorists of sex and desire, is that sex and desire are hard to theorize about. It is easier to explain what sex isn’t than what it is. “Sex is not a sandwich,” Srinivasan writes. Angel agrees: sex is not “something to be given and taken,” like an object or a good. It is “a process, a development, an unfolding.” That is why she and Srinivasan care so much about it—not just because it provides pleasure but because it can expand the limits of the self.

And sexual desire can be a creative act, an invitation to imagine. This is something that Srinivasan gets at in an essay called “Talking to My Students About Porn.” Many second-wave feminists believed that porn not merely condoned but in fact conditioned violence against women. Some fought to restrict and ban it, though, as Srinivasan points out, laws restricting sexual expression and its depiction tend to do no favors to women and queer people. Her own problem with porn is the way it insures that “imagination is limited to imitation, riffing on what it has already absorbed.” What people—young ones, particularly—need is “an emboldened sexual imagination.” Sex, she writes, “can, if they choose, remain as generations before them have chosen: violent, selfish, and unequal. Or sex can—if they choose—be something more joyful, more equal, freer.” It’s a lovely vision, though Srinivasan isn’t sure how it can be brought about.

Maybe no one can know—at least, not until such a choice becomes a necessity. Readers of Srinivasan might want to watch Xavier Dolan’s film [“Laurence Anyways”](#) (2012), which follows ten years in the lives of a couple in Montreal. When the film begins, in the late nineteen-eighties, Laurence (Melvil Poupaud) is a teacher of literature who lives with his beautiful, vital girlfriend, Fred (Suzanne Clément). They are in an ideal kind of love, inhabiting a private world of two. Then Laurence announces that he is trans. Fred is furious. She feels betrayed. Her mother pushes her to leave; her sister points out that Fred likes men. But Fred decides that she will try to make it work: she, too, will do her best to wrestle with ambiguity, to expand

her own imagination of what desire can be. Laurence's transition, in its social difficulty and personal liberation, is beautiful, but so is the process by which Fred, who wishes everything could stay the same, grapples with change. None of us are static, stable beings, with some fixed, internal true north. The real question may not be whether we can manage to change but whether we can afford not to. ♦

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## **City Works**

- Hopper on the Couch, O'Keeffe Against the Floor Lamp

[October 4, 2021 Issue](#)

# Hopper on the Couch, O'Keeffe Against the Floor Lamp

Elie Hirschfeld offers a tour of his home-grown collection of New York City-themed art works in his apartment across from the Met—Warhols, a Hopper, and a Hockney—before they're donated to the New-York Historical Society.

By [Sarah Larson](#)

September 27, 2021

Elie Hirschfeld grew up in New York, develops real estate in New York, and has long bought art depicting New York—by Rothko, Rockwell, O'Keeffe, Hockney, Lawrence, Hopper, and others—for a collection once kept largely at his Manhattan apartment, across from the Met. He and his wife, Sarah, are donating the collection to the New-York Historical Society. (An [exhibition](#) of the works opens on October 22nd.) Before it moved, they gave a visitor a tour. Paintings hung on walls and reclined on couches, like guests. Hirschfeld, seventy-one, is tall, lean, and balding; Sarah, sixty-one, a doctor and a scientist, is shorter, with dark hair. They both possess a serene but exacting demeanor.



The collection has strong architectural themes. Hirschfeld gestured at a painting of snowy, small-town Brooklyn in 1818, by Francis Guy, which they'd chosen for the apartment's entryway. "We thought about the de Kooning—but this has a sense of home that is very relaxing," he said. "Don't you just want to go inside and put on a fire?" The living room featured a fifteen-foot Red Grooms mural: a rollicking Seventh Avenue scene, from 1967, with a groovy couple zooming by on a motorcycle. "Look at the price on a cab," Hirschfeld said. ("35¢.") Nearby hung four Warhols of the Brooklyn Bridge, from 1983. "I had lunch with Andy Warhol in his studio that year, in Union Square," he said. "I said, 'See there, at the south corner? I'm building the One Union Square condominium tower.' For the next forty minutes, all he wanted to talk about was real estate." Hirschfeld owns another Warhol, "a fabulous drawing of Trump Tower," where Hirschfeld once had an office and befriended Donald Trump. ("There's a whole story on that, we'll leave it alone. . . . He actually did appoint me to the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad.") Warhol and Trump "got into a well-known dispute about the final," he added. ("Mr. Trump was very upset that it wasn't color-coordinated," Warhol wrote in his diary. "I think Trump's sort of cheap, though, I get that feeling.")

“This is a Calder,” Hirschfeld said, of a tabletop mobile. “We have a couple of non-New York scenes. You see the Stella there?” He pointed to a wall-size painting of colorful squares in the dining room. Next: Romare Bearden, from a series of paintings for a credit sequence in a movie—Hirschfeld had forgotten which. (Sarah, checking a binder: “John Cassavetes, 1980, ‘Gloria.’”) Also in the living room were Hopper (“They knocked down this Waldorf-Astoria and built the Empire State Building”), Saul Steinberg, de Kooning (“Totally abstract, but it’s done on the New York *Times*, so it’s a New York scene to me”). “This is absolutely amazing,” Hirschfeld said, picking up a pastel of a view from a window, from 1958. “A scene of New York City from Marc Chagall.” After Hirschfeld brought it home, he realized that the view was uncannily familiar. In 1958, Chagall had stayed at the Stanhope Hotel, now the Hirschfelds’ apartment building.

Hirschfeld breezed through the kitchen, pausing to admire a line drawing by Hirschfeld (“And not me!”) of the “21” Club, and proceeded into a long hallway featuring Childe Hassam; Lawrence; a Christo sketch of a wrapped Madison Square Garden; Reginald Marsh, of skyscraper construction (“These figures building New York, that excitement about the future”); and a Rockwell of a posh boy and a rumpled worker in Gramercy Park. At the Thomas Hart Benton painting “Washington Square Art Fair,” mounted at the end of the hallway, Hirschfeld got choked up. “This is the piece that started the collection,” he said. On a hall table, unremarked upon, was a small photo of Hirschfeld with Trump, both smiling.

A Louis Lozowick from 1932-36, of an industrial Manhattan waterfront, was unusually tall and thin. “There’s a reason for that,” Hirschfeld said. “I used to own the Hotel Pennsylvania, and my office was there. I would go to that post office”—now Moynihan Train Hall—“to get things out fast.” Moseying around there one day, he turned a corner and saw “a three-story-tall painting of this. So this was a study for that!” He recently sneaked into a construction area at Moynihan to look for it. “Still there,” he said.

In the bedroom, where drapes could be drawn, a few special paintings, usually protected from light, leaned against the furniture. (“I got them out, and I was, like, ‘Whoa,’ ” Hirschfeld said.) They included Bemelmans’s “Greeley Square,” in rich greens, and a small Keith Haring “radiant baby,” with bolts in it, from the Bowery subway station. The couple turned to a

stunningly vivid O'Keeffe of the Brooklyn Bridge's curved interior peaks, propped against a floor lamp. "Georgia O'Keeffe has long been my favorite artist," Hirschfeld said. "The eroticism of her paintings, and the beauty of them. It pulsates!" Where did they usually keep it? "Turned around—I forgot where." Sarah pointed: "Over there."

Were they getting a good look at the works while they still had them? Hirschfeld paused. "I guess there's no harm in telling you. I'm having all of the pieces copied and framed." (And stamped "*NOT ORIGINAL.*") "So I can look at them all the time, and I don't have to have the shades down." ♦

# **Classical Music**

- [Opera and Cabaret Mashups in “Only an Octave Apart”](#)

[October 4, 2021 Issue](#)

# Opera and Cabaret Mashups in “Only an Octave Apart”

At St. Ann’s Warehouse, Anthony Roth Costanzo and Justin Vivian Bond sing medleys arranged by Nico Muhly, including a number that stitches together two different laments by women named Dido.

September 24, 2021



*Photograph by Gioncarlo Valentine for the New Yorker*

For the show **“Only an Octave Apart”** (running through Oct. 3, at St. Ann’s Warehouse), Anthony Roth Costanzo and Justin Vivian Bond stitch together opera and cabaret in medleys arranged by Nico Muhly. One mashup combines two different laments by a woman named Dido: the closing aria from Henry Purcell’s “Dido and Aeneas” (1689), and the singer Dido’s single “White Flag” (2003). Purcell’s Carthaginian queen cannot forsake love, and the English songwriter echoes her namesake’s dignified demurral: “I’m in love and always will be.”

# **Comment**

- [The Supply-Chain Mystery](#)

[October 4, 2021 Issue](#)

# The Supply-Chain Mystery

Why, more than a year and a half into the pandemic, do strange shortages keep popping up in so many corners of American life?

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

September 26, 2021

A good way to get people talking, in this lingering [pandemic](#) era, is to ask whether they have tried to rent a car lately. Even if they haven't, they have likely heard stories, perhaps about largely empty lots at the Atlanta airport, where customers were forced to compete in what the actress [Audra McDonald](#), in an angry tweet, called a "hunger games relay," or about the man who told the Los Angeles *Times* that he had booked a compact car to take his kids to Disneyland only to be directed to a van that "reeked of cigarettes and marijuana." But most of the stories are more quotidian; the common elements are long lines, high rates, few choices, and mysterious references to "supply-chain issues."



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

What are these supply-chain issues, and why, more than a year and a half into the pandemic, do they keep popping up in so many corners of life? The shortage of rental cars—as well as used and new cars—isn’t expected to let up until at least next year. Last week, the [Park Slope Food Co-op](#), in Brooklyn, sent an e-mail to members explaining that certain types of pasta could be out of stock; other purveyors are having trouble getting chicken wings. At times, it’s been oddly hard to come by plumbing fixtures, construction materials, salad dressing, and even some new books. [Remote work](#) and [schooling](#) have added to the demand for tech products, contributing to long waits. Most items are, ultimately, available, if at a higher price; during the past year, the Consumer Price Index has risen about five per cent, double the percentage it rose in the year before the pandemic.

Americans are not facing Soviet-style empty shelves, or having to scrap for the basics. In aggregate, we are hardly in a condition of scarcity. Still, supply-chain trouble suggests that something is off with the way we’re operating in the world, and that we don’t yet know the extent of our vulnerabilities. The issues can also be a serious impediment to a broader economic recovery.

The most obvious culprit is *COVID-19*. In the case of rental cars, when travel decreased sharply in the spring of 2020, many companies generated cash by selling off a sizable portion of their fleets. They may have assumed that they could just buy more cars later, but when the time came cars weren’t available. The main reason for that is a worldwide shortage of semiconductors, the chips used in automotive systems—the supply has been constrained by *COVID*-related plant closures in Asia, where many of them are made. Last week, the *Wall Street Journal* estimated that, because of the “chip famine,” some seven million cars were not built.

Last Thursday, Gina Raimondo, the Secretary of Commerce, hosted an industry summit on the chip shortage, with executives from companies including Ford and General Motors, as well as Apple and Samsung, which are also competing for semiconductors. Afterward, her office said that one of its goals is to build supply-chain “trust.” (Another is to explore how the United States can become less dependent on overseas suppliers.) A White House briefing posted the same day said that the dearth of chips was

“dragging down the US economy,” and cited an estimate that it may lop a percentage point off G.D.P. growth.

What’s often at the heart of a supply-chain issue is a labor issue. Last week, the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach were approaching a crisis state because more than seventy container ships were idling offshore, in what had become a maritime parking lot; there aren’t enough dockworkers to unload their cargo, or enough truck drivers to move it out of the ports. (Shipping rates have spiked, too.) Labor shortages are the reason that so many things just seem to be in the wrong place—the prime symptom of a supply-chain squeeze. “Just in time” delivery works only if you can deliver.

The labor situation, too, is no doubt related to *COVID-19*, but there is wide disagreement about exactly how. A significant number of people who were laid off early in the pandemic because of closures haven’t gone back to work, even as more businesses reopen. The factors cited include a fear of infection and an aversion to dealing with customers who are angry about policies, or the lack of them, requiring masks and proof of vaccination—a particular concern for restaurant workers, who are also in short supply. Some essential workers, such as health aides and delivery drivers, who were hit hard by the pandemic, may be reassessing their jobs; and many of the more than six hundred thousand people who have died of *COVID* were members of the workforce. Professional reckonings have taken place among higher-paid workers, too. Transitions require mobility and time. And, even with schools reopening, a shortage of affordable day care (and of day-care workers) means that some parents who want to return to jobs can’t do so.

Many of these circumstances, notably the lack of child care, were not so much caused by the pandemic as exposed by it. (The same could be said of another shortage: affordable housing.) The question of how to solve the labor issue can’t be answered without an examination of values and priorities. Would it be better to persuade people to fill jobs by further cutting unemployment benefits, or by raising the federal minimum wage, which is still \$7.25 an hour, or raising wages generally? What about adding support for child care, paid family leave, and public transportation—measures being debated in Congress now—or increasing immigration?

Referring to supply-chain issues, in other words, can be a useful shorthand when a problem arises, but it's an insufficient one. For that matter, pinning the supply-chain meltdown on the pandemic can be an evasion. Last week, at the Council on Foreign Relations, the Irish Taoiseach, or Prime Minister, Micheál Martin, said that multiple supply-chain breakdowns created by [Brexit](#) had been "masked by *COVID*." (The United Kingdom has faced shortages of everything from fuel to the carbon dioxide needed for processing many foods.) Similarly, recent storms have caused major disruptions; by one estimate, [Hurricane Ida](#) alone wrecked a quarter of a million cars.

Such severe weather events are a reminder that the pandemic supply-chain ruptures may pale compared with those which will be associated with the climate crisis in coming years. Indeed, one of the most urgent tasks now may be to think about the two issues together. In both cases, the scramble for quick fixes—clearing downed power lines, restocking pasta—can distract from the need for systemic change. The real challenge, when it comes to thinking about supply chains, isn't making sure that a container ship is unloaded. It's deciding how we want to live. ♦

# Crossword

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, September 22, 2021](#)

[October 4, 2021 Issue](#)

# The            Crossword:            Wednesday, September 22, 2021

A moderately challenging puzzle.

By [Natan Last](#)

September 22, 2021

*A previous version of this crossword contained an error in 52-Across.*

By [Aimee Lucido](#)

By [Patrick Berry](#)

## **Dept. of Hope**

- [Jane Goodall's Survival Guide](#)

[October 4, 2021 Issue](#)

## Jane Goodall's Survival Guide

The eighty-seven-year-old naturalist knocks around her home on the south coast of England and explains why, despite the floods and fires and melting ice caps, she's still optimistic about planet Earth.

By [Anna Russell](#)

September 27, 2021

Before the pandemic, Jane Goodall travelled three hundred days a year to speak to audiences about the climate crisis. “I used to do, like, three days in the Netherlands, three days in Belgium, three days in France,” Goodall, who is eighty-seven, recalled recently. In China or Australia, “it would be, like, two weeks, where they’d spread me through their country.” Everywhere she went, she met young people who were “angry, depressed, or just apathetic, because, they’ve told me, we have compromised their future and they feel there is nothing they can do about it,” she writes in her twenty-first and most recent work, [“The Book of Hope: A Survival Guide for Trying Times.”](#) Amid flooding and wildfires, impassivity and eco-grief, the question she was asked most often was “Do you honestly believe there is hope for our world?”



Jane Goodall Illustration by João Fazenda

She does, and she'll tell you why. "The Book of Hope," which she wrote with Douglas Abrams and Gail Hudson, is structured like a dialogue in which the naturalist (Ph.D., D.B.E., U.N. Messenger of Peace) plays whack-a-mole with the darkest fears we hold for our ailing planet. Stories of the human intellect and indomitable spirit abound. Also, the resilience of nature and the power of young people. Hope, she argues, is not merely "passive wishful thinking" but a "crucial survival trait." She noted, "If you don't have hope that your action is going to make a difference, why bother to do anything? You just become a zombie."

Goodall was seated on a sofa in the drawing room of her childhood home, in Bournemouth, on the south coast of England. She had her hair in a ponytail and was wearing a Patagonia jacket with jeans, moccasins, and whale-print socks. Shuttered in the house since the outbreak began, Goodall has adopted a relentless schedule of online engagements, Zooming to multiple countries each day. "Virtual Jane has been busier than ever," she said. "It's hurting my voice, my eyes." She has not taken a day off in a year and a half; she Zoomed twice on Christmas, launched a podcast called "[The Hoepcast](#)," and, in May, accepted the Templeton Prize (previous recipients include Mother Teresa and the Dalai Lama). "But the pluses!" she said. "I've reached literally millions more people in many more countries. I was in

Tanzania this morning, and then I was in the Netherlands for an interview. Or is it Belgium?"

Goodall was sharing the Gothic-style house (built in 1872) with her sister, Judy, Judy's daughter and grandchildren, and an aging rescue whippet named Bean. It's not the first time the family has taken refuge there. "It was my grandmother's," she said. "Mum and Judy and I came here when the war broke out. World War Two." In the garden, butterflies flitted by; Bean was asleep in an armchair. Growing up, there were always animals around, she said. Dogs, cats, "a couple of tortoises." "Peter the canary, who used to fly around the whole house. Hamlet the hamster, who escaped and spent the rest of her life in the back of the sofa, coming out at night for food."

In 1960, at the age of twenty-six, Goodall left England for Gombe National Park, in Tanzania, to study animals in the wild. She took her mother with her. ("Mum played a very important role.") It was in Gombe that Goodall almost lost hope. She was up at dawn every morning, crawling through the forest with binoculars, looking for chimps. She would return to camp unsuccessful and depressed. Finally, a chimpanzee she called David Greybeard ("very handsome") let her observe him using grass stems to collect termites, the report of which prompted Goodall's mentor to send an exuberant telegram: "Ah! We must now redefine man, redefine tools, or accept chimpanzees as human!"

In the drawing room, Goodall checked the time: fifteen minutes until she needed to record a message for French university students. She poured herself a drop of whiskey. "When my voice goes like this, it's the only thing that works," she said. (It was a lifesaver when she had bronchitis at Davos.) Did she ever get tired? "I care about the future, I care about animals, I care about trees, I care about children," she said. "And I'm obstinate and I won't give in. I won't be defeated by the Bushes, and the Putins, and the Bolsonaros, all these terrible, terrible people."

Lately, Goodall has been working from an attic bedroom surrounded by objects that give her hope: a photograph of David Greybeard, a Native American talking stick, a bell made from a defused land mine. She climbed the stairs slowly, held up the bell, and rang it. "Special," she said. She checked the time again. The French students beckoned. ♦

# Fiction

- “Red Pyramid”

By [Vladimir Sorokin](#)

To put it plainly, Yura confused Fryazino with Fryazevo and went the wrong way. Natasha had explained everything to him: go to Yaroslavsky Station and take the train toward Fryazevo or toward Schelkovo. Her station was Zagoryanskaya and not all trains stopped there. The train toward Fryazevo did, but the train toward Fryazino didn't. Yura ended up on the train toward Fryazino.

“There’s a train at six-fifteen—it runs regularly on weekdays,” Natasha had said, standing in the Dinamo Station and licking the ice cream, sandwiched between two round waffles, that Yura had treated her to. “That train always stops at our station.”

“And how long . . . mmm . . . does it take to get there?” Yura quipped, chomping on his own ice cream and waffles.

#### [Vladimir Sorokin on supernatural encounters.](#)

“Forty-five minutes.” Natasha smiled. “You’ll be at my stop by seven.”

This was the third time they’d met, but for some reason they were still using the formal word for “you.”

“Will it be a big group?”

“I don’t like small ones!” Natasha laughed, shaking her head.

She always shook her head when she said something funny. Because of this, she came off as too sincere, perhaps even foolishly naïve, but she wasn’t stupid; Yura had quickly figured that out. He liked her more and more. Short, tan, slender, fidgety, and always smiling—she clearly had some southern blood running through her veins. Moldavian or Armenian. Maybe even Jewish. Yura hadn’t asked her about her roots yet. There was always a wave of joy emanating from Natasha. Her hair was black, tied up in two tight braids that encircled her head.

“So can I expect to meet a whole cohort of your admirers?” he asked, finishing his drippy ice cream.

“No doubt!” Natasha shook her head again.

“You got any duelling pistols?”

“My dad’s got a double-barrelled one.”

“I’ll provide the ammunition.”

“Deal!”

Looking at her lips, which were smiling and glistening with ice cream, Yura imagined their first kiss. Perhaps . . . in front of a lilac bush.

“Are there any lilac bushes at your house?” he asked.

“We had one. It was *ex-qui-site!* But it was dying, so Dad cut it down. There’s just the *ti-i-niest* bit left.”

Natasha finished her dessert, took a handkerchief out of her jacket pocket, wiped her lips, picked up her satchel, which had been leaning against her slender, nut-brown legs this whole time, wrapped both her arms around it, and pressed it to her stomach.

“Well, I’m off.” Then, bowing her head and looking sideways at Yura, she added, “See you Saturday, Yura.”

“See you Saturday, Natasha!” Yura raised his hand in a fist.

Natasha turned away and hurried down into the subway. She’d turned away from him just as quickly the first time he’d seen her, as she was walking across a balance beam in the gym. Then she’d done an easy cartwheel along the beam, pushed off it, and jumped into the air, her hands spread wide and her head thrown back, exposing her radiant face.

She was a top-ranked student athlete, studying at a pedagogical institute and participating in a student Spartakiada, which Yura, a second-year student in the journalism department of Moscow State University, class of ’63, was reporting on for the university periodical. That was how they’d met.

Then they'd gone to a French film, "Under the Roofs of Paris," which they'd both already seen: Yura once and Natasha three times.

Then they'd taken a stroll through Gorky Park.

Then Natasha had invited him to her birthday party.

And now . . . Yura had missed his chance.

He was carrying two gifts: a bottle of champagne and a book of poems by Walt Whitman, translated by Kornei Chukovsky. The book, beautifully printed by Akademia Publishers, had been at Yura's home, nestled among the many other books that Yura's grandfather had collected. Before today, Yura had glanced at it only once, flipping through it quickly and putting it back on the shelf. But when he started to think about what to get Natasha for her birthday he remembered it. He'd already spent his student stipend on three American jazz records, which he'd bought from scalpers on Kuznetsky Most. The remaining money was just enough for the champagne. Yura had basically not asked his parents for money in two months.

A good poet and a beautiful book, he thought, and put the Whitman into his yellow leather bag along with the champagne, then slung the bag over his shoulder.

On the train, he read Whitman. And realized too late that he was heading the wrong way.

"Could you tell me when we'll be at Zagoryanka?" he asked a thin old man with a cane and a pail in a string bag.

"Never," the old man replied laconically. "You got on the wrong train."

"What?"

"Well . . . the train to Fryazino has never, ever stopped in Zagoryanka."

Yura jumped up and looked out the window. Bushes and telegraph poles were crawling by.

“What the heck . . .”

“The next stop is Green Pine. Get off there, take this train back to Mytishchi, then get on the train toward Fryazevo.”

“Damn it!” Yura punched his palm impotently.

“There’s no reason to swear,” the old man said, and looked gloomily out the window.

Cursing his own idiocy, Yura picked up his bag and walked into the vestibule. The door was missing, so the June air blustered in.

“Hey, buddy, gimme a smoke!” A voice rang out behind his back.

Yura turned around. A tough-looking guy was leaning against the wall in a corner of the vestibule. Yura hadn’t noticed him when he walked in. Looking unhappily at him, Yura took a half-empty pack of Astra cigarettes and a box of matches out of his pants pocket. He removed one cigarette for himself, then held out the pack. The guy pushed himself off the wall, strode over in his loose black pants, silently pulled out a cigarette, and placed it between his prominent lips. Yura lit his own cigarette and threw the used match over his shoulder.

“Gimme a light, too!” the guy demanded.

Yura hesitated, thinking of telling him it was time to start carrying his own, but ended up lighting a match and putting it to the tip of the man’s cigarette. The guy started to smoke. He had a pale, thin face with wide cheekbones and a steep chin.

“Is Green Pine soon?” Yura asked him crabily.

“Who the hell knows,” the guy answered. “I’m goin’ to see some fellas in Ivanteevka. I’m not from here. Same with you, right?”

Yura nodded.

The guy examined Yura dully, then leaned back against the wall and, with the cigarette between his wet lips, half-closed his eyes.

Yura turned away and blew smoke out through the door frame.

The train rolled along unhurriedly.

This train is crawling like a turtle, Yura thought furiously. Cretinoid. Idiotium. Stuposaurus . . .

He quickly finished off his cigarette and threw the butt into the dusty greenery the train was passing through. Went back into the carriage. The same passengers were sitting in the same seats. Some of them were looking at Yura and, he felt, smirking.

I'm a laughingstock. And rightly so, he thought.

Yura opened the Whitman and again began to read. Eight pages later, a hoarse voice on the intercom announced, "Green Pine." Yura picked up his bag, walked out into the vestibule, the lippy man now gone, and took his place next to three women of various ages: an old woman, a full-figured middle-aged woman, and a young girl.

The train braked with an unpleasant screech. Yura got off with the women and looked around. A small number of other passengers were also stepping down onto the wooden platform, then setting off in the direction of a village that was visible in the distance through the trees. The train crawled away.

Realizing that he had to get over to the opposite platform, Yura jumped down onto the railroad ties and crossed the tracks, stepping over the rails, which had grown hot in the sun. As he approached the other side, he surveyed the platform, spotted a set of wooden steps, and climbed up them. There was nobody on the platform. Some cigarette butts lay on the ground. On the long, latticed sign only the word "pine" remained. Yura could just see the outline of the word "green" that had once been there.

"They must be painting the pines red, then," Yura joked gloomily. He walked over to a bench with peeling white paint, and sat down.

He looked at the Luch watch that his father had given him when he'd got into Moscow State: six-forty-two.

“They’ll start without me.”

He pulled out his cigarettes, then thought better of it and put them away.

“Idiotium!” he pronounced again, looking at the rays of light caught in the branches of the pine trees, and spat onto the filthy flooring.

Twelve minutes passed.

Then thirteen more.

Then twenty more.

The train wasn’t coming.

“Frick me. Happy birthday, Natasha!”

Yura stood up and walked down the platform. There was still not a soul to be seen. The sun was sinking lower in the sky, already hemmed in by the trunks of the trees.

With his bag over his shoulder, Yura began to walk across the dusty boards, slapping his sandals down angrily against them.

“Shitometer!

“Tearassium!

“Shitassium!”

The boards groaned stupidly under the blows of Yura’s feet. Their groans enraged him. Having walked the entire length of the platform, he turned around, started to run, and tried to do a long jump like a track-and-field athlete, compressing all his fury into his impact on the shabby platform.

“Foolodancius!

“Shitokneadius!”

The boards rattled.

Yura walked up to the latticed sign with the word “pine” on it.

“A pine day!

“I pine for the train!

“*oh, suck a pinus!!! when! will! it! come!?*”

“In eight minutes,” someone said loudly.

Yura turned around. A man was sitting on the bench he’d just jumped past. This was so unexpected that Yura stopped moving. A fat, puffy-faced man in light summer clothes sat looking at Yura.

“What?” Yura muttered, not believing his own eyes.

“The train will be here in eight minutes,” the man pronounced.

There was no expression on the man’s large, mealy-white, pear-shaped face. No expression at all. *Absolutely* no expression. It was the first time in his life that Yura had seen a face like that.

“What train?” he asked, unable to look away from the man’s face.

“Your electric locomotive.”

The man’s small, *expressionless* eyes were fixed on Yura. It seemed to Yura that the man’s face was frozen. And that the man himself . . . was from the morgue. A corpse. A dead man. Yura suddenly began to feel ill, just the way he’d felt when he’d had sunstroke in Baku last summer. His legs trembled.

“Please, sit down,” the man’s frozen lips said. “You look like you have sunstroke. It’s very hot for the beginning of June.”

Yura plopped down onto the bench. He inhaled, coming back to his senses now, and ran his hand across his sweaty forehead.

“It’s better not to practice your long jump in this kind of heat,” the man advised.

Yura noticed just how fat the man was. He hadn’t moved at all and was still staring straight ahead. His clothing was old-fashioned: a white panama hat, a beige summer suit, and a white *kosovorotka* with an embroidered collar. White canvas shoes peeked out from under his loose beige trousers. A fun friend of Yura’s late grandfather—a coin collector, a joker, a drunk—had dressed this way in the summer; he was also dead. The fat man’s comical shoes—really, they were low boots—brought Yura back to his senses. He exhaled. Inhaled. Exhaled again. He was calmer already. The gloom had suddenly passed. He felt light and cheerful.

Where did he come from? Yura thought. Totally out of the blue . . . Why didn’t I notice him? Did I really, like, overheat?

The fat man stared straight ahead with calm indifference and without changing his position.

“Eight minutes, huh? You know the schedule?” Yura asked.

“Seven now.”

“Do you have a mental stopwatch or something?”

“And that’s not all.”

Yura began to feel even lighter and more cheerful. He laughed with relief and scratched at the back of his neck.

“So you know everything there is to know?”

“Almost.”

“O.K. What’s *Mittelspiel* ?”

“It’s the middle of a game of chess.”

“Right. What about . . . Betelgeuse?”

“A star in Orion’s Belt. A red supergiant with roughly the same diameter as Jupiter’s orbit around the sun.”

“Exactly right! Now tell me who Dave Brubeck is.”

The fat man’s frozen lips puckered up as he whistled a pretty decent version of “Take Five.”

“Who-o-oo!” Yura gasped. He slapped his knees, then chuckled. “You’re a musician. That’s it, right? And musicians are usually good at chess, right? You play jazz?”

“No,” the fat man replied calmly.

“Come on, that’s got to be it! What do you play? Sax? Trumpet?”



*“It’s all significantly less impressive once you realize these guys had free child care.”*  
Cartoon by Caitlin Cass

The fat man was silent.

“O.K. A guessing game. Then tell me this: where is . . . hmm . . . Rotten Marsh?”

“In the Selizharovsky District of Tverskaya Oblast.”

Yura was shocked. Rotten Marsh was a place known only in Khutor, the small village where he used to go hunting with his father and grandfather. It was indeed in the Selizharovsky District. Rotten Marsh was a swamp surrounded by a forest. Waterfowl loved nesting there. How could the fat man know that?

He was still sitting on the bench, unmoving.

Was he telepathic? A hypnotist? He had to be a hypnotist! Probably used to work with Wolf Messing. . . . So. Yura had to trip him up somehow.

He examined his surroundings. And suddenly, in the middle distance, in front of a one-story building made of white silicate brick, he saw a faded poster on a large panel: “*our goal is communism!*”

Lenin’s profile was visible beneath the slogan.

“Tell me who Vladimir Ilyich Lenin was, then,” Yura demanded loudly, folding his arms victoriously across his chest.

“The man who called forth the pyramid of the red roar,” the fat man replied calmly.

Yura opened his mouth.

“What? The pyramid? Of the red . . . what?”

“The red roar.”

“What kind of pyramid is that?”

“The source of the endless red roar.”

“And where is it?”

“In the center of our capital.”

“Where, exactly?”

“Where the center is.”

“In the Kremlin?”

“No. On Red Square.”

“On the square itself? A pyramid?”

“Yes.”

“But where is it on the square? Concretely.”

“Its base takes up the entire square.”

“The entire square?”

Yura laughed. The fat man was still sitting with the same imperturbable calm.

“You know,” Yura said, “I live pretty close to Red Square, on Pyatnitskaya. But I’ve never noticed a red pyramid around there.”

“You can’t see it.”

“But *you* can?”

“Yes.”

O.K., then, Yura thought. The guy has hallucinations.

“And what does this pyramid do?”

“Emits the red roar.”

“Like a loudspeaker?”

“More or less. But it emits a different kind of sound wave. Different vibrations.”

“And why does it . . . emit them?”

“To infect the world with the red roar.”

“Why?”

“To destroy mankind’s intrinsic structure.”

“Destroy it? Why?”

“So that humans stop being humans.”

This sounds seditious, Yura thought, and looked around.

But there was still no one else on the platform.

“So Lenin built this pyramid?”

“No. He simply called it into being.”

“So he, like, flipped a switch?”

“Something like that.”

“Who built it, then?”

“You wouldn’t know them.”

“The Germans, then? Or Marx, maybe? Engels?” Yura laughed.

“No, not the Germans.”

“The Yanks, then?”

“No.”

“Well, then, who? Where are they from?”

“From there,” the fat man replied, then added, “Your train’s coming from there.”

Yura looked out into the hot air, gazing to the left at the tracks shrinking off toward the horizon, didn’t see anything, but still stood up and put the strap of his bag over his shoulder. Looked back over at the poster of Lenin.

“What about Communism?”

“What about Communism?” The fat man trained his frozen eyes on Yura.

“Well, isn’t it our . . . radiant future?”

“It’s not our radiant future but the red roar of the present day.”

At that precise moment, a horn sounded off in the distance. And Yura saw his train. It was still far away, and its movement was inaudible. Yura wanted to say goodbye to the fat man, wanted to say something humorous and offensive, but suddenly thought better of it. He stood there, swaying in place as he loved to do, and stared at the strange man. The man still sat looking straight ahead. Yura could hear the train now. It crawled up to the platform. He suddenly felt absolutely certain that he would never see this unusual man again. He was quite sure that the man would just keep sitting there on this empty, dusty platform. He wouldn’t get on the train to Moscow. Maybe he wouldn’t get on any train at all. It was unclear where this man could possibly want to go. He seemed to have grown up out of the bench itself. Yura felt bitterly sad. His eyes filled with tears.

The train came to a halt with its usual screech.

Yura automatically stepped inside. Entered the car and sat down. Wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. Looked out the window at the platform. The fat man was sitting in exactly the same position on the bench. Looking straight ahead. There was something painfully familiar about him.

The train shoved off.

Yura was frozen in place. He felt an intense yearning. A quiet yearning. He had nowhere to go. And no thoughts to think. Instead of thinking, he simply

remembered the fat man's last words: "The red roar of the present day."

Paralyzed, Yura stared out the window at the greenery, the telegraph poles, the little houses, the cars, the dumps, the warehouses, the cranes, the piles of coal, the heating plants, the people, the birds, the goats, the dogs. . . .

And completely forgot about Natasha's birthday party.

And missed the stop for Mytishchi.

He came to his senses only as the train was pulling into Yaroslavsky Station. The moment it stopped, his paralysis passed. He stood up and got off the train, stepping down onto the platform with the other passengers, and immediately moved away from the crowd. He took out his cigarettes.

And what about the birthday party? Zagoryanka? Natasha? He remembered everything.

"You idiot!" he said, and spat furiously.

He lit his cigarette. Wandered through the evening streets of Moscow. Crossed the Garden Ring. Walked toward his apartment, on Pyatnitskaya.

Smoking brought him back down to earth.

"He must have been a hypnotist," Yura told himself, and started laughing, "and I got taken in like a little idiot. Red roar! Red ro-o-o-oar! A pyramid!"

He pulled the bottle of champagne out of his bag and opened it while walking. The cork flew out with a loud pop, scaring an old lady, and bounced off the wall of a building. The warm, half-sweet champagne erupted out of the bottle, and Yura lapped at it, drenching himself in the process.

He drank the whole sticky bottle on his way home, then left it on someone's windowsill.

At home, he read a fresh issue of *Youth* and went to bed earlier than usual.

Sunday passed by.

On Monday, Yura had two tests. And on Tuesday he set off to Dinamo, where the Spartakiada was coming to an end. Walking into the gymnasium, he nearly bumped into Natasha. In dark-blue tights, her palms white with talcum powder, she was walking toward the locker room.

“Hi!” he said, stopping.

“Hi,” she replied with her perpetual smile, then continued walking.

They never saw each other again.

Yura graduated from Moscow State University and married Albina, the daughter of one of his parents’ old friends. With the help of his father, a prominent functionary in the Ministry of Transport, he got a job at *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. He and Albina had a son named Vyacheslav. In the late sixties, Yura joined the Party and got a job with *Izvestiya*. He and Albina had a daughter named Yulia. In the mid-seventies, he took a position as a department head at *Ogoniok*.

One July morning, he had a quick breakfast, as he always did, got into his father’s old white Volga, and set off for the editorial office. The moment he drove onto Moskvoretsky Bridge, his heart clenched and fluttered in such a way that he couldn’t catch his breath. Yura stopped the car by the curb. He tried to take evenly spaced breaths and massaged the He Gu points on his hands as his doctor had taught him to.

Yura had already had a lot of heart problems. They’d started after he published a controversial article in *Izvestiya*, which had been “rashly” approved by the department head while the editor-in-chief was on vacation. Yura was called to testify in front of the city’s Party committee. “You’ve crossed the line of what is permissible,” a man with the face of an old wolf had said to him. The department head was removed from his position with lightning speed. Yura’s career was hanging by a thread. He managed to hold onto it by a miracle; his father’s Party connections came in handy like never before. But his heart went out of whack, and the doctors said that he had suffered a small heart attack. He spent two months with Albina at a

sanatorium. The second time his heart acted up was when his son was implicated in a disgusting story: a gang rape in a student dormitory. Yura's father had recently died, and there was no one *up there* to appeal to for help. Yura had to go to a lot of offices, asking for favors and humiliating himself. His son was saved: he got away with probation. But after those six months Yura had to start taking heart medication. Then the problem had gone away.

But now, now, now.

His heart was fluttering.

It had never felt like this before. Yura just couldn't catch his breath. He got out of his car and walked to the balustrade of the bridge, laid his hands on the chill granite, and tried to breathe normally, looking out at the morning light over the Moscow River. The freshness of the water wafted toward Yura on the bridge. He tried to calm himself down. But his heart was still fluttering. Like a small animal flitting around in a cage—as if it were dancing.

Doing the can-can.

Dressed in a caf-tan.

Its paws going bam-bam.

Yura breathed, breathed, breathed.

His head was spinning and two steel cicadas were buzzing in his ears.

His legs trembled. He grabbed onto the balustrade and leaned over it. The water was shining below him. The water was shining. The shining water shone with shiny shininess.

“Stop, stop, stop,” he whispered to himself.

The he-art. The h-ea-rt. His h-e-a-r-t. Stopped fluttering.

Stopped. Sto

pped.

Stopped for good.

Inside Yura reigned

silence.

With the last of his strength, he tried to stand up straight.

Clutched the balustrade.

And suddenly saw the red pyramid.

It towered up on Red Square, its base taking up the entire area of the square. The pyramid vibrated as it emitted the red roar. The roar came forth in waves, flooding everything around it like a tsunami, flowing off beyond the horizon toward all four corners of the earth. The human race was drowning in this red roar. Drowning as it tried to paddle through. Walking, driving, standing, sitting, sleeping—men, women, old people, children. The red roar overwhelmed all of it. Its waves beat beat furiously against every person person inside every person person light light and the red roar roar beats beats out of the pyramid pyramid in order to extinguish extinguish the light light of man man and extinguish extinguish cannot cannot and why why beats beats this frighteningly frighteningly and dumbly dumbly red waves waves beat beat and cannot cannot beat beat and cannot cannot why why beat beat this stupidly stupidly furiously furiously six-wingèd six-wingèd you here here next to next to six-wingèd six-wingèd you bright bright you most most you eternal eternal you hello hello six-wingèd six-wingèd back then back then you were were different different fat fat funny funny white white shoes low boots shoes your name name.

“A pine day,” Yura muttered, his lips turning white as he tried to smile.

And keeled over.♦

(Translated, from the Russian, by Max Lawton.)

# **Georgia Postcard**

- [Wrongful Conviction, the Game!](#)

[October 4, 2021 Issue](#)

## Wrongful Conviction, the Game!

Two exonerated convicts visit the escape room run by Cobb County, in Georgia, which was conceived as a prison-break scenario, with visitors playing the role of innocent inmates. Can they get out in time?

By [Charles Bethea](#)

September 25, 2021

Cobb County, a wealthy area northwest of Atlanta, recently advertised a new escape room on its Facebook page. “You’ve been wrongfully sentenced to life without parole,” the description read. “You’ve settled in, made a few friends, but every one has their breaking point.” It continued, “While the prison is in chaos because of a riot in the yard, you have a tiny window of opportunity to explore the building and carry out a great escape.” Noting a “hard difficulty level” and the potential use of fog machines, the description concluded with a line cribbed from “The Shawshank Redemption”: “It’s time to get busy living, or get busy dying.”



A local reporter posted a screenshot on Twitter. Commenters noted the weirdly worded plot. What, one asked, did “you’ve settled in” mean, exactly? Another responded, “I assume it means: ‘You have accepted that the system is irretrievably broken and nothing short of burning it all down will solve it. But the cafeteria shift gives you a chance to play with some new recipe ideas.’ ” Others offered context. “[Robert Clark](#) was wrongfully convicted in Cobb County” and served twenty-four years, a former inmate wrote. “Such injustices aren’t a game.” It is estimated that thousands of inmates in the U.S. are innocent. Conditions within Georgia’s prisons are currently under federal investigation.

One recent evening, five curious customers together paid a hundred and thirty-five dollars to try their luck. Among them were two Cobb County residents in their sixties who had lived the game’s basic premise: [Calvin C. Johnson, Jr.](#) (sixteen years for rape and aggravated sodomy; exonerated 1999), and [Clarence Harrison](#) (seventeen years for rape, robbery, and kidnapping; exonerated 2004). They arrived together in Johnson’s car. Johnson’s girlfriend was out of town, and Harrison was tired of sitting home alone. Neither had been to an escape room before.

“It’s like a game of Clue or something?” Johnson asked. He had a white goatee and wore an Atlanta Falcons hat. Someone explained the idea.

“Interesting,” Johnson replied. He went on, “I thought about escape. It’s normal. But then you think, Innocent people don’t break out of prison.”

“Because that’s criminal,” Harrison added. He wore khaki cargo shorts and used a cane. He said, “The warden thought I was trying to escape, because I was drawing stuff from memory—reconstructing the area where the crime occurred. But my idea of getting out was to prove my innocence with DNA.”

Christina Cribbs, a lawyer for the [Georgia Innocence Project](#)—which has freed a dozen people, including Harrison—joined them. Her office had discussed the prison-escape-room concept. “Tone-deaf at best,” she said. Shortly before the opening of the room, Cobb County quietly took down the Facebook post. “They know they did something wrong,” Cribbs said. “But there was no acknowledgment of it.”

"The old D.A. never said he was sorry to me, either," Harrison said.

Inside, liability waivers were signed. A staffer handcuffed some of the group. Then he led them into "Shankshaw Penitentiary." The first room had an interrogation table. There was a tape player on it with a cryptic recording. But advancing to the next room—a cell with a set of bunk beds, some books, a deck of cards, and what appeared to be a poster of the pinup girl Bettie Page—required a hint from a short man in a gas mask playing a prison guard. "Look inside of everything," the man advised.



"Well, the bad news is I can't find the mustard . . ."   
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

After a while, Johnson found a key hidden in the cell's toilet. The guard claimed that the toilet had been donated by an actual Georgia jail.

"I thought so," Johnson said. He asked someone else to reach in for the key.

Next was the warden's office. A bunch of license plates on a wall, rearranged in the right order, opened the door to the final room—a maintenance closet. But a siren went off before the group could figure out the last clue. Game over.

"You almost had it," the guard said. "I guess you'll have to stay in here forever!" They headed for the exit.

Outside, the air felt nice. Some kids were playing Frisbee golf nearby. A vehicle resembling an unmarked patrol car sat in the parking lot. Was it real or a prop?

“Maybe the game’s not over yet,” Johnson said. He took out his phone and read something he’d written about wrongful convictions. “Nothing can replace what’s been taken from you. Not money, not counselors, not friends or family,” he said. “Still, you go forward marching into the future with hope.”

“A struggle for all of us,” Harrison said quietly, leaning on his cane.

Johnson’s phone rang. It was his girlfriend, asking how the experience had gone. “There’s no way to explain it other than it wasn’t realistic,” he said. As he spoke, a smiling white family headed inside. It was their turn to escape. ♦

# **Life and Letters**

- A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Woman

The author's diaries and notebooks chart her early work and love life.

By [Patricia Highsmith](#)

*Patricia Highsmith, who published twenty-two novels, including "Deep Water" and "The Talented Mr. Ripley," died in 1995, at the age of seventy-four. By the time of her death, she had alienated many of the people in her life, espousing racist, anti-Semitic, and otherwise offensive views, but the eight thousand pages of diaries and notebooks she left behind—an edited version of which will be published this November—depict an engaged, social, and optimistic youth. The following selections begin in the spring of 1948, when the twenty-seven-year-old Highsmith had a two-month residency at the Yaddo artists' colony. There, she met the British writer Marc Brandel, with whom she began an on-again, off-again relationship, and finished writing her first novel, "Strangers on a Train." To make money, for several years Highsmith wrote for comics, including those published by Timely, which later became Marvel. In December, 1948, she also found seasonal work in the toy department of Bloomingdale's, where she sold a doll to Mrs. E. R. Senn, the wife of a wealthy businessman from New Jersey, who became the inspiration for the character Carol, in her novel "The Price of Salt," which was first published, in 1952, under a pseudonym.*

*april 3, 1948:* Have rented a typewriter, and begun, in good mood, another ending on the *Comp. [Woman's Home Companion]* story. It flows. Yet each day that goes by—where is the writing I wish to do? I feel it in me. Shall I be like those people without number who feel a destiny to write magnificent works one day? Yet looking at them I know I am different, and I put my trust in my intensity—my enormous need—which I do not see at all in them. The fortune-teller's remark to my mother in N.O. [New Orleans] haunts me: "You have one child—a son. No, a daughter. It should have been a boy, but it's a girl." All around me, the happy, lighthearted, happily living couples of the South. Courtship is so easy, the attainment so easy, their bodies so fortunate.

*april 10, 1948:* My mother awakened me at 9 with a call that I have been admitted to Yaddo. I am thrilled and delighted. Such a relief, like a soldier, to have one's life planned for the next 10-12 weeks! My mother pleased, too, and grandma impressed. Grandma read all about Yaddo in the pamphlet.

How wide in range are her interests—how much grander a person is she than all her offspring.

*may 11-30, 1948:* What to say of Yaddo? I shall never forget it. A singularly dull bunch, no big names—though Marc Brandel is interesting. Bob White, Clifford Wright, Irene Orgel, Gail Kubik, Chester Himes, and Vivien K[och] MacLeod, W. S. Graham, a Scots poet, Harold Shapero & wife, Stan[ley] Levine, painter, Flannery O'Connor. Great desire to drink, after 3 days. The drunkest evening of my life after ten days. At the Maranese Restaurant btw. here & town, the place we took dinner when the kitchen moved from garage to mansion. None of us ate much. We trooped into the bar & drank as if we had never had cocktails before. Mixing was the order—for a thrill—Marc soon succumbed, with carrot hair in his carrot soup. I exchanged a revealing phrase with C. Wright, the solitary gay person here, which was carried no farther. We both know. So what?

I must have had five Martinis or six. Plus two Manhattans. A near blackout at Jimmy's with Bob & Cliff, who had passed out at the Maranese, & had to be carried by three of us into the cab. We propped him on a stool in Jimmy's, whence he fell like an egg. We seated him in the taxi, but when we came out he was gone! The taxi fare \$7.50 for Bob & me by the time we finished looking at Bob's drawings in his studio. The driver drinking & looking, too. When we refused, we were whisked back to town, passing Cliff on the way, staggering under the dark elms of Union Avenue on his 2-mile trek back home. This night has become legendary as “the Night Clifford Fell in the Lake.”

Chester tried (in his room) to kiss me. Did I mention it already? Doesn't matter.

There are six artists here. We are all very different from one another, yet remarkably sociable, I think. What strikes me most forcibly is our basic similarity, in fact. It occurred to me last night, if any of us saw a white note being slid under the crack of our door—with a sound like thunder in the silent depths of midmorning—each of us would drop his work and spring for it. With what hope? Perhaps a friend, some sign of personal choice, of a singling out from the rest. And it followed—personal security, ego assurance, a lover. These every artist needs and wants. Even the married

artist is constantly attuned to these needs. The mornings. Energy is too abundant at ten. The world is too rich to be eaten. One sits in a whirl at one's desk thinking of drawing, writing, walking in the woods. The overwhelming flood of experience rushing in from all sides. In the morning only do I ever desire a drink to reduce my energy from 115% to 100%.

5/15/48: Please try to notice if every artist isn't ruthless in some way. Even the sweetest of characters have done something, generally because of their creative life, that to the rest of the world is inhuman. Some cases are more obvious, others may be more concealed. I know mine exists, my cruelty. Though where I cannot precisely say, for I try always to purge myself of evil. Generally it is selfishness in an artist. And because he subjects himself so cheerfully to all kinds of privations for his art, it is difficult for him to see wherein he has been guilty of selfishness. He sees it as selfishness for such an obviously worthy cause, too. Generally, in one form or another, it is a self-preservative selfishness, in regard to his not giving enough of himself to the world or another person.

*[no date]* After three weeks at Yaddo. The soul lusts for its own corruption —after only one week. Desperately, through alcohol, it tries to reestablish contact with the rest of humanity. One's eternal and individual loneliness is silhouetted sharply against dark green pine woods where it seems no human figure has ever walked or will ever walk. And, too, there is the desire born of loneliness also, to mingle spiritually with all the rest of the world of this year 1948 which is now starving, fighting, writhing in agony of thirst and undressed wounds, whoring, cheating, scheming, developing private, secret fondnesses for the stinking gutter. We want that, for it is our destiny, too, and Yaddo is depriving us. There is the moment of utter corruption, around eleven or eleven-thirty in the morning. One goes to urinate, washes their hands and looks into the bathroom mirror. The clock in the workroom grows audible. One realizes the isolation and imprisonment of the body, one realizes the hell of the body, and not only here, everywhere and as long as one lives, one longs for another body, naked and loving, a man or a woman, as it may be. One mixes a drink of rye and water, sips half of it truculently at a window, looks at the sterile, made bed and contemplates masturbating and turns from it in fear and scorn. One stalks about the room like a criminal imprisoned, unregenerate, incorrigible. This is the moment delicious, nihilitive, supreme, all-answering, the moment of utter corruption.

*june 2, 1948:* Happiness overwhelms me. Twenty-three days at Yaddo. My life is regular, pleasant, healthful on the obvious plane. (And how often and where in the past eight years, since I lived with my parents, have I been able to say this?) On the less obvious plane, it restoreth my dignity, my self-confidence, it enables me to complete what I have never completed, that child of my spirit, my novel, and give it birth.

*june 26, 1948:* A turning point. Went with Marc to the lake and discussed homosexuality quite a bit. Amazingly tolerant he is. And he convinced me I must abolish guilt for these impulses and feelings. (Can't I remember Gide? Must I always try to "improve" myself?) I returned with quite a different attitude. I think more highly of myself. I have opened myself a little to the world.

*august 2, 1948:* These days, I've been speaking with Jeanne about the need for us to separate. Promised Marc I would. She was sad, but understands. Mostly she was jealous, I think. And later with Marc. I asked if he could spend the night with me. Said yes. He was very sweet, but nothing happened, and I was upset again.

8/5/48: Persistently, I have the vision of a house in the country with the blond wife whom I adore, with the children whom I adore, on the land and with the trees I adore. I know this will never be, yet will be partially, that tantalizing measure (of a man) which leads me on. My God, and my beloved, it can never be! And yet I love, in flesh and bone and clothed in love, as all mankind.

*september 10, 1948:* Provincetown. Marc drunk when I arrived. Ann Smith [a painter, designer, and ex-*Vogue* model, a friend of Marc Brandel's] visited us, I think probably to get a look at me. She interests me—young, pretty, simple, and understanding. We wanted to take a walk (a few days later), and Marc accompanied us. Yes—I feel like I'm in prison. Always has to be like that—with a man.

11/23/48: Opening at Midtown of B.P.'s [Betty Parsons's] gallery. All the ancient acquaintances, friends of my friends of my twenty-first year. Age has sagged a chin line, silvered a golden head, stamped its uniform signature

of tiredness on a dozen faces. I think of Proust, re-seeing the Guermantes clan in the last chapter of “À la Recherche du Temps Perdu.”



*“Your favorite scene where he tramples the town’s small business is coming up, sir.”*  
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

*december 6, 1948:* First day at Bloomingdale’s. Training, and in the toy [department]. Very pleased.

*december 7, 1948:* Hard work. Selling dolls, how ugly and expensive! And then—at 5 p.m., someone stole my meat for dinner! What kind of wolves one works with!

*december 8, 1948:* Was this the day I saw Mrs. E. R. Senn? How we looked at each other—this intelligent-looking woman! I want to send her a Christmas card, and am planning what I’ll write on it.

*april 23, 1949:* How much I resent about Marc these days—his never doing anything but reading when he is here, while I attempt to play records, fix drinks, watch meat & canapés in the oven, simultaneously fix dinner, wash dishes, do the bed (and disgusting diaphragm) and, in the morning, prepare breakfast. He hasn’t the particular sensitivity to realize that a person in the bathroom does not wish another person sitting at the table just outside the door. These and a thousand things disturb my digestion, banish the gains made at other times.

*may* 7, 1949: [The fashion designer and painter] Mme. [Elizabeth] Lyne's party tonight. The party a fiasco, because dear Marc thought two boys were making passes at him. I got my coat and left. Wish I'd stayed on or told him off—one or the other, for I came home in a silent, pent fury.

*may* 8, 1949: Very depressed from last night. "You'd better make up your mind whom you love," said Ann, "because you're wasting a hell of a lot of valuable time . . . irrevocable time." I feel she refers to my lack of achievement in my work, my age, etc., and it all overwhelmed me. Moreover, I feel literally deprived of something, now that I cannot fall in love with anyone. However, it takes only a lunch with Dione (or even a good drawing) and laughter to make me feel, and know I am, happier now, enjoying life more now, than ever before. Such a fact allows me to bear a great deal—even the thought of going away with Marc. Though, actually, Saturday night dissuaded me from that. I will not be imprisoned so.

*may* 20, 1949: A gloomy, uneventful day, until Margot [Johnson, Highsmith's agent] informed me that Harpers wants my book! Everything happens at once! After all these months of plodding dullness, the book and Europe. And—so I asked Marc to come over for dinner. He brought champagne. And we decided to marry Christmas Day. Three high points of my life—definitely!

*june* 4, 1949: Rosalind [Constable, a friend and a writer], Marc, my mother saw me off. A short farewell, for the cabin is not attractive (D deck!) and the Queen sailed promptly. I could not see any of them from the deck. Who is with me most? Ann. I think of her thinking of me today. Everything a madhouse. One gets lost dozens of times a day. The meals are thrown at one, then snatched away. No one attractive in tourist class, and we are very effectively barred from fraternizing with the other two.

6/7/49: I am curious as to that part of the mind which psychology (which denies the soul) cannot find, or help, or assuage, much less banish—namely, the soul. I am curious as to the soul's dissatisfactions, that ever unsatisfied portion of man, which would ever be something else, not necessarily better, but something else, not necessarily richer, more comfortable, or even happier, but something else. It is this I want to write about next.

*june 11, 1949:* A delightful first-class carriage ride from Southampton to London, where both Dennis [Cohen, Highsmith's future U.K. publisher] & Kathryn [Cohen's wife] met me at Waterloo Station. Dennis in a Rolls-Royce. And a beautiful house to come home to—a Siamese cat, a superb lunch with Riesling. Kathryn is charming!

*june 17, 1949:* With Kathryn to Stratford. Poor Kathryn—she unburdens her heart to me, I trust, about Dennis. She has money to play with, but passion—she cannot spend at the moment, and she has a treasure of that. A rushed bite of dinner at the Avon [Hotel], and to “Othello” with Diana Wynyard as Desdemona, John Slater as Iago, Geoffrey Tearle as Othello.

*june 20, 1949:* London. Increasingly I must be drugged to be creative. Whether this is a stage, whether it is wrong (it is momentarily wrong) is the great problem. The worst letter from Ann. She writes me almost daily. “Why do you write to me. If you loved me, we should live together & there would be no question. It has been almost a year . . . I cannot keep the light touch much longer.” And from Marc, the first letter. Rather cool, otherwise all right. I feel so tenderly toward him. But which is I???? Extremely tired. I grow ever thinner.

6/20/49: There must be violence, to satisfy me, and therefore drama & suspense. These are my principles.

*june 22, 1949:* Today at last a grand decision. It is impossible to think of marrying Marc—a sacrilege. I prefer Ann. But as yet I cannot trust my emotions enough to believe I love her enough. Perhaps that will come—immediately—for her. But I know I would only hurt Marc and myself by marrying him.

*[no date]* How I miss the long talks with Kathryn. What things go through my head. What a charming woman is she. And the pity. The unjustness. The male form without context: everywhere. Dennis incapable of loving her. How alive she still is. How worthy of adoration. What a beautiful instrument to play on! What songs could she sing! How proud could she make her lover! I come to Paris thinking of the strange kiss she gave me the night before I left, the way she held me close and would not let me go. And why? And why? And why was I not bolder? How many years since someone had

kissed her—a modest kiss, but one with reality—as I did that night? I should have liked to hold her in my arms all night, to give her the feeling of being loved and desired, because the feeling is more important than the deed.

*july 18, 1949:* I wrote to Marc—finally—severing everything, telling him I am sure I cannot be to him what I should.

7/29/49: Europe for the first time at twenty-eight: it widens one's interests again, makes one diverse as at seventeen. This closing up! I hate it. It grows on one slowly from nineteen onward, as S. [Samuel] Johnson said.

*august 23, 1949:* Roma—a dirty town. All the men masturbating or something, staring with idiotic fixity at me. Wired K. last night & she telephoned at 6 last night. Wants to join me in Naples. Was so happy suddenly—a proper date with English-speaking friend—and what a person—I bought Cognac, wore my sweater from Florence. How lucky I am. Though suffering backache (?) and sore stomach, I feel like a god as I lie alone in my room, too sick, too frightened (physically) of what might happen in Rome, should I fall sick, to move out. Out finally to eat a beefsteak & nothing else. Had had nothing but 2 omelets for 2 days. Forgive food details, dear diary, but they become life details, perhaps. Kathryn will join me Friday. I spin out the days in Rome until then, therefore, hating it.

*september 8, 1949:* I wanted to embrace and kiss Kathryn. Depression—for what? I am not in love with her, only afraid to show the least spontaneity in my emotions. Always afraid? Always afraid—not really of offending—but of being offended by someone else's rejection. With her, I can only think of my bad points, my untidy hair, bad teeth, my untidy shoes, perhaps. We leave tonight for Palermo. The boat is beautiful. Suddenly we both purr like kittens, responding to the cleanliness, the good service, above all the leaving of Naples, the change ahead. K. will stay with me until I go, then return to Rotterdam, finally to London where—everything hellish awaits her—

*september 21, 1949:* To the Grotta Azzurra with K. Very cluttered with rowboats, so certainly 50% of the light was obscured. What a shame. Caught the 4:10 bus back to Napoli. Then the parting. And the rushing. Grapes. And a last dinner with K. I in my white suit, which I'd wanted to wear the first evening with her. We dined—indifferently—at the vine balcony restaurant of

our first lunch. K. often holds me, looks earnestly into my face, and kisses me on the lips. What does she wish me to say further? (I have said nothing.) She doesn't wish anything. But mightn't I? Plans—does K. want them? I know it is I who do not want them. That K. could more easily bear than I could say, I shall come to London next year and we shall live together. No, I don't know what I want. With perfect equanimity, I can contemplate nothing but brief affairs—promiscuous ones—in N.Y. And yet I hope for a jolt (of time, in time) to crystallize my desires. I long to write, and dream of its coming out easily as a spider's web. Now I know why I keep a diary. I am not at peace until I continue the thread into the present. I am interested in analyzing myself, in trying to discover the reasons why I do such & such. I cannot do this without dropping dried peas behind me to help me retrace my course, to point a straight line in the darkness.

*october 2, 1949:* Does K. think of me in this long silence? I know she does. We have a strange psychic communication, we two. I began my novel, "Argument of Tantalus" [later titled "The Price of Salt"]. Seven or eight pages that went along with that ease and fluency (of vocabulary) that generally means nothing much need be changed later. Naturally, I am very happy today. The happiest since leaving Kathryn.

*october 5, 1949:* Page 28 of "Tantalus." I have no clear detail of what happens once Therese meets Carol. But it goes romping along, much as I do. All is my own reaction to things—with only, at the extremes, some extensions to follow more closely the attitudes of my main character. The sea is rolling rather heavily tonight. Could not sleep until 2 a.m.

*october 9, 1949:* Have never felt such outpouring of myself—in all forms of writing. A great gush. I want to get this book out of me in the shortest possible time, not even stopping to earn a bit of money.

*october 19, 1949:* Marc called yesterday, to my surprise. We had drinks and dinner tonight, says he still feels the same, still talks of marriage, "not in two years or even more, but you're still the person I want to spend the rest of my life with." Marc stayed the night, trying to please me, but being too self-effacing even.

*october 22, 1949:* Date with Marc. Went to dinner—bad at Le Moal's—and movie. He stayed. I was excessively tired, and then (in fact, unless I am drunk) he is so much dead weight in my bed. Oh Christ, I want Kathryn in my bed! I trust her. I like the fact she is older than me. I think she is beautiful and intelligent. I had another letter from her. More affectionate, I would say, more half said, than the other.

*november 6, 1949:* Typed almost all my [story] "Instantly and Forever" today. All I can say is, I've seen such things printed. Marc came up with a title [for the first novel] this morning. "Strangers on a Train." I like it very much & hope they do. God bless him. He helps me so much. Am very grateful.

*november 11, 1949:* Lunch with Harpers. Joan Kahn & Mr. Sheehan, an editor, junior, who says he likes my book tremendously, thinks it's wonderful. (Later spoke with Mme. Lyne, who said Sheehan dropped in, raved about the book, without knowing she knew me.) Kahn: Will allow me to finish "Tantalus" without showing even a piece of it. And some money can be arranged, too. Wants McCullers, etc., to read "Strangers" and comment for jacket.

*november 23, 1949:* Thanksgiving morn: 2:45 a.m. No letter from Kathryn. She doesn't love me. I had my chance, and I muffed it. (Will that be engraved upon my tombstone?) There is nothing in the world I want so much at this moment as a word from her. A new word. One cannot go on forever rereading the same letter. I am sick, and starving, from living on what one always lives on. Hope. The future that never comes, because one never makes it. That is, I don't. I must tell her that I love her. I want her. I am hers. I want only to be with her. I must ask her, does she want it, too.

11/23/49: Continually I toy with my "if—ifs." For instance, if my experience should be shut off now, sexually, emotionally (not intellectually), but mundanely, practically, I feel I should have enough. I have stretched an hour into eternity. It is all within me. I have but to draw upon it. I have not been to sea for many months, but neither have I been immured. And yet I know, as I write this, that in a week I shall condemn it as sterile, decadent, simply stupid. Thank God, I am not the single person, not even worshipping the Intellect and the Soul with single mind, like Melville! For Melville became

insane, and I shall not. This afternoon in Hastings [New York], I raked leaves, in the sun and the air and the smoke. And I loved my love with all my heart. Therefore, I felt and I knew that I was not entirely the priggish person I had been half an hour before, immersed in Melville's "Pierre" and following his vagaries of soul with the most personally involved fascination. Therefore, I know I shall not ever go mad. Which is one of the matters for which I give thanks this Thanksgiving Day.



"Is it possible you made the appointment under another name—like, say, Handsome Prince?"  
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

*november 26, 1949:* Another letter from Kathryn. The first in two weeks, but well [worth] waiting for. It transforms everything. She misses me. It was a very intimate letter. I have never been so happy in my life. I must literally rest a while each day, lest I drop dead with the absurd ailment of Euphoria. Not that I am excited. I am calm, serene, my concentration is even good. But I am blessed, and I know it. All these years of repression, sacrifice, disillusionment, frustration have come to be of value, for they help me to measure my extreme happiness now.

*november 26, 1949:* Lyne informs me Sheehan of Harpers was chiefly fascinated by my book's ["Strangers on a Train"'s] "homosexual theme" and presumably subject matter. I was astounded, a little disturbed. Felt wonderful this evening, going downtown after one Martini here, my

pinstripe suit. I prefer my hair straight. Frightfully, dangerously tired when I went to bed at 4 *a.m.* I am always afraid of dropping dead, of course.

*december* 8, 1949: I read my notebooks all evening. A real thesaurus! I lay closer plans of “Tantalus.” I believe it will go well. I must not be too loose, that is all! I am happy tonight. And if I don’t have a letter from K. tomorrow, the fourteenth day? I shall be disappointed, sorry, but not unhappy. For betrayal of faith and trust is the very theme of “Tantalus,” which tomorrow I hope to begin to write once more.

*december* 10, 1949: Worked. How well it all goes. How grateful I am at last not—as Lil says—to spoil my best thematic material by transposing it to a false male-female relationship!

1/10/50: Loneliness. Not a mysterious visitation, not a disease. It depends what one has been doing last, what one will do next, whether it comes or not. This has nothing to do with “distraction,” either. I mean loneliness has to do with the psyche’s rhythm alone. Distraction never keeps loneliness [at bay], of course. I honor loneliness: it is austere, proud, untouchable, except by what it would be touched by. Melancholy on the other hand can quickly be touched by distraction. For it is a more logical thing. (And I can also see myself writing the very opposite of all this one day.)

1/10/50: A note on hearing “America.” From sea to shining sea. The many small towns I have driven through. The many lighted windows on the second floors of small homes, where young girls stand brushing their golden hair. The houses certain people call home. The rooms that are certain people’s own rooms, unforgettable. And perhaps the rooms they will have all their lives. And the shaded window with the red cross over the sill, that I passed every morning on the way to high school in Ft. Worth. The bread they eat, and the boyfriends who call them, the cars they drive to hamburger stands in, the summer evenings when the boys are home from colleges, and the betrothals are made. The children that are born to lead the same simple lives externally. And, always, the loneliness, the unsatisfied striving that is below the surface, much or little below. The girl who is unsatisfied, and yet has not the energy or perhaps the courage to escape. She dreams of something better, something different, something that will challenge and use up the aspiration that she feels clamoring within her, that cannot be satisfied

by the men she meets, the stores she buys her clothes at, the movies she dreams in, even the food she eats.

*january 13, 1950:* Bad luck. I owe the government \$122, which I won't pay. Margot says that I have to continue working for the comics industry for several months at least. Well, then, I shall do that. At least I don't have a hangover this morning. Ann came to see me. She's not going to Europe this summer. Ann is too slim, not as attractive as before. My God, how many women do I want?

*january 19, 1950:* My birthday. 29. Work—I thought that the comics might be stimulating now. Unfortunately not. However, the checks will doubtless be. But the stories—! With the family tonight. Martinis, good French wine, presents. And a check over \$20 for a macintosh. Couldn't sleep tonight. I think of Lyne—who tickles my curiosity, that's all. And I was also thinking about my life. I should be writing now. I cannot possibly justify these two months I plan to work on comics. I don't get any younger.

1/25/50: Education. How we should love those years of formal education, especially in the university. To the reflective person, it is the last time he will remember that the world made sense, the world promised to continue to make sense. It is the only time when all he is filled and concerned with really concerns life. No wonder he is happy! No wonder each day is heroic adventure! No wonder he doesn't want to go to bed at night!

1/26/50: Insanity. When one has glimpses of it, it is not in the form of random irrational thoughts, but as the entire structure of one's information slipping. It is as if the crust of the entire world slips a bit, so that one easily imagines the North Pole at the South Pole one day.

*february 1, 1950:* Thus, I go through life, subsisting on one drug or another.

2/2/50: I do indeed grow tired and depressed by realism in literature—especially à la O'Hara, or even à la Steinbeck. I want a complete new world. Painters are doing it. Why not writers? I do not mean the pixie-like fantasy of Robert Nathan. I mean a new world that is at once not real, and at once fascinating and full of message, that is art, too, as simply, timelessly, and unrealistically as the best of the cave dwellers' wall paintings.

*february 9, 1950:* Margot likes “Tantalus.” What more can I say? I am alive once more. I am in love with Kathryn. I am an angel, a devil, a genius. I must have nothing more to do with Lyne, who will not grant me her bed, as simply and partially as I should take it. (Idiot, she is!) I love Kathryn. My eyes are on the stars and beyond. My spirit wanders in the galaxies, and under the oceans. My breath is in the coming spring winds. My fertility is in the dry, living seeds as yet unplanted. My food is my love itself, better than any feast! The frame of my life is the frame of my work. *Gloria in Excelsis Deo!*

*2/27/50:* The entire pattern of my life has been and is: She has rejected me. The only thing I can say for myself at the age of twenty-nine, that vast age, is that I can face it. I can meet it head on. I can survive. I can even combat it. It will not knock me down again, much less knock me out. In fact, I have learned to reject first. The important thing is to practice this. That my limping crutches are not trained to do. Ah, how insignificant it all is! And how significant! To one more love, goodbye. Adieu. But no— God will not be with you, not you. But fare thee well, all the same. God knows, I hold thee high.

*march 28, 1950:* Lyne told Marc all I need[ed] was a man to “make me feel like a woman.” Her usual, refreshing tack, and to hell with Freud, and even past history. Pat’s not queer, Lyne says. She’s got this wrong. Spent night with Marc. I am easier with him, but much rebellion left, I can feel. And if Kathryn writes me favorably? I envisage 2 months now with Marc, when I shall write my book, followed by movie money, Europe, and I hope Kathryn. If I were to do what I feel like doing, it would be Kathryn & Europe, and not these 2 months (so far as pleasure goes) with Marc even. Feel like a woman? He makes me feel like a male pervert, a sailor in the Navy, a naughty little boy at school. He has a knack of not knowing what I want.

*4/2/50:* A note after rereading all my notebooks—rather, glancing through all of them, for who could possibly read them? Impressed only by the range of interest, the terrible striving in all directions. Depressed by the monotonous note of depression, and the affinity of melancholy. Impressed very rarely by cleverness, by poetry. But sometimes, I think, by an occasional good insight. A few usable things in literature. But this I must say: the sackcloth ashes age has passed. The adolescent aloneness

(reluctance to join with humanity) has passed. So melancholy now, on the lonely gray seas, is tempered with sight of shore. I have my friends. More than that I have Life, and know how to repair to it at all times, under any conditions. Things which once were so bewildering and complex, marriage and sex, for example, are not so now. They have been torn down a bit. Become more lovable, in fact. I must get it all to flow. To let it dam up till it is an insufferable force, that has to be knocked out by liquor and dissipation to tire the body. In short—as I have ivy-towerishly preached since adolescence—I must learn to find life in my work, living there, with its dramas, hardships, pleasures, and rewards. For I have yet another long road to go, before I can find in another person those compatible elements, which will enable all this to flow. I have merely learned, so far, to avoid those persons who would stop it.

*april 3, 1950:* Margot sold my book [“Strangers on a Train”] to Hitchcock for \$6,000 + \$1,500 for Hollywood work or not at time of filming—6-9 months hence. Celebrated wildly with Lyne (broke date with Jeanne). Then called Ann at 3 a.m. & was stupidly inveigled into inviting her here. Dismal, and I feel it’s the last time.

*april 7, 1950:* Hysterical, because Lyne made me wait an hour for her. I have a cold & fever, but that’s small excuse. The point is, the pattern resumes. The point is, I have a chance out of it now (a bit of money), and my imprisoned soul (in such bad shape that an A.S.P.C.A. would have guillotined me years ago, had they known, and God himself must be wishing, o profoundly wishing, he hadn’t made such a creature or let such a creature be made). How about the insect in the country brook, born to live 30 seconds due to natural enemy living in the proximity? I think such a creature even would be considered happier. At any rate, drunk and sober tonight, I feel myself approaching the end of phoniness. I have lived as a phony too long. The honest money in my pocket is crying out against it. What do I cry? What is the cry of my soul? Kathryn. (Result of waiting for Lyne 45 minutes, plus 102 fever, plus lousy dinner in a nightclub, + 3½ Martinis + a crying jag.)

*april 17, 1950:* I have borne heavier crosses than Kathryn. The letter came today (written Thursday April 13) and it is not good, I suppose. She is incredibly burdened with all kinds of things just now. “I have to learn to

walk alone," she wrote, "before I'll be of any use to myself or to anyone else." And that she would like to see me whenever possible. What ever remains but friends?

Marc got my negative letter today, too. Thus we both get it in the neck the same day.

*april* 20, 1950: [Port Jefferson] One inconvenience after another. No gas. Parents left at noon, and I sat huddled by a fire the rest of the chill, rainy day, reading Greene's "The Man Within." How brilliant it is. How like Kathryn is Elizabeth. And Andrews like me in my most cowardly, indecisive moments. (My cowardice, if any, lies in indecision alone.) I wept at the end. Real tears, à la "David Copperfield" when I was a child, tears now because I am grown up, and so are these people.

*may* 3, 1950: Ah, life can be beautiful. Chapter Nine done. P. 111. And the next chapter planned at the moment. Symbolism coming out fine. I've my sloppy shirt-paper notes pinned beside my desk. I might go all day without speaking to anyone here, except perhaps for my mail.

*may* 4, 1950: This is such a painful novel I am doing. I am recording my own birth. My 8-page stint is sometimes agony. So far, generally, I feel happy at night, however, after the pages are done.

5/4/50: To hell with the psychoanalyst's explanations of Dostoyevsky's gambling as sexual release. Dostoyevsky wanted to destroy himself, to experience his own destruction. Purge of the soul! Dostoyevsky knew. Touch bottom before you can thrust to the heights! Touch bottom, indeed, merely for the sake of knowing bottom. I know all this so well, I feel it, I enact it, too.

*may* 5, 1950: A letter from Kathryn. A good one. Very good. She liked my postcards, letters, congratulates me on the movie. "You are neither an irrit[ation] or a distraction, but someone whom I feel very close . . ." Excoriating letter from Marc, telling me I cling to my disgusting, infantile sicknesses like a little girl clings to a doll, ending "and let's get married."

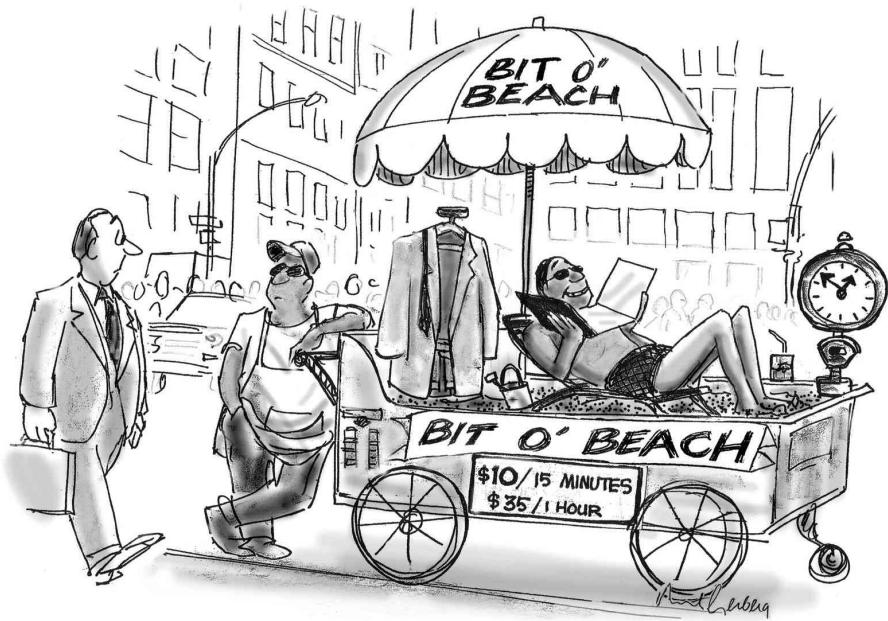
5/6/50: This won't come again (some things I know, as I knew when I was twenty-three, and twenty-one, that the same sensations cannot be reduplicated because of the very age element), the sheeplike clouds on a pleasant evening in May, with the castle nearby, all black and dark and huge, where I shall work alone. And while my friends are leaving in the car. It is all pleasant, I welcome it, and I am not afraid, and yet love goes with them, the human voice, the touch of the flesh at all, and the possibility of something failing, some little thing, while the group goes out to get into the car, while one or all of us look for a place which sells newspapers after ten o'clock in the evening. No, this will not come again, I standing in the dark driveway, lighting a cigarette to comfort me, while the automobile purrs away in the darkness. I staring to a different world and one which I love better. Living life I do mistrust, but friends and lovers one has always. One has always, at least, the remembrance of how the lovers were, which indeed is no different from the way the friends are. For I do project into friends the imaginative virtues, capabilities, which I project into lovers. Both are created. And a man does love by an illusion.

5/17/50: Writing, of course, is a substitute for the life I cannot live, am unable to live. All life, to me, is a search for the balanced diet, which does not exist. For me. Alas, I am twenty-nine, and I cannot stand more than five days of the life I have invented as the most ideal.

*May 23, 1950:* In a burst of confidence, I showed Ethel [Sturtevant, who was Highsmith's creative-writing instructor at Barnard] chapter six, in which Carol appears, picks up Therese. "But this is love!" Ethel exclaimed upon reading half of the first page. I admitted it was something like that but in later discussion said T. had a schoolgirl crush, wanted back to the womb relationship, which Ethel said was borne out by the milk episode, but not in their meeting. "That's a sexual awakening. Your genius ran away with you here . . . Now this packs a wallop! This is an excellent piece of writing, Pat."

5/28/50: I have just heard a remarkable popular song called "Let's go to church on Sunday (we'll meet a friend on the way)" ["Let's Go to Church (Next Sunday Morning)," performed by Margaret Whiting and Jimmy Wakely]. They will meet a friend on the way. Next Saturday night, the young man will hold up a candy store and the girl will sleep with the man who will necessitate an abortion. These two will marry in less than a year

and produce five more Catholics. They will vote in the Catholic senators and boycott the best artists and writers. They will provide sons for the next war and dedicate the next superwar mondial to the unknown soldier. They will prevent people from parking on their block and they will turn the stomachs of the rest of us when they appear in bathing suits on public beaches. They will be honored because they carry on the race. But they will not be the people by whom this century will be known.



Cartoon by Mort Gerberg

*may 31, 1950:* Went to Wanamaker's on luxurious lady of leisure shopping tour, & picked up maps from R.C.A. for Carol & Therese's trip. I live so completely with them now, I do not even think I can contemplate an amour.

6/6/50: Today I fell madly in love with my Carol. What finer thing can there be but to fling the sharpest point of my strength into her creation day after day? And at night, be exhausted. I want to spend all my time, all my evenings with her. I want to be faithful to her. How can I be otherwise?

*june 14, 1950:* Carol has said no now. Oh God, how this story emerges from my own bones! The tragedy, the tears, the infinite grief which is unavailing! I saw Marc for a beer. Very detached, unreal feeling tonight.

6/16/50: (One day before finishing my second novel.)

I have learned the trade of writing rather late. I am later still learning the art of life. I came home and only happened to look into Emily Dickinson, and was reminded afresh of that poor woman's (and rich poet's) fate of loving a man she saw so briefly—and of what she made of it, of what she gave the world and herself in beauty.

*june 30, 1950:* Today, feeling quite odd—like a murderer in a novel, I boarded the train for Ridgewood, New Jersey. It shook me physically, and left me limp. Had she [Mrs. E. R. Senn] ever taken the same train? (I doubt it. She'd use a car.) Was compelled to drink two ryes before I took the 92 bus, the wrong one, toward Murray Ave. I asked the driver, and suddenly, to my dismay and horror, I heard the entire bus shouting "Murray Avenue?"—and giving me directions! Murray Avenue is a comparatively small lane going into thickly wooded land, on one side of Godwin Avenue. There is a building on the left, a big, quiet, fine house on the right, where two cars stood, and women sat on the porch, talking. The number was 345—and I pushed on, seeing 39—on the next house, and thinking the numbers were going the wrong way, for hers is 315. Besides the street was so residential, there were no sidewalks, and I was a conspicuous figure. I dared not go any further up the avenue where the trees grew closer and closer, and hers might have been the only remaining house (I caught no glimpse of it!) and where she just might have been on the lawn or porch, and I might have betrayed myself with halting too abruptly. I walked on the opposite avenue, which was not even called Murray. (And felt safer because it was not hers.) And then as I came back to Godwin a pale aqua automobile was coming out of Murray Avenue, driven by a woman with dark glasses and short blond hair, alone, and I think in a pale blue or aqua dress with short sleeves. Might she have glanced at me? O time, thou art strange! My heart leapt, but not very high. She had hair that blew wider about her head. O Christ, what can I remember from that encounter of two or three minutes a year and a half ago. Ridgewood is so far away! When shall I ever see her in New York again? Shall I go to a party one evening and find her there?

7/1/50: I am interested in the murderer's psychology, and also in the opposing planes, drives of good and evil (construction and destruction). How by a slight defection one can be made the other, and all the power of a strong mind and body be deflected to murder or destruction! It is simply fascinating!

And to do this primarily, again, as entertainment. How perhaps even love, by having its head persistently bruised, can become hate. For the curious thing yesterday I felt quite close to murder, too, as I went to see the house of the woman who almost made me love her when I saw her a moment in December, 1948. Murder is a kind of making love, a kind of possessing. (Is it not attention, for a moment, from the object of one's affections?) To arrest her suddenly, my hands up on her throat (which I should really like to kiss) as if I took a photograph, to make her in an instant cool and rigid as a statue. And yesterday, people stared at me curiously wherever I went, in the trains, the bus, on the sidewalk. I thought, does it show in my face? But I felt very calm and composed. And indeed, at a gesture from the woman I sought, I should have cringed and retreated.

7/21/50: The night. I dream of earthquakes, the earth shaking and tipping out the window, while the house stands still! One half awakens—more than half! —sits up in bed with the dream clinging heavily to the edges of one's brain, tipping the whole brain like a house itself, caught in an earthquake. I call out someone's name, because I don't know what bed I am in, or what house. I see and hear myself doing it, knowing I am both asleep and awake, and the limbo is horrible! I walk into the kitchen, thinking of getting some hot water and milk to drink, but my brain grasps even this simple idea like the clumsy hands of a primitive monster. And the primitive monster is myself. I chew voraciously at a half-eaten chop which I really do not want, and put it down again. The earth shakes, and I doubt even gravity. I am suddenly somebody else, another creature I do not know. (I know, though, that I lived a hundred million years ago.)

9/22/50: Of my book, in conclusion, two weeks before finishing the rewrite: this is not a picture of the author sweating. The bookstores at this moment happen to be glutted with tracts excusing and apologizing for homosexuality, depicting their very rugged male heroes writhing with heterosexual disgust as they try to throw off the hideous coils that bind them, while in the last scene their beloved is without reason killed, lest somebody in the Bible Belt despise the fact they may continue living together in a cohabitation he has been hammered into countenancing, but which may sour in his mind a week later. This is the story of a woman weak because of social weaknesses in her society, having nothing to do with perversion. And a girl starved for a mother, in whom the artificial upbringing of an orphanage's home, however

scientific, has not sufficed as parental love. It is just a story that might have happened, with no axe to grind.

*october 12, 1950:* In furious mood. Walked furiously up 2nd Avenue. And at 4 p.m. got the curse! First time since end of May or June. Because I finished my book today, too, perhaps. A nice writing streak, with the end in which Therese does not go back with Carol—but refuses her, and is alone at the last. Shall show M.J. [Margot Johnson] both versions, and am sure she will prefer the “lift” ending in which T. & C. go back together. In the course of the evening got horribly blind drunk! Blackouts and everything else. Including spending all the money in my wallet. Lyne eventually poured me into a taxi at 3 a.m.

*october 18, 1950:* Walter [Marlowe, a friend and a writer] & I discussed my book. I told him I did not mind shelving it for five years. He suddenly agreed, and said Sheehan told him—“I’m glad Pat tackles a subject like this, because it’s something she really knows about, but for her career I think it’s very bad.” To get a label. And I’ve already one as a mystery story writer!

*october 19, 1950:* So that is the big news—I shall try to persuade Margot J. that the book should not be published now. And she will doubtless argue otherwise. Everyone will. But it is my career, my life.

10/20/50: Now, now, now, to fall in love with my book—this same day I have decided not to publish it, not for an indefinite length of time. But I shall continue to work on it for some weeks to come, to polish and perfect it. I shall fall in love with it now, in a different way from the way I loved it before. This love is endless, disinterested, unselfish, impersonal even.

*october 29, 1950:* Margot has finished my book. “I’m very pleased, Pat,” but not with too much enthusiasm, I thought. “What do you think of getting it published under another name?” she asked. I don’t mind. Temporary, partial relief from shame. We must get the opinions of several “independent readers.”

*december 21, 1950:* What shall I write about next, I think here in this diary where I think aloud. O more definitely than ever this 29th year, this third year and I always change on the thirds, has seen much metamorphosis. It

will come to me. My love of life grows stronger every month. My powers of recuperation are wonderfully swift and elastic. I think of writing a startler, a real shocker in the psychological thriller line. I could do it adeptly. ♦

*(Diary entries are dated in long form, notebook entries numerically. A few entries here were written or partly written in French or German and were translated by Sophie Duvernoy and Elisabeth Lauffer.)*

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# Poems

- “Entire”
- “To Gather Together”

[October 4, 2021 Issue](#)

# Entire

By [José Antonio Rodríguez](#)

September 27, 2021

## Content

*Audio:* Read by the author.

There was dirt once, an entire earth  
That clung to our bare feet when it rained,  
Scorched them when it hadn't,  
Coated our arms when it rose  
With the dry, furious wind.  
How obvious, I thought then,  
That it wanted to touch, interact,  
Even if just molecule to molecule.  
We hated that we couldn't escape its reach—  
Even indoors, weighing down our heels,  
Licking our shoelaces. How it even opened itself  
To other creatures, a baby snake poking through,  
Surveying the kitchen. Such naked desire,  
Though we never called it that, even after we moved  
To another country with its concrete  
And vast fields held inert beneath.  
“Our feet never touch mud now,”  
I told my mother the other day.  
“Yes,” she said, “yes.”  
That was all.

[October 4, 2021 Issue](#)

# To Gather Together

By [Erika Meitner](#)

September 27, 2021

## Content

*Audio:* Read by the author.

It is not yet after the pandemic  
but most of us have bared our faces  
in public. Most of us are a little haptic  
though we remain somewhat wary  
of strangers merging in enclosures &  
what does it mean, to gather? To take up  
from a resting place. We are so tired.  
We are uncovered & mustering  
strength. Never mind my mother's  
post-stroke slurred speech & vertigo,  
her ear crystals misaligned, her  
neck brace. We are survivors of the  
panic wars. We are reaching new  
conclusions intuitively from inferences  
about hugging. My radar is broken.  
I'm not sure where to put all my limbs.  
When they're tangled with yours it's not  
a problem. Your failing configurations  
of attention. My bad knees. To draw  
fabric into puckers: pleated pants,  
rumpled sheets, your fingers hooked  
in my underpants & we bring together  
all the parts of ourselves to embrace—  
haul in our bodies. To harvest, like  
clusters of ripened cherry tomatoes  
still warm from the sun. Forget  
the kale, stripped bare by bright-

green cabbage worms congregating  
on thick stems. To summon everyone  
back to this abundant & skeletal planet  
after we've jettisoned the billionaires  
into space. We celebrate the launch  
with tiny coupes of champagne.  
To throw open the doors & host  
guests & board packed planes where  
everyone is cranked & cranky about  
proximity still. But look at the skyline—  
clutches of buildings reaching for  
billows of clouds. To assemble  
in a sequence for binding, somewhere  
past contact tracing. Gather is a  
transitive verb.

# **Pop Music**

- [The Unexpected Introspection of Lil Nas X](#)

Fans may have thought that the artist's début album, "Montero," would be a bawdy romp. Instead, it takes a turn toward the morose and the self-searching.

By [Carrie Battan](#)

In the earliest days of his career, the twenty-two-year-old musician Lil Nas X was a poster child for success on TikTok, after the platform helped propel his song "Old Town Road" to unprecedented ubiquity. Lately, he's grown into something more old-fashioned: a music-video star. Pop culture is more visual than ever, but the traditional music video—in all its cinematic, big-budget glory—has been overtaken by bite-size, off-the-cuff material tailored for rapid consumption on social media. Still, the extravagant music video has become the most effective way for Lil Nas X, a master of visual iconography, to make a splash. In March, he released a video for a new single titled "Montero (Call Me by Your Name)," which begins with a voice-over: "In life, we hide the parts of ourselves we don't want the world to see. . . . But here we don't. Welcome to Montero." Lil Nas X, born Montero Lamar Hill, was using his given name for a fantastical underworld of his own making, a pastel-colored utopia where everyone could fly a freak flag. Rendered in C.G.I., the video follows Lil Nas X through a baroque, Boschian netherland, populated by outrageously costumed clones of the artist, and crackling with sexual charge.

For Lil Nas X, who revealed in 2019 that he is gay, "Montero" signalled a new and emphatically libidinal phase in his art. At the end of the video, the singer, dressed in nothing but a pair of briefs and thigh-high boots, slides down a never-ending stripper pole and lands in a version of Hell, where he performs a striptease for Satan. As part of the rollout for the video, Lil Nas X announced a collaboration with a company called *MSCHF*, which designed a limited-edition run of satanic-themed Nikes, each allegedly containing a drop of human blood in its sole. The video was raunchy, sure, but it was too absurdist to be as salacious as its naysayers made it out to be. Nevertheless, after the release of the video and the sneakers, Lil Nas X was decried by Christian pastors, Fox News, and even the South Dakota governor, Kristi Noem. ("We are in a fight for the soul of our nation," she tweeted.) The critiques only affirmed Lil Nas X's intuitive ability to create a major moment in pop culture. "Montero" the song—a hand-clappy fusion of hip-hop and flamenco with lyrics about Lil Nas X's desperate longing for

one man—was almost beside the point. “Old Town Road” lived in a psychedelic alternative universe, bridging the familiar with the futuristic. “Montero” positioned Lil Nas X in pop music’s present-day reality, which is not nearly as fun.

The frenzy of attention around the “Montero” video seemed only to fuel Lil Nas X’s taste for provocation. In July, he released the music video for a new single, “Industry Baby,” another ambitious visual feast, this time with a mischievous eye trained on the institution of prison. The clip features Lil Nas X as an inmate at Montero State Prison, a place where the prisoners wear bright-pink uniforms, and sometimes nothing at all. Riffing on Black male sexuality in the context of incarceration, Lil Nas X performs an energetic dance routine in the showers with his fellow-inmates. The song, which nods to some of the hip-hop pumping out of Lil Nas X’s home town of Atlanta, contains a triumphant horn arrangement and a swaggering chorus: “This one is for the champions.” It also has a forgettable guest verse by Jack Harlow, the faintly charming, cocksure white rapper du jour. (Near the end of the video, Lil Nas X escapes the prison when one of the guards is distracted by watching the video for “Montero (Call Me by Your Name).”) Not since Lady Gaga in her early days of stardom has an artist so fully taken advantage of the music video as a receptacle for camp, comedy, social commentary, and ostentation. And as with Lady Gaga there’s some cognitive dissonance involved in the pairing of such over-the-top videos with otherwise unremarkable pop songs. Since “Old Town Road,” Lil Nas X has yet to produce a song that feels worthy of such pomp.

He may never need to. In today’s pop ecosystem, music is often a vessel for stardom and charisma, not the other way around. And Lil Nas X’s uncanny understanding of the Internet’s attention economy has seldom failed him. In 2018, he was a college student in Atlanta reportedly managing a popular Nicki Minaj fan account on Twitter. He began recording songs, and promoting them by attaching them to memes that were already going viral. After dropping out of school, he recorded “Old Town Road,” a rudimentary country song filled with hip-hop Easter eggs, not necessarily because he was interested in inverting genre tropes but because he’d noticed that “country trap” was trending online. As anyone with a pulse knows, his strategies worked: his remix of “Old Town Road,” featuring Billy Ray Cyrus, became

the longest-running No. 1 song in history, a track with a miraculous ability to transcend cultural and generational divides.

“Montero (Call Me by Your Name),” on the strength of the music video, also shot to No. 1, and helped transform Lil Nas X from a one-hit wonder into a full-fledged pop star. It underscored his savvy, although to characterize him as a marketing genius, as many have done, ignores his burgeoning artistic talents. The song, along with “Industry Baby,” turned Lil Nas X into an icon because of his unrestrained expressions of queer sexual desire. Unlike some of his most successful contemporaries—such as Frank Ocean or Tyler, the Creator—Lil Nas X refuses to participate in the game of coyness when it comes to his sexuality. (“I’m queer, ha!” he says on “Industry Baby.”)

But his new, full-length album, also called “Montero,” is not the bawdy romp that fans might have anticipated. If those singles were about Lil Nas X’s desires, the album is largely about the disappointment arising from passions left unfulfilled, or the melancholy that floods in once you’ve got what you want. Lil Nas X has refuted the assumption that he’d never have a hit after “Old Town Road,” but the accomplishment comes with a host of new demands and stressors, and it has not granted his every wish. Even the album’s most cheerful and peppy songs are backlit with innocent yearning: “I want someone to love / That’s what I fuckin’ want!” he shouts on a track called “That’s What I Want.” Co-written by Ryan Tedder, the song is a whirligig of whoops and claps that seems designed for the wedding dance floor. Like much of this mostly wholesome record, it is hardly an expression of demonic lust or sexual debasement.

“Old Town Road,” at the peak of its popularity, generated a heated discussion about the boundaries of genre. Initially, Lil Nas X had classified the song as country, but as it gained velocity *Billboard* removed the song from its country chart, arguing that his label had not promoted it as a proper country track. At the time, the decision seemed strange, especially given how stylistically broad the country charts were becoming. “Old Town Road” assumed such cultural force that these distinctions now feel irrelevant, but the success of the song helped fuel an evolution in the crossover between hip-hop and country. “Montero”—a pop-rap album that shares almost no DNA with country music—is less interested in musical innovation. It’s genre agnostic, a blur of hi-hats, guitar flourishes, and midrange trap beats

that make you wonder whom, exactly, the record is intended for. It's an awkward vehicle for Lil Nas X's charisma. It points to the insufficiency of the album as a format for the modern pop star.

The back half of "Montero" takes an unexpected turn toward the morose and the introspective. On one song, "Void," Lil Nas X pens a letter to an old friend to let him know that the exuberance of his public image is all smoke and mirrors. The song is spare, with a bleary electric-guitar line but not much else; in the open space, Nas is able to use his vocals to mark the contours of his emotions more delicately than on his other songs. "I spent inordinate 'mounts of time / Trapped in a lonely, loner life / Looking for love where I'm denied," he sings mournfully in a half whisper, as if in a confessional booth. We've experienced Lil Nas X as an Internet troll, a hypersexual provocateur, a pop star with a Warholian visual sensibility, but "Montero" shows something different: a human being. ♦

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# Profiles

- [Neo Rauch's Antagonistic Art](#)

German painting's arch-traditionalist has a brush with controversy.

By [Thomas Meaney](#)

## Content

I first met the German painter Neo Rauch shortly before Christmas last year, in Leipzig. It was one of the final days of his show at the gallery Eigen+Art, and the place was nearly empty. The show was called “Handlauf” (“Handrail”), and the title picture, roughly eight feet tall by ten feet wide, showed a solidly built, barefoot woman joining hands with a gentleman in leather boots. But the man’s hindquarters revealed him to be a centaur, and the woman seemed to have an extra leg and an extra face, to the side of her main one. They were in a tumbledown room in front of what looked like a stage backdrop of a classic German Romantic landscape—mountains, forest, clouds, moon—next to which a man cradled an electric guitar and a woman pounded some kind of tambourine.

This is what Rauch is known for: huge, dense, ostensibly narrative scenes in which narrative is stubbornly elusive. Events seem to take place in a parallel world. Portions of a canvas can be futuristic, with space-age infrastructure, while elsewhere there may be a sky out of Tiepolo and people who have come from the Napoleonic Wars or some primordial Europe. Rauch’s figures are bound together in tight compositions that recall Renaissance art one minute and socialist realism the next, and yet they remain sealed off from one another, unaware of anything around them, and their actions have a suspended quality. Alongside patches of preternatural calm, a discordant color breaks in, or a reptilian tail, or a burning backpack, or a Converse sneaker. The over-all effect is of allegorical painting, but these are allegories to which Rauch has thrown away the key.

As I walked around, a small, puckish man fell into step beside me and started to talk to me about Rauch and the Leipzig art scene. It was Rauch’s gallerist, Gerd Harry Lybke, who has been a figure in East German art since the early eighties. Universally known as Judy Lybke—for his resemblance to a character on the American television show “Family Affair,” which Leipzigers watched surreptitiously in the Communist years—he grew up wanting to be a cosmonaut but found himself working in a factory and being an artist’s model as a sideline. That’s how he met Rauch and the other artists

who became known as the New Leipzig School. He ran a clandestine gallery out of his apartment, and manned the entrance in the nude, in part to dissuade Stasi agents from entering. By the time the [Berlin Wall](#) fell, he was a major impresario, and he soon became one of the chief gallerists representing art coming out of the former East. As he explained it to me, all the bottled-up energy of East German art seemed to have nowhere to go but to his gallery. He captured it all, and started uncorking it in the nineties, when Rauch and several of his other artists began to break into the Western market. Rauch's pictures, which can nowadays fetch around a million dollars apiece, have established him as the unrivalled German painter of his generation.

Rauch's work stands in stark contrast to that of German worthies such as [Gerhard Richter](#) and [Anselm Kiefer](#). A generation younger, Rauch is not preoccupied with German national shame, and he paints like someone who never got the news that other artistic media existed. Critics are sometimes put off by his painterly traditionalism, but more often they write about having been cornered into admiration in spite of themselves. "I was well prepared to dislike Rauch," the art critic Dushko Petrovich Córdova wrote, after seeing a 2005 exhibition. "The first room of the show abruptly ended my plans. Three large Rauch paintings imposed themselves on the huge space in an entirely unexpected way. They reminded me, in their scale, of the altarpieces by Giotto and Duccio that dominate the first room of the Uffizi."

After Lybke and I had talked for nearly an hour, Rauch himself came in, from his studio nearby, wearing a leather motorcycle jacket. His wife, Rosa Loy, was with him; they met while in art school, and she is also a prominent figurative painter. He surveyed the smattering of visitors and the staff warily, as if each of them might lay claim to his time. Now sixty-one, he is tall and fit, with a faintly martial bearing. His hands are strong, with rough, paint-caked fingers. His hair, close-cropped at the sides, is permitted to flow a little on top, and he peers at the world through slightly bulging, seemingly impastoed eyes.

Lybke introduced us, and Rauch took me to look again at some of the larger canvasses. In one of them, two men, one dressed in white and one in black, stood in front of some factory chimney stacks, daubing paint on a large set

of horns, while a woman, twining her limbs around the horns, gazed on. To the left was a man assisting the painters, and at the bottom was a resentful-looking man with a large magenta megaphone in his hand and a snakelike tail that coiled up the legs of the assistant. This archetypal agitator reappeared in several of the paintings. “I dislike activist types,” Rauch said. He speaks quietly, in a slightly formal register that all the while ironizes itself. I asked him about a group of three men in a smaller painting, one of whom, his hair in a topknot, was whipping his own back like a medieval flagellant. “They are punishing themselves for having white skin,” Rauch told me, and added, “I detest hair buns on men.”

As we looked at the last painting in the show, Rauch said, “So you’ve heard about the critic?” The year before, Wolfgang Ullrich, one of the country’s leading art critics, had written an article, later expanded into a book, identifying a rightist ascendancy in the German art world. For progressive painters, he argued, the idea of art as a pure expression of freedom seemed less tenable in the face of gender and post-colonial critiques, on the one hand, and art-market commoditization, on the other. Right-leaning artists, by contrast, were rallying to the cause of aesthetic autonomy. In the past, radical artists had indicted a reactionary German society, but now many important painters were reactionaries who indicted politically correct liberalism. Rauch was singled out by Ullrich as the most famous example. “What are we to think when Rauch compares feminists to the Taliban?” Ullrich wrote.

Rauch responded with a large painting of a man resembling Ullrich hoisting himself up from a latrine and, with his own feces, painting a figure giving a Nazi salute. The painting was titled “Der Anbräuner,” which translates literally as “the one who makes things brown” but means something more like “the one who meretriciously paints his enemies as fascists.” The message was clear: Rauch was not about to let himself be publicly folded into the ranks of the new German right; in his view, the threat to German culture came from those who dared to reduce questions of artistic form to politics. Completing the publicity stunt, “Der Anbräuner” sold at a charity auction, raising three-quarters of a million euros for a Leipzig children’s hospice.

Still, the experience had left Rauch wary. Shortly after “Der Anbräuner” sold, Rauch pulled out of a show in Leipzig that was to have been one of his largest exhibitions in his native land in a decade. Rauch sometimes speaks of his art as a peristaltic filtration system that pulls in everything around him, and lately there had been so much political dirt in circulation that caution seemed advisable. “Among my New Year’s resolutions is not to comment on political issues!” he wrote to me in January, and it took many months to persuade him to speak again. “I’ll coöperate with this profile under one condition,” he said at one point. “You send [James Thurber](#) to do my portrait.”

At night, Rauch sometimes lies awake with a feeling of being pursued by figures from whatever he’s working on. He paints entirely from imagination and says that his paintings have their origin in waking dreams. These images become a scaffolding on which he builds, by turns instinctively and cerebrally, letting the picture develop on the canvas. When I visited him at home in July, he looked haggard, having had a particularly disturbed sleep, but on this occasion there was an additional factor: a techno party nearby. “The only thing worse than techno for sleep is bad techno,” he said.

The house where Rauch and Loy have lived for the past twenty years is large but unimposing, situated on the southern outskirts of Leipzig. Nearby, a Communist-era lignite mine has been reclaimed as lakes and woodland, and the house, set back from the road, is hidden in overgrown foliage, making it feel more isolated from the world than it actually is. Enclosed in bushes in the front garden stood a large statue Rauch had made of one of his centaurs, dressed like an office worker and wearily carrying two jerricans of gasoline, recurrent objects in his work. We sat with coffee at a worn wooden table under cherry trees in the garden. Rauch and Loy don’t paint on weekends and instead spend their time gardening, mostly growing potatoes and other vegetables. “You could say we are ‘preppers,’ ” he said, smiling at having hit on a slightly ridiculous English term. Rauch feels deeply rooted in the state of Saxony. “It may sound esoteric,” he told me, “but I happen to believe in telluric forces, and that you have a connection to the place where you came into the world.”

Saxony has been at the forefront of German painting for centuries. Caspar David Friedrich, the signal painter of German Romanticism, made his career

there. The small court that ruled Saxony held its own culturally against the rest of the country, and its two largest cities, Leipzig and Dresden, have the museums and the academies to show for it. Much of the core of German Expressionism emerged from this background, including Max Beckmann, who was born in Leipzig, and Otto Dix and George Grosz, both of whom passed through the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts.

But the cities have also been considered provincial backwaters by many Germans, especially in the West. During the Cold War, part of Saxony was known as *Tal der Ahnungslosen* (“valley of the clueless”), because it was one of the few areas that West German radio waves didn’t reach, and the Saxon accent is still roundly mocked in the rest of the country. The success of the new German right in Saxony has given a darker tinge to such regional rivalries, and the repercussions have been felt in the cultural world. A few years ago, another target of Ullrich’s, the writer Uwe Tellkamp—whose 2008 novel, “[The Tower](#)” (a virtuosic G.D.R. version of “[Buddenbrooks](#)”), had made him an international publishing phenomenon—became persona non grata in German literary circles after he criticized Angela Merkel’s refugee policies as dishonest.

Tellkamp is on friendly terms with Rauch, and has subsequently published a novella based on him and the Leipzig art scene. When I talked to Ullrich, he spoke of both men as products of a peculiarly East German pride. “You have to understand that Rauch has an attitude that only in the East did they learn what *real* art was, and what it means to be a great artist,” he said. “Uwe Tellkamp sees himself as the next Thomas Mann, and Rauch sees himself as the new Max Beckmann. They have insulated their world view with the sense of their own majesty. They look with a kind of pity on artists who dabble in concepts or who cocoon themselves in theory. They don’t want to explain anything.”

Rauch’s studio is in an old cotton mill in a former workers’ district in the west of the city, and he likes to bicycle there from his home. The taxi-driver who drove me to the studio commented on how much Rauch’s paintings sold for and joked sourly that he was single-handedly responsible for rising rents in the city. (“Some people apparently preferred it when the whole district smelled of piss,” Rauch said when I mentioned this.)

I rode a freight elevator up to the top floor and went through a pair of unmarked metal doors. When I entered, Broken Social Scene was blasting from a stereo. I asked if I was disturbing him. “Everything disturbs me,” he said. He seemed to mean it, but not in a rude way—more as if this were an affliction he suffered from—and in his resigned tone there was a hint of self-mockery. A small pug named Smylla was pacing around the room. “We partly chose her for her size, since she fits on the basket of my bicycle,” he said. In one of Smylla’s several beds in the studio, I noticed a toy replica of her.

The room was cavernous and had the feeling of being half studio, half gym, with a punching bag hanging from the ceiling. “I imagine it’s the face of my critics,” Rauch said, with a smile that seemed to concede the predictability of the line. Behind him, four canvasses stood in various states of near-completion. In another, a winged man was supine on a table and being operated on: it was difficult to tell whether the wings were being torn off or stitched on. “Angels are important,” Rauch said cryptically.

He looked a little less groomed than when I’d seen him at the gallery; his face was bronzed from a recent vacation in the South Tyrol and sprouting scrubs of beard. We sat at a worktable next to a small kitchen, where he and Loy, whose studio is next door, break for lunch each day. Loy is one of the few people Rauch takes criticism from, but they have a rule that each will offer an opinion only if solicited by the other.

“Coffee, water, vodka?” Rauch asked. We opted for vodka. “Good,” Rauch said. “That will loosen my tongue.”

High up on one wall of the studio is a photograph of Rauch’s mother. When Rauch was five weeks old, his parents, both art students at the academy in Leipzig, were killed, in a train derailment outside the city’s main station. “My mother was nineteen, my father was twenty-one,” Rauch said. “The state was set up to have children when you were young. My grandmother was thirty-nine.” He grew up with his grandparents, calling them Mother and Father, in the midsize town of Aschersleben. The family kept photographs of Rauch’s parents and some of their art around the house. “They were integrated into my upbringing, and we spoke of them often,” Rauch said.

“When you have a tragedy like mine in the background, people tend to treat you tenderly,” he told me. “I wanted to be like other children, but the tragedy hovered.” He remembers older people whispering about the terrible thing that had happened to him, even though he didn’t himself feel the full force of the event.

At around the age of sixteen, Rauch found a book about the Los Angeles architect Richard Neutra in a stall in Aschersleben, and went home and drew up designs for his own houses. Listening to British rock on the radio, he dreamed of the West. “It was this great blue promise on the horizon,” he told me. “And I would be going there someday.”

Life in the East entailed deprivations, but for a future artist there were also resources. One of the ironies of East German Communism is that it consecrated many of the bourgeois rituals and institutions of German culture—piano lessons, choir practice, drawing schools, classical prose—that suffered in West Germany during the upheavals of the sixties.

After Rauch graduated from the local *Gymnasium* in Aschersleben, he applied to study art in Leipzig, just as his parents had. “It was not a mystery who I was and why I was going there,” Rauch told me. But his first application was rejected, he said, because he was too young. Waiting to reapply, Rauch spent three years in the Army, in an infantry battalion. He recalls his bit part in the Cold War fondly—“You were with the sons of professors and the sons of garbagemen”—and feels that it gave him discipline. “Of course, at the time I didn’t appreciate it,” he said. “But it was an important experience—a vanished experience in this country.”

Rauch arrived at the Leipzig Academy of Fine Arts in 1981. He was twenty-one, and recalls the atmosphere as that of a prolonged party. “There was a hedonism among the students that is all but unthinkable today,” Rauch said. “We had everything except drugs, which were hard to come by.” The academy, one of the most traditionalist German art schools, was then an unlikely citadel of experimentation, and Western art books were passed around like samizdat. More important to Rauch’s development, though, was a stringent emphasis on old-fashioned technical skills that were barely being taught in the West. “‘You think you’re an artist!’” he recalled a teacher scoffing on the first day of class. “He rolled up a piece of paper and placed it

on my desk. ‘Draw that,’ he said. I couldn’t draw it!” For the first year, Rauch and his classmates worked almost entirely in monochrome. “You had to *earn your way* into color!” he said.

Rauch’s closest mentor, Arno Rink, and other professors there, such as Werner Tübke, Bernhard Heisig, and Wolfgang Mattheuer, formed the first generation of the Leipzig School. These artists believed in the country’s socialist ideal, but still insisted on adhering to their own aesthetic prerogatives, rather than conforming to any state-sanctioned style. Tübke painted gargantuan agitprop pieces, but in the manner of Tintoretto. Heisig painted Lenin as if he were competing with Velázquez. “With considerable courage, they had managed to create a kind of space sheltered from the directives of the regime,” Rauch said. “Heisig once told me: If the state commissions you to do a work, don’t sacrifice your style, even if they want to title it ‘Workers and Intellectuals.’”

Rauch mostly disavows his paintings from this period, but his career took off quickly. Soon after getting his first diploma, in 1986, he began to be included in group exhibitions, and his work was warmly reviewed by the Communist press, which praised his synthesis of the international and the local. He was poised to become a leading artist in a state that was about to disappear.



“Oh, that reminds me of this article I barely remember.”  
Cartoon by Drew Panckeri

“I can’t remember what I was doing on the day the Wall fell,” Rauch told me, getting up to refill our vodkas. He put some corned beef in Smylla’s bowl, and then realized that another bowl of it had already been set out. “A lucky day for her,” he said, shrugging. He returned from the kitchen with vodka, a pair of espressos, and slices of *Bienenstich* (“bee sting” cake), one of several German delicacies for which Rauch is a tireless evangelist.

When the socialist state collapsed, Rauch claimed, he was prepared to settle into a quiet life as a painter with a teaching post at the academy: “A more than adequate salary—it was going to be fine.” All the same, he resented the dissolution of his artistic world. “Suddenly everyone was scrambling to do installation art and video art, and whatever the curators commanded,” he said, and it felt almost embarrassing to be a painter. For a while, his work toggled between abstraction and figuration, as if trying to chart a course between them, but the latter eventually won out. The choice seems to have been instinctive, but he came to think of it as a drama of purity pitted against opportunism. A 1998 painting, “Stoff,” showed women in a Cold War-era factory apparently mass-producing abstract art. “It’s less obvious when you paint a bad abstract painting,” Rauch told me. “Whereas with a bad figurative painting everyone knows right away.”

In Berlin, I went to a Rauch show at Gutshaus Steglitz, a mansion from the early Romantic period in the far southwest of the city, a short walk from where I live. It seemed unusual that an artist who has had a solo show at the Met would exhibit in this charming but fusty venue. It was as if Frank Stella were having a show at the Brooklyn Historical Society. Later, I asked Rauch why he’d chosen to have his work shown there, of all places. “I have never been warm toward Berlin,” he said. “And they don’t like me there. So to have my show on the perimeter of Berlin is my way of saying, ‘Here I will come, but no farther.’”

Rauch is not wrong about his Berlin critics. “He’s absolutely disgusting,” Alexander Koch, one of the city’s leading gallerists, told me. Koch, who had been a junior colleague of Rauch’s at the Leipzig Academy, explained that the work had solved a German problem. “It was the nineties, and the failing project of reunification needed better publicity,” he said. “And here you have this success story of an Eastern German artist who is selling well in New York? It was just too perfect.” In 2010, when Rauch’s fiftieth birthday

was celebrated with major shows in a number of cities, Elke Buhr, who is now the editor of the Berlin art magazine *Monopol*, wrote a scathing article asking why Rauch had become the most successful painter of his generation. “Unfortunately, it’s a dumb question,” she wrote. “The answer is: because he applies the clichés of German profundity so aptly.”

Koch told me that, on a recent visit to New York, he had met up with a group of well-known feminist painters, who were praising Rauch’s work. “I told them, ‘Have you bothered to look at what Rauch actually paints?’” he said, pulling up an image from the Leipzig show. “You’ve got a bomb blowing up a factory of the good old hardworking Germans in the background, and then, in the foreground, there’s a Biedermeier painter who’s trying to do his work, while a demonic activist’s reptilian tail is twirling around the poor man’s leg, while his wife comforts him in an oh-so-wifely way. It’s not as if Rauch is hiding anything he thinks.”

Rauch’s first international break came at the 1999 Armory Show, in New York, where his work was one of a handful of pieces by German painters. Roberta Smith, of the *Times*, singled him out as a Leipzig artist “who mixes various illustrational styles with beautiful paint handling and a sense of lost Utopias, and the more Pop-like work of Liz Arnold.” It was only a line, but both Rauch and Judy Lybke attribute their ascent to Smith’s notice.

A steady trickle of buyers became interested in Rauch, and soon private jets from LaGuardia were making direct flights to Leipzig. Overwhelmed with demand, Lybke hit upon a way of husbanding supply while increasing Rauch’s appeal. He would tell prospective buyers that there were other artists they should really own before their collection would be ready for a Rauch. I talked to the collectors Don and Mera Rubell, who eventually mounted the first significant Rauch show in the U.S. They recalled the various artists they bought—Matthias Weischer, David Schnell—before finally being given access to some of Rauch’s major early work, and described how Lybke fashioned an installment plan for them to pay for paintings they couldn’t yet afford.

The more I spoke to people about Rauch, the more it seemed as if some kind of transatlantic ruse had enveloped him. A painter who went out of his way to learn from artists beyond the Iron Curtain had been mistaken for an

experimental socialist realist by a New York art world hungry for East European exoticism in the wake of the Cold War. Some wealthy buyers liked the idea of having parables of the failure of Communism hanging in their living rooms. It hardly mattered that Rauch had been born too late for socialist realism's heyday and had suppressed as much of his early art as possible. When American buyers came to Leipzig, Rauch became the beneficiary of this historical misunderstanding.

Still, Rauch found life in nineties Germany unsettling. "They were sending all of these mediocrities over into the East to occupy key positions," he said. "Men who looked like Quasimodo came looking for uncomplicated Eastern women." Many East Germans felt humiliation at suddenly being poor relations in their new country. As Western investors and officials came to see what value could be extracted from the carcass of Communism, uncompetitive factories were shuttered, and workers found themselves jobless and reliant on the new state.

Rauch was spared such indignities, but in 1999 a West German curator mounted a controversial exhibition in Weimar called "The Rise and Fall of Modernism." The exhibition juxtaposed rooms of Nazi art with rooms of G.D.R. Communist art, as if they were equal parts of the gruesome legacy that unification had overcome. Rauch was appalled to find that a Communist-era painting of his, a state commission for a national youth association, was in the show. ("We thought we could subversively convey our libertarian world view to them and get some money for it on top," Rauch told me.) Because the painting had by then become the property of unified Germany, Rauch had no control over its inclusion in the show, or over the way it was jammed in with the other works. In a magazine interview, he threatened to break into the museum and rescue the picture.

It is this feeling of indignation that fuelled his more recent fight with Wolfgang Ullrich. Once again, a self-appointed liberal commissar was presuming to judge his politics and his motives, and was stifling dissent by labelling anyone who departed from bien-pensant norms a fascist. I expressed surprise that Rauch, no stranger to negative criticism, should have been so upset. "Yes, but this one went over the line," he said. "Comrade Ullrich left art criticism to become a full-time political activist. This man,

from the West, who doesn't know socialism, is trying to bring these ideas back here, to the East, to me, who does."

In July, Rauch proposed a drive to Aschersleben, where there is a permanent museum dedicated to his work. I met him at his house, and we lowered ourselves into his 1992 Porsche 911. "Brewster green," he commented. "You have to special-order the color."

I had read in a German newspaper that Rauch is a fast driver—a couple of years ago, he broke several ribs in a crash—but on the road he was a perfectly courteous participant in the delicate medley that is the German Autobahn. The news in Germany was of deadly floods across the West. "Baerbock will become Chancellor," he said, referring to Annalena Baerbock, of the Green Party. I assured him that this would almost certainly not happen—the Greens had been dropping in the polls—but he was convinced that the Greens would triumph sooner or later, and he wasn't happy about it.

"That's the Petersberg," Rauch said, as a small mountain came into view, and told me that it was the highest point between Saxony and the Urals. "I've painted it many times. There's a twelfth-century church, a Bismarck monument, a G.D.R.-era TV tower, and a roller coaster." It sounded like a site made for Rauch. I noted that there seemed to be a lot of wind turbines in the area. "They are foisted on these rural districts in a kind of low-level corruption scheme, where state ministers take the funds but the people who live here have little say," Rauch said. "I would like to see them erect a turbine in Mitte"—the central district of Berlin. I asked Rauch if he'd ever painted any turbines. "No, no, no," he said. "Only the old sort of windmills."

We arrived in Aschersleben and pulled up to the Grafikstiftung Neo Rauch. Established nearly a decade ago, the museum is a jagged modernist structure in the middle of the town. Rauch visits every few weeks and is treated as an absentee lord by the staff. There was a large, well-lit room of Rauch's paintings and drawings. We approached a drawing of a hipsterish-looking head atop a body of tentacles, one of which was holding a megaphone. "You have to be able to risk kitsch," Rauch told me. He explained how he often, at the last moment, uses an ironic flourish—some adjustment to a landscape or a face, say—to rescue the equilibrium of a painting. "Irony is essential," he

said. “It’s the sport of kings, and where we should make our home if we want to stay sane.”

As we walked through the gallery, Rauch told me that, in the depths of the nineties, he had found solace and renewal in the writings of Ernst Jünger, a renegade nationalist who shot to fame in the twenties with an account from the trenches, “[Storm of Steel](#). ” Rauch was especially drawn to his 1939 novel, “On the Marble Cliffs,” about a besieged aristocracy in a surreal landscape battling a depraved forest ranger and his minions. The book was read at the time as an allegory of the rise of the Nazis; Jünger, though a figure of the hard right, ultimately found the Nazis déclassé. But Rauch felt that it spoke equally to our own era, when great artists must battle against a new generation of politically correct commissars, the grandchildren of the Communist originals.

Rauch had made arrangements for us to have lunch at the Grauer Hof, in the old town. “The trouble with the old town is that there are no German restaurants,” Rauch said. “I don’t quite know how this happens.” The Grauer Hof turned out to be the grand exception: part of the vast agricultural landholdings of a monastery in the fourteenth century, it had been a prison from the nineteenth century until the nineteen-forties, and then a storage facility for the city archives under Communism. The owner greeted Rauch with deference and joined us at a table. We were the only occupants; the restaurant was open just for Rauch.

Over ox cheeks in rich red-wine sauce, potatoes, and beer, I asked Rauch if he wasn’t exaggerating the confrontation between abstraction and figuration in the nineties. Weren’t Richter and Kiefer and [Bacon](#) all figurative? “But it wasn’t the painters who were in control,” Rauch shot back. “It was the age of the curator.” He entered into one of his periodic rhapsodies about the glories of British painting: “Freud, Auerbach, Bacon—we looked up to them because they were also working on an island, in their case an actual island, but they were cut off as well, much like us in East Germany.” We were served another round of ox cheeks. “I’m afraid I need to capitulate before the potatoes,” Rauch said to the owner. “The ox cheeks are my vegetables.”

After lunch, we took a stroll through Aschersleben. Rauch pointed to the Art Deco movie theatre where, as a teen-ager, he had taken the *Jugendweihe*, a

Communist version of a confirmation ceremony. On a small street, two children on scooters grazed my side, and Rauch, turning burgherly, gently admonished them. As we walked, he looked covetously at the buildings, wondering if he should buy a house in the center of town, or fix up one of the abandoned buildings. I asked him whether he didn't have a kind of schizophrenic attitude toward the West, where he has achieved his fortune and his revenge, but which also still irritates him. "I believe in capitalism," he told me. "But capitalism plus responsibility and sensitivity." There was something rote about the pronouncement. It seemed likelier that Neo Rauch was someone who was going to rise to the top of whatever system he was thrown into.

We got in the car and headed back to Leipzig. There were more animadversions against wind farms. "The view of the old poets is gone," he said. Rauch extolled Jünger's passion for the natural world—botany and entomology—and his visions of the future; the writer had dreamed up the drone and the smartphone in his novels, decades before their arrival in reality. "Jünger knew how to harvest his inner experience," Rauch had said earlier. "And he mints an infinitely rich trove of images."

That applied to Rauch also, and there were perhaps other commonalities. Jünger, despite his cordial, if aloof, relations with the National Socialists, was feted by postwar German governments. By the time he died—in 1998, at the age of a hundred and two—he was lauded as the greatest German writer on modern warfare, a connoisseur of humanity's underbelly. Rauch, too, despite his provocations in the public sphere, is on good terms with much of the centrist German establishment, including the head of the Free Democratic Party and the editor of *Die Zeit*. He was commissioned to create the stained-glass windows of Naumburg Cathedral, which Angela Merkel inspected to her satisfaction, and he also built a light sculpture for the Bundestag. Jünger had a special name for the kind of figure who, with an abundance of sang-froid, purges all social norms from himself while outwardly upholding them: the Anarch. It's an idea for which Rauch feels deep affinity.

I asked Rauch what he'd meant when he said, in an interview, that beards symbolize the irrational and have an enormous potential for destruction. "I didn't mean irrationalism," he said. "I meant that beards are what our

forefathers had—that it is impossible to imagine some of them, like Moses, without beards.” He later remarked that, if you strip away the beards of the men on a Velázquez canvas, the painting loses its meaning. His own incipient beard was gone—“Rosa kept trying to escape from me when I went to embrace her with the beard, so it had to be gotten rid of”—but the question of facial hair no longer seemed to preoccupy him. “The irrational is encapsulated for me in the tattoo,” he said. “They are emblems of a hollow spirit.”

Rauch was veering into self-parody now. I thought about his postmodern, magpie approach to his artistic forebears—as if the whole history of painting had been flattened into a palette of techniques for him to pick from. Ullrich had been right to register something alarming about Rauch, but it was hardly the political pantomime he engaged in. It was more that Rauch had, through his teachers, come into contact with some of the last traces of the utopian impulse behind modernist art, but he had subjected their ideals to remorseless inversion. “I do utopia, but backward,” he told me several times. In Rauch’s paintings, connection has broken down, and he projects his utopia not into the future but into a fractured past.

Furthermore, Rauch’s recent tours of duty in Germany’s culture wars had unsettled the riddling poise of his neo-Romantic tableaux, and ambiguity was submitting to something almost hectoring. It seemed that Rauch realized this at some level and that it was behind his resolution, however imperfectly kept, to step away from politics.

Rauch told me that New York City was the only place he could live besides Saxony. “The hard angles, the lines,” he said. “I could work with them for a while.” The last time he was in New York for a show, Rauch made a trip up the Hudson. Dia:Beacon made less of an impression than West Point. “I have a great interest in military matters, and I wanted to see how the U.S. military élite do things,” he said. “It was a great blunder that Germany got rid of the wrong army after the Wall fell.” I asked Rauch what New York painters he liked. He mentioned Cecily Brown, Ena Swansea, Lisa Yuskavage, Marcel Dzama, Julian Schnabel, and Dana Schutz. “Nicole Eisenman is a good painter,” he said. “But I think she might have a tattoo.”

We reached Leipzig's central station, where Rauch was to drop me off. In front of the station, a group of people crossed the street, including a limping man in camouflage, heavily tattooed. "The Herrenvolk are not coming back," Rauch said, letting the statement hang in the air for sardonic effect. Before we said goodbye, he mentioned that he was behind schedule for his next show in New York. "I'm having a problem—a new kind of difficulty—with the figures," Rauch said. No doubt the figures would be chasing him past the edge of sleep, deep into the night. ♦

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# **Shouts & Murmurs**

- [The Age of Monsters](#)

[October 4, 2021 Issue](#)

# The Age of Monsters

By [Teddy Wayne](#)

September 27, 2021



*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

Lo, one day, a monster crawled from a cave. At first, the people of the kingdom were not alarmed.

“Many a monster has crawled from a cave before, and nothing came of it,” one said, and the people went about their business of tending sheep, harvesting crops, and imbibing beer soup at breakfast together. “ ’Tis silly to get worked up over a monster every one score years.”

The monster began biting the people of the kingdom on their necks, however, and, after a few days, many of those bitten turned into monsters themselves. Most who became monsters turned back into people after a few weeks, but some, sadly, did not.

“If you are young and able, a monster bite is no worse than being bitten by a common fox,” said one villager, echoing the beliefs of most of the people of

the kingdom, who themselves were typically neither young nor able.

As the people of the kingdom kept turning into monsters who then bit others, it led to greater numbers of new monsters every day, a measure of growth for which the people did not have a name, so they simply referred to it as “many scores of additional monsters by each sunrise.”

Most of the people of the kingdom were advised to stay in their dwellings, and they banged their chamber pots at sundown to thank the brave chirurgeons who were attending to the bitten. If they ventured out, they wrapped swaths of itchy wool around their necks as protection. Exemptions were made for those who had tasks essential to the functioning of the kingdom, such as town fools, courtesans, and torturers, and also for the youngest residents. (Their parents were going mad tending them whilst also tending their sheep.) As for those who gallivanted about merely for their own revels, everyone else hoped that they would get bitten and—though ’twas sort of frowned upon to declare aloud—not necessarily remain monsters but perhaps spend several weeks retching black bile.

A miraculous end to the scourge seemed to arrive sooner than expected when apothecaries brewed three separate magical potions that would protect nearly everyone who imbibed one. There was great rejoicing throughout the kingdom as people boasted, in a phrase that became irksome with overuse, “I got my sip.” They were eager to see friends and family again—groups that were indistinguishable, as everyone in the kingdom was related to one another through inbreeding. Some of the younger people vowed to make up for lost time fornicating with their cousins in the upcoming “hot poshe midsummer.”

Yet not everyone was so excited about the potions. Some were concerned that they had been insufficiently tested on subjects other than rams and oxen. Others worried about the inclusion of a relatively new reagent, despite the fact that apothecaries had been experimenting for years with eye of newt.

After months of sympathetic tolerance for their wary brethren, the imbibers’ patience was worn down. “ ’Tis madness!” they all said. “Lo, they came up with a magical potion so you don’t turn into a monster! Just get the sip, you village fucking idiots!”

These slurs only strengthened the resolve of the potion-hesitant, who were now proud anti-potioners, and the number of monsters roaming the kingdom, which had dropped steeply, rose once more, and the afflicted were baring sharper fangs. It became clear that the monsters would never go extinct and would remain at consistently low levels in the population, in a manner for which the people of the kingdom did not have a name, so they called it “small amounts of monsters existing forever.”

At times, a deep melancholy descended upon the people who had imbibed the potions, for life as they knew it would never be quite the same as ‘twas before, when, without wool swaths, constant dread, or the ever-present threat of contracting “long monster,” children could merrily taunt beggars, neighbors could share bowls of beer soup at breakfast, and young people could fornicate with their cousins without the designation of a specific season.

And yet hope remained. Further protection would come from the brewing of new potions, childhood exposure to the monsters, and experimental treatments with dragon testicle. Some people would continue to wrap swaths of wool around their necks for certain group activities that they had previously participated in blithely, such as attending a casual burning at the stake.

For the people of the kingdom were resilient and would not give up on the future—for themselves, for their inbred children, and for their inbred children’s inbred children. And, lo, they would find a way to go on, as they always had, in the age of monsters. ♦

# **Tables for Two**

- [Vegan French Cookery at Délice & Sarrasin](#)

[October 4, 2021 Issue](#)

# Vegan French Cookery at Délice & Sarrasin

The chef Yvette Caron creates vegetal reinterpretations of meat- and dairy-based dishes with her versions of crab cakes, tournedos Rossini, foie gras, and escargot.

By [David Kortava](#)

September 24, 2021



For four and a half million years, early hominids survived on a plant-based diet—seeds, nuts, roots, tubers. Around 2.6 million years ago, one of our ancestors got the idea to impale another terrestrial mammal with a sharp-edged tool, leaving butchery marks on its bones, later discovered as fossils by archeologists in the Ethiopian highlands. Today, some *Homo sapiens* still cling to the old ways, calling themselves vegetarian or, in their most traditionalist form, vegan, and envision a future in which the natural order is restored. At Délice & Sarrasin, a charming French bistro in the West Village, vegans can bide their time in style, enticing new recruits with the beau ideal of meatless haute cuisine.



*Yvette Caron, Délice & Sarassin's head chef, sources her wines from vineyards—in Alsace, Bordeaux, Burgundy, and Provence—that do not use animal-derived fining agents, such as casein and gelatin, in their filtration process.*

Vegan French cookery exposes an interesting paradox. On one hand, the very existence of Délice & Sarrasin and restaurants like it serves as a critique of animal farming—see, you can eat well without inflicting violence on sentient life-forms. On the other, Yvette Caron, Délice & Sarrasin's head chef, does not wish to alienate the omnivorous, a good number of whom she counts among her patrons. She has tactfully sprinkled her menu with all the animalic terms that we accept as unremarkably normative: “Brie,” “duck,” “salmon.” The kitchen is stocked with none of these, of course, only their vegetal reinterpretations at the hands of an imaginative chef.



*“Sarrasin” is the French term for “buckwheat,” the flour used in the savory galettes.*

One metric for assaying the quality of a self-consciously vegan dish (that is, a dish featuring imitation meat or dairy) is the extent to which it approximates the sensory attributes—the mouthfeel—of the real thing. By this standard, the crab cakes at Délice & Sarrasin, presented with a savory cashew-based tartar sauce, are beyond reproach. My father, a longtime pescatarian, tried them and wove a theory (in jest, sort of) that the kitchen is serving actual crab to unsuspecting herbivores. “This is crab cake,” he kept saying, indiscreetly. (Rest assured, the “crab” cake is made of dehydrated lemon peel, yellow bell pepper, and seaweed marinated in soy sauce; wheat flour provides the crust.) In the tournedos Rossini, pan-seared Impossible Burger, subbing in for filet steak, fooled us both. In taste tests, half of the respondents can’t distinguish the company’s bioengineered products from actual meat. *PETA* has called the fatty, iron-dense patty “probably the unhealthiest veggie burger on the market”; in other words, it’s delicious.



PETA has called the Impossible Burger, which takes the place of the filet steak in Caron's tournedos Rossini, "probably the unhealthiest veggie burger on the market"; in other words, it's delicious.

You can also evaluate a vegan dish on its own terms, mentally setting aside whatever fleshy alias it's been assigned. Producing authentic foie gras entails force-feeding a duck or a goose; it's banned in California and about a dozen countries, and will become illegal in New York City next year. Not wishing to seem impolite, I once sampled the stuff as a dinner guest at the home of a Frenchman living in Park Slope. Caron's cruelty-free version—made from tahini, cashews, garlic, onion, cloves, ginger, nutmeg, and cardamom—is fruitier, nuttier, and silkier, and comes with homemade fig jam and sourdough bread. Who cares if it's not a perfect simulacrum of a bizarrely produced luxury food whose obsolescence is long overdue?

For the escargot, Caron replaces snails with thinly sliced oyster mushrooms, which she glazes with white wine and cooks in a sauce of pulverized cashews, coconut, garlic, and parsley. They pass for neither snails nor oysters, but they stand out all the same. Why not call them *délicieux champignons* and be done with it?



The ratatouille involves sautéing coarsely cut garlic, onions, eggplant, zucchini, tricolor bell peppers, and heirloom tomatoes before combining them with herbs in a rich, floral mélange.

Perhaps the best dish in the house is one that's not trying to be something else. The ratatouille, a canonical medley of stewed vegetables, involves sautéing coarsely cut garlic, onions, eggplant, zucchini, tricolor bell peppers, and heirloom tomatoes before combining them with various herbs in a rich, floral mélange. By some alchemy, every bite retains the full, distinct flavor of each ingredient. It tastes like, well, garlic, onions, eggplant, zucchini, peppers, tomatoes, and herbs—and isn't missing anything at all. (*Entrées \$14-\$35.*) ♦

## The Pictures

- [Margaret Qualley Acts Her Age](#)

[October 4, 2021 Issue](#)

# Margaret Qualley Acts Her Age

The “Once Upon a Time . . . in Hollywood” ingénue and star of the Netflix series “Maid” visits Color Me Mine for some sophisticated conversation.

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

September 27, 2021

A few days before appearing at the Met Gala in a Chanel frock of organdy and silk tulle adorned with some ninety-five thousand glass beads, sequins, and crystals, which took a team of master seamstresses thirteen hundred hours to produce, the actress Margaret Qualley hopped off her bike on Baxter Street and strolled into Color Me Mine, a pottery-painting studio, to try her own hand at the decorative arts. She wore a white ball cap, fake pearl earrings, a KN95 mask, and a T-shirt emblazoned with the face of Tony Soprano. At twenty-six, she raised the median age of the establishment’s patrons into the teens.



*Margaret Qualley Illustration by João Fazenda*

Qualley selected an enormous mug and ordered a palette of yellow and leaf-green glazes. “I’ll put anything in a mug,” she said, as she dipped her brush

in water. “I’ll put cereal in a mug. I’ll put wine in a mug. I’m all over the place with my mugs. I’m not very sophisticated.”

Qualley has developed something of a specialty playing fresh-faced ingénues with a zany streak. Quentin Tarantino cast her in “[Once Upon a Time . . . in Hollywood](#)” as a Manson groupie in jorts who has a thing for the stuntman played by Brad Pitt. A Spike Jonze [ad](#) for Kenzo perfume in which Qualley, dressed in a Gumby-green gown, rampages around the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, in Los Angeles, like a ballerina bitten by a funky werewolf, went viral. At Chanel’s recent haute-couture show in Paris, she scored the coveted role of Bride. “I’m particularly smiley in the video, partially because I was very excited, and also because that video is actually two videos edited together, and in the first run of it, I do almost fall down the stairs,” she said. “I’m beaming in full embarrassment.”

Lately, Qualley has tried maturity on for size. She stars in the new Netflix miniseries “[Maid](#)”—based on a memoir by Stephanie Land—as Alex, a young mother in the Pacific Northwest who leaves her abusive boyfriend and struggles to make ends meet by cleaning houses. During the nine-month shoot, in Vancouver, Qualley got close to Riley, the child actress who plays her daughter. “I think about the concept of permission a lot,” she said. “With a four-year-old, in order to play her mom, I had to have permission to hold her in any way, and she had to have permission from me to be able to grab me, to call me Mom.”

The actress Andie MacDowell plays Paula, Alex’s free-spirited mother. Qualley did not have to seek permission to call her Mom, because MacDowell happens to be Qualley’s mother in real life. Toward the end of the series, MacDowell and Qualley share a scene in a Mexican restaurant. “It’s Paula telling Alex that she’s proud of her, but it was also very much my mom telling me that she was proud of me,” Qualley said.

Qualley was born in Montana and grew up in Asheville, North Carolina. She is given to folksy expressions and speaks with an unplaceable twang. “I don’t know why my voice sounds the way it does,” she said, as she added a red blob—“an apple”—to her mug’s splotchy abstract background.

Qualley trained as a ballet dancer before moving to New York, where she started modelling. The city instantly felt right but the career did not. Midway through eleventh grade at Professional Children's School, she got a boyfriend. "This may not sound like the most woke sentence that's ever been said, but it did change my life," she said. "I all of a sudden had friends." The boyfriend brought her to an improv class in a church on the "Upper Upper East Side, like A Hundred and Twentysomething Street." Qualley was hooked: "At that point in my life, I was very quiet. I didn't talk about my feelings, or know I had them. More than anything, I think I adopted a personality that wasn't mine." She went on, "There's always a depiction of the cool girl in high school who's, like, quiet and mysterious and standing in the corner, and I was, like, 'I can do that. That's easy.' But it's not really true to my nature. In reality, I love talking. I love being silly. I do like a certain amount of attention. Not the wrong kind. But saying something and having it land? Great."

Qualley sent her mug off to the kiln and prepared for the bike ride back to her apartment, in the East Village. For years, the space was barren, décor-wise—mattress on the ground, no table. Qualley ate her meals on the floor. Recently she realized, "I'm no longer sixteen, and living on a mattress is not cool anymore." She took the first step toward certified adulthood and bought a bed frame. "Now I just roll off the bed and stroll around like a gosh-darn princess." ♦

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